

## Tibetan Buddhist Scholastic Education

Which works shall we translate into English? The sūtras translated into Tibetan fill more than one hundred volumes and many thousands of pages. The translations of the treatises composed by Indian masters fill another two hundred volumes and many more thousands of pages. Add to that the many thousands of texts composed by Tibetans of many different lineages, temperaments, and interests. We have only the rest of our lives in which to work—not very long—what shall we translate? Sometimes we respond to the needs of practitioners; thus, Light of Berotsana undertook a translation of Jigme Lingpa's liturgy of instructions for the interior yoga of channels, winds, and vital fluids. Sometimes we know of a particular series of lectures given by a teacher whom we respect on topics of interest and importance, and we give our time to putting those instructions into English. Thus I translated Trangu Rinpoche's lectures on Kamalashīla's *Stages of Meditation in the Middle Way*<sup>1</sup> in *Essential Practice* and during the past year have been translating Khen Rinpoche Tsültrim Gyatso's lectures on the two truths, the selflessness of persons, Mind Only, and the Middle Way from Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé's<sup>2</sup> *Treasury Pervading All that is to be Known*,<sup>3</sup> which will be published in 2005 as *A Course on View*. Sometimes an esteemed teacher requests that we work on something we know to be of great value. Thus, early in 2005 I will begin working on Jamgön Mipam's<sup>4</sup> *The Lion's Roar: Empty of Other*<sup>5</sup> and his *The Lion's Roar: The Essence of the One Gone to Bliss*,<sup>6</sup> translations of which will be accompanied by Khenpo Palden Sherap's oral commentary. Sometimes our own interests meet with the centrality of particular cycles of texts and the passion of an appropriate master. Thus, my colleague Sangye Khandro's desire for further education has gone hand in glove with Khen Rinpoche Namdröl's immense learning, leading to the series of programs in India, Nepal, Oregon, Hawaii, California, and France where an able teacher is pouring out an elaborate and subtle body of knowledge passed down through many centuries of contemplative practice and rigorous scholarship focused upon the *Tantra of the Secret Essence*.<sup>7</sup> The work that Khenpo Namdröl, Sangye Khandro, and Lama Chönam have undertaken will bear fruit in translations of the tantra and the cycle of commentaries on this tantra composed by Longchenba,<sup>8</sup> Jamgön Mipam, and Jigme Tenpay Nyima.<sup>9</sup>

We could continue in this way more or less endlessly, and there would be no particular fault in our doing so. Yet something else beckons to us, for when we look further and think of how best to lay the ground for the translators, scholars, and earnest students who will come after us, we are drawn to the great Indian texts from which the curriculum of Tibet's monastic universities has been constructed. Cryptic in their terse complexity, the Indian texts beg for commentary, which can be found in the works finely woven by many centuries of Tibetan scholars. It is these commentaries that give focus to any particular path of inquiry and in tandem with the Indian texts have formed the durable center of education for all the Buddhist orders of Tibet. They deserve a new life in the literature of the Buddhadharmā now seeking a voice in the English language.

Several versions of extended and thorough instruction in this literature flourished in Tibet. Here I will describe three, which will indicate both a pattern and some alternatives. I am drawing on conversations with various Tibetan teachers about their own studies in Tibet and in India, a book published recently by a European scholar who completed a course of study typical of education in the Geluk<sup>10</sup> colleges, and my own studies in a variety of institutions.

**Sera Jay Monastic University**

At the Sera Jay monastic university, originally founded in 1419 by Jamyang Chojay,<sup>11</sup> a follower of Tsong-ka-pa,<sup>12</sup> and now flourishing in exile in southern India, we find a twelve- to twenty-year curriculum oriented by five texts summarizing the tradition of the Buddha's sūtras. The course of study begins with an introduction to the vocabulary and style of the principal texts. This is followed by an analysis of cognition describing the ways in which various types of consciousnesses apprehend their objects with varying degrees of accuracy, and a presentation of the process of reasoning<sup>13</sup> and the varieties of correct and incorrect signs<sup>14</sup> that will be used throughout one's education. These preliminaries equip the student to dig into the challenging texts that form the core of the curriculum.

