

Origin of Sakya School in Tibetan Buddhism

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Sakya School is one of the important schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The Sakya tradition was initiated by Khon Konchog Gyalpo. Khon Konchog Gyalpo belonged to Khon clan whose history traces back to the three divine brothers called Chiring, Yuring and Yusu who descended from the Clear Light Heaven on the land of upper Ngari in Tibet to benefit living beings on earth during pre-Buddhist, pre-historic time. 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 remained in this world and he had a son called Pawo tag. The son of the latter was known as Lutsa Tagpo Ochen and his son was called Yapang Kye. For five generations this lineage was known as Lharig as they came down from the Clear Light Heaven. However, Yapang Kye subdued the bloodless demon² chief called Kyareng and married his wife Yadum Silima. 'She gave birth to a child and as he was born during the battle between gods and demons he was named as Khon Barkye.'³ Since they developed enmity with Yakṣas (demons) they came to be known as Khon (enmity). With the birth of Khon Barkye the name of this lineage was changed from "Lharig" to "Khon".

The continuation of Khon lineage, specially from Khon Palpoche to Khon Konchog Gyalpo followed the esoteric teachings of Nyingma tradition and as a result they became well-versed in tantric teachings and many of them realized the meditational deities of Mahayoga Tantra, known as *Srvisuddha* and *Vajra Kila*.⁴

When we study the history of Tibet, we are aware of the fact that Khon family was very influential in Tibetan society both spiritually and politically. Khon Palpoche was a minister of King Thrisong Deutsan and his son Khon Lui Wangpo Sungba (Skt. Nagendraraksita) was one of the first seven monks in all over Tibet who had received ordination from Shantaraksita in Samye Monastery.

Khon Konchog Gyalpo and the First Sakya Monastery:

In eleventh century the two brothers- Khon Rog Sherab Tshultim and Khon 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 were shown only to the initiated persons in secret. Later, when

² Blood sucking demons 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.

³ Rinpoche, Dhongthog, (Sam Van Schaik, trans.), *The Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism: A History*, Somerville: Wisdom Publication, 2016, p. 54

⁴ *Srvisuddha* and *Vajra Kila* belong to the Mahayoga Tantra class and meditational practices relating to these deities were introduced into Tibet in the eight century by Padmasambhava and since this time they become an important part of the spiritual practice of the Nyingma tradition.

the followers of Nyingmapa started to bring this to public show, the Khon 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.

Khon Sherab Tshultim encouraged his younger brother to go to Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe (992-1074 C.E.) at Mangkhar to study the new esoteric doctrine.⁵ They also thought it was necessary to preserve the ritual objects related to the old teachings of Nyingma tradition of his elder brother Khon Konchog Gyalpo went to Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe and became well versed in both theory and practice of the new tantric doctrine which was becoming very popular in Tibet during the eleventh century. It is also said that Drogmi Lotsawa did not accept him as student at first sight.

Hence, 'Konchog Gyalpo went to Yarlung to study under another teacher Lama Namkha U Pa, who later dreamed that if Konchog Gyalpo would leave the monkhood and marry, he would fulfill the prophecy of Atisha. From him would bear a son who would be an emanation and who also found a new religious tradition. After the death of Lama Namkha U Pa, Drogmi agreed to receive Konchog Gyalpo as a student and finally was initiated.'⁶

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, Bari Lotsawa, Ma Lotsawa, Puhrang Lotsawa 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. Then he lived for some years in the temple that he had built at Dawo Lungpa and later on this temple came to be known as Sakya Gogpo (The ruined Sakya).

While residing there Khon Konchog Gyalpo decided to go to a picnic with his disciples. While passing through the mountain in shape of a sleeping elephant called Ponpori, 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 clan of Zhang Zhung.⁷ 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, a woman's coat and a necklace made of jewels.

⁵ 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 (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 school founded by Guru Padmasambhava, King Trisong Deutsan and Abbot Shantaraksita. The Sakya, Kagyu 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".

⁶ Rinpoche, Dhongthog, (Sam Van Schaik, trans.), *The Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism: A History*, , Somerville: Wisdom Publication, 2016, p. 54

⁷ 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". 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". Cassinelli, C.W., Ekvail, Robert B., *A Tibetan Principality: The Political System of Sa sKya*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969, p.12, Das, Sarat Chandra, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004. p. 1089

In the Water Buffalo year of the first cycle of the sixty years cycle (1073 C.E.), Khon 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. Concerning this monastery there are several predictions made by the Buddha, Padmasambhava and Atisha. Padmasambhava prophesied in Khado Nying-gud (Skt. *Daka-prak Tantra*, Wyl. *mkha' 'gro snying rgyud*) about the coming of the emanations of Avalokitesvara, Manjusri and Vajrapani in future. While travelling from India to Tibet Atisha 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 Mahakala who will be the protectors of Buddhism in future. There he also observed the syllable *Hri*, *Hum* and Seven *Dhi* 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 Avalokitesvara, seven incarnate masters of Manjusri and one incarnate master of Vajrapani 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. Also written as Exalted Masters.

The Five Exalted Masters:

- i) Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1172 C.E.)
- ii) Sonam Tsemo (1142-1172 C.E.)
- iii) Jetsun Dragpa Gyaltsan (1147-1216 C.E.)
- iv) Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsan (1182-1251 C.E.)
- v) Drogon Chogyal Phagpa (1235-1280 C.E.)

