

A Brief Pilgrimage to the Hidden Land of Pemakö

[Version 1.2]

by Dylan Esler

*Homage to the guru who reveals the secret pathways
To the hidden land at the centre of my heart
Where resides the eternal teacher
Beyond all birth and death –
Ever serene and radiant
To you I pray:
In all my lives may we come face to face,
May my mind be always merged with yours!
May my prayers turn towards you
In times happy and sad!
May your blessings pour upon me
And your teachings be my only light!*

In April and May 2006, I had the good fortune to accompany Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche and Khandro Chöku Wangmo on a trip to their school in Payingdem village, Pemakö.¹ For the benefit of Rinpoche's Western students, who through him are connected to this hidden land, and to give a picture of Rinpoche's remarkable activity there, I would like to share with you the following account of our journey; I have sought to weave into my depiction of our adventures some of the local lore I picked up along the way.

We departed from Varanasi on the evening of April 24th, and travelled by train to Guwahati, the capital of Assam, where we arrived the following evening. Guwahati is a bustling city; while there we took the opportunity to visit by boat the shrine of Umānanda, located on the banks of the Brahmaputra river. This is where Ānanda, the Buddha's lifelong attendant, attained arhatship after having been expelled from the community for his lack of realization by Mahākāśyapa.² It has nowadays become a place of worship for Lord Śiva. We then visited the tantric site of Kāmakhya, also known as Kāmarūpa, which is counted among the twenty-four sacred places, as well as among the four main tantric sites (Skt. *pīṭha*).³ This place is currently dedicated to the goddess Satī. Although generally regarded a Hindu deity, it is important to bear in mind that there generally is a great deal of overlap

¹ The name Padma-bkod literally means 'Lotus Array'. Pemakö is the name given to a particular region in the North-Eastern Province of Upper Siang of Arunachal Pradesh, India. It is one of the hidden lands (*sbas-yul*) referred to in the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche.

² Although this may seem like a rather harsh treatment, the episode is traditionally interpreted to exemplify the skilful means of the *arhat* Mahākāśyapa. Perceiving that due to his lifelong attendance of the Buddha, Ānanda had had but little opportunity to practise and gain realization, Mahākāśyapa chastised him for his lack of spiritual accomplishment. The following reproaches were advanced against Ānanda: he neglected to question the Buddha about the minor precepts which the latter had authorized his monks to abolish; he put his foot on the Buddha's raincoat; he allowed his body to be defiled by a woman's tears; he neglected to request the Buddha to defer his passing into transcendence (Skt. *nirvāṇa*); and he pleaded for women's entry into the community. Sometimes, ten reproaches are counted. Ānanda thereupon went into exile in the place nowadays called Umānanda, where he entered retreat and attained arhatship. Having spent so much time in the Buddha's company and being gifted with a prodigious memory, Ānanda thereafter became instrumental in codifying the Buddha's discourses (Skt. *sūtra*) during the first great council of Rājagṛha in 486 or 368 BCE. See Lamotte, Etienne, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śaka Era*, Louvain-La-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988, pp.124-6.

³ The four main tantric sites are: Uḍḍiyāna, Kāmarūpa, Jālandhara and Pūrṇagiri. Their locations, particularly that of the former, will be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

between the Hindu and Buddhist tantric sites. Whereas the Hindus envisage these places as dedicated to Śiva and Satī, the Buddhist tantric tradition conceives of them as being sacred to Vajrayoginī; for the *Nyingmapas*⁴ in particular, they are the holy sites of Vajravārāhī and Hayagrīva. A further example of the close relation between both tantric traditions is that among the thousand names of Kālī⁵ are found the names of many Buddhist goddesses, such as Tārā, Vajravārāhī, Kurukullā, and so forth,⁶ so that to make rigid distinctions in this domain seems inappropriate.⁷ Inside the temple we placed our hands into a small hole in the ground, which is envisaged to be Satī's womb. From this opening in the ground pours forth reddish water, the blood of the goddess' menstruation.

On the other side of the Brahmaputra in Mayam, in the Nagaon district of Assam, is found another tantric site inhabited by powerful *yoginīs*; these reportedly transform all the men who visit them into goats during the day, while at night they use them for erotic play. This place is located in Hojay, which some hold to be Uḍḍiyāna, though the latter is most likely to be found in Orissa. Despite the almost irresistible temptation to go there, this was unfortunately impossible.

