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## On Reconciling Buddhism and Violence: The Tibetan Army of the Dga' Idan Pho brang during the Tibet–Ladakh Conflict (1679-1683).

Federica Venturi

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# Wind Horses

## Tibetan, Himalayan and Mongolian Studies





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# Wind Horses

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*To Chögyal Namkhai Norbu*







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*On Reconciling Buddhism and Violence:  
The Tibetan Army of the Dga' ldan pho brang  
during the Tibet-Ladakh Conflict (1679–1683)\**

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ABSTRACT

By observing the relationship between the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po (d.1687), the general of the troops of the Dga' ldan pho brang that waged war against the kingdom of Ladakh between 1679 and 1684, this study examines the lead to this conflict, with a particular focus on the theoretical and practical devices used to justify the use of violence, antithetical to Buddhist principles, for political reasons.

At the core of this study is a set of well-known notions that have proved resilient throughout the years. Namely, these are the beliefs that Buddhism is a religion utterly devoted to the ideals of peace and nonviolence, and that Tibetans, as Buddhists, represent and have represented enviable paradigms of dedication to the

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cause of non-belligerence in the present as well as in the past.<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent, these perceptions are nurtured by the examples of prominent Buddhist figures such as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as by publications, movies and other popular media which emphasize this aspect of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

This romanticized concept of Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, is not wholly unfounded. In fact, while the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh present flawless models in their commitment to these ideals, it also cannot be denied that Buddhism is indeed largely pacifist in its general outlook. Proof of it may be found in its religious tenets, such as the *pañca-śīla*, the five ethical precepts to which all Buddhists conform, the first which is the prohibition of taking life. To these may be added a series of celebrated historical episodes, such as the conversion to Buddhism of King Aśoka as a consequence of his remorse for the death and devastation caused by his war of conquest against Kalinga.

Still, notwithstanding the numerous solid reasons to attribute a general pacifist intent onto Buddhism, the proverbial needle of the scale has been tipped all the way to one side, leaving little room for a balanced view and creating an equivalence between the theory and the practice of nonviolence that stretches the limits of credibility. In particular, scholars who specialize on Tibet are sure to encounter at some point the theory according to which the Tibetans, originally a fierce and bellicose race that gradually conquered the entire Himalayan plateau and eventually ventured to occupy portions of Central Asia and even the capital of the Tang empire, lost their belligerent traits and became peaceful after the introduction of Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

This notion should be reconciled with a number of historical events, including several internal and external wars, that introduce a fair amount of nuance to it. Another element that should

<sup>1</sup> An example of the resilience of this notion may be observed when considering that one of the most often cited articles on the involvement of Buddhism with violence, Paul Demiéville's "Le Bouddhisme et la guerre" was first published in 1957, but the idea that Buddhism is a quintessentially peaceful religion is still widespread.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Kraft 1992; Sundara Ramaiah *et alii*, 1991; Mun-Green, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Demiéville 2010, 17–57 (especially 21–22).

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be given consideration is the existence of a military structure within the government of the Dga' ldan pho brang (1642–1959). This administration, largely in the hands of ecclesiastical hierarchs, and thus in theory committed to the full respect of Buddhist principles, had to contend on various occasions with situations that compelled it to resort to means less than acceptable from the strictly Buddhist viewpoint. The principal question being investigated in this paper, then, is how the above-mentioned Buddhist hierarchs, ordained members of the “virtuous” Dge lugs pa school of Buddhism, interacted with the Tibetan Army, and often sanctioned military intervention in order to resolve a dispute while being fully aware of the discrepancy of its methods with Buddhist principles.

An examination of documents discussing wartime events may provide evidence as to how this question was solved both from a philosophical and practical viewpoint. Thus, this research proposes to compare two texts that deal with the same conflict and illustrate how two of the main characters involved in the war viewed it.

The war in question is that between Tibet and Ladakh, which took place between 1679 and 1684;<sup>4</sup> the two main characters are the Fifth Dalai Lama and the general of the latter's government troops, Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po. The two sources are the autobiographical diary of the Fifth Dalai Lama,<sup>5</sup> and the biography of Pho lha nas bsod nams stobs rgyal (1689–1747),<sup>6</sup> which in its initial part narrates the life of Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po, who was considered the previous birth of Pho lha nas.

The campaign against Ladakh was the last war that took place during the period of the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. While in 1679 the Dga' ldan pho brang was still a relatively new institution, which may have felt unstable and intimidated by neighboring polities, this particular war did not originate in a situation of concrete threats to the territorial integrity or power of the Dga' ldan pho brang, and thus cannot be considered a defensive conflict. Rather,

<sup>4</sup> Other conflicts mentioned in the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiographical diary are addressed in Venturi 2018, 23–47.

