KAḤ THOḠ PA BSOD NAMS RGYAL MTshan (1466-1540)
AND HIS ACTIVITIES IN SIKKIM AND BHUTAN1

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The establishment of the monastery of Kaḥ thog in Eastern Tibet in the year 1159 marked an important step in the consolidation of the rNyin ma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Its founder, Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs (1122-1192), occupies a prominent place in the transmission known as the “Spoken Teachings” (bka’ ma). This specific teaching tradition was further spread by a number of abbots, known collectively as the “Succession of Teachers [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]” (bka rabs bcu gsum). According to one way of counting, the list begins with sPhyan snga bSod nams ‘bum [pa] (b. 1222) and ends with mkHas grub Ye shes rgyal mthshan (1395-1458); the two immediate successors of Kaḥ dam pa bDe gshegs, gTsang ston rtDo tje rgyal mthshan (1126-1216) and Byaltsa pa ‘bum [pa] (1179-1252), are not included in this particular list of successive regents of the glorious Kaḥ thog monastery.2

In the historiographical literature of the rNyin ma pa school the period of the next series of abbots—called the “Succession of Attendants [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]” (drung rabs bcu gsum)—is characterized by an increasing influence of the tradition of the “Treasure Teachings” (glzer ma), which led to a slight diminishing of the importance of the Spoken Teachings tradition. This event is linked to the journey of Drung Nam mkha’ seng ge, the first in this list of abbots, to the region of rDo brag, where he became the “master of

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1 A different version of this article will appear in the Ubatan panel volume (Pommaret F. and J. Ardussi eds), IATS Oxford, 2003, Leiden: Brill.
2 See bKa’ bral Rin po che Sangs rgyas rdo tje (b. 1313): dPal rgyal rgyal ba kaḥ thog pa’i gkan rabs brgyed ’dzin dang khes pa’i byung bo brjed pa rin po che’ phreng ba bka’ cu’i gsum, s.p., n.d., fol. 31a5-37a4. The author states that this way of counting follows the mittshan brdons gsal ‘degs of the teachers of Kaḥ thog composed by Kaḥ thog Si tu Cha’u kyi tsho mthshar (1880-1925); ibid., fol. 31b1-2. The same authority is acknowledged by mkHas chan ’Jan sPhyan rgyal mthshan (b. 1929): gSang chen bka’i chos ‘go rgyal ba kaḥ thog pa’i tsgo rgyas mdor brjed pa’i chos med rab’i’i sgra zgra nga mthshar maa ba’i dga’ ston. Chenga: Si khtron mgsis dpal shes khang, 1996, p. 543-5.
the teachings” (chos bdag) of the treasure-cycles of Rig ‘dzin Ratna gling pa (1403-1478). This particular phase of new spiritual developments within the teaching lineages of Kañ thog in the 15th century was also the period when the exponent who would later create a subschool known as the lHo mon Kañ thog pa or Mon lugs Kañ thog pa received his training.3

A first assessment of the history of this subschool in Bhutan was provided by the late Michael Aris. He opened his sketch of the rNying ma pa in Bhutan with a treatment of the lHo mon Kañ thog pa, whom he called “[the rNying ma pa to arrive in a formal sense”.

According to the historical sources available to him, it was one of the abbots of the above-mentioned first group of regents of Kañ thog, a certain dBu ‘od Ye shes ‘bum [pa], who in the 13th century made his way to Bhutan on his way to Sikkim and founded in sPa gro sTag tshang the monastery of O rgyan rtse mo; the location of this old residence of the Kañ thog pa tradition was immediately above the main shrine of sTag tshang. It is further stated that this master had two disciples, namely bSod nams rgyal mtshan and the later’s son rNam grol bzang po, who both settled at sTag tshang in the sPa gro valley.4

It was further noted by Aris that there exists a biography of bSod nams rgyal mtshan by a certain rNam grol bzang po, and also an autobiography, but he was obviously not in a position to consult these works. As we now have access to the biographical tradition of this teacher from Kañ thog closely connected with the religious history of Sikkim and Bhutan, I want to readdress the issue of the arrival of the lHo mon Kañ thog pa in the Himalayan valleys, and in particular at the famous Padmasambhava shrine near sPa gro. This will be done in two steps: clarifying the identity of Ye shes ‘bum [pa] from the Kañ thog monastery, and giving an overview of the life of bSod nams rgyal mtshan, with special reference to his activities in Sikkim and Bhutan.

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3 For the change in doctrinal emphasis from the Spoken Teachings to Treasure Teachings within the teaching lineages of Kañ thog in the 15th century see Ehrhard (1990: 88, note 20). For the counting of Nam mkha’ seng ge as the second drung and the difficulties of dating him see Elmer (2002: 331).

