

## ***Lung*: Authorisation and Transmission**

The culture of giving *lung* (ལུང་) or authorisation and oral transmission is very popular throughout Bhutan and the Himalayas. A religious teacher will often read out the scriptures for months in order to pass down the transmission of the teachings and give authorisation to study and teach the scriptures. *Lung* is one of the three modes of transmission of the teachings in Vajrayāna Buddhism alongside *wang* (དང་) or empowerment and *thri* (ཐྲི་) or instructions. *Wang* is the rite of initiation or empowerment while *lung* gives the recipient the transmission of the teachings and the authorisation to access it. *Trhi* is the actual didactic instruction on how to meditate or practice.

*Lung* in its original form as *āgama* in Sanskrit perhaps referred to a collection of sūtras which were taught by the Buddha. These *sūtras* were passed down orally before the words of the Buddha were written down in around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century before the common era. Thus, to preserve the sūtras intact, a teacher would chant the sūtras to his or her disciples passing down both the purport and words of the sūtra accurately. The students, using various mnemonic tools, retained the sūtras in their memory and passed it down to their disciples. This was perhaps the original process of giving *lung* and the reference to *lung* in the early Buddhist writings refer to such oral transmission of teachings.

After the Buddha's teachings were written down, the texts were perhaps read out as *lung* to pass on the blessings of the transmission and to also preserve the original thoughts and interpretations of enigmatic teachings. The purpose of *lung* was perhaps primarily to save the authentic teachings. Giving *lung* largely referred to a didactic process of passing down the original messages and purport of the teachings. If a master composed a new treatise, the master passed down the actual purport and interpretations of the texts by giving oral expositions on the text. It appears *lung* referred this process of passing down the legitimate and correct thoughts of the author.

Today, the *lung* practice in Bhutan and the Himalayas is a symbolic transmission of the teachings rather than an actual didactic transmission of its purport and message. The religious master who gives the *lung* transmission reads the text very swiftly and loudly and

the audience listens to the reading. Neither party makes any effort to explain or understand the purport of the text. The *lung* reading ritual is said to formally allow a person to read and study the text and also pass down the transmission line, although the disciple may not have understood anything in the given text. The Himalayan societies believe in the power of such reading as a formal process of authorisation and transmission of its blessings and impact.

Lamas are frequently asked by devotees to give a *lung* of some mantras, prayers and texts. The lama would clearly chant the mantra or the texts to the disciples. Some *lung* sessions are brief as the lama may be asked to give a *lung* of a mantra or short prayer for a few seconds while other *lung* sessions may last for months. When a high lama gives the *lung* of *Kanjur* (བཀའ་འགྱུར་) or the translations of the words of the Buddha, it can take the lama many months to finish reading the entire collection of over a hundred volumes. Yet many lamas give *kanjur* oral transmission to thousands of devotees who flock to receive such teachings for months. In such events, while the lama reads the scriptures tirelessly, the audience sits quietly listening to the reading but they do not actively follow what the lama is reading.

Bhutanese and Himalayas Buddhist seek the reading transmission of all Buddhist teachings from high lamas. Some of the very large religious gatherings such as the *Kanjur* reading in Thimphu in 2017 led by His Holiness the 70<sup>th</sup> Je Khenpo and attended by some 20,000 devotees for four months are undertaken to give the *lung* for authorization and transmission. The lama reads the texts clearly and loudly although the speed at which they read and the sheer volume they read often makes this difficult. Lamas and disciples also give and receive *lung* for the complete set the specific teaching. Merely being in the area where *lung* reading can be heard is considered to be adequate to receive the *lung*. As one of the main religious activities lamas carry out in the Himalayan Buddhist world, the practice of giving *lung* continues to flourish but there is hardly any didactic transmission of teachings, which was perhaps the original purpose of the *lung* transmission.

Karma Phuntsho is a social thinker and worker, the President of the Loden Foundation and the author of many books and articles including *The History of Bhutan*.