

## CHAPTER VII

### MYSTIC THEORIES AND SPIRITUAL TRAINING

THE religious world in Tibet, generally speaking, is divided into two sections. The first includes those who advocate the strict observance of moral precepts and monastic rules as the means of salvation, the second is formed of those who prefer an intellectual method which frees its followers from all laws whatsoever.

Nevertheless there exists no rigid division between these two categories. Though their respective theories are always a favourite subject of controversy between the followers of the two schools, it seldom happens that one stands in the position of a harsh, pugnacious adversary towards those in the opposite camp.

Even the monks attached to morality acknowledge that a virtuous life and the monastic discipline, though of great value and advisable for the many, are but a mere preparation to a higher path. As for the adepts of the second system, they all believe in the beneficial results of a faithful adherence to the moral laws and the rules laid down for members of the religious Order.

Moreover, all are unanimous in declaring the first method the safer of the two. A pure life, the performance of good deeds, righteousness, compassion, detachment from worldly cares, selflessness and quietness of mind act—they say—as a cleansing process which gradually removes the “impure dust that covers

the mental eyes,”<sup>1</sup> therefore leading to enlightenment which is salvation itself.

As for the method which mystics call the “Short Path,” the “Direct Path,”<sup>2</sup> it is considered as most hazardous. It is—according to the masters who teach it—as if instead of following the road which goes round a mountain ascending gradually towards its summit, one attempted to reach it in straight line, climbing perpendicular rocks and crossing chasms on a rope. Only first-rate equilibrists, exceptional athletes, completely free from giddiness, can hope to succeed in such a task. Even the fittest may fear sudden exhaustion or dizziness. And there inevitably follows a dreadful fall in which the too presumptuous alpinist breaks his bones.

By this illustration Tibetan mystics mean a spiritual fall leading to the lowest and worst degree of aberration and perversity to the condition of a demon.

I have heard a learned lama maintain that the bold theories regarding complete intellectual freedom and the enfranchisement from all rules whatever, which are expounded by the most advanced adepts of the “Short Path,” are the faint echo of teachings that existed from time immemorial in Central and Northern Asia.

The lama was convinced that these doctrines agree completely with the Buddha's highest teaching as it was made evident in various passages of his discourses. However, said the lama, the Buddha was well aware that the majority do better to abide by rules devised to

<sup>1</sup> A favourite Buddhist illustration. We read in the Mahāvagga (I, 10): “Bhagavan, looking over the world with his eyes of a Buddha, saw beings whose mental eyes were darkened by scarcely any dust and beings whose eyes were covered by much dust, beings sharp of sense and blunt of sense, of good disposition and bad disposition, easy to instruct and difficult to instruct. . . .”

<sup>2</sup> Technically, in mystic parlance: *tse gchig, lus gchig sang rgyais*, to attain Buddhahood in one life, one body. That is to say, in the very life in which one has begun one's spiritual training. Tibetans say also: *lam chung* (“the short road”).



avert the baleful effects of their ignorance and guide them along paths where no disasters are to be feared. For that very reason, the all-wise Master has established rules for the laity and monks of average intelligence.

The same lama entertained serious doubts as to the Aryan origin of the Buddha. He rather believed that his ancestors belonged to the Yellow race and was convinced that his expected successor, the future Buddha Maitreya, would appear in Northern Asia.

Where did he get these ideas?—I have not been able to find out. Discussion is hardly possible with Oriental mystics. When once they have answered: "I have seen this in my meditations," little hope is left to the inquirer of obtaining further explanations.

I have also heard similar ideas expressed by Newars from Nepal. Their argument was that the native land of the Buddha was their own country. "The great Sage of India," they said, "belonged to the same stock as ourselves. And as for us, we are of the same race as the Chinese."

It is, of course, only the learned lamas and mystics who hold the theories just mentioned, regarding the "Path of the Rules" and the "Short Path." Now, in Tibet, as elsewhere, scholars and thinkers are few. So while amongst the partisans of the "rules" the many merely vegetate in the monasteries, the doctrine of "complete freedom" affords a *raison d'être* to countless people scarcely capable of haunting any summit, but whose originality cannot be denied.

Most magicians shelter themselves under the flag of the latter party. Not that many of them seek rapid spiritual achievement. That which appeals to them in the "Short Path" is freedom from the bondage of discipline and the permission thus granted to proceed with whatever experiments may be useful for their own advancement. The formula is vague enough to allow interpretations that fit all kinds of characters.

A broad classification of Tibetan professed magicians and students of the magic art divides them into two categories.

The first includes all those who do not seek direct mastery over nature, but only the power of coercing certain gods and demons to secure their help. The men who practise that method believe in the real existence of the beings of the other worlds as entities completely distinct from them. They also think that their own ability and power are much inferior to those of the personalities whom they endeavour to enslave, and that they would be incapable of obtaining the results which they expect from the latter's help by their own efforts.

Again, whatever other means they use: spells, charms, etc., they also implicitly recognize that their active power, though put into motion by the man who uses them, does not emanate from him.

In the second category only a small number of adepts are to be reckoned.

These employ, at times, the very same means as their less enlightened colleagues, but they do it for different reasons. They hold the view that the various phenomena which the vulgar consider as miracles, are produced by an energy arising in the magician himself and depend on his knowledge of the true inner essence of things. Most of them are men of retired habits, even hermits, who do not exhibit any singularity in their ways and appearance. They make no attempt to exhibit their powers and often remain entirely unknown. On the contrary, the magicians of the first group are fond of indulging in many kinds of showy and bewildering eccentricities. Sorcerers, soothsayers, necromancers, occultists from the meanest beggarly class to those of high social standing, can be met with among them. A lover of odd discourses and deeds may enjoy himself listening to the theories regarding "integral freedom" and its practice that are current in



such society. But behind these absurd extravagances there are elements of knowledge regarding old traditions, forgotten history and the handling of psychic forces to be gleaned. But in these circles, as elsewhere in Tibet, the great difficulty is to gain a footing.

It is unnecessary to be an ordained monk to enter the "Short Path to Deliverance." According to its adepts, only initiations are of value. So any layman, if recognized as fit to undertake the spiritual climbing, may be accepted by a mystic master and in due time initiated by him. The same rule applies to students of magic. Nevertheless, most mystics and magicians have begun their career as youths in the religious Order.

The choice of the master who is to guide him along the mystic path, arduous and fraught with deceitful mirages, is a momentous decision for the candidate to initiation. The course which his life will follow depends to a great extent upon the character of the lama he elects.

For having asked admittance at a door from which they ought to have turned away, some have met with fantastic adventures. Yet, if the young monk is satisfied with begging the spiritual guidance of a lama who is neither an anchorite nor an "extremist" of the "Short Path," his novitiate will probably not include any tragic incidents.

During a probation period of undetermined length the master will test the character of his new disciple. Then he may simply explain some philosophical treatises and the meaning of a few symbolic diagrams (*kyilkhors*), teaching him the methodic meditations for which they are used.

If the lama thinks his pupil capable of proceeding farther, he will expound him the programme of the mystic training.

The latter includes three stages, namely:  
*Tawa*—to look, examine.

*Gompa*—to think, meditate.

*Chyöd pa*—to practise, realize. This is the fruit of accomplishment through the two former stages.

Another less current enumeration makes use of four terms to convey the same meaning, as follows:

FIRST STAGE { *Tön*—"meaning," "reason." That is to say investigation of the nature of things, their origin, their end, the causes upon which they depend.

SECOND STAGE: { *Lob*—"study" of various doctrines.  
*Gom*—thinking or meditating on that which one has discovered and learnt.  
Practising introspective meditation.

THIRD STAGE: *Togs*—Understanding.

In order that the novice may practise in perfect quietness the various exercises which that programme requires, it is nearly certain that the lama will command him to shut himself in *tsams*.<sup>1</sup>

The word *tsams* signifies a barrier, the border of a territory. In religious parlance, to "stay in *tsams*" means to live in seclusion, to retire beyond a barrier which must not be passed.

That "barrier" may be of different kinds. With advanced mystics it becomes purely psychic and it is said that the latter need no material contrivances to isolate themselves while meditating.

There exist several categories of *tsams*, each one being subdivided into a number of varieties.

Proceeding from the less austere towards the most severe forms, we find the following ones:

A lama or a lay devotee shuts himself in his room or private apartment. He does not go out or only does so at fixed time, to perform some devotional practices, such as walking around religious edifices making repeated prostrations before sacred objects, or the like.

