

CREATING 'HER'STORY: FEMALE LINEAGES AND TEACHERS



Written, translated and compiled by Adele Tomlin

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter One: Achi Chokyi Drolma	4
Chapter Two: Ārya Kshema (Buddha's female arhats).....	16
Chapter Three: Bhaddā-Kāpilānī.....	22
Chapter Four: Chinese Empress Wengcheng	31
Chapter Five: Chinese Empress Xu	45
Chapter Six: Machig Drupe Gyalmo	52
Chapter Seven: Freda Bedi	62
Chapter Eight: Gelongma Palmo and Nyung Ne.....	75
Chapter Nine: Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo	88
Chapter Ten: Jomo Menmo	92
Chapter Eleven: Machig Jobum.....	96
Chapter Twelve: Machig Labdron	100
Chapter Thirteen: Mandāravā.....	123
Chapter Fourteen: Queen Māya Buddha's Mother	147
Chapter Fifteen: Lady Niguma.....	160
Chapter Sixteen: Rechungma (Milarepa's Female Disciples I)	169
Chapter Seventeen: Saley O (Milarepa's Female Disciples II)	173
Chapter Eighteen: Kunga Trinley Wangmo	186
Chapter Nineteen: Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā and Vajrayoginī.....	197
Chapter Twenty: Tilopa's Female Teachers.....	226
Chapter Twenty-One: The Sakya Jetsunmas, a family lineage.....	240
Chapter Twenty-Two: Utpalavarnā	248
Chapter Twenty-Three: Yeshe Tsogyel	253

Introduction

This is a compilation of some of the research, translations and articles connected to women and female lineages in Buddhist and Tibetan Himalayan Vajrayana traditions, which I published on the Dākinī Translations website (from 2019 onwards). It is not intended to be an academic, scholarly collection, but simply an e-book/compilation of the articles (a mix of scholarship, translation and music) for a general audience, that can be easily downloaded and read in one file. The contents of the e-book are listed below. My wish in creating these articles was to bring some of these women and their lives to life in a more visual and musical format, off the PhD and academic 'dry and wordy pages'.

The largest chapters are those on Guru Padmasambhava's main human consorts, Mandāravā and Yeshe Tsogyel. There are also chapters on the Buddha Shakyamuni's mother, Māyā, his main female students, Ārya Khsema and Utpalavarnā, Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā and Vajrayoginī, Chinese Empresses Wengcheng and Wu, Tilopa's female teachers/consorts, Niguma and her six yogas, and Milarepa's students such as [Saley O](#) and [Rechungma](#). Also, women from the Nyingma, Jonang and Sakya lineages. There are three contemporary women, the British women who both became Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the Kagyu lineages taking vows from the 16th Karmapa, Freda Bedi and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. As well as a Tibetan woman, Tare Lhamo from Larung Gar Monastery in Tibet, who was discussed in the Yeshe Tsogyel podcast, with Dr. Jue Liang last year. This list is just a selection of the women I have written about, of course there are many more worthy of mention and inclusion!

There are some original music and art creations too, such as in the *Songs of Yeshe Tsogyel*, I composed a musical rendition of it, music and vocals, for people to enjoy and sing along with for inspiration if they wish. Also, an original commission thangka artwork, with the female teachers, consorts and lineage holders of the Kagyu forefathers lineage from Tilopa down to Milarepa, in an effort to make visible women in our practice and refuge tree visualisations.

In the chapter on [Tilopa's female teachers and consorts](#), I also challenge contemporary depictions of women as 'dollybird' pretty young things and also playfully title an article about [Yeshe Tsogyel and her male consorts](#), as a 'cougar' (modern-day slang) challenging sexism and ageism in Vajrayana (and in worldly contexts too) but also about her time spent in what is now called Bhutan.

Thus, I hope some of these articles will provoke some new ideas, thoughts, debate and ways of thinking about some of these topics, in ways that have not been written about, or considered, before!

Adele Tomlin, 25th December 2024. Copyright.

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Chapter One: Achi Chokyi Drolma

GODDESS QUEEN OF SPACE: ACHI CHOKYI DROLMA. Life-Story, Texts, Depictions, ‘Praise to Achi’ by Jigten Sumgon and Teaching by 8th Garchen Rinpoche

3rd Dec 2021 [Dākinī Translations](#)

“The Chief of the activity dākinīs will come to the area of Tidro cave in Drigung. This will be a nirmanakāya manifestation of Vajrayogini.” –Cakrasaṃvara root tantra

“I, Achi Chokyi Dolma, wrote this sadhana of myself. By this, for 15 generations, this woman (I) will take care of you. If it is important, call me. I am more tenacious than other women. By all means it is my task to ensure that there will not be breakage in the continuity of (your) lineage. These are the words of Achi. “

–from Achi sadhana composed by Achi Chokyi Drolma

“There are as many dākinīs as there are stars in the night sky, but there is only one brilliant, shining full moon.”

–Achi Chokyi Drolma

“The fact that Achi said OM TĀRĀ at her birth was proof for everyone that she was an emanation of Tārā. Tārā appears in so many different ways not just one way. Tārā has always appeared in the past and she will always appear in the future, there are innumerable manifestations always appearing of Tārā.”

—8th Garchen Rinpoche (Achi teaching in 2021)

Introduction

For the Dharma Protector Day today, am happy to offer the first research post on this website about female protector Achi Chokyi Drolma (A phyi chos kyi sgrol ma), often referred to as the Glorious Goddess of Space^[1] (Ying Wangchug Pelden: dyings dbang phyug dpal ldan) considered to be a manifestation of Vajrayogini, the Drikung Kagyu tradition’s protector and the great-great grandmother of Je Jigten Sumgon (’Jig rten gsum mgon) founder of Drikung Kagyu: and, as such the three kāyas of Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya and Nirmanakāya^[2]. She is one of the few female Dharma protectors but is considered to be an enlightened, not worldly, protector (for more on that see below).

This article gives:

1. a brief overview of Achi’s life-story,
2. English language research and texts about her,
3. visual depictions/iconography of her and her role as both protector and deity.
4. a new translation of a *Praise to Achi* by Je Jigten Sumgon (published below)
5. A brief catalogue of texts by Jigten Sumgon on Achi Chokyi Drolma, and
6. a full transcript of a teaching on Achi given in 2021, by 8th Garchen Rinpoche.

This whole article (with Praise and transcript) can be freely downloaded as a 30-page pdf booklet [here](#). The Praises alone can be downloaded here: [PRAISE TO ACHI CHOKYI DROLMA BY JIGTEN SUMGON](#).

Music? Beautiful rendition with images of the [Achi Drolma mantra](#) or [Wild Horses](#) by the Sundays or [‘The Power of Love’](#): ‘I’ll protect you from the hooded claw, keep the vampires from your door, when the chips are down I’ll be around, with my undying, death-defying love for you. Envy will hurt itself, let yourself be beautiful...make love your goal.’

May this research, translation and transcript inspire beings to practice and attain the siddhis and protection of Achi and do more research on her life and practices!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 3rd December 2021.

Achi Chokyi Drolma’s Life-Story



1 Photograph of the hermitages of Drikung Terdrom, courtesy of Bryan J. Cuevas, 2006 (Muldowney (2011))

There are several texts containing the life-story of Achi. Garchen Rinpoche also speaks about her life in his teaching. To summarise Achi’s life-story in brief, it is said her birth and role as Drikung Kagyu protectress, and emanation of Vajrayoginī, was prophesied by Guru Padmasambhava[3]. This popular account states that the Wisdom Dākiṇī Vajrayoginī decided to be reborn in Central Tibet, specifically in an area called Zhoto, (Gzho stod) [4], in the Drikung Valley, within the prestigious Nanam (Sna nam) clan. She was born as the daughter of the Nyingma yogin, Nanam Jowo Pal (Sna nam pa Jo bo pal) and his wife Driza Dardzom (’Bri za dar ’dzoms) sometime in the early 11th century.

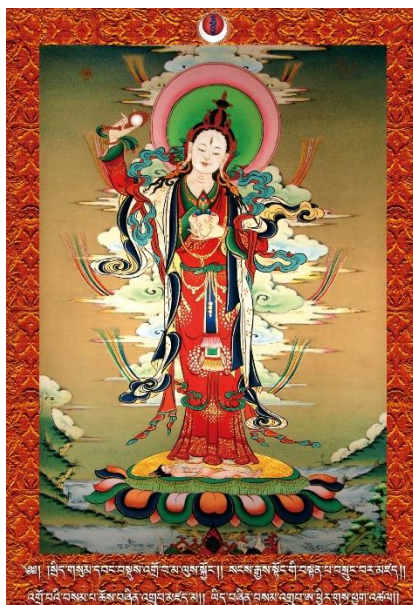
After refusing to get married as a young woman, she went to Kham and while there requested to marry an old yogin, Ame Trinley Gyatso, to maintain the rare Khyura bloodline. Reluctantly he agreed and she performed various miracles for their marriage ceremony. After practicing together, she gave birth to four sons. When her sons were older, she initiated her sons in the Vajrayoginī practice and continued to perform miraculous acts, such as binding pernicious spirits under oath. Numerous sacred sites in the area bear her mark to this day.

Achi was over 70 years old when she passed away. One of her sons, Peka Wanggyel (Dpe ka dbang rgyal), likewise had four sons, and one of their sons was Jigten Sumgon, the founder of ’Bri gung mthil Monastery. Before passing away, Achi is said to have conducted a Chöd offering transforming a human corpse into a sacred offering and vowed to be a protector of Buddhism, composing a liturgy for invoking herself as a protector deity. Having composed her own sādhana practices, she promised to protect those who would continue to perform them after her death. Upon completion of the verses, she flew into the air on the back of a blue horse, accompanied by a small dog, and departed for the Pure Lands. She then manifested to Je Jigten Sumgon and others on several occasions. It is also

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reported that she helped prevent a Mongolian invasion of the Drikung Thil monastery in the 13th Century[5]. For more details on her life-story, see Muldowney (2011) and Garchen Rinpoche (2021) below.

‘Outward Beauty, Hidden Wrath’ – Research and texts by and about Achi Chokyi Drolma



2 Image of Achi Chokyi Drolma from Garchen Buddhist Institute website

Despite Achi’s importance to the history of the Drikung Kagyu tradition, and as one of the few female Dharma protectors, little English-language research has been done on her. The most comprehensive English-language source available on Achi and texts about her, is within an interesting, yet relatively unknown MA thesis (Florida State University) written in 2011 by Kristen Kail Muldowney: ‘*Outward Beauty, Hidden Wrath: An Exploration of the Drikung Kagyu Dharma Protectress Achi Choekyi Drölma*’ [6], which is worth reading in full, if one has time. In her research, Muldowney has helpfully provided:

- A translation of the complete catalogue of the contents of volumes one and two of *The Sadhana handbook of the Teaching Guardian Achi: Collected Texts Concerned with the Rites of Propitiation of the Special Protective Deity of the Drikung*[7].
- A translation of a short sadhana of Achi from the collected works of the Khampa Gelug master , Rongta Lozang Damchöe Gyatso (1865-1917).
- A translation of the third chapter of the *Abridged Life-story of Achi Chokyi Drolma* (Bri gung a phyi chos kyi sgrol ma’i rnam thar mdor bsdus) and Konchog Gyeltsen’s summary of the texts and rituals related to the dharma protectress, Achi (2011:123-127)[8].

Also, a whole chapter of David P. Jackson’s book *Painting Traditions of the Drikung Kagyu School* (2015) is written by Muldowney called *The Elusive Lady of Nanam: An Introduction to the Protectress Achi Chokyi Drolma*. Muldowney (2011) also references a life-story (composed by Kunga Rinchen (1475-1527), the 15th successor of Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon) and several sadhanas of Achi, translated by Tashi T. Jamyangling in 2010, which are all available for free download, [here](#)[9].

There are five works by Je Jigten Sumgon I saw listed in his online Collected Works[10], one of which is the Sadhana that Achi wrote herself. I have listed them below for reference purposes (they are also referenced by Muldowney in the translations listed above). The one practiced at Garchen Buddhist

Institute is written by Jigten Sumgon. The practice and secret supplication taught by Rinpoche is currently not available on their website but I have requested it.

As part of this article, I have newly translated and published a *Praise to Achi*, composed by Jigten Sumgon Gonpo (with Tibetan and phonetics)[\[11\]](#).

Enlightened, barefoot protector and yidam deity emanation of Vajrayogini

There are different forms of Achi, in some depictions she is presented standing and peaceful, with a mirror and jewel. As she is seen as a manifestation of Vajrayogini she is also depicted with that deity goddess (see image below).

In others, she is depicted riding a blue horse, with damaru drum and kapala, and a semi-wrathful expression. She is certainly seen as a protector capable of great wrath and power when it comes to protecting the Drikung Kagyu teachings and monasteries during invasions and threats.



3 Achi Chokyi Drolma

In an interesting chapter on categories and clothing of protectors and deities, Muldowney (2011:53-54) explains the distinction between mundane (unenlightened, worldly) and supra-mundane (enlightened) protectors:

“On one side are supramundane protectors, the fully-enlightened ‘guardians who have passed beyond a ra’ (‘jig rten las ‘das pa’i srung ma) and on the other are the worldly guardians or ‘guardians who have not yet passed beyond a ra’ (‘jig rten pa’i srung ma / ‘jig rten ma ‘das pa’i srung ma). While much of the first group are only approachable by ritual specialists and yogic practitioners, the second group commonly resides in the world and can take an active role in the lives of Tibetans, some even taking possession of mediums or intervening in times of trouble.”

Muldowney concludes that according to Achi’s short biography and other sources, it is clear that Achi is not worldly protector (wearing boots) but an enlightened, barefoot, protector[\[12\]](#), as well as yidam deity (for some):

The *Abridged Life-story* contains more than just a hagiography, although Achi’s life and death take up a substantial portion of the chapter. After beginning with a prayer to the deity, the author provides a detailed description of the category of dharma protectors in Tibet, including an extensive list of examples, showing how Achi stands apart from them...

Accordingly, she herself is not the type of guardian who is bound under oath, because she is a Wisdom *ḍākinī* who deliberately came in order to protect the teachings. The unanimous glorification from the words of the authentic scholar-adepts of Tibet explains below how [this is so].

Achi revealed herself to people, such as Jigten Sumgon, and it is said some even wondered if Achi was a demoness[13]. For example, in Konchog Gyamtso's biography, it also says that Achi revealed herself to the 1st Karmapa, while he was debating with Jigten Sumgon[14]. Muldowney (2011: 38) explains that:

“Departing from the behaviour of many of Tibet's mundane, oath-bound protectors, however, Achi takes multiple roles, making her an interesting point of departure in this category. According to at least one *sadhana*, besides being taken as one's dharma protector, she can be taken as one's inner-most secret lama (*gsang bla ma*), one's inner yidam (*nang ltar yi dam*), or one's secret *ḍākinī* consort[15].”

However, 8th Garchen Rinpoche (2021) advises against making divisions of protectors in his teaching that:

“If one possesses wisdom then one will not make a division between the worldly and the wisdom beings and so on. Everything becomes non-dual or indivisible. Therefore, now if we make divisions on the other hand, in the practice and think that this is this, and this is that protector, we might achieve some happiness or some benefit from that in this life, but then if the motivation is not so pure then it will still become a cause of falling into the three lower realms. However, if we stay away from that division and we see their indivisible nature, then their practice will really become beneficial in this life and all future lifetimes. Then they will really become a companion on our path to liberation.”

8th Garchen Rinpoche's Teaching on Achi Chokyi Drolma – April 2021



4 HE 8th Garchen Rinpoche

I also offer a full transcript of a teaching on Achi Chokyi Drolma, given by HE 8th Garchen Rinpoche in April 2021 (for video see [here](#)). I received the online empowerment on Achi from Garchen Rinpoche, given in October 2020 (see [here](#)). The transmission and chanting of the Achi mantra, is given by Garchen Rinpoche in this video [here](#). There is also an 8th Garchen Rinpoche Achi Chokyi Drolma teaching and practice (2018) [here](#). Another Drikung Kagyu teacher, 11th Choeze Kuchen Rinpoche, offers a live teaching and practice on *ḍākinī* Day of Achi Chokyi Drolma, see [here for most recent one](#).

Garchen Rinpoche's teaching first gives some background and life story of Achi, including how she got her three names and the meaning of them, her marriage in order to maintain the ancient Khyura lineage in Tibet, which was in danger of dying out, and her great, great grandson, Lord Jigten Sumgon who was from this Khyura clan[\[16\]](#). Rinpoche explained that the cave where Achi passed away is called the Khacho Phug (I have been unable to find any photos of this cave, so if anyone has any, please let me know):

“That was the point where Achi departed to the *ḍākinī* pure lands in space. She left this world without leaving her physical body behind. Nowadays, this cave from where they departed is called the Khacho Phug, which is the *ḍākinī* Pure Land cave from where she departed from this world. It is considered a very holy pilgrimage place now. It is still there and be seen there in Kyuradrag in Kham. Also, in that area, close to that cave is another rock, and after she departed, on that rock a self-arisen HUM syllable appeared. This HUM syllable actually then became the original form of the Drikung Kagyu logo. It became like the original logo.”

It includes a description of her qualities, the meaning of her mantra and how she is a manifestation of Tārā. The longer mantra is OM MAMA CHAKRA SVAHA YAR DU SARWA DU RADZA RADZA DU MAMA DU HUNG PHAT SVAHA:

“You can just also recite the short Achi mantra which is OM DHARMA TARE SVAHA. Basically, that means ‘may I accomplish Dharma Tārā (Chokyi Drolma)’ and that is what you can recite.”

This is followed by an explanation of the ultimate meaning and qualities of Tārā [\[17\]](#). Rinpoche states that one can practice any of the Achi sadhanas available and recite the short or longer form of her mantra. The secret supplication and practice of Achi, referred to by Garchen Rinpoche in his teaching, are not currently available online on the Garchen Buddhist Institute website and so I have asked them to send me a copy.

PRAISE TO ACHI CHOKYI DROLMA BY JE JIGTEN SUMGON

མ་ཕྱི་ཚེས་ཀྱིས་སྒྲོལ་མའི་བསྟོན་པ། འཇིག་རྟེན་གསུམ་མགོན།



ཧཱུྃ HUM

བཞིན་བཟང་དཔལ་ལྷན་མ་ཚས་ཀྱི་སྟོན། །

སྐྱུ་མདོག་དཀར་དམར་འགྱུར་མེད་འགྱུར་ས་གཞན། །

zhin zang pelden lhamo chökyi drön/

ku dok kar mar gyur mé gying bak den/

Excellent, Glorious Goddess [Palden Lhamo], Lamp of Dharma [Chokyi Dron],

Rosy-white body of unchanging, graceful stance.

འཁོར་བའི་ལོག་སྒྲིམ་བྱེད་འོད་མངའ་མ། །

བདེ་ཆེན་དགའ་སྟེར་རབ་དགྱེས་དཔལ་མོ་སྟེ། །

khorwé lok ta kem jé ö nga ma/

dé chen ga ter rap gyé pamo té/

Mistress over demons and wrong views of samsara,

Giver of great bliss, intensely delightful heroine.

ཞལ་གཅིག་ཕྱག་གཉིས་བཞིན་བཟང་འཇུག་པའི་ཉམས། །

གཡས་པ་མི་ཐོད་རྩ་བྱ་བྱ་ཏུ་འཁྱོལ། །

zhel chik chak nyi zhin zang dzum pé nyam/

yé pa mi tö da ru drak tu trol/

One face, two hands, beautiful smiling expression,

Right [hand] strongly beating a human-skull damaru,

གཡོན་པས་དམ་ཉམས་སྟོང་ཁྱག་རྩོན་མོ་འཐུང་། །

ཟ་འོག་སྒྲ་ལྡེའི་ན་བཟའ་སྐྱུ་ལ་གསོལ། །

yön pé dam nyam nying trak drön mo thung/ za og na ngé na za ku la söl/

Left [hand] drinking warm heart-blood of samaya-breakers.

Form clothed with five types of brocade silken garments,

རིན་ཆེན་བརྒྱན་དང་དར་གྱི་ཚོད་པན་འཕུར།།

ཆེབས་སུ་སྤྲིན་གསེབ་ཀྱི་རྩ་ཐོ་ནག་བཅིབས།།

rinchen gyen dang dar gyi chö pen pHur/

chib su trin sep chu ta ngo nak chib/

Adorned with precious ornaments and billowing silk ribbon tiara,

Riding amidst the clouds on a blue-water horse,

རིན་ཆེན་གོང་སྤེང་མུ་མེན་ཡོབ་ཆེན་འཁྲུག།།

གསེར་སྤུང་གཡུ་མཐུར་དར་སྤྲ་ཐུ་ཡིས་བརྒྱན།།

rinchen gong mé mu men yop chen tröl/

ser sap yu thur dar na nga yi gyen/

Priceless, lapis-lazuli jeweled stirrups clicking,

Golden harness and turquoise stone reins, adorned with five types of silks,

ཟ་འོག་དར་སྤྲ་གསེར་སྤུང་སྤྲ་ཐུ་ཡིས་བརྒྱན།།

དབྱིངས་ཕྱག་དབལ་ལྷ་མོ་མོ་བཞད་ཆོད་ཚུལ།།

za oG dar ten ser gé ga teng du/

ying chuk pelden lhamo zhé chö tsül/

Atop a silk cushion on a golden saddle,

Rides the laughing glorious, goddess queen of space, [Yingchug Palden Lhamo]!

གར་དགུའི་ཉམས་ལྷན་མོ་ཉ་ཆོ་འཕྲུལ་འགྱེད།།

ལྷ་མེན་གཞོད་སྤྲིན་མཁའ་འགྲོའི་ཆོགས་ཀྱིས་བསྐྱོར།།

gar gü nyam den po nya chotrül gyé/ lha min nöjin khandrö tsoG kyi kor/

With nine-fold dancing moods and miraculous display of retinue,

Surrounded by masses of asuras, yakṣas and dākinīs.

འཕྲིན་ལས་བཞི་ལྷན་སྤྲོས་མེད་ངང་རྒྱལ་ཅན།།

བར་ཀུན་སེལ་འདོད་དགུའི་དངོས་གྲུབ་རྩྭ།།

trinlé zhi den trö mé ngang tsül chen/ bar kün sel dö gü ngö drup tsöl/

Endowed with the four activities and within the way of non-elaboration,

Removing all obstacles, granting siddhis and all that is desired!

ཕུན་སུམ་ཚོགས་གནས་དཔལ་གྱི་འབྲི་གུང་འདྲིར།

ལོངས་ལྷོད་ཐེལ་ཕྱིར་བཀའ་སྤང་གུན་མཛད་མ།

pün sum tsok né pel gyi drigung dir/

long chö pel chir ka sung kün dzé ma/

Here in the glorious Drigung place of abundant excellence

In order to increase prosperity, she who protects the whole doctrine,

བསྟན་པ་བསྐྱེད་ཕྱིར་གཏོར་མ་འདི་བཞེས་ལ།

ཚོགས་གཉིས་རྫོགས་པའི་འཕྲིན་ལས་མཛད་དུ་གསོལ།

ten pa sung chir tor ma di zhé la/

tsok nyi dzok pé trin lé dzé du söl/

Please accept this tormo to protect the teachings , and

May the activities of completing the two accumulations be done!

Translated by Adele Tomlin, 3rd December 2021.

Sources/Further Reading

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8th Garchen Rinpoche Achi Drolma teaching (April 2021) [here](#).

8th Garchen Rinpoche Achi Drolma empowerment (October 2020) [here](#).

8th Garchen Rinpoche Achi Drolma mantra transmission [here](#).

8th Garchen Rinpoche Achi Chokyi Drolma teaching and practice (2018) [here](#).

11th Choeze Kuchen Rinpoche musical rendition of Achi mantra [here](#).

WORKS BY JE JIGTEN SUMGON ON ACHI CHOKYI DROLMA

Great Drikung Dharma Treasure – TBRC W00JW501203 (Lhasa, 2004)[\[i\]](#).

a phyi'i sgrub thabs rang gis mdzad pa/ – 23: 315- 321

a phyi chos kyi sgrol ma'i sgrub skor rin po che'i cod paN las le'u bco lnga ma/ – 23: 321- 355

a phyi'i sgrub thabs 'khyer bde ba bsdus pa/ – 23: 355- 360.

a phyi'i sgrub thabs snyan brgyud byin rlabs shin tu che ba/ – 23: 360- 370.

a phyi'i bskang ba nor bu'i 'phreng ba/ – 23: 370- 385.

Collected Works of Jigten Sumgon – TBRC W23743[\[iii\]](#)

bstan srung a phyi chos kyi sgrol ma'i sgrubs thabs/ 9: 564-578

bstan srung a phyi chos kyi sgrol ma'i bskang ba nor bu'i phreng ba/ 9: 578-597.

bstan srung a phyi chos kyi sgrol ma'i sgrub thabs bsdus pa/ 9: 597-604.

Endnotes for the Catalogue

[\[i\]](#) The *Drikung Kagyu Great Treasure* is a massive collection of texts from the Drikung Kagyu, as well as some texts from other Kagyu orders. Edited by Agon Rinpoche and Rase Kunchok Gyatso. 'bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo/. TBRC W00JW501203. 23: 315 – 321. Published in Lhasa by Drikung Thilgon ['bri gung mthil dgon/], 2004.

[\[ii\]](#) In the *Collected Works* of Jigten Sumgon (gsung 'bum/ 'jig rten mgon po) TBRC W23743. 9: 564 – 578. Delhi: Drikung Kagyu Ratna Shri Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 2001.

Endnotes for the article

[\[1\]](#) Here most previous translators have translated the Tibetan term *ying* (dbyings) as 'space' which is normally 'namkha' in Tibetan. The term *ying* has more the sense of 'expanse' than 'space'. I have kept the commonly translated version here.

[\[2\]](#) Achi also appears as a protector in the Karma Kagyu refuge tree as Achi Chodron and is a dharmapāla protector and ḍākinī in the life story of the Nyingma tertön Tsasum Lingpa (rtsa gsum gling pa).

[\[3\]](#) "In Oddiyana, the country from which Vajrayana came, there is a divine palace where Vajrayogini appeared in the form of Vajraḍākinī and promised to defend the teachings of the Buddha. She gave this promise to the five Wisdom ḍākinīs. Later, in the eighth century, when Guru Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet to spread the teachings of Dharma, he blessed many parts of Tibet and meditated in many caves. Among them was the Tidro cave near Drikung, where Guru Rinpoche spent seven years – the largest time he spent in any place in Tibet. During this period, Vajrayogini appeared before Chief Karmaḍākinī and promised to defend the teachings of Vajrayana. Through manifestations in the jñanakāya (body of wisdom) it protects precious teachings and brings good to all living beings." – prophecy about Drikung Kagyu protector, Achi Chokyi Drolma

[\[4\]](#) *Zhoto Terdrom*, north of the Drikung Til complex, the birthplace of Achi which literally means "Box of Treasures." Is alternatively known as Tidro in early sources, and it contains some of the oldest and most sacred sites of the region with legends dating back as early as the eighth century. A cave there was said to have been practiced in by Yeshe Tsogyel during various points of her life with

Padmasambhava, alone and with her male consort, one time for seven years and she returned there to do solitary retreat for the rest of her life. For more detail on that see: Muldowney (2011: 93-96).

[5] “Around this same time [1239], another raiding party, led by the commander Miliji (Mi li byi) reached Drikung Til, but upon seeing the face of the Fourth Drikung Hierarch (Spyan nga grags pa ‘byung gnas, 1175-1255), “faith was born in him,” and the party left without harming the monastery or its inhabitants. Around a month later, Dorda Darkhan arrived in Drikung to do the job himself, but again the miraculous powers of the abbot is said to have thwarted his attacks. While the Blue Annals reports that this miracle came in the sudden magical showering of stones from the sky, local legends claim that Achi, now regarded as the deified protectress of the monastery, was responsible for the defeat, having imprisoned many of the invaders in her lhakhang located below the monastery and incinerating them inside.” (Muldowney (2011: 90).

[6] MA thesis by Muldowney, K. K. (2011). ‘Outward Beauty, Hidden Wrath: An Exploration of the Drikung Kagyü Dharma Protectress Achi Chökyi Drölma’. See: http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-4677

[7] Bstan bsrung A phyi’i sgrub thabs be’u bum: *Collected Texts Concerned with the Rites of Propitiation of the Special Protective Deity of the ‘Bri gung* (New Delhi: Tersing Dorma Gelek, 1975).

[8] See Muldowney (2011: 123): this short biography by Konchog Gyamtso is published in a text called: Dpal Idan lha mo dbyings phyug a phyi chos kyi sgröl ma dang ‘brel ba’ (Lhasa: Tibet’s People Publishing House, 2004). ” According to the colophon of the *Abridged Life- Story of Drikung Achi Drolma*, (Bri gung a phyi chos kyi sgröl ma’i rnam thar mdor bsdus) this small, three-chapter booklet was commissioned by one of the two current leaders of the Drikung Kagyu, Chungtsang Tenzin Chokyi Nangwa Rinpoche (Chung tshang bstan ‘dzin chos kyi snang ba rin po che, 1942- present) himself, and written at Lhasa’s Norbulingka palace in the year 2000.(2011: 13).

[9] These texts are: A phyi’i Gsang sgrub (dhana); A phyi’i ‘Khrung rabs (Life story of Dharma Tara or Achi Chokyi Drolma); A phyi’i Sgrub skor Bstod pa’i Rim pa (Praise from the Cycle of Achi Liturgy. All published by the Tara Foundation of Germany, 2010, Tashi T. Jamyangling. They are all available for free download here: <http://www.drigung.com/translations.html>

[10] In the *Great Treasure of Drikung Kagyu Dharma*: ‘bri gung bka’ brgyud chos mdzod chen mo/. TBRC W00JW501203. Lhasa ‘bri gung mthil dgon/, 2004.

[11] The Praise is in *The Garland of Profound Dharma Jewels* (khams gsum chos kyi rgyal po thub dbang rat+na shrl’i thun mong ma yin pa nang gi zab chos nor bu’i phreng ba bzhugs so/) Volume 9:2-3 in *the Collected Works of Jigten Sumgon* (‘jig rten mgon po’i gsung skor/) published by Songsten Library, Dehra Dun in 2008. TBRC W3JT13348.

[12] To back up this conclusion, Muldowney (2011) discusses the clothing, accoutrements and footwear of worldly Dharma protectors who normally wear boots, whereas enlightened protectors are normally barefoot.

[13] “Regarding the Goddess Queen of Space (Dbying phyug lha mo) herself: Even though, as explained, she is fundamentally not a type [of dharma protector] who is bound under oath because she is a genuine wisdom dākinī who intentionally undertook worldly existence [as a] teaching method, some [people], because of a measure of ignorance, wonder if she is a female demon (‘dre mo). She is not. Lord Jigten Sumgon from the *Introduction to Vajrayana* (Rdor rje theg pa’i lde mig), praises [her, saying],

"I am known as the Lord of Dakinis. The Mother Queen of Space is a Vajradakini. [Mundane] sky-goers were vicious [and were] subjugated. Yogins [who have] not transcended are protected [only] because of their oaths. Not only [that], love has been nurtured, [and the sky-goers] grew affectionate. Today, the minds [of] the mistress [sky-goers] have become [loving] like one's own children. As for this Vajradakini, a great grandmother is a low woman, but a maternal grandmother is very low."

The entire assembly having entrusted [themselves] to her, including the hermits, [Achi] is known in all directions." (2011:30-31).

[14] The abridged biography says that Drubthob Khampa Gyagar (Grub thob khams pa rgya gar, 1110-1193) [which Muldowney explains is a common name for the 1st Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa] were debating in Drikung Changchupling ('Bri gung byang chub gling), the sound of a damaru [resounded] from the sky and the melodious voice of a *ḍākinī* arose. Druptop asked the Lord of the Dharma (Chos rje) how this could be, [and] he replied, "The voice which arises is a Wisdom *ḍākinī*, my Grandmother."

Druptop insisted, "What is her sadhana like? How is [her] practice done?"] Because of that [Jigten Sumgon] bestowed many extensive sadhana and the fifteen chapters [of] the *Precious Diadem in the Sadhana Cycle* (Sgrub skor rin chen cod pan le'u). Druptop said, "Having reviewed the oral transmission with earnest, the essence [of the] goddess (hri ma) rose up from the sphere of reality, [and I] perceived [her] with divine sight from the sphere of wisdom.

Is that like a vicious demoness? Moreover, that method [of practice is] not only [in] the Precious Five Ornaments (Rin chen gyi rgyan can lnga), [but] the empowerment of this Protectress Deity is also said to be like [those among] the Highest Mother Tantras (Bla med ma rgyud). This itself is able to indicate the truth [that she is] a mother who is born a Wisdom *Ḍākinī* Victorious One, because an empowerment [which] entrusts the life-force to a kind of mundane demon is not a true [empowerment].

When some say [she] is like the Sakya witches (Sa skya'i 'bag mo), [she] is not. As for that, the hateful beings teach [that she] is a demoness of an arrogant lineage, but she herself is actually the mother of the Victorious Ones." (from 2011:31-32).

[15] Meghan Howard, trans., *The Unelaborated, Easy to Implement Sadhana of the Sole Mother Chokyi Drolma, Lady of Nanam* (Frederick: Tibetan Meditation Center, 2005), see Muldowney (2011).

[16] 'Khyura is 'an illustrious clan from Tsungu (tsu ngu) in Kham that claims descent from King Relpachen. It was Jikten Gonpo Rinchen Pel from this clan who founded Drigung Til Monastery in central Tibet in 1179 and established the Drigung Kagyu tradition. With the rise of Drigung as a center of political power in the thirteenth century, the Kyura clan became one of the rivals to Sakya rule in the period of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Kyura control of Drigung ended in the seventeenth century, replaced by two incarnation lines, the Drigung Chetsang and the Drigung Chungtsang'. (See: <https://treasuryoflives.org/en/institution/Kyura>).

[17] Mantra of Achi Chokyi Drolma: OM MAMA CHAKRA SVAHA YAR DU SARWA DU RADZA RADZA DU MAMA DU HUNG PHAT SVAHA OM MAMA means "to me". CHAKRA is a Sanskrit word, it means a wheel that symbolizes all kinds of activities and excellent qualities. SVAHA means "may it be so." OM MAMA CHAKRA SVAHA is a very short version of the Achi mantra. YAR DU is a peaceful activity. SARWA DU is increasing activity. RADZA RADZA DU is magnetizing activity. MAMA DU is wrathful activity. By those activities, Achi can destroy external and internal maras – all mental delusions and defilements with her great compassion and wisdom. HUM means getting these qualities. PHET means the removal of all obstacles. SVAHA here means "may it be so".

Chapter Two: Arya Kshema (Buddha's female arhats)

BRAVEHEART BUDDHA: Women and lower castes as 'foremost' disciples

[26th Sep 2021 Dākinī Translations](#)

Here is the write-up of the 13th Day of the 17th Karmapa's recent teachings on the *Origins of Secret Mantra* (see video [here](#)).

The Karmapa first considers the question of the dates of the Buddha, his birth and death; how they are calculated based on the time of Emperor Ashoka and why there are differing views of them.

The second part of the teaching was on the Buddha's principle students, male and female, including the 'ten great disciples'. Men and women were noted as 'foremost' disciples among Buddha's following. It is interesting to note (although this was not mentioned by the Karmapa) that the Buddha identified four pairs of disciples (two sets male, two sets female) "who have no compare" and who should thus be emulated. These four pairs are a subset of the 80 foremost disciples listed above, identified in the sub-section 14 of Anugattara Nikaya 1 (i.e. AN 1.188-267). These four pairs of disciples to be most emulated are:

- monks: Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna
- nuns: Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā
- laymen: Citta and Hatthaka of Alavi
- laywomen: Kujjuttara and Veḷukaṇḍakīyā

The Karmapa then went on to discuss Buddha's extraordinary courage and equanimity, how he welcomed all castes and creeds into his spiritual community, yet still also treated higher castes, such as Brahmins, with respect. His view of a person was not about their caste but about what they practiced and thought. He gave a brief account of how Sunidha, a low caste man was instantly accepted by Buddha as a monk when he requested it.

Buddha was a pioneer in terms of language too. The Karmapa explained how he was the first to teach in colloquial language (Pali) and allowed people to recite the scriptures in their own dialects, much to the annoyance of some Brahmins. Buddha even went so far as to make it an offence to force people to recite them in Sanskrit if they did not know that language.

This was followed by a description of the eight wondrous qualities of the sangha community and the simple life of a monastic, as evidenced by the 'six requisites' of three robes, a begging bowl, water cup and mat.

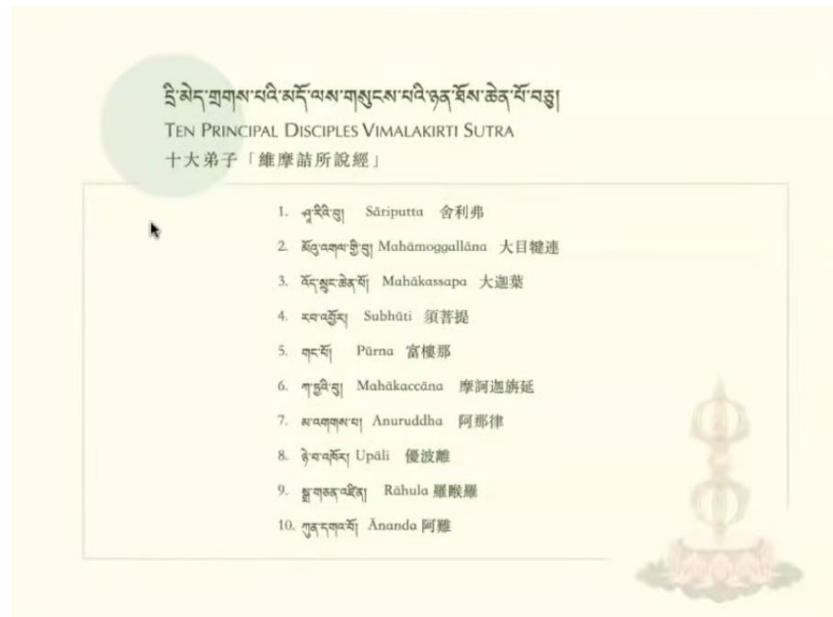
The final part of the teaching was an overview on how Buddhism spread after the Buddha passed away and the 'First Council' [all-male] that was allegedly held to compile the Buddha's teachings from recording those that had been memorised.

May we all be able to attain the courage, integrity and wisdom of Buddha and see all sentient beings, regardless of gender, caste, race, age, species etc. as worthy of respect and happiness.

Music? [Respect](#) by Aretha Franklin or [Where Is the Love?](#) by Black-Eyed Peas. 'But if you only have love for your own race, then you only leave space to discriminate.'!

Written, edited and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 26th September 2021.

The Buddha's 'Foremost' Disciples: Men and Women



5 Slide from the 17th Karmapa's presentation

“The Vimalakirti Sutra lists the ten great disciples of the Buddha (see image above) as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Maha Kashyapa, Subhuti, Purna, Mahākaccāna, Anuruddha, Upali, Rahula, and Ananda (see image above). The Theravada tradition has a slightly different list in the “Sutra of the Ten Elders”. “

[Author's Note: It is said that in the “Etadaggavagga” (“These are the Foremost Chapter,” Anguttara Nikaya, 1.188-267), the Buddha identifies 80 different categories for his “foremost” (Pāli: *etadagga*) disciples: 47 categories for monks, 13 for nuns, ten for laymen and ten for laywomen. While the disciples identified with these categories are declared to be the Buddha’s “foremost” or “chief” (Pāli: *etadagga*), this is different from his “Chief Disciples” (Pāli: *aggasāvaka*) who are consistently identified solely as Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna.]



6 Slide from the 17th Karmapa's presentation

“Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Maha Kashyapa, Purna, Subhuti, and the three Kashyapa brothers [Uruvilvā-Kāśyapa, Nadi-Kāśyapa, and Gayā-Kāśyapa] were from the Brahman caste. Rahula, Ananda, Anuruddha, Nanda, and Devadatta were Kshatriya caste, among them the first three were counted among the ten great śrāvakas. Except for the three Kashyapas, they were also among the ten great śrāvakas. Yasa and Gavāṃpati were from the Vaishya caste and were also among the ten great śrāvakas. Upali was also one of the ten great śrāvakas, according to the list in the Vimalakirti Sutra.

As I mentioned before, the Buddha’s students included members of all castes. There were Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras because the Buddha dharma makes no distinctions of caste or clan; everyone can practice. Not only were there disciples from all castes, but there were also several women śrāvaka disciples. For example, the Buddha’s aunt Prajapati, his queen, Yashodhara, and Utpalivarna. They were all well-known Bikkshuni disciples.”



7 Shakyamuni Buddha depicted with lay women students

The 17th Karmapa continued:

“Among the male bhikshus, the greatest are recognised in terms of prajna, power and so forth, and among the female bhikshunis those with the greatest prajna and so on, were also recognised. Due to time constraints, I cannot show you all the names but if you are interested, they are there.

In addition, there were many great lay disciples who went for refuge to the Buddha, who were considered superior, great disciples. Including the kings Bimbisara and Ajatashatru of Magadha, King Prasenajit of Kosala, all the Shakya people, the Mallas, the Licchavis, the Kauśāmbis, Anathapindada, the elder Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā, the young Jivika the great physician, the elderly woman Viśāka, who was one of the great women disciples. “

For an image of the Buddha’s foremost disciples (based on Anuttara Nikaya, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Śrāvaka>)

[Author’s Note: The Buddha was clearly a feminist well-ahead of his time, who accepted women as equal members of the four-fold spiritual community: laywomen, laymen, nuns and monks. Before giving women full ordination as nuns, he first readily accepted them as householder/lay students.

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

However, this was not without challenges from the sexist, misogynist Shakyas men^[iii]. However, as Wendy Garling says regarding the women's insistence on being accepted as students:

"The story is extraordinary for the women's forceful claim to legitimacy and equal rights based specifically on their sex. How dare men exclude women, the very bearers and nurturers of buddhas! Not only that, but the Sakya women were demonstrably equal to the men in their enthusiasm and capacity to learn the dharma. In a much broader context, this exceptional story relates an organized women's protest against misogyny and patriarchy that took place more than twenty-five hundred years ago. Could this have been the first such protest? And that was just the beginning for the Sakya women, as five years later they marched again to the Nigrodha Grove to request the Buddha's permission to ordain as nuns (to be discussed in a later chapter). Indeed, contemporary women can take heart from our fierce foremothers who struggled and overcame obstacles not dissimilar from ours today.

What we learn from this "forgotten" story is how the Sakya women became upāsikās first and did not plunge directly into monasticism without prior experience of the Buddha and the dharma. It only makes sense that they took this first step during the Buddha's first visit home and on his subsequent visit felt prepared to make the commitment to ordain as nuns."

It seems from the textual sources that Buddha was hesitant to accept women as nuns though. There are slightly differing accounts of how that happened. Generally, it is accepted that Buddha did initially refuse requests but changed his mind after a discussion with one of his senior male students, Ananda^[ii]. However, this does not mean Buddha was sexist or misogynist at all:

"...as Analayo points out, the Buddha (being the Buddha) would not have needed reminding that women had the same potential as men, or that there was the precedent of the fourfold assembly, or for that matter, that he himself had made a commitment to forming a fourfold assembly shortly after his enlightenment. The Buddha would have known exactly what was going on and had his own unique handle on how this important karmic event was meant to play out. We can't know what that was, but one way or another, we can be glad that it did. A Sinhala passage reflects his omniscience on this matter as he speaks to Ananda:

"Are the Buddhas born in the world only for the benefit of men? Assuredly it is also for the benefit of females as well. When I delivered the Tirokudha-sutra, many women entered the paths, as did also many goddesses when I delivered the Abhidhamma in Trayastimsa. Have not Visakha and many other upāsikās entered the paths? The entrance is open for women as well as men."—excerpt from Garling (2021).]

The incredible courage and strength of Buddha – accepting and respecting all castes, creeds, rich and poor



Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

The 17th Karmapa continued:

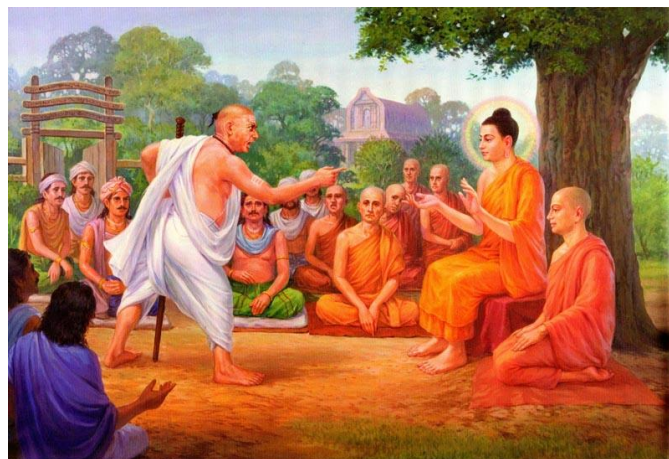
“Basically, the Buddha’s students could be found from all social backgrounds and levels of society, high and low. Some were siblings, parents, or in the same clan; some were friends. There was no distinction of male or female or old and young. If you consider the best or most senior of his students, there were more than 1,250. We might think ‘oh that is nothing special and not very much. In our Kagyu Monlam when we get together we have 3-4000 sangha members.’ However, at that time in India, the population was much smaller and travel was not so easy either, so for that amount to gather is amazing. Also, as I said before, I am speaking about Buddha’s best students, I am not talking about all the followers and students he had.

At that time, many different religions and philosophies were all competing with each other in terms of superiority. Yet only Buddhism was able to become one of the world’s most supreme religions. If you ask why that must be so, there are many different reasons, causes and conditions. From one perspective, if we compare Buddhism with the Brahmanical religions of that time, it was much more comprehensive and had a much broader way of thinking.

Also, Buddhism was in many ways a rebellion against the customs of caste, asceticism, and a reaction against being ruled and regulations and being deceived by rituals. If it was only focused on the external aspects of religion, it was not deemed to be alright. Buddhism was a big reaction against all that.

However, the Buddha himself paid great respect to spiritual practitioners of that time, including Brahmins and the shramanas. He treated everyone with respect. The reason he gave them respect was nothing to do with their caste; but because he recognised that the Brahmins had good prajna and conduct. What Buddha saw was related to their intelligence and conduct but not related to their caste. There was the Buddha’s final student Subhadra who asked the Buddha about those who say they are best and supreme and how to decide among them. The answer the Buddha gave was not connected to social status or caste but whether or not they kept the eight branches of the noble path, the prajna, and ethical conduct. We should distinguish who is supreme in terms of their practice, not based on the individual. Sutras such as the Theravadan “Assalayana Sutta” and “Kannakatthala Sutta” show clearly the vast and broad view of the Buddha. It is clearly described in these Sutras.

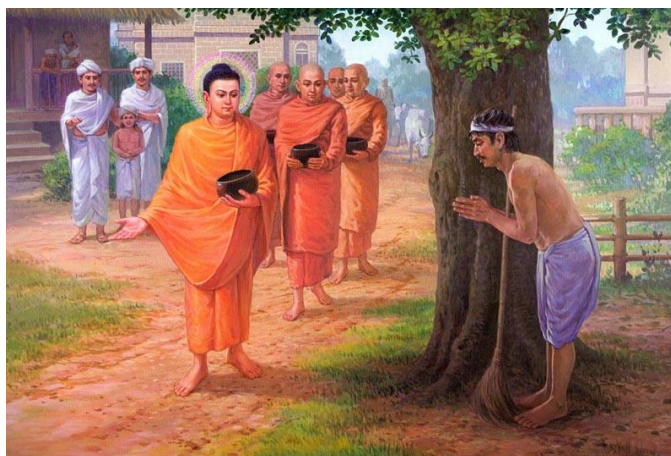
Another good example of this vast view is Upali, who although he came from a low-caste family, was praised and respected for having the purest discipline and being learned in the Vinaya by the other sravaka disciples. This is also good evidence of the Buddha viewing everyone equally regardless of caste and social status.”



8 Brahman priest challenging the Buddha on the superiority of the Brahman caste

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The lower-caste Sunidha's testimony



9 Buddha depicted with the low-caste man, Sunidha who on seeing Buddha requested ordination, to which Buddha replied 'Very well, Bikshu'

"There is also the "Sutra of Verses on Dhyana" in the Theravadan tradition. Within this it speaks of another great disciple, whose name we have been unable to find in the Tibetan tradition. In Tibetan, his name is Shunide, or Sunidha in Pali. Within this Sutra he speaks about himself, and I have translated this roughly:

"First, I was born in a low caste and am very poor and deprived. I always have to hurry about as someone else's servant. I am a sweeper."

In the "Sutra of the Wise and Foolish" it says that Sunidha cleaned toilets, frankly speaking, his job was to clear the excrement out of toilets. He had a very difficult job. He says:

"Everyone looks at me and ridicules me. Everyone looks down at me and out of the corner of their eyes. They see me as inferior and bad and no other way. Yet, no matter how they consider me, I always have to be subservient and respectful to everyone and bow to them. However, one day, I followed some of the great disciples and by chance, met the Buddha on the way. When I met him, I took all the things I was holding and threw them on the ground and immediately knelt before the Buddha. The loving and compassionate Buddha stopped walking and came to me. I immediately prostrated at his feet and asked him to accept me as his student. Then the Buddha, the Teacher who has no rival on this earth, turned his face towards me, and said, "Very well, bhikshu" That was the first dharma I heard from the Buddha".

What this shows is that the Buddha saw poor and disadvantaged people like friends. Sunidha had not yet become a fully-ordained monk, but Buddha still recognised him as one. Among the Buddha's students, the highest status was that of a Bhikshu.

Master Aśvaghoṣa's "Treatise of the Great Multitude" I have not seen in Tibetan, also describes in great detail how Sunidha and Upali went forth. The reason for writing it was to show the Buddha's extraordinary courage and strength. Normally, we only speak about Buddha's miracles, but actually in terms of the strength of the Buddha it is an extraordinary characteristic. Buddha even showed respect to those viewed as the lowest in society and cared for them with great love and compassion. He even gave them the opportunity to practice the Dharma. This reveals the exceptional quality of the Buddha, his loving compassion and his blessings."

Chapter Three: Bhaddā-Kāpilānī

THE ‘GOLDEN GODDESS’ NUN WHOM BUDDHA SAID WAS BEST AT RECOLLECTING PREVIOUS LIVES AND ATTAINED ARHATSHIP: BHADDA-KAPILANI. Introduction to Bhaddā Kāpilānī’s life-story, previous lives and excellent qualities.

[20th Sep 2022 Dākinī Translations](#)

66. “Similar is Bhaddā Kāpilānī, a triple-knowledge bearer, killer of death; Who bears the last body, having conquered Māra and his mount. (Tattheva bhaddā kāpilānī, tevijjā maccuhāyinī; Dhāreti antimaṃ dehaṃ, jetvā māraṃ savāhanaṃ.)

67. “Having seen danger in the world, both of us ordained; We are taintless, tamed, cooled down, we are liberated. (Disvā ādīnavaṃ loke, ubho pabbajitā mayaṃ; Tyamha khīṇāsavā dantā, sītibhūtamha nibbutā”ti. ... Bhaddā kāpilānī therī ...)”

—Bhaddā Kapilānī from *Therīgāthā* (Thig 4.1)

“Thereafter soon I won the rank of Arahant.
Ah! well for me who held the friendship wise and good
Of glorious Kassapa.”

—Bhaddā Kapilānī in the *Apadāna*

“The goldsmith made a woman’s statue as requested, which was almost life size. Then, Mahākāśyapa showed his father the statue. He said “if you can find a beautiful woman just like the statue, who has that kind of a golden colour complexion. If you can find a woman as beautiful as that, then I will take her as my bride. Otherwise, I do not need a wife”. This was his idea. He thought that his father would never find anyone as stunning as the statue.”

—excerpt from Life-Story of Mahākāśyapa teaching by 17th Karmapa (2022)

INTRODUCTION

Today for Dākinī Day, (as promised) to counter-balance the male-centred accounts of Buddha’s main students I published recently, I offer this short post on one of the foremost nuns of the Buddha, Bhaddā Kāpilānī. Although, those male students were without doubt highly realised practitioners and inspiring members of the Buddha’s original sangha, the fact that it is still only the men whose stories are shared and valued is not alright, especially now in the 21st Century where women’s voices and lives are increasingly being valued, heard and accounted for.

One example, is the case of Sthūlanandā, the badly-behaved nun who is said to have inspired many Vinaya rules, whom I wrote about recently [here](#). Another case, this time is of a nun considered to be highly realised, that of Bhaddā-Kāpilānī (Pali: Bhaddā-kapilānī), an incredibly beautiful woman born into an extremely wealthy Brahmin family, whose beauty matched that of a golden statue created by the son of one of the wealthiest men in India at that time, Mahakasyapa, whom she married. The story of their meeting and their celibate, platonic marriage (as told by the 17th Karmapa) can be read [here](#).

However, as the 17th Karmapa himself said, Bhaddā Kapilānī’s story after her husband and her decided to leave their home and go forth and practice (separate from each other) is an interesting and moving one. Moreover, Bhaddā Kapilānī became one of the Buddha’s main students, who he called the

foremost of nuns who could recall former lives, and who attained Arhatship. Thus, it is surprising more is not known or spoken about her.

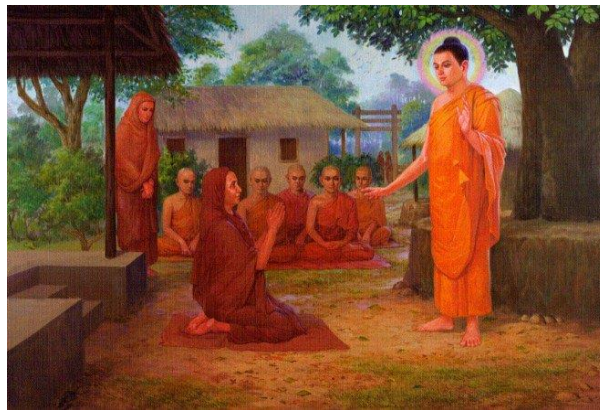
So, in this short article, I have compiled information and research available on Bhaddā Kapilānī. First, I give a list of the foremost female disciples of Buddha (laywomen and nuns), then some information about Bhaddā Kapilānī. Finding any drawings, images or statues of the Buddha's female disciples is almost impossible. There simply are not any, unlike the Buddha's male disciples. This is not limited to original Buddhism though, and is an issue in Tibetan Buddhism where female lineage holders and teachers are rarely, if ever included in depictions of lineage trees and so on. More on that in another post.

May this compilation inspire nuns and laywomen to do more research and translation on the great female disciples of Buddha, and have the same intelligence, courage and resilience when facing patriarchal, sexist discrimination and harassment!

Music? [Buddhist nuns chanting the Heart Sutra](#) in Sanskrit and [Golden Lady](#) by Stevie Wonder. Sarva Mangalam!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 20th September 2022.

Twenty-three foremost female disciples (nuns and laywomen) of Gautama Buddha



10 Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the step-mother and maternal aunt of Buddha. In Buddhist tradition, she was the first woman to seek ordination, which she did from Gautama Buddha directly, and she became the first Buddhist nun.

The names of women listed as Buddha's best students, both nuns and householders, are listed in the Pañcama Vagga and Chaṭṭha Vagga of the Aṅguttara Nikāya^[1] respectively.

Foremost of nuns:

1. Foremost in seniority: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī
2. Foremost in great wisdom: Khemā
3. Foremost in psychic power: Uppalavaṇṇā
4. Foremost in memorizing the Vinaya: Paṭācārā
5. Foremost in speaking the Dhamma: Dhammadinna
6. Foremost in absorption: Sundari Nandā
7. Foremost in energy: Soṇā

8. Foremost in clairvoyance: Sakulā
9. Foremost in swift insight: Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā
10. Foremost in recollecting past lives: Bhaddā Kāpilānī
11. Foremost in great insight: Bhaddakaccānā
12. Foremost in wearing coarse robes: Kisāgotamī
13. Foremost in faith: Siṅgālakamātā

Foremost of laywomen

1. Foremost in first going for refuge: Sujātā Seniyadhītā
2. Foremost as donor: Visākhā
3. Foremost in learning: Khujjuttarā
4. Foremost who dwells in metta: Sāmāvatī
5. Foremost in absorption: Uttarānandamātā
6. Foremost in giving fine things: Suppavāsā Koliyadhītā
7. Foremost in caring for the sick: Suppiyā
8. Foremost in experiential confidence: Kātiyānī
9. Foremost in reliability: Nakulamātā
10. Foremost in confidence based on oral transmission: Kālī of Kuraraghara

Bhaddā Kāpilānī is listed among the foremost nuns as the one who could best recollect previous lives.

Bhaddā Kāpilānī's family background and previous lives and Verses in the *Therīgāthā*



11 *Sagala in the Maurya Empire under Ashoka the Great (c. 250 B.C.)*

Bhaddā was an incredibly beautiful woman whose beauty matched that of a golden goddess statue and who married one of the Buddha's main disciples, Mahākāśyapa. She later became a Buddhist bhikkhuni and a leading disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Bhaddā came of a Brahman family of the Kosiya clan at Sagala, now modern day Sialkot in Punjab, Pakistan (see image). There is little written about her. One example is this passage in the *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Elder Nuns), in which Bhaddā speaks of her attainments as a Buddhist nun and praises her husband, Mahākāśyapa (which is fully translated [here](#)):

“She was born in the time of Padumuttara Buddha, in a clansman’s house at Haṇṣavatī. Come to years of discretion, she heard the Master preach, and saw him assign a Bhikkhunī the first rank among those who could recall previous lives. Thereat she made her resolve, wishing that she, too, might acquire such a rank. Working merit all her life, she was reborn, when no Buddha had arisen, in a clansman’s house at Benares, and in due course married.

Then one day a quarrel arose between her and her sister-in-law. And the latter having given food to a Silent Buddha, Bhaddā thought, ‘She will win glory for this,’ and taking the bowl from his hand, she filled it with mud instead of food. The people said, ‘Foolish woman! what has the Silent Buddha done to offend you?’ And she, ashamed of herself, took back the bowl, emptied and scrubbed it with scented powder, filled it with the four sweet foods, and sprinkled it on the top with ghee of the colour of a lotus-calyx. Handing it back, shining, to the Silent Buddha, she registered a prayer: ‘May I have a shining body like this bowl!’

After many fortunate rebirths, she was reborn, in the time of Kassapa Buddha, at Benares, as the daughter of the wealthy treasurer. But by the fruition of her previous karma her body was of evil odour, and she was repulsive to others. Much troubled thereby, she had her ornaments made into an ingot of gold, and placed it in the Buddha’s shrine, doing reverence with her hands full of lotuses. Thereby her body, even in that birth, became fragrant and sweet. As a beloved wife she did good all her life, was reborn in heaven to celestial joys, and at length took birth as the daughter of the King of Benares. There she lived gloriously, ministering to Silent Buddhas. When they passed away she was greatly troubled, and left the world for ascetic practices. Dwelling in groves, she practised Jhāna, and was reborn in the Brahma heavens, and thence into the family of a brahmin of the Kosiya clan at Sāgala. Reared in great state, she was wedded to the young noble Pippali at the village of Mahā-tittha. When he renounced the world she handed over her great wealth to her kinsfolk that she too might go forth; and she dwelt five years in the Sophists’ Grove, after which she was ordained by Great Pajāpati the Gotama. Establishing insight, she soon won Arahantship.

And she became an expert in knowledge of her past lives, through the surplus force of her resolve (made in past ages), and was herein ranked first by the Master when, seated in the Jeta Grove among the company of Ariyans, he classified the Bhikkhunīs. One day she broke forth in a Psalm, recounting all that she had wrought, accompanied by a eulogy of the virtues of the great Elder Kassapa, thus:

Son of the Buddha and his heir is he,
Great Kassapa, master of self, serene!
The vision of far, bygone days is his,
Ay, heaven and hell no secrets hold for him. (63)

Death too of rebirth hath he won, and
A seer is he of mystic lore profound.
By these three arms of learning doth he stand
Thrice-wise, ‘mong gods and men elect, sublime. (64)

She too, Bhaddā the Kapilani–thrice-wise
And victor over death and birth is she–

Bears to this end her last incarnate frame,
For she hath conquered Mara and his host. (65)

We both have seen, both he and I, the woe
And pity of the world, and have gone forth.
We both are Arahants with selves well tamed.
Cool are we both, ours is Nibbana now! (66)”

Previous Lives of Bhaddā Kāpilānī- twice-former Queen of Benares



“In the time of Padumuttara Buddha, Bhaddā Kāpilānī was the wife of Videha, a setthi of Hamsavatī, and having heard a nun proclaimed in the first rank of those who could recall former lives, she resolved to acquire a similar rank, while her husband (Mahā Kassapa in this life) resolved to be chief among those who practise austere vows (dhutavādinam). Together they did many good deeds and were reborn in heaven.

In the time of Vipassī Buddha, the husband was the brahmin Ekasātaka and she was his wife. In his next birth he was king of Benares and she his chief queen. Together they entertained eight Pacceka Buddhas on a very lavish scale. In the interval between the appearance in the world of Konāgamana and Kassapa Buddha, the husband was a clansman and she his wife. One day a quarrel arose between her and her sister-in law. The latter gave alms to a Pacceka Buddha and Bhaddā, thinking “She will win glory for this,” took the bowl from her hand and filled it with mud. But later she was filled with remorse, took back the bowl, emptied it, scrubbed it with scented powder and, having filled it with the four sweet foods, sprinkled over the top ghee of the colour of a lotus calyx. Handing it back to the Pacceka Buddha, she prayed to herself “May I have a shining body like this offering.”

In a later birth, Bhaddā was born as the daughter of a wealthy treasurer of Benares; she was given in marriage, but her body was of such evil odour that she was repulsive to all and was abandoned by several husbands. Much troubled, she had her ornaments made into an ingot of gold and placed it on the shrine of Kassapa Buddha, which was in process of being built, and did reverence to it with her hands full of lotuses. Her body immediately became fragrant and sweet, and she was married again to her first husband. The Apadāna account mentions two other lives: one when she was the wife of Sumitta and gave a blanket to a Pacceka Buddha, and again when she was born among the Koliyans and attended on one hundred Pacceka Buddhas of Koliya.

Later, she was the queen of Nanda, king of Benares (Brahmadatta, according to the Apadāna, which gives King Nanda as the name of her husband in another life), with whom she ministered to five hundred Pacceka Buddhas, sons of Padumavatī. When they passed away she was greatly troubled and left the world to give herself up to ascetic practices. She dwelt in a grove, developed jhāna, and was reborn in the Brahma world. (ThigA.67ff.; Ap.ii.578ff.; AA.ii.93ff., 203f.; A.i.25; Thig.vs.63-6).

The 'Golden Goddess' nun who outshone a stunning golden statue



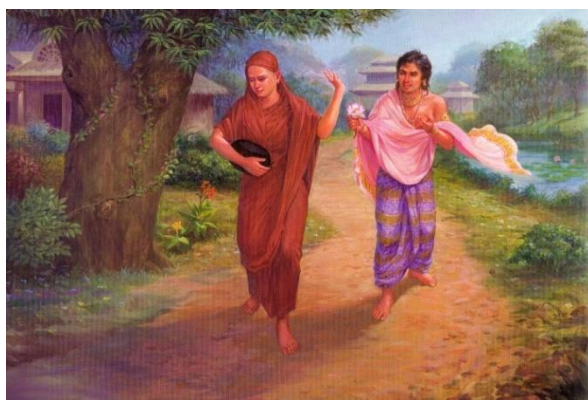
Bhaddā Kāpilānī first married (at a young age) the great Mahākāśyapa, one of the main male disciples of the Buddha. As for how they met, this was recently explained by the 17th Karmapa in detail [here](#):

“The goldsmith made a woman’s statue as requested, which was almost life size. Then, Mahākāśyapa showed his father the statue. He said “if you can find a beautiful woman just like the statue, who has that kind of a golden colour complexion. If you can find a woman as beautiful as that, then I will take her as my bride. Otherwise, I do not need a wife”. This was his idea. He thought that his father would never find anyone as stunning as the statue.”

“When Bhaddā was going to the statue to make offerings something happened that surprised everyone. When Bhaddā was in front of the statue, its colour started to fade more and more. At first, the statue was golden in colour but as Bhaddā was extremely beautiful and glowed with golden colour, as she got closer to it then the colour of the statue faded, it got bluer and bluer until at the end, it was as if the goddess of woman that was made of gold had turned into iron and had no radiance at all. Maybe the way these Indian stories are told are probably exaggerating a little. In any case, basically, because Bhaddā was so beautiful people got this feeling like the glow of the statue had disappeared because of her beauty. Her beauty dimmed and outshone the golden glow of the statue until it looked totally dark. It is like a poetic way of saying and showing how beautiful she was.

Some of the people then thought, “What is this? It is so strange, what is this bad omen? Has someone cast a spell on the statue?” So, they went to look where the glowing light was coming from and they saw the girl and realised that the light was coming from the girl. The Brahmin youths asked Bhaddā “Whose daughter, are you?” She told them she was Kapila’s daughter. The Brahmins thought: “ This is a special girl; this is the one we’re looking for.”

Difficult life after separating from her husband, Mahākāśyapa so they can both engage in practice



12 Bhaddā Kāpilānī was regularly harassed by men when begging for alms and raped by fellow ascetics before she became a Buddhist nun.

In *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*, (2014) University of Hawai'i, Clarke, S. states that after separating from her then husband, Mahākāśyapa who became ordained under the Buddha, met her again. She had joined an order of naked [immoral] ascetics led by Nirgrantha Pūraṇa (Pali: Pūraṇa Kassapa). She was regularly targeted for rape by her fellow ascetics, however. Mahākāśyapa pitied her and persuaded her to become ordained as a Buddhist *bhikṣunī* instead. Nevertheless, she was still harassed often, but now only when going outside. Since this happened when Bhadra went out in villages to obtain alms, Mahākāśyapa requested the Buddha's permission to daily give half of the alms food he had gained to her, so she did not need to go out anymore. His actions came under criticism, however, from a group of monks called the Group of Six, as well as Sthūlanandā.

Ohnuma (2013) says that Sthūlanandā went against the idea of detachment and renunciation as generally advocated in early Buddhist monasticism, which is why she hated Mahākāśyapa and Bhadra. She expressed criticism of Mahākāśyapa often, even when he did not act with typical ascetic detachment. Regardless, Mahākāśyapa continued to guide his former wife and she attained *arhat* (Pali: *arahant*) afterwards. In a poem attributed to her, she praises her ex-husband's gifts, shared vision of the truth and spiritual friendship. Mahākāśyapa did not mention her in his poems, though.

Bhaddā Kāpilānī in the Ekottarika-āgama



Another text that mentions Bhaddā Kāpilānī is the Ekottarika-āgama. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2013) in his study of this text says that:

“This Ekottarika-āgama is a counterpart to the Aṅguttara-nikāya preserved in Pāli, both being collections of early Buddhist discourses arranged according to a numerical principle. While the Aṅguttara-nikāya is part of the Theravāda canon, the Ekottarika-āgama is a collection transmitted by a different school, whose precise identity is still a subject of ongoing discussion among scholars.

In the case of the bhikkhunīs, the Ekottarika-āgama lists fifty-one outstanding bhikkhunīs, whereas the Aṅguttara-nikāya has thirteen....(2013:98)

“The list of outstanding bhikkhunīs in the Aṅguttara-nikāya agrees with its Ekottarika-āgama parallel that Bhaddhākapilānī (11) was foremost among those who recollect past lives, differing only in mentioning her in the tenth position in its list.” (2013:105)

In a [video teaching about Bhaddā Kāpilānī](#), Ayya Vimalanyani shares teachings from the Ekottarika-āgama, explaining that:

“The Ekottarika-āgama is very interesting for many reasons, but one reason is that there are a number of Suttas in there that do not have a parallel in the Pali, or any other place in any other canon and they feature Bhikkhuni nuns and portray them in a very positive light[iii].

Because we have so few Suttas about Bhikkhunis that feature Bhikkhunis prominently where either the Bhikkhunis are giving the teaching, or whether there is a teaching given two Bhikkhunis in the Pali canon we have about about 20 of those suttas from among like many thousands of suttas in the Pali canon. So, altogether we have very few suttas that feature Bhikkhunis and therefore having a few more in the Ekottarika-āgama is very special.” It says:

“I heard it like this, at one time the Buddha was at Sravasti in Jeta’s grove together with a great community of 500 Bhikkhus.”

So we see this is the typical introduction of a sutta, pretty much the same as in Pali even though this is a Chinese Sutta.

“Also, at that time in Sravasti there was a Bhikkhuni called Bhaddā who was dwelling together with 500 Bhikkhunis of whom she was the leader.”

This is again very interesting here we see the Buddha is there with 500 and Bhaddā Kāpilānī is there with 500 Bhikkhunis. Both of them are the leaders of their respective communities. So, we see that Bhikkhuni is set up sort of a little bit even as being on par with the Buddha so as a very respected leader and this parallelism shows us that the Sutta portrays Bhaddā Kāpilānī, in a very positive light as an outstanding teacher as an outstanding leader. Also the number 500 is very unusual. Normally, there’s only one Bhikkhuni that has 500 other Bhikkhunis as her following, which is of course Mahajāpati the Buddha’s maternal aunt and foster mother. So, ascribing 500 followers to Bhaddā Kāpilānī again is a sign that this wants to show us how outstanding Bhaddā Kāpilānī is and what a great leader she was. So here from the start, the sutta tells us that this is a very positive sutta about Bhikkhunis.”

Indeed it is, and that is why Bhaddā Kāpilānī’s life and background are worthy of study, preservation and emulation.

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Tomlin, Adele (2022):

[FROM RICHES TO RAGS: THE MAN TO WHOM BUDDHA GAVE HIS OLD ROBES: MAHAKASHYAPA’S LIBERATION-STORY BY 17th KARMAPA](#)

[THE ‘FAT JOYFUL’ NUN, STHULANANDA: ‘BADDEST-BALDIE’ IN THE VINAYA OR ‘BAD-ASS’ PROTO-FEMINIST? Early Buddhist nun, Sthūlanandā; challenging male monastic privilege or a powerful symbol of the futile ‘trappings’ of following rules without real, inner transformation](#)

[i] The Anguttara Nikaya (*aṅguttaranikāya*; lit. 'Increased by One Collection', also translated "Gradual Collection" or "Numerical Discourses") is a Buddhist scripture, the fourth of the five nikayas, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka, which is one of the "three baskets" that comprise the Pali Tipitaka of Theravada Buddhism. This Nikāya consists of several thousand discourses ascribed to the Buddha and his chief disciples arranged in eleven "books", according to the number of dhamma items referenced in them.

[ii] The city was the capital of the Madra Kingdom and it was razed in 326 BC during the Indian campaign of Alexander the Great. In the 2nd century BC, Sagala was made capital of the Indo-Greek kingdom by Menander I. Menander embraced Buddhism after extensive debating with a Buddhist monk, as recorded in the Buddhist text *Milinda Panha*. Sagala became a major centre for Buddhism under his reign, and prospered as a major trading centre.

[iii] In Chapter Five of 'Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies' (2013) Alice Collett (ed.), Bhikkhu Anālayo focuses on the Aṅguttara-nikāya / Ekottarika-āgama. He provides a translation of the lists of preeminent nuns in the Chinese Ekottarika-āgama and a comparison between this and the Pāli version. The number of outstanding nuns listed in the Ekottarika-āgama is far greater than in the Pāli. The Ekottarika-āgama records fifty-one eminent nuns, while the Pāli has only thirteen. Qualities identified, sanctioned, and eulogized range from broad ethical characteristics through mental ability or agility to teaching and other beneficial activities. As Anālayo notes in his conclusion, the nuns named on each list are each noted as foremost of all nuns, which presupposed that many other nuns also exemplify such noble characteristics. See: [Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#).

Chapter Four: Chinese Empress Wengcheng

7TH CENTURY CHINESE QUEEN'S SHOWER OF BLESSINGS ON A 21st CENTURY AMERICAN WILDFIRE: Garchen Rinpoche and the Gyanagma Wheel of Princess Wencheng: her life, influence and sacred objects in Tibet

[21st Jun 2021 Dākinī Translations](#)

“Thank you! Now people worldwide will hear about the Gyanagma Wheel. This is a great addition to its rich history. Thank you, now we can show Gyanagma to the world! Everyone has to know.” —HE 8th Garchen Rinpoche

“Above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.” —Roald Dahl

21st Century wildfire near Garchen Institute, USA

At 12pm June 17 2021, a wildfire threatened to consume the Garchen Institute, Arizona, USA where HE 8th Garchen Rinpoche is based. His translator, Ina Bieler, and fellow lamas were at the Institute during that time. This YouTube video below reports what happened and how Garchen Rinpoche implored his Lama Abao to contact Gar Monastery in Tibet, requesting them to speedily make prayers to the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel (personally gifted to Gar Tsongtsen by the 7th Century Chinese-Tibetan Queen, Wen-Cheng, wife of Tibetan king, Songsten Gampo) in order to stop the fire from spreading to the Institute.

Although they could not immediately contact the monastery, as it was in the middle of the night in Tibet, Genphel Lama, a resident lama at the monastery, got up early in the morning and started praying to the Gyanagma Prayer wheel as requested. Despite airplanes continuing to try and put out the wildfire, it was only when some miraculous rainfall started that it was finally extinguished. The video reports that the area in Arizona had not had rainfall for three months.

In the video, Garchen Rinpoche verbally reports the event in his calendar and sent a message to Genphel Lama at Gar Monastery saying:

“Thank you Genphel Lama! It rained today and the fire stopped. It came very close to our center and we even packed up ready to evacuate. Now the fire is extinguished. Thank you! Now people worldwide will hear about the Gyanagma. This is a great addition to its rich history.”

Rinpoche describes how the fire got very close and ‘dangerous’ and then suddenly ‘heavy rainclouds moved in’.

“Thank you, now we can show Gyanagma to the world! Everyone has to know.”

Prior to this event, I had not heard about the Gyanagma (as am sure many others will not have either) nor knew much about Princess Wencheng, the owner. Thus as an offering to Garchen Rinpoche and the ‘prayer wheel, I offer this short post on its history, the life and influence of its female owner, Princess Wen-Cheng, including a more feminist analysis/reading of her life, with some collated images of sacred objects and temples dedicated to her in Tibetan areas.

Princess Wencheng's Gyanagma Prayer Wheel and Gar Monastery, Tibet

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

In Tibetan, 'gyanag' means Chinese and 'ma' means 'female'. So Gyanagma, , means 'Chinese female', the prayer wheel of the Chinese female. The video of this event explains that:

"The Gyanagma Prayer Wheel is spun day and night at Gar Monastery in Tibet. It is the most precious holy object at Gar Monastery. Princess Wen-Cheng's wheel was hidden for many years and was returned to Gar Monastery in the early 1980s."

In Vietnam 2019, Garchen Rinpoche described the prayer wheels and the special butter produced from them [here](#). He states that the prayer wheel was brought by Princess Wen-Cheng when she came from China to meet the Tibetan King Songsten Gampo. The person who escorted her was Gar Songtsen and he received that prayer wheel from her. See below some pictures of the Prayer Wheels being returned to Gar Monastery in Tibet at that time (taken from the video above).





There is also a special balm that is made from the greasy residue of the prayer wheels, which [Garchen Rinpoche advises people to use for sickness, including the Covid-19 virus](#):

“The special balm (called Blessed Chokor Jodrag) is made from the greasy residue of the precious Gyanagma prayer wheel at Gar Monastery which contains all the words of the Buddha that was miraculously built by the Great Hearer Licchavi Vimalakirti. The balm confers *Liberation Upon Smelling* and can be applied on the nostril of the sick, dying or deceased. Through the blessings endowed in it, one will be able to repel contagious diseases and be protected.”

Below, I give a brief overview and collation of available resources and studies on Princess Wencheng and her marriage to the famous Tibetan King, Tsongtsen Gampo, her remarkable overland trip from China to Tibet, her influence on Tibetan Buddhist culture and precious sacred objects and statues in Tibet and China commemorating her.

Princess Wencheng, Chinese Queen of Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo



13 Princess Wencheng (628-680 or 682),

Princess Wencheng (628-680 or 682), is an ancient historical figure who holds great significance in China. Her story was recorded and written about in many ancient Chinese literatures. She married King Songtsen Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*; 569–649) of the Tibetan Empire in 641[i], [her *Treasury of Lives* biography](#) says:

“Gyaza Kongjo (rgya bza’ kong jo) was born between the year 623 and 631, probably in or near the Tang Dynasty capital Chang’an (長安, modern-day Xi’an 西安). Her name in Chinese was Wencheng Gongzhu (文成公主), “gongzhu” meaning “princess” or “noblewoman.” That title

is rendered in Tibetan as Kongjo (kong jo), while the “Gyaza” in her Tibetan name means “Chinese wife.” Her family name was Li (李), and she was possibly a daughter of Li Daozong (李道宗, circa 603-656), a military officer and cousin to the Chinese Emperor Taizong (太宗598-649).”

Songtsen Gampo’s ‘winning of a Chinese bride’



14 Statues of Tsongsten Gampo and Princess Wencheng in Potala Palace, Tibet

Princess Wencheng’s life is said to be depicted in Tibetan novels such as the *Hundred Thousand Mani* (*Mani bka’ ‘bum*) and the famed historiographies of *The Victorious Clear Mirror* (*Rgyal rabs Gsal ba’i Me long*). However, as with most historical accounts of women in religious histories, the female first-person voice has been completely erased. There are no historic autobiographical accounts from Princess Wen-Cheng on her life and marriage with the Tibetan King. Her biography states that she was married off at a very young age, almost a child:

“At a young age, possibly ten, twelve or sixteen, she was sent to Tibet as a bride for either the son of King Songtsen Gampo (srong btsan sgam po, circa 617-650) or for the king himself. The marriage appears to have been made in the wake of Tibetan and Chinese military clashes in Amdo between 635 and 636, and the negotiation was undertaken by the Tibetan minister Gar Tongtsen (mgar stong btsan, d. 667). If indeed she was intended for the prince, he died before she arrived, and Songtsen Gampo took her as a wife. In some narratives the king met her in Amdo with great ceremony. He had previously accepted (or demanded) a Nepali wife, the Liccavi princess Bhṛkūtī (bal bza’ khri btsun). The year of Wencheng’s arrival in Lhasa is recorded in a Tibetan stele as 641.”



Janice Ngiam (2017) who has cleverly attempted to re-create Wen-Cheng’s voice and life, using historical and academic accounts [here\[iii\]](#), says:

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

“...both Tibetan and Chinese historiography texts erase Wencheng’s agency. Tibetan texts subsume her actions under that of Songtsen Gampo (Warner 2011: 248). Chinese texts do the same by referring to the union between the Tang Emperor and the Tang’s “superior country”, rather than as Wencheng as an individual, as the marriage’s main benefit (Warner 2011: 249).”[\[iii\]](#)

In terms of extant historical accounts about how Wencheng’s hand in marriage was ‘won’, both appear to agree that Songtsen Gampo launched a murderous attack on people living in the Tang dynasty territory and that this attack apparently was what led to the Tang Emperor to present his daughter as a ‘peace offering’ or ‘truce’ to the Tibetan King, after a humiliating defeat. Needless to say, it does not sound like Princess Wencheng had much to say in the whole matter!

“According to Chinese accounts, in the spring of 634 on an official state visit to Imperial China, Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo fell in love at first sight and had relentlessly pursued the princess hand by sending envoys and tributes but was refused.

Allegedly, in 635/636, Royal Tibetan forces were deployed, attacking and defeating the peoples of Tuyuhun who strategically lived near the Lake of Koko Nor in present-day Qinghai, impeding a trade route into Imperial China. News of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo’s attack on Songzhou quickly spread from the ground to the Royal Courtiers, and Emperor Taizhou despatched his Militia and defeated Songtsen Gampo’s army, causing Songtsen Gampo’s retreat. He then sent a written expressed apology to the Tang Emperor¹ The Tang Emperor upon seeing Songtsen Gampo’s sincerity, then agreed to marry the princess to the Tibetan king.

Tibetan sources (and Chinese sources not aligned with the PRC government), by contrast, say Songtsen Gampo sent an envoy to Luoyang, the Tang capital demanding (rather than requesting) a Chinese bride and insisting he would lead 50,000 battle-hardened Tibetan troops to the sparsely defended capital and slaughter the inhabitants if he was not given this tribute. According to historian Pan Yihong, the Tang emperor refused this demand and Gampo’s army marched into China, burning city after city until they reached the walls of Luoyang, where the repeatedly-crushed Tang Army finally defeated the Tibetans in a single minor skirmish, thus enabling the Tang Emperor to save face by presenting his daughter as a “truce” rather than the tribute of the vanquished to the vanquisher.”

‘Diplomat’ bride, Chinese saviour or Buddhist Goddess?



Despite the violent start to their union, according to Tibetan history, Songtsen Gampo’s and Princess Wencheng’s marriage is said to have brought hopes of promoting a harmonious, matrimonial relationship between the peoples of Tibet and China. As further evidence of the patriarchy at that

time, and women being exchanged like property and trade agreements, a dowry was also given with her:

“A substantial dowry accompanied her, as did promises of trade agreements and safe passage on this Silk Road route which connected the capital at Xian and Lhasa. Wencheng’s dowry contained not only gold, but fine furniture, silks, porcelains, books, jewellery, musical instruments, and medical books.”

Thus, Wencheng is also revered in China for being one of the brides who brought Chinese culture to the peoples beyond their borders – expanding their civilization with culture and knowledge:

“...she arrived with the intent of introducing new agricultural methods. Seeds of grains and rapeseed which can adapt to high altitude climates were planted by Chinese craftsmen. Hoe plows, and other farm tools, and technical advice to on how to increase Tibetan agricultural productivity appeared. Han artisans also were brought to pass on their skills in metallurgy, farming, weaving, construction, and the manufacture of paper and ink. Wencheng is also credited with helping to developed Tibetan alphabet and writing.”

However, as another online account states, there are differing accounts of the role of Princess Wencheng depending on the source: Tibetan or Chinese:

“The Chinese and Tibetans today venerate Wencheng for somewhat different reasons. In the Chinese view, Wencheng was one of a number of so called “diplomat brides” who brought much needed Han Chinese culture to the peoples beyond their borders, whom the imperial court often looked down upon as barbarians. Wencheng thus served to forge a cultural as well as political link between China and Tibet, which today is still cited in their claim of long historic ties to Tibet.

The Tibetan perspective has important differences. For Tibetans, Wencheng is venerated most often because she was Buddhist, and, along with Songtsan Gambo’s Nepalese wife, Bhrikuti Devi, is said to have introduced Buddhism to Tibet. In Tibet, Wencheng is popularly known as Gyasa, and sometimes is worshiped as a goddess of mercy. She is praised for bringing a sacred image of Sakyamuni (the Buddha) with her, which is still enshrined in the center of the main hall of the Jokhang Monastery. The Jokhang is the spiritual center of Tibet and the holiest destination for all Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims.

The view that Wencheng was a “saviour” of a backward Tibetan culture, is challenged by Tibetans who chafe at the idea that it was, and is, China who promoted Tibet’s technical and social progress. They say that Songtsan Gambo, who established his capital at Lhasa and built the Tubo regime into a powerful kingdom, was the one whose nation building strategy purposely sought ways to inject new cultures into his kingdom. His marriages to important women from Nepal and China were planned as ways to foster improvements in Tibetan life.

Regardless of divergent views, the marriage of Princess Wencheng and Songtsan Gambo did solidify this portion of the Silk Road as a major route for trade and cultural connections between the two kingdoms.”

Princess Wencheng's Lament and Statues in Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple



15 Painted statue of Princess Wencheng in Potala Palace, Tibet

Specially built for Princess Wencheng, Potala Palace has a total of 1000 rooms and is magnificent. After two expansions in later generations, the present scale was formed. It is in the preservation of a large number of the rich content of the murals. Among the murals, including the scene of the difficulties and dangers Princess Wencheng encountered along the way to Tibet, as well as the scene of a warm welcome when she arrived in Lhasa. Princess Wencheng is said to have presided over the construction of Ramoche Temple and Jokhang Temple and that the willow trees outside the Jokhang Temple were planted by her, which has become the famous Tang willow of later generations. The statue of Buddha brought by Princess Wencheng is still enshrined in Jokhang Temple and worshipped by the Tibetan people and all the Buddhist pilgrims all over the world. Today, in the Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple of Lhasa, there are also statues of Princess Wencheng, which are very exquisite and vivid (see above).



16 Painting of the meeting of King Tsongtsen Gampo and the arrival of Princess Wencheng

According to Ngiam (2017):

“ Historical sources disagree on the significance of Wencheng’s role in establishing Buddhism in Central and Eastern Tibet. In fact, the two Tang texts do not even mention Wencheng as bringing any statue to Tibet. A proposed explanation is that Buddhist influence had dwindled during the 10th and 11th centuries of Tang rule, with historiography dominated by Confucian literati instead (Slobodnik 2006: 271).In *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, Songtsen Gampo’s Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

symbolic role is emphasized. Wencheng, as the goddess Śyāmā Tārā, came into existence out of his tears for the Tibetans. Songtsen Gampo was hence the ultimate harbinger of Buddhism, as Wencheng could have only built the temples if she had lived — and it was his tears that had brought her into existence in the first place (Warner 2011: 247)!

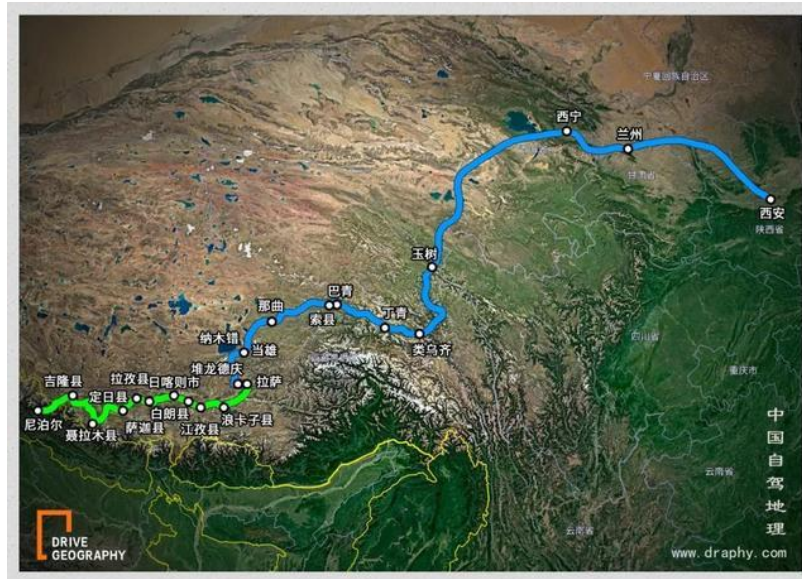
In the older *Pronouncement of Ba*, Wencheng's dowry included the Buddhist statue of Jowo Śākyamuni. She then built a temple to both display the statue as well as to reside within. However, her actions are again attributed to "what the ancestor Songtsen Gampo did to introduce the practice" (Warner 2011: 245, quoting *Pronouncement of Ba*). Wencheng could only bring Buddhism to Tibet because Songtsen Gampo had married her in the first place. Naturally he is given credit for the introduction of Buddhism. In *Old Tang History* (Jiu Tang Shu) and *Institutional History of the Tang* (Tang Huiyao), Songtsen Gampo reacted to his marriage to Wencheng as the "honour" of "join[ing] in marriage with the superior country". Thus, although Wencheng is named as the individual who brought Buddhism from the Tang over to Tibet, she is an empty vessel of transportation: who "brought" the statue in the "lap of a horseman" in the *Pronouncement of Ba*; used in *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament* to paint a picture of Tibet 'before' Buddhism; and used by the Chinese texts to contrast the "Great Tang" to the subservient Tibetan King (Warner 2011: 246 & 249)."

