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EDITORIALS

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Leprosy in Tibetan Art and Religion

Tibetan art traditions. Tibetan art is entirely religious. This is well illustrated by the *tankas* which are hung in immense numbers in temples and private homes; borne in religious processions; and carried into lonely places by wandering lamas to serve in their preaching and teaching. Usually the painter is a lama, thoroughly versed in the traditional teaching. He accompanies his work with continuous reciting of prayers, or sometimes in the presence of another lama who reads prayers aloud while the artist works. They do not date their work, nor do they sign their names, but remain anonymous, out of time and space, while producing sacred images that have power. Because of the religious significance of these *tankas*, a Tibetan who owns one will hardly ever part with it. Most such paintings found in Western public and private collections have appeared on the market as a sequence of destructive and impoverishing wars and upheavals.

The *tankas* were usually painted on cotton or silk which was first stretched on a frame, covered with a thick mixture of glue and chalk and then polished evenly with the smooth surface of a conch. The painting was drawn strictly to canonical rules, of-

ten utilizing a transfer process from standard, iconographically correct models known as *tshags-par*, or "dotted impressions." This produced an outline in red or black ink which was then filled in with paint consisting of the pigments (mineral, rarely vegetable) suspended in a yak butter vehicle.

Out of this tradition there come two representations related to leprosy, one concerned with an Oriental concept of its moral cause and one involving cure of the affliction. The first is derived from *tanka* presentation of the birth-stories telling of the former existences of the Buddha and those about him. The second comes from the *tanka* rendition of one of the several forms of Avalokitesvara (Chinese: Kuan-yin or "Goddess of Mercy") known as Simhanada Lokeshvara.

The birth-story. There is a traditional store of more than five hundred birth-stories. These tell how the Buddha acquired ten *Paramitas* ("means of getting to the other side"), through many re-births as a succession of creatures, scholars and saints. They teach of moral practice, self-abnegation, wisdom, patience, resolution, truth, exertion, equanimity and good-will.

The Buddha, like all men according to Buddhist theology, was born with a first-being-body, called "planetary," which is composed of cosmic crystallizations that originate on the planet earth, come from it, and return to it. The transmigrator exists as an animal until he makes of himself something more than an animal; and this he does by "conscious labor and intentional suffering."

Thus, in his twenty-fourth birth succession the Buddha was incarnated as a Great Ape, of immense size, living alone in the Himalaya Mountains. His compassion, as if attached to him, never left him. As an ascetic he lived on the leaves and fruits of forest trees, and he helped such creatures as he met, within the bounds of his ability. The following account is condensed and adapted from that derived by Edna Bryner¹ from J. S. Speyer's translation⁸ of the Sanskrit teaching collection by Arya Sura, "The Jatakamala or Garland of Birth-Stories."

One creature helped by the Great Ape was a certain man, who lost his way while searching for a strayed cow and roamed about until he reached the place where the Great Ape lived. Looking about he saw on the ground some tawny tinduka fruits (edible but sour; food for the poor). Enjoying them in his hunger and wishing to find out whence they had come, he discovered a tree with its roots on the edge of a waterfall. When he climbed the tinduka tree, the branch broke off and he fell into a place surrounded on all sides by steep rock walls from which there was no way out. Amidst swarms of mosquitoes and in darkness and despair, he lived on water and tinduka fruit for several days.

The Great Ape, wandering about in search of food, almost as if beckoned there by the branches of the tinduka tree, came upon the area and, looking over the waterfall from the branches of the tree, saw the wretched man lying there pale, hungry and emaciated. The man, seeing the Ape, cast his eyes upward, bowed his head, folded his hands as a suppliant, and said: "I am a man, Illustrious Being." Then he described how he came to be there and besought the Great Ape to be "also my protector." Stirred with boundless pity, the Great Being comforted him and threw down fruits to him. Then, with the thought of rescue, he went to another place and practised climbing with a stone, the weight of a man, on his back. When he was satisfied that he would be able to get the man out, he descended to him. With reverential bowing the man mounted the great back and then, with extreme difficulty, the ape succeeded in getting him

out. Exhausted, the ape lay down on a rock slab to rest and asked the man to keep watch for wild animals which might want to kill him while he rested. With honest mien, the man promised.

However, after the Great Being had fallen asleep, the man conceived wicked thoughts, asking himself how he was to become strong enough to escape from this wild place on the meager and hard to obtain roots and fruits. In the body of the ape he would have enough food to keep him going till he escaped. But the ape must be killed while asleep for the man was no match for him in an open fight. Therefore he at once lifted a stone and dropped it on the head of the sleeping rescuer. But his hand trembled so from weakness and haste that the stone only bruised the ape's head with its side, falling on the ground with a great noise which awakened the ape.

