

O Tibet e suas Religiões

Stanislav Grof, MD, PhD



Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the 7th and 8th centuries, mostly from Kashmir and Nepal; there was also some Chinese influence but it was much weaker. It became the dominant religion in Tibet and remained such even after it was suppressed in India by the Moghul invasion in the 12th and 13th centuries. In Tibet, Buddhism was the main source of philosophy, art, and learning.

Tibetan civilization flourished not only in Tibet per se, but also in the neighboring countries – Assam in the East, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal in the South, and Ladakh in the West. After the 1949 Chinese invasion, Tibetan Buddhism continues to be practiced in these countries. Also hundreds of thousands of Tibetans fled their homeland and hundreds of centers of Tibetan Buddhism have been founded all over the world.

Tibetan Buddhism developed in isolation from the rest of the world. One reason for this was Tibet's geography; it is surrounded by giant mountain ranges. In the North, it is the Kunlan range, in the West the Karakoram mountains, and in the South the Himalayas. The East is open, but it involves vast deserts (the Gobi), plains and lower mountains; travel in that direction was very time-consuming. There were also political reasons for this isolation. Tibet functioned as a buffer between British India, China, and Russia. These powers preferred a steady state and kept Tibet cordoned off. In addition, the highly conservative culture inside Tibet was not welcoming to foreigners.

Buddhism is not the only religion of Tibet. Since the tenth or eleventh century and until the present day, there have been two organized religious traditions in Tibet: Buddhism and a faith that is referred to by its Tibetan name, Bön. In the context of Western scholarship, Bön has three meanings:

1. The term Bön is used for the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, which was gradually suppressed by Buddhism in the eighth and ninth centuries. This religion, only imperfectly reconstructed on the basis of ancient documents, appears to have focused on the person of the king, who was regarded as sacred and possessing supernatural powers. Elaborate ritual carried out by professional priests called bönpo were above all concerned with ensuring that the soul of a dead person was conducted safely to a post mortem land of bliss – usually a yak, a horse, or a sheep – which was sacrificed in the course of the funerary rites. There were also offerings of food, drinks, and precious objects.

These rites reached their highest level of elaboration and magnificence in connection with the death of a king or a high nobleman. As it was the case in China, when a king died, enormous funerary mounds were erected and a large of priests and court officials were involved in rites that lasted for several years; the sacrifice included servants and ministers. The additional purpose of these rites was to obtain beneficial influence on the welfare and fertility of the living.

2. Bön can also refer to a religion that appeared in Tibet in the tenth and eleventh centuries, at the time when Buddhism, reintroduced to Tibet from India, after a period of decline, became again dominant. This religion has so many similarities with Buddhism in terms of doctrine and practice that its independent status has been questioned. Some scholars suggested that it is more appropriate to see it as an unorthodox form of Buddhism.

3. Bön is sometimes used to designate a vast and amorphous body of popular beliefs, including divination, the cult of local deities, and conceptions of the soul. An alternative term that has been proposed for these phenomena is “nameless religion.”

Some misconceptions about Bön in the second sense is that it “shamanism” or “animism,” basically continuation of the practices from pre-Buddhist Tibet. It has also been incorrectly claimed that Bön is a perversion of Buddhism in a similar sense in which medieval satanic cults were a perversion of Christianity. The art of pre-Buddhist (pre seventh century) Bön is virtually unknown and all known Bön iconography relates to Bön in the second sense.

Tibetan geography, political structure, and religious trends.

The northern third of Tibet is an uninhabited vast desert with mountains; it is very cold and swept by fierce winds. It is occasionally visited by hunters and people searching for salt, borax, and soda. The middle part is still high and cold, but the climate is more temperate. It consists of grassland, mountain ranges, and lakes and is inhabited by tough and hard nomads who live in felt tents and herd goats, sheep,

and yaks. The southern part is warmer, moist, and fertile, mostly agricultural. In its river valleys are hamlets, villages, and a few towns.

The central part of Tibet, districts Ü and Tsang and several other provinces have dense population, rich farming, the largest towns, such as Lhasa. It has large estates owned by wealthy nobility, farms of small peasant landowners, and landless farm workers. This region is rich, most centralized, stratified and hierarchical. It is the stronghold of the Geluk school and has the largest monasteries. Since the seventeenth century, it was the seat of the government – the Dalai Lama, monks of the ruling Geluk sect, and the nobility loyal to them. Also strong was the Sakya school.

East Tibet (Kham) has valleys, several great rivers (Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze) and between them pastureland. It was more decentralized; the regions were governed by princes or lamas, and there was commercial exchange with China. The predominant schools were Nyingma and Kagyü which had their monasteries and retreats.

Amdo in northeastern Tibet is inhabited by nomads and Mongolian herdsmen, who are also followers of Tibetan Buddhism. Here is the sacred lake Kokonur, where Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelukpa sect was born. This region is less centralized than Central Tibet or Kham; the nomads are mostly self-governing. The Geluk sect was particularly strong here; they had many large monasteries. The Nyingmapas had also a strong influence.

Different parts of Tibet show great diversity; (nomadic, agricultural. Urban) and are relatively culturally and politically autonomous. There are great variations in dress, food, way of speaking, artistic tradition, different styles of Buddhism and shamanic practices, and others. This is due to long distances and poor communication and the fact that the Tibetans are fiercely independent. The same variations can be seen in areas outside of Tibet with strong Tibetan Buddhist influence – Sikkim, Assam, Ladakh, and Nepal.

On the other hand, there are also strong unifying elements – shared history, language (although with dialects), Buddhist worldview and way of life (even for the Bön people, and the influence of monasteries that provide not just religion but also medical services, mediation in disputes and conflict resolution, and storage of grain. There was unity in diversity; dharma had “one taste” but not one style. For example, the Geluk school was more scholastically and politically oriented, the Nyingma and Kagyü school more meditative.

The strength and vitality of Tibetan Buddhism is in its ability to accommodate so many different forms of human spiritual aspiration. This can be traced back to the teachings of the Buddha himself and represents a precious gift to his followers.

The cosmos of Tibetan Buddhism. According to the classical Tibetan Buddhist view, the world is defined not just by what we perceive with our physical senses and think about rationally. Important aspects of existence that are critical for its understanding are not available to our ordinary perception, but can be discovered through meditation, visions, dreams, divination, and the like. These approaches reveal the larger context in which the physical world is set; the wisdom that they entail is available to anyone who is willing to pursue spiritual practices offered by Tibetan Buddhism.

The Tibetan cosmos is a vast one, beginningless and endless in terms of time and limitless in extent. Our immediate world – in a model derived from Indian cosmology – is conceived as a flat disk. In its center is Mount Meru, the “world mountain,” surrounded by oceans in which are four continents:

Aparogodaniya – west

Uttarakuru – north

Purvavideha – east

Jambudvipa (our human island) – south

Each of these is flanked by two subcontinents. Extending above and below, with Mt. Meru as the central axis, are six lokas, realms of existence inhabited by sentient beings. Below Mt. Meru is pretaloka (hungry ghosts) and hell (narakaloka). At the base of Mt. Meru, on the same level as the human realm (manakaloka) is the animal realm (tiriyakaloka). These three realms are called “unfortunate” or “lower” realms. The human realm is considered the lowest of the “fortunate” or “higher” realms. On the upper slopes of Mt. Meru are the realm of jealous gods (asuraloka) and the realm of gods (devaloka), also divided into several levels.

This configuration represents our “local universe.” But this is only one of an infinite number of such worlds that exist. Their life span is called great kalpa and is divided into four: kalpa of creation, kalpa of duration, kalpa of destruction in conflagration, and final kalpa of empty space. This repeats itself ad infinitum throughout endless space. This is the arena for samsara, “cyclic existence,” the condition of sentient beings who have not yet achieved liberation and are governed by belief in separate “self” or “ego.” They are driven by the three root defilements of passion, aggression,

and delusion to defend and aggrandize the “selves” they think they possess. This is then the source of karma.

However, this situation is not hopeless. In addition to the “impure” realms of samsara, there are also “pure” realms that stand outside of samsara, abodes of enlightened, realized beings – celestial buddhas, male and female yidams (personal deities, also called wisdom dakinis and herukas), the great bodhisattvas, the dharma protectors, the enlightened men and women who have passed beyond this world, and others. According to Mahayana Buddhism, the state which they embody is the ultimate destiny of all humans and other sentient beings.

In these pure lands, samsara does not prevail; there is abundance of compassion and understanding. All the problems are absent, all the experiences pleasant. The pure lands are innumerable, but some are more important than others – Sukhavati, the western paradise of Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, and Tara; Abhirati, the eastern paradise of Akshobya Buddha; and Vaiduryanirbhasa, home of the Medicine Buddha, Bhaishajyaguru, also in the east. These pure land are rather remote, although one can aspire to be born in them after death.

They are other, more accessible places on a higher spiritual level: Potala, the sacred mountain identified with several mountains in South and Southeast Asia, the home of Avalokiteshvara; the palace of Lotus Light of Padmasambhava in the glorious Coppercolored Mountain; and the mythical kingdom Shambhala. The buddhas and bodhisattvas appear in our world bringing blessings, protection, and guidance on the path.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, Western science that limits its investigation to the aspects of the world that can be measured and weighed, studies only Jambudvīpa and, even there, it misses some of its important dimensions. It describes a natural world that is dead, disenchanted, without any spiritual enlivening principle, and essentially without meaning. In the traditional Tibetan view, the animate and inanimate phenomena of this world are charged with life and spiritual vitality. One of the way to recognize spirit is through the energy that is mobilized in the perceptual moment; a rock, tree, or a cloud formation is “striking,” “dramatic,” “compelling,” “menacing,” “nourishing,” etc. Every river and mountain has its spirit embodiment or inhabitants; these spirits are malevolent, neutral, or benevolent.

