

The Sakya Lineage in Historical Context

His Holiness the Sakya Trizin

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In this world, there are many different peoples with different ideas and beliefs. However, one thing that is common to everyone is the wish to be free from suffering and to accomplish happiness. For the sake of happiness, everyone is working very hard, yet it is clear that no matter how much outer progress one makes, true inner peace and happiness will not be attained this way. Real peace and happiness can only be achieved by changing our minds. As long as our minds are controlled by negative emotions, we can not really experience peace, and the way to have release from negative emotions is to practice a spiritual path. There are many different religions in the world, and each one has its own purpose, its own beauty, and its own way to help mankind. I believe that all the major religions emphasize the importance of love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. All of these religions can help us to change.

There are limitless beings, and although we all are the same, we also have different tastes, mentalities, defilements, emotions and propensities. For this reason, we need different spiritual systems, different ways to overcome our negative emotions. For example, it's clear that there is not one medicine that can cure every disease. In fact, not only do we have different medicines for different diseases, we even have different systems of medicine. Allopathic medicine is very effective for certain diseases, while for others, Ayurvedic medicine might be more effective. Sometimes homeopathic medicine might be more effective, and so on. The variety of spiritual traditions in the world is necessary. This is the reason that the great Lord Buddha, with infinite wisdom, compassion, and power, through skillful means, bestowed many different levels of teachings, including the paths of the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The Buddha did not give just one teaching to all beings. Furthermore, within the Theravada, there are different schools and traditions, and in the Mahayana there are different philosophical schools and traditions, and in the Vajrayana there are different classes of tantra.

The Buddha performed most of his activities in India. These activities included physical, verbal, and

mental activities, but the most important thing that the Buddha did to help beings was to turn the wheel of Dharma. To turn the wheel of Dharma means to give teachings. The Buddha did not say, "If you worship me, and if I please, then I will rescue you," or "I will give you liberation and enlightenment as a gift." What Buddha said was, "I have shown you the way to liberation. But liberation itself depends upon you."

The greatest way that the Buddha helped sentient beings was by giving the teachings and showing the path to liberation and enlightenment. From India, the Buddhadharma, or the Buddha's teachings, traveled to many different countries. Eventually, by the great kindness of the Tibetan Dharma kings, the great blessings of the Indian masters, and the great efforts of the Tibetan translators, Buddhism was brought from India to Tibet.

In Tibet we have all the forms of Buddhist teachings, namely the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. This is very clear. Some people nowadays talk about southern Buddhism and northern Buddhism. Southern Buddhism means the Theravada traditions in such countries as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and so on. These countries have an excellent tradition of vinaya for monks and

strong monastic traditions, with rules about how to receive the vows, how to maintain the vows, proper rituals, and so on. The practices that they have, we also have in Tibet. For example, Tibetan monasteries have excellent monastic traditions. There is thus a complete similarity and consonance between the Theravadin countries and Tibetan Buddhism. It is so complete, in fact, that very recently, under the guidance of H.H. the Dalai Lama, a meeting was held in Delhi between Tibetan monastic tradition holders and Theravada masters. The meeting produced a very good discussion, and they concluded that there are no essential differences between countries, and the slight differences that can be seen are due to differences in language.

Similarly, northern Buddhism refers to Buddhism in Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan, where there are Mahayana traditions based upon the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, and so on. Buddhists in these countries practice the bodhisattva way. All of the bodhisattva teachings are presented in the native languages of these countries and exist not only in books but in real practice.

The Vajrayana tradition is now mainly practiced in Tibet and Mongolia, although Japan also has some Vajrayana traditions. Because Tibet has all of these

different Buddhist traditions, discussion is possible between Tibetan Buddhism and the Buddhist traditions of all of these other countries. Japan and Sri Lanka, by comparison, although both are Buddhist countries, do not have the same degree of common ground. Japan does not possess the Vinaya traditions of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka does not have the Mahayana sutras. Tibetan Buddhism has common ground with all other Buddhist countries.

Buddhism came to Tibet from India in two different periods. The first was during the 8th century in the time of the great abbot Śāntarakṣita, the great Guru Padmasambhava, and the Tibetan Dharma kings. Although during the time of Songtsän Gampo in the 7th century, some teachings and practices were introduced, there were no complete Buddhist teachings. It was during the time of Śāntarakṣita, Guru Padmasambhava, and King Trisong Detsen that real Buddhism formed in Tibet. This is the time when the monastic traditions were established.

