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Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, and the Sacred Geography of Bhutan

Dasho Karma Ura

Guru Pema Jungney was a Mahaguru, the great mantra-ist (*sngagspa chenpo*) but also a great traveller, making an old saying ring true: by forsaking one's birthplace, one becomes a yogi by circuiting foreign lands. Guru's terma hagiography in pulsating poetry by Ugyen Lingpa¹ or Sherab Odzer traces his journeys in places that perhaps include current regions of Kashmir, Pakistan, Xinjiang, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet and India. The hagiography mentions Guru's journey further afield into China and Lanka and Cannibal Lands, though we have to be open to the thought that this may be a mix of physical or metaphysical journeys. Even in this age of global tourism we are struck by cosmic awe at the journeys of Guru criss-crossing linguistic, racial, cultural and political boundaries. Kapstein (2000) notes that Buddhism was 'the most prominent cultural system' (p. 59) present in India, Tibet, Nepal, China, Central Asia (that included "Khotan, the Tarim Basin, Lop Nor, and other places with Iranian and Turkic populations") and Monyul as Bhutan was known in those days. So perhaps there was a big cultural space through which he treaded. If so, Guru was thus operating at the height of Buddhism, which he

¹ Terchen Ugyan Lingpa. 1326. *Ugyan Guru pad ma 'byung gnas kyi skyes rabs rnam par thar pa rgyas par bkod pa pad bka' i thang yig*. This biography has been translated first into French by Gustave-Charles Toussaint as *Le Dict de Padma* in 1912. It was translated from French into English as Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays. 1978. *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*. Dharma Publishing.

served to elevate as the second Buddha. In theory, all of these places where Guru's actions were distributed should be hallowed because Guru was there.

Because Guru was in so many places, different segments of his life were observed by different societies. There are seven biographies I am aware: by Nyangrel Nyima Yoeser (1124-1192),² by Guru Choewang (1212-1270),³ by Jonang Taranatha's (1575-1634), by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-1892), by Pemalingpa (1450-1526).⁴ Both Taranatha's and Jamgon's versions of the Guru's life have been translated into English by Ngawang Zangpo in his book titled *Guru Rinpoche: His Life and Times*.⁵ The most dominating one in popularity is Ugyen Lingpa's (Sherab Ozer) *Padma bka' i thang yig* revealed as *ter* in 1326. Quite unexpectedly, it was translated as *Le Dict de Padma* in 1912 into French, and retranslated from French into English in 1978. It took 15 years to translate into French because it was difficult and long. Both Nyangrel and Guru Chowing took *ter* from Bumthang. Guru Chowing also left a genealogical line in Lugchu in Khoma. Guru Chowing was reincarnated as Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay in Bhutan according to the later's biography.⁶ Guru Chowing's entombment chorten near Lhodrag was built by the late Ashi Phuntsho Choden, Queen of the Second King.

Guru's life in Bhutan was illuminated additionally by three pertinent terma literature. First one is 'the Hagiography of Sindharaza and Clear Mirror of Prediction' by terton Ugyen. The second one is the surviving fragments of biography of Terton Sherab Member.⁷ Sherab Member's biography show how

² *mnga bdag myang nyi ma 'od zer gyis rnam thar gsal wai me long bzhugs so//*
See also Ngyang Ral's *phur pa yang gsang bl med kyi sgrub ldang lha khra mo brag gi gter ma*.

³ *Guru rnam thar mzad pa bcu gcig bya wa/ sprul pai sku thams cad las khyad par lngas 'phags pa/ mthu dang rzu thrul du mas 'dro wai don mzad pa/ U rgyan slo dpon pad ma 'byung gnas kyi rnam par thar pa/ mzad pa bcu cig cas bya wa/ bzhugs pai dbu phyogs legs so/*

⁴ *Peling 'ka 'bum. U rgyan pad ma 'byung gnas kyi 'khrung rabs sang bstan pai chos 'byung mun sal rgon me stod cha bzhugs//*

⁵ Ngawang Zangpo. 2000. *Guru Rinpoche His Life and Times*. Snow Lion. Ngawang's book contains a full translation of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's work in this regard as it was reprinted in Jamgon Kongtrul's *Catalogue of Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings*.

⁶ *Mtshung med chos kyi rgyal po rje rinpoche'i rnam par thar pa bskal bzang legs bris 'dod pair s skong dpag bsam gyi snyema zhas by aba bzhugs so*

⁷ *gter ston shes rab me 'bar gyi rnam thar le'u gsum cu so gcig pa bzhugs so he he//* (n.d).

