

5: Padmasambhava

(From Shantarakshita's lecture; edited and abridged)

Introduction

A few years ago I happened to visit Darjeeling, a small town situated in the foothills at the eastern end of the Himalayas. It is inhabited by a mix of people, including Nepalese, Sikhimese, Indians, and Bhutanese. Many of the inhabitants are followers of the Tibetan style of Buddhism. In the course of my visit I found myself standing in front of what seemed to be a sort of three storey pagoda-like building. The door was open so I went in. At first I couldn't see very much. There weren't any windows, and the only light came from the open doorway. But as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I started to make out the outline of an enormous image. The image was perhaps fifteen to twenty feet tall; so big that it almost filled the chamber. This figure was seated cross-legged on an enormous lotus-throne. He was not clad in the yellow or orange robes of the Buddha, but in rich, decorated, deep red robes. In his right hand there was a golden vajra, and in his left hand, which rested in his lap, there was a skull cup. In the crook of the left arm, resting against the shoulder, there was a long staff surmounted by a sort of trident, and below the trident I could just discern what seemed to be three human heads in various stages of decomposition. Raising my eyes just a little I saw that on his head he wore a red lotus-cap surmounted by a vajra, and above the vajra there was a long white vulture's feather. The most impressive thing of all was the face. It was half Indian, half Tibetan, and had a thin black mustache. The brows were slightly knitted together, as though in anger. The expression of the face was on the one hand extremely intelligent and penetrating, and on the other powerful and commanding, not to say fierce. This figure was Padmasambhava, the great tantric guru from India who played a key part in introducing Buddhism into Tibet and who founded the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism. [This is the oldest of the four main schools.] Followers of this school regard Padmasambhava as the "near Buddha", and Shakyamuni as the "far Buddha".

There is not a lot of historical information about Padmasambhava, and what is known comes from Tibetan records. It seems probable that he only visited Tibet for about 18 months, and there are no surviving records about Padmasambhava in India. There is a great deal of mythological biography about Padmasambhava, which throws light on the inner significance of his life.

A legend/myth

We will start with just one legend before going into historical information. It is the legend of his birth. It illustrates the sort of symbolism that in the course of centuries clustered about the events of his life. The

legend of the birth begins not on the earth but in a purely spiritual world, the world of the red Buddha Amitabha. As the Buddha Amitabha sat in meditation a ray of pure red light came from his tongue and penetrated the water of a certain lake in north-west India. At the place where it penetrated the water a small island rose up. The island was completely covered with golden grass, and in the midst of the golden grass there flowed three springs of pure turquoise-coloured water. From the centre of the island there sprang forth an enormous lotus blossom, and as this lotus emerged Buddha Amitabha emitted from his heart a golden vajra. This vajra fell into the centre of the lotus blossom, and later people found a boy of about eight years of age seated in the lotus. It was Padmasambhava, whose name means "the one born from the lotus".

Historical account of his life

He was born in the eighth century in the kingdom of Uddiyana, which is thought to be in what is now Pakistan. As a boy he was adopted by the king. Padmasambhava was given the education of a young prince of those days. But he was not satisfied with the household life, and left home and became a monk. In the course of a number of years he studied all the different forms of Buddhism then known in northern India, and visited practically all the Buddhist kingdoms of northern India and central Asia. It is likely that he also visited Java and Sumatra which in those days were great centres of Buddhism. But above all he practiced a lot of meditation, often in cremation grounds. He had many spiritual experiences, and eventually became Enlightened.

Around 750 ce, while he was living in a cave in Nepal, he received an invitation to visit Tibet, to help establish Buddhism there. At the time Buddhism had only been known in Tibet for about 100 years, but it had not really taken root. Despite some of the king's most powerful ministers being very opposed to the introduction of Buddhism, the king (who was strongly in favour of it) arranged for the famous teacher Shantarakshita to visit. There was a lot of opposition to this, and the king had to get rid of his chief minister before it was possible to invite Shantarakshita. Although Shantarakshita was spiritually mature, his approach to teaching Buddhism was predominantly or entirely intellectual.

On his arrival in Tibet, Shantarakshita taught Buddhist ethics, psychology and metaphysics in the king's palace for four months. He taught the king, the courtiers, and other interested people, using a Kashmiri monk as an interpreter. As a result of this was that the gods of Tibet became very angry. The gods of Tibet were local animist forces and can be thought of as the collective non-rational aspects of the minds of the Tibetan people. These forces were not addressed by Shantarakshita's rationalism. So

apparently one of the King's palaces was struck by lightning; another was swept away by a flood. The harvest was badly damaged, and there was a great epidemic. So terrible was the reaction from the gods that Shantarakshita had to leave Tibet. But before he left, he advised him to invite Padmasambhava, who would be able to communicate with the gods of Tibet.

Like Shantarakshita, Padmasambhava was a great scholar. But his overall approach to teaching was much more than an intellectual. He had spent a great deal of time meditating in cremation grounds, where he confronted the deeper forces of the mind - forces that many people are hardly aware of. His communication of Buddhism took account of these deeper aspects of the mind. He acknowledged the non-rational forces in the Tibetan psyche, and succeeded in integrating them into the great current of the spiritual life.

Padmasambhava - the second Buddha

In Tibet, Padmasambhava has long been revered, especially among followers of the Nyingmapa school that he founded. They refer to him as "the second Buddha". The Nyingmapa school continues, is even to be found in countries like the USA and Australia. It is a less conventional school, and many of its sages/lamas are non-monastic.

Padmasambhava's teachings

It is not easy to say anything about Padmasambhava's teaching, partly because what he taught was mainly tantric in character, and as such not really amenable to rational explanation. Also he had far greater impact on account of what he was than on account of what he said. Even today the figure of Padmasambhava - as depicted in statues and paintings - exerts a tremendous impact on the imagination of the Tibetan people. There is probably not a single Tibetan Buddhist who is not familiar with the figure of Padmasambhava, regardless of the school of Tibetan Buddhism to which he or she belongs. In some ways Padmasambhava is the most distinctive and colourful figure in the whole history of Tibetan Buddhism. When you see his picture or image it is quite impossible to mistake him for anybody else.

According to Ningmapa tradition, after the consecration of Samye monastery Padmasambhava decided that the Tibetans were not spiritually advanced enough at that time to understand his deeper teachings, so he wrote them down in little books and he hid them in different places in central Tibet, in caves and under rocks. Tibetans believe that the sacred texts known as *termas* (treasures) were these writings of Padmasambhava, and that they were discovered many centuries later. [However many scholars doubt whether this is what actually happened.]

There is an enormous number of *termas*, all attributed to Padmasambhava. They include the famous: 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'. Lamas of the Ningmapa school esteem the *termas* as highly as the sutras (ie. the scriptures that purport to come from the Buddha). Among Tibetan Buddhists, especially followers of the Ningmapa school, the *termas* exert a profound spiritual influence.

Padmasambhava divided Buddhist practices not just into the three "vehicles" (*yanas*) of Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana/tantra, but into nine parts. Under this system, the culminating part or stage is *atiyoga-yana*, which was Padmasambhava's own distinctive teaching. This nine *yana* system is well known to the lamas of the Ningmapa school.