

# Kim's Lama

## Spiritual Quest in Kipling's Novel

By Rasoul Sorkhabi

One hundred years ago, in 1907, Rudyard Kipling was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (the first English writer to obtain this honor), partly because of *Kim* which was published in 1901 and was regarded by T.S. Eliot and W. Somerset Maugham as his masterpiece. Here I explore a less-studied aspect of this novel – the Tibetan Lama who comes to India and adopts Kim as his *chela* (disciple). How did the Lama enter Kipling's novel and what role does he play?

Since its publication at the turn of the twentieth century, numerous scholars and critics have commented on Kipling and *Kim* from various perspectives. Some have equated the novel with boys' tales of adventure such as Stevenson's *Treasure Island* or Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Some have been fascinated by the panorama of the exotic Orient, the colorful landscape, and the cultural diversity of India and the Himalaya depicted in the novel. Others have criticized Kipling as the British Empire's poet and have thus cast *Kim* as colonialist literature. While all these perspectives shed some light on Kipling and *Kim*, less attention has been given to the book's spiritual dimension, and in this vein, the character of the Tibetan Lama in the novel is paramount right from its beginning to the end.

Rudyard Kipling in 1899 when he was working on *Kim* (portrait by Philip Burne-Jones).



Kim is an orphan boy of thirteen who lives with a half-caste opium smoking woman in the city of Lahore (now in Pakistan). His father was an Irish sergeant in the British Indian Army and his mother was an Indian nursemaid – both dead. Kim is an Anglo-Indian, but speaks Hindustani and plays among the Hindu and Muslim boys of Lahore. In some respects,

these overlap with Rudyard Kipling's own hybrid life. Born in Bombay (Mumbai) to a British couple (they had just moved to India) in 1865, Kipling lived the first six years of his life in Bombay. He heard Indian folk tales and songs from his "Hindu bearer" (who would then send him to his parents, with the caution, "Speak English now to Papa and Mamma," as Kipling later wrote in his autobiography, *Something of Myself*). After graduating from a high school in England, Rudyard returned to India – this time to live in Lahore, where his father was Principal of the Mayo College of Art and Curator of the Lahore Museum. Aged 16, Rudyard began his literary career as an assistant editor for the *Civil & Military Gazette*, published in Lahore. This is also where *Kim* begins – Kim playing with friends in front of the museum, and then a Tibetan Lama appears.

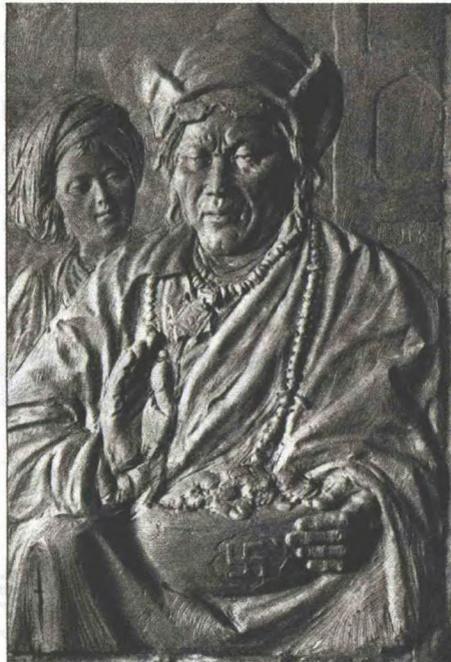
Kipling could have learned about Buddhism from some publications of his time, notably Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* (1879). Moreover, in 1889, after working as a journalist in India for seven years, Kipling visited Japan on his way to England. Indeed, a few verses he had composed for the Great Buddha at Kamakura, Japan, appear as beginning lines in *Kim's* chapters. But what is puzzling is that in his novel Kipling introduces the Tibetan as "a Red Lama" (belonging to the Red Hat Order or *Nyingma-pa* of Tibetan Buddhism) rather than a lama from Yellow Hat Order (*Gelug-pa*) which was then far better known. Did Kipling have a real lama in his mind – one whom he had seen in person? The British Raj historian Peter Hopkirk, in his valuable research book titled *Quest for Kim: In Search of Kipling's Great Game* (1997), refers to a letter dated May 16, 1902, which John Lockwood Kipling (Rudyard's father) had written to the famed explorer, Sir Aurel Stein: "I wonder whether you have seen my son's *Kim*, and recognized an old lama whom you saw at the old Museum and at the School."