4 See Aris (1979: 153-154). There are two different sets of dates for dBu ‘od Ye shes ‘bum [pa], the third member of the bka’ rabs bceu gsum according to the enumeration advocated by Kañ thog Gi tu cho kyi rgya mtsho. As documented by Elmer (2002: 327-328 & 330), these dates are either 1254-1257 or 1242-1315. For the lHo mon Kañ thog pa in Bhutan compare also Aris (1994: 23): “The Kalksga school of eastern Tibet operated from within the Nyingmapa and established an early branch in Bhutan.”
If one consults the biographical account of dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa] in modern works dealing with the monastery of Kah thog and its different successions of abbots, one learns that this master had a great number of disciples from dBus and gTsang in Central Tibet, but there is no record of travels to either Sikkim or Bhutan. What is remembered about this particular regent is his rapport with the Sa skya pa scion 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235-1280), who is said to have visited the nNying ma pa monastery in Khams on his way back from the Yuan court and to have received on that occasion the sgYu 'phral zhi khro initiation from dBu 'od Ye shes 'bum [pa].

A journey to Central Tibet and to the “Rice Country” (’Bras mo ljon) — the name of modern-day Sikkim as known to the followers of Padmasambhava — is recorded in the case of still another master from Kah thog bearing the name Ye shes 'bum pa. This person is known as the “teacher from bZhad” (bZhad bts), a region in the Nyag rong province of Khams, and his name turns up in the list of the “Succession of Scholars” (mKhan rabs) of Kah thog. One of the modern histories of the monastery provides the following account:

He who is called Ye shes ‘bum pa, the teacher from bZhad [in] Nyag rong, a disciple of Mānake, the one who is both learned and realized — this master of an ocean of the qualities of being learned, venerable [and] realized, in order to revive the stream of the doctrine in the regions of dBus [and] gTsang, and in order to search for the sacred site of the hidden valley “Rice Country”, proceeded to the regions of dBus [and] gTsang. In the end, after accruing marvellous benefit for the

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1 For biographical data on dBu ‘od Ye shes ‘bum [pa] see Bja bral Rin po che (as in note 1, fol. 32a-1-3), and Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1, pp. 42.20-44.12). Compare: mkha’ spyan bras mo ljon/ kyi gTang nor /sprul pa’i rnal byor mchek btsi brgud’ dzin dngog btsas pa’i byung ba brjod pa’i gyur gsal ma’i dga’ ston [’IN A Saga of Sikkim’s Supreme Revered Four Pioneer Nyingmapa Reincarnates and their Torch-Bearers], Gangtok: Khenpo I. Tsering, 2002, pp. 20.10-22.16, for an evaluation of the different historical sources concerning the person of dBu ‘od Ye shes ‘bum [pa], and the conclusion that this regent of Kah thog could not have reached Sikkim. It also noted that the misidentification of dBu ‘od Ye shes ‘bum [pa] and bZhad bs is Ye shes ‘bum pa is responsible for the view that one of the early abbots of Kah thog was already travelling to the south, see ibid., p. 22.1-4.
doctrine and the beings, he passed away at the place of his spiritual practice in gTsang.6

The person referred to by the Sanskritized name “Jñānaketu” is the previously mentioned [mkhas grub]. Ye shes rgyal mtshan, the last member of the bla rabs bceu gsun of Khaŋ thog. Both master and disciple: this belong to that phase in the history of Khaŋ thog when the influence of the Treasure Teachings was increasing, the cultural practice of the search for hidden valleys in the Himalayan border regions by rNyih ma pa masters from Eastern Tibet being least partly attributable to the change in the doctrinal emphasis within the teaching tradition. At the same time, the transmission of the Spoken Teachings was restructured and new commentaries were written. This becomes especially clear from a transmission represented by mkhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan and bZhab bla Ye shes ’bum pa. In the historiographical literature of the rNyih ma pa school, this transmission is noted for having promulgated the sGyur ’phral ddra ba and the rDo dgyongs pa ’dus pa—the main tentras of respectively Mahayoga and Anuyoga—as a unified system, and it was this particular tradition which was continued by rDo mon Khaŋ thog pa bskyod nams rgyal mtshan and his disciple rNam grub bzang po.7

Having identified bZhab bla Ye shes ’bum pa instead of dbu ’od Ye shes ’bum pa as the first scholar of Khaŋ thog, who directed his

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6 See Bya bral Rin po che (in note 1), fol. 44a1-4 (... mkhas grub jñānaketu’s stob na nyag rgyon bshag blo je shes ’bum pa zhes mkhas bstan gru pa yi yon tan rgya mtha’i mngag) ’bod de nyid dus gsam phyogs su bstan rgyan gsal ba dang / shes yul ’bras mo gongs kyi gnas ’tshul phyur dus gsam phyogs su phels te bstan ’gro i don mna dus byung ba rtags nas mba mngon gi sgrub gnas su sgra phags). The characterization of bZhab bla Ye shes ’bum pa by Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1, p. 73.13-20) contains nearly the same wording, but it leaves out the sequence, the “hidden valley” (shes yul), while adding more information on the location in gTsang: “At the end of his life he revived the doctrine in [palpung] like Zar ’Ug pa lung ad gSang sngags gling” (sku ’tshe)’i mtha’ur zur ’ug pa lung dang gsal sngags gling, sogs kyi bstan pa rgyuns su gsal).”

