



WISDOM ACADEMY

Sutra and Tantra:
The Profound and Miraculous

ROBERT A. F. THURMAN

Lesson 1:
The Spiritual Life of Tsong Khapa

Reading:
The Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa
(Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 2015)
A Short Biography, pages 3–34

A Short Biography



The great Nyingma teacher, Lhodrag Khenchen Namkha Gyaltzen once asked the Bodhisattva Vajrapani to describe the qualities of Lama Je Tsongkhapa; but since these were innumerable, Vajrapani was unable to do so. To hear the complete biography of the Lord Tsongkhapa would take at least a year. This brief exposition has been compiled merely as an introduction for English speaking readers.

Tsongkhapa, popularly known as Je Rinpoche, was born in 1357, the year of the Bird, in the Tsong Kha region of Amdo Province, in eastern Tibet. His father, who was bold but unassuming, energetic yet taciturn and reserved, was constantly in thoughts of the Doctrine and recited the *Expression of the Names of Mañjushri* each day. His mother, a guileless and very kind woman, was always chanting the six-syllable mantra of Avolokiteshvara—Om Mani Padme Hum. They had six sons, Tsongkhapa being the fourth.

During the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, Tsongkhapa, in a previous incarnation, was a young boy who offered the Buddha a clear crystal rosary and received a conch shell in return. The Buddha then called his disciple Ananda to him and prophesied that the boy would be born in Tibet, would found a great monastery between the areas of Dri and Den, present a crown to the statue of the Buddha in Lhasa and be instrumental in the flourishing of the Doctrine in Tibet. The Buddha gave the young boy the future name of Sumati Kirti, or, in Tibetan, Losang Drakpa.

All this occurred exactly as the Buddha had prophesied. The conch shell that the Buddha had given the boy was unearthed during the

4 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

building of Ganden and, until 1959, could still be seen in Drepung, the largest Monastery in Tibet. The crown still rests on the head of the Buddha in Lhasa.

Over a thousand years after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha, further prophesies relating to Je Rinpoche, were given by the Lotus Born Guru, Padma Sambhava. He predicted that a fully ordained Buddhist monk named Losang Drakpa would appear in the east near the land of China. He said that this monk would be regarded as being an emanation of a Bodhisattva of the greatest renown and would attain the Complete Enjoyment Body of a Buddha.

During the Year of the Monkey, which preceded his birth, his parents had unusual dreams. His father dreamt of a monk who came to him from the Five peaked Mountain (Wu-tai-shan) in China, a place particularly associated with Mañjushri. This monk required shelter for nine months which, in the dream, his father gave by accommodating him in their shrine room for that length of time.

His mother dreamt that she and one thousand other women were in a flower garden to which a boy dressed in white and carrying a vessel came from the east while a girl dressed in red and holding peacock feathers in her right hand and a large mirror in her left came from the west. The boy went to each of the women in turn and asked the girl if she would be suitable. The girl repeatedly rejected them until the boy pointed to Tsongkhapa's mother, whom she indicated as the perfect choice. The boy and girl then purified Tsongkhapa's mother by bathing her and when she awoke the next day she felt very light.

In the first month of the Year of the Bird, Je Rinpoche's parents again had striking dreams. His mother saw monks coming with many different ritual objects, saying that they were going to invoke the statue of Avalokiteshvara. When the statue appeared, it was as big as a mountain yet, as it approached her, it diminished in size, finally entering her body through her crown aperture.

Tsongkhapa's father dreamt of Vajrapani, who, from his own pure realm, threw down a vajra, which landed on his wife.

Just before giving birth, his mother dreamt of many monks arriving with offerings. When she inquired about their purpose they replied

that they had come to pay their respects and gain an audience. Simultaneously, the boy in white from her previous dream appeared and pointed to her womb. With key in hand he entered it and opened a box, from which came the golden statue of Avalokiteshvara. This statue was stained, and a girl in red appeared and cleaned it with a peacock feather. This dream symbolised that Tsongkhapa would be an emanation of Avalokiteshvara as well as of Mañjushri. The same morning, Tsongkhapa was born without causing any suffering to his mother. At the time of his birth an auspicious star appeared in the sky.

These portents were ample evidence of the birth of someone remarkable. In this respect Je Rinpoche's birth resembled that of the Buddha.

Prior to these events, Tsongkhapa's future great teacher, Choeje Dondrup Rinchen, had been in Lhasa and had learnt that on his return to Amdo, he would find a disciple who was an emanation of Mañjushri. After Tsongkhapa's birth, he sent his chief disciple to the parents with a protection knot, some relic pills and a letter of greeting.

At three years old, Tsongkhapa took the layman's vows from the Fourth Karmapa, Rolpay Dorje, and received the name Kunga Nyingpo.

When Tsongkhapa's parents invited Choeje Dondrup Rinchen to their home, the Lama brought horses, sheep and a huge amount of gifts which he gave to Tsongkhapa's father. When the Lama requested the father to part with his son, the father was delighted at the prospect of his child being with such a great teacher and allowed him to leave with the Lama.

Before taking the novice vows, Tsongkhapa, received many tantric initiations and teachings, including the Heruka empowerment, and was given the secret name of Donyo Dorje. When he was seven, he fulfilled his yearning to take the novice vows; receiving them from his teacher. It is here that he was given the name of Losang Drakpa, that, forty years later, was to become the most talked about and controversial *nom de plume* in Central Tibet.

Tsongkhapa attached greater importance to guarding his vows than his eyes or his own life. He had entered the mandalas of Heruka, Hevajra, Yamantaka and other deities before receiving ordination and

6 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

was even performing self-initiation meditations upon Heruka when he was only seven. Before self-initiation is allowed, a major retreat of the specific deity must be completed.

His eminent teacher took care of him until he went to central Tibet at the age of sixteen. Before the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha in the Lhasa Cathedral, he offered prayers to enable his completion of all the stages of sutra and tantra in order to mature and lead other trainees to enlightenment.

Choeje Dondrub Rinchen proffered advice in poetical form to the effect that Tsongkhapa should first study and master the *Ornament for the Realisations (Abhisamayalamkara)* and then approach the other four great treatises. The Lama further suggested Tsongkhapa's lifelong choice of meditational deities to whom he should make offerings and with whom he should feel perpetually inseparable. The following deities were to be cultivated accordingly: Yamantaka for the continuation of his practice; Vajrapani for freedom from interruptions; Mañjushri for increase in wisdom and discriminating awareness; Amitayus for long life; the three Doctrine Protectors for the availability of prerequisites while practising; and Vaishravana, the Six-Handed Mahakala and Dharmaraja for protection.

On his departure, his Master came with him as far as Tsongkha Kang from where Tsongkhapa went on alone, walking backwards with his hands folded at his heart and reciting the *Expression of the Names of Mañjushri*. When he reached the line, "Those who do not return to cyclic existence do not come back," he had tears in his eyes for he realized that he would never return to Amdo.

Travelling with Denma Rinchen Pel, in the autumn of the Year of the Bull, (1357), Tsongkhapa arrived at Drikung, a five day journey from Lhasa, where he met the head Lama of the Drikung Kargyu monastery, Chennga Choekyi Gyalpo by name. This great Lama was his first teacher after leaving his original Master, and tutored him on various topics such as the Altruistic Mind (*bodhicitta*), and five sections of the *Great Seal (mahamudra)* during his stay at the monastery. He also met the great doctor Konchog Kyab who taught him the major medical treatises and, by the time he was seventeen, he had become

an excellent doctor. Thus his fame was already spreading even in the early years of his study.