These five masters hold a special place in the annals of the Sakya tradition. The annals states that, during the first Gongma, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the Sakya School firmly established and formulated as a distinct tradition with a philosophical system of its own. Lobpon Sonam Tsemo and Jetsun Dragpa Gyaltsan 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 Pandita Kunga Gyaltsan. 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 Pandita is one of the most influential key figures.

His nephew, Drogon Chogyal Phagpa, succeeded him as the fifth superior master of the Sakya tradition. During his time the Sakya tradition touched its political advancement, with the introduction of Buddhism into

China and Mongolia. The Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, in devotion, offered the thirteen myriarchies of Tibet to Drogon Chogyal 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 special place in the annals of the Sakya tradition. The importance of their influence on the evolution of Tibetan literature is highly honoured.

Numerous sutras and tantric teachings have been introduced into Sakya School which have been studied and practiced by the followers of this school. Among them, the following are the most famous ones:

- i. Hevajra tantras transmission originated from the Mahasiddha Virupa.
- ii. Vajrakila tantras of Padmasambhava
- iii. Vajrayogini precepts of Naropa
- iv. Guhyasamaja tantra teachings of Nagarjuna
- v. Mahakala precepts of Vararuci.

There are other Buddhist philosophical texts that are collectively known as *grags chen bco brgya*. They are as follows: i) Abhisamayalamkara (Ornaments of Clear Realization), ii) Mahayana-sutra-lamkara (Ornament of Mahayana Discourse), iii) Dharma-dharmitavibhanga (Clear Distinction between Phenomena and their Reality), iv) Madhyanta-vibhanga, v) Anuttaratantrasastra, vi) Bodhisattvacaryavatara (Guide to Bodhisattva's Way to Enlightenment) of Santideva, vii) Pratimoksasutra (Sutra of Individual Liberation), viii) Vinayasutra (Sutra of Root Discipline) of Gunaprabha, ix) Mulamadhyamakakarika (The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way) of Nagarjuna, x) Madhyamakavatara (Entering the Middle Way) of Candrakirti, xi) Catuhsataka (Four Hundred Verses) of Aryadeva, xii) Abhidharmakosa (Treasure of Knowledge) of Vasubandhu, xiii) Abhidharmasamuccaya (Compendium of Knowledge) of Asanga, xiv) Pramanasamuccaya (Compendium of Valid Cognition) of Dignaga, xv) Pramanavartika (Commentary on Valid Cognition) of Dharmakirti, xvi) Pramanaviniscaya (Discernment of Valid Cognition) of Dharmakirti, xvii) tsad ma rigs gter (Skt. Pramana-yuktinidhi, Eng: Treasure of Valid Cognition) of sa-skya Pandita, xviii) sdom gsum rab dbye (Skt. Trisabhara-pravedha, Eng: Distinction Between the Three Vows) of sa-skya Pandita, It was categorized by renowned Sakya pa scholar Gorampa Sonam Sengge (1429-1489).⁸ The most distinct of all Sakya pa philosophical teaching is known as the *lam 'bras* or the "Path and Fruit" and is based on the Hevajra tantra. These instructions are the heart of the Sakya tradition having originated with the Mahasiddha Virupa who received the Hevajra empowerments directly from Vajra Nairatma, the consort of Hevajra. It was brought to Tibet by the yogin Gayadhara and was translated into Tibetan by Drogmi lotsawa (992-1074 C.E.). The translator stated Lamdre as: "The philosophical viewpoint expressed in the Path and its Fruit is the inseparability of *Samsara* and *Nirvana*. According to this, an individual cannot attain *nirvana* or peace by abandoning *samsara* or cyclic existence, because the mind is the root of both *samsara* and *nirvana*. When

⁸ Sanjib Kumar Das, *Basic Buddhist Terminology*, Sarnath: KRPC, 2009, p. 527

obscured, it takes the form of *samsara* and when freed of obscurations it is *nirvana*. Hence, the reality is that a person must strive through meditation to realize their inseparability”.⁹

Sakya School co-relation with the other contemporary schools:

One good indication is that Sakya tradition always had a close relationship with the other three major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance Sakya tradition also follows the Vajrakila lineage which originated from Padmasambhava, the fountainhead of the Nyingma School. Also Kagyu and the Sakya traditions originated almost at the same time, and both received important teachings from Naropa. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug School, studied under the Sakya Lama Rendawa.

Branches of Sakya pa Schools:

- i) Ngorpa lineage
- ii) Tsharpa lineage
- iii) Zongpa lineage

Furthermore, a number of sub-schools appeared within the main Sakya tradition. Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382-1457 C.E.) and successive masters had come to be known as the Ngorpa lineage, whereas, the lineages of Tsharchen Losel Gyatsho (1502-1556 C.E.) came to be known as Tsharpa lineage. Thumi Kunga Namgyal (1432-1496 C.E.) or Gongkar Dorjedenpa¹⁰ founded the Zongpa lineage. Thus, the Sakya tradition of the Khon 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 in Sakya tradition. Succession to the position of Sakya Trichen, head of the Sakya tradition, has been hereditary since the time of Khon Konchog Gyalpo and before sometime Sakya's are divided between the two palaces¹¹.

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⁹ A site maintained and updated by the office of Tibet, the official agency of H.H. the Dalai Lama in London.

¹⁰ The Dzungpa Tradition is a branch of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery of Gongkar Dorje Den was founded in 1464 by saint and scholar, Thumi Kunga Namgyal (1432-1496) also known as Gongkar Dorjedenpa.

¹¹ The two palaces are: Dolma Phodang and Phuntshog Phodang.

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