

# Book Review

***BORN IN TIBET.* By: Chogyam Trungpa  
(Allen and Unwin, 35s.)**

**Review by Martin Lings**

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This unique autobiography falls into two parts, the story of the upbringing and education of a young Tibetan Lama from his earliest years until the age of nineteen, and the story of his escape to India when his country was invaded by the communists.

The death of the tenth supreme abbot of Surmang had left the monks of that group of monasteries without a spiritual head; and after several months, through visions and other signs, as happens also in the case of the Dalai Lama and many other lesser dignitaries, the author of this book, then less than a year old, was identified beyond doubt as the tenth abbot's incarnation, and he was subsequently enthroned as the eleventh of the line. It may be mentioned in passing that the traditional conception of reincarnation is quite different from what it is generally understood to be by Westerners. This becomes clear when one learns that the author's *guru* is one of five reincarnations of the same person who are all living at the same time and who all accept each other, and are universally accepted, as reincarnations of that person. A valuable appendix explains that there are several different kinds of reincarnation but there is never any question of a dead man's ego, the kernel of his individuality, being reincarnated.

The author was brought up in the monastery, and at the age of eight he was ordained as a novice. Shortly afterwards he went into spiritual retreat for three months, and on the basis of that his training in general was intensified.

There are many brief and vivid sketches of some of the remarkable men who passed through his early life: his tutor who had previously spent three years in spiritual retreat behind bricked in doors, receiving food through a panel, and who, when he felt that his tutoring was finished, retired to end his days at the same hermitage; the saintly and gifted regent abbot, lover of birds and animals, in his mountain retreat which he called the Garden of the Mists; a married Lama who was a gifted poet and who handed on to him much of the teaching that he himself had received from the tenth abbot. Many other disciples of the tenth abbot also came into the life of his successor, as was to be expected. No doubt the most outstanding of all was Jamgön Kongtrül of Sechen who was invited to perform a rite at the monastery when the author was only nine. Even at that age he was impressed to the point of being conscious that this Lama was destined to be his *guru*; and at the age of twelve he insisted on going to Sechen. One has the impression that the two years spent there with his *guru* were the most satisfying of his early life. Both master and disciple felt that a considerably longer period was necessary, but the young abbot's monks were impatient at the absence of their spiritual head and contrived a pretext to make him return. Later he insisted on going back to his *guru*, but for the moment he had to leave him. He writes: "The following day when I went to say good-bye to my *guru* he told me that, though I must now leave, he had had a dream the night before and had seen a half moon rising in the sky; everyone was saying 'This is a full moon': 'this means,' he said, 'that you are the moon but not yet really full, for

your studies are not complete.' He gave me further advice on meditation...and broken-hearted I left that wonderful place."

By now the author was fourteen, and from that time on he was in ever increasing demand, sometimes from quite distant parts, to officiate at funerals and to perform other rites. Many vividly described incidents stay in one's memory—for example, his visit to a highland monastery and the solemn meeting, with all due ceremony, of two processions, that of the guests headed by himself, and the procession of welcome headed by the young abbot who was to be his host, a boy of his own age who soon became a close friend and who later became the disciple of his *guru*, and who took part in the final escape to India.

It was at this young abbot's highland monastery that the author was invited to bestow a vast collective initiation into a body of teaching which he himself had received at Sechen, an exceedingly complex rite which took six arduous months to perform. This was just one of the many dilemmas with which the book is punctuated. On the one hand it was more or less taken for granted that he would accept the invitation, and a steady stream of aspirants were arriving at the monastery; on the other hand his tutor, who still travelled with him everywhere, warned him on no account to accept unless he was confident that he could do it perfectly "as failure would be serious." It was only after spending several days in devotional meditation that he decided to undertake the task, and all went well.

Memorable also is the description of the four nunneries that were established, as an offshoot of the monastery, at the four corners of a near-by mountain. There was also, not far from the monastery, a hermitage "which was exclusively used for seven week periods of meditation on *bardo*, the state experienced at the moment of death and just afterwards."

