

Introduction

The year 2016 marks 400 years since Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of Bhutan, ‘steered his riding horse towards the south’ (ཆེབས་ཁ་རྩོད་ལུ་བརྒྱུར་) and arrived in Bhutan. The phrase ‘steering the riding horse towards the south’ has been used metaphorically in the past four centuries to describe and commemorate the departure of Zhabdrung from Tibet to the southern land, which now constitutes Bhutan, in 1616. It is a standard idiom used in Bhutanese historical accounts to denote Zhabdrung’s journey, which did at that time literally involve steering his riding horse southward. It was a fateful departure. We don’t know the exact month and day but Zhabdrung was just twenty-two (twenty-three by Tibetan reckoning). He was accompanied by some thirty monks, most of them from the southern land pursuing religious training at the Ralung centre in Tibet.

While Zhabdrung concentrated on prayers to the tutelary deities for guidance and protection throughout his last day in Ralung, his father packed the important relics and organized the people who would accompany him. When darkness fell, the party quietly loaded the ponies and set off on the arduous journey. They took two days to reach the border and were then stranded in a cave at the border for a number of days under heavy snow and blizzard until, according to oral narratives, a fox finally showed the way over the pass. Soon after they crossed the pass, they were received by the Bhutanese party composed of many lamas and chieftains from Gasa region who were waiting for them on the Bhutanese side of the watershed. Message has already been sent to them about the impending arrival of the chief Drukpa hierarch into political exile.

The reasons and the events which led to Zhabdrung’s departure from Tibet into exile consist of complex religious and political structures and institutions of Tibet. It is largely thanks to the biographies of Zhabdrung such as this one by Ngawang Pekar and the biography by Tsang Khenchen Palden Gyatsho that we have access to adequate information to unpack the underlying reasons and stories behind Zhabdrung’s departure from Ralung. This short biography, which has come to light only some years ago, has significantly enhanced our understanding of Zhabdrung’s life and turn of events by providing some interesting information and details which are not found in other biographies of Zhabdrung.

Zhabdrung was born in the Gya family of Ralung which originates from two men who carried the holy Jowo statue from China to Lhasa in the 8th century. The family rose to its highest claim when one of its scion, Tsangpa Gyarey became a renowned master of meditation and founded the Drukpa Kagyu school of Kagyu tradition. Zhabdrung was the 17th in the Drukpa lineage of Ralung, the famous centre of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. Tsangpa Gyarey sent forth several waves of his followers to spread the teachings of the Drukpa school far and wide leading to grand claims that a half of humanity were Drukpas, half of Drukpas beggars and half of beggars realized saints.

The Drukpa tradition is said to have spread as far as the vulture could fly in eighteen days.

Tsangpa Gyarey passed down his teachings and establishment to Sangay Onre, his nephew. It was Sangay Onre's disciple Drukgom Zhigpo (1184?-1251?) who arrived in Bhutan in 1222 and spread the Drukpa tradition in the main western valleys of Paro, Thimphu and Punakha. By the time Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo passed away in the middle of the 13th century, he has not only gained great religious influence over the western Bhutanese valleys but have also secured his political hegemony over the region so that his sons took the position of the chieftains in these valleys. They and their subjects in the following centuries became devout patrons of the Ralung establishment and received from Ralung a series of Drukpa lamas to the southern lands on religious mission. Thus, by the time Zhabdrung made the historic journey in 1616, many parts of present day Bhutan were converted to Drukpa school and there was not only acceptance but strong willingness to have Zhabdrung as a refugee religious teacher in the western valleys of Bhutan.

However, Bhutan was not Zhabdrung's land of choice to build the centre of his Drukpa tradition. For years even after his arrival in Bhutan, Zhabdrung only saw Bhutan as a temporary base until he could return to his seat of Ralung. However, Tibet was engulfed in incessant sectarian and political turmoil and the changing political tides in Tibet were not in his favour. Zhabdrung eventually decided to set up his main base in Bhutan, although Bhutanese today like to think that Zhabdrung made the decision to come to Bhutan and unify the country in accordance with some previous prophecies.

