

Lecture 56: the Schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Edited)

Tibetan Buddhism is Divided, broadly speaking, into four major schools, but as the term 'school' could be misleading we need to be clear about what it means in this context. I have chosen to use the word 'school' in preference to 'sect', which has a rather negative connotation. We might equally speak of the four major 'traditions' of Tibetan Buddhism. None of these English words, however, is completely satisfactory. We usually think of the sects or schools of any religion as being mutually exclusive in membership and doctrine; if you belong to one, you cannot belong to another, and what one of them teaches may even contradict the teaching of another. But it is not like that in Buddhism, not in Tibetan Buddhism, nor in Indian Buddhism, which provided the pattern for the Tibetan tradition.

To trace the rise and fall, the development and the flowering, of the different schools of the Indian Buddhist tradition is very difficult. The lines of transmission continually overlap and flow into one another, so that you can never identify any particular school very clearly or definitively. It keeps shading off into another school - or even into several. In the Western religious context we are accustomed to sharp divisions. If we look at the history of the Christian churches down the centuries, we can say quite definitely that someone was either, say, Roman Catholic or Methodist or Baptist. These are all clear-cut divisions. But Indian Buddhism is not sectarian. Schools exist, but they are not very sharply defined, so that in the case of certain great teachers, they cannot be definitely identified with one particular school more than with another. There is a dispute, for example, as to whether Maitreyanatha, the great author of the Five Treatises, was a Madhyamika or a Yogacarin. It is very difficult to say, because his works strike such a beautiful balance between these two viewpoints.

Tibetan Buddhism follows this Indian non-sectarian pattern. So if we ask ourselves what is meant by a 'school' of Tibetan Buddhism, all we can say is that it is a particular lineage of teachers and disciples. A certain teacher teaches Buddhism to his disciples, they teach their disciples, and so on. This succession from master to pupils, who become masters in their turn and teach their own pupils, is what we call the school. The line of transmission may have its own angle on the Dharma, it may stress a particular aspect of the doctrine or a particular practice, but the emphasis is no more than an emphasis. Rarely, if ever, is it exclusive.

Sometimes a certain line of teachers and pupils may be associated with a particular monastery. This is usually quite fortuitous; the teacher happens to live in a certain monastery to which his disciples come, and when the original teacher dies his pupils stay on and teach there. Thus the monastery comes to be associated with a certain line of transmission and may become the 'headquarters' of that school.

Sometimes too a certain school, or line of teachers, may be associated with a particular group of texts. The Buddhist scriptures are voluminous, and it is not easy - indeed not possible - for one person to study them all even in a cursory manner. We therefore find in the history of Buddhism a sort of division of labour whereby a particular line of teachers and disciples concentrates on the study, the explication, and even the propagation, of a specific group of texts. Again, this is one of the ways in which a school arises. It is as if a particular group of Christians were to take up, say, the study of St John's Gospel and were to concentrate on studying, teaching, and writing commentaries only on that text, thus becoming a school of teachers and pupils devoted exclusively to it - though without detriment to their respect for the rest of the Bible. This has never happened in the case of Christianity, but it is the sort of thing that happens very often in

Buddhism. Chinese Buddhist schools, especially, tend to be associated with a particular scriptural text or group of texts; the T'ien T'ai School, for instance, concentrates on the Saddharma-pundarika Sutra, the 'Sutra of the White Lotus of the Good Law'.

Then again, schools sometimes arise because a certain line of teachers and pupils is associated with a particular type of spiritual practice, especially a particular type of meditation. The teacher has practised a certain kind of meditation, he teaches it to his pupils, and in this way a line is established which may become the nucleus of a school.

The birth of a school may involve several such factors combined together. Over time, each school assumes a more and more distinctive character, but without ever becoming exclusive. In keeping with the tolerant spirit of Buddhism, no school of Tibetan Buddhism claims to teach the one true version of the Dharma. Differences are recognized, they are not glossed over, but no school would go so far as to maintain that it had a monopoly of Buddhist truth.

In chronological order, the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism are: the Nyingma School, the Kagyu School, the Sakya School, and the Gelug School. The first three are known as the old schools, and the Gelug is called the new school. Sometimes the first three are called the unreformed schools and the Gelug the reformed school, but some Tibetan Buddhists contend that this distinction is not quite fair. I once discussed this with a very eminent Nyingmapa lama (the suffix -pa means simply 'man' or 'person'). I asked him, 'What is the basis for this classification? How is it that you and the Kagyupas and Sakyapas are called unreformed whereas the Gelugpas are known as reformed?' He just smiled and said, 'We didn't need to be reformed.'

Western scholars tend to regard the three old schools as unreformed much as they regard the Roman Catholic Church as unreformed compared to the Protestant churches, but this analogy is not very helpful. In fact, the major difference between them is that the three old schools are of directly Indian origin, having been founded either by Indians or by Tibetans who had studied in India. But the Gelug School, the new school, is indigenous in the sense that Tsongkhapa, its founder, never went outside Tibet. The school which he founded is of purely Tibetan origin.

