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CONTENTS OF LIFE IN BUDDHIST STÜPAS AND IMAGES

Preliminary report on a research project at the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden

There are large collections of Buddhist altar stūpas and images (sculptures and thankas) in the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden. Most of these ritual objects belong to the Central Asian form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which was one of the main objects of study and collecting for the last expedition carried out by Sven Hedin, the Sino-Swedish Expedition 1927-1935. Gösta Montell was in charge of this work, as well as being engaged in general anthropological work in connection with this expedition to the Northwestern parts of China. At that time he was not yet an expert on Buddhism or Oriental cultures, but luckily the eminent German scholar Ferdinand Lessing happened to be at hand and was willing to assist as a Sinologist and Buddhologist. Therefore, this main part of the collection of "Lamaist" objects became well documented, even if a certain amount was bought in Peking and not "in the field", in temples in Mongolia or Tibet. Smaller parts of the material of this kind were acquired in e.g. Kalgan and other places in Inner Mongolia, in Edsengol and in Tibetan settlements in Kansu and elsewhere in northern regions.

Naturally these collections have ever since been of great interest to many scholars of Central Asian Buddhist art and religion. Besides permanent exhibitions of large portions of the collections in the museum, especially during the period 1938-1968, temporary exhibitions in Sweden and in other countries have also made extensive use of these objects. Interest has also been shown increasingly for religious motives, parallel to the growing missionary activities by Buddhist orders, especially by Lamas representing the Kargyudpa Buddhists. Even while in storage, the collections have been shown at some special occasions, e.g. when the Dalai Lama visited Sweden in 1973.

It has always been fascinating to observe, at such visits, how the Buddhists show deep and sincere veneration for the holy objects by placing them on their head. For a moment the items regain their original function as centres of power or energy - life streams downwards into the pious human beings. Stūpas or sculptures are sometimes used regularly in this way, e.g. once in Stockholm by the patriarch of the Kargyudpa order, Gyalwa Karmapa, who used a sculpture to touch the tops of the heads of hundreds of persons, believers or non-believers, who passed by him after he had performed the "Black Hat" ceremony.

For these and other reasons it has long been planned by the present author to take up a thorough study of the ways and materials used in order to "open the eyes" of sculptures of this kind, and other related initiation ceremonies which give life and meaning to cult objects.¹ Now and then notes have been made, but not until about half a year ago did the plans materialize in a more systematic way. What happened was that by an accident the contents of a big almost "life-sized" sculpture representing the Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara (Fig. 2A) fell out onto the floor, when the wooden bottom-plate loosened. The contents were carefully collected and placed in a special box, which was numbered and shown to the author, who started to describe this new "find", which was rich and variegated; part of it is shown in Fig. 2B.

The first thing to do was to re-read, carefully, Werner Schulemann's detailed pilot study on this subject, the contents of a stūpa.² Much of his detailed kind of analysis will also be used by us in the project where we will examine a large quantity of stūpas and images in the collections of the Ethnographical Museum. His sample item, shown in full in his Abb. 1 a, contained among other things *ts'a-tš'a* of clay, dried-up human muscles and crushed bones, bundles of black human hair, scriptures with Tibetan texts, etc., everything well mixed with a buff-coloured powder made of vegetable material, including cereals, and minerals.

The next activity consisted of taking copy of *gTer-bdag gling-pa's Rab gnas cho ga'i 'grel bšad*.³ This publication contains detailed instructions on how to meditate when consecrating the various kinds of objects, including e.g. musical instruments, but unfortunately it is not very illuminating on the subject of what kind of things are put

into containers such as stūpas and sculptures. It seems, therefore, that there are no short cuts in this question, but only careful examination, piece by piece, of the relevant objects in the museum collections can give more general results. Besides Schulemann we also have some useful comments made by e.g. Eleanor Olson, who writes as follows in connection with a description of a miniature stūpa, or "receptacle for offerings": "The base is sealed and the interior presumably contains prayer scrolls, charms or relics. As in the case of anthropomorphic images it is these sacred contents which give the chörten life and make it efficacious as an object of worship"⁴.