From Drikung, Tsongkhapa went to the Choedra Chenpo Dewachen monastery in Nyetang where he studied with Tashi Sengi and Densapa Gekong. Furthermore Yonten Gyatso taught him how to read the great treatises and continually helped him with the *Ornament for the Realisations*. Within eighteen days he had memorized and assimilated both the root text and all its commentaries, and soon mastered all the works of Maitreya Buddha. He then gained a complete understanding of the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajña paramita)* at great speed and with little effort. His teachers and fellow students with whom he debated were astonished at his knowledge and, after two years of studying the *Perfection of Wisdom*, he was recognized, at the age of nineteen, as a great scholar.

That year Je Rinpoche debated at the two biggest monasteries of the day in Tibet: Choedra Chenpo Dewachen and Samye. He now became very famous in U-tsang, the central province of Tibet and undertook an extensive tour of it. First he visited the great monastery of Zhalu, where the renowned translator Khenchen Rinchen Namgyal, a direct disciple of the founder of the monastery, gave him the Heruka initiation. He went on to Sakya, the centre of the Sakya tradition, in order to debate further on the major treatises and there by increase his understanding of them. But on arrival, he learned that most of the monks had gone to debate at the distant Karpu pass so instead he went to Zhalu and met the great Lama Demchog Maitri, who initiated him into the Thirteen Deity Yamantaka practice. Later he returned to Sakya but the debaters had still not returned so this time he went to Sazang and met the great Sazang Pandit Matt, who gave him extensive teachings. Returning a third time to Sakya, he was able to take the required examinations on the *Perfection of Wisdom*.

He then continued on his travel around the other monasteries of U-tsang, engaging in more and more debate. There are many stories concerning the miraculous visions of those present at these places, as well as Tsongkhapa's ever-developing great realizations and insights.

8 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

Je Tsongkhapa continued with many other required debates on the systems of tenets and the five major treatises at various monasteries. As he had a great admiration for Nyapon Kunga Pal whom he met at Tzechen in U-tsang and from whom he received many discourses, he went to him and requested instructions on the *Perfection of Wisdom*; but this master was unwell and referred him to his disciple, the Venerable Rendawa, Je Rinpoche developed tremendous respect for Rendawa's method of teaching the *Treasury of Knowledge* and its auto-commentary. Tsongkhapa asked many searching questions on certain points to the amazement of his teacher, who was sometimes unable to answer immediately. This master had innumerable spiritual qualities and Tsongkhapa later came to regard him as his principal teacher. Their relationship became such that simultaneously they were each other's Master and disciple. He also received teachings on the *Middle Way (Madhyamika)* philosophy from Rendawa.

Tsongkhapa composed a verse in honour of Rendawa and would often recite it:

Mañjushri, Lord of stainless omniscience,
Avalokiteshvara, mighty treasure of immaculate love,
O Rendawa Zhonnu Lodro, crown jewel of Tibetan sages,
At your feet I make this request,
Grant protection to me, a fly seeking Liberation.

Rendawa replied that this was more applicable to Tsongkhapa than to himself and so adapted the verse as follows. This is now regarded as Tsongkhapa's mantra:

Avalokiteshvara, mighty treasure of immaculate love.
Mañjushri, Lord of stainless knowledge,
Vajrapani, destroyer of all demonic forces,
O Je Tsongkhapa, Losang Drakpa,
Crown jewel of the sages of the Land of Snow,
Humbly I request your blessing

During the autumn and winter he received many teachings on the *Entrance to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti, who also wrote an auto-commentary to it. He then returned to U-tsang, where the great

translator and metaphysician Jangchub Tsemo, was to give teachings in Lhasa on the five major treatises.

On arrival in Lhasa, Tsongkhapa went straight to him and requested teachings. However, this old Lama was in delicate health and intended to leave soon for an area south of Lhasa. Tsongkhapa was not satisfied with the short discourses he received so returned to Nyetang to become the student of the great scholar of *Monastic Discipline (Vinaya)*, the Abbot Kazhiwa Losal, at whose feet he studied the root texts of *Discipline* and of the *Treasury of Knowledge*, as well as many related commentaries. By the time he left, his depth of understanding surpassed that of his teacher. He memorized a commentary on the extensive root text of the *Discipline* at the daily rate of seventeen Tibetan folios which is thirty four pages.

While reciting prayers with the other monks, he had complete and effortless single-pointed concentration on insight meditation. However, he remained dissatisfied and continued to search for further teachers and teachings. Surely we can derive inspiration from such rectitude considering that he had memorized, for example, over twenty thousand verses of the extensive *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.

During that winter a troublesome backpain developed and he thought of returning to Rendawa in U-tsang but the bitterly cold weather forced him to stay at Nanying where he gave his first teachings. Scholars had asked for teachings on *Knowledge (Abhidharma)*, or metaphysics, and in particular on Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* which composes the Mahayana Abhidharma. He also wished to re-study the *Treasury of Knowledge* written by Vasubhandu, which is a compilation of Hinayana Abhidharma. Tsongkhapa studied the higher tenets; and although it was his initial encounter with this text, he mastered it on first reading and gave perfect teachings.

From there he went to Rendawa, who was at Sakya and for eleven months taught the *Compendium of Knowledge*.

At this time he himself received teachings on Dharmakirti's *Commentary on the Compendium of Valid Cognition*, as well as various texts such as the *Entrance to the Middle Way* and the transmission of the *Sutra on Discipline*.

10 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

While at Sakya he also received an explanation on the *Root Tantra of Hevajra* from Dorje Rinchen. This lama also taught him a method by which to cure his painful back.

In the company of the master Rendawa, he left for northern Tibet and spent the spring and summer at the monastery of Choeday. Here Rendawa wrote his commentary to the *Compendium of Knowledge* which he later taught to Tsongkhapa upon the disciple's request.

At this time, many people from Tsong Kha were coming to Lhasa with gifts from his now wealthy family and brought with them many letters from family and friends imploring him to come back. Reading these on his return to Lhasa, Je Tsongkhapa considered going back but realised that return would necessitate a break in his studies with the consequence of failure in his drive to help sentient beings. Thus he stayed and wrote to his mother instead, enclosing a self-portrait which spoke to her when she opened it. From childhood he had always possessed a strong sense of renunciation and later on even refused an invitation from the Emperor of China, who had requested his services as Imperial Tutor.

Tsongkhapa went into retreat for a few months and in between sessions studied the *Commentary on the Compendium of Valid Cognition*. This text contains four chapters, and when he reached the second, he realized the profundity of the work and developed the greatest respect and admiration for Dharmakirti, whilst deepening his conviction in the Buddha and his teachings.

He then returned to Tsang to debate, traveling to Narthang where the Tibetan woodblocks of the Buddha's actual teachings (the *Kanjur*) and of the Commentaries (the *Tanjur*) were kept. Here he met the great translator, Donzang, author of a critique to the *Commentary on the Compendium of Valid Cognition* which he taught to Tsongkhapa. They also debated on the two sets of *Knowledge* and on the *Discipline*.

He received teachings on the technical aspects of poetry from the Translator Namkha Zangpo and then returned to Rendawa for further elucidation on the five major treatises: the *Middle Way* philosophy, *Logic*, *Knowledge*, *Perfection of Wisdom* and *Discipline*. He especially concentrated on the *Entrance to the Middle Way* and from the Abbot of Narthang, received instruction on the *Six Works on Reason* by Nagarjuna.

Having further refined his dialectical skills, he and Rendawa returned to Sakya where he took examinations on four of the five treatises, omitting the *Perfection of Wisdom*, which he had previously covered. Tempers are sometimes short during a debate, but he always remained calm and spoke with amazing mastery.

