

The Dragon's Gift

THE SACRED ARTS OF BHUTAN



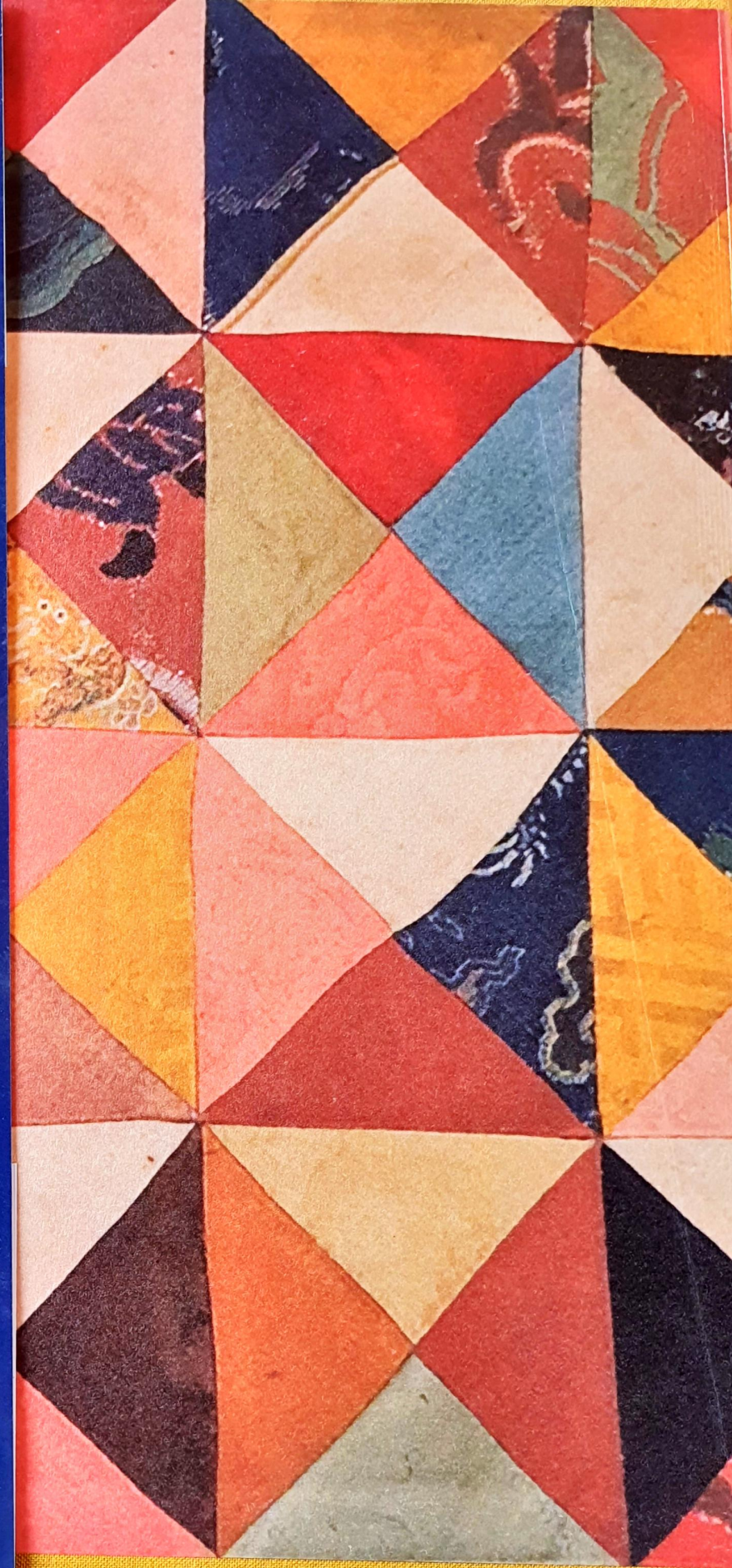
Honolulu Academy of Arts

The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan presents more than one hundred works of Buddhist art from Bhutan. The vast majority of these sacred items are from active monasteries and temples where the objects continue to be used in ritual practice. With few exceptions, this is the first time these items have been published or brought to international audiences. The Honolulu Academy of Arts research teams worked in close collaboration with the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Central Monastic Body for a number of years to develop the exhibition. The sacred items that comprise *The Dragon's Gift* were selected from sanctuaries across Bhutan. Some of these sacred sites are very remote and rarely visited.

Local Bhutanese experts and accomplished monks were consulted throughout the research process for the exhibition and catalogue. This important indigenous perspective on the sacred works of art is well represented in the catalogue. Ranging from rare Tantric deities to portraits of Buddhist masters, the exhibition presents outstanding works of art that shed light on the living Buddhist traditions in Bhutan.

This catalogue includes twelve essays by Western and Bhutanese scholars on a variety of relevant topics ranging from biographies of Buddhist masters to the conservation of cultural properties. These essays enhance our understanding of a number of subjects including Bhutanese religious life, art, history, and architecture.

Cham, the sacred Buddhist dances of Bhutan, is an important component of *The Dragon's Gift*. A DVD accompanying this catalogue presents several examples of Cham from various dance lineages in Bhutan. The Academy has partnered with Core of Culture, a Chicago-based non-profit dance research organization specializing in the Himalayas, to thoroughly research these dances. The dance team has developed an extensive digital database with over three hundred hours of video documentation, including the performances of numerous rare and nearly extinct Cham rituals.



