

NON-SECTARIAN SONG TO LINEAGE MASTERS

Je Tsongkhapa, Bodong Panchen, Je Ngorchén and Rongtön Chénpó

by 8th Karmapa, Mikyó Dorjé

With commentary by 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorjé



Translated, transcribed and edited by Adele Tomlin

Introduction

“So if you wish to follow me,
Do not make Dharma lineages into ‘mine’ and ‘yours’,
Spreading Buddha’s teachings is enough.
Having warm affection for one’s ‘own side’
Do not think of flourishing for that one alone.
May that mind of non-sectarian bias for the teachings
Be like an unbearable, blazing gust in the heart!”

–Excerpt from ‘Song to Lineage Masters’ by 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje

Today, for Guru Rinpoche day, here is full translation and explanation of a song (mGur) by 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje which the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje explained for the ‘Good Deeds’ Teaching on autobiographical verses by the 8th Karmapa¹. The song is one of many ‘songs’ the 8th Karmapa composed for other Buddhist masters from different lineages, and within the Kagyu lineage. The song praises the deeds of four important great Tibetan Buddhist masters, Je Tsongkhapa, Bodong Panchen, Je Ngorchon and Rongton Chenpo (details about these masters are included in footnotes below the explanation and translation).

In summary, what the text shows is how Mikyo Dorje experienced intense regret at having negative views about teachers from other lineages, and his confession about that. It encourages the reader to understand that bias and sectarianism towards one lineage or teacher in particular is not in accord with the preservation and dissemination of the Buddha’s teaching as a whole. That such ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ attitude will lead to the degeneration of the Buddha Dharma.

This first published transcript and translation is based on the original Tibetan and simultaneous oral translation by David Karma Chophel. However, as parts of the English were not audible or missed out, and the text itself was not presented with an English translation, I have referred back to the Tibetan teaching and text as necessary. As it was produced in a short space of time, apologies for any errors.

May it be of benefit and may the Buddha Dharma flourish!

Translated, transcribed and edited by Adele Tomlin, 22nd February 2021. Copyright.

Commentary by 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje on 'Song for Lineage Masters' by 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje

Below is a full translation of the 8th Karmapa song, first is a transcript of the 17th Karmapa's teaching on it.

"The Praise I am going to share with you today is the one that gives me the most feeling and emotion. This song is in the *Collected Songs of Mikyo Dorje*². When we talk about a song, it's different from a normal composition. We talk about a song it's like an experience and a feeling of realization. It's that kind of creation. The words of songs are not like other types of works.

First Verse – Je Tsongkhapa

"In the Victorious Realm of Snowy Tibet

In an era of merely donning the Vinaya

The deeds of Lobzang Dragpa [Tsongkhapa], having

Grasped the ways of Bhagavan Shakya Thubpa [Buddha]

Holding the saffron victory banner

With followers like Shariputra, he

Filled the victorious realm of the world with excellent acts.

If you lack faith for that Lord, in whom can you have faith?

Before, with sectarian bias, I offered abuse,

Due to not knowing and having bad friends,

These sins I committed out of stupidity, I confess and admit.

May I follow him in future births and lives!"

“Here he is making a supplication and confession to Lobzang Dragpa [Tsongkhapa]. At that time, people didn’t take much interest in Vinaya and so Tsongkhapa just was like a Buddha Shakyamuni appearing in the world.(42 mins). He upheld the teachings of the Vinaya and he had many students like Shariputra and his deeds filled up the whole world. So, he is saying, if you don’t have faith in someone like Tsongkhapa then whom can you have faith in? The 8th Karmapa says there have been times that I have criticized him a little bit but I have been caught up by negative friends and come under their influence and so made these accusations through not understanding. So he says: ‘I confess what I did out of ignorance’.

