

TIBETAN MASTERS AND THE FORMATION OF THE  
SACRED SITE OF TASHIDING

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Tashiding (bKra shis sdings)<sup>1</sup> monastery in West Sikkim owes its importance to its sanctity which was created and then further enhanced by the arrival of several great Buddhist masters. From a religious perspective, bKra shis sdings monastery is located at the centre of Denjong ('Bras ljongs—lit. 'rice', 'grain' or 'fruits valley'),<sup>2</sup> i.e., the holy land and kingdom of Sikkim.<sup>3</sup> This would be the place from where Guru Rinpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava) blessed the land of 'Bras ljongs and, by doing so, recognised it as a holy place. Owing to both the close relation between Tibet and Sikkim and the crucial role played by Tibetan ideas and figures in the construction of the Sikkimese kingdom, bKra shis sdings emerged from an early stage as the meeting place between the two countries and thus as a central element of this religio-political space. Great Buddhist masters continued to put their stamp on the monastery in later years. bKra shis sdings was the cremation site of many high Buddhist incarnates with their reliquaries (*sku gdung*) being built there. Others offered the building of *mchod rten* (Skt. *stūpa*) during their lifetime or built houses for meditation (*mtshams khang*) in bKra shis sdings.

Together, these elements contribute to the perception of bKra shis sdings as a sacred place. This article aims to detail some of these elements<sup>4</sup> so as to gain a better understanding of this perception of

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<sup>1</sup> Tibetan words are transliterated using the Wylie system (1959) with common nouns written in italics and proper nouns in roman. The Sanskrit words bear the mention 'Skt.' and the words in IHo skad, i.e. the Tibetan dialect spoken in Sikkim, are indicated by the mention 'Lk.'. The orthography of the original texts has not been changed in quotations.

<sup>2</sup> 'Centre of the holy place'—*gnas kyi lte ba*.

<sup>3</sup> The identification of the holy land that we are talking about with the kingdom of Sikkim applies only to ancient times. When the kingdom's territory expanded, the holy land having bKra shis sdings for centre became only its western region.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of perception implies that, concerning the past, we are going to present how the events are depicted in the literature and by the population—and

sacredness. Following a discussion about the early stages of the formation of bKra shis sdings' sanctity, since the present issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* is concerned with the contributions of Tibetan masters to Sikkim, the second part of this article presents biographies of Tibetan figures whose marks added to the holiness of bKra shis sdings monastery: bLa ma 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros (1893-1959), lCags thag rin po che (end of nineteenth century-1957) and mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen (1923-2006).

#### THE EARLY STAGE

'Bras ljongs became a holy land after it was blessed by the Indian Saint Guru Rinpoche. According to Ringzing Ngodup Dokhampa, “[D]uring the first dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth-century, Guru Rinpoche and his twenty-five disciples (rje 'bngas nyer lnga) are said to have visited and blessed this land known as Beyul Demojong (sbas yul 'bras mo ljongs) or the ‘hidden fruitful valley’. Thereafter, he tamed the malevolent beings and blessed the sites of some of the Sikkim’s future monasteries and erected a number of Stūpas.”<sup>5</sup>

In this regard, 'Bras ljongs is included among the seven ‘hidden countries’ of the Himalayan region discovered by the ‘treasure discoverer’ (*gter ston*) Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can (1337-1408)—about whom more will be said below. According to Tibetan thought, ‘hidden countries’ are places where Buddhism will take refuge when it will be endangered in Tibet.<sup>6</sup> The process of ‘construction’ of the hidden land of Sikkim follows the same stages as other Himalayan hidden lands: besides having blessed the place, Guru Rinpoche prophesied about the Saint who will ‘open’ (i.e. give access to) it in future and appropriate time.

As a representation of a sacred land, sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs is thought of as a maṇḍala (Skt.) i.e. the abode of a deity and its retinue.<sup>7</sup>

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which concrete relationships to the site this perception leads to—rather than to make a history of bKra shis sdings. This perception is here to be considered as a narrative of which certain elements will be set forth.

<sup>5</sup> 2003a: 25. See also Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002. In another text, it is said that “[I]n a pure vision, Santarakshita, Guru Rinpoche and Khri srong lde btsan set foot in this rice valley, the highest and most sacred of all hidden lands [...]” S. Mullard, 2005a: 61.

<sup>6</sup> See H. Diemberger, 1992: 291. Concerning the transformation of the land of Sikkim into a sacred Buddhist site, see also A. Balikci, 2002, chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> G. Tucci, 1974 [1969].

Indeed, a guide to the holy land of Sikkim (*'Bras ljongs gnas yig*)<sup>8</sup> describes the country as a rectangular, oriented and centered space in the manner of a maṇḍala. The land is also sometimes qualified 'maṇḍala': it is for example the word 'Jigs med dpa' bo used to name it when he met the Sikkimese king Phyag rdor rnam rgyal for the first time in 1710.<sup>9</sup>

The description of a place as a maṇḍala is frequent in the areas of Tibetan culture and, according to H. Diemberger the maṇḍala is "a model of interpretation of landscape giving a ritual dimension to the pilgrimage."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, most of the monastic Buddhist practices consist of entering the maṇḍala of a certain deity which occupies the central place, make its way until this central figure and visualise it (this latter practice is called *sgrub thabs* or *sgrub mchod*, Skt. *sādhana*, i.e. method of effecting propitiation or method of attainment). In consequence to the transposition of this ritual model to the landscape, "[T]he physical features of the landscape thus become the setting for ritual journeys. [...] The 'landscape maṇḍala' is the sacred enclosure which gives access to spiritual insight and mystic realization for the initiated."<sup>11</sup>

sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs is considered as a maṇḍala of Guru Rinpoche and, as centre of this sacred land bKra shis sdings would be the throne of the master.<sup>12</sup> Several Buddhist Saints eventually recognised bKra shis sdings as the centre of the sacred land of Sikkim (see below). In the seventeenth century, after the first Sikkimese king and the three Tibetan religious men did so, "[T]he following wonderful phenomenon was observed at this time; a bright streak of light, issuing from the top of the peak of mDzod-lNga (kinchen-jinga) shone right upon Tashiding, marking out the place as a divine spot."<sup>13</sup>

According to some other texts, Guru Rinpoche blessed the land from the monastery's location. bKra shis sdings itself could also be "a palace [i.e. mandala] of deities and that in the centre of Tashiding is the palace or mandala of Guru Rinpoche."<sup>14</sup> It is also what Lha btsun 'Gyur med 'jigs brel bstan 'dzin dpa' bo's 'Guide of the holy land of Sikkim'

<sup>8</sup> See Lha btsun 'Gyur med 'jigs brel bstan 'dzin dpa' bo, c.1700 and in English, for instance Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003b and Tsultem Gyatso Acharya, 2005: 50.

<sup>9</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 273, line 2.

<sup>10</sup> 1992: 3.7.

<sup>11</sup> H. Diemberger, 1992: 292.

<sup>12</sup> See Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003b: particularly 75-76 and 79.

<sup>13</sup> mThu stobs rnam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, 1908: 31.

