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# **Flourishing of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan and its Way Forward: An Opening Address**

*by Leytshog Lopön*

I would like to talk briefly about the status of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan and its way forward. There are two different traditions of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the old and the new tradition.

## **The Nyingma (Old) Tradition**

First, let me introduce the arrival and propagation of the old tradition of the Vajrayāna Buddhism. It was during the Iron Tiger Year in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD that Guru Padmasambhava arrived in Bumthang from India. Guru Rinpoche restored the life-soul of King Sindhu Raja and saved his life, took the princess Tashi Khewdren as his consort and blessed the barbaric land.

Towards the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Guru Padmasambhava came to Bhutan. He founded and blessed many sacred sites including Singye Dzong and Paro Taktshang Singye Samdrup. He spent at least three months in these sacred sites, practicing and teaching the sacred teachings of the Three Yogas benefitting innumerable fortunate practitioners. Besides, for future disciples he left Mandalas, selfcreated images of deities, hid numerous artifacts, and left body, hand and footprints and scriptural treasures beyond imagination.

In brief, he travelled all over the country, thereby turning this country into a sacred and ideal place for practicing Vajrayāna.

Guru Rinpoche said:

Just by being in the area one will achieve accomplishment  
Therefore, my disciples and followers practicing the Buddha Dharma  
Go to the sacred hidden land in the south.

And...

Find secluded caves in the sacred southern land and practice;  
That way, accomplishment requiring seven years in Tibet  
Will be achieved within seven days in that place.

Over the period of time, in accordance with their respective prophecies, among the 25 disciples of the Canonical and Terma traditions, several including Langchen Pelgi Singye, Omniscient Longchen Rabjampa, Tertön Sherub Mebar, Terchen Dorji Lingpa, Drubthob Thangthong Gyalpo, Tertön Tshering Dorji, Terchen Pema Lingpa and his successors propagated the so-called “distant transmission” lineage, the direct lineage of the revealed treasures and the profound lineage of the pure vision. These saints contributed immensely to the propagation of the Nyingma tradition in this country, which flourishes even to this day.

### **The Sarma (New) Tradition**

Second, let me introduce how the “New” Vajrayāna tradition came and flourished in Bhutan. Buddha Shakyamuni first generated the wish to attain enlightenment and develop Bodhicitta. Gradually he perfected the completion, ripening and accomplishment stages and perfected the four paths of learning and crossed the Ten Bhumis (“levels of attainment”). Finally, he achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya and turned the wheel of Dharma consisting of 84,000 teachings in accordance with the requirements and ability of the disciples.

These teachings can be summarized into two distinctive approaches, the causal philosophical vehicle or dialectical approach, and the resultant vehicle or the method of taking fruition as the path. The latter known as the Vajrayāna tradition was taught by the Buddha at the age of seventy-nine at Amravati. A vast set of teachings were taught that were received and later written in different languages including Sanskrit, and were preserved in the pure realm of Vajrapani, Shambhala and the celestial world.

Later these sacred teachings were revealed and made available in our world by great Mahasiddhas like King Visukalpa, Saraha and Nagarjuna. One such master was great Indian adept Tilopa (988–1069), who was believed to be an emanation of Cakrasamvara, and who had symbolically received these teachings from four great Gurus representing four different traditions.

During the renunciation practice, he went to Oddiyana, revealed and brought the three jewel lineages of the so-called “Whispering Dakini Transmission” of

the Cakrasamvara teachings. On the way back to East Bengal, he picked up the nine teachings of the “Formless Dakini Hearing Lineage”. Contemplating these teachings while he pounded sesame, he finally attained enlightenment or Siddhi.

He went to the pure realm of Akanishtha, Tilopa met Buddha Vajradhara, and received many teachings of the contemplation stages condensed into four and six stages, and the realization stages abridged into five and four courses. He returned to the human realm and started the Kargyud tradition. There are stories that he had three times liberated all sentient beings living in the thirteen provinces of East Bengal into the celestial realm.

