

BRAG DKAR BKRA SHIS SDINGS KYI SKU 'BUM:¹
 THE TEXT, THE AUTHOR, THE STUPA AND ITS
 IMPORTANCE IN THE FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS
 IN SIKKIM

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Historical introduction to the author and text

As is well known, lHa btsun chen po nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1650)² is accredited with the introduction of rdzogs chen into Sikkim³ and is also recognized as the key figure in the consecration of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal as the first Chos rgyal.⁴ In order to shed light on his later religious and political work in Sikkim, it is important first to sketch out a brief history of his studies and the monasteries he was connected with in Tibet and the implications of these connections for his later work in Sikkim. Therefore, in this introduction to the text of *Brag dkar bkra shis sdings kyi sku 'bum*, I will start with a brief

¹ The full title of this text is: *Brag dkar bkra shis sdings kyi sku 'bum mthong ba rang grol gyi dkar chag mdor bsdus don gsal me long zhes bya ba bzhugs so*. I would like to thank Sonam Thinley (Tibetan librarian at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok) for locating this text, Anna Balikci-Denjongpa for a copy of this text in U-chen and her continued support during my time in Gangtok, Tashi Densapa for his help and advice and Dangsang Namgyal for his help with some of the more difficult passages in the text.

² Tibetan texts = Italics and initial capitalized. Names = no italics and capitalized initial.

³ For further information on rdzogs chen in Sikkim see '*Bras ljongs rdzogs chen pa'i ring lugs* (the tradition of Sikkimese rdzogs chen).

⁴ The precise date of the coronation of Phuntsog Namgyal is an issue of some dispute. In '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* the date 1642 is given. However, the work of Dudjom Rinpoche (1991: 820) indicates the date of lHa btsun chen po's arrival in Sikkim to be 1646. The date of 1642 seems at first glance to be a date fixed retrospectively in order to make the formation of Sikkim contemporaneous with the establishment of the Ganden Phodrang under the Fifth Dalai Lama. It is, therefore, hypothetical to suggest that the differences in these dates could stem from the desire of the Sikkimese Chos rgyals to associate themselves more closely with the government of Lhasa. My own research into the formation of the Sikkimese state in the seventeenth century has not, as of yet, revealed any concrete evidence to suggest the reliability of either of these dates.

biography of lHa btsun in order to contextualize the later summaries and selected translations that follow.

lHa btsun nam mkha' 'jigs med was born in 1597 into a family who were the descendants of the lHa dynasty of sByar yul btsad po (southern Tibet). 'O rgyan dpal 'byor, a lama from the Bon po monastery of Mi nub dgon, in the hermitage of gSung snyan (1607) officiated when he took his first vows (dge bsnyan).⁵ Mi nub monastery, probably of dPal ldan mi nub g.yung drung gling, which is mentioned in Karmay and Nagano (2003: 441-45), is located in Nyag rong County, Khams (eastern Tibet).⁶ It was at this time that lHa btsun nam mkha' jigs med received the name Kun bzang rnam rgyal. It is said that he studied rdzogs chen under the renowned teacher bSod rnam dbang po, of Brag dben monastery⁷ for seventeen years. He also received key teachings from 'Brug sgra bzang po, bKra shis snying po, the Nyingma scholar sNa tshogs rang grol (born 1608), and the non-sectarian 'Ja tshon snying po (1585-1656) who is credited with sending of lHa btsun to open the sbas yul of Sikkim.⁸

This link between Bon scholars of rdzogs chen and lHa btsun chen po during the seventeenth century is an interesting one, given the later link between the Sikkimese Chos rgyal[s] and the central Tibetan state.⁹ As is well known, the political and religious environment was undergoing a radical change during the seventeenth century, with different religious traditions vying with each other for political power, authority and support in central Tibet. What is also well known is that, with the development of the dGe lugs pa authority aided by Mongolian military support, large communities of Bon pos in eastern Tibet, Khams, were severely weakened as a result of warfare between

⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche: 1991: 820. Further information about 'O rgyan dpal 'byor and his lineage can be found on-line in the TBRC (Tibetan Buddhist Research Centre) archives.