<sup>14</sup> See S. Mullard, 2003: 16.

suggests, “[O]h king and ministers,<sup>15</sup> bKra shis sdings has a square shape, the land has six measures of length, in each of the four corners there is a sandal tree. If we go on the top of the rock, we can see Sikkim as clearly as in a mirror.”<sup>16</sup> In another text, “[T]he external setting [is perceived] as a palace of the Peaceful and Wrathful Jinās, the inside as if consisting of the nādis of the Vajrakāya, and its secret aspect as a maṇḍala of the spiritual dimension of the ‘Great Perfection’ (rdzogs pa chen po).”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, “bKra shis sdings is a natural god’s heaven. Its shape is semi circular. It is the magnificent mountain and the key of the treasure. Its cremation ground is like bSil ba tshal cremation [located near to rDo rjen gdan and which has been blessed by the Buddha] and it is separated from the monastery. At each of the four directions there is an unchangeable throne of Guru Rinpoche. At each of the four corners there is Sandalwood that was formed from Guru Rinpoche’s walking sticks.”<sup>18</sup>

One can also read that Guru Rinpoche taught and “blessed the area [of bKra shis sdings] as the maṇḍala of Lama Gongdu (bLa ma dgongs ’dus), one of the three main rNying ma texts [in which the central deity is Guru Rinpoche].”<sup>19</sup> However *Bla ma dgongs ’dus* text has been discovered much later by gTer ston Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340-1396). At the end of the 1640s, lHa btsun chen po<sup>20</sup> writes (without mention of

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<sup>15</sup> We find this address in other hidden land’s guide; it is the Guru Rinpoche’s address to the Tibetan king Khri srong de’u btsan when, in bSam yas and to appease the king’s worries, he explained the existence and the function of the Himalayan hidden lands (see H. Diemberger, 1992: 292). Genuine or not, this address links sBas yul ‘Bras mo ljong to Guru Rinpoche and to the Tibetan tradition of hidden lands.

<sup>16</sup> *rgyal blon yon mchod kyi bzhugs gnas brag dkar bKra shis gdengs zhes bya ba: dbyibs gru bzhi pa srid du ’dom drug yod pa: rgyar ’ur rdo’i rgyang drug yod pa: steng me long gi ngos ltar khod snyoms la dwangs pa’i phyogs bzhir tsan+dan gyi stong po bzhi yod pa: brag de’i steng nas bltas pas ’bras mog shongs kyi phu mda’ thams cad me long physis. Lha btsun ’Gyur med ’jigs brel bstan ’dzin dpa’ bo, c.1700: 10.*

<sup>17</sup> F-K. Ehrhard, 2005: 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 119. The mentions of the semi-circular shape and of the sandalwood are borrowed from lHa btsun ’Gyur med ’jigs brel bstan ’dzin dpa’ bo’s *gNas yig* (page 10), and the four thrones are mentioned in Lha btsun Nam mkha’ ’jigs med, 1974, Vol. VI: 439.

<sup>19</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003: 26 and unpublished: 2. See also Khenpo Dechen Dorje, 1995: 16 and Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 118.

<sup>20</sup> lHa btsun chen po (1597-1650) is one of the three Tibetan religious men credited with the first *chos rgyal* of Sikkim’s enthronement. The introduction of Buddhism to Sikkim is attributed to him. His contribution to bKra shis sdings will be detailed hereafter.

Guru Rinpoche), “[I]t is written in the *dGongs ’dus bka’ rgya ma* that, according to oral sayings, Brag dkar bKra shis sdings is the palace of *Bla ma dgongs ’dus*, in the middle, bKra shis sdings is the main palace of Padma bedza rtsal [one of Guru Rinpoche’s name].”<sup>21</sup> *Bla ma dgongs ’dus* belongs to the sMin grol gling tradition and is nowadays practised yearly on the fifth, sixth, eleventh and twelfth months of the Tibetan calendar and on the tenth day of each month in bKra shis sdings monastery.

These characteristics attributed to the place determine the actual practice that pilgrims have of it. Indeed, most of the Buddhist families living in Sikkim sponsor one of the seven monastic funeral rituals in bKra shis sdings. It is believed that “[I]f one is able to go to Drag Kar Tashiding, even once then one will not be reborn in the lower realm.”<sup>22</sup> This saying reminds lHa btsun chen po’s words concerning the main *mchod rten* of bKra shis sdings that he consecrated (detailed hereafter), “[I]f we turn around this great *mchod rten* the pollution collected during more than four billion of years will be purified.”<sup>23</sup>

The funeral rituals as well as the *bum chu* ritual, held on the fifteenth day of the first Tibetan month every year and which attracts many pilgrims, are also occasions for visitors to experience the sanctity of the place, taking the blessing of the holy elements (trees, rocks, etc.) surrounding the group of temples which remind the venue of past saint men and their miraculous deeds: the highest coniferous tree near the main *mchod rten* represents Guru Rinpoche’s trident that he planted in the ground in order to subdue local deities; several rocks having a long and straight shape are believed to be pieces of a serpent spirit that the Indian Saint ‘killed’ as a malevolent entity and ‘liberated’, etc. The local inhabitants also locate for visitors the four Guru Rinpoche’s ‘thrones’ (*khri*, i.e. rocks)—each situated at one cardinal point—surrounding the group of temples, which gives visibility to the maṇḍala of bKra shis sdings:

- 1) The Western one borders the cremation ground;
- 2) The second one is on the hill located in front of the Chos rgyal lha khang and carries a small *mchod rten*. This hill is called

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<sup>21</sup> 1974, Vol. IV: 438, *de yang dgongs ’dus bka’ rgya ma las gnas ’di dgongs pa ’dus pa’i pho ’brang gi tshul du yod gsungs pa las dbus su brag dkar bkra shis sdings gtso bo padma bdza rtsal gyi pho brang gi tshul du yod pa*.

<sup>22</sup> Khenpo Dechen Dorje, 1995: 17.

<sup>23</sup> 1974, Vol. IV: 441, *mchod rten chen po ’di nyid la bskor ba lan gcig bskor na ’ang bskal pa stong du bsags pa’i sgrub pa dag pa’o*.

Sing ge brag ('lion rock') after its shape. There are more precisely two 'thrones-rock' at this place, and it is not known which of these is Guru Rinpoche's.

- 3) One is located at the crossroad of Tshe chu phug and the monastery's roads;
- 4) The Northern one is in the forest behind the Chos rgyal lha khang—it is locally called 'flat stone' (Lk. rdo leb thang kha). We also heard the name '*nāga pani*', i.e. 'serpent spirit of the water' in Nepali, for this rock. But according to other informants, '*nāga pani*' is located in a tree, which is a 'Pure holy land' (*sangs rgyas zhing khams*) and the dwelling of a demon, a deity of the rock and a serpent spirit of the water (*bdud btsan klu gsum*).

According to some other local informants, the place would not only be marked by four stones but by eight, giving reality to a more complex maṇḍala shape. Each of these stones would be the throne of (or represent) one of the eight forms of Guru Rinpoche (Gu ru mTshen brgyad). Moreover, each direction from the main temple of bKra shis sdings has its protector:

- 1) In the eastern direction, bTsan chen rDo rje dgra 'dul lives with his wife, his son and his attendance in a rock having a *gtor ma* triangular shape.
- 2) In the southern direction, lHa btsan lHa bdud chen po are living in the place called Bong bu kyong or 'donkey of the pond' because mNga' bdag sem pa chen po used to take water from this pond and carry it on the back of his donkey. It is just below the White Rock (defined below).
- 3) Jo bo rang stong dGe bsnyen chen po is protecting the western direction. This protective deity is located further away from the monastery, in the forest on the Ra thong chu's bank, dwelling in a big and small protuberance of a rock (Lk. *bur jog*).
- 4) In the northern direction, bDud btsan dPa' bo hung ri is living in the high hill of Hung ri. Rig 'dzin rgod ldam built a temple there which ruins can still be seen.<sup>24</sup>

The central protective deity is rGyal mtshan sKu Inga.<sup>25</sup> Like for the rocks, the protective deity draw an eight angles diagram as there are dwellings at the intermediary directions:

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<sup>24</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, unpublished.

