

The Life and Lineage of the Ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa Khutukhtu of Urga

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In the winter of 1997–1998 I had the unique opportunity to spend a few months in Dharamsala, India, at the home of the ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa Khutukhtu¹ Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltsen,² where I greatly enjoyed his generous hospitality and his willingness to share with me the amazing story of his Tulku lineage³ and of his very life.

To begin with it might be useful to give a brief explanation of what is meant by the designation “Tulku” according to Vajrayāna Buddhism. Tulkus are a special kind of human being, who at birth possess certain characteristics, which they owe entirely to the karmic baggage that shapes them as individuals, making them a suitable receptacle for a specific kind of “divine” influence. Furthermore, when seen from the perspective of the divine principles, one could say that they need, in order to successfully carry out the duties of a Bodhisattva, motivated by compassion, to constantly exert its influence in the world; one of the ways through

1 *khal kha rje btsun dam pa*. For the sake of readability Tibetan names are given in a “phonetic rendering” in the body of the text, while actual transliteration of the less common words will appear in the footnotes at their first occurrence. Terms only mentioned in the footnotes will appear in transliteration only.

2 *jam 'phel nam sgrol chos kyi rgyal mtshan*

3 *sprul sku*. Traditionally in Tibet three kinds of lineage, the *rgyud pa gsum*, are numbered. They are: *gtung rgyud*, family lineage; *slob rgyud*, the teaching lineage, transmitted from Master to disciple; and the *sku rgyud*, the spiritual lineage of Tulkus. The latter is the one which we are discussing.

which this is done is for the divine to inspire⁴ a being that is possessed of the qualities needed for this perpetual task.

However the Tulku is still a man⁵ and for this reason, from his early childhood he needs to undergo a strenuous educational curriculum so as to be able to actively recognise the quality and aims of the Divine Inspirer he hosts in some part of his mental continuum. He will be instructed on the Dharma and will have to venture into the practice of the meditative Sādhanas of the Buddhist Path that will finally enable him to willingly cooperate with the nature of the Principle he imbibes, and to bring his consciousness to a level of contact, if not identity,⁶ with the inspiring Principle. He must develop his contemplative faculty, his mindfulness and awareness (Tib. *rig pa*). For this reason it is said that the actions of a Tulku can be thought of as being of two different kinds: actions done with a precise, intuitive knowledge, with the actor completely conscious and aware of the causes and effects of his actions, yet unattached to their consequences, can generally be ascribed to the influence of the Divine which inspires him. Those actions performed in ignorance, delusion, distraction, unconsciousness and the like are carried out by the man.⁷ This is also the reason why even Tulkus are subject to the inherent suffering of duality, to ignorance and to the usual limitations of saṃsāric existence.

When a Tulku dies the man will follow the usual path of the dead, which will be determined by his karmas, and after an intermediate period, (Tib. *bar do*), take up a new place in a new world or whatever, according to the level of his knowledge. Yet the Divine influence he hosted, "overwhelmed" with compassion, remains in this world and seeks out a new individual who will again

4 This word clearly expresses the process referred to here. The Latin compound *in-spirare* denotes exactly the exertion of some subtle influence from the inspirer to the inspired. *Spirare* is a product of the same root that produces *Spiritus*.

5 In this sense definitions like "living Buddhas" and the like are not correct, insofar as they give the impression that one is not talking about human beings; on the other hand it is not clear in what sense a Buddha could be dead.

6 In this case of course there will be no further transmigration; the identity with the divine is *nam par thar pa*, enlightenment.

7 Of course the man will experience the result of any action he performs as his karma.

possess the most suitable characteristics for the time and location where the action will take place.

In the case of the Jetsun Dampas the Deity who emanates the influencing Principle is Demchog or Khorlo Demchog,⁸ the principle of supreme bliss. This Deity of the Heruka class is the principal one of the Tantric cycle of the Anuttaratantra class which goes by the same name. As we shall see in more detail further on, it is interesting to point out that the teachings, transmission and some historical work relating to the origins and spread of the Tantric cycle of Cakrasaṃvara, were undertaken by several holders of the Tulku lineage of the Khalkha Jetsun Dampa (up to the time of Tāranātha), before it migrated to Mongolia.

However let us start from the beginning. Before the lineage came to be known by the name Khalkha Jetsun Dampa, a number of great Masters are recorded, going back to the remotest of times, as is usual with most of the more important Tulkus. In the narration of the ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa, which he inherited from the official biographies and from oral sources, a series of fourteen manifestations are mentioned before Tāranātha; this means that their lives took place in the time span from around the seventh to the seventeenth centuries.

Interestingly, once the lineage had entered Tibet, these sages of old are said to have belonged to the various schools and school-branches of Tibetan Buddhism, namely Nyingma, different branches of the Kagyu, Sakya, Jonang and finally Kadam/Gelug.⁹ This clearly indicates that, for once, no sectarianism is involved and that their position is considered to be somewhat outside and above the mostly political and worldly competition between the different schools.

As mentioned before, the metaphysical principle which is said to be the origin and primal inspiration of the Masters of this lineage is the Heruka Cakrasaṃvara. Following are the holders up to Tāranātha:

1) Paṇḍita Barwai Tsowo¹⁰ (Skr. *Jvālapati*), a disciple of Nāgārjuna (Tib. *klu sgrub*), he was a Siddha of great renown in his time, and belonged to the Bengali Cārya tradition.

⁸ *bde mchog* or *khor lo bde mchog* (Skt. *Saṃvara* or *Cakrasaṃvara*)

⁹ *rnying ma, bka' brgyud, sa skya, jo nang, ka dam/dge lugs*

¹⁰ *paṇ ḍi ta 'bar ba'i gtso bo*

2) Drupchen Nagpo,¹¹ whose best known Sanskrit name is Kṛṣṇācārya,¹² one of the eighty four Mahasiddhas¹³ traditionally enumerated in Tantric Buddhism. Tāranātha devoted a monographic biography to him, probably attracted by the fact that he had been one of the first known exponents of the Tantric cycle of Cakra-saṃvara and of the Bengali Caryā Tradition. Kṛṣṇācārya was born in India, presumably in Bengal. He most likely lived between the seventh and eighth Centuries and was a disciple of another famous Siddha, Jālandharipa. Kṛṣṇācārya also wrote a commentary on the Hevajra Tantra and a number of “esoteric songs” (Dohā) which are now included in the Caryāgiti, a collection of Bengali Caryā songs. A conspicuous variety of texts belonging to the *bstan 'gyur* is attributed to him and, should this be true, at least partially, it would be an unusual fact, given that in general Siddhas tend to avoid the written word.

3) Raten Bakula,¹⁴ was an Indian ascetic. He was one of the aforementioned eighty four Mahasiddhas as well.

4) Rongson Chökyi Sangpo,¹⁵ also called Rongson Chökyi (1012–1088) was a great scholar of the *Kama* oral tradition of the Nyingma¹⁶ school and, together with Longchenpa,¹⁷ is considered to be one of the most brilliant Masters of this school. A great Tibetan paṇḍita, he was the disciple of Dregyalwai Lödro,¹⁸ the

11 *grub chen nag po spyod pa*

12 Doubts seem to have been dispelled about Kṛṣṇācārya and Kāṇha being the same person; another name frequently used with reference to the same person is Kṛṣṇāpāda. For some remarks on his life vide: Tāranātha's life of Kṛṣṇācārya/Kāṇha, LTWA, 1989; and Abhayadatta: “Le vite degli ottantaquattro Mahasiddha”, Trad. and Ed. Elio Guarisco, Milano 1986.

13 A biography of this famous Siddha can be found in J. B. Robinson's “Buddha's Lions, the Lives of the Eighty Four Siddhas” Berkeley, Dharma Publishing, 1979; and Abhayadatta, op. cit.

