

Nyingma Transmission, How 'The Cyclone' Came to the West

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Once there lived a family in the village of Joephu, in the Palrong valley of the Dhoshul region in Eastern Tibet. There was a father, mother, two sisters, and two brothers. Like many Tibetan families they were very devout. The father taught his children and the children of the village the Buddhism of Tibet, the Dharma. He taught them to read and write and to chant the stories of the Buddha Shakyamuni and of Padmasambhava the second Buddha who brought Buddhism to Tibet. Teachings of the Dharma and practice were woven into their lives. If one of the children happened to wake in the night, the father's continuous chanting could be heard.

The valley was a magical place with a high mountain no one had yet climbed and a high lake with milky white water and yellow crystal sand around its edges, sand that dissolved instantly on the tongue without a taste. This mountain had extraordinary rocks with footprints embedded in them. Tsa Sum Lingpa, the Crazy Wisdom Yogi, made these footprints when he danced on the rocks in an explosion of radiant energy. Not surprisingly, Tsa Sum Lingpa is especially revered in the Dhoshul region of Tibet.

The oldest of the brothers was nicknamed "The Cyclone" for his enormous energy. He would run up a nearby mountain to explore and play for hours. One day he found a baby goat on the mountainside and was so taken with it that he hid it under his shirt and streaked home. An upset mother goat wasn't far behind. His own mother advised him to return the baby goat, which he did reluctantly. Other times he would pick wild mushrooms and stuff them in his shirt, but they were so plentiful that they kept falling out, a predicament for a five-year-old. Many a summer day "The Cyclone" would lie down in a field of wild flowers--all with names of Tibetan deities--and gaze up into the vast blue Tibetan sky.

During his fifth year he went on a journey with his mother to a mountain miles away. They were going to visit a well-known monk named Ahtsok to whom the mother had a special devotion and who lived in lifelong retreat. Local people brought him offerings of cheese, yogurt, tea or Tsampa and left them a distance away from the cave with a friendly shout; other times they stayed to visit. The mother and son were visiting on this day and climbed miles up the mountain to Ahtsok's cave above the timber line. They found the monk wrapped in ragged woolen clothes with a wool shawl around his head; he never wore animal skins. The little boy was deeply struck by Ahtsok.

The children were eager scholars at early ages. They went to the village monastery for instruction. However, their prime instruction continued to be with their father at home. The younger brother was recognized as a tulku, but the family decided not to emphasize this in his upbringing. When the younger brother was born the family chose to move to another village. The baby became gravely ill, and when the illness failed to respond to ordinary remedies his parents took him to the monastery for a diagnosis. They were told to move back to the village of Joephu because the baby was the incarnation of a highly revered lama from the Dhoshul region. The family returned to their old village and the baby regained his health.

When "The Cyclone" was six years old he entered Gochen Monastery

for his secular and religious education--a five-year undertaking. The family visited him at the monastery; the trip involved a days' ride on horseback or yak. In 1953, at eleven years of age, he entered Riwoche Monastery and trained to master Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and logic and the teachings of the Three Yanas.

Throughout the 1950s the Chinese were invading Tibet. The father, knowing Padmasambhava's predictions, felt that the time had come as Guru Rinpoche had said when Tibet would be destroyed and Tibetan lamas would be scattered all over the world turning the wheel of the Dharma. The father would relate these predictions to relatives and friends in the village repeatedly. It was also foretold that the time to leave was in the winter. The others said, "No, lets wait until the spring thaw to go." Guru Rinpoche also predicted that if ever Tibetans were fleeing Tibet, the safe haven was a land to the south called Pemako, where the mountains dropped down into tropical jungle. In 1960 the father gathered the family together, called the oldest son, now eighteen, home from the monastery, and with only what belongings could be carried or packed on the yaks' backs, set out in the depth of winter. They headed for Pemako. The hardships of the journey were extraordinary--the Himalayas, the snow and cold, the Chinese taking their yaks, and having to hide from Chinese machine guns. Somehow, they made it to the safe land. But in Pemako the altitude dropped extremely, the water was not safe to drink, they were unaccustomed to the heat and they all became ill. The mother, two sisters, and the older brother were ill for months. The older brother recovered very slowly. The mother and sisters died.

