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When a Return to Tradition Appears as Innovation: Establishing the ordained non-monastic Vajrayāna sangha in the West

Ngakma Mé-tsal Wangmo & Naljorpa Ja'gyür Dorje

Vajrayāna as it was first transmitted in India and Tibet bears little resemblance to the institutionalised forms that are current in the contemporary world. As a result, the essence of Vajrayāna insight and practice has often been obscured by secondary cultural and political developments. This paper illuminates the original ethos and practice of Vajrayāna, prior to later culturally determined modifications. Central to this is the advanced psychology expressed in the lives and teachings of the Mahasiddhas – and, its application to contemporary working life. This paper will aim to establish the cogent relevance of the original Vajrayāna teachings in the world today – and, the importance of the non-monastic sangha in manifesting and preserving these teachings. We will include a brief early history of the *gos dKar lCang lo'i sDe* (ngakpa sangha), as distinct from the more widely known tradition of Buddhist monasticism; and also outline practices from a contemporary Western non-monastic gTérma lineage – the Aro gTér. The practices outlined will include the *mKha' 'gro dPa bo nyi zLa me long rGyud* (Khadro Pawo Nyi'da Mélong Gyüd) - essential teaching on vajra romance as an approach to the nondual state of liberated awareness, and *grub chen brGyad bCu bZhi* – the drüpthabs of the 84 Mahasiddhas as visualisation and mantra practices, from the revealed treasures (gTérma) of Jomo Pema 'ö-Zér, which, along with their associated hagiographies, bring out the principle and function of individual life in the process of liberation.

We were honoured to present this paper at the ground-breaking international conference in Bhutan ‘Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayāna Buddhism: A Mandala of 21st Century Perspectives’ in July 2016. We were particularly honoured to be at the conference representing the first gö kar chang lo (gos dKar lCang lo) or non-monastic, non-celestial Vajrayāna sangha from the West. **Gö kar chang lo dé means the stream of those who wear white skirts and keep long, uncut hair**, as opposed to the shaven heads and red skirts of the monastic sangha. We are a teaching couple within the Aro gTér and disciples of the Western-born Nyingma gTértön Zértsal Lingpa – usually known as Ngak’chang Rinpoche, who teaches with his wife Khandro Déchen.



Ngak'chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen

They are the current lineage holders of the Aro gTér, a pure vision gTérma which primarily contains teachings from Dzogchen Long-dé – the series of space. Ngak’chang Rinpoche was recognised as the incarnation of Aro Yeshé – the son of the female mahasiddha and gTértön Khyungchen Aro Lingma who lived and practised in Southern Tibet from 1886 – 1923.



Aro Yeshé

In 1975 Düd'jom Rinpoche Jig'drèl Yeshé Dorje asked Ngak'chang Rinpoche to establish the gö kar chang lo'i dé, the non-monastic sangha of ngakpas and ngakmas, in the West – and he and Khandro Déchen have dedicated the last 40 years to doing so. The current Düd'jom Rinpoche, Düd'jom Sang-gyé Pema Zhépa remembers Ngak'chang Rinpoche and the promise he made in 1975 – and expressed pleasure that he and Khandro Déchen's work has led to the increased visibility of non-monastic ordained practitioners, and the foundation of a thriving gö kar chang lo'i dé in the West.



Members of the Aro sanghas on pilgrimage to Katmandhu, Nepal 2012



Aro sangha practitioners – New York 2010

For the continuance of the lineages and teachings of Vajrayāna, it is clear that a coherent, sustainable, Vajrayāna Buddhist culture will need to emerge over the next century – and although monasticism is the dominant form of this culture – Vajrayāna is not a monoculture. Non-monastic traditions have also always been present, if less visible. If Vajrayāna is to survive – both in the East and the West it needs to be seen in its diversity, including the non-monastic heritage established by Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. It is important that Dharma survives in its countries of origin but it is also important that Dharma takes root in the soil of western culture – as the need for it is increasingly evident – particularly for the teachings of Vajrayāna. There are already second and third generation Vajrayānists in the west who need the support of the sangha and the guidance of Lamas.