14 *ra tan ba kū la*

15 *rong zom chos kyi bzang po, rong zom chos bzang*

16 The *nying ma* school is mainly divided into two sub schools: the *ka ma* and the *gter ma*. The former mainly follows the teachings of the oral tradition, the latter relies principally on the teachings revealed in the *gter mas*. *gter mas* are texts, objects, images, even dreams, etc., supposedly hidden in previous times by Guru Padmasambhava, which convey the spiritual influence needed for the spread of these teachings, once the time is ripe for their re-emergence.

17 *klong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer*

18 *'bre rgyal ba'i blo gros*

first Tibetan to receive full monastic ordination; in the “Blue Annals” it is clearly stated that Rongson Chökyi Sangpo was a reincarnation of Kṛṣṇācārya and that Atiṣa had been the one to recognise him as such. He was very well known for his expertise in all branches of the Buddhist Doctrine as well as in the Vedas of India. He was also a translator of Buddhist texts from the Sanskrit.

5) Barom Darma Wangchug;¹⁹ was the founder of one of the branches of the Kagyu school, namely the Barom Kagyu;²⁰ he built the Barom monastery which later lent its name to the whole school which is now extinct.²¹ After his death his body was enshrined in a silver Stūpa.

6) Awanduti Özerpel²²

7) Samdon Tushi²³ of the Drigung Kagyu²⁴ school

8) Nyögyalwa Lhanangpa²⁵ also affiliated to the Drigung Kagyu school.

9) Sangha Baṭa²⁶

10) Jamyang Chöji Tripel Tenpa²⁷ (1379–1449) was a pupil of Tsongkhapa, and in 1416 he founded the Drepung²⁸ monastery, one of the three great centres of Gelugpa learning. In fact this is one more reason for the importance of the Khalkha Jetsun Dampas in the history of the Gelugpa order. Jamyang Chöji was a great scholar of the Kālacakra Tantra and made a significant contribution to its diffusion.

11) Paṇḍita Chökyi Nyejyed²⁹ was born in Lanka and later travelled to China and Tibet in search of Dharma.

12) Chölung Kunga Drolchog³⁰ (1507–1566), of the Sakya school, is remembered mainly for being the author of the famous

19 *bha rom dar ma dbang phyugs*

20 *'ba' rom bka' brgyud*

21 Nowadays only three sub-schools of the bka' brgyud are alive: the *'brug pa bka' brgyud*, the *'bri gung bka' brgyud* and the *kar ma bka' brgyud*.

22 *a ba 'du sde 'od zer dpal*

23 *shang bston khrul zhi*

24 *'bri gung bka' brgyud*

25 *snyod rgyal ba lha gnang pa*

26 *sang gha bha 'dra*

27 *'jam dbyangs chos rje bkris dpal ltan pa*

28 *'bras dpungs*

29 *paṇ di ta chos kyi nyen byed*

30 *chos lung dkun dga' grol mtshog*

Ṭigya,³¹ the “Hundred Instructions”, a collection of a hundred Sādhanas with commentary and explanation, central to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

13) Gyalpo Gajie Sakyong:³² this was a sort of “intermediate life”. At this point he was to be born as Tāranātha, but when ready to do so, he found that his mother-to-be was still a young seven or eight-year-old girl (she was in reality a Ḍākinī with human likeness), so he decided to be born first as the son of an Indian king. When he was about fourteen years old, one day standing on the rooftop of his father’s palace he had a vision of his mother-to-be in the form of a woman down to the waist, and of a Phurba³³ from there to her feet. She waved, exhorting him to follow her and the prince left his body in order to be born as her son.

14) Tāranātha

Here we come to the most important Master in the history of the Jetsun Dampas. He is, without any doubt, Jetsun Tāranātha,³⁴ also familiar to Tibetans by the name Jetsun Kunga Nyingpo.³⁵ Tāranātha is one of the most enigmatic and fascinating personalities in the entire history of Tibetan Buddhism. The variety of fields in which he exerted his brilliant intellect and the range of his actions are amazing: he thoroughly enlivened the world-view typical of Tibetan Buddhism in which the essence of the Buddhadharmā is the Principle and supreme synthesis, through which the whole indefinite multiplicity of possibilities of an indefinite number of worlds can be comprehended, coherently represented and explained. It is precisely in the light of this wisdom that every field of human knowledge and action can be mastered through the practice and cultivation of methods through which one can free oneself from ignorance, desire, aversion and arrogance and thus bring about the cessation of both Samsāra and Nirvāṇa. Coming down to the human world, life and history are then regarded as if being a play – a symbol and ornament of the Absolute. An accomplished being can take part in the play with a precise cogni-

31 *khrid bryga*

32 *gyal po dga 'byed sa skyong*

33 The tantric sacrificial dagger

34 *rje btsun tā ra nā tha*

35 *rje btsun kun dga' snying po*

tion of what effects the present conditions are going to yield and what action has to be taken in order to favour the spread of the knowledge of Dharma. Without being attached to his actions or to their result, he takes part in directing the world, the human realm as a whole, with its peoples and individuals, in a direction which is the most favourable for the correct transmission of the teaching of the Buddhadharmā.

Born in central Tibet in the year of the wood-monkey (1575), in his early years he joined the Jonangpa monastery and from then on devoted his life to the study of Sūtras and Tantras as well as to the practice and experience of the sādhanas related to those teachings. He became a disciple of the Indian Master Buddhaguptanātha,³⁶ who awakened in his pupil a strong interest for the history of Buddhism in India with the narration of countless biographies of the Masters who had been rings in the chain that connected their present with the remotest past of the origins of these teachings. So he dedicated himself to the exposition of the history of the Buddhadharmā in India, as he had heard it from his Master, in order to grant authority and legitimacy to the different Master-disciple lineages of transmission through which the teachings were handed down until his time. The result of this effort was the "Chöjung",³⁷ the History of Dharma to which scholars still refer today for valuable information on the little studied and little known period which saw the development of Tantric Buddhism in India. He also wrote two works about the Tantric cycle of Cakrasaṃvara³⁸ and many others. Another important aspect of Tāranātha's complex life is his deep knowledge of another Tantric cycle of great import, which, as we will point out later, he derived from his belonging to the Jonangpa school: the cycle of the Kāla-

36 The Indian Master *Buddhaguptanātha* was one of the most important sources of Tāranātha's historical works. He was a disciple of the *Mahāsiddha Śāntigupta*, from whom he had heard many of the biographies of Siddhas and Masters, which he reported in his works.

37 *chos 'byung*

38 The "*bde mchog nag po zhabs lugs gyi sgrub thabs rnam par bzhad pa rgyas 'grel t'un mong ma yin pa lhan cig skyes pa'i gzi 'od phyogs bcur rgyar pa*", a commentary on the Tantra according to the tradition of *Kṛṣṇācārya* and the "*bde mchog bstod chen dngos grub 'byung gnas*" with a commentary.

cakra Tantra.³⁹ This corpus of teachings is mainly concerned with the study of time cycles, and is held to be extremely useful for the conditions of this “dark age”. According to the ninth Jetsun Dampa the doctrines of the Kālacakra Tantra, starting from the time Tāranātha lived in, are becoming more and more important with the passing of time. For this reason a teaching which was once jealously kept secret is now taught rather openly.

Tāranātha, the great Tantric practitioner, certainly is a kind of corner stone, a turning point of fundamental importance for the future development of this lineage, which after him moved to Mongolia and became known to the peoples of central Asia, China, Tibet and Russia as the “living Buddha of Urga”.

