

Origins of Tibetan Script and its Role in Spreading Tibetan Buddhism Across the Himalayas

Dechen Chuskit

Department of Pāli and Buddhist Studies, BHU.

Email: dechenchuskit99@gmail.com

Abstract: Tibetan Buddhism, also known as Vajrayana Buddhism, emerged in the Himalayan region, primarily in Tibet, and is notable for its unique blend of Mahayana teachings, tantric practices, meditation, and ritual, under the guidance of spiritual teachers known as Lamas. According to tradition, Buddhism first appeared in Tibet during the fourth century CE, under King Lha-tho-ri-gnyan-bstan, when sacred texts reportedly fell from the sky onto the king's palace. These texts remained undeciphered until King Songsten Gampo's reign, when he established Buddhism as the state religion by marrying Buddhist princesses from Nepal and China. Songsten Gampo's minister, Thonmi Sambhota, developed a Tibetan script and grammar, facilitating the translation of key Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan. Indian scholars such as Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita significantly contributed to this early transmission. This paper examines the origins of the Tibetan script and the pivotal role of textual translations in the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the Himalayas. It explores the development of Tibetan writing and emphasizes the critical process of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan, which was instrumental in preserving and establishing Buddhist teachings in Tibet.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, translation, Indian scholars, language.

Introduction

The propagation of Tibetan Buddhism across the Himalayas has been significantly influenced by sacred texts, which shape beliefs, practices, and teachings. These texts provide essential spiritual guidance, shaping religious doctrines and rituals, and facilitating the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism to remote regions. Originating in India during the third century BCE, Buddhism flourished in various cultural spheres before its decline in its homeland. However, it thrived in the Himalayas, becoming a major religion in Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia. The teachings of compassion, mindfulness, and detachment resonated deeply, leading to the establishment of monasteries and a devout following.

Tibet is a high plateau located in the Himalayas, and it has been a key center for the development of Buddhism. Tibet is called shangri-la¹. The Tibetans called their country “bod” and themselves “bod pa”, meaning “people of Tibet”. According to Tibetan legends, the Tibetan people have their origins in the union of a monkey and a female demon. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (2007, p.328-329). explains,

“That early myths describe Tibetans as descendants of a forest monkey and a rock demoness,

¹ an imaginative place described only in literature and stories where the youth of a person last forever) by the western scholars

initially considered "wild" and in need of taming. Over time, these legends were "Buddhisised," with the monkey becoming a bodhisattva and the demoness symbolizing the untamed Tibetans who needed conversion to Buddhism. Eventually, the bodhisattva-monkey was identified with Avalokiteśvara², making the Tibetan people direct descendants of this bodhisattva, symbolizing their transformation into civilized Buddhists”.

The majority of Tibet's post-tenth century historical writing is composed by Buddhists Scholars in Tibet which deals with Buddhist subjects. Because of this, all historical occurrences are frequently viewed through the prism of Buddhist history, and the genesis legends of Tibetan writing are no exception. Singh believes that Buddhism first established in Tibet during the reign of king Lha Tho-ri Nyentsen (born A.D 173), who was the 23rd king from *Nya Thi Tsen po*³ (Singh,2006, p.33) According to some Tibetan legends, a casket containing Buddhist texts fell from sky on the roof of the king's palace⁴. The casket contained two Buddhist texts; *Karaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*⁵ and The *Pangkong* Homages.⁶ But some scholars accept the texts came from India as it is stated in *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, "Tsepon Shakabpa cites a Tibetan account that indicates that these articles were actually brought from India, but Totori Nyentsen hid their origin after having a dream indicating that in four generations a king would be able to read and understand the books. The arrival of this text is considered to be the first introduction of Buddhism to Tibet and is believed to have been planned by *Avalokiteyvara*" (Powers, 2007.)

There is a presence of various accounts on the number, king's discovery but many scholars claim of these two texts. Unfortunately, the king was unable decipher the texts. Powers stated, "the text was written in Sanskrit and according to the chronicles, neither the king nor any other Tibetans were able to understand these writings." (Powers, 2007)" The texts were resealed by the king until it was opened by 33rd king *Songsten Gampo* (Srong sten Gam Po). According to the traditional accounts, the first appearance of the written word in Tibet occurred simultaneously with the first appearance of Buddhism in Tibet. (schaik,2011,47).The first transmission of Buddhism into Tibetan occurred during his time. He was the first among the three Dharma kings of Tibet.⁷ He is considered to be the reincarnation of *Avalokiteśvara*, who took rebirth as a king in order to further the dissemination of dharma. In order to make alliance with his neighbouring provinces he married to princess of Nepal and China. However according to Martin Slobodnik, the "marriage-alliance" (*chin. Heqin*)⁸ was a part of civilization project to spread the Chinese civilization to the Tibetan which they considered barbarians (Slobodnik,2014, p.268). Different cultures have their own

² Avalokiteshvara means "Lord who looks down with compassion."

