Kathok Monastery, King of Holy Places

Kathok Lineage is the first amongst the lineages in the Nyingma School. Its history stretches far back. Its essence is extraordinary and vast. It is the primary source of the present six lineages of Nyingma school[i]. Some stanzas from a song says:

At this eastern place named Kathok
Lion-roar prophecy of the Guru
Thirteen times blessed by Padmasambhava
Mountain shaped like a prone sleeping lion
Termas deeply hidden in the neck of lion
With karma for Padmasambhava benefitting beings
I, Tsogyal, will emanate the precious Dampa
Resting in the midst and fringe of the secret Ati doctrine
Buddhadharma's rise and fall with no fixed count
Those with affinity emerge from the gradual
Tsogyal's last place of benefitting beings
Hundred thousand rainbow bodies will be perfectly accomplished

For a long time, many termas have contained profuse praises of Kathok which were as abundant as snowflakes. There is no way to enumerate them one by one. The siddha Dechen Lingpa in his commentary to "Profound Terma - 25 supreme places in the Xi-kang" said that Do-shang[ii] was the "Sacred Place of Enlightened Activity- the Vajra Throne of Enlightenment", it is the chief of all five sacred places where Yeshe Tsogyal, who was the holder of the Vajrakilaya lineage of Padmasambhava, practiced the five activities. In a Kathok text, "Thousand Jewels of Do-Shang", there are verses stating:

In Southern Dzambuling frontier,
At the heart of the snowland of Tibet,
Kathok's unchanging Vajra throne,
Sacred place of peaceful and wrathful deities of five cycles
Numerous are the holy places for practice
Kathok is the king of holy places

Kathok is an excellent sacred place for practitioners to accomplish the rainbow light transformation body and the dakini practice. Up to present times, about a hundred thousand people have been recorded accomplishing the rainbow light transformation body there. Therefore Kathok well-deserves its accolade of being a Vajra Throne, an epithet also given to India's Bodhgaya.

Standing at Kathok Monastery and gazing afar at the horizon, its sky resembles the eight wheels of prosperity, the land is like a fully-blossomed eight-petalled lotus flower, flanking its land are geographical patterns like the eight auspicious symbols. At its rear, the mountain is shaped awe-inspiringly like a white parasol. The hills in front bear the shape of the clockwise turning conch, it signified that Kathok's fame would be spread far and wide in the ten directions. The profile of the mountain on the right has the appearance of a leaping tiger on the rocks of fortune. On the left, there is an outline on the mountain that seems to be a fragrant elephant carrying the load of eighty-four thousand tomes of Buddhist scriptures. If one peers upwards past the silk scarves dangling gracefully, in the mountain face below, there is an image of hands folded in the unmoving mudra beckoning the vast multitudes of devotees. The whole mountain is perfect and complete with the deportment of mighty Yamantaka.

In the profile of the mountain in front, at the level of the secret chakra, there was a triangular vermillion colored lake.

Above the navel chakra (Nirmanakaya chakra), there was a lion throne, multi-colored vajras, natural syllables of AH and KA, as well as parasols that seemed to be fashioned out of peacock feathers.

At the center of the mountain (its heart chakra or Dharmakaya chakra), on its left side was the place where the illustrious master Dampa Deshek saw Red Manjushri and Yellow Manjushri debating and built a large hall Chorkorling, to represent that there would be a unremitting stream of great scholars appearing in the Kathok lineage.

On the symbol of the throat chakra (Sambhogakaya chakra), there was a black rock which has a natural white syllable AH appearing on it. To the left of this AH syllable was a cave which is a holy place of accumulation of Avalokiteshvara's heart mantra called, "Batrul Lekden Ling"

At the crown chakra (Chakra of Great Bliss), there was a white peak, like a torma where all the deities of the Three Roots occasionally seemed to gather like a cloud and at times seemed to surround the Torma, partaking of the offering.

Above it, on the steep face, there was a naturally emanated image of Buddha Shakyamuni, to the left, there was a famous and sacred retreat cave called "Yangtul Dechen Ling". In the cave were many images, Dharma instruments, mantras which appeared naturally on the rock walls. Aside from that, lions, tigers, dragons and Garudas, the four wind-horse animals also appeared there. The entire Kathok monastery had numerous marvellous different practice caves.

