

Guru Rinpoche and Buddhism in Tibet

*Geshe Ngawang Samten**

I venerate the Buddha Shakyamuni and the Guru Padmasambhava. Today is a very auspicious day, and it is especially fortunate for me and for all of us to be here, on this very special occasion, to celebrate the birthday of Guru Padmasambhava and speak about him. It is a meritorious deed, as we say, to talk about the Gurus, the Buddhas, and the Bodhisattvas and remember their qualities and deeds as they inspire us to follow their path to enlightenment. On this occasion, I would like to pay my respect to His Majesty the King of Bhutan and also I would like to join the people of Bhutan in rejoicing at the birth of the Prince, which is being celebrated throughout the country - and wish him a long and successful life.

Padmasambhava, known as Guru Rinpoche, is a very important and highly revered figure in Tibetan tradition. We have been talking for the last two days about the life and deeds of Guru Padmasambhava: why he came to Tibet and the deeds he performed there that made a deep impact on the tradition of Buddhism in Tibet. I won't go into detail. However, to contextualize the matter it is necessary to give a brief historical account.

One of the three greatest Emperors of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, invited to Tibet Acharya Shantarakshita, a great saint and scholar from Nalanda Monastic University of India. Nalanda was the top-most academic and spiritual institution of ancient India, a single campus at which all different kinds of disciplines were studied, and a forerunner of the modern concept of the university. Later, Takshishila, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri mahaviharas, the other great Indian seats of learning, were founded on the same model. When the Tibetan

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Emperor Trisong Detsen invited Shantarakshita to teach and disseminate Buddhism in Tibet, and the great master began to teach dharma and do other spiritual deeds, such as building temples, the annals of history tell us that obstacles raised by human and non-human spirits prevented the dharma from flourishing. Therefore, the master Shantarakshita advised the Emperor Trisong Detsen to invite Guru Padmasambhava from India. He was invited, accordingly, and after his arrival, he used his spiritual power and miracles to subdue all the human and non-human forces that were antagonistic to Buddha's teachings and the dharma. Although the foundation of Buddha dharma already had been laid down by the earlier Emperors, commencing from the Emperor Songtsan Gampo, it is the "Khen-lop-Choe-sum" who were responsible for bringing Buddhism into full swing, for truly establishing it, in Tibet: *Khenpo* Shantarakshita, *Lopon* Guru Padmasambhava, and *Choeki Gyalpo* Emperor Trisong Detsen. They always are remembered with great reverence. We can now understand why these three figures are so important. In today's context we are talking about Guru Padmasambhava, who in association with Acharya Shantarashita, and the Emperor established a strong foundation of Buddhism in Tibet through founding the monastic system and establishing translation centres, on the basis of which Buddhism could flourish widely and deeply in Tibet.

In the process of the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet, the three components--translation, transmission, and transformation - are highly important; without them Buddhism could never have succeeded in Tibet as it did, reaching such heights and depths of both intellectual achievement and spiritual realization. It was a great idea to translate the huge corpus of Buddhist literature. Without translation of the original treatises into the indigenous language it would be impossible for Tibetans to have access to the riches of Buddhist literature. Therefore, the first and foremost task undertaken was the translation of the Buddha's teaching and the works of the Indian masters into the Tibetan language from Indian languages, primarily Sanskrit. This made the entire enterprise of receiving the Buddha dharma

in Tibet very different from that found in many other nations. Having such a large number of Buddhist texts accessible to them in their own mother tongue, Tibetans produced a huge corpus of literature in all of the disciplines, making significant contributions to the development of those disciplines. In the process of translation, the great Indian masters were invited and the great Tibetan Lotsawas worked with them with the support of the Emperor and the government of Tibet. In the course of four and a half centuries, they translated more than five thousand texts, which included more than one thousand five hundred of the Buddha's teachings and more than three thousand five hundred treatises of the Indian masters. These works include five major fields of studies, the *panca mahavidyas*: spirituality and philosophy, logic and epistemology, medicine, arts, and linguistics; and the five minor fields of studies, the *panca laguvidyas*: poetry, grammar, dramaturgy, lexicography, and prosody. These fields of study include all the knowledge, the *vidya*, prevalent in India that time. In those great monastic universities, not only Buddhist philosophical systems but non-Buddhist philosophical systems, too, were studied. These great monasteries played a vital role in developing Indian knowledge systems to a great height through high-level and intensive interaction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian philosophical schools.

So far as the Tibetan translation project is concerned, it is unparalleled in the human history both in terms of quality and quantity. Several measures were undertaken to maintain the quality of the translation, by virtue of which the standard of the translation became so high that it cannot be matched even today, with all our facilities and advancements. Such a standard was possible to maintain because the project was meticulously planned, taking great care to maintain in the translation both the literal meaning and the thematic meaning of the original texts. Unlike in other translations, in the translations in the Kangyur and Tangyur, the great Lotsawas and Indian masters have retained the literal meaning with the great precision, which is crucial for understanding the essence of the texts. The thematic meaning of the original text is also retained, in such

a manner that the entire meaning, down to the fine details, is found in the Tibetan translation. Thus, many scholars are of the view that the texts in the Tibetan translation are a reliable “shadow” of the original Sanskrit works.