The reasons leading to Zhabdrung's departure from Tibet involve complex Tibetan religious and political systems. Like many founders of religious traditions, Tsangpa Gyarey was a celibate monk. Thus, his lineage and the establishment were passed down to his nephew in the fashion of ancient Tibetan uncle-nephew transmission. After four generations, this was replaced by the hereditary line as the 5th hierarch in the line was himself a married priest and there was an increasing tendency to retain power in the immediate family. The hereditary transmission was, however, not without problems as sometimes there were no able heirs and at other times, many would be vying to take the central position in the family. Moreover, the family's control of monastic assets and spiritual affairs often led to tensions between the family and the followers of the lama.

To overcome this problem and help the monks retain full power over the economic assets and entitlements of the religious master, the Tibetans found an ingenious solution of finding the reincarnation of the deceased master and passing down all the entitlements and privileges to him. As democratic and spiritual as it may seem, this tradition of finding a reincarnation or *yangsi* was a political manoeuvre and open to abuse. Many families would recognise one of their own children as the reincarnation of the deceased master to keep the power and privileges within the family. Yet, the

reincarnation system opened the floodgate to all types of contenders as there is no infallible way of verifying an authentic reincarnation. Thus, when Pema Karpo (1527-92), the great Drukpa scholar, who was also considered to be the reincarnation of Tsangpa Gyarey, passed away, the doors were wide open to make claims for highest post of the Drukpa school.

Zhabdrung was duly recognized by the prominent members of the Gya family as the reincarnation of Pema Karpo and thus of Tsangpa Gyarey, the founder of the Drukpa school. In being both the spiritual reincarnation and the scion of family line, Zhabdrung thus combined both the physical and spiritual genes of Tsangpa Gyarey, the founder of the school. However, not everything was to go smoothly. Lhatsewa, a relation of Chongye family and senior disciple of Pema Karpo and many other disciples recognized a different child, Pagsam Wangpo (1593-1653) from the Chongye family as the reincarnation of Pema Karpo and sought the blessings of the hierarchs of Ralung establishment.

The hierarchs of Ralung did the divination before the school's main relic: an image of Buddha Khasarpaṇi, which is believed to have been formed miraculously from the vertebra of the founder, Tsangpa Gyarey. The outcome was negative. The father of Zhabdrung, Tanpai Nyima also visited the Chongye house with artefacts, which Pema Karpo is said to have entrusted to him to be used in the verification of the reincarnation. The child failed to recognize them. According to the interesting accounts in this biography of Zhabdrung, when Tanpai Nyima invited the child to sit on his lap saying "Come, my lama, come", the child only retreated and wailed. Tanpai Nyima left the Chongye establishment declaring that the true reincarnation of Pema Karpo is his own son. The family later alleged that Tanpai Nyima frightened the child with serious demeanour and dress. Having just come out of a retreat, he is said to have been wearing long tresses and frightful tantric costume.

When Lhatsewa and the child's parents insisted on Ralung's support for the child, Tanpai Nyima bluntly responded that the hierarchs of Drukpa cannot support a false claim. The rejection of Pagsam Wangpo as the true reincarnation of Pema Karpo divided the Drukpa school into two camps. While the Ralung establishment and its followers promoted Zhabdrung as the incarnation of Pema Karpo based on prophecies which the late master is said to have left behind, the Chongye group ignored Ralung's rejection and formally installed Pagsam Wangpo as the successor of Pema Karpo. In 1605, the leader of Ja myriarchy attempted to reconcile the two incarnates when Zhabdrung was visiting the Ja province but Zhabdrung's party declined to meet his rival after discovering that the meeting was to take place with the Zhabdrung seating on a slightly lower seat than his rival. By 1610, the Chongye governor appealed to the Tsangpa ruler of Tibet to intervene in the dispute. Being an important political ally, the Tsangpa ruler understandably sided with the Chongye group but Tanpai Nyima solemnly stood his ground saying the Drukpa deities will decide who the true incarnation is.