³ Nay The Tsan Po the name of 32 kings prior to song tsan Gampo.[Singh,2006,33].

⁴ The legend, which appears in a very similar form in all post-tenth century histories, states that a casket containing Buddhist texts fell out of the sky and landed at the king's feet, or on the roof of his palace, depending on which account one reads. [schaik,2011, p.46]

⁵ Sutra is dedicated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion in the world, and introduced the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara that was to become so popular in Tibet: Om maṇi padme huṃ. The sutra appeared first in Kashmir, and became popular in the Central Asian Buddhist kingdom of Khotan—two areas that were to fall to Tibetan expansionism in the seventh century. [schaik,2011, p.46]

⁶ is a prayer of homage and confession that, as the non-Tibetan part of its name suggests, probably comes from China. [schaik,2011,p.47]

⁷ Three dharma kings are Songtsen Gampo, Tri Songdetsen, and Ralpachen.

⁸ A part of system establishes by the Chinese emperors in the year 198 B.C. which include granting of Chinese princess to the neighbouring states.

different interpretations on the marriage of Princess Wen-cheng. Nevertheless, Buddhism was greatly benefited by both marriages and the Nepalese and the Chinese princess certainly played a role in introducing Buddhism to the Tibetan royal palace.

Historical development of Tibetan script

The absence of grammar or literary script was one of the most apparent cultural gaps in Tibetan society at that point in history. However, with the arrival of the Nepalese and Chinese princesses, the influence of their respective cultures brought about a gradual

transformation. This not only bridged the cultural gap but also paved the way for the flourishing of Buddhism and the spread of knowledge and literature in Tibet (Singh,2006,33). The treasure book known as The Pillar Testament and the clan history known as The Testament of Ba are the earliest sources for the Tönmi narrative (schaik,2011,49). In order to prepare the duty of introducing a grammar and acceptable literary script as well as to study Buddhism, King *Songsten Gampo* dispatched his minister Thonmi Sambhota (son of Thonmi Anu) and sixteen companions to India.

When Thonmi arrived at Nalanda (Nalanda Mahavihara), it was the largest residential university in Asia and well-known worldwide. From Lipikara Brahmana, he acquired the Sanskrit language. He completed training in political science, the 21 sutras of Avalokitesvara, Tantra, and the grammar portions of Panini, Kalapa, and Candra (grammar part) from Pundit

Deva Vidya Singh. The huge collection of Indian Buddhist texts was brought back to Tibet by Thonmi Sambhota (Singh,2006,36). He formed two Tibetan alphabets, one 'with heads' (bdučan) out of the Lāñcā script, and another 'headless' (dbu-med) out of the Wartula characters (Laufer,1918,35). As the emergence of the Tibetan alphabet are a matter of dispute, various scholars have their own opinions. Singh claimed that “The scholar monk and the writer of Tibbati Pathmala Tulku Dondub, is of the opinion that the scripts today of Tibetan language, which is built by Thonmi, has taken from the Sanskrit language in Devanāgarī scripts, some scholars have suggested that it is based on the Rajñnā scripts of the Gupta period. As far as Schaik views Thonmi, learned 20 different Indian scripts from a brahmin called Lijin and develop Tibetan alphabet from those scripts. And according to Singh, he took the alphabet from Sanskrit, he eliminated 12 consonants and added six from Tibetan to it, he only selected four vowels in the Tibetan alphabet”. (Singh,2006,37). Six Tibetan consonants (ca, cha, ja, 'a, za, and zha) that are absent from Indic languages could not be represented by an Indian letter. For these, Tönmi modified already-existing letter formats. The invention of writing and the influence of the Tibetan empire are cleverly intertwined in the Pillar Testament, where Tibet's subject neighbours contribute the first letter of their names to the Tibetan alphabet. According to the text, Tönmi discovered the letters ca in Chogro, za in Zahor, zha in Zhangzhung, and 'a in Azha. On the other hand, the new Tibetan alphabet omitted nine Indian letter forms that represented sounds that are not present in the Tibetan language. They were the aspirates gha, jha, dha, and bha, as well as the palatal sounds ta,tha, da, dha, na. This shows that the transcription of Sanskrit was not a top concern at the time the Tibetan alphabet was created. (schaik,2011,50) And in this way, Thon-mi Sambhota created alphabetic scripts made up of 30 consonants (*saljed sumchu*) in Tibetan, 4 unique marks vowels (*yangs zhi*), and 7 signs attached to the tops or bottoms of consonants. The origin of Tibetan scripts has been a subject of scholarly debate, leading to varying interpretations among experts. Consequently, there