According to the rule which he has adopted, the

<sup>1</sup> Written *mtshams* and pronounced *tsam*.



*tsamspa*<sup>1</sup> either may be seen or must remain invisible. In the first case, he is generally permitted to talk briefly with the members of the household, his relatives or servants, and even to receive a few visitors. In the second case, he may only be seen by those who attend him. If a visitor is admitted, he must remain within hearing *outside* the *tsamspa's* room. A curtain screens the entrance and the interlocutors remain invisible to each other as in some Roman Catholic contemplative Orders of nuns.

A number of Tibetans resort occasionally to one or another of these mild forms of seclusion for non-religious motives, seeking merely to avoid disturbance while engaged in the study of any branch of Tibetan learning : grammar, philosophy, astrology, medicine, etc.

Next come the recluse who sees but one attendant.

He who renounces speaking and makes known his needs by writing.

He who partly covers his window, so that he cannot see the surrounding landscape, nor any outside object except the sky.

He who renounces the sight of the sky, covering his window entirely or, living in a windowless room which, nevertheless, admits the daylight indirectly.

He who sees no one at all.

In this case, if the *tsamspa* enjoys the use of a suite of rooms, his meals are brought into one of them, while he retires into another. When he lives in a single room, food is placed next the entrance. Someone knocks at the door to inform the recluse that what he needs is ready, and then the inmates of the house leave the adjacent room or corridors for a moment to allow the *tsamspa* to come out without being seen. Any object is returned in the same way, the *tsamspa* calling attention by knocking at the door or ringing a bell.

<sup>1</sup> He who practises *tsams*. Not to be mistaken for *tsampa* : flour of roast barley, written *rtsampa*.

Among those who practise this particular kind of *tsams*, some ask by writing for the things which they require, but others renounce this facility. Consequently, whatever may be their needs, they cannot make them known. Even if those who attend on them forgot to give them their meal, they ought to fast in silence.

Generally *tsams* in one's own house do not last long, especially of the strict kind. One year seems to be an exceptional period. One usually hears of people who live in seclusion for three months, one month and even a few days only. Laymen rarely shut themselves in their apartment for more than one month.

It is easy to understand that prolonged and severe *tsams* cannot be practised in an ordinary residence. There, whatever care is taken, the moving about of people busy with worldly affairs and the noise inevitably reach the *tsamspa*, through the thin barrier of his closed door.

The silence and quiet surroundings which may be enjoyed to a high degree in the monasteries are not even deemed sufficient by some, and many *gomphas* own special small houses built for the use of their members who wish to live in strict seclusion.

These houses are called *tsams khang*.<sup>1</sup> They are sometimes situated in an out-of-the-way spot, inside the monastery's walls, but more frequently stand aloof on some hill, at a little distance outside the walled enclosure. It is not unusual to find groups of these meditation houses standing in the solitude, at a few days' march from their parent monastery.

The plans of the *tsams khangs* correspond to the various rules and requirements here above mentioned.

From the windows of some of them, the recluse may enjoy the sight of beautiful landscapes, while others

<sup>1</sup> From *mtshams* and *khang*, house : "a house where to live in seclusion."



are surrounded by walls that cut off the view on all sides. In that case, the enclosure often forms a small courtyard or terrace where the *tsamspa* may sit or walk in the open, without being seen, or himself seeing anything of the outside world.

Most *tsams khangs* are divided into two rooms. In one of them, the recluse sits and sleeps, the other one is the kitchen in which an attendant may live.

When the *tsamspa* must see no one and keep the rule of silence, his attendant lives in a separate hut. A double wicket is then built in the wall or the door of the recluse's room, and through it meals are given to him.

Solid food is generally served only once a day, but buttered tea is brought several times. If the lama belongs to one or another of the "Red cap" sects, beer<sup>1</sup> alternates with the tea. Tibetans having the custom of keeping a small bag of barley flour at hand, the recluse is at liberty to eat some with his tea or beer, whenever he likes.

Only members of the religious Order retire in the cottages specially built to be used as meditation houses. Some remain in seclusion during several consecutive years. A canonic period is three years three months three weeks and three days. Some repeat that long

<sup>1</sup> Though drinking fermented beverages is strictly prohibited by Buddhism, Tibetan "Red caps" declare that Padmasambhava, their founder, allowed it. Nevertheless, some of them seem to know better. Padmasambhava, they say, allowed the drinking of alcohol when performing certain rites, and then the quantity to be drunk was that which fills the hollow of the palm. Padmasambhava, who was a Western Indian and an adept of Tantrism, taught his Tibetan converts the form of worship of his sect and, as with many *tantrikas*, the two drops of wine to be drunk in sacramental fashion led to habitual drinking. An Indian saying goes: "Some drink to perform the rite, and some perform the rite in order to drink." But Tibetans addicted to drinking do not seek a religious excuse any more than their Western brethren in drunkenness.

retreat twice or thrice in the course of their life, and a few shut themselves in *tsams* for life.

There exists a still more austere form of *tsams*: that of dwelling in complete darkness.

Meditation in darkness is not a practice peculiar to Lamaism. It is known in all Buddhist countries. I have seen different kinds of room in Burma, specially built for the purpose, and made use of them myself during my stay on the Sagain hills. But while Burmese and other Buddhist monks only spend a few hours at a time there, certain Tibetan ascetics bury themselves for years, and even till death, in such grave-like dwellings. However, these extreme cases are rare.

When complete night is desired and the sojourn in the *tsams khang* is to be long, the latter is often established in a grotto or a partly underground building, ventilated by chimneys constructed in such a way that they do not allow the light to penetrate into the recluse's cell. This, however, is very seldom done. Usually the dark hermitage is aerated in a natural—and, indeed, very imperfect—way, through fissures and the like. Though these must, perforce, admit some light together with air, that light seems often of a purely theoretical kind, for in some of these obscure abodes it is impossible to distinguish any object. Yet, after a time, the eyes of the *tsamspas* get accustomed to dark, and succeed in vaguely seeing their surroundings.

According to what I have heard from men who have spent long periods of seclusion in darkness, these hermits enjoy, at times, wonderful illuminations. Their cell becomes bright with light or, in the darkness, every object is drawn with luminous outlines; or again, a phantasmagoria of shining flowers, landscapes and personages arises before them.

Optic phenomena of that kind are certainly common, for they have also been described to me in Burma, by *bhikkhus* who practised meditation in darkness, and I



suppose that everybody has seen something of the kind at night.

Tibetans see in this a way of testing the degree of fixity attained by the mind. The kaleidoscopic mirage is considered by them as entirely subjective. It is, they think, caused by the uncontrolled agitation of the mind. When the latter is brought near stillness, the phantasmagoria vanishes. There remains only a spot (*thigle*) which may be either dark coloured or like a diminutive globe of light. At first that spot moves and the aim of the practice is to fix it.

The stage in which the spot remains motionless, without undergoing any change in size, colour, etc., is the moment when the mystic is able to concentrate his thoughts on any object he chooses without any other ideas breaking his "one-pointedness" of mind. The next stage is marked by the disappearance of the spot which sinks in utter darkness. This however is not always attained; many continue to proudly enjoy the fairy-scene thinking that they have obtained a glimpse of paradise.

Beside recreations of this kind, a number of subtler enchantments await the *tsamspa* in his hermitage. These, according to religious teachers, are traps which catch the unintelligent disciple who ventures on the mystic path.

When the *tsamspa*, who has spent a long time in darkness, is nearing the end of his retreat, he gradually accustoms his eyes to see the daylight again. For that purpose, a hole, the size of a pin's head, is pierced in a mud part of the wall and is enlarged each day till the aperture forms a small window. This operation may take several months and is either done by the recluse himself or by another person: his *guru* or a friend. The longer the time spent in obscurity the slower is the admission of light into the cell.

Novices who shut themselves up entirely for the first



A TIBETAN ASCETIC

THIS MAN HAS ALREADY SPENT THREE YEARS IN SECLUSION IN DARKNESS, AND IS NOW ON PILGRIMAGE TO NEPAL. WHEN HE RETURNS TO TIBET HE IS GOING TO MEDITATE IN COMPLETE DARKNESS FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE, WITHOUT RECEIVING ANY VISITORS OR SPEAKING TO ANYONE.



time, either in light or dark *tsams khangs*, generally receive instructions from their *guru* during their seclusion.