The Dragon's Gift

THE SACRED ARTS OF BHUTAN

Edited by
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With Contributions by

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Dr. Reda Sobky, Dorji Yangki,
Ephraim Jose, Mark Fenn,
and Joseph Houseal

This exhibition is respectfully dedicated to
His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, The Fourth King of Bhutan
and
Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck

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Frontcover: Thangka of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, 18th century, Tango Buddhist Institute, Thimphu. (Cat. no. 85)

Frontispiece: Kagyu lineage thangka, late 17th-early 18th century, Seula Gōnpa, Punakha. (Cat. no. 73)

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HOTELS&RESORTS
OF HALEKULANI

Note to the reader:

The editors have sought to provide consistent, phonetic-based spellings of Dzongkha and Classical Tibetan terms. Phonetic spellings for these terms are highly varied and are not yet standardized within Bhutan or in the Bhutanese studies community. In some cases contributors to the catalogue provided spellings in the Wylie system.

The dimensions given for the thangkas include the textile mountings and rollers.

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27th September 2007

Message from His Holiness the Seventieth Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the Honolulu Academy of Arts on the occasion of the publication of the catalogue and opening of the exhibition *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*.

The exhibition marks the culmination of years of hard work and cooperation between the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, and the Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii, USA. It has been a great pleasure for the Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body) to be involved as a close partner in the preparation of the catalogue and exhibition.

The Dragon's Gift exhibition is a unique and unprecedented occasion to share the rich Buddhist heritage of Bhutan with the people of the United States of America in particular, and with the rest of the world in general. Thangkas, sculptures, and ritual objects from our sacred monasteries and temples compose the vast majority of items in the exhibition. Many of these items are rarely on view, even in their home temples. Therefore, one should view these items not as "art" in the traditional sense, but as support to Buddhist practice and a window into the spiritual world of Bhutan. To us, these objects are potent with spiritual energy and bestow blessings upon the faithful. I therefore sincerely hope that readers of the catalogue and visitors to the exhibition will be inspired and enlightened by the spiritual significance and purpose of these profound sacred arts.

I am thankful to the Honolulu Academy of Arts for training a group of Bhutanese monks in the conservation of thangkas and objects selected for the exhibition. As a consequence, we are in the process of establishing conservation units in all the major monasteries and temples in the kingdom to help protect and preserve our great Dharma heritage.

Further, I am pleased that visitors to the exhibition will be able to get a glimpse of the sacred dances of Bhutan. These dances are a highly refined spiritual practice in themselves, and directly communicate the Buddhist Dharma to the viewers. A dancer, in the course of his performance, enters into a deep meditative state and becomes one with the deity that he represents. The viewer is thus able to directly behold this deity and receive its blessings.

I am certain that the documentation of the sacred dances, and other steps taken by the project, will go a long way in preserving and maintaining the authenticity of the sacred dance traditions of Bhutan.

May the merit of this undertaking benefit all sentient beings.

Tashi Delek!



Trulku Jigme Chhoedra

A red circular seal with a complex, multi-layered design, likely a traditional Buddhist symbol. Below the seal is a stylized signature in black ink. Underneath the signature, the name "Trulku Jigme Chhoedra" is printed in a black, sans-serif font.



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Ministry of Home & Cultural Affairs

Royal Government of Bhutan

བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཚོས་ཚོང་།

25th September 2007

Message from the Honorable Secretary and Officiating Minister, Ministry of Home & Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan.

The Buddhist arts of Bhutan are among the great treasures of our Kingdom, and it gives us immense pleasure to share these gifts with the world through the catalogue and exhibition *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*.

This exhibition abroad, which is part of the celebrations of the Coronation of the Fifth King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck and the Centenary of the Bhutanese Monarchy in 2008, is of special significance for the people of Bhutan.

This exhibition developed over many years between the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan. The close cooperation between the two sides has ensured that the sacred objects have been collected, researched, conserved, catalogued, and presented with great care and respect. Furthermore, in-depth research and digital documentation of the sacred dances of Bhutan is another successful outcome of the project.

I would like to pay rich tribute to Dr. Stephen Little, Director, Honolulu Academy of Arts, for his unstinting support and leadership in the implementation of the project; to Mr. Ephraim Jose and Mark Fenn, Art Conservators, for leading the restoration of many sacred paintings and objects and for training a new generation of capable Bhutanese conservators; to Mr. Joseph Houseal and Mr. Gerard Houghton for the valuable research and documentation of sacred dances (*cham*); and finally to Ms. Terese Tse Bartholomew, Mr. John Johnston, and Dr. Reda Sobky, who, together with Dr. Little, led curatorial efforts resulting in this excellent exhibition and catalogue.

On the Bhutanese side, I would like to thank HE Lyonpo Jigmi Y Thinley, former Minister of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, whose vision and guidance were instrumental in ensuring the success of this important exhibition, Venerable Tsugla Lopön of the Zhung Dratshang for his knowledge, wisdom, and support in providing useful information for the catalogue, for assisting with the layout of the exhibition, and for performing special rituals before sending off the sacred objects from Bhutan.


My special thanks go to the Dzongs, Rabdeys, Lhakhangs, and the owners of private temples who very kindly lent sacred items to the exhibition. Lastly, but not the least, I would like to compliment Mr. Phuntsho, the Project Coordinator; Lopön Gyeltshen, Chief Administrator, Zhung Dratshang; Mr. Tshewang Gyalpo, Chief, Cultural Properties Division; Ramjam Thinley Gyamtsho, Principal, Royal Academy of Performing Arts; Mr. Karma Tshering, Videographer; and Mr. Tshewang Nidup, Liaison Officer for the the Honolulu Academy of Arts, for contributing tirelessly and meaningfully toward the success of the exhibition.

It is our hope that all those with an interest in art and spirituality will enjoy these representations of the Buddhist faith of Bhutan, and perhaps this experience will accelerate their journey to enlightenment. Furthermore, we hope this exhibition will deepen the bonds of friendship and understanding between peoples of the world.

Tashi Delek!