Furthermore, one of the less known activities to which he devoted part of his life, coherently with the world view we tried to outline above, was the exertion of a strong authority and influence on the political scene of the time. He was the Lama of some of the more important feudal kings and princes who ruled central Tibet at that time. The most outstanding of them was certainly the Desi Tsangpa Karma Tenkyong.⁴⁰ This ruler was the strongest rival to the fifth Dalai Lama's – or, more precisely to his influential regent, the Desi Sonam Chömpel's⁴¹ – attempt to unify all parts of Tibet under the authority and power of the Gelugpa school and the Lhasa government. Tāranātha's spiritual authority was the source of legitimacy of the Desi Tsangpa's rule, in a land where everything had necessarily a sacred source, and he was the origin of the Desi's power. Indeed, soon after the death of Tāranātha (1634) central Tibet was unified, and the Desi Tsangpa was killed by Gushri Khan, the head of the Qoshot Mongols who granted support and military might to the fifth Dalai Lama.

39 The Tantric cycle of the *Kālacakra* Tantra is primarily concerned with cosmological issues. In other words it is devoted to the study of the structural constitution of the cosmos, and particularly of its diachronic on going (the word *Kālacakra* means “wheel of time”). Time is not conceived as linear and homogeneous but as cyclical. Its parts or phases are therefore thought of as endowed with qualitative distinctions of their own, as for instance their speed or direction (mainly ascending or descending, centrifugal or centripetal etc.)

40 *sde srid gtsang pa kar ma bstan skyong*

41 *sde srid bsod nams chos 'phel*

Thus Tāranātha was the first Lama in this lineage to get more or less personally involved in political matters, and to a certain extent to unify in his person both spiritual authority and temporal power. For this reason then, according to the ninth Jetsun Dampa, he is so important in the history of that spiritual lineage, since his successors, from then on, were to be considered as both the highest Lamas of the Khalkhas as well as their Emperors.

Furthermore, from a more strictly religious standpoint, another interesting peculiarity is extremely important to be considered: Tāranātha was the last great teacher of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism. This important school was founded by Yumo Mikyo Dorje⁴² in the XI century and later perfected by Dolbupa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292–1361)⁴³ to whose outstanding works the school owes a period of great popularity and renown. Among the reasons that contributed to the spread of the tenets and rituals of this school was their extremely deep and sophisticated knowledge of the science of the cosmological Tantric cycle of Kālacakra, and, in a more metaphysical way, the doctrine of Shentong.⁴⁴ This view was peculiar to the Jonangpas and was charged with heterodoxy, in fact quite mildly, when the Gelugpa school gained full political and religious control of Tibet, as mentioned before. The Shentong debate seems to have been more of a political nature rather than a purely doctrinal concern. The meaning of Shentong, or “other Void”, seems at a first glimpse to refer to a kind of artificial or theoretical distinction, in opposition to the understanding of the Void as normally intended by Buddhists. This Doctrine might appear to endorse an ontological or eternalist position that is not acceptable from a Mahayāna-Madhyāmika standpoint. The Shentong teaching has been compared by some scholars to the position of the Hindu Sāṃkhya Darśana, or to Kashmiri Śaivism. Yet others tend to identify the origin of this view in the doctrines of the ancient Indian Buddhist school of the Pudgalavāda. Be that as it may, the “state” or “condition” of Shentong is the highest goal for a practitioner of the teachings of the Jonang school, the apex and essence of his path. The basis which gave

42 *yu mo mi bskyod rdo rje*

43 *dol bu pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*

44 *gzhan stong*

rise to this idea seems to have been a particular way of understanding the Doctrine of the Tathāgatagarbha (T. *bde bar gzhegs pa'i snying po*), the “embryo” or “essence of the Tathāgata”. Like other Buddhist schools the Jonangpas assert the illusory nature of all phenomena, i.e. their lack of inherent reality: their only foundation being the Tathāgatagarbha. This is also referred to as the “Supreme Truth”, “True (or Real) Sense” (Skr. *paramārtha satya*, Tib. *don dam bden*) which is symbolic of the presence of the Supreme Possibility in everything relative, from the highest of heavens down to the meanest realms of Universal Existence. As the central element of anything manifested and nonmanifested, it represents the factor of continuity between all the indefinitely different states of being, without which the experience of a variety of them would be impossible. Most importantly, without this continuity, the possibility to achieve the state of Liberation (Skr. *mokṣa*, *vimokṣa*, Tib. *nam par thar pa*) would only be theoretical.

The Tathāgatagarbha, as a kind of hyposthesis of the enlightened condition, is empty of any relativity, qualification or duality. It is thus a negative-affirmative, because the mere negation of its having any characteristics or attributes at the same time affirms its existence, something which is, generally, never openly asserted by Buddhist authors, because this mere assertion would constitute a limitation and a contradiction to the doctrine of selflessness. The Jonangpas consider two ways of understanding Emptiness: on one side, the usual lack of inherent reality of all phenomena (Skr. *svabhāvaśūnyatā*, Tib. *rang stong nyid*); on the other hand there is posited an uttermost Reality, Empty of any determination and duality, i.e. the “Other Void”, which is immutable, due to its being far beyond time, and incommensurable, due to its being far beyond space. The former way of considering Emptiness is in some way related to phenomena and appears somewhat limited by this way of representing it. Shentong is totally unrelated, yet everything relates to it; phenomena pertain to a very different level of reality. So, as in the common Buddhist exposition there are two kinds, (or levels) of reality: that is Supreme and relative, the Jonangpas contemplate two levels of Emptiness. The necessity to formulate these two distinct kinds of Emptiness derives from the deluded condition of the human

mind: it is useful for the spiritual progress of the practitioner, and will finally bring about the realisation that only the Shentong is endowed with reality. In fact, in order to enter the state of Shentong, which is at one with the Dharmakāya, there is no way to proceed on, and nothing to accept or reject. The practitioner should “simply” recognise the nonduality of his own nature and the Tathāgatagarbha, or the Dharmakāya, or the Shentong. Another important word in Jonang terminology is Takten,⁴⁵ which conveys the meaning of Origin or Eternal Base, and which is also meant to indicate the Supreme.

One more point against the accusation of heterodoxy is the fact that even Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the well known reformer and founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism (who is considered by the followers of this school to be the supreme authority on matters concerning orthodoxy and heterodoxy of tenets) had been a pupil to the well-known Jonang Master Bodong Chole Namgyal (1306–1386),⁴⁶ and was thus undoubtedly well aware of their doctrines, though he never spent a word to criticise the Shentong view.

From an historical point of view the Jonangpas were bound to an inevitable decline after the death of Tāranātha, who had been their last great Master (and altogether one of the greatest) because of their political sponsorship of the enemies of the Gelugpas. In Central Tibet even in the years before Tāranātha they had been reduced to a tiny enclave in and around their principal seat of Takten Phuntsogling⁴⁷ and the famous Jonang Kumbum,⁴⁸ although they maintained an uninterrupted transmission of their teachings from Master to disciple. After the death of Tāranātha the Jonang school disappeared from central Tibet. The Takten Phuntsogling was severely damaged by the Mongol troops and its name was changed to Ganden⁴⁹ Phuntsogling, giving it a distinct

45 *rtaḡ brtan*. One of the most important monasteries of the Jonang school was the *rtaḡ brtan phun tshogs gling*, founded by Tāranātha. It is also interesting to note that the house where the ninth Jetsun Dampa resides today in Dharamsala, India, took the name “*rtaḡ brtan khang*” (Takten house).

46 *bo dong phyogs las rnam rgyal*

47 *rtaḡ brtan phun tshogs gling*

48 *jo nang sku 'bum*

49 The name *dga' ldan* (Skr. *Tuṣita*) designates the highest of the Buddhist

Gelugpa flavour. Nowadays only a few monasteries belonging to this school survive in the Amdo province. At present the ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa is also the highest Tulku of the Jonang school, being a direct successor of Tāranātha.

According to the traditional Tibetan view of history, the political position of antagonism between the fifth Dalai Lama Nawang Losang Gyatso⁵⁰ and his ambitious and powerful regent, the Desi Sonam Chömpel on one hand, and Tāranātha and the Desi Tsangpa Karma Tenkyong on the other, is looked upon by some Lamas as a kind of theatrical representation of a struggle. No anger or attachment troubled the hearts of the “actors” (at least not those of the Dalai Lama and Tāranātha), but they skilfully orchestrated events in order to direct the course of history in a certain direction, which was necessary for the healthy spread of the teachings of the Buddha.

