

Revival and Renewal through Reincarnation: The Bodong Tradition, Then and Now

Derek F. Maher

(East Carolina State University)

It is frequently noted that Tibetans are fond of recounting the past, a notable contrast to India which has served as a model for Tibet in so many other ways. Autobiographical, biographical, and historical writings in Tibet come in many overlapping subgenres and are intended to fulfill a range of objectives. While a broad range of these materials mainly employ a rigorous historiographic methodology and provide detailed and highly reliable accounts of the past, there is also a contrary current of literature that appeals to miraculous events, magical acts, and stunning coincidences; sources will sometimes dip into the fantastic as a means of inculcating a sense of inexplicable wonder and inspiring the faithful. The incredible, the unbelievable, the narrative elements that strain objective reality are, ironically, felt to be the very things that are best able to verify the sacrality of religious figures, institutions, and the teachings they carry through time. Accounts of marvelous reincarnations are among the most prevalent and significant features of Tibetan narrative writing, legitimizing religious leaders and the teachings they convey.

While the notion that sentient beings reincarnate in different life forms is found throughout the Buddhist world, Tibetans are best known for developing this concept to include a complex of beliefs relating to the tulku, the reincarnation of a spiritually important person through a series of identifiable lifetimes. This brilliant social innovation has shaped Tibetan culture in diverse ways since it was introduced, as it has come to fulfill numerous cultural purposes, providing for, among other things, institutional continuity, a means of succession among celibate luminaries, a route to legitimacy, a token for various forms of identity, a method for inculcating faith, and a structural counterpoint to the concentration of wealth and power among the nobility. As this collection of papers demonstrates, the dynamism and versatility of the tulku institution has caused it to flourish and endure, and it has become so important to Tibetan

culture that it shows up as the solution to a broad array of problems confronted by Tibetan society. In this paper, I will show how the tulku institution has been deployed to animate a revival movement and to unify a community's collective resources and efforts to maintain their group identity in light of the pressures of occupation and exile.

The territory of the Porong (*spo rong*) kingdom is a high mountain region on the Tibetan Plateau, framed to the north by the Tsangpo River and to the south by the section of the Himalayan Mountains stretching from the Langtang Range to Mount Everest along the Nepali border, with the Pelkhyü Lake (*dpal khud mtsho*) and the border town of Kyirong (*skyid grong*) to the west, and the small city Lhatsé (*lha rtse*) to the east.

The Porong people claim a political identity based on the notion that their ancestral leaders descended from the Dong (*ldong*) clan, one of the six original clans of the ancient period. A fourteenth century scion of the family, Burwa, was an official in the service of Situ Chökyi Rinchen (d. 1402), the ruler of one of the fourteen myriarchies governed from Sakya.¹ Even as the political map was redrawn many times throughout the centuries, with a sequence of rulers assuming power over the area, the Porong people, living on the periphery of the Tibetan-speaking world, managed to maintain their self-perception of retaining a distinct character and identity as a semi-autonomous jurisdiction.²

At the same time, the people of Porong also configure their self-image through their participation in the religious history of Buddhism in Tibet. One of the sons of the lineage of ancient rulers is said to have been among the first seven ordained monks in Tibet in the eighth century. Likewise, the region played host to many of the consequential visitors who visited from beyond the Himalayas, including Padmsambhava in the eighth century and Atiśa (980-1054) in the eleventh century. And Porong figured in the transfer of knowledge from India to Tibet during the establishment of the Kadampa lineages that revived large scale monastic Buddhism.

1. *Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal: The Pride of Porong*

The most significant contribution the Porong region made to the elaboration of Tibetan Buddhism is in the person of its favorite son,

¹ Ramble 2002, 62-63.

² See Shakabpa 2010, chapter 5 and Dreyfus 2006 on the political background to the evolving alliances and patronage relationships during this period.

