

## A Decree of lHa Bla ma Ye shes 'od

Samten G. Karmay

In 1980 I published an article on what appeared to be an ordinance (*bka' shog*) of lHa Bla ma Ye shes 'od (947–1024).<sup>1</sup> This ordinance was quoted line by line at random but in full and commented upon in a work by Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1553–1624), a polemicist writer of the rNying ma school. This was the only work that contained the ordinance, and I did not come across it anywhere else. It shed light on the kind of Buddhist practices, particularly tantric rituals, that were prevalent in Western Tibet and that provoked a very strong reaction on the part of lHa Bla ma. It finally led him to send young Tibetans to Kashmir and India to study Buddhism and find out whether the Buddhist practices which were then current should be regarded as “authentic Buddhist teachings” or not. Several of these young Tibetans became highly prominent translators of Buddhist texts, especially Lotsawa Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) who, as is well known, initiated what was later regarded as the New Tantra (*sngags gsar ma*). This was the dawn of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*) in Tibet in the eleventh century CE.

The ordinance I published is mainly a criticism of a variety of Buddhist ritual practices, but also of philosophical teachings such as rDzog chen (Karmay 1988). It does not, however, mention the Bon religion as one might have expected. Its absence, I thought, was rather odd.

Sixteen years later a monumental study of the 15<sup>th</sup> century historical work, the *mNga' ris rgyal rabs*, was published by Roberto Vitali (1996).

---

I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Charles Ramble who kindly read this article and made a number of suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Karmay 1980: 150–62, 1998: 3–16. The *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* by Nga dbang grags pa refers to a *bka' shog chen mo* (p. 54). Vitali (1996: 185–86) takes the *bka' shog chen mo* to be the ordinance I published, and he reckons that it was issued in 986. Vitali also gives two possible dates for lHa Bla ma: 953–1012 and 947–1024. He prefers 947–1024 (pp. 181, 183).

This was followed by a publication of the Tibetan text itself by Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute (bKra shis Tshe ring 1996a). The work was totally unknown even to the Tibetan bibliographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the preface to this publication Tashi Tsering, after thorough research, established the author's identity and identified his name as Gu ge mkhan chen Ngag dbang grags pa, a disciple of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419). Amongst other important historical questions, it shed some light on the chronology of lHa Bla ma and his immediate royal descendants. Further enlightened studies focusing on lHa Bla ma were made by Deborah Klimburg-Salter (2008), especially in connection with the paintings in Tabo Monastery.

In 2004 what looked like fragments of decrees of lHa Bla ma, which are similar in content to the ordinance, came to light. They were published in the *Bod ljongs zhib 'jug* (Ch. *Xizang Yanjeu*, No. 2, pp. 117–25) under the title *bTsan po khri lde srong btsan gyi bka' gtsigs kyi yi ge thor bu*, 'Fragments of Decrees of the bTsan po Khri lde srong gtsug btsan.'

These fragments are copies made from manuscripts and are presented by Ra se dKon mchog rgyal mtshan. They are printed in *dbu can* in two rows on each page. Ra se is a scholar of the 'Dri gung tradition and presently lives in Lhasa. Here is what he says about the fragments in a short introductory note:

In the very well known historical works sketchy biographical accounts of Lha Bla ma are given, but the name Khri lDe srong gtsug btsan as his name is not attested anywhere else. There is no record showing that he issued any decrees. Consequently when one wishes to carry out research into the Second Diffusion of Buddhism one comes across many difficulties. For many years I have been in search of old documents. I found the manuscript fragments of the decrees among the old books that were collected at the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama and this collection was sealed and kept in the library of Drepung. I thought that these manuscript fragments were valuable for research and I am therefore presenting them to those who are engaged in Tibetological research.

Let us begin with the author's title of his article. He has used the word *bka' gtsigs*, which is in fact not very common although the second word, *gtsigs* ("edict"), was current in the imperial period, that is, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to 850 CE. This we know thanks to the intensive studies of

the early Tibetan inscriptions of edicts by Hugh Richardson (1985). As we have noted, Ra se's remark about the name Khri Srong lde gtsug btsan being unknown is probably correct, but in the fragments of decrees which he presents the name Khri Srong lde gtsug btsan is not mentioned. There is only the name Khri lDe srong gtsug (Ra se 2004: 125, row 2, line 17).<sup>2</sup>

The library to which he refers is probably the one situated in the Ganden Phodrang in Drepung. It was there that the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) resided for most of the time before he moved to the Potala in 1649.