After the death of Tāranātha the presence of this spiritual lineage in Tibet was seemingly no longer necessary. The Gelugpas had gained full spiritual and political control of central Tibet and under normal conditions the spiritual lineage of Tāranātha, having exhausted its function, would have finished at the time of his death. Yet a number of factors concurred to perpetuate its existence under a different name and form in Mongolia. Among these factors were his widely admired spiritual accomplishment in the first place, the fame of which was great even during his very lifetime. Another factor was the political authority that he had exerted and, finally, the profound and matchless knowledge of the Tantric cycle of Kālacakra. The perpetuation of this lineage constitutes further proof that the allegations of heterodoxy levelled against the Shentong view of the Jonangpas had been a political pretext. In point of fact the Gelugpas would not have searched for and installed the successor of a heterodox Tulku in the third most important hierarchical position, after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. It is also interesting to note that the successor of Tāranātha was found and recognised by the members of an antagonistic school. Another interesting point is that the Shen-

Paradises, has become a kind of distinctive mark in the names of the monasteries of the Gelugpa school, which is also called *dga' ldan pa*. The sectarian implications involved in this re-naming are explicit.

50 *ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*

tong view was conceivably not so much considered as heterodox but rather that it was held to be unsuitable for the current time, or else not of such great import for the attainment of enlightenment. In any respect, the view prevailed that Tāranātha's lineage could still be of great benefit to the followers of the Buddhadh-arma, and in fact, from that point of view, it later proved to have been the right choice.

From a more political and historical perspective it is also interesting to evaluate a few further points. In the struggle that resulted in the unification of Central Tibet both factions, that of the Dalai Lama (with his regent Desi Sonam Chömpel) and that of Tāranātha (with the Desi Tsangpa Karma Tenkyong), were backed by two different Mongol armies, namely that of the Qoshot, Dzungars and Torgut who were allied to the former, and the Chogtu soldiers, who backed the latter. In a way it is possible to say that the Mongols were the armed hands of the Tibetan Lamas, even though they did not hide a fervent interest in the direct political rule of Tibet under the spiritual authority of the Lamas. In fact one of the most serious problems for the Mongols after the end of their empire was the continuous outburst of bitter conflicts between the different tribes, between the various princes within the tribes and also a general tendency to continual conflict that was probably due to their extremely fierce and bellicose nature. In this respect there was an urgent necessity for the Tibetan Sangha, mostly Gelugpa, to try and pacify the northern territories of the Mongols, simultaneously extending their spiritual authority over those regions as well as over their own land. This was meant also with a view to building a more compact and cohesive alliance of the Buddhist populations belonging to the Tibetan Tradition, able to strengthen their political position, especially in their relations with the awe-inspiring might of the Chinese Empire.

Under these circumstances on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month of the Wood-Pig year (1635) the first Jetsun Dampa, Zana-bazar (Skr. *Svayambhū Jñāna Vajra*, Tib. *rang byung ye shes rdo rje*) was born as the son of Tushetu Khan Gombodorje, a descendant of Abatai Sain Kahn, who was an offspring of the twenty-fifth generation of Cinghis Khan. This birth was preceded and accompanied by all sorts of portents and unusual events. When the Dalai and Panchen Lamas learned of this news they recog-

nised the child as being of the spiritual lineage of Tāranātha and the Tsang oracle confirmed the identification. The event of the union in a single child of a high spiritual lineage of Tantric Buddhism, and the golden lineage of Cinghis Khan, still regarded in Mongolia as the greatest production that country ever gave to the world, was a somewhat unique fact and a strong, if not sufficient prerequisite for the accomplishment of great purposes.⁵¹ The characteristics of this birth endowed the new-born child with the temporal power needed to exert in the world the sacred authority conferred onto him by the divine Principle he carried within his person. The first Jetsun Dampa is also known by the names Ündür (Ondur) Gegen or Bogdo Gegen or Bogdo Khan. The latter, being an imperial title, as will be examined later, was used for all the Jetsun Dampas and still has a strong political flavour. At the age of five the first Jetsun Dampa was enthroned, received his novice vows and officially took up his duties as the supreme spiritual refuge of the Mongols. When he was fifteen he travelled to Tibet, where he received teachings from the fourth Panchen Lama Losang Chökyi Gyaltsen (1570–1662)⁵² and from the fifth Dalai Lama Nawang Losang Gyatso. Among other reasons Zanabazar was held in great esteem by the Gelugpa high Lamas because he was of the lineage of Jamyang Chöji Tripel Tenpa, a disciple of Tsongkhapa and founder of the Drepung monastery.

After he had spent one year in Tashi Lhunpo⁵³ and one in Drepung, when he completed his studies the first Jetsun Dampa went back to Mongolia with a conspicuous retinue of learned Lamas, artists, builders and carpenters who would assist him in building the physical manifestations of the spread of the Dharma. However in his homeland a difficult situation was waiting to try his political skills. The position of the land of the Mongols – choked between its huge neighbours, Zarist Russia and Imperial China – was in great danger of disappearing given their all too evident expansionistic designs. In 1686 Zanabazar called for a conference, held in Huren Belchir, of more than sixty senior members of the aristoc-

51 For a detailed biographical account of the life of the first Jetsun Dampa see: Bawden "The Jebtsun Dampa Khutukhtus of Uрга, Text translation and notes" Wiesbaden, 1961.

52 *blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*

53 *bkra shes lhun po*

racy from all Mongol tribes. During this conference all but one⁵⁴ of the Mongol Khans entrusted the Jetsun Dampa with the power to take a decision about whether to seek protection from Zarist Russia or from imperial China. Due to the traditional and cultural affinities with China, where the Buddhist faith had a long history, it was only natural to look southwards in order to find a guarantee of survival and at least some degree of autonomy for the Mongols. Kang Xi, for his part, recognised the title of Jetsun Dampa Khutukhtu and even declared him as a holder of the Namkö,⁵⁵ the „heavenly mandate“. In Chinese Tradition this is a fundamental concept, and as such is well known⁵⁶. In any case during that period relations between the Tibetan Gelugpa establishment and the Chinese court were quite friendly, as the Emperor was well inclined towards Vajrayāna Buddhism, and received quite a number of teachings from many Lamas among whom was Zanabazar.

Even though he formally submitted to the temporal power of the Chinese, the first Jetsun Dampa managed to maintain a high degree of independence and, for the first time after the Mongol Empire, a certain political unity. This allowed him to exert his remarkable abilities in an astonishing variety of fields. He engaged his exceptional intellect in a number of fields ranging from the Arts, medicine, language and music up to the organisation of the complexities of the Vajrayāna Rituals. In this respect he is known up to this day as being the founder of the Mongolian style of Buddhist Art, and a good number of his bronzes⁵⁷ and paintings

54 Only Galdan Boshogtu, Khan of the Oirats, opposed this resolution on account of his ancestral rivalry with Tushetu Khan. He even invaded the territories of the Khalkhas and Erdeni Zuu, obliging Zanabazar to flee through the Gobi desert.

55 *gnam bskos*

56 The word is used in Chinese with reference to the imperial power which owes its legitimacy to the possession of the „heavenly mandate“. This conception is in a certain way similar to that of the origin of the nature of Tulkus. In fact some Chinese emperors are traditionally regarded by Tibetans to have been emanations of a Bodhisattva, like for instance the emperor Kang Xi, who is seen as being inspired by *Mañjusri*.

