



# A HISTORY OF GOSHIR PALJOR DHONDUP

Ziche Leethong



# A HISTORY OF GOSHIR PALJOR DHONDUP

by Zeeche Leethong

with short biography by Mikyö Dorje

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## FOREWORD

by the Karmapa

The supreme victor, the glorious Sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen's chief spiritual son, the all-knowing victor, the great Nyewowa, Goshir Rinpoche Paljor Dhondup, not only stands as the inaugural figure in the line of successive Drungpa Gyaltsabs but is also honored in the golden rosary of the essence lineage. His immense kindness has profoundly benefited this precious lineage in both spiritual and temporal matters. On this momentous occasion, commemorating over 600 years since the birth of this protector of beings, a historian blessed with keen insight, Ziche Leethong, has thoroughly explored Goshir Rinpoche's life and published this insightful work. I have the pleasure of bestowing upon it the title: *Clouds of Offerings to Delight the Bodhisattva*. With that, I offer my auspicious prayer that it will serve as a key to unlock the rich history of Kamtsang in general and the biographies of the successive Gyaltsabs in particular.

Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje



## FOREWORD

by the Twelfth Goshri Gyaltsabpa

Lord Goshir Paljor Dhondup was the first incarnation of the regent of the sixth Buddha, the Lion, the supreme victor, the Karmapa. With altruistic intent, my disciple, the historian Karma Legthong Namgyal, has conducted contemporary and meticulous research on the life of Paljor Dhondup. The fruit of this endeavor is a new composition he is publishing titled: *Clouds of Offerings to Delight the Bodhisattva*. I rejoice in this work and commend his efforts. This biography clearly conveys the exceptionally noble mind and character, as well as the spiritual essence of Guigongpa, the bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup. May this work greatly inspire and strengthen the faith of many beings, bringing forth the auspiciousness of the Buddha's teachings and the ancient practice lineage of Karma Kamtsang, allowing them to flourish and endure for generations to come.

The 12th Gyaltsabpa Mingyur Gocha  
5th day of the 9th month, 2024

## PREFACE

In 2010, I began my research on Karma Kagyu history, spending several years at Gyuto Monastery. There, His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa maintained a modest yet significant personal library containing rare documents unavailable elsewhere at that time. My research also extended to prominent Tibetan libraries, including the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim, the Library of Varanasi University, and the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu.

Initially, I expected to find namthars (spiritual biographies) of former Gyaltsabs, as historical records suggested that some existed. However, I didn't intend to write about any particular Gyaltsab due to insufficient sources. This was especially true for the first Gyaltsab, whose longest extant biography spanned merely two or three pages in *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*.

Upon discovering a substantial amount of information about the first Gyaltsab, Paljor Dhondup, I conceived the possibility of authoring a complete biography in an academic manner. I began

compiling notes, and the writing process took approximately three days.

At that time, I was in the early stages of my research career and an inexperienced writer. Thus, when I presented my work to my teacher and other scholars, I was gratified by their positive feedback. I recall my teacher remarking that this is what research means.

I harbor a sense of disappointment that more comprehensive biographies of previous Gyaltsabs weren't composed or preserved by their students. Consequently, after many generations, my ability to author a book about Goshir Paljor Dhondup fills me with pride. I consider this work my personal contribution to the historical record of the Gyaltsab lineage.

This year, Palchen Chosling Monastery, the seat of the Twelfth Goshir Gyaltsab, is commemorating the 600th anniversary of Goshir Paljor Dhondup. To honor this significant occasion, I felt compelled to republish this book. Working under tight time constraints, I revised the Tibetan version and produced a preliminary English translation in approximately one month.

I extend my gratitude to the Gyalwang Karmapa for granting me access to his personal library and honoring this second edition

with a new title: *Clouds of Offerings to Delight the Bodhisattva*. I am indebted to the twelfth Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche for his consistent and unconditional kindness. I am truly grateful to both of them for blessing this book with auspicious prayers in the form of their forewords.

I also express my appreciation to General Secretary Sherab Tharchin, Drupon Lama Tenzin Gyurme, Deputy General Secretary Drubgyu Thrinley, Khenpo Ghawang, and all the staff and monks of Ralang monastery who have always supported and valued my work.

Furthermore, I am grateful to my friend Jane Leung for editing my English translation despite her busy schedule and my pressing deadline. I also thank Pat Murphy (also known as Karma Trinley Paldron) who helped with the final proofreading, as recommended by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, to whom I am always indebted. I am grateful to Sean Wong for his assistance in conducting research about Goshir Paljor Dhondup within the Chinese archives. I would like to thank my dharma sisters Chingya and Chen Yi Xin (Red) for the cover design, and Palden Lama for the page layout. My thanks also go to Lama Eric, Nangdrak, and Inge.

I offer my sincere thanks to Peta's family from Bouchen, who provided food and shelter for me during my translation of this book, and to Karma Lak of Norbu Graphics for handling the

## PREFACE

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ISBN registration. In summary, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who contributed to making this book a reality.

*12 September 2024*  
*Bouchen, East Sikkim*





A SPIRITUAL ACCOUNT OF THE  
OMNISCIENT GYALWA (VICTOR),  
THE EMINENT BEING NYEWOWA,

Who Was Granted the Title of Dayuan Goshir Guigongpa by  
Decree of the Emperor, Who Was an Emanation of Manjushri,  
Who Was Known to Be Shakyamuni's Bhikshu Paljor Dhondup,  
and Also a Great Tulku of Rechung Dorje Drak or Shiwa O.

by Mikyö Dorje

Sadhu, Mangalam, Shubhamstu, Sarvajagam. Svasti,  
Intentionally you took birth as a Tulku,  
A great bodhisattva on the bhumis,  
To fulfill all the intentions of supreme victor Karmapa.  
To you, one not contaminated by the obscuration of  
womb, I prostrate.

Thus the one who is worthy of being praised, revered and paid  
tribute to, who is the teacher of beings, and though he achieved  
complete enlightenment many eons ago, he appears during this

degenerative time as Avalokiteshvara, the embodiment of all the activity of the buddhas. On his head he holds a crown which is the nature of Buddha Akshobhya, dark blue in color, with a sun and moon coming out from the white clouds and further marked with the crossed vajra as the bud.

The great being Paljor Dhondup was renowned throughout the three worlds as an emanation of a great bodhisattva on the higher bhumis whose purpose was to fulfill the intentions of the Gyalwang Karmapa. Even though he is free from the harm of birth and death, when he showed the appearance of entering the womb, he was free from the contaminations of ordinary development such as one's mindfulness and awareness becoming impaired.

Through his blessings, the womb of his mother became a buddha field with a palace, a throne, and the bed of a fully bloomed lotus flower, upon which the bodhisattva sat with crossed legs and hands in the mudra of equipoise. Fearlessly he entered into the great yoga of liberation of calm abiding and penetrative insight. Seeing this, the gods of the Pure Realms up to the Peak of Cyclic Existence exclaimed *A la la ho*, in a manner similar to what occurred when Buddha Shakyamuni entered the womb of his mother Mahamaya in the past.

In this way, he was revered by all beings without exception and was praised by all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples.

As soon as he was born,  
He went to the dharma lord and protector of beings,  
Karmapa,  
Received the empowerment of all-accomplishing  
activity,  
And became the secret holder of all the buddhas.

As soon as he was born, he was free from notions of coming and going. Miraculously, he traveled through the sky into the presence of a lion-throne of the Dharma Lord Karmapa. He made a request by saying:

Ema, as I will accomplish the activities of all the buddhas of countless pure lands throughout space, may you grant me the power to accomplish my intentions.

Suddenly, Gyalwa Karmapa and the buddhas of the ten directions, like a pod of sesame seeds that burst open, blessed him with their truth. He was empowered with ability, great potential and the glory of abundant magnificence. Then he possessed the immeasurable secret of the vajra of body, speech and mind of all

the buddhas in order to carry out the inconceivable activities of benefiting beings without any hindrance or obstruction.

To tame the ordinary people who are arrogant,  
Far away from the path of Lama,  
The way he relied upon tutors  
Was just like Manibhadra and Ever Weeping.

Although in reality, a complete Buddha appears in the roles of lama and disciple to guide unfortunate individuals, it is also to destroy the mistaken ego of ordinary people who harbor resentment towards pure spiritual teachers, who abandon dharma, and who discard ultimate happiness as if it were grass. For this purpose, this great bodhisattva relied upon spiritual masters such as Gyalwa Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, the great Khenpo and omniscient Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo, and the great Tokdhen and lord of the yogis, Shamarwa Choepal Yeshe.

The manner in which he revered them with offerings, respect, service, and practice, thereby increasing his accumulation of merit and wisdom, is entirely comparable to the lives of bodhisattvas Manibhadra and the Ever Weeping. Just this way of life alone possesses great power to liberate beings from samsara.

When the supreme victor Karmapa

And other eminent lamas passed from this world,  
You became their heir and fulfilled all of the wishes  
They proclaimed before passing into parinirvana.

When Thongwa Dondhen — one meaningful to see, hear, touch or remember — and all the other pure spiritual masters that this great bodhisattva relied upon in his life, completed their vast benefit of beings in this world and demonstrated passing into parinirvana, they showed inconceivable benefit of beings at that time. When that happened, this bodhisattva played various roles: that of Maitreya by holding the throne of dharma and acting as the heir of those great victorious ones (the Karmapas); that of Ananda by holding the secret treasury of their dharma; that of Mahakasyapa to propagate and fill the ten directions with relics so that the heap of merit wouldn't come to an end; that of Brahma and Indra by protecting the entire horizon of their activities because of which there is no other like him, one who is skillful to establish firmly the activities of all buddhas for the great benefit of beings.

The one who is the rebirth of the Buddha Karmapa,  
Great Tulku Choedrak Gyatso,  
And other incomparable lamas of beings,

Their clear wisdom has been illuminated by him in  
this world.

This great bodhisattva raised the ultimate objects of refuge such as Tulku, the Great Karmapa, for beings. Through his activities he appeared as others have made appearances to benefit beings. Just like the teacher of literacy known as Teacher to All who taught the young prince Siddhartha, he demonstrated teaching the pitakas, tantras, and great sciences, and the tulkus [his students] too demonstrated mastering all this knowledge and gaining the power of great confidence that is free from any fear. Choedrak Gyatso, the one who was the reincarnation of Gyalwa Karmapa, was known as the all-knowing and all-seeing one in this world. He had the eyes that had no obstruction across the three times. He defeated anyone who challenged him, including gods and shramanas who claimed to be teachers. This too was the resulting kindness from having this great bodhisattva as his tutor.

To benefit beings, you not only performed the  
activities  
that are beyond the mundane world,  
But also, in accordance with the world, you benefited  
beings,

Again, you manifested the emanation, to you, I  
prostrate.

This means that to abandon all the things that are contaminated by negative emotions and to complete the virtue that is beyond the worldly, he benefited beings in accordance with the conditions of the impure world. He brought them to virtue in this world by engaging in generosity and urging others to do so as well. He created texts and statues and urged others to do the same. He observed morality and urged others to do likewise. He refrained from harming others and urged the same for others. He remained with less desire and more contentment and urged others to do so. He purified all enmity towards others and urged others likewise. He repaid the kindness of his parents, dharma people and elders, and he urged others to do the same.

Thus he increased the virtues of the past, present and future in the mind-streams of beings throughout space. His wisdom, compassion and power are not different from the three lords of the world: Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Vajrapani. To live such life, he mastered the power of having continual reincarnations, the first being this great being, the second is Tashi Drakpa Dhondup Namgyal Palzangpo, the third one is Tashi Drakpa Paljor, whose

presence we see with us as the as defender, protector and guide of all beings.

Therefore, with just this much one can roughly understand the spiritual account of this great being. This was written by Palden Dorje Gawei Yang at Hawo Gang [which in other words is known as Yaksha Gangwa Sangpo]. By this merit, may all beings attain the state of this lord.



CLOUDS OF OFFERINGS  
TO DELIGHT THE BODHISATTVA

A History of Goshir Paljor Dhondup

by Ziche Leethong

## INTRODUCTION

Goshir Paljor Dhondup stands as one of the most significant figures in the Kagyu lineage during the fifteenth century. Contemporary Chinese imperial documents, which record Paljor Dhondup alongside the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso as the preeminent Tibetan Lamas of their era, attest to his prominence not only within Tibet but extending as far as China. Notably, Paljor Dhondup was a key figure in the unprecedented development within the Karma Kagyu tradition.

The Vajrayana practices of the Karma Kagyu reached their zenith under the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, Paljor Dhondup's teacher. Subsequently, during the time of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, Paljor Dhondup's student, the Karma Kagyu established its own system for studying sutra philosophies. So Paljor Dhondup played a pivotal role in these crucial developments within the Karma Kagyu tradition.

Consequently, during the era of Paljor Dhondup and his two principal disciples — the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak — the Karma Kagyu tradition flourished to an extent unparalleled by other Tibetan Buddhist lineages, including the Sakya, Geluk, Nyingma, and

other Kagyu traditions. This period marked the apogee of the Karma Kagyu's development, both in religious and secular spheres, since its inception — a pinnacle that remains unmatched to this day. Thus, Paljor Dhondup established a historical precedent of paramount importance to Karma Kagyu adherents.

Paljor Dhondup distinguished himself as a master who excelled not only in religious scholarship but also in worldly administration. His generous dedication to the activities of the Karmapa and his heart sons significantly benefited the Karma Kagyu teachings. Yet, in documenting the more visible activities of the Karmapa and Shamar, historians often overlooked the subtlety and magnitude of Paljor Dhondup's legacy.

As a result, a contemporary reconstruction of the history of Goshir Paljor Dhondup presents a considerable challenge. Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa's *The Feast for Scholars* notes:

Nyukla Wa compiled the biography of the Great Thongwa Dondhen written by Horton Sangye Gyaltsen, along with supplications of Bengar Wa and Goshir Wa that he himself wrote, as he couldn't find the biography of these two. He then gave the oral transmission of these annually.

*A Record of Teachings Received* by Tertön Rigzen Jatsön Nyíngpo, dating from the seventeenth century, mentions:

The collection of works of Great Thongwa Dondhen, the biography of Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, the biography of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, the collection of works of great Choedrak Gyatso, the biography of Sangye Nyenpa Drupthob, the thirty-four volumes of works of Great Mikyö.

This reference suggests the existence of a biography of Goshir Paljor Dhondup that Tertön Rigzen Jatsön Nyíngpo accessed.

However, the non-specific nature of this reference leaves uncertainty as to whether it refers to an extant biography of Paljor Dhondup (possibly the one authored by the eighth Karmapa) or to a now-lost record. Currently, the most extensive biography of Paljor Dhondup available is found in the *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, co-authored by Situ Choekyi Jungnay and Belo Tsewang Kunkyab in the eighteenth century. Even so, this biography spans merely two or three pages.

As a result of these limitations, reconstructing Paljor Dhondup's history necessitates a meticulous approach akin to assembling an ocean from water droplets. This study aims to illuminate the significant events and import of Paljor Dhondup's life by col-

lating information from diverse related literature. However, it will not delve extensively into Paljor Dhondup's early life, which intertwines with that of the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, nor his later years, which overlap with the formative period of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso.

The primary objectives are to supplement the oversights of previous historians, rectify historical inaccuracies, and, crucially, to comprehend the broader history of the Karma Kagyu. This includes examining the contextual background, the factors contributing to its development during Paljor Dhondup's time, and the subsequent impact on the Karma Kagyu's evolution, using Paljor Dhondup's life as a lens through which to view the lineage.

It is important to clarify that this work does not constitute a spiritual biography that serves purely religious purposes. Instead, it primarily relies on established facts, employing analytical reasoning and judicious interpretation. As such, this study adheres more closely to an academic article in style and approach.

## FATHER AND MOTHER

The Tibetan tradition of composing biographies of eminent masters typically includes several crucial elements. These encompass

the individual's birthplace, birth year, parental lineage, ordination details (if applicable), the source of their vows, principal teachers and disciples (particularly lineage holders), and the location of their passing (parinirvana). Among these elements, there exists a convention of referring to a Lama by their clan name. But as this is no longer common practice, it presents a challenge for us to understand the family background of a given master.

Extant biographies of Goshir Paljor Dhondup notably omit his parents' names. However, the *Collected Works of Choedrak Gyatso* provides some illuminating information. In one of the seventh Karmapa's writings, we find:

Amitabha, embodiment of compassion,  
Liberator of beings from samsara's ocean,  
In wisdom's space benefiting sentient beings  
spontaneously,  
May Jangchub Dolma take rebirth.

Traversing the bodhi path,  
In that Vajra space of wisdom,  
In the Sukha mandala of the Protector,  
May Jangchub Dolma attain the supreme state.  
This was instructed to the Mother Jangchub Dolma of  
Goshirpa at Arigthang.

Furthermore, the *Collected Works of Choedrak Gyatso* contains another relevant passage:

The dakini, mother of wisdom's space,  
Glories for the yogis like Saraha,  
Establishes beings on the liberation path with great  
bliss's dance,  
May all swiftly follow Vajrayana's secret path.  
This too was instructed to the Mayum [Honorary  
Mother] Jangchub Dolma.