Lasting happiness in the ordinary sense is not attainable in the samsaric world. The introduction of buddhahood as standing outside of samsara offers an alternative to this dismal prospect. Buddhism thus reveals the radical inadequacy of samsara, but at the same time offers the confidence, joy, and well-being that can be achieved on the spiritual path. People on the spiritual path obtain experiential evidence for their worldview (examples: the story of dharmapala, the protective deity, and Chögyam

Trungpa's divination; the psychic abilities of the mother of Chagdud Tulku, who was a delog, the one who dies and returns; Chögyam Trungpa's vision of Shambhala; the hermits communicating with spirits, demons, and deities; the enlightened masters seeing the unseen worlds).

The classification of beings of the unseen world.

1. Beings transcending samsara:

The selfless and compassionate beings of Buddhism, such as the various buddhas, bodhisattvas, protectors of the dharma, and departed masters, who remain available to practitioners in rituals and meditations. Buddhas may be human (Sakyamuni) or purely celestial (Amitabha). There are also celestial bodhisattvas (Avalokiteshvara and Tara, who are emanations of Amitabha buddha) and human ones (His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Gyalwa Karmapa).

The tantric Yidams, or "personal deities," are enlightened beings, whom one takes as the focus of one's Vajrayana practice (Chakrasamvara and Vajrajogini of the Kagyü lineage). The dharmapalas, or "protectors of the dharma," are also beyond samsara. "Wisdom dharmapalas" are embodiments of the fierce energy of the buddhas (mahakalas). "Wordly protectors" are guardians of dharma, but are not enlightened; they are worldly deities who were tamed by masters, such as Padmasambhava. Also outside of samsara are realized gurus (Padmasambhava and the dakini Yeshe Tsogyal). All the above beings are objects of Buddhist practice.

2. Beings within samsara.

Indian deities were inherited by the Tibetans; they are not considered to be very important, but they can be encountered by the meditators. The gods of this human world, including local deities of mountains, lakes, and houses (nagas – deities of springs, lakes, and wells, also presiding over weather; sadaks – masters of the soil; the nyen and gyalpo – deities of the mountain; the tien – deities of the air; spirits associated with man-made phenomena – the field gods, the tent god, and the hearth god). Harmful spirits, or dön, are always malevolent toward human beings (mamo, black ferocious female demonesses, who thrive on confusion, conflict, and quarrel and cause disruption of human affairs and all kinds of misfortune – sickness, war, calamity of crop and livestock; rakshasas and pishachas, who attack unsuspecting prey; maras or dü, who are viciously antidharmic and create problems for yogis and other serious practitioners.

The most important system classifying various beings is that of six lokas; of these two are physical (humans and animals), the rest are not. Another important classification,

also inherited from India, includes three realms or dhatus. The desire realm (kama-dhatu) includes all beings seeking pleasure and trying to avoid pain; this includes the hell-beings, pretas, animals, asuras, and humans, as well as lower gods. The form realm (rupa – dhatu), composed of four substages, is inhabited by higher gods, who have appearance, but are not material. Their state of being is defined by peace and equilibrium. The formless realm (arupa-dhatu), is inhabited by gods who have no particular shape, size, or boundaries; however, they still have a subtle sense of identity. Their being is identified with infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, or neither perception nor nonperception. Even the beings in the two upper dhatus lie within samsara and are subjected to karma; when their karma is exhausted, they will suffer rebirth, usually in lower realms.

Focus on specific beings reflects interests – for the farmers the nagas are critical (water and weather), for the monastery the protector deities, for meditators personal deities (yidams), etc. The proper and most effective way of communicating with spirits, deities, and gods is through rituals (offerings, sacrifices, praises, confessions). From the Tibetan point of view, relationships with the unseen world are essential to a full and successful human life. However, in the last analysis, not only the beings of the unseen world, but also the phenomena of the external universe are false objectifications and solidifications of nondual awareness.

But then again, to say they are aspects of mind does not deny their existence on the relative level, nor does it obviate our responsibility to deal with them as beings in their own right. The way we experience and conceive of them has to do with our own psychology and level of awareness. As human beings, we are part of an interconnected web of relations to the visible, as well as invisible world. We share with all other beings the inherent core of Buddha nature. Awareness of this fact gives human life direction, meaning, and dignity. A person unaware of the vast cosmos and living as if it did not exist is lost. He or she is a dundro – an animal realm being in human form controlled by ignorance.

Living in the sacred cosmos.

As humans, we have been countless times in various roles in the lokas. According to the Tibetans, all the experiences we have had as sentient beings are indelibly imprinted in us as subliminal memories and they continue to shape and inform how we experience our present human life. We might have different degrees of access to this understanding and live accordingly. It is similar to our capacity to relate to children in accordance with the degree we remember our own childhood.

We have a connection not only with the beings in the samsaric world, but also with enlightened beings. The emotions that human gurus evoke in us reflect the fact that they embody our own potential and drive toward enlightenment. As we mature

spiritually, the buddhas and bodhisattvas play a larger role in our life, the “sky draws closer to the earth.

The importance of ritual.

Rituals are of extreme importance in Tibetan Buddhism. The essence of ritual is communication with beings in the samsaric world and in the higher domains. Fellow humans, animals, and the pretas are particularly close to us. Ritual for the pretas can assuage their hunger and bring them closer to human incarnation. Through this kind of ritual, we not only provide assistance to those in great need, but also remove the obstructive influence they might be sending our way, and improve our karmic condition.

The gods and hell beings are more removed from us, but it is still important to maintain contact with them. It is considered important to imagine on a daily basis the beings in all the realms and wish them that they may travel the road to liberation. In another practice, called tong-len, one imagines the beings in all the realms and tries to feel what they are experiencing; by this, the solitude of their suffering is broken and our own hearts open. Even the gods experience a subtle form of suffering, because of the effort to ignore the pain of others. In the “initiation into the six realms,” performed in Tantric Buddhism, one practices to experience the sorrows and joys of each of the realms (e.g. six-day retreats with a guru, one day for each loka).

The essence of Tibetan Buddhism is communication with the awakened ones – buddhas, bodhisattvas, departed masters, etc. One of the most common rituals is the sevenfold offering of Mahayana Buddhism to visualized beings:

1. salutation
2. real and imagined good offerings
3. confession of one’s shortcomings and harming of others
4. rejoicing at the existence of the enlightened being
5. request for teaching and instructions
6. asking the being to stay in samsara and not to seek nirvana
7. dedication of all accumulated merit to the well-being of all

Even the most devotional supplication is not theistic. We actually bow to what is our own innermost nature and potential; discovering it in others facilitates our own spiritual progress. There are many ritual stages on the way to awakening; however, they all share visualization, imagining.

The Lhasang.

The lhasang (literally “higher purification offering”) is one of the most common rituals in traditional Tibet. Unlike many other rituals performed for specific purposes, the lhasang. that calls upon all the various “good spirits” and well-intentioned deities, as well as buddhas, bodhisattvas, protectors, and deceased teachers, is multipurpose. It is conducted for a variety of spiritual as well as secular purposes and by different people – a lay person in time of duress, a householder on behalf of the entire family, by a lama before a journey, construction of a building, or blessing of a special object. The lhasang involves purification of negative forces by fire and juniper smoke and is empowering by attracting higher beings of samsara and the enlightened ones.

The lhasang has several stages. First a fire is made using juniper and cedar branches – glowing embers are preferable to open flames. This is followed by an invocation inviting higher being to attend. On the general level, the lhasang might call upon the three jewels (Buddha, dharma, and sangha), the three bases of Buddhist practice (gurus, yidams, and dakinis), and whatever gods and sages there might be – protectors, the three most important bodhisattvas in Tibetan Buddhism (Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani), Guru Rinpoche, and other lineage figures. This is followed by offerings that can be material (grains, food, alcohol) or imagined.

Then supplication for assistance is issued to the beings who have been gathered and with whom contact has been established through the offerings. One first asks for purification and protection against obstacles and negativity, which can be inner (disease, emotional problems, resistance, and other impediments to successful dharma practice) or outer (curses, lawsuits, warfare, failing crops, plague, and famine). The following request is for empowerment, health, material prosperity, and well-being. On the transmudane level, one asks for successful dharma practice, insight, compassion, and close connection with one’s lineage. Higher beings are seen as participating in the overall scheme of things and capable of influencing the course of events.

The supplication is followed by repetition of various mantras, often in Sanskrit which, as the original language of Buddhism, is considered particularly powerful. For example, the revered mantra of Avalokiteshvara, OM MANI PADME HUM, or the most important mantra of Padmasambhava, OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HUM. In Vajrayana, the mantras embody the essence of particular buddhas, protectors, or departed gurus. At this point, participants circumambulate the fire in a clockwise fashion, purifying themselves and various objects (clothes, brushes, sculpting tools, etc.) by juniper smoke. It does not include ritual implements, which are sacred already.

The lhasang concludes with a restatement of the purpose and with a particularly powerful mantra, such as:

OM YE DHARMA HETU-PRABHAVA HETUM TESHAM
TATHAGATO HYAVADAT
TESHAM CA YO NIRODHA EVAM VADI MAHASHRAMANAH SVAHA

This mantra represents one of the oldest statements of Buddha Shakyamuni; it roughly translates as: "Whatever phenomena (dharmas) arise from a cause, the cause of them the Tathagata has taught, as well as the cessation thereof. Just so has the great ascetic declared."