Padmasambhava once brought his twenty-five disciples to stay at Kathok for twenty-five days and consecrated the place thirteen times (the meaning of consecration is to cause the blessings to permanently remain), Padmasambhava left a hand-print on a rock as he was blessing Kathok. It appeared as if he were clutching on to something. There were also foot-prints of both his feet and indentations made by his robes. Many images of Padmasambhava, Dharmapalas, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas also manifested naturally on the cliff-walls. Besides that, the footprints of many Dakinis who were celebrating during the Dharma festivities at Kathok were left on the boulders. It really causes one to be amazed! Its many auspicious manifestations are parallel to those in the Lotus palace of the Great Ultimate heaven in Akanistha pureland.

When the master Vairotsana went to Gyalrong, he stayed at Kathok for a whole month to practice. Kathok's first lineage master Dampa Desheg also practiced here. His practice cave is named "Dan Pu".

Below the Kathok Monastery and situated to its left was a place of 'Gonpo'. It was the site of the thousand Buddhas. The siddha Vairotsana erected a stupa at Gonpo. It was one of the many monastery/stupa structures built to tame the female Rakshasa demon which, according to ancient geomancy, the land of Tibet resembled. This place became the area where many of the reliquary stupas of lineage masters were located.

At Kathok monastery, the sacred places considered to be the emanations of body, speech and mind blessings are :

Sacred place of body - Zeqing Pawo Pungjung
Sacred place of speech - Rongpu Yulo Goba
Sacred place of mind - Lingchu Yangdak Puku
Sacred place of qualities - Dagchen Shunla
Sacred place of activities - Zhaga Dorje Pulang
The meaning of the common sacred places is the Shan-nong mountains
The uncommon sacred place is Palyul Noble Mountain

It is impossible to give complete detailed descriptions of Guru Padmasambhava's five dharma wheels of sacred places and the hundred and eight exalted holy sites. Therefore, Kathok is regarded as the second Manganda or the second Bodhgaya where Buddha arose.

As Kathok's lineage and teachings proliferated, the sangha members increased correspondingly. When it came to the time of the fifth lineage master Yeshe Bern, the lineage had prospered to a height of having 180,000 sangha members. A hundred of Yeshe Bern's disciples attained rainbow body. The rainbow body is the culmination of the highest level of spiritual attainment possible in the widely-spread teachings left for future-generations. The practitioner has integrated his physical body, nature of mind and clarity-

emptiness completely. This is identical to the wisdom body of luminosity of Buddha. The practitioner who accomplishes this may be completely obscure when he was alive but upon his death, he demonstrates that he has already realized Buddhahood and dissolves his whole body into limpid rainbow light which melts into space, leaving behind only his hair and nails. In Kathok's lineage, there have been a hundred thousand cases of rainbow body accomplishments recorded even before 1912. The silent, relentless and solid practice of these people with their body and mind has proven to the world that the Dharma is authentic beyond the shadow of a doubt.

According to historical records and supported by latter-day research, there was a magnificent story of Kathok handed down to posterity. During the construction of the Kathok monastery, there was a time when everyone was in incredible difficulties. Someone then took this opportunity to offer them a thousand sheep with the (wicked) hope that the people would slaughter the sheep as food for the builders of the monastery. The master Jangchub Pawo allowed them to kill these sheep, but after they had partaken of the meat to their satisfaction, they piled the bloody fur and bones together. The master snapped his fingers and all the sheep were resurrected without any harm. They continued to eat the grass as if nothing had transpired. All the bystanders who witnessed this were completely astonished. Jangchub Pawo snapped his finger again and in an instant, all the sheep were transformed into light and soared into the sky to the pureland of Great Bliss and Emptiness. Only a thousand sheep skins were left behind. In recent times, during the Chinese revolution, many sheep skins were found in the reliquary stupas. These sheep skins that had been left behind from a long time ago were proof that this famous tale of Kathok was not made-up.

The sixth lineage master Jangchub Pawo (Jangchub Bern) built more than a hundred monasteries of different sizes and many cabins for the sangha. As the whole of Kathok's frontal mountain was already filled with monasteries and sangha cabins, they began building on the mountain to its rear. The monastics that filled the august Kathok mountain were so numerous that the maroon-yellow colors of their robes ranging over the verdant green mountain wilderness, cast their sheen in the sheer blue sky, often filling the sky with a radiant sunset glow. It was very picturesque!

