

A FEW TIBETAN CUSTOMS AND A FEW THOUGHTS SUGGESTED BY THEM. THE PRAYER-WHEELS

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In my paper before the Society at its July meeting, at the outset, I divided the subject of the Prayer-Machines of the Tibetans into Prayer-flags, Prayer-Wheels, and Prayer-Beads or Rosaries. I then dwelt, at some length, on the subject of the Prayer-flags and exhibited some of their small Prayer-flags and their prayer-streamers of variegated hues. To-day, I place before the society, a specimen of their small prayer-wheels, and will speak on the subject of these prayer-wheels which I saw at Darjeeling in their *gompas* or monasteries, at the family altars in private houses, and in the hands of the itinerant Lamas and their laymen and laywomen.

The prayer-flags first draw our attention when entering into the compounds of Buddhist monasteries at Darjeeling. Then, the next thing that draws our immediate attention, is the number of prayer-wheels which we see arranged in a row on the two sides of the entrance to the monastery. These prayer-wheels are also spoken of by different travellers of Tibet, as prayer-barrels, prayer-cylinders, prayer-drums, prayer-mills and even as prayer-machines. They turn on an axis from the right to the left. They have Tibetan prayers inscribed on them on the outside. The axis in the hollow of the machine has a roll of paper—large or small according to the size of the machine—which is inscribed with Tibetan prayers.

It was on the morning of the 21st of May 1913, that I saw, for the first time in my life, a Tibetan *gompa* or monastery and its prayer-wheels, of both of which I had occasionally read a good deal. The prayer-wheels or barrels, which I saw at the *gompa* of Bhutia Basti, varied in size from 2 feet in height and 1 foot in

The description
of a Prayer-wheel.

diameter to 8 or 9 feet in height and 3 to 4 feet in diameter. In the above monastery, I saw in all 12 small barrel-shaped prayer-wheels—seven on the left while entering and five on the right. In the verandah on the right, I saw a large wheel, which one would rather call a machine. The worshipper on entering into the monastery, at first, turned all the twelve small wheels outside. He had simply to give a push to the wheels which then turned round for a number of times. He then thought, that he had, as it were, recited a number of prayers. He then went up the verandah and began to turn the huge wheel there. This was no light work. A weak person cannot do that easily. The worshipper sat himself down, and then, catching hold of a large strap attached to the wheel, began to pull it. Thus, the wheel turned from right to left. The movement, which one has to give to the body while turning it, is like that we observe in a person turning a grinding-mill, in our country. As, by long working at the grinding-mill, one exhausts himself, so, one can exhaust himself in the case of these prayer-machines. I think the work at these huge machines is heavier than that at a grinding-mill. I was touched at the devotion with which a pious old woman turned such a large prayer-wheel at the beautifully-situated monastery of Ging. The woman, I was told, was wandering from monastery to monastery to seek her heaven, depending upon the charity of the monasteries for her board and lodge, which were always free for such pilgrim-travellers.

These big machines had, at the top, two small sticks or pegs, projecting about two or three inches from the outer surface of the barrel. In the revolution of the barrel, these projecting pegs struck two small bells that hung from the ceiling. The bells gave a sonorous sound, which gave, as it were, a solemn harmony to the movement of the wheel and produced a kind of rude music, which, however rude, added to the solemnity of the religious place in a sequestered corner of wild nature.

These Prayer-wheels are often decorated. The projecting parts of the axis of the wheel are decorated with coloured cloths.

Again, the barrel of the machine is painted with various gaudy colours which we often see on some of the temples of our country.