The lama speaks to them from outside, through the double wicket which is used to pass in the recluse's meal. The *guru* of a *tsamspa* who must see nobody, often shuts the entrance of the latter's cell with his own seal. A religious ceremony is performed on that occasion and another one when the master breaks the seal and the recluse steps out.

If the *tsams* is not of the severe kind, a flag may be placed at the recluse's door, on which are written the names of the persons who are allowed to enter his rooms: attendants or visitors allowed by the *tsamspa's* teacher.

A dry branch is sometimes driven in the earth or stuck in a pot, near the hermitage of a *tsamspas* who shuts himself up for life.

The term *tsams khang* is more generally applied to meditation—cottages built in the vicinity of a monastery. Those standing in more remote places are called *ritöd*.<sup>1</sup>

*Ritöds* are never built at the bottom of a valley, they are always perched on a dominating spot, and the choice of the site is made in accordance with special rules. Two well-known Tibetan verses depict the main conditions required.

*Gyab rii tag*

*Dun rii tso*<sup>2</sup>

The mountain rock, behind.

The mountain lake in front.

That is to say that the hermitage should be built on the hillside with a background of rocks, or better still against the rock itself, looking down on a lake or, at least, a stream.

Various other regulations have been laid down, in

<sup>1</sup> Written *Ri khrod*.

<sup>2</sup> Spelt *gyab rihi brag, mdun rihi mtsho*.



accordance with the requirements of peculiar spiritual and psychic trainings. Thus, some dwellings must permit an extended view so that the anchorite can see the sun rising and setting. The noises produced by running water or wind must be muffled as far as possible. The vicinity of woodland is advised or a barren landscape deemed more suitable, etc.

*Ritödpas* do not remain continually shut in their houses. Outside the periods of strict *tsams*, most of them go out between the hours which they devote to meditation or other practices. According to the rule imposed by their *guru*, or self-imposed, they are either allowed, or forbidden, to talk with their neighbours while fetching water, collecting fuel or taking a walk around their cabin. Meditation in the open is sometimes advised by the *ritödpa's* spiritual guide or some practise it from their own inclination.

Though the term *ritöd*, properly speaking, means a "group of hermitages," current usage applies it to all single isolated anchorite abodes: huts or caves.

It is to such primitive dwellings, far away from inhabited regions, that staunch *naljorpas* who aim at climbing the rugged rocks of spiritual heights, retire.

Those who are still at the novice stage, tramp at long intervals to their *guru's* place to tell him about their psychic experiences, the ideas to which their meditation have given birth, and also to receive his advice and communication of spiritual power (*angkur rite*). Several years may elapse between such meetings.

As for the hermits who are teachers, some of them allow a few promising beginners to live in their vicinity. "Vicinity" is, however, a wide term. The disciple may stay on the same hill as his master at a spot situated lower down than the latter's dwelling, or at one or two days' march.

One can well imagine that all of the many *tsams khangs* and *ritöds'* dwellers are not saints or sages.

False pretence and sham mysticism have long ago crept into the world of Tibetan anchorites. Even on the shining snowy ranges, one can meet the hypocrite. Under the guise of *gomchens*, boasting of secret knowledge and supernormal powers, they deceive simple-minded peasantry or tent-dwelling herdsmen. It may appear to a Westerner that they pay dearly for the material advantages or the fame they enjoy, by purchasing them at the cost of the hardships of hermit life. But one must appreciate the bargain from a Tibetan, and not from a Western point of view.

Tibetans are a strong and sturdy people; the cold, sleeping on the ground in the open, solitude, and many other things from which the average Westerners would shrink, do not frighten them in the least. There are but a few of them, even among the upper classes, who have not experienced something of the kind whilst travelling or on other occasions. Adventurous clerical charlatans, often illiterate and of poor parentage, who cannot expect any standing in their monastery, enjoy a much more agreeable life in a *ritöd* than they could hope for elsewhere.

The more ambitious among them may, indeed, submit to uncommon austerities, in order to gain repute, but they give up all these after a few years, when their fame is sufficiently well established. Then, they may settle in some private abode, relying on the gifts of the laity to enable them to spend their days in comfort.

Others make no attempt at calling attention to themselves. They merely settle down in a cabin or a cave conveniently situated at a few miles from a prosperous village or herdsmen tribal ground. Things may be a little hard at first and food not always plentiful, for Tibetans are not hasty in giving their confidence and faith to "uncommissioned" lamas. But if the man is clever and knows "the ways" he will gradually succeed. He must play the soothsayer of course and drive away



the demons which cause illness. If chance favours him, a few of the oracles he delivers may prove true, man or beast recover after he has exorcised the evil one. Nothing more is needed to secure quite brilliant prospects.

I suppose that few Westerners would enjoy the life of a pseudo-ascetic in the Tibetan wilds, but Tibetans do. Frauds of this kind always end by being caught at their own tricks. Of course, they do not attain the bliss which awaits true mystics; but they live free, respected, without any occasion for working; and they receive enough tea, butter, and *tsampa* for all their daily wants. Beyond this any cabin or cave roughly fitted up as a dwelling-place satisfies the unsophisticated craving of these ingenious, yet simple, rogues. Many of them are far from being bad characters and altogether unsympathetic. They nearly always struck me as practical jokers, and the fun I derived from their naive cunning inclined me to kindly judgment.

The current idea in the West is that a man cannot maintain seclusion or absolute solitude for a considerable length of time. It is believed that these unavoidably bring in their train, brain disorders, finally leading to stupidity and madness.

This is perhaps true about the individuals on whom the effects of isolation have been studied: lighthouse guards, travellers thrown on to desert island after a shipwreck, explorers lost in uninhabited regions, prisoners in solitary confinement, etc. But such observations do not apply to Tibetan hermits. The latter after ten or twenty years, or even a longer time, in the wilderness or in *tsams khangs*, are far from being insane. One may dispute the theories which they have conceived during their protracted meditations, but it is impossible to question their sanity.

There is nothing really remarkable about this. These men are prepared for loneliness. Before shutting them-

selves in their *tsams khang* or settling in a *ritöd*, they have accumulated in their mind a store of ideas which keep them company. Moreover, they are not inactive during their retreat, long as it may be. Their days are occupied by methodical exercises in spiritual training, the search for occult knowledge or meditations on philosophic problems. And so, often passionately interested in these manifold investigations and introspections, they are actually very busy and hardly notice their solitude.

I have never heard a Tibetan hermit say that, even at the beginning of his retreat, he had suffered from lack of associations with men. Generally, those who have tasted the anchorite life find it difficult, if not impossible to resume life among other people or to enjoy regular social intercourse.

Whatever those unacquainted with it may think, solitude and utter loneliness are far from being devoid of charm.

Words cannot convey the almost voluptuous sweetness of the feelings experienced when one closes the door of one's *tsams khang*, or when one looks down from the heights at the first wintry snow heaping up in the lower valleys, creating for months around the hermitage an impassable white and cold rampart.

But, most likely, only those who have lived through it themselves can understand the irresistible attraction that hermit life exerts on many Orientals.

The practices to which Tibetan recluses apply themselves while shut in their *tsams khang* or *ritöds* are many and of a various nature. Any attempt to compile a complete list of them would be vain, for most probably nobody in the world knows them all.

One finds in the Tibetan mystic literature more or less exhaustive descriptions of a few practices, but, as a rule, they are reticent on the points which interest us most, that is to say the purpose of the practices. Reliable



information can only be obtained from those who are acquainted with traditional oral teaching for each particular exercise. One must, especially, beware of remaining satisfied with interpretations obtained of only one initiate, for they vary not only among different sects, but among individual teachers.

It would be a mistake to fancy that all Tibetans who live in seclusion in a *tsams khang* or betake themselves to solitude, are endowed with uncommon intelligence and ponder over transcendental problems.

I have already spoken of the sham *gomchens* who have taken to religious life as to a profession. There also exists a very large number of well-meaning simpletons and men of average mental power who bring the superstitions of popular lamaism to their retreat.

Amongst those, many devote the time of their seclusion repeating thousands and even millions of times one single formula: generally a Sanskrit *mantra* which is unintelligible to them. Others recite a Tibetan text, but often they understand no more of its meaning than if they were uttering words in a foreign language.

The most ordinary formula is the well-known *Aum mani padme hum!* I say, well known as far as the words are concerned, because foreigners have read it in many books. It does not follow that its meaning has been made clear to them.

