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The spiritual legacy of Drukpa Lama Staktsang Raspa: Revitalising Buddhist practices and preserving cultural heritage in Ladakh

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Abstract

The Buddhist religion has a rich history and cultural heritage spanning various regions of the world. Among these regions, Ladakh, a remote and high-altitude desert plateau in the Indian Himalayas, is home to a unique and different Buddhist community. Among them is Drukpa Kagyu, a prominent Tibetan Buddhist tradition that has played a pivotal role in shaping Ladakh's cultural and spiritual landscape. Staktsang Raspa Ngawang Gyatso was an eminent Drukpa Kagyu patriarch and also a key figure in the religious history and cultural preservation of Ladakh. He worked with the expansionist king Sengge Namgail to establish the Drukpa Kagyu tradition as the dominant force in the kingdom. Hanle was the first of the Drukpa Kagyu monasteries he founded in Ladakh during the seventeenth century. He is famous for making several journeys across central Asia, visiting Emei Shan in China, numerous sites in southern Tibet connected to Milarepa, and historically Buddhist kingdoms in northern India. In Ladakh, he founded the Hemis monastery, which his incarnations have continued to lead.

This paper examines the life and contributions of Lama Staktsang Raspa, focusing on his role in revitalising Buddhist practices and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Ladakh. Through an analysis of historical accounts, teachings, and community impact, this study highlights the enduring significance of Lama Staktsang Raspa's work. By examining his efforts to propagate Buddhist principles and preserve traditional customs, this research sheds light on the enduring impact of Lama Staktsang Raspa's spiritual legacy on the landscape of Ladakh and the broader Buddhist community.

Keywords: Lama staktsang raspa, Drukpa Kagyu, Buddhism, and Ladakh

Introduction

Nestled in the stark, majestic expanse of the Trans-Himalayan region, Ladakh stands as a significant stronghold of Vajrayana Buddhism. Its rugged terrain and high-altitude landscapes with centuries-old monasteries and religious monuments that continue to bear witness to a rich legacy of spiritual practice and cultural continuity. Among the many figures who have shaped the religious topography of this region, Drukpa Lama Staktsang Raspa ('brug pa bla ma stag tshang ras pa, 1574–1651) holds a particularly prominent place. Staktsang Raspa was a Tibetan hermit, accomplished Buddhist master, and extraordinary pilgrim who travelled extensively throughout the Buddhist countries, including China, India, and the sacred land of Oddiyana, which is often identified with the Swat Valley in modern-day Pakistan, an area closely associated with the origins of Tantric Buddhism.

Staktsang Raspa was a key figure in the Drukpa Kagyu ('brug pa bka' brgyud) lineage, a sub-school of the broader Kagyu tradition known for its emphasis on meditative practice and yogic disciplines. Emerging from the teachings of the Indian master Naropa and his Tibetan disciple Marpa, and was further developed by Gampopa and Tsangpa Gyare, the Drukpa Kagyu tradition spread across the Himalayan region, including Bhutan and Ladakh. Staktsang Raspa's spiritual authority and charismatic leadership significantly contributed to the establishment and consolidation of Drukpa institutions in Ladakh, leaving a lasting effect on the region's spiritual and cultural landscape.

Early life and spiritual calling

Born as Tsewang Lhundrub (tshe dbang lhun grub) in 1574 into the noble Khon ^[1]

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¹ Khon family is the noble family from where Sa-skya hierarchs came.

Thuwchoe Family in Tsang province, Tibet. Staktsang Raspa emerged from humble beginnings to become a significant figure in Himalayan Buddhism. His mother's name was Rigs Zangmo (rig bzang mo), and his father's name was Gonpo Tsering (mgon po tshe ring), who served as an official for the governor of Gyantse. Tsewang Lhundrub learned to read and write and was also able to understand the grammar texts and poetry by the age of seven ^[2]. When he was ten years old, his father became gravely ill and, in hopes of gaining religious merit, vowed to send his son to the Sakya (sa skya) Monastery. Although his mother delayed fulfilling this promise because he wanted to look after her, she reconsidered when Tsewang Lhundrub contracted smallpox at the age of fourteen. The sickness was considered a clear sign that he was destined for monastic life. sTag tshang's mother finally sent him to the Monastery ^[3].

