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Manepa in Ladakh: The Revival of a Religious Tradition?

Pascale Dollfus

In this essay, I first introduce the historical context of the *manipa* tradition in the wider Tibetan and Himalayan cultural arena, before focusing in more detail on its history in Ladakh. The Masters of the *mani* mantra are tantrists, who regard the fourteenth-century Tibetan yogi Thangtong Gyalpo as their founding preceptor. Among other skills, they perpetuate a fascinating exorcism known as *pho ba rdo gcog*, 'breaking a stone [placed] on the stomach', which is believed to have been performed for the first time by their guru to ward off evil and to avert misfortune. Though the *manipa/manepa* tradition is still alive in Spiti, it died out a few decades ago in Ladakh when the last representative of the two existing *manepa* lineages passed away without an heir to carry on the family tradition. Recently, however, his grandson Tsewang Dorje decided to revive the tradition.

In the second part of the essay, I trace his life story, and discuss the steps that he has taken to acquire the specialist knowledge

and religious practices needed to attain the status of a fully qualified *manepa*. The essay therefore makes a contribution to the study of contemporary Ladakh. At the same time, it raises the question of whether and how it is possible to revive the transmission of lineage-based religious practices from an earlier era in a period of rapid social change.

Keywords: Ladakh, Spiti, religion, storytelling, *manipa*.

Introduction

Among Buddhist religious specialists in the Tibetan world, there are storytellers called *manipa* (*ma ni pa*), literally ‘the one who recites *maṇi*.’ They were given this name because of their great commitment to repeating the mantra *oṃ ma ni pad me hūṃ* dedicated to Chenrezi (Tib. *spyang ras gzigs*, Skt. Avalokiteśvara),¹ the bodhisattva of compassion. They used to underline for their listeners the importance of reciting this six-syllable formula by explaining its meaning and by encouraging them to do good deeds and to feel compassion for all beings. Their repertoire, however, not only contains this famous mantra and its explanation, but also edifying stories, such as accounts of journeys to Hell.²

In the Ladakhi variant of the tradition, we can trace the lineages of two *manepa* families (*manepa* is the local pronunciation). One family settled in Leh, the ancient capital of the Ladakh kingdom, and the other in Sharnos,³ a village located in the Shara valley, sixty kilometers to the east of Leh. Stanzin Angchuk, the last performing *manepa*, belonged to the Sharnos lineage, but he passed away in 1993 without leaving an heir with the knowledge and specialist skills needed to perpetuate the *manepa* practice. For a time, it seemed as though the tradition was lost. However, acting on his own initiative, Stanzin Angchuk’s grandson, Tsewang Dorje, is now trying to revive the *manepa* tradition with the support of his family as well as his fellow villagers, and with the assistance of skilled practitioners from further afield.

In this essay, I first introduce the historical context of the *manipa/manepa* tradition in the wider Tibetan and Himalayan cultural arena, before focusing in more detail on the history of the *manepa* in Ladakh. In the second part of the essay, I trace Tsewang Dorje’s life story, and discuss the steps that he has taken to acquire the specialist knowledge and religious practices needed to attain the status of a fully qualified *manepa*. The essay therefore makes a contribution to the study of contemporary Ladakh. At the same time, it raises the question of whether and how it is possible to revive the transmission of lineage-based religious practices from an earlier era in a period of rapid social change.

The material presented here is primarily based on first-hand field research, including detailed interviews with Tsewang Dorje and his family. I have visited Ladakh almost every year since 1979 and have studied the parallel *buchen* (*bu chen*, literally ‘great son’) traditions in the Pin Valley in Spiti since 1999.

The Masters of Mani Mantras

In Tibet, the *manipa* tradition goes back at least as far as the thirteenth century, but it is slowly dying out both inside the country and outside, in exile. Called *manipa*, *mani lama*, *lama-mani*, *lama-manip*, *lochen* or *buchen* depending on the region, these storytellers are Buddhist devotees who have undergone the initiation of the bodhisattva of compassion and have acquired the *wang* (*dbang*, power) to repeat his mantra, which is said to stop rebirth and to relieve the sufferings of the six realms. They preach to people the basics of Buddhism by reciting the deeds of famous figures associated with the great cycles of Chenrezi and Indian Tantrist Padmasambhava, moving from one place to another with a small shrine and a set of *thangka* (*thang ka*, painted scrolls) that they use as visual supports or, especially in eastern Tibet, a *mani* wheel under a canopy with hanging bells (*maṇi jo khor*), and in Bhutan, a small wooden chörten known as Tashigomang (*bkra shis sgo mang*, lit. ‘bringing luck—many doors’).

