

Eight Chariots and Four Lineages

The 'Eight Chariots' were the original eight major streams of vajrayana transmission flowing from India to Tibet. Each stream was, in itself, a confluence of tantras taught and translated by the great Indian and Tibetan masters of the eighth to twelfth centuries CE. Since then, historical, geographical and political factors have crystallised the Buddhism of Tibet into four major lineages: those of *Nyingma*, *Kagyü*, *Sakya* and *Gelug*. All incorporate the fundamental teachings of the Buddha (*hinayana*). Equally, but with slight variations of interpretation or of style of presentation, they all preach his special teachings of the bodhisattva path (*mahayana*). Their real differences lie in the *vajrayana* traditions they perpetuate.

1. Nyingma

Its name means 'ancient', as it was the first Buddhist tradition to take root in Tibet, as described in some detail in the preceding pages. Established in magnificence in the eighth century, through the royal patronage of King Trisong Detsen, the wisdom of India's greatest scholar of the time, Santaraksita, and the might of its most powerful guru, **Padmasambhava**, it brought Buddhism to Tibet in a very dynamic and magnificent way. Padmasambhava taught many tantras, from the wealth of his knowledge of Indian vajrayana, and concealed many treasure-texts (*terma*) to be unearthed in later years. He established three major practice centres of Samye, Yerpa and Chuwori and had twenty-five outstanding disciples among his hundreds of gifted followers. Masters **Vimalamitra** and **Vairocana** also taught tantra in that seminal time.

The early glory of this tradition lasted for some sixty years, until the hostile (and probably insane) monarch Langdarma destroyed the majority of its vestiges. Although it did gradually re-establish its monasteries and sangha, it had to vie at first with the animist Bön religion for influence and then later with the new lineages (*sarma*) arising from the work of Atiṣa, Marpa and other eleventh century renovators. It was during that period that it became referred to as the 'ancient' (*rnying.ma*) school.

The Nyingma tradition views Buddhism as a whole as falling into nine distinctive trends and sees itself as the result of three streams of spiritual transmission:

- < the 'remote' canonical lineage, transmitted by an uninterrupted line of humans
- < the 'close' lineage of hidden spiritual treasures and
- < the 'profound' lineage of pure vision.

The first of these is the traditional guru-to-disciple transmission of teachings, by empowerment, word of mouth and example, as found in other schools. The tantric speciality of the Nyingma focusses, in its formal stages of training, on primordial Buddha *Samantabhadra*, on the form of *Guru Rinpoche* and on the wrathful winged *Vajrakila*, among others. Beyond these, the formless zenith of its training is known as the Great Perfection. As these teachings date back to the Buddha, they are known as those of 'remote' origin.

The 'close' teachings are those hidden, along with sacred objects, by Padmasambhava and his consort, **Yeshe Tsogyal**, in rocks, caves, lakes, images, temple pillars and other extraordinary places, to be discovered and given to the world when the time was ripe. These are known as 'treasures' (*terma*) and the masters who find them are known as 'treasure-revealers' (*tertön*). Most are considered reincarnations of one or another of the twenty-five main disciples, who had been initiated into the meaning of each teaching in their seminal life with Padmasambhava. Not all *terma* are physical. Sometimes they simply arise in the mind of the master. The third type of transmission comes through the pure vision of a *tertön*, who actually sees Guru Padmasambhava come to him and give teaching.

The Nyingma tradition fosters an inbuilt love of going as quickly as possible to the heart of the matter. Offering, for those who are ready, some of the deepest teachings on the nature of reality, it still maintains that ring of majesty and magic of its unique origins and has found a considerable following in the West.

The nine levels of Buddhism

1. Basic Buddhism for freeing the mind (*sravakayana*)
2. A special form of the above followed by solitary hermits (*pratyekabuddhayana*)
3. The way of the bodhisattva (*bodhisattvayana*)
4. The mantrayana practices based on positive and purifying acts of the *kriya tantra*
5. The mantrayana practices based on skilful means of the *carya tantra*
6. The vajrayana practices of inner yoga of the *yoga tantra*

7. The vajrayana practices of the 'greater' (*maha*) branch of higher yoga tantra
8. The vajrayana practices of the 'higher' (*anu*) branch of higher yoga tantra
9. The vajrayana practices of the 'primordial' branch (*ati*) of higher yoga tantra

Some of the most famous Nyingma monasteries were those of Katok, Dorjé Drak, Palyul, Mindroling, Dzogchen and Secchen. Among its greatest masters were Longchenpa (1308-1363), who made the first systematic compilation of their doctrine, **Mingling Gyurdo** (1646-1714), who preserved their canon, **Jigme Lingpa** (1729-1798), **Patrul Rinpoche** (1808-1887), **Lama Mipham** (1846-1912), **Jamyang Chentse** (1820-1892) and **Jamgon Kongtrul** (1813-1899).

