SBAS YUL 'BRAS MO LJONGS: THE HIDDEN VALLEY OF SIKKIM¹

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In the land of snow, the great master Padmasambhava said to his twenty-five disciples (Rje 'bangs nyer lnga), the king and his subjects and other predestined blessed persons: 'In future times, following the disappearance of the noble doctrine of Buddha, when the evil practices will be disseminated, great misfortunes and obstacles will come to all the countries. Lawlessness and disruptive activities will prevail all over China, Tibet and among the hordes of Mongolia. Disease, famine and war will prolong the difficult times affecting the people due to past karma. Although unfortunate, this will be unavoidable.

Where the mind dwells on spirituality, happiness will follow. Otherwise, whatever one's efforts to obtain temporal necessities, they will be in vain, and the wind will blow away future happiness, sending its growing sprout into oblivion. In spite of the difficulties they might encounter time and again, the sentient beings of this unfortunate degenerate era, oppressed by karmic activities, will not be inclined to follow the teachings.

With the advent of these difficult times, the practitioner and the fortunate man and woman should, for their own benefit and that of other devout followers, proceed to the four great hidden lands in the four directions of Tibet, with their four small states at the four junctions, twenty mountains, four gorges, small valleys, ravines and such places as the rocky hill where one is free from the fear of harm.

Together with his instructions in the proper methods of practicing, the master Padmasambhava blessed many large and small hidden lands of great significance, among which is the hidden land of sBas yul 'bras

¹ The Tibetan version of this article was previously published in the Bulletin of Tibetology (1998 no. 1) and is thus not reproduced here. It has been translated for the benefit of those Sikkimese who can't read Tibetan but who nevertheless wish to learn more about the qualities of Sikkim as a hidden land. Although the Tibetan sources from which this compilation was prepared are provided at the end, regrettably, the exact quotes have not been precisely indicated (the Editor).

mo ljongs. The lam yig (guide-book) informs us of various skilful means to overcome obstacles encountered on the way, how to settle upon arrival, which eating and drinking habits and farming and planting practices to follow, and how to make offerings to the guardian spirits and local deities of the land. Among these, instructions are also given concerning our own hidden land called sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs. It is the fountainhead of the water flowing towards India. Because it lies between Bhutan to the east and Nepal to the west, it is called 'the intermediate land' (bar yul). Situated in front of mdZod lnga stag rtse, the land embodies auspiciousness and fascination.

Rectangular shape, its higher grounds are flat and spacious, inhabited by playful deer, musk deer, rna ba [?], pheasants, peacocks, tigers, leopards and bears. The mountains resemble the Buddha family. The hills in the lower regions are dark. In the east they resemble the brocade decorations of the monastery. In the north they resemble the spread-out fingers of a hand. All the rocky hills below the mountains are celestial palaces. The sloping meadows below offer a beautiful sight of a variety of medicinal plants and fragrant flowers. Even lower down is the forest that resembles the majestic stance of a Bengal tiger (rgya stag), its young, as well as leopards, playing happily in the jungle. In short, there is not a single known species of bird, fish or animal that is not to be found here. The vegetation covering the countryside resembles the spread-out skin of the black bear. The spurs of the hills are like young leopards in motion, and the splendid hills themselves resemble kings sitting on their thrones. The verdant lands and the forests stand alongside one another. The upper waters of the streams cascade like swords and swirl like iron chains. The hollows of the land are like golden bowls with a thick layer of golden butter at the bottom. On higher ground grow various medicinal herbs, white mustard plants and fragrant rhododendrons. In the lower regions there are red creeping plants, whereas in the middle regions, all types of crops are grown. Because it is such a happy place, the land is like the celestial Pad ma can palace. Tashiding, the spiritual centre of the land is as sacred as Bodh Gaya, the centre of the whole world. Inherently kind and compassionate, the people of the land rank along those of the heaven of Chenresig (Ri bo po ta la pa), and as it is favourable to spontaneous growth of knowledge, its people compare with those of the heaven of Manjushri (Ri bo stse lnga). Whoever undertakes spiritual practice here will acquire great supernatural powers comparable to those inhabiting the heaven of Vajrapani (lCang lo can). Because the Dakinis actually assembled in this sacred land, it is comparable to the heaven of Padmasambhava (O rgyan zangs mdog dpal ri). As a repository of abundant wealth, it resembles the celestial mansion of rNam par rgyal ba'i khang bzang. As a land of great rejoicing, it resembles the western paradise, the heaven of Amitabha.