Today, as in the past, these non-monastic practitioners form a disparate group. Among them are famous yogis but also lay practitioners, or celibate monks and nuns. While some are revered as respected teachers and may occupy important ritual functions and high social rank, others have never learned how to write and are regarded as beggars to whom one has to give a few coins in order to acquire merit when one comes across them reciting prayers in the temple precinct, in the market place or on a pilgrimage circuit.⁴ Prior to the 1950s, *manipa* came in large numbers to Lhasa during the fourth lunar month dedicated to the Śākyamuni Buddha to make the most of the large and generous congregation of pilgrims who had come to worship in the temples during this particularly holy month; the audience that came to listen to them rewarded them with a little money or food (measures of wheat or barley).

In Tibet, there were both male and female *manipa*,⁵ as attested in this description, illustrated by a photograph, by the Swedish geographer and explorer Sven Hedin⁶ in 1909 during his stay near Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Shigatse:

Pious visitors frequent my courtyard: two nuns, for instance, with a large *tanka* representing a series of complicated episodes from the Holy Scriptures. While one chants the explanation, the other points with a stick to the corresponding picture. She sings so sweetly and with so much feeling that is a pleasure to listen to her. (Hedin 1909: 383).

In other regions, such as Ladakh and Spiti, *manipa* are only male and most often belong to patrilineal family lineages. They are tantrists, *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*, lit. 'one who practices mantra, *sngags*'). As for their guru, they revere the great *mahāsiddha* Thangtong Gyalpo (*Thang stong rgyal po*, lit. 'the King of the Empty Plains'), who was born in Tibet at the end of the fourteenth century,⁷ and regard themselves as his close disciples or *buchen*. They follow the path of their spiritual forefather, for whom entertainment, songs, and dances proved to be a rewarding means of educating people about religious values.

The *Manepa* Tradition in Ladakh

The date when the *manepa* tradition started to flourish in Ladakh is still not known to this day. Curiously, we have very little written evidence of Ladakhi *manepa* performances, whether in local chronicles or missionaries' diaries and travel accounts. The Royal Chronicles of Ladakh (*La dwags rgyal rabs*), the most important historical source, especially for the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries when its authors described events that were contemporary to them, do not mention *manepa*. However, we know from other Tibetan sources that *manepa* were received by the 'Kings of Ladakh' at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, it was the case of Jetsun Lochan Rinpoche (1865-1951),⁸ who was born at Tso Pema,⁹ a holy lake near Rewalsar in Himachal Pradesh, and used to stay during her childhood in Sani monastery in Zaskar with her family during summer, and to visit the Indus valley. There, she met the head lama of 'the king of Ladakh' with whom she studied writing and the biographies of *délok* Khampa Adrung (b. c. 1508), Gyalpo Yulha Legpa Döndrup and others. She was given a religious painting scroll and a book, part of the ritual paraphernalia of the *manepa*.

From the age of six, the young Lochan encourages others to the recitation of *manis* in a beautiful voice. In Ladakh people were in awe because *Dharma* was preached by a child still sucking milk from her mother and everyone wept from compassion. (Havnevik 1999a: 4).

In Western sources, *manepa* 'tricks' in Ladakh have been cited since the last decades of the nineteenth century, notably by the Moravian doctors A. Reeve and Kathleen M. Heber in their book written in 1925 at the end of their twelve-year stay in Leh. However, the Hebers clearly mention that "these gentlemen wearing long red robes, [but] distinguished from lamas by the absence of caps, and by long hair plaited up in braids, close to their heads in front and hanging down to their waists behind" came from Spiti

(Heber 1926: 209). The same is true of the Italian Filippo de Filippi who led two major expeditions in Ladakh and Baltistan in 1909 and 1913-1914. In the report of his second journey, he briefly mentioned "some Spiti players" who gave a long performance when he was in Leh in 1914:

Some Spiti players gave us a long performance, a mixture of ritual, magic and mountebankery, in front of a little shrine, with its Buddha, beating the cymbals and shaking the little bell of the cult, revolving the prayer wheel, and executing whirls and dances and mimic scenes, in which a white faced clown took part. There followed displays of dexterity with sword and dagger; and long incantations ending in a mock-miracle; one man lay with a stone block crosswise on his abdomen and his confederate split it in two by hurling a large round pebble at it. (Filippi 1932: 174).

The only exception is Rev Ahmed Shah, a Christian missionary and surgeon who came from Lahore and spent nearly four years in Ladakh between 1894 and 1897. In the description of the breaking-stone ceremony and of the sword dance that precedes it, which he gives in his book *Four Years in Tibet* in a chapter dedicated to 'Sports, Amusements, and Festivals', he does not tell us where these men come from but describes them rather inaccurately as "one class of people", i.e. "wandering beggars":

Gymnastic exercises are left to one class of people; to wandering beggars who thrive by such exhibitions. One trick of these men is to apply the somewhat blunt point of a sword to the navel, the handle resting on the ground, and to balance the body and turn it round in a horizontal plane. It is, of course, pretended that the point of the sword is not blunt: this is not so in reality; sometimes the skin is protected by a small plate of metal. Another trick which these men perform is to split in two a very heavy long stone, lying across the belly of a sleeping man, by hurling another stone against the centre. It seems a somewhat dangerous method of entertaining, and this impression is increased by the behaviour of the performers who solemnly offer prayers before attempting the trick. The long flat stone weighs as much as 1,200 lbs., and it is not easy to see how the thing is so neatly done (Shah 1906: 67).