As a teenager, Tsewang Lhundrub received his initial religious instruction and initiations from a lama affiliated with Katok Monastery, a lama of the Nyingma tradition. In 1593, at the age of twenty, he decided to renounce worldly life entirely and devote himself fully to the religious path. He informed his mother of his intention to go on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, where he visited prominent monasteries and met numerous pilgrims and spiritual teachers. Among them was Karma Tenphe (kar ma bstan 'phel, 1569–1637), a leading disciple of the renowned Drukpa ('brug pa) master Lhatsewa Ngawang Zangpo (lha rtse ba ngag dbang bzang po, 1546–1615) ^[4].

During this encounter, Tsewang Lhundrub earnestly requested the lama to provide a guide toward the attainment of Buddhahood. Lhatsewa accepted him as a disciple and ordained him with the name Ngawang Gyatso (ngang dbang rgya mtsho) and calling him affectionately Shar Kha Ras-Pa ^[5]. Under Lhatsewa's guidance, Ngawang Gyatso studied for more than three years at Namgyal Lhunpo (rnam rgyal lhun po) in Gongkar (gong dkar). Following his master's advice, he travelled to Tsari to practice meditation in retreat. There he spent a year meditating in a cave known as Stangtsang Rong. ('Stag' meaning tiger and 'Tsang' meaning its nest) He also received training at Taklung Monastery (stag lung) from Won Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyel (dbon rin po che ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1571–1626), where he studied the Naro Chodruk (na ro chos drug), the Six Yogas of Naropa, and the teachings of the Kadam (bka' gdams) tradition ^[6].

After completing his studies, Ngawang Gyatso embarked on several extensive journeys across Central Asia, visiting many regions in Tibet, including Mount Kailash, the Holy lakes Rakas and Manasarovar, and Emei Shan ^[7] in China,

and most notably in Ladakh. One of his first destinations was Tolung, a place deeply associated with the Kagyu (bka'brgyud) tradition. These sacred sites were believed to be blessed due to their connection with great Yogins in the past, such as the famed Tibetan mystic Milarepa ^[8].

Arrival in Ladakh and the founding of monasteries

Staktsang Raspa's destiny in Ladakh crystallised under the reign of King Sengge Namgyal (1570–1642 C.E.), a dynamic ruler whose expansionist vision included strengthening Buddhism as a unifying force in his kingdom. He served as the religious Guru (Cho sje) to King Senge Namgyal of the Namgyal Dynasty in Ladakh. As Ladakhi people used to say, it's like the relationship between a Tiger and a Lion.

Lhatsewa instructed him to visit sites especially associated with the great Indian scholars Naropa, Tilopa, Marpa, and other revered saints. Additionally, he was encouraged to travel to regions such as Jalandhar, Kashmir, and Ladakh in the northern Himalayas, as well as Oddiyāna. (present-day Swat Valley). He travelled through North India with a few monks as companions, journeying from one sacred site to another. Following the Sutlej River, he reached Kinnaur and Shimla, then continued down to Kangra, known as Jhalandra. Along the way, he stopped and visited a meditation retreat at Ugyen Dzong, near Kargil, a cave associated with Guru Padmasambhava. He also spent several months meditating in a retreat cave at Naropa's Zongkhul, at the invitation of the Siddha Dewa Gystso (bde ba rgya mtsho) ^[9]. During his initial stay in Zanskar (Zangs dkar), the King of Ladakh, Jamyang Namgyal ('Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal), invited him to Ladakh, noting that he was a patron of Drukpa Kagyu ('Brug pa bka gyu) establishments, several monasteries in his kingdom. The king expressed that Staktsang Raspa's presence would be highly beneficial to the tradition. However, Staktsang Raspa initially declined the king's invitation, explaining that he needed his guru's permission and spiritual guidance from the Dākinīs (female embodiments of enlightened energy) ^[10]. Still, he promised to visit Ladakh at a later time.