It is crucial that the Dharma continues as a complete means of liberation, and that people are offered the opportunity to realise non-duality. This style of ordination and practice within the non-monastic sanghas translates well to the West, with its emphasis on integration with daily life, careers, marriage, and families. There are a large number of committed practitioners in the West, and many more with a potential interest in practising, for whom monasticism is neither inspiring nor possible. The stream of ordained non-monastic practice however, has a long history of being relegated to obscurity. In the 1980s for example, many academics held the view that Ngakpas were a fabrication, and then when *their* existence was conceded, we were told that there had never been Ngakmas – white skirt wearing, long haired ordained female practitioners. That is now also understood to have been mistaken with the emergence of photographs and study of great female gö-kar chang lo practitioners such as Ngakma Rigtsang of Pemakö, and the Ngakmas of Repkong for example.



Aro sangha members on pilgrimage to Katmandhu, Nepal 2012



Ngakma Rigtsang of Pemakö



The Ngakmas of Repkong

There have in fact been monastic and non-monastic practitioners from the very inception of Dharma. The division of the sangha into '**'dülwa'i dé** (celibate Sūtrayāna practitioners) and **ngak kyí dé** (non-celibate Vajrayāna

practitioners) was not unique to Tibet. The '**dülwa'i dé**' and '**ngak kyi dé**' date back directly to Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha's principle followers were by no means all of the '**dülwa'i dé**'. Dri'mèd Drakpa (*dri 'med grags pa / Vimalakirti*) is one excellent example of a major non-celibate practitioner. Dri'mèd Drakpa was not simply a non-celibate practitioner, but a merchant by livelihood – and it was he who defeated the great monastic scholar Shariputra in debate on the subject of emptiness (*tongpa-nyid - sTong pa nyid - shunyata*).



Dri'mèd Drakpa wall painting from Dunhuang 8th Century

It could be said that Dri'mèd Drakpa was the prototype Mahasiddha, for not only was he non-celibate, but he was also a householder and a businessman – thoroughly outwardly immersed in the world of commerce. That his attainment was unimpaired and unimpeded by his so-called ‘worldly’ involvement is the original and most powerful precedent for the non-monastic sangha. Dri'mèd Drakpa was the author of the highly esteemed Drima 'mèd-par Dragpa Tenpa'i mDo (*dri ma med par grags pas bsTan pa'i mdo - Vimalakirti Nirdesha - Vimalakirti's Teaching Sūtra*). Dri'mèd Drakpa challenged the understanding of every major disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha and every one was found wanting at some point on their path. All disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha were in agreement that Dri'mèd Drakpa had the highest understanding of the disciples, and concurred that they had been corrected through his unparalleled nondual wisdom and insight. Dri'mèd Drakpa stands at the beginning of Buddhist history as the definitive argument against monasticism as the ‘one and only true path’. The following account from

Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, of Dri'mèd Drakpa's teaching may help to illustrate his importance in the history of non-monastic Dharma.

Dri'mèd Drakpa happened to be ill at one time, and no sangha members came to see him to enquire after his health. When Shakyamuni Buddha became aware of the fact he said: '*Shari'i bu (Shariputra) go and visit Dri'mèd Drakpa. Enquire about his health – we should not neglect this fine disciple.*' Shari'i bu was visibly disconcerted and replied: 'I am somewhat reluctant to ask Dri'mèd Drakpa about his illness. As to why that should be, I must explain that I was once sitting meditating under a tree in the forest when Dri'mèd Drakpa appeared. He said:

"Shari'i bu, this is not the way to meditate. You should meditate without reference points. Without straying from emptiness, you should manifest the entire range of ordinary behaviour. Without abandoning your cultivated spiritual nature, you should meditate manifesting as an ordinary person. With regard to external forms - your mind should not settle internally nor move externally. Without abandoning the passions of the world - your meditation should release all phenomena into liberation. So Shari'i bu - those who meditate thus are pronounced by Shakyamuni to be authentically meditating."

When I heard this teaching, I could not reply. I remained silent, and am now reluctant to go to ask Dri'mèd Drakpa about his sickness.'

