

Who is the Tigress in the Lair? A Preliminary Enquiry About Khandro Yeshe Tshogyel's Visit to Taktsang

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Introduction

The holy site of Taktsang in Paro, Bhutan, is renowned for its association with Guru Rinpoche, his consort Khandro Yeshe Tshogyel and disciple Langchen Pelgi Sengye. Although a monastery was built at this site in 1692 by Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye, the fourth civil ruler of Bhutan, the site was visited and blessed by Guru Rinpoche as far back as the 8th century. Its sacredness has been reinforced by the visits and spiritual undertakings of great Buddhist luminaries over the centuries.

Pilgrims and tourists visiting Taktsang are generally told two things associated with Yeshe Tshogyel, who was a Tibetan princess and an emanation of Lhamo Yangchenma (Sarasvati). One, when Guru Rinpoche transformed into Dorje Drolo (one of his eight manifestations) and flew to Taktsang riding on the back of a tigress, Yeshe Tshogyel had transformed into that tigress. Two, Yeshe Tshogyel did the Vajrakilaya practice at the cave of Sengephu in Taktshang.

Sources, both oral and literary – including tourist-oriented materials – provide different versions of the narrative of Yeshe Tshogyel, the tigress and Vajrakilaya practice. Trulku Thondup, for example, mentions that Guru Rinpoche practiced Vajrakilaya with Yeshe Tshogyel at Paro Taktshang and that

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she transformed herself into a tigress and became his mount when he manifested as Dorje Drolo (Thondup, 1996, p. 96). This suggests that Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tshogyel were already at Paro Taktshang and it was only during the practice and accomplishment of Vajrakilaya that the transformation took place. But this contrasts with narratives found in tourist books and oral folklore which suggest that Guru Rinpoche had already transformed into Dorje Drolo when he rode on the back of a tigress and flew to Taktshang (Brown, 2007, p. 128). Another source suggests that Guru Rinpoche flew from Senge Dzong in Lhuntse to Taktsang in the form of Dorje Drolo riding on a tigress although it does not mention Yeshe Tshogyel as the tigress (Bhutan Times, 2008, p. 178). In yet another source, it is mentioned that Yeshe Tshogyel transformed herself into a tigress while meditating at Taktshang ‘to protect herself from harmful humans and wild animals’ (National Library, 2005, p. 2). It also mentions that the tigress on which Dorje Drolo is mounted is the form assumed by Yeshe Tshogyel. The common theme that binds different versions of these narratives is usually the association of Yeshe Tshogyel with the tigress. As such, this is also the point of enquiry of this article. Is Yeshe Tshogyel the tigress in the lair or Taktshang?

A few however, speak of it being the manifestation of Monmo Tashi Kheudren also known as Bumden Tshomo instead of Yeshe Tshogyel. She was the daughter of Sendha Gyalp of Bumthang who invited Guru Rinpoche to Bhutan in the 8th century. Guru Rinpoche took Tashi Kheudren as his spiritual consort for the tantric practice at Kurjey in Bumthang to subdue Shelging Karpo, the local deity – who is said to have caused illness to Sendha Gyalp. It was to help treat his incurable ailment that Sendha Gyalp had invited Guru Rinpoche. This event however, took place during Guru’s first visit to Bhutan. He did not visit Taktshang at that time.

Karma Phuntsho (2013) also identifies the tigress as the manifestation of Tashi Kheudren. But this is a different Tashi Kheudren than the one mentioned above. She is the daughter of a local chief called Hangrey ‘probably from Bumthang or Kurtoe’ and not Sendha Gyalp. They are said to have met while Yeshe Tshogyel was meditating at Senge Dzong.

“Yeshe Tshogyel took Tashi Kheudren as her student and introduced her to Padmasambhava in Taktshang.¹ As she possessed all the hallmarks of a spiritual partner, Padmasambhava took Tashi Kheudren as his consort in order to undertake all the esoteric practice of Vajrakilaya. As the culmination of this religious meditative practice, Padmasambhava is said to have manifested in the appearance of Dorji Drolod while Tashi Kheudren, who had already achieved great spiritual heights transformed herself into a tigress” (Karma Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 108-109).