<sup>5</sup> *Za hor gyi ban de*, 3 vols., 2009. It was composed between 1667 and 1681; see also the translation into English of the first volume in Karmay 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981 and 2002. It was completed in 1733.

the war against Ladakh can arguably be called a war of aggression on the part of the Dga' ldan pho brang against a non-compliant neighbor. Let us review the information at our disposal.

The *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* imputes the origins of the war to the envy of the Ladakhi establishment for the success of the Dge lugs pa. This rationale is observable in at least two passages. The first, rich in metaphors, implies a certain amount of aggressiveness on the part of Ladakh against the neighboring regions of Mnga' ris khor gsum:

Then, at another time, the lord of the land of Ladakh, did not (*mi bra ba*) lack an excellent nature. Since he acted in agreement with the Dharmā, [as] Dharmarāja and secular ruler, he relied on originating virtuous results from virtuous causes, and troubling results from non-virtuous causes, the essential point being in the certainty of the result. Nevertheless, as when immaculate pure crystal or a beautiful painting are contaminated by a true impurity, they and their appearance are [still] gleaming; similarly, his mischievous and malicious ministers were clearly envious of the faith that wears the tiara of the yellow caps, which is similar to the appearance of the sun that encompasses [everything] in pervading all space. With [these] unbearable thoughts, in those regions, depending on the ascendance of whatever manifestations of flawed reasoning, and also from the perspective of regions such as Mustang, Ru thog, etc., equally without discernment, as if following the frightened screech of a rabbit (*ri bong cal sgrog* = *ri bong cal 'dregs*), they flexed their muscles (lit.: “showed their strength”) of their own initiative and gave battle on Sa dga', Gro shod, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The second passage, a few folios below, expands in the following manner:

Then, at another time, as mentioned above, as for the ruler of Ladakh called Seng ge rnam rgyal,<sup>8</sup> who had a great mass of merits, when he had no [more] previously accumulated [merits], the time to experience the ripening of karma arrived, and as for the first behaviors (*cho ga*) that caused [his] self-destruction, by means of unbearable envy for the prosperity of others, evil provoking thoughts dawned [on him].<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 20; 2002, 14: *De nas dus gzhan zhig na yul la thags kyi sa'i bdag po rang nyid dam pa'i rang bzhin btang mi bra ba | chos bzhin du spyod pas chos kyi rgyal srid skyong ba | rgya dge ba las 'bras bu dge ba | rgyu mi dge ba las 'bras bu sdug bsngal ba 'byung ba'i gnas la sogs pa las 'bras la nges pa gting phyin pa zhig yin mod kyi | 'on tang dri ma med pa'i dwangs shel gtsang ma tshon ris bzang po dang ngan pa dag gis bsalad na de dang de'i rang mdangs 'dzin pa bzhin du | de'i mdun na 'don sdig to can mi srin pa dag gi byed pas zhwa ser gyi cod pan 'chang ba'i bstan pa nyin mor byed pa'i snang ba ltar mkha' khyab tu gdal ba la mngon par phrag dog pa dang | mi bzod pa'i sems kyis yul 'khor de dag tu log par rtog pa'i rnam 'gyur ci yang shar ba la brten nas yul glo bo dang | ru thog la sogs pa'i cha nas kyang rtog dpyod med bzhin du ri bong cal sgrog gi rjes su 'brenge te sa dga' gro shod la sogs par rang nus rtsal du bton pa'i g.yul 'gyed pa.*

<sup>8</sup> The *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* usually writes Seng ge rnam rgyal instead of Bde legs rnam rgyal; see Petech 1988, 23, n. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 25; 2002, 18: *De nas dus gzhan zhig na gong du smos pa ltar yul la thags kyi sa skyong ba seng ge rnam rgyal zhes bya ba bsod nams kyi dpung*



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As expected, both passages employ an evident Dge lugs pa-centric stance. In the first, the author imputes the aggression not to the king of Ladakh himself, Bde legs rnam rgyal (r.: 1675/1678–1691; d. 1691), but to his ministers, who were jealous of the success of the Dge lugs pa. Their “faulty reasoning” eventually lead to the beginning of incursions into Mnga’ ris. The second passage maintains the same rhetoric of envy for the Dge lugs pa’s success as a cause of the hostilities, but this time attributes it to the king of Ladakh. In sum, the two passages view the beginning of the war as an understandable reaction of the Dga’ ldan pho brang to the hostile incursions of Ladakh into Mnga’ ris.