57 The best-known bronzes by Zanabazar, unanimously considered to be among the masterpieces of Buddhist art in general, are for instance the *Vajradhāra* (Tib. *rgyal ba rdo rje 'chang*), a series of the „Buddhas of the five Families“ (known as Dhyani Buddhas), etc.

survive to testify that. He employed his extraordinary talent to allow as many people as possible, each one according to his own possibilities, to get a knowledge of what was, in his opinion, the very reason for universal and human existence, its principle and its end. He caused the spread of Buddhism, which had been up to that time somewhat confined to the aristocratic elite, to become the faith of the common man as well. He also elaborated a new alphabetical script, which he designed in a way that could equally well represent Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian.

According to the ninth Jetsun Dampa, Zanabazar always belonged to the Gelugpa school, but interestingly in some of his writings, a knowledge of the Jonang doctrines surfaces, especially in a commentary he wrote on the *Mañi*.⁵⁸

Zanabazar had an excellent relationship with the sixth Dalai Lama Tsanyang Gyatso⁵⁹ to whom he offered his own position after the latter had lost his throne. In his secret biography the sixth Dalai Lama is said to have celebrated the funeral rites for Zanabazar.⁶⁰

Biographies of the Second through to the Seventh Jetsun Dampas are extremely succinct and do not contain many episodes of interest other than the usual eulogistic enumeration of marvels and portents that accompanied their birth and all the important stages and phases of their lives. From a purely historical perspective very little remains to say apart from that. In fact the lives of those holders of the throne of the Khalkhas were all very short. In this respect the ninth Jetsun Dampa gives an explanation, which provides an excellent example of the traditional Tibetan way of looking at the "rules of the universe". He holds that one possible

58 The well-known Mantra "*Om Mañi Padme Hum*".

59 *tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho*. The sixth Dalai Lama has been an extremely controversial figure. He had a very short "official" life, and is often depicted as being very fond of archery, beautiful ladies and mundane enjoyments. He never accepted full monastic ordination, but never renounced his Dalai Lama seat. Some think he was not the right choice, but the monastic hierarchies accept him as the true sixth Dalai Lama. In a series of troublesome and dramatic events he "disappeared", or died, or escaped on his way as a prisoner to Beijing. His secret biography goes on to tell of his adventures after his official death when he wandered as an ascetic in the northern territories.

60 See: Ngawang Lhundrub Dargye, *La Biografia Segreta del Sesto Dalai Lama (1683-1706 [1746])*, Milano 1999.

reason behind this course of events was that, up to Tāranātha's time, the practitioners of the Jonangpa school had steadfastly cultivated the practice of the principal protector of that school, one of the many forms of Mahākāla. If this practice was performed correctly with regard to its ritual and meditative prescriptions its result was to bring about a relation, or even a unification of the meditator with the particular aspect of Reality symbolised by that form of Mahākāla. This means that every practitioner, as well as the school as a whole, gains advantages and must fulfil certain duties (Skr. *Samaya*) towards his protector. The conversion of Tāranātha's lineage and most of his school into the Gelugpa order, caused an interruption of the cult of this particular deity, which may have been one of the reasons why most Jetsun Dampas met an untimely death.

This situation of relative historical anonymity of the Jetsun Dampas came to an end with the eighth lineage holder who was born in 1869, just below the Potala Palace hill in Lhasa. His family was akin to that of the previous Jetsun Dampa, Nawang Chökyi Wangchug Tindle Gyatso.⁶¹ The recognition of the eighth Jetsun Dampa is described in the following anecdote. One morning the twelfth Dalai Lama Tindle Gyatso (1856–1875),⁶² who at that time was still very young, woke up with a clear thought abiding in his mind: "Today the Jetsun Dampa was born". Some time later a party of Mongol Lamas and officials came to consult the high hierarchies of the Gelugpa school and the state oracles concerning the identification of the new Jetsun Dampa. The Dalai Lama told his attendant: "It is not necessary to have more children undergo the identification procedure; the Jetsun Dampa is the one born below the Potala". The assistant was surprised and admonished the Dalai Lama not to tell anyone of his precocious identification for political reasons. In fact, later on, the prescribed procedures were carried out: five or six candidates with specific qualities were selected, taken to the Palace and subjected to a series of trials in which candidates had to recognise a series of objects that belonged to the previous Lama etc. In this case a rather uncommon method was used as a final test: the names of

61 *ngag dbang chos kyi dbang phyugs 'phrin las rgya mtsho*

62 *'phrin las rgya mtsho*

the candidates, written on pieces of paper, were cast in a golden bowl, the children were led in front of a big sandalwood figure of Avalokiteśvara, where the bowl was shaken and some Mantras were sounded. Finally the paper with the name of the new Jetsun Dampa jumped out of the bowl. He was indeed the little boy born at the feet of the Potala who had come into the Dalai Lama's mind on the day of his birth. The child was given the name Nawang Losang Chökyi Nyima Tenzin Wangchug,⁶³ and he was taken to the remote monastery of Gompasar⁶⁴ where he began his studies in the Buddhist Dharma. When he was six he moved to Mongolia, accompanied by his tutors and a conspicuous retinue of monks who were to assist him in the spread and teaching of Buddhism. When the eighth Jetsun Dampa was twenty he married, as Zana-bazar had done.

The period in which he lived was one of extreme turbulence in East and Central Asia, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century. The eighth Jetsun Dampa, who was renowned for his straightforward manners and his outspokenness, managed to continue his predecessor's achievement of granting a *de facto* independence to Mongolia by maintaining an equidistance from his neighbours. He was on friendly terms with the Qing Court until the collapse of Imperial China and even maintained his sovereign position when Russia managed to export its revolution to Mongolia. The princes and nobles of the Khalkha took advantage of the turmoil in the neighbouring countries and, on December 16th, 1911, declared the independence of Mongolia, appointing the eighth Jetsun Dampa as Supreme Head of the Sangha and of the State of Mongolia. He formed a two-house parliament, modelled on western institutions, and appointed mainly members of the Buddhist hierarchies and the Aristocracy to government positions, keeping for himself a position of *super partes* supervision and control. Unfortunately the proclamation of Mongolian independence was acknowledged by hardly any country, except for the Tibetan Religious establishment, with whom the Mongolian government signed a treaty of mutual recognition in 1913. Never-

63 *ngag dbang blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma bstan 'dzin dbang phyugs (Mong. Agvaan Luvsan Choiji Nyam Danzan Vanchüg)*

64 I have not been able to identify this place.

theless many Mongol tribes enthusiastically joined the new political entity and the leadership of the Jetsun Dampa.

During the long office of the eighth Jetsun Dampa many dramatic changes took place in the land of Mongolia and in the neighbouring countries. The feudal struggles of the past began to appear as small skirmishes compared to the massive turmoil and chaotic conflicts brought by the arrival of the modern world and mentality into that area. In Mongolia the overwhelming wave of the Soviet revolution finally crushed the traditional world. Clearly the enormous charisma and authority that the institution and person of the Jetsun Dampa exerted on most people were highly disliked by the communists, who knew that the divine authority of the Bogdo Khan was completely incompatible with the Marxist positions. In fact the gross material world (the only existent according to the materialistic communist view), is not according to Buddhists the only level of relative existence and, most importantly, manifestation as a whole is completely void of inherent Reality. This situation, in which the revolutionary forces were not yet strong enough to compete with the authority of the Jetsun Dampa, led Mongolia to take up an unprecedented form of government: a socialist monarchy. For his part the eighth Bogdo Khan, in keeping coherent with the Tantric Buddhist teaching of taking advantage of circumstances, or taking obstacles on the path, accepted this compromise in order to use his power to protect the religious life of Buddhist practitioners in Mongolia. He managed to maintain a certain status quo until his death, in May 1924, after which the new rulers felt free relentlessly and radically to destroy everything that had to do with their own past or even present, and to start a propaganda campaign against the Buddhist tradition and Sangha. Indeed, even today, after seventy years of soviet controlled rule it is extremely difficult to ascertain what really happened in those dark years. The history of Mongolia at the turn of the twentieth century and that of the life of the eighth Bogdo Khan clearly need further investigation. The thick layer of dirt thrown by the destructive communist propaganda on the previous history of Mongolia, and the typical superimposition of Marxist historical clichés on factual history need to be removed. This situation led the institution of the Jetsun Dampas, rather than his person, to be represented by the official ideologists as a kind of paradigmatic