is no definitive account on this matter within academic discourse, and it remains a topic of ongoing discussion and scholarly conflict. According to Khosla, the script taken by him to form the

Tibetan alphabet was similar to Kashmir's script of that period. This suggests that Thon-mi Sambhota borrowed from the Kashmiri script when creating the Tibetan alphabet. The influence of the Kashmiri script is evident in the similarities between the two, indicating a possible cultural exchange or influence between the two regions during that time period. The choice to incorporate specific consonants and marks into the Tibetan alphabet also reflects the linguistic needs and phonetic structures of the Tibetan language (Khosla,1972, p.157).

Thonmi is said to have penned eight books on writing and grammar in Tibetan with the aid of *Ācārya Śīlamanju* and the Chinese Ho-Shang. Two of his grammatical works are preserved in the Tibetan Tangyuri.e. *Vyākaranamūlatrimśakanāma* and *Vyākaranalingavarnānāma*. From the time of this script's introduction, all historical events in Tibet as well as all sacred Buddhist works were translated and written down in this script. Thonmi is regarded as the father or the founder of Tibetan literature as a result (Banerjee,1984,p.24). One of the earliest examples that shows Thonmi invention of Tibetan alphabet is the monumental inscription made on the pillar that stands in front of the Potala in Lhasa, known as the Zhol pillar (circa 767 AD). Initiation of Tibetan writings to the common people begins from the early ninth century. For instance, Ordinary land and property owners entered into written contracts, and tax collectors employed written documents to carry out their daily tasks in the administrative domain. The availability and usage of writing must have gradually increased between the mid-seventh and late-eighth centuries, but it likely took some time for writing to penetrate this deeply into Tibetan society (schaik,2011, p.51-54.) The history of writing in Tibetan Buddhism can be traced back to the 7th century CE, when the first Tibetan texts were written. Today, Tibetan Buddhist texts are being written in a variety of languages. However, the majority of new Tibetan Buddhist texts are being written in English due to the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the western countries.

Dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism through translation and transmissions of text

Bon religion was practiced widely throughout the nation until Buddhism was introduced in Tibet in the eighth century. Bon religion is associated with mystic rituals, spells, and sacrifices. These rituals often involve dances, chanting, and the use of prayer wheels. There is still presence of institutions in Tibet where bon practitioners could pursue in-depth their studies and meditation. It also influenced Buddhist culture in Tibet, for instance, the present Buddhist culture such as prayer flags, festival dances, and prayer wheels are influenced by Bon religion. In contrast to the expansion of Buddhism throughout Asia, the spread of Buddhism in Tibet came relatively late and was mostly driven by geography. It the middle of 7th century with the expansion of the Tibetan military central Tibetan Yurlung⁹ kingship bought a local ruler in the area into political and social contact with the Buddhist neighbours in China and Nepal, with the contact Buddhism in the plateau began (Mills,2003,8). Since the location of Tibet, nestled between China and Nepal, allowed for political and social contact with its neighbours, this contact facilitated the introduction of

⁹ The Yarlung kingdom was the beginning of Tibetan history, established by the first King Nyatri TsenpoIt, possibly as early as 300 BC or as late as 127 BC.