Before we look at the four schools individually, we should note some of their common characteristics. Firstly, the Buddhism of all these schools is triyana in character. To understand this term, one needs to understand something of the history of Indian Buddhism. Buddhism lasted for about 1,500 years in India, from about 500BCE to 1000CE, and passed through three clearly marked stages during each of which particular aspects were predominant.

The first stage, which lasted for some 500 years, was marked by a predominantly ethical and psychological emphasis in the way the Dharma was expounded. There was a great deal of close study and analysis of the mind, especially in connection with meditation and higher states of consciousness. There was also a strong emphasis on ethical discipline and monastic rules. This first stage in the development of Indian Buddhism is therefore often described as the ethico-psychological phase.

The second stage developed and emphasized two additional elements: the metaphysical and the devotional. There was no rejection of the ethical and psychological, but while that tradition was continued, the nature of Reality was explored more deeply in conceptual terms. At the same time much more stress was placed on the importance of the devotional element in Buddhism, the importance of the worship of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and of the emotions of reverence,

love, and respect. This metaphysical-devotional phase in the development of Indian Buddhism also lasted about 500 years.

During the third stage, from approximately 500CE to 1000CE, the ethico-psychological and the metaphysical-devotional traditions were continued, but the emphasis again shifted. It came to be placed more and more on the performance of ritual acts and procedures with certain archetypal meanings and values, and also on what we can only describe as 'esoteric meditation'. This is not ordinary concentration of mind, but advanced meditation which may be practised only under the personal guidance of a guru after the proper initiation or empowerment, about which more is said in Chapter 7.

In traditional Buddhist language each of these three stages of development is called a yana, which means 'path' or 'way', and is also sometimes translated as 'vehicle', in the sense of a vehicle for spiritual practice and progress. So the Sanskrit term triyana refers to these three phases of Indian Buddhism: the Hinayana or 'little way' (the ethico-psychological), the Mahayana or 'great way' (the metaphysical-devotional), and the Vajrayana or 'adamantine way' (the ritualistic-yogic). From the time of Trisong Detsen the Buddhism of all schools was of this triyana character.

So although Tibetan Buddhism is described as a branch of the Mahayana, this is not really accurate. All its schools follow the Hinayana in respect both of monastic discipline and organization, as well as all the basic teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the twelve links of Conditioned Co-production. All these teachings in Tibetan Buddhism are derived from the first, or Hinayana, phase of Indian Buddhism, especially in its Sarvastivadin form. As regards philosophy, all Tibetan schools follow the Mahayana, especially the two great traditions of Indian Buddhist thought, the Madhyamika, the teaching of the middle way between extremes, and the Yogacara, the teaching of yoga (in the sense of meditation). Also from the Mahayana comes Tibetan Buddhism's overall spiritual ideal, that of the Bodhisattva. And its ritual and its esoteric meditation are taken from the Vajrayana or Tantra. In this way, all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism are composite in character.

Furthermore, Tibetan Buddhism regards the three yanas not just as three successive stages in the historical development of Buddhism, but as constituting successive stages of the spiritual path for each individual Buddhist. This idea is especially associated with Atisa, who went from India to Tibet and taught there in the eleventh century. Though a late development in Indian Buddhism, it plays a prominent part in the structure of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Hence we cannot distinguish schools of Tibetan Buddhism as being either Tantric or non-Tantric, as some early Western writers on Tibetan Buddhism tried to do. All schools accept this threefold structure both in terms of the historical development of Buddhism and within the spiritual life of the individual. All accept all three yanas, and all regard the Tantra as the highest flowering, the culmination, of Buddhism. In the West the Tantra has been widely misunderstood and is often thought rather shocking. But for Tibetan Buddhists the Tantra represents the highest and most sacred stage in the development of Buddhism.

The second characteristic common to all Tibetan Buddhist schools is that they accept the same scriptures as their canonical basis - though, as we shall see, the Nyingmapas have certain extra texts. These scriptures comprise the Kangyur, which is in 100, or in some editions 108, xylograph volumes, and the Tangyur, which is in 225 volumes. The Kangyur comprises translations into Tibetan of the sutras and tantras, in other words all those works which are traditionally believed

to be the utterance of the Buddha himself or of one of his Enlightened disciples speaking under his inspiration and guidance. These include texts such as the Perfection of Wisdom literature, the Saddharma-pundarika, and the Lankavatara, in Tibetan translation. The Tangyur consists of translations of commentaries and other expository works by the great Indian Buddhist sages and philosophers - Nagarjuna, Dharmakirti, Dignaga, and others.

A volume of one of these texts consists, like all Tibetan books, of oblong pages of tough hand-made paper, usually made from bamboo and very thick and crisp; they make quite a sound as you turn them over. The pages are stacked between wooden covers, not bound together but loose, and you just turn them over one by one as you read them. They are quite massive, so that to speak of a 'small Tibetan library' would be something of a contradiction in terms. Usually libraries contain hundreds of these enormous and heavy volumes. Once when I was studying a Tibetan painting of the Wheel of Life, I noticed that the sphere which we would call hell - that is, the realm of torment and punishment - showed people being crushed by these enormous volumes of the sacred texts. (When I asked a Tibetan friend what this meant, he said that these were people who had not shown respect for the scriptures.)

The third common characteristic of all schools is that those of their followers who happen to be monks all follow the same vinaya, the same pattern of monastic life and observance. Thus the four schools have a lot in common; in fact, the similarities are greater than the differences. Nevertheless differences do exist, each school having distinctive features which are of great significance.

THE NYINGMA SCHOOL

The name Nyingma means 'Old School', and it is so called because it follows the old translations of the tantras, those which were made before the time of King Ralpachen. It's rather as though there were in this country a Christian church which insisted on following only the Authorized Version of the Bible, ignoring the Revised Version and other modern translations.

The Nyingmapas regard the great Indian teacher Padmasambhava, the Lotus-born One, as their founder, and such is their respect for him and devotion to him that they sometimes refer to him as the second Buddha. According to the Nyingma tradition, Padmasambhava has eight principal forms in which he manifests in eight different regions of the world, and Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, is regarded as being simply one of these.

You can see this emphasis in Nyingma temples. These are usually three-storied. As you enter, you find on the ground floor an enormous image, usually many times larger than life, of the great guru Padmasambhava. He is dressed in royal robes with the lotus cap, seated with the khatvanga in the crook of his arm, a skull cup containing blood or nectar in one hand, and a vajra or diamond-thunderbolt in the other, and with his characteristic 'wrathfully smiling' expression. Usually images of his two consorts, the Indian princess Mandarava and the Tibetan yogini Yeshe Tsogyal, are placed on either side of him. All around there are different frescoes and images, and you generally find Gautama the Buddha in a corner somewhere, a very minor figure in this pantheon. For the Nyingmapas, Padmasambhava is everything. He has become the embodiment of the ideal of Buddhahood, more so than even Sakyamuni himself.

By all the accounts that have come down to us, Padmasambhava was a many-sided character. He was a brilliant scholar and dialectician, and often worsted the Brahmin scholars in debate. He was

a respected sage and teacher, a prolific author, and also a renowned yogi and ascetic, spending much of his time in meditation. Furthermore he was a magician. According to legend he could perform all sorts of wonderful feats. He was, it would seem, one of the greatest masters of the occult that the world has ever seen. And according to some accounts he was also an accomplished dancer. In Tibet he is always referred to as Guru Rimpoche, which means 'the great precious teacher', rather than as Padmasambhava, it being considered disrespectful to use someone's personal name.

The Nyingma tradition reflects the many-sidedness of its legendary founder, and in my own opinion, after considerable contact with this school, I would say that it is the richest form of Tibetan Buddhism. It is therefore very difficult to generalize about it. Nyingma teaching of course accepts the triyana framework, but it is a distinctive feature of this tradition that it subdivides the three yantras into nine, a division which is the basis of their system of practice.

First in this enumeration is the sravakayana, the path of the disciple. Sravaka or disciple here means someone who does not find out the Truth by himself but hears it from an Enlightened teacher, a Buddha, and then directs his efforts towards his own individual emancipation. So while he (or she) makes a genuine effort to attain liberation from samsara, that effort is made solely for his own benefit, no thought being given to the spiritual welfare of others.

Secondly there is the yana of the pratyekabuddha. Pratyeka means private or solitary, so the pratyekabuddha is one who finds out the Truth by his own efforts. He has no teacher, but also no disciples because he does not care to pass on what one has discovered, being concerned only with his own spiritual emancipation. The pratyekabuddha, like the sravaka, is a kind of spiritual individualist.

The third yana is the bodhisattvayana. The Bodhisattva has a teacher and also aspires to have disciples, because the aim of the Bodhisattva is to gain Enlightenment not just for his or her own sake but for the benefit of all living beings. He makes the effort to develop spiritually so that he can help and guide other beings; and he does this by practising the six (or ten) paramitas or perfect virtues. Thus the bodhisattvayana is the path of unmitigated spiritual altruism.

Fourthly there is the kriyayoga tantrayana. Kriya literally means 'ritual', and this yana involves a certain amount of external symbolical ritual together with repetition of the mantra and visualization of a particular Buddha (this is described in more detail in Chapter 7). Fifthly there is the upayayoga tantrayana. Upaya means 'both sides' or 'equally', so this is the yana in which ritual and meditation are practised equally. The sixth yana is called the yoga tantrayana and comprises various practices for developing the union of Wisdom and Compassion, so that neither exceeds the other. These second three yantras are collectively called the 'Exoteric Tantra' or the mantrayana.