That monastic disciples such as Shari'i bu and Mo'u 'gal bu (*Maudgalaputra*) were in awe of Dri'mèd Drakpa is a clear indication that the highest level of attainment is available within every sphere of life – if one is a genuine practitioner. Shari'i bu and Mo'u 'gal bu are the Nyèntö Chog-nyi (*nyan thos mChog gNyis* - two supreme shravakas) and the two closest disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha's Dharma cannot be confined or limited by the monastic approach. The monastic approach is undoubtedly of great value and of high renown – but its value and renown should not exist at the expense of access to the non-celestial, non-monastic approach; if we are concerned with the survival of Dharma in the world.

In India the '**dülwa'i dé**' were associated with the Sthaviras, and the **ngak kyi dé** were contained within a division of the Mahasanghikas. 20th Century Buddhist academics have commented in their written works on the differences within the early Buddhist sanghas in respect of the 'yellow robed Sthaviras' of the monastic community and the 'white robed practitioners' within the sangha of the Mahasanghikas.

This information is well known and accepted. It is also well known that both Sthaviras and Mahasanghikas possessed authentic lineages which can be traced back to Shakyamuni Buddha - although they differed in their emphases with regard to practise.

A century after Shakyamuni Buddha's parinirvana a schism became evident at the Vaisali Council between the views of the Sthaviras and the Mahasanghikas. The Sthaviras maintained that liberation from cyclic entrapment necessitated male rebirth and becoming a monk. In contradistinction, the Mahasanghikas held that enlightenment was available to men and women; and to celibate and non-celebate alike. Their view was based upon the nondual nature of each individual – and this precluded any sense in which any human existence could be seen as lacking in the primary qualification for liberation. The Mahasanghika sangha was thus the womb of Mahayāna and in that tradition it was eminently possible for non-celebate men and women to be fully fledged Dharma practitioners rather than suffering relegation to an inferior position in relation to monasticism.

The next historical development—the epoch of the Mahasiddhas—occurred in Northern India between the 3rd and 13th Centuries. This period is crucial with regard to the development of the *Ngak kyi dé* in Tibet. The Mahasiddha tradition was founded on the revelations of Mahayāna Sūtras of the Madhyamaka, Cittamatra, and Yogachara philosophical trends, but their meditational methodologies differed radically from the methodologies which paralleled them in the monastic institutions.

The Mahasiddhas (*Drüpchen - sGrub chen*) were ‘masters of accomplishment’. A Mahasiddha can be defined as a person who practises drüphab (*sGrub thabs – method of accomplishment*) and who attains both nondual realisation and paranormal capacities. The methodology of the Mahasiddhas arose from visionary revelations. These revelations were the Tantras which were received from Buddha Shakyamuni manifesting in the form of various Sambhogakaya yidams.

The word drüphab is often mistaken taken to mean a liturgical text or chant manual which accompanies the practice of visualisation and mantra. This is indeed a form of drüphab, indeed the major form of drüphab – but drüphab has a wider meaning. Drüphab means ‘method of accomplishment’, and the genius of the Mahasiddhas lay in the fact that their teaching conjured with essential Vajrayāna principles in relation to the individual and the individual’s predilections. A thief who became the disciple of a Mahasiddha was instructed to steal the entire phenomenal universe in this mind. An indolent was given recumbent practices. Whatever the orientation—be the person a glutton, wastrel, prostitute, king, moron, musician, arrow maker, —all a person required was devotion to the teacher and utter willingness to apply the exact nature of the drüphab.

This unstructured and amorphous interpersonal web of Mahasiddhas was the womb of Vajrayāna revelation. The eighty-four Mahasiddhas received the entire corpus of Vajrayāna from Shakyamuni Buddha. They in turn returned it to Padmasambhava who brought the complete Vajrayāna to Tibet. The Mahasiddhas had little interest in the Buddhist codified monastic conventions

of their time, and abandoned institutional settings in favour of the mountain caves, uninhabited islands, forests, and charnel grounds. They also dwelt in remote villages in the Himalayan and Karakorum ranges. In contrast to the monastics, the Mahasiddhas adopted itinerant life-styles and often lived beyond the bounds of common social and religious convention.