7 The lineage of this transmission starts with Khaŋ dam pa bDe gshegs, gTsang ston rDo rgyal mtshan and dbang pa ’bum bstan, but includes only the second and the thirteenth members of the bla rabs bceu gsun, namely dpal snga Nam mkhas i rdo rje (b. 1223) and mchun grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan; see Dugjom Jakdor Yeshes Dorje (1991:699). Among the new commentaries of the Spoken Teaching tradition during that period, mention must be made of Ye shes rgyal mtshan’s exposition of the Thad pa spyi bcams of Khaŋ dam pa bDe gshegs; see Thad pa spyi brgyed rtsis gser, Chengdu: Si khron mi rig sde skrin khang, 1997, pp. 34-417. For the writings of Khaŋ dam pa bDe gshegs and the commentary of Ye stas rgyal mtshan, see Dalton (2007: 109-129).
steps to the Himalayan border regions, we are able to date the arrival of the Ho mon Kaḥ thog pa to Sikkim and Bhutan to the end of the 15th century. The initial spread of this subschool can now be described on the basis of the biographical tradition of Kaḥ thog pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan.

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The autobiography bears the title “Rosary of Stainless Wish-fulfilling Jewels” (Dri med yid bshin nor bu’i phreng ba) and was completed by bSod nams rgyal mtshan in sPā gro sTag tshang O rgyan rtses mo in the year 1539. Added to it is a work by his disciple rNam gro [Ye shes] bzang po which covers the final events of his teacher’s life; this text must have been composed in the year 1541, since it mentions an “ox year” (glang lo) for the consecration of the reliquary shrine of bSod nams rgyal mtshan. The place of composition of the latter work is given as “the upper part of dGe rgyas ‘Jag ma lung, below the great glacier mDozod Inga stag rtses, the western gate of the glorious Rice Country” 4. This seems to suggest that the first representatives of the Ho mon Kaḥ thog pa had their residences in both Sikkim and Bhutan, and became influential in these regions at about the same time.

In the following I will make use only of the autobiography, which is divided into three chapters, dealing respectively with prophecies concerning the person of bSod nams rgyal mtshan, with the teachers he relied upon during his spiritual training, and with the salvational means he had recourse to both for himself and for others. The second and third chapters are subdivided into five and eleven subsections respectively.

The initial part of the first chapter quotes from the dGe lugs ’dus lung bstan bka’ rgya ma, that is, from “the cycle of the sealed pronouncements of prophecies for the future” (ma ’ongs lung bstan bka’ rgya ma’i skor) of the Bla ma rgyas po’i dpa’ pa, a treasure-cycle of Rig ’dzin桑srgyas gling pa (1340-1396). The works of this

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4 See the dbu med text in Sar kah thog pa bgo ston nams rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po’i mdum par shar pa, Gangtok & Delhi: Deogarh Varanasi Khyentsey Lhachang, 1979, p. 40-2-3 (dpal ’bras mo bzhongs (+gshungs) kyi nab sgo gongs chen mDozod Inga stag rtses’i zhol / dge rgyas ’jag ma lung gi pho). The name “Great Glacier mDozod Inga stag rtses” for the Kangchenjunga range is already attested in the writings of Rig ’dzin sGod dbang’brugs can (1337-1406), one of the earliest and most prolific writers of literature concerning hidden valleys; see his sBas yul ’bras mo njangs kyi gneg yig bshus pa in Rare Texts of the dPal sponges Tradition, Gangtok: Shephr Gyaltsen, 1981, p. 374-5. For the different gates leading to Sikkim as a hidden sanctuary see note 10.
treasure-discoverer, along with ones of mNga’ bdag Nyang ral [Nyi ma’i ’od zer] (1124-1192), Guru Chos [khyi] dbang [phyug] (1212-1270) and especially Fig ‘dzin Rama gzang pa, are listed at the beginning of the second chapter as those religious traditions which dominated the studies of bSod nams rgyal mtshan up to the age of seventeen years. The names of his teachers during that period include Kun dga’ ‘bum [pa], Brag ngo rDo rje dpal, ’ugie ‘don blo gros and a certain La rgyab Shes rab dpal who transmitted the teachings of Klong chen Rab ‘byams pa (1308-1364) to the young student. But the first and most important teacher was his own uncle, whom he accompanied up to lHa sa when the latter embarked on a journey to the regions of dBcs and gTsang. This uncle is called in the autobiography mKhas grub Ye shes ‘bum [pa], and he is none other than bZhad bla Ye shes ‘bum pa from Nyag rgy og province in Khams.9

For the next three years bSod nams rgyal mtshan stayed in the “land of the gorges” (rong yul) where he was advised by two further teachers how to follow the life of a yogin and practice austerities. It was only after this experience, at the age of twenty years, that he entered the monastery of kAph thog and took up his studies with the Great Ačārya Nam mkha’ dpal. This teacher imparted to him the classic works of the Spoken Teachings tradition and its exegetical literature, such as the Theg pa spyi bsigs of kAph, dam pa bDe goregs; it is noted in the autobiography that this exposition was in the tradition of mKhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan. In addition, Nam mkha’ dpal instructed his disciple in the different Indian and Tibetan commentaries on the sGrub ‘zhral dpal ba, the authority of the Ačārya being based on the fact that he had penned an important commentary on this tantra. This course of study having been mastered over a period of seven years, there followed further studies under a number of teachers, all associated with kAph thog monastery; among these we find the First Draug Nam mkha’ seng ge and the Third Draug rGyal mtshan rdo rje.10

9 See the dbyul text of the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 45.6-57.3, for the studies up to the age of seventeen years. Only after his return from lHa sa did bSod nams rgyal mtshan attend upon other teachers than his uncle. His own hitherto given as the “land of gZhang (sits of Nyag rgyo [in] Khams” (‘... mdo khams nyag rgyo gzhag g yul); see ibid., p. 47.3-4. This description has already been noted as an early reference to the “toponym” (sTong) “Nyag rgyo”; see Tsersing (1991:101).