2 Khadampa

A tremendous wave of Buddhist rejuvenation and renewal swept through Tibet in the eleventh century. One of its most important figures was **Atiṅ Dipamkara**, who taught for thirteen years in western and central Tibet. His teaching placed great emphasis on a careful presentation of Middle Way (*madhyamaka*) philosophy, a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism and a vigorous restoration of pure monastic conduct, which had somewhat deteriorated in Tibet by his time. Onto this firm foundation were planted vajrayana teachings, such as those of the *Kalachakra* and *Guhyasamaja* tantras. Throughout Atisa's stay, **Dromtönpa** studied at his feet and became, of his six main students, the main spiritual heir. Dromtönpa himself had three main disciples. Of these **Potowa** received complete transmission of 'Six Treatises' concerning the bodhisattva path. **Chen-Nga Tsultim** received many teachings about the Four Noble Truths. **Lama Pu-Chung** received detailed teachings on the 'Sixteen Quintessences' of vajrayana practice.

In general these teachings, handed down through generation after generation of masters, eventually divided into two distinct streams. One was integrated into the Kagyu tradition, through **Pawo Tsulak Trengwa** (1440-1503), who received them from **Sakya Pandita**. The other went to **Tsongkhapa** (1357-1419), from whose illustrious disciples arose the **Gelug** lineage. Since this latter is not doctrinally different from the Khadampa, it is not treated as a separate 'chariot' and is known by some as the Later Khadampa (not to be confused with the controversial late twentieth-century sect, the New Khadampa).

The Gelug school places great emphasis on tantra being practised upon a firm basis of renunciation, altruism and a correct understanding of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti's view of voidness. To this end, monastic discipline, study and logic in the form of stylised religious debate are held in great esteem. Not surprisingly, this school associates itself with *Manjusri*, Bodhisattva of wisdom. It is also a tradition which has given rise to the largest monastic universities the world has ever known, the most important being founded in Central Tibet by disciples of Tsongkhapa.

In 1416, Tashi Palden founded Drepung monastery which, at its height, had over 10,000 thousand monks and an influence felt as far away as Mongolia. In 1419, Sakya Yeshe founded Sera, which grew to house over 5,000 monks. In 1447, another disciple, Gendun Drup, later to become the first Dalai

Lama, founded Tashilhunpo in Zhigatse. This later became the seat of the reincarnations of Tsongkhapa's disciple Khedrup Je, who became known as **Panchen Lamas**. Tsongkhapa himself founded Ganden monastery in 1409. This grew to house some 3,000 monks and whoever is its Abbot — the **Ganden Trichen** — has traditionally presided over the Gelug tradition, although its most famous personage is without doubt the **Dalai Lama**.

Of the Dalai Lamas to date, the fifth was the most renowned. It was he who, in 1645, undertook the rebuilding of the Potala palace, one of the world's first skyscrapers. The original eleven-storey royal palace had been built on Mt Marpori in Lhasa in 637. During the nine centuries between its destruction by lightning in the eighth century and the reign of the 'illustrious fifth', the Tibetan capital had been located successively at Sakya, Tsetang, Rinpung and Zhigatse. This was the result of various religious factions wooing the support of Mongol armies and establishing the Tibetan capital at their own stronghold. The violent backing of the Qosot Mongols not only established Lhasa as the capital but made the Dalai Lama temporal king as well as spiritual luminary, giving him more power and a larger kingdom than Tibet had known for many centuries.

While the Gelug spiritual tradition flourished in its giant monasteries of Central Tibet, the fate of subsequent Dalai Lamas was less illustrious. The Manchu Emperors put a stop to the Mongol influence and imposed their own stamp on Tibet, ensuring that Dalai Lama incarnations either died young or never exercised real power, the latter lying in the hands of their regents. This continued until the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933), who had real authority. The present fourteenth Dalai Lama is undoubtedly the world's best known Buddhist and Nobel champion of peace.

