

KAḤ THOG PA BSOD NAMS RGYAL MTSHAN (1466-1540)
AND HIS ACTIVITIES IN SIKKIM AND BHUTAN¹

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[1]

The establishment of the monastery of Kaḥ thog in Eastern Tibet in the year 1159 marked an important step in the consolidation of the rNying ma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Its founder, Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs (1122-1192), occupies a prominent place in the transmission known as the “Spoken Teachings” (bka’ ma). This specific teaching tradition was further spread by a number of abbots, known collectively as the “Succession of Teachers [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]” (bla rabs bcu gsum). According to one way of counting, the list begins with sPyan snga bSod nams ’bum [pa] (b. 1222) and ends with mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan (1395-1458); the two immediate successors of Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs, gTsang ston rDo rje rgyal mtshan (1126-1216) and Byams pa ’bum [pa] (1179-1252), are not included in this particular list of successive regents of the glorious Kaḥ thog monastery.²

In the historiographical literature of the rNying ma pa school the period of the next series of abbots—called the “Succession of Attendants [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]” (drung rabs bcu gsum)—is characterized by an increasing influence of the tradition of the “Treasure Teachings” (gter ma), which led to a slight diminishing of the importance of the Spoken Teachings tradition. This event is linked to the journey of Drung Nam mkha’ seng ge, the first in this list of abbots, to the region of lHo brag, where he became the “master of

¹ A different version of this article will appear in the Bhutan panel volume (Pommaret F. and J. Ardussi eds), IATS Oxford 2003, Leiden: Brill.

² See Bya bral Rin po che Sangs rgyas rdo rje (b. 1913): *dPal rgyal rgyal ba kaḥ thog pa’i gdan rabs brgyud ’dzin dang bcas pa’i byung ba brjod pa rin po che’i phreng ba lta bu’i gtam*, n.p., n.d., fols. 31a/5-37a/4. The author states that this way of counting follows the *mTshan bsdoms gsol ’debs* of the teachers of Kaḥ thog composed by Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1925); *ibid.*, fol. 31b/1-2. The same authority is acknowledged by mKhan chen ’Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (b. 1929): *gSang chen bstan pa’i chu ’go rgyal ba kaḥ thog pa’i lo rgyus mdor bsdus brjod pa ’chi med lha’i rnga sgra ngo mtshar rna ba’i dga’ ston*, Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1996, p. 54.3-5.

the teachings” (chos bdag) of the treasure-cycles of Rig ’dzin Ratna gling pa (1403-1478). This particular phase of new spiritual developments within the teaching lineages of Kaḥ thog in the 15th century was also the period when the exponent who would later create a subschool known as the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa or Mon lugs Kaḥ thog pa received his training.³

A first assessment of the history of this subschool in Bhutan was provided by the late Michael Aris. He opened his sketch of the rNying ma pa in Bhutan with a treatment of the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa, whom he called “[t]he first rNying ma pa to arrive in a formal sense”. According to the historical sources available to him, it was one of the abbots of the above-mentioned first group of regents of Kaḥ thog, a certain dBu ’od Ye shes ’bum [pa], who in the 13th century made his way to Bhutan on his way to Sikkim and founded in sPa gro sTag tshang the monastery of O rgyan rtse mo; the location of this old residence of the Kaḥ thog pa tradition was immediately above the main shrine of sTag tshang. It is further stated that this master had two disciples, namely bSod nams rgyal mtshan and the latter’s son rNam grol bzang po, who both settled at sTag tshang in the sPa gro valley.⁴

It was further noted by Aris that there exists a biography of bSod nams rgyal mtshan by a certain rNam grol bzang po, and also an autobiography, but he was obviously not in a position to consult these works. As we now have access to the biographical tradition of this teacher from Kaḥ thog closely connected with the religious history of Sikkim and Bhutan, I want to readdress the issue of the arrival of the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa in the Himalayan valleys, and in particular at the famous Padmasambhava shrine near sPa gro. This will be done in two steps: clarifying the identity of Ye shes ’bum [pa] from the Kaḥ thog monastery, and giving an overview of the life of bSod nams rgyal mtshan, with special reference to his activities in Sikkim and Bhutan.

³ For the change in doctrinal emphasis from the Spoken Teachings to Treasure Teachings within the teaching lineages of Kaḥ thog in the 15th century see Ehrhard (1990: 88, note 20). For the counting of Nam mkha’ seng ge as the second drug and the difficulties of dating him see Eimer (2002: 331).

⁴ See Aris (1979: 153-154). There are two different sets of dates for dBu ’od Ye shes ’bum [pa], the third member of the bla rabs bcu gsum according to the enumeration advocated by Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho. As documented by Eimer (2002:327-328 & 330), these dates are either 1254-1327 or 1242-1315. For the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa in Bhutan compare also Aris (1994:23): “The Kathogpa school of eastern Tibet operated from within the Nyingmapa and established an early branch in Bhutan”.