In fact, the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, portrays a first-person account of Wencheng as positively not wanting to go to Tibet and having very negative views of Tibet and Tibetans:

'O Father King, listen with your ear and grant me the words of my dear Father! Grant me the words of my dear Mother! Dear brother and Sister, have you lost the ability to speak?!? Alas, I cannot believe it! O Father, King, listen to me! If I go to the land of Tibet, in the direction of the Land of Snows, it is cold and freezing with big rocks, many poisonous gods, (nāgas, dré, rakṣasas), where the mountains resemble the tusk of a beast of prey, the rocks resemble the horns of a wild yak, unhappy, depressed, a remote place (dgon) of famine, where no grain [can] grow, the lowliest outcasts [from] the lineage of beasts of burden who [are like] lice, rude barbarians, who act like demons (dron po) who eat their brothers, a borderland never trodden by the Teacher, a low- caste country without the fourfold retinue [of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen], lacking sacred places and any basis for worship, completely without fields for cultivating merit. So if I am to go there, give me a sanctuary, the tutelary deity of my Father, Śākyamuni. The Land of Snows is a starving country. Grant me a treasury of precious gems. The Land of Snows is a cold country. Grant me clothing for my whole life. The people of Tibet are impudent, carelessly practising coarse doctrines, [therefore] grant me 500 female servants. The people of Tibet are unclean with unclean hearths, [so] grant me a clean handmaiden. If they do not respect me, I will not die in that place. [Now] I will go to Tibet.' The Princess Wencheng said this in the great garden of the Queen.[\[iv\]](#)

Princess Wen-Cheng's Remarkable Road Trip from China to Tibet

Two scholars recently recreated Wencheng's route from China to Tibet, beautifully illustrated in their book, *"The Ancient Tangbo Road, Princess Wen Cheng's Route to Tibet."* Tourists can also now follow the ancient Tangbo Road, the route Wencheng took going from Xi'an (then called Chang'an), China, to Lhasa, Tibet, a route which was part of the southern Silk Road until the end of the Tang and Tubo dynasties in the early 900s. See images below of the route (taken from a travel blog, [Re-walking Princess Wencheng into Tibet, what will we meet?](#)):



According to [her biography](#):

“Songtsen Gampo is known to have constructed a series of temples across the Tibetan Plateau, which were evidently an expression of his kingship—they are laid out in concentric squares much like the royal geography of imperial China. Tibetan legend holds that Wencheng’s journey to Lhasa was plagued by multiple hardships. After her arrival she used Chinese divination to discover that the Tibetan landscape, personified as a great demoness (srin mo) laying on her back, had attempted to block her from bringing Buddhism to Tibet. In this legend Wencheng commissioned the temples in order to subjugate that demoness by pinning her down at key points of her body.”

Through the centuries, Wencheng’s influence was and is celebrated. In Tibet, generations of poets have written numerous verses to eulogize her. Two traditional days are still devoted to her: the fifteenth day of the fourth month of each Tibetan year (the day of her arrival) and the fifteenth day of the tenth month of each Tibetan year (her birthday). At each, the population turns out to sing and dance in commemoration of her influence. In Tibet, a butter-flower ceremony is also held that commemorates her^[v].

Here are some images of statues commemorating her in Tibetan areas:



17 Princess Wencheng Temple in Tibet

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

Pearl-embroidered thangka made by Princess Wencheng as White Tara in Tradruk Temple



18 Tradruk Temple, Tibet

Tradruk Temple (khra-'brug dgon-pa, referred to as Changzhu Monastery in Chinese) in the Yarlung Valley, located in Nêdong County of Lhoka in the Tibet Autonomous Region, is the earliest great geomantic temple after the Jokhang and some sources say it predates that temple. The temple allegedly commemorates Princess Wencheng: a thangka embroidered by the Princess is kept in one of its chapels. I have not been able to locate an image of this thangka, so if anyone has one please let me know.

It is said to be the largest and most important of the surviving royal foundations in the Yarlung Valley and founded in the 7th century under King Songtsen Gampo. The most important treasure of Tradruk is said to be a thangka embroidered with thousands of pearls which is made by Queen Wencheng herself. It depicts Wencheng as White Tara. The thangka is kept in the central chapel on the upper floor. It is one of only three thangkas made by Wencheng. The two others are said to be in the reliquary stupa of the 5th Dalai Lama in the Potala Palace in Lhasa and in Xigazê[[vi](#)].

Conclusion – An enduring 21st Century legacy

Even today, the influence and legacy of the Chinese Queen lives on, both in Arizona, USA and in Tibet. For example, in 2009, the major event of Wencheng arriving in Tibet to meet Songtsen Gampo, was [depicted in a new thangka scroll painting by Niangben](#), artist from Rebongong Region, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, southeastern Qinghai.



19 Niangben, a Qinghai artist displaying his completed thangka, a scroll painting on cloth or silk, "Princess Wencheng into Tibet," Aug. 12, 2009. (Xinhua Photo)

Cynics may say that the rainfall at Garchen Institute was just a mere coincidence. However, those with faith and understanding believe that the power of her prayer wheel brought the heavy rainclouds that hadn't been seen for three months in dry, arid Arizona. As the famous childrens' author Roald Dahl said:

"Above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it."

Musical themes? 😊

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 21st June 2021.

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Re-walking Princess Wencheng into Tibet, what will we meet? DayDayNews
<https://daydaynews.cc/en/car/299193.html>

ENDNOTES

[i] Some Tibetan historians consider both the wives of Songtsen Gampo, Princess Wencheng and Bhrikuti, to be physical manifestations of the bodhisattva Tara.

[ii] Ngiam says: "In the blog, I use quotidian details to try and bring Wencheng out of her one-dimensional portrayal. I try to humanize her by creating motivation for bringing the statue to Tibet. I also draw some sentiment out of the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*, containing an apparently verbatim record of her lament to her father at the news of being sent to Tibet. [This is interestingly also a Tibetan text which voluntarily includes the criticism of Tibetan geography, the lack of Buddhist institutions, its people, etc. Actually, it is more accurately described as a total bashing of Tibet itself — in a Tibetan text — including things like "the people of Tibet are unclean with unclean hearths". Warner (2011:248) reads this not as Tibetan historians submitting to the Tang, but as justification for the conversion to Buddhism]. In addition to giving a voice to Wencheng, I use archaeological findings to describe the Jokhang Temple (Bríd 2006; Alexander 2005). The temple itself mostly resembles the architecture of Indian and Nepalese viharas. While Wencheng is credited in historical texts for bringing Buddhism over, Bríd (2006) and Alexander (2005) report that there is virtually no evidence for any Tang influence. Viharas from the Tang era were unique in their architecture of hip and gable roofs, double eaves, and longitudinal arrangement of buildings with ponds and bridges (Bríd 2006: 22)."

[iii] The full quote from Ngiam is: "I drew from 4 sources translated by Warner (2011) that describe Princess Wencheng's role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet: (1) *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*; (2) *Pronouncement of Ba*; (3) Old Tang History [*Jiu Tang Shu*]; (4) The Institutional History of the Tang [*Tang Huiyao*]. I tried to use Warner's (2011) translated excerpts to draw a holistic picture of *heqin* as a means of religious transferral...both Tibetan and Chinese historiography texts erase Wencheng's agency. Tibetan texts subsume her actions under that of Songtsen Gampo (Warner 2011: 248). Chinese texts do the same by referring to the union between the Tang Emperor and the Tang's "superior country", rather than as Wencheng as an individual, as the marriage's main benefit (Warner 2011:

249)."

Table I: Historical texts used for this blog
Source: Adapted from Warner 2011: 246

Title	Author	Terminus a quo /ad quem	Relation to Wencheng
Pronouncement of Ba	attrib. Ba Sainang	Late 8th century (fragments of the same text found in Dunhuang Caves) /Late 11th century	Earliest source
Vase-shaped Pillar Testament	attrib. Songsten Gampo	9th or later /After 1169 CE	Earliest complete narrative
Old Tang History [Jiu Tang shu]	Zhao Ying; Liu Xu	941 CE /945 CE	Compilation of (now lost) earlier annals; describes Songster Gampo's reaction to Wencheng's arrival in Lhasa
Institutional History of the Tang [Tang Huiyao]	Wang Pu (960-1125 CE)	?/ 961 CE	Compilation of (now lost) earlier annals; same quotation as Old Tang History

[iv] Wencheng's lament at the news of being sent to Tibet, according to the *Vase-shaped Pillar Testament*. Translated by Warner (2011: 247)

[v] Excerpt from Legend of Wen Cheng and Buddhist reformer called Tasong-kha-pa (1357 – 1419):

“On the fifteenth of the first month in 1409, Tasong-kha-pa held a ritual in front of Jokka Khang Temple in Lhasa to commemorate Sakyamuni. During the ritual, the Sakyamuni (Buddha) image brought by Princess Wencheng from Xian [then capital of China] when she came to Tibet was decorated with a golden canopy and a robe. In front of the statue were flowers made of butter. When the ritual was concluded, Tasong-kha-pa was so exhausted that he fell asleep as soon as he lay down. In a dream, he went to a mountain covered with thick forests...While Tasong-kha-pa was gazing at this scene, Princess Wencheng flew gracefully down and stood before him. She was dressed in Tang dynasty clothing, and, though she was beautiful, her expression was sorrowful. Tasong-kha-pa said, “Your Highness came to Tibet at the emperor’s command and married Songtsen Gampo, the Tibetan King, thus joining the Chinese empire and Tibet. You are highly respected by all the people. Today, I decorated the Buddha image with a gilded canopy, offered it butter flowers, and chanted scriptures in worship. So why are you so sad?” Princess Wencheng said...“When I saw the butter flowers, I was reminded of my life in Chang-an [Xian] and am tortured by past memories. I won’t think of Chang-an if I can see such butter flowers every year.” Tasong-kha-pa thought for a moment, then said, “Rest. I promise that we will hold a ritual every year in Jokka Khang Temple with many butter flowers.” ‘That is very kind of you,’ said Princess Wencheng, and she left. Tasong-kha-pa then awakened from his dream. He summoned skilled craftsmen, divided them into two groups, and had them make butter flowers. The two groups competed with each other, and their butter flowers were very beautiful. On the same day the next year, Jokka Khang Temple again held a ritual and the two groups of butter flowers were exhibited. One group depicted Sakyamuni’s life, while the other depicted Wencheng’s journey to Tibet. Both butter-flower exhibits were splendid. They were shown exactly at the hour when Tasong-kha-pa had earlier dreamed of Princess Wencheng, and taken away the following morning. Afterwards, Jokka Khang Temple exhibited flowers every year.” See: <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/essay-07-02.html>

[vi]“The centre of the temple is the innermost chapel, which is said to date back to the original temple built by Songtsen Gampo; according to the legend, it held Buddha statues of stone and a Tara statue. Today, the chapel houses clay figures which are said to contain fragments of the original statues. There is a famous “talking” statue of Padmasambhava at the age of eight years in the same room in Tradruk.”

Chapter Five: Chinese Empress Xu

EMPRESS XU'S DREAM REVELATION OF A SUTRA BY AVALOKITESVARA AND ADVOCATE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION. 'Good Deeds' by 17th Karmapa (Day 9: part 2)

[2nd Mar 2021](#) [Dākinī Translations](#)



20 Empress Xu (徐皇后) (1362 – 1407) with her husband, Yongle, Ming Emperor

Today, is a short post about the Empress Xu (徐皇后) (1362 – 1407), consort of the Yongle Emperor, her background and life, and the teaching the 17th Karmapa recently gave about her connection with the 5th Karmapa, Dezhin Shegpa, and an extraordinary dream in which Avalokiteśvara dictated an entire Sutra to her.

Empress Wu – Consort of Yongle Emperor and third Empress of Ming dynasty



21 Empress Xu (徐皇后) (1362 – 1407)

Empress Xu, formally Empress Renxiaowen (仁孝文皇后), was the empress consort to the Yongle Emperor and the third empress of China's Ming dynasty. Born in 1362, as the eldest daughter of Xu Da and Lady Xie (謝氏). She had four brothers—Xu Huizu (徐輝祖), Xu Tianfu (徐添福), Xu Yingxu (徐膺緒), and Xu Zengshou (徐增壽)—and two younger sisters, who were the wives of Zhu Gui, Prince Jian of Dai (thirteenth son of the Hongwu Emperor) and Zhu Ying, Prince Hui of An (twenty-second son of the Hongwu Emperor). On 17 February 1376, she married the Zhu Di, Prince of Yan, the Hongwu

Emperor's fourth son. After Zhu Di ascended the throne as the Yongle Emperor on 17 July 1402, Consort Xu, as his primary wife, was created empress in December 1402.



22 Empress Wu was the daughter of Xu Da, the ming Dynasty's opening father. Pictured is Xu Da. (Sheep Sister/Da Era)

Dream Revelation of a Sutra by Avalokiteśvara



23 Large head of Gyanyin, Ming dynasty era

Empress Xu is the first person credited with transcribing a Buddhist sutra from a dream revelation. The 17th Karmapa spoke about her dream:

“As was mentioned, the Ming Emperor Yongle and his Empress had great faith in the Dharma. It was the Empress who had greatly encouraged Yongle to invite the 5th Karmapa and she had great devotion for him. When the Empress died, the Emperor wrote to Dezhin Shekpa at Wutai Shan to hold rituals for her. The Emperor also said he would never take another Empress, and he never did. She was his last Empress.

In a dream, the Empress saw Avalokiteśvara was writing a sutra and when she woke up, she wrote it down. Later, she showed it to the 5th Karmapa to see if it was authentic or not, and he said it was very good. As a memorial of the Empress, the Yongle Emperor then printed many

copies of this sutra that had been revealed to the Empress in her dream.” [Other accounts state that she wrote the Sutra down from memory after waking up].



24 Gyanyin/Avalokiteśvara

According to sources, her work is entitled ‘The Sutra of Great Merit of the Foremost Rarity spoken by the Buddha, which the Renxiao empress of the Great Ming received in a dream’ (大明仁孝皇后夢感佛說第一希有大功德經 第1卷, Da Ming Ren Xiao Huang hou meng kan Fo Shuo di yi xi yu da gong de jing). In her introduction to the sutra, the empress wrote that one night after meditating and burning incense, Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara)^[i] appeared to her as if in a dream, and took her to a holy realm where the sutra was revealed to her in order to save her from disaster. After reading the sutra three times, she was able to memorize it and recall it perfectly upon awakening and writing it down.’



25 Image of the original Sutra print (see 大明仁孝皇后夢感佛說第一希有大功德經 – 藏品專題 – 藝術中國網 (artchn.com))



26 Sutra of Great Merit, cover page and other pages

The scripture is said to be housed at the Beijing Zhihua Temple. An edition of the Sutra (in Chinese only) can be seen [here](#). It is listed under the catalogue of Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō (卅新纂大日本續藏經). Although it was listed under Ming's Southern Collection 永樂南藏, this collection is now lost. Recently, they found this collection at Qinglong Monastery, Shanxi, in the 70's. The full text in Chinese can be downloaded [here](#).

It has also been claimed by some not only to be a Buddhist text but one that was used by Yongle for political gain and power, see [here](#).



27 Guanyin/Avalokiteśvara – wooden carving Ming dynasty era



Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

Author of 'Inner Training' – Advocate of Women's Education and Good Relationships

Although this was not mentioned in the 17th Karmapa's teaching, it is said that Empress Xu believed that the beautiful virtues of women were formed through education. She attached great importance to women's education, and in 1404, in order to educate women in the palace, she combined previous generations of books on women's education, "Women's Speech", "Women's Ring", the collection of ancient saints on women's character teachings, and filial piety and high queen's relevant remarks, and the implementation of women's education, into "Inner Training" (內訓, Nèi xùn).



28 'Inner Training' (內府刻本) engraved book See: <https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/19/4/15/n11186931.htm>

Empress Xu also asked Yongle for giving gift to the wives of husbands she summoned as cabinet ministers. In the Temple of Juyi, Queen Xu gave them clothes, gold and silver and other gifts, encouraging them to understand their husbands, and because their husbands were busy to serve their hard-working husbands, so that they are free from worries and can one-pointedly help the Emperor.

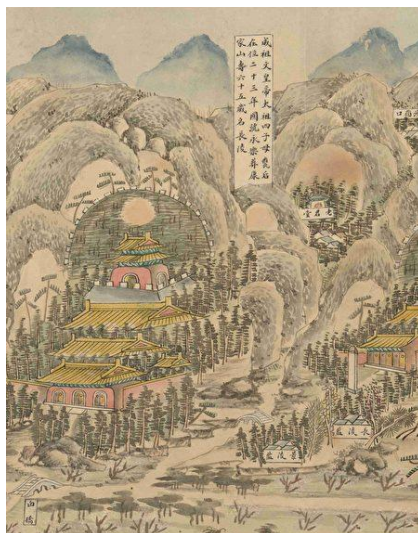


29 Ming Duxuan's "Woman's Picture" (partial), Shanghai Museum Collection.

Body placed in the Ming XIV Mausoleum

After the death of Queen Xu, the extremely grief-stricken, Yongle held a big fast for her, and commiserated he could no longer hear her voice.

It is reported that after the Empress passed away, the Emperor lasted only one hundred days more in his reign. The casket of Queen Xu's body was placed in the Nanjing Palace until the changling of Changping, Beijing, was completed, and Zhu transported Queen Xu's coffin from Nanjing to Beijing for burial. The funeral was extraordinary, and Queen Xu was the first person to be buried in the Ming XIV Mausoleum.



30 13th Ming Mausoleum that Empress Wu's body was placed in

Fifteen years later, Yongle died on his way to the north , and was buried with Empress Xu in Changling.

Yongle Kangyur – first Kangyur printed

The 17th Karmapa also briefly described the Yongle Kangyur, created during the time of the Yongle Emperor:

“Likewise, the Emperor had a copy of the Kangyur printed using wood blocks and brought back to China. This became known as the Yongle Kangyur. Scholars say this was the first printing of the Kangyur in Tibet, and it occurred because of the Ming Emperor and Dezhin Shegpa's efforts. ”

For more on the 5th Karmapa and the Yongle Kangyur, as well other Karmapas' connections to the different editions of the Kangyurs, see my previous article: [The Kangyur and the Karmapas' role in their publication and preservation](#). In this article, it states that:

“Around 1410 the Yongle Emperor made an offering of the first printed copy of his Kangyur around 1410, to a famous pilgrimage site temple, Pusading, at Wutai Shan, which also now houses the only known exemplar of a forty-two volume supplement to the Wanli Kangyur.”



31 Edition of the Yongle Kangyur

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 2nd March 2021.

[\[i\]](#) Guanyin is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Among the Chinese, Avalokiteśvara is almost exclusively called *Guanshiyin Pusa* (觀世音菩薩).

Chapter Six: Machig Drupe Gyalmo

THE INSEPARABILITY OF THE DAKINI LINEAGE’S RED AVALOKITESHVARA (GYALWA GYAMTZO) AND 2ND KARMAPA, KARMA PAKSHI: Five-Deity Mandala of Red Avalokiteshvara and Karma Pakshi’s Guru Yoga mandala; female siddha lineage of Machig Drupe Gyalmo to Rechungpa; PLUS NEW TRANSLATION of Supplication and Short Daily Practice of five-deity Red Avalokiteshvara by Third Karmapa

[29th Apr 2022 Dākinī Translations](#)

“In the centre, on an unchanging vajra seat is

Bhagavan, Great Compassionate One

Gyalwa Gyamtso, surrounded by retinue

I supplicate with devotion and longing,

Bestow the blessings of appearances and peace!”

དབུས་མི་འགྱུར་ངོ་མཉམ་གདན་སྟེང་ན།

བཙུན་ལྷན་ཐུགས་རྒྱུ་ཆེན་པོ་ལ།

ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་མཆོད་ཆོག་གིས་བསྐྱོད།

བདག་མོས་ཁྱེད་གདན་བས་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས།

སྒྲུང་མཛད་ཀྱི་ཁྱེད་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་གསོལ།

—Excerpt of ‘Supplication to Gyalwa Gyamtso’ by Jamgon Kongtrul

“One could think there is a lineage between other masters and Jinasagara (Gyalwa Gyamtso) and myself, Karmapa. But it is equally valid to think there is no lineage in between me and the deity’, which is an indirect way of indicating that he, Karma Pakshi was the yidam deity, Jinasagara. Therefore, instead of the usual placement of the yidam deity in the center of the mandala, Karma Pakshi is the principal figure in the mandala.”—17th Karmapa (2015)

“Karma Pakshi was a great Mahasiddha, who then travelled to Pungri, in the Tibetan eastern region called Ba. While there, he saw the deity Gyalwa Gyamtso face to face and became inseparable from Gyalwa Gyamtso at that time.” —12th Gyeltsab Rinpoche (2019)

For Dharma Protector Day today (and the New Moon tomorrow), am happy to offer:

- Translation of a *Supplication to the five-deity Gyalwa Gyamtso* (rGyal ba rgya mtsho: Red Avalokiteshvara) mandala by the 1st Jamgon Kongtrul,
- Translation of *Clear Realisation of Gyalwa Gyamtso*, a short daily practice of the five-deity Gyalwa Gyamtso composed by the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Available on [request here](#) only to those with the required empowerment .
- Compilation of transcribed teachings on 2nd Karmapa, Karma Pakshi’s Guru Yoga by the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, HE 12th Gyeltsab Rinpoche and HE 8th Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Downloadable here: [KARMA PAKSHI GURU YOGA COMPILED TEACHINGS](#).

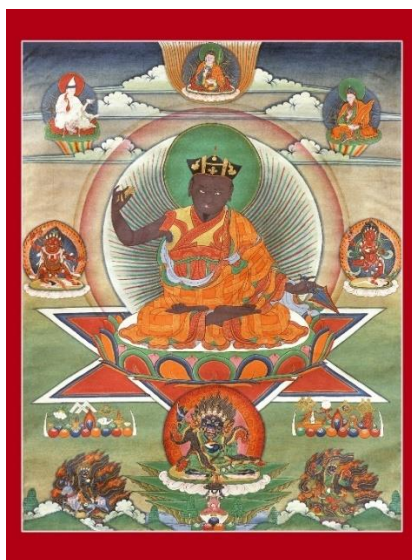
INTRODUCTION – Teachings on 2nd Karmapa's Guru Yoga



On 20th April 2022, 7th Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche bestowed the 2nd Karmapa, Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga empowerment at the Thrangu Canada centre. I was not aware of this empowerment and would have taken it if I had known, as I have published before on the Karma Pakshi Guru Yogas and translated a short Guru Yoga sadhana by the 15th Karmapa (see [here](#)). Also, I participated in the 17th Karmapa's recent practice online of the Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga during the Winter teachings (February 2022). It is a practice particularly close to my heart, the mandala includes Karmapa, Vajrayogini and Mahakali after all! Fortunately, the empowerment is still online [here](#) and can be taken that way if necessary.

The 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje also gave the Karma Pakshi empowerment several times. Once in 2014 in Berlin, Germany and the [second time in 2015 in the USA](#). I have written-up and combined all these teachings on Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga into one short transcript/document, for people to read like a commentary. It is based on the original Tibetan and English oral translations (as the Karma Kagyu Office reports are edited summaries only), and can be downloaded from the link above.

Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga Mandala and the Jinasagara (Gyalwa Gyamtso) five deity mandala



32 Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga Mandala. Karma Pakshi is the central figure, with Padmasambhava (top), Rechungpa (top left), Yongey Mingyur (top right), Red Hayagriva (left), Vajrayogini (right) and the protectors Bernagchen Mahakala, Rangjung Gyalmo (Mahakali)

In the 2015 teachings, the Karmapa explained the name of Karma Pakshi, his role as the first recognized Karmapa, the miraculous actions he showed to escape execution eighteen times. For a more extensive biography of Karma Pakshi, see [here](#).

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

The 17th Karmapa also explained how the Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga mandala (see image above) is actually based on the special form of Avalokiteshvara, Jinasagara (known in Tibetan as Gyalwa Gyamtso, or Red Chenrezig) who was a yidam deity of both Karma Pakshi and the 1st Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa. It was also a main practice of Karma Kagyu lineage holder, the First Jamgon Kongtrul^[i]. in this image (see below), Kongtrul is drawn with the five deity mandala^[ii].



33 The First Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye with the Gyalwa Gyamtso mandala (top right)



34 Thangka image of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche with the Karma Pakshi Guru Yoga mandala (top left)

The 17th Karmapa (2015) explained that the origin of the empowerment and practice of the Karma Pakshi Ladrub (Guru Yoga) arose as a pure vision in 1862 by the treasure finder Yongey Mingyur Dorje, for more on that see [here](#). The Karmapa explained that:

“In essence, this guru sadhana concerns a mandala which in nature is the five-fold mandala of Jinasagara, a form of Avalokiteshvara. In form it is a mandala containing all of the three roots (guru, yidam deity, and Ḍākinī). The principal of the mandala is Karma Pakshi himself. The

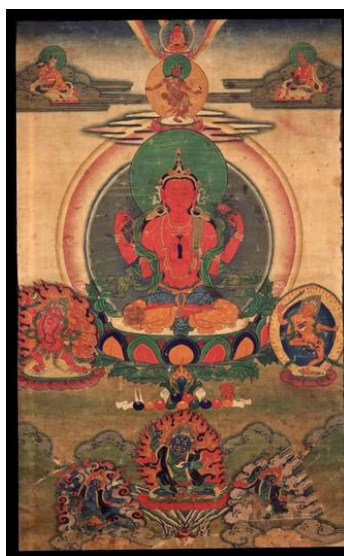
reason for this is often given in relations to a statement made by Karma Pakshi himself, who said:

“One could think there is a lineage between other masters and Jinasagara and myself, Karmapa. But it is equally valid to think there is no lineage in between me and the deity’, which is an indirect way of indicating that he, Karma Pakshi was the yidam deity, Jinisagara. Therefore, instead of the usual placement of the yidam deity in the centre of the mandala, Karma Pakshi is the principal figure in the mandala.”

Interestingly, one of the main English-language experts on Karma Pakshi, Charles Manson (2009: 43) (whose biography of Karma Pakshi is soon to be published) mentions Gyalwa Gyamtso in relation to the 2nd Karmapa meeting Ogyenpa:

“At Tsurphu (mTshur phu) he met with Orgyen Rinchen Pal (O rgyan Rin chen dpal 1229/30-1309), to whom he entrusted the transmission to pass on to the postulated next incarnation. The nature of the transmission is not elucidated. The earlier accounts give no details of the meeting-it is not until the *Feast For Scholars* (mkhas pa'i dga' ston) account that we learn that Orgyan Rinchen Pal's visit lasted just three days. From this passage in *Feast For Scholars*, it would appear that elements of the transmission consisted of instructions (gdams ngag), an empowerment ritual (the Gyalwa Gyamtso deity empowerment), and the donation of a black hat, as a vestment symbol of transmission for the next Karma pa. During the Gyalwa Gyamtso empowerment, Karma Pakshi placed a bowl of barley on Orgyan Rinchen Pal's head and stirred it three times-this seems to have been something of an esoteric 'word-less' transmission, although the author does not comment on it.”

Jinasagara (Gyalwa Gyamtso) and the Nyingma connection



35 Red Avalokiteshvara (Gyalwa Gyamtso) mandala Tibetan thangka (featuring 13th Karmapa, Dudul Dorje on the top left).
See HAR: <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/790>

The 17th Karmapa also explained that:

“Another reason for Karma Pakshi's connection to Jinasagara is that this yidam deity's five fold mandala was his principal yidam practice. This practice primarily comes down from the Nyingma tradition. As both Karma Pakshi and the 1st Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa were born in

Nyingma families[i], they both practiced this deity, which they maintained as one of their main practices throughout their lives.”

According to Manson (2009) Karma Pakshi practiced this deity for eleven years at Khawa Karpo mountain:

“After Pomdragpa (sPom brag pa)’s death, Karma Pakshi then settled at Pungri (sPung Ri), near the sacred mountain Khawa Karpo (Kha ba dkar po), and meditated there for eleven years with a focus on the Gyalwa Gyamtso praxis, yet experiencing a variety of deity visions. At Pungri he apparently attracted 500 disciples around him, which indicates that his career as a teacher had begun to develop.”

The Amitayus practice by 3rd Karmapa which includes the five-fold mandala of Jinasagara



36 Amitayus Buddha, 19th Century Tibetan thangka. HAR: <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/698>.

The 17th Karmapa also added that:

“Having spoken about the five-fold mandala of Jinasagara (Gyalwa Gyamtso), I should tell you that within the Karma Kagyu practice, there is a special practice that began with the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, in which the five-fold mandala is complete in the single form of Amitayus. This is called Amitayus: the combined practice of the three roots into one (tshe dpag med rtsa gsum dril sgrubs)[iii].”

Gyalwa Gyamtso lineage and mandala – handed down to Milarepa’s disciple, Rechungpa by female siddha, Machig Drupe Gyalmo

In 2019, HE Gyeltsab Rinpoche gave [the torma empowerment for the five deity Gyalwa Gyatso practice at the Kagyu Monlam](#), Bodh Gaya, which I was fortunate to attend in person. In his teaching, he explains the origin of the lineage, which came after Milarepa sent his student Rechungpa to India, who received the Gyalwa Gyamtso lineage from an Indian female Mahasiddha which was then passed down to Pomdragpa, the guru of 2nd Karmapa, Karma Pakshi:

“Milarepa sent his disciple Rechungpa to India, to get some teachings there for him. When Marpa was teaching Milarepa he had told him that he had got many teachings from India like the six yogas of Naropa, Mahamudra and so on but some teachings on the secret mantra had been left behind and he had not been able to get them. So he told Milarepa that if he could go to India then he should go and get those teachings but if it is not possible for him to go, then he should send one of his students to India to get them.

Jetsun Milarepa sent his student Rechungpa who attended many teachers and got many teachings, in particular from female Mahasiddha Machig Drupai Gyalmo, he got the practice of the five deities of Gyalwa Gyamtso and also got a version of this five deity practice from Tipupa. In that way he was able to bring these teachings back to Tibet.

Many beings have practiced this version of Gyalwa Gyamtso and have been of vast benefit to beings because of it. So there are many teachings and presentations, reading transmissions and so on of this practice that were given and spread throughout Tibet and that still exist today. When the teachings were brought back to Tibet, Jetsun Milarepa was very pleased that the practice was there and so much benefit would come from it."



37 Rechungpa, (1084-1161) student of Milarepa who received the lineage of five deity Gyalwa Gyamtso from female Mahasiddha, Machig Drupai Gyalmo

"Rechung Dorje Dragpa (1084-1161) gave it to one of his students, Dzangri Repa, a ngagpa. He met Rechungpa and had great faith in him, so he attended him and received teachings from him. Then, Dzangri Repa had a student to whom he gave this practice, [Drogon Rechen Repa \(1148-1218\)](#), he was also not a fully ordained monk, he was also a Ngagpa. Then he travelled to Kham, Tibet and took full ordination when he was 37 years old. He then became one of the great Mahasiddhas of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

He then approached the 1st Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, and received teachings from him and became a guru of the Karma Kagyu lineage. He had many students, and his two principle students were Lodro Gyaltsen and [Pomdrakpa \(spom brag pa bsod nams rdo rje, 1170-1249\)](#). To these two, he gave all the teachings of Gyalwa Gyamtso and many others teachings and these two stayed together and together attained the state of siddha. Lodro Gyaltsen passed away suddenly but Pomdrakpa lived to an old age and he became one of the teachers of the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, so Karma Pakshi received from Pomdrakpa, many teachings including the teachings of Gyalwa Gyamtso.

So Karma Pakshi was a great Mahasiddha, who then travelled to the East, to a place called Pungri, in the Tibetan region called Ba, he saw the deity Gyalwa Gyamtso face to face and became inseparable from Gyalwa Gyamtso at that time. So Karma Pakshi attained the state of siddha through this practice of Gyalwa Gyamtso. Then he met the Kings of Mongolia and through that a great, vast benefit to sentient beings arose. When he met the Mongolian kings Kublai Khan and Gushri Khan, he showed miracles such that they became Buddhists. Through their influence, they spread the Buddhist dharma. Through Karma Pakshi's practice of Gyalwa Gyamtso he became completely inseparable from the deity and then was able to be of vast

benefit to beings. So it is said: ‘that just as space is endless, Karma Pakshi’s activities for beings was just as vast.’

Karma Pakshi’s main student was Nyenre Gon, and he passed the lineage to 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje and then it continued through the line of Karmapas. It is said that their principal method for accomplishing the benefit of beings was through the practice of Gyalwa Gyamtso.

Also, Guru Rinpoche hid many treasures and texts and these contain many sadhanas and texts on Chenrezig. It is said that in the practice of Gyalwa Gyamtso, all of these different treasure texts of Chenrezig are included within this text of Gyalwa Gyamtso.

Many great masters of Karma Kagyu have taken Gyalwa Gyatso as their yidam, including Karma Chagme Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrol Lodro Thaye; and many of the Karmapas, Shamarpas, Gyaltsapas, and Pawo Rinpoches.”



38 Milarepa with his repa (yogi) disciples. He told Rechungpa to go to India and get the teachings from dakinis there.

In *Rechungpa: A Biography of Milarepa’s Disciple* (2012: Chapter 2), it explains in more detail how Rechungpa met the female siddha, Machig Drupai Gyalmo. First, Milarepa told Rechungpa to go to India to get the teachings from the dakinis, which Marpa had been unable to get:

“Then Milarepa and Rechungpa exchanged what they had for gold, and Milarepa said to Rechungpa one last time, “If you go to India and study logic and sorcery, it will just defile your mind and create more disturbing emotions, which will cause you to move backward on the path. Instead seek out and receive these teachings of the formless dakinis.” Rechungpa traveled to India a third time and was able to meet Tipupa again. From Tipupa, he received all nine teachings on the formless Dākinī lineage.”

“One day Tipupa told Rechungpa that he should go into town and take a look around. So Rechungpa went off to see what this town was like. On the way he passed a tall, thin yogi who took a good look at Rechungpa and said, “What a sweet, handsome young Tibetan you are, but it is a shame you’ve only got seven days to live.” This gave Rechungpa a fright, and he thought, “I only have only seven days left. What am I going to do?” He went running straight back to Tipupa and told him, “I’ve just met a yogi in the street who told me I’ve only got a week to live! What shall I do?” Tipupa asked Rechungpa, “Are you that afraid of dying?” and Rechungpa replied, “Well, actually I’m not very frightened of dying, but I’ve gone through a lot of trouble to come down to India and receive these teachings of the formless dakinis. If I die here, it will all be completely meaningless. I’ve got to take these teachings back to Tibet and give them to Milarepa.”

Tipupa then said, “Actually, I knew you didn’t have very long to live, so I told you to go into town. I knew you would meet this person who told you that you didn’t have long to live. But there’s no need to be afraid of dying, because there is a woman called Machik Drupai Gyalmo (which means ‘one mother, the queen of accomplishment’) living in a cave. Machik Drupai Gyalmo has achieved the practice of long life and is five hundred years old, but she looks like a sixteen-year-old girl.” He told Rechungpa to go see her, and so Rechungpa went to her cave, met her, gave offerings, and prostrated to her.

She said, “Well, what do you want?” He said, “I’ve been to town, and I met a yogi who told me I only have a week to live. So, please give me the siddhi of long life.” Then Machik Drupai Gyalmo asked Rechungpa, “Can you do without sleep for a week?” and he replied, “Yes, I can.” She then gave him a long-life practice to do, and he did it continuously night and day for seven days. At the end of seven days, he had a vision of Amitayus—who taught him the long-life sadhana in a long form, a medium form, and a short form.

After this, Machik Drupai Gyalmo asked him how long he wanted to live, and Rechungpa replied, “I want to live until I don’t want to live anymore.” She asked how old he was now and he said he was forty-two. She said, “You wicked Tibetan with such a great desire to live so long. Your teacher Milarepa is now eighty-three and is going to live until his eighty-fourth year, so you can do the same.” Then, Rechungpa received from Machik Drupai Gyalmo the empowerment and transmission and instructions for the Red Chenrezig practice. One night, after receiving this empowerment, he had many dreams, and one of these dreams was of a pandita dancing in the sky. Then it began to rain flowers, and in the midst of this rain of flowers were dakinis, who said that he had received a very good empowerment and had practiced it well. They sang a song to him. Rechungpa thought the song sounded so beautiful, so he paid very close attention to the wonderful melody. When he woke up, he realized that he didn’t know what the words of the song were. All he could remember was just one line, and this line had been written over Tipupa’s doorway.

Rechungpa received many other instructions from Tipupa and Machik Drupai Gyalmo, and these teachings were translated into Tibetan. Tipupa said that the translation was not perfect; he didn’t really know how to translate it completely correctly. He made the prophecy that it didn’t matter because in the future other people would go through and remove the mistakes in the translation.”

The Oceanic Retinues Five-Deity Mandala and Supplication to the Mandala in the Rinchen Terdzo

The 12th Gyaltsab Rinpoche further explained that:

“There are many different lineages of Gyalwa Gyatso, some coming from India and later schools in Tibet. There were many texts of the practice of Chenrezig but amongst them all, the one that has had vast benefit is this practice of Gyalwa Gyatso. There are different configurations of the deity; sometimes there are nine but in this particular practice there are 5 deities. Lamas, buddhas, bodhisattvas, heroes, dakinis, protectors, are all represented, so it is said there is no Buddha, bodhisattvas, hero, Ḍākīnī, or protector that is not contained within this practice; including all the treasure texts of Chenrezig that Guru Rinpoche hid in Tibet.

Gyalwa Gyatso is in the middle; the five deities are Hayagriva to the right, Tsomo Yeshe, a form of Vajra Varahi to the left, above is Padmasambhava, below are dakinis and protectors. Each of them is surrounded by a vast retinue of their kind. This practice is unique in that Gyalwa

Gyatso's retinue is an ocean of all the yidams, in Hayagriva are all the heroes, in Tsomo Yeshe all the dakinis are contained, around Padmasambhava is an ocean of siddhas and with Bernagchen below is the ocean of protectors."

I thus also offer here the first translation of the *Supplication to Gyalwa Gyatso* contained in the *Rinchen Terdzo* by Jamgon Kongtrul ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*. (BDRC), purl.bdrc.io/resource/IE1KG14], which refers to these oceanic retinues. I have published the *Supplication* in full below.

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Yongey Mingyur Dorje Rinpoche, 8th (April 2022) [Karma Pakshi Teaching and Empowerment](#) (video).

ENDNOTES

[i] "This practice of Jinasagara, being the quintessential life force of the dakinis, is traditionally said to be very hazardous, and so there are many stories of others, too, who have encountered dangers with this practice. For me, though, I just have never experienced a personal retreat more upsetting than this one." –"The Autobiography of Jamgon Kongtrul" (p67)

[ii] In 2012, the 17th Karmapa Gyalwang wrote a play and opera about the life of Karma Pakshi in a contemporary idiom, the drama focuses on three events: the arrival of Orgyenpa (1230-1312), who would hold the Karma Pakshi's lineage; the meeting of these two great lamas; and finally, Orgyenpa's meeting and recognizing the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284-1339). Performed during the 29th Kagyu Monlam Chenmo on March 3rd, 2012 (see video here).

[iii] "Karma Pakshi was born into the family of a yogi belonging to the Nyingma tradition of the Secret Mantrayana, the oldest one in Tibet. He practiced in this tradition and then met Gyalse Pomdrakpa, an important student of Drogön Rinchen, who in turn was a close disciple of the first Karmapa. It was Pomdrakpa who gave Karmapa Pakshi the transmission of Mahamudra (the Great Seal), which he then combined together with the Nyingma practice of Dzogchen (the Great Perfection), and continued to practice both of them." –17th Karmapa (2014 teaching)

[iv] I found a reference to this text contained in Kongtrul's Rinchen Terdzo Chenmo. I could not find a version of it in the online editions of 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje's Collected Works though, 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, editor. "Kar lugs tshe dpag med rtsa gsum dril sgrub kyi bskyed rdzogs dmigs rim gsal bar bkod pa dngos grub dpal 'bar." *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, vol. 5, Ngodrup And Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980, pp. 495–507. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC)*, purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW20578_829FA5. [BDRC bdr:MW20578_829FA5]

Chapter Seven: Freda Bedi

‘TOWARDS SUPREME ILLUMINATION’: Guru Yoga Texts by 16th Karmapa and translations by the Karmapas’ first female translator, Freda Bedi

20th Apr 2021 [Dākinī Translations](#)

“To attain to some understanding of Dharma, some outpouring of energy, spiritual and physical, is required on the part of the aspirant, on our own part. You are willing to take infinite pains for example to put up a complicated piece of machinery. Or to acquire wealth, position, influence. Work for the Dharma like this.” — 16th Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje in *Towards Supreme Illumination, Guru Yoga Commentary* (1974), tr. Sister Palmo/ Bedi.

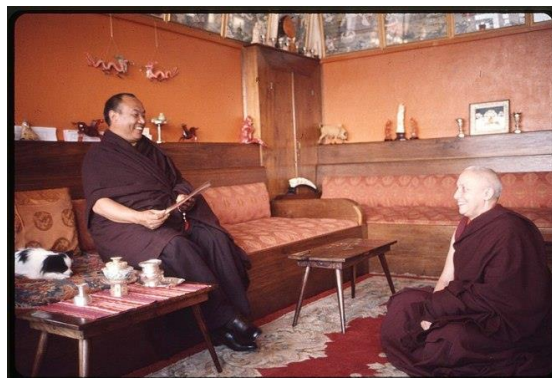
“There are things deeper than labels and colour and prejudice, and love is one of them.” — Freda Bedi

Introduction



39 Gelongma Palmo [Freda Bedi]

For Tara Day today, am happy to offer an article on the extant Guru Yoga texts composed by the 16th Karmapa, including two particular works that were translated by one of his closest female disciples, British nun, Freda Bedi (Gelongma/Sister Palmo, (1911-1977)). The 16th Karmapa reported that Bedi was an emanation of Tara, who was said to be the main yidam of the 16th Karmapa. Bedi herself translated a Tara Praise dedicated to the 16th Karmapa (preserved [here](#)) and two White Tara sadhanas (one by Jamgon Kongtrul and one by Tai Situ Rinpoche, more on that in another post).



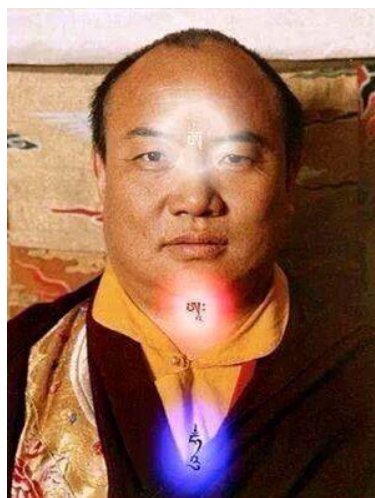
40 16th Karmapa with Fred Bedi (Sister Palmo) at Rumtek Monastery, Sikkim 1970s. Shambhala Archives

Sister Palmo/Bedi was not only extremely close to the 16th Karmapa mentally and physically, but appears to have been the first, female (oral and written) translator of the Karmapas, in their 900 year old history. Despite three biographies having been recently published, generally, not much has been said or is known about her work in this area, and there is more research to be done on her spiritual life, teachings and works.

It is hoped that this post not only helps to preserve and collate the different extant works by the 16th Karmapa, but also highlights some of the works of Freda Bedi, the translator, and their remarkable preservation by Samten (Andre) De Wet.

May it be of benefit and may we all attain the state of Gyalwang Karmapa and Noble Tara!

Guru Yoga Texts by the 16th Karmapa



41 16th Karmapa with the three seed syllables of Guru Yoga practice

The Guru Yoga practice is one of the most important practices in the Vajrayana/Tantric Tibetan Buddhism, in which with longing devotion, the Guru as Buddha – with all the enlightened qualities- is supplicated, and the sacred syllables of OM, AH, HUM visualized as light emanating from their head, throat and heart chakras. The student's devotion activates the guru's blessings (who is not separate from the ultimate nature, Dharmakaya) from these three vajra places, and merge with one's own mind stream inseparable. Giving one a 'taste' of genuine freedom, bliss and awakening.

As part of a project to collate, translate and preserve in one place the extant works of 16th Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje, available in English and other languages (soon to be published on this website), I recently translated one of his Guru Yogas called a *Shower of Siddhis*.

Including this one, there are at least four extant Guru Yoga practice teachings/texts composed by the 16th Karmapa, two of which are in the Third Volume of his Collected Works (see [outline here](#)), and two of which are oral commentaries^[i]. Below is an overview and analysis of those Guru Yoga works by the 16th Karmapa, including a commentary, *Towards Supreme Illumination*, translated by Bedi.

TWO GURU YOGA SADHANAS

There are two Guru Yoga sadhanas in the 16th Karmapa's Collected Works (3rd Volume), these are:

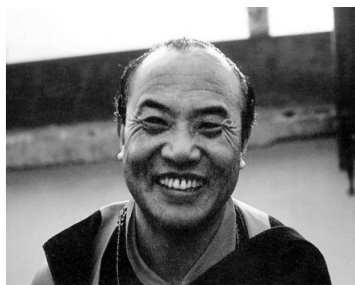
Shower of Siddhis of the Profound Path Guru Yoga

SHOWER OF SIDDHIS OF THE PROFOUND PATH GURU YOGA

BY 16TH KARMAPA, RANGJUNG RIGPE DORJE

ཐཱ་ལམ་ཐུ་མའི་རྣལ་འབྱོར་དངོས་གྲུབ་ཆར་འབེབས།

ཀུམ་པ་བསྐྱུག་རང་བྱུང་རིག་པའི་དྲི་མ།



42 Front cover of Shower of Siddhis Guru Yoga text (2021)

Shower of Siddhis of the Profound Path of Guru Yoga^[ii] is a very concise, daily Guru Yoga Practice. It can be downloaded freely from this website [here](#). As I wrote in the intro to that translation, 16th Karmapa states it was written by him:

“At the request of Bhutanese son, Karma Tenzin and daughter, Konchog Wangmo, of the King of Bhutan, on offering gold and a katag scarf, it was composed on a virtuous day and month by the 16th holder of the name Karmapa.”

It is not totally clear where it was composed and who these people are. However, the 16th Karmapa does have a Bhutanese connection. According to some online sources, In 1967, the 16th Karmapa, accompanied by a party of ninety-five followers, visited Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, at the request of His Majesty the King. During the course of his stay in Bhutan he visited Tak Tsang, the Tiger’s Nest cave-monastery, famous for having been visited by Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava). He also travelled to the Kyichu temple in Paro, there performing special rites for peace and tranquillity in the world and for the preservation and propagation of the Dharma everywhere. His Royal Highness the King and Her Royal Highness the Queen Mother most generously presented the Tashi Cho Ling palace at Bumthang, together with its entire landed property, to the 16th Karmapa.”

***Continuous Rain of Nectar on the Sprouts of the Four Kayas*^[iii] Guru Yoga**

The second Guru Yoga sadhana, the most common one recited, and the first Guru Yoga to be translated into English (by Bedi in 1971) is the *Continuous Rain of Nectar That Nurtures the Sprouting of the Four Kayas*.

It is said to have been composed by the 16th Karmapa when he was 35 years old in Tibet, on the 8th Month of the Earth-Dog Year (1959). Gerd Bausch reports in [Radiant Compassion. The Life of the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa](#)^[v] that:

“In July 1958 one of the rebel Khampas went to see Karmapa and asked him to compose a Guru Yoga from his enlightened mind stream which was “effective and short” for the new life circumstances. The Khampa explained that he was already too old to do more extensive practices and asked for a simple but complete practice to purify the mistakes he had made. Yishin Norbu [16th Karmapa] honoured the request and wrote a Guru Yoga, which later became

very famous among Kagyü practitioners in the West. Probably, no other Guru Yoga is practiced as much in the West as the meditation on the 16th Karmapa.”

There are four extant translations [\[iv\]](#) of this Guru Yoga available (in both English and Tibetan). These are:

- a. *A Shower of Ambrosia Generating the Shoot of the Four Kayas. Guru Yoga of the 16th Karmapa*: Translator Unknown. KTD Publication [Guru Yoga of the 16th Karmapa: A Shower of Ambrosia Generating the Shoot of the Four Kayas \(namsebangdzo.com\)](#).
- b. *The Continuous Rain of Nectar that Nurtures the Sprouting of the Four Kayas: A Guru Yoga of the 16th Lord, Rigpe Dorje*. Translator Eric Thaye Dorje. Available for free download here: [A Guru Yoga of the 16th Lord, Rigpe Dorje • dharmaebooks.org](#)
- c. *The Guru Yoga which Continuously Waters the Seedlings of the Four Bodies of the Buddha*. Rumtek Monastery, 1971. Translation by Gelongma Palmo (Freda Bedi), Tenga Rinpoche and Ayang Rinpoche. [\[vi\]](#) Free download of .pdf [here](#).
- d. *Continuous Rain of Nectar that Causes the Four Seeds of the Bodies to Germinate*. Palpung Jangchub Dhargye Ling. Translator and date of publication unknown. Available for download here: [16-Karmapa-Guru-Yoga-TEXT.pdf \(palpung.org.uk\)](#)

As the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa wrote in the foreword to 2) the Dharma E-books edition:

“This guru yoga of the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, is special and of particular significance because it was composed by the Sixteenth Karmapa himself, and to this day it remains as the daily guru yoga practice for many of his students. As every guru yoga related to the Karmapas, this practice allows their students to receive the direct blessings of their lineage, purify obscurations and increase accumulations, and eventually attain the very state of the guru’s four kayas. And especially in this e-book the lineage blessings are even more present because the Guru Yoga is recited by the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa. Note: Since it belongs to the path of secret mantra, this guru yoga, should be practiced only by people who have received the appropriate transmission and instruction from a qualified lama.”

Here is the 17th Karmapa reciting this Guru Yoga here:

Other than those, there are no other Guru Yoga texts in his Collected Works. However, there are two publications (in English only) of 16th Karmapa’s teachings and instructions on the Guru Yoga practice.

TWO GURU YOGA COMMENTARIES

Seedlings of the Four Kayas, A Commentary on the Guru Yoga (1980)

Seedlings of the Four Kayas is a commentary on the second Guru Yoga sadhana, said to have been orally transmitted by the 16th Karmapa in USA, 1980. Published by *Buddhism Today* (no.28, Fall/Winter 2011) with Tibetan translation by Ngodrup Bukar, compiled and edited by Manfred Seegers. It is in English with no Tibetan source record. As it is not available online, a .pdf of the commentary is available to download [here](#).

Towards Supreme Illumination, A Commentary on the Guru Yoga (1974)



43 16th Karmapa with Fred Bedi. Shambhala Archives

Another commentary on Guru Yoga, *Towards Supreme Illumination*, given by 16th Karmapa in 1974, translated by Bedi has been kindly preserved and published by Andre de Wet on his website, see [here](http://luxlapis.co.za): [Karmapa \(luxlapis.co.za\)](http://luxlapis.co.za).

Although there is no Tibetan record of the teaching, de Wet writes that:

“This short but profound article on meditation was composed by His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa on the eve of his departure from India, on his first visit to the West, and it is offered to the world at the instance of William Stucky, who is bringing out the journal *Samata* or the *Blue Pearl* for His Holiness’ friend in Dharma, Baba Mukhtanandaji, of the Guru Dev Ashram in Ganeshpuri, Vajreshwari, Bombay. Composed by His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa in the Monastery wreathed in a Thousand Rays of Rainbow Light, which we call Rumtek, the Dharma Chakra Centre of Sikkim, August, 1974. Translated by Gelongma Khechog Palmo, helped by Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche. it is said to have been given by 16th Karmapa at Rumtek Monastery, Sikkim, August 1974.”

The Polish follower who informed me about the existence of this text, told me that it was made up of two parts divided by horizontal line of dots, written by the 16th Karmapa in two different places and times. The upper part was said to be written by the Karmapa in India, on the eve of his first world travel in 1974. The bottom part was written in Rumtek, sometime earlier^[viii]. I have no way of checking this at the moment.

Commentary Overview

The commentary itself is short, with a profound (yet accessible) description of the nature of relative and ultimate bodhicitta, the importance of compassion, the practice of Guru Yoga and the Ultimate state, nature of mind, free of concepts and clinging. It opens with the following powerful and profound words of 16th Karmapa:

“In order that all men may reach the Supreme State of Illumination of the Buddhas, the practice of Dharma is the most necessary thing. All are, as we say, drowning in the ocean of the suffering of the world, outwardly stained by greed and desire, and the poison of hatred and malice towards others. We compare the state of unawakened man to a dark night of ignorance.

If we could put Dharma in its most essential form we can say it is the teaching of the Buddha that brings liberation from ignorance, and cleans away the poisons of the mind, voice and body. That is what this profound yet simple word Dharma signifies.

To attain to some understanding of Dharma, some outpouring of energy spiritual and physical is required on the part of the aspirant, on our own part. You are willing to take infinite pains for example to put up a complicated piece of machinery. Or to acquire wealth, position, influence. Work for the Dharma like this.

Teaching in Dharma is imparted not only in lectures, or read in books. By meditation and looking into the mind, analysing it, a certain spiritual maturity comes to us.

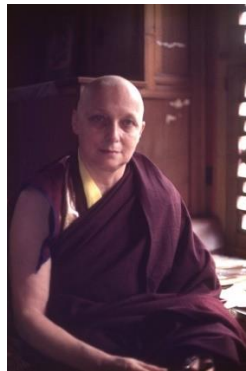
Deeper Dharma (*guhya*) requires the oral teaching of the Lama. The Lama's teaching is the teaching of all the Enlightened Ones—he is not different from them.

That is why we say there are three elements in the deeper *anuttara* teaching- the energy-aspiration of the disciple, patient listening to what the Lama-Guru says (and in particular heeding the secret inner Instructions), and thirdly the silent meditation practice of looking into the mind. The combination of these three brings us to the *Mahasukha* or inexpressibly great happiness of the Buddhas."

—excerpt from *Towards Supreme Illumination* by 16th Karmapa, tr. Freda Bedi (1974)

FREDA BEDI: FIRST FEMALE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRANSLATOR OF THE KARMAPAS

Life and Biographies



44 Freda Bedi/Sister Gelongma (1911-1977)

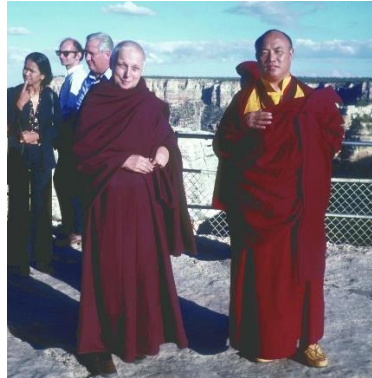
Freda Bedi translated two of these Guru Yoga texts, while a nun staying at Rumtek monastery (1971 and 1974). She had a room below the 16th Karmapa.

In terms of Bedi's life and connection with 16th Karmapa, three books have recently been published 1) [*The Spiritual Odyssey of Freda Bedi: England, India, Burma, Sikkim & Beyond*](#). Naomi Levine (Shang Shung Editions, 2017) and 2) [*The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi*](#), Vicki Mackenzie (Shambhala, 2017) and 3) [*The Lives of Freda: The Political, Spiritual and Personal Journeys of Freda Bedi*](#) Andrew Whitehead (2019) and 4) [*Lady of Realisation: A Spiritual Memoir*](#) Sheila Fugard (Balboa Press, 2012 and available to read [here](#)). According to Levine:

"Freda Bedi was the first English woman to voluntarily enter prison as a freedom fighter under Mohandas Gandhi for Indian independence. She became a close friend of Nehru, the first Prime Minister and his only daughter Indira and was appointed Social Welfare Advisor as the Tibetans flooded the borders of India escaping from the Chinese in 1959. On meeting the Sixteenth Karmapa, the renowned hierarch of the Karma Kagyu tradition, Freda embraced Tibetan Buddhism and became the Karmapa's chela or heart disciple."

Mackenzie explains in a [recent interview](#): “She established the first nunnery in exile. She really, really believed in the equality of women. In fact, in the exile community, the nuns got their first nunnery, Karma Drubgyu Thargay Ling, before the monks got their first monastery. And it’s still going. On a personal note the sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje encouraged her to become the first fully-ordained Tibetan Buddhist nun of any nationality. It was yet another historical milestone she clocked up. She was the first gelongma, which helped pave the way. Tenzin Palmo followed and so did all the others. It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

Close relationship and travels with the 16th Karmapa



45 16th Karmapa with Freda Bedi (Sister Palmo). Shambhala Archives.

Bedi’s beloved friend, Goodie Oberoi, said of Bedi’s close relation with the 16th Karmapa:

“She was almost always in retreat, very close to God, to Buddha, to the Twenty-One Taras, and she was closest to Karmapa. There was total spiritual unanimity between them. If she suggested something, it happened. They just clicked spiritually. He was spiritually above her, she was a little below.” (Chapter 8, Levine (2018)).

Mackenzie explains:

“She [Bedi] persuaded the sixteenth Karmapa to go on his first tours to Europe and America. She did that personally, because she was his close disciple, living in a room just beneath his in Rumtek, and he listened to her. She said to him, “The West definitely is ready, go, please, please, they are ready, give them the Dharma.” She arranged for him to meet the Pope. She went with him, organizing all the way and acting as his intermediary.... while she was on these tours to South Africa and America, she was conducting high initiations with the permission of the Karmapa. So she must have been an extraordinary practitioner. And the Karmapa told her assistant, the nun who was with her all the time, that she was an emanation of Tara. She was doing these extraordinary empowerments. Her explanations were exceptionally profound and very clear....

And her devotion to the sixteenth Karmapa was absolute. She didn’t have to learn guru devotion. Her first meeting with him was remarkable. While she was working with the Tibetan refugees, they told her she must go and meet the Karmapa, who had just arrived. It was a long journey on horseback, and she didn’t really know who he was. But she trekked up to see if she could help him. And he revealed himself to her as the Buddha. He was instantly her heart guru. Her devotion to him was so absolute that it annoyed her daughter, who was brought up by her mother to be an independent woman. “Whatever are you doing obeying everything he says? I thought you were an intelligent, liberated woman!” That was her daughter’s view.”

Bedi's Collected Works and their preservation by Samten De Wet

Sister Palmo/Bedi was also one of the first female Tibetan Buddhist Dharma translators in the history of the Karmapas and Tibetan Buddhism (the only other one I am aware of -from that era- is Katia Holmes). I contacted Mackenzie but she told me she had not seen any translations Bedi had done by the 16th Karmapa. Mackenzie reported (ibid.): “She was an ace at languages. She just had a knack. She had studied French; that’s what got her into Oxford. She learned Hindi and Tibetan, and she was translating texts very early on. That was one of her first jobs, which she was doing on the side. She was one of the first translators of Tibetan texts.”



46 Samten de Wet with Sister Palmo/Bedi in Milan, Italy 1975. Image courtesy of De Wet.

Fortunately, Samten (Andre) de Wet, a former follower of the 16th Karmapa (with an interesting background and history himself), has preserved (see his website <http://www.luxlapis.co.za/>) all of Bedi’s translations and compositions, and helpfully compiled a complete list of them for reference and download, see [here](#) and [here](#).

De Wet told me he has all Bedi’s translations – but not the Tibetan texts she worked from – except Green Tara, and a few others. He donated his collection of Tibetan texts he gathered in India in 1978/79 to the Kagyu Center in South Africa, where he is based. Bedi gave him the texts and various other materials, which he published in small editions and in the various Buddhist magazines published there, such as: The Bodhisattva Path, Maitri etc. Other material is on his website. He explained that many of her translations were also published in Canada and California by her students there – all of whom have passed away – but those were all duplicated in the Cape Town collection, which is now stored in the [Sheila Fugard Buddhist Library in Nieu Bethesda](#).

De Wet also remarked that some people may have been ‘unkind’ and overly judgmental of Bedi’s translations:

“Certainly the translations may not stand up to academic scrutiny – but she was a poet in her own right – and she imbued the various prayers and sadhanas with great heart. After all she was very devotional in her approach – and her dedication to the Karmapa was profound. I saw them together – and the flow of energy between her and the Karmapa was marvellous to behold. At that time here in South Africa we performed the pujas etc. in English. The Buddhists here in South Africa only do them in Tibetan.”

Whitehead (2019) wrote this in his book about the accuracy and standard of her translations:

“Sister Palmo studied Tibetan and gained a basic knowledge of the language but not sufficient to translate. Ato Rinpoche recalls that while she picked up some facility in reading Tibetan, her ability to speak the language was not good. Her reversionings into English were collaborative ventures. Lamas and monks helped her with the basic meaning, and then she fashioned the prayers in English bringing to bear her facility with words honed by many years of writing and journalism. Shenpen Hookham, who as Susan Rowan had come out to volunteer at the Tilokpur nunnery and became proficient in Tibetan, harboured reservations about the authority of her renditions. ‘She would say: “oh, this translation has to be right because I had it checked by the tulkus”. And they were quite badly wrong – and it isn’t enough to say they’d been checked by the tulkus. ... I suppose it was overconfidence really about how much she knew.’

In fact, one should remember that Bedi was one of the first Tibetan Buddhist Dharma translators, at a time when there was no internet, very few Tibetan-English language resources, no laptops, no pen drives and so on. For her to have translated anything, deserves the same respect and credit as other perhaps more prominent male translators. It may be this unfair and unrealistic view of her work, as below standard, that has led biographers to focus more on her colourful life and connections. However, her pioneering Dharma translations and activity is something that should not be overlooked. Perhaps, a biography that focuses more on her translations, teachings and practices is needed.

Fires destroyed many of Bedi’s works: USA and South Africa

Sadly, as Samten De Wet told me, many of Bedi’s translations were consumed by fire in a horrific ‘accident’ that burnt down the home of her friend, Barbara Pettee and daughter, who both tragically died in the fire. De Wet said that people thought it had been caused by candles burning on a shrine. See photo of Bedi with Pettee below:



47 Sister Palmo/Bedi with close friend, Barbara Pettee who tragically died with her daughter in a fire that also destroyed many of Bedi’s Works. Photo courtesy of De Wet.

According to De Wet, Barbara Pettee had very elevated connections – political and diplomatic – her mother was possibly friends with Rose Kennedy. Pettee tape recorded all the events and activities of the 16th Karmapa’s tours, plus recordings of many of Bedi’s teachings – which have yet to be transcribed. The cassette tapes are in the Bedi collection in India. Pettee also set up the Senator Percy link for the Karmapa. Many of the tapes in her collection also were consumed in the fire but Sheila Fugard had copies, and they converted to digital form.



48 Photograph of fire at University of Cape Town, 19th April 2021

Fast-forward to the present day, on 19 April 2021, in an eerie ‘karmic repeating itself’ ‘coincidence’, De Wet informed me that “raging fires on the slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town over the past two days resulted in the tragic fire damage on the University of Cape Town’s Jagger Library. In the Special Collections of this Library are the Dr Ernst Landsberg Papers. He was the first President of Karma Rigdol Centres founded by H.H. the 16th Karmapa and Sister Palmo. The Collection consists of correspondence between Sister Palmo, Thrangu Rinpoche and the Karmapa, but also many translations, photographs and related material to the founding of Tibetan Buddhism in South Africa. As staff have not been allowed into the building as yet, and apparently fire doors were activated and may have protected some of the collections, it will take time to find out whether this valuable Buddhist collection was destroyed. We hope not.” This tragedy is reported [here](#).

The collection in the library was that of Dr. Enrst Landsberg (1903-1976). Here is a [link to the collection](#), which states that: “Dr Landsberg had a very deep interest in mysticism, symbolism, and the occult. He studied the Egyptian sacred books and translated some passages into English and German from the hieroglyphics. He made translations from Hebrew texts into English and German and compiled glossaries of. both Sanskrit and Mahayana. Towards the end of his life he became a Buddhist and was the head of the Tibetan Buddhist group in Cape Town. He died in Cape Town in 1976.”

For more on Bedi’s life, see [here](#) and the *Further Reading* section below.

Bedi’s Tibetan Incarnation? – Jetsunma Jamyang Palmo



49 Jetsunma Jamyang Palmo (Photo Evam Institute website)

A note by Anila Pema Zangmo, about Bedi’s last days, has been preserved by De Wet [here](#). It records how the day before she died, Bedi put out her finest and special dharma robes and played a tape of the 16th Karmapa, which was advice he had sent from New York.

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

I was fortunate to briefly meet and hear Jetsunma Jamyang Palmo (a Tibetan recognised tulku of Freda Bedi) teach in Siliguri, January 2020, at a set of empowerments and oral transmission of the *Complete Works of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo* given by Schechen Rabjam Rinpoche. She is unique in being one of the first Tibetan tulku incarnates of a western lama and was recognized by Sakya Trizin as Bedi's reincarnation. She seemed very humble, compassionate and knowledgeable about Dharma.

Political decision or multiple incarnations?

After publishing this post, Naomi Levine expressed her personal concern (publicly in the Comments section) that Bedi's tulku should be recognised by the 17th Karmapa and that Jamyang Palmo was merely a political recognition. Levine also stated that Ayang Rinpoche (who was close to Bedi) said that is unlikely that Bedi would have wanted a recognised tulku in her name, she quotes:

"Reincarnation depends on what wish or dedication prayers were made in that lifetime. If one has prayed, "Until the end of samsara, I want to help all sentient beings", if done with strong determination, then that person can reincarnate. If one wishes not to come back anymore to samsara and wants to go to the Pure Land, then it will happen. We don't know what she wished, whether she wished to come back or not.... If she reincarnated her work will have continued. If she has reincarnated it will have shown and people will know. But nobody requested it. She is already born, already grown up. Who knows? ...She was very great, not an ordinary lady.... I believe she was a *Ḍākinī*. "

Off the record he disclosed that there was no indication that Freda had chosen to reincarnate into the family of Beru Khyentse Rinpoche nor did they have a particular connection.

Gerd Bausch, another biographer of 16th Karmapa, responded to Levine's comments that: "Discrediting an incarnation saying she has "more to do with Kagyu politics" polarizes and create division among the Sangha. Why not just rejoice about the many reincarnations of wonderful masters?"

Andrew Whitehead says in his book: "There is no simple answer as to whether, in the view of Tibetan Buddhists, Sister Palmo has been reborn. Two high lamas have suggested that their daughters are the new incarnation. The family says it awaits a decision by the 17th Karmapa. Tenzin Palmo, another English convert to Tibetan Buddhism, has commented: 'This may be the only occasion of a Westerner taking rebirth as a Tibetan tulku, as opposed to a Tibetan lama being reborn as a Westerner.'"

In my view, whether Jamyang Palmo is Bedi's actual incarnation or not, I tend to agree with Bausch that such comments themselves, rather than help heal rifts, often create further misunderstandings, division and conflict, especially as the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, is making efforts to build bridges, friendship and harmony. However, I also agree with Levine, that if anyone would know about Bedi's tulku, it is likely to be 17th Karmapa and/or Thrangu Rinpoche, and the teachers she was closest to.

Pure View by Bedi

To end on a positive note, I share this beautiful quote from Bedi about the importance of having pure view in Vajrayana (Levine (2017)):

"When one becomes a disciple of Tantra, everything is pure because we have been empowered by the initiation of the lama: our body becomes like a Buddha body, our voice like a Buddha voice, our mind like a Buddha mind. It's not things that change but it is the mind that

changes. The mind is the forerunner of all creative things. This path is so full of beauty that it purifies the body, speech, and mind to the ultimate purity.”

Written, compiled and edited by Adele Tomlin, 20th April 2021. With special thanks to Jerzy and Samten de Wet. Copyright. If shared or re-published please cite the source.

FURTHER READING/BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Towards the Supreme Illumination, Guru Yoga commentary by 16th Karmapa, (1974) tr. Bedi. <http://www.luxlapis.co.za/supreme.htm>

Biographies

[Freda Bedi: The British Woman Who Fought For India's Freedom! \(thebetterindia.com\)](#)

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[The Spiritual Odyssey of Freda Bedi: England, India, Burma, Sikkim & Beyond.](#) Naomi Levine (Shang Shung Editions, 2017)

[The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi](#), Vicki Mackenzie (Shambhala, 2017)

[The Lives of Freda: The Political, Spiritual and Personal Journeys of Freda Bedi](#) Andrew Whitehead (2019)

[South Africa: Cape Town fire damages nearly 200-year-old library | Gallery News | Al Jazeera](#)

ENDNOTES

[i] I am grateful to a devout Polish follower of 16th Karmapa, who first wrote to me about the existence of these texts, and requested I collate all the 16th Karmapa's texts as a project. Without his efforts and insistence, this work would not have happened.

[ii] Title of the text is *Zab lam bla ma'i rnal 'byor dngos grub char 'bebs/* in the in the 3rd Volume, *Collected Works of 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje* (gsung 'bum/ karma pa bcu drug rang byung rig pa'i rdo rje/). Collected Works of 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje; collected and compiled by Tashi Tsering Josayma. 3 volumes; TBRC W8LS18007. Tsurphu Labrang and The Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala. 2016.

[iii] Title of the text is *bLa may rnal 'byor sku bzhi'i myu gu skyed byed bdud rtsi'i char rgyun ces bya ba bzhugs so.* in the 3rd Volume, *Collected Works of 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje* (gsung 'bum/ karma pa bcu drug rang byung rig pa'i rdo rje/). Tashi Tsering Josayma. 3 volumes; TBRC W8LS18007. Tsurphu Labrang and The Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala. 2016.

[iv] A devout Polish follower of 16th Karmapa collated the translation of this Guru Yoga practice and re-produced in a .pdf document.

[\[v\] Tireless Dharma activity despite escalating violence – RADIANT COMPASSION THE LIFE OF THE 16TH GYALWA KARMAPA \(weebly.com\)](#)

[\[vi\]](#) “This Prayer-Puja was written by He who is called His Holiness Rangjung Rikpe Dorje, the Sixteenth Karmapa, at the request of Namgyal Dorje, the late Head of the Bir Settlement in the Kangra Valley in India. It was written in Tibet itself in the eighth month of the Earth Dog Year. This prayer and sadhana was translated in the Dharma Chakra Centre “the Monastery Wreathed in a Thousand Rays of Rainbow Lights” before the beginning of the Retreat of the Rains, in Rumtek, Sikkim, in the year of the Iron Pig, 1971. It is offered in devotion to His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa by his pupils and translators, the Anila Karma Khechog Palmo, the Lama Tengah Rinpoche, Vajra Lobpon of Rumtek, and Ayang Rinpoche of Byelkuppe in Mysore, South India.” From De Wet’s website, [palmo.pdf \(luxlapis.co.za\)](#)

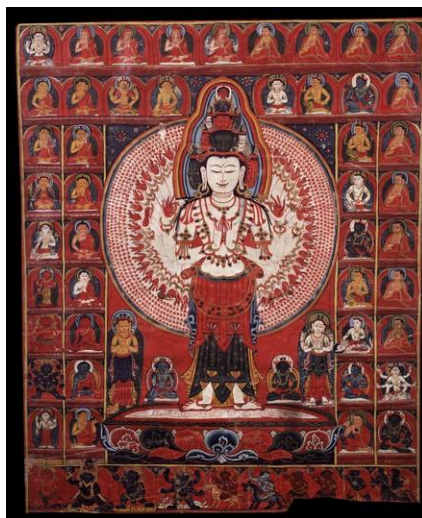
[\[vii\]](#) The Polish follower told me that: “Editor W.Stucky ,few years ago was still alive and said to Gerd Bausch (author of two books devoted to XVI Karmapa) that he remembers only a scene of handing him the text by Sister Palmo and reason/cause of it was Guru Muktananda’s request to 16th Karmapa to contribute something to the newsletter which Karmapa fulfilled. In Buddhist magazines English/Polish the text was printed in two sections. The bottom part (below dotted line) was circulating, but the upper part I saw only once at the beginning of the 80s in one Polish Buddhist newsletter. Impression is that something strange goes on with upper part of the text , easy to notice some resistance of Buddhist editors to make upper part of the text widely accessible for Kagyu followers.”

Chapter Eight: Gelongma Palmo and Nyung Ne

SEEING SICKNESS AND SUFFERING AS POSITIVE: Female Mahasiddha and Lineage Founder, Gelongma Palmo and the 11-faced, 1000-armed Avalokitesvara (Nyung Ne) and teaching by 8th Garchen Rinpoche

14th Jun 2021 [Dākinī Translations](#)

“Generally, speaking samsara is an ocean of suffering, but it is not necessarily a negative thing. Dzogchen Patrul Rinpoche said: ‘I prefer not to be happy, I prefer to suffer. When I suffer, I am purifying my negative karma. Yet, when I am happy the five poisons/afflictive emotions increase.’” —excerpt from teachings on 1000-armed Avalokitesvara by 8th Garchen Rinpoche



50 15th Century Tibetan thangka of 1000-armed Avalokitesvara See: <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/211>

In May 2021, [HE 8th Garchen Rinpoche](#) (1937-) gave a teaching and empowerment on the 11-faced, 1000-armed Avalokitesvara practice from the tradition of the female Mahasiddha, Bhikshuni Lakshmi, known in Tibetan as Gelongma Palmo. In this article, I briefly consider the female lineage and the life of Gelongma Palmo and the iconography of 1000-armed Avalokitesvara and its meaning. This is then followed by a full, transcript of the teachings given by Garchen Rinpoche on the lineage and practice (based on the oral translation of Ina Bieler). The full empowerment and teaching can be viewed [here](#).

Gelongma Palmo Life, Lineage and 1000-armed Avalokitesvara Iconography



51 Image of Gelongma Palmo, female Mahasiddha and lineage founder. See: <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=4225>

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

As I wrote about here before in [*Vajrayogini's instructions on the 'Great Compassionate One': Tsembupa's Lineage*](#), there are five main traditions of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet[i].

The Gelongma Palmo lineage is thus unique and important not only because it is one of the few lineages headed by a woman but also it is the fasting practice, Nyung Ne, is very popular, practiced by all lineages in Tibet. It is a key event in the Tibetan Buddhist ritual year and, in addition to its annual performance during the sixth lunar month, can be undertaken at any time. As Shaw (1994:126] states :

“Unlike some of the other founding mothers, Bhikshuni Lakshmi has attained the stature of a culture hero. She introduced a vastly popular ascetical discipline for lay people that continues to be important for Tibetan Buddhism in all its geographical locations and among followers of all the sects. One cannot live in a Tibetan Buddhist community for very long without hearing about individuals or, more often, large groups undertaking the fasting ritual of Bhikshuni Lakshmi. Works of art depicting her meditating at the feet of Avalokitesvara will be encountered in Tibetan homes and temples. Bhikshuni Lakshmi has is better known than some of the other female founders perhaps because her practice is less esoteric and hence more public and also because she is often put forward as an exemplar when her practice is imparted.”[ii]

The core of the fasting practice is a total fast from food and drink, accompanied by prostrations, prayers, and mantra recitation. The laity may also shave their heads, go barefoot, and avoid leather products. It is a chance for lay people to undergo the rigors of monasticism and for monastics to undergo a period of intensified renunciation. The usual length of the ritual is between two and four days, although consecutive sessions may be undertaken, in some cases for several months. The end of the ritual and return to ordinary life is marked by a feast.”

Textual Sources and lineage

Like other famous male panditas such as Saraha, it is not easy to say whether or not Gelongma Palmo was an historical person, since there is little information in the sources available. As Vargas (2001), one of the few contemporary scholars to write extensively about Gelongma Palmo, points out not only are there few textual sources but it is not clear whether she may have been the Indian siddha Lakshminkara (lineage holder and founder of the severed-head Vajrayogini) and she may also have been Nepalese:

“First, the only textual historical source that establishes the dates for Gelongma Palmo’s possible historical existence in a particular time period is the Blue Annals (1476-1478) which links this nun with Avalokitesvara and with imparting a fasting lineage, and gives details about her impressive lineage of fasting descendants:

“The Degree of propitiating Arya Avalokitesvara by performing the rite of fasting was preached by the Nun Lakshmi (dPal mo) personally blessed by Arya Avalokitesvara. She taught it to the pandita Ye shes bzang po (Jñānabhadra), blessed by her. He to Bal po (the Nepalese) Peñaba, blessed by him. They were all saints (siddhas).... Also there existed a Lineage of the dmar-khrid (detailed exposition) of the Cycle of the Great Merciful One (Mahakaruika). The Nun Lakōmi (dGe-slong ma dPal mo) imparted it to dPal gyi bzang po (Sribhadra). The latter to Rin chen bzang po who imparted it to Atisa.... The Chapter on the Lineage of the system of dPal mo (Lakshmi) of the Cycle of Avalokitesvara.

For example, the hagiographies link Gelongma Palmo with a King Indrabodhi/Indrabhuti, (perhaps one of three figures mentioned in the historian Tāranātha's *The Seven Instruction Lineages*, and possibly one the Indian Mahasiddhas), and a so-called King Dharmapala. Gelongma Palmo, prior to her renunciation, is also referred to as Lakshminikara, and after her healing experience as Vajravarahi, perhaps alluding to some conflation of her identity with one of the Indian Mahasiddhas or other figures.

The Newars refer to her as Candrikanta and as Srimati Bhikshuni, who is believed to have existed in the 10th century. There may also have been two Gelongma Palmos/Bhikshuni Lakshmi-s, one of this tradition, and another who propagated higher anuttarayoga tantras."

Because of her association with key figures in Tibetan Buddhist history like Atisa (?982-?1054), Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po (958-1055)), and others, Gelongma Palmo is placed in the 10th to 11th century.

This possibility that Gelongma Palmo was Nepalese is also mentioned in a teaching on Nyung Ne by Lama Yeshe[[iiii](#)] who mentions a location south of Kathmandu on the way to Pharping with a temple by which is said to be her family home where she lived for many years.

Ivette Vargas is one of the main English-language scholars on the life and practice of Gelongma Palmo. In her PhD study (2003), she states that the three main texts are: Joden Sonam Zangpo (Jo gdan Bsod nams bzang po)'s (1341-1433) *The Sacred Biography of the Lineage Gurus of the State of Fasting*; O Pag Dorje ('Od dpag rdo rje)'s (?late 14th-?15th century), *The Sacred Biography of Gelongma Palmo*, and Drugpa Lama Rabten ('Brug pa Bla ma Rab brtan)'s modern text, *The Liberation Story of Gelongma Palmo: A Religious Discourse for Generating Renunciation in the Mind Stream* (pub. 1953). It is interesting that a Joden text is cited, as I have written here before, the Joden communities of monastics were also very influential on the Karmapas and Karma Kamtsang in the practice of one-day fasting and vegetarianism, see here.

Vargas (2001:158) says:

"The stories of Gelongma Palmo's life are diverse but there is a thread in both oral and written versions that holds them together, that is, the descriptions of a woman whose fortitude healed her from a devastating illness and propelled her to become the founder of a lineage of fasting (smyung gnas "nyungnay") revealed by her tutelary deity Avalokitesvara. As texts, the stories are part of a larger corpus according to the Gelongma Palmo system. Western scholarship has, for the most part taken notice of the impact of this corpus of material in Tibetan culture, focusing mostly on the significance of the fasting ritual and limited oral versions of Gelongma Palmo's life extracted from present-day Tibetan communities. This has generated useful sociological and religious insights.

What is unique about this study is a focused attention on what has been neglected about the life of the figure behind such an influential fasting ritual: specifically, Gelongma Palmo's illness experience as a graphic example of Buddhist teachings on suffering and renunciation and how this contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of the fasting ritual in these texts."

For more on the Gelongma Palmo sources and life it is worth reading Vargas' work in detail. Shaw (1994: 126-130) has also written a brief section about her (see Bibliography below).

Princess, to abbess of a monastery, to kicked out for leprosy



52 Bhikshuni Lakshmi/Gelongma Palmo – female mahasiddha and lineage founder

Bhikshuni Lakshmi/Gelongma Palmo – female Mahasiddha and lineage founder

Shaw (1994:) gives a summary of the earlier part of her life in which she succeeded in becoming a highly-skilled debater and the abbess of a monastery, only to then be kicked out by the monks there when she contracted leprosy:

“Brilliant scholar-abbess, kicked out by monks after contracting leprosy Bhikshuni Lakshmi (Tib. dGe-slong-ma dPal-mo), a Kashmiri princess of the late tenth or eleventh century, forged this widespread fasting practice out of her experiences of life-threatening illness, devastating rejection by her religious community, and healing hierophany. Young Lakshmi was endowed with a sensitive and sympathetic temperament, and when she discovered that animals--such as lambs, of which she was particularly fond--are slaughtered for food, she was so horrified that she resolved to cut her ties with worldly life. Overcoming the opposition of her parents, the princess became a fully ordained nun (bhikshuni) and then apprenticed herself to a Tantric guru. Lakshmi became extremely skilled at logical debate, so her guru ordered her to debate the leading philosophers and Tantric scholars of the day. When she defeated one after another, Lakshmi was installed as abbess of a monastery and held this position for many years, until she contracted leprosy. The monks then drove her out and ruthlessly abandoned their abbess to die in the forest--according to one version of the story because they suspected her of having a miscarriage.”

Dreams and twelve years practice of Avalokitesvara – healed from sickness

The 8th Garchen Rinpoche describes her meeting with Avalokitesvara and bestowal of the 1000-armed fasting practice on her thus:

“Indivisible from the essence of Vajrayogini, Gelongma Palmo was the daughter of the King of Oddiyana. At a young age, she contracted leprosy. Once she had a dream in which she received a prophesy to travel to the Kasaparni jungle. She asked her father for permission and he sent her off. When she arrived there she came to a temple that was housing a Avalokitesvara statue, although the gatekeeper didn’t allow her to enter, the Avalokitesvara statue told her to stay outside the temple. One night she dreamt of a young boy that was actually her father. He told her that her principal deity is Avalokitesvara and that she should travel to the East to find a monk who was the emanation of Avalokitesvara, to receive his instructions on the practice of

Avalokitesvara. The boy said if she devoted herself to the practice of Avalokitesvara for twelve years her illness would be cured, that she would attain the supreme siddhi and become the chief Dākinī of Oddiyana.”



“When she practiced Avalokitesvara at first, her sickness and pain increased. After eleven years, blood and pus were streaming from her mouth, nose and she couldn’t move her body any longer, nevertheless she persevered in practice. One night she dreamed of many Oddiyana dakinis who told her not to stay here and go to Kasaparni and practice there. They said she would become Vajrayogini for most of the other dakinis. Gelongma Palmo replied she would not be able to go there as she could not move her body any longer. In her sleep, the dakinis miraculously carried her off. When she awoke she found herself in Kasarparni. There she practiced Avalokitesvara for twelve years and progressively healed from her illness.

Eventually she began to see other various deities. Once she supplicated Avalokitesvara and a bright light appeared. She wondered what that might be and then she beheld the 1000 arm, 1000 eyed, 1000 armed Avalokitesvara. She said I have been practicing you for many years. Waiting for you to appear and only now can I see you, you surely have little compassion for me. Avalokitesvara replied, I have been with you from the very beginning, from the time you started praying to me but due to your obscurations you were unable to see me. He showed her his robes which were stained with all her blood and pus of many years, after that she gave rise to trust and finally attained the ultimate siddhi.”



Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

Shaw (1994:128) then says that Gelongma Palmo, despite initial aversion, eventually returned to the monastery where they had treated her so badly, and passed on the practice to the monks there:

“As the culmination of her visionary journey, the bodhisattva of compassion revealed a fasting practice to her and instructed her to teach it to everyone—including lay people as a powerful method of merit-accumulation and purification. Meanwhile, the abbess’s personal attendant assumed that she had died in the forest and came looking for her bones. Bhikshuni Lakshmi emerged from the cave fully restored to health and reported all that had happened. The attendant advised that they should return to the monastery and impart the fasting practice to the monks. Still upset about her treatment there, she retorted, “That monastery? I wouldn’t even go there to pee!” Compassion prevailed, however, and the two women went to the monastery and taught the newly revealed practice, which was accepted by those who still felt devotion to their abbess and rejected by those who had turned against her. The two women then set out traveling and taught the newly revealed fasting practice in India and Tibet.”

Taking a consort and severing her head for her father/King

8th Garchen Rinpoche explains that Gelongma Palmo then took a male siddha as a consort and to appease her father’s doubts about that, severed her head to demonstrate her spiritual powers:

“To uphold the siddha’s lineage, she took the siddha, Patsangpa [not sure who this is] as her consort. This was very upsetting to her father the King, who developed many doubts. To dispel his doubts, she severed her own head and casting it into the sky, she said: “If I have broken any vows then my head shall not return, otherwise it shall. And so it did. Her head returned to her neck like before. Thus, she became known as the Vajravarahi with the severed-head.

Avalokitesvara revealed to her the ascetic fasting practice of the 1000-arm Avalokitesvara and this is where the tradition of the Nyung Ne comes from and told her that one who engages in the practice for just a single time will purify all negativities and obscurations accumulated in 84 000 kalpas.”

Gelongma Palmo composed a *Praise to Great Compassionate One*, which has been translated into English and can be downloaded from the Garchen Institute website, [here](#). Jetsun Tāranātha also composed a short sadhana of the Gelongma Palmo practice (phags pa spyen ras gzigs bcu gcig zhal dpal mo lugs kyi sgrub thabs/.” In yi dam rgya mtsho’i sgrub thabs rin chen ‘byung gnas/ TBRC W12422). I hope to translate this and publish in the future.

Vargas (2001) concludes:

“Uncertainty about the identity and historical existence of Gelongma Palmo has not detracted from her historical relevance as a symbol since her stories have provided a model and illustrated a doctrine throughout a long historical period. Examples of this are explicitly seen in present-day Buddhist female renunciants’ tendency in Tibetan Buddhist communities to be the holders of her ritual tradition. Their nunneries are places for the retelling of her stories. And as the compiler of the modern text and contemporary evidence from Nepal and Tibet show, sufferers of severe illnesses like leprosy have sought solace through the printing and transmission of her story, practicing her ritual, or visiting a temple associated with Gelongma Palmo.”

1000-armed, 1000-eyed Avalokitesvara Iconography



53 In terms of the depiction of this form of Avalokitesvara, images speak louder than words as they say. There are a number of different forms and traditions of the Eleven-faced Lokeshvara, who can be seated or standing.

8th Garchen Rinpoche says that:

“One outer representation of the deity is 1000-arm and 1000-eyed Avalokitesvara. This is the Sambhogakaya that arises from the Dharmakaya. From the expanse of the Dharmakaya from which arises limitless forms of Sambhogakaya with different appearances to benefit sentient beings. That is what the image of a thousand arms and thousand eyes represent, it is the limitless appearances to benefit sentient beings. It is symbolic of these inconceivable activities.”

Shaw (1994: 130):

“The form in which Avalokitesvara appeared to the Kashmiri abbess is one of the most widely depicted of Tibetan Buddhist icons. As a tremendously beloved deity and major focus of religious aspiration, this form of Avalokitesvara is often encountered in Tibetan scroll paintings, statuary, and temple frescoes. He can be recognized by his eleven heads, thousand arms, and identifying attributes in his eight major hands: a rosary, Dharma-wheel, and gesture of giving (varada-mudra) in his right hands; a golden lotus, bow and arrow, and initiation vessel in his left hands; and a pair of hands in afajal-mudra cupping the wish granting gem of enlightenment at his heart. The colours of the heads, the hand positions and implements, and the significance of the hand attributes are described in her meditation manual and other writings.”

Generally, the deity is male, although as Shaw (1994) points out there is an original textual source, *Praise to the Great Compassionate One*, that describes the deity as a female too^[iv]. Gelongma Palmo describes the visualization/image of the deity in sources^[v] and there is also a form called the “Eleven-Headed Avalokitesvara according to (Bhikshuni) Lakshmi’s system” (sPyan-ras-gzigs bcu-gcig-zhal dpal-mo-lugs). This form, with four subsidiary figures is found in Sakya Ngor pantheon of deities.^[vi]



54 Thangka image by Carmen Mensink. <https://www.tibetan-buddhist-art.com/1000-armed-chenrezig-avalokiteshvara-by-carmen-mensink/>

In [this video](#), thangka artist, Carmen Mensink explains the iconography and symbolism of the 1000-armed and eyed Avalokitesvara.

According to [Himalayan Art Resources](#):

“At one time the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara made a promise that should he give rise to thoughts of self-benefit may the head break into 10 pieces and the body into 1000. After continuously witnessing the misery of beings in various states of existence, discouraged, he gave rise to thoughts of seeking only his own happiness. At that very instant the head and body shattered. Calling out to Amitabha, the Buddha came forth and spoke words of encouragement. Gathering up the 10 pieces of the head Amitabha constructed 10 faces – representing the 10 perfections. Gathering the 1000 pieces of the body he constructed another with 1000 hands each with an eye on the palm – representing the 1000 buddhas of the Golden Eon. Finally he placed a duplicate of his own head at the crown – illuminating the entire threefold universe. This story is found in the apocryphal Tibetan text called the Mani Kabum. In that text it also describes how Tara appears from a tear drop coming from Avalokiteshvara’s right eye and the goddess Bhrikuti appears from a tear drop of the left eye. Both Tara and Brikuti are manifesting, like the other enlightened figures, to assist Avalokiteshvara on the path of benefiting all beings and reaching enlightenment. Some modern tellings of the story name the two goddesses as Green Tara and White Tara.”

TRANSCRIPT : Teachings by 8th Garchen Rinpoche on 1000-armed Avalokiteshvara (May 2021)

“The Dharmakaya, Buddha and love and compassion

Who is Buddha? We tend to think he is so precious and yet so far away from us. We speak about a Buddha appearing every aeon and kalpa and infinite Buddhas appearing in those aeons and kalpas. We think of them being so far away from us. On one hand, there was an outer Buddha who appeared, There was a Buddha who appeared and attained merit for three endless eons and then attained enlightenment. What does that mean? It means Bodhicitta, the Buddha arises from bodhicitta. Buddhas arise from and through sentient beings, and so sentient beings arise from

Buddhas. Milarepa said that from the state of non-conceptuality arises the Dharmakaya and also it is said elsewhere that within the expanse of primordial wisdom all the Buddhas are one. The Dharmakaya is the space-like nature of mind. Buddha and everything, in the end, dissolve back into that open expanse, the space, the Dharmakaya. So when one attains enlightenment, one dissolves into the space of Dharmakaya. One does not just go out of existence. One becomes a Buddha, Vajradhara, and thus one continues to remain. So from non-conceptuality arises the Dharmakaya.