Staktsang Raspa would eventually arrive in Ladakh and serve the successor of King Jamyang Namgyal. However, Staktsang Raspa first spent time in Upper Ladakh, in the region of Gya (Rgya), at the request of the Drungpa Sherab Zangpo (Drung pa shes rab bzang po), a disciple of Lhatsewa (lha rtse ba). Later, Staktsang Raspa spent time with a group of Buddhist yogins who called themselves Munda, led by a man named Buddha Nātha (Buddhanata). It was during this period that the yogins gave him the name Sha Mo Nātha (Shamonata) ^[11].

While with this group, Staktsang Raspa encountered a yogin from Oddiyāna named Pāla Nātha (Pelanata), who promised to take him to Oddiyāna (Swat). They joined a party of traders, and eventually, Staktsang Raspa reached Oddiyāna. However, they found only the remnants of Buddhist activity, as the region had long before converted to Islam.

² Peter S, sTag tshang ras pa's exceptional life as a Pilgrim, Published by KAILASH - A journal of Himalayan Studies, Nepal. 1996;XVII:84

³ "Taksang Repa ngawang Gyatso", The Treasury of lives, December 2009, <http://www.treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Taksang-Repa-Ngawang-Gyatso/P7857>, accessed on 21.05.2025

⁴ Peter S, Kailash – A journal of Himalayas studies. 1996;xviii(1-2):87

⁵ The term "Ras pa" refers to cotton clad yogis connecting him to the tradition of Milarepa, who was himself part of this lineage of accomplished meditation practitioners who wore simple cotton robes even in harsh mountain conditions.

⁶ 142 Bonn, Op. Cit.p.89

⁷ Mount Glang-chen gyang-ri, is known as Emei Shan, is located in Sichuan province, china and is one of the four Sacred Buddhist Mountains of China. Standing at the western edge of the Sichuan basin.

⁸ Ibid., p.88

⁹ Tucci, Op.Cit. Pp. 70,71

¹⁰ Janet R, LADAKH: Crossroads of High Asia, Second Edition, Published by Oxford University press, Bombay, Calcutta and madras, 1996, P.67

¹¹ Taksang Repa ngawang Gyatso", The Treasury of lives, December 2009, <http://www.treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Taksang-Repa-Ngawang-Gyatso/P7857>, accessed on 21.05.2025

He returned to Tibet through Kashmir, Zaskar, and Ladakh. However, upon Lhartsewa's death in 1615, Staktsang Raspa left Ladakh in 1620. When the 5th Gyalwang Drukpa advised Staktsang Raspa to return to Ladakh at the request of Sengge Namgyal, the lama arrived not merely as a teacher but also as a spiritual architect. Tasked with guiding to the royal court and propagating the Drukpa teachings, he laid the foundation for a Buddhist renaissance in the region. While in Ladakh, Stagtsang Raspa came to know about King Jamyang Namgyal's wish to build a Maitreya statue at Basgo during his lifetime.

To honour this wish and the memory of the king, he began the construction of the statue under his supervision. Queen Khatoon supported the project by donating 500 gold coins and many precious gems. The construction took ten years to complete ^[12]. Today, the Maitreya statue can still be found at the Basgo Palace. Made of mud, bronze, and copper, it stands as a large three-storey structure. In 1624, Staktsang Raspa also founded the Monastery of Wamla, known as Dechok Namgyal (bde mchog rnam rgyal). The crowning achievement of this mission was the establishment of Hemis Monastery in 1630, built beneath a sacred cave where Gyalwa Gotsangpa, a disciple of the 1st Gyalwang Drukpa, had meditated centuries earlier. Unlike many hilltop monasteries that can be seen from afar, Hemis is nestled discreetly between mountains, revealing itself only upon close approach, a perfect metaphor for the hidden depths of its spiritual legacy. Under Staktsang Raspa's direction, Hemis became the epicentre of Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism in Ladakh, eventually becoming the region's largest monastic institution, with over 1,000 monks at its peak. The Monastery's artefacts, some of which date back over 400 years, stand as a testament to its role as a guardian of Buddhist tradition.

