

## *Vairocana Buddha at Mentsun Lhakhang in Mustang*

A DEPICTION IN RINCHEN ZANGPO TRADITION

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**B**eginning particularly in the 11th century, an important Buddhist cultural landscape evolved in Mustang, in North Western Nepal, especially in the area of the former kingdom of Lo Manthang / Mustang, with influences from Central Asia, Kashmir, West Tibet and the Pala kingdom in Eastern India, as recent research has revealed.<sup>1</sup> Over time, a close interaction between man and nature has shaped this cultural landscape, replete with centuries-old monasteries, temples and stupas, as well as recently rediscovered historically significant inhabited caves and cave-temple sites, with marvellously rendered sculptures, wall paintings and numerous scriptures.

### THE MENTSUN LKAKHANG ROCK CAVE TEMPLE

One of these historically important cave sites in Mustang is Mentsun Lhakhang, near Tetang village, presumedly the oldest cave temple

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<sup>1</sup> Thingo & v.d. Heide 1998, 2012; v.d. Heide, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2013

in Nepal, as the late Chairman of HimalAsia Foundation, Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author where able to find out.<sup>1</sup> The author has chosen to introduce the main cult figure of this temple site, the statue of the Meditative (Tathagata) Buddha Vairocana who symbolises the mirror-like wisdom of the Buddha's enlightenment.



Fig 1: Tathagata Buddha Vairocana, Mentsun Lhakhang , Mustang  
Photo taken by Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche

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<sup>1</sup> Thingo & v.d.Heide 1998, 2012.

Therein, Vairocana is surrounded in the altar room by the Meditative Buddhas - Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi, Akshobhya and Amitabha, besides a statue of Prajnaparamita and at the entrance by two ferociously faced Bodhisattvas, Vajrapaini and Hayagriva. They are found on two wooden shelf-like ledges along the walls to the right and left of Vairocana and are surrounded by beautifully rendered murals that have recently been discovered during the restoration of the temple by the author and her team.

During their earlier visits, shortly after the opening of northern Mustang for foreigners, Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author had registered the exceptionally remarkable mural paintings and elegantly modelled clay sculptures in the Mentsun Lhakhang temple which unfortunately were in a very bad condition. The paintings and clay figures they studied at the temple gave rise to the supposition that they are significantly earlier art historical evidences of Buddhism than previously thought.

After the local families who are affiliated with that temple had requested them, the author together with her team decided to renovate the roof and restore the sculptures and wall paintings inside the altar room, which had been presumedly carried out in the 11th century.<sup>1</sup>

This dating also corresponded with the research, that Ngari Thingo Rinpoche had carried out: He translated a written scroll (Bemchag) in the possession of the six families that ritually tend Mentsün Lhakhang; According to this Bemchag the temple was named after Lama Mentsün Yönten, who supposedly is the founder of the temple site. Ngari Thingo Rinpoche was moreover able to prove that Lama Mentsün Yönten was a contemporary of the famous Buddhist scholars Atisha (982-1054), Marpa (1012-1097), Milarepa (1040-1123) and Gampopa (1079-1153). All these spiritual masters spend some time in the 11th century in Upper Mustang, being on their way to the West Tibetan Kingdom of Guge-Purang, helping to

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<sup>1</sup> Thingo & v.d.Heide 1998, 2012.

create a renaissance of Buddhism, as Ngari Thingo Rinpoche brought to attention (Thingo, v.d. Heide 1998, 2012).

### **MEDITATIVE BUDDHA VAIROCHANA**

The altar room (height: 3.50 m; width: 3.05 m; depth: 2.90 m) of the temple lies in the second storey of a rock complex and is entered from a wide anteroom. The central cult figure dominating the altar room at the front side, is the clay sculpture of the crowned white Tathagata Buddha Vairochana (height: 1.00 m), who here performs a local version of the Dharmachakra mudra (gesture of teaching). The rather coarse white colouring of the body derives from later repainting. He is adorned with a five pointed jewel crown and wears earrings, necklaces, arm and wrist bracelets. The upper torso of Vairocana has broad shoulders tapering to a thin waist. He wears a red top and a red lower garment. His lower belly shows two protuberances that cross at the navel. A belt covers the navel and is holding the lower garment in place.

Seated on a lotus throne, borne by two lions, he is surrounded by a fully three-dimensional, elaborate richly adorned mandorla / aureole (height: 1.90 m; width: 2.05 m), which symbolizes the six Mahayana virtues, also called *paramitas*. The last and highest among the six *paramita* virtues, *prajnaparamita* (transcendent wisdom), is symbolized here by a Garuda at the top of the mandorla holding a Naga in its beak. The Naga is intertwined with acanthus designs that coil around two Makara bodies. Out of their gullets two venerating figures are evolving.

Vairocana and the surrounding clay statues of the Tathagata Buddhas and *Prajnaparamita* are all made with rather broad shoulders, sitting on a lotus throne, showing extremely even and harmonious modelled figures with contemplative faces, with large half open eyes, high arched eyebrows and small aquiline noses. The jewellery of the figures, in some cases lost, seems to consist of moulded elements.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES RELATED TO THE TRADITION OF RINCHEN ZANGPO

It was found that the statues sculptured in clay at Mentsun Lhakhang display obvious stylistic influences, as well as formal and iconographic similarities with clay figures at various temple sites in the Spiti and Kinnaur valley of Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Zaskar and Western Tibet. These temple sites are attributed to the great translator and artist Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055) or his students and related schools.