[2]

If one consults the biographical account of dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa] in modern works dealing with the monastery of Kaḥ thog and its different successions of abbots, one learns that this master had a great number of disciples from dBus and gTsang in Central Tibet, but there is no record of travels to either Sikkim or Bhutan. What is remembered about this particular regent is his rapport with the Sa skya pa scion 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235-1280), who is said to have visited the rNying ma pa monastery in Khams on his way back from the Yüan court and to have received on that occasion the *sGyu 'phrul zhi khro* initiation from dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa].⁵

A journey to Central Tibet and to the “Rice Country” ('Bras mo ljongs)—the name of modern-day Sikkim as known to the the followers of Padmasambhava—is recorded in the case of still another master from Kaḥ thog bearing the name Ye shes 'bum pa. This person is known as the “teacher from bZhag” (bZhag bla), a region in the Nyag rong province of Khams, and his name turns up in the list of the “Succession of Scholars” (mkhan rabs) of Kaḥ thog. One of the modern histories of the monastery provides the following account:

He who is called Ye shes 'bum pa, the teacher from bZhag [in] Nyag rong, a disciple of Jñānaketu, the one who is [both] learned and realized—this master of an ocean of the qualities of being learned, venerable [and] realized, in order to revive the stream of the doctrine in the regions of dBus [and] gTsang, and in order to search for the sacred site of the hidden valley “Rice Country”, proceeded to the regions of dBus [and] gTsang. In the end, after accruing marvellous benefit for the

⁵ For biographical data on dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa] see Bya bral Rin po che (as in note 1, fol. 32a/1-b/3), and 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1, pp. 42.20-44.12). Compare: *mKha spyod 'bras mo ljongs kyi gtsug nor sprul pa'i rnal 'byor mched bzhi brgyud 'dzin dang bcas pa'i byung ba brjod pa blo gсар gzhon nu'i dga' ston* [= *A Saga of Sikkim's Supremely Revered Four Pioneer Nyingmapa Reincarnates and their Torchbearers*], Gangtok: Khenpo L. Tsering, 2002, pp. 20.10-22.16, for an evaluation of the different historical sources concerning the person of dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa], and the conclusion that this regent of Kaḥ thog could not have reached Sikkim. It is also noted that the misidentification of dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa] and bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa is responsible for the view that one of the early abbots of Kaḥ thog was already travelling to the south; see *ibid.*, p. 22.1-4.

doctrine and the beings, he passed away at the place of his spiritual practice in gTsang.⁶

The person referred to by the Sanskritized name “Jñānaketu” is the previously mentioned [mKhas grub] Ye shes rgyal mtshan, the last member of the bla rabs bcu gsum of Kaḥ thog. Both master and disciple thus belong to that phase in the history of Kaḥ thog when the influence of the Treasure Teachings was increasing, the cultural practice of the search for hidden valleys in the Himalayan border regions by rNying ma pa masters from Eastern Tibet being least partly attributable to the change in the doctrinal emphasis within the teaching tradition. At the same time, the transmission of the Spoken Teachings was restructured and new commentaries were written. This becomes especially clear from a transmission represented by mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan and bZhag bla Ye shes ’bum pa. In the historiographical literature of the rNying ma pa school, this transmission is noted for having promulgated the *sGyu ’phrul drva ba* and the *mDo dgongs pa ’dus pa*—the main tantras of respectively Mahāyoga and Anuyoga—as a unified system, and it was this particular tradition which was continued by lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan and his disciple rNam grol bzang po.⁷

Having identified bZhag bla Ye shes ’bum pa instead of dBu ’od Ye shes ’bum [pa] as the first scholar of Kaḥ thog, who directed his

⁶ See Bya bral Rin po che (as in note 1), fol. 44a/1-4 (... *mkhas grub jñānaketu’i slob ma nyag rong bzhag bla ye shes ’bum pa zhes mkhas btsun grub pa’i yon tan rgya mtsho’i mnga’ bdag de nyid dbus gtsang phyogs su bstan rgyun gso ba dang / sbas yul ’bras mo ljongs kyi gnas ’tshol phyir dbus gtsang phyogs su phebs te bstan ’gro’i don rmad du byung ba mdzad nas mthar gtsang gi sgrub gnas su sku gshegs*). The characterization of bZhag bla Ye shes ’bum pa by ’Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1, p. 73.13-20) contains nearly the same wording, but it leaves out the search for the “hidden valley” (sbas yul), while adding more information on the localities in gTsang: “At the end of his life he revived the doctrine in [places] like Zur ’Ug pa lung and gSang sngags gling” (*sku tshe’i mthar zur ’ug pa lung dang gsang sngags gling sogs kyi bstan pa nyams so gnang*).

⁷ The lineage of this transmission starts with Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs, gTsang ston rDo rje rgyal mtshan and Byams pa ’bum [pa], but includes only the second and the thirteenth members of the bla rabs bcu gsum, namely sPyan snga Nam mkha’ rdo rje (b. 1223) and mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan; see Dudjom Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje (1991:699). Among the new commentaries of the Spoken Teaching tradition during that period, mention must be made of Ye shes rgyal mtshan’s exposition of the *Theg pa spyi bcings* of Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs; see *Theg pa spyi bcings rtsa ’grel*, Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997, pp. 34-417. For the writings of Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs and the commentary of Ye shes rgyal mtshan, see Dalton (2002: 109-129).

steps to the Himalayan border regions, we are able to date the arrival of the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa to Sikkim and Bhutan to the end of the 15th century. The initial spread of this subschool can now be described on the basis of the biographical tradition of Kaḥ thog pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan.

