



The Origins of Buddhism in Tibet

By Cortland Dahl

Tibetan spirituality is as rich and varied as the Tibetan landscape, which soars from the lofty peaks of the high Himalaya to the remote and hidden jungles of the Indian borderlands. Tibet is home to a multitude of Buddhist traditions and lineages, each with its own unique instructions, texts, and approaches to Buddhist practice. The influx of these lineages from India occurred in two phases.

The First Wave of Buddhism in Tibet

The first transmission of Buddhism to Tibet was initiated by a series of Tibetan monarchs that ruled the land at the height of its prestige and influence—in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries CE. King Songtsen Gampo was the first of these rulers. In addition to building numerous Buddhist temples, Songtsen Gampo formed links with the Buddhist cultures that bordered Tibet through his marriages to Chinese and Nepali princesses. Perhaps the most important development during his reign, however, was the creation of the Tibetan alphabet. In the middle of the seventh century, the king sent one of his ministers, Tönmi Sambhota, to India to study the Sanskrit language. The alphabet system created by Sambhota later allowed for the translation of the entire Buddhist canon into the Tibetan language and also served to bridge the geographic and cultural chasms that existed in Tibet at the time.

Though Songtsen Gampo is often credited with beginning the process of bringing Buddhism to Tibet, it was during the reign of his descendent, King Trisong Deutsen, that the Buddha's teachings truly took root in Tibetan soil. King Trisong Deutsen, who ruled the country in the eighth and ninth centuries and vastly expanded the Tibetan territory with fierce military campaigns, undertook the arduous tasks of building a major monastic center, translating the Buddhist canon, and inviting teachers from India to transmit the Buddha's teachings. The king also invited the abbot Shantarakshita and tantric adept Padmasambhava from India. Together, these two masters worked under the king's patronage to establish Samyé, Tibet's first monastery. Trisong Deutsen's work

was later continued by his grandson, King Ralpachen, the third of Tibet’s three “Dharma Kings.” Along with many other scholars and translators, these monarchs inaugurated a tradition of Buddhist study and practice that continues to this day.

After this flourishing of Buddhist activity during the seventh to ninth centuries, the spread of Buddhism suffered a major setback at the hands of Langdarma, the brother of King Ralpachen. Langdarma was bitterly opposed to the spread of Buddhism, which he saw as a threat to the indigenous Bön tradition. During his short reign, Langdarma worked to undo the efforts of his predecessors. His violent persecution dismantled the community of ordained monks and nuns—nearly destroying Tibet’s fledgling Buddhist community—and plunged the country into a period of political and cultural fragmentation.

Buddhism was not entirely wiped out during this dark period, however. While Langdarma and his cohorts decimated most of the monastic community, a few monks escaped to Amdo in northeastern Tibet, where they preserved the lineage of monastic ordination. The community of lay practitioners survived as well, and many tantric lineages that were transmitted by Padmasambhava and other Buddhist masters continued to be taught and practiced in secret. Thus, despite the great upheavals that took place in the ninth century, the work of Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Deutsen, and Ralpachen made a lasting impact in Tibet. The lineages that stem from this first spreading of Buddhism to Tibet came to be known as the *Nyingma*, or Ancient School.

The Nyingma tradition holds unique teachings that are not found in other lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Among its distinct teachings are the *Tantra of the Secret Essence* and the Great Perfection. In the Nyingma school, the *Tantra of the Secret Essence* is regarded as the most significant work on Buddhist tantra, a form of spiritual practice that stresses using all facets of life as avenues to awakening. The teachings of this text lay out the theoretical foundations of tantric philosophy, in addition to offering a thorough treatment of the main principles of tantric practice. This text has given rise to a rich commentarial tradition, with works being composed by the greatest luminaries of the Nyingma lineage, including Rongzom Mahapandita (1012–1088),ⁱ Longchenpa (1308–1362),ⁱⁱ and, in more recent times, Ju Mipam Namgyal (1846–1912).ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite the renown of the *Tantra of the Secret Essence*, it is the Great Perfection, or *Dzogchen*, that is the hallmark of the Nyingma lineage. Though the term “Great Perfection” can be used to refer to the fundamental nature of reality as well as the state of buddhahood, it most commonly refers to a continually evolving set of spiritual instructions and the lineage of enlightened beings who have mastered these teachings and passed them down through the ages. This radically direct approach points out the mind’s fundamental nature of luminous purity. According to its teachings, enlightenment is not a distant goal to strive toward, but an immanent reality that must be recognized in the present moment. Effort and agendas only serve to obscure the true nature of mind. Once this nature has been recognized, however, problems and negativity automatically dissolve, leaving the open space of pure awareness, in which the qualities of enlightenment spontaneously unfold.