Having visited the above temples and done a few errands in the city, it was time for us to leave Guwahati for Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. We travelled by night bus and reached Itanagar the next morning. At dawn the following day we took a bus to Pasighāt, arriving there in the afternoon.

Here it may be useful to bear in mind that Pemakö being a configuration (Skt. *maṇḍala*) of the sky-farer (Skt. *ḍākinī*) Vajravārāhī, there are a number of boundaries which must be crossed before one can enter her sacred space; Pasighāt may be considered to be the outermost periphery of her configuration. Therefore it may not be surprising that it was here that I was confronted with one of the protectors of the hidden land. He took the form of a local police officer who addressed me in harsh terms, asking for my papers; I was lucky that Rinpoche was with me and was immediately able to pacify him, so that we could continue on our journey unhindered.

We proceeded that very night from Pasighāt to Yingkong,⁸ and from there on to Tuting. On the road to Tuting our car had a puncture, so we got off and had an improvised picnic by the roadside, while we waited for our driver to sort the problem out. As he had no spare tyre, he had to walk off to the nearest village, which, as luck would have it, was not all too far away. After a while, he came back in another jeep. It had been hired by a couple from Australia who were in search of the hidden land of Pemakö. They had heard of Rinpoche and were very pleased to meet him. They very kindly gave us one of their spare tyres, and we continued on our journey in their company. As it turned out, their guide knew next to nothing about Pemakö, so they were able to benefit from Rinpoche's vast knowledge of the area. Our two jeeps reached Tuting in the end of the afternoon. There we received a warm welcome from Rinpoche's family and enjoyed the hospitality of his niece, Kapi; after a hearty meal, we were only too happy to sleep and recover from our exertions.

The next morning we began our climb into the Pemakö jungle. Towards the beginning of our hike we had to cross a rope-bridge over the torrents of the Brahmaputra. Reassuringly, I was informed that the bridge had a rather temperamental character and had previously tipped over and killed a few people who had come there with a bad intention; I made sure to check my intention before crossing and found nothing wrong – I was probably just fortunate to be

⁴ rNying-ma-pa: 'the ancient ones', the oldest of the Tibetan Buddhist schools.

⁵ Kālī is identical to the Tibetan Buddhist goddess Khros-ma nag-mo.

⁶ See, for instance, *Daśa-Mahāvidyā Tantra-Mahāśāstra*, Delhi: Manoj Panket Books.

⁷ Nonetheless, I do not wish hereby to suggest that the Buddhist tantric tradition is but an offshoot of the Hindu one. If anything can be said with some degree of probability on this matter, it would seem that the reverse is true. However, this is a complex question which I do not wish to enter into any detail here.

⁸ Though locally pronounced Yingkong, the name is actually Zhing-skyong.

travelling with Rinpoche. Luckily, there is one phobia which I lack, it being the one of heights, so this also made the crossing easier.

Climbing up the paths in the jungle was certainly no easy feat; as we struggled to keep walking, it was amazing to watch the locals who were carrying our luggage trod along seemingly effortlessly. Despite the difficulties, with breaks at regular intervals and sufficient whisky and *chang*⁹ to maintain our spirits high, we were able to keep going. After an adventurous but exhausting day, we finally arrived at Nyering¹⁰ in the evening, where we enjoyed the delightful hospitality and company of Meme Sonam Palden.

Early the next morning we paid a visit to the young Marphung Tulku,¹¹ an emanation of Lang Palgyi Senge.¹² In a previous life he had been a monk in Khams (East Tibet). Although he was an excellent monk, he received little respect, as no one recognized his inner spiritual qualities. He therefore promised that he would be born as a wrathful emanation in his next life. It is as such that he took birth in Pemakö, where he had two wives. Later in his life, a tragic incident struck him. His son had crossed over to Tibet just as the Tensung Dangling¹³ had cut all the bridges leading from Tibet into Pemakö. In order to send a message to his father, he attached it to an arrow which he shot towards his father's house. Unfortunately, the members of the Tensung Dangling immediately suspected his father of being a Chinese spy. They thereupon beat him up with their guns so badly that he was to die shortly thereafter. All those who engaged in the beating later suffered various problems in their limbs. Shortly before dying, he foretold that he would be reborn as someone called 'dog' in a place whose name would start with the Tibetan letter 'nya'. One of his wives asked him how he, a great *lama*, could possibly take such a low birth. He angrily replied that she knew nothing at all. After a prolonged sojourn on the Copper-Coloured Mountain (*Zangs-mdog dpal-ri*), he took birth again in Pemakö in Nyering as the boy we presently visited; his father's name is Khyitruk¹⁴ and his mother is the late *lama*'s granddaughter.