Penden Wangchuk



Secretary
Ministry of Home & Cultural Affairs
Tashichhodzong



Ogyen Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), His Life and Legacy

Dr. Karma Phuntsho

*Pema Lingpa is the quintessential
Bhutanese master. He is the only one who
embodies the country of Bhutan so totally.*

– Gangtey Trulku¹

There is little doubt that Ogyen Pema Lingpa (O rgyan Pad ma Gling pa) ranks as the most eminent Bhutanese figure both within Bhutan and beyond. His spiritual stature and the impact he has left through his teachings and institutions are so prominent and pervasive that he is considered a cultural hero and spiritual father² of the land that roughly constitutes the modern state of Bhutan. Pema Lingpa's legacy to this day underlines the cultural identity of the Bhutanese people and has shaped Bhutan's religious and socio-political landscape.

However, Bhutan's only "king treasure discoverer"³ remains a mysterious character. An artist, a mystic, a traveler, a lama with a large following, and the head of a large family, Pema Lingpa's personality and life elude a simple description. With his wide range of talents and the various roles he played in religion and society, he was and continues to be an enigma. In particular, his role as a treasure discoverer (*tertön*), for which he has left a mark on the Himalayan Buddhist landscape, defies any straightforward and rational explanation or acceptance. Like many other treasure discoverers, he has been subjected to controversy for his claim to have rediscovered religious texts and objects that were buried by Padmasambhava and his disciples in the 8th century.

This claim, compounded with his enigmatic personality and the tension between received and revealed traditions in Tibetan Buddhism, triggered serious contentions even during his own lifetime, and disagreements on his character and persona continue in our times. Even today, scholars are strongly divided in treating Pema Lingpa as a revered religious figure on the one hand and a fraudulent charlatan on the other. Aris, in his controversial work *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, has treated Pema Lingpa with a vengeful embitterment (perhaps for his personal grievances with Bhutanese) and overt cynicism and dismissed him as a self-deceiving fraud. Others, such as Harding and Butters, trying to understand Pema Lingpa in his own context, present him as a saint and religious visionary.

Early Life and Background

The extraordinary acts and life of Pema Lingpa, as well as the controversies they gave rise to, can only be fully appreciated through understanding his social environment. He was born at Baribrang in the idyllic village of Chel, which, nestled on a picturesque slope that rises upward to Kunzang Drak and drops down to the deep river pool of Membartsho, renders an enchanting backdrop to his mystical life and miracles (Fig. 1). His mother, Pema Drolma, is described as a herder (*'brog mo*) and his father, Dhondup Zangpo, was a son of the Sumthrang Chöje, a family of religious elites founded by the Nyöton Trulzhig Chöje, alias Demchog (1179-1265). This family, based in the adjacent valley of Ura, claimed direct descent from the ancient Nyö clan of Tibet. Pema Lingpa was the first of nine sons.



Fig. 1 Chel village, Bumthang, birthplace of Pema Lingpa. Photo: Karma Phuntsho

Analogous to the descriptions of holy birth in Buddhist hagiographies, even the accounts of Pema Lingpa's conception were full of extraordinary portents. His mother felt blissful and light, and in her dream she saw the sun and moon shine simultaneously, while ornamented girls entertained her with songs and dances and a lady with a turquoise vase dissolved into her. The father dreamt of drawing maṇḍalas and of the sky filled with texts and syllables.

Pema Lingpa was born at daybreak on the fifteenth day of the second month, Iron Horse Year, 1450. His maternal aunt Palmo was there to receive him, and light and rainbows, the accounts have it, encircled him for three days. As his mother gave birth to his brother Guru the following year, Pema Lingpa, then named Paljor, was taken under the care of his maternal grandfather, Yonten Jangchub. At the age of three, Pema Lingpa was taken to Mani Gönpa where his grandfather ran a smithy. It was here that Pema Lingpa learnt smithery, sewing, masonry, and carpentry, skills that Aris alleged he later used to forge the various relics he claimed to have discovered. When he was still an infant, the disciple/son of Dorje Lingpa (1346-1405), called Choying,

visited the family and prophesied that Paljor would grow up to benefit the teachings of the Buddha and sentient beings.

Pema Lingpa's youth is recorded to have been full of deep religious inclinations and revulsion for the world and its ways. However, until his first discovery of treasure below his village, no striking episodes are told of his life. He is described instead as a difficult, willful, wayward, and frivolous child with sturdy average physique and a number of uncomplimentary nicknames given by his parents and villagers. Pema Lingpa was nonetheless a very bright child and he learnt what he did entirely on his own without formal training or education. Two anecdotes from his youth tell us how quickly and easily he memorized certain ritual texts.⁴

His aptitude for self-learning is perhaps one of the most outstanding qualities, which he asserts with pride and which his followers attribute to the spiritual and intellectual achievements in his previous rebirths, particularly as the great philosopher-saint Longchenpa (1308-63). His first religious training, if it may be called so, was a reading transmission (*lung*)⁵ of Dorje Lingpa's treasures from Lama Chogden of Rimochen,

¹ Sarah Harding (2005), *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa*, p. 1.

² Padma Tshewang (1991), p. 16, uses the term "the only father, the treasure revealer dharma lord" (*pha gcig gter chen chos rje*) in his poetic eulogy to Pema Lingpa. Gangtrey Rinpoche refers to him as the role model and Sarah Harding to him as a folk hero. See Harding (2005), pp. ix, 1.

³ Among the numerous treasure discoverers, five are considered "king treasure discoverers" (*gter ston rgyal po lnga*). These include Nyang ral Nyi ma 'Od zer, Gu ru Chos kyi dBang phyug, rDo rje Gling pa, Pad ma Gling pa, and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dBang po mDo sngags Gling pa. This list was partially acknowledged by the Fifth Dalai Lama and later fully endorsed by Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' yas and bDud 'joms 'jigs bral Ye shes rDo rje, who were themselves treasure discoverers.