We will return to the Nyingma school and its Great Perfection teachings later in this text. Now we turn our attention to the second spreading of the Buddha’s teachings and the lineages that were brought to Tibet after the ninth century.

The Second Wave of Buddhism in Tibet

The Buddha’s teachings regained their foothold on the Tibetan plateau one hundred years after the persecutions of Langdarma. In the middle of the tenth century, Yeshé Ö, king of a region in western Tibet called Ngari, abdicated the throne to devote his life to Buddhist practice. Aware of the setbacks Buddhism had faced in the previous century, Yeshé Ö worked to revive the spread of the Buddha’s teachings by inviting Buddhist scholars from the Indian subcontinent to his kingdom and by sending a group of Tibetan scholars to learn Sanskrit and study the Buddha’s teachings. One of them, Rinchen Sangpo (958–1051), became a skilled translator. The work initiated by Yeshé Ö and Rinchen Sangpo marks the beginning of the second phase of the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. The lineages that were founded during and after this period are collectively referred to as the *Sarma*, or New Schools.

One of Yeshé Ö’s initiatives was to invite the famed abbot of India’s Vikramashila Monastery, Atisha (982–1054), to Tibet. Atisha initially refused Yeshé Ö’s entreaties, but changed his mind once he learned that the former king had been imprisoned as a result

of his efforts to spread the Buddha's teachings in Tibet.^{iv} Inspired by the former king's dedication, he left India for Tibet and spent more than a decade in the land of snows, where he reinvigorated the monastic tradition and founded the Kadampa lineage.

The Kadampas stressed the importance of renunciation and monastic ordination. Above all, however, Atisha and his followers are remembered for their uncompromisingly simple lifestyle and the system of mind training, or *lojong*, that they espoused. The Kadampa mind-training teachings present the key ethical and philosophical principles of the Buddha's teachings in a pithy and accessible manner. Many of Tibet's most cherished literary works stem from this tradition, including Langri Tangpa's *Eight Verses on Training the Mind* and Geshé Chekawa's *Seven-Point Mind Training*. Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is a model for the various mind-training systems practiced throughout Tibetan Buddhism.^v

Over time, the Kadampa tradition was absorbed into other lineages and ceased to exist as an independent entity. The Kadampa teachings were not lost, however, as they became the cornerstone of the Geluk school, a lineage founded in the early fifteenth century by Tsong Khapa (1357–1419). Like Atisha before him, Tsong Khapa stressed the importance of monastic ordination, celibacy, and academic study, especially as a prerequisite for the advanced meditations of Buddhist tantra. While the Geluk school has produced innumerable meditation masters, it is particularly well known for its rigorous philosophical training and skilled logicians.

The Kadam teachings were also incorporated into the Kagyü lineage, which was brought to Tibet by the translator Marpa (1002/1012–1097). Marpa had traveled to India to study with the enlightened scholar Naropa (1012–1100) and a number of other spiritual masters. In Tibet, he passed the Kagyü teachings on to Milarepa (1052–1135), his main student and Tibet's most famous saint, who in turn transmitted them to Rechungpa (1085–1161) and Gampopa (1079–1153). The Kagyü lineage then divided into a number of subgroups founded by Gampopa's primary students and those who followed in their wake.

It was Gampopa who integrated the Kagyü teachings of Marpa with Atisha's mind-training lineage. Prior to Gampopa, the instructions of the Kagyü lineage focused primarily on the Buddhist tantras and Mahamudra—a profound system of

contemplation similar to the Great Perfection teachings of the Nyingma school. Gampopa had been steeped in the mind-training instructions of the Kadam school before meeting Milarepa. Once he attained enlightenment and began to pass on the teachings to his own students, he created a unique synthesis of the Kagyü and Kadampa teachings. To this day, the lojong instructions of Atisha are commonly taught alongside the Mahamudra transmissions of Marpa.

In the same century that Atisha reinvigorated the monastic traditions of Tibet and Marpa passed on the profound teachings of Buddhist tantra to Milarepa, the Sakya lineage was formed based on the instructions of the Indian siddha Virupa. Like Naropa of the Kagyü lineage, Virupa started as a monk and became a respected scholar at India's famed Nalanda University. After practicing Buddhist tantra for a number of years, he attained enlightenment and took on the role of a wandering yogi, adopting the "crazy wisdom" of living outside societal norms, with no fixed abode or established code of moral conduct to follow.