3. Marpa Kagyu

The Kagyu is one of the four main schools of Tibet and one which has greatly influenced Eastern Tibet, China, Mongolia and the Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan, Ladakh and Nepal. It is sometimes known as the Marpa Kagyu, in honour of **Marpa** the Translator(1012-1097), its first Tibetan patriarch. It is also known as the Dagpo Kagyu through the powerful way it was established as a monastic tradition by Dagpo Rinpoché (Gampopa 1079-1153). Through the latter's disciples arose its four main and eight minor lineages.

The name *Kagyu* has often been poorly translated as 'oral transmission'. It really means *lineage of transmission of (four) masteries*, because of the way in which, for almost a millennium, it has perpetuated an impeccable mastery of the most profound Buddhist yoga practices. These were originally taught by two of India's greatest Buddhists, Tilopa and Naropa, as the quintessence of the scores of vajrayana tantras being practised at the time. Tilopa had received spiritual transmissions from more than one hundred of the finest gurus of his time and, after attaining enlightenment, had reviewed them all in a global perspective, considering the areas in which they overlapped or differed. The result was his teaching a series of practices which help the adept methodically bring each aspect of his or her existence into the light of ultimate truth. Only at such time as the disciple has completely mastered them can he or she transmit them to others, thus ensuring that the original meaning and purpose is preserved through the ages. Tilopa's main disciple, Naropa, taught these as the Six Yogas:

- C *Candali* or Heat Yoga, bringing ultimate reality into the biological and neurological functions of the body, thereby purifying karma,
- C Illusory Body, bringing it into the experiences of daily life
- C Dream Yoga, bringing lucidity and control into dream experience
- C Clear Light, the recognition of mind's innate lucidity, voidness and bliss,
- C Intermediate State, bringing lucidity and control into the after-death and between-lives experience and
- C Transference, bringing control of consciousness at the moment it leaves the dying body.

The component of ultimate truth, with its natural lucidity and spontaneous mastery over phenomena, is assured by the teachings of mahamudra: the be all and end all of the Buddha's teachings. These

point out the nature of the human mind and of all its possibilities, from the most sublime to the most gross, detailing how the ultimate truth of voidness is inextricably linked with the relative web of manifestation through voidness' innate compassion.

Marpa received mahamudra and the Six Yogas from his guru **Naropa** (see previous pages) and from **Maitripa** (also known as Avadhutipa), who held a special lineage of their transmission from **Nagarjuna** and **Saraha**. All these teachings make four main areas of mastery, for which the Kagyu is renowned. They are:

1. Mahamudra
2. *Candali* Yoga
3. Clear Light - a general term for the last five of the six yogas mentioned above
4. Karma Mudra - the reconciling of all subjective and objective aspects of consciousness.

The entirety of what Marpa had brought from India was passed on to the great yogi **Milarépa**, who had a sun-like disciple (**Gampopa**), a moon-like disciple (**Réchungpa**) and twenty-five others, like stars. Gampopa had also been heir to the Khadampa teachings of Atiñā. Blending these two streams together as one, he established the basis for the Kagyu lineage as it exists today. All disciples are given instruction in the Khadampa teachings, known as *sutra mahamudra*, and the gifted ones among them go on to receive the *vajrayana mahamudra*, practising the Six Yogas on a basis of tantras of the anuttara yoga tantra class, usually those of *Hévajra*, *Chakrasamvara* and *Vajra Varahi*. The Kagyu tradition does not use the nine yana template of the Nyingma but instead classifies the fourth level of tantra, i.e. anuttara yoga tantra, into three sections: mother tantras, father tantras, and non-dual tantras. The illustrious ninth Karmapa explained this, writing:

In the way they express things, there is some difference between the father and mother tantras of the anuttarayogatantra. Very generally, one can say that mother tantras such as Chakrasamvara place more emphasis on the wisdom aspect and stress voidness, the ultimate stage, the six yogas etc., whereas the father tantra [in particular Guhyasamaja] place more emphasis on skilful means, and in particular the creative stage of meditation.