example of “feudal society” and “superstitious beliefs”, and as such strongly condemned and banned from the constitution. The part the Jetsun Dampa played in Mongolian history, as far as objectivity is concerned, was completely distorted in order to represent to the eyes of the common man the superstitious, backward and rigidly hierarchical society against which the “new lords” were fighting. In other words it was chosen as an example of the reckless exploitation of the poor, credulous and ignorant masses by an intellectual elite. The Buddhist Dharma became an enemy of the state and no means was neglected to eradicate it from the hearts and minds of the faithful. In the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Mongolia the search for a new Jetsun Dampa was forbidden and his position banned, everything that belonged to his institution was either destroyed or converted to some secular purpose, considered to be more “useful to the people”. Under such circumstances it became impossible for the surviving Mongolian Sangha to act independently and set out in search of a child endowed with the characteristics needed to become the new head of the Khalkha Buddhists. In fact, the official recognition of the new head of the Mongolian Sangha should have been the duty of all the highest Lamas of the Gelugpa school and particularly, as had always been since the rise of this lineage, of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. It is normal that the first and second Authorities of the Gelugpas should have the final word on matters concerning the identification and enthronement of the Tulku who occupies the third rank. Considered from the point of view of Buddhist Dharma it is clear that, in the eyes of the faithful, there cannot be any controversy over the ethnic or national provenance of particular Tulkus. In fact, in the light of the doctrinal foundation of this phenomenon, the peculiarity of Tulkus lies in the principle inspiring them, and nowhere else. This means that the search for a new exponent of the lineage should not be limited to a particular area or country, but is the onus of the whole Sangha leadership, regardless of the ethnic or national origin of its members, or of the child identified. It is a matter of religious interest in the first place, and as such it should not take limitations of nationality and ethnicity into account.

As mentioned earlier, because of the political situation in Mongolia it became impossible openly to discover and enthrone the

new manifestation of the Khalkha Jetsun Dampa Khutukhtu, as would have happened under normal circumstances. The quest for the child endowed with all the necessary special marks and attributes was started secretly in Tibet by the Reting Rinpoche,⁶⁵ who was Regent in the interregnum between the thirteenth and fourteenth Dalai Lamas.

Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltzen was born on the tenth day of the eleventh month of the Water-Monkey year (1932), in a house called Thumsi Khang,⁶⁶ close to the Jokhang temple. His father, Losang Jampel⁶⁷ was from Phempo⁶⁸ (near to Lhasa to the north) and his mother, Yangchen Lhamo,⁶⁹ was from Khams. Before the conception of her son Yangchen Lhamo went to visit some Lamas in order to receive blessings, because she wanted to give birth to a very gifted child. So she went to see her Tsawe Lama (Root Guru) Champa Chödrag, a former Ganden Tīpa,⁷⁰ holder of the throne of Ganden monastery, who had been a very influential personality during the reign of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. When Yangchen Lhamo went to see him he was blind and close to his nineties, though he still exhibited a crystalline intellect. Champa Chödrag calculated the horoscope for Yangchen Lhamo and predicted that her child would be a Tulku, but he did not say anything more precise. Some time later, Yangchen Lhamo realised she was pregnant and when she felt the time of delivery was approaching she informed the old Lama, who sent several monks from the Gyūme⁷¹ monastery to perform the ritual bath for the new-born child. They also recognised in him a divine principle that would dignify him as a Tulku but they left more precise details open for further examinations in due time.

However six months after the birth of the little Rinpoche his parents separated and his mother felt she was not in a position to provide the child with what he needed, especially in terms of education. So she decided to entrust him to her brother, Chömpel

65 *rva sgreng rin po che*

66 *khrom gzigs khang*

67 *blo bzang 'jam dpal*

68 *'phan po*

69 *dbyangs chen lha mo*

70 *rtsa ba'i bla ma; byams pa chos grags; dga' ldan khri pa*

71 *rgyud smad*, the Gelugpa Tantric college in Lhasa.

Namgyal,⁷² who lived in the Zhol area of Lhasa. Chömpel Namgyal was a Geshe⁷³ but he had undergone severe physical training and was a bodyguard of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. This uncle put a lot of effort into the education of his promising little nephew up to his fourth year of age. The thirteenth Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso (1876–1933)⁷⁴ had died, and while a new one was being sought and prepared for his office, Reting Rinpoche⁷⁵ took up duty as regent.

It is useful briefly to give an account of what should have happened under normal circumstances, i.e. with the freedom of the Mongolian Sangha to act according to their needs and wishes. Of the nine holders of the Jetsun Dampa lineage only two were born in Mongolia whilst all the others were Tibetans. After having requested the Dalai Lama for the search of a new lineage holder, and after his recognition and basic education by the Dalai and Panchen Lamas and other tutors, a delegation of Mongol monks would arrive in Lhasa in due time, in order to escort their Master back to his seat. Finally a consecration ceremony should have been held at the Khalkha Mitsen⁷⁶ of the Drepung monastery. This would mark the official proclamation of the identification of the new Tulku, during which he should receive the homage of all the major Lamas and representatives of the government. Later on all this would have been repeated once more, with much greater pomp, in Mongolia. Finally the Chinese Emperor would also have been requested for his approval.

In the case of the ninth Jetsun Dampa none of this was possible: the Mongolian Sangha was struggling for survival and there was no chance to search for let alone to handle the presence of a new Jetsun Dampa whose name had been banished from the country. Under such circumstances the Tibetan religious leadership acted independently and Reting Rinpoche recognised the new Jetsun Dampa in a small four year old boy, Jampel Namdrol

⁷² *chos 'phel nam rgyal*

⁷³ *dge bzhes*

⁷⁴ *thub bstan rgya mtsho*

⁷⁵ *rva sgreng rin po che* also had a very important role in the identification of the fourteenth and current Dalai Lama.

⁷⁶ *khal kha mi tshan*, is one building in the Drepung Monastery where students from Khalkha Mongolia would reside. Its top floor was the residence of the Jetsun Dampa when he was in Lhasa.

Chökyi Gyaltzen, after he had successfully undergone three sets of examinations. Firstly his body was examined and the absence of imperfections and the presence of certain characteristics were verified. Secondly he had to choose some objects that had belonged to his predecessor from among a number of them, thus demonstrating the existence of some relation between himself and the objects. Lastly all the higher Lamas and most importantly the oracles of Nechung and Tsang⁷⁷ had to confirm and approve the choice. A key person in the recognition of the ninth Jetsun Dampa was also a Mongolian, who had been the Sapon⁷⁸ (the supervisor) to the eighth Jetsun Dampa, and had fled to Lhasa during the revolution, where he found a position as a secretary to the thirteenth Dalai Lama. In Lhasa he lived very close to where the ninth Jetsun Dampa lived, and he noticed in the small boy an unusual interest and singular reactions when he heard him talking about the fate of his former Lord and of Buddhist Dharma in his country. The Sapon reported his impressions of the child at court. Due to the complex political situation, the recognition of the new Jetsun Dampa was kept quite secret, even though everyone in the religious establishment knew of his existence. These circumstances caused the ninth Jetsun Dampa to live a very difficult and unusual life for such a high Tulku. In the early years, after he had been recognised as a Tulku, he lived mostly in the residence of Reting Rinpoche and frequently visited and played with the fourteenth Dalai Lama, whose parents were originally from Amdo and had been devotees of the eighth Jetsun Dampa. At seven years of age he was admitted as a novice to the Drepung monastery. Here, due to the secrecy of his identity he could not enter the Khalkha Mitsen, but had to go to the section set aside for people from Phenpo, where his father came from. Among his tutors in the study of the basics of Buddhist philosophy were the Geshe Nawang Chönde⁷⁹ a man of great rigour and severity who subjected his pupil to strict discipline and long hours of study, the Khalkha Mongol Tashi Gyatso and the Buriat Geshe Thubten Nyima.⁸⁰ Af-

⁷⁷ *gnas chung, tshang*

⁷⁸ *so dpon*

⁷⁹ *dge bzhes nga dbang chos 'ldan*

⁸⁰ *bkhra zhes rgya mtsho, dge bzhes thub bstan nyi ma*

ter the completion of the Farchin⁸¹ stage the student must undergo an examination in form of a public debate.