However, the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama provides additional elements and hints at a worsening of the relations between Ladakh and Central Tibet from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Apparently already in 1654 the Dalai Lama had asked the Ladakhi royal house to support the Dge lugs pa monasteries as much as the ’Brug pa establishments.<sup>10</sup> The promise seems to have not been faithfully maintained, as in 1661 the Dalai Lama sent an investigative mission to Ladakh to check the fairness of the Dge lugs pa’s treatment.<sup>11</sup> By 1669, the situation had not improved. In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama noted with some frustration that the ’Brug pa had not supplied offerings they owed to the Dge lugs pa establishments in Mnga’ ris. Moreover, they had refused to refund the losses incurred by the Dge lugs pa by replying that they had never heard of such a thing as a refund.<sup>12</sup>

*chen po dang ldan pa ni | ji tsam na sngon bsags dkar min las kyi mam par smin pa nyams su myong ba’i dus la babs pa dang rang nyid rtag par byed pa’i cho ga dang po ni gzhan gyi dpal ’byor la mi bzod pa’i phrag dog gis kun nas bslang pa’i bsam pa ngan pa ’char bar byed pa yin.*

<sup>10</sup> This request is not mentioned in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiographical diary, but only in the biography of the Sixth Rgyal dbang ’brug chen Mi pham rgyal po (1641–1717), entitled *Rgyal dbang a dzi tendra’i mam par thar pa*; see Ardussi 1977, 312–313.

<sup>11</sup> See Ardussi 1977, 314.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. *Za hor gyi bande*, vol. 2, p. 115. The entry is dated 5/VI/1669. This passage is also mentioned in Ahmad 1968, 342–344, but notice his translation is to be taken with caution.

*Tshes lnga’i nyin blo gsal gling pa’i rigs gra’i skal ba skyel bar slob dpon dge ’dun grags pa gra bcas ’byor | lding dpon dpal yags can dang lhan du mnga’ ris bde ldan gyi mi drag khul no no rgyal zer ba btang byung rung ’brug pas snum ma thon pa sogs nyes pa rnam*







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This dispute underscores one of the more characteristic threads running through the course of Tibetan history, that of competition for the largesse of a limited number of donors among the various religious establishments active in an area. In fact, it should be recollected here that since the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the royal house of Ladakh had gradually converted to the Ra lung branch of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud pa. Thus, much of the royal patronage was directed toward this school, and likely siphoned off from other traditions. Additionally, with the conquest of Guge, Zanskar and upper Lahul during the reign of the same king, the geographical sphere of influence of the royally sponsored 'Brug pa bka' brgyud pa expanded in the new districts, and Mnga' ris became an area of open competition between the newly arrived 'Brug pa clerics and the already established Dge lugs pa.

*la ngos blangs 'gyod sdom | mnga' ris kyi dge lugs tshor bdag rhyen 'di tsam zhig byed zer ba'i rgyu mtshan gang yang med par snum ma longs pa'i chad las kyi rgyu dngos shor ba rnams phyir gtod dgos zer ba'i rgyal khirms ma bas ma thos pa 'dra ba'i gtam btang 'dug pa de 'dra'i rigs la go ba bskon pa'i rgyu mtshan mang po labs kyang bser ma bskyed pa las mi snang bas lan spam pa zhig las ma btang | lding dpon can gyi sa rim kyang dge lugs kyi mchod gzhin rnams la bkal zhing rta drel tsho de mtshungs kyi gso bcug 'dug pa rang gis btsugs pa'i zam pa la rang 'gro ba chos nyid yin pas | de bzhin gshegs pa khyed sku ci 'dra byas nas phyir slog. Tr.: "On the 5th, the ācārya Dge 'dun grags pa came together with [some] monks, to bring [my] share [of offerings] for the rigs gra [council] of ['Bras spungs] Blo gsal gling. Although the lding dpon Dpal yags can, together with the one called No no rgyal, local dignitary of [king] Bde ldan of Mnga' ris, had been sent [here], the 'Brug pa, without any reason whatsoever to say they would admit their crime for such things as not providing oil, [or that] they would be remorseful, [or that] they would give a compensation of as much as this to the Dge lugs pa in Mnga' ris, sent a communication that was like they had never heard with their ears the royal law that says they must refund the property losses with a fine for the unreceived oil. Even though [I] spoke many reasons to persuade [their] ranks (rigs) like this, because it did not look like anything other than making wind, [I] gave only a facade of a reply. Even the corvée stations (sa rim) of the lding dpon were imposed onto the monastic estates of the Dge lugs pa. Similarly, [the Dge lugs pa] were forced to feed the horses and mules; [but] it is the accepted law to travel by oneself on a bridge built by oneself [i.e. they must maintain what they have built themselves]. Therefore, having acted as "Tathagata, however is your body..." [this is the beginning of a prayer that continues "...may I be the same", so the Dalai Lama is suggesting that he acted with them in the same way as they acted toward him], I dismissed them". I am grateful for the help of Gedun Rabsal (Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University) in reviewing the meaning of this passage. Naturally, any mistakes or omissions are solely mine.*





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Therefore, the aggravation of the Fifth Dalai Lama at the question of the offerings of oil and the costs of maintenance of the corvée station can be explained from this perspective. Accordingly, this episode discloses the prospect that the war between the Dga' ldan pho brang and the kingdom of Ladakh started not on account of the king of Ladakh's envy and of his exhausted storage of good karma, but rather because of competition for a limited pool of resources between the 'Brug pa and the Dge lugs pa.

