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## Ratnabhadra's Lifestory—the origin of a Tibetan narrative tradition in memoriam Buchen Gyurme, 1930-2004

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It didn't look very promising first when I went to India in 1998 to ask around about a certain type of Tibetan storytellers so called Mani Lamas. Most Tibetans have never heard of them, and those few old lamas who remembered seeing them in their childhood reciting stories on the Barkhor<sup>1)</sup> in Lhasa or on marketplaces elsewhere, weren't positive. Most of them shared the opinion, that the Tibetan storytelling tradition perished, as modern forms of narration like movie and television took over its function. I refused to give it up though and kept asking people, when suddenly a monk at Sakya Monastery in Rajpur, India started happily nodding while listening to my question. 'Yes, there is a Mani Lama living in my village, only four km away from here' he said. We set off immediately, and soon arrived to a small Tibetan settlement, Dekyiling, where everyone knew Buchen Gyurme, one of the last representatives of the Mani Lama tradition. He happily invited us to his modest home, and agreed to talk about his life and vocation.

Buchen Gyurme was born in 1930 in TöShelkar, the southern part of Tibet, close to the Everest region<sup>2)</sup>. His family followed the Nyingma school of Tibetan

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1) Bar 'khor: middle circle, circumambulation path in Lhasa around the Jokhang Temple, the spiritual centre of Tibet.

2) Stod shel dkar, meaning Shelkar in Töpa, or upper region, Stod rtsa skor



Buddhism, Dzatul Dorje Chang Rinpoche was his family's lama, a famous reincarnation of the locality, who founded Dzarong Gumpa in 1902, on a hillside south of Tingri.<sup>3)</sup> The Mani Lamas are called 'buchen' in this area, this is why Gyurme also used this name since his early age. He was 8 years old, when his uncle started teaching him the namthars<sup>4)</sup>, Buddhist liberation stories or hagiographies, and he performed alone first time when he was 13. From then on he was wandering in Tibet, mostly in the south, carrying thangkas in his backpack to be able to illustrate his stories. He visited the nearby Tsibri mountain quite often, one of the four holy mountains in Tibet. According to Gyurme the Mani Lamas go to Tsibri, the holy mountain to get Chenrezi initiation.<sup>5)</sup> He described the locality in the traditional way Tibetan people see the landscape with its visible and invisible dimensions: 'The stones here have strange shape and it takes five days to circumambulate the mountain. There are one hundred-eight gompas on the circumambulation path (*skor ba*), four big monasteries among them and four mountain peaks. There are four rivers bordering the mountain. The four big rocks were put there by the Khandro<sup>6)</sup>, and there are one hundred-eight cemeteries. The Tsibri is unmovable, because it is pinned down by four phurbas<sup>7)</sup> in the form of big rocks. There are many pilgrims coming here from faraway places, especially on big festivals like *cho 'phrul dus chen* (15th day of the first Tibetan month)<sup>8)</sup>, a *duschen sa ga zla ba* (15th day of the 4th Tibetan month)<sup>9)</sup>, *chos 'khor dus chen* (4th day of the 6th

3) Dzatul Rinpoche Ngawang Tenzin Norbu was born in 1866. The locals called him Rongphu Sangye, the Buddha of the Rocky Valley.

4) Tib.: rnam thar

5) The Mani Lamas are teaching and explaining the meaning of the six syllable mantra of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezi (OM MAŌI PADME HŪM), this is why they need Chenrezi initiation. This initiation doesn't have a strict precondition as some others, any lay practitioner can receive it from a teacher.

6) Tib.: mkha' 'gro: Female principle related to wisdom. The word can have several meanings, but in general we can say that common *ḍkinis* possess certain spiritual powers, the wisdom-*ḍkinis* attained the state of final realization.

7) Ritual dagger

8) The Festival of Miracles. According to the Tibetan tradition the Buddha performed several miracles in the city of Shravasti on the first fifteen days of the first lunar month.

Tibetan month)<sup>10</sup>, és a *lha babs dus chen* (22nd day of the 9th Tibetan month)<sup>11</sup>.’

Buchen Gyurme fled to India after the Chinese invasion in 1959. I was thrilled to recognize him on an old black and white photo in R. A. Stein’s book, which was taken around that time by the author<sup>12</sup>). Later he settled down in Delyiling and tried to keep alive the storytelling tradition he learnt. Every year on the 25th day of the 4th month he started a week long storytelling session on the main square of Delyiling. Most often he recited the stories of Sukyi Nyima, Nangsa and Kunga Rangdol. Most of the time he performed from 7 am till 6 pm. To tell a full story without omission took him usually one or two days.

Buchen Gyurme was not only a storyteller, but also a prominent leading figure of his settlement’s Nyingma community. Being a Mani Lama also meant working as a spiritual expert, giving advice to the members of the community, praying when someone was ill, doing divination (*mo*) for others. He was often called to the house when someone died to help the deceased person’s consciousness to find the way through the intermediate state, the Bardo. After death at the end of the 7th week he would be invited to the final ritual to recite one of the delog<sup>13</sup>) stories: *Karma Dbang ’dzin* or *Kung dga’ Rang sgrol*.