The last three yantras of the Nyingmapas' ninefold scheme comprise the Vajrayana proper, the Esoteric or 'Inner' Tantra. The seventh is the mahayogayana, consisting mainly of the practices known as the 'growing' yoga and the 'perfect' yoga (which will be explained later). The eighth is the anuyogayana, which comprises all meditation exercises connected with the control of the breath, the nervous system and psychic centres, and sexual energy. Its aim is the sublimation of all the different gross and subtle forces of the personality of the individual in the direction of Enlightenment. Ninthly there is the atiyogayana. This is the direct practice and realization of the highest truth without any intermediaries at all, and corresponds very roughly to Ch'an or Zen in

the fullest sense. There are several different traditions of atiyogayana practice, the most important being dzogchen or the 'Great Perfection'. The Nyingmapas maintain special monasteries for this practice.

The way in which the three yantras are divided into nine is very significant. The first two yantras are seen as Hinayana, the third comprises the Mahayana, and the remaining six cover the Vajrayana. This reflects the emphasis of the Nyingma School which, while it accepts the triyana, in practice depends almost entirely on the Vajrayana or Tantra. Generalizing broadly, when you get a Tantric initiation in the Nyingma tradition, they start off by giving you the three Refuges and the five Precepts, and this represents your practice of the Hinayana. Next you take the Bodhisattva vow, which represents your practice of the Mahayana. All this usually only takes a few minutes, and then the rest of the initiation is concerned entirely with the Vajrayana. The whole emphasis of Nyingma practice is on the Vajrayana; the Hinayana and Mahayana are studied and practised to a much lesser degree.

The Nyingmapas accept the same scriptures as the other schools, the Kangyur and the Tangyur, but they also have a collection of what they call the Nyingma tantras. These consist of about 300 Tantric texts which the other schools regard as uncanonical, as not really given out by the Buddha. Western scholars used to think that these were forgeries, that they had been written by Tibetans, and that there were no Sanskrit originals as alleged. But Sanskrit originals of some of the Nyingma tantras have been discovered quite recently in Nepal, so it would seem that at least some of them are genuinely canonical.

The Nyingmapas also have a collection of sixty-four volumes of texts known as the rinchen terma, which they consider extremely important. These are the so-called 'concealed scriptures' - rinchen meaning a 'great treasure', and terma 'what is taken out'. According to legend they were written by Padmasambhava during his visit to Tibet. But then - so the legend goes - he realized that the Tibetans were not ready for these particular teachings, so he hid them in different spots, in caves and under stones, and they are supposed to have been discovered gradually over the centuries. Not surprisingly, Western scholars tend to regard these texts as being simply forgeries. However, the rinchen terma contains some very important material which we cannot so easily dismiss. For instance, one of these taken-out texts is the Bardo Thodol or Tibetan Book of the Dead, a very sublime and important document indeed. It is certainly not the work of an ordinary forger. The author of it would have to have been a very great spiritual teacher, whether Padmasambhava himself or not.

During my stay in Kalimpong I knew many followers of the Nyingma School, including great lamas, ordinary monks, and lay people. They used to come to my own monastery, and we would co-operate over Buddhist meetings and celebrations. In this way I got to know many of them quite well. And I observed that they all placed a very definite emphasis on the practice of meditation, in a way that the Gelugpas didn't. The Gelugpas are very devoted to debate. A couple of monks will get together and, surrounded by an audience, have a sort of dialectical discussion. This is all rigidly prescribed by tradition. The questions and answers are all out of their books of logic and philosophy, and are accompanied by appropriate dramatic gestures. They spend hours or even days practising these debates, and are examined for their proficiency. But the Nyingmapas - with whom the Gelugpas maintain a certain friendly rivalry - profess to regard all this as rather childish, and say that one should spend more time in meditation.

I also noticed that Nyingma lamas tended to be very spontaneous. If you ask a Gelug lama a

question, nine times out of ten he will refer you to the appropriate page in Tsongkhapa's writings. He will tend to answer by the book, to stick to tradition rather strictly. The Nyingmapas are also very learned, though without pedantry, but if you ask them a question they are likely to answer directly, out of their own experience. Some of the Nyingma lamas I knew were entirely guided by what came to them in their meditation. If they were meditating in the morning and it came to them that they should go and see someone, or hold a big puja - well, as soon as they came out of their meditation they would do it. They were guided by their inner inspiration and tended to speak and act out of this inspiration - something the Gelugpas might have regarded as being rather presumptuous.

One of my own Nyingma teachers, Kachu Rimpoche, was staying with me once in Kalimpong. One morning at breakfast he said to me, 'What do you think I saw in my meditation this morning? I saw a great banner of victory on the roof of your monastery. We must get one put up.' For the next week we were busy buying cloth of various colours in the bazaar and ordering the necessary wooden base from a carpenter, and at the end of the week we were able to hoist the banner of victory up on to the roof. It was six feet high, with flounces of coloured silk surmounted by a golden Dharmachakra. And it was put there simply because the Rimpoche had seen it in his meditation. Subsequently he told me that every morning he'd see in his meditation who would be coming to see him later that day.