Lay travellers and even Orientalists are sometimes a little too quick to declare that meaningless which they do not at once understand. Erudite authors, even to-day, translate the first word of the formula, *aum*, by our commonplace exclamation *ah!* and *hum*, the last word, by *amen*.

There exists an immense literature in India devoted to the explanation of the mystic word *Aum*. The latter has exoteric, esoteric and mystic meanings. It may signify the three persons of the Hindu Trinity: Brahma, Vishnou, Shiva. It may signify the Brahman, the "One

without a second" of the *adwaita* philosophy. It stands as a symbol of the Inexpressible Absolute, the last word to be uttered in mysticism, after which there follows only silence. It is, according to Shri Sankarâcharya,<sup>1</sup> "the support of the meditation," or, as declared in the *Mundakopanishad*'s text itself, "it is the bow by the means of which the individual self attains the universal self."<sup>2</sup>

Again, *Aum* is the creative sound whose vibrations build the worlds. When the mystic is capable of hearing all in one the countless voices, cries, songs, and noises of all beings and things that exist and move, it is the unique sound *Aum* which reaches him. That same *Aum* vibrates also in the utmost depth of his inner self. He who can pronounce it with the right tone, is able to work wonders, and he who knows how to utter it silently, attains supreme emancipation.

Tibetans who have received the word *Aum* from India together with the *mantras* with which it is associated, do not appear to have been acquainted with its many meanings among their Southern neighbours, nor do they know the very prominent place it occupies in their religions and philosophies.

*Aum* is repeated by lamaists along with other Sanskrit formulas, without having a special importance by itself, while other mystic syllables as *hum!* and especially *phat!* are supposed to possess great power and are much used in magic and mystic rites.

So much for the first word of the formula.

*Mani padme* are Sanskrit terms that mean "jewel in the lotus." Here we come, it seems, to an immediately intelligible meaning, yet the current interpretation does not take any account of that plain meaning.

<sup>1</sup> In his commentary on *Mundakopanishad*.

<sup>2</sup> "The *Pranava* (that is the name of the sacred syllable *Aum*) is the bow, the *Atman* (the individual self) is the arrow and the Brahman (universal self: the Absolute) is said to be the mark."



Common folk believe that the recitation of *Aum mani padme hum!* will assure them a happy rebirth in *Nub Dewa chen*, the Western Paradise of the Great Bliss.

The more "learned" have been told that the six syllables of the formula are connected with the six classes of sentient beings and are related to one of the mystic colours as follows :

*Aum* is white and connected with gods (Iha).

*Ma* is blue and connected with non-gods (Ihamayin).<sup>1</sup>

*Ni* is yellow and connected with men (mi).

*Pad* is green and connected with animals (tudo).

*Me* is red and connected with non-men (*Yidag*<sup>2</sup> or other *mi-ma-yin*<sup>3</sup>).

*Hum* is black and connected with dwellers in purgatories.

There are several opinions regarding the effect of the recitation of these six syllables. Popular tradition declares that those who frequently repeat the formula will be reborn in the Western Paradise of the Great Bliss. Others who deem themselves more enlightened declare that the recitation of *Aum mani padme hum!* may liberate from a rebirth in any of the six realms.

*Aum mani padme hum!* is used as a support for a special meditation which may, approximately, be described as follows :

One identifies the six kinds of beings with the six syllables which are pictured in their respective colours, as mentioned above. They form a kind of chain without

<sup>1</sup> A kind of Titans always at war with the gods.

<sup>2</sup> The bodies of *Yidags* are as big as a hill, their necks are as thin as a thread. These miserable beings are perpetually tortured by hunger and thirst. When they approach water to drink it transforms itself into flame. Every morning the lamas offer consecrated water to the *Yidags* to relieve their sufferings. This consecrated water does not turn into flame at their approach.

<sup>3</sup> In the *mi ma yin* class are included demi-gods, genii; spirits of various kind, either friendly or malevolent.

end that circulates through the body, carried on by the breath, entering through one nostril and going out through the other.

As the concentration of mind becomes more perfect, one sees mentally the length of the chain increasing. Now when they go out with the expiration, the mystic syllables are carried far away, before being absorbed again with the next inspiration. Yet, the chain is not broken, it rather elongates like a rubber strap and always remains in touch with the man who meditates.

Gradually, also, the shape of the Tibetan letters vanishes and those who "obtain the fruit" of the practice perceive the six syllables as six realms in which arise, move, enjoy, suffer, and pass away the innumerable beings, belonging to the six species.

And now it remains for the meditator to realize that the six realms (the whole phenomenal world) are subjective: a mere creation of the mind which imagines them and into which they sink.

Advanced mystics reach, by the way of this practice, a trance in which the letters of the formula, as well as the beings and their activity, all merge into *That* which, for lack of a better term, Mahâyânist Buddhists have called "Emptiness."

Then, having realized the "Void," they become emancipated from the illusion of the world and, as a consequence, liberated from rebirths which are but the fruit of that creative delusion.

Another of the many interpretations of *Aum mani padme hum!* ignores the division in six syllables and takes the formula according to its meaning: "a jewel in a lotus." These words are considered as symbolic.

The simplest interpretation is: In the lotus (which is the world) exists the precious jewel of Buddha's teaching.

Another explanation takes the lotus as the mind. In the depth of it, by introspective meditation, one is able



to find the jewel of knowledge, truth, reality, liberation, nirvāna, these various terms being different denominations of one same thing.

Now we come to a meaning related to certain doctrines of the Mahāyānist Buddhists.

According to them *nirvāna*, the supreme salvation, is not separated from *samsāra*, the phenomenal world, but the mystic finds the first in the heart of the second, just as the "jewel" may be found in the "lotus." Nirvāna, the "jewel," exists when enlightenment exists. *Samsāra*, the "lotus," exists when delusion exists, which veils nirvāna, just as the many petals of the "lotus" conceal the "jewel" nestling among them.

*Hum!* at the end of the formula, is a mystic expression of wrath used in coercing fierce deities and subduing demons. How has it become affixed to the "jewel in the lotus" and the Indian *Aum*?—This again is explained in various ways.

*Hum!* is a kind of mystic war cry; uttering it, is challenging an enemy. Who is the enemy? Each one imagines him in his own way: either as powerful fiends, or as the trinity of bad propensities that bind us to the round of rebirth, namely lust, hatred and stupidity. More subtle thinkers see him as the "I." *Hum!* is also said to mean the mind devoid of objective content, etc., etc.

Another syllable is added to conclude the repetition of *Aum mani padme hum!* one hundred and eight times on the beads of a rosary. It is the syllable *hri!* Some understand it as signifying an inner reality hidden under the appearances, the basic essence of things.

Beside *Aum mani padme hum hri!* other formulas are also repeated as *Aum vajra sattva!* That is to say, "Aum most excellent (diamond) being." It is understood that the excellent One meant is the Buddha. The followers of the Red cap sects often repeat: *Aum vajra guru padma siddhi hum!* as praise of their founder Padmasambhava.

These words mean *Aum*, most excellent powerful guru Padma, miracle worker, *hum!*

Amongst longer formulas one of the most popular is that called "Kyabdo."<sup>1</sup> It is Tibetan without admixture of Sanskrit and its significance is plain, yet far from crude. The text runs as follows:

"I take refuge in all holy refuges. Ye fathers and mothers (ancestors) who are wandering in the round of rebirths under the shapes of the six kinds of sentient beings. In order to attain Buddhahood, the state devoid of fear and sorrow, let your thoughts be directed towards enlightenment."

Often this formula is given to beginners for their first period of *tsams*. Its words are well known and anyone can repeat them without being shut in *tsams*. They are held as meritorious and efficacious under any circumstance. For this reason, I had chosen them during my journey to Lhasa, to break the monotonous repetition of *Aum mani padme hum!* when I deemed it prudent to appear absorbed in a pious exercise to avoid annoying talks and embarrassing questions that might have put my incognito in jeopardy.

The common "*kyabdo—tsams*" consists in remaining in seclusion in a hut or in one's own room and repeating the above-mentioned formula one hundred thousand times, while prostrating oneself the same number of times. Any formula may be repeated in the same way, with one hundred thousand prostrations.

Tibetans perform prostrations in two ways. One is very much like the Chinese *kowtow*. The difference is that before kneeling, one lifts the arms above the head, joining the palms and, then, brings the folded hands successively in front of the forehead, the mouth and the heart.