In Ladakh, as noted above, one can trace two *manepa* lineages: one in Leh, the other in Shara valley. Their descendants, however, cannot trace their ancestry further back than to their great-grandfather born in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Ladakhi scholars and

other respondents date the tradition to *rgyal po'i dus* (the period of the kings), which is very vague even if we only take into account the Namgyal (*rnam rgyal*) dynasty, which ruled from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. They base their claims on the fact that a *manepa* was appointed to the royal court and given a house below the palace in Old Leh. The building lies in ruins today. During heavy rains in 2010, the roof of the prayer room collapsed and the paintings on the walls are now in an advanced state of decay (Figure 1).

This house, over which the two families claimed ownership, was declared the property of the Leh *manepa* during the land settlement, which was carried out during the Dogra administration of Ladakh in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, the family left the house for a new one built among the fields in Tukcha near Leh. At that time, the family took the *rigs gsum mgon po* ('three chörtens representing the Lords of the three families'), a protective device, and put them above the gate of its new residence. Nobody in the family has performed for the last three generations. In the family, even among the eldest members, nobody remembers the actual name of the last *manepa* to give a performance. He is simply known as *no chung*, 'young brother.'

Nowadays, two statues of Thangtong Gyalpo stand in the family prayer room: a large one made of clay, perhaps seventy centimeters high, and a small one made of wood. When performing away from home, their *manepa* ancestor used to take the second of these statues along with his travelling altar-like box. However, there are no narrative

paintings and no *manepa*-specific objects such as the long iron cane to point to scenes on a narrative *thangka*, swords for the eponymous dance, conch-shell ornaments, or a headdress. There is little to remind them of their ancestors.

According to Shara villagers and *manepa* relatives, their valley cradled the first *manepa* lineage in Ladakh. To support this claim, they argue that the valley is the only place in which a *manepa* is invited to exhort villagers to recite Chenrezi mantras at the end of funerals. People also say that even today, when *buchen* come from Spiti, they have to prostrate themselves before the Thangtong Gyalpo statue kept in the prayer-room of the *manepa* house in Sharnos and to ask him for special permission before moving on. Furthermore, according to the family, the plot of land below the palace on which the so-called 'Manepa House' stands in Old Leh was given by the King of Ladakh to one of their ancestors who built a house on it. They lived there when performing in the Leh area until the Dogra invasion in 1834. However, as noted above, the house was assigned to the Leh *manepa* who was in the neighborhood when the land register was carried out.

The Art of Being a *Manepa*

Ladakhi *manepa* have never been wanderers, going from place to place all year around in accordance with religious festivals and the pilgrimage calendar. They used to have permanent residences and to own land which they cultivated. There was no ban on doing any kind of manual work for them. They could do all kinds of domestic chores, agricultural work, and other kinds of activities as all



Figure 1. 'Manepa House' in Old Leh. Dollfus, 2017

laymen did. They were usually married within a fraternal polyandry union, which until recently was the preferred form of marriage among Ladakhi Buddhists. Unlike blacksmiths and professional musicians, they were not rejected as being at the lower end of the social scale but belonged to the commoners' strata, *mangriks* (*dmangs rigs*). Like other non-monastic religious practitioners, such as *amchi* (*am chi*, medical practitioners) and *onpo* (*dbon po*, astrologers and experts in exorcisms), they were exempt from village taxes in exchange for the services that they provided to the community at large.¹⁰

Manepa in Ladakh not only repeated the six-syllable mantra, but also read, recounted, and sometimes enacted stories to exhort people to perform virtuous actions, thus providing villagers with some form of teaching. These edifying stories, called *namthar* (*rnam thar*), a term conveniently translated into English as 'biography,' are of two types: some celebrate Tibetan Buddhist heroes and focus on miraculous events, superhuman actions, or accounts of superior virtues; others are *délok* narratives. Generally speaking, *délok* ('*das log*, lit. 'those who have returned from the dead') are simple, ordinary people, mostly women, who 'die,' tour the netherworld—hells, and less often paradises. They come back to earth when the Lord of the Dead decides to send them back and tell people what they have witnessed and bring back messages from the dead to the living exhorting the latter to perform virtuous actions. The vast majority of *délok* come from Nyingmapa and Kagyupa milieus, and they see themselves as incarnations of Chenrezi.

