



The Terma Tradition Of Guru Padmasambhava

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Buddhism has had a widespread influence in the regions of Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and other parts of the Himalayan region. However, it is a more esoteric form of Buddhism with leanings towards Tantrism that has flourished in this region. It is also referred to as Mantrayana for its reliance on sacred mantras, symbolic Mudras and use of Mandalas along with a visualisation of deities. This form of Buddhism can be traced back to the 7th century AD, when the Tibetan king Songsten Gampo set about introducing Buddhism as the state religion for Tibet. Encouraged by his two wives, who were considered to be emanations of Green and White Tara, he zealously pursued a mass conversion of his subjects, who were largely followers of the Bon religion. His pursuit was carried on by one of his late successors Trisong Detsen in the 8th Century. To cement the foundation of Buddhism in Tibet Detsen invited the Indian Pandit Rakshita and the renowned tantric Guru Padmasambhava (Sclagenweitt). With his superior knowledge of Tantrism Guru Padmasambhava is believed to have subdued the local demons and converted them into protectors of the dharma. An amalgamation was also achieved by merging the practices and rituals of the Bon religion with the Tantric form of Buddhism. A large array of mystical symbols and complex Tantric rituals make up this form of Buddhism. It was during this period that the first monastery in Tibet called Samye Monastery was established as a dharma centre and the first scholars inducted.

In the beginning of the 17th century, Tibetan Buddhism began to spread to the regions of Sikkim and Bhutan. A pivotal factor was the conflict between the red hat and yellow hat sect which necessitated a form of migration and exploration into neighbouring regions to locate safe havens. In fact, it is to the credit of the efforts of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme, Ngadak Sempa Chenpo and Kathok Rigzing Chenpo who helped establish a Buddhist monarchy in Sikkim, and subsequently aided in the conversion of the masses to Buddhism. However, legend speaks of Guru Padmasambhava traversing through Sikkim on his journey either to or from Tibet and during his sojourn here he is believed to have blessed the land and hid sacred texts and treasures in consecrated spots and subdued and commanded the local deities to be the protectors of these treasures and the land. He prophesied that Sikkim will be the new frontier for Buddhism to flourish. These sacred texts and treasures are referred to as Terma and contain the teachings of Guru Padmasambhava. The Terma tradition was initiated in the 8th Century when followers of Guru Padmasambhava requested him to entrust his teachings for the benefit of future generations. Along with his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, he traveled through Tibet blessing the land and leaving these Termas in sacred spots entrusting them to the protection of local deities. These Termas are supposed to be revealed at the prophesied time by a Terton or Treasure revealer. The Tertons are considered to be avatars of the first followers of Guru Padmasambhava.

To understand the Terma tradition one has to first understand the concept of the Terma. Teachings in Tibetan Buddhism can be either Sutric which is a canonical form or Tantric which relies on transmission. Terma falls into the latter Tantric form of teaching through transmission. Terma can be classified into earth Terma and mind Terma as mentioned by Tulku Thondup Rinpoche in his seminal work which is an explanation of the Terma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Earth Terma refers to physical treasures that have been concealed in selected places. These treasures may include sacred scriptures, relics etc. Mind Terma is a more metaphysical concept where the treasure teaching has been hidden in the mind. The purpose of both the earth and mind Terma are the same, which is to unlock the sacred teachings of Guru Padmasambhava at the opportune time by the prophesied person. The scriptures in the earth Terma work as a key that aids in the revelation of the sacred teaching. In the mind Terma, the teaching is embedded deep in the subconscious of the practitioner and may be revealed at the preferred time through a catalyst. These embedded teaching are passed on to the reincarnates from their successive lives. The Termas are entrusted to local deities as protectors and the deities also aid in the revelation of the teachings. A case in point is the legendary interaction between Mount Kanchendzenga, the chief guardian of Denzong and Gyalwa Latsun Chempo which led to the revelation of the sacred spots where the Termas of Guru Padmasambhava were hidden and the proper way to propitiate the local deities entrusted with its protection. This meeting later led to the discovery and revelation of the Ridzing Sogdrub, a treasure teaching par excellence, in a cave called Lharing Nyipu above Tashiding. In some cases, if the Terton does not possess the skill to unlock his mind, he can take the aid of other renowned Tertons.

There has been a steady succession of Tertons that have entered Sikkim starting with Rdizing Godem, famed revealer of the Jyang Ter or the Northern cycle of Treasures, who visited Sikkim in the 13th Century. He is credited with identifying and revealing treasures in parts of Sikkim and is also believed to have constructed the first Buddhist hermitage called Pow Hungri. He is also the one believed to have started the cult of the Sacred mountain Kanchendzenga and described it as a protector of five treasures.(Scheid) However, the most popular Terton in relation to Sikkim is Gyalwa Latsun Namkha Jigme who is credited with the discovery of the most important treasure texts of the Lhopo. He was also instrumental in establishing a Buddhist monarchy, as prophesied by Guru Padmasambhava, and proved central to the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim. There have been successive Tertons who have revealed teachings that have aided in the development of Buddhism in Sikkim. There are still Tertons living amongst us who play a vital role in furthering this glorious tradition. It must be mentioned that although every sect of Tibetan Buddhism follows and practices the Terma tradition, it is the Nyingma Sect that has played a vital role in its preservation. The Nyingma is the oldest sect which was established by Guru Padmasambhava in the 9th century and is the only one that has come down to the present day in an unbroken lineage.

The knowledge thus revealed and possessed by the Tertons aid in reaffirming and revitalising the teachings of Guru Padmasambhava through different generations and centuries according to the needs of the time. They perform an effective role in retaining the essence of the original teachings as canonical teachings passed down through generations from teacher to student run the risk of obfuscation through additions and omissions. Termas retain the purity of the teachings and transmit them directly to the tertons.

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