Buchen Gyurme told me, that in the 1980ies the Oral History Department of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala invited all the living

9) The most important Buddhist festival. According to tradition the Buddha was born in Lumbini on this day, attained realization 35 years later on the same day in Bodh Gaya, then 50 years later he passed away on the same day to nirvana in Kushinagar.

10) Commemoration of the day when the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma and gave teaching on the four noble truths to his five disciples in Sarnath.

11) The Buddha came down from the Tushita on this day to Shankhasa, the city of Kashi. He spent a whole rainy season in Tushita heaven when he was forty-one years old, teaching the Dharma to his mother, Maya and others.

12) Stein, Rolf A., *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 13., Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959Pl. 1. I would like to thank Gergo Orosz, the librarian of the Oriental Collection, Hungarian Academy of Sciences for sending me the copy of this photo to Darjeeling.

13) 'das log: people who died, visited different realms, and returned to their body to teach others about the sufferings of other realms.

Mani Lamas –they could find only four – to record their biography and stories. The interviews were done by Tashi Tsering<sup>14</sup>), a librarian that time, who later helped me to find some Tibetan texts related to the topic. By 1998 only two of the four Mani Lamas were alive, Buchen Gyurme, who I met first, and his old friend, Buchen Norgye in Kollegal, South India who I visited in 2000. The other two, Mani Lama Dawa and Buchen Porongpa already passed away by the time I heard about them, but in Paonta Sahib I had a chance to meet Buchen Porongpa's daughter.

Buchen Gyurme told me he knew eighteen stories, but only ten of them were recorded in the Dharamsala library. According to Tashi Tsering he didn't know any of them by heart, just read them out from the text. The following stories were recited by Buchen Gyurme and recorded in the LTWA:

1. *Dri med kun ldan*: popular story of a compassionate prince, it is also performed as a lhamo opera. Originally it is a jātaka story from India, now part of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon, Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*).
2. *Snang sa 'Od de 'bum*: the biography of Delog Nangsa Öbum. According to some Tibetan sources it is based on a real story, and its origin goes back to the 12th century Tsang Province.
3. *Kun dga' Rang grol*: autobiography of Delog Kunga Rangdol, this story was Buchen Gyurme's favourite
4. *'Das log Padma Chos skyid*: less known delog story
5. *Padma 'Od 'bar*: popular story of Guru Rinpoche's (Padmasambhava) past life, also performed as a lhamo opera. The original story comes from the Pema Kathang<sup>15</sup>).

14) Now director of the Amye Machen Institute.

15) The Pema Kathang (pad ma bka' thang) is a collection of life stories of Padmasambhava, the original was written by Yeshe Tshogyal. The 'kathang literature' consists various terma texts which were discovered during the past centuries by different tertons. One of the most popular among them is the Padma bka'-thang shel-brag-ma, discovered by U rgyan gling pa (b.1323).



6. *Nor bzang*: popular story of Prince Norsang, also performed as a lhamo opera. Originated in India, now part of the Tibetan Canon, *Bka' gyur*.
7. *Gzugs kyi Nyi ma*: popular story of Sukyi Nyima brahminess, also performed as a lhamo opera. It is originated in India, a version of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, now part of the Tibetan Canon, *Bka' gyur*.
8. *'Gro ba Bzang mo*: popular story of a ḍkinī called Drowa Sangmo, also performed as a lhamo opera. The story has historical background, probably comes from the Monpa tribe living in north-eastern Nepal.
9. *'Das log Karma Dbang 'dzin*: popular story of Delog Karma Wangdzin.
10. *Rgya lu Yid mdzes Bzod pa'i Dbang phyug*

Buchen Gyurme often visited Bodh Gaya, the place where the historical Buddha Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, and where His Holiness the Dalai Lama gives teachings every year in the 10th Tibetan month. In 1998 I also went there to see Gyurme performing for pilgrims who came for the Dalai Lama's teachings. That year he told the story of Kunga Rangdol. He was singing, reciting, explaining it 3-4 hours a day to his engaged audience, little children, nomads coming all the way from their distant Tibetan homeland, and exile Tibetans, who were all singing together the six syllable mantra after each chapter full of devotion: OM MAÓI PADME HŪM. He always emphasized the importance of these delog stories teaching the audience how to live a virtuous life through the experiences of delogs in the lower realms. He was always urging me to translate these texts, and showed me several times his books he considered to be the most important teachings:

1. *'Das log lha mo lham cung gi dmyal ba 'grim pa'i rnam thar bzhugs sol*<sup>16)</sup>  
Delog story from the Yolmo valley, Nepal. Photocopy from the collection of the LTWA. Acc.No. 2454.

