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The Origin and Development of Sakya Tradition: An Introduction

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Abstract

There was only one Buddhist Tradition in Tibet prior to the eleven century which later became known as Nyingmapa (Lit. "The Old One") and no other sects appeared to have existed at that time. The growth of different Buddhist traditions dated from the visit to Tibet of the eminent Buddhist scholar Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna in the middle of the 11th century (1040 A.D.). He preached celibacy, moral abstinence, and expressed disapproval of some of the existing practices such as magic arts etc. The first reformed Buddhist tradition was called Kadampa (Wyl. bka' gdams pa) and the rise of this tradition was followed by Kagyüpa and Sakyapa. David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson stated: "There were no essential differences in doctrine between all these various orders. Their main differences consisted in their traditional attachments to different lines of teachers and particular tutelary divinities".

Keywords: Nyingmapa, Kadampa, Kagyüpa, Sakyapa.

The Early Period of the Propagation of Buddhism in Tibet began during the reign of King Srongtsan Gampo (Wyl. srong btsan sgam po, c. 629-649) in seventh century A.D. Although it is believed that two Buddhist texts, *Karaṇḍavyūhasutra*¹ (Wyl. za ma tog bkod pa shes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo) and *Hundred Precepts*² (Wyl. spang skong phyag rgya pa) had become available during the reign of the sixteenth king of the country called Lha Tho Thori Nyantsan (Wyl. lha tho tho ri gnyan btsan) but there was no one to comprehend and explain these texts. King Srongtsan Gampo realized the importance of

¹ According to Sarat Chandra Das in his *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, *spang skong phyag rgya pa* or *Karaṇḍavyūha* contains "an enumeration of the epithets of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas etc., and also the method of confession of sins", *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 796

² The Hundred Precepts or *za ma tog bkod pa* is "a religious treatise describing the good services done by Avalokiteśvara to all living beings, including the account of *Balahaka* the miraculous cloud-horse and of the significances of the mystic formula *om maṇi padme hūm*; besides an enumeration of the names of Bodhisattvas, Nāgas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, etc." *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 1089

having a written language and so he sent Thonmi Sambhota, son of Anu, with sixteenth companions to India³ to master in the languages and devise a new script for his country. Thonmi Sambhota having mastered Sanskrit under the Indian teacher, Devavidya Simha, returned to Tibet and invented the Tibetan alphabetical script consisting of thirty consonants and four vowel signs. After inventing the alphabetical scripts, he composed eight works on writing and grammar⁴. It was followed by the translations of several important Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Tibetan.

King Srongtsan Gampo is considered as the first Buddhist King who patronized and developed Buddhism in Tibet. The king was converted to Buddhism by his two queens, namely, Princess Bhṛkuṭi Devī from Nepal, who was honoured as Green Tārā, and princess Wengchen from China, who was honoured as White Tārā. Through Buddhist teachings and Buddhist culture he changed Tibet from a barbaric state to civilized state. During thirty years of reign, the king built temples in almost every part of his kingdom. He drew up ten moral principles and sixteen rules⁵ for public conduct. Thereafter, Buddhism became the state religion of Tibet and it started to assert itself over its indigenous the Bon religion⁶.

³ Shakabpa, Tsepon W.D., *Tibet: A Political History*, New York: Potala Publications, 1988, p. 35

⁴ Ibid, p. 35

⁵ i. One should have faith in Triple Gem.

ii. One should take part in religious activities.

iii. One should respect one's parents.

iv. One should honor the meritorious and to promote the talents.

v. One should respect the elders and the people who are of high birth.

vi. One should be considerate to the relatives and friends.

vii. One should support one's own country and be a useful citizen.

viii. One should be honest and upright.

ix. One should be aware of the good use of food and wealth.

x. One should follow the example of the righteous persons.

xi. One should return the kindness of benefactors and be thankful to them.

xii. One should be just in measurement and weight.

xiii. One should live harmoniously with all without jealousy.

xiv. One should not to listen to the words of woman.

xv. One should have skill in conversation and be gentle and polite in speech.

xvi. One should have patience and meekness to bear the suffering and polite in speech.