⁶ Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano: 2003: 441.

⁷ This is also a Bon po monastery, like the monastic seat of 'O rgyan dPal 'byor: Mi nub dgon, and like Mi nub monastery, it is located in Nyag rong County (currently in Sichuan province) at a distance of 28 km from Ri snang, the county town of Nyag rong (*Ibid*: 439).

⁸ 'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs 1908: 15 (English edition) and 2003: 38 (re-published in Tibetan from the palace documents of Yeshe Dolma).

⁹ Later Sikkimese history is characterized by an alliance of sorts (and even a state of vassalage) between the Chos rgyal[s] of Sikkim and the government in Lhasa. One particular example is the exchange of two government ministers between Sikkim and Tibet during the early eighteenth century. The descendants of the Tibetan minister still reside in Sikkim. (S. Mullard, *Yang t'hang rdzong: an example of Tibetan and Sikkimese alliances*, forthcoming).

different political groups. This general religious and political environment, together with lHa btsun chen po's links with Bon teachers, provide a context to the formation and the uncovering of the hidden land of Sikkim, which has been overlooked in the past. While it is evidently clear from the literature which was authored by lHa btsun chen po that he is clearly a Nyingmapa it is also clear that the boundaries between different religious traditions, especially Bon and Nyingma, was more fluid during the seventeenth century than they are today. Furthermore, the sharing of religious teachers associated with religious practices that transcend religious sectarianism seems to be a common phenomena during times of political upheaval. As groups with common bonds are more likely to unite against other religious and political groups in order to protect religious teachings and traditions.

Therefore, one could at least tentatively suggest a more complex position for the formation of Sikkim, a context which maybe is lacking in Tibetan historical sources. Furthermore, this context becomes crucial when translating texts relating to Sikkim during this period of Tibetan and Sikkimese history. For this reason it is important to mention wider politico-religious developments when looking at this particular text, especially when one takes into account the perceived role of lHa btsun chen po in the founding of Sikkim.

This role is further illustrated by the fact that one of his principal teachers requested him to go to open the sbas yul, leading to believe that this request centered upon the need, during a period of violence and religious rivalry and hostility in Tibetan history, to escape the politico-religious context of central Tibet by establishing a haven for Buddhist practitioners in general, and especially for those who were beginning to experience difficulties in Tibet.

In the 1640s lHa btsun chen po entered Sikkim and proceeded towards Brag dkar bkra shis sdings (above the present west Sikkimese village of Tashiding) where, according to the Tibetan documents, he is said to have resided.¹⁰ While meditating in the cave of lHa ri rin chen snying phug in that locality, he received the *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub* in a pure vision. This particular text is considered of great importance in a number of key Sikkimese monasteries.

¹⁰ Full details of lHa btsun chen po's life can be found in '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* 1908 and its later Tibetan 2003 re-publication; it is important to mention both these editions as some differences exist between them. Also '*Bras ljongs rdzogs chen pa'i ring lugs, mkha' spyod 'bras mo ljongs kyi gtsug nor sprul pa'i rnal 'byor mched bzhi*, by Khenpo Lha Tshering: 2002: 65-75, and more specifically relating to Tashiding (pp. 118-123) – *Brag dkar bkra shis sdings su zhabs pad bskyod pa*, and Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 818-820.

Summary and selected translations

Title: *Contained within is the mirror which is the clear meaning of the collected contents of the stupa of Dagkar Tashiding, which brings liberation upon sight.*¹¹

The first part (folio 1-6) of the text starts with a reference from the *dGongs 'dus bka' rgya* in which is mentioned that Tashiding is a palace of deities and that in the centre of Tashiding is the palace or mandala of Guru Rinpoche. And so the scene of the text is set, by associating the physical site of Tashiding with the dwellings of many accomplished masters and divinities. The text then describes the physical environment of Tashiding. For example it states on line 2 (folio 2) that 'the eastern mountain has the appearance of a heap of many precious jewels' and explains the benefits which can be obtained here by making reference to the easy accomplishment of the four actions from any of the four directions. The therapeutic qualities of the water if drunk when nearing death are documented, which adds to the perception of Tashiding as a pure land endowed with innumerable physical and spiritual benefits. This is further stressed by the statement that Tashiding is the seat of Guru Rinpoche and thus carries his blessings.