10 For the seven year study period with the Great Ačārya Nam mkha’ dpal, see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 60.2-65.5. The list of further teachers begins with the First Draug Nam mkha’ seng ge and the Third Draug rGyal mtshan rdo rje; see ibid., pp. 65.5-72.2. A short biographical sketch of Nam mkha’ dpal can be found in the kAph thog history written by ‘Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1), p. 72-4.
At the age of twenty-seven years, during a visit to the monastery of Bzhag yul dGox gei in his home region, Bsdod nams rgyal mtshan saw in a dream his uncle Bzhag bla Ye shes 'bum pa who urged him to come to Central Tibet and, more especially, to join him in opening dBul gYi 'bras mo gshongs, that is, Sikkim. He left soon afterwards for dBu and gTsang, the autobiography giving as the date for this departure the tenth Tibetan month of the year 1493.

Without going into the details of the journey, the autobiography relates next the meeting with the uncle at his residence, called Theg chen chos sdings, at the “northern gate” (byang sgo) of the hidden valley known as Yarlung. There follows an interesting account of the difficult process of finding the proper entry point into the sanctuary, with no success being met at the “eastern gate” (shar sgo) and the “southern gate” (Iho sgo). It is also stated that Bsdod nams rgyal mtshan took up this search in place of his uncle Bzhag bla Ye shes ‘bum pa, who had supplied him with the necessary guidebooks. The mission finally went to the “western gate” (mub sgo) and there came upon a site called dGe rgyas ‘Jag ma lung; having passed through the “inner gate” (nang sgo), which bears the name g.Ya’ maTsag ri, the small group under the leadership of Bsdod nams rgyal mtshan arrived in the inner region of the sanctuary, said to be like a realm of the gods.

20. The title of the commentary of the sGnyas phral drwa bu is given there as gSrong snying fika dgu slar mo long and is considered to be in the same class with the commentaries of Rong zom Chos kyi brang po (b. 1046), Klong chen Rab 'byams pa and g.Yang ston dDo rje dpal (1285-1364). A biographical note on Nam mkha’ seng ge, pointing out his role as a disciple of Rig dzin Rama gling pa, is contained ibid., pp. 66-10-67.13. Bya bral Rin po che’s work (as in note 1), fol. 42a’.1, remarks that the First Drung came from the same family as the 2nd member of the bRa rabs bcu gsum.

This subsection of the second main chapter has the title “Account of the Opening of the Gate to the Hidden Valley, [Which Is] a Sacred Site” (chos yul gnas sgo phyed pa’i rnam thar), see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 72.2-82.5. The conception of “gates to the sacred site” (gnas sgo) in the four cardinal directions leading to the centre of a hidden land conceived as a marjala is known from further cases; see, for example, the “four large gates” (sgra chen po bzhub) topographically located around the valley of Glang ’phrug—present-day Langtang—in Ehnhard (1979b: 342-344). An elaborate description of the four entry points to the hidden valley of Sikkim can be found in sthus yul 'bras mo lhongs kyi gnas yig phan yon dang brson pa rgyas mthar gter mdo’ud (block print), fol. 19a-6-28b:2 & 42b:5-44b:4. This work is the scriptural basis for the observations by Brauen-Dolma (1985: 248-249) that the gates should be approached depending on the time of the year (in autumn
The remaining two sections of the chapter, dealing with the teachings of bSod nams rgyal mtshan, describe activities after his death of bZha 'gag bla Ye shes 'bum po, beginning with the funeral ceremonies on his behalf. The passing away of his first and most important teacher postponed for the time being a fuller engagement in the Himalayan valleys, and he discarded the idea of settling permanently in the inner part of the hidden valley just opened by him.

Travelling instead to Hsa sa and to bSams yas in order to make offerings for bZha 'gag bla Ye shes 'bum pa, bSod nams rgyal mtshan came across the Seventh Karmapa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454-1506) in the Yar klungs valley, and while still in the valley, at the site of Chu mig dGon gsar, he received teachings from a certain Grags pa 'od zer. As this master was a member of the family of Rig 'dzin Radna gling pa, bSod nams rgyal mtshan was able to receive those cycles of the treasure-discoverer's teachings which he had not obtained before. The next two teachers mentioned in the autobiography also imparted teaching traditions of the rNyung ma pa school to him. In gTsang dMus ston chen po Kun brang dpal gave the "reading authorization" (lung) of the "Collected Tantras of the Old [School]" (rNyung ma rgyud 'bum), a detailed list of the contents of the 35 volumes being contained in the autobiography; from the same teacher he also received the bKa' brya'ug bde gshogs 'dus pa cycle of mNga' bdag Nyal ral [Nyi ma'i 'od zer]. Finally, in Illa stod Ill Ho, bSod nams rgyal mtshan received the treasure-cycles of Rig 'dzin rGrol 'idem 'phu can from a teacher called Chos rje sTon chen Grags pa rgyal mtshan; this master also transmitted to him the treasure-cycles of Rig 'dzin Shes rab me 'bar (1267-1326), a