However, what is being expressed is at all times non-dual, and although, for good practical reasons, the mother and father tantras emphasis one or another aspect, these aspects are equal aspects of a non-dual fusion. Were this not the case, they could not merit their name

*annutara **yoga** tantra, the word yoga signifying complete inseparability.*

The first **Karmapa** was Gampopa's main spiritual heir. In general, the Karmapas are viewed as being at one and the same time the presence of Avalokitesvara (the compassion of all the Buddhas) and emanations of he who will be the sixth Buddha of our age: the Lion Buddha. It is often said that the Karmapas are reincarnations of the great mahasiddha Saraha. Seventeen generations of Karmapas have guided the Kagyu tradition with the light of their wisdom. Some have been gurus to Chinese Emperors, Mongol Khans and Tibetan and Himalayan kings. All have established monasteries and brought the Buddha's teaching to tens of thousands of people. The current Karmapa, Urgyen Tinley Dorjé, resides at present in Tsurphu monastery, in central Tibet.

Other famous lamas of the Kagyu tradition have been the **Tai Situpas**, considered to be emanations of the bodhisattva who will become the fifth Buddha, Maitreya, and equally regarded as reincarnations of Marpa the Translator and mahasiddha Dombipa. Their main seat is in Palpung monastery. The **Shamarpas** have been another important series of lineage lamas. In more recent centuries, the **Gyaltsabpas** and Jamgon **Kongtruls** have also played important roles.

4. The Sakya Lineage

is named after its first monastery, built at Sakya in the west of central Tibet in 1073. However, it started in the eighth century with teachings from Padmasambhava (especially those on *Vajrakila* tantra) which were perpetuated over four difficult centuries by the Khön family dynasty. **Khön Koncho Gyalpo** complemented them with new tantras, such as *Hevajra* and *Chakrasamvara*, received from a great master of the eleventh century renaissance, **Translator Drokmi**, and established Sakya monastery. Around the same time, lineages from the Indian mahasiddha Naropa were also integrated into the lineage.

The Sakya line prides itself in striking a wise balance between study and meditation. Its tantras are practised only after a thorough training in the general hinayana and mahayana foundations, presented in a special way associated with the *Hevajra* tantra and known as 'the path and its results' (*lam dre*). The more profound teachings speak much of non-differentiation between worldliness and voidness, as well as of ultimate truth being a total fusion of luminosity and voidness.

A succession of great masters, such as **Sachen Kunga Nyinpo** (1092-1158) and **Sakya Pandita** (1182-1251) further developed this tradition. The latter was probably the most famous Sakya patriarch. Fame of his erudition spread as far afield as Mongolia and China and he was invited to the imperial court. Being celibate, his dynasty passed on to his nephew **Chöjal Pakpa** (1235-1280). Mongol emperor Kublai Khan gave Chöjal dominion over thirteen small kingdoms, thus uniting much of the Tibetan plateau under one spiritual and temporal ruler, much as the Chinese did later with the Dalai Lamas. A network of Sakya monasteries was established across central and eastern Tibet. This power waned by the early fourteenth century and the single family dynasty which had dominated it effectively split into two. Ever since the tradition has been ruled on a rotational basis by the leaders of each. **HH Sakya Trizin** is the present head.

5. The 'Peacemaking' or Chö Lineage

With beautiful, haunting tunes, the rhythmic banging of large hand drums and the singing harmonics of bells made from seven metals, the Chö ritual has captured the hearts and imagination of many Westerners. Those who practise it find it takes them to the heart of the Buddha's teaching: a complete

letting-go of everything personal so as to be at the service of all beings, without any distinction. But this series of practices (written *gChod* in Tibetan but pronounced Chö) is only part of the Shiché (Peacemaking) lineage, from **Dampa Sangyé**. Many Tibetans had trained under him and established small lineages of his teachings in Tibet but it was really through his own five journeys to that land that the coherent wealth of his teachings took root there.

His instruction involved a fusion of mahamudra alongside a tantra known as the Great River of Consonants and Vowels. He taught that the correct *foundation* was to observe the three levels of Buddhist commitments (precepts, bodhisattva vow and tantric commitments). On this firm basis, the *path* to follow is that of strict asceticism, living in desolate places, such as funeral grounds. There, one practices severing the very root of suffering by annihilating the mind-poisons, such as desire and anger, and making sure not to be distracted from the essential point of Buddhism by involvement with its superficial trappings. This *results* in a threefold activity which greatly benefits beings. Dampa's disciple, **Lapji Dröma**, a female yogi, greatly furthered these teachings in Tibet. At one point, Dampa Sangyé's lineage almost disappeared. It was restored by the vigorous activity of **Mingling Lochen Chöpel Zangpo** and continues until this day.

