

Spreading the Word in Tibet 1716-21

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Introduction

Ippolito Desideri, a young Italian Jesuit, set out from India in 1715 to climb the Himalayas in order to 'Spread the Word'.

Showing a remarkable 'bodhicitta' type of aspiration he set off to cross the frozen Tibetan plateau. Enduring extreme temperatures and frighteningly dangerous conditions he finally reached the capital of Lhasa. There was no Church, and with the exception of his travelling companion (Fr. Freyre S.J., who beat a hasty retreat to India a few weeks later) it is probable that Desideri was the only follower of Jesus in this inaccessible and mysterious city. He remained undaunted and fortuitously, a short time later, he was given an audience with the Mongolian king who ruled Tibet. Lhazang Khan was a committed Buddhist and enthusiastically entered into religious discussions with Desideri. In due course he challenged Desideri to prepare for a debate with some learned Buddhist lamas. The king was aware that Desideri's knowledge of Buddhism was quite limited and wanted to give him time to prepare. Desideri was overcome with joy and subsequently the king arranged for him to study at the large Sera Monastery on the outskirts of the city. Some months later a political uprising resulted in the assassination of the king. Fearing for his life, Desideri fled from Lhasa and relocated to a rural district in S.E. Tibet. There he resumed his research on Buddhism and continued to make extensive notes (in Tibetan) explaining why the Buddhist teaching on 'Emptiness' is actually enhanced by accepting the existence of an intrinsically existent God.

In this short paper I will examine some of Desideri's poetic verse and will attempt to show that his commitment to 'spread the word' was energized, not only by a sense of compassion, but also a strong desire to make his writings relevant for Buddhist readers.

[A] Bodhicitta (*byang chub kyi sems* in Tibetan) describes an altruistic aspiration to gain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

In the Buddhist context the term 'enlightenment' refers to an individual's awakening to the mind's true nature. ⁱ The term for enlightenment, *byang chub* ⁱⁱ consists of two words; (i) *byang* relates to the purification of obscurations, (ii) *chub* relates to the perfection (understanding/comprehension) of omniscience.

Enlightenment is a process; it proceeds in conjunction with the dispelling of dissonant emotions (*nyon mongs*) which obscure the perception of reality as it really is. An enlightened being (a bod-

hisattva or Buddha) is totally free from all obstructions to true knowledge and is omniscient in the knowledge of reality.

'Buddha nature' (*sangs rgyas kyi rigs*) is made up of two separate words; *sangs rgyas* meaning Buddha and *rigs* refers to a type, or kind of nature. Jinpa and Dorji define 'buddha nature' as: "The seed of enlightenment which is inherent within the mental continuum of all sentient beings."

The essential nature of the mind is viewed as being pure but the mind is continually bombarded by conflicting and disturbing emotions (*nyon mongs*) and, as a result, sufferings arise. A helpful analogy is to liken the mind to clear blue sky on a bright sunny day. However the sky soon becomes obscured or veiled by dark threatening clouds. These cover and obscure its true nature.

[Summary: The disturbing emotions that agitate one's mind and obscure its 'buddha nature' are called *nyon mongs*. The Tibetan word *sgrib pa* means obscuration/s.]

Obscurations are classified as: ⁱⁱⁱ (i) Dissonant or conflicting emotions (such as desire, hatred, jealousy, harmful intent etc.) These are referred to as *nyon sgrib*: ^{iv} and are said to hinder liberation – i.e., the gaining a total freedom from the karmically conditioned (and beginningless) cycle of existence. In addition there are the psychological tendencies which are imprinted by these negative states and which serve as seeds for their continuity and recurrence.

(ii) Ignorance which obstructs the gaining of a direct and non-deceptive knowledge of all aspects of reality (*shes sgrib*).

A total overcoming of both kinds of obscuration marks the attainment of Buddhahood. ^v

In returning to the subject of an altruistic aspiration to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings – it is necessary to cultivate this type of aspiration on the basis of certain mental attributes, and in particular on the development of love and great compassion towards all beings equally. Initially one is conscious of training oneself to think like this, but eventually (as a result of one's successful mind training) the aspiration becomes spontaneous and is no longer a result of the practitioner's deliberate efforts. Having reached the stage of possessing a spontaneously compassionate concern for all suffering sentient beings the individual is said to be a bodhisattva (*byang chup sems dpa'*).