These writings are among Choedrak Gyatso's earliest works, likely composed during his adolescence or even childhood. While these Tibetan writings may not exhibit professional-level composition, understanding the author's age allows for a deeper appreciation of the merit and profound meaning of his words.

During this period, it is plausible that multiple Lamas held the title of Goshir. However, these *Collected Works of Choedrak Gyatso* references a specific object being bestowed or certain words being addressed to Goshirpa. Moreover, the biography of Choedrak Gyatso, authored by Paljor Dhondup, explicitly identifies Paljor Dhondup himself as the recipient of said object or communication. Thus, one can infer that the individual referred

to as Jangchub Dolma in the *Collected Works of Choedrak Gyatso* was Paljor Dhondup's mother.

Contrary to the common practice in Tibetan Buddhism in which young monks or recognized tulkus often lose contact with their parents upon entering monastic life, Paljor Dhondup appears to have maintained a close relationship with his mother even after becoming a monk. This continuity of their connection may be attributed to his mother's potential high social status or simply, to the presence of lay followers or practitioners in the Karmapas' Great Encampment during this period. It can be inferred with certainty that Paljor Dhondup's mother was spiritually inclined and a dedicated practitioner, maintaining close ties not only with her son but also with the Karmapa probably through her son's connection. Her son's achievements would undoubtedly have been a source of great pride for her, and it is possible that she even became his student.

The notable lack of documentation regarding Paljor Dhondup's father is a possible indication that he was raised by a single mother, or perhaps that his father did not exert as important an influence on his life.

## NYEMO OR NYEWO?

Even though Paljor Dhondup is very important for many reasons, there has been no research about Paljor Dhondup during our time and we find little information about him in the books or on-line articles written by foreigners and Tibetans. Without exception, all have written that Paljor Dhondup was born in Nyemo in Central Tibet. However, upon careful examination of the biographies, it becomes evident that none of the older accounts mention Nyemo as his birthplace. Instead, they consistently refer to Nyewo. In addition, the biographies of the earlier Karmapas frequently mention traveling to a place called Nyewo before reaching Central Tibet.

My research revealed to me the existence of two places in Tibet with similar names. One is Nyemo, located in Central Tibet, is larger and more widely known. Nyewo, situated in the Nagchu region, is currently considered part of Central Tibet or the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Geographically, however, it is positioned between Central Tibet and Kham.

While there is debate regarding whether Kongpo, a region in Southern Tibet, belongs to Central Tibet or Kham, one must reach Lhasa before arriving at Nyemo in Central Tibet, which

is situated between Wu and Tsang. The Wu mainly constitutes Centre of Tibet such as Lhasa while Tsang mainly constitutes more Western part of Tibet. The location referred to as Nyewo appears to be in the vicinity of Kham and Kongpo and it is distinct from Nyemo in Central Tibet, despite the apparent similarity in their names.

The ninth chapter of the series *A History and Culture of Lhasa City* discusses Nyemo. It cites *The Feast for Scholars* by Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa, which mentions the six Khos during the reign of Tibetan King Songtsan Gampo, stating that the border of Wuru is Western Nyemo. Additionally, Vairochana's biography mentions "the Sandal Castle of Nyemo in Tsang." These references indicate that this region has been known as Nyemo since at least the seventh or eighth century.

The book also notes that, traditionally, the name *Nyemo* is attributed to the Tibetan word "Nyema," meaning "ear of grains," due to the region's high-quality crop production. According to this source, the region was formerly called Nemo, but there is no mention of it being referred to as Nyewo.

Regarding Nyewo in the Nakchu region, a five-volume series on Nakchu's regions provides information about Nyewo. It cites the *Kachem Kakholma*, believed to be composed by Tibetan King

Songtsan Gampo, which mentions that the Chinese Princess Wencheng Gongzhu traveled through Nyewo. This suggests that the region has been known as Nyewo since approximately the seventh century.

Local folklore, as recounted in this book, attributes the name Nyewo to a rich boy who married a goddess and had seven children. Two of their sons planted onions and garlic, which grew abundantly. As onions and garlic are also called *nyewu* in Tibetan, the region subsequently became known as Nyewo.

It is noteworthy that the book about Nakchu does not mention this region being alternatively known as Nyemo. This evidence strongly suggests that Nyemo and Nyewo are distinct places, and their names were never used interchangeably.

In summary, due to insufficient knowledge of Tibetan geography and inadequate historical research, many have erroneously written that not only the first Gyaltsab Paljor Dhondup but also the second Gyaltsab Tashi Namgyal were born in Nyemo, Central Tibet. Now, we know that the second Gyaltsab was also born in Nyewo. The prevalent belief that most Gyaltsabs were born in Nyemo, Central Tibet, is partially a myth.

Several factors contribute to the common misconception that Paljor Dhondup was born in Nyemo, Central Tibet, rather than Nyewo in Nakchu.

Nyemo in Central Tibet is more widely known, whereas few people are familiar with Nyewo in Nakchu.

The fourth Gyaltsab Drakpa Dhondup and the current twelfth Gyaltsab were born in Nyemo, Central Tibet, where there remains a significant following of Gyaltsab. Conversely, Nyewo in Nakchu has almost no Gyaltsab followers.

Most contemporary Karma Kagyu followers are unaware of Nyewo's existence. Unfamiliar with the two distinct locations, they confuse the similar Tibetan names.

In colloquial Tibetan, many words retain their meaning even when the last syllable (*wo* or *mo*) changes. For example, “Sha Tsamo” and “Sha Tsawo” both mean “cute” in Tibetan.

Given that Nyemo and Nyewo are separate and geographically distinct places, and their names were never used synonymously, it is important to present additional sources to clarify this point. All historical literature concerning Goshir Paljor Dhondup, when mentioning his birthplace or title derived from his birthplace, consistently refers to Nyewo and never Nyemo. For example, *The*

*Collected Works of Choedrak Gyatso* frequently mentions “Nyewo Goshir” but never “Nyemo Goshir.”

In *The Blue Annals* by Goelo Zhonnu Pal, a contemporary of Paljor Dhondup, it is written regarding the sixth Karmapa: “[...] to the Dharma Lord Nyewowa, he [Thongwa Dondhen] said don’t let the seal be broken until my return.”

Tsuklak Trengwa in *The Feast for Scholars* states: “Goshir Rinpoche was born in Nyewo.”

Karma Chakme, who wrote short biographies of Karma Kagyu masters in the seventeenth century, refers to “Nyewo Goshir Paljor Dhondup.”

*A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, written in the eighteenth century, mentions: “Goshir Paljor Dhondup was born in a place called Yagteng in Nyewo.”

The eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje titled his biography of Paljor Dhondup: *The Biography of the victorious, the omniscient, the great Nyewowa, the one who is named as the Dayuan Goshir Guigungpa by the declaration of the Manjushri King, and whose other name is Bhikshu of Shakya, Paljor Dhondup.*

These statements consistently confirm the same information without contradiction. Many of these writers traveled extensively

to both Nyemo and Nyewo, making it highly improbable that they would err in naming these locations.

Therefore, we can conclude with certainty that Goshir Paljor Dhondup was not born in Nyemo, Central Tibet, but in Nyewo, Nakchu. More specifically, he was born in a place called Yagteng in Nyewo, in the Lhari District of Nakchu province of the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

The veracity of the place name “Yagteng” remains uncertain. In *The Feast of Scholars*, which contains the biography of the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa, it is stated:

When he was invited to Nyewo, he left many footprints. At Yangkha Teng, he saw that he was invited by the dharma protectors and he even imitated them.

It is possible that Yagteng, (mentioned in Paljor Dhondup’s biography), and Yangkha Teng, (found in the fifth Karmapa’s biography), refer to the same place despite the apparent variation in name. However, this is merely conjecture and requires further verification.

Recent information from Tibet has brought to light a sacred site in Nyewo, where local tradition indicates the birth of a prominent Karma Kagyu master in the distant past. The identity of this

master, however, remains obscure to the local population. Given that no significant reincarnations like Karmapa, Shamar, Pawo or Treho were born in Nyewo, and considering the region's primary association with the birthplaces of the first and second Gyaltsab, it is plausible that this site pertains to the birthplace of Paljor Dhondup since he may have been held in higher esteem than the second Gyaltsab. Nevertheless, additional scholarly investigation is requisite to corroborate this proposition and establish its validity within the historical context of Tibetan Buddhism.

The relative obscurity of Nyewo within the Karma Kagyu community can be attributed to the decline of Karma Kagyu from the seventeenth century onward. During this period, Karma Kagyu teachers (primarily the Karmapas) did not travel as extensively as their predecessors, and later followers of Karma Kagyu possessed increasingly limited knowledge of various sciences, including history, leading to gaps in knowledge about places significant to the Karma Kagyu lineage. In contrast, the biographies of many earlier Karmapas, Gyaltsabs, and Shamars, starting from the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, document their travels to Nyewo and their numerous activities there.

According to oral traditions from the older generation in Nyewo, Nakchu, there were once many small Karma Kagyu monasteries

in Nyewo, which were consolidated into one large monastery by the third Karmapa. Historical records, however, indicate that this consolidation was actually carried out by the fifth Dalai Lama when he and his government in Lhasa converted many Karma Kagyu monasteries to the Geluk tradition. Consequently, the influence of Karma Kagyu in many areas diminished from being the dominant lineage to virtually disappearing. Nyewo exemplifies such a place.

It is crucial to understand that while Karma Kagyu followers may have forgotten about Nyewo, the people of Nyewo have maintained their connection to Karma Kagyu, continuing to pass down stories of past Karmapas to subsequent generations. The importance of discussing Nyewo extends beyond its being the correct birthplace of Paljor Dhondup; it clearly appears to have been a significant centre of Karma Kagyu lineage activities and Karmapa presence in the past. We must not ignore or misinterpret history. It is imperative that we understand and appreciate its historical significance and connection.

Since many writers have altered the birthplace to Nyemo, and this has become a mainstream belief in our society, extensive research and a comprehensive account using all available sources and reasoning were necessary. The human mind is such that sometimes

no reason is required to mislead people, yet countless pieces of evidence are not sufficient to prove what is evidently true.

## THE YEAR OF BIRTH

Due to the limited availability of comprehensive biographies, determining the precise years of birth and death (or parinirvana) of Paljor Dhondup presents us with a significant challenge. Only *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* mentions the year of his passing. However, no old historical documents provide a definitive birth year.

Several texts containing information about Goshir Paljor Dhondup's chronology merit consideration, although many lack historical evidence or rationale. Of particular note are:

*A Collection of Biographies of Indian and Tibetan Masters* by Khetsun Zangpo, which states:

Upon careful examination of the birth and passing years, it appears he was born in the (Seventh Prabhava) Wood Sheep year and passed away in the (Eighth Prabhava) Earth Dog year.

Khetsun Zangpo provides the numerical years "1415-1478". Although he does not elucidate his reasoning for this chronology,

Khetsun Zangpo seems to be the first to conduct research or calculations on this matter.

A brief biography of the Karmapas by Nik Douglas and Meryl White, published in 1976 in London, which asserts that the first Gyaltsab was born in 1427 and passed away in 1489. The authors do not provide a rationale for this conclusion, suggesting minimal research.

A comprehensive biography of the twelfth Gyaltsabs, composed by the current twelfth Gyaltsab's general secretary, Sherab Tharchin. This biography, titled *Sangdak Rolgar (Dance of Vajrapani)*<sup>1</sup> by the seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa and published during the 2010 Kagyu Monlam, states that Paljor Dhondup was born in 1428 and passed away in 1486.

My own research has yielded birth and passing years that diverge from those mentioned in the aforementioned texts. I have specific reasons for this discrepancy, which I explain here.

While not explicitly stated in the *The Feast for Scholars, A Rosary of Crystal Moons* notes:

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<sup>1</sup> གསང་བདག་གི་རྩལ་གར། on [dharmaebooks.org](http://dharmaebooks.org)

At the age of fourteen, [Paljor Dhondup] was appointed as the Guigongpa in the position of Great Khenpo Golonpa Lodoe Gyaltzen who passed away.

Also, in describing the disciples of the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje, *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* mentions that the Great Khenpo Golonpa passed away on the fourteenth day of the eleventh month of the Ox Year, when the Encampment went to Kongpo.

Two short paragraphs about Golonpa appear in different sections of *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, conveying the same meaning with minimal variation. The first paragraph specifies the year of his passing. Given that Golonpa was still with the sixth Karmapa when Karmapa received monastic ordination from Nyakphuwa, the Ox year during which Golonpa passed away must be the Water Ox Year, corresponding to 1433 CE.

Although the eighth Karmapa does not mention Golonpa's passing, he writes that Paljor Dhondup was appointed as the Guigongpa at the age of fourteen. From this information we can infer that Golonpa passed away in the Water Ox Year and that Paljor Dhondup was appointed to the Guigongpa position in 1420. Since the sixth Karmapa was born in 1416, it follows that Paljor Dhondup was only four years younger than Thongwa Dondhen.

Additional evidence supporting this theory will be discussed in a subsequent chapter addressing Paljor Dhondup's parinirvana.

## MEETING THONGWA DONDHEN

According to Karmapa Mikyö Dorje, Goshir Paljor Dhondup was eight years old when he first met Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen. Mikyö Dorje's commentary of Drikung's *Single Intention* states:

The great disciple of Lord Thongwa Dondhen, Goshir Chenpo Paljor Dhondup, is also known as an emanation of Venerable Shiwa Ö. From an ordinary perspective, starting at age eight, he served Lord Thongwa Dondhen as a spiritual master through offerings, respect, service, and practice. Except for not breaking his thigh, he followed the example of the Bodhisattva Ever Weeping. He became a vessel for all secrets and attained the state of Vajradhara in one lifetime through the tantric path.

However, *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* says:

At age five, Lord Thongwa Dondhen recognized him as the incarnation of Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk and Repa Shiwa Ö, and performed the hair-cutting ceremony.

*A Rosary of Crystal Moons* contains some information not found in other religious histories such as *The Feast for Scholars*, suggesting that its author may have had access to now-lost documents about Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

If Paljor Dhondup met Thongwa Dondhen at age eight, it would have been in the Fire Sheep year 1427 CE, when Thongwa Dondhen was twelve and practicing in Tsari, an important holy site between Kongpo and the border of Arunachal Pradesh, India. If they met when Paljor Dhondup was five, it would have been in 1424 CE, when Thongwa Dondhen was nine and taking his novice vow in front of Nyakphuwa in Olkha, Lhokha in Southern Tibet.

Geographically speaking, it may make more sense to think that Paljor Dhondup met Thongwa Dondhen when he was five years old as Thongwa Dondhen was traveling close to Nyewo on his way to the Lhokha region.

Yet according to *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, Paljor Dhondup was sixty-three in the Earth Dog year. This would place his birth in 1420 CE, making him the same age as Thongwa Dondhen, which seems unlikely. Therefore, it seems more plausible to assume that Paljor Dhondup was indeed born in 1420 CE and that he met Thongwa Dondhen when he was five years old in 1424 CE, and when Thongwa Dondhen was nine.

In any case, the biographies tell us that when Paljor Dhondup met Thongwa Dondhen at this young age, that not only did the young Karmapa recognize him as a tulku, but he even sent Paljor Dhondup to Central Tibet possibly with Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo in order to prepare him to be teacher to his next reincarnation.

## WAS GOSHIR PALJOR DHONDUP A TULKU?

Goshir Paljor Dhondup was not a tulku in the conventional sense because he was the first Gyaltsab.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to differentiate between two interpretations of the term *tulku*.

The first, broader definition encompasses any buddha or great bodhisattva who is intentionally born into this world in order to benefit beings. In this context, there is no concept of succession; these beings can manifest in countless forms and locations. The second, more specific definition refers to the recognized rebirth of a great master, who is given the same name, title, and respect as their predecessor, and who is entrusted with the care of the established monastery.

Goshir Paljor Dhondup embodied the first definition of tulku and initiated a tradition aligned with the second.

According to biographical accounts, Thongwa Dondhen recognized Paljor Dhondup as a tulku almost immediately upon meeting him. Specifically, Paljor Dhondup was identified as the reincarnation of two significant figures: Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk and Repa Shiwa O.

Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk was a disciple of Guru Padma Sambhava in the eighth century. Sources describe him as either the brother or father of Yeshe Tsogyal, who was Guru Rinpoche's Tibetan consort. As a lay practitioner, he was one of the twenty-five chief disciples of Guru Rinpoche in Tibet and was renowned for his mastery of Vajrakilaya, a principal teaching brought to Tibet by Guru Rinpoche, which is noted for its efficacy in removing obstacles.

Repa Shiwa O, a lay disciple from Lato in Western Tibet, was among Milarepa's primary repa students. Multiple authoritative sources, including Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's *E-Wam Mudra* and Desi Sangye Gyatso's *Religious History of Geluk*, cite Repa Shiwa O as an example of someone who ascended to the Pure Land without leaving his physical body behind. In Lato, a landmark allegedly marks the site where Shiwa O transcended through his cave to the Pure Land. While a particular lineage stemming from Repa Shiwa O is mentioned in *The Feast for Scholars*, it appears

to have ceased in modern times. Additional information about Repa Shiwa O can be found in Milarepa's biography.