Then, from bliss arises the Sambhogakaya. The non-conceptual mind is indeed a very blissful state. When we practice Mahamudra and other similar practices, we experience great bliss within our minds. From great bliss, Milarepa said, the Sambhogakaya arises. So all of us who practice these things such as Mahamudra, we know about these meditative experiences that arise. There are basically three. The experience of bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality, or non-thought. From this non thought, arises the realization of the Dharmakaya. The non-conceptual state is the thought-free mind. The thought-free mind is blissful and from that bliss arises the Sambhogakaya. Bliss, the sambhogakaya, is also connected to love. All the deities arise really from a mind of love and compassion.

When we speak about nature of mind, how I explain it, is the Buddha said all beings are Buddhas, but although their mind is Buddha they have not recognized that. So, even though all sentient beings are Buddhas, their mind is like an ice block, but that ice is actually water. We need to understand that point. It is the concept of a self and a perception of me that leads to a perception of self and other. A dualistic existence. So ice has arisen from water because the weather/external circumstances got very cold. If you want to melt the ice, you need heat. The heat and warmth [that melts the self and other] in the mind is love and compassion. That is where all Buddhas come from; that is really Buddha. That is why we say that at the beginning, the Buddha gave rise to bodhicitta, and then after that he attained enlightenment.

Buddhas arise from love and compassion. Bodhicitta is love and compassion and that is where Buddhas arise from. That is the essence of the deity. Which deity is the very embodiment essence of bodhicitta? It is Noble Avalokitesvara. For that reason, it is also said that he is the father of all the deities. That is how I put it in simple terms, for those like myself who do not have much learning. There is no way to attain enlightenment without love or compassion. This is the indispensable ingredient for enlightenment. As Avalokitesvara is the embodiment of love and compassion, he is the father of all the deities.

One outer representation of the deity is 1000-armed and 1000-eyed Avalokitesvara. This is the Sambhogakaya that arises from the Dharmakaya. From the expanse of the Dharmakaya arise limitless forms of Sambhogakaya with different appearances to benefit sentient beings. That is what the image of a thousand arms and thousand eyes represent; the limitless appearances to benefit sentient beings. It is symbolic of these inconceivable activities.

In Vajrayana secret mantra this is a skilful method to introduce. This is the empowerment we will get today, the 1000-armed Avalokitesvara. We are indeed very fortunate.

Seeing sickness and suffering as positive

Generally, speaking samsara is an ocean of suffering, but it is not necessarily a negative thing. Dzogchen Patrul Rinpoche said: 'I prefer not to be happy, I prefer to suffer. When I suffer, I am purifying my negative karma. Yet, when I am happy the five poisons/afflictive emotions increase.' So from a Buddhist perspective, suffering has many good qualities. In Buddhism, we are given a method to transform suffering into happiness. If we are not able to do that, then we will even turn happiness into suffering. Basically, one cancels the other out, if there is suffering there is no happiness, and if there is

happiness there is no suffering. So there is a way to find happiness though suffering, or to find suffering even through happiness. The Buddhist way is to transform suffering into happiness.

The next part is the story of Gelongma Palmo, who experienced a lot of suffering, who practiced the deity Avalokitesvara and who actually is a nirmanakaya who appeared in the human world, to whom the sambhogakaya, Avalokitesvara directly appeared. Through this story we can understand that suffering is actually not a negative thing, since it purifies our negative karma and obscurations. Also, Jigme Lingpa said that suffering is like a stepping stone in our Dharma practice. Lord Jigten Sumgon also had the same sickness, leprosy, as Gelong Palmo, and he finally accepted it, and through acceptance, he ultimately attained enlightenment.

There are so many individuals who have attained enlightenment through suffering because basically the greater the suffering is, the more the self-clinging becomes eliminated/dissolves. And self—grasping is what is suffering by nature. An intelligent person would recognize that and see that samsara is suffering. The source of that suffering is the self and such a person will be able to identify the self and the self-clinging within themselves and through that ultimately they can release suffering and realize selflessness. Gelongma Palmo was such a practitioner who became completely liberated from her misery; who attained the rainbow body of Vajrayogini. She was a nirmanakaya who came in this world to benefit beings, to give us this method to transform suffering into happiness.

History of Gelongma Palmo and the 1000-armed Avalokitesvara practice

Indivisible from the essence of Vajrayogini, Gelongma Palmo was the daughter of the King of Oddiyana. At a young age, she contracted leprosy. Once she had a dream in which she received a prophecy to travel to the Kasaparni jungle. She asked her father for permission and he sent her off. When she arrived there she came to a temple that was housing a Avalokitesvara statue, although the gatekeeper didn't allow her to enter, the Avalokitesvara statue told her to stay outside the temple. One night she dreamt of a young boy that was actually her father. He told her that her principal deity is Avalokitesvara and that she should travel to the East to find a monk who was the emanation of Avalokitesvara, to receive his instructions on the practice of Avalokitesvara. The boy said if she devoted herself to the practice of Avalokitesvara for 12 years her illness would be cured, that she would attain the supreme siddhi and become the chief Ḍākinī of Oddiyana. When she practiced Avalokitesvara at first, her sickness and pain increased. After 11 years, blood and pus were streaming from her mouth, nose and she couldn't move her body any longer, nevertheless she persevered in practice. One night she dreamed of many Oddiyana dakinis who told her not to stay here and go to Kasaparni and practice there. They said she would become Vajrayogini for most of the other dakinis. Gelongma Palmo replied she would not be able to go there as she could not move her body any longer. In her sleep, the dakinis miraculously carried her off, when she awoke she found herself in Kasaparni. There she practiced Avalokitesvara for 12 years and progressively healed from her illness.

Eventually she began to see other various deities. Once she supplicated Avalokitesvara and a bright light appeared. She wondered what that might be and then she beheld the 1000-eyed, 1000 armed Avalokitesvara. She said: 'I have been practicing you for many years. Waiting for you to appear and only now can I see you, you surely have little compassion for me'. Avalokitesvara replied: 'I have been with you from the very beginning, from the time you started praying to me but due to your obscurations you were unable to see me'. He showed her his robes which were stained with all her blood and pus of many years, after that she generated trust and finally attained the ultimate siddhi.

To uphold the siddha's lineage, she took the siddha, Patsangpa as her consort. This was very upsetting to her father the King, who developed many doubts. To dispel his doubts, she severed her own head

and casting it into the sky, said: “If I have broken any vows then my head shall not return, otherwise it shall. And so it did. Her head returned to her neck like before. Thus she became known as the Vajravarahi with the severed-head.

Avalokitesvara revealed to her the ascetic fasting practice of the 1000-arm Avalokitesvara and this is where the tradition of the Nyung Ne comes from. He told her that one who engages in the practice for just a single time will purify all negativities and obscurations accumulated in 84 000 kalpas. [Then Garchen Rinpoche read the names of all the lineage gurus and that he had received the empowerment from the Mahasiddha, Jigme Dorje).

Difference between Nyung Ne and Nying Ne

What is the difference between the *Nyung Ne* and the *Nying Ne*? So *Nyung* is an honorific for ‘sickness’. Gelongma Palmo was very sick so that she could not even eat any more. It was at that time of hardship that she practiced. That’s where the term *Nyung Ne* comes from. *Nyung* means ‘sick’ and *Ne* means ‘to abide’ or ‘to stay’. She stayed with her sickness. Basically it means a practice that causes discomfort. *Nying Ne* is a lighter practice that causes lighter discomfort. So the *Nying Ne* we have to remain silent but we can eat lunch but nothing after midday. There is less of a hardship. That’s the difference between the *Nying ne* and the *Nyung ne*. it’s good for you to hear the history. Many of you might already know it and many may not. I wanted to make that clear.

The empowerment purpose of body, speech and mind, is to purify the karmic defilements and imprints on our body, speech and mind. So what is an imprint and how is it placed in our mind? First, imprints are placed in our own mind. The imprint ultimately is seeing a self, a me. Mind is actually like empty space, so an imprint is beginning to see an entity that is a self in empty space that does not exist. Forming imprints is like taking pictures, or filming it on a camera and storing it on the camera roll. That is where it stays, stored on the camera roll. So whatever imprints, or habitual patterns, we are accustomed to, the three poisons, the various afflictions, each of these actions is like taking a picture that is stored in the mind. Then, in future lifetimes, over and over again, the film that we have filmed ourselves becomes projected to us as our experience. Therefore, it is not someone else that is doing something for us or creating our karmas, we are naturally doing it to ourselves. Whatever imprint we put in our mind becomes projected back to us as our experience. In this way, we wander in the six realms of samsara. Until all karma has come to an end. When Karma has come to an end, then there is still Buddha nature, then we realize that we have never been separate from Buddha, that’s why the Buddha said himself that sentient beings are actual Buddhas. Thus, in brief, it’s important that we purify the mind.”

Written, compiled and transcribed by Adele Tomlin, 14th June 2021.

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Endnotes

[i] 1. Bikkshuni Palmo (dpal mo) from the nun, Palmo. This is the one practiced in the Nyungne. According to the *Blue Annals*, Lakshmi (dge slong ma dpalmo) imparted it to Śrībhadrā (dpal gyi bzang po). The latter to Ratnabhadrā (rinchen bzang po), who imparted it to Atiśa [iv].

2. [Kyergangpa](#) tradition from Atisha, Dimpamkara, he taught this to Geshe Lhatshorwa who passed it to Kyergangpa. He received the complete Avalokiteśvara teachings from a great practitioner of Avalokiteśvara, Pakpa Chegom. Through practicing in solitary retreat for four and half years Kyergangpa received a vision of Avalokiteśvara.
3. Dawa Gyaltsen, a great Dzogchen siddha who appeared in Tibet who saw Avalokiteśvara face to face in a pure vision and received instructions, which he then passed on in a lineage from master to disciple. This is called the Dagyal tradition.
4. Mitra from Mitra Yogi (mi tra dzo gi). A siddha from India who received teachings from Avalokiteśvara who appeared to him. The transmission of his "Six Vajra Yogas" is still alive and can be found in Volume 16 (Ma) of the gdams ngag mdzod of Jamgön Kongtrül ('jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899). Mitra then gave it to the great translator, Thropu (khro phu brgya rtsa), this tradition is called the Mitra tradition.
5. Tsembupa from 13th Century Mahasiddha Tsembupa (tshems bu pa), who got the instructions directly from Vajrayogini.

See: <https://dakinitranslations.wordpress.com/2020/10/12/vajrayoginis-instructions-on-great-compassionate-avalokitesvara-tsembupas-lineage/>

[ii] Shaw (1994:) also cites how important the ritual still is for the Sherpa community in Nepal and the Himalayan regions.

[iii] "However, I think Bhikshuni Lakshmi might have been Nepalese. In the Kathmandu valley, just to the south of Kathmandu on the way to Pharping, the holy place of Padmasambhava and Vajrayogini, after you cross the mountain that is said to be the one that Manjushri cut with his sword, there is a high mountain, with a long set of steps going up from the main road to the top. There you find a temple with a red Avalokitesvara inside, and outside the temple, on the walls of the surrounding buildings, are a lot of empty pots that people have offered, though I'm not sure why. There must be a reason, but I haven't heard the explanation of its purpose. Basically, it must be to pacify some obstacles or to fulfil some wishes. It must be for happiness—otherwise, why would people do it? At one side of the temple, there's also a house with a large, roofed platform in front of it, like a kind of seat. It is said that it was

Bhikshuni Lakshmi's family home and she lived in that house nearly a thousand years ago. (I'm not sure that she practiced there, because in the later part of her life she lived in a cave and did much recitation of OM MANI PADME HUM.) So, this is why I think Bhikshuni Lakshmi might have been Nepalese." See: <https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/chapter/chapter-3-bhikshuni-lakshmi>.

[iv] r]e btsun thugs rje chenpo In bstod pa, sDe-dge 2740, fol.127b.1-2: zla ba'l 'od ltar rgyal ba'i yum l gzugs kyi lllli mo yid 'od sku/ ... /rang bzhin mi dmigs stong pa'i ngang l bud med gzugs kyis 'gro ba 'dul.

[v] The visualization manual is *The Sadhana of the Eleven-faced Noble Chenrezig* (r]e btsun 'phags pa spyen ras gzigs dbang phyug zhal bcu gcig pa'i sgrub thabs), sDe-dge 2737; the heads and hands are described on fol. 124b.6-125a.3. She interprets the hand implements and gestures in 'Phags pa spyen ras gzigs dbang phyug gi bstod pa, sDe-dge 2739, fol. 126b.1-2.

[vi] As Shaw(1994) points out: " This form, with four subsidiary figures, can be found in the Sakya Ngor (Sa-skya Ngor) pantheon of the *Gyude Kuntu* (rGyud sde kun btus), compiled in the nineteenth century; see bSod nams rgya mtsho and Musashi Tachikawa, *The Ngor Mandalas of Tibet: Plates*, p. xx and plate 135. It also occurs in the nineteenth-century sNar-thang pantheon, or "sNar-thang Five Hundred"; see Lokesh Chandra, *Buddhist Iconography*, no. 614."

Chapter Nine: Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

'I DON'T EAT MY FRIENDS': 78th birthday offering to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, meditator, teacher and nunnery founder, on eating animals

[2nd Jul 2021 Dākinī Translations](#)

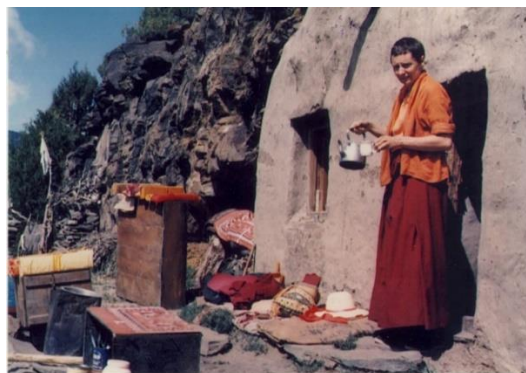
'Animals are my friends, and I don't eat my friends'—George Bernard Shaw

'In Tibetan Buddhism, where we are taught that all beings have been our mothers, if you really believe what you're saying, then how can you sit down and eat your mother?' — Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

For the 78th birthday of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo [celebrated yesterday, see photos [here](#)], as well as for the section on this website on [Buddhism and vegetarianism](#), I offer this edited transcript of a short teaching she gave on eating animals as food in Buddhism (see video below).

Jetsunma is one of the most inspiring [and well-known] female teachers and practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism alive today. Her life-story, as Diane Perry, the daughter of a fishmonger from London's East End, who spent 12 years alone in a cave 13,000 feet up in the Himalayas and became one of the first western ordained nuns in Tibetan Buddhism, a world-renowned spiritual leader and champion of the right of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment can be read in Vicki Mackenzie's inspiring biography about her, *Cave in the Snow: A Western Woman's Quest for Enlightenment* (1999) and in an online biography [here](#).

"On her 21st birthday in June 1964, the school had a special guest: His Eminence the 8th Khamtrul Rinpoche, a great Drukpa Kagyu lama. Diane recognised him immediately as her Guru and asked him if she could become a Nun. Aged 21, only 3 months after arriving in India, the newly named *Drubgyu Tenzin Palmo* became one of the first Westerners to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monastic. In 1967 she received the *sramanerika* ordination at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim from H.H. the 16th Karmapa."



55 Tenzin Palmo outside the cave where she meditated for 12 years

She is also the author of other books on Buddhist Philosophy and Practice, such as *Reflections on a Mountain Lake: Teachings on Practical Buddhism* (2002). There is also a free video film of her life and teachings [here](#). As she says in it, 'what is perfection? Many people are good and kind but that is not perfection.'

In addition, Jetsunma has been one of the most vocal and public advocates of gender empowerment and equality for nuns and women in Tibetan Buddhism. Her direct questions to the [14th Dalai Lama on](#)

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

[this topic](#) are evidence of that, as is her founding of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, Dongyal Gatsal Ling, near Palampur in Himachal Pradesh, India [which has one of the most stunning temples to Tara and female deities I have ever seen!]. She is a woman who practices what she preaches and demonstrates courage and integrity when push comes to shove, as we say in English!

In her short interview here on eating animals, Jetsunma mentions that some great lamas ate meat, however, as the [17th Karmapa also taught recently here](#), and in the work of scholar Geoffrey Barstow, there were also many great Tibetan masters who did not eat slaughtered animals and forbid their followers from doing so too, such as Jonang Kunkhyen Dolpopa, Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo and 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje. So one could say there was no excuse for eating animals even in Tibet.

In this degenerate era, as yet more sex scandals, hypocrisy and misconduct from male lamas to female followers surfaces, it is refreshing and healthy to see women such as Jetsunma taking a leading role as a teacher and advocate, not only of women, but also in not eating animals. Rather than focus only on what we dislike or not beneficial, it is good to promote what is beneficial and worthy of emulation and admiration. I hope this post achieves that, and inspires others to boycott sexism, misogyny, and unnecessary cruelty to animals, and follow and support female teachers, translators, practitioners and so on, bringing in a new era for Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayana, with women doing it for themselves, at the forefront as full participants!



56 Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo on her 78th birthday yesterday in the nunnery she founded in India.

In the final section of the interview, she says: “The point with vegetarianism is that in this modern day and age, where food is so easily obtained, there doesn’t seem to me to be too many excuses to eat any kind of food which has caused pain to another being. It doesn’t seem to fit in with our whole idea on compassion or bodhicitta. Does it?”

No, it doesn’t fit with that, Jetsunma la. Thank you for saying that and for being a living, breathing example of inspiration and integrity to girls, women, nuns and men. Thank you for asking those ‘difficult questions’ and not shying away from telling the truth on topics that some are not willing to look at. May your life be long and your activities flourish!

Musical theme? [Sisters are doing it for themselves](#), rock on beautiful, laughing, dancing queens! 😊

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 2nd July 2021.

'I DON'T EAT MY FRIENDS' INTERVIEW OF JETSUNMA TENZIN PALMO

TRANSCRIPT

Q: What's the reason you became vegetarian?

A: Because of the idea in the quote of George Bernard-Shaw, "animals are my friends and I don't eat my friends." Basically, the idea that just as I wouldn't like it for someone to kill and eat me, I don't think any being wants to be slaughtered and eaten, especially considering the manner in which animals are killed in this day and age, and the terror and trauma that they go through in the process. How can we sit down and eat them? Of course, in Tibetan Buddhism, where we are taught that all beings have been our mothers, if you really believe what you're saying, then how can you sit down and eat your mother?

Q: Do you think it's controversial within Tibetan Buddhism eating meat?

A: Oh, it's extraordinarily hypocritical, that's for sure. In Tibet, they had an excuse insofar as it was a very high altitude climate there, and there really wasn't much growing. Especially for the nomads, it would be very difficult to cultivate vegetation, so the only thing which was available to be eaten was the barley flour, the tsampa, the meat, and products from the milk, from the dri and yak. However, Tibetans have been living for fifty years now, in exile in India and Nepal, and both those countries are primarily vegetarian. They have plenty of vegetables, they have plenty of protein in their lentils and their dal, and in their milk products and there's simply no excuse anymore. In fact, the lamas themselves and ordinary people, know that by eating so much red meat they are getting diabetes, high blood pressure, heart problems, stomach cancer, and a lot of arthritis. They know now but they say 'oh yes, this is because I eat the wrong kind of diet, but I can't give it up'. It also seems that for health reasons, only Tibetan Buddhist lamas need to eat meat, sometimes they eat meat and they say yes it's because my doctor advised, it's always for my health, but it's not like that in other traditions.

Q. Without being personal etc. , what does all this mean?

A. The point is Tibetans have it very strongly in their mind that if they go without meat for one meal, they feel weak and so in the next meal, they have to make it up by double the quantity. It's cultural, but it's a bit naughty, because they say 'oh well you know we were brought up eating meat'. Now, that doesn't necessarily have to be true, because most of the Tibetans in India and Nepal were brought up in India, not in Tibet, but also we Westerners were also often brought up eating meat. In an English breakfast you get bacon and sausages for breakfast. The main meal is centered around the meat, and also in the evening again, it's all meat. If you take away the meat, all you've got is potatoes and squishy vegetables. There's nothing left, the whole point of the meal is the meat. We were not brought up with vegetarians either, but as soon as we realize that what we are eating was actually a living being, who wanted its life, and didn't want to be killed, and was probably reared in the most ghastly of conditions before dying a very painful and traumatic death, how can one subscribe to that? And, in that way, approve of that torture for millions of animals by eating them?

Q: Did the Buddha forbid eating meat?

No, the Buddha did not forbid eating meat altogether, but the point is that the time of the Buddha, he and his monks were all going on alms rounds begging. They were supposed to have food without any discrimination. They couldn't say to the laypeople: 'look I don't need this and I'm not eating that', they ate whatever was given them without discrimination.

For example, in the Sutras, there is the description of a leper offering a meal to one of the monks, and one of his fingers fell into the bowl and the monk ate it, because he was non-discriminating on alms.

So, the rule was made that if you [a monastic] didn't kill the animal yourself, or you didn't request it to be killed for you, and/or you are not aware that it was killed on your behalf, then karmically you are pure, as you were just wandering around through the villages, collecting whatever people happen to want to put in your begging bowl.

However, in a situation where you are actually in charge of what you can eat, and you go into butcher shops and buy meat, then, in a way, the very fact that you're buying it says that you are subscribing to the whole culture that rears animals to be killed for consumption. People only raise and kill these animals because other people buy the meat. If we didn't buy it, that particular industry would die out.

Nowadays, it is noticeable that in India the first Tibetans to become vegetarians were usually the nuns and the nunneries. Then, more recently, some of the very large monasteries in south India have gone vegetarian, at least within the monastery. I'm not saying that is what the monks eat when they go out. Yet, as a result, it means if there is a monastery with say eight thousand monks, how many animals would have been killed, especially for New Year celebrations and special occasions, who now are no longer slaughtered for the sake of the monastery? It's an enormous difference.

There is also a [Tibetan] youth organization who campaign against meat-eating, who have horrific documentaries of what actually happens, especially in the West, to animals. On how they are actually reared, and the dreadful conditions they're reared in. As well as, how the animals are actually slaughtered and their fear and terror. These films are shown when there are big gatherings of Tibetans for any special functions. They show these DVD films and it does have an effect on the people, because often people just haven't thought about it. When they think about it, then they can say 'Oh!'.

Of course, certain high Lamas themselves are vegetarian. HH Gyalwang Drugpa Kagyu, head of my tradition, and HH Gyalwang Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu tradition are now both vegetarian, and they encourage people that even if they cannot become completely vegetarian, at least they should eat less meat and they should only try to eat it at a certain meal in the day, or certain days of the week, or at least they should be able to cut down on it.

Some of the most carnivorous lamas I ever knew nonetheless radiated an aura of tremendous purity, and I'm a vegetarian. I'm not defending meat-eating but while I think it would be wonderful for all the beings on earth if people would stop eating them, I don't think it has anything to do with getting enlightened. [Why?] Because many of the greatest enlightened beings ate meat. The point with vegetarianism is that in this modern day and age, where food is so easily obtained, there doesn't seem to me to be too many excuses to eat any kind of food which has caused pain to another being. It doesn't seem to fit in with our whole idea on compassion or bodhicitta. Does it?"

Chapter Ten: Jomo Menmo

Part VI Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo: ‘Gathering of all the Ḍākinī’s Secrets’ (Khandro Sangdu), the empowerment ‘Gathering of Vārāhīs’ and the ‘Lady Demoness’ female terton, Jomo Menmo

[17th Feb 2020 Ḍākinī Translations](#)

For Ḍākinī’ day today, my sixth short instalment on the Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo transmissions in January 2020 given by HE Schechen Rabjam Rinpoche, is about the ‘*Gathering of Vārāhīs*’ empowerment (given on the 11th day of the event) from a Tibetan text revealed by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (and a female treasure-revealer, Jomo Menmo) called the ‘*Gathering of all the Ḍākinī’s Secrets*’ (Khandro Sangwa Kundu). First, I will write a little about that text itself and its origin. The photos below are from the empowerment this year.



57 Torma for Gathering of Varahis empowerment, by Schechen Rabjam Rinpoche, January 2020.



The ‘Lady demoness’, Jomo Menmo



58 Jomo Menmo, female treasure-revealer of ‘Gathered Secrets of the Dakinis’

The [lifestory of Ayu Khandro](#) (Tsewang Dorje Paldrön 1839-1953) refers to the teachings of *Gathering of all the Dākinī’s Secrets*, or its abbreviated form Khadro Sangdu (mKha’ ‘gro gSang ‘dus), declared to be a mind-treasure (dgong gter) of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and is explained to be the teaching given to female master, Jomo Menmo (1248–83) by Vajravarahi (Dorje Phagmo) herself in the cave of Padmasambhava. This text was lost and in the nineteenth century [Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo](#) claimed to rediscover Jomo Menmo’s treasures, based on his identification as the reincarnation of Guru Chowang (her former teacher and spiritual consort). Jamgon Kongtrul thus included the *Gathering of all the Dākinī’s Secrets* in the *Rinchen Terdzod* (*rin chen gter mdzod*), for which he composed his hagiography of her. It is a series of teachings on Vajravarahi associated with the four actions or Trinley (‘phrin las): pacifying, enriching, subjugating, and wrathful.

Jomo Menmo Pema Tsokyi (Jom-mo sMan-mo Padma mTsho-sKyid) was born in the Earth Male monkey year (1248 CE) and passed into the sky-dimension in 1283 CE. Yeshe Tsogyel is reported to have said about her: “An activity emanation of my speech will appear in Tsang and she will be known as Jomo Menmo.” The story of how Jomo Menmo got her name the Lady Demoness and was given the teaching of the *Gathering of all the Dākinī’s Secrets* is detailed [here](#):

Jomo Menmo Pema Tsokyi (*Jom-mo sMan-mo Padma mTsho-sKyid*) the incarnation of Ma-gÇig Labdrön was born in the Earth Male monkey year (1248) and passed into the sky-dimension in 1283. She was born in Zarmolung, in the vicinity of the cave in which both Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel once stayed. Zarmolung is located in an area of Tibet called É-yül, which means ‘primordial-awareness country’. Her father, Dorje Gyalpo, was an accomplished Tantric practitioner. Her mother was a Dākinī named Padma Paltsun. Her parents named her Pema Tsokyi which means ‘Lotus of the Ocean’.

At the onset of puberty (in the Spring of 1261), whilst she was grazing the yaks and dris in the high pasture lands, she fell asleep in a meadow. The alpine meadow was overlooked by the Déwachen Puk – the cave of great ecstasy, in which Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel had demonstrated attainment. The place was known as Khyungchen-ling – the place of the great garuda. The garuda is the ‘space-eagle’, which demonstrates, in its being: the unborn, unceasing, ever present state of enlightenment that is the fundamental ground of the Dzogchen teachings and practices. It was from the name of this place that her incarnation Khyungchen Aro Lingma received her name as a gTértön from Yeshé Tsogyel in pure vision in the 19th century.

Whilst asleep, she had a dream of clarity in which she experienced a profound vision. A sonorous voice awoke her from her dream state into a state of pure and total presence. She found herself standing in front of the entrance to a secret cave in the mountainside. She entered the cave immediately and with a sense of keen enthusiasm; she did not know what she would find there, but she was consumed with a sense of immanence without hope or fear. Once inside the cave a vision of a charnel ground unfolded, in which Yeshé Tsogyel manifested in a phantasmagorical variety of guises. These visions melted into each other until they coalesced into the form of Yeshé Tsogyel as Dorje Phagmo. Dorje Phagmo means ‘indestructible sow’ or ‘thunderbolt sow’. Dorje Phagmo is the ecstatically fierce Ḍākinī, whose head is surmounted by the head of a sow whose screech shatters illusion. The sound of the screech obliterates all concepts and sharply confides the direct meaning of ro-gÇig – the one taste of Emptiness and Form. Dorje Phagmo was surrounded by many other dakinis; they were making a Tsog offering. At the moment in which she apprehended Yeshé Tsogyel as Dorje Phagmo, a complete body of teaching was revealed to her; this teaching named itself as ‘The Gathered Secrets of Sky Dancers’. She understood its meaning in the instant of its appearance. She realised this teaching was something that she should practise in complete secrecy until its results were obtained. She knew immediately that there would be no obstacle to her fulfilment of these practices. With the arising of this knowledge the vision of Dorje Phagmo dissolved into chö-nyid (*chos nyid* – *Dharmata, the space of reality*).

Pema Tsokyi awoke from the vision and went about her daily life. But wherever she went she gave teachings as the spontaneous expression of her Mind, Voice and Body. She gave Mind-to-Mind teaching as the natural expression of her presence. She sang teaching-songs as the natural expression of her conversation, and performed vajra-dance as the natural expression of her deportment. She could leave footprints and handprints in stone – which had both fortunate and unfortunate consequences. Many ordinary people were astounded by her and recognised that she was a realised yogini, but the ecclesiastics made people afraid of her. She was slandered as a madwoman who had been possessed by a demon. Once fear had been stirred up by the ecclesiastics, people became nervous of Pema Tsokyi. The ordinary people lost their natural faith in Pema Tsokyi. They found themselves unable to have confidence in their own spontaneous devotion, in opposition to the ecclesiastical conservatism that styled her as a demoness. The people then began to make accusations against her as well; saying that she had gone to sleep in the mountains and been possessed by a Menmo. It was then that she became known as Jomo Menmo.

Because of the ill feeling that the narrow-minded ecclesiastics showed toward her, she decided to leave her home and family and never return. After a period of wandering, she reached La-yak-pang-drong in the western part of Lho-drak, where she met a great Nyingma visionary – the gTértön Chö-kyi Wangchuk (*guru rin po che chos kyi dBang phyug*). Guru Chöwang was one of the five sovereign Nyingma Visionaries, and one of the three major emanations of Padmasambhava. As soon as Guru Chöwang saw Jomo Menmo he knew that she was the perfect sang-yum with whom he could bring his realisation to fulfillment. He was then able to translate The Innermost Secret Heart Essence Tantra of the Eight Wrathful Awareness-beings (*bKa’a brGyad gSang-ba yong rDzogs man-ngak-gi rGyud chen po*.)

There is also a biography in English at [Treasury of Lives](#) which states that:

“Jomo Menmo remained with Guru Chowang for a brief period, during which he gave her essential instruction on maturation and liberation (*smin grol*). Guru Chowang then advised her, saying:

“The time has not yet come for you to propagate the profound treasure, the *Khandro Lekbam* (*mkha’ gro’i glegs bam*) that you received during your previous incarnation as Yeshe Tsogyel; better that you should practice it yourself in utmost secrecy. Roam the regions of U and Tsang,

and benefit beings, employing a secret method of establishing all you meet in great bliss. Ultimately you will attain the accomplishment of the *ḍākinī* without relinquishing your body.”

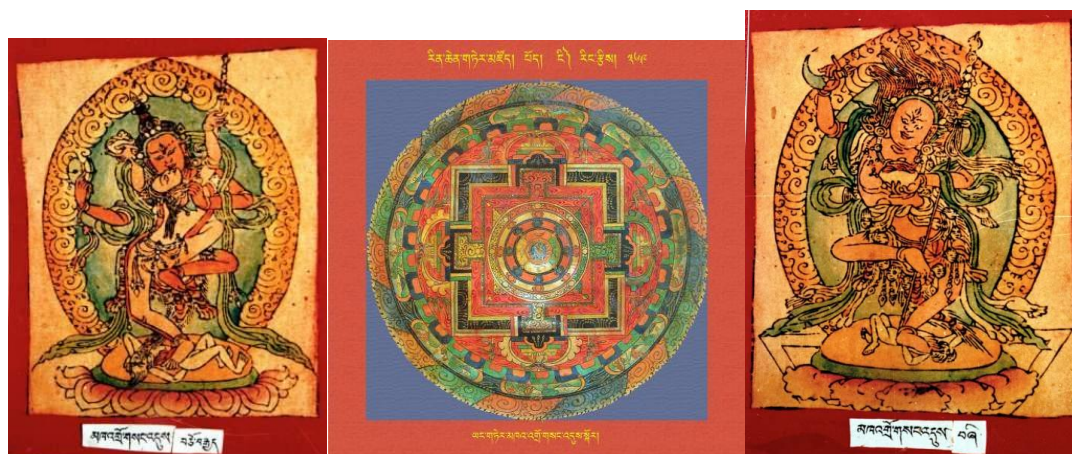
Jomo Menmo then set out with two female companions, making her way to Dingri in Lato, practicing the “secret method of benefiting beings” (*sbas tshul gyi ‘gro don*) until she reached the age of thirty-six.”

Gathering of all the Ḍākinī’s Secrets (Khandro Sangwa Kundu)

This treasure/terma cycle revealed by Jomo Menmo/Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, has been very helpfully uploaded [online here](#) at the Tsadra Foundation site of ‘Rinchen Terdzo’. There are thirty-eight texts in the cycle and they were authored/written down by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, 15th Karmapa and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

The empowerment given at the Siliguri transmissions on the 20th January 2020, was the empowerment of the root of the *Gathering of Vārāhīs* (*phag mo ‘dus pa’i dbang bskur*) written down by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. The Tibetan text can be read [here](#). As far as am aware, this text and others in the cycle have not yet been translated into English, a potential translation project for those of us who have the transmission of it for sure!

Here are some lovely photos from the Tsagli and mandalas, available on the Tsadra Foundation website.



Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 17th February 2020

Chapter Eleven: Machig Jobum

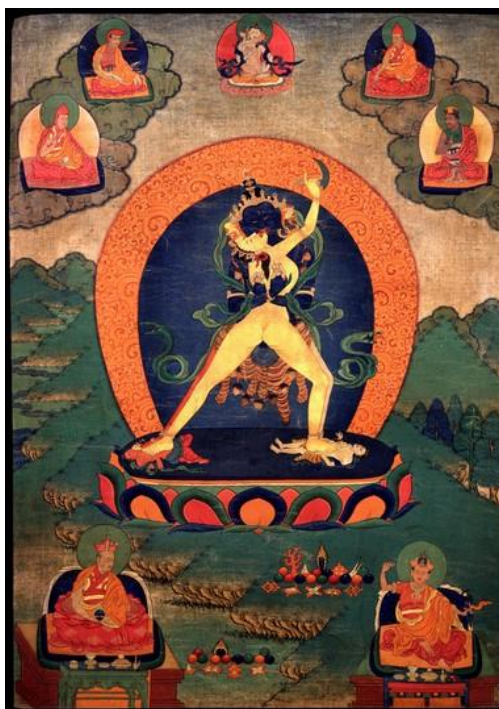
Machig Jobum: Female Mahasiddha and lineage holder of Dro Kālacakra

[31st May 2020 Dākinī Translations](#)

“Chief of all who live life in the sky [dākinīs],
[attainer of the] rainbow body, Jo-‘bum-ma.
I pray to you, hold me in your thoughts with compassion.
You hold the lineage; bless me to have a life like yours.”
—Tsewang Norbu

As is typical of ‘his’-stories of famous, or powerful, men, women are often underrepresented, undervalued, sidelined or worse still, ignored. The dearth of current literature in English (and it seems Tibetan) language on one of the female lineage holders of Dro Kālacakra, Machig Jobum, is a very good example. For a woman to hold such a position and attain such levels of realisation, in a predominantly male-dominated, patriarchal monastic society and culture is nothing less than extraordinary. This short post aims to pull together, share and promote the life-story of this remarkable woman and hopefully inspire more interest and research on it.

Yumo Mikyo Dorje and the Dro Kālacakra lineage



59 Innate Kālacakra

One of the Kashmiri scholar Somanatha’s disciples, the 11th century Kālacakra yogi Yumowa Mikyo Dorje (b. 1027) is regarded as one of the earliest Tibetan proponents of a Shentong (*gzhan stong*) view — the bliss-emptiness nature of reality. Emphasized within the Kālacakra Tantra and the teachings on Buddha nature, this view would later become heavily associated with the Jonangpa lineage. From Yumo Mikyo Dorje onwards, the Dro lineage of the Kālacakra passed on through the lineage-holders Dharmeshvara, Namkha Odzer to Machig Tulku Jobum.

Machig Jobum – Accounts of her life-story

Thanks to scholar-translator, Alexander Gardner, we have a brief biography of Machig Jobum in English here at [Treasury of Lives](#):

“Machik Jobum was born in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Her father, who was known as [Dharmesvara](#), the Sanskritized version of his Tibetan name, Chokyi Wangchuk (chos kyi dbang phyug, d.u.), and her grandfather was [Yumowa Mikyo Dorje](#) (yu mo ba mi bskyod rdo rje, d.u.), both of whom were important figures in the early Kālacakra transmission in Tibet, specifically of the Dro lineage (*‘bro lugs*). Yumowa composed several treatises on the topic that were later misattributed to [Buton Rinchen Drub](#) (bu ston rin chen grub, 1290-d.1364). Her brother, [Semo Chewa Namkha Gyeltsen](#) (se mo che ba nam mkha’ rgyal mtshan, d.u.), was also a master of the Kālacakra and its main commentary, the Vimalaprabhā. Jobum herself is said to have memorized the Vimalaprabhā in her youth.

According to the *Blue Annals*, when she was still young her mother urged her to study black magic in order to murder enemies of the family. According to Tāranātha she studied the rites of Yamāntaka “Gesture of Vanquishing,” and she forced deities such as Tsedak (tshe bdag) and Lhachen Pelbar (lha chen dpal ‘bar) into her service. She engaged in these practices — making hail and the like — until she was thirty-six, when she suffered a serious illness and experienced a religious awakening. She then practiced the Six Yogas, which she had learned from her father. She is said to have practiced in isolated hermitages, surviving without food for weeks on end.

She is generally credited with having transmitted the Kālacakra to [Jamsar Sherab Ozer](#) (‘jam gsar ba shes rab ‘od zer, d.u.), although the *Blue Annals* has him as the disciple of her brother instead.”

The brief account of Jo-‘bum in the *Blue Annals* translates as follows:

“The daughter of Dharmesvara was Jo-‘bum. In her childhood, she was urged by her mother to study magic (mthu) and destroyed many enemies. After that she practiced the Six Limbed Yoga, and during that same incarnation became a saint (*‘phags-pa-mo*) of equal fortune to the naturally-born yoginīs.”

As Dan Martin mentions in his article ‘The Woman Illusion’ in *Women of Tibet* (2006), Jobum is omitted from Buton’s account of the Dro Kālacakra lineage, and when she is mentioned she is underestimated:

“She appears in a, for most part, quite standard lineage of the Dro system of Kālacakra by Tshedbang-nor-bu, where a single line, with added refrain, is devoted to each lineage holder. Her line reads: “Chief of all who live their lives in the sky [the *dākinīs*], [attainer of the] rainbow body, Jo-‘bum-ma. [refrain:] I pray to you, hold me in your thoughts with compassion. You hold the lineage; bless me to have a life comparable to yours.” She is preceded in the lineage by her father, and after her comes her student ‘Jam-sar Shes-rab-‘od-zer, although it is curious that she is not mentioned in the role of teacher in the latter’s biographical account in the *Blue Annals*, where he studies instead with her brother Se-mo-che-ba.”

Martin states in a footnote that she is included in a record of teachings by the 7th Dalai Lama but does not appear in other records such as Buton and Tsongkhapa nor that of Chogyal Phagpa (contained with the Sakya Collected Works):

“Checking the lineage of the Dro system in the ‘record of teachings received’ (thob-yig) by the Seventh Dalai Lama (Dalai Lama VII 1983: XI 222), one may observe that Sprul-sku Jo-’bum (nothing here indicates her gender) is indeed included. Still, there is a footnote attached informing us that the name does not appear in the Dro lineages as included in some seven other thob-yigs, including those of Bu-ston and Tsong-kha-pa. The Seventh Dalai Lama places her immediately after Drubthob Namkha Od (Grub-thob Nam-mkha’-’od) (described in the footnote as a shaven-headed white [robed] tantric) and immediately before her brother Se-mo-che-ba. One of the earliest sources for the lineage, ‘Phags-pa (1968: 191, column 3), also excludes Jo-’bum.”



60 Jetsun Tāranātha (1575-1635)

The most detailed biography of Jo-’bum is found in the *Kālacakra History* by Tāranātha (1575-1635):

“Of the three children of Chos-kyi-dbang-phyug, there were two who served animate beings. The Lady Lha-rje Jo-’bum was renowned as being the emanation body of Indrabodhi’s Lady Lakṣmīkāra. She had such great knowledge that she had thoroughly mastered the tantras and commentaries of the Kālacakra. In her younger years she engaged in all kinds of activities. When she became a young woman, at her mother’s urging, she practiced the Yamāntaka Gesture of Vanquishing and beheld His visage. She coerced Life Lord (Tshe-bdag) and Great God Blazing Glory (Lha-chen Dpal-’bar) into her service. She practiced life magic (srog mthu). She made magical displays, hail and so forth. She spent all her time on this. The magical powers of her coercive mantras were extremely great. During her 36th year (i.e., age 35) she was suffering from a severe illness which convinced her that nothing was of any importance apart from realizing the way things truly are. She meditated on the Six Limbed Yoga which she had learned from her father and during the first day she completed the ten signs. In the 7th day, the internal winds dissolved into the central vein. She became a great woman siddhā (grub-thob chen-mo). In her retreats she would go entirely without human food for about half a month or about a month, but her physical strength would become much better. She stayed in rock shelters at Srin-po-ri, and travelled in areas impassable to humans, meditating. She was able to stop outbreaks of contagious diseases simply by pronouncing the Power of Truth. A simple touch of her hand would free the sick from their sicknesses. These and other such signs [of her accomplishments] became known.”

Kālacakra Lineage Supplications

Tāranātha also refers to Machig Jobum in two lineage supplications he wrote, the first is from the *Kālacakra Lineage Supplication*, translated and published [here](#). In it he refers to Jobum as ‘the extraordinary ‘counter’, nirmanakāya Machig’ (ཇོ་མཚན་བགྲངས་བཅས་མ་ཅིག་སྐུ་སྐུ་དང་། ཤ). She is placed between her father, Dharmeshvara (Chokyi Wangchuk) and Namkha Ozer. Referring to her remarkable ability of counting mantras and memorising perhaps.

He also refers to her in much shorter, *six vajra-yogas lineage supplication*, where she is placed between Namkha Odzer and Drubtob Sechen.

Further reading/Bibliography

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- Tāranātha 1983: Tāranātha, *Dpal Dus-kyi-‘khor-lo’i Chos Bskor-gyi Byung-khungs Nyer-mkho*, contained in: *The Collected Works of Jo-nang Tāranātha*, Smanrtsis Shesrig Dpemdzod (Leh, Ladakh), vol. 2, pp. 1-43.
- [‘Supplication to the Kālacakra Lineage’ by Jetsun Tāranātha](#)
- Tshe-dbang-nor-bu 1979: Kah-thog Rig-‘dzin Tshe-dbang-nor-bu, *Dpal Mchog Dang-po’i Sangs-rgyas-kyi Man-ngag Zab-lam Rdo-rje’i Rnal-‘byor Byin-rlabs Bka’-brgyud Bla-mar Gsol-ba ‘Debs-pa Brgyud-‘dzin Mchog Rgyas (Brgyud-‘debs)*, contained in: Kong-sprul Blo-gros-mtha’-yas, compiler, *Gdams-ngag Mdzod: A Treasury of Precious Methods and Instructions of the Major and Minor Buddhist Traditions of Tibet, Brought Together and Structured into a Coherent System by ‘Jam-mgon Kong-sprul*, Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey (Paro, Bhutan), in 18 volumes.

Chapter Twelve: Machig Labdron

CHOD LINEAGES AND MACHIG LABDRON: Indic-Tibetan Sources, Contemporary Works, The Karmapas and ‘The Long Lineage Supplication to Machig’ by Bengar Jampel Zangpo

18th Jun 2021 [Dākinī Translations](#)

“Girl, expose your hidden faults,
Trample down grudges,
Lift up the powerless,
Sever obscurations,
Behold craving,
Wander in scary places!
Knowing that all beings are like space,
In dangerous places, seek the Buddha within yourself.
In the future, your teachings will be as bright as the sun rising in the sky!”

འཇིག་ཅིང་མཚན་ལུས་ནས་འདོན་། མི་ཡོད་པ་མེས་མི་རྒྱུ་པ་བསྐྱར་། འཇིག་ཅིང་། ཞེན་པ་མཐོང་། གཉན་ས་འགྲིམ་སེམས་ཅན་ནམ་མཁའ་ལྟར་ཤེས་པར་གྱིས་ལ། གཉན་ཁྲོད་དུ་
སངས་རྒྱས་རང་ལ་ཚལ་དང་། ཁྱེད་གྱི་བསྟན་པ་མཁའ་ཉི་མ་ཤར་པ་བཞིན་དུ་འོང་བ་ཡིན་གསུངས་ནས་ལུང་བསྟན་གནང་པ་མཛད་དེ

—Padampa Sangye’s advice to a young, Machig Labdron[\[1\]](#)

“There is no satisfactory evidence that there was a Buddhist Chod lineage of transmissions identified as such until Machik started to describe and categorize her own teachings.”

—Dr. Michelle Sorensen (2013)

Introduction



In the Secret Mantra Chod lineage, Green Tārā is listed as having bestowed the Chod transmission directly to Machig Labdron [\[2\]](#). Thus today for Tārā Day, I share a new article on the Chod lineages and Machig Labdron, including the first published translation of *The Long Lineage Supplication of the Deeds of Machig* by [Bengar Jampel Zangpo](#) (1427-1489) (that could be entitled the Karmapa Chod Lineage supplications, as it includes several Karmapas and senior Karma Kagyu masters)[\[3\]](#).

In 2012, I received the Chod empowerment, transmission and instruction on an 8th Karmapa text, from HH 17th Karmapa at Dorzong Monastery, India (see [here](#)). The event, which was the first time the 17th Karmapa gave the Chod empowerment, was requested by renowned Chod practitioner and writer, Tsultrim Allione (considered to be a direct emanation of Machig Labdron, see photo below). In attendance were several members of Allione’s predominantly female Tārā Mandala community and

the revered British nun, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, founder and head of the [Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery](#) in Himachal Pradesh, India.

Since then, as part of my research for a forthcoming translation project on the Karmapas and Chod, I have been looking into the origins of Chod and source texts on the lineages. Here is an overview of that, together with the first published translation of a lineage supplication composed in the 15th Century by Bengar Jampel Zangpo (ban sgar ba 'jam dpal bzang po), student of the 6th Karmapa, Thongwa Donden (Mthong ba don ldan) and teacher of the 7th Karmapa, Chodrag Gyatso. For an English-language biography, of Bengar Zangpo, see [here](#).^[4]

The first half of this article will give a brief overview of the Indic-Tibetan sources of Chod lineages and practice, followed by an overview of contemporary works on the subject. The second half will be an introduction and full translation of the Chod Lineage Supplication by Bengar Zangpo with some information about the historical figures cited in it.

May it be of benefit in severing obscurations, beholding craving directly and abandoning fears of 'scary places' and 'demons'!

Written, compiled and translated by Adele Tomlin, 18th June 2021.



PART I: CHOD LINEAGES: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SOURCES

Root Indic/Tibetan Source Texts on Chod

Dr. Michelle Sorensen's PhD study, *Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chod Tradition* (Columbia University, 2013) is the most recent, in-depth and extensive academic work on Chod and Machig Labdron (2013)^[5] ^[6]. In particular, her translation and discussion of the texts of the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (1284-1339), including the earliest extant commentary on a text of Machik Labdron's, focuses on new ways to appreciate the transmission and institutionalization of Chod.^[7] I refer to her work extensively in this article.

In Chapter Two of her study, Sorensen (2013: 47-48) helpfully lists Indic sources of Chod, via Tibetan texts such as Karma Chagme (Karma chags med), in his 17th century text, *Concise and Confident Explanation of Chod* (*Gcod kyi gdengs bshad nyung nyur bsdus pa bzhugs pa'i dbu phyogs*), who identifies four different Indic sources of Chod that might be considered lineage, or perhaps proto-lineage, sources. These are Āryadeva the Brahmin's *The Great Poem*; Nāropa's *One Taste* (*Ro snyoms*); the *Khrul gcod terma* (gter ma) cycles of Orgyan Rinpoche; and Padampa Sangye's *Zhije*^[8].

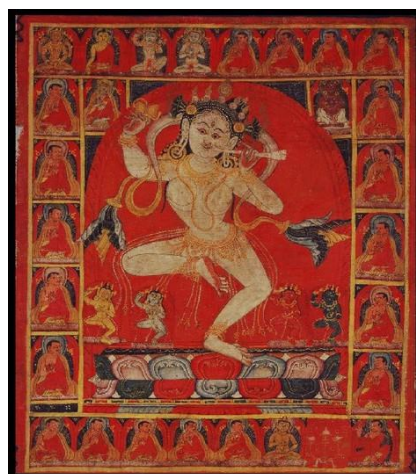


61 Āryadeva, 3rd Century Indian Mahasiddha and disciple of Nagarjuna. His 'Great Poem', translated by Padampa Sangye, is listed as an original source text for Chod.

Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (1813-1899) has a similar list in his *Treasury of Knowledge*^[9]. In his *Treasury of Instructions*, Kongtrul includes the *Great Speech Chapter* by Machig Labdron and other Chod "root texts (gzhung rtsa ba)" such as:

- The *Great Poem by Aryadeva*, translated by Padampa Sangye and revised by Zhama Lotsawa (Zhwa ma Lo tswa ba)^[10];
- *The Great Speech/Explanation Chapter* by Machik Labdron (Shes rab kyi pha rol ty phyin pa gcod kyi gzhung dang man ngag mtha' dag gi yang bcud zab don thugs kyi snying po);
- Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gcod yul gyi gzhung 'grel zag med sbrang rtsi, by Drung pa Ru pa;
- A *Commentary on The Great Speech Chapter* by 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gcod kyi gzhung shes rab skra rtse'i sa gzhung spel ba rin po che'i gter mdzod); and *The Supplementary Chapter of Oral Instructions of the Prajnaparamita*.

.Chod is also considered to be one of the "Eight Great Chariots, Lineages of Spiritual Accomplishment" (sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad)^{[11] [12]}.



62 12th Century Tibetan thangka of Machig Labdron. See <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/58523>

According to Sorensen (2013:)

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“The earliest discussion of Machig and Chod for which we can approximate a date is contained in *The Blue Annals (Deb ther sngon po)* by [Go Lotsawa Zhonnupe](#) (‘Gos lo tswa ba Gzhon nu dpal, 1392-1481), a Dharma History (*chos ‘byung*) composed in the late fifteenth century . In the section on Chod, Zhijé is not foregrounded (in contrast to other sources which characterize Chod as a branch of Zhijé). ”

In various texts. several lineages and categorisations have been identified and listed for Chod, such as Sutra, Mantra, Long, Short, Male, Female, Father, Mother, Union and Instruction. The majority of these tend to go through Buddha Shakyamuni, to Green Tārā, Sukhasiddhi, Aryadeva, and Dampa Sangye.^[13] However, others go directly to Machig Labdron from Vajravārahi^[14] or Green Tārā (see note above).

Sorensen (2013: Chapter 2) explains that in Namkha Gyaltsen’s appendix to the life-story (*rnam thar*) in *The Great Explanation* collection, the transmission lineages of Chod are described along three different paths:

1. One lineage of the **Sūtra tradition of Prajñāpāramitā**, or Yum Chen mo.
2. **A second lineage from Śākyamuni**, runs through Mañjuśrī, Nāgārjuna, and the Brahmin Āryadeva to Padampa Sangyé and finally to Machik.
3. **A third lineage of Tantra** runs from Vajradhara through Tārā to Machik.

The Bengar Zangpo/Karma Kamtsang lineage seems to belong to the second type.

Allione, in this short video below about Machig Labdron, categorises her three main lineages as:

1. The **Father lineage** from Prajñāpāramitā and her teachers, such as Padampa Sangye.
2. The **Mother lineage** based on her visions of Tara and other dakinis and deities.
3. The **Experience Lineage** based on her experience in practice.

Machig Labdron – Life-Stories and Lineages



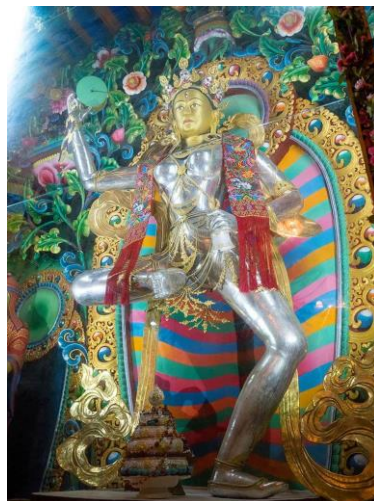
63 Machig Labdron. Source HAR 619.

“In the •Life of Yeshe Tsogyel, Padma Sambhava predicted that Yeshe Tsogyel would be reborn as Machig Lapdron; her consort, Atsara Sale, would become Topabhadra, Machig’s husband; her assistant and Padma Sambhava’s secondaxy consort, Tashi Khyidren, would be reborn as Machig’s only daughter, and so on. All of the important figures in Tsogyel’s life were to be reborn in the life of Machig Lapdron, including Padma Sambhava himself, who would become Phadampa Sangye.” —Allione (2000).

There are several brief life-stories of Machig Labdron (c. 11th Century) in the English language available online, and in the contemporary sources listed below. For example, here at [Treasury of Lives](#) and here on [the Tara Mandala website](#).

As is the norm in the lives of great practitioners, there were many challenges for Machig, especially as a woman and mother:

“Following a series of visions and prophesies from her lamas, Machig encountered Töpa Bhadra, an Indian yogin who became the father of her children. In their first union, radiant rainbow light is seen streaming from their room as though the house had caught on fire. At the age of 24, Machig gave birth to her first son, and in the ensuing few years to another son and daughter. Having accrued fame and renown for her spiritual accomplishments, Machig was now shunned in her new role as partner and mother. She and their small family entered a time of extreme poverty, wandering through various parts of Tibet.”



64 Machig statue at Druk Zangri Khamar, Bhutan, the seat of Machig Labdron. Photo credit: Josh Brownlee

“At 35, Machig decided to leave her children and Topa Bhadra, and within a few years established Zangri Khangmar, the Red House of Copper Mountain, the primary seat of her teachings and activities until the end of her life. From here her teachings and reputation grew once more, spreading throughout the provinces of Tibet. Learned practitioners came to meet and debate with Machig, and she continually proved herself as a profound and realized teacher.”

In terms of the original sources, the life story of Machig has been told in several different Tibetan biographies (rnam thar), including two complementary versions in *The Explanation of Casting Off the Psycho-Physical Aggregates: Clarifying the Meaning of Chod*, often referred to as *The Great Explanation* and attributed to Machik (Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod kyi don gsal byed, or the Rnam bshad chen mo), a version in *The Blue Annals* (Deb ther sngon po) by Gö Lotsawa Zhonnupel

(‘Gos lo tswa ba Gzhon nu dpal), and a version in Dharmasenggé’s *Zhijé and Chod Dharma History* (Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos ‘byung rin po che’i phreng ba thar pa’i rgyan).^[15]

Sorensen (2013) explains how it has become standard to attribute the transmission of Chod from Dampa Sangye to Machig although there is little material evidence that such a transmission took place. Frequently invoked in support of this argument is the prose work by Āryadeva the Brahmin, Padampa’s maternal uncle, *The Great Poem on the Prajñāpāramitā*^[16] or such root texts:

“However, such claims are at odds with another traditional claim, namely that Machig’s system of Chod was the only Buddhist teaching transmitted from Tibet to India, rather than from India to Tibet.” (2013: 5)

For example in Lodro Rinpoche’s Introduction to the Chod commentary by Jamgon Kongtrul (2007: 13) he states that Machig’s Chod was unusual in being not only headed by a female lineage holder but also the first time that a practice was transmitted from Tibet into India.^[17]

Of the extant texts directly attributable to Machig Labdron, *The Great Explanation/Speech Chapter* is the only one that can presently be historically situated through the existence of an annotated outline and a commentary ascribed to the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé^[18] (for more on the Karmapas and Chod, see below).

After an extensive overview of the original sources of Chod, Sorensen (2013: 50) concludes that, despite claims that Dampa Sangye was the founder of Chod:

“There is no satisfactory evidence that there was a Buddhist Chod lineage of transmissions identified as such until Machik started to describe and categorize her own teachings.” ^[19]

Contemporary Research on Chod and Machig Labdron



65 Alexander David-Neel (1868-1969) in 1933 Tibet with Chod Kangling at her hip.

In terms of research on Chod after the 19th Century, Sorensen (2013: 8-9) remarks that:

“Although the 18th and 19th centuries were a time of increased Tibetan interest in Chod, with texts being recovered, authored and edited, Europeans and North Americans did not begin to write on Chod until the late 19th and early 20th centuries with a lengthier first-hand description of a Chod practice provided by Alexandra David-Neel in her 1929 writing, *Mystiques et magiciens du Tibet*:

“In the early 20th century, English-reading audiences were exposed to the details of one particular form of Chod practice [*The Wisdom Dākini*] attributed to the Nyingma scholar,

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Longchenpa (Klong chen Rab 'byams pa, 1308-1363). This teaching was recovered by Jigmé Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1729/30-1798) and was translated and published in 1935 by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup. Dawa-Samdup was a Sikkimese translator for the British government and a teacher of and translator for David-Neel. This was the first Chod practice text that was widely available in the English language.^[20]

Interestingly, the most important works published in last few decades on Chod and Machig Labdron, are all by women such as Janet Gyatso's important study in 1985, "The Development of the gCod Tradition," which describes various source texts and contributes a preliminary historicization of Chod. Giacomella Orofino has published several Italian translations of Chod texts^[21], as well as an abridged English-language translation of *The Great Speech* Chapter (Bka' tshoms chen mo) in "The Great Wisdom Mother and the Chod Tradition" (2000). There is also a short section on Machig Labdron in 'Women of Wisdom' (1984, 2000) by Lama Tsultrim Allione, and *Machig's Complete Explanation* (2003, 2013) by Lama Sarah Harding. Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz and Adelheid Hermann-Pfandt (see Bibliography) have also written articles on Machig's life and contributions. Machik's biography has been translated at least three times—by Ani Zimpa (1975), Tsultrim Allione (1984), and Jerome Edou (1996).

However, Sorensen (2013) critiques several contemporary publications:

"It is often the case that teachers are transmitting a teaching—usually based in a practice text—as they have received it; rarely have teachers or students engaged in the critical and comparative study of the variations of Chod. In my experience, teachers and practitioners alike often resort to ahistorical generalizations of Chod and its transmission histories, thus neglecting issues of the sources of the discrete transmissions, their location in time, their development and the ways in which they reflect textual sources."^[22]

One of her examples of such ahistorical generalizations is the recent full translation of *The Condensed Daily Practice of Offering the Body* by the Fourteenth Karmapa, Thekchok Dorje and Commentary to the Chod Practice: *The Garden of All Joy* by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (tr. Lama Lodro Rinpoche) (2007), which contains a brief oral commentary of the life of Machig Labdron and Chod Lineages in the Introduction (pp.11-23)^[23].

Sorensen further asserts:

"In addition to the limitations of current scholarship on Chod, there has been little sustained critical study of the philosophy, praxis and contributions of Machik to the male-dominated Prajñāpāramitā commentarial tradition. The reception and canonization of Machik is symptomatic of the production and reproduction of woman through and in Buddhist Tantric traditions."



66 Folio from *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. Machig was renowned for her ability to read the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* and her knowledge of them and is considered an emanation of the Great Mother.

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

Clearly, there is still a lot of research to be done in this area.

PART II: MACHIG, THE KARMAPAS, KARMA KAGYU and BENGAR ZANGPO'S SUPPLICATION



67 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje

Turning now to the Machig lineage supplication by Bengar Zangpo. *The Long Lineage Supplication to Machig by Bengar Zangpo* (Ring brgyud kyi gsol 'debs ma gcig gis mdzad par ban sgar 'jam dpal bzang pos kha bskang ba ldeb- in Jamgon Kongtrul's *Treasury of Precious Instructions*) is a practice text invoking the recipients of a transmission of Chod teachings. tracing a Chod lineage that is transmitted through several Karmapas and Karma Kagyu masters and establishes a Chod connection between Machig and [3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje](#).

The Karmapas and several Karma Kagyu masters are important holders of the Chod lineages. Most of the lineages mention the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Dharma Sengge's *Dharma History* situates Rangjung Dorje as an important inheritor of Chod, explaining that he is responsible for having clarified previous erroneous ideas about Chod. Sorensen (2013: 100-1) also explains why Rangjung Dorje is a pivotal figure in the development of the Chod tradition[\[24\]](#). Tsultrim Allione (in the video on Machig Labdron above) also states that she follows mainly the 3rd Karmapa lineage.

The 'Long Lineage Supplication of Machig Deeds' by Bengar Jampal Sangpo



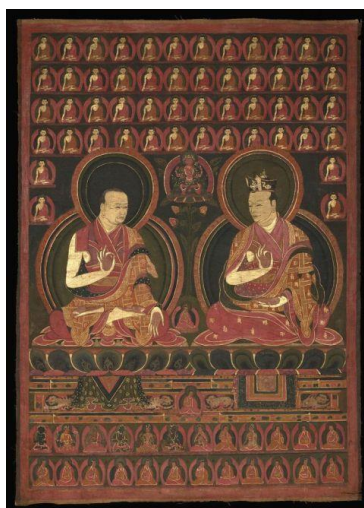
68 Bengar Jampel Zangpo (15th Century)

[Bengar Jampel Zangpo](#) (15th Century) was a student of the 6th Karmapa and a teacher to the 7th Karmapa and 1st Gyaltshab Rinpoche. The lineage supplication by Bengar Jampel Zangpo could be called the Chod lineage of the Karmapas and Karma Kamtsang[\[25\]](#). Sorensen (2013: 82-86) is the only

contemporary source to consider this Bengar supplication (although she does not provide a word-for-word translation of the text as written), she says:

“This is one of the earliest instances of a text making a direct connection between Padampa Sangyé and Machig Labdrön in the context of Chod transmissions; as we have seen, texts such as *The Blue Annals* are more ambiguous about the direct receipt of Chod teachings by Machig from Padampa Sangyé.”[\[26\]](#)

Unlike texts in the Life-Liberation stories and *The Blue Annals*, the supplication does not classify its lineage according to a particular category such as “Male lineage,” “Union lineage,” or one of the other popular categories of Chod lineages. In addition, it identifies the locations for many of the transmissions and contains several Karmapas [3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 13th 15th], the 2nd and 8th Zharmarpa and Tai Situpas (8th, 9th and 11th) [\[2\]](#) and Jamgon Kongtrul 1st and 2nd.”[\[27\]](#) There is another lineage, called the *Lineage of Chod Explanation*, which also contains several Karmapas who pass it on to Bengar Zangpo who passes it down to the 1st Sangye Nyenpa and 8th Karmapa[\[28\]](#). The 17th Karmapa recently taught a Chod commentary by the 8th Karmapa, which I am in the process of translating for publication.



69 8th Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje with teacher 1st Sangye Nyenpa (both of whom were holders of the Chod Lineage)

According to Sorensen (2013):

“Machig’s principal male disciples included Gyalwa Dondrub (Rgyal ba Don grub, also known as Rgyal ba Grub che), who would become a principal lineage holder of her teachings. His grandson was Tönyon Samdrub (Thod smyon Bsam grub), known as the “snowman (gangs pa) residing on Sham po gangs”; the tradition of black-hat-wearing Chod practitioners known as “Gangs pa” originated with him[\[29\]](#). A second student, Khugom Chokyesenggé (Khu sgom Chos kyi seng ge), would also become renowned for his transmission of Chod teachings.”

However, the Bengar Zangpo lineage supplication, is similar to others only up to Machig herself. It then branches off to Machig’s grandson Khambuyale rather than coming through Machig’s son Dondrub. Then it goes through a long list of Karma Kamtsang lamas, including the purported author Bengar Jampal Zangpo, right up to Situ Pema Nyinje (1774–1853):

“This is where the lineage ends in this text as found in the Kundeling edition of the Palpung prints. However, at this point in the Shechen printing sponsored by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–1991), it continues from Pema Nyinje to Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye (1813–1900), then

to the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakhyap Dorje (1871–1922), then to Kongtrul’s disciple, Tashi Ozer (1836–1910), then to Khyentse Ozer (1896–1945), and ends in “my root guru.”

Thus, although it is attributed to a 15th-century author, the lineage list continues several centuries beyond Bengar Zangpo[30]. This text provides important information about how the transmission of Chod has travelled down through figures from schools including the Kagyu and Gelug.



70 Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, Rime and Karma Kagyu master and Chod lineage holder.

There is much research and work to still be done on the Chod lineages, and the connection/works of the Karmapas and Karma Kagyu masters on Chod, as well as the shorter lineages handed down directly to Machig Labdron by female deities like Vajrayogini, Green Tārā and Sukhasiddhi.

PART III: ENGLISH TRANSLATION

རིང་བརྒྱུད་ཀྱི་གསལ་འདེབས་མ་གཅིག་གིས་མཛད་པར་བན་སྐར་འཇམ་དཔལ་བཟང་པོས་ཁ་བསྐྱང་བ་ནི།

LONG LINEAGE SUPPLICATION OF THE DEEDS OF MACHIG BY BENGAR PEL ZANGPO

བྱེ་གཙུག་ཉི་ཟེའི་གདན་སྟེང་ན། ཅ་བའི་ཟླ་མ་བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན། བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན་ལ་གསལ་བ་འདེབས།

Above the crown, on sun and moon seat are the blessings of **the root guru**, supplicate the blessed one!

ཟླ་མ་ལ་གསལ་བ་འདེབས། ཡུམ་ཆེན་མོས་བྱིན་གྱིས་ཆོབས།

I supplicate the guru, may the **Great Mother** bless us!

འོག་མིན་ཆས་དབྱིངས་ཀྱི་པོ་བླ་ན། ཡུམ་ཆེན་ཤེར་བྱིན་བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན། བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན་ལ་གསལ་བ་འདེབས།

In the Palace of the Dharmadhatu, Akanishtha, are the blessings of **Great Mother Prajnaparamita**, supplicate the blessed one!

བྱ་ཚྭ་ཕུང་པོའི་རི་བོ་ན། བཅོམ་ཐུན་ཤྲུག་བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན། བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན་ལ་གསལ་བ་འདེབས།

At Mount Vulture's Peak are the blessings of **Bhagavan Śākyamuni**, supplicate the blessed one!

ལང་ཆེན་བསྐྱལ་བའི་བྱི་སྟེང་ན། འཇམ་དཔལ་མཁུ་ལེང་།

On the Great Lion Throne are the blessings of **Lion's Roar Mañjuśrī**, supplicate the blessed one!

བྱ་གར་འཇག་མའི་བྱིལ་པོ་ན། ལྷ་ཡེ་དེ་བཤ།

In the Indian grass hut are the blessings of [Āryadeva\[31\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

ལ་སྟོད་དིང་རིའི་རྒྱང་འཁོར་ན། དམ་པ་སངས་བྱིན་ཆལས་ཅན།

At Langkhor Dingri[32] in Latö (La stod) are the blessings of [Padampa Sangyé](#), supplicate the blessed one!

ཁབས་རི་མཁར་དམར་དགོན་པ་ན། མ་གཅིག་ལ་བསྐྱོན་།

At [Zangri Kharmar](#) Monastery[33] are the blessings of [Machik Labdrön](#), supplicate the blessed one!

གཉེན་ས་དུར་ཁྲོད་དགོན་པ་ན། ཁམ་བུ་ལ་ཡེ།

At a Neighbouring Cremation Ground are the blessings of **Khambu Laye**,[\[34\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

གཡུ་ལོ་བཀོད་པའི་ཞིང་ཁམས་ན། ལྷོ་ན་ཇ་ལེ།

In the Turquoise-leaf display pure realm[\[35\]](#) are the blessings of [Jñānadzala](#)[\[36\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

མཚོ་དྲིལ་པོ་བླ་ན། གནམ་མཚོ་ཆེན་པོ།

On an island in Sky Lake are the blessings of **Great Sky Lake**[\[37\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

མཚུར་མདོ་བོ་ཕུང་གི་གནས་མཚོག་ན། རང་བྱུང་དོ་རྩེ།

In the pilgrimage place of Tsurphu Valley are the blessings of [Rangjung Dorje](#) (3rd Karmapa)[\[38\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

རང་བྱུང་མཉམ་ཉིད་ལོ་བ་ན། ། གཡུང་རྩེན་ཆེན་པོ།

In the Display of Self-Arisen Equanimity are the blessings of [Yungton Chenpo](#)[\[39\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

ཆོས་དབྱིངས་སྒྲོས་བཤམ་བྱང་ན། ། རྩེན་པའི་དོན་ཆེ།

In the Palace of Unelaborated Dharmadhatu are the blessings of [Rolpai Dorje](#), (4th Karmapa) [\[40\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

གནས་ནང་རྒྱལ་བའི་རི་ཁྲོད་ན། ། རི་ཁྲོད་དབང་ཕྱགས།

At the Victorious Inner Abode Retreat are the blessings of [Rithro Wangchug](#)[\[41\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

སྒྲང་མིང་རྒྱལ་བའི་དགྲིལ་འཁོར་ན། ། མཁའ་སྒྱུད་དབང་པོ།

In the Maṇḍala of Victory over Appearance-Existence are the blessings of [Khacho Wangpo](#) (2nd Zhamarpa)[\[42\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

འཁོར་འདས་གཉིས་མེད་པོ་བྱང་ན། ། དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པམ།

In the Palace of Non-dual Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa are the blessings of [Dezhin Shegpa](#) (5th Karmapa)[\[43\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

སྒྲང་ཉིད་ཐབ་མའི་དགྲིལ་འཁོར་ན། ། རིན་ཆེན་བཟང་པོ།

In the Maṇḍala of Profound Emptiness are the blessings of [Rinchen Zangpo](#)[\[44\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

བདེ་སྒྲང་དབྱེར་མེད་པོ་བྱང་ན། ། མཐོང་བ་དོན་ཅན།

In the Palace of Indivisible Bliss-Emptiness are the blessings of [Thongwa Donden](#) (6th Karmapa)[\[45\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

གར་བཞུགས་ཆོས་སྒྲུབ་པོ་བྱང་ན། ། འཇམ་དཔལ་བཟང་པོ།

In the Palace of the residing Dharmakaya residing are the blessings of [Jamphel Zangpo](#)[\[46\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

ཁམས་གསུམ་ཡོངས་སྒྲུབ་པོ་བྱང་ན། ། ཆོས་གསུམ་གྱ་མཆོ།

In the Palace of Complete Liberation of the Three Realms is [Chodrag Gyatso](#), 7th Karmapa[\[47\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

གང་ཤར་ཆོས་དབྱིངས་པོ་བྱང་ན། ། འཇམ་དཔལ་གྱ་མཆོ།

In the Palace of the Dharmadhatu expanse of Whatever Arises is [Jamphel Gyatso](#)[\[48\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

ཡོགས་མེད་གཉན་ས་རི་ཁྲོད་ན། ། ཆོས་ཀྱི་གྱ་མཆོ།

In the Non-Sectarian wilderness retreat is [Choki Gyatso](#)[\[49\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

ཕྱགས་མེད་ཡངས་པའི་དགྲིལ་འཁོར་ན། ། ཡངས་པ་སྒོ་བདེ།

In the Boundless Expanse Maṇḍala are the blessings of **Yangshog Lhepa Lode**[\[50\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

འཇུར་མེད་ཆོས་སྒྲིའི་ཕོ་བྲང་ན། ། དཔག་བསམ་དབང་པོ།

In the Palace of the Unchanging Dharmakāya are the blessings of **Pagsam Wangpo**[\[51\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

བསྐབ་གསུམ་རིག་གོལ་ལྡན་པ་ཡི། ། སུན་ཆོགས་བཟན་འཛིན།

Visual Liberation of the Three Trainings holds the blessings **Phuntshog Tenzin**[\[52\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

བསྐྱེད་རྒྱུ་ལྡན་ལྡན་པ་ཡི། ། བཟན་འཛིན་དར་རྒྱས།

Application of Creation and Completion holds the blessings of **Tenzin Dargye**[\[53\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

རིག་གནས་ཀྱན་ལ་མཁས་པ་ཡི། ། རིན་ཆེན་དབང་པོ།

Expertise in all the fields of knowledge is the blessing of **Rinchen Wangpo**[\[54\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

ནཱ་ཐར་སྒོ་གསུམ་ལྡན་པ་ཡི། ། ཆོས་ཀྱི་དབང་པོ།

The life-story of the ‘three doors’ hold the blessings of **Chokyi Wangpo**[\[55\]](#) (8th Zhamarpa) supplicate the blessed one!

མི་ཤིགས་ཐེག་ལའི་དགྲིལ་འཁོར་ན། ། ཆོས་ཀྱི་དོན་གྲུབ།

in the Maṇḍala of the Indestructible Drop are the blessings of **Chokyi Dondrub**[\[56\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

དོན་དམ་ཆོས་དབྱིངས་ཕོ་བྲང་ན། ། ཆོས་ཀྱི་འཕྱུར་གནས།

In the Dharmadhātu Mansion of Ultimate Truth are the blessings of **Choki Jungne (Eighth Situ Panchen)**[\[57\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

བདུད་བཞིའི་གཡུལ་ལས་ནཱ་རྒྱལ་བ། ། བདུད་འདུལ་རྩོམ་པ།

In the Victorious from the Land of Four ‘Demons’ are the blessings of **Dudul Dorje, (13th Karmapa)**[\[58\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

ཕྱག་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོའི་གནས་མཆོག་ན། ། བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་ཕྱེད།

In the Supreme Mahāmudrā Pilgrimage Abode are the blessings of **Pema Nyingje (9th Situpa)**[\[59\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

རིས་མེད་མཁས་གྲུབ་ཆོགས་དབུས་ན། ། སྒོ་གོས་མཐའ་ཡས།

In the centre of the Non-Sectarian Community of Accomplished Experts are the blessings of **Lodro Thaye (1st Jamgon Kongtrul)**[\[60\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

བདེ་སྐྱོང་འཇུར་མེད་ཕོ་བྲང་ན། ། མཁས་ཀྱི་དོན་པོ།

In the Palace of Unwavering Bliss-Emptiness are the blessings of **Khakyab Dorje, (Fifteenth Karmapa)**[\[61\]](#) supplicate the blessed one!

སྒྲོང་ཉིང་སྒྲོང་རྒྱལ་གཞལ་ཡས་ན། ། བཟ་ཤིས་འོད་ཟེར་།

In the Celestial Mansion of Emptiness -Compassion are the blessings of **Tashi Ozer**[\[62\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

སྒྲོང་སྒྲིང་དབང་སྒྲུང་ལོ་བྱང་ན། ། བསྐྱེད་དབང་མཆོག་།

In the Palace of Magnetizing Appearances and Existents are the blessings of **Pema Wanchog (Eleventh Situ Panchen)** [\[63\]](#), supplicate the blessed one!

འགྲོ་དོན་ཕྱགས་མེད་ལོ་བྱང་ན། ། མཁྱེན་བརྩེའི་འོད་ཟེར་།

In the Mansion of Unbiased Benefit to Wanderers, are the blessings of **Jamgon Kongtrul**[\[64\]](#)(2nd), supplicate the blessed one!

བཀའ་འདྲིན་སྐུ་ཐུན་གཞལ་ཡས་ན། ། རྩ་བའི་བླ་མ་།

In the mansion of the three seats of kindness are the blessings of the root guru, supplicate the blessed one!

དག་སྒྲོང་ཕྱགས་མེད་རི་ཁྲོད་ན། ། མཆོད་གོགས་ཆོས་མཛད་།

In the pure vision, unbiased retreats are the blessings of Dharma friends, supplicate the blessed ones!

ཕྱགས་རྩེ་བྱུན་ཆད་མེད་པ་ཡི། ། ཡི་དམ་ལྷ་ཆོགས་།

Continuous, unceasing compassion is the blessing of the yidam deities, supplicate the blessed ones!

ཐུན་ལས་ཐུ་མཐར་བྱུང་པ་ཡི། ། དཔའ་བོ་མཁའ་འགྲོ།

Boundless, pervasive activities are the blessings of the heroes and ḍākinīs, supplicate the blessed ones!

བར་ཆད་དག་དཔུང་རྒྱུག་པ་ཡི། ། ཆོས་རྒྱུང་སྤང་མ་བྱིན་ཆུབས་ཅན། ། བྱིན་ཆུབས་ཅན་ལ་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས། །

Repelling hostile armies of obstacles is the blessing of the dharma protectors and guardians, supplicate the blessed ones!

མ་གཅིག་ལ་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས། ། ཡུམ་ཆེན་མོས་བྱིན་གྱིས་རྒྱབས། །

I supplicate Machig, may the Great Mother bless us!

བྱེད་ལ་གསོལ་བ་བཏབ་བའི་མཐུས། ། བདག་སོགས་མ་ཀུན་སེམས་ཅན་རྣམས། །

By the power of this supplication, may myself and all mother beings,

བདག་འདྲིན་སྒྲོ་ཡིས་ཐེངས་པ་དང་། ། རྗེ་མ་ཐག་ཆོད་པར་བྱིན་གྱིས་རྒྱབས། །

abandon the self-clinging mind! Bless us to resolve all conceit!

རྗེ་དང་བུལ་བར་བྱིན་གྱིས་རྒྱབས། ། ཆོས་ཉིད་རྟོགས་པར་བྱིན་གྱིས་རྒྱབས། །

Bless us to be free from arrogance! Bless us to realise reality-itself, Dharmata!

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གཙོང་ལུས་མཁའ་འགྲོའི་གད་རླུང་། Chöd of Ḍākinī's Laughter:

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ENDNOTES

[1] Ma chig Labdron (Lab sgron 1974. *Phung po gzan skyur gyi rnam bshad gcod gyi don gsal byed*. In *Gcod kyi chos skor*. New Delhi: Tibet House. 32.

[2] For example: 1) *Mother Lineage of Wisdom* (ma gyü): Prajñāparamita, Green Tara, Sukhasiddhi, Dampa Sangye, Machig Labdrön. 2) *Lineage of Absolute Meaning* (dön gyi gyü) Buddha Shakyamuni, Mañjushri, Green Tara, Machig Labdrön. 3) *Close Lineage of the Mantra Tradition* (ngag lug nye gyü): Vajradhara, Green Tara, Machig Labdrön, Thönyön Samdrub (*Machig’s younger blood son*). Green Tara is also in the *Long Sutra Lineage*.

[3] Damngak Dzö Volume 14 (ཨ་) / Pages 335-336 / Folios 1a1 to 1b7. See: https://dnz.tsadra.org/index.php/Wylie:Ring_brgyud_kyi_gsol_%27debs_ma_gcig_gis_mdzad_par_ban_sgar_%27jam_dpal_bzang_pos_kha_bskang_ba

[4] “He received teachings from Rongton Sheja Kunrik (rong ston shes bya kun rig, 1367-1449) and Lhapuwa (lha phu ba, d.u.). Je Donden Zhab (rje don ldan zhabs, d.u.) gave him teachings on the Naro Chodruk (na ro chos brug) over a period of four years. Jampel Zangpo was also a close disciple of Tongwa Donden, the Sixth Karmapa (karma pa 06 mthong ba don ldan, 1416-1453).”

[5] Michelle Janet Sorensen. ‘*Making the Old New Again and Again: Legitimation and Innovation in the Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition*’. PhD diss., Columbia University (2013).

[6] In 2018, Sorensen recently gave a talk at the University of Virginia on how notions of the “feminine” as it characterizes humans and suprahuman beings may have (and may have not) contributed to the historical development and contemporary practice of Chod in Asian and in Euro-American contexts, see: <https://www.uvatibetcenter.org/event/dr-michelle-sorensen-on-the-chod-tradition/>.

[7] Sorensen argues not only that Chod praxis has been an ongoing project of innovation and renewal, but also that we can properly understand modern incarnations of Chod only through a nuanced appreciation of its historical and philosophical developments.

[8] “It appears that there were teachings in circulation explicitly using the trope of “Chod” as a technical term in practice from at least the time of Padampa Sangye’s maternal uncle, Aryadeva the Brahmin, and his verse teaching entitled *The Great Poem* on the Prajnaparamita. This text is frequently associated with Chod by later authors, including Karma Chagme and Jamgon Kongtrul, as a precursor to Machik’s Chod teachings, or as a (or even the) “root text” for Chod.

This piece of philosophical prose was transmitted to Tibet by Aryadeva's nephew, Padampa Sangye, who traversed the area giving his teachings on Zhije. The recitation of this text to Machik by Padampa Sangye may have been the transmission of the teaching that became the basis of the Chod tradition. Padampa Sangye is famous for his development of the Zhije teachings, which are sometimes discussed in complement with Chod, whereas Machik is always spoken of as the female teacher of Chod. Both Zhije and Chod teachings are associated with Prajnaparamita teachings, with Zhije emphasizing practices which pacify suffering and negativities, while Chod emphasizes cutting through the root of mind as a means for eradicating clinging." (Sorensen, 2013).

[9] "differing only in the substitution of an unknown lineage or text referred to as the *Kagyu Meaning of Chod* (Bka' brgyud don gcod) for Aryadeva's *The Great Poem*. "However, Kongtrul is not consistent in which texts he includes as relevant precursors to the Chod system. For example, he does not include the Bka' brgyud don gcod in his collection of Chod texts in the *Treasury of Instructions*, but he does include Aryadeva's *The Great Poem*." (Sorensen (2013: 47).

[10] "This text [the Great Poem] is frequently associated with Chod by later authors, including Karma chags med and Jamgön Kongtrül, as a precursor to Machik's Chod teachings, or as a (or even *the*) "root text" for Chöd. This piece of philosophical prose was transmitted to Tibet by Āryadeva's nephew, Padampa Sangyé, who traversed the area giving his teachings on Zhijé. The recitation of this text to Machik by Padampa Sangyé may have been the transmission of the teaching that became the basis of the Chöd tradition." (Sorensen: 2013: 47).

[11] Sorensen explains that: "Threngwo Tertön Sherab Ozer (Phreng bo gter ston Shes rab 'od zer) (1517-1584) classified Chod as one of the "Eight Great Chariots, Lineages of Spiritual Accomplishment" (sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad), independent transmissions that have historically flourished in Tibet. This classification was later picked up by Jamgon Kongtrul ('Jam mgon kong sprul lo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899) and provided a guiding principle for his *Treasury of Instructions*. Unlike several of the others, most notably the tenet systems (chos lugs) of Nyingma (Rnying ma), Kagyü (Bka' brgyud), Sakya (Sa skya), and Kadam (Bka' gdams), Chod did not retain its independent status."

[12] "It is often claimed that Chod is found in all four of the dominant tenet systems, i.e. the Geluk, Sakya, Nyingma and Kagyu; however, unless one wants to draw parallels between Sakya Ku sa li'i tshogs bsags practice and the Chod offering of the aggregates, there is little evidence of Chod praxis in the Sakya tradition. Chod may not have survived as an independent tradition because it never developed an institutional apparatus; rather, it became assimilated into the prevailing tenet systems. One could argue that the development of an institutional apparatus is anathema to the internal logic of Chod, which, like other yoga or practice traditions, does not lend itself to regimented organization. Yet Chod does have a kind of independent status when one considers the existence of Chodpas—practitioners of Chod—for whom Chod is their principal practice." (Sorensen, 2013).

[13] These lineages are listed in Lodro Rinpoche (2007: 15-21): *Lineage of the Sutra Tradition* (do lug gyü pa) Buddha Shakyamuni Maitripa Asanga Vasubandhu Aryadeva Dampa Sangye etc.

Long Sutra Lineage (ring gyü) Prajñāparamita Buddha Shakyamuni Mañjushri (Mer.seng, "Lion of Speech") Green Tara Sukhasiddhi Aryadeva Dampa Sangye Kyotön Sönam Lama Machig Labdrön P Jetsün Zilnan Gyalwa Döndrub (Machig's elder blood son) Khugom Chökyi Senge bKa' bab bu chen bcu drug—the Sixteen Great Sons of the Lineage of Descended Word— and the 108 Lineage Holders Labdül Dorje Drölma Penchen Dönyö Dorje Second Karmapa, Drubchen Karma Pakshi Kyedrub Urgyenpa Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje Künga Namgyal Karma Chagme

Long Lineage of the Mantra Tradition (ngag lug ring gyü) Prajñāparamita Vajradhara Buddha Shakyamuni Mañjushri Sukhasiddhi Aryadeva Dampa Sangye

Father Lineage of Skillful Means (pha gyü) Buddha Shakyamuni Rabjor Kungao (Arhat Ananda) Nagarjuna Aryadeva

Mother Lineage of Wisdom (ma gyü) Prajñāparamita, Green Tara, Sukhasiddhi, Dampa Sangye, Machig Labdrön,

Lineage of Absolute Meaning (dön gyi gyü) Buddha Shakyamuni, Mañjushri, Green Tara Machig Labdrön...

Close Lineage of the Mantra Tradition (ngag lug nye gyü) Vajradhara Green Tara Machig Labdrön Thönyön Samdrub (Machig's younger blood son)

Close Lineage of Lamas (nye gyü la ma) Vajrayogini, Machig Labdrön, Kambu Yale, Drubchen Yeshe Barwa.

Close Lineage of the Sutra Tradition (do lug nye gyü) Gyalwa Döndrub (Machig's elder blood son) Nyenjung Lotsawa Drapa Harten Kambu Yale

Lineage of Chöd Explanation (chö thri gyü pa) Togden Yeshe Barwa, Rangjung Dorje (3rd Karmapa), Yungtönpa, Rolpei Dorje (4th Karmapa), Togden Kacho Wangpo, Dezhin Shekpa (5th Karmapa), Ratnabhadra, Tongwa Dönden (6th Karmapa), Jampal Zangpo, Sangye Nyenpa (1st), Mikyö Dorje (8th Karmapa) Künchog Yenlag, Wangchug Dorje (9th Karmapa), Chökyi Wangchug, Künga Namgyal, Karma Chagme (and continuing through the general Kagyü and Nyingma lineages until the present guru).

[14] This is called the '*Close Lineage of Lamas*' (nye gyü la ma): Vajrayogini, Machig Labdrön, Kambu Yale, Drubchen Yeshe Barwa (in Lodro Rinpoche (2007)). For an interesting and extensive discussion on the connection between Machig and Vajrayogini, see Sorensen (2013: 107-125). This subject is worthy of a separate post in its own right.

[15] For an extensive overview of the namthar/life-story sources on Machig Labdrön, see Sorensen (2013:62-66).

[16] "According to several traditional sources, at some point fairly early in her career Machig met and received teachings from the Indian yogi Padampa Sangyé (Pha Dam pa Sangs rgyas, d. 1117), the well-known teacher of Zhijé, a Buddhist tradition of teachings focused on the pacification of suffering. It has become standard to attribute the transmission of the Chöd lineage from Dampa to Machig, although there is little material evidence that such a transmission took place. Frequently invoked in support of this argument is a prose work by Āryadeva the Brahmin, Dampa's maternal uncle, *The Great Poem on the Prajñāpāramitā* (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa tshigs su bcad pa chen mo or the Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa man ngag), and considered to be a "root text" (gzhung rtsa) for several Chod lineages that would develop later. Alternate versions of the Chod transmission history suggest that the teachings were passed from Dampa to Machig's teacher, Sönam Lama, and then to her." (Sorensen (2013)).

[17] This is stated in the oral biography of Machig Labdrön by Lodro Rinpoche (2007: 13): "While the teachings of the Buddha had been faithfully carried from India to Tibet and elsewhere, never before had any tradition been transmitted from Tibet to India. Machig's Chod of Mahamudra transmission was the first time in history that a valid source of Dharma went from Tibet to India. Thus, such a great

being, Machig Labdron, was the first lineage holder, and this unbroken lineage continues until the present guru.”

[18] Sorensen (2013:5-6): “Extant texts that are traditionally directly associated with Machig include *The Great Speech Chapter*, the textual tradition of the oral instructions of the profound Chöd of the Prajñāpāramitā (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa zab mo gcod kyi man ngag gi gzhung bka’ tshoms chen mo, or the Bka’ tshoms chen mo), *The Supplementary Chapter of Oral Instructions of the Prajñāpāramitā* (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa’i man ngag yang tshoms zhus lan ma, or the Yang tshoms), *The Quintessential Chapter of the Chöd System of Negative Forces*, *The Instructions of the Prajñāpāramitā* (Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa’i man ngag [s]nying tshoms chos kyi rtsa ba, or the Snying tshoms), *The Common Eightfold Supplementary Section* (Thun mong gi le lag brgyad), *The Uncommon Eightfold Supplementary Section* (Thun mong ma yin pa’i le’u lag brgyad pa), and *The Distinctive Eightfold Supplementary Section* (Khyad par gyi le lag brgyad pa). Of these, *The Great Speech Chapter* is the only one that can presently be historically situated through the existence of an annotated outline and a commentary ascribed to the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje). In Rangjung Dorjé’s Commentary on the *Great Speech Chapter* (Bka’ tshoms chen mo tikka), he mentions texts by Machig which may no longer be extant, including the Gnad them, Khong rgol, Gsang ba’i brda’ chos, as well as a Nang ngo sprod. Rdza rong bla ma also mentions the Gnad them, Gsang ba’i brda’ chos and Nang ngo sprod, adding the Gzhi lam slong in his study entitled Gcod yul nyon mongs zhi byed kyi bka’ gter bla ma brgyud pa’i ram thar byin rlabs gter mtsho.”