⁴ See *Autobiography*, ff. 27v-28r and HTSL, pp. 36-37.

⁵ A reading transmission is a ritual of reading out the text at high speed in order to pass down the spiritual line of the teachings and to authorize the disciple to access the content of the text. It is one of the three popular didactic processes of *dbang lung*, and *khrid*.



Fig. 2 Tag Rimochen, Bumthang. Photo: Karma Phuntsho

whose daughter he married. The marriage did not last and Pema Lingpa returned to his village to attend his dying grandfather. It was at Mani Gönpa, while looking after his grandfather's temple bequeathed to him, that Pema Lingpa began to have mystical experiences and visions, which were to transform his life and set him on the path of a full-fledged treasure discoverer (Fig. 2).

Treasures, Visions, and Dreams

The first significant event in Pema Lingpa's life as a treasure discoverer was the appearance of a Khampa mendicant in the summer of 1475, who left for him a scroll containing instructions to extract the treasures from a rock called Naring that lay at the bottom of the valley. Following the instructions, Pema Lingpa approached the Naring rock on the full moon night of the seventh month with five companions, and upon arriving at the spot, he fell into a trance and plunged into the riverine pool of Membartsho to enter a cave on the opposite side (Fig. 3). He came out carrying with him a

casket containing the yellow scrolls of the treasure text for *The Quintessence of the Secrets of Clear Expanse* (*Klong gsal gsang ba snying bcud*). The casket was brought to Baribrang and the yellow scrolls later transcribed into standard Tibetan script using an alphabetical chart enclosed in the casket, and with the help of a scribe from Ura. The discovery of this treasure was followed by a public exposition of the text and performance of rituals in Dungkarbi, for which Pema Lingpa received visionary instructions from Yeshe Tshogyal and other *ḍākinīs* on the ways of chanting and exposition. The movements and steps for the sacred dance of the five classes of *ḍākinīs* (*mkha' 'gro sde lnga*), his first visionary dance, was choreographed at this occasion.

This event was followed by the second discovery of treasures at Naring rock. In a spectacular act witnessed by a huge crowd, Pema Lingpa plunged into the deep river pool with a butter lamp in his hand, swearing the oath: "If I am an emanation of a

devil, may I die in this river. If I am the heart-son of Guru [Padmasambhava], may I return with the required treasure and not even this lamp be extinguished.”⁶ He emerged from the pool with a statue of the Buddha and a sealed skull, the lamp purportedly still burning. It is for this feat of extracting treasure in public (*khrom gter*), to convince the crowd, that Pema Lingpa is best remembered by posterity.

These events initiated for Pema Lingpa a life of pursuing religious treasures, first concentrated in his local area and gradually extending to places beyond his native country of Bumthang. He traversed the region that is today central Bhutan in earnest quests for treasures he was destined to reveal, according to the list of treasure locations (*gter byang*) he had received. A significant number of his later discoveries were also made in Lhodrak, a region north of Bumthang beyond the Himalayan watershed, which today forms part of the southern border region of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Much of Pema Lingpa's time from 1475 to 1484 was occupied with revealing treasures; performing placatory rites for the treasure guardians (*gter bdag*), or spirits who guard the treasures; transcribing the symbolic *dākinī* script (*mkha' 'gro'i brda yig*) of the yellow scrolls (*shog ser*) into standard Tibetan script; and delivering religious sermons on his revelations. The treasure discoveries became less frequent in the latter part of his life, much of which he spent traveling to meet his patrons and students, and propagating his treasure teachings.

Pema Lingpa's revelations generally belong to the class of earth treasures (*sa gter*), that is, treasure buried in and rediscovered from the physical world, such as a cliff, temple, or

lake. These are said to have been buried and entrusted to the guardian spirits by Padmasambhava and his disciples, to be revealed at an appropriate time by the destined treasure discoverer. His treasures mainly consist of cycles of religious rituals and meditation instructions, which traditionally fall under the category of *chos gter*, or religious treasures. Besides the religious teachings, which form the main bulk of his treasures, he also revealed objects such as the Buddha statue and skull extracted from Membartsho during his second hunt. One finds today in many places in Bhutan a great number of statues and other religious artifacts that are deemed to be hidden treasures discovered by Pema Lingpa (see cat. no. 71).

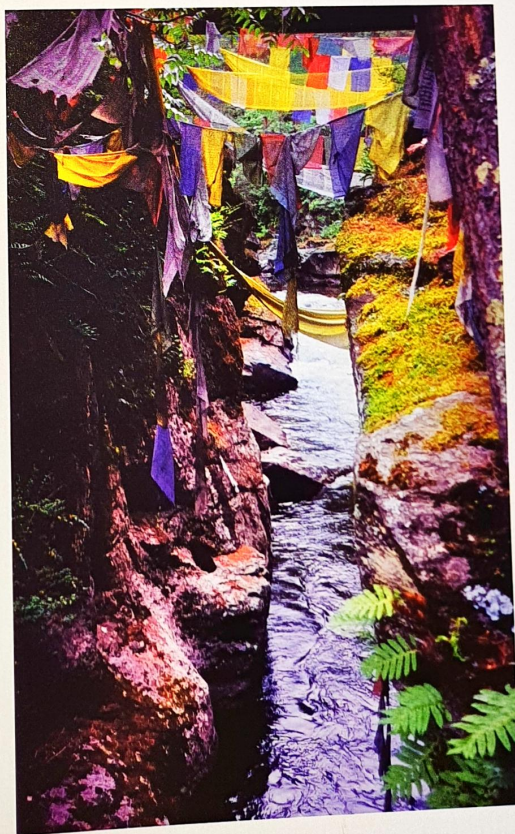


Fig. 3 Membartsho. Photo: Bruce Huett

⁶ *Autobiography*, f. 33v: nga bdud sprul gcig yin na chu 'di la 'chi bar gyur cig / ghu ru'i thugs sras cig yin na / mar me 'di yang ma shi bar dgos pa'i nor len nas log par shog cig /.