In this connection we may point out that an investigation of this kind, when seals have to be broken in order to take out contents which still have their religious value for religious communities, constitutes an ethical problem for the investigator as well as for his institution. This problem should be carefully discussed before the next stage of the present project is taken. Maybe there will be shown to exist no real, practical hindrance to continuing as planned, but that remains to be demonstrated.⁵

Another point to make now is that stūpas and sculptures, besides holy books, symbolize the Buddhist Triad, which means that these three categories must be present whenever temple sermons are performed.

The Tibetan term for these items is *rten gsum*, "The Three Containers, or Supports" of Divine contents or presence. The sculpture, or image, represents the community, or clergy, which is "the body" or holy essence. The book represents the word, or the verbal information. The stūpa stands for Wisdom and Buddha. Therefore, these three holy objects should logically receive special forms of consecration, but that, too, remains to be proved as the project goes on.

As this is a very preliminary report on this project, we will not now enter into other aspects of the cluster of ideas and beliefs related to the contents of what we could call "reliquaries".⁶ May it suffice here to hint at such possibilities as funeral ceremonies through the ages, ending in politically motivated mausolea even in our own times, or philosophical/religious systems in Tibetan Buddhism, symbolized by the sign of *rnam-bč'u-dbang-ldan*, "The Ten Aspects of Power" which is

regularly placed on temples and which contains the top of an iceberg, the very complex interrelationship of medicine and philosophy⁷. This thought system of a very holistic nature could be compared with the equivalent Chinese Taoistic system, symbolized by so-called *nei-ching t'u*, "pictures of the interior weave"⁸. In the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden there is another sample of this symbol, where the foetus- or embryo-looking human body is sketched as a frame for a deep world of hidden meanings having associations in many directions. E.g. wordings like "The world is hidden in one single grain", or "Beyond this mystery is no more mystery", are embedded together with drawn details of ploughing, water wells, mountain peaks, etc. - Some of these aspects of investigation are shown in the accompanying set of pictures. Others have to be left this time, or forever, as questions of the type: "what kind of life? vegetable? animal? human? undifferentiated? relationship to various levels or consciousness?", and so on. At least, we believe that the project may involve many interesting strands of a general "inner weave" of man's archetypes.

Notes

- 1) Cf. e.g. Montell 1955, p. 155, where he describes the way of another Avalokiteśvara, the Mongolian Ariyabalo, from a factory to the Western Temple of Edsengol.
- 2) Schulemann 1969.
- 3) This Tibetan text printed in 1970 in Tashijong, Padanpur, has the following English title-page: *Methods for the Consecration and Vivification of Buddhist Icons, Books and Stupas. Tibetan Texts by Gter-bdag-gling-pa Gyur-med-rdo-rje, edited by Khams-sprul Don-brgyud-nui-ma*. Gudrun Hegardt, M.A., who is a member of the research team, has now started making a complete translation of this text, which belongs to the collections of our museum.
- 4) Olson 1950, p. 33. Cf. also Lange 1964.
- 5) A Lama could, for instance, give new life by adding new contents to the items chosen for the investigation.
- 6) The different technical methods to be used have not yet been fully developed. Some special tests are now being made, e.g. experiments with Kirlian photographing on private material.
- 7) Cf. e.g. Korvin-Krasinski 1953², pp. 337 ff. et alibi.
- 8) See Rousselle 1933.

References

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Figure 1 A. Outer environment: Eight *me'od rten* at the temple of Bayan-shandai-sūme (Shande-miao), Western Inner Mongolia. Note the sign of *nam boudbang ldan* close to the small stūpas half-way to the top of the foremost large stūpa building. Photographed by Sven Hedin, in August, 1927. Courtesy of the Sven Hedin Foundation, Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm.