Given this premise, it is opportune to illustrate now how the two texts describe the occasion in which the decision to go war was taken. In the *Za hor gyi bande*, the Dalai Lama states that he took this decision even against the council of his advisors and of his fourth regent (*sde pa*), Blo bzang sbyin pa (r. 1675–1679). The passage in question describes the council between the Dalai Lama, Dga' ldan tshe dbang, and other members of the cabinet. It states (vol. 3, 183):<sup>13</sup>

Dga' ldan tshe dbang said: “Previously in Mnga' ris the Dge lugs pa greatly flourished, as [here]. But recently because not even one or two lamas of our regions have been suitable (*ma 'pher*), the doctrine of the Yellow Hats is of very little benefit (*shin tu nyam dma' bar phan cha*), is it? Therefore, this is a reason to go to war (*mag la 'gro ba'i rgyu mtshan*)”.

But because the *sde pa* Blo bzang spyin pa<sup>14</sup> and Stag star, and so on, had not made an exact conclusion (*lhus thigs pa*, lit. “exact number, measure”) of this kind, while in agreement with what they had learnt here, to create (*chags*) pressure for the inappropriate conduct [at this] stage (*'gros*), they

<sup>13</sup> This entry is dated 28/V/1679. See *Za hor gyi ban de*, vol. 3, 183. It is also mentioned in Ahmad 1968, 345.

*Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang mnga' ris phyogs su snga sor dge lugs dar rgyas che ba de mzhin yin kyang bar du rang phyogs kyi bla ma re gnyis kyi ma 'pher bar brten ding sang zhwa ser po'i bstan pa shin tu nyam dma' bar phan cha zhig e yod re bas dmag la 'gro ba'i rgyu mtshan zer yang 'di rigs lhus things ma byas par stabs 'gros mi 'gab tshul nan chags 'di ga nas labs pa dang mthun par sde pa blo bzang spyin pa dang stag star sogs kyi shol biab kyang nged chos ma byung phyin bla ma'i gsol ras za yin bsdad par dgos pa mi 'dug pas bstan pa'i zhabs tog bsrub rtsis kyi mnga' ris su 'gro bar shol ma thebs gshis sde pas mthun rkyen spel te rdzong bda' | bi lig thu'i 'dod pa ltar ring 'tsho'i tshigs bcad kyi lungs bklags | mdud pa byin rten sogs dang bcas gnam gang la thon |.*

<sup>14</sup> He acted as regent to the Dalai Lama before Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. According to Petech 1988b, 134–135, he was installed on 27/VIII/1675 and resigned on 13/V/1679, just about two weeks before the council described above. Notice, however, that at the time of the council Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho had not yet been officially appointed, as his regency began on 6/VI/1679, so about a week after the council. For one so close to the highest political appointment within the Dga' ldan pho brang, he was strangely absent from this meeting.



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objected (*bshol btab*). I, as donation (*gsol ras zas*) to the lama until the Dharma appeared, should not have stayed put, consequently, calculating to achieve service for the doctrine, I did not object to going into Mnga' ris. Therefore (*gshis*) the *sde pa* increased the favorable conditions and dispatched [the army]. According to the wishes of Biligthu, [I] read verse scriptures of long life and [made] the [protective] knot, blessed supports, etc., and [they] left on the new moon.

An analysis of this passage reveals that the first suggestion to declare war arrived from Dga' ldan tshe dbang. Then, the Fifth Dalai lama took personally the responsibility to agree to such proposal, admitting to have no objections to intervene in Mnga' ris, as it would have been of benefit to the doctrine. Finally, this passage emphasizes the fact that the actual logistical preparations for the war and the orders to dispatch the troops were managed by the regent, who seems to have been charged with the logistical aspects. The division of roles seems clear, and indicates the existence of a structured and stratified administration.

This passage illustrates that the Fifth Dalai Lama supported the employment of the Tibetan army against Ladakh not as a form of defense of his state from aggressive neighbors, but rather as an offensive move in order to expand and consolidate his supremacy.

