

Brief History of Dzogchen

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Introduction

Dzogchen (*rdzogs-chen*), the great completeness, is a Mahayana system of practice leading to enlightenment and involves a view of reality, way of meditating, and way of behaving (*lta-sgom-spyod gsum*). It is found earliest in the Nyingma and Bon (pre-Buddhist) traditions.

Bon, according to its own description, was founded in Tazig (*sTag-gzig*), an Iranian cultural area of Central Asia, by Shenrab Miwo (*gShen-rab mi-bo*) and was brought to Zhang-zhung (Western Tibet) in the eleventh century BCE. There is no way to validate this scientifically. Buddha lived in the sixth century BCE in India.

The Introduction of Pre-Nyingma Buddhism and Zhang-zhung Rites to Central Tibet

Zhang-zhung was conquered by Yarlung (Central Tibet) in 645 CE. The Yarlung Emperor Songtsen-gampo (*Srong-btsan sgam-po*) had wives not only from the Chinese and Nepali royal families (both of whom brought a few Buddhist texts and statues), but also from the royal family of Zhang-zhung. The court adopted Zhang-zhung (Bon) burial rituals and animal sacrifice, although Bon says that animal sacrifice was native to Tibet, not a Bon custom. The Emperor built thirteen Buddhist temples around Tibet and Bhutan, but did not found any monasteries.

This pre-Nyingma phase of Buddhism in Central Tibet did not have dzogchen teachings. In fact, it is difficult to ascertain what level of Buddhist teachings and practice were introduced. It was undoubtedly very limited, as would have been the case with the Zhang-zhung rites.

Guru Rinpoche and the Introduction of Nyingma Dzogchen

The next major figure, Emperor Tri Songdetsen (*Khri Srong sde-btsan*), was cautious of the Chinese and paranoid of Zhang-zhung, most likely because his pro-Chinese father had been assassinated by the xenophobic, conservative Zhang-zhung political faction in the imperial court. In 761, he invited the Indian Buddhist abbot Shantarakshita to Tibet. There was a smallpox epidemic. The Zhang-zhung faction in court blamed Shantarakshita and deported him from the land. On the abbot's advice, the Emperor then invited Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) from Swat (northwestern Pakistan), who drove out the demons who had caused the smallpox. The Emperor then reinvited Shantarakshita.

Guru Rinpoche left in 774, without having completed the full transmission of dzogchen. Seeing that the times were not ripe, he buried some texts as buried treasure texts (*gter-ma*,

"terma"). They were exclusively texts on dzogchen.

Samyay Monastery and the Bonpo Exile

Samyay Monastery (*bSam-yas*) (the first monastery in Tibet with the first seven Tibetan monks) was completed shortly afterwards. Chinese from the Chan (Jap. *Zen*) tradition, Indian, and Zhang-zhung translators worked together there. Buddhism became the state religion in 779, probably because Emperor Tri Songdetsen needed an alternative culture to Zhang-zhung for unifying the country. The Emperor appointed three families to support each monk.

Tibet conquered Dunhuang (Tunhuang, a Buddhist oasis on the Silk Route northwest of Tibet) from China in 781. Yet, the Chinese emperor sent two Chinese monks to Samyay every other year from 781, to maintain his influence.

Shantarakshita died in 783, warning of trouble from the Chinese, and advised inviting his disciple Kamalashila to debate them, which the Tibetans did.

The next year, in 784, a grand persecution and exile of the Bonpos (followers of Bon) took place. Most went to Gilgit (northern Pakistan) or Yunnan (southwestern China). According to the traditional Bon account, Zhang-zhung Drenpa-namka (*Dran-pa nam-mkha'*) buried the Bon texts (all categories, not just dzogchen) at this time for safekeeping.

Historical and political analysis reveals that the reason for the exile was suspicion that the xenophobic conservative Zhang-zhung political faction might assassinate the Emperor for being pro-Indian, as they had done to his father. Moreover, the state kept the Bon burial rituals and sacrifices. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that it was a persecution of the Zhang-zhung political faction, not a persecution of the Bon religion.