Due to an accident in which his mother, who was carrying him, fell down on him, this boy is now slightly physically impaired; we were told that at times he behaves harshly towards his mother, as if he knew that she was the facilitating condition for this accident. Once as he was lying in his room looking at the ceiling, he asked his father: "Do you see Guru Rinpoche?" The latter could not see him, and the vision faded away.

After paying our respects to the *tulku* we resumed our climb into the Pemakö jungle; here the Australian couple and I separated tracks with Rinpoche and Khandro, as we needed to visit the sacred place of Devakoṭa,¹⁵ one of the holiest sites in Pemakö, which is considered to be Vajravārāhi's womb. There are said to be no less than seven hundred and twenty-five deities residing around Devakoṭa, a place graced with four caves located to its four directions as well as eight cemeteries. Our guide to get there was Rinpoche's nephew, Rapgye.

That particular climb into the jungle has left an indelible impression in my memory: surely, it was not an easy affair, but as we made our way along windy, steep, slippery paths, the luxuriant vegetation, the beauty of the surroundings and the breathtaking views which at times

⁹ Brewed non-distilled liquor made from barley or rice.

¹⁰ Nye-ring derives its name from the fact that on the one hand it is near (*nye*) to Devakoṭa, while on the other hand it is far (*ring*) enough for it to be a day's walk away.

¹¹ Mar-phung sprul-sku

¹² rLangs dPal-gyi seng-ge: one of Padmasambhava's twenty-five disciples, he was among the hundred and eight translators (Skt. *lotsāwa*) to travel to India to study Sanskrit. He is moreover considered to be a heart-son (*thugs-sras*) of Guru Rinpoche. Lang Palgyi Senge's spiritual practice centred on the '*Jigs-rten mchod-bstod*'. He had three sons from two wives, passing on his teachings through his family line. See Tarthang Tulku, 'The Twenty-five Disciples of Padmasambhava', in *Crystal Mirror*, vol. IV, 1975, pp.35-74, esp. pp.52f.

¹³ bsTan-srung dang-blangs: 'Voluntary Guardians of the Teachings', a group of armed Tibetans which comprised a voluntary army.

¹⁴ Khyi-phrug: 'pup'.

¹⁵ Although locally called Devakoṭa, the name actually is Devīkoṭa.

were revealed from behind the trees all combined to give that unmistakable sense that we indeed found ourselves in a pure field, a place where the boundaries between different orders of reality have become quite transparent. Along the way we found wild berries growing on the trees and bushes, as well as springs whose pristine nectar-like waters became ever more delicious as we proceeded onwards; these gifts of nature were just what we needed to give us the energy to continue.

We reached Mañkoṭa,¹⁶ a village located about one-and-a-half hours' walk from Devakoṭa, in the early afternoon and stayed in the family of Meme Lodrö, whose daughter attends Rinpoche's school. Before dawn the next day we set off for Devakoṭa, arriving there about seven o'clock in the morning. On the way to Devakoṭa, there are a number of holy springs located in caves. The main cave however, where Guru Rinpoche engaged in long-life practices with his consort Mandaravā, can only be visited in winter, as during the summer the river rises and so renders access to the cave perilous. Nevertheless, the upper cave, connected to the lower one, is accessible, and a constant stream of life-water (*tshe-chu*) and life-beer (*tshe-chang*) steadily drips from the rock.¹⁷ We gathered some of the holy waters from these springs, as well as from the Yangsang river, which is one of the Brahmputra's tributaries.¹⁸ After practising in Devakoṭa temple, we were taken for a tour of the grounds by Lama Yeshe Dorje, the local *lama* and caretaker of the hermitage.

Just outside the temple is a treasure (*gter-ma*) which was originally revealed by Dudjom Drakngak Lingpa.¹⁹ Later Dudjom Rinpoche²⁰ confirmed that it would benefit many beings in the future. Moreover, the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche foretell that when humanity is extinguished, it is from this place that the human race will regenerate itself. The treasure consists, in part at least, of Guru Rinpoche's seat. Unfortunately however, it was damaged by a young *lama*, who touched it prematurely.