Meanwhile the enthusiastic Zhabdrung openly challenged Pagsam Wangpo to a spiritual duel. “Pagsam Wangpo, if you are the true incarnation, bring the myrobalan tree from India with its fruits and branches intact. If you cannot, I will do so. Or bring the goddess Palden Lhamo holding the rein of her riding mule. If you cannot, I will do so. Alternately, let’s stir each other’s intestines.” Of course, no such contests ever took place but the Tsangpa ruler, being wary of the power of Drukpa deities and advised by his famous teacher Tāranātha, did send an invitation to Zhabdrung to visit his court. It appears that a tension between the ruler and Ralung also developed after the ruler cast a blind eye to Ralung’s complaint about the forced conversion of a Drukpa centre to Karmapa school. Such conversion of centres belonging to other schools into those of the Karmapa school was occurring rampantly during the rule of Rinjung and Tsangpa princes.

Zhabdrung visited the Tsangpa court in modern day Shigatse in 1614. The ruler came at the gate to receive Zhabdrung but the proud young Zhabdrung continued on his horse through the gate all the way to the steps, causing the ruler some discomfiture. Although Zhabdrung and his party were received with great respect and hospitality and the meeting was cordial, it failed to yield any positive result. Both the leaders, Tsangpa ruler Phuntsho Namgyal aged twenty-eight and Zhabdrung aged twenty, were said to have been impressive but uncompromising and sharp. On their way back to Ralung, Zhabdrung and his entourage encountered by chance the Pawo Tsuglag Gyatsho (1568-1633), a lama of the Karmapa school, and his attendants at a ferry crossing. Pawo Tsuglag’s group was in a bit of hurry, and in their rush, the attendants of Pawo Tsuglag dragged out Zhabdrung who was already in the ferry. This enraged the attendants of Zhabdrung and in the ensuing skirmish, two of Pawo’s attendants were stabbed and the ferry turned upside down. Zhabdrung was very infuriated by Pawo’s attendants but he ordered his attendants to save the followers of Pawo Tsuglag from drowning. Locals would later remark that ‘the drukpa *trulku* has both intense anger and compassion.’ Leaving the ferry crossing, Zhabdrung and his team were on the way when they came across another incident. A lonely woman was being robbed of her jewellery by some soldiers. Zhabdrung’s attendants went to her rescue and thrashed the soldiers who happened to be men under a general of the Tsangpa ruler.

The incident at the ferry crossing almost irreparably damaged the relationship between Zhabdrung and the Tsangpa ruler, which was already heavily strained from the dispute over the incarnation. Bhutanese would later humourously add that they should be grateful to Pawo Tsuglag for without the incident Zhabdrung may have never left Tibet. The Tsangpa ruler, who was a staunch patron of the Karmapa school, seized this opportunity to put down Zhabdrung. After his return to Ralung, Zhabdrung received a letter from the Tsangpa ruler commanding him to pay a fine for homicide to Pawo Tsuglag. Zhabdrung explained that he was not guilty of the charge and requested a fair investigation. The Tsangpa ruler reprimanded Zhabdrung for disobeying him and demanded all important relics including the vertebra relic (an image which had miraculously formed from Tsangpa Gyarey’s vertebra) to be

submitted to him or face serious reprisals. This image was the holiest relic of the Drukpa school and its possession came with a great deal of authority and legitimacy.

Zhabdrung refused to comply with the order and sent a stern reply: “The self-born Khasarpaṇi image is as vast as space or as minute as a mustard seed. No one can be even certain of its existence or non-existence. Even if it exists, I cannot submit it to you. If you wish to be so determined to harm a hermetic adept like me with a small monastic establishment, do what you wish just as you have done so far. I have no reason to be attached to a small monastery if you are not attached to your kingship.” He then amplified his supplication to the protecting deities and cultivated occult powers and warned the Tsangpa ruler of facing the wrath of Mahākāla, the chief of his tutelary deities.

