

A Dharma Raja and a Mahasiddha: A Note on the Spiritual Relationship Between His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck and Togden Shakya Shri

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In 1917, King Ugyen Wangchuck (1862-1926) made an offering of forty thousand English pounds to Togden Shakya Shri (rtogs ldan shAkya shrI, 1853-1919), who was raising funds for renovating and re-consecrating Swayambhunath (phags pa shing kun) stupa in Nepal. Approximately a hundred years earlier, i.e., on the fourth day of the fifth month of Water Bird Year (1813), Lama Sangye Norbu initiated the renovation which took five long years. He was one in a line of more than twenty lamas appointed by Bhutan's Dharmarajas to the courts of Gorkha and later Nepal's kings. He served during the reign of King Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah (1799-1816) (Padma Tshewang, 1995, p. 238). Exactly a hundred years later in 2017, His Majesty the King commanded support for restoring the Bhutanese temple within the precinct of the same stupa, which was badly damaged by the 2015 earthquake. Call it historical coincidence or karmic continuity, the royal patronage of this important Buddhist monument by the first and fifth Druk Gyalpos – separated by a hundred years – reminisces Bhutan's custodial rights over Swayambhunath and its monastic lands given as compensation to Bhutan by King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1772 after the 16th desi, Zhidar relinquished Bhutanese control over the kingdom of Vijaypur at the former's request!

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The three stupas of Swayambhunath, Boudhanath (bya rung kha shor) and Namobuddha (stag mo lus sbyin), all located in Kathmandu valley, Nepal, occupy a special place in Buddhist cosmology and thought. They are deemed indispensable for the Buddha Dharma and well-being of sentient beings. This preliminary discussion on the relationship between a great Dharma King and peerless Mahasiddha was first shared over social media on the occasion of Bhutan's 110th National Day celebrated at Haa as personalized mode of paying tribute to His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck, whose enthronement as the First King is celebrated every year on 17 December. I drew my information primarily from the biography of Togden Shakya Shri written by Kathog Situ Chokyi Gyatsho. His biography was first carved on woodblocks in Bhutan and was commissioned by Lopen Sonam Zangpo (1892-1983), his foremost disciple. Recently, I had access to a few other publications which helped improved the earlier version posted online.

Shakya Shri was a highly learned yogi, "a spiritual luminary," and a master for both Mahamudra and Dzongchen traditions. He was regarded as an incarnation of the Indian Mahasiddha Saraha. He saw the need for renovating these stupas both for the sake of Buddha Dharma and as means of counteracting the difficult times befalling Tibet then. He began with Swayambhunath raising funds with donations from the government of Tibet and patrons in Lhasa and other regions as well as offerings received from devotees. King Ugyen Wangchuck "in the glory of his matchless merit and power, opened wide the door of a sky treasure by sending Geshe Sherub Dorje to Shakya Shri with an offering of forty thousand pounds" (Gyatsho, 2011, p. 153) His Majesty's contribution eventually totalled seventy five thousand English pounds, and appears to have been a major part of the funds mobilized.

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Shakya Shri did not go himself to Nepal but sent his two sons with a group of people after raising the required funds. The project began on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of 1917 and concluded with a consecration ceremony on the fifteenth day of the third month of 1918. His sons and others associated with the renovation reported to Shakya Shri on their return to Tibet information about the dilapidated conditions of the other two stupas: Boudhanath and Namobuddha. Hence he made it known to them that renovating these two stupas was one of his last wishes for the sake of Buddha Dharma and sentient beings.