Obeisances of that kind are repeated three times when saluting the images in the temples, the lamas

<sup>1</sup> "Going to the refuge."



of rank, one's own *guru*, and the sacred books or edifices.

The second kind of prostration is called *kyang chag*. It is made in Indian fashion, the body lying flat on the ground, and is only performed in a few special very devotional exercises such as the *kyabdo* practice.

*Tsamspas*, who aspire to the title of *chagbum*, repeat one hundred thousand times a *kyabdo* formula while prostrating themselves as many times, their foreheads actually touching the ground or the floor of the room at each prostration. This repeated contact of the flesh with a hard surface produces a bump or even a sore. The latter must show certain peculiarities understood by experts in the matter, which indicate whether the object of the rite has, or has not, been obtained.

*Tsamspas*, who consider themselves far above the practice of *kyabdo*, perform breathing exercises. These consist in taking different, often extraordinary, postures while one trains oneself to inhale, exhale, hold the breath in and keep it out<sup>1</sup> in various ways.

Often the *tsamspas* drill themselves naked, and the shape of the belly during the exercises is a sign that shows the degree of proficiency attained by the disciple.

Beside physical results, some of which have been described in a preceding chapter, Tibetans affirm that through mastery over breath one may conquer all passion and anger as well as carnal desires, acquire serenity, prepare the mind for meditation and awake spiritual energy.

"Breath is the courser and mind is the rider," say the Tibetan mystics. So it is essential that the courser must be well trained. But breath, in its turn, influences bodily and mental activity. Consequently, two methods have been devised: the most easy one which quiets

<sup>1</sup> That is to say after having breathed out, one remains for a while without breathing in. In technical terms, this is called: *to stay void*.

the mind by controlling the breath and the more difficult way which consists in regulating the breath by controlling the mind.

To the breathing drill repeated several times each day, the recluse often adds the contemplative meditation practised with *kyilkhors*.<sup>1</sup> The latter are, also, most important and conspicuous in the magic rites called *dubthabs* (method of success).

*Kyilkhors* are diagrams drawn on paper or material, or engraved on stone, metal or wood. Others are constructed with small flags, altar lamps, incense sticks and vases containing various things such as grain, water, etc. The personalities who are supposed to dwell in the *kyilkhors* and their requisites are represented by pyramidal cakes named *torma*.

*Kyilkhors* are also drawn with coloured powders on the temple floor or on boards. I have seen some which measured about seven feet in diameter.

The word *kyilkhors* means a circle, nevertheless, amongst the numberless kinds of *kyilkhors*, there exist square and quadrangular forms, while those used in black magic or for the coercion or destruction of malignant entities are triangular.

The monks who wish to become proficient in this kind of art spend years studying its rules. One of the four high colleges which exist in all large monasteries teaches the art of drawing the *kyilkhors* that are parts of the official lamaist magic rites. As for secret ones connected with mystic training or black magic, each student must learn them privately from his own teacher.

The least mistake in the drawing of a *kyilkhors* or the place given to the *tormas* in its construction, may have most terrible consequences, for the *kyilkhors* is a magic instrument which hurts him who handles it unskillfully.

Moreover, no one should construct or draw a *kyilkhors* if he has not been empowered to do so, by a proper

<sup>1</sup> Written *dkyilkhors*.



initiation, and each variety of *kyilkhor* requires the corresponding initiation. That which is the work of a non-initiated cannot be animated and remains powerless.

As for the true understanding of the symbolic meaning of the *kyilkhors*, and the theories which support their use in psychic training, very few are aware of them.

Needless to say that elaborate and large-sized *kyilkhors* cannot find room in the *tsams khangs*. Their form, there, is very much simplified.

At the beginning of his spiritual education the novice is likely to be taught by his teacher the way of constructing a diagram which is to be used as support (*rten*) to fix the attention during meditation.

One of the exercises most generally practised—either with or without a *kyilkhor*—at that stage of the training, is the following :

A deity is imagined ; it is first contemplated alone, then from its body spring out other forms sometimes like its own, sometimes different. There are often four of them, but in some meditations they become hundreds or even innumerable.

When all these personages have appeared quite clearly around the central figure, they are one after another reabsorbed in it. Now the original deity remains again alone and gradually begins to disappear. The feet vanish first and then slowly the whole body and finally the head. Only a dot remains. This may be dark, coloured or purely luminous. Mystic masters interpret this as a sign which shows the degree of spiritual progress attained by their disciples.

Then, the dot moves towards the man who beholds it and sinks into him. One must note the part of the body in which it seems to disappear. A period of meditation follows that exercise, which may be done again and again as many times as desired.

One may also imagine a lotus. It opens slowly and

on each of its petals stands a Bodhisatva, one of them being enthroned in the heart of the flower. After a while, as the lotus begins to fold its petals again each one emits a ray of light that sinks into the centre of the flower, and when it closes entirely, light escapes from its heart and penetrates the man in meditation.

There exist many kinds of similar practices.

Many novices do not proceed farther. Thus dryly described, such visions cannot but appear absurd, yet they constitute a somewhat fascinating puzzle on account of the multifarious unexpected aspects they assume after a certain time of training.

They provide the recluse with spectacles which rival the most beautiful fairy-plays that can be seen on the stage. Even those who are well aware of their illusive nature may enjoy them, and as for those who believe in the reality of the divine players, it is not surprising that they are bewitched.

However, it is not to amuse the hermits that these exercises have been invented. Their true aim is to lead the disciple to understand that the worlds and all phenomena which we perceive are but mirages born from our imagination.

“They emanate from the mind  
And into the mind they sink.”

In fact this is the fundamental teaching of Tibetan mystics.

If we now consider the case of a monk (who instead of placing himself under the spiritual guidance of a lama who is a regular member of a monastery) ventures to solicit the teaching of a contemplative anchorite *naljorpa* the training takes another aspect. Methods become strange, sometimes even cruel ; we have seen it in a previous chapter.

The trilogy : *Examination, Meditation, Understanding*, takes a peculiar importance among the followers of the



"Short Path" and the intellectual activity of the disciple is exclusively directed towards these results. Sometimes the means that are used seem extravagant, yet when closely investigated one sees that the object aimed at is quite reasonable. It is also clear that the inventors of these curious methods perfectly understand the mind of their brethren in religion and have devised them accordingly.

Padmasambhava is said to have described the stages of the mystic path in the following way.

1. To read a large number of books on the various religions and philosophies. To listen to many learned doctors professing different doctrines. To experiment oneself with a number of methods.

2. To choose a doctrine among the many one has studied and discard the other ones, as the eagle carries off only one sheep from the flock.

3. To remain in a lowly condition, humble in one's demeanour, not seeking to be conspicuous or important in the eyes of the world, but behind apparent insignificance, to let one's mind soar high above all worldly power and glory.

4. To be indifferent to all. Behaving like the dog or the pig that eat what chance brings them. Not making any choice among the things which one meets. Abstaining from any effort to acquire or avoid anything. Accepting with an equal indifference whatever comes: riches or poverty, praise or contempt, giving up the distinction between virtue and vice, honourable and shameful, good and evil. Being neither afflicted, nor repenting whatever one may have done and, on the other hand, never being elated nor proud on account of what one has accomplished.

5. To consider with perfect equanimity and detachment the conflicting opinions and the various manifestations of the activity of beings. To understand that such is the nature of things, the inevitable mode

of action of each entity and to remain always serene. To look at the world as a man standing on the highest mountain of the country looks at the valleys and the lesser summits spread out below him.<sup>1</sup>

6. It is said that the sixth stage cannot be described in words. It corresponds to the realization of the "Void"<sup>2</sup> which, in Lamaist terminology, means the Inexpressible reality.

In spite of these programmes, it is impossible to establish a regular gradation of the multifarious training exercises devised by Tibetan mystic anchorites. In practice, these various exercises are combined. Moreover each lama adopts a peculiar method, and it is even rare to see two disciples of the same master following exactly the same path.

We must make up our minds to accept an apparent chaos which is a natural result of the different individual tendencies and aptitudes which the *gurus*, adepts of the "Short Path," refuse to crush. "Liberty" is the motto on the heights of the "Land of Snows," but strangely enough, the disciple starts on that road of utter freedom, by the strictest obedience to his spiritual guide. However, the required submission is confined to the spiritual and psychic exercises and the way of living prescribed by the master. No dogmas are ever imposed. The disciple may believe, deny or doubt anything according to his own feelings.

