

"THE MESSED UP BOOKS" (*PECHA TROK WA LA*)¹.
A personal recollection of Samten G. Karmay
and the O rgyan chos gling catalogue (Bhutan)².

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It was a beautiful day of October 1999 when Samten arrived in O rgyan chos gling in the sTang Valley of Bum thang³. A short but steep walk of 45 minutes took him in full view of the grand mansion sitting at the top of a hillock and dominating the whole sTang valley. Buckwheat fields, pine trees and little hamlets were towered to the North by the cragged summits of the Three Sisters. Prayers flags and chortens dotted the landscape. He had reached a unique place where six centuries of history⁴ had taken place in an uninterrupted way.

Little did he know that it was the start of a mission which will take him many more times to the top of this hill after a long 11 hours drive from Thimphu. The usual welcoming tea served by impressed ladies for whom Samten was a *dge shes* from 'Bras spung in Tibet, and therefore worth all the respect. Then the landlady Kunzang Choden⁵, given

¹ This Bumthangkha expression is applied to her ancestral books collection by Ashi Kunzang who wrote in her personal introduction to the catalogue (Karmay, 2003): "None of us dared to touch them [books] for the fear of mixing them up further for they were already classified as *pecha throk wa la* ("mixed up texts" in Bumthangkha). At least, we were fully aware of the fact that these manuscripts and texts were a significant part of our religious heritage which had to be protected and revered. But beyond their physical presence the contents, and therefore, the actual value of these texts remained "closed and mixed up" and we would literally be passing on a legacy of unknown significance."

² Samten G. Karmay. *The Diamond Isle. A catalogue of Buddhist writings in the library of Ogyen Chöling, Bhutan*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 2003.

³ See www.geocities.com/ogyencholingmuseum/

⁴ For background on O rgyan chos gling see: Kunzang Choden, "Lo g sar Celebration: the Significance of Food in the Noble and Religious Family of O rgyan chos gling (Central Bhutan)", in J. Ardussi & F. Pommaret (eds), *Bhutan. Traditions and changes*. Proceedings of the XIth IATS Oxford 2003, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 27-44. See also Karmay, *Catalogue*, 2003, and Françoise Pommaret, "Historical and religious relations between Lhodrak (Southern Tibet) and Bumthang (Bhutan) from the 18th to the early 20th century: Preliminary data", in *Tibet and her neighbours. Proceedings of the History of Tibet Conference St Andrews University 2001*, A. McKay (ed.), London: Ed. Hansjörg Mayer, 2003, 91-106; *id.*, "Estate and deities: A ritual from central Bhutan. The *bskang gso* of O rgyan chos gling" in J. Ardussi & F. Pommaret (eds), *Bhutan. Traditions and changes*. Proceedings of the XIth IATS Oxford 2003, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 135-158.

⁵ See among her numerous publications, Kunzang Choden, "Lo g sar Celebration: the Significance of Food in the Noble and Religious Family of O rgyan chos gling (Central Bhutan)", in J. Ardussi & F. Pommaret (eds), *Bhutan. Traditions and changes*. Proceedings of the XIth IATS Oxford 2003, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 27-44; *id.*, *The Circle of Karma*, Penguin-Zuban, New-Delhi 2005; and *id.*, *Chilli and cheese. Food and Society in Bhutan*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2007.

the honorific title of Ashi (*A lce*) in Bhutan, and her husband Walter started to talk about the sorry state in which they found the books when she took over the place in the early 1990s. Both Ashi Kunzang and Walter were much aware of the value of their books and several scholars, such as Gene E. Smith⁶, John Ardussi, and Lam Pemala had already underlined the importance of this private library⁷.

A tour of the mansion confirmed the state in which the books had been kept by the previous landlord. Except for the *Kanjur*, *'Bum* and *Brgyad stong pa* which were wrapped and kept in the bookcases on the altars, most of the books were kept in bundles in different places without any protection against humidity. Samten writes⁸:

"I was shown a collection of books then packed up in boxes made from leather and also bamboo. They were stored away in one of the dark rooms on the ground floor of the temple called Jo bo Lha khang. The boxes of which there were about fifteen were stacked one on top of the other resting against the wall on one side of the room. I opened two boxes and found volumes and volumes of assorted texts in both manuscripts and printed editions. Some were wrapped up in cloth, others in the thick Bhutanese paper. The first thing that caused me to worry was the penetration of damp. As it was damp and cold in the room a fire stove was brought in to keep me warm while I looked through some of the books just out of curiosity. On this occasion the prevalent feeling that one had was that something had to be done rapidly about the condition in which the collection was kept as well as compiling a catalogue."