Tsongkhapa practised simplicity and lived without affluence or great comfort. People felt over-awed before meeting him, but once in his presence were happy and relaxed. He would treat all questions with equal respect. Many of his disciples attained enlightenment in one lifetime.

By this time people realized that Tsongkhapa was an exceptional person who had taken birth by choice in order to help the sentient beings. His pure morality gained him the greatest respect from all sides and his devotees in U-tsang were now legion. It is certain when he took the vows of a fully ordained monk, or Bhikshu, for there is nothing to substantiate the commonly accepted thesis that he was twentyone. However, at a monastery just south of Lhasa, the Abbot Tsultrim Rinchen and a group of Bhikshus were present at the ordination ceremony. This was conducted in accordance with the tradition of the Hinayana, which requires the presence of ten bhikshus and an abbot when ordination is given in a place where the teachings are flourishing, technically called a central land. If the ordination is not held in such a place, then at least five bhikshus and an abbot should attend. In either case, the presence of two elders is essential. One reads from the *Sutra on Discipline* and the other questions the candidate concerning his suitability for the monastic way of life.

After ordination, he returned to the great Lama at the Drikung Kargyu centre and while the two were engaged in lengthy conversation the elderly Lama was overcome by tears, wishing that he too could have practised so intensively in his youth. He later told his disciples that both he and they had merely received higher rebirths whereas Je Tsongkhapa received a stream of realisations even in his youth. He received many teachings from the Lama on such topics as tantra, the *Six Doctrines of Naropa*, the works of Je Phagmo Drupa (who was one of the foremost disciples of Gampopa) and the teachings of the founder of the monastery.

12 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

By this time, Tsongkhapa had received from this Drikung Kargyu master all the teachings that Marpa had given to two of his four sons: Milarepa and Ngogchu Dorje; the other two ‘sons’ being Meto Chenpo and Tsultrim Dorje Wang. In addition, Tsongkhapa was constantly developing spiritual qualities and reading all the texts and commentaries available.

At thirty-two, he travelled to Tsay Gungthang where he commenced writing a commentary on the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. He synthesized all twenty-one Indian Commentaries relating to the *Ornament for the Realisations*, for Maitreya’s text is itself a commentary to the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, and called his work *Legshay Serteng* (*The Golden Rosary of Eloquent Teaching*). The translator Tagtsang, who had previously disputed many of Tsongkhapa’s viewpoints, was amazed by this commentary and showered praise on the text and its author. He wrote, “As your sun of wisdom rises, my flower of arrogance disappears.”

Tsongkhapa and his chief disciples travelled to Lhasa and started a fasting retreat near the statue of Avalokiteshvara. One evening, he told the disciple, who was his scribe, to observe his dreams that night. The acolyte did so, and dreamt that two conch shells appeared in the sky and then descended into his lap, where they merged. He blew this conch, which gave forth a deep resonance. The dream symbolised that Tsongkhapa’s teaching would flourish.

After this retreat, he visited Nyethang once more and gave many discourses on the *Middle Way* and the other major treatises. He decided to study the *Kalachakra Cycle* and received the relevant teachings from Thubten Yeshe Gyaltzen, who lived near Lhasa. This teacher also imparted the relevant instructions on astrology and mandala construction.

He now started giving tantric initiations and the teachings related to such practices; especially the permission of Saraswati, a female deity of wisdom, whom some took to be his particular protectress. The instructions that he conferred ripened and liberated many disciples.

While staying at Moenkar Tashi Dong, just south of Lhasa, he taught the biographies of the great accomplished beings of the past. Je Tsongkhapa was requested to teach in the tradition of Geshe Shatonpa

and others who had dealt with as many as eleven volumes during the period of teaching. He promised to do so and went into retreat for twenty days to prepare. His idea was to commence the discourses on the first day of the Tibetan month, but as so many people wished to attend, he deferred until the fourth to give them time to arrive. In the interim, he gave some teachings from the lineage of Marpa and Milarepa, and thereafter proceeded to teach not just eleven, but seventeen texts in three months. Each day was divided into fifteen sessions between dawn and dusk and the texts covered were as follows: *Commentary on the Compendium of Valid Cognition*, *Ornament for the Realisations*, *Treasury of Knowledge*, *Compendium of Knowledge*, *Sutra of Discipline*, the latter four works of Maitreya, the five texts by Nagarjuna, *Entrance to the Middle Way*, Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas* and Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.

All these texts and their commentaries he taught from memory, explaining their use of profound logical analysis and expounding upon them, in great depth; yet he still continued concurrently with his own daily practices. For example, he carried out many self-initiations daily into the mandalas of various deities such as Yamantaka.

From here, he went to the south for a very intensive retreat in the practice of Heruka in which he did the self-initiation each night. In the Kargyu tradition, great emphasis is placed on the *Six Doctrines of Naropa* and the *Six Doctrines of Nigu*, both of which deal with breathing and mystic heat meditation. After tremendous practice, in which he engaged in eight hundred rounds of heat meditation daily, he developed both powers.

The summer was spent with his Sakyapa teacher Rendawa. They resided together and mutually gave many initiations on the hill where the famous Potala palace was later to be built. Rendawa then returned to Tsang, Tsongkhapa returned to Kyomo Lung, where he gave discourses on the *Kalachakra Cycle*, the *Ornament for the Realisations* and *Entrance to the Middle Way*.

He decided to concentrate on the four classes of tantra and searched once more for a teacher, even though he had been giving initiations himself since the age of seven. He left for Tsang to discuss

14 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

his plans with Rendawa and on the way, at Rongrub Choelung, Abbot Dragpa Shenyen Rinpoche gave him many initiations. Each of the four Tibetan sects has a standard set of initiations and permissions with respect to the practice of the lower divisions of Tantra and the Rinpoche conferred part of such a set. Two of Tsongkhapa's disciples had received many discourses from Lama Umapa Pawo Dorje, who now requested Tsongkhapa, via the disciples, to give the initiation of Saraswati. This Lama as a young shepherd in eastern Tibet had received visions of Black Mañjushri. Tsongkhapa asked him for the teaching of Mañjushri Dharmachakra, but was unable to receive it at the time, since he was determined to see Rendawa.

One night Tsongkhapa dreamt of Choekyi Pel. In his dream, he asked the lama how many times he had received Kalachakra teachings from Buton Rinpoche. The reply was seventeen, which he subsequently substantiated on meeting Choekyi Pel in person. At that time, the living tradition of Kalachakra was in danger of extinction.

He arrived in Tagten, meeting Rendawa and two other teachers, Dragpa Gyaltzen and Choeje Kyabchog, and together the four gave many discourses. He received teachings from Rendawa on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, called “The King of Tantras”, and Rendawa advised him to concentrate on the teachings of the Three Baskets, or Pitakas, the *Discourses*, *Knowledge* and the *Discipline*.

He returned to Lama Umapa Pawo Dorje to receive the Mañjushri Dharmachakra teaching and a commentary on *A Guide to the Middle Way* and thereafter, due to military activity in the area, he practised intensive meditation in a cave. Afterwards he set off to meet Nyento, a learned scholar and practitioner of Kalachakra, who was also a disciple of Buton Rinpoche. On arrival he found that this great Master had already finished teaching the first chapter of the *Kalachakra Tantra* Tsongkhapa first presented him with a yellow scarf, the colour symbolising accomplishment of the Completion Stage yogas, and the next day offered blue and green brocade, the colours being auspicious regarding the Development Stage yogas. In their ensuing conversations the Master told Tsongkhapa that his predispositions would enable him to reach the pinnacle of the Completion Stage of that practice,

and proceeded to give him the external, internal and secret Kalachakra teachings.