Although exact circumstances remain uncertain, it seems plausible that Thongwa Dondhen initially recognized Paljor Dhondup as the reincarnation of Repa Shiwa O and that the identification with Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk may have occurred later on, as Paljor Dhondup's influence grew. A verse from Tertön Sangye Lingpa's revelation could be interpreted as describing Paljor Dhondup and might have served as the primary basis for this association.

Gyaltsabs are traditionally believed to be emanations of Vajrapani and Ananda. This association likely stems from the Karma Kagyu tradition, where Karmapas are regarded as buddhas and referred to as Gyalwa or Gyalwang. The Gyaltsab, akin to Ananda, serves as both an attendant and a close disciple of the Buddha. In Vajrayana tradition, Ananda and Vajrapani are considered identical in essence, leading to the recognition of Gyaltsabs as emanations of Vajrapani.

Some tantras, particularly the *Empowering Vajrapani Tantra*, describe the bodhisattva Samantabhadra transforming into Vajrapani upon receiving empowerment from the buddhas.

Consequently, there is also a tradition of recognizing Gyaltsabs as reincarnations of bodhisattva Samantabhadra.

The works of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje suggest that Goshir Paljor Dhondup was also a reincarnation of Rechungpa, Milarepa's favored disciple whom he raised as his own son. Rechungpa is also considered to be an emanation of Vajrapani, having been instrumental in propagating Vajrapani practices from Nepal or India. This connection may have further reinforced the association of Gyaltsabs with Vajrapani.

It is important to note that the recognition of a great master as an emanation of certain buddhas, bodhisattvas, or other great masters is often related to the role they fulfill. This is illustrated in the autobiography of Minyak Jamyang Drakpa, which recounts his prayers to the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa at Phakmo Drupa's monastery in Southern Tibet:

I presented substantial offerings to the Dharma Lord, commensurate with my resources. Of particular note were the offerings of the *Collected Works* and statues. I articulated numerous supplications, including aspirations to emulate Ananda, that I might remain in the Dharma Lord's presence throughout all my lifetimes and adhere

to his teachings. Additionally, I expressed the desire to embody the qualities of Vajrapani, seeking comprehensive understanding of the secret nature of the Dharma Lord's body, speech, and mind. For each supplication the Dharma Lord bestowed a blessing through laying his hand on my head and offered a corresponding prayer. The two eminent khenpos in attendance were also gratified and offered prayers on my behalf.

The recognition of Gyaltsabs as emanations of Vajrapani and Ananda appears to be closely tied to their role as Guigongpas (close attendants). While it is beyond our capacity to determine whether Gyaltsabs are truly emanations or reincarnations of these bodhisattvas and great masters, it is certain that their inherent value remains unchanged regardless of such designations. Throughout history, all Gyaltsabs have been undoubtedly great masters, which is of paramount importance to genuine devotees.

## THE SECOND EVER WEEPING BODHISATTVA

The biography of Paljor Dhondup by the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje, states:

Although in reality, a complete Buddha appears in the roles of lama and disciple to guide unfortunate individuals, it is also to destroy the mistaken ego of ordinary people who harbor resentment towards pure spiritual teachers, who abandon dharma, and who discard ultimate happiness as if it were grass. For this purpose, this great bodhisattva relied upon spiritual masters such as Gyalwa Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, the great Khenpo and omniscient Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo, and the great Tokdhen and lord of the yogis, Shamarwa Choepal Yeshi.

The manner in which he revered them with offerings, respect, service, and practice, thereby increasing his accumulation of merit and wisdom, is entirely comparable to the lives of bodhisattvas Manibhadra and the Ever Weeping. Just this way of life alone possesses great power to liberate beings from samsara.

In his introduction to Paljor Dhondup in the *Grand Commentary of Single Intention of Drikung*, Mikyö Dorje states:

If we regard him as an ordinary person, from the age of eight, the way he relied upon Lord Thongwa Dondhen as a spiritual master with offerings, reverence, service, and

practice was akin to living the life of the Ever Weeping Bodhisattva, with the exception that he did not break his own thigh bone.

The bodhisattva Ever Weeping appears at the conclusion of the sutra, *Prajnaparamita of Eight Thousand Lines*. According to the Buddha, there once existed a bodhisattva called Ever Weeping. He received this name due to his desperation in seeking a proper spiritual master who could teach him the perfection of wisdom. Unable to find such a teacher and facing numerous obstacles, he frequently wept. Upon finally discovering such a teacher, known as Bodhisattva Dharmodgata or Choephak in Tibetan, he went to the extreme of breaking his own thigh bone to clean the dust using his own blood.

This Mahayana narrative serves as a popular example of the quest for a proper spiritual teacher. The Eighth Karmapa employs this analogy to describe Goshir Paljor Dhondup's comparable effort and his loyalty in terms of his reliance upon spiritual masters, primarily Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen.

Another significant aspect is Mikyö Dorje's assertion that the three most important teachers of Goshir Paljor Dhondup were Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo, and the third Shamar Choepal Yeshe.

Among these, Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo is regarded as a master of the Jonang tradition. He was also a disciple of the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje. The fifth Karmapa received full monastic ordination from him. Pawo Tsuklak Trengway notes that although he was a teacher of the fifth Karmapa, he was actually more devoted than Karmapa's other disciples. In fact, Tsalmin, his monastery, was bestowed upon him by the fifth Karmapa. Subsequently, the sixth Karmapa also received his first monastic ordination from him, indicating his close connection with the Karma Kagyu lineage.

The third Shamar Choepal Yeshe, who was also an important teacher of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, is not included in the Golden lineage of Karma Kagyu, nor was he a prominent figure among the previous Shamars.

The third Shamar Choepal Yeshe, was primarily a disciple of the fifth and sixth Karmapas. At the conclusion of his biography, the first two names in the list of significant disciples are Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup, indicating Shamar Choepal Yeshe's importance to Paljor Dhondup. Goelo Zhonnu Pal, who was the author of *The Blue Annals* and who later became an important teacher of the fourth Shamar, also received teachings from Shamar Choepal Yeshe.

It is worth noting how Paljor Dhondup was trained by the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen for a specific mission: He was to become the teacher of his successor. *The Feast for Scholars* states,;

To prepare him as the teacher for his [Thongwa Dondhen's] successor, he sent him [Paljor Dhondup] to receive teachings from numerous great masters. Particularly regarding the transmission of Kangyur and Tengyur, it is said that there was no teaching in Tibet that he did not receive.

Until this point, no one had been intentionally trained to become the teacher of the next Karmapa. The fact that Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen not only trained Paljor Dhondup but prepared him to become his successor's teacher when Paljor Dhondup was yet a young child, and Thongwa Dondhen himself not much older, can be regarded as a remarkable achievement.

This information sparked my curiosity to identify the other teachers that Paljor Dhondup encountered.

There is no doubt that the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen was Paljor Dhondup's primary teacher and Root Guru. As evidenced in *A Record of Teachings Received* of the fourth Shamar, Paljor Dhondup received upasaka or lay vows from Thongwa Dondhen. Typically, these are received from one's first Lama or Guru. In the

brief biography of Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, mentions that Paljor Dhondup, together with Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, received instructions on the Six Yogas of Naropa from Thongwa Dondhen for four years, indicating an intensive level of training.

Given that Paljor Dhondup was a bhikshu as he not only conferred monastic vows upon Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and the fourth Shamar but was also known as the Khenchen or great Khenpo. During that period, the term Khenpo specifically referred to someone whose role was to confer monastic vows.

The question arises as to from whom Paljor Dhondup received his monastic vows. In the first edition of this book, I wrote that Paljor Dhondup received them from Thongwa Dondhen. However, upon further reflection, I think that this may not have been the case.

Thongwa Dondhen received his novice vows from Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo and intended to receive his bhikshu vow from Nyakphuwa as well. It is said that Nyakphuwa, who was of advanced age, was waiting for Thongwa Dondhen to reach the appropriate age to receive it. However, someone, either with ill intent or due to a misunderstanding, informed Nyakphuwa that Thongwa Dondhen had already received the bhikshu vow from

someone else. Nyakphuwa passed away shortly after hearing this news.

Perhaps he was disheartened by this event, but it appears that Thongwa Dondhen did not receive the bhikshu vow from anyone subsequently. According to the Vinaya, one is not permitted to confer novice or bhikshu vows upon others if one has not received the bhikshu or full monastic ordination. If this was the case, it suggests that Paljor Dhondup did not receive his monastic vows from Thongwa Dondhen.

Another possibility is that Paljor Dhondup received his monastic vows from Nyakphuwa Sonam Zangpo. Nyakphuwa was an important teacher for him and was primarily known for conferring monastic vows. But this theory is problematic because Paljor Dhondup was even younger than Thongwa Dondhen and was with Thongwa Dondhen when he left Kongpo for Central Tibet, where Nyakphuwa resided. Therefore, it is unlikely that he received bhikshu vows from Nyakphuwa. It could be that he received novice vows from Nyakphuwa and bhikshu vows from Golonpa (the former Guigongpa), since Golonpa's role was to confer monastic vows upon Karma Kagyu monks.

Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo was another important teacher for Paljor Dhondup. Regarded as one of the greatest scholars of his

time, Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo was a disciple of the fifth Karmapa Doshin Shekpa and the seat holder of Tsurphu monastery.

*A Record of Teachings Received* of the fourth Shamar mentions that the transmission of the complete *Collected Works of Jamyang Chenmo* was transmitted to Paljor Dhondup, indicating their strong teacher-student connection. Furthermore, in his *Instruction of Inseparability of Wind and Mind*, Paljor Dhondup quotes Jamyang Chenmo, demonstrating his great respect for him.

According to *A Record of Teachings Received* of the fourth Shamar, Paljor Dhondup received an initiation and oral transmission of Mahakala from Sogwon Rigpe Raldri. Also known as Ratna Bhadra, Rigpe Raldri was a student of the fifth Karmapa and the primary teacher of the sixth Karmapa, Thongwa Dondhen. *A Record of Teachings Received* mention that the *Thirty-Four Former Lives of Buddha* was received by Ratna Bhadra from Thongwa Dondhen and subsequently transmitted to Paljor Dhondup. Given Ratna Bhadra's importance, it is likely that Paljor Dhondup received other empowerments and teachings from him as well.

Paljor Dhondup also received teachings from Golonpa Lodoe Gyaltsen, who was the Guigongpa before him, as well as from Drongbuwa Sangye Gyaltsen and Drongbu Drakpa Lodoe, both of whom appear to have been associated with a prominent Karma

Kagyü monastery in Nakchu. From the former, he received the oral transmission of Milarepa's biography, believed to have been compiled by twelve disciples of Milarepa.

In the first edition of this biography, I wrote that Paljor Dhondup received teachings from Tsangchen Choekyi Wangchuk. This was based on information found in *A Rosary of Vaidurya*, the history of Gampopa's monastery. Here, Goshir Paljor Dhondup is listed as an important master called Choekyi Wangchuk. As there was a renowned master called Tsangchen Choekyi Wangchuk at that time, I assumed that this Choekyi Wangchuk and Tsangchen Choekyi Wangchuk were the same individual.

However, further investigation, revealed that this Choekyi Wangchuk, who was the teacher of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, was from the family of Gampopa and was known as the reincarnation of Gomtsul, Gampopa's nephew.

Choekyi Wangchuk's nephew and chief disciple was known as Sonam Rinchen, and Tsangchen Choekyi Wangchuk was a disciple of Sonam Rinchen. Moreover, it appears that Tsangchen Choekyi Wangchuk held the lineage of Lower Drukpa Kagyu that originated from Lorepa.

Paljor Dhondup received the transmission of the autobiography of Yungton Dorje Pal from Sonam Chokdhen, a master of Tsurphu monastery who received many teachings from Buton's tradition. Yungton Dorje Pal primarily held the lineage of Nyingma but was also an important disciple of the third Karmapa as well as being the main guru of the fourth Karmapa.

In his autobiography, Yungton Dorje Pal states that his reason for writing it was because many disciples make their guru appear deceitful by offering excessive and unnecessary praise.

These are only the teachers we are aware of from the available sources, but Paljor Dhondup likely received from many other great masters.

From the Nyingma tradition, Paljor Dhondup's main teacher may have been Lama Yeshi, who held the lineage of Tertön Sangye Lingpa, one of the eight great treasure revealers bearing the name Ling. I believe that this Lama Yeshi was actually the son of Sangye Lingpa himself, and if this is the case, his real name would be Yeshi Dorje.

From Lama Yeshi, Paljor Dhondup received an empowerment of Hayagriva of four deities. This is also known as Tadrin Nakpo Chakral Chan or Black Hayagriva. There are few versions of

this empowerment: one revealed by Tertön Nyang and another revealed by Tertön Sangye Lingpa. It is difficult to determine which version Paljor Dhondup received.

The version that came from Tertön Nyang was transmitted into the Karma Kagyu lineage through Nyenre Gedun Bum, who was a student of the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi. Regardless of its origin, this practice became quite significant for the Gyaltzab lineage, as it is one of the main empowerments that Gyaltzabs offered to Karmapas. In addition, according to the sadhana written by the Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje, there was also a sadhana of this practice composed by Paljor Dhondup.

In Paljor Dhondup's biography, it is mentioned that Thongwa Dondhen sent him to many masters to receive teachings. This would not have been possible after he was appointed as the Guigongpa of the Great Encampment. It is surprising to consider that he was appointed to such a high position at the age of fourteen, and even more remarkable that he completed most of his studies before reaching that age.

For some, this may be difficult to believe, but since it is mentioned in his biographies, and Tibetan writers typically only record events that are truly extraordinary, it must be accepted as true. From his achievements, it is evident that he was indeed

an exceptional individual. Therefore, all of these accounts must be considered factual.

## THE CHINESE GUIGONG

In the Karma Kagyu tradition, Paljor Dhondup was known as Guigongpa. Initially, it appears that only the position of Guigongpa existed, rather than that of Chakzoe, which in contemporary usage translates as, “general secretary,” or one who manages ecclesiastical affairs.

The role of Chakzoe seems to have been established by Drogön Phaspa, whose administration of the Sakya monastery in Tsang region was influenced by the Mongolian empire in the thirteenth century. The Karma Kagyu’s system of appointing a Chakzoe was implemented at a later date. Over time, the position became more prevalent and some Chakzoes were granted the title of Guigongpa.

It is only recently that people developed the assumption that the titles of Guigongpa and Chakzoe were synonymous. For instance, in *A Record of Tsurphu*, Rinchen Palzang writes of, “the Guigongpa who is the general secretary of the Black Hat.” The English publication of Karmapa 900 translates Guigongpa as “general secretary.” However, the true meaning of Guigongpa can

only be understood by researching Chinese sources that attest to the origins of this title.

The term *guigongpa* comprises the Chinese word 國公 *guigong* and the Tibetan suffix *pa*, which denotes the title holder. In most ancient Tibetan literature, the pronunciation of this word is written as *guigong*, which closely resembles the Chinese pronunciation. However, some writings spell the word as *gu 'yi' gongpa*. This error occurs because of a failure to recognize that the *i* in *Guigong* as an integral part of the Chinese word, and not equivalent to the Tibetan genitive particle *yi*.

In ancient China, *Guigong* was one of the five main titles of the noble class. These titles, recorded in the *Mengzi* 孟子 (from the fifth century BCE), are 公 *gong*, 侯 *hou*, 伯 *bo*, 子 *zi*, and 男 *nan*. Over time, numerous sub-classifications of these titles emerged, and their hierarchical positions fluctuated. Nevertheless, they remained an integral part of Chinese culture for an extended period.

In ancient China, *Wang* signified king and was the highest title. The second-highest title was *Gong*, which was comprised of three different levels: *Guigong*, *Junging*, and *Shangong*, with *Guigong* being the most prestigious. After China's unification by Qin Shi Huang in the second century BCE, the title of China's primary ruler became *Huangdi*, while the title *Wang* was bestowed upon

princes or minor kings. In this new hierarchy, Gong became the third-highest title.

During the Qin period, there were seven titles for nobles after the emperor, with Gong ranking second. However, during the later Yuan dynasty, when this title was introduced into Tibet, there were ten noble titles, and Gong was considered the third-highest.

In China, the title of Guigong was primarily bestowed upon emperors' elder sons, princes, important individuals in the central administration, or those who had achieved great merit. Historical holders of this title included political rulers of autonomous regions, kings of small sovereign kingdoms, and highly distinguished national generals.

Zhou Gongdan (周公旦) of the Zhou dynasty, was one of the most renowned Guigong in Chinese history. He served as regent when his brother the king passed away and subsequently led the country to prosperity. Then, when the king's son came of age, Zhou Gongdan enthroned him and relinquished full political power. Confucius, who is regarded as one of the most distinguished teachers and philosophers in the history of Chinese culture, considered Zhou Gongdan as the epitome of a noble person.

During the Shang dynasty, the prevailing view was that the “Shang” was divinely appointed as the earthly king. However, Zhou Gongdan argued that whoever rules the nation justly is appointed by heaven and those who fail to do so are not. This philosophy was adopted by the Zhou as well by subsequent dynasties, effectively transforming perceptions of the king’s role and significantly altering the course of Chinese history as a result.