⁶ Sarat Chandra Das describes Bon in his *Tibetan-English Dictionary* as "the ancient religion of Tibet which was fetishism, demon worship, and propitiation by means of incarnations. The word 'chos' which ordinarily means religion is used as the antithesis to Bon. Bon now signifies the kind of Shamanism which was followed by Tibetan before the introduction of Buddhism and in certain parts still extant; of this there were three stages, namely- 'dzol bon, 'khyar bon and bsgyur bon. The duration of the first

After the death of Srongtsan Gampo the expansion of Buddha Dharma in Tibet continued under the patronage of King Thrisrong Deutsan (Wyl. khri srong lde'u btsan, 742-798 C.E.) who assumed power in 755 and rendered many services for the upliftment of Buddhism in Tibet. On the advice of the eminent scholar, Śāntarakṣita, the king invited Padmasambhava to Tibet in 747 C.E. He patronized the construction of Tibet's first monastery at Samye in the years 762-766 C.E. Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita together organized the existence of a Saṃgha in Tibet along with seven Tibetans ordained into monk hood. The monastery became a very important Buddhist centre and many more Buddhist texts from India were translated into Tibetan language.

Over a two-year period (792-794 C.E.) a debate was held between Kamalaśīla, the Indian Paṇḍita, and Hwashang, a renowned Chinese Buddhist monk at Samye. The debate was presided over by King Thrisong Deutsan. At the end of the debate he declared Kamalaśīla the winner.

The next celebrated king of Tibet was Thri-tsung Deutsan (Wyl. khri gtsung lde'u btsan, 806-841 C.E.), popularly known as Ralpacan and he too rendered a great service for the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet. He invited many Indian scholars of Sanskrit, such as Jinamitra, Śilendrabodhi, Dānaśīla, Bodhimitra, Vidyākaraṇabhā, Buddhajñāna and Surendrabodhi to carry on the great work of translation. They were also responsible for the revision of the Buddhist texts which had been translated earlier.

There was only one Buddhist Tradition in Tibet prior to the eleven century which later became known as Nyingmapa (Lit. "The Old One") and no other sects appeared to have existed at that time. The growth of different Buddhist traditions date from the visit to Tibet of the eminent Buddhist scholar Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna in the middle of the 11th century (1040 A.D.). He preached celibacy, moral abstinence, and expressed disapproval of some of the existing practices such as magic arts etc.⁷. The first reformed Buddhist tradition was called Kadampa (Wyl. bka' gdams pa)⁸ and the rise of this tradition was followed by Kagyüpa⁹

extended from the time of Nyathi Tsanpo (Wyl. gnya' khri btsan po), the first historical king of Tibet, down to the reign of King Thri De Tsanpo (Wyl. khri lde btsan po), the second from the reign of king Thrigum Tsanpo (Wyl. khri gum btsan po) to the formal introduction of Buddhism under the king Srongtsan Gampo, and the third stage from king Srongtsan's time down to the time of Tsong Khapa", *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 879

⁷ Snellgrove, David and Richardson, Hugh, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boulder: Prajna Press, pp. 129-131.

⁸ This reformed Buddhist school of Tibet was founded by Dromtonpa Gyalwe Jungnas (Wyl. 'brom ston pa rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas), the chief disciple of Atīśa.

⁹ Sarat Chandra Das describes Bon in his *Tibetan-English Dictionary* as "The principal school of Tantrik Lamaism originating from Naro Panchen of Magadha and alleged by

and Sakyapa. David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson state: “There were no essential differences in doctrine between all these various orders. Their main differences consisted in their traditional attachments to different lines of teachers and particular tutelary divinities”.¹⁰

The history of the Khön family who later initiated the Sakya tradition, traces back to the three divine brothers called Chiring (Wyl. *spyi ring*), Yuring (Wyl. *gyu ring*) and Yusu (Wyl. *gyu su*) who descended from the clear light heaven (Wyl. *'od gsal lha'i yul*) on the land of upper Ngari (Wyl. *mnga' ris stod*) in Tibet to benefit living beings on earth. According to the *sa skya'i gdung rabs ngo mtshar bang mdzod*, the youngest brother, Yusu had four sons and his older brother Yuring had seven sons. Two of the three brothers returned to the heaven accompanied by the six sons of Yuring. However, the youngest Mazang Chije (Wyl. *ma bzang spyi rje*) remained in this world and he had a son called Pawo tag (Wyl. *dpa' bo stag*). The son of the latter was known as Lutsa Tagpo Öchen (Wyl. *klu tsha stag po 'od chen*) and his son was called Yapang Kye (Wyl. *g.ya' spang skyes*). For five generations this lineage was known as Lharig (Wyl. *lha rigs*) as they came down from the clear light heaven (Wyl. *'od gsal lha'i yul*). However, Yapang Kye (Wyl. *g.ya' spang skyes*) subdued the bloodless vampire¹¹ (Wyl. *srin po khrag med*) chief called Skyareng (Wyl. *srin po skya rengs khrag med*) and married his wife Yadum Silima (Wyl. *gya' drum si li ma*). She gave birth to a son and as he was born during the battle between gods and demons he was named as Khön Barkye (Wyl. *'khon bar skyes*).¹² Since they developed enmity with Yakṣas (demons) they came to be known as Khön (enmity). With the birth of Khön Barkye the name of this lineage was changed from “Lharig” to “Khön”.