There are twenty-seven main sacred caves blessed by Guru Padmasambhava. Descending from the snow mountains, the river waters endowed with the eight attributes² have formed several large lakes: Rab dkar ho ma can gyi mtsho lies to the east, Rin chen hod 'bar nor bu'i mtsho to the south, bDe chen pad ma can gyi mtsho to the west, and gYu mtsho mu li mthing gi mtsho to the north. Apart from these main lakes, there are four hundred and four lesser ones. From them small streams gently flow and form the Rathong Chu (Ra thong chu), the Rangeet (Ri rnyed) and the Teesta (bKra shis brag) rivers. Then there are seven famous medicinal springs that will cure different types of diseases. There also grow many types of medicinal plants used to cure phlegm (bad can), wind (rlung) and bile (mkris pa) disorders. In the higher regions are found medicinal plants to cure fevers, and in the lower regions there are others for colds. Also found are various fruits, 360 varieties of edible green plants, many kinds of mushrooms, and numerous varieties of root crops like do ba3, ke'u, la khag, ko sag and lo bhe ke'u [?]. There are pigments for painting the sacred images: black, white, yellow, red and green, representing the body, speech and mind, and other types of colour such as gold, silver, copper, iron and others, precious minerals being available here in large quantities. The five great mountain ranges called mdZod lnga, for example, are repositories of salt, gold and turquoise, religious texts and gems, weapons, seeds and medicines which were buried by Padmasambhava for the benefit of posterity. The great master entrusted this hidden land of great sanctity to: the twelve bsTan ma protectors of Tibet; Thang lha; rNam sras the lord of mdZod lnga; the seven lHa btsan brothers; the seven bDud and bTsan brothers; the lower region's guardian Ma bdud learn dral; the Ttsho sman sman mo of the middle region; the middle region's guardian dPa' bo hum ri; and the upper region's guardian Gangs chen mdzod Inga. All the protective deities of the snow mountains, rocks, lakes, streams and forests, in accordance with the command of Guru Padmasambhava, are fiercely protecting the land. Whoever destroys these, would put themselves in great danger.

² Like those of the river Ganges, the eight attributes are: coolness, sweetness, lightness (digestive), softness, clearness, freedom from impurities, on drinking soothing to the stomach, and makes the throat clear and free.

³ Alocacia and calocasia.

It is because, in the past, the great master along with his 25 disciples, the king and his subjects, subdued and declared the above local deities as the guardians of the treasures and the masters of the land. As he set foot in Tashiding, he blessed it as the centre of the sacred land. Seen from Tashiding, on the horizon is a chain of mountains that resembles a hundred thousand moons overlooking an area entirely covered with rolling hills. This region with its beautiful trees and meadows alongside wooded areas and majestic hills resembles a divine elephant taking delight in entering the lotus pond. With doors at its four corners, its sky like a wheel with eight spokes, its earth like a lotus with eight petals, with three regions at its four boundaries, with only one door in the lower region, and four gently flowing rivers, such is Brag dkar bkra shis sding, a heavenly mansion eulogized by the victorious Maha Guru Padmasambhava. This represents the centre point of the great sanctuary, which when looked upon from the heavens above, resembles the centre of a shining wheel with eight spokes; when seen from the earth below, it resembles the centre of a blooming lotus flower with eight petals; and when looking towards the rivers from its middle, one sees the merging point of the four great rivers flowing through a large valley. Its unchanging northern gate faces the sacred place in the south. Square in shape, it has the width of six horizontal extensions of one's arms ('dom drug) and the length of six times the distance covered by a stone thrown from a sling. Its summit is flat and sparkling like a mirror. At its four corners, there are four sandalwood trees. Seven treasures were hidden in succession at this sacred site.