One night during this discourse Tsongkhapa dreamt of the Nyingma Lama Kyungpo Lhaypa, seated on a great throne, a crown on his head and bell and dorje in hand, repeating the word “karmavajra”, the Sanskrit form of Tsongkhapa’s mystic name. Je Rinpoche was overjoyed and determined to go to Zhalu where this lama lived. Another night, he dreamt of the same Lama who had at his heart many circles of mantras. The image was so vivid that Tsongkhapa could read them all individually. Consequently he journeyed to Zhalu to meet this Lama, who proved to be identical to the figure in his dreams.

From this master Je Rinpoche received a complete set of standard initiations into the three lower classes of tantras. Later he embellished the walls of the temple where these initiations were conferred with gold leaf as an act of devotion to the master. He also here received the teachings that this Lama held on the *Heruka Tantra* in accordance with the three traditions of the Mahasiddhas Luhipada, Ghantapada and Krishnapada.

Not only should the trainee have impeccable devotion for the master, as exemplified by Tsongkhapa’s actions, but the master in turn should be willing to fully teach such a receptive vessel. After every initiation, in order that psychic attainment be transmitted, this lama would always say that he had received the material from such and such a teacher who had been completely willing to instruct.

Tsongkhapa and Lama Umapa Pawo Dorje left for Lhasa in the Year of the Monkey for Gawa Dong, the seat of the Second State Oracle, located about three miles from Lhasa. In Lhasa Cathedral they paid their respects to the large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha which had been made during the Buddha’s lifetime and consecrated by him in person.

This sacred image had been brought to Tibet via China, in the seventh century A.D. by the first queen of King Srongtsen Gampo. They offered some prayers before the statue and then returned to Gawa Dong for intensive retreat.

16 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

During the retreat Tsongkhapa received many tantric lineages including the special teachings on Mañjushri Dharmachakra. Although he experienced visions of Arapatza Mañjushri, the most well-known of the five aspects of Mañjushri, he spoke of these to no one but Khaydrub Rinpoche, who was one of his chief disciples and, after Je Rinpoche had passed away, was also his biographer. Henceforth, Mañjushri and Tsongkhapa became teacher and disciple. From this time onward Je Rinpoche was able to question Bodhisattva Mañjushri on any topic.

After this retreat, many thousands of people came for teachings. Mañjushri advised him to enter another intensive retreat, but Lama Umapa felt that it would be of greater benefit for sentient beings if he gave discourses. Thus in spite of Mañjushri's exhortations, he carried on teaching for some time out of respect to his guru. However, secretly he felt that it was vital for him to master the import of Nagarjuna's profound view and that scriptures and teachers were unable to provide him with these. What was required, he felt, was intensive meditation. Therefore after teaching for a short period he announced, that he would soon enter a retreat. Lama Umapa chose to go to eastern Tibet and Tsongkhapa escorted him to Lhasa, where they stayed in one of the small rooms on the upper floor of the Cathedral and engaged in long discussions.

Tsongkhapa then returned to Kyomo Lung and taught until winter. He then left for Wolka Choelung a few days journey south of Lhasa, in order to enter meditation. When in the Lhasa Cathedral, he had asked Mañjushri how many disciples to take with him into retreat. The reply was eight, and he chose four from Central Tibet and four from the two eastern provinces.

The retreat was to last for four years. During the first phase, both master and disciples undertook intensive generation of spiritual energy and purification of the obscurations in order to demonstrate the indispensability of such practices from the outset. Je Rinpoche personally performed three and a half million full-length prostrations and one million eight hundred thousand mandala offerings. Indeed, his prostrating form wore an impression in the floor of the temple;

and at the conclusion of the mandala offerings his forearm was raw and bleeding.

While the nine were engaged in prostrations, they recited the names of the thirty-five Confession Buddhas, which are found in the *Discourse on the Three Heaps of the Doctrine*, and eventually received a vision of a golden Maitreya. The next vision was that of the Medicine Buddha, Bhaishajyaguru, and by this stage, their insights and spiritual qualities had increased to an extraordinary degree. After they had carried out many self-initiations into Thirteen Deity Yamantaka Mandala they received a vision of Nageshvaraja, King of the Nagas, who is one of the thirty-five Confession Buddhas. Tsongkhapa subsequently wrote a detailed commentary describing the visions.

The first Tibetan month is known as the Month of Miracles, for the Buddha competed with six non-Buddhist masters in a contest of miracles from the first to the fifteenth. On the New Year's day after the retreat, they went to the temple of Dzingji Ling where there is a statue of Maitreya. They found this to be in very poor condition, and Tsongkhapa wept on seeing it thus cracked and covered with bird droppings. In order to repair it they all sold all their possessions, except their robes. However, as this was insufficient to make significant repairs, they made offerings to Vaishravana, the Wealth Deity, and lit a lamp using butter that they had been given by a passing monk. Mañjushri himself blessed the work and as a result many people came and offered both financial and physical assistance. Everyone involved in the restoration took daily Mahayana precepts and they were all careful to ensure that their speech during the work was prayer rather than mundane chatter. This work upon the Maitreya statue was the first of Tsongkhapa's four major deeds.

Soon thereafter, Tsongkhapa wrote down two prayers composed and given to him by Mañjushri: a praise of Maitreya and a prayer for rebirth in the pure realm of Sukhavati.¹

Tsongkhapa and the eight disciples then travelled south of Lhasa to Nyaello Ro, where they spent five months meditating in the mountains. Here they gained many insights and Tsongkhapa gave a large number of discourses on topics such as *Discipline*. They had a

18 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

vision of Mañjushri surrounded by a concourse of not just Bodhisattvas, but also Mahasiddhas like Naropa and Tilopa and great scholars like Nagarjuna and Asanga. Tsongkhapa made little of such experiences and did not mention them. Mañjushri predicted that by following the teachings of these Bodhisattvas, Tsongkhapa would be able to benefit the living beings immeasurably. Mañjushri also manifested to Tsongkhapa in the aspect of Yamantaka, and after that reappeared as the youthful Mañjushri, his sword handle at his heart and its tip at Tsongkhapa's chest with a stream of nectar flowing down the blade. Thus Tsongkhapa experienced utter bliss.

The Nyingma Lama Lhodrag Khenchen Namkha Gyaltzen invited Tsongkhapa to his residence at the Lhodrag Drawo Monastery to answer some questions for him. When they met, the Lama saw Tsongkhapa as Mañjushri and Tsongkhapa saw him as Vajrapani. When he was seventy the Khenchen had a vision of a white goddess who had told him that he would meet a man indistinguishable from Mañjushri and closely linked with Saraswati. The goddess had also noted that there was a karmic connection between Je Tsongkhapa and the lama spanning their past fifteen lifetimes. That evening Tsongkhapa requested the Khenchen to give teachings on guru-yoga and during these he had a vision of Vajrapani.²

The oral teachings of the Kadam tradition coming from Atisha had been passed to Atisha's chief disciple, the layman Dromtonpa. He in turn passed on the lineage in three distinct lines. The *Textual Kadam Lineage* was given to Geshe Potowa and emphasised the need for a thorough comprehension of the meaning of the Buddha's actual words in their entirety, not omitting even a single word or syllable. The Kadam *Lamrim Lineage* was given to Gampopa and places reliance on Atisha's *Light on the Path to Enlightenment*. The *Guideline Instruction Lineage* was given to Geshe Chen Ngawa, the disciple of Geshe Sharawa and depends on the transmission of oral instructions, especially those Atisha obtained from Guru Suvarnavipa. This included the lineage of Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, that Atisha had travelled to an island near Java in order to receive.