16) Reproduced from a rare manuscript from the library of Lama Zla ba of Yol mo. Published by Lama Dawa and Chopal Lama, Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, Darjeeling, Printed in Delhi, 1984. fs.1-95, fs 1-48a. Right now I'm working on the translation of this text.

2. *Rigs bzang gi mkha' 'gro ma Snang sa 'Od 'bum gyi rnam thar bzhugs sol*<sup>17)</sup>  
 Story of Delog Nangsa Obum. Popular Tibetan story, also performed as a lhamo opera.
3. *'Das log dkar chags thar pa'i lam ston gsal ba'i sgron me bzhugs sol*  
 Delog manual. Photocopy from the collection of the LTWA.
4. *A lags kar ma dbang 'dzin de nyid kyi rnam thar*<sup>18)</sup>  
 Old blockprint, story of a famous Tibetan delog.
5. *Lo chen Ratna bha dra'i rnam thar bzhugs sol*  
 Text on the origin of Mani Lamas. Photocopy from the collection of LTWA, incomplete manuscript.<sup>19)</sup>
6. *Dmyal ba mi yul gyi sa mtshams shi bson gnyis kyi bang chen bka' 'phrin pa bya bral kun dga' rang grol gyi dmyal khams gnas su byon nas 'khor 'dus kun gyi chos rgyal rin po che'i dkar nag dbye ba'i 'bras bu'i rnam thar mdo rtsom bzhugs sol*  
 The story of Delog Kunga Rangdol.<sup>20)</sup>

Ratnabhadra's life story, the text on the origin of Mani Lamas was considered to be an important work by Buchen Gyurme, because it described the origin of the vocation and the symbolism of different tools used by storytellers. But as we can notice from the list above, he didn't have the original copy of the text, only a photocopy of the pecha from the LTWA library. This is an incomplete

17) I translated this text in 1998 into Hungarian, but it hasn't been published yet.

18) Written down by Khrag 'thung Rdo rje (Tshul khrims rgyal mtshan), reproduced from the manuscript belonging to Dr. Yeshay Donden of Dharamsala by Ngawang Gelek Demo, New Delhi, 1973. Gedan Sungrab Minyam Gyunphel Series Vol. 55. Ka/3, 1973, 373 p., 10.7x14 cm

19) The translation of this text is included in this article.

20) I translated this text in 2005 into Hungarian, and it was published under the title Kunga Rangdrol's visit to the lower realms - Account of a Tibetan delog, in: Proceedings for the 70th birthday of Prof. Georg Kara, ELTE University, Budapest, 2005.

manuscript bought in Sikkim, folio 10-14 are missing<sup>21</sup>). First I translated this text and published excerpts of it in the catalogue of an exhibition held in the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East-Asian Arts, Budapest, called Demons and Protectors.<sup>22</sup> When I asked Buchen Gyurme, what it could have been written on the missing pages, he told me to go to Kathmandu, to meet the nuns he taught before at the foot of the Swayambhu Stupa, and get the recordings they made, where he sang the whole story without omission. The following translation of Ratnabhadrā's lifestory is a reconstruction. A translation of the manuscript, and the missing four folios are inserted from the transcription of the recording made in Kathmandu.

'Biography of Ratnabhadrā, the translator/ For the benefit of every sentient being

OM MAI PADME HŪM HRĪ/ NĀMO GURU

The lifestory of Ratnabhadrā is the following:

In the land of India Dharmabhadrā was born; in the central part of Tibet *Thon mi Sambhota*<sup>23</sup>) was born; in the golden grove of *Sman Lding*<sup>24</sup>) Tulku Ratnabhadrā was born, the great master. He was called Ratnabhadrā by Indians, *Rin chen bzang po* by Tibetans. The Mirror illuminating Ratnabhadrā's life describes his story the following way:

21) Lo chen Ratnabhadrā'i rnam thar, Dkon rigs, LTWA, Dharamsala, Ms., fs.1-19b

22) The Masters of the Mani Mantra, in: Demons and Protectors, Hopp Ferenc Museum of East-Asian Arts, 2003. pp.111-119.

23) Thon mi Sambhota: 'the great Tibetan of the Thon tribe', was a minister of Songtsen Gampo, who was sent to North India with others to study Sanskrit. After his return to Tibet by creating the Tibetan alphabet and writing several grammar books, he provided solid foundations for Tibetan literacy.

24) *Ldog sman sding*, or '*dog ma lding*', name of a place in southern Tibet.



The first chapter is about how Ratnabhadra emanated. OM MAÓI PADME HŪM

Thus how I have heard. Once upon a time on the eastern part of the Land of Happiness stood the *Dvags po Bkra shis* house, whose lord was called *Bkra shis Rnam rgyal*. He and his wife had everything they desired, generated lots of wealth, but they were still sad, because they were without a heir, who could inherit their lands. One day *Bkra shis Rnam rgyal* thought: 'Though I got all the wealth and prosperity in this life, I should also have a son, who could inherit it all.'