It was then decided that Samten will come back and start sorting out and cataloguing the books while Kunzang and Walter will have traditional book covers stitched and organize a proper place for them to be kept. A small fund for Samten's travel was given by the French Embassy in India from the Bhutan cooperation funding.

Because of his dual background, as a Tibetan monk and as a Western scholar, Samten was the ideal person for this work. Not only did it required a great amount of knowledge of the religious literature, but he was also considered by the villagers as "empowered" to handle the books because of this religious background.

In 2000 and 2001, Samten spent around ten days each autumn in O rgyan chos gling. The large sitting-room located in the living quarters of the building became a huge repository of texts.

At 3,000m, it was very cold inside except for few hours of sun coming through the small Bhutanese windows. Around 3 pm, everyday when the sun starts setting, he was given a small brazier of charcoal to

⁶ Gene E. Smith was instrumental in having printed in 1985 the 21 volumes of rDo rje gling pa's writings from O rgyan chos gling.

⁷ See also the very personal introduction to the O rgyan chos gling catalogue by Kunzang Choden, Catalogue: 2003, 7-8.

⁸ Karmay, 2004: 350.

help him bear with the cold sipping through, and cups of tea were provided the whole day.

From the room facing east, Samten had a view on the village, the peasants going to work, women milking and washing near the water prayer-mill, cows grazing and children playing in the meadows. However he did not have much leisure to watch the scenery. Because of the lack of electricity, he could work only by daylight and after several hours looking at texts, his eyes were sore. It was compounded by terrible allergies due to the books ancient dust and the pervading cold. His nose ran all the time, but he never complained about anything, totally absorbed in his work. He enjoyed his breakfast which was specially roasted tsampa with butter-tea. Things were a little bit more complicated for the other meals as Samten could not take the hot Bhutanese chillis. So dishes were prepared without chilli for him, much to the surprise of the village ladies who could not understand how one could eat such bland food. During dinner time with the whole family in the dark kitchen, "Geshe Samten", as he was called, would tell stories of his childhood in Shar khog (Amdo), an area which used to look very much like Bumthang. He would also narrate anecdotes of his monk's life in central Tibet and Ashi Kunzang or her brother translated into Bumthangkha. Samten would not hesitate to mimic the scenes, making the people roar with laughter as these were stories they could relate to. Notions of geography were much more difficult to explain and people were surprised to know than Amdo and Khams were much farther from Bod than Bhutan. Days walk had to be the measure of time.

The first two days in 2000 were dedicated gather the books from all over the mansion and bring them in one room. They were carried in baskets up to the sitting-room by women servants, the chaplain, Lopen Ngawang Jampa and Kunzang's nephew, Jigme. Both of them were appointed as Samten's assistants.

The first task for Samten was to sort out and check the books because they were mixed up, pages were missing or torn, as well as clean them. Then the cataloguing *per se* started. Samten used a pen and a notebook as there was no electricity and no facility for computer. Each of the books was given a number and the stamp of Orgyan chos gling, made specially for the occasion, applied to them. Samten went through each book to briefly see the contents and wrote in the notebook all the information he could find: main title, margin title, folio numbers, author, subject, type of edition, folio numbers, and his comments.

That's how Samten found under the title *Blo bzang bka' bum*, a copy of the controversial *dBen sa snyan brgyud* by dBen sa rdo rje 'chang Blo bzang don grub (1504/1505-1566)⁹.

⁹ Karmay, 2004: 354: " Blo bzang don grub is known to have maintained the earlier views of Tsong kha pa. These views were expressed when Tsong kha pa was a young man and were later considered as still immature. There is certainly a leaning towards Rnying ma pa doctrines in the writings of Blo bzang don grub and this was probably the main reason why his tradition remained unfamiliar among the Dge lugs pa themselves. He was the head of the small monastery known as Lha

After much questioning on which classification to adopt, he decided to classify the texts in four sections according to the four religious schools represented in the collection, plus a section of miscellaneous non religious subjects.