He was a remarkable person. Another story about him was told to me by a Buddhist nun, a Frenchwoman who lived in Kalimpong. She had had a number of teachers, and tended to go from one to another, always dissatisfied because they didn't teach her enough or not quickly enough. She was a bit of a handful, to put it mildly. She had a doctorate in philosophy from the Sorbonne and was rather intellectual and difficult to please. On one occasion she had just finished with her latest teacher, and was wandering in the wilds of Sikkim, where she happened to meet Kachu Rimpoche. She was on the look-out for a new teacher, so she entered very eagerly into conversation. She told him what meditation practice she had been doing, and when he asked her how often she had been doing it, she said, 'Oh, every day.' Then he said 'You are not speaking the truth - you haven't done it for six months.' She told me that when he said this she almost jumped out of her skin, because it was true. Being annoyed with her previous teacher, she had not done that meditation for six months.

Of course, she asked to become Kachu Rimpoche's disciple on the spot - though eventually she became disgruntled with him as well, having found him sprinkling all the sacred images in the shrine-room of Pemayangse Monastery with whisky. There is of course nothing wrong with this. The Nyingmapas have occasion in their rituals to use liquor in a skull-cup, or in a little silver dish; it represents amrta or immortality, and in the course of the ritual they take a single drop in the palm of the hand and drink it. But to her this was all wrong, so off she went. But for a time she was very taken by Kachu Rimpoche.

On another occasion, Kachu Rimpoche and I were having lunch with an American couple who had come to study the mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism in Kalimpong. At one point the young man said to me laughingly, 'You know the old story about people levitating. Ask the lama if he has ever seen anyone do it.' He meant this as a joke, but the lama replied very seriously, 'Oh yes, I've seen people do this in Tibet; in fact I can do it a little myself.' When he heard this, the young American almost fell off his chair. In the course of the conversation with this young couple, I noticed that Kachu Rimpoche at times answered their questions before I had had time to translate, even though some of the questions were quite complex. Later on, I questioned him a little more

closely on the subject of levitation, and he told me that he couldn't just levitate on the spot. He had to isolate himself for about six months in a secluded cave or jungle somewhere in order to develop the requisite state of mind.

These stories illustrate the nature of the Nyingma lama and the general nature of the Nyingma tradition. The Nyingmapas are often more spontaneous and lively than other lamas. They are also much less organized, especially compared to the Gelugpas. Traditionally the Gelugpas have tended to think in terms of enormous monasteries in Lhasa from which directives would go flying to all the subordinate monasteries. The Nyingmapas tended to be much more on their own, with individual lamas having their own circles of monk and lay disciples. They are also less exclusively monastic. Some of the greatest Nyingma lamas are not monks at all. Another of my own teachers, Dudjom Rimpoche, one of the most famous Nyingma lamas, was a layman with a family.

THE KAGYU SCHOOL

Ka means simply 'speech', and gyu is 'tradition', so the name means the school of the oral tradition or oral lineage. The Kagyupas place very little emphasis on scriptural study. They attach much more importance to what they call 'ear-whispered instructions', instructions which the guru gives directly to the disciple and which may in fact never have been written down. The Kagyu School traces its lineage back to the eleventh century, to the great Indian - or rather Bhutanese - teacher Marpa, who had studied in India under Naropa.

The most famous figure of this school is Milarepa. His name means simply 'Mila who wears cotton cloth', and he is surely one of the most vivid and interesting characters in the history of Buddhism, indeed in the whole history of religion. Apparently his father died when he was quite small, and his aunt and uncle robbed him and his widowed mother of their inheritance so that they were left penniless. Milarepa's mother wanted revenge, and encouraged her son to learn black magic. He studied and practised sorcery for many years, and eventually wreaked a terrible vengeance on his relations. But afterwards he was overcome with remorse, because many lives had been lost as a result of his practices.

Eventually he came to the feet of the great guru Marpa, who saw at once that Milarepa was an immensely gifted person, a spiritual genius. But he also saw that he had done a great deal of harm and had to be purified. Marpa was nothing if not a spiritual disciplinarian, and he put Milarepa through such difficult trials that Milarepa was reduced to despair and even wanted to commit suicide. But he was encouraged and helped by Marpa's wife (apparently without her husband's knowledge) and eventually, after many struggles, he was initiated and sent to meditate in the solitude of the high mountains.

If we look at the life of Milarepa thereafter - he lived to be quite an old man - its most prominent feature is his sheer uncompromisingness. He never did things by halves, never made concessions, never gave way even by a fraction. For instance there are all sorts of things which a monk is allowed to possess, but Milarepa would have none of them. He did not wear any robes, just his piece of cotton cloth. At one time he had an earthenware bowl in which he used to boil the nettles he gathered for his meal, but one day the bowl broke and then he truly had nothing.