In contradistinction to the external renunciate discipline of Sūtrayāna, the inner discipline of Vajrayāna provided a methodology of transformation and self-liberation, through which the dualistic neuroses were not renounced but specifically cultivated as the context for energetic transformation. Vajrayāna held that the dualistic neuroses were simply dualistically distorted forms of nonduality, and were therefore the supreme opportunity in terms of discovering the nondual state. Through the transformative nature of drüpṭhab, the Mahasiddhas transformed their neuroses into yeshé (*ye shes- jnana*) – primordial wisdom. Alcohol, meat, and sexuality—renounced by Sūtrayāna ascetics—are enjoined by Vajrayānists who embrace the fields of the senses in order to realise the nondual state.

During the earlier centuries of the Second Spread this approach was discredited as a rationale which supported unrestrained hedonism – deliberately ignoring the fact that Vajrayāna contained a strict inner discipline.

In India, the Inner Tantras were not practised in the monasteries because of their incompatibility with the monastic vows. This was also the case within the First Spread (*Nga-dar - sNga dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet. In the Second spread (*chi dar - phyi dar*) however—in order to subsume Vajrayāna within the monastic structure—Vajrayāna was modified. It was modified in such a way as to make it practicable in terms of maintaining the vinaya. The Mahasiddha tradition—which existed in parallel to the monastic tradition in India—was brought to Tibet in the 8th Century by Buddha Padmasambhava thus heralding the Nga-dar – the First Spread of Dharma in which Vajrayāna was taught and practised exactly as it was in India. The Vajrayāna teachings were also brought by Mahasiddhas such as and Dri'mèd Shé-nyen (*dri med bShes gNyen Vimalamitra*). Vajrayāna teachings and practices were then adopted as the principal practice of the **Ngak kyi dé** by the twenty-five disciples – famous amongst whom was Nubchen Sang-gyé Yeshé (*gNubs chen sangs rGyas Ye shes* - 9th Century *ngakpa, married man, scholar, and translator*). There were significantly more female practitioners during the Nga-dar, but women were not so well regarded within the Second Spread due to the emphasis away from manifest Vajrayāna, and the adaption of Vajrayāna to concur with monasticism. Vajrayāna gives great value to women and to female practitioners – and in fact within the tantric phases of Vajrayāna women are considered more qualified for visionary practice than men. Sūtrayāna however does not have this emphasis, and it is a short step—for those who wish to take it—from ‘lack of emphasis’ to the relegation of women to an inferior rôle.

The five most prominent female disciples of Padmasambhava were Yeshé Tsogyel, Mandarava, Tashi Chhi'dren, Kalasiddhi, and Shakya Devi – but there were many others. The female siddhas were astonishing – although little is currently known of them. Their siddhis were of no lesser degree than the 24 male siddhas, and occasionally they were more remarkable in terms of the exuberant flamboyance of their manifestations. According to Phurtak Rinpoche, Yeshé Tsogyel had over 3,000 female disciples in Tibet after Padmasambhava had departed – and most were Ngak kyi dé practitioners. It is to be hoped that texts will eventually come to light, which enumerate these women and their lives.

It is evident that a high percentage of practitioners during the Nga-dar belonged to the Ngak kyi dé and that a significant number of the most famous of the 25 disciples began their spiritual training by taking monastic vows – but at that time in Tibet this was considered normal. During the Nga-dar training involved progressing through the yantras according to experience. In the phase of Sutric study and practice it was deemed valuable to live as a monastic, and Yeshé Tsogyel herself spent a period of time as a nun. In the many pictures of the Siddhas of Chhimphu one can see that there is no great conformity in who is presented as Ngak kyi dé and who as 'dülwa'i dé. Some thangkas show them all wearing the gö-kar-chang-lo, and some relatively few. These differences are by no means contradictory, because whether one siddha was presented as a member of the '**dülwa'i dé or ngak kyi dé**' would depend on which phase of their lives were being presented. Certainly, at the close of their lives most—if not all—were Ngak kyi dé practitioners.