All these raise the question that this article seeks to ask. Who is the tigress in the lair? Yeshe Tshogyel or Tashi Kheudren? If Tashi Kheudren, is she the daughter of Sendha Gyalp or chief Hangrey? The other question that also needs to be answered is if it was really Vajrakilaya that Yeshey Tshogyel practiced at Paro Taktshang? I had the good fortune of spending some time at Sengephu in Taktshang 2014. It was there that I read the translation of Yeshe Tshogyel’s biography, which I had bought in Kathmandu, Nepal fourteen years earlier. I took it as an auspicious coincidence that the book, which had collected dust for so long on my bookshelf, could be read in the very cave where Yeshe Tshogyel spent seven months. Translated by Keith Dowman, the biography was first written by Gyalwa Jangchub

¹ As we will see later, this is not the Taktshang located in Paro.

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along with Namkhai Nyingpo. Gyalwa Jangchub, also known as Atsara Sale, was a consort of Yeshe Tshogyel from Nepal. The biography was hidden as a treasure text in Lhorong, Kham. Taksham Nuden Dorji who was also known as Samten Lingpa and the reincarnation of Gyalwa Jangchub, revealed the biography as terma text in the 18th century. The following is therefore, an answer to the question posed as title to this article based wholly on this biography. I must emphasize the fact that it deals only with Yeshe Tshogyel in Taktshang, and not with the visits and exploits of Guru Rinpoche, a subject which has to be pursued separately later.

Yeshe Tshogyel first comes to Bhutan from Tidro in Tibet. She had gone to Tidro to meditate following the precepts, empowerments and teachings she received from Guru Rinpoche at Samye. His instruction to her was thus; “Practice at Womphu Taktsang, Mon Taktsang and Kham Taktsang and in all those places where there is a naturally manifest image of Guru Rinpoche, particularly in Tidro itself” (Dowman, 1996, p. 63). It is common knowledge to many Bhutanese that the massive cliff of Paro Taktshang has the appearance of Dorje Drolo. The three Taktshangs mentioned here, and events associated with them have been confused in latter narratives, oral or textual, that gave rise to different versions. Many assume that there is just one Taktshang, in Paro, Bhutan, and hence associate events that happened in other Taktshangs with the one at Paro.

Yeshe Tshogyel comes to Sengye Dzong from Tidro with her consort Atsara Sale and a girl called Dewamo.² During the

² I am yet to ascertain whether her other consort Atsara Pelyang and a Bhutan boy called Sale were there at Sengye Dzong or not since they were certainly there at Taktshang later on.

course of her meditation and austere practices, a girl called Khyidren visits her and offers her honey and milk from time to time. Khyidren was the daughter of local king called Hamrey. She asks him to give her his daughter who was thirteen years old then and had all the marks of a dakini (Dowman 1996, 73-84). During my research about Khoma village in Lhuntse more than a decade earlier, I was informed that the origin of the name Khoma is based on Guru Rinpoche telling the local ruler that he had a daughter/girl (khomo) whom the Guru would need (for tantric practice) ང་ལ་མཐོ་བའི་མོ་ཞིག་འདུག། (Sonam Kinga, 2002). It now turns out that it was Yeshe Tshogyel instead of Guru Rinpoche who said it. Indeed, Guru Rinpoche says the same to Yeshe Tshogyel later but in a different location as we shall see below.

Yeshe Tshogyel names the girl Tashi Chidren³ (“Fortunate Guide to Mankind”) and brings her along with others to Taktshang from Senge Dzong. There were five of them at Taktshang: Yeshe Tshogyel, her consorts Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang, a Bhutanese boy called Sale and Tashi Chidren. Today, the small wooden sign board pointing towards Sengephu at the junction leading to it and Taktshang states, “This is a cave, where Khando (dakini) Yeshe Tshogyal practised, Vajrakilaya (Phurpa).” The lines written in Dzongkha on the walls of the cave also state likewise. However, Yeshe Tshogyel states that her practice there was ‘the seed essence of co-incident pleasure and emptiness’ (བདེ་སྤྱོད་ཟུང་འཇུག་གི་ལེ་འེ་དཀར་སྤྱོད) (Dowman, 1996, pp. 85-86) and not Vajrakilaya. After months of vigorous practice, her body assumes the appearance of sixteen year old maiden and she transforms herself into

³ The name Tashi Chidren is interchangeably used as Tashi Khyidren in the biography.

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Vajravarahi. The following lines inscribed below the painting of Yeshe Tshogyel at Sengephu on a rectangular granite-like stone tablet as a sixteen-year old maiden⁴ capture the essence of her accomplishment.