However, the young Jetsun Dampa did not feel at ease in the monastery because he had to lead the hard life of a common monk, in spite of being one of the highest Tulkus of the Gelugpa school. Moreover, his education was not really suited to his true identity. In fact, he was not being prepared to take on his high office, but was following the curriculum of any young monk. This situation made him consider the possibility of giving back his monastic vows and leaving the monastery.

While he was still in the monastery he began to receive personal teachings, empowerments and initiations from a number of well-known teachers, in this way entering a more Tantric perspective, instead of the mostly Sūtra-style teachings he had received up to that time. Among the teachers from whom he received many kinds of teachings and practices are: Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama; Chökyi Gyaltzen, the tenth Panchen Lama; Kyabje Ling Rinpoche and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche also senior and junior tutor of the Dalai Lama; Kundeling Tatsha Rinpoche; Rigpai Dorje Rinpoche; Kalu Rinpoche; Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche,⁸² to mention only the best known ones. From those teachers, belonging to all four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, he received the most essential and important teachings of the Vajrayāna Tradition, ranging from Tantric sādhanas like those of Kālacakra, Cakrasaṃvara, Hevajra, Guhyasamāja, etc. to the Lamrim series, from Mahāmudrā to Dzogchen.⁸³

Of all those Sādhanas and teachings received, the ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa prefers or considers most suitable for his condition the point of view and practice of Chöd.⁸⁴ This practice has many variants but almost all lineages do recognise Macig

81 *phar phyin*, abbreviation of *pha rol tu phyin pa*, the perfections, sometimes numbering six and sometimes ten, are a fundamental part of Buddhist monastic education, and culminate with the *zhes rab pha rol tu phyin pa*, the well known *prajñāpāramitā*, the perfection of Wisdom.

82 *bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*; *chos kyi rgyal mtshan*; *skyabs rje gling rin po che*; *skyabs rje khri byang rin po che*; *kun bde gling rtag tshag rin po che*; *rig pa'i rdo rje rin po che*; *ka lu rin po che*; *dil mgo khyen brtse rin po che*.

83 *lam rim*, *rdzogs chen*.

84 *gcod*

Labdrön⁸⁵ as the first Lama to have taught it in Tibet. The meaning of Chöd is “to cut” and it refers to a practice which is held to be complete, or sufficient to allow gifted practitioners to attain enlightenment. The Sādhaka goes alone to a cemetery or some other terrifying location – in this case a mountain spring, which Tibetans claim to be haunted by ghosts, “Pretas” and various other classes of “psychic” or “subtle” beings. In this hostile spot, while chanting and playing a *damaru* (the skull drum) he visualises his own body dismembered and dissected up into all the revolting detail of its constituent parts. The skin, blood, organs, bones etc., are then offered to the demons and subtle dwellers of those region, whom he invites to feast on his own body. This practice should lead to the realisation that the concept of “self” or “I” as having independent existence is false. This idea is precisely the root of all ignorance, desire and hatred, which are the causes and condition of transmigration in Saṃsāra (i.e. suffering) and this very root is what has to be “cut”. The dismemberment and offering up of one’s own constituent body parts leaves behind nothing that can be named or perceived, nothing that has any determination, quality or quantity whatsoever and is thus called “Void”. The sādḥaka faces horror and disgust, internal and external “demons”, and conquers them by direct experience of their unreality.

The particular retreat which the ninth Jetsun Dampa completed is called Chumi Gyakordropa or Chumi Gyatsa,⁸⁶ which is the retreat of “roaming a hundred mountain springs”. After receiving the necessary initiations and instructions the sādḥaka proceeds to a mountain spring and does his practice during the nights. Then, by daytime, he travels on to a different spring, camps there and starts the practice all over again during the night. It took the Jetsun Dampa four months and twenty-eight days to complete the whole retreat.

After this intense experience the Jetsun Dampa decided not to go back to life in the monastery. He thought it would be more productive to move to the ancestral monastery of his spiritual

85 *ma gcig lab sgron*, one of the most famous Yoginis of Tibet; she lived from 1031 to 1129.

86 *chu mig brgya skor 'gros pa; chu mig brgya rtsa*

lineage, the Ganden Phuntsogling, which was located on the banks of the Tsangpo river not far from either Lhatse and Shigatse. Here he went into a number of further retreats, received more teachings and began to impart some. At twenty five he gave back his monastic vows and moved from the monastery to one of a few homes on the other side of the hill on which stand the ruins of the Tāranātha Pho87 the palace of Tāranātha. Having left the monastic life, Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltsen now began to lead the life of a householder, took a wife and had children. In 1959, when the well-known events that led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India took place, he decided that it was time for him to go as well. Indeed at the Phuntsogling and the surrounding area, rumour had spread about his identity as the Jetsun Dampa and he deemed it crucial to avoid political problems with the Chinese occupants and, most importantly, to avoid becoming an instrument of Chinese propaganda. Furthermore, staying in Chinese occupied Tibet would most probably have made any contact with the remaining Mongol Buddhists impossible. So the Jetsun Dampa crossed the high passes of the Himalayas and reached Nepal with his wife and two children where they lived for one year. After that the family moved to Darjeeling where they spent fourteen years of great hardship with a growing family and very little income. The lineage of the Jetsun Dampas hails from the Mongol area and normally, after the end of temporal power, it would rely on the donations of Mongol believers. But of course none of them lived in India or was allowed to visit there, even supposing they had known of the existence of the ninth Jetsun Dampa, despite the veil of secrecy that covered him. Thus he had to engage in many humble jobs, such as a street vendor or cow herd. Some time later he worked at the Tibetan language radio and at the Tibet house in New Delhi, and as a representative of the Kagyu school at the Sanskrit University in Sarnath. In 1975 the whole family (the wife he married after the death of his first, and by now seven children) moved to the Tibetan settlements in Karnataka, south India. But it was only in 1981 that he was given the full status of a refugee with some consequent benefits, like a little flat in the Tibetan settlement

87 *tā ra nā tha pho brang*

called the "Main Part" in Madhya Pradesh, and a small piece of land. Here he could finally leave aside the worldly concerns for his family and begin to live the life of a Tulku, performing rituals and giving some private teachings as the news of his identity spread among the members of the Tibetan community.

In 1984 Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltzen set up a canteen during the public Kālacakra initiation which was performed there by the Dalai Lama, and he was able to raise enough money to go back to Tibet, for the first time in twenty-five years. Thanks to the relatively relaxed policy of the Chinese government at that time he managed to return to the Ganden Phuntsogling. Sadly he found that it had been severely damaged and that the main temple had been transformed into a granary by Chinese soldiers, and the monks had been chased away. Thanks again to the government's co-operative policy in that period, through which he obtained the necessary permission and even some public funds (together with the money he was able to raise from the locals) he started the restoration of the main hall and some other small buildings at the monastery. A few monks were allowed to go back and live in the monastery. Before returning to India he held a solemn re-consecration ritual for the monastery and then left it for the monks to complete the renovation, and later to oversee the administration of daily life.

He then went back to India and resumed his normal life until 1990. The years around the turn of the decade were a period of massive geopolitical changes: thanks to the collapse of the seemingly monolithic block of the socialist republics led by the Soviet Union, a country like Mongolia found itself relatively free to control its own future. The seven decades of forced lethargy concerning anything that was pre-Revolutionary came to an end, and what had survived of Buddhism began to reemerge. The new political forces were, and still are, busy attempting to solve the most urgent problems that such a drastic change necessarily brings about, and consequently the iron grip that strangled the free practice of Buddhism was eased. This situation allowed the Dalai Lama, in 1990, to deliver a preliminary official statement in which he affirmed the existence of the ninth Jetsun Dampa and his identification in the person of Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltzen. In the meantime, during an official visit to Mongolia by the the min-

ister for religious affairs of the Tibetan Government in Exile, Kelsang Yeshe, the Mongolian government started to show some signs of interest as to the whereabouts of the historical religious and political leader of the country. In 1991, on the occasion of a teaching tour to Madhya Pradesh, the spiritual leader of Tibetans performed a ritual of enthronement for the ninth Khalkha Jetsun Dampa, during which the seat prepared for him was only slightly lower than that of the Dalai Lama.⁸⁸ On that occasion the Dalai Lama also expressed the wish that a much more solemn ceremony, called *Tipeb*⁸⁹ (enthronement), be performed in Dharamsala, his usual residence and the centre of all Tibetan exile institutions, where he could receive the homage of all the high Lamas and Tulkus. This took place in 1992, when the ninth Jetsun Dampa and his family moved to Dharamsala. To give an idea of the instability of relations between the new Mongol government and the Jetsun Dampa, and therefore with their own past, it is interesting to see that originally an official delegation from Mongolia should have taken part in the enthronement ceremony. When the delegation reached their New Delhi embassy, they were urgently called back to their country for no apparent reason.

Furthermore the Drepung monastery, now re-established in south India, requested that a formal ritual be performed in honour of the Jetsun Dampa, due to his being a spiritual heir to the lineage of Jamyang Chöji, the founder of that famous monastery. One of the purposes of all these formal and official ceremonies was to establish very clearly that the ninth Jetsun Dampa had been unanimously recognised in the person of Jampel Namdrol Chökyi Gyaltzen by all the competent authorities. This was done in an effort to avoid any possible confusion or the risk that someone might recognise, for reasons of political interest, a different Jetsun Dampa, as recently happened in the case of the Panchen Lama and other Tulkus.

Being the highest, and probably the only, living Tulku to have some relation with the Jonangpa school, one of the tasks the Dalai Lama asked the Jetsun Dampa to fulfil was to re-establish a

88 It is well known how, in Tibetan tradition, hierarchies are made explicit through the height of the thrones on which Lamas are seated.

89 *khri phebs*

monastery of that school in India. This he did with the assistance of several monks coming from the few monasteries in the Tibetan Amdo province whose very survival was under threat. The monastery, now close to its completion, is located in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

In the following years the ninth Jetsun Dampa performed many meditation retreats and travelled once more to Tibet, where he found that the situation had dramatically deteriorated not only from the point of view of religious freedom, but also as far as basic living conditions were concerned. Nevertheless he was able to deliver some public teachings at the Phuntsogling, where the monks and laymen had prepared a platform with a large marquee, in the same style and very place where Tāranātha used to deliver his public teachings. The Jetsun Dampa tried to continue the restoration of the Phuntsogling. He had two statues made, one of Buddha Śakyamuni and one of green Tārā, to replace the ones that had been destroyed by the invaders. This was to make the temple look as similar as possible to the original. But rumour was mounting that the Chinese authorities had started some investigations on his account and this made him decide to return to India in a bid not to put anyone, including himself, in a position of danger.

Back in India, Rinpoche started to enjoy the consequences of his official recognition. He moved to a more comfortable house, where he could receive the many pilgrims who came to pay him visit. People even came from the U. S. and other western countries to ask for some teachings and he was invited to visit North America. As a result he travelled twice to the U. S. and Canada, and more importantly to some parts of the former Soviet Union inhabited by ethnic Mongol people, like Buriatia and Kalmukh. There he also received the homage of many monks, politicians and common people, coming from the neighbouring Khalkha Mongolia, all of whom expressed their wish to invite him to Mongolia. However a number of obstacles, mainly political in nature, precluded the possibility of a visit of the ninth Jetsun Dampa to Mongolia. On one side stood the strong political and economic pressures exerted by China in a bid to discourage the possibility of a return to any form of political power, or even mere influence, of a person of such historical weight. Opposition was made worse

by his doctrinal and personal vicinity to their arch-rival in matters Tibetan, the Dalai Lama.

On the other hand there was the instability of the internal political scene, periodically swinging between the two extremes of waves of nostalgia for the communist era, and relentless and dangerous opening up to savage capitalism and western influence. To be sure, whoever found himself in a position of power did not look positively at a return of the Jetsun Dampa, because of the faith and trust he inspired in common people, as well as being a kind of symbol of Mongolian unity. Indeed from time to time during demonstrations in Ulan Bator, the name of the Bogdo Khan was shouted out loudly by the crowds. As mentioned earlier this name has a strong imperial (i.e. political) flavour and meaning, conveyed by the word "Khan". Surely no politician and no government could tolerate the competition of a person bearing a name that evokes a sense of absolute power, as if to say coming from heaven to be exerted on earth. For his part the ninth Jetsun Dampa is a meek man in his late sixties and has no political interest whatsoever, his only wish being to be able to help in the teaching and preservation of the Buddhist Dharma in its most pure, traditional and correct form. He also lays no claim to properties, palaces or items that belonged to his predecessor, and is of the firm opinion that the conditions of the world have changed dramatically during his "absence". As such he maintains that it would be unrealistic, anachronistic and dangerous to try to revive the past.

At first, the present Jetsun Dampa wanted to visit Mongolia in an open and official way, with a government invitation, so as to be welcomed by all, without having to deal with preconceived enmity on the part of anyone. As it happened, many Mongolian monasteries and Buddhist organisations requested the government to invite the Jetsun Dampa, but an agreement could not be reached in the two houses of Parliament.

In Summer 1999, while in Moscow on his way to a tour of the ethnic Mongolian territories of the former Soviet Union, the Jetsun Dampa met the Mongolian Ambassador to Russia, who suggested that Rinpoche could enter Mongolia on a common tourist visa. After some pondering he accepted because he had lost all hope in the possibility that politicians would come to an

agreement on this issue. On the other hand, he had a strong yearning to visit Mongolia and meet the important Lamas there, so that he could witness personally the situation of Buddhism there. Thus, on the thirteenth of July 1999, the ninth Jetsun Dampa entered Mongolia after more than seven decades of absence. In the Ganden monastery, the largest and most important in Ulan Bator, a solemn enthronement ceremony was held by all the highest members of the Sangha. The throne on which he was seated had remained empty since the days of the revolution. In all the monasteries he visited these rituals were repeated and great numbers of people went to see him and receive his blessings. In the Erdeni Zuu monastery he was even given a seal, donated by all the Buddhist institutions in the country, symbolic of his supreme authority over the Mongolian Sangha. It was meant to confirm their acceptance of the identification made long ago by Reting Rinpoche, the State Oracles and more recently authenticated and publicly stated by the fourteenth Dalai Lama. While in Mongolia he also set up the Jetsun Dampa Foundation, using funds he had collected from donations, and aiming to help orphans and destitute children.

I would like to conclude mentioning once again the wish expressed by the ninth Jetsun Dampa to be able to serve the correct and uninterrupted transmission of Buddhist teachings, and their correct application in daily life. The relationship between the Jetsun Dampa and Mongolia is one of a very deep nature: for "many lives" he has been the spiritual leader of that country and his title is very distinctively Mongol. It is his opinion that as long as the name of the Jetsun Dampa stays alive, the Buddhist Dharma will be alive. His royal function belongs to the past and even though there may be those who believe the days of his political power might somehow return, he considers that a completely anachronistic possibility.