from the eas, in winter from the south, in spring from the west, and in summer from the north). The text in question is a compilation of different prophecies, consisting for the greater part of a long quotation from the ones of Rig 'dzin Sangs rgya gling pa; see the relevant section in bLha ma dkon 'pjug pa 'chas pa las / ma 'longs lung bstan bla' rgya ma' soks. Gangtok & Delhi: Sherab Gyaltsen, n.d., pp. 442.4-448.3 ["bSuds yol 'bras mo 'dang yig yan gSam dang bRa's pa ng[ mltshar gyi mgyud, fols. 3a-5-6b-3"). It should be noted that Rig 'dzin Sangs rgya gling pa pays no attention to the western gate. A description of the entry through this gate can be found in the writings of Rig 'dzin rGrol 'idem 'phu can; see his gYas 'bras mo 'dangs ("gshong gyi gyi lam yig [manuscript]." Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project, reel no. 1. 27; fols. 3b ff.); this text also mentions an inner gate with the name gYa ma tTag rtse (sic). For the observation that the text bSpi'i thim byung of Rig 'dzin rGrol 'idem 'phu can—a work dealing with hidden valleys in general—contains numerous references to dPal gyi 'bras mo gshongs, compare Chodba (1999: 111, note 13).
treasure-discoverer who had been active in the sPa gro valley in Bhutan.12

After a three-year period from 1502 to 1505, devoted exclusively to the spiritual practice of these different teaching traditions at a site known as [Thre chen]; chos sdings Yang dben rdo thang—obviously located in the vicinity of the former residence of his uncle bZhay bla Ye shes 'bum pa—bbsod nams sgyal mshan pondered the idea of returning to his home region in Khams and to the monastery of Kaṭ thog. At that time repeated invitations arrived at his hermitage in northern Sikkim from sPa gro sTag thyang, having been sent by a person named bIa ma Ngang brgyud sGyal ba. He finally took up the invitation. The autobiography records a request made by the Bhutanese disciple when his guest arrived for the first time at the celebrated Padmasambhava shrine of sTag thyang:

The regions of dBus gtsang, mDo khams, [and] especially the monastery of Kaṭ thog—they are pure lands, [and] the Dharma will always spread [there]. [Here, in] our Land of the Mos, a barbarous border country, the Dharma has not been diffused: the beings who are foolish [and benighted] like animals—take care of them with [your] great affection! [And] especially at the pilgrimage site of the Great One from Oddphyana, at [this cave known as] ‘Tiger Den, Where Lions’ Thoughts Are Accomplished’, erect to completion a place for spiritual practice [this] we request [you]!13

12 For the last two subsections of the second chapter see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 82.3-105.5. The list of the contents of the sVing ma rgyud 'bum collection in 35 volumes can be found ibid., pp. 92.2-98.6; this is a kind of provisional list, an extended version of which is said to be contained in the 'list of teachings received' (thob yig) of bbsod nams sgyal mshan (not yet available). The teacher dMus ston chen po Kun brang dpal is also known under the name Gling chen Kun bzang dpal, derived from his residence in gTsang, "the monastery of Gling bu [in] 'Nyang stod" (nyang stod gling bu dgon pa). This is known from the autobiography of the treasure-discoverer 'Gro 'dul Las. sPhri gling pa (1488-1555) who stayed for a period of one year with the master Kun bzang dpal; see Rig 'dzin chen po gser brtan las 'sPhri gling pa's phreng skye skye brgyud dang emam pa thar po che long 1am chog bskod po me tog 'sPhurang bshes, Derge and Delhi: Gyampo Tseten, 1979, pp. 387.1-391.1.

13 See the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 114.6-115.2 (dBus gtsang mDo khams phyag pa btsan 'bIa ma phyag po 'dag pa'i stong yin btsan po nam yang skor / bshes
The teacher from Kah thog provides the detailed story of the circumstances of the establishment of this site, to which he later gave the name “Tiger Den, the Peak of Odhlyāna” (sTag tshang o rgyan rts mo). A translation and edition of this part of the autobiography, which closes the second subsection of chapter three and covers the years 1507 to 1508, will be given on a later occasion. There remain nine subsections, dealing with the spiritual achievements of bSod nams rgyal mtshan and his further travels and teaching activities. I select three of them in order to sketch a rough picture of this part of his life-story.