Scholars generally agree that the Chinese Gong is equivalent to a Western Duke. Consequently, Gong can be translated as “Duke,” and Guigong as “Duke of State.” This is noted in *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* by Charles Hucker, (pub. Stanford University Press 1985), which is considered to be an invaluable resource for research on Chinese honorific titles.

In the West, there are various levels and classifications of the Duke title. For example, in Germany, the highest position is Emperor, followed by King, and then Grand Duke. In England, the highest titles are King and Queen, followed by Prince, and then Duke. There is no tradition of Grand Dukes in England.

When Tibetans translated the Guigong title as “Chakzoe” in Tibetan, or “general secretary” in English, it was done without a comprehensive understanding of other cultures. This reminds me of an anecdote: when Tibetan people first learned about de-

mocracy, some asked, “What is democracy?” Others responded that it is a British tradition, to which they replied, “Well, if that’s the case, it must be a very inauspicious tradition. We’d better not adopt it.”

Go He Ching’s recent Chinese translation of *The Blue Annals* by Go Lotsawa Zhonnu Pal uses the word *guigongpa*, which is a mere transliteration of the Tibetan, instead of using the original Chinese characters for Guigong. This may be because these titles are so ancient that these days the Chinese, let alone Tibetans, are uncertain as to whether the title is of Tibetan or Chinese origin.

## THE ROLE OF GUIGONGPAS IN KARMA KAGYU

According to Tatsak Tsewang Gyal’s *Religious History* (popularly known as *Religious History of Lhorong*), when the Karma Kagyu lineage was established by the first Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa, Tshurphu monastery, one of the five monastic seats that he founded, housed a community of over three thousand monks, which functioned without the benefits of an advanced administrative system.

Due to his extensive travels and miraculous performances, the second Karmapa Karma Pakshi, may not have had the opportunity to improve this situation, so it was under the leadership of the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje that a unified administrative system was established and the Karma Kagyu flourished throughout Tibet. This situation remained stable until the seventeenth century, when the Mongolian invasion of Central Tibet caused a substantial decline in the Karma Kagyu's influence.

Lobpon Rinchen Pal, who was the third Karmapa's main attendant, received the title of Guigongpa from the Mongolian Emperor Toghon Temur, and thereafter, this title and position played a crucial role in the development of the Karma Kagyu lineage. It established the Karmapa as a central figure with a Great Encampment, while successive Guigongpas oversaw the entire administration of the lineage.

In order to better understand the role of the Guigongpa within the Karma Kagyu, it is helpful to examine the history of other lineages in Tibetan Buddhism. Prior to the Karma Kagyu's Guigongpas, other lineages (primarily the Kadampa and Kagyu) had a position called Chennga, which can be literally translated as "The Presence." This title was given to the personal attendant of great masters, who was always in their presence and who managed affairs on their behalf.

Historically, although Mahakasyapa held a higher position than Ananda, the latter served as Buddha's personal attendant and was therefore the Chennga of Buddha. Following the passing of Mahakasyapa, Ananda became the next regent of the Buddha and the leader of Buddhism as a whole. So, as the primary transmitter of Buddha's teachings, Ananda played a more significant role in the course of Buddhism's history than any other disciple, including Mahakasyapa.

In Tibet, Drom Tonpa Gyalwe Jungnay, the chief disciple of Atisha, may have been one of the first people to formally hold the title of Chennga. While this title was usually associated with one of Drom Tonpa's three main disciples, Atisha's biographies clearly refer to Drom Tonpa as the Chennga. He not only served as Atisha's personal attendant and managed his affairs, but he was also recognized as the founder of the Kadampa lineage that originated with Atisha.

Within the Kagyu lineage, there appears to be an understanding that a disciple holding the title of Chennga is considered to be the most important disciple of a given Lama or master.

For example, there is some debate around the identity of Phakmo Drupa's main disciple, who was the founder of Phakdru Kagyu. Taklung Kagyu claims it was Taklung Thangpa, while Drikung

Kagyü asserts it was Drikung Jigten Sumgon. Both claimants maintain that they were the Chennga of Phakmo Drupa, and it seems that both indeed fulfilled this role for Phakmo Drupa at different times. Following Drikung Jigten Sumgon, his chief disciple Drakpa Jungnay was popularly known as Chennga Drakpa Jungnay and who latter oversaw the religious lineage of Phakdro Kagyü.

In Karma Kagyü, among great mahasiddhas and scholars, the Guigongpas came to be regarded as the chief disciples of successive Karmapas. *The Blue Annals* by Goelo Zhonnu Pal, provides a list of the main disciples:

The disciples of Dharma Lord Rangjung Dorje were Tokdhen Samten Rinchen, She Drakpa Sengge, Tokdhen Trewo, Tokdhen Khuyowa.

Shey Drakpa Sengge, born in the Shey region of Eastern Tibet, was the first Shamar, with Yungton Dorje Pal, the primary teacher of the fourth Karmapa, appearing near the end of the list.

*The Blue Annals* continues:

The Dharma Lord Rolpe Dorje's disciples are Lobpon Guigongpa Rinchen Pal, Choeje Riwu Gangpa, Kunpang Kunga Dhondup, Lho Rinpoche, Jetsun Nakgowa, Rigowa,

Sharapa, Tsokarmowa, Jamchoepa Jangchub Gyaltsen, Karmapa Konzhon, Choeje Khachoeпа and so on.

When listing the disciples of the fifth Karmapa, Goelo Zhonnu Pal states:

Among them, the supreme ones are Goshir Sangye Rinchen, Goshir Lodoe Gyaltsen, Goshir Rinchen Pal, Goshir Dhondup Ozer, Goshir Choekyi Gyaltsen, Goshir Shakya Zangpo, Kazhipa Rinchen Zangpo, Tulku Choepal Yeshe, Ngompa Jadralwa, Mase Tokdhen and many others.

Considered one of the most significant, non-sectarian historians of Tibet, Goelo Zhonnu Pal was sufficiently close to the Karma Kagyu to understand its history, yet distant enough to view it objectively. Therefore, I believe his perspective can be very helpful to understand Karma Kagyu of that time.

The first tulku (Karmapa) originated the Karma Kagyu, which over time, evolved into a lineage of tulkus. As a result of the greater emphasis placed on the tulkus in terms of training monks and recording the histories, there are very few complete biographies of great mahasiddhas within the Karma Kagyu. Scholars such as Karma Konzhon, Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo, and Palgang Lot-sawa were among the greatest scholars of their time, but as they

were not tulkus, there is insufficient biographical information about them, and their important works were not preserved by the lineage.

The current generation of Karma Kagyu grew up in a community where only the tulkus (mainly the Karmapa, Shamar, Situ, Jamgön, and Gyaltsab), are deemed important. In addition, there is a common belief that from the inception of the Karma Kagyu, the Shamars were always the chief disciples of the Karmapas. In reality, however, this was not always the case.

A deeper exploration reveals that the third Karmapa had disciples like Tokden Samten Rinchen, who was highly regarded by Rangjung Dorje himself (“the one who is better than me is Samrin.”) In addition, Yungton Dorje Pal, the fourth Karmapa’s main teacher, played a more significant role in the Karma Kagyu lineage than the first Shamar, Tokdhen Drakpa Sengge.

While the first Shamar did not contribute significantly to the overall Karma Kagyu lineage (apart from establishing Tsur Nanyang, which later became the seat of the Pawos), the second Shamar was important in that he authored many significant texts for the lineage. In addition, Karma Trinleypa’s *Responses to Questions* states that the third Shamar was very close to Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen:

[...] just as Lord Rolpe Dorje entrusted the entire Karma Kagyu's teaching in the Kongpo and Tsari regions to Lord Kachöpa, he was entrusted with the entire Karma Kagyu's teaching in Kongpo and Tsari by the Lord [Thongwa Dondhen].

The Karma Kagyu teachings flourished throughout almost the whole of Tibet during this period, and the Shamars were responsible for the Kongpo regions in Southern Tibet.

Among the five main monasteries of Karma Kagyu that were established by the first Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa, in Central Tibet, Tsurphu monastery was overseen by successive seat holders who were originally from the family lineage of Karma Pakshi's nephew. Among the most renowned was Tsurphu Jamyang Chemo, who was a disciple of the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa and who lived until the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso was recognized.

There were several important Karma Kagyu monasteries in Eastern Tibet. At Karma Gon monastery, currently located in Chamdo, there was a lineage of seat holders with the title Situ, who descended from Karma Pakshi's nephew's family.

The first Tai Situ Goshir Choekyi Gyaltsab came from this family and it was he who initiated the tulku lineage of Situ Rinpoche.

However, it was not until the eighteenth century that the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche established his seat at Palpung monastery, in Dege, Kham.

Khampo Naynang monastery in Lithang was also overseen by seat holders who traced their family lineage back to Karma Pakshi's nephew. They later held the title of Nangso and were regarded as local chieftains.

In addition to the Karma Kagyu centers in the three regions of Tibet, the Great Encampment of the Karmapa traveled extensively from Tibet to Mongolia and China and formed the central administration of the Karmapas. Without exception, and with the blessing of the Karmapas, the Guigongpas oversaw everything on behalf of the supreme leaders of the Karma Kagyu.

Scholars like Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa and Karma Chakme may refer to Guigongpas as leaders or owners of both secular and religious systems within the Karma Kagyu. If interpreted literally, this is a role or title which seems only appropriate for the Karmapa himself.

Research into earlier Guigongpas of early Karma Kagyu reveals that their responsibilities were significantly different, and their importance far greater, than the general secretaries or Chakzoes

of the later Karma Kagyu. The political, or secular authority of Guigongpas centered on managing the Karmapa and the Great Encampment's travels, during which they would engage with political rulers and great masters of various lineages. They also maintained contact with the emperors of the Yuan and Ming dynasties and organized the Karmapa's visits to these emperors.

From a religious perspective, Guigongpas held far more importance than later Chakzoes, one of their primary duties being the ordination Karma Kagyu monks. It is possible that the Karmapas did not have the time to ordain so many monks, or it could be that in those days most monasteries had one important master, or Khenpo, who was responsible for conferring ordination. In any case, Guigongpas held this role within the Karma Kagyu, and as a result, many of the Guigongpas also held the title of Khenchen, meaning Great Khenpo.

This was not merely a political authority. Guigongpas needed to attain a very high level of realization and spiritual power as they were responsible for confirming a Karmapa's reincarnation. Traditionally, great masters only reveal their supernatural qualities and secret biographies to their most trusted disciples, those regarded as "one who holds the ocean of secrets." For the

Buddha, these disciples were Ananda and Vajrapani. For the Karmapas, it was the Guigongpas.

In the biographies of the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje, it becomes clear that supernatural activities, traditionally considered the most important elements in a great master's biography, were primarily attributed to Guigongpa Rinchen Pal.

The Karmapas would entrust the Guigongpas with information about their future rebirths, and the Guigongpas would often use their own supernatural powers to assist in the process of recognizing the new Karmapa. For example, Sogwon Rigpe Raldri's biography of the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, describes how the second Guigongpa, Khenchen Golonpa was in Central Tibet when he recognized the young Karmapa, who was in Kham at the time.

Even more significantly, the Guigongpa had the sole authority to officially recognize, or confirm, the reincarnation of a Karmapa. While a few individuals or even great masters may recognize a tulku, only those with official authority can confirm it. So it should not be assumed that anyone can recognize the Karmapa's reincarnation, as this may not constitute an official recognition. This practice is not unique to the Karmapa's tulku system but is

also observed in many other tulku systems, such as those of the Dalai Lamas and Panchens in the Geluk tradition.

The importance of confirming the recognition of Karmapa becomes clearer when we look at the recognition, or enthronement, of the eighth Karmapa. This was perhaps the most complicated event in the history of Karmapa recognitions before the recent controversy about the reincarnation of sixteenth Karmapa. The eighth Karmapa was recognized by Situ Tashi Paljor from Karma Gon monastery, as well as by Jigten Wangchuk, who was an important master of the lower Taklung Kagyu monastery in Chamdo.

Neither recognition was sufficient, however, and the situation nearly resulted in conflict. Although not a Guigongpa, Gyaltsab Tashi Namgyal was the regent of the Karmapa and he oversaw the administration of the Great Encampment. It was only when he officially recognized Mikyö Dorje as the Karmapa that the dispute was finally resolved.

## THE THREE GREAT GUIGONGPAS OF KAMTSANG

The first Guigongpa in Kamtsang was Master Rinchen Pal. In *A Mirror that Shows Immeasurable Noble Qualities*, the second

Shamar Khachö Wangpo's biography of the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje, the colophon states:

The sequence of events and the ocean of pure views were solely based on the instructions given by Great Master Guigongpa, who has followed the lord since he was five years old and possesses inconceivable noble qualities.

As the second Shamar was also an important disciple of the fourth Karmapa, we can observe here the level of respect he held for Guigongpa Rinchen Pal.

In *The Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa wrote:

In particular, Great Master Guigongpa Rinchen Pal was present when the camp of Lord Rangjung Dorje was at Nethang in the valley of Tolong. There were many children collecting dung and playing. One of the [Rangjung Dorje's] personal dogs ran after them, and others were unsure where to go. One of the children opened a basket used to gather firewood. He turned it upside down, entered into it, and kept the threads [used to close it] from inside. The dog went around but couldn't do anything and returned. All were amazed by it. The Drung [Rangjung Dorje] asked for the child's parents, and they offered him."

From this account, we can infer that Guigongpa Rinchen Pal was born somewhere near Tsurphu monastery and that Rangjung Dorje was so impressed by his intelligence that he wanted to raise him as his monk.

Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa continues:

His [Rinchen Pal] knowledge of both secular and religious matters cannot be measured by anyone. He has the limitless legacy of having served as the Guigongpa to three successive [Karmapas]. Princes and nobles of China and Mongolia, political leaders, rulers of the provinces, Situs, or any high-ranking person in Tibet, all revered him without dispute. No other names were used to address him other than Great Master. For the teachings of Karmapa, he is the one who made the most significant contribution.

Additional information is provided in Lhorong's *Religious History*, written in the fifteenth century. He begins by stating, "The great disciples of the Dharma Lord Rolpe Dorje were Master Guigongpa and Khenpo Golonpa Lodoe Gyaltzen." He then gives a brief account of each of the major disciples and continues:

Master Guigongpa's birthplace was Kawa Dong in Tolung. Ever since childhood, he has been foretold to be a fortunate

one due to his special physical marks. After being ordained, he achieved siddhi of Manjushri Yamantaka. Later, he served as the Lord's attendant, and it seems this Lama possessed all the practical qualifications for serving a Lama, which are taught in the *Fifty Stanzas of Relying Upon a Guru*. Subsequently, he also raised Dharma Lord Deshin Shekpa until adulthood and then passed away in Kongpo.

In this manner, Great Master Guigongpa Rinchen Pal formally confirmed the recognition of the fourth Karmapa. It is important to understand that although the tulku system originated with the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje, the continuation of this system of reincarnation took some time to be established firmly. The biography of the fourth Karmapa indicates that even after he had met many senior disciples of the third Karmapa, it took approximately three years for him to be confirmed, as it required Guigongpa's validation. The confirmation occurred only when Guigongpa Rinchen Pal provided it. Without this recognition it is highly unlikely that the fourth Karmapa would have become the official leader of the Karma Kagyu.

Although Guigongpa Rinchen Pal was senior to the fourth Karmapa and a disciple of the third, it seems that he was a student of the fourth Karmapa, rather than being his formal teacher. When

the Great Encampment was established during Rolpe Dorje's time, Guigongpa served as its leader as well. Goelo Zhonnu Pal noted in *The Blue Annals* that when Rolpe Dorje passed away that:

Subsequently, Master Guigongpa made the teachings flourish by building a stupa of eighty big Dre, which is adorned with statues. He built many such religious objects of worship in both seats of Tsurphu and Karma.

Many historians speak highly of Guigongpa, especially regarding his funeral services for the fourth Karmapa.

As the Karmapa's tulku system was by now firmly established, Guigongpa Rinchen Pal recognized the fifth Karmapa approximately fifteen days after the passing of the fourth Karmapa. Guigongpa became both attendant and teacher to the fifth Karmapa, bestowing many precious teachings including Mahamudra and the *Six Applications of Kalachakra*.

According to *The Blue Annals*:

Generally, he [Karmapa] demonstrated the appearance of receiving countless sutras, tantras, profound instructions, and empowerments from Khenchen Sonam Zangpo, Master

Guigongpa, Choeje Khachö Wangpo, Khenchen Gyaltzen Pal, Gya Sangye Wangchuk, and others.

We can learn of the Karmapa's perspective on Rinchen Pal from the autobiography of Minyak Jamyang Drakpa, who was also a student of the fifth Karmapa:

In a very secluded place, he [Deshin Shekpa] said this: When my full ordination was completed, Master Guigongpa said, 'all my tasks were now completed. Now I entrust everything to you. All your things are here without any degeneration.' When I looked, all the things he received in the past were there without degeneration. Some of them were never opened at all. The bags were kept as before without untying the knot.