Death, the law of *karma* and the importance of reciting *mani*—the most important practice among lay people—were their key themes. The *manepa* was called to a house when someone had died to help the deceased person's consciousness find its way through the *bardo* (*bar do*, the intermediate state between lives), and was invited to the merit-making ceremony or *gewa* (*dge ba*)¹¹ that brings funerals to a close. People in Shara Valley still remember these séances, which lasted until the death of the *manepa*'s younger brother in 2012. This performance was generally held outdoors and during daytime. An altar was erected upon which the figure of Thangtong Gyalpo, portrayed as a bearded old man, was set up along with offering bowls and butter lamps.¹² Behind this, two *thangka* were hung on poles. One portrayed the bodhisattva of compassion who is the main tutelary deity of the *manepa*; the other depicted the story of the journey to Hell of the *délok* Lingza Chökyit ('*das log gling bza' chos skyid rnam thar bzhuogs so*), a woman and mother of three children who lived with her husband

as herders in an eastern Tibetan nomadic community in the seventeenth century.

Having announced the beginning of his performance by blowing into a conch and having recited a prayer called *mani lung 'dren* (from *lung 'dren*: 'advice and quotations') that preceded most of their rituals, the *manepa* sang a brief invocation to Thangtong Gyalpo. Then, in the same singing monotone voice, he continued to recite a text called *mani külgen* (*mañi bskul mkhan*) or an exhortation to say *mani*: a psalmody largely incomprehensible to the audience and interspersed with sequences where villagers repeated in chorus the six-syllable mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion, which is believed to save a person from rebirth.

Only after that did the *manepa* begin the story of Lingza Chökit. This is an opportunity not only to talk about the universal Buddhist principles of impermanence and to describe in detail the *bardo* and the regions of hell, the torments inflicted upon the damned by the ferocious attendants of the Lord of the Dead and the King of Dharma who stands in a halo of flames at the center of the painting, but also the feasibility of obtaining a favorable rebirth through virtue and merit.

Standing near the large painted scroll illustrating the journey of Lingza Chökit to Hell, the *manepa* did not read the story but recited parts of it, pointing with his iron cane to the scenes he was describing.¹³ He highlighted the relationship that links sin and punishment, a good deed and a reward. The punishment fits the crime. In Hell, people are placed among *pretas* (hungry ghosts) for being stingy, or crushed under the weight of holy books for omitting passages when reciting them. They are trapped between two rams or goats as a recompense for brutalizing animals during their earthly lives, and their enormous tongues are pulled by a team of yaks as a punishment for shouting swear words and harming these animals when ploughing.

From time to time, he would interrupt his recitation to explain, in the Ladakhi language, expressions and words that were unknown to the audience. Indeed, as Pommarret (1997: 501) notes, "the vocabulary of *délok* accounts is simple," but all these stories are written in the 'Tibetan language' (*bod skad*) and are therefore difficult for Ladakhis to understand. At the end of each chapter, the *manepa* would stop to chant a short invocation to Chenrezi to which the audience answered by singing in chorus *om mañi padme hūm*.

In addition to mantra recitation and storytelling, *manepa* also performed rituals, for example to protect an individual or a household from envious words, *mikha* (*mi kha*,

lit. 'people's mouths'), and collective exorcisms to avert floods and other cataclysms, and more generally to prevent epidemics and illness and to ensure fertility and prosperity. In fact, when questioned about *manepa*, most Ladakhis talk about the breaking-stone ceremony: an impressive ritual, in which a rectangular stone placed on a man's chest is crushed by a round dense boulder being thrown on top of it to destroy the demon that has taken up residence inside it.¹⁴

This exorcism is called *phowa dochok* (*pho ba rdo gcog*), 'breaking a stone on the stomach', or simply 'breaking a stone' *dochok* or 'stone' *do*.¹⁵ It is said to have been performed for the first time by Thangtong Gyalpo himself when building Riwoche monastery in Chung (southern Tibet) to kill a demon, which at night had destroyed what people had built during the day; a second time to kill a demon that was causing water to rise above a bridge which was being built; and a third time, at the request of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), a famous teacher whose activities led to the formation of the Gelug school, to destroy a demon spreading all sorts of diseases and killing people in Lhasa.

Nowadays, the ritual is performed to avert unfortunate circumstances and hindrances and, more generally to ensure prosperity and fertility, and not specially to ban the spirit of disease or to protect people against floods or cataclysms. It is also carried out at wedding ceremonies to bestow fecundity, and on special request, to welcome a visiting high-ranking dignitary, or for any such important event. The entire ceremony, as performed today by the *buchen* of the Pin Valley, lasts three to four hours and is enacted by a team comprising three to five men led by the head *manepa* who is called *lochen* (*lo chen*)¹⁶ here and directs the proceedings. For the occasion, he wears a headdress made of a mass of bright-colored silk ribbons, a long red robe, Tibetan boots, necklaces made of coral and turquoise beads, conch shell ornaments, charm-boxes, and a dagger tucked into his waistband.

