

KONG-SPRUL YON-TAN RGYA-MTSHO

—TASHI DENSAPA

Kong-sprul Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho, the nineteenth century Bka'-brgyud-pa Bla-ma, is not an unfamiliar figure in the literature and religion of Tibet. His name appears in almost every literary text, as well as religious work, and it is verbalized daily in the chantings of numerous monks and laymen of both Bka'-brgyud-pa and Nying-ma-pa Sects. He was born in the Water Bird Year of the 14th cycle of the Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. 1813 Christian Era) at Rong-rgyab in Zal-mo-sgang of Chu-bzhi sgang-grug in Kham (Eastern Tibet). His father, who passed away a few years after his birth, was Kyung-po Bla-ma Gyung-drung bstan-'zhin and his mother's name was Bkra-shis 'tsho. He was brought up by his step-father namely Bsod-nams 'phal, who taught him the basic education when he was 5 years old. From an early age the boy displayed his talents of learning and within a short period he was able to fluently read and write with perfection without much coaching.

When he was 3 years old, Gtsang sman-ri Mkhanpo Bsod-nams blo-dros took the first sample of Kong-sprul's hair as a sign of acceptance into the Sangha. At the age of 10 years he had mastered the art of calligraphy and copied 3 volumes of prayers. When he was 14 years he studied the subject of herbs and herbal medicine and learnt the art of diagnosis based on pulse reading and urine symptoms from Kar-ma Phun-tshogs a well-known physician. He learnt the basic forms of the graphic art of Sman-lugs tradition from a well-known Chab-mdo artist and sculptor at the age of 16 years. While staying in Zhe-chen Ri-khrod he received teachings and initiations in all the five sciences from Bla-ma 'Gyur-med Mthu-stobs Rnam-rgyal of Zhe-chen.

The local chief had observed the brilliance and talents of this youngster and had taken him along to Dpal-spungs. It was here on the 6th day of the 10th month of the Water Snake Year (1832) he received the monastic ordination (dge-slong) to embrace the Dharma as a profession for life, and take the vows of purity, celibacy and strictly to follow the rules and regulations as laid down in the Vinaya. In this auspicious ceremony the 9th Si-tu Pad-ma Nyin-byed dbang-po was the Mkhan-slod sbrags-ma and Dbon-rgan; Kar-ma Theg-mchog Bstan-'phel was Gsang Ston-pa; 'Tsho-byed Kar-ma Tshe-dpal was Dus-go ba'; Kar-ma Mkhas-bstun was Brda spro-dpa and Byang-'dren; and Kar-ma Thogs-med was Kha-skong. They conferred upon Kong-sprul the vows of Stod-bdul pan-chen lugs and gave him the name "Kar-ma Ngag-dbang Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho Phren-las Kun-khyab Dpal Bzang-po". The local chief being fully aware of the talents and quality of the youngster consulted the Si-tu about the possibility of this young man to be a reincarnate. And if so, requested the Si-tu to recognize him even before the gentry of Derge who were very powerful could take him away in their service. The Si-tu fully recognized and supported the idea, and after meditation announced his spiritual finding that the young boy was the reincarnate of one of the previous Si-tu's close disciples, Kong-po or Steng-sprul, as a result of which the youngster became known as Kong-sprul.

RIN-CHEN GTER-MDZOD

At a young age Kong-sprul had received the teachings and initiations of the Nying-ma-pa Sect and had known the dispersed and obscure sources. He foresaw the possibility of the traditions of Dbang (Initiation) and Lung (Precept) in the Gter-chos becoming extinct unless the writings were compiled into one collection. Therefore, in the Water Dog Year (1862) at the age of 40, he met Gter-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa and 'Jam-dbyangs Mkhyan-brtse'i dbang-po whom he had met earlier and was constantly his encourager. With their cooperation and encouragement, Kong-sprul started the collection of all the Gter-chos, the discoveries made by all the well-known and authentic Gter-stons. Earlier in the Iron Bird Year (1861) he had a vision that one of the five treasures he had aimed at compiling must be named Gter-dzod; thus he named it Rin-chen Gter-dzod (store of precious gems). 'Jam-dbyangs Mkhyan-brtse also had the vision that it was destined that the Mdzod-linga must be compiled by Kong-sprul. On the 7th month of the Water Monkey Year (1872), having arranged all the collection of the Gter-chos he delivered the second Dbang and Lung of the Rin-chen Gter-dzod. Finally in 1880, with the help of Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mtshan 40 volumes of the Gter-dzod was completed after proof-reading. By 1893 Kong-sprul had completed the entire compilation of the Dzod-linga (Five Treasures) and he records that all his longings and wishes have now been fulfilled.

