

I. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THANGTONG GYALPO

The King of the Empty Plains

The life and work of Thangtong Gyalpo are available in several biographies of which two were written in Tibet. The first one was written by his nephew Konchog Dewä Jungnä (*dKon mchog bde ba'i 'Byung gnas*) who took care of a temple in the Phari (*Phag ri*) Dzong in Tibet near the Bhutanese border and the second one by Gyurme Dechen (*'Gyur med bde chen*) in 1609. Several other versions were composed in Bhutan with minor variations.² Beside the 'hard' facts, all biographies contain myths, religious views, legends, tantra and magic.

While G. Tucci assumes that the biographical facts are to a large extent overlaid by legends that hardly allow for retrieving reliable data,³ Michael Aris⁴ explains that:

It seems that at the vital beginning and at the end of the work, legend and miracles dominate. In the core of the work an amount of detailed and practical information is given, which helps to identify his work (of the divine person; the author) reliably.

In fact, it is difficult to trace the widely differentiating data of his birth and death and, linked to that, the lifetime of the Mahāsiddha. The earliest mention of his birth is 1361 and the latest year of his death is 1485. These data prove a lifetime of 124 years, which quite often are also mentioned in the literature. However, some also speak of a lifetime of 128 years. According to their authentic references, G. Tucci and R. A. Stein accept 1385 as the year of his birth and 1464 as the year of death. The author follows their data.⁵

² Aris 1979, p.185.

³ Tucci 1949, p.163.

⁴ Aris 1979, p.185.

⁵ Gyatso 1980, p.111.

According to the biographical information in *History of Bhutan*,⁶ Thangtong Gyalpo was born in the Wood Ox Year (1384) in the village of Rinchen Ding (*Rin chen sdings*), also called Owa Lhatse (*'O ba lHa rtse*), in the district of Latö (*La stod*) i.e. about 100 kilometres to the west of Lhasa in Tibet. The master is said to have come into the world in the “way of Padmasambava” as a united emanation of Chenrezig (*sPyan ras gzis*, skr.: *Avalokiteśvara*) and his wrathful form, Tamdrin (*rTa mgrin*, skr.: *Hayagrīva*). His human father was Dorje Gyaltsen (*rDo rje rGyal mtshan*) and the mother Jagar Lhamo. Thangtong Gyalpo is also regarded as the united incarnation of the Mahāsiddha Kukuripa (*skr. Kukurīpa*), one of the 84 Mahāsiddhas of India and Kuenkhyen Dolpopa (*Kun mkhyen Dol po pa*).

Even at birth, he manifested the mystic shine and the extraordinary being of the saint. Thus, Sarat Chandra Das and Austine Waddell in connection with a representation of Thangtong Gyalpo in the Jokhang (*Jo khang*) in Lhasa report a legend about his birth. According to this legend, Thangtong Gyalpo at first refused to be born and remained for 60 years (i.e. a complete sexagenary cycle) in the mother’s womb, owing to the misunderstandings of this world, which he had to face in his former lives. There, he remained in deep meditation and concentrated his mind upon the well-being of all sentient beings. At the end of the 60th year, Thangtong Gyalpo realised that he had negated the suffering of his mother, while he meditated for the well-being of others. Thus, he left the womb and came into the world at the age of 60 years, i.e., already with grey hair and began his teachings immediately. According to another legend, he uttered the Mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* at his birth.⁷

⁶ Tshewang, S. 1994, p.1.

⁷ Waddell 1895/1974, p.385.

Other accounts initially sound surprising as well: Thangtong Gyalpo is said to have studied under more than 500 teachers. One of his early teachers was his uncle Lama Dragzang (*Bla ma Grags bzang*) who later initiated him into the teachings of Avalokiteśvara. The teachings of this Bodhisattva later developed to be a central point in his philosophical treatises. The most important teacher in this regard was Ka Ngapa Päljor Sherab (*bKa' Inga pa dPal 'byor Shes rab*) from Dotö Kyara (*mDo stod sKya ra*).⁸

⁸ Gyatso 1980, p.116.



Fig. 2: Thangtong Gyalpo on a slate plate in the Simtokha Dzong in Bhutan.

Thangtong Gyalpo's intensive studies and teachings were supported by visions and communication with other masters, in addition to a large part by meditation periods, for example, a seven-year 'retreat' after the death of his mother. Later in life, he meditated on the 'compassionate' Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who led not only to the intensive communication, but also to visions and prophecies, which the Drubthop was able to experience. Janet Gyatso formulates accordingly:

The prophecies he received from Avalokitesvara became the major impetus for his extensive bridge construction, an endeavour seen as part of the Bodhisattva vow to help all sentient beings.⁹

After his ordination as a gelong, Thangtong Gyalpo received the surname Tsundup Zangpo (*brtson 'grus bzang po*), whereby the name Tsundup refers to Thangtong Gyalpo's abilities in the crafts.

At the beginning of 15th century, Thangtong Gyalpo began his work with the casting of bronze and iron thunderbolts (Dorje); construction of chörten and chain suspension bridges; and above all, with the spread of his teachings and the establishment of his own religious school, the Chakzam line, in short called "Chakzampa". Thangtong travelled throughout Tibet, taught in the most important monasteries like Samye; visited and discussed with the most extraordinary masters of the time, like the Fifth and Sixth Gyalwang Karmapa; and also travelled to neighbouring countries, like India, Kashmir, Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh, Mongolia and China.

