

# A Renovation of Svayambhunath-Stupa in the 18th Century and its History

(according to Tibetan sources)

-Franz-Karl Ehrhard

If one climbs the steep stone steps situated in the east up to the stupa of Svayambhunath and starts walking around the stupa in the prescribed direction, one comes upon the Tibetan monastery known under the name Drugpa Kagyu Gompa. Opposite the stairs leading to the shrine room in the first floor, next to the entrance into the Murtisangralaya Museum, there stands a man-sized stone covered with an inscription in Newari and Tibetan. As early as 1877 a first translation of the Newari text was available, rendered according to the text of a "Buddhist chronicle" (*vamsavali*),<sup>1</sup> and recently the

Tibetan portion has been translated into Nepali.<sup>2</sup> This inscription describes one renovation of Svayambhunath Stupa extending over a period of eight years, namely from 1751 to 1758.

Rather than going into the details of the actual inscription, such as the list of materials used during the renovation work, or the exact account of the start and end of construction, I should like in the following to restrict myself to taking a closer look at the renovation's background. This is done with the intention of placing the person of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu (1698-1755), a teacher of the rNying-

1. D. Wright : *History of Nepal* (translated from Parbatiya by Munshi Shew Shunker Singh and Pandit Sri Gunakand), First Edition, Cambridge 1877; Third Edition, Calcutta 1966, pp. 155-157. The rendering of the "longue inscription bilingue" in S. Levi: *Le Nepal: Etude Historique d'un Royaume Hindou*, Tome 2, First Edition, Paris 1905; Second Edition, Paris 1985/86, pp. 5-6, is based on this translation.
2. Ramesh Dhungel: "Svayambhu Sthita Syamarapa Lama Dasanko Tibbati Abhilekha ra Tyasako Nepali Anuvada", *Nepal Economist*, no. 6 (May-June 1988), pp. 4-11. I owe this bibliographic reference to Mr. Mahesh Raj Pant.

ma-pa school from Kah-thog in Khams (East Tibet), more in the centre of the account. In my opinion too little attention has been devoted hitherto to him and to his role during the renovation.

That special significance should be attached to Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu in the context of the renovation may be inferred from the inscription's first lines :

"Om svasti ! I bow down to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In all times and in all forms I bow down to the spotless lotus feet of the glorious teacher, the excellent rDo-rje Tshe-dbang nor-bu, and take refuge in him!"

(om svasti/sangs rgyas dang byang | chub sems dpa' thams cad la phyag 'tshal,lo | dpal ldan bla ma dam pa rdo rje tshe dbang nor bu'i zhabs kyi padmo dri ma med pa la dus dang rnam pa thams cad du phyag 'tshal zhing skyabsu mchi'o)

Following a laudation of the stupa the next lines of the inscription speak of the necessity of the planned renovation; in doing so they attach the following honorifics to Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu :

"Head ornament of all scholars and siddhas, knowledge holder (*vidyadhara*), ruler over all worlds (*cakravartin*), noble rDo-rje Tshe-dbang nor-bu."

(mkhas pa dang grub pa thams cad kyi gtsug rgyan du 'gyur pa rig pa 'dzin pa yongs kyi 'khor lo bsgyur ba 'i dbang phyug dpal rdo rje tshe dbang nor bu).

Who is then this teacher from the first half of the 18th century, and what information

do we have about him ? In an article from the year 1967 Hugh E. Richardson makes the following remarks concerning the person of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu:

"Tshe-dbang nor-bu was born in 1698 in the Sa-ngan region of East Tibet and was soon recognized as the reincarnation of one Grub-dbang Padma nor-bu who carried on the spiritual line of gNubs Nam-mkha'i snying-po, a teacher at the time of Khri Srong-lde-btsan ..... Tshe-dbang nor-bu studied with the leading rNying-ma-pa teachers and also with those of the Karmapa with whom Kah-thog had a close connection. Among the skills he developed was that of *gter-stop*, discoverer of religious texts and objects believed to have been concealed in the remote past. He travelled widely and his activities included the founding or repairing of monasteries in Western Tibet and in Sikkim, and the repair of *mchod-rten* (stupas) in Nepal. He was greatly revered by Pho-lha-nams stobs-rgyas, the ruler of Tibet; and in 1751/52 when trouble arose between the princes of upper and lower Ladakh and there was danger of interference by the Dzungar masters of Kashgaria, Pho-la and the VII. Dalai Lama commissioned him to restore peace ..... From Ladakh he went to Nepal and not long after, in about 1755, he died at sKyid-grong where is a *mchod-rten* containing his relics."<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime the collected writings of this "Tibetan Antiquarian" have become available to us : 1. *Selected Writings of Kah-thog Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu*, 4 vols.,

