

A Brief Account of the Life of mNga' -bDag Sems-dPa' -Chen-Po (1591 - 1656 A.D.)

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mNga' -bDag Sems-dPa' Chen-Po was born in the Iron-Female Hare year of the tenth sexantry (Rab-byung) corresponding to 1591 A.D. at Pho-drang Sags-Khri to a pious couple named Chogyal bKra-Shis Khri-bTsen and bSod Nams sGrol Ma. The father Chogyal bKra Shis was a descendant of the great Tibetan king Khri-Srong ldeu-bTsan. One of the successors of this king known as gLang-darma had two wives. A son was born to the younger queen who was named mNga' -bDag Hod-Srung. The elder queen who did not beget any issue adopted the son of a destitute couple who eked out their living by begging. She took this recourse in order to thwart the young prince from becoming heir to the throne. The adopted boy was named mNag'-bDag Yum-bsTen. It is well known in history that gLang-darma ascended the throne after assassinating king Khri Ral-Pa Chen¹ and thereby became the most infamous apostate ruler. In the wake of his ignominious death at the hands of a priest Lha-lung dPal-gyi rDo-rJe², the two princes fought as adversaries for a considerable period of time, each one contending his claim to the throne. This internecine struggle resulted in defeat of the younger prince who was the rightful heir by virtue of his royal pedigree. Thus Hod-Srung and his son and successor dPal-Khor were vanquished. Those who belonged to dPal Khor's lineage went towards the upper part of Tibet like Mang-Yul, sPu-Rang, Las-sTed etc., and ruled these regions. Some generations of this family also settled down in the country called Guge. One of the kings of Guge named bKra-Shis Khri-bTsen and his wife Lha-gCig bSod-Nams sGrol-Ma were destined to become the parents of the Bodhisattva mNga'-Gdag Sems-dPa Chenpo according to the prophecy of the saint teacher Chos-rGyal sTag -Sham-Chen. Accordingly, on the fifth day of the fourth month (Hor-Zla bZhi-pa) of the Iron female-hare year (lCags-Mo-Yos), mNga' -bDag Sems-dPa Chen-Po announced his advent on earth.

The new-born became the darling of all the courtiers and the cynosure of all eyes. On attaining the age of five, he manifested miracles which inspired awe and wonder amongst those who had the opportunity to experience them. For

1 Khri-Ral-Pa-Chen, The 41st King was the third and youngest son of Sed-Na-Legs-Zin. He was assassinated around c. 902 A.D.

2. This even took place in the year 906 A.D. according to the Tibetan Annals.

instance, many people perceived the precocious child sitting upright in a meditative posture while his mother, the Queen performed her daily ritual prayers. The prince was later brought to the presence of the preceptor Chos-rGyal sTag-Shams-Chen who performed the tonsure ceremony as ordained by tradition. He visited central Tibet during his twenty first year where he received initiations, empowerments and instructions pertaining to various tantric disciplines from a host of erudite Masters of his time as well as from his own preceptor.

One day while engrossed in penance in an empty quarter in the vicinity of his palace Pho-drang Sag-Khri, he attained Transcendental Wisdom of the Infinite Void. Following this sublimating attainment, the prince sought the permission of his father and set out in quest of teachers and holy grounds for more sustained practices. For fifteen long years, he performed the most arduous austerities, meditating in retreats and uninhabitable fearsome burial grounds, subsisting on air and elixirs extracted from elements of nature.

Commensurate with his high attainments and spiritual eminence, Chos-rGyal sTag-Shams-Chen recognised and consecrated him as his successor, eulogising him as a second Mila-res-pa. Thus, conferring fame and honour to his well deserving disciple, Chos-rGyal sTag-Shams-Chen also bequeathed to him all his personal belongings, the crux of which was the sacrosanct Vase of gTer-Bhum³. It might be germane to quote at this juncture, an extract from the prophecy contained in the apocalyptic work of Guru Padmasambhava which was discovered from its hidden sanctuary by the gTer-rTon Ratna gLing-Pa⁴:

"Among my four reincarnations who will be manifested in the hidden land BasYul 'Bras-Mo-lJongs, one endowed with the long tresses of hair will appear from the western gate of the land".

True to this prophetic declaration, the chosen teacher arrived at Yuksam in Western Sikkim on the 3rd day of the 8th month of the water-male-horse year (Chu Pho-rTa) of the 11th sexanry corresponding to the year 1642 A.D. Here he conferred with his son who had accompanied him, regarding the founding of a monastery. In the 11th month of the same year on the 3rd day, the construction work of the monastic complex named as Lha-Khang dMar-Po, the first monastery of Sikkim was commenced. In due course of time, the work was completed along with the interior and exterior ornamentations. The images of Buddha corresponding to His body, mind and speech were too installed and consecrated within its sanctum.

According to the prophecy of Guru Padmasambhava discovered by Rinchen-gLing-Pa⁵, "One among the four yogins -rNal-'byor mChed bZhi will be a veritable lion among men, who by dint of his chivalry and sagacity will rule over the

3. This Vase is today enshrined at Brag-dKar bKara Shis sDings (Dagkar Tashiding) in West Sikkim and since then, it is the fulcrum of an annual celebration held on the fiteenth day of the first month. For details please refer B.T. - Vol. 3-92

4. nGo-mTshar-gTer-mZod of bLama Jigs-Med-dPao. Fols.