Guru and Trelchung Dorji, who was Sherab member in his previous life hid The Garland of Views: As Esoteric Precept (*Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*), on which Guru gave teachings at Drakmar in Tibet. The third source is the biography and works of Ratna Lingpa (1403-1478). There is also oral tradition of Monpas of Tongsa, which shows the geographic route details of Guru during his first entry into Bhutan. However, for my presentation here, the biography of Yeshey Tshogyal by Gyalwa Jangchub and Namkhai Nyingpo⁸ is the basic reference. Yeshe Tsogyal's visits to Bhutan were propelled by Guru's instruction.

What was the purpose of Guru's ceaseless and incredible journeys? The purposes can be reinterpreted as peace maker, of internal and external peace, as a wider healer-practitioner of longevity and health, and of reveler and trainer towards of absolute truth in Dzogchen tradition which Khenchen Namdrol defines as the basis for all appearance of samsara and nirvana to arise, as opposed to definition of absolute truth in Madhyamaka understanding as freedom from all conceptual elaborations (Roy, 2010, p. 128). I will not dwell on the very heavy last point: that of the absolute truth in Dzogchen.

But as Geshey Ngawang Samten (2016) has said, the purpose of Guru's journeys can be summed up in three Ts: translation, transmission and transformation (p. 52). Let me give an example of each starting with translation. In Ugyen Lingpa's hagiography, Chapter 87 is a catalogue of sutras and commentaries Guru translated while Chapter 88 gives a catalogue of translations of secret mantra or Vajrayāna texts (Douglas & Bays, pp. 430-437). It lists about 250 texts of sutra and tantras translated in Samye by Guru, with help of 108 Tibetan translators and 21 Indian panditas. Tibetans were sent off for language training in Kashmir. Therefore, Samye became the main hub of translation, and a great of library and archive for transmission of knowledge.

Then, let me give an example of transmission and empowerment. The word Vajrayāna is said to appear in tantric texts only in the late 7th century. Soon after that, by mid 8th century, Vajrayāna came to Bhutan. Sometimes in the middle of the 8th century, The 'Roundtable Peace Conference' between the two warring parties (*thang chenpo gcig la 'thugs nas/ dbyen zlum zhing 'cham par bya ste*) was concluded by Guru at Nabji with the erection of the Immortal Stone Pillar of Peace (*'chi med zhi wai rdoring btsugs*) on which Guru, Sindharaja and Nauche swore on reconciliation and peace.⁹ For the first time in

⁸ *Rgyal ba Byang chub dang nam mkha'i snying po. Mkha 'gro ye shas mtsho rgyal gyi rnam thar*. Reprinted in 2005 by KMT: Thimphu

⁹ Terton Ugyen. *rgyal po sindha ra dza'i rnam thar dang lung bstan gsal ba'i me long*. In the introduction, Denma Tshemang remarks that the text of gsal wai me long (clear mirror of prediction, will be retrieved from the rock Dorji Tsegpa (resembling a pile of vajra) by his incarnation named Urgan.

Bhutan in a place called Nabji, Guru Rinpoche delivered the teachings and empowerment of Druba Kagyed or the Eight Great Herukas (*sgrub pa bka brgyad*, which is the main teaching of Guru, to the two kings and their entourages, making them get the fruits of enlightenment on the spot.¹⁰ This is by way of pointing out how far Vajrayāna goes back in Bhutan, also to point out that this stone pillar exists still intact. But the main point is that there was a direct transmission.