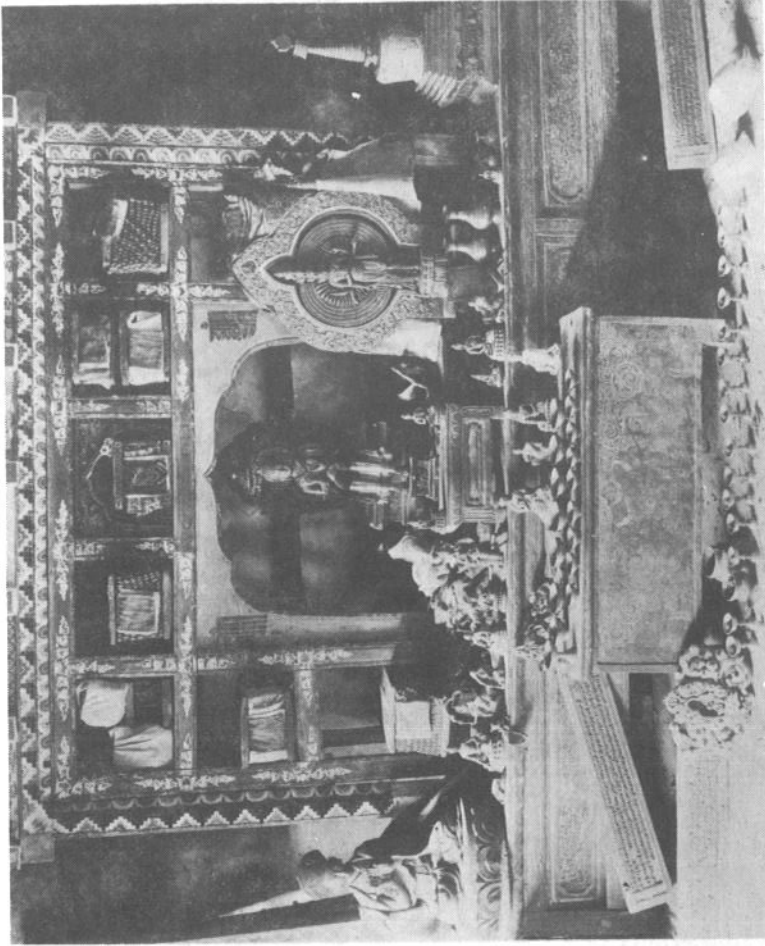


Figure 1 B. Inner environment: Interior of the altar room, Burdan Gumpa, Zangskar, Ladakh (Kashmir), with i.a. an altar stupa and a sculpture representing the Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara. Courtesy of the Sven Hedin Foundation, Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm.



Figure 2 A. The Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara, a gilded bronze statue of about half "natural" size, obtained for the Hedin collections after the Sino-Swedish Expedition (1927-1935). Inv. no. H. 4561. The base had a rich content of different kinds of materials (see Figure 2 B).



Figure 2 B. Part of the materials contained in the base of the Avalokiteśvara statue illustrated in Figure 2 A: minerals, vegetable materials such as seeds, branches and waste from wood-work, etc., Chinese copper coins.



Figure 3 A. A small Buddha statue of bronze, found at Helgö island in Lake Mälaren west of Stockholm in 1956 in archaeological excavations. The site seems indeed to have been a "holy island", as indicated by its name, because the Buddha sculpture was found close to the bronze head of a Christian crozier and 26 small gold sheets with fertility scenes, and other finds representing heathen worship, all dating from the sixth or seventh century A.D. The lotus throne of the Buddha is hollow and open, but it could have been sealed with a bottom plate originally; on the back there are indications of a former *mandorla*. Courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska Arkivet, R.A.Ä., and Historiska Museet, Stockholm.



Figure 3 B. A *ts'a-ts'a*, found in a field at Adelsö island near Helgö. Now missing, except for this photograph. Courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska Arkivet, R.A.Ä., and Historiska Museet, Stockholm.