When I was young, there was a bit of a grudge and rivalry between Kagyu and Gelug, particularly from the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, when the armies of Gushri Khan attacked the Kagyupa. They had no power to do anything but inside they felt a grudge towards them. So there is this tradition. When I was young, people would always say Gelugpas are no good. In my living quarters there was only one room to sleep in and live in. In that, there was one thangka that was of the thirty-five Buddhas of Confession. When I looked at the top of the thangka, there was an image of Je Tsonkhapa. While looking at it, my attendant said ‘oh that Tsongkhapa is no good’. Normally, there is fabric at the top of thangkas which you roll up, and they would cover the bit with Tsongkhapa on it with that fabric. However, since I was young I always had a little faith and affection for him. Also, when I was studying poetry, I studied a poem by the 5th Dalai Lama and I think his writing is excellent and so I do have this affection for him. Yet, when he criticizes the Kagyu I feel strange about that. Yet, I also fundamentally feel affection. So people around me would always speak badly about him and at the time of Mikyo Dorje it must have been the same.”

Second Verse – Bodong Panchen Rinpoche, Chogle Namgyal

“Finally, when the teachings were nearing destruction

The one who again turned the wheel of all Dharma;

The three baskets³ and four classes of tantra,

Sovereign master of the six families, Lord Vajradhara

With texts about ‘ka, kha, ga’ [Tibetan alphabet]

Up to glorious Kalacakra,

Turning the wheel of inexhaustible Dharma.

With a miraculous display of unlimited arrangements, and

A shower of uncountable volumes of texts.

Previously, unknown in the Arya land [India]

He was unheard of in Snowy Tibet.

Founder of a new, sacred Dharma ‘chariot’ tradition

Je Bodong Chogle Namgyal,

Understand his knowledge was equal to space.

If you lack faith for that Lord, in whom can you have faith?

Previously, I had not studied and been indifferent to his liberation-stories

Now, unbearable faith has arisen

May I discover and follow him in future lives!”

So here, 8th Karmapa is speaking about the omniscient Bodong Rinpoche (bo dong pan chen phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1375-1451) ,who was an incredible scholar. His collected works are probably the longest of any scholar in Tibet. There are about one hundred volumes [it seems that Je Ngorchén has more, see note below]⁴. Among his works it goes from how to read Tibetan alphabet all the way up to Kalacakra tantra. They include excellent teachings on Sutra and Tantra and all the fields of knowledge. Someone wrote that he had fifteen secretaries and would go round to them and ask them to write this and then ask another, ‘can you write this?’ and they would write for him. So, in a short space of time he was able to write a huge amount of texts. We talk about Bodong Kagyu but there was the Bodong tradition⁵ and there was a particular feature of their view and practice. This tradition used to be active but it seems to be no longer with us. Mikyo Dorje says I also felt faith for him when I saw his liberation-stories, I didn’t take notice of them, but now I do.

Third Verse – Je Ngorchén Kunga Zangpo

“When the five degenerations abound, ‘experts’ of tantra and Sutra will

Crave killing, meat and blood.

At that time, Avalokiteśvara took up the external conduct of Vinaya

By becoming a human form of Vajradhara by

Adopting the way of Je Ngorwa Chen,

He swept clean the path of secret mantra, and

Flourishing among common Tibetan Tantrikas,

They held his teachings as authentic,

By adopting that authenticity, roots of virtue increased.

If you lack faith for that Lord, in whom can you have faith?

Previously, the stain of jealousy brought out hatred and aversion.

Now, I confess and admit this with regret,

May I discover and follow him in future lives!"

This is about [Je Ngor chen](#) (ngor chen kun dga' bzang po, 1382-1456), Kunga Zangpo we talk about the three, Then in Tibet, in particular the Kagyu would have ganachakra and take it as an opportunity to kill animals, eat meat and drink alcohol so because of degenerative times, they acted in bad ways. So Je Ngor chen told people if you do this it is very bad and many tanktrikas in Tibet took what he said as authoritative⁶ they stopped doing that.

[N.B. Je Ngorchen was one of the leading exponents of vegetarianism in Tibet, as were other great masters such as Jonang Kunkhyen Dolpopa. For excellent articles on Je Ngorchen's teachings on the faults of alcohol and meat, see Dr. Joerg Heimbels and Nyangshem Gyal's recent scholarly research listed in Bibliography below].