When Śāntarakṣita was attempting to establish a monastic tradition and building temples, there were many disturbances caused by local Tibetan guardians or spirits. Śāntarakṣita would build temples during the day and at night the work would be destroyed. Then the abbot Śāntarakṣita suggested that Guru

Padmasambhava be invited. Guru Padmasambhava came, and he subdued the evil spirits and made the remaining ones become Buddhist protectors. Once this was accomplished, the trouble subsided, and the work of establishing the Dharma proceeded very smoothly. These were the great blessings of Guru Padmasambhava right at the beginning. In this period, the collection of the Buddha's teachings known as the *Kangyur* and the collection of the great commentaries known as the *Tengyur* were translated into Tibetan. With this, authentic Buddhism was established.

The Sakya tradition was established by and flourished within the Khon family. The Khon were originally believed to be direct descendants of celestial beings who had come down to dwell on the high mountains of Tibet. Some of them returned, but others stayed, and the family line descended from those who stayed. At that time, they were known as the "Clear Light Celestial Race." This was the original name for the Khon family. In this early period, outwardly, the Khon were engaged in a struggle with the rakshas. These rakshas were defeated. Inwardly, these early Khon were emanations of Manjushri. Thus, inwardly, Manjushri defeated ignorance. The word "Khon" originates from this. "Khon" means

disagreement – disagreement outwardly with the rakshas, and inwardly with ignorance.

A second name of the Sakya is “Pure Khon.” In the time of the original Khons, which was very long ago, there was not yet writing and thus no literature exists that describes their lives or activities. However we know that at that time there was only the Bon religion in Tibet, and that the Khons were originally Bon practitioners.

When Śāntaraksīta and Guru Padmasambhava brought Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century, the Khon became involved in Buddhism. The first Buddhist Khon was named Khon Nagarakshita, and he was a great translator. During this period, Tibetans began to receive full Buddhist monastic ordination for the first time. Because there were doubts about whether Tibetans would be able to keep the vows, only seven individuals were chosen for a kind of trial: three young people, three old people and one middle-aged person. Khon Nagarakshita was one of the three young ones. They all received the full Buddhist *bhikṣu* ordination from the abbot Śāntaraksīta, and they were all very successful in keeping the vinaya. This was the auspicious beginning of the great Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition. Later, of course, thousands and

thousands of monasteries were established with hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns.

Khon Nagarakshita had a younger brother known as Rinchen Dorje. Rinchen Dorje was a householder, not a monk. Both Khon Nagarakshita and Rinchen Dorje received many empowerments and teachings, including Vajrakilaya and Samyak Heruka, and these became the main deities of the Khon tradition. For many generations, the Khons practiced these two deities and accomplished great realizations and great miracles. This continued for a very long time during which the Khon family were Nyingmapas, or followers of the tradition of the earlier translations.

A Tibetan king named Langdarma destroyed many Buddhist teachings and practices, and this caused a gap in the flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet. After that, the Buddhadharma began to spread again and was again brought from India. This second period is called the “new translation” or *sarma*. The new translation schools are the Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug traditions.

The Khon family switched from Nyingma and established the Sakya because, after many generations, they felt that auspicious conditions were ripening for the establishment of a separate school. To this end, during the 11th century in Khon Konchog

Gyalpo's time, they attempted to conceal the ancient or Nyingma teachings. However, signs arose that the protectors of Vajrakilaya and Heruka were displeased, and they found that they could not conceal the Vajrakilaya cycle of teachings. This is why although we are now in the new tradition, we still carry on the Vajrakilaya teaching and consider Vajrakilaya to be one of our principle deities and one of our main practices, right up to the present day.

Khon Konchog Gyalpo had an older brother who said to him, "I am old now and unable to learn. But you are younger, and you must learn from the new tradition." When Khon Konchog Gyalpo learned about Drogmi Lotsawa, the most famous living master in Tibet at that time, he went to him to request teachings. His full name is Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe, *lotsawa* meaning translator. From Drogmi Lotsawa, Khon Konchog Gyalpo received many teachings, in particular the Lamdre and Hevajra cycle of teachings. Later, Khon Konchog Gyalpo's son, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, received the full cycle of Lamdre teachings from the disciples of Drogmi Lotsawa's disciples, and so on.