The Nga-dar (*sNga dar*) - the 'First Spread of Buddhism' in Tibet was characterised by the dynamic and dramatic presence of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel who imbued the entire TransHimalayan region with the entire uncompromised gestalt of Vajrayāna. The Nga-dar was characterised also by widespread and far reaching spiritual attainment, by the most enthusiastic endeavour with regard to the translation of Buddhist texts, and by the establishment of the two Sanghas: the Gendün Gyi-dé (*dGe 'dun gyi sDe*) and the Ngak kyi dé (*sNgags kyi sDe*).

The Ngak kyi dé is also known as:

1. The gö kar chang lo'i dé (*gos dKar lCang lo'i sDe*) the series or division of long hair and white skirts'
2. The Gendün Karpo (*dGe 'dun dKar po*) the White Sangha – it contradistinction to the Gendün Marpo (*dGe 'dun dMar po*) the Red Sangha of monastics
3. The Ngak'phang Gendün (*sNgags 'phang dGe 'dun*) the mantra hurling assembly. Ngak'phang is an archaic term and not widely understood even within the Nyingma Tradition



Unidentified mural from Tibet showing gö kar chang lo'i practitioners

During the Nga-dar, the **ngak kyi dé** was comprised of two streams of practice. The ngakpa and ngakma (*sNgags pa* and *sNgags ma* or *sNgags mo*) ordination was based in Mahayoga and the naljorpa and naljorma (*rNal 'byor pa* and *rNal 'byor ma*) ordination was based in Anuyoga. Dzogchen was common to both streams.



Mahasiddha Jalandhara from the Aro gTér

These two streams of ordination continue today in lineages such as the Aro gTér which maintains teachings and practices of the Mahasiddha tradition of Vajrayāna. In the Aro gTérma the advanced psychology expressed in the lives and teachings of the Mahasiddhas is explored in the drüpthabs of the 84

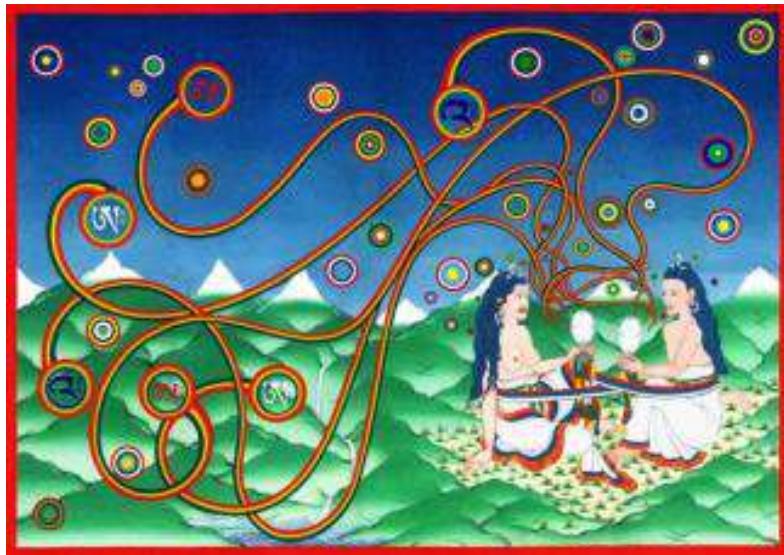
Mahasiddhas as visualisation and mantra practices, where each of the 84 can be practised as yidam.

There are more female mahasiddhas here than are listed in the usually cited set of 84, they come from the revealed treasures of Jomo Pema 'ö-Zér – the originator of a small gTérma nested within the Aro gTér.

Here, the stories are slightly more concerned with real life in that the situations are not as idealistic nor are the motivations of the aspirants. There is also an absence of beatific vision and mahasiddhas becoming Buddhas in the visionary sense, with the interactions between the aspirants and their teachers being more personal and often humorous – the teachers can be tricksters too. These drüpthabs and their associated hagiographies, bring out the principle and function of individual life in the process of liberation and are uniquely suited to practice in a secular Western context. Arguably the most important aspect of the Aro gTérma in terms of relevance to contemporary practice - both in the West *and* the East - however is the practice of Vajra Romance from the mKha' 'gro dPa bo nyi zLa me long rGyud – the *Tantra of the Mirror which Reflects the Sun and Moon of the Khandros and dPa'wos* – an essential teaching on vajra romantic relationship as an approach to the nondual state of liberated awareness.