The Bodhisattva jumped up hastily and looked about to see who had attacked him. He beheld only the man whom he had rescued, now in an attitude of shame, ashy-pale, timid, downcast, his body covered with drops of sweat, afraid to raise his eyes to his benefactor. The Great Being, realizing that the man was an evildoer, was moved with compassion for him. Eyes wet with tears, and unmindful of the pain of his bruises, he lamented that he had saved the man from one precipice only to have him fall down another. He declared that his bruises grieved him less than the suffering in his mind over the fact that it was on his own account that the man had plunged into evil and that he did not have the power to wipe off that sin.

"Well, then, go with me, keeping by my side, for thou art much to be distrusted," the Great Being adjured him. "I will conduct thee out of the forest, the abode of manifold dangers, again into the path which leads to the dwellings of men."

Thus the Great Being conducted him to the border of the inhabited region. There he pointed out the further way, bade him a happy journey, and wished him avoidance of evil acts, since their harvest is extremely painful. The High-Minded One then returned to his forest abode.

But the man, tormented now by "the blazing fire of remorse," was struck with leprosy. His figure became changed. His skin erupted with vesicles, which turned to ulcers that burst, covering his body with putrid matter. Wherever he went, he was an object of horror. Thinking him to be an embodied Devil, the people drove him away with clods or clubs and cursed him. One day while roaming through the forest he was seen by the king who was out hunting. On observing this horrible creature, so little clad with remnants of dirty garments as hardly to cover his shame, the king, fearful yet curious, asked him what he was—a *Preta*, or a goblin, or a *Pūtana* ("a horrible looking ghost living in cemeteries and feeding on human flesh").

"I am a man, Great King, not a spirit," the man answered; going on, when pressed, to relate what he had done. He said that he deemed his present state "only the blossom of the tree sown by that treacherous deed against my friend. Oh, surely, its fruits will be more miserable than this." What he had learned out of his suffering, he developed into advice to the king: "Thus, knowing power and the consequences of good and evil behavior with respect to friends, O king, hold fast to the road followed by the virtuous."

Avalokitesvara as Simhanada Lokesvara.

In the jungles whence, legend has it,^{3, 5} came the chaulmoogra treatment of leprosy stands Angkor Wat, the great Khmer temple complex. Included among the temples of Angkor is a little chapel dedicated to Avalokitesvara standing isolated in the middle of a great pool. This shrine, known as Neak Pean (the coiled serpent) was a place of pilgrimage where the sick used to come and dip in the water of the pools invoking Lokesvara the healer.⁶ Indeed, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, held first place among Buddhist representations of the Angkor period, while Mahayanism, or the Northern School, was at the height of its prosperity in Cambodia. This compassionate, pitying divinity, so popular in Japan and China under his feminine shape, Kwannon, or Kuan-yin, was known especially by the name of Lokesvara, "Lord of the World," in ancient Cambodia.

Specific association of Lokesvara with leprosy is found in the Tibetan Lamaist tradition which derived from and modified Northern Buddhism by the addition of its Bon-po animist heritage. Thus, in the Tibetan tradition, Simhanada-Lokesvara is a non-Tantric form of Avalokitesvara invoked to cure leprosy. The title Simhanada means "with the voice of a lion." Northern Buddhists claim that the first success of Lamaism among the Mongols was due to the cure of a leprous king by means of the Simhanada-sadhana.² The sadhana is a formula for the invocation of a god which must be carried out in a prescribed manner.

The Simhanada-sadhana proceeds as follows: "He (the Buddhist priest) must see, developed from the white symbol 'Om', a moon disk (i.e., the platform on which the god is seated); above this, from the white

syllable 'Ah!', a white lion; and above this, from the white syllable 'Am!', a white lotus, on the heart of which he is to see the syllable 'Hrih!', white and shining. Having developed all this, he must see himself in the form of Simhanada, a body all white with two arms, one face and three eyes; his hair in the form of a tiara, his head-dress ornamented with a small image of Amitabha; crouched in Indian fashion, with one knee raised, seated on a lion covered with a tiger-skin, the five Dhyani-Buddhas emanating from his person. Having thus meditated on all this, tired of meditation, let the conjurer pronounce the formula of conjuration."²

In Tibetan representations of Simhanada-Lokesvara, he is "seated sideways on a roaring lion that is generally crouching, with the head always turned upward toward the god. According to the *sidhana*, the god should be seated on a lotus which is supported by a lion, but he is often seated on a cushion instead of a lotus throne.

"In this Simhanada form, Avalokitesvara is represented in his manifestation Padmapani with one head and two arms. He wears all the Bodhisattva ornaments with a small image of Amitabha in the five-leaved crown. But the crown may be omitted, in which case his hair is drawn up into a mitre-shaped *ushnisha* elaborately decorated with jewels, and on the left side of the head-dress is usually a half moon. Over the left shoulder there may be an antelope skin. The right leg is either pendent (in which case the right hand is in 'charity' *mudra*) or is in the attitude called 'royal ease', with the right knee raised and the right arm hanging loosely over the knee, the hand sometimes holding a rosary. In the latter attitude the left hand leans, behind the left knee, on the cushion (or lotus-throne), and holds the stem of a lotus-flower, which either supports a *kapala* (skull-cup) out of which rises a sword, or the sword rises directly from the lotus-flower. In the latter case the *kapala* filled with flowers is at his left side, but is often missing. Behind the right arm may rise a trident, around which is coiled a cobra, but this also may be missing.