In the three valleys of the hidden country, there is a place called Gro mo khud, where there is a stone stupa which appeared of its own accord and has a spring belonging to the *nagas*. Also in this place are foot and hand imprints of Guru Rinpoche. The text then describes Tashiding as a site of celestial wonder, stating that its environment is made from spontaneously occurring qualities and physical features

¹¹ The idea of attaining liberation from samsara upon sight is linked with other concepts of instantaneous liberation such as through hearing (*The Tibetan book of the Dead*). However, in this context it almost acts as an invitation to the devout to perform religious activities at this stupa. Furthermore, in order to understand why this can bring instantaneous liberation one needs to read the section of this text which details the relics contained within this stupa. Andy Rotman (2003), in his article *The Erotics of Practice: Objects and Agency in Buddhist Avadhana Literature*, discusses the nature of the arousal of *Prasada* (Skt. Pali: Pasaada; this is very close to *Prasad*, a word in common usage in India, which means offering) – faith, graciousness, serene joy – at the sight of certain shrines, temples, external objects, etc., which are endowed with certain powers (p. 556). Rotman goes on to state that the sight of such external phenomena, whether they be animate (e.g. a Buddha) or inanimate, arouse *Prasada* in the individual, a feeling that incites to make offerings. (p. 557.) Like *Prasada*, liberation on seeing this stupa is achieved through an outside agency, i.e. the object itself.

such as self-emerging mountains, stupas, lakes, clouds, etc. Furthermore, there is the association of people, dwellings and physical landscapes with the dwelling places of gods, and the belief that the people there are similar to gods, free of desire and selfishness. lHa btsun chen po then goes on to associate Tashiding with the teachings and proclamations of Guru Rinpoche by mentioning the visions and the setting and stating that it is the place Guru Rinpoche was referring to when he spoke of the hidden or pure lands as places for the specific practice of the Dharma.¹²

The text then proceeds to discuss the nature of the stupa itself and its contents. It mentions that while it was being built, rocks, stones and earth were brought there from many holy places in Tibet and India such as Bodhgaya, La phyi chu bar, bSam yas, lHa sa, and Kailash (folio 7). The text further states that honouring this stupa by making circumambulations and performing prostrations will confer the same benefits as performed on the sites where the stones and earth originated.

The text then describes the 'real' contents of the stupa, as follows:¹³

In the beginning was the form body, which spontaneously emerged from the unchanging and pure nature of emptiness and [is as] illusory as a dance.¹⁴ It is the depths of the non-existent [lit. untrue] *khechara* pure realm,¹⁵

¹² This association of Tashiding with the teachings of Guru Rinpoche is important if one wishes to understand the political changes that took place in seventeenth century Sikkim. Not only does this text bring religious reasons for the importance of Tashiding as a focus for the Dharma, its religious benefits convey an undertone of political and religious aspirations. Furthermore, the importance given to the association of respected figures from a past time lends weight to political formations of statehood (see Tosh: 2000: 63-75 for an explanation of this idea of historical legitimacy). For further details relating to the seventeenth century political situation in Tibet, see Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol I; Richardson, 1984: 28-43; Shakapa, 1988: 91-99; and most importantly Petech, 1950.

