

SACRED ART AMONG HIDDEN TREASURES

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Fig. 1 Terma Dorje Discovered by Dorje Lingpa (1346–1405); discovered in Senge Dzong, Bhutan; produced ca. 8th century, discovered 14th century; iron and cold gold; 6 1/8 × 1 3/8 in. (15.5 × 3.4 cm); Collection of Royal Government of Bhutan; photograph by Shuzu Uemoto, Honolulu Museum of Art, reproduced with permission from Ministry of Culture, Royal Government of Bhutan

***DORJE* DISCOVERED BY DORJE LINGPA**

Discovered in Senge Dzong, Bhutan
attributed to the 8th century, discovered in the 14th century

SUMMARY

Before the fall of the Tibetan Empire, divine yogis are said to have hidden texts and objects for later generations to uncover when they would be needed to avert crises in their time. This ritual implement, called a *dorje*, or vajra scepter, is one such “hidden treasure,” supposedly concealed by the eighth-century guru Padmasambhava and revealed five hundred years later by the Bhutanese master Dorje Lingpa. Bhutanese scholar Karma Phuntsho studies this sacred object and its prominent role in Tibetan Buddhist rituals.

The *dorje* (vajra in Sanskrit) is a very important ritual object prevalent in Vajrayana Buddhist communities in the Himalayas. Symbolizing the indestructible nature of reality and pristine awareness, it is widely used by priests as a ritual object and aid for meditation. This particular *dorje* belongs to a popular category of sacred objects known as rediscovered treasures, or *terma*, associated with Padmasambhava, the master from Swatt/Oddiyana who is said to have tamed the wild spirits and spread Buddhism in the Himalayas in the eighth century. Padmasambhava, who wields a *dorje* in his right hand, and his disciples are said to have buried religious texts and objects as treasure, or *ter*, in the earth, rocks, lakes, and statues for safekeeping. Considered a sacred heritage discovered by later treasure discoverers with special connections to Padmasambhava, such *terma* artifacts are highly valued and venerated in the Himalayan Buddhist world. This particular *dorje*, currently housed in Trashigang Dzong in eastern Bhutan, is believed to have been discovered in the fourteenth century by Dorje Lingpa (1346–1405), a leading Tibetan treasure revealer, who, like many other figures through the centuries, frequented the Bhutanese valleys in search of religious treasures and economic patronage. Aja Lam Dorje, a patriarch in the tradition of Dorje Lingpa, claimed that this *dorje* was discovered at Senge Dzong cave in northeastern Bhutan, along with a bell and *purba* dagger.¹ According to his son, Lam Kesang Chopel, the

purba dagger was lost in a temple fire, but the bell (fig. 2) was retrieved and in his possession.



Fig. 2 *Drilbu* Bell Claimed to Have Been Discovered by Dorje Lingpa; Bhutan; discovered in the 14th century; bronze; Thimphu, Bhutan; photograph courtesy Loden Foundation

TERMA CULTURE AND ART

The Tibetan Buddhist treasure culture is a unique and skillful practice of religious preservation and regeneration that started in the eleventh century during the period of Tibetan Buddhist renaissance (late tenth through the thirteenth century). This practice may have begun as a practical endeavor to bury religious articles for safekeeping as the Yarlung dynastic power of the Tibetan Empire, which patronized the transmission of Buddhism in Tibet from the seventh to ninth centuries, crumbled in the middle of the ninth century and Tibet went through an era of political chaos and peasants' revolts.

Hidden during such troubled times, the objects were then perhaps retrieved using guides and notes when the sociopolitical situation became conducive to their use from the beginning of the eleventh century, when Buddhism regained support and popularity. Thus, Tibet saw the emergence of the culture of treasure discovery, which focused on revealed knowledge in contrast to received tradition passed down from person to person.