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The autobiography bears the title “Rosary of Stainless Wish-fulfilling Jewels” (*Dri med yid bzhin nor bu'i phreng ba*) and was completed by bSod nams rgyal mtshan in sPa gro sTag tshang O rgyan rtse mo in the year 1539. Added to it is a work by his disciple rNam grol [Ye shes] bzang po which covers the final events of his teacher's life; this text must have been composed in the year 1541, since it mentions an “ox year” (glang lo) for the consecration of the reliquary shrine of bSod nams rgyal mtshan. The place of composition of the latter work is given as “the upper part of dGe rgyas 'Jag ma lung, below the great glacier mDzod lnga stag rtse, the western gate of the glorious Rice Country”.⁸ This seems to suggest that the first representatives of the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa had their residences in both Sikkim and Bhutan, and became influential in these regions at about the same time.

In the following I will make use only of the autobiography, which is divided into three chapters, dealing respectively with prophecies concerning the person of bSod nams rgyal mtshan, with the teachers he relied upon during his spiritual training, and with the salvational means he had recourse to both for himself and for others. The second and third chapters are subdivided into five and eleven subsections respectively.

The initial part of the first chapter quotes from the *dGongs 'dus lung bstan bka' rgya ma*, that is, from “the cycle of the sealed pronouncements of prophecies for the future” (*ma 'ongs lung bstan bka' rgya ma'i skor*) of the *Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa*, a treasure-cycle of Rig 'dzin Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340-1396). The works of this

⁸ See the dbu med text in *Shar kaḥ thog pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa*, Gangtok & Delhi: Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentsey Labrang, 1979, p. 40.2-3 (*dpal 'bras mo bshongs (=gshongs) kyi nub sgo gangs chen mdzod lnga stag rtse'i zhol / dge rgyas 'jag ma lung gi phu*). The name “Great Glacier mDzod lnga stag rtse” for the Kangchenjunga range is already attested in the writings of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem 'phru can (1337-1406), one of the earliest and most prolific writers of literature concerning hidden valleys; see his *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig bsod pa* in *Rare Texts of the dPal spungs Tradition*, Gangtok: Sherab Gyaltzen, 1981, p. 374.5. For the different gates leading to Sikkim as a hidden sanctuary see note 10.

treasure-discoverer, along with ones of mNga' bdag Nyang ral [Nyi ma'i 'od zer] (1124-1192), Guru Chos [kyi] dbang [phyug] (1212-1270) and especially Rig 'dzin Ratna gling pa, are listed at the beginning of the second chapter as those religious traditions which dominated the studies of bSod nams rgyal mtshan up to the age of seventeen years. The names of his teachers during that period include Kun dga' 'bum [pa], Brag mgo rDo rje dpal, dGe 'dun blo gros and a certain La rgyab Shes rab dpal who transmitted the teachings of Klong chen Rab 'byams pa (1308-1364) to the young student. But the first and most important teacher was his own uncle, whom he accompanied up to lHa sa when the latter embarked on a journey to the regions of dBus and gTsang. This uncle is called in the autobiography mKhas grub Ye shes 'bum [pa], and he is none other than bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa from Nyag rong province in Khams.⁹

For the next three years bSod nams rgyal mtshan stayed in the "land of the gorges" (rong yul) where he was advised by two further teachers how to follow the life of a yogin and practise austerities. It was only after this experience, at the age of twenty years, that he entered the monastery of Kaḥ thog and took up his studies with the Great Ācārya Nam mkha' dpal. This teacher imparted to him the classic works of the Spoken Teachings tradition and its exegetical literature, such as the *Theg pa spyi bcings* of Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs; it is noted in the autobiography that this exposition was in the tradition of mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan. In addition, Nam mkha' dpal instructed his disciple in the different Indian and Tibetan commentaries on the *sGyu 'phrul drva ba*, the authority of the ācārya being based on the fact that he had penned an important commentary on this tantra. This course of study having been mastered over a period of seven years, there followed further studies under a number of teachers, all associated with Kaḥ thog monastery; among these we find the First Drung Nam mkha' seng ge and the Third Drung rGyal mtshan rdo rje.¹⁰

⁹ See the dbu med text of the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 45.6-57.3, for the studies up to the age of seventeen years. Only after his return from lHa sa did bSod nams rgyal mtshan attend upon other teachers than his uncle. His own birthplace is given as the "land of gZhag (sic) of Nyag rong [in] Khams" (... mdo khams nyag rong gzhang gi yul); see *ibid.*, p. 47.3-4. This description has already been noted as an early reference to the "toponym" (sa ming) "Nyag rong"; see Tsering (1993:103).

¹⁰ For the seven year study period with the Great Ācārya Nam mkha' dpal, see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 60.2-65.5. The list of further teachers begins with the First Drung Nam mkha' seng ge and the Third Drung rGyal mtshan rdo rje; see *ibid.*, pp. 65.5-72.2. A short biographical sketch of Nam mkha' dpal can be found in the Kaḥ thog history written by 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1), p. 72.4-

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At the age of twenty-seven years, during a visit to the monastery of bZhag yul dGon gсар in his home region, bSod nams rgyal mtshan saw in a dream his uncle bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa who urged him to come to Central Tibet and, more especially, to join him in opening dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs, that is, Sikkim. He left soon afterwards for dBus and gTsang, the autobiography giving as the date for this departure the tenth Tibetan month of the year 1493.