At the time of making this prediction concerning Drakngak Lingpa's treasures, Dudjom Rinpoche was twenty-five. However, his relation with Dudjom Drakngak Lingpa goes back many years. Hailing from Khams, it was Dudjom Drakngak Lingpa who invited Dudjom Rinpoche to Devakoṭa for the first time when the latter was eighteen years old. On this occasion Dudjom Rinpoche travelled to Chimé Yangsang²¹ in Upper Siang and in Devakoṭa bestowed the empowerments (*dbang*) and scriptural authorizations (*lung*) of the *Rinchen Terdzö*²² for the first time. It was during this visit that Dudjom Namkhai Dorje,²³ another local treasure revealer (*gter-ston*), bestowed on him the name Dechen Dorje.²⁴

Dudjom Drakngak Lingpa promised Dudjom Rinpoche his daughter in marriage, and the latter agreed that he would return to fetch her. Fulfilling his promise, he returned to Tuting when he was twenty-five, travelling from Kongpo (South Tibet). However, Drakngak Lingpa's secretary, who also coveted his daughter, took her away. Drakngak Lingpa thereupon declared this to be a terrible sin, foretelling that many calamities would befall them.

¹⁶ Mañkoṭa is the local distortion of Mahākoṭa.

¹⁷ This stream of life-water and life-beer is constant and neither decreases in the dry season nor increases in the rainy season.

¹⁸ The Yangsang (*yang-gsang*) river pours into the Brahmputra near Tuting.

¹⁹ bDud-'joms drag-ngags gling-pa, also known as mNga'-dbang dge-legs.

²⁰ bDud-'joms Rin-po-che, 'Jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje (1904-87)

²¹ 'Chi-med yang-gsang: 'The Ultra-Secret Place of Immortality'.

²² Rin-chen gter-mdzod, a massive collection of treasure teachings compiled by 'Jam-mgon kong-sprul Rin-po-che.

²³ bDud-'joms nam-mkha'i rdo-rje; among his treasures is found a guide to Pemakö's sacred places. See *Pad-bkod yang-gsang gnas-yig: Supreme Sacred Realm of Upper Siang (Pemako)*, translated by Lopen P. Ogyan Tenzin and Tenzin Chozom from the original Tibetan Terma text revealed by Dudjom Namkhai Dorje, unpublished.

²⁴ bDe-chen rdo-rje: 'Diamond of Great Bliss', Dudjom Rinpoche's *sambhogakāya* name.

Indeed, his own daughter, being Dudjom Rinpoche's predicted consort,²⁵ passed away a month later. Drakngak Lingpa himself, however, being a great treasure revealer, died a natural death.

Dudjom Rinpoche's last visit to Pemakö occurred in 1968, when he came to Tuting from Kalimpong.

On the way back from Devakota, we passed by a rock in which a treasure is concealed. Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche had told me about this treasure, which is reserved for a future treasure revealer. The treasure is termed Tergyi Gyadün tra (*gter-gyi rgya-bdun bkra*), 'the treasure whose seven seals are brilliantly visible'. The name refers to seven rope-like designs which can be distinguished on the rock's surface.

Later that morning we stopped at the temple of Tulku Ogyan Phuntsok,²⁶ the emanation of Tokden Sithar Rinpoche.²⁷ The latter had built this temple on Dudjom Rinpoche's behest, so as to preserve the relics which the latter had just brought to Pemakö from Tibet. It houses relics of Lama Konrap,²⁸ Dudjom Rinpoche's stepfather and teacher, as well as of his mother. Tulku Ogyan Phuntsok is a young man of about thirty, with an excellent command of English. We had a pleasant conversation, during which he told us that he had recently returned from the United States where he had spent a number of years. He is currently engaged in preserving and developing this centre, and has built a number of retreat huts for his Western disciples.

Continuing our journey through the jungle, we arrived in Payingdem²⁹ village at dusk. Rinpoche had sent a party of children out to greet us, and they served us tea as we contemplated the surrounding panorama. A vast green plateau lay before us, quite different from any of the hilly landscapes we had passed through so far. The setting sun lent an air of magic drama to the scene, as only the outlines of things were visible against the red and purple sky. As we walked towards the entrance of Lhundrup Topgye Ling,³⁰ we could just make out the silhouettes of wild horses freely roaming in the pastures. I was deeply moved: after so many preparations and more than a week on the road, I had finally arrived in what seemed to be a paradise within a paradise. As soon as we were welcomed by Rinpoche, it began to pour with rain, as if to signify an auspicious omen on our arrival. Although we had just been apart for two days, we had so much to talk about as we enjoyed a warm meal accompanied by generous quantities of *chang*.