Again, he [Rinchen Pal] said, 'I have not taken anything except eating the food. I personally did not possess even a piece of khata. If anything happens to my health, my body can be discarded anywhere convenient. I don't need to be reminded of Phowa of words as I have the Phowa of meaning. But there is nothing wrong even if Phowa of words is performed for me.' Later, he passed away without any pain or suffering. [Jamyang Drakpa] asked how old [Rinchen

Pal was]. He [Deshin Shekpa] said eighty-nine years old. He said it came from him [Rinchen Pal] and showed me a piece of a relic skull which appeared half bald. He told me this appeared after it was received in my hand and showed me a skull in which there was a relic, white and shining.<sup>2</sup>

Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa reflects:

In this way, the activities of Great Master Guigongpa Rinchen Pal, who was able to carry out practically all the wishes of the Lord Lama, is something that should only be respectfully prostrated to. This came as a matter of course and should also be taken as advice for future generations.

Guigongpa Rinchen Pal can be considered a great example of serving the Lama. Yet unfortunately, in our age it is very rare for someone in the Karma Kagyu to recognize, or even have heard his name.

The second Guigongpa of the Great Encampment was the Great Khenpo Golonpa Lodoe Gyaltsen, who was the leader of both secular and religious matters of the Karma Kagyu and who followed both the fourth and fifth Karmapas. He was popularly known as Golonpa.

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<sup>2</sup> This passage was not very clear in the original Tibetan text.

In Tibetan, *gon* means protector, and many people have names like Gonpo. Consequently, some writers have written his name as Gonlonpa. However, in most writings of his time, they have written *Golon* and not *Gonlon*. Thus, it seems that his name was not Gonlon but Golon, which could be the name of a place or of some position.

The *Religious History of Lhorong* states:

As for Khen Rinpoche, Dharma Lord of Golon, which is a division of Tak Rangtsa, came to the Omniscient Dharma Lord and had uncommon faith. He followed the Lord without being separated from him and made prostrations and circumambulations. He served as the attendant of Deshin Shekpa and raised the present one too. During the lifetimes of the three Dharma Lords, he encouraged people to recite the mantra of Chenrezik and chant the names of Buddhas. He is certainly blessed by Chenrezik himself to benefit beings with certainty.

In addition, *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* mentions the geographical area Tak Rongtsa division of Dokham. *Dokham* means Kham or Eastern Tibet, so Golonpa could be from Kham.

From what Tatsak Tsewang Gyal says in the *Religious History of Lhorong*, it appears Golonpa was already a great master before he met the fourth Karmapa. It is even possible that he was from another lineage before becoming the Karmapa's disciple.

Like Guigongpa Rinchen Pal, who emphasized the practice of Yamantaka, Manjushri's wrathful form, it seems that Golonpa was a devoted and accomplished practitioner of Chenrezik. Reciting the mantra of Chenrezik, and chanting the names of Buddha are said to be the main activities of the fourth Karmapa, so this could suggest that Golonpa followed his guru's intentions and activities.

When Guigongpa Rinchen Pal officially recognized the fifth Karmapa, he sent Golonpa, who was already a senior Lama. He practiced Chenrezik along the way and Chenrezik confirmed him that the young boy is indeed the unmistakable reincarnation of Karmapa. Then, when the Karmapa went to China to perform puja for the Yongle emperor, Golonpa was one of the three important Lamas that he brought with him.

Tatsak Tsewang Gyal then continues:

Thus, he was the personal attendant of the masters who were the Root Lamas even to the Chinese and Mongolian Emperors. Later, he received the title of Tai Goshir. When

the Encampment traveled to Kongpo, at Yishi, he passed away on the fourteenth of the eleventh month of the Ox Year, during which many relics and various types of rainbows appeared.

In the fifth Karmapa's biography, it is noted that Golonpa received the title of Goshir from the Yongle Emperor when he accompanied Karmapa to China. His predecessor Rinchen Pal also has the title Goshir which must have been conferred to him by the Mongolian emperor, and these might have paved the way for their successor Paljor Dhondup to receive the Goshir title from China. Unfortunately, there is not much information about Golonpa's role as Khenpo, and his responsibility of giving monastic vows to the monks.

In *The Feast for Scholars*, we find the same details about Golonpa outlined in the *Religious History of Lhorong*, but with very little additional information. Here, it is noted that Goshir Lodö Gyaltzen was an attendant of Guigongpa Rinchen Pal and worked with him, which helps us understand why he became the next Guigongpa.

We can also appreciate the significance of Golonpa from the words of the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa, as presented in Minyak Jamyang Drakpa's autobiography.

After you [Jamyang Drakpa] went to Rabgang, this Great Khenpo [Golonpa] grew three small teeth. When asked about his [Golonpa] age, [Deshin Shekpa] said now he is eighty years old.

The fifth Karmapa spoke of this when he met Minyak Jamyang Drakpa in Central Tibet, referring to a previous meeting in Eastern Tibet, after which Jamyang Drakpa left for his hometown at Rabgang in Minyak, Kham. As the traditional Tibetan saying goes, people who recite the MANI PADME mantra of Chenrezik one hundred million times will grow a small baby tooth even if the person is very old. Thus, Golonpa grew three such baby teeth because he was an accomplished practitioner of Chenrezik and reciter of the MANI mantra.

Jamyang Drakpa then shares his own understanding of Guigongpa Rinchen Pal and Golonpa:

In this way, I [Jamyang Drakpa] have understood that both the master [Rinchen Pal] and student [Golonpa] are prophesied as unfathomable great people. [Golonpa] passed away at the age of eighty-nine. Generally, I have read in sutras that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are surrounded by retinues of bodhisattvas, but these words [of Deshin Shekpa] convinced me even more so. During the Previous One [the fourth

Karmapa], Master Guigongpa was prophesied at Tsotra in the North. This Lama Golonpa is just like how Ananda served the Buddha and took birth as swans in the Buddha's former lifetimes, as mentioned in the Vinaya scriptures.

Here, Jamyang Drakpa is referring to a story of the Buddha's past life in which he was born as a swan king and Buddha's attendant Ananda was born as a swan minister. They were caught by a king from Varanasi, who was then so moved by their love for each other and their willingness to sacrifice their lives to save the other, that he released them.

Citing this example, Jamyang Drakpa continues:

It was not only at some place or some time, nor was it just mouth and words; I have seen that he was someone who cherished his Lama, the tulku, more than his own life.

Since Jamyang Drakpa had also met the sixth Karmapa and as Golonpa passed away in Kongpo only when the sixth Karmapa was recognized and ordained, it is reasonable to assume that the tulku he is referring to is the sixth Karmapa.

Jamyang Drakpa adds:

When he passed away, he said, ‘I have relied upon Lama in the past, and this time also, I want to rely upon Lama.’ With that said, he passed away with his head facing towards the Tulku. Such wonder! A la la! Generally, dharma is about practice, but the practice is indeed difficult.

Golonpa was the main abbot, or Khenpo, of the Karma Kagyu, so the third Shamar Choepal Yeshe received novice ordination from him, as well as from the fifth Karmapa.

Then (according to Sogwon Rigpe Raldri’s concise biography), as leader in both secular and religious matters of the Karma Kagyu it was Golonpa who formally recognized the sixth Karmapa, and who gave him the name of Thongwa Dondhen.

Like his predecessor, Guigongpa Rinchen Pal, Golonpa is thought to have lived to the age of eighty-nine. There is, however, a chronological inconsistency in Minyak Jamyang Drakpa’s account, because if Golonpa had reached his eighties during the fifth Karmapa’s lifetime, he would actually have exceeded eighty-nine years when the sixth Karmapa was seventeen. But by comparing various sources such as *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, perhaps we can deduce that Golonpa was born in 1345 and died in the Ox year, 1433.

The third Guigongpa of the Karma Kagyu lineage is Goshir Paljor Dhondup, who is often referred to as Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup. Although comprehensive biographies are lacking, there is more information about Paljor Dhondup than about his two predecessors.

In *The Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa describes Goshir Paljor Dhondup:

He was enthroned as the Guigongpa who possessed the special transmission of the blessing and, consequently, was appointed as the leader of both secular matters and religion.

Employing a verse style in his biography of Paljor Dhondup, Karma Chakme echoes Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa's description:

He was enthroned as the Guigongpa who possesses  
the special transmission of the blessing,  
Thus, appointed as the great leader of two traditions:  
the secular and the religious.

The eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje explicitly states that Paljor Dhondup was fourteen years old when he was appointed Guigongpa, which is corroborated in *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*.

Although this is not an unreasonable age, elevation to the esteemed position of Guigongpa and becoming assistant to the Tulku at fourteen is a remarkable and significant appointment. Most monks are just beginning their education at that point. Moreover, the two preceding Guigongpas were advanced in age and highly respected throughout Tibet.

Although the Karma Kagyu experienced a decline during the early years of the sixth Karmapa (due mainly to the rising influence of Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk tradition who had earlier established a connection with the fifth Karmapa through an exchange of gifts and correspondence), there is no reason to assume that Thongwa Dondhen lacked sufficient number of senior monks to appoint as Guigongpa. Indeed, many of the fifth Karmapa's devoted disciples and were still alive at that time. Therefore, it is likely that Paljor Dhondup's appointment at such a young age was due to his extraordinary qualities, as well as to Thongwa Dondhen's confidence in him.

Paljor Dhondup's enthronement as the third Guigongpa occurred in 1433. According to *Religious History of Lhorong* (and also stated in the biography of the third Shamar Choepal Yeshe), this was a year of significant travel for Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen. He traveled from Sokzong in Nakchu to Central Tibet to Tsurphu

monastery during this time. Regardless of these details, however, it can be inferred that Golonpa passed away during this period, and that Thongwa Dondhen appointed Paljor Dhondup to the position.

Thongwa Dondhen was only eighteen years old at this point. So, at that juncture, both leaders of the Karma Kagyu (Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen and Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup), were teenagers and may have developed a close friendship as well as sharing a teacher-student relationship.

Unlike the fourth and fifth Karmapas, who were raised by senior Lamas over extended periods of time, Sogwon Rigpe Raldri (the primary teacher of Thongwa Dondhen) did not have a long life. As a result, it appears that despite their youth, Thongwa Dondhen and Paljor Dhondup held substantial power and played crucial roles in preserving the Karma Kagyu during a critical period.

The achievements and legacy of Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters. However, it is worth mentioning here that in his youth, Paljor Dhondup effectively organized the sixth Karmapa's Great Encampment, and that by the end of his life, which was during the time of the seventh Karmapa, he had developed it to its highest level.

Although I have not personally found any old sources, some contemporary scholars have said that during the time of the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, the Great Encampment established a system of reading the Kangyur every day. Every morning, the entire Kagyu liturgy, comprising over one hundred volumes of the Buddha's teachings, was distributed to the all present and read aloud. The source of this account is probably based on oral tradition, but if accurate, it represents a practice unparalleled in other Tibetan Buddhist communities.

These sources also suggest that the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen's motivation for writing numerous texts on Vajrayana practices within the Karma Kagyu tradition stemmed from childhood observations of the way Karma Kagyu monasteries utilized Geluk texts in their pujas. Personally, I have doubts about this claim, as none of this is mentioned in the most authoritative biographies of Thongwa Dondhen. Moreover, the minor rituals of the Geluk tradition were established during the time of Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsen, who was actually a contemporary of the tenth Karmapa Choeying Dorje.

Nevertheless, Thongwa Dondhen and Paljor Dhondup both recognized the importance of having comprehensive and grand ritual texts for the Karma Kagyu. For instance, prior to the sixth

Karmapa's time, Vajrayogini was performed as an individual practice and the texts were relatively brief. Thongwa Dondhen composed grand Vajrayogini texts for group practice, incorporating numerous elements for accumulating merits at the beginning, making various offerings, and receiving full empowerments. These texts have since become the primary sources for Vajrayogini puja in the Karma Kagyu tradition.

In addition to Vajrayogini, Thongwa Dondhen also composed texts for Gyalwa Gyatso, Mahakala, and Sarvavid (or Kunrig), some of the most important ritual texts in the Karma Kagyu tradition and which are practiced to this day. Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen is also one of the main source of ritual dances and chanting notations in Karma Kagyu lineage.

In some cases, later texts written by the seventh or eighth Karmapa were based on texts which were earlier composed by Thongwa Dondhen. Just as the seventh and eighth Karmapas are significant for philosophical studies within the sutra tradition, the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje and sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen are important for tantric practices. Within this distinction, Rangjung Dorje is notable for tantric studies, while Thongwa Dondhen is particularly significant for tantric practices, especially those related to group rituals, or pujas.

Prior to Thongwa Dondhen, the Karma Kagyu primarily practiced Anuttarayogatantra, which is the highest tantra among the four classes of tantra in Vajrayana Buddhism. Thongwa Dondhen emphasized the importance of the lower tantras of Yoga and Charya from the Shalu tradition and incorporated these into the Karma Kagyu. Hence, it was during Thongwa Dondhen's tenure as sixth Karmapa that the Karma Kagyu established its own comprehensive practices of Vajrayana. Paljor Dhondup played a crucial role in this development and, indeed, the colophons of many of Thongwa Dondhen's works indicate that these were written at Paljor Dhondup's request.

We can thus infer that in keeping with Tibetan tradition (wherein a Lama or great master produces work only when earnestly requested by someone, thereby signifying the value, reason, and purpose behind it), this achievement resulted from the collaborative efforts of Thongwa Dondhen and Paljor Dhondup. Their significant accomplishment was summarized by Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa when discussing the sixth Karmapa in *The Feast for Scholars*:

All the retinues were established on the path of generation and completion stages of Vajrayana. The practices of ritual dances, ritual tunes, and ritual drawings were not merely

superficial; the authentic Vajrayana teachings spread and flourished during those days.

Despite being the youngest, Paljor Dhondup was the most influential Guigongpa within the Karma Kagyu tradition. Because the sixth Karmapa entrusted the lineage to him, he was the only Guigongpa to be recognized in the Golden Rosary of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Furthermore, as the seventh Karmapa recognized his reincarnation, he was also the first Guigongpa to initiate a tulku lineage. Moreover, he assumed a role akin to that of a regent of the Karmapa following the sixth Karmapa's passing. These factors contribute to his remarkable status in comparison to the two preceding Guigongpas.

Upon Paljor Dhondup's passing, the Guigongpa position of the Karma Kagyu lineage was bequeathed to the fourth Shamar, in keeping with Tibetan tradition. He subsequently bestowed it upon Drongbu Goshir, who became the fifth Guigongpa. Their contributions were relatively limited, however. From *The Feast for Scholars*, we learn that the third Gyaltsab Drakpa Paljor also received the position of Guigongpa, and among the later Gyaltsabs, the sixth Gyaltsab Norbu Zangpo also held this position.

Among all of them, there is no doubt that Guigongpa Rinchen Pal, Guigongpa Golonpa, and Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup were

the three most eminent Guigongpas in the Karma Kagyu lineage, significantly influencing the direction of the Karmapas' activities and causing the Karma Kagyu teachings to flourish more than those of any other lineage.

During their time of these three Guigongpas, the Gyalwang Karmapas became the most revered masters within the entirety of Tibetan Buddhism. However, as the Gyaltzab's tradition emerged, the significance of the Guigongpa position diminished.

In later periods, the Guigongpa title was bestowed upon general secretaries or Chakzoes, but none of these attained the level of importance, influence, or reverence of the earlier Guigongpas. None of the Chakzoes possessed the authority or historical precedent to personally recognize the reincarnation of the Karmapa or to serve as a spiritual master to the Karmapa, let alone be included in the Karma Kagyu's Golden Rosary.

Moreover, those who interpret or translate Guigongpa or Goshir as equivalent to general secretary or Chakzoe, encounter the difficulty of having to explain why the third Gyaltzab Drakpa Paljor received the Chakzoe or general secretary position while already holding the title of Guigongpa, as documented by Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa in *The Feast for Scholars*.

Within the Karma Kagyu, the roles of Guigongpa and general secretary are not only distinct but also strikingly different in their importance. As Guigongpas were not only monks but also accomplished practitioners, their authority was more religious than political. The only secular activities they engaged in involved the administration of the Great Encampment and monasteries and even then, their management of these activities was purely driven by the interests of their Gurus, the teachings of the Buddha, and the well-being of sentient beings in accordance with the Dharma.

Consequently, the lineage maintained a pure history during their tenure, and they were not perceived as politicians. They were regarded by all as great bodhisattvas or great masters and were often addressed as Dharma Lords.

## CLARIFICATION ABOUT KAMTSANG GUIGONGPA

There are three main reasons for me to delve deeply into the history of the Guigongpas. Firstly, as the Gyaltshab Tulku lineage was initially intertwined with the Guigongpa lineage, it is impossible to comprehend the history of the former without understanding

the significance of the latter. Secondly, despite their crucial roles in the lineage, very little information about the Guigongpas can be found in the Karma Kagyu religious histories. This paucity of information can be attributed to the fact that many of the Guigongpas were not tulkus and were not part of the Golden Rosary of the Karma Kagyu. Consequently, almost no one at our time seems to be aware of their historical significance.

Upon reflection, one can discern that the significance of the Karma Kagyu's Guigongpas extended well beyond the Karma Kagyu tradition. Tibetan Buddhism gradually evolved into a Buddhism of tulkus, an important development that indisputably originated with the Karmapas. The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, became the first tulku in Tibetan Buddhism, and his disciple Guigongpa Rinchen Pal became the first Guigongpa. This progression demonstrates that the Guigongpas were instrumental in successfully establishing the Karmapa's tulku system.