<sup>1</sup> Compare *Dhammapada*: "When the learned man drives away vanity by earnestness, he, the wise one, climbing the terraced heights of wisdom, looks down upon the fools. Free from sorrow, he looks upon the sorrowing crowd, as one that stands on a mountain looks down upon them that stand upon the plain." The *Dhammapada* is a work belonging to the Buddhist canonic Scriptures in Pali language.

<sup>2</sup> In a general way, one must understand here, the realization of the non-existence of a permanent *ego*, according to the Tibetan current formula: "The person is devoid of self; all things are devoid of self."



I have heard a lama say that the part of a master, adept of the "Short Path," is to superintend a "clearing." He must incite the novice to rid himself of the beliefs, ideas, acquired habits and innate tendencies, which are part of his present mind, and have been developed in the course of successive lives whose origin is lost in the night of time.

On the other hand, the master must warn his disciple to be on his guard against accepting new beliefs, ideas and habits as groundless and irrational as those which he shakes off.

The discipline on the "Short Path" is to avoid imagining things. When imagination is prescribed, in contemplative meditation, it is to demonstrate by that conscious creation of perceptions or sensations, the illusory nature of those perceptions and sensations which we accept as real though they too rest on imagination; the only difference being that, in their case, the creation is unconsciously effected.

The Tibetan reformer, Tsong Khapa, defines meditation as "the means<sup>1</sup> of enabling oneself to reject all imaginative thoughts together with their seed."

It is this uprooting of the present "imaginative thoughts," and the burning of their "seed," so that no fanciful ideas may arise in the future, that constitutes the "clearing" which I have just mentioned.

Two exercises are especially prescribed by the adepts of the mystic path.

The first consists in observing with great attention the workings of the mind without attempting to stop it.

Seated in a quiet place, the disciple refrains as much as he can from consciously pointing his thoughts in

<sup>1</sup> The word used by the author is *khungs*, which means the "source," the "origin." The quotation is taken from the work called *The Lamp of the Way*. A similar definition is found in the Yoga sūtras of Patanjali.

a definite direction. He marks the spontaneous arising of ideas, memories, desires, etc., and considers how, superseded by new ones, they sink into the dark recesses of the mind.

He watches also the subjective image which, apparently unconnected with any thoughts or sensations, appears while his eyes are closed: men, animals, landscapes, moving crowds, etc.

During that exercise, he avoids making reflections about the spectacle which he beholds, looking passively at the continual, swift, flowing stream of thoughts and mental images that whirl, jostle, fight and pass away.

It is said that the disciple is about to gather the fruit of this practice when he loosens the firm footing he had kept, till then, in his quality of spectator. He too—so he must understand—is an actor on the tumultuous stage. His present introspection, all his acts and thoughts, and the very sum of them all which he calls his *self*, are but ephemeral bubbles in a whirlpool made of an infinite quantity of bubbles which congregate for a moment, separate, burst, and form again, following a giddy rhythm.

The second exercise is intended to stop the roaming of the mind in order that one may concentrate it on one single object.

Training which tends to develop a perfect concentration of mind is generally deemed necessary for all students without distinction. As to observing the mind's activity it is only recommended to the most intellectual disciples.

Training the mind to "one-pointedness" is practised in all Buddhist sects.

In Southern Buddhist countries—Ceylon, Siam, Burma—an apparatus called *kasinas*, which consists of clay discs variously coloured, or a round surface covered by water, or a fire at which one gazes through a screen



in which a round hole is pierced—are used for this purpose.

Any of these circles is stared at until it is seen as clearly when the eyes are shut, as when they are open and actually looking at it.

The process does not aim at producing an hypnotic state, as some Western scholars have said, but it accustoms one to concentrating the mind. The fact that the subjective image has become as vivid as the objective, indicates—according to those who patronize that method—that “one-pointedness” has been reached.

Tibetans consider the object chosen to train oneself to be of no importance. Whatever attracts and retains most easily the thoughts of the disciple should be preferred.

There is a story well known in the Tibetan religious world which illustrates a successful result of this practice.

A young man begs the spiritual guidance of a mystic anchorite. The latter wishes him to begin by exercising himself in the concentration of mind.

“What kind of work do you usually do?” he inquires of his new disciple.

“I keep the yaks<sup>1</sup> on the hills,” answers the man.

“All right,” says the *gomchen*. “Meditate on a yak.”

The novice repairs to a cave roughly fitted up to serve as a habitation—a few such shelters can always be found in the regions inhabited by herdsmen—and settles down there.

After some time, the master goes to the place and calls to his pupil to come out of the cave.

The latter hears the *gomchen's* voice, gets up and wants to walk out through the entrance of his primitive dwelling. But his meditation has achieved its purpose. He has identified himself with the object on which all his thoughts have been concentrated, he has forgotten

<sup>1</sup> *Yak*, spelt *gyag*. The Tibetan wild hairy ox that has been domesticated.

his own personality, he feels himself a yak. Now, though the opening is large enough to allow the passage of a man, it is too narrow for a big bull, so, while struggling against an imaginary obstacle, the young man answers his *guru*: “I cannot get out, my *horns* prevent me.”

Though deeply respectful of everything connected with religion, Tibetans always retain a keen sense of humour. They do not fail to notice the comic effect that such practices produce when performed by simple-minded novices.

The following story was told me in the course of a tramp with a *naljorpa* from Gartog.

After having spent some time with his *guru* to receive his instruction, a zealous disciple was returning to his hermitage. While walking, he began to meditate and, according to a well-known reverential custom, he imagined his worshipful teacher was seated on his head. After a time, he entered a state of trance in which he felt perfectly sure that he was carrying his lama.

A stone or some other obstacle caused the man to fall, but so strong was his concentration of thought that the shock did not break it. He got up loudly apologizing:

“I beg your pardon, ‘Precious One.’ I am so sorry to have let you fall, I hope you have not hurt yourself. . . . Where are you, now? . . .”

And the good disciple hurried away to examine a ravine near by in case his lama had rolled into it.

Another story about “the lama on the head” was told me by a Dugpa<sup>1</sup> lama. The joke is coarser than the former one and reflects the mind of the sturdy massive Dugpa hillmen.

A nun, it is said, was advised by her spiritual teacher to imagine him seated on her head when meditating.

<sup>1</sup> A native of Bhutan.



She did so accordingly and was so successful that the weight of the venerable lama who was a well-fed, tall and stout man, gave her great pain. Women of all countries, we must believe, are peculiarly clever at finding a way out of their troubles.

When paying another visit to her *guru* he asked if she had carried out his instruction and imagined that he was seated on her head.

"I did, 'Precious One,'" answered the nun, "and indeed, your weight became so painful, that I changed places with you and sat on your head myself."

One variety of exercises in concentration consists in choosing some kind of a landscape, a garden for instance, as a subject of meditation.

First, the student examines the garden, observing every detail. The flowers, their different species, the way in which they are grouped, the trees, their respective height, the shape of their branches, their different leaves and so on, noting all particulars that he can detect.

When he has formed a subjective image of the garden, that is to say when he sees it as distinctly when shutting his eyes as when looking at it, the disciple begins to eliminate one by one the various details which together constitute the garden.

Gradually, the flowers lose their colours and their forms, they crumble into tiny pieces which fall to dust and finally vanish. The trees, also, lose their leaves, their branches shorten, and seem to be withdrawn into the trunk. The latter grows thin, becomes a mere line, more and more flimsy till it ceases to be visible.

Now, the bare ground alone remains and from it the novice must subtract the stones and the earth. The ground in its turn vanishes. . . .

It is said that by the means of such exercises one succeeds in expelling from the mind all idea of form and matter and thus gradually reaches the various

states of consciousness such as that of the "pure, boundless space," and that of the "boundless consciousness." Finally one attains to the "sphere of void," and then to the sphere where "neither consciousness nor unconsciousness" is present.<sup>1</sup>

These four contemplative meditations are often mentioned in early Buddhist Scriptures and are recognized by all sects as part of the spiritual training. They are called "formless contemplations."

Many methods have been devised which lead to these peculiar states of mind. Sometimes the later states are produced by a contemplation absolutely devoid of cogitations, while in other cases they follow a series of minute introspections or are the result of prolonged investigations and reflections regarding the external world. Lastly, it is said that there are people who suddenly reach one or another of these four states of mind without any preparation, in any place or during any kind of occupation.

