

The Legacy behind Ralong Karma Rabtenling Monastery

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Ra- in simple term means a Goat, and long means upright. If one were to relate the definition in a lay mans vocabulary it would sound as if an upright goat; now we wonder how and why this name was given to a monastery or the place where it stands. Every place has its own history, and some may believe the tales which have been endorsed where as some prefer to brush aside the stories as mere hear say. I would like to research upon them and let my writings speak for it-self and it is up to the readers to believe or treat them as fables for a bed time story. Never the less if a name has been given we would like to know the meaning or the reason why was the name given. As such through my interaction and research I got to know the simple meaning of the place concerning Ralong which is situated in South District of a young state of Indian Union Sikkim, very close to a renowned tourist hotspot called Ravangla.

Sikkim as it is believed is a sacred place for the Buddhists of the Himalayan belt which caters to the Buddhists of certain sections which are mainly the Tibetans, the Drukpa's of Bhutan, the Bhutias, and others from neighboring county of Nepal. Sikkim has its own importance apart from it being a tourist destination; it is also a religious place for the Buddhists. Every place and religious sights especially the older ones in my research has a beautiful narrative of its own. It has got to do a lot for the fact that Sikkim shares its border with Tibet (which China has claimed), Nepal, and India. A lot of tales of mysticism and magical instances has been narrated for a long time but not much importance has been given to them, on my part I would like to tell the tales and leave it up to the readers and researchers to follow on whether to believe or not to believe in the tales and stories that I am trying to bring forth through my writings.

In my interaction with a renowned lama¹ and some elders of the village, where the books and prayers relate to the narrative I am about to unfold hidden among them the past tales of this historic monastery along with the place it occupies. A history, a legacy which has long been forgotten or made to forget so that a new more suitable one might be rewritten and the place be forgotten in the back drop. Before we begin one need's to imagine the description of this particular monastery which is situated beyond the newly built monastery at Ralong, many do not stop over since it is away from the new monastery and is hidden beyond the entrance of the actual monastery. I have been here since 2003, and even I get confused if I do not ask in between for directions. The roads up to the monastery or rather the Ralong town is motorable but like all hilly roads in India is poorly kept.

There is a lone gate on which the name of the monastery is encrypted, and a tar road leads the way to the main building. At the sides of the road one may witness olden day's houses in numbers which also act as schools for the local children and few huts for the lamas on the hill

¹ An interaction with Lama Karma, Monk from Ralong Karma Rabtenling Monastery, Ravangla, South Sikkim.

top. There is an open field on which the children play above the monastery as soon as we cross the gate. On arriving at the monastery we see a pillar in the middle with open space along with the main building where prayers are recited. At the right side is a new building recently being made to house a number of new lama recruits and also for the older lamas to reside, the open space in front of the monastery is for the monks to perform the masked dance, it is imperative to mention that the masks are made at the monastery itself before the rituals and I am a witness to the making of these masks.

The main monastery comprises of three sections the middle section which is rebuilt, it is here the main altar is situated, the one on the right is a part of the old monastery and the floor above is the place for the head lamas to pray and give teachings and sermons. There is also an old section behind the monastery which houses the statue of Avalokitesvara (Tib: Spyen ras gzigs) the compassionate Buddha with prayer wheels all around, situated at the outside of the hall and to its proximity it houses a huge tree which has the shape of a spear, resembling that of the famous and revered Guru Padmasambhava widely known as Guru Rinpoche, who also happens to be a renowned and widely followed guru at all Buddhist houses and monasteries all over Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and India. A whole lot of history is centered on Guru Padmasambhava and his teachings more regarding his tantric abilities to tame the wild and misguided souls.

It is prescribed in scriptures and local beliefs that the fourth king² of Sikkim referred to here, hence forth as the Chogyal went to Tibet for a pilgrimage journey disguised as a commoner.³ During those days the twelfth Karmapa (Changchub Dorji) was at the helm of the religious superiority, when the Chogyal went to Tibet, none of the lamas recognized him during his stay. Upon his arrival at Tsurphu monastery in Tibet, for his pilgrimage the twelfth Karmapa sensing through his divine powers ordered his attendants to make arrangements for the arrival of a special guest of his who would be arriving at the monastery. All arrangements were in place and all awaited for the special guest, in the evening one of the attendant was asked to watch for the guest as he returned bringing news of only a man completing his pilgrimage that had come to the monastery and was praying. The twelfth Karmapa ordered for the same man to be brought in for it was that same person he was waiting for. The Chogyal was invited into the monastery before the twelfth Karmapa and even before he could introduce himself the twelfth Karmapa asked him if he had a peaceful journey coming all the way from the sacred place of Denzong (Sikkim). Upon hearing and witnessing this ordeal, the Chogyal was touched and affirmed in him that the twelfth Karmapa was indeed the real jewel he had always heard of and to his disbelief prostrated before him.

