



Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo the Great (1820-92)

by Alak Zenkar Rinpoche

Jamyang Khyentse was born in the region of Yaru Khyungchen Drak in Dilgo in Derge, East Tibet, on the fifth day of the sixth Tibetan month of the Iron Dragon year during the fourteenth sexagenary cycle. His father was Rinchen Namgyal, a secretary in Derge belonging to the Nyö clan, and a descendant of Drikung Changchub Lingpa. His mother Sönam Tso was a daughter of Gerab Nyerchen Göntse of the Sogmo family.

Jamyang Khyentse learnt to read at the age of four or five, and from an early age his intelligence grew so keen he was able to master reading, writing and other skills without any difficulty. At twelve, he was recognized by Thartse Khenchen Jampa Kunga Tendzin as the incarnation of the great khenpo of Evam Tharpatse, Jampa Namkha Chimé, and he was given the name Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo Kunga Tenpé Gyaltzen Palzangpo. At twenty-one, he received full ordination from Minling Khenchen Rigdzin Zangpo. In all, he had more than one hundred and fifty teachers, who were great masters from all four major schools—Sakya, Gelug, Kagyü and Nyingma—from the regions of Ü and Tsang, as well as eastern Tibet, including Minling Trichen Gyurme Sangye Kunga,¹ Shechen Gyurme Thutob Namgyal, Sakyapa Dorje Rinchen² and the great khenpo brothers of Thartse,³ as well as many other exponents of the scriptures learned in the five sciences.

Through his studies in the ordinary sciences of craft, medicine, grammar and logic, and the various secondary disciplines, as well as the major treatises of the causal vehicle of characteristics on Madhyamika, Prajñāparamita, Vinaya and Abhidharma, and the profound instructions of the tantras such as

Chakrasamvara, Hevajra and Guhyasamaja, as well as the Guhyagarbha and the Kalachakra and other tantras of the resultant vehicle of Secret Mantra, he dispelled any doubts and misconceptions.

He studied with masters from every authentic tradition of practice with an unbroken lineage which existed at that time in the Land of Snows, but especially the so-called 'Eight Chariots':

1) The teachings of the kama, terma and pure vision traditions within the **Nyingma** School of Ancient Translations, which had come down in an aural lineage transmitted by countless learned and accomplished masters, all thanks to the kindness of Khenpo Shantarakshita, Guru Padmasambhava and the Dharma-King Trisong Deutsen.

2) The divine teachings⁴ of the Old and New **Kadam** traditions, founded by the incomparable and glorious Lord Jowo Atisha and further developed through the magnificent efforts of Lobsang Drakpa, who was Manjushri in person.

3) The essential instructions of the Path together with its Result (**Lamdré**), the heart-essence of the Mahasiddha Virupa, which came down to the glorious Sakyapa founders and their heirs, and were then passed on by the various lineages including those of Sakya, Ngor and Tsar.

4) The four streams of teachings⁵ within the **Kagyü** tradition that stems from Marpa, Milarepa and Gampopa, and branched into the four major⁶ and eight minor⁷ Kagyü lineages.

5) The golden doctrine of the dakini Niguma from the glorious **Shangpa Kagyü**, which comes from the learned and accomplished Khyungpo Naljor.

6) The Six-Branched Application, which emphasizes the Vajra Yoga of the perfection stage of the splendid **Kalachakra**, and which came to Tibet from the noble dharma-kings of India and others such as Kalapada in early, intermediate and later phases, and developed into seventeen traditions, which were then brought together and passed on by the renunciate Tukjé Tsöndru⁸ and others.

7) The noble teachings of the **Pacifying** of Suffering Tradition coming from Padampa Sangyé together with the profound teachings on the objects of severance, or *Chöd*, which were passed on by Machik Labdrön and others.

8) The approach and accomplishment of the **Three Vajras**, the teachings bestowed on the mahasiddha Orgyenpa Rinchen Pal by the mother of the buddhas, Vajrayogini herself.

He received these teachings in their entirety and in the proper way, imbibing all the ripening empowerments, liberating instructions and supporting reading transmissions from the whispered 'mouth-to-ear' lineage into the glorious 'eternal knot' of his wisdom mind.

With great diligence, and forsaking all physical hardship, he received the reading transmissions for about seven hundred volumes in total, representing the complete unbiased teachings of India and Tibet, including especially whatever transmissions still remained for the Precious Translated Teachings of the Victorious One (*Kangyur*), the Collection of Nyingma Tantras (*Nyingma Gyübum*), and the Translated Treatises (*Tengyur*).