The rituals are often accompanied by very auspicious synchronicities involving natural phenomena (sun, clouds, rainbow, appearance of animals, etc). This is considered to be confirmation of the success of the ritual.

Buddha's Legacy.

For Tibetans, India is the "middle country," the land in which Buddha Shakyamuni was born and in which the major Buddhist traditions that are important to Tibet originated. Although Buddhism all but disappeared from India, the Tibetans have great reverence for its homeland; In addition, the great deceased Indian gurus are for the Tibetans still present today. Vajrayana is a form of Mahayana Buddhism, according to which every human beings and every sentient being is destined to become one day a fully enlightened Buddha. The ideal of Mahayana is the bodhisattva, and enlightened being who practices wisdom and compassion and strives for enlightenment of all sentient beings.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, the biographies of the Buddha's life found in Buddhacharita and other early texts, in which he is shown teaching only the four noble truths and personal salvation are incomplete. They refer to these Hinayana teachings (the lesser vehicle) as the "first turning of the wheel of karma (dharmachakra)." The early scriptures do not mention the "second and the third turning of the wheel," the more advanced teachings of Mahayana (the greater vehicle), that focus on selfless nature and emptiness of all phenomena (anatta) and on Buddha nature of all sentient beings. Beyond these three turnings of the wheel, the Buddha also gave initiations and instructions for the unconventional lineages of Vajrayana (the diamond vehicle).

The Tibetan tradition also maintains that the Buddha did not give all these teachings in the physical body. He had three bodies: the physical form (nirmanakaya), visible to ordinary people; a spiritual or "visionary" body of shape, color, and light, but not materiality (sambhogakaya), in which he journeyed to celestial realms to teach the dharma to the gods; and ultimate reality (dharmakaya). The Mahayana and

Vajrayana teaching are understood to have been given in the sambhogakaya body. Buddha's talks (Buddha-vacana) given in various manifestations of sambhogakaya are seen as more "real" or legitimate than those given in the physical body, because they are more closely related to the source.

The Buddha's teachings of the first turning of the wheel, delivered in the Deer Park in Sarnath to five of Buddha's ascetic companions, are contained in the Tripitaka ("three baskets"), Vinaya (rules of monastic restraint), Sutras (basic doctrines, meditation instructions, stories), and Abhidharma (advanced teachings for monastic colleges). The teachings of the second turning on sunyata or emptiness are contained in the Prajnaparamita Sutras. They are not nihilistic; it is our self-serving version of reality that is empty. Once this is realized, the true beauty of the world may be seen and compassion arises.

The third turning emphasizes this beauty and luminosity of the world and the Buddha nature of all sentient beings. This is described in the Sandhinirmochana Sutra, in the Tathagatagarbha Sutras, and other texts.

Vajrayana: Extraordinary Instructions on Practice.

The teachings of the three turnings of the wheel reflects the Buddhas skillful means (upayas) – choosing the form that the listeners can relate to. However, the journey described by the conventional vehicles (Hinayana and Mahayana) is a long one, extending over innumerable lifetimes. In order to provide a more direct route to realization, the Buddha also taught the unconventional instructions of Vajrayana. He delivered these in his sambhogakaya body, appearing in various forms in different locations in the world. The teachings of the three turnings are given in various discourses of the Buddha (sutras), the Vajrayana is set forth in revelations (tantras), particularly the unsurpassable tantra (anuttara-yoga tantra).

Vajrayana does not articulate a different doctrine, but consists of an array of powerful meditation practices and more focused yogic way of life. Its essence is to make direct contact with the Buddha nature within; it takes the awakened mind as the basis of the path ("fruitful vehicle), as compared to Hinayana and Mahayana that focus on the causes leading to eventual attainment of the enlightened state ("causal vehicles").

Vajrayana has two primary methods: 1. imaginary identification with a particular Buddha or bodhisattva following iconographic instructions, and 2. formless practice – mahamudra or dzokchen – in which one is first introduced directly to one's Buddha nature and then meditates upon it.

The Tibetans see the three vehicles as steps on the spiritual path. One first enters the Hinayana by taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, meditates, and pursues ethical life. Subsequently, one follows Mahayana by taking the bodhisattva vow and working for the welfare of others and one's own. And then one enters the Vajrayana, fulfilling one's bodhisattva's vow through various methods of intensive meditative practice.

The Buddha attained buddhahood by solitary meditation, "forest renunciation" and he recommended the same to his earliest disciples. This involved staying on a mountaintop, a hidden cave, or deep in the jungle, wearing simple robe, wandering, begging for food, living in the open or under a tree, and meditating. But the Buddha also legitimated two other ways of life – institutionalized monasticism and the way of the lay follower, emphasizing moral behavior and generosity toward the renunciant dharma practitioners. Over time, a fourth way of life developed in India, that of the householder yogin, a layperson practicing meditation.

Hinayana and Mahayana were preserved and transmitted primarily in the monasteries and nunneries, where the sacred texts were copied and discussed. In Tibet, six of these scholar monks ("six adornments") were particularly renowned for providing the foundations for Buddhist philosophy in Tibet. The first three of them are known as "progenitors:"

1. Nagarjuna, (1st to 2nd century CE), venerated as a "second Buddha," initiator of the Mahayana, founder of Madhyamaka, the most important Mahayana philosophy in Tibet.
 2. Asanga (3rd to 4th century CE), founder of Yogachara, known for his teachings on the path of the bodhisattva.
 3. Dignaga (5th to 6th century), the renowned Buddhist logician
- The remaining three were prominent commentators – Aryadeva, Vasubandhu, and Dharmakirti, who lived between the fourth and seventh centuries.

The Siddhas.

By the seventh century when Buddhism started coming to Tibet, the only forest lineages left in India were those of Vajrayana. According to History of Buddhism in India by Lama Taranatha, Vajrayana existed in India already in the time of Nagarjuna among masters called siddhas ("the perfected ones"). Between the eighth and the twelfth century, we hear about the existence of eighty-four mahasiddhas, who lived throughout India, teaching, transmitting the Vajrayana teaching to a limited number of chosen disciples, and performing miracles. The Tantras of the Inner Yanas were introduced into India under the strictest secrecy.

The siddhas played a central role in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet and in continuing the tradition there until the present day. They were men and women who in their pretantric days often were in great crisis, distress, and dislocation. They typically found a guru who introduced them into Vajrayana practice through the initiatory liturgy, or abhisheka. They meditated often in secluded places and in cremation grounds and were known for their ruthless approach to the spiritual path and “crazy wisdom.”

They often brought their realization back into the world and led ordinary life in all kinds of roles and professions, from kings to street sweepers. According to their Indian biographies found in the Chaturashiti-siddha-pravritti, the early Vajrayana was a strictly non-monastic tradition; only a few began their Buddhist careers as monks and later separated themselves from monastic life. More conventional forms of Tantric Buddhism did not begin in India until the tenth century and, in the next two centuries, Tantric texts were studied in the monasteries. However, even then, the most serious Vajrayana practice continues to be found outside of conventional settings. Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are two major orientations: one focusing on study of the texts, the other on meditational practice and direct experience.

The beginnings of Buddhism in Tibet.

Buddhism was carried into India in two waves, The first one (nyingma) occurred between the seventh and ninth centuries; these traditions are held principally by the Nyingma, known as the Old Translation (nga-gyur) school. The later spreading (sarma) took place between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. The traditions brought during this New Translation period (sar-gyur) survived mainly in the Kadam school, which later transformed into the Geluk and the Sakya and Kagyü.

The early spreading of Buddhism in Tibet is closely connected with a series of kings ruling Central Tibet. This way, Buddhism got associated with the prestige and power of the royal court. According to the Tibetan tradition, the first kings originated in prehistory; they were sacred beings who came from heaven. After one of them was killed by deception, they became mortal. However, they were seen as human incarnations of celestial bodhisattvas. The role of the kings was to mediate between spiritual reality and the material world.

Tibetan legend has it that Buddhism first appeared in Tibet under the reign of La tho ri; at this time the Buddhist scriptures and symbols fell from the sky. Buddhism existed in many of the surrounding countries; there was contact by trade and some Buddhist teachers visited Tibet. The first definite appearance of Buddhist teachings occurred under the reign of Songtsen Gampo (609-649), seen as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara. This powerful king conquered the Kathmandu Valley and the

Chinese Tang empire. Both empires acceded to his demand for wives; he married two princesses, Wengcheng Kongjo from China and Bhrikuti from Nepal.

Both of the king's wives were Buddhists and converted him to the teachings, against the opposition of the aristocracy who had allegiance to the old shamanic tradition. Wengcheng Kongjo brought, as part of her dowry, a very precious Indian image of Shakyamuni Buddha and required that a palace be built for it; this is how the Jokhang came into existence. At this time, a script was imported from India and adapted to the Tibetan language. Songtsen Gampo and his wives are represented in virtually every monastery and nunnery in Tibet.

The second important religious king was Trisong Detsen (742-797), seen as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Manjushri. He founded institutionalized Buddhism through the building of the great monastery of Samye, built as an enormous three-dimensional mandala, ordination of the first Tibetans, and translation of many texts. The Indian Mahayana monk Shantarakshita, from Bengal invited by the king to help with the construction of the monastery encountered natural disasters and calamities, seen as resistance of the local natural spirits.

The task of taming the local deities was accomplished by the Indian Siddha Padmasambhava. His history resembles to some degree that of Sakyamuni. He was born as an incarnation of Amitabha Buddha to the childless king Indrabodhi of Uddiyana (today's Afghanistan) in answer to the prayers of priests. He took miraculous birth from a lotus as an eight-year old boy (Padmasambhava). After years of life in the palace as a prince and five-year marriage, he realized the futility of all worldly things, renounced the world, and entered a monastic order.