Kathok's teachings once pervaded the whole of Tibet, Nepal, India and Mongolia, Dali and Shanxi's Five-peaked Mountain and other places locally. The Kathok school's practice, during the time of Dampa Desheg, was based primarily on the sutra, illusory tantra and mind sections amongst the Nyingmapa's Generation-Completion stages and Dzogchen scriptures, namely:

Scripture section : Sutra of the Gathering of Secret Intent
Illusory Tantra section : Sutra of Illusory Web or the Sutra of Auspicious Secrets
Mind section : Mind section, eighteen root and ancillary scriptures

Other scriptures included the Guhyasamaja, Cakrasamvara and Kalachakra practices.

The teachings on the sutra section were given openly on a wide scale with teachings and practices conducted in groups. This nurtured many accomplished masters who later attained the state of Vidyadhara[iii].

The illusory tantra and mind sections were transmitted in the manner of mouth-to-ear sublime pith instructions. This unsurpassed transmission was incomparable and galvanized the unimaginable achievements of a hundred thousand rainbow bodies and their unfathomable realms of practice.

At the time of Mani Rigdzin, apart from the kama (scriptural) lineages, there were also the terma lineages of the Yang and Gu - two realized masters who revealed earth treasures. At the time of Dzongnang Kasengye, they started to practice Ratna Lingpa's termas.

During the period of Duddul Longsal Nyingpo, the Northern treasures such as Karma Lingpa's "Peaceful and Wrathful Hundred Deities of the Bardo" practice, "Embodiment of the Gurus", making a total of nine types of practices were widely promulgated.

When it came to Situ Chokyi Sengye, as he was the disciple of Jigme Lingpa, he brought the Longchen Nyingthig practices to Kathok!

From Dampa Desheg onwards, the sutra and terma baskets of scriptures consisted of thirteen large compendiums of teachings. They were the principal practices at Kathok. These were also the sources of practice done by practitioners who attained rainbow body over past generations. They were usually called the essential profound thirteen collections of teachings.

These grand and magnificent thirteen teachings are the precise compositions of the accomplished masters:

1. Zhang-dong-jie's Pith Instructions - Rosary of Views
2. Namkhai Dorje's Teachings on Semde (Mind Section)
3. Migyur Sangye Dorje's Guru's Quintessential Heart Essence
4. Yeshe Gyaltsen's Ocean of Mahamudra Core Instructions
5. Kong-ga-bern's Extensive teachings on Severance
6. Tashi Rigdzin's Dzogchen Profound Mirror of Wisdom
7. Kusali Sonam Dudjom's Profound Essential Meaning of Dzogchen
8. Horpo Chatral Gyaltsen's Direct Path to Insight of Wisdom Mind
9. Pema Madeng's Teachings on the Six Realms and Bardos
10. Rigdzin Dorwang Tsurpu's Uncommon Collection - Guru's Mind Ornament
11. Pema Madeng's Profound Path - Illuminated Meaning

12. Duddul Dorje's Dzogchen Teachings - Samantabhadra's Rainbow Body
13. Longsal Nyingpo's Phowa - Accepting and Rejecting Rainbow

A recent accomplished master Getse Gyurmed Dampa Namje collated these thirteen teachings and all its essential teachings completely into a compilation "Teachings of Pith Instructions - Precious Jewelled Mirror". It became an extremely important practice text for practitioners who were engaging in meditation.

As time went by, with successive generations, the Kathok lineage practitioners who spread out to different regions to spread the teachings began to set up their own branches and schools. By the time of the great accomplished master Longsal Nyingpo, there were more than a thousand monastics. When it came to the time of Situ Chokyi Gyatso, there were more than three thousand monastics. The strength in numbers of the sangha was no longer like before, however within the Kathok monastery there remained many valuable artifacts. These were, for instance, the hand-written manuscripts of the lineage masters, wood-carved print-blocks for various works and termas, the Kangyur scriptures written in gold ink, and various rare treasures. There were also golden statues several stories high and numerous inexpressibly marvellous Buddha images and dharma items from exceptional sources such as the entirely gold plated, three-storied high stupa that was bestowed by the national teacher Phakpa (Lodro Gyaltsen) of the Yuan dynasty. This stupa was a thanks-giving gift from Phakpa to his empowerment teacher, the fifth Kathok lineage master, Yeshe Bern. Yeshe Bern had conferred the Illusory Hundred Deities Bardo empowerment on Phakpa. Another holy object is the glass stupa presented by the king of Dali, within which is a Buddha statue cast from pure gold and an upright mandala made from elephant tusks. The king also gave seven huge offering bowls which has a diameter of three meters each. There was also a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha which was a treasure of the Wu-dang Dar-por-lee Monastery in India and many other holy objects.