After his demise in 1919, his sons, disciples and devotees undertook to fulfil his wishes. As before, they began to raise funds from Tibet, and also from Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling and nearby places. Once again, His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck donated 13,700 pounds.¹ He wrote an appeal to the people of Bhutan to contribute to the raising of funds. The Bhutanese disciples of Shakya Shri then went to their native villages and raised £ 1,174 “In addition, the family of a deceased government official named Kazhi donated £ 2000 on his behalf to accumulate merit” (Gyatsho, 2011, p. 181). Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014) identifies him as *zimpon*. He must have been Kazi Ugyen Dorji, who was appointed as the chamberlain to Ugyen Wangchuck in 1911 (Damchoe Lhendup, 2008, p. 208). Renovation works began first with Boudhanath stupa in 1920 followed by Namobuddha stupa. It

¹ Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014) also refers to donation made by Ugyen Wangchuck. But she is not sure about the currency. She writes in a footnote (p.131) that “[i]t is difficult to know what type of currency the text mentions, as it only uses the term ‘sgor,’ which is literally currency. However, other sources from this time suggest that Indian and Chinese rupees were widely in circulation throughout Tibet and the Himalayas, though there was also Tibetan currency.” I have used English pounds as is mentioned in the translation of the biography on which this paper is based.

is important to note that Lopen Sonam Zangpo was one of Shakya Shri's main disciples involved in the renovation. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014, p. 114) notes that the Newari and Bhutanese were crucial agents in the renovation works. Their roles have not been sufficiently captured in Tibetan sources concerning the works.

The biography also mentions very briefly Shakya Shri's own contribution to restoration works in Bhutan and in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh. It is said that he offered thrice more than eighty ounces of gold to paint special statues of Guru Padmasambhava (Gyatsho 2011, p. 146). The exact location of these statues or the temples they are enshrined in are however, not specified.

How and when did the special relationship between King Ugyen Wangchuck and Togden Shakya Shri begin? When did they meet? Shakya Shri had predicted long ago that his teachings would spread to countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan, and to the regions of Lahoul, Lapchi, Tsari and other places. Lopen Sonam Zangpo, Lama Menlam Rabzang (1879-1945) and Drubwang Tenzin Gyatsho (1883-1966) were his principal students in Bhutan and those responsible for the transmission of his teachings. They too were sent by King Ugyen Wangchuck. Other Bhutanese students include Namdrol Yeshe from Bumthang, Lama Rabgye from Zhungar (Lhuntse), Nyima Yoezer and his brother from Dongzamkha (Dungsamkha), Rigdzin Dorje from Kurto, a certain Nampar Gyalwa as well as "the master of rituals of Chakar monastery in Bumthang." Buli Trulku was reportedly the first Bhutanese disciple of Shakya Shri (Gyatsho 2011, p. 135).

It appears likely that King Ugyen Wangchuck's relationship with Shakya Shri began long before his enthronement as the

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first hereditary monarch of Bhutan. This, however, has to be confirmed. The biography mentions about the visit of Artsa Lama Ngawang Palden, another foremost disciple of Shakya Shri, to deliver his master's letter to King Ugyen Wangchuck. Dorji Gyeltshen (2010, p. 41) also mentions about Artsa Lama's visit to deliver the letter. The biography also notes that Shakya Shri received a letter from King Wangchuck to visit Bhutan. It is not very clear whether Shakya Shri had sent Artsa Lama in response to King Ugyen Wangchuck's invitation.

The visit of Artsa Lama and his activities in Bumthang are vividly described by Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014). The point of interest to note here is that both King Ugyen Wangchuk and Artsa Lama approved Tenzin Gyamtsho's submission to travel to Tibet and study under Shakya Shri. He had come to Bumthang at age 16 and was one of the top three students benefitting from His Majesty's sponsorship. He not only became one of the early Bhutanese disciples of Shakya Shri but a highly accomplished practitioner and lineage holder. On his return from Tibet, he was given a grand welcome by His Majesty and others. In Bhutan, he spread the teachings of Shakya Shri. He became the Vajra Master or Dorje Lopen of the state monastic order. He went back in 1918 as instructed by Shakya Shri to receive the last of teachings and empowerment. The 68th Je Khenpo His Holiness Tenzin Dendup is one of his principal disciples.