The next morning Rinpoche took us for a tour of the grounds. He showed us the classrooms where the children were engaged in recitation practice, each one seated facing a wall and reciting a scripture as fast as possible at the top of his or her voice. It was actually a very moving sight: these children and teenagers who only a few years ago had had no opportunity of education whatsoever were now able to read their prayers at such a tremendous speed. Moreover, it was clear that they did not only do this as a duty, but engaged in the exercise with their full heart, being completely lost in their devotions; I observed this on a number of occasions while there. I was also shown the water-purification system (which functions through solar panels) and medical centre set up through the kindness of Traktung Rinpoche.

²⁵ All in all, Dudjom Rinpoche had five predicted sky-faring consorts (Skt. *dākinī*).

²⁶ sPrul-sku O-rgyan phun-tshogs

²⁷ rTogs-ldan srid-mthar Rin-po-che

²⁸ dKon-rab

²⁹ Although most likely a name deriving from the local language of the indigenous Naga people, there is an ahistorical Tibetan interpretation of the name which should be recorded simply because of its charm: dPal-dbyings ldem: 'The Glorious Plateau of the Open Dimension'.

³⁰ Lhun-drup stobs-rgyas gling: 'The Site where Strength Spontaneously Unfolds'. It was sMin-gling khri-chen Rin-po-che who bestowed this name on Rinpoche's school.

Rinpoche explained to us the curriculum of his school. The aim of Lhundrup Topgye Ling foundation being to transmit the doctrinal, meditative, yogic, ritual and artistic heritage of the Tibetan *ngakpa* tradition,³¹ most of the curriculum is organized in such a way that these subjects take predominance. Hence, at first the children are taught Tibetan language and are trained in the recitation of liturgies and prayers. They also have classes in Buddhist philosophy, studying the classical texts; whereas in many religious colleges and training centres across the Tibetan diaspora it has become customary for a great number of scriptures to be covered during the curriculum, yet without the students having an opportunity to read the texts in their entirety, Rinpoche insists that his students limit their study to a few of the most fundamental texts, such as Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Thokmé Zangpo's Gyalsé Laklen³² and Nāgārjuna's *Surllekha*, and that they study these thoroughly. Also included in the syllabus are such texts as Longchenpa's Ngalso Korsum,³³ as well as the *Guhyagarbhatantra* and the *Kunjé Gyalpö Do*.³⁴ Generally speaking, the emphasis is not on endless scholastic study for its own sake, but on an integration of study and practice. The students are therefore taught the spiritual practices (Skt. *sādhana*) and tantric rituals a *ngakpa* must observe, in particular those of the Dudjom Tersar³⁵ tradition, and are engaged in completing their preliminaries (*sngon-'gro*). As the school follows the Dudjom Tersar lineage, a number of Dudjom Rinpoche's own works are also incorporated in the curriculum: these include both doctrinal works, such as his *Tenpé Namzhag* and his commentary on Ngari Panchen's *Domsum Namngé*, and historical writings, such as his *Chöjung* and his *Gyalrap*. The students also receive instruction in modern disciplines such as English, Hindi and mathematics, so as to offer them a basic preparation for the contemporary world. Other traditional subjects taught at the school include astrology, which encompasses both astrological calculations relating to matters of life (*skyes-rtsis*) and those relating to matters of death (*gshin-rtsis*), and traditional crafts, such as the making of hand-woven *ngakpa* shawls and the manufacturing of *damaru* drums for the practice of cutting (*gcod*).³⁶ The latter are shaped on a machine with peddles somewhat akin to a bicycle: one person must quickly peddle while another holds the drum near the borer. Apart from these religious items, the children can also make bags and bowls. I was told that Lama Yeshe Dorje from Devakoṭa had come to the school the previous year and taught the children carpentry. Such handicrafts, apart from preserving the artistic traditions of the *ngakpas*, also have a practical value. By selling these items in the West, Rinpoche is able to give the students money for their work. In this far-off region where people do not necessarily perceive the value of education and tend to require their children's assistance in the fields, this helps to convince their families of the usefulness of keeping their offspring in the school. It is particularly difficult for girls to receive a good schooling: if a family has saved some money, they will spend it on their son's education, whereas girls are expected to help with household chores, with keeping their younger siblings and with work in the fields. Therefore it has been necessary for Rinpoche to establish a nursery where the younger children can be