Jomo Pema 'ö-Zér thangka from the Aro gTér



mKha' 'gro dPa bo nyi zLa me long rGyud thangka from the Aro gTér

Family environments in which kindness, openness and an enthusiasm for life are exemplified, are needed for there to be peace and harmony in the world and for these qualities to exist as examples for children, men and women need greater respect and appreciation for each other. The term ‘vajra romance’ does not correspond directly to a Tibetan phrase. This can give the mistaken impression that the Aro teachings on vajra romance are a departure from established Buddhist doctrine. Vajra romance is, in fact, taught in every Vajrayāna lineage. It is one of the fundamental principles of Tantra. It played a particularly central rôle in the early days of Tantra in India. It was the main practice of Mahasiddhas such as Saraha and Dombipa, who founded the principal Tantric lineages. It was also a primary practice of various Tibetan Mahasiddhas, such as the Sixth Dalai Lama, and of innumerable lesser-known Indians and Tibetans. In Tantra, vajra romance is part of the two-person practice called *karma mudra*. Historically karma mudra was regarded as essential to attaining Buddhahood (although various traditions interpret this in different ways). Karma mudra has two aspects. First, one regards one’s lover as a fully enlightened Buddha. Second, while in sexual union, the couple engages in highly technical exercises that manipulate the psychophysical energy of the ‘subtle body’. The first aspect is ‘vajra romance’. Vajra romance is nothing more nor less than the practice of regarding one’s lover as enlightened. One of the Fourteen Root Vows—the fundamental prerequisites to Tantra—is ‘never to denigrate women’. This is a statement of the principle of vajra romance from a male perspective. The detailed explanation of why one should not denigrate women depends on the lineage – but essentially it relates to the first aspect of karma mudra: vajra romance. If a man regards women as inherently defective in any way, karma mudra is impossible. The main unusual feature of the Aro gTér is that it presents all Buddhist teachings from the point of view of Dzogchen. Karma mudra is usually presented as Tantric practice. The Aro teachings on vajra romance describe the same material as Dzogchen practice.

Dzogchen men-ngag-dé is largely concerned with practices of ‘viewing as’. Aro gTér teaches ‘viewing one’s lover as a Buddha’ in men-ngag-dé style. Dzogchen long-dé is largely concerned with practices of the energies of the subtle body. The Tantric karma mudra practices belong to Anuyoga, in which these energies are deliberately manipulated according to intricate set patterns. Long-dé instead teaches one to experience the sensations resulting from these energies as they naturally arise, without specifically directing them. The Aro gTér teachings on vajra romance discuss the energetic interactions of lovers in long-dé style.



Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam'phel Déchen Rinpoche

According to the teachings of the Khandro dPa'wo Nyida Mélong Gyüd for a Ngakpa, one of the most important vows is never to disparage women. For Ngakpas, women are the source of wisdom, and the practice of a Ngakpa is to see the phenomenal world as female – as wisdom-display. When the world is seen as the scintillating dance of the khandros, the inner khandro is incited. The vow for a Ngakma is to regard the entire phenomenal world as male – as method-display. Men and women who enter into this reality, relate with each other through appreciation of the dance of inner and outer qualities. When we waken to the nature of our inner qualities, we are able to mirror each other. We are able to undermine each other’s conditioning rather than entrenching each other in dualistic patterns. If we can catch the reflection of our inner qualities before we have begun to concretise them, then romantic relationship is the most remarkable opportunity that life has to offer. The Khandro dPa'wo teachings provide the methodology for realising this opportunity.

References

All material presented here relies on the writings and teachings of gTértön Zértsal Lingpa and Khandro Déchen Tsédrüp Yeshé. It also includes material from their interviews with Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. References to texts and publications are listed where available.

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