Besides these wheels of different sizes which are seen in the monasteries, one sees smaller prayer-wheels in the hands of Lamas and also in the hands of laymen of both sexes. While going about for their ordinary business purposes, they carry these small wheels in their hands and turn them with a view to acquire meritoriousness at all times. While turning these, they often repeat the sacred words: "Om! Mani Padme Hung!" i.e. "Hail! Jewel (Lord of Mercy) in the Lotus-Flower"¹

According to Col. Waddell, these words are believed to be "the mystic spell" of "the most popular of all the divinities of the later Buddhists, namely, the 'Lord of Mercy's' (*Avalokita*, in Tibetan *Chän-rä-zi*), who is supposed to be a potential Buddha who relinquished his prospect of becoming a Buddha, and of passing out of the world and existence into the Nirvana of extinction, in order to remain in heaven, and be available to assist all men on earth who may call upon him to deliver them from earthly danger, to help them to reach paradise and escape hell." The Tibetans believe that all "these three great objects" are "easily secured by the mere utterance of the mystic spell..... It is not even necessary to utter this spell to secure its efficiency. The mere looking at it in its written form is of equal benefit. Hence the spell is everywhere made to revolve before the eyes, it is twirled in myriads of prayer-wheels, incised on stones in cairns, carved and painted on buildings, as well as uttered by every lip throughout Tibet, Mongolia, Ladak, and the Himalayan Buddhist States down to Bhotan, and from Baikal to Western China."²

¹ "Lhasa and its Mysteries" by Dr. Austine Waddell (1905) p. 29. *Vide* also Dr. Waddell's "Buddhism of Tibet" pp. 148-14.

² Col. Waddell's "Lhasa and its Mysteries" p. 29. The first word *Om* (ॐ) of this mystic spell is used in India as a kind of magic word or amulet. It is inscribed on books and tablets. I have seen it even in the Gujarati inscription of a Parsee tablet in a *dharamsala* erected at Sanjan. The *Dharamsala* was first erected by the late Mr. Vicaji Taraporewala, a Parsee, celebrated in all the country round Tarapore, and, at one time, much known in the court of the Nizam. Having fallen into ruin, a new one is erected. The tablet of this *Dharamsala* begins with the word ॐ.

I have seen these mystic words written on side rocks, at several places, on my way to Sukhiapuri and Rangaröong. This is their most sacred prayer. It is like the Bi'smillah prayer of the Mahomedans, the Yathâ Ahu Vairyo of the Zoroastrians, the *Pater Noster* of the Christians. When at Darjeeling, on many a morning, at a very early hour, I heard from my bed-room the low muttering voice of a Bhutia man or woman passing along the road, reciting this prayer, and turning his or her wheel.

The word "Mani" in the above short prayer, which is generally inscribed on the prayer-wheel and with the recital of which a Tibetan turns the wheel, has given to the wheel its ordinary name of "mani."¹ The Tibetans know this wheel by the name of K'orlo.² This wheel is always to be turned from the right to the left.

It is said, that besides the machines of various sizes standing in the monasteries, and the small portable ones carried by the religious-minded, which we generally see in and round about Darjeeling, there are many of different sizes that are erected on the tops of mountains, and over the currents of rivers,³ where, turning by the force of winds and of the running waters, they repeat, by their movement, the prayers inscribed over them, and are believed to bring merit to the pious erectors, and good to the world round about. Some prayer-wheels are erected over fire-places, so that they may turn by the ascending currents of heated air.⁴ In Tibet, even ordinary houses of a somewhat richer class of persons have a row of barrel-shaped prayer-wheels set up in a prominent part of the building, where it can be easily turned by the inmates or the visitors of the house.⁵

¹ For a fuller account of the cult of the Tibetans, and of this "mani," vide "Bod-Youl ou Tibet," par M. L. de Milloué, (1906), pp. 241 *et seq.*

² *Ibid.* p. 254.

³ "Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet" by Rai Sarat Chandra Das Bahadur, C. I. E., p. 28.

⁴ "Diary of a Journey through Mongolia and Tibet in 1891 and 1892" by William Woodville Rockhill (1894) pp. 86-87.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 366.

When one had no work to do he turned the wheel.¹ Itinerant singers carried these prayer-wheels and turned them while singing.²

Dr. Waddell speaks of the use of a kind of prayer-wheel in Tibet the like of which I have not seen in Darjeeling. It is "a stationary praying-wheel, which is turned like a spinning-top by twirling its upper stem."³ (For the figures of this prayer-wheel and the smaller hand wheels, *vide* the figures at the commencement of this paper. I am indebted to Dr. Waddell's excellent book for these figures.)