In this respect, the war against Ladakh is similar to the campaigns that preceded his enthronement in 1642, namely the one against the king of Beri and his Bon supporters in Khams and that against the Gtsang pa *sde srid* and the Karma bka' brgyud pa. However, if for these first two wars of conquest the Fifth Dalai Lama attempted to deflect responsibility to Gushri Khan himself or to his own treasurer Bsod nam Chos 'phel,<sup>15</sup> in this case the military decision to go ahead and dispatch troops in order to gain control of Mnga' ris seems to be squarely in the hands of the Fifth Dalai Lama himself.

Still, as the Dalai lama sided with the advice of Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang, it is to this figure that we shall now turn. Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po is better known as the general that commanded the Mongol and Tibetan forces against Ladakh. His role was first highlighted by Luciano Petech in his contributions to the history of the Tibet-Ladakh-Moghul war,<sup>16</sup> but in light of the

<sup>15</sup> See Karmay 2003, 70–72 and 2014, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Petech 1977, 71–80 and 1988, 19–44.



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aim of researching the coexistence of the army within a Buddhist establishment it is opportune to explore this figure in more detail.

His date of birth is not reported in the sources, however, the *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* dedicates some space to him and his role in this war, and it is mainly on the basis of this source that it is possible to reconstruct some details of his life. To begin with, Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po was not Tibetan. He was an Oirat, and more precisely a Khoshut of princely stock. He was in fact the son of Dalai Qongtaiji, who, in turn, was the sixth son of Gushri Khan. As the grandson of Gushri Khan, then, his presence at the private court of the Dalai Lama is not surprising. He is said to have arrived in Tibet around 1627 to undertake religious studies.<sup>17</sup> As the scion of royal and highly influential lineage he was accepted as a novice at the great monastic centre of Tashilhunpo. Successively he took monastic orders directly from the First Panchen Lama, Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570–1662), and is praised for having devoted himself wholeheartedly to the study of the Dge lugs pa curriculum. He apparently also excelled in the art of debate, as his arguments are said to have stunned his opponents rendering them unable to answer appropriately. In this way he obtained the title of *rab 'byams pa*, and was eventually selected for the task of disciplinarian (*dge skos*) of the monastery.<sup>18</sup>

It may be assumed that both his experience with debate and his role as disciplinarian prepared him for his subsequent task as a military general. In the case of debate, Michael Lempert<sup>19</sup> has shown that its often violent language, threatening physical postures and harsh methods combine to create aggressive social interactions that may seem out of place in a Buddhist monastery but have been, nonetheless, common and traditional practices in Tibet for centuries. Concerning his role as disciplinarian, Berthe Jansen has highlighted that the main responsibility of disciplinarians was the

<sup>17</sup> See Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las 2002, 597.

<sup>18</sup> On this role see Jansen 2016, 145–161. Interestingly, the fact that Dga' ldan tshe dbang was wealthy, from a storied family and well educated corresponds with the set of guidelines established by the Eight Panchen Lama on the ideal candidate for the position of “great disciplinarian” (*dge skos chen mo*) at Tashilhunpo. See Jansen, 150.

<sup>19</sup> Lempert 2012.



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executive task of identifying and punishing the monks who breached the rules of the monastery.<sup>20</sup> Punishments meted out could be harsh, and Dga' ldan tshe dbang seems to have imposed strict penalties:

Just at that time Dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po carried the burden of the activities of monastic law in that great community (i.e. the monastery of Tashilhunpo). Ill-intentioned people caused harm through acts and thoughts of hatred and envy. [He] disposed of them (*med par byas shing*) and moreover, as a basis for the distribution of goods in the estate of Bsam grub rtse, he newly built a scaffold (*khriims shing*)<sup>21</sup> as fearsome as an underground dungeon (*dong*), walking on the excellent path of whatever [suitable] method, religious or secular.

Through [his] forceful orders, all the insolent ones became cowed; and he obtained the power of making them prostrate in no time at all [...]<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it may be hypothesized that his success as a disciplinarian in Tashilhunpo, in combination with his royal lineage and his fame as a strict enforcer, eventually contributed to render him the ideal candidate both to participate in the war council described above, and to become the general in charge of the troops of the Dga' ldan pho brang against Ladakh. The problem, naturally, was that not only was Dga' ldan tshe dbang supposed to respect the *pañcaśīla*, the five moral precepts observed by all Buddhists (which prohibit the taking of life), but he had also become a monk. As a consequence, to participate in an enterprise of war involved a serious breach of his vows. The *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* and the *Za hor gyi bande* illustrate in a complementary way how the Fifth Dalai Lama and Dga' ldan tshe dbang responded to this contradiction, eventually resolving it.

<sup>20</sup> See Jansen 2016.