Only the latter two lineages were taught to Tsongkhapa by this Nying-ma master, for he had already received the first one elsewhere. The Khenchen dreamt that he was told to receive Shantideva's *Compendium of Training* from Mañjushri, so he asked Tsongkhapa for this instruction. On Tsongkhapa's head he witnessed Maitreya Buddha; on his right shoulder, White Mañjushri; on his left, Saraswati; and he saw many Doctrine Protectors as well. Tsongkhapa and the Khenchen gave each other reciprocal teachings, and this kind of mutual teacher-disciple association quickly became the pattern in Tsongkhapa's relationship with his various masters.

At this time Tsongkhapa was considering going to India to meet Nagabodhi and the great Mahasiddha Maitripa, for he desired further elucidation on Middle Way theory as well as the tantric teaching on the illusory body, which is one of the highest stages in the tantric path. So he checked his dreams that night, and beheld he and his disciples, dressed in robes, sitting on Vultures Peak at Rajgir where the Buddha had taught the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Tsongkhapa discussed his plans with Khenchen Namkha Gyaltzen, and the Lama said that he would consult Vajrapani. The reply was that if Tsongkhapa went to India, he would develop great renown and probably become the abbot of one of the monasteries there, but Vajrapani advised Tsongkhapa to remain in Tibet because it would be of greater benefit both to sentient beings generally as well as to his direct disciples, some of whom had already attained the Mahayana path of preparation. Furthermore, the heat in India would prove unbearable for some of the Tibetans. The present Junior Tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang, has said that we have this Nying-ma Lama to thank for such works as Tsongkhapa's *Great Exposition on the Stages of the Path* because Tsongkhapa might otherwise have gone to India and been lost to Tibet.

For six months Tsongkhapa stayed at Nyan studying the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Teachings* by Geshe Drinlay, which is a text on the stages of the path (*Lamrim*). Contrary to popular belief, this literary form was neither the creation of Je Rinpoche nor of Atisha

20 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

but originates from the Buddha himself. Tsongkhapa derived innumerable insights from this particular text and would offer incense in its honour. He also gave a variety of other teachings while in Nyan.

Tsongkhapa had now gained complete understanding of all the five paths and perceived the need to compose a text for the benefit of future practitioners. He planned to write in accordance with the works of Nagarjuna and Atisha, taking guru-yoga as the foundation of the path and proceeding onwards to meditative quiescence and penetrative insight, the very heart of all meditation. He also planned to compose a similar graded text explaining the stages of tantra. The basis for the former project would be the *Light on the Path to Enlightenment*.

From Nyan, Tsongkhapa and thirty others went on a pilgrimage to Tsari, a sacred place of Heruka. This site is only visited once every twelve years during the Year of the Monkey. It is in a very primitive area inhabited by extremely wild peoples. Here Tsongkhapa had a vision of Maitreya, who told him that he was propagating the Doctrine in the same manner as Buddha Shakyamuni had done. The cave in which he experienced this vision can still be seen there.

Tsongkhapa then went into retreat on the *Kalachakra Tantra* which contains the “six branched yoga.” Again he had a vision of Kalachakra, who said that he would become a second Dharmaraja Chandrabhadra, the famous king who received the Kalachakra system from Vajradhara; the form in which Buddha conferred the highest tantric teachings.

Tsongkhapa gave many ordinations and discourses on the *Discipline* for he was a very strict practitioner in that respect and would never transgress even the minor rules of a monk.

He received a vision of Saraswati, who told him that he would live only to fifty-seven, and until then he should maximize his work for the Teachings and sentient beings. Because of this he offered Prayers to the eight-armed Ushnishavijaya, a female aspect who is one of the three long-life deities. His disciple Tokden Jampay Gyatso approached Mañjushri regarding the possibility of lengthening Tong Khapa's life, and the reply was affirmative.

Mañjushri told Tsongkhapa in a vision that it was no longer necessary for him to ask for further advice regarding the correct view

of emptiness since he himself now had extensive insight into it. He advised Tsongkhapa to teach in accordance with the standpoints of Nagarjuna and Atisha. Je Rinpoche travelled to the south of Lhasa to stay for the summer, and there he met Gyaltsab Dharma Rinchen, the great scholar and debater from the Sakya tradition. Gyaltsab Je wanted to debate with Tsongkhapa and first encountered him while the latter was giving teachings. Gyaltsab even had the temerity to climb onto Tsongkhapa's throne, but as he listened to the discourse, all of his questions were so perfectly answered that he realized his grave error, got down from the throne, offered three prostrations and humbly sat with the listeners. Later on Gyaltsab Je was to become well known as one of the foremost disciples of Tsongkhapa.

Tsongkhapa then returned to Wolka Choelung, the scene of his four-year retreat, this time to undertake an intensive one year retreat in which he concentrated upon the Middle Way schools of thought in greater detail. During this period he received a vision of Nagarjuna with his five chief disciples known as the "Holy Father and Sons", Buddhapalita, one of the sons and also the author of a famous composition by the same name, placed his text on Tsongkhapa's head to give him inspiration and blessings. The *Sustaining Buddha* is the best commentary to Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way* and the very next day while Tsongkhapa was perusing the eighteenth chapter of this commentary, he gained complete nonconceptual understanding of emptiness. He then composed a text in praise of the Buddha's teachings on the interrelationship of all phenomena. This text, popularly called *Essence of the Eloquent*, and also the text *In Praise of Relativity*,³ mention how he was unable to restrain tears whenever he thought of the Buddha's kindness in teaching the *Perfection of Wisdom* at Vulture's Peak.⁴

After intensive practice, many retreats and a great deal of meditation, Tsongkhapa received visions of many deities. He also constantly sought Mañjushri's advice on his choice of abode and a study material.

He travelled to Wolka and spent the winter and spring teaching the monks the enormity of the altruistic attitude and the profundity

22 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

of emptiness. He accepted an invitation to spend the rainy season retreat to the south of Lhasa, after which he came back to Lhasa at the request of Namkha Zangpo and stayed on the Potala Peak giving many discourses. Thereafter he travelled to Gawa Dong.

For tantric practice, extraordinary devotion to the tantric master and flawless moral discipline are necessary, especially to keep the very easily broken tantric pledges. Tsongkhapa taught the *Fifty Stanzas on the Master*, written by Ashvagoṣa, who had initially been a non-Buddhist but who had changed his faith after defeat in debate by Aryadeva and thereafter was known as Acharya Vira or Aryasura. Je Tsongkhapa also taught a text on the root tantric vows and Asanga's *Bodhisattva Levels* as well as writing commentaries to them.

Rendawa had so far remained in Tsang but now came to meet Tsongkhapa at Gawa Dong where they gave many teachings to each other, Tsongkhapa made elaborate offerings to Rendawa in connection with his practice of guru-yoga.

They both considered doing a retreat at Reting, the monastery that had been founded by Dromtonpa. The great Kadam geshe had stayed there, and a special tradition of group retreats had originate at this monastery. Thus, it seemed to be an ideal environment for such activity.

Reting is a place of beautiful juniper forests located three day's journey by horse to the north of Lhasa. It was here that Tsongkhapa wrote the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* as well as many commentaries. Just above the monastery was a large rock in the shape of a lion where Tsongkhapa sat with a scroll painting of Atisha by him. This painting was still in the monastery in 1959. First he made entreaties to Atisha and received a vision of all the lineages from the Buddha to his own teachers. The vision continue for one month, giving Tsongkhapa the chance to put forth many questions. Finally all the lineages dissolved into Atisha, Dromtonpa, Geshe Potowa and Geshe Sharawa. Thus, Tsongkhapa was able to have prolonged discussion with these great lamas. Then the latter three Masters absorbed into Atisha, who gave Tsongkhapa a blessing by placing his hand on Tsongkhapa's head.