For the next six to ten years, a student at Sera Jay will study Maitreya's *Ornament for Clear Realization*,<sup>15</sup> Chandrakīrti's *Entrance to the Middle Way*,<sup>16</sup> and Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on (Dignāga's) "Compilation of Valid Cognition."*<sup>17</sup> Maitreya's *Ornament* describes the paths that are followed by various types of practitioners—hearers,<sup>18</sup> solitary realizers,<sup>19</sup> and bodhisattvas<sup>20</sup>—as well as the fruits they achieve. Chandrakīrti's *Entrance* portrays the journey of a bodhisattva over the ten grounds<sup>21</sup> leading to the rank of a buddha. In that portrayal, Chandrakīrti delves deeply into the meaning of emptiness<sup>22</sup> by studying the principal reasonings that lead to inferential realization<sup>23</sup> of the profound lack of inherent nature<sup>24</sup> that characterizes all phenomena. Dharmakīrti's *Commentary* explores the mechanism of cognition in its various forms and the evidence upon which different types of consciousness rely in the process of apprehending their respective objects.

The curriculum at Sera Jay concludes with four to eight years given over to Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*<sup>25</sup> and Gunaprabha's *Aphorisms on Discipline*.<sup>26</sup> Vasubandhu's *Treasury* consists of eight chapters setting forth an understanding common to many Buddhist schools of the elements of experience, the structure of the world, the relationship between actions<sup>27</sup> and their results, the development of afflictions,<sup>28</sup> the cultivation of meditative absorption, and other topics related to these. Gunaprabha's *Aphorisms* gives the now mature student a detailed explanation of the discipline to be upheld by those ordained in the Buddhist tradition. After completing this course of study, a few students will go on to one of two tantric schools where they will study the *Tantra of the Gathering of the Secret*,<sup>29</sup> a tantra central to the Geluk tradition of Secret Mantra.<sup>30</sup> Before turning to the course of study followed at the Ngagyür Nyingma Institute in Bylakuppe, just up the road from Sera Jay, I would like to recommend a wonderful book that Georges Dreyfus has written about his education in several Geluk colleges, including Sera Jay. Read his *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*<sup>31</sup> if you would enjoy learning about this tradition of education from someone who has explored it thoroughly.

## **Ngagyür Nyingma Institute**

The Ngagyür Nyingma Institute for Higher Learning is housed within the Namdröl Ling Monastery that is overseen by Drupwang Penor Rinpoche, the leader of the Palyul tradition of the Nyingma. The Institute presents an approach to education in the Buddhist tradition that resembles Sera Jay's in some ways while departing from it in others. The course of study offered at Ngagyür Nyingma may be traced to a tradition of commentary that, in Tibet, stems from Sagya Pañchen Gūnga Gyaltsen.<sup>32</sup> Annotated commentaries<sup>33</sup> composed much later by Shenpen Chökyi Nangwa<sup>34</sup> gave both form and substance to educational institutions that flourished in the eastern Tibetan cultural area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As these schools played an important role in the non-sectarian<sup>35</sup> movement spearheaded by Jamyang Kyentse

Wangbo,<sup>36</sup> who was closely affiliated with Dzongsar Monastery,<sup>37</sup> their curriculum became known as the Dzongsar syllabus.<sup>38</sup> At Ngagyür Nyingma, the study of Sūtra follows the pattern of this syllabus and relies heavily upon Shenpen Chökyi Nangwa's annotated commentaries. However, Jamgön Mipam's lucid and elegant commentaries often supplement or replace Shenpen Chökyi Nangwa's corresponding works. Together, these two strains of commentary provide a six-year curriculum consisting of thirteen texts that summarize the tradition of Sūtra. These six years of study will be followed by a further three years devoted to the *Tantra of the Matrix of the Secret*,<sup>39</sup> a tantra central to the Nyingma tradition of Secret Mantra.

The thirteen texts introducing a student to the tradition of Sūtra at Ngagyür Nyingma include all five of the treatises from which the curriculum at a Geluk school is constructed and add to it a number of others, all of them familiar to any well educated Tibetan Buddhist scholar. Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*, representing the Lesser Vehicle's<sup>40</sup> knowledge of central topics, is paired with Asaṅga's *Summary of Manifest Knowledge*,<sup>41</sup> thus augmenting the discussion with a response representative of the Great Vehicle.<sup>42</sup> Chandrakīrti's *Entrance to the Middle Way*, which has defined the study of the Middle Way<sup>43</sup> in Tibet for many centuries, is amplified by Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Middle*,<sup>44</sup> Āryadeva's *Treatise in Four Hundred Stanzas*,<sup>45</sup> and Shāntideva's *Entrance to the Conduct of a Bodhisattva*.<sup>46</sup> Maitreya's *Ornament for Clear Realization* holds a place of honor at any Tibetan Buddhist institution where the Indian Buddhist tradition of Sūtra is studied seriously; adding wealth to wealth, Ngagyür Nyingma's curriculum guides a student through the whole of Maitreya's *Five Sets of Dharma*<sup>47</sup> by also offering instruction in his *Ornament for the Sūtras of the Great Vehicle*,<sup>48</sup> *Differentiating the Middle from the Extremes*,<sup>49</sup> *Differentiating Phenomena and Reality*,<sup>50</sup> and *Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime*.<sup>51</sup> Other texts enhance the curriculum of the first six years, but those mentioned here supply its substance.