At the outset of the novel, the Lama clarifies that he is neither a *pahari* (a hillman) nor *Khitai* (Chinese) but comes from *Bhotiyal* (Tibet): "We be followers of the Middle Way,

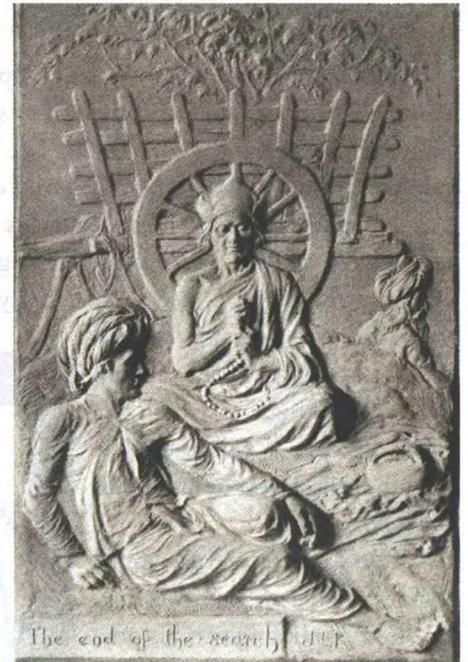
living in peace in lamaseries.” This shows that in Kipling’s time, Tibet enjoyed a separate identity from China. The Lama further says that he came to India “by Kulu – from beyond the Kailash ... where the air and water are fresh and cool.” His disciple had died at Kulu [a Himalayan valley in northwest India], and he had continued his journey to Lahore to visit the Museum where many Buddhist images and antiques were kept. Kim then takes the Lama to the “House of Wonder” (museum), and the Lama is engaged in a very informative conversation with the curator of the museum who appears to be quite knowledgeable about Buddhism (this character is obviously modeled on Kipling’s own father).

The Lama is so excited to see the Buddha’s statues: “The Lord! The Lord! It is Shakyamuni himself ... My pilgrimage is well begun.” The Lama talks of his own background: He comes from the “Such-zen” Monastery and he has a friend, who had visited India before, and is now an Abbot (“Teshoo Lama”) of the “Lung-Cho” monastery. Zara Fleming, a British scholar of Tibetan culture, believes (quoted in Hopkirk’s book) that “Such-zen” is probably a corruption (by Kipling) of the “Tso-chen” – a Red Hat lamasery about 450 miles east of Simla and 200 miles north of Kathmandu (or as the Lama says, “four months away” from Lahore), and that “Lung-cho” is probably “Lung-kar” – a more remote and less known monastery in Tibet.

Then Lama explains to the curator why he has come to India: He is on a pilgrimage to the holy places related to the Buddha’s life (“before I die”): (1) The place the Buddha was born (“Lumbini,” although Kipling does not name it); (2) Kapilavastu, the capital of the Shakya kingdom where the Buddha was raised in a splendid palace; (3) Buddh Gaya (Kipling gives the old name of “Maha Bodhi”), where he attained enlightenment under a tree; (4) the Deer Park (“Sarnath” near Benaras) where he started his teachings; and (5) Kaushinagara, where the Buddha passed away at the age of 80. The Lama adds that



Kim and the Lama at the beginning of the novel (relief illustration by Lockwood Kipling for the first edition of his son’s *Kim* published in 1901).



The Lama and Kim at the end of “the search” (relief illustration by Lockwood Kipling from *Kim*, 1901).

he is also looking for a river – the Fountain of Wisdom or the River of Arrow – formed where the Buddha’s arrow fell when he participated in an archery contest with other young men for the girl he wished to marry. Neither the curator nor Kim knew about this river; the Lama insists: “Think again! Some little stream, maybe – dried in the heat? But the Holy One would never so cheat an old man.”

Kim decides to accompany the Lama as his disciple on an uncharted journey. Meanwhile, Kim reveals to the Lama his own secret dream: He will look for “a red bull on a green field, with a colonel riding on a horse.” This, his father had prophesied, would bring luck and welfare to Kim. Indeed, the search for the River of Arrow (enlightenment) for the old Lama, and the search for a red bull on a green field for the young Kim, becomes the overall goal of the novel. They travel together along the Grand Trunk Road – from Lahore to Benaras (Varanasi), and then to the western Himalaya.

Through the novel, the Lama teaches – in words and action – the Buddha Dharma. He chants *Om mani padme hum* (Hail to the jewel in the lotus) on the train, tells his fellow passengers the story of the Buddha’s life, and wishes that they all be free from “the Wheel of Things” (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in suffering). On a farmland, where Kim tries to kill

a snake, the Lama prevents him, saying, "Why? He is upon the Wheel as we are – a life ascending or descending – very far from deliverance ... Let him live out his life." The Lama is kind to everyone irrespective of their "caste" (Kipling knew that Buddhism has no caste system, or as the Lama says, "There is neither high nor low in the Middle Way."). The Holy Man earns the respect of Kim and those whom he meets on the way; the Lama also respects Kim's good heart (despite his mischievous talk and behavior to others). The Lama tries to guide Kim indirectly and through being a role model. Early in the novel, Kim fantasizes that perhaps "the red bull on the green field ... will make me a king," to which the Lama answers, "I will teach thee the other and better desires upon the road."