- a. In the south-east resides Am ding rom chen mo, at about two and half miles away from the monastery.
- b. In the south-west is mTsho sman chen po living in the place called Nub chug lung which is not safe for pregnant women.
- c. In the north-east is mTsho sman Yung drung lha mo living in rGyam be thang, in square-shaped stone.<sup>26</sup>

The path surrounding the group of temples is marked by many holy sites, the major one being the White Rock which gives its name to the monastery: Brag dkar bKra shis sdings, believed to be the door of an inner hidden land where people will find refuge in troubled times and when a suitable master will show them the way. The description of the White Rock suggests it to be the centre of the sacred land of bKra shis sdings, “[E]ach of the four holy caves of ‘Bras ljongs has a holy door. Among these doors, Drag dkar is the main one,” explain an informant.

The cremation ground that we have already talked about is of course one of the holiest place of bKra shis sdings. Its door has been opened by Lha btsun chen po and in the past, there were three ‘thrones’ of this Tibetan master. Only one remains today. bKra shis sdings also links the site to other holy places of ‘Bras ljongs as it is said that two other cremation grounds of equal sanctity exist in the country: at gSang sngags chos gling and Grub sde monasteries.

Further on the same path are two other rocks on which visitors press their knees and back to relieve pain. A few kilometres away from the monastery is the cave Tshe chu phug where Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated and consequently materialised a source of pure water to appease the thirst of the local inhabitants.

One particularity of bKra shis sdings’s sacred site is that it does not have any specific ‘guide to the holy place’: *bKra shis sdings gnas yig* is ‘*Bras ljongs gnas yig*. Moreover, the information concerning it is scattered in different texts which are not easily available to the common people so few religious men who took an interest in the subject only detain the literary knowledge of the place. A common knowledge of the site is mainly orally transmitted. Oral narratives are characterised by textual variants and allow more changes than written ones. However, though the religious description of bKra shis sdings is fluid, all these

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<sup>25</sup> This information comes from a local informant. It is probably the five high-ranking spirits headed by the deity Pe har, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 107 onwards.

<sup>26</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, unpublished. The protective deity of the north-western direction is not known.

narratives recognize the high holiness of the site. Moreover, it is by these narratives that each visit to bKra shis sdings maintains and perpetuates the sanctity of the place.

Hidden lands also have a political dimension, as a place of refuge for Buddhist practitioners in a time of political trouble for instance. In the case of Sikkim, it takes on a particular aspect where the Buddhist history is also a political history in which bKra shis sdings is an important symbol: bKra shis sdings would be the place where Guru Rinpoche “prophesized the coming of the four saints”,<sup>27</sup> i.e. lHa btsun Nam mkha ’jigs med, mNga dag Phun tshog rig ’dzin and Ka thog Kun tu bzang po to whom the enthronement of the first Dharma king (*chos rgyal*, Skt. dharmarāja—a ruler governing according to the Buddhist principles) of Sikkim in the seventeenth century is attributed. As such, it is the place of religious conception of a political entity, the place of creation of kingdom, i.e. a concrete element that legitimises a Dharma King’s political power installation in Sikkim.<sup>28</sup>

This political dimension also gives us a frame to understand the actual ‘practice of the monastery’ by its religious men and by the population. But it has to be taken into account that bKra shis sdings has never been a political centre, which could be compared to Padma yang rtse monastery for example: the latter has been closely associated to perpetuation of the Kingdom not only by rituals (Padma yang rtse religious men were royal priests) but also by the participation of its member to the political governance. bKra shis sdings is better understood as a symbol, which allowed a particular political power.

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<sup>27</sup> S. Mullard, 2005a: 61.

<sup>28</sup> See also B. Steinmann, 1996, who shows that the construction of ’Bras ljong as a place of pilgrimage, with the different stages that this requires (prophecies of Guru Rinpoche, taming of the local deities, opening of the hidden land by predestined beings, etc.) is a metaphor of the lHo po political domination of the land. ‘lHo po’ is the name of the ethnic group to which the *chos rgyal* of Sikkim belongs. It is a group of Tibetan culture speaking a dialect of Tibetan (*lho skad*). It is composed of ancient migrants who came from Tibet and Bhutan presumably from the thirteenth century onward. This group is usually called ‘Bhoṭiyā’, a name that is commonly given by the Indo-European speakers’ groups to the Tibetan dialects’ speakers living in the Himalayas. The group’s members call themselves lHo po or ’Bras ljons pa. See also S. Mullard, 2003: 17, n 12.



## BKRA SHIS SDINGS MONASTERY'S FOUNDERS

*Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can (1337-1408)*

In the fourteenth century, the Treasures Discoverer Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can,<sup>29</sup> founder of the Northern Treasure School of Tibetan Buddhism (Byang gter), discovered the hidden land of Sikkim's northern door. Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can was born in Northern La stod in Tibet. He left Tibet for Sikkim in 1373 at the age of 37 with ten disciples and servant and arrived in summer 1374 (Tiger year).<sup>30</sup> The blessing of the White Rock Cave of bKra shis sdings is attributed to him.<sup>31</sup> He also established monasteries and meditation centres at bKra shis sdings and nearby dPa' bo Hung ri.<sup>32</sup> He passed away at the age of seventy-one in Zil gnon, on the neighboring ridge to bKra shis sdings.<sup>33</sup> Its 'Deep Treasure' is nowadays practised on the twenty-first day of the ninth month every year in the monastery.<sup>34</sup>

*mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po phun tshogs rig 'dzin (1592-1656)*

mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po is the founder of bKra shis sdings monastery since he identified its site<sup>35</sup> and built the first temples on its actual location (though one of these temples no longer exists). He not only established the monastery but also "consecrated it as the main seat of the followers of the Nyingma northern treasure (Byang gter) tradition, which was brought to Sikkim from the Tibetan monastery of Dorje Drak (rdo rje brag) by Rigzin Godemchen."<sup>36</sup>

mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po was born in La stod, western Tibet, in the Palace of Sag khri mkhar, in a ruling family of a local kingdom.<sup>37</sup> He left Zhi mkha tse to go to Sikkim in the third month of

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<sup>29</sup> His full name was Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem 'phru can and his first name was dNgos grub rgyal mtshan.

<sup>30</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 15.

<sup>31</sup> M.J. Boord, 2003: 32.

<sup>32</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003a: 26.

<sup>33</sup> M.J. Boord, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> The text practised at this date is *Rig 'dzin rgod sdem can gyi zab gter thugs bsgrub drag po rtsal gyi sgrub dkyil.*

<sup>35</sup> F-K. Ehrhard, 2005: 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003: 27.

<sup>37</sup> See Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 37 onward, S. Mullard, 2005b: 37-39 and Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 1996. According to Khenpo Lha Tsering, mNga' bdags

1642 (Water Horse year of the Eleventh sixty-year cycle, i.e. *rab byung*) with his son Prince Byams pa bstan 'dzin, another relative and servants. He arrived to Yog bsam about four months later. Here, he performed the *rTsa gsum 'khor ba las sgrol* (*sādhana* and liturgical texts from the cycle of practice focusing upon Avalokiteśvara) discovered by Zhig po gling pa (1524-1583).<sup>38</sup> This text is of primary importance in bKra shis sdings monastery: its *sādhana* and vase consecration's parts<sup>39</sup> are recited every year from the eighth to the fifteenth day of the first month, a period that ends with the famous *bum chu* ritual.

Like Guru Rinpoche, mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po recognised bKra shis sdings as the centre of 'Bras ljongs holy land. He built a first temple there called bKra shis dge legs dGon.<sup>40</sup> But the date of this foundation is still unsure. According to Byams pa bstan 'dzin, it was after the Fire Dog year of 1646<sup>41</sup>. According to mThu stobs rnam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, "[T]he mNga-bDag Lama visited Tashiding and built the monastery of Tashi-ga-legs first, and performed the ceremony of taking possession of the place, as prescribed in the oracular book of Ugyen-Rinpoche on the 3rd day of the 7th month of Sa-Glang year (earth bull) [1649]."<sup>42</sup>

So, the consecration ceremony would have been performed two month before the foundation of Zil gnon monastery (which took place on the ninth month of the Earth Ox year).<sup>43</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering writes that mNga' bdag founded bKra shis dge legs dGon before the foundation of Zil gnon monastery but doesn't specify the date.<sup>44</sup> Ringzin Ngodup Dokhampa<sup>45</sup> also mentions this temple as well as

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Sems dpa' chen po was born on the Water Male Dragon year (1592 A.D) of the Tenth sixty-year cycle but according to Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, it was on the Iron Female Hare, i.e. 1591.