Shakya Shri sent Artsa Lama to Bodh Gaya in 1909. It was then that he visited Nepal, Varanasi and Himachal Pradesh and went back to Tibet. It is not clear whether he visited Bhutan before or after this trip to Bodh Gaya. The sequence of the biography's narrative suggests that the visit to Bhutan took place after his visit to Bodh Gaya. However, the lengthy footnote at the end states that he entered Tibet through Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh and passed away in Tsibri in

Tibet. Therefore, his visit to Bhutan could not have taken place after the visit to Bodh Gaya. Indeed, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2014) suggests that the visit was a separate one since he had come to deliver a letter. He returned with Drubwang Tenzin Gyatsho to Tibet. Therefore, it appears that the visit to Bhutan took place before 1909.

It looks certain that King Ugyen Wangchuck and Togden Shakya Shri have met personally; what is not uncertain is the place where they met. In a brief biography in the “Treasury of Lives,” Jagar Dorji (2011) mentions that Shakya Shri visited Khenpajong in eastern Bhutan. There is no mention of an encounter between them there. However, if Shakya Shri indeed visited Khenpajong, it is possible that the meeting may have taken place there. The biography mentions that Shakya Shri returned to his hermitage in eastern Tibet after a visit, in 1909, to Chigchar and Tsari. At the hermitage, the biography notes that ‘he donated the offerings he had received (as parting gift from the king of Bhutan) to several masters, tulkus and local monasteries for their support.’ This at least affirms that they had met possibly at Khenpajong.

The relationship between them have certainly continued thereafter. King Ugyen Wangchuck had once “sent yaks packed with loads of rice escorted by thirty men, up through the perilous paths in the district of Lhodrak, as an offering to the siddha master. In an accompanying letter, the King explained that he had included an expensive bowl of Chinese porcelain in one of the sack of rice.” The men had the instruction to present the bowl immediately on their arrival but were not sure in which bag of rice it was concealed. A frantic search began in front of the master. Then the master is said to have pointed out the sack although there was no identifying label. When they looked in that sack, the porcelain was indeed found.

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One of Shakya Shri's foremost Bhutanese disciple was Lama Monlam Rabzang. Ugyen Wangchuck had entrusted him to do the painting works of murals inside the newly constructed Guru Lhakhang at Kurje. He was commanded to reproduce the works at Pelri Gonpa. However, he decided on a different set of motifs in consideration of the space. When Ugyen Wangchuck visited the Lhakhang to inspect the paintings, he found out about the different paintings and threatened Lam Monlam Rabzang to re-do the works in a month or face consequences. This led him to escape to Tibet and seek his future master Shakya Shri, of whom he had first heard during Artsa Lam's visit to Bhutan.

Another version describes how Monlam Rabzang was leading a group of people to Lhasa in 1900. They were deputed by Ugyen Wangchuck to make offerings to various monasteries and lamas in memory of his late consort Azhi Rinchen Pelmo. It was then that Monlam Rabzang is said to have heard about Shakya Shri, who was residing and teaching in Kham. He sent a letter to Ugyen Wangchuck informing him of his decision to stay back in Tibet and study with Shakya Shri (Dorji Gyeltshen, 2010, pp. 38-41).

Monlam Rabzang returned to Bhutan in 1919. Based on Shakya Shri's prophecy, he lived and taught in Tashigang, eastern Bhutan. Before his return, Ugyen Wangchuck reportedly learnt about Monlam Rabzang's scholarly and meditative accomplishments particularly in the practice of Naro Choedrug of Mahamudra tradition. He had commanded the Crown Prince Jigme Wangchuck to bring him back to Bhutan later after the completion of his studies and training in order to promote those profound practices in the country. However, Monlam Rabzang returned much ahead but chose to stay in Tashigang (Dorji Gyeltshen, 2010, p. 57. Translation mine).

What this brief article attempted to do was highlight some aspects of the close relationship between one of Tibet's greatest Yogi and Bhutan's first king, Chogyal Ugyen Wangchuck. His Majesty had undoubtedly been an important supporter and sponsor of Shakya Shri's projects. It was as a result of their relationship that the first shedra at Tharpaling, Bumthang was established at the beginning of the 20th century. His personal involvement in the training of Bhutanese under Shakya Shri led to the emergence of a class of Bhutanese yogis and scholars, who fostered Shakya Shri's teachings in Bhutan, which flourishes to this day!

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