[19] “In his *Zhije and Chod History*, Dharma Senge (Dharma sengge), a near contemporary with Jamgon Kongtrul, mentions teachings by others which bear similarities to Machig’s Chod teachings: the Khrul gcod gter ma cycles of Orgyan Rinpoche (n.d.); the pure visions received by Thang stong rgyal po (1361-1485); a Chod teaching on offering the aggregates articulated by Rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje (1189-1258);⁵⁹ and the Ro snyoms teachings by Naropa (70a).”

[20] “*The Wisdom Dākinī* (Ye shes mkha’ ‘gro ma), by Kunkhyen Jigme Lingpa (Kun mkhyen ‘jigs med gling pa), translated by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup and included Evans-Wentz, 1958 (1935), 276-341. See also Hermann-Pfandt 1990, which contains a discussion of this practice by Jigme Lingpa.” (Sorensen (2013: 8: fn. 5).

[21] Including *Contributo allo studio dell’insegnamento di Ma gcig lab sgron* (1987) and *Ma gcig: Canti Spirituali* (1995).

[22] Sorensen (2013) says: “Examples of this ahistoricism may be drawn from two recently published texts. The first is a 2006 publication of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche’s teachings on Chöd in the Ganden (dga’ ldan) tradition of the Gelukpa school. This text does distinguish the particular Chöd lineage that it follows, as well as its origination with Je Tsongkhapa (Rje Tsong kha pa Blo bzang Grags pa); however, other than a biography of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche, it provides little historical discussion of the tradition. David Molk, the editor of Zong Rinpoche’s text, writes that “[f]rom Khedrup Chöje (also known as Khedrub Chenpo Zhönu Drub), Je Tsongkhapa received the Chöd lineages that can be traced back through Machig Labdrön and Padampa Sangyé to Buddha Shakyamuni. Je Tsongkhapa also received teachings on Chöd directly from Manjushri. This visionary lineage is known as the Ganden Oral Lineage of Chöd. A ‘Dākinī’ oral lineage is also practiced in Gelug. Je Tsongkhapa passed the Chöd [sic] to only one of his disciples, Togden Jampel Gyatso, who was the principal holder of his Tantric Mahamudra lineage as well” (2006, 28). This discussion of “the Chöd” suggests that the Ganden tradition is the preeminent, or even singular, transmission of Chöd. Unfortunately, such obscuration of Chöd’s history is common to many such practice texts.” The second text is that of Lodro Rinpoche (2007), see footnote below.

[23] Sorensen (2013:14-15): “Unfortunately, Lodrö Rinpoche does not explain why these texts are qualified as “Mahāmudrā” (rather than, for example, Prajñāpāramitā). Given that the text does not provide a teaching lineage originating with either Padampa Sangyé or Machik in narrative (although one can use the supplied tables to piece together an unbroken lineage), the characterization of Machik’s teaching as specifically “Mahāmudrā” appears to be somewhat partisan. Lodrö Rinpoche later repeats the ubiquitous claim that “(w)hile the teachings of the Buddha had been faithfully carried from India to Tibet and elsewhere, never before had any tradition been transmitted from Tibet to India. Machik’s Chöd of Mahamudra transmission was the first time in history that a valid source of Dharma went from Tibet to India. Thus, such a great being, Machik Labdrön, was the first lineage holder, and this unbroken lineage continues until the present guru” (2007, 13). As I discuss later in this study, the identification of Chöd with Mahāmudrā does not originate with Machik herself, but is a historical development of the transmission of her teachings.”

[24] “The importance of Rangjung Dorjé in the Chöd tradition is attested to by his appearance in a range of lineage texts. In the colophon for Rangjung Dorjé’s Zab mo bdud kyi gcod yul khyi khrid yig, which the author alternatively refers to as the Gcod kyi don bsodus ba’i tshigs su bcad pa rdzogs, the transmission lineage provided begins with the Buddha and continues with Mañjuśrī (Mañjuśrī), through to Aryadeva, Padampa Sangyé, Machik Labdrön, Kham bu ya le, Dznya na dzwa la, Nam mtsho and finally to Rangjung Dorjé. This transmission lineage from the Buddha to Rangjung Dorjé is the same as the one given in the Ring brgyud gsol ‘debs. However, it differs from that included in The Blue Annals, which suggests that the lineage through Kham bu ya le is then transmitted into the Gangspa line—to Tönyon Samdrub (aka Sham po Gangspa, the first Gangspa), to Gangspa Rmug sang and Gangspa Dmu yan, and then to Gangspa Lhun grub. A number of other lineage texts position Rangjung Dorjé as an important inheritor of the Chöd tradition.” (Sorensen (2013:100).

[25] “Lineage supplications are so informative—and so confusing. This one is not mentioned in Kongtrul’s Catalog, except perhaps as one of the branches (yan lag rnam bcas) of *Source of All Qualities*, leading the editor of the table of contents of the Kundeling printing to assume that it belongs with the Zurmang feast activities. While that may be the case, it does not represent the Zurmang long lineage. That supplication can be found in *Source of All Qualities*, where it is attributed to Samten Rinchen of Lhapu. And the same one is used as the basis for the whole story of the lineage in the history of Zurmang, where it is also called the “supplication of the Severance lineage gurus by Bengar Jampal Zangpo.” That version and the one in *Source of All Qualities* are identical, despite the differing author identification. The version here may have been added to that liturgy to ensure that all relevant lineages were duly honored.” From Tsadra Foundation website: https://dnz.tsadra.org/index.php/Wylie:Ring_brgyud_kyi_gsol_%27debs_ma_gcig_gis_mdzad_par_ban_sgar_%27jam_dpal_bzang_pos_kha_bskang_ba

[26] The Bengar Zangpo long lineage is as follows: Bhagavan Śākyamuni, Mañjuśrī, Āryadeva, Padampa Sangyé, Machik Labdrön, Kham bu ya le, (Jñāna) dzwa, Great One (chen po) of Sky Lake, 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé, G-yung ston chen po, Fourth Karmapa, Rol pa rdo rje, Ri khrod dbang phyug, 2nd Zhamarpa, Mkha’ spyod dbang po, Fifth Karmapa, De bzhin gshegs pa, Rin chen bzang po, Sixth Karmapa, Mthong ba don ldan, ‘Jam dpal bzang po, Seventh Karmapa, Chos grags rgya mtsho, ‘Jam dpal rgya mtsho, Chos kyi rgya mtsho, Yangs shog lhe pa blo bdeDpag bsam dbang po, Phun tshogs bstan ‘dzin, Bstan ‘dzin dar rgyas, Rin chen dbang po, Chos kyi dbang po, Eight Zhwa dmar, Chos kyi don grub, Eighth Si tu Pan chen, Chos kyi ‘byung gnas, Eighth Karmapa, Ninth Si tu Pan chen, Padma nyin byed dbang po, ‘Jam mgon kon sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas, Fifteenth Karmapa, Mkha’ khyab rdo rje, Bkra’ shis ‘od zer, Eleventh Si tu Pan chen, Padma dbang mchog, Jamgön Kongtrül, Mkhyen brtse’i ‘od zer, root guru.

[27] It is also similar yet different from the lineage supplication by Tāranātha in *The Required Liturgies on the Occasion of Master Tāranātha's Severance Empowerment of Opening the Door to the Sky in the Gyaltang Tradition*. This has been translated by Sarah Harding and published on the Jonang Foundation website here: http://www.jonangfoundation.org/sites/default/files/jf_taranatha_chod_02.pdf?. Harding has not included any reference to textual sources nor the original Tibetan in this translation though.

[28] See Lodro Rinpoche (2007: 20) *Lineage of Chöd Explanation*: (chö thri gyü pa): Togden Yeshe Barwa, Rangjung Dorje (*Karmapa*), Yungtönpa, Rolpei Dorje (*Karmapa*), Togden, Kacho Wangpo, Dezhin Shekpa (*Karmapa*), Ratnabhadra, Tongwa Dönden (*Karmapa*), Jampal Zangpo, Sangye Nyenpa, Mikyö Dorje (*Karmapa*), Künchog Yenlag, Wangchug Dorje (*Karmapa*), Chökyi Wangchug, Künga Namgyal, Karma Chagme (*and continuing through the general Kagyü and Nyingma lineages until the present guru*)

[29] According to Rossi-Filibeck states that “The Karma pa masters received the gCod teaching from the Gañs pa masters, so named from the Śam po or Śam bu'i gañs hermitage, and they in their turn had received it from Thod smyon bsam grub, a Gcod master” (1983, 48).

[30] “How could Bengar Jampal Zangpo, who lived in the fifteenth century, have written such a contemporary addendum, let alone Machik Lapdrön? One scenario is that Machik uttered a prayer to her lineage using the place-and-name format, beginning with, “In the palace of dharmadhātu in Akaniṣṭha, the Great Mother Perfection of Wisdom has blessings” and ending with her teacher Kyotön Sönam Lama (who is in fact skipped over here, although he is named in the Zurmang version). Then the well-known author Bengar Jampal Zangpo picked up the trope and continued it up through his guru, the Sixth Karmapa, Tongwa Dönden (1416–1453). After that, the prayer in all its various forms came to be known simply as Bengar's supplication. Jamgön Kongtrul himself must have continued the supplication style through to his teacher Pema Nyinje before the blocks were printed at Palpung. From Kongtrul on, the last stretch may have been added for the Shechen printing of the Treasury. Variations of this style can also be found in the Kagyu Feast Liturgy and Kongtrul's supplication *Essence of Auspicious Renown* in this volume, as well as in the popular Severance compilation known as *Precious Garland* (Rin chen phreng ba).” From Tsadra Foundation website: https://dnz.tsadra.org/index.php/Wylie:Ring_brgyud_kyi_gsol_%27debs_ma_gcig_gis_mdzad_par_ban_sgar_%27jam_dpal_bzang_pos_kha_bskang_ba

[31] Āryadeva (fl. 3rd century CE) (Tibetan འཕགས་པ་ལྷ་, 'Phags-pa-lha), was a disciple of Nagarjuna and author of several important Mahayana Madhyamaka Buddhist texts. He is also known as Kanadeva, recognized as the 15th patriarch in [Chan Buddhism](#), and as “Bodhisattva Deva” in Sri Lanka. He is known for his association with the Nalanda monastery in modern-day Bihar, India

[32] Dingri Langkhor (Ding ri Glang 'khor) was founded by Padampa Sanggye in 1097. It was the site where he is said to have first taught Machig Labdron.

[33] Zangri Khangmar; The Red Citadel (Khangmar) is thus called because it was built upon a red rock, at the southern extremity of the Copper Mountain (Zangri), overlooking the northern banks of the Tsangpo river. On the cliff-face to the west of the temple (which was destroyed by the Chinese) is Machik Labdron's meditation cave.

[34] Kham bu la ye (P3315), a student of 'Jam dbyang mgon po and teacher of Thod smyon la ston.

[35] This is a pure realm of Noble Tara.

[36] TBRC P10180 lists a Lam 'bras master, (Mi nyag) Pra dznyA dzwa la, b. 12th c. TBRC P5293 is for (Khri thang) DznyA na, 11th c.

[37] Sorensen (2013: 83) states she cannot identify this person with certainty. However, it could be a famous Drigung Kagyu master, Chennga Namtsowa (spyang snga gnam mtsho ba) who was born in Drigung and received teachings from the founder of Drigung Kagyu, Jigten Gonpo: "After he finished his main period of studies, Jikten Gonpo instructed him to meditate near Namtso Lake (gnam mtsho). While there, he was said to have left footprints on a rock near a cave called Chonzhi (cong bzhi phug). It was from this activity that he earned the title "Namtso Lake," by which he is known to history. " See: <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Chennga-Namtsowa/13233>

[38] 3rd Karmapa, [Rangjung Dorje](#) (1284-1339) This is the point that Chod enters the Karma Kamtsang lineage. <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Third-Karmapa-Rangjung-Dorje/9201>

[39] G-yung ston chen po. P1454, 1296-1376 , was a student of 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje and teacher of 4th Karmapa, Rolpai Dorje and "received all the key instructions and transmissions of the lineage in full and attained highest realization. He practiced in Tibet and also in Paro, Bhutan for years. He composed a text differentiating the views of buddhahood in Sutra and Tantra and impressed and outshined many great scholars of the time, such as Yakde Panchen, who became his students. He manifested as a hidden yogi and benefited many sentient beings. At the age of eighty-two, in the Wood Snake Year, he passed into parinirvana with many great signs of realization. Among countless students, his main disciple and lineage holder was the Fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje. It is said that: "Before travelling to Central Tibet in 1352, at the age of 12, Rölpe Dorje met Yungtönpa, who was now approximately 56 years old. The young man told him many events from his former life as the Third Karmapa, which convinced Yungtönpa that Rölpe Dorje was the authentic reincarnation of his most revered Root Guru. Having told Yungtönpa that he himself would be his teacher and Guru in this life, Gyalwa Yungtönpa imparted all the teachings and gave Rölpe Dorje the entire empowerments and transmissions of the Kagyü Oral Practice and Whispering Lineages. The next Lineage-holder, Rölpe Dorje, the Fourth Gyalwa Karmapa, was 36 years old when his Guru, Yungtönchenpo, passed into Parinirvana at the age of 82."

[40] 4th Karmapa, [Rolpe Dorje](#) (1340-83) Rol pa rdo rje P1456.

[41] Sorensen is not able to identify this person, but it is possible that he is a Drigung Kagyu master, Palden Rithro Wangchug (dPal-Idan Ri-khrod-dbang-phyug), who was a disciple of Jigten Gonpo (rJig-rten mGon-po), the founder of the Drigungpa ('Brigung-pa) sect. P7850. Sorensen (2013): "The next figure in this transmission lineage is an individual about whom little is known, Ri khrod dbang phyug; we are told that he received the teachings while at the Victorious Inner Abode Charnel Grounds, which might be a reference to Gnas nang ri khrod, one of the ten charnel grounds at the Geluk Sera Je (Se ra byes) institution."

[42] 2nd Zhamarpa, Mkha' spyod dbang po, (1350-1405) P1413,.

[43] 5th Karmapa, [Dezhin Shegpa](#), De bzhin gshegs pa. (1384 – 1415). P1410.

[44] Rin chen bzang po. Ratnabhadra/Rin chen dpal (TBRC P1416); ca. 15th c Student of 5th Karmapa, Dezhin Shegpa.. He was a teacher of 6th Karmapa.

[45] 6th Karmapa, Mthong ba don Idan (1416-1453), P1006.

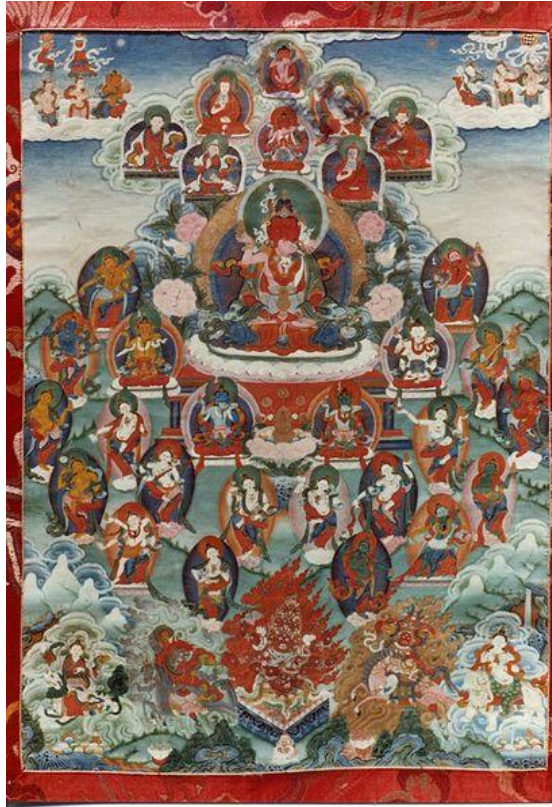
[46] Bengar Jampel Zangpo. Jam dpal bzang po P467; b. 15th c.

- [47] 7th Karmapa, [Chodrag Gyatso](#) (Chos grags rgya mtsho) (1454-1506) P821.
- [48] Jampel Gyatso (1356-1428) P2077. 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho was an early Geluk master and a close disciple of Rje Tsong kha pa. It would appear that the transmission lineage then enters the Geluk tradition.' (Sorensen: 2013).
- [49] Chos kyi rgya mtsho. Unidentified.
- [50] Yangs shog lhe pa blo bde. Unidentified.
- [51] Dpag bsam dbang po. Possibly P877, 1593-1641. Sorensen (2013): "Pagsam Wangpo (Dpag bsam dbang po) might be the same figure as the Fifth 'Brug chen and thus an incarnation of Pema Karpo (Padma dkar po); however, I am not confident with this identification, since the figures immediately preceding and following him in this lineage list are unknown to me at this time."
- [52] Phun tshogs bstan 'dzin. Unidentified.
- [53] Tenzin Dargye (Bstan 'dzin dar rgyas) Sorensen (2013): "this Bstan 'dzin dar rgyas may be one of the Tre ho incarnations of Shangs, although more research is required to authenticate this identity."
- [54] Rin chen dbang po. Unidentified.
- [55] Chos kyi dbang po. Unidentified.
- [56] The 8th Zhamarpa, Chokyi Dondrub (Dpal chen Chos kyi don grub). P955, (1695-1732).
- [57] The 8th Situ Panchen. Chokyi Jungne (Chos kyi 'byung gnas). P956, (1700-1774).
- [58] 13th Karmapa, Dudul Dorje (Bdud 'dul rdo rje). Sorensen (2013:85) identifies Dudul Dorje as the 8th Karmapa, [Mikyo Dorje](#) (1507-1554), however, this is incorrect. It is the 13th Karmapa P828, (1733/4-1797/8).
- [59] 10th Situpa, Padma nyin byed. P559, 1774-1853.
- [60] 1st Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, Blo gros mtha' ya. P264, 1813-1899/90. By collecting the works of minor lineages such as Chöd, 'Jam mgon kon sprul Blo gros mtha' yas was instrumental in keeping the tradition in scholarly memory.
- [61] 15th Karmapa, Mkha' khyab rdo rje. P563, 1870/1-1921/2.
- [62] Bkra' shis 'od zer. P1373, 1836-1910: student of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and 14th Karmapa, and a teacher of 15th Karmapa.
- [63] 11th Situpa, Padma dbang mchog. P925, 1886-1952.
- [64] 2nd Jamgon Kongtrul, Mkhyen brtse'i 'od zer. P937, 1904-1953/4.

Chapter Thirteen: Mandāravā

15th Karmapa on the 'Immortal Life-Essence Bindu' treasure: long-life practice of Padmasambhava and Mandāravā

[14th Aug 2020 Dākinī Translations](#)



71 Thangka of the Immortal Life-Essence Bindu (Chime Sogtig)

For Dākinī day today am happy to offer this article (and new translation) of the 15th Karmapa's lineage supplication, and information about his works on a treasure cycle, *Immortal Life-Essence Bindu*, the long-life practice of Guru Rinpoche and Mandāravā. (Scroll down for the translation, it can also be freely downloaded [here as a .pdf](#)).

Reading some of the Karmapas' *Collected Works* is a voyage of discovery of how amazingly diverse and rich their textual and spiritual legacy is, and how they were masters of many different practices and traditions. Such as the [8th Karmapa's compositions on the 'Single Intention'](#) of Drigung Jigten Gonpo. Other, not so well-publicised, facts about the Karmapas are their connection to treasure termas and treasure-revealers, such as Chogyur Lingpa (14th Karmapa). Recently, I translated a text by the 15th Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje, [Aspiration for the Prospering of Ultimate Meaning Teachings](#), which he composed at the suggestion of Zilnon Namkhe Dorje(*zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje*) (1868-20th c.)[\[i\]](#), a well-known twentieth century treasure-revealer. Zilnon revealed several treasures, two in particular, *Most Secret Activity Quintessence of Vajrakīlaya* (*rdo rje phur pa yang gsang phrin las bcud dril*), and the *Immortal Life-Essence Bindu* (Chime Sogtik/*chi med srog thig*) cycle.



72 Guru Padmasambhava and Mandāravā

According to Gyatrul Rinpoche^[ii]:

“The ‘Immortal Life-Essence Bindu’ originated at the time of Guru Rinpoche, who traveled to Nepal with his Indian consort, Mandāravā, in order to accomplish immortality. They went to the cave way up in the mountains in Nepal, the famous long life Maratika cave. There in the cave they practiced for three years this particular method [...]. After three years they achieved immortality, passing beyond death. The practice is very, very profound. While Guru Rinpoche and Mandāravā were in the cave practicing, Buddha Amitayus, the Buddha of Long Life, actually came and gave the empowerment, transmissions, and teachings to them directly. The directness of his presence was just like pouring water from a full vase into an empty one. It was not a dream.

After three years of retreat, practicing the long life methods in the cave, the two of them, Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) and Mandāravā his consort, both achieved the state of Buddha Amitayus: immortality. They passed out of the round of cyclic existence through the force of the practice to become fully enlightened. After this Guru Rinpoche travelled to Tibet, taking with him the scripture of the teachings that had been given to him by Amitayus. In Tibet, he then decided to bury the teachings as a terma, and prophesized the time of its revelation, and the details surrounding that revelation. He gave the full transmissions to two of his main disciples, who were two of the original twenty-five disciples. One of them was Vairocana, and the other Nanam Dorje Dudjom. Afterwards, the termas were concealed physically as well as within the minds of the disciples.”

Two lineages – 15th Karmapa and Dudjom Rinpoche



73 15th Karmapa. Khakhyab Dorje

Zilnon Namkhe Dorje then subsequently transmitted the terma to two of his main students, first to the 15th Karmapa and then after that, to Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdral Yeshe Dorje (1904-1987).

The 15th Karmapa lineage of *Immortal Life-Essence* was passed from Karmapa to his son, the second Jamgon Kongtrul, who passed it onto 16th Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje. I am assuming that this was then passed on to other Karma Kagyu lamas but have been unable to ascertain to whom and when. I will update this if and when I have more details.

This research post aims to give a little more detail about the texts composed by the 15th Karmapa on these two treasures, with a small catalogue I have compiled from his *Collected Works*[\[iii\]](#). I have also included a new translation of the 15th Karmapa's short *Immortal Life-Essence Bindu Lineage Supplication Prayer*, which is recited at the beginning of practices connected to the cycle. None of the sadhanas or commentaries have been translated since they are restricted material and require empowerment and transmission from a qualified teacher. First, some information about the revelation of the treasures.

Most Secret Activity Quintessence of Vajrakīlaya treasure



74 Vajrakīlaya

In 1902, on the northern part of Pemakö, southeast Tibet, on the slopes of the mountain Namchak Barwa, Zilnön Namkhé Dorjé revealed a Vajrakīlaya practice called *Most Secret Activity Quintessence of Vajrakīlaya*. The terma revelation consisted of an image of Vajrakīlaya and *Ḍākinī* script on a yellow scroll (shog ser). Why this Kīlaya treasure was revealed first and not the *Immortal Life-Essence*, is various, according to Dudjom Rinpoche in his commentary, the reason why the longevity cycle would be included in a Kīlaya cycle is because it is very important to dispel obstacles before embarking on a longevity practice. He compares it to a situation to protecting crops from harm, or a travelling merchant needing an armed escort to accompany him. This is why longevity practices are frequently combined with wrathful deities like Hayagriva and Kīlaya[\[iv\]](#).

Immortal Life-Essence Bindu treasure



75 Lion Fortress (Senge Dzong) where the Immortal Life-Essence treasure was publicly revealed by Zilnon Namkha Dorje

In 1904, in the Mönkha Sengey Dzong[\[v\]](#), the ‘[Mon Kha Lion Fortress’ cave](#) of Yeshe Tsogyal associated with her Vajrakīlaya practice, in Bhutan[\[vi\]](#), Zilnön Namkhe Dorje revealed the *Immortal Life-Essence Bindu* terma as an ancillary practice of the *Most Secret Activity Quintessence of Vajrakīlaya* . According to Gyatrul Rinpoche:

“At the end of the 19th century, these two disciples, [Vairochana and Nanam Dorje Dudjom reincarnated] in the form of one lama who was a great Tertön, known as Zilnön Namkai Dorje. Zilnön Namkai Dorjé went to Bhutan to the practice cave of Ḍākinī Yeshe Tsogyal where he found this terma by pulling it out from behind a rock in the cave. This was not done in secrecy, but rather as a public treasure. This means that when it was revealed, it was revealed in the presence of many hundreds of people. All the people came to witness the revelation, at which time rainbows appeared in the sky, the sound of roaring dragons reverberated throughout space along with countless other wonders. Then for many years he kept the terma secret. It was meant to be revealed for the first time to the terma’ s owner. That owner was Dudjom Rinpoche.”

This is partly incorrect as it fails to mention that it was first transmitted to the 15th Karmapa. Although the *Immortal Essence* is an ancillary practice to those in the main treasure of Vajrakīlaya , it is said that in the twentieth century its textual corpus grew to such an extent that as to rather overshadow the texts of the original cycle within which it is contained[\[vii\]](#).

It is said that ‘the place where Senge Dzong is located is filled with mysterious and inexplicable features such as Guru Kurjey (the body image of Guru), imprint of Khandro Yeshey Tshogyal on a rock, another rock where Guru imprisoned 108 mythical Garudas (bird like creatures) who wanted to fill the world with chaos and disorders.’ (For more details see [here](#)). Let us not forget that these great beings practised in caves without access to any modern comforts (hot showers, internet, clothes, phones etc.) at all!

Immortal Life-Essence Texts

The first two texts from the *Immortal Life-Essence* terma were composed by Zilnon Namkhe Dorje :

- A daily sadhana, condensed version of the practice (Tshe drub yang zab snying po) in the Wood Dragon Year (1904), and
- the main ritual manual (Las byang), composed in 1908.

Afterwards, he transmitted it to the 15th Karmapa who composed texts on it in the 1910s. Those written by Karmapa within his own *Collected Works* take up almost three-quarters of a volume:

- An extensive empowerment manual
- A medium empowerment manual
- A concise empowerment manual
- A tormo empowerment manual
- Supplementary Notes
- A daily *Immortal Life Bindu* Sadhana based on the pure vision of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo
- Recollected notes on the *Immortal Life Bindu* Sadhana based on the pure vision of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

Those composed by the Karmapa included within the *Collected Works of Dudjom Rinpoche* [\[viii\]](#) are :

- Lineage Supplication Prayer
- Main empowerment text
- Longevity empowerment Text
- Two fulfilment practices
- Short fulfillment recitation (*skong ba*)
- Short recitation for elixir offerings

May this short article and new translation be of benefit in preserving and promoting the teachings of the 15th Karmapa, and the treasures of the *Immortal Life-Essence Bindu*. May all attain enlightenment and immortality!

Music? [Dākinī Mandāravā Song](#) by Amrit Stein and [Angels](#) by Robbie Williams.

Written and translated by Adele Tomlin, August 2020.

Billowing Clouds of Siddhis: Supplication to the Immortal Life-Essence Bindu Lineage

By 15th Karmapa



76 Amitayus in union with consort, Chandali

oṃ āh huṃ hrīh

From the space-like dharmadhātu, vast pure realm

In the palace of the unique, immortal bindu

I supplicate Bhagavan Amitayus,

May we attain the long-life empowerment of unchanging primordial-wisdom!

The syllable EH in the centre of blissful dharmadoya realm

In the mandala of the perfected sambhoghakaya of four joys

I supplicate Bhagavan Chandali[\[9\]](#),

May we attain the long-life empowerment, naturally without cessation!

In the totally pure appearance, Lotus-Net realm

In the palace of Lotus Light[\[x\]](#)

I supplicate Sugata Thothreng Tsal [Padmasambhava],

May we attain the long-life empowerment of stainless deathlessness!

In the vast, all-pervasive realm of Samantabhadra

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

In the palace of the coiled bliss-emptiness bindu
I supplicate Machig Tshogyel [Yeshe Tshogyel],
May we attain the long-life empowerment of the immortal vajra!

In the form of an immortal vase, stainless, beyond intellect,
In the mandala of the expanding, all-embracing primordial-awareness
Vairocana[xi] and Dorje Dudjom[xii],
I supplicate, please bestow the siddhi of immortality!

In the pure realm compassionate display for those who need to be tamed
To the supreme Dharma Lord of ordinary beings of great fortune
Who transmits the oral lineage and more,
I supplicate, may we spontaneously accomplish the two benefits!

In the dharmakāya expanse, primordially pure, essence luminous-clarity
The nature of the unceasing, immortal divine mandala
To the compassionate expressive display of speech and words
I supplicate, may the great blessings of long-life empowerment descend!

To the mandala of the three roots and root lineage gurus
By the blessings of this devoted supplication
May we complete the generation and perfection stages of the path, and
The flawed body be liberated to the form of luminous immortality!

May the ripening of the bindu of great bliss that purifies the moving winds
Accomplish the vajra primordial awareness that conquers the 'demon' of dualistic clinging
And attain the long-life empowerment, the primordial nature of immortality!

As long as space continues uninterruptedly, without possession
May Amitayus, indivisible from Buddha's
activity of unceasing, compassionate display,

Bestow the blessing power of ripening and liberating wanderer's realms!

Translated, edited and compiled by Adele Tomlin, August 2020. Ḍākinī Publications, copyright.

ENDNOTES

[i] See also his profile at [TBRC P2746](#).

[ii] Gyatrul Rinpoche, *Chimed Tsog Thik: The Abbreviated Practice of the Immortal Essence*, Los Angeles May, 1985.

[iii] One of the main academic English language source published on these two treasures, is that of *The Creation and Transmission of a Textual Corpus in the Twentieth Century: The 'Chi med srog thig'*, by Cantwell and Mayer (2010) which has been very useful for some of the biographical background but does not contain detailed bibliographical information on the texts composed by 15th Karmapa. Rigpa Shedra has also published some online information about it, however, there are some errors, which this post corrects. Since writing this I was kindly informed by Cantwell that there is a new book recently published that contains a chapter on this cycle, [Dudjom Rinpoche's Vajrakīlaya Works: A Study in Authoring, Compiling, and Editing Texts in the Tibetan Revelatory Tradition \(University of Oxford, 2020\)](#). Sadly, I do not have a copy of this book but I will update the information on here when I can read the relevant material in it.

[iv] Ibid., p67.

[v] Fifth of the eight sacred places in Tibet and Bhutan blessed by Guru Padmasambhava for the practice of the Eight Herukas, Monkha Senge Dzong (mon kha seng ge rdzong) is the place related to the Heruka of the Activities Family, Vajrakīlaya, where Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal attained realization.

[vi] I had the good fortune to visit this place in 2019.

[vii] According to Dasho Karma Ura in *Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal, and the Sacred Geography of Bhutan* (2017)[vii]:

“In the Chimi sogthig ritual (Cantwell & Mayer, 2008), his recovery included examination of (1) the decline of life force and breath, (2) the loss of body and mood, (3) the interruption in the subtle neurological, respiratory and libido processes (rtsa-rlung-thigle) (Dudjom 1999: pp. 110-122). Accordingly, a comprehensive method of recovering longevity encompasses five elements (Samuel, 2008b): (1) ritual seeking jinlab (byin rlaps) from the assembly of Amitayus Buddhas and protector deities; (2) burnt offerings to the fire gods of wisdom (yeshey kyi me lha); (3) casting away of effigies of scapegoat as substitutes for meat, blood and life force to repurchase bla and life force (sha rin khrag tsab srog gi glud, see Dudjom 1999: 354); (4) consumption of herbal pharma products and other essences such as that of minerals (Dudjom 1999: 449-450); (5) the ultra secret practice of union following sbyor dnyos rje gsum (Dudjom 1999: 492-506); (6) longevity blessing (tse dbang), and (7) psycho-physical yogic exercise to work on subtle parts of neurological, respiratory and libido systems; and, more importantly, (8) visualisation and meditation that activates perceptual mechanism in a different way and reorients consciousness. In the case of longevity blessings with longevity nectar ('chimed rdud tsi), longevity arrow-silk (tse dhar) and longevity pill (tse ril), the recipient visualizes Amitayus blessing the recipient with healing power and energy through the performing lama.”

[viii] For more on the Dudjom lineage and his works, see Cantwell and Mayer (2010) and Gyatrul Rinpoche (1985).

[9] The consort of Buddha Amitayus.

[x] The Palace of Lotus Light (pad+ma 'od) is the abode of Guru Rinpoche on the Copper-Coloured Mountain, in Ngayab Ling. It is said to be described in Jigme Lingpa's *Prayer to be Reborn in Zangdokpalri*, or in Tulku Zangpo Drakpa's terma, *The Prayer in Seven Chapters*.

[xi] Vairochana (rnam par snang mdzad) is the chief buddha of the Buddha family, or the great Dzogchen master and translator, Vairotsana. Zilnon Namkhe Dorje was considered to be an emanation of him.

[xii] Nanam Dorje Dudjom (sna nam rdo rje bdud 'joms) (8th-9th cent.) was one of King Trisong Detsen's ministers, sent to Nepal to invite Padmasambhava to Tibet. He became one of Guru Rinpoche's main twenty-five disciples. When receiving empowerment from Guru Rinpoche, his flower fell on the mandala of Vajrakīlaya. Through the practice he became an accomplished mantrika, who could fly with the speed of the wind and pass through solid rock. Zilnon Namkhe Dorje was considered to be an emanation of him. For his biography see https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Nanam_Dorje_Dudjom.

Catalogue of 15th Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje texts on the Termas: Most Secret Activity Quintessence of Vajrakīlaya and Immortality Life-Force Bindu

Volume Three

- ***Supplementary Notes to Long Life sādhana of Vajrakīlaya based on teachings of Jamgon Kongtrul***

gter gsar rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril gyi cha lag /tshe sgrub 'chi med srog thig gi zur 'debs 'chi med nor bu'i phreng ba – Vol.3: 211-266.

Supplementary notes to a long life sAdhana of Vajrakīlaya , based on teachings of 'jam mgon kong sprul and according to the rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril, a gter gsar of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje; written in 1916 at mtshur mdo, at the request of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje himself

- ***Extensive root-empowerment into the long life sādhana of Vajrakīlaya at request of Zilnon Namkhe Dorje***

gter gsar rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril gyi cha lag tshe sgrub 'chi med srog thig gi rtsa ba'i dbang bskur rgyas par phye ba 'chi med nor bu pad ma'i phreng ba – Vol.3: 267-466, 100 ff. (pp. 259-458).

Extensive root-empowerment into the long life sAdhana of Vajrakīlaya , according to zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje's gter gsar rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril; written in 1916 at the palace of mkha' spyod thugs kyi 'khor lo in mtshur phu, at the request of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje; edited by 'jam dpal tshul khriims.

- ***Middle-length empowerment into the long life sādhana of Vajrakīlaya***

gter gsar phur pa yang gsang bcud dril gyi cha lag tshe sgrub 'chi med srog tig gi dbang gi mtshams sbyor nyung ngur spros pa 'chi med nor bu'i bum bzang – Vol.3: 466-514.

middle-length empowerment into the long life sAdhana of Vajrakīlaya , according to the gter gsar rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje; written in 1911 at the request of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje himself.

- **Short empowerment into the long life *sādhana* of Vajrakīlaya**

gter gsar phur pa yang gsang bcud dril gyi cha lag tshe sgrub 'chi med srog tig gi tshe dbang snying po bsdus pa 'chi med chu rgyun – Vol.3: 515-540, 13 ff. (pp. 507-532)

Abridged empowerment into the long life sādhanā of Vajrakīlaya , according to the gter gsar rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje; written in 1913.

- **Torma empowerment into Vajrakīlaya**

rdo rje phur pa yang gsang phrin las bcud dril las/ gtor dbang ye shes spyi blug gi mtshams sbyor ye shes bcud 'bebs – Vol.3: 541-558, 9 ff. (pp. 533-550).

Torma empowerment into Vajrakīlaya , according to the rdo rje phur pa yang gsang phrin las bcud dril of zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje; written at the sgrub sde chen mo lhun grub pho brang of the mtshur mdo'i gan+d+ho la'i yang dben; edited by 'jam dpal tshul khriims

Volume Six

Daily Practice of Long-Life Mother, Pema Chandali based on pure vision of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

dag snang pad+ma tshe'i snying tig 'chi med tsaN+Da li'i sgrub thabs rgyun khyer du dril ba tshe dbang gter gyi bum bzang

tshe yum tsaN+Da li'i rgyun khyer, Vol. 6: 351-352, 1 f. (pp. 343-344).

Recollected notes on the sādhanā practice of Pema Chandali based on pure vision of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

dag snang 'chi med tsaNDa li'i sgrub thabs kyi zin bris bltas pas 'grub pa tshe dbang bcud 'dren – Vol. 6: 353-384, 16 ff. (pp. 345-376).

Recollected notes on the invocation of the sādhanā practice of padma tsaNDa li, based on a dag snang of pad+ma 'od gsal mdo sngags gling pa; written at the request of the sku zhabs of thim 'dzong pa.

From Dudjom Rinpoche's Collected Works (TBRC W20869), Volume 14 (Pha):

Billowing Clouds of Siddhis: Supplication to the Immortal Life-Essence Bindu Lineage

rdo rje phur pa yang gsang bcud dril gyi cha lag tshe sgrub 'chi med srog thig gi brgyud ba'i gsol 'debs dngos grub sprin phung / Vol.14: 158-159, TBRC W20869, 1 ff. (pp. 155-156).

Clouds of Indestructible Vajras: Fulfilment Ritual Text

'chi med tshe phrin gyi skong ba mi shigs rdo rje brtsegs ba'i sprin phung / Vol.14: 182-185, TBRC W20869, 2 ff. (pp.179-182). This shorter text is given as an alternative by Didjom Rinpoche to his own text.



77 Mandāravā

Here is the first English translation of *Praises to Mandāravā* composed by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. The idea to translate this text came a couple of days ago, from a female Dharma friend who felt there was not so much available in English about Mandāravā. So, having recently received the entire transmission of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's works (see [here](#)), I searched online and found two short compositions by Khyentse Wangpo offering praises to her.

On commencing this translation, I had an auspicious dream of Namkhai Norbu telling me that 'love and compassion are essential for Dharma practice' and without them it is empty and useless. As I have never had a dream with Namkhai Norbu in it, I took this as an extremely auspicious sign to do this translation and make available more of Mandāravā's sadhanas in the future too. Before discussing the textual sources (for the full translation scroll down to the end, or [download the .pdf here](#), first a little background about Mandāravā herself.

Music? [Dākinī Mandāravā Song](#) by Amrit Stein and [Angels](#) by Robbie Williams.

May we all attain the accomplishments and long-life of Mandāravā!

Written and translated by Adele Tomlin, 10th July 2020.

Mandāravā – mahasiddha demon-tamer who achieved immortality and rainbow body

Mandāravā was one of the great 8th century mahasiddhas and one of the main consorts of Guru Rinpoche. The ḍākinī Niguma, the founder of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage and the sister of Naropa, is considered a reincarnation of Mandāravā. Before meeting Padmasambhava, she was born into royalty and abandoned her life of privilege to become a nun and accomplished practitioner. There is a [complete biography](#) called *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandāravā* (see Bibliography below), a translation of the biography of her life given by Padmasambhava that was hidden as a treasure and later revealed by Samten Lingpa (for more on that see below). There is also shorter account of her life by scholar, Sarah Jacoby on the [Treasury of Lives site](#).

In the opening chapter of the biography by Padmasambhava (revealed by Samten Lingpa) it speaks about her names and life-stories:

“One of them, the lotus family Ḍākinī Natyendri, is a longevity Ḍākinī and pure awareness consort who took the form of a female known in the human world as Mandāravā.

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

“Unsurpassed in fame, she came into this world as a princess, yet was also famous as a realized being in the realm of the gods, where she propagated the teachings of secret mantra. In the realm of dakinis she disseminated an account of the lifestory of the Wisdom Garuda. In the land of Oddiyana, where ten thousand of her lifestory were propagated, she became famous as Dungmen Tsedzin, Conchshell Mistress of Life. Nine hundred chapters spread forth in the country of Zahor. In India, she was well known as Shrimala, Rosary of Splendor, and there one hundred chapters of her lifestory were spread forth. In the country of the eight tribes, she was known as Buddhi Tsomo, and five hundred and ten chapters of her lifestory were propagated. In the cold-blooded realm of the Nagas she was known as Maitri Shridevi, Glorious Goddess of Love, and one thousand chapters of her lifestory were disseminated there. Similarly, one hundred chapters of her lifestory were propagated in other continents, such as Maru Singhala, Tsoti Bigche, Lanka, Oddiyana, Bheta Soge, Shambhala, Kashmirakarabha, and the eight great charnel grounds. Until now, her names and lifestories of the past have not been revealed here in Tibet according to the wondrous level of absolute understanding. For posterity, I shall reveal the story of her lives and liberation in brief.”

As Prof. Janet Gyatso explains in her foreword to the Samten Lingpa biography:

“As already indicated, however, stories about Mandāravā had long been in circulation before the revelation of this particular version. They are often recounted in the course of relating the life of Padmasambhava. One of the earliest summaries of her lifestory is given in the 12th century treasure discoverer Nyangral Nyima Ozer’s hagiography of Padmasambhava. Other material can be found in the treasures of Orgyan Lingpa and Sangye Lingpa (both fourteenth century) and Padma Lingpa (fifteenth century); several other versions are referred to in the final pages of the current work. Scholars have not recognized any independent evidence from Indian sources of a woman named Mandāravā, not to mention any of the previous lives that are detailed in the current version of her story. Nonetheless the text contains allusions to a fascinating array of places and persons—some historical, some mythological— in the Indian subcontinent, and for the careful historian this work would surely provide many hints about the sacred geography and political actors of India’s tantric Buddhist period.”

Not just a ‘romance’ and pretty face

Interestingly, many of the online accounts (and general impression) of Mandāravā’s life, focus on her youth and physical beauty and being a consort of a great master, like a modern-day tale of a pretty woman who had some ‘romance’ and ‘union’ practice. Yet this does not do justice to her incredible spiritual accomplishments, will-power and courage. This was a woman who faced the wrath of her family and community, whom people persecuted repeatedly, tried to murder for her relationship with Guru Rinpoche and whom demons attacked and so on.

As Lama Ngawang Zangpo points out in [Guru Rinpoche: His Life and Times](#), it was not her status as consort that mattered but rather that she and Yeshe Tsogyal “were the best among Guru Rinpoche’s disciples, men or women; their inclusion in countless paintings and sculptures of the master is a tribute to their personal enlightenment during an era of social enlightenment.” [\[1\]](#)

Let us also not forget that Guru Rinpoche, himself was considered to be incredibly handsome physically (yet no so much is made of that in the online biographies of his life). An exception to this, is in *Crazy Wisdom*, included in [The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa, Volume 5](#), Trungpa Rinpoche describes the scene when Mandāravā met Guru Rinpoche:

“One day he visited a nunnery. At this particular nunnery lived a princess called Mandāravā, who had just recently become a nun and had completely turned away from worldly pleasure. She lived in seclusion, guarded by five hundred women, whose task was to make sure that she maintained her monastic discipline. When Padmasambhava arrived at the monastery, everyone was quite impressed with him—naturally. He had the innocence of one born from a lotus and a pure and ideal physique. He was very beautiful. He converted all the women in the nunnery: they all became his students.”

Both of the English-language biographies about Mandāravā were translated and composed by female scholar/translators. Reading the English language literature that is available, it is clear that there is a lot more to the life and character of Mandāravā than being a ‘pretty-faced’ consort doing union with Padmasambhava.

As Prof Janet Gyatso writes, the biography has a significantly womanist/pro-female flavour in many areas, in particular, being anti-marriage/family and portraying female power against attackers:

“The text’s pro-female orientation prefigures what in modern times would be called feminist. On several occasions, wittily playing on the widely-acknowledged preference for sons over daughters in Indian society, the text portrays the birth of a child attended by all the auspicious signs that lead everyone to assume that a son has been born. But no, it turns out that the child is a girl (chapters 4, 16). In another life, the parents even perform rituals so that they will have a son, but they too end up with a daughter—albeit one who clearly is just as blessed and saintly as any boy would be (chapter 10). The text nonetheless overtly recognizes the special limits upon females in samsara (see p. 106–7). Most remarkably, this work rejoins the lifestory of Yeshe Tsogyal in courageously engaging the too-often repressed topic of rape. In the case of Yeshe Tsogyal, the heroine transforms her rape by seven brigands into an opportunity to teach them about the tantric transformation of bliss.¹⁰ Mandāravā instead takes a more defiant stance by deliberately provoking the ridicule and aggression of a group of butchers, displaying herself as a beautiful but husbandless vagrant. When they taunt and then try to rape her, this becomes the excuse for her to manifest herself as a wrathful Ḍākinī in order to extract their vow to stop taking the lives of others and to enter the Buddhist path (chapter 34). In addition to showing the heroine as capable of overcoming her male tormentors, this episode subverts the stereotype of the vulnerability of any woman who lacks a husband.

In any event, a strong critique of the conventional institution of marriage pervades the entire text, particularly the section on Mandāravā. This theme is, of course, directly indebted to the monastic orientation of Buddhism overall, evident with respect to women as early as the Therīgāthā.¹¹ Like many of the women featured in that Pali account of the first Buddhist nuns, as well as many other female Buddhist heroines, Mandāravā’s rejection of marriage in favor of her desire to practice Buddhism is resisted by her parents. Thus her propensity for the Dharma simultaneously becomes the occasion for her separation from her parents. It also becomes the occasion for Mandāravā to lecture her maidservants on the uselessness not only of husbands, but also of class status and wealth—again very much in line with the overarching antimaterialist stance of the ascetic strand in Buddhism (chapter 20).

Mandāravā eventually wins her father’s approval to be a nun (her mother supports her daughter’s wishes more readily), but only after escaping from her parents’ home and finding a master to ordain her on her own. Her father still attempts to control Mandāravā and to enforce conventional morality by virtually imprisoning her in a retreat house, surrounded by nun attendants but strictly guarded against any male intrusions. The castle is nonetheless

penetrated by Padmasambhava, and for the rest of her life she follows the tantric path, rather than one of strictly celibate monasticism. Messages that subordinate the importance of family continue throughout the narrative, as when Padmasambhava lectures on the superiority of the Dharma over blood relatives (chapter 28). This irreverence for conventional norms and sexuality becomes almost humorous when, criticized again in another context for not having a husband, Mandāravā's mocking response is to create a multitude of manifestations of herself, all of whom proceed to join in sexual union with all of the men in her presence."

Immortality and the Maratika Cave



78 Guru Padmasambhava and Mandāravā

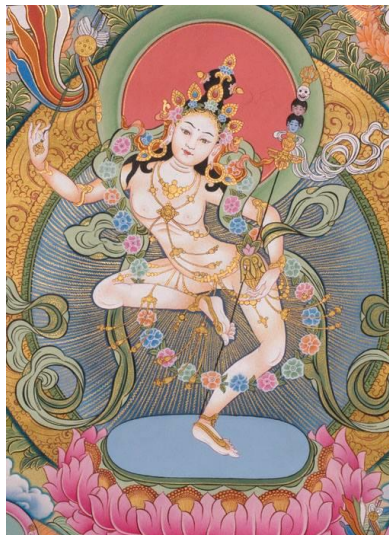
Mandāravā is strongly associated with the Maratika cave and immortality practice. In *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandāravā* (Ch. 30), it explains how Mandāravā and Padmasambhava came to practise in the Maratika Cave. When she first arrived at the cave alone she became scared and lonely and made prayers to Padmasambhava. When he arrives, he admonishes her for lacking courage and reminds her that difficult environments and situations are the best for practice. Then:

"After practicing for three months, they received a clear vision of the Buddha of Long Life, Amitayus, and accomplished the state of an immortal pure awareness holder. The guru proclaimed that she was a fortunate upholder of pure awareness and that in order to eliminate any obstacles to their accomplishment, they both should practice the deity Hayagriva. They practiced the Hayagriva Mechar cycle from the tantra known as the Great Play of the Quintessential Lotus and the Treasury of One Thousand Essential Instructions, a tantra on the union of Hayagriva and Vajravarahi. Following this, both guru and consort had clear visions of Hayagriva, whose neighing and sounding of hum could be clearly heard around them thereafter. At this point, all possible demonic and obstructing forces had been banished. Mandāravā compiled a treasury of more than a thousand extensive and concise longevity methods, including essential pointing-out instructions. Both guru and consort became free from the process of birth, old age, sickness, and death, until the end of this age of ongoing existence. They appeared in the embodiment of rapture, from which they went on to accomplish the secret practice of union. When the vajra master manifested himself in the form of the slightly wrathful guru of the Buddha family, the princess followed accordingly. By

engaging in the perfectly pure mandala of primordial wisdom, they discovered the primordial awareness of stainless miraculous display. They gained the ability to transcend the ordinary elements, with powers that included leaving impressions on solid matter, rainbow light displays, and so forth. Their enlightened union naturally caused flowers to descend from the sky and captivated and summoned those who were oath-bound guardians of the secret doctrine. These guardians were then given the task of ensuring that the lineage of accomplishing longevity was secure. Even the gods, nagas, and the gods among humans and their assemblies offered the essence of their life without hesitation. The vajra master became known as the Immortal Padmasambhava, and Mandāravā as the *ḍākinī* pure awareness holder of immortality Dungmen Karmo, Maiden of the White Conch.”

Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, Rinpoche who is one of the main contemporary Buddhist teachers and practitioners of the inner yoga (tsalung) practice of Mandāravā, gives an account of his experiences at Maratika Cave in *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light* relating his dreams of Mandāravā before discovering a gongter, or earth treasure, there.

Demon-taming in the charnel grounds



Mandāravā also displayed many feats in relation to demon-taming after she had attained immortality in the [Maratika Cave](#) (see chapter 31). Practising in the charnel grounds with Padmasambhava, she was then told by him to start taming demons and so she went to the cave in the charnel ground known as Hematsal, while there, the demons:

...let loose an uproarious din, and some of the cruelest demon leaders began dragging the *ḍākinī*’s body here and there. Some of them began to beat her, some to rape her, and some to stretch open her secret place. Others were busy lighting fires, carrying water, and displaying their own inconceivable powers. During this time, the *ḍākinī* remained in the meditative absorption upon compassion without wavering.

Then, entering into wrathful meditative absorption, she arose as a blazing, fierce female of wrath. She transformed the demons’ rain, hail, and thunderbolts into coal and pieces of burnt wood. She cried, “Hum bhyoh! I am the consort of the buddhas of the three times! All of you and your attendants are subservient to me! I am the blazing, fierce female of wrath! I am the executioner of all elemental demons who cannot be tamed through loving-kindness! I shall make you surrender your life essence, and you will promise to take the oath!” Immediately

the demons were overwhelmed. Some lost consciousness, while others, in their fear, tried to flee. Some were rendered crazy, yet all were unable to escape her command. By the light rays of the ḍākinī's body, each one of them swore loyalty and awoke to the path of virtue. Then the ḍākinī bestowed secret empowerment upon them, and her secret name became Kalaraksha Marajita. She gave each of them a Dharma name and water that conferred the words of honor. She herself continued to send forth many manifestations, all of which continued to liberate the demons through secret means, thus exclusively revealing the secret mantra doctrine. They all accomplished the secret mantra, and so she further entrusted them with the essential secrets and conferred upon them the cycle of accomplishment called Wrathful Demon Tamer, including all pointing-out instructions and supplementary practices. She then commanded them to pass the entrustments on to future incarnate teachers in the land of Tibet, and further predicted that all of the elementals would eventually achieve Buddhahood."

Biography and Praises by Padmasambhava

A biographical account of Mandāravā's life was recited by Guru Padmasambhava, and revealed later as a treasure by Samten Lingpa. Yeshe Tshogyel also made a request to Padmasambhava to give a more concise version of the life and deeds of Mandāravā.

"We express our gratitude to you for giving us the complete teaching on the Lives and Liberation of the Principal Ḍākinī Mandāravā! Please—for the benefit of those of us who are gathered here, as well as for future generations—I implore you to bestow upon us a concise version of her enlightened deeds that is simple to read and inspires faith. Please speak a few profound words for our welfare, so that we might cleanse the two obscurations and receive blessings and spiritual attainments. I implore you now to speak to us again out of your great kindness and compassion!"

Guru Padmasambhava sings a song of praises to Mandāravā, the last two verses of which:

"Together with nine hundred pure awareness holder disciples,
After dissolving into a rainbow body,
she manifested herself once again for the benefit of others.
Mandāravā emanated unceasingly,
manifesting herself as a ḍākinī to tame the minds of beings in every essential way.
To the feet of Mandāravā, I supplicate!
In the Realm of Great Bliss, she is known as
the secret wisdom consort Pandaravasini;
In the realm of Khechari, as Natyendri;
And in Zahor, as Dungmen Karmo.
To the feet of Mandāravā, I supplicate!"

He then gives an explanation of the benefits of reading the longer biographical account of her life and reciting his praises to her early in the morning:

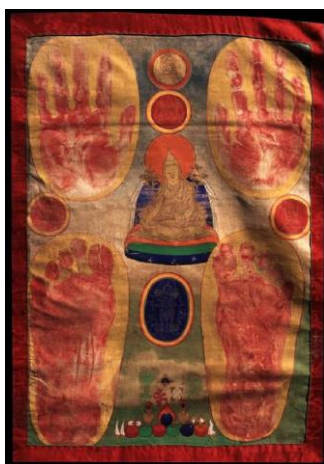
"Have no doubt that the mother Mandāravā will guide one to the future place of rebirth in the Realm of Great Bliss. Accordingly, for all beings, including the fortunate disciples of Tibet, whoever writes or reads this account of Mandāravā's lives and liberation and makes prostrations, offerings, and supplications with faith and devotion will experience the result of the spontaneous accomplishment of all wishes. Whoever simply reads this account with pure faith will be free from the threat of contagious disease, war, misfortune, and drought; black magic, curses, and detrimental threats will be pacified. The threat of untimely death and

obstacles to one's life will be reversed if one reads this account a hundred times. If one reads this text, the illnesses that four-legged beasts endure, as well as those of impoverished beggars, will be pacified, and good fortune and prosperity will abound. If one desires offspring, one's family line will increase by reading this text. Whoever owns this text about her lives and liberation will accomplish all desires without obstacle.

Wherever a copy of this account is found—within any monastery, country, city, or family home—the spirits, demonic forces, and elementals will be kept back at a distance, unable to approach any closer than a mile. If this account is recited a hundred times in order to obtain a better future rebirth, there will be liberation from the fear of the lower realms, and the consciousness will travel to the realm of Khechari.

The actual benefits of this account are so remarkable that they simply cannot be expressed. If it is worn on the body, the effects of obscuration will not occur. There will be no fear of weapons, and poison will lose its potency. Contagious diseases, open, festering sores, and leprosy will all be pacified. Illness, demonic-force possession, obstructing forces, and all such harm will be stripped of strength. If this account is read prior to embarking upon a journey, all mishaps and harm, such as ambush, robbery, and treacherous passageways, will be pacified. If one maintains this text as an object of veneration, making regular prostrations, circumambulations, and offerings, it is certain that rebirth will occur in the Realm of Great Bliss. Therefore, sentient beings of the future generations, persevere accordingly!"

Texts on Mandāravā by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo



79 Foot and handprints of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

The first translation here is *Praises to Mandāravā* by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, found in his *Collected Works* and is the first section of a longer sadhana text [\[2\]](#). I also found two short texts online to Mandāravā by another famed Nyingma master called, [Kunzang Dechen Dorje](#)[\[3\]](#).

The second translated text here is the first part of a sadhana from a mind treasure of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo[\[4\]](#) called the *Profound Cycle of Teachings of Immortal Vajra Ḍākinī Mandāravā* from the *Heart Essence of Lotus-Born (Tshokye Nyingthig)*[\[5\]](#) cycle which can be found in the *Rinchen Terdzo Chenmo* in which there is also another Mandāravā sadhana text from that cycle.[\[6\]](#) I hope to make these two sadhanas available in the English language soon.

It is also reported that Khyentse Wangpo had pure visions of Mandāravā and composed a long-life sadhana treasure that was revealed later by Shakyas Shri, I have been unable to find this text in either the collected works of either person though.

Other Texts

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, has realized and transmitted a terma of spiritual practices of Mandāravā along with oral instructions specifying the iconography of Mandāravā and how she is to be depicted in thangka.

Other sources for Mandāravā practices include Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's terma as offered by Gochen Tulku Sang-ngag Rinpoche.

The *Chime Söktik*, a terma received by Mandāravā and Padmasambhava directly from Buddha Amitayus, has become the central long life practice of the Dudjom Tersar lineage.

Incarnations

As Mandāravā attained the vajra rainbow body (jalus), she is held to be present in the world now spreading and inspiring the Dharma through various incarnations in both the east and the west

- The female tertön Jetsunma Do Dase Wangmo Rinpoche (1928-2019) of Kham, Tibet, is understood as an emanation of Mandāravā.
- In the USA, Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo (below) was recognised by HH Penor Rinpoche, then supreme head of Nyingma, as an emanation of Mandāravā.



80 Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo

For the crowning ceremony of Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, in the presence of HH Penor Rinpoche, see here:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/T-N6D5P7yPY>

Here is a teaching she gave on the mind of the Dākinī:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3Ce-9HiTVA>

The translated text is posted below and translations can also be freely downloaded as a .pdf here . Any errors are mine! May it be of benefit and may all beings maintain the rainbow body, immortality and see Mandāravā's shining face in this very lifetime!

Translated, edited and compiled by Adele Tomlin (July 2020)

TRANSLATIONS

Praises to Mandāravā by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

ཏཱ་མ་གུ་ཅ་ཇཱ་ཤཱ་ཀི་ནི།

namo guru *jñāna* ḍākinī

ཤེན་ཏུ་ནཱ་པར་དག་པའི་ཡེ་ཤེས་ལས།།

བྱང་འབྱུག་མཚན་དཔེའི་སྣང་ཆར་ཡོངས་ཤར་བ།།

དྲན་བས་ཆེ་དང་ཡེ་ཤེས་མཚན་སྣོད་པའི།།

འཆི་མེད་མཆོར་ར་བ་ཁྱོད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

shin tu nam par dak pai yé shé lé

zung yuk tshen péi nang char yong sharwa

dren wé tshé dang yé shé chok tsol wé

chi mé manda ra wa khyö la tö

From the extremely pure, primordial-awareness

Arises the appearance marked by the characteristic of union.

Bringing to mind, bestower of long-life and supreme, primordial-awareness,

Immortal Mandāravā, I praise you!

ཡིད་ཐོག་སྒྲུ་རྩ་གའི་མཚར་སྤྱུག་ཅན།།

མིད་དང་ཞི་བ་དཔེར་མེད་འཇུག་ཞལ་ལ།།

ནཱ་ཐར་གསུམ་གྱི་བྱུན་རས་རབ་གཡོ་བས།།

གོ་ཀུན་འཁོར་བ་སྟོལ་མཛད་ཁྱོད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

yi throk padma ra gai tshar duk chen

si dang zhi wa yer mé dzum zhel la

nam thar sum kyi chen ré rap yo wé

dro kün khorwa dröl dzé khyö la tö

To the stunning red lotus, that captivates minds, and

Smiling face, inseparable from ‘peace’ and ‘becoming;

Whose passionate, penetrating ‘eyes’ of three emancipations^[7]

Liberates all wanderers in samsara, I praise you!

ཕྱག་གཡས་ལྷགས་རྩེ་ཆེན་པོའི་གྲི་གུག་གིས།།

བདུད་བཞི་སྟོང་གི་བརྟན་པ་འཕྱོག་ནས་སྒར།།

གཡོན་པས་བདུད་རྩིས་གང་བའི་ཐོད་བུམ་གྱིས།།

སྤྱབ་ལ་དངོས་སྤྱབ་སྟོལ་མཛད་ཁྱོད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

chak yé thuk jé chen poi dri guk gi

dü zhi nying gi ten pa throk né lar

yön pé dü tsi gang wai tö bum gyi

drup la ngodrup tsöl dzö khyö la tö

In the right hand, a curved knife of great compassion that

Robb the four ‘demons’ from the heart.

In the left, a skull cup vase full of nectar that

Bestows the siddhis of accomplishment, I praise you!

སྤྱ་བཞི་ཡེ་ཤེས་ལ་ཐུན་ཏེ་བྱ་ག།།

ཐབས་གྱིས་ཕྱག་རྒྱ་པར་ཐོད་ཐང་རྩལ།།

ཁ་རྩི་ཚུལ་གྱིས་གཡོན་ནས་འབྲིལ་བ་ཡིས།།

སྟོམས་འབྲུག་དབྱེས་པ་སྦྱང་མཛད་ཁྱེད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

ku zhi yé shé nga den hé ru ka

thap kyi chak gya pema tö treng tsel

kha tvam tshül gyi yön né thril ba yi

nyom juk gyé pa kyé dzé khyö la tö

Heruka, endowed with the five awarenesses and four kāyas

Method, māmhamudrā seal of Pema Thotreng Tsel

Embracing a Khatvanga staff on the left,

Generating delightful union equipoise, I praise you!

གནག་ལྷུ་དབྱ་སྒྲ་སྒྲ་ལ་བུར་འཕྱར་བ་ལ།།

བུ་རྩི་ཀྲུ་ཐོད་གྱིས་ལེགས་འཛེངས་ཤིང་།།

དར་དང་རིན་ཆེན་རྩས་པའི་ཕྱག་རྒྱ་ཡིས།།

རྟོག་པའི་འཁོར་ལ་གཙོད་མཛད་ཁྱེད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

nak num u tra sil bur chang wa la

punda ri kai thö kyi lek ching shing

dar dang rin chen rü pai chak gya yi

tok pai khor lo chö dzé khyö la tö

Black shiny hair, half hanging down,

Excellently bound with pundarīka crown;

Adorned with bone, jewels and silk,

Severing the cycle of concepts, I praise you!

འབས་གཉིས་གཡས་བསྐྱམ་སྲིད་ལ་མེག་ནས་ཤིང་།།

གཡོན་བརྒྱུད་ཞི་བའི་མཐའ་རུ་ལྷུང་མེན་པར།།

གཟུང་འཛིན་བས་ཐོད་སྦྱང་གར་རྩལ་བ་ཡིས།།

ཟུང་འབྲུག་ལྷ་དན་འདས་པ་ཁྱེད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

zhap nyi yé kum si la mik né shing

yön kyang zhi wai tha ru lhung min par

zungdzin bam roi nying gar röl pa yi

zung juk nya ngen dé pa khyö la tö

Two legs, right bent, not abiding in ‘existence’,

Left stretched, not falling into the extreme of ‘peace’,

Pressing on the heart of the dualistic clinging corpse,

A union gone beyond suffering, I praise you!

གང་སྐྱུ་མཐོང་བས་བྱུ་གཉིས་ལྷུག་པར་འཛོ།།

གསུང་གསང་ཐོས་པས་བདེ་ཆེན་ཡེ་ཤེས་འབར།།

དྲན་པ་ཡིས་ཀྱང་ཆེ་ཡི་བར་ཆད་ཀུན།།

སེལ་མཛད་མཁའ་གྲོའི་གཙོ་མོ་ཁྱེད་ལ་བསྟོད།།

gang ku thongwé drup nyi lhuk par jo

sung sang tö pé dé chen yé shé bar

dren pa yi kyang tsé yi bar ché kün

sel dzé kha drö tso mo khyö la tö

By seeing your form, the two accomplishments are naturally achieved,

By hearing your secret speech, the great bliss of primordial awareness blazes,
 Even remembering you, all obstacles to life are eliminated,
 Chief queen of ḍākinīs, I praise you!

སྒོ་བཟུང་ཟབ་གསལ་གཉིས་མེད་དཀྱིལ་འཁོར་ཆེར།

ཡོངས་ཤར་བསྐྱེད་པ་ལྷགས་ཀྱིས་རྒྱུད་བསྐྱེད་ཞིང།

དབྱིངས་རིག་བྱང་འཇུག་ངང་དུ་མཉམ་བཞག་པས།

ཆེ་གཅིག་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཞབས་པད་ལེགས་བསྟན་ན།

nö chü zap sel nyi mé kyil khor cher

yong shar dré pa ngak kyi gyü küi zhing

ying rik zung juk ngang du nyam zhak pé

tse chik khyö kyi zhap pé lek nyen na

དངོས་ཉམས་མྱེ་ལམ་ཅན་གྱི་སྒྲུང་ཆ་རུ།

དབྱིས་པའི་ཞལ་བསྟན་གསུང་གིས་དབྱགས་དབྱང་ཞིང།

ཆེ་བསྟོན་དཔལ་འབྱོར་དབང་བཟུང་ཡེ་ཤེས་ལ།

བརྟན་ནས་འཆི་མེད་གོ་འཕང་ལྷུང་འགྲུབ་མཛོད།

ngö nyam mi lam tsam gyi nang cha ru

gyé pé zhel ten sung gi wuk yang zhing

tsho sö peljor wang chü yé shé la

ten né chi mé go phang nyur drup dzö

The environment and beings in the great mandala of profound, luminous, non-duality,

The perfect mantra sound invokes and invites from within

The meditative equipoise of the union of expanse and awareness,

When one-pointedly venerating at your feet

With a sigh of relief at the revelation of your delightful ‘face’

Appearing in mere dreams, visions and reality; and

By relying on the primordial-awareness of the ten powers^[8] of life, death and resources,

May we quickly accomplish the state of immortality!

Exquisite Clouds of Supplication
From The Profound Cycle of Immortal Mandāravā:
in Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's Mind-Treasure Heart Essence of the Lotus-Born

འཇམ་དབྱངས་མཁའ་ལྷ་མོ་དབང་པོའི་དགོངས་གཏེར་མཚན་སྒྲིབ་སྒྲིབ་ཐོག་གི་ཡུམ་བཀའ་མཁའ་འགྲོ་འཆི་མེད་མཆོ་རྩལ་འཛིན་ཆོས་སྐོར་ཟབ་མོ་བཞུགས་སོ།

From the Accomplishment of the Life-Force of the Immortal Vajra Rainbow Body is the Exquisite Clouds of Supplication

འཆི་མེད་འཇམ་ལུས་རྩི་རྩི་ཐོག་སྒྲུབ་ལས།

བརྒྱད་འདེབས་འཆི་མེད་སྤྱིན་མཛེས་བཞུགས།

འཆི་མེད་ཐོག་མའི་མགོན་པོ་འོད་དཔག་མེད།

འཆི་མེད་བདེ་ཆེན་སྐུར་བཞེངས་ཆེ་མཐའ་ཡས།

འཆི་མེད་གྲུབ་པའི་རིག་འཛིན་མཚན་སྒྲིབ་རྩེར།

གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་སོ་འཆི་མེད་དངོས་གྲུབ་སྩལ།

chi mé tok mé gön po ö pak mé

chi mé dé chen kur zheng tsé ta yé

chi mé drup pé rindzin tso kyé jer

sölwa dep so chi mé ngö drup tsöl

Immortal, highest protector, Amitabha

Immortal, form of great bliss, Amitayus

Immortal, accomplished Vidyadhara, Lord Lotus-Born^[9]

We supplicate, please bestow the immortal siddhi!

འཆི་མེད་ཡེ་ཤེས་ལྷ་གི་མཆོ་རྩལ་

འཆི་མེད་གནས་ལུགས་མངོན་གྱུར་བྲི་ཐོང་ཞབས།

འཆི་མེད་རིག་འཛིན་ཆུ་བརྒྱད་སྒྲུབ་ལ།

གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་སོ་འཆི་མེད་དངོས་གྲུབ་སྩལ།

chi mé yé shé da ki mandarah

chi mé né luk ngön gyur tri song zhap

chi mé rigdzin tsa gyü la ma la

sölwa dep so chi mé ngö drup tsöl

Immortal, primordial-awareness Dākinī, Mandāra,

Immortal, abiding reality, Venerable Trisong,

Immortal, vidyadhara root lineage lamas,

We supplicate, please bestow the immortal siddhi!

དེ་ལྟར་སྤྱིང་ནས་གྲུབ་པས་གསོལ་བ་ཏུ་བ་མཐུས།

སྤྱང་སྤྱིང་ཆུ་གསུམ་ཆེ་ལྷའི་དཀྱིལ་འཁོར་དུ།

ཡོངས་ཤར་བསྐྱེད་པ་ཐུགས་ཀྱིས་རྒྱུད་བསྐྱེད་ནས།

དངོས་གྲུབ་ནུས་གཉིས་བདེ་སྒྲུབ་འགྲུབ་གྱུར་ཅིག།

dé tar nying né gü pé söl tap thü

nang si tsa sum tsé lhé kyil khor du

yong shar dé pa ngak kyi gyü küi né

ngö drup nam nyi dé lak drup gyur chik

Like that, by the power of this heart-felt, devotional supplication, and

Invoking with recitation of the perfectly arisen mantra

The three roots long-life deities mandala of appearance-existence,
May the two siddhis be easily accomplished!

ཁྱེ་པར་ཚ་ལུང་ཐིག་ལེ་ཡེ་ཤེ་ཁམས།

དོན་ཤེས་རྣམ་འབྱོར་ཐབ་མའི་རྒྱས་བཏབ་པས།

སྐུ་བཞི་དབྱེར་མེ་ཕྱེད་པའི་ཐིག་ལེ་རུ།

དོན་དམ་འཆི་མེད་རྩ་གི་མངོན་འགྱུར་ཤོག།

khyé par tsa lung thik lé yé shé kham dor jé neljor zap mö gyé tap pé
ku zhi yer mi ché pé thik lé ru dön dam chi mé da ki ngön gyur shok

In particular, by the profound vajra-yoga seal of the
primordial-awareness element, channels, winds and drops;

At the essence drop, indivisible from the four kāyas,

May the ultimate, immortal Ḍākinī manifest!

By Garwang Osel Lingpa

ཅེས་པའང་གར་དབང་འོད་གསལ་གླིང་པས་སྟོ། །

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- *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandāravā: Indian Consort of Padmasambhava*, translated by Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998).
- *Mandāravā Tsalung Practices* by Namkhai Norbu (Shang Shung Institute, 2004)
- In *Ḍākinī's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*, Judith Simmer-Brown explores the importance and role of Mandāravā.
- In *Feminine Ground*, Jan Willis also explores Mandāravā and what she represents, through a contemporary lens.
- TBRC Reference: <http://tbrc.org/#!/rid=P00AG0428>
- Treasury of Lives Biography: <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Mandāravā/9>

ENDNOTES

[1] For more examples of biographies that speak about Mandāravā see the Shambhala Publications reading guide here: <https://www.shambhala.com/mandarava/>.

[2] “‘chi med man+dA ra ba la bstod pa DA ki dgyes pa’i rol mo/.” In gsung ‘bum/_mkhyen brtse’i dbang po/. TBRC W21807. 1: 477 – 497. gangtok: gonpo tseten, 1977-1980.

[3] 1) d+hAki man+d+hA ra wa yi/_bstod cing phrin las bcol ba// gsung ‘bum/_kun bzang ‘gro ‘dul bde chen rdo rje/Volume 6 Pages 31 – 3; 2) “ye shes d+hAki man+d+hA ra wa’i tshe ‘gugs zab mo/.” 6: 33 – 34. [mer chen?]: [mer chen dgon pa], [2006].

[4] There are two editions of this text online: 1) ‘jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse’i dbang po’i dgongs gter mtsho skyes snying thig gi yum bka’ mkha’ ‘gro ‘chi med man+dA raHba’i chos skor zab mo by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo) revealed by (Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo) in cycle (‘chi med ‘ja’ lus rdo rje’i srog sgrub) parent cycle འཆི་མེད་མཚོ་སྒྲུབ་ལྷིང་ཏིག་ (‘chi med mtsho skyes snying tig) Volume 49, Pages 163-166 / Folios 1a1 to 2b6. <https://rtz.tsadra.org/index.php/Terdzo-DZI-015-1>

And 2) “‘jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse’i dbang po’i dgongs gter mtsho skyes snying thig gi yum bka’ mkha’ ‘gro ‘chi med man+dA raHba’i chos skor zab mo /.” In rin chen gter mdzod chen mo/. TBRC W1KG14. 49: 183 – 204. new delhi: shechen publications, 2007-2008.

[6] There is another longer Mandāravā text following that one ‘chi med ‘ja’ lus rdo rje’i srog sgrub las/_mkha’ ‘gro man+dA raHba’i byin rlabs smin grol gyi rim pa chu ‘bab tu bkod pa ‘chi med bdud rtsi’i bum bzang /.” In rin chen gter mdzod chen mo/. TBRC W1KG14. 49: 205 – 224. new delhi: shechen publications, 2007-2008. Also a online edition at <https://rtz.tsadra.org/index.php/Terdzo-DZI-016>

[7] The three liberations (*rnam thar gsum*) are emptiness (stong pa nyid) without characteristics (mtshan ma med pa) and without hope (smon pa med pa).

[8] The ten powers (dbang bcu) are said to be power over life (tshe), deeds (las), necessities (yo byad), devotion (mos pa), aspiration (smon lam), miraculous abilities (rdzu ‘phrul), birth (skye ba), doctrine (chos), mind (sems), and primordial awareness (ye shes).

[9] This is a reference to Padmasambhava, one of his names.

Chapter Fourteen: Queen Māya Buddha's Mother

RE-TELLING (AND RE-NAMING) 'LHABAB DUCHEN': WHEN MILK STREAMED FROM MOTHER'S BREASTS TO BUDDHA'S MOUTH AND BUDDHA'S GREAT ACT OF REPAYING MOTHER'S KINDNESS

[27th Oct 2021](#) [Dākinī Translations](#)

"From women...buddhas come into this world...."

"But when Queen Māyā saw the immense might
Of her son, like that of a seer divine,
She could not bear the delight it caused her;
So she departed to dwell in the divine realms."

—excerpt from *Buddhacarita* on Queen Māyā's death

"I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother and father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder and your father on the other shoulder for 100 years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate and urinate right there [on your shoulders], you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. "

—Shakyamuni Buddha's advice to monks on the importance of parents, in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*

"You who have been born from my womb so many times, have now rendered me a recompense. In one birth, from being a slave I became the wife of the king of Benares, but that exaltation was not equal to the privilege I now receive. From the time of Piyumatura [Buddha], during an [eon], you sought no other mother and I sought no other son. Now, my reward is received."

—Buddha's mother, Māyā speaking to the Buddha in the divine realms on him bringing her to arhatship after his ascent there

Today is *Lhabab Duchen* , one of the most sacred times (*duchen*) in the Buddhist calendar when Buddha descended (*bab*) from the divine/God realms (*lha*) after teaching his mother, Māyā there and bringing her to arhatship, before he passed away. Traditionally, even though Buddha ascended to the heavenly realms to teach his mother there, the day is androcentric, predominantly focused on Buddha and his actions descending to earth, but not so much attention is paid to his mother's story, and other women who were present, not only when he descended back to the earth but also in the main event that led up to him even being in the divine realms, to meet his mother.

To counter-balance this biased male-centred *history*, last year, I wrote an article about one of the main female students of Buddha Utpalavarṇā , [The power of a woman's devotion: Utpalavarṇā, the first to greet Buddha's Descent from the Heavens \(Lhabab Duchen\)](#), who was the first person (and woman) to greet Buddha as he descended to the earth on that day.

This year, I focus on the Buddha's mother, Māyā and the events that led up to Lhabab Duchen. This post uses some recent research by Wendy Garling (2021) as well as a brief article by Kim Gutschow (2016), [Death of the Buddha's Mother](#). As well as Garling's books, there is a [video interview with Garling about Buddha's mother, Māyā and Lhabab Duchen](#), which I have quoted here too. In it Garling explains how most of her sources were English translations of primary sources, which obviously leaves

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it open to critique, as she is relying on other people's work. However, the fact Garling is bringing to our attention the overlooked, yet important, women in Buddha's life is valuable and commendable indeed.

I add to this here, that not only do we not know much about Māyā but also about the *origin* of the event, Lhabab Duchen itself. In fact, I assert below that when we consider why Buddha went to the divine realms and how important it was for his mother, one could argue that even the naming of Lhabab Duchen is a male-centred one and should be re-named as *Lha-DZEG Duchen* (Ascent to divine realms) or *Ma Kadrin Drenpa Duchen* (Remembering Mother's Kindness).

In this post, I first consider Māyā in terms of the birth of Buddha and her death which resulted from it. Then consider her life and role in the events leading up to Lhabab Duchen. This includes a fascinating, and emotional, account from the *Mahamayastura*, originally composed in Sanskrit but now extant only in Chinese (translated by Durt and cited by Garling) in which upon hearing the words of her son, milk streams from Māyā's breasts. If the Buddha is indeed Siddhartha, she says, then her milk will reach his mouth directly. So, miraculously, her milk enters his mouth from afar. As any mother will tell you, breastfeeding a child can be very blissful and profound, like making love and the fact that Māyā offers her breast milk again to Buddha who takes it, shows the unshakeable love of mother to son and vice versa. No wonder you don't find many monastic accounts on that!

Thankfully, a more balanced emphasis on women during the Lhabab Duchen event is also now happening at Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery, India and the reclaiming of the centuries-old Ḍākinī Dances the nuns now perform there for the commemoration (livestreamed on their FB today).

Today, may we all remember Lhadzeg and Lhabab Duchen, and the incredible acts of Buddha in ascending to the divine realms to repay his mother's great kindness and bring her to arhatship. Perhaps we could even call it the Buddhist Mother's Day!

Music? [Stairway to Heaven](#) by Led Zeppelin (of course) and [Woman](#) by John Lennon 'Woman, hold me close to heart, however distance may keep us apart....After all, I'm forever in your debt! I love you, now and forever.....'

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 27th October 2021.

The general invisibility of the Buddha's mother in male-composed Buddhist textual accounts



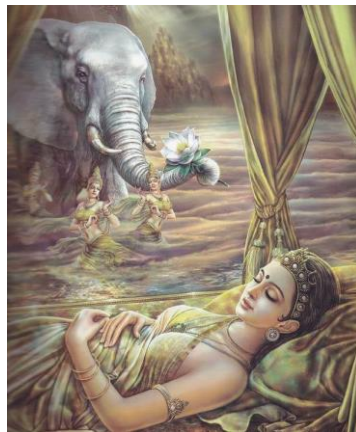
81 Queen Māyā, mother of Buddha was praised for her extraordinary beauty in Lalitavistara Sūtra

"Her beauty sparkles like a nugget of pure gold.
She has perfumed curls like the large black bee.

Eyes like lotus petals, teeth like stars in the heavens.”
— description of Queen Māyā from the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*

In *The Woman Who Raised the Buddha: The Extraordinary Life of Mahaprajapati*, Garling (2021: Chapter 2) explains how despite the importance of Māyā to the Buddha’s birth, and how she died shortly afterwards, she has generally been made invisible and absent from textual accounts and traditions of the Buddha’s life by male (monastic) editors and writers who saw women as largely irrelevant. In fact, I would go further and say that until recently, even contemporary lay-people’s focus has unquestionably gone along with such male-centred readings making Māyā’s relevance seem insignificant.

“It’s fortunate indeed that we have early Buddhist art to serve as a counterpoint, if not a corrective, to literary narratives. Unlike written records generated more or less contemporaneously, artistic images—some literally chiseled in stone—could not be altered or redacted over time to suit Buddhism’s evolving androcentrism. Further comparative investigation in the prodigious areas of early Buddhist art and literature is certainly warranted.” (Garling 2021)



82 Image of Māyā, Buddha’s mother and her dream of a white elephant before she gave birth to Buddha



83 Mahā Māyā dreaming of the white elephant, Gandhāra relief, 2nd century CE; in the British Museum.

Queen Māyā’s death due to childbirth – joy or fatigue?

But Queen Māyā, does not live much longer. Kutschow (in [The Death of the Buddha’s Mother](#), 2016) cites how the *Buddhacarita* describes Māyā ’s death after the return to Kapilavastu in a brief, elliptical stanza:

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“But when queen Māyā saw the immense might
Of her son, like that of a seer divine,
She could not bear the delight it caused her;
So she departed to dwell in heaven.”

Here, the *Buddhacarita* offers a possible motive for Māyā’s death: that Māyā chose death over the unbearable joy that her son’s spiritual power would bring her. Modern scholars imply that Māyā preferred death to seeing her son renounce home to become a monk. However, this interpretation seems odd, given the universal experience most mothers have of children growing up and leaving home, which rarely drives them—especially those as enlightened as Māyā—to suicide. If Māyā’s temperament is indeed such that she is full of benevolence and devotion and is free from all envy, jealousy, intrigue, fault, and deceit, why would she choose death over seeing her son become a Buddha? Later textual sources inform us that Māyā heard the Buddha’s teachings in Tushita Heaven, yet it is unclear why Māyā would prefer to hear her son’s teachings after her death rather than live to see her son become a Buddha. The lack of mention of Māyā’s funeral rites suggests a silencing of an unfortunate event rather than one preordained by an omniscient Buddha, as the later *Lalitavistara* would have us believe. As Vishvapani Blomfield notes, the brief mention of Māyā’s death “strikes a dissonant note, as if an uncomfortable but important fact has somehow survived within the litany of marvels.”

Garling (2021) adds to that, the lack of emotion in the accounts of her death too:

“Missing from nativity accounts, both Pali and Sanskrit, is any emotional response to Māyā’s death. She was, after all, a beloved and generous queen to a large population in addition to being the Buddha’s birth mother. Most narratives simply note the fact of her death, some adding a brief, if inadequate, explanation, such as she died of joy at having such a marvelous son, or her body could never again be sullied by sex. Understandably it was a tough call for the early bards and storytellers, since Māyā’s postpartum death was clearly linked to the Bodhisattva’s birth. That she died as a consequence of childbirth is acknowledged in the *Abhinishkramanasutra*^[1].”

Personally, I think such interpretations that she died due to the childbirth and physical weakness make her and the Buddha sound more worldly. However, considering the enormous merit of giving birth to Buddha, and her pronouncements that she had given birth to him many times so that she herself could attain arhatship, lends more weight to a reading that she did in fact die out of having accomplished her task and at great joy!

However it is clear that there are few accounts of details about her death:

“The legends all stall after Māyā’s death. Where and how did she die? What happened next? What about a funeral? We don’t find satisfactory answers in the literature. The narratives fall into silence or fragmented, murky contradictions at this point in the timeline where Māyā simply vanishes after giving birth. With scant evidence to the contrary, the premise here is that she died in Lumbini’s Grove, never to return home with her son to palace life in Kapilavastu.”

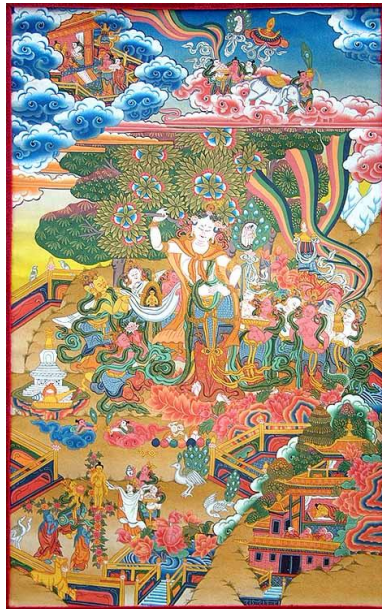
Gutschow (2016) also explains the absence of accounts of Māyā’s death

“The early textual silence around Māyā’s death and funerary rites may reflect a Brahmanic aversion to death pollution. Yet this is at odds with an early Buddhist focus on death as a means of teaching the impermanence and emptiness of all things, including the self. Further, a central Buddhist doctrine known as dependent origination is grounded in the fundamental connection

between birth and death that shapes human existence and that is perpetuated by an ignorance that Buddhist practice is supposed to dispel. So why does Māyā's death play such a small role in the Buddha's own life and teachings? Many modern commentators, who have subjected almost every detail of the Buddha's biography to scrutiny, seem all too willing to dismiss Māyā's death as a necessary but uninteresting footnote to the Buddha's mythical birth. As such, they miss an opportunity to explore what Māyā's death can teach us.

Whether or not the Buddha's mother actually died after childbirth is less important than the insights that her death may provide. Given the paucity of textual and archaeological evidence for the Buddha's life, we will never know whether Māyā's really died in childbirth; the first biographies of the Buddha were only committed to print at least four centuries after his death. Asking whether or not Māyā really died shortly after giving birth to the Buddha is about as useful as asking whether or not the lore of an elephant piercing Māyā's side at conception is true. Yet the descriptions of Māyā's pregnancy, delivery, and death may shed some light on the contradictory awe and revulsion that early Buddhist and Brahmanic authors felt toward birth and the female body."

After death, Māyā 'lives on' in the divine realms



84 Thangka image of Māyā

Yet, even though Māyā is invisible in many accounts of her death and after, according to Garling, 'she lived on', mainly in the Northern sources who say she went straight to heaven and was incarnated as a goddess. Garling also brings to our attention that these stories of Māyā are more emotional and profound in their content too:

"This is not a one-off story that she is in heaven, this is also told in some of the Sanskrit sources, that as soon as she passed away, she went to the heavenly realms. There are a few little notes that say she came back to earth immediately to reassure her husband who was grieving that she was alright and could not feel more joyous at having given birth to the Buddha.

There is also a funny passage that she became a goddess of her husband's harem of women, in other words she kept an eye on things there, even though she was gone. The point is that even in the imagination of the early story-tellers, Māyā lives on, and very specifically in heaven.

One thing I appreciated in particular, is she retains all the qualities of a mother, she does not become iconic as a goddess. She does not gain any supernatural powers, she is Siddhartha's mother. So in all the snippets and scenarios, she is still worried about him, or keeping an eye on him, and she never leaves that role of a mother and she always kept her loving mother eye on him. So it was like Buddha always had his mother's protection. For many people that is a comforting thought about mothers we have lost. The unconditional loving mother that never dies.

These stories are much more profound and emotional than other stories about the Buddha that are unemotional and exclude women and speak more about the Buddha's heroism and so on. Finding the stories of the women added lots of beautiful, emotional depth that we can all welcome in revisiting the life of Buddha."

These accounts of Māyā's continuing support for Buddha in his life are important not only as part of historical accounts in general, but also as part of the events leading up to the Lhabab Duchen itself.

Mother Māyā appears to Buddha again when he is almost dying of starvation from austerities



As Garling says explains in the Shambhala interview, Māyā lived on and appeared at least twice to the Buddha during important events in his life, as she recounts:

"I am going to tell you one story that is very clearly spelled out in the Sanskrit *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, which appears in Tibetan and Sanskrit. It is essentially about the life of the Buddha and is familiar to those who study it. What is beautiful in this version, is Māyā appears to her son in it.

The story begins when Buddha is starving to death and is emaciated and corpse-like and the Gods are watching over him and hoping he gets enlightened and they see him in that state and they think he is dead and go to his father and seek his help. In this version, however, they go to his mother and say it looks like your son is dying, he needs help go to your son."

Garling then reads a quote from her book which she says gives a sense of the Buddha's closeness with his mother:

"Finding the Buddha's mother in the celestial realms, surrounded by a retinue of celestial maidens, they report to her the terrible news that the Prince is about to die. As any mother would, she departs immediately for the Naranja River where he has collapsed. Arriving at

midnight, she finds her son cadaverous and unconscious on the ground. Choking with tears, she sings to him:

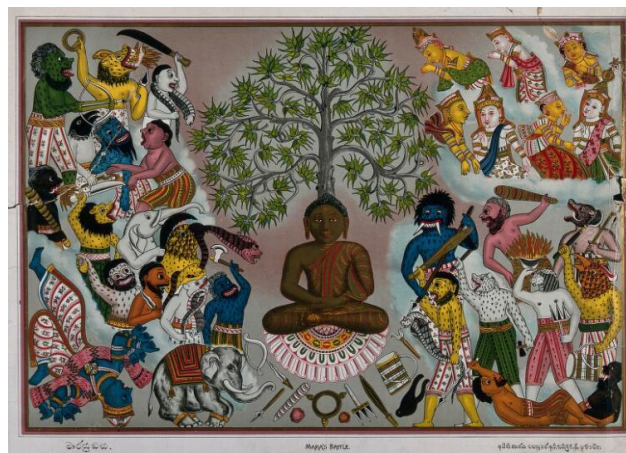
“When I gave birth to you my son, in the Lumbini Grove without support, like a lion you took seven steps on your own, you gazed in the four directions and said these beautiful words ‘This is my last birth.’ But now those words will never come to pass. A siddha predicted that you would be a Buddha in this world, but his prediction was wrong as he did not foresee impermanence. My son, you have not yet had the joys of a universal monarch’s splendours and now you are passing away in this forest without even attaining awakening. To whom can I turn to about my son? To whom shall I cry out in my pain? Who will give life back to my only son who is barely alive?”

Now awakening in confusion, the Bodhisattva responds ‘Who are you? You cry so heart-wrenchingly, with disheveled hair and your beauty impaired, lamenting your son so intensely and throwing yourself on the ground.’

Again, Māyā sings to him ‘It is I, your mother, O son, who for ten months carried you in my womb like a diamond. It is I who now cry out in despair.’