The third reason for addressing the Guigongpas in detail stems from a misunderstanding among contemporary Karma Kagyu followers. For several generations, Karma Kagyu followers have not paid sufficient attention to the lineage's history. I believe that this is due to a lack of education. For example, even the Karmapas lacked proper biographies from the eleventh to the fourteenth

Karmapa, not to mention the great disciples of the Karmapas. In addition, much of the historical information disseminated at Tsurphu was either not based on authentic sources or else completely contradicted them.

Following the passing of the sixteenth Karmapa, controversy surrounding the authority to recognize the Karmapa's reincarnation became a heated international debate, which remains a court case even to this day. This complex situation prompted many Karma Kagyu followers to develop a sudden interest in Karma Kagyu history, possibly in support of their respective claims. However, even those who were not driven by the bias and prejudice of the parties around them failed to faithfully recount the history of the Karma Kagyu.

In the widely known history of the Karmapas, only the fifth to eighth Shamars took responsibility for recognizing and enthroning the Karmapa's reincarnation. Similarly, the Situs only rose to power to officially assume the same responsibility after the eighth Tai Situ Choekyi Jungnay. Despite this historical fact, some claim that most of the Karmapas were recognized by Shamar, while others assert many of them were actually recognized by Situs. Both perspectives neglect the authority of the Guigongpas. Similar misconceptions are found in the magazine published for the Karmapa 900 com-

memoration. So, my effort here is to bring awareness to this history, enabling a better understanding of the overall development and historical structure of the early Karma Kagyu tradition.

## GOSHIR OR STATE TEACHER

In referring to Paljor Dhondup, Chinese sources document several titles that he received from the Chinese emperors, some of which were not commonly used. The two primary titles recorded in Tibetan sources are Guigongpa and Goshir as Paljor Dhondup is often known as Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup or Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

In *Reponses to Questions*, Karma Trinleypa states:

The golden seal which has six golden marks along with the position of Guanting Tai Goshir [was] given to Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup by the Chinese emperor.

Although Paljor Dhondup was primarily known as Goshir, he also held the title Guanting Tai Goshir, which is slightly higher in rank than Goshir.

To understand the origins of this title, one must look to *Fozu Chuantong (Records of Buddhism in China)*, a text written by a

Chinese monk during the Song dynasty of the thirteenth century. He cites an edict issued in 550 CE in the reign of Wen Xuandi of the Northern Qi Kingdom, during which a Buddhist monk with the title Goshir traveled to the palace to teach the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Some sources suggest that Kumarajiva, the most renowned Buddhist translator of China, who lived in the fourth century, also held the title Goshir, indicating that although Goshir is not as ancient as Guigong, it nevertheless has a long history within China.

In *The Special Collection of Archives of Tibetan Historical Documents* published by the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Goshir is written as 国师 and translated into English as “State Tutor.” Some have also translated it as “National Teacher.” Guanding Tai Goshir is written as 灌顶大国师 and translated into English as “State Initiation Master.”

The correct pronunciation is more likely *goshi* rather than *goshir* or *goshri*. However, it has become common to pronounce an *r* letter at the end of the word. Many Tibetan writers have written Goshir as “Goshri,” with *shri* invoking the popular Sanskrit word for “glory.” It is somewhat amusing to consider Tibetan people interpreting a Sanskrit meaning from these Chinese words.

Although, in Tibet, Goshir is a title given to religious figures, this does not seem to be the case in China, where many prominent politicians held this title. For example, Liu Bo Wen, who was an important advisor to Hongwu, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, held the title Goshir. In addition, Tenzin Choegyal, a famous Mongolian general who invaded Tibet in the seventeenth century and established the Geluk government in Lhasa, also held the title. He was known as Goshir Han or Goshir Tenzin Choegyal.

As an eighteenth century Gelukpa scholar from Amdo stated:

In the past, there were three high titles for Lamas: Dishī, Goshir, and Chanshi. Among them, Drogon Phaspa held Dishī, Jamchen Choeje and Changkya Dorje Chang held Goshir, and some, including my Lama Dharma Vajra, held Chanshi.

Among these, Goshir and Dishī are the most well-known in Tibet. According to the *The Red Annals* by Tsalpa Kunga Dorje, the fourth Karmapa also received the title Goshir from the Mongolian Emperor. In addition, the third and fifth Dalai Lamas both held Goshir titles. Indeed, in some writings, the fifth Dalai Lama proudly refers to himself as Guanting Tai Goshir.

*Dishi* can be literally translated as “Emperor’s teacher,” while *Goshi* literally means “State teacher.” It appears that while the *Dishi* title was primarily given to those who became teachers to the emperor, *Goshir* was bestowed on those who were not necessarily their teachers (although *Goshir* does not seem to be a lower title than *Dishi*). The biography of Drogön Phaspa, who became the Guru to Kublai Khan and was the first Tibetan political ruler after the fall of the Tibetan empire, mentions that Kublai Khan first offered him the *Dishi* title and later, *Goshir*. Therefore, many Tibetan Lamas held the title *Goshir*.

Within the Karma Kagyu tradition, there were numerous instances of the Karmapas conferring the *Goshir* title on other Lamas. For instance, Ja Jamyang Choedrak, who is considered to be the third Gyalwang Drukpa Tulku in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, was given the title *Goshir* by the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso. In fact, during this time, there were many *Goshirs* in the Great Encampment. Thus, among the Lamas in Tibet who held the *Goshir* title, there were those who officially received it from Chinese emperors, and those who received it from high Tibetan Lamas such as the Karmapas.

In the case of Paljor Dhondup, *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* notes that the “Emperor Daming Zhengtong king offered the edict of Goshir’s position, golden seal, and dark blue Crown.”

Emperor Zhengtong, the sixth emperor of the Ming dynasty was officially known as Ying Tsong Ru, and his personal name was Zhu Qi Zhen. He became emperor twice and during his reign gave offerings and titles to important figures in Tibet, including the Tibetan ruler from the Phagmo Drupa dynasty and the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen.

An old Chinese archive of this emperor, titled *The Ninety-Fifth Volume of Events Records of Daming Emperor Ying Tsong Ru*, states that Emperor Ying Tsong Ru offered Paljor Dhondup a title called 崇教宏贍 Chongcho Hongshan. This title can be translated into English as “Preacher of Dharma.” However, Tibetan sources indicate that Paljor Dhondup was not called by this title.

Another Chinese archival document called *Daming Xianzong Chun Huang Shilu Juan Chi Yibai Liushi*, is a compilation of documents about the Ming Emperor Xianzong, (popularly known as the Chenghua Emperor.) He was the son of the Zhengtong emperor and during the thirteenth year of his reign, he elevated Paljor Dhondup from Goshir to Guanting (or Kenting) Tai Goshir. It appears that other offerings and titles were offered to Paljor

Dhondup, but as he had passed away by this time, these gifts were given to the fourth Shamar instead. This will be explored in more detail later on.

Among these titles, only Goshir or Guanting Tai Goshir were maintained by the Paljor Dhondup Tulku lineage. Generally, they are known as Goshir Gyaltsabs, but sometimes they also use the Kenting Tai Goshir title. In his *Records of the Twelfth Karmapa's Memorial Stupa*, the eighth Situ Panchen addresses the seventh Gyaltsab Kunchok Ozer, who had built the stupa. Situ Panchen says:

The way it started in the beginning was that the seventh reincarnation of the fearless and great master, the one whose name is given by the Emperor as Kenting Tai Goshir shines and the one who was given initiation as the regent for countless eons by the Karmapa (Jigten Wangchuk), the lord of the world.

So, even in our time, it seems that only Gyaltsab Rinpoche uses this title. The conferral of Chinese titles upon Tibetan Buddhist masters has become a subject of controversy in contemporary times. Some contemporary Tibetans express disapproval of this practice as being expressive of Chinese political influence.

However, in this regard, it is crucial to consider the historical and cultural context.

The Chinese have a longstanding tradition of bestowing various titles and positions upon individuals they deem significant, irrespective of citizenship. In the Tibetan milieu, these titles did have some substantial weight. For example, if a Lama held a prestigious title given by the Chinese emperor, Tibetan rulers would be expected to demonstrate greater respect, such as personally receiving the Lama upon meeting.

Throughout history, these titles were predominantly viewed as representations of the esteem, fame, and respect that certain Lamas received, rather than as indicators of political power. Since most Tibetans lacked a comprehensive understanding of the precise meanings of these titles, it is imperative to interpret these practices in relation to relevant historical and cultural contexts, rather than through only contemporary political lens.

## THE BLACK CROWN OF PALJOR DHONDUP

*A Rosary of Crystal Moons* states:

Offered the dark blue Crown, but since the Crown looked like the Lord's [Karmapa], he felt that it would be inappropriate and so placed it with the relics of Vajradhara.

Similarly, Karma Khenpo Rinchen Dhargye's 19th-century history of Gyaltsab's Crown called *Guitar of Sarasvasti*, mentions:

Chinese Emperor Daming Zhengtong offered the position of Goshir and golden seal. However, as it is the nature of reality that a bodhisattva will not be interested in high rank, fame, ego, pride, attachment, aversion, and competitiveness, he saw that it would be inappropriate in appearance if he wore that Crown, so he placed it with the relics of Vajradhara.

This shows how Goshir Paljor Dhondup's service to the Karmapa was completely wholehearted and full of dedication, with no absolutely no sense of Paljor Dhondup ever once acting out of self-interest.

The historical record states that it was Zhengtong who offered the black Crown to Paljor Dhondup, indicating that the it was

probably received it while Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen was still alive. Although the black Crown is considered a special attribute of the Karmapa within the Karma Kagyu tradition, several other Lamas also received black crowns from the Chinese emperors. For instance, when Jamchen Choeje of the Geluk tradition visited China, he received a black crown from the Yongle emperor, though it differed slightly in appearance from the Karmapa's Crown. It remains uncertain whether Paljor Dhondup's black Crown exactly resembled Karmapa's or even the common black crowns worn by high-ranking Chinese monks.

In accordance with the wishes of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, the statue of Vajradhara in which Paljor Dhondup enshrined his black Crown may have been one of many large and small statues that he and the third Situ Rinpoche Tashi Paljor constructed at Karma Gon monastery in Eastern Tibet. Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso himself, document the insertion of relics into these statues. In the colophon of the seventh Karmapa's work, the Karmapa writes:

Also, the sponsors who made donations for the statue of this Buddha, and Drung Goshirpa and the seat holder Situpa and his nephew...

The seventh Karmapa later bestowed a red Crown upon the second Gyaltsab Tashi Namgyal, marking the second instance of a Karmapa conferring a Crown to a heart son, and following the fourth Karmapa's initial bestowal of a red Crown upon the second Shamar. Since then, the Gyaltsabs have continued to wear this red Crown.<sup>3</sup>

## PALJOR DHONDUP IN THE GOLDEN ROSARY

Thongwa Dondhen and Paljor Dhondup not only developed a strong relationship as teacher and student, but were close spiritual companions whose renown extended as far as China. The sixth Karmapa acknowledged Paljor Dhondup as one of his principal students. In *The Blue Annals*, Goelo Zhonnu Pal wrote:

Although he had innumerable students, Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup were the chief disciples.

In addition, most historical sources identify only these two masters as close disciples of the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen.

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<sup>3</sup> Further information can be found in the works of Karma Khenpo Rinchen Dhargye.

As documented in the eighth Karmapa's, *A Discussion That Came from the Teachings of Glorious Dhakpo Kagyu*, it is clear that Thongwa Dondhen held a particular regard for Paljor Dhondup:

When the benevolent Dharma Lord Karmapa Tulku Thongna Ngonpar Ga [Thongwa Dondhen], who accomplished all, entered parinirvana, he instructed Mahatma Paljor Dhondup to pray in this manner:

The one who embodies all the Buddhas,  
The compassionate Thongwa Dondhen,  
I beseech you to gaze upon me with your  
compassionate eyes,  
I supplicate you to bestow the rain of blessings upon  
me.

He then declared, 'Now I, too, shall be in the lineage of the Kagyu.

In *The Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa notes that Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen:

... bestowed the Crown and instruction texts of Mixing and Transferring to Goshir Rinpoche and made a prophetic declaration with a seal. He stated, 'Ensure that the seals of these relics remain unbroken until my return. I am going to

assist the Kalki, as there is a conflict between Shambhala and Mecca.”

In the same text, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa states:

Due to their special connection, the former Lord entrusted the teaching to Goshir Rinpoche, he[the seventh Karmapa] requested the dharma transmission.

These documents clearly indicate that Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen entrusted the lineage to Goshir Paljor Dhondup, who affirms this lineage transmission in a text outlining how the forefathers of the Kagyu lineage were prophesied from Vajradhara down to Paljor Dhondup. Regarding his own role, he wrote:

Master Padma prophesied Shri Bhadra Paljor Dhondup in the Prophecy of Seal and stated that:

You, known as Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk,  
Have a special connection and are fortunate from  
beginningless time,  
Even in these days, you are equal to the lord,  
In the future, when the end of time approaches,  
Your emanation will preserve the teachings.  
A great yogi of ascetic practice whose name will be  
Paljor,

He will benefit beings in Monkha Ding with skill,  
He will practice profound treasures and will travel  
extensively,  
He will not manifest publicly and will primarily  
remain a secret yogi,  
He will preserve the Lama Gongdu and propagate the  
teachings.

*The Prophecy of Seals*, is a treasure believed to have been revealed by Sangye Lingpa. It is one of the primary sources describing the Gyaltsabs as the reincarnation of Kharchen Palgyi Wangchuk, who was a disciple of Guru Rinpoche.

Paljor Dhondup continues:

The dharma lord Thongwa Dondhen addressed me and prophesied the following:

Namo Guru Bhe!

The stainless and noble path which the Buddhas  
traversed,  
Certain in the innate nature that is free from extremes,  
The one who ripens the fortunate ones as the essence  
of the point,  
The one who is the living force of Kagyu, may you  
remain stable.

Again,

The Lord Lama who embodies all the liberators,  
The pure and complete Buddhas and noble dharma,  
Bodhisattvas, Shravakas, and the ocean of Sangha,  
By their blessing and truth, may you endure.

Given such words of supplication, I was thus prophesied.

When the sixth Karmapa passed away, the testament he left for Paljor Dhondup indicating his next incarnation marked the first instance of a Karmapa leaving such a letter. The significance of these letters has become more prominent in recent years, with some claiming that the letter was a unique attribute of the Karmapas and that no Karmapa failed to leave a letter about his next rebirth. Some even asserted that the first Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa left a letter for Drogön Raychen, who then passed it on to Pomdrakpa, who subsequently recognized Karma Pakshi as the second Karmapa. However, these claims were motivated by political agendas and are entirely unfounded.

When Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen passed away at Saphu in Kongo, all the activities fulfilling the intentions of his passing were performed by Paljor Dhondup. In his biography of Paljor Dhondup, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje noted that “he was

akin to Mahakasyapa when he filled the entire ten directions with the collection of merit of expanding the relics.”

## SHIFTING THE CENTRE OF KARMA KAGYU

A passage in *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* illustrates some important points regarding Paljor Dhondup’s service as the Karmapa’s regent:

Lord Thongwa Dondhen traveled to Saphu, sealed the precious objects and the Crown, and entrusted them to Goshir along with texts. He then passed away. Subsequently, he [Goshir Paljor Dhondup] constructed the stupa of relics and statue [of Thongwa Dondhen] in the [Karmapa’s] personal chamber at Tsurphu. He restored the Golden Roof, assumed the role of regent, and administered the Encampment.

In its early years of the Karma Kagyu, the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa, established the Karma Kagyu in Kham and in Central Tibet, where his monastery, Tsurphu, is located. Paljor Dhondup had a pivotal role in officially shifting the centre of the Karma Kagyu from Tsurphu and Eastern Tibet to Kongpo in the southern region. Here, the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje performed extraordinary feats, such as altering the course of a large river that had been threatening the local village. As a result, people

converted from the ancient Bon religion to the Karma Kagyu, which flourished throughout the Kongpo region as a result.

In the *A Dictionary of Dungkar*, Great Scholar Dungkar Lobsang Thinley wrote:

In this Kongpo region, there were indications of a flourishing Bonpo religion in the past. The Bonpo mountain and Taktse retreat were recognized as significant holy sites of Bonpo's founder, Shenrab. Furthermore, there existed ancient Bon traditions of animal sacrifice, knife rites, and funerary rites. Since the flourishing of Karma Kagyu, there has been the Kong Karsid [Karma Kagyu's Governance in Kongpo], which encompassed numerous monasteries of great faith and many influential local rulers.

Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso's *Collection of Works* has a brief text about Tselha Gang, the main monastery of the Karmapa in Kongpo:

Lord Rolpe Dorje was offered land by the sponsors of Drong Tsa Gyang Rol. There, the construction of this personal residence, Tashi Rabgye, was overseen by Tokdhen Kachoe Wangpo and others. Master Guigongpa stated, 'during difficult times, it is more pleasant to reside in the impoverished region,' and he transferred all the treasures

from Central and Eastern Tibet here. I also constructed a retreat centre, hoping it would prove beneficial in the future. If one practices virtue here, one experiences a fresher mind, more profound experiences and realizations, and more frequent visions of deities than in any other location.