To begin with, the *lochen* places himself under the protection of Chenrezi and requests authorization to carry out Thangtong Gyalpo's teachings. Then, while ringing cymbals, he leads a dance, at first slowly, then whirling round with increasing speed. Next to him stands the 'Goddess' *lhamo* (*lha mo*) played by a man finely dressed in red and wearing a five-lobed crown. When the dance is over, a *lukzi* (*lug rdzi*, 'shepherd') suddenly appears on the stage, holding a dough ball and a sling to hurl stones. He is clad in a long sheepskin coat turned inside out, wears a ridiculous hat, and his face is smeared with roast barley flour.

He plays a buffoon. He scoffs at the *lochen* uttering prayers and makes fun of Buddhist teachers and devotees with total abandon.

After this interlude comes the third part. The *lochen* prepares for the sword dance. He takes off his upper garment and one of his assistants attaches a piece of cloth to his naked shoulders with two safety pins. Then, he pierces his cheek with a long needle or a trident and strikes his naked arms and abdomen with a sword to demonstrate his powers. Then, seizing another sword, he begins a slow dance, swinging and raising the weapons in front of him with each step. The pace gradually increases. The *lochen* points the two swords toward his belly and balances himself on the tips of the swords which are placed either in his armpits or on his bare abdomen or even inside one of his cheeks. According to oral tradition, this sword dance was first performed by Thangtong Gyalpo to convince the demon of the superiority of his magic powers. But, as "he was unable to elicit any reaction from the demon, he decides that he will break the stone and thereby force the demon to appear to open light" (Kahlen 1993: 145).

At the end of this comes the breaking of the stone. Once fully dressed again, the *lochen* goes over to the altar where he offers food and libations while chanting the *rdo bshad* ('explanation of the stone'), which recounts the background to this ritual and its purposes. Shortly after this, he is joined by the man on whose stomach the stone is to be crushed. Once the man has lain down on his back, the heavy rectangular stone inside which the demon resides is placed crosswise on his abdomen. After a number of incantations and dances, the *lochen* drops a round dense stone onto it and breaks the larger stone. The performance ends with a dance led by the *manepa* singing and playing a horse-head-shaped long-necked lute *dranyen* (*sgra snyan*, lit. 'melodious sound').

In Hemis-shukpa-chan, a village in Sham or Lower Ladakh, T. T. Namgyal (seventy-seven years old in 2018) remembers seeing Mémé *buchen*¹⁷ of Shara and his companions in the 1950s when he was a child. When the stone was broken, everyone would rush over to pick up a splinter. There was a real scramble. These splinters of stone were considered to be blessings, *chinlaps* (*byin rlabs*). People used to put one in their storeroom so that they would never run out of flour, one in their stable to induce the birth of calves and trigger an abundant supply of milk. By way of thanks, the *manepa* and his team were given food, dry apricots, walnuts and apricot oil—the specialties of Sham—and some money.

The Revival of a Tradition

The last *manepa* to perform was Mémé (grandfather) Stanzin Angchuk from Shara valley. Born in 1915, he died in 1993 at the age of 78. His father, who was also a *manepa*, was born in Phuksey, a village situated a few kilometers further up the valley but he married uxorilocally in Sharnos.

According to people interviewed both in the valley and outside it, Mémé Stanzin Angchuk was a very great and powerful *manepa*. He was able to balance his rigid body on the tip of a sword placed inside his mouth and, perhaps even more fascinatingly, below his eyebrows, in his eyeballs. He was also a renowned raconteur. He knew more than a dozen stories but his favorite was the story of the *délok* Lingza Chökyit. The hanging scroll illustrating this story was painted in the 1930s by a relative from Phuksey. This painting, which is still in good condition, is kept in the prayer room along with his iron-pointer (*lcags mda'* or *lcags mdung*, lit. 'iron arrow'/'iron lance'), the traveling altar-box¹⁸ and the statue of the crazy saint that fits inside it. There one can also find all the ritual paraphernalia and adornments used during *manepa* performances: the 'white conch-shell of Dharma' (*chos dung dkar*), the human femur trumpet (*rkang gling*), the Five-Buddha-Family crown (*rigs lnga*) worn by the *lhamo* actor, the conch-shell ear and chest ornaments (*thong ga*), the headgear (*thod ka*) consisting of a simple woolen cap with numerous multi-colored silk streamers, the necklaces, the Buddhist rosary (*phreng ba*), the charm boxes (*ga'u*), the ritual dagger (*rdo rje phur pa*) and the pair of swords (*ral gri*). One of these swords was taken to Stok Palace Museum in the 1990s and replaced by a new one made by a blacksmith from Likche, a nearby village where Mémé Stanzin Angchuk was well known. In fact, he used to go on tour from there as far as western Tibet and westward through Sham (Lower Ladakh) up to Da-Hanu. According to his daughter and grandson, the team consisted of four men from Shara valley.