Virupa's teachings centered on the *Hevajra Tantra* and a related cycle of instructions known in Tibet as *Lam-dré*, or Path and Fruition. Eventually these instructions were passed down to the Tibetan translator Drogmi during the late ninth and tenth centuries. Drogmi followed the example of Virupa, beginning with the rigorous philosophical training of the sutra tradition and then moving on to the esoteric practices of Buddhist tantra, also known as *Vajrayana*. This became the established model for Buddhist practice in the Sakya lineage and was institutionalized at Sakya Gönpa in central Tibet, a monastery founded by Könchok Gyalpo (1034–1102) in the eleventh century. An unending stream of great scholars and saints has issued forth from this lineage, including unparalleled masters such as Sakya Pandita (1182–1251) and Gorampa Sonam Sengé (1429–1489).

The Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Geluk schools share many characteristics. Each, for example, synthesizes the relatively accessible teachings of the Sutra Vehicle with the more esoteric teachings of Buddhist tantra. In a Tibetan monastery today, you will find monks following both the Vinaya precepts (a set of guidelines for monks laid down by the Buddha roughly 2,500 years ago) and performing elaborate tantric rituals on a daily basis. Similarly, Tibet's monastic colleges traditionally focus on the teachings of the Sutra

Vehicle, yet most include courses on the theoretical framework of tantra. Lamas give public tantric initiations as often as they explain fundamental Sutra Vehicle principles like impermanence and compassion.

All of these schools have thriving monastic traditions and long histories of philosophical and scholastic training. The Geluk monasteries of central Tibet are famed for their many learned scholars, yet the other three lineages have equally impressive monastic colleges, or shedras, such as the Shri Simha Shedra of Dzogchen Monastery, one of the six “mother monasteries” of the Nyingma lineage. The curricula of the four schools are also remarkably similar. When it comes to the Abhidharma teachings, for example, Vasubhandu’s *Treasury of Abhidharma* is a mainstay in all four schools, just as the works of Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, and Maitreya are widely viewed as the pinnacle of Great Vehicle thought.

The practice of meditation has always been the hallmark of the Buddhist tradition, and Tibet’s many remote valleys and icy peaks are the perfect environment for those called to a life of contemplation. For these reasons, meditation and retreat play a vital role in all four schools. Each lineage nurtures communities of ascetic yogis dwelling in isolation and small bands of meditators living in strict retreat. In some schools, a regimented three-year, three-month retreat is a common form of intensive meditation practice, while in other lineages, meditators living together in small communities practice individually and at their own pace.

Despite these similarities, there are also differences between the four schools. One obvious example is lineage. As noted above, each of the four schools traces its ancestry back to ancient India and the teachings of the historical Buddha. Specific lines of transmission, however, vary greatly. The Great Perfection teachings of the Nyingma school, for example, are traced back through Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Berotsana to Garap Dorjé, the first human Great Perfection master, and then to the buddhas Vajrasattva and Samantabhadra. The Kagyü lineage, meanwhile, is said to have originated with the primordial buddha Vajradhara, who transmitted the teachings to the Indian siddha Tilopa. The teachings then descended to Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and finally to Gampopa, before dividing into a number of sublineages. The Sakya and Geluk schools also possess their own lines of transmission.

Each school has a unique orientation. The Geluk and Sakya lineages stress the importance of philosophical training as a prerequisite for intensive meditation practice. For this reason, many lamas of these schools begin their training by studying in one of the lineage's major monastic colleges. This training can often take decades to complete.

The Nyingma school, in contrast, is the least monastic of the four lineages and tends to emphasize the practice of Buddhist tantra and Great Perfection meditation alongside scholarly study and philosophical inquiry. In the last century, Ju Mipam and Khenpo Shenga reinvigorated the model of the realized scholar-monk in the Nyingma school, but there have also been numerous lay masters. In fact, some of the greatest luminaries of this tradition were not monks, including great masters like Rongzom Mahapandita, Jigmé Lingpa, and, more recently, Dudjom Rinpoche Jigdral Yeshé Dorjé, the late head of the Nyingma school. The presence of a strong nonmonastic community of lamas and practitioners in the Nyingma school has also opened the door to a great number of female adepts.^{vi}

The Kagyü school emphasizes the practice of meditation. There is a rich scholastic tradition in this lineage as well, but the Kagyü school is known especially for its yogis and advanced meditators. In particular, this lineage is famous for its teachings on Mahamudra and the Six Dharmas of Naropa. Over the past thousand years, innumerable saints have based their practice on these teachings. Like the Geluk and Sakya lineages, this school places more emphasis on the importance of monastic ordination than the Nyingma lineage.