Bodong Paṅchen Choklé Namgyal (*bo dong paN chen phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1375/6-1451), a fifteenth century spiritual savant and scholarly polymath, famous in western Tibet during his own lifetime and renowned throughout the Tibetan-speaking world subsequently. Among the most prolific authors in world history, Bodong Paṅchen composed treatises on all areas of Tibetan knowledge, focusing especially on tantra. His *Collected Works* is contained in 137 volumes and nearly a thousand distinct texts, and he reportedly kept as many as twenty scribes occupied at once as he simultaneously recited passages on distinct topics to each of them while circumambulating a stūpa. His scholarly production was said to flow like a river.³

Bodong Paṅchen became the twenty-third abbot of Bodong É Monastery, the most notable scholastic monastery in the local region during his time, and the already considerable reputation of Bodong É Monastery increased dramatically under his abbacy.⁴ Eventually, the name of the monastery became synonymous with his intellectual and spiritual legacy. Initially, the influence of the Bodong tradition remained limited to the area around Lhatsé and Shigatsé in Tsang, the intellectual and spiritual center of the tradition, although it began to spread slowly into the Himalayan region to the south and southeast, in Nepal, and eventually to parts of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, in eastern India.

Articulating a strong link with Indic models of Buddhism, Bodong Paṅchen was an expert Sanskritist with strong links to India just as these qualities were on the decline in Tibet. He was deeply knowledgeable about all traditional branches of learning, including medicine, astrology, grammar, poetics, and all fields of Buddhist thought. He specialized, if such can be said of someone with such learning and diverse writings, in tantra. At the same time, he was said to be skilled in sports, as well.⁵

Bodong Paṅchen attracted a large following during his lifetime, including the famous female saint, Chökyi Drönma (*chos kyi sgron ma*, 1422-1455/6) whom he identified as an emanation of the deity Dorjé Phakmo (*Vajravārāhi*) and who is sometimes said to have been the origin of Tibet's first female tulku lineage.⁶ Chökyi Drönma studied with Bodong Paṅchen during the final nine years of his life, and

³ For a partial Table of Contents to his work, see <http://mypage.direct.ca/w/wattj/txt/bodong-1.txt>. See also Rechung 1984 and Chok 2005, 120.

⁴ Rechung 1984.

⁵ Diemberger et al. 1997.

⁶ Van der Kuijp 2005 identifies a previous case in Drowa Zangmo (*'gro ba bzang mo*, thirteenth century).

remained in the circle of his followers thereafter, taking a leadership role in compiling and editing his corpus of writings.⁷

However, after an initial period of flourishing, the active study of his intellectual tradition eventually began to decline and became dormant due to external causes. First of all, the rise of the Bodong tradition found itself in a competition for resources with the already emerging Geluk movement of Bodong's older contemporary, Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa*, 1357-1419), with which Bodong Pañchen was closely associated. Bodong was nineteen years younger than Tsongkhapa, and apparently never met him, but he is listed as a teacher to a few of Tsongkhapa's premier disciples, including the first Dalai Lama Gendundrup (*dge 'dun grub pa*, 1391-1474) and Khedrup Jé Gelek Palsang (*mkhas grub rje dge legs dpal bzang*, 1385-1438). The ideological harmony between the two lineages is also evident in the fact that much of Bodong's *Stages of the Path* text is liberally borrowed from Tsongkhapa's writings on the same theme.⁸

Also, during this time period, political power was drifting to the east. Increasingly, the religio-political story in central and western Tibet was configured in terms of the strengthening power of the Kagyü lineage headed by the Karmapa and his allies within the Rinpung leadership in Tsang as opposed to the Geluk lineage led by the Dalai Lama who were supported by patrons based in Lhasa. Also over the horizon, the influence of Mongol armies on the side of the Gelukpas centralized political and religious rule dramatically. Smaller and more decentralized lineages had little chance to prosper in this environment. For these reasons, serious study of the philosophical foundations of Bodong Pañchen's writings or the lineage he inaugurated withered over time, and patronage flowed to the more prominent players instead of the Bodongpas.