⁹ Gyatso 1980, p.113. The contents of the citation make clear that for Thangtong Gyalpo, Mahāsiddha and suspension bridge builder were not two separate occupations, but that one conditioned the other, from the methodical beginning of the spreading of the teachings as well as from the teachings of Avalokiteśvara.

Tibet of his times

Thangtong Gyalpo worked in an exiting and fruitful period in Tibet's history. The 'second spread of the teachings' from the 10th to the 12th century with such significant teachers like Rinchen Zangpo (*Rin chen bzang po*, 958-1055), Atiśa (*Jo bo rje Atiśa*, 958-1054), Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (*Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros*, 1012-1097) up to Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*, 1040-1123) led to series of significant monastic foundations like Reting (*Ra sgren*, 1057), Sakya (*Sa skya*, 1073), Drigung ('*Bri gung*, 1120) and Tsurphu (*mTshur phu*, 1198). This momentum continued in the middle of the 14th century and possibly up to the first half of the 15th century, which gave a significant push for an extraordinary spiritual, social, judicial and cultural jump in development which led to the rise of extraordinary personalities.

Following are some of the important personalities who were contemporaries of Thangtong Gyalpo:

1357 Tsongkhapa (*Tsong kha pa*), the founder and reformer of the Gelugpa school (*dGe' lugs pa*) is born in the "onion valley", where today the holy monastery of Kumbum is located.

1385 Khedrup Je Geleg Pelzang (*mKhas grub rje, dGe legs dpal bzang*), one of the principle disciples of Tsongkhapa is born.

1391 The nephew and favourite disciple of Tsongkhapa and later the first Dalai Lama is born as Gedün Drubpa (*dGe 'dun grub pa*).

1455 Kunga Legpa'i Zangpo commonly called Drukpa Kunley (*rNal byor pa 'Brug pa Kun legs*) is born.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gerner 1981, p.190 ff.

Finally, originating in this time were noteworthy monasteries such as,

1409 Galdan (*dGa' ldan*), the Joyful

1414 Drepung (*'Bras spungs*), the Rice Heap

1417 Sera (*Se ra Theg chen gling*), the Court of the Wild Roses

1429 Ngor (*Ngor E wam chos sde*), the monastery of Ngor E wam

1447 Tashi Lhünpo (*bKra shis Lhun po*), the Lucky Mound



Fig. 3: Larger than life size statue of Thangtong Gyalpo next to the entrance of the Dukhang at Samye, the oldest monastery of Tibet.

With a determining influence by Thangtong Gyalpo, the tradition of the chörten with a hundred thousand statues and many doors of auspiciousness, 'Kumbum Tashi Gomang (*sKu 'bum bKra shis sgo mang*), is developed to the full blossom. While all-important texts were already printed at the beginning of the 14th century, the painting style that once was influenced by Kashmir, India and Nepal is now merged into a pure Tibetan painting style.

In this touching sphere, Thangtong Gyalpo, through direct contact with his people, stands out until to this day for the visibly extraordinary results of his method of spreading the teachings of Dharma. Tashi Tsering has quoted ten forms of religious activities of Thangtong Gyalpo from a biography:

Rnam thar gsal ba'i sgron me says that Thang stong rgyal po's [...] religious activities took ten forms. What were they? Building temples as a symbol of the (Buddha-) body; printing scriptures as a symbol of the speech; building stupas as a symbol of the mind; building bridges for the sake of all beings; and saving individual lives. These were the five major forms. Uninterrupted daily offerings at the temples; the uninterrupted sound of reading the scriptures; uninterrupted circumambulations of the stupa; non-stop building of bridges and sparing life without interruption were the five minor forms. Thus his ten powerful forms filled the world.¹¹

In 1430, Thangtong Gyalpo built a bridge across the Yarlung Tsangpo (*Yar klungs bTsang po*) which was probably his first big and most significant suspension bridge called the Chushul Chakzam (*chu shul lcags zam*). Later, this bridge became so famous that it was simply called Chakzam or Iron Bridge without being known by its local name.

Thangtong Gyalpo's journeys to Bhutan

¹¹ Tsering, T. 2001, p.43. Tashi Tsering with the citation from the biography depicts a whole spiritual persona with a few facts.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

To spread the teachings beyond his native Tibet and in search of raw materials for iron chain bridges, Thangtong Gyalpo travelled to Bhutan in 1433 via Ralung, the Phari Dzong and the Phari La.¹² In Bhutan, his way is exactly to be pursued alongside the temples he built, like the Dungtshi Lhakhang in the Paro valley, as well as the iron chain bridges or traces of them in Tamchog, Chukha and Wangdi Phodrang.



Fig. 4 & 5: Like many other masters, Thangtong Gyalpo began his work in Bhutan at the Palphug meditation cave of Taktshang in the Paro valley.