On the return journey he visited another centre, one of the most important in Tibet.

"The whole area around the monastery is famous for its art...All the villagers earn their living by painting...All the houses belonging to the villagers contained wonderful paintings and carvings, and their shrine rooms were in the same style as those of the monasteries...On the opposite side of the river the people specialized in goldsmith's and silversmith's work, particularly in smelting and casting these precious metals."

The Dalai Lama's visit to East Tibet and the remarkable preparations for it are described in rich detail. Of the actual visit he remarks:

"He (the Dalai Lama) gave me personally a wider vision, since I now understood what it meant to be the incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, for this was apparent in the Dalai Lama's serenity and radiance, which one could feel was part of him."

The author's education continued. The purely mental part of it, as regards the study of texts, was formidable enough to have overstrained the mind if it had not been balanced by continual meditation and invocation. There were many other aspects to his training. After his ordination at the age of eight he had to learn "how to perform various rites, how to intone and how to use drums, bells and various other instruments." There were also lessons in painting and in poetry and, at a much later stage, intensive lessons in sacred dancing.

The second part of the book, the story of the escape, is told in a matter of fact way, but when read between the lines it is the story of terrible hardship and astounding endurance, made possible by drawing on the forces of the Spirit. No one can fail to be impressed by the prevailing serenity. At one point the author feels obliged to make a short spiritual retreat to renew his

strength. At another point he is able to write a poem, which is given at the end of the book. The following is part of an address made by him, still only in his twentieth year, to the assembled fugitives:

"Our journey to India must be thought of as a pilgrimage, something that in the past few Tibetans have been able to make. Whether or not India has changed, the spiritual blessings imparted to that country by the presence of the Buddha remain: the places where he lived, freed himself from the bondage of *Samsara*, taught, and died have an eternal value. It is fortunate for us that our way is hard and that we are struggling against greater difficulties than the pilgrims of the past, for by this means we shall learn and profit the more from our journey. We should not be thinking only about the enemies threatening us from without. Each moment we should be aware of ourselves and of the forces of destruction that threaten each man from within. If we fail in this, we are indeed putting the spiritual object of our journey in jeopardy; each step along the way should be holy and precious to us."

But when the book has been read and when the overwhelmed reader has had time to see it in perspective, it is neither the narrative of upbringing and education nor the narrative of escape that seems to stand out most of all. To say this is not to deny the intense interest of either, for each in its own way serves once again to confirm the fact that fiction is no match for truth as regards the strange and the marvellous. But the author, faithful to his ancestral outlook, has succeeded in painting a vast canvas in which the human individuals and their paths and the bridges that they cross are dwarfed and overshadowed by the setting itself. That setting is the civilization of Buddhist Tibet. Our dominating memory is of a theocracy in full flower, surrounded on all sides, penetrated, and in many places deeply indented, by virgin nature, which the author so often and so lovingly describes throughout the book and which enters so profoundly into the lives of both priest and layman; and within the framework of this theocracy, we are especially struck by the sheer quantity of spiritual riches. In a book of this kind we would expect to hear of spiritual dignitaries. But what takes us by surprise is the remarkable correspondence between outward function and inward spirituality which seems to be the rule rather than the exception. The chief characters in this book are nearly all Saints in the making, one feels, while some of them no doubt are Saints already made; and to match what one might call this quantity of quality, we have a corresponding impression of the piety of the people as a whole, a general orientation towards the merciful Beyond such as the Western world has not seen for six hundred years or more.

Yet the author's civilization was still flourishing, quite undecayed, only ten years ago. Through *Born in Tibet* it is now revealed to the West, to a world which mistakes machine-power for vigour and which claims to be "Civilization" with a capital "C"; and if that world were prepared to listen, it might learn from this book something of what vigour and civilization truly are.