Already by the mid-seventeenth century, as decades of turmoil, war, and strife gave way to a new Geluk hegemony under the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682), a range of rival lineages were suppressed or suffered from a lack of patronage, and many religious institutions were converted to the Geluk curriculum. The Bodong lineage was a casualty of this kind, being largely proscribed due in part to an error prevalent among Geluk scholars—including the fifth Dalai Lama and his regent Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1653-1705)—that wrongly conflated the Bodong lineage with the Jonang lineage, which was much despised by the Gelukpas. This error, based on a confusion between the names of Jonang Choklé Namgyal (1306-

⁷ Diemberger 2007. See also Bessenger 2017.

⁸ Oral communication with Tenzin Tsepag, who is translating the Bodong text.

1386) and Bodong Choklé Namgyal, demonstrates that the Bodong tradition had already become dormant. Gene Smith suggests an ideological reason for the confiscation, noting that there were apparently no people around who could correct the mistaken supposition that Bodongpas advocated the other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*) view so reviled by Gelukpas.⁹ As many as thirteen monasteries in Ü-Tsang following the Bodong curriculum were converted to Geluk monasteries. Charles Ramble posits an alternative theory based in political affiliations:¹⁰

The confiscation was the result of a dispute between an uncle and a nephew in the ruling Burwa clan. It is not clearly stated, but nevertheless implied, that while the uncle was a supporter of the Dalai Lama, the nephew was backing Tsang. The matter was resolved in the following generation. The new Jewön was apparently trusted by Lhasa—his elder brother had taken his vows in Drepung monastery from the Dalai Lama himself—and when he came of age the principality was returned to the Burwa family, together with all its subjects and religious and political institutions. The territorial boundaries of Porong were later reconfirmed in an edict issued in 1703 by the Sixth Dalai Lama.

Part of the intrigue of this period of Tibetan history is that the ideological and the political are deeply entangled.

According to the oral tradition, the Bodong master himself prophesied that his Bodong tradition would decline and be revived five centuries after his death by a future reincarnation from his spiritual lineage.¹¹ In recent decades, it would seem, that revival has commenced through the efforts of a group of people from the Bodong region of Tsang. It is to those events that we now turn.

2. *A Vulnerable Identity*

The border between Tibet and Nepal has always been porous, and a small but steady flow of pilgrims and traders have crossed back and forth through the network of mountain passes and herders' trails. With the arrival of the Chinese at the beginning of the 1950s, Porongwas, among many others along the borderlands, made skillful

⁹ Smith 2001, 180.

¹⁰ Ramble 2002.

¹¹ Oral communication with Dawa Dhargye, the father of the tulku, Tenzin Thutop Jikdrel Rinpoché.

use of their location on the edge between two lands. Both material wealth and religious treasures were moved across the frontier for safe-keeping until it became clear how enduring the Chinese presence would become. Many times in the past, Mongol, Sikh, Gurkha, Ladakhi, or Chinese armies had passed through their territory on the way to conflicts with others, but they had not stayed long in the forbidding landscape. While the Porongwas waited on the edge of their seats, on the edge of their territory, to see what would happen next, they began to establish links to the growing numbers of Tibetans in Nepal, and contingency plans were developed.

In 1959, as word spread that the Dalai Lama had fled for exile in Tibet, tens of thousands of Tibetans gathered up their most sacred objects and slipped across the border into exile. These perilous journeys, well-attested in countless biographies by now, ranged from month-long treks to short hikes over the next hillside. Given their proximity to the border with Nepal and the relative absence of Chinese troops in the region, a comparatively large number of people from the Porong region were able to escape. A mule train was organized to carry texts to safety from the Bodong monastic libraries, including most notably the *Collected Works of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal*; however, some of the mules were captured by Chinese security forces at Kyirong, and the texts from those animals were placed in a temple that was used episodically in the following years as a storehouse and as a barn. Those texts were probably destroyed there in 1974. The surviving texts were deposited at Tibet House in Delhi.¹²

A large number of relics and religious treasures were also brought into exile by the people of Porong in the later 1950s and early 1960s, including a gilded clay image of Bodong Pañchen; declared to be a striking resemblance of the master, he fashioned it himself. A photograph of it figures prominently on the website of the Bodong Research Publication Centre.¹³ While a number of other relics were lost in the confusing and inadequate effort to catalog sacred objects arriving in great numbers in Dharamsala, India—the center of the government-in-exile and the home of the Dalai Lama—this statue of the seated master was preserved in a community of exiled Porongwas that was forming in Nepal. The Porongwas, accustomed to the cool temperatures in Tibet, found the summer heat in Kathmandu to be oppressive, and so they established an annual migration pattern for themselves, spending the coolest months in

¹² Oral communication with Dawa Dhargye.