Buddhism to Tibet and created a pathway for the exchange of knowledge, resources, religious artefacts, Buddhist texts, and relics. Additionally, Tibet's position along the Silk Road, a major trade route connecting China to the West, exposed the Tangut people in the Upper Yellow River Valley to Buddhism at least three centuries before it reached Central Tibet. Although Tibetans were exposed to Buddhism early on, it took several centuries for Buddhism to spread to Tibet itself from India via Kashmir and Nepal (Sankrityayan, 1984). Under the guidance of King Srong-tsan, the first Tibetan translation of Buddhist text was initiated. The *Suvarnaprabhasottama* sutra was one of these works which were translated by Tibetan scholars Jāna Kumāra and *Mulakosha*

(Sankrityayan, 1984, p.3). Thon-mi began the translation of Sanskrit manuscripts that he had brought from India, into the Tibetan language. He was supported in his work by the Indian Pundit Kusar, the Nepalese Shila Manju, the Kashmiri Tun, the Chinese Bhikshu Mahadev and his own pupil, Choe Jod (Singh, 2006, 119). Khosla has mentioned the contribution of Kashmiri scholars to the development of Buddhism in Tibet and according to her: “Khosla highlights the significant role of Kashmiri scholars in spreading Buddhism in Tibet. Despite differing historical views on the exact date of its introduction, Kashmiri monks were instrumental. During King Srong-Detsan's reign (740-786 AD), many monasteries were founded, and Indian and Kashmiri scholars were invited to translate Indian works into Tibetan. Key translators included Vimal Mitra, Buddha Guhya, and Kashmiri monks like Jina Mitra and Ananda.”

Pandit Tuna (630-690 AD) translated numerous Buddhist works into Tibetan with Thon-mi's help. During King Khri-Srong-Lde-Btsan's reign (802-842 AD), Ananta translated several Buddhist texts. In the 9th century, Jina Mitra, along with other scholars, translated many Sanskrit books into Tibetan, including the "Pratimoksha."

Pandit Somnath (1027 AD) introduced the Kalchakrayana system to Tibet, translating it with the help of Grey-cho-Lakshmikar. Despite Buddhism's decline in Kashmir after the 14th century, it flourished in Ladakh and other Tibetan regions, contributing to Ladakh's reputation as a center of Buddhist learning and maintaining a blend of Tibetan and Kashmiri Buddhist traditions (Khosla, 1973, p.152-158).

During the second part of the seventh century to the middle of the thirteenth century, when Buddhism was all but exterminated from its original land, translation effort was persisted in Tibet. Together with the study of the history of Buddhism, these Tibetan translations are crucial and equally vital for the study of Indian thinking, culture, and literature. Several books were translated under the rule of the first five kings of the Srong-tsan dynasty, but it wasn't until the reign of the sixth ruler and head Thi-Tsam-po—also known as Sad-nalegs—who succeeded Mu-ne-Tsan-po that the process was systematized (Sankrityayan, 1984, p.7). Translation from other languages into Tibetan was done haphazardly before his time. He was the one who invented a new method of translation that has never been exceeded, not even by the most cutting-edge translations in existence today.

In order to ensure accuracy, the monarch further instructed Buddhist monks and academics to translate solely from Sanskrit sources. During the years 850 and 900, there was a lot of activity in this area, and more books were translated during this time period than at any other point in history (Sankrityayan, 1984, p.27). The Tibetan King Hla-to-to-ri-nyen-tsen was responsible for the initial dissemination of Buddhist teachings in Tibet. Eventually it grew gradually, and many famous

Indian scholars—including Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla—as well as numerous adepts—including Padmasambhava—translated and disseminated a large number of sūtras, tantras, and commentaries. These translated writings were the product of the tremendous missionary zeal of the Indian scholars and the effort and resourcefulness of the Tibetans themselves. It might be argued that no translation in history has been more accurate to the letter of the original texts. These Tibetan writings, owing to their purity and perfection, were subsequently retranslated into Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian and other languages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Buddhism's emergence in India profoundly influenced various aspects of culture, including religion and philosophy. While it declined in India, it flourished in regions like Tibet and in the Himalayas due to the introduction of Tibetan script and texts. Without these, the spread of Buddhism would have been slower, hindering its establishment in the Himalayas. Texts played a crucial role in transmitting teachings, and their availability accelerated the religion's growth. Today, translations of Tibetan texts aid in preserving ancient wisdom, bridging gaps left by lost Sanskrit originals. Now the question is if Tibetan script had not been introduced and there was no Buddhist text available during those days would Tibetan Buddhism still have been established like it did? As far the present researcher believes there is no doubt that the origination of Tibetan scripts played a significant role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet and Himalayas, without the introduction of Tibetan scripts and texts it might be significantly slower to spread the religion. Religious text and writing system are vital for transmitting and preserving religious teachings, doctrines and practices. The growth of Buddhism in Tibet would have been hampered by the absence of the basic foundation, making it difficult for the religion to established a solid foundation in the Tibet and Himalayas. Fortunately, since this was not the case, today lots of Tibetan texts are being translated into many languages especially English.

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