

A brief History of the Karmapa & Shamarpa Lineages

by Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche.

The Karma Kagyupa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism has enjoyed a distinguished 900-year history that is intertwined at various points with the Gelugpa School to which the Dalai Lama belongs. Central to the transmission of the Kagyupa Lineage are the alternating reincarnations of the Karmapa and the Shamarpa. This brief history discusses some of the highlights of this cycle and its points of intersection with the Gelugpa School and the Dalai Lama.

The 1st Karmapa, *Dusum Khyenpa* (1110-1193), founded the Karma Kagyupa Lineage. The Sakya School developed about the same time, but before his lifetime, the Nyingmapa Tradition (the Old School) and *Atisha* School (*Kadam*) had already taken root in Tibet. The Gelugpa School was not founded until the time of *Tsonkapa* (1357-1413) who coincided with the 5th Karmapa. The 1st Dalai Lama *Gendun Drub* did not appear until the 15th century during the lifetime of the 6th Karmapa (1416-1453).

Before he died, the 1st Karmapa predicted his own reincarnation as the 2nd Karmapa, *Karma Pakshi* (1206-1283). With this prediction, the 1st Karmapa started the lineage system of incarnate lamas in Tibet, and Karma Pakshi predicted in his diary that he would be reborn as *two lamas*. They would reincarnate one after the other, alternately as guru and disciple, in order to preserve and continue his lineage without interruption.

In the same year (1283) the 2nd Karmapa passed away, *Drakpa Sengye*, who later became known as the 1st Shamarpa, was born. In the following year the 3rd Karmapa (1284-1339) was born and at the age of eight confirmed himself as the Karmapa. Drakpa Sengye was the chief disciple of the 3rd Karmapa who confirmed him as the second emanation of the 2nd Karmapa. Thus, in Tibetan Buddhism, the 1st Shamarpa was the second incarnate lama. Because his name means "red hat" (*sha: hat; mar: red*), he is sometimes called the Red Hat Lama, whereas the Karmapa is referred to as the Black Hat Lama, but not for reasons having to do with his name.

Since then the successive Karmapas and Shamarpas have jointly worked to spread the Dharma. Indeed, as a result of their leadership, the Karma Kagyu Lineage became the most prominent school of Tibetan Buddhism until the time of the 10th Karmapa, *Choying Dorje* (1604-1674), when it was repressed and suffered a long decline. During the centuries of decline, the succeeding reborn Karmapas and Shamarpas brought about brief revivals of the Karma Kagyu Lineage and transmitted its teachings and traditions.

Before the 5th Dalai Lama (1617-1682), [the royal followers of] the Kagyupa Lineage ruled Tibet. Two events in the 1630's, however, precipitated the end

of [the royal followers of] the Karma Kagyu Lineage's political power and the decline of its religious influence. First, the death of the 6th Shamarpa (1584-1630) whom the 5th Dalai Lama and many others in Tibet respected weakened the Lineage's prestige. Then in 1639 with the assistance Mongol troops invited into Tibet from Sinjiang by the 5th Dalai Lama, the Kagyupa ruling government was defeated. The 10th Karmapa and his followers were also attacked, but he managed to escape by flying into the sky. For the next forty years, penniless and with the only one attendant, the 10th Karmapa wandered in exile from northeastern India to Yunnan in China.

Without its two leaders, the Karma Kagyu Lineage was defenseless in Tibet. Twenty-seven monasteries belonging to the Karmapa and twenty monasteries of the Shamarpa were forcibly converted to the Gelugpa School. Only the *Tsurphu* and *Yangpachen* monasteries, the seats of the Karmapas and Shamarpas respectively, and a few others of lesser importance were allowed to continue practicing the Karma Kagyu tradition. However, they existed under harsh restrictions, especially Tsurphu and Yangpachen which were near Lhasa and thus under the government's careful watch.

The early 18th century saw a brief revival of the Karma Kagyupa Lineage due to the constant Dharma activities of the 12th Karmapa, *Jangchub Dorje* (1703-1732), and the 8th Shamarpa, *Chokyi Thondrub* (1695-1732). They traveled together throughout Tibet and prevented the Lineage from slipping into extinction.