The following exercise has already been briefly described in the story of the man who felt himself to be a yak. However, it includes developments that were unknown to the hero of that story:

For instance, the disciple has chosen a tree, as an object of meditation, and has identified himself with it. That is to say that he has lost the consciousness of his own personality and experiences the peculiar sensations that one may ascribe to a tree. He feels himself to be composed of a stiff trunk with branches, he perceives the sensation of the wind moving the leaves. He notes the activity of the roots feeding under the ground, the ascension of the sap which spreads all over the tree, and so on.

Then, having mentally become a tree (which has

<sup>1</sup> That is to say that it is an indescribable state to which the ordinary notions of consciousness and unconsciousness cannot be applied.



now become the subject) he must look at the man (who has now become the object) seated in front of him and must examine this man in detail.

This done, the disciple again places his consciousness in the man and contemplates the tree as before. Then, transferring his consciousness once more into the tree, he contemplates the man. This alternative transposition of subject and object is effected a number of times.

This exercise is often practised indoors with a statue of a stick called *gom shing* (meditation wood).<sup>1</sup> A burning incense stick is also used in an obscure or completely darkened room to dispose the mind to meditation. But I must again lay stress upon the fact that it is not intended to produce an hypnotic state.

Preparation for meditation is called *niampar jagpa*. It consists in bringing the mind into perfect stillness and the contemplation of the tiny dot of fire at the top of the stick helps in producing that state of calm.

People who habitually practise methodical contemplation often experience, when sitting down for their appointed time of meditation, the sensation of putting down a load or taking off a heavy garment and entering a silent, delightfully calm, region. It is the impression of deliverance and serenity which Tibetan mystics call *niampar jagpa*, "to make equal," "to level"—meaning calming down all causes of agitation that roll their "waves" through the mind.

Another exercise which, however, seems to be seldom practised, consists in "displacing one's consciousness in one's own body." It is explained as follows.

We feel our consciousness in our "heart." Our arms seem to us to be "annexes" to our body, and our feet seem to be a distant part of our person. In fact,

<sup>1</sup> Properly speaking, the *gom shing* is merely a stick at which one gazes to obtain fixity of mind. The burning incense stick is a variety of *gom shing*.

arms, feet and other parts of the body are looked at as if they were *objects* for a *subject* dwelling elsewhere.

Now the student will endeavour to make the "consciousness" leave its habitual abode and transfer it, for instance, to his hand, then he must feel himself to have the shape of five fingers and a palm, situated at the extremity of a long attachment (the arm) which joins on to a big moving structure, the body.

That is to say, he must experience the sensation that we might have if, instead of having the eyes and the brain in the head, we had them in the hand and then the hand was able to examine the head and the body, reversing the normal process which is to look downwards in order to see the hands or the body.

What can be the aim of such strange exercises? The most frequent answer given to my questions will probably seem unsatisfactory by many inquirers, yet it is probably quite correct.

Some lamas have told me that the aim of these practices can hardly be explained, because those who have not felt their effects could not understand the explanations.

One attains, by the means of these strange drills, psychic states entirely different from those habitual to us. They cause us to pass beyond the fictitious limits which we assign to the *self*. The result being that we grow to realize that the *self* is compound, impermanent; and that the *self*, *as self*, does not exist.

One of these lamas seized upon a remark I had made as an argument in support of his theory.

When he spoke of the heart as the seat of thought and mind, I had said that Westerners would rather place thoughts and mind in the brain.

"You see," immediately replied my interlocutor, "that one may feel and recognize the mind in different places. Since these Philings<sup>1</sup> experience the sensation

<sup>1</sup> Foreigners.



of thinking in their *head*, and I experience it in my *heart*, one may believe that it is quite possible to feel it in the *foot*. But all these are only deceitful sensations, with no shadow of reality. The mind is neither *in the heart* nor *in the head*, nor somewhere outside of the *body*, apart, separated, alien to it. It is to help one realize this fact that these apparently strange practices have been devised."

Here again we meet with the "clearing" process. All these exercises aim at destroying habitual notions accepted by routine and without personal investigation. The object is to make one understand that other ideas can be put in their place. It is hoped that the disciple will conclude that there cannot be any absolute truth in ideas derived from sensations which can be discarded while others, even contradictory to them, take their place.

Kindred theories are professed by the followers of the Chinese Ts'an sect.<sup>1</sup> They express them in enigmatical sentences such as :

"Lo, a cloud of dust is rising from the ocean and the roaring of the waves is heard over the land."

"I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding."

"When I pass over the bridge, Lo! the water floweth not, but the bridge floweth.

"Empty handed I go, and behold! the spade's handle is in my hand."

And so on.

The doctrine of the Ts'an sect has been defined by one of its followers as "the art of perceiving the polar star in the Austral hemisphere." This paradoxical saying resembles that of the lama who said to me : "One must discover the white in the black and the black in the white."

I shall cite a question, current in Tibet, which mystic

<sup>1</sup> Called Zen sect, in Japan.

hermits, as well as philosophers living in monasteries, put to their pupils.

"A flag moves, What is that which moves?—Is it the flag or the wind?"

The answer is that neither the flag nor the wind moves. It is the mind that moves.

The followers of the Ts'an sect ascribe the origin of this question to the sixth Patriarch of their sect. Once, in the courtyard of the monastery, he saw two monks looking at a flag floating in the air. One of them declared : "It is the flag that moves." The other affirmed : "It is the wind that moves." Then the master explained to them that the perception of a motion which they experienced was not really due to the wind or to the flag, but to something existing in themselves.

We are in doubt as to whether such ways of thinking have been imported into Tibet from India or from China. I may, however, state the opinion expressed by a lama : "The *Bön pos*," he said, "taught such things long before Padmasambhava came to Tibet."<sup>1</sup>

Abandoning further investigations on the transcendental results of transferring one's mind to different parts of one's body, I may remark that during this exercise, a peculiar sensation of heat is felt at the spot where one has "transported his consciousness."

It is rather difficult to ascertain whether the phenomena consists in a real increase in heat or a subjective sensation only. The very idea of undertaking such investigation would break the concentration of mind and so destroy the cause that produced heat. As to making observation upon other people, it is almost impossible. Tibetan hermits and their disciples have nothing in common with Western professional mediums who work for money and allow us to examine the phenomena which they produce. The most insignifi-

<sup>1</sup> This means before Buddhism spread into Tibet.



cant pupil of a *gomchen* would feel astonished if such a proposal was made to him. I can hear him answer: "I do not care whether you believe or not in these phenomena, and I have no desire to convince you. I am not a juggler giving theatrical performances."

The fact is that Orientals, excepting vulgar charlatans, do not make a show of their mystic, philosophic or psychic knowledge. It is most difficult to win their confidence in these matters. A traveller in search of information may be the guest of a lama for several months, drink tea daily with him and go away thinking his host is an ignoramus, while on the contrary, the lama could have answered all his questions and told him more things than he has even thought of.

Whether the heat be actual or subjective the exercise has more than once warmed my feet, and given me a refreshing sleep while spending the night under a tent—or even without any tent—outdoors in the snow. But unless one has been trained for a long time in the practice, it requires strenuous efforts which make it extremely tiring.

To conclude, I will call attention to the fact that the terms which I have translated by "consciousness" and "mind" have not exactly the same signification in Tibetan as in English.

Tibetans distinguish as many as eleven kinds of "consciousness" and have three words in their language which we are compelled to translate by "mind," though each of them bears a special philosophic meaning.

A frequent way of ascertaining the degree of the concentration of mind is to place a small burning lamp on the head of the novice who is to remain in solitary meditation.

Tibetan lamps consist of a cup-like receptacle, made of metal or mud; the base of the lamp enlarges at the bottom, which is shaped like a second cup turned

upside down. These lamps are filled with melted butter; a wick is thrust into a small cavity bored for that purpose at the bottom of the cup. When the butter cools it forms a cake and the lamp is ready to be lighted.

This apparatus easily rests on the crown of the head as long as one preserves absolute immobility, but it falls off at the slightest movement. Now as perfect concentration produces complete immobility, any failure is proved by the fall of the lamp.

It is said that a lama who had once placed a lamp on the head of a pupil found him the next day still seated in meditation, but with the lamp beside him on the ground without any butter in it. Answering his master's question, the novice who had not understood the aim of the exercise replied:

"The lamp did not fall down, I myself took it away when the butter was exhausted and it went out."—"How could you know that the lamp went out, or even that you had a lamp on your head, if you had reached true concentration of mind?" retorted the teacher.