The wrath of Mahākāla came soon indeed. The palace of the Tsangpa ruler was surrounded by many disturbing omens leading to rituals of protection and repulsion being conducted. The governor of Chongye was stabbed to death using his own sword and Lhatsewa died from a stroke. Confronted with the fear of the invisible, the Tsangpa ruler decided to swiftly eliminate Zhabdrung before he used more of his occult powers. A secret army was to be despatched to Ralung. Fortunately for Zhabdrung, a minister in the court, who was well disposed to the Drukpa establishment and who owed his father a favour, secretly sent intelligence of the imminent attack. It was about this time that Sithar, a Bhutanese patron from Gön, also arrived in Ralung. In an intimate conversation, Zhabdrung confided to him that he may go via Tagtse to Mongolia to seek Mongol support and return to annihilate the Tsangpa power. The Bhutanese patron however suggested an alternative option of fleeing to the south, where, he assured the Zhabdrung, there was plenty of land and support and the need for a unifying leadership. That night, Zhabdrung went to sleep with this thought and had a clear dream in which he followed a large raven southward and arrived at an unknown place. The raven was understood to be his tutelary deity, the Raven-headed Mahākāla. The next morning, Tanpai Nyima and Zhabdrung carried out divination in front of the holy vertebra image and the indication was unequivocally to go southward. Thus, the decision was reached about ‘steering the horse southward’ (ཚེབས་ཁ་ལྷོ་ལུ་བསྐྱར་), as the later accounts would put it metaphorically, and a message was sent to the Bhutanese patrons to send escorts to meet the party at the border.

This journey in 1616, unbeknownst to anyone at that time, began a new chapter for Bhutan. Zhabdrung’s act of crossing the Himalayan watershed became a true watershed in the history of the land, which some 50 years later became the Bhutanese nation state. This publication of this short biography of Zhabdrung is a token of celebration of the 400th anniversary of the journey and Zhabdrung’s arrival in Bhutan. It is being published by the Language and Literature section of the Taktse College of Language and Culture Studies. The editors, Lopen Dorji Gyaltsen and Lopen Ngawang Dorji, have carried out a text critical edition using two primary exemplars

and one secondary publication. The two original manuscript exemplars were discovered in 2006 in the archives of Drametse temple in eastern Bhutan when Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research carried out the digitisation of the books in that temple library.

The version called Exemplar Ka here is in Ume (འུམེ་མེད་) script and the Exemplar Kha is in Uchen (འུམེ་མེད་) script. This current edition is produced using Exemplar Kha in Uchen as the main text. Through philological and text critical analyses, the editors have found that Exemplar Kha was copied from Exemplar Ka in the Ume script and also Exemplar Ka, the oldest one used as exemplar, was itself copied from another text. The third text, here called Exemplar Ga, was copied from exemplar Kha and published by Centre for Bhutan Studies recently and has, thus, not a great deal of variation from Exemplar Kha. The Exemplar Ka has gone through some editorial improvement and Exemplar Kha was copied from it after the improvements were made. Unfortunately, the text of Exemplar Ka is not complete with about ten pages missing at the end.

When the two exemplars vary in orthography, the one, which the editors considered correct, was preserved in the current text and the alternative reading or the wrong reading is given in the footnote. Except for the first instance, subsequent corrections are made without repeatedly showing the reading in the footnote. When it is clear that none of the existent exemplar are correct, the text has been improved using standard orthographical and grammatical rules and the erroneous reading not even recorded in the footnote, except when they are some specific archaic terms.

The biography, entitled “The Biography of the Reincarnate Prince Lineage Holder” (ཀུལ་སྐལ་གཤུང་འཛིན་སྐུལ་སྐུའི་རྣམ་ཐར་) was written by Ngawang Pekar, who signed using his name in Sanskrit as Vagendra Pundarika. The author is not generally a well-known figure in the Bhutanese scholarly and religious circles. According to Gedun Rinchen's *History of the Southernland* (ལྗོངས་འབྲུག་ཚེས་བུང་), Ngawang Pekar was the younger brother of the famous monk artist and diplomat, Ngawang Gyaltshen of Seula (1647-1732). He was a reclusive monk who have spent his entire life in retreat and seems to have passed away in 1730, according to the historian, Sangay Dorji. As the biography states right at the beginning (p. ...), the author, who did not live in Zhabdrung's lifetime, primarily compiled the stories and accounts narrated to him by his teacher Jyatang Pekar Tashi, his brother Ngawang Gyaltshen and other elders. As the biography is a compilation of stories which were passed down orally for over a generation, it has many accounts and anecdotes which were not included in the first biography of Zhabdrung. Since this biography was not easily available, most later biographers have also not included the accounts. Thus, this biography stands as a unique record of Zhabdrung's life and the formation of the Bhutanese state. It is the hope of the authors that this new text critical edition will not only enhance our

understanding of Zhabdrung's important life and legacies but also help promote the academic enterprise of philological and text critical analysis among Bhutanese scholars and researchers.