Lama Stagtsang Raspa laid the foundation for the main temple at Chemde in 1644 in honour of King Senge Namgyal's memory, who had passed away. The temple was completed within a year and subsequently became known as Chemde Monastery. In 1647, the main temple at Shey was constructed under his supervision with the support of King Deldan Namgyal. Following the death of Queen Kalzang Dolma, Lama Stagtsang Raspa built a long mani wall in her memory. It is believed that the tradition of building long mani walls in Ladakh began with him ^[13]. He also restored other sacred sites, creating a network of spiritual centres that reinforced the Drukpa lineage's dominance in Ladakh, Zaskar, and Lahaul. His collaboration with Sengge Namgyal secured royal patronage, which facilitated the construction of dzongs (fortress-monasteries) and the broader dissemination of Buddhist teachings among the people. During this period, Ladakh experienced a peak in both prosperity and cultural flourishing ^[14].

Revitalising Buddhist practices and cultural preservation

Staktsang Raspa's legacy is deeply tied to his efforts to breathe new life into Buddhist practices in Ladakh. The Drukpa Kagyu lineage, with its roots in the teachings of Tsangpa Gyare (gtsang pa rgya ras 1161–1211), emphasises direct experience of the mind's nature through meditation and tantric rituals. Staktsang Raspa brought these traditions

to Ladakh, which appealed to both monastics and laypeople. Under his guidance and supervision, numerous significant religious activities were undertaken, including the construction of statues, stupas, mani walls, and monasteries, as well as the transcription of critical religious writings such as the Tengyur and Kangyur.

By establishing the Hemis Monastery in the early 17th century, Staktsang Raspa created a spiritual and cultural epicentre that remains one of Ladakh's most significant monastic institutions. Located in the rugged terrain of the Indus Valley, the Hemis Monastery has become a hub for religious learning, meditation, and the preservation of Buddhist art, literature, and rituals, embodying the Drukpa lineage's devotion to both spiritual enlightenment and cultural continuity. Staktsang Raspa was a notable figure in Ladakh's history, particularly recognised for his distinctive appearance in paintings and sculptures. Unlike the traditional portrayals of high-ranking religious figures in Ladakhi monasteries, his portrait stands out for various uncommon characteristics. The most remarkable features are his beard, which is unusual among Tibetan religious images, and his characteristic white turban-like headgear. These characteristics not only visually distinguish him but also imply his extraordinary status and possibly a distinct spiritual lineage.

One of the most striking examples of his influence is a collection of statues, including silver statues of White Tara at Hemis ^[15]. These images depict the goddess Tara, who is believed to bestow longevity and offer prophetic guidance to enlightened practitioners. Furthermore, the manuscripts, mani walls and statues, including the gigantic Buddha image, are documented in the historical chronicle ^[16]. Such phenomena highlighted the mystical dimensions of Staktsang Raspa's approach, inspiring devotion and sustaining Ladakh's tantric legacy. The annual Hemis Festival, which features the masked Cham dance performances, also traces its origins to this period, blending spiritual instruction with communal celebration. These practices, revitalised under Staktsang Raspa influence, remain a vibrant and integral part of Ladakhi Buddhism today.

Beyond his spiritual contributions, Staktsang Raspa played a crucial role in preserving Ladakh's cultural heritage. The monasteries he established became custodians of art, literature, and ritual traditions, safeguarding them against the region's isolation and periodic turmoil. Hemis Monastery, in particular, houses an unparalleled collection of rare thangkas ^[17], created in the 18th century by His Eminence Gyalse Rinpoche ^[18]. It also features centuries-old manuscripts and ancient statues that reflect a synthesis of Indian, Tibetan, and Central Asian influences. Stagtsang Raspa served not only as a spiritual teacher but also as a peacemaker. During the conflict between Guge and Ladakh, he served as a mediator, playing a crucial role in maintaining political stability in the region. This cultural preservation was not merely archival; it fostered a living

¹⁵ Ibid, p.103

¹⁶ Rizvi, Op. Cit, p.69

¹⁷ A magnificent three-story-high embroidered depiction of Guru Padmasambhava, revered as the Second Buddha, is unfurled once every 12 years during the Tibetan Year of the Monkey.

