

THE TRADITION OF TREASURED - TEXT TEACHINGS IN BUDDHISM THROUGH THE AGES

Phuntsok Tsering

It is true that the Nyingma(rNying-ma) Order of Tibetan Buddhism abounds in the tradition of 'Treasured-teachings' (gTer-chos). But the tradition of hiding and discovering of treasured-text teachings is not exclusive to Nyingma Order. There are several instances of the existence of the treasured teachings and their transmission in other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and interestingly, it existed even in the earliest days of Buddhism in India.

WHAT IS GTER-MA?

The literal meaning of the word 'gter' is 'mine', 'treasure' or 'store'. The word, consequently, became associated with the idea of something that has been mined out and worthy of preservation or precious. The objects termed 'gter-ma' may be jewels, silver, gold, etc. indicating 'material' values or may be figurines, cult objects and reliquaries, representing 'religious' values. A gter-ma can also be precious in the sense that it embodies liberation in which case its preciousness would be the doctrinal content laid down in written works or their oral teaching. Whether precious teaching or cult objects, common to all of them is that they have, at least once, been concealed and then have been rediscovered. Furthermore, they have a hidden meaning. The significance of these teachings, scriptures or cult objects is revealed only to the religious man who is qualified or predestined for such a task. The concealment can be related to the belief in Dakas and Dakinis, the representatives of the transcendent, so as to ensure their transmission, and to the guardian-deities (srung-ma) for their custody till their rediscovery or excavation by their predestined 'Discoverers' (gter-ston). When these books etc. are rediscovered, the Dakinis merely pass them to the discoverers. This tradition of discovering the text and the transmission of the teachings by the Dakinis to the discoverers taking place through this "transcendent sphere" is called the "Short - routed Trans-

mission of Treasured-texts" (Nye-brgyud gter-ma) and is contrasted with the "Long-routed Transmission of the Pronouncements" (Ring-brgyud bka'-ma) which takes place through the "historical human sphere".

A discoverer of Treasured-texts (gter-ston) is a person embodying in himself the poles of temporality and extra temporality. The former is the discoverer's historical existence which we know from his name and the events in his life. This historical human existence which follows the rules of temporality is pervaded by the absolute reality of extra-temporality. The discoverer sees this reality in his enlightened vision (dag-snang).

GTER-MA IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Going back to the earliest days of Buddhism, the noted bKa'-brgyud-pa historian, dPa'-bo gTsug-lag 'Phreng-ba (1503-1565) records : "According to the Sutra, it is said that the texts of Fasting (bsnyen-gnas, upavasa) and Refuge (skyabs-'gro, sharana) were taken from a pillar. Again, when Lord Buddha was on the way at the invitation of the Great Brahman (Bram-ze chen-po), some rays of light emitted from a rubbish-heap accompanied by a broadcast saying : "Welcome! Shakyamuni!" At this, the Buddha offered his salutation with tears of veneration, tidied his mantle and said : "Here lay the relics of all the Buddhas". And then he promulgated the "Dharani of the Secret Relics" (gSang-ba ring-srel gyi gzungs). It is true that the Tathagata did not have to depend upon (an earlier) text of the "Dharani", but verily that text has been counted as a "gTer-ma." I dPa'-bo gTsug-lag further maintains that the monk who converted Ashoka to Buddhism is believed to have been a manifestation of Padmasambhava and in the sutra entitled sPyod yul rnam 'phrul gyi mdo, the Buddha prophesies thus : "After I attain Mahaparinirvana, King Ajatashatru would hide his share of the relics and this Sutra collectively at a place to the South of Rajagriha. A king to be called Ashoka would come after 100 years of my Parinirvana. At that time, a monk to be named Bhikshu Indrasena (dBang-po'i-sde) will discover these hidden treasures with the aid of which he will tame the king. The King will build eighty-four (-thousand) stupas in his empire with those relics. That Bhikshu

will hide that text at a place in the north to be known by nobody." It is believed that this Bhikshu hid this text in a place in Tibet. 2 In order to lend credence, the Buddha, in several of his sutras including Chos yang dag par bsodud pa'i mdo, mNgon du zhugs pa'i ting nge 'dzin gyi mdo, KLu'i rgyal pos zhus pa'i mdo, 'Phags pa bsod nams thams cad bsodud pa'i ting nge 'dzin gyi mdo, Chu klung rol pa'i mdo and bDe mchog nyung ngu'i rgyud prophesies the prevalence of treasured-text teachings. 3