After this vision Je Rinpoche completed the *Great Exposition* as far as the section on penetrative insight.⁵ At this point he hesitated, feeling that in future such teachings would be beyond anyone's comprehension. However, Mañjushri appeared and bade Tsongkhapa both to finish the work and to write a small and medium exposition on the stages of the path for those whose aptitude was not commensurate with the presentation in the *Great Exposition*. The eight great Doctrine Protectors also requested him to continue with this work, and it is a tribute to his humility that such great names were not included in the colophon where it is customary to mention those who have requested the teaching. In fact he wrote only the name of one of his disciples there.

Meanwhile Rendawa had been discoursing on some of Nagarjuna's tantric writings. Tsongkhapa gave many teachings using Asanga's work, the *Hearer Levels*, which includes a section on meditative quiescence, and at this time many people staying in the surrounding mountains developed samadhi. Rendawa and Tsongkhapa also clarified points of issue concerning certain tantric practices.

They were then invited by the great Lama Jamkawa to stay some time at the main Drikung Kargyu monastery. So they went there in the spring when the great translator Kyabchog Palzang was in residence. Tsongkhapa was now about forty. There he received instruction according to the Kargyu tradition on the *Six Doctrines of Naropa* and a special oral teaching on the *Great Seal*.

The master Yonten Gyatso invited Tsongkhapa, Rendawa and Kyabchog Palzang to Namtze Deng, a monastery of six hundred monks, where they spent the rainy season retreat with their host as sponsor. Tsongkhapa gave an elaborate discourse on the *Discipline* so lucidly that it is regarded as the second of his four greatest deeds. He also gave teachings on *Pramana* and the *Middle Way*.

After the retreat Rendawa left for Tsang and Tsongkhapa went to Reting where, ensconced at the lion shaped rock above the monastery, he completed the *Great Exposition*. Kyabchog Palzang had particularly urged the completion of this work.

24 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

Tsongkhapa now decided to teach tantra and so sent twenty-five of his disciples to Kyabchog Palzang for initiations before he started. He was concerned that many people who had taken Bodhisattva vows from him and from countless other masters did not know how to guard their vows properly. Therefore, he wrote a commentary on the moral discipline chapter of Asanga's *Bodhisattva Levels*. There are two distinct lineages with respect to taking these vows, one of which derives from the above text, whereas the more well known one is from *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. In both cases the vows are identical.

Je Tsongkhapa wrote a commentary to the *Fifty Stanzas on the Master* to reinforce the paramouncy of such devotions in the tantric vehicle. He then taught the *Great Exposition* in its entirety to Kyabchog Palzang who thereafter went to U-tsang with the text while Tsongkhapa stayed and gave teachings on this remarkable composition. He spent the Month of Miracles at Reting making offerings, after which he returned to Lhasa.

Until his time little value was given to the study of dialectics and epistemology; but Tsongkhapa's discourses provided the necessary impetus for people to realize the enormous importance of these subjects as an indispensable tool in the quest for enlightenment. Khaydrub Rinpoche noted that people were able to appreciate this because of Je Tsongkhapa's infinite kindness which would be difficult to repay. At the request of Miwang Drakpa Gyaltsen, Tsongkhapa spent the next rainy season retreat at Wonde Chenteng where he gave many discourses.

At Wolga Jampa Ling he taught all the stages of the highest tantras as well as the *Great Exposition* and then entered a strict retreat with a few disciples. During this retreat he composed a commentary to Nagabodhi's *Ordered Stages of the Means of Achieving Guhyasamaja*, Nagabodhi being a disciple of Nagarjuna.

One of the most difficult parts of tantra is the Guhyasamaja teaching on the illusory body. Here Tsongkhapa confidentially told several disciples that he had clearly understood and mastered these teachings some ten years earlier and affirmed his intention of explaining how to actualize such a body. Complete understanding of this ensures the attainment of Buddhahood in one lifetime.

Following many requests, he wrote the *Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*, the sequel to his previous *Great Exposition* dealing with the path from the point where the previous text finished up to resultant enlightenment. He also composed a text on the method of attaining enlightenment as found exclusively in the practice of Yamantaka. In all facets of the practice his concentration was single-pointed and uninterrupted. During meditation he was completely oblivious to all disturbances around him.

South of Lhasa at Jangchub Ling he taught both *Great Expositions* after which he went to the area near Lhasa where Sera monastery now stands. Close to the site was Choeding hermitage where he had spent many rainy season retreats. After completing a retreat there, he taught the *Guhyasamaja* and *Heruka Tantras* and gave general discourses on the completion stage of the other tantras.

Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way* is very difficult to understand, and Tsongkhapa, now almost fifty, was requested to write a commentary to it. During the composition he would invoke Mañjushri, and seed syllables would appear in the air around him. Once the wisdom letter *AH* appeared and descended onto a nearby rock, leaving an impression that could still be seen in 1959 in one of the Sera gardens. Je Rinpoche prophesied that a large monastery producing many sages would be constructed at that spot. Sera Monastery was duly built there by one of his disciples, Jamchen Choeje who also went to China as the Imperial Tutor in Tsongkhapa's stead.

Tsongkhapa foresaw interruptions if he remained at Choeding, so he departed for the peace and solitude of Raka Drag. Soon afterwards a party of Chinese officials and ministers arrived at Choeding, but in the absence of Tsongkhapa, they proceeded on to Lhasa. Miwang Dragpa Gyaltzen met these dignitaries who requested his services in obtaining an audience with Tsongkhapa. So he travelled to Raka Drag to inform Tsongkhapa of the situation.

Je Tsongkhapa came to Lhasa where the ministers presented him with a letter from the Chinese Emperor requesting his presence in China that he might teach, but Tsongkhapa replied that his advancing age and his wish to stay in retreat precluded acceptance. The officials

26 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

went back to China with his reply and some images of the Buddha for the Emperor while Tsongkhapa returned to Raka Drag.

Tsongkhapa then commenced writing the *Essence of the Eloquent, An Analysis of Interpretive and Definitive Teachings*, which differentiates between the interpretive and definitive teachings of the Buddha. He went to Choeding and stayed for two years, giving teachings on his stages of the path texts.

After the rainy season retreat Miwang Dragpa Gyaltsen invited him to spend the winter at Kyimay Drumbu Lung, and he travelled there with an estimated five hundred to one thousand disciples; many of whom were great scholars. He gave many discourses on the *Stages of the Path*, the *Heruka Tantra* and other tantric systems during his stay.

On leaving Choeding, he conceived the idea of and decided to inaugurate the Great Prayer Festival, asking two of his disciples to prepare many offerings for it; however funds were lacking because he always gave away whatever he received. Henceforth, he kept everything he was given solely for use in the festival.

The two disciples gathered many artists to both wash with perfumes and paint the statues and walls of the Lhasa Cathedral. In 1409 Tsongkhapa was fifty-two, and during the final evening of the Year of the Mouse eight thousand monks assembled for the first Great Prayer Festival which ushered in the Year of the Bull. An enormous offering ceremony commenced at midnight with Tsongkhapa presenting a crown of fine gold to the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, which he consecrated, thus fulfilling the Buddha's prophecy. This is the third of his four major deeds.

Tsongkhapa also presented a jewelled silver crown to the statue of Avalokiteshvara. This statue was destroyed by the Chinese after 1959 though some Tibetans managed to salvage three of the heads, two of which are now on display in the Cathedral at Dharmasala in India. Je Rinpoche made copious offerings, including a huge silver begging bowl which he presented to the Buddha statue. He also robed and crowned many of the other statues in the Cathedral.