Unfortunately, Mémé Stanzin Angchuk had no male heir to whom he could pass on his art. Unlike with Tibetan *manipa*, there were no females among Ladakhi practitioners, whose skills included not only story-telling but also violent exorcisms. In fact, the sword dance and the stone-breaking that ends it and gives its name to the entire ceremony are qualified as 'men's activities' (*bu tsha'i las*) or 'men's skills' (*bu tsha'i mkhas*), in the same way as hunting, raiding or butchering. Women are regarded as being too weak to play these roles.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Tsering Mutup from Phuksey came to marry Stanzin Angchuk's eldest daughter Yangchen Dolma (born c. 1947). During his seventeen-year

career as an army serviceman, Tsering Mutup never spent any time in Shara and did not learn anything about being a *manepa*.

Mémé Stanzin Angchuk's last performance took place in the Leh Indus Stadium in 1984 when he was nearly seventy years old. He was the star guest at a cultural and religious event organized by the government. At that time, his grandson Tsewang Dorje, the son of Yangchen Dolma and Tsering Mutup, was only seven years old. However, he was very impressed by his grandfather's performances and would have followed the tradition. But he was still only a child and was not able to learn from his grandfather before the latter passed away. In 2000, Tsewang Dorje got married and had to work to earn a living.

When I first met Tsewang Dorje in 2011 he was thirty-four years old and lived in Sharnos with his wife Padma Chödol from Likche, and their three children (Figure 2). He was a teacher at the government primary school in the tiny village of Tuna (ten houses), situated five kilometers away on the opposite bank of the Indus River. He told me that his dearest wish was to revive his family's *manepa* lineage tradition but he didn't know how to go about it. As he explained:

I am from a family of *manepa*. When I was young my grandfather was already quite old. I was only a small child, so I couldn't learn this tradition. Then my father passed away. So, I had to join a local school. *Manepa*, like my grandfather, play the role of encouraging people to recite the mantra of the Buddha of Compassion.

After my grandfather passed away, I thought it was a great loss. I had thought I would continue this tradition without breaking the lineage.

Tsewang Dorje is a very devoted practitioner. He knows how to read the Tibetan scriptures. He has a good voice and already knows a lot of songs. He has inherited the long-necked lute from his grandfather and knows how to play it. He does this to earn money during wedding ceremonies and on other festive occasions. He told me that he was also very good at making jokes. All these are very important elements for being a *manepa*. *Manepa* usually belong to *manepa* lines—or 'houses,' as they are often referred to—even if this is not a rule. They were trained on the job first at home and then by taking part in their relatives' performances. Learning to be a *manepa* is achieved first and foremost by memorizing prayers, stories, songs, and ritual dances, which require complete immersion. Training is all about practice and the repetition of certain ritual activities. It is never a question of commenting on



Figure 2. Tsewang Dorje, Sharnos.

Dollfus, 2012

or discussing the texts, but of interpreting them. As there was no *manepa* in Ladakh to teach him, Tsewang Dorje contacted the *buchen* from the Pin Valley who come to Ladakh practically every year, touring in Rong and among the nomads living on the high plateaus of Changthang or among those newly settled in Choglamsar near Leh.

In 2012, Tsewang Dorje was lucky enough to meet a Japanese student of anthropology, Atsuki Nakagami, who was doing research into Thangtong Gyalpo's legacy. Thanks to him, he was able to receive from Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche the transmissions of Pema Lingpa,¹⁹ which is a fundamental condition for learning the *manepa* art, from the *buchen* of the Pin Valley, who today are the only 'masters of the *mani* mantra' to still perform the stone-breaking ceremony. After that, as luck would have it, he was granted a two-year scholarship by the Khyentse Foundation²⁰ which enabled him to go on a retreat and to undertake dharma practices at Bir monastery in Himachal Pradesh and then to go to the Pin Valley in Spiti to meet the *buchen* living there. They gave him a number of ritual texts and songs in the form of photocopies of their books and notebooks.

Back home, Tsewang Dorje arranged one of the rooms for use as a retreat and for meditation, and fitted it with a wooden board for carrying out prostrations. There, he performed the *ngondro* (*sngon 'gro*, 'preliminary practices') that, according to the Padma Lingpa tradition, must be completed and fully internalized before receiving advanced tantric practices from a qualified spiritual teacher.

As Tsewang Dorje explained: "to build a house that lasts a long time, you need to give it solid foundations. And, just as it is advisable to carefully wash a cup into which tea is to be poured to avoid wasting it due to unpleasant smells, the mind and the body need to be cleaned before pouring religion into them." These preliminary practices are designed to purify oneself of negative deeds and to accumulate merit. They consist of:

100,000 prostrations to purify oneself of pride and jealousy;

100,000 recitations of Dorje Sempa's hundred-syllable mantra²¹ to purify oneself of hatred;

100,000 mandala offerings to purify oneself of attachments;

100,000 guru yoga practices²² to purify oneself of delusion.

It took him a whole year to carry out these practices: four months spent on a retreat during the winter and then eight months spent mingling with people in their daily lives.