¹³ Bodong Research Publication Centre,
http://www.buddhistcharity.org/GesheInfo/bodong_org.pdf.

Kathmandu and avoiding the summer heat by ascending to altitude in the Langtang Range on the northern edge of Nepal, just across the border from Porong. Out of devotion to the statue, they carried it with them as they ascended and descended throughout the year, despite its fragility, antiquity, and considerable size.

By the 1970s, the small community of exiled Porongwas in Nepal resolved that they must preserve the statue and revive the Bodong tradition, with the two projects seeming to be thoroughly intertwined. Some of them began to find some measure of financial success through the manufacture of carpets and other crafts, while other Porongwas ended up immigrating to Switzerland in significant numbers, gaining comparative prosperity and success. But despite being distributed through Switzerland, Nepal, and the Porong homeland, the regional identity among the Porongwas remained strong, and they maintained close contact with each other, enabling them to undertake collective action in service of reviving the tradition of Bodong Paṅchen.

In 1984 and 1985, Porongwas living in exile gathered together all of the sacred relics from their region and deposited them in one place, the home of a layman named Tashi Dorjé, just to the north of the Boudhanath Stūpa in Kathmandu. By 1989, they had managed to construct a small monastery to hold the artifacts, to house a few monks, and to serve as the locus of their ongoing efforts to promote the Porong identity and preserve the Bodong tradition. Although there were some monks from the Porong region, none of them was particularly learned in the Bodong tradition. At most, they knew a few prayers that had been written by Bodong Paṅchen. But the intellectual examination of the scholastic monk had truly become dormant.

Among the Porong laity living in exile, there was a great appetite to recover the Bodong tradition. Lay people felt it was necessary to remind the Tibetan world of the great importance of Bodong Paṅchen. But also, they felt driven to revive his memory as an expression of their regional identity. A general consensus emerged among Porongwas that they needed to work collectively to revitalize and renew the tradition.

3. Revival in Exile

During the final decade of the twentieth century, with large numbers of Tibetans in exile in India, Europe, and elsewhere, a series of events unfolded that have indeed permitted a renewal of the Bodong tradition. The pivotal roles were played by two Tibetans born in the

region of Tsang near Bodong É Monastery, one of them a little-known monk by then living in Switzerland and the other a prominent monk living in Dharamsala, India. The Porong monk living in Switzerland, Tsering Damchoe, experienced a series of astounding dreams and visions in the 1990s that puzzled him at first, but eventually convinced him he would participate in reestablishing the Bodong tradition.¹⁴

The imagery in the dreams and visions was richly detailed, including the vision of a man riding a blue horse, blue lights, and other details, but he was uncertain as to how he should interpret these signs. Additionally, in the apparitions, Tsering Damchoe encountered a small boy who insisted that the monk identify his new incarnation. Knowing that it was said that Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal himself would not reincarnate, having achieved enlightenment, Tsering Damchoe thought another Bodong lineage holder might be reborn again. However, for the years these visions endured, Tsering Damchoe could not understand what he was supposed to do in response to the vision child's insistent demands. There was not enough information for him to make any clear determination of how to respond, and out of humility, he also felt unqualified to serve in this capacity; usually great and exalted figures were charged with identifying reincarnations. What was a simple man of his standing supposed to do in this regard? Still the visions persisted, and he dutifully recorded them all.