The first one bears the title “An Account of How [the People of] Mon in the South Became Established in the Dharma” (lho mon chos la bkod pa’i rnam thar). At the beginning one finds the interesting statement of bSod nams rgyal mtshan that he was a recipient of all the Spoken Teachings of the rNying ma pa school and, although not a treasure-discoverer himself, had also obtained most of the Treasure Teachings available in his time. It was the transmission of the collection of Tantras from both these teaching traditions which he gave to his disciples at the start of his effort to spread these lineages in Bhutan:

In the beginning, at [sPa gro] sTag tshang, the meeting ground of the Đākṣinīs, headed by dBang phyug rgyal mtshan, the sky-yogin, and by the teacher Ngang brgyud rGyal [ba] and so forth—for an assembly of about five hundred [persons] with the proper karmas—I performed in their totality [the transmission of] the Collected Tantras of the Old [School]. On
these auspicious occasions, there were downpours of flowers, and marvellous signs and countless blessings appeared.14

After these initial transmissions is the western part of the country, bSod nams rgyal mtshan accepted an invitation from a certain rGyal mtshan ye shes, affiliated to a monastery called Kun bzang gling. This is one of the monasteries founded by the great Klong chen Rab ’byams pa in Bhutan, and is located in the skur stod valley. As the teacher from Ka’h thog travelled afterwards through the region of sNan lung, where another of Klong chen Rab ’byams pa’s foundations can be found, one may surmise that he visited on this journey the sites associated with the famous codifier of the ’Odzogs chen doctrine; and in fact, besides transmitting the cycles of the Spoken Teachings collectively called sGyu ‘phrub zhi khro phur gsun, he also gave empowerments and instructions of the sNyin thig cycles of Klong chen Rab ’byams pa.

Another invitation having arrived from the valley of Bun thang from a person named Tshe dbang rgyal po, sSod nams rgyal mtshan gave once again teachings including the sGyu ‘phrub zhi khro phur gsun. On that occasion he encountered Rigung ’dzin Padma gling pa, who had just established his temple of g’lam zhung in Bun thang. Further travels seem to have been mostly undertaken in the western valleys of Thim phu and sPa gro. For example, he was active in Glang ma lung and in Icags zm Thog kha; these two places, located in Thim phu and sPa gro respectively, are known to have been residences of the gNas mying pa, a school of Tibetan Buddhism which was firmly established in western Bhutan at the time.

But it was, of course, at O rgyan rts mo that bSod nams rgyal mtshan chiefly propagated his teaching traditions, including the sKu’ brgyud bde gzhugs du pa, the Bla ma dpungs pa dus pa, the “Southern Treasures” (ho gter) and the “Northern Treasures” (byang

14 See the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 122-123.3 (’ogz lag stong sde) mkha’ ’gro dus ra ’kun mkha’ ral byor dbang phyug rgyal mtshan dngos/bla ma ngang brgyud rgyud las bzang pa’i las dam lnga brgya smam gcig ’thogs pa la/nying ma’i rgyud/’byun byongs ra rgyud pa/’byun bzang rnam ru mo tag char ba’i thong/’ngo nitar ba dus dang byin rabs dpag med byang). This seems to be the first reference to the transmission of the sNyin ma rgyud bum in Bhutan; surprisingly, it was a transmission from g’Gang and not from Ka’h thog monastery. In the following period the main source for the diffusion of this collection of Tantras was Iho bzang sNan lung, the main seat of the teaching tradition of Rigung ’dzin Padma gling pa (1450-1521). For the importance of the Third Pad gling gsum sprul Tshul khrims rdo rje (1598-1669) in this process, see Birhard (1997:256, note 8).
The subsection titled “An Extensive Account of Teachings [and] Initiations [Which Are] of Benefit for the Disciples of the Regions of dBus [and] gTsang” (dbus gsang phyogs skyi gadu bya la / chos dbang skra don rgyas pa’i rmsam thar) describes first travels to bBar brgyad in La stod, to ’Bring mtshams, and to mGy yul. In the latter area mSod nams rgyal mtshan gave public discourses to a great number of people, headed by the “princess” (don sa) bDag mo’i drung. He also revisited eastern gTsang, where his teacher Chos rje Gling chen, that is, Kun bzang dpal from the monastery of Gling rnag, had since passed away. On that occasion he gave the complete initiations and instructions of the bKa’i brgyud bde gshegs ’dus pa cycle at mPos khang Iha steng in Nyang smad.

Concerning his travels in dBus, the autobiography states that they began in the year 1528—at the age of sixty-two—when he was invited by a teacher known as dKar chen Kun dga’ gags pa to the bSam yan vihāra. There he was called upon to consecrate a colossal statue of the 13
Precious Guru Padmasambhava. The project of erecting such a huge icon had been initiated for the "explosion of armed forces" (dmag bzhog), a danger that was quite real at the time in Central Tibet. After the consecration from a throne in front of the bSam yas pillar, he imparted teachings and initiations, among the disciples are mentioned lhBo brag [rDo rje gdan] Chos rje lHa ro ba and [bSam yas] gDan sa [pa] Rab ’byams pa dGe ba’i blo gros, both representatives of the teaching lineage of the master dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa.15