The Chogyal requested the twelfth Karmapa to bless his lands by making a monastery in Denzong (Sikkim) so that his people and the country as a whole would be blessed and honored to have a monastery with his teachings and blessings. To this request, the twelfth Karmapa agreed to send his emissary for a period of six to seven months and that the emissary would decide on the place and location of the monastery to be built. In a few months time the twelfth Karmapa did direct his emissary to visit Sikkim, it is so endorsed upon in an ancient text:-

² Gyurmed Namgyal, born in 1707 AD, crowned in the year 1721. During his reign the first Kagyud Monastery was built. He passed away in the year 1734. For further references See. *History of Sikkim*, Compiled by their Highness the Maharaja Sir Thutob Namgyal, K.C.I.K., and Maharani Yeshay Dolma of Sikkim, 1908 (Unpublished typescript).

³ After passing away of Jigme Pawo (third reincarnation of Lhatsun Namkha Jigme), the 4th Chogyal was deeply affected, hence he went on a pilgrimage, (Sir Thutob Namgyal, *Op. Cit.*)

As the prophecy goes that the emissary was the personal attendant of the twelfth Karmapa, who upon arrival in Sikkim went to Tashiding monastery from there he took east wards where he discovered a cave from there on to the left he saw Kanchenjunga, to his front a sacred place of Avaloketsvara, he started walking further and stopped on the way when he saw a goat which flew above in the sky, this was a sign on which he asked this present day monastery to be built on and the name Ralong given to the place. In 1730, a small monastery was established at the very sight where the attendant of His Holiness the twelfth Karmapa had seen the rare sighting as was also desired by the Chogyal and as was directed by the emissary of the twelfth Karmapa. It is believed that the twelfth Karmapa himself visited this sacred monastery and blessed the sight, some say he came riding on a vulture, some monks and local people still have the seeds blessed by His Holiness and some are fortunate to still find them and get hold of the blessed seeds.

It is believed to be the first Kagyud monastery in Sikkim, a claim that most monasteries would like to take for themselves but the lama at this monastery believes for a fact that this is and was the first Kagyud monastery in whole of Sikkim. Sikkim in itself is a land blessed with a vast and untold history of Buddhism and its tales with various monasteries and their depiction of their importance to this sacred land. Till date we can come across a lot of Buddhists who come for pilgrimage and to conquer their spiritual quest. Same can be said about our not so distant neighbor, the people of Bhutan. Who hold a significant importance towards the land of Sikkim as a holy place and some even believe that their last rights should be performed in Sikkim to be able to achieve Nirvana. Weather as a Buddhist we blindly follow and believe in the significance of this sacred land which was once blessed to have been home to the Guru (Guru Rinpoche), who having believed to have meditated in the caves and hills of this beautiful land. The truth as a scholar, as a researcher is out there to be discovered and proved to the ones who are willing to find it and embrace it, what could be the conclusion to some may well be the beginning for others who wish to follow on and give a bit more knowledge to this area and its people, culture, heritage, and religion in terms of history.

The more we know and come to terms with the reality the more interesting this land becomes to the research scholars. Not just one but there are many fields in which one can research upon. Here in the above case it is just one of the many monasteries that had an interesting history to have learnt about and to have come across as a scholar and a researcher. As such it was duty bound for me as a scholar in Buddhism that I should relate my findings and research so that others may follow and give their input in regards to this place and its history. Not everyone may be able to relate and understand nor agree to the findings that I have displayed, to really understand these lands and to be able to come to terms with the mystics it has in stored for researchers and scholars one has to stay in these parts and try and first understand the Buddhism of the land in question and then relate it to nature and its surroundings which could have prevailed in the past. If these can be understood and embraced one can understand the importance of this sacred place and the various religious sentiments and sights which need proper and through research so that we may be able to know and understand them in the near future.

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