<sup>38</sup> *rTsa gsum 'khor ba las sgrol* is also called *Thugs rje Chen po 'khor ba las sgrol* and discovered in 1563 by Zhig po gling pa (complete name, Zhig po gling pa gar gyi dbang phyug rtsal or, according to Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 1992: 38, Chokyi Gyalpo Garwang Rigzin Zhigpolingpa) who was a reincarnation of Prince Mu rub btsan po, i.e. one of the Tibetan Khri srong lde btsan's sons. See also Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 48 and F-K. Ehrhard, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> *'Phags mchog thugs rje chen po 'khor ba las sgrol gyi sgrub mchod dang phrel ba'i bum sgrub*.

<sup>40</sup> See Byams pa bstan 'dzin, c. 1600: 10.

<sup>41</sup> *brag dkar bkris sding su phebs shing bkris bde legs btab*.

<sup>42</sup> 1908: 32.

<sup>43</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 42.

<sup>44</sup> 2002: 42-44.

<sup>45</sup> *History of bKra shis sdings*, unpublished: 3.

another one called Dril bu lha khang and several *mchod rten* that the Master built before the foundation of Zil gnon. He adds that these buildings no longer exist due to fires and earthquakes. In another article the same author writes that the first ritual mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po performed in bKra shis sdings was conducted in bKra shis dge legs dgon<sup>46</sup>

Khenpo Chowang also mention bKra shis dge legs dGon, without giving any foundation date but specifying that it was before the building of another temple in 1651 and adding that after having consecrated this new *lha khang*, mNga' bdag founded bKra shis sdings's religious community (Skt. sangha) and acted as its abbot (*mkhan po*).<sup>47</sup> We also know that the cremation ground of bKra shis sdings already existed between 1646 and 1650 because lHa btsun chen po visited it during this period of time.<sup>48</sup>

In 1651 (the fifth day of the first month of the Iron Hare year of the Eleventh sixty-year cycle) mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po and his son Byams pa bstan 'dzin<sup>49</sup> as well as the newly enthroned Chos rgyal Phun tshog rnam rgyal started to build the foundation of a temple called Byams pa lha khang.<sup>50</sup> This temple was named after the principal deity Maitreya Buddha (Byams pa in Tibetan) to whom it was dedicated.<sup>51</sup> It no longer exists but the actual Chos rgyal lha khang, the main temple of bKra shis sdings today, would have been its later extension. At the same time, mNga' bdag and his son started the construction of the bsKang gsol lha khang (the temple that Khenpo Lha Tsering calls 'Pe har cog gi lha khang').<sup>52</sup> They also built a statue of Byams pa that they consecrated and placed inside the *lha khang*. On the tenth day of the second Tibetan month of 1652 (Water Dragon year), mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po consecrated both *lha khang* after he came back to bKra shis sdings from Mustang.

The Tibetan master also brought the 'holy water vase' to bKra shis sdings which is the focus of the *bum chu* ritual. Prince Mu rup btsan po,

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<sup>46</sup> 1996: 58.

<sup>47</sup> Khenpo Chowang, 2003: 115 (from line 4). Byams pa bstan 'dzin (c. 1600: 12) writes that mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po promised to handle the religious organisation of the holy site.

<sup>48</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 118.

<sup>49</sup> Also with mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po's grandson called mNga' bdag Rin chen mgon (according to Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003a: 27).

<sup>50</sup> See Byams pa bstan 'dzin, C. 1600: 11.

<sup>51</sup> Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 1996: 58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 44 and personal communication from Khenpo Lha Tsering.

Ye she tsog rgyal and Vero tsa na first consecrated this vase. It would have also been consecrated by Guru Rinpoche “by conducting Sadhana of Yidam Chuchig Zhal.”<sup>53</sup> The gTer ston Zhig po gling pa later discovered the vase, eventually offered it to the gTer ston sTag sham chen who gave it to mNga’ bdag Sems dpa’ chen po.<sup>54</sup> The latter “conducted special recitation of 1,300 million syllables ‘OM MANI PADME HUM, through Thugjechenpo Khorwalegrol Sadhna under the royal patronage of the first Chogyal [of Sikkim] Phuntshog Namgyal.”<sup>55</sup> After this consecration, the *bum chu* ritual, during which the water of the vase is distributed to the pilgrims, has been performed every year in bKra shis sdings.

mNga’ bdag Sems dpa’ chen po died in 1656 at the age of sixty-five in his house (*gzim chung*) in bKra shis sdings. His *sku gdung* can still be seen inside the Chod rgyal lha khang in bKra shis sdings.

According to Byams pa bstan ’dzin, the construction of the temple Thub chen lha khang,<sup>56</sup> which was the third built in bKra shis sdings, was started immediately after mNga’ bdag Sems dpa’ chen po death. It would have been done “[I]n fulfillment of the final wishes of the deceased teacher” and finished in 1658.<sup>57</sup> Then “[T]he new vihāra was furnished with a so-called ‘Enlightenment Stūpa’ (*byang chub mchod rten*), reminding the inhabitants of Sikkim of the central event in the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, and this religious edifice was finally inaugurated in the year 1665.”<sup>58</sup>

*lHa btsun chen po Nam mkha ’jigs med (1597-1650)*

lHa btsun chen po was born in sByar yul,<sup>59</sup> southern Tibet. He arrived in Sikkim on the tenth Tibetan month of 1646.<sup>60</sup> After he arrived to

<sup>53</sup> Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 1992: 37.

<sup>54</sup> Concerning the link between mNga’ bdag Sems dpa’ chen po and gTer ston Zhig po gling pa, see F-K. Ehrhard, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 1992: 38. See also 1996 from the same author and F-K. Ehrhard, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Called Thub bstan lha khang by Khenpo Lha Tsering.

<sup>57</sup> F-K. Ehrhard, 2005: 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> S. Mullard, 2005b: 14.

<sup>60</sup> The *Lha btsun gsung ’bum* writes *me byi* (Fire Rat) year which could be 1636 or 1648. But a correction shows *me khyi* (fire dog, i.e. 1646) which is also the date that Dudjom Rinpoche indicates for the arrival of Lha btsun in Sikkim (1991: 820). In the *Gsun ’bum*, this date is given at the page 438 (Vol. III) which then explains that Lha btsun performs a *tshogs kyi ’khor* ritual (‘feast gathering’ performed before a journey) and that monks and nuns wish they will meet him again. On the next page, it

Yog bsam at the beginning of the tenth month, Lha btsun enthroned the king Phun tshog rnam rgyal once more;<sup>61</sup> the prince rGyal ba'i sras po bKra shis rnam rgyal dpal zang po of Chos kyi rgyal po tshang pa lha'i me tog's lineage, [Kathog?] Kun tu bzang po, etc. joined the celebration.<sup>62</sup> According to Khenpo Lha Tsering, bKra shis rnam rgyal dpal zang po is the name given by Lha btsun chen po to mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po's son, i.e. Byams pa bstan 'dzin.<sup>63</sup>

Then, early morning on the fourteenth day of the third month of an unspecified year<sup>64</sup> (which can not be the same year but could be 1647), lHa btsun chen po consecrated the main *mchod rten* of bKra shis sdings called mThong ba rang grol, i.e. 'which bring liberation upon sight'. Though we have not found this specification in *lHa btsun gsung 'bum*, the *mchod rten* mThong ba rang grol could have been consecrated by 'the Three Saint Men' (rNal 'byor mched gsum).<sup>65</sup> This title most probably refers to the three Tibetan religious men who consecrated the first Sikkimese *chos rgyal*: lHa btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, mNga' bdag Phun tshogs rig 'dzin and Ka' thog Kun tu bzang po. As it is usually referred to 'rNal 'byor mched bzhi', i.e. 'The Four Saints', which adds the Chos rgyal to the three above mentioned religious men,

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is said that Lha btsun left on the 13<sup>th</sup> day with fifteen followers (*rnal 'byor pa*) but the year is not re-specified, so we can assume that it is still the Fire Dog year. On page 556, is written that he arrived in Yog bsam (in Sikkim) at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> month.