These four schools—the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Geluk—are the most widely practiced lineages in Tibet. It is important to note, however, that there have been many other lineages and teachings on the Tibetan plateau. Some of these have died out, while others continue to flourish. The Chöd lineage of the great female master Machik Lapdrön (1031–1124), for example, continues to exert a powerful influence on the spirituality of Tibet, as do the Jonang and Shangpa Kagyü lineages, despite the fact that all three lack the institutional clout of Tibet's more prominent schools. Monks and nuns, householders and wandering ascetics, philosophers and simple yogis . . . there is enough variety in Tibetan Buddhism to accommodate them all.

- Excerpted from [*Great Perfection: A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices*](#)

ⁱ Rongzom is one of the earliest of the great scholar-adepts of the Nyingma school. His seminal work on the *Tantra of the Secret Essence* topic, *Jeweled Commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra*, was the first major Tibetan commentary on this tantra. To date, Rongzom has received relatively little attention from the academic world. One notable exception is Heidi Köppl's recent translation of *Establishing Appearances as Divine* (*sNang ba lhar sgrub*) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008). In addition to her lucid translation, Köppl also discusses the life, works, and philosophical views of Rongzom. Other important works by Rongzom include *Entering the Way of the Mahayana* (*Theg chen tshul la 'jug pa*) and his influential commentary on Padmasambhava's *Key Instructions on the Rosary of Views* (*Man ngag lta phreng*). I have translated this text and am preparing it for publication. It will be accompanied by commentaries on the same text by Jamgön Kongtrül (translated by Gerry Wiener) and Mipam.

ⁱⁱ Longchenpa's commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is entitled *Dispelling the Darkness of the Ten Directions* (*Phyogs bcu mun sel*). His life and works will be discussed in detail later in the introduction.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mipam's main commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is actually an overview of Longchenpa's commentary (see previous note). Entitled *Luminous Essence*, this text is one of the most widely studied commentaries on the topic. The Dharmachakra Translation Committee has published a translation of this text entitled, *Luminous Essence: A Guide to the Guhyagarbha Tantra* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2009).

Mipam's influence on the trajectory of Nyingma thought can hardly be overestimated. In the present day, his texts are far and away the most commonly studied commentaries in Nyingma monastic colleges. Two excellent sources on Mipam are Douglas Duckworth's *Mipam on Buddha Nature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008) and John Pettit's *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999). Both contain extensive information on Mipam's life, works, and philosophical views.

^{iv} Atisha initially refused the former king's request, stating that he was needed in India to help ensure that the Buddha's teachings would endure, as Buddhism was in the midst of a state of decline due to the Muslim invasions that were plaguing the Indian subcontinent. When Yeshé Ö learned of Atisha's refusal, he believed that his offering of gold to Atisha had been insufficient. To obtain more gold, he then traveled to another kingdom, but was thrown into prison by the ruler of the area. When Yeshé Ö's grandnephew, also a monk, attempted to free him with more gold, the former ruler refused the offer and asked that the gold be used to convince Atisha to visit Tibet. Upon hearing this story, Atisha finally relented and agreed to travel to Tibet. Though there is some dispute, some believe that Yeshé Ö died in prison.

^v Perhaps the most well-known example of the influence of Atisha's *lojong* teachings is found in the work of Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Geluk school. Tsong Khapa's *Lam-rim Chenmo*, which has recently been translated as *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, 3 vols. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2000–2004), is considered a classic of Tibetan Buddhist literature.

^{vi} Two of the earliest female masters of the Great Perfection are Princess Mandarava and Yeshé Tsogyal. These figures are often mentioned as the spiritual partners of Padmasambhava, yet they were also great masters in their own right. Yeshé Tsogyal in particular played a critical role in transmitting the Great Perfection teachings to Tibet and helping to ensure their preservation for future generations. Later female masters continued to practice, transmit, and teach the Great Perfection, and many were instrumental in maintaining and shaping their respective lineages. One such example is Mingyur Paldrön (1699–1769) of the Mindroling lineage, whose profound writings on the Great Perfection were included by Jamgön Kongtrül in his *Treasury of Precious Treasures*. Remarkable female masters of recent times include Shuksep Lochen Chönyi Sangmo (1865–1953) and Sera Khandro (1892–1940), two women who trained some of the foremost Great Perfection masters of the twentieth century, including Zhadeu Trulshik Rinpoche (b. 1924) and Chatral Rinpoche Sangyé Dorjé (b. 1913).