As Thangtong Gyalpo continued to travel further on to Paro, he finds a place occupied by an evil demoness and builds a

¹² Tshewang, 1994, p.100. Today it is difficult to find out what were the most important causal motives for Thangtong Gyalpo to visit Bhutan. Was it his wish for the spreading of his teachings? Did he want to experience the 'power places' like Taktsang himself? Did he want to find iron in Bhutan or did he want to learn from the Bhutanese blacksmiths?

chörten, Dungsit Lhakang (*Zlum rtse lha khang*). He blessed the place and prayed that the evil demoness be banished for good from the place so that she could not do any more harm to the people.

From Dungsit Lhakang, Thangtong Gyalpo proceeded to Dzong Drakha or Dzong Khraka, the today's Dzong Drak Gonpa, which is located to the west of Bongdey. In this monastery (which today is often called the small Taktsang), Thangtong Gyalpo again built a small chörten, blessed it and carried out the inauguration rites. From this Gonpa, Thangtong Gyalpo's way led him to the Haa valley, and there after to the Jildo Charig gorge. In the Haa valley, it is reported that for the first time, Thangtong Gyalpo forged iron chains for suspension bridges.

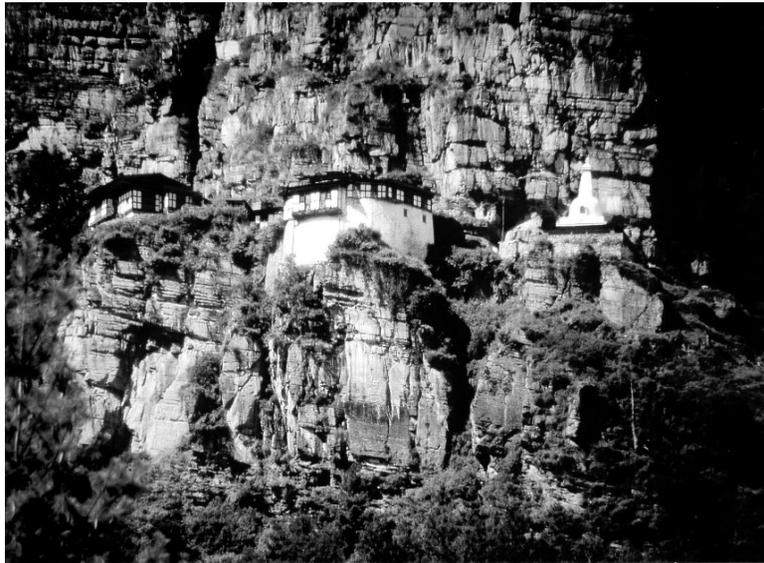


Fig. 6: Dzong Drak Gonpa near Bongdey where Thangtong Gyalpo built one of his chörtens in Bhutan.

Having returned to the Paro valley, Thangtong Gyalpo proceeded down to the Paro Chhu (*sPa gro chu*) up to the place of today's Tamchog Lhakang (*gTang chos Lha khang*).

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

The place to this day shows very red, ferrous rock. Here as well as a few kilometres farther downstream, Thangtong Gyalpo is supposed to have built yet another iron chain bridge.

The bridge building master continued his journey to the east, first to Thimphu and then in the direction of Punakha. Close to Wangdi Phodrang, he is said to have built the Badong Lhakhang. There a lama also donated 250 pieces of iron to him for another iron chain bridge, probably the bridge of Wangdi Phodrang, which was substituted in 1684 with a cantilever bridge. Finally, moving further to the east, he built another big temple of Shar Chitog Khar. From hence, Thangtong Gyalpo's tracks are lost for some time. However, his biography records that he built many bridges, chörtens and lhakhangs in Bhutan to stabilise the teachings of the Buddha. In the course of time, these monuments were assigned local names, which make the identification difficult in the present time.



Fig. 7: Another foundation of a monastery by Thangtong Gyalpo is the Gonpa of Shar Chitog Khar near Wangdi Phodrang.

In 1434, Thangtong Gyalpo imported the blacksmith's tools and a total of 7500 horse loads of raw iron to Tibet. Various sources agree that Thangtong Gyalpo had large quantities of iron, raw iron, ready made chain links transported from Bhutan to Tibet, including their precise quantity. His biographer, Gyurme Dechen records that the blacksmiths of Paro forged 7000 chain links and that he packed 1400 horse loads of 15 chain links each alongside with other baggages and have them brought to different places in Tibet.¹³ Other parts of the biography also mention 1084 'plumbs' of iron that the Drubthop brought to Phari in Tibet.

Fragments from his life's work

In 1436, Thangtong Gyalpo is back in Tibet to build the bridge at Päl Riwoche (*dPal Ri bo che*) across the Yarlung Tsangpo river (*Yar klung gtsang po*), which is still extant. It is here that the Drubthop, many years later will establish his large Kumbum Tashi Gomang Chörten.

Following the Päl Riwoche (*dPal Ri bo che*) bridge, the Drubthop embarked upon the next big bridge building work in 1442, the Rinchen Chakzam (*Rin chen lCags zam*) at the monastery of Phodo (*phod mdo*) and Lhundrub (*lHun grub*), across the Kyichu river (*sKyid chu*), an important passage between the monastery of Reting (*Ra sgren*) and Lhasa.