It is quite likely that early treasure discoveries involved ordinary human procedures of recovering texts or artifacts, although the acts of retrieval may have been accompanied by some religious rituals and prayers (fig. 3). However, as the practice developed, it appears to have gone through a process of sacralization and ritualistic systematization, and it gradually evolved into a complex mystical and transcendental process involving specific sacred sites, secret codes, guides, rituals, miracles, and, above all, treasure discoverers with special connections to Padmasambhava. The objects, including texts and artifacts, came to be highly regarded as powerful pieces blessed and buried by Padmasambhava and his cohort in the eighth century, and the treasure discoverers came to be seen as exceptional beings who were associated with and predicted by Padmasambhava. By Dorje Lingpa's time, treasure discovery was not merely an ordinary practice of hiding and retrieving things but a transcendental revelation of religious knowledge and objects involving superhuman and prophetic abilities.



Fig. 3 Duntso Repa Extracting Treasure, detail of a thangka; Gangteng Monastery, Nubding, Bhutan; photograph courtesy Karma Phuntsho

Dorje Lingpa (fig. 4), considered to be an incarnation of Vairochana, a translator and master in the eighth century who worked alongside Padmasambhava, was a leading treasure discoverer—in fact, one of the five so-called king treasure discoverers, who had many other treasure discoverers as their disciples. He left behind a large corpus of revealed teachings, important spiritual and family lineages in Tibet and Bhutan, and many artistic objects, such as this *dorje*, which are said to have been discovered by him. Another king treasure discoverer, and a figure influential particularly in Bhutan and southern Tibet a generation after Dorje Lingpa, was Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) (fig. 5), the foremost spiritual figure Bhutan produced.



Fig. 4 Dorje Lingpa, detail of a thangka; Gangteng Monastery, Nubding, Bhutan; photograph courtesy Karma Phuntsho



Fig. 5 Pema Lingpa; statue; Kunzangdrak Monastery, Bhutan; photograph courtesy Karma Phuntsho

Today, in addition to dozens of volumes of texts attributed to him, one can find many statues and ritual implements believed to have been revealed by him (fig. 6).² They are now highly revered and cherished as community relics or religious heirlooms.



Fig. 6 *Purba* Dagger Discovered by Pema Lingpa; date unknown; mixed metals and gilding; 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (35 × 4 cm); Collection of Royal Government of Bhutan; photograph by Shuzu Uemoto, Honolulu Museum of Art, reproduced with permission from Ministry of Culture, Royal Government of Bhutan

There were numerous other treasure discoverers like Dorje Lingpa and Pema Lingpa. Kongtrul Lodro Taye (1813–1899), who compiled the biographies of these treasure discoverers up to the middle of the nineteenth century, enumerates some 230 treasure discoverers.³ He also compiled most of their revealed teachings in *Treasury of Precious Terma Teachings*, but the terma artifacts attributed to them remain dispersed without a proper inventory and procedure for authentication, thus often leading to false claims. The culture of revealing texts and artifacts (*terma*) continues today and, given the special status terma objects enjoy as religious artifacts, many objects have been claimed to be rediscovered treasures.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND USE OF *DORJE*

The Tibetan word *dorje* literally means “lord of stone” and refers to diamond, thunderbolt, or an indestructible phenomenon. In the Indian Vedic religion, the vajra is a scepter associated with the Vedic god Indra, the king of gods. Indra wielded the vajra, believed to have been made from a sage’s bone, as a powerful weapon against evil forces. In Buddhism, the vajra thunderbolt is presented as the handheld implement of buddhas and deities such as Akshobhya, Vajrapani, Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, and Mahakala, among others. The term *vajra* is also used as an adjective to refer to something that is adamant, such as the vajra topic, vajra seat, vajra body, vajra speech, and vajra heart. As a corollary, the adjective *vajra* is attached to the names of many deities and gods.