Many of Pema Lingpa's revelations also fall within the class of pure visions (*dag snang*) and mind treasures (*dgongs gter*). These categories are spontaneous and dynamic projections and expressions of the enlightened mind, which is viewed in Mahāyāna Buddhism to be an inexhaustible treasury of dharma. Pema Lingpa's visionary revelations consist mostly of experiences occurring in the state of dreams and trances. His life as a treasure discoverer is interspersed with such episodes of mystical visions, dreams, and trances, which Aris unduly criticizes as incongruent shamanistic elements in his acclaimed saintly Buddhist life. Such experiences are in fact considered by Tibetan Buddhists as spiritual achievements resulting from the mind's ability to engage on a higher psychological plane. As in the case of his first discovery, it was often through the extraordinary visions and dreams that Pema Lingpa received the directions for the discovery of earth treasures.

Yet in other cases these experiences were acts of treasure discovery in their own right. The sights, sounds, words and movements he perceived vividly in the dreams and trances, which he recounted and recorded as soon as he came out of such states, constituted sacred revelations. Cases in point are the drawing of the maṇḍala of *The Guru: The Gathering of the Secret* (*Bla ma gsang ba 'dus pa*), for which Pema Lingpa employed the artist Pön Tshering after he saw the configuration of deities during the initiation ceremony he conducted for the mountain god Khari in his dream; and also the choreographic record of ḍākini dances after being instructed by Yeshe Tshogyal in his dream. Many of his codes for mask dances were set after a visionary experience. The dance for the consecration of Tamzhing Monastery in Bumthang is also one such reenactment of a dance revealed in his dream (Fig 4).

One of Pema Lingpa's most significant dream experiences took place in 1481; this was his



Fig. 4 Tamzhing Monastery. Photo: Karma Phuntsho

trip to the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain (*Zangs mdog dpal ri*) of Guru Padmasambhava, where he met the great guru and his entourage (Fig. 5). He was taken there by three *ḍākinīs* on a white horse through snowy mountains and brought before Padmasambhava, who, in his intense manifestation, resided there to suppress the unruly world of cannibals. Pema Lingpa saw in the guru's retinue a host of Indian and Tibetan masters of meditation and other treasure discoverers. Placed on his own seat, which had lain empty since he left the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain to work in the human world, he received much advice from the guru. It was also at this occasion that the guru formally bestowed upon him the name Pema Lingpa, the *lingpa* suffix being a common epithet of the treasure discoverers.

He made a similar dream journey in 1508 to the abode of the mountain deity Khari, perhaps the guardian spirit of the mountain peak Kulha Khari on the Bhutan-Tibet border. This time, he was taken by three *ḍākinīs* on a silken palanquin (*dar gyi do li*) and given a cosmic tour before being brought before Khari, who received teachings from him. These dream journeys (in consonance with the Buddhist philosophy that everything, including dreams, is ontologically empty and illusory but empirically self-evident) were considered as no less real than actual life and thus seen as important events in Pema Lingpa's life.

The Lama and His Milieu

It is in his frequent travels in actual life, however, that we see a more human face of Pema Lingpa and his religious activities. His autobiography, which in effect is largely a travelogue, shows us that he was an enthusiastic public figure, a charismatic



Fig. 5 Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain of Guru Padmasambhava, detail from cat. no. 51. Photo: Shuzo Uemoto

leader, a caring spiritual guide for his followers and, above all, an earnest promulgator of his teachings. He was held in high esteem by his milieu and used his public stature and economic means – accumulated through religious services – for worthy causes. An important non-religious role that he played, often expected of a public figure, was as a mediator and conciliator to settle civil disputes.⁷

⁷ Michael Aris (1989), *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, p. 68.

Pema Lingpa lived a highly mobile life, traveling for numerous reasons including the extraction of hidden treasures, the propagation of these revealed teachings, seasonal alms rounds, and visits to his patrons and students. The hunt for treasures was the primary reason for his travels in the first part of his life, but later other religious and social reasons became the main motives for his travels. Although these journeys were mainly concentrated in the central districts of Bumthang and Kurelung, Pema Lingpa traversed the region that is modern Bhutan and made some twenty-four trips northward to the Lhodrak region of Tibet. He also went three times as far east as Mönnyul, which is in the modern state of Arunachal Pradesh, first to attend his brother Ugyen Zangpo's wedding and later at the invitation of King Jophak Darma.

During these travels, he would meet his patrons and disciples to bestow blessings on them, to impart teachings, and to perform religious rituals. Such events ranged from sessions with a single individual to public sermons attended by huge gatherings, perhaps the largest being the crowd of nine thousand people who showed up for his teachings in Tibet the year before he died.⁸ Pema Lingpa and Gyalwa Dhondup, who completed Pema Lingpa's autobiography, provide lists of the various gifts offered to Pema Lingpa after these religious sessions, thus giving us insight into the economy, gift culture, and religious piety of the people in their times.

There is no doubt that Pema Lingpa in his final years was one of the most respected and prestigious lamas in "proto-Bhutan" and southern Tibet. His lay supporters included the chieftain of Ura, Dung Lhawang; the

regents of Chokhor, Thubpa Tashi, and Chokyi Tashi; and Jowo Namgyal Rabten (perhaps the chieftain of Ura after Dung Lhawang). In the oral stories prevalent in Bumthang, Thubpa Tashi, alias Kunthub, is said to have started as a skeptic but later became a staunch follower of Pema Lingpa through his miraculous discovery of treasure in public.