In the Wood Rat Year, corresponding to 1444, Thangtong Gyalpo founded the monastery, which he later used as his main seat. This monastery is located at the holy mountain of Chuwo Ri (*Chu bo ri*), above the southern bridgehead of his iron chain bridge across the Yarlung Tsangpo river. Chuwo Ri is one of eight original meditation caves of Guru Rinpoche

¹³ Gruschke 2004, p.157.

and the eighth century king of the Dharma, Trisong Detsen. It is here that the hermitage of Namkading is located.¹⁴

Around this period, Thangtong Gyalpo visited Bhutan for the second time. During this visit, he was in the Eastern Bhutan, where he built (among others) the large iron chain bridge below Tashigang, which stood until 1968. The literature mentions a bridge building in Tashitse (*bKras shis rtse*) from 1436 to 1449, which could refer to this event. Above all, there are numerous references to his 'son' Buchung that proves his sojourn in Eastern Bhutan.

Towards the middle of the 15th century, the Drubthob works in Eastern Tibet. In 1448, he founds the Sakya monastery of Derge (*sDe dge*) Gonchen, which today is located in the district of Derge Xian, and is also called Lhündrub Teng (*lHun grub steng*). Derge Gonchen is one of the headquarters of the Sakya Tridzin, the head of the Sakya order who presently resides in Rajpur in Uttar Pradesh in India.¹⁵ Here at the beginning of the 15th century, the relationship between Thangtong Gyalpo and the leading member of the Sakya School become visible again; this is true even today with the 17th Chakzampa Tulku (*lCags zam pa Thugs sprul sku*). On a hill, opposite of Derge, a cave exists, in which Thangtong Gyalpo has meditated. And not far from Derge, in the district of Riwoche, the Riwoche Chakzam across the Chi Chhu, a tributary of the Mekong, exists to this day.

In the same year, Thangtong Gyalpo returns to Central Tibet once again to continue his immense network of iron chain bridges. Some of these bridges, like the ones in Chung Riwoche, Lhundrup, Panding, Phuntsholing and Tholing are still extant to this day. Other bridges, like the famous 'Chakzam' of which Sven Hedin could still take a photo in

¹⁴ Chan 1994, p.478.

¹⁵ Dowman 2000, p.317/318.

1907 are mentioned in the literature, and with others again, like the Nyango Druka Chakzam near Samye, some of the river pillars have survived.

Thangtong Gyalpo, however, begins the preparations for his masterpiece in 1448: The Chung Riwoche Kumbum at Päl Riwoche, which he started constructing in 1449.

Furthermore, it was important to Thangtong Gyalpo to strengthen his monastic institution, his teachings and the Chakzampa School in Central Tibet.

Finally, like his year of birth, biographers differ in the year of his death as well. Several sources point out to the fact that Drubthop Thangtong Gyalpo has died in the district of Riwoche in the eastern Tibetan province of Kham.¹⁶ The year of his death is assumed anywhere between 1464 and 1509. By keeping the variations of his birth in mind, 1384, Thangtong Gyalpo has accordingly become anywhere between 78 and 125 years of age.¹⁷

Incarnation lineage

The incarnation lineage of Thangtong Gyalpo, the lineage of the Chakzampa Tulkus (*lCags zam pa sprul sku*) is uninterrupted to this day. Gyonpo Tshering in Thimphu has recorded it thus:

1. Thangthong Gyalpo
2. Char Thukchan
3. Ja-Kangpa
4. Jatangpa Nering Sonam
5. Jatangpa Nering Chodpa
6. Nering Jatangpa
7. Jatangpa Phuntshog (1738-1790)

¹⁶ Zeng 1996, p.192. A. Gruschke mentions even more authors.

¹⁷ This wide range of the data is mentioned in the literature.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

8. Jatangpa Yontenpal
9. Jatangpa Oewapal
10. Ngedon Nyingpo
11. Khyentse Wangpo
12. Dewai Dorje
13. Jatangpa Zhabkar Tshogdrug Rangdrol
14. Jatangpa Ri-ul Lama
15. Jatangpa Sulmang Chodgyan
16. Drupai Wangchuk Chenpo Rikey Jadral
17. Ngawang Thinley Lhundrub, born in 1990.¹⁸

His Eminence, the 16th Thangtong Tulku, Rikey Jadral Rinpoche, passed away in 1983 after he had founded the new Thangtong Dewachen monastery in Thimphu in 1976. Kalu Rinpoche who conducted the funeral rite for Rikey Jadral Rinpoche prophesied a swift reincarnation. In addition, His Holiness, the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Kalu Rinpoche indicated that His Holiness, the Sakya Tridzin possesses the ability to recognise the new incarnation.

In the Fire Horse Year, corresponding to the 17th May 1990, Sangay Choedzin was born in the morning at 6 o' clock along with the sunrise to Gyonpo Tshering and Deki Wangmo. Quite early, the boy manifested many signs, pointing to be the reincarnation of the previous Chakzampa. In his prediction letter, the Sakya Tridzin described the place, house, names of parents and birthday of the boy. A friend of the family mentioned to the father, a few days after the birth that the boy could be the reincarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo. Subsequently, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama as well as His Holiness, the Sakya Tridzin recognised the boy as the 17th incarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo.