Among Tilopa’s disciples, the most outstanding was Pandit Naropa, the crown jewel of all scholars, who had taught at Nalanda University for many years. Through blessings and prophecy of the Wisdom Dakini and Cakrasamvara, he finally met Tilopa, and propitiated him with twelve minor and twelve major hardships and services. Naropa also attained Siddhi after Tilopa hit him with his sandal. He received all teachings and thereafter the two became equal in realization. Thus, they were referred to as the Two Excelled Ones.

Then, as per the prophecy left by Guru Padmasambhava that “an emanation of Drombipa (one of the 84 Mahasiddhas), who will be known as a translator Named as Lodre will be born in the southern region,” the Tibetan adept Marpa Choki Lodre (1012 – 1097) with great courage and effort went to India three times and spent over twenty-five years studying under hundreds of great masters, but principally by Naropa and Maitripa (1007-1078). Finally, at Phulahari, he received teachings on Hevajra, Whispering Dakini and Rongyom (process of equalizing taste) from Naropa, practiced and attained Siddhi.

He also received the essence of meditational instructions from Maitripa, the Father Tantra from Yeshe Nyingpo, the Mother Tantra from Zhiwa Zangpo, and the Denzhi (the “Four Seats” or Catuhpita, an Anuttara Mother Tantra) from his Lady, Cham Niguma, etc. Thus, after receiving so many teachings and becoming a reservoir of Dharma, he became master of the five Kayas. With numerous collections of sutra books, he returned to Tibet and began to tutor many disciples including those who came to be known as “the four pillars.”

A disciple of one of the four pillars was the great Milarepa (1040? – 1123?) from Gunthang. He was the upholder of the oral instruction of the six treatises of Naropa including “the union of mixing and ejection of consciousness”. In the beginning, he was put to a rigorous purification process to annihilate all of his accumulated sins, then gradually initiated into the sacred practices, and finally given the responsibility of upholding the practice lineage, like filling the vase to the brim. He also practiced rigorously at Tanyaphug, Drakartaso, and Lachigang and, spreading the practice lineage far and wide, he became the crown jewel of all practitioners. Whoever heard his name generated deep

devotion and attained liberation. Thus, he contributed immensely to the propagation of the Buddha Dharma.

Then, among the heart-sons of Milarepa, the most excellent one was the great, Gampopa (1079-1153), the Sun-like disciple who was prophesized by Guru Padmasambhava in the words:

I will be born as the great physician of lower Nyel  
There will appear a host of practitioners of essence.

To him, Milarepa bestowed all teachings, in their totality, like ‘filling the vase to the brim’ including the sacred Whispering Dakini teachings. He became accomplished in the practice and achieved realization. He propagated the combined tradition of the Kadampa and Mahamudra teachings later known as the Dagpo Kargyud tradition. Thus, the conceptual principal philosophy of the Mahamudra known as “Gampopa’s tradition of realization” came into existence.

Milarepa’s “Moon-like” disciple Rechung Dorji Drakpa went to India as per his command of Guru. He received teachings on the practice and propitiation of Amitayus from Machig Drupai Gyalmo, and sacred teachings of the formless Dakinis and the six treatises from Tiphupa, and then returned to Tibet. He also realized the ultimate nature and attained Siddhi. Both “Instruction manuals of Rechungpa” and “Gampopa’s tradition of realization” eventually were passed down to Tsangpa Jare.

Tsangpa Jare (1161-1211) was the undisputed dual reincarnation of the Indian scholar-adapt Panchen Naropa and the crown jewel of all Kargyud tradition, Gampopa. He was prophesized by Buddha in the words:

In the place called Sa  
A person with the name Ja [rGya]  
Will appear, who is emanation of Naropa.

As per the directives of the Dakini, he went to Tsari and opened the sacred site. Cakrasamvara and Vajrayogini blessed him. Meditating for three months without releasing his crossed leg, he was blessed by the seven Buddhas from whom he received the seven teachings of interdependent origination. Later the teachings came to be known as “Tsangpa Jare’s classified teachings on interdependent origination”. Thus, he propagated the union of these three lineages.