Prince Gautama then consoles his mother and assures her that the predictions about his awakening will happen. That Māyā should not despair but be joyous, as he will soon be a fully, awakened Buddha. Māyā is said to have been overjoyed and circumambulates him three times and returns to her celestial abode.”

Second Appearance of Mother Māyā to Buddha when he is battling the maras



85 Buddha, resisting the demons of Mara, who are attempting to prevent him from attaining enlightenment, as angels watch from above. Credit: Wellcome Collection.

Garling also refers to another story about Māyā appearing, when Buddha is just about to attain awakening in his battle to defeat the maras. According to some texts, she hovers around in the background concerned about her son and the outcome. When he defeats them, she descends again from the heavenly realm to tell her husband, the King Suddhana, and transforms into a servant girl to relay the news to the King.

Lhadbab Duchen or Lhadzeg Duchen?- Absence of mother’s voice and story in conventional accounts of this event



86 Image of Buddha Shakyamuni descending from the divine realms after teaching for three months (human time) there

Even though the events leading up the Lhabab Duchen are significant, not much has ever been written about them. The name ‘Lhabab Duchen’ is a Tibetan term and does not seem to have any origin outside Tibetan-speaking countries. If anyone knows the origin of commemoration of this event and who invented it, please do let me know. Like the oral transmission of the Kangyur, it is not clear at all how or when these (now commonplace) events first began.

Here, I assert that for a more female-centred and accurate portrayal of Lhabab Duchen, it would be suitable to re-name it *Lhadzeg Duchen (Ascending to the Divine Realms)*, or even *Ma Kadrin Drenpa Duchen (Remembering Mother’s Kindness)* in order to better commemorate the Buddha’s amazing act of ASCENDING to the divine realms and thus bring out the central role of his mother in that act.

Ascending to the celestial realms to teach his mother the Abhidharma

In the video interview with Shambhala Publications, Garling specifically explains how in the telling of Lhabab Duchen, the absence of the mother in textual accounts (and even contemporary commemorations) is yet another example of sexism and male-centredness, ‘where women have obviously been overlooked and dismissed in the telling of the stories.’ Not only that Garling explains why the teachings Buddha gave his mother in the divine realm are important:

“They are said to be the source of the Abhidharma (in the Pali Canon), and this is where he delivers those sermons. It is said in some traditions that he chose those teachings in particular to suit his mother. He wanted to honour her with the most difficult and esoteric teachings. That is one way of looking at it. We are also told that he is now at the end of his life, and know he is going to pass away. It is forty to forty-five years into his teachings and he sees the passing away on the horizon.”

Garling asserts in the interview that ‘every Buddhist bucket list’ is to convert one’s parents to Buddhism in this life’ (which is questionable as Buddhism does not aim to convert people unlike other religions) and that Shakyamuni had not completed that task at the end of his life, in terms of his mother, because she died shortly after he was born.

“Prior to that, he had converted his father, but whom never became an arhat. However, in the last seven days of his life, the Buddha went to his father and gave him teachings. It is said that the Buddha completely relieved all his father’s suffering, first his physical suffering and then

by the seventh day, after giving him constant teachings, his father attained arhatship. It is said then that his father cheerfully then proceeded to give teachings to his wife and the other women in his inner close circle [2]. That was the Buddha's gift to his father.

I never think of Mahaprajapati as an aunt but as his mother. The only mother he ever knew. They are 'co-mothers'....There are profound dialogues between the two of them and her gifts to him as his mother and his gifts to her in the Dharma. This is then repeated somewhat in the upcoming story about Māyā. He had already covered Prajapati. The last person was Māyā, as she was in the heavenly realms, he had to go there to find her."

In addition, according to the texts, Buddha preached the Abhidhamma to his mother (and the gods) continuously for three months without break. This would not be possible for most human beings. However, as 100 years on earth is just 1 day in Tāvātimsa heaven, 3 months on earth is only 3.6 minutes there. To the gods, it would be a short teaching and they would have no difficulty listening to it.

Repaying mother's kindness and bringing Māyā to arhatship



87 Buddha teaching in the divine realms

The Buddha's notion of reciprocating and repaying people with gratitude is prevalent in the life story of the Buddha. Garling quotes a passage of Buddha speaking (in the Pali canon), in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (lit. 'Increased by One Collection', also translated "Gradual Collection" or "Numerical Discourses") [3] in which Buddha explains the importance of gratitude for and repaying one's parents:

"I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother and father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder and your father on the other shoulder for 100 years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate and urinate right there [on your shoulders], you would not in that way pay or repay your parents.

If you were to establish your mother and father in absolute sovereignty over this great earth, abounding in the seven treasures, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. Why is that? Mother and father do much for their children. They care for them, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world. But anyone who rouses his unbelieving mother and father, settles and establishes them in conviction; rouses his unvirtuous mother and father, settles and establishes them in virtue; rouses his stingy mother and father, settles and establishes them in generosity; rouses his foolish mother and father, settles and establishes them in

discernment: To this extent one pays and repays one's mother and father, and more than repays them for what they have done." {II,iv,2} [4]

Thus, due to such thinking:

"With her welfare in mind, the Buddha determined to travel to the heavenly realms to find her. The stories about this significant event typically focus on the important teachings the Buddha reputedly gave while abiding three months in Trayastrimsha heaven. However a few narrative fragments center on the interactions between mother and son that took place at that time." (Garling: 83)

Before doing so, Buddha performs a series of miracles in Shravasti and then after that, in some versions after that, he reflects that this is the time to teach my mother; to repay her gift of life. There are beautiful descriptions of how he gets the divine realms of 'mountains bending down so that he can step on them to go upwards and he creates these steps and finally arrives in the divine realm.

"The Buddha ascends to heaven without difficulty because immense mountains lower their summits and lift him up, taking him to the sacred teaching spot at the nexus of the celestial realms. The Kangyur describes this seat as a gleaming white stone surrounded by a beautiful grove of trees. Multitudes of goddesses and gods gather around, including the Buddha's mother, to whom his subsequent teachings are directed. In some traditions, Māyā has become male; for example, in the Sinhalese story, she appears as the male leader of the entire celestial assembly but is still conspicuously named Matru, or "mother." In the Burmese tradition, she remains female and appears as the daughter of an unnamed god. The *Lalitavistara* concludes before this event takes place, but we know from earlier accounts that Māyā in heaven retained her femaleness both as a goddess and as an emotionally engaged mother. Now the Buddha's profound teachings convert not only her, but everyone within earshot. Due to her exceptional merit, Māyā attains arhatship on the spot. As other women in the Buddha's life have expressed, she states that her goal over countless lifetimes has now been fulfilled. Her son's karmic debt to her has been repaid. She says,

'You who have been born from my womb so many times, have now rendered me a recompense. In one birth, from being a slave I became the wife of the king of Benares, but that exaltation was not equal to the privilege I now receive. From the time of Piyumatura [Buddha], during an [eon], you sought no other mother and I sought no other son. Now, my reward is received.'

Soon after this, the Buddha descends to earth on a resplendent staircase surrounded by rainbows and retinues of newly converted celestial devotees." (Garling 2021).

Buddha's longing to see the sublime Face of his mother – milk streaming from Māyā's breast to the Buddha's mouth and Māyā's teachings to the gathered assembly

There is another version of the *Lhadzeg (Ascending to the Divine Realms)* story. Garling shares a quote from the *Mahamayāsūtra* (tr. by Durt), in which milk streams from the breasts of Māyā to her son as a way of showing that he is indeed Siddhartha her son:

"A much more complete story of mother and son reuniting in heaven appears in the *Mahamayāsūtra*, originally composed in Sanskrit but now extant only in Chinese. This account opens with the Buddha already in Trayastrimsha heaven, seated under a tree in meditation and surrounded by a vast assembly of disciples. In lengthy verse, he opines to a messenger

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stories of his birth and his long-held wish to see again the sublime face of his mother and preach to her the dharma as an act of gratitude for giving him life.

The messenger swiftly conveys this message to Māyā some distance away. Upon hearing the words of her son, milk streams from her breasts. If the Buddha is indeed Siddhartha, she says, then her milk will reach his mouth directly. So, miraculously, her milk enters his mouth from afar.”

Garling explains in her interview that milk spouting breasts are a well-known trope used in such stories, that an authentic mother, who has not seen her child in a long time, will spontaneously start generating milk when they meet them.

“As miracles attend this event, she declares that she has not experienced such joy since the moment of his birth. Thus, mother and son are reunited. Māyā greets him ceremoniously by taking refuge, with the stated purpose of realizing the fruits of awakening. For innumerable eons, as his mother nourishing him at her breast, her motivation has been to cut the bonds of rebirth and enter the stream of arhatship.‡ The Buddha demonstrates his gratitude by giving her a teaching that notes the inevitability of separation and his impending nirvana. When the time comes for him to depart, Māyā is beset with sorrow.

There are two details of special note for women in this sutra. First, before the Buddha delivers his homily, Māyā herself gives extensive teachings to the assembled disciples. In fact, most of the dharma passages are delivered in her voice. Further, in a departure from the convention that only deities can appear in the celestial realms, the seated assembly witnessing the reunion of Māyā and her son numbers both human and nonhuman living beings, including a host of earthly laywomen, laymen, nuns, and monks. Together, they accompany the Buddha on his return to earth via the magical staircase. Greeting them below is King Prasenajit, similarly surrounded by a throng of the fourfold community, which has been clamoring to see their beloved teacher again.” (Garling 2021: 84).

And of course, let us not forget, there is the [female nun, Utpalavarnā](#) waiting first to greet Buddha back on earth!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 27th October 2021.

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Endnotes

[1] "The prince royal now being seven days old, his mother the Queen Māyā, being unable to regain her strength or recover the joy she experienced whilst the child dwelt in her womb, gradually succumbed to her weakness and died. How does one tell Māyā's sad story without detracting from the Bodhisattva's joyous one? Perhaps the grief was too profound for the storytellers to relate. Most narratives simply switch gears at this point in the chronology and move on to stories of the precocious young prince growing up in Kapilavastu."

[2] Garling uses the word 'harem' a few times in her interview to describe women connected to the King. I prefer to use the word community, as harem has the connotation that the women were slaves, or prostitutes, which is not an accurate way to portray them.

[3] The Anguttara Nikaya (aṅguttaranikāya; lit. 'Increased by One Collection', also translated "Gradual Collection" or "Numerical Discourses") is a Buddhist scripture, the fourth of the five nikayas, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka, which is one of the "three baskets" that comprise the Pali Tipitaka of Theravada Buddhism. This nikaya consists of several thousand discourses ascribed to the Buddha and his chief disciples arranged in eleven "books", according to the number of dhamma items referenced in them.

The Anguttara Nikaya corresponds to the Ekottara Āgama ("Increased by One Discourses") found in the Sutra Pitakas of various Sanskritic early Buddhists schools, fragments of which survive in Sanskrit. A complete version survives in Chinese translation by the name Zēngyī Ahánjīng (增一阿含經); it is thought to be from either the Mahāsāṃghika or Sarvāstivādin recensions. According to Keown, "there is considerable disparity between the Pāli and the Sarvāstivādin versions, with more than two-thirds

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of the sūtras found in one but not the other compilation, which suggests that much of this portion of the Sūtra Piṭaka was not formed until a fairly late date.”[

[4] This teaching is introduced by Buddha in the following way, as a teaching about a person of integrity and a person of no integrity:

“Monks, I will teach you the level of a person of no integrity and the level of a person of integrity. Listen and pay close attention. I will speak.” “As you say, lord,” the monks responded. The Blessed One said, “Now what is the level of a person of no integrity? A person of no integrity is ungrateful and unthankful. This ingratitude, this lack of thankfulness, is advocated by rude people. It is entirely on the level of people of no integrity. A person of integrity is grateful and thankful. This gratitude, this thankfulness, is advocated by civil people. It is entirely on the level of people of integrity.”

Chapter Fifteen: Lady Niguma

THE YOGA OF LADY NIGUMA AS COMPILED BY JETSUN TARANATHA

[9th Oct 2022](#) [Dākinī Translations](#)

“When one realizes that our many thoughts of anger and desire,
which churn the ocean of Samsara,
are devoid of any self-nature,
everything becomes a land of gold, my child.—*A Song of Niguma*

“When he requested these vajra verses [from Niguma], the learned and accomplished Kyungpo Neljor offered five hundred measures of gold to the wisdom Dākinī. He placed this text like a heart in an amulet box he always wore at his neck.”

“The elusiveness of Niguma is typical of the lore of the Dākinī, the very embodiment of liminal spiritual experience. Additionally, the difficulty of pinpointing historical information may well be due to the lack of ancient sources from India and the lack of concern about such mundane matters by the Tibetan masters who encountered her in dreams and visions and maybe in person. After all, when confronted with the blazing apparition of the resplendent and daunting dark Dākinī bestowing cryptic advice, a background check would be rendered irrelevant.”—Sarah Harding, *Niguma: Lady of Illusion* (2010)

“Seeing that this practice was on the verge of disappearing, and to prevent its bright light from ever waning, and that its radiance can spread, this one who has developed a little devotion to the Glorious Shangpa Kagyu, named Tāranātha has composed this in a clear open way without hiding anything.” —colophon of Tāranātha’s Niguma Yoga text used by 2nd Kalu Rinpoche

I have just returned back to India after an amazing ten days in the Dragon Land (Bhutan, Drug Yul), stunning home to many amazing pilgrimage sites of Guru Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel and more. I visited Bhutan this time (my previous visit there was in 2019) as a speaker on the ‘Women in Vajrayana’ main panel at the 4th Vajrayana conference in Thimphu, Bhutan, hosted by the Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies, see [here](#). My paper was on the Vinaya, monasticism, female teachers and consorts in Vajrayana and whether they mix well or not, particularly in the 21st Century (see video [here](#) and update below about that). I will be writing a short series of posts on Bhutan in connection with the conference and pilgrimage sites I visited there soon.

First, for the full moon today, I offer this post on the remarkable and inspiring teachings and presentations on Niguma Yoga by HE 2nd Kalu Rinpoche, both at the Vajrayana conference in Bhutan and now, here in New Delhi for three days (7th to 8th October).

I wrote about Niguma, Tāranātha, Jonang and Shangpa Kagyu lineage before [here](#) in 2019. This new post first gives a general overview of the history and textual background (some of which is taken from my previous article) on Niguma’s life story, her connections with Marpa the Translator and Khyungpo Neljor, who became the lineage holder of her teachings on Niguma Yoga. Then I offer a write-up and some photos of the Niguma Yoga events and presentations in both Bhutan and India. Previously, in 2015 (see video [here](#)) Kalu Rinpoche spoke about the importance of doing the preliminaries before doing Niguma Yoga. although he did not mention that during these teachings.

Kalu Rinpoche stated at both events that there was nothing magical in the techniques he was showing, it was simply the product of hard work, dedication and discipline. He concluded the New Delhi event with a full, non-stop presentation of the whole series of Niguma Yoga postures. Breathtaking and moving indeed. Like watching Niguma in action, spontaneous joy, devotion, laughter and tears bubbled up through the chakras at the sheer mastery and liberation of it all.

May this post enable us all to accomplish the Niguma Yoga and go to the Pure Land of the Dakinis!

Music? Indian vibes [Inner Sounds](#) ; for the Dark Lady, Niguma: Grace Jones, [Pull Up to the Bumper](#) , [Woman](#) by Doja Cat; and for Kalu Rinpoche's gravity-defying yoga presentation [Levitating](#) by Dua Lipa.

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 9th October 2022.

UPDATE FEBRUARY 2023: After writing this article , I decided to re-record my Bhutanese conference presentation, as the conference organisers have not published or released the video recording of my talk, despite publishing all the other three speakers on the same panel 'Women in Vajrayana'. They have not provided me with any explanation as to why it has not been published either, even when requested. So it seems reasonable to conclude that it has been deliberately censored/excluded. Here is the new video recording of the same talk:

Additionally, in hindsight, (and no disrespect intended) after writing this article about Niguma, I personally no longer see much benefit or purpose in attending or going to such short, public courses on the Niguma Yogas, especially when there is no real support or encouragement provided to participants afterwards to continue the practice. A couple of days teaching is not sufficient, or safe at all. Niguma herself did not teach these yogas to anyone and everyone public, and they were given to highly qualified and devoted students in a strict one-on-one environment. They were also not taught for health reasons only either but for full enlightenment for the benefit of others.

In addition, the hostile reaction and verbal attacks that a couple of Kalu Rinpoche's FB page admins/followers subjected me to online after I wrote this article, for merely writing that Niguma may have been the consort of Naropa (not the sister, as Kalu Rinpoche teaches) as being 'disrespectful' to him (their words) was a cause for concern. They later deleted this article from their FB page too. This was then followed by more hostility from the same people at my correcting their incorrect rendering of the phonetics of the publicly available mantras in my article [here](#).

When I posted that article in the Niguma Yoga Whatsapp group created by Kalu Rinpoche of which he was an administrator, I was removed from the group by Kalu Rinpoche himself without any warning or explanation, and none was given to me or anyone in the group either who asked him why I had been removed. So much for transparency, love and compassion! For me this was not only an abuse of his power, and enabling others to continue to bully and demonise me, but I realised that neither Kalu Rinpoche, nor these people following him and managing his FB pages, were interested in authentic scholarship, translation or my support/interest unless they strictly controlled it and it did not contradict anything 'their lama' said.

Also, I was told by a reliable source that Kalu Rinpoche had abandoned and divorced his wife (the sister of the young Dilgo Khyentse yangsi), and their daughter, after a few years of marriage and does not meet their daughter at all. That is not consistent with being a man who values and respects women or children.

In addition, as I am a devoted follower of the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, for some unknown reason, Kalu Rinpoche rarely if ever mentions him, nor attends any of the Kagyu Monlams in Bodh Gaya, as he used to do with the young Jamgon Kongtrul 4th. Also, the two main Shangpa Kagyu lineage

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holders from whom Kalu Rinpoche got the entire transmission of the Shangpa Kagyu, 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche and Goshri Gyaltzab Rinpoche, he never mentions or meets or posts about on his social media. Frankly, speaking he is not the sole Shangpa Kagyu lineage holder and never was.

Kalu Rinpoche states that the 14th Dalai Lama told him he should teach and transmit Niguma Yoga to anyone and everyone who signs up, but since when did the actual Shangpa Kagyu lineage holders give him that permission? Never. These matters are important to examine and understand the reasons for. I did ask Rinpoche some of these questions privately via whatsapp and FB but never received any response.

However, I certainly enjoyed attending the courses in Bhutan and India (as you can read below) and wish them all well with their practice, activities and life.



88 Spectacular view of the mountains from the Druk Air plane going from Paro, Bhutan to Delhi, India. Photo: Adele Tomlin (7th October 2022)

1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SOURCES

Niguma's life-story and connections to Naropa, Marpa and Khyungpo Naljor



89 Lady Niguma

Currently, the only scholarly book on Niguma's life in the English language is by lama-scholar, Sarah Harding's *Niguma: Lady of Illusion*. According to [this recent article](#) on Niguma:

"In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Niguma was one of the most important Buddhist teachers and yoginis in India. While there are only brief glimpses of her life from sources and

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texts, Sarah Harding's *Niguma: Lady of Illusion* surveys what little literature there is surrounding "the heiress of unimaginable qualities." Niguma developed esoteric instructions, treatises, and practice manuals. Within the collection of commentaries in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, called the *Tengyur* — part of the core of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition — seventeen texts are attributed to Niguma, though they were likely written by her student Khyungpo Naljor.

Although it is difficult to identify the woman behind the mystery of Niguma's *Ḍākinī* image, Tibetan master Tāranātha (1575-1634) (for more on his connection with Niguma's yoga and transmissions, see below) wrote a short biography that helps shine light on her story:

The *Ḍākinī* Niguma's place of birth was the Kashmiri city called "Incomparable." Her father was the brahmin Santivarman. Her mother was Shrimati. Her real name was Srijnana. She had previously gathered the accumulations for three incalculable eons. Thus, in this life, based on the teachings of the instructions by the adept Lavapa and some others, she manifested the signs of progress in the secret mantra Vajrayana, and attained the body of union. So her body became a rainbow-like form. She had the ability to really hear teachings from the great Vajradhara. Having become a great bodhisattva, her emanations pervaded everywhere and accomplished the welfare of beings.

Harding points out that Niguma's life story consists of only six folios, while that of her student Khyungpo Naljor consists of forty-three.

According to research by Harding, Niguma was known by several names both during her lifetime and afterwards. She was called Yogini Vimalashri, or Vajradhara Niguma, or *Jñāna* (wisdom) *Ḍākinī* Adorned with Bone (ornaments), or The Sister referring to her purported relationship to the great Buddhist teacher and adept Naropa. She was also sometimes called Nigupta, which is explained by the historical Buddhist scholar Tāranātha as follows: "The name Nigu accords with the Indian language, which is Nigupta, and is said to mean 'truly secret' or 'truly hidden.' In fact, it is the code-language of the dakinis of timeless awareness (Harding (2010): p7).

Although not much is known about Niguma's life, her teachings had a significant impact on Buddhism. Harding (2010) says this:

"Indian Buddhist hagiographies are virtually unknown, whether of men or women. In Tibet, where hagiography became a prolific genre in its own right, those of women are extremely rare, for all the usual reasons. It is in the experience of those heroes who encountered the *Ḍākinī* that one finds the most information, and these experiences are invested with the value of spiritual meaning."

Harding (2010: 15) concludes in her Introduction however that historically locating Niguma is not an easy task:

"As much as I have searched for this *Ḍākinī* named Niguma and hoped to find her as an actual person and the subject of her own story, it may have been in vain. The more I dig, the more elusive she becomes. No doubt I am looking in all the wrong places, in old books and dusty corners. Still, I hope that this might be more than another case of the female as a vehicle of meaning for men, or that, as one post-Buddhist feminist puts it, "the place of the male as subject is unconsciously protected, whilst creating a notion of fluidity around the concept of the female body."" I might have to admit, however, that she is primarily an important event in the lives of the men who saw her, rather than a historically locatable person. Those men, in

any case, are really the only sources of information about her. Her own story, if it ever existed, is not to be found apart from the few details that I have explored here.”

According to the Shangpa Kagyu website:

“The wisdom Ḍākinī Niguma was born in Peme in Kashmir, India. At that time her father was the Brahmin Shantasamnaha and her brother was the Great Sage Naropa. In Niguma’s past lives she practiced the path for three immeasurable eons. In this life she came to realization just by meeting a realized lama and receiving a few teachings. Her impure illusory body then arose as perfect body.

She dwelt in the three pure states and saw the face of Vajradhara himself. She received the four complete empowerments from the emanated Mandala of Tantric Mahayana. She developed omniscient wisdom in the sutras, tantras, oral instructions and teachings.

She saw all phenomena as they are and as they appear. She herself attained Cloud of Dharma, the tenth level of a bodhisattva. Niguma released even the subtlest veil to the knowable and became in essence the three bodies of enlightenment, indistinguishable from the Buddha. For her own benefit, she brought to completion abandonment and cultivation. For the benefit of others, she manifested the two form bodies and will continue to do so until Samsara is completely empty. Her foremost disciple was the [Mahasiddha Khyungpo Naljor](#), who was born in Tibet and traveled to India to receive the full transmission from her. In granting him the empowerments, Niguma also confirmed that not only he, but also all his successors and followers would in the future have the good fortune to receive the blessing of Dakinis, encounter enlightened beings, and attain perfect Liberation. Niguma granted the four complete empowerments to the adept Khyungpo Naljor in the emanated Mandala and transmitted the most profound tantras, intimate advice, and oral and written teachings.

Niguma gave him the essential pith instructions that would enable worthy disciples to attain enlightenment in one lifetime. She promised Khyungpo Naljor that all disciples and Shangpa lineage holders would go to the Pure Land of the Ḍākinī, because this lineage was special above all others. Niguma commanded that for seven generations, these ear-whispered teachings should be only passed on in a one to one guru to disciple transmission. From her lifetime to this present day, she continues to manifest whatever subtle or more material form is necessary to benefit beings over limitless time. In particular, through her activity and blessings, she gazes with impartial compassion on all the holders of the Shangpa Kagyu Lineage.”

When I asked Harding in an email about Niguma’s collected works, she replied that:

“Everything attributed to Niguma that is in the Peking Tengyur was translated in *Niguma, Lady of Illusion*. Some of those plus a few more that are in the Dam Ngag Dzo (gdams ngag mdzod) were translated in *The Treasury of Precious Instructions, Volume 11: Shangpa Kagyu*. There is no Niguma Collected Works (gsung ‘bum) per se. everything was reported and written by Khyungpo Naljor and translated by him and Lendarma Lodro, and some others centuries later from visions and dreams.”

It is also not clear whether Niguma was Naropa’s sister or consort, although Harding concludes that she was his sister. For an interview with Sarah Harding about Niguma and Naropa, see [here](#).

Niguma and Marpa Lotsawa



90 Marpa the Translator

It is said that the great meditation master and translator, Marpa Lotsawa received teachings from Niguma on at least two occasions. Marpa is said to have visited Niguma each time he traveled to India. Sources say that he sought out Niguma on the advice of Naropa. The story is told thus, in *The Life of Marpa*:

“Naropa said, “On the shores of the poison lake in the South, in the charnel ground of Sosadvipa, is Jnanadakini Adorned with Bone Ornaments. Whoever encounters her is liberated. Go before her and request the *Catuhpitha*. You can also request of the kusulus there whatever teachings you desire.” Having arrived in the charnel grounds at Sosadvipa, Marpa met this yogini, who was living in a woven grass dome. offering her a mandala of gold, he supplicated her. She joyfully gave him the full abhiseka and oral instructions on *Catuhpitha*.

Another source says that Marpa’s first visit to Niguma was suggested by Naropa and that a later visit to Niguma was suggested by Shantibhadra. During the first meeting, Marpa received the *Catuhpitha* empowerment and instructions. During his second visit with Niguma, he received prophecy about meeting Naropa again, even though Naropa had already died.” (Harding (2010)

Holder of the Niguma and Shangpa Kagyu lineage – Khyungpo Neljor



91 Khyungpo Neljor (1050-1127)

According to various sources, Niguma transmitted the yogas to [Khyungpo Naljor](#) (1050-1127) who became the founder of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage. According to Sarah Harding (2010):

“Khyungpo Naljor traveled to Nepal and India seeking teachings and transmissions from a variety of teachers, including Niguma. Some of Niguma’s realization, and teaching style, can be seen in the description of Khyungpo Naljor meeting Niguma for the first time. While in India studying with various teachers, Khyungpo Naljor asked those he met if there were any teachers who had met the Buddha Vajradhara. He was told that Niguma had. So, he sought out Niguma in order to receive even higher levels of teaching from her. He found the Dākinī Niguma in the Sosa charnal ground of eastern India. It is traditional for a student to request teachings and transmissions three times before they are bestowed. When Khyungpo Naljor first requested transmissions, Niguma is said to have replied in the code-language of the dakinis: “I am a flesh-eating Dākinī!” One source says that she claimed to be the queen of the cannibals. Finally, when Khyungpo Naljor again asked for transmissions, Niguma demanded gold from him. He had been traveling with great amounts of gold in order to make offerings to any teacher he met. When he offered the gold to Niguma, she threw it up into the air and it scattered throughout the forest. Then,

. . . her retinue of dākinī formed a maṇḍala, bestowing on Khyungpo Naljor the initiation of the Illusory Body (*sgyu lus*) and Dream Yoga, two sections that make up the Nigu Chodruk (*ni gu chos drug*), or Six Yogas of Niguma. Niguma then transported him to a golden mountain summit where she bestowed the complete Six Yogas, the Dorje Tsikang (*rdo rje tshig rkang*) and the Gyuma Lamrim (*sgyu ma lam rim*).”

Khyungpo Naljor then returned to Tibet, and established a monastery at Zhangzhong in the Shang region in western Tsang. This was his main seat, and he became known as the Lama of Shang. Although he was reputed to have founded hundreds of monasteries and had thousands of students, he passed the teachings of Niguma to only one of his students, Mochok Rinchen Tsonдру.

In his presentations, the 2nd Kalu Rinpoche repeated that Niguma had said the yogas should only be taught privately for seven generations, but that after that they could be taught publicly.

Another source says that Marpa’s first visit to Niguma was suggested by Naropa and that a later visit to Niguma was suggested by Shantibhadra. During the first meeting, Marpa received the *Catuhpitha* empowerment and instructions. During his second visit with Niguma, he received prophecy about meeting Naropa again, even though Naropa had already died.

The Jonang lineage master holders of Niguma’s Yogic Techniques (Trulchor), Kunga Drolchog and Jetsun Tāranātha’s commentary and root on the Niguma Yoga



92 Jetsun Tāranātha (1575-1635)

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The Niguma yoga postures are not just physical exercises or skills but ancient profound inner yoga and tsa-lung internally working with the breath and channels in order to lead to full liberation. The text produced and used for the event with Kalu Rinpoche in Delhi was in both Tibetan and English, and said to be taken from Tāranātha's text re-written about the Niguma Yoga. When I asked Kalu Rinpoche about the text, he told me it is a secret one and the images are also from the Tibetan text. The preface was written by Rinpoche.

As many of you know, I am a major fan and researcher of Tāranātha, ever since I did my postgraduate degree on *Tāranātha's Commentary of the Heart Sutra* (published as a book by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2017). Also, see articles I have written on or about Tāranātha [here](#). Jetsun Tāranātha was not only a Jonang lineage holder but also an accomplished Shangpa Kagyu lineage holder.

Harding (2010:25) explains that:

“In the Jonang tradition, Kunga Drolchok (1507-1566) is said to have received the long lineage many times and the direct lineage twice from Niguma in pure visions. Since he also received guidance more than a hundred times in twenty-five lineages, his very diverse collection is called *Hundred Guides of Jonang* and is supplemented by sources and histories. His immediate incarnation, the great Tāranātha (1575-1635), minces no words in describing his own mastery of these teachings. He made important contributions to the body of Shangpa literature that can be found among his Collected Works. These include both histories of the lineage and probably the most widely used practice guides.”

Tāranātha was born 500 years after Niguma and was of crucial importance in preserving and disseminating the lineage because although the teachings existed at that time, it is said that few understood them as they had become corrupted and confused. One of the main commentaries on the practice of the Yogas by Tāranātha is called the Trulkhor of Niguma (Body Machinations). It was through Tāranātha's dedication and commitment to the teachings, that they were preserved. I asked Kalu Rinpoche how Tāranātha had received the transmission, he told me from the Shangpa Kagyu lineage and also from Niguma herself.

In the colophon to the Tāranātha text that the 2nd Kalu Rinpoche used for the New Delhi event, it explains that:

“These exercises were taught by the Wisdom Dākinī, Niguma herself. These 18 exercises are essential instructions for the supreme accomplishment of the path of liberation. They utilise our bodies as a method to cause the ‘Prana Mind’ to enter the Central Channel and untie the knots of the channels.

Seeing that this practice was on the verge of disappearing, and to prevent its bright light from ever waning, and that its radiance can spread, this one who has developed a little devotion to the Glorious Shangpa Kagyu, named Tāranātha has composed this in a clear open way without hiding anything.”

Harding (2010: 183-184) refers to the same words and text by Tāranātha saying that:

“The five brief personal or oral instructions (zhal gdams) that are attributed to Niguma in the Peking Tengyur may be the source of the yogic techniques that are used in conjunction with Niguma's Six Dharmas, and particularly that of inner heat (gtum mo). Niguma's instructions

here are particularly cryptic, and practitioners in this tradition have long relied on other sources for clarification...

Lineage holders of the past culled from the original sources a system of eighteen or twenty-five specific techniques (though, as noted, there are some issues with enumeration). Perhaps the most central such text is, again, by the great Tāranātha: *Nigu's Yogic Exercises, Root and Commentary*. "Root" in this case refers to a section quoted by Tāranātha that appears to be the jumbled remains of what was once Niguma's outline of these practices. The commentary is Tāranātha's own attempt to make sense of them."

Apart from Niguma's text entitled *Mahamudra as Spontaneous Liberation*, the school's teaching and practice is centered around the so-called Five Tantras (Mahakala-, Chakrasamvara-, Hevajra-, Mahamaya-, and Guhyasamaja Tantra), and the five golden dharmas of the Shangpas (Tshangs pa gser chos lnga); a group of teachings envisioned as forming a tree:

1. root: Niguma's Six Yogas, Nigu Chosdrug (rtsa ba ni gu chos drug)
2. trunk: Amulet-box Precept of Mahamudra (phyag chen ga'u ma)
3. branches: Three Ways of Carrying Realisation on the Path (yal kha lam khyer rnam gsum)
4. flowers: Red and White Khechari (me tog mkha' spyod dkar dmar)
5. fruit: Deathlessness and Non-deviation (bras bu 'chi med chugs med)

For a catalogue of texts I compiled from Tāranātha's Collected Works see below.

Chapter Sixteen: Rechungma (Milarepa's Female Disciples I)

Rechungma's Song of "Fifteen Realisations"

15th Jun 2020 Dākinī Translations



93 Rechungma, one of Milarepa's main female students as depicted in the huge wall mural at DGL nunnery, India

For Dākinī Day today, I offer a new translation of a song by Rechungma, one of Milarepa's female heart disciples. Many people will probably have heard of Milarepa's male disciple, Rechungpa^[i], from whom an important Kagyu lineage developed. However, not so many may know of Milarepa's female heart-disciple, Rechungma (ras chung ma) and several songs that were recorded as sang for and by her. The final song in the section of 'Milarepa's Songs' about Rechungma, is her song of 'Fifteen Realisations', an extraordinary finale aria ode of commitments to devotion, non-conceptuality and not clinging to duality.

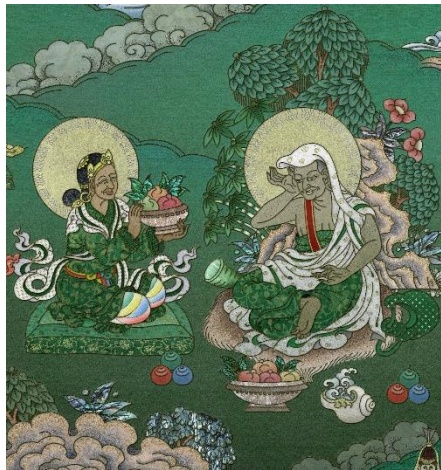
The song happens after Rechungma, after first scorning Milarepa and Rechungpa and laughing at them, was then won over by his realisations and song, and accepted as one of Milarepa's disciples. The text states that:

"At that time, Milarepa and his male disciple, Rechungpa, were staying at the Five Small Lakes where he gave empowerments and instructions to the women and set them to meditating. Within three days, Rechungma developed qualities [in meditation], such as the bliss and warmth of Tummo. Later, she became ill. In order to test her ability to remain in remote hermitages and to assess the stability of her faith, Milarepa dismissed her, telling her to go wherever she pleased. Although she was ill, she continued to roam in mountain retreats and attained the confidence to withstand difficult conditions.

Then, one day, Rechungma went to see Milarepa where he was staying in another part of the country and met him among a crowd of people. In order to check whether her faith was still unwavering, Milarepa sang a song with a hidden meaning to the people present. Rechungma was the only one who understood it and sang a song to Milarepa. The song is a poetic rendering of fifteen realisations or resolutions that she (and others) should adopt; they are commitments not to engage in ways of thinking about reality, the lama and practice."

The Tibetan text used for this translation is an edition of the *Collected Songs of Milarepa*^[ii]. I have included the Tibetan for those who like to read it the original script. In previous translations of the songs, the Tibetan is not included. Here is my translation of it below:

Fifteen Realisations of Rechungma



94 *Rechungpa with consort Rechungma*, from artwork commissioned by Adele Tomlin, see [here](#).

Among the audience [only], only Rechungma understood and she arose and said to Milarepa: “Guru mahasiddha, I have never had a single moment of wrong view towards you’ and thus offered the meaning of fifteen resolutions:

“I prostrate to the Gurus!
Do not cut unceasing faith and devotion
To the only ‘father’, Jetsun Guru!
Do not take or give up as a crutch
The deity that is one with the supreme three!
Do not sow patches of superficial words
Onto whispered-lineage instructions of the gurus!
Do not break the four-session yoga
To the yidam, noble Vajrayogini!
Do not reinforce habitual clinging as real
To appearances that are illusory by nature!
Do not corrupt with conceptuality
The nature of mind itself, clear luminosity!
Do not cover with garbs of duality
The abiding nature of objects of knowledge!
Do not make a home for habitual tendencies
In the fundamental essence of mind!
Do not sully with stains of characteristics
The empty nature of mind, Dharmakāya!
Do not blame other companions

For being struck with a sick four-element body!
 Do not perform divinations with wrong views
 Towards demons and obstructors, friends of virtuous practice!
 Do not grasp, with concepts of true existence,
 To deluded appearances of habitual dreams!
 Do not harbour thoughts of revenge
 Towards angry enemies, teachers of patience!
 Do not glorify or denigrate
 The lama's siddha conduct!
 Do not seek any other result than
 The self-arisen, spontaneously present Buddha!
 Do not cease the stream of compassion
 To your followers, worthy disciples!
 I pray, please lead your mentally inferior student
 and hold me with the hook of compassion."

Tibetan text

རྩེ་ལྷ་མ་ནུ་མས་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ།

ཕ་ཅིག་ལྷ་མ་རྩེ་བཙུན་ལ།	དང་གུས་རྒྱུན་ཆད་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
ལྷ་ཅིག་སྐད་མཆོག་གསུམ་པོ་ལ།	རྒྱལ་རྟེན་སྤྱང་ལེན་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
ལྷ་མའི་སྙན་བརྒྱུད་གདམས་ངག་ལ།	ཐ་སྙད་ལྷན་པ་མི་གདབ་འཚལ།
ཡི་དམ་རྩེ་བཙུན་རྣལ་འགྱུར་ལ།	ཐུན་བཞིའི་རྣལ་འགྱུར་མི་བཅག་འཚལ།
སྤང་བ་རྒྱུ་མའི་རང་བཞིན་ལ།	དངོས་ཞེན་བག་ཆགས་མི་བཞག་འཚལ།
སེམས་ཉིད་རང་བཞིན་འོད་གསལ་ལ།	རྣམ་རྟོག་སྤྱད་ཀྱིས་མི་བསྐྱད་འཚལ།
ཁེས་བྱ་དངོས་པོའི་གནས་ལྷགས་ལ།	གཟུང་འཛིན་དྲི་མས་མི་གཡོག་འཚལ།
གཞུག་མ་སེམས་ཀྱི་ངོ་བོ་ལ།	བག་ཆགས་བརྟེན་པ་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
སེམས་ཆོས་སྐྱེ་སྤྱང་པའི་རང་བཞིན་ལ།	མཚན་མའི་དྲི་མས་མི་གོས་འཚལ།
ལྷས་འབྱུང་བཞིའི་ནད་ཀྱིས་ཐེབས་པ་ལ།	གྲོགས་གཞན་ལ་སྐྱེ་དེ་ཀྱི་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
གདོན་བགགས་དགེ་སྦྱོར་གྱི་གྲོགས་པོ་ལ།	ལོག་རྟོག་གི་མ་ཕྱ་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
མི་ལམ་བག་ཆགས་ཀྱི་འབྲལ་སྤང་ལ།	བདེན་ཞེན་གྱི་རྟོག་པས་མི་བཟུང་འཚལ།
སྤང་དབྱ་བཟོད་པའི་ལྷ་མ་ལ།	གཞོད་ལན་བསམ་སྦྱོར་མི་བགྱིད་འཚལ།
ལྷ་མ་བྱལ་ཐོབ་གྱི་མཛད་སྦྱོར་ལ།	རྟོག་དཔང་གྱི་སྦྱོར་མི་གདབ་འཚལ།

རང་ཤར་ལྷན་གྱི་སངས་རྒྱལ་། འབྲས་བུ་གཞན་ནས་མི་བཅས་འཛམ་།
 རྒྱལ་འབྲུག་སྒྲིབ་ལྷན་སྒྲིབ་མ་ལ། ལྷགས་རྒྱུ་ལྷན་སྒྲིབ་མ་འཛམ་།
 རྒྱལ་མ་དམ་པ་སྒྲིབ་མ་ལ། བདག་སྒྲིབ་མ་སྒྲིབ་མ་དང་ལྷགས་ལ།
 ལྷགས་རྒྱུ་ལྷགས་ལྷགས་ལྷགས་ལ། ལྷགས་ལྷགས་ལྷགས་ལ།

Milarepa was extremely delighted. He decided she was a qualified yogini, worthy of being a companion in [Tantric] conduct, so he gave her the complete oral instructions, without exception.”

After becoming the spiritual companion of Rechungpa, at Milarepa’s suggestion, she then went to Semodo near the Precious Sky Lake in the North (known in Tibet as Lake Namtsho Chugmo) and meditated for eight years, keeping complete silence. During this time, she actualized the purifications and realizations of the paths and bhumis, such as the ten signs of practice and the eight qualities. In this life, she went to the pure Dākinī realms. This is the story of Milarepa meeting Rechungma, one of his eight foremost female disciples, at the Five Small Lakes of Choro Driksam.”

Translated and edited by Adele Tomlin (June 2020). May it be of benefit!

ENDNOTES

[i] Rechung Dorje Drakpa (ras chung rdo rje grags pa, 1083/4-1161), known as Rechungpa was one of the most important students of Milarepa and founder of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage or Rechung lineage of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. (The other student was Gampopa (founder of the Dagpo Kagyu). Rechungpa was particularly important in the transmission of the cycle of teachings of the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra known as the Demchok Nyéngyü (bde mchog snyan brgyud), Réchung Nyéngyü (ras chung snyan brgyud).

[ii] *rje btsun mi la ras pa'i rnam thar dang mgur 'bum* Biography and Collected Songs of Realization by the poet yogin Milarepa (1052-1135) and later Kagyu masters, published by Khenpo shedup tenzin and lama thinley Namgyal (2006), TBRC W1KG4276.

Chapter Seventeen: Saley O (Milarepa's Female Disciples II)

'Male-centred' Buddhist history, Milarepa's main female disciples, and the songs and story of Tibetan woman, Saley O

[6th Mar 2023 Dākinī Translations](#)

"Well-behaved women seldom make *history*."

"At first, a smiling, divine man,
In the middle, a black-faced demon,
At the end, a bull ready to beat you.
Thinking thus, melancholy arises.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Be a companion of vajra-sibling friends!"
—excerpt from Saley O's song to Milarepa

"..not only are the Buddhist past and Western scholarship on Buddhism thoroughly androcentric; contemporary Buddhism itself, both Asian and Western, is unrelenting in its androcentrism."
—Rita M. Gross in *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1995)

Introduction

For the anniversary of the Mahasiddha yogi, Jetsun Milarepa, today March 6th, as well as this month being Women's History Month in the USA [\[1\]](#), here is an article giving a brief overview of the main female disciples of Milarepa [\[2\]](#), and life and songs of one of these women, Saley O (Sa-le-'od, which literally means 'Brilliant Light'). who from the age of sixteen years old told Milarepa she wanted to abandon household life, and then spent the rest of her life in solitary mountain retreats.

Another story and song, *Fifteen Realisations* by another female disciple, Rechungma, I translated and published before [here](#). Considering the times in which these women lived, the songs reveal how Milarepa actively welcomed and guided female students, with the requisite dedication and faith, in the same way as his male students. He was a feminist [and a vegetarian](#) well before his time! In this article, I consider the following:

- 'Male-centred' Buddhism and the lack of women's 'herstories' and voices
- Milarepa's main female students
- Life-story of Saley O and her connection to Milarepa
- A translated excerpt of one of Saley O's songs

Today, all the Karma Kagyu nunneries in India, Nepal and Bhutan are also commemorating this Milarepa event live online, with a [Milarepa Guru Yoga led by HH 17th Gyalwang Karmapa \(19.00 IST\)](#) to commence the [annual Arya Kshema \(nun's debate\) event](#) from March 6th to April 8th 2023, taking place at Thrangu Rinpoche's Vajra Vidya Institute in Sarnath, India. For a video of the 17th Karmapa speaking in 2014 about the first Arya Kshema event, see [here](#), in which he explains why he founded and named the event after the nun, Kshema whom Shakyamuni Buddha said was the most confident, and 'wisest of the wise' female disciple.

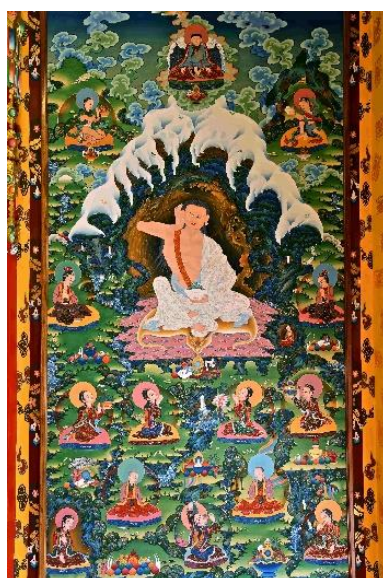
This month *Treasury of Lives* (TOL) also announced that only 4% of their published biographies were about women's lives and their [new Women Initiative project](#) aims at re-balancing that 'shockingly low' number with 100 new female biographies being translated and published. None of the women mentioned in this article have biographies on TOL. Such projects are good news but sadly a 'long time coming'. For more of my own research and translations on women in Buddhism, see [here](#).

It is with similar intentions to these that I wrote this short piece and translation on the realised female yogini, Saley O, not only to commemorate her remarkable teacher, Milarepa but also to promote her 'forgotten' songs, as the first in a series of posts that women's lives, experiences and voices are not only a valuable part of a spiritual and religious 'her-story' but a human one too. As the saying goes: "Those in power write the history, while those who suffer sing the songs." So, to know the full history of a people is to know their songs.

Music? [Milarepa's Song of Impermanence](#) by Lama Karma Drodhul. For the androcentric bias, PJ Harvey's ironic [Man-Size](#). For Saley O's fiery response to Milarepa, [No Man's Woman](#) by Sinead O'Connor.

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 6th March 2023.

'Male-centred' Buddhism and the lack of women's 'herstories' and voices



95 Wall mural painting (at Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery in Himachal Pradesh) of Milarepa with his main female students and teachers. Marpa his main teacher is above his head.

While doing some research on Milarepa Songs and looking the first published translation in English of Milarepa's Songs (see bibliography), I discovered there was a whole chapter entitled 'Women's Role in Dharma' and also one entitled 'Saley O and her Understanding' (a title not in the Tibetan text but coined by the male translator) as well as other songs by and for females. Reading the songs, it is clear that these girls and women were realised and sang songs of great profundity and spiritual depth and yet unlike the often discussed and studied male disciples of Milarepa, such as Je Gampopa and Rechungpa, these women are rarely, if at all, known, depicted or spoke about. The only image/painting I have seen in my life of Milarepa with his female students and teachers, is a recent one on the walls of the DGL Nunnery temple, commissioned by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo (see photo above).

So it is reasonable to ask why women's stories not so well-researched or well-known in Tibetan Buddhism? As is common in 'his'-stories of famous men (not just spiritual ones), women are often left

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

out, briefly mentioned in relation to men, or their stories/voices hijacked by male voices/commentators (see [here](#)) [3].



*96 Buddhist scholar, Rita M. Gross whose book *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993) was highly influential and important in feminist scholarship and analysis of Buddhist culture and history.*

The renowned scholar Rita M, Gross in her book, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1995), identified androcentrism, male-centred consciousness, a “one-sex model of humanity” where “the male norm and the human norm are collapsed and become identical.” as a major issue. Applied to Buddhism, Gross explains why it is difficult for a Buddhist feminist scholar to find an ‘accurate and usable’ past due to four levels of male-centredness:

“On the first level, when Buddhists chose which documents to keep and whose experience to preserve in their historical records, they usually operated with an androcentric consciousness and set of values. Stories about men and men’s statements were far more likely to be recorded than were stories about women or what women said....

At the second level, even when Buddhists did preserve significant records by or about women, later Buddhist traditions tend to ignore those stories in favor of stories about male heroes. The *Therigatha* were recorded and preserved, but many Buddhists throughout most Buddhist history believed that women needed to be reborn as men before they could attain enlightenment.

Third, most Western scholarship on Buddhism is quite androcentric and often agrees with the biases of Buddhist records, to the point of further ignoring the few records about women or even ridiculing the women in them.

Finally, not only are the Buddhist past and Western scholarship on Buddhism thoroughly androcentric; contemporary Buddhism itself, both Asian and Western, is unrelenting in its ongoing androcentrism.” (1995:18).

As an example of the androcentric ‘western’ male scholarship on women’s stories, see my review of Michael Sheehy’s treatment of Kunga Trinley Wangmo’s life story, [here](#). Another example of this, is how women’s lives, texts, histories are often side-lined as being ‘women’s issues’ [4]. As Dan Martin (2006) in [his article ‘The Woman Illusion’ in *Women of Tibet*](#), states:

If there was, and I believe this was so, a reluctance in those and later times to recognize, and therefore record for posterity, the accomplishments of women, it becomes justifiable and even necessary to magnify what evidence we do have (and this holds regardless of their potential value as models for contemporary emulation[5]).

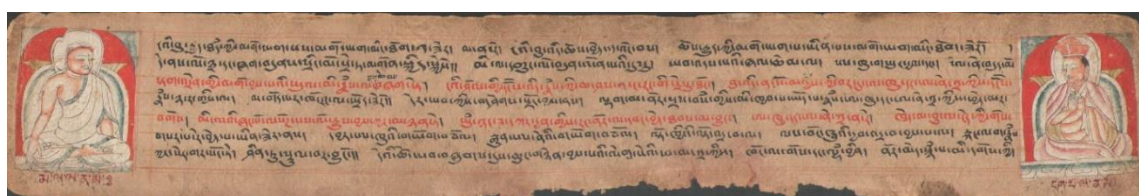
Interestingly, there is a [project in Canada, named after Saley O](#), which was founded after the yogi-meditator, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche told a female disciple, that:

“Women need to start a strong lineage of meditators. It would be good for you to find the cave of Saley O. I don’t know if it still exists, but if it does, you should sit there, even just an hour, that would be very good.”



97 Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche (1934 – 2024)

Milarepa’s Songs – Tibetan and English Sources



For more information about the main Tibetan sources for Milarepa’s Liberation-Stories and Songs, see [my article on the 3rd Karmapa’s Black Treasury \(Dzo Nag\)](#). The 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje is said to have compiled *The Black Treasury* using as a source, the earliest biographical work of Milarepa called the *Twelve Great Disciples* (Bu chen bcu gnyis), written by Ngen Dzong Tonpa (Ngan rdzong ston pa Byang chub rgyal po (b. late 11th century) and other disciples of Milarepa.

The two English translations of Milarepa’s songs I have referred to in this piece, as well as to guide my own translation of Saley O’s song, are those of Chang (1962) and Stagg (2017). I have included the original Tibetan in my translation (which is not available in the above translations).

The female ‘Nya-ma’ disciples of Milarepa: five that ‘entered the sky-life’ and four ‘sisters’

According to Dan Martin (2006), Sangye Dharpo’s sixteenth century history text lists five women: Beta his sister, Dze-Se (Mdzes-se) his childhood fiancée, Drichama (‘Gri-lcam-ma), Saley O (Sa-le-’od) and Peldar Bum (Dpal-dar-’bum) as among Milarepa’s disciples that ‘entered the sky life’ without leaving physical bodies behind. It also separately lists a similar group of disciples, termed the ‘four sisters’ as:

1. **Rechungma of Tsonga** – she doubted Milarepa’s realization upon their first meeting, but she later gained complete faith in him. Milarepa imparted to Rechungma all the pith-instructions without reserve. She practiced in complete silence for eight years and attained enlightenment through the practice of Inner Heat/Tummo. At the time of her passing, she had become a leading exponent of Milarepa’s teachings.

2. **Saley O of Nyanang** – she rebuked Milarepa when first meeting him but afterwards meditated in solitude for many years, achieving enlightenment. She later taught the Dharma to many disciples throughout Tibet.
3. **Paldar Bum of Cung** – similarly achieved complete enlightenment in a single lifetime. After first scorning and belittling Milarepa upon their encounter, she was converted to the Dharma by his beautiful songs. Paldar bum succeeded in being able to enter into higher dimensions while in her human body. Playing a drum for all to hear, at the time of her death she is said to have bodily vanished, ascending into the pure realm of the Dakinis.
4. **Chamo Beta** (his real sister Beta)

There is also history by Nyang-ral (1988: 493) that mentions, unfortunately without listing the individual names, a group of nine women disciples of Milarepa who were *siddhās* (*grub-thob-ma*).



98 Milarepa and five female disciples. Section of artwork by a Tibetan artist in the Men-ri Tibetan style, envisioned and commissioned by Adele Tomlin in early 2022 as part of her vision/project to address male-centred depictions of Mahasiddhas and Masters

Tseringma, was also said to be tamed by Jetsun Milarepa, and became a tenth-level Bodhisattva and is now frequently prayed to as a holy protector of the Dharma.

Martin (2006) mentions that:

“Most of the women disciples of Milarepa tend to be referred to with the rather unusual term *nya-ma*, an obsolete word, still remembered but difficult to define or etymologize.”

The word *nya-ma* is often translated as ‘woman’ or ‘maiden’ or even ‘vagina’. It seems women were also seen as walking vaginas, much like today!

A disillusioned yet dedicated teenager: Saley O’s meeting and Milarepa’s ‘patronising’ refusal/test



99 Saley O, Milarepa's student and realised yogini from the large wall mural at the DGL nunnery

Saley O was one of the four main female disciples of Milarepa who became a fully enlightened mahasiddha, under his guidance. She was said to be around sixteen years old and physically pretty when she meets Milarepa when he comes down from his meditation cave and goes to Nyanong where she lives, and she scolds and rebukes his begging for food. That same night she has an auspicious dream and believes it must be due to him. Saley O sees Milarepa the following day and asks him who he is, and about the dream:

"I dreamt that the sun and moon were inside of me, but they had no light. Then another sun and moon dawned in the east, and the light from those lit up the sun and moon within. The sun and moon went out of my body, and then mixed with the light of the sun and moon of the east. With that, I could see the entire universe become completely illuminated. If I follow and attend the Jetsun, will the dharma dawn for me?"

When Milarepa tells Saley O he is a beggar, and then confirms that he is Milarepa and that the dream may have been caused by him, she is filled with devotion and requests him to be her guru, offering some gold. When Milarepa, testing her depth of renunciation, responds: "I do not want your gold. It is very seldom that the rich can practice the Dharma, though they may have great ability in other things. Since you are still very young, I think it is better for you not to renounce the world completely. Now, listen to my song":

"By the kindness of the father Jetsun,
All appearances are made of gold;
I have no need for your little treasures.
This song with five examples and their meaning, making six,
I have sung for a faithful student.
But your faith right now is merely passing,
And it is difficult for it to become constant and unchanging.

Therefore, young girl, it is best that you go.
In the future, you can focus one-pointedly on dharma.
Care for your spouse as though he were divine.
Care for your children to whom you're karmically indebted.
Restore the ruins of the fortress on high.
Work vigorously in the fields and cultivate them fully.
Care for your livestock just like your own child.

Above, make offerings to the three jewels and the guru.
Below, care with kindness for the suffering and poor.
In between, have respect for your parents-in-law.
Be friendly with the neighbors in your own land,
And make supplications to this old man.
Aspire to meet the dharma in the future.
I aspire that your life be auspicious and long.” (tr. Stagg: 2017)

Saley O’s brilliant, heartfelt lament rebuking Milarepa’s ‘test’

Considering her young age (in numbers), Saley O’s song reply (see full song below*) to Milarepa’s deliberately ‘patronising’ test and refusal to be her guru, is an extraordinary (and spiritually mature) lament about the sadness and suffering of female’s life, from birth, to being a child, a lover, leaving her parents, a mother and more. She soulfully responds to each of Milarepa’s points using the same metaphors of spouse/companion, children, fortress, crops, livestock and so on, as sources of sorrow and suffering, something many women can relate to!:

“Great Repa, please listen!
I offer with devotion this sincere request,
You will know if the words are true or not!

I myself have such huge despair
And contemplated what can be done.
Remembering deeply impermanence and death,
Since my mother birthed me, until now,
I have seen many die, old and young.
Life is impermanent, like dew on the grass.
Days and hours pass without feeling,
Life is impermanent like a dewdrop on grass.

Wherever it is there is no place
Where a person does not die, I understand.
Knowing for sure, I have to die,
Having no choice or power where I will go.
When thinking of suffering in the lower realms,
I am extremely fearful of the suffering found there.

Considering the other ways of samsara,
Engaging in miserable householder life,
When using the utensils of samsara
One’s kind parents are cast behind.
Yoked and carted off to an unkind man
Laying the foundation for the lower realms,
Chopping down the tree of higher realms and liberation.
Carrying the load of my parents’ wealth,
To a meaningless life as a servant.

The companion who plunges your neck into the yoke,
At first, a smiling, divine man,

In the middle, a black-faced demon,
At the end, a bull ready to beat you.
Thinking thus, melancholy arises.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Be a companion of vajra-sibling friends!

Then, of the children bodily borne,
Those possessing merit are few,
It is possible that some have good karma,
Yet most are chasing payment of karmic debts.
At first, they rob the body's radiance,
In the middle, they rob food from the mouth,
At the end, they rob wealth from the hands.
Thinking thus, I feel melancholy.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Nourish the small child of awareness!

As for temples, hotels and so on,
Few were constructed with real meaning.
Those 'fortress' dungeons of samsara,
At first, invite mental suffering,
In the middle, hang you up with torment,
At the end, leave you in rubble ruins.
Thinking thus, I feel melancholy.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Erect a fortress of indestructible 'concentration'!

Other than forms and teachings of the Tatagatha, and
the virtuous stream of the faithful,
Farm and field work are meaningless.
At first, fighting over empty land,
In the middle, fighting over sources of water,
At the end, fighting with angry-faced people.
Thinking thus, I feel melancholy.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Tame the field of wild mind!

If one seizes the mind of bodhicitta intention,
It is possible for merit to come.
If not, then focusing on gathering wealth, by
Caring for livestock is negative work.
At first, the envious mind of desire is present,
In the middle, arrogance and jealousy flourish;
At the end, it signals enemies to come.
Thinking thus, I feel melancholy.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Compassionately care for the 'livestock' six classes of beings!

Not taking hold of one's own faults,
Always seeing faults in others,
How can one be in harmonious with all?
Even our flawless 'friend'
the omniscient teacher, Buddha,
By those full of negativity and non-virtue,
Was seen to have heaps of faults.
Thus, there is no harmony with all, and
One can never take hold of human minds.
Thinking thus, I feel melancholy.
So, this girl shall practice divine Dharma, and
Look at the face of my own mind!

For you, an emanation of the Buddha,
All appearances dawn as gold.
Even when not dawning, there is no existence or nonexistence.
This, my worldly heart-held stuff [gold]
I offer, in order to abandon craving.
"Abandon things for which there is great craving."
The Victorious Ones have said.
"If one uses illusion-like food and wealth for virtue
It will become meritorious." The buddhas have said,
Such I heard with my ears.
Thus, I offer this to you,
Having accepted this sign of devotion,
Please kindly teach the divine dharma." (tr. Tomlin, 2023)

After singing it, she pleads with Milarepa to teach her and take her as his student, which he does- giving her the name Saley O and advising her to meditate in the mountains in solitude:

"O faithful meditator, Saley O,
Wipe the dirt from the mirror of mind
And look into the space of the stainless sky.
With the blessings of all the previous siddhas,
Go meditate in the mountains, in solitary places.
The reason for wandering in mountain retreats
Is to gain mastery; look at mind's nature.
Now I'll explain the way to look:
Listen without distraction, Saley O!" (Stagg, 2017)

The story ends by saying that:

"Accordingly, Saley O remained inseparable from mountain retreats and meditated. Through this, she became a self-liberated *Ḍākinī* who benefited the teachings and sentient beings. This is one of the stories of the four primary female disciples of the Jetsun that were written down by Ngendzong Tonpa Jangchung Gyalpo, who has the dharani of perfect memory."

*Song of Saley O, translated by Adele Tomlin (2023). The Tibetan text I used for this translation is in *The Biography and Thousand Songs of Jetsun Milarepa* [3]. The chapter about Sa-le-'od was composed by Ngendzong Tonpa (Ngan-rdzong Ston-pa), himself a disciple of Milarepa.

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['JOYFULLY JOYOUS' SIDDHA'S ROAR : PADAMPA SANGYE'S 'DHARMA THAT PACIFIES SUFFERING \(ZHIJE\)' SONG TO MILAREPA](#)

[Milarepa's Song on the Ten Pāramitās , 'Empty words are of trivial value'](#)

[Hermit-Yogi Caves and Fortresses \(Part I\): Jetsun Milarepa's Twenty Sacred Places](#)

[Milarepa's Song on the Suffering of Animals in the Evil 'Tradition' of Meat-eating](#)

[Milarepa's Female Disciples: Rechungma's Song of 'Fifteen Realisations'](#)

[NEW PUBLICATION: Milarepa's Songs to the Hunter and Animals, the Khyira Kagyu lineage](#)

[Milarepa's 'Song to the Hunter'; and the living 'ear-whispered' lineage of Khyira Kagyu in Nepal](#)

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Endnotes

[1] Women's History Month is a dedicated month to reflect on the often-overlooked contributions of women to United States history. From Abigail Adams to Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth to Rosa Parks, the timeline of women's history milestones stretches back to the founding of the United States.

[2] I first published some of this material in these two previous articles: *A Girl's Lament: Songs of Saley O to Milarepa* (<https://dakinitranslations.wordpress.com/a-girls-lament-songs-of-saley-o-to-milarepa/>) (June 2020, Dākinī Publications) and *Milarepa's Female Disciples: Rechungma's Song of Fifteen Realisations* (<https://dakinitranslations.wordpress.com/2020/06/15/milarepas-female-disciples-rechungmas-song-of-fifteen-realizations/>).

[3] For more on the 17th Karmapa's outstanding activities and projects for empowering and improving the status of female practitioners and nuns, see [here](#).

[4] As Miranda Shaw observed in her book *Passionate Enlightenment* (2004):

“Well-known male figures, such as Saraha, Tilopa and so on, recur in the sectarian annals, religious biographies, and historical works of India and Tibet as the founders of Vajrayana (or Secret Mantra) Buddhism, while the names of equally glorious foremothers and lineage founders ‘do not shine with the same lustre as those of their male counterparts and in some cases have nearly been forgotten altogether—save for sufficient evidence for a historian to rediscover them.”

[5] For example, I recently spoke about the female roots of Vajrayana in Bhutan, and whether or not tantric union practice is allowed for monks (a topic of interest to both men and women), the paper was placed on a ‘Women in Vajrayana’ panel (as titled by the male organisers). I did query this (as there would never be a panel named ‘Men in Vajrayana’ at such a conference), but my concerns were not listened to and we were all bundled together as a niche group topic.

[6] rje btsun mi la ras pa'i rnam thar dang mgur 'bum, TBRC W1KG4276:2:620

Tibetan Text of Saley O's song

ཇེ་རས་པ་ཆེན་པོ་སྟན་གསོན་དང་། བདག་མས་པའི་ཁྱབ་འབྲུལ་བ་འདི།
རྩུན་ཁ་ཆོག་ཡིན་མེན་ཐུགས་ཀྱིས་མཁྱེན། རང་ལ་རང་ཉིད་ཡི་སྟག་ཆེ།
ཅིང་ག་སེམས་ཀྱི་བསམ་མཚོ་ལ། མི་རྟག་འཆིབ་གཏིང་ནས་དྲན།
རང་མ་ལ་སྐྱེས་ནས་ད་བར་ལ། ཁན་གཞོན་མང་པོ་ཤིབ་མཐོང་།
ཆེ་མི་རྟག་སྔ་ཁའི་ཟེལ་པ་འདྲ། དེ་ཞག་དང་ཟ་མས་མ་ཆོར་འཛད།
གང་དུ་གནས་ཀྱང་མི་འཆིབ་འདི། ས་ཚྭ་གས་གང་ན་འང་མེད་པར་གོ།
བདག་ལ་ངས་པར་འཆིང་གོས་ཤིང་། ས་ནས་གར་སྐྱེ་རང་དབང་མེད།
ངན་སེང་ཐུག་བཟུལ་བསམས་ཅན། ཐུག་བཟུལ་རྟེད་སྟམ་ཤིན་ཏུ་འཛིགས།
འཁོར་བ་གཞན་གྱི་ཚུལ་ལ་བསམས། ལས་ངན་བྱིམ་ཐབ་བྱེད་དོ་ཞེས།
འཁོར་བའི་གཡོས་སྦྱོར་བྱས་ཅན། པ་མ་དྲིན་ཚྭ་ཏུ་བོར།
རང་གཉེན་དྲིན་མེད་མི་ལ་བསྐྱུལ། ངན་སོང་གསུམ་གྱི་འགྲམ་གཞི་བཏིང་།
མཐོར་གོ་ཐར་པའི་སྦྱོང་པོ་སྐྱེལ། པ་མའི་ཟས་རྩར་ཁྱར་ནས་སྟ།
དོན་མེད་མི་ཡི་གཡོས་ལ་གཏུ། གསོར་བར་མཆོང་བའི་གཉེན་གྲོགས་དེ།
དང་པོ་ལྷ་བྱ་འཛུམ་བག་ལ། བར་དུ་བདུད་པོ་ངོ་ནག་པོ།
ཐ་མར་ཐང་བྱ་བདུད་སྟེང་ལ། བསམས་ཤིང་སྦྱོབ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས།
དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྷ་ཆོས་བྱེད། གྲོགས་སུ་དོ་རྩེ་སྟན་དང་འགྲོགས།

དེ་ནས་ལྷས་ལ་སྐྱེས་པའི་བྱ། བསོད་ནམས་ཐུན་པ་རེ་རེ་ལ།
ལས་ཅན་རེ་ཅན་བྱུང་བའང་སྟིད། པལ་ཆེར་ལན་ཆགས་འདིད་མཁན་དེ།
དང་པོར་ལྷས་ཀྱི་མདངས་འཕྲོག་པོ། བར་དུ་ཁ་ཡི་ཟས་འཕྲོག་པོ།
ཐ་མར་ལག་གི་རྩྭ་འཕྲོག་པོ། བསམས་ཤིང་སྦྱོབ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས།
དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྷ་ཆོས་བྱེད། སྐས་བྱ་རིག་པའི་ཁྱུ་ཆུང་གསོ།
གཞུག་ལག་ཁང་དང་མགོན་ཁང་སོགས། བརྟེན་པ་དོན་ར་ཡོད་རེ་རེ་ཅན།
འཁོར་བའི་བཙོན་དོང་ས་མཁར་དེ། དང་པོ་སེམས་ལ་སྟག་བཟུལ་བསྐྱར།
བར་དུ་ལྷས་ལ་ངལ་དུ་བ་བསྐྱར། ཐ་མར་ཞིག་རབ་ལྟངས་ལ་བཏང་།
བསམས་ཤིང་སྦྱོབ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས། དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྷ་ཆོས་བྱེད།
འཛིག་མེད་བསམ་གཏན་མཁར་བྱ་ཆེག།

བདེ་གཤེགས་གསུང་རབ་སྐྱོ་གཟུགས་དང་། དང་ཐུན་དགེ་རྒྱན་མ་གཏོགས་པའི།
 བཞོས་ཞིང་ལས་ནམས་དོན་མེད་ཡིན། དང་པོར་ཐང་སྟོང་ས་ལ་འཛིང་།
 བར་དུ་འབྱུང་བ་རྩ་ལ་འཛིང་། ཐ་མར་མགོ་ནག་མི་ལ་འཛིང་།
 བསམས་ནང་སྐྱོ་བ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས། དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྟ་ཆོས་བྱེད།
 ཞིང་དུ་རང་རྒྱུད་ཐ་གྲོད་འདུལ།

གལ་ཏེ་སེམས་བསྐྱེད་བསམ་པ་ཡིས། ཟེན་ན་བསོད་ནམས་འོང་བའང་ཤིད།
 མ་ཟེན་ནོར་གྱི་འདུ་ཤེས་ཀྱིས། ཟུགས་ལྷག་བསྐྱེད་བ་ཟླག་པའི་ལས།
 དང་པོར་བརྟན་སེམས་འདོད་པས་ཐལ། བར་དུ་ང་རྒྱལ་ཐག་དོག་འཕེལ།
 ཐ་མར་དག་པོའི་གཡལ་མོ་བྱས། བསམས་ཤིང་སྐྱོ་བ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས།
 དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྟ་ཆོས་བྱེད། ཟུགས་ལྷགས་རིགས་དྲུག་སྟོང་རྩེས་སྐྱོང་།

རང་སྐྱོན་རང་གིས་མི་ཟེན་པར། མི་ཡི་སྐྱེད་ལ་རྒྱན་དུ་ཉ།
 ཀུན་དང་མཐུན་པ་ག་ལ་འབྱུང་། ཉེས་པའི་དྲི་མ་དང་བྲལ་བའི།
 ཀུན་མཁྱེན་སྟོན་པ་སངས་རྒྱས་ལའང་། ཟློག་ཅན་ལ་སེཛྲགས་ནག་ཕྱོགས་ཀྱིས།
 སྐྱོན་གྱི་ཕུང་པོ་དགའ་མཛོང་། དེ་ཕྱིར་ཀུན་དང་མི་མཐུན་ཞིང་།
 མི་སེམས་བབྱང་བས་ཟེན་དུས་མེད། བསམས་ཤིང་སྐྱོ་བ་ནང་ནས་སྐྱེས།
 དེས་ན་བྱ་མོ་ལྟ་ཆོས་བྱེད། ད་ནི་སེམས་ཀྱི་རང་ཞལ་ལྟ།

Chapter Eighteen: Kunga Trinley Wangmo

A Woman's Voice : the Autobiography of Kunga Trinley Wangmo, (Zhentong lineage holder and secret consort of Tāranātha)

[21st Oct 2020 Dākinī Translations](#)

I first became aware of an extraordinary woman, Kunga Trinley Wangmo (Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo (1585-1668)), a few years ago in 2016-17, during my postgraduate research on *Tāranātha's Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (LTWA, 2017). While delving into Tāranātha's lifestory, I was made aware (particularly by discussions with the main English language scholar on Tāranātha's autobiographies, David Templeman)^[i] that Wangmo was a close disciple and secret consort (gsang yum) to Tāranātha (1575-1635), as well as a Jonang lineage-holder and key figure in the transmission of zhentong (gzhan stong) philosophy. In addition, when I started translating some Jonang Kālacakra texts in 2017, a couple of Jonang lamas in exile had even said that I might be her incarnation. I laughed this suggestion off as very unlikely! However, I wanted to read more about her but could not find any primary source material^[ii] and was told that Michael Sheehy was doing research on her life.

However, due to not having any access to these texts myself (despite requesting Sheehy to see them and his refusing) ^[iii], it was with great interest that I read his new article, [Materializing Dreams and Omens: The Autobiographical Subjectivity of Tibetan Yogini, Kunga Trinley Wangmo](#)^[iv]. The title of paper immediately made me wonder about its contents. The use of *autobiographical subjectivity* in the title struck me as odd and ironic in some ways as it was a 'subjective' analysis of a woman of colour's voice (and self-penned story) by a privileged white, male academic. I have not seen such a provocative title used in relation to the autobiography of a Tibetan male master, for example. Thus, I felt both excited and apprehensive about reading it.

My brief article here, aims to pull out and share some of the interesting revelations in her autobiography as well as review Sheehy's personal treatment and analysis of the Tibetan source material and Wangmo's 'voice'. Without having had any access to that material up until now, this review is necessarily limited though.

'An Emanation of Vajrayogini' – Trinley Wangmo's Autobiography

Sheehy states he 'acquired' her autobiography in the summer of 2006, while staying in the Dzamthang valley in Amdo, with Tulku Kunga Tsultrim Zangpo (Kun dga' Tshul khriims bzang po) when they came into possession of some 'rare' Tibetan manuscripts in Amdo^[v]. The texts themselves came from a man called Lama Phuntshog who was said to have handwritten many important texts he had acquired and kept them in his home. According to Sheehy:

"He [Lama Phuntshog] unexpectedly died at a relatively young age, leaving his private collection of handwritten manuscripts stockpiled in his mother's house. Upon hearing this story, Tulku Tshul khriims bzang po and I informed Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje, the vajra-master at Jonang Gstang ba Monastery in 'Dzam thang. Tulku 'Jigs med rdo rje had not heard this account but knew this local elderly woman, and vaguely recalled her son."

These texts were then given as a gift to the now head of Jonang in Tibet, Jigme Dorje Rinpoche by Lama Phuntshog's elderly mother.



100 Vajrayogini

Trinley Wangmo was considered to be an emanation of Vajrayogini. Among the instances of biographical writing by Tāranātha's immediate disciples found in Lama Phuntshog's collection was the autobiography of Kunga Trinley Wangmo (Rje btsun ma Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo). The full title of her life story in thirty-three folios is, *Secret Primordial-Awareness: The Life-Story of the Fortunate Trinley Wangmo, Emanation of Venerable Vajrayogini* (Rje btsun rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sprul pa skal ldan 'phrin las dbang mo'i rnam thar gsang ba'i ye shes)[\[vi\]](#). Sheehy explains that:

“Though there is nothing to suggest that she titled her own work, and that the title was not added by later editors, the title makes her connection to Vajrayogīni explicit with the phrase, “rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sprul pa,” indicating that 'Phrin las dbang mo is considered (or considered herself) an embodiment of the deity. Perhaps it is the latter part of the title that is however most revealing; here the phrase, “Gsang ba'i ye shes” which is the primary title of the work, suggests her relationship with and possible self-imaging of guhyajñāna dakīni, a vermilion esoteric form of Vajrayogīni. This meditation deity (yi dam) is known by its full name, Mkha' 'gro ma gsang ba ye shes, and is found in the Yi dam rgya mtsho collection of sadhāna compiled by Tāranātha. A few folios into her autobiography, 'Phrin las dbang mo describes having received the empowerment for Cakrasaṃvāra at age fifteen. This initiation seemingly left a deep impression on her as a young woman, so much so that her writing regularly and seamlessly quotes stanzas from the Cakrasaṃvāra and Vajrayogīni literature, as reflected in the title of her own life story. For those familiar with Tāranātha's praxis, the implicit linkage of her as Vajrayogīni will evoke the idyllic image of her in union with his yidam, Cakrasaṃvāra (p.267).“



101 Cakrasaṃvāra

Sheehy goes on to explain that:

“A year after this find, in 2007, Tulku Tsultrim Zangpo (Tshul khriims bzang po) and I digitized the Collected Works of the Jonangpa scholar from Swe Monastery in Ngawa (Rnga ba), Palden Namnag Dorje (Dpal ldan Rnam snang rdo rje (d. 1847)). Within this collection, there is both a supplement (kha skong) that augments and comments on Trinley Wangmo’s autobiography as well as a supplication to her successive line of women re-embodiments (skyes ‘phreng gsol ‘debs) These two texts are critical sources for contextualizing and understanding Trinley Wangmo’s life writing and for situating her historically (p.268).”

The manuscript is in handwritten U-med and, according to Sheehy, ‘the only extant witness that we have available to-date. Her autobiography is not known by the elder Jonangpa scholars in Tibet with whom I consulted, suggesting that it was a manuscript that had minimal circulation in Jonang circles through the late twentieth century.’

Trinley Wangmo was considered to be a re-embodiment of the female deity Vajrayogīni and is associated with Sarasvatī, Niguma, and Yeshe Tshogyal. In terms of her previous lives, Wangmo is said to have been prominent female figures, although these are not specifically stated by Sheehy:

“At the beginning of her autobiography, she writes about her previous incarnations in Nepal, India, and Tibet. All of this situates ‘Phrin las dbang mo not only as one of the few women authors in pre-1959 Tibet, but includes her among Tibetan Buddhist women who claimed prominent female figures among their past lives. This is however distinct from women who spawned tulku lines of succession with an established monastic seat, such as the Bsam sdings Rdo rje phag mo and Gung ru Mkha’ ‘gro ma tulkus.”

This leaves another intellectual (and feminist) question, as to why figures like Wangmo do not spawn successive tulku lines and monasteries.

Wangmo’s autobiography is extraordinary not only for the content but also for its very existence too. As Sheehy reminds us, ‘it is estimated that historical Tibetan women were the authors or subjects of less than one percent (1%) of the thousands of biographies that were written in the Tibetan language’:

“To further contextualize ‘Phrin las dbang mo’s autobiographical writing in this broader frame of literary women in Tibet, we might note that her work not only gives unique insights into her time, but is a prime example of female authorship in early modern Tibet. In fact, her work is among the earliest known autobiographical accounts by a woman writing in Tibet (p.270).”

In addition, it is considered to be the only known first-person account of such critical moments in Jonang history, such as the death of Tāranātha, civil unrest in Gtsang, the fifteen year period after the death of Tāranātha in 1635 that led to the Ganden Phodrang (Dga’ ldan Pho brang) takeover of Jonang headquarters at Tagten Damcho Ling (Rtag brtan Dam chos gling) Monastery in 1650, its conversion into a Gelug (Dge lugs) establishment in 1658, and the subsequent migration of the Jonangpas to remote regions of Amdo on the margins of the Sino-Tibetan frontier.

The Royal Background and connection with 5th Dalai Lama



102 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso

According to Wangmo’s account, she writes that she was “born into a royal family,” in the foothills on the southern shore of the turquoise lake Yardrog Yumstho (Yar ‘brog G.yum mtsho) near the palace of the snowpeaked glacial Mount Gangzang (Gang bzang) in Nakar Tse Dzong (Sna dkar rtse rdzong), south central Tibet. Sheehy explains that in a supplement, Namnang Dorje (Rnam snang rdo rje) elaborates on this phrase by explaining that she was the “tsha mo” (cousin or niece) of Thripon Chenpo Tenzin Migyur^[vii] (Khri dpon chen po Bstan ‘dzin mi ‘gyur (d.u.)), the principle myriarch of the Yardrog Taglung Thrikor (Yar ‘brog Stag lung khri skor) area of Nakar Tse Dzong, making her a princess of royal descent^[viii]. Sheehy states that:

“Given the known and probable dates, ‘Phrin las dbang mo was likely not the granddaughter, but rather was the niece of Khri dpon chen po Bstan ‘dzin mi ‘gyur and she lived in his royal household during her girlhood. That these women were relatives is made more probable by Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho’s autobiographical description of his mother being from a Jonangpa family in Sna dkar rtse who were devoted to Kun dga’ Grol mchog and then his tulku, Tāranātha. If Bstan ‘dzin mi ‘gyur was in fact the father of Kun dga’ lha mdzes, which the current biographical sources suggest, and ‘Phrin las dbang mo was his niece, this would make ‘Phrin las dbang mo a cousin of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s mother, Kun dga’ lha mdzes. This gives us not only a greater salience of the interpersonal relations among the social and kinship worlds of Tāranātha and the Fifth Dalai Lama, which become consequential for the religious history of Tibet, but this contact tracing compounds the psychological and emotional layers of this history.”

This assertion that Wangmo was the cousin of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s mother, Kunga Lhadze (who Sheehy claims is a decade younger than Trinley Wangmo), is at odds with another scholar, David Templeman’s controversial suggestion that Wangmo may have been the actual mother of the Fifth Dalai Lama, with Tāranātha the father (see below).

Sheehy then discusses the birth year of Trinley Wangmo as 1585, making her ten years younger than Tāranātha. He says:

“Based on dated events in her autobiography and the kha skongs by Rnam snang rdo rje. Evidence suggests that she was ten years younger than Tāranātha who was born in 1575, making her birth year 1585. In the kha skongs, Rnam snang rdo rje verifies this by stating that in the chu mo bya year, which would have been 1633/1634, Tāranātha was fifty-nine (i.e. 58) years old and ‘Phrin las dbang mo was forty-nine (i.e. 48) years old.^[ix]”

Wangmo is said to have met Tāranātha as a young girl and ‘her narrative reads linearly through her life from her girlhood through her adulthood with Tāranātha in the remote Jo mo nang valley until she became an elder during the final days of the Jonangpa in Tsang.

Secret consort of Tāranātha?



103 Jetsun Tāranātha

Sheehy asserts that Wangmo was the secret consort of Tāranātha but provides no clear textual information or sources to back this claim up, he says:

“She lived within the inner circle of Tāranātha and his closest disciples during her entire adult life and was charged with compiling his Collected Works after his passing. She was his consort (pho nya mo), and her intimacy with Tāranātha performs multiple roles, including that of assisting him as a female muse who becomes intrinsically entangled within his secret autobiographical experiences (nyams) and realizations (rtogs); and by her close association with him, she gained greater agency and authority.”

In addition, there is a glaring omission of any reference to the work of David Templeman, the main English-language scholar on the autobiographies/biographies of Tāranātha. It is not clear why. It would certainly have been interesting to have read more about Wangmo’s life and practice as Tāranātha’s consort (perhaps that is forthcoming).

Despite it being generally asserted that Wangmo was the consort of Tāranātha, as well as a major Jonang and Zhentong lineage holder, according to my informal email discussions with Templeman in February 2017, there is nothing in Tāranātha’s autobiographical or biographical texts that explicitly state this, or even mention him having a consort. According to Templeman this omission is a political one, and moreover, Wangmo’s role in the 5th Dalai Lama’s life may be a lot more intimate than the official version too! Templeman explained that:

“Tāranātha does not mention Trinley Wangmo by name even in his Secret Autobiography and less so in his Large one. This is entirely a political strategy. As you may know, Gene Smith found in an early draft of the 5th Dalai Lama’s Autobiography, and expunged from later editions, a reason for the 5th’s rather unreasonable dislike of Tāranātha. Basically, it suggested that Tāranātha impregnated Trinley Wangmo and she was dismissed from Tsang. The child was later to become the 5th Dalai Lama. Tāranātha made overtures to the mother to bring the young lad into the Jo nang lineage but as she was mightily upset at his treatment of her she refused. Absolutely none of this is even mentioned in Tāranātha’s writings.

However, an extract from Tāranātha's large Autobiography dealing with when he meets Indian Hindu mendicants and the advice they give him is about as close as we get to anything to do with consorts in his writings[\[x\]](#)“.

Templeman told me that there is a secret secret handwritten autobiography which refers to Tāranātha's consort life and practice, in which Wangmo is mentioned. Sheehy reveals that Wangmo's tantric secret name (gsang mtshan) is Rinchen Dorjema (Rin chen Rdo rje ma (ratna badzri ñi)).

Lineage holder of Zhentong and other traditions

Trinley Wangmo is mentioned in Zhentong lineage supplications as a lineage holder, and Sheehy explains that:

“She was also a formidable intellectual who is said to have taught gzhan stong philosophy “as it dawned spontaneously within her heart” and is listed in Jonang lineage records as a primary figure in the transmission of gzhan stong after Tāranātha. She becomes an important human link in the transmission line of gzhan stong and other teachings from Tāranātha to Zur Kun bzang dbang po (d.u.) who was the teacher to Rig ‘dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698-1755), the torch-bearer who ignited the scholastic renaissance of Jonang teachings in eastern Tibet.”

Some of the selected passages in Wangmo's autobiography also speak about commentaries she wrote on the Kālacakra mandala and completion stage, but these do not appear to be in existence. In addition, it was interesting to learn that Wangmo is also a holder of the Tsemdu Lineage of the Great Compassionate One, an important practice within the Jonang school, which I recently wrote about [here](#).

Sheehy also gives a valuable discussion of female authors and figures (ie. the lack of them) in Tibetan Buddhist texts, particularly during the 16th Century. Helpfully citing the recent publication of a text in 2013 by Larung Gar, Tibet that details the lives of female practitioners in Tibet and India[\[xi\]](#). This publication also contains the aforementioned autobiography by Wangmo, and has been recently uploaded onto TBRC for free access. It is a treasure chest indeed!

A significant bulk of Sheehy's article is spent on Wangmo's dreams and omens, including some fascinating ones about Tāranātha and his future incarnation, Sheehy states:

“In what seems to be very conscious choices, Trinley Wangmo (‘Phrin las dbang mo) works constantly to solve the riddles that are presented in her dreams as well as omens. For instance, more than once throughout her autobiography, ‘Phrin las dbang mo writes-down the phrase, “rmi lam dang dngos ltas rnam mgnon du ‘gyur” – which may be rendered more literally, “The signs that manifest in both dream and reality.”

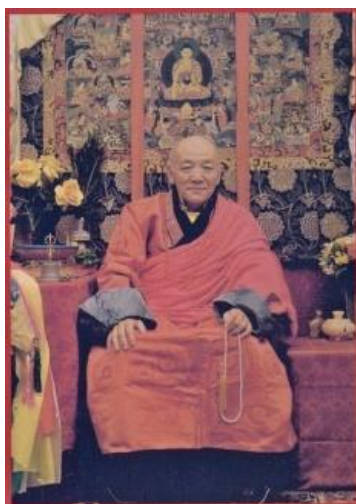
Tāranātha's Rebirth as Jetsun Kalkha Dampa?

Sheehy shares a conversation she is alleged to have had with Tāranātha about his future re-birth as the First Khalkha Jetsun Dampa:

“She recounts in her autobiography, ‘Phrin las dbang mo describes an intimate conversation that she had with Tāranātha during his final days about omens (rten ‘brel) that he intuited about the future of the Jonangpa, and the volatile political climate that would ensue after his passing. During this conversation, Tāranātha revealed a series of omens that had recently transpired for him, and that he believed would lead him to be reborn to benefit the Gelukpa. As history tells, the child born in Mongolia that same year that Tāranātha died, Blo bzang Bstan

pa'i rgyal mtshan (1635-1723)—known as 'Jam dbyangs Tulku—would soon be recognized by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho, First Pañchen Lama Blo bzang Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1567-1662), and the State Oracle of Tibet to be the rebirth Tāranātha, the First Khal kha Rje btsun dam pa. Later in her autobiography, 'Phrin las dbang mo wrote that she rejoiced when she heard this news of Tāranātha's rebirth in Mongolia years later, which was likely after the official confirmation in 1642."

As of 2020, a current Khalkha Dampa, as usually recognized by the Dalai Lamas, has yet to be officially recognized, with the head of the Jonang lineage in Tibet, Jigme Dorjee Rinpoche, taking the main, official role of Head of Jonang.



104 The 9th Jetsun Khalkha Dampa (1933 – 2012) It is clear that Wangmo was close to Tāranātha and is mentioned as scribe and collator of his Collected Works.

Meeting with 5th Dalai Lama

By the end of her life, Wangmo writes about making connection again with the Fifth Dalai Lama:

Then in 1664, as one of the last living disciples of Tāranātha, she visited and met with the Fifth Dalai Lama. In her brief description of this encounter, she recounts receiving several authorization initiations (rjes gngang) from the Dalai Lama including White Tārā and a guruyoga, and briefly meeting Desi Sangye Gyatso (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705)). These historical episodes in her autobiography make it clear that certainly by the end of her life, 'Phrin las dbang mo was considered not only an elder of the Jonang order, but a mediator in the real politic of her time.

Appropriating women's voices and 'ownership' of texts?

To conclude, I will share some observations about Sheehy's personal treatment of the source material.

Sheehy rightly acknowledges the 'subjectivity' of Wangmo's account, particularly when it comes to her words about the 5th Dalai Lama and Tāranātha, which may have been changed or hijacked by those with political motives. However, I don't think this observation justifies making such 'subjectivity' the title of the article itself. All too often women are critiqued directly (and indirectly) for being too 'subjective' or 'emotional' (or 'sentimental' as Sheehy puts it). I hope I am wrong, but the titling of the article reeks a little of such sexist 'sentiment'.

Sheehy explains that Wangmo's voice is unique and 'unfiltered' within that genre of Tibetan Buddhist texts, in that:

"Her autobiographical writing challenges conventions commonly associated with the auto/biographical (rang nam, nam thar) genre of Tibetan literature. In particular, her writing style does not conform to preconceived patterns of the outer, inner, and secret (phyi, nang, gsang) structure that came to frame Tibetan biographical writing. Throughout her autobiography, she presents the reader with her critical awareness, sentimentality, and testimonial in an unfiltered way that expresses the voice of her ongoing internal dialogue (p. 278)."

Although the revelation and translation of such rare and inaccessible material about an important female lineage holder and consort is valuable indeed, I also felt reading it as if Sheehy's enthusiasm for intellectual jargon and obscure wording (as a native speaker, I am a fan of plain English, even in academic texts), obscured much of the raw (and most interesting) material and 'voice' from the reader's view. His verbose 'pontification' about her dreams is interesting in some respects, but repetitive and overbearing by the end. So, while I was happy to read some information about her life based on primary sources, I was left feeling slightly disappointed at the lack of original sourced content and excessive conjecture about the material presented. In sum, the voice that dominated was that of Sheehy, and not of Trinley Wangmo.

Yesterday, with the publication of the new *Treasury of Lives* biography of Trinley Wangmo (written by Sheehy), the texts by and about Wangmo referred to in his article are now available, including her *Autobiography* (which is published as a computer input text, in the Tibetan, Larung Gar 2013 publication (mentioned before) of collected biographies of great women of India and Tibet. This has been uploaded online to view (see TBRC W1KG16649. 11: 192 – 223). As a result, more can be said and shared about her life, realizations and experiences as the secret consort of Tāranātha.

As a male scholar, Sheehy should perhaps be cautious about initially claiming 'ownership' of such literature, which after all can rightfully be said to belong to the Jonang lineage holders and descendants of Wangmo herself. In particular, denying access or information to a female translator and researcher in the field, such as myself. It all comes down to whether or not a researcher is genuinely interested in widening public knowledge and scholarship on a topic, or using that topic as a way to increase their own reputation and name. If the latter, then maintaining strict control over access to such unrestricted texts would be a sign.

As I myself have recently personally experienced, women's voices are all too often erased from accounts, histories, conferences and so on, and their stories hijacked (or worse impersonated) by more powerful (in the worldly sense), male voices. Considering the dearth of female voices in Tibetan Buddhist textual translation, analysis and history (and in Tibetan Buddhist academia) Sheehy (who am sure considers himself to be a progressive male) might do well to remember that. At the very least, it is impossible to check another's work, if the texts themselves are unavailable.

In addition, for me (and perhaps other scholars who consider histories from a female/feminist perspective) the intellectual question of who and where is Kunga Trinley Wangmo's current incarnation is a relevant one. There are male tulkus of Tāranātha and other renowned (and even lesser) Tibetan Buddhist masters but why do lineage holders like Wangmo not spawn such lineages and incarnations?

Apologies for any errors, this article was written in the space of a few hours. Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 21st October 2020. Copyright.

Endnotes

[i] Templeman told me that he is currently converting his PhD on Tāranātha's Autobiographies as well as his translation of Tāranātha's Large Autobiography for forthcoming publication by Brill.

[ii] In his article, Sheehy helpfully lists some primary source material available on Wangmo as:

"In addition, there are two brief works, if not others, that are dedicated to her: (1) one is a letter written to her by the 'Brug pa Kagyu master Mi pham Dge legs rnam rgyal (1618-1685) that was preserved among his miscellaneous official letters (chab shog phyogs bsgrigs), expressing his plea for her to pray for the rebirth of his recently deceased disciple; (2) the other is a personal instruction (zhal gdams) that was advised to her by Tāranātha. As for her own writings in addition to the autobiography, she also transcribed, arranged, and compiled a handbook of handwritten notes based on Tāranātha's oral explanations on the history and practice of the Jonang protector deity Trak shad. Another important source for contextualizing her is Tāranātha's Collected Works wherein she is documented in colophons as being active as a scribe, commentator, requestor, and close disciple."

[iii] When I contacted Sheehy to get access to some of the texts on Wangmo, he refused citing his own research as the reason. Although this seemed to go against principles of open intellectual collaboration and research, I nevertheless was forced to accept it and Sheehy never responded to my queries about it again.

[iv] [*Materializing Dreams and Omens: The Autobiographical Subjectivity of the Tibetan Yoginī Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo \(1585-1668\)*](#). Revue D'Etudes Tibetaines, [Number 56, Octobre 2020](#), pp. 263-292.

[v] Sheehy explains that:

"The manuscript cache that we acquired from the late Lama Phun tshogs totals fifteen volumes and includes writings from Nyingma, Kagyu, and Jonang authors. Significant texts in this find include the biography and interlinear annotated commentary (mchan 'grel) on the Kālacakra Tantra and Vimalaprabhā by Mnga' ris pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1306-1386), one of Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan's (1292-1361) primary disciples; two volumes of miscellaneous writings (gsung thor bu) by the Kālacakra adept Ratna bha dra (1489-1563); two volumes of important writings by Kun dga' Grol mchog (1507-1565), including ritual and liturgical texts concerning Hevajra, Vajrayoginī and the special form of black Cakrasaṃvāra that is transmitted via the Jonangpa, instructions on the sixfold yoga of the Kālacakra, various poetic songs and praises, a guidebook to the sacred sites and nooks of Chos lung byang rtse Monastery, two works on Sakya Lam 'bras and his writing on gzhan stong;⁴ along with a handful of biographical writings by Tāranātha's closest disciples and their immediate Jonangpa successors in Amdo."

[vi] In the *Collected Works of Namnang Dorje* (Rnam snang rdo rje'i gsung 'bum, ka, 259-260). Rnga ba: Swe dgon pa.

[vii] According to Sheehy: "Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur was an established ruler by the time that Tāranātha was four years old because he mentions Khri dpon chen po Bstan 'dzin mi 'gyur dbang gi rgyal po and his relationship with the royal family in his autobiography (p.274)."

[viii] Sheehy explains that:

“Here, the term “tsha mo” is ambiguous about whether she was the niece or granddaughter of Bstan ‘dzin mi ‘gyur, since the term can refer to both relationships. An interlinear note inserted into the autobiography helps to clarify, but not define this relationship, which states that she was born into the familial care of Bstan ‘dzin mi ‘gyur.⁴² Why this is historically important is that Khri lcam Kun dga’ lha mdzes, the mother of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617-1682), was contemporaneously the daughter of the Yar ‘brog Khri dpon in Sna dkar rtse rdzong, as suggested by her appellation, Khri lcam.⁴³ While dates for Kun dga’ lha mdzes remain uncertain, it is well documented that she gave birth to Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho in the year 1617, making it probable that she was born in the 1590s, making her roughly a decade or so younger than ‘Phrin las dbang mo.”

[ix] “chu mo bya’i lo la rje btsun dam pa dgong grangs lnga bcu nga dgu bzhes/ ‘phrin las dbang mo zhe dgu yin.”

[x] According to Templeman, Tāranātha states in his large autobiography that:

“At the time of my arrival at (the meditation site of) Mahābodhi, the paṇḍits Puṇnānanda and Premānanda also both arrived there for my sake, after doing a pilgrimage route around *Lha sa* and the province of *dBus*, as well as certain other places. Although they themselves were Buddhists by virtue of their various tenets, their ancestors were believers in the Vedas and both of them were greatly attached to those teachings and also worshipped one or two other deities, and so I did not seek empowerments and teachings from them. The paṇḍits were extremely learned in all the various sciences and severing many of my doubts, I was able to translate a few selections from the śāstras with them. I also heard the Bharata (= Mahābharata) and the Rāmayaṇa as well as many other accounts from them.

At that time the protector of the Rāmayaṇa was a magical transformation of Hanumanda (= Hanuman), whose monkey body was as big as the mountain above the Mahābodhi retreat centre. The Bharata (=Mahābharata) was protected by the King Bhīma who had actually been seen by the paṇḍits who said to me, ‘You too are a protector and power, renown and great wealth will come to you.’ Moreover he went on to say, ‘Moreover how can you serve even one of the deities or demons who do not have faith in the dharma? Later on when many great gurus are seen to be in sexual union (with their consorts) at that time you yourself, quite spontaneously and effortlessly will approach complete fulfilment and as a yogi you will achieve full renunciation in your own time.’ I engaged in discussion with them both both day and night for about ten days. Thereafter at *bSam sdings* in the presence of *dPal ldan bla ma Byams pa’i mtshan can* I requested the empowerment for the ‘Vajra Garland’ (*rDo rje ‘phreng ba*) and that of the ‘Ocean of Ḍākinīs’ (*mKha’ ‘gro rgya mtsho*). Dz. F 126. L7. P/ling. P. 143. L.1. Print. P. 172. L.2.

[xi] Sheehy states that: “The most important recent contribution to the study of Tibetan literary women is the 16-volume Tibetan language anthology, compiled and produced by nuns at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy in Kham, *Bod kyi skyes chen ma dag gi rnam thar*. This anthology includes biographical sources that extend our current register of Tibetan literary women.”

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Chapter Nineteen: Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā and Vajrayoginī

IN PRAISE OF THE HEADLESS, FEMME FATALE ‘SCARLET WOMAN’: Male monastic privilege and appropriation, denigration of women, female lineages, ‘feminist’ male consorts, and Vajrayoginī with severed-head and reversed Yum-yab union

[26th May 2021 Dākinī Translations](#)

“Thus I have heard—at one time the Buddha stayed in the vagina of the admantine woman, who is the essence of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas.” – Shakyamuni Buddha^[1]

“Wherever in the world a female body is seen, That should be recognized as my holy body.” – Vajrayoginī, in Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra

“Even if you fear bondage and death thereby
Withstand all that.
On this path, women must not be abandoned!
Free from trickery, arrogance, and shame,
Always helping with whatever is needed,
The real bestowers of the spiritual attainments,
They should be honored with all one’s possessions.
One must not disparage women ...
One should speak with pleasant words
And give a woman what she wants.
Having worshipped with one’s belongings,
Accordingly one should not despise her.
Never abandon women! Heed the Buddha’s words!
If you do otherwise, That transgression will land you in hell![2]
—from ‘In Praise of Women’ in Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra[3]

Introduction

Today, on one of the most sacred days of the Buddhist calendar, Vesak Day (Saga Dawa, Buddha Jayanti), a time when followers remember the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha, I share a new research post on the fully enlightened goddess, Vajrayoginī and how remembering her forms, words and male consort, might help bring us all back to a balance and respect for the sacred feminine as embodied in all women, in all their forms and guises.



105 ‘Scarlet woman’ archetype as source of forbidden desire and temptation and wild, promiscuous female sexuality

The Oxford English dictionary defines the phrase, ‘scarlet woman’, as a woman who is notorious for having many casual sexual encounters or relationships, a sexually promiscuous *woman*, or a *woman* who commits adultery, a hidden/secret woman. Desired by many, yet at the same time frowned upon as morally subversive and a dangerous ‘femme fatale’, the scarlet woman also symbolizes the ‘whore’ of the Freudian virgin-whore complex[4] that afflicts those in patriarchal cultures and religions. It is no coincidence that many fully enlightened female deities in Vajrayana Buddhism are bright, scarlet red. Red being the colour of magnetizing, blood and fiery heat, they are fully enlightened female forms representing the energy of lust, love, sex, desire, female power, magnetism, and the inner heat fire of passion and wrath. Vajrayoginī, a prime example of such a ‘scarlet woman’, in all her forms, is venerated and worshipped for her mandala of beauty, power and bliss, which are represented in monasteries and temples all over India, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan.

However, we also live in times when violence, humiliation and degradation against women is commonplace, and often used as entertainment. Gender inequality is still rampant in most cultures and races. Even though, respect and veneration for women is still publicly advocated as a necessity in most religious cultures and traditions, still the majority of those traditions maintain and promote men in positions of influence, power and visibility.

Even within a goddess-worshipping culture such as Vajrayana/Tantric Buddhism, females have often been publicly and privately degraded as a group, and as individual practitioners/consorts. [Yeshe Tsogyel’s gang-rape](#) being a clear example. The last thirty years has seen increasing public exposure and censure of serious downfalls and transgressions by senior male teachers against females, and the trauma and harm it causes people within those communities[5], of which I recently wrote about my first-hand experience here[6].

In the first section, I consider the pervasive spread and influence of male monastic culture and privilege, with its emphasis on (often forced) celibacy, ‘taught’ aversion to female bodies and sexuality and its oppressive and misogynist effect on the treatment and perception of females by male practitioners (monastic and lay) as human beings, nuns, consorts[7], spiritual teachers[8] and even as a deity in yab-yum union. Citing the severe and catastrophic consequences of disrespecting women, as embodied by the male consort of Vajrayoginī, Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa, this is followed by an overview of the invisibility of female incarnation lineages in Tibet, yet the undeniable presence of ‘mother’ teachers of the founding fathers[9], and female lineage founders such as Jomo Menmo and Princess Laskhminkara.

In the second section, in order to address this ‘mistaken’ yet often unconscious, ‘inferior’ perception of the ‘female’, I consider the visceral example of two forms of Vajrayoginī : one with severed head, bringing to the forefront, ‘mother’ lineage holders such as Lakṣmīṅkarā. The other, Vajrayoginī as the female-centred deity, in reversed yum-yab with male consort, highlighting and reversing unconscious male-centric, sexist perceptions of consorts and deity visualization. It is hoped that citing these examples helps to re-balance and re-store the perception of the full and sacred equality of the female, as human, consort, teacher, lineage holder and deity.

So, the question remains can monastics engage in tantric union practice with females, when females are still continually looked down upon and denigrated? The answer, especially judging by recent public scandals, is a shrieking sow’s squeal of NO!

Thus, ending at the beginning- with the first quote of this article:

“Thus I have heard—at one time the Buddha stayed in the vagina of the adamant woman, who is the essence of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas.” – Shakyamuni Buddha

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The undeniable ‘conclusion’ is that the blissful, *bhaga* mandala, symbolized by the vibrant red vulva, as the blissful, yet empty, source and abode of all the Buddhas, must be respected and revered at all times.

Or as [Fatboy Slim sang](#): ‘I I have to celebrate you baby, I have to praise you like I should!’

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 26th May 2021 (15th day of the 4th Month, Saga Dawa). Please share, steal and borrow! Copyright. This article is also downloadable as a pdf. [here](#).

PART I: MALE MONASTIC SUPREMACY AND DENIGRATION OF WOMEN

Male monastic prudish privilege and the repression of the ‘wild’ female

In the ground-breaking work of scholars such as Miranda Shaw (1994), Tsultrim Allione (2000), Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt (1997), Ulrich Timme-Kragh (2011), Nicola Schneider (2015), and historical and contemporary examples of female masters, it is clear that the role of women in Tantric Buddhism was never merely that of *dākinī*/consort to the main realized male/hero/master.

Yet as male monastic and patriarchal culture hijacked Buddhist ideas (and boys without genuine renunciation were put in monasteries), the female became downgraded as something inferior, to be feared and avoided by celibate males wanting to be free from the suffering of desire and lust. This misogyny (which bypasses the original intent of the Vinaya and purpose of monasticism, the abandoning of desire, not fear and loathing of women) became an unspoken institutional norm for monks, many of whom did not freely choose to enter monastic life as children[10].



As many scholars have asserted, this normalization of female ‘inferiority’ meant that Buddhist culture in Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, gradually became dominated by notions of male supremacy and power, represented and symbolised by ‘heads’ of the major Tibetan Buddhist lineages (the vast majority of whom are red-robed male monastics, or whom perpetuate the inequality that men are superior to women). This male-dominated control of male (and female) sexuality via monastic celibacy as the prime example of a ‘spiritual practitioner’, led to an increasingly ‘unhealthy’ type of hidden consort practice and sexual union, which was driven more ‘underground’, secret and hidden. Not in healthy, respectful ways though, rather in ways that led to more misogyny, domination, fear, hypocrisy, transgression and repression of all things female (unless the female is submissive and deemed acceptable to that male perception).

Monastic rules, intended to benefit women in the highly patriarchal culture of India, also led to a mistaken perception of nuns as inferior and unequal to monks, as Herrman-Pfandt says (1997: 15):

This basic structure fixed in the nuns' rule, which equalizes men and women wherever they are separate, but subordinates women as soon as there is a relation between both, is a kind of union of two contradictory positions: the discrimination against women prevalent in society and the religious equality admitted to them by the Buddha. In a way, the Buddha found a very clever compromise: on the one hand, he offered to the women a path which suits their religious equality, on the other hand, he spared the monks the uncomfortable experience of being directly confronted with female equality. He created a refuge for women without disturbing men in their habitual consciousness of being superior. Moreover, he spared society the encounter with a religious community overthrowing the generally accepted rules of gender hierarchy. For even the Buddha could not afford to disregard the rules of the society which paid for his community's livelihood.¹³

But even if meant only as a concession to society, these rules on the long term turned out to narrow the *religious* possibilities of women as well. It is hardly imaginable that any normal monk was *not* induced by the Eight Rules to regard the lower social position of a woman as being due to her lower mental faculties and abilities, the more so as she was not allowed to give religious teachings to monks but only to receive them from them. One of the long-term consequences is that till today, most Buddhist nuns all over Asia have much less access to religious education than monks, to say nothing of the much lower reputation they enjoy in their respective societies.¹⁴ And was not for any single monk the discrimination against his fellow-nuns an additional temptation of aggrandizing his ego instead of reducing it?

This subtle, and sometimes outright, perception of the female, as inferior, or less prominent/important within early Buddhist monastic culture, later then spread into Mahayana Buddhist cultures, in which women were advised their highest goal was to be re-born as men, as the male body was seen as superior to attain enlightenment. As Herrmann-Pfandt points out, there were dissenting voices that asserted biological sex was not sustainable with the genderless view of emptiness, as well as the example of Bodhisattva Noble Tara, who vowed to attain enlightenment in a female body. Yet, this contradictory view of females as both inferior and yet still capable, led to a decline in the number of nuns and a perpetuation of inequalities within the tradition.

'La Femme Dangereuse': Woman as Dākinī Goddess in Tantric Buddhism



In tantric Buddhism, the female was clearly put on a pedestal of veneration and devotion. Instead of female minds and bodies represented as fearful objects of lust to be avoided, realized female practitioners were represented as beautiful (and ugly), playful, naked erotic goddesses called *dākinīs*, (sky-goers). However, despite this, the male gaze and view also fixed the *dākinī* goddess as centred around, and for, men: part male fantasy, part male fear, as symbolized by the femme fatale. As Timme-Kragh (2011) puts it:

“In spite of their tantalizing appearance of sexual empowerment for both genders, the male-authored Tantras—like their monastic counterpart emulating the ascetic ideal—were nevertheless fixed in an androcentric[11] mind-set. Female Tantric practitioners, viewed as feminine embodiments of insight requiring male worship and seduction, were often represented as goddesses called *ḍākinī*, literally meaning “capable of flying” or “those drumming with the sound of *dak*.” The use of the word *ḍākinī* intimates a male fantasy and fear of the female, casting the feminine divine in a sense of *la femme dangereuse*, because, outside of Buddhism, the *ḍākinī* signified ferocious, carnivore, female attendant-deities linked with the cult of Mother-goddesses.”[12]

Herrmann-Pfandt (1997) claims that even within Tantric Buddhism though, the gender inequalities persisted:

In this context, one does not expect any kind of discrimination against women, and, according to Shaw, one does not find any, at least not in the early texts from India. But Tantric Buddhist literature is not as a whole devoid of notions discriminating against women, as I have shown elsewhere.²⁶ On the one hand, there are quite some highly venerated female saints in Tibetan tradition, but on the other hand, as Tsultrim Allione²⁷ has pointed out, a whole school of Tibetan Buddhism – and even the largest, i.e. the *dGe lugs pa* tradition – does not know of a single female saint in all of their history, in spite of the thousands of nuns this sect contains! It seems thus as if the double standards exhibited by pre-Tantric Buddhism towards women still survive.²⁸

Accordingly, the present paper contends that the described basic structure of gender relations present in all phases of Buddhist history is continued even in Tantric Buddhism, notwithstanding the strong position and sometimes even the priority it concedes to female deities and practitioners. This will be discussed using the example of Tantric Buddhist iconography.

The ‘crime’ of disrespecting women and Vajrayoginī’s feminist male consort, Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa



Yet, as one of the opening quotes of this article shows, the consequences of such double standards and disrespecting women are severe indeed. Shaw (1994: 47) explains:

“Unconditional respect for women was so integral to the Tantric ethos that men who failed to take seriously this aspect of Tantra were severely criticized and rebuked. Men were instructed

regarding what behaviors and attitudes toward women were to be cultivated and which were inconsistent with the Tantric world view. Male practitioners were warned to dispense with any denigrating attitudes they might have about women and admonished that these were incompatible with the Tantric path. The special commitments of a Tantric initiate include, as the culminating vow, a pledge never to disparage or belittle women.”

Citing Tsongkhapa’s Chakrasamvara commentary, Shaw shows how even anger and aversion towards women has dire consequences:

“If one who aspires to enlightenment
Generates anger toward a female messenger,
The merit accumulated over ten million eons
Will be destroyed in an instant.”

Shaw (1994:50) also gives the example of how Vajrayoginī herself does not suffer misogynist fools who belittle women gladly, and pronounces hyperbolic curses on those who think they can scale the Tantric peaks while disparaging women:

“Chattering fools ...who disparage women out of hostility,
Will by that evil action remain constantly tortured
For three eons in the fathomless Raudra hell,
Wailing as their bodies bum in many fires.”

Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa, Vajrayoginī’s consort in the Tantra text from which these quotes are taken, has as his general function the subduing of the evildoers of the world, yet he singles out in particular those who transgress against women. “He assures her that he keeps his sword and noose at the ready as he scouts for men who fail to pay homage to women, so he can slash the scoundrels to pieces.”



FIGURE 5. Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa, defender of women, with Dveṣavajrī

106 Caṇḍa-mahā-roṣaṇa, Vajrayoginī’s consort

This disrespect of women, individually and as a group, has clearly led to a major degeneration in our times of Buddhist monastic culture, with monks (and laypeople) practicing sexual tantra without the requisite qualities, taking consorts, wives and even having children (with the pressure to keep it hidden) and the public outcry and horror when the duplicity and hypocrisy is revealed. This is why some have said that Sutra should be practiced by monastics and Tantra by lay-people (or tantrika yogis) and that these should not be mixed, even that a person’s clothes should clearly distinguish between the two.[13]



Tantric practice with a female consort does not sit well with monastic celibacy and professed revulsion of women and female sexuality and desire. It was the reason ‘founding fathers’ of tantric Buddhism, intentionally (or were forcibly) disrobed and left monasteries when meeting yogini female teachers or consorts . Although a consort is not essential, it is still a commonly used method and relied on by many teachers and students, as a way to reach liberation[14].

Nonetheless, as Shaw (1994:194) concludes such practices were created by and for women, not to be used by men to exploit them:

“There may be Buddhist doctrines and practices that developed in the hothouse environment of a monastery, but the sexual yogas cannot lay claim to such a genesis. The sexual *sidhani* provided a natural arena for the expression of women’s interests and aspirations. Since women were among the early teachers and formulators of this genre of practice, it is reasonable to maintain that women did not create or view this practice as one in which they would be manipulated and exploited. It was conducive to women’s enlightenment because women helped to design it.”

‘Cherchez la femme’: The invisibility of female lineages in Tantric Buddhism



107 Machig Labdron (Lineage Holder and Founder of Chod)

The effects of this downgrading of women and their role in tantric Buddhism can be seen in the lack of prominent women as incarnations, lineage heads and teachers in both historic literature and in

contemporary reality[15]. Female deities such as Tārā, Vajrayoginī or Samantabhadrī are often cited as the source of female incarnation lineages, yet they are few and far between in reality.

Despite the visible presence of female lineages and incarnations such as Machig Labdron, Jomo Menmo, Lakṣmīṅkarā, Gelongma Palmo, Samding Dorje Phagmo and several others[16], there are still very few compared to men within the male tulku system, said to have originated from the 1st Karmapa, [Dusum Khyenpa](#) (1110-1193)[17].

This predominance of male incarnation (tulku) lineages, as opposed to female incarnation lineages (and lineage holders) has also entrenched and exacerbated an unconscious perception of females as ‘inferior’ or ‘not qualified’. As Nicole Schneider says, in *Female Incarnation Lineages: Some Remarks on their Features and Functions in Tibet* (2015)[18] :

“While male incarnation lineages are well known for the religious, political and social roles they played and continue to play in Tibetan societies, not much is known about female lineages, of which there are only very few.”[19]

Yet, in one of the most comprehensive studies of the existence of female adepts and lineage holders in the history of Tantric Buddhism, Miranda Shaw’s monograph *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994), clearly demonstrates that the relevant literature contains numerous traces evidencing the active participation of women and their bearing on male figures[20]. As Shaw states:

“My method is what in crime fiction is called *cherchez la femme*, the principle that when one is looking for the cause or root of something one should “search for the woman.” The purpose of this exercise is to question the current portrait of the Tantric movement as strictly and exclusively a male cultural creation by exploring whether women may be found at its roots.” (1994: 136)

In her ‘search for the woman’ Shaw discovered that Tantric Buddhism was created by women who were the ‘mother’ teachers of the so-called founding fathers:

“A question of origins is always a hard one to answer, but based on the available evidence—namely, the tradition’s own legendary sources of its origins and founders—the trail does not end at the male founders but rather leads to a deeper stratum, to their female teachers: their mothers, female companions, and gurus. The identity of the women’s teachers poses another question regarding the historical origins of the movement, but the fact remains that the historical trail runs cold not at the so-called male founders but at their female mentors and gurus.” (1994: 138).

Ulrich Timme-Kragh (2011)[21], using the example of 8th Century female masters from Uddiyāna , also asserts that female lineages form the heart and life-blood of tantric Buddhism, which turned away from the dominant, repressive male monastic culture[22]. The reason for their ‘invisibility’ being widespread male appropriation of history and women’s voices:

“In the context of Tantric Buddhism, the legacy of every female master has invariably been transmitted to posterity through a male reception. In this process, past women became embedded in an androcentric perception of history, subject to male appraisal, and often downplayed to relative insignificance. The male appropriation of the past, which is meant to record the saga of his own subjectivity, is an appropriation of the very performativity of the female gender, because the female spiritual experience is recast in male memories and retold by male voices.” (2011: 91).

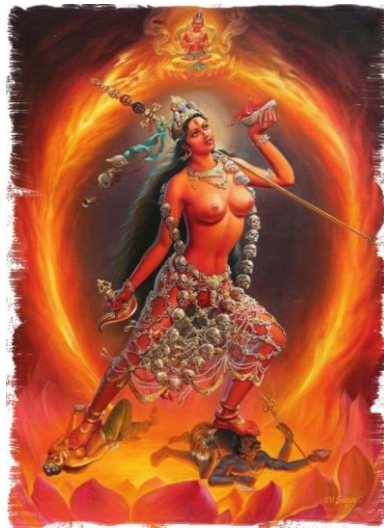
Such appropriation of women's voices and stories by men, continues even today in contemporary scholarship and translation, as I wrote about recently [here in relation to Jonang female lineage holder, Kunga Trinley Wangmo](#).

PART II: VAJRAYOGINI AS EVERYWOMAN, LINEAGE HOLDER, CONSORT, MASTER AND DEITY

Having set the background to the denigration and suppression of the female in both monastic and even tantric Buddhist cultures, I now turn to how considering the role and forms of the fully enlightened 'scarlet woman' goddess, Vajrayoginī to subvert and re-balance such misleading and biased representations of the female in Buddhism. Vajrayoginī is often described with the epithet *sarvabuddhaḍākiṇī*, meaning "the *ḍākiṇī* [who is the Essence] of all Buddhas".

According to Shaw (2006: 360), Vajrayoginī is "inarguably the supreme deity of the Tantric pantheon. No male Buddha, including her divine consort, Heruka-Cakrasaṃvara, approaches her in metaphysical or practical import."

As enlightened Goddess in human form



108 Vajrayoginī

Firstly, Vajrayoginī is a prime metaphysical example of the tenet that human women are embodiments of the great goddesses of Tantric Buddhism. As Shaw (1994: 41) explains:

"The identification of human women and goddesses is often voiced by a female deity. For instance, in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa-tantra*, Vajrayoginī repeatedly states that she reveals herself in and through women. She claims that all forms of female embodiment-including supernatural beings, women of all castes and forms of livelihood, female relatives, and female animals-participate in her divinity and announces:

"Wherever in the world a female body is seen,
That should be recognized as my holy body."

Vajrayoginī insists that all women and female beings in the universe are her embodiments (*rilpa*), or manifestations, and thus should be respected, honored, and served without exception."

Vajrayoginī even declares that whatever a woman may do, if she meditates on her form and divine pride arises, she can literally do no wrong:

“In the Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra which addresses this theme, the female Buddha Vajrayoginī (also called Devavajri, or “Diamond of Hatred,” in the text) reveals her metaphysical link with women and expresses her special concern for them. She announces that she is fully immersed in emptiness and bliss, and thus on some level is formless, but that she appears in bodily form “for the benefit of women who do not know that I exist in the bodies of all women.” Vajrayoginī takes form so that women, seeing enlightenment in female form, will recognize their innate divinity and potential for enlightenment:

“When [a woman] meditates on my form,
If supreme pride in her innate divinity arises,
She will not be stained by sin,
Even if she kills a hundred Hindu priests
Even if she is pitiless, fickle, and irascible and considers taking life for profit,
That yogini will remain stainless.”

As this vehement defense of women is placed in the mouth of a female deity, it reminds her devotees that her gender is a trait she shares with human women.”

For more on the forms of Vajrayogini, see Elizabeth English (2002). For more on the ‘feminism’ of Vajrayogini, see Shaw (2000) “Is Vajrayogini a feminist? A Tantric Buddhist Case Study?”.

Vajrayoginī as Lineage Bestower: Jomo Menmo and Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā

There are many examples of Vajrayoginī appearing to female (and male) practitioners and bestowing teachings directly on them[23]. In that respect, she is the queen female lineage master and holder.

Jomo Menmo and the bestowal of Sangwa Kundu



109 Jomo Menmo, (1248-1283), female lineage-holder and tertön

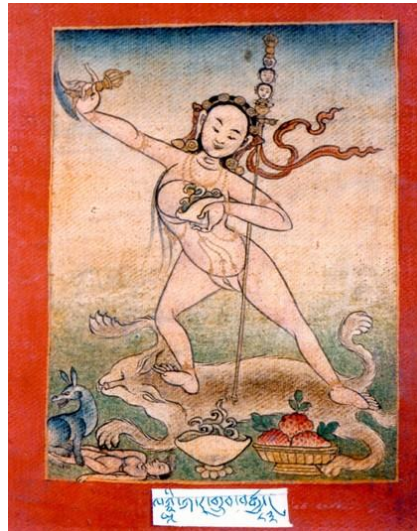
One such example is of Vajryogini bestowing teachings of the *Sangwa Kundu* to the 13th Century female tertön, [Jomo Menmo](#) (1248-1283):

“When she was thirteen years old, one day, at noon, she was minding the cattle near the sacred cave, when she slipped and fell. Then she heard a sweet voice calling her from the cave. She was awakened by this very pleasing voice and she looked into the cave and saw a door at the back. She opened the door and saw a heavenly cremation ground, with Vajravārāhī in the center, surrounded by many other ḍākinīs. They were making a feast offering. Vajravārāhī said to her: “So, my girl, you have arrived?” She took a text and placed it on Jomo Menmo’s head,

blessing her with it. Then she gave her the text. She said: “This is the teachings of the *ḍākinīs*, ‘Sangwa Kundu’; if you do this meditation you will reach liberation. As soon as she received the book, she knew immediately all that it contained. After she had feasted with the *ḍākinīs* and eaten the feast offerings, she awoke and found herself in the place where she had fallen. After this experience, she became suddenly all-knowing and very learned. Teachings she had never studied came into her mind spontaneously. She could leave footprints and handprints in stone.” (Allione (2000: 292-293)).

For more on Jowo Menmo and the Sangwa Kundu, see [here](#).

The ‘Crazy Princess’, *Lakṣmīṅkarā* and severed-head Vajrayoginī



110 One of the eighty-four mahasiddhas, Princess *Lakṣmīṅkarā*

Another example of a female lineage-holder, to whom Vajrayoginī directly bestowed teachings is that of Princess *Lakṣmīṅkarā*[24], said to be the sister of the great king Indrabhuti who ruled over the kingdom of Sambola in the land of Uddiyāna . She was wise and through listening to the teachings of Lawapa, she became well versed in many tantras. When she was of age, her brother arranged to marry her off to prince Jalandhara, a son of the King of Lankapuri. Timme-Kragh (2011), who has written extensively on her[25], says:

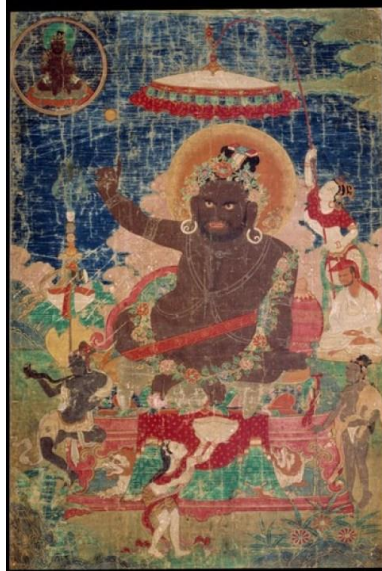
“Particularly, in medieval India, the Tantric community of Uddiyāna included several female teachers and authoresses. Among them, *Lakṣmīṅkarā* became the most outstanding individual, whose stature reverberates to the modern time. Believed to hail from the ruling family of Uddiyāna , her activities as a guru and commentator date back to the ninth or tenth century, and three works attributed to her are still extant.”[26]

Shaw (1994: 111) explains how *Lakṣmīṅkarā* got a direct instruction from Vajrayoginī :

“*Lakṣmīṅkarā*’s story dramatizes the lengths to which a mystic must sometimes go in order to sever the attachments that prevent full immersion into the egoless state. *Lakṣmīṅkarā* had already received religious training and practiced meditation before she left her palace, but the sojourn in the wilderness catapulted her into a realm of visionary experience in which she could see and communicate directly with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Buddhas themselves gave her religious instruction. The female Buddha Vajrayoginī appeared to *Lakṣmīṅkarā* in a distinctive [severed-head] form that became the basis of a widespread meditation practice.

When Lakṣmīṅkarā came out of seclusion, she attracted a circle of disciples, several of whom subsequently became quite famous. Her former fiancé, Prince Jalandhara, even converted to Buddhism and asked her to be his guru, but she assigned one of her low-caste disciples to be his guru instead.”

This was then transmitted to [Virupa](#), whose life-story became more well-known, but the mother of the lineage is clearly Lakṣmīṅkarā.[27] The [account of her life in Himalayan Art](#) says that this low-caste disciple was in fact a toilet-cleaner at the palace[28].



111 Virupa, 8th Century Mahasiddha whose human guru was Lakṣmīṅkarā

“Virupa, an adept whose idea of religious discipline was to meditate in a tavern over a dozen glasses of wine, is important as the Indian forefather of the Sakya (Sa-skya) school of Tibetan Buddhism, with its distinctive Path and Fruit (Tib. lam-‘bras) formulation of the religious path beginning with Mahayana philosophy and culminating in Tantric teachings on the Hevajra-tantra. According to the official Sa-skya telling of his biography, he received his Tantric teachings and initiations directly from the blue female Buddha Nairatmya... and the practice of Severed-Headed Vajrayogini by its founder, Lakṣmīṅkarā, and then transmitted the practice to his own disciples, who spread it to Nepal and Tibet. Thus, in the case of Virupa, too, we find a spiritual mother.” (1994: 136)

Shaw (1994) also cites a teaching given by Lakṣmīṅkarā on the importance of respecting women:

“In a treatise entitled *Realization of Nonduality*, Lakṣmīṅkarā argues for this respect on the grounds that women are embodiments of female deity:

“One must not denigrate women,
In whatever social class they are born,
For they are Lady Perfection of Wisdom,
Embodied in the phenomenal realm.”

For more on the symbolism of the severed-head Vajrayoginī received by Lakṣmīṅkarā, see below.

Vajrayoginī’s Forms: Severed Head, Yum-Yab reversal and Vibrant Vulva

The vast majority of female deities are either pictured alone, or in a yab-yum (male-female) union, with the male Heruka deity figure looking outwards and the female deity's backside facing the viewer, hair flowing down.

Even though they exist, it is much rarer to find a yum-yab union female deity with face outwards in union with a male consort figure. Even rarer, are male Vajrayana masters giving empowerments or teachings on such yum-yab representations. Herrmann-Pfandt (2015) in *Yab Yum Iconography and the Role of Women in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* [29] refers to this lack of yum-yab depictions as further supporting her assertion that the female is still subtly seen as secondary, even in the traditional yab-yum depiction (see below).

As Solitary Mistress – Red and Black



112 Vajrayoginī

As I have written [here before](#) about the iconography of Vajrayoginī, she is depicted alone in different ways depending on the lineage. The khatvāṅga staff carried symbolizes the secret consort. For a woman it symbolizes her hidden male counterpart, skillful means, and great bliss. Again reminding us that the ultimate consort/bliss is within one's mind and never separate.

There is also a solitary form of her, as the fierce Black One, Troma Nagmo (Krishna Krodhini) a wrathful form of Vajravārāhī, see [here](#).



In Yab-Yum Unions with Male Deities

Vajrayoginī is also often depicted in union with a ‘male’ deity. As Vajravārāhī, her consort is Chakrasaṃvara (Khorlo Demchog), see below:



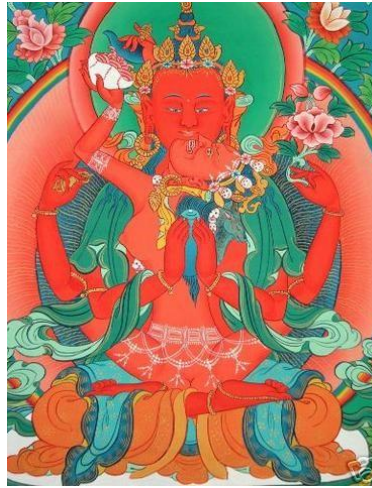
113 Chakrasaṃvara (Khorlo Demchog)

Vajravārāhī is also depicted as the consort of Hayagriva (*Tamdrin*) – a wrathful emanation of Bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara (*Chenrezig*). There is a specific form called Hayagriva Vajravarahi Chintamani (*Tapag Yishin Norbu*) in which the two deities are in union in a dancing pose[30].



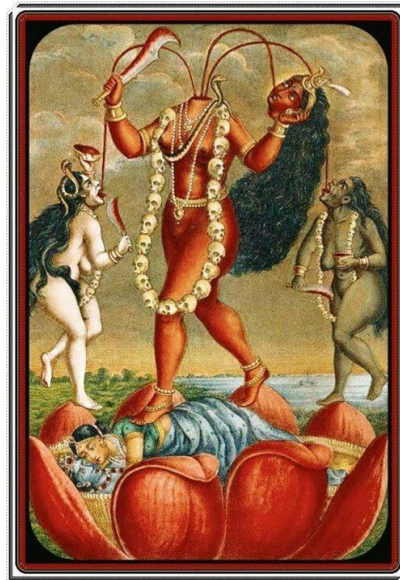
114 Hayagriva (*Tamdrin*)

Vajravārāhī is also the spiritual partner of Avalokiteshvara in his specific form, called Jinasagara (*Gyalwa Gyatso*) – see below. He is red in color, with four hands. With two of his hands he holds a gem in front of his heart, hugging his consort and with the other two holds a *vajra* in the right and a lotus in the left. Vajravārāhī is also red in color and holds her usual attributes[31].



115 Jinasagara (Gyalwa Gyatso)

With severed-head



116 the severed-head form of Vajrayoginī

As mentioned above, the severed-head form of Vajrayoginī arose from the female lineage of Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā. Shaw (1994) explains, the visualization and practice are visceral and bloody:

“The female deity whose practice Lakṣmīṅkarā introduced is Severed-Head Vajrayoginī. Severed-Headed Vajrayoginī has a yellow body, a dynamic dancing pose, and long black hair streaming behind her. The meditator identifies with her and envisions her as raising a sword, cutting off her own head, and triumphantly waving it aloft. Three streams of blood spout from her body at the neck and flow into the mouth of her own severed head and the mouths of two yoginis at her sides. The yoginis are green Vajravarnani (or Vajrapranava) on her left and yellow Vajravairocani on her right. The divine yoginis are naked and have loosely flowing hair. (see image below (1994): 111).

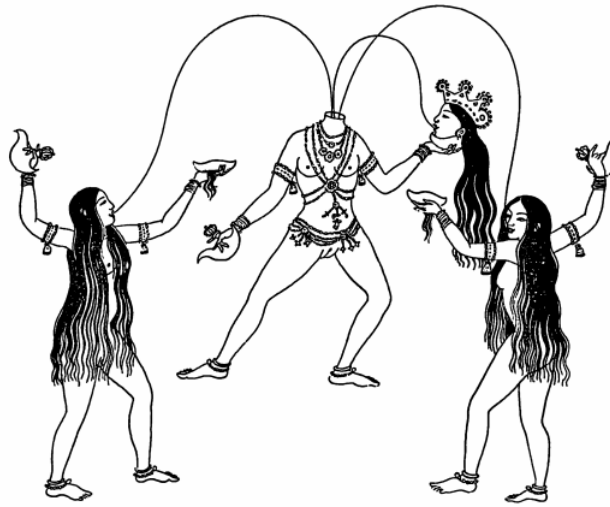


FIGURE 10. Severed-Headed Vajrayoginī



117 Indian painting of Chinnamasta, signed by master artist Nainsukh of Guler (Kapoor Galleries)

The English phrases ‘lost your head’, ‘off with his head’ all mean having gone insane or having one’s egoic life force severed. There appears to be some connection here to the Chod lineage (also ‘headed up’ by a female, Machig Labdron), which is a rich area for future research.

Shaw (1994: 113-117) gives a whole section on two female gurus, Mekhala and Kanakhala, who continued this particular lineage and practice (more on them in another post). Mekhala (*Mekhalā* or Mahakhala – “Elder Mischievous Girl”) “The Elder Severed-Headed Sister” and Kanakhala (*Kanakhalā* – “Younger Mischievous Girl”) “The Younger Severed-Headed Sister”) are two sisters who figure in the eighty-four mahasiddhas of Tantric Buddhism :

“Mekhala and Kanakhala were sisters who both undertook Tantric practice and attained enlightenment together. They devised the authoritative version of the inner yogas of Severed-Headed Vajrayoginī. Lakṣmīṅkarā had introduced meditation on this deity, but perhaps

because of their special expertise it fell to the sisters to provide a definitive formulation of the inner yoga.”

“Mekhala and Kanakhala are usually portrayed with swords, either dancing with the swords held aloft or in the act of cutting off their heads. By cutting off their heads they demonstrated that they had severed their egos with the sword of wisdom. One interpreter suggests that the sisters beheaded themselves to show that they had conquered the “self-centered conceit” and “vanity” that characteristically afflict women; however, nothing in their story indicates that the sisters were vain. To become the object of unjust accusation is something that could befall anyone, male or female, and the guru gave them the Buddhist teachings as a remedy not for specifically feminine weaknesses but for the core of human suffering, namely, attachment to an illusory self.”

The sisters’ iconography also refers to their mastery of the practice of Severed-Headed Vajrayogini. Portraying someone with attributes of a deity shows that she has fully identified with that deity through meditation. Portraying the sisters in a manner that likens them to this form of Vajrayogini—naked, with flowing hair, and with swords or flaying knives in the act of cutting off their heads—expresses their identification with the female Buddha and the successful awakening of their divine potentialities.”

Tāranātha (1575–1634) in his *Historical Works – Kahna pa ‘i mam char* (a biography of Kanhapa) also describes the life of some of the Mahasiddha, Kahnapa’s disciples including Mekhala and Kanakhala.



FIGURE 11. Sister adepts Mekhalā and Kanakhala

118 Image of the sister adepts Mekhala and Kanakhala, published in Shaw (1994).

As Yum-yab deity union with male consort – gender reversal



FIG.10: CENTRAL PART OF THE MANDALA OF THE SIX-ARMED VAJRAVĀRAHI YAB YUM WITH HERUKA (Courtesy of Dr. Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi)

Although Vajrayoginī is normally in a male-centred union as yab-yum, there are a few forms of her (published by Herrmann-Pfandt (1997)) where she is the central deity with a male consort, standing or in her lap. Above is a form with a single head, two-armed Heruka in her lap. Below is a two armed form of her with a standing Heruka.

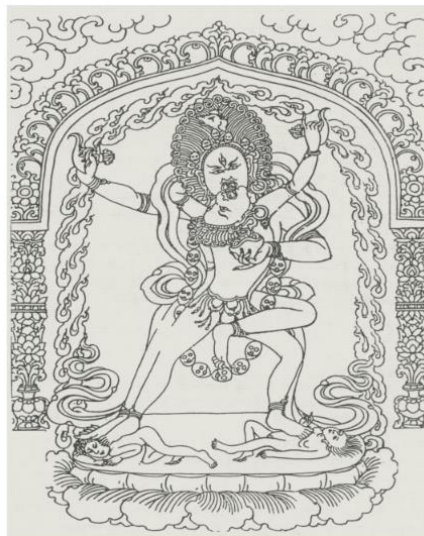


FIG.11: TWO-ARMED VAJRAVĀRAHI YAB YUM (Courtesy of Dr. Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi)

I have already written [here](#) about how the traditional yab-yum depiction in images (but also in reality) is strictly male-female, and why this biological nature cannot be changed for union practice, due to inner hydraulics of the channels and chakras. In the union, the male and female are considered to be equals, nonetheless, the deity unions are generally male facing, female back facing the viewer, with the male deity's face(s), arms and legs clearly visible.

Citing a modern-day meditation manual on Kalacakra visualization, Herrmann-Pfandt contends that this traditional yab-yum depiction leads, particularly for monastic, celibate practitioners, yet again into a male-centred visualization and perception. First, Pfandt says that it lends the viewer to focusing mainly on the male who remains more in focus whether the female figure is present or not. However, imagining the female without the male figure becomes very difficult.

She then questions why so few female deities were accorded a female-centred yab-yum:

It cannot be that the mere femininity of Vajravārāhī is the only reason for this, because in *ekavīra* form she is, (as already remarked), one of the foremost meditation deities of Tibet, used by male as well as female practitioners. It is not the *single* female deities, but evidently the female *yab yum* forms that are not accepted, i.e., the reason seems to have to do with the presence and role of the male partner in those images.

What, then, is the difference between a male-centered and a female-centered *yab yum* constellation as regards the role of the male partner?

Herrmann-Pfandt then posits the possibility that as the lack of female-centred yab-yum cannot be anything to do with the inferiority or lack of practice of the female deity, it may be yet again a ‘subtle attempt’ of sparing men the humiliation of being subordinate to the feminine:

But if it is true that the nearly exclusive use of “male” *yab yum* deities in Tantric Buddhism is but another very subtle attempt of sparing male meditators the experience of masculinity subordinate to femininity, exactly as males were spared this experience in the nuns’ rule one and a half millenniums ago, there is at least one remarkable difference: Female *yab yum* deities were not categorically banished from Tantric Buddhism as was any kind of female insubordination from the nuns’ rule in Hinayāna; they were even included in the Tantric pantheon. A gender constellation *without* the female being assimilated to the male deity was thus not only held possible, but was included in the pantheon and used in meditation, even if it apparently has never been very popular and seems to have been neglected and nearly forgotten in the course of time. As one of the very rare sources of a constellation, which has been avoided as much as possible in Buddhism throughout its history, the Vajravārāhī *yab yum* is indeed a precious gem within Buddhist tradition.

Pfandt then discusses two Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhist female-centred VajraVarahi yum-yab depictions and practices, one of which she is surrounded by eight goddesses who are also in the yum-yab form. Pfandt says this tradition was continued in the 17th Century by Jetsun Tāranātha:

VAJRAVĀRĀHĪ YAB YUM³⁹

First of all: There *are* at least one or two female-centered *yab yum* deities and meditation practices in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As far as I can see, they are hardly known among today’s Tibetan Buddhists, but they doubtlessly stem from India, which indicates that they have been part of the original Tantric system of thought and practice. From Chapter 36 of the *Abhidhānottara-tantra* (Peking Kanjur no.17),⁴⁰ a so-called explanatory Tantra (*ākhyā-tantra*, Tib. *bsad rgyud*) belonging to the Cakrasaṃvara cycle,

and from an Indian *sādhana* of the same tradition,⁴¹ we know of a form of the *Ḍākinī* *Vajravārāhī* as three-headed and six-armed (or: six-headed and twelve-armed) with a smaller, single-headed and two-armed *Heruka* on her lap (Fig.10).⁴² Like other forms of *Vajravārāhī*, she is of red colour and furious, and in the two hands put around her blue-coloured partner she holds the *vajra* and *ghaṇṭā* (bell), the symbols of the Union of Wisdom and Means. She is accompanied by 16 goddesses of whom the innermost eight are also in *yab yum* form.

This tradition is continued in the 17th century A.D. by *Tāranātha*⁴³ and in the 19th century by 'Jam dbyaṅs Blo gter dbaṅ po in his *rDo rje rnal 'byor ma lha bcu bdun gyi sgrub thabs* included in the *Sa skya pa* collection *rGyud sde kun btus*.⁴⁴ The *guruparamparā* of this work (fol.4b3-4) goes back to the *mahāsiddha* *Virūpa*. It is the source text for our Fig.10 which was first published by *Raghu Vira* and *Lokesh Chandra*.⁴⁵

At least one other tradition of this kind must have existed, because Fig.11⁴⁶ shows another form of *Vajravārāhī yab yum* for which we have not yet been able to find a textual tradition.

Dombiyogini's Song



FIGURE 8. Dombiyogini dancing on lake

119 Dombiyogini, teacher and consort. Image from Shaw (1994).

Herrman-Pfandt states that a possible source of this *Vajravārāhī yum-yab* tradition might be the Indian tantric yogini, *Dombiyogini*, who sings about it while meditating in the middle of a lake:

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the people who developed and practiced this meditation. One possible reference is found in a mystical song composed by the Indian Tantric Ḍombiyoginī, who sings it while meditating on Vajravārāhī in the midst of a lake:⁴⁷

Vajrayoginī appears in four forms.
and traverses the world.
The one with a boar's head, Vajravārāhī,
embraces (her lover).
She sits on a four-cornered *maṇḍala*, bestowing compassion.
Sometimes in one form, sometimes in another,
she embraces the blue-faced lord.

This song clearly describes the goddess as the main deity of the couple. As a woman Tantric, Ḍombiyoginī quite naturally focuses her attention on the female partner in the *yab yum* couple she is identifying with. From this reference – the only one by a woman found as yet – we can derive the expectation that a systematic research, especially in Tantric works written by women, might bring to light more references to female-centered *yab yum* deities. Regarding historiographical works, there are short references to Vajravārāhī *yab yum* by Tāranātha⁴⁸ and in the life story of Ye śes mtsho rgyal.⁴⁹

For more on the song and Ḍombiyoginī, see Shaw (1994: 63-68). I will also do a future post on this woman and the song in a series of posts on female gurus and lineage holders.

Vibrant Red Vulvas – a Vajrayoginī sand mandala and thangka made in Bhutan (2021)



In a recent short film, [The Mandala of Vajrayoginī : Tantric Goddess of Enlightened Wisdom](#), Dasho Karma Ura, Director of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, charts the creation of a Buddhist sand mandala (see image above) commissioned by the British Museum in response to the exhibition, *Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution*. Made almost 5000 miles away in the mountains of Bhutan, depicting Vajrayoginī, the mandala was intricately constructed by nuns and monks from across Bhutan, before

being ritually destroyed as a metaphorical expression of the impermanence and transformation of all phenomena.



Dr. Ian Baker [32] a scholar-practitioner and National Geographic-designated ‘explorer for the millennium’, who was actively involved in the production of the film, told me that during the making of the sand mandala and thangka painting, a discussion was had about the depiction of her prominent vulva[33].



Dasho Karma Ura’s thangka painting (which has yet to be exhibited in the British Museum, see screenshot of the unfinished image below) presents Vajrayogini’s anatomy more naturalistically and again a clear depiction of her vulva beneath an apron of bone ornaments. But as Baker noted, the unabashed representation of female genitalia was initially a concern for the British Museum’s acquisitions department, which recognised that the vast majority of viewers would be unaware of the transcendent symbolism. He said: “Displaying Vajrayoginī in a museum context raises inherent challenges, particularly in regard to her nudity which symbolises, in the context of Tantric Buddhism, the unconditioned nature of the mind.” [34]



Dasho Karma Ura's unfinished thangka painting of Vajrayogini.

Conclusion: Praise and bow down to the vulva, source of all the Buddhas



For me, watching the Bhutanese monks and nuns together constructing the sand mandala's huge vulva, was a timely reminder of the inherent conflict in tantric practice within monastic culture. On the one hand, monks socially and culturally obliged to be separate from females/nuns, who are still seen as inferior to the monk and something to be avoided and repressed. Yet, openly creating in a sacred space, the female genitalia of an enlightened goddess, next to a nun, could not have symbolized better the contradictions and conflict between monastic and tantric culture. On the one hand, maintaining a public image of celibacy and purity, on the other, imagining and gazing at the majestic red clitoris and vulva of a goddess, completely oblivious to – the glaring blind-spot of – that sacred divinity in the female sitting right next to him.

So, the question remains can monastics engage in tantric union practice with females, when females are still continually looked down upon and denigrated? The answer, especially judging by recent public scandals, is a shrieking sow's squeal of NO!

Thus, ending at the beginning- with the first quote of this article:

“Thus I have heard—at one time the Buddha stayed in the vagina of the adamantine woman, who is the essence of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas.” – Shakyamuni Buddha

The undeniable 'conclusion' is that the blissful, *bhaga* mandala, symbolized by the vibrant red vulva, as the blissful, yet empty, source and abode of all the Buddhas, must be respected and revered at all times.

Or as [Fatboy Slim sang](#): 'I I have to celebrate you baby, I have to praise you like I should!'

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 26th May 2021 (15th day of the 4th Month, Saga Dawa). Please share, steal and borrow! Copyright.

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[‘Actions Speak Louder than Words’: 17th Karmapa’s outstanding activities for females](#)

[Tantric Buddhism, vows, sex and women – the importance of love, respect and consent](#)

[Vajrayogini’s instructions on the ‘Great Compassionate One’: Tsembupa’s Lineage](#)

[The male-female tantric union: Homophobic heteronormativity or biological inner essences?](#)

ENDNOTES

[1] This quote, taken from Timme-Kragh (2011) is explained: “A yoga-seat denotes the locus for performance, a feminine space for male agency, reminiscent of the underlying female locality for the entirely male verbalization of the Tantras, the vagina in which the Buddha delivers his Tantric teaching, as is seen in the opening sentence of several major Tantras: “Thus I have heard—at one time the Buddha stayed in the vagina of the adamantine woman, who is the essence of the body, speech, and mind of all buddhas.”

[2] This quote is taken from Shaw (1994: 47-48).

[3] The *Glorious Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra* (*dpal gtum po khro bo chen po’i rgyud kyi rgyal po dpa’ bo gcig pa*) For the Tibetan and English translation of this Tantra, see: <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh431.html>.

[4] Freud, Sigmund (1957). “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men, pages 165–175”. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. XI. London: Hogarth Press. pp. 179–190. For a simple explanation see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madonna-whore_complex.

[5] For recent examples of public exposure of Tibetan Buddhist lama misconduct, see [Dagri Rinpoche](#), [Shambhala Mipham Rinpoche](#), Sogyal Rinpoche and the independent report commissioned by Rigpa here: <https://www.rigpa.org/independent-investigation-report>. See also [Finnegan and Hogendoorn \(2019\)](#). More allegations about other senior Tibetan Buddhist lamas are coming to the fore, including well-known Bhutanese Karma Kagyu lamas such as Sangye Nyenpa, as detailed [here](#).

[6] One of the few influential Tibetan Buddhist teachers who has done the most work to empower and improve the status of female practitioners is one of my main teachers, 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, as I have written about [here](#).

Sadly, the 17th Karmapa (who I have followed for many years, and still do) is now also facing serious of allegations from three separate women of alleged sexual misconduct, dishonesty and emotional abuse. One can only pray and hope that he will soon give a clear statement on these cases for the sake of his followers and the women concerned.

[7] As I have already written about [here](#), the question of essential qualities of a teacher for consort practice and the biological sex (not gender) of the traditional yab-yum union, both in terms of representation and practice is strictly male-female, for specific reasons connected to the ‘hydraulics of inner channels and essences that cannot be artificially changed.

[8] The use of the word ‘mistress’ in English is problematic because unlike ‘master’ it generally has a meaning of a woman who is the secret lover of a man, who is normally married or betrothed to someone else. However, maybe now is the time to reclaim this word to another meaning, that of female master.

[9] This phrase, mothers of the ‘founding fathers’ is used by Shaw in Chapter 5 of *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994).

[10] For more on the ethical issues of children in monasteries, see: <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/06/what-lies-beneath-the-robles-are-buddhist-monasteries-suitable-places-for-children-adele-wilde-blavatsky/>.

[11] Timme-Kragh (2011) explains this androcentricity later on: “As man determines the being of the female, he takes that which has no place of its own and makes it his own. Within the entire androcentric structure, the female appears to be nothing but a male appropriation of the female, and in this regard “appropriation” becomes a fundamental analytical term.” “The male appropriation of the female is likewise an act of taking possession of, placing the female in his own context and ascribing her new meaning. He revalues and devalues the feminine, circumscribing her in a strictly male sense of worth and utility. He sets her aside, allocating her worth, expropriating her for his own consumption. This was a point underlined by June Campbell in her book *Traveller in Space*, which has provided one of the few feminist critiques of Tantric Buddhism baring the dissymmetries of its male and female sexual roles: Furthermore, in the context of the social and iconographical structures, the exclusion of the female in worldly terms, and the appropriation of the female in transcendental terms, can only be seen to be of benefit to the ruling class—the priesthood of incarnate lamas—and the lineage system.” (2011: 89).

[12] “Paraphrasing the words of Adelheid Hermann-Pfandt, the *ḍākinī* represented the “shadow” of the patriarchal Indian ideal of the obedient feminine. By referring to their female Tantric partners as *ḍākinīs*, the male authors of the Tantras projected such women to be outside the norms of patriarchy, and perhaps also outside the conventional patterns of sexual availability.” Timme-Kragh (2011).

[13] The 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, recently alluded to the negative consequences of such ‘mixing’ by discouraging the wearing of monastic type robes by lay-practitioners with spouses and children, and vice versa. See: <http://www.kagyumonlam.org/index.php/en/2017-02-12-16-06-48/transcripts?id=727>.

[14] “I walked out to the place where the two flooded rivers came together. On the way out I found two stones. Each one had a carving of a trident (khatvanga) on it. This staff is carried by deities and symbolizes the secret consort. For a woman it symbolizes her hidden male counterpart, skillful means, and great bliss. As I sat down to meditate, Machig appeared before me in the sky as a dancing red skeleton surrounded by red gossamer scarves of energy. She said, “The experience of sexual union with an outer consort is something that can be drawn forth from within yourself and need not depend on an external partner. The potential for great bliss is always inside of you.” As she gave this teaching I had an experience of indescribable bliss. and emptiness, beyond anything I have ever experienced with a lover. At the end she said, “There is a union of death and passion. In death we meet wholeness. Death and passion are one, and this is the meaning of my appearance as a red skeleton.” Allione (2007).

[15] Generally, female Buddhist masters can be categorized in the following way:

- Incarnations
- Founders/holders of specific lineage teachings

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- Teachers of well-known Buddhist masters
- Consorts of Buddhist masters
- Tertons/Treasure-Revealers

[16] For more on female lineages and holders see Allione (2007), Diemberger (2007) and Shaw (1994). I have also written recent articles on Jonang Shentong lineage holder, Kunga Trinley Wangmo, [here](#) and Jomo Menmo, see [here](#).

[17] This idea that Dusum Khyenpa was the originator of the tulku recognitions was recently challenged by the 17th Karmapa (March 2021) who said the Karmapa lineage actually began with the 2nd Karmapa, Karma Pakshi who was the first to be recognised as Karmapa, and Dusum Khyenpa was subsequently post-humously recognized as the 1st Karmapa, of whom Karma Pakshi was the incarnation. Whatever the case may be, the tulku tradition in Tibet started with male incarnations and those recognized were, and are predominantly male.

[18] Schneider, Nicola (2015) *Female incarnation lineages: some remarks on their features and functions in Tibet*, in H. Havnevik und C. Ramble (Hgg.), *From Bhakti to Bon: Festschrift for Per Kvaerne*. Oslo: Novus forlag (The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture), pp. 463-479.

[19] “A decade ago, the French Tibetologist Anne Chayet raised the question of whether there has been some kind of deliberate restriction on female incarnations, pointing to the fact that several famous historical women are said to have been reborn as men, as was the case for Tsong kha pa’s mother, Shing bza’ a chos, for example. Another, more recent, instance is the famous Rje btsun Lo chen Rin po che from Shug gseb Nunnery in Central Tibet, who indicated that she might reincarnate as a boy. Her incarnation was found in ‘Chi med rdo rje, the son of Bde skyong dbang mo from the Phreng ring family. Born in 1953, he lives as a layman in Lhasa. However, the 14th Dalai Lama and the 16th Karmapa have also recognized a female incarnation: Rje btsun Padma, daughter of Kazi Bsod nams stobs rgyas (1925–2009) from Sikkim, previously stationed in Tibet and former disciple, together with his wife, of Shug gseb Lo chen Rin po che.” Schneider (2015).

[20] “Particularly, in medieval India, the Tantric community of Uddiyāna included several female teachers and authoresses. Among them, Lakṣmīṅkarā became the most outstanding individual, whose stature reverberates to the modern time. Believed to hail from the ruling family of Uddiyāna, her activities as a guru and commentator date back to the ninth or tenth century, and three works attributed to her are still extant.”

[21]. Many thanks to Dr. Ian Baker for kindly inspiring me to read Timme-Kragh’s works and ideas on Lakṣmīṅkarā and the form of the severed-head goddess, as well as sending some images that I have used here of her.

[22] “In Buddhist history, Uddiyāna did play a unique role, because it was a locality where several female Buddhist masters and authoresses appeared in the eighth to tenth centuries, in spite of the fact that nameable female masters otherwise have been rare in ancient and medieval Buddhism. Women had already been allowed the status of professional religious practitioners since the early days of Buddhism, in the fourth to third centuries BCE, when nuns were permitted to join the Buddhist order. However, the nuns were strictly subordinated to the monks, and given monastic Buddhism’s emphasis on the eradication of desire, the bodies of the opposite sex—and in particular the bodies of women—had been portrayed in the all-male-authored contemplation-manual as filthy, repulsive, decaying, or decomposing. Consequently, Buddhist monasticism not only stratified gender roles within a patriarchal hierarchy but at the same time ingrained an ascetic ideal that suggested a gender

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performativity other than the sexual. With the rise of Tantric Buddhism in the sixth to seventh centuries CE, a novel Buddhist discourse of gender appeared that seems to have had a particularly strong impact in Ud.d.iyāna. The valley had been invaded by the Central Asian Huns in the sixth century, which had virtually eradicated the Buddhist monastic culture. The ensuing civilization provided a fertile ground for a new form of Buddhism to grow. Tantrism represented a turn away from the earlier emphasis on celibacy and was instead written in a tripartite grammar of sexual” Timme-Kragh (2011).

[23] See also the Vajrayogini lineage of Chenrezig, called the Tsemdu Lineage, as written about [here](#).

[24] I am grateful to Dr. Ian Baker for introducing me to the work of Timme-Kragh on this form of the goddess.

[25] For an earlier article on Lakṣmīṅkarā examining the history of the Tibetan translation of her *Sahajasiddhipaddhati, see Ulrich Timme Kragh, “On the Making of the Tibetan Translation of Lakṣmī’s *Sahajasiddhipaddhati: ‘Bro Lotsa’ ba Shes rab Grags and His Translation Endeavors,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 53, no. 3 (2010): 195–232.

[26] “Her first text is a little treatise on Tantric practice entitled *The Accomplishment of Non-Duality*. Due to its value, it was later included in a principal Tibetan anthology of Indian Tantric treatises. Her second writing, entitled *Method for Accomplishing Vajrayogini* is a manual on the goddess Chinnamastā Vajravahni. It seems that Lakṣmīṅkarā was the originator of this goddess practice, which later became the basis for the Hindu goddess Chinnamastā. Her third work, entitled *Guide to the Accomplishment of the Inborn*, is an extensive philosophical commentary written on the basis of a short tract attributed to her elder brother, King Indrabuddhi. All these writings were preserved by later traditions and are today found partly in the Sanskrit heritage of Nepalese Buddhism and fully in the Tibetan canon.” Timme-Kragh (2011: 90-91).

[27] Shaw states that: “Lakṣmīṅkarā transmitted the practice to several female disciples and to the male disciple Virupa, who transmitted it to Nepal and Tibet. Virupa wrote a Severed-Headed Vajrayoginī practice manual that he says is “based on the secret oral instructions of the yogini and should be kept secret.” Although he does not mention her by name, the “yogini” is clearly Lakṣmīṅkarā, the woman from whom he learned the practice. Lakṣmīṅkarā’s transmission of this practice then passed through Virupa, traversed Nepal, and reached Tibet, where it was popular for several centuries. Lineal descendants of the practice are still maintained by the Drigung Kagyu (‘Bri-gung bKa’-brgyud) sect and by the Sakya (Sa-skya) school of Tibetan Buddhism, which traces its origins to Virupa. Although Virupa’s reputation eclipsed that of Lakṣmīṅkarā over the centuries, this practice nonetheless had a founding mother” (Shaw: 113).

[28] “Lakṣmīṅkarā continued to live in this manner and after seven years achieved a level of realization. She then gave instruction to a lowly toilet cleaner who worked in the royal palace and he also achieved success. No one knew of this man’s attainment except for Lakṣmīṅkarā and he continued to work in the palace as though nothing had changed.

One day, Jalandhara and his court went out on one of their many hunting trips. While deep in the forest, the prince became separated from his servants. He dismounted to rest while his subjects caught up with him. Tired from the hunt, he fell asleep under a tree and awoke several hours later, only to find that no one had yet found him. Needing to find shelter before nightfall, he began searching for a place of refuge and by chance came upon Lakṣmīṅkarā’s cave. Upon entering, he was surprised to find Lakṣmīṅkarā radiating light and being adored by an uncountable retinue of goddesses. This beautiful sight deeply effected Jalandhara who then began making regular visits to the cave. Despite his visits,

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Lakṣmīṅkarā remained skeptical of his presence and eventually inquired as to his motives. He affirmed his faith in the Buddha and requested teachings from her. She taught him only one single verse of profound spiritual meaning and said that she was not his teacher. She informed him that his teacher is one of his very own toilet cleaners in the palace.

When Jalandhara returned home to the palace, he found the servant that would be his teacher and brought him to his chambers. Paying respect and requesting teachings, the servant that cleaned the toilets for the prince agreed and gave Jalandhara the initiation into the Transference of Consciousness and the practices of the Generation and Perfection Stage Yogas of the meditational deity Vajravarahi.”

Both Lakṣmīṅkarā and the toilet cleaner lived and taught for many years in the city of Lankapuri and performed countless miracles before they each departed in their physical bodies for the pureland of Khechara.” See: <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1054>.

[29] *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1997, pp. 12–34. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43300602. Accessed 19 May 2021,

[30] Hayagriva is red in color, with a curved knife in the right and a kapala in the left hand. Vajravarahi is blue in color, with the same attributes. Both deities have wrathful expression and flames of wisdom fire are depicted around their bodies. The couple also appears in the Yangzab cycle of Dzogchen teachings. Through this practice one attains the essence of Padmasambhava as a *guru*, Hayagriva as a deity of meditation and Vajravarahi as a *ḍākinī*.

[31] This specific form of both deities is related to the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. The Kagyu school in particular revere this form, and she is considered the personal *yidam deity* of primary teachers Marpa (1012–1097), Milarepa (1052–1135), and Gampopa (1079–1153).

[32] Ian Baker also served as a liaison between Dasho Karma Ura, in Bhutan, and Dr. Imma Ramos, the curator of the Tantra exhibition, in regard to the British Museum’s acquisition of the life-size painting of Vajra Yogini that Dasho Karma Ura created simultaneously with his production of the sand mandala.

[33] The equation between the vulva and the mandala is also discussed by Anne C. Klein (1995) in “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), pp. 73–98.

[34] Ian Baker further shared that, “Vajra Yogini, dancing in an aureole of flames, symbolises the pure essence of the natural state of the mind, while her genitalia signifies not only a primordial matrix, but the bliss of consciousness divested of egoic identification. But no matter what’s written on an accompanying text panel, casual viewers are likely to see her more in the way that nudes are presented in western art, as an object of naturalistic beauty. The severed heads suspended around her neck, however, speak directly to the ways in which Vajra Yogini, in the context of Tantric yoga, supports self-transcendence through her portrayal of a state of being beyond dualistic conceptions.”

Chapter Twenty: Tilopa's Female Teachers

'DAKINI IS TRUTH!' TILOPA'S 'OVERLOOKED' FEMALE TEACHERS AND ENTERING 'UNCONVENTIONAL' CONDUCT (TUL-ZHUG)

[31st October 2021 Dākinī Translations](#)

"Now you must meditate continuously on the very essence of suchness and the nature of phenomena and mind. To do this you must find some kind of activity to engage in. Previously you were a king, so you have some vestige of class arrogance and this must be destroyed."

—Female Mātāṅgī's instruction to Tilopa to act as a servant for a low-caste prostitute

"Tilopa's early spiritual journey was entirely directed by a woman who converted him to Buddhism, advised him to study Buddhist scripture and philosophy, and decided with which gurus he should study (Saryapa and Matangi), finally taking it upon herself to give him the Chakrasamvara-tantra initiation and teachings. This Dākinī continued to oversee Tilopa's development as he left the monastery, studied with additional gurus, and did Tantric disciplines in a cremation ground."

—Miranda Shaw in *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994)

"You are not at fault. You didn't know I was a mahasiddha. Actually, I have attained all the siddhis because of you. I needed to work as your servant to become enlightened. There has been no harm done."

—Tilopa to prostitute, Dharima on attaining the siddhis

"[When] evil is exhausted, false words are not spoken: there would be no cause. There are no 'demons'; a Dākinī is the truth!"

—Tilopa to the Dākinīs

Introduction

For Dākinī Day today, I offer a post on the Mahasiddha and Kagyu forefather Tilopa's generally overlooked (and voiceless) female teachers. This is based on earlier post I did compiling a catalogue of Tilopa's biographies (see [here](#)). Like another Mahasiddha, Saraha (see [here](#)), Tilopa's female teachers are almost invisible (or at least viewed as insignificant in lineage depictions and supplications of predominantly male, monastic lineages).

A key figure for all the Kagyu lineages is the Indian master, Tilopa (988-1069), one of the 84 Mahāsiddhas, is often depicted at the top of the traditional paintings of Kagyu refuge trees. Surprisingly, other than the [The Life of the Mahāsiddha Tilopa](#) (tr. Torricelli and Nagar (1995)) composed by renowned student of Nāropa, Lotsawa Marpa[1], and a two biographies by HE Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche (2002, 2019), there is little else about Tilopa's life (translated from Tibetan source texts) in the English language. Yet, HH 16th Karmapa mentioned the transmissions from the Indian Mahasiddhas like Tilopa as being what identifies the Kagyu lineages. Moreover, the complete lack of emphasis and research on the important female masters in Tilopa's life, combined with the fact none of these women are included in Kagyu supplications or thangka images, clearly needs to be questioned and amended.

According to the life stories of Tilopa he had various encounters with and teachings from human women Dākinīs[2] and including the wisdom (ye shes) Dākinīs [3]. I summarise some of these

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important female teachers below. In particular, there was the low-caste prostitute, Dharima [4] whom Tilopa acted as a servant for in a brothel while grinding sesame seeds for a living during the day. This stage in Tilopa's human aspect also corresponds to what is termed the 'unconventional conduct' (tul zhug: brtul zhugs) stage of a mahasiddha. The Tibetan term 'tul zhug' is not easy to translate and has been called 'crazy wisdom', conduct of a madperson, vanquishing conduct and so on. It is often used in Chod texts as well, for the Chod practitioner to enter into. Here I have translated it as 'unconventional conduct'. The dictionary definition explain the meaning as 'abandoning normal/ordinary conduct and entering into unique/abnormal/conventional conduct'.

In these free and easy internet porn days, the story of Tilopa and Dharima is often presented in a rather sexy, glamorous way, as if Tilopa was some kind of eccentric, stud pimp for a wild, sexy woman. However, at that time, prostitution was considered extremely disgusting and disgraceful work (like cleaning sewers) and would not have been glamorous, sexy or well-paid at all. Dharima is also said in some accounts to be the daughter of a sesame seed grinder and low-caste. Thus, to be the servant of such a woman would have been considered a gross thing to do (and a great blow to a man's pride). For those in doubt about the grim life in Indian brothels for women (and their children born into them), see this documentary about prostitution in Mumbai (as an example) [here](#). Tilopa was told to do this for twelve years, which is also a long time.

I have also re-published in full a very short text I translated, an advice from a wisdom Ḍākinī[5]. *Severing the Bardo 'Once and for All': 'Question and answer' oral instructions of the Wisdom Ḍākinī to Tilopa*[6].

May this new translation and research on the female teachers of Tilopa inspire people to find out more about them and be of benefit to beings and the Dharma, and may we all have the merit and fortune to meet with and be instructed by Ḍākinīs!

Music? Mātāṅgī's cutting down Tilopa's pride: [You're So Vain](#) by Carly Simon; Tilopa's praise of Dharima: [Praise You](#) by Fatboy Slim and [This is a Man's World](#) by James Brown....'this is a man's world, but it would be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl'.

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 31st October 2021.

Tilopa's female teachers –Kalpabhadri, Mātāṅgī, Ḍākinī Samantabhadri, Dharima



120 *Tilopa with female teachers/consorts. Artwork section from Kagyu female lineage thangka artwork envisioned and commissioned by Adele Tomlin (2024)*

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

The biographies by 3rd Karmapa Rangjung Dorje and Dorje Dze O list his four human gurus as Charyawa, Nagarjuna, Lawapa, and Ḍākinī Samantabhadri, while other biographies are said to list four human gurus in addition to Nagarjuna: Mātāṅgī, Lalapa, Ḍākinī Samantabhadri, and Nagpopa. It is said that Tilopa met Nagārjuna's female disciple, Mātāṅgī, when he sought to find Nagārjuna again and discovered that he had already passed away. Tilopa received *Guhyasamaja* teachings on illusory body from Mātāṅgī, Mahamudra and *Chakrasamvara* teachings on clear light from Lalapa, *Hevajra* teachings on tummo from Ḍākinī Samantabhadri, and *Chakrasamvara* teachings from Nagpopa. Tilopa himself stated his teachers were: Cāryapa, Nāgārjuna, Lavapa and "Sukhasiddhī." Except for the Ḍākinī identified as Sukhasiddhī, who is often referred to as Kalpabhadrī (skal pa bzang mo), these four are the ones generally recognized as Tilopa's human masters.

However, as Ducher (2017: 173-179) explains in detail, there are many inconsistencies in the Tilopa biographies, so it is not easy to say exactly who his teachers were[7]. Yet, the invisibility of these named women in Kagyu lineage supplications, biographies and thangka depictions is all too obvious.

As Shaw says:

"Tilopa's early spiritual journey was entirely directed by a woman who converted him to Buddhism, advised him to study Buddhist scripture and philosophy, and decided with which gurus he should study (Saryapa and Matangi), finally taking it upon herself to give him the Chakrasamvara-tantra initiation and teachings. This Ḍākinī continued to oversee Tilopa's development as he left the monastery, studied with additional gurus, and did Tantric disciplines in a cremation ground. When she perceived that Tilopa was ripe for complete enlightenment, she sent him to a town in Bengal to find a woman named Dharima, ordering Tilopa to work for Dharima when he found her. Dharima was a spiritually advanced bodhisattva and Ḍākinī who lived as a courtesan in order to liberate sentient beings. The entire town was saturated with her spiritual presence and provided the optimum environment for the final stages of Tilopa's journey to enlightenment, as he worked as a sesame-pounder by day and as a servant to the courtesan by night."

'Act like a madman' – Tilopa's female teacher, Ḍākinī Karpo Sangmo and expulsion from the monastery



121 Tilopa statue said to have been created by 10th Karmapa, Choying Dorje

In his aspect as a human, Tilopa became a monk after weariness with royal life. One English language biography of Tilopa, in the book, *'Karmapa: The Black Hat Lama of Tibet'* (Douglas and White (1976), and in Thrangu Rinpoche (2002: 5-8) describes Tilopa's connection as a boy with the great Indian Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

siddha Nagārjuna and how it led to him being crowned a King[8]. Then, becoming weary of a life of luxury, he became a monk at the temple of Somapuri in Bengal.

After that, it has been said that Tilopa was expelled by monks from the monastery[9]. However, Thrangu Rinpoche (2002: 11) explains that Tilopa was actually told by a Ḍākinī (Karpo Sangmo) to leave the monastery and ‘act like a madman’:

“The Ḍākinī transformed herself into the mandala of Chakrasamvara in the sky in front of him, giving Tilopa the pith instructions of the creation and completion stages of practice.With these two pith instructions, Tilopa attained a degree of realization and the Ḍākinī said, “Now throw out your bhikshu ordination and go about acting like a madman, practicing in secret so that nobody knows what you are doing,” and then she vanished into the sky. This Ḍākinī who bestowed these instructions and empowerments on Tilopa was called Karpo Sangmo.....This part of Tilopa’s biography corrects the notion that people can accomplish enlightenment by themselves and that they don’t need a teacher. Tilopa took a Ḍākinī as a teacher. That is why Marpa in his commentary on this part of Tilopa’s life wrote, “He received the blessing from the great Ḍākinī, Karpo Sangmo, and she gave him the four empowerments.”

As he was a former Brahmin Pandita and Buddhist monk, he lost all his opportunities for wealth and fame. Later, he was advised by a Ḍākinī [some say his female teacher Mātāṅgī] to serve a prostitute, Dharima, as her servant (for more on that see below).

Entering ‘unconventional conduct’ (tul zhug) – Tilopa instructed to act as servant to Dharima, the prostitute



122 Illustration of Tilopa in a Tibetan edition of Marpa’s biography of Tilopa

Although, there are several instances of Tilopa being instructed by (and subduing/outshining) Ḍākinīs, one of the most well-known is when he was instructed by his guru Mātāṅgī to be the servant of Dharima, a sex worker. Considering that Mātāṅgī was not only Tilopa’s teacher, but also one of the students of Nagārjuna, it is disappointing there is little to read about her life or accomplishments.

This stage in Tilopa’s human aspect also corresponds to what is termed the ‘unconventional conduct’ (tul zhug: brtul zhugs) stage of a mahasiddha. The Tibetan term ‘tul zhug’ is not easy to translate and has been called ‘crazy wisdom’, conduct of a madperson, vanquishing conduct and so on. It is often used in Chod texts as well, for the Chod practitioner to enter into. Here I have translated it as

unconventional wisdom. The dictionary definition explain the meaning as ‘abandoning normal/ordinary conduct and entering into unique/abnormal/conventional conduct’.

One of the best explanations of it is by Thrangu Rinpoche (2002:9), with the ultimate accomplishment of it being a ‘total lack of inhibition about anything done’:

“The outer action of any mahasiddha has three stages, The first stage is called the “all-good stage,” the second is called the “stage of vanquishing behavior,” and the third stage is called the “victorious in all directions behavior.” A mahasiddha goes through these stages one by one. The first is called “all-good behavior” because the beginner must take up the practice of being extremely peaceful, calm, and carefully watch his or her actions by having extremely controlled and noble behavior. The beginner who engages in this behavior is able to advance along the path and then at a certain point, he or she must enter what is called the “vanquishing behavior” or ‘dul zhug in Tibetan. The syllable ‘dul means “to vanquish” or “to subdue” and refers to one’s kleshas, especially one’s arrogance which is to be completely subdued by the practice. The syllable zhug means “entering.” So in this stage one actually submits oneself to conditions that may normally evoke disturbing consequences such as rage or desire. In the stage of all-good behavior the beginner avoids these situations, but in the vanquishing stage the meditator actually seeks them out. The meditator has to destroy arrogance, pride, and hatred by confronting them and throwing himself into situations that evoke the kind of response that allows him or her to work with these emotions. The third stage of “victorious in all directions behaviour” is the final expression of total fearlessness; it is a total lack of any inhibition about anything done.” Mātāṅgī ordered him to work as a sesame oil maker and as servant by night to a prostitute named Dharima [10] saying to him (Thrangu Rinpoche (2002):14) :

“Now you must meditate continuously on the very essence of suchness and the nature of phenomena and mind. To do this you must find some kind of activity to engage in. Previously you were a king, so you have some vestige of class arrogance and this must be destroyed.”

Marpa recounts it thus:

“After some time, he was instructed: In Bengal, in the East, In the market-place of Pancapana, There is the prostitute Bhari and her associates. If you follow her as a servant, you will be purified; You will pass over the limits of practice and attain the siddhis! [11].

He went there according to what she had said. There in the night-time he would do the work of inviting and accompanying men [into Dharima’s]. During the day, he worked at thrashing sesame grains, and that is why he was known as Tilopa in the language of India and, in Tibetan, as the Sesame-keeper (Til-bsrungs-zhabs). After that, he and Dharima went to the cemetery called Ke-re. There they took delight in the practice of the secret mantra (gsang-ba-sngags) and performed it to its completion.”

Tilopa worked for twelve years as her servant, and on attaining awakening, he is said to have levitated in the sky and brought Dharima up there with him. When she saw him, she was filled with intense regret at not realising he was such a great yogi, apologised and asked to be his student[12]:

“Tilopa said, “You are not at fault. You didn’t know I was a mahasiddha. Actually, I have attained all the siddhis because of you. I needed to work as your servant to become

enlightened. There has been no harm done.” Dharima developed great faith in Tilopa who approached her and touched her on the head with a flower. He blessed her saying:

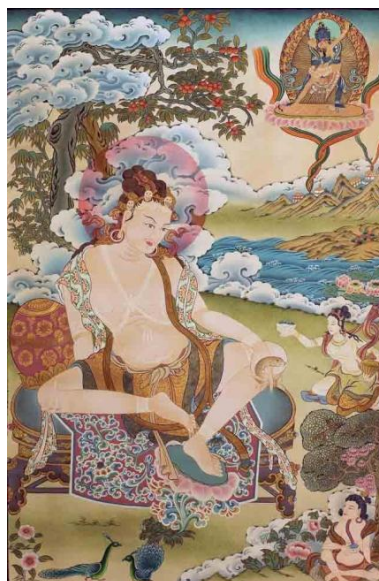
“May all the experience and wisdom I possess arise in you at this very instant.” Because of her strong connection with him, she immediately had a profound experience of realization and became a yogini. Everyone around them was completely amazed and rejoiced. Word quickly spread to the king who came in regal splendor riding on an elephant to see what was going on. As he approached he noticed that Tilopa and Dharima were floating in the sky at the height of seven plantain trees.” (Thrangu Rinpoche (2002): 15).

I did a little online research to find out more about the life of Dharima, the prostitute from Tibetan sources texts but could not find anything. Considering she was one of the main consorts (and students) of Tilopa, it is another example of how significant women are absent and ignored in Tibetan Buddhist textual sources. As Shaw (1994: 137) writes:

“According to Tāranātha’s account, the couple traveled and taught together, singing songs that filled their listeners with wonder at the spiritual depths of life. When some Bengali villagers doubted the religious credentials of the obviously low-caste religious wanderers, Tilopa and the sesame-pounding woman allayed their doubts by rising into the sky above them and hovering there, pounding sesame seeds and singing. It is impossible to interpret Tilopa’s career without reference to the guidance of his numerous spiritual mothers.”

In addition, in these free and easy internet porn days, the story of Tilopa and Dharima is presented in a rather sexy, glamorous way, as if Tilopa was some kind of eccentric, sexy pimp for a wild woman. However, at that time, prostitution was considered extremely disgusting and disgraceful work (like cleaning sewers) and would not have been glamorous, sexy or well-paid at all. Dharima is also said in some accounts to be the daughter of a sesame seed grinder and low-caste. Thus, to be the servant of such a woman would have been considered a gross thing to do (and a great blow to a man’s pride). For those in doubt about the grim life in Indian brothels for women (and their children born into them), see this documentary about prostitution in Mumbai (as an example) [here](#).

Tilopa’s declaration that ‘Dākinī is truth!’



123 Tilopa depicted with female yogini. As is typical of thangka representations, yoginis and female teachers of Mahasiddhas are either very small or not even depicted.

In Marpa's biography, during the time when Tilopa subdued Ḍākinīs, just prior to being recognized as Chakramsavara himself, he was challenged by a group of them, where he declares that a Ḍākinī is truth[13]:

“Those in the assembly uttered an embarrassing laugh, making fun of him, and spoke in one voice: “A born-blind looks at, but he cannot see the forms; A deaf man listens to, but he cannot hear the sounds; An idiot speaks, but he cannot understand the meaning. In those deceived by Mara, there is no truth!” The master replied to them: [When] evil is exhausted, false words are not spoken: there would be no cause. There are no ‘demons’; a Dākinī is the truth!”

དུས་ཤིང་བསྐྱེད་པའི་གཞུགས་མི་མཆོད། འོན་པས་ཉན་པས་སྐྱེ་མི་ཐོས་། ཀླགས་པས་སྐྱེས་པས་དོན་མི་གོ། བདུད་ཀྱིས་བསྐྱེས་ལ་བདེན་པ་མེད། ཉེས་པ་ཟད་པ་རྒྱན་ཀྱི་ཚིག། སྐྱ་བཟ་མི་
འཕྲུར་རྒྱ་མེད་མྱིར། བདུད་མིན་མཁའ་འགྲོ་མ་ཅུ་བདེན།

The translated text, *Severing the Bardo ‘Once and for All’: ‘Question and answer’: Oral instructions of the wisdom Ḍākinī to Tilopa*, is a short (one folio), question and answer between Tilopa and the wisdom Ḍākinī on the nature of awakening [Buddhahood] and how it manifests at the time of the present moment and at the time of death; and how realizing that eliminates the bardo, the ‘intermediate state’ between death and birth.

The text can be read in full below. The ‘Once and for All’ in the title is my poetic rendition of the Tibetan ‘gcig chod ma’, which has the sense of eliminating something once, without having to do it again. In the teaching, Tilopa gets instructions on the nature of mind, ‘like space gazing into space’. This is very similar to the instructions Tilopa gives to Nāropa in his famed *Ganges Māhamudrā*.

Tilokpa nunnery in India – Tilopa’s cave and 17th Karmapa on ‘Life of Tilopa’ at Tilokpur Nunnery



124 The Tilokpa nunnery nuns perform a puja on the riverbank opposite the cave of Tilopa (see Tibetan Nuns Project).

From February 19-26, 2007, HH 17th Karmapa visited Drubten Pemo Jalpay Gatsal, the newly constructed [Tilokpur Nuns' Monastery](#) near Dharamsala, in Himachal Pradesh. At the request of HH the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa, an English woman, Freda Bedi founded the nunnery in 1968.

During his visit, the Karmapa taught on the life of Tilopa and the *37 Actions of a Bodhisattva*, as well as bestowed a number of empowerments. He also consecrated a new temple at Tilokpur, as well as made a pilgrimage to the historic cave of Tilopa near the nunnery. I was fortunate to be able to attend these teachings in person and visit the cave twice. [Here](#) is the teaching the 17th Karmapa gave on the Life of Tilopa. The transcript of this teaching has not been published in English, and I hope to do that soon.



Severing the Bardo ‘Once and for All’:

‘Question and answer’ oral instructions of the Wisdom Ḍākinī to Tilopa

shrī vajraḍākinī namo!

Tilopa asked the wisdom Ḍākinī: what is awakening [Buddha]? The wisdom Ḍākinī responded:

“Tilopa! When the mind looks at mind, the ‘looker’ is mind, the ‘looked at’ is also mind.

Like space gazing at space, both the ‘gazer’ and the ‘gazed at’, are naturally dissolved in purity.

When thoughts are lucidly clear, that is spontaneously accomplished awakening [Buddha]. Actual manifestation of realization is also awakening [Buddha]. Abiding on the path is also awakening [Buddha].

Likewise, by severing the four ‘demons’[māras] of conceptualization, with no birth nor death in the mind, that is the dharmakāya. Tilopa, understand this!

By severing the root basis of mind, since one doesn’t even merely think of mental constructs, at that time, uninterruptedly day and night, decisively strive for the 13th level of the Vajra Holder [14], Tilopa, understand this!”

Tilopa then asked: “How is the yoga of clear luminosity of death and the clear luminosity of present moment mixed?” The Ḍākinī answered:

“The present moment clear luminosity is when the mind is looking at mind, the beholder and that which is beheld, those two, like gazing into the centre of space, like space free from clouds.

At the time of death, at the time when the outer and inner breath has ceased, the death clear luminosity arrives like space without clouds. By the power of pure looking, that which is called ‘bardo’ will be completely absent. Tilopa, understand this!”