Large amounts of food were offered and later distributed amongst the poor and destitute. The multifarious events of the festival, which

lasted twenty-one days, would take many pages to describe even in broad outline. Each day gold was applied to the face of the Buddha statue, and on the eighth and fifteenth the bodies of all the statues were painted with gold.

During the festival Tsongkhapa gave many teachings on both sutra and tantra, including a discourse on Ashvagosa's *Birth Tales*. This teaching is still given annually in Dharamsala on the fifteenth of the first Tibetan month by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The power and clarity of Tsongkhapa's discourses wrought beneficial change in many people who also saw great accomplished beings of the past appearing in the sky. Tsongkhapa had now become celebrated as an author and teacher of great renown.

At the close of the festival his disciples concluded that it would be unwise for him to continue his peripatetic lifestyle. Hence, they offered to build him a monastery wherever he chose. He prayed in front of the Shakyamuni statue and examined his dreams, concluding that such a monastery should indeed be built, and he chose Nomad Mountain (Drogri) as the site. This was, in fact, the very spot cited in the Buddha's prophecy. He decided to call the monastery Ganden—in Sanskrit, Tushita—the abode of Maitreya. Tsong Khapa went to the site with one of his disciples, Gendun Drub, who was later posthumously recognized as the First Dalai Lama, appointing two others to take charge of the construction.

Many gave donations, and many volunteered their services in the building of the monastery. The main temple and over seventy other buildings were completed within a year. The monastery was built in accordance with the rules of the Discipline laid down by the Buddha, so there was a preliminary survey of the site for future dangers and a check to make sure that there was no infringement of land ownership. In the following year, the Year of the Tiger (1410), Tsongkhapa went to Ganden and gave instruction on the *Stages of the Path*, discourses on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, on Asanga's *Compendium of Knowledge* and explanations of difficult dialectical points.

Not only did he compose a host of commentaries to such texts as the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, but on careful consideration of the list of

28 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

Tsongkhapa's discourses and teachings, it would also appear that he must have spent his whole life discoursing. Yet from the point of view of his daily practice it seems that he spent his life in meditative retreat. But on reading his literary output, it would seem that he could only have read and composed texts. His Holiness the Dalai Lama feels that Je Rinpoche's greatest feat was to have done all three.

Signs now appeared suggesting the onset of considerable health problems from his fifty-seventh year onwards. Therefore, when he was fifty-five his disciples requested him to perform special practices in the extensive Yamantaka system in order to transcend these auguries. Together with thirty disciples he went for a Yamantaka retreat during the winter and spring after which Khedrub Rinpoche and many other disciples performed long-life rituals for their master's well being.

When fifty-six, he taught extensively, telling his disciples not to forget such instruction, for his ability to continue teaching was uncertain. His disciples' mounting concern impelled them to offer still more prayers and mandalas, and it is said that every longevity practice possible was carried out for his benefit.

In Tsongkhapa's fifty fifth year, the Year of the Dragon, he and many disciples entered an intensive retreat on the seventh day of the eighth month, and during it the disciples offered fervent prayers for his long life.

During the eleventh month he felt unwell, and though no sickness manifested, he was unable to sleep. Khaydrub Rinpoche and the future First Dalai Lama carried out a wide range of rituals and offerings to the Doctrine Protectors in order to safeguard their master's life.

He frequently entered long periods of single-pointed concentration until one day while out walking, he said that he felt much better. From his throne he urged his disciples never to separate themselves from total altruism or from meditation on it, and while seated there, he had a vision of the Buddha, Conqueror of Interferences. The Buddha approached, then dissolved into him filling him with renewed strength and vigour. He was temporarily cured and his disciples rejoiced.

In the following year he accepted Miwang Dragpa Gyaltsen's invitation to spend the rainy season retreat at Wongyi Tashi Dokar

where he gave many discourses. After this sojourn he returned to Ganden and composed a commentary to Luhipada's system of *Chakrasamvara* (the *Heruka Tantra*); a commentary to Chandrakirti's logical analysis of the completion states of the highest tantras; and the commentary known as the *Four Commentaries Combined* on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*.

At this juncture he decided to erect a special temple where tantric rituals could be carried out privately since the uninitiated are not permitted to see artifacts such as the mandalas. In the Year of the Sheep (1415) the construction of this hall at Ganden commenced. He was fifty-eight at the time.

Two years later in the third month of the Year of the Bird (1417) artists and sculptors congregated at Ganden to make a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni. This was to slightly exceed the dimensions of the one in the Lhasa Cathedral. The artists were commissioned to make gilded copper three dimensional mandalas relating to the thirty-two deity *Guhyasamaja*, the sixty-two deity *Heruka* and the thirteen deity *Yamantaka* practices.

During the fabrication of these, miraculous manifestation occurred, and effulgent symbols of various deities, possessing an inherent sheen and luster, came forth from the moulds and were often surrounded by rainbow light. The consecration ceremonies were performed, thus completing the construction of Ganden's main hall and the various figures contained therein. This is held to be the fourth of Tsongkhapa's major deeds.

In the Year of the Dog (1418) when Je Rinpoche was sixty-one, he gave extensive discourses and wrote a commentary on *Entrance to The Middle Way*. His complete works fill eighteen large volumes.

Four of his disciples one day witnessed him losing a tooth, and each of them asked if he might have it. Je Tsongkhapa's choice fell on Khaydrub Rinpoche, whom he likened to Mount surrounded by rings of golden mountains. However, the three did not relent so Tsongkhapa elected to satisfy everyone. He took back the tooth, placed it on the altar and then proceeded to make offerings, perform rituals and recite prayers. The tooth transformed into the Youthful Mañjushri from

30 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

whose forehead came a white relic pill the size of a plover's egg, from whose throat came a red one and from whose heart, a blue one. Thus, everyone was satisfied. The manifestation became the tooth once more, which was returned to Khaydrub Rinpoche.

In the Year of the Hog (1419) Tsongkhapa's disciples invited him to the hot springs at Tolung. From Ganden Tsongkhapa first went to Lhasa and made offerings and prayers, then journeyed on to the hot springs where he gave teachings to those assembled there. On a previous visit there he had leant against a rock, and his body had left an imprint that still can be seen. Here he also received a vision of the Sixteen Great Arhants. Thus, Tolung was included on the itinerary of the Lhasa Lower Tantric College during their annual one-month stay at Ganden.

Tsongkhapa then went on to Drepung at the invitation of the founder, Tashi Palden, and gave a variety of discourses on material like the *Stages of the Path*, the *Six Doctrines of Naropa* and *Entrance to the Middle Way*. Those present saw rainbows appear in a clear sky, which they took as an indication of his impending death. About two thousand of the roughly nine thousand monks present were holders of the *Tripitaka*, the three baskets of the sutra teachings. Tsongkhapa privately requested a sculptor to fashion a large silver image of Buddha Vairochana.

During a teaching on the root text of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* which contains seventeen chapters, Tsongkhapa unexpectedly halted at the end of the ninth, saying that he would break there. This was a most unusual occurrence, and again people felt it to be an indication that he was preparing for his passing away. It is considered auspicious to leave a teaching unfinished if departing somewhere to ensure that master and disciples will meet again and continue the teaching in this and future lives. Before he left Drepung, there was a minor earth tremor and the appearance of more rainbows.

From there he went to the Lhasa Cathedral to make comprehensive prayers and offerings with the wish that the teachings might endure for the benefit of all sentient beings. He prostrated before leaving the Cathedral, which also was unusual because it is only done in such circumstances when return to that place will be impossible for a long time; he said that he might be unable to come again to the Cathedral.

