

RINZING LHADRIPA LAMA (1912–1977)  
AND THE NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY'S  
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Rinzing Lhadripa Lama with two of his thangkas, 1947-8 <sup>2</sup>

Rinzing Lhadripa Lama, also known as Barmiok Lhadrip from the Chungyalpa family, was the best thangka painter Sikkim has ever had. Born in 1912 in the village of Temi in South Sikkim, he joined the Ralang monastery at about ten years of age where he excelled in his

<sup>1</sup> With information kindly provided by Kunzang Chungyalpa, daughter of Rinzing Lhadripa, and Tashi Densapa.

<sup>2</sup> Photograph by P. Goodwin, courtesy Kate Wentworth (born Hopkinson).

studies and served the Barmiok Lama, Karma Palden Chogyal, the then head of the monastery. He stayed with Barmiok Rinpoche serving and receiving teachings from him for several years. Barmiok Rinpoche soon noticed Rinzing's artistic talent as he drew with charcoal on the walls.

While Rinzing Lhadripa was with Rinpoche, the Panchen Lama's court artist Champa Tashi Lhadrip U Chenmo (Byams pa bKra shis), the greatest artist of Tsang,<sup>3</sup> arrived in Sikkim from Tashilhunpo on his way to Kalimpong. Recognizing Rinzing's prodigious artistic talent, Rinpoche placed Rinzing in 1924 under the great master of Tashilhunpo with whom he trained for seven years. He thus had the unusual good fortune to be trained directly under a grand master.

Rinzing's first formal assignment came as the lead assistant to the master of Tashilhunpo who, in 1930, had been commissioned by the royal family to paint the murals of Gangtok's Tsuglakhang, Sikkim's Royal Chapel. Upon completion of the Tsuglakhang, although still very young, Lhadrip Rinzing had himself become an accomplished artist.

In 1941, the Chogyal of Sikkim asked Rinzing Lhadripa to train students from Sikkim's six major monasteries which he continued to do throughout his life. It is thought that he trained more than sixty students-lhadripas<sup>4</sup> although none came close to his artistic skills or his spiritual knowledge and experience.

In the early 1964-5, Rinzing Lhadripa contributed murals to the newly constructed Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Established in 1958, the Institute served as a repository of Tibetan manuscripts, and later as a museum and research centre. Not being a monastery, the walls of the Institute's top floor's hall offered a canvas on which Rinzing Lhadripa could apply his talent perhaps without having to subscribe to the rigid rules of Tibetan iconography. Inspired by a visit to the Ajanta caves and aided by photographs, Rinzing Lhadripa painted ten panels representing various events of Buddha's life and the Jātaka Tales, in a style blending early Indian wall painting and Tibetan iconography.

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<sup>3</sup> Information about Champa Tashi from *Selected Writings of Burmiok Rinpoche Karma Palden Choegyal (1871-1942)*, compiled and edited by Tashi Tsering, Sikkim: Zimig Sang ngag Dud dul Ling Gongpa 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Among his students were Lama Ganden Lhadrip, Lhadrip Tobden of Pemayangtse (from 1959), Omze Ngawang Gelek of Pemayantse, Lhadrip Kunzang of Pemayantse, Karma Dorjee of Marchak, Lhadrip Tenzing Norbu (Balu), Ugyen Choeda of Phensang and Karma Tshering of Ralang monastery.

Unfortunately, a leaking roof eventually caused extensive damage to these unusual murals. Appreciating their value, Tashi Densapa<sup>5</sup> Director of the Institute requested Late André Alexander of the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) to undertake their restoration once the leaks were sealed. In the spring of 2013, the murals were restored by chief conservator Anca Nicolaescu together with assistant conservators Yangchen Dolma and Skarma Lotus of Ladakh, together with Lhadripa Tenzing Norgay Lachungpa of North Sikkim.

Prior to this, THF and chief conservator Anca Nicolaescu had undertaken the conservation of Gangtok's Tsuglakhang murals,<sup>6</sup> which had partly been painted by Rinzing Lhadripa.

Rinzing Lhadripa independent major works include (with approximate dates):

#### MURAL PAINTINGS

1942 – Tashiding monastery, West Sikkim

1945 – Dubde monastery, West Sikkim

1947 – Phodong monastery, North Sikkim

1949-50 – Enchey monastery, Gangtok, East Sikkim<sup>7</sup>

1950 – Luktsa monastery, Darjeeling

1957 – Ship monastery, Dzongu, North Sikkim

1959 – Phodong monastery, North Sikkim

1959 – Guru Lhakhang, Deorali, Gangtok, East Sikkim<sup>8</sup>

1960 – Phensang monastery, North Sikkim

1960 – Lachung monastery, North Sikkim

1964-65 – Institute of Tibetology, Ajanta Hall, Gangtok, East Sikkim

1967-68 – Pemayangtse monastery, West Sikkim

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Tashi Densapa is considered the reincarnation of the Barmiok Lama, Karma Palden Chogyal, who had first noticed Rinzing's talent and placed him under the Tashilhumpo master.

<sup>6</sup> See Bulletin of Tibetology, 2011, Vol.47 No.1&2, pp.107-114.

<sup>7</sup> Date provided by Agya Ugyen, lama of Enchey monastery.

<sup>8</sup> Date provided by Lhadrip Tobden of Pemayangtse.

1976/77 – Karmapa’s Centre in Copenhagen. He was asked by the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa to undertake the assignment. He expired there towards the end of his work.

The majority of these wall murals, very unfortunately, are no longer standing. Due to Sikkim’s extreme climate and numerous earthquakes, the majority of these monasteries have since been rebuilt without preservation of the original murals. However, murals painted by Rinzing Lhadripa can still be viewed at the monasteries of Lachung, Pemayangtse and Dubde as well as at the Namgyal institute of Tibetology and Gangtok’s Tsuglakhang.

#### THANKGAS

Rinzing Lhadripa painted numerous thangkas during his life time including some for foreign visitors to the Palace. His major thangka paintings include:

1. Nyeten Chudrup (gNas brtan bcu drug), thangka set for Barmiok Athing painted in his late twenties. Rinzing Lhadripa later painted one set for the Chogyal of Sikkim; one set for his friend from Lachen which, it is said, was later offered to HH the Dalai Lama; and one for late Yap Zerung.
2. Dorje Phurba tsok shing (rDo rje phur pa tshog zhing) painted under the direct guidance of HH Dudjom Rinpoche while he was conducting *terzod wang* (gter mdzod dbang) in 1944. The thangka is said to be at HH Dudjom Rinpoche’s monastery in Kongpo.
3. Gyalrab (rGyal rab), series of five thangas on the history of Sikkim, commissioned by the Chogyal in the 1960s and currently with the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.
4. Kagyu Sertheng (bKa’ brgyud gser phreng), 15 ft thangka of the Kagyud lineage painted as offering to HH the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. Currently under lock and seal of the Indian Government along with other precious belongings of HH Karmapa.

AJANTA HALL, NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY  
EXAMPLES OF MURALS



Panel 3: Jātaka Tales: The Chandatta Elephant



Mural conservation work in-progress  
Yangchen Dolma and Tenzing Norgay Lachungpa at work





Panel 10: The 9<sup>th</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> deeds of the Buddha:  
'Defeating a host of devils'