

### III: Natha means protector

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In *Karmapa, The Politics of Reincarnation (KPR)*, Lea Terhune discusses the word “natha”, which appears in the prophecy of the 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa as part of his description of the person who would nearly destroy the Karma Kagyu lineage. However, in lieu of examining the meaning of “natha”, Terhune instead introduces a new word: “nata”.

Terhune claims that “nata” means nephew, or relation:



*KPR*, Terhune: 216:

Reading Tibetan prophetic verse can be like trying to make sense of Nostradamus because of symbolic language that is difficult to interpret and words that have multiple meanings, several which may be intended at the same time. For example, *Nata* can mean “nephew” or “relation,” and it has been suggested that two nephews, Shamarpa and Topga, wished to retain power at Rumtek, though their proper role was as “protector”—another meaning of the word — of the Karmapa and his properties. But it can mean other things as well, and its usage in the text is ambiguous. Even so, the two-hundred-year-old prediction seems astonishingly prescient.

This interpretation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa’s words would appear to implicate the current Shamarpa unequivocally, since he is the nephew of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. However, there is no existing Sanskrit or Tibetan word “nata” that means nephew or relation. In this section I would like to address Terhune’s use of “nata” in her book. I present here the meaning of a similar-sounding word that does appear in the prophecy – “natha” – as it has been explained to me by Khenpo Tsering Samdup,<sup>54</sup> which coincides with Geshe Dawa Gyaltzen’s analysis.

Having professed the difficulty of understanding Tibetan prophetic verse, which author Terhune claims is endowed with multiple meanings and difficult to interpret, she then focuses on the word “nata”,<sup>55</sup> as her example. She explains that it can mean nephew, relation, or protector. Terhune’s explanation is supposed to show the ambiguity of the language in prophetic verses, yet, her own interpretation is astonishingly precise. She confidently identifies two specific individuals – Shamarpa and Topga – as being implicated in the events that unfolded, and she goes on to describe them both as “troublemakers.” How it is possible to derive such an exact conclusion from passages that Terhune herself claims are difficult to understand, is puzzling indeed. She would appear to be contradicting herself here.

More alarming than the contradiction, however, is the fact that the word used to accuse these two individuals with such certainty – “nata” – does not appear to exist.

I asked Khenpo Tsering Samdup to clarify the meaning of the word “natha”, which is found in the 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa’s prophecy. Here is his explanation:

The Tibetan word for “natha” is “mgon”,<sup>56</sup> from “mgon-po”. In his prophecy, Karmapa Dezhin Shegpa used the word “natha” without ambiguity. As found on page 286 of Sarat Chandra Das Dictionary, “natha” means “protector;” there is no mention of “nephew” or “relation,” or any other suggestion of any meaning that comes close to either of these words.

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<sup>54</sup> *The principal of Divakar Vihara, a Buddhist college in Kalimpong, India.*

<sup>55</sup> *Nata also appears in KPR 215, line 21. Terhune offers this explanation of it as an endnote numbered 160 on KPR 293: “Nata has several meanings: relation, protector, and nephew among them.”*

<sup>56</sup> *Pronounced gon.*

The abovementioned definition on page 286 of the Sarat Chandra Das Dictionary contains no reference to a nephew, or for that matter, to any relation, be it familial, professional, or social. It states:



*Sarat Chandra Das Tibetan-English Dictionary*, Sarat Chandra Das: 286:

mgon-po according to some grammarians the word mgon is an abbreviation of the words mgo-hdren (hdre being eliminated), signifying protector, patron, principal, master, lord, tutelary god; so the word is applicable to Buddha, saints, and also ordinarily to any protectors and benefactors in general. When (mgon-po) occurs as a proper name it denotes either Buddha or Avalokite'vara or Mahadeva.<sup>57</sup>

Khenpo Tsering also explained that “natha” or “mgon” can be found in many Tibetan and Sanskrit names:

One example is the famous Taranatha. This is a Sanskrit name, which translates as Drolwae Gonpo in Tibetan – “natha” corresponds with “gonpo”.

Byam Ngon (or Chamgon or Jamgon) is the short form of the illustrious Mahabodhisattva Maitreya's Tibetan name. His full Sanskrit name is Natha Maitreya (“Protector Maitreya”), and his full Tibetan name is **Byampa** (“loving”) **Ngonpo** (“protector”) or **Byam Ngon** when abbreviated. Tibetan words are often formed by joining parts of separate words, which explains why Byampa Ngonpo appears as Byam Ngon in this case.

There are other examples of names with “natha” or “ngon” in them. Eight Nyingma lamas in the past have had “natha” in their names. In every case without exception, the meaning of “natha” is consistent with “protector.”

The Sarat Chandra Das Dictionary gives three examples of Nathas who were worshipped in India. Again, the meaning of “protector” is implicit in these three deity-like spirits. It states in the definition of “mgon-po” on page 286:



*Sarat Chandra Das Tibetan-English Dictionary*, Sarat Chandra Das: 286:

In Buddhist India there were worshipped three Natha, or mgon-po, viz.: (1) Hbab-stegs mgon-po the spirit invoked to inspire one by entering one's body; (2) Nag-po mgon-po the black-spirit; (3) Bram-ze mgon-po the Brahma natha, i.e., Brahmana's spirit.

Khenpo Tsering also confirmed with great certainty that the word “nata” does not exist in any Sanskrit or Tibetan dictionary.

If Terhune's use of “nata” is simply a misspelling of “natha”, why would she define it as nephew, or relation – a meaning that is not attached to “natha” in any dictionary? Only Terhune can reveal her sources, or what dictionary she used that contained these three meanings together. Khenpo Tsering wrote to Terhune and to her publisher, requesting clarification.<sup>58</sup> To date, he has not received a reply.

So, what is the actual word for nephew in Sanskrit and Tibetan? Khenpo Tsering clarifies:

<sup>57</sup> Tibetan fonts are excluded in this quote; a photocopy of the entire page 286 is provided in Appendix A-1.

<sup>58</sup> A copy of his letter is provided in Appendix A-2.

I have found two possible translations of the word “nephew” in Sanskrit. One is “naptra”,<sup>59</sup> and the other is “bhatreya”.<sup>60</sup> Neither of these words could possibly be spelled “nata”.

In Tibetan the word for nephew – “thsawo” – is completely different from “nata”, and does not even appear in the prophecy in question. The 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa simply did not write that word, or any word meaning nephew or relation.

A well-known Sanskrit and Tibetan scholar, Sempa Dorje, has corroborated these findings. “Natha” means protection, and the word for nephew is “naptra”. He also confirmed that “nata” cannot be found in any dictionary as a translation of nephew or relation. Terhune’s “nata” simply does not exist in any Sanskrit, Tibetan, or English dictionary that we have been able to find.

Khenpo Tsering then added:

Sanskrit is the ancient language of India, stretching back thousands of years. For Buddhists, it is the language of the Buddha; for Hindus, it is the language of the gods. Manipulating it to suit one’s own interests is problematic to say the least.

Terhune may have found it difficult to “make sense” of Tibetan verses; however, this neither justifies her invention of an entirely new word, nor her use of that word to call into question the credibility of two individuals. In Terhune’s book, the 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa’s mention of “natha” has been transformed into a non-existent term. Terhune then marvels at Karmapa’s prescience regarding the two nephews, but all evidence suggests that this prescience was nothing more than her own fabrication.

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<sup>59</sup> *Chandra Das Dictionary*, page 1018

<sup>60</sup> *Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* by Vaman Shivaram Apte, published by Rinsen Book Publications.