

ORIGINS OF THE BUMCHU (BUM CHU)<sup>1</sup> OF DRAKAR  
TASHIDING (BRAG DKAR BKRA SHIS SDINGS)<sup>2</sup>

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According to Sikkimese cultural and religious history as related in old anecdotal accounts, Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim in the eighth century AD. The land was then blessed by Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who personally consecrated many of Sikkim's sacred landmarks and blessed Drakar Tashiding as the land's spiritual centre.

The present article seeks to provide a brief historical and legendary account of the Bumchu, the blessed water vase ritual of Tashiding, and its meaning. The Bumchu celebration is held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month and is one of Sikkim's most important events, annually attracting thousands of pilgrims from Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and abroad wishing to participate in the rituals.

*Introduction to Sikkim as a sacred hidden land*

Before we discuss the Bumchu itself, it is necessary to provide some background information about Sikkim as a sacred hidden land or beyul (sbas yul) and the establishment of Tashiding as its spiritual centre. During 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, they tamed all malevolent beings and evil forces which infested the country, selected and blessed the sites of some of Sikkim's future monasteries and erected a number of stupas.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bum chu' means water vase.

<sup>2</sup> 'Brag dkar' means white rock and 'bKra shis sdings' means auspicious centre.

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this article was published in the *Bulletin of Tibetology* (1992, No. 3). We thought it important to republish an expanded and corrected version of the same article because of its relevance to the theme of this issue and the importance the ritual holds in Sikkim (the Editor).

According to the *'Bras ljongs gnas yig* (guide book to the sacred places of Sikkim), Beyul Demojong had five great (gnas chen) and six minor sacred sites (gnas chung) which protected all living beings. Guru Rinpoche concealed innumerable scriptures (chos), wealth (nor) and sacred objects (dbang rten) in those sacred places and performed prayers for the benefit of all sentient beings, thereby entrusting the preservation of these treasures to the Dharma protectors and tutelary deities. He blessed and consecrated this land which thus became as sacred as his own heaven known as Urgyen Zangdogpalri (O rgyan zangs mdog dpal ri) and Kanchopalgiriwo (mKha' spyod dpal gyi ri bo), the divine vision of heaven, both realms of unlimited happiness where female divinities (ma mo mkha' 'gro) assembled like clouds and took up their abode. Likewise, innumerable Buddhas and the Bhodisattavas of ten directions blessed the land.

In the four cardinal directions of Tashiding are four sacred caves. To the east is Shar chok be phuk (Shar phyogs sbas phug), the hidden cave of the east; to the south is Lho khandro sang phuk (Lho mha' 'gro gsang phug), the womb of the celestial female deity; to the west is Nub dechen phuk (Nub bde chen phug), the cave of great happiness; and to the north is Byang Lhari rinchen nying phuk (Byang lha ri rin chen snying phug), the cave of god's precious heart. At the centre, Drakar Tashiding is considered the spiritual heart or navel of Sikkim. Indeed, Guru Rinpoche is said to have given teachings at Tashiding and to have blessed the area as the mandala of the Lama Gongdu (*bLa ma dgongs 'dus*), one of the three main Nyingma texts.

Later, in the fourteenth century, the great tertön (gter ston)<sup>4</sup> Rigzin Godemchen (Rig 'dzin rgod ldem chen, 1337-1408) came to Sikkim and established monasteries and meditation centres at Tashiding and nearby Pawo Hungri. Following this, the reincarnation of Rigzin Godemchen, tertön Ngari Rigzin Chenpo Lagden Dorje (mNga' ris rig 'dzin legs ldan rdo rje (1512-1625), discovered the sublime *mKHa' 'gro'i mkha' lang ma'i rgyud* tantra or the sadhana (sgrub thabs, method of accomplishment) of Amitayus in the northern cave of Lhari rinchen nying phuk in 1568.

The seventeenth century was a turning point in the history of Sikkim. The kingdom was founded when the first Chogyal Phuntshog Namgyal (chos rgyal Phun tshoks rnam rgyal) was enthroned at Yuksum in 1642 by three great lamas of Tibet: Lhatsun Namkha

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<sup>4</sup> 'gter ston' means revealer of hidden treasures.

Jigme<sup>5</sup> (lHa btsun nam mkha' jigs med, 1597-1650), Ngadag Sempa Chenpo Phuntshog Rigzin (mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po phun tshoks rig 'dzin, 1591(?) -1656) and Kathog Rigzin Chenpo (Ka brog rig 'dzin chen po). Under the patronage of Chogyal Phuntshog Namgyal, monasteries, hermitages and stupas were built and Buddhism was proclaimed the state religion. Following the revelation of the *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub* text to Lhatsun Namkha Jigme at Tashiding, Sikkim became the main centre of Dzogchen (rdzogs chen) teaching and meditation practice in the Tibetan world. Its followers came to be known as Denjong Dzogchenpa ('bras ljongs rdzogs chen pa).

Ngadag Sempa Chenpo, one of three lamas who had consecrated the first Chogyal, was a great scholar from Central Tibet. Together with his grandson Ngadag Rinchen Gon (mNga' bdag rin chen mgon), he established the monastery at Drakar Tashiding and consecrated it as the main seat of the followers of the Nyingma northern treasure (Byang ter) tradition, which was brought to Sikkim from the Tibetan monastery of Dorje Drak (rdo rje brag) by Rigzin Godemchen.