Ra se has arranged the fragments by dividing them into six sections and marked them with the letters *Ka*, *Kha*, *Ga*, *Nga*, *Ca* and *Cha*. However, he does not explain why he has divided them into six sections. Were the manuscripts in six separate sections when he found them or were they in one whole manuscript copy that he subsequently divided into six sections? It is unfortunate, to say the least, that no description whatsoever of the manuscripts is given. Were they in the form of folios or scrolls? What kind of writing, *dbu can* or *dbu med*, were they in?

## The Section *Ka* of the Fragments

The section *Ka* is the longest of all, but Ra se considers that it is incomplete. At the end of the document he has added a note that states: “The end of this section is absent. In the future if the missing part is found it should be added here” (*di'i 'jug mi 'dug pas slad mar rnyed na bsab rgyu*). It seems that Ra se is right to consider that the end of the decree is missing. However, within this decree there are four parts. All four are presented as components of one single decree by Ra se. The first part begins on p. 117, row 1, line 1 of Ra se 2004.

The title of this part reads: “The condensed summary of the activities of the three — the father and the two sons (*yab sras gsum gyi mdzad tshul gyi dril*). Here “father” refers to lHa Bla ma<sup>3</sup> and “two sons” refers to his two sons Devaraja and Nagaraja.<sup>4</sup> It then begins with a sentence as

<sup>2</sup>The *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* has: *khri lde srong gtsug btsan* (p. 51).

<sup>3</sup>In my article (1980: 3) I have stated that lHa Bla ma Ye shes 'od (=Srong nge) was the elder of the two brothers. According to the *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* (p. 51), he was the younger one.

<sup>4</sup>According to the *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* (p. 51): they are called Khri lDe mgon btsan and lHa 'khor btsan. The same source states they had a sister called lHa'i me tog, who became a nun (pp. 51, 60). For a detailed discussion of the dates of the two brothers, see Vitali 1996: 241–42.

follows: “In the third month of the spring of the mouse year<sup>5</sup> lHa btsan po Ye shes ’od, the father and his sons were residing in the palace dBen (g)nas byam(s) snyom gling.”<sup>6</sup> It then gives a short account of monasteries and temples founded by lHa Bla ma in various places such as Kha khyer (char)<sup>7</sup> and Tholing. This section is essentially concerned with monastic codes (*dge ’dun gyi khrims*), and it ends on p. 118, in row 2, line 11.

The second part begins on p. 118, row 2, line 11. This is about Gautama’s lives in the past, his achievement of enlightenment, and the preaching of his doctrines as the Buddha. It then admonishes us, stating that we are now in a degenerated age and that there are very few followers of the teaching. It urges that one must practise in accordance to *sūtras*, *vinaya* texts and the books written by earlier generations of the royal family (*gdung snga ma*).

The third part starts on p. 119, row 2, line 1. It is called ‘The code that forbids monks from practising the wrong religion’ (*dge ’dun gyi(s) chos log mi spyad pa’i khrims*). It is this part that I shall be focusing on in this article. It is short compared with the other parts, but contains extremely interesting elements that one rarely finds elsewhere. I have made a tentative English translation of this part below and will be devoting more discussion to it.

The fourth part begins on p. 119, row 2, line 17. It is entitled “The codes of monks” (*dge ’dun kyī khrims*). This again contains admonitions against taking up practices with selfish interest. It emphasises the importance of observing the *vinaya* rules and generally studying Buddhist scriptures. It then brings up the subject of the Bodhisattva vows. This leads to the teachings of Mantrayāna. Here it stresses that these teachings are to be taken up by those who are appropriately qualified. It ends on p. 120, row 2, line 23. It is incomplete, and Ra se makes the same statement: “The end of this section is absent. In the future if the missing part is found it should be added here.” (*’di’i mjug ma mi ’dug pas slad mar rnyed na bsab rgyu /*)

In an article that is focused on part *Cha* of the decrees published by Ra se, I have shown how the author of the *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs* has borrowed

<sup>5</sup>It is too hazardous to suggest anything for this vague indication. Nevertheless, there are three possibilities: 988, 1000 and 1012, which are all mouse years.

<sup>6</sup>This is Ba sgam byam snyom gling; see the *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs*, p. 59 (Vitali 1996: 251 ff.).

