The Life Stories of Padmasambhava and their Significance for Tibetan Buddhists

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Abstract

This work seeks to examine a small selection of biographies of Padmasambhava, the figure who introduced and spread the Buddhist teachings in Tibet during the eighth century. These writings appear to have a function that goes beyond merely recounting the details of Padmasambhava’s life and works. Two of these functions – the transmission of various teachings and support for the Tibetan identity – have been the main focus for my investigation.

Key Words: Padmasambhava, Tibetan Buddhism, biographies, Terma-treasure, Tibetan identity.
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1. Introduction

Although I had heard the names Padmasambhava and Guru Rinpoche a few times previously, it was only whilst travelling in Ladakh, situated in northern India, during the summer of 2012, that this figure really caught my attention. Ladakh is a region that is steeped in Buddhism, with monasteries, temples, chorten,\(^1\) mani stones,\(^2\) prayer-flags and, of course, crimson-robed monks almost everywhere. The frequency with which paintings and statues depicting Padmasambhava appeared in these temples and shrine-rooms was surprising, and woke an interest in finding out who he was, why he has been given such a central place within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, and what role he might still hold in the religious lives of modern followers. This work is a result of some of the discoveries made whilst following this line of interest.

It would appear that the best way to begin to investigate the life of a historical figure is to read a comprehensive biography of the individual in question. However, in the case of Padmasambhava, this is more complicated than one might expect – not because of a lack of available biographies, but for almost exactly the opposite reason: that is, there are a huge number of biographies, or life-stories, of Padmasambhava of differing length, amounts of detail, and – most interestingly – great variation in the information they present.

From my point of view, I expect a biography to keep to the available facts and make scholarly interpretations based on the gathered information. Even if that information or interpretations prove in time to be wrong, I still expect the author to have made that effort. In several of the texts I have read on the life of Padmasambhava, however, the authors not only make little or no reference to their possible sources, they don't even seem to care about keeping within the bounds of conventional methods of historical study. Why is that so? Is it even reasonable to regard these texts as biographies, rather than stories or folk-tales?

Whatever the historical accuracy of much of the material contained in these texts, I find Padmasambhava's life-stories fascinating because they give a picture of an enlightened being that is radically different from those I am familiar with from Christianity and the traditional schools of Buddhism. Here we find depicted an incredibly efficient spiritual teacher who is willing to use pretty

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\(^1\) A mound-like structure containing religious relics that symbolizes the Buddha in meditation posture. Also known as stupa.

\(^2\) Stones and rocks with carved inscriptions of the Avalokiteshvara mantra.
much any means necessary to shake people out of arrogant self-interest, and push them toward enlightenment. This radically unconventional approach (which Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche referred to as “crazy wisdom”\(^3\)) presents a strong challenge to our assumptions and dogmas regarding the religious life, and to our perceptions of how a saint should be or behave.

When looking for information on Padmasambhava written in English, I was struck by how little is actually available. This is surprising, considering the enormous body of work that can readily be found on other aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, on Tibet’s culture, and its history – subjects that are either wholly dependent on, or heavily influenced by, Padmasambhava and his achievements. Therefore, I have been quite heavily dependent on the few books and other materials that have been produced.

1.1 Aims

My main intention with this work has been to investigate the background, life and works of Padmasambhava, together with his importance within the lives of Tibetan Buddhists. This line of inquiry has led me to the biographies of Padmasambhava, and the surprising variation of certain details contained therein.

This investigation has taken form according to three specific goals or aims:

- To give descriptions of a small but relevant selection of texts detailing the life and works of Padmasambhava that are available in English. These descriptions will be guided by the themes I present in the Method section of this work.
- To examine some of the recurring images or themes within these texts, and try to provide explanations regarding the variation of certain details.
- To investigate the influence Padmasambhava (as portrayed in these biographies) has had, and continues to have, on the religious life and identity of followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

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\(^3\) Trungpa 2001:11
By following these aims I hope to form a clear picture of Padmasambhava and his life, although I am aware that this picture is almost certainly not a reliable image of the man himself, but rather of how he is portrayed within the writings of Tibetan Buddhism.

1.2 Method

I have used a hermeneutic/phenomenological-inspired approach for the main body of this work, with a certain emphasis on the cultural and contextual aspects of the material. When studying non-scientific texts, such as those that form the basis of this essay, one must take into account the aspect of personal interpretation of the material in the individual believer’s religious life, together with the subjective interpretations based on the culture and traditions within Tibetan Buddhism. These form an experienced reality around these texts, wherein lies much of their value – as tools for interpreting and managing the vicissitudes of life, that lies beyond the mundane confines of our sensory, everyday existence.

Another factor that is essential to be aware of is my personal interpretation of the material presented in these texts. In this context I have a role as an outside observer – an observer with a predominantly western-European background, which provides a foundation for a substantially different structure of interpretation and experience. It cannot be repeated often enough, it seems, that human beings interpret similar phenomena in a multitude of different ways, and that we as humans appear to have a “built-in” comparative approach to understanding the world around us.

When choosing which themes to focus on, I have had in mind Van Manen's “selective or highlighting approach” to isolating thematic statements (as opposed to his “wholistic or sententious approach” or “the detailed or line-by-line approach”\(^4\)). To attempt to extract a global meaning to these complicated texts would be far too reductionist, and miss much of the “richness” and variety of meaning they contain. Therefore, to focus on the aspects and details that stand-out for me as an observer seems to do better justice to these texts, as well as maintaining an appropriate level of respect.

\(^4\)Van Manen 1990:93
The themes that stood out as I read these texts are:

- Their importance for the national pride, and support for the identity of the Tibetan people – both those in exile and those that have remained and lived under Chinese rule. These writings speak of a time when Tibet was a superpower in the region, and exercised considerable influence over those that currently oppress and humiliate not only the people, but even their national integrity.

- The function of these texts as a vehicle for the transmission of teachings. Variations in the details of the biographies seem to highlight or transmit other aspects of the teachings. These variations can also make these biographies acceptable to those with different personalities and temperaments. These transmissions are often aided by the use of supernatural powers which function as proof of Padmasambhava’s attainments and realizations, and, as a direct consequence, the truth of the teachings being described. In these texts, supernatural powers are portrayed, for example, as skillful means for developing inspiration and faith, or as warnings against pride and arrogance.

I have chosen to present the life-stories “one-by-one”, whilst at the same time highlighting the above themes within the texts. This approach retains the coherence and dynamic aspect of the texts, and also provides the means of meeting the first of my goals – that is, to give a description of Padmasambhava’s life and works as recounted in the texts.

I have restricted myself to using texts that have been translated into English directly from Tibetan sources by suitably qualified translators. By “suitably qualified” I mean translators that not only have a scholarly knowledge of the Tibetan language (though obviously essential), but who also have great experience of Tibetan culture and deep knowledge of the context in which these texts are used.

I have not given the original Tibetan spelling (which is normally written in Wiley-format\(^5\)), using instead the established western forms. I personally have no knowledge of the Tibetan language, and a lot of unfamiliar and oddly-constructed words, that don't even give a clue as to their pronunciation, would just be confusing to myself and the majority of readers.

I have also noted that Beckwith, Kapstein and Zangpo all state, with a certain pride one feels, that

\(^5\)The established form of transliteration of Tibetan script, developed by Turrell V. Wylie.
they have generally ignored the scholarly conventions of transliteration. Since they are all qualified scholars in this field, with knowledge of the Tibetan language that I lack, I have no hesitation in following suit.

Even though the main characters in these stories are often referred to by a variety of different names, I have “standardized” them in my work, in order to reduce any possible confusion. For example, Padmasambhava is also known as Guru Rinpoché, Lopon Rinpoché, Padma Vajra, Padmakara, Padma Thötreng Tsal, Shakya Senge, Loden Chogsey, and Senge Dragdrog, amongst many others. Therefore, I think it simpler and clearer to address him only as Padmasambhava. In those cases where the name relates to a relevant aspect of the narrative, I have included it, either indicated in the text or as a footnote.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the task of establishing an accurate date for Padmasambhava’s birth (or, rather, appearance) and passing away is as good as impossible (using the information available at the present time). The vast array of conflicting information on his life obscures any reliable information that may have once existed. For example, even Taranata, who seems quite sure of the accuracy and reliability of his sources, is unable to come closer to fixing a date for Padmasambhava’s birth than saying it occurred during the reign of King Devapala of Magadha – ca 730-777 CE. Fortunately, this fact has little bearing on Padmasambhava’s importance within the lives of the Buddhists of Tibet, so I have not given this question much attention in the present work.

1.3 Material

Here it is appropriate to discuss how we can categorize these texts. According to Kunsang, the first two biographies of Padmasambhava that I have studied (the Sanglingma and the Immaculate White Lotus) belong to a particular class of Buddhist scriptures known as the Kathang literature, which is a collection of what are known as Terma or treasure texts (see below).

Even the highly respected Nyingma master Tsele Natsok Rangdröl (1608-? CE) states that he finds it

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7Kunsang 1993:3
hard to regard the Kathang literature as being historically reliable sources. However, his reasons for doing this are more related to the limits of our perception when observing the actions of Buddhas and great bodhisattvas, rather than as a consequence of scientific enquiry as we would regard it.\(^8\)

Clearly then, it is impossible for us to regard these writings as scholarly or scientifically-compiled biographies. In my opinion, however, it is not reasonable, accurate or fair, to regard them only as pure fantasy either. These texts have a powerful meaning and purpose for Tibetan Buddhists, and contain a great amount of religious teachings and direction, as well as having cultural and historical value—especially, for example, texts such as Taranata’s *The Indian Version of the Life of Padmasambhava*, which has been built up upon a fairly modern methodological foundation.

That a certain degree of “mythology” has grown around Padmasambhava and his activities within Tibet, is an acceptable statement, I feel. Finding consistent, clear-cut definitions of this sort of term, however, can sometimes be difficult. Two that appear to fit the material on which the present study is based are as follows:

“*Myths are essentially symbolic, metaphorical, or archetypical narratives that also contain supernatural or mysterious elements at their very core. Myths frequently imply an all-encompassing system of belief which explains the structure of reality and suggests how human experience should be understood. Myths need not necessarily be fictional or false. A true story may be so central to human experience that it is simultaneously mythical. Indeed, more than one scholar has suggested that certain scientific theories such as the theory of evolution are better understood as myths. Even when a myth is known to be false, it may be a powerful means of encapsulating a world view...”*\(^9\)

In Sacred Narratives: Readings in the Theory of Myth, Lauri Honko writes:

“A myth expresses and confirms society’s religious values and norms, it provides patterns of behavior to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult...”\(^10\)

In the present context it is also essential to understand something of the Buddhist approach to history and historical fact. In contrast to, for example, the Christian tradition (which is a faith that is based within human history and events), where it seems of great importance whether or not the life of Jesus

\(^8\)Kunsang 1993:15-16


\(^10\)Dundes 1984:49
was exactly the same as reported in the gospels, the Buddhist tradition (at least in the Mahayana and tantric schools) obviously give little regard to such a “black or white” fixation with historical accuracy. As Zangpo states in his introduction, of all the groups of beings that go to the Buddha for learning, it is historians that go away most often empty-handed. In his opinion, even though these texts may sometimes seem to be presented as “history” it is actually more accurate and beneficial to regard them as a particular form of Buddhist teachings - the Jataka Tales being another well-known example. This point is echoed by Taranata, who states that the nearest we are going to get to a historical perspective is the Theravadan writings – the Mahayana and Tantric teachings (from which the writings on which the present work is based are taken) are concerned almost exclusively with bringing the individual to enlightenment.

Zangpo goes on to say that we do not find any trace of conventional historical writings in the works of the great Indian Buddhist masters such as Nagarjuna, Shantideva, Dharmakirti or Chandrakirti, even though they deal with many other subjects including poetry, astrology and medicine. The Tibetans made several attempts at writing historical records from the fourteenth century onwards, but the authors Mahayana and Tantric Buddhist training seems to have made it hard for them to make clear distinctions between well-established myths, legends and historical fact.

When speaking of an event that is related in the Testament of Ba, Kapstein makes the point that “It is, however, no doubt best regarded as, in Butterfield's phrase, "a special kind of religious meditation on parts of the story" of Trhi Songdetsen's career, one that indeed seeks to advance the rudiments of a distinctively Buddhist interpretation of Tibetan history in general.” This viewpoint seems to apply equally well to here.

Based on the above information, I personally feel it is most fitting and accurate to regard these writings as “mythologized histories.”

The main sources for the translations I have made use of here are as follows:

11Zangpo 2002:24
12Zangpo 2002:24
13A body of literature describing Buddha Sakyamuni’s previous lives.
14Zangpo 2002:29
15Zangpo 2002:49
16Zangpo gives the examples of Butön’s The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet (1322), Gö Lotsawa’s Blue Annals (1476) and Taranata’s History of India Buddhism (1608).
17The Testament of Ba is an account of Buddhism's establishment in Tibet, made up of several different texts, with the earliest dating from the tenth or eleventh century CE.
18Kapstein 2000:33
The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava translated by Erik Pema Kunsang. The Sanglingma biography, which is the main focus for Kunsang’s book, is the most detailed translation I have found in English and contains the details that are most often related by Tibetan Buddhist teachers. This text forms an excellent framework with which to begin, and gives the average western reader, with little or no knowledge of Padmasambhava, a background to the man himself, his activities, his importance for Buddhism in Tibet, and of his style of teaching.

Guru Rinpoché: His Life and Times by Ngawang Zangpo. From this work I have taken the translations of The Immaculate White Lotus by Dorje Tso and The Indian Version of the Life of Guru Rinpoche by Taranata. Zangpo also gives a description of the historical context of these texts, which has had a strong influence on this particular aspect of my own study. The information supporting this historical aspect has also been complimented with material from Matthew T. Kapstein’s The Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism and Christopher I. Beckwith’s The Tibetan empire in central Asia.

Tibet: Its History, Religion and People by Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull. This work, written by H. H. Dalai Lama’s brother, gives a subjective account of Tibetan history and another description of Padmasambhava’s life-story, together with his relevance for the Tibetan people. This personal account has given some insight into the nation’s self-perception and their interpretations of the events that have had such a great influence on the country’s development.

Antonio Terrone’s doctoral thesis The Ravens Crest from 2010 has provided many insights into the Terma or treasure-revelation tradition that is the source of many of these biographies of Padmasambhava, as well as highlighting their importance for the identity and national pride of the Tibetan people.

1.4 Outline

After describing my aims with this essay, and the methods and materials I shall use to reach those aims, I shall give a concise description of the land of Tibet as it was around the time of Padmasambhava and Buddhism's arrival. This description shall be confined only to those aspects of history that are relevant to the present work.
Then follows the main investigation, where I shall recount and examine three texts/biographies describing Padmasambhava's life and activities. Two of these texts are *Terma* treasure-texts (I shall describe these in the *Background* section) whilst the third was written by an Indian Buddhist master at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In this section I will investigate these texts from the perspective or themes mentioned in the *Method* section.

In my analysis I shall describe some of the possible intentions or meanings behind certain details of the information related in these texts, and attempt to provide explanations to some of the variations that occur in these life-stories.

This will be followed by a summary of the conclusions we can make from the material presented, and finally a list of the literature and other resources that I have made use of.
2. Background

In order to gain insight into some aspects of these texts (for example, Padmasambhava's being presented as a Lotus-born being, his cold reception by the ministers and other inhabitants of Tibet etc.) it is essential to spend a little time looking at the history of Tibet, and Tibetan life as it was in the time preceding Padmasambhava's arrival.

As Beckwith makes clear, even though archeological evidence proves that the land of Tibet has been inhabited for several thousand years, records mentioning or describing the people are fairly scanty, to say the least. It is only about four thousand years ago that they first appear in Chinese records as a distinct people, known then as the Ch'iang. Little information is given, other than that they were nomads. This picture of the Tibetan people doesn't get much clearer until we come to the seventh century, where we begin to hear much on Tibet’s influence within that region.

Beckwith, Zangpo and Kapstein give a fairly consistent picture of events of the period of Tibetan history (although with varying interpretations) that I believe is most relevant to the present work – that is, the period of expansion that began with the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (ca 605/617-649 CE). With the country's recent unification, and a growing sense of national pride, King Songtsen began paying a strong interest in its neighbors – first Nepal, then China and Kashmir, and then a particularly violent invasion into northern India. Zangpo even goes so far as to compare this emerging Tibetan empire with that of the Mongolian empire, suggesting that had Buddhism not had such a pacifying impact on Tibet, it could have resulted in a similar history.

The Nepalese and Chinese response to this vigorous and often terrifying threat was to send princesses to marry the King, presumably with the hope that they could act as a pacifying influence on the "barbarians" - a tactic that appears to have actually been at least partly successful. The Nepalese princess Bhrikuti Devi, and the Chinese princess Wencheng, both brought with them the Buddhist religion and both saw to it that King Songtsen did what he could to establish the religion in Tibet. Apart from the building of a substantial number of temples, however, the people and subsequent rulers of Tibet paid little attention to the new, foreign religion, and the country continued its aggressive relationship towards its neighbors.

Beckwith 1993:5
Later, under the reign of the ruler Lalitaditya Muktapid (724-761 CE), Kashmir gained considerable power in the region, which gave rise to a series of armed incursions and counter-incursions between the two countries. Under the period when Padmasambhava arrived in Tibet, during the reign of King Trisong Deutsen (742-ca 800 CE), Padmasambhava's homeland Uddiyana (which corresponds to the region of the Swat Valley in present-day north-west Pakistan) was actually under Tibetan control at the time so, given Uddiyana's status as a colony together with its proximity to Kashmir, it is perhaps not so surprising that Padmasambhava's presence in Tibet was viewed with a certain suspicion.

Here it has to be said that the picture of Tibetan history often presented – of a wild, warrior nation that terrorized its civilized neighbors, built a great empire, but which was later tamed and distracted by Buddhism, resulting in a severely weakened influence in the region – is (partly) contested by Kapstein. Although it is true, in his opinion, that the above sequence of events took place and that the Tibetan Empire's influence in the region at the time became drastically reduced, just what the influence of the introduction of Buddhism had is unclear. Political in-fighting was present long before Buddhism’s arrival, and the Tibetan Kings continued to wage war whilst at the same time converting to the new religion. Although it can be assumed that Buddhism was a factor, the fall of the empire was probably as inevitable as it has been with all empires of the past (and lies in store for those of the present).

2.1 Padmasambhava in modern times – Terma treasures

One of the functions of these texts appears to be to join the past with the present – to create the connection between the legendary figures and times, and the not-so-legendary present. This function is carried out both through the content of these texts but also through the means of communication: that is, through the Terma tradition, in which tantric masters discover writings and objects - in physical or non-physical forms – that were originally hidden by Padmasambhava himself or his closest disciples.

According to tradition, in the time immediately before his departure, Padmasambhava realized that the struggle was not over for Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners in Tibet, and that the obstacles that occurred in the future would require different solutions than those of the present. Therefore he “hid” teachings in various places in and around Tibet. Although these teachings were not entirely relevant to
his own time, they would meet the problems or needs of dedicated Buddhist practitioners in future times. These teachings would be discovered at the appropriate time by individuals who purportedly are the reincarnations of Padmasambhava’s 25 closest disciples. Thus a link is formed between this great master and practitioners in modern times. Two of the texts I describe in the present work are terma treasure texts, whilst the third is likely strongly influenced by early terma discoveries.

Terrone gives descriptions of both physical treasures and mind treasures. The physical treasures are often religious objects with a specific symbolic meaning within Tibetan Buddhist culture (for example, a vajra or a phurba, a small symbolic knife) but can also be magical powders or even small “treasure-chests”. Mind-treasures, on the other hand, are a little harder to define, and also give rise to greater controversy and skepticism (Rangdröl gives quite a scathing critique of the non-celibate practitioners and their Terma treasure discoveries).

These revealed mind-treasures often developed into complete cycles of teachings. One of the examples of actual Treasure revelation that Terrone relates, and that give clear examples of both mind- and physical-treasures, is as follows:

“On November 17, 1998, the Treasure revealer bkra shis rgyal mtshan accompanied by his wife dpal chen lha mo and a small entourage of devotees was performing ritual circumambulations around a hill in Khams called gNas chen mkha’ ’gro ’bum rdzong, not far from sKye rgu mdo (Yushu TAP). As they reached a rock that he had previously seen in a visionary experience, bkra shis rgyal tshan had another vision in which a group of “sky-goers” (Skr. Dakinis) appeared in front of him and guided him to a huge boulder that was part of a larger rock formation. The dakinis apparently instructed him to get closer to the rock and alerted him to be ready to grab a Treasure object that would soon fall from an opening in the rock. A cavity spontaneously opened in the rock emitting a Treasure casket (gter sgrom) that dropped in his hands. At the same time, divine nectar (bdud rtsi) is also said to have poured down from the same rock opening which bkra shis rgyal mtshan promptly collected in his lower garment, assisted by his wife.

A few days after the retrieval of the Treasure relic, while taking care of the precious nectar collected during the revelation event, bkra shis rgyal mtshan took the casket and as soon as his hands touched the rock chest, it slowly cracked and opened. From the inside of the Treasure chest, bkra shis rgyal mtshan and the others present in the room saw a blazing small luminous sphere followed by a ray of light that was projected towards the middle of the room and then dissolved in the crown of bkra shis

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20Kunsang 1993:14
21A female embodiment of enlightened energy.
rgyal mtshan's head. According to the teacher bKra shis rgyal mtshan, he suddenly received a spiritual text or mind Treasure (dgongs gter) in the form of a short string of syllables that in due time he would translate into textual form. More nectar was then collected from the Treasure chest which was later to be employed for medicinal purposes."^{22}
3. Investigation

3.1 Sanglingma life story

According to H. H. Dilgo Khyentse (1910-1991 CE) “there exist an inconceivable number of life stories...” and that the Sanglingma life story “is the most authoritative scripture regarding how the teachings of Sutra and Mantra spread to the Snowy Land of Tibet.”

This biography was recorded by Padmasambhava's most famous Tibetan disciple, the *dakini* Yeshe Tsogyal (757-817 CE). Sanglingma means “Copper Temple” which refers to the temple at Samye where the biography was hidden by Yeshe Tsogyal. It was later discovered as a Terma treasure by Nyang Ral Nyima Öser (1124-1192 CE).

Padmasambhava was emanated by Buddha Amitabha and appeared in the land of Uddiyana, which at the time was ruled by the generous but childless King Indrabodhi. Whilst returning on a ship from a mission to recover a wish-fulfilling jewel, the king and his retinue passed an island on which grew a magnificent lotus-flower. Sat upon this lotus-flower was a boy of eight years of age, whose body was adorned with the major and minor marks. The king asked the boy:

*Little boy child, who is your father and who is your mother?*

*What is your caste and what is your country?*

*What food do you live on and what is your purpose here?*

The boy replied:

*My father is the wisdom of spontaneous awareness.*

*My mother is the Ever-Excellent Lady, the space of all things.*

*I belong to the caste of indivisible space and awareness.*

*I have taken the unborn dharma-dhatu as my homeland.*

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23Kunsang 1993:1
24Kunsang 1993:1
25Kunsang 1993:3, 271-272
26Kunsang 1993:29
27The physical signs of a great enlightened being.
I sustain myself by consuming the concepts of duality. My purpose is the act of killing disturbing emotions.

The king was suitably impressed by this meeting and decided to make the boy his son, making him a prince and giving him the name Padma Vajra (padma means lotus; vajra means diamond, but in this context the name could also be referring to the vajra (a ritual object) the boy was holding in his hand when the king first saw him). The king also declared that everyone in the kingdom was to embrace Mahayana Buddhism, and thereby all developed bodhichitta and attained the fruition of nonreturn. (Already here we find examples of supernatural powers and miraculous events being used to inspire, convert, and give extra “gravitas” to the teachings being proclaimed.)

After an undisclosed period of time in the palace, the prince realized that this way of life was not helping other beings in any great measure, and therefore arranged the circumstances of his own expulsion from the kingdom – initially by performing religious dances naked on the palace roof, and then by letting a khatvanga fall from his hand, which landed on the head of the son to a powerful minister, thus causing his death.

The law of the kingdom was strong and clear, and the prince was banished to a charnel ground called Cool Grove. Here he lived in freedom and great bliss, performing yogic practices and receiving empowerments and initiations from dakinis he had placed under his command. Initially he lived on the food offerings left for the dead, and wearing the cloth used to wrap the corpses as clothing. Later, during a period of famine and disease in the area, he had to instead use flayed-skin from the corpses as clothing, and eat the bodies for food.

During this time, he came to hear of an evil king, Shakraraja, in a nearby kingdom, which was forcing his people onto an errant path that would lead them all to lower rebirths. He decided that the only way to convert these people was through subjugation and wrathful means. Therefore he entered the kingdom, wearing a human-skin shirt and tiger-skin skirt, killing all the men he met along the way, and uniting with all the females. He thus brought everyone under his control and performed the tanagana ritual of union and liberation. These acts and the lifestyle of Padmasambhava under this

28 Bodhichitta is the compassionate wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.
29 “Nonreturn” is a stage of enlightenment which means the practitioner will not need to take physical form in the next life. Instead, they will be reborn in a heavenly realm or pure-land, and remain there until final enlightenment.
30 A heavy, trident-staff carried by Tantric adepts.
31 The Vajrayana practice of “union and liberation”: that is, liberating ignorance and disturbing emotions by uniting with the wisdom of the enlightened state.
time led to him being given the name Rakshasa Demon.\textsuperscript{32}

Whilst living in desolate and terrifying places is not unheard-of in the life-stories of saints (especially Indian saints), this particular approach to conversion – that is, random killing and fornication – is an extreme example of Padmasambhava’s unconventional methods, and indicates the reputation he built up would have been intimidating to many, and not just inspiring.

After spending various periods of time at other charnel grounds – Joyful Grove, Sosaling and Rugged Grove – he then made his way to the Vajra Seat (the “diamond seat” under the bodhi tree where Buddha Shakyamuni had attained enlightenment) at Bodhgaya in India. Whilst there, he reflected that he would need to show people – by his own example – how essential it was to be guided by a spiritual teacher, even if he himself had no need for this kind of instruction. Therefore, he made his way to many of the greatest teachers living in India at the time, including Master Prabhahasti (who gave Padmasambhava the name Shakya Senge), Manjushrimitra, Humkara, Nagarjuna, Buddhaguhya, Mahavajra, Dhana Sanskrita, Rombuguhyya Devachandra, Shantigarbha and Shri Singha.

In order to convert the people of Sahor to the Buddhadharma, Padmasambhava (and his consort called Mandarava Flower) entered the city to beg for alms.\textsuperscript{33} The people, however, becoming alarmed because of Padmasambhava’s reputation, tied them both up and placed them on a pile of sandalwood and oil, in order to burn them. Smoke was still seen emanating from the fire after nine days, so the villagers went to investigate. When they arrived, they saw a lake with a lotus-flower in the middle, upon which Padmasambhava sat with his consort – both unharmed by the blaze. The people were stunned and, after prostrating before him and begging his forgiveness, embraced the Buddhadharma and gave him the names Padmakara and Padmasambhava, which both mean “the Lotus-born”.

He then returned to Uddiyana with the same intention,\textsuperscript{34} received much the same welcome, with much the same result: the people tried to burn him and his consort but, this time after 21 days, found them sitting in a lotus-flower on a lake; King Indrabodhi’s realization deepened, as did that of all who live in the kingdom; and Padmasambhava received two more names – Padma Thötreng Tsal\textsuperscript{35} and Lotus

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\textsuperscript{32} According to Encyclopedia Brittanica: *The term rakshasa... generally applies to those demons who haunt cemeteries (and) eat the flesh of men...*

\textsuperscript{33} The tradition of mendicancy is well established within most traditions of Buddhism and reflects a reciprocal relationship between a Buddhist master and ordinary householders.

\textsuperscript{34} It was stated earlier that everyone in the kingdom of Uddiyana had embraced Buddhadharma and attained nonreturn. However, it appears that here his intention was to deepen the peoples understanding further and bring as many as possible to the supreme vidyadhara level of mahamudra.

\textsuperscript{35} This name means “the Powerful Lotus of the Garland of Skulls” and refers to the fact that he and Mandarava were wearing garlands of skulls when they were discovered sitting on the lotus-flower in the middle of the lake.
King (the latter referring to the time he had been the son of the king). After remaining in the kingdom of Uddiyana for 13 years, Padmasambhava went to practice alone in the charnel ground Jalandhara.

In Bodhgaya (the Vajra-Seat) at this time, four heretic teachers and their followers had challenged the Buddhist panditas to a test of debate and magic – the losers converting to their opponents teachings. The Buddhists discussed this challenge, and whilst confident they could win any debate, they feared they would lose the magic contest. A pale-blue-skinned woman (probably a dakini) appeared amongst them and said that her brother – Padma Vajra – was the only one who could defeat the heretics: they should therefore arrange an offering ceremony and prayers to him, whilst she travelled to him and requested his help.

Padmasambhava arrived the next morning and helped the panditas defeat the heretics in debate, who then flew up into the air in order to display their magical powers. Padmasambhava responded with a display that sent the teachers fleeing to their respective castles. The followers of these heretics did as promised and converted to the Buddhadharma – their teachers, however, threatened Padmasambhava and began uttering evil mantras. After receiving help and instruction from the dakini Subduer of Mara, Padmasambhava sent a shower of meteors onto the teacher’s castles, thus destroying them. For this favor, the panditas named him Roaring Lion (or Senge Dragdrog).

At this point, the story of how Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet begins. Although the invitation was sent by King Trisong Deutsen, it was a previous ruler, King Songtsen Gampo, that first made serious efforts to establish the Buddhadharma in the country by, amongst other things, building 108 temples. However, in order to make the Dharma spread and prosper, the bodhisattva Manjushri decided to send an incarnation of himself to be king over Tibet. This incarnation became Trisong Deutsen, who ascended the throne at the age of thirteen.

This elevation of King Trisong to being an emanation of the great bodhisattva Manjushri, is an obvious means of raising his status and importance – both in terms of his role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet, but even his achievements as a secular leader of the country.

When King Trisong Deutsen was twenty, there arose in him a deep aspiration to spread the Buddhadharma and build a great temple that would act as a palace for the Three Jewels and a site of devotion and respect. To assist with this goal, he sent a request to a great Indian teacher, Master

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36 A being that has developed the aspiration to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings.
37 Manjushri sent a ray of light from his heart, with a golden boy-child at the tip, into the womb of the current king’s consort, Lady Angchung of Mashang.
Bodhisattva, who agreed to come to Tibet and help the king with his aspiration. This, however, proved to be harder than planned, due mainly to the mischief of local spirits and deities. After arriving, Master Bodhisattva was able to consecrate the site of the new temple, whilst the King himself began the digging of the foundation stone; but whatever the people achieved during the day through their labor, the evil spirits destroyed during the night.

These events led Master Bodhisattva to suggest to the King that he should send a request for help from Padmasambhava – “wrathful means” were needed to discipline these spirits and deities, and those were precisely the skills that Padmasambhava could deliver. Therefore, a group of five emissaries was sent to the Cave of Yangleshö with the request and a tray of gold-dust.

As soon as the emissaries had started on their journey, all the Guardians of the Dharma went to Padmasambhava, telling him of the King’s plan and request, and asked if he would travel to the border of Tibet to meet them. This he immediately agreed to, and, three months after his arrival at the border, the emissaries finally arrived. After teasing them a little for their sluggishness, and testing their resolve and faith, he accompanied them on the journey back to Hepori, where King Trisong Deutsen resided. On the journey, Padmasambhava and the emissaries encountered a great many hostile deities and spirits that attempted to obstruct their progress and destroy them. Padmasambhava was able to subdue and tame them all through his power, and many became protectors of the Buddhadharma.

When the group arrived in Hepori, they were met by the King. Being the ruler of the land, and regarding himself as a king who upholds the Dharma, King Trisong felt that Padmasambhava should bow and pay homage to him. Padmasambhava, on the other hand, felt he had been invited to be the King's master and, being also an enlightened yogi, the King should therefore pay homage to him. Sensing the King's pride, Padmasambhava decided to sing a song entitled “I am the Great and Powerful,” wherein he recounted his powers and attainments, and scolded King Trisong for his pride and arrogance. He finished by scorching the King's clothing with a ray of light from his hand, which produced the desired result – King Trisong Deutsen bowed and payed homage to Padmasambhava.

The group returned to the palace, where Padmasambhava was sat on a golden throne. The King made offerings to him and then explained his intention to build a great temple, in order to aid the spread of the Buddhadharma in Tibet. Padmasambhava agreed to help, but said that there were a great many

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38 Later in the Sanglingma he is referred to as Khenpo Bodhisattva. In sanskrit his name is Shantaraksita, "Guardian of Peace".
male and female gods, demons and spirits that needed to be tamed and brought under his command first. This he achieved through his powers, and a torma offering, made in exchange for their obedience. The building of Samye Temple could now be completed. With the help of the deities (apart from a little trouble from one of the naga), the temple was built in only five years, and became a magnificent and vast array of buildings, made up of smaller temples and stupas, and surrounded by a great wall.

With the temple being completed, Padmasambhava and Master Bodhisattva announced to the King that, because the vows the three of them had made together in a previous existence have been realized, the two masters would now return to India. On hearing this King Trisong became distraught, and requested that they stayed longer in order to deepen the establishment of the Buddhadharma in “the dense darkness of Tibet”. This self-view the Tibetans have of themselves under this period of their past – of being a fierce, wild and mostly ignorant people – recurs often in the texts I have studied, and appears to propagate the view that the land and its people didn’t amount to much until the arrival of Buddhism. One can wonder if the Buddhist writers of these histories are aiming a good part of their criticism towards their Bönpo “competitors” that were well established long before the Buddhists.

The two masters agreed to King Trisong’s request and, together with help from the translator’s Chokro Lui Gyaltsen and Kawa Paltsek, proceeded to translate a vast number of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan – many of the works being aimed at removing the obstacles to the establishment of Dharma that Padmasambhava sensed still existed in the land and its people.

Padmasambhava realized also that, in order for the King and the inhabitants of Tibet to truly develop deep faith in his teachings, it would be necessary to send someone (that is, a Tibetan) to an Indian master to request, attain, and then bring back to Tibet, the Vajrayana teachings of the Secret Mantra (not even someone with Padmasambhava’s insight and reputation, coupled with his displays of psychic powers, could defeat the people’s prejudices and resistance to being taught by a foreigner). King Trisong agreed to this, and so Master Bodhisattva ordained five Tibetans, who were then trained in the translation of Indian languages into Tibetan, and then sent to India to search for teachings.

After a long, difficult journey, the five learned of a master called Hungkara, whom they decided to visit. Master Hungkara received them and agreed to their request for teachings, and after giving the

39 A food offering made to protectors of the Buddhadhamma.
40 Powerful, serpent-like beings.
41 Kunsang 1993:79
monks the empowerments necessary in order to receive the teachings, he composed a daily practice which the monks were to stay and follow for a year, before returning to Tibet. Four of the monks, however, became suspicious of Master Hungkaras intentions, and decided to leave immediately. The fifth monk, Namkhai Nyingpo, stayed and practiced as the Master had instructed. When the four told the Master of their plan to leave, he gave the leader of the group, Palgyi Yeshe, a teak dagger that he had blessed, in order to protect him from obstacles on the journey home. Another monk in the group, however, took the dagger from him while he slept, and he subsequently was bitten by naga-demon and died – all as a result of the negative karma accrued from not trusting the Master.

The remaining three returned safely to Tibet, and presented the teachings they had received to the King and his ministers. They described also what had happened to the other two monks, but were not believed; the ministers, being driven both by jealousy of the Buddhadharma and the suspicion that these monks had simply done-away with the other two, therefore had them banished to the outskirts of the country. After a year, Namkhai Nyingpo, having attained the supreme and common accomplishments as a result of the practices he had learned from Master Hungkara, returned and presented what he had learned to King Trisong, together with a display of his attainments. The King was deeply impressed and prostrated before the monk; the ministers, however, were again jealous and decided to banish Namkhai Nyingpo also.

After a time, King Trisong became seriously ill, and many offering and healing ceremonies were performed – all to no effect. However, a divination was performed that showed the King would not recover until the monk Namkhai Nyingpo was invited to return to the palace. Two emissaries were sent and the monk returned as requested. After performing a healing ceremony, the King immediately recovered, and Namkhai Nyingpo again became the focus for the ministers’ wrath. This time they planned to set an ambush and kill him; however, the monk, having foreseen this, used his powers to terrify the ministers to such a degree that they gave up their murderous plans and fled. Namkhai Nyingpo then returned to his previous dwelling place, to continue his spiritual practices.

After an undisclosed time, King Trisong Deutsen had a dream in which Vajrasattva appeared and instructed him to send two translators to India, in order to learn and record the sacred Great Perfection teaching. The King consulted with Padmasambhava, who recommended that the King choose two intelligent individuals to be ordained and trained in translation by Master Bodhisattva. The two chosen monks would then be further trained in magic techniques by Padmasambhava himself

42 A sambogakhaya (with semimanifest form) Buddha who embodies the five Buddha families: tathagata, vajra, ratna, padma and karma, that in turn represent the five aspects of innate qualities of our enlightened essence
43 The third of the three inner tantras of the Nyingma School
– in order to protect them on their journey – and then sent off to find and recover the teachings from a qualified master. The two monks, Vairochana and Lekdrub, discovered on arriving in India that Shri Singha was the most learned master of the teachings, and so went to visit him. The monks were well received by the Master, and he agreed to teach them, but said that due to the Indian Kings' jealous guarding of the Buddhadharma, they would have to be "resourceful". The monk Vairochana was therefore hidden within a huge copper vessel, upon which the Master sat and gave his teachings (via a copper pipe!).\textsuperscript{44}

With the teachings given and fully recorded, it was time for the two monks to return to Tibet. Even though Vairochana was the more adept of the two monks, Lekdrub wanted to try to impress King Trisong by being the first to return, and therefore started the journey home before Vairochana. Lekdrub, however, was killed at the border by the guards. Vairochana, using his intelligence, cunning and the art of swift feet (that he had also mastered during his stay with Shri Singha), was able to return safely.

Back in India, many signs appeared that suggested the Buddhadharma had been taken from India to Tibet. This infuriated the King of India and, when it became obvious he would be able to catch neither the monk nor the master that had taught him, decided to send two soldiers into Tibet to spread slander about Vairochana, saying that he had not brought back Dharma teachings at all; rather, had had returned with evil mantras he had learned from heretics, that he would use to destroy the country. King Trisong's ministers were obviously delighted to hear this news, and proclaimed that Vairochana was to be drowned. Unknown to Vairochana, and in order to appease his ministers, the King let a beggar be clothed in Vairochana's robes, sealed in a copper pot and thrown into the Tsangpo River.\textsuperscript{45} Meanwhile, Vairochana was hidden in the palace so the King could go to him at night to receive teachings. Obviously it didn't take long for this arrangement to be exposed, and the King, feeling powerless against his ministers, asked Vairochana what he should do. Vairochana expressed that he would gladly be expelled to a place called Gyalmo Tsawarong, where he had some residual karma to take care of; in the meantime, the King was to invite another Indian master, Vimalamitra, to come to Tibet to verify the teachings that Vairochana had given. This would produce trust in the ministers and thus enable him to return and spread the Great Perfection teaching at a later time.

The King also decided to introduce religious law into the kingdom, and announced that he himself

\textsuperscript{44}See Kunsang 1993, note 28.

\textsuperscript{45}For more information on this episode see Kunsang 1993, note 32.
would give veneration to any Tibetans that could take ordination, learn translation or practice the Buddhadharma with diligence. Padmasambhava praised this decision and told the story of the past karmic connections and aspirations of himself, King Trisong and Master Bodhisattva, together with the past lives of the King’s ministers who were obstructing the spread of the Dharma in Tibet. The King then sent three skilled translators – Kawa Paltsek, Chokro Lui Gyaltser and Rinchen Chok of Ma – to the Indian king Dharmachakra of Vikramashila in order to make an offering of gold and a request for the help from a pandita skilled in all the inner and outer teachings.

The journey to India, the request, and return, were all performed without great incident, and Vimalamitra received a warm welcome when he arrived at Samye monastery. After dispelling any doubts that may have been present in the King’s mind about his teachings or attainments, he set about giving teachings. He reflected, however, that because Vairochana had been expelled for teaching the resultant vehicle (the Vajrayana teachings), it would be wise for him to take a more gradual approach, and start with the causal vehicle (the Hinayana and Mahayana teachings). Soon Vairochana got wind of these events and, feeling it was time for the resultant vehicle to be taught to the King and ministers again, decided to send his disciple, Yudra Nyingpo, to “do something to satisfy these Tibetan ministers who hate the Dharma.”

Yudra Nyingpo arrived at Samye, stripped naked, and rode a wooden sword into the assembly hall where Vimalamitra was teaching. This caused Vimalamitra to smile – something he had never done since arriving in Tibet. The yogi was later found (flirting with a waitress) and invited to give teachings on the resultant vehicles to the King and ministers in the afternoons, whilst Vimalamitra taught the causal vehicles in the mornings. It soon became clear that these two teachers, in essence, taught the same teachings, and so the ministers, realizing their mistake in banishing Vairochana, sent emissaries to request his return. The King also invited two more masters – Danashila from Singala and Kamalashila from China – to Tibet to give teachings. All of these Buddhist masters, together with a group of learned translators, established a Dharma assembly for a period of thirteen years, during which time they taught and translated the entire Buddhadharma from the languages of India, Uddiyana, Sahor, Kashmir, Singala and China.

At some point during this time, King Trisong Deutsen made a request to Padmasambhava to receive longevity empowerments. This he agreed to, but whenever the King was about to receive the

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46 This last group could refer to the King’s encouragement towards the practices of Tantric laymen, and his support in establishing a community of ngakpas. These tantric practitioners also learned writing, divination and astrology from Master Bodhisattva.

47 Kunsang 1993:110
empowerment, the ministers managed to obstruct and convince him that the empowerment – given in the form of water of longevity – would in fact cause him harm. Padmasambhava announced that this act had reduced the Kings lifespan from a possible one hundred and eight years (if he had taken the empowerment) to fifty-six years. However, ceremonies were performed that increased the Kings lifespan by thirteen years.

When the Dharma assembly had finished its work, the masters – except for Padmasambhava and Master Bodhisattva – returned to their homelands. Master Bodhisattva remained at the Bodhi Temple at Samye, whilst Padmasambhava travelled to the Tregu Cave of Chimphu, together with his consort Lady Tsogyal of Kharchen. Soon after, King Trisong and the adept translators came to Chimphu to receive sadhanas from Padmasambhava. The King also took the opportunity to request that Padmasambhava appoint temple guardians to protect the temples and teachings in the coming degenerate ages.

Padmasambhava gave many predictions regarding the decline of the Buddhadharma in Tibet and had no hesitation in meeting the King’s request. After an unsuccessful attempt to convince the nagas to perform the task, it was decided that a warrior spirit by the name of King Pekar, would be “the right man for the job”. In order to entice him to Tibet, Padmasambhava advised King Trisong to send an army to conquer the spirits homeland in Mongolia, and return with all the valuables, thus provoking King Pekar to travel to Tibet in order to recover the treasures. This act was duly performed, and when King Pekar arrived, Padmasambhava bound him under oath and appointed him as the temple guardian of Samye monastery. Translations of protective fierce mantras were also given to the King, but since he was easily swayed by the ministers and his own doubts, Padmasambhava decided to hide them as terma treasures, to be rediscovered at the appropriate time (this is the first time in the text that Terma treasures are mentioned). Padmasambhava continues to relate the places where he has hidden these termas, and then gives predictions relating to the future lives and enlightenment of King Trisong Dreutsen. The King died, as predicted, at the age of sixty-nine years.

King Trisong’s heir, Prince Mutig Tsenpo, was enthroned as the new king, and governed the land in much the same way as his father, and upholding the religious law. Soon after, Master Bodhisattva “dissolved his incarnate mandala” and, after the body was appropriately taken care of, Padmasambhava announced that after having stayed in Tibet for fifty-one years, it was time for him to leave his position as the King’s guru, and search for suitable places to perform spiritual practices. He

48They did agree, however, to refill all the King’s treasuries.
49In our terms, he died.
travelled to many caves and other sacred places in and around Tibet, concealed countless terma treasures, left teachings, and made aspirations for, and left instruction to, those that would discover these teachings in later times and incarnations.

After returning to Samye for a short time, Padmasambhava turned his attention to the rakshasas living on Lankapuri, the Land of Rakshasas, and saw that they were planning to invade and destroy all of India, Nepal, Tibet, and the surrounding areas. Being confident he could put a stop to all this, he decided to travel to the Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain. However, before Padmasambhava had left, Prince Mutig Tsenpo, the ministers, and many others, went to him in order to beseech him not to go. Padmasambhava replied in turn to each group that was present, and expressed his weariness with Tibet and its people.

To begin, he says that his work has been finished – he has fulfilled King Trisong Deutsen's aspirations and brought the Buddhadharma to the Land of Snow. After this he gives a brief description of the reasons behind his weariness, with criticisms aimed first to the King and ministers, then to the Tibetan monks, the Tibetan teachers, the Tibetan meditators, the Tibetan tantrikas, the Tibetan yogis, the Tibetan chieftains, the Tibetan benefactors, and finally, to the Tibetan women. Padmasambhava's descriptions of their weakness, immorality, deceptiveness, bragging etc. is quite scathing, and the people of Tibet respond with shame and remorse, and even despair. Even so, Padmasambhava's decision to return to India is final. He does, however, offer each group lengthy advice on how they should behave in daily affairs, warnings around their misdeeds, and how they should dedicate themselves to practice of the Buddhadharma. He concludes with a general testament to all the Tibetan people of future generations.

It is known that the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is to be the deity that watches over Tibet, so Prince Mutig therefore requests "the instruction of the Great Compassionate One that closes the doors of rebirth among the six classes of beings and leads us along the path to perfect buddhahood." Padmasambhava replies first with a story of how humans came to inhabit Tibet.

When the Buddha Shakyamuni lived and taught, Tibet was inhabited only by animals. However, just before his parinirvana, he sent a prophecy to Avalokiteshvara, who in turn sent an emanation of his

In this context they are regarded as cannibal savages.
The Pure-Land of Padmasambhava.
Tantric practitioners.
The Great Compassionate One is another title of Avalokiteshvara.
The six classes of beings are gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings.
Kunsang 1993:188
mind – a monkey bodhisattva – to Tibet. At the same time, Tara Goddess sent an emanation of herself as a rock demoness. These two beings became the father and mother of the Tibetan people and it is from them that the people inherited certain characteristics – restlessness and gullibility from the monkey, and lack of compassion, fondness for misdeeds, and dislike of the Dharma from the rock demoness. Even so, it was fortunate for the Tibetan people that their parents were emanations of great bodhisattvas; otherwise trying to teach them would be hopeless.

This is an interesting example of a “myth within a myth,” which corresponds with many of the characteristics I named in the Material section of the present work, and presents us with an illustration of these texts functioning as vehicles for teachings. This section of the narrative puts certain negative qualities into a potentially skillful context: by being open and honest about what hard-headed people the Tibetans were at the time, they could admit and clearly see their faults, but at the same time they are given the hope (and status) of their being the offspring of emanations of Avelokiteshvara and Tara.

Padmasambhava then continues to give – as requested – teachings on Avalokiteshvara, which focuses on an explanation of the bodhisattvas' six-syllable mantra, OM MANI PADME HUM which, he states, is the quintessence of the mind of Avalokiteshvara. After then describing the inherent suffering of each of the six realms, he relates how reciting this mantra can help those beings therein and how, if repeated often enough and with complete faith and dedication, it can even liberate all beings from samsara.56

After singing a song in which he again reaffirms his intentions, and lists his accomplishments and attainments, Padmasambhava then gives more detailed instruction on how the people of Tibet – whom he has accepted as his attendants – should live and practice, if they are to live in happiness and peace. With this, Padmasambhava mounted a ray of sunlight, and instantly flew away to the southwestern continent of Chamara, with the intention of subduing the rakshasas. The people of Tibet were distraught, but Prince Mutig vowed to uphold both the civil and religious law, and told the people to practice whatever teaching they felt inclined to follow.

56The cycle of rebirth and suffering.
3.2 The Immaculate White Lotus: The Life of the Master from Oddiyana by Dorjé Tso

According to Zangpo, this relatively short text is a good example of a “standard” account of Padmasambhava's life-story, as found in many Termas. It was written by a close disciple of Padmasambhava – Dorjé Tso – and remained hidden until 1927, when it was revealed by Sera Khandro (1899-?), who is said to have been a reincarnation of the dakini Yeshé Tsogyal.

This relatively modern text (depending on one’s perspective), made up of ten short chapters is, in contrast to the Sanglingma, presented in the form of verse. It gives a very condensed form of Padmasambhava's miraculous birth, his religious education, his journey to Tibet, his activities there, and his leaving. This last event is actually given more space in this text than any other event or aspect, and seems to create an intention within the text of trying to accept the Master's leaving and provide followers with supplications with which to address him. Many of the details of Padmasambhava's life and works recounted in this text are the same as described in the Sanglingma. There are, however, a few differences which are worth exploring.

The text begins by describing Padmasambhava as an emanation from the hearts of both Buddha Infinate Light and Buddha Sakyamuni, and by giving him the title of “second Buddha”. This is followed by a description of the celebrations at the place of Padmasambhava's appearance by various gods, dakinis and nagas who sang, danced and scattered auspicious flowers.

After the familiar sequence of being brought to King Indrabodhi's palace and given the rule of the kingdom, the White Lotus text states that:

"You (Padmasambhava) repeatedly witnessed birth, ageing, sickness and death
And thus gradually abdicated your rule and left for India..."

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57 According to the entry in Rigpa Shedra Wiki: Shelkar Dorje Tso (Wyl. shel dkar rdo rje mtsho), aka Shiwa Dorje Tso (zhi ba rdo rje mtsho), was one of Guru Rinpoche's consorts. According to Tulku Thondup, she crossed the Tsangpo river standing on a bamboo walking stick. She is counted among the previous incarnations of Sera Khandro and Khandro Tsering Chödrön. In Pema Lingpa's Lama Jewel Ocean (Wyl. bla ma nor bu rgya mtsho) collection there is an account of Namköl Nyingpo meeting Dorje Tso as a result of a prophecy, taking her from her homeland in Shang Tanak, introducing her to the practice of Yangdak Heruka and offering her to Guru Rinpoche as a consort before she eventually attains realization through the practice of Yangdak and is able to fly through the sky.


58 Buddha Amitabha.

59 Referring to his status in Tibetan Buddhism as being second only to Buddha Sakyamuni himself.

60 Zangpo 2002:134
This statement makes reference to the four kinds of suffering inherent in existence that is a fundamental teaching within all schools of Buddhism (but especially popular within the Theravadan tradition, often referred to as the Hinayana or the Lesser Way by the Mahayana schools). In doing so, and by bringing attention to Padmasambhava’s abandoning of his royal status, the author seems to be drawing a direct parallel between the life-story of Padmasambhava, and that of Buddha Sakyamuni.

In the traditional account of Buddha Sakyamuni’s life, he was born as the son of the Sakya king Suddhodana. His mother, Queen Maya, had previously had a dream in which a white elephant entered her womb through her side, thus signaling the conception of Prince Siddhartha – the future Buddha. She later gave birth in Lumbini Park, Kapilavatthu, delivering Siddhartha again through her right side. Even though not as a miraculous beginning as Padmasambhava’s lotus-flower birth, the “virgin birth” implication here is quite clear.

Just like King Indrabodhi in the Sanglingma, King Suddhodana wants Siddhartha to grow to be his successor, and therefore keeps him confined to the luxury and unlimited pleasures of palace life. The Prince was given the appropriate education, and married the beautiful Princess Yasodhara at the age of sixteen, with whom he later had a son. He himself describes this period of his life in this way:

“I was delicate, excessively delicate. In my father’s dwelling three lotus-ponds were made purposely for me. Blue lotuses bloomed in one, red in another, and white in another. I used no sandal-wood that was not of Kāsi. My turban, tunic, dress and cloak, were all from Kāsi. Night and day a white parasol was held over me so that I might not be touched by heat or cold, dust, leaves or dew.

There were three palaces built for me – one for the cold season, one for the hot season, and one for the rainy season. During the four rainy months, I lived in the palace for the rainy season without ever coming down from it, entertained all the while by female musicians.”

Even though the Prince was often bothered by doubts about this luxurious lifestyle, the situation continued until the Prince met with four sights or signs (or “heavenly messengers,” as they are sometimes referred to): a decrepit old man, a sick, diseased man, a dead body, and a mendicant. The first three reflected the true nature of existence, whilst the fourth gave insight in how to go about

61 The following details on Shakyamuni Buddha’s birth and life are taken from *The Buddha and His Teachings* by Venerable Narada Mahathera (1998)
62 Quote taken from Narada 1998:5
63 A spiritual seeker who lives on alms.
leaving the cycle of birth, ageing, sickness, death and suffering. This combination of events gave Siddhartha the motivation and resolve he needed to leave the pointless life of indulgence in the palace, and start his quest for deeper insight and liberation.

The manner in which Siddhartha and Padmasambhava choose to take leave of their lives in the palace also gives an indication of the different styles of how their religious careers would develop – Siddhartha choosing to leave quietly in the night, with the absolute minimum of fuss, whilst Padmasambhava created the circumstances for his banishment by killing family-members of a powerful minister. The next step for them both was to train with various masters in India.

By repeating the connection between Sakyamuni Buddha and Padmasambhava, one can assume that the author is giving justification to Padmasambhava's extremely high status within Tibetan Buddhism, but also wants to impart greater credibility upon the Tibetan form of Buddhism: even if they did not receive the teachings direct from Sakyamuni Buddha himself, they got the next best thing… The two line quote above also transmits an important aspect of the Buddhist teaching: namely, the dissatisfaction and suffering inherent within samsaric existence.

Chapter 2 begins by stating that, after arriving in India, Padmasambhava met Ananda, who was Buddha Sakyamuni's personal attendant during his lifetime, and whom gave Padmasambhava ordination as a bhikshu or monk. Rangdröl gives two quotes that relate to Padmasambhava being born twelve years after the parinirvana of Buddha Sakyamuni.$^{64}$ He goes on to say that Padmasambhava's birth was foretold by Buddha Sakyamuni, and that this prediction is repeated in the literature of many different Buddhist schools – it is not simply a creation of the Nyingma tradition.$^{65}$ This part of the story, I feel, again strengthens the link between Sakyamuni Buddha and Padmasambhava, and also gives a clue as to how old Padmasambhava is thought to be, within certain traditions.

What follows after this is, for the most part, just a highly condensed version of the life-story that differs little (except, obviously, in length and detail) from the Sanglingma. Dorjé Tso describes Padmasambhava's studies with various masters in India, his being invited to Tibet and his activities therein (building Samye monastery, taming demons etc), facilitating the spread of Buddhadharma, his

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$^{64}$The final entry into nirvana.
$^{65}$Kunsang 1993:12
$^{66}$Kunsang 1993:8
eventual decision to leave Tibet (to travel to the land of cannibal demons, in order to tame and subdue them) and the hiding of Terma treasures.

In chapter nine we come to what appears to be one of the central intentions behind the creation of this text – that is, the communication and teaching of prayers and supplications to Padmasambhava. After Yeshé Tsogyal expresses her dismay at his leaving, and poses the question of to whom she should turn for guidance, instruction and support, Padmasambhava answers that he will never be separated from her, and that she should meditate on him at the crown of her head or in her heart.

For the support of those that have never met him, he has left texts and life-stories that should be read, followed and made objects of veneration. Yeshé Tsogyal, the King, and all the others present then make a request to Padmasambhava that he give them a prayer of aspiration that they can recite when thinking of him. By doing so, he promises that his followers will be reborn in his Pure-Land. After giving a final warning against false teachers and teachings, Padmasambhava left Tibet.

3.3 The Indian Version of the Life of Guru Rinpoché by Taranata

Terma or treasure texts provide a (almost) unanimous account of Padmasambhava's appearance from a lotus-flower. However, other sources (for example, Bön sources and from early Tibetan and Indian chronicles) of these life-stories give different accounts of, for example, a birth from human parents. Rangdröl mentions that for “people who could not be converted by someone miraculously born, Padmasambhava showed himself as taking birth through a womb”. One of these alternative accounts is to be found in this text by Taranata.

Taranata's text, which was written in 1610 when the author was thirty-six years old, is probably the first to attempt to write an account of Padmasambhava's life and activities from an accurate historical perspective. The production of this work can be seen as a reaction of Taranata to the numerous life-stories with a more fanciful flavor that he is clearly infuriated by. This attitude of disdain is displayed

67 Zangpo 2002:21
68 Kunsang 1993:9
in the “Concluding Verses and Colophon” where he states:

*Some small-minded persons, equipped only with the faith of fools, have written many fabricated histories to inspire others.*

*Most people are so foolish that such fraudulent and unsound words and meanings might in fact increase their faith.*

*But when wise readers see or hear of these books, they are startled and amused and, for this reason,*

*Develop doubts in all pure teachings and individuals. Such books are the work of demons: what could be more harmful?*

Taranata states his own sources as being accomplished, Indian masters and the disciples of teachers such as Master Shanti-gupta, together with eyewitness accounts recorded in the early Tibetan Chronicles, and he expresses no doubts about the reliability of the information he has been able to gather.

Taranata's text begins with his giving the names of the kings that ruled in both Magadha and Oddiyana around the time of Padmasambhava's birth. Zangpo quotes the Tibetan scholar Doung-kar Lo-zong Trinlé as placing King Devapala of Magadha's reign to around 730-777 which helps set at least an approximate date for Padmasambhava's birth. Under this time there lived a devout Buddhist practitioner in Oddiyana, who was also a member of the aristocracy. To him was born a son, whose body bore many auspicious marks and signs.

According to the traditions of that time and place, Brahmins were called to examine these marks and give predictions about the boy's future. These Brahmins gave many different predictions – both positive and negative – but they all agreed that whichever direction the boy's life took, he would excel in that area. However, an unnamed yogi who appeared amongst them stated without hesitation that the boy would become a master of Secret Mantra and that the Buddha Boundless Light would bless him – therefore he should be named Padma Avabhasi (or Padmavabhasi for short).

The child quickly became learned in many subjects including grammar, logic, medicine and art. He also began his Buddhist training and received empowerment and instruction from many teachers,

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69 Zangpo 2002:181
70 A collection of narratives and songs thought to have been written around the eleventh century CE.
71 Buddha Amitabha
72 Means approximately ”shining lotus”
before moving into the forest in order to perform long meditation retreats. These meditations were accompanied by various signs and happenings (not all good!) and it is stated that he was supported under this time by dakinis and minor spirits.

After a time, Padmasambhava was expected to take over from his father as Brahmin advisor to King Akchalila, and, wishing that the kingdom be converted to the Sacred Teachings, Padmasambhava encouraged the King to undertake major virtuous projects. One of these projects was to build a temple in the forest, with a residence for the Spiritual Community of monks (or sangha).

Soon, several of the government officials and ministers began to plot against Padmasambhava (it is interesting to note that it was not only Tibetan ministers that are portrayed as having a serious grudge against Padmasambhava!). They went to the King and claimed that the monastery he had built was being used by Padmasambhava to train an army of skilled warrior-monks that planned to overthrow the monarchy and take power. Unfortunately, the King was gullible enough to believe the ministers, and sent his army to banish Padmasambhava and the monks (the laws of the kingdom meant that he was unable to execute them). The sangha left quietly enough, but the ministers were fearful that Padmasambhava would return later and cause trouble for them, so they sent a gang of murderers after him, with orders to kill him. This they attempted, but whatever means of murdering Padmasambhava they tried, he was left completely unharmed. In the end, they tried to bury him alive, but he emerged spontaneously from a cave far from where he had been buried. Within a week, all the officials, ministers and murderers who had tried to harm Padmasambhava were either killed when their house burned down or committed suicide, and King Akchalila died after being bitten by a poisonous snake (Taranata makes no conclusions as to whether these deaths occurred as a result of the actions or intentions of Padmasambhava himself – rather, it appears that they simply reaped the harvest of their negative karma).

For a time afterwards Padmasambhava (unsurprisingly) avoided villages and towns, preferring to dedicate himself to meditation practice whilst living in charnel grounds. He was able to communicate directly with dakinis and powerful spirits, with whom he travelled to the eight major charnel grounds in order to study and train with the great divine spiritual masters who have lived there since time immemorial. In a dream, Buddha Amitabha spoke to him and said that in order to realize full accomplishment in the Great Seal (or mahamudra) he should go and train with Master Buddha Jnana, who was living in Magadha.

After arriving in the kingdom of Magadha, Padmasambhava took full renunciate vows – with Master
Buddha Jnana as preceptor – and lived as a monk in Spout of Truth Monastery. From this master Padmasambhava received teachings and empowerments for all the tantras. When these attainments and insights had become clear and stable, the master sent Padmasambhava to meditate at a spot near the city of Pandruva, in the land of Bangala. This he did, and after finding a suitable mudra he practiced for six months, until he attained full accomplishment of mahamudra.

After these attainments, his attention turned towards helping other sentient beings. For the next few years he travelled in the area of northern India and Nepal, using his many skills (he gave spiritual teachings where appropriate, but also used alchemy and medicinal elixir) in order to bring benefit to as many as possible. During this time, it became known to Padmasambhava that three situations had occurred in different parts of the country, that were detrimental to the Buddhist teaching and caused harm to Buddhist practitioners: at Trimala, in southern India, a linga of Vishnu had arisen, and here were made sacrificial blood-offerings and wrathful curses that harmed Buddhists; in Bengal, an evil naga gave riches to non-Buddhists, causing their own religious traditions to prosper whilst causing harm to the Buddhist institutions in the region; and in Rajgir, Magadha, many non-Buddhist deities and spirits living in a crystal boulder bestowed psychic powers to individuals (clairvoyance and divination) without them having had appropriate training in spiritual practices.

In order to subdue these negative influences, Padmasambhava made a meditation hut at Bodhgaya and meditated on Héruka's awareness mantra, which produced many signs – amongst them the appearance of the three daggers of stability. With the first of these, Padmasambhava travelled instantly to Trimala and destroyed the linga of Vishnu; with the second, his consort known as “Discrete” destroyed the evil naga and all the non-Buddhist temples that had been built in the region; and with the third dagger, a yogi called Ratnashila (who had been an attendant to Padmasambhava) shattered and destroyed the crystal boulder at Rajgir.

Taranata here gives a description of an incident in Kachha (whose king was a devout Buddhist), which had been invaded by the armies of a Turkish king. Many Buddhist temples were faced with destruction, so while this army was crossing the Nili River, Padmasambhava caused seven large ships, five hundred small boats, and all the swimmers to sink and drown, thus killing the Turkish force. Interestingly, even though this is probably the most extreme example of Padmasambhava’s use of magical powers (where the killing of humans is involved, at least), Taranata makes very little of this event. It appears that even within Buddhism one can find an acceptance of killing, if it is in the cause of defending one’s religion.

73 A phallic symbol used as an object of worship in the Hindu tradition.
According to Taranata, all of Padmasambhava's beneficial activities in India, Nepal and Damido\(^{74}\) whilst being obviously impressive, were not nearly as great as the works he performed in, and on the behalf of, the Land of Snow, Tibet. He also states that, at this point in the narrative of Padmasambhava's life-story, there is little more to be found in the Indian sources. He describes how, even if many of the teachings and Terma treasures contain details of Padmasambhava's activities, there is too much variation in certain parts – for example, the circumstances of his birth and the length of his stay in Tibet – to make them useful in a purely historical study. When describing the latter point – the length of Padmasambhava's stay – he describes how some "disciples with pure vision" have the view that he is still here amongst us, simultaneously manifesting his form in all worlds. To this Taranata states:

"However, such a perspective is inappropriate in such contexts as linear histories: here we must confine ourselves to recording what could be experienced in the common perception of ordinary human beings who lived at a specific point in time."\(^{75}\)

This passage provides a clear statement of his intentions, and the method he has used to realize the goal. Taranata continues with an account of the sources he now turns to for information and describes a little of why he feels these texts are reliable and trustworthy.

The narrative continues with King Trisong's aspiration to spread Buddhadharma in Tibet and his subsequent invitation to Master Bodhisattva\(^{76}\) to come to Tibet and give teachings. This he did, but after just a few months, demons and spirits – who were infuriated by the practice of Buddhism – made such problems and strife that the King felt forced to politely ask Master Bodhisattva to leave for Nepal. This, too, he agreed to, but stated that the only person who could bring an end to these calamities and tame the demons and spirits was Padmasambhava. The King should therefore invite this Master to Tibet.

As it turned out, when the King sent a messenger with the invitation to Padmasambhava, he, Master Bodhisattva and a small group of Nepalese temple-builders and sculptors were already making their

\(^{74}\)Zangpo states that he has been unable to determine the location of Damido, which is described by Taranata as having a long tradition of Tantric Buddhism. Taranata states that it is “a small island in the middle of the sea, it can be reached by boat straight west, from south India.” This description would place Damido in the area of the Lakshadweep Islands or the Maldives.

\(^{75}\)Zangpo 2002:165

\(^{76}\)Taranata calls him Acharya Bodhisattva in his text, and states other names as being Shantiraksheeta and Master Dharmashantighosha.
way to the Tibetan border. Whilst Master Bodhisattva took the quickest route to the Kings palace, Padmasambhava and the builders took their time, moving from village to village, and subduing and demanding allegiance from demons and spirits along the way.\textsuperscript{77}

When Padmasambhava finally arrives at the King's palace, there arises a scene similar to the one recounted in the Sanglingma, but with a more direct and simple resolution. Whilst King Trisong and the ministers expect Padmasambhava to bow and pay homage to the King, Padmasambhava expresses the two men's actual status by stating that the King could not bear his homage. To show this, Padmasambhava bows toward a large boulder, which immediately splits open, and then does the same toward the King's robe which duly bursts into flames (luckily he is not wearing it at the time!). At this, the King forgets his pride and bows before Padmasambhava.

There then follows, in Taranata's narrative, many descriptions of Padmasambhava's actions. These events seem to have three main goals: to subdue and tame unruly demons and spirits who obstruct the Buddhist teachings; to spread the Buddhadharma in a way the Tibet people can accept and relate to; and to inspire confidence in his own abilities as a teacher.

For example, Padmasambhava addressed statues of deities in a temple, which later that evening came to life; butter-lamps and incense lit themselves; music played by itself and gongs sounded; and a small bunch of grapes, even though they were eaten by everyone in a large crowd, never diminished. This display had the desired effect on the people.

Padmasambhava's work of taming demon spirits continued. He stated to the King that he had placed under oath all the demons, spirits and nagas twice, but planned to do the same a third time, in order to ensure all these beings would be permanently bound to their promises. This intention, however, was never fulfilled, with negative consequences for Tibet and its people. In this matter, as in many others, as we have seen, it is said that it was the ministers who obstructed this work.

Another example of their obstructive attitude that is related by Taranata is when Padmasambhava planned to perform a burned-offering ceremony for the benefit of the land and its people. Master Bodhisattva suggested to the King that he should wash his hair in with water from a spring on the north face of Mount Meru,\textsuperscript{78} which would give the King himself long-life and protect the future of his family line. The water was fetched in a golden vase by Padmasambhava (using his magical powers)

\textsuperscript{77}This version of events is taken from \textit{The Testament of Ba}, which Taranata regards as being most reliable.

\textsuperscript{78}Mount Meru is an enormous mythical mountain that is regarded as being the centre of the universe.
and then presented to the King. The ministers, however, after inspecting the contents of the vase, convinced the King that it could be the "water of madness" from Mön, and so it was immediately poured away.

The ministers were also infuriated by Padmasambhava’s habit of using his magical powers to transport beautiful Tibetan woman great distances in order to assist in ceremonies and act as his consorts.\textsuperscript{79} To this the ministers said (in secret) “Is this tantric practitioner going to take Tibet's beautiful women and all its wealth to India?” These secret meetings led inevitably to plots to kill Padmasambhava who, in response, used his magical powers to cause blood to pour out of the body of one of the main antagonists – Dawé Dong-zik – thus killing him. According to Taranata, this act had the effect of restraining the ministers so that, in the future, they only plotted to achieve Padmasambhava’s exit from Tibet, rather than trying to murder him.

One of Padmasambhava’s final missions in Tibet – to bring benefit to the land and its people through creating rivers and new agricultural land, and to assist the King in bringing the rulers of China, Mongolia, and other surrounding lands, under the control of Tibet – was again obstructed by the ministers, who manipulated the gullible King Trisong into abandoning these plans, and requesting that Padmasambhava and Master Bodhisattva leave the country and return to India.

Padmasambhava himself summarizes this situation with these words to the King:

"Your good intentions have brought catastrophe;
Your long-term kindness has become the cause of hatred.
The sovereign's ship is steered by the ministers,
The very evil, minister-demons of Tibet.

Sentient beings' evil deeds
Can impede even the Buddha's power.\textsuperscript{80}

Taranata states that, after giving a few final teachings, and reiterating the fact that he was unable to complete the entire transmission of instructions, perform rituals to increase the power of the King’s family line, and complete the third binding of demons and nagas under oath (all of which would

\textsuperscript{79}Taranata gives the examples of lady Lhamo Tsen and lady Tso-gyal (who later wrote down the Sanglingma) being fetched as offering consorts, and of Chok-ro-za Bu-choung-men and Chok-ro-za Lha-bu-men who were brought to assist with ground-pacification rituals for King Trisong's temple. Zangpo 2002:171-172

\textsuperscript{80}Zangpo 2002:174
become the source of problems in the future), Padmasambhava concealed many teachings and mantras (Terma treasures) in various places all over Tibet, for the future welfare of the people. He then gave personal counsel to each of his disciples, and then departed for India.

One gets the feeling that this incomplete body of teachings, transmissions and ceremonies (which is repeated in other biographies) creates something of a “loophole” when relating to the mixed fortunes of practitioners, and even for the land of Tibet itself: whenever something doesn’t go to plan, or when misfortune arises, it can be blamed on Padmasambhava’s unfinished work and the obstruction of the evil ministers.

The ministers, however, were still not satisfied – fearing Padmasambhava would send evil spells to Tibet after he had left, they decided to send eighteen warriors to kill him. When the warriors had caught up with Padmasambhava, and were about to strike him, he made a gesture which made them immobile and unable to speak. The group then continued to the border, where Padmasambhava gave the escorts a jar filled with mustard seeds, which they were to sprinkle on the warriors when they passed by on the return journey, which would remove the spell.

At this point Taranata takes up a discussion on the length of time Padmasambhava is supposed to have spent in Tibet. Eighteen months in total seems to be the consensus, but Taranata comments that even if it really was such a short period of time, it would still be possible for Padmasambhava to achieve all that he did using his powers and his ability to produce many manifestations of himself. This ability appears to be regarded as being quite common for accomplished spiritual masters at this time, and Taranata lists a few others whom he regards as having had this power (Indian masters such as Virupa, Luyipa and Jalandharipa) in order to prove his point.

Taranata continues his narrative with a concise description of Padmasambhava's activities on the island of Damido, and finishes with a recapitulation of the authority and trustworthiness of his sources – both the texts he has made use of, but also the respected teachers he has learned these histories from.
4. Analysis

After reading the above accounts, it is not so hard to understand why earlier western interpreters of Padmasambhava's life-stories were sometimes shocked by what they read of his actions. From the western imperialist mentality, much of his behavior seems immoral, unethical and, quite often, even criminal. However, the events and actions described, when interpreted (and interpretation is certainly needed here) through the eyes of its intended audience, communicates a view of reality which is both coherent and beneficial.

It is essential, in the context of the present work, to give an example of how the Tibetans themselves look upon this period of their history, and their perceptions of the main characters involved. This telling example comes from the book The Words of My Perfect Teacher by Patrul Rinpoche. In this passage, two monks are told by the bodhisattva Manjusri to go visit the King of Tibet (Song-tsen Gampo), for the king is the incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. When the two arrive in Lhasa:

"... they could see a large number of people had been executed or imprisoned. They asked what was going on.
"Those are punishments ordered by the King," they were told.
"This king is most certainly not Avalokitesvara," they said to themselves, and fearing that they might well be punished too, they decided to run away.
The King knew that they were leaving and sent a messenger after them summoning them to his presence.
"Do not be afraid," he told them. "Tibet is a wild land, hard to subjugate. For that reason I have had to produce the illusion of prisoners being executed, dismembered, and so on. But in reality, I have not harmed a single hair on anyone's head."
That King was the ruler of all Tibet, the Land of Snows, and brought kings in all four directions under his power. He vanquished invading armies and kept peace along the frontiers. Although he was obliged to conquer armies and defend his subjects on such a vast scale, he managed to do so without harming so much as a hair on a single being's head."\(^{81}\)

In fact, three of the king's of Tibet, whose reigns took place between the seventh and ninth centuries,

\(^{81}\)Patrul 1998:200-201
have been given the status of bodhisattva: as we have already seen above, King Song-tsen Gampo is regarded as an emanation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion; King Trisong Deutsen is regarded as being an emanation of Munjushri, the bodhisattva of transcendent knowledge; and Tri Ralpachen (a grandson of Trisong Deutsen) is seen as an emanation of Vajrapani, the bodhisattva of power.

The above passage makes it clear that the Tibetans see this period of their history as being extremely important, but that certain details have had to be adapted to fit better with the Buddhist belief-system that permeates the culture.

The biographies of Padmasambhava that we have investigated reflect a time of greatness of the Tibetan people, when it was them that had power and influence; and this clearly must have great importance in maintaining a sense of national identity and pride in this present era of assimilation, oppression and exile.

I feel this point of view is supported by Terrones’ findings. In his work he states that the underlying aims of his study relate to the background and practices of the Terma tradition and its role within contemporary Tibetan life, and that to achieve these goals, it was essential to also explore the influence of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and how this event affected the religious life of the country.

According to Terrone, much of the religious repression conducted by the Chinese authorities has been aimed at breaking the power and influence of the large monastic institutions – with great success, it seems – whilst the religious longings of the Tibetan people have remained surprisingly strong. This has opened the door for smaller, loosely connected communities to form around charismatic leaders – quite often non-celibate Tantric professionals from the rNying ma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. These communities often lack the formality, structure, organization and resources of large-scale monasteries and have been more successful at “keeping under the radar” of the Chinese authorities.

The increased freedoms allowed religious activities and groups, began after the death of Mao Tsetung in 1976, when his successor, Den Xao-ping, introduced measures for the economic development of the PRC which, in turn, included a relaxing of certain measures against religion and "superstitious beliefs". This response to the disasters of the previous decade of the Cultural Revolution meant the Tibetan people could again openly practice their belief and traditions but, according to the
information Terrone relates in his text, the authorities still regarded the monastic institutions with
great suspicion and continued to exercise great control over and place enormous restrictions upon the
activities of the monasteries. These restrictions of the monasteries, together with a strong revival of
religious beliefs and practices, have enabled these alternative forms of religious and community life
to flourish.

This historical investigation leads Terrone to the conclusion that, just as the development of the Terma
tradition was a response to the conditions and pressures present in eleventh-century Tibet (when the
first traces of the tradition began to appear), so is the present revival of the tradition a clear response
to the current pressures of life in modern Tibet: that is to say that it provides a link between the
present and the glorified imperial history of Tibet, which in turn helps impart an important sense of
national pride, essential for Tibetan identity. With this in mind, and remembering Padmasambhava’s
central role within the Terma tradition, it is unsurprising that he is given such pride of place within
Tibetan culture and tradition.

Another of the tactics used for raising the status of the Tibetan form of Buddhism is by creating a
direct link between Sakyamuni Buddha and Padmasambhava. This is performed by drawing parallels
between their life-stories, by the statements/predictions made about Padmasambhava by Sakyamuni
Buddha, and even by the account of Padmasambhava's training with Sakyamuni’s famous attendant,
Ananda.

After reading these texts, one can wonder if another function of this approach is to ease a sense of
inferiority when comparing themselves with their Indian neighbors (and possibly later with their
Chinese “liberators”). Even though their admiration and respect for the religious traditions of India is
clear, this seems to rest uneasy with the sense of Tibetan national pride when thinking of the country’s
military dominance at the time. Whilst admitting their gratitude for the gifts they received, there still
appears to exist a need to prove the value of their own forms of the Buddha’s teachings – and the
“adoption” of Padmasambhava seems an important part in this process.

Whilst it must be said that much of the information in the Terma texts doesn’t appear to be directly
contradictory, the differences that do exist seem to have as a function the highlighting of different
aspects of Padmasambhava’s life and teachings. This, one can assume, is intended to make the
.teachings contained within the texts acceptable to a wider range of readers.
It is important to remember the point that Padmasambhava's – and all the other Buddhas, bodhisattvas and great master – main intention is to lead beings to enlightenment by whatever means available. In the Hinayana this guidance and instruction conforms much more to Western/Christian ideas of how a spiritual life should be lead: through generosity; by acting with moral integrity; at times, through living a life that is largely separated from the “worldly” aspects of daily living; through prayer and meditation; through abstinence from alcohol and drugs; and through acts of kindness that we all can recognize.

In the tantric teachings, however, these seemingly obvious modes of “spiritual” behavior are seen as very limiting – the wealth of skillful means available to the tantric master is an essential tool in his or her work of guiding beings to enlightenment. In contrast to many of the more “saintly” spiritual masters we are used to hearing of, who's lives seem to conform to our preconceived ideas of which qualities a religious or spiritual individual should manifest, Padmasambhava's biographies portray a far more complicated being, whose actions are guided by a radically different set of principles. To read of Padmasambhava's life and actions challenges many of these notions of what “enlightenment” and “saintliness” means.

I am reminded of a comment made by Ajahn Sumedho, the former abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, who, when speaking to the monastic community living there, that most of them weren't actually interested in awakening – it was the deva or heavenly realms of existence they were aiming at. I think he was pointing at our wish to use spiritual practice to make our lives more comfortable, to try to control ourselves and the world around us in a way that better suits our wish for security, happiness and ease. In Padmasambhava's life-stories, however, we see a picture of enlightened action that cannot be placed within our cozy fantasies – this is reality at a level that goes a step (or many steps!) further.

The Buddhist world-view that is presented to the individual practitioner is adapted to suit that particular individual's temperament and level of attainment. As one progresses and develops – as in any training or art – one begins to see things differently. This, in part, is why it can be hard to look at a whole tradition of spiritual teachings like, for example, the tantric school, and recognize a clear, consistent system of “facts.” The most central and important aim of these teachings, as has already been stated, is to lead the individual to awakening, to enlightenment – NOT to provide lessons in history.
One example of the seemingly obvious misses, contradictions and inconsistencies in the information given is of the episode when King Trisong Dreutsen sends two monks to India to record the Great Perfection teachings from Shri Singha, when it it stated earlier in the text that Padmasambhava “journeyed to the great master Shri Singha, with whom he studied all the teachings on the sacred Great Perfection”. Why would the King then need to go to the trouble of sending translators to India to record teachings that Padmasambhava was already familiar with, and even practiced to perfection?

One possible answer is that Padmasambhava understood the need for the teachings to have been brought to Tibet by Tibetans, in order for them to gain credibility and be more easily accepted by the Tibetan people. It is important to remember the fact that Padmasambhava was Indian, and therefore regarded as a foreigner (this point is echoed in Zangpo’s introduction). This simple fact (of Padmasambhava’s foreign background) – and the likely prejudice that resulted – can explain at least a part of the resistance Padmasambhava faced in certain groups of the Tibetan society, most notably the government officials and ministers.

This recurring theme in the traditional accounts of Padmasambhava’s life-story – the opposition to Padmasambhava and his activities, from government officials and ministers in the areas where he has gained the support of the ruling monarch – implies a certain weakness in the character of the kings of Tibet, who appear to act as mere “figureheads” for the society rather than rulers.

This particular detail is curious, considering (as I have already noted) the status and respect these kings have been given for over a millennium. Padmasambhava’s comment to King Trisong in Taranata’s text (“Sentient beings’ evil deeds can impede even the Buddha’s power”) gives a possible explanation as to why this has remained so: that is, if even a Buddha’s will can be thwarted by negative forces, it’s not so surprising that a mere king (even one of King Trisongs’ status) cannot always get the wished-for result. One can possibly even add that stories in which the heroes suffer no setbacks generally don’t remain popular for very long, if at all.

It should also be noted that resistance to Padmasambhava and the spread of Buddhism didn’t come only from Tibetan ministers. In Taranata’s text we read that the ministers of the kingdom of Oddiyana – Padmasambhava’s homeland – also made plots against him. From this one can surmise that the resentment from the Tibetan ministers was based on something more than xenophobia, and that political in-fighting around this time was rife.

82 Kunsang 1993:44
83 Zangpo 2002:22
From the information presented I feel it is quite obvious that a central emphasis within these texts – especially when looking at the Terma texts – is to provide a wide range of teachings and reflections, so that any individual can find something relevant to his or her temperament and level of understanding. This strikes me as being in strong contrast to those traditions that seem to try to force followers into a specific mould of belief, or a particular way of being. Here, the teachings are adapted to suit the individual follower, rather than expecting the individual to adapt to a rigid teaching. The aim is not to define a single “correct view” but to help the practitioner bring some coherence to his/her practice of Buddhism – in this sense, one can say that a correct view is one that is consistent with the individual’s spiritual path.  

One of the tools that are put to use in order to inspire is the manner of Padmasambhava’s birth – his spontaneous appearance, as a boy of approximately eight years of age, in a large lotus-flower, and the more “natural” birth to human parents. How are we to interpret this lotus-birth which, from the perspective of a Western reader, obviously cannot be taken literally?  

Even if we assume Padmasambhava didn’t create this myth around himself, he accepted the name and title and certainly made use of it – principally, it seems, as a means of inspiring and “getting people’s attention.” Zangpo makes the point that, given the circumstances of Padmasambhava’s visit, and the social climate in Tibet at the time, his reputation as being a Lotus-born can be seen as an example of “skillful means” - that is, it imparted him with a certain authority that other teachers had lacked, which possibly gave him a little more time to establish the Buddhadharma in the land, before being politely asked to leave.  

Zangpo continues to say that it is important to remember that, according to tradition, Padmasambhava was born a fully enlightened being – he was not (as is the case with most spiritual masters) an individual who followed a path to enlightenment. His birth in a lotus-flower then becomes a symbol of a pure and full awareness that appeared at the moment of his birth. We unenlightened beings normally identify strongly with our gender, nationality, with our bodies and with our social group or class. However, this aspect of the biographies suggests that Padmasambhava identified totally with the state of unborn, pure, timeless and formless awareness, and the physical forms he took were regarded as nothing more than a “suit of clothes,” so to speak. As Zangpo puts it, “whatever physical, linguistic, or conceptual worlds he adopted, he wore as ephemeral ornaments on the infinite expanse of timeless awareness.”

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84 Zangpo 2002:28
85 Zangpo 2002:22
5. Summary

As I stated at the beginning of this work, my aims have been to describe a small selection of biographical texts, investigate any variations that may exist in the information presented, and examine the importance these texts have for Tibetan Buddhists.

From this investigation we have seen various examples of his birth, background, training, the methods of instruction he made use of, the acts he performed in the Himalayan countries he visited, and the impact this figure has had on the people of Tibet. It also becomes clear that many aspects of these life-stories have a function that is quite separate from the aim of presenting a historically-correct account of Padmasambhava's life and works.

These life stories not only give a rich and detailed picture of how Padmasambhava is perceived and understood within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but also form a link between the present and a historical period of glory and power.

From the information presented we get a clear picture of why Padmasambhava, and the period of Tibetan history in which his story is told, is of such enduring fascination and inspiration to the Tibetan people.
Literature


Terrone, Antonio (2010). *BYA ROG PROG ZHU, The Raven Crest: The Life and Teachings of BDE CHEN ’OD GSAL RDO RJE, Treasure Revealer of Contemporary Tibet*


*Other resources:*