Another kind of transmission and empowerment involved could have been Guru as healer and source of longevity in relation to the wider, not only organ level illness of Sindharaja. As in Chimi sogthig ritual (Cantwell & Mayer, 2008), his recovery included examination of (1) the decline of life force and breath, (2) the loss of body and mood, (3) the interruption in the subtle neurological, respiratory and libido processes (*rtsa-rlung-thigle*) (Dudjom 1999: pp. 110-122). Accordingly, a comprehensive method of recovering longevity encompasses five elements (Samuel, 2008b): (1) ritual seeking *jinlab* (*byin rlaps*) from the assembly of Amitayus Buddhas and protector deities: (2) burnt offerings to the fire gods of wisdom (*yeshey kyi me lha*); (3) casting away of effigies of scapegoat as substitutes for meat, blood and life force to repurchase *bla* and life force (*sha rin khrag tsab srog gi glud*, see Dudjom 1999: 354); (4) consumption of herbal pharma products and other essences such as that of minerals (Dudjom 1999: 449-450); (5) the ultra secret practice of union following *sbyor dnyos rje gsum* (Dudjom 1999: 492-506); (6) longevity blessing (*tse dbang*), and (7) psycho-physical yogic exercise to work on subtle parts of neurological, respiratory and libido systems; and, more importantly, (8) visualisation and meditation that activates perceptual mechanism in a different way and reorients consciousness. In the case of longevity blessings with longevity nectar (*'chimed rdud tsi*), longevity arrow-silk (*tse dhar*) and longevity pill (*tse ril*), the recipient visualizes Amitayus blessing the recipient with healing power and energy through the performing lama.

In terms of teachings and transmission for his disciples including 21 *rje 'bang*, 32 *mchen bu*, and seven *rigs ldan ma*, they were aligned with the distinct capacities of each person suggesting almost tailor made life programme for his numerous disciples. The sadhanas Guru prescribed for different individuals ranged from *sdrub chen bka' brgyad*, *ma mshin phur pa*, *dgongs 'dus*, *zhi khro*, *snying thig*, *man ngag*, *thugs bsgrub*, etc. For Tshogyal, Guru specifically instructed her to practice mandala of guru and *rtsa-rlung-thigle* at places where there are Guru's body prints, especially at Onphu Taktshang, Kham Takstshang and Paro Takstshang, and Tildro (KMT 2005: 82).

Then, I want to point out also transmission and teachings in the forms of terma texts hidden and later found in Bhutan. Yeshey Tshogyal is the author of

¹⁰ 'O rgyan bdag gi snying gi thigs pa rzogs pa chenpo gsal wai melong/

many texts, as colophons of texts confirm, containing the teachings of Guru which were concealed in many parts of Tibet and Bhutan during her multiple trips to Bhutan. Thangtong Gyalpo retrieved 10 scrolls of yellow paper and Dorji Lingpa (1346-1405 according to Kongtrul 2003; 439) retrieved Serthurma from Paro Taktshang. The late Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigrel Yeshey Dorji (1904-1987), the emanation of the disciple of Guru, Nanam Dorji Dudjom, retrieved terma of Phurpa Pudri Regphung (Samuel 2008); many extraordinary individuals have been thrown into visionary states when they were at Taktshang). Chogyam Trungpa (1940-1987) and Dilgo Khyentse (1910-1991), both composed at Taktshang in visionary states as had many Bhutanese masters.

As far as literary evidence is concerned, Tertön Sherab Member seems to have been an early visitor to Singye dzong. Ratna Lingpa, a great tertön, of the 15th century (Gyatsho, 1981, p. 84), also visited Singye Dzong. He retrieved a text titled '*glong gsal snying tig*' from Singye Dzong-Rolmoteng valleys, Longsel Korsum from a cave called Zangphug behind Singye Dzong and a scroll from a stone box from a rocky place above Singye dzong. More recently, in 1904, Tertön Zilnon Namkha Dorji (1874-1904) (Samuel G, 2008) Chimi Sogthig ('*chi med srog thig*) from the cave of Yeshey Tshogyal in Singye Dzong.

Yeshe Tsogyal

Yeshe Tsogyal, was an unhumanly beautiful, often attracting unwanted attentions, and who transcended ordinary dualistic existence, left behind a candid biography with a degree of realism that we often do not have in modern literature. Her rich literary biography unfolds with a drama played at different levels. It is a multi-dimensional account of court intrigues, subtle cultural clash, doctrinal conflicts, philosophical and pure visions, commitment to the bonds of inner tantra at physical and moral levels, physical and psychological sufferings, achievement of abnormal, but certainly possible, bodily abilities. But it dwells mainly on teachings, though this is not the focus here.

Along with her companions she left for the secret caves at Tildro in Tibet, Singye Dzong and Paro Taktshang, in that order. Yeshe Tsogyal and Archarya Saleh took retreat in a secret cave in Lhodrag for seven months soon after they came from Nepal and discovered the four blisses. Saleh and Penlgye Singye were identified by Guru as liberating ritual partners (*thabs kyi grogs dpa'o*), for Yeshe Tsogyal. Just before she passed away much Yeshey Tshogyal emphasized strongly to Kalasiddhi that if bliss is not combined with voidness through mutual support between male and female, the Secret Mantrayāna is rather meaningless (KMT 2005: 222).