People carried and turned these prayer-wheels even while riding. Dr. Sven Hedin speaks of two old Lamas, who "as they rode incessantly turned their *Korlehs*, or prayer-wheels, mumbling *Om maneh padmeh hum!* without for one moment tiring, their voices rising and falling in a monotonous, sleepy sing-song."⁴ The smaller prayer-wheels are placed on the outer side of the monastery, so that, even when the monastery is closed, worshippers can go there and turn them. Rai Sarat Chandra Das Bahadur speaks of a monastery which was deserted, but still it was at times visited by women for "turning the prayer-wheels outside the temple."⁵ While speaking of the castle of Diba Dongtse, he says: "Around this (the central court-yard), on the sides, the building is 40 feet high, and has three stories, along the outer edge of which, on the court-yard side, are rows of drum-shaped prayer-wheels two feet high, and as much in diameter, that take the place of railings."⁶ At times, they were placed in the passages of palatial residences of cardinals, like that of the Potala, the palace of Delai Lama, where people turned them on their way to and back from the residences.⁷

¹ *Ibid*, p. 248. ² *Ibid*. p. 300.

³ Dr. Waddell's "Lhasa and its Mysteries," pp. 405-406.

⁴ "Central Asia and Tibet. Towards the Holy City of Lhasa" By Sven Hedin, Vol. II (1903), p. 390.

⁵ Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet. By Sarat Chandra Das, C.I.E. (1902), pp. 24-25. ⁶ *Ibid*. p. 98. ⁷ *Ibid*. p. 166.

Now, what is the origin of this custom of turning the prayer-wheels, as a form of prayer. I think, the custom has arisen from the *form* of ancient manuscripts which contained prayers. Even now, many an old Sanskrit manuscript is found written on rolls, *i.e.*, large strips of papers that are rolled.¹ We know, that all horoscopes in India are prepared in rolls. It seems, that in old times, when prayers were written on rolls, one had to turn such rolls to recite the prayers. For the sake of convenience, these rolls were rolled round rods or poles which acted like axis and looked like cylinders or barrels. The worshipper went on turning the roll, as he read the prayer on it. In the case of many worshippers, the prayer was mechanically read without being understood. In such a case, the worshipper hastened in his work with a view to finish his roll. The work of reading a whole prayer-manuscript being long and tedious, at times, portions here and there were enjoined to be omitted or willingly omitted. The omissions hastened and thus shortened the work. Such a process went on gradually. It seems then to have proceeded to such an extent, that it came to be understood and believed that the turning of the roll from the beginning to the end, with the recital of a short prayer-formula amounted to a recital of the whole prayer inscribed on the roll. Then, gradually, even the recital of the short prayer-formula was ignored and the process came to a mere turning of the roller or wheel. Thus, in the gradual evolution of the ways or processes of recital, we find at the bottom, what we can term "the shortening-process." It is the process, which one also finds in the case of the use of prayer-beads or rosaries, of which I will speak, later on, in another paper before the Society. The shortening-process seems to be at the bottom of all the different forms of the prayer-machines, though we cannot exactly trace—

¹ My friend Ervad Nusserwanjee Burjorjee Desai, in the course of the discussion that followed the reading of this paper, said, that he had seen an old Parsee manuscript written on such a roll.

in fact one has not sufficient materials to trace—its evolution in the case of prayer-flags.

As an instance of the shortening-process, in solemn matters, one may refer to the origin of the use of the words
 Instance of a shortening process. Hip, Hip, Hurrah. Hermit went from village to village preaching the Crusades. He held the flag of the Cross in his hand and going to the villages shouted "*Hierosolyma est perdita*," i.e., "Jerusalem is lost." He called the Christians to a Crusade or Holy War, repeating these words and drawing their attention to the fact of their holy city of Jerusalem being in the hands of the Saracens. Afterwards, in order to save himself the trouble and the time of frequently repeating the whole sentence, he recited only the first letters,—*h*, *i*, and *p*—of the three words of the above sentence. These three letters gave him the word "Hip." So, he repeated the word Hip. When he entered the villages shouting the word "Hip, Hip", the people responded to his appeal by shouting "Hurrah". This instance, though not on all fours with our subject, illustrates, how man always tried to shorten all his work, even his recital of holy formulæ and prayers.