He was invited to Choeding hermitage by a disciple whom he instructed to build a large monastery there. This came to be the famous Sera Monastery, and Tsongkhapa went to the site of the future monastery to conduct a Confession Ceremony in order to strengthen the links between Master and disciples. He also taught the root tantras of *Guhyasamaja* and *Heruka*.

From there he returned to Ganden, stopping on the way at Dechen at the invitation of a government official. He suggested that Dechen Monastery should be rebuilt and that the monks should harmonize their practices of the *Discipline* and *Tantra* following the method introduced into Tibet by the great kindness of Atisha. He presided at an elaborate consecration ceremony and stated that he would be unable to return to conduct another when the reconstruction was finished. In addition, he donated many things to furnish the monastery.

Back at the main hall in Ganden, he offered a massive ritual cake then concluded the rite with many prayers from the *Stages of the Path* tradition. Together with the assembly of monks gathered in the hall, he dedicated the accumulated merit for the benefit of all sentient beings and finally recited the *Prayers for the Pure Land* and other auspicious verses. Afterwards, in the room, he expressed satisfaction at being back in the monastery far removed from trivial affairs. That night he developed a back pain so many monks gathered for prayers. It was the Year of the Hog and Tsongkhapa was sixty-two.

The next day he admitted he was in pain though it was not immediately obvious. He gave his hat and robe to Gyaltseb Je and proffered advice to his disciples stressing the importance of not drifting away from an altruistic state of mind.

He continued to perform self-initiations and four-session yoga of many deities. On the twentieth of the tenth month, he made an extensive offering to Heruka and that night meditated on the Adamantine Recitation, a special tantric breathing exercise. Very early on the morning of the twenty-fifth, sitting in full lotus posture, he meditated on emptiness then at dawn made a series of inner offerings, although no one present could understand why.

32 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

His breathing ceased and his body regained the vibrance of a sixteen year old, taken on the generally depicted appearance of the youthful Mañjushri. Many disciples present witnessed the emission of variegated light rays from his body which substantiates the belief that Tsongkhapa entered the intermediate state as an Enlightened Being.

For the following forty-nine days, an offering of one hundred thousand butter lamps and many other offerings were made at Ganden and Drepung. Many saw a rain of flowers descend from the sky. A high Lama of the Kargyu tradition, Kargyu Panchen, came to Ganden fifteen days after the passing away and composed *The Eighty (Main Deeds) of Tsongkhapa*, which is regarded as the standard biography and which contains elaborate details of his life.

The disciples consulted oracles—those who, in a state of trance, become the accessory of certain Doctrine Protectors, in order to divine the most appropriate treatment for the body. The oracles' prophesy was that it should be enshrined in a stupa. A special hall was built to accommodate a silver platform on top of which was a solid gold stupa that became very-well-known and was visited by many Tibetans and Mongolians. Another famous stupa associated with Tsongkhapa is the one containing the tree which grew from his afterbirth. It appeared in the middle of his parent's house in Amdo, now the site of Kumbum Monastery and this stupa still exists. The other stupa was desecrated during the Cultural Revolution of the mid-sixties when the whole of Ganden was demolished. However, some of Tsongkhapa's hair was recovered and there are a number of statues containing clippings in Tibetans in homes in India. What is extraordinary is that the mummified body of Je Tsongkhapa was still intact in the middle of this century.

Gyaltsab Dharma Rinchen was requested by the other disciples to ascend the throne of Ganden, signifying that he was to be head of the monastery. His incumbency lasted for twelve years until his own demise. Gyaltsab Je was a prolific writer and his work are contained in eight volumes. Khaydrub Rinpoche then succeeded to his office until he passed away at the age of fifty-four. These two are always depicted flanking Je Tsongkhapa in Scroll paintings of the *Hundred Gods of Tushita*.⁶

Khaydrup Je received five visions of Tsongkhapa after his Master's decease. The first occurred when Khaydrup Je had grown disheartened at being unable to give clear teachings on emptiness. Tsongkhapa appeared and advised him concerning the correct view. Later Khaydrup Je was again downhearted at his failure to fathom a difficult tantric text written by Tsongkhapa and since he was the best scholar of the time, he could not refer to anyone. Tsongkhapa appeared on an elephant and answered many questions. Again, while reading the *Great Exposition on the Stages of the Path*, he was struck by the brilliance of Tsongkhapa as a master and, at that moment, his teacher appeared.

Je Tsongkhapa, who was only sixty-two when he passed away, taught and achieved so much. This is especially true considering the much longer life-spans of Asanga and Nagarjuna which were one hundred and fifty years and six hundred years respectively.

On another occasion, Tsongkhapa appeared and fortified Khaydrup Je when he became discouraged after musing on the decline of the Buddha's doctrine. Khaydrup Je, who often thought of joining his master in the Tushita Pure Land, received the final vision when he wished to ascertain whether Tsongkhapa had been born in Tushita as had been predicted. Tsongkhapa appeared on a tiger, holding a sword and a skull-cup and this time, Khaydrup Je asked for Tsongkhapa's approval of his decision to enter parinirvana, which was given. Khaydrup Je prepared to leave this life but was urged by Six-Handed Mahakala, in a vision, to remain for the benefit of sentient beings. However, Khaydrup Je felt that he had done everything possible and so went to the Land of Dakinis.

His body was placed inside another stupa beside that of Tsongkhapa and the same was done with Gyaltsab Je's remains. However, the lineage of the throne holder of Ganden, who is also the head of the Gelug sect which Tsongkhapa founded, did not cease. The present incumbent and ninety-seventh successor to Tsongkhapa is the Senior Tutor to His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Kyabje Ling Dorje Chang.

Many of Tsongkhapa's disciples benefitted sentient beings through the foundation of religious institutions, such as the great monasteries of Drepung, Sera and Ganden. Furthermore, the First Dalai Lama

34 *Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*

founded Tashi Lhunpo Monastery at Shigatse, about half-way between Lhasa and the Nepalese border to the South. The two Tantric colleges in Lhasa were also inaugurated.

After Tsongkhapa's passing away several biographies were written by lamas from the different traditions. They all agreed that he was a teacher without parallel. The ninth Karmapa praised Tsongkhapa as one "who swept away wrong views with the correct and perfect ones".

It is generally accepted that the three greatest contributors in the annals of Tibet were Guru Padmasambhava, Atisha and Tsongkhapa, all of whom appeared when a great teacher was needed. It was the thirty-seventh Tibetan King, Trisong Detsen, who first invited the Bodhisattva Shantarakshita to Tibet. At that time, there were many evil forces in Tibet strongly resenting the appearance of the Buddha's doctrine there, thus hindrances and calamities occurred. Shantarakshita advised the king to invite Padmasambhava, who came and subdued these malignant forces, and then instigated the construction of the first monastery at Samye, south of Lhasa. After the repression of the Doctrine by King Lang Darma, there was a period in Tibet when a very degenerate form of religion was practiced. During this time, no one could find compatibility between the systems of sutra and tantra, which were considered to be an irreconcilable dichotomy. It was Atisha who dispelled such views and started the Kadam tradition. Later, when people could not see how learning and yogic practice were to be united, Tsongkhapa came and revealed the correct path.

Today we should strive to emulate Tsongkhapa's peerless progress along the path. To hear as many teachings as possible and never to be satisfied with less than ultimate knowledge as the most important lessons that can be applied in life. It is imperative to appreciate and work towards the peerless goal of wishing to achieve enlightenment in order to help every other sentient being do exactly the same. Je Rinpoche's example of scriptural learning and meditative application taken as a unified path show the essence of Buddha's intent and the truly quick method of achieving enlightenment.

