

PREFACE

Thangtong Gyalpo (*Thang sTong rGyal po*) is a historical figure reaching in the supernatural who impresses us with his versatility to liberate sentient beings. His teachings and writings are translated only partly. The far bigger part of his work is passed down traditionally. To a large extent, it is directly visible, learnable and conceivable in reality in the form of monasteries, bridges, plays and songs. Further, we meet this reality of the Mahāsiddha in another form: Living in Thimphu in Bhutan and studying in India is the 17th reincarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo, Ngawang Thinley Lhundrub (*Ngag dbang phrin las lhun grub*).

In Tibet, Bhutan and the world of the Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Himalayas, Thangtong Gyalpo is known and revered by all people. If one questions this, his oeuvre, his whole work and actions will be known far less. This is one reason for the results shown in the present work, which is the result of about 30 years of research projects in Tibet and Bhutan and in particular, fieldwork that was taken up in July 1974 in Bhutan and in April 1981 in Tibet.

Thangtong Gyalpo has developed complex philosophical ideas. However, unlike most other Buddhist masters, he not only noted them down in his writings and passed them on in theories, but has also found his own way for the spreading of the teachings: Thangtong Gyalpo has lived his teachings. He has cooperated with his people as a blacksmith, as well as a philosopher, and shared the results and failures with them, which made it possible for him to personally access people of different classes. Therefore, he is regarded as one of three unusual masters in Tibetan Drubchen Nyönpa (*sGrub chen sMyon pa*) or ‘divine madman’.

Thangtong Gyalpo’s ideas richly yielded fruit: He inspired his fellow people, spurred them to top performances and with it achieved unexpected multiplicative effects in the spreading of the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet and Bhutan.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

For Buddhists, Thangtong Gyalpo's teachings, his life and works are as a whole, model, help and a clue. For westerners, who are more on 'logos' and 'ratios,' Thangtong Gyalpo shows methods for their own mental concepts. Far beyond that, he has iron suspension bridges built with a span of more than 100 metres at the beginning of 15th century; while in Europe, spans of more than 20 metres were regarded as significant achievement.

In this contribution, the biography of Thangtong Gyalpo, his teachings, songs, plays (*'cham*) and his whole work in brief, is touched slightly in as much as it seemed necessary for the clarification of his personality as an architect and a bridge builder. Instead, the paper attempts to draw the attention to the bridges he built in Tibet and Bhutan and their influence in Europe and America.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo is one of the most significant Mahāsiddhas of Tibet who worked in the first half of the 15th century in Tibet and Bhutan. Thangtong Gyalpo was a yogi, philosopher, poet, exorcist, teacher, architect, engineer, painter, sculptor, doctor, treasure revealer and last but not least, an iron chain suspension bridge builder, a universal genius with supernatural abilities. The spectrum of his titles and epithets is accordingly wide, beginning with his name, 'Thangtong Gyalpo' (the King of the Empty Plains), 'iron bridge yogi' (*lcags zam rnal 'byor pa*), 'father of the Tibetan opera' and up to the 'Leonardo da Vinci of Asia' as Wolf Kahlen called him.

Tashi Tsering summarises his activities in superlatives as presented below:

The mad saint (*sgrub smyon*), the destroyer of illusion (*'khrul zhig*), the performer of miracles, the medicine man who dispelled epidemics, the protector from Hor invasions, and the mender of harmful geomantic configurations (*me btsa' gso ba*). He was also an accomplished master of technology, who built numerous iron bridges and ferries, erected many devotional objects symbolising body, speech and mind and allegedly

pioneered the fashioning of statues out of precious stones. He was a great propagator of the Avalokiteshvara cycle and sadhana and, to come closer to our subject, and is considered to have been the initiator of *a lce lha mo* and *bla ma ma ni*, those who display thangkhas and those who use a stupa with many doors (*mchod rten bkra shis sgo mang*).



Fig. 1: Drubthop Thangtong Gyalpo. Votiv statue, produced and consecrated at the Tsug Lhakhang in Lhasa in 2005.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

Thangtong Gyalpo is also credited with establishing the ritual of breaking the stone on the stomach (*pho ba rdo gshag*) and is famous for having discovered hidden treasures (*gter*). He started his own religious tradition (*Thang lugs*) within the Shangpa Kagyu (*Shangs pa bka' brgyud*) lineage. Although a graduate of the Sakyapa (*Sa skya pa*) school, he founded the Chakzampa (*lCags zam pa*) tradition by combining the Shangpa Kagyu and Jangter (*Byang gter*) traditions. Moreover, he attained the power of longevity (*'chi med tshe'i rig 'dzin mnga' brnyes pa*). Even to the present day, those with purified karma can be fortunate enough to see his wisdom body (*ye shes kyi sku*).¹

Thangtong Gyalpo is known as a Mahāsiddha and a treasure revealer (*gter ston pa*). But he is also mentioned as one of the three great Drubthobs, the Divine Madmen, who, as already explained, impelled the teachings not with the usual methods like meditation and prayer but taught through contact and work.

¹ Tsering, T. 2001, S. 37: Tashi Tsering in his work on Thangtong Gyalpo's contribution to the a *lce lha mo* tradition draws a sharp profile with the help of different original texts of the extraordinary abilities of an extraordinary personality.