For this reason, several Western scholars assert that the term *Bonpo* (followers of Bon) in this period had primarily a political rather than religious reference. It was used for the Zhang-zhung political faction at the court and their followers, rather than for the spiritual leaders who performed the Zhang-zhung religious rites at the court and their followers.

Vairochana, Vimalamitra, and the Samyay Debate

Emperor Tri Songdetsen sent Vairochana, one of the seven original Tibetan monks from Samyay, to India for more texts. He brought back both dzogchen and Buddhist medicine tantras, and invited the Indian dzogchen master Vimalamitra, who brought more texts.

The Samyay debate was in 792-794, between Indian and Chinese Buddhism. The Indian side, led by Kamalashila, won; the Chinese, led by Hoshang Mahayana (Chinese for "Mahayana monk"), were expelled from Tibet. The Tibetans officially adopted Indian Buddhism and Indian Buddhist medicine, although they kept some Chinese medicine influences combined with it.

Shortly afterwards, the Tibetan Vairochana was exiled after Indian abbots slandered him for revealing too much, so he buried more dzogchen texts, as did the Indian Vimalamitra.

The Three Divisions of Nyingma Treasure Texts

From the treasure texts buried by Vairochana and Vimalamitra and those buried earlier by Guru Rinpoche, the dzogchen teachings were later divided into three divisions.

1. *semdey* (*sems-sde*, mind division), emphasizing pure awareness (*rig-pa*) as the basis for all (*kun-gzhi*, Skt. *alaya*),
2. *longdey* (*klong-sde*, open space division), emphasizing the cognitive open space aspect (*klong*) of pure awareness as the basis for all,
3. *menngag-dey* (*man-ngag sde*, quintessence teachings division), also called *nyingtig* (*snying-thig*, heart essence division), emphasizing pure awareness being primally pure (*ka-dag*).

The first two derive from the treasure texts buried by the Tibetan monk Vairochana and are not practiced much today. The mind division comes from Indian texts that Vairochana translated; the open space division from his oral teachings. The quintessence teachings division has two sections from the two Indian teachers, one from Guru Rinpoche: *Kadro Nyingtig* (*mKha'-'gro snying-thig*, *Dakini Heart Essence Teachings*) and one from Vimalamitra: *Vima Nyingtig* (*Bi-ma snying-thig*, *Vimalamitra's Heart Essence Teachings*).

The Persecution of Buddhism

Emperor Relpachen (*Ral-pa-can*) (a Buddhist fanatic), in 821, after signing a peace treaty with China (complete with animal sacrifice) made the Samyay abbot the head of the State Council. He decreed that each monk in Tibet be supported by seven families. He also formed a council to authorize terms to be included in a large Sanskrit-Tibetan compendium of translation terms he commissioned, *Mahavyutpatti* (*Bye-brag-tu rtogs-pa chen-po*, *Grand [Lexicon] for Understanding Specific [Terms.]*) No tantra terms were included. The Emperor and his council decided what was translated and allowed practice of only the first two classes of tantra.

Most likely due to the excesses of Emperor Relpachen, his successor Emperor Langdarma (*gLang-dar-ma*) closed monasteries and persecuted monks from 836-842. The Buddhist libraries and the *ngagpa* (*sngags-pa*, tantric) lay tradition, however, were preserved.

The first buried Bon treasure texts were recovered by accident at Samyay in 913.

The New Transmission Schools

Atisha was sent for from India in late tenth century, to clear up misunderstandings of Buddhism, especially about tantra, concerning sex and sacrifices. New translations were made from Sanskrit, starting with the work of Rinchen-zangpo (*Rin-chen bzang-po*).

During the early eleventh century, the Kadam (later became Gelug), Sakya, and Kagyu traditions developed as the Sarma (*gSar-ma*, New Transmission, New Tantra) Schools. In contrast, Nyingma is the Old Transmission or Old Tantra School.

Bon also revived at this time, but now its contents are very Buddhist. Bon texts were codified in 1017 - mostly non-dzogchen texts in the main categories of the Buddhist literature. Later in the eleventh century, Nyingma and more Bon dzogchen texts were found, often by the same

person.

