

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KAZI DAWA SAMDUP (1868-1922)

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Thimpu

Kazi Dawa Samdup was born to Shalngo Nimpenjo—also spelt Nim Paljor of the Guru Tashi clan²—on 17th June, 1868 in Sikkim. On the death of his mother, his father remarried, begetting three sons and two daughters from the second wife.

Among Kazi Dawa Samdup's siblings, the youngest brother Sarki Tshering—also known as Pemba Thendup according to some sources—acquired equal fame and honour in Sri Lanka as Reverend S. Mahinda Thero. In recognition of his contribution towards the propagation of Buddhism, and the development of Pali and Sinhala languages, the Sri Lankan government erected a statue in his name and also issued commemorative postage stamps in his memory. Pemba Thendup was mainly recognised as a poet monk, whose poems and songs inspired the Sri Lankan people during their independence movement. Considered as a national hero, his patriotic and devotional songs are used in school textbooks to instill a national feeling.

Kazi Dawa Samdup's early education began at the age of four learning the Tibetan script from his grandfather. Thereafter, in 1874,³ he was admitted as a boarder in the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling—later Darjeeling Government High School—where he

¹ This short biography was written by Dasho (Dr) P.W. Samdup, grandson of Kazi Dawa Samdup, who served as one of the earliest doctors in Bhutan and now leads a retired life in Thimpu, Bhutan. He can be contacted at GPO Box no 377, Thimphu, Bhutan, telephone numbers +975 2 323352/+975 17669837, email drsamdup61@hotmail.com. All the information in this biography is based upon a write-up compiled by his father, the late Mr T.T. Samdup, son of Kazi Dawa Samdup, family owned records and diaries maintained by Kazi Dawa Samdup himself, various publications of his work and accounts of Kazi Dawa Samdup's life as told by his students, some of whom include distinguished and eminent personalities such as Kazi T.D. Densapa, Secretary General, Development Ministry, Royal Government of Bhutan (first high level deputation from the Government of India to Bhutan), and Lama Karma Samdhen Paul, lecturer of Tibetan at Calcutta University and later lecturer of Tibetan at Government College, Darjeeling, where Dr P.W. Samdup had the privilege of being a student.

² [Editor's note: the Guru Tashi clan is one of the four founding clans of Sikkim to which the Namgyal dynasty or royal family of Sikkim belongs].

³ The year could have been 1874 or 1875.

impressed the headmaster Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Das. The headmaster was very pleased with the progress of his studies. His Tibetan teacher was Rai Bahadur Ugyen Gyatso, a lama originally from the Pemayangtse monastery in West Sikkim. Kazi Dawa Samdup was a very bright scholar and received a silver medal for his proficiency in the English language.

After completing school, he joined the service of British India as Chief Interpreter to the Commissioner of Raj Shahi Division and was posted at the Buxar Duar in Bhutan. During his stay in Bhutan, he came across a learned lama, Lopen Tshampa Norbu of Punakha. Kazi Dawa Samdup took a fascination to the Lopen who possessed vast mystical knowledge and led a strict ascetic life. He became a pupil of the great Lopen and received mystic initiations from him. He was so impressed by him that he almost renounced his worldly life to lead the ascetic life of a Buddhist monk. Kazi Dawa Samdup's father who was very old by then did not allow his eldest son to lead the life of an ascetic. Sometime later his father died and the responsibility of looking after his stepmother, three younger brothers and two younger sisters fell on his shoulders.

At the time, the ninth Maharaja of Sikkim Sir Thutob Namgyal was looking for a suitable headmaster, who could teach both Tibetan and English, for the state Bhutia Boarding School for boys at Gangtok. Kazi Dawa Samdup was proposed for this post by Crown Prince Sidkeong Tulku. Accordingly, his service was lent to the Sikkim Durbar in 1905 as the headmaster of the state Bhutia Boarding School at Gangtok. In addition to ably running his school, he undertook the compilation and translation of the Sikkim Gazette for Maharaja Sir Thutob Namgyal in 1911.⁴

His proficiency in the English and Tibetan languages often led to his services being borrowed for important occasions. In 1905, he accompanied the Maharaja of Sikkim to Calcutta on the occasion of the visit of the British Heir Apparent and his consort, the Prince and Princess of Wales. In 1910, his services were lent to the British Political Officer Sir Charles Bell to act as interpreter and translator during HH the 13th Dalai Lama's visit to India. In December 1911, Kazi Dawa Samdup accompanied the Maharaja of Sikkim to Delhi for the coronation Durbar of King-Emperor Edward V. In 1914, his services were utilised once again by the British Political Officer Sir

⁴ [Editor's note: the author is most probably referring to the unpublished *History of Sikkim* compiled by Maharaja Sir Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Jeshay Dolma of Sikkim in 1908].