Having visited the different sacred sites in the surroundings of the bSam yas vihara, including ’Ching phu (sic) and Brag dmar gYa ma lung, the teacher from Kab thog proceeded on to Ila sa, where his local patron was a person called bKor nGyur dpod or bKor bdag nGiyal po. After giving teachings in lhBa sa skyid shed, he returned via La stod to his residence in the sp ga gro valley of Bshatan, and there stayed in retreat for a longer period. Bzod nam srgyal mtshan’s last journey to gTsang took place in the year 1532, when he visited the court of the rGyantse rulers. In front of an assembly of seven hundred people he imparted teachings and initiations from the traditions of the Spoken Teachings and the Treasure Teachings, including the cycle Zab chos zhi bshes dgyongs pa rnam grol of Rig ’dzin Karma gling pa (14th century).17

15 For the travels in gTsang and the events in bSam yas, see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 144.1-156.1. dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa is known to have been a lineage-holder of the treasure-cycles of Sangs rgyas gling pa and of Dri med Kun dga’ (h. 1347). For his position in the lineage of Dri med Kun dga’ and the epithet “whitely dressed one” (dkar po ba), see the historiographical work of sTag sngag mkhas mchog [Ngag dbang blo gros] alias Guru sKri snis (18th-19th cent.): bSton pa’i stong po phag chen snyas ’gyur legs don zhe mkhi’i chos kyi ’byung; la gsal bar byed pa’i legs bshad mkhas pa dga’ byed ugo mchog gsal zhi rol mtshi, Hsinking, 1990, pp. 466.9-467.3. In order to spread the teachings of Sangs rgyas gling pa, this master kept up four “residences” (gdan sa). They were known as Dvags po dGeGongs ’don gling (in the east), lhBo brag rDo rje gdan (in the south), gTsang gi zha dba’ gling [’zhab phu lung] (in the west), and bSam yas Ri bo rtsa (in the north); see Karma Mi’ gyur dldang gi rgyas po (17th cent.): gTsang lha brtan phun grub rgyas gling sde bzhads gcud chos rgyal lha ba stobs rgyal gci mchud po’i grol pa in rgyas gter bton chos ’byung. Darjeling: Taklang Tsentral Rinpoche Pema Wangyal, 1978, pp. 136.4-127.3. According to this passage dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa was famous for renovating shrines and temples, among them the cave known as Nyi lta [kha shes] phug in sp ga gro sTag tshang. For the erection of the colonial statue of Padmasambhava in lhBo brag by the treasure-discoverer mChog lad mgon po (1497-1531), a disciple of dKar chen Kun dga’ grags pa, and the dangers of armed forces in Central Tibet during this particular period, see Ehhardt (2000:35-37).

17 The second part of the journey to dBu and the last visit to gTsang can be found in the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 156.1-162.5. The period between these
As a kind of overview of the disciples who continued his teaching tradition bSod nams rgyal mtshan lists about a dozen names in the subsection called "An Account of the Assembling of the Great [Spiritual] Sons Who Transmitted the Dharma" (chos byrgyad ba chen dus pa'i rnam thar). The enumeration starts with dKar chen Kun dga' grags pa and includes both lhao ro Chos rje—now qualified as being a member of the family of Guru Chos [khyil] dbang [phyag]—and Rab 'byams pa dGe ba'i blo gros, namely the respective representatives of dKar chen Kun dga' grags pa's teaching lineage from Hlo brag and bSam yas. Two of the disciples were at the same time bSod nams rgyal mtshan's own teachers: dMus ston chen po Kun bzang dpal from gTsang and Chos rje sTon chen Grags pa rgyal mtshan from La stod Lho. The noble Tibetan lady dPon sa'i bdag mo drung is now identified as an "emanation of [Ye shes] mTsho rgyal" (mthabs rgyal sprul pa), the Tibetan consort of Padmasambhava. The list also contains the name g.Yang lung [Chos rje] Kun dga' legs pa'i 'byung gras; this person is always mentioned as being in the company of the female patron of bSod nams rgyal mtshan in the different episodes noted above.

One also finds in the list the name of Chos rje Grags pa rgyal mtshan, one of the sons of Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa; he was that offspring of the great treasure-discoverer from Bhutan who had inherited the temple of gTsam zhing in the valley of Bum thang. Another disciple of the teacher of Ka'h thog was Rig 'dzin bSton gnyis gling pa (1480-1555), whose alternative name is given in the autobiography as the "treasure-discoverer [from] Chu bzang" (chu bzang gter ston). The list closes with the names of two brothers, two travels was devoted to the composition of the main literary work known to exist from the pen of bSod nams rgyal mtshan. It bears the title bka' thams cad gsal bar ston pa byed pa' / bstan pa thams cad kyi spis' grel / theg pa thams cad kyi shun 'byed / man ngag thams cad kyi dgyungs don / sems kyi chos nyid mugm du stong pa'i me long / rnyi' od gsal ba; see the Ka'h thogs histories of Bya bral Rin po che (as in note 1), fol. 44b3-6, and of 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (as in note 1), pp. 74, 77-78. The work was published, under the title Thug pa thams cad kyi shun 'byed rnyi' od rabs gsal, in two parts (250 fols. & 181 fols.), Delhi: Kunsang Tobgyal 1979 (the year of composition is lcags pho stag = 1530). My thanks to Prof. Per K. Soensens for providing a copy of this text. Like mkhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan's exposition of the Thug pa spis' beings, this work should be classified among the new commentaries of the Spoken Teachings tradition; see note 6.