The Sakyapas are called the lineage holders of the four great Tibetan translators. These four are Bari Lotsawa, whose first name was Rinchen Drak,

Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe, Mal Lotsawa Lodro Dragpa, and Lotsawa Richen Zangpo. The teachings, pith instructions, and traditions that were brought to Tibet by these four translators were practiced and disseminated by the Sakya order. The teachings that came from these translators were considered to be very authentic because the translators went all the way to India from Tibet, where they met great Indian masters and studied for a long time, bringing the teachings with them back to Tibet. As such, these teachings are held to be very authentic and very pure, and so they have been kept and transmitted.

Generally speaking, all of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism are the same in agreeing that the most important thing is motivation. Whatever practice we do, whatever teachings we receive, the place where the practice eventually leads depends upon our motivation. The motivation in all of the Tibetan Buddhist schools is the same: every school wishes to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. In this there is absolutely no difference between schools.

Regarding the main practice, all schools emphasize both method and wisdom. Method or means includes such practices as generosity, moral conduct, patience, meditation, etc. These are similar in

all the schools. Wisdom consists in finding the ultimate truth, or knowing the ultimate nature of all phenomena. Regarding wisdom, every Tibetan Buddhist school follows what is called the Madhyamaka or the Middle Way.

Ordinary people do not bother to inquire about the true nature of things or ask what reality is. They just take life as it is. But more intelligent people try to find out about the nature of reality. What we see and what reality is are two different things. For example, people who have certain diseases like jaundice will see the moon as yellow in color because of their sickness. What we apprehend, like form, sound, smell, taste, etc. is not the ultimate truth of these phenomena.

What then is the ultimate nature or truth of phenomena? There are different answers to this question. Non-Buddhist schools have answers that differ from Buddhist schools. There are different answers, too, among the different philosophical schools in Buddhism. The highest, which is known as the Buddha's most important teaching, is called the Perfection of Wisdom, or *Prajnaparamita*. Later, this was explained by the great Indian master Nagarjuna.

Buddha himself prophesied that four hundred years after his mahaparinirvana, there would be a

bhikṣu named Naga who would be able to explain the true meaning of the *Prajnaparamita*, the *Perfection of Wisdom*. As the Buddha prophesied, Nagarjuna came into the world and explained the philosophy of Madhyamaka, or the Middle Way. Madhyamaka differs from other schools in that the Middle Way school offers no conclusion as such. All of the other schools have a conclusion: it is like this, or it is like that.

In the Madhyamaka, all phenomena are explained in two ways, in terms of relative truth and absolute truth. Relative truth takes what ordinary people see just as it is. We accept that there is form to see, that there is sound to hear, that there are smells, tastes, and so on. However, when we try to find the absolute truth, then there can be no conclusion. This is because the absolute truth is away from all explanation, perceptions, descriptions, and words. You cannot describe it as being this way or that way. It is beyond words, perceptions, and explanations.

Since the basic motivation and the main practice or the method are the same, the final accomplishment of enlightenment is also the same. All Tibetan Buddhists are absolutely not different from one another, except that the lineages of all four schools are different; they differ with respect to the lineage of

masters by which the teachings have been passed down. Their original Indian gurus may be different, the translators were different, how the teachings were brought from India and passed down from one master to the next – these things are different. The emphasis of each school is somewhat different. Some schools emphasize studies, while others put more emphasis on meditation. But other than these things, there is really no difference at all between the Tibetan Buddhist schools.

As mentioned earlier, because all beings are different, it is necessary for there to be a variety of practices. For example, there are hundreds and thousands of deities. But all of the deities are actually the ultimate transcendental wisdom of the Buddha. The omniscient Buddha is the same, and there is no difference between the deities. For the sake of practitioners and followers, however, they appear to be different. As such, some deities are wrathful, some are peaceful, some have very elaborate forms with many hands, heads, and legs, while others are very simple, with one face and two hands. Some are surrounded by hundreds of other deities, some appear alone or in very simple form. All of this is due to the fact that we have different interests. Some people are inclined toward wrathful deities. Some are

inclined toward peaceful deities. Some prefer elaborate forms, and some prefer simple forms. Some are intrigued by deities surrounded by many thousands of other deities, and some are attracted to a solitary deity. But of course all of the practices are really the same.