Another story relates how once Milarepa was asleep in his cave. It was a cold winter's night, and he had no clothes. There was no blanket in the cave, no fire, no food: nothing. In the middle of

the night he was woken up by the sound of someone moving about in the cave, and realized that it was a robber. Milarepa was quite amused by this, and called out, 'I don't know how you'll find anything by night, I couldn't find anything by day.' Tibetans - even robbers apparently - have a great sense of humour, so the robber laughed and went away.

Milarepa is traditionally said to have been the greatest yogi in Tibet. There was no spiritual practice, no form of meditation, no attainment of which he was not the master. He was also a remarkable teacher, besides being Tibet's greatest poet. The best-known collection of his poetry is the Mila Grubum, the 100,000 songs of Milarepa (there are not literally 100,000; in Tibetan the title really means 'the collected songs'). These poems are not only of profound spiritual import, but often quite wonderful as poetry.

The Kagyu School, following in the footsteps of Milarepa, stresses the actual practice of Buddhism much more than study of the theory, and until the Chinese occupation there were many Kagyu hermits living in remote, inaccessible places in Tibet. Kagyu practices consist mainly of the six Dharmas or Yogas of Naropa. The first of these is the generating of psychic or internal heat. It was his mastery of this that enabled Milarepa to live amidst the snow and ice of the high mountain ranges clad in only a single cotton garment. In modern times one finds Kagyu lamas wearing their single piece of cotton cloth - which is all they are supposed to wear if they are practising the yoga of psychic heat - over their thick woollen robes. This suggests that things are not quite what they were in Milarepa's day.

The second of the six Dharmas of Naropa is the realizing of the illusory nature of personality, of one's own individual being. The third is the practice of realizing that the whole of existence is like a dream. Fourthly there is the comprehending of the clear light of the Void. The fifth Dharma is gaining Enlightenment in the after-death state, a practice which is connected with the teaching of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. And the sixth Dharma or Yoga of Naropa is the transference of consciousness, not just into other forms of life but into higher states of being.

These six Dharmas involve many complex yogic practices and exercises. However, the highest of the Kagyu practices is the mahamudra or 'great symbol', which corresponds to the atiyoga or 'supreme yoga' of the Nyingmapas as well as approximating in some ways to Ch'an or Zen in the very highest sense.

THE SAKYA SCHOOL

This term sakyas has nothing to do with the Indian word sakyas, the name of the tribe to which the Buddha belonged. In Tibetan, sakyas means 'tawny earth', in the sense of fallow or unploughed land, and it is the name of the principal monastery of this school, which was situated in a place known as 'the region of tawny earth'. The school was begun in 1073CE by the great teacher Drokmi, who had studied in India for a number of years under many spiritual masters. However, Drokmi's disciple Konchok Gyelpo is usually regarded as the founder of the school, and he was not a monk but a layman. Though the early heads of the school were married, subsequently it became the custom for them to be monks and to be succeeded by a nephew who was also a monk. Thus when the head of the Sakya School dies, his brother's or his sister's son will succeed, and when he dies, the succession will revert to his nephew, the grandson of his predecessor. In this way the succession goes backwards and forwards between two collateral family branches.

The Sakyapas are especially distinguished for their scholarship. The greatest of their scholars,

perhaps the greatest of all Tibetan scholars, was the celebrated Buton, who lived in the fourteenth century. He it was who was responsible for the compilation of the Kangyur and the Tangyur, and his collection of the Buddhist texts into these two great editions is accepted as standard and authoritative by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He also wrote an important history of Buddhism, covering Buddhism in India as well as in Tibet. Another great historian, Taranatha, belonged to an offshoot of the Sakya tradition.

Historically there is a close connection between the Sakyapas and the Mongols, as it was the Sakyapas who converted this rather warlike people to Buddhism. Out of gratitude for the teaching they had received, the Mongols supported the Sakyapas politically to such an extent that the supreme abbot of the Sakya School ruled practically the whole of Tibet for a period of about eighty years, spanning the second half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth. They can thus be said to have paved the way for the later rule of the Dalai Lamas.

In connection with this there is an interesting story about Pakpa, who consolidated the political power of the Sakyapas in Tibet in the thirteenth century. This celebrated Sakya leader was the guru of the even more famous Kublai Khan, who at that time ruled not only China, but also the whole of Central Asia and even parts of the West. Kublai Khan was apparently very grateful for the spiritual instruction and inspiration which Pakpa had given him, and very devoted to the Sakya School. One day he proposed to Pakpa that he should make a law compelling all the people of Tibet to give up the other traditions and follow only the teaching of the Sakya School. Such was Kublai Khan's enthusiasm.