Charles Bell during the historic Simla Convention on the Indo-Tibet Border signed between India, Tibet and China.

Kazi Dawa Samdup wanted to propagate Tibetan Buddhism to the world, and especially to the English-speaking world. This required extensive translation of difficult Buddhist and tantric texts into English and heavy publication expenses, which he could not afford. His opportunity came when the famed orientalist Dr W.Y. Evans-Wentz came to see him at Gangtok. Dr Evans-Wentz was prepared to edit and bear the publication costs. Kazi Dawa Samdup set about translating difficult Tibetan texts into English ensuring that the contents were simple enough for ordinary laymen to understand. Some of the important translations rendered by him are:

1. The Tibetan Book of the Dead⁵
2. Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa⁶
3. Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines⁷
4. Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation⁸
5. The History of Sikkim, 1908

In 1919, Kazi Dawa Samdup edited the English translation and the Tibetan text of the Shrichakrasambhara Tantra, which was published by Sir John Woodroffe as Volume 7 of the Tantrik Texts.⁹ Sir Woodroffe writes about Kazi Dawa Samdup: "These and other appointments

⁵ *The Tibetan book of the dead; or, The after-death experiences on the Bardo plane, according to Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English rendering, with foreword by Sir John Woodroffe, London, Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1927.*

⁶ Evans-Wentz, W. Y., ed. *Tibet's Great Yogi, Milarepa : A Biography from the Tibetan; Being the Jetsün-Kahbum or Biographical History of Jetsün-Milarepa According to the Late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering.* London: Oxford University Press, 1928.

⁷ Evans-Wentz, W. Y., ed. *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, or, Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path, According to the Late Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering.* London: Oxford University Press, 1935.

⁸ *The Tibetan book of the great liberation; or, the method of realizing nirvana through knowing the mind, preceded by an epitome of Padma-Sambhava's biography and followed by Guru Phadampa Sangay's teachings. According to English renderings by Sardar Bahādur S. W. Laden La and by the Lāmas Karma Sumdhon Paul, Lobzang Mingyur Dorje, and Kazi Dawa-Samdup.* Introductions, annotations, and editing by W. Y. Evans-Wentz. With psychological commentary by C.G. Jung. London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954.

⁹ *Shrichakrasambhara Tantra: A Buddhist Tantra, Edited Kazi Dawa-Samdup.* Edited by John Woodroffe. Translated by Kazi Dawa-Samdup. Tantrik Texts V. 7. London: Luzac & Co., 1919.

which the translator held and to which Dr Evans-Wentz had referred, sufficiently establish this competency both in Tibetan and English. He had also, I may add, some knowledge of Sanskrit, which I found of much use in discussing with him the meaning of terms used in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and rituals.” In addition to these major translations, he also contributed short articles for the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.

During the same year, Sir Asutosh Mukerjee, the then Vice Chancellor, appointed Kazi Dawa Samdup as Professor of Tibetan at Calcutta University where he compiled and published his English-Tibetan dictionary in 1919. The dictionary was and still remains unique because it also contains meanings in the Sikkimese and Dzongkha languages.

Kazi Dawa Samdup, being a man from the hills, could not adjust to the hot and humid climate of Calcutta. His health rapidly deteriorated till he breathed his last on 22nd March 1922 at the young age of 54 at Calcutta General Hospital. Kazi Dawa Samdup’s friend Profulla Shankar Sen writes in his obituary, “Kazi Dawa Samdup was an early riser, at 4 am he used to be out of bed. After his morning ritual of prayers, he would set about his day’s task. A hard worker who worked himself to early death in the hot climate of Calcutta. He was simple in his bearing, enjoyed long discourse with learned people.”

In addition to being an intellectual, Kazi Dawa Samdup was also a competent artist, well adept in both water and oil colour painting. He left behind some portrait paintings, including a self-portrait and religious paintings.

At his death, Kazi Dawa Samdup left behind his wife, eight year old daughter and ten year old son. The son, late T.T. Samdup, led a retired life in Kalimpong while his late sister Dorji Budar, wife of late Shap Kalon Kazi Daw Gyatso, resided at Bikstang, West Sikkim.

Kazi Dawa Samdup was a pioneer through whose efforts secrets of the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine were unlocked for the first time to the Western World.