In Tibet, Pema Lingpa enjoyed the strong patronage of the prefects (*nang so*) of Lhalung, Sonam Gyalpo and Gyalwa Dhondup. It was to visit them that Pema Lingpa made almost all of his journeys northward. The Lhalung temple – founded by Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (1110-93), and seat of the hereditary prefects and administrative headquarters of the Lhodrak region – was later to become Pema Lingpa's main base in Tibet; even the subsequent incarnations of Pema Lingpa came to be known as Lhalung Sungtrul, the speech incarnations of Lhalung.

Other eminent supporters and disciples of Pema Lingpa included Tashi Dargye, myriarch of the Ja clan in southeast Tibet, and Dakchen Dondrup Phakpa, hereditary governor of Gyantse. Pema Lingpa was also invited and attended by King Jophak Darma of Shar Dongkha, in today's Arunachal Pradesh. He became a faithful follower and it was at his court that Pema Lingpa met an exiled Indian prince, who Aris has identified to be Nilambar, the last ruler of Kamata before its conquest by the Muslim nawab of Bengal.⁹

Pema Lingpa also encountered important religious characters of his time, including the Seventh Black Hat Karmapa, Chodrak Gyatsho, and the Fourth Red Hat Zhamarpa.



Fig. 6 Pema Lingpa, from a wall painting at Tamzhing Monastery, Bumthang.
Photo: John Johnston



Fig. 7 Pema Lingpa, from an appliqué thangka at Dremetse Gönpa, Mongar.
Photo: John Johnston

Chokyi Drakpa, both powerful and popular churchmen of Tibet. Tshultrim Paljor, the abbot of Ney, was one of his strongest religious supporters, as was Karpo Kunga Drakpa of Kongpo. A figure very familiar in Bhutanese society and one with whom Pema Lingpa had cordial relations is Drukpa Kunley, the holy madman of Ralung, who Pema Lingpa probably met several times (see cat. no. 80). Stories of their brief encounters reveal their shared spiritual sophistication and maverick characters. In addition to the above persons, Pema Lingpa's autobiography also mentions a wide range of religious leaders and lamas who came to receive

religious teachings from him. Many, such as Tertön Lethro Lingpa and Chogden Gyonpo, also became his close disciples.

Despite his prestige and popularity, Pema Lingpa's high religious profile and treasure discoveries did not go unquestioned. Both of his staunch patrons in Bhutan and Tibet, the Chokhor Deb and Lhalung Nangso, were said to have begun as doubters. A serious dissenter and rival was a certain Shangpa Lama Namkha Samdrup of Nyemo in Tibet. The Lama arrived in Pemaling to request teachings from Pema Lingpa but, for a bad start, he mistook a dumb attendant for Pema

⁸ *Autobiography*, f. 190r.

⁹ Michael Aris (1989), *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, p. 76.

Lingpa and made prostrations to the attendant. When that was rectified, he requested teachings in an offhanded manner: "I myself have dharma. If you impart your teachings, I will receive them. If you don't, perhaps you don't have anything more than what I have."¹⁰ The Lama stayed for three years, only to leave in an outrage for being asked if he had found the missing pages of the yellow scroll on which Pema Lingpa was then working. He went to Kurelung and Kharchu, spreading malicious gossip about Pema Lingpa.

The full conflict between Pema Lingpa and Shangpa Lama Namkha Samdrup, however, unfolded when Pema Lingpa was invited to teach by some ladies of Zhamling in Kurelung. Namkha Samdrub interfered, demanding that equal thrones be installed for both of them and that people receive teachings from both of them in shifts. When no such arrangements were forthcoming from Pema Lingpa and the locals, he harassed Pema Lingpa's party. After unsuccessful attempts on the part of Pema Lingpa and his hosts to resolve the issue amicably, Pema Lingpa challenged Namkha Samdrub to an ordeal by fire, in which both of them would leap into flames. Unable to face the challenge, Namkha Samdrub fled to Tibet the next day and, according to Pema Lingpa's accounts, soon succumbed to a terrible leprosy. Another figure named Samdrup Zangpo is also mentioned twice in Pema Lingpa's autobiography as a jealous rival. On one occasion he accused Pema Lingpa of interfering with his rituals to stop rain and, on another, he dissuaded the people of Saphuk from transporting Pema Lingpa's baggage upon the latter's return from his second trip to Tibet.¹¹

Pema Lingpa's religious and social life as an acclaimed treasure discoverer and influential high priest was no doubt rich, active, and intriguing. It is also the facet of his life that is well documented. On the other hand, we have sparse information on his personal and family life. What we can glean from his *Autobiography* and other sources seems to suggest a varied and complex love life. His first marriage to the daughter of the Lama of Rimochen neither lasted long nor produced any heir. But in the latter half of his life Pema Lingpa went on to beget six sons and a daughter from his three wives.¹² It is also clear that Pema Lingpa's love life extended beyond the nuptial bonds. Compounded with the belief that female consorts are expedient for esoteric Buddhist practice and that treasure discoverers may have to rely on destined consorts for their successful discovery of treasures, Pema Lingpa, like many other treasure discoverers and his later followers, seems to have enjoyed a lax sex life. A hint of this libertine attitude surfaces in an apologetic joke he tells his patron, Lhalung Nangso: "The people of Lhodrak have no understanding, the people of Mön have no vows [of chastity]."¹³ Ironically, it was also such an extranuptial copulation with "an incarnation of a demoness," in fact the sister of his wife Bumdren, that allegedly caused Pema Lingpa's final illness and death.¹⁴

On the third day of the first month, Iron Snake Year, 1521, Pema Lingpa passed away at his seat of Tamzhing, in the posture of meditation, with his hands resting on his sons Dawa and Drakgyal. He had gathered his family and patrons and delivered instructions as to how they should live and carry on their religious and worldly pursuits in his absence. Gyalwa Dhondup tells us how,

despite his failing health and a wailing family, he faced death with full control and composure in an undisturbed meditative state. In the end, his was a great Buddhist death, and like his birth, was accompanied by many positive signs.