³¹ The term *ngakpa* (*sngags-pa*; Skt. *mantrin*) refers to a non-celibate tantric priest, specialized in the practice of the secret *mantra* vehicle (*gsang-sngags-kyi theg-pa*; Skt. *guhyamantrayāna*). It should be noted that the feminine equivalent of this term is *ngakma* (*sngags-ma*), which refers to a female practitioner of the secret *mantra* vehicle. This should be distinguished from *ngakmo* (*sngags-mo*), which simply signifies the wife of a *ngakpa*, who may or may not be a practitioner in her own right.

³² *rGyal-sras lag-len so-bdun-ma* by Thogs-med bzang-po (1295-1369).

³³ *Ngal-gso skor-gsum* by Klong-chen-pa (1308-63).

³⁴ *Kun-byed rgyal-po'i mdo*

³⁵ The bDud-'joms gter-gsar comprises both the revelations of bDud-'joms gling-pa and those of bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje.

³⁶ This practice is called 'cutting' (*gcod*) because it involves the cutting of conceptual self-grasping, in particular as such self-grasping tends to identify the mistaken sense of self with the body.

looked after while their elder sisters attend the school. Furthermore, a medical centre has been established which provides basic medical attention to the local villagers; the nearest hospital is in Tuting, so that the sick must otherwise be carried there by back.

Thus it can be seen that in order to be successful, Rinpoche's project at Lhundrup Topgye Ling has had to take into account a number of interconnected areas, each of which is important in its own right and affects the others. Thanks to Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche's selfless efforts and the generous financial help provided by Traktung Rinpoche and the other donors, it has been possible to establish a centre for the preservation and transmission of the *ngakpa* tradition in all its manifold richness in a region which is as beautiful as it is remote. Judging from the enthusiasm the students display towards their studies and from the warm response of the villagers, it can be confidently asserted that this school is beginning to achieve its goal. It is certainly a pioneering project, both in terms of being a centre *specifically* dedicated to the training of young *ngakpas* and *ngakmas*, and in terms of being the first non-governmental school in the area.

It is my firm belief that if some of these students manage to remain in the school to complete the curriculum,³⁷ their qualities will be no less than those of the learned preceptors (*mkhan-po*) coming from the famous colleges (*bshad-grwa*), and that they will be able to guide those, both in Eastern and Western countries, who wish to enter the *ngakpa* tradition. It may not be an appropriate place to do so, but I would nevertheless appeal to you from the bottom of my heart to help Rinpoche through your generosity in fulfilling this vision, both for the sake of these children of the hidden land, and for the future of the *ngakpa* tradition.

I have so far described at some length the outward aspect of Rinpoche's work in Payingdem village. There is however another, far deeper dimension involved. Pemakö is known as a hidden land (*sbas-yul*) and its opening has occurred only recently.³⁸ It is held to have been visited by Guru Rinpoche and Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal during the eighth century CE. At that time Guru Rinpoche is said to have tamed the local spirits of the place, to have concealed treasures there for future generations and in particular to have predicted that the land of Pemakö would be opened up by future treasure revealers – the emanations of his twenty-five disciples – so that those of good *karma* would be able to settle there and engage in their spiritual practice undisturbed.

Though the whole of Pemakö may thus be said to be a hidden land, there is one site in particular which Guru Rinpoche predicted as being a place where eternal youthfulness and success in religious practice could be attained, especially when Tibet would be befallen by calamities due to the negative *karma* of her people. The gateway to this place is none other than Devakoṭa, and Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche's work in Payingdem can be seen as a preparation to enter that most secret of secret lands.

Two days after my arrival was held a celebration to mark the fourth anniversary of Lhundrup Topgye Ling's inauguration. The day began with the children singing songs and performing a few dances; as 'the special *inchi* guest'³⁹ I also had to amuse them with a few songs. Then

³⁷ It should be noted that Rinpoche has devised a system of degrees integrated to the curriculum, which starts at the nursery level and leads up to the traditional *lopon* (*slob-dpon*; Skt. *ācārya*) degree, roughly equivalent to an MA. Furthermore, those of the students wishing to stay at Lhundrup Topgye Ling after their studies in order to do retreat and to pass on their knowledge in their turn will be encouraged to do so.