Now one might have expected Pakpa to have been overjoyed at this development. One might have thought that he would have agreed at once with Kublai Khan's proposal and even have urged him to punish those who refused to conform. After all, such has been the pattern of religious history in the West. But Pakpa did not agree. On the contrary, he dissuaded Kublai Khan from making such a law. Such a law, he said, would not be in accordance with the Dharma. In effect Pakpa was saying that the other Buddhists of Tibet, the non-Sakyapas, should be free to follow whatever school they wished. There must be no compulsion, no coercion. This is, in fact, the Buddhist tradition, and it is very much the attitude of Tibetan Buddhists. They are very devoted to their own form of Buddhism; they believe in it, and follow it wholeheartedly. But at the same time they respect other traditions. Rarely is there any attempt to coerce anybody into a particular school. This is indeed the attitude of Buddhists throughout the East. They are generally very tolerant, whether towards other forms of Buddhism or other religions.

THE GELUG SCHOOL

The Gelugpas are, literally, 'the virtuous ones'. Not that the followers of the other schools were not virtuous, but the Gelugpas specialized, as it were, in virtue; it was their strong point. The Gelug School was founded by Tsongkhapa in the fourteenth century, and is the school to which the Dalai Lamas especially belong, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

This fourth and latest of the great schools of Tibetan Buddhism cannot be understood apart from the character and career of its founder Tsongkhapa, who is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in Tibetan Buddhism. He embodies the characteristic spiritual or religious genius of the Tibetan people. He is known primarily as the reformer of Buddhism in Tibet, as he swept away many abuses. He was also a great organizer; he unified the monastic Sangha to a considerable extent and imposed a consistent discipline. And he is renowned as a scholar-saint of the highest

distinction. Saints are often not scholars, and only too often scholars are by no means saints. But Tsongkhapa was that rather rare combination, a man of saintly life and at the same time a scholar, and both almost to perfection.

Tsongkhapa's life is very well documented, the Tibetans having always been very historically-minded. Here they differ from the ancient Indians. Sanskrit literature is one of the richest in the world, including drama, poetry, and fiction, but it can boast just one historical work. The Tibetans, on the other hand, produced many histories of India, of Tibet, and of Buddhism, as well as innumerable biographies, mainly of saints and religious people, which are often sound critical works, not just hagiography. Hence we know that Tsongkhapa was born in the year 1357CE, the fourth son of his parents, and that, like many other famous and illustrious men, he came from a very poor family. He was born in Tsongkha - literally 'onion valley' - in the province of Amdo in north-eastern Tibet; the famous Kumbum Monastery, the monastery of the 100,000 Buddha images, was later built over the place of his birth.

Tsongkhapa therefore means 'the man from the onion valley'. This again reflects the Tibetan notion that it is disrespectful to refer to people by their personal names. For any respectable, especially religious person, they coin some sort of title. This happened to me when I arrived in Kalimpong. Most Tibetans there never knew that my name was Sangharakshita because nobody ever used it. During the first few years they called me Imji Gelong, which means 'the English monk'; and when I had been there a few years they called me Imji Gelong Geshe Rimpoche. Tsongkhapa's monastic name, given to him on his ordination, was Sumatikirti which is a Sanskrit name meaning one who is praised, or is praiseworthy, on account of superior intelligence - a very appropriate name for Tsongkhapa. The Tibetans also refer to him as Jetsun Tsongkhapa - Jetsun meaning 'the venerable one' - or as Je Rimpoche, which means 'the greatly precious ruler', the spiritual sovereign as it were.

He seems to have been precocious, not to say a prodigy; his religious education began at the age of three, when he received various initiations and started practising meditation, and he became a sramanera, a novice monk, at the age of seven. According to the Vinaya, the Book of the Discipline, you can be ordained if you are old enough to earn your living by scaring crows away from the crops (a very important occupation in an agricultural country), and in the East this is usually understood to be when you are about seven. So Tsongkhapa was ordained at the earliest possible opportunity; this is not unusual even today in Buddhist countries. Indeed, there are records in the Buddhist scriptures of little boys of seven, eight, and nine attaining arhantship or Enlightenment. This only goes to show what one can do and how far one can get if one only starts early enough, before one has been corrupted by what Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth century English poet and mystic, calls 'the dirty devices of this world'.

At sixteen Tsongkhapa was sent to study at a number of famous monasteries in central Tibet. For a number of years he moved from one great teacher to another, in this way systematically covering the whole field of Buddhist studies. He studied the voluminous Tibetan scriptures and also the translations of works by the great Indian Buddhist sages and philosophers, which are even more voluminous. In particular he studied logic - in later life he was very strong on logic - as well as mathematics and the Indo-Tibetan ayurvedic tradition of medical science. In addition to this, of course, he studied and practised the teachings of all three yanas of Buddhism.

Thus in his own teaching work, Tsongkhapa had a rich source of material to draw upon. By his time Buddhism had been firmly established in Tibet for several hundred years, and practically

everything of importance had been translated and could be studied. Tsongkhapa was therefore able to take quite an encyclopaedic approach. He immersed himself in all the existing traditions, took the best of them, and codified and systematized these in a manner which is still of the utmost importance for the study of Tibetan Buddhism.

At the age of twenty-five he received his full ordination as a Buddhist monk. This 'higher ordination', as it is also called, is available to monks at twenty, but as he was busy with his studies he deferred it until he was twenty-five. After that he was fully occupied both with continuing his studies and with teaching; and the remaining thirty or so years of his life were passed in this way. In the course of these years he gathered many disciples who, on account of their devotion and dedication to the Dharma and the purity and holiness of their lives, gradually became known as the Gelugpas, meaning 'the virtuous ones'. They were so called because, following Tsongkhapa's example, they insisted on a stricter observance of the vinaya than was customary at that time, including a total prohibition of marriage and of alcohol.

In the West the Gelugpas are often known as the Yellow Hats, in contradistinction to members of the older schools who are known as the Red Hats and to some of the Kagyu off-shoots who are called the White Hats or Black Hats. This distinction relates to certain Tantric ceremonies, at least with regard to the Yellow Hats and the Red Hats. At the time of Tantric initiation, the officiating lama or guru puts on a cap - yellow in the case of the Gelugpas, red in the case of the Nyingmapas - and this has a definite significance. The cap is put on at those moments in the ceremony when the lama is identifying himself mentally, through meditation, with the Buddha or Bodhisattva whose initiation he is giving.

So when an acolyte hands the yellow cap - or the red cap, as the case may be - to the guru, this is a very solemn moment. The cap is usually handed over ceremoniously on a piece of silk or a cushion. When the guru puts it on, you know that he is at that moment identifying himself in his meditation with the Buddha or Bodhisattva whose initiation he is about to give. The recipient of the initiation therefore feels that he is receiving it from the Buddha or Bodhisattva himself, through the guru. After that moment has passed, the hat is solemnly taken off and given back to the acolyte, to be folded up and put away. Up to the time of Tsongkhapa all the lamas, following the Indian tradition, used to have red caps for this purpose. Tsongkhapa wanted to make a visible distinction between his followers and those of the existing schools, so he changed the colour of the hat used in these ceremonies from red to yellow.

In the course of Tsongkhapa's lifetime his disciples founded in or near Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, three great Gelug monasteries: Ganden, Sera, and Drepung. These have survived to the present day, although they have been seriously damaged by the Chinese. Before the Chinese occupation Ganden and Sera each housed about 5,000 monks, and Drepung was even bigger, with over 7,000. They were almost like monastic towns or even cities.

Tsongkhapa was a prolific author; the standard collected edition of his writings fills sixteen massive Tibetan volumes. His two principal works are the Lam-rim chen-mo and the Nga-rim chen-mo. Lam-rim literally means 'stages of the path' (chen-mo means 'great'); the work is a survey of the whole spiritual path according to the Mahayana tradition, discussing in detail the practice of the paramitas and so on, citing innumerable Buddhist scriptures. The Nga-rim is a similar account of the Tantric Path, that is, the Vajrayana. These two comprehensive and highly systematic works are the basis of Gelug studies. Tsongkhapa also wrote a shortened version of the Lam-rim for those of lesser intelligence, and this is the one which even the monks usually

study, the longer version being extremely difficult, abstruse, and technical. Besides these, he composed some commentaries on scriptures, and a number of rather beautiful minor works.

Tsongkhapa died in the year 1419, by which time the Gelug Order and the movement which it represented was well established, with a firm footing in the religious life of Tibet. Thereafter the anniversary of his death was observed every year - not just by the Gelugpas but by all schools - with a great festival of lights. As the evening draws in and it begins to get dark, people put rows of tiny oil or butter lamps round every house, monastery, and temple, in the windows, along the parapets, on the flat roofs, on the window sills. Hundreds or even thousands of these lamps can be seen all over the town, presenting a beautiful sight.

On account of the force of his personality, his vast scholarship and organizational ability, and his spiritual genius, Tsongkhapa left a permanent imprint on Tibetan Buddhism. But even more than this, in the estimation of the Tibetan people, especially the Gelugpas, Tsongkhapa is above all a Bodhisattva. He is traditionally regarded as a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, who is associated in particular with the Perfection of Wisdom teachings. Tibetan paintings or images representing Tsongkhapa therefore show him with the attributes and insignia of Manjusri. He is depicted as a rather typical Tibetan scholar-saint, seated in his monastic robes and wearing his tall yellow cap, but growing out of his shoulders, as it were, rather like two little wings, are lotus flowers. On one lotus is the flaming sword of Manjusri, the sword which cuts asunder the bonds of ignorance, and on the other is the book of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures. This indicates that Tsongkhapa is regarded as a manifestation on the earthly plane of Manjusri, the great archetype of spiritual wisdom.