The Sakyapas have historical connections with all of the Tibetan Buddhist schools. The Khons were originally Nyingmapas. They were direct disciples of the Guru Padmasambhava, and their main practices were Vajrakilaya and Samyak Heruka. The Nyingmapa, then, is like our grandfather; it is from where we came originally. Next, the Kagyupas and the Sakyapas are like twin brothers. These two lineages were founded around the same time, and they share the same practices. One of the main practices of the Kagyu tradition is Hevajra, the main practice of the Sakya tradition. The founder of the Kagyu tradition, Lhodrak Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Marpa Lotsawa) went to India and brought back many teachings, including the Hevajra cycle. The *Hevajra Tantra* taught in the two schools is similar. There are two translations of the *Hevajra Tantra* in Tibetan. One was translated by Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe, and the other was translated by the

Marpa Lotsawa Chökyi Lodrö. The translations are similar, and the teachings are the same.

The practicing philosophy of these two schools is similar, too. In the Sakyapa tradition, a master of the highest importance after the five founders is Ngorchen Dorje Chang Kunga Zangpo, who founded the Ngor sect, a kind of sub-school of the Sakya tradition. Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo wrote many commentaries on many tantras, and especially on the Hevajra cycle of teachings. In his commentaries, he clearly illustrated the various traditions and their respective practices of the Hevajra cycle. These exist because in India there were different Buddhist traditions practicing Hevajra. After studying all of the Hevajra teachings from the various traditions from India, he rejected and refuted some of them. He then continued with additional study and repeated contemplation and found that the teachings that came from Marpa Lotsawa in the Kagyu tradition were similar to the Sakya traditions.

Another great Sakyapa master is Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo's disciple, Gorampa Sönam Senge who wrote many commentaries on the sutras as well as on the tantras. Today, for philosophical studies in all of our Sakya monasteries and especially in the colleges, we study a text written by Gorampa Sönam Senge. This

work is called *Distinguishing the Different Philosophical Views*, and it describes the views and practices of many different schools. Gorampa states in this work that those who follow the true Madhyamaka philosophy were the ancient translators, the great Sakyapa masters, and Milarepa. All those who follow the Madhyamaka hold the same view, and view is the essence of our practice. Of course, rituals with chanting and music are slightly different in every monastery. But this aspect is not really important. If all of the schools share a similar view, then what other similarity is needed?

Next we have the Gelugpas, founded by Lama Tsongkhapa. Lama Tsongkhapa did most of his sutric studies in the Sakya monastery. His main teacher for many years was Rendawa Shyönnu Lodrö, one of the assistant abbots of Sakya. Lama Tsongkhapa received his Vajrayana teachings and empowerments from Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltzen, who was one of the throne holders of the Sakya tradition. In this way, the Gelugpa is like our nephew. As you can see, all of the three traditions are very much connected.

The differences between the Tibetan schools are mainly a matter of the lineages in which the teachings were passed down. Later on, three great masters – Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, Tertön Chogyur Lingpa

and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé – followed what is called the nonsectarian tradition. These masters received teachings from every school, and they combined them and practiced them all. They also wrote commentaries and compiled the great treasury or collections of sadhanas and collections of tantras, containing empowerments, initiations, blessings and teachings from all the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, even the lineages are very much connected together. In the many collections of sadhanas from the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, Gelug and other schools, all masters of the teaching lineages are assembled together and can be seen to be essentially the same.

Further, there is no difference between the deities in terms of their wisdom, compassion or power. It is due to our karmic affinity that certain deities are easier to accomplish and others are more difficult to accomplish. This is why it is important to find a deity appropriate to one's own karmic connections. Similarly, we can have karmic connections with different schools. Some people are karmically connected with the Sakya, some with the Kagyu, some with the Gelug or Nyingma, and so on. Whatever is your karmic connection, that should be taken as your main practice.

We must also regard all of the schools with the right view and with pure vision. This means that we should see each school as the actual activity of Buddha himself, having established different schools with different purposes. In this way, one can earn great merit and receive great blessings from every school. In the past, there were times where sectarian activities occurred. In recent times, due to the great blessings and guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism has been brought into a harmonious unity, with pure vision for all schools. Thanks to this, everyone benefits and receives blessings and can enrich their practices. In Vajrayana practice, pure practice or commitment (samaya) is very important. If samaya is not pure, then it is very difficult to gain experience and realization. But if you have pure samaya, then it is easy to achieve realization and experience.

It is very important to understand these things. I attempted here to give a brief overview of the Sakyapa lineage practice, which has traditionally been carried down from the Khon lineage up to this very day.

However, in 2014, when I came to the United States of America, I thought that it was necessary to make some changes. At the moment, we are

completely united. But if the status quo remains unchanged, problems might arise in the future. It is therefore necessary for us to make some changes in our system in the Sakya tradition.

The proposed change is not really an essential change. In our tradition, of course, the Khon lineage holders are recognized as the head of the Sakya order. Everyone recognizes that this system is historically established and continues until now. However, while I was in the United States of America, I made a visit to Seattle and held a discussion with the Phuntsok Podrang (palace) members, in particular with Dagchen Rinpoche, the head of Phuntsok Podrang. Since we two are the senior members of the Sakya school, we felt that while we are still alive it should be our responsibility to help the younger generation in the tradition so that there will not be confusion or problems when they succeed to the leadership of the Sakya school. After the discussion, the Phuntsok Podrang members were in complete agreement with what was proposed. The agreement was written down, read, signed and sealed at that time. However, the proposal was not immediately announced. I had an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in which I presented His Holiness with the signed agreement and sought his blessings and suggestions.

His Holiness was very pleased with the proposal and remarked that this was the best news. Thus, His Holiness gave his full blessing and his permission together with an acknowledgment letter.

The proposal was officially announced during Monlam 2014. Traditionally, the leadership of the Sakya school rotated between the two palaces, the Phuntsok Podrang, who currently lives in Seattle, and our Drolma Podrang. The two palaces in fact have the same father and mother if we trace back many previous generations. The founders of the palaces were actually brothers, and the heads of the two palaces have been taking turns as the head of the Sakya tradition, and this position has usually been based on seniority. The appointment was for life. As such, the younger members of the Khon family had almost no chance to become head. Because of these problems, we felt it was necessary for us to propose a change in this system.

There is a further reason to support this proposal. A long time ago, when I was still young and living in Tibet, one of the greatest masters in Tibet, one of my gurus, Khyentse Dorje Chang – Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö – suggested that members of the two palaces could take turns as head of the Sakya school for a three-year term. This would be similar to the

headship of the Ngor Palaces, the sub-sect of the Sakya school. In the Ngor tradition, there are four palaces, and the head of each palace takes a turn to be appointed as the head of Ngor tradition every three years. Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö proposed that the Drolma and Phuntsok palaces adopt such a system in order to avoid confusion and problems in the system. It was impossible to implement this at that time in Tibet, but I think that now is a good time for us to begin. Khyentse Dorje Chang was a great master, and his suggestions certainly carry great blessings. I brought this up to Dagchen Rinpoche, and apparently Dagchen Rinpoche also recalled this. He verified that, indeed, Khyentse Dorje Chang did make these suggestions.

In the new system, every Khon family member who meets the qualifications stated in the document would be eligible to be chosen to be the head of the Sakya order, and in this way, everyone would have an opportunity to be the head. There are only two palaces officially, but in reality, every Dungsey has his own family and they stay in different houses. Strictly speaking, then, there are more than two palaces. In the new system, everyone from each palace would have a chance to lead the Sakya school. Many people think this will be a big change. But in

reality, it will not be a real change. It is still the same tradition, and the Sakya tradition will still be led by Khon members. The only difference is that the duration of the appointment is being altered, providing an opportunity for every Khon member who is qualified to have an equal chance to become the head of the order.

The official announcement of the new system was made at the Monlam in 2014. According to the Tibetan astrological chart, 2016 will be an inauspicious year. But 2017 is believed to be a good year, and we will start implementing this new system in 2017, as stated in the signed agreement. Moreover, the new system has an additional advantage in that the Dungseys from both palaces are already fully grown. Some have already completed their studies and others are finishing their studies now. It is a good time for them to assume responsibility for leading the tradition because their elders are still alive. If they were to take leadership roles some day without us, it might be difficult for them when they want to seek advice and so on. While senior members are still alive, however, we can provide suggestions and direction when they encounter problems. This is the news I wanted to mention in this teaching. We will conclude the teaching here.

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