Fig 2: Mandorla around Vairocana at Lamayuru, Senggye Temple, Ladakh  
Photo taken by: Susanne von der Heide

Similar ornamented throne frames embracing Vairocana, symbolizing the *paramitas*, are found, for example, at the Rinchen Ling Monastery in Halji, Humla, today Far Western Nepal, which was part of the West Tibetan kingdom of Guge-Purang in the 11th century, and a place that is attributed to Rinchen Zangpo as one of the 21 minor temples, built by him (Fig. 3). Other examples are in



Fig 3: Vairocana at Halji, Humla, Far Western Nepal  
Photo taken by: Susanne von der Heide

Sumda, Alchi and Lamayuru (Fig 2 ) in Ladakh, Nako and Lalung and other ancient temple sites in the Spiti Valley, as Tabo, and Western Tibet, as for instance Tholing and Tsaparang (Fig 5), - which have been carried out presumably between the eleventh and early thirteenth century and are all attributed to the tradition of West Tibet under the main influence of Rinchen Zangpo.<sup>1</sup>

The aesthetic of shaping and modelling face and body of the figures that were found in Mentsun Lhakhang corresponds, furthermore, also in part to the clay statues familiar from the main monastic complex of Tabo in the Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh, even though the statues of Mentsun Lhakhang are not as elaborately decorated and are carried out in a more provincial style. As in Tabo, Lalung, Halji, Tholing, Tsaparang, Sumda, Alchi and Lamayuru the proportions of the clay statues of Mentsun Lhakhang follow those attributed to the Kaschmiri aesthetic that was introduced by Lotsawa Rinchen Sangpo to West Tibet in the 10th/11th century. The clay statues of these temple sites and the figures in Menstun Lhakhang follow the features of Kashmiri sculptures – for example, with broad shoulders and a slight muscular chest, with oval faces and chubby cheeks, slightly exaggerated double chins, highly arched eyebrows with an aquiline nose and narrow slanting dreamy eyes. The monastery of Tabo is closely associated to Rinchen Sangpo and his school and was founded in the year 996 by Lha Lama Yeshe Ô, the king of Guge-Purang, before he resigned and became a devoted Lama. It was renovated under the patronage of his nephew Jangchub Ô in the year 1042.<sup>2</sup> Lotsawa Rinchen Sangpo, whose home was the Guge-Purang area, had been sent by Lha Lama Yeshe Ô to Kashmir for further Buddhist studies and later also for introducing Kashmirian artists to the kingdom of Guge-Purang. He returned with scholars and texts, but also with 32 artists from the Kashmir valley to West Tibet (Handa, 70). With Rinchen Zangpo

<sup>1</sup> See Klimburg-Salter 1997, Luczanitz 2004, or Singh 2006

<sup>2</sup> See: Handa, 1994, 72, 73; Klimburg-Salter, 1997, 62 et passim;; Luczanitz, 2004, 33-56.



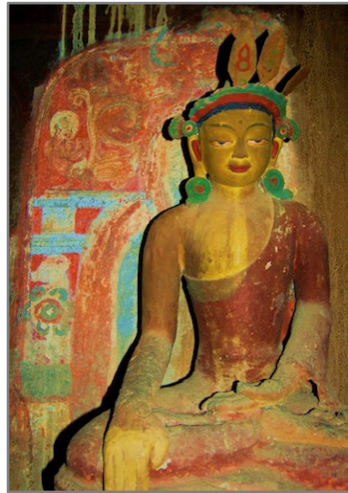


Fig 4: Tathagata Buddha,  
Menstun Lhakhang, Mustang  
Photo taken by: Susanne von der Heide

these artists created a lasting tradition of Buddhist art, with Tathagata Vairocana as the main cult figure, that had its impact not only in the Purang-Guge area, Ladakh, Zaskar, Kinnaur and the Spiti Valley, but moreover, as it seems, also in Mustang. Rinchen Zangpo had introduced the cult of Vairocana in Western Tibet in the late 10th century – after he was initiated into that cult during his stay in Kashmir, and his translations of root texts and commentaries related to Vairocana from Sanskrit into Tibetan form a part of the Tibetan canon to this day.

Together with the great Master Atisha, who was invited by Yeshe Ô and his nephew Jangchub Ô to the Guge-Purang kingdom, Rinchen Zangpo paved the way for a great Buddhist Renaissance in West Tibet and surrounding areas, and the establishment of many Buddhist monasteries in and around Guge-Purang followed, that were mainly devoted to Vairocana under his guidance. These were further followed by the foundation of temples presumed by students and related ateliers influenced by



Fig 5: Tathagata Buddha at Tsaparang,  
West Tibet, Photo taken by Li Gotami



Rinchen Sangpo - Mentsun Lhakhang is an example for this.

As late Ngari Thingo Rinpoche's research has revealed, the great Buddhist masters Atisha, Marpa and Milarepa were contemporaries of Lama Mentsün Yönten, who had established Menstun Lhakhang, having all spend some time in the 11th century in Lo Mustang area, partly on their way to Guge-Purang, helping to create a renaissance of Buddhism on initiation of Yeshe O and his nephew Jangchub O, who continued the legacy of his uncle. As we know from Deborah Klimburg-Salter (1997,34), also Rinchen Zangpo has been in Mustang, and his artistic influence is still visible at Mentsun Lhakhang.

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