Following the instructions of the Sakya Tridzin, the investiture ceremony was carried out by His Eminence, the

¹⁸ Tsering, G., p.8.

late Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche on the fourth day of the sixth month in the Water Dog Year, corresponding to 12 July 1994 at the Thangtong Dewachen monastery in Zilukha, Thimphu. Later in the same year, the Sakya Tridzin carried out the formal installation on the 16 September 1994, at his residence in Rajpur, Uttar Pradesh in India.¹⁹

On the 6 May 2004, in the presence of his parents as well as the director of the Thangtong Dewachen Lhakhang in Thimphu, I was able to have a detailed conversation with the 14-year-old incarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo, Ngagwang Thinley Lhundrub. During the interview, His Eminence gave an account of his studies under the guidance of His Holiness the Sakya Tridzin and His Eminence Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche in India. As to his previous incarnations, the young Tulku pays an extraordinary reverence to them and formulates his future plans clearly: "I will take special care of Thangtong Gyalpo's teachings."²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid. p.2.

²⁰ Ngagwang Thinley Lhundrub has the charisma of a great personality already at 14 years. He met the author not as a child or youngster but with restraint and great seriousness.

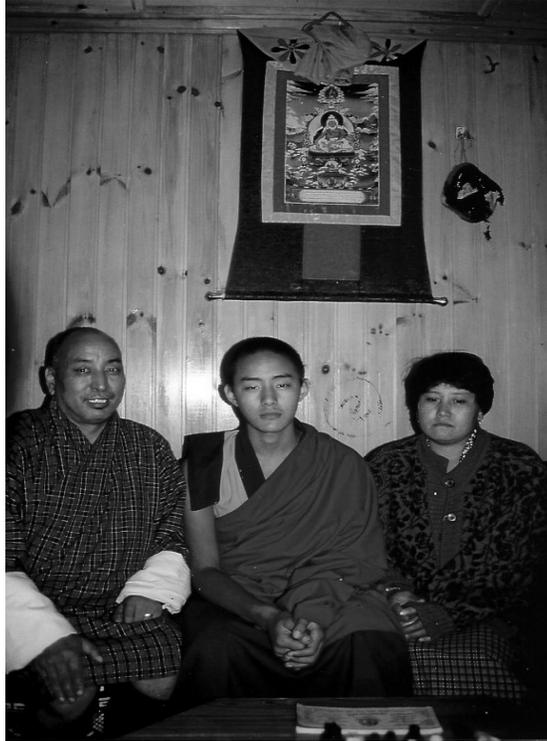


Fig. 8: 17th incarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo, Ngagwang Thinley Lhundrub (Ngag dbang phrin las lhun grub), with his father and mother.

Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo

Not much is known about Thangtong Gyalpo's family. In a prologue to the *Ache Lhamo* (*A Ice Lha mo*) play, the activities of the Drubthop are connected to his family. According to that source, Thangtong Gyalpo produced copies of the Kangjur (*bKa' gyur*) and Tanjur (*bsTan gyur*) for his father and built the Kumbum Chörten for his mother. As for his son, he had the Mani Kabum (*Ma ni bka' bum*) copied, and for the welfare

of all sentient beings, he built iron chain bridges across the rivers.²¹

In the biography of Gyurme Dechen, it is pointed out that Nyima Zangpo (*Nyi ma bzang po*) is regarded as his spiritual son. In Tibet, there is no indication of his biological offspring; however, there is a clear trace of such an existence in Bhutan.

In addition, nothing is known about the wife of the Mahāsiddha. Françoise Pommaret, however, reports (again only in respect to Bhutan) about a female partner of Thangtong Gyalpo, who worked as a teacher of Pema Lingpa (*Padma gling pa*):

Pema Lingpa came into the world in Chel in the Tang valley of Bumthang. He was regarded as the reincarnation of Longchen Rabjampa, as well as that of Pematsetel, the daughter of the king Trisong Detsen. Since his mother could not feed him, she gave Pema Lingpa to a nurse in the family of a blacksmith, where he learnt the craft of a blacksmith as a child. With the passage of time, he became a skilful blacksmith and wood carver. Since Pema Lingpa was interested in religious activities, he received lessons from, Drubthob Zangmo, his paternal aunt and the partner of the Chagzampa (iron bridge builder) Thangtong Gyelpo.²²

Just as real is the historical personality of Thangtong Gyalpo, so blurred is the information on his son, Gyalwa Zangpo. As already explained, nothing is reported in the Tibetan biographies about a biological son. Neither picture nor sculpture is extant in Tibet. However, the discovery of artefacts and references strongly point to a son of Thangtong Gyalpo in Merak in the eastern extremity of Bhutan.

²¹ Tsering, T. 2001, p.50.

²² Pommaret 1997, p.189/190.

Chakzampa Thangtong Gyalpo

Thangtong Gyalpo first came to Bhutan via the monastery of Ralung, the Chumbi valley and the Phari Dzong to Paro. However, there are two trade routes existing during that time, by which Bhutan could be reached a lot easier from Lhasa: One route is via Senge Dzong to Lhuntse Dzong and another through the Valley of the Kings directly to Tashigang, which is only two day's walk from Merak.