At Tildro, Tsogyal and Acharya Saleh practiced rigorously leading them to various meditative successes and visionary experiences. Her reports to Guru after these metaphysical experiences brought additional instructions for her to overcome the eight super adversities (*bka' chen brgyad*). Thus, this brings me

to refer to Bhutan as a place for transformation, the last of the three Ts, but with reference to Yeshe Tsogyal.

In a moving poem, Guru explained the eight super adversities to Tsogyal at Tildro (KMT 2005: 88-90). Let me briefly outline what the eight adversities. The first one is the adversity of food (*zas kyi dka' ba*) by living sheerly on wind, and on essence of herbs and rocks-essence. The second one is the adversity of cloth (*gos kyi dka' ba*) by generating body heat through *gtum mo* exercise, while being clad first in a thin cotton, then being unornamented except only for human bones, and finally being naked. The third one is the adversity of speech (*ngag gi dka' ba*) by maintaining a vow of silence except for mantra recitations. The fourth one is the adversity of body (*lus kyi dka' ba*) by sitting in lotus position in meditative absorption and by performing prostrations and circumambulations. The fifth one is the adversity of mind (*yid kyi dka' ba*) by training on inseparability of meditative concentration (*zung 'jug ting 'zin*), through generations and completion stages, with training on essence-drops of bliss and emptiness (*bde stongs thig le sbyang*). Just before she passes away, Yeshe Tsogyal herself emphasizes the strong point to Kalasiddhi that if bliss is not combined with voidness through mutual support between male and female, the Secret Mantrayāna is rather meaningless (KMT 2005: 222). The sixth one is the adversity of promoting doctrine (*bstan pa'i dka' ba*) by explanation, debate and writing about Buddhism. The seventh one is the adversity of altruism (*gzhan phan dka' ba*) by wishing well for others in the Mahayāna way and by giving away, if necessary, life and body. The eighth one is the adversity of compassion (*rnying rje' dka' ba*) by loving others more than oneself, and by equating one's enemies with one's children, and by equating gold with anything bulky (*dgra dang bu mnyam gser dang bong wa mnyam*). In an unequivocal tone, Guru told her that Tsogyal would be indistinguishable from a nihilist (*mu stegs rgyang 'phan*) if she didn't practice and assail these adversities.

Archarya Saleh the Indian and Tibetan girl Dewamo accompanied Yeshe Tsogyal came to Singye dzong. Monbu Saleh, another male companion was also present at Paro Taktshang with Yeshe Tsogyal later. Singye Dzong has been regarded since the time of Guru as the special place for practice of Vajarakila sadhana desirable for promoting and succeeding in any intended 'activity' (*'phrinlas*).

Tsogyal visited Singye Dzong and Paro Taktshang to act on, and overcome some of these adversities, after a few years of practice in Tildro, at the instruction of Guru. She received a kind of transfer order for further spiritual maturation. Having promised Guru to practice all adversities, Yeshe Tsogyal took them up one by one.

Guru chose Singye Dzong and Rolmoteng (Phugmochey) valleys because of their efficacious attributes for spiritual progress. The price of practice was nearly too high. Yeshe Tsogyal admittedly came close to death three times in

Tildro (KMT 2005: 91, 93, 114). It happened once in peak of snow clad Tildro during a year of practicing heat generation with only one cotton robe. She nearly died for the second time during the one year practice of emaciated living on water and essence of rocks. The third risky incidence took place during another year of living on wind while naked with bone ornaments on. Her fourth nearly death experience occurred in Paro Taktshang while she was training on the inseparability of bliss and emptiness (*bde stongs zung 'jug thig le' dka' wa*) while living on essence of herbs. We can make out the toughness of the regime from the fact that her fellow practitioners, Acharya Saleh, Acharya Pelyang and Mon boy Saleh, became mentally disturbed and physically ill at Paro Taktshang before they succeeded. They nearly perished from such physical illnesses of various kinds and mental disturbances. Her seven-month long practice resulted in witnessing in revelation or pure vision the divinities of Amitayus (*Tshe dpa' med*), and the promise (*lung stan*) of long life. Yeshe Tsogyal and her group of six, reached Onphu Taktshang in Tibet, after she left Paro Taktshang, to meet Guru. She described her experiences at Paro Taktshang to Guru, which pleased him. Guru told Yeshe Tsogyal that the signs of her experiences at Paro Taktshang suggested that the time was opportune for her to practice Vajrakila and Amitayus sadhanas.