སྐྱོ་གྲོ་སྐྱོ་གྲོ་ཚང་ཟབ་ལམ་བརྟུལ་ཞུགས་སྦྱོང།
སྐྱོ་གསུམ་བདེ་ཆེན་དོ་ཇི་གསུམ་དུ་གྱུར།
བརྟུ་རྟུག་ལང་ཚོས་སྐྱེག་པའི་གཟི་མདངས་འབར།
དཔའ་མོ་ཉེ་རུ་ཀ་ལ་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས།

Undertaking austere practice at Paro Taktshang on the
profound path,

The three doors (of body, speech and mind) became three vajras
of great peace;

Blazing red radiance like a graceful sixteen-year old maiden,

To the Heroine Vajravarahi, I pray!

At Sengephu, Yeshe Tshogyel receives a vision of Amitayus mandala (Tshepame) and a prophecy that foretells her lifespan to be 225 years. From there, she and all her companions go to Womphu Taktshang, and meet Guru Rinpoche. It was there that Guru Rinpoche foretells their reappearance in future: Guru Rinpoche as Pha Dampa Sangye and Yeshe Tshogyel as Machig Labdron. He also prophesizes that Atsara Sale would appear then as a monk and be a consort to Machig Labdron. Tashi Khyidren would be her only daughter whereas the

⁴ A beautiful life-size image of Khandro Yeshe Tshogyel offered by the Supreme Dharma Patron, Her Majesty the Gyaltsuen has been installed in Sengephu.

Bhutanese boy, Sale, would be her spiritual son. Atsara Pelyang would also appear as a monk and become her mystic consort (Dowman, 1996, pp. 86-87).

It was also there at Womphu Taktshang that Guru Rinpoche asks Yeshe Tshogyel to give him Tashi Chidren, who had all the marks of Awareness Dakini (Vajrakarmaki). She would be employed as his consort for the practice of Dorje Phurba (Vajrakilaya). Yeshe Tshogyel offers Tashi Chidren to her Guru and prays that he reveal to her the tantric mysteries and to her, Yeshe Tshogyel, the secret instructions of Dorje Phurba. Guru Rinpoche sends Yeshe Tshogyel to Uru in Central Tibet to find a fourteen year old boy who would be her tantric partner for the practice. She finds him and returns. Guru Rinpoche names the boy, Lhalung Pelgyi Sengye, who would be reborn later as Lhalung Pelgyi Dorji and assassinate the anti-Dharma king, Langdarma.

It was therefore, at Womphu Taktsang in Tibet and not Paro Taktshang in Bhutan that the practice of Dorje Phurba (Vajrakilaya) was initiated by Guru Rinpoche along with his five 'root' spiritual sons. They were Lhalung Pelgyi Sengye, Namkhai Nyingpo, Ma Rinchen Chok, Dorje Dudjom and Yeshe Tshogyel. Her four other companions were also assigned roles in the initiatory rite of Dorje Phurba.

Dewamo, who was renamed Chonema, the Glorious Priestess, was appointed the Vajra hostess (Dorje Jenmo); Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang were appointed Vajra Dancers (Dorje Gingpa) and renamed Karma Dondup and Karma Tarje; the Bhutanese boy Sale was appointed Vajra Attendant (Vajrakarmaka); and then, at the beginning, he made me the "root consort" and Tashi Khyidren the "liberating consort" (Dowman, 1996, p. 90).

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The Guru and his two consorts practiced for seven nights, and all signs of accomplishment of the Dorje Phurba appeared. The signs included the manifestation of the gods attending to Dorje Phurba and dancing of ritual daggers “redolent with perfumes”. I quote Yeshe Tshogyel at length below in order to answer the primary question that concerns this article.

The evening that these miraculous signs appeared, the Guru himself was transformed into Dorje Trollo (Adamantine Sagging Belly) with myself as Ekajati (The Crone with One Hair Knot), joined in union with him, and Tashi Khyidren as our mount, the tigress, to subject the gods and demons of microcosmic worlds of the four quarters of Tibet. Riding upon the back of the girl Khyidren transformed into a tigress, the Guru and his mystic partner absorbed in the *samadhi* of Dorje Phurba, holding a nine-pronged *vajra* in his right hand and rolling a phurba of bell-metal in his left hand, the Guru projected countless, fierce, terrifying beings in forms identical to himself. In particular, one of these forms called Blue-black Vajra Wrathful Phurba (Tingnak Dorje Trophur) flew directly to Paro Taktsang, and there he subjugated gods, demons, wrathful Dakinis, and demon savages and the three eight-fold classes of spirits of the barbarian borderlands and beyond – Bhutan, Nepal, India and Lho – and bound them to serve the dharma. Another emanation called Purple Vajra Wrathful Phurba (Muknak Dorji Trophur) flew as far as the second Taktsang, in Kham, and subjugated the gods, demons and demon savages and the three eight-fold classes of spirits in the barbarian lands of Kham, Jang, China and Hor, binding them to serve the dharma, taking away their life-essence (Dowman, 1996, pp. 90-91).