The continuation of Khön lineage, specially from Khön Palpoche (Wyl. *'khon dpal po che*) to Khön Konchog Gyalpo (Wyl. *'khon dkon mchog rgyal po*) followed the esoteric teachings of Nyingma (Wyl. *mnying ma*) tradition and as a result they became well-versed in tantric teachings and many of them realized the meditational deities of Mahāyoga Tantra, known as *Śrīvisuddha* (Wyl. *dpal yang dag*) and *Vajra Kīla* (Wyl. *rdo rje phur pa*).¹³

Milarepa to have been introduced by Marpa Lotsawa in Tibet in the beginning of the 11th century A.D.”, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 61

¹⁰ *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boulder: Prajna Press, p. 139.

¹¹ Vampires are figuring mostly in Tibetan mythology. They suck blood and exist on dead bodies. Actually Lanka was considered to be their chief abode but they also used to live in Tibet and Mongolia.

¹² *sa-skya'i gdung-rabs ngo-mtshar bang-mdzod* (Geneological History of Sakya Lineage), Ngawang Kunga Sonam (Wyl. *ngag-dbang kun-dga' bsod-nams*), Beijing: People's Press, 1986, pp. 9-10

¹³ *Śrīvisuddha* and *Vajra Kīla* belong to the Mahāyoga Tantra class and meditational practices relating to these deities were introduced into Tibet in the eighth century by Padmasambhava and since this time they become an important part of the spiritual practice of the Nyingma tradition.

When we study the history of Tibet, we are aware of the fact that Khön family was very influential in Tibetan society both spiritually and politically. Khön Palpoche was a minister of King Thrisong Deutsan and his son Khön Lui Wangpo Srungba (Skt. Nagendrarakṣita, Wyl. 'khon klu'i dbang po srung ba) was one of the first seven monks in all over Tibet who had received ordination from Śāntarakṣita in Samye Monastery. In eleventh century the two brothers-Sherab Tshultim (Wyl. shes rab tshul khrim) and Khön Konchog Gyalpo realized that the practice of old esoteric teachings of Nyingma tradition had become vague and corrupted when the later saw one day a public dance in a street by the Lamas wearing masks of certain deities on their faces and carrying various weapons in their hands. Initially the tantric dances (Wyl' cham) were shown only to the initiated persons in secret. Later, when the followers of Nyingmapa started to bring this to public show, the Khön brothers strongly protested thinking that the Nyingma followers were humiliating the tantric dances. However, later on Sakyapa also began to perform the dance in public.

Khön Sherab Tshultim encouraged his younger brother to go to Drogmi Lotsawa Sakya Yeshe (Wyl. 'brog mi lo tswa ba sa skya ye shes, 992-1074 C.E.) at Mangkhar (Wyl. mang mkhar) to study the new esoteric doctrine (Wyl. gsang sngags gsar ma).¹⁴ They also thought it was necessary to preserve the ritual objects related to the old teachings of Nyingma tradition of his elder brother Khön Konchog Gyalpo went to Drogmi Lotsawa Sakya Yeshe and became well versed in both theory and practice of the new tantric doctrine which was becoming very popular in Tibet during the eleven century. It is also said that Drogmi Lotsawa did not accept him as student at first sight and he had to visit another teacher called Lama Namkhaupa (Wyl. bla ma gnam kha'u pa). However, later, Drogmi Lotsawa agreed to accept him as his disciple and bestowed his blessing on him. Besides these two teachers, he followed several other masters like Mal Lotsawa (Wyl. mal lo tswa va), Bari Lotsawa (Wyl. ba ri lo tswa va), Ma Lotsawa (Wyl. rma lo tswa va), Puhrang Lotsawa (Wyl. pu hrang lo tswa va) etc. and later, he himself became the master of all tantric teachings. According to the history of Sakya tradition he built a monument dedicated to his father and brother as a tribute at a place called Zhangyul Jagshong (Wyl. zhang yul 'jag gshong). Then he lived for some years in the temple that he had built at Dawo Lungpa (Wyl. bra bo lung pa) and later on this temple came to be known as *sa skya 'gog po* (The ruined Sakya). While

¹⁴ The term *gsar ma* (Lit. New) generally signifies the reformed or new school of Tibetan Buddhism. It is described in the History of Sakya Tradition translated by Jennifer Scott as “the New dissemination of the tantras began in the tenth century when Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (Wyl. lo tswa ba rin chen bzang po, 958-1051 C.E.) and other scholars devised new cannons of translation technique, emphasizing etymological precision in place of the somewhat free style of the ‘old’ translation (Wyl. rnying ma) school founded by Guru Padmasambhava, King Thrisong Deutsan and Abbot Śāntarakṣita. The Sakya, Kagyü and Kadam traditions, all three of which arose in eleventh century focused upon the new tantric cycles introduced at that time from India and translated according to the new technique”.

residing there Khön Konchog Gyalpo decided to go on a picnic with his disciples and while passing through the mountain in shape of a sleeping elephant called Ponpori (Wyl. dpon po ri), he saw the “grey earth”. He was attracted by the auspicious sight of an oily place beside which a stream runs down. When he saw this auspicious sign, he thought it to be the perfect place for establishing a monastery. First of all he asked for permission from the community of monks, seven villages and specially from Gurawa (Wyl. gu ra ba) clan of Zhang Zhung (Wyl. zhang gzhung).¹⁵ His proposal was faithfully accepted by all without any payment but in order to refrain from conflict and inconvenience in future, he gave them a white mare (Wyl. rgod ma dkar mo), a woman’s coat (Wyl. mo gos) and a necklace made of jewels (Wyl. nor bu’i phreng ba).

In the water buffalo year of the first cycle (1073 C.E.), Khön Konchog Gyalpo founded the monastery which became the nucleus of Sakya tradition in Tibet. The Sakya tradition originated with the establishment of this monastery at the place called Sakya which means “grey earth” in central Tibet. Since then the followers of this tradition have been known as Sakyapa (Wyl. sa skya pa). Concerning this monastery there are several predictions made by the Buddha, Padmasambhava and Atīśa. Padmasambhava prophesied in *mkha’ ’gro snying rgyud* about the coming of the emanations of Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi in future. While travelling from India to Tibet Atīśa also happened to reach the mountain called *Ponpori* and there he saw two black wild yaks grazing on the slopes of the mountain. By seeing them he prophesied that this place will witness two manifestations of Mahākāla who will be the protectors of Buddhism in future. There he also observed the syllable *Ḥri*, *Hūm* and Seven *Dhī* on a near mountain and he made many offerings and worshipped the “grey earth”. When he was asked by his attendants about the reason for making offerings to the mountain, he foretold that one emanation of Avalokiteśvara, seven incarnate masters of Mañjuśrī and one incarnate master of Vajrapāṇi will appear herein to benefit all living beings. Accordingly, these prophesies were fulfilled when Sakya tradition had a splendid success in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Tibet for the endeavours of the five superior masters. During this period the Sakya tradition enjoyed grand success and fame both spiritually and politically. The way of life of the people in Tibet at that time was moulded by the Sakya tradition and the five superior masters became the spiritual teachers

¹⁵ According to C.W. Cassinelli and Robert B. Ekvall, “Gurawa clan of Zhang Zhung were non-Tibetan people who were eventually absorbed by the Tibetans” Cassinelli, C.W. and Ekvail, Robert B., *A Tibetan Principality: The Political System of Sa sKya*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969, p.12. However, Sarat Chandra Das pointed out in his Tibetan English Dictionary that Zhang Zhung was a province of Guge in Western Tibet. He says, “It is comprised the district bordering to the west of Lake Mansarowar where the Bon religion was first promulgated and where Shenrab Miwo, its founder was born. It is therefore called Zhang Zhung, The Land of the Bon (Wyl. zhang zhung bon yul)” *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, 1989, p. 1066.

of the people as well as the political leaders of Tibet. Khön Konchog Gyalpo gave up the vows of the monk hood when he was forty years of age and got married.

The five exalted masters (Wyl. gong ma lnga) hold a special place in the annals of the Sakya tradition. During the first Gongma, Sachen Künga Nyingpo (Wyl. sa chen kun dga' snying po, 1092-1172 C.E.), the sakya school was firmly established as a distinct tradition with a philosophical system of its own. Lobpon Sonam Tsemo (Wyl. slob dpon bsod nams rtse mo, 1142-1172 C.E.) and Jetsun Dagpa Gyaltsan (Wyl. rje btsun grags pa rgyal mtshan, 1147-1216 C.E.) succeeded him as the second and third 'Exalted Ones' of the Sakya tradition, and greatly enhanced the tradition through their writings, meditation and their exemplification of practicing the Dharma. The most famous of all was the fourth superior master Sakya Paṇḍita Künga Gyaltsan (Wyl. sa skya paNDita kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251 C.E.). The fame of his knowledge and scholasticism spread as far as Mongolia and China, from where he received invitations from imperial courts. The history of Sakya tradition would not be complete without mentioning his writings and activities, especially considering the tremendous influence he exerted on Buddhism in countries like Tibet, China and Mongolia. For the traditional Buddhist monk-scholars in this region, Sakya Paṇḍita is one of the most influential key figures.