There is far less information about what she did in other places in Bhutan besides Taktsang and Singye dzong and Khenpajong. But there are many other sites, which we know from oral traditions, like Minjay Churtsal Lhakhang, and Aja linked to the life of Yeshey Tshogyal while she was in Bhutan.

In the later half of her life, aged around 80, after Guru left Tibet possibly in the reign of Mutri Tsenpo, she travelled to the 108 main meditation places and countless subsidiary places of Guru. A large number of these places are listed by their names along with the duration of her stay and the number of ter she deposited in each of these places (see for details KMT 2005; 196-201). Scanning her biography, I could count 631 ters deposited by Tsogyal in 35 major places, most of them in Tibet. I could identify some places in Bhutan. One of the places in Bhutan she visited was Khenpalung where she lived for one and half year and deposited 10 ter (*gter kha bcu krag gcig sbas so*). She lived for more than a year in a placed called Mon Budumlung and an unspecified period again in Nering Singye dzong. These visits were additional to her previous stays in Bhutan for an unspecified period in Sengyi Dzong and seven months in Paro Taktshang, when she was younger and Guru was still in Tibet. Thus, it is clear that Tshogyal herself was in Bhutan at least three times at different points in her long life.

Tashi Chidren

Yeshe Tsogyal's biography mentions that during the seven days of practice of Kila Sadhana by the *Guru-Yab-Yum gsum*, Yeshe Tsogyal was the main consort (*rtsa ba'i gzungs ma*) and Tashi Chidren was the consort at the conclusion of the practice (*sgrol ba'i gzungs ma bkra shis chos sdron gyis mzad nas*) (KMT

2005; 122). Tashi Chidren became part of the sadhana of Unity of Emptiness and Bliss (*bde stong zung 'jug thig le*) practiced in ONphu Taktsang. King Hamray (*Ham Ras*) was the father of Khidren (spelt in the text sometimes as *khi 'dren* and at other times as *khyi 'dren*) later renamed by Jomo (lady) Yeshey Tshogyal as Tashi Chidron (*Trashī sPyi sdron*).

We know about Guru's activities in Bhutan more clearly from Tsogyal. It was the first time in Himalayas when women were intellectuals and spiritual liberator at the same time. Guru told her that provided there is higher motivation, women can exceed men in spiritual progress (*sems bskyed ldan na mo lus lhag* (KMT 2005:114)). As his principle adherent, Yeshe Tsogyal was the first widely known liberated Himalayan woman to prove it. Tsogyal passed away in rainbow body form at Pama Gang, leaving behind mortal remains of ears, teeth, nails, head-hairs and body-hairs. Five days before that, she spoke to us all, through Monmo Tashi Chidren, a Bhutanese and daughter of Mon King Hamray, whom Tshogyal met first at Singye Dzong:

Ma nga yi rjes su 'jug pa kun.
Ma nga yi rnam thar brtul shugs bsten.
De yi don brnyes 'bras bu 'drub.

Those who follow me, I, mother:
Study mine, mother's, liberated behaviour
That person will find meaning and fruit.

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mnga bdag myang nyi ma 'od zer gyis rnam thar gsal wai me long bzhugs so//
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Mtshung med chos kyi rgyal po rje rinpoche'I rnam par thar pa bskal bzang legs bris 'dod pair s skong dpag bsam gyi snyema zhas by aba bzhugs so

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Peling 'ka 'bum. U rgyan pad ma 'byung gnas kyi 'khrung rabs sang bstan pai chos 'byung mun sal rgon me stod cha bzhugs//

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gter ston shes rab me 'bar gyi rnam thar le'u gsum cu so gcig pa bzhugs so he he//. (n.d).

Guru' rnam thar mzad pa bcu gcig bya wa/ sprul pai sku thams cad las khyad par lngas 'phags pa/ mthu dang rzu thrul du mas 'dro wai don mzad pa/ U

*rgyan slo dpon pad ma 'byung gnas kyi rnam par thar pa/ mzad pa bcu
cig cas bya wa/ bzhugs pai dbu phyogs legs so/*

Terton Ugyen. *rgyal po sindha ra dza'i rnam thar dang lung bstan gsal ba'i me
long.*

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