¹³ Tib. *Gdod nas rang bzhin rnam dag chos dbyings ngang / lhun grub rnam rol gzugs sku sgyu ma 'I gar / bde chen 'og min dag pa mka' spyod mthil / sna tsogs rin chen las grub khyon yangs mdzes / bedur sa gzhir ljon shing skied tshal dang / me tog 'bar ma rmos 'bru yis gang / brag khang gzhai med nor bu 'I ba gam brtsegs / 'khor yug rab mdzes zla ba 'I khang bzang rtser / gzhai yas rdo rje chos dbyings 'khor lo 'I gtsug* // This section of the text is written in verse, and in the process of translation I have attempted to convey its meaning rather than remain tied to the grammatical forms of the Tibetan language.

¹⁴ This refers to the form body, which in essence is empty.

¹⁵ It may be interesting to note that Lake Khetchopari in western Sikkim, is probably named after this pure realm. The Khechara pure land is the pure land of Vajrayogini,

which is unsurpassable. Which is created from the beautiful attainments of many various jewels and on a base of lapis lazuli a grove of generated trees, flowers which shine and a harvest which is produced without ploughing;¹⁶ and on this base is a stone house, the stories of which are built of priceless jewels, and upon the peak of an extensively beautiful lunar mansion is an exquisite environment, and the crown of this mandala is the *vajra dhatu*.¹⁷

The text then goes on to describe (folio 7-14) the main objects that were placed within the stupa, which I will now briefly explain. In the top part (*bre la*) of the stupa is a collection of tantric mantras and invocations of *Maha anu yoga* and *Ati yoga*. In the bell of the stupa (*bum*) are collections of mantras and invocations of the *Kriya*, *Carya* and *Yoga* tantras. Throughout the stupa are other important texts such as the *gsungs* 'bum by the great scholars of Sha lu monastery. Inside the stupa there is also the important text (*Gu ru thang yig*)¹⁸ which was discovered by the gTer ston Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340-1396), besides many other important religious texts by different authors.

who is the consort of Heruka Chakrasamvara, of the Chakrasamvara Tantra, in which her practice is described. What is particularly interesting about the reference to this pure land in the Tashiding text is that this practice of Vajrayogini and her pure realm is generally associated with the lineage of Naropa teachings (Kagyü-pa). What also is interesting is the way in which the religious concept of pure lands has been transferred into a physical dimension and this transference has implications for the understanding of the association of Sikkim as a sbas yul. Therefore the sbas yul or hidden land, in its physical form, becomes synonymous with religious formations and concepts, such as pure lands, and these religious notions are transformed into physical entities.

¹⁶ Lit. 'grain which is not plowed'. This implies that the physical location in which the grain grows does not require tilling nor harvesting, etc; rather, it is wild and bountiful. This refers to one of Aalokiteshvara's gifts to the proto-human descendants of the demon and the monkey. It is said in many rgyal rabs of Tibet that the Tibetans descended from a rock demoness and a monkey.

¹⁷ This passage is quite difficult to translate into English. However, what is being conveyed is the construction of the mandala out of the void and the stressing of the idea that in essence it is empty.

¹⁸ Literally this title means 'The religious history and biography of the Guru' (*Thang yig* refers to a genre of Tibetan writing which is basically gter mas of religious history and biography). *Gu ru thang yig* probably refers to 'O rgyan gu ru padma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar rgyas pa gser gyi 'phreng ba thar lam gsal byed which is often shortened to *Padma'i bka' thang gser gyi 'phreng ba* (lit. 'the golden rosary of the biography of the lotus', i.e., Guru Rinpoche) which was 'discovered' by Sangs rgyas gling pa in the late fourteenth century (Martin: 1997: 55).

There are also fifteen pure relics of the Buddha, the teeth of Shariputra and further relics of Sangs rgyas gling pa. In the bell of the stupa there are relics from the white stupa of bSam yas, the great stupa of rGyal rtse and rTse la sgang. Self-emanated relics of dGa' rab rdo rje are documented as being amongst the contents of the stupa.¹⁹ The forearm bones of rGyal ba mchog dbyangs (one member of the first group of seven monks in Tibet and one of the twenty-five main disciples of Guru Rinpoche) are kept there as relics of religious significance. More relics of renowned teachers and practitioners, such as Nam mkha'i snying po, Sangs rgyas ye shes,²⁰ sKa ba dpal brtsegs, 'O bran dbang phyug, Dran pa nam mkha'²¹ and rMa thog rin chen, are there as well. There are also relics of Khri srong lde btsan, Santarakshita, rDzogs chen bSod mams rin chen and other important religious scholars and saints.

