

The History of the Sixteen Karmapas of Tibet

KARMA THINLEY

The Fourth Karma Thinleypa

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Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa

(1110–1193)

DUSUM KHYENPA was born in the snow range of Tray Shu in Do Kham in the year of the Iron Tiger (1110 C.E.). From his parents, who were themselves accomplished practitioners, Dusum Khyenpa received instruction in *dharma*. At the age of eleven he had a vision of Mahākālī, the feminine energy aspect of the *dharmapāla*, thus manifesting his natural spirituality.

Five years later Dusum Khyenpa entered the monastic community as a novice, and subsequently studied the Yogācāra *mahāyāna* texts of the great philosopher Asaṅga from Geshe Jamarwa Chapa Cho Kyi Senge. During this period Dusum Khyenpa also studied Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka texts from Lotsawa Patsap Nyima Drak. In addition he received the *tantric* teachings of the Kadampa lineage from Geshe Shawarapa.

At the age of twenty Dusum Khyenpa was ordained as a monk by the abbot, Mal Duldzin. He remained with the abbot to study the *vinaya*¹ texts. From the great Ga Lotsawa, Dusum Khyenpa received Kālacakra teachings and the "path and fruit" (Tib.: *lam.'bras*) teachings of the Indian *tantric* saint, Virūpa.²

Now thirty years old, Dusum Khyenpa traveled to Dak Lha Gampo to meet his teacher Gampopa, the holder of the Kagyupa lineage. When they met, Gampopa instructed him in the "graduated path" (Tib.: *lam.rim*) of the Kadampa tradition as preliminary practice. He told Dusum Khyenpa that he should practice it as he himself had done.³ Following this basic training in the *sūtra* approach, Gampopa empowered Dusum Khyenpa to perform the spiritual practice of Hevajra. During this empowerment Dusum Khyenpa saw that Gampopa became the body of light of Hevajra.

A little later, Dusum Khyenpa went into a *sāmatha* (“tranquillity”) meditation retreat for nine months on the advice of his teacher. Throughout this period he never unfolded his hands long enough for the perspiration on them to dry. Gampopa recognized him as his most gifted student and instructed him in *vipāśyanā* (“insight”) meditation. He practiced this for three years until his development of insight was comparable to the sun dispelling clouds. At this time Gampopa told him, “You have severed your bond with phenomenal existence. Now you will not return to *samsāra*.” He gave Dusum Khyenpa the oral instructions of *mahāmudrā* and teachings on the symbolic deity, Vajrayoginī. Gampopa told him to practice this at Kampo Gangra in Kham, and prophesied he would attain enlightenment at that place.

Dusum Khyenpa traveled first to Shau Tago, where he constructed a small retreat hut called Drub Zhi Densa (“square seat”), in which he practiced *mahāmudrā*. He attained the realization that *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are inseparably nondual (Tib.: *'khor.'das.yer.med*). Word reached him that his teacher had died, so he returned to Dak Lha Gampo monastery, where in a visionary experience he saw his teacher in the sky.

Dusum Khyenpa recalled his teacher’s instructions for practice in the Kampo Gangra area. The mountain deity, Kampo Dorje Paltseg, symbolic embodiment of the area’s elemental energy, invited him in a vision. Phagmo Drupa, another student of Gampopa, from whom came the eight minor lineages of the Dakpo Kagyu, entreated him not to go, saying, “If you go to Kham you will have to give many empowerments. This will shorten your life.” Dusum Khyenpa said in reply, “Thank you for your kind advice, but regardless of what I do, I shall live until I am eighty-four.”

At the age of fifty, he journeyed to Kampo Nenang where he immediately attained enlightenment through the practice of dream *yoga*. Dusum Khyenpa realized the essential sameness of day and night, dreams and the waking state, meditation and everyday life. His realization corresponded to the fourth level of *mahāmudrā*, which is known as “beyond meditation” (Tib.: *bsgom.med*).⁴

Spiritually, the moment of his enlightenment was symbolized in the visionary offering by *ḍākinīs* of a black *vajra* crown woven out of their hair. This crown is said to be symbolically present above the heads of all the Karmapa incarnations signifying their realization of the true nature of reality.

At this time, the nine deity *maṅḍala* of Hevajra and the fifteen deity *maṅḍala* of his wisdom consort, Nairātmyā, as well as many other *yidams*

appeared in a vision to Dusum Khyenpa. Through his accomplishment of “dream *yoga*”⁵ he “traveled” to Ceylon, where the *tantric* saint, Vajra-ghaṇṭā,⁶ empowered him in the spiritual practice of the symbolic deity, Cakrasaṃvara, and to Tuṣita, the spiritual environment of the future Buddha, Maitreya, who instructed him in *bodhisattva* vows.

Dusum Khyenpa remained in Kampo Nenang for eighteen years, during which time he built a monastery and a retreat center. The fame of his spiritual realization spread and he became known as “the knower of the three times—past, present and future” (Tib.: *dus.gsum.mkhyen.pa*), indicating his transcending of time through his understanding of the unborn nature of mind.

The Kashmiri *paṇḍita*, Śākyaśrī,⁷ who had been invited to Tibet to establish a new ordination lineage for the monastic community, declared Dusum Khyenpa was the “one of buddha-activity” or Karmapa, prophesied by Śākyamuni Buddha in the *Samādhirājasūtra*. Lama Zhang, founder of the Tsalpa Kagyu lineage confirmed this. The two teachers further said that Dusum Khyenpa embodied the principle of awakened compassion (Skt.: *avalokiteśvara*) and that following the age of Buddha Maitreya, the Karmapa Lama would be reborn as the Buddha Siṃha.

At the age of seventy-four Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa journeyed to the Drelong area of Kham, which was troubled by disputes. He pacified factional feuding and brought a time of peace. Moreover, he worked extensively for the sick, curing many diseases including blindness and paralysis. The healing power of his compassion was extremely potent. He also established monasteries at Mar Kham and Karma Gon, where he met Drogon Rechen, his principal student and holder of the lineage.

Toward the end of his life, Dusum Khyenpa returned to Dak Lha Gampo as he had been instructed to do by Gampopa. He made offerings to the monastery, repaired some of the buildings, and gave many teachings to the community there. Subsequently Karmapa established his principal monastic seat at Tsurphu, which remained the seat of the Karmapas until 1959. The abbot of Bodhgayā monastery in India sent a conch-shell horn to Tsurphu as a gift and as an acknowledgement of Dusum Khyenpa’s powerful expression of *dharma*.

While he was at Tsurphu, Dusum Khyenpa brought to an end the disputes which Lama Zhang of the Tsala Kagyu lineage was engaged in. Lama Zhang was a great *siddha* and the ruler of the kingdom of Tsalpa, but had a rather aggressive nature which Karmapa alone was able to pacify.

One night while he was practicing dream *yoga*, Dusum Khyenpa received the spiritual practice of the four-faced twelve-armed Vajrayoginī from the *tantric* saint Indrabhūti.⁸ Subsequently, during another visionary experience he received teachings from Vajrayoginī. Karmapa instructed his own students in these teachings, but a little while later he dreamt that five girls dressed in red and adorned with jewels appeared to him and said, "Do not give secret *vajrayāna* teachings to everybody who asks for them."

A few days later Dusum Khyenpa again gave the teachings and that very night the five girls appeared to him again in his dreams saying, "We are messengers of Princess Lakṣmīṅkarā.⁹ Do not give secret *vajrayāna* teachings to everybody who asks for them." Three days later Karmapa gave the teachings to Lama Khampa Kungba, and that night in his dreams the girls appeared in the sky riding white clouds saying, "We told you not to give this secret *vajrayāna* teaching to everyone who asked for it, but you did not listen."

In the three months before Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa's death there were an unusually large number of rainbows, slight earth tremors and rumbling noises which people said were the drums of the *ḍākinīs*. The play of the elements seemed to be heralding some momentous event. At the age of eighty-four, on the first day of the year of the Water Ox (1194 C.E.) Dusum Khyenpa placed Tsurphu monastery, together with his books and relics, in the care of his principal student, Drogon Rechen. He also entrusted him with the letter in which he had predicted the circumstances into which the next Karmapa would be born. He distributed all his other possessions among the Kagyu communities.

In the morning of the third day of the new year, Dusum Khyenpa instructed his students in *dharma* for the last time. Then, sitting up, he gazed into the sky and entered into meditation. At noon he passed away.

During his death rites a week later many people had visionary experiences; some seeing his body in the smoke that rose from the funeral pyre, others seeing many suns in the sky and *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* dancing among them.

When the flames of the pyre died away, Dusum Khyenpa's heart, signifying his love, and his tongue, symbolizing his teaching, were found intact among the ashes. His students also recovered some of his bones, which appeared to have seed-syllables (Skt.: *bija*) marked on them and other symbolic relics.

Karmapa's ashes were enshrined in a *stūpa* modeled after the one at Dhānyakaṭaka in southern India, where Śākyamuni Buddha had given the teachings of Kālacakra. This *stūpa* was deposited at Tsurphu monastery.

Dusum Khyenpa had many accomplished students through whom his influence penetrated into other traditions as well as his own Kamtshang Kagyu. The holder of his lineage was Drogon Rechen, who subsequently passed it to Pomdrakpa, who in turn gave it to the second Karmapa Lama. Four important founders of other lineages who received some teaching from Dusum Khyenpa were Taglung Thangpa, founder of the Taglung Kagyu; Lingje Repa, the great *mahāmudrā* practitioner and spiritual ancestor of the Drukpa Kagyu; Tsangpa Gyare, the actual founder of the Drukpa Kagyu; and Lama Kadampa Desheg, who founded the Katok Nyingma lineage. In addition, there were five students who had developed special powers. They were Dechung Sangjay in the area of telepathic ability, Dagden Batsa in the area of performing miracles, Tawa Kadampa in the area of special *bodhisattva* powers, Drogon Rechen in the area of blessing and Ge Chutsun in the area of profound realization.



Karmapa Karma Pakshi (1206–1283)

THE SECOND KARMAPA, Karma Pakshi, was born in 1206 C.E. into a family descended from the eighth-century *dharm*a-king, Trisong Detsun. His parents, who were devout religious practitioners, named their son Chodzin.

Chodzin was a precocious child and by the age of six he could read and write perfectly. By the time he was ten years old he had already grasped the essence of Buddhist doctrine. In addition to his intellectual ability, Chodzin also possessed an intuitive aptitude to rest the mind in stillness. As a result of this natural facility, when his meditation teacher, Pomdrakpa, introduced him to the nature of his own mind, he was able to develop spontaneous insight.

Pomdrakpa had himself received the teachings of the Karma Kagyu lineage from Drogon Rechen, the heir to Dusum Khyenpa's transmission. When he first bestowed an empowerment on Chodzin, he explained that in a vision he had seen Dusum Khyenpa and other teachers of the lineage surrounding his young student's residence, illustrating the latter's importance. In a further vision, Dusum Khyenpa revealed to Pomdrakpa that Chodzin was in fact his incarnation. From this time on, Pomdrakpa recognized Chodzin as the second Karmapa Lama and entitled him *dharm*a master (Tib.: *chos.kyi.bla.ma*). In addition he ordained Karma Pakshi as a novice.

For eleven years Karma Pakshi studied with Pomdrakpa, specializing in the *mahāmudrā* teachings of Saraha and Gampopa. With his natural ability he was able to accomplish the teachings as quickly as he received them. At the conclusion of this period of study Pomdrakpa told him that he had developed his own understanding sufficiently but that he also needed to have a lineage of empowerments, textual transmissions and instructions

from Śākyamuni or Vajradhara in order to teach others. He gave Karma Pakshi the complete series of Kagyu teachings, and thus became his spiritual father. When Karma Pakshi received the empowerment of Mahākāla he experienced the actual presence of the *dharmapāla*.

At the age of twenty-two Karma Pakshi was ordained a monk by Lama Jampa Bum, abbot of the Katok Nyingmapa monastery, established by Kadampa Desheg, the student of the first Karmapa. In his own spiritual practice at this time, Karma Pakshi concentrated upon "inner heat *yoga*" combined with *mahāmudrā* itself. In this way he developed both the form and formless aspects of *tantric* practice.

This was a period of civil disturbances in Kham and Karma Pakshi responded to the needs of the people by touring the area in an attempt to bring about peace. The whole area with its fields, mountains and valleys appeared to him as an environment of complete happiness (Tib.: *bde. mchog*) which contained the potential for the spread of *dharma*. This was symbolized in his vision of Mahāsukha Cakrasaṃvara surrounded by the dance of *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs*. Later, inspired by the Vajra Black-Cloaked Mahākāla (Tib.: *rdo.rje.ber.nag.can*), who subsequently became the main *dharma* protector of the Karma Kagyu lineage, Karma Pakshi built a new monastery in the area of Sharchok Pungri in Kham.

In another vision, Karma Pakshi was instructed by a *ḍākinī* to develop communal singing of the six-syllable *mantra* of Avalokiteśvara, embodiment of enlightened compassion.¹ Karma Pakshi and his monks chanted the *mantra* as they traveled. From this time onward communal singing of the six-syllable *mantra* became an important part of popular religious practice in Tibet.

Karma Pakshi stayed at his new monastery for eleven years, engaged in intensive meditation practice. The fame of his spiritual power reached as far as Jang and China. Through his mastery of the energy of the four elements, Karma Pakshi pacified his environment. This was confirmed by the symbolic commitment of the mountain deity, Dorje Paltseg, to protect the Karma Kagyu lineage.

Subsequently, Karma Pakshi visited Karma Gon monastery, which had fallen into a state of disrepair. He restored it to its former condition. Then, inspired by Mahākālī, Karma Pakshi journeyed to Tsurphu and again carried out restoration work. Six years later, he went to the Tsang area of western Tibet via Lake Namtsho, where he obtained treasure which was used for the debts incurred during the restoration of the monastery.

In 1251 Karma Pakshi received an invitation from Prince Kublai who at that time ruled the Sino-Tibetan border regions. In response, Karma Pakshi traveled to the Wu-tok palace, reaching there in the year 1254, after being welcomed by a large army at Serta on the way.

Karma Pakshi was aware of the importance of his visit for the future of Kagyupa teachings and had many visionary experiences indicating this after his arrival at the court. He was honored by Kublai Khan, who requested him to display his spiritual power to the other religious teachers. Karma Pakshi complied with this request and also conducted himself with such courtesy that all acknowledged his greatness. The khan asked him to remain at his court permanently, but Karma Pakshi declined, foreseeing the potential for trouble in the factional interests at the court.

At this time, the rest of China was under the control of Mongka Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, who had deposed his own cousin, Godin. Mongka Khan exercised a rather tenuous control of his younger brother Kublai. During this period the Sakyapa school had spread its teachings throughout China, due largely to the work of Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) and his nephew, Phakpa (1235–1284).

Inspired by Avalokiteśvara and Mahākāla, Karma Pakshi decided to travel to northern Tibet. Despite Kublai Khan's anger at his refusal to stay, he journeyed to the Sino-Tibetan border region of Minyak. When he arrived the country was rocked by a tornado, which Karma Pakshi envisaged as the manifestation of the Vajra Black-Cloaked Mahākāla. He also had a vision of Vaiśravaṇa, protector of wealth, who requested him to remain in Minyak in order to construct a new temple there.

By 1256 Karma Pakshi had reached Amdo in northeastern Tibet, where he learned that Mongka Khan had suppressed the power of his younger brother, Kublai, and was now the supreme ruler of Mongolia and a large part of China. At this point, Mongka Khan invited him to return to China to teach *dharma*. The invitation was accepted and Karma Pakshi traveled slowly back to China, passing through the Minyak region once again. In a visionary experience, he was inspired by the red Tārā to go to Mongka Khan's palace in Liang Chou. By this time the far-ranging importance of Karma Pakshi's *dharma* activity had become very clear. On the journey to Mongka Khan's court he removed both environmental and social imbalances by his compassionate activity.

Karma Pakshi arrived at the court at the beginning of the winter. The khan marked his arrival by freeing prisoners in his honor and Karma

Pakshi manifested the enlightened compassion of Avalokiteśvara by giving many empowerments, textual transmissions and instructions. The khan became his devoted student and Karma Pakshi revealed that he had in fact studied with the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, in his previous life, and indeed had achieved the same *mahāmudrā* realization as Karma Pakshi himself.

In order to display the superb skillful means of the *dharma*, Karma Pakshi invited many jealous Taoist masters from Shen Shing, Tao Shi, and Er Kao to join him in debate. However, none were equal to it and they all accepted his teaching.

At the Alaka palace, Karma Pakshi empowered the khan and his other students in the spiritual practice of Cakrasaṃvara. Mongka Khan practiced his instruction so precisely that he was able to visualize the *yidam* in perfect detail. Later, through the power of Karma Pakshi's meditation, a vision of Saraha and the other eighty-four *tantric* saints appeared in the sky, where they remained for three days. The power of his teaching cut through the khan's involvement with politics, enabling him to develop an intuitive realization of *mahāmudrā*.

Karma Pakshi's influence extended far beyond the royal court and indeed had a profound effect on Sino-Mongol culture. He continued the process begun by Sakya Paṇḍita. As an example of this, Karma Pakshi advised that all Mongol Buddhists should avoid meat-eating on the days of the moon's phases. Similarly, non-Buddhists were advised to keep their own religious precepts on these days. The ten virtues² enunciated by Śākyamuni Buddha were emphasized as the basis of individual and social morality. Karma Pakshi's work for the welfare of the people was very extensive. For example, on thirteen separate occasions groups of prisoners were freed from confinement on his urging. Despite his own personal prestige, Karma Pakshi did not seek to advance the Karma Kagyu school at the expense of the other Buddhist traditions, but urged the khan to support them as well.

Subsequently the khan invited his guru to accompany him on a tour of his empire. At Karakorum, the Mongol's capital city, Karma Pakshi entered into a friendly dialogue with the representatives of other religious traditions. The party traveled on to the Sino-Mongolian border regions and then journeyed to Minyak. Here, inspired by the memory of Dusum Khyenpa, Karma Pakshi decided to return to Tibet. Mongka Khan had wanted his guru to accompany him to Manchuria, but Karma Pakshi

declined, pointing to the impermanent nature of all situations. The khan did not attempt to detain him but granted him a safe conduct pass through all Mongol territories.

However, in the year of the Iron Tiger, as Karma Pakshi returned to Tibet, trouble broke out in China upon the death of Mongka Khan. At first Alapaga, the late khan's son, established his rule in spite of the fact that some Mongol chiefs supported the rival claim of his uncle, Kublai Khan. Soon, however, Kublai Khan was able to seize control and Alapaga was killed, reputedly by the magical power of a student of Lama Zhang of the Tsalpa Kagyu lineage.

At this time Karma Pakshi, whose journey had been delayed by local warfare, was inspired by a vision to construct a large statue of the Buddha, on his return to Tibet. However, he was acutely aware of the difficulties in the way of such a project. The way through these obstructions was revealed to him in a dream of a white horse which rescued him from danger. He composed a song to celebrate this in which he declared, "This supreme horse is like a golden bird. I, myself, am the supreme man, as was Siddhārtha Guatama. Therefore we will cross over these dangerous times."

Word reached Karma Pakshi that Kublai Khan, encouraged by court intrigue, had developed a grudge against him. The khan felt that he had been slighted by Karma Pakshi and that the latter had encouraged his rival and brother, Mongka Khan, so he decided to order his assassination.

The new khan's soldiers detained Karma Pakshi and subjected him to various indignities and tortures such as burning, poisoning and being thrown off a cliff, but in the face of this brutal treatment he manifested the compassion of Avalokiteśvara and the natural freedom of a *mahāsiddha*. Karma Pakshi's realization of the unborn and undying nature of mind meant that his captors were unable to harm him. Eventually he expressed great pity for their confusion.

These events forced Kublai Khan to reconsider his attitude to Karma Pakshi. Instead of assassination, exile seemed appropriate. The khan attempted to damage Karma Pakshi's health by sending him to a deserted area near the ocean where there were few people to receive the *dharma*. However, within the next few years Karma Pakshi spent his time composing texts and slowly recovered. Eventually Kublai Khan relented and apologized, asking Karma Pakshi to stay with him. When Karma Pakshi replied that he had to return to Tibet, the khan allowed him to depart saying, "Please remember me and pray for me and bless me. You are free to go and teach *dharma* wherever you wish."

Karma Pakshi arrived back at Tsurphu after a long journey and set to work constructing the statue of Buddha. The cast brass statue, named "Great Sage, Ornament of the World" (Tib.: *thub.chen dzam.gling.rgyan*), stood fifty-five feet tall and contained relics of the Buddha and his disciples. On completion the statue appeared to tilt to one side. Seeing this, Karma Pakshi entered into meditation, tilting his body in the same way. As he straightened up, the statue righted itself.

Before his death in 1283, Karma Pakshi transmitted his lineage to his great student, Urgyenpa. He informed Urgyenpa that his next incarnation would come from western Tibet.

Karma Pakshi was both a profound *tantric* saint and scholar. The energy of his teachings inspired many people to travel the spiritual path. In addition to Urgyenpa, his other famous students included Maja Changchub Tsonдру, Nyenre Gendun Bum and Mongka Khan.



Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339)

ON THE EIGHTH DAY of the first month of the year of the Wood Monkey (1284 C.E.) the third Karmapa incarnation, Rangjung Dorje, was born in the Tingri area of western Tibet. It is said that as his mother gave birth to him, the moon was rising and the baby immediately sat up saying, "The moon has risen."

The young Rangjung Dorje displayed extraordinary precocity. One day, at the age of three, while playing with friends, he suddenly asked them to make him a throne. When the imitation throne was constructed, he sat upon it, put on a black hat and announced that he was the Karmapa Lama.

Soon news of this remarkable child traveled far and wide, reaching the attention of Lama Urgyenpa. This Drukpa Kagyupa *lama* requested that the now five year old Rangjung Dorje be brought to see him. The spiritual qualities of the young child led Urgyenpa to realize that this was indeed the incarnation of the Karmapa. To renew the relationship between them, Lama Urgyenpa then bestowed the empowerments of Cakrasamvara and Hevajra upon Rangjung Dorje.

The education and training of the new Karmapa began at the age of seven, when he received the novice ordination from Lama Kunden Sherab. Following this he was formally enthroned as the Karmapa Lama at Tsurphu. His training continued at Tsurphu, where for eleven years he studied the complete teachings of the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions from Lama Nyenre Gendun Bum and Lama Namtshowa. The former saw Rangjung Dorje as an embodiment of Saraha, the great Indian *tantric* saint. He completed this intensive period of study with a meditation retreat in the vicinity of the great "Lady of the White Snows," Jomo Gangkar, known elsewhere as Mount Everest.

At the age of eighteen, Rangjung Dorje traveled to the great Kadampa monastery of Sangphu, where he received the full ordination from the abbot, Sakya Zhonnu. He remained for some time at the monastery, engaged in a wide study of philosophy, logic and religious law. His studies included the *vinaya*, thought transformation (Tib.: *blo.sbyong*), *The Five Texts of Maitreya* (Tib.: *'byams.chos.lde.lnga*)¹ Madhyamaka philosophy, *abhidharma*,² and the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* and *śāstra* commentaries.

The third Karmapa was an omnivorous student. Although he retained understanding from his previous lives, he researched all aspects of both contemporary and traditional learning. He received teachings from the most profound scholars of his day. As an example of this, some of the teachings he received from Lama Kunga Dondrup are particularly noteworthy, viz:

- Kālacakra Tantra*: root text and commentary
- Guhyasamāja Tantra*
- Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*: root text and commentary
- Yamāntaka teachings.³
- Vajramālā teachings
- Hevajra Tantra* and commentaries
- Saṃpuṭika*⁴
- Guhyagarbha teachings
- "The peaceful and wrathful deities" teaching⁵
- Shi Jaypa teachings of Dampa Sangjay
- Machig Labdron's *chod* teaching
- Sakyapa path and fruit teachings
- The *ṣaḍaṅga yoga* of Kālacakra⁶
- Kanjur* and *Tanjur* textual transmission⁷
- A comparative study of Hindu philosophy

When Rangjung Dorje received the empowerment of Kālacakra, he had a visionary experience of the entire universe as contained within the body itself. Inspired by this, he composed a very influential text on astrology.

When this period of study with Lama Kunga Dondrup was completed, Rangjung Dorje entered into intensive meditation at the Garuḍa Castle retreat center near Tsurphu. During this retreat he had a dream in which the teachings of the philosopher Nāgārjuna were conveyed to him by his late guru, Urgyenpa.

Rangjung Dorje's studies extended into the medical field. From Lama Bare he received the *Sowa Rikpa* medical education. Subsequently, the

Karmapa stayed for a while with the learned Abbot Tsultim Rinchen, from whom he received teachings, among which are the following:

Guhyasāmaja Tantra

Madhyamaka philosophy

Mahāmāyā Tantra

Hevajra teachings, from the lineage of Ngok Chodor and Meton Tsonpo⁸

Yamāntaka Tantras

Cakrasaṃvara Tantras.

Later, Rangjung Dorje studied with Rigdzin Kumārarāja, the most important contemporary exponent of the innermost essence (Tib.: *snying. thig*) teachings of the Nyingmapa tradition. These teachings, which had been introduced into Tibet in the eighth century by the *paṇḍita*, Vimalamitra, reveal the direct experience of buddhahood through the nakedness of awareness. They had a lasting influence on Rangjung Dorje. In meditation he had a vision in which Vimalamitra was actually absorbed into his forehead. The effect of this teaching on Rangjung Dorje led to his bringing together the two teachings of Kagyupa “great seal” and Nyingmapa “great perfection” into one stream.

Rangjung Dorje’s depth and breadth of scholarship was of a degree usually associated with the European “renaissance man,” and in Tibet with the later Rime (“boundaryless”) movement. Having assimilated most of the Buddhist teachings, empowerments and textual transmissions, which had been brought to Tibet, he communicated his vision in many important texts. Of the ones surviving, the foremost for the Kagyu sect is the *Deep Inner Meaning* (Tib.: *zab.mo.snang.don*), an invaluable commentary on the nature of *tantra*.

On the completion of his studies, Rangjung Dorje began to travel through southern Tibet, giving teachings and bestowing empowerments. He stayed in the Kongpo area for a period of three years. Many people were inspired to study *dharma* by the power of his presence and reputation as a *dharma* master.

In time, Rangjung Dorje’s fame spread as far as the Mongol Emperor Togh Temur, who invited him to visit. He accepted the invitation and set out for China, but on the way his party was held up by unseasonable weather. The following spring the party again set out for China. On the way certain omens occurred which indicated to Rangjung Dorje that the emperor had died. Before continuing Karmapa performed the death rites for the emperor. The party finally arrived at the palace of Tai-ya Tu on the

eighteenth day of the tenth month of the year of the Water Monkey (1332 C.E.). There it was learned that the Emperor Togh Temur had indeed died on the day of the omens. However, the royal family and court were still able to welcome Rangjung Dorje.

Karmapa advised the late emperor's younger brother, Toghon Temur, to wait for six months before ascending the throne and he predicted that Toghon Temur would prove to be a great monarch. On the fifteenth day of the first month of the Water Bird year the new emperor was enthroned by Rangjung Dorje in a grand ceremony.

In the year of the Wood Dog, Karmapa set out on the return journey to Tibet to procure, as a gift for the emperor, some long life nectar, *tse chu* (Tib.: *tse.chu*), left near Samye by Padmasambhava. On the way he established many monasteries dedicated to Kagyu *dharma*. Of especial importance is the temple that he established at Wu-tai Shan, the Five Peaks of Mañjuśrī mountain in China.

On his return to Tibet, Rangjung Dorje was involved in teaching and resolving political problems. Subsequently, Karmapa received an invitation from Toghon Temur to revisit China. So in the year of the Fire Rat, Karmapa set out once again for China. Throughout the long journey Rangjung Dorje continually taught *dharma*. Upon his arrival, the emperor welcomed him joyfully and received the gift of the *tse chu* from Karmapa which enabled him to live the longest of the Mongol emperors. During his stay Rangjung Dorje established a new Kagyupa monastery. He was also able to end the climatic difficulties which were harming the crops in China at that time.

On the fourteenth day of the sixth month of the year of the Earth Rabbit (1339 C.E.), Rangjung Dorje told the emperor of his presentiments of his own imminent death. He withdrew into the Cakrasaṃvara shrine, where he meditated on the *heruka* and passed away in meditation. The next day, as his final teaching to the emperor and empress, Karmapa appeared to manifest his face in the full moon.

Rangjung Dorje's influence on *vajrayāna* Buddhism was incalculable. As well as his invaluable texts, his teaching was spread through his many accomplished students. Rangjung Dorje taught the famous Sakya scholar, Yagde Paṇḍita,⁹ and also the most profound Nyingmapa guru, Longchen Rabjampa. In addition, Rangjung Dorje's other students included Shamar Rinpoche, Drakpa Senge and Toghon Temur.



Karmapa Mikyo Dorje

(1507–1554)

SHORTLY BEFORE HIS DEATH the seventh Karmapa, Chodrag Gyatsho had a visionary experience of Maitreya, the next Buddha, who said, “We are approaching the end of the age of Buddha Śākyamuni and many people are going to lower realms. So you must emanate many incarnations of yourself.” In addition, Chodrag Gyatsho foresaw the circumstances of his next birth. On waking the next morning he wrote down the details, which he eventually entrusted to his regent.

On the fourth day of the eleventh month of 1507, the eighth Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje was born in Damchu in eastern Tibet. The new born child opened his eyes and said, “Karmapa.”

News of the remarkable child spread quickly and reached the ears of the third Situ Rinpoche, Tashi Paljor, who realized that the child’s place of birth agreed with the details left in Chodrag Gyatsho’s prediction letter. Situ Rinpoche decided to investigate the child and interviewed the parents. He was satisfied by the similarity between the actual names of Karmapa’s parents and those names left in the letter of prediction. In addition, all the other details matched. Situ Rinpoche confirmed that the child was indeed the new incarnation of Karmapa, but asked the parents to maintain absolute secrecy for three months in order to protect the child from unwholesome intrigue. He gave the parents some blessing pills, some tea, some butter, and some frankincense and said to them, “Give butter tea to the boy and burn this incense before him, saying that it was sent by Situ Rinpoche. Then give him the blessing pills. If he really is the Karmapa incarnation, he will utter a few words. Tell me what he says.”

The father followed these instructions and the infant Karmapa uttered the syllables, *e, ma, ho*, and declared, “Do not doubt me, I am Karmapa.” This was reported to Situ Rinpoche, and at the age of three months the

young incarnation accompanied him to Karma monastery. Subsequently the child was visited by the great meditation master, Ser Phowa, who had been a close student of the seventh Karmapa. When an offering *pūjā* was performed, the tiny Karmapa played the hand-drum and bell perfectly. Ser Phowa asked him, "If you are Karmapa, do you remember what you taught me in Tse Lhakang?" The boy replied, "I gave you *mahāmudrā* and the six doctrines of Nāropa."

In 1512, at the age of five, Mikyo Dorje journeyed to Riwoche. There he was asked by Lama Sonam Rinchen to say who he really was. The boy laughed and declared, "Sometimes I am Padmasambhava, sometimes Saraha and at other times I am Karmapa. I have many emanations. In Tsang province there are sixteen, and west of Tibet there is a chieftain who is my emanation."

In the same year a young boy from the region of Amdo was put forward as a rival claimant to be the new Karmapa incarnation. Gyaltsap Rinpoche set out to investigate the rival's claims but when he met Mikyo Dorje, he spontaneously felt compelled to bow down to him. Realizing this boy was the Karmapa incarnation, Gyaltsap Rinpoche sent letters of authority to all Karma Kagyu monasteries in which he declared that, according to a prediction by Padmasambhava, the name of the eighth Karmapa was Mikyo Dorje. In the following year, Gyaltsap Rinpoche ceremonially enthroned the young boy as the eighth Karmapa at Tse Lhakang.

The education of the eighth Karmapa commenced when he reached the age of seven. His first tutor was Situ Rinpoche, from whom he received the eight moral precepts¹ and some elementary Kagyu teachings. Then Mikyo Dorje set out on a tour of monasteries. At Surmang monastery a vision of the Kagyu lineage evoked in him a realization of the richness of his inheritance. A little later the young Karmapa met with the meditation master Sangye Nyenpa, whom Chodrag Gyatsho had appointed as the transmitter of the lineage to his next incarnation.

Following this initial meeting, Mikyo Dorje and his camp traveled into far Kham. The unfoldment of his inner potential was continued by a visionary experience in which he received teachings from Śākyamuni Buddha accompanied by his two chief students, Śāriputra and Mahāmaudgalyāyana. While in this area, the young Karmapa incarnation had a very significant dream in which a *ḍākinī* told him, "You are the activity aspect of the buddhas of the three times."

Mikyo Dorje and his party returned briefly to Riwoche, where he carried out both religious and welfare work. Afterward Karmapa revisited the area of his birth in Damchu province. There he had a profound visionary experience in which Guru Padmasambhava revealed to him his true nature, saying, "I am Padmasambhava and you are my principal student, Gyalwa Choyang.² The unity of our two natures is Vajradhara."

A short time after this, Mikyo Dorje, inspired by the memory of Dusum Khyenpa, made a pilgrimage to Kampo Gangra. It is said that he left footprints in the various meditation caves there.

In 1516 the nine year old Karmapa received an invitation from the king of Jang Sa-tham. The invitation was accepted, and Mikyo Dorje, accompanied by his camp, set out. The party was welcomed with great ceremony on its arrival and the king lavished honor and offerings on the young Karmapa. The uncontrived dignity of Mikyo Dorje made a deep impact on the king, who had previously not been well disposed to Buddhism. He made provision for the support of the *dharma* in his territories and also undertook to adopt a policy of nonaggression in political matters. Before leaving, Mikyo Dorje promised to return in seven years.

In 1517 the young Karmapa entered into the most important phase of his education. During the next three years he received, from Lama Sangye Nyenpa, a thorough grounding in a comprehensive range of Buddhist teachings, in addition to the complete transmission of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Despite his wealth, Sangye Nyenpa was a perfect example of Kagyu asceticism. At the conclusion of this three year period of teaching he died, without regret, in the knowledge that Mikyo Dorje had absorbed his instructions. During the funeral ceremonies, Karmapa experienced the presence of his deceased guru and received absolute clarification of his teachings.

Mikyo Dorje was similar to the third Karmapa in his appetite for learning and scholarship. He was a very talented linguist and mastered Sanskrit grammar under the direction of Lotsawa Richen Tashi. The eighth Karmapa also ventured into the fields of poetry, painting and sculpture, where he met with considerable success. As a monk Mikyo Dorje was an example of austerity and simplicity. As a master of *mahāmudrā* he lived in the realization that whatever arises is self-liberated.

In one of his visions, a monk appeared to Mikyo Dorje announcing that he had been Padmasambhava during the age of the previous Buddha, Dīpaṃkara. Mikyo Dorje responded with a question, "If this is so, where

was your 'lotus birth' and where did you stay?" The monk replied, "Where did space come from?" He then disappeared. Reflecting on this, Karmapa realized that each of the thousand buddhas is accompanied by a Padma-sambhava as a natural expression of the teaching of enlightenment.

Subsequently Mikyo Dorje and his great camp traveled slowly through Kham, where he gave teachings to more than ten thousand people. During this tour he recognized the third Gyaltschap *tulku*, Drakpa Paljor, and the fifth Shamar Rinpoche, Konchog Yenlag. At Mar Kham, Mikyo Dorje carved a statue of himself out of stone. It is recorded that he placed the statue in front of him and asked it, "Are you a good likeness of me?" The statue replied, "Yes, I am." Then Karmapa squeezed a chunk of left-over stone like a piece of butter, leaving the imprint of his palm and fingers in it. Both the statue and the stone have been preserved and are now at the residence of the present Karmapa at Rumtek monastery in Sikkim.

On his arrival at Karma monastery, Mikyo Dorje met emissaries of the Chinese Emperor Wu Tsung, who presented him with many invitation offerings and on behalf of the emperor, invited him to China. However, Karmapa foresaw the emperor's imminent death and declined the invitation. The Chinese envoys took offence at this and repacking the emperor's offerings to Karmapa, returned to China, where they discovered that the empress and emperor had just died.

From Kham, Mikyo Dorje traveled to central Tibet. At Samding, the Dorje Phagmo *tulku* made the offering of a monastery to him. On reaching Tsurphu, he found it was in a state of disrepair and arranged for restoration work to be carried out. Karmapa was visited by Surmang Trungpa Tulku, who saw him as the embodiment of Cakrasaṃvara.

After a period of administrative work Mikyo Dorje set out again with his retinue. He visited the Kadampa monastery of Radeng. From there he went on to Gangri Thokar, the retreat of the great Nyingma saint, Longchenpa, where he left his footprints and the hoofprints of his horse in the rock.

From there Mikyo Dorje journeyed to where the aged Lama Karma Thinley was in retreat. Karma Thinleypa gave Karmapa the empowerments of Kurukullā, Mahākāla and Vaiśravaṇa. Then together they went to Karma Thinleypa's doctrinal school (Tib.: *shes.'gra*) at Lekshay Ling, where Mikyo Dorje gave many teachings.

Later in the following year Karmapa met Lama Karma Thinley again. This time the venerable scholar instructed Mikyo Dorje in the six doctrines

of Nāropa. At the age of twenty-one, Karmapa was ordained a monk by the abbot, Chodrup Senge, who was an incarnation of the Kashmiri scholar, Śākyaśrī. The abbot was assisted at the ceremony by Lama Karma Thinley.

At this time Chodrup Senge gave Mikyo Dorje very detailed teachings on the "empty of something else view" (Tib.: *gzhan.stong.lta.ba*). He asked Mikyo Dorje to promulgate this vitally important philosophical concept, which had gained wide currency in the Jonangpa and Nyingma traditions. It had been attacked by adherents of the Gelugpa tradition, who held the opposing view, "empty of selfness view" (Tib.: *rang.stong.lta.ba*). The "empty of something else view" was passed down through the lineage and reached the fifteenth Karmapa through Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye. Kongtrul Rinpoche made this view the cornerstone of his Rime ("boundaryless") approach. Thus, Mikyo Dorje may be seen as an important precursor of this nineteenth century Buddhist renaissance.

Mikyo Dorje's relationship with Je Karma Thinleypa was of great importance in his training. He stayed with him, in all, for three years. During this period he studied the *Five Books of Maitreya*, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's texts on logic, the *abhidharma* (Skt.: *Abhidharmasamuccaya*) of Asaṅga and the *abhidharma* (Skt.: *Abhidharmakośa*) of Vasubandhu, the *vinaya* texts, the six principal texts of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti's *Entering into the Middle Way* (Skt.: *Madhyamakāvātāra*), the *Hevajra Tantra*, astrology and many other Indian works on the *mahāyāna* and *vajrayāna* approaches to Buddhism. In addition to the wide ranging study of Indian Buddhism, Karma Thinleypa introduced Mikyo Dorje to the collected works of Ngok Lotsawa⁴ and Sakya Paṇḍita.

Mikyo Dorje was an exemplary student, maintaining complete mindfulness throughout this long and intense period of study. He constantly reflected on the meaning of the texts and whatever points arose from them. He questioned and debated all abstruse points and in this manner developed a perfect realization. Karmapa studied so much he had little time to eat, and as a result his physical strength weakened. Thinleypa praised Karmapa as a great scholar. In return Mikyo Dorje praised his tutor, saying, "You are on the first *bodhisattva* level, the border of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. As far as *saṃsāra* is concerned, you are a nonreturner and you have the power of incarnation."

At the conclusion of his intellectual studies Mikyo Dorje devoted more of his time to meditation. In a visionary experience, *ḍākinīs* carried him into the presence of the *mahāsiddha*, Śavaripa, who had transmitted

the *mahāmudrā* to Maitrīpa. Savaripa then introduced Mikyo Dorje to the nature of his own mind, saying, “Both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* come from mind. Your own mind is itself wisdom. So there are no different levels. Everything comes from mind.” Then the *mahāsiddha* disappeared.

Mikyo Dorje himself became a very prolific author whose works were both controversial and influential. At the age of twenty-three he wrote a commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* entitled, *Authentic Relaxation of the Noble One* (Tib.: *rje.btsun.ngal.so*). He then invited the Gelugpa scholar, Sera Jetsun, to a critical debate on the text. This talented scholar responded by composing a commentary of his own in which he wrote, “Karmapa is a high incarnation and scholar. Therefore, I am unable to criticize him. However, at his invitation I am following his commentary with my own book entitled, *A Reply to Karmapa*.” In this way a famous literary debate took place between the brilliant Karmapa and the famous Gelugpa scholar.

Mikyo Dorje authored over thirty volumes in all, fourteen more than Karma Pakshi. These included texts on linguistics, religious law, *abhidharma*, *tantra*, Madhyamaka philosophy, art and poetry. He composed important texts on *mahāmudrā* and inspired the Karma Gadri movement in art through his work in this field. In addition he composed the spiritual practice known as *The Guru Yoga of the Four Sessions* (Tib.: *thun.bzhi.bla.ma'i.rnal.'byor*) in honor of his *guru* Sangye Nyenpa. This has become one of the most important practices of the Kaṃtshang lineage.

In 1546 Mikyo Dorje had a premonition of his imminent death. However, Shamar Rinpoche and Pawo Rinpoche entreated their *guru* to remain and continue his work. Responding to their request Karmapa agreed to extend his life span for several years. He set out with his monastic camp on a long final tour of Karma Kagyupa monasteries and *dharma* centers. On this tour Mikyo Dorje told his officials to relax the normally strict protocol that surrounded him. It was his wish that it be as easy as possible for people to have an audience with him.

While traveling, Mikyo Dorje wrote many poetic accounts of his visionary experiences. One of the most significant was one in which he envisaged Cakrasaṃvara seated above the head of Vajrayoginī. From the *guru*, in the form of Cakrasaṃvara, came the nectar of wisdom, which transformed the concepts of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* into wisdom of enlightenment. A *vajra* hook made the wisdom unshakeable. Then in the same vision he saw *saṃsāra* burned away in a cooking pot, which rested on a

vajra trivet. In another visionary experience Mikyo Dorje saw eight Padmasambhavas and eight Karmapas combine to produce a secret teaching.

In his final years Mikyo Dorje's health declined, but despite this he continued his arduous work unabated. In 1554 there was an outbreak of leprosy in southern Tibet. Karmapa traveled there in an effort to bring the epidemic to an end. He had a black *stūpa* surrounded by four smaller *stūpas* constructed in the center of the area. The central *stūpa* was a symbolic representation of a *nāga* ("snake spirit"), which in myth was said to cause leprosy. The four surrounding *stūpas* symbolized its arms and legs. Then Mikyo Dorje went into the center of the area and with the power of his compassion absorbed the imbalance that was causing the disease into himself. The epidemic quickly cleared and Mikyo Dorje returned to the Dakpo Shedrup Ling monastery of Shamar Rinpoche.

However, a little while later, Karmapa himself began to exhibit signs of leprosy and was soon unable to walk. He realized the imminence of his own death and so he arrayed himself in the dress and ornaments of the *sambhogakāya*, the communicative form of buddhahood, and showed himself in this manner to his students. Subsequently Mikyo Dorje entrusted Shamar Rinpoche with the letters containing the predictions of his next rebirth, and passed away at the age of forty-seven. His corpse was cremated at Tsurphu. Shamar Rinpoche enshrined his relics in a silver *stūpa*.

The eighth Karmapa had many accomplished and scholarly students. Among the most outstanding were Shamar Konchog Yenlag, Pawo Tsuglak Tengwa, Gyaltschap Drakpa Paljor, Situ Chokyi Gocha and Karma Thinley Legdrup. He also numbered artists, doctors and poets among his disciples, on whom he exerted a profound influence.