

## **Morning Musings: Heartwarming Rejuvenation of Drukpa-Sakya Relations**

The visit of HH Sakya Gongma Rinpoche and Dakmo Tashi Lhakyi and the wonderful reception offered to them by Bhutanese leaders and public is very encouraging. HH is a master of immense wisdom and eloquence, the senior most Sakya hierarch alive, and also considered a rebirth of a Nyingma tertön. However, it is the rejuvenation of the very old relationship between Sakya and Drukpa/Bhutan, which we see unfolding and must deeply rejoice in.

Since the foundation of the Sakya or Grey Earth establishment by Khon Konchog Gyalpo, the Khon line and Sakya establishment enjoyed a close relationship with the Gya family, from which the Drukpa tradition arose. The hierarchs of Sakya also had a sustained connection with the geographic area of Bhutan ever since the establishment of centres such as Lhading in Paro, Chizhing, Pagar, Shelmar in Geneykha/Chapcha area, Nepa in Punakha and some unidentified centres in the 14th and 15th centuries. When Tibet was under the Sakya rule, it put down the large hordes of dung reng marauders in Paro, Haa and other western regions of Bhutan although it is not clear what exactly happened during the massacre of some 160 chieftains in Phari.

In the 1500s, we see Sakya Trizin Ngakchang Kunga Rinchen travelling widely in western Bhutan including his visit to Taktshang, where he had a vision of Guru Rinpoche and Vajrakila.

In about 1600, it was the Sakya hierarch Sonam Wangpo, who gave Ngawang Namgyal of Ralung, the title of Zhabdrung in a ceremony when Zhabdrung was eight years old. The relationship Zhabdrung had with Sakya in Tibet continued after he came into exile, it being reinforced when the Sakyapa hierarch Thutob Wangchuk toured the Sakyapa centres in western Bhutan in 1632.

When Zhabdrung's overture to build a diplomatic relationship with the new Gaden Phodrang government of Tibet failed in 1644, he told his half brother Tenzin Drukdra to give to Sakya the rice, which was originally sent as a gift to authorities in the new Tibetan government. The fall out with the Dalai Lama's government resulted in the first Tibetan invasion under the Gaden Phodrang, and the third Tibetan invasion after Zhabdrung took residence in Bhutan. The invasion ended in a disgraceful defeat for the Tibetans with many military leaders held as prisoners in Punakha. It was at the request of Sakya hierarch Ngawang Kunga Sonam and Rinzin Nyingpo, a Nyingma teacher of Zhabdrung, that those prisoners were freed and sent back to Tibet with gifts.

The Tibetan leaders, however, were not appeased as they carried out many subsequent invasions of Bhutan. In 1648, when a large Tibetan contingent of some thousand soldiers were ambushed in Paro, it was again the Sakyapa hierarch who intervened to beg for their lives. The Bhutanese built Drukgyal dzong or 'fort of Drukpa victory' to celebrate their victory. The Sakya hierarchs also mediated between Bhutan and Tibet in

1657 and 1679, and finally in 1730, when Tibet under Pholhaney Sonam Tobgay saw a semblance of a victory after over 100 years of incursions into Bhutan. The victory was partly due to the division within Bhutan with a faction in Paro siding with the Tibetans. The Sakya hierarchs persuaded Pholhaney to withdraw his troops from Bhutan.

The relationship between Sakya and Bhutan was not limited to religious transaction and diplomatic mediation. In 1678, the third ruler Mingyur Tenpa organized a bride for Zhabdrung's son Jampal Dorje from a Sakya family of Ngor branch. The lady became the Tsei Dakmo, or the Lady of the Apex and mothered Tshokyi Dorje, the last scion of the direct Ralung line. Unfortunately, the Sakya-Drukpa or the Khon/Ngor-Gya line ended with Tshokye Dorje's premature death from smallpox. Nevertheless, the demise of familial connection did not strain the close friendship. In 1681, when Tenzin Rabgay became the ruler of Bhutan, the Sakya hierarchs were one of the main supporters who congratulated him, and they remained a staunch supporter of the new Drukpa state.

In 1711, when Ngawang Gyaltshen, Bhutan's renaissance man of the period and diplomat par excellence, was imprisoned by the Tibetan border patrols in Phari as he was secretly returning from Ladakh where he served as ambassador for many years, it was the Sakya hierarchs who sought his release in 1712. Sadly for the hierarch, his mother passed away just before he was released. A generation after Ngawang Gyaltshen, his star student and Bhutan's brightest literary luminary of the medieval period, Shakya Rinchen would claim to be the rebirth of Śākya Chogden, a Sakya master of exceptional intellectual sharpness and verve. The writings of Shakya Chogden, reportedly destroyed and banned in Tibet, were preserved and published in Phajoding in Bhutan.

May HH Gongma Rinpoche live long and fulfil his wishes. 🙏🙏🙏 May this wonderful relationship continue long into the future. 🙏🙏🙏

PS. Interestingly, the Drukpa and Sakya also share the tradition of giving Ngawang as a first name. Hence, the author is a namesake of Ngawang Kunga Gyaltshen, the most illustrious figure of Sakya tradition.