Having completed this introduction to the tradition of Sūtra, a student who chooses to continue will then give three years to the study of Gunaprabha's *Aphorisms*, mentioned previously in connection with Sera Jay, and to the Nyingma tradition of Secret Mantra. Commentaries on the *Tantra of the Secret Essence* composed by Jamgön Mipam and Jigme Tenpay Nyima; Jigme Lingpa's<sup>52</sup> *Precious Treasury of Good Qualities*,<sup>53</sup> several works by Longchenpa, including his *Trilogy of the Mind at Rest in the Great Completeness*<sup>54</sup> and his *Trilogy of Intrinsic Freedom in the Great Completeness*,<sup>55</sup> and Jamgön Mipam's *Explanation of the Eight Words*<sup>56</sup> form the heart of this exploration into the further reaches of Buddhist knowledge. In this way, a nine-year course of study provides an introduction to the Nyingma tradition of Sūtra and Mantra.

### **Nālandā Institute<sup>57</sup>**

At the Nālandā Institute established by the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, Rangjung Rikpe Dorje,<sup>58</sup> in Rumtek, Sikkim, we find a nine-year program focused upon texts summarizing the tradition of Sūtra. Although the series of Indian texts that forms the core of the Nālandā Institute does not differ substantially from the curriculum of the Ngagyür Nyingma Institute, the two programs rely upon different commentaries to the Indian texts. Where the syllabus in Bylakuppe features the commentaries composed by Shenpen Chökyi Nangwa and Jamgön Mipam, the explanatory works upon which students in Rumtek have relied are drawn mainly from authors such as the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje,<sup>59</sup> the Seventh Karmapa, Chödrak Gyatso,<sup>60</sup> the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje,<sup>61</sup> Rendawa Shönu Lodrö,<sup>62</sup> Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa,<sup>63</sup> Situ Chökyi Jungnay,<sup>64</sup> and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé. It is interesting to note that Jamgön Mipam's work

also figures significantly in Nālandā's curriculum, as it does at Ngagyür Nyingma. In part, this attests to the impact of his work upon his contemporaries; in part, to the clarity of his prose, the breadth of his learning, and the depth of humanity one meets in his knowledge. Where Ngagyür Nyingma has designed an education in the tradition of Sūtra that requires six years of intensive study—the remaining three years spent as a student at the Institute are given to the study of the tradition of Mantra—Nālandā asks for nine full years. Students who desire training in the literature and knowledge of the Vajrayāna of Secret Mantra<sup>65</sup> will accomplish this in a different setting, usually subsequent to completing the program offered at the Nālandā Institute. It is worth noting that either alternative may well mark only the beginning to a lifetime of study, over the course of which a passionate scholar will return to these central texts many times, steadily absorbing their meaning in a long and gradual maturation.

### **In Conclusion**

I would like to conclude by returning to the question with which I began: which works shall we translate into English? 'The ones that will help us to understand and practice the Buddhadharma.' Isn't that the answer? Yet which ones are those? Some texts will speak to us and others may not. What combination of beautifully complex treatises, advice given by seasoned practitioners, and personal instructions imparted by those adept in meditative craft will provoke transformation of the sort we have met in our teachers and desire to bring forth in ourselves? I imagine that we will need to translate many texts and patiently open the kernels of meaning locked away in Tibetan and other Asian languages before we can discern which words of instruction liberate the insight that delivers us from ourselves. In the meantime, it seems best to turn to the task of translation driven by conviction that the tapestry of knowledge studied so ardently by twenty-five centuries of Buddhist practitioners may well serve as a reliable guide.