Mere translation alone was not sufficient for bringing Buddhism to Tibet. Therefore, great efforts were made to assure proper transmission. Every text has three levels: literal content, thematic content, and spiritual content. All of them, with their intricacies and complex systematic context, were transmitted from Indian masters to Tibetan masters - through whose practice they became part of individual life and national culture. Thus, it can aptly be said that the entire intellectual, spiritual, and cultural tradition of Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri and Takshila was transplanted to Tibet with the utmost authenticity.

Guru Rinpoche, being an enlightened being, transmitted his realization to a great many prominent disciples, such as *Jebang Nyernga* (the twenty-five disciples) and many others. Guru Rinpoche transmitted spiritual realization to his disciples as he travelled across the three provinces of Tibet: Utsang, Dotoe and Domey. He also travelled to Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal where many people were blessed. This very course of transmission is a matter of great importance in the transformative spiritual system of Buddhism. In a similar manner, Acharya Shantarakshita transmitted the Nalanda traditions of scholarship and spirituality to many of his Tibetan disciples. Thus, together, these great masters established strong foundations for Buddhism in Tibet.

Basically, Tibet is a Mahayana country where the traditions of both Sutra (Prajnaparamita teachings of the Buddha) and Tantra (Buddha’s teaching belonging to the four tantra schools) are extensively practiced; and sutras (teachings of the Buddha) and shastras (treatises written by masters and scholars) are extensively studied. In this tradition, one dedicates from twenty to twenty-five years to complete one’s formal education and obtain the highest degree.

In the Tibetan tradition of Mahayana, which is the legacy of Nalanda, there are two traditions: the Sutrayana and Vajrayana. Those who lack a proper understanding of these profound, sophisticated and complex traditions, think that Hinayana, the lesser vehicle, Mahayana, the great vehicle, which also includes Vajrayana, are absolutely different systems, and are not related to each other. However, the reality is that in the traditional practice of Buddhism in Tibet, we begin our practice from the small-scope person, who is focused on a good rebirth, and then enter into the practice of middle-scope person, where one aspires to attaining liberation for oneself. Thereafter, the practitioner enters into the practice of great-scope person, the Mahayana, in which one aspires to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Thereafter, persons who are capable and equipped with the pre-requisites - including a high level of understanding of the philosophy of emptiness and practice of Bodhicitta - enter into the practice of Vajrayana, the “fast track” to enlightenment, which is a sophisticated and complex system of practice that develops the subtle mind within a subtle physiological system. Those who do not understand this gradual stages of Buddhist practice and the relation among them tend to think and make statements as if they are not only unrelated but antagonistic to each other. In the Tibetan tradition of Buddhist practice, we undertake all these stages of practice in a single meditation session - not to mention in the course of a lifetime - moving through the gradual stages and culminating in the Vajrayana practice of the Mahayana. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Mahayana sutras and treatises belonging to the realization paths, meditation and mind training, on the one hand, and the tenets of the four philosophical schools, on the other, are extensively studied. There also is a strong tradition of scholarship on epistemology and logic, which came down from the fathers of the Buddhist logic, Dignaga and Dharmakirti. Such extensive and profound study of philosophy, logic and epistemology is a unique feature of Tibetan Buddhism.

While Guru Padmasambhava visited various parts of Tibet, he visited Bhutan, too. After Guru Rinpoche, Kunkhyen Longchen

Rabjampa - the reincarnations of one of the 25 major disciples of Guru Rinpoche in eighth century - visited Bhutan and established monasteries and temples. Kunkhyen Longchen Rabjampa revealed many of the concealed texts known as Termas. Terma is not merely getting a text from earth or rock. If this was the case, a text found in an archaeological excavation could also be a terma. It is not that simple. Terma is revealed by a realized person who understands the literal content, thematic content, and most importantly, the spiritual content of the text. As he has the necessary realization, he can understand the text properly and can transmit to others. Later, four hundred years ago, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal came to Bhutan from central Tibet; he not only gave dharma discourses but also built infrastructure, like castles, systemic structures, in the form of structures for administration and governance. He also framed laws, a social order and even dress codes, which can be seen as preserved in Bhutanese culture even today.

Ever since Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's time, Tibetan masters and scholars have been visiting this peaceful nation of Bhutan, and today, hundreds of Bhutanese students are studying in various monasteries of the four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism in India, actively pursuing scholarship and spiritual practice. Hence, the relation between Tibet and Bhutan is deeply rooted in a common culture and spirituality.