Father and sons went on to a refugee camp for Tibetans in Northern India. Refugee schools were begun and the work of translating sacred texts went on. Many lamas had carried out of Tibet whatever sacred manuscripts they could. When each one had contributed what he had brought, the entire body of sacred teachings was intact. At that time the Indian government made a proposal to the United States that India print seventeen copies of each Tibetan text and the United States buy them for the Library of Congress. It was agreed; India received payment, and the U.S. Library of Congress became the repository of the treasury of Tibetan manuscripts.

The Venerable Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, the older brother, became Abbot at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India, in charge of the Nyingma Department. Khen Rinpoche is one of the most highly qualified scholars and meditation masters of the Nyingma tradition, fully versed in Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools, and a master of Dzogchen, the most developed and advanced tradition of spiritual practice in the Nyingma tradition.

The younger brother, the Venerable Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche, graduated from Sanskrit University in Sarnath. His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche enthroned him as Abbot in Charge at the Nyingmapa Institute in Kathmandu where he taught Buddhist philosophy, writing, calligraphy and poetry. He was later invested with the authority of Khenpo Abbot by His Holiness and presided at Orgyen Chokholing Monastery. Khenpo Tsewang is a published author, historian, and poet, as well as an expert in the study of ancient Tantric literature. He holds the transmission and all initiations of the Nyingma Kama and Terma lineages.

In accordance with another of Padmasambhava's predictions, that when the iron bird flies and the horse goes on wheels Buddhism will go to the west, many Tibetan lamas were now teaching in the West. So in 1980, at the insistent invitation of Dr. Rhoda P. Lecocq, a professor from California who had taken teachings from Khenpo Palden Sherab

Rinpoche in India, the Khenpos came to the United States for a teaching visit to California. His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche later enlisted them in assisting with His Holiness' considerable Dharma activities in the United States. After about eight years of working in this liaison the time came to launch their own teaching approach in the West with His Holiness' blessing.

Since that time their teaching has become more extensive each year. Sanghas sprout up around them where ever they go. They teach together with a simple and beautiful method: Khen Rinpoche teaches in penetrating Tibetan and Khenpo Tsewang translates into English with inspired precision and wit. Their sanghas are formally called Padmasambhava Buddhist Centers, established to teach and preserve the tradition of Nyingmapa Buddhism, especially the mediation technique of the Higher Tantras. The practice of these profound techniques aims at removing the habits of mind obscuring the true, primordial Buddha Nature and revealing its boundless compassion. These teachings have been transmitted in an unknown lineage from master to master from that time to the present day.

The first center began in New York City, the Khenpos' home base. There are now Padmasambhava Buddhist Centers in West Palm Beach and Orlando, Florida; Wilmington, Delaware; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Cookeville, Tennessee; Santiago; Puerto Rico; Denver, Colorado; San Francisco, California; and in Ellsworth Maine. Close connections and a full teaching schedule are maintained with all these centers. The Khenpos visit each center at least three times a year with one visit usually being a week's retreat.

From 1980 on, the Khenpos have maintained a strong connection to the Native American practice through the Sunray Meditation Society and its leader, the Venerable Dhyani Wahoo. The Khenpos travel to Sunray's Vermont Peacekeeper Center to give teachings and empowerments yearly. Sunray members come to New York for special initiations and practice instructions which bears out the Native American prophecy that Buddhism and Native American practice would join their amazing forces when the Red Hat lamas came to the west.

The Khenpos Rinpoche keep translation at the center of their attention. The entire cycle of the "Seven Treasures of the Great Longchenpa" is in the process of being translated by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche working in conjunction with Dr. Janet Gyatso of Amherst College and Dr. Anne Klein of Rice University. The first edition of the "Prajnaparamita" by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, translated by Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche with Dr. Joan Kaye, has been republished with the collaboration of Phyllis and Michael Friedman.

The Khenpos regularly return to Sarnath India, to oversee the construction on the Nyingmapa College and Monastery which they founded there. These visits occur on an average of about every other year, allowing the Khenpos to teach and spend time with their father who still lives and practices in retreat in India.