The Master and His Legacy

If Pema Lingpa can be said to have lived a successful life and died an exemplary death, the traditions and legacies that ensued from him have certainly secured him a distinguished place in Himalayan Buddhist history. For the Kingdom of Bhutan, which vaguely corresponds to the southern Mön region, where he was born and remained active, Pema Lingpa is an outstanding home-grown figure and a religious hierarch unparalleled for his strong influences in Bhutan and in many places beyond. He has come to be, to use his own metaphors, “the pillar of the house and the handle of the parasol”¹⁵ for his own tradition and society, through his treasures, works of art, establishments, institutions, and family lines.

The treasure teachings, which spread widely across the Himalayan Buddhist world in his own lifetime, are today being studied and practiced in many monasteries. In Bhutan, the teachings and rituals associated with them form the main liturgical literature for religious chanting and practice in numerous monasteries; during the 17th century they were included in the liturgical corpus of the Central Monastic Body, which is a Drukpa Kagyu organization. His tradition is almost the only one to survive the vigorous expansion of the Drukpa Kagyu, which took place under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1652?). While all other Buddhist schools, often enumerated as the five lamaist factions, were disbanded or eliminated, Pema

Lingpa's tradition thrived with support from the new power in Punakha. In addition to his revealed teachings, Pema Lingpa also composed a number of biographical and exegetical works for which he claimed personal authorship. His teachings, including both his revelations and writings, make up the Pema Lingpa treasure cycle (*pad gling gter chos*) comprising twenty-one volumes in its most recent edition.

Beside his literary legacy, Pema Lingpa also composed and taught religious arts including dances, hymns, and fine arts. The sacred dances, known as *Peling Tercham*, are performed throughout Bhutan during festivals and ceremonial occasions. The most popular ones are the *dākinī* dance mentioned above, the three *ging* dances signifying the identification and subjugation of evil and the subsequent celebration, and the *ging* and *tsholing* dance. Other popular dances, such as the famous *Drametse Ngacham*, were also inspired by Pema Lingpa's revelations.

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, f. 38v: chos nga rang la yod de / khyod kyi chos bka' nams gsungs byung na zhu / ma byung na nga rang la yod pa tsam las med las che /.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 52r and f. 70v.

¹² Bla ma gSang sngags (1983), p. 232.

¹³ *Autobiography*, f. 158r. The full verse goes: “The people from Kham have no homes. The people from Ü and Tsang have no benevolent intention. The nomads have no virtue. The people from Lhodrak have no understanding. The people from Mön [= Bhutanese] have no vows [of chastity].” Another anecdote illustrating the sexual liberality of Pema Lingpa and his followers can be found in Jatshon Mebar's biography of Thugse Dawa Gyaltzen, one of Pema Lingpa's sons. The biography recounts that Deb Thubpa Tashi once teased Thugse Dawa Gyaltzen at a festival gathering, saying: “You, sons of Pema Lingpa, do not practice dharma so that you can each find a wife, but are still discontent, and go on chasing other pretty women.” Thugse Dawa Gyaltzen, a little abashed, responded that everything was illusion for him, and put his fist into a hard rock. See Jatshon Mebar (1978), *sPrul pa'i sras mehog zla ba rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar rin chen rgyan mdzes*. Kinnaur: Sumra gSang sngags Chos gling, ff. 47, p. 409.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, f. 207v.

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, f. 209r.

Pema Lingpa is also proudly remembered for his metalwork, which is viewed with deep religious awe. Flat iron plates (*golang*) for making buckwheat pancakes are still used in Bhutanese homes with the belief that all those eating the pancakes will escape rebirths in the lower realms. The plates and long swords attributed to Pema Lingpa, called *bum thang btsan gri*, are believed to bear his thumbprint as a trademark and are treasured as priceless heirlooms. These artifacts, and the ones he revealed as hidden treasures (see cat. no. 71), constitute sacred spiritual relics and rare cultural items of Bhutan.

The entire religious project of Pema Lingpa, like that of the general treasure tradition to which he belonged, revolved around the figure of Padmasambhava, to whom is traced the ultimate origin and authority of the hidden treasures and their discoverers. In his dialogue with Drukpa Kunley, Pema Lingpa even claims Padmasambhava as his sole teacher. The centrality of Padmasambhava in the treasure teachings and the emphasis laid on his role as the chief architect of Tibetan Buddhism in general has gradually led to the rise of the cult[ure] of Padmasambhava. As illustrated by the epithet Guru Rinpoche, or Precious Teacher, given to him, Padmasambhava is seen as the supreme master and subject of numerous rituals, ceremonies, and practices. It is thus primarily due to the influence of treasure teachings like those of Pema Lingpa that the veneration and worship of Padmasambhava can be found nowhere as pervasive and intense as in Bhutan, so much so that one can perhaps claim Padmasambhava to be the patron saint of the nation.

By directly linking his teachings to Padmasambhava, Pema Lingpa also inadvertently associated himself with the golden period of 8th-century Tibet, when, under the aegis of the Thirty-seventh Yarlung king, Trisong Detsen, Buddhism was fully established in Tibet. This reference becomes more explicit in his autobiography, when he recounts his earlier rebirths starting with the life of Princess Pemasal, daughter of King Trisong Detsen and disciple of Padmasambhava. She suffered a premature death but was blessed by the Guru to be a custodian of his teachings in the future. Pema Lingpa claimed to be the reincarnation of this princess after undergoing five unfortunate and six fortunate rebirths.