³⁸ Treasure revealers associated with the opening of Pemakö are bDud-'dul rdo-rje and sTag-sham nus-ldan rdo-rje. There is also a triad known as 'the three awareness-holders' (*rig-'dzin rnam-gsum*), comprised of 'Gro-'dul gling-pa, rGyal-sras bde-chen gling-pa and Chos-rje gling-pa. None of these luminaries lived earlier than the 17th century CE. Dudjom Rinpoche should also be counted among the important figures in the opening of Pemakö.

³⁹ *dByin-ji* is the Tibetan word for Englishman, and, by extension, any foreigner.

commenced what would end up seeming like an incessant procession of beautiful sky-farers (Skt. *ḍākinī*) carrying jugs full of *chang* and other delicacies. As is traditional in Tibetan culture, as soon as one's cup was but slightly emptied, they would fill it up to the brim again, so that after a while it became rather difficult to keep track of how many cups one had drunk; besides, they did this with such seamless charm that to refuse would have been very hard indeed.

After lunch we all gathered outside to watch some of the elder students along with one of the Tibetan teachers, Sangye, perform a religious dance.⁴⁰ At first two personages, one pig-faced (*phag-gdong*) and the other lion-faced (*seng-gdong*), executed a dance to tame the land (*sa 'dul*). Then a deer (*sha-ba*) came on stage and performed a dance to liberate all negative forces.

Later that day, Rinpoche handed out gifts to all the students, particularly rewarding those who had performed well in their studies. The evening was spent with more singing and dancing, alternating between traditional Tibetan-style dances and disco music.

The next day I gave a symbolic English class to the students of the school. As the time was short and as I could sense the students' receptivity to poetry and beauty, I decided to teach them to sing some poems of William Blake, and within a short while the classroom had become a divine chorus. I have qualified the class as 'symbolic' because, though it had been my original intention to spend a few months in semi-retreat in Payingdem teaching English part of the time, this plan turned out to be unworkable due to the high cost of obtaining the permit to stay there. Unfortunately, this is likely to make it difficult for those of Rinpoche's students intending to spend a prolonged period of time in Payingdem for the purpose of doing retreat and of helping the school to be able to do so. It is to be hoped that the local authorities may come to realize this and will in the future discriminate between foreign nationals who enter the area for the purpose of 'social work' and those who come as tourists.

That afternoon we all assembled for a feast gathering (Skt. *gaṇacakra*) of Tröma Nagmo. As the sun began to set, the melody of the practice sung by over sixty young voices, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of the *damaru* drums and the clinking sound of the bells, rose as an invocation to the black goddess. It was a beautiful sight to behold: the children not only knew the practice well, but clearly engaged with it from their heart; it seemed to me like a sign that here something wonderful was taking place, something of central importance and yet totally intangible: the transmission of the sacred from one generation to the next.

The following morning it was already time to leave. As we began our walk down to Tuting, I must admit that a mood of sadness came over me: just as I was settling into this paradise and getting to know the children, I felt as though I was being torn away from it again, back to the mundane realities of permits, visas and the tooting cars of the Indian planes. At the same time, I felt a profound sense of gratitude to have been permitted to enter this hidden land.

As a parting word, I pray that our teacher, Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin Rinpoche, may enjoy a long, happy and healthy life, like a delightful feast of religion, that all his activities for the welfare of beings may spread effortlessly and that his vision may be spontaneously accomplished.

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⁴⁰ Such religious dances are called '*cham*' in Tibetan; there are different dances representing a great number of religious themes and stories.

Note: To find out more about the Pemakö Project and to make a donation to support the work at Lhundrup Togye Ling School, please visit: <http://www.pemakoproject.org>

If you are resident in the UK or Europe and would like to make a donation in Euros or Pound Sterling, please visit: <http://www.nyingma.com/ogyen-cho-khor-ling/pemako.htm>

An appeal for funds has been launched to purchase a jeep, which will be of tremendous use in reducing the costs for the transport of basic goods to the school. The money thus saved will be able to be spent far more usefully on the development of the school (e.g. on the teachers' quarters which have yet to be built, etc.). While a good amount has already been collected, any further donations are still gratefully accepted; the purchase of the jeep is scheduled for spring 2008. To make a donation specifically towards the jeep, please contact Miss Lindsay Young: lindsayyoung28@yahoo.co.uk

Lopon P. Ogyen Tanyin Rinpoche and the children at Lhundrup Topgye Ling are most grateful for your generosity.