It is a well-known fact that the ancestors of the today's inhabitants of Merak and Sakteng emigrated from Tibet in the 14th century, which is a proof of the good connections existing between the two regions.

The author saw the representation of Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo for the first time in 1997, in form of a clay-sculpture, while measurements were taken for the renovation of the Choetsi Lhakhang, high above the Paro valley. Inside the niched wall of the altar of this Lhakhang is a group of three figures standing with Thangtong Gyalpo as the central figure. Below him, to the left is a slightly smaller figure of a younger man who in the representation resembles the holy Chakzampa and on the right lies the Chökyong (*chos skyong*, skr.: *Dharmapāla*), the protector of the teachings.

In 1998, the author found the second one in the small monastery of Gengo on the way to Merak. Gengo lies about 3.5 hours of walk behind the Mindula pass and one hour before Merak. The Lama of the Lhakhang informed the author about Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo, but could not show the reliquary chörten, as he was engaged in carrying out an important ritual with a hermit who stayed as a guest.



Fig. 9: The altar (*mchod shoms*) for Thangtong Gyalpo, his son and Chökyong (*chos skyong*) in the Choetsi Lhakhang in the Paro valley.

Later, more information about Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo began to reach me. Thanks to Robert Dompnier,²³ who had seen a wooden sculpture of Thangtong Gyalpo in Merak and had its photo taken. The gilt figure completely differs from all other Thangtong Gyalpo representations. The sculpture in Merak shows a young man with a 'Buddha's face' without a beard, but with the bun of the Arhats and Mahāsiddhas. The right hand holds a small but original chain above the level of the head and the left hand rests in the meditation gesture in

²³ Robert Dompnier, like the author, has travelled to the most remote places of Bhutan.

the lap. The figure does not sit crossed legged nor on a double lotus throne, but on a simple piece of cloth. When thousands of Thangtong Gyalpo representations follow precisely the same iconography, however, for the figure in Merak, there are only two interpretations: Either Thangtong Gyalpo is represented in his youthful years or it may be a representation of his son, Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo.



Fig. 10: Statue of Thangtong Gyalpo or his son Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo in Merak. Photo: Robert Dompnier

Finally in 2005, Karma Ura gave additional information on Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo to the author. Following is the translated version of Lama Rinchen's verbal assertion transcribed by Karma Ura:

The most important thing to see in Gengo village is its temple. In the temple, the main relics are a statue of eleven-headed Avaloketishvara and Guru Rinpoche. However, the most important antique treasure in this temple is the holy mummy or relic of Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo, the son of the famous Drupthop Thangtong Gyalpo. It was mentioned to me that Gyalwa Zangpo was born from the rib cage of Thangtong Gyalpo. The holy mummy of Buchung Gyalwa Zangpo is embalmed and enshrined in a wooden Gomang Chorten. I, Karma Ura, would like to add that the existence of the holy mummy of the miraculously born son of Drupthop Thangthang Gyalpo is totally unknown, not only internationally but also within Bhutan. It is a great rediscovery to know that Thangthong Gyalpo had, what may probably be a genealogical son in this country. This fact is not recorded in any of his biographies, which of course were written in Tibet. So the Tibetans would not have known the existence of his descendant in eastern Bhutan.²⁴

Further, Karma Ura expounds that Buchung may have been born in Merak and sent to India at the age of 21 years in search of spiritual treasures.²⁵ Once again, this is easily possible as India is accessible to the east and south from Merak in one or two day journey on foot. In addition to many places and geomantic points like trees or stones in the greater vicinity of Merak, bear the names of Thangtong Gyalpo or his son.

In the Gengo Lhakhang, among the eight traditional chörtens, the embalmed body of Buchung is said to be concealed in the most beautiful of these chörtens, the Gomang Chörten, the chörten of the one hundred thousand doors. Merak must have been a home and homeland to Thangtong Gyalpo and his 'miraculous' family for a long time. Since he is thought to

²⁴ Ura 2006, p.1/2.

²⁵ Ura 2005: In 2005, the author was able to speak in detail with Karma Ura about Thangtong Gyalpo. As a result, Karma Ura wrote the manuscript with the oral expounding by Lam Rinchen.

have lived there for a long period, he may have built a number of bridges using this location as his centre. Tashigang and Doksum for example belong to this area, just like the bridges to the south of Mongar, which likewise are only a few days' journey. Last but not least, there is another basic fact that makes Merak an operating place for Thangtong Gyalpo: To the south of Tashigang, close to Khaling lies Barshong, where one of the two huge iron deposits of Bhutan are located.²⁶

The representations of Thangtong Gyalpo

Thangtong Gyalpo lives on as a Drupthob, as well as through the unbroken line of his incarnations. Moreover, he also lives on in his works: i.e. lhakhags, chörten, iron chain bridges, his philosophical writings up to the dances and songs that accompany certain works. Unlike other masters who have 'only' left their philosophy, Thangtong Gyalpo is remembered through physical structures like bridges and temples that remain, which make Tibet and Bhutan more easily 'conceivable' to lamas, monks and laymen alike, which according to him is a very popular media of his activity among simple people.