Without going into the details of the journey, the autobiography relates next the meeting with the uncle at his residence, called Theg chen chos sdings, at the “northern gate” (byang sgo) of the hidden valley known as Rice Land. There follows an interesting account of the difficult process of finding the proper entry point into the sanctuary, with no success being met at the “eastern gate” (shar sgo) and the “southern gate” (lho sgo). It is also stated that bSod nams rgyal mtshan took up this search in place of his uncle bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa, who had supplied him with the necessary guidebooks. The mission finally went to the “western gate” (nub sgo) and there came upon a site called dGe rgyas 'Jag ma lung; having passed through the “inner gate” (nang sgo), which bears the name g.Ya' ma sTag ri, the small group under the leadership of bSod nams rgyal mtshan arrived in the inner region of the sanctuary, said to be like a realm of the gods.¹¹

20. The title of the commentary of the *sGyu 'phrul drva ba* is given there as *gSang snying ṭikka dngul dkar me long* and is considered to be in the same class with the commentaries of Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (b. 1040), Klong chen Rab 'byams pa and g.Yung ston rDo rje dpal (1285-1364). A biographical note on Nam mkha' seng ge, pointing out his role as a disciple of Rig 'dzin Ratna gling pa, is contained *ibid.*, pp. 66.10-67.13. Bya bral Rin po che's work (as in note 1), fol. 42a/1, remarks that the First Drung came from the same family as the first member of the bla rabs bcu gsum.

¹¹ This subsection of the second main chapter has the title “Account of the Opening of the Gate to the Hidden Valley, [Which Is] a Sacred Site” (*sbas yul gnas sgo phyed pa'i rnam thar*); see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 72.2-82.5. The conception of “gates to the sacred site” (gnas sgo) in the four cardinal directions leading to the centre of a hidden land conceived as a maṇḍala is known from further cases; see, for example, the “four large gates” (sgo chen po bzhi) topographically located around the valley of Glang 'phrang—present-day Langtang—in Ehrhard (1997a: 342-344). An elaborate description of the four entry points to the hidden valley of Sikkim can be found in *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig phan yon dang bcas pa ngo mtshar gter mdzod* (block print), fols. 19a/6-28b/2 & 42b/5-44b/4. This work is the scriptural basis for the observations by Brauen-Dolma (1985: 248-249) that the gates should be approached depending on the time of the year (in autumn

The remaining two sections of the chapter, dealing with the teachers of bSod nam rgyal mtshan, describe activities after the death of bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa, beginning with the funeral ceremonies on his behalf. The passing away of his first and most important teacher postponed for the time being a fuller engagement in the Himalayan valleys, and he discarded the idea of settling permanently in the inner part of the hidden valley just opened by him.

Travelling instead to lHa sa and to bSam yas in order to make offerings for bZhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa, bSod nam rgyal mtshan came across the Seventh Karmapa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454-1506) in the Yar klungs valley, and while still in the valley, at the site of Chu mig dGon gсар, he received teachings from a certain Grags pa 'od zer. As this master was a member of the family of Rig 'dzin Ratna gling pa, bSod nam rgyal mtshan was able to receive those cycles of the treasure-discoverer's teachings which he had not obtained before. The next two teachers mentioned in the autobiography also imparted teaching traditions of the rNying ma pa school to him. In gTsang dMus ston chen po Kun bzang dpal gave the "reading authorization" (lung) of the "Collected Tantras of the Old [School]" (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*), a detailed list of the contents of the 35 volumes being contained in the autobiography; from the same teacher he also received the *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* cycle of mNga' bdag Nyang ral [Nyi ma'i 'od zer]. Finally, in lHa stod lHo, bSod nam rgyal mtshan received the treasure-cycles of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem 'phru can from a teacher called Chos rje sTon chen Grags pa rgyal mtshan; this master also transmitted to him the treasure-cycles of Rig 'dzin Shes rab me 'bar (1267-1326), a

from the east, in winter from the south, in spring from the west, and in summer from the north). The text in question is a compilation of different prophecies, consisting for the greater part of a long quotation from the ones of Rig 'dzin Sangs rgyas gling pa; see the relevant section in *Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa las / ma 'ongs lung bstan bka' rgya ma'i skor*, Gangtok & Delhi: Sherab Gyaltzen, n.d., pp. 404.2-448.3 [= *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi gnas yig phan yon dang bcas pa ngo mtshar gter mdzod*, fols. 3a/5-56 b/3]. It should be noted that Rig 'dzin Sangs rgyas gling pa pays no attention to the western gate. A description of the entry through this gate can be found in the writings of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem 'phru can; see his *gNas 'bras mo 'dzongs (=gshongs) gi lam yig* (manuscript), Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project, reel-no. L 278/, fols. 3b ff.; this text also mentions an inner gate with the name g.Ya ma sTag rtse (sic). For the observation that the text *sPyi'i them byang* of Rig 'dzin rGod ldem 'phru can—a work dealing with hidden valleys in general—contains numerous references to dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs, compare Childs (1999: 131, note 13).

treasure-discoverer who had been active in the sPa gro valley in Bhutan.¹²

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After a three-year period from 1502 to 1505, devoted exclusively to the spiritual practice of these different teaching traditions at a site known as [Theg chen] chos sdings Yang dben rDo thang—obviously located in the vicinity of the former residence of his uncle bZhaḡ bla Ye shes 'bum pa—bSod nams rgyal mtshan pondered the idea of returning to his home region in Khams and to the monastery of Kaḡ thog. At that time repeated invitations arrived at his hermitage in northern Sikkim from sPa gro sTag tshang, having been sent by a person named Bla ma Ngang brgyud rGyal ba. He finally took up the invitation. The autobiography records a request made by the Bhutanese disciple when his guest arrived for the first time at the celebrated Padmasambhava shrine of sTag tshang:

The regions of dBus gtsang, mDo khams, [and] especially [the monastery of] Kaḡ thog—they are pure lands, [and] the Dharma will always spread [there]. [Here, in] our Land of the Mon, a barbarous border country, the Dharma has not been diffused: the beings who are foolish [and benighted] like animals—take care of them with [your] great affection! [And] especially at the pilgrimage site of the Great One from Oḡḡiyāna, at [this cave known as] 'Tiger Den, Where Lions' Thoughts Are Accomplished', erect to completion a place for spiritual practice [this] we request [you]!¹³

¹² For the last two subsections of the second chapter see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 82.5-105.5. The list of the contents of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* collection in 35 volumes can be found *ibid.*, pp. 92.2-98.6; this is a kind of provisional list, an extended version of which is said to be contained in the "list of teachings received" (thob yig) of bSod nams rgyal mtshan (not yet available). The teacher dMus ston chen po Kun bzang dpal is also known under the name Gling chen Kun bzang dpal, derived from his residence in gTsang, "the monastery of Gling bu [in] Nyang stod" (nyang stod gling bu dgon pa). This is known from the autobiography of the treasure-discoverer 'Gro 'dul Las 'phro gling pa (1488-1553) who stayed for a period of one year with the master Kun bzang dpal; see *Rig 'dzin chen po gter bton las 'phro gling pa'i dus gsum gyi skye brgyud dang rnam par thar pa che long tsam zhig bkod pa me tog 'phreng mdzes*, Gangtok & Delhi: Gonpo Tseten, 1979, pp. 387.1-391.1.

¹³ See the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 114.6-115.2 (*dbus gtsang mdo khams khyad par bka'* (sic) *thog phyogs / dag pa'i zhing yin bstan pa nam yang dar / bdag*

The teacher from Kaḥ thog provides the detailed story of the circumstances of the establishment of this site, to which he later gave the name “Tiger Den, the Peak of Oḍḍiyāna” (sTag tshang o rgyan rtse mo). A translation and edition of this part of the autobiography, which closes the second subsection of chapter three and covers the years 1507 to 1508, will be given on a later occasion. There remain nine subsections, dealing with the spiritual achievements of bSod nams rgyal mtshan and his further travels and teaching activities. I select three of them in order to sketch a rough picture of this part of his life-story.

The first one bears the title “An Account of How [the People of] Mon in the South Became Established in the Dharma” (*lho mon chos la bkod pa'i rnam thar*). At the beginning one finds the interesting statement of bSod nams rgyal mtshan that he was a recipient of all the Spoken Teachings of the rNying ma pa school and, although not a treasure-discoverer himself, had also obtained most of the Treasure Teachings available in his time. It was the transmission of the collection of Tantras from both these teaching traditions which he gave to his disciples at the start of his effort to spread these lineages in Bhutan:

In the beginning, at [sPa gro] sTag tshang, the meeting ground of the Ḍākinīs, headed by dBang phyug rgyal mtshan, the sky-yogin, and by the teacher Ngang brgyud rGyal [ba] and so forth—for an assembly of about five hundred [persons] with the proper karma—I performed in their totality [the transmission of] the Collected Tantras of the Old [School]. On

cag mon yul mtha' khab chos mi dar / dud 'gro lta bu'i blun rmongs sems can la / brtse ba chen pos rjes su bzung ba (=gzung ba) dang / khyad par o rgyan chen po'i gnas chen ste / stag tshang seng ge bsam grub 'di nyid du / bsgrub (=sgrub) sde cig kyang rab tu 'dzugs par zhu). For the gDung family of Ngang and their genealogy, see Aris (1979: 138-139); a person named rGyal ba is listed in the accompanying table; see (*ibid.*: 136). At the beginning of the 16th century sTag tshang was the most important pilgrimage site associated with Padmasambhava in the sPa gro and Had valleys. See, for example, the biography of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa yogin Grags pa mtha' yas (1469-1531), who paid visits to these sites after the death of his teacher lHa btsun Kun dga' chos kyi rgya mtsho (1432-1505). He, too, referred to sTag tshang under the name of the Seng ge bsam grub cave; see *rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug grags pa mtha' yas dpal bzang po'i rnam thar mgur 'bum ngo mtshar nor bu'i phreng ba*, Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten, 1977, pp. 190.4-194.2.

these auspicious occasions, there were downpours of flowers, and marvellous signs and countless blessings appeared.¹⁴

After these initial transmissions in the western part of the country, bSod nams rgyal mtshan accepted an invitation from a certain rGyal mtshan ye shes, affiliated to a monastery called Kun bzang gling. This is one of the monasteries founded by the great Klong chen Rab 'byams pa in Bhutan, and is located in the sKur stod valley. As the teacher from Kaḥ thog travelled afterwards through the region of sNan lung, where another of Klong chen Rab 'byams pa's foundations can be found, one may surmise that he visited on this journey the sites associated with the famous codifier of the rDzogs chen doctrine; and in fact, besides transmitting the cycles of the Spoken Teachings collectively called *sGyu 'phrul zhi khro phur gsum*, he also gave empowerments and instructions of the *sNying thig* cycles of Klong chen Rab 'byams pa.

Another invitation having arrived from the valley of Bum thang from a person named Tshe dbang rgyal po, bSod nams rgyal mtshan gave once again teachings including the *sGyu 'phrul zhi khro phur gsum*. On that occasion he encountered Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa, who had just established his temple of gTam zhing in Bum thang. Further travels seem to have been mostly undertaken in the western valleys of Thim phu and sPa gro. For example, he was active in Glang ma lung and in lCags zam Thog kha; these two places, located in Thim phu and sPa gro respectively, are known to have been residences of the gNas rnying pa, a school of Tibetan Buddhism which was firmly established in western Bhutan at the time.