The text then describes the various sacred pills and locks of hair of well-established Buddhist practitioners that are kept within the stupa. For example on folio eleven, references are made to the sacred pills of the Sa skya pa and the hair of Thang stong rgyal po:

[contained within...] are locks of hair of the spiritual master Nam mkhai snying po, the wise and accomplished Virochana and so forth.... [also to be found within] is the flesh of Padma dbang chen, gTer ston Ratna gling pa, the clothing of the smyon pa[s] of U and Tsang and the meditation mat and clothing of Tilopa,²² the bones of Gampopa, the bones of the Thatagatas of

¹⁹ It is said that Dga' rab rdo rje was the son of King Upparaja of Uddiyana and the one who passed on the teachings of rdzogs chen to Padmasambhava. (Dudjom Rinpoche: 1991: 490-494.)

²⁰ This probably refers to Sangs gyas ye shes, born in 832 into the nub clan rnying ma pa, who is the author of *bDud rtsi me long*. (*Ibid*: 607-614.)

²¹ The eighth century translator who is associated with both Nyingma and Bon traditions. For example, in mKhar sna Bon monastery, prayers are said to this figure on the tenth day of the second month. One can find many images and statues of this teacher and his twin sons in a number of Bon-po monasteries, such as 'Om bu bsam gtan gling. It is said that Dga' rab rdo rje was the son of King Upparaja of Uddiyana and the one who passed on the teachings of rdzogs chen to Padmasambhava. (Dudjom Rinpoche: 1991: 490-494.)

²¹ This probably refers to Sangs gyas ye shes, born in 832 into the nub clan rnying ma pa, w in Nyi ma rdzong (western Tibet), dGa' ri monastery in 'Bri ru rdzongs, and Phug leb monastery in north-eastern Tibet (see Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano 2003: 101, 112, 180, and index entries p. 806).

²² sMyon pa refers in this case to spiritual practitioners that break with orthodox religious conventions and practice Buddhism in ways which may at times seem to

Nyang,²³ the clothing of Vikramashila and the clothing of Milarepa (folio 13).

The text then goes on to list various other relics of lamas and practitioners from both India and Tibet. These include bones, flesh, locks of hair, blood from noses and items of religious clothing.²⁴ The amount and importance of the relics cited in this text give the construction of the stupa and its physical form a place within established religious conventions and serves as a tool to generate faith amongst the inhabitants of Sikkim.²⁵

Conclusion and Summary: the importance of sacred spaces in early Sikkimese history

Earlier in this paper I alluded to the importance of the establishment of sacred spaces during the early history of the Chos rgyal[s] in Sikkim, because of the nature of the religious and political institutions that were created during these early years. This period was not only a time of radical political change and organization, but also of the introduction of

contradict the established teachings. The most famous and recognizable of this group of practitioners is Milarepa. SMyon pa literally means mad or insane.

²³ Nyang is a region in Tsang, central Tibet.

²⁴ For example there are many relics from the lineage of the Karmapas and Shamarpas, which include locks of hair, bones and flesh. The descriptions of the contents of the stupa is contained within nineteen folios from page bdun (7) to page bcu bzhi (14). I have just listed the relics contained within the stupa of Tashiding. However, other interesting relics associated with the Kagyu lineages included in this section on the contents include such things as the third Karmapa's hair, Karmapa Chos dbyings rdo rje's clothing (the tenth Karmapa and a contemporary of lHa btsun chen po), Karmapa Chos grags rgya mtso's hair, flesh and clothing (the seventh Karmapa 1450-1506), and Karmapa dBang phyug rdo rje's hair and clothing (the ninth Karmapa 1556-1603). The contents of the Tashiding stupa come mainly from three sources: Indian masters and saints, Nyingma gter ston[s] and masters and high ranking Kagyu-lamas (more specifically Karma Kagyu, although there are references to articles associated with 'Brug pa Kagyu) with only a few articles from the Sakya and Geluk schools. This might suggest that the Nyingma School had better relations with the Kagyu. This is in marked contrast with later politico-religious relations in Sikkimese history, which were characterized by close ties between the Chos rgyal[s] of Sikkim and the dGe lugs pas of the central Tibetan state.