Fourth Verse – Rongton Chenpo

“In the degenerate age, when those with little knowledge of the Sutras

Disregarded the words of teachings and scriptures,

Lord Rongton Shakya Gyaltsen

Arrived like the great Translator Ngog⁷..

His pith instructions explaining the great texts were

Like the sun rising in the sky,

Dispelling the darkness of black-head Tibetans.

If you lack faith for that Lord, in whom can you have faith?

May I discover and follow him in future lives!”

This is a supplication to Rongton Chenpo (1367-1449)⁸, who is very important in our philosophical tradition. For this reason, when MD wrote long texts himself on Sutra and Tantras, Rongton had a great influence on him. This, he says those texts were like the sun rising, and extremely beneficial for study. For those reasons, he says I felt faith for you. Next is the summary in the final part. It is very important:

“Now, as the precious teachings of Buddha are

Innumerable as beings’ who hold them,

In this realm of the fortunate aeon, the expansion

In this world, of the rare, supreme source of refuge,

The supreme Sangha filled its entire surface.

Due to that fullness, there is joy equal to space!”

Here, when Mikyo Dorje talks about ‘teachings of Buddha’, he is not just talking about Tibetan Buddhism but all Buddhist teachings and because of the kindness of the masters of all the lineages, they are spreading and flourishing. Likewise, the supreme community [sangha], or great realm of merit is the refuge jewel. It is due to the kindness of the great masters that it covers and fills the whole earth. Thus, Mikyo Dorje’s mind is filled with great joy.

“Before, due to extreme envy arising towards

The flourishing of other Dharma lineages,

Now, even a horse could not bear this regret and

I was left without any other method”

So here, Mikyo Dorje is telling us, that when people say other traditions are flourishing and doing well, he felt some envy. Now he feels such huge regret that even a horse could not bear it.

“I recite to myself this huge regret

With a mind unable to bear it, I confess and admit.

Now, even though I was filled with intense regret

In isolated places, such awareness became clear, and

Unable to hold it in any longer,

Understand this supplication of extreme longing of

Devotion for the undisputed, great Kagyu siddhas such as Nyenpa⁹

To be their authentic blessings.

So if you wish to follow me,

Do not make Dharma lineages into ‘mine’ and ‘yours’,

Spreading Buddha’s teachings is sufficient.

Having warm affection for one’s ‘own side’

Do not think of them only flourishing for that one.

May that mind of non-sectarian bias for the teachings

Be like an unbearable blazing wind in the heart!”

Here, the 8th Karmapa is saying, 'if you follow me and want to be my student, don't make disputes in the Dharma lineages between 'me and 'you''. If anything is a teaching of Buddha it is excellent if it flourishes and spreads. If you think, 'oh it has to be our side that flourishes and try to ensure their side does not' that is not OK. We should always be thinking, 'what can we do to help the teachings of all the lineages'. This should be continually burning intolerably in our hearts. For that reason, this is a really important point. We need to have a much wider and broader perspective. If the teachings of Buddha degenerate and disappear then there is no way for there to be Tibetan Buddhism. Not only that, if you can't say Tibetan Buddhism, you cannot say Kagyupa. Therefore, it is important that the entire framework of the Buddha's teachings remain without destruction. If we divide Buddha's teachings into factions and groups then, in the end, we see others' teachings as faulty and they see ours as faulty too. Then, finally, you can find nowhere that you can identify as the Buddha's teaching and there's a great danger in that.

For that reason, Mikyo Dorje himself is a great lama with wisdom, love and power. However, here he presents himself as an ordinary person and says he felt jealousy, anger, aversion, regret, and afflictions. These days, lamas will rarely say they felt hatred, envy and regret it and confess it. Here, Mikyo Dorje openly admits this, and says I will no longer do that. He speaks clearly and directly so it is easy to follow him. Otherwise, if we don't really know what the teacher's intent is, it's difficult to follow that lama. Here, as the 8th Karmapa clearly states his intention, if we are then unable to follow him, that is our fault not his.