<sup>61</sup> The text indeed specifies that Phun tshog rnam rgyal was enthroned 'once more' ('*slar*' in Tibetan). Khenpo Lha Tsering writes that after mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po arrives in Sikkim on the third day of the eighth month of the same years he left Tibet, i.e. the Water Horse year of the Eleventh sixty-year cycle (1642), "[H]e enthroned the first *chos rgyal* of Sikkim and gave him the name of Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal." (*op.cit.*: 42). As lHa btsun chen po was not yet in Sikkim at that time, this means that Phun tshogs rnam rgyal has been firstly enthroned by mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po and then a second time by lHa btsun chen po in presence of, at least, mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po's son. See also *op. cit.*: 117 and F-K. Ehrhard, 2005: 19.

<sup>62</sup> Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, 1974, Vol. III: 557, *slar rgyal srid sna bdun bKra shis rdzas rtags la sogs dpa' bo brtan bzhugs dang bcas te bstan pa'i sbyin bdag Chen por mnga' gsol/ de nas chos kyi rgyal po tshang pa lha'i me tog gi gdung 'dzin pa rgyal pa'i sras po bkra shis rnam rgyal dpal bzang po dang/ gnas chen gyi phyi nang du zhabs yun ring mo nas chags pa'i mtshungs med chos kyi rje kun tu bzang po sogs kyang rim par mjal.*

<sup>63</sup> 2002: 51 and 117, note 2.

<sup>64</sup> Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, 1974, Vol. III: 442.

<sup>65</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 123 (line 4).

the mention of the three Saints suggests that the king sponsored the building of the *mchod rten*.

The idea of attaining liberation from *samsara* upon sight as well as the signification of the objects that lHa btsun chen po enshrined in the *mchod rten* in the frame of this ceremony as described in a text written by lHa btsun chen po have been analysed by Mullard.<sup>66</sup> This author shows amongst other things how, in this text, *sbas yul* (hidden / holy land) becomes synonymous of ‘pure land’ (*mkha’ spyod*, which in this case is the pure of Vajrayogini)<sup>67</sup> and how these religious notions are transformed into physical [visible] entities through the construction of the *mchod rten* mThong ba rang grol. He also reminds that the formation of the holy land of Sikkim conferred legitimacy to political changes and shows that the construction of the *mchod rten* took part in the introduction of institutionalised religious practices and institutions in Sikkim.

lHa btsun chen po is accredited with the introduction of rDzogs chen into Sikkim.<sup>68</sup> It is indeed following the revelation of the *Rig ’dzin srog sgrub* text by lHa btsun chen po at bKra shis sdings<sup>69</sup> that Sikkim became the main centre of rDzogs chen.<sup>70</sup> After the consecration of the *mchod rten*, he performed many rituals at the same place (like *Khrus gsol*, i.e. ritual for the purification of imperfections; *tshogs brgya*, ‘hundred offerings’; *lha srin dam bsgrags*, ‘restriction to the gods and spirits’, etc.).<sup>71</sup> He also gave two kinds of religious vows to followers: ‘Eight limbs of time discipline’ (Dus khirms yan lag brgyad), which are ascetic vows that can be taken temporarily and vows of Bodhisatva (Byang sems sdom pa).<sup>72</sup>

He also built statues of mGon po and Ma mo from stones found in bKra shis sdings and then consecrated it. He also built a statue of mKhan slob chos gsum. The king himself performed a *sMon lam* for long life after the consecration of the statues.<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion of this section, we can remind that the *mchod rten* mThong ba rang grol is a key element of Tashdiding’s sanctity. More practically speaking, it is consequently a major element of perpetuation

<sup>66</sup> 2003. Concerning the ‘liberation upon sight’ see particularly: 16 note 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Op. cit.*: note 15.

<sup>68</sup> See notably S. Mullard, 2003: 13.

<sup>69</sup> Or lHa ri rin chen snying phug, the northern sacred cave of the holy land of ‘Bras ljongs (S.Mullard, 2003: 15) located above Zil gnon monastery.

<sup>70</sup> Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, 2003: 27.

<sup>71</sup> Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 118-121.

<sup>72</sup> *Op. cit.*: 122.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

of bKra shis sdings monastery as the funeral rituals bring an important part of the monastery's economy.

*'Jigs med dpa' bo (1682-c.1730)*

'Jigs med dpa' bo was born at Shang in Central Tibet<sup>74</sup> (in the region of Gtsang) on the fifth day of the second month of the Water Dog year of the Eleventh sixty-year cycle (1682).<sup>75</sup> The fifth Dalai-lama (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682) had prophesised that a reincarnation of the second lHa btsun rDzogs chen sPrul sku Kun bzang 'jigs med dbang po will be born (this prophecy is written in the *bKa' shog sbrag ma*) and that this man's father will send him to a rDzogs chen monastery.

'Jigs med dpa' bo came to Sikkim at the request of the third *chos rgyal* Phyag rdor nam rgyal and arrived in Sikkim at the end of the Earth Ox year of the Twelfth sixty-year cycle (1709).<sup>76</sup> From this date onwards he returned many times to Sikkim until his death in the 1730s<sup>77</sup> at Brag dkar Yangs thing in front of the Gangs can mdzod lnga on his way back to Sikkim from Tibet.<sup>78</sup>

On the eighth day of the eleventh month of the Wood Sheep year of the Twelfth sixty-year cycle (1715, which is actually the beginning of the Fire Monkey year, 1716), 'Jigs med dpa' bo went to bKra shis

<sup>74</sup> mThu stobs nam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, 1908: 37.

<sup>75</sup> His father's name was Dza ya mi tra and his mother's one, Rigs ldan drung (Khenpo Lha Tsering, 2002: 150 line 12).

<sup>76</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 270, line 4, *gnam gang nyin rgyal zhabs nas tshes gsum la gza' tshes legs khyad par gdan sa Padma yang rtser 'byor pa dgos tshul ltar sa glang rdzogs pa'i lcags stag zla ba bco gcig pa'i tshes gnyis la bde chen skyid shongs su 'byor pa'i dbang drag gi khyim du mal phab. Op. cit. line 6, tshes gsum la gsang chen Padma yang rtser phyin pa'i chu mig can lhad nas Phyag mdzod mdzod Padma gar dbang zab 'tshor spras spos Phyag cig kher nas 'dug.*

<sup>77</sup> As Khenpo Lha Tsering writes, the exact date of the death of 'Jigs med dpa' bo is difficult to find. This author writes that he found in '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs dwangs shes me long* [Ye shes grol ma's *History of Sikkim?*] that 'Jigs med dpa' po died on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the Wood Hare year, which is 1735. But he adds that this date is not correct (2002: 187). Indeed, Khenpo Chowang (2003: 143) like mThu stobs nam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma (1908) explains that being greatly moved by 'Jigs med dpa' bo's death, the fourth *chos rgyal* 'Gyur med nam rgyal went to Tibet where he met the twelfth Karma pa Byang chub rdo rje. Consequently to this meeting, the king founded the first *karma bka' brgyud* monastery in Sikkim, i.e. Rab brtan gling (Ra lang) founded in 1730. In this case 'Jigs med dpa' bo died before 1730.