What is most spectacular and highly acclaimed is the world-renowned Lotus Born mandala - the Auspicious Copper Colored Palace. Its external appearance is that of a magnificent and elegant three-level palace. Its interior contains the statues and great palatial mandala of the three kayas of Buddhahood, ie, the Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya dimensions. The wall paintings and carvings are life-like and vivid. It is like encountering the actual Sukhavati pureland directly. The stone walls, stone pillars and roof tiles are painted with gold as thick as the horse's hide. There are also gold ornaments of parasols, banners, deers, dharma wheel and a treasure vase at the roof-ridge. There were a wealth of such splendorous religious symbols and exquisite artistic treasures.

Nonetheless, the force of impermanence did not stay its hand just because it concerned the Dharma. The natural progression of formation, abidance, destruction and void continued to creep up silently on the glorious Kathok monastery in its sacred land. During the Chinese cultural revolution, the flood-gates of violence opened and invaded the Kathok Monastery loftily poised atop the highlands. All of the above-mentioned magnificent monastery, stupa

and precious holy objects were levelled to the ground in one day. Everything was looted, leaving only the rubbles as mementos for posterity. The sangha members were either forced to disrobe or exiled to foreign lands.

Before the communist party inflicted the damage, the Kathok lineage had more than three hundred monasteries scattered all over Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Mongolia, Dali and Inner China. After the revolution, there were only a total of a hundred and thirty monasteries after including those that were recently restored.

From the first founding master of Kathok, Dampa Desheg to the recent 80th lineage-holder Situ Choje Gyaltsen Rinpoche, there were a total of a hundred and twenty-three sublime masters. Situ Choje Gyaltsen passed the mantle to the present Motsa Rinpoche, Shingkyong Rinpoche and Khenchen Gyaltsen Woser (already passed into parinirvana) who respectively maintained the lineage up to its 83rd lineage-holder. Lhoga Rinpoche is the 84th lineage-holder.

After ten years of tumultuous changes, the golden throne-holders of Kathok - Motsa Rinpoche, Shingkyong Rinpoche, Khenchen Gyaltsen Woser and the present abbot and lineage-holder Lhoga Rinpoche led the masses of disciples to renew and strengthen their lineage and its norms. Relentless efforts were poured into the reconstruction of monasteries, sangha residences, Buddhist college, retreat places and the resplendent glorious Copper-colored Mountain Palace of Lotus Light, in order to establish Kathok as a center for the neighbouring or distant sangha members and laity to do Dharma practice.

In this way, by building up from the ashes, in these few years, the ancient Kathok has begun to manifest its might, just like a formidable lion that had returned from afar or an elephant that emerged from the muddy swamp. Thus, Kathok made its first sacred step on the important and far-reaching journey of propagating the Dharma and benefitting beings.

In 1992, the Tibetan monkey year, from the first day of the sixth month to the tenth day, the Thousand Sangha Grand Ceremony took place. There were a total of thirteen mandalas involved in the turning of the Dharma wheel. More than three thousand six hundred monastics and some tens of thousands of lay-people who participated in this great event.

In 1995, the Tibetan boar year, from the first day of the sixth month to the tenth day, the Ten-Thousand Sangha Grand Ceremony was held. In the ceremony, there were specially blessed nectar Dharma medicine. There were more than ten thousand monastics who came from the smaller Kathok-affiliated monasteries and included those sangha members who had received benefit from the Kathok lineage. From all parts of the world, there were more than ten thousand disciples of various nationalities, including Chinese and so forth.

The Kathok lineage, originating with the founding master Dampa Desheg till the present Motsa Rinpoche, Lhoga Rinpoche etc, with its excellent lineage, great practitioners who have attained ultimate realisation and the Bodhisattvas who have received the nectar of

Dharma have influenced countless local and foreign people. They have benefitted limitless beings through their boundless compassion and power of the Dharma. In accordance with Kathok's strict tradition of attaining realisation through genuine practice and its authentic mind-teachings, the aspirations of the lineage and its followers will benefit sentient beings, turn the dharma-wheel and forever pervade throughout samsara without ceasing!

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[i] The six Nyingmapa schools are Kathok, Palyul, Dzogchen, Shechen, Mindrolling and Dorje-drak.
[ii] "Do-shang" is the name of an ancient place.
[iii] A realized practitioner who has at least attained the first Bhumi of Bodhisattvahood