"Avalokitesvara may also be represented

as Simhanada in a simpler form, but is always a Lokeshvara, a prince wearing rich garments and many jewels. In this form he is seated on the lion with his hands at his breast in *namakara mudra* (devotional attitude). His hair is drawn up on his head in a high *ushnisha*, mitre-shaped. His symbol, the rosary, is supported by a lotus-flower on a level with his right shoulder.

"The Simhanada-Lokeshvara seems to unite the form of Avalokitesvara and Manjusri but although the sword, the pose, and the support indicate Manjusri,

the god is undoubtedly Padmapani (another non-Tantra form of Avalokitesvara)."²

This presents some problems in identification since in one of his forms, Manjusri adopts a similar pose. "He is seated . . . in the attitude called 'royal ease.' The left hand, holding the stem of the *utpala*, i.e., blue lotus, (which is on a level with the left shoulder), leans on the lion throne or on the back of the lion support. If painted, he is yellow. In this form, Manjusri closely resembles the Simhanada-Lokeshvara, but the latter may be identified either by the



FIG. 1. Photograph of original tanka. Lower central figure is probable representation of Simhanada-Lokeshvara.



FIG. 2. Redrawn representation of lower central figure of Figure 1.

antelope skin over his left shoulder or by a trident, while the Manjusri has no distinguishing marks besides the blue lotus, not even the sword. If painted, they are easily identified, for the Maharajalila-Manjusri is yellow on a blue lion, while the Lokeshvara is white on a white lion.

Figure 1 presents a Tibetan *Tanka* in which the central figure is Manjusri. Below this figure appears Simhanada-Lokeshvara.⁹ Figure 2 is from a repainting of the figure of Lokeshvara in Figure 1. Age has made the original presentation difficult to photograph clearly and the reproduction brings out

more clearly the characteristics which are evident on close inspection but lost in photographic reproduction of the original.

Discussion. Neither of these presentations speaks to either the presence or absence of leprosy in Tibet. The birth-story is derived from the account of the Indian Buddhist teacher, Arya Sura who probably lived before 434 A.D., long before Buddhism took root in Tibet. It does speak to the presence of leprosy in India at this early period. The account of the cure of the Mongol King speaks to the presence of leprosy in Mongolia at the time that lamaism was intro-

duced into Mongolia. This was several centuries after Buddhism was first brought to China from India by way of the longer route through the mountains and across the Gobi desert, and leprosy could readily have been brought to Mongolia from India, or elsewhere, at an earlier date by earlier travelers along these trade channels.

The attribution of the acceptance of Lamaism by the Mongol rulers as the result of a cured instance of leprosy is of interest, for this acceptance made Lamaism the state religion of the mighty Mongol Empire of the Yuan Dynasty (1280–1368 A.D.) and its influence carried over into the reigns of the emperors K'ang Hsi and Ch'ien Lung at

the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries. These emperors used Lamaism as a means to strengthening the alliance between China and Tibet. New monasteries were founded, old ones were renovated, whole pantheons of gods were set up. Most of the *tanka* canvases today date back to this period and so, in all probability, does the original from which the illustration here presented is derived.

The birth-story account, in its telling of the treatment of the sufferer from leprosy, reiterates for Tibeto-Mongolia the reaction that has been so characteristic of society to this disease in so many areas (⁷).—O. K. SKINSNES

¹ BRYNER, E. *Thirteen Tibetan Tankas*. Indian Hills, Colo., Falcon's Wing Press, 1955.

² GETTY, A. *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*. Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1962, pp. 60-61, 194-195, 112.

³ GOULLART, P. *Forgotten Kingdom*. London, John Murray, 1955, pp. 71-74.

⁴ HACKLIN, J. *Asiatic Mythology*. New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1963, p. 204.

⁵ HUIZENGA, L. S. *The Leper Kind of Angkor*. *China Med J.* **43** (1929) 1142-1143.

⁶ JEANNERAT DE BEERSKI, P. *Angkor Ruins in Cambodia*. London, Grant Richards, Ltd., 1923, pp. 170-175.

⁷ SKINSNES, O. K. Leprosy in Society. I. Leprosy has appeared on the face. *Leprosy Rev.* **35** (1964) 21-35; II. The pattern of concept and reaction to leprosy in Oriental antiquity. *Ibid.* **35** (1964) 106-122; III. The relationship of the social to the medical pathology of leprosy. *Ibid.* **35** (1964) 175-181; The genesis of lepra-angst. *Ibid.* **39** (1968) 223-228.

⁸ SPEYER, J. S. Ayta Sura's *The Jatakamala or Garland of Birth-Stories*. Translated from the Sanskrit. London, Henry Frowde, 1895.

⁹ Attempts have been made to verify this probable identification through Buddhist sources, with neither positive nor negative agreement available. The identification is, therefore, tentative.