Lord Maitripa unearthed the three last books of the "Maitreya Doctrines" (Byams-chos) including the Uttaratantra from the crevice of a stupa. 4 We again find Nagarjuna obtaining the last chapter of the Prajna-paramita from the realm of the Naga-spirits where it had been buried as a treasured-text by Manjusri and had been entrusted to the care of the Naga-spirits. The Great Indian Mahasiddhas have unearthed treasured-texts of Tantra from the Stupa of Urgyan Dhu-ma-tha-la. 5

SRONG-BTSAN & GTER-MA

The practice of hiding treasured-texts and other objects received a tremendous popularity and significance during the reign of the Tibetan King, Khri-srong LDe-btsan (755-797 AD) effected as it was by Padmasambhava, and other teachers but the practice of hiding texts and other objects in Tibet started much before the visit of Padmasambhava. The Sa-skyapa historian, bLa-ma Dam-pa bSod-nams rGyal-mtshan (1312-1375), in his rGyal-rabs gsal ba'i me long (written in 1368 AD), records that the King, Srong-btsan sGampo (617-649) hid several treasures of different kinds and contents for the benefit of the posterity.

In the proximity of the Vase-like Pillar (Ka-ba bum-pa-can) in the Cathedral (Jo-khang), he hid the "Treasures of the Doctrines" (Chos-gter). In the proximity of the Leaf-like Pillar (Ka-ba shing-lo-can), he hid the "Treasures of gold, silver, and gems". In the proximity of the Snake-head-like Pillar (Ka-ba sbrul-mgo-can), he hid the "Treasures of Mystic Formulae". In the proximity of the Lion-head-like Pillar (Ka-ba seng-mgo-can), he hid "Benedictory Formulae" (gYang-yig) of the domestic cattle. Ratna-de-ba, a precious stone, was encased

in a chest of onyx(gzi) and covered it with five different kinds of high quality silk and was hidden beneath the image of Jambhala (deity of wealth). sTag-sha de-ba, another precious stone, wrapped up in a case of a snake was hidden in the KLu-khang. A Sapphire bowl filled up with several varieties of delicacies was hidden in the Yaksha house (gNod-sbyin khang-pa). A copper Degchi filled up with gold, silver, and several other varieties of precious stone was hidden beneath the Big Mandala (dKyil-'Khor chen-po). The King then offered prayers to the effect that only fortunate beings be able to unearth them. In addition to this, the King, in order to augur fertility in the land, for securing timely rain, for ripening the grains, for averting drought, frost, hail-storm, famine, diseases and external aggression and also to augur good luck and prosperity at all time hid several vessels full of precious stones including gold and silver in the Yaksha house, kLu-khang and the Lha-khang. 6 The King even hid his own short, medium and long autobiographies beneath the Vase-like Pillar, and prayed that these items be unearthed by the fortunate ones only. 7 The Mani-bka'-'bum hidden in the right leg treasury of Hayagriva (rTa-mgrin, one of the retinue of the Five Self-evolved aspects of Avalokitesvara (Thugs-rje chen-mo rang-byon lnga-ldan) in the Central Cathedral of Lhasa was unearthed by the rNyingma ascetic, Grub-thob dNgos-grub in the 12th century. 8 A Minister of King Khri-lde gTsug-brtan Meg-ag-tshoms (704-754) discovered and inscribed copper plate in a rocky ravine at 'Chims-phu hidden by mGar-stong-btsan, on which were inscribed the following words of King Srong-btsan sGam-po :

" My nephew bearing my name with the addition of "lDe" will spread the Doctrine of the Buddha."

Khri-lde gTsug-brtan thinking that "this lDe must be I" built several viharas including that of Brag-dmar mgrin-bzang. 9

GTER-MA AND RNYING-MA

The special greatness of Guru Padmasambhava's action lay in the fact that he had been hiding countless concealed treasures in the form of religious objects,

treasures, medicines, things for astrological divination and for devotion in India, Nepal and Tibet in the interest of the Doctrine and the followers of future times. 10 Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal gathered all the Pronouncements (bka'-ma) by seizing them through the ability of not forgetting anything. She wrote treatises on the 'Five Methods' of Spiritual Maturing in the symbolic language of the Dakinis, hid them in various receptacles and impressed on them the "Seal of Indestructibility". Padma-sambhava together with his divine consort hid Treasured-texts and other items in appropriate places entrusting their custody to the "Protector of the Treasures". When Padmasambhava left for rNga-yab-gling, Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal remained in Tibet for a further one hundred worldly years, hiding countless treasures in the upper and lower regions of Tibet. She prohibited the removal of the "Hidden Texts" through her divine command. 11

The great saint-scholar Vimalamitra, the King Khri-srong lDe-btsan and his disciples, the great Translator Vairocana, sNubs Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes, Nam-mkha'i sNying-po, gNyags Jnanakumara, sNa-nam bDud-'joms, Nyang-ban Ting-'dzin bzang-po, and others also had been hiding Mysterious Treasured-texts. They gave their blessings for the benefit of all beings, so that in future the right might come to guide the beings and practise the Treasured-teachings. When the prophecies and prayers had been uttered, then one after another, the Master with his followers came into existence as "Reincarnated Ones" (sprul-sku).12

Both sTag-sgang mKhas-mchog Ngag-dbang bLo-gros 13 and Kong-sprul Rin-po-che 14 tell us that there had been more than two hundred "Discoverers of Treasured-texts". The first forty-eight correspond to those who have been revealed in the Padma-thang-yig. Thu-bkwan reports that the most authoritative "Discoverers of the treasured-texts" from Sangs-rgyas bLa-ma (ca. 1000-1080 AD) to bDe-chen Zhig-po gling-pa are listed in the prophecies of the Thang-yig. 15 There also came many undisputed Discoverers who are not directly mentioned in the prophecies. Later on, Chos-rgyal dBang-po'i-sde collected everything about them and accordingly composed a prayer about the Discoverers of the Treasured-texts (gter-ston rgya rtsa'i gsol 'debs). These Discove-

urers and their teachings derived from the Hidden Treasuries were genuine. Such has been said by many great authoritative teachers. From amongst these Discoverers, the two : Nyang-ral and Guru Chos-kyi dBang-phyug are called the "Former and latter Discoverers" (gter-kha gong-'og). They are as well known as the Sun and the Moon and are recognised as the Kings of the Discoverers of the Treasured-text teachings. 16

In short, it may be said that the literature of treasured-texts form a distinctive feature of the rNying-ma Order. These extremely numerous texts were discovered and put into circulation at different periods. Each of them was found by one of the series of discoverers on whom are bestowed the title of gter-ston, revealer of gter-ma. Often, the discoverers claim not only to have found the texts but also to have translated them into Tibetan. In these cases, the texts in question are writings on rolled up yellow leaves (hence the name thang-yig) in non-Tibetan languages.

GTER-MA IN OTHER SECTS

When Lord Atisha visited Lhasa, he saw wondrous signs and portents over Lha-sa and became anxious to know the construction of the Cathedral (Jo-khang). It was revealed to him by the "Mad One of Lha-sa" (Lha-sa'i smyon-ma, a popular name then given to an action-crazy lady who was actually a dakini in human form) that the accounts of the construction were hidden and that she could show them to him. Atisha was asked by the Guardian-deity to return the scroll by that very evening. The contents of the scroll was copied down to the extent 'Brom-ston-pa and two other Tibetan teachers could do till that evening. The original scroll was once again hidden. 17

According to Regent Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho (1652-1705), the Lung-bstan gsang-ba'i me-long revealed by Lord Manjusri records :

"The conch-shell offered to the Buddha by Naga-rajā Anavatapta (kLu'i rgyal po Ma dros pa) on the Gridhakuta Hill, was, for sometime, used as a Dharma-conch by Buddha. Thereafter, when Buddha and

his retinue went to Kashmir, he said, "That disciple, Bhikshu Padmashila (Padma - Ngang-ldan) will be reborn in Tibet, the Land of the "Red-faced Ones" (gdong-dmar) as Bhikshu Sumatikirti (bLo-bzang grags-pa) who would disseminate the teachings of Prajnaparamita and the coherent teachings of the Sutra and the Tantra." On being instructed by Buddha, Ananda, taking the conch-shell with him went to Tibet with aid of his miracle, hid the conch-shell there as a "Concealed Treasure" in the 'Brog-hill (also known as 'Gog-pa Hill). Ananda entrusted Tshogs-bdag (name of a deity) as the Guardian of the treasure" who guarded it in the form of a monkey." 18

In the Iron-Tiger year (1410 AD), Lord Tsong-kha-pa bLo bzang Grags-pa took out the conch, the Mask of the Dharmaraja (chos rgyal gyi zhal 'bag) that were caused to be buried there by the Buddha. Tsong-kha-pa also set a yogi who was in eternal trance ('gog snyoms-pa) on to the path of deliverance. 19 Lord Tsong-kha-pa later presented the Dharma-conch to Venerable 'Jam-dbyangs Chos-rje bKra-shis dPal-ldan to be used as the Dharma-conch for his monastery which was then to be constructed. 20 Besides this, he also put into writing a scroll what is now known as 'Jam-dpal gyi shog-dril (the Scroll of Manjusri). This was preserved in dGa'-ldan monastery. 21 Lord Tsong-kha-pa also discovered a slab from a treasure-spot in mKhar-lung, which later lay in the Outer Court of bKra-shis Lhun-po Monastery. The embossed images of the One Thousand Buddhas of this Auspicious Kalpa and the Assembly of Thirty-five deities were found on this slab. 22

sGam-po-pa of the bKa'-brgyud-pa Order hid a list of hidden objects (gter gyi kha byang) in the lake 'Mandala' at Nag-po, situated beyond sGam-po. He also hid some profound texts to be unearthed by Dung-tsho Ras-pa (in about 1315-16). 23 Again, Dung-tsho Ras-pa hid Sems-'khrid yid bzhin nor bu'i gter chos. 24 These texts were rediscovered by gTsang-pa rGya-ras. 25 Mi-la Ras-pa found that it was not a ripe time to propagate the teachings of Ro-snyoms. Hence, at his command, Ras-chung-pa hid the texts Ro-snyoms skor-drug and Sangs rgyas thos mchog at Lho-brag mKhar-chu. Mi-La prophesied that the right owners of these teachings (chos 'di'i bdag po)

would come after three generations. 26 The text, Ro-snyoms skor drug was verily unearthed by gTsang-pa rGya-ras at Lho-brag mKhar-chu. 27 bLa-ma Zhang brTson-'grus Grags-pa (1123-1193), an important disciple of the All-knowing Phag-mo Gru-pa unearthed several hidden texts from gYu-brags at Grags (Name of small city) and some treasures from the Leaf-like Pillar (Ka-ba shing-lo-can) of the Cathedral at Lhasa. 28 Again, Kong-sprul Rin-po-che reports that Khro-phu Lo-tsva-ba Byams-pa'i-dpal unearthed the tantric text, gNod-sbyin dbug tho can gyi rgyud from Bya-rgod-gshong. 29

Thu'u-bkwan rightly summarizes our point when he says :

"It is the defect of not being well informed if one considers the entire teachings of the "Hidden-text Teachings" as a theory of the rNying-ma, because the general teachings of the "Hidden-text Teachings" existed even in the earliest days of Buddhism in India and also because they are inherent in other schools of Buddhism in Tibet."30

NOTES

1. Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston (hence KhG), New Delhi, 1959 Vol. I p. 254
2. Ibid. p. 254
3. Chos 'byung mkhas pa dga' byed ngo mtshar gtam gyi rol mtsho (hence Rol-mtsho) by sTag-sgang mKhas-mchog Ngag-dbang bLo-gros, New Delhi, Vol. II pp. 311-313 : Shes bya kun khyab mdzod (hence Shes-bya), published by Dri-med Shes-rab, Delhi, fols. 511-12, bDud-'joms Rin-po-che's rNying ma'i chos 'byung (vide The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet, by E. Dargay, Delhi 1979 pp. 185-86).
4. KhG I p. 254
5. Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche : The Opening of the Dharma, Dharamsala, 1974, p. 13.
6. rGayl rabs gsal ba'i me long, Beijing, 1982 pp. 164-65. Also see rDzogs ldan gzhon nu'i dga' ston (hence rDzogs-ldan) by the Fifth Dalai Lama, p. 46; KhG

IV, p. 24 (for a sketchy detail).

7. rGyal rabs p. 165.
8. *rNam thar nor bu'i rdo shal* (vide Biographical Dictionary of Tibet Vol. III p. 310); Tibet: *A Political History* by Shakabpa (Tibetan text) Vol. I, p. 21; *Grub mtha' thams cad kyi khung dang 'dod tshul ston pa legs bshad shel gyi me long* (hence GT) by Thu'u-bkwan bLo-bzang chos-kyi Nyi-ma, Sarnath 1963, p. 30.
9. *sBa-bzhed zhabs btags ma* Dharamsala, 1968, pp. 4-5; *sBa bzhed* Beijing, 1981, pp. 1-2; *Blue Annals* tr. Dr. Roerich, p.40: *Nel-pa Pandita's History of Buddhism in Tibet* (to be found in the *Rare Tibetan Historical and Literary text*) published by Taikhang, Delhi, 1974, fols. 60-165; rDzogs-ldan p. 50; Khg IV pp. 35-36.
10. Shes-bya fols. 505-06
11. bDud-'joms Rin-po-che's History of Nying-ma (hence DC) fols-510-11.
12. Ibid. pp. 510-12
13. Rol-mtsho II, pp. 311 ff.
14. gTer ston rgya rtsa'i rnam thar
15. GT p. 44. See Khg I, pp. 255-58 for a synopsis of the prophecies of these Discoverers. All the genuine and reliable discovered texts have been compiled by Kong-sprul Rin-po-che to form the precious and holy collection *Rin-chen gter mdzod*
17. Biography of Atisha as narrated by Nag-tsho Lo-tsva-ba and compiled by Zul-phu, Varanasi, 1970, p. 188, Rol-mtsho II, p. 495; *ibid.* IV pp. 339, 449. This excavated text is now known as *Jo-bos gter nas bzhes. pa'i bKa' chem ka khol ma*.
18. *Ba'i durya Ser Po* (Yellow Sapphire) I, p. 19. Also see *Ba'i durya Ser Po* I. pp. 20-21 and dPag bsam ljon bzang of Sum pa mKhan-po, Sarnath, 1965, p. 93 where the Chinese version of the Lankavatara Sutra has been quoted by the authors of these books which say that Buddha gave the conch-shell to Maudgallani-putra, to be hidden in Tibet.

19. *dPag bsam ljon bzang* p. 130, *Ba'i durya ser po I*
p. 169, *Rol mtsho III* p. 29 and *ibid. IV* p. 399.
20. *Ba'i durya Ser Po I* p. 169
21. *dPag-bsam lJon bzang*, p. 143.
22. *Ibid.* 253.
23. *Blue Annals II*. pp. 718-19; *KhG I*. p. 276.
24. *KhG II* p. 409.
25. *GT* p. 85
26. *Chos 'byung padma rgyas pa'i nyin byed* (hence PNY)
by Padma dKar-po ed. Dr. Lokesh Chandra, N. Delhi,
1968, fol. 505
27. *Ibid*, fols. 574-76
28. *KhG II* p. 379
29. *Rin-chen gter-mdzod I*. fol. 500
30. *GT* p. 44.