By thinking this he said to his wife, *Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma*: 'My dear spouse, as long as we were young, and our teeth were white, we didn't have a son. Now, that our hair is turning grey from old age we should go and visit *Thang stong rgyal po*<sup>25)</sup>, the great siddha, and ask him how we could have a son, who would take over our wealth and possessions.'

They packed up numberless presents and set off with their entourage to the Chubori ironchain bridge<sup>26)</sup>. There they handed over their marvellous gifts to the great siddha, *Thang stong rgyal po*, and requested him to help to have a son.

Siddha *Thang stong rgyal po* gave them the following advice: 'Oh, noble couple, as long as you were young, you didn't have a son. Now that your hair is turning grey from old age, your son will be born as the emanation of the holy Bodhisattva Chenrezi<sup>27)</sup> by the great compassion of the bodhisattva. Oh,

25) Tibetan 'crazy yogi', 1361-1485, according to some authors he was the founder of the Mani Lama tradition, the Chenrezi prayer written by him is still part of the introductory ritual of the mani lama performance.

26) Tib. chu bo ri: Famous ironchain bridge built by Thangtong Gyalpo on the Tsangpo River. The siddha was not only a great Buddhist master, but also a polihistor of his era. Some of the suspension bridges built by him are still used today.

27) *sprul-pa*

noble lady, avoid contaminated food and clothing. Have a bath, clean the house, and sit down in a spotless place to meditate and strive.'

Then let them set off with his advice. After the noble couple returned home, the lady of the house had a bath and started holy meditation in a clean spot.

That time the holy Chenrezi Wangchug<sup>28)</sup> was staying in samādhi for the benefit of every sentient being in the East, on the Potala mountain<sup>29)</sup>, and he was looking down at the four big and the other small continents<sup>30)</sup>. By experiencing the unbearable suffering of the six classes of beings<sup>31)</sup> caused by impermanence, he thought: 'Oh, what a pain is to see the deviation of 'I', that makes beings fall into the three lower realms<sup>32)</sup>! May my emanation be born for them. May he eliminate the ignorance of beings, and make them able to strive for virtue.'

Then he thought: 'May my emanation be born in the East, in the House of *Dvags lha*, as the son of *Dvags po bkra shis rnam rgyal* and *Skal bzang chos kyi sgröl ma*, and teach the heart of MAÓI PADMA<sup>33)</sup> on the southern Jambu continent.'

28) *Spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug*

29) *Ri Po ta la*: Chenrezi's abode according to Buddhist cosmology on the eastern part of the world.

30) According to Buddhist cosmology the bhūmandala has three levels: the kāmadhātu (desire realm), a rūpadhātu (form realm) és az arūpadhātu (formless realm). The Sumeru Mountain stands in the middle of the kāmadhātu, and there are four big continents around it in the four directions, which are flanked by two smaller continents. The southern continent is Jambudvīpa, the human realm. This is the only place to encounter the teachings of the Buddha, and the only realm where attaining enlightenment is possible.

31) The six classes of beings (*'gro ba rigs drug*): gods (*lha*), demigods (*lha ma yin*), humans (*mi*), animals (*dud 'gro*), hellbeings (*dmyal ba*), pretas (*yi dvags*).

32) The three lower realms: the realm of animals, hells and hungry ghosts.

33) *Lho 'dzam bu gling* is the southern continent, Jambudvīpa. The MAÓI PADMA's heart: the meaning of Chenrezi's six-syllable mantra.

The holy Chenrezi shot out a comet-like golden light, that entered *Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma*'s heart.

As long as the noble couple was young, and their teeth white, they didn't have a son, now that their hair was turning grey from old age, the wife *Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma* had a beautiful, revelation-like dream as a sign of the birth of Ratnabhadra. She told it to her husband the following way: 'There was a fourfold conch shell stairway in the East, on the Potala Mountain, I climbed up on it. Inside there was the Great Compassionate One<sup>34)</sup> and from his heart a golden ray of light shot out and entered the top of my head. A white ācārya<sup>35)</sup> came holding a crystal mālā<sup>36)</sup> in his hand and he said to me: 'Give me lodging in your body!' then disappeared like a transient rainbow.'

Hearing this story, the husband said: 'Your dream is beautiful. Keep your promise and go on meditating!'

*Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma* sat down again to immerse herself in the meditation of the venerable Tārā. After nine months and ten days, on the day of Great Miracles<sup>37)</sup>, rainbow-tent covered the sky, a rain of flowers was falling, a sweet melody was heard from above and the baby was born. In the moment of birth the baby said: 'OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ, may I be the protector of the ones without protection, may I be the defender of the ones without defence. May I show the way to all beings, who are my mothers and fathers, to the land of the Potala Mountain! OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ.'<sup>38)</sup>

34) Tib. *'phags pa thugs rje chen po*, the epithet of Chenrezi.

35) Tib. *lo tsa ba chen po*, great scholar.

36) Tib. *'phreng ba*, Buddhist rosary with 108 beads.

37) Tib. *cho 'phrul chen po'i zla ba*: the first fifteen days of the first month of the year, when the Buddha performed a miracle every day to strengthen the faith of his disciples. The 15th day of the Tibetan calendar is always the day of the full moon. They always perform rituals, because they believe, that the effect of positive actions is stronger during full moon.

38) This verse is part of the Chenrezi puja.



His parents and the people living on their estate were all truly rejoicing by hearing these words, and organized a big celebration for the honour of the baby's birth. The little boy was given the name *Rin chen bzang po*<sup>39</sup>. [Already when he was born] he was skilled in the five sciences<sup>40</sup>, and when he was three years old, his father pondered: 'It's time to get an Indian name for my son.'

That time an Indian siddha, *Dam pa sangs rgyas*<sup>41</sup> was contemplating: 'I can see, that in Tibet *Thon mi Sambhota*'s emanation was born.' He mounted the wings of the wind, and reached soon the golden grove of *Sman lding*.

The mother, *Skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma* was milking the cow at the door. Seeing the approaching *ācārya*, she rushed inside to her husband and said: 'There is an *ācārya* at our gate.'

'Invite him inside, if it's so' answered *Dvags po bkra shis rnam rgyal*.

After the *ācārya* was called inside and offered food and drinks in abundance, the father said: 'Please, give a name to my son!'

The Indian siddha, *Dam pa sangs rgyas* replied: 'In the dark land of Tibet a boy was born, who is like an illuminating lamp. Shall his name be Ratnabhadra.'

This is the reason why he became known as Ratnabhadra.

When the boy was ten years old, *Dvag po bkra shis rnam rgyal* handed him over the estate, and made him its rightful owner. Ratnabhadra stayed at home for

39) Meaning 'noble, blessed jewel'.

40) *Rig pa'i gnas lnga*: arts and crafts (*bzo*); medicine (*gso*); linguistics (*sgra*); logic (*tshad ma*); the teachings of the *tripiṭka*, the three baskets (*sde snod gsum*).

41) *Pa dam pa sangs rgyas*, Skt.: Buddha Paramapitri (d. 1117): Indian mahāsiddha, who was born in South India and travelled to Tibet five times to transmit many teachings on sūtra and tantra. His best known teaching is the 'Pacifying of Suffering' (*zhi byed*), and he is considered to be one of the teachers of Machig Labdrön (1055-1149), who founded the Mahāmudrā Chod lineage.

three years protecting the property to fulfill his parents' wish. One day, when he was thirteen, he heard the hymn of a formless clear voice from the sky: 'Oh, *Rin chen bzang po*! There is a siddha living at the Chubori ironchain bridge called *Thang stong rgyal po*, visit him and request the initiation (*dbang*) of the Great Compassionate yidam<sup>42</sup>, the oral instructions (*lung*) and the precepts (*man ngag*). Ask him to explain the biography of the first and greatest Jina, give you its written copy, and do without distinction for the benefit of sentient beings.'

The words entered *Rin chen bzang po*'s heart like piercing arrows. He explained his wish to enter the path of Dharma to his parents the following way: 'My kindparents, please, let me enter the path of Dharma, let me go to visit *Thang stong rgyal po*, who is residing at the iron chain bridge to be able to enter the path of Dharma.'

His parents replied: 'Though you are our only child, you are our son by the benevolence of *Thang stong rgyal po*. Follow then the holy voice, visit the great siddha and enter the path of Dharma.'

After *Rin chen bzang po* bundled up his gifts, he set off to the Chubori ironchain bridge to meet *Thang stong rgyal po* and enter the path of Dharma. When he arrived, he said to the siddha: 'Oh, great siddha, *Thang stong rgyal po*, please, listen to me! I received a holy message to spread the MAÓI for the benefit of sentient beings without distinction. Please, bestow the teachings of the Great Compassionate One with its profound meaning by your great kindness.'

Thangtong Gyalpo cut Rinchen Sangpo's hair, transformed his countenance, and took away his name. When taking the *genyen* vow<sup>43</sup>) Ratnabhadra received from

42) Tib: *yi dam*, Skt.: iṣṭ-devatā, personal protector, in this case Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

43) Tib: *dge bsnyen*, five lay vows, which are the following: refraining from killing, from taking that is not given, from sexual misconduct, from incorrect speech, and from intoxicating drinks and drugs. In

him the name *lo chen*<sup>44)</sup> He was also given the initiation of the Great Compassionate yidam, the precepts and the oral instructions, as well as the consecration<sup>45)</sup> of Aryapalo<sup>46)</sup>. This is how the lineage of *lo chens* began, which is like the river whose source leads to the snow. OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ. He also taught him the highest teachings (*bka'*) and histories (*lo rgyus*) of the Jina, which were followed by liberation stories (*rnam thar*). The lama of the Chubori iron chain bridge spoke thus: 'Among the ten chapters of the father tantra biographies, the most important [histories] are about the highest lamas, Dharmaking Jigten Wangchug and Dharmaking Drime Kunden; among the seven chapters of the mother tantra the history of Sukyi Nyima brahmin woman is the most important; among the twenty-one delog histories, the [history] of Delog Lingsa Chokyi is the most important. But this is not all. In addition to these I will give you a few more liberation-stories as well. Oh, wise Ratnabhadra, head of *lo chens*! Continue your meditation in the golden grove of *Sman lding*.'

Ratnabhadra, the emanation and lama-scholar was sitting in the northern golden grove of *Sman lding*. There were dark red clouds up on the sky. The snowmountain stood like a crystal stupa. Little lower the multi coloured rocky mountain looked like the fur of a roaming tiger. Deep down there were precious stones hidden under the earth. The golden grove of *Sman lding* was permeated with the fragrance of lotus flowers, down in the river the water looked like morning offering<sup>47)</sup>, and the song of water birds filled the air.

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the Tibetan tradition anyone can take these vows after taken refuge and bodhisattva vow.

44) *Lo chen*, short form of *lo tsa ba chen po*, meaning: great translator, great scholar.

45) Tib: *rab gnas*, Skt.: *pariṣṭā*, Buddhist practice performed for consecrating sacred objects, statues, images. Usually it is part of a longer ritual (Skt.: *sādhana*).

46) Hayagrīva, horse-headed Tantric deity, a form of Chenrezi.

47) Buddhist practitioners fill seven water bowls in the morning from left to right, light an incense and a butter lamp or candle. These offerings are multiplied without limit through mantra and visualization. The water is visualized as billowing clouds of pure offerings and qualities that are presented to all buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially to someone's personal deity (*yi dam*), and their blessings shower on the practitioner and all beings.



In the middle of this grove, that in the old times was the gathering place of Tārā and the ḍkinīs, Ratnabhadra, Chenrezi's emanation was sitting, the lama-scholar, his right hand formed protection mudra, and held the *Mani bka`bum*<sup>48)</sup> in his left. On his head he wore a floating hat, signifying the level of his realization; his body was cloaked in a trellised cloth of monks, and he was praying to Āryā Avalokiteśvara the following way: 'May all beings of the six classes be born in the East on the Potala mountain!'

Then he took the highest teachings and the histories of the Jina, and went from the golden grove of *Sman Lding* to Kyirong<sup>49)</sup>. He arrived to the Garden of Teaching on the 15th day of the month of performing miracles<sup>50)</sup>, blew his conch shell, and for his signal the people of Kyirong, urban and villager, old and young, men and women all gathered. On that day he told them the story of Dharmaking Drime Kunden. The chief of Kyirong, who was called Chowanglha, also appeared, and after listening for a while, he said: 'Your teaching sounds beautiful. Please, explain us what the Garden of Teaching symbolizes.'

'Very well' answered [Ratnabhadra].

And the all-knowing lama said the following: 'Pay attention, great lord! That protecting ceiling-like silk fabric is called the rainbow palace of the ḍkinīs, the lower part is the ḍkinīs' silk rope. The two tent poles are the axis of the Teaching, the two vehicles, the applied paths to enlightenment. The two iron pegs are called lightning from the sky. The yidam's name is Phakpa Chenrezi Wang<sup>51)</sup>. The Garden of Teachings is also called celestial divine palace of gods.

48) Belonging to historical literature the *Mani bka`bum* originated in the late 12th century or later. It includes legends, rituals and teachings related to the Chenrezi cult. In the text King Songtsen Gampo, who is considered to be the first Tibetan king devoted to Buddhism, appears as an incarnation of Chenrezi.

49) Place in southern Tibet, near the Nepali border.

50) *cho`phrul dus chen*: the 15th day of the first Tibetan month, full-moon day and festival of performing miracles by Buddha Shakyamuni.

The rosary is to drag living beings up. I am the *lo chento* encourage [people] to practice the Dharma. The market congregation is the vajra brotherhood. The backcurtain is to close the door of downfall. This palace of the Victorious Ones<sup>52)</sup> is symbolizing the prosperous buddha-lands. On the right the eight stupas of the Tathāgatas are the symbols showing that the life tree of Buddhist teaching is planted. On the left the venerable White Tārā is to dissolve the obstacles of the *lo chen*. The string tied to its lower part symbolizes the magical abilities we can attain in this world. The little stupas in front arranged in a square symbolize the merit-field of devotion. On the top of that the hundred-thousand mandala base shows that the virtuous ones will be purified from all the impurities. Thus it is taught.'

Then the great chief said: 'Then now please, explain and teach the meaning of your iron lance!'

'Yes, please, do!' joined in the audience.

'All-knowing lord, please, be patient! Pay attention when I explain the meaning of the iron lance!' and said the followings to the great chief: 'OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ. The iron lance in my hand symbolizes the introduction to the history of liberation. It is an offering for the joy of the father-lama. On the tip [of the lance] the *'khyong go* shakes people up from the deep saṃāra, and the knot in the middle is the symbol of the holy doctrine woven into the heart. On the bottom, the vajra symbolizes the wrathful scarlet-black Hayagrīva<sup>53)</sup>, and the ring on the holder symbolizes the eternal oath. The attached chain symbolizes the stairway to the heavens. The separate bracelet symbolizes the rule of the marketplace. The half-circle healing stone is the base of the father-lama's seat. The three separate knots on it symbolize the three pure bodies, the dharmakāya,

51) Skt.: Āryā Avalokiteśvara

52) The audience is sitting under a Tibetan-style tent, more like a canopy held by poles.

53) Tib. *Rta mgrin*, 'Horse-neck'. Tantric deity, manifestation of the wrathful activity of Amitābha.

the sambhogakāya and the nirmānakāya. The point of the awl on its tip is the introduction performed in the marketplace. The five-pointed diadem fastened onto this is the meeting of the mother-ḍkinīs belonging to the five groups. The little bell tied to it symbolizes that fame spreads in ten directions. The ring on this symbolizes the reign over the three worlds. The little ring tied to this symbolizes the circumambulation of the kingdom. The sign of the Sun and the Moon on it cleanses the four continents from pollution. The mirror on this is the symbol of cleansing from ignorance. The little bell shows that the voice of the glorious Dharma resounds [in far-away lands]. The *a lig rtsi lig* tied to it symbolizes the great faith in the Dharma. The tiger skin tied onto the right side symbolizes the pure right-side hero. The yellow leopard skin symbolizes the pure left-hand heroine. This was the explanation of my iron lance.'

'If this was the explanation of your iron lance, that's marvellous! Now please, explain and teach the meaning of your white conch shell!'

'Very well!' he said, 'I prostrate in front of the great father-lamas. The conch shell of the Dharma was born in the depth of the sea. There is an oral instruction (*lung*) related to the appearance of the conch shell of the Dharma. It is the Dharma conch shell of beautiful temples, the sweet voice of lamas, the signal of nobles devoted to the teaching, the messenger of Mani Lamas, who encourage the market congregation to be virtuous, the sound of Chenrezi's teaching. OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ. The white conch shell horn symbolizes that I belong to the lineage of the sons of Chenrezi. The spotless lineage is the lineage of Ratnabhadra, the faith is the untainted six-syllable mantra's wisdom, the Dharma is a clear and blooming water lily. I am a humble pauper traveling the kingdom, a *lo chen* who understands his actions and their reasons. I am an elephant prod, who prompts the believers to follow the Dharma. I am the judge above the great sinners, the one who knows the Path. Thus the origin of *lo chens* is taught.'



The great chief, the lords and servants all said in unison: 'If this is the origin, that's marvellous! Now please, tell us and teach about the action, its causes and conditions.'

Then *Lo chen* Ratnabhadrā told them first the history of *Delog Gling bza' chos skyid*, then *Mi la ras pa*, and *Dri med kun ldan's* hagiography. During [his teachings] everyone was crying. The great chief, the lords and servants were all just crying and sighing. From the Garden of Teaching they went to the palace. After a short while *Lo chen O rgyan Bhairotsani* arrived with great female entourage. Seeing Ratnabhadrā she marvelled him and said:

'OM MAÓI PADME HŪM HRĪ. May all beings of the six realms be born on the Potala mountain and meet Chenrezi by the [teaching] of this great heir of noble parents!' said *O rgyan Bhairotsani*. 'Even just the sight of you makes everyone being filled with joy. Your body colour is beautiful, and your face is white. You are protecting the interest of beings the right way.'

Then they heard from the distance the humming sound of the MANI. Three more *lo chens* arrived, *Lo chen Klong yangs Rang grol*, *Lo chen Bkra shis Dar rgyas* and *Lo chen Karma 'Brag grags*.

[They said:] 'Son, you are serving the benefit of beings without delay! May the unspoiled teaching of the six-syllable mantra shine bright like the Sun!'

Then the great chief thought: 'Is the teaching of *lo chens* indeed true?'

By seeing the *Aṣṭsāhasrikā*<sup>54</sup>), and the hagiography of the *Always-crying*<sup>55</sup>) in it, great devotion and faith was born in the heart of the great chief towards *Lo chen* Ratnabhadra. He gave him a golden mandala and a seven-fold present to acknowledge his excellence. *Lo chen* Ratnabhadra's generous patron was the chief of Kyirong district named *Chos dbang lha*, the governor (*sde pa*) himself. Then Ratnabhadra soon left for the marketplace, and he was teaching there for seven days. Then he went to *Kong po A rong rdzong*<sup>56</sup>). From there he went to Sikkim. He got a disciple called *O rgyan bstan 'dzin*. This is how his story of benefitting endlessly sentient beings spread far and wide. We collected it and wrote it down.

The lineage of the *lo chens*:

*Lo chen O rgyan bstan 'dzin*

*Lo chen dvags lha sgam po*

*Lo chen bkra shis dar po*

*Lo chen O rgyan rig 'dzin*

*Lo chen blo gsal rgya mtsho*

*Lo chen 'jam dpal rang grol*

*Lo chen bstan 'dzin 'brug rgyal*

*Lo chen ma 'brug rgyal sgrol maLo chen ngag dbang rig 'dzin*

*Lo chen lar pa'i sging*

*Lo chen bsod nams rig 'dzin*

*Lo chen 'jigs med grags pa*

*Lo chen karma 'brug rgyal*

54) *Aṣṭsāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā*: 'Perfection of wisdom in 8,000 lines', one of the earliest *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras which was put into writing first probably about 100 BC.

55) The story of Sadaparudita from the *Aṣṭsāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. He was ready to sell his body in order to get the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings.

56) Place situated in southeastern Tibet.

This is the thirteen-fold lineage of the *lo chens*. The condensed lifestory of Ratnabhadra is now finished.

HA HA HE HE / *Good luck!* May all beings be in peace!'

The text above is the most important and so far the only known source written on the origin of the Mani Lama tradition. The teachers of the MAÓI mantra were the 'sons of Chenrezi', itinerant storytellers wandering from village to village to spread the teaching of compassion, performing on market places, monastic festivals, popular pilgrimage sites. Ratnabhadra's lifestory links the origin of this storyteller tradition to Thangton Gyalpo, the great Tibetan siddha, who lived around the turn of the 15th century, though there are earlier sources mentioning Manipas, like Guru Chowang's<sup>57)</sup> biography. And though we could interpret Ratnabhadra holding the *Mani bka` `bum* in his hand in the golden grove of *Sman lding* as a reference suggesting that the origin goes back to Songtsen Gampo, the 7th century king who was a devout Buddhist and brought the Dharma first to Tibet by marrying a Chinese and a Nepali princess, and was considered to be an incarnation of Chenrezi, the *Mani bka` `bum* itself was not compiled before the late 12th century or later. We can say in general that the Chenrezi cult was on the rise from the 12th century on in Tibet, as the Dharma started spreading again<sup>58)</sup> after the desintegration of central power in the 9th century and Thangtong Gyalpo had a central role in its propagation by writing the even today most popular Chenrezi sādhana based on his visionary experiences.<sup>59)</sup>

Chenrezi embodies compassion. The practitioners of his cult strive to selflessly act to alleviate suffering wherever it appears. In *The Essence of the Heart Sutra*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote 'According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not

57) *Guru Chos dbang*, 1212-1273

58) *spyi dar*: later or second dissemination of the Dharma in Tibet

59) Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Smithsonian, 1993, p.233.



passive – it's not empathy alone – but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and loving-kindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving-kindness). Tibetans believe that the recitation of the six-syllable mantra can save people from being reborn in the lower realms, and it has special effects when the mantra is sung by the initiated in various ways (*mani dbyangs*). This is why taking a genyen vow is necessary in order to become a Mani Lama, and getting the oral instructions and precepts from a teacher, and learning the liberation stories which will constitute the main part of the performance later.

The text seems to be a compilation consisting three parts: the life of Ratnabhadra; the explanation of the symbolism of the Garden of Teaching, the iron lance, the conch shell, the teaching on cause and effect; and the lineage of *lo chens*. The lack of colophon makes it difficult to date the text and say anything of its authorship. These will be subjects of further research.

Buchen Gyurme in his last years found a generous patron, a Tibetan politician living in America, who supported his wish to preserve the Mani Lama tradition. Gyurme was even invited to the US to an event organized by the Smithsonian Institute to perform. By the generous support of Rinchen Dharlo, the director of the Tibet Fund in New York, he taught several nuns in Nepal and India to become a Mani Lama. First he was teaching in Kathmandu, in the Thukje Choling Nunnery at the Swayambhu stupa. Tsering Rhitar Sherpa produced a film about his activities there, that was showed at the International Himalaya Festival in Amsterdam in October, 2003.

In his last years Buchen Gyurme was teaching nuns in Dolmaling, near Dharamsala, India. He passed away in 2004 after a short illness, and he was cremated in the nearby Hindu holy place, Haridwar. Not knowing about his sudden illness I went to visit him a few months after he passed away. I found

only his nephew in his house in Dekyiling, who gave me a box, to see if any of his photos or other things he kept could be of any use for my research. Among his little treasures I found the catalogue of Demons and Protectors' published by the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East-Asian Arts, Budapest, that was given him by me. I remembered the moment when I gave him the book the year before. By hearing about my arrival he ran out of a Dekyiling house where he was conducting a ritual. When he saw his photo in my article, he started joyfully shouting on the street, calling the neighbours to show them the book. His whole life was governed by the wish to pass on to us the tradition of Mani Lamas. Sarva mangalam.

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