Here his story radically departs from that of Sakyamuni. He was accused of the death of several people and narrowly escaped execution by hanging when the king changed this sentence to exile. For years, he meditates on cremation grounds, sitting on corpses, eats their transmuted flesh, and uses their skin for clothing. He studies all forms of Buddhism and receives initiation from various siddhas and women known as dakinis (sky-goers). When he attains miraculous powers, he uses them to convert lay people and to subjugate evil spirits. He can enter at will all the lokas and communicate with their inhabitants; he is also entirely independent of the monastic system.

Padmasambhava, invited by the king, tames the local deities and enlists their help in the project. With supernatural help, the Samye monastery is built in only five years and Shantarakshita is able to ordain the first seven Tibetans. The king receives many teachings from Padmasambhava and, as part of his initiation gift, he offers his queen Yeshe Tsogyal, to his master. She becomes Padmasambhava's consort and primary disciple, receiving his teachings, including the most sacred Nyingthig ("essential

heart") instructions. Having attained realization and the power of total recall, she is able to bring together many of Padmasambhava's teachings and hide them as terma ("hidden dharma treasures).

The building of the Samye monastery illustrates some important aspects of the early Buddhist history in Tibet: the need to respect the local non-human environment and include it and cooperation between the institutional and non-conventional traditions, both of which were supported and flourished. Once the monastery was built, King Trisong Detsen organized an extensive translation project to render the most Important Indian scriptures into Tibetan; it involved over a hundred of scholars and translators.

Another important event that occurred at this time was a debate between Indian and Chinese contingents at Samye. The Indian side favored the gradual Mahayana path to enlightenment, The Chinese maintained that the superior path lay in meditative realization of the Buddha nature here and now. This position, close to the Chinese Zen (Ch'an), emphasized that the ultimate awakened state is already present in each sentient being. Intellectual knowledge and morality are not essential and can be counterproductive.

The accounts concerning the result of this debate differ from each other and are difficult to evaluate. For those in position of power, monks in established monasteries were certainly a preferred alternative. On the other hand, the kings have always been fascinated by magical powers of yogis, tantrics, and shamans. The conflict still continues in modern Tibet: The Gelukpas and others, favoring institutional monasticism, accuse others, particularly the Nyingma school of perpetuating the mistaken Chinese approach. From the Nyingma perspective, without emphasis on realization, Buddhism will produce good people, but not enlightened people.

The third religious king, Ralpachan (815-831) was considered to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Vajrapani. During his reign, he showed ardent and even naively enthusiastic support for Buddhism. He supported translations, heaped gifts and privileges on monasteries, and required each family to provide one seventh of the support needed for one monk. He even braided his long hair and had monks sit on them. This behavior met strong opposition among the non-Buddhist nobility who saw it as humiliating and inappropriate submission to the Buddhist clergy.

Ralpachan was assassinated by an individual named Langdarma, who seized the throne and for several years relentlessly persecuted Buddhism. Langdarma was himself murdered in 842 and after his death, there was a period of 150 years of political disorganization, civil strife, and internecine warfare. This seemingly dark period was also a time of creative and mutually transformative interaction between practitioners of dharma, various contemplative traditions, and local shamanic sources.

Yogis and various ritual masters studied with one another and spirits were “tamed” and brought into the arena of Buddhism.

Nyingma: The Ancient School.

During the second spreading of Buddhism between the latter part of the tenth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism took their classical shape. This includes the Nyingma, or Ancient School, which traces its lineages and teachings to the early spread, and three schools that emerged from the new importation of the dharma – Kadam (later transformed into the Geluk), the Sakya, and the Kagyü. Before the later spreading, the monastic and non-monastic practitioners thought about themselves simply as Buddhists, “insiders” (nang-pa).

The Nyingma lineage can be traced to several masters, who lived before and during the eighth century, particularly to Garab Dorje, the human originator of Dzokchen. He was born to a Buddhist nun, who initially cast him away to die; when she found him later still alive, she came to the conclusion he was a divine child and raised him. At the age of seven, Garab Dorje successfully debate the king’s scholars and was recognized as incarnation of a Buddha or high level bodhisattva. During a 32-year retreat in a place known for its terrifying spirits, he received many revelations, including the profound dzokchen teachings (directly from Vajrapani), and received the instruction to write down all the tantras.

Garab Dorje transmitted the dzokchen lineage to Manjushrimitra, another important Nyingma progenitor, who had studied under him for 75 years. After Garab Dorje dies, he appeared to Manjushrimitra as a celestial vision and dropped a small casket with his final teachings, a famous epitome of the dzokchen teachings called “the three words that strike to the heart” (tshik-sum ne-du). It was Manjushrimitra, who divided the dzokchen into its three classical parts, the mind section (sem-de), space section (long-de), and section of secret oral instructions (me-ngag-de). He went to a charnel ground, where for one hundred and nine years, he taught the doctrine to ugly dakinis, animals, and various practitioners.

Manjushrimitra’s primary lineal disciple was Buddhajnanapada. He encountered his guru on the way to China as an old householder with an ugly wife, ploughing his fields. Manjushrimitra offered him a fish from a latrine and ridiculed him for being scrupulous when he refused to eat it. Finally, Buddhajnanapada recognized the status of his guru and received instruction. From him, the lineage passes on until it reaches Vairochana, Vimalamitra, and Padmasambhava.

The mahayoga and anuyoga lineages began from King Ja, who lived in the Indian city Sahora. He received them directly from the Buddha Vajrasattva and from the Indian master Vimalakirti and transmitted it to other masters. The anuyoga lineage was

passed on to one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava. The Nyingmas consider Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoche, to be the actual founder of their lineage. They see him as the Second Buddha and the true originator of the various traditions and lineages, not just through his activity during his life, but also through ongoing revelations down through history.

In addition, Yeshe Tsogyal and his twenty-five disciples are thought to have lived not only in the eighth century, but also in the form of reincarnations, who act as tertöns, “finders of spiritual treasures.” Padmasambhava is believed to dwell in the “pure land,” the Copper-Colored Mountain outside of the ordinary time. An important Nyingmapa practice is the Guru Yoga of Padmasambhava, which involves visualization in which one imagines him bringing blessings and relief to his devotees.

Longchenpa.

One of the most important figures of the Nyingma history was Longchen Rabjampa, or Longchenpa (1308-1363). He was ordained at the age of 12, studied the New Translation traditions of various schools, and received instructions from prominent teachers in the most important tantras. During years of meditative practice, he experienced many visions of the tantric deities, such as Manjushri, Vajravarahi, and Tara. His writings on the history, teachings, and practice are among the most important treasures of the Nyingmapas; he integrated various strands of Nyingma teachings into a coherent perspective.

At the age of 27, he met his master Rigdzin Kumaradza (1286-1343), holder of the Vima Nyingthik, the essential teachings of dzokchen, which derive from the eighth century master Vimalamitra. Longchenpa stayed with his master for two years in his extremely austere retreat, held in constantly changing locations; his austerity was considered essential for successful practice. (This raises the question of the efficacy of Western Buddhism practiced in comfortable conditions).

Longchenpa spent most of his life in solitude, simplicity, and great humility. Everything he had received he spent for the service of the dharma, never showed reverence to a lay person however high their rank, and never expressed gratitude (it would have interfered with accumulation of merits). In one of his retreats, Vimalamitra appeared to him and conferred on him the Vima Nyingthik teachings. This direct transmission from the originator of the tradition, insuring freshness, potency, and accuracy of the transmission, became central to the Nyingma dzokchen teaching.

For Longchenpa, dzokchen was the innermost essence of the Buddha’s teachings. This is how he summarized the dzokchen perspective:

The present mind, which is unhindered -
no grasping at "this" or "that",
free from any modification or dilutions,
and unstained by (the duality of) grasped and grasper -
is the nature of ultimate truth.
Maintain this state.

In Longchenpa, we find the essence of the spirituality of the Nyingma school as it took shape at the time of later spreading: There was rootedness in the traditions of the early spreading, veneration of Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and the other early masters and their teachings. At the same time, the school shows inclusiveness in relation to the other lineages that Longchenpa had studied. Longchenpa also was an example of the vigorous spirituality of the Nyingma with emphasis on retreats, rugged life in the wild, meditation, poverty, sacrificing everything to the dharma, and avoidance of the destructive machinations of Tibetan religious politics. Although during the second half of the seventeenth century, partly as response to increasing persecution, the Nyingma began to build large centers (Kathok, Palyül, Mindröling, and Dzokchen), renunciation, simplicity, and retreat practice still characterize the Nyingma tradition.

Kama and Terma.

Because of the nonmonastic nature of their Vajrayana traditions, the Nyingmapas were decentralized and originated as many distinctive lineages. The two primary lineages both derive from Padmasambhava and his disciples. The Kama, or humanly transmitted text lineage, consists of teachings passed from master to disciple, often from one family generation to the next. The Terma, or lineages of revealed "spiritual treasures," represent rediscovery of "treasures," hidden during the early spread by Padmasambhava and other masters and later revealed by tertöns from the later spreading to the present time.

The Kama, or the "long lineage of textual transmission," includes texts of the Hinayana (Vinaya), Mahayana (Sutra), and Vajrayana (Tantra) brought into Tibet during the early spread from India, China, and central Asia. These are contained in collections unique to the Nyingma and include teachings by the great Nyingma forefathers, such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Vairochana. The Nyingmapas also accept later texts, the Kanjur ("Buddha's word") and Tenjur (commentaries by others on these texts).