But it was, of course, at O rgyan rtse mo that bSod nams rgyal mtshan chiefly propagated his teaching traditions, including the *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, the *Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa*, the "Southern Treasures" (lho gter) and the "Northern Treasures" (byang

¹⁴ See the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 132.6-133.3 (*thog mar stag tshang mkha' 'gro 'dus sa ru / nam mkha' rnal 'byor dbang phyug rgyal mtshan dang / bla ma ngang brgyud rgyal sogs gtso byas pa'i / las ldan lnga brgya tsam gcig 'tshogs pa la / rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum yongs su rdzogs par byas / dus bzang rnams su me tog char babs shing / ngo mtshar ltas dang byin rlabs dpag med byung*). This seems to be the first reference to the transmission of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* in Bhutan; surprisingly, it was a transmission from gTsang and not from Kaḥ thog monastery. In the following period the main source for the diffusion of this collection of Tantras was lHo brag lHa lung, the main seat of the teaching tradition of Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa (1450-1521). For the importance of the Third Pad gling gsung sprul Tshul khriims rdo rje (1598-1669) in this process, see Ehrhard (1997b:256, note 8).

ger). At the same place, for the spiritual practice at sPa gro sTag tshang, he gave a second time the transmission of the Tantras of the Old School, on this particular occasion for people both from Mon yul and from Tibet. Among the group of about one hundred disciples, a Tibetan lady of noble origin is mentioned who offered the teacher a 35-volume set of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*. The autobiography suggests that although there existed at that time diverse reading authorizations of this collection, the complete one as maintained by the master from Kaḥ thog was quite rare.¹⁵

[6]

The subsection titled “An Extensive Account of Teachings [and] Initiations [Which Are] of Benefit for the Disciples of the Regions of dBus [and] gTsang” (*dbus gtsang phyogs kyi gdul bya la / chos dbang 'gro don rgyas pa'i rnam thar*) describes first travels to Bar 'brog in La stod, to 'Bring mtshams, and to mGo yul. In the latter area bSod nams rgyal mtshan gave public discourses to a great number of people, headed by the “princess” (dpon sa) bDag mo'i drung. He also revisited eastern gTsang, where his teacher Chos rje Gling chen, that is, Kun bzang dpal from the monastery of Gling bu, had since passed away. On that occasion he gave the complete initiations and instructions of the *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* cycle in sPos khang lHa steng in Nyang smad.

Concerning his travels in dBus, the autobiography states that they began in the year 1528—at the age of sixty-two—when he was invited by a teacher known as dKar chen Kun dga' grags pa to the bSam yas vihāra. There he was called upon to consecrate a colossal statue of the

¹⁵ The travels in the eastern and western valleys are related in the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 133.3-142.2. For the eight monasteries founded by Klong chen Rab 'byams pa in Bhutan, see Aris (1979:315, note 19); compare Ehrhard (1992:54-56) for that part of his family line descending from Bum thang Thar pa gling. For a description of the erection of gTam zhing based on the biography of Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa, see Aris (1986b:33-37); the consecration of the temple took place in the year 1505. The history of the gNas rnying pa in Bhutan and their residences in Glang ma lung and lCags zam Thog kha is also treated by Aris (1979:191-195 & 322, note 131). Concerning the second transmission of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* at O rgyan rtse mo, see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 142.3-143.6. The name of the Tibetan lady is given as rGyang rtse dPon sa bDag mo drung and bDag mo'i drung; she was thus a member of the ruling house of present-day Gyantse in gTsang. For the reading authorization of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, see *ibid.*, p. 143.1-2 (*ding sang gsang sngags rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum lung / skor le than thun yod pa mang 'dug kyang / yongs rdzogs bdag tsam min pa dkon pa 'dra*).

Precious Guru Padmasambhava. The project of erecting such a huge icon had been initiated for the “expulsion of armed forces” (dmag bzlog), a danger that was quite real at the time in Central Tibet. After the consecration from a throne in front of the bSam yas pillar, he imparted teachings and initiations, and among the disciples are mentioned lHo brag [rDo rje gdan] Chos rje lHa ro ba and [bSam yas] gDan sa [pa] Rab ’byams pa dGe ba’i blo gros, both representatives of the teaching lineage of the master dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa.¹⁶

Having visited the different sacred sites in the surroundings of the bSam yas vihāra, including ’Ching phu (sic) and Brag dmar g.Ya ma lung, the teacher from Kaḥ thog proceeded on to lHa sa, where his local patron was a person called bKor gNyer dpon or bKor bdag rGyal po. After giving teachings in lHa sa sKyid shod, he returned via La stod to his residence in the sPa gro valley of Bhutan, and there stayed in retreat for a longer period. bSod nams rgyal mtshan’s last journey to gTsang took place in the year 1532, when he visited the court of the rGyang rtse rulers. In front of an assembly of seven hundred people he imparted teachings and initiations from the traditions of the Spoken Teachings and the Treasure Teachings, including the cycle *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol* of Rig ’dzin Karma gling pa (14th century).¹⁷