During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the Dalai Lamas enjoyed the patronage of the Ch'ing Dynasty emperors of China, some of whom were under the tutelage of a series of reincarnated Gelugpa lamas representing the Dalai Lama in Beijing. Nevertheless, the fame of the 12th Karmapa and the 8th Shamarpa was so great during the reign of Emperor Yung Cheng that he decided to invite them to his court in 1732. Unfortunately, one day after their arrival in Beijing, they both died of smallpox. In their autobiographies, the two Gelugpa Hutogato* lamas *Kyangkya* and *Thudkan* explained the deaths of Karmapa and Shamarpa as follows:

The emperor had invited the Karmapa and the Shamarpa to Beijing. We were of the opinion that the emperor would follow them and therefore that Gelugpa power would be greatly affected. We consequently started to do black-magic pujas day and night. Within a day of their arrival in Beijing, both of them died from smallpox. So it can be said that our black magic succeeded.

After the death of the 12th Karmapa and the 8th Shamarpa, the Karma Kagyupa Lineage suffered another period of decline in central Tibet. Another complicated series of developments explained below also contributed to this decline.

During the time of the 13th Karmapa, *Dudul Dorje (1733-1797)*, in the reign of the Chinese Emperor *Ch'ien Lung*, the powerful 6th Panchen Lama, *Palden Yeshe*, and the 10th Shamarpa, *Chodrub Gyaltsso (1742-1792)*, were brothers. Because of his kinship with the Panchen Lama, who after the Dalai Lama was the second highest lama in the Gelugpa School, the 10th Shamarpa hoped that the Tibetan government would reinstate his monasteries that had been forcibly converted to the Gelugpa sect in the preceding century. Before this could happen the Panchen Lama died of smallpox in Beijing where he had been invited by the emperor.

Out of deep respect for the Panchen Lama who was his teacher, the emperor offered a large quantity of gold coins to the Panchen Lamas brothers and sisters. However, the Drungpa Hutogatu of Tashi Lungpo Monastery, which was the seat of the Panchen Lama did not give the 10th Shamarpa his fair share. When the administration of the Yangpachen Monastery complained, Drungpa Hutogatu replied that all the gold belonged to the Tashi Lungpo Monastery. He also slandered the 10th Shamarpa, claiming that he had plotted a rebellion against the Tibetan government in order to regain his monasteries. As a result, the government, which was under the power of two regents in the absence of the Dalai Lama, became hostile to the Shamarpa. In 1784 he fled Tibet for the safety of neighboring Nepal.

In the late 18th century, counterfeit Nepalese currency was so rampant in Tibet that it even caused high inflation in Nepal itself. When the 10th Shamarpa sought refuge in Nepal, the Nepalese King *Bahadur Shah* thought he could take advantage of this and use the Shamarpa to negotiate a solution to the currency problem with the Tibetan government. The negotiations failed, and the Tibetan delegation that had come to Nepal was taken prisoner. King Bahadur dispatched his troops to Tibet where they captured much territory. The Chinese sent troops to repel the invading Nepalese, and a peace was finally negotiated in 1792. The Tibetan government blamed the Shamarpa for the political and military debacle and in retaliation banned the enthronement of reincarnated Shamarpas and confiscated the Yangpachen Monastery, converting it to Gelugpa.

In 1792 the 10th Shamarpa died of jaundice , but rumors were rife that he committed suicide by poison. A Tibetan minister named Gazhi Dhoringpa, whom the Nepalese troops had earlier taken prisoner, wrote:

I was released after the peace was settled. The Shamarpa had died, and I was taken to see his funeral. I did not respect this Shamarpa. His corpse even smelled so I believed he actually committed suicide. But during his cremation, I saw with my own eyes five arching rainbows joined together in the shape of a dome right above the crematory at Bodhanath in Kathmandu.

In spite of the official ban against the enthronement and official recognition of the Shamarpa, Shamarpas continued to be reborn as bodhisattvas. Hence, the 11th Shamarpa, *Chowang Rinpoche* of Tsurphu monastery and the lineage holder of the Mahakala Tantra, was reborn as the brother of the 14th

Karmapa (1797-ca. 1845) who kept his recognition secret. The 11th Shamarpa transmitted the entire Mahakala Tantra to the 15th Karmapa, *Khachab Dorje* (1871-1922). The 12th Shamarpa took rebirth as the son of the 15th Karmapa. He was a monk first, then practiced as a yogi with consort, but he frequently was able to visit and teach at the Yangpachen Monastery where he was highly respected. The 13th Shamarpa (1949-1951) was recognized by the 16th Karmapa, *Ranjung Rigpe Dorje* (1924-1981) in Tsurphu but lived less than two years and was never officially enthroned.