The Southern and Northern Treasure Text Lineages

In first half of fourteenth century, the Sakya master Buton (*Bu-ston Rin-chen grub*) compiled the *Zhalu Manuscript*, which was the forerunner of the *Kangyur* (*bKa'-'gyur*, the words of the Buddha). He did not include any dzogchen materials in it, or any of the Old Translation Period translations of the tantras.

Buton's contemporary, Longchenpa (*Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa Dri-med 'od-zer*) put together *Kadro* and *Vima Nyingtig* into *Zabmo Nyingtig* (*Zab-mo snying-thig*, *The Profound Heart Essence Teachings*), and collected and organized the dzogchen texts available at his time. From him derives the Nyingma Southern Treasure Text Lineage (*lho-gter*).

Bon codified its equivalent of the *Kangyur* in the second half of fourteenth century, which includes dzogchen.

The Nyingma Northern Treasure Text Lineage (*byang-gter*) was started in the late fourteenth century by Rigdzin Godem Jey (*Rig-'dzin rGod-ldem rJe dNgos-grub rgyal-mtshan*), a descendent of the early Tibetan kings. The head of this lineage is called *Rigdzin chenpo* (*rig-'dzin chen-po*).

Compilation of the Nyingma Canon and Major Texts

In the early fifteenth century, Ratna Lingpa (*Ratna gling-pa*) compiled the *Nyingma Gyubum* (*rNying-ma rgyud-'bum*, *Lakhs of Nyingma Tantras*), the collection of all dzogchen texts and all the Old Transmission translations of tantras, expanding on Longchenpa's work.

Jigmey Lingpa (' *Jigs-med gling-pa mKhyen-brtse 'od-zer*), in the late eighteenth century, revised Longchenpa's *Zabmo Nyingtig* and made it into *Longchen Nyingtig* (*Klong-chen snying-thig*, *Longchenpa's Heart Essence Teachings*), the main Nyingma dzogchen system practiced today. His disciple, the First Dodrubchen (*rDo-grub chen 'Jigs-med 'phrin-las 'od-zer*), wrote a ritual text of preliminary practices for it, *Longchen ngondro* (*Klong-chen sngon-'gro*).

One of Jigmey Lingpa's reincarnations, Peltrul (*rDza dPal-sprul 'O-rgyan 'jigs-med dbang-po*; Patrul Rinpoche) wrote *Guideline Instructions from My Totally Excellent (Samantabhadra) Spiritual Mentor* (*Kun-bzang bla-ma'i zhal-lung*, *Perfect Words of My Excellent Teacher, Kunzang Lamey Zhellung*). This is the most elaborate Nyingma text on the equivalent of *lam-rim* (graded stages of the path) and on the preliminaries for the *Longchen Nyingtig*.

The Rimey Nonsectarian Movement

Also in the next generation after Jigmey Lingpa, of the three main founders of the Rimey (nonsectarian movement): Kongtrul (*Kong-sprul Yon-tan rgya-mtso*), Jamyang-kyentsey-wangpo (' *Jam-dbyangs mkhyen-brtse dbang-po*), and Mipam (' *Ju Mi-pham rgya-mtsho*), the latter wrote the main Nyingma commentaries to the major texts.

Chog-gyur Lingpa (*mChog-gyur bde chen gling-pa*; "Chokgyur Lingpa") was both a disciple and teacher of Kongtrul and Jamyang-kyentsey-wangpo. His terma cycle, *Chogling Tersar*

(*mchog-gling gter-gsar*; "Chokling Tersar"), is followed by both the Nyingma and Karma Kagyu schools.

Jamyang-kyentsey-wangpo and Peltrul's disciple, the Third Dodrubchen (*rDo-grub-chen 'Jigs-med bstan-pa'i nyi-ma*), wrote the clearest commentaries on dzogchen - *Dzogchen Cycles* (*rDzogs-chen skor*) and *Miscellaneous Writings on Dzogchen* (*rDzogs-chen thor-bu*) - putting dzogchen in the context of the other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. These are the commentaries that His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama strongly relies on as a source for his explanations of a unified theory of all four Tibetan traditions.

Is Dzogchen Buddhist or Bon?

