

# The History of the Sixteen Karmapas of Tibet

KARMA THINLEY

The Fourth Karma Thinleypa

*Edited with an essay by David Stott*

*Illustrated by Namkha Tashi*

*Foreword by Chögyam Trungpa*

*Introduction by Reginald A. Ray*



1980 Prajñā Press BOULDER

# The Historical and Theoretical Background

THIS BOOK CONTAINS the biographies of the sixteen successive incarnations of the Gyalwa Karmapa Lama of Tibet, head of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Buddhism. The activity and teaching of this great incarnation line has been of the utmost importance in the history of *vajrayāna* Buddhism to this day.

The present Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1923–), is the sixteenth of the line which began with the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (1110–1193). The Gyalwa Karmapa Lamas have continually embodied and guided the Karma Kagyu transmission of the message of Śākyamuni Buddha. They have displayed their mastery of *dharma* variously as scholar, *yogin*, artist and poet and their lives are flawless examples of renunciation, compassion and the view of wisdom.

From the point of view of spirituality, the Karmapa Lamas embody the activity (Skt.: *karma*, Tib.: *phrin.las*)<sup>1</sup> of buddhahood, and as such were prophesied by Śākyamuni Buddha in the *Samādhirājasūtra*. In addition, their activity was also prophesied by the eighth-century Indian *mahāguru*, Padmasambhava.

## *The Notion of Lineage*

The notion of lineage is of the utmost importance for an understanding of the history of the Gyalwa Karmapas. The teachings of Buddha have been preserved for two thousand five hundred years in a multiplicity of lineages. Lord Buddha himself gave many varied and sometimes contrasting instructions to his students, who subsequently specialized in particular cycles of precepts. Out of these early groupings of *dharma* followers emerged the eighteen *hīnayāna* sects. Later the *mahāyāna* traditions of the Madhyamaka and Yogā-

cāra flourished as a result of the inspiration of the two supreme masters, Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga. Subsequently from the fifth century C.E. onward, the various lines of the *vajrayāna* or “secret *mantra*” emerged. Therefore, when the *buddhadharma* was transmitted to Tibet, the Tibetan lineages developed to a large extent on the basis of this pre-existing pattern.

A “lineage” (Tib.: *brgyud*) or “tradition of *dharma*” (Tib.: *chos.lugs*) possesses certain recognizable characteristics, including a central spiritual theme or “viewpoint” (Tib.: *lta.ba*) such as the Kagyu *mahāmudrā*. This view is itself associated with specific practices and symbolic deities. Moreover, the particular teachings are preserved by and passed on through a line of accomplished spiritual masters, who themselves embody the actual qualities of the teaching. The major lineages of *dharma* in Tibet possessed a relatively sophisticated degree of organization, with many monasteries, convents, colleges and meditation centers in which students were trained in a range of studies including philosophy, meditation, ritual, art and astrology.

In addition to the line of transmission from teacher to student within the lineage, there are also the lines of *tulkus* (Tib.: *sprul.sku*) or “incarnate teachers.” Incarnate teachers are spiritually advanced practitioners, who, having transcended the network of ego, nevertheless return in successive lives to carry out their vow to work for sentient beings. The second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi was in fact the first recognized Tibetan *tulku*. Although incarnate teachers had been recognized in India, the existence in Tibet of developed traditions with great cultural and social influence enabled *tulkus* to be recognized and trained in a way which had not been possible in India. Within the Tibetan lineages, the incarnate teachers have been regarded as the jewels of the tradition and have generally been the senior teachers, *yogins* and scholars.

In the thousand year history of *buddhadharma* in Tibet four major traditions, Nyingma, Sakya, Gelug and Kagyu have developed. Numerous small lines and sub-sects have also arisen, most of which have since disappeared as independent schools.

### *The Kagyu Tradition*

The Karma Kagyu lineage has been the most extensive of the original four great branches of the Dakpo Kagyu tradition, which is the name given to the systematization of the lineages of teaching transmitted through Gampopa (Tib.: *sgam.po.pa*) (1079–1153), the profound scholar and spiritual master

whose life was predicted by Lord Śākyamuni. The Buddha told one of his followers, a physician *bhikṣu* named Kumāra, that in the future he would again be a physician *bhikṣu*, only this time in a northern country by the side of the river Lohita and would establish a meditation school. Gampopa, a skilled physician, was first a Kadampa *bhikṣu* who received teachings from Jayondag, Jayulwa, Geshe Nyugrumpa, Shawo Gangpa and Geshe Chakregongkhapa. He studied the “graded path” (Tib.: *lam.rim*) teachings of Atīṣa and the teachings of Dromtonpa. He became a holder of the Kadampa lineage and wrote the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* and other commentaries on Kadampa teaching. Later he received the Kagyu teaching on *mahāmudrā* and the “six *yogas* of Nāropa” from Milarepa. After that he was called “two streams become one” (Tib.: *bka'.phyag.chu.bo.gnyis.'dres*). Gampopa organized these lineages into an organic whole, giving his name, Dakpo Lharje (Tib.: *dwags.po.lha.rje*) “the doctor from Dakpo” to the school he formed, which thus became known as the Dakpo Kagyu. After Gampopa’s death the “four great and eight minor (sects)” (Tib.: *che.zhi.chung.brgyad*) comprising the Dakpo Kagyu tradition, emerged.

The term Kagyu (Tib.: *bka'.brgyud*) derives from a longer phrase meaning “lineages of the four commissioned ones” (Tib.: *bka'.babs.bzhi'i.brgyud.pa* or sometimes *bka'.bzhi'i.brgyud.pa*). The lineages referred to being: (1) that of Guhyasamāja, Catuḥpīṭha and the *yogas* of the “illusory body” and “transference” handed down through Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara, Indrabhūti, Yoginī, Viśukalpa, Saraha, Nāgārjuna and Tilopa; (2) that of Mahāmāyā and the “dream” *yoga* handed down through Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara, Jñāna Ḍākinī, Kukuripa, Caryāpa and Tilopa; (3) that of Cakrasaṃvara and the other mother *tantras*, and the “luminosity” *yoga* handed down by Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara, Vajrapāṇi, Ḍombipa, Vinasavajra, Lavapa and Tilopa; and finally (4) that of Hevajra and the “heat” *yoga* handed down through Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara, Vajrapāṇi, Kāmadevavajra, Padmavajra, Ḍākinī Kalpa Bhadre and Tilopa. The term Kagyu is often translated simply as “oral transmission” but this is only an attempt at literal translation and overlooks the origin of the term and its original meaning. The alternate rendering of the term as Kargyu (Tib.: *dkar.brgyud*) is a late Drukpa Kagyu custom referring to the wearing of a “white” (Tib.: *dkar*) cotton robe by the *yogins* of the tradition.

Gampopa’s principal teacher, the famed *yogin* and poet, Milarepa, had himself received the “transmission” of the lineage from Marpa the translator, student of Nāropa and Maitrīpa. He thus became the holder of the Kagyu lineage. The “direct lineage” (Tib.: *nye.brgyud*) of the Dakpo Kagyu is described as:

Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara  
 Tilopa  
 Nāropa  
 Marpa Lotsawa  
 Milarepa  
 Gampopa

The “indirect lineage” (Tib.: *ring.brgyud*), which is expressly concerned with the transmission of *mahāmudrā*, is described as:

Dharmakāya Buddha Vajradhara	}	Indian <i>siddhas</i>
Ratnamati		
Saraha		
Nāgārjuna		
Śavaripa		
Maitrīpa		
Marpa Lotsawa		
Milarepa		
Gampopa		

The “four great” (Tib.: *che.bzhi*) lineages of the Dakpo Kagyu originated with pupils of Gampopa or his nephew, Dakpo Gomtsul (1116–1169): (1) The Kamtshang or Karma Kagyu was founded by Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (1110–1193), who studied under Gampopa. (2) The Tsalpa (Tib.: *tshal.pa*) Kagyu was founded by Zhang Yudrakpa Tsonдру Drakpa (1123–1193), a disciple of Dakpo Gomtsul. (3) The Baram (Tib.: *'ba'.ram*) Kagyu was founded by Baram Darma Wangchuk, a disciple of Gampopa. (4) The Phagmo Drupa (Tib.: *phag.mo.gru.pa*) Kagyu was founded by Gampopa’s student, Phagmo Dru Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170). The Phagmo Drupa Kagyu subsequently spawned “eight minor” (Tib.: *chung.brgyad*) subsects:

Drigung	(Tib.: <i>'bri.gung</i> )
Taglung	(Tib.: <i>stag.lung</i> )
Trophu	(Tib.: <i>khro.phu</i> )
Drukpa	(Tib.: <i>'brug.pa</i> )
Martshang	(Tib.: <i>smar.tshang</i> )
Yelpa	(Tib.: <i>gyel.pa</i> )
Shugseb	(Tib.: <i>shug.seb</i> )
Yamzang	(Tib.: <i>gya'.zang</i> )

The Drukpa, Drigung and Taglung have survived to the present day, with the Drukpa being the largest, followed by the Drigung.

### *The Other Lineages*

The Karma Kagyu tradition cannot be considered in isolation from the other traditions of Buddhism in Tibet upon which it exerted considerable influence and from which, in return, it received many teachings. The first tradition to appear in Tibet was the Nyingma (Tib.: *nying.ma*) or "Ancient Ones," which emerged out of the missionary work of the eighth-century masters, Guru Padmasambhava, King Trisong Detsun and the *bodhisattva* Śāntarakṣita. The early Nyingmapas were both lay and monastic practitioners who followed the *sūtra* and *mantra* teachings of the period of early translations. The key Nyingma precept is *mahā ati* (Tib.: *rdzogs.pa.chen.po*) or "Great Perfection," which was introduced into Tibet in the eighth century by the Indian scholar and *yogin*, Vimalamitra. The teaching of *mahā ati* points directly to the natural perfection of awareness, and it may be regarded as the supreme teaching of the Buddha's way. The main *tantra* of the Nyingma tradition is the *Guhya-garbha* (Tib.: *gsang.ba.snying.po*) or *Secret Essence*. Three distinct lines can be distinguished within the Nyingma school: the "indirect lineage" (Tib.: *ring.brgyud*) of the "oral transmission" (Tib.: *bka'.ma*), the "direct lineage" (Tib.: *nye.brgyud*) of "the treasures" or "concealed texts" (Tib.: *gter.ma*) and the lineage of "profound visions" (Tib.: *zab.mo.dag.snang*). The greatest masters of the Nyingma tradition included the omniscient Longchen Rabjampa (1308–1363), Jigme Lingpa (1729–1797) and Ju Mipham (1848–1914). The present heads of the Nyingma school are Minling Trichen and Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje.

The later schools in Tibet collectively belong to the period of the "new translations" (Tib.: *nga.gyur.gsar.ma*), which began in the tenth century when Rinchen Zangpo (958–1051) and other scholars devised new canons of translation technique, emphasizing etymological precision rather than the freer style of the "old translation" school. The Sakya and Kagyu traditions, both of which arose in the eleventh century, were based on the "new" *tantric* cycles which were introduced at this time.

The monastery of Sakya, which later became the central seat of the Sakyapa (Tib.: *sa.skya.pa*) school, was founded in 1073 by Konchog Gyalpo of the Khon family. This influential family had previously been Nyingmapa but Konchog Gyalpo studied the new *tantras* with Drogmi Lotsawa and the Indian *paṇḍita*, Gayadhara. The Sakya tradition was given definite shape by Konchog Gyalpo's son, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158) and the other four of the "five great masters," Sonam Tsemo (1142–1182), Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen (1147–1216), Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) and Chogyal Phakpa (1235–1280).

The Sakya school has specialized in the combined *sūtra* and *mantra* teaching of the *lam dre* (Tib.: *lam.'bras*) or "path and fruit" cycle, developed by the Indian *siddha*, Virūpa. Their principal Sakya *tantra* has been *Hevajra* and their main deities are Hevajra and Vajrayoginī. Three sub-sects have appeared: Sakyapa, Ngorpa and Tsharpa, which, however, have differed only in ritual. The present head of the Sakya tradition is H. H. Sakya Tridzin (1945–), an emanation of Mañjuśrī, the *bodhisattva* of wisdom.

The Kadampa (Tib.: *bka'.gdams.pa*) tradition also began in the eleventh century but it has not survived as an independent school, its teaching having been absorbed into the other schools. The Kadam school developed from the activity and teachings of the Indian master Atīṣa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna (979–1053), who spent the last twelve years of his life in Tibet. Atīṣa laid great emphasis on the "graded path" of both *sūtra* and *tantra* as an essential prerequisite for authentic spirituality. To a few gifted disciples he transmitted the especially profound precepts of "thought transformation" (Tib.: *blo.sbyong*).

It was his student Dromton (Tib.: *'brom.ston.rgyal.ba'i.byung.nas*) who actually organized the Kadam as a school. The Kadampas generally upheld the philosophy of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka teaching of "emptiness" (Skt.: *śūnyatā*, Tib.: *stong.pa.nyid*) as a negation of all predicates.

The Gelug tradition was founded by the great Tibetan *paṇḍita* Tsongkhapa Lozang Dragpa (Tib.: *tsong.kha.pa.blo.bzang.'grags.pa*) (1367–1419). In early life Tsongkhapa studied with masters of all the major lineages and displayed superb qualities of scholarship. He gathered many disciples and out of them grew the Gelug tradition. The central concerns of the Gelug tradition are its insistence on the *vinaya* monastic rules and the "graded path" to enlightenment inherited from Atīṣa's teachings. This emphasis on the teachings of Atīṣa has led to the Gelug sometimes being referred to as the new Kadam (Tib.: *bka'.gdams.sar*). Their particular philosophical viewpoint is that of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka as elaborated by Tsongkhapa. In *tantra*, they have placed their main emphasis on the *tantras* of Guhyasamāja, Vajrabhairava and Cakrasaṃvara. The Gelugpa tradition has been ornamented by the work of many brilliant scholars such as Khedrupje (Tib.: *mkhas.grub.rje*) (1385–1438) and Konchog Jigme Wangpo (Tib.: *dkon.chog.'jigs.med.dbang.po*) (1728–1781). The present head of the school is H. H. Ling Rinpoche, tutor to the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatsho (1935–), embodiment of the compassion of Avalokiteśvara.

In addition to these major traditions a great contribution to *buddha-dharma* in Tibet has been made by the various smaller lineages. Important ones include the Shijay (Tib.: *shi.byas*) and Chod Yul (Tib.: *gcod.yul*)

lineages of the Indian *siddha*, Dampa Sangye (Tib.: *dams.pa.sangs.rgyas*) and his student, the famed *yoginī*, Machig Labdronma (Tib.: *ma.gcig.labs.sgron.ma*) (1055–1145); the Urgyen Nyendrup (Tib.: *o.rgyan.snyen.sgrub*) lineage of the *siddha*, Urgyenpa Rinchen Pal (Tib.: *u.rgyan.pa.rin.chen.dpal*) (1230–1309), which was very influential for the Drugpa and Kamtshang Kagyu lineages into which it was eventually absorbed; and the Shangpa (Tib.: *shangs.pa*), founded by Khyungpo Naljor (Tib.: *khyung.po.rnal.'byor*) (990–1140), who inherited the *mahāmudrā* transmission of the *ḍākinīs*, Niguma (consort of Nāropa) and Sukhasiddhi.

One of the most controversial sects in Tibet was the Jonang school (Tib.: *jo.nang.pa*) founded by the learned philosopher, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsan (Tib.: *dol.po.pa.shes.rab.rgyal.mtshan*) (1292–1361). The Jonang tradition held the influential doctrine of “empty of something else” (Tib.: *gzhan.stong*). This view, which is derived from the *Uttaratantra* (Tib.: *rgyud.bla.ma*) of Maitreya, states that ultimate reality, while being empty of any relative blemishes, is intrinsically positive. The Jonangpas subsequently were attacked by many Prāsaṅgika scholars, especially the Geluggas at the time of the fifth Dalai Lama (1615–1680) and since this time have not existed as an independent sect. However, their teachings have been maintained and propagated by certain figures within the Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya traditions, such as Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, Longchenpa and Śākya Chokden.

### *The Lineage of the Karmapas*

The Karma Kagyu school has had a long and glorious history in which it has established itself as the supreme Kagyu sect under the leadership of the Gyalwa Karmapas. It has spread from Ladakh to China, and now to the West. The Black Hat (Tib.: *zhwa.nag*) line of the Karmapas has been aided and supported by the three chief incarnation lines of the sect: the Red Hat Shamar (Tib.: *zhwa.dmar*), Situ (Tib.: *si.tu*) and Gyaltsab (Tib.: *rgyal.tshab*) *tulkus*. In addition, numerous other scholars, *yogins* and visionaries have contributed to the splendor of the tradition. Notable among these have been the Jamgon Kongtrul (Tib.: *'jam.mgon.kong.sprul*), and Pawo (Tib.: *dpa'.bo*) *tulkus*.

The Kamtshang Kagyu tradition was established by the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, who inherited the Kagyu transmission from Gampopa. After he attained enlightenment he was recognized by eminent



contemporaries to be "the Man of Buddha Activity" (Tib.: *karma.pa*) prophesied by the Buddha in the *Samādhirājasūtra*, and also to be an embodiment of Avalokiteśvara, the compassionate form of buddhahood. Dusum Khyenpa later founded the three main centers of Karma Kagyu tradition at Todlung Tsurphu (Tib.: *stod.lung.mishur.phu*) near Lhasa, Karma Gon (Tib.: *karma.dgon*) in Kham province and Kampo Nenang (Tib.: *kam.po.gnas.nang*) also in Kham, and thus organized the Karma Kagyu as a distinct school.

It was during the lifetime of the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1204–1283) that the expansion of the Kaṃtshang began. Famed as a *siddha*, Karma Pakshi was invited to Mongolia by Prince Kublai where he became guru to Mongka Khan and subsequently, though not without initial problems, to his successor, Kublai Khan. While in China, Karma Pakshi on several occasions displayed miraculous powers in order to assist his work of spreading *buddhadharma*. The display of miraculous activity by Karma Pakshi and the other Karmapas has functioned as a means of manifesting the utter freedom of enlightenment. Being beyond the limitations of dualistic perception, such enlightened activity takes on the garb of miraculous power. Its apparently miraculous nature derives from its absolutely spontaneous response to the needs of beings and the particular situation which it confronts.

The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339), who was a consummate master of theory and practice is particularly important for his bringing together of the hitherto separate streams of Kagyu *mahāmudrā* and Nyingma *mahā ati*. He received the teachings of the "innermost essence" (Tib.: *snying.gi.thig.le*) of *mahā ati* from Rigdzin Kumārārāja (1266–1343), who was also the guru of Longchenpa. In addition Rangjung Dorje composed the extremely important and influential texts *Zabmo Nangdon* (Tib.: *zab.mo.snang.don*), which dealt with the subtle teachings of the *anuttarayoga tantra*.

Like his two predecessors and his successors up to the tenth Karmapa, the fifth Karmapa Dezhin Shegpa (1384–1415) was the guru of the emperor of China. During one particular ceremony performed by Dezhin Shegpa, the Emperor Yung Lo perceived the spiritual form of the black *vajra* crown above Karmapa's head. The *vajra* crown, which is the symbol of Avalokiteśvara's compassion, is present above the heads of all Karmapa incarnations. The first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, had been presented with the crown by *ḍākinīs* at the moment of his attainment of enlightenment. The spiritual form of the crown was said to be woven from the hair of

one hundred thousand *ḍākinīs*. When, through his devotion to Dezhin Shegpa, Yung Lo perceived the *vajra* crown, he determined to have a replica made, ornamented with precious jewels and gold, so that all might be inspired to see the true nature of Karmapa's spirituality. On his receipt of Yung Lo's replica, Dezhin Shegpa developed the ceremony wherein he wore the *vajra* crown while embodying the compassion of Avalokiteśvara. All succeeding Karmapas have followed this custom and the ceremony, which has the power of communicating the unending inspiration of the Karmapa lineage, has become one of the most sacred and characteristic features of the activity of the Karmapas.

The eighth Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje (1507–1554), was a brilliant scholar and prolific author. He composed over thirty texts, including works on *abhidharma* psychology, Madhyamaka philosophy, the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *vinaya*, logic, *mahāmudrā*, *tantras*, Sanskrit grammar, art and poetry.

During the lifetime of the tenth Karmapa, Choying Dorje (1604–1674), the Karma Kagyu lineage was drawn inevitably into politics<sup>2</sup> because of the antipathy to the Gelugpa sect felt by influential lay supporters such as Desi Karma Tenkyong (Tib.: *de.srid.karma.bstan.skong*), the king of Tsang (Tib.: *gtsang*) province at the time of Choying Dorje.

The fourteenth Karmapa, Thegchog Dorje (1798–1868), played a major role in the nineteenth-century religious and cultural renaissance associated with the Rime (Tib.: *ris.med*) ("boundaryless") movement. His students included the three principal Rime figures: Chogyur Dechen Lingpa (Tib.: *mchog.'gyur.bde.chen.gling.pa*) (1829–1870), Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (Tib.: *'jam.dbyangs.mkhyen.brtse.dbang.po*) (1820–1892) and Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (Tib.: *'jam.mgon.kong.sprul.blo.gros.mtha'.yas*) (1811–1899).

The present Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1923–) is the sixteenth of the line. His Holiness has presided over the Karma Kagyu school during this period of great change both for the school itself and also for Tibet as a whole. Trained by the leading masters of the Kagyu and other traditions, His Holiness has manifested the tremendous qualities of compassion and natural wisdom of the Gyalwa Karmapas. After the abolition of Buddhist culture in Tibet in 1959, His Holiness brought his followers into exile in Sikkim where he established a new monastic seat at Rumtek. His Holiness has striven unceasingly to maintain the lamp of Kagyu *dharma* and in recent years has twice visited the West at the invitation of his own emissary disciples. Under the enlightened inspiration of this, the sixteenth Gyalwa

Karmapa, the Karma Kagyu tradition is now establishing itself throughout the world.

### *The Teaching of the Karma Kagyu Tradition*

The essential theme of Kagyu teaching is *mahāmudrā*, the realization of the true nature of mind and its radiation in wisdom and compassion. It is the foundation, path and goal of spirituality. Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche compared *mahāmudrā* to a king who affixes his seal to documents and so forth to signify his confirmation. Similarly, the *mahāmudrā* (“great seal”) *yogin* realizes that as “buddha-nature” (Skt.: *tathāgatagarbha*, Tib.: *de. gsheg.snying.po*) is the underlying reality of all phenomena, whatever arises is “sealed” (Skt.: *mudrā*) with “coemergent” (Skt.: *sahaja*, Tib.: *lhan.gcig.skyes.pa*) perfection.

The actual instructions and methods of the Kagyu spiritual path derive from Gampopa’s unification of the Kadam “graded path” *dharma* and the *tantric* precepts of the *mahāsiddhas*. Its chief philosophical base is the *Uttaratantra* of Maitreya and its commentary by Asaṅga. The *mahāmudrā* theme embraces all the apparent multiplicity of these precepts and practices.

Within *saṃsāra*, as sentient beings are alienated from the true nature of reality, “buddha-nature” exists only as an indwelling potential obscured by unawareness and various defilements (Skt.: *kleśa*). The spiritual path is the liberation of “buddha-nature” and its fulfillment as *dharmakāya*. As Gampopa says in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, “The motive is buddha-nature.” This transforming path has three main stages or “vehicles” (Skt.: *yāna*, Tib.: *theg.pa*) of development: *hīnayāna*, *mahāyāna* and *vajrayāna*. *Mahāmudrā* is itself the crown or climax of the path.

#### *Hīnayāna*

The starting point of the spiritual path is the *hīnayāna* (“narrow vehicle”) way. In its exclusive approach the *hīnayāna* focuses on the frustration that permeates all aspects of our experience, due to clinging to the illusory notion of a permanent, independent self. This recognition derives from Buddha’s enunciation of the “four truths”: (1) suffering, (2) its cause, self-clinging, (3) liberation, (4) its cause, the eightfold path of right view, intention, action, speech, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and meditative

concentration. This teaching provides a diagnosis of our illness and its cause and the prescription of the method of attaining health. By applying the simple precision and dignity of the *hīnayāna* in meditation and everyday life the practitioner develops an understanding that conditioned reality is impermanent, sorrowful and egoless. From this understanding comes a natural, unfeigned renunciation. This is the key concept of the *hīnayāna* path.

Within the Kagyu tradition a series of precepts known as “the four thoughts that turn the mind (to *dharma*)” (Tib.: *blo.ldog.nam.bzhi*) are utilized as a particularly effective means of realizing the “four truths.” The four thoughts are: (1) precious human life (Tib.: *mi.lus.rin.po.che*), (2) death and impermanence (Tib.: *'chi.ba.mi.rtags.pa*), (3) action and result (Tib.: *las.'bras*), (4) defects of *saṃsāra* (Tib.: *'khor.ba'i.nyes.pa*). They have been inherited from the tradition of Atīṣa and elaborated by Gampopa and successive Kagyu masters.

The first thought is the reflection on the uniquely positive situation of precious human life with its freedom and ability. Within the varied forms of embodied life, human birth, which is free from situations of entrapment and limitations, is extremely rare. In addition, human life becomes precious through contact with the *buddhadharma*. Such unique “opportunity” and “juncture” (Tib.: *dal.'byor*) constitute precious human life, the sole basis of spiritual endeavor.

The second thought is the reflection on the impermanence of all phenomena. As Buddha has said, “the end of every meeting is parting.” Ego derives its sense of security from the notion of its own permanence and that of its relationships and possessions. Realization of impermanence in meditation and everyday life cuts through the laziness and self-satisfaction of neurotic mind and prepares the practitioner for evolution on the path.

Thirdly comes the reflection on actions and results. Past actions by body, speech and mind have brought about the particular characteristics of the present. The present situation itself provides a variety of choices for action out of which the future situation will develop. Generally action is divided into the three categories of virtuous, nonvirtuous and neutral, which have their corresponding results in positive, negative or neutral situations and environments. This third thought thus enables the practitioner to acknowledge responsibility for all aspects of his life and develop a spaciousness of mind suitable for spiritual growth.

The fourth and final thought is the reflection on the defects of *saṃsāra*. All sentient beings are trapped within the sufferings of conditioned existence. *Saṃsāra* is variously hostile, fascinating and bewildering but in it there is no ultimate satisfaction or security for ego. Understanding of this produces a true turning away from *saṃsāra* and a longing for the path of liberation, symbolized by the three jewels of *buddha*, *dharma* and *saṅgha*.

### *Mahāyāna*

As the practice of *hīnayāna* brings about a detachment from the fixation on ego, a natural spaciousness and openness develops. This is the dawn of the *mahāyāna* path. Its key concept is *bodhicitta*, the union of *prajñā* and compassion which arises out of the all-encompassing space of "buddha-nature." Its *prajñā* consists in its direct penetration of the "emptiness" of ego and phenomena. Its compassion consists in its responsiveness to the needs of others.

Within our tradition many precepts exist for both relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*. In particular we have inherited precepts of relative *bodhicitta* from the Kadam school, such as the famous "seven stages of thought transformation" (Tib.: *blo.sbyong.don.bdun.ma*) through which one develops the fearlessness of *bodhicitta* in exchanging oneself for another.

Ultimate *bodhicitta* practice is meditation on "emptiness," in which the practitioner sees the space-like "emptiness" of reality, free from the extremes of existence and nonexistence. From the Madhyamaka teachings, of *paṇḍita* Nāgārjuna and the teachings of the *siddhas*, Gampopa brought together many precepts for ultimate *bodhicitta* meditation. He termed this approach "*sūtra* tradition *mahāmudrā*" (Tib.: *mdo.lugs.phyag.rgya.chen.po*).

The all-powerful inspiration of *bodhicitta* extends outward into all aspects of life as the activity of the six "perfections" (Skt.: *pāramitā*, Tib.: *pha.rol.tu.phyin.pa*): giving, morality, patience, energy, meditation and *prajñā*.

### *Vajrayāna*

The *vajrayāna* or *tantrayāna* is the highest level of Buddha's way. In the lower *yānas* the practitioner follows a path which will lead to enlightenment in the future. However, in the *vajrayāna* the practitioner adopts the goal itself as the path. The spaciousness of *mahāyāna* gives birth to the

*vajrayāna* perception of the universe as the play of interwoven Buddha-energies, so at the level of *tantra*, body, speech and mind are transformed into the body, speech and mind of buddha. The key concept of *vajrayāna* is *samaya*, which is the *yogin's* commitment to the perfect purity of the *vajrayāna* vision.

In *vajrayāna*, buddahood is directly manifested in the "three roots" (Tib.: *rtsa.ba.gsum*) of *guru* (Tib.: *bla.ma*), *devatā* (Tib.: *yi.dam*) and *ḍākinī* (Tib.: *mkha'.gro*) and *dharmapāla* (Tib.: *chos.skyong*), which are, in effect, the *tantric* aspect of the three jewels. The *guru* is the root of "inspiration" (Skt.: *adhiṣṭhāna*, Tib.: *sbyin.brlabs*) as he is the one who reveals the presence of the Buddha within our mind. The *devatā* ("deity") is the root of "attainment" (Skt.: *siddhi*, Tib.: *dngos.grub*), as buddhahood manifests in a multiplicity of forms to benefit different aptitudes and dispositions. So the *yogin* performs the spiritual practice of the deity or deities which embody the awakened transformation of his own particular disposition. The *ḍākinīs* ("sky-goers") and *dharmapālas* ("dharma-protectors") together comprise the root of "activity" (Skt.: *karma*, Tib.: *phrin.las*). The *ḍākinīs* embody the feminine energy of enlightenment as it appears in situations to guide and restore the *yogin* to a sense of balance. The *dharmapālas*, both male and female aspects, function in an analogous manner to guard the *yogin's* spiritual development and the accumulated blessings of the various lineages of *buddhadharma*.

In our tradition the principal *guru* is Gyalwa Karmapa, who is inseparable from Vajradhara. The principal *devatā* is Vajravārāhī (Tib.: *rdo.rje.phag.mo*), mother of all Buddhas, and the principal *dharmapālas* are the Vajra Black-Cloaked Mahākāla (Tib.: *gon.po.rdo.rje.ber.nag.can*) and Mahākālī, the Self-Arisen Queen (Tib.: *rang.'byung.rgyal.mo*).

As the practice of *tantra* revolves around the transformation of body, speech and mind into the three *kāyas* of buddhahood, *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, the *tantras* include practices relating to each of these three aspects. Bodily practices include prostrations, offerings, walking meditations and yogic postures. Speech practice revolves around *mantra* and liturgy. Mind practice involves visualization in which the dualistic perception of subject and object is purified by the creation of the *devatā* and his environment. Its other aspect is formless meditation, which is *mahāmudrā* meditation.

In the Kagyu, Gelug and Sakya schools, which collectively belong to the "new *tantra*" tradition, there are four orders of *tantra*, whereas in the

“old tradition” (Tib.: *rnying.ma*) there are six. The four orders are respectively *kriyā*, *upa* (*caryā*), *yoga* and *anuttarayoga*. The various cycles of *tantras*, commentaries and *sādhanas* are assigned to the appropriate one of these four orders, in respect of their level of spiritual power.

The *kriyā tantra* is the initial stage of *vajrayāna* wherein the emphasis lies on the external, awe-inspiring purity of buddha-energy. The *yogin* relates to the deity as a servant to a master and pays great attention to ritual activity and purity. Avalokiteśvara is an example of a *kriyā tantra* deity.

The second order of *tantra* is *upa* or *caryā*. Here the *yogin* perceives the buddha-energy as both external and internal. This is comparable to the relation between friends. Less stress is placed upon ritual activity at this level. An example of an *upa tantra* deity is Vairocana.

*Yoga tantra* is the culmination of the *kriyā* and *upa tantras*. Here the *yogin* is consubstantiated with the buddha-energy, so he meditates on himself as identical with the deity. Ritual activity is only little emphasized. The cycle of *Sarvavid* (Tib.: *kun.rig*) is an example of a *yoga tantra*.

The highest order of *tantra* is the *anuttarayoga*, which is radically distinct from the three lower orders in its emphasis on the unsurpassable, all-pervading nature of buddha-energy. *Anuttarayoga* is divided into a “development” (Tib.: *bskye.rim*) and “fulfillment” stage (Tib.: *rdzogs.rim*). In the first stage the *yogin* identifies himself and his environment with the divine appearance of the *devatā* and his palace. The fulfillment stage completes the transformation and itself possesses a twofold aspect, one based on form and one on formlessness. The former aspect is the yoga of the “channels” (Skt.: *nāḍī*, Tib.: *rtsa*), “breath” (Skt.: *prāṇa*, Tib.: *rlung*) and “seed” (Skt.: *bindu*, Tib.: *thig.le*). The latter aspect is meditation on the “coincident luminosity and emptiness” (Tib.: *gsal.stong.zung.jug*) of natural awareness.

In the Kagyu tradition the principal *anuttarayoga* deities are Vajravārāhī and the group of “five deities” (Tib.: *lha.lnga*): Cakrasaṃvara, Vajrabhairava, Hevajra, Mahāmāyā and Guhyasamāja. These five constitute the fivefold *heruka maṇḍala* of *anuttarayoga*. Vajravārāhī is herself both the mother and consort of all the *herukas*.

### *Mahāmudrā*

*Mahāmudrā* is simultaneously the climax of *vajrayāna* and the thread running through the entire Kagyu spiritual path. Although essentially it eludes formulation, one may consider that it possesses three aspects: view

(Tib.: *lta.ba*), meditation (Tib.: *bsgom.pa*) and action (Tib.: *spyod.pa*). However, even these three categories are only apparent distinctions as in fact they spring from the unity of the *mahāmudrā* realization.

*View.* The true nature of mind is the primordial union of “luminosity” and “emptiness.” As such it is unborn and undying. However, through the spontaneous arising of unawareness, natural purity becomes obscured and the pattern of *saṃsāra* with its five defilements, five *skandhas* and so on, emerges. Nevertheless the underlying reality of both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is the thread of mind’s primordial purity, which is termed “buddha-nature.” As the great *siddha* Saraha says in his *People Dohās*, “Mind itself is the one seed of everything. From it the world of becoming and *nirvāṇa* arise.”

In the vast open nature of this view whatever arises is self-liberated since whatever arises is sealed with “coemergence.” The apparent duality of subject and object is reconciled in the unborn and undying nature of awareness. The *dharmatā* of mind is the middle way between the extremes of assertion and negation. As Tilopa declares, “*mahāmudrā* mind dwells nowhere.” All phenomena arise and fade in the space of mind, which itself is naturally empty.

*Meditation.* The heart of *mahāmudrā* is the effortless, uncontrived experience of mind. When the cloud-like obscurations are dispersed, the unborn and undying *dharmakāya* is revealed. Karmapa Rangjung Dorje says,

The ground of purification is the coincident luminosity and emptiness.  
The purifier is the *vajra yoga* of *mahāmudrā*.  
The purified are the momentary delusions and impurities.  
May the purified fruit of the immaculate *dharmakāya* be realized.

This ultimate realization is generally attained, unless one is especially gifted, as the outcome of the training in both ordinary (Tib.: *thun.mong*) and extraordinary (Tib.: *thun.mong.ma.yin.pa*) *mahāmudrā*.

As with all cycles of teaching, to begin *mahāmudrā* practice the *yogin* must receive the appropriate empowerments (Tib.: *dbang*), textual transmissions (Tib.: *lung*) and instructions (Tib.: *khrid*) from the *guru*. In particular the practitioner must receive the fourth empowerment known as the “awareness empowerment” in which the meeting of the two minds of the *guru* and student takes place and the nature of mind is clearly pointed out.

The preparation for both the ordinary and extraordinary *mahāmudrā* is the practice of the four preliminaries (Tib.: *sngon.gro*). The four sections



of the preliminaries are: (1) refuge and *bodhicitta* combined with prostrations, (2) Vajrasattva meditations and recitation, (3) *maṇḍala* offerings, (4) *guru yoga*. By the accomplishment of each section one hundred thousand times, the practitioner is ripened for the main practice.

In the Karma Kagyu, *guru yogas*, particularly of the eighth Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje, and the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, are performed to receive the particular inspiration of the Karmapa lineage.

The ordinary practice of *mahāmudrā* is actually formless meditation itself. In the first stage of tranquillity (Tib.: *zhi.gnas*) the practitioner rests in effortless one-pointedness of mind. When this tranquillity is achieved the *guru* introduces the student to the nature of his own mind (Tib.: *ngo.bo.sprod.pa*). Insight arises wherein the nature of awareness is revealed as nondual "luminosity and emptiness." Thought is the body of *dharmakāya* itself. This is the ultimate realization of *mahāmudrā*.

The extraordinary practice of *mahāmudrā* is comprised of the various "development-stage" meditations such as Vajrayoginī and Cakrasaṃvara and the ensuing "fulfillment-stage" *yogas* such as the "six doctrines of Nāropa" (Tib.: *naro.chos.drug*): inner heat (Tib.: *gtum.mo*), illusory body (Tib.: *sgyu.ma.lus*), dream (Tib.: *mi.lam*), luminosity (Tib.: *'od.gsal*), transference (Tib.: *'pho.ba*) and intermediate state (Tib.: *bar.do*). Their accomplishment leads to the production of the union of "bliss and emptiness" (Tib.: *bde.stong.zung.'jug*), from which the *mahāmudrā* realization spontaneously develops.

*Action.* The characteristic feature of *mahāmudrā* action is effortless-ness. As it results from the complete emptiness and compassion of the view and meditation, it goes beyond the notion of an imposed discipline. Hence the *mahāmudrā yogin* may sometimes behave in a way which is apparently shocking. This kind of action is referred to as the behavior of the "crazy *yogin*" (Tib.: *smyon.pa*). Saraha says,

If I am like a pig  
That covets worldly mire  
Tell me what fault  
Lies in a stainless mind.

The practice of *chod* (Tib.: *gchod.*, "cutting off ego") is associated with the action of the Kagyu *yogin*. It emphasizes direct openness to both internal and external hindrances. *Chod* entered the Kagyu tradition from the lineage of the eleventh century *yoginī*, Machig Labdronma, and has

been propagated by the Karmapa lineage, especially the third, Rangjung Dorje, and Surmang Trungpa Kunga Namgyal.

As one studies these biographies of the Gyalwa Karmapas it is vital to realize their true significance. They are not merely historical accounts but also spiritual doctrines. Essentially they are the records of the liberation (Tib.: *rnam.pa.thar.pa*) of the Karmapa lineage. Their multifaceted quality reflects the equally many-sided nature of *buddhadharma* itself, comprised of the three *yānas* with their multiplicity of spiritual instructions.

The aspects of the biographies which relate the actual history of the Karmapa lineage together with their example as accomplished students and practitioners may be characterized as their *hīnayāna* aspect. In the *hīnayāna* the student grounds himself in the basic truths of *dharma*, thus building a foundation for spiritual development. All the Gyalwa Karmapas have displayed great assiduity in meditation practice and scholarly study. It is said of the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, that while in meditation retreat, he never unfolded his hands long enough for the sweat on them to dry.

The particular features of the biographies which deal with the compassionate activity of the Karmapas may be considered as their *mahāyāna* aspect. In the *mahāyāna* the student radiates a warmth and openness emanating from the absence of emphasis on self. As the biographies show, each of the Gyalwa Karmapas has worked unceasingly for sentient beings by teaching, healing and establishing the Karma Kagyu lineage itself. This compassionate activity has not been confined merely to practitioners but also extended to the ordinary people of Tibet, China, Mongolia and so on. Like the other Gyalwa Karmapas, Mikyo Dorje did not remain constantly at the monastery of Tsurphu, but journeyed throughout Tibet with his monastic camp and gave teachings and aid to all who requested it. While traveling, Mikyo Dorje composed many texts in which he set forth his profound understanding of *dharma*. His death came as a result of clearing an epidemic of leprosy, which he subsequently contracted himself.

The *vajrayāna* aspects of the biographies may be seen as the varied accounts of visions and miracles. In the *vajrayāna* the practitioner experiences and acts from the standpoint of primordially pure energy of enlightenment itself. As the network of conceptualization is totally transcended, it is the level of visions and miraculous activity. As we see from the biographies, the successive Gyalwa Karmapas have rediscovered

their own natural spirituality largely through visionary experience. Furthermore, each has had affinities with particular symbolic deities through which agency they have received visionary inspiration. One famous example of this process is the vision of the third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, in which he envisaged that the eighth-century *ati yoga* master Vimalamitra was absorbed into his forehead. As a result of this, Rangjung Dorje unified the two streams of *ati yoga* and *mahāmudrā*.

In this history the underlying clarity and intelligence of the biographies have been stressed. In the presentation of Buddhism in the West the two extremes of arrogant dismissal or over-sentimental naivete have too often obscured the actual nature of the material. In contrast here is a clear and profound account of the lives of the Gyalwa Karmapas, from a representative of the Karma Kagyu tradition, the fourth Karma Thinley *tulku*.

Karma Thinley, Rinpoche was born in Nangchen in Kham in 1931 and was recognized, at the age of two and a half years, by Sakya Tridzin, Dakshul Thinle Rinchen as *tulku* of Beru Shaiyak Lama Kunrik, thought to be a Vairocana incarnation. At that time he received all the symbols and titles of his rank and authority. He was subsequently recognized by His Holiness the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa as the fourth Karma Thinleypa. Rinpoche studied with many leading contemporary teachers including Zechen Kongtrul and Dingo Khyentse, Rinpoche, and Ling Rinpoche. In addition to his position as a master of the Kagyu and Sakya schools, Rinpoche is also widely learned in the Nyingma and Gelug traditions. In 1974, His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa appointed him a "Lord of Dharma" of the Karma Kagyu lineage. As a leading scholar and close disciple of His Holiness, Rinpoche is thus uniquely fitted to compose this history of the lineage of the Karmapas.

The biographies themselves have been compiled in the traditional manner from various Tibetan historical texts and the oral tradition. Subsequently their significance has been illuminated by Rinpoche's understanding of such sacred history. Throughout, the intention has been to reflect the pattern of spirituality revealed by the lives of the Karmapa, while also rendering an accurate historical outline of the lineage.

David Stott  
Spiritual Representative  
of Karma Thinley, Rinpoche  
at dharma centres in the U.K.  
Manchester, U.K.  
October, 1978