## Notes

- 1 dbu ma'i sgom rim, madhyamaka-bhavanākrama
- 2 'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899
- 3 shes kun khyab bya mdzod
- 4 'jam mgon mi pham, 1846-1912
- 5 gzhan stong seng ge nga ro
- 6 bder gshegs snying po stong thung seng ge nga ro
- 7 rgyud gsang ba'i snying po, guhyagarbhatantra
- 8 klong chen pa, 1308-1363
- 9 'jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1865-1926
- 10 dge lugs
- 11 'jam dbyangs chos rje, dates
- 12 tsong kha pa, 1357-1419
- 13 rigs pa, nyāya
- 14 rtags, liṅga
- 15 Maitreya, *Ornament for Clear Realization (shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba tshig le'ur byas pa, abhisamayālamkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadesha-shāstrakarikā)*, P 5184.
- 16 Chandrakīrti, *Entrance to the Middle Way (dbu ma la 'jug pa, madhyamakāvātāra)*, P5261, Vol. 98, P5262, Vol. 98.
- 17 Dharmakīrti, *Commentary on (Dignāga's) "Compilation of Valid Cognition" (tshad ma rnam 'grel gyi tshig le'ur byas pa, pramāṇavarttikārikā)* P5709, vol. 130.
- 18 nyan thos, shrāvaka
- 19 rang sangs rgyas, pratyekabuddha
- 20 byang chub sems dpa', bodhisattva
- 21 sa, bhūmi
- 22 stong pa nyid, shūnyatā
- 23 rjes dpag, anumāna
- 24 rang bzhin, svabhāva
- 25 Vasubandhu, *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge (chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa, abhidharmakoshakarikā)*. P5590, Vol. 115.
- 26 Gunaprabha, *Aphorisms on Discipline ('dul ba'i mdo rtsa ba, vinaya-sūtra)*, P5619, vol. 123.
- 27 las, karma
- 28 nyon mongs, klesha
- 29 *Tantra of the Gathering of the Secret (de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku gsung thugs kyi gsang chen gsang ba 'dus pa zhes bya ba brtag pa'i rgyal po, sarva-tathāgata-kāya-vāk-chittarahasya-guhyasamājanāma-mahākalparāja)*, P81, vol. 3.
- 30 gsang sngags, guhyamantra
- 31 Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2003).
- 32 sa paṇ kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251
- 33 mchan 'grel
- 34 gzhan phan chos kyi snang ba, 1871-1927
- 35 ris med
- 36 'jam dbyangs mkhen brtse dbang po, 1820-1892
- 37 rdzong gsar

- 38 rdzong gsar yig cha
- 39 rgyud gsang ba'i snying po, guhyagarbhatantra
- 40 theg pa dman pa, hīnayāna
- 41 Asaṅga, *Summary of Manifest Knowledge (abhidharmasamuchchaya, chos mngon pa kun btus)*, P5550, Vol. 112.
- 42 theg pa chen po, mahāyāna
- 43 dbu ma, madhyamaka
- 44 Nāgārjuna, *Treatise on the Middle; dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab cas bya ba, prajñānāmamūlamadhyamakakārikā; aka Fundamental Treatise on the Middle, Called "Wisdom" madhyamakashāstra, dbu ma'i bstan bcos*, P5224, Vol. 95.
- 45 Āryadeva, *Treatise in Four Hundred Stanzas (bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa, chatuḥshatakashāstrakārikā)*, P5246, Vol. 95.
- 46 Shāntideva, *Entrance to the Conduct of a Bodhisattva (byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa, bodhisattvacharyāvātāra)*, P5272, Vol. 99.
- 47 byams chos sde lnga
- 48 Maitreya, *Ornament for the Sūtras of the Great Vehicle (theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i rgyan gyi tshig le'ur byas pa, mahāyānasūtrālamkāra)*, P5521, Vol. 88.
- 49 Maitreya, *Differentiating the Middle from the Extremes (dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa, madhyāntavibhaṅga)*, P5522, Vol. 108.
- 50 Maitreya, *Differentiating Phenomena and Reality (chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa, dharmadharmatāvibhaṅga)*, P5523, Vol. 108.
- 51 Maitreya, *The Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime (theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma'i bstan bcos, mahāyānottaratantrashāstra)*, P5525, Vol. 108.
- 52 'jigs med gling pa, 1730-1798
- 53 yon tan rin po che'i mdzod
- 54 rdzogs pa chen po sems nyid ngal gso skor gsum
- 55 rdzogs pa chen po rang grol skor gsum
- 56 bka' brgyad rnam bshad
- 57 Here I am relying on conversations with students who matriculated at Rumtek during the 1980s. I do not know much about the opportunities for education currently available to the Karmapa's students. I will hope that the leadership and commanding presence of the Seventeenth Karmapa, Urgyen Drodül Trinley Dorje, will enable the Nālandā Institute to flourish once again.
- 58 rang jung rig pa'i rdo rje, 1924-1981
- 59 rang byung rdo rje, 1284-1339
- 60 chos grags rgya mtsho, 1454-1506
- 61 mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507-1554
- 62 red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros, 1349-1412
- 63 dpa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba, 1504-1564/1566
- 64 situ chos kyi 'byung gnas, 1699/1700-1774
- 65 gsang sngags rdo rje'i theg pa, guhyamantravajrayāna