<sup>78</sup> mThu stobs nam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, 1908: 53.

sdings to repair the *mchod rten* mThong ba rang grol and rebuilt (or built according to mThu stobs rnam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma)<sup>79</sup> the Gu ru lha khang.<sup>80</sup> The *mchod rten* had been burned in 1696 by the Bhutanese invaders and was falling into ruin.<sup>81</sup> 'Jigs med dpa' bo led the consecration ceremony of both buildings for the next two days after his revival joined by dignitaries of several Sikkimese monasteries like bKra shis sdings, Padma yang rtse, dPa' bo Hung ri, mKha' spyod dpal ri.<sup>82</sup> The third *chos rgyal* Phyag rdor rnam rgyal was the main sponsor of the rebuilding of mChod rten mThong ba ran grol and of the Gu ru lha khang. Around one thousand persons gathered on this occasion.<sup>83</sup> And, according to mThu stobs rnam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, "[T]he internal furnishing of the temple, in the way of images and various books on the tantric lore and stupas or Chortens in plenty were built. An entire set of *Ka-gyur*, written in gold was brought from Lhasa. Monthly Pujas of the local deities was established at Tashiding, and an annual reading of the *Ka-gyur* on the anniversary of the Lord's descension from the Tushita Heavens, on the 22nd of the 9th month."<sup>84</sup> This recitation still takes place yearly on the occasion of Lha bab dus chen; it gathers Rab brtan gling monastery (Ra lang) religious men (who recite the bKa' 'gyur in the Ma ni lha khang) and Padma yang rtse's ones who read it in the Gu ru lha khang while bKra shis sdings occupies the Chos rgyal lha khang. The entrance ceremony (*sgrigs cug*) to the religious community of bKra shis sdings are often performed on this occasion.

At the same period, Chos rgyal Phyag rdor rnam rgyal's sister, Phan sde dbang mo, "having incurred the sin of having conduced to the Bla nGa-dag-pa's [mNga' bdags sems dpa' chen po phun tshogs rig 'dzin's grandson, called mNga' bdag Rin chen mgon] breaking his priestly vow of celibacy, made him build the Senon Monastery, as an act of penance, while she herself built the Cho-gyal Lhakang monastery of Tashiding."<sup>85</sup> But we could not find any primary source

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<sup>79</sup> P 46.

<sup>80</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 345 line 6 - 347.

<sup>81</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 332 line 2-3, *bKra shis sdings gi mchod rten Chen po 'Bras ljongs nang zhig gi 'brug 'dzin skabs me shor ba'i dus nas rim zhig tu song ba* [the *mchod rten* was burned when the Bhutanese invaded Sikkim] *me byi nas shing rta'i bar la lo bco bdun tsam song 'dug* [from 1696 to 1714, almost seventeen years have passed].

<sup>82</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 348.

<sup>83</sup> Lha btsun 'Jigs med dpa bo, 1735: 345 line 6 - 347.

<sup>84</sup> 1908: 46.

<sup>85</sup> mThu stobs rnam rgyal and Ye shes sgrol ma, 1908: 36.



to certify this latter fact. According to oral sources, it is consequently to this restoration that the extension of the temple bKra shis dge legs dGon came to be named Chos rgyal lha khang. The name of 'chos rgyal' given to the temple came from mNga' bdag Sems dpa' chen po's descendent, who belonged to a Tibetan ruling family. Khenpo Chowang gives the date of 1716 for the rebuilt Zil gnon monastery.<sup>86</sup>

These short biographies of Tibetan high religious men, and especially their contributions to bKra shis sdings monastery, reveal amongst a diversity of religious influences, the co-presence in bKra shis sdings' ritual organisation of mainly two sub-schools of Tibetan Buddhism, i.e. the Byang gter tradition introduced by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can and institutionalised in bKra shis sdings by mNga' bdags Sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin and his descendants, and the sMing grol gling rDzogs chen tradition introduced by lHa btsun chen po and strengthened in Sikkim by 'Jigs med dpa' bo. This fact recalls Mullard's article showing how the sMing grol gling tradition has come to supersede mNga' bdags's one at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Today, these two movements are still present in bKra shis sdings' religious calendar since texts belonging to both traditions are still practised as we have seen.<sup>87</sup> To support this idea, we can add that, five days after the practice of *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* which belongs to sMing grol gling tradition as we have seen, the *Byang gter rig 'dzin dung sgrub* is performed for the death anniversary of mNga' dag Phun tshog rig 'dzin. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, are performed the *Byang gter thugs sgrub rtsal gyi sgrub dkyi* as well as the *'Bras ljongs gnas gsol lha bsang*. However, while some say that this latter text is the one discovered by lHa btsun chen po, others explain more convincingly because with more details that the *gNas gsol* of bKra shis sdings is a text called *gNas srung gtso 'khor gyi mchod sprin tshogs gnyis phan bde'i grib bsil dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i char rgyun zhes bya ba bzhus so* written by mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po, who took inspiration from kLong chen rab 'byams (1308-1364), author of several *gNas gsol*.

Concerning the monthly ritual, half are Byang gter (*Byang gter thugs bsgrub drag po rtsal* on the twenty-fifth day of each month and *Thugs rje chen po 'khor ba las grol gyi sgrub dkyil* and *tshogs* on the thirtieth) while on the tenth day of the month (*tshe bcu*) *Bla ma dgongs*

<sup>86</sup> 2003: 135.

<sup>87</sup> See page 3 of this article concerning *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* and page 6 concerning Rig 'dzin rgod ldem can's 'Deep Treasure'.

*dus kyi skong chog* is practised and on *tshes bco lnga* (fifteenth day) *rDo rje gcod pa* (commonly called ‘Diamond sutra’)<sup>88</sup> is performed.

If this suggests that this coexistence is not conflictual, the contradiction existing amongst local informants concerning the school to which bKra shis sdings belongs—some claiming the monastery belongs to the Byang gter sub-school, others denying it—reveals an actual questioning about this coexistence. It has not yet been possible to confirm this idea but knowing that the past is often deciphered according to present necessities, we can assume that this questioning could be related to modern issues as well as to historical ones.

We are now going to look at three modern ‘prints’ on bKra shis sdings which, though they are less involved in the life of the monastery, have nevertheless taken part in increasing the sanctity of the place.

*bLa ma ’Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros*<sup>89</sup> (1893-1959)

bLa ma ’Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros is the first incarnation of the Tibetan Buddhism nonsectarian movement’s<sup>90</sup> founder, ’Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892). He spent the end of his life in Sikkim at the invitation of Chos rgyal bKra shis rnam rgyal and passed away here. He has been cremated in bKra shis sdings monastery and his relics have been laid on the bright golden *mchod rten* that one can see when entering the *mchod rten* area, on the right of the *mchod rten* mThong ba rang grol. His consort (*gsang yum*) was mKha’ ’gro Tshe ring chos sgron who lived in the gTsug lha khang for many years.

’Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros was born in 1893 (Water Snake year of the Fifteen sixty-year cycle) in the locality of Ri khe a byam in the Tibetan province of Kham. His father<sup>91</sup> belonged to a tantric lineage (*sngags rgyud*). At birth he showed many remarkable signs. His father gave him the name ’Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros. He started to learn reading and writing at the age of six with his uncle bLa ma dGe legs. ’Jam mgon kong sprul rin po che bLo gros mtha’ yas<sup>92</sup> (one of the

<sup>88</sup> Skt. Vajracchedikā-prajñāparamita-sūtra.