The Terma, "short lineage of revealed treasures," includes texts of spiritual power and also statues, ritual implements, and other objects of spiritual power, hidden by Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal for "dark ages." They are hidden in the earth,

rocks, or water; the “sky terma” appear abruptly in the minds of later masters. The idea is that the termas refresh the tradition and modify it according to the needs of specific times and situations. Those who discover them are high bodhisattvas, reborn specifically for the purpose of finding them and interpret their meaning, since they are written in the cryptic “language of the dakinis.”

The Nyingma tradition has a long list of tertöns – three pre-eminent, eight great ones, twenty-one powerful ones, one hundred and eight intermediate, and one thousand subsidiary. The termas are often hidden and discovered in such spectacular fashion that even skeptics have to admit their validity (e.g. by opening a solid rock, etc.). Through the terma tradition, the Nyingma school has been able to shortcut distortions caused by time and stay in close continuous contact with the spirit, energy, and inspiration of Padmasambhava.

The Three Lineages.

There are three methods by which the teachings are transmitted in the Karma and the Terma tradition; each of them corresponds to one of the “Buddha bodies” (kayas). They show, on the one hand, how the Nyingma lineages were first received by human beings, and on the other, how they have been passed on from master to disciple.

Most of the teachings of the Thought Lineage of the Victorious Ones were originally taught by the primordial buddha Samantabhadra in his ultimate form (dharmakaya) directly from mind to mind, with no shape or form, to buddhas in glorious sambhogakaya forms, such as Vajrasattva (the image of the moon reflected in buckets of water). The sambhogakaya buddhas then used the Sign Lineage transmission (mudras, mantras, and symbols) to pass the teachings to realized human beings (nirmanakaya). The disciple instantly understands the complete meaning of the Tantra. In the Hearing Lineage of Individuals, the teachings are verbally passed on from nirmanakayas, such as Sakyamuni Buddha, to disciples in an unbroken chain. These texts are contained in Nyingma Gyübum, a collection of tantras from the early spreading in thirty-three volumes. All these transmission are still practiced today; practice without transmission is considered dangerous.

The Nine Yanas.

The Buddha described his teachings as “a gradual progression from the beginning up to the highest perfection, like the steps on a staircase, which extends from the lowest to the highest, or like a newborn infant who slowly grows up.” The nine yanas on the Nyingma path show a linear progression of spiritual development from the beginning; however, different people are naturally suited to the practice of different yanas.

The first three yantras are called “vehicles of cause,” because through purifying negative karma and removing obstacles, they generate the causes that will advance one toward Buddhahood. The first two belong to Hinayana (Shravaka-yana and Pratyekabuddha-yana); here one takes refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha and then pursues ethical conduct, meditation, and prajna to attain personal liberation. The third (Bodhisattva-yana) belongs to Mahayana; it involves the Bodhisattva path – to develop wisdom and compassion for others.

The remaining six tantric yantras are Vajrayana practices. They are known as “vehicles of result,” because they take the awakened state as the basis of the path. The dharmakaya, the fully realized state is assumed to be already present in each sentient being, but in an obscure form. Through ritual, visualization, and other means, one develops familiarity with the enlightenment within. In kriyayoga, the deity is visualized outside of oneself and one assumes the attitude of a servant. In upayoga, the relationship is more that of a friend. In yogayana, one visualizes oneself as a deity and later one meditates directly on the suchness of the deities.

The inner or higher tantras represent the quintessence of the Nyingma tradition and are understood as a radical and direct way to enlightenment. In Mahayoga-yana, one visualizes oneself as a deity with a consort. One visualizes oneself as a deity and the environment as sacred; in this way, all appearances are purified. Mahayoga is associated with the masculine principle and is for those, whose primary defilement is aggression. In Anuyoga-yana, one meditates on the subtle body with its chakras, nadis, prana, and bindu. This yoga is associated with the feminine principle and is for those, whose primary obstacle is passion and longing for experiences. Ati-yoga, containing the teachings of dzokchen, transcends both the masculine and feminine and is for people whose primary obstacle is delusion (ignorance). It was transmitted from the deity Vajrasattva to the human founder of dzokchen, Garab Dorje. His lineage reached eventually to Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Vairochana. In ati or dzokchen, the awakened state is all-pervading – it lies in every moment of our life, however pleasurable or painful, elevated or debased. All phenomena of samsara and nirvana are seen as kadak, primordially pure.

The Later Spreading: Kadam and Sakya.

When Buddhism arrived in Tibet during the early spreading, the classical monastic tradition in Indian was defined by conventional Mahayana teachings, such as Shantarakshita’s Kamalashila’s teachings on the gradual path, and Vajrayana existed in nonmonastic settings. During the 150 years that followed, Tantric Buddhism had been much better known and accepted and some of its forms were practiced in the monasteries. At the time of the late spread, it was expected that a well-trained monk was versed in all three traditions – Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

The early spread brought both the monastic and nonmonastic tradition to Tibet. After the assassination of Ralpachan, monasticism was largely eliminated. The task to revitalize it was undertaken by the great Indian Master Atisha (982-1054), founder of the Kadam lineage, that later became the Geluk school. As a youth, he had a vision of Tara, who remained his tutelary deity. A vision of Shakyamuni enjoined him to enter the monastic way. After studying in Indian monasteries and in Sumatra, he came to Tibet, on the 200th anniversary of the murder of Langdarma.

Atisha was trained in tantra and made a place for it in his system, he taught that the highest form of religious life is to be a celibate Mahayanist monk, who adheres to the Vinaya, studies the sacred texts, and follows the gradual path to enlightenment, working for the welfare of sentient beings. This orientation was later adopted by the Gelukpas and marks their approach today. Atisha's disciples had to live simple, unpretentious life of poverty and abstain from marriage, intoxicants, travel, and possession of money. His slogan "keeping low seat" meant not to allow one's mind to be preoccupied by food, clothing, fame, and importance. Atisha's renowned Bodhi-patha-pradipa became the basis of the Geluk founder Tsongkhapa's "stages of the path (lamrim).

Atisha brought with him from India a very irascible and difficult Bengali tea boy as an attendant to practice the paramita of patience. After meeting the wild and unruly Tibetans, he felt he did not need him any more. But he got to love the rugged Tibetans, learnt to speak fluent Tibetan and stayed in Tibet until the end of his life, instead of three year as he had planned.

Atisha's own training included both scholarly study and meditation practice. Each of these dimensions spawned a different lineage: the intellectual Kadam school, emphasizing study, philosophy, dialectics, and debate (Gelukpa) and the contemplative Kadam school, practicing the Mahayana type of meditation called lojong or "training the mind." His own "four aims" were:

1. Aim your mind on Dharma, not on mundane attainments
2. Aim your Dharma Practice at simple living
3. Aim at simple living until your death
4. Aim your death at solitude – die alone and friendless

Atisha undertook the task to sort out the differences in the many lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. The Old Translation Nyingma tantra is usually described in terms of the nine yantras, the New Translation Tantra in terms of Atisha's "four orders" of tantra:

1. Kriya Tantra, revolving around ritual texts comparable to conventional Mahayana practice, focuses on purification
2. Charya Tantra, emphasizing worship of one of the classical Mahayana deities as an external entity

3. Yoga Tantra, also compatible with conventional Mahayana, like the first two, comprises texts that enable practitioners to identify with the supremely divine form representing the goal of Buddhahood

4. Anuttara-Yoga Tantra emphasizes meditation on the great yidams, such as Guhyasamaja, Hevajra, Chakrasamvara, and Vajrayogini. It has been practiced by the great siddhas in India and Tibet in cremation grounds and solitary retreats; it involved some highly unconventional behaviors, unacceptable in the monasteries.

Anuttara is sometimes subdivided further into father tantra (Guhyasamaja Tantra), mother tantra (Chakrasamvara Tantra), and nondual tantra (Kalachakra Tantra). There are discussions about the relationship between these subdivisions and the higher yantras.

Sakya.

The Sakya lineage played a critical role in the later spreading of Buddhism in the 11th and 12th centuries and was politically most powerful during the 13th and 14th centuries, when the Mongols made the Sakyapas rulers of Tibet. The Sakya maintain a distinctive set of traditions from India, including a unique balance of both conventional monastic and esoteric Vajrayana teachings.

Even though their political fortune waned after the 14th century, the Sakya lineage continued to produce great scholars, practitioners, and saints. However, they remain the least known of the four schools, because of the neglect of Western scholars and their own effort to protect their teachings.

The progenitor of the Sakya is the master Virupa, one of the eighty-four Indian Mahasiddhas. The time of his life is uncertain, as it is the case with the other siddhas, probably between the 8th and 10th centuries. Born into a royal family, he took ordination at a young age and became a monk at the Nalanda University. A brilliant student, he was made an abbot and senior teacher at Nalanda. During the day, he participated in the monastic activities, teaching Hinayana and Mahayana, but at night, he practiced tantra.

Over many years, Virupa recited Vajravahi's mantra, twice accomplishing a cycle of ten million recitations. At the age of 71, he gave up and threw his rosary into the communal privy. In the evening that same day, he had a vision of the female Buddha Vajravahi, who bestowed on him teachings and blessings. She told him to abandon all concepts and look directly at the primordial state. She appeared to him repeatedly on subsequent evenings and led him through different teachings to the exalted state of bodhisattva (bhumi).

He was expelled from the monastery after he was seen eating a pigeon and drinking wine. Before leaving, he performed two miracles – he walked on the leaves of

lotuses on the pond as if they were solid land and resurrected the pigeons he had eaten from their bones and wings. Then he flew away to the regret of the repenting monks to become a wandering siddha. He expressed his realization in songs, miracles, and various forms of unconventional behavior.