Historical sources documenting the passing of Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo note that he passed away in some disappointment because Paljor Dhondup had transferred the treasures from Tsurphu to Kongpo. Thus, we can confidently assert that Choedrak Gyatso is referring to Paljor Dhondup rather than Rinchen Pal.

During the time of the first and second Karmapas, Karma Gon in Kham and Tsurphu in Central Tibet were of equal importance. However, during the era of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth Karmapas, Kongpo became a significant residence for the Karmapas. After the passing of the sixth Karmapa, Paljor Dhondup officially established Kongpo as the main centre of the Karma Kagyu, with Tselha Gang monastery serving as the Karmapa's headquarters. The Great Encampment was seen as the ultimate, albeit nomadic headquarters, while Tselha Gang acted as a stable secondary base.

During Choedrak Gyatso's youth, the Karma Kagyu in Kongpo, under the leadership of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, established the

Kongpo Karsi or The Governance of Kongpo by Karma Kagyu. This series of rules for the protection of mountains, forests, rivers and other natural features were known as seals of mountains, seals of rivers, seals of paths, seals of dharma, and so forth. Essentially, the rules stipulated that animals living in those mountains and fish inhabiting those rivers should not be harmed, that no taxes should be levied on the use of certain paths, and that individuals living in those communities should adhere to minimum moral principles.

Situated between Central and Eastern Tibet, Kongpo was a beautiful and resourceful region which did not come not directly under the jurisdiction of any Tibetan Central Government; a factor which played a crucial role in the development of the Karma Kagyu. During this period, Kongpo was administered by the Karma Kagyu, which was the predominant religion in the region. As a result, the Karma Kagyu flourished here to a greater extent than anywhere else in Tibet.

A problem arises from a misunderstanding around this historical point in that many contemporary adherents of the Karma Kagyu assume that Tsurphu was always the centre of the Karma Kagyu. Many do not even comprehend the distinction between Tsurphu monastery and the Great Encampment of the Karmapas,

leading them to use the term, “Tsurphu Garchen,” meaning the Great Encampment of Tsurphu. But in reality, Tsurphu is not an encampment and Great Encampment doesn’t belong to Tsurphu either.

Even a well-known contemporary Tibetan historian named Thupten Phuntsok, a follower of the Karma Kagyu, wrote in *The Key of Pema Raga* that the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje went to Tsurphu monastery after he returned from China, where he was surrounded by many followers, marking the beginning of the Great Encampment. However, the fourth Karmapa never visited Tsurphu after his return from China.

These misconceptions arise from a failing to understand that Tsurphu was only one of many centers of Karma Kagyu at that time, and that Kongpo was far more significant than Tsurphu during that period.

## GUIGONGPA TO GYALTSAB

Although Paljor Dhondup was elevated from Guigongpa to Gyaltsab, or regent, it is almost certain that he was not formally called Gyaltsab during his own time. The significance of the distinction between Guigongpa and Gyaltsab is complex and raises

questions around how the regent of Karmapa is regarded more highly than the Guigongpas, who are already highly esteemed and revered.

My own understanding is that there are two ways to understand Paljor Dhondup's role as the regent. Firstly, when the sixth Karmapa passed away, Paljor Dhondup was revered and heeded by everyone almost as if he were Karmapa himself. In addition, his authority to transfer all the treasures of Karma Kagyu to Kongpo, indicates that he wielded significant power and commanded deep reverence.

The second way is that up until Paljor Dhondup's time, the Karmapas had Guigongpas who were primarily responsible for the administration of the lineage and who also served as their teachers or Gurus. The Karmapas also had Lamas who were responsible for receiving important lineage instructions, for which they were considered the Karmapas' root gurus and were included in the Golden Rosary. Usually, they were simple practitioners without substantial administrative or formal responsibilities. In addition, the Karmapas had other Lamas whose primary duty was to offer monastic vows, both novice and full ordination, to the Karmapa.

This system was in place from the time of the third Karmapa. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether some of the lamas

occupying these roles were truly of the Karma Kagyu. For example, Khedrup Ugyenpa, who was the main guru of the third Karmapa, was from Drukpa Kagyu, and Yungton Dorje Pal, who was the main guru of the fourth Karmapa, was a holder of the Nyingma lineage.

Once Paljor Dhondup became the Karmapa's regent, he assumed all of these aforementioned roles. I believe that this may have been partially motivated by a desire to ensure that all these roles could be fulfilled by Lamas within the Karma Kagyu lineage and that Paljor Dhondup was attempting to unify the system.

Despite not formally assuming the title, Paljor Dhondup's significance ascended from Guigongpa to regent. We can discern his importance to the Karma Kagyu based on the words of the seventh Karmapa Choedark Gyatso, who in his *Collection of Works*, describes building a statue of Mahakala under Paljor Dhondup's instructions:

The Jetsun Dharma King and Guru, Lord Paljor Dhondup, the one whose name is too worthy to mention, asked me to write down a description of a statue of the Great Mahakala as I build it. So this description is written by Choedrak Gyatso at Gajed Gang.

Observing that Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso viewed Paljor Dhondup as the Dharma King, we can comprehend Paljor Dhondup's esteemed position.

Although he was not formally addressed as Gyaltsab or regent during his lifetime, Paljor Dhondup embodied the role of Gyaltsab in meaning and action. After Paljor Dhondup's passing, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso recognized his reincarnation, who was named Tashi Namgyal. Approximately three years before his passing, Choedrak Gyatso formally appointed Tashi Namgyal as the Gyaltsab. Regarding this, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa states in his *Feast for Scholars*:

As commanded by the Lord, primarily the five monastic seats and all people, both high and low, revered him equally as the Lord himself. After the seventh Lord passed away, he became the leader of the Karma Kagyu, and people addressed him as Gyaltsab Tulku.

The activities and responsibilities of a Gyaltsab come into effect upon the demise of a Karmapa, at which point they must oversee the Karma Kagyu, identify and recognize the next Karmapa, and transmit the lineage of empowerment and instructions from the previous Karmapas. This system was first established by the

Karmapa and Gyaltsab and was subsequently adopted by Shamar. Later, it was implemented by almost every other tulku system, including the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama in the Geluk tradition. The process of tulku A recognizing and training tulku B and vice versa, when tulku A passes away, is now an almost universal practice in Tibet.

The third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje once said:

The one who is greater than me is Samrin,  
And the one who is equal to me is Drakseng.

Both were students of the third Karmapa. But Samrin did not have a reincarnation lineage, while Drakseng or Drakpa Sengge was the first Shamar.

It is only in the case of Gyaltsab Tashi Namgyal that a Karmapa formally appointed a disciple or anyone as equal to himself. The eighth Shamar Palchen Choekyi Dhondup sat slightly higher than the twelfth Karmapa, who was his disciple, though this was not at the Karmapa's instigation. In Pangphuk monastery in Eastern Tibet, there is a picture of the eleventh Situ sitting as an equal with a very young sixteenth Karmapa. However, this is not officially accepted system of the Karma Kagyu.

In the early period of Tibetan Buddhism, there was no system indicating the hierarchical levels of Lamas or Great Masters. Hence, it is challenging to explain who held higher status in early Karma Kagyu society. People often assume that the Shamars were second to the Karmapas. However, as the Guigongpa system and Shamar's lineage were established almost concurrently, it is not easy to determine which was considered higher.

Although there is more information available about the Shamars than the Guigongpas, many early historical sources mention Guigongpas as the chief disciples, frequently preceding the Shamars. This might suggest that they were considered higher than the Shamars. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Shamars were often more publicly revered than the Guigongpas as Shamars were tulkus.

The first and second Gyaltzabs were considered the second-highest Lama after the Karmapa within Karma Kagyu society. This changed when the second Gyaltzab did not live long, and the eighth Karmapa 'informally' appointed the fifth Shamar as his regent. From then until the tenth Shamar, the Shamars were the second-highest Lamas in the lineage. Once the Shamars held that position, Gyaltzabs became the third-highest tulku of the Karma Kagyu. They were the three main masters of the lineage,

and until the seventeenth century, they were the most renowned and revered high lamas in all of Tibet.

At some point, the Karmapa, Shamar, Gyaltsab, and Pawo were the main Lamas of the Karma Kagyu. Starting from the sixth Situ, the Situs became the fifth most important tulku of the Karma Kagyu. Pawo held a higher position than Situ for a long time, though the eighth Situ Choekyi Jungnay rose in significance and popularity after becoming one of the most celebrated scholars of Tibet. The fifteenth Karmapa gave the second Jamgön Kongtrul the same position as the Situ, so until the third Jamgön, Gyaltsab and Pawo were higher than Jamgön and Situ.

Then, during the time of the sixteenth Karmapa, after Shamar's reincarnation was recognized, the positions of Karma Kagyu Rinpoches were as follows: Karmapa, Shamar Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Jamgön Rinpoche, Gyaltsab Rinpoche, Pawo Rinpoche, and Trewo Rinpoche. The last two were sometimes not even counted, while the others were popularly known as the "Four Heart Sons" of the Karmapa.

Just as everything is impermanent, so are the positions and popularity of Lamas or great masters. Like new kings or dynasties, various tulku lineages arise and disappear. Some rise and some fall. It is erroneous to assume that a tulku lineage that is

important in our time must also have been important throughout history. Furthermore, there is no point in demanding a certain position that has long since been lost. As is the case in most tulku lineages, great merits and qualifications were possessed by the former incarnations. Most of the later or current incarnations merely use their previous tulku's names and history to enjoy the associated privileges.

I have briefly discussed the positions of these great Karma Kagyu masters partly because many people care deeply about this topic, while others are simply curious. Some think of these positions as if they can never change.

My main reason for addressing this is that some people misinterpret past history due to lack of proper research, while others alter it for political reasons and prejudices. We can always change our future if we desire, but the past can only be understood and accepted. It should be respected in this manner.

## RECOGNIZING THE SEVENTH KARMAPA

In his role as the sixth Karmapa's regent, or Gyaltsab, one of Paljor Dhondup's primary legacies was the recognition of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso. Karma Kagyu historical accounts

mention a prediction letter left by the sixth Karmapa for Paljor Dhondup regarding his next rebirth, and although Paljor Dhondup himself noted the names of the next Karmapa's parents in this letter, there is no further mention of the role this information played in the process of recognizing Choedrak Gyatso.

Detailed information about the recognition of the seventh Karmapa can be found in Tsuklak Trengwa's *The Feast for Scholars*. Choedrak Gyatso was born in Ngo Chimda, near Kongpo, not far from Nyewo. When he was fifteen days old, the seat holder of Dara Teng monastery in Nyewo (a Lama named Chö Paljor,) came to meet him. I have recently that there are still the remains of this monastery in Nyewo, Nakchu.

Paljor Dhondup was in Tsurphu at the time, doing necessary memorial works in the name of late sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen. As he received the news from Chö Paljor, three auspicious events occurred simultaneously: the sun was rising, and the sounds of both the cuckoo and the dragon were heard for the first time since the year began. Paljor Dhondup then spoke with Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo (the main seat holder of Tsurphu monastery), who remarked that the names of the child's parents matched those he had seen in his dream. They therefore determined that this child was indeed the Karmapa's reincarnation.

When the young Karmapa was nine months old, Paljor Dhondup traveled from Central Tibet to Nyewo to meet the young Karmapa. He was greatly impressed by the young Karmapa's magnificence. The child took the conch shell of the Great Encampment and claiming it as his own, he blew it. This astonished Paljor Dhondup, who then brought the young Karmapa to the Great Encampment.

There, Paljor Dhondup enthroned him and bestowed upon him the name, Rangjung Kunchen Choekyi Gyalpo, which means "The Self-Arising Omniscient and Dharma King."

In *The Feast for Scholars*, Tsuklak Trengwa states that Choedrak Gyatso was recognized by both Jamyang Chenmo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup. However, in his biography of Choedrak Gyatso, Paljor Dhondup wrote that the young Karmapa had been recognized by Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo and did not mention his own involvement. Jamyang Chenmo was Paljor Dhondup's teacher, so this omission both shows respect for his lama and demonstrates his own humility.

Jamyang Chenmo was a highly respected scholar and master, even among Sakya scholars. Within Tsurphu and other parts of Karma Kagyu society, however, his reputation was called into question because of his frequent refutations of the second Shamar's texts (these, over time, had become the primary texts of

the Karma Kagyu tradition.) Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa's *The Feast for Scholars*, states that for a considerable period, the Tsurphu tradition consisted solely of works originating from Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo.,

Also in *The Feast for Scholars*, is a passage describing the passing of Jamyang Chenmo:

After the Lord Thongwa Dondhen passed away, the Great Paljor Dhondup came to build two small eaves of the golden roof [in memory of Thongwa Dondhen]. He [Jamyang Chenmo] said, 'this won't be good for me. So leave it for some time.' But [Paljor Dhondup] did not heed this request. When [Paljor Dhondup] took the Great Dark Store to Tselha Gang [in Kongpo] by stating that poor regions are better place to live during difficult times, Jamyang Chenmo was not happy. He said, 'the Encampment's work of erecting the golden roof will be completed, but I have to go. I won't be able to see the face of reincarnation.' Having said that, he passed away.

It is important to note that what seems to have been a conflict, or minor disagreement between Jamyang Chenmo and Paljor Dhondup, merely reflects their different perspectives and should not be interpreted as Paljor Dhondup intentionally harming his

teacher. Nor, indeed, should it be viewed as Jamyang Chenmo harboring a strong resentment. Although he was undoubtedly upset, Jamyang Chenmo held Paljor Dhondup in high esteem, as evidenced in the colophon of his text on nectar offering, where he states that it was written at the request of “the one who is properly raised by the kindness of Dharma Lord Rinpoche Tulku [sixth Karmapa], the one who is endowed with merits and wisdom, the Zimpon Kenting Goshi Paljor Dhondup.”

Although a few individuals were involved in the process of recognizing the seventh Karmapa, ultimate authority rested solely with Paljor Dhondup. This recognition of the seventh Karmapa remains one of his most significant legacies, as Choedrak Gyatso went on to become one of the most important Karmapas in history. Yet throughout his biography of the seventh Karmapa, Paljor Dhondup rarely mentioned his own merits, and when he did, it was primarily to highlight the exceptional qualities of Choedrak Gyatso.

## RARE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD?

Further information regarding the teachings that Paljor Dhondup offered to Choedrak Gyatso, as well as accounts of their travels

together can be found in Choedrak Gyatso's biography, so this text will not delve into those details.

Although Paljor Dhondup spent most of his life in Kongpo, he traveled as extensively as the sixth and seventh Karmapas, frequently visiting Eastern and Central Tibet. He never ventured out of Tibet, however, and because he only traveled with the Karmapas he never went to Amdo and may never have visited the Tsang region, where Nyemo is located. The sixth Karmapa never visited there, and the seventh Karmapa visited Nyemo only after Paljor Dhondup's passing.

Another important aspect of Paljor Dhondup's legacy was his role as one of the main teachers or gurus to Choedrak Gyatso. *The Feast for Scholars* says:

Due to the auspicious connection of the previous Lord [Thongwa Dondhen] entrusting the lineage to Goshir Rinpoche, he [Choedrak Gyatso] said to him [Paljor Dhondup], 'You should offer me dharma and transmission, and also first I need Amitayu and Six Syllabus.' Therefore, at the age of five, on the third day of the third month in the year of the Earth Tiger, during which there was the special combination of constellation Gyal and the day Thursday, he was offered the external, internal, and secret

empowerments, the blessing of Torma of the Amitayu along with Six Syllabus, and alphabets of both India and Tibet, which are the basis of literacy. In return, he said many inconceivable things about how to hold Vajra, bell, vase, and the introduction of empowerments.

In his short biography of Choedrak Gyatso, Bengarwa Jampal Zanppo writes:

To the great (Goshirwa) Paljor Dhondup,  
He listened to Guhyasamaja, Kalachakra, Dakini  
Sahara, and so on,  
All the works of Rangjung Dorje that can be found,  
All the collection of works of Kagyu masters,  
The Collection of Buddha's teachings and Great  
Commentaries.

This clearly shows that not only was Goshir Paljor Dhondup the primary person who recognized and enthroned Choedrak Gyatso as well his first teacher, but he was actually one the seventh Karmapa's two main important teachers.

The first, third, fourth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth Karmapas were renowned scholars. Among these, the first, third, and fourth Karmapas had several teachers, while the eighth and

ninth Karmapas also had more than four or five main teachers. In the case of the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, however, there were only two teachers and these were Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

Although Choedrak Gyatso met well-known scholars such as Goelo Zhonnu Pal and Zhalu Lotsawa Choekyong Zangpo, he had very little interaction with them.

Karma Trinleypa was one of the main disciples of Choedrak Gyatso as well as a great scholar, so there is no better source on matters regarding the seventh Karmapa's teachers than his *Reponses to Questions*. Here is a full quotation from this work:

He relied only upon the two Lamas with great respect — Lama Rinpoche Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, also known as Wanggyapa [the one who has a hundred empowerments], and Guigongpa Bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup. In the past, Lord Thongwa Dondhen trained Guigongpa to receive all the teachings available in Tibet so that he could receive the empowerments and transmissions from him in this next life. Due to Thongwa Dondhen's kindness, there is no teaching that Guigongpa has not received. He received the transmission of all the teachings of Buddha and every Indian commentary that was ever translated into Tibetan.