The face of the hill opposite this sacred place resembles a sleeping pig. The hill at its back resembles a mother and child in an embrace. The outer landscape of the site is made up of rocky hills, and the inner shines like luster from a hundred different kinds of bright 'wish granting jewels' (yid bshin nor bu) of the celestial realm of O rgyan dakini; esoterically, it is like the actual presence of the entire pantheon of deities of bDe gshegs sgrub pa bka' brgyad, Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa (text discovered by Sangay Lingpa), and such as Rab 'byams theg dgu who all appeared as rainbow bodies. All its stumps are as indestructible as Vajra, all its water gives immortality, and all its trees are wish-granting trees (dpag bsam 'khri shing). In short, whoever comes into contact with the wind blowing from that hill will be entirely cleansed, even of the defilement from sins accumulated in thousands of kalpas. The central area of this sacred place is a miraculously created sacred place, and therefore the four meritorious activities can be carried

out here without impediment. Because it is the source of the tantric teachings. Atiyoga tenets (rDzogs chen kun bzang thugs kyi bstan pa) will flourish there. Any earnest practice here will bring forth a rainbow body (hod skur) devoid of any residual remains of the gross physical body (phung po lhag ma med pa). Moreover, bsTan gnyis gling pa'i gter byang said:

Tashiding, the central sacred place, is like a mound descending from the sky. The eastern hill resembles the drawn curtain of a tent. The western hill is like a sleeping scorpion and an elephant. The distant hills resemble a leaping tiger, lion, bear and a bear like hairy animal. The hills of the upper region resemble glass stupas lined up in succession. The hills of the lower region resemble the lama's gesturing hands.

In the four directions are the four sacred caves dedicated to the four meritorious acts.

Shar phyogs sbas phyug: the eastern cave

Shar phyogs sbas phyug in the east is the abode of Shi ba kha gdong dkar ba, the peaceful white deity. It has an infinite number of selfarisen figures. The southern section of the cave is a heaven with a figure of rDo rje sems pa (Vajrasattva). Above the entrance of the cave are inscriptions in the codified language of Dakini (mkha' 'gro'i brda yig), and on the right are the volumes of bKa' 'gyur and bsTan gyur. Upon entering the cave, one sees, on the right, the figures of 42 peaceful deities, and on the left, the figures of 69 wrathful deities. The seat of Guru Padmasambhava occupies the threshold. Below, one hears the constant musical murmur of the flowing nectar of milky water. Then, after walking a distance of about four lengths of the arms, one sees the figure of a demoness spontaneously emitting pills of the elixir of life from her heart. Then, after a distance of about seven lengths of the arms, there is the shrine hall of the Dakini and Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva and a large number of Dakini reside there. On the east side

is located the pantheon of deities associated with Vajrasattva, and on the south side is the shrine hall of Rin chen 'byung ldan (Ratnasambhava). Then, after a distance of about five horizontal extensions of one's arms, is the Mandala circle of Chos sku snang ba mtha' yas (Amitabha Buddha) with numerous Dakinis and other figures. On the north side is located the shrine hall of Don you grub pa (Amogasiddhi), and rNam par snang mdzad (Vairocana) resides in the centre. On the right side of the cave, one sees the self-arisen figure of Garuda, which when seen by the local spirits and nagas, will disappear and depart to their own abode. Above it resides Padmasambhava. Just being told of his presence will cause all one's wishes to be fulfilled. Below resides Phyag na rdo rje (Vajrapani) who conquered the three realms (khams gsum) and subdued the three existences (srid gsum) thanks to his brilliance. Padamsambhava promised that when lepers see him, they would be instantly cured. The eastern side is the abode of peaceful deities where whoever makes an effort to cleanse their sins, will overcome all illnesses caused by malignant spirits, the defilement of sins and other obstacles. Making a pilgrimage to this sacred place just once will lead without fail to the path of 'the five families of Buddha' (rGyal wa rigs lnga).

Lho mkha 'gro gsang phug: the southern cave

Lho mkha 'gro gsang phug is the cave of longevity and increased knowledge. There all wishes for longevity, virtue and abundance will swiftly be fulfilled. When seen from Rin chen spungs, the hill on the eastern side looks like a black spider in motion. The base of the hill, called Me 'bar phug, has a naturally evolved shape resembling a shoe, with an entrance. Inside on a huge rock stands the sha ma ri tree. On the left is the figure of dPal rdo rje gshon nu, and on the right are the figures of 'the five families of Dakinis' (mKha' 'gro sde Inga) which have formed naturally on the rock. On the ceiling of the cave are the lungs and heart of the demoness emitting the nectar of longevity, and below is the vase of longevity surrounded by about seven ritual offerings. Under the vase lie the remains of the demoness, complete with head, arms and other parts. On their right are figures of animals, such as snakes. Then with the help of a lit candle, at a distance of about one length of an arm, one comes to twelve narrow obstacles. Passing over the first, one reaches the shrine hall of Guru Padmasambhava containing his whole body, its imprint, his headgear. and the imprint of his hands, which can be seen clearly. On the right is the figure of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and behind this is the pill of longevity made from the marble stone ka ma ru pa bearing the selfarisen figure of a lion. Inside it is a large sacred treasure of the Dakinis. Then, proceeding downward, one comes upon the secret passage concealed by the Dakinis. Simply being told of this will generate enlightened thought. Likewise, it is stated that making a pilgrimage to this sacred place and going round it will cleanse the defilement of all sins accumulated during many past lives and cause to be born in the land of O rgyan mKha' 'gro gling in the future.

Nub bde chen phyug: the western cave

When seen from Tashiding, the hill of Nub bde chen phyug looks like a sleeping pig. Looking upwards from the side of this hill, one sees a place called Bar yul rin chen gshongs, a cave facing southwest. It is as high as a three-storied house and covers an area similar to the one with twelve pillars. At the centre of the cave, is a square Mandala, one length of an arm across, made from precious materials, within which is the yang dag Mandala circle ris ma yal, which is clearly visible with its distinctive features. Here is seen the Nor bu bsam 'phel vase filled with a precious substance. Just from looking at it, 'common attainments' (thun mong gi dngos grub) may be acquired, and by touching it on its body, 'supreme higher attainments' (mchog gi dngos grub) may be obtained. On the four sides of the Mandala are four skulls filled with nectar. Also found here are the relics and skull of sKye bdun gram ze filled with nectar, and Guru Padmasambhava's mystic dagger (Srid gsum kun 'dul) called the subduer of the three lokhas. By simply brandishing the Phurpa, all hindrances and obstacles will vanish.

In short, Nub bde chen phyug contains the sacred images representing body, speech and mind, ritual objects, and the complete sutras and tantras translated in Tibet. Treasured stores that could feed almost half the population of the world are also hidden here. Just by going to this cave, 'the Mahamudra's supreme higher attainment' (phyag rgya chen po mchog gi dngos grub) will be acquired.

At the main cave are located two lesser caves of 'supreme higher attainments' and three lesser caves of 'common attainments'. Moreover, in this 'intermediate land' of Bar yul 'bras mo liongs, there are nine caves of 'supreme higher attainments', 13 caves of 'common attainments' and 27 large and small caves where enlightenment has

been attained. On the right of the cave known as O rgyan bde chen phyug, grows a fragrant medicinal tree bearing many kinds of flowers and fruits which can cure diseases associated with wind, bile and phlegm disorders.

Byang lha ris snying phug: the northern cave

Byang lha ris snying phug is the northern field for the application of wrathful activities. So, embarking on the mystical tasks of putting an end to, of summoning and of liberating from the ten heinous crimes will defend the doctrine so it might achieve its purpose unhindered. It has three caves facing eastward. The cave in the south has the selfarisen golden figures of the Chos sku yum chen mo (Dharmakaya Prajnaparamita) surrounded by the Bodhisattvas of the ten quarters. The cave in the centre has the figure of Tshe dpag med (Amitayus) surrounded by a pantheon of longevity deities. The cave to the north has rDo rie gshon nu surrounded by the ten wrathful deities in their fearsome costumes and the four fearsome southern deities in their hereditary order. The eastern cave has rGyal chen rnam sras surrounded by the eight fabulous horses of wealth. Going there will produce favorable signs of enhancing the might and the meritorious affairs of the Tibetan king and his ministers. To the west of this is located the self-arisen rDo rie phag mo with the five families of Dakinis (mKha' 'gro sde lnga). Going there will produce signs favorable to the growth of spiritual realization of Tibetan men and women. Should a layman not have any sons, he will be given seven. To the west of this is located the goddess of wealth Vasundhara (Lha mo nor rgyun ma) with the three goddesses of bountiful harvests. Even further west of this is located the lord of death, gShin rie (Yama), with the assembled messengers of death. Below this is the triangular hom pit. If the names of the powerful demonic clans of Tibet are written down and thrown in the hom pit during the annual casting off of evil, the messengers of death will flee to their own abode. Nearby are three stone charm boxes containing seven paper scrolls inscribed with the names of the ten wrathful deities. If the wrathful mantras are recited three times when the powerful and prosperous life threatening enemies of the earlier and later periods have assembled, there will appear a sign within seven days. In the compound is a rock as big as a mountain. If upon arriving here, one makes offerings and says prayers, there will be a favorable sign indicating the diffusion of the Buddha's teachings in Tibet. For

example, prayers requesting that the Buddha's teachings and their practice might flourish in all places, as well in this particular location. and if they are put down in writing and secured to the rock, they will be answered.

When in the eighth century the Upadhayaya Shantarakshita, master Padmasambhava and King Khri srong lde btsan and his subjects actually set foot here, they blessed the land as the sacred hidden land. In the fourteenth century, one of the three supreme incarnate treasure discoverers, the great treasure holder Rig 'dzin rgos Idem (1337-1408), had begun to open the gate to the sacred land. He brought with him many profound texts. Native guardians and local deities were bound by oath to reside there, and he undertook the bestowal of blessings to transform it into a sacred land. He built many monasteries, the foremost of which was dPa' bo hum ri, and spread the teachings. During that time, the 'early dissemination of teachings' (sNga 'gyur bstan pa) was carried out by a number of central figures like Ka thog rDo rje gdan, Ka thog pa Ye shes 'bum shar and Ka thog pa bSod nams rgval mtshan who came for that purpose. After them, at the end of the sixteenth century, came mNga' ris Rig 'dzin chen po, an incarnation of Rig 'dzin rgod Idem. He set foot on the land, and having placed the local deities under strict oath of loyalty, he discovered many profound teachings in the hidden treasures of Nub bde chen phug.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, according to the prophesy of Guru Padmasambhava, the incarnates rNal 'byor mched bshi further opened the gate of this hidden land as a pilgrimage centre. The most eminent of all the erudite masters of Tibet, embodying both Pan chen vi ma la and rGyal wa Klong chen, was rGyal wa Lha btsun chen po, who came from Kong po and entered Sikkim from the northern gate, arriving at Yok bsam nor bu sgang. Then came mNga bdag sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin⁴, an unblemished descendant of the Dharma Raja of the land of snow and an incarnation born of Avalokitesvara's intended wish, who entered the hidden land from Gu ge and mNga' ris and arrived at Nor bu sgang. Another of the most eminent of great masters, who came from Ka thog rDo rje gdan, the eastern centre that produced all the eminent masters of the land of snow, was Ka thog Kun tu bzang po. He opened the northern gate of the hidden land and arrived at Yok bsam. Phun tshogs rnams rgyal, the

⁴ Some sources mention that mNga bdag sems dpa' chen po phun tshogs rig 'dzin arrived in Sikkim in 1642, a few years before rGyal wa Lha btsun chen po's arrival around 1646.

king who, in accordance with the prophesy of Guru Padmasambhava, represents both spiritual and temporal affairs of this region and is king Indrabodhi's direct descendant, came to the kingdom from the east. The three incarnates rNal 'byor mched gsum enthroned him in Yok bsam nor bu sgang as the great Dharma Raja endowed with both spiritual and temporal power over the region. A charter was promulgated to rule over the kingdom in accordance with the tenets of Buddha, for the benefit of the doctrine and all sentient beings.

The lamas also decided to lay the foundations of the Buddha's teachings on three different elevated sites. Lha btsun chen po chose the sites of Pad ma yang rtse, Theg mchog yang rtse, and Lhan rtse. mNg'a bdag Sems dpa' chen po decided upon rNam rtse, bSam 'grub rtse and rNam rgyal rtse. Ka thog Kun tu bzang po chose the elevated site where brag tog dgon was erected. Chos rgyal Phun tshogs rnam rgyal's choice fell on the sites of Rab brtan rtsea, sGrub sde, and dBang 'dus rtse (Gangtok) which became the main sites. The three lamas and the king promised to first establish these monasteries, palace, meditation centres, mani lhakhangs, etc. Then, they established the bKra shis hod 'bar mehod rten in Nor bu sgang for the blessing of the country, mThong ba rang grol in bKra shis sdings (Tashiding stupa), and in many more dangerous sites, antagonistic and malignant spirits were vanquished. Tsha khang, man ldang and many sacred monuments which bring deliverance if merely looked upon, have multiplied. Up to this day, the six main monasteries which are known to all are Pemayantse (Pad ma yang rtse), Tashiding (bKra shis sdings), Ralang (Ra lang), Rumtek (Rum btegs), Phensang (Phan bzang) and Phodong (Pho gdong). In addition to these there are many lesser monasteries and also mani lhakhangs, which altogether amount to more than one thousand. These monasteries and mani lhakhangs follow the fine traditions of their previous masters. For example, Nyingma monasteries follow the tradition of sMan gling, Byang gter and Ka thog. In Kargyu monasteries, it is the bKa' brgyud traditions that are fundamentally followed. In the mani lhakhangs, dkar po cha brgyad fasts are undertaken on sacred occasions along with religious ceremonies and other meritorious acts such as the reciting of hundred thousand million Vajra Guru Amideva. On the 10th and 25th days of the month, local deities are invoked by burning juniper branches and sprinkling water. On the 15th day of the 7th month, Gangs can mdzod lnga, the chief of all the guardian deities of 'Bras mo liongs, dPa' bo hum ri, Yab bdud, as well as other guardians of the upper, lower and middle regions are worshipped by burning juniper branches and offering of libation (gser skyem), accompanied by great festivities and religious dance performances. Every year, a series of religious services of general importance - such as sGrub chen bka' brgyad, Bla ma dgongs 'dus, Gu ru drag dmar, 'Jam dpal gshin rje'i gtor bzlog, bDe gshegs kun 'dus kyi sgrub mchod, Rig 'dzin sgrub mchod, rDor sems sgrub mchod - and other important propitiation services are conducted in different monasteries on a grand scale.

Whenever the mountains, rocky hills, lakes and small streams of such a sacred land are polluted, it's native guardians spirits and local deities will become agitated. When mdZod lnga becomes agitated, there will be harm from a tiger. When it is Thang lha, there will be harm from the yeti (mi rgod). When bdud becomes restless, there will be harm from a wild bear. The nagas will send harm by a poisonous snake, btsan will cause harm through a wolf or a wild dog. In short, whenever the native guardians spirits and local deities are not honoured, rain will not come on time, human and animal diseases will occur as well as internal unrest and famine, causing all kinds of hardship and suffering.

Because the guardian spirits and local deities inhabiting the region are extremely fierce, it is important to refrain from acts of disrespect caused by insanity and the misuse of the fireplace such as burning animal skins on outside fires. Favourable actions that bring happiness comparable to that of bde skyld rdzogs ldan would be: erecting stupas and mani lhakhangs in the centre of the town and at the intersection of three roads; invoking the native guardians spirits and local deities by burning juniper branches and sprinkling water; making offerings to the guardian deity of the land; and refraining from harming the wild animals. Likewise, the benefits acquired from undertaking a pilgrimage to such a sacred land is that by coming into contact with its grass, water and plants and eating them will remove all misfortunes and obstacles. Disease, malignant influences and defilement caused by sin will disappear. Whoever makes a single meritorious act in the sacred land will attain the rank of Vidyadhara. Those who do accordingly will attain the rainbow body (phung po lhag med) and will go to the land of Dakini (mKha' spyod kyi gnas), as cited in large volumes of the treasured texts belonging to Jo mo mTsho rgyal, Acharya Sa le and the master Nam mkha'i snying po. Therefore, showing reverence, offering worship, rendering service and paying homage are not devoid of results. He who obtains the 'common higher attainments' (Thun mong gi dngos grub) in this life will be established in the omniscient state of

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the most perfect Buddhahood (rNam mkhyen rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi go 'phang) in the next life, as it was stated.

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