In 1990, a health crisis resulted in a rush to the hospital for Tsering Damchoe, eventuating in his being declared dead in a Zurich hospital. In his process of dying, he had a vision in which he was slapped sharply across the face and told, "You are always bothering me." In the kind of narrative turn of events that often populates Tibetan stories of this kind, after Tsering Damchoe's corpse was removed to a morgue room in the hospital, his health improved. Some hours later, he was discovered sitting cross-legged on the metal gurney on which his previously dead body has been arranged; the shocked nurse went shrieking from the room to call for help.

After many more visions, finally, in 1996, he received a pivotal final dream in which the demanding boy said, "I am the one you are looking for." In the vision, the child then revealed a vision of his mother and his father. Immediately, Damchoe recognized a couple with whom he was acquainted from the Porong community; he knew

¹⁴ The following account is based on extensive in-person interviews with Geshé Pema Dorjee, the prominent monk in Dharamsala mentioned above; Dawa Dhargye, the father of the incarnation in Kathmandu, Nepal; and the dossier of information submitted to the Dalai Lama as the basis for the identification of the new incarnation, including the visions of Tsering Damchoe.

that they were then living among the Porong people that had gathered around the small monastery in Boudhanath, Nepal. Despite the time difference, he immediately called Kathmandu to speak to Dawa Dhargye, the father in the vision, asking him if he had a son. Upon hearing an affirmative reply from Dawa Dhargye, Tsering Damchoe responded, "He is my lama."

Dawa Dhargye was a successful carpet manufacturer who already had an acute interest in his Porong heritage and the Bodong tradition. He was stunned to think that his own son could be a prominent incarnation of the Bodong lineage, and that he might play a role in the revitalization that had long been a collective wish for the Porong people. As Tsering Damchoe explained his series of visions, Dawa was, however, circumspect about the impact this would have on his family. His son was his only male heir. If he became a monk, the family lineage would be severed.¹⁵

For a week, Dawa did not reveal the phone call he had received from Switzerland, as he reflected on the curious incidents he could recall from the past. His son had folded a cloth normally used for wrapping Tibetan manuscripts into the form of a paṇḍita's teaching hat. Even as a wee boy, he had taken a thread he found in the home, split it into eight strands, and solemnly dispensed it to family members, as a lama might do to transmit blessings.

When Dawa Dhargye finally resolved to tell his family about the news, his wife also exhibited mixed feelings about having their only son become a monk. A nun in the family was immediately overjoyed. A short time later, the family called a meeting of the senior people in the Porong families around Kathmandu so they could discuss the impact of the exciting new possibility. At once, people understood how significant this turn of events could be, but they understood the downside of what it could mean for the family. They remarked, "If you give up your son, great. But if not, what can we do?"

Finally, it was decided that the matter should be referred to the Dalai Lama for his determination. A complete record of Tsering Damchoe's visions was submitted to the Dalai Lama, and within two days, he had performed a divination that convinced him that the child in Nepal was the reincarnation, not of Bodong Paṅchen Choklé Namgyal, but rather of Bodong Paṅchen's most prominent teacher, Paṅchen Sonam Gyeltsen (*paṅ chen bsod nams rgyal mtshan*, b. fourteenth century). The Dalai Lama issued a letter confirming the identification.

¹⁵ He remembered how anxious he had been to have a son, and how he had appealed to a lama, Penpa Geshé, requesting spiritual assistance in gaining a son. As is customary, the lama prescribed a series of religious activities, and in due time, the boy was born.

In a 1996 letter written by Tsering Damchoe to the Porong community, he made the case that the discovery of an incarnation would be a rare and precious opportunity to accelerate the revitalization of the Bodong tradition. He beseeched his fellow Porongwas to accept the incarnation, writing:¹⁶

Today we are in an auspicious situation: at the same time as a Bodong monastery has been built, there is a young incarnation of an exalted Bodong lama, through the blessings of our lamas and dharma protectors. This is glorious and marvelous. If we fail to make use of this opportunity to preserve the Bodong tradition, it would be like letting the precious jewel slip out of our hands. This occurred in the past, and if we are not careful, we could once make the same mistake. Through the blessings of our lamas and Dharma protectors, Bodong Lama Sonam Gyaltzen has come, and this is our great responsibility. The prophecies make me feel one hundred percent confident that if we take good care of this lama, give him the best education, and bring him up in the way he deserves, the tradition of Bodong Choklé Namgyal will flourish again as it did in centuries past. However, if we do not recognize this lama today, it would present difficulties for such lamas to return often in future. In that case, I doubt if the Bodong tradition would thrive.