²⁵ While it is almost certain that access to the written text was by no means available for public consumption in the seventeenth century, there are people today who understand its importance and religious significance, suggesting the existence of an oral tradition pertaining to the text and the stupa.

institutionalised religious practices and lineages. It is therefore all the more important to contextualize the text, despite the fact that it deals almost exclusively with religion. Moreover, religious and political concepts were not perceived as diametrically opposed, but rather as part of an integrated system of thought (hence the terms *chos srid lugs gnyis*, the dual system of religion and politics, and *mchod yon*, the relationship between a spiritual practitioner and a secular sponsor).²⁶

With this in mind, the construction of Tashiding and the rest of Sikkim as not only a *sbas yul* but also a pure land (in the tantric sense), provided the dedicated practitioner with tools and benefits to further his (or her) practice and conferred religious legitimacy to political changes, physical domains and institutions. Therefore, when the context is based upon the desire to establish a new politico-religious state, it becomes important to formalize notions of religion and politics as a physical entity. Whether lHa btsun chen po endeavoured to do this in *Brag dkar bKra shis sdings kyi sku 'bum*, cannot and probably will never be established by evidence. However, in order to understand political and religious institutions within the Tibetan sphere, it is important to consider the need (on the part of those wishing to establish a politico-religious state) to elaborate and construct physical places as a focus for religious devotion.

In connection with the politico-religious dimension of Tashiding stupa in view of the creation of an integrated political state, there are other dimensions which need to be highlighted. Stupas have a social and cultural dimension, as by nature they are a focus point for religious practice on an individual as well as a communal level (festivals, rituals, etc.) and, as other sacred spaces, they are therefore also used for social meetings and activities. Thus the construction of a sacred space is also the construction of a social one, destined to unite individuals and groups around a physical edifice as well as a politico-religious ideology. Tashiding stupa not only combines the establishment of a unified community around a physical structure with religious, political and social dimensions, but is also a symbol of Nyingma nationalism, its construction being associated with the changing political environment

²⁶ Seyfort Ruegg quite rightly traces this to the early history of Indian Buddhism and the requirement for political interaction between communities of Buddhist monks and Indian political patrons. Furthermore, it was this requirement that led to the construction of such terms as *dharmaraja* and its Tibetan equivalent *chos rgyal*. (*Mchod Yon, Yon Mchod and mchod gnas / yon gnas: On the historiography and semantics of a Tibetan religio-social and religio-political concept* (1991), and *Ordre spirituel et ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet*, (1995).

in which the Nyingma tradition is dominant. Furthermore, the Tibetan and Indian origins of the relics contained in the stupa as well as their sheer volume legitimate the existence of the Nyingma religious authority in Sikkim.

While this text deals primarily with religious issues, it also touches upon a wide variety of related ones and, perhaps, seeks to legitimate the opening of the sbas yul to primarily Nyingma practitioners. Furthermore the construction of the Tashiding stupa represented a focus point for religious practitioners who felt under threat in a geographical location which was somewhat removed from the political tensions of central Tibet in the seventeenth century. Therefore, when this text is placed within its complex context, such as the importance of safe havens during a period of political upheaval in central Tibet and the need to establish and justify such havens for weaker religious groups (the founding of Bhutan is also interesting in this respect), its religious nature (characterized by its constant references to Buddhist saints of Indian and Tibetan origins) also carries various important connotations for the political developments in Sikkim.

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