MASTERS AND DISCIPLES

Among the numerous great masters from whom he received teachings and initiations, to mention a few, were :

The 14th Kar-ma-pa Theg-mchog Rdo-rje (1798-1868)
'Brug-chen Rin-po-che
Dpa'-bo-dtsug-lag Chos-rgyal (8th)
'Jam-dbyangs Mkhyen-brtse (1820-1892)
Gter-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa (1829-1870)
Dbon-rgan Theg-mchog Bstan-'phel
Zla-bzang Rin-po-che
Smin-gling Khri-chen 'Gyur-med Yid-bzhin and his consort.

With his vast learning, Kong-sprul attracted many students from all the four Sects as well as the nobility, most of whom became great scholars in Tibet. We mention a few here :

From the Bka'-brgyud Sect

The 15th Kar-ma-pa Mkha-khyab Rdo-rje (1871-1922)
The 10th Si-tu Padma Kun-bzang (1854-1885)
The 11th Si-tu Padma Bdang-mchog Rgyal-po (1886-1952)
The 9th Gnas-nang Dpa-bo-Gstug-lag Nyi-ma'i sde (?—1910)
Mkhan-chen Kar-ma Bkra-shis 'Od-zer
Kar-ma'i Mkhan-po Rin-chen Dar-rgyas
Ri-bo-che'i Rje-drng Phrin-las Byam-pa'i 'Byung-gnas
Stag-lung Ma Rin-po-che
Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mtshan

From the Sa-skya Sect

Thar-rtse Dpon-slob 'Jam-dbyangs Blo-gter Dbang-po
Ngor Khang-sar Mkhan-chen Ngag-dbang Bsod-nams Rgyal-mtshan
Rdzong-sar Mnga'-ris Chos-rje Kun-dga' 'Jam-dbangs

From the Nying-ma Sect

The 5th Rdzogs-chen Rin-po-che
Dpal-yul Gsang-rgyas Bstan-'Dzin and Dza-ka-mchog
Sprul Kun-bzang Rnam-rgyal
'Ju Mi-pham 'Jam-dbyang Rnam-rgyal (1846-1912)
Rdo-grub-chen 'Jigs-med Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mtshan
Rdzogs-chen Mkhan-po Dkon-mchog 'Od-zer
Nyag-bla Byang-chub Sems-dpa' Blo-gros Bzang-po
A-'dzoms 'Brug-pa Rin-po-che 'Gro-'dul Dpa'-bo Rdo-rje (1842-1924)
Gter-ston Las-rab Gling-pa (1856-1926)
Sa-ngan Bstan-ri Sprul-sku Byang-chub Chos-seng

From the Dge-lugs Sect

Rgyud-smad Mkhan-po Dge-shes Ye-shes Gong-'phel
Brag-gyab Gdong-kong Sprul-sku Ngag dbang Dam-chos rgya-mtsho

From Nobility

Regent Ra-sgreng Ngag-dbang Ye-shes Tsul-khrim Rgyal-mtshan (1845-
1955 Regency)
The King and Princes of Derge
And many other kings and princes of Kham and neighbouring countries.

Works of Kong-sprul

It appears, when one examines the record of Kong-sprul that he spent his lifetime receiving teachings and initiations; while when one looks at the record of his own students one would feel that he had devoted his lifetime giving initiations and precepts; yet in another one finds that he had devoted his lifetime in meditation and performing religious rites, on the other hand when one sees the list of books credited to him, one cannot but feel that Kong-sprul had spent his lifetime contributing to the Tibetan Religious Literature.

He has more than 90 volumes of Tibetan Religious Literature where he either was the editor or the author of these collected works. The important ones were :

Shes-bya' Mdzod 3 volumes
Bka' a' Mdzod 10 volumes
Zab-'mo Gter-Mdzod 61 volumes
Gdams-ngag Mdzod 10 volumes
Miscellaneous 7 volumes

Having spent most his life time in receiving teachings, giving teachings, collecting and rearranging rare writings and compiling them, as well as

writing explanatory notes, composing, and making clarification of deep and difficult teachings, he led a life of endless effort to preserve and spread the Dharma. He passed away, at the age of 87 in 1899. In addition to all these meritorious deeds he had performed, he even found time to help, restore and renovate old monasteries, paintings, to carve wood blocks, help the preservation of manuscripts and to enlighten and purify the Sangha.

This is but a very small fraction of the important events in the biography of Kong-sprul. If one intends to write a complete biography it would cover a number of volumes to justify his long and meritorious life.