He lived until Gyalwe Wangpo [this refers to the full form of Gyalwang of the Lord of the Victorious Ones — here he is referring to the seventh Karmapa] was thirty-one years old and followed him as if he were the shadow of the holy body [of the Karmapa]. He offered teachings all the time. I believe there might not have been anyone, not only in Tibet but the entire world, who received more teachings than this master and disciple. Gyalwe Wangpo received ordination from Lama Rinpoche Wanggyapa and many empowerments and instructions. Yet he received the most teachings from Guigongpa, his main Lama. Therefore, both were placed in the list of Kagyu lineage [Golden Rosary].”

Similarly, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje’s biography of Paljor Dhondup contains a verse as a summary, followed by a long prose piece of detailed description. Both are quoted below in full:

The one who is the rebirth of the Buddha Karmapa,  
Great Tulku Choedrak Gyatso,  
And other incomparable lamas of beings,  
Their clear wisdom has been illuminated by him in  
this world.

This great bodhisattva raised the ultimate objects of refuge such as Tulku, the Great Karmapa, for beings. Through his

activities he appeared as others have made appearances to benefit beings. Just like the teacher of literacy known as Teacher to All who taught the young prince Siddhartha, he demonstrated teaching the pitakas, tantras, and great sciences, and the tulkus [his students] too demonstrated mastering all this knowledge and gaining the power of great confidence that is free from any fear. Choedrak Gyatso, the one who was the reincarnation of Gyalwa Karmapa, was known as the all-knowing and all-seeing one in this world. He had the eyes that had no obstruction across the three times. He defeated anyone who challenged him, including gods and shramanas who claimed to be teachers. This too was the resulting kindness from having this great bodhisattva as his tutor.

As Mikyö Dorje suggests, we can get a sense of Paljor Dhondup's level of knowledge by understanding the knowledge of his main disciple, Choedrak Gyatso. As Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa mentioned in *The Feast for Scholars*, Choedrak Gyatso was already a great master and scholar when Paljor Dhondup passed away. Hence, it is evident that Paljor Dhondup's wishes came to fruition.

Two years after Paljor Dhondup passed away at Tsurphu in 1482, Choedrak Gyatso gave teachings on the Middle Way school using

a text written by the fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje. The teachings took place at Namtse Deng, an old monastery in Central Tibet, with around five hundred attendees, who were mainly scholars, including Shakya Chokdhen of Sakya. Shakya Chokdhen is generally considered one of the three main scholars of the Sakya tradition and has been very influential not just to the Sakya lineage, but to the Kagyu and Jonang lineages also.

Jonang Kunga Drolchok, the former reincarnation of the great scholar Taranatha, writes in his biography of Shakya Chokdhen that Nyangrampa, the Sakyapa scholar, was in the audience during the Karmapa's teachings. Nyangrampa said:

I used to think the Karmapa was someone inconceivable as he only gave some oral transmission of MANI and other mantras and then conquered all the people and wealth. But this one is just incredible. I confess my wrong thoughts.

Nyangrampa's words were no exaggeration. Choedrak Gyatso's commentary on logic, known as *The Ocean of Reasoning*, is one of the most important commentaries on logic in Tibet. According to historical accounts, the Karmapa wrote it without even looking at texts. Whenever he had time, he sat on the throne and narrated, and his commentary was simply written down by his

disciple Dhakpo Rabjampa. In analyzing his works, it becomes apparent that Choedrak Gyatso's writings are very similar to those of the Indian masters. Succinct in words and deep in meaning, he presents strong arguments in his own philosophy and clear, sharp logic when refuting others.

I personally feel that among all the Karmapas, no one writes philosophical texts as elegantly as Choedrak Gyatso. Yet unfortunately he lost his life when he was only in his fifties, and as such, we have limited texts composed by him. This is quite sad. However, it is important to appreciate how he paved the way for proper academic studies in the Karma Kagyu by establishing its first shedras (monastic colleges). His successor, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje, was a beneficiary of this development and fully dedicated his life to study and writing. This resulted in many wonderful philosophical commentaries which have been crucial not just to the Karma Kagyu, but to the entire Kagyu lineage.

If we examine the origin of the Karma Kagyu tradition of philosophical studies, we find that most of it comes from the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje. His main philosophical teacher was Karma Trinleypa, whose own main guru was Choedrak Gyatso, although he also studied with many important scholars of the Sakya tradition. Indeed, almost all of Karma Trinleypa's writings

hold to Choedrak Gyatso's viewpoint. He even wrote a commentary on *Perfection of Wisdom* based on Choedrak Gyatso's own commentary.

Mikyö Dorje states that the Karma Kagyu's Middle Way tradition came from Bengarwa and Paljor Dhondup to Choedrak Gyatso. Even more importantly, it was Choedrak Gyatso who promoted the tradition of studying philosophical texts within the Karma Kagyu by establishing shedras and by writing commentaries. As a direct result, the Karma Kagyu became one of the most important centers of learning in Tibet, and this continued for few generations afterwards.

We can determine that it was Goshir Paljor Dhondup who instigated this important milestone, as he was the main and almost exclusive philosophical teacher of Choedrak. If Goshir Paljor Dhondup had been like any other typical Kagyu master (only interested in meditation), the Karma Kagyu may not have experienced this important historical development.

The historical significance of the promotion of studies within the Karma Kagyu tradition by the Seventh Karmapa, Choedrak Gyatso, is explicitly elucidated by the eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje in his commentary on Drikung's *Single Intention*. He asserts:

During that era, when the majority of retreat centers and monastic institutions within the Kagyu school adhered to instructors and doctrines divergent from this particular Kagyu lineage, he successfully established this lineage of practice to thrive independently. The continued existence of activities associated with the so-called Dhakpo Kagyu in contemporary times can be attributed solely to his efforts.

## SUN AND MOON-LIKE LAMAS

Lineage is of paramount importance in Tibetan Buddhism. Consequently, all lineages maintain a list of Lamas traceable to Buddha Shakyamuni, Vajradhara, and others, notwithstanding occasional challenges to historical accuracy. As these lineages typically propagate through a master's transmission to a student, each generation usually consists only one master.

Within the Karma Kagyu tradition, the Golden Rosary is mainly comprised of the Karmapas, and of other masters who facilitated the transmission of teachings between successive Karmapas.

Given that Karmapas receive recognition and essential teachings from an early age, one master typically bridged the gap between two Karmapa reincarnations in the lineage. Between Thongwa

Dondhen and Choedrak Gyatso, however, two important Lamas emerged. These were Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

It is important to understand Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo's background. Born into a family associated with a great master who had instructed the first Karmapa Dusum Kyenpa, Jampal Zangpo hailed from Bengar in Nagchu province, which is near to Nyewo, the birthplace of Paljor Dhondup.

Jampal Zangpo received teachings from numerous eminent masters across various lineages before becoming a disciple of Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen and subsequently dedicating his life to practice. Unlike Paljor Dhondup, Bengar Jampal Zangpo embodied the traditional yogi archetype, spending eighteen years in solitude at Namtso, a sacred site frequented by great masters, which was north of Lhasa. He is primarily remembered for the Short Dorje Chang Prayer, which is frequently recited in the Karma Kagyu lineage.

Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup were regarded as the sun and moon of the Karma Kagyu during their time. As the two most prominent disciples of the sixth Karmapa and the two most significant teachers of the seventh Karmapa, they shared a unique connection. Jampal Zangpo gravitated towards practice, living as

a yogi monk, while Paljor Dhondup focused on scholarship and oversaw the entire Karma Kagyu. Both were venerated as great masters, with no apparent conflict or competition between them. Their writings suggest mutual profound respect.

Neither appears to have been significantly superior or inferior to the other. Typically, in monastic ordination, a Khenpo (abbot) is considered higher than a Lobpon (master). However, when Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup collaboratively conferred monastic ordination, they alternated these roles. For instance, when Choedrak Gyatso received his vows, Jampal Zangpo assumed the Khenpo role and Paljor Dhondup served as the Lobpon. Conversely, when the fourth Shamar received ordination, Paljor Dhondup acted as Khenpo, and Jampal Zangpo as Lobpon. This practice exemplifies the beauty of their spiritual friendship as well as their teamwork.

Those unfamiliar with the strong connection between these two great masters might question the presence of two masters between the sixth and seventh Karmapas. We find an answer in Karma Chakme's *Mountain Dharma*, where, in discussing the importance of the teacher-student relationship, he cites the connection between the second Karmapa Karma Pakshi and Kheldrup Ugyenpa, with the latter achieving special realization after

only three days with the Karmapa. Conversely, Karma Chakme presents Paljor Dhondup's failure to achieve realization from Thongwa Dondhen as an example of a weak karmic connection:

In the same way, the disciples of Thongwa Dondhen

Are Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup.

The two were spiritual friends

So received the empowerments and transmissions  
together.

Yet Paljor Dhondup could not give rise to supreme  
realization

By relying upon the empowerments and transmissions  
of Thongwa Dondhen.

Later, he received again from Jampal Zangpo,

Then Paljor Dhondup achieved the realization.

Therefore, Jampal Zangpo had to be included.

It is unclear whether this was Karma Chakme's personal assumption or a transcription of an oral tradition within Karma Kagyu society of his time. In any case, there is not much value in this assertion, as Paljor Dhondup lived in the fifteenth century, while Karma Chakme flourished in the seventeenth. Based on all the available historical and Karma Kagyu works produced before Karma Chakme, no other historical source supports the theory

he proposes in *Mountain Dharma*. Therefore, his writings on historical matters need to be scrutinized against older, contemporaneous, and more reliable sources and his authority in this case should not be considered absolute.

Situ and Belo's *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* does list Bengarwa among Paljor Dhondup's teachers. But this view is very likely to be influence of Karma Chakme.

Paljor Dhondup did receive some teachings from Jampal Zangpo, such as the oral transmission of *Approach and Accomplishment of Three Vajras* from Ugyenpa and one of the eight great chariots of Tibetan Buddhism. However, apart from Chakme's *Mountain Dharma*, no older source suggests that Paljor Dhondup received significant or numerous teachings from Jampal Zangpo. Sources giving information on the lineage of teachings transmitted by Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup consistently mention that particular teachings were transmitted to Choedrak Gyatso from both or either one of them. None of them indicate that a teaching was transmitted from Jampal Zangpo to Paljor Dhondup, and then from Paljor Dhondup to Choedrak Gyatso. This pattern is evident in all sources upon careful examination.

In his comprehensive commentary on the *Single Intention* of Drikung, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje elaborates on how both

Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup achieved realization by relying upon Thongwa Dondhen, and how they both became teachers to the seventh Karmapa. He does not mention Paljor Dhondup becoming Jampal Zangpo's student. In fact, aside from Karma Chakme's statement, apart from *Approach and Accomplishment of Three Vajras*, almost no sources provide any evidence of Paljor Dhondup receiving anything from Jampal Zangpo.

In one source explaining how Kagyu masters as teachers prophesied their student who would uphold their lineage, Goshir Paljor Dhondup himself stated that he was prophesied by Thongwa Dondhen and included in the Golden Rosary. He did not mention Jampal Zangpo and this omission should not be attributed to a desire for concealment. Even if Karma Chakme's assertion were true and Paljor Dhondup had hidden this information, it is likely that others such as the seventh Karmapa, or Karma Trinleypa, Mikyö Dorje and Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa would have mentioned it. But there is no record of this in any of the sources.

It is often said that Thongwa Dondhen's sole motivation for raising Paljor Dhondup was to prepare him as the main guru for his next incarnation, indicating that he had high expectations for Paljor Dhondup. If, as Karma Chakme suggested, Thongwa Dondhen failed to impart realization to Paljor Dhondup, then

surely Thongwa Dondhen's own clairvoyance would be called into question.

The fact that Thongwa Dondhen bequeathed his lineage to Paljor Dhondup is mentioned in numerous authentic sources. According to Karma Chakme's account, Thongwa Dondhen would have transmitted his lineage despite Paljor Dhondup lacking sufficient realization to assume such a great responsibility.

Furthermore, it is highly improbable that Paljor Dhondup would have received empowerments and transmissions from Jampal Zangpo while Thongwa Dondhen was still alive, and equally unlikely that this would have occurred after Thongwa Dondhen's passing. Historical records indicate that during the period leading up to the seventh Karmapa's recognition, Jampal Zangpo was in retreat at Namtso, while Paljor Dhondup was occupied with relocating treasures to Kongpo and constructing memorials for Thongwa Dondhen.

Once the seventh Karmapa was recognized, Paljor Dhondup started conferring numerous empowerments and teachings when seventh Karmapa was five years old and Jampal Zangpo came to meet the seventh Karmapa only when seventh Karmapa was eight years old.

These questions can only be resolved by understanding that these two great masters were like the sun and moon in all endeavors, and that they should neither be separated nor compared. A similar situation can be observed in the case of the sixteenth Karmapa, whose two main teachers, the eleventh Situ and second Jamgön, both held places in the Golden Rosary. If realization could only be achieved from a single master, having multiple masters would seem futile. It is important to note that many masters had two primary gurus. Marpa's main gurus were Naropa and Maitripa, and there is no reason to assert that he achieved realization from only one of them.

In looking at the roles of Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup, it is clear that the former was more revered within the Karma Kagyu than the latter. This may be attributed to Jampal Zangpo's seniority in age compared to Paljor Dhondup. However, the most significant reason is that Jampal Zangpo focused solely on practice and lived free from the complexities of monastic administration.

This does not imply that Paljor Dhondup was tainted by politics. While managing all of the Karmapa's activities and administering the Karma Kagyu, he also became one of the greatest masters and yogis in the Karma Kagyu tradition. These accomplishments are exceptionally rare and demonstrate Paljor Dhondup's dedication

to the teachings and to sentient beings, rather than pursuing a life of solitude in the mountains.

This may also explain why Choedrak Gyatso recognized the reincarnation of Paljor Dhondup but not that of Jampal Zangpo. Generally, in Tibetan Buddhism, the reincarnations of Lamas who are famous and influential have been recognized. During their lifetimes, Jampal Zangpo maintained the lineage of practice, while Paljor Dhondup oversaw and propagated the teachings of the Karma Kagyu and the activities of the Karmapa. Both played their respective roles and were significant in their own right. In the long term, Paljor Dhondup's reincarnation allowed his legacy to endure longer than that of Jampal Zangpo. It appears that no reincarnation of Jampal Zangpo was ever recognized.

## TEACHER OF OMNISCIENT ONE

Among the most important disciples of the seventh Karmapa, Goshir Paljor Dhondup, the seventh Karmapa and fourth Shamar were the two most powerful, influential, and celebrated masters of their time.

The Shamars were the second most important tulku of the Karma Kagyu lineage, and the third Shamar was a teacher to Goshir

Paljor Dhondup Once Paljor Dhondup successfully recognized the young Choedrak Gyatso as Karmapa, he then requested him to recognize Shamar's reincarnation.

The third Shamar and sixth Karmapa passed away almost simultaneously, separated by only a few months. As the third Shamar passed away earlier than the sixth Karmapa, the fourth Shamar was born one year before the seventh Karmapa, in 1453.

Paljor Dhondup invited the Karmapa to the Kham region where the fourth Shamar was born. There, he requested the Karmapa to recognize the fourth Shamar, and once this was confirmed, Paljor Dhondup himself went to receive Shamar at Khangmar monastery in the Tresho region, which is the same region where the first Karmapa was born. In *The Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa mentions that as soon as Paljor Dhondup and the young fourth Shamar met, they were both filled with joy, and that from then on, the fourth Shamar received many teachings from Paljor Dhondup.

Karma Trinleypa provides an account of this occasion in *Reponses to Questions*:

Gyalwe Wangpo [Choedrak Gyatso] stayed for retreat near the Karma monastery. Guigongpa bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup

led the Encampment and went to receive the Tulku from Khangmar in Tre. He successfully invited [fourth Shamar], and they met when Gyalwe Wangpo was seven years old. Chennga Rinpoche [fourth Shamar], who was eight years old, offered his hair-cutting ceremony to Gyalwe Wangpo. Bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup, who was the Guigongpa of the Encampment, worked as the Khenpo and gave ordination.

In the fourth Shamar's autobiography, *A Rosary of Utpalas*, he writes:

The twelfth month of that year,  
On the fifteenth date, to the Glorious Lama [Paljor  
Dhondup],  
I received the full Upasaka ordination properly,  
He named me Choekyi Drakpa Yoshi Palzangpo.”

This demonstrates that even the fourth Shamar's popular name, Choedrak Yoshi Palzang, was given by Paljor Dhondup. He was later known as Chennga Choedrak as he held the position of overseeing the Phakmo Drupa's monastery Densa Thil. This is significant because during this period, the Tibetan political dynasty belonged to this monastery.

Goshir Paljor Dhondup was the fourth Shamar's first teacher. He transmitted the *Collected Works* of ancient Kagyu masters and previous Karmapas, as well as many important teachