

# Karmapas: *A historical and philosophical introduction*

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**T**he Karmapa is the spiritual leader of the Kagyud school of Tibetan Buddhism and ranks third in the Tibetan spiritual hierarchy after Dalai Lama and Panchan lama. Karmapa is an important sub-sect of Kagyudpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. From Kagyud-pa arose four major and eight minor sub-sects. The origin of these sects can be traced from the Buddha period in India. It is a fact that the Buddha advised his disciples not to follow his teachings blindly, but to analyse them according to their own intellect and experience. The Buddha had liberal view regarding the adaptations of his teachings. He told his followers to analyse his teaching well, and only then adopt them, but not for the sake of showing him respect. Probably due to this liberal viewpoint of the Buddha their arose a number of Buddhist schools in India and other parts of the world. Indian Buddhist tradition generally speaks of "eighteen" such schools, but that is a mere traditional number and in fact more than thirty are known to us, at least by name.<sup>1</sup> All these branches appeared one after another in close succession within three or four hundred years after the Buddha's *Mahaparinirvana*. According to the Ceylonese sources the first schism took place 100 years after the *Nirvana*. The remaining sects have arisen between the second and the third councils, i.e., between 100 B.C. and 247 B.C., most of them belonged to the second century after the *Nirvana*, but the last six in the third century.<sup>2</sup>

A hundred years after the Buddha's *Mahaparinirvana* dissension arose among the monks in regard to the actual doctrine of the master and their interpretations which ultimately led to the origin of sects in Indian Buddhism. Buddhist council was held to settle down the differences among his followers, but these councils failed to narrow down the differences. The second council was held regarding practices of 'ten points'. In one passage these 'ten points' constitutes such a division in order. This is a step towards the foundation of a sect.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha's teachings can be categorized in terms of three distinct vehicles, the lesser vehicle (*Hinayana*), the greater vehicle (*Mahayana*), and the Vajra vehicle (*Vajrayana*), each of which was intended to appeal to the spiritual capacities of the particular groups. Indian Buddhism is commonly divided into four main schools namely Great Exposition School, Sutra School, Mind Only School and Middle Way School. Each of these is associated with particular teachings, lineages, texts, doctrines and practices. The four main schools of Tibetan

Buddhism are also based on their own systems. The Nyingma School, for instance, emphasizes the practices of great perfection. The Kagyud School emphasizes the Mahamudra system and the six yoga of Naropa. The Gelugpa system of tantrik theory and practice is based on the Guhyasamaja Tantra, the Chakrasamvara Tantra and the Kalchakra Tantra. The Sakyapa favors the Hevajra Tantra. It is generally agreed that the development of Buddhism properly took place in Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. during the reign of Srong-Chan-Gampo.

According to the Tibetan historians, in the period of Lang-dar-ma's persecution, the Buddhist doctrine was rooted out, and it was a great disaster to Buddhism in Tibet. No sects appeared to have existed prior to Lang-dar-ma's persecution, nor till now a century and a half later. Waddell writes that the sects "arose in revolt against the debased Lamaism then prevalent, which was little else than a priestly mixture of demonolatry and witchcraft. Abandoning the grosser charlatanism, the new sects returned to celibacy and many of the purer *Mahayana* rules.<sup>4</sup> The sectarial movement seems to date from the reformation started by Indian Buddhist monk Atisa, who, as we have seen, visited Tibet in 1038 A.D.<sup>5</sup> Atisa corrected, rectified and systematized the Buddhist teachings prevailing there. He reformed the *Sangha* in Tibet and brought a great renaissance in the religion. With his reformation originated the Kadam-pa sect, the first sect of Tibetan Buddhism as against the unreformed type of Buddhism called Nyingma-pa started by Padmasambhava. In Tibet the dominant form of religious practice is the Tantrik Buddhism inherited from India and there is also a high degree of compatibility in the philosophical views of the four schools. At present in Tibet, four schools of Tibetan Buddhism are existing such as Nyingma, Kagyud, Sakya and Gelug. Here we will discuss only the Kagyud and its important subsect Karma Kagyud.

The Kagyud-pa is one of the important sect in Tibet, the next great reformed sect after Gelug-pa to which the famous Dalai Lama and Panchan Lama belong. From Kagyud sect came out numbers of sub sects. This sect was founded in the later half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. by Lama Mar-pa of Lhobrag, who had visited India and obtained special instructions from the Indian Pandits Atisa and his teachers Pamthing and Naro, the janitor of Nalanda University.<sup>6</sup> The name Kagyud means the line or thread of the word, i.e. the oral tradition of the word of the Buddha which is supposed to have been delivered through a continued chain of teachers and disciples, apart from the written scriptures.<sup>7</sup> Its followers believe in the succession of precepts handed down through a Galaxy of teachers. The Kagyud literally means "Teaching lineage", and its followers claim that its doctrines and practices are passed down through a succession of enlightened teachers, each of whom directly understands the true nature of reality through spontaneous, non-conceptual awareness and then transmits the essence of his or her teachings to the next generation of meditators. The Kagyud sect traces its lineage back to the

Indian Tantrik sage Tilopa, who is said to have received instructions directly from the metaphysical Buddha Vajradhara. In addition to Tilopa, the Kagyud-pa also counts such important figures as Nagarjuna, Sarahar, Savari and Maitri-pa as members of its lineage.

The Kagyud-pa sect traces its second member of Lineage back to the Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa (988-1069)<sup>8</sup>, the metaphysical Buddha being the very first member of this Lineage. Tilopa had a number of fine disciples, the foremost of whom were Lalitavajra and Naropa. Naropa (1016-1100) became the third member of the Lineage.<sup>9</sup> From Tilopa and Naropa originated meditative practices with which the sect has been identified, the six yoga of Naropa and Mahamudra. Naropa's foremost disciples were Siddha Dombhi Herruka, Siddha Shantipa, Siddha Maitri-pa, Shantibhadra, Pitopa, Dipankara Atisa and Marpa, the Tibetan translator who carried the teachings to Tibet, so forming the beginning of Kagyud-pa sect. The main disciple of Naropa was Choge-Lodro of Mar, generally referred to as Marpa (1012-1097).<sup>10</sup> He made three visits to India in search of Dharma. For sixteen years Marpa received initiations and teachings from Naropa. He received additional teachings from Janagarba in the west and from Siddha Kukuripa in the south.<sup>11</sup> He spent many years translating the manuscripts, brought the copies of the *Tantrik* teachings from India and became gradually famous as a translator. He established a community farm and monastery at Lohbrag. Marpa transmitted Naropa's instructions to several disciples, most famous among whom was Milarepa (1052 A.D.).<sup>12</sup> Clad only in cotton, milarepa lived for many years in total isolation in high mountain caves. After finally receiving the desired instructions, he spend his life meditating in solitude, composing his famous songs.<sup>13</sup> After completing nine full years in isolation he began to accept disciples. In the year 1135, at the age of eighty Milapara passed away leaving 8 greater and 13 lesser disciples.<sup>14</sup>

Milapara's best known disciple was Gampopa or Dagpo Lharje (1079-1153 A.D.).<sup>15</sup> Gampopa founded many monasteries including Dagpo after which the Dagpo division of the Kagyud-pa sect is named. At the age of 26 Gampopa received ordination as monk, taking the name Sonam Rinchen and following the doctrine of the Kadam-pa's. At the age of 32 he overheard some beggars talking about Jetsun-Milapara. Immediately he was filled with devotion and realized that this *Yogi* must surely be his destined teacher. He set out in search of Milapara and after many hardships he managed to find him. For a period of thirteen months he received teachings directly regarding the doctrine of Naropa, the mystic heat *Yoga* in particular and also the teachings of *Mahamudra*. He spent many years in retreat there and found a monastery, which came to be called Dvags Lha Gampo. He soon attracted many disciples. Gampopa blended the doctrines of the Kadampas with his own realization of the Mahamudra, so producing the basis for many aspects of the Kagyud-pa. The four main disciples of Gampopa formed the four larger

branches of Kagyudpa from which the eight smaller divisions developed later. In the water-bird year 1153 A.D. Je Gampopa passed away at the age of seventy-five, having firmly established the Kagyudpa teachings.

It should be noted here that there are many sub-sects within the Kagyudpa. The Kagyudpa fundamental principles are rooted in Mahamudra and the six yogas of Naropa. The different sects have arisen only due to slightly different individual approach to the fundamental teachings. The training of the monks in Kagyud monasteries consist mainly of the study of the perfection of wisdom, Madyamika, valid cognition, discipline and phenomenology common to all tradition, except that each tradition has its own monastic text and commentaries to facilitate understanding of the original Indian texts.

The Kagyudpa has two main sects and many minor ones. The two minor sects are; Shangpa Kagyud and Dagpo Kagyud. The first two divisions of Kagyudpa sect originated with the two Tibetan disciples of Naropa. Khungpo the *Yogin* founded the Shangpa Kagyud and Marpa, the translator founded the Dagpo Kagyud. The Shangpa Kagyud's founder is said to have received the teachings from one hundred and fifty scholarly adept. He is said to have mastered the entire exoteric and esoteric doctrines as well as meditation on it.<sup>16</sup> Besides receiving practical guidance from the teachers in the human form, he also received transmission from the Dakinis (celestial beings). He established the Shang-shung monastery at Yeru Shang, in Shang valley in central Tibet, which was his principle monastery. As a result the tradition he founded came to be known as the Shangpa Kagyud. Later he is said to have built more than a hundred monasteries, belonging to this tradition in Tibet and he taught for thirty years to eighty thousand disciples. The main teachings of this sect were based on five tantras; Chakrasamvara, Hevajra, Mahamaya, Guhyasamaja and Vajrabhairava. He also transmitted the six doctrines Neguma, Sukhasidha and the doctrine of Mahamudra and of others. The principle contemporary exponent of this tradition was the late Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1989), one of the leading Kagyud meditation master of the century. The system is not at present wide-spread as a school, but the the teachings are being practised by many Kagyud Lamas.

The second original form of Kagyud is the Dagpo Kagyud. It literally means the transmission of the order of Dagpo. Dagpo is one of the names for the great scholar and Yogi Gampo-pa who lived in the Dagpo valley and played a decisive role in the establishment of the school in Tibet. Because of Dagpo Lharje scholarhip the school became known as the Dagpo Kagyud. From the mother lineage of this Dagpo Kagyud arose the four major subsects and 8 minor ones.

The four major subsects of the Kagyud are Karma Kagyud, Phagtru Kagyud, Tshalpa Kagyud and Baron Kagyud. Here we will discuss only the important sect of the Karma Kagyud.

The Karmapa Sect, an important offshoot of the Kagyud-pa, was founded by dPal-cho-gyi-grags-pa (Pal Chogyi Dagpa) generally known as Dus-gsum-mkhyen-pa (Dus-sum- Khenpa), who was born in 1110A.D. at Dresd in east Tibet. <sup>17</sup> At the age of thirty Dus-sum- Khyenpa became the principle disciple of Gampopa, the chief disciple of Milarpa, and so entered the direct doctrinal succession from Marpa, the founder of Kagyudpa sect. The name Karmapa is that of an assembly of Gods and Dakinis who bestowed on Dus-sum- Khyenpa, (knowledge of the past, present and future) a Black Hat woven from a hair of the hundred thousand of angels or fairies. However, earlier the name Karmapa came into existence probably due to the association of Dus-sum-Khyenpa with the monastery of Karma Dansa or Lho-Karmai-garr which he founded in 1147 A.D. and which was to the east of the 'Non-chu, somewhere between Ri-bo-che and De-ge.<sup>18</sup> He built the monasteries for the greater benefit of people. Waddel<sup>19</sup> states that his monastery of Su-tsrung-lha-ung, built in 1154 A.D. at Tsur-pu which is about one day's journey to the north of Lhasa beyond Sera, is still the headquarter of this , the most powerful of Kagyudpa sect. It is also the home of its chief incarnate Lama. Dus-sum- Khyenpa died at the age of eighty three in 1193 A.D. Since Dus-sum- Khyenpa, the head of this subsect has been the uninterrupted reincarnation of him till today. The second incarnation was Karma Pakshi. In the religious lineage of the Karmapa, Dus-sum- Khyenpa is put in the first generation and Pakshi in the second. Pakshi was the first person to be recognised as Tulku (incarnation, Avatara) or a Lama in Tibet. He visited the court of Emperor of China and became the Chaplain of the Emperor, who bestowed the title "Karma Pakshi" on him. It is also said that the Karmapas are also known as the Black Hat Lamas because the emperor "honoured him with the gold rimmed black-cap". This hat which is worn on ceremonial occasions, has been passed through the entire lineage of the Karmapas. Thence, after Pakshi, this sect was also called the Black Hat sect. According to Kalu Rinpoche, this original hat was invisible to all but to those having great merit. A material replica was given to the fifth Karmapa Deshin-Shegpa (1384-1415) by the Yung Lo Emperor Chengtsu, so that the Black Hat, a mere glimpse of which is said to guarantee the beholder's rebirth in the higher realms, might be seen by all.<sup>20</sup> This replica is thought to be the same one donned by the Karmapa, His Holiness Rang Byung Rig-pay Dorje (1924-1981), when he performed the Black Hat ceremony in Europe and North America in 1974. This ceremony is the key ritual of Karmapas. It reenacts the original coronation of the Dus-sum-Khyenpa by the Dakinis, reaffirming the place of each Karmapa in the Karmapa line and invoking Avalokiteshvara as the source of that lineage.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting that the seventeenth Karmapa has been discovered but is still controversial. The seventeenth Karmapa was discovered in Lhatok in Eastern

Tibet after a long and tedious search initiated by the twelfth Tai Situpa, now based in Sherabling near Baijnath, and Goshir Gyaltseb Rinpoche, the traditional regent of the Karmapa in the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim. In a meeting between them and other sacred masters on March 29th, 1992, a sacred prediction letter left by the sixteenth Karmapa was analysed and interpreted.<sup>22</sup> After this meeting, the Rinpoches sent a copy of the prediction letter to the abbot of the Tsurphu monastery in Tibet, requesting him to initiate a secret search for the next Karmapa. Accordingly, some lamas set off for Lhatok, where they posed as pilgrims looking for long-lost relatives. Following the directions in the letter, they finally found a nomad couple, Loga and Dondrup, parents of a large family of six daughters and three sons. The middle son was named Apo Gaga, or 'beloved elder brother'

In accordance with the letter, it appeared that miraculous events had occurred at the time of Apo Gaga's birth. It was said that the three suns had appeared in the sky, with a rainbow arching over the central orb. For as long as two hours after his birth, the sound of conch shells reverberated through the valley, leading people to believe that a high lama had arrived in the area. The letter had mentioned that the Karmapa's birth would be accompanied by the "wondrous, far-reaching sound of the white one."

His mother Loga also revealed that she had many prophetic dreams while carrying her son. One of these featured three white cranes who handed her a golden letter balanced atop a cup of yoghurt, saying that the letter was sent by Guru Rinpoche and would reveal her son's identity. The Karmapa was born before sunrise, just as a cuckoo alighted on the family's tent and began to sing. Tibetans believe that the morning song of the cuckoo is an auspicious sign.

The little boy displayed remarkable qualities. He would cry in sympathy and compassion when ever he saw an animal in pain. He was psychic and could predict future events with uncanny accuracy. Once, while playing with his sister, he suddenly remarked that their father's truck had "fallen down". When his sister rebuked him for his morbid thought, pat came the reply, "Everything is all right". Later, they discovered that the truck in which his father was travelling had actually had an accident, but no one was hurt. Long before he was discovered, the young Apo Gaga began his religious training at the Kalek monastery in 1989. Even then he was respected as a reincarnate Lama and provided with an attendant and small throne in the shrine hall. The news of the discovery in 1992 was conveyed to Tai Situ Rinpoche and Goshir Gyaltseb Rinpoche, who informed His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He revealed that the discription of the child's birthplace corresponded perfectly with a vision he had several months earlier-green mountains covered with meadows flanked by two streams. In his dream, he heard a voice proclaiming, "this is the place where the Karmapa was born." Later, His Holiness the Dalal Lama presented Tai Situpa and Goshir Gyaltseb with a formal letter of confirmation,

dated June 30, 1992, known as the 'Precious Seal of His Holiness.' He also sent the young Karmapa a white silk scarf, a blessing cord and his personal rosary. He formally recognised him as the reincarnation of the 16th Karmapa.<sup>23</sup> He was enthroned on Sept. 27, 1992<sup>24</sup> at Tsurphu monastery and his reincarnation was first recognised by the Chinese government.

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| 1) Dusum Khyenpa (1110-1193)  | 9) Wangchug Dorjee (1556-1630)             |
| 2) Karma Pakshi (1206-1;83)   | 10) Choying ~orje (1604-1674)              |
| 3) Rongjung Dorje (1284-1339) | 11) Yeshe Dorje (1675-1702)                |
| 4) Rolpey Dorje (1340-1383)   | 12) Jongchub Dorje (1703-1732)             |
| 5) Deshm Shegpa (1384-1415)   | 13) Dudul Dorje (1733-1797)                |
| 6) TongwaDondan(1416-1453)    | 14) Tegchog Dorje (1797-1845)              |
| 7) Chodrag Gyatso (1454-1506) | 15) Khakh ba DoTe (1845-1924)              |
| 8) Michod Dorje (1507-1554)   | 16) Rongjung Rigpay Dorje (1924-6.11.1981) |

The sixteenth Karmapa Rangjung Rigpay Dorje established his monastic head quarters in exile at Rumtek (Sikkim) in India, and passed away on 6-11-1981 in Chicago U.S.A. He visited several countries abroad many times and established more than 200 meditation centres in the various parts of the world. When he passed away his four regent, presided over this sect. This sect produced many great scholars, among whom one of the most famous was Situ Chokey Nagwa (1700-1774), he built the great Kagyud monastery of Palpung in Derge, Kham in Tibet in 1727. He was also a great scholar and wrote fifteen texts including the famous commentary on the Tibet Basic Grammatical text. In the 19th century a great scholar and writer Kōngtrul Yonten Gyatso wrote and compiled hundred volumes of both Nyingma and Kagyud teachings. The other lineage holders and highly venerated reincarnation of the Karma Kagyud are the Shamar, Gyalstabs, Tai Situ, Nenang Pawos Rimpoche.

The Kagyud sect generally follows the tradition of Kadampa on doctrinal matters, but it further practices the four tantras, viz, Kriya Tantra, Caryatantra, Yoga Tantra and Annuttara Tantra of the new translation tantras. The special teachings of this sect are the Naro-cho-drug (six yogas of Naropa) from the Indian Mahasiddha Naropa and the Mahamudra teachings of Mahasiddha Maitripa. An important factor to identify a particular sect is its particular type of practices. Each school has particular deities that are featured in its Tantrik practices. The Kagyud sect, for example, favours practices associated with Avalokiteshwara, Manjusri, Vajrapani, Green Tara, Bhaisajyaguru, Vajrayogini and Heruka Chakrasamvara. Another identifying feature is the group of monasteries in which the monks and nuns live, study and practice. The concept of monastery originated from the time of the Buddha. In Tibet, Samya, the first monastery was founded in 749 A.D.<sup>26</sup> The monasteries of every sect are similar in architect. Over 3000<sup>27</sup> monasteries are said to be there in Tibet. Famous among these are: Samya, Galdan, Dre-pung,

Sera, Tashi Lunpa, Sakya, Di-Kung, Shalu etc. There are many big and famous monasteries of the Kagyud-pa sect. Some of them are Dagleha Gampo, built by Gampopa in 1122; Densathil, built by Phagmo Drupa in 1158; Drikung, built by Minyag Gomring in 1179; Laglung built by Thangpa Trashpa in 1180; Ralung, built by Tsang pa Gyase in 1189; Tsurphu, built by Karmapa Dusum Khyanpa in 1189; Riwoche, built by Sangye Wontragpa; Sangngag Choling, built by Padma Karpo and Palpung, built by Situ Chokyi Nangwa in 1727.<sup>28</sup> There is a temple in each monastery. It is generally the central which is the most outstanding building in the monastery. In these monasteries the images of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, local gods and goddesses, saints and the like are generally installed therein. The images apart, several paintings also decorate the walls of the monasteries. These paintings represent divinities, Lamas, scenes from the Buddha's life, from the conception to the attainment of Nirvana, Mandalas and the like, scenes from the life of Buddha taken from the Jataka stories, Dhayni Buddhas, Manjusri Buddha, Maitreya, Bodhisattava, Tara, Marici, Lokapalas, Thambhalas, and various other gods and goddesses. Most of the sculptures and paintings are the religious representation of those objects which are based on the instruction of the Buddhist text dealing with the concerned subject.

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