Among Virupa's most important teachings were the "path with its results" (lamdre), associated with the Hevajra Tantra of Anuttara Yoga. Its essence is contained in a text known as Vajra Songs (Vajragatha), covering only twelve Tibetan folios. This first statement of the lamdre teachings outlines the Buddhist path from the entry into the Dharma to full enlightenment. In a condensed fashion, it includes all the teachings of the three vehicles – the "three visions" (Hinayana and Mahayana) and the "three tantras" (Vajrayana).

Virupa's teachings eventually found their way to Drogmi. During his long arduous studies in India, where he was student of the renowned Mahayana scholar Shantipa, Drogmi received transmission of Virupa's lineage from the great tantric teacher Viravajra, including the three tantras of the Hevajra Tantra and the instructions on the lamdre. The education involving rigorous conventional monastic training followed by tantric initiation into Anuttara Yoga, modeled by Virupa, Shantipa, and Drogmi, then was to characterize the Sakya lineage throughout its history in Tibet.

The same combination characterized also Drogmi's disciple, Könchok Gyalpo (1034-1102), a member of the Khön, a family of hereditary lamas. Considered one of the most brilliant Buddhist scholars of his day, he was moving in the direction from the tantric style of the Nyingmapas to a more conventional, academic Mahayana approach (although the deity Hevajra remained important as a more esoteric dimension of the Sakya lineage). In 1073, Könchok Gyalpo built a monastery in south-central Tibet, known as Sakya, or "Gray Earth." It became the primary institutional home of the Sakya lineage and an important center for study and practice. The monastery flourished under his son, Sakyapa Künga Nyingpo, and grandson, Jetsun Dagma Gyaltsen. The hereditary transmission established among the Khön remained within the family until this day.

Sakya Pandita, Künga Gyaltsen, and the Mongols.

One of the most important and influential masters of the tradition was the renowned scholar, Sakya Pandita, Künga Gyaltsen (1182-1251), born as the fourth son of Künga Nyingpo. A miraculously prodigious child, he began speaking Sanskrit at birth, was able to write devanagari as an infant, and as child he could understand and memorize any dharma that he heard. He particularly excelled in the theory of perception and logical disputation. His usual targets were the Nyingmapa and the Kagyüpa, both of whom he accused of carrying the morally suspect Chinese tradition.

In addition to his unparalleled academic talents, Künga Gyaltsen received in his dreams direct transmissions from great Indian luminaries of Buddhist philosophy.

For his qualities, he was considered an emanation of Manjushri and depicted with the emblems of this deity, the sword of prajna and the text of the Prajnaparamita. During the Mongol invasion, he mediated submission and in 1260, Kublai Khan, who had become the ruler of the Mongols and of China, made his nephew and successor vassal ruler of Tibet.

This arrangement lasted until 1358, when Mongol power weakened and the Kagyü lama Changchub Gyaltsen seized power from the Sakya. Since then various New Translation Schools backed by local or foreign power ruled Tibet. Theocratic system in which around 20% of people participated in the monastic life kept China in isolation, which made the Chinese takeover in Tibet relatively easy and without much political risk.

The Sakya Path: Lamdre.

The lamdre system is derived from the Hevajra Root Tantra and presents the essence of the tripartite Buddhist canon: 1. ethical discipline (vinaya), discourses of the Buddha (sutra), and psychology/cosmology (abhidharma). The lamdre is a complete system of exoteric (sutric) and esoteric (tantric) methods. The teachings have been passed with special emphasis on the “four authenticities”: authentic teachers, direct experiences, scriptures, and treatises. Central to lamdre is the non-differentiation between samsara and nirvana. The nature of mind is explained as “the root of samsara and nirvana” and “the union of luminosity and emptiness.”

The lamdre teachings are divided into two broad categories: the three visions and the three tantras. The first (impure) vision refers to ordinary sentient being that are trapped within the six lokas and points to the endless suffering they endure. It confronts us with the uncertainty of death and the existence of karma and reminds us that human life provides a unique opportunity to practice the dharma. The second vision (vision of experience) describes the bodhisattva vow, the generation of the mind of enlightenment (bodhichitta), actions based on compassion, and the meditation of shamatha (peace) and vipashyana (insight). The third (pure) vision depicts the complete enlightenment of the Buddha; it discusses the enlightened body, speech, and mind of a fully realized one. (see Konchog Lhundrub’s *The Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*).

The three tantras represent a particular presentation of the Hevajra Tantra, the root tantra of the Samkya tradition. The causal tantra teachings point to the fact that the Buddha nature within lacks inherent existence. Any idea we have about it is invalid, any quality we attribute to it is a projection. They offer an initiation which reveals

that our mind has always been pure and untainted. The path tantra involves initiations, methods, and practices that makes it possible to gain access to this incomprehensible self within. This happens by identifying with deities, by assuming the role of a Buddha, by creating a world, a celestial mansion. One does not meditate on the nihilistic concept of emptiness which focuses on non-existence, but on its creative aspect which makes everything possible. The fruition or result tantra, Mahamudra, involves seeing all beings as buddhas and bodhisattvas. It transcends thought, language, and knowledge. The self is no other than the world, the world is no other than the self. It is just as it is. But it can play, it can manifest anything.

The later Spreading: Kagyü.

Whereas the Kadam and Sakya schools were inspired and shaped largely by conventional Indian monasticism, the Kagyü order originated from strictly tantric roots and involved transmission from master to disciple. It began taking its present institutional form with Gampopa and the early Karmapas. The founder of the lineage was Tilopa, who was born a Brahman, renounced the world as a young man, and took monastic ordination. After a short period, he had a vision of a dakini, who gave him tantric initiation and enjoined him to throw away the monk's robe, act like a madman, and practice in secret.

Tilopa wandered from place to place, received instructions from several siddhas, and then spent twelve years meditating in Bengal, pounding sesame seeds during the day and acting as servant of a prostitute by night, defiling in the extreme his Brahman status. Later, meditating in a seclusion in a tiny grass hut, he came face-to-face with reality in the form of the celestial Buddha Vajradhara.

Following his realization, he wandered about as a powerful, unpredictable master, teaching and performing miracles and various shocking actions. His lineage includes teachings on mahamudra received directly from Vajradhara; practices that make up the "six yogas of Naropa;" and anuttara yoga tantra transmissions including father, mother, and non-dual tantras.

Tilopa's primary disciple was Naropa, born into a wealthy kshatriya family. At seventeen, he was compelled by his parents to marry; after eight years, he decided to divorce and get ordained. After years of studying all the major branches of Buddhist texts – Hinayana (Vinaya, sutras, and Abhidharma), Mahayana (Prajnaparamita), and Vajrayana (tantras) – he became an unexcelled scholar and supreme abbot at Nalanda.

One day, while studying texts on logic and grammar, he had a visitation by a dakini in the form of an old woman with a dark blue face, red eyes, and a beard, leaning on a cane. She was delighted and laughed when he answered her that he understood

the words of what he was reading, but cried when he claimed that he also understood the inner meaning; the former was true, the latter was a lie. She directed Naropa to her “brother” to seek true understanding, without specifying who her brother was. Then she disappeared.

He resisted the monks, who thought he had gone mad and tried to dissuade him from ruining his illustrious career as a monk and scholar, took his begging bowl and staff and left. He searched in jungles, deserts, mountains, valleys, and uninhabited regions and had many strange and confusing experiences that only in retrospect made sense as marked by Tilopa’s presence. In the process, he realized his past pride, arrogance, and limitations of conceptual understanding of the dharma. Having lost his old life and unable to find a new one, he fell into a deep depression and decided to kill himself by cutting his veins.

At this point, Tilopa appeared – a blue-black man with bloodshot eyes and a topknot – and accepted him as disciple. During twelve years of demanding tutelage, Naropa suffered many physical, psychological, and spiritual torments as karmic purification. After each death of the ego, Tilopa revealed a deeper level of Naropa’s being, that was clear and resplendent. When the time came for the transmission of the dharma, Tilopa requested an offering and Naropa offered his fingers; Tilopa collected them and hit him over the head with a dirty sandal. Naropa directly perceived the ultimate truth, the suchness of reality and his fingers were restored.

As a realized master, he roamed through the jungles, defeating heretics, hunting deer with a pack of hounds, performing magical feats, or acting as a child; through his shocking activities, he revealed the awakened state. His previous scholarly training also enabled him to be a prolific writer on Vajrayana topics; these survived in the Tenjur. This combination of tantric practice and more traditional scholarship made him a pivotal figure in the history of the Kagyü order. Through him, Tilopa’s untamed lineage was brought out of the jungles of India and given a form which the Tibetan householder can understand.

Marpa: Householder Yogin.

Marpa, the Tibetan founder of the Kagyü lineage, was born in 1012 of relatively prosperous parents in southern Tibet. As a young man with violent temper, he was sent by his parents to study the dharma. Frustrated by his experience with various teachers, he decided to go to India on his own. After an arduous journey over the Himalayas, he found in Nepal in the forest the siddha Naropa. For twelve years, he studied with him and other siddhas. The most important of these was Maitripa, from whom Marpa received instructions on mahamudra.

At the end of this time, he returned to Tibet, married a woman named Damema, and established himself as a well-to-do farmer. He returned to India to study with Naropa for a period of six years. At the end of his stay, he promised Naropa to return to India to complete his training. Back in Tibet, he gathered around him a group of students including Milarepa. Finally, well into middle age and against objections of his family, he set for his final journey to India.

Marpa's last stay in India was full of difficulties, agonies, and ordeals. He found out that Naropa had disappeared into the jungle and his whereabouts was unknown. When Marpa was just about giving up after a long search, Naropa appeared and after another three years of the training, Marpa could return to Tibet. But there tragedy struck; Tarma Dode, the favorite of his seven sons and the only one with special gifts to help others, got mortally wounded in an accident, when he left a retreat and rode his horse to attend a great festival instead. Dying in his parents' house, he performed phowa, the practice of ejecting his consciousness. His consciousness then entered a pigeon who flew to India and entered and revived the body of Tiphupa, a young Brahman boy who just had died.

After Tarma Dode's death, Milarepa became Marpa's primary dharma heir. Marpa died at the age of 84 amidst many auspicious signs – a rainbow in the sky, showers of flowers, ravishing music, and delightful scents. Naropa with hosts of dakas and dakinis arrived to escort him to the celestial realm, as he had promised. Marpa brought to Tibet the lineage Tilapa and Naropa, translated many important Indian texts, and started the tradition of the dohas, songs of realization, later developed and made famous by Milarepa. As a realized being, who was also a farmer with a large family and heavy worldly responsibilities, Marpa provided a model of the lay tantric practitioner.

Milarepa: Tibet's Greatest Yogin.

Unlike the stereotypical Tibetan saint, Milarepa was not an extraordinary human being from the beginning. In his early years, he was about as confused, self-destructive, and misguided as anybody can be. His life offers hope for enlightenment to an average person. Probably for this reason, his biography (told in the first person) is one of the best known and the best loved of all sacred Tibetan biographies.

Milarepa was born in southern Tibet into a warm and prosperous family. However, his father died while he was still a small boy and, because of a poorly conceived will, the family property went to his uncle and aunt. Milarepa, his mother, and his sister became virtually slaves of this couple and lived under the hardest of circumstances. When the time came for the mother to get the family fortune, the uncle and aunt falsified the documents. Milarepa's mother, full of anger, sent her son to a lama skilled in destructive spells to learn how to bring ruin upon these enemies.

After a year of training, Milarepa was given the instructions and sent protector deities to destroy his uncle and aunt. After two weeks, the horses went mad in a house, in which a wedding was taking place and tore the house down; thirty-five people were killed; the only survivors being his uncle and aunt. Milarepa, now hated and feared by the villagers, decided to repent and purify himself through sincere practice to escape hell. A Nyingma lama suggested to him to seek Marpa; hearing Marpa's name, Milarepa was filled with happiness and bliss.

Marpa, having heard Milarepa's story, sent him to work as a menial laborer and put him through great abuse. He had him build one stone tower after another, promising to reward him with the teaching, and breaking his promise again and again. Finally, Milarepa, the "Great Magician" – as Marpa called him – finally got depressed and suicidal. Secretly, Marpa loved Milarepa and often shed some tears for him when he was alone with his wife. Finally, he extended an invitation for all the students to come to him. Milarepa did not want to come, expecting another trick. However, this time Marpa talked about his love for him and gave him the teaching.

Milarepa moved to a cave in the mountains, living under very austere circumstances (nettle tea, food he was able to beg in the villages ahead of time), practicing meditation throughout the day and much of the night. His only garment was a white cotton cloth (repa), hence his name. His fame and veneration grew and he was visited by scholars and monastic prelates. He gathered a small circle of close disciples, among them the yogin Rechungpa and the monk Gampopa, who would carry on his teachings.

Milarepa's lineage developed into the Kagyü school with its four greater and eight lesser branches, one of Tibet's most important and influential traditions. Milarepa himself became one of the most beloved Tibetan yogin. The books describing Milarepa's life and work are *The Life of Milarepa*, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, *Drinking the Mountain Stream*, and *The Miraculous Journey*.

Rechungpa and Gampopa: The Dharma Heirs.

Rechungpa lost his father when he was a young boy. Reciting texts in exchange for offerings, he encountered Milarepa and decided to stay with him, against violent resistance of his family. His relatives kidnapped him and forced him to work in the field and he developed leprosy. He traveled to India to be healed by a guru and, after return to Milarepa, he took up the life of meditation in wild and remote places and the "begging practice of one taste" (developing indifference to the type of treatment by the donors).

Rechungpa encountered many obstacles in his practice, struggling with pride, resentment against the enemies of his master, criticism of his seeming inability to defend himself in the debates with his opponents, and strong impulses to defend him. However, he persevered and attained realization. Although he wanted to stay with Milarepa, the master told him that he had to wander for the good of others. In arguments with monks who were jealous of him and criticized him for not leading monastic life, he occasionally performed miracles – walking on water or through walls. One of the last instructions, Milarepa gave him was to show him his leathery bottom, hardened from sitting on stone.

After his death, Rechungpa disappeared into the “rainbow body.” His lineage is that of the non-institutionalized yogin and is known as “the lineage of oral instructions of Rechungpa.” Among his disciples were thirteen special heirs, particularly a woman who did not leave her physical body behind. Rechungpa was specifically connected with the tradition of togdenmas, extraordinary female yogic practitioners.

Gampopa (born in 1079) was the most influential disciple of Milarepa in terms of the institutional continuity of the Kagyü lineage. As a young man, he had a wife and a child, but lost both of them in a plague epidemic. He realized the futility of seeking happiness in the world and in his mid-twenties, he entered a monastic life. One day, he overheard three beggars discussing what they would like from life. One wished to have plenty of food and drink, the second to be a king, the third to be like Milarepa. On hearing this name, Gampopa got paralyzed and had an emotional reaction like never before in his life. He decided to sell his land and search for Milarepa.

Before Gampopa’s arrival, Milarepa announced to his disciples that a real bodhisattva was coming to see him; one of his monks told this to Gampopa and this filled him with pride. Milarepa deflated Gampopa by refusing him the audience for two weeks and then offered him a skull full of alcohol. When Gampopa overcame his resistance to break his monk’s vow, he praised him for his capacity to assimilate the teachings of the lineage. Gampopa’s path included the scholarly training of the monk, as well as the solitary meditation of the yogin. He institutionalized this integration of the Kadam and Kagyü training by building a monastery and laid it out in his Jewel Ornament of Liberation.

One of Gampopa’s primary disciples was Tüsum Khyenpa (1110-1193), who built three important Kagyü monasteries: Tsurphu near Lhasa, and Karma Gon and Kampo Nenang in Kham. Karma Pakshi, was recognized as the reincarnation of Tüsum Khyenpa – the first tulku in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Tüsum Khyenpa was retroactively declared the first Karmapa, with Karma Pakshi as the second. Under this second Karmapa, the Karma Kagyü lineage gained prestige owing to his close connection with the Mongols and the fact that he was a guru first of Mongka Khan and the Kublai Khan.

The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284-1339), integrated the Kagyü mahamudra tradition (received from Milarepa and Gampopa) and the Nyingma dzokchen (received from Rigdzin Kumaradza, guru of Longchenpa). This synthesis has remained the hallmark of the Kagyü lineage and the lineage of the Karmapa continues down to the present. To sort out the various Kagyü schools, sub schools, and attendant lineages derived from various Gampopa disciples is very complex and difficult. The Kagyü specializes in various anuttara-yoga tantras, the instructions on the mahamudra, and the six yogas of Naropa – inner heat (tummo or chandali), the illusory body (gyulu), dream yoga (milam), the practice of luminosity (ösel), bardo meditation, and the ejection of consciousness (phowa). The general purpose of these yogas is to clear karmic obscurations and prepare for the experience of mahamudra.

Besides the four principal schools of Tibetan Buddhism – Nyingma, Kadam/Geluk, Sakya, and Kagyü – there were other traditions that arose as a result of the later spreading, but did not survive as independent lineages. Three of them deserve special notice. The first two derive from the teachings of the eleventh century great South Indian saint Phadampa Sangye. Shije, or “pacification,” refers to teachings that first purify suffering and then eliminate the defilements that cause it. Chö, meaning literally “cut off,” refers to cutting of the ego and the defilements that support it by offering one’s body, mind, and all attachments to the most hungry and fearsome beings in samsara.

Although the Chö has not survived as an independent school, its transmissions are kept alive in various lineages, particularly its female form, or Mo Chö that was transmitted from a principal student of Phadampa to the loved and respected wisdom dakini Machik Labdrönma (a fully realized being in human form). She wrote:

To travel to dangerous and solitary places is the Outer Chö,
To transform the body as food for demons is the Inner Chö,
To cut off the single thing (grasping) from the root
is the Actual Chö,

Whoever practices these three Chö is a yogi.

The Jonang school became well known in Tibet for the teaching of shentong, or “emptiness of other,” based on the third turning of the wheel. It maintains that within each human being there is the essence of enlightenment in the form of Buddha nature covered by defilements of passion, aggression, and delusion. Their gradual removal reveals the enlightenment within.

Modern Traditions: The Geluk and the Ri-Me.

Tibetan Buddhism, as we know it today, involves two primary approaches, the Geluk or “virtuous” school and the Ri-me or “non-sectarian school. The Geluk, founded in

the fourteenth century by the great scholar Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) represents a reformulation and reinvigoration of the old Kadam tradition of Atisha, with its emphasis on monastic scholarship. Its primary location is in the provinces of Ü and Tsang in central and west-central Tibet.

In contrast, the Ri-me movement is not a coherent school, but a loose grouping of like-minded people. It was started in the eighteenth century by the Nyingma yogin-scholar Jigme Lingpa (1730-1798); it emphasizes meditation and retreat. It evolved primarily in East Tibet, in Kham and Amdo, and it continued there until the Chinese invasion. The distinctions between the two orientations are not absolute; there is a significant overlap, and they both combine scholarship and meditation, only the emphasis differs.

