ORIGINS OF THE BUNCHU (BUM CHU) OF DRAKAR TASHIDING (BRAK DKAR BKRA SHIS SDINGS)

According to Sikkimese cultural and religious history as related in old anecdotal accounts, Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim in the eighth century AD. The land was then blessed by Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who personally consecrated many of Sikkim's sacred landmarks and blessed Drakar Tashiding as the land's spiritual centre.

The present article seeks to provide a brief historical and legendary account of the Bunchu, the blessed water vase ritual of Tashiding, and its meaning. The Bunchu celebration is held on the 15th day of the first lunar month and is one of Sikkim's most important events, annually attracting thousands of pilgrims from Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and abroad wishing to participate in the rituals.

Introduction to Sikkim as a sacred hidden land

Before we discuss the Bunchu itself, it is necessary to provide some background information about Sikkim as a sacred hidden land or beyul (bras yul) and the establishment of Tashiding as its spiritual centre. During the first dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century, Guru Rinpoche and his twenty-five disciples (the 'bngag sors lnga) are said to have visited and blessed this land known as Beyul Demojong (bras yul 'bras no ljong) or 'the hidden fruitful valley'. Thereafter, they tamed all malevolent beings and evil forces which infested the country, selected and blessed the sites of some of Sikkim's future monasteries and erected a number of stupas.

1 'Bum chu' means water vase.
2 'Bra khar' means white rock and 'bkra shis sdings' means auspicious centre.
3 An earlier version of this article was published in the Bulletin of Tibetology (1992, No 3). We thought it important to publish an expanded and corrected version of the same article because of its relevance to the theme of this issue and the importance the ritual holds in Sikkim (the Editor).
According to the ‘Bras gling gsas yig (guide book to the sacred places of Sikkim), Bheyul Demopang had five great (gsas chen) and six minor sacred sites (gsas chung) which protected all living beings. Guru Rinpoche concealed innumerable scriptures (chos), wealth (nor) and sacred objects (dbang rten) in these sacred places and performed prayers for the benefit of all sentient beings, thereby ensuring the preservation of these treasures to the Dharma protectors and tutelary deities. He blessed and consecrated this land which thus became as sacred as his own heaven known as Urgyen Zangdönpalri (O rgyan zangs mdog dpal ri) and Kanchosaligriwo (mKha' spyod dpal gyi ri bo), the divine vision of heaven, both realms of unlimited happiness where female divinities (ma zo mkha' 'gro) assembled like clouds and took up their abode. Likewise, innumerable Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas of ten directions blessed the land.

In the four cardinal directions of Tashiding are four sacred caves. To the east is Shar chok be phuk (Shar phyogs stas phug), the hidden cave of the east; to the south is Lho khandro sung phuk (Lho mtha' 'gro gsang phug), the womb of the celestial female deity; to the west is Nub dechen phuk (Nub bde chen phug), the cave of great happiness; and to the north is Byang Lhari rinchen nying phuk (Byang lha ri rin chen snying phug), the cave of god's precious heart. At the centre, Drakar Tashiding is considered the spiritual heart or navel of Sikkim. Indeed, Guru Rinpoche is said to have given teachings at Tashiding and to have blessed the area as the mandala of the Lama Gongdu (bla ma dgyongs 'juts), one of the three main Nyinma texts.

Later, in the fourteenth century, the great terton (gtser ston)4 Rigzin Godemchen (Rig 'dzin gnyod Idan chen, 1337-1408) came to Sikkim and established monasteries and meditation centres at Tashiding and nearby Pamo Hungri. Following this, the reincarnation of Rigzin Godemchen, terton Ngari Rigzin Chempo Ladjen Dorje (mNga' ris rig 'dzin legs Idan rdo rje (1512-1625), discovered the sublime mKha' 'gro'i mkha' 'lung na'i 'rgyal tantra or the sadhana (sngub thabs, method of accomplishment) of Amogasiddhi as the northern cave of Lhari rinchen nying phuk in 1558.

The seventeenth century was a turning point in the history of Sikkim. The kingdom was founded when the first Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal (chos 'rgyal Phun tshogs raam 'rgyal) was enthroned at Yuktsum in 1642 by three great lamas of Tibet: Lhatso Namkha

4 'gtser ston' means revealer of hidden treasures.
jigme⁵ (IHa btsun nam mkha' jigs med, 1597-1650). Ngadag Sempa Chenpo Phuntsog Rigzin (mNgags 'btag smugs dpa' chen po phan bsucks rig 'dzin, 1591(27)-1656) and Kathog Rigzin Chenpo (kal brog rig 'dzin chen po). Under the patronage of Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal, monasteries, hermitages and stupas were built and Buddhism was proclaimed the state religion. Following the revelation of the Rig 'dzin srog sgrub text to Lhatsum Namkha Jigme at Tashiding, Sikkim became the main centre of Dzogchen (dzogs chen) teaching and meditation practice in the Tibetan world. Its followers came to be known as Denjong Dzogchenpa ('bras lugs dzogs chen pa).

Ngadag Sempa Chenpo, one of three lamas who had consecrated the first Chogyal, was a great scholar from Central Tibet. Together with his grandson Ngadag Rinchen Gon (mNgags 'btag rin chen mgon), he established the monastery at Drakar Tashiding and consecrated it as the main seat of the followers of the Nyingma northern treasure (Byang gtek) tradition, which was brought to Sikkim from the Tibetan monastery of Dorje Drak (do rje brag) by Rigzin Gomchen.