During the winter of 2015-16, he went to Tso Padma, where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) performed the miracle of transforming the funeral pyre into a lake after the King of Zahor attempted to burn him and Princess Mandarava alive. In this pilgrimage place, which is very popular with the inhabitants of Spiti during the cold season, he met Tsering Tobgye from Par, one of the senior *buchen* from the Pin Valley. They retreated together to Guru Rinpoche's cave above the lake. Mémé Buchen read aloud and explained a number of texts to him, all related to the breaking-stone ceremony. Among these texts one finds the *mani lung 'dren*, as well as many texts belonging to the 'explanation' genre and giving the meaning and the use of objects such as the trident, sword, bow and arrow, and stone;²³ and also of the main characters such as *lukzi* ('the shepherd') and the *mirgot* (*mi rgod*, 'wild man'), and of rituals such as the recitation of *namthar* ('liberation stories') and the sword dance. When the two men went their separate ways, Tsewang Dorje took away all these documents in the form of photocopies.

Tsewang Dorje has been on many retreats at home and has completed the preliminary practices. He has received the

initiation of the Greatly Merciful *yidam* (Chenrezi), the *wang* (*dbang*, empowerment), the *lung* (*lung*, precept), and the *thit* (*khrid*, 'practical instructions') he needed for practicing as a *manepa*. He knows how to play the lute and has learned *manepa* songs and 'liberation stories,' even if he still lacks practice. On several occasions, he has assisted *buchen* from Spiti by taking part in their performance. He has played the role of shepherd-buffoon and has been the one on whom the stone is crushed during the breaking-stone ceremony.

Now, he is waiting to do the ten-to-twelve-month-long retreat during which the future *manepa* will learn from his *guru* how to carry out the techniques and gestures specific to *manepa* practice: how to pierce his cheek with a needle or a trident; how to draw swords over his bare arms and chest without shedding any blood (*khrag ma bing*); how to perform the sword dance and to break the stone in one blow. In fact, contrary to the idea spread by Western travelers and missionaries, there are no magic tricks behind these impressive acts.

Performers are not possessed during these performances. Unlike *lha ba/lha mo* mediums, they are in total control and remember everything they have done. According to everyone who has been on one of these retreats, they are "very hard." Apprentices have to follow a very strict form of asceticism both in terms of their food and of the posture they have to adopt or of the number of prostrations they have to do, etc. It is by doing violence to one's own body that one gains power, which enables one to perform exorcisms with no risk of harming oneself and for the benefit of others.

In 2016-2017, Tsewang Dorje was unable to go on this long retreat because the government had asked him to follow a training course as part of his job as a schoolteacher. In July 2019, he spent three weeks in the Pin Valley, speaking to different *buchen* about their art and trying to find a *guru* to guide him and supervise his retreat, now scheduled for Spring 2020. As Tsewang Dorje explains, times have changed and today it is hard to find a teacher: everyone is very busy. The senior *buchen* with whom he had talked a few years ago during his first stay in the Pin Valley is now building a new house and has no time. Another, who owns many properties, is busy all summer harvesting and selling green peas, a flourishing cash crop that has gradually replaced traditional crops like barley, black peas and potatoes. In winter, everybody is free but it is freezing cold, and nowadays, most *buchen* go down to Lower Kinnaur or to Rewalsar (Tso Pema) to winter in warmer climates. Despite Tsewang Dorje's determination, the revival of the tradition in Ladakh remains an open question.

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Endnotes

1. The transliteration of a Tibetan term, according to Wylie system for transliterating Tibetan script, is given in brackets at its first occurrence.
2. To find out more about this repertoire and the stories it contains, see Dollfus (2017).
3. In what is called the 'Shara valley' there are three distinct villages known from top to bottom as Phuksey, Shara, and Sharnos which house temples that belong to different schools of Buddhism: Nyingma (*rnying ma*), Drikung (*'bri gung*) and Gelug (*dge lugs*) respectively.
4. About Tibetan *manipa* in Tibet and in exile, see Cuevas (2008), Gelle (2003, 2010, 2012), Havnevik (1999a and 1999b), Tashi Tsering (2011).
5. According to Havnevik (1999b), it would even seem that women were predominant among *manipa* in Tibet. The public appreciated their melodious voices.
6. This type of storyteller has been known in the West since the end of the nineteenth century thanks to photographs and travel accounts. See among others, Kawaguchi (1909: 483), Stein (1982), Waddell ([1895] 1974: 542) and, for a photograph taken in Sikkim by F. S. Chapman, Hoffman (1983: 134).
7. The dates of Thangtong Gyalpo's life are disputed. Tibetans attribute to this *mahāsiddha* or 'great accomplished one' an exceptionally long life of 125 years

(1361-1485) deriving from his Tantric powers. Tibetologists have agreed, however, to reduce his life span to seventy-nine years (1385 -1464). On his role as ‘the Tibetan iron bridge builder,’ see Stearns (2007); about his role as the founder of Tibetan theater, see Gyatso (1986) and Henrion-Dourcy (2017: 55-83).