(In Skt. bodhi refers to enlightenment and citta is mind). I have mentioned previously that the Tibetan term for Bodhicitta is *byang chub kyi sems*.

Those with a bodhicitta aspiration have a single goal which is to bring about the welfare of all sentient beings. ^{vi}

Having laid this brief and somewhat superficial foundation, I now want to move onto Desideri and examine a short extract from one of the many verses he compiled in the Tibetan language for his Buddhist readers.

However just before I do this I wish to draw your attention to my introductory sentence; “Showing a remarkable ‘bodhicitta’ type of aspiration he set off to cross the frozen Tibetan plateau.” Desideri was not a syncretistic in his approach to Tibetan Buddhism – far from it. He was a remarkable scholar who was thoroughly committed to learning the philosophy and customs of those whom he believed God had called him to serve. He did not seek to ‘spread the Word about Christ’ as a European would to his fellow Europeans. Neither did he follow a traditional Ecclesiastical approach. Initially he refrained from talking about God altogether and made no appeal to Biblical Scriptures, or to Catholic teaching. Instead he interacted with the concepts and ideas that were familiar to the Tibetans. He used their terms – sometimes giving them a new meaning - and quoted extracts taken from their Buddhist Scriptures.

In his writings he articulately expressed the [God placed] longing in his heart that Tibetans might come to know and experience the reality of Christ. He believed that such an encounter would bring them inestimable benefit.

Desideri claimed to have generated ‘a mind that has a concern for others’. (See page 2, ‘*Essence of the Christian Faith*’). This would imply a ‘bodhicitta’ type of aspiration and be a concept that his readers would immediately relate to in a positive way. ^{vii}

He elaborated on this commitment in an earlier manuscript where he wrote: ^{viii} “For them [the Tibetan people] I shall point out the path that leads to perfect virtue. I would wish to lead them towards the city of the Absolute Good, which is the goal which one should seek; I want to purify all those who are ridden by impurities; I want to guide all those who are stuck in the mires of negativity; I want to disperse the poverty of those who are poor in virtue; I want to bear the burden of those who have been crushed beneath huge loads (lit, large bundle of wood); like a good doctor I wish to cure the illnesses of all those who are sick, without exception; I want to fight for the well being of mankind...”

[B] Contextualization: Desideri’s Prayer.

1] This first stanza centres on the mind. Here Desideri summarizes the *dGe lugs* Tibetan Buddhist understanding of how one thinks.

*“A thousand magnificent things
present themselves to your mind:
objects of consciousness though they are,
they are empty of existence.
Those thousand magnificent things,*

*though being non-existent,
when they come to your attention
appear to be existent.*

2] In his second stanza we see him referring to his own mind – again in a way a Tibetan would understand. And then he begins to pray - not only focusing on the condition of his own mind - but he makes an appeal to the One whose light is limitless, eternal and all-pervasive.

*My mind too lacks consistency (Substance?);
and if your light doesn't appear,
limitless, eternal, suffusing all things,
it retains its state of darkness:
It cannot see objects
It cannot see itself:
confused like a blind person in a dark place,
its natural condition is one of shadow.*

3] Stanza three speaks of his mind being infused with a sparkling brilliance as a consequence of God's grace. On the fifth line the subject suddenly changes. The focus is now on multiplicity and unity. He gives the example of the sun and points out that there is both sunlight and warmth. Thus it gives the impression of multiple existences when in fact it is a single entity.

*But when, Oh Lord, it meets your light,
by a miracle of your grace,
it is suffused by a sparkling brilliance,
it is cloaked in shafts of light.//
Like the sphere of the sun
with its light and its warmth
it appears to be many, but is only one.*

4] In stanza four Desideri changes the topic to God and describes his mode of existence as a supreme single entity that radiates infinite goodness and grandeur. He prays that God would bless him by removing the darkness from his mind so that it might become clear. He acknowledges that God is the only [true] resting place for his cluttered mind.

*Similarly your supreme mode of existence
is a single entity
that radiates infinite goodness and grandeur.
I pray to you Oh Lord,
only resting place of this my mind,
give me your blessing
that transforms like sunlight, my mind
still obscured by the shadows
and [which] is by nature only darkness.*

5] Desideri continues to ask for God's blessing in the fifth stanza – a blessing that would transform his heart and drive away all confusion. The 'it' * (in line four) could relate to the blessing, or possibly to the revelation received as a result of that blessing - whereby one is enabled to perceive [the mystery] of multiplicity and unity. The term mind's eye is a Tibetan expression.