Both the community and the family embraced the five-year-old child as the real tulku, and when the Dalai Lama confirmed the identification, community members felt the fate of their religious and regional identity had pivoted.

The father of the tulku, Dawa Dhargye, in particular, came to embrace the new reality implied by his son's identification. Already active in the community, he assigned himself the role of becoming the community's memory. He interviewed most of the elders from the community, compiling a thick narrative of Porong history, the oral history of the exile community from Porong, and the textual evidence from the past. Much of what I have learned about these events springs from interviews with Dawa Dhargye and from the two Tibetan-language volumes he has written collecting together the history of the Bodong lineage and especially the Porong community.¹⁷ He has even managed to visit Porong communities within Tibet

¹⁶ Dawa Dhargye provided me a copy of the letter as part of the dossier of information about the case.

¹⁷ Dhargye 2009.

while in disguise to learn more about the region's history and to provide assistance to the people who remain there.

His son, Tenzin Thutop Jikdrel Rinpoché (b. 1992), was enthroned at Porong Pemo Chöding Monastery in Kathmandu in April 10, 1997. He later moved to a newer monastery nearby in 2005, and he now studies at Sera Jé Monastery in Bylakuppe in South India. The pivotal event of the identification of this tulku enlivened the interest of monks and lay people from the Porong area of Tibet, both those in Tibet and those in exile, stimulating the founding of new institutions, the patronage of monasteries and nunneries, the collection of significant Bodong-related artifacts and texts, and the enrollment of scores of young novice monks and nuns from Bodong-connected families.

4. Rebuilding the Bodong Monastery

Much of the rest of what I have learned about these events comes from a series of interviews I conducted with the monk Geshé Pema Dorjee in 2011 and 2012. Back in 1998, when Tsering Damchoe received a visit in Switzerland from Geshé Pema Dorjee, Tsering Damchoe implored him to take on the task of reviving the Bodong tradition. Geshé Pema Dorjee is a Geluk scholar who the Dalai Lama had previously appointed to various prominent administrative posts in the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, including principal of the large campus of the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, director of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD), and founding director of the Sarah campus of IBD. He was initially resistant to the idea of participating in the renewal of the Bodong tradition about which he knew little. His only real qualification, he thought, was that he too was from the Porong region. One could add his widely respected administrative abilities and his institutional experience.

However, Tsering Damchoe was insistent, and so Geshé Pema Dorjee offered to develop a plan through which such a renewal might be realized. When Pema Dorjee presented his proposal to the Dalai Lama, the latter requested that he take on the leadership of the initiative. The Dalai Lama, aside from wishing to see all lineages prosper, took a special interest in the Bodong tradition because the first Dalai Lama had studied it as a direct discipline of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal.

Among Pema Dorjee's first acts was the founding of a special research institute, the Bodong Research and Publication Centre, to edit and publish key Bodong literature. Talented young scholars were hired, including Chok Tenzin Monlam, a student of Geshé Pema

Dorjee, who had studied at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics and received his Ph.D. from the University of Delhi with his dissertation on the *Feast of Marvels*, a biography of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal. Chok Tenzin Monlam went on to serve as the head of research at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and also as research scholar at the Bodong Research and Publication Centre. Geshé Pema Dorjee traveled across the world seeking sponsors for various aspects of the work, a natural talent that had animated his earlier administrative assignments.