Sometimes a small bowl filled with water is used instead of a lamp.

Certain masters also command their disciples, either before the time of their meditation or immediately after it, to carry from one spot to another a bowl with water up to the brim. This exercise aims at testing the degree of tranquillity of the mind. The slightest agitation of the mind, whatever may be its cause—joy or sadness, memory, desire, etc.—is likely to produce a movement of the body. Now, the least quivering of the fingers is sufficient to shake the bowl and the quantity of water poured out, as well as the number of times the accident happens, discloses the more or less violent movement of the mind. Such at least is the theory on which the exercise is based.



This theory and the exercises which have been devised from it, are known all over the East. Indians tell pretty stories about them. Here is one.

A *rishi*<sup>1</sup> had a disciple whom he believed already far advanced in spiritual development. Wishing that he might receive supplementary teaching from Janaka, the kingly Sage of great repute, he sent the young man to him. At first Janaka left the new-comer for several days outside his palace gate without allowing him even to enter the courtyard. Nevertheless, the well-trained disciple, though he was of noble descent, did not show the least sign of being grieved, offended, or displeased by this humiliating treatment.

When he was finally admitted to the presence of the king, he was given at the door of the throne hall a bowl filled with water up to the brim and ordered to walk with it in his hand all round the hall.

Janaka, though his mind was utterly indifferent to all worldly things, was surrounded by true Oriental splendour. Gold and precious stones glittered on the walls of the great hall, the courtiers wearing costly jewels surrounded their sovereign, and the palace dancing girls, as beautiful as goddesses and scantily clad, smiled at the young stranger when he passed before them.

Nevertheless the disciple went through the prescribed ordeal without spilling a drop of water. Nothing offered to his eyes had been capable of producing the slightest movement in his mind.

Janaka sent him back to his *guru* saying that he did not need any lessons.

Tibetans are acquainted with the theory regarding the *khloros* (wheels) which is classic among the followers of Hindu Tantrism. Most likely it has been imported into Tibet from India or Nepal, but the interpretation given by the lamas differs on a number of points from that which is current in Hindu circles.

<sup>1</sup> A Sage often possessed with supernormal powers.

The *khloros* are said to be centres of energy that are situated in various parts of the body. They are often called "lotus." The practices connected with the *khloros* belong to the esoteric teaching. The general aim of the training in which the *khloros* play a part is to direct a stream of energy to the higher lotus: the *dabtong* (lotus with a thousand petals) which is situated at the top of the head. The different kinds of exercises in this training aim at utilizing the energy naturally expressed in animal manifestations connected with sex, for the development of intelligence and supernormal powers.

The lamas belonging to the Dzogschen sect are practically the only masters of this teaching.

Again, certain disciples are advised to contemplate the sky and sometimes to confine themselves to this practice only. Some lie flat on their back in the open, in order to look at the sky with no other object in sight. This contemplation, and the ideas which it excites, is said to lead to a peculiar trance in which the notion of personality is forgotten, and an undescrivable union with the universe is experienced.

All lamas agree regarding the usefulness of most of these strangely artful training practices. Yet, when reading certain treatises about them or listening to oral explanations given by some mystic masters, one not unfrequently detects a restrained impatience. The teacher who instructs us seems to say: Yes, all that is necessary, perhaps, even indispensable to the majority of novices, but as a preparatory drill only, the goal is elsewhere. Let us make haste and finish with the preliminary process.

The following sober method keeps closer to this goal; at any rate its working is more easily understood.

The master orders his disciple to shut himself in *tsams* and to meditate—taking his *Yidam* (tutelary deity) as object of his contemplation.



The novice dwelling in strict seclusion, concentrates his thoughts on the *Yidam*, imagining him in the shape and form ascribed to him in books and images. Repeating certain mystic formulas and constructing a *kyilkhor* are parts of the exercise of which the aim is to cause the *Yidam* to appear to his worshipper. At least, such is the aim that the master points out to the beginner.

The pupil breaks his contemplation during the time strictly necessary to eat <sup>1</sup> and the very short time allowed for sleep. Often the recluse does not lie down and only dozes in one of those *gomti* which have been described in a previous chapter.<sup>2</sup>

Months and even years may elapse in that way. Occasionally the master inquires about the progress of his pupil. At last a day comes when the novice informs him that he has reaped the fruit of his exertion: the *Yidam* has appeared. As a rule, the vision has been nebulous and lasted only a little while. The master declares that it is an encouraging success, but not as yet a definitive result. It is desirable that the recluse should longer enjoy the hallowed company of his protector.

The apprentice *naljorpa* cannot but agree, and continues his effort. A long time again elapses. Then, the *Yidam* is "fixed"—if I may use that term. He dwells in the *tsams khang* and the recluse sees him as always present in the middle of the *kyilkhor*.

"This is most excellent," answers the master when he is informed of the fact; "but you must seek a still greater favour. You must pursue your meditation until you are able to touch with your head the feet of the *Yidam*, until he blesses you and speaks to you."

Though the previous stages have taken long to be

<sup>1</sup> Generally the recluse has only one meal a day, but drinks buttered tea several times. However, during such periods of retreat some ascetics subsist on water and roast barley flour only.

<sup>2</sup> See the end of Chapter II.

effected they may be considered the easiest part of the process. The following are much more arduous to attain, and only a small minority of novices meet with success.

These successful disciples see the *Yidam* taking on life. They distinctly feel the touch of his feet when, prostrated, they lay their head on them. They feel the weight of his hands when he blesses them. They see his eyes moving, his lips parting, he speaks. . . . And lo! he steps out of the *kyilkhor* and walks in the *tsams khang*.

It is a perilous moment. When wrathful demi-gods or demons have been called up in that way, they must never be allowed to escape from the *kyilkhor*, whose magic walls hold them prisoners. Set free out of due time, they would revenge themselves on the person who has compelled them to enter this prison-like consecrated circle. However, the *Yidam*, though his appearance may be dreadful and his power is to be feared, is not dangerous because the recluse has won his favour. Consequently, he may move about as he pleases in the hermitage. Even better, he may cross its threshold and stand in the open. Following his teacher's advice, the novice must find out if the deity is willing to accompany him when he walks out.

This task is harder than all previous ones. Visible and tangible in the obscure hermitage fragrant with incense, where the psychic influences born from a prolonged concentration of thought are working; will the *Yidam's* form be able to subsist in quite different surroundings under the bright sunlight, exposed to influences which, instead of supporting it, will act as dissolving agents?

A new elimination takes place amongst the disciples. Most *Yidam* refuse to follow their devotee into the open. They remain obstinately in some dark corner and sometimes grow angry and avenge themselves for



the disrespectful experiments to which they have been submitted. Strange accidents occur to some anchorites, but others succeed in their undertaking and wherever they go enjoy the presence of their worshipful protector.

"You have reached the desired goal," says the *guru* to his exultant disciple. "I have nothing more to teach you. You have won the favours of a protector mightier than I."

Certain disciples thank the lama and, proud of their achievement, return to their monastery or establish themselves in a hermitage and spend the remainder of their life playing with their phantom.

On the contrary, others trembling in mental agony prostrate themselves at their *guru's* feet and confess some awful sin. . . . Doubts have arisen in their mind which, in spite of strenuous efforts, they have not been able to overcome. Before the *Yidam* himself, even when he spoke to them or when they touched him, the thought has arisen in them that they contemplated a mere phantasmagoria which they had themselves created.

The master appears afflicted by this confession. The unbeliever must return to his *tsams khang* and begin training all over again in order to conquer his incredulity, so ungrateful to the *Yidam* who has favoured him.

Once undermined, faith seldom regains a firm footing. If the great respect which Orientals feel for their religious teacher did not restrain them, these incredulous disciples would probably yield to the temptation of giving up the religious life, their long training having ended in materialism. But nearly all of them hold on to it, for if they doubt the reality of their *Yidam*, they never doubt their master's wisdom.

After a time the disciple repeats the same confession. It is even more positive than the first time. There is no longer any question of *doubt*; he is thoroughly *convinced*

that the *Yidam* is produced by his mind and has no other existence than that which he has lent him.

"That is exactly what it is necessary for you to realize," the master tells him. "Gods, demons, the whole universe, are but a mirage which exists in the mind, 'springs from it, and sinks into it.'" <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A declaration continually repeated by Tibetan mystics.