When Samten thought it was finished, Ashi Kunzang's younger brother, Ugyen Rigzin, suddenly at dinner remembered that they were some in a place that everybody had forgotten about. And a bundle of *pecha trokwa la* was promptly delivered the next morning.

In 2001, Ashi Kunzang and Walter who were finishing to convert the main tower (*dbu rtse*) into a museum transformed the upper room into the library. Amongst different exhibits showing the quality of the ancient books and woodblocks, a several meter long and enclosed book case was made to receive the books. As a simple measure to protect the books from the humidity and due to lack of funds, the book case was elevated on stilts and set up far from the walls. Moth balls were placed all over. All the books were neatly wrapped in cloth cover (*pe cha nam bza'*) that Ashi Kunzang had stitched, with their codes disposed in the traditional way.

Samten summarized his experience¹⁰:

"There were all together 511 texts. While I began to compile a catalogue Ashi Kunzang had one of the rooms known as *gTor khang* on the fourth floor of the *dbu rtse* building converted into a library. However, my stay of less than two weeks on this occasion at the place was too short to complete the work on the catalogue. On a third visit in October 2001 I stayed there for 12 days and this time I was able to complete a draft of the whole catalogue.

There are other Buddhist texts which are not included in the catalogue. The *Jo bo lha khang* contains a set of *Kanjur* of the Snar thang edition and an unknown edition of the *Klu 'bum* of the Bon tradition in three volumes; in the *rDo sems lha khang*, which is an adjoining piece of the *Jo bo lha khang*, is a beautiful Punakha edition of the *brGyad stong pa* (*Astasahasrika prajnaparamita*, No. 734, *The Tibetan Tripitaka*, Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1962); in the *Tshe dpag med lha khang* of the *dbu rtse* building there are Buddhist sutra written in gold and silver as well as manuscript copies of other sutras. In the same temple a few woodblocks for printing the *bKa' thang 'dus pa* of O rgyan gling pa (1239-1367) are kept. It was Mi dbang Dbang chen rdo rje (*alias* Mtsho skyes rdo rje), a prominent member of the family who had these woodblocks carved, but no date is given for the carving of the wood blocks. He lived in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Books for various purposes are also kept in the *gZims chung*, a private bedroom-cum-chapel used by the head lama of the family, Lama Nus ldan (1930-1985). This chapel is found in the building of

phu dben sa chos sde (or simply Dben dgon), situated near Shigatse, hence his title Dben sa rdo rje 'chang, and was recognized as the 3rd reincarnation of Mkhaz grub rje Dge legs dpal bzang (1385-1438), and later retrospectively counted as the 3rd Panchen Lama."

¹⁰ Karmay, 2004: 351.

the living quarters of Ogyen Chöling. There are no particular texts in this place that are not found in the Library or not entered in our catalogue."

In 2001, discussions took place in the O rgyan chos gling kitchen on the lay-out of the catalogue which had to benefit the interested Bhutanese scholars. Many of them cannot read the Wylie transliteration and we decided to have the title in Tibetan script while the other information will be given English.

The Tibetan typing as well as the whole lay-out was done from Samten's notes by Burkhard Quessel, Curator of the Tibetan Collections at the British Library. The funds for the edition and publication were given via the Austrian Cooperation bureau in Thimphu by Prof. E. Steinkellner and the Institute for Buddhist and Tibetan Studies of Vienna University.

The catalogue is far from perfect, some codes may still be "mixed up" but it was a beginning and Ashi Kunzang wrote about Samten¹¹ : "It was through his dedication, his vast and profound knowledge in the field and his monk's discipline that "the messed up" collection became a meaningful and ordered legacy, a library with 511 documents."

In 2007 the "mixed up books" which had been languishing for years or even centuries, in O rgyan chos gling caught up with the latest technology. Under the auspices of the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, Karma Phuntsho, our Bhutanese colleague, had the books digitalized and an electronic catalogue will be on line in the future.



¹¹ Choden, *Catalogue*: 2003, 8.