3. Hugh E. Richardson : "A Tibetan Antiquarian in the XVIIIth Century", *Bulletin of Tibetology*, vol. IV, no. 3 (1967), p.8. Biographical material relating to Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu was at the same time drawn upon by R.A. Stein in his article "Nouveaux Documents Tibétains sur le Mi nag/Si-hia" in *Melanges de Sinologie offerts a Monsieur Paul Demieville*, Paris 1966, pp. 286-287.

Darjeeling, W. B. 1973—1982, and 2. *Collected Works of Kah-thog Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu*, 6 vols., Dalhousie 1977. For present purposes I shall refer principally to the detailed biography of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu in vol. 1 of the *Collected Works*,<sup>4</sup> as well as to supplementary material from vol. 1 of the *Selected Writings*. I shall proceed by introducing individual episodes from the biography in order to follow the course of events leading to the renovation of Svayambhunath.

Towards the end of the year 1726 Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu for the first time spent some time in the Kathmandu valley; he arrived via Ding-ri and gNya'-nang. But after visiting the two stupas of Svayambhunath and Bodhnath, as well as other pilgrim sites such as Yang-le-shod (=Pharping), he soon left the Valley, via the north-western route. Thus we find him in the year 1727 in sKyid-grong, where he visits the famous Avalokitesvara statue 'Phags-pa Wa-ti<sup>5</sup> and goes about his spiritual practices at the "six forts" (*rdzong drug*) and three caves" (*phug gsum*) of the yogin Mi-la-ras-pa (1040—1123), (*Biography*, pp. 119—128).

The first reference to activities undertaken by Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu in connection with repairs to a stupa in Nepal can be dated to the beginning of the year 1728. It is at this point in time that he receives from South Tibet, i. e. from the province of gTsang, the summons to bring the repair activities at the stupa of Bodhnath to their conclusion with a consecration ceremony (*rab gnas*). This summons comes from bSod-nams stobs-rgyas from Pho-lha (1689—1747), the ruler (or "king" of Tibet, whose reign falls in the years 1728 to 1747. We are lucky to have a detailed study by L. Pétech on the political role played by Pho-lha-ba bSod-nams stobs-rgyas and the power struggles in Tibet during the first half of the 18th century and we are therefore in a position to identify the motive for this renovation of Bodhnath Stupa: before his battle campaign in Central Tibet, which led to the ending of the Tibetan civil war of 1727—1728 and to his establishing himself as the ruler of Tibet, Pho-lha-ba bSod-nams stobs-rgyas has the stupa of Bodhnath given a face lifting in order to conjure a happy end to his plans.<sup>6</sup> Thus Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu, then only thirty years old, already

4. *dPal rig 'dzin po rdo rje tshe dbang nor bu'i zabs kyi (s) rnam par thar pa'i cha shas brjod pa ngo mtshar dad pa'i rol mtsho*, 187 fols., in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 1—376. The author of this biography, which was completed in the year 1819, is Brag-dkar rta-so sprul-sku Chos-kyi dbang-phyug (\*1775), who via his teacher Karma 'Phrin-las bdu-l-'joms (1726—1789) is in the lineage of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu (Abbr.: *Biography*).
5. Four such Avalokitesvara statues are generally distinguished; on the tradition of these statues and their connection with Nepal see T. Wylie: *A Tibetan Religious Geography of Nepal* (= *Serie Orientale Roma XLII*), Rome 1970, pp. 14—16 (fn. 20), Keith Dowman; "A Buddhist Guide to the Power Places of the Kathmandu Valley", *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, vol. VIII, nos. 3/4 (1981) pp. 233—235, and J.K. Locke, S.J.: *The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal*, Kathmandu 1980, pp. 352 ff.
6. L. Pétech: *China and Tibet in the Early XVIIIth Century* (= *Monographies du T'oung Pao*, vol. I), Second, Revised Edition, Leiden 1972, P. 122: "P'o-lha-nas was marching back to gTsan ..... He encamped at Lu-ma-dgo-dmar, where he decided, as an auspicious deed

commanded enough spiritual authority to be entrusted with the concluding act of the renovation (*Biography*, pp. 127-129).