¹⁸ His Eminence Gyalse Rinpoche Mipham Tsewang Thinley Tenzin was the son of Prince Mipham Jampal Thutop Dorje and a descendant of King Dekyong Namgyal.

¹² Das, Op.Cit, p.416

¹³ Das, Op.Cit, p.418

¹⁴ Tashi R. The history of Maryul Ladakh, Printed at Jayyed Press, Ballimaran, Delhi; c2018, pp. 102-103

tradition that shaped Ladakhi identity.

Enduring impact and contemporary relevance

Taktsang Repa's death on January 29, 1651, at the age of 78, marked the end of an era, but his spiritual legacy has continued through successive reincarnations. These reincarnations have led to the establishment of the Hemis Monastery and carried forward his vision. His enduring influence continues to shape the tradition of Ladakhi Buddhism, which has not only survived but thrived despite centuries of external invasions, political turmoil, and the pressures of rapid modernisation. The Drukpa lineage, now over 800 years old, remains a powerful spiritual force throughout the Himalayan region. Hemis Monastery, with its historic ties to Staktsang Raspa, continues to serve as the spiritual centre of the Drukpa tradition in Ladakh. Annual events at the Monastery, such as the Hemis Festival, continue to attract thousands of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world^[19], honouring Ladakhi culture and maintaining the spiritual legacy of Staktsang Raspa. Through such efforts, the Drukpa lineage not only preserves the past but also adapts it to address contemporary issues, ensuring that Staktsang Raspa's influence remains a living force in the Himalayas and beyond.

In the contemporary era, figures like the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa, Jigme Pema Wangchen, have revived and reinterpreted Staktsang Raspa's teachings for the modern world. Under his guidance, the lineage has expanded its relevance beyond monastic boundaries to engage with global challenges. One notable example is the establishment of the Druk White Lotus School in Shey in 2001. This groundbreaking institution blends modern academic education with traditional Ladakhi values, languages, and environmental awareness^[20].

Furthermore, large-scale environmental initiatives, such as the planting of over a million trees in the arid regions of Ladakh^[21], reflect the Drukpa emphasis on interdependence, compassion, and ecological responsibility, core tenets of Staktsang Raspa's philosophy. Through such efforts, the Drukpa Kagyu lineage continues to foster spiritual growth while promoting sustainable development and gender equality. For example, the Drukpa nuns, under the guidance of the Gyalwang Drukpa, have gained recognition for their Kung Fu^[22] training, which empowers them both physically and spiritually, challenging traditional gender norms. Staktsang Raspa's legacy, therefore, is not confined to religious teachings alone; it lives on in the practical, compassionate actions of a community deeply rooted in the Himalayas yet dynamically engaged with the world.

Conclusion

Drukpa Lama Staktsang Raspa's spiritual legacy played a crucial role in reviving Buddhist traditions and preserving Ladakh's cultural heritage, thereby deeply embedding these values into the region's identity. Through the establishment of monasteries such as Hemis, Chemday, and Hanle, and his tireless propagation of the Drukpa lineage, he transformed

Ladakh into a sanctuary of Vajrayana Buddhism, blending the mystical with the practical. His life and work demonstrate the timeless relevance of Buddhist values, including wisdom, compassion, discipline, and devotion. The teachings and monasteries he founded continue to inspire countless individuals, reminding us that the preservation of tradition and the pursuit of enlightenment are not separate goals, but somewhat interconnected paths that improve the human experience.

More than four centuries later, Staktsang Raspa's spiritual legacy continues to guide innumerable practitioners. In the shadow of the Himalayas, where snow-capped peaks meet the sky and the wind carries old mantras across vast landscapes, his spirit endures, not merely as a historical figure but as a living presence in the hearts and minds of those who seek awakening. Through his enduring legacy, Staktsang Raspa remains a beacon of wisdom and compassion for generations past, present, and future.

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¹⁹ Norzin Jigmet, *FOREVER LADAKH The Crown Jewel of India: A Guide to Ladakh in the Himalayas*, Published by ROLI books; c2016, p.115

²⁰ Ibid, p.97

²¹ Ibid, p.264

²² Ibid, p. 206