The relationship between the two orientations has varied. On the one hand, they were cordial and supportive. The present Dalai Lama is a Geluk monk, but he studies, practices, and – as political leader of Tibet – supports all the major Tibetan traditions. On the other hand, there often has been conflict and tension, because of differences in doctrine, culture, legal matters, social customs, and dialect, seeking political power.

Tsongkhapa.

Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk school, was born in 1357 in the Amdo province. His birth was heralded by many auspicious signs, among them the dream of his father about the arrival of a young monk from the sacred mountain of Manjushri. Tsongkhapa was ordained at the age of three by the fourth Karmapa and received novice vows at the age of seven. He studied with some of the greatest masters in the most renowned monasteries and became a formidable scholar and debater, as well as practitioner. At the age of 33, he gave up his scholarly studies against the objections of his teacher and turned to tantra and eight years later attained realization.

From his new perspective, Tsongkhapa then proposed reform. He emphasized the monastic ideal and its ethical precepts, as well as study, scholarship, and debate. The curriculum of the Geluk monasteries and colleges came to include the following:

1. Study of prajnaparamita and other Buddhist sutras;
2. Madhyamaka philosophy, the Prasangika approach of Chandrakirti;
3. Pramana, logic, epistemology; and Vinaya. He also introduced more rigorous criteria for tantric practice, including long preparation and screening. Tsongkhapa held that only the texts of the later spreading, proven to be translations from Indian sources, should be considered legitimate and all the others should be avoided.

Tsongkhapa's most important works are Lamrim Chenmo (Stages of the Buddhist Path), where he describes three levels of spiritual development, and Ngag-rim Chenmo (Stages of the Path of Tantra), in which he insists that tantra has to be philosophically based on the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, specifically on the Prasangika Madhyamaka. As a prerequisite for tantra, it is essential to abandon any views about what is ultimately real.

Tsongkhapa gave final institutional form to the school he had founded in 1410 by building the Genden monastery and acting as its first head. After his death, the abbatial seat passed to his first close disciple, Gyaltsup, and, when he died, to his other main disciple, Khedrupje. Since then, the "throne holder" of Genden has functioned as the head of the Geluk order. In addition to the above two, another disciple of Tsongkhapa played an important role in the Geluk history; it was Gendün Druppa, who was retrospectively recognized as the first Dalai Lama.

After Gendün Druppa's death, a tulku named Gandun Gyatso was located, who inherited his lineage. Sönam Gyatso, who was the third in this series, broke the policy of the Geluk order not to get involved in politics, and made an alliance with the Mongol prince Altan Khan, who conferred on him the title of Ta-le, meaning "ocean" (in Tibetan Gyatso), which is now written Dalai. This title was henceforward used to designate the line of tulkus, with Gendün Druppa and Gandun Gyatso being retroactively recognized as the first and the second Dalai Lamas. The tie between the Gelukpas and the Mongols was further reinforced when the fourth Dalai Lama was discovered to be the great-grandson of Altan Khan.

The Fifth Dalai Lama, the Great Fifth, using his own military force and with the help of the Mongol chieftain Gushri Khan, consolidated the Gelukpa religious and political power over previously divided Tibet. Since then until the Chinese takeover, the Gelukpas were the primary ruling power in the land, with the Dalai Lama being the head of the government. From the time of Tsongkhapa, they underwent steady growth and built many monasteries.

Despite the Fifth Dalai Lama's achievements, his death in 1682 exposed the weaknesses in the succession by reincarnation. Because of the inevitable gap before the next Dalai Lama could assume control, an unstable situation was liable to emerge. Initially, regent Desi Songgye Gyatso concealed the Dalai Lama's death, maintaining that he was in long meditation. Later, the choice of the successor turned out to be an unfortunate one. Tsangyang Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama, showed little interest in either religion or politics and preferred the life of a poet and libertine.

The Tibetans tried to explain his behavior as the enlightened, unfettered activity of a yogi. But Lobzang Khan, a nephew of the Fifth Dalai Lama took the opportunity to murder Desi Songgye Gyatso and seized power, declaring himself king of Tibet. He

banished the inconvenient Sixth Dalai Lama to China, but this died before reaching the border. In 1717, a group of Mongols, the Dzungars, invaded Tibet and murdered Lhabzang and started looting and burning. At this point, the founder of the newly established dynasty in China, K'ang His, intervened and brought along the young Seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso; he declared Tibet to be a protectorate of China.

The Seventh Dalai Lama was a religious man who played a minor role in the governing of the country; this was left to lay administrators. The Eighth Dalai Lama, Jampel Gyatso, was also largely uninvolved in matters of state; from the time of his rule, the administration was put in the hands of a council of four ministers, one of whom would be a monk. In 1792, toward the end of his reign, the Chinese army had to be called in, to drive out the invading Nepalese Gurkhas. This was the last Chinese intervention and for more than a century, their role in Tibet became a formality.

None of the next four Dalai Lamas, from the ninth to the twelfth, had any influence over Tibetan affairs, since they all died before reaching the age of majority. Whether they were murdered or died for natural causes, is still an open question. In the nineteenth century, Tibet adopted a xenophobic attitude and closed its borders to all foreigners; this was a period of conservative, church-dominated stability.

The next great national leader of Tibet was the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Tubten Gyatso, who ushered Tibet into the tumultuous twentieth century. He recognized the precarious position of Tibet and the need to reach agreement with its neighbors – Russia, China, and British India. He was twice forced into exile, but in 1913 he returned in triumph to his capitol and declared an independent Tibet, free from even the formality of Chinese overlordship.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born to a farming family in northeast Tibet in 1935. At the age of two, he was taken to Lhasa and enthroned. He grew up in seclusion in the Potala and Norbulingka palaces. In response to the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, when he was only fifteen, he was officially appointed the political leader. In 1959, he fled into India after a popular uprising against the Chinese that resulted in the death of thousands of Tibetans.

The Geluk monastic training can begin at any age and proceeds in stages from the novice (getsül) to the ordained monk (gelong) and from there to the honored degree of geshe and ultimately the highest academic degree of all (geshe lharampa). The pedagogical method is twofold: memorization and debate. The debates are highly valued and the emphasis is on creative search for meaning and disclosing the nature of the mind and of reality, not literalist adherence to the scriptures.

The basic Geluk training involves five areas:

1. Prajnaparamita (primary text: Abhisamaya-alankara – Ornament of Clear Realization by Maitreya)
2. Madhyamaka (primary text: Madhyamakavatara – Entry into the Middle Way by Chandrakirti)
3. Pramana (primary text: Commentary on “Compendium of Valid Cognition [of Dignaga] by Dharmakirti)
4. Abhidharma (primary text: Abhidharma-kosha -Treasury of Abhidharma by Vasubandhu)
5. Vinaya (primary text: Vinaya Sutra by Gunaprabha)

The non-sectarian Ri-me movement (literally; “without boundaries) originated in Eastern Tibet in the 19th century. It is eclectic and shows appreciation for the multiplicity of authentic Tibetan practices and traditions. It is really not a school, but rather an orientation held by practitioners belonging to different lineages. It is said that this perspective reflects the original teachings of the Buddha, who gave 84,000 different dharma or types of instructions to address differing capacities and needs of sentient beings. Yet, the orientation of dzokchen, with its aim to move beyond any stricture of conceptual thought to a place where there is not any barrier (ji-shin-wa), plays a particularly important role in Ri-me.

While the Gelukpas drew their inspiration from the work of Atisha and the great Indian universities, the core of the Ri-me movement was tantric – the yogins and lay practitioners, mainly of the Nyingma tradition. Among the great jogin-scholar predecessors of the movement was Longchenpa and two of the Karmapas. The initial impetus that later nurtured the Ri-me movement came from Jigme-Lingpa, an accomplished master, whose spiritual journey after a difficult childhood in poverty involved numerous visions of deities and deceased teachers, including Guru Rinpoche, Yeshe Tsogyal, and Manjushrimitra, and revelation of Longchenpa’s Nyingthik cycle.

Jigme-Lingpa built a hermitage and meditation school in southern Tibet named Tsering Jong, where he spent the rest of his life. Known for his great compassion and kindness, he meditated, taught disciples, and composed texts. He was a person of childlike nature and said about himself: “My perceptions have become like those of a baby; I even enjoy playing with children.”

Another outstanding Ri-me master was the legendary Ju Mipham Rinpoche (1848-1912), who consumed a large variety of texts with truly supernatural capacity of fast reading. He also wrote with the same incredible speed, so that some regarded his composition virtually as “sky terma,” texts that had existed in their complete and perfect form in the limitless space of mind. Mipham Rinpoche’s writings fill 32 Tibetan volumes.

One of the important Ri-me projects was preservation of old text that were in danger of being lost, because of the stormy situation in Tibet. For example, when at the time of the fifth Dalai Lama, the princes of Shigatse unsuccessfully tried to take over control of central Tibet, the monasteries of the Karma Kagyü and the Jong schools, that were closely tied with the princes, were converted to Geluk institutions, and many of their texts were burned.

The Ri-me perspective can be summarized as follows: A person should be evaluated not on the basis of the sect or school he or she belongs to, but by the quality of their awakening. A tradition should be judged not by its sectarian identity, but by its spiritual potency and efficacy. Every spiritual tradition possesses a measure of truth and no one lineage can claim exclusive access to it; each of them has something vital to give to others. Given the variety of human temperaments and needs, a rich array of teachings and practices is necessary. This requires mutual respect, interaction, and dialogue.

All rights reserved to Stanislav Grof