These details are all woven together to tell an engaging tale. In short, Kipling (given his pro-British political thinking) makes Kim a spy for the British secret service engaged in the "Great Game" (a phrase indeed popularized by *Kim*) between Russia and Britain over domination of central-south Asia, especially India. Nonetheless, the spiritual quest for human's true identity is embodied in the story. The Lama eventually finds the River of the Arrow. This does not turn out to be a mighty Himalayan river as readers would have expected (such as the Ganges, which the Lama and Kim also visited) but only an irrigation canal on some farmland close to a small town, Saharunpore, in northwest India! ("For the merit I have acquired," the Lama says, "the River of Arrow is here. It broke forth at our feet.") In this way, Kipling tells us that what the Lama was really searching for was enlightenment and inner realization. The story, which had begun with Kim sitting on a gun in front of the Lahore Museum, ends with the Lama sitting on a lotus posture in meditation by the stream where he had become enlightened. "The search is ended" for the Lama, but as for Kim, even though he had found the "red bull on a green field with a colonel riding a horse" in the Great Game, a long road lies ahead.

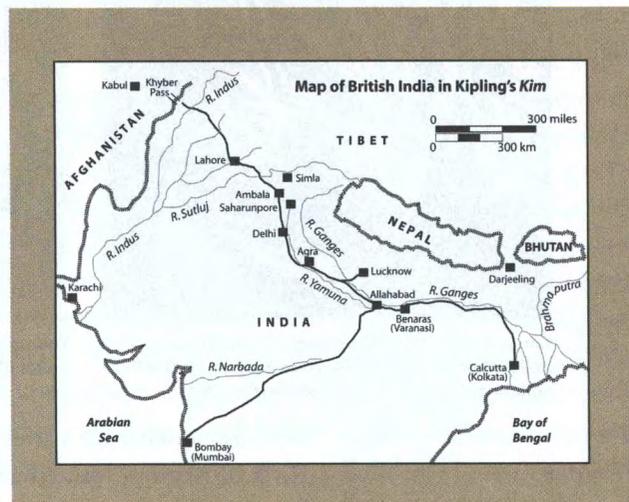
The Lama, as Kipling describes, was a tall man who wore a pair of spectacles and carried with him a begging bowl, a

rosary (*mala*), a Buddhist book, a "holy picture" (*thangka*), and a pen case which he presented to the curator of the Lahore Museum "as a sign of friendship." Kipling makes one huge error: He writes again and again that although the Lama spoke Urdu and Tibetan (his mother tongue), he quoted Buddhist verses in Chinese or from a Chinese Book. Now we know (if Kipling did not know then) that a huge number of Buddhist sutras actually exist in the Tibetan language.

Some scholars have asserted that *Kim* is not a coherent novel. In his introduction to the Oxford University Press' edition of *Kim* (1987), Alan Sandison writes: "Kim was described by its author himself as plotless, and it is true that the movement of the novel is highly episodic ... Yet the result is not a rambling, incoherent narrative, for a powerful unity is established by other highly sophisticated means." Indeed, the Tibetan Lama and his search for the River of the Arrow is one of these "highly sophisticated means" to provide a "powerful unity" to the novel.

In December 1907, when Kipling arrived in Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize, he found the city in mourning for the death of the King of Sweden. The Nobel Prize ceremony went on in the presence of a new king. Perhaps the statement in the Nobel Prize presentation for Kipling highlights not only the importance of *Kim* in Kipling's literary heritage, but also the vital role of the Tibetan Lama in this masterpiece: "*Kim* (1901) deserves special notice, for in the delineation of the Buddhist priest, who goes on a pilgrimage along the banks of the stream that purifies from sin, there is an elevated diction as well as a tenderness and charm which are otherwise unusual traits in this dashing writer's style. There is, too, in the figure of the little rascal Kim, the priest's *chela*, a thorough type of good-humoured roguishness." ❁

*Rasoul Sorkhabi's previous articles in Mandala include "Albert Einstein and the Dalai Lama" (June/July 2005), "A Zen Monk in Tibet: The Kawaguchi Story" (August/September 2005), "The Dalai Lama and the Science of the Mind and Life" (December/November 2005), and "The Dalai Lama Brings Science and Meditation to Washington D.C." (February/March 2006).*



A map of the British India (including Pakistan) during Kipling's time (map by Rasoul Sorkhabi)