Not only did he come to possess infinite learning, he also developed unsurpassable qualities of experience and realization through perfecting the practice of meditation. In time, his fame spread throughout Tibet and the name of Pema Ösal Dongak Lingpa, 'holder of the seven special transmissions (*ka bab dñin*)',⁹ was heard everywhere like claps of thunder resounding through the land. He received these seven special transmissions in the following way:

1) Inspired by the blessings of Guru Tsokyé Dorje's wisdom mind and the bestowal of the symbolic empowerment,¹⁰ he received the authority to teach and transmit the sutras and the tantras of the new schools and the original **canonical teachings** (*kama*) and revelations (*terma*) of the ancient tradition, including all the maturing empowerments, liberating instructions and supporting oral transmissions.

2) By revealing treasure caskets in places such as Drakmar Drinzang, Damshö Nyingdrung and Terlung Pema Shelri, he received the transmission of **earth treasures**.

3) Deciphering the secret code which appeared before his eyes or clarified itself spontaneously in the expanse of his wisdom mind, he was granted all the empowerments and instructions in their entirety all at once by Guru Rinpoche in the form of various treasure revealers, thereby receiving the short lineage of **rediscovered treasures**.

4) Through the power of seeing various yidam deities face to face and receiving their blessings, vajra words no different from those of the tantras came to him spontaneously and he received the transmission of profound **mind treasures**.

5) He received the transmission of **recollected teachings**, consisting of teaching cycles formulated based on memories of places and events from the past.

6) He also received the transmission of **pure visions** and 7) the transmission of the **aural lineage**.

All that he himself had received of the sutras, tantras and pith instructions, he passed onto his disciples in accordance with their own inclinations and karmic fortune. By continuously giving empowerments, transmissions and teachings, he ensured that his followers were thoroughly grounded in the complete non-sectarian teachings of the Buddha, and established many on the path of maturation and liberation. The most important of his many countless disciples who were holders of the teachings were Kongtrul Yönten Gyatso, Ju Mipham Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso, Dodrupchen Jikmé Tenpé Nyima, Terchen Chokgyur Lingpa and many other learned and accomplished masters of the Nyingma school; the great Sakya throneholder Tashi Rinchen, Zimok Rinpoche of Nalendra monastery, many of the venerable khenpos of Ngor and many other precious masters of the Sakya tradition; the fourteenth and fifteenth Gyalwa Karmapas, the tenth and eleventh Situ Rinpoches, Taklungma Rinpoche and other holders of the Kagyü teachings; Könchok Tenpa Rabgyé, the great Nomihan of Drakyab, Lithang Khenchen Jampa Phuntsok, Horkhang Sar Gyalwa and other great geshe of the Riwo Gendenpa tradition, as well as many other studious scholars and renunciate meditators, as well as holders of the teachings of the Yungdrung Bönpo tradition.

With the offerings he received from devoted disciples, he commissioned the crafting of around two thousand statues of the Buddha, made from gold and copper, as representations of the Buddha's enlightened body. As representations of enlightened speech, he commissioned the carving of woodblocks for almost forty volumes of texts and was responsible for around two thousand volumes being copied out by hand. As representations of the Buddha's enlightened mind, he commissioned the construction of more than a hundred stupas in gold and copper, the foremost of which was the great stupa at Lhundrup Teng. To house these representations of enlightened body, speech and mind, he built some thirteen temples and shrines, large and small, where the members of the sangha received veneration, and undertook regular daily practices and periodic ceremonies. In addition, he offered timely aid to monasteries damaged during the civil disturbances and unrest of the time, and made vast donations to support offerings and so on. He advised officials from China and Tibet, as well as the kings and ministers of Derge, and in doing so brought reconciliation. Such were his unparalleled deeds in the activity sphere of work to benefit the teachings and beings.

Bringing to an end such vast and magnificent deeds, he demonstrated passing into nirvana on the twenty-first day of the second month of the Water Dragon year during the fifteenth sexagenary cycle.