In this song, he is expressing his thought about ' how could I have thought these things in the past?' He felt this unbearable pain for having done so and is making a confession of regret about it. The reason for feeling such intense regret is that when his body, speech and mind were in an isolated place, his 'sight' or awareness became very clear, so he was not only filled with great devotion but supplicated the great Kagyu siddhas, like Sangye Nyenpa and so on. The generation of this intense regret is their authentic blessing."

Song to Lineage Masters

by 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje

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Upheld the saffron victory banner, and
With followers like Shariputra, he
Filled the victorious realm of the world with excellent acts.
If you lack faith for that Lord, in whom can you have faith?
Before, with sectarian bias, I offered abuse,
Due to not knowing and having bad friends,
Such sins committed out of stupidity, I confess and admit.
May I follow him in all future lives!

Finally, when the teachings were nearing destruction
The one who again turned the wheel of all Dharma
The three baskets and four classes of tantra,
Sovereign master of the six families, Lord Vajradhara
With texts about ‘ka, kha, ga’ [Tibetan alphabet]
Up to glorious Kalacakra,
Turning the wheel of inexhaustible Dharma.

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Further Reading

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 - Songs of the 16th Karmapa (1940 - 1962)
 - [Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopedia of Tibet, Inner Asia and the Himalayan Region](#)
 - [\(PDF\) Ngorchen Künga Sangpo on the Faults of Alcohol and Meat | Joerg Heimbels - Academia.edu](#)
 - [\(PDF\) Biographical Sources for Researching the Life of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po \(1382-1456\) | Joerg Heimbels - Academia.edu](#)
 - [\(PDF\) The Sectarian Formation of Tibetan Vegetarianism: Identifying the First Polemic on Meat-eating in Tibetan Literature | Nyangshem Gyal རྒྱལ་ལྷན་པོ་གྲགས་པ་ - Academia.edu](#)
 - [Rongton Sheja Kunrik - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopedia of Tibet, Inner Asia and the Himalayan Region](#)
 - [Ngok Lotsāwa Loden Sherab - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopedia of Tibet, Inner Asia and the Himalayan Region](#)
- *Revival and Renewal through Reincarnation: The Bodong Tradition, Then and Now* Derek F. Maher (East Carolina State University) See: http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_38_06.pdf
- *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*. Marianne Dresser (ed.). North Atlantic Books. (1996)

¹ See the video of the teaching given on 21st February 2021, with English translation here: <https://youtu.be/9WnSE2Nrf1g>

² As the 17th Karmapa does not give an explicit source edition for the text, I am assuming that it may be one of the songs by Mikyo Dorje published in a volume in Sikkim in 1978 (rdo rje'i mgur dang zhal gdams tshigs bcad kyi skor). Songs of realization and instructions by Karmapa 08 Mikyo Dorje (1507-1554). mi bskyod rdo rje; 1 volume; 649 p.. W23656. gonpo tseten, gangtok. 1978.

³ Tripiṭaka is the traditional term for the Buddhist scriptures. The version canonical to Theravada Buddhism is generally referred to in English as the Pali Canon. Mahayana Buddhism also holds the Tripiṭaka to be authoritative but, unlike Theravadins, it also includes in its canon various derivative literature and commentaries that were composed much later.