His nephew, Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (Wyl. 'gro mgon chos rgyal 'phags pa, 1235-1280 C.E.), succeeded him as the fifth superior master of the Sakya tradition. During his time the Sakya tradition touched its political zenith, with the introduction of Buddhism into China and Mongolia. The Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, in devotion, offered the thirteen myriarchies of Tibet to Drogön Chögyal Phagpa and thus for the first time Tibet was united under a joint spiritual and political authority. These five masters popularly known to the follower of Tibetan Buddhism as Jetsun Gongma Nga are regarded as the real founders of the Sakya tradition. They hold a special place in the annals of the Sakya tradition. The importance of their influence on the evolution of Tibetan literature cannot be neglected. Numerous Indian sūtras and tantric teachings were introduced into the spiritual life of Tibet. The most famous of these are:

Hevajra tantras whose transmission originated with the Mahāsiddha Virūpa
Vajrakīla tantras of Padmasambhava
Vajrayoginī precepts of Nāropa
Guhyasamāja tantra teachings of Nāgārjuna
Mahākāla precepts of Vararuci.

The distinct philosophical system taught by the Sakya tradition is known as the "Path and Fruit" (Wyl. lam 'bras; Skt. mārga phala), and it based on the Hevajra tantra. These instructions are the heart of the Sakya tradition having originated with the Mahāsiddha Virūpa who received the Hevajra empowerments directly from Vajra Nairātma, the consort of Hevajra. It was brought to Tibet by the yogīn Gayādhara, the master of Drogmi lotsawa (Wyl. 'brog mi lo tsa wa, 992-1074 C.E.), the translator. "The philosophical viewpoint expressed in the Path and its Fruit is the inseparability of *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*. According

to this, an individual cannot attain *nirvāṇa* or peace by abandoning *samsāra* or cyclic existence, because the mind is the root of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. When obscured, it takes the form of *samsāra* and when freed of obscurations it is *nirvāṇa*. Hence, the reality is that a person must strive through meditation to realize their inseparability”.¹⁶

One good indication is that Sakya tradition has a close relationship with the other three major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, Sakya tradition also follows the Vajrakīla lineage which originated from Padmasambhava, the fountain head of the Nyingma (Wyl. rnying ma) school. Also Kagyü and the Sakya traditions originated almost at the same time, and both received important lineage from Nāropa. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug (Wyl. dge lugs) school, studied under the Sakya Lama Rendawa.

Furthermore, a number of sub-schools appeared within the main Sakya tradition. Ngorchen Künga Zangpo (Wyl. ngor chen kun dga' bzang po, 1382-1457 C.E.) and successive masters had come to be known as the Ngorpa lineage, whereas, the lineages of Tsharchen Losel Gyatsho (Wyl. tshar chen lo gsal rgya mtsho, 1502-1556 C.E.) came to be known as Tsharpa lineage. And the lineage of Thumi Künga Namgyal (Wyl. thu mi kun dga' nam rgyal, 1432-1496 C.E.) or Gongkar Dorjedenpa¹⁷ came to be known as the Zongpa lineage (Wyl. dzong pa). Thus, the Sakya tradition of the Khön lineage stands for the main stem of a tree of which the Ngorpa, Tsharpa and Dzungpa traditions are the branches. These will be studied later as the four main schools (Wyl. sa ngor tshar dzong bzhi) in Sakya tradition. Succession to the position of Sakya Thrichen, head of the Sakya tradition, has been hereditary since the time of Khön Konchog Gyalpo and recently alternates between the two palaces¹⁸.

¹⁶ A site maintained and updated by the office of Tibet, the official agency of H.H. the Dalai Lama in London.

Last updated: 10-Nov-2010 (<http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/Sakya.html>)

¹⁷ The Dzungpa Tradition is a branch of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery of Gongkar Dorje Dhen was founded in 1464 by saint and scholar, Thumi Kunga Namgyal (1432-1496) also known as Gongkar Dorje mipham denpa. (<http://www.dzungpa.com/History.html>)

¹⁸ The two palaces are: Dolma Phodang and Phuntshog Phodang.