There are many different types of Chö practice, often with specific purposes such as healing the sick or erasing the shadow of death cast by proximity and attachment to the dying. They all involve 'killing demons' but one should understand that the demons are the four *Mara*: the four main existential problems that cause suffering, i.e.

- C being composed of the five aggregates which together form body and mind (*skandha mara*)
- C the mind being polluted by selfish desire, animosity, jealousy and the other mind poisons (*klesa mara*)
- C being attached to the details of one's existence and existence in general (*deva's son mara*)
- C being unable to accept change (*lord of death mara*).

The actual practice of Chö embodies all six perfections (*paramita*) but emphasises two in particular. The total letting-go of physical attachment, through compassionate asceticism, represents a special aspect of generosity and the main meditation is the very expression of primordial wisdom (*prajñāparamita*), severing the chattering delusions of ego.

The Chö lineage was integrated into the Kagyu lineage at the time of the **third Karmapa (1284-1339)**,

who held its practice in great esteem. Since then, it has been perpetuated by the Kagyu school, with distinct Chö styles emerging from the Surmang, Nédo and Japché monasteries. Chö is part of the daily practice in the famous three-year meditation retreats of this Lineage.

6. Jonanga tradition

This tradition has two specialities. In its general teachings on Buddhism, it propounds the 'devoid of other' (*Shengtong*) view of Middle Way philosophy. Its tantric teachings centre on a meticulous and thorough presentation of the *Kalachakra* (Wheel of Time) Tantra. This very important tantra, showing all the levels of relationship between the human microcosm and the macrocosmic universe, had entered Tibet through many doors in the hands of many masters. Altogether, the teaching and translation activity that occurred through them gave rise to seventeen distinct Kalachakra lineages. Master **Kunpang Tukjé** gathered these seventeen into one authoritative teaching and established a vihara dedicated to this within Jomo monastery, hence the name of this tradition *Jo* (Jomo monastery) *nang* (within). The residence of Master **Dolpopa** in the Jomo vihara caused this philosophical view and the Kalachakra tantra to become quite widespread. Master **Taranatha** also furthered them greatly.

Unfortunately, all the Jonang monasteries in the central areas of the Tibetan plateau, including Takten Puntsok Ling, the seat of Taranatha, were destroyed by followers of the fifth Dalai Lama, driven by misplaced religious zeal. However, the lineage continued until this century in eastern Tibet, with its two main monasteries being Dzamtang Chöjé and Dzamtang Tsangpa. The *shengtong* stance of Middle Way philosophy has also been very healthily preserved within the Kagyu tradition.

7. Shangpa Kagyu

This lineage arose from the mahasiddha **Khyungpo Naljor** of Shang, in west-central Tibet. It propagates five tantras of the anuttara yoga class, each being considered the zenith of expression of a certain practice:

C the *Hévajra* tantra is the zenith of candali (heat) yoga

- C the *Chakrasamvara* tantra is the zenith of consort yoga (*karma mudra*)
- C the *Guhyasamaja* tantra is the zenith of illusory body and clear light yogas
- C *Mahamaya* tantra is the zenith of dream yoga
- C *Dorje Jigdzé* is the zenith of enlightened action.

These tantras are communicated through the teachings of five early Indian masters: **Niguma**, **Sukhasiddhi**, **Dorjé Denpa**, **Maitripa** and **Rahula**. The Shangpa Kagyu tradition almost died out this century. It was preserved and restored through the vigorous activity of **Kalu Rinpoché** towards the end of his life.

8. The Three Vajras tradition



This lineage comes from mahasiddha **Orgyenpa**, who is said to have received its teachings directly from the celestial being Vajrayogini. It stresses the primordial purity of the three vajras: those of body, speech and mind. This is present within the illusory bodies, speech and minds of beings. The illusions are purified by a threefold application: that of precepts, meditation and ritual. The result is to make manifest the three bodies (*kaya*) of the Buddha, in this very lifetime. These teachings reached the third Karmapa and have, since that time, been preserved in his Kagyu tradition. They no longer exist as a separate lineage.

The evolution of the Eight Chariots into the Four Great Traditions
*This is a simplified version of a tremendous and complicated
cross-fertilisation occurring over the centuries. The resulting
Kagyü tradition is the greater Kagyü, including its
four major and eight minor lineages*