



## The history of the educational system of sNang zhig monastery

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The sNang zhig monastery of rNga khog in Amdo is the largest Bonpo monastery in the Tibetan cultural area. Its education system presents the highest level of monastic education in Bonpo tradition. This paper will talk about the education system of the sNang zhig monastery.

### *1. General history of the educational system in the Bonpo tradition and its evolution*

From the beginning, the traditional Bonpo education was carried out by the hereditary teachers (*gdung rgyud bla ma*) and so continued for the thousands of years of their early history. During that period, since Bonpos did not have any places for giving or receiving teachings, Bonpo teachings were spread from father to son with the lineages being kept within the families. From the beginning of the existence of gSas khang, the first gathering place of Bonpos in Tibet, Bonpo people started to gather and receive some public teachings. Thus the way of transmitting Bonpo teachings was enlarged. But until the later development of Bon religion in Tibet, gSas khang existed mostly as a temple and its function was very limited.

Characteristic of that later second development was the discovery of numerous Bonpo *gter ma* texts and the foundation of several monasteries. Especially at the Wensakha monastery, where the adherents were a mixture of both laity and monks, the monastic studies achieved a new level of development. In the 14th century, Wensakha monastery was destroyed by a flood. After that Menri monastery continued the Wensakha traditions but became exclusively monastic. This development influenced the general development of Bonpo monasteries for the following centuries. As time went on, it was sNang zhig who advanced monastic studies in the Bon religion to their highest level, There was also significant adherence to monastic traditions in rTogs ldan, sTeng chen, and in recent times the Shar rdza hermitage.

## 2. General history of sNang zhig monastery

In the eleventh century, Zhu sgom 'phrul zhig, a Bonpo master from Zhu family in central Tibet, came to Amdo to spread the Bon religion. His activities were undertaken in Amye Machen area. At the beginning of the twelfth century, Do 'phags Yon tan rgyal mtshan (b. 1088), a disciple of Zhu sgom 'phrul zhig, established the first Bonpo monastery in rNga ba, at the south eastern edge of the Amye Machen range. In the 14th century it also became the first Bonpo monastery to be converted into Buddhism by Tshakho Ngag dbang grags pa (b. 1410).

After Do 'phags Yon tan rgyal mtshan founded the first rNga ba monastery, he then moved to Khri gdan nor bu yang rtse in the middle part of rNga ba. There he opened a hermitage in 1168 which was later enlarged by his eldest son, Nyi ma 'dzin, to become the sNang zhig monastery. The foundation of that hermitage which later became sNang zhig was a symbol of the beginning of the spread of Bon in rNga ba area as a official religion. It was the principal Bon monastery for the whole of the rNga ba area. A few years later, another monastery, Cog lo, was founded in rNga ba by 'Dul ba rgyal mtshan, the middle son of Do 'phags Yon tan rgyal mtshan.. From the beginning, this latter monastery was a branch monastery of sNang zhig. An uncertain number of generations later, Bon blon bla ma, a lineal descendant of Nyi ma 'dzin, opened another hermitage about 4 km west of the sNang zhig which also became a monastery in later time called rTogs ldan. Because of this extensive activity, all of the people of rNga ba gradually became Bon followers.

In the 19th century, Brag dgon pa dKon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas of Labrang, a famous historian of Buddhist monasteries in Amdo, said "this place (rNga ba) was full of Bonpos at that time" meaning the 14th century which was when Buddhism started to spread and build monasteries in rNga ba. Up until then and for more than two centuries, Bon was the only religion in rNga ba. In 1920, sNang zhig Nam mkha' blo gros (1891–1945) invited abbot Shes rab grags pa, of gYung drung gling monastery in central Tibet, to sNang zhig monastery to initiate the inclusion of philosophic debate into their curriculum. Thereafter, sNang zhig monastery started to have its own *dge bshes* degree and later became the largest monastic university in the Bonpo tradition.

## 3. Description of the present education system and its use of texts

Bonpo people have long considered that Tantra and rDzogs chen are the main teachings of Bon religion. However, because of the influence of Buddhist scholasticism, Menri and gYung drung gling monasteries began to adopt more and more methods of philosophic debate and set up the system of *dge bshes* study mainly in the Sutra tradition. Zla ba rgyal mtshan, who founded gYung drung gling monastery had been Sa skya monastery to learn Buddhist sutra and earned the title of *dge bshes rab 'byams pa* at the age of 25. This greatly affected the development and use of philosophic debate later at gYung drung gling. At that time debate was in vogue among monasteries of all traditions, especially

the dGe lugs pa, and so it also stimulated Bonpo monasteries to develop their own *dge bshes* studies. With gYung drung gling as a center of philosophic debate and *dge bshes* studies for the Bonpo in Tibet, Sutra became much important than Tantra or rDzogs chen and other Bonpo monasteries began to emulate gYung drung gling. Not only because of the success of the system of *dge bshes* studies of gYung drung gling, but also because Zla ba rgyal mtshan was a descendant of sNang zhig clan, sNang zhig monastery gradually adopted the method of philosophic debate and its own tradition of *dge bshes* studies. The educational system and the system of promotion for *dge bshes* degrees in sNang zhig monastery was founded by Shes rab grags pa in the beginning of the twentieth century. Similar to the system of gYung drung gling monastery in central Tibet, Shes rab grags pa established a system of thirteen different subjects to be studied which are:

1. Kha dog 'gab ma
2. Kha dog gong ma or bsDus chung 'dzin gvra
3. bsDus 'bring
4. bsDus chen
5. Blo rig
6. rTags rigs
7. gZhung gsar or sa lam
8. gZhung gong ma
9. Phar phyin
10. rDo rim 'og ma or 'dul ba
11. rDo rim gong ma or dbu ma
12. rDo rim bar ma
13. rDzogs chen

This system had been continued until the middle of the twentieth century when sNang zhig monastery was destroyed during the middle of the 20th century. After more than three decades in ruins, sNang zhig monastery began to rebuild and re-establish their system of education as well. The number of subjects and the texts are almost the same as before. However since this system is very much related to gYung drung gling, and even remotely to Sa skya monastery, it concentrated very much on the philosophic studies of Sutra instead of Tantra and rDzogs chen which had previously been considered to be at the core of Bon religion.

In Dolanji, Menri monastery has also established a system of *dge bshes* studies under the guidance of abbot Sangye Tenzin and Lopon Tenzin Namdag. However, they concentrated very much on Tantra and rDzogs chen instead of Sutra and this has become a very important characteristic of that monastery. Since several monks from sNang zhig have been Dolanji for further studies, they have started to teach in sNang zhig following the system of Dolanji, so now the educational system of Dolanji is strongly influencing the sNang zhig monastery. The present program of *dge bshes* studies in sNang zhig monastery has already added many texts which have been used in the curriculum at Dolanji. Their program therefore now concentrates more on study of Tantra and rDzong chen than Sutra

#### 4. Conclusion

Across the panorama of Tibetan history there have been many cross fertilizing influences. In this case, we can see that the development of *dge bshes* studies at sNang zhig was affected by many factors including prevailing influences of the times. This trend continues to this day with a shift in the current sNang zhig curriculum as the result of contact with Dolanji and this also represents a return to the roots of traditional Bonpo religion.