⁴ In the entry for him on Rigpa Wiki it states: “Bodong Panchen Chogle Namgyal, a contemporary of the Mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo, was born in the south-western Tibetan region of Yigu and went on to become one of Tibet's most learned and realized masters as well as a most prolific writer. His collected works are in no less than 137 volumes. However, to be fair it has to be added that this corpus of literature includes his personal library as well. Not all, even though many, of these volumes were composed by him.” “But he was not only a scholar. In his spare time he practiced intensely and gained realizations quickly. As of then, he beheld many deities in visions, and eventually Vajrayogini and Vajrasattva requested him to compose his most famous works, the four “de nyid ‘dus pa” collections. They make up a sizable part of the above-mentioned 137 volumes. He also, at age sixteen, had visions of the awareness dakinis Niguma and Sukhasiddhi, most often associated with the Shangpa Kagyu tradition, and received from them their special longevity practices in these visionary encounters. As evidenced by quite a number of short but pithy commentaries on various Shangpa practices, and also some fairly lengthy ones, he seems to have received the transmission of this lineage, though it is not clear from whom. This material seems either to have been mostly ignored by mainstream Shangpa masters, or it was simply unavailable and unknown to them. In 1410 Chogle Namgyal established his own monastic seat of Palmo Chöding, near the Palgu lake in the Porong region. He spent most of his remaining life there. His teaching tradition became an independent school for a few generations, the Bodongpa, and was later assimilated into the Sakya and Gelugpa schools. While he had many great scholar and practitioner disciples, the foremost, and possibly most famous one among them was Chökyi Drönma (chos kyi sgron ma, 1422-1455/6), a princess of the Gungthang court, who went on to originate one of the very few, and certainly the most well-known, female incarnation lineages of Tibet, known as Samding Dorje Phagmo (bsams sdings rdo rje phag mo). After Chogle Namgyal's death, she went on to become a student, and presumably consort, of the Mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo.”

⁵ According to Treasury of Lives: “The Bodong (bo dong) tradition has a long and complicated history. The seat of what would become the institutionally independent Bodong lineage was the monastery Bodong E, which was founded in 1049 by Geshe Mudrapa Chenpo. What teachings were current there is difficult to know, save that in the twelfth century Kodrakpa Sonam Gyeltsen invited the Nepali yogin Vibhūticandra to Tibet and received from him a new transmission of the six-branch practice of the Kālacakra. Kodrakpa also propagated a lineage of Lamdre which was later subsumed into the Sakya tradition by Sonam Gyeltsen and Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo. Its greatest representative was Bodong Panchen Chokle Namgyel, with whom the unique Bodong Tradition is commonly said to have begun. It is important to avoid confusing Bodong Panchen with Jonang Chokle Namgyel, a teacher of Tsongkhapa and proponent of the Zhentong view.”

⁶ Je Ngorchen also composed many texts and works. In the Treasury of Lives bio it says: “Kunga Zangpo was extremely prolific, and his collected works contain nearly two hundred titles. Due to his many written works, the teachings he gave, his accomplishments as a practitioner, and the major monastic institution he established, Kunga Zangpo is included among the famous Sakya masters who came to be known as the Six Ornaments of Tibet.” https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Ngorchen-Kunga-Zangpo/TBRC_p1132

⁷ rmgog lo tsA ba blo ldan shes rab) [1059-1109]: “one of the most famous translators in Tibetan history. He was the nephew of Ngok Lekpé Sherab. He revised the translation of the Bodhicharyavatara and composed a commentary on it. He also translated Maitreya's Uttaratantra Shastra and Asanga's commentary with the pandita Sajjana, as well as Vasubandhu's commentary on the Dharmadharmata-vibhanga. With Bhavyaraja, he translated Prajñakaragupta's commentary on Dharmakirti's Pramanavarttika. His many other translations and revisions include the Abhisamayalankara and commentaries by Vimuktasena and Prajñakaramati; Dignaga's Prajnaparamita-samgraha karika with Triratnadasa's commentary; and Dharmakirti's treatises, Pramanavinishchaya and Nyayabindu.” See also: <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Ngok-Loden-Sherab/4261>

⁸ Rongton Sheja Kunrik ((rong ston shes bya kun rig) is the second in the line of great Sakya masters known as the ‘Six Ornaments of Tibet’. Among these teachers he is particularly revered for his mastery of the Buddhist sutras. Rongton studied and taught at Sangpu Neutok Monastery. He founded Penpo Nalendra Monastery in 1436. See: [Rongton Sheja Kunrik - The Treasury of Lives: A Biographical Encyclopedia of Tibet, Inner Asia and the Himalayan Region](#) and [Rong ston shes bya kun rig - Buddha-Nature \(tsadra.org\)](#).

⁹ Here Mikyo Dorje is talking about one of his four main teachers, 1st Sangye Nyenpa (also known as the siddha from Denma)