THE CONJUNCTION OF CHINESE CHAN AND TIBETAN
RDZOGS CHEN THOUGHT: REFLECTIONS ON THE TIBETAN
DUNHUANG MANUSCRIPTS IOL TIB J 689-1 AND PT 699

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INTRODUCTION

During and for some time after the Tibetan domination of the Inner Asian oasis of Dunhuang, which began in the late eighth century and lasted until the middle of the ninth, Tibetan Buddhism was subject to various Chinese Buddhist influences, particularly to that of the Chan tradition (chanzong 蕪宗). The century following the disintegration of the Tibetan Empire (roughly 850 to 950) is usually described as the most obscure period of Tibetan history. Manuscripts recovered in the grottoes of Dunhuang at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, show a variety of religious practices that were in vogue during that time of political anarchy in Tibet. Since there was no central authority to control various religious speculations, different traditions sometimes syncretistically merged owing to doctrinal similarities. This may be seen to some extent in the teachings of Chan and of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen).2

1 This article is based on a preliminary version first presented at the 9th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (Leiden 2000) and published as MEINERT 2002. It was originally prepared for publication in 2001, but during the intervening delay it was not possible to revise it as fully as I intended, owing to health problems since that time. I am grateful to Thub bstan Chos dar and to Dge bshes Padma tshe ring for their discussions of the manuscripts.

2 According to later Chinese historiography Chan Buddhism was brought to China in the sixth century by Bodhidharma and spread to Dunhuang and Tibet in the late eighth century. These developments are described further below. Rdzogs chen emerged during the early spread of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth and ninth centuries and is transmitted down to the present as the pinnacle of the teachings within the nine vehicles (theg pa dgu) of the Rnying ma school, the ‘ancient school’ of Buddhism in Tibet. For an overview of Rdzogs chen as part of the Rnying ma system, see DUDJOM RINPOCHE 1991: 294-345; TULKU THONDUP 1997: 15-49. S. Karmay has already pointed out that similarities between Chan and Rdzogs chen led to misunderstandings about both traditions in the early period (KARMAY 1988: ix).
Within the corpus of Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts we find among others two short documents demonstrating the early spread of Chinese Chan Buddhism and its Tibetan assimilation in the Sino-Tibetan border area during the early ninth through the early tenth centuries: the manuscripts IOL Tib J 689-1 (two folios) preserved in the collection of the British Library in London, and its commentary PT 699 (five folios) from the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. In 1979 Okimoto Katsumi first called attention to these two manuscripts in a short article that contained a transliteration of IOL Tib J 689-1 and identified PT 121-3 as another copy of the same text and PT 699 as a commentary on the root-text IOL Tib J 689-1. Even though K. Okimoto pointed out that these are important manuscripts in regard to the connection between Chan and the Tibetan teachings of Rdzogs chen, his research did not go into any further detail. In 2004, S. van Schaik and J. Dalton published an article in which they presented PT 699 as a Mahāyoga commentary on a Chan text.

The aim of the present chapter is to contextualize these two Dunhuang manuscripts in their historical and philosophical framework in order to shed new light on the relationship between Chan and Rdzogs chen thought in the ninth and tenth centuries in the Sino-Tibetan border region. I argue, first, that the root text IOL Tib J 689-1 is to be read as an instruction on the nature of mind as it is transmitted in the Chan tradition. Here, the teaching is described as ‘gazing at mind’ (Tib. sems la bltas, Ch. kanxin 看心), and thus

For a comprehensive comparison of Chan and Rdzogs chen thought in the eighth and ninth centuries, refer to MEINERT forthcoming.


4 Though VAN SCHAIK and DALTON 2004 advance a very different interpretation of these manuscripts, this demonstrates above all the fluidity of the categories of Mahāyoga and Rdzogs chen prior to their codification as distinct paths to enlightenment.

5 The Tibetan past tense sems la bltas is intentionally translated in the present continuous form ‘gazing at mind’ as Tibetan Chan manuscripts from Dunhuang sometimes use sems la bltas instead of the future tense sems la blta (cf. PT 21: f. 2r, PT 823: f. 1.4). The Chinese original kanxin, for instance in P. chin. 4646: f. 135a, is clearly used in the present continuous tense (cf. DEMIEVILLE 1987 [1952]: 43). See also n. 28 below. However, the phrase rang gi sems la bltas na/ (Lung chung: f. 115a.3) could also be translated as ‘if one has gazed at one’s own mind’ without changing the meaning in general. But because we are trying to deal with both the Tibetan translation and the Chinese original, one English translation for both terms is chosen here as a matter of convenience. I am aware of the difficulties surrounding this procedure.