¹⁶ For the travels in gTsang and the events in bSam yas, see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 144.1-156.1. dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa is known to have been a lineage-holder of the treasure-cycles of Sangs rgyas gling pa and of Dri med Kun dga’ (b. 1347). For his position in the lineage of Dri med Kun dga’ and the epithet “whitely [dressed] one” (dkar po ba), see the historiographical work of sTag sgang mKhas mchog [Ngag dbang blo gros] alias Guru bKra shis (18th/19th cent.): *bsTan pa’i snying po gsang chen snga ’gyur nges don zab mo’i chos kyi ’byung ba gsal bar byed pa’i legs bshad mkhas pa dga’ byed ngo mtshar gtam gyi rol mtsho*, Hsining, 1990, pp. 466.9-467.3. In order to spread the teachings of Sangs rgyas gling pa, this master kept up four “residences” (gdan sa). They were known as Dvags po dGongs ’dus gling (in the east), lHo brag rDo rje gdan (in the south), gTsang gi zab bu gling [=zab phu lung] (in the west), and bSam yas Ri bo rtse (in the north); see Karma Mi ’gyur dBang gi rgyal po (17th cent.): *gTer bton brgya rtsa’i mtshan sdom gsol ’debs chos rgyal bkra shis stobs rgyal gyi mdzad pa’i ’grel pa lo rgyus gter bton chos ’byung*, Darjeeling: Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche Pema Wangyal, 1978, pp. 126.4-127.3. According to this passage dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa was famous for renovating shrines and temples, among them the cave known as Nyi zla [kha sbyor] phug in sPa gro sTag tshang. For the erection of the colossal statue of Padmasambhava in lHo brag by the treasure-discoverer mChog ldan mgon po (1497-1531), a disciple of dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa, and the dangers of armed forces in Central Tibet during this particular period, see Ehrhard (2000:35-37).

¹⁷ The second part of the journey to dBus and the last visit to gTsang can be found in the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 156.1-162.5. The period between these

As a kind of overview of the disciples who continued his teaching tradition bSod nams rgyal mtshan lists about a dozen names in the subsection called “An Account of the Assembling of the Great [Spiritual] Sons Who Transmitted the Dharma” (*chos brgyud bu chen 'dus pa'i rnam thar*). The enumeration starts with dKar chen Kun dga' grags pa and includes both lHa ro Chos rje—now qualified as being a member of the family of Guru Chos [kyi] dbang [phyug]—and Rab 'byams pa dGe ba'i blo gros, namely the respective representatives of dKar chen Kun dga' grags pa's teaching lineage from lHo brag and bSam yas. Two of the disciples were at the same time bSod nams rgyal mtshan's own teachers: dMus ston chen po Kun bzang dpal from gTsang and Chos rje sTon chen Grags pa rgyal mtshan from La stod lHo. The noble Tibetan lady dPon sa'i bdag mo drung is now identified as an “emanation of [Ye shes] mTsho rgyal” (mtsho rgyal sprul pa), the Tibetan consort of Padmasambhava. The list also contains the name g.Yang lung [Chos rje] Kun dga' legs pa'i 'byung gnas; this person is always mentioned as being in the company of the female patron of bSod nams rgyal mtshan in the different episodes noted above.

One also finds in the list the name of Chos rje Grags pa rgyal mtshan, one of the sons of Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa; he was that offspring of the great treasure-discoverer from Bhutan who had inherited the temple of gTam zhing in the valley of Bum thang. Another disciple of the teacher of Kaḥ thog was Rig 'dzin bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480-1535), whose alternative name is given in the autobiography as the “treasure-discoverer [from] Chu bzang” (chu bzang gter ston).¹⁸ The list closes with the names of two brothers,

two travels was devoted to the composition of the main literary work known to exist from the pen of bSod nams rgyal mtshan. It bears the title *bKa' thams cad gsal bar ston pa byed pa / bstan pa thams cad kyi spyi 'grel / theg pa thams cad kyi shan 'byed / man ngag thams cad kyi dgongs don / sems kyi chos nyid mngon du rtogs pa'i me long / nyi 'od gsal ba*; see the Kaḥ thog histories of Bya bral Rin po che (as in note 1), fol. 44b/3-6, and of 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1), pp. 74.17-75.2. The work was published, under the title *Theg pa thams cad kyi shan 'byed nyi 'od rab gsal*, in two parts (230 fols. & 181 fols.), Delhi: Kunzang Tobgyal 1979 (the year of composition is lcags pho stag = 1530). My thanks to Prof. Per K. Sorensen for providing a copy of this text. Like mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan's exposition of the *Theg pa spyi bcings*, this work should be classified among the new commentaries of the Spoken Teachings tradition; see note 6.

¹⁸ For the subsection dealing with the different disciples see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 175.4-180.3. Rig 'dzin bsTan gnyis gling pa was affiliated to the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa monastery of Chu bzang and had met Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa at the latter's temple gTam zhing in the years 1519 and 1520. He returned to Bhutan in the year 1532 and raised treasure-works in two caves at the sacred site of

simply referred to as the “ones from mNga’ ris” (mnga’ ris pa). This designation refers to mNga’ ris Paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487-1542) and to mNga’ ris Rig ’dzin Legs dan bdud ’joms rdo rje (b. 1512). If one consults their biographies from a later historical tradition, one finds references to meetings of these teachers from Western Tibet with both the founder of the lHo mon Kaḥ thog pa and with rNam grol bzang po, his immediate successor.¹⁹

[7]