*I beg you, grant me your blessing
that drives away the shadows
within me, in my innermost being. (Soul/heart)
That it * might appear to my mind's eye
by means of your blinding light,
that multiplicity and unity
which until now I could not see.*

6] The final stanza has a term that is familiar to Christians – 'Supreme Goodness'. Without considerable explanation its implications (from a Christian perspective) would not be grasped by Desideri's Tibetan readers. (In Tibetan *nges legs* means 'Certain Goodness'.) His final words express the longing in Desideri's heart for Tibetan people to come to know the Triune God.

*[Oh] that your light may appear to me in this instant,
And by its appearance, disperse the shadows.
This is the true way which leads to Supreme Goodness:
[Oh] That I might embark upon it and obtain it,
that after death I might reach this end -*

the supreme stage of All Goodness.

[Oh] That Tibetans, present and future

may attain it.

This is my prayer.”

The search for Substance.

“In order that the aim of this prayer is attained, one must meditate intensely, day and night, from the depths of one’s heart. And if one’s mind is clouded by darkness, and thrown off course by error and cannot succeed in recognising Substance, one must decide to free oneself from the darkness and error. For this reason one must search again for the source of this continuing mental clouding.

If despite having found the root of the defects and errors he still remains in a darkness which prevents him knowing the Supreme Noble Entity, then he must free the mind from prejudice in order to overcome the error.”

OPERE TIBETANE DI IPPOLITTO DESIDERI S.J. Vol. IV IL ‘NES LEGS’ Roma 1989: pages 163-64.

Translated by Giuseppe Toscano S.X. [from Tibetan into Italian]

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Note: NEG LEGS in Tibetan (nges legs) means ‘Certain Goodness’.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ G Coleman (editor) *Handbook of Tibetan Culture* (1993: 307) Glossary of key Tibetan, Buddhist, and Sanskrit terms compiled by Geshe Thubten Jinpa and Dr Gyurme Dorje.

ⁱⁱ The literal meaning is an “enlightenment mind”

ⁱⁱⁱ Coleman (ed.) 1993: 352.

^{iv} Coleman (ed.) 1993: 300. Dissonant emotions: a mental event whose arising causes psychological afflictions within the mind, thus destroying its peace and composure. The cause of all suffering is said to be threefold, namely: ignorance (delusion), attachment (desire), and hatred (aversion). These three unwholesome roots are referred to as the three poisons (*dug gsum*) and give rise to other afflictions (*nyon mongs*).

^v “The principal cause that allows us to overcome our cyclic existence, and the basic misconception that underlies it, is familiarizing ourselves with emptiness and the dependently existent nature of things.” Rinchen (2006:14).

“The first thing we need to do is to protect ourselves from bad future rebirths by observing a sound code of ethical discipline, beginning with restraint from the ten harmful activities. Once we are in a bad state of existence, it is difficult *not* to keep taking bad rebirths. The power of our previous actions and the powers of the Buddhas to help us are equal, and even an enlightened being cannot override the force of our bad karma.” Rinchen (2006: 48).

^{vi} A Bodhisattva is a spiritual trainee who has generated the altruistic mind of bodhicitta and is on the path to full enlightenment. They are courageous individuals who dedicate their entire being towards a single goal, i.e., to bring about the welfare of all sentient beings. An essential element of this commitment to work for [the benefit of] others is the determination purposely to remain in the cycle of existence instead of simply seeking freedom from suffering for oneself. [Coleman (ed.) 1993: 285.]

^{vii} A Bodhisattva (*byang chub sems dpa'*) is an enlightened being, i.e., one who has generated bodhicitta (*byang chub kyi sems*) and is spontaneously putting it into practice. Bodhicitta is defined as; 'The desire to achieve perfect, complete enlightenment for others' benefit.' Gampopa (1998:428). [*The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (1998): trans. Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen. Snow Lion Publications USA.]

(See Williams 2009: 194-208 for a more detailed examination of this topic).

^{viii} OPERE TIBETANE DI IPPOLITTO DESIDERI S.J., Vol. IV: IL 'NES LEGS' Roma 1989: page 317. Translated (into Italian from Tibetan) by Giuseppe Toscano S.X.: Publisher: ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER IL MEDIO ED ESTREMO ORIENTE.

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