CHAPTER FIVE

RDZOGS CHEN THOUGHT AND ITS CRITICS IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

With the eleventh century we enter into a relatively well known period in Tibetan religious history. It was the formative period of all the subsequent development of Tibetan religious thought, and was also a period of retrospective study of the religious practices prevalent in the immediately preceding centuries. New translations of Indian Buddhist works began to appear after a lapse of almost two centuries in translation activities. The more new translations of tantras were made the less authentic seemed to the Tibetans the existing old translations. Once again, tantric teaching was the centre of polemic as it had been in the eighth century A.D., but in the eighth century it was a question of suitability to the Tibetans whereas now in the eleventh century the issue was the authenticity of the earlier translations whose Sanskrit origins were no longer available.

Tibetan Buddhism in general regards tantric teaching as indispensable for gaining Enlightenment, but at the same time, the question of authenticity, whether of the new (sngags gsar ma) or the old tantras (sngags rnying ma) has always been a source of anxiety for the historians, for no sutras that were considered authentic confirm that the tantric teaching was actually taught by Śākyamuni. At the beginning of the eleventh century, lHa Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od, the king of mNga’-ris undertook the re-establishment of the Buddhist monastic

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1 See introduction, p. 4 et seq.
2 Different categories of tantras, such as Kriyā, Udbhāyā, Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga are said to have been taught to different types of people according to their temperament and only the category of Udbhāyā tantras were thought to be appropriate for the Tibetans and therefore were translated. ḪGJa (f. 105b) quotes the following passage from one version of BZk:

ma ha yo ga mu stegs dge ba la gzud pa'i slad du gtsang dme med par bstan pas ma bsgyur/ a ti yo ga choi kyi dbyig lla ba ni ma rtags par (pa) log par 'jug pa 'gyur bas ma bsgyur/ sngags yoda nus pa can yam bod la nus pa mi 'byung bas ma bsgyur/ kri ya bram ze rnamz dge ba la gzud pa'i phyir gyungs pa bod gtsang sbra chung bas ma bsgyur/ a nu yoga rme bag can la bstan pa bod rtag pa che bas ma bsgyur/ u pa ya bod la ran par brtis nas ye shes dbang pos (gol nas) bsgyur/

This same passage but defective can be found in BZk (p. 52). Now a certain number of both Kriyā and Caryā tantras are attested in TD and it therefore does not conform to what is said in the above passage, but on the other hand, Mahāyoga tantras were the object of translation restrictions. As to Anuyoga and Atiyoga tantras, e.g. dGongs ’das owes its translation to a period much later, but earlier than the 11th century since it is quoted in SM.

3 For the discussion of this topic, see Karmay 1981, p. 197.
tradition in Western Tibet. He himself renouncing the world became a monk, hence the name of Ye-shes-’od. Buddhist monastic tradition had been suppressed by Glang Dar-ma, but tantric teaching, particularly Mahāyoga tantras, had been a flourishing faith from about the middle of the ninth to the middle of the eleventh centuries A.D. However, it harboured many a practice about the genuineness of which the king began to wonder. In this connection, he therefore issued an edict in the form of an open letter requesting all concerned to refrain from their malpractices,⁴ and encouraged young Tibetan monks to travel to Northern India in order to find out whether the prevalent practices were genuine or not. In this edict, the king indicates that he was particularly concerned with the practices of the sexual rite (shyor) and the rite of deliverance (sgrol), and these according to him were practised under the name of rDzogs chen. Now it would seem that he did not really consider the practice of shyor sgrol as a part of the rDzogs chen teaching. On the other hand, not a single tantra is named in the edict. This, however, gave rise in later centuries to various interpretations. Subsequent Buddhist historians too have been unwilling to specify any tantras that particularly expound the practice and that had been popular in the period in question.

In a paper to the Tibetan International Seminar in Oxford, I gave an account of the religious practices of the period as found in the edict and pointed out that it is SNy that the edict was mainly aimed at among other tantras, but no details could be given.⁵ This is perhaps the best place to go into a more detailed discussion of this subject. The practice of shyor sgrol is the main topic expounded in chapter XI of SNy and it is this tantra that had been very popular from the time of Glang Dar-ma’s persecution, i.e. about from the middle of the ninth century till new translations of tantras were made in the eleventh century, but the tradition of this particular tantric teaching continued in later centuries. The commentary on this tantra by Rong-zom pandita Chos-kyi bzang-po (middle of the eleventh century)⁶ and the one by Klong-chen rab-’byams (1308–1363)⁷ testify to the importance that is attached to it in the rNying ma pa tradition. This tantra was evidently also known in Tun-huang, for several manuscripts bear relation to it.⁸

⁵ Karmay 1979, p. 152.
⁶ See KC.
⁷ NyP.
⁸ E.g. Part I, VIII and IX of PT 42 (Macdonald, Imaeda 1978, Pl. 48–52; Pl. 59–61). Part VIII more or less corresponds to the section on this subject in the commentary of the gSang ba snying po by Sūryasimhaprabhā, dPal gsang ba snying po’i rgya cher ’grel ba, Delhi 1976, ff. 308–17.