The lore of the Early Propagation of Buddhism (*bstan pa snga dar*) in Tibet and the glorious dynastic period during which it happened – the golden age in Tibetan history – is particularly preserved and promoted by the Nyingma school, which claims direct descent from the early dynastic period. Pema Lingpa belonged to this school. For later Tibetans, such references to the imperial past, with its thriving Buddhist civilization, fostered both national pride and religious sanctity during periods when the country was torn and strife-stricken with constant Mongolian incursions and the proliferation of religious sectarianism. The connection to the early period for Pema Lingpa, as for many Tibetans, was an implicit claim to authenticity and authority, as true heir to the great personages of the glorious past.

Pema Lingpa also replicates this lore of the great dynastic past in a localized form through the two semi-legendary accounts in his treasures: (1) of the warring king,

Sindhuraja, who invited Padmasambhava to Bumthang, which eventually led to the spread of Buddhism there; and (2) of Khikharathoe, the prince with canine jaw and caprine skull who, after being banished from central Tibet and the hidden valley of Khenpajong, settled in the valley of Bumthang. These stories about a local royal period and Padmasambhava's visit helped foster in later periods a regional identity for Bhutan by supporting the claim for a distinct religious and political status against the popular belief of loose Tibetan hegemony over the country. Furthermore, some of Pema Lingpa's works, like the eulogy to Bumthang by his predecessor, Longchenpa (cat. no. 66), portray the southern Mön valleys as idyllic realms hidden from worldly strife and ideal for spiritual practice.

The most salient and well-known legacies of Pema Lingpa, however, are the numerous establishments and institutions founded by him and his spiritual and physical descendents. Pema Lingpa spent most of the gifts and alms he received on construction and renovation of religious centers, sites, and objects in central and eastern Bhutan. Among them, the first temple he built was Pemaling in his native village, but the most important and grandest is perhaps Tamzhing monastery, his main seat in Bumthang, finished in 1505. He also renovated numerous sites and objects, including his grandfather's temple at Mani Gönpa and Tsilung Lhakhang in Bumthang. After him, his sons and disciples went on to found many other monasteries and temples. These establishments have since served as the centers of Pema Lingpa tradition and have become premier Buddhist institutions in Bhutan and southern Tibet.

In conjunction with the physical establishments are the three socio-religious institutions that have sprung from Pema Lingpa: the family line, the reincarnation line and the transmission-disciple line. These three lineages mostly own or run the centers and establishments. Pema Lingpa's family, since his time, has emerged as a leading class of religious aristocrats, and through intermarriage with other important families of the region now extends to most of the Bhutanese elites, including the current royal family. His incarnation, the Lhalung Sungtrul, is in its eleventh reincarnation, and those of his son, Thugse Dawa Gyaltzen (b. 1499), and grandson, Gangtey Trulku Pema Thinley (1564-1642?), are in their tenth and ninth respectively. These three hierarchs make up the supreme heads of the Pema Lingpa tradition today.

The line of uninterrupted transmission of his teachings, from master to disciple, continues healthily passed down through generations of religious figures, which include, alongside others, many individuals who are his own descendents and reincarnations. While the lines of the family and reincarnation have remained concentrated in the region that one can call Pema Lingpa's world, the transmission of his teachings has spread far and wide, making the Pema Lingpa tradition more dynamic and widespread, and the master himself ever more famous. Despite the rise of scientific rationalism and clinical empiricism, which critics such as Aris employed to attack him, and the intermittent sectarian dissent even among his own people, Pema Lingpa's legacy and the stories of his life – filled with magic and wonder – continue to flourish undiminished and unhindered.



This catalogue accompanies *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, one of the most highly anticipated exhibitions of Buddhist art to be held in recent times. For over five years, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, under the direction of Dr. Stephen Little, has conducted ambitious fieldwork and research in Bhutan. Enjoying a close working relationship with the Royal Government of Bhutan, the Honolulu Academy of Arts research teams have been given unprecedented access to the nation's treasuries of sacred art and dance.

The Dragon's Gift offers a rare opportunity to introduce, to the wider international audience, some of the most sacred Buddhist images of Bhutan. From the wealth of material surveyed, the organizers of the exhibition have selected over one hundred objects of superior aesthetic achievement and deep religious significance, the vast majority of which have never before been seen in the West. Nearly all of the works of art presented in this catalogue are from active temples and monasteries and remain in ritual use. Most of the items are painted or textile thangkas or gilt bronze sculptures which date primarily from the 17th to the 19th centuries – a golden age in the Buddhist arts of Bhutan. Ranging from depictions of Tantric deities to individualized portraits of Buddhist masters, the exhibition and catalogue present outstanding works of art with a wide iconographic scope. For the Buddhist people of Bhutan, these sacred items are conceived as supports along the journey to enlightenment, and are of vital spiritual significance.

Complementing the presentation of sacred works of art is the documentation of the ancient Cham dances of Bhutan, to which the dance preservation team was given privileged entrée. Having documented over three hundred hours of sacred and secular dances, they have made a first assay of one of the few surviving treasures of the trans-Himalayan movement tradition. These differing approaches to the visual and moving arts provide further insight into the unique experience of Buddhism in Bhutan. A brief sampling of the variety of extant dance lineages – some many centuries old – is included on the DVD contained within the catalogue.

Beautifully illustrated, the catalogue also includes twelve essays contributed by leading Bhutanese and Western scholars, covering various aspects of the Bhutanese arts. Contributors include: Dr. Stephen Little, Ven. Lopön Pemala, Ven. Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, Terese Tse Bartholomew, John Johnston, Dr. Karma Phuntsho, Dr. David Jackson, Dr. John A. Ardussi, Dr. Yonten Dargye, Dr. Per K. Sorensen, Dorji Yangki, Ephraim Jose, Mark Fenn, and Joseph Houseal.


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