### *Origins of the Bumchu*

In the eighth century, Tibet's religious king Trisong Deutsen (Khri srong lde'u btsan) requested Guru Rinpoche to teach him a meditation practice that would allow him to reach enlightenment in his present life. He explained that due to his administrative responsibilities as head of state, he had little time left for meditation and was anxious to learn a short but effective practice. Guru Rinpoche agreed to initiate King Trisong Deutsen in a practice which would help him gain emancipation from the cycle of mundane existence, known as the *THugs rje chen po 'khor wa las grol*. However, in order to perform the initiation, Guru Rinpoche asked for a vase made of special earth, water and five kinds of gems (rin chen sna lnga) collected from all over the world. When Trisong Deutsen explained that he was unable to produce such a vase, Guru Rinpoche agreed to collect the precious materials from India, Odiyana and Zahor and instructed the wrathful Dharmapala Damchen Garnag (Dam chen mgar nag) to fashion the object. When the wrathful Dharmapala presented the finished vase to Guru Rinpoche, he invoked Chenresig's (snyan ras gzigs) blessing and empowerment to hold the

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<sup>5</sup> Lhatsun Namkha Jigme is known as the embodiment of compassion and the incarnation of Indian Maha Pandita Vimalamitra and Tibetan omniscient Kunkhyen Longchenpa Dema Ozer (Kun mkhyen klong chen pa dri med 'od zer).

initiation. While he initiated King Trisong Deutsen and his son, Prince Murub Tsenpo, Yeshe Tsogyal and disciple Verotsana, Guru Rinpoche consecrated the Bumchu, or sacred vase, which is the very same one that is preserved in Tashiding monastery to this day.

According to the works of the great tertön Chokyi Gyalpo Garwang Rigzin Zhigpo Lingpa (gter ston Chos kyi rgyal po gar dbang rig 'dzin zhig po gling pa, 1524-1588)<sup>6</sup> while Guru Rinpoche performed the sadhana of Yidam Chuchig Zhal (yi dam bcu gcig zhal) as part of the initiation, the Yidam and the entire retinue of deities appeared in the sky and immersed in the water contained in the vase. This caused the sacred water to overflow and spread in all directions in the form of rays. That very moment, as a good omen, there was an earthquake and the four Dharma protectors and gods of thirty-three heavens showered flowers from the sky. This spectacular event was witnessed by the people who were assembled there who were overjoyed, and sacred water from the vase was distributed to all. Yet it was found that the water in the vase never decreased. Inspired by this, the sinful became virtuous, the pious realized lofty divine qualities and all benefited spiritually. Finally, Guru Rinpoche concealed the Bumchu as a sublime hidden treasure and entrusted it to the protective deities.

In the sixteenth century, Zhigpo Lingpa, the reincarnation of Prince Murub Tsenpo who had attended the first initiation, unearthed the initiation text and the Bumchu for the sake of all sentient beings from a monastery in Lhasa (ra sa 'phrul snang gi gtsaug lha khang). After the vase's discovery, tertön Zhigpo Lingpa adopted Chenresig, the deity of the same sadhana as his tutelary deity (thugs dam rten). During the latter part of his life, he offered it to tertön Tagshamchen (sTag gsham can 1556-?) of Ngari with special instructions. Tertön Tagshamchen then entrusted the Bumchu to his grandson Ngadag Sempa Chenpo

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<sup>6</sup> Zhigpo Lingpa is the reincarnation of Prince Murub Tsenpo who attended the initiation performed by Guru Rinpoche for King Trisong Deutsen in the eighth century. Prior to the initiation, Guru Rinpoche had instructed all present and his minister guarding the door that no one would be permitted to enter the room while he gave the empowerment. Prince Murub Tsenpo arrived late and being refused entry, drew his sword, killed the minister, entered the room and made a very precious offering to Guru Rinpoche for receiving the initiation. After confessing his murder, the Prince was judged by a council of ministers and sent into exile as punishment. However, during the initiation, Guru Rinpoche told him that the initiation text and the Bumchu would be kept hidden in a monastery. Later, Guru Rinpoche prophesized that Prince Murub Tsenpo would be reborn as Zhigpo Lingpa and would discover the Bumchu in a monastery in Lhasa.

Phungtsog Rigzin instructing him to install it at Drakar Tashiding, where it was to be kept in the heart of the most blessed hidden land of Guru Rinpoche. Thus, Ngadag Sempa Chenpo brought the Bumchu to Tashiding and installed it in the main temple known as the Tashi Geleg Gon (bkra shis dge legs dgon). He then conducted a special recitation of 13 million syllables 'om mani padme hung' following the same *THugs rje chen po 'khor wa las grol* text. At that time many unprecedented and auspicious signs appeared in the sky.

The Bumchu and its sacred water are kept in a miniature mansion (mchod bsham) under lock and seal of the Chogyal of Sikkim and the lama committee of Tashiding. Every year, a special recitation is conducted and the seal is checked by the high officials and lamas before the Bumchu is taken out of its mansion. The Bumchu is opened during the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the lunar calendar, and three cups of water are taken from it. The first cup is for the royal family, the second for the lamas and the third is distributed among the pilgrims on the day of the full moon. The three cups are replaced with water brought from Rathong Chukha, which is also considered to be a blessed river.

In some years, the Bumchu's sacred water increases by 21 cups while in others it decreases or remains at the same level. It may also be found to be clear or cloudy, states that are interpreted as predictions for the country. When the water level increases, it is a sign of prosperity and when it decreases, it predicts a bad year of drought and disease. Cloudy water indicates conflict and unrest.

It is said that the seed of enlightenment may be obtained by drinking a mere drop of the Bumchu water. By this action, all distress, malevolent beings and untoward happenings are removed, prosperity and fulfillment are awarded in this life, and one may attain Buddhahood or be born in the Riwo Potala (ri bo po ta la), the heaven of Chenresig or Zangdopalri (zangs mdog dpal ri), the heaven of Guru Rinpoche, in the following life.

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