<sup>21</sup> I could not find the term *khriims shing* in the dictionaries. However, Petech 1972, 149 labels it as the scaffold built to execute Nga phod pa, Lum pa nas and their allies after the trial that followed the civil war of 1727–1728. The literal meaning of this word, “pole of the law”, indicates that it was some sort of structure used to mete out punishments to those who contravened the rules.

<sup>22</sup> *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 24; 2002, 17: *De'i tshe dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po de nyid chos khriims kyi bya ba'i khur bzod par byed pa las | 'dus pa'i sde chen po gang der mi srün pa dag gis zhe sdang ba dang | phrag dog pa'i bsam sbyor gyis gnod pa med par byas shing | gzhan yang gzhis ka bsam grub rtse mo'i tshong zong dgram pa'i gzhir dong du 'jigs su rung ba'i khriims shing gsar du btsugs te | chos dang srid kyi lugs gang yin pa dam pa'i lam du 'gro ba | lung btsan pos dregs ldan mtha' dag zhum zhing 'dud par byed pa'i mthu btsan po thob pa las ring por ma thogs par.*



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According to the *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*, during the above mentioned war council,

[...] As every matter of activities to be accepted or rejected [was discussed], so he (the Dalai Lama) fully counseled many single-aimed secrets to accomplish [that goal], therefore he generated consensus and accord. [He] actually dissolved the *jñanasattva* into the essence of *samayasattva*,<sup>23</sup> transferred into a drawing of king Yama, the Lord of Death. Supports that had been hand-made (*phyag gis bstar ba*) by the Victorious himself, a life-stone, life-force, etc., set ablaze the power of mind blessings; when exhorted to activities of destruction of enemies and hindrances, [they] trembled and shook, and the dispersal of sparks, etc. [and other] wondrous displays of magic became within the reach of the eyes of all, high and low people. This was kindly bestowed, and [he said]: “As for you, by means of [your] former aspirations, there is no doubt that you will be in charge with strong directives in the land of the three districts<sup>24</sup> therefore make your heart glad and happy (*yid dga’ ba dang bde ba skyed*), and go quickly!”.

When ordered thus, with intrepid bravery he (Dga’ Idan tshé dbang) proclaimed (*khas ’ches*): “I salute obediently the Omniscient; I salute obediently the leader of the world”.<sup>25</sup>

This passage shows that the order to go to war was supported by an elaborate ritual ceremony. In particular, the supernatural conclusion of this ritual, including the apparition of sparks, the shaking of the holy supports and the absorption of the wisdom being (*jñanasattva*) into the image of Yama contributed to reinforce the opinion that a conflict was the right option, and that it was supported by the deities.

However, notwithstanding this eminent display of divine approval, in the following passage the doubts of Dga’ Idan tshé dbang are discussed:

<sup>23</sup> Lit.: “vow-being”, the being or deity visualized when making a *samaya* vow.

<sup>24</sup> This expression normally indicates the three areas of ’Bras mo ljongs (Sikkim), Mkhan pa ljongs and Lung gsum ljongs, but in this case it is used as a synonym of Mnga’ ris skor gsum.

<sup>25</sup> *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 26–27 and 2002, 18–19:

*Ji lta ji ltar blang ba dang dor bar bya ba’i gnas mtha’ dag de lta de ltar sgrub pa’i gsang ba phyogs gcig pa du ma yang dag par ’doms par mdzad pas | mos blo dang yang mthun par gyur cing | ’chi bdag gshin rje’i rgyal po ri mor ’phos pa dam tshig sems dpa’i ngo bor ye shes pa mngon sum du bstim zhing | bla rdo srog ’khor sogs rgyal ba rang nyid kyis phyag gis bstar ba’i rten thug byin rlabs kyi tshan kha ’bar ba dgra bgegs gzhom pa’i las la bskul ba na ’phar zhing g.yo ba dang | me’i tsha tsha ’phro ba sogs cho ’phrul ngo mtshar ba mchog dman kun gyi smon lam gyi mthu las yul bskor gsum gyi ljongs su lung btsan pos dbang sgyur bar gdon mi za ba yin na yid dga’ ba dang bde ba skyed la myur bar dengs shig ces bsgo ba na | des kyang zhum pa med pa’i snying stobs kyis thams cad mkhyen pa bka’ bzhin ’tshal lo | ’jig rten ’dren pa bka’ bzhin ’tshal lo zhes khas ’ches shing |.*