Born in 1952, *Mipham Chokyi Lodro* is the current and 14th Shamarpa. He is the nephew of the 16th Karmapa. He was born in Derge in Eastern Tibet and brought to Tsurphu Monastery at the age of three. In 1956 the 16th Karmapa invited the current Dalai Lama to the Tsurphu Monastery and requested him to

revoke the ban against the Shamarpas. Although the Dalai Lama agreed, he advised the Karmapa first to perform the initial enthronement ceremony of the 14th Shamarpa at Tsurphu so that the Tibetan government could then publicly announce the lifting of the ban. Afterwards, the main enthronement was to be held at Yangpachen Monastery. The initial enthronement ceremony was held in 1957 at the Tsurphu Monastery, but before the government could announce the revocation of the ban, the Dalai Lama, Karmapa and Shamarpa had to flee Tibet for sanctuary in India.

Although Tibet was lost, as a courtesy to the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa again requested him to announce the lifting of the ban against Shamarpas. In 1963 the Dalai Lama complied with a written letter to this effect. In the following year, the main official enthronement of the 14th Shamarpa took place at the Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim in the presence of delegations from the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism and from both the Indian and Sikkimese governments.

Constructions of the Rumtek Monastery began soon after the 16th Karmapa arrived in Sikkim in 1959. It served as his seat outside Tibet and quickly became well known throughout the Himalayan region because of the Himalayan peoples' devotion to the Karmapa. In contrast to the Karmapa, most other lamas who fled from China found themselves in a weak position.

In an effort to unify the Tibetan exiles and thereby strengthen their opposition against the Chinese government, the Dalai Lama and his brother *Thondrup* in 1962 formulated and began to implement a policy of political, ethnic, and spiritual unity for all Tibetan exiles. Lamas belonging to the three lineages outside the Gelugpa School supported the political aspect of this policy but were quite suspicious of its call for spiritual unity. They feared this would end the traditional independence of their lineages. Therefore, Nyingma and Kagyu lamas encouraged the Karmapa to lead a resistance to the Tibetan Government in Exile's policy for spiritual unity.

For almost two decades the 16th Karmapa actively opposed the Dalai Lama's spiritual unification policy until his death. This put extreme pressure on the Dalai Lama because over 13 large Tibetan Resettlements Centres in the Himalayan region unanimously supported the Karmapa. In addition, all the high Nyingma and Kagyu lamas - especially Situ, Gyaltsab, Trungpa, Dhazang , Sachu, Kalu, Thrangu, Bokar and Tenga Rinpoches - followed the Karmapa without question because of his leadership and of the Karma Kagyu and because generations of repression of the Karma Kagyu by the Dalai Lama's government left the Karma Kagyu disgusted with it.

The 16th Karmapa died in the United States in 1981 during one of his several trips to the West to spread the Dharma. Shortly thereafter his General Secretary *Dhamcho Yongdu* requested that four Rinpoches, including the 14th Shamarpa, form a committee of regents charged with finding the reincarnation of the 17th Karmapa and spreading the teachings of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Because the committee became politicized due to the misuse of power by some of the regents, in 1984 the 14th Shamarpa proposed that the regents be dissolved. As the only one legitimate able to recognize the reincarnated Karmapa, according to religious practice since the early years of the Karma Kagyupa Lineage, the 14th Shamarpa independently pursued the search. However, this process became contentious as a result of a competing claim of recognition. In 1991 at the inauguration of a monastery in Pokhara, Nepal, the 14th Shamarpa indicated, without revealing the actual identity, that the 17th Karmapa had been identified in Tibet and would be called *Thaye Dorje*.

Ultimately, the 14th Shamarpa confirmed the reincarnated Karmapa to be the son of the 3rd Mipham Rinpoche of the Nyingma School; he was born in Lhasa, Tibet in 1983. He and his family escaped from Tibet in 1994. Immediately thereafter, the young Karmapa went to New Delhi where he was publicly recognized by the 14th Shamarpa in a welcome ceremony. Since that time he has resided in India where he has received Dharma instruction and undergone training. In November 1996, he formally joined the monkhood by receiving refuge vows from Buddha in a ceremony at the Bodh Gaya Temple. At this time he was given the name Trinlay (*meaning, Buddha activity*) Thaye (*limitless*) Dorje (*unchanging*).

POSTSCRIPT:

The 17th Karmapa Thaye Dorje has since married Rinchen Yangzom and given up his monks vows. He now lives most of the time in a rather small house in Kalimpong in the North West of West Bengal, right on the foothills of the Himalayas, South of Sikkim and West of Bhutan's South West border.

Thaye Dorje and his wife has been blessed with a son, that they call Thugsey. Everything indicate that Thugsey is the new Tulku of Shamarpa. Read about it here:

www.tilogaard.dk/html/shamarpagamle_nyheder_2019.html

* *Hutogatu* is an official title bestowed by the Ch'ing Dynasty emperors on certain Gelugpa lamas in Beijing.