18 For the subsection dealing with the different disciples see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 175.4-180.3. Rig 'dzin bSton gnyis gling pa was affiliated to the 'Brug pa bKa' byrgyad pa monastery of Chu bzang and had met Rig 'dzin Padma gling pa at the later's temple gTsam zhing in the years 1519 and 1528. He returned to Bhutan in the year 1532 and raised treasure-works in two caves at the sacred site of
simply referred to as the "ones from mNgā' ris" (mnga' ris pa). This designation refers to mNgā' ris Pañ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487-1542) and to mNgā' ris Rig 'dzin legs dan bsdus 'joms rdo rje (b. 1512). If one consults their biographies from a later historical tradition, one finds references to meetings of these teachers from Western Tibet with both the founder of the lhV mon Kāḥ thin po and with rNam grol brang po, his immediate successor.19

The final advice offered by bStod nams rgyal mthstan before he passed away at O rgyan rts mo called for his disciples to follow their spiritual

19 see the biography of 'Wn'ga' ris Pañ chen Padma dbang rgyal written by rdOb rje brgag Rg' dzin Padma 'phrin las (1610-1718). "Bu pats ma brtan gi blo ma brtan khyud ma brtan ston mthun dwarf pad dtab kyi 'phreng bvi" (‘SmaStus ShegSrig SpodNdog, 37), Lek: S.W. Tashigjampa, 1972, p. 323.2 (kab brtse pa chos rje 'byod nams rgyal mthstan lugs brgyas gnay mung ma dang choS khryos 'bo sgrub mthad); this meeting with bStod nams rgyal mthstan occurred in 1529 during the latter's sojourn at the bStan yas lhV nas mNga' ris Rig 'dzin legs dan bsdus 'joms rdo rje was regarded as an incarnation of Rig 'dzin rGyud ldam 'phun cu and, like his predecesor, undertook to open dgal gsal las. This happened after the death of his elder brother in the year 1542; for a meeting with rNam grol bsang po at the former residence of bZhang la Ye shes 'bum pa at [Thog chen] chos srids, located at the northern gate of the hidden valley, see ibid., p. 371.6 (slar 'yang 'bras gsgrangs phyogs su phibs ce yA gro yug shes dang gsal ma dang mjal). mNgā' ris Rig 'dzin also stayed for some time in sPa gro sTag shing and obtained there an "introduction certificate" (kha byang) for a treasoe-cycle which he later retrieved from the bStan yas lhVs. See rDo rje brtag Rg' dzin Padma 'phrin las: 'Khro ka dbyings sgrugs gi tshad rdo rje las byas los slob dgres dbyer ha lüm byang sbying po (‘SmaStus ShegSrig SpodNdog, 66), Lek: S.W. Tashigjampa, 1973, p. 477.3-2 (sPa gro yug stong du bshungs dus o rgyan chen po chad brtan cong kha dang yang rned pa ba bser nas bsam yas nas slob dgres rgyan drangs chung shes sgrugs sna yas mchams pha leg pa thugs snyags su bstan).
practice at such sacred sites in Tibet as Zab phu long and ‘Ching phu (se) in the vicinity of the bsam yas vitha. But first and foremost they were urged to stay at the “great hidden valley” (shas yid chen po) called dpal gyi ’bras mo gshongs and at spa gro sTag tshang; and in the latter case at a site called Nyi zla dmar mo, which obviously refers to the previously mentioned Nyi zla [tha sbyor] phug. If one consults, in addition to the autobiography, the account by rNam grol [Ye shes] bsang po, it becomes clear that in 1539 the master from ka-thog had a dream of the country known as Rite Land, and that this particular vision resided in his handing over to his disciple a written scroll describing the entry through the western gate. 25

Although the literary sources are quite reticent about the activities of the following representatives of the Ho rnon Ka-thog pa in Sikkim and Bhutan, it is known at least that in the middle of the 17th century the western gate was entered once more by a teacher from Eastern Tibet in order to gain access to dpal gyi ’bras mo gshongs, and that this time the journey resulted in the permanent presence of this school of the Nying ma pa in the hidden valley of Sikkim. Such a settlement process had already occurred in Bhutan at the beginning of the 16th century, and one may attribute this to the fact that the memory of Padmasambhava and the expectation that his prophecies would be fulfilled were very much alive at the sacred shrine in the spa gro valley during that particular period.

REFERENCES


25 For the section of the final advice dealing with the sacred sites see the autobiography (as in note 7), pp. 220-221.4. The dream of the year 1539 is to be found ibid., pp. 15.3-16.5. Concerning the “Four Great Yogins” (mda’ ’byor brtus) or the “Four Great Yogins [Who Are] Brothers” (mda’ ’byor mchog brtus) associated with the definitive opening of dpal gyi ’bras mo gshongs—including Phun thog rnam rgyal (1604-1670), the first Buddhist ruler of Sikkim—see the work of Iya bal Rin po che (as in note 1), fols. 133b4-133a2. Additional information on Ka-thog pa Kun bzang po, who at that time entered through the western gate and founded in Sikkim a “site for a monastic community” (dbyin ’dun gyi sde), is contained in the work of Shempo L. Tsiring (as in note 5), pp. 231.17-232.16.