Thangtong Gyalpo's blessing is especially sought for the 'long life' and protection from evil. In Tibet, people generally place a figure of Thangtong Gyalpo on to the household altar. If one moves to another place or another house, his statue is brought before anything else. His popularity and admiration in the present day Tibet is clear. Even in the holiest temple of Tibet, the Tsuglakhang (*gTsug lag khang*) in Lhasa bears a large statue of him in terracotta with offerings. At the Barkhor (*bar'khor*), beside the Buddha statues, only statue of Thangtong Gyalpo painted richly and sized approximately 15 to 20 centimetres are sold to pilgrims by the two shops. In

²⁶ Rapten 2001. Rapten's report for the Centre for Bhutan Studies as published in 'Kuensel' issue of 23 June 2001, p.6.

Bhutan, every year at the end of a nine day ceremony at the Memorial Chörten in Thimphu, *tshewang* or long life initiation according to the lineage of Drubthop Thangtong Gyalpo is bestowed on tens of thousands of people. In 2005, this ceremony was conducted by the highly honoured Namkhai Nyingpo.²⁷

Very often one finds Thangtong Gyalpo's physical representations on wall paintings, Thangkas as well as on Tsa-tsas and figures far larger than life size displayed. Thangtong Gyalpo is thereby shown very uniformly which leads Schumann to assume that a representation similar to a portrait is aimed,²⁸ in addition one is trying to show substantial characteristics of the emanation that he embodies, express it through the figures or statues and in the paintings.

As already mentioned, Thangtong Gyalpo embodies the emanation of Guru Rinpoche, Chenrezig and Tamdrin. Padmasambhava popularly known as Guru Rinpoche is seen as the master who is directing 'outside' because he brought the Buddhism to Tibet and Bhutan. Avalokiteśvara, the transcendent Bodhisattva of Compassion in his 4 armed form embodies the 'inwardly' directed way and Tamdrin, the 'horse-necked' with red skin colour, finally stands out and represents the 'mystic or secret' form.

Thangtong Gyalpo is usually portrayed as a paunchy old man with brown or red skin colour. The brown or red-brown is supposed to resemble the colour of a fresh sheep liver and, therefore, varies from red-brown or brownish to practically all

²⁷ Kuensel 2005. In the issue from the 6th April, 2005 of the Kuensel, the Bhutanese weekly paper, the blessing is expressly appreciated and a large photo showing the numerous pilgrims and believers is added.

²⁸ Schumann 1986, p.365.

shadings between red and black. The origin of this colour is to be found with Tamdrin, who is always shown with a skin colour from red-brown to deep brown. Thangtong Gyalpo wears his hair highly bound up in a big knot, as many other Mahāsiddhas do. The long beard is, like the hair, always white, a symbolic indication that he came to see the light of the world only at the age of 60.



Fig. 11: Typical illustration of Thangtong Gyalpo on a block print. Source: Schumann 1986

Thangtong Gyalpo is usually shown sitting in the lotus posture on a double lotus throne. He wears, like many of the yogis and Mahāsiddhas, a white cotton garment and a red cloak. In addition to these characteristics, he wears a meditation belt, a jewel chain, earrings and arm tyres with the flame jewel. In the left hand, he holds the scull cup, Thöpa (*thod pa*, skr.: *Kapāla*) and the nectar vase (*bdud rtsi'i*

bum pa, skr.: *Amṛtakalaśa*) placed inside the bowl. The right hand, which is almost in the 'earth-touching' gesture lies on top of the knee. Finally, a piece of chain, mostly five chain links may be seen in his right hand. Only in the small sculpture, which is located in Merak, is he shown as a young man, holding five chain links high above his head.

In all significant sanctuaries, Thangtong Gyalpo is revered in murals, even more so in larger-than-life-size statues. A huge statue of the master rises in front of the Potala at the rock spur on the Marpori, subtending the Chagpori (*lCags po ri*), the iron mountain. Inside the Potala palace, a medallion is found with a representation of Thangtong Gyalpo placed above an iron chain bridge and a wooden bark as a ferry. In the large Dukhang (*'Du khang*), the meeting hall of Samye, the Drubthop greets us directly left to the entrance.



Fig. 12: Wall painting of Thangtong Gyalpo at the Gyantse hotel in Tibet

In Chung Riwoche, an almost demon-like black statue in a niche reminds us of the builder of the sanctuary, and even at the new Gyantse hotel, a whole wall is dedicated to Thangtong Gyalpo with the following inscription:

Thangthong Gyalpo (1361-1486). He was born in Wolka Lhatse. That includes Angren County of Tibet now. He built many temples and eighty-five iron bridges in Tibet. In his life, he wrote many historical opera plays. We Tibetan say traditional Tibetan opera was founded by him. In medicine, he invented white saint pills and many other special pills. Later, he died in Chung Riwo at the age of hundred and twenty-five. He was a resourceful person for Tibet.