A broad range of Bodong-related textual material was gathered for study, and Geshé Pema Dorjee also oversaw the development of a formal monastic curriculum drawn from Bodong Pañchen's writings. The Centre has published a series of key critically edited texts from the Bodong canon, including standard philosophical works, rituals, prayers, songs, etc. Researchers have especially sought out texts that were not originally included in Bodong's *Collected Works*. In an ongoing project, he has sought out living transmission lineages (*lung*) for as many Bodong teachings as possible.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, narratives that are intended to inculcate faith and confidence in a sacred community frequently highlight the incredible. The account of Tsering Damchoe's death in the hospital and his subsequent improvement certainly falls into this category. The participants in the revitalization of the Bodong tradition like to narrate the various coincidences that have marked the process. In another such example, Geshé Pema Dorjee found himself at Tibet House in Delhi doing some research in the archival records relating to Bodong Choklé Namgyal when the librarian mentioned how surprised he was that although few people ever consulted that particular body of literature, there was at that moment another figure in the library who was also researching Bodong Choklé Namgyal. This other person was an Indian from Lumla, Anurachal Pradesh, a remote area twenty miles to the east of Bhutan and 40 miles to the south of the Tibetan border. The area has long been under the influence of Tibetan religion and culture, although the people themselves are not Tibetan. The visitor from Lumla, whose name is unfortunately not known to me, was overseeing a small revitalization effort himself. In his very poor area of India, people became interested in rebuilding their Buddhist heritage. They were also interested in developing educational and medical infrastructure that would help to improve their lives. As part of their effort to improve their community, they decided that they should try to find a way to send some of their children to Buddhist monasteries and nunneries throughout the Himalayan region.

Since in the distant past the region has been religiously affiliated with the Bodong tradition, the delegate from Lumla had gone to Tibet House in Delhi to attempt to learn more about Bodong and what remained of the religious tradition that sprang from him. The librarian at Tibet House was surprised that two people with no other connection were sitting across the library from each other, requesting Bodong sources. When the librarian introduced them, a natural alliance formed. As Geshé Pema Dorjee describes the meeting, "We had a monastery without many monks, and they had potential monks without any monastery."

In the following years, a few dozen boys from the Lumla area were established as novice monks at the Porong Pemo Chöding Monastery in Kathmandu. At the same time, four bright young monks were sent from Kathmandu to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in McLeod Ganj, where they learned debate, gained an overview of the standard Geluk model of Buddhist scholastic education, and began their study of Bodong's writings. After several years, these young men were able to return to Kathmandu to take on responsibilities for teaching the youth from Lumla. One of them, a young man named Trinlé, with a sparkling intelligence and an appetite for European philosophy, now manages the monastery.

Even as he raised money for the research institute in India and the monastery in Kathmandu, Geshé Pema Dorjee raised large sums of money and ongoing support from donors in Europe, Israel, and the United States to build both a nunnery and a small clinic in the Lumla region of Anurachal Pradesh, fortifying the religious connection between the Porong people, the Bodong tradition, and the Indians in that remote area. A symbiotic relationship seems to have emerged. The poor people of Lumla are benefitting by an influx of resources, medical attention, educational opportunities for their children, and a renewed religious identity. The Porong community, intent on revitalizing the religious tradition of their most significant regional figure, Bodong Choklé Namgyal, benefit by having a population of monks and nuns to continue the tradition, populate their institutions, and serve the new tulku.

When spending time with Geshé Pema Dorjee, his mobile phone rings frequently, and his contacts are sprinkled around the world. Patrons in Sweden visit India and Nepal often and support his various endeavors, sponsoring young monks and nuns from Lumla and visiting the health clinic in Anurachal Pradesh to check on progress. Partners in Israel and the United States call to visit and to hear updates on some project of common interest. He relishes putting people with common interests in contact with one another and arranging for meetings. And all of those interested in the interrelated

projects that occupy him can follow the details on his Facebook page, the Facebook page devoted to Porong Monastery in Kathmandu, or a Blogspot archive maintained since 2008 by Geshéla's supporters in Sweden.

While the revival of the Bodong tradition that has taken place thus far would not have been possible without Geshé Pema Dorjee's energy, enthusiasm, and organizational talents, it would appear that his own involvement would not have been triggered were it not for the events that eventuated in the identification of a new tulku capable of linking the contemporary crisis of exile and the quest for renewal with those ancient and now dormant roots of Porong self-image. Among the many functions the tulku institution has served through time, the revival of a community's identity is among them.

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