8. Lochen Chönyi Zangmo, better known as Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche, was an attained female practitioner of the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions. Among her various religious roles were those of pilgrim, professional singer of manis (*mani pa*), healer, a messenger from the land of the dead (*das log*), yogini, nun, lineage-holder, visionary, performer of miracles (*siddha*), emanation, treasure-finder, religious teacher and head of a nunnery. See Havnevik (1999a and 1999b).

9. Tso Pema or, according to Ladakhi pronunciation, Tso Padma (*mtsho padma*), literally ‘Lotus Lake’, is an important Buddhist pilgrimage site that pilgrims from Buddhist Himalayan areas visited in the winter. It is also a pilgrimage place for Hindus and Sikhs. See Cantwell (1995).

10. The same is true for *buchen* living in the Pin Valley of Spiti, who are very close in many respects to the *manepa* from Ladakh. See Dollfus (2004, 2009).

11. *gewa* literally means ‘virtue’; the common word for ‘merit’ is *sönam* (*bsod nams*). But in death-related contexts *gewa* appears as a translation of the Pali term *kalyāṇa* and means anything that is morally good, auspicious, or propitious.

12. All *manepa* performances present a statue of Thangtong Gyalpo placed on a wooden box ‘altar.’ Women bring bowls of barley grains as an offering to the *mahāsiddha*, and these also function as payment to the *manepa*.

13. To tell the full story without leaving anything out, and with explanations if needed, would take one or two days.

14. The ceremony was described in great detail by George de Roerich who attended it twice in Lahaul in the 1930s (Roerich 1932). Further information is provided by A. Reeve & Kathleen Heber (1926) who saw it in Ladakh in the 1920s and Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark (1958 and 1962) who attended it in July 1938 at Patseo (Lahaul). Although Tibetologists R. A. Stein (1959) and S. Hümmel (1968) did not attend the ceremony, they analyzed it using second-hand data. More recently, in 1988, W. Kahlen claimed to have ‘discovered’ the breaking of the stone, and recorded it in full on 16-mm film, on video, in photographs and with sound equipment. For a contemporary description, see Dollfus (2004).

15. *pho ba rdo gcog* or *pho ba rdo gshag(s)*, from *pho ba* ‘stomach’, *rdo* ‘stone’, *gcog* ‘to break, hurt, smash’ or *gshag* ‘to cleave, split’.

16. This was the name given to Ratnabhadra, a student of Thangtong Gyalpo, who is said to be the first *manepa*. Ratnabhadra—originally called Rinchen Zangpo—was an emanation of Chenrezi, and received the initiation and teaching needed to become a *manepa* from Thangtong Gyalpo. When taking the monastic vow Ratnabhadra received from him the name *lochen*. (Gelle 2012: 112).

17. *Mémé* (Tib. *mes mes*, lit. ‘grandfather’): A term of address for monks and non-monastic religious practitioners, and even for young ones, and a common local descriptor for chief *manepa*.

18. This traveling altar-box, locally known as Tangam (*thang rgam*, ‘Thang [tong] box’) or Tengam (*rten rgam*, ‘religious object/support’s box’) is a double-doored wooden box that is sometimes carved and/or painted. The upper corners are sometimes decorated with five-color prayer-flags just like a real house. Some informants spoke of this box as ‘Thangtong Gyalpo’s home’.

19. Padma Lingpa (*Padma gling pa*, 1450–1521), born in central Bhutan, was a famous *siddha* of the Nyingma school. He is considered to be a preeminent *tertön* (*qter ston*, discoverer of spiritual treasures). According to N. Henry (2017), the *buchen* of the Pin valley practice the tradition of Padma Lingpa that was introduced in the Valley at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

20. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (born in 1961 in Bhutan) was recognized as the main incarnation of Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1893-1959), a major figure of the Rimé (non-sectarianism) movement within Tibetan Buddhism. Khyentse Foundation is a nonprofit organization founded in 2001 by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche to support all traditions of Buddhist study and practices, and especially oral transmissions. <<https://khyentsefoundation.org/manipa-buchen/>>.

21. Dorje Sempa (*rdo rje sems pa*, Skt Vajrasattva).

22. *guru yoga* in Sanskrit or *bla ma'i rnal byor* in Tibetan: a liturgy in which one meditates on one’s root guru as embodying the nature of all buddhas (*Rangjung Yeshe Dictionary*).

23. *gri bshad* (‘sword explanation’), *mda’ bshad* (‘arrow explanation’), *bzhu bshad* (‘bow explanation’), *mtshon bshad* (‘trident explanation’), *rdo bshad* (‘stone explanation’), or *bsgral las* (to kill an enemy by wrathful application of the *karma* of destroying).

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