<sup>89</sup> This section is written according to ’Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros’s biography (see bibliography here below for the reference), page 388 onward, kindly translated for the purpose of this article by Tashi Tenzing, T.N.A. Academy, Gangtok to whom I am deeply thankful.

<sup>90</sup> The Ris med movement.

<sup>91</sup> His father’s name was rGyur med tshe dbang rgya mtsho and his mother was called Tshul khriims mtsho.

<sup>92</sup> Before this recognition, he received the long life initiation (*tshe dbang*) from Brag dmar sprul pa.

four regents of the Karma bKa' brgyud school) recognised him as the action emanation (*phrin las*) of 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po.

He was initially admitted in the rNying ma pa monastery of Ka' thog in Khams and received his ordination from Srid tu rin po che. The latter gave him the name of 'Jam dbyan blo gros rgya mtsho. With a tutor,<sup>93</sup> he learned ten volumes in a year, Tibetan grammar and poetry (*sum rtags* and *sgra rig*), astrology (*dkar rtsis*), preliminary instructions (*sngon 'gro'i khrid*), Shantideva's work 'Engaging in Bodhisattva Conduct' (*sPyod 'jig*, seventh century) and how to perform rituals (*cho spyod kyi phyag len*). He made a summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*) for meditation at the age of ten. Then, he joined a tantric college (*rgyu sde'i bshad grwa*) and studied there until he was fourteen years old. He studied the main texts of sutra and mantra (*mdo sngags kyi gzhung bshed pa*) and the sciences (*rig gnas*).

He eventually settled in his predecessor's place at the Sa skya pa monastery of bKra shis lha rtse at sDe dge, in Khams. During his life, he travelled to different Tibetan monasteries where he received explanations (*khiring*) and transmission (*man ngag*) of an important number of teachings from teachers belonging to a great range of schools and branches of Tibetan Buddhism (he himself wrote in his biography that he received teachings from eighty Buddhist masters). For instance, at the age of seventeen, he received high tantric teachings and Sa skya pa main teaching (*Lam 'bras*, 'the path and the fruit'). At the age of eighteen, he received the teaching of *Rin chen gter mdzod* from his father. When he was twenty-eight, he went to North-East Tibet (at Byang rdo sgar) and received the teaching of *rDzogs chen klong snying rigs 'dus* from the previous incarnation of rDo grub chen rin po che<sup>94</sup> (i.e. rDo grub 'Jigs med btsan pa'i nyi ma). The latter also gave him the name of Ye shes rDo rje.

From the 1960s, he propounded the non-sectarian movement (Ris med). He came to Sikkim when he was sixty-three years old (1956) feeling that troubles were about to happen in Tibet.<sup>95</sup> He stayed a few years at the Tsuklhakhang with mKha' 'gro lags and directed ritual ceremonies and initiations.

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<sup>93</sup> Called Thub bstan rig 'dzin.

<sup>94</sup> His complete name is rDo sgrub chen Thub stan phrin las dpal bzang.

<sup>95</sup> From this point, the information comes from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Rigs dkyil rgya mtsho'i khyab bdag...* (see bibliography) kindly translated by Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya. See also the article of this author in the present issue of the *Bulletin*.

He passed away in Sikkim on the sixth day of the fifth month of 1959 (Earth Pig year). The funeral ritual was performed over a period of forty-nine days at the gTsug lha khang led by four of the most important Tibetan incarnates: Dril ngo mkhyen rtse rin po che, rDo grub chen rin po che, brGya ston rin po che and Srid tu rin po che.<sup>96</sup> From Sikkim, were present religious men from Padma yang rste (practising *bDe gshegs kun sdus*) and dBen can (practising *sMing gling rdor sems*) monasteries led by gLing stog sGom chen.<sup>97</sup> 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros's body was taken in procession to bKra shis sdings where it was cremated at the place where his reliquary is now located. Here also, many important religious men from Tibet as well as from Sikkim (like mKa' spyod sPrul sku and his elder brother Srog sgrub) performed the ritual. Three days after the cremation, the *gdung khang* ('house of cremation') was opened and some relics were left on the spot where the golden *sku gdung* has been built while some others were brought back to the royal chapel, enshrined in one golden and silver *mchod rten* given to Chos rgyal dPal lden don grub rnam rgyal. Concerning the *sku gdung* in bKra shis sdings, it was partly sponsored by 'Jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros's personal care takers (*bla brang*), which also collected some funds from donators, and partly by the Chos rgyal.

*lCags thag rin po che*<sup>98</sup> (end of nineteenth century – 1958)

There is no written biography of lCags thag rin po che and, though this name is very famous in Sikkim, very little is known about him. The following information comes from different members of his family who have interviewed. It is a summary of a forthcoming article for the *Bulletin* centered on lCags thag rin po che. There are some important differences between versions of events told by the informants and our position here has not been to choose one of these versions but to present the facts that are the most frequently found. The different version will be compared in the next article.

Different names are given for lCags thag rin po che's place of birth but all mention the Khams region of Tibet. He was born at the beginning of the 1870s or of the 1880s. His father was a provincial

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<sup>96</sup> The information here comes from Sem Tinley Ongmu Tashi who was a direct witness of these events and to whom we are deeply thankful to have shared her memories with us.

<sup>97</sup> Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Rigs dkyil rgya mtsho'i khyab bdag...*

<sup>98</sup> *lCags thag* [*pa*], lit. means 'iron rope'.

chieftain. He was the sixteenth incarnation of the Indian Yogi Saraha (eighth century), head of the Mahamudra meditation lineage nowadays held by the Karma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. lCags thag rin po che's previous incarnation was called sGrub chen Ma Ni bSod rnam Rin chen.

He attempted many times to run away from his home and finally succeeded at the age of ten or eleven years. Very little is known about what he did then. He probably received a monastic education: he could read the Tibetan script and used to practise the text *rDo rje gcod pa*. But he didn't perform monastic rituals and never wore any monastic garment. He sponsored the first practice of *rDo rje gcod pa* in bKra shis sdngs and this text is now chanted on the fifteenth day of every month.

He entered Sikkim when he was twenty five or thirty years old and visited many places, mainly in West Sikkim. He eventually got married with a Lepcha woman from Mangthiang ('Moong phyang' in Lepcha) nearby sGang rgyab. His wife was the niece of to Mkha' spyod sgro dbang sKu zhog (also called Mkha' spyod sgro dbang rin po che) of Mkha' spyod dpal ri. The details of his meeting with his wife vary according to informant. But all mention that lCags thag rin po che shot an arrow from a very distant place that reached the future wife's meditation house at a time when she was practising a long retreat for meditation under the guidance of her uncle. Rin po che then came to enquire about his arrow. The lady returned it to him and he then knew she would become his wife.

After his marriage, lCags thag rin po che went back to Tibet with his wife for a few years. His eldest son, mThsams po rin po che, was born there in 1910 (Iron Dog year of the Tibetan calendar). He was also well known in Sikkim though he has often been confused with his father. He passed away in August 2006. lCags thag rin po che's second son was born in Sikkim in 1911. Altogether, he and his wife had five sons and three daughters.

lCags thag rin po che is also famous for his appearance: he was very tall and strong, wearing only a leopard skin around his waist and, at the beginning, iron chains around his chest. "Without these chain, he would have flown" some say, adding that he often appeared very suddenly in a place, like if coming from nowhere. They explain he would not touch the ground without chains because of his practice of *rtsa rlung* or practice of *anu* yoga which leads to the control of the internal channels and the vital energy. Rin po che made the links of his

chains from bangles of different precious metals. He used to leave pieces of them in different places, often inside *mchod rten*. This led some to believe that he wanted to bless and transmit a force of protection by keeping it on his body; the object then exerting its power in different places. He eventually left the whole set in Rumtek from where it has been scattered.