The final advice offered by bSod nams rgyal mtshan before he passed away at O rgyan rtse mo called for his disciples to follow their spiritual

sPa gro sTag tshang. These places are called Nyi zla [kha sbyor] phug and Sen ge bsam grub phug; see his autobiography *Rigs* (sic) *’dzin bstan gnyis gling pa’i rnam thar las / rnal lam lung bstan gyi skor*, Delhi: Dawa Lama, 1982, pp. 94.2-95.1; at the latter cave Rig ’dzin bsTan gnyis gling pa rediscovered teachings originally found there—and then hidden again—by Gu ru Tshe brtan rgyal mtshan, an early treasure-discoverer active in Bhutan; see Ehrhard (1997a:341 & 350, note 12). After these findings, a meeting of the master from Chu bzang with Chos rje Kaḥ thog pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan is recorded in the text. Another disciple of Rig ’dzin Padma gling pa who had retrieved treasure-cycles from sPa gro sTag tshang was the previously mentioned ’Gro ’dul Las ’phro gling pa. He remained afterwards for one year in the company of bSod nams rgyal mtshan at O rgyan rtse mo, listening to his exposition of the lineages of the Spoken Teachings and Treasure Teachings; see the autobiography of ’Gro ’dul Las ’phro gling pa (as in note 10), pp. 384.3-387.1.

¹⁹ See the biography of mNga’ ris Paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal written by rDo rje brag Rig ’dzin Padma ’phrin las (1640-1718): *’Dus pa mdo dbang gi bla ma brgyudpa’i rnam thar ngo mtshar dad pa’i phreng ba* (=Smanrtsis Shesrig Spendzod, 37), Leh: S.W. Tashigangpa, 1972, p. 323.2 (*kaḥ thog pa chos rje bsod nams rgyal mtshansogs bshes gnyen mang po dang chos skyes ’bul res mdzad*); this meeting with bSod nams rgyal mtshan occurred in 1529 during the latter’s sojourn at the bSam yas vihāra. mNga’ ris Rig ’dzin Legs dan bdud ’joms rdo rje was regarded as an incarnation of Rig ’dzin rGod ldem ’phru can and, like his predecessor, undertook to open d’al gyi ’bras mo ljongs. This happened after the death of his elder brother in the year 1542; for a meeting with rNam grol bzang po at the former residence of bZhang la Ye shes ’bum pa at [Theg chen] chos sdings, located at the northern gate of the hidden valley, see *ibid.*, p. 371.6 (*slar yang ’bras gshongs phyogs su phebs te spa gro stag tshang nas rin po che kaḥ thog pa rnam grol bzang po drang lung chos sdings su phebs dang mjal*). mNga’ ris Rig ’dzin also stayed for some time in sPa gro sTag tshang and obtained there an “introduction certificate” (kha byang) for a treasure-cycle which he later retrieved from the bSam yas vihāra. See rDo rje brag Rig ’dzin Padma ’phrin las: *’Khor ba dbyings sgrol gyi khrid yig shas don gsal ba lam bang snying po* (=Smanrtsis Shesrig Spendzod, 66), Leh: S.W. Tashigangpa, 1973, p. 475.1-2 (*spa gro stag tshang du bzugs dus o rgyan chen pos zhal bstan cing kha byang yang rnyed pa la brten nas bsam yas nas zab gter spyang drangs shing dben gnas isam yas mchims phu legs par thugs snyans su bstan*).

practice at such sacred sites in Tibet as Zab phu lung and 'Ching phu (sic) in the vicinity of the bSam yas vihāra. But first and foremost they were urged to stay at the "great hidden valley" (sbaṅ yul chen po) called dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs and at sPa gro sTag tshang; and in the latter case at a site called Nyi zla dmar mo, which obviously refers to the previously mentioned Nyi zla [kha sbyor] phug. If one consults, in addition to the autobiography, the account by rNam groḷ [Ye shes] bzang po, it becomes clear that in 1539 the master from Kaḷ thog had a dream of the country known as Rice Land, and that this particular vision resulted in his handing over to his disciple a written scroll describing the entry through the western gate.²⁰

Although the literary sources are quite reticent about the activities of the following representatives of the lHo mon Kaḷ thog pa in Sikkim and Bhutan, it is known at least that in the middle of the 17th century the western gate was entered once more by a teacher from Eastern Tibet in order to gain access to dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs, and that this time the journey resulted in the permanent presence of this sub-school of the rNying ma pa in the hidden valley of Sikkim. Such a settlement process had already occurred in Bhutan at the beginning of the 16th century, and one may attribute this to the fact that the memory of Padmasambhva and the expectation that his prophecies would be fulfilled were very much alive at the sacred shrine in the sPa gro valley during that particular period.

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²⁰ For the section of the final advice dealing with the sacred sites see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 220.3-221.4. The dream of the year 1539 is to be found *ibid.*, pp. 15.3-16.5. Concerning the "Four Great Yogins" (rnal 'byor bzhi) or the "Four Great Yogins [Who Are] Brothers" (rnal 'byor mched bzhi) associated with the definitive opening of dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs—including Phun tshog rnam rgyal (1604-1670), the first Buddhist ruler of Sikkim—see the work of Bya baḷ Rin po che (as in note 1), fols. 133b/4-135a/2. Additional information on Kaḷ thog pa Kun tu bzang po, who at that time entered through the western gate and founded in Sikkim a "site for a monastic community" (dge 'dun gyi sde), is contained in the work of Khenpo L. Tsering (as in note 5), pp. 231.17-232.16.

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