

PREFACE

"Holding the name high"

by Françoise Pommaret

I am very pleased to write this preface to the Volume of Homage to Samten Gyeltshen Karmay, a great scholar and a close friend. I just hope that I can do justice to his achievements which are well known to all and that he will forgive me if I wander out of the scholarly path. His friends who have taken time to write important contributions for him have taken this path and Samten will be moved by their mark of friendship. My own inadequacy is evident as such a preface can never express the immense respect I have for him, and can only be a personal and probably biased view of Samten.

Samten Gyeltshen Karmay has had a most extraordinary life and intellectual voyage, although being modest, he will hardly consider it so. However, he admits that he was "lucky". The Tibetan astrologers, if they could have seen his horoscope of birth (*skyes rtsis*), would have certainly seen that his *g-yang*, *dbang thang*, and *lung rta* were in an auspicious combination !

Samten was born in 1936, at the beginning of the Fire Rat year, in the Karme'u tshang family of farmers-traders in Sharkhog in Eastern Tibet, and was named Tergya Gawang, abridged as Terko as was the custom in his region. Sharkhog, the south-easternmost part of Amdo, is a beautiful forested and broad valley, looking over the trading Chinese city of Song pan in Sichuan. The Sharkhog people, who call themselves Sharwa, have a strong sense of identity: they have their own Amdo dialect, they practice the Bon religion and their deity is Mount Shar Dungri which is a sacred site for pilgrimages and worship. Bon po monasteries dot the landscape and it was in one of them, in the monastery of the Four Villages, that Samten started his intellectual journey. I will not dwell on Samten's childhood as he has beautifully recollected it in the mesmerizing book *Les Neuf Forces de l'Homme*¹ which he co-authored with the French anthropologist Philippe Sagant.

Besides his mother, who was very close to him, the most influential person of his initial years of religious training was his maternal uncle, the formidable Horwa Akhu from Kyangtsang monastery. Samten paid his uncle an indirect homage in the texts he edited *The call of the Blue cuckoo. An anthology of nine Bonpo texts on myths and rituals*.²

In 1955 after he completed his studies in the Bon monastery and obtained the grade of Geshe, he went with a group of monks friends including Sangye Tenzin, the present *Menri* Trizin of the Bon po school, to the great Gelugpa monastery of Drepung near Lhasa. The Bon po institutes took advantage of the fact that Drepung was considered to be the best place for philosophical

¹ *Les Neuf forces de l'homme*, (en collaboration avec Philippe Sagant), Société d'ethnologie, Nanterre, 1999.

² S. Karmay & Y. Nagano, eds., *The call of the Blue cuckoo. An anthology of nine Bonpo texts on myths and rituals*, Bon studies 6, Senri ethnological Reports 32, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2002.

studies, and sent their monks to study in this stronghold of the Gelugpa. Samten, however, does not hold fond memories of his time in Drepung; he remembers the monastery as being dirty and the monks less than friendly to people of his remote and heterodox background. Nevertheless, it was here that he learned the Central Tibetan dialect and honed his skills at debating as well as studied philosophical texts.

During his stay at the Drepung monastery the political situation deteriorated rapidly but the monks did not seem to understand its gravity. Alarmed by the tragic events she had witnessed in Eastern Tibet, in early 1959, Samten's mother arrived in Lhasa from Amdo with his younger brother Soko and literally forced him to leave for Nepal. Samten recalls with affection and gratitude, that without his mother's intervention, he would not have survived. With a donkey as a companion, they walked through the arid Tsang province, almost starving, to the Kyirong region where they crossed into Nepal.

The months in Nepal and India did not leave Samten, in poor health and in pathetic circumstances, with good memories of the Lands of the Buddha contrary the great Gedun Choephel, his fellow Amdowa and predecessor in the sub-continent.

In 1961 while working at a printing press in Delhi, Samten, because of his Bon po background and his intellect, was selected by David Snellgrove to go to the UK under a Rockefeller fellowship. David Snellgrove who kindly consented to contribute to this volume, described the first steps of Samten and his fellow monks in the West.³ Samten himself retains a vivid memory of the first girls he saw in swimming-suits on the beach and the lessons in table manners given by David Snellgrove. These are mementos consigned to personal history. What was, indeed, a revelation for Samten, was the academic research characterized by thoroughness and critical approach as practised in the West. While some Tibetan scholars never reconciled their traditional monastic upbringing with Western methodology, Samten embraced it with great enthusiasm. He studied with diligence but sometimes impatience under the guidance of his two mentors, both brilliant scholars with very distinct personalities ; first David Snellgrove in the UK and later Rolf Stein in France, While these mentors had a paramount influence on his intellectual development they recognised not only Samten's great knowledge of the Tibetan texts but also his potential as a researcher.

On realizing how important the French language was in his field of study Samten learnt the language and then settled down in France where he entered the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) in 1981. He obtained his PhD from the SOAS in London in 1985⁴.

During his remarkable career at the CNRS, he was awarded in 1994 with the prestigious CNRS Silver Medal given in recognition of his contribution to Human Sciences.

³ See also David L. Snellgrove, *Asian Commitment: Travels and Studies in the Indian Sub-continent and South East Asia*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2000.

⁴ *The Great Perfection. A Philosophical and Meditational Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1988.

His academic career, which is well-known, is paved with books and articles. By combining his vast traditional knowledge with a sharp and critical mind, Samten has been a trail-blazer as the first Tibetan to achieve international academic fame, and this in the field of Tibetan studies. Samten is proud to have been elected as the President of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, a post he held from 1995 to 2000, but his pride rests not so much in his personal achievements but rather in the fact that a Tibetan was elected to that post.

Indeed, underlying his enormous contribution to the studies of Tibetan myths, beliefs, Bon religion and religious history, the recurrent theme is Tibet as an original civilisation and as a nation. His whole work is focused on exploring the ideas and concepts which make Tibet a separate and distinct entity from its neighbours. For Samten, because of his background, does Buddhism is not the major unifying factor of the Tibetans but rather the maze of myths and beliefs which are still alive in the landscape and the ritual practices that are deeply embedded in the psyche of the Tibetans. For him, these myths and beliefs form the hidden threads of the culture which transcend the micro regional differences or the overwhelming culture of Buddhism, and bind the Tibetans together. Of course, Samten would not deny the importance of Buddhism for Tibet but his life passion has been to uncover the threads which lie beyond the obvious representations of a culture. Moreover he believes strongly that the Tibetan government in exile should establish a modern political system separating religion and state, and that should give them more weight in their negotiations with China. In his academic and steadfast way, Samten has proven himself to be a dedicated and passionate advocate of the uniqueness of the Tibetans, and a proud son of this wounded land. In true Tibetan fashion, Samten "holds the name high".

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