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Tibetan Text

ཡེ་ཤེས་གྱི་མཐའ་འགོ་མ་ལ་རྟི་ལོ་པའི་བྱམས་ལེན་སྐྱེན་བརྒྱུད་མན་ངག་བར་དོ་གཅིག་ཆོད་མ། སྤྱི་བ་ཇཱ་གཱ་ན་མོ། དཔལ་ཡེ་ཤེས་གྱི་མཐའ་འགོ་མ་ལ་རྟི་ལོ་པས་བྱམས་པ་སངས་རྒྱས་བྱ་བ་ཅི་ལགས། ཡེ་ཤེས་གྱི་མཐའ་འགོ་མའི་ཞལ་ནས། རྣམ་མཁས་རྣམ་མཁའ་མཐོང་བ་ལྟ་བུ་ལྟ་གཉིས་རང་སར་དག་ནས། སེལ་ལེ་སིང་ངེ་རྟོག་པའི་དུས་སྟེ། ལྷན་གྱི་གྲུབ་པའི་སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱང་དེ་ཡིན། རྟོགས་པ་མངོན་དུ་གྱུར་པའི་སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱང་དེ་ཡིན། ལམ་དུ་བྱུག་པའི་སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱང་དེ་ཡིན། དེ་ལྟར་རྟོགས་པའི་བདུད་པའི་ཆོད་ནས། སེམས་ལ་སྟེ་རྒྱ་འཛིན་མེད་པས་ཆོས་སྐུ་བྱ་བ་དེ་ཡིན་པས། རྟི་ལོ་པས་གོ་བར་གྱིས་ཤེགས། སེམས་གྱི་གཞི་རྩ་ཆོད་པས་ཐོས་བྱས་སྐྱེས་ཅན་དུ་མ་ཤོར་བས་ཉིན་མཚན་རྒྱུན་ཆད་མེད་པའི་དུས་དྲར་བར་ཆད་མེད་པར་བརྟུགས་མ་དོན་འཛིན་པའི་ས་ནོན་པ་ཐག་ཆོད་མཐའ་སྤྱོད་བྱ་བ་ཡང་ཡིན། རྟི་ལོ་པས་གོ་བར་གྱིས་ཤེགས། ཡང་རྟི་ལོ་པས་བྱམས་པ། རྣལ་འབྱོར་འཛིན་པའི་འོད་གསལ་དང་དཔྲལ་འོད་གསལ་ཇི་ལྟར་འདྲེས་བྱས་པས། མཐའ་འགོ་མའི་ཞལ་ནས། ད་ལྟའི་འོད་གསལ་བྱ་བ་སེམས་གྱིས་སེམས་ལ་བརྟན་པའི་དུས་སྟེ་ལྟ་གཉིས་ཀ་ནས་མཐའི་དགྱེལ་ལྟར་རྟོགས་པས་སྤྱིན་མེད་པའི་རྣམ་མཁས་ལྟ་བུ་སྟེ། འཛིན་པའི་དུས་སྟེ་དབྱགས་ནང་

དབུགས་མ་ཆད་པའི་དུས་སུ་འཆི་ཁའི་འོད་གསལ་བྱ་བ་དེ་མྱེན་མེད་པའི་ནམ་མཁའ་ལྷ་བྱ་འོང་བས་ལྷ་སྒྲུངས་པའི་སྒྲོབས་ཀྱི་བར་དོ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་མེད་པར་འཆང་བྱའོ། ཉི་ལོ་པས་གོ་བར་གྱིས་ཤིག། མཆོད་པ།

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[UNSUNG HEROINES, MOTHERS OF MAHĀMUDRĀ AND SOURCE OF SARAHA’S SONGS : Re-telling the \(her\)stories of the symbolic ‘arrow-maker’ Dakhenma, and the ‘radish-curry’ cook gurus of siddha, Saraha](#)

[NEW TRANSLATION: Tilopa’s Gangama Māhamudrā Instructions](#)

- Torricelli Fabrizio (1998), *A Thirteenth Century Tibetan Hymn to the Siddha Tilopa*, The Tibet Journal, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 3-17, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.
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Endnotes

[1] The translators of this text state that “it is the earliest biography of the mahasiddha Tilopa of which we have direct knowledge. In fact, from the dedicatory verses and the colophon, it appears to have been composed by the great Kagyupa master Marpa Chokyi Lodro (Mar-pa Chos-kyi-blo-gros (1012-1097)) for the benefit of his son Damra Dode (Dar-ma mDo-sde). It is a short work included in a collection of texts of the Mar-pa dKar-brgyud-pa tradition: (bD em chog mkha’- ‘gro snyan-rgyud, vol. klia—brGyud-pa yid-bzhin-nor-bu rnam-par thar-pa, fols. lb-1 lb). Such texts are connected with the oral ‘whispered’ tradition (snyan-rgyud) transmitted by the disciple of Milarepa (Mi-la-ras-pa), Rechung Dorje Drag (Ras-chung rDo-rje-grags (1084- 1161)) and, because of that, they are known as Rechung Nyengyu (Ras-chung snyan-rgyud). The manuscript, compiled by Shar-kha Ras-chen, Kun-

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dga'-dar-po and Byang-chub-bzang-po in the first half of the 16th century, is written in a cursive script (dbu-med), which is known as Kham Dri (khams-bris), where many short forms are attested. As to the genre, it belongs to what we could call "Buddhist hagiology", being an account of the 'complete liberation' (rnam-par thar-pa, vimoksa) of the guru of Naropa." See also an edition of the text at TBRC W3CN15304.

[2] There are different definitions of and types of ḍākinī. In Tibetan, the word is Khandroma (mkha' 'gro ma), which literally means 'space traveller'. Judith Simmer-Brown (2002) identifies four main classes of ḍākinī:

1. The *secret class* of ḍākinī is prajnaparamita (*yum chenmo*), the empty nature of reality according to Mahayana doctrine.
2. The *inner class* of ḍākinī is the ḍākinī of the mandala, a meditational deity (*yidam*) and fully enlightened Buddha who helps the practitioner recognise their own Buddhahood.
3. The *outer ḍākinī* is the physical form of the ḍākinī, attained through completion stage tantra practices such as the Six Yogas of Naropa that work with the subtle winds of the subtle body so that the practitioner's body is compatible with an enlightened mind.
4. The *outer-outer ḍākinī* is a ḍākinī in human form. She is a yogini in her own right but may also be a karmamudrā, or consort, of a yogi or mahasiddha.

ḍākinīs can also be classified according to the Trikaya, or three bodies of buddhahood.

1. The Dharmakāya ḍākinī, which is Samantabhadrī, represents the dharmadhatu where all phenomena appear.
2. The Sambhogakāya ḍākinīs are the yidams used as meditational deities for tantric practice.
3. The Nirmanakāya ḍākinīs are human women born with special potentialities; these are realized yoginis, consorts of gurus, or even all women in general as they may be classified into the Five Buddha Families.

See also: <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/Dākinī>

[3] One [online source states that](#): "In Tilopa Meets the Ḍākinīs, the 4th Chetsang Rinpoche (1770-1862) of the Drikung Kagyu tells how the Bengali brahmin boy, Salyeu, out minding water buffalo, was visited by a "fearsome, ugly woman" who told him to ". . . herd buffalo And read scriptures. There you will find the prophecies of the Ḍākinīs." With this, she disappeared. Some time later, while he was reading under a shapa [hat-shaped?] tree, she returned, and asked him to identify himself to her. He gave the appropriate, ordinary information, but she corrected him, saying: "Your country is Oddiyana in the North; your father is Chakrasamvara; your mother is Vajrayogini; your brother is Pantsapana [Hind: Panchpana], and I am your sister, Bliss-giver. If you want to find the true buffalo go to the forest of the bodhi tree. There the stainless Ḍākinīs hold the ear-whispered teachings." He said, "If I go there, the Ḍākinīs will pose obstacles and prevent me from succeeding." She said: "Yogi, you can get the teachings. You have received the predictions And kept the samaya vows." Realizing she was a Ḍākinī, he said: "The path is dangerous and I do not know how to traverse it." In reply she gave him a crystal ladder, a jeweled bridge, and a coral-handled key, saying: "I give you my blessings; depart without hesitation." The young man, who would become known as Mahasiddha Tilopa, then crosses the country to reach Oddiyana where, using the magical tools, he negotiates a poison lake and the "iron

wall of Ghandola.” Then, he chooses the correct one of the three gates to the Temple of Ghandola and, using his coral key, he enters.

First, he meets nirmanakaya “stainless Ḍākinīs Who desire flesh and blood.” in their many fearsome forms that make terrible noises and threatening gestures, but he is not afraid. Frustrated, they fell into a faint, and when they regained their composure, they begged his forgiveness and admitted: “We are to you as the butterfly to the lamp; The butterfly hopes to extinguish the lamp, But instead dies in the light. ... ,” One among them continued: “I am just an ordinary being, without authority. If I do not ask our leader’s permission to let you in, She will eat my flesh and drink my blood. Therefore, precious one, do not think unkindly of me.”

Then, samboghakaya Loka Karma Ḍākinīs appear, but by making the three threatening ritual gestures, Tilopa overpowers their faculties of body, speech and mind. They suffer the same as the previous group, and their leader, “a Minister,” goes to announce him to the Queen. When she permits him to enter, he does not even bow but rather assumes a state of meditation, so the host of attending Ḍākinīs get angry, saying: “She is the blessed one, The mother of the Buddhas of the Three Times. Let us beat him Who shows no respect.” The Mother intervenes saying that he is “. . . The father of the Buddhas of the Three Times. Even a rain of vajras . . . Could not destroy him. Therefore I will give him the teachings.”

She instructs him in prana [breath/energy] and other unrecorded things, but he insists on more, and Tilopa says that he wants “. . . the perfect teaching. The stainless bliss, the great secret Of the ordinary and the extraordinary.” She then agrees to confer the three wish-fulfilling gems including the self-arising body of co-emergent Wisdom and Means united; the speech that is the 7-syllable self-arising emerald in the Dharmakara, and the 5-pointed vajra jewel of self-arising mind, but only if he can understand the signs. The host of Ḍākinīs express their doubt that he will be able to understand the signs, but Tilopa responds directly to the Mother, that he has 3 special keys, and that they are: 1. The self-liberation key of samaya that grants access to “the light of wisdom which dispels the darkness of ignorance, And to self-awareness, self-arising, ad self-clarity.”

2. “the key of experience Which opens the door to the mind-as-such, Self-appearing clarity which is ever unborn,” and 3. “the key of experience of the realized yogi” that opens the door to “Mind-as-such, Dharma-as-such, and Dharmakaya.”

At that the Ḍākinīs rejoice and hold a Ganachakra feast in which they prepare the sindhura (vermillion powder) mandala and further empower him by means of both oral and mental transmissions. They give him 13 distinct tantras for the future benefit of beings including Tantra of Vajra Ḍākinī, Tantra of Sangwai Zo and Tantra of Vajradhara Self-appearance. Then they liken him to a bird and, having addressed him as Chakrasamvara and as Prajnabadra, they beg him to remain with them. Knowing the future, Tilopa explains that he must return to Tsukgi Norbu (Crest Jewel) Monastery “For the spiritual sons Naropa, Ririkasori and others.” As he was leaving, a formless Ḍākinī bestowed 9 special objects with instructions to:

1. “loosen the knot of the mind” 2. “act like a sword striking water” 3. “chase the sun of realization” [a lasso?] 4. “see samaya in the mirror of your mind” 5. “see that the light of awareness is wisdom” 6. “turn the wheel of the channel and wind net” 7. “see the outer mirror equalizing taste” 8. “see the mahamudra [a seal?] of self-liberation” 9. hold “the jewel of great-bliss speech”

And that, according to the Drikung Kagyu, is “how Tilopa as a human being over- powered the Ḍākinīs, and how he received the teachings.”

[4] The translators of Marpa's biography of Tilopa say her name is Bharima, whereas other online sources, such as TBRC and the Kagyu Office, write Dharima.

[5] There are many different definitions of a *Ḍākinī*, and types of them too. At the ultimate level of reality there are transcendental buddhas. These are thought of as five families or categories of buddhas. Their female consorts are regarded as "enlightened wisdom" which, paired with the male aspect or "skillful means," give rise to the enlightened compassionate activity of the universe(s). Thus, there are five major corresponding *Ḍākinīs*: Padma-*Ḍākinī*, Buddha-*Ḍākinī*, Ratna-*Ḍākinī*, Karma-*Ḍākinī*, and Vajra-*Ḍākinī* or Vishva-*Ḍākinī* (vajra-cross *Ḍākinī*.)"

[6] "ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ma la te+e lo pa'i zhus len snyan brgyud man ngag bar do gcig chod ma/." In karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs/. TBRC W3PD1288. 3: 413 – 414. lha sa/: dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang /, 2013?.

[7] One study shows that Tilopa had four human masters: Cāryapa, Nāgārjuna, Lavapa and "Sukhasiddhī." Except for the *ḍākinī* identified as Sukhasiddhī, who is often referred to as Kalpabhadri (*skal pa bzang mo*), these four are the ones generally recognized as Tilopa's human masters. Tilopa is said to have stated in a verse:

I	have	human	masters:
They	are	Nāgārjuna,	Cāryapa,
And Kalpabhadri.			Lavapa

The trouble arises when one tries to ascertain what transmission Tilopa received from whom, and who were the previous masters in each of the lineages.... How, therefore, can we explain these differences?" (Ducher 2017a: 177-8). To summarize, although it is certain that there are several irreconcilable versions, it is possible to make sense of this mass of data on the basis of the different traditions of the *bka' babs bzhi* alluded to in *The Four Lineages of Transmissions and Tilopa's Hagiography*. To begin with, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels:

- the lineage of realization and blessing;
- the lineage of transmission and experience.

In the first, the proximate lineage (*nye brgyud*), Tilopa receives teaching directly from enlightenment, "omniscience," under the guise of Vajradhara, without the intercession of human masters. In the second, the "long lineage" (*ring brgyud*), there are four lines of transmissions, the *bka' babs bzhi*. Descriptions of the four can be related to two traditions, sometimes called "combined" and "non-combined" (*thun mong/thun mong ma yin pa*). When Tilopa speaks of his four human gurus as Nāgārjuna, Cāryapa, Lavapa and Kalpabhadri, this refers to the four recipients of the four non-combined transmissions. Their own lineage is sometimes detailed, but mostly not. It is likely that this tradition descends from Tilopa's *Ṣaḍdharmopadeśa* (*chos drug gi man ngag*).

In the combined tradition, for which a single source has not been identified, Tilopa's masters are Mātāṅgī, Karṇaripa, Indrabhūti and Deṅgipa. The line ending with Mātāṅgī in this set can be equated to the one of Nāgārjuna in the previous set, and the line of Indrabhūti the Lesser corresponds to that of Lavapa, as Mātāṅgī and Indrabhūti are disciples of respectively Nāgārjuna and Lavapa. The two other lines differ in the two sets[6]. Hence, if one takes into account all the lines of transmission referred to in the two traditions, one ends up with six distinct lines of transmission....

From the above, we understand that the term "four lines of transmission" covers a large and indefinite number of Indian gurus who practiced and transmitted tantric teachings that became the core of Mar

pa's legacy in Tibet. These "four" lineages can be counted as six, sometimes seven, or more. There must therefore be reasons for the tradition to remember the number four. A hint to that is the fact that the four lines of the combined tradition are sometimes associated with the four directions of India." (Ducher 2017a: 177-8).

[8] "Legend tells that as a boy he was put to a test by the great Siddha Nagarjuna, who asked for his help across a river. Carrying the Teacher on his back the young Tilopa waded fearlessly through the raging waters, never doubting that he would reach the other side safely. Some years later Nagarjuna again appeared in the district and found Tilopa playing at being a King, with two young girls as his Queens. The young man immediately prostrated himself before the Siddha, who asked him if he would really like to become the King. Laughing TUopa replied that indeed he would, but added that it was unlikely ever to happen. When the King of that region died, however, the State Elephant, guided by Nagarjuna's magical powers, placed the ritual vase of holy water on top of Tilopa's head, thus indicating the Divine choice for the new monarch. At the same time the great sage conjured up a mighty and invincible army which would only obey the commands of Tilopa. The young man was crowned King and after reigning for several years began to weary of the life of luxury. (p.5).

[9] According to the account in Douglas and White (1976): "One day, while engaged in his priestly duties, an ugly hag-like woman appeared before him and asked if he would like to attain true Enlightenment. Tilopa recognised her as a Ḍākinī, a keeper of esoteric secrets, and begged for her instructions. She initiated him into the Chakrasamvara Tantra and he was able to absorb the teachings fully. Tilopa stayed at Somapuri for twelve years, engaging himself in the revealed teachings. He was able to visit the realms of the Dakinis, surviving many ordeals and temptations, culminating in his meeting with the Ḍākinī-Queen herself, from whom he received the full and final transmission of the teachings. He united with a Yogini-ascetic, who was a pounder of sesame seeds, and on this account was driven out from the order of monks."

[10] "When Tilopa was abiding in a certain cave, Nagarjuna sent the Ḍākinī Matongha to give him teachings. When Matongha appeared, Tilopa inquired about Nagarjuna and was told that Nagarjuna was not in the human realm at that time but was giving teachings in the god realm. Matongha also told Tilopa that Nagarjuna knew Tilopa would be in this particular cave and had sent her to give him teachings.

As Nagarjuna requested, Tilopa received teachings from Matongha. During this time, Matongha noticed that because Tilopa had been king and of royal caste, his mind possessed a strong pride that hindered his progress, and she told him that his arrogance must be removed. Tilopa was given instructions to go to a certain village to seek out a woman there who was a prostitute and to work for her. The woman worked during the day making oil out of sesame seed and worked at night as a prostitute. As he was instructed, he worked for the woman during the day by pounding sesame seed, and during the night by soliciting her customers. In this way Tilopa lived as the prostitute's helper." From Rumtek Monastery website (see [here](#)).

[11] In Tibetan: ཤར་ཐུགས་རྒྱུད་གཡེ་བརྒྱུད། བན་ཚབ་ནའི་ཚོང་འདུས་ན། ལྷ་དཔྱད་ལྷ་རི་འཁོར་བཅས་ཀྱི། དེ་ཡི་ཞབས་འབྲེང་བྱས་ན་གསངས། མཐར་ཐན་ནས་དངོས་གྲུབ་ཐོབ།

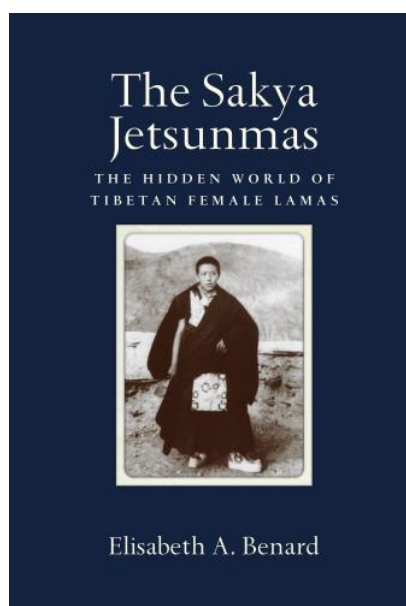
[12] From Rumtek Monastery website (ibid.): "One day as Tilopa was pounding sesame seeds in the village, he realized ultimate buddhahood, the Vajradhara aspect of enlightenment. As a sign of his achieving complete realization, Tilopa levitated to the height of seven royal palm trees while still holding a mortar and pestle in his hands and continuing to grind sesame seeds. The news that Tilopa hovered in the air at the height of seven royal palm trees quickly spread through the village.

When the prostitute who employed Tilopa heard that someone was levitating very high in the sky, she hastened to see who it was. To her surprise she discovered that it was her employee in the sky, and that he was still working for her, even as he hovered, by continuing to grind sesame seeds with a mortar and pestle. She felt ashamed to have given such work to a highly realized being, and with great regret, she confessed this to Tilopa and requested him to accept her as his student. As she mentally made this request, Tilopa threw a flower down to her from the sky. The flower hit her on the head, instantaneously causing her to reach complete realization. She then levitated to the same height as Tilopa.”

[13] From Marpa’s *The Life of the Mahasiddha Tilopa*: 40.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Sakya Jetsunmas, a family lineage

17th July 2021 [Dākinī Translations](#)



A couple of days ago, I was contacted by Dr. Elisabeth Benard who kindly congratulated me on my work as ‘phenomenal’ and expressed her interest in my recently published work on Vajrayogini (see [here](#)). She also sent me a copy of her article on the Sakya Jetsunmas, *Born to Practice: The Sakya Jetsunma Phenomenon* (2015)^[i] and informed me of her forthcoming book, *The Sakya Jetsunmas: The Hidden World of Tibetan Female Lamas* (Shambhala, 2020).^[ii]

I was delighted to get this information, as before then, I had not really heard about the Sakya Jetsunmas. This is not surprising, as Benard herself points out:

“Though the Sakya Khon family has had many daughters as well as sons, the paucity of information about the Sakya Jetsunmas is disconcerting. There are only a few brief biographies written about some of them. In contrast, the proliferation of elaborate and extensive biographies of the sons who become the throne holder of the Sakya sect, or Sakya Trizin (Sakya khri ’dzin), is characteristic of the gendered logics of Tibetan historiography...”^[iii]

In fact, the Sakya Trizin heads of the lineage are often referred to as ‘patriarchs’, since it is a family lineage. However, as Benard concludes:

“It is to be hoped that when the Sakya genealogies are updated next, the Jetsunmas will insist on having their own biographical chapters written....Their hidden world needs to be brought to light and their achievements must surely be recognised in any account of spiritual lives of Tibetan women, past and present.”

While having more female teachers, practitioners and lineages at the public forefront can only be a good thing for women, Tibetan Buddhism and spiritual practice, the question as to whether the Sakya Jetsunma tradition is a genuinely autonomous lineage of female realisation, empowerment and equality, or more female ‘tokenism’ that maintains and promotes nepotistic, patriarchal religious power is yet to be fully discussed or decided. I hope that this post begins that discussion and also raises awareness about the Jetsunmas and their heritage, lives and lineage.

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 17th July 2021.

The Sakya Jetsunmas – a female family lineage among male patriarchs



125 Khon Konchok Gyalpo ('Khon dKon mchog rgyal po, 1034-1102)

Female incarnation lineages in Tibetan Buddhism are rare, and often unheard of. The Sakya Jetsunmas are not an incarnation lineage though but a family lineage. For that reason, some might argue that it is yet another (perhaps worse) form of elitism that keeps all the spiritual power and teachings within one family. Albeit at least in this case it is a *female* family line, which other male-dominated incarnation lineages do not have at all. However, as feminist Buddhist scholar Rita Gross points out in her book [*Buddhism After Patriarchy*](#) (1992):

“The single biggest difference between the practice of Buddhism in Asia and the practice of Buddhism in the West is the full and complete participation of women in Western Buddhism.”

Even though Bernard (2015) does not question, investigate or analyse the political or gendered aspect of nepotism and male religious power in her paper (for more on that see below), she provides an interesting (albeit brief) report of some of the historical background of the tradition and biographies of several well-known Sakya Jetsunmas:

“The Sakya Khon family began in the eleventh century when Khon Konchok Gyalpo ('Khon dKon mchog rgyal po, 1034-1102) established the Sakya sect seat in a place, which became known as Sakya (lit. “pale white earth”). The family has undergone numerous divisions, but ever since the early nineteenth century, there are two main branches: Dolma Palace and Phuntsok Palace. Until 1959, both had their main residences in Sakya and both provided residences or labrang (bla brang) reserved exclusively for their daughters. The labrang was a place to live, study, meditate and perform religious rituals. Prior to 1959, Jetsunmas were encouraged to live as nuns to pursue religious practice, yet they did not live in Sakya nunneries, but in their own residences, a labrang.” (Bernard, 2015: 7)

The Jetsunmas were given equal opportunity to study with all the religious preceptors or lamas who taught their brothers. H.E. Jetsun Kushok likes to emphasise that when they lived in Tibet she received the same teachings and did the same retreats as her brother, H.H. Sakya Trizin. One of the most important teachings and practices in the Sakya tradition is Lamdre (Lam 'bras; “The Path and Result to Liberation”), a complete and gradual system that combines both the sutras (exoteric teachings) and the tantras (esoteric teachings) to provide a guided path to Buddhahood. Lamdre emphasises that the mind is the root of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, as well as the combination of luminosity and emptiness. Ideally every son and daughter in the Sakya Khon family should receive the transmission and learn how

to do the accompanying meditations, chants and rituals explained in Lamdre. All sons are expected to become lineage holders of Lamdre and to continue its “unbroken” transmission to others.”



126 Sakya Monastery, in Tibet Autonomous Region, is located in Sakya County, in Shigatse Prefecture, south-west Tibet. Around 160km southwest of Shigatse, the monastery lies on the hillside on the road to Tingri.

Some might say that the Sakya Jetsunma tradition is a counter-example to Gross’s contention. However, the fact there is a female family lineage (rare as it is) does not necessarily mean it is a female-friendly lineage or tradition. In fact, more could be written about how (in all fields of life) male patriarchal power is maintained via the presence of a token, few women who don’t work to change the status quo of male privilege and power, and worse may even maintain and promote it as their very existence and status depends on it. For example, women in politics who attain high status have often been criticized for being positively anti-women and anti-feminist, and use their own status as a woman to keep other women down^[iv].

As Benard herself admits about the Sakya Jetsunmas, still little is known about or heard of them, compared the male teachers within the Sakya lineage. Is that because they are more ‘token women’ with still little power or education, or because they are not as interested in teaching Dharma and more public forms of Dharma activities? This is clearly an area of further research and analysis^[v] and something Bernard herself may have more to say about. Bernard (2015:6) acknowledges that the Jetsunmas have similarities to the male privileged tulku system and do not face the great difficulties other famous female practitioners have faced due to biology and gender) but argues that such women have accumulated great merit to be born into such a family:

“Yet the Sakya Jetsunmas do not face these difficulties. Instead they are akin to the male-dominated prestigious recognised reincarnations or tulkus (sprul sku). While Jetsunmas are not considered recognized reincarnations the similarities with tulkus are noteworthy. First, one is born into the Sakya Khon lineage only if one has already accumulated a lot of merit in their past lives; and many sons are considered reincarnations of their grandfathers or uncles or someone else. Second, like tulkus, Jetsunmas are given opportunities for spiritual study at an early age. Third, everything is provided for the Jetsunma and after her death, her property is saved for future Jetsunmas in much the same way that property and belongings of a tulku are passed down to the next reincarnation.”

Benard (2015:2) outlines the main historical textual sources on the Jetsunmas:

“Such biographies will sometimes mention a sister or daughter but not much more than that. The most extensive, available historical sources for the Sakya Jetsunmas are the Sa skya gdung rabs or Genealogies of the Sakya Families. Some of the more famous are the Extensive

Genealogy or the gDung rabs chen mo which was written by Jamgon Amezhab ('Jam mgon A mes zhabs, 1597-1659), the Twenty-seventh Sakya Trizin in the seventeenth century and its continuation by Kunga Lodro or Kunlo (Kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783), the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin. Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (Drag shul 'phrin las rinchen, 1871-1936), Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin, wrote the final update.

Within these genealogies, one is still lucky to find the names of the Jetsunmas mentioned at least, or who their parents and possibly their teachers were. Occasionally, if a brother or uncle was an important Sakya Trizin or significant scholar, one will find an episode when they visited Lhasa together or attended a teaching given by an important lama [\[vii\]](#)."

Benard focuses on, in particular, Jetsun Kushok (rJe btsun sKu shog), Jetsunma Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche ('Chi med phrin las klu sdings), born in 1938 in Sakya, Tibet who lives today in Richmond, BC, Canada. Benard's article is based on extensive interviews with H.E. Jetsun Kushok herself [\[viii\]](#).

Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima (1756 – 1850s)

Benard (2015: 14) also presents a biography of one of the most renowned Jetsunmas, Chime Tenpai Nyima (rJe btsun ma 'Chi med bstan pa'i nyi ma) who lived from the mid eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century and is a female master in the Vajrayoginī guru transmission lineage:

"Looking back at earlier outstanding and autonomous religious women in the Sakya Jetsunma tradition, one great Jetsunma stands out. Being one of the most eminent, Chime Tenpai Nyima (b. 1756-ca. 1850's) is remembered as an extraordinary practitioner and as teacher to four Sakya Trizins, their brothers, sons and daughters, including many other tulkus and significant teachers in the Sakya tradition. Her two most important legacies are that she is the only woman in the transmission lineage of the Sakya Nāropā lineage of Vajrayoginī and accompanying teachings and she is one of the four Jetsunmas who bestowed Lamdre. In view of the paucity of information generally available, I will briefly summarise her biography here. For this, I am mainly using textual information based on the final Sakya genealogy updated by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin. 33 This main but brief biography of Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima is embedded in the biography of Kunga Pende Gyatso's (Kun dga' phan bde rgya mtso, also known as E waṃ bzang po, 1766-1788) who was her paternal first cousin and son of Sachen Kunga Lodro. Also, H.H. Sakya Trizin has related his own findings and stories that are known about her to me in interviews."

"Sachen Kunga Lodro bestowed on her the important and essential transmissions of both the common Lamdre or Lamdre Tsokshe (Lam 'bras tshogs bshad) and the uncommon Lamdre Lopshe (Lam 'bras slob bshad) and all of the teachings concerning Vajrayoginī. He bestowed on her many major empowerments including Sarvavid Vairocana (Kun rig rnam par snang mdzad), the main deity of the Sarva Durgati Parishodhana Tantra ("Elimination of Bad Rebirths") that is performed when a person is recently deceased. She became very learned and the holder of different religious master lineages including Parting from the Four Attachments and the principal Vajrayoginī (Naro mkha' spyod) teaching cycle. In the Vajrayoginī guru transmission lineage, she is the only female master."

Jetsunma Pema Trinle (rJe btsun ma Pad ma phrin las, 1874-c.1950)

Even though the Sakya Jetsunmas held power and status within the Sakya tradition, inherited from their family, they still faced gender discrimination. In Benard's biography of [Jetsun Pema Trinle](#) (1874-1950):

“Pema Trinle held a prominent place in the Sakya tradition, being one of the few women to have been authorized to teach both *Lamdre Tsokshe* and *Lobshe*, the general and esoteric presentation of the Path and Result in the Sakya tradition. She was particularly renowned for her mastery of the Vajrayogini teachings....

...Her great-nephew, the current Sakya Tridzin, recounts an episode that offers insight into the social pressures she faced as a female master, and reveals that she held her own in the face of those pressures. At a Sakya monastery in eastern Tibet where she was giving an initiation, some nearby monasteries—offended by the idea of a female master—sent their *dobdob*, or monastic police, to intimidate her. The story goes that when she became aware of their presence, she was holding up an initiatory vase, from which she removed her hands to adjust her robes, leaving it levitating in the air. Astonished, the monks prostrated to her, requested her blessing, and left her in peace.”

Jetunma Kushok. Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche (1938 –)



127 Jetsunma Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche ('Chi med phrin las klu sdings). She was the third woman in Sakya history to have transmitted the Lamdre.

Bernard (2015) discusses the life of Jetsun Kushok (rJe btsun sKu shog), named Jetsunma Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche ('Chi med phrin las klu sdings). For a fuller biography on Jetsun Kushok, see [here](#), which includes details of how she was the third woman in Sakya history to have transmitted the Lamdre:

“Soon after she left this retreat, in 1955, a crowd of monks from Kham arrived in Sakya, and requested the Lamdre teachings from His Holiness, who because of his own schedule, was unable to accommodate them. Their aunt then urged Jetsun Kushok, who was then sixteen, to give the teaching herself. The Lamdre is a complete cycle which encompasses the full range of Buddhist teachings, from Hinayana through Mahayana and up to and including Vajrayana. It revolves around the central mandala or the Virupa transmission of Hevajra. Jetsun Kushok bestowed the short version of the Lamdre by [Ngawang Chodrak](#), as well as the lung for all the various practices and ceremonies connected with the Sakya lineage. The whole teaching lasted around three months.

Thus she became the third woman in Sakya history to have transmitted the Lamdre, and in 1956 when she and His Holiness went to Lhasa to receive the middle-length teaching on the Lam Rim from the Dalai Lama, she headed the procession, crowned with the Sakya hat worn by high Sakya lineage holders and preceded by a golden umbrella.”

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Teaching in the West and the Vajrayogini Retreat Centre

Since then she has founded a dharma center in Vancouver, [Sakya Thubten Tsechen Ling](#), and visits the other member centers of [Palden Sakya](#) (the association of Sakya Dharma Centers in the United States) in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Washington, DC. She has also taught in Hawaii and Singapore.

It has long been Jetsun Kushok's intent to spend the rest of her life in retreat practicing the Vajrayogini meditations. It is also her wish to build a retreat center at the site of her retreat. Between her own practice sessions she will give guidance and instruction to the individuals in residence there. The retreat will be known as [Kacho Ling](#), the name of Vajrayogini's pure field of activity. Practitioners will be able to stay at the facility from one month up to a full lifetime of retreat and seclusion.

<https://sakyadechenling.com/teachers-jetsun-kushola-sakya-tibetan-buddhist-center-california.html>

Family lineage: Jetsunma Dagmo Kalden Kungi and Jetsunma Kunga Trinley Palter (2007 –)

This family tradition continues even today and can be expected to continue in the future:

Though H.E. Jetsun Kushok and H.H. Sakya Trizin had only sons, the Jetsunma lineage is continuing with H.H. Sakya Trizin's daughter-in-law, Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi (bDag mo skal Idan dun kyi b. 1978 in Kalimpong, India)) who is married to his eldest son, Khondung Ratnavajra ('Khon gdung Ratnavajra, born on November 19, 1974 in Dehra Dun, India).



128 Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi

Dagmo Kalden has already expressed her support for veganism, in a [Facebook post here](#), she said:

“ I think as parents we are obliged to let children make certain choices. What they want to wear, what they want to play with and also, whether they want to eat meat or not. I really want to encourage all parents NOT to give their children meat before they (the children) are able to understand, think for themselves and vocalize their wishes. Once children understand the source of the meat, I honestly feel that no child will want to eat another sentient being. Give them that choice, parents: it might make a world of difference”.



129 Jetsunma Dagmo Kalden Kungi with her children

Their first child is Jetsunma Kunga Trinley Palter (Kun dga' 'phrin las dpal ster, born on January 2, 2007 in Rajpur, India). She is being home-schooled and trained in spiritual endeavors. The family has great hope that she will uphold the Jetsunma tradition and follow in her great aunt's and great and great aunt's footsteps." (Benard 2015).

If one is judging by Dharma activities alone, other than lots of social media posts about relatively worldly things, like family life or events, it has yet to be seen if the Sakya Jetsunmas are emanations of Vajrayogini or have any genuinely extraordinary activities or realisations. Or like their male relatives, are they relying on title, name, history, power and privilege for their following and popularity? I will leave the readers to investigate and answer that question.

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[IN PRAISE OF THE HEADLESS, FEMME FATALE 'SCARLET WOMAN': Male monastic privilege and appropriation, denigration of women, female lineages, 'feminist' male consorts, and Vajrayoginī with severed-head and reversed Yum-yab union](#)

Endnotes

[i] *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 34, Décembre 2015, pp. 1-20.

[ii] HH Sakya Trizin says of the book:

"This invaluable work on the Sakya Jetsunmas offers an intimate look into the lives of four exceptional yoginis who were outstanding by virtue of both their birth and their spiritual accomplishments.

Biographies of realised female spiritual adepts are few and far between, and until now this has also been true of the Jetsunmas of the Khon family. And so, it is a huge boon that the pages of this wonderful book are so abundantly filled with rich details of the Jetsunmas' extraordinary lives. The book is filled with wonder and is bound to inspire and instruct not only female practitioners but anyone who is walking the spiritual path in earnest. I pray that it may lead uncountable beings to enlightenment."

[iii] Such biographies will sometimes mention a sister or daughter but not much more than that. The most extensive, available historical sources for the Sakya Jetsunmas are the Sa skya gdung rabs or Genealogies of the Sakya Families. Some of the more famous are the Extensive Genealogy or the gdung rabs chen mo which was written by Jamgon Amezhab ('Jam mgon A mes zhabs, 1597-1659), the Twenty-seventh Sakya Trizin in the seventeenth century and its continuation by Kunga Lodro or Kunlo (Kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783), the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin. Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen, 1871-1936), Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin, wrote the final update. Within these genealogies, one is still lucky to find the names of the Jetsunmas mentioned at least, or who their parents and possibly their teachers were. Occasionally, if a brother or uncle was an important Sakya Trizin or significant scholar, one will find an episode when they visited Lhasa together or attended a teaching given by an important lama.

[iv] One of the most famous examples of this was Margaret Thatcher, the first female British prime minister. As Hadley Freeman writes about Thatcher in 'Margaret Thatcher was no Feminist' (The Guardian, 2013): "Women aren't always good for other women because the gender of a person matters a lot less than that person's actual beliefs." See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/09/margaret-thatcher-no-feminist>

[v] "There were certainly many great female practitioners in Tibet," British nun and abbess Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo writes in her book "Reflections on a Mountain Lake." "But because they lacked a background of philosophical training, they could not aspire to write books, gather disciples, go on Dharma tours, and give talks. When we read the histories, we will notice that nuns are distinguished by their absence. But this doesn't mean they weren't there." To this day nunneries in Asia usually lack the resources the monasteries get, and full ordination for women is currently not a possibility in the Tibetan tradition, though many monks and nuns, including the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje are working towards a change.

[vi] Benard also mentions another important source on the Jetsunmas: "In addition to the genealogies, an important textual source for information on Jetsunmas was written by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen, who from the time he was eight years old, kept diaries, which were compiled into two large volumes (each is over eight hundred pages) and are known as the *Autobiographical Reminiscences of Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen* (rDo rje 'chang Drag shul phrin las rin chen gyi rtogs brjod). These provide contemporary information especially about two exemplary Jetsunmas.

The first one is Jetsunma Tamdrin Wangmo Kelzang Chokyi Nyima (rJe btsun ma grub pa'i rTa mgrin dbang mo skal bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 1836-1896) who is one of his principal teachers and his great paternal aunt. The second Jetsunma is his younger sister, Jetsunma Pema Trinley (rJe btsun ma Pad ma phrin las, 1874-c.1950) who is considered a major lineage holder for the important Vajrayogini teachings and the paternal great aunt of H.E. Jetsun Kushok."

[vii] Bernard states that she had numerous interviews with Jetsunma Kushog at her home in Richmond, BC, Canada (April 2005, July 2007, August 2009, June 2013 and August 2013).

Chapter Twenty-Two: Utpalavarnā

The power of a woman's devotion: Utpalavarnā, the first to greet Buddha's Descent from the Heavens (Lhabab Duchen)

[7th November 2020](#) [Dākinī Translations](#)



130 Utpalavarnā, the first person to greet the Buddha on his Descent from the Heavens

“With chariot and horses, four I came,
Made visible by supranormal power,
And worshipped, wonder working, at his feet,
The wondrous Buddha, Sovereign of the World.”
-Utpalavarnā, the first person to greet the Buddha on his Descent from the Heavens

Today is known as *Descent from the Divine Realm* (Lha-Bab Duchen) and is celebrated on the 22nd day in the ninth lunar month of the Asian calendars. It marks the anniversary of Buddha Shakyamuni descending down from *The Heaven of Thirty-Three* (Trayastrimsa), after giving teachings there to benefit the gods in the desire realms, and to repay the kindness of his mother by liberating her from Samsara (who had passed away only one week after giving birth to Buddha). This is considered to be one of the great deeds of the Buddha and it is part of the Buddhist tradition to engage in virtuous activities and prayer on this day.

At the age of 41, after having attained enlightenment, Shakyamuni Buddha became aware that his dear mother was stuck in *The Heaven of Thirty-Three*, where numerous gods resided, but since it was a realm where desire existed, liberation from samsara was not possible for mortals reborn there. After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he went to *The Heaven of Thirty-Three* to teach the Abhidharma to his mother and other celestial beings. After three months of teaching there, the Buddha decided to return to his disciples and lay followers who had become worried at his long absence. Even though they could see that he was well in the divine realms, they wanted him back. Maudgalyayana, one of his closest disciples, pleaded with him to return. The Buddha was reluctant to do so, and a long debate ensued between the two, at the end of which, he was persuaded to return to Earth. His descent from the heaven takes place at Sankashya in modern Uttar Pradesh, India.



131 Photo of Stupa at Sankashya, India the place of Buddha's descent, commissioned by HE Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche

Buddha also then performed the miracle of lifting the veil on all the worlds, as he returned on a staircase, not *to* but *from* heaven, all the worlds were, for that brief period of time, able to see each other. The veil between the worlds and all the different realms of being was lifted, and all the vast audience of those who came to welcome him back, were able to see other realms of existence, and thus know that they truly existed. Light is supposed to have come into even the very darkest realms, where by definition, no light shines.

UTPALAVARNA: The Nun who was first to greet Buddha on his Descent from the Heavens

Although the story of Buddha's actions for his mother is the most well-known aspect of this important Buddhist commemoration, less is known (or spoken) about another woman, [*Utpalavarṇā* \(one of the chief female disciples of Buddha\)](#) on that day, whose extraordinary devotion for the Buddha enabled her to be transformed into a Universal Monarch so that she could be first to greet him when he returned to earth. According to some accounts, crowds of people gathered eagerly awaiting the Buddha's return. Everyone wanted to greet the great teacher, yet the nun Utpalavarna (whose name literally means 'colour of the blue lotus') vows that she would be the first person to greet the Buddha when he descends. For a simple nun it would have been difficult to get a prime spot to meet Buddha against the powerful kings and princes with their elaborate entourages.



132 Utpalavarṇā greeting Buddha on his descent from the divine realms after teaching his mother there

However, as a result of Utpala's devotion, she is transformed into a universal monarch, accompanied by seven treasures and the most elaborate troops, and thus she is able to secure the best position to fulfill her vow. She is the first to greet the Buddha, upon which she reverts back to her original appearance. Recognizing Utpala's devotion, the Buddha predicts her future enlightenment .

The earliest known record of Utpala comes from a 3rd century BCE stone engraving, portraying her at the Buddha's descent. Utpala is said to be mentioned in several early Buddhist texts of the Pali Canon, including the *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, and the *Therīgāthā* and *Apadāna* collections within the *Khuddaka Nikaya* as well as some early Mahayana texts such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eighty-thousand Lines* and *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

row. In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* of Nāgārjuna, it is written that Utpalavarṇā, in order to conceal her disreputable sex, transformed herself to a noble king, a cakravartin with his seven treasures and his thousand sons. Seeing her arrive, people got up from their seats and let him proceed. This fictive king came closer to the Buddha and took his original form becoming a nun (bhikṣuṇī) again. Thus Utpalavarṇā was the very first to worship the Buddha¹⁶. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, or *Legend of King Aśoka*, we read that Pindola Bharadvāja¹⁷ has witnessed Utpalavarṇā's magical creation of a cakravartin¹⁸. In the Tibetan Buddhist canons (*Bkaḥ-hgyur* and *Bstan-hgyur*) it is also said that Utpalavarṇā having seen the Blessed One descended from Trayastrimśa, took the appearance of an emperor and came to honour him. King Udayana, who was also there, recognised her by the sweet odour that her body emitted¹⁹. The Chinese Buddhist monk, Fa Xian who travelled to Nepal, India and Sri Lanka to acquire Buddhist scriptures between 399 CE and 412 CE, reports that on the day when the Buddha descended from the Tāvātimsa, the great kings of the eight kingdoms, the ministers and people, not having seen the Enlighten One for a long time, assembled to greet him. At this time, according to Fa Xian, Utpalavarṇā thought: "Today the kings of the countries and ministers and people are going to worship and meet the Buddha. I am but a woman; how can I get to see him first?" Contrary to other texts, Fa Xian says it was the Buddha forthwith by his miraculous power transformed her into a holy Cakravartin king, and as such she was the first to worship him²⁰. In the *Therīgāthā*, Utpalavarṇā says how she concealed herself by transforming herself into a cakravartin:

With chariot and horses four I came,
Made visible by supernormal power,
And worshipped, wonder working, at his feet,
The wondrous Buddha, Sovran of the world²¹.

It goes without saying that it is this story which is vividly shown on this unique sculpture from Zar Dheri. If the missing middle panel surfaces one day, which is not absolutely impossible, we will be fortunate to see not only the Buddha, Brahmā and Indra descending from the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, but also Utpalavarṇā transforming herself into her original form as a bhikṣuṇī. This deduction is made in the light of some reliefs already known, unfortunately misunderstood by many art historians. Before coming to this point, let us examine the iconography of the rest of the relief.

133 Excerpt from https://www.academia.edu/14260827/In_Search_of_Utpalavarna_in_Gandharan_Buddhist_Art

For this short post, I have compiled a catalogue of texts on Utpala contained in Volume II of a publication of outstanding women in India and Tibet, published in Tibet in 2013 ('phags bod kyi skyes

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chen ma dag gi rnam par thar ba pad+ma dkar po'i phreng ba/ TBRC W1KG16649). I hope to write more about these texts in the near future.



134 Utpalavarna and the Buddha front and center.

This fantastic fable of love, compassion and devotion by, and for women is something to rejoice in and to remember that Buddha Shakyamuni was well ahead of his time when it came to treating women with equality, respect and compassion. Similar, to when the Buddha [complied with his aunt's demand that nuns be ordained](#), the Buddha's treatment of Utpala can be seen as yet more evidence of his view of women as capable of full awakening.

May all beings attain the fully awakened state and have the devotion of Utpala!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 7th November 2020.

CATALOGUE OF TEXTS ON UTPALAVARNA IN 'THE WHITE-LOTUS GARLAND OF LIFE STORIES OF GREAT WOMEN IN INDIA AND TIBET'

These titles on Utpala can be found in Volume II of 'phags bod kyi skyes chen ma dag gi rnam par thar ba pad+ma dkar po'i phreng ba/ TBRC W1KG16649:

- *The way in which the woman, Utpalavarna, went to the extreme of reversing lust for men and became a nun* (bu mo ut+pa la'i mdog can mo 'gal bu la chags pa dang mthar rab tu byung nas rdzu 'phrul can rnams kyi mchog tu gyur tshul/ pp. 61 – 83).
- *The way in which the magical manifestation of the teacher conquered the puffed-up pride of woman Utpala and established her on the path of liberation* (ston pas rdzu 'phrul gyis bu mo ut+pa la'i lang tsho'i khengs pa bcom nas thar lam la bkod tshul/ pp. 84-91, pp. 70-77).
- *Gelongma Utpalavarna's autobiography about her own suffering at home, resulted in five hundred women* (dge slong ma ut+pa la'i mdog can gyis rang gi lo rgyus dang sbyar nas khyim na gnas pa'i sdug bsngal rgya cher bstan te bud med lnga brgya 'bras bu la bkod tshul/ pp.78-91).
- *The story of how Gelongma Utpalavarna magically emanated a retinue* (dge slong ma ut+pa la'i kha dog ma 'khor bsgyur du sprul nas rdzu 'phrul bstan pa'i lo rgyus/ pp.92-94).
- *The story of Gelongma Utpalavarna offering some cloth after neutralising a band of robbers who generated faith towards her* (dge slong ma ut+pa la'i mdog can la chom rkun pa dag dad pa skyes nas bsod snyoms dang ras yug phul ba'i lo rgyus/ pp.95-100).

Further Reading

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Yeshe Tsogyel

“SEEING THE FACE OF GURU PADMA”: SONGS OF DETERMINATION AND DEVOTION BY YESHE TSOGYEL: New translation (with Tibetan and phonetics) of songs by Yeshe Tsogyel

25th November 2024 [Dākinī Translations](#)

“The method for attaining Buddhahood in one lifetime is to definitely generate great bliss. In a place of mindfulness, recite: *Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Pema Siddhi Hum*. It is said to be liberation upon sight and touch.” —Guru Padmasambhava to Yeshe Tsogyel

ཆེ་གཅིག་ཏུ་སངས་རྒྱལ་པའི་ཐབས་ལ་བདེ་ཆེན་ངེས་པར་སྐྱེ་བ་གཅིག་ཡིན་ནས་དྲན་པའི་གནས་སུ་མྱ་ལྷན་བྱེད་ཀྱི་རུ་པར་སྐྱེ་བའི་རྒྱུ་ཞེས་བརྒྱུས་ནས་མཐོང་གོལ་རེག་གོལ་ཡིན་གསུངས་པ་

“Other women merely speak of longing for Dharma

She has faith from the core of the heart!

Other women have faith in ornaments and decoration,

She has longing for the essence of the three times, absent of good and bad.

My reasoning is inferior but determination is huge!” —Yeshe Tsogyel’s song

གཞན་གྱི་བྱང་མེད་ལ་ཡི་ཆོས་མས་པུ་ཁོ་མོ་སྤྲོད་གི་དབྱིས་ནས་དང་པ་ཡོད་པུ་གཞན་གྱི་བྱང་མེད་མཆོར་ལ་དང་པ་ཡོད་པུ་ཁོ་མོ་དུས་གསུམ་ངོ་བོ་བཟང་ངན་མེད་ལ་མས་པུ་རིག་པ་དམན་ནས་སྤྲོད་ཅུས་ཆེ་

Introduction

Today for Dākinī day, I am delighted to share a new translation, and first time ever published with the original Tibetan and phonetics, of four of Yeshe Tsogyel’s songs (Tibetan: Gur) that are contained in her extended life story composed by Jigme Lingpa[i]. My translations of these songs are quite different in some respects from that of Dr. Jue Liang, who does not seem to strictly follow the Tibetan original in terms of sentence order and repetition of the repeating words, and she even adds some words in for meaning/flow (although perhaps that is due to her using the handwritten manuscript and/or editors) [ii]. It is always good to have more than one translation (and analysis of a text/song) so please feel free to compare them! The translation with this introduction is also available as a pdf free download: [Songs of Yeshe Tsogyel Translation Tibetan and English Adele Tomlin 2024](#), or on [academia.edu here](#).

The songs were translated spontaneously (completed and compiled within twenty-four hours) [iii] and are themselves are a joy to read in the original Tibetan, with a meter 8 or 9 syllables per line. One can really feel Tsogyel’s frustration at her ‘meaningless’ family and their lack of purpose, not being able to get Dharma teachings and practice, and how she has so much genuine faith and devotion, whereas other women are only interested in looking ‘glamorous, and worldly and householder things, such as décor, clothing, jewelry, adornments, speaking about devotion only rather than have it authentically within. Tsogyel’s desire to not speak any dishonesty and only truth! A woman I can really admire and relate to!

Also, interestingly, Tsogyel refers to herself (*kho-mo*: ཁོ་མོ་) in the third person, ‘she/her’ which I see as a sign of her growing detachment from her worldly identity/self, to one of observing! Tsogyel uses the Tibetan word *nying-ru* (སྙིང་རུ་) several times in her songs too, which literally means ‘heart-bone’, and can be translated variously in English as perseverance, resilience, determination, courage, back-bone etc. It is one of those Tibetan terms whose sound gives its meaning, English terms cannot really get it across other than sheer ‘heart-bone’ courage! Tsogyel also uses the term *zhelo de* (ཞེ་ལོ་དེ་) which can be translated as at ease, or carefree.

On a personal note, as I was finishing this late last night, as it drew towards the midnight hour, while playing the Yeshe Tsogyel mantra, I felt an unmistakable energy and voice descending into my

anonymous hotel room. A vision of a wide-eyed, golden skinned, Guru Paldmasambhava's energy and face, completely covered my mind. Big, bright aware eyes, handsome, smiling, brilliant and kind. Like being in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha I felt great bliss, and then closed my eyes to see more clearly. I asked "Is it you, Guru Padmasambhava?" to which he replied "Yes it is." and smiled. I replied smiling with joy and awe saying: "I never thought I would see you." To which he smiled, an endless smile and I started uncontrollably weeping with joy and awe. He held me in his "embrace" in union with him for a short time. Then the face and energy just vanished. Like Tsogyel, I wanted to hold onto 'him' but I was left with a huge smile and longing in my face and heart. And an unforgettable experience. The article/translation had been truly blessed by the Guru! For other research and translations on Yeshe Tsogyel, see [here](#).

I have translated songs of other female masters, such as Milarepa's students [Saley O](#) and [Rechungma's Songs of Fifteen Realisations](#) here. As I did recently with the [16th Karmapa's Ala-tha-la song](#) (gur). As with liberation-stories (Nam-thar) are not similar to worldly biographies of ordinary beings, the same is true of poetic songs (gur). They are sang by people with great devotion, realisations and merit. They are not like ordinary worldly songs sung by pop stars/celebrities/ordinary people.

As all poets/musicians know the melody, rhythm and tone of a song comes from the words themselves, which is why it can be so difficult to render a poem or song well in another language. A lot is 'lost in translation' as they say! As I am a poet myself, I am often surprised at how English translations of songs, are so often done without following the repetition or even tone of the song, and often never published with the original Tibetan. In my renderings of the songs, I have tried as far as possible to follow the repetition, and rhythm of the original Tibetan. However, one thing is also for sure, AI systems cannot translate such songs or poems well at all, the metaphors, idioms etc. are often lost on a robotic computer, and even on human beings sometimes!^[iv]

I also composed and sang Song One, which can be [heard here with a video with Tibetan script and English subtitles](#).

Music? [Yeshe Tsogyel mantra](#) Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Jnanasagara Bam Ha Ri Ni Sa Siddhi Hum, [He Was Beautiful](#) by Cleo Laine, and [Seven Line Prayer of Guru Padmasambhava](#) by Karma Tseten, [Don't Stop Me Now](#) by Queen for that huge Padmasambhava and Tsogyel energy.

Written, compiled and translated by Adele Tomlin, 25th November 2024. Copyright.

SONGS OF YESHE TSOGYEL



135 Yeshe Tsogyel, one of Guru Padmasabhava's great disciples and main consorts.

SONG ONE: Tsogyel bemoans her unimportant birthplace and meaningless family lineage

In the first song, typical of many women fed up with ordinary, worldly life, a young Tsogyel bemoans her situation, place of birth and meaningless Kharchu lineage.

ཡེ་ཤེས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་གྱིས་དགོངས་ནས་ལྷོ་ཆོས་ལ་མོས་པས་ཆོས་གཅིག་བྱེད་བསམ་ན་ཉིན་དུས་བསམ་པ་ཟུབ་དུས་བསམ་ནས་ཆོས་བྱེད་བསམ་ནས་མགུར་འདི་ལྟར་བཞེངས་སོ།

Yeshe Tsogyel thought: “As I only think about practicing only Dharma and long for Dharma, I will practice Dharma day and night.” She sang this song:

ཨ་མ་དྲེ་ སྒྲིང་ཉམས་ཡུལ་ཉམས་སྐྱེས་པ་མི་ཐིང་དོ།

é maho/ ling nyam yül nyam kyé pa mi si do/

ཅང་སྟོང་མཁར་རྒྱལ་ནས་སྐྱེས་ཐིང་དེ།

tsang tö khar chu yül né kyé si pa/

མཁར་རྒྱལ་བྱེད་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་ངེ།

khar chu bümé tsogyel nga/

འདི་ལ་ཐོས་པས་དུས་མེད་གངས་བཅས་དེ།

di la tö pé dü mé gang ché pa/

ཆོས་ཤིག་བྱེད་བསམ་གང་དུ་ཆོས་སྐལ་ཡོད་པེ།

chö shik jé sam gang du chö kel yö/

མི་མོ་ཁོ་མོ་བདག་གིས་ཆོས་ཤིག་བྱས་པེ།

mi mo kho mo dak gi chö shik jé/

དག་ལ་མོས་པ་དམ་པའི་ཆོས་བསམ་པེ།

gé la mö pa dam pé chö sam pa/

རིགས་ནི་མ་མཆིས་མཁར་རྒྱལ་པའི་རིགས་པེ།

rik ni ma chi khar chu gyü pé rik/

ལུས་མ་མཆིས་པའི་བྱ་མོ་བདག་གི་ལས་པེ།

lū ma chi pé bu mo dak gi l

སྐྱེས་པའི་ལུས་ཡིན་བདག་གིས་ཆོས་བྱེད་དམ་པེ།

kyé pé lü yin dak gi chö jé dam

Emaho! It is not possible to experience birth in a realm of experience.

In the land of Upper Tsang, Kharchu, it is possible to be born.

I, the girl, Tsogyel of Kharchu,

Here, having heard in the place of endless snow,

Wishing to practice only Dharma, where is the opportunity

For I, a female girl, to practice?

**Longing for virtue, I think of the sacred Dharma.
There is no lineage, but the lineage of Kharchu
There is no body, but the body of I, the girl
Being born with this body, can I practice Dharma?**

རང་དབང་འཛིན་པའི་བར་སྐབས་དུས་གནས་པུ།

rang wang tsowé bar kap dü né pa/

ལྷ་བའི་མཐུན་འཇུག་གྲགས་པའི་གནས་པ་མེད་པུ།

tawé tün juk drok pö né pa mé/

བུ་མོ་བདག་གིས་དམ་ཚིག་བྱེད་བསམ་ནས་པུ།

bu mo dak gi dam chö jé sam né/

སྐབས་ལ་བབ་པ་ཡོད་ན་བདག་གིས་བྱེད་པུ།

kap la bap pa yö na dak gi jé/

Abiding in a time when one has to live independently,

There is no abode of friends with similar views.

I, this girl, think of practicing sacred Dharma.

If the opportunity descends, I will practice.

མཁར་རྒྱུད་འདི་ལ་སྤྱེས་པའི་བཟང་ངམ་ཡོད་པུ།

khar gyü di la kyé pé zang ngam yö/

ཕ་ནི་རྒྱལ་སྐས་མཁར་ཚུབ་མཆིས་པ་མེད་པུ།

pa ni gyel sé khar pup chi pa mé/

མ་ནི་རྩང་བ་ཟས་སྤྱོད་དོན་མ་མཆིས་པུ།

ma ni tsang za bé drön dön ma chi/

བུ་བུ་མཚོ་སྤྱོད་གནས་པ་འཛིན་པུ།

nu bu tso drön né pa chi mé pa/

མིང་པོ་དཔལ་གྱི་དབང་ཕྱུག་དོན་མ་མཆིས་པུ།

ming po pel gyi wang chuk dön ma chi/

In this Khar [castle] lineage, is there any excellence that has been born?

The father has not built any castles (Khar) for his offspring.

The mother is Tsangza Bedron, who has no purpose.

The sister, Tsodron remains immortal,

The brother, Pelgi Wangchug is without purpose.

མཆིས་པའི་སྐབས་ཀྱི་དོན་གོ་ལས་སྐས་པུ།

chi pé kap kyi dön go lé ngé pa/

བུ་མོ་བདག་གིས་ལུས་རྒྱེད་རབ་དགའ་བུ།

bu mo dak gi lü nyé rap gawa/

ཆོས་གཅིག་མི་བྱེད་བདག་གི་ཕུང་ཁམས་འདི་པུ།

chö chik mi jé dak gi pung kham di/

མི་ལུས་སྤྱོད་ཟད་བྱེད་པའི་དོན་རྩལ་བུ།

mi lü tong zé jé pé dön chungwa/

ཆོས་གཅིག་བྱས་པའི་ཡོན་ཏན་བསང་མི་རུས་པུ།

chö chik jé pé yön ten drang mi nü

The most urgent meaning of this situation is

I, this girl am delighted to have found this excellent body!

If I do not practice Dharma only, my aggregates

This human life will become empty and exhausted and with little meaning. The virtuous qualities of practicing only Dharma are uncountable!"

SONG TWO: Tsogyel's dream of Padmasambhava and his instructions

The second song in this translation happens after Tsogyel has a dream with Guru Padmasambhava, and sings a song of longing to see his ‘face’, if she is to be his spiritual companion. Here Tsogyel already has the aspiration to be his consort.

Padmasambhava then appears to her in the sky, showing ‘his face’ and asks her why she is calling out to him. Tsogyel then begs him to teach her the Dharma and give her a transmission, which she is hungry/starved for.

ལཱ་མོ་རྒྱལ་མོ་མི་ལམ་མྱིས་པ་ཉི་མ་དྲུང་ཤར་གླར་ཆོག་མེད་པོ་རྒྱུས་པ་གཅིག་མྱིས་ཀྱི་དེ་ནང་པར་ཡི་ཤེས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་ཁལ་ནས་མེད་མི་ལམ་གཅིག་ མྱིས་ནས་དུས་བབ་དང་པའི་གླེང་ཅི་
ཡིན་ནམ་དུས་ཤིག་མེད་མི་ལམ་དང་མྱིས་པ་དག་པའི་ལས་ཅི་ཡང་མེད་ཟེར་། ཁོ་མོ་ཉི་མ་བསྐྱོན་ནས་བསྐྱོན་ནས་ཆོས་གཅིག་ཤེད་པས་མེད་པའི་མཁའ་ལྷ་མ་ནམ་མཁའ་ནས་པས་ནས་པའི་གསལ་ནས་ཁོ་

At night, the girl (Tsogyel) had a dream about the sun rising shaped like a conch shell and many stars spread out. In the morning, Yeshe Tsogyel declared: “Wow, last night’s dream was so auspicious!” “There will be no pure karma from your woman’s dream”. She (Tsogyel) meditated day and night, gazing into space towards the region of Khar, she said:

ཐཱ་འབས་དྲིན་ཅན་གླ་མ་མེད་པ་ནས།
nga rab drin chen la ma mé pa né/
ད་ཡང་ཁོ་མས་བསྐྱེམ་པས་བསྐྱེད་བྱུང་།
da yang kho mö gom pé pema jung
ལུཔ་དུས་མྱིས་བའི་དོན་གོ་གནས་ཀྱི་ཆེ།
nup dü mi bé dön go né kyi tsé/
ཐུགས་རྒྱུ་བཟུང་བའི་སྐབས་ནས་ཨ་མའི་སའུ།
tuk jé zungwé kap né é chi sam/
ཆོས་གསུངས་བསྐྱེད་མཁུན་དུ་ཡོད་ན་དགའ།
chö sung pemé dün du yö na ga/
འི་སྐད་བྱུང་ཐག་པ་དུའི་གསུང་སྐད་དུ་ནུ།
pi wang gyün tag pemé sung ké dren/

**“In previous lives there was no kind lama.
Now, she meditates and there is Padmasambhava (Pema Jung)!
When the meaning of the dream last night remains,
I wonder when I will be held with compassion?
How delightful to be in front of the Dharma teacher, Padma!
Remembering Padma’s voice of the teachings, the lute continues on.**

མཚན་མཚོག་ལྟན་པའི་པདྨ་འབྱུང་གནས་དྲན་ཏེ།
tsen chok denpé pema jungné dren/
གང་ལ་དྲན་ནས་པདྨ་མེད་ཐབས་མེད་ཏེ།
gang la dren ne pema me thab me/
ཆོས་གཅིག་ཁྱེད་ན་ཁོ་མོ་ཞོ་བདེ་ཏེ།
chö chik jé na kho mo zhé lo dé/
འདི་ལ་ཐོས་ནས་དྲན་པའི་དུས་མཆིས་པ་ལྟེ།

di la tö né dren pé dü chi pa/

དཀྱིལ་མཐོང་བའི་ཞལ་གཅིག་ཨ་གཟིགས་སམུ་

pema tongwé zhel chik é zik sam/

མ་འོངས་གྲགས་བྱེད་ཡིན་ན་པརྒྱའི་ཞལ་གཟིགས་ཤོག་ུ་

ma ong drok jé yin na pemé zhel zik shog/

Remembering the Lotus-born One (Pema-jung), who bears the supreme marks,

Whenever remembering, without Padma, there is no method.

If one does a single practice, her mind is carefree.

Having heard this, comes a time of recollection.

I wonder if Padma sees a single face?

If I will be his future companion, may I see Padma's face!"

ནམ་མཁའ་ནས་སྤྱིན་འཇའ་གཅིག་ཡོང་ནས་ཁོ་མོ་ཐོག་ནས་ཐོན་པའི་དུས་ུ་ ལྷ་རྒྱན་ནམ་མཁའ་ནས་ཞལ་གཟིགས་ནས་ུ་

རིགས་ཀྱི་བྱ་མ་བདག་ལ་འབོད་པ་ཅི་ཞིག་ཡིན་ུ་ ལྷོད་ལ་ཅི་བྱུང་ནས་ཐབས་གང་ལ་ཡང་མ་རག་པ་ུ་ ང་ལ་འབོད་ནས་ཅི་བྱེད་དམ་ཞེས་གསུངས་པ་ུ་ མཚོ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་ཞལ་ནས་ུ་ བདག་གིས་ཚས་གཅིག་
རབ་བྱེད་བསམ་ནས་ུ་ ལྷོད་ནས་འབོད་པ་ུ་ ང་ལ་རིག་ཅིང་དག་འདོད་པ་ུ་

**Having said this, a rainbow appeared in the sky and landed above her head. She saw the face of
Ogyenpa (Padmasambhava) in the sky/space, who said: "Daughter of the lineage, why did you call
for me? What has happened to you that you have not got any method? Why did you call out for
me?" Tsogyel replied: "having thought of thoroughly practicing one single Dharma, I called out to
you."**

ང་ལ་རིག་ཅིང་དག་འདོད་པ་ུ་

nga la rek ching gé dö pa/

དཔའ་བོ་གཡུལ་ལས་རྒྱལ་གྱུར་པའི་ུ་

pawo yül lé gyel gyur pé/

ཚས་ལ་མས་པས་ཁོ་མོ་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་ུ་

chö la mö pé kho mo zhé lo dé/

ལྷོད་མཐོང་ཚམ་ནས་བདག་ནི་རབ་གྲོལ་བ་ུ་

khyé thong tsam né dak ni rap drölwa/

བྱ་མོ་བདག་གིས་རྒྱགས་པས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་ུ་

bu mo dak gi tok pé zhé lo dé/

ཚས་གསུངས་བྱ་མོ་བདག་གིས་རབ་རྒྱགས་ནས་ུ་

chö sung bu mo dak gi rap tok né/

Touching me, I desire virtue.

Like a victorious hero in battle.

Longing for Dharma, her mind is carefree.

Merely seeing you, I am liberated.

I, the woman due to realization, mind is carefree.

Teaching Dharma, to I, the woman due to excellent realization,

ལྷོད་ལ་འབོད་པ་བདག་གིས་བཀའ་མ་བདེ་ུ་

khyé la bö pa dak gi ka ma dé/

རིགས་ཤིང་དབུལ་བའི་བདག་ལ་བཀའ་རྩལ་པ་ུ་

rik shing ülwe dak la ka tsel pa/

ཐོས་ནས་དགའ་བའི་བདག་གིས་རིགས་རྟོགས་དུ།
thö né gawé dak gi rik tok pa/

**Having called out to you, if I do not obey your command, it will not be well.
Please grant your teachings to me, the impoverished lineage.
Having heard it, I will joyfully realise what is correct.”**

པར་དེ་ཞལ་ནས་མཛན་སྤྱོད་ལས་ཀྱིས་བཀའ་མི་མཐུན་པའི་ཚོས་མོས་པའི་བྱ་གར་སྐད་བསྐྱར་བའི་ཐབས་ཡིན་ནམ་ཅི་བྱེད་དུ་ཁོ་མོས་བྱས་དུ་ཆོ་གཅིག་ཏུ་སངས་བྱུས་ཐབས་གཅིག་གནང་བར་བྱུ།
ཁྱ་ཀྱན་གྱི་ཞལ་ནས་ཆོ་གཅིག་ཏུ་སངས་བྱུས་པའི་ཐབས་བདེ་ཆེན་ངེས་པར་སྐྱེ་བ་གཅིག་ཡིན་ནམ་དུ་ན་པའི་གནས་སུ་མྱོ་མྱུ་བཟོ་གྲ་ཅ་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་ཞལ་བསྐྱས་ནས་མཐོང་གྲོལ་རྟོག་གྲོལ་
ཡིན་གསུངས་པུ།

“Is this a method for translating Indian texts into languages that do not agree with the Buddha’s teachings? What is being done?” Tsogyel asked. Ogyen replied: “The method for attaining Buddhahood in one lifetime is to definitely generate great bliss. In a place of mindfulness, recite: ཨོཾ་ཨུཾ་ཧུཾ་བཤྭ་ཀུརཾ་པཤྭ་སིདྭཾ་ཧུཾ་ Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Pema Siddhi Hum. It is said to be liberation upon sight and touch.”

SONG THREE: A carefree, easy mind

Guru Padmasambhava then disappears from the space, at which Tsogyel sings another song, tormented by her situation, and bemoaning other women who have no interest in Dharma or merit, and why

ཁྱ་ཀྱན་ནམ་མཁའ་ནས་ཡལ་ནས་མཛོ་བྱལ་ཆོས་མང་པོ་ཉན་པར་མ་ཡོང་བ་བསམ་ནས་མཁུར་འདི་ཉར་དུ་བཞེངས་དུ།

After Uddīyāna (Padmasambhava), vanished into space, Tsogyel thinking that many Dharma teachings had not come for her to listen to, this song rose up:

ཀྱེ་མ་མི་རྟག་འཁོར་བའི་ཆོས་པུ།
kyema mitag khorwai chö/
ལས་དབང་ཆེ་བས་ཆོས་མ་བཅས་པུ།
lé wangchewé chö ma ché/
སྤང་བ་རྩུན་པས་ཆོས་མ་ལྟུང་པུ།
nangwa dzünpé chö ma lob/
ཆོས་ལ་མོས་པས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་པུ།
chöla möpé zhélo dé/
ཁོ་མ་སྤང་བ་ཆེ་བས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་པུ།
khomo nyingrû chewé zhélo dé/
བཙོན་འགྲུས་ཆེ་བས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་པུ།
tsöndrû chewé zhélo dé/
བཟོད་དཀའ་ཐར་པས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་པུ།
zöka tharpé zhélo dé/
ནན་ཏན་ཆེ་བས་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་པུ།
nenten chewé zhélo dé/

Alas! impermanent, samsaric phenomena!

Due to the power of massive karma, Dharma was not established.

Due to false appearances, Dharma was not studied.

Due to devotion to the Dharma, mind is carefree.

Due to great courage, mind is carefree.

Due to great diligence, mind is carefree.

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**Due to liberation from the unbearable, mind is carefree.
Due to great perseverance, mind is carefree.**

གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་ཁྱིམ་ཐབ་འདྲོད་ཅུ་
zhenkyi bümé khyimthab dö/
ཁོ་མོས་ཁྱིམ་ཐབ་ལྷངས་འདྲོད་ཞེ་སྒོ་བདེ་ཅུ་
khomö khyimthab pangdö zhélo dé/
གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་འཕྱོར་འདྲོད་བསུ་
zhenkyi bümé chor dö pé/
ཁོ་མོས་སྒྲང་བ་རྩུན་ཆེན་རང་ཐག་ཆོད་ཅུ་
khomö nangwa dzünchen rang thakchö/

**Other women desire households,
She who desires to give up household life, mind is carefree.
Other women desire to be glamorous,
She who decisively realizes appearances to be massively fake.**

གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་ཐིག་ལ་མོས་ཅུ་
zhenkyi bümé dik la mö/
ཁོ་མོ་མཁར་ཟ་དགེ་ལ་དད་ཅུ་
khomo kharza géla dé/
གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་ཚུལ་འཆོལ་བ་ཅུ་
zhenkyi bümé tsul cholwa/
ཁོ་མོ་བདག་གིས་ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས་བསྟུངས་ཅུ་
khomo daki tsultrim sung/

**Other women are inclined towards negativity,
But she, Kharchen, has faith in virtue.
Other women are promiscuous,
But she, I have kept ethical discipline.**

དབུས་ཡུལ་ཚང་ཡུལ་བུ་མོ་རྣམས་ཅུ་
üyul tsangyul bumo nam/
སྒོ་མང་གཏམ་པའི་རྩུན་ཆོག་སྒྲིམ་ཅུ་
lomang tampai dzüntsik mé
ཁོ་མོ་ཆོ་གཅིག་ལུས་གཅིག་ཆོས་བྱེད་མོས་ཅུ་
khomo tséchik lüchik chöché mö/
ཞེས་གསུངས་ཅུ་

**The girls of central and Tsang regions
Speak many words of deception.
She longs for Dharma [practice] of one life, one body [\[v\]](#).**

SONG FOUR: Longing for truth and liberation

མཚོ་རྒྱལ་གྱིས་ངས་ཆོས་ལ་མོས་ནས་ཆོས་བྱེད་འགྲོ་བསམ་པ་འདི་གསུངས་སྟེ་

Tsogyel thought “I think only of Dharma, so I must go and practice Dharma!”

ཀྱེ་མ་ལས་དབང་ཆེ་བས་དམ་ཚིས་བསམ།

kyema lé wangchewé damchö sam/

བུ་མོ་སྒྲུང་བ་རྒྱན་པས་མ་ལོང་ནས།

bumo nangwa dzünpé malob né/

བསམ་སྟེ་མོས་པའི་དག་མི་སྟོབ།

samté möpai ngakmi lob/

Kyema! Due to the vast power of karma, I think about the sacred Dharma.

Due to false appearances and not studying,

I have not studied how to voice my longing

གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་ལ་ཡི་ཚས་མོས་པ།

zhenkyi bümé khayi chö möpa/

ཁོ་མོ་སྒྲུང་གི་དཀྱིལ་ནས་དད་པ་ཡོད།

khomo nyingki kyilné depa yö/

གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་མཚར་ལ་དད་པ་ཡོད།

zhenkyi bümé chorla depa yö/

ཁོ་མོ་དུས་གསུམ་ངོ་བོ་བཟང་དན་མེད་ལ་མོས།

khomo düsum ngowo zang ngen mé la mö /

རིག་པ་དམན་ནས་སྒྲིང་བས་ཆེ།

rigpa men namnying rü ché/

Other women speak of longing for Dharma

She, has faith from the core of the heart!

Other women have faith in ornaments and decor,

She has longing for the essence of the three times, absent of good and bad.

My reasoning is inferior but determination is huge!

གཞན་གྱི་བྱད་མེད་ཡར་གཏམ་མར་གཏམ་བྱེད།

zhenkyi bümé yartam martam ché/

པ་ཁུ་བྱེན་པའི་མེ་ལ་འགྲོ་མི་མེད།

phakhu jinpai mila dro mime/

ཚས་ལ་མི་མོས་སྒྲུང་བ་མཚར་ལ་མོས།

chöla mimö nangwa chorla mö/

ཁོ་མོ་ཆོ་གཅིག་ལ་གཏིང་མེད་པར་བསམ།

khomo tséchik khating mepar sam/

ཁོ་མོ་ལ་གཏིང་མེད་པའི་ཚས་འདོད་པ།

khomo khating mepai chö döpa/

སྒྲིང་བས་ཆེ་བས་ཚས་ལོང་པ།

nyingrü chewé chö lobpa/

མ་ལོང་ཁོ་མོ་ཁྲུལ་བ་མེད།

malob khomo trelwamé/

སྐྱབས་གནས་ལྷ་མེད་ཐུགས་རྗེས་མི་བཟང་དམ།

བདག་བསམ་གཞན་གྱིས་མི་སྟོད་དམ།

dag sam zhenkyi é-chö dam/

Other women chatter away back and forth

Given away to other people by father and uncles.

Without longing for Dharma and only longing for baubles and appearances, whereas

She, thinks only of speaking without hypocrisy.

**Due to huge determination, having studied Dharma,
Or not, she is without shame.
Will she be held with compassion by the unsurpassed refuge?
Do I have any other intentions?**

གཞན་གྱི་བྱ་མཁོ་བདེ་བ་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་
zhenkyi bümé tho dam ché/
ཁོ་མོ་མཐོ་དམན་མེད་པའི་སེམས་སྦྱོང་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་
khomo thomen mepai sem kyeché/
ཆོས་རྒྱལ་རང་སྐོས་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་སྒྲོལ་བ་ཀྱིས་
chönam rangdrol jingyi lob/
པ་བཀའ་རྒྱུད་སྒྲོལ་བའི་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་སྒྲོལ་བ་ཀྱིས་
Pha ka gyü lamai jingyi lob/
འགྲོ་བའི་དོན་དུ་རང་སྐོས་ཤོག་ཀྱིས་
drowai döntu rangdrol shog/
མ་ཁར་ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་པའི་ཐར་ལམ་ཟེན་པར་ཤོག་ཀྱིས་
kharchu gyüpai tharlam zinpar shog/
ཅེས་གསུངས་པ་ཀྱིས་

**Other women want high positions,
She practices bodhicitta, without high or low.
May the blessings of Dharma that self-liberates descend!
May the blessings of the Kagyu forefather lineage descend!
May the self-liberation for the benefit of beings descend!
May the liberation path of the Kharchu lineage be held!**

Translated and compiled by Adele Tomlin. Copyright Tomlin/Dākinī Publications. 2024. These songs and this intro can be downloaded as a pdf [here](#). They are intended for free use and recitation, but if used or copied in any format, please cite this source and website.

Endnotes

[i] The text is available on BDRC at “mKha’ ’gro ye shes mtsho rgyal gyi skyes rabs rnam thar rgyas pa.” *’Phags bod kyi skyes chen ma dag gi rnam par thar ba padma dkar po’i phreng ba*, Par gzhi dang po, vol. 6, Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 2013, pp. 17–191. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC)*, purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG16649_43376F.

For more on the dating of Lingpa’s liberation-story of Tsogyel, see Dr. Jue Liang’s (2020) article [Branching from the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the Extensive Life of Ye shes mtsho rgyal. About Padmasambhava: Historical Narratives and Later Transformations of Guru Rinpoche](#). According to Liang (2020): “the Extensive Life) is the longest rnam thar of Ye shes mtsho rgyal so far. Its colophon contains a prophecy of its place, time, and person of discovery, In this Life, Ye shes mtsho rgyal is not one of the queens of Khri Srong lde brtsan (a narrative element usually found in the later stratum of her literary tradition) rather, her karmic connection with Padmasambhava was predestined”.

[ii] I am grateful to the work of Dr. Jue Liang on Yeshe Tsogyel, whom I recently interviewed for a podcast about her work here. Liang’s recent published translation in [Yeshe Tsogyal Laments. Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song](#) (eds. Gayley and Townsend, University of Virginia Press, 2024) of some of these songs, alerted me to their presence in this Jigme Lingpa liberation story. However, as Liang has not included the original Tibetan, or phonetics, I have thus given my own interpretation and introduction to the songs, and translated them as close to the melody, rhythm and poetry of the Tibetan original, and transcribed the Tibetan with English phonetics.

[iii] I was informed by the two female editors of the new 2024 Tibetan poetry collection, Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, featuring Jue Liang’s translation of the songs that it took them six months workshopping the short songs with several translators! Unless they used a different Tibetan text to the one I used, it did not seem to work out that well though, “too many cooks (translators) spoil the broth” as we say!

[iv] No disrespect to the new Monlam AI (which is very useful for scanning photos of texts, to transfer them to text) but when I typed in some Tibetan text even that was a teaching and very straightforward, much that came up in its English translation was ‘gobbledegook’ as we say, and needed re-doing by someone listening to, or reading the original. One particular glitch in the AI programme bizarrely kept producing “The Dalai Lama wants to go to Potala Palace, but does not know where he is going.” Also the name Dalai Lama kept being used as a translation, when it was not related at all.

[iv] Here Tsogyel is referring to the possibility of attaining full awakening in one life and one body, as is spoken about in Kālacakra Tantra.

THE LIFE AND 'SOUL' OF YESHE TSOGYEL. As woman, disciple, consort and dākinī; and contemporary female empowerment in Tibet. Interview with Dr. Jue Liang (Dākinī Conversations, Ep.5)

22nd September 2023 Dākinī Translations

“A disciple like me, who is a woman with little wisdom and a dull mind; I have limited understanding and am narrow-minded. May I request an oral instruction on enlightenment in this lifetime with a female body, a teaching that is easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize!”

—Yeshe Tsogyel’s request to Guru Padmasambhava

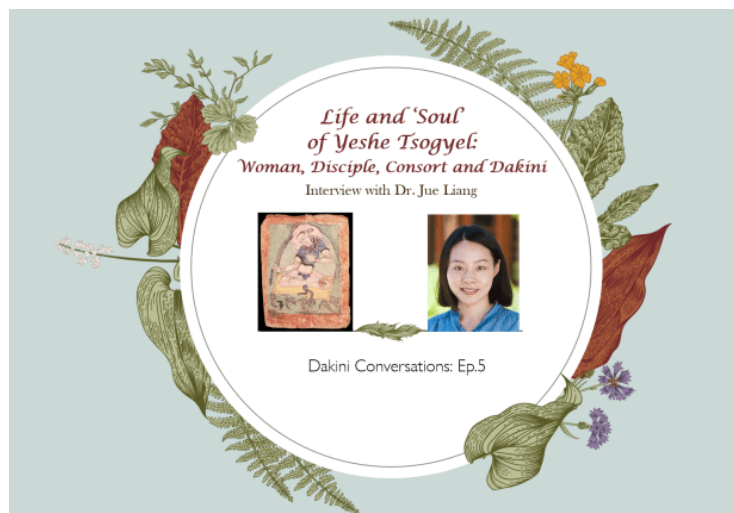
“In this expanded definition, the khandroma is equated with the feminine in general, it is the female bodhisattva and the mother of all buddhas. It is the feminine foundation for all practitioners, like the glacier is the source for all rivers. It even hails the female body as superior in benefitting beings. The khandroma has taken over other female divinities, and become a uniquely Tibetan phenomenon. The complexity of her activities also resists a clear definition, making the khandroma a grab bag term for virtually any Buddhist women.”

—Dr. Jue Liang (2020)

“If one searches for the most precious thing that sustains humankind in this world, it goes without saying that it is the enormously powerful mother. Mothers are those who foster kindness and compassion and bestow the sweet, luscious taste of livelihood.”

—First sentence in *Great Treasury of Dākinī* teachings collection

For Tara and Guru Rinpoche Day this weekend (there is no ninth day this month), I am delighted to publish the fifth episode of the [Dākinī Conversations podcast](#), with Dr. Jue Liang, the leading, foremost scholar-translator in the world today on renowned 8th century Tibetan yogini and master, [Yeshe Tsogyel](#) (ཡེ་ཤེས་མཚོ་ལྷུ་). Audio only is on [Spotify](#), [Apple](#) and Amazon Music. The video has time-stamped chapters and English subtitles (click on CC).



Originally from China, but now based in the USA, [Dr. Jue Liang](#), is a female scholar and translator whose PhD in 2020, from the University of Virginia, was on the life of highly-realised Tibetan yogini, female lineage holder and famous consort of Guru Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyel. Dr. Liang is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Case Western Reserve University and is currently completing her first book, entitled *Conceiving the Mother of Tibet: The Early Literary Lives of the Buddhist Saint Yeshe Tsogyel* based on her PhD. Although there are now a few English-language

publications about Yeshe Tsogyel, Liang is one of the very few PhDs that considers Tsogyel's life and legacy to the standards of academic research. In that respect one could say that Dr. Liang is one of the foremost scholar-translators in the world today on Yeshe Tsogyel. She is also working on a second project, tentatively titled *Thus Has She Heard: Theorizing Gender in Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism*.

In the podcast interview, we discuss Dr. Liang's background in China and how she became interested in Tsogyel's life-story, after visiting Larung Gar nunnery and as a postgraduate student in the USA. We then discuss her research on Tsogyel's life and legacy, first considering sacred places associated with Tsogyel such as her birthplace, temple and 'soul' lake (La-tso) and 'soul' wood (La-shing), in Tibet. This is followed by the Tibetan textual sources available on Tsogyel, her name, and her experience and symbolic importance as a woman (gender and biology), as disciple with 'inferior' female body, as consort and celibate nun, and as *Dākinī*. We also briefly discuss Tsogyel's role as 'Mother of Tibet' as a realised master and transmitter of Vajrayana teachings and practice.

The discussion ends with Liang's research on the Tibetan nuns based at Larung Gar, in Tibet and the institution of the very successful Khenmo programme led and promoted there by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog, their Aryatare publishing initiative and 53 volume collection entitled the [Great Treasury of Dākinī Teachings](#), as well as the nuns' views of gender and biology as Buddhist practitioners.

At the end of our discussion, I asked Dr. Liang, what Tsogyel personally meant to her, and she quoted the nuns of Larung Gar in their moving admiration and respect for her resilience as a biological woman who against all the odds, and without much external support, managed to study, practice and be the esteemed consort of Guru Padmasambhava, going on to become the 'Mother of Tibet', and a renowned Buddhist teacher and master in her own name. For more on Dr. Jue Liang's work and publications, see her new website, [here](#).

I have also written several research posts on Tsogyel before including [her connection to Tiger's Nest \(Paro Tagtsang\) Bhutan](#), [liberating beings in hell realms](#), her [connection with Varjayogini](#), and translated a [Guru Yoga of Yeshe Tsogyel by 15th Karmapa](#). So it was a real treat to be able to discuss her life and legacy with such a scholar and expert on Tsogyel.

Music? [Yeshe Tsogyel's mantra](#), [Five Dakinis/Heart Sutra](#) by Yoko, [Flying Dākinī](#) by Yungchen Lhamo and for the undefeatable life and 'soul' of Lady of Karchen (Karchen Za), [Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands](#) by Bob Dylan, [She](#) by Elvis Costello, and [Is it Love or Desire](#) by Betty Davis.

May we all have the resilience, determination, passion and intelligence of Yeshe Tsogyel to withstand all the obstacles, gender discrimination and so-called biological 'inferiority' to attain the fully awakened state for all beings!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 22nd September 2023. Interview took place on 16th September 2023.

Review and overview of the interview and Liang's work

The 'Soul' of Yeshe Tsogyel: Temple, Lake and Wood

In the podcast interview, Dr. Liang explains how she came to do her PhD on Yeshe Tsogyel. Her dissertation traces the literary traditions surrounding Yeshe Tsogyel who is said to have lived in eighth-century Tibet. However, literary accounts about her did not flourish until some six hundred years later. The dissertation "examines how an origin narrative with her as one of the core personas emerged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as Tibetan Buddhists traced their religious pedigree and

defined what counts as authentic Buddhism.” Liang’s research considers in detail three aspects of the role of Yeshe Tsogyel: a disciple, a consort, and a khandroma/ḍākinī.”

We begin our discussion where Liang’s thesis starts with visits to sacred places in Tibet associated with the birthplace and ‘soul/la’ (or life-force) of Tsogyel and the Tsogyel Lhakhang (temple) in Ngadrag, Tibet, which was also associated with the famous Karma Kagyu master, Lama Zhang. As well as a meditation cave of Tsogyel, in Chimphu (see photos below, re-published with permission). We also discuss the importance of visiting the place/geography in research about Tibetan Buddhist figures. Liang writes:

“The belief that a person’s soul (bla) resides in, or could extend to significant places and objects is already found in pre-Buddhist Tibet. In this case, the lake and wood trunk are considered to be sites where Yeshe Tsogyel’s soul remains after the passing of her physical body.”

It is said that Tsogyel was born into the aristocratic Kharchen family of the Chokdro Dri area and that her mother gave birth to a baby girl whose forehead bore the mark of crossed vajras, and whose body gave off the fragrance of a lily. At the same time, a spring of fresh water burst from the ground and formed a pond next to her house (this was later named Tsogyal La-tso, the soul lake of Tsogyal, and became a famous pilgrimage site). It was not until the 18th century when the great master Jigme Lingpa made offerings to the life force lake that its reputation as a visionary lake began to manifest. Sleeping next to the lake, he dreamed of symbols floating above the lake. Realizing they were a symbolic Ḍākinī script, he transcribed the symbols into Tibetan. This treasure is well-known today as the Longchen Nyingtik Yeshe Tsogyal Sadhana of Yumkha Dechen Gyalmo.



136 Front Entrance to Tsogyel Lhakhang, Tibet. Photo: Dr. Jue Liang (2016).



137 Right in front of the temple structure is a small pond said to be the soul lake or latso (bla mtsho)

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.



138 Tsogyel Lashing, the Soul Wood of Yeshe Tsogyel. Photo: Dr. Jue Liang (2016).



139 Protuberance on the wall next to the door to the shrine room at Tsogyel Lhakhang; it is said to be a naturally-appearing wooden pole³ that was used for load carrying by Jigme Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1730-1798).



140 Stele A, Left Side of the Door of Tsogyel Lhakhang. Photo: Dr. Jue Liang (2016). Said to be erected by Lama Zhang Yudrakpa Tsöndru Drakpa (Bla ma zhang G.yu brag pa Brtson 'grus grags pa, 1122-1193), a religious leader from the Kagyu (Bka' brgyud) School



141 Entrance to Tsogyel Druphuk, Meditation Cave of Yeshe Tsogyel, in Chimphu, Tibet. Photo: Dr. Jue Liang (2016). Liang writes that: "The site of Chimphu is a short hike from Samye Monastery, where Padmasambhava was first invited to Tibet.



142 Statues of Tsogyel and Padmasambhava in Tsogyel Druphuk, Meditation Cave of Yeshe Tsogyel, in Chimphu, Tibet. Photo: Dr. Jue Liang (2016).

For videos about Tsogyel Latso in Tibet, see also the Jnanasukha Foundation Video page [here](https://www.jnanasukha.com/).



143 Mural Art on the Tsogyel Lhakhang. Photo Jnanasukha Foundation: <https://www.iamyeshetsogyal.com/>

Life stories and original textual sources on Tsogyel



144 Renowned Nyingma treasure-revealer, Drime Kunga (1347-?) is one of the main sources in Liang's thesis on the life of Yeshe Tsogyel.

This discovered account differs from the popular seventeenth-century biography of her revealed by [Taksham Nuden Dorje](#) (stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, b. 1655) in several striking ways, both in terms of its contents and its structure. <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Drime-Kunga/9574>

In Chapter One, “The Story of Yeshe Tsogyel,” Dr. Liang outlines available written information about Yeshe Tsogyel and Tibetan primary sources used and the various genres at work in her literary tradition: The Two Earlier Lives of Yeshe Tsogyel, The Drime Kunga/Pema Lingpa corpus, The Chronicles (Bka’ thang), or the Chronicle of Padmasambhava (Padma bka’ thang yig), The Chronicle of the Queens (Btsun mo bka’ thang yig), Yeshe Tsogyel in Colophons. Zhus lan or Question-and-Answer Texts. I asked Liang if there were any Indic sources on Tsogyel and she replied that she had not come across any.