Is Bon Buddhist or non-Buddhist? Both lead to enlightenment, and use the term Buddhahood. The seventh-century Indian master Dharmakirti said that if a work accords with the main themes of Buddha, it is Buddha's teaching. Thus, both Nyingma and Bon dzogchen are clearly Mahayana Buddhist teachings because both have shared features with the Mahayana sutras. Each, of course, also has its unique uncommon features. Furthermore, whether we say dzogchen is a division of tantra or beyond the divisions of sutra and tantra, Nyingma and Bon dzogchen also share features in common with the various tantra classes.

Since Nyingma and Bon both claim the origin of dzogchen and that the other copied it from them, there are three possibilities:

1. Dzogchen developed very early in Buddhism and Bon received it through the early spread of Buddhism in Iran and Central Asia, through Zhang-zhung. Thus, Bon dzogchen had a Buddhist origin, but not directly an Indian Buddhist one.
2. Bon learned of dzogchen from Guru Rinpoche at Samyay and buried it when the Zhang-zhung Bon faction went into exile in 784, mostly to Gilgit (northern Pakistan).
3. When the Zhang-zhung Bonpos went into exile to Gilgit, they learned of it there, separate from Guru Rinpoche.

It is not possible to come to a decisive conclusion about which possibility is correct.

Dzogchen in the Kagyu Traditions

Dzogchen is also found in Drugpa Kagyu, coming from its late twelfth-century founder, Tsangpa Gyaray (*gTsang-pa rGya-ras*).

The Third Karmapa (*Kar-ma Rang-byung rdo-rje*) introduced dzogchen into Karma Kagyu in the early fourteenth century and wrote the *Karma Nyingtig* (*Kar-ma snying-thig*, *Karmapa's Heart Essence Teachings*). He studied dzogchen with Kumararaja, the same dzogchen teacher as Longchenpa had. Thus, Guru Rinpoche is visualized in the Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi's heart in the Karma Pakshi practice. There is also a Karma Kagyu practice of Guru Rinpoche.

Dzogchen entered the Drigung Kagyu tradition via the treasure texts discovered by the sixteenth century masters Drigung Ratna (*rGyal-dbang Rin-chen phun-tshogs 'Bri-gung Ratna*) and the Fourth Drigung Lho Jedrung (*'Bri-gung Lho rJe-drung O-rgyan nus-ldan rdo-rje*).

Dzogchen and the Dalai Lamas

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Fifth Dalai Lama had pure visions of dzogchen. He compiled them into *Bearing the Seal of Secrecy* (*gSang-ba rgya-can*) and introduced these dzogchen practices to his Namgyal Monastery, which otherwise mostly practices Gelug.

Guru Rinpoche prophesied that if the line from the early Tibetan kings - whose descendants, the line of Rigdzin-chenpos, were the heads of the Northern Treasure Text Lineage - discontinued, it would be detrimental to Tibet. Thus, the Fifth Dalai Lama transmitted his dzogchen lineages also to the Rigdzin-chenpo of his times. Consequently, the Northern Treasure Text Lineage also practices the Fifth Dalai Lama's dzogchen teachings.

The next Rigdzin-chenpo transmitted the Fifth Dalai Lama's dzogchen teachings to Nechung Monastery, the monastery of the state oracle, Nechung (*gNas-chung*). The Nechung oracle was appointed at Samyay by Guru Rinpoche to protect Tibet. There has been a personal connection between the Dalai Lamas and the Nechung oracle since the time of the Second Dalai Lama, when he moved from Tashilhunpo Monastery to Drepung Monastery.

The Fifth Dalai Lama also appointed the throneholder of the Nyingma Mindrol-ling (Mindroling) monastery (*sMin-gling khri-can*, "Minling Trichen") the head of the Southern Treasure Text Lineage. Thus, the Fifth Dalai Lama supported both major Nyingma lineages. There has been a close connection between the line of Dalai Lamas and the Nyingma tradition ever since.

[For a schematic presentation of the major points, see: [Brief History of Dzogchen in Chart Form](#) {1}.]

Links

{1} http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/dzogchen/basic_points/history_dzogchen_chart.html