His writings, which date from his youth to just before he passed away in his seventy third year, comprise some thirteen volumes in all. As made clear in the index to his collected works, entitled *Key to the Treasury of Excellent Explanations*, these works can be divided into nine main categories:

- 1) a collection of prayers and praises, which is like heavenly music to delight the victorious buddhas and their heirs;
- 2) a collection of advice on various topics, which is like a great ship in which one might set sail across the vast ocean of learning;
- 3) numerous profound points on buddhist philosophy, 'the science of the inner meaning', which are like great gatherings of clouds;
- 4) elegant explanations to shed light on the meaning of sutra and tantra, which are just like the brilliant orbs of the sun and moon;
- 5) sadhanas and ritual arrangements related to infinite yidam deities, which are like the glorious insignia of Vajrasattva;
- 6) clarifications on all the major and minor sciences, like a great lake to delight the goddess Sarasvati;
- 7) histories, biographies and chronicles of abbatial succession, which are like a wondrous and enchanting garden;
- 8) works on various other essential topics, which are like a powerful monarch capable of granting our every wish; and
- 9) a cycle of profound vajra songs of realization, which is like a spontaneously arisen secret treasury of indestructible luminosity.

Moreover, it was this great master who was responsible for arranging the major collections such as *The Compendium of Sadhanas*, and it was through his enlightened activity that Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoche's *Five Treasuries*, Pönlop Loter Wangpo's *Compendium of Tantras* and Palyul Gyatrul Dongak Tenzin's *Collection of the Twenty-seven Mandalas of the Nyingma Kama* were all compiled and edited. So it was that his enlightened activity continued, bringing all these teachings to his own fortunate followers and so many other students of the Dharma.

Composed by the devoted Thubten Nyima

¹ The seventh Minling Trichen.

² It was from Sakyapa Dorje Rinchen that he formally took the bodhisattva vow.

³ Ngorpa Thartsé Khenpo Jampa Kunga Tendzin (1776-1862) and Thartsé Pönlop Naljor Jampal Zangpo (b. 1789), who were the nephews of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's previous incarnation Namkha Chimé. Short biographies of the two brothers may be found in Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's *gangs can bod yul du byon pa'i gsang sngags gsar rnying gi gdan rabs mdor bsdud ngo mtshar padmo'i dga tshal*. See 'jam dbyang mkhyen brtse'i dbang po'i gsung rtsom gces sgrig, si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, pp. 93-98.

⁴ This is a reference to the so-called 'Seven Divine Doctrines of the Kadampas' (*bka' gdams lha chos bdun*), the three pitakas (Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma) and four deities (Shakyamuni, Achala, Avalokiteshvara and Tara).

⁵ These are the teachings of the so-called 'long lineage' which Tilopa received and passed on to Naropa. As Gene Smith has noted however, "Tibetan sources differ considerably regarding the lineage and content of these currents." According to most accounts, the teachings concern what have come to be known as 'the six yogas of Naropa.' There is disagreement over the list of teachers from who Tilopa received these teachings. Shechen Gyaltsab, in his history of the eight practice lineages, gives them as Nagarjuna, Dombi Heruka, Lihupa and Sukhasiddhi.

⁶ The Kamtsang or Karma Kagyü founded by the 1st Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa (1110-1193), the Barom Kagyü founded by Darma Wangchuk (1127-1199), the Tsarpa Kagyü founded by Zhang Yudragpa Tsöndrü Drakpa (1123-1193), and the Pakdru Kagyü founded by Phagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110-1170).

⁷ The Drigung Kagyü founded by Drigung Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön (1143-1217), Taklung Kagyü founded by Taklung Thangpa Tashi Pal (1142-1210), Tropu Kagyü founded by Gyal Tsha Rinchen Gön (1118-1195) and Kunden Repa (1148-1217), Drukpa Kagyü founded by Lingje Repa Pema Dorje (1128-1188) and Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (1161-1211), Marpa Kagyü founded by Marpa Drubthob Sherab Senge (no dates available), Yelpa Kagyü founded by Drubthob Yeshe Tsegpa (born 1143), Yabzang Kagyü founded by Sharawa Kalden Yeshe Senge (d. 1207) and Shukseb Kagyü founded by Gyergom Chenpo Zhönnu Drakpa (1090-1171).

⁸ 1243-1313, the original founder of Jonang monastery.

⁹ *bka' babs bdun*. For more on these seven, and especially how they were received by Jamyang Khyentse's contemporary and spiritual counterpart Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa, see Andreas Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism*, Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2005, pp.84-101.

¹⁰ This is a reference to a vision Jamyang Khyentse had in his sixteenth year during which he went to Ngayab Ling and met Guru Rinpoche, who introduced him to the nature of mind with the following verse:

"Unstained by objective clinging,
Unspoiled by the grasping mind,
Sustaining the naked and empty awareness
Is the wisdom mind of all the buddhas!