The names of Yeshe Tsogyel



145 Initiation Card: Yeshe Tsogyel (Front)

We then discuss the naming of Tsogyel by her father, and the aspect of her gender and biological sex as a woman.

“Her father “Kharphub offered the name Yeshe Tsogyel with the following explanation:

“[She] entered the womb at the time [stars] set at Namso, [she] awakened when [they] set at Gyal. If I am to give a name to this person (lit. head, *dbu*), the name will be Yeshe Tsogyel. Yeshe is one of the classes of *ḍākinīs*, Tso pertains to staying in the womb during Namtso (Namso?), and Gyal relates to awakening at the time of Gyal. It is a fitting name.”

This etymology of the name Yeshe Tsogyel spells out her enlightened identity as a *ḍākinī* or a khandroma (a wisdom khandroma, to be specific), and assigns felicitous dates to her conception and birth.

Then, Tsogyel being named as Khandro by a wrathful being [after she descends into hell in order to rescue Shanti](#), the wicked minister who condemned her to death for refusing to marry:

“After returning to Chimphu (Mchims phu), she is praised by a wrathful being (who encouraged her to go find Shanti in the first place) and given the secret name Khandro Yeshe Tsogyel. The wrathful being explains the meaning of her name as follows:

“You have perfected your realization and traverse (*’gro*) the space (*mkha’*) of reality with your wisdom (*ye shes*). Your compassion nurtures (*’tsho*) all beings and vanquishes (*rgyal*) all sufferings. Your compassion is more forceful than all of the peaceful and wrathful conqueror-buddhas—such as me, Heruka—combined. Because of this, I bestow you the name Khandro Yeshe Tsogyel (*mkha’ ’gro ye shes mtsho rgyal*).”

Liang also considers the references to her as Karchen Za or Lady of Karchen.

Yeshe Tsogyel as biological woman/female and disciple and the Zhu-len (Q&A) textual tradition/format

In her PhD, Dr. Liang categorises three aspects of Yeshe Tsogyel: as disciple, consort and *Ḍākinī*/khandro. In particular, the idea of the inferiority of the female body and what the role and purpose of a tantric consort and *Ḍākinī* is. In terms of Tsogyel as woman, Liang contextualises being a woman into three main categories: biological sex, social gender and theological gender, and how biological sex is considered important by Tibetan female practitioners in contemporary Tibet as well

as karmic dispositions, which fits with something I also wrote about biological sex and consort/Vajrayana practice.

The second chapter of her thesis, “The Disciple Yeshe Tsogyel,” examines the “outer,” or most publicly accessible, role of Yeshe Tsogyel as the foremost disciple of Padmasambhava. She is widely known as and regularly listed among the most important disciples of Padmasambhava in Treasure narratives from the thirteenth century. After the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as evidenced in many Treasure colophons and in the stylized meta-narratives of the dialogical accounts, Yeshe Tsogyel is frequently cited as the disciple responsible for receiving and transmitting Padmasambhava’s teachings to future generations. Liang discusses the distinctive use of *zhus lan* (*queston and answer*) texts or dialogues that adopt the Indian canonical dialogical style to authenticate lineages of Treasure teachings. These dialogues are also rich venues to explore the issue of female inferiority and women’s access to Buddhist teachings.

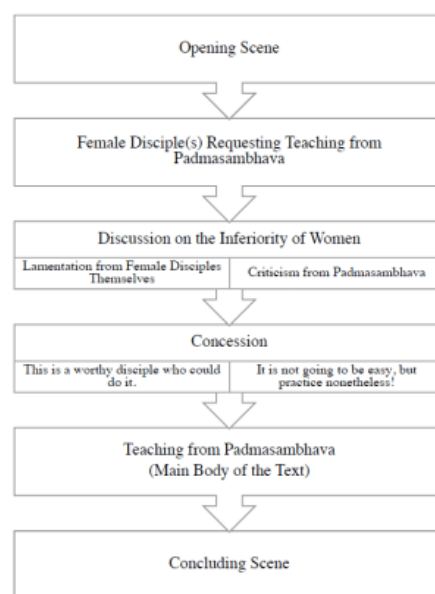


Figure 22 Structure of Padmasambhava's Conversation with Female Disciples

146 Diagrammatic description of the Zhu-Len (Q&A) text format of Padmasambhava and female disciples. From Jue Liang's PhD (2020)

Liang writes that:

“These conversations begin with descriptions of the inferiority of women by the female disciples themselves, and Padmasambhava’s chastisement of women not setting their minds on the dharma and squandering away their precious human life. Nonetheless, Padmasambhava always grants the teaching in the end. The formulaic disparagement of women discloses more than simple misogyny; rather, it demonstrates the uneasiness toward women having access to Buddhist teachings and the effort to mitigate this concern. By squaring themselves with the convention of viewing women as inferior in the beginning, these dialogues averted a radical challenge to the status quo but at the same time created a literary space for women’s access to Buddhist teaching and practice.”

“A disciple like me, who is a woman with little wisdom and a dull mind; I have limited understanding and am narrow-minded. May I request an oral instruction on enlightenment in

this lifetime with a female body, a teaching that is easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize!”

“The majority of the *zhus lan* texts revealed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are dialogues between Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel, or a group of women led by her.”

In the interview, Liang mentions how the Abhidharmakosha refers to gender as a sense faculty, connected to biology but that we should take a more sympathetic and nuanced approach to the comments about female ‘inferiority’ as speaking more to challenges biological women faced during those times in particular.

Yeshe Tsogyel as Vajrayana/Tantric Consort



147 Yeshe Tsogyel was one of the main consorts of Guru Padmasambhava

We then discuss Dr. Liang’s research on the “Consort Yeshe Tsogyel,” and the consort relationship between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava. Liang quotes one text that:

“Princess Mandāravā, the Nepalese Kālasiddhi, the Nepalese girl Śākyadevī, the Mönpa girl Tashi Khyedren, and the woman Yeshe Tsogyel—these are the five women that captivated the heart of the master.”

Using contemporary (and provocative) titles such as *Deal with Your Ex Before you become a Consort* and *Consorts as Nuns*, Liang addresses how women often have to leave a worldly relationship with a man behind, citing Tsogyel’s own story of leaving her worldly lover, and even dealing with sexual assault, which leads her to pray to Padmasambhava for help and making the connection with him. Rings are exchanged on leaving her worldly relation with her ex and sealing her consort relation with Padmasambhava.

This is followed by the revelation (for some) that Tsogyel (and Princess Mandāravā, another well-disciple and consort of Padmasambhava were both referred to and identified as nuns) and the whole notion of celibacy and consort practice, a subject I also recently was interviewed about [here](#). Liang considers the different (but not mutually exclusive) goals of consort practice: 1) Liberation, 2) Treasure Revelation and 3) Healing, and concludes that celibacy is not contradictory when done in the context of liberation and treasure revelation.

In fact, Tsogyel later went on to take her own male consorts and students, staying with them at the famed Paro Tiger’s Nest (Tagtsang) in Bhutan, for more on that see [here](#). This latter aspect of Tsogyel as teacher and master is not considered in Dr. Liang’s thesis, but she explains how her forthcoming

book expands on what she wrote and considers her role as the ‘Mother of Tibet’, a childless mother but a teacher and master of Tibetans in her own right.

Yeshe Tsogyel as *ḍākinī*/khandro: the meaning of the term *ḍākinī*



We then discuss the fourth and last chapter of Liang’s thesis, “Khandroma Yeshe Tsogyel” that highlights the particular significance of the *ḍākinī*/khandroma, its Indian precedents and Tibetan developments, and whom Liang writes is:

“A type of female divinity that came to outshine all others and became the goddess par excellence in the Treasure context. By reading khandroma narratives as myth, I argue that the indeterminate nature of the khandroma is the site in which paradoxical identities of Buddhist women are negotiated.”

In defining the meaning of *ḍākinī*, Liang writes:

“*Ḍā* means sky travel, and she who is directly realized in space, that is, who has achieved [the ability] to range all throughout the sky, is called the *ḍākinī*. She who is united with all buddhas by means of all *mudrā* without exception and the great bliss of all without exception is known as the *ḍākinī*. She who is the *ḍākinī* is composed of the buddha elements. The *ḍākinī* who is the self of all buddhas has achieved [the ability to] go everywhere.

In this expanded definition, the khandroma is equated with the feminine in general, it is the female bodhisattva and the mother of all buddhas. It is the feminine foundation for all practitioners, like the glacier is the source for all rivers. It even hails the female body as superior in benefitting beings. The khandroma has taken over other female divinities, and become a uniquely Tibetan phenomenon. The complexity of her activities also resists a clear definition, making the khandroma a grab bag term for virtually any Buddhist women.”

Figure 25 Typology of Khandroma

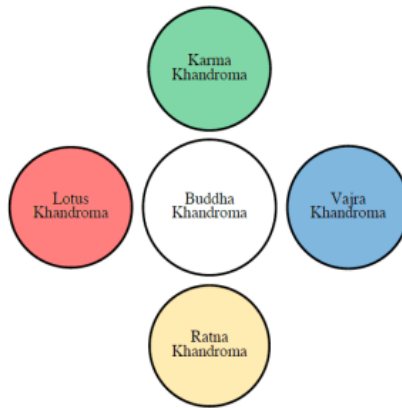
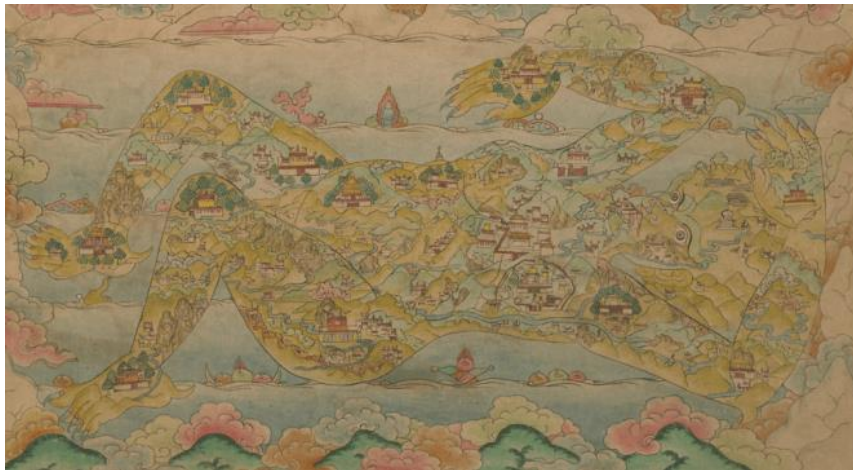


Figure 26 Khandroma of the Five Families

148 Categorisation of dakinis/khandroma in the five Buddha families. Jue Liang's PhD (2020).

Dākinī as demoness of Tibet



149 The Demoness of Tibet; Tibet; late 19th–early 20th century; Pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.1.1 (HAR 65719). <https://rubinmuseum.org/blog/demoness-of-tibet-legend-painting-architecture>



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Liang's research also considers the difference between a worldly and wisdom/supramundane *ḍākinī* and a demoness. Citing the example of the country Tibet equated with a demoness lying on her back, 'demoness of Tibet' and its binding/suppression by King Songsten Gampo to allow Buddhism to take root there. As a result of these differing definitions, Liang asserts that:

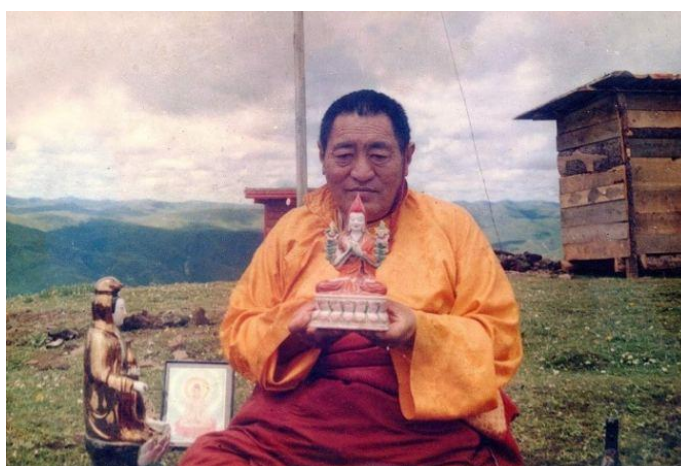
"..the identity of a khandroma is used to strategically negotiate the problematic apotheosis of women, because her indeterminate nature provides a space for women to be both powerful yet subdued, to be active but interdependent, and to be venerated but not for her physical femininity."

We briefly discuss Liang's categorisation of the *ḍākinī* as the 'demoness that does not need subjugation', 'Agent Without Agency', and 'Childless Mother'. *Fuzzy Femininities and Muddled Myth*.

Contemporary female practitioners in Tibet: Larung Gar and the Khenmo programme and Aryatare publications



150 Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog Rinpoche (-2004), founder of Larung Gar, with renowned tertön couple. Tare Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche



151 Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog. In 1993, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche visited North America where he met and taught Trungpa Rinpoche's students in Colorado and Nova Scotia. In this audio recording from Boulder, June 27, 1993, Rinpoche talks about the Kingdom of Shamb

In the final part of the interview, I ask Liang about her research on the nuns of Larung Gar and the Khenmo programme started there by the renowned Nyingma master, [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog](#) [1]. Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, also known as Serthar Buddhist Institute, sits in the Larung Valley at an elevation of 4,000 meters, about 15 km from the town Sêtar, in Sertar County, Garze Prefecture in the traditional Tibetan region of Kham, in western Sichuan, China. In her 2020 co-written paper called *Tilling the Fields of Merit*, Liang discusses these topics as well as the publications arm of Larung Gar run by the nuns (Arya Tare) and Khenmo Yonten, one of the first Tibetan females to have written and published commentaries on the major texts studied in monastic institutions.

This research discusses the bigger programme at Yarchen Gar, Jigme Phuntsog's strict rules of admission to Larung Gar, and refusal of young women as consorts. As well as the non-sectarianism of Larung Gar studies, inclusion of Han Chinese practitioners and his teaching at Mount Wutai. Liang cites a quote of Phuntsog:

“A monastery is a place where equality is preached but not practiced; a gar is a place where equality is practiced but not preached.”

The first female khenmo awards were in 2004 and thus were the first in Tibetan Buddhist history to get such degrees. As of 2018, there were just under 200 graduated khenmos associated with Larung—one of the abbots of Larung estimated 104 Tibetan khenmos at Larung Gar, 58 of whom are on leave due to sickness or “other reasons.”¹⁰ The khenmo program, once run by senior monks and khenpos, is today run largely by the khenmos themselves: A majority of the teachers are khenmos rather than khenpos, and a committee of senior khenmos also has a voice in designing the curriculum for the khenmo/po programs of Larung Gar.

Āryatārē, the publishing arm of Larung, annually producing dozens of books and publications, as well as other multimedia materials. Perhaps the most impressive of Āryatārē's projects is their [Great Treasury of Dākinī Teachings](#) (Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo), a fifty-three-volume collection of works by and about important Buddhist women, spanning from Mahāprajāpatī to Mumé Yeshe Tsomo. Now available on the BDRC website [2].

In the interview, Dr. Liang also briefly discusses the success of these female-oriented initiatives, with full and active participation of women as writers, scholars, administrators and teachers. Including Khenmo Yonten, the first Tibetan nun to write an extensive commentary on the five main texts studied at Larung Gar. Currently, Larung Gar is closed to all foreign visitors and only Chinese nationals can visit there [3].



152 Panorama from above Larung Gar (pre-2016). Photo: Yowangdu website, [here](#).

Endnotes

[1] Liang writes that a “common appellation found haloing Jigme Phuntsok on icons and shrines says his teachings are like “the blissful sun rising in the Snowland as the miserable period of darkness fades (dus 'khrug gi mun nag dbyings su yal/ bod gangs can la bde ba'i nyi ma shar).”

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[2] For example, the editors collected all the stories about Buddhist women from the Vinaya and the sūtras, where they are rarely foregrounded, compiling them into two individual collections entitled Collected Stories of the Female Monastics of the Vinayapiṭaka ('dul ba'i sde snod las btus pa'i dge sbyong ma sogs kyi rnam thar skor) and Collected Stories of the Female Bodhisattvas of the Sūtrapīṭaka (mdo sde'i ste snod las btus pa'i byang chub sems ma'i rnam thar skor). These two collections comprise the first five volumes of the Treasury.

[3] For the government re-location and 'downsizing' of hundreds of nuns at Larung Gar in 2016, see [here](#).

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[NOT A MOUNTED TIGRESS BUT A POWERFUL COUGAR? YESHE TSOGYEL AT TIGER'S NEST \(PARO TAGTSANG\) WITH HER YOUNG MALE CONSORTS. Yeshe Tsogyel's connection to Tiger's Nest in Bhutan, her young male consorts, contemporary research on her life-stories and a 21st Century interpretation of her experiences as a woman \(Bhutan 2022\)\)](#)

[Yeshe Tsogyel's Descent to the Hell Realms and How She Got Her Name](#)

[BLISS QUEEN: YESHE TSOGYEL AND VAJRAYOGINĪ. Their connection, supplications and new translation of Yeshe Tsogyel Supplication by Tertön-Yogini, Tare Lhamo](#)

['Yeshe Tsogyel Guru Yoga' by 15th Karmapa](#)

NOT A MOUNTED TIGRESS BUT A POWERFUL COUGAR? YESHE TSOGYEL AT TIGER’S NEST (PARO TAGTSANG) WITH HER YOUNG MALE CONSORTS. Yeshe Tsogyel’s connection to Tiger’s Nest in Bhutan, her young male consorts, contemporary research on her life-stories and a 21st Century interpretation of her experiences as a woman (Bhutan 2022))

[13th October 2022 Dākinī Translations](#)

“Undertaking the profound path of unconventional conduct practice at Paro Taktsang, The three doors (of body, speech and mind) became three vajras of great bliss; Blazing brilliant radiance as a stunning sixteen-year old, I supplicate the Heroine Varahi!”

“The evening that these miraculous signs appeared, the Guru himself was transformed into Dorje Trollo (Adamantine Sagging Belly) with myself as Ekajati (The Crone with One Hair Knot), joined in union with him, and Tashi Khyidren as our mount, the tigress, to subject the gods and demons of microcosmic worlds of the four quarters of Tibet. Riding upon the back of the girl Khyidren transformed into a tigress, the Guru and his mystic partner absorbed in the samadhi of Dorje Phurba, holding a nine-pronged vajra in his right hand and rolling a phurba of bell metal in his left hand, the Guru projected countless, fierce, terrifying beings in forms identical to himself. In particular, one of these forms called Blue-black Vajra Wrathful Phurba (Tingnak Dorje Trophur) flew directly to Paro Taktsang, and there he subjugated gods, demons, wrathful Dakinis, and demon savages and the three eight-fold classes of spirits of the barbarian borderlands and beyond – Bhutan, Nepal, India and Lho – and bound them to serve the dharma.”

—Yeshe Tsogyel recounting the famous ‘tigress mount’ story and its voyage to Paro Tagtsang

“The fact that Tsogyel had several teenage, male consorts (at the same time), cuts through the male-centric (and sexist and ageist) traditional and conservative view of consorts being young, pretty women of male teachers. In addition, the fact that Tsogyel was significantly older than these men demonstrates how karmamudra consort practice is not about a woman’s age or physical appearance at all, but about her mastery of the inner channels and winds. In contemporary language, and slightly tongue-in-cheek, Tsogyel might well be called the first Tibetan Buddhist enlightened ‘cougar’!”

—Adele Tomlin (2022)

INTRODUCTION

For the second in a series of posts about my second recent trip to Bhutan, as a speaker at the 4th Vajrayana Conference in Thimpu and pilgrim to some of the sacred sites there, I offer a new article on the world-renowned Tiger’s Nest (Tagtsang) in Paro, Bhutan and its most revered female yogini practitioner, Yeshe Tsogyel, one of the main consorts of Guru Padmasambhava.

In this article, I continue a theme I have been writing about over the last two years of re-telling and raising awareness about female lineages and teachers with Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayana (see [here](#)). I recently spoke about this in a [video interview too](#), such as the unsung heroine teachers of Mahasiddha masters like Tilopa, Nāropa and so on.

Yeshe Tsogyel is not such an unknown woman though, in fact she is one of the few women in the Vajrayana pantheon to be widely spoken about and praised. I have also written before about Yeshe Tsogyel and translated a Tsogyel Guru Yoga sadhana [here](#) by the 15th Karmapa (which is now available

in Portuguese, Polish and Vietnamese) as well as Tsogyel's connection to Vajrayogini, [here](#). Yet, considering Tsogyel's renown not only as the consort of Guru Padmasambhava but also as a realised yogini in her own right, there are aspects of her liberation-story (namthar) that do not get so much attention, and if they do, are normally told through the eyes and voice of male scholars and translators.

This brief article aims to address those issues by first giving an overview of current publications and research on Tsogyel, and then shining a light on aspects of her life, which demonstrate her unique and pioneering quality as a woman in patriarchal misogynist cultures, but also as an inspiring heroine for women (and men) in the 21st Century.

First, I present a compiled list of the main English-language biographies (including a main one by her young male consort, Atsara Sale) and contemporary postgraduate research on Yeshe Tsogyel.

Second, I give a brief overview of Tsogyel's connection to Bhutan and Paro Tiger's Nest (Tagtsang), citing a recent article by Bhutanese scholar, Dr. Sonam Kinga (2019) who challenges the commonly-cited view that Yeshe Tsogyel transformed into the tigress mount for Guru Padmasambhava as Dorje Drolo, rather that it was his other consort, Tashi Khyidren. I also share some photos I took at the Tagtsang temple in 2019 (my first visit) and this year and Yeshe Tsogyel's cave next to that temple.

Finally, I consider how Tsogyel's life as an older female teacher-practitioner with several young, male consorts, and her mental transformation of being raped by seven bandits can be interpreted as an inspiring example for women even now: as a spiritual practitioner, and as a survivor of sexual abuse and misogyny.

Of course, much more can and should be told about Tsogyel's life and example in this respect. Women's history is all about transforming HIS stories into HER stories. It is with this intention that I write this brief article for a more general audience.

Although there were two speakers at the Bhutanese conference who spoke on Tsogyel, neither of them presented or spoke about any of the information in this essay during their talks. Hence another reason I decided to write this article! [\[1\]](#).

I composed this article in a day, so it is not particularly detailed or comprehensive, but I hope it is of benefit to those interested in knowing more about prior research and publications on Yeshe Tsogyel's life, her connection to the renowned Paro Tagtsang and to discover that she was not in fact the tigress mount of Guru Padmasambhava as often stated, and in addition, (in a tongue-in-cheek way) was more a feisty, brave and compassionate 'cougar' (in 21st Century parlance) who had several very young, male consorts, some of whom she practiced with at Paro Tagtsang Tiger's Nest.

I have written before about Yeshe Tsogyel and translated a Tsogyel Guru Yoga sadhana [here](#) by the 15th Karmapa (which is now available in Portuguese, Polish and Vietnamese) as well as Tsogyel's connection to Vajravarahi, [here](#).

I would like to thank the organisers of the Vajrayana conference in Bhutan who kindly invited me to speak there, providing tasty and healthy vegetarian lunches and refreshments daily, as well as hotel accommodation. In addition, I would like to thank the sponsors of my flight to Bhutan from India, whose generosity and support made this trip possible.

Music? [Yeshe Tsogyel mantra](#), the [Eye of the Tiger](#) by Survivor, [Ride the Tiger](#) by Jefferson Starship and [Roar](#) by Katy Perry.

May we all get to visit the Paro Tagtsang, practice Vajrakilaya there and ride the tiger with the Phurba of wisdom! Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Jnanasagara Bam Ha Ri Ni Sa Siddhi Hum!

Written and compiled by Adele Tomlin, 13th October 2022. Copyright. This article is also downloadable as a .pdf file [here](#).

1) HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL SOURCES AND BACKGROUND ON YESHE TSOGYEL AND TIGER'S NEST

A) ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRANSLATIONS OF BIOGRAPHIES ABOUT YESHE TSOGYEL

Despite her renown and fame as a realised yogini and teacher, there is not a huge amount of English language scholarship on Tsogyel. In *Who is the Tigress in the Lair? A Preliminary Enquiry About Khandro Yeshe Tshogyel's Visit to Taktsang*, Dr. Sonam Kinga^[1] (Journal of Bhutan Studies, Vol 40, Summer 2019) Kinga states that:

“One of the first Yeshe Tsogyel biographies translated into English by Keith Dowman (for online excerpts from it see [here](#)), was that by Gyalwa Jangchub, also known as Atsara Sale, who was a consort of Yeshe Tshogyel from Nepal. The biography was hidden as a treasure text in Lhorong, Kham. Taksham Nuden Dorje who was also known as Samten Lingpa and the reincarnation of Gyalwa Jangchub, revealed the biography as terma text in the 18th century.”

[Taksam Nuden Dorje](#) (stag sham nus ldan rdo rje) aka Samten Lingpa (b. 1655-1708) — was a famed Nyingma master from Kham who had settled in the kingdom of Powo and discovered many hidden termas. For more on Atsara Sale and his presence at Tagtsang with Tsogyel, see below.

Other English language biographies of Tsogyel, including Dowman's, currently available are:

- Drime Kunga and Yeshe Tsogyel. 2017. *The Life and Visions of Yeshe Tsogyel: The Autobiography of the Great Wisdom Queen*. Chonyi Drolma, translator. Boulder: Snow Lion.
- Gyatso, Janet. 2006. “A Partial Genealogy of the Lifestory of Ye shes mtsho rgyal.” Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, no. 2, pp. 1-27.
- Taksham Nuden Dorje. 1996. *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. Keith Dowman, translator. Ithaca: Snow Lion. [Yeshe Tsogyal – Sky Dancer by Keith Dowman](#). The Tibetan of this text is available as an e-book at: [Secret Symbolic Biography of the Queen of Dakinis, Yeshe Tsogyal \(skydancerpress.com\)](#)
- Taksham Nuden Dorje. 1983. *Mother of Knowledge: The Enlightenment of Ye-shes mTso-rgyal*. Tartang Tulku, translator. Berkeley: Dharma Publishing.
- Taksham Nuden Dorje. 1999. *Lady of the Lotus Born*. Wulston Fletcher and Helena Blankleder, translators. Boston: Shambhala.
- Gardner, Alex. “Yeshe Tsogyel,” [Treasury of Lives](#)

Yeshe Tsogyel's liberation stories about Guru Padmasambhava have also been translated into English^[2].

In terms of recent postgraduate research on Tsogyel, there are the following:

- Angowski, Elizabeth J. 2019. PhD Harvard University, *Literature and the Moral Life: Reading the Early Biography of the Tibetan Queen Yeshe Tsogyal*.

- Liang, Jue. 2020. Ph.D, University of Virginia, *Conceiving the Mother of Tibet: The Life, Lives, and Afterlife of the Buddhist Saint Yeshe Tsogyel*.
- Vecchione, Andrea. 2009/10. *Yeshe Tsogyel: Tibet's First Enlightened Buddhist: A Feminism Model in Ancient Form?* Published on Academia.edu.

Within these two scholarly publications, there is very little about Yeshe Tsogyel's connection to Paro Tagtsang/Bhutan. I have not listed the Tibetan language sources on Tsogyel in the Bibliography below.

I have listed some of the Tibetan language sources on Tsogyel in the Bibliography below.

B) HISTORY OF THE TIGER'S NEST (TAGTSANG) MONASTERY, PARO, BHUTAN AND VISITS THERE IN 2019 AND 2022



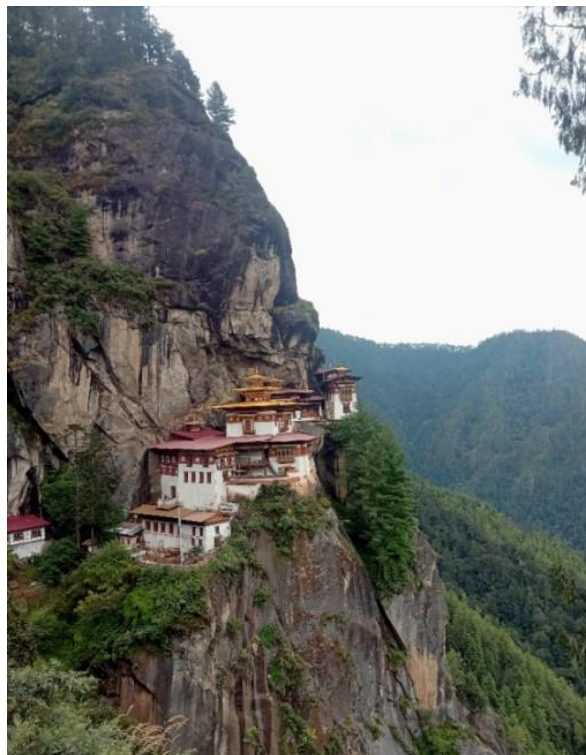
153 My first visit to Paro Tagtsang in 2019. Photo: Adele Tomlin.

Tagtsang (in Tibetan, *Tag* means Tiger and *Tsang* means nest) is one of the most iconic and sacred sites in Bhutan. Guru Padmasambhava is said to have visited Bhutan three times and travelled there before he went to Tibet. Among many sacred places he blessed, Bhutan is considered to be a very special 'hidden' place. He felt that it is ideal for the sacred Mantrayana or Vajrayana teachings to flourish. Paro Tagtsang was one of these sacred places he visited.

I first visited the Tiger's Nest temple in 2019 on my first trip to Bhutan. Next to the temple is the Senge Phug, the cave in which Tsogyel is commonly said to have accomplished Vajrakilaya practising with Guru Padmasambhava, and with her young, male consorts and female companion, Tashi Khyidren. For more on that see below.



154 Visiting Paro Tagtsang in October 2022. Photo: Adele Tomlin. Taken on simple mobile phone camera.



Visiting Paro Tagtsang in October 2022. Photo: Adele Tomlin.

Visiting Paro Tagtsang in 2022. Silvery blonde-haired after the 'stressful' two-year lockdown....just kidding.



155 Vintage black and white style Paro Tiger's Nest.

I visited the Tiger's Nest again in 2022 (see photos), this time visiting Bhutan again as a speaker at the Fourth International Vajrayana conference in Thimphu, see [here](#). I arrived in Bhutan only a few days after they opened their borders again to tourists after a strict two-year lockdown.

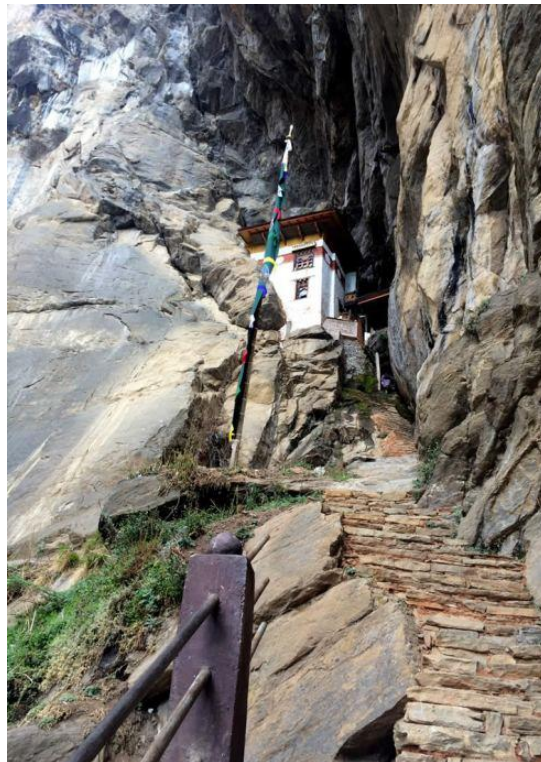
It takes about two to three hours to walk to the main temple from the ground level, involving some steep parts. However, it is possible for most to do it of varying levels of fitness. It has also been a site of activity of many great teachers and practitioners, such as Milarepa, Tangtong Gyelpo, Pema Lingpa, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, and Dilgo Khyentse. It was damaged by fire in 1951, burned completely in 1995, and was rebuilt in 2005.



156 The sign reads in Tibetan script, the Accomplishment Water of Khandro Yeshe Tsogyel. A small dog was seen regularly supping at this tap, great blessings! Photo: Adele Tomlin.



157 Waterfall next to the Paro Tagtsang and Senge Phug cave. Photo: Adele Tomlin (2022).



158 Steep stairway up to the Senge Phug cave next to the main temple, Tiger's Nest



159 The statue of Yeshe Tsogyel, inside Senge Phug at Paro Tagtang. Photo: Adele Tomlin (October 2022).

Not all visitors attempted the steep climb up to the Yeshe Tsogyel cave. It was slippery and wet, however, as I had done in 2019, I went up again in 2022. Once inside the cave, I immediately felt the intense energy and blessings, and went into a short Vajrakilaya practice and mantra recitation. The palpable energy of Tsogyel, Padmasambhava and Vajrakilaya came roaring into perception, as if they were all fully present in the cave. I could have stayed there for hours but had to move on.

C) Yeshe Tsogyel's trip to Bhutan and her five companions at the cave (Senge Phug) next to Tiger's Nest



160 Dr. Sonam Kinga, author of 2019 paper on Yeshe Tsogyel and her connection to Paro Tagtsang

Singa (2019: 62) writes this about the Tagtsang history:

“The holy site of Taktsang in Paro, Bhutan, is renowned for its association with Guru Rinpoche, his consort Khandro Yeshe Tshogyel and disciple Langchen Pelgi Sengye. Although a monastery was built at this site in 1692 by Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye, the fourth civil ruler of Bhutan, the site

Adele Tomlin/Dakini Publications, 2024. Copyright.

was visited and blessed by Guru Rinpoche as far back as the 8th century. Its sacredness has been reinforced by the visits and spiritual undertakings of great Buddhist luminaries over the centuries. Pilgrims and tourists visiting Taktsang are generally told two things associated with Yeshe Tshogyel, who was a Tibetan princess and an emanation of Lhamo Yangchenma (Sarasvati). One, when Guru Rinpoche transformed into Dorje Drolo (one of his eight manifestations) and flew to Taktsang riding on the back of a tigress, Yeshe Tshogyel had transformed into that tigress. Two, Yeshe Tshogyel did the Vajrakilaya practice at the cave of Sengephu in Taktshang. Sources, both oral and literary – including tourist-oriented materials – provide different versions of the narrative of Yeshe Tshogyel, the tigress and Vajrakilaya practice. Trulku Thondup, for example, mentions that Guru Rinpoche practiced Vajrakilaya with Yeshe Tshogyel at Paro Taktshang and that she transformed herself into a tigress and became his mount when he manifested as Dorje Drolo (Thondup, 1996, p. 96). This suggests that Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tshogyel were already at Paro Taktshang and it was only during the practice and accomplishment of Vajrakilaya that the transformation took place.

But this contrasts with narratives found in tourist books and oral folklore which suggest that Guru Rinpoche had already transformed into Dorje Drolo when he rode on the back of a tigress and flew to Taktshang (Brown, 2007, p. 128). Another source suggests that Guru Rinpoche flew from Senge Dzong in Lhuntse to Taktsang in the form of Dorje Drolo riding on a tigress although it does not mention Yeshe Tshogyel as the tigress (Bhutan Times, 2008, p. 178). In yet another source, it is mentioned that Yeshe Tshogyel transformed herself into a tigress while meditating at Taktshang ‘to protect herself from harmful humans and wild animals’ (National Library, 2005, p. 2). It also mentions that the tigress on which Dorje Drolo is mounted is the form assumed by Yeshe Tshogyel. The common theme that binds different versions of these narratives is usually the association of Yeshe Tshogyel with the tigress. As such, this is also the point of enquiry of this article. Is Yeshe Tshogyel the tigress in the lair or Taktshang?

A few however, speak of it being the manifestation of Monmo Tashi Kheudren also known as Bumden Tshomo instead of Yeshe Tshogyel. She was the daughter of Sendha Gyalp of Bumthang who invited Guru Rinpoche to Bhutan in the 8th century. Guru Rinpoche took Tashi Kheudren as his spiritual consort for the tantric practice at Kurjey in Bumthang to subdue Shelging Karpo, the local deity – who is said to have caused illness to Sendha Gyalp. It was to help treat his incurable ailment that Sendha Gyalp had invited Guru Rinpoche. This event however, took place during Guru’s first visit to Bhutan. He did not visit Taktshang at that time.”

Using Kinga’s article and question, which are based on the biography by her consort, Atsara Sale (as translated by Dowman), one can conclude that Yeshe Tshogyel was not the tigress mount, as commonly cited, for more on that see below. I have now written to Alexander Gardner at *Treasury of Lives* to request him to update his biography of Yeshe Tshogyel on that website and he has kindly responded that he will.

YESHE TSOGYEL’S TRIP FROM TIBET TO BHUTAN AND HER FIVE COMPANIONS AT THE TIGER’S NEST LION’S CAVE (SENGE PHUG)

Around the end of the 8th Century, Yeshe Tshogyel is said to have travelled to Nepal to meet Atsara Sale, then a slave, as her prophesied consort. As Padmasambhava advised her:

“So go to the Valley of Nepal where there is a sixteen-year-old youth with a mole on his right breast, who is an emanation of the Buddha Hero Hayagriva called Atsara Sale. He has wandered there from Serling in India. Find him, and make him your ally”

After raising enough money to buy his contract from his owners, Yeshe Tsogyel and Atsara Sale then returned together to Tibet. Along the way, they went to some of the caves famous for being places where Padmasambhava practiced meditation.

Yeshe Tshogyel first came to Bhutan from Tidro in Tibet. She had gone to Tidro to meditate following the precepts, empowerments and teachings she received from Guru Rinpoche at Samye. His instruction to her was:

“Practice at Womphu Taktsang, Mon Taktsang and Kham Taktsang and in all those places where there is a naturally manifest image of Guru Rinpoche, particularly in Tidro itself” (Dowman, 1996, p. 63)[\[5\]](#).

See image of Tidro, Tibet here:



161 Contemporary image of Tidro, Tibet where Yeshe Tsogyel meditated taken from *The Life and Visions of Yeshe Tsogyal: The Autobiography of the Great Wisdom Queen* (2017) Chonyi Drolma, translator.

During the course of Tsogyel’s meditation practices at the cave next to Paro Tagtsang, a girl called Khyidren visited her and offered her honey and milk occasionally. Khyidren was the daughter of local king called Hamrey. Tsogyel asked the King to give her his daughter who was thirteen years old then and had all the marks of a Ḍākinī (Dowman 1996, 73- 84).

Kinga (2019) explains:

“Yeshe Tshogyel names the girl Tashi Khyidren (“Fortunate Guide to Mankind”) and brings her along with others to Tagtshang from Senge Dzong. There were five of them at Tagtshang: Yeshe Tshogyel, her consorts Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang, a Bhutanese boy called Sale and Tashi Khyidren.”

YESHE TSOGYEL WITH ATSARA SALE (16 YEAR OLD MALE) CONSORT AND PRINCESS TASHI KHYIDREN

Yeshe Tshogyel came to Sengye Dzong from Tidro with her consort Atsara Sale and a girl called Dewamo. What is known of the life and spiritual attainments of Atsara Sale come from the biographies of Yeshe Tsogyal.

In 795ce, Yeshe Tsogyal traveled to Nepal to meet Atsara Sale, her prophesied consort to offer support on the path of spiritual maturation. As Padmasambhava exhorted Yeshe Tsogyal,

“So go to the Valley of Nepal where there is a sixteen-year-old youth with a mole on his right breast, who is an emanation of the Buddha Hero Hayagriva called Atsara Sale. He has wandered there from Serling in India. Find him, and make him your ally”

After raising enough money to buy his contract from his owners, Yeshe Tsogyal and Atsara Sale then returned together to Tibet. Along the way, they went to some of the caves famous for being places where Padmasambhava practiced meditation with his consorts.

During the course of Tsogyel’s meditation and austere practices at Paro Tagtsang, a girl called Khyidren (or Chidren) visited her and offered her honey and milk occasionally. Khyidren was the daughter of local king called Hamrey. Tsogyel asked the King to give her his daughter who was thirteen years old then and had all the marks of a Ḍākinī (Dowman 1996, 73- 84)[\[6\]](#).

Singa (2019) explains:

“Yeshe Tshogyel names the girl Tashi Chidren (“Fortunate Guide to Mankind”) and brings her along with others to Taktshang from Senge Dzong. There were five of them at Taktshang: Yeshe Tshogyel, her consorts Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang, a Bhutanese boy called Sale and Tashi Chidren.”

ACCOMPLISHMENT IN THE LION’S CAVE: TRANSFORMATION OF TSOGYEL INTO A SIXTEEN YEAR-OLD VAJRAVARAHI



162 Small wooden sign board at the bottom of Senge Phug, at the bottom of the steep staircase up to Yeshe Tsogyel’s Cave (Senge Phug). Photo: Adele Tomlin.

The small wooden sign board pointing towards Senge Phug at the junction leading to it and Taktshang states, “This is a cave, where Khandro (Ḍākinī) Yeshe Tshogyel practised Vajrakilaya (Phurpa)” (see photo). The lines written in Dzongkha on the walls of the cave also state likewise. However, in Tsogyel’s biography it states that she practiced the essential essence of co-emergent bliss and emptiness:

At Paro Taktsang I began the last austerity to be practised for my own benefit. This was the austerity of 'the seed-essence of co-incident pleasure and Emptiness'.²⁵ With my consorts Atsara Sale, a Bhutanese boy called Sale and Atsara Pelyang, all three invigorated by nutritious herbal elixirs, I disciplined myself in the cultivation of creative skill to its full potential for seven months through day and night without respite. At first, shaking and trembling, my body was enervated and my mind was stunned and intoxicated. Lymph saturated my whole body, above and below, and diseased, aching, feverish and trembling, I came close to death. But later, all the lymph was transmuted into the nature of seed-essence and pleasure flooded my entire body. Initially this pleasure was contaminated by passion, but soon it became a field of Awareness and finally an unremitting flow of Awareness. Red and white seed-essence gradually blended into an homogenous mixture, and the resulting seed-essence was not capable of evolving into dualistic vision. After placing my psycho-organism into the Conqueror's *maṇḍala*, through offering pleasure and worshipping in pleasure the full potential of pleasure was aroused and sealed in the body of pure pleasure. Red radiance suffused my white body, and retaining the appearance of a charming, sixteen-year-old maiden, my body was transformed into the pure being of an Heruka Ḍākinī Heroine (Vajra Vārāhī). At the same time I had a vision of Amitāyus' *maṇḍala*, and in the immutable being of a *vajra*-body I accomplished the Immortal Knowledge Holder²⁶ who is free of ageing and infirmity. At that time I received a prophecy

that I would live for 225 years in this world; Glorious Hayagrīva and Vajra Vārāhī exorcised obstructive spirits; the Five Buddha Heroes and the Five Ḍākinīs became my constant companions, accompanying me like shadows and performing whatever magical transformation was necessary with unimpeded efficiency; the Bodhisattvas gave auspicious benediction; and since I was now a Knowledge Holder with power over my life-span I was given the name Radiant Sky-blue Mistress of Life (Tsedak Tingwo Barma).

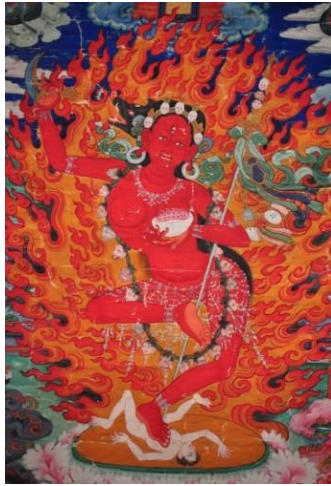
Thereafter, I and my five companions went to Womphu Takstang where Guru Rimpoche was staying. When we met him I prostrated, and greeting me he said, 'So you have come, Ḍākinī Heruka! What a surprise! I thought that you would have lost heart!' And he continued:

(Dowman, 1996, pp. 85-86).

After months of vigorous practice, her body assumes the appearance of sixteen year-old maiden and she transforms herself into Vajravarahi. The following lines inscribed below the painting of Yeshe Tsogyel at Senggephu on a rectangular granite-like stone tablet:

"Undertaking the profound path of unconventional conduct practice at Paro Taktsang, The three doors (of body, speech and mind) became three vajras of great bliss; Blazing brilliant radiance as a stunning sixteen-year old, I supplicate the Heroine Varahi!"

I have re-translated this passage myself from the one used by Kinga/Dowman, as several terms were not quite accurate in English, such as *tul-zhug*, which means unconventional (not austere) conduct.



According to Rita Gross (1987: 3), Tsogyel is considered to be the speech emanation of Vajravarahi. She writes that Vajravarahi, like most gurus and yidams takes on five emanations: body, speech, mind, qualities and activities and that Guru Padmasambhava had five consorts who represented these five emanations of Varahi. He also had a sixth 'essence' consort and myriads of other consorts.

For more on the connection between Yeshe Tsogyel and Varahi, see my previous essay *Bliss Queen Yeshe Tsogyel and Vajrayogini* [here](#). I will try write more about Yeshe Tsogyel and her root female disciples as manifestations of Varahi in another post.

VISION OF AMITAYUS MANDALA AND PROPHECY OF LONG-LIFE and RE-BIRTH AS MACHIG LABDRON



163 *Buddha Amitayus – Long-life Buddha*

The Tsogyel life-story by Atsara Sale continues that at Senge Phug, Yeshe Tshogyel received a vision of Amitayus mandala (Tshe-pag-me) and a prophecy that her lifespan will be 225 years. From there, she and all her companions go to Womphu Taktshang, and meet Guru Rinpoche.

Singa (2019) concludes that:

“It was there that Guru Rinpoche foretells their reappearance in future: Guru Rinpoche as Pha Dampa Sangye and Yeshe Tshogyel as Machig Labdron. He also prophesizes that Atsara Sale would appear then as a monk and be a consort to Machig Labdron. Tashi Khyidren would be

her only daughter whereas the Bhutanese boy, Sale, would be her spiritual son. Atsara Pelyang would also appear as a monk and become her mystic consort (Dowman, 1996, pp. 86-87).

It was therefore, at Womphu Taktsang in Tibet and not Paro Taktsang in Bhutan that the practice of Dorje Phurba (Vajrakilaya) was initiated by Guru Rinpoche along with his five 'root' spiritual sons. They were Lhalung Pelgyi Sengye, Namkhai Nyingpo, Ma Rinchen Chok, Dorje Dudjom and Yeshe Tshogyel. Her four other companions were also assigned roles in the initiatory rite of Dorje Phurba. Dewamo, who was renamed Chonema, the Glorious Priestess, was appointed the Vajra hostess (Dorje Jenmo); Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang were appointed Vajra Dancers (Dorje Gingpa) and renamed Karma Dondup and Karma Tarje; the Bhutanese boy Sale was appointed Vajra Attendant (Vajrakarmaka); and then, at the beginning, he made me the "root consort" and Tashi Khyidren the "liberating consort"

The Guru and his two consorts practiced for seven nights, and all signs of accomplishment of the Dorje Phurba appeared. The signs included the manifestation of the gods attending to Dorje Phurba and dancing of ritual daggers "redolent with perfumes".

WHO WAS THE TIGRESS MOUNT? – IT WAS TASHI KHYIDREN NOT YESHE TSOGYEL



164 Guru Padmasambhava in the form of Dorje Drolo, riding a tigress mount

According to Yeshe Tsogyel's liberation-story, it seems clear that the tigress upon whose back Guru Padmasambhava mounts as Dorje Drolo was the Bhutanese girl Tashi Khyidren. Whereas Yeshe Tshogyel was transformed into Ekajati and was joined in union with Dorje Drolo.

"The evening that these miraculous signs appeared, the Guru himself was transformed into Dorje Trollo (Adamantine Sagging Belly) with myself as Ekajati (The Crone with One Hair Knot), joined in union with him, and Tashi Khyidren as our mount, the tigress, to subject the gods and demons of microcosmic worlds of the four quarters of Tibet. Riding upon the back of the girl Khyidren transformed into a tigress, the Guru and his mystic partner absorbed in the samadhi of Dorje Phurba, holding a nine-pronged vajra in his right hand and rolling a phurba of bell metal in his left hand, the Guru projected countless, fierce, terrifying beings in forms identical to himself. In particular, one of these forms called Blue-black Vajra Wrathful Phurba (Tingnak Dorje Trophur) flew directly to Paro Taktsang, and there he subjugated gods, demons, wrathful Dakinis, and demon savages and the three eight-fold classes of spirits of the barbarian

borderlands and beyond – Bhutan, Nepal, India and Lho – and bound them to serve the dharma. Another emanation called Purple Vajra Wrathful Phurba (Muknak Dorji Trophur) flew as far as the second Taktsang, in Kham, and subjugated the gods, demons and demon savages and the three eight-fold classes of spirits in the barbarian lands of Kham, Jang, China and Hor, binding them to serve the dharma, taking away their life-essence..”

It was also there at Womphu Taktshang that Guru Rinpoche asks Yeshe Tshogyel to give him Tashi Chidren, who had all the marks of Awareness *Ḍākinī* (Vajrakarmaki). She would be employed as his consort for the practice of Dorji Phurba (Vajrakilaya). Yeshe Tshogyel offers Tashi Chidren to her Guru and prays that he reveal to her the tantric mysteries and to her, Yeshe Tshogyel, the secret instructions of Dorje Phurba. Guru Rinpoche sends Yeshe Tshogyel to Uru in Central Tibet to find a fourteen year old boy who would be her tantric partner for the practice. She finds him and returns. Guru Rinpoche names the boy, Lhalung Pelgyi Sengye, who would be reborn later as Lhalung Pelgyi Dorji and assassinate the anti-Dharma king, Langdarma[7].” (from Dowman, 1996, pp. 90-91)



165 Ekajati and protectors with Guru Rinpoche

As Kinga (2019) explains:

“The transformation of the trio into Dorje Dorlo, Ekajati and the tigress neither takes place at Taktsang nor do they fly in from Sengye Dzong, as the signboard tells visitor at Ramthangkha, the place where motor road ends and the trek to Taktshang begins. Again, at the junction between Sengephru and Taktshang monastery, the following prayer is inscribed on a board besides the sign board pointing up the flight of 125 steep steps to Sengephru. It captures what Dorji Drolo did at Taktsang.

In the sacred rock cavern of Sengye Samdrup in Taktshang,
Subduing vicious heretics, demons and gnomes,
Hiding sacred treasures in holy sites, mountains and cliffs.
Looking with compassion at sentient beings of degenerate age,
I pray to the skillful Dorje Drolo!”



166 Guru Padmasambhava in the form of Dorje Drola, riding a tigress mount

2) A 21st CENTURY INTERPRETATION OF TSOGYEL'S LIFE AND CHARACTER

As I wrote about before [here](#), Yeshe Tsogyel was an extraordinarily brave woman who travelled to the hell realms to save beings who had harmed her. However, other aspects of her life and experience are worth brief comment as being evidence of a woman blazing a fire-trail for other female practitioners, both then and now.

COUGAR – 21st CENTURY SEXISM APPLIED TO TSOGYEL AND/OR A PLAY ON WORDS? Older woman with young male consorts



167 Cougar is a modern slang term for an older woman who is in, or seeks out, relations with younger men.

The fact that Tsogyel had several teenage, male consorts, cuts through the male-centric (sexist and ageist) view of consorts being young, pretty women of male teachers. In addition, the fact that Tsogyel was significantly older than these men demonstrates how karmamudra consort practice is not about a woman's age or physical appearance at all, but about mastery of the inner channels and winds.

In contemporary language, and slightly tongue-in-cheek, Tsogyel might well be called the first Tibetan Buddhist 'cougar' [\[8\]](#)! Cougar being a modern slang term for an older woman with, or who seeks out younger men. The use of the word 'cougar' here is not meant in any way to condone the sexist use of the term applied to women. It is seen by some as derogatory and misogynist, as older men with younger women do not get termed that way. Although some women (and men) see the term as empowering and cutting through ageism and sexism. As some black people have done with the word

n**ger, words intended to be used in derogatory, racist or sexist ways can be re-claimed and used by the very group they are intended to humiliate, and there is no reason why cougar cannot be re-claimed in the same way either.

The point here is that, if Yeshe Tsogyel were alive today, she may well have that term applied to her by people who regarded her very young male consorts and conduct in a negative and sexist way too. Nonetheless, it could be asserted that her conduct is brave, unconventional and ahead of its time in terms of challenging sexist gender stereotypes about older women having tantric sexual unions with younger men.

However, a cougar like a tiger is also a strong and powerful animal, and used in this context it is also playfully intended to draw attention to the fact that Tsogyel was not in fact the tigress mount as is commonly explained. As I wrote previously in [Re-Claiming Words](#), words intended to be used in derogatory, sexist and racist ways can be re-claimed and used by the very group they are intended to mock and humiliate, and there is no reason why cougar cannot be re-claimed in the same way either.

Ageism, gender and the importance of celibacy

Also, it is worth clarifying here that even though Tsogyel's consorts were much younger than her the age is symbolic, and was taught generally to refer to the mind of the person and purity of the inner channels etc. Sexual desire is important, but both men and women find older people in their 40s, 50s and 60s attractive and sexy too.

A real, qualified master will not be looking at physical age or appearances but more the state of mind and level of the woman/man. Also, Sukhasiddhi, one of the most important female masters in the Shangpa Kagyu, was 66 in years when she did union practice with a qualified master and attained the youthful appearance of a 16 year-old.

It is celibacy and ethical discipline (rather than virginity) that is often more important than physical appearance, as I have written about before, as the inner channels are much purer than someone who is having ordinary worldly sex with people, or smoking and drinking etc. I also spoke about the importance of celibacy in a paper I presented at the Bhutan conference on the Vinaya, Vajrayana and women as consorts, that being 'celibate' (not engaging in sex for ordinary, worldly reasons) is actually very important for consort practice, contrary to the commonly-held idea that it is all about sexual intercourse and being young and pretty. More on that in the future!

For my essay on the feminist, male consort of Vajrayogini, see [here](#).

The rape of Yeshe Tsogyel – transforming it into the four joys

Yeshe Tsogyel was not only a brave, courageous proto-feminist with young, male consorts who subdued demons and travelled to hell realms to save beings who had harmed her, she also endured brutality, misogyny and rape. As the *Sky-Dancer* biography states, she was raped by seven bandits:

“Then I went to live in Shampo Gang, and it was there that seven bandits robbed me of my possessions and raped me. Afterwards I sang them this song of introduction to the four joys.

NAMO GURU PADMA SIDDHI HRI!

My sons you have met a sublime consort, the Great
Mother,

And by virtue of your resources of accumulated merit,

Fortuitously, you have received the four empowerments.
Concentrate upon the evolution of the four levels of joy.

Immediately you set eyes upon my body-mandala,
Your mind was possessed by a lustful disposition,
And your confidence won you the Vase Initiation.
Apprehend the very essence of lust,
Identify it as your creative vision of the deity,
And that is nothing but the Yidam deity himself.
Meditate upon lustful mind as Divine Being.

Uniting with space, your consort's secret mandala,
Pure pleasure exciting your nerve centres,
Your aggression was assuaged and loving kindness
 was born,
And its power won you the Mystic Initiation.
Apprehend the very essence of joy,
Mix it with your vital energy and maintain it awhile,
And if that is not mahamudra, nothing is.
Experience pleasure as mahamudra.

Joined to your consort's sphere of pure pleasure,
Inspired to involuntary exertion,
Your mind merged with my mind,
And that blessing won you the Wisdom Initiation.
Undistracted, guard the very essence of pleasure,
Identify pure pleasure with Emptiness,
And that is what is known as immaculate empty
 pleasure.
Experience pure pleasure as supreme joy.

United at your consort's blissful nerve,
Our two nectars fused into one elixir.
The phenomena of self and others extinguished,
Awareness won you the Initiation of Creative
Expression.
Guard the natural purity in the world of appearances,
Identify your love and attachment with Emptiness,
And that is nothing other than Dzokchen itself.
Experience innate joy as no-joy.

This is extraordinary, exalted secret instruction;
To consciously practise this method brings a fall,
But discovered by chance it gives miraculous release.
You attained the four empowerments at once,
And your success was matured by the four stages
 of joy.

(Establishing, Spreading and Perpetuating the Teaching, pp.118-9)"

[N.B I have not checked the translation of the Tibetan here, so cannot say for sure if it is accurate translation or not].

Dowman wrote his own commentary on this rape of Tsogyel [here](#). As this life-story is said to be written by Tsogyel's male consort, Atsara Sale (and translated by a man), it is difficult to know how much this accurately represents Tsogyel's own voice and experience.

Nonetheless, in the current climate of #metoo and exposure of lama misconduct, it is inspiring and interesting to read how Tsogyel uses her practice and view of reality to transform what happened to her, even teaching the rapists about the ultimate view and four joys.

That is not to condone or excuse the rape or sexual assault of any person, or to suggest people should not seek justice and protect others from harm and further misconduct. In fact, actions exposing abuse and misconduct by men towards women, when undertaken with love and compassion and to protect others from harm, can be considered Bodhisattva actions. However, this example demonstrates that in the Vajrayana world of an authentic and advanced Buddhist practitioner, such as Tsogyel, as Mahatma Gandhi said: 'No-one can hurt me without my permission.'



168 Or as we might put it in modern-day slang :-)

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[UNsung HEROINES, MOTHERS OF MAHĀMUDRĀ AND SOURCE OF SARAHĀ'S SONGS : Re-telling the \(her\)stories of the symbolic 'arrow-maker' Dakhenma, and the 'radish-curry' cook gurus of siddha, Saraha](#)

['DIFFICULT' AND WILD WOMEN: THE INVISIBILITY AND OVERLOOKING OF FEMALES IN BUDDHISM, PAST AND PRESENT, PATRIARCHAL ACADEMIA AND FEMALE TOKENISM](#)

[BLISS QUEEN: YESHE TSOGYEL AND VAJRAYOGINĪ. Their connection, supplications and new translation of Yeshe Tsogyel Supplication by Tertön-Yogini, Tare Lhamo](#)

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ENDNOTES

[1] At the Bhutan Vajrayana conference in 2022, it was disappointing at the very least, that the white American undergraduate student on my panel who had been chosen by the male organisers to present her paper on Tsogyel did not even do a quick review and mention of the several books and PhDs on Tsogyel done by several female scholars (whom I list in this essay). The speech was like a high school presentation, with personal opinions, unsourced quotes and not much else.

In my view, it does not matter if it is a man or a woman, people should not come to an international Vajrayana conference, and speak on a main panel about a subject they have done zero research, translation or significant time/work on with scholars/experts who have (and for whom they clearly do not value or respect). Ageism (especially when combined with sexism) is absolutely anti-modern and anti-intellectual. In addition, they should expect and happily accept some critique if they do, whether it is from a man or a woman. Failure to accept or value that feedback from a person who is an experienced and recognised scholar/researcher/writer, and worse still take it very personally, is a sign they are also not mature enough to engage in genuine intellectual or academic discussions. It is not a high school charity/popularity contest.

Generally speaking, the Vajrayana conference in Bhutan was a 'mixed bag' as they say in English. Some were renowned, or rigorous scholars whose work, although excellent in the scholarly context, was way beyond the interest/focus of the majority of the audience of non-scholars and did not really directly address the issue of modernity at all. Some were non-scholars, whose work was unsourced and unoriginal and spoke more about their own businesses/projects/travel expeditions etc. than anything

connected to the conference theme of Buddhism and modernity or Bhutan. A few managed to be both scholarly and directly addressing the theme, of which I hope mine was one! Nonetheless, due to the diversity of speakers and interests, it was certainly a fun and interesting conference to attend, more so perhaps than a very scholarly and academic conference, with people pontificating at length over critical editions and an obscure quote in Sanskrit, that no-one has read or really cares about :-).

[2] Dr. Sonam Kinga was the chairperson of the National Council of Bhutan, and currently serves in the faculty at the Royal Institute of Strategic Studies (RIGSS), Phuntsholing, Bhutan.

[3] English language translations of liberation-stories about Guru Padmasambhava written by Yeshe Tsogyel, include:

- Tsogyal, Yeshe. 1999. *The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava*. Translated by Erik Pema Kunsang. Boston: Shambala Publications.
- Tsogyal, Yeshe. 1978. *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*. Translated into French by Gustav-Charles Toussaint; translated into English by Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays. Berkeley: Dharma Publishing.

[4] In his *Religious History of Southern Dragon* (lho 'brug chos 'byung), Guru Rinpoche stated:

“Just by traveling there, one would find the path [to liberation],
My followers, who practice the dharma,
Flee to the southern gorges, the hidden sacred land!

And said:

Find a retreat place at the southern gate of the southern gorges,
If you did this what you accomplish in seven years in Tibet
You will accomplish it in seven days in these sacred places.
And the Lamp that Illuminates All Prophecies says:
At mountain gorges and snow crevices in the border regions of southern Tibet,
And at the forested gorges, so forth, in all types of gorges,
As they will be needed at a future time,
I, Padmasambhava, blessed and left them as it is. Dharma Yogis could obtain accomplishment
in these places very quickly.
All country gods and local spirits will protect them from obstacle makers.

Even devils and non-Buddhist heretics will not occur. It is the fatherland of all the dharma practitioners.”

And:

“At the border between Mon (Bhutan) and Tibet, there are four [greater] hidden land
Eight lesser hidden lands, and ten thousand sub-hidden lands,
I, Padmasambhava, concealed them as they will of use in future!”

[5] Kinga (2019: 65) writes: “It is common knowledge to many Bhutanese that the massive cliff of Paro Taktshang has the appearance of Dorje Drolo. The three Taktshangs mentioned here, and events associated with them have been confused in latter narratives, oral or textual, that gave rise to different versions. Many assume that there is just one Taktshang, in Paro, Bhutan, and hence associate events that happened in other Taktshangs with the one at

Paro. Yeshe Tshogyel comes to Sengye Dzong from Tidro with her consort Atsara Sale and a girl called Dewamo.”

[6] Kinga (2019:66) also writes that: “During my research about Khoma village in Lhuntse more than a decade earlier, I was informed that the origin of the name Khoma is based on Guru Rinpoche telling the local ruler that he had a daughter/girl (khomo) whom the Guru would need (for tantric practice) ལ་མ་བོ་བ་ཀྱི་ལྷ་མོ། (Sonam Kinga, 2002). It now turns out that it was Yeshe Tshogyel instead of Guru Rinpoche who said it. Indeed, Guru Rinpoche says the same to Yeshe Tshogyel later but in a different location as we shall see below.”

[7] Kinga (2019) continues: “It was therefore, at Womphu Taktsang in Tibet and not Paro Taktshang in Bhutan that the practice of Dorje Phurba (Vajrakilaya) was initiated by Guru Rinpoche along with his five ‘root’ spiritual sons. They were Lhalung Pelgyi Sengye, Namkhai Nyingpo, Ma Rinchen Chok, Dorje Dudjom and Yeshe Tshogyel. Her four other companions were also assigned roles in the initiatory rite of Dorje Phurba. Dewamo, who was renamed Chonema, the Glorious Priestess, was appointed the Vajra hostess (Dorje Jenmo); Atsara Sale and Atsara Pelyang were appointed Vajra Dancers (Dorje Gingpa) and renamed Karma Dondup and Karma Tarje; the Bhutanese boy Sale was appointed Vajra Attendant (Vajrakarmaka); and then, at the beginning, he made me the “root consort” and Tashi Khyidren the “liberating consort” (Dowman, 1996, p. 90)

BLISS QUEEN: YESHE TSOGYEL AND VAJRAYOGINĪ. Their connection, supplications and new translation of Yeshe Tsogyel Supplication by Tertön-Yogini, Tare Lhamo

[13th December 2021](#) [Dākinī Translations](#)

རང་ཉིད་སྒྲིབ་ཅིག་དྲན་རྒྱལ་ལྟ།

Perfect in the moment of recollection,

དོན་རྒྱལ་འབྱོར་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་སྒྲུབ།

I am Vajrayoginī in the form of Yeshe Tsogyal

-From the *Concentrated Essence: A Sādhana of Yeshe Tsogyal*^[1] by Dudjom Rinpoche^[2]

The mother of all the Buddhas, Vajrayoginī;

རྒྱལ་བ་ཀུན་ལུས་དོན་རྒྱལ་འབྱོར་མ།

Queen of the ocean of melodies, Sarasvatī;

སྒྲུབ་དབྱངས་རྒྱ་མཚོའི་མངའ་བདག་དབྱངས་ཅན་མ།

The liberator of all beings with compassion, Arya Tārā;

ཐུགས་རྒྱུ་འགྲོ་ཀུན་སྒྲུབ་མཛད་རྒྱལ་བ་ཅུན་མ།

The ḍākinī who is kind to Tibet.

བོད་ལ་བཀའ་དྲིན་ཆེ་བའི་མཁའ་འགྲོ་མ།

-from *Supplication to Yeshe Tsogyel: Longing Melody of Faith* by Mipham Rinpoche^[3]

“It is essential to practice a yidam deity because through that you will attain siddhis, your obstacles will be removed, you will obtain powers, receive blessings, and give rise to realization. Since all these qualities result from practicing the yidam deity, then without the yidam deity you will just be an ordinary person. By practicing the yidam deity you attain the siddhis, so the yidam deity is essential.”

—Guru Padmasambhava’s Advice to Yeshe Tsogyel from *Dākinī Teachings*

Introduction



169 Vajrayoginī

For Guru Rinpoche Day today, I offer a brief research post on the 8th Century realised yogini, Yeshe Tsogyel (one of the main consorts of Guru Padmasambhava) and her connection to Vajrayoginī, as well as a new translation of a supplication to her by a twentieth century yogini emanation of Tsogyel, called Tare Lhamo, where she refers to Tsogyel as Vajravārāhī. For more on the life story of Yeshe Tsogyel, see [here](#).

Vajrayoginī appears in many forms, as I wrote about recently [here](#), she can be any woman, wrathful, peaceful, old or young. As a yidam deity, she is often depicted with a scarlet red, semi-wrathful form (Vajrayoginī/varahi/Dorje Phagmo) and a black, wrathful form (Troma Nagmo). In particular, there are certain well-known female practitioners, such as Machig Labdron, Achi Chokyi Drolma and currently the female tulku Vajrayoginī, based in Bhutan who are considered to be her emanations.



170 Troma Nagmo

It is said that in *The Precious Garland of Lapis Lazuli*, Jamgön Kongtrul says:

“Yeshe Tsogyal was a direct incarnation of Dhatvishvari Vajrayoginī in the form of a woman. She served Padmasambhava perfectly in that life, engaged in sadhana practice with incredible perseverance and attained a level equal to Padmasambhava himself, the ‘continuity adorned with inexhaustible body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities.’ Her kindness to the land of Tibet surpasses the imagination and her compassionate activity which is no different from Padmasambhava’s continues unceasingly.”

Although it is well-known that Yeshe Tsogyel practiced and accomplished the yidam deity, Vajrakilaya, not so much has been written about her connection to Vajrayoginī. A follower of my work and website, sent me a brief sadhana, said to have been written by Jnana, also the name for Dudjom Rinpoche. They wanted to know if there are any other sadhanas that refer to Tsogyel as Vajrayoginī? The answer is ‘yes’, many Nyingma masters, such as Dudjom Rinpoche, have composed praises, supplications and sadhanas for Tsogyel that refer to her as a manifestation of Vajrayoginī.

For example, there is the *Supplication to Yeshe Tsogyel: Longing Melody of Faith* by Mipham Rinpoche^[3] quoted at the beginning of this post. This is produced (in English only) in a *Cascade of Waterfall Nectar* by Thinley Norbu (2009: 171-172). The Tibetan text is in the *Collected Works of Mipham Rinpoche* published in Bhutan and available online at TBRC W23468. Also, in the Dudjom Tersar Volume 6, there are several texts to the Yumkha Yeshe Tsogyel, from the pure visions of the 5th Dalai Lama in the Longsel Sky Dharma cycle^[4]. Yeshe Tsogyel is said to be the nirmanakāya, outer form; Vajrayoginī is the Sambhogakāya, inner form; and Wrathful Black One (Troma Nagmo) as the Dharmakāya, innermost secret form.



171 Dudjom Rinpoche who recognised Tare Lhamo as an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyel

Below is a small intro to the twentieth-century yogini and treasure-revealer, Tare Lhamo, an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyel recognised by Dudjom Rinpoche, followed by the first translation of a supplication she wrote to Yeshe Tsogyel where she is referred to as Vajrayoginī. This whole post and translation, can be freely downloaded as .pdf [Yeshe Tsogyel and Vajrayogini](#).

Music? [Yeshe Tsogyel mantra](#). [Superwoman](#), by Alicia Keys: 'Say yes I will. yes I can. Cause I am a Superwoman, yes I am.' [Queen](#) by Jessie J: 'Let's get naked, start meditating and say: 'I love my body, I love my skin, I am a goddess, I am a Queen.'

May this new translation be of benefit and may we all realize the qualities of Yeshe Tsogyel and Vajrayoginī! Dedicated to the Queens, Jetsunmas, Khandros, Yoginis and the superwomen heroine mothers. Special thanks to Kate for being the inspiration for this post.

Written and translated by Adele Tomlin, 13th December 2021.

Tare Lhamo – emanation of Yeshe Tsogyel and Vajravārāhī



172 Tare Lhamo (1938-2003)

I was looking at the *Collected Works of Tare Lhamo*^[5], Tare Lhamo (ta re lha mo nam mkha'i bu mo) or Tare Dechen Gyalmo (1938-2003) who was one of the most active contemporary women tertöns and masters of Tibet. Volume Four of those works is full of sadhanas, praises and texts about Yeshe Tsogyel. It is a treasure trove of short sadhanas on many female deities in fact.

Within her Collected Works, there are short supplications and sadhanas to Yeshe Tsogyel in both white and red form. Although they do not all explicitly state that she is Vajrayoginī in them, where she is red

in colour, the connection in terms of colour and implements is striking nonetheless. More on that in another post.

However, there are not many of these texts translated into English for practice (see Sources below), or that are bestowed as empowerments and transmissions by qualified teachers[6]. For this post, I have also translated a short supplication composed by Tare Lhamo to Yeshe Tsogyel that refers to her in the Vajravārāhī form[7].

Incarnation of Yeshe Tsogyal

In terms of her life-story, Lhamo was born as the daughter of Apang Tertön, a miraculous son of Dudjom Lingpa, she was recognized as a reincarnation of several key figures including Tra Gelong Tsultrim Dargyé, a master from Golok, and Sera Khandro, the consort of Tulku Trimé Özer, a son of Dudjom Lingpa. With her husband Namtrul Rinpoche she played a vital role of inspiration and protection during the Cultural Revolution, and of revival of the practice of Dharma in Tibet since the 1980's. Her collection of termas with Namtrul Rinpoche is in twelve volumes. She was the first to recognise Dudjom Sangye Pema Zhepa Rinpoche as an incarnation of Dudjom Rinpoche.

When she was one year old, Khandro Tare Lhamo travelled to Lhasa in Central Tibet with her father and mother. There, they met several realized lamas including Dudjom Rinpoche who immediately recognized her as an emanation of Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal.

It is said that in the Jokhang Temple, these masters offered many prayers so that her activity would greatly flourish the Dharma. Dudjom Rinpoche took the baby in his arm and in front of the Jowo Yeshin Norbu statue, made a strong aspiration that she would bring vast benefits to beings. Dudjom Rinpoche wrote the following prayer:

“Emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal and Vajravārāhī, mother of all the Victorious Ones,
The dākinīs from Kham who hold the name of Sukha,
Will manifest again as Tare, born from mantras.
Her activity will cover India, Tibet and China.
She will then bring all those connected to her to the pure realms of Khechara.”

Khandro Tare Lhamo was also recognized as an emanation of several others deities or masters, including Vajravārāhī, Machik Labdrön, Nechung Yuyi Drolma (ne'u chung g yu yi sgrol ma) and Lushul Khenpo Könchok Drönme.

Stone with Yeshe Tshogyel's red syllable BAM – first terma discovery



Around the age of 18, around the year 1956, Khandro Tare Lhamo left with her mother to Dodrupchen Monastery. According to Tulku Orgyen Zangpo Rinpoche:

“On their way, while they were walking, they were attacked by a pack of wild dogs. They were just two women by themselves in the middle of nowhere and didn't know how to protect themselves. All they could do was picking up some stones and throwing them at dogs. In the

panic and confusion that ensues, Khandro Tare Lhamo wasn't sure what was happening, but they did get away from the dogs. Later that night, when Khandro went to bed, she took off her jacket and discovered some stones inside with the mantric syllable of Yeshe Tsogyal — a red BAM.

So right away, her mother once again understood that Khandro Tare Lhamo was an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal. She told her daughter, 'This stone is very important and you must wear it next to your body'. She put the stone inside a gau [a locket] and Khandro Tare Lhamo began to wear this gau all the time. This rock was actually a terma. And based on the principle of interdependence, through her connection with this special treasure rock, her life changed. Her consciousness and realization expanded. She began having visionary experiences. She acquired extrasensory powers and great compassion swelled within her heart. All of these transformative experiences came from her connection with this very special rock."

Since then, Khandro Tare Lhamo began to discover termas, often in the form of caskets orned with syllables and mantras[8].



173 Tare Lhamo with her consort and fellow terton, Namtrul Rinpoche and Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok

Her love relationship after that with fellow terton, Namtrul Rinpoche is detailed by Holly Gayley in *Love Letters from Golok: A Tantric Couple in Modern Tibet* (2016).

Interestingly her biography also mentions that in 1978 In 1978, Khandro Tare Lhamo revealed and transcribed a long life practice, the *tshe bsgrub rdo rje'i rgya mdud can*, in order to prolong the life of Khenpo Lobsang Dorje and other masters including Khenpo Munsel, one of the main teachers of Garchen Rinpoche (while they were both imprisoned in a Chinese communist prison and when they were released), for more on Khenpo Munsel, told by 8th Garchen Rinpoche, see [here](#).

It is said that toward the end of her life, Tare Lhamo had visions of Vajravārāhī who assured her they were inseparable. When she passed away she was reported to have shown the signs of a great Dzogchen practitioner such as a major shrinking of the body[9]. Born on January 2nd, 2007 as a granddaughter of Sakya Trizin, Jetsunma Kunga Trinley Palter Sakya was recognized by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Tare Lhamo, a recent interview with her in 2020 can be seen here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wRIIOcjXxM>).

For more information on Tare Lhamo, her life and works, see [here](#) and Sources below. There is an English translation of the outline of her collected works, helpfully provided by Lama Dechen Yeshe Wangmo [here](#).



Supplication for Self-Liberation from Clinging [Dzinpa Rangdrol]

from the *Secret Deeds of the Wisdom Dākinīs*

by Tare Lhamo

ཡེ་ཤེས་ལའི་འཕྱེད་གསང་མཛད་ལས་གསོལ་འདེབས་འཛིན་པ་རང་གྲོལ་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

ན་མོ་བཙོ་རྩ་དྲི

Homage to Vajravārāhī!

ཆོས་སྐུ་ཡུམ་ཆེན་ཤེས་རབ་པ་པོ་ལ་ཕྱིན།།

ལོང་སྐུ་འགག་མེད་དོར་རྩལ་འབྱོར་མ།།

chöku yumchen sherab parol chin

long ku gakmé dorjé naljorma

སྐུ་སྐུ་འབྱོ་འདུལ་ཡེ་ཤེས་དུ་སྐྱེ་ལ།།

གསོལ་བ་དེབས་སོ་འཛིན་པ་རང་གྲོལ་ཤོག།།

tulku gato dul yeshe Dākinī la

solwa deb so dzinpa rangdrol shok

To the Dharmakāya, Great Mother Prajñāpāramitā

Sambhogakāya, Vajrayoginī

Nirmanakāya, tamer of beings, wisdom Dākinī

I supplicate, may self-liberation from clinging come!

ཨོ་རྒྱན་རྩུ་མ་ཐ་ལའི་པོ་བྲང་ནས།།

ཆངས་དབྱངས་ཡན་ལག་དྲུག་ཅུའི་གསྐང་མངའ་བ།།

orgyen dhumatala'i podrang né

tsang yang yenlak drukchü sung ngawa

ཤེས་རབ་སྒོ་འབྱེད་དག་དབང་དབྱངས་ཅན་མར།།

གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་སོ་དགོངས་དོན་རྟོགས་པར་ཤོག།།

sherab gojé ngawang yangchenmar

solwa deb so gongdön tokpar shok

From the Mansion of Orgyen Dhumatha la

Mistress of the sixty-branch speech of divine [\[10\]](#) melody

Powerful melody that opens the wisdom door, Saraswati [Yangchenma]

I supplicate, may realization of the ultimate meaning come!

རང་སྒྲུང་གཡུ་ལོ་བཞོད་པའི་ཞིང་ཁམས་ནས།

དུས་གསུམ་རྒྱལ་བའི་ཡུམ་གཅིག་འཕག་མ་སོགས།

rang nang gyu lo köpé shyinkham né

dü sum gyalwé yum chik pak ma sok

དབྱིངས་བཞུགས་དཔའ་བོ་དཔའ་མོ་མ་ཚོགས་ལ།

གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་སོ་བརྟལ་ཞུགས་མཐར་ཕྱིན་ཤིག།

ying zhuk pawo pamo ma tsok la

solwa deb so tul zhuk tarchin shok

From the naturally-arisen Turquoise Pure Realm [Yuloko][11]

Noble woman, single mother of Victors of the three times,

To the masses of heroines and heroes abiding in the expanse

I supplicate, may the perfection of uncontrived conduct[12] come!

མདོར་ན་སྤྱིར་ཞིང་ཆོར་བས་ཐམ་ཅད་དུ།

གསང་གསུམ་རྒྱ་འཕྲལ་རྩལ་བའི་མཛོད་འཆང་བ།

dorna kyé shyng tserab tam ché du

sang sum gyutrul rolwé dzö changwa

བཀའ་བབས་བརྒྱུད་པའི་སྤྱ་མ་ཐམས་ཅད་དང་།

སྐད་ཅིག་འབྲས་མེད་རྩེས་བཟུང་དུ་གསོལ།

kabab gyüpe lama tamché dang

kechik dralmé jé sub sung du sol

In brief, in all births and lifetimes,

From the upholder of the playful display of the three secrets

from the oral transmissions of all the lineage lamas

Please accept us without separation for an instant!

ཕྱི་ནང་གསང་བའི་བར་ཆད་ཞི་བ་དང་།

ཆོས་སྤྱོད་སྤང་མས་མགོན་སྤོབས་གཡེལ་བ་མེད།

chi nang sangwé barché zhiwa dang

chökyong sungmé gön kyob yelwa mé

ཆོས་མཐུན་བསམ་བའི་དོན་ནམས་མ་ལུས་ཀྱན།

གཞི་མེད་སྤྱར་དུ་འབྲལ་པར་ཕྱིན་གྱིས་སྤོབས།

chö tün sampé dön nam ma lu kün

gekmé nyurdu drubpar jingyi lob

Bless us that outer, inner and secret obstacles be pacified

Dharma protectors and guardians tirelessly give refuge.

All thoughts and intentions, without exception, be in accordance with Dharma, and

Absence of hindrances quickly be accomplished!

ཞེས་སྒོ་གསུམ་ཐ་མལ་དུ་མི་འཆར་བར་གསོལ་བ་རྩེ་གཅིག་དུ་འདེབས་པ་ལ། ཕྱིན་རྒྱབས་སྤྱར་བར་ཐེ་ཆོས་མེད་དོ། ས་མ་ཡ། རྒྱ་རྒྱ་རྒྱ། རིག་དགོངས་ངོར་ཀ་ལ་སྤྱོད་སོ།

One-pointedly supplicating without falling into distraction of the ordinary three doors [body, speech and mind], blessings will quickly come to those without doubts. SAMAYA GYA GYA GYA. The face of awareness mind KALASIDDHI!

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- Tulkou Péma Osel Thayé, *Hagiographies de Taré Lhamo et Namtrul Rinpoché*, « Nuées d’offrandes pour réjouir les dākinī s et vidyadharas », translated by Jean-Francois Bulliard (Editions Yogi Ling, 2005)
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- Tare Lhamo website <https://www.tarelhamo.com>.
- *Dākinī Teachings: A Collection of Padmasambhava’s Advice to the Dākinī Yeshe Tsogyal* (Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 2004).
- [NEW TRANSLATION: ‘Yeshe Tsogyel Guru Yoga’ by 15th Karmapa](#)
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- *Lady of the Lotus-Born The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal* By Gyalwa Changchub, Namkhai Nyingpo, and Yeshe Tsogyal. Translated by Padmakara Translation Group (Shambhala Publications (2002).

Endnotes

[1] This has been translated into English, here: [Concentrated Essence: A Sādhana of Yeshe Tsogyal](#). It was also translated and published by Eric Fry-Miller in 2015, by Buddha Visions Press. I have not been able to find this sadhana in the Collected Works of Dudjom Rinpoche though, and neither translation cites the source/edition of the Tibetan text.

[2] <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/dudjom-rinpoche/yeshe-tsogyal-sadhana>

[3] The complete prayer has not been translated or published. Part of this prayer is produced (English only) in a *Cascade of Waterfall Nectar* by Thinley Norbu (2009: 171-172). The Tibetan text is in the *Collected Works of Mipham Rinpoche* published in Bhutan and available online at TBRC W23468 (mi pham rgya mtsho. “mkha’ ‘gro’i rgyal mo ye shes mtsho rgyal la gsol ‘debs dad pa’i gdung dbyangs.” In gsung ‘bum/_mi pham rgya mtsho. TBRC W23468. 27: 515 – 524. paro, bhutan: lama ngodrup and sherab drimey, 1984-1993).

[4] In the *Dharma Treasure of Dudjom Drangag Lingpa* (bdud ‘joms drag sngags gling pa’i gter chos/. TBRC W21576. 6: TBRC W21576, Volume 6, tulku pema lodoe, bir, distt. kangra,. 1983-1985).

[5] *The Treasure Dharma of Tare Lhamo and Namtrul Jigme Phuntsog* was published in Tibetan in 2012 by Sithron Mirig Publishers and is available online on TBRC (tA re lha mo dang nam sprul ‘jigs med phun tshogs kyi gter chos/si khron tang deb tshogs pa/ si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang / khreng tu’u/ 2012).

[6] There are three translated texts from these Collected Works, published on the www.tarelhamo.com website by Lama Yeshe Dechen Wangmo. One of these is the first supplication to Yeshe Togyel in Volume Four of the Collection.

[7] Ye shes mkha’ ‘gro’l gsang mdzod las gsol ‘debs ‘dzin pa rang grol

[8] “Just after the discovery of this terma stone, Dodrupchen Rigdzin Tenpé Gyaltzen asked her: ‘Did you extract, from the site of Dzong, a terma which should have been mine?’ Khandro Tare Lhamo answered: “Is it the locket wear now by my mother which I discovered on the rock Kyabchen Thang?”. “Oh yes, it is this one!” answered Dodrupchen Rigdzin Tenpé Gyaltzen, who, based on this, revealed the Khandro Gongdu cycle.”

[9] “Tāre Lhamo died on March 26, 2002, in a Chengdu hospital. She had been healthy and strong throughout her life. However, according to Tulku Orgyen Zangpo Rinpoche, in 2000, she started feeling that she would soon die. With Namtrul Rinpoche, they consulted with Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok. Everyone agreed that the indications of her forthcoming death were undeniable. They arranged for medical tests, but nothing helped. When they prayed to extend her life, hopeful signs did not arise. It was clear that the dākinī s would soon escort her from this world. After that, one day, Tāre Lhamo donned her best robes and ornamented her hair. She gathered her disciples and offered her heart advice. They begged her to take rebirth quickly and to return to them. Shortly after, Tāre Lhamo laid down on her side in the dying position and passed away. As soon as she had passed, her skin turned white. She glowed and was beautiful. Her body became fragrant. These were some signs of her realization. Her body was taken to Nyenlung Monastery and displayed. According to the practice of Dzogchen, her body began to shrink. Finally, it was the length from your fingerprints to your elbow. It was placed on a plate and offered up at the cremation. During the cremation, there were still more signs that she had attained the realization of a Dzogchen master, such as rainbows in the sky and flowers raining down. After her passing, Namtrul Rinpoche vigorously continued their activities until he passed way in 2011.” From biography written and compiled by Jnanasukha Publications, 2020. <https://www.tarelhamo.com>

[10] The Tibetan here says *tshangs dbyang*, which literally means ‘Brahma’s melody’.

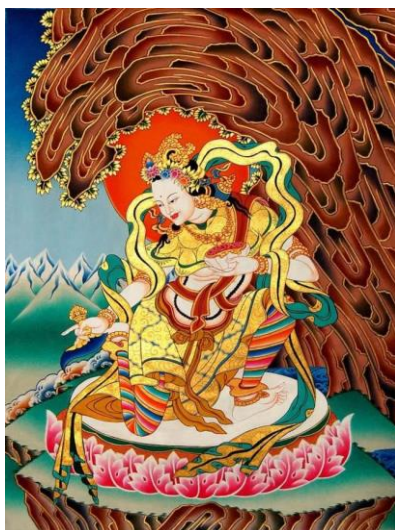
[11] This is the pure realm of Noble Tārā, pronounced Yuloko in Tibetan. An aspiration to be re-born in this pure land, was revealed by female Treasure-Revealer, Sera Khandro, called “Burgeoning Benefit and Happiness: An Aspiration to be Reborn in the Land of Turquoise Leaves” (g.yu lo bkod du skye ba’i smon lam phan bde’i myu gu bzhugs/). It can be found in the *Collected Works of Kunzang Dekyong*

Wangmo (kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo; gsung 'bum/ W1PD108254, pp. 75-77. si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, khreng tu'u. 2009). The aspiration contains vivid descriptions of the realm. It has been translated into English by Adam Pearcey, see here (<https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/sera-khandro/tara-pureland-aspiration>).

[12] The Tibetan term is *btul zhugs* is often translated as 'uncontrived' or 'unconventional conduct'. It means a tantric practitioner who has abandoned worldly, conventional modes of conduct.

Yeshe Tsogyel's Descent to the Hell Realms and How She Got Her Name

[15th April 2020 Dākinī Translations](#)



174 Yeshe Tsogyel (c. 757 or 777–817CE)

As part of the purpose of this page and website is to promote the work and lives of female practitioners, teachers, scholars and translators, here is a quote from a recent PhD on the life of Yeshe Tsogyel, *Literature and the Moral Life: Reading the Early Biography of the Tibetan Queen Yeshe Tsogyal* (p123-4) by Elizabeth Angowski (Earlham College). For the full paper, see [here](#):

” The chapter begins at the Gégong Cave in Chimphu where, one evening, a group of women have gathered to learn how to attain enlightenment quickly. Apart from Yeshé Tsogyal, ten other women are named. After arranging heaps of turquoise on seven golden maṇḍalas, in unison, they appeal to Padmasambhava: “O great Oḍḍiyāna, for as low as women like us are born, even higher is our self-esteem. Since our lineages are bad and our knowledge minimal, we beseech you speak few words full of significance, the instructions for quickly attaining enlightenment. Following his instructions related to the path of the secret mantra, each of the women meditate for one month and achieve spiritual success. On the evening of Yeshé Tsogyal’s seventh day of practice a fierce, blue-bodied entity (khro bo sku mdog sngon po) wielding a hooked knife and holding a skull cup of blood appeared in front of her practice chamber. After acknowledging that Yeshé Tsogyal had realized all of her own aims (rang gi don), he asked her if she is yet able to help others.

When she affirms that she is indeed ready to help others, the fierce entity challenges Yeshé Tsogyal to go to the hell realm and descend to the lowest level where she will find Shanti, the evil minister who is supposed to have attempted to thwart her pursuit of Dharma. The entity then leans a white ladder down a pitch-black hole and points Yeshé Tsogyal downward. As Yeshé Tsogyal descends the ladder into lower and lower levels of hell, she witnesses different gruesome forms of torture being inflicted on hell denizens by armies of demons (‘dre’i dmag) known as dré. At each level, she asks a member of the torturers at work what the people being tortured had done to deserve their fate. She also inquires after Shanti, the minister who advocated for her execution. Shanti, she finds, resides in the level of hell reserved for beings who attempted to prevent others from practicing the Dharma. Though she offers to take on Shanti’s suffering, the king of the hell in which he resides informs her that this is not possible, for Shanti must endure the effects of his own karma. Instead, says the king, if she knows a

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ritual for emptying the hells (na rak dong sprugs kyi cho ga), she should perform it. Yeshé Tsogyal creates a maṇḍala of peaceful and fierce deities, and her veneration of those deities saves numerous hell beings, including Shanti. At this, the king of the hell realm acknowledges that Yeshé Tsogyal's compassion exceeds that of all previous buddhas. When she ascends back up to the Chimphu charnel ground, she informs the fierce entity that she was successful in saving many beings from hell. Before the entity is absorbed into Yeshé Tsogyal's heart, he praises her and dubs her "Yeshé Tsogyal."

"You are the mother who gave birth to all the Victors. You are the Ḍākinī who possesses all qualities." – Padmasambhava afterwards to Yeshe Tsogyel

མཚན་ཉིད་ཐུན་པའི་མཁའ་འགྲོ་བློ་རྒྱལ་བ་ཀུན་ཡང་བསྐྱེད་པའི་ཡུམ།

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