In the tantric or Vajrayana form of Buddhism, which is named after it, the term *vajra* bears a much greater significance and role as both a spiritual concept and a ritual object. As a concept, *vajra* refers to the ultimate nature of reality, which is indestructible, and the pristine awareness of it. Any experience or phenomenon ensconced in such nature and awareness is described as *vajra*, or adamant. As the tantric form of Buddhism is centered on the actualization of such adamant reality and awareness, it is called Vajrayana, or the adamant or diamond vehicle. The vajra as a religious object generally symbolizes such immutable ultimate nature of existence and pristine awareness of it. However, when juxtaposed with the bell with which it is normally paired, the vajra represents skillful method or compassion, while the bell represents wisdom. The vajra also symbolizes supreme bliss or appearance and male energy, while the bell signifies emptiness and feminine power. In this context, the term *vajra* is also used to refer to the male organ. Together, they represent the union of wisdom and compassion, emptiness and bliss, and male and female energy.

The vajra or *dorje* plays a prominent and ubiquitous role in Tibetan Buddhist rituals and practices and is normally, but not specifically, wielded by the leading priest. According to accounts, there are single-pronged *dorje*, *dorje* with three, five or nine prongs, and also crossed *dorje*, but the five-pronged type, known as *damtsik dorje*, and the nine-pronged, known as *yeshe dorje*, are most common.⁴ There are dorjes for peaceful activities as well as for fierce or wrathful practices. In the case of the common five-pronged *dorje*, of which this is an example, the five prongs at the top symbolize the Buddhas of the Five Families, or the buddhas associated with the center and four directions in a mandala configuration; the five prongs at the bottom symbolize the five types of pristine wisdom; the eight upper lotus petals the eight bodhisattvas; the eight lower lotus petals the eight female divinities; and the central hub Buddha Vajrasattva. In the same manner, every aspect of the *dorje* object bears spiritual symbolism. The accounts of the *dorje* also mention the ways in which it should be used together with the bell, and the benefits of possessing and using the dorje.⁵

As the *dorje* is widely used in Himalayan Buddhist rituals, they are produced and sold in great numbers, but some examples, like the one discovered by Dorje Lingpa shown above, are highly regarded for their antiquity, for their association with important figures, or for their status as rediscovered treasures. They are generally made of metal, sometimes plated in gold and also studded with precious stones. In Bhutan, one also finds *dorjes* called *damchen ledungma*, which are claimed to have been crafted by the protective deity Damchen Dorje Lekpa, using his thigh as an anvil and presented to Padmasambhava, who named him Garwa Nakpo, the dark blacksmith, in recognition of his work. The *dorjes* in Somthrang in Bumthang District and Dungkar in Lhuntse District are believed to have been made by Damchen Dorje Lekpa.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Lam Kezang Chopel, personal communication with author, August 14, 2021.

² Terese Tse Bartholomew and John Johnston, eds., *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, Exhibition catalog (Honolulu and Chicago: Honolulu Academy of Arts in association with Serindia, 2008), 304–5.

³ Kongtrul Lodöe Thaye, “Zab Mo'i Gter Dang Gter Ston Grub Thob Ji Ltar Byon Pa'i Lo Rgyus Mdor Bsdus Bkod Pa Rin Chen BaiDUr+Ya'i Phreng Ba [The Rosary of Lapis Lazuli: A Brief Account of the Profound Treasures and Treasure Revealers],” in *Rinchen Terdzö*, 2021, <https://rtz.tsadra.org/index.php/Terdzo-KA-006>.

⁴ Jigme Lingpa, “Bla Ma Dgongs Pa 'dus Pa'i Cho Ga'i Rnam Bzhag Dang 'brel Ba'i Bskyod Rdzogs Zung 'jig Gi Sgrom Mkhyen Brtse'i Me Long 'od Zer Brgya Pa Zhes Bya Ba,” in *The Collected Works of 'jigs-Med-Glin-Pa Ran-Byun-Rdo-Rje Mkhyen-Brtse'i-'od-Zer*, vol. 4 (Gangtok: Pema Thinley for Dodrupchen Rinpoche, 1985), 90, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW27300>.

⁵ See for instance Jigme Thinley Özer, “Rdo Rje Dang Dril Bu'i Bshad Pa [Explanation of the Vajra and Bell],” in *Btsan Po Mgar Gyi Dra Ba*, 2019, http://www.tbmgar.com/zwndbw.asp?id=4799&Zhg=001&NdRak_ID=ZamqowLc.

FURTHER READING

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