THE INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO LADAKH

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Ananda, one of the important disciples of the Buddha, had five hundred students named Nima Gungpa. Chief among them were Nima Gungpa Chen & Chu Thuba Chenpa. They lived in the period 550 BC.

Nima Gungpa Chenpo visited Kashmir with the help of his power of performing miracles. Kashmir was then an important Buddhist country with nine big cities, many rural towns, one fort and twelve monastic Institutions. It was during his stay in Kashmir that Nima Gungpa also visited Ladakh. He blessed the land where Lamayuru Gonpa now stands.

King Kanishkas began his reign in the year 125 A.D. Under his rule Buddhism became a popular religion in Kashmir. It is quite clear from the scholar Kalhon’s book that King Kanishka built a large number of Stupas and Viharas all over Kashmir. From this fact, we can also conclude that the might have built Stupas and Viharas in Ladakh too. In the Kani Fort at Sani in Zanskar, we can still find a Stupa known by the name of Kani Stupa. Thus it is evident that Buddhism came into Ladakh around 130 A.D. At Teri there is still a Stupa called Ashoka Stupa. We can, therefore, come to the conclusion that if Buddhism was not introduced in Ladakh before the time of Christ, it was brought to Ladakh in the 1st and 2nd century A.D.

Kanishka had conquered Yarken and Khotan. Therefore, it is very probable that he had come to Ladakh also. If Buddhism had shone like the sun in Skardo and Gilgit in those days, there was no reason why it should not have spread to Ladakh.

In the year 975 Skide Nyima Gon reigned in Nyari (western Tibet). His three sons viz. Lhachen Palgyi Gon, Tashi Gon and Getsul Gon ruled over Ladakh, Purang and Zanskar respectively. Lha-Chen Palgyi Gon built the first Fort in Ladakh at Likir to carry on the tradition of the Kadampa sect founded by Dipamkara Atisha.
The Nyingmapa sect and its introduction into Ladakh

Secret Tantric teachings are divided into the Old Tradition and the New Tradition. Those who follow and practice the Old Tradition are called Nyingmapa.

During the reign of King Trisong Detsen in the 8th century, Guru Padma Sambhava and Khanchen Bodhisattva propagated the highest yoga Tantric teachings by way of giving empowerment, and teaching of the Tantric texts etc. The Guyasamaya Tantra and the other eighteen Tantric teachings were of that time. The main practice resolved round the eight great oral traditions.

In the 8th century Padma Sambhava visited the Zanskar, Sakti and Phokar regions of Ladakh. In the year 1430, the saint-ascetic Padma Thinley sat in retreat in the famous Cave-Hermitage of Padma Sambhava. An unending line of his lineage continues to this day. He built Dak-thok monastery at Sakti. Many people still practice the great compassionate teachings of this sect.

The Kagyud Sect and its introduction into Ladakh

The Kagyud sect was started by Marpa Cheikyi Lodoe. He was born in 1012 and his teacher was the famous Naropa. Marpa visited India three times to receive teachings. He later became very famous as a translator. His four chief disciples were:

1. Tsurton Wangpo
2. Nyontan Choedor
3. Meinton Chenpo
4. Milarepa

The Kagyud sect is further divided into eight sub-sects; four big and four small.

In the year 1010 Naropa came to Lamayuru and the Zanskar regions of Ladakh. Then Marpa, Naropa’s most important disciple built Marpaling in Zanskar. Gotsang Gonbo Dorje came to visit Ladakh during the reign of King Tashi Namgyal from 1225 to 1250. He spent a lot of time in meditation at Hemis Gotsang, Igu, Matho etc. It seems that even before Lama Stak-tsang Raspa, the Kagyud sect had already been followed in most regions in Ladakh. The most glorious period in the life of the Kagyud sect in Ladakh was when King Singey Namgyal (1590-1620) patronised Lama Stak-tsang Raspa leading to the establishment of Hemis Gonpa and many other Gonpas professing the Druk-pa Kagyud sect. The other important contribution to the spread of the Kagyud sect was made by King Tashi Namgyal (1500-1530) when he invited Choeje Denma who then founded the Dri-khung
Kagyud sect in Ladakh.

The Sakya sect and its Introduction into Ladakh

Khon Konchok Gyalpo, the holder of the New Tradition of Tantra was born in the year 1634. He later built the Sakya monastery in 1091. The famous Sakya Lama, Kunga Nyingpo was born to him in 1092. Kunga Nyingpo propounded the Sakya doctrine of the Path and the Truth. Sakya Pandit Kunga Gyaltsan and Dro-gon Choegyal Phagspa established the political rule of Tibet by the Sakya sect. Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo built the monastery of Ngo in 1435.

The Sakya sect started spreading in Ladakh from the year 1300. Then in the year 1430, the scholar-hermit Drungpa Dorje arrived at Matho. King Drakpa Bumde patronised him and built the Matho Gonpa. Two other monasteries were built at Skidmang and Chite. However, in the war between Baltistan and Ladakh during the reign of King Jamyang Namgyal, Matho Gonpa was pillaged. The monks and the villagers were forced to carry the loot all the way to Baltistan. Matho Gonpa then passed through a period of decline, but with time it has regained a semblance of its past glory.

The Gelug sect and its introduction into Ladakh

Tsong-Khapa, the founder of the Gelug sect was born in the year 1357. In the year 1413, he started the great prayer festival of Lhasa. He built the monastery of Gaden in the same year. His Chief disciples later built the famous monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Tashi Lhonpo. Thus began the great tradition of the Gelug sect.

During the reign of King Drag-pa Bumde (1400-1440), two ascetics arrived from Tibet carrying with them a statue of Amidaus sent by Tsong-Khapa to be given to the King. The King took the Statue to indicate the importance of propagating the Gelug sect traditions in Ladakh. He therefore patronised Lama Lhawang Lodo who built the monastery of Spituk. Many monasteries in Nubra, Zanskar and other places were built to preserve and promote the Gelug sect teachings.