Within this tradition, it was said that “the Upper Drukpa spread like the stars in the sky; the Lower Drukpa spread like the silt of the earth; and the Middle Drukpa spread like the dust mote in a sunbeam.” Gradually the tradition spread far and wide, proverbially “as far as eighteen days of a vulture’s flight”. During that period, it was also said that “half of the Tibetan population were

Drukpas, half of the Drukpas were mendicants and, half of the mendicants were Siddhis.”

From the Middle Drukpa, the family and throne holder of the Drukpa tradition, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the unison emanation of Avaloketeshvara and Padmasambhava was born.

As per Guru Padmasambhava’s prophecy:

Drukpa Tsangpa Jare, who is the emanation of Namkai Nyingpo  
Who will be known as Ngawang will come to the southern land.

Again, Padmasambhava said in the text “stag sham khog dbub” that:

The person named “Ngag” mastered in the Tantric art  
Will rule the South-Western land and bring peace in the region.

From the “sku lha mkha’ ri” prophecy:

From the Ja [rGya] clan prevailing in Tsang,  
A wisdom embodiment of Pema Gyalpo will appear briefly in the Ngari and Tsang  
region;  
He will be heard far and wide like the Thunder Dragon in the region of U-Tsang and  
the southern land.

Therefore, as per the above prophecy, and as reiterated by Mahakala’s offering of the region as his domain of influence, Zhabdrung Rinpoche came to Bhutan in 1616 AD.

He propagated the Buddha Dharma and the Palden Drukpa tradition in particular, emphasizing the subtle phase of creative meditation on the Nine Deities and realization instructions on the five completion stages. In addition, he adopted the rule of law based on the ten virtuous deeds and sixteen codes of conduct in line with those Bodhisattva incarnate kings of India and Tibet. Thus, he brought the whole country under the golden yoke of one political administration and gently bound the people together with the silken scarf knot of religious administration.

During this period, as per the command of Zhabdrung Rinpoche, in addition to the tradition of the founding masters known as the “*Pha Chos*”, unique traditions of the sons or the successive followers known as the “*Bu Chos*” were added by Desi Umzey. He established the three unique traditions of Gar (dances), Thig (arts) and Yang (ritual performances). Along with the traditional system, new suitable features and permissible textures were added to make them unique Bhutanese traditions.

### **Future Prospect of Vajrayāna Tradition**

Third, let me address the future of Vajrayāna in Bhutan and its way forward. Through the benevolence and farsighted guidance of our successive kings, Bhutan is giving due consideration and emphasis on our unique culture, which is based on Buddhist principles. In addition, the Bhutanese population believes in the principles of Karma and interdependent origination. We are aware of the fact that our culture originated from Buddhism. The development policy of His Majesty the King, cabinet and the public is Gross National Happiness (GNH). The main means to achieve GNH is also the Buddha Dharma. For, in order to make sure that the source, the Sangha flourishes for all times to come, Zhabdrung Rinpoche appointed Je Khenpos as his spiritual successors. A chain of succession to the golden Vajra throne continues until today. His Holiness Trulku Jigme Choeda is the 70<sup>th</sup> Je Khenpo.

In order to promulgate the three sacred sources of teachings of the *Pha Chos*, Their Majesties the Kings and Their Holiness the Je Khenpos opened several institutes for higher Buddhist learning, led by Tango Buddhist University. Several meditation centers were also opened led by the Cheri Drubdey Tewa. This ensured sustenance and continuity of the sacred teachings and instructions.

Similarly, in order to safeguard and promote the *Bu Chos* comprising the arts of dances, creations and chants, the performing arts division led by the Chant Master maintained the continuity of the chants, Mudras and music. Likewise, the Kilchor (Mandala) Division and Lhadri (Painting) Division continued teaching and learning these unique arts. The Choengyer took control of the Dance Division and has gained coverage and popularity in all Rabdeys (District Monk Body) in all 20 districts due to annual Tsechu (Mask Dance) Festivals.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, looking at the sustenance and growth of all our religious tradition of the great founding masters and the unique tradition of successive followers, the Vajrayāna tradition of Buddhism is likely to prevail in Bhutan for many more centuries to come.