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He also thought: “Concerning the falling on top of [my] head of the irrefutable instructions by the exalted leader, Lord of the Family, I, being fortunate, if I am able to accomplish the well-being of the doctrine and sentient beings, I will be glad even to enter in the place of great hell. Therefore, although I will certainly bear the burden of [my] deeds, nevertheless, I must also accumulate much karma by fighting in battle and taking life; therefore, as for improperly disregarding (*'da' bar byed pa*, lit. “to pass over”) the vows (*bslab khrims*) created by the *Sugata*, [my] monastic conduct will be demolished, and [I] will degenerate, destroy, transgress, [and] defeat, I will be abominable!”<sup>26</sup>

The doubts of Dga' ldan tshe dbang are clear. While he was perfectly conscious that his warlike actions would help the Buddhist doctrine, and particularly the Dge lugs pa, he was also aware that such actions would damage his own karma. How could such an unsurmountable dilemma be solved? According to the *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*, when Dga' ldan tshe dbang was about to leave for Ladakh with his troops, an emanation of Pehar possessed a man and made the following proclamation:

“From beginningless time, the one who possesses the meaningful-to-behold Master jewel of the sky (i.e. the Dalai Lama) and [myself], the main of the meat eaters, have profound links of the completely pure aspirations, therefore I authorize (*dbang*) to bring about activities which are beneficial to all the series of rebirths [of the Dalai Lama]. Also at this time there is no doubt to accomplish the immense objective that is just as the desire of the Master. Also I, king Pehar, will be a comrade-in-arms (*dpung gnyen*) and helper (*gdong grogs*) in accomplishing [this] accordingly! Also how to accomplish it [will] become clearly delineated with a variety of signs and marks of magical display. Also, the meat-eater possessing courage, through the power of [his] previous aspirations and profound oaths, performed activities for the doctrine of Lord 'Jam dpal snying po (i.e. Tsong kha pa) and for the religio-political [system] of successive Masters. Also in the future, in order to bring about immense benefit, there has to occur an uninterrupted series of rebirths, so be brave!”

Therefore, through [this] unchangeable vajra prophecy, he (Dga' ldan tshe dbang) was comforted (*dbugs dbyung*).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 27 and 2002, 19:

*Yang bsam pa | rigs kyi bdag po rnam 'dren mchog gi bka'i cod pan spyi bor lhung ba ni bdag skal bas bzang ste 'bstan pa dang 'gro ba la phan bde sgrub par rngo thogs na sems can dmyal ba chen po'i gnas su 'jug par yang spro ba yin pas | 'di tsam gyi bya ba'i khur nges par bzod mod | 'on tang yul der g.yul 'gyed pa dang srog 'phrog pa'i las du ma yang mgon par 'du byed dgos na | bde bar gshegs pas bcas pa'i bslab khrims las tshul min du 'da' bar byed pa ni dge sbyong gi tshul zhig par 'gyur zhing nyams pa' | bcom pa | ltung ba | pham par gyur te bdag thag chad du 'gyur ro.*

<sup>27</sup> See *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* 1981, 28–29 and 2002, 20:

*Nam mkha'i nor bu slob dpon mthong ba don ldan dang sha zan gyi gtso bo nyid thog ma med pa nas smon lam rnam par dag pa'i 'brel ba zab pas | skyes rabs kyi phreng ba thams cad du mgo thogs pa'i 'phrin las sgrub par dbang | da lam kyang slob dpon gyi*



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This prophetic speech by Pehar emphasized the close ties between the deity himself and the lineage of the Dalai Lamas, thus conferring authority to the words being uttered. These provided official, divine authorization for any activity, including war, that would bring benefits to the lineage of the Dalai Lamas and guarantee its perpetuation. In addition, Pehar reassured Dga' ldan tshe dbang that he and his troops would enjoy the protection and favor of the deity himself, who would show the path to victory through a series of portents and supernatural signs. Only after this speech did Dga' ldan tshe dbang feel reassured and gather his troops.

Another side of the same story is illustrated by the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Here it is recorded that on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the fifth month of the Earth-Horse year (1678),<sup>28</sup>

Dga' ldan *dge bshes* Dalai Hung taiji thought that in the same wish with his present ability to establish the Dharma, if it would occur in the future that he would bring up children and grandchildren, although it was a wishful thought, he said it was necessary to examine [if he] would or would not produce perfected Dharma, like a hermit with profound wisdom. "As for the foreknowledge which discerns the three times, I do not have [it]. I cast easy-to-carry lots of *dbyangs 'char* divination (*mo*) to ask Dpal ldan lha mo as a witness, and [this] caused the arising of a very great turbulence on the stability of the Dharma" [thus] Hung Taiji *dge bshes* himself spoke.

[Then] a golden image together with the eight closest sons of its retinue purely appeared, indicating to us the meaning to "cut the cord", like a monk who returns a lay Buddhist. [I] raised the preparatory goods,

*thugs bzhed ji lta ba'i don rlabs po che 'grub par gdon mi za | ji bzhin du 'grub pa'i dpung  
gnyen gdong grogs pe har rgyal po rang nyid kyis kyang bgyid cing | ji ltar sgrub pa'ang  
rtags dang mtshan ma cho 'phrul ji snyed pa dang bcas mngon sum du gtan la phebs par  
'gyur ro | sha zan snying stobs dang ldan pa gang yang sngon gyi smon lam tha tshig zab  
mo'i dbang gis rje 'jam dpal snying po'i bstan pa dang / slob dpon na rim gyi chos srid la  
bya ba byas shing | slan chad du yang phan pa rlabs po che sgrub par skyes rabs kyi phreng  
ba zam mi chad du 'byung dgos pa yod pas snying stobs skyed ces rdo rje'i lung 'gyur ba  
med pas dbugs dbyung ngo |.*

<sup>28</sup> See *Za hor gyi bande*, vol. 3, 114.

*Dga' ldan rab byams pa da la'i hung tha'i ji'i bsam par chos tshugs thub pa'i 'phral  
kho rang dang 'dod pa gcig pa la phugs bu tsha thams cad kyi mgo 'don lta bu byed mkhan  
zhig byung na snyam pa 'dod par 'dug kyang rab 'byams pa rang ri khrod pa lta bu'i chos  
mthar phyin yong mi yong la btag pa dgos gleng ba nged la dus gsum shes pa'i mngon  
mkhyen ni med dpal ldan lha mo dpang por gsol ba'i dbyangs 'char gyi mo 'khyer bde btap  
par chos tshugs zin par 'tshub shin tu che ba shar ba bzhin rgyu mtshan byas pa hung tha'i  
jir rab 'byams pa rang gis labs nas ban log par thag bcad 'dug don ltar 'o skol gyi ston pa  
'khor nye sras brgyad dang bcas pa'i gser sku byon gtsang | sngags thang gra tshar spus  
legs sogs sngon 'gro'i bdog pa bteg nas dge tshul gyi sdom pa len dgos zhes pa ltar blangs te  
ming dga' ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang du btags shing sog po mi skya'i gyon pa cha tshang  
sogs ster cha byas |.*





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*mantra*, sets of *thang ka* of superior quality, and so on, and I stated: “You should take the vow of novice (*dge tshul*)”. I gave [him] the name Dga’ ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang, and gifted [him] a Mongol layman’s complete set of clothes, etc.

In practice, the autobiographical diary of the Fifth Dalai Lama attributes the renunciation of the monastic vows of Dga’ ldan tshe dbang to the doubts he himself entertained on his spiritual abilities. In addition, the Dalai Lama adds a new element, which should not be neglected; the importance of assuring a progeny to the royal lineage that had rendered possible the rise to power of the Dalai Lama himself, a lineage that evidently continued to protect him.

The Dalai Lama agreed with Dga’ ldan tshe dbang’s request, which was confirmed by the results of a *mo* divination and then further by the apparition of a golden deity with its retinue, and contributed to the ceremony of “cutting the cord” with all the necessary implements. When he gave Dga’ ldan tshe dbang the vows of *dge tshul*, he imposed on him the name of Dga’ ldan tshe dbang dpal bzang po, and offered him as a gift a full set of Mongol layman’s robes. Thus, the name of the Mongol general that led the campaigns of the Dga’ ldan pho brang against Ladakh between 1679 and 1684 was his name as a Buddhist layman, received from the Dalai Lama himself well before the beginning of his military campaign. This, however, contradicts the statement in the *Mi dbang rtogs brjod* according to which Dga’ ldan tshe dbang was worried about breaking his monastic vows (see above). If the chronology provided by the *Za hor gyi bande* is correct, as it would seem, Dga’ ldan tshe dbang had already renounced his monastic vows at the time of the war council in the fifth month of 1678.

In conclusion, these episodes show that the Fifth Dalai Lama was seemingly at ease with the idea of war, and that he did not see any negation or contradiction of his Buddhist faith in approving a declaration of war. On the contrary, he employed ritual instruments to confirm the support of the deities for the decision to engage in warfare. Thus, warfare, violence and military interventions were not seen as absolutely contradictory and untouchable from a Buddhist viewpoint. Rather, in extreme cases like this, they could prevent the erosion of what the Dge lugs pa considered their legitimate sphere of influence — in this case, Mnga’ ris. Strategies to justify the use of violence included the logic of an



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action undertaken for the benefit of the doctrine, the use of divine prophecies, and of apotropaic and revealing rituals.

Differing from this view, from about the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist modernism contributed to create an image of Tibetan Buddhism as pacifist at all costs, an image that appears to be not only implausible, but also historically inaccurate.

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