There is no doubt from Yeshe Tsogyel’s statement that the tigress upon whose back Guru Rinpoche mounts as Dorje Drolo was the Bhutanese girl Tashi Chidren. Yeshe Tshogyel was transformed into Ekajati and was joined in union with Dorje Drolo. The transformation of the trio into Dorje Dorlo, Ekajati and the tigress neither takes place at Taktsang nor do

they fly in from Sengye Dzong, as the signboard tells visitor at Ramthangkha, the place where motor road ends and the trek to Taktshang begins. Again, at the junction between Sengephu and Taktshang monastery, the following prayer is inscribed on a board besides the sign board pointing up the flight of 125 steep steps to Sengephu. It captures what Dorji Drolu did at Taktsang.

སྟག་ཚང་སང་གི་བསམ་གྲུབ་ཀུན་ཚང་དུ།
གདུག་པའི་སྤྲི་སྤྲི་གས་བདུད་དང་དམ་སྲི་བཏུལ།
གནས་ཆེན་གངས་བྲག་རྣམས་ལ་གཏེར་ཆེན་སྤྲས།
མ་འོངས་སྤྲི་གས་མའི་སེམས་ཅན་ལྷགས་རྗེ་གཟིགས།
རྗེ་རྗེ་ལོ་དུ་ཕྱལ་ལ་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས།

In the sacred rock cavern of Sengye Samdrup⁵ in Taktshang,
Subduing vicious heretics, demons and gnomes,
Hiding sacred treasures in holy sites, mountains and cliffs.
Looking with compassion at sentient beings of degenerate age,
I pray to the skillful Dorje Drolu!

In this biography, there is just one more reference to Yeshe Tshogyel's visit to Taktshang. Before Guru Rinpoche leaves for Ngayab Khandroling, the Land of the dakinis, he instructs Yeshe Tshogyel to compile all his teachings to be hidden as *terma* and revealed in future. Along with her, the twenty-five pre-eminent disciples of Guru Rinpoche such as Namkhai Nyingpo, Denma Tsemang, Atsara Pelyang, Vairotsana and

⁵ Sengye Samdrup is the local deity of Taktsang.

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others write down the teachings at Chimphu in Tibet and then travel with the Guru himself to hide them. First, they go to the three Taktshangs.

In Paro Taktsang in Bhutan we disposed the treasures separately and left prophetic catalogues. “This is the place of Guru’s Mind,” prayed the Guru. “Whoever practices here will attain *mahamudra siddhi*. When the Guru dwells in The Highest Paradise (Ogmin) these symbols of his Body, Speech and Mind will spontaneously manifest.” Then he made wish granting prayers and made benediction upon an image of Dorje Trollo, a naturally manifest stupa and the spontaneously manifest Six-syllable mantra (Dowman, 1996, p. 124).

From there, they go to Womphu Taktshang, the power place of Guru’s body and to Kham Taktshang, the power place of his speech and concealed many treasures. Around 804 AD, according to the translator, when Guru Rinpoche left for Ngayab Khandroling, Yeshe Tshogyel was about 80 years old. For the rest of her life, she travelled to the power places blessed by Guru Rinpoche. Although she received a prophecy at Sengephu in Paro Taktsang that she would live for 225 years, she attains her parinirvana at Zapu Peak in Tibet at the age of 211 years. Thus, she would have been practicing and teaching for nearly 131 years thereafter. But the translator puts her age at 60 years (birth 757 AD and death 817 AD).

Determining the exact age of Yeshe Tshogyel however, is not the point of enquiry of this article. It is about her visits and stay at Taktshang. During her last visit to Bhutan, the biography does not mention any more visits to Taktshang. Rather, she first goes to Senge Dzong. Interestingly, she even records of her visit to ‘Phari Dzong in Bhutan.’ Then she names four more places here in Bhutan where she spends a year each and conceals many caches of treasures. They are Gyelmo Mudo

Jong, Lhamo Ngulkhang Jong, Gyellung Jokpo Lung and Budum Lung.

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