Rin po che built the three thrones at Zil gnon monastery, one dedicated to his previous incarnation; the meaning of the two others is not known. He also built numerous *mchod rten*. He built eight of them in Mangtiang and we find again the idea of ‘protection’ in the belief that Rin po che did so in order to ‘reverse’ or ‘tame’ the local deities (*bzlog thabs*). He built them at night and refused any help. Because the construction was nevertheless very fast, it is believed that he received supernatural support. He also built one *mchod rten* at Ten Miles in Kalimpong—on a land donated by a Bhutanese queen—which no longer exists. He had stayed in Kalimpong after his return from Tibet.

Throughout his life in Sikkim, Rin po che meditated in three different places: his first ‘meditation house’ (*mthsams khang*) was in Mangtiang, the second was Ri gsung mThsams khang (above Zil gnon) and the third one in sGang rgyab itself.

At the end of his life he was no longer wearing chains; he was staying home most of the time, meditating and receiving visitors who came to ask him advice and receive his blessing. He passed away in 1958 at sGang rgyab. His dead body was cremated there, a *sku gdung* can still be seen at his cremation place. After his death, his family built a *tsa khang* or ‘recipient for clay icons of deity’ (*tsa tsa*) in bKra shis sdings in his memory at the feet of the two big *mchod rten* between the sTong mchod lha khang and the bsKang gsol lha khang.

*mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen*<sup>99</sup> (1923-2006)

*mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen* was born in rKong bo (near to Padma bkod, in the Brahmaputra’s big loop) in Tibet in a prominent family in the Water Pig year of the Fifteenth sixty-year cycle (1923).<sup>100</sup> When

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<sup>99</sup> Her complete name was 'Khrul zhig dpa 'bo rdo rje mkha' 'gro Padma bde chen.

<sup>100</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from dKon mchog yon tan, secretary of mChod rten monastery in Gangtok who knew well *mKha' 'gro lags*. We are deeply thankful to him for his help. Another part of this information comes from two articles in the sikkimese daily newspaper *Now!* All information has been checked with dKon mchog yon tan and the source for each of them will be specified in

she was twelve or thirteen years old, 'Khrul zhig rin po che (1897-1952) came from Kham Mi nyak to visit rKong bo. Rin po che could have recognised the girl as being a *mkha' 'gro ma*, i.e. a Wisdom *ḍākiṇi* at that time. More precisely, amongst the five kinds of *ḍākiṇi*, mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen was a West *ḍākiṇi*. 'Khrul zhig rin po che would have explained to mKha' 'gro lags's mother that the girl's life would be in danger if she wouldn't let this inner religious capacity express itself by becoming a practitioner. It is also possible that the girl became a *mkha' 'gro* due to her marriage with Rin po che as it is usually the case. Indeed the terms '*mkha' 'gro*' as well as '*gsang yum*' (consort) or '*a ni*' (nun) are used to address a *rin po che*'s wife—depending on the religious perspective—and mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen was called 'Khrul zhig A ni' by Sikkemese people in her young age.<sup>101</sup>

mKha' 'gro lags started her religious training with 'Khrul zhig rin po che, accompanying him wherever he was going. Indeed, Rin po che was not attached to a specific monastery and was travelling very often for religious purposes. mKha' 'gro lags also had bDud 'jom rin po che (1904-1987) for 'root master' (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*), whose *gter gsar* (literally 'new treasure', in the present case, i.e. bDud 'jom rin po che's religious 'tradition') was followed by 'Khrul zhig rin po che. mKha' 'gro took the *dge snyen* vows from both Rin po che(s).

'Khrul zhig rin po che and mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen came to Sikkim in 1946 (bDud 'jom rin po che arrived latter) at the invitation of Chos rgyal bKra shis rnam rgyal.<sup>102</sup> Rin po che built the main *mchod rten* of 'Dud sdul mChod rten monastery (commonly called 'mChod rten monastery') in 1948 "according to the wishes of the Chogyal Tashi Namgyal and Crown Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal"<sup>103</sup> who also gave the land. He became dPal lden Don grub rnam rgyal's root master.<sup>104</sup> With the king's support, 'Khrul zhig rin po che built the Gu ru lha khang of mChod rten monastery in 1956 and the Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies in 1961.

mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen travelled extensively in Sikkim in her younger days, still accompanying her teacher 'Khrul zhig rin po che.

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footnotes. Until the next footnote the information has been given by dKon mchog yon tan.

<sup>101</sup> Thank you to Tashi Densapa for this information.

<sup>102</sup> Now! 27 Sept.

<sup>103</sup> Tsulstem Gyatso Acharya, 2005: 61 note 21.

<sup>104</sup> dKon mchog yon tan.

They were based in La chung for a while and during her stay there, she organised the lay people into a socio-religious body which continues with the religious practice of offering Tshes bcu initiated by her in 1963. mKha' 'gro lags also organised the faithful at La chung to construct the Thang mo che monastery there.<sup>105</sup> Rin po che also meditated for two years in Lukshama, the *chos rgyal*'s cremation ground, and in Hung ri where mKha' 'gro lags provided him care.

She was also a very lively person and Sem Tinley Ongmu Tashi, who has been close to mKha' 'gro lags throughout her life, remembers their young days as follows: “[W]hen dPal lden don grub nram rgyal was going to meet 'Khrul zhig rin po che in mChod rten, I used to go with him and ask Rin po che the permission to give a leave to mKha' 'gro lags. Then, we used to go near to the White Hall where there was a grass field and played their. We were joking a lot and playing in the grass or jacks stones.”

'Khrul zhig Rin po passed away in 1962 and mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen stayed in mChod rten monastery. She became rDo grub chen rin po che's consort; Rin po che had arrived in 1956 in Sikkim and was known to 'Khrul zhig rin po che. He settled in mChod rten with her and took the administration of the monastery in-charge.<sup>106</sup>

mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen performed the strict and rigorous *sNgon 'gro*, which involves 500,000 different practices, including 100,000 prostrations, nineteen times in her lifetime. mKha' 'gro pad me bde chen then became respected as the most accomplished lady practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism of the era in Sikkim.<sup>107</sup>

About her function in the monastery, Sem Tinley Ongmu Tashi explains: “mKha' 'gro lags was looking after rDo grub chen rin po che's personal cares. She was Rin po che personal attendant and also a kind of social secretary. When people that Rin po che knew came to visit him, they were first going to mKha' 'gro lags's room and welcomed by her. She was offering them tea and talking with them. She was giving advice to everybody. She had time for every one; she was very kind, she never shown any anger.”

mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen died on the fifth of September 2006 and it is believed she remained in meditation for one week after her death (this meditation is called *thugs dam*) before the '*byang sems dkar dmar*' or 'the white and red [signs of] Boddhisatva' appeared. Her body was cremated on the twenty-sixth of September in bKra shis sdings

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<sup>105</sup> Now! 27 Sept.

<sup>106</sup> dKon mchog yon tan.

<sup>107</sup> Now! 09 Sept.



monastery and rDo grub chen Rin po decided that her remains would be thrown in the Ganga river. In bKra shis sdings, the location of her cremation has been demarcated with the belief that a *sku gdung* will be built, many pilgrims (mainly from Bhutan) attended the *bum chu* festival this year, declaring that they also came to pay their respects to mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen's remains. Indeed, the crowd which came to attend the *bum chu* ritual has been particularly numerous this year 2007 and these pilgrims' statements lead some bKra shis sdings villagers to believe that mKha' 'gro Padma bde chen's cremation in bKra shis sdings has played a part in attracting more pilgrims than the previous year. The role of these new 'marks' in bKra shis sdings monastery in the perpetuation of the sanctity of the place is here exemplified.

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