This is not, however, Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu's final contact with Pho-lha-ba bSod-nams stobs-rgyas and the stupa of Bodhnath. In the year 1747, shortly before the death of Tibet's ruler, we find him, now barely fifty, in Pho-lha-ba's presence in lHa-sa. Also taking part in the rituals that Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu carries out on Pho-lha-ba are the Eighth Si-tu Rin-po-che Chos-kyi 'byung-gnas (1700-1774) and the Seventh dPa'-bo Rin-po-che dPa'-bo gTsug-lag dga'-ba (died 1781). The Seventh 'Brug-chen Rin-po-che bKa'-brgyud 'Phrin-las shing rta (1718-1766) is also mentioned (*Biography*, pp. 196-198). Shortly thereafter Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu again sets off towards Nepal, with the purpose of renovating the stupa of Bodhnath.<sup>7</sup> I would not rule out the possibility that this renovation, too, grew out of a desire on the part of Pho-lha-ba bSod-nams stobs-rgyas, this time to insure success to the continuation of his policies under his youngest son, 'Gyur-med rnam-rgyal.

Be that as it may, when Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu comes to Kathmandu via sKyid-grong in 1748, there to have, without much difficulty, reparations undertaken on Bodhnath Stupa and to round them off once again with a consecration ceremony, he meets his friend and colleague whom he has known since the 1720s, and who likewise is on his second trip to Nepal: the Eighth Si-tu Rin-po-che. Shortly after his arrival in the Valley Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang looks him up in Kimdol Vihara, a Buddhist Newar monastery located on a hill to the south of Svayambhunath Stupa (*Biography*, pp. 206-211).<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to include at this point information provided by E. G. Smith concerning the Eighth Si-tu Rin-po-che:

"In 1748, Si-tu had the opportunity to pay another visit to Nepal. It is possible that he went entrusted with some official commission from the Tibetan Government. He was received warmly by Jayaprakasamalla of Kathmandu (1736-1768). Ranajitmalla of Bhatgaon (1722-1769) presented him with a manuscript *Amarakosa* commentary. His

of propiation for victory, to restore the decayed Stupa of Bya-run K'a-sor in Nepal. He issued orders that the revenue of K'yun-rdson-dkar-po, bKyid-gron and Sa-dga 'be set aside for this purpose, and deputed two officials for the task, which was to be finished by the 11th month of the same year."

7. A letter has been preserved that Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu sent to his native province before departing for Nepal, *Selected Writings*, vol.1, pp. 732-735: *Me yos mchod rten bya ri kam sho ma'i zhig gso la phebs mdo khams su ltos bcas rnam la ras dgon nas gnang ba* ("Letter written in 1747 to friends in Khams just before his departure for Nepal to undertake restorations at Bodhnath"). Concerning his *Ras dgon* Monastery see *Biography*, p. 205.
8. On Kimdol Vihara see K. Dowman (as in fn. 5), pp.205-208, and J.K. Locke, S. J. : *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal*, Kathmandu, 1985, pp. 401-402. A picture of the monastery after a Tibetan block print is found in R. Kaschewsky: "Zu einigen tibetischen Pilgerplätzen in Nepal", *Zentralasiatische Studien*, vol.16 (1982), p. 11 (illustration 3).

account of his meeting with Prthvīnarayana Saha at the Gorkha Fortress is fascinating yet distressing because of its brevity. During his stay in Nepal, he was able to complete a translation of a short *Svayambhupurana*.<sup>9</sup>

Kimdol Vihara is mentioned again when, three years later, in the year 1751, Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu once more visits Kathmandu, causing great excitement among the population. In between there are trips to gTsang, where, among others, he meets the Third Pan-chen bla-ma Blo-bzang dpal-ldan ye-shes (1737-1780), and to lHa-sa; there he again meets the Seventh Brug-chen Rin-po-che and the Seventh dPa'-bo Rin-po-che. In mTshur-pu, to the northeast of lHa-sa, he gives teachings to the younger generation of the Thirteenth Karma-pa bDud-'dul rdo-rje (1733-1791) and the Tenth Zhva-dmar-pa

Chos-grub rgya-mtsho (1742-1792), and of course the Eighth Si-tu Rin-po-che is not far away either (*Biography*, pp. 217-236).

But contact with Nepal does not break off during this period; a letter has been handed down, for instance, which Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu addressed to the king and ministers of Kathmandu in the year 1749.<sup>10</sup> In it is the first mention of the renovation of the stupa of Svayambhunath that Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu considers undertaking. A bit later on there are words to the effect that he desired to bring offering gifts in that year (i. e. 1749) to the stupa of Svayambhunath, but that he had to change his plans (*Biography*, p. 225). Finally, we learn in clear terms that at the end of the renovation of the stupa of Bodhnath in 1748 the rNying-ma-pa bla-ma from Khams

9. *The Autobiographie and Diaries of Si-tu Pan-chen* (= *Sata-Pitaka-Series*, vol. 77), New Delhi 1968, Introduction, p. 11. The description of the visit in 1748 is found in pp. 263-270 of the text; the first visit of Si-tu Rin-po-che in the year 1723, *ibid.*, pp. 113-130. At that time, too, Si-tu Rin-po-che stayed in the Newar monastery of Kimdol; we can therefore assume that up to the middle of the 18th century there was no Tibetan monastery to be found on the hill of Svayambhu Stupa that might have served as a residence for the lamas. On the activities of Si-tu Rin-po-che in the field of Sanscrit lexicography see *The Amarakosa in Tibet* (= *Sata-Pitaka-Series*, vol. 38), New Delhi 1965, Preface, pp. 11-14. His translation of the *Svayambhupurana* is now available under the title *Bal yul rang byung mchod rten chen po'i lo rgyus*, 30 fols., in *Bal yul mchod rten gsum gyi lo rgyus dang gnas bshad can rna ba'i bdud rtsi: A Collection of Guide Books to the Three Great Stupas of the Kathmandu Valley*, place of publ. unmentioned, 1983, pp. 3-61. As the colophon shows (*ibid.*, p. 60), Si-tu Rin-po-che was urged to make the translation by Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu.

10. *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 737-741: *Bal yul gyi rje bo dang 'dun pa chen po rnam la bsrings pa* ("Verse communication to the notables of Nepal written in 1749"). I assume that this is the written reply mentioned in the *Biography*, p. 217. 4-5. For the period between 1749 and 1751 we also have an autobiographical text of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 531-559: *Rig pa 'dzin pa tshe dbang nor bu rang nyid kyi spyad rabs las phyung ba lu ma nas snyem pa'i chu ltar sa bon tsam zhis smon pa* ("Autobiographical account covering the years 1749-1751"), 14 fols.

expressed the desire to put Svayambhunath Stupa, too, back into presentable shape; this plan, due to adverse circumstances, however, though approved by the king of Kathmandu Jayaprakasamalla (1735-1768), and the king of Gorkha Prthvinarayan Saha (1743-1775), could not be carried out for three years (*Biography*, pp. 251-256).

When, in the year 1751, work on the stupa can finally commence, all signs point to its successful completion. The gods Mahadeva-Ganes and Kumara-Karttikeya (both sons of Siva), who are willing to guarantee the materials for the renovation, manifest themselves, and Visnu in the form of a Brahman gives instructions that a pillar (skt. *yasti*) should be chosen for the repair

work which is similar to a "sacrificial post for the gods".<sup>11</sup> Not to be outdone by the gods, Jayaprakasamalla also promises his aid, and Prthvinarayan Saha takes upon himself the task of erecting the pillar. This information is contained in the stone inscription and—in the same wording—in Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu's biography (*Biography*, pp. 258-259). It is further recorded that, during this occasion, a stone quarry and a fresh spring came to light on Kimdol Hill.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of this promising beginning, however, work did not advance speedily, as Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu was charged by the Seventh Dalai bLa-ma sKai-bzang rgya-mtsho (1708-1757) with the political mission of laying to rest local feuds in Ladakh and

11. The Tibetan rendering of Skt. *yasti* is *srog shing*. Cf. J. Irwin: "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stupa: An Exegesis", in *The Stupa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, ed. A. L. Dallapiccola (= *Beitrage zur Sudasienforschung*, vol. 55), Wiesbaden 1980, p. 16: "The Tibetan term for the axial pillar of a stupa is *srog-shing*, literally, 'life-wood', corresponding in our own language to 'Tree of Life'. For 'sacrificial post' (*mchod sdong*) a native dictionary gives the etymology 'post for a fire offering' (*mchod me'i sdong bu*). On the problem involved in interpreting the pillar as a sacrificial post see J. Irwin, *ibid.*, pp. 13-15. Compare on this point A. W. Macdonald and A. V. Stahl: *Newar Art*, New Delhi 1979, p. 63: "The Buddhist *stupa* too, and there are many *stupas* which have been erected by Newars in the Kathmandu Valley, derives from the fire-altar. It too represents the universe."

12. See A. W. Macdonald and Dvags-po Rin-po-che: "A Little-Read Guide to the Holy Places of Nepal- Part II", in A. W. Macdonald: *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia*, Kathmandu, 1987, p. 105: ".....on the hill of the 'Pile of Barley' are found traces of the exhumation of a treasure of stones which was offered by the great and powerful auspicious gods to Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu, at the time of the restoration of the large *stupa*, and a new spring." Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 117: "In our time, when restoration was carried out at Svayambhu, a stone quarry was discovered and a new spring burst forth", and p. 119: "At the time when the big *stupa* was being restored, stones appeared where there had been previously none, along with a spring, and everyone was astonished. I have heard it said that there really were many auspicious signs on that occasion." The author of this "description of localities" (*gnas bshad*) is the Fourth Khams-sprul Rin-po-che Chos-kyi nyi-ma (1730-1780).

stemming possible attempts by the Dzungars to bring their influence to bear there (*Biography*, pp. 263 ff.)<sup>13</sup> Thus the renovation is again delayed for some time, i. e. progresses in fits and starts.

It would go beyond the bounds of this brief account to reproduce all the items in Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu's biography in the years between 1752 and 1755 having to do with the stalled work on the stupa. They are, in any case, numerous and bear witness to the fact that this project occupied the final years of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu's life. Of particular interest is the information concerning the fashioning of the pillar and the roles Jayaprakasamalla and Prthvinarayan Saha play during the prolonged renovation. Finally, in the year 1755, the pillar is erected, and in the context of a description of the end of this first stage an earlier renovation is recalled, that undertaken by gTsang-smyon He-ru-ka (1452-1507) and his disciple lHa-btsun Rin-chen rnam-rgyal (1473-1557)

(*Biography*, pp. 313 ff.)<sup>14</sup> In this context, too, one finds a catalogue" (*dkar chag*) of the repair work (*Biography*, pp. 331-335).

Soon after the pillar has been erected and the accompanying ceremonies conducted, Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu retires again to sKyid-grong and dies shortly afterwards. The story of the renovation, however, does not end there. Testifying to this fact is, above all, the second part of the stone inscription, where the year 1758 is given as the date of the final consecration. In order, in conclusion, to take in with a glance this period of time, I shall draw upon a second biography of Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu, which in seven folios documents the most important events.<sup>15</sup>

There we learn that before his departure for sKyid-grong Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu expressly asks his disciples to see the work still to be done on Svayambhu Stupa through to completion. Among them it is one "priest" (*mchod dpon*) in particular, bsTan-'dzin rdo-rje, who assumes responsibility for

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13. See the information provided by H.E. Richardson (as in fn. 3); the summons to go on this mission comes only from the Seventh Dalai bLa-ma, not from Pho-lha-ba bSod-nams stobs-rgyas, who by this time is already three years dead. Concerning the attempted exercise of Dzungar influence in Ladakh, which occurred at the end of the brief reign of 'Gyur-med rnam-rgyal, the last king of Tibet (1747-1750), see L. Petech (as in fn. 6), pp. 232-233.
  14. On this renovation under the first king of the Malla dynasty of Kathmandu, Ratnamalla (1484-1520), see *The Life of the Saint of Gtsang* (= *Sata-Pitaka-Series*, vol. 79), New Delhi 1969, Preface, p. 12. A detailed "catalogue" (*dkar chag*) of the repair work completed in the year 1504 is contained in the text portion, pp. 220-226.
  15. *dPal rig 'dzin kah thog pa chen po tshe dbang nor bu'i zhabs kyi rnam thar mdor bsdus dad pa'i sa bon*, 7 fols., in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 377-391. This text was written 1818, likewise by Brag-dkar rta-so sprul-sku Chos-kyi dbang-phyug. It was inserted by Khetsun Sangpo into his *Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. IV, pp. 375-382.

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the repair work. With the support of the Seventh 'Brug-chen Rin-po-che, then, work is completed in the year 1757. The consecration is finally performed the following year by the Seventh dPa'-bo Rin-po-che. Ten years have thus elapsed from the time in 1748 when, at the conclusion of the renovation of the stupa of Bodhnath, Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang nor-bu made the decision to preserve Svayambhunath Stupa, too, from the decay of time.

But as the final lines of the inscription prove, even the stone that recorded this event could not escape decay but had to be restored along with the inscription at a later point in time.





*Statue of Kah-thog Rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang  
nor bu (1698-1755) in the Murtisangralaya  
Museum at Svayambhunath*