In Bhutan, Thangtong Gyalpo is shown virtually in classical mode as reflected in the fine mural painting at the walls of the Dungtse Lhakhang that he himself had established. Another large wall painting in Taktshang is also dedicated to the memory of his domain in Bhutan. As mentioned earlier, one can find an altar at the Choetse Lhakhang above Tamchog bearing images of Thangtong Gyalpo in the middle, with his son to the left and a protective deity to the right. The temple at the bridgehead of the former Tashigang iron chain bridge encloses altars, sculptures and wall paintings of Thangtong Gyalpo. Finally, the lhakhang of Tamchog also contains several wall paintings of Thangtong Gyalpo.

In the broader sense, the monasteries and lhakhangs that are attributed to Thangtong Gyalpo must be counted as his representations. Many times these lhakhangs are only called Drubthop Lhakhang (*sGrub thob Lha khang*) or Mahāsiddha Lhakhang as general names for a Thangtong Gyalpo lhakhang.

The Drubthop Lhakhang of Lhasa is located indicatively at the foot of the Chakpori, the iron mountain. To its right lies the Palphuk cave, a sanctuary which was founded in the seventh century at the time of the King of Dharma, Srongtsen Gampo. It is one of the oldest sanctuaries of Tibet besides Jokhang, Samye and Ramoche, where Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated.



Fig. 13: Head of Thangtong Gyalpo inside the Drubthop Lhakhang at the Chagpori in Lhasa.

According to the foundation legend, Thangtong Gyalpo came to this cave and meditated here. During the meditation, a black spot appeared above the left eye of the master. The Buddhists in the Himalayas believe that for the well-being of all sentient beings, Thangtong Gyalpo banished all evil deeds of the world in this spot. The Lhakhang was established to commemorate the selflessness of the Drubthop. Around 1930, Khyenrab Norbu, an incarnation of Yutok Yönten Gonpo, the founder of the Tibetan medicine, whose mortal remains are kept in a metal chörten, renovated the Lhakhang. Later, after its destruction during the Cultural Revolution, it was Sonam

Rinchen, another incarnation of Yutok Yönten Gonpo, who restored the Lhakhang once again.²⁹



Fig. 14: Thangtong Gyalpo at the Thangtong Dewachen Lhakhang in Zilukha, Thimphu.

A huge gilt statue of Thangtong Gyalpo, with pronounced spot above left eye, dominates the Dukhang Lhakhang. Beside representations of Yutok Yönten Gonpo, there are many small painted figures of Thangtong Gyalpo and the Three Kings of the Dharma are found as mural paintings at the back: The one on left is Trisong Detsen, in the middle resides Srongtsen

²⁹ Chan 1994, p.127.

Gampo and to the right is Ralpachan. Today four Nyingmapa nuns help in keeping the Drubthop Lhakhang clean. One of the duties of these four nuns is to make Tsa-tsas of the Drupthob and to distribute them to the pilgrims passing by.

The Thangtong Dewachen Lhakhang, a Drubthop Lhakhang in Zilukha above the Tashi Chhō Dzong in Thimphu, is, like in Lhasa, a nunnery. The 16th Chakzampa, Rikey Jadral, founded Thangtong Dewachen in 1976. A several metre high-gilt statue of Thangtong Gyalpo in the middle of the altar commands the Dukhang of this Lhakhang. Beside, the altar also houses statues of Green Tārā and the local deity 'Zhilshindam.' The nunnery owns a whole series of Thangkas with representations of the Drubthop from which some have suffered from a fire in 2005. Presently, 60 nuns promote Buddhism in general and the teachings of Thangtong Gyalpo of the Jangter tradition in particular. Furthermore, this nunnery take care of spiritual and liturgical needs of the surrounding inhabitants, in addition to the care of the 17th incarnation of Thangtong Gyalpo, Tulku Ngagwang Thinley Lhundrup, born in 1990.

Below the Tashigang Dzong, an iron chain bridge once spanned the Drangme Chhu (*Drang me chu*). In the former western bridgehead of the Drangme Chhu Chakzam, another Drubthop Lhakhang is located which was renovated at around 2000, whereby it received a new multi-staged roof. On the ground floor of this Lhakhang, an appropriate part of the chains of the former bridge is attached to the walls, each one below a painted bridge representation. The Dukhang is controlled by Thangtong Gyalpo figures. Among them, there is also a highly revered small figure, similarly to the one in Chung Riwoche.

Similarly, the Tamchog Gonpa (*rTa mchog dgon pa* or generally *rTa mchog sgang*), half way between Paro and Chuzom in the Paro Chhu valley is regarded a Drubthop Lhakhang. The red earth around the buildings indicates the high iron content. The biographies prove unambiguously that

Thangtong Gyalpo once worked here. It is also known that an iron chain bridge of Thangtong Gyalpo stood here until 1969 and by order of His Majesty, the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, a new iron chain bridge has been erected here once again in 2005. The lhakhang and the hermitage belonging to it were founded by successors of Thangtong Gyalpo. The Dukhang is dedicated to Thangtong Gyalpo and the Drubthop is seen illustrated everywhere. Today, private farmers who work in the succession to the Drubthop maintain the lhakhang.



Fig. 15: The highly revered statue of Thangtong Gyalpo inside the temple at the Drangme Chhu near Tashigang.