5. Ibid

sacred land". In keeping with this prediction, a resident of sGang-Tog (present day Gangtok) named Zhal-nGo A-Phag rDo-rJe was presented the seven objects of temporal power and the eight auspicious objects emblematic of prosperity, and thus blessed by the teacher to rule over the land. The king was also given a new name and hailed as Chos-rGyal Phun-tsogs-rNam-rGyal⁶. The Teacher further predicted that eighteen generations of his successors will rule the land. Thus, the coronation (gSer-Khri-mNga'-gSol) was performed and a dynasty established.

The royal preceptor performed the first Mani Dhung-sGrub, the accomplishment of one hundred million recitation of the Avalokitesvara Mantra⁷ at Lha-Khang dMar-Po under the benevolent patronage of the King. This occasion was rendered more potent and significant by the consecration of the holy Vase which is known as Bhum-sGrub⁸. The second Mani Dhung-sGrub was performed at Rinchen-sPung. Likewise it was at Karma-'Zom in sBar-sPong that this was accomplished for the third time. At the dGe-Legs-dGon in bKra-Shis-sDings, the teacher undertook the fourth and fifth Mani Dhung-sGrub. As a result of such repeated and consistent observance of the million-fold recitation and consecration of the Vase which became an annual feature among the devout Buddhists, many miraculous and auspicious signs and symbols became visible as though to endorse such successful accomplishments.

Eight years after his first advent, the Teacher founded another monastery near bKra-Shis-sDings and gave it the name Zil-gNon dGon-Po. Three years later, he once again conferred with his son and established a monastery called Byams-Pa-Lha-Khang within the portals of bKra-Shis-sDings. This monasatery was aptly named after the principal deity Maitreya Buddha to whom it was dedicated. After completing the task of raising this chapel, he returned to Tibet for a brief period where he spent three years. Thereafter, he visited the kingdom of Nepal and performed austerities pertaining to Vajrakila in the sacred rock cavern Yang-Le-Shod where Guru Padmasambhava too had meditated. He was blessed with a vision of Lord Vajrakila and attained a high and sublime state of bliss. The monarch of Nepal became his ardent devotee and accepting him as his royal preceptor, invested him with religious authority.

Once again, the teacher came back to 'Bras-lJongs enroute the town of Ellam in Nepal. Arriving at bKra-Shis-sDings, he spent a decade and half propagating the rNying-Ma-Pa doctrines. The renaissance ushered in by the teacher during these fifteen memorable years was like the glorious sun-rise, brilliant and all-encompassing.

As though guided by a presentiment that the end was drawing nearer, the Teacher one day addressed his disciples who were preparing for the sacra-

6. The Teacher mNga'-bDag-Sems-Pa Chenpo-Phun-Tsogs Rig-'Zin conferred his own title Phun-Tsogs to the King as a sobriquet that signifies a round accomplishment and prosperity

7. This is regarded as the second important work undertaken by the Teacher for the benefit of all sentient beings as well as the holy land of 'Bars-lJongs.

8. See footnote 3

mental observance of the holy tenth day⁹ in this manner-

"The Celestial Realms of Mighty Padma Hod,
The sacred Feet of Rig-Zin-Padma, His Presence Sublime;
Thither do I hasten verily as the arrow,
Sped from the bow held in titanic hands..."

While the Teacher uttered these parting words in the course of his last sermon, the disciples led by his own son Phun-Tshogs-Tshering-mNga-bDang sTen-Zin bade the Master to continue to live with them in the flesh as ever since his departure would virtually turn them all into destitutes. The Teacher, moved by their impassioned importunity replied that he had already extended his life on earth by five years purely for the sake of 'Bras-Mo-lJongs. Now that he had accomplished his terrestrial mission, he was spreading his wings for the final flight into the Ultimate destination. "Yet, I will live amidst you for five more days since you have prayed that I should prolong my life".

Having designated his son as his spiritual successor, the Teacher attained the Immaculate Sate of Dharmakaya on the fifteenth day. Nature paid her tribute to this great Master by revealing a cloudless sky on the day of cremation. Even as the flames licked the sacred body transmuting it into the elements, many devout ones observed the Master seated in the Lotus posture, levitating towards the heavens, while some others clearly perceived a stupa radiating great brilliance from its spire, heading towards the sky.

Thus, on attaining the age of sixty five, this great Teacher passed away from the land of mortals at bKra-Shis-sDings. Following this, his son and successor Phun-Tshogs and nephew Sems-dPah-Rinchen-dGon along with a host of learned disciples continued to disseminate the tradition founded and taught by the Master in a consistent and perennial stream. The tradition known as Byang-gTer or simply the tradition of mNga-bDag lives and still reverberates in the hallowed grounds of bKra-Shis-sDings, rNam-rTse, Zil-gNon, etc. The relics of the Master are enshrined in the monastery of bKra-Shis-sdings which is the premier monastery following the tradition of mNga-bDag -Sems-dPa'-Chenpo.

REFERENCES

1. Rinchen-gLing-Pa'i gSung-'Bum.
2. Rig-'Zin-rGod-Kyi-IDem-'Phrul-Chen Gyi gSung-'Bum.
3. Thugs Chen 'Khor Ba Las sGrol of Zhig-Po-gLing-Pa.
4. mNga-bDag-Sems-dPa' -Chen-Po'i gSung-'Bum.
5. 'Bras-lJongs rGyal-Rabs.
6. sBas-Yul 'Bras-Mo-lJongs Kyi gNas-'Yig Phen-Yon Dhang bChas-Pa-nGo mChar-gTer-rDzod of bLama 'Jigs-Med-dPao.

9. The tenth day of every month is observed by all ardent Buddhists as the sacrosanct day when Guru Padmasambhava appears to bless his devotees.