<sup>7</sup>A place in Pu hrangs; see the *mNga’ ris rgyal rabs*, p. 54 (Vitali 1996: 258 ff.).

from, or rather has paraphrased, the decrees without acknowledging his sources.<sup>8</sup>

### The Third Part of Fragment *Ka*

#### The Tibetan Text

*dge 'dun gyi chos log rnams mi spyad (spyod) pa'i khrims la /<sup>9</sup>*  
*sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das kyis bstan pa dang sems can la*  
*phan pa dang bde bar 'gyur ba'i lam / dam pa 'di sgrub pa las /*  
*gzhan dag (dam) pa'i chos ltar bcos pa phyin ci log gi spyod*  
*pa dag ni spang bar 'os pa yin pas / sngags log pa dang / lung*  
*dang man ngag tu gsol ba'i chos nor ba dang / phyi rol ba'i*  
*lta ba dang / gzhung dang / atipa dang / bon dang / mo dang /*  
*zhang zhung gi gtsug lag skar stad kyi rtsis log pa lung dang*  
*mi mthun zhing / tshad ma dang 'gal ba'i ma dag pa rnams*  
*mi slob / gzhan la yang mi snyad / yi ge yang mi bcang / gal ste*  
*slob pa'am / 'chang ba byung na / chos bzhin du chad pas btab*  
*pa / chung ba la / lha phyag brgya yan chad bgyid du 'tshal /*  
*ma 'chis na phral mer bsreg / phyis 'di lta bu ma spyod ces lan*  
*gsum bka' bsgo / skyed ma mchis zhing blo ngan ma zhi na /*  
*log par spyod pa 'di lta bu lags / ces yi ger bris te rgyal khams*  
*gzhan du dbyug go (spyug go) //<sup>10</sup>*

#### Translation

*The code that forbids monks from practising the perverted  
 religion*

Monks should strive for adhering to the holy path that leads to happiness and that is beneficial to the sentient beings and to the interest of the doctrine taught by the Buddha. The perverted practices that masquerade as the holy *Chos* of the others are fit to be rejected. These are: the perverted Tantras,

<sup>8</sup>This article, under the title “Bon Institutions Referred To in the Newly Discovered Decrees of lHa Bla ma Ye shes 'od”, will appear in the proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the IATS, Vancouver 2010.

<sup>9</sup>Here is a *yig mgo*, a head letter.

<sup>10</sup>Ra se 2004: 119, row 2, lines 1–17.

the wrong books that disguise themselves as the authoritative texts and those that contain oral instructions, books that contain the view of the *tīrthikas* and their primary texts. The followers of the Ati, the Bon, divination, the “astrological science” from Zhang zhung such as the perverted astrology of sKar stad stand in contradiction to the *āgama* and oppose logical reasoning. These erroneous matters are not to be taught and not to be exposed to others. The books that deal with them are not to be kept. Those who teach them and keep the books shall be punished in accordance with the *Chos*. For the minor action [offences, the culprit] shall do more than one hundred prostrations. If the person still keeps the books, the books shall be burnt and the person shall be told three times not to keep the books again. If there is no improvement and his bad spirit is not calmed, he shall be banished to another country with a written letter stating, “This is how he committed the perversion.”

**Comments** The term *atipa* refers to those who follow the *atiyoga*, which normally designates the rDzogs chen doctrine. In the rNying ma tradition it is the last and topmost of the nine categories of Buddhist teachings (Karmay 1988: 172–74). Bon is mentioned among the category of perverted religions. As stated earlier, the absence of it in the ordinance was somewhat curious given the combative spirit of lHa Bla ma against all practices regarded as un-Buddhist. However, the most intriguing point here is the phrase *zhang zhung gi gtsug lag*, the “religious culture of Zhang zhung”. The phrase echoes similar expressions that are found in the early rock inscriptions of royal edicts (Richardson 1985): *chos gtsug lag ni lugs kyis bzang* (p. 38), *lha'i gtsug lag ni ma nyams* (p. 38), *g.yung drung gi gtsug lag chen po* (p. 86). Various meanings of the term have been suggested. Richardson renders it by “order of the world”, but for Stein (1985) it generally designates “political savoir-faire”, “art of ruling”, “wisdom of institution” and “ethical conduct”. Stein’s suggestions of course depend on the context in which it is used.

The term is also used in the *mNga' ris rgyal rabs* (p. 51): *mnga' ris 'dir / gtsug lag ni bon/* (“Here in mNga' ris, the religious culture is of Bon”

or “Bon, a part of the Zhang chung culture”).<sup>11</sup> Here I have no wish to go further into a detailed discussion concerning the usage of the term in later sources as it varies considerably from one source to another.

As it stands sKar stad looks like a proper name, but as such it is unknown to me. However, there is also the term *skar ltas*, a kind of astrology that involves stellar observations.

## Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the decree is mainly concerned with two non-Buddhist doctrines, the philosophical views of the adherents of Hindu schools of thought, usually designated by the terms *phyi rol pa* or *mu stegs pa* (*tīrthika*) and the question of Bon. The king clearly considered Bon as a kind of religion that was somehow associated with the practice of divination and the “religious culture of Zhang chung”, traditions that were prevalent in mNga' ris when the king attempted to re-establish Buddhist monasticism. In this regard, we therefore have a 10<sup>th</sup> century account that bears witness to the presences of Bon, a religion that needed to be officially refuted and banned by a person of high authority such as lHa Bla ma.

---

<sup>11</sup>Vitali (1996: 214) does not make any specific comment on the phrase *gtsug lag ni bon*. The phrase is also used in the lHa bla ma ye shes 'od kyi rnam thar rgyas pa (p. 3). I would like to express my thanks to Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po who kindly let me have a digital version of this work.

## Sources in Tibetan

- bKra shis Tshe ring (1996a). “Tho ling dpal dpe med lhun gyis grub pa’i gtsug lag khang nas mtho lding dgon pa’i bar gyi chags rabs shin tu bsdus pa ngon ’gro’i lam ston”. In: bKra shis Tshe ring 1996b, 83–123.
- ed. (1996b). *Tho ling dpal dpe med lhun gyis grub pa’i gtsug lag khang phyag btab nas lo gcig stong ’khor ba’i rjes dran dus deb*. Dharamsala: Tho ling gtsug lag khang phyag btab nas lo gcig stong ’khor ba’i rjes dran mdzad sgo’i go sgrig tshogs chung.
- Grags pa rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po. “lHa bla ma ye shes ’od kyi rnam thar rgyas pa”. An unpublished digital version of a manuscript formerly kept in the gNas bcu lha khang in Drepung.
- Ngag dbang grags pa, Gu ge mkhan chen (1996). *Gu ge mkhan chen ngag dbang grags pas mdzad pa’i mnga’ ris rgyal rabs*. Dharamsala: Tho ling gtsug lag khang phyag btab nas lo gcig stong ’khor ba’i rjes dran mdzad sgo’i go sgrig tshogs chung.
- Ra se dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (2004). “bTsan po khri lde srong btsan gyi bka’ gtsigs kyi yi ge thor bu (Fragments of Decrees of the bTsan po Khri lde srong gtsug btsan)”. In: *Bod ljongs zhib ’jug (Xizang Yanjeu)* 2, 117–125.
- bSam gtan rgyal mtshan, mKhar rme’u (1996). “lHa bla ma ye shes ’od dang pho brang zhi ba ’od gnyis kyis springs pa’i bka’ shog gi ngo sprod skya rengs ’od snang”. In: bKra shis Tshe ring 1996b, 1–41.

## References in Western Languages

- Karmay, S. G. (1980). “The Ordinance of lHa Bla ma Ye shes ’od”. In: *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*. Ed. by M. Aris and A. S. S. Kyi. Warminster: Aris & Philips, 150–162.
- (1988). *The Great Perfection (rDzogs chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*. Reprint 2007. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- (1998). *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Reprint 2009. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.



- (forthcoming). “Bon Institutions Referred to in the Newly Discovered Decrees of lHa Bla ma Ye shes 'od”. In: *Proceedings of the 12th Seminar of the IATS, Vancouver 2010*.
- Klimburg-Salter, D. (2008). “Imagining the World of Ye shes 'od: 10<sup>th</sup>-Century Painting in Tabo”. In: Klimburg-Salter et al. 2008, 231–286.
- Klimburg-Salter, D. et al., eds. (2008). *The Cultural History of Western Tibet: Recent Research from the China Tibetology Research Center and the University of Vienna*. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 71. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House; Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien.
- Richardson, H. E. (1985). *A Corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions*. James G. Furlong Series 29. London: Royal Asiatic Society.
- Stein, R. A. (1985). “Tibetica Antiqua III: A propos du mot *gcug-lag* et de la religion indigène”. In: *Bulletin de l'École française d'extrême-orient* 74, 83–133.
- Vitali, R. (1996). *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.hrang*. Dharamsala: Tho ling gtsug lag khang lo gcig stong 'khor ba'i rjes dran mdzad sgo'i go sgrig tshogs chung.