Origins of the Bumchuk

In the eighth century, Tibet's religious king Trisong Deutsen (Khi brang Ile'u btsan) requested Guru Rinpoche to teach him a meditation practice that would allow him to reach enlightenment in his present life. He explained that due to his administrative responsibilities as head of state, he had little time left for meditation and was anxious to learn a short but effective practice. Guru Rinpoche agreed to initiate King Trisong Deutsen in a practice which would help him gain emancipation from the cycle of mundane existence, known as the Thugs rje chen po 'khor wa las grol. However, in order to perform the initiation, Guru Rinpoche asked for a vase made of special earth, water and five kinds of gems (rin chen snga lnga) collected from all over the world. When Trisong Deutsen explained that he was unable to produce such a vase, Guru Rinpoche agreed to collect the precious materials from India, Osiyana and Zahor and instructed the wrathful Dharmapala Damchen Garnag (Dam chen mgar nag) to fashion the object. When the wrathful Dharmapala presented the finished vase to Guru Rinpoche, he invoked Chenresig's (spyin rgyal rtags) blessing and empowerment to hold the

⁵ Lhatsum Namkha Jigme is known as the embodiment of compassion and the incarnation of Indian Maha Pandita Vimalakirti and Tibetan omniscient Kunzhyen Longchenpa Dema Ozer (Kun mskyen klong chen pa dri med 'od zer).
initiates. While he initiated King Trisong Detsen and his son, Prince Murub Tsempo, Yeshe Tsigyel and disciple Venotsana, Guru Rinpoche consecrated the Bunchu, or sacred vase, which is the very same one that is preserved in Tashiding monastery to this day.

According to the works of the great lama Chogyi Gyalpo Garwang Rigzin Zhigpo Lingpa (the son Chos kyi rgyal po gar dbang tig 'dzin zhi gpo gling pa, 1524-1588) while Guru Rinpoche performed the sadhana of Yidam Choechug Zhal (yi dam bcos gcig zhal) as part of the initiation, the Yidam and the entire retinue of deities appeared in the sky and immersed in the water contained in the vase. This caused the sacred water to overflow and spread in all directions in the form of rays. Thus, very moment, as a good omen, there was an earthquake and the four Dharma protectors and gods of thirty-three heavens showered flowers from the sky. This spectacular event was witnessed by the people who were assembled there who were overjoyed, and sacred water from the vase was distributed to all. Yet it was found that the water in the vase never decreased. Inspired by this, the sinful became virtuous, the pious realized lofty divine qualities and all benefited spiritually. Finally, Guru Rinpoche concealed the Bunchu as a sublime hidden treasure and entrusted it to the protective deities.

In the sixteenth century, Zhigpo Lingpa, the reincarnation of Prince Murub Tsempo who had attended the first initiation, unearthed the initiation text and the Bunchu for the sake of all sentient beings from a monastery in Lhasa (ra sa 'phul snang gi gser bu lha kharg). After the vase’s discovery, tertön Zhigpo Lingpa adopted Chenresig, the deity of the same sadhana as his tutelary deity (bshu dang rten). During the latter part of his life, he offered it to tertön Tagshamchen (tsing gsham can 1556-7) of Ngari with special instructions. Terton Tagshamchen then entrusted the Bunchu to his grandson Ngagpa Tempa Chenpo

6 Zhigpo Lingpa is the reincarnation of Prince Murub Tsempo who attended the initiation performed by Guru Rinpoche for King Trisong Detsen in the eighth century. Prior to the initiation, Guru Rinpoche had instructed all present and his minister guarding the door that no one would be permitted to enter the room while he gave the empowerment. Prince Murub Tsempo arrived late and being refused entry, drew his sword, killed the minister, entered the room and made a very precious offering to Guru Rinpoche for receiving the initiation. After confessing his murder, the Prince was judged by a council of ministers and sent into exile as punishment. However, during the initiation, Guru Rinpoche told him that the initiation text and the Bunchu would be kept hidden in a monastery. Later, Guru Rinpoche prophesied that Prince Murub Tsempo would reborn as Zhigpo Lingpa and would discover the Bunchu in a monastery in Lhasa.
Phuntso Rigzin instructing him to install it at Drakar Tashiding, where it was to be kept in the heart of the most blessed hidden lord of Guru Rinpoche. Thus, Ngadag Sempa Clengo brought the Bunchu to Tashiding and installed it in the main temple known as the Tashi Geleg Gon (bka’ shis dge legs dgen). He then conducted a special recitation of 13 million syllables ‘em mani padme hung following the same Thugs rje chen po ‘khor wa las grol ten. At that time many unprecedented and auspicious signs appeared in the sky.

The Bunchu and its sacred water are kept in a miniature mansion (mchod bsham) under lock and seal of the Chogyal of Sikkim and the lama committee of Tashiding. Every year, a special recitation is conducted and the seal is checked by the high officials and lamas before the Bunchu is taken out of its mansion. The Bunchu is opened during the night of the 14th day of the first month of the lunar calendar, and three cups of water are taken from it. The first cup is for the royal family, the second for the lamas and the third is distributed among the pilgrims on the day of the full moon. The three cups are replaced with water brought from Kathong Chakha, which is also considered to be a blessed river.

In some years, the Bunchu’s sacred water increases by 21 cups while in others it decreases or remains at the same level. It may also be found to be clear or cloudy, states that are interpreted as predictions for the country. When the water level increases, it is a sign of prosperity and when it decreases, it predicts a bad year of drought and disease. Cloudy water indicates conflict and unrest.

It is said that the seed of enlightenment may be obtained by drinking a mere drop of the Bunchu water. By this action, all distress, malevolent beings and untoward happenings are removed, prosperity and fulfillment are awarded in this life, and one may attain Buddhahood or be born in the Riwo Potala (ri bo po ta la), the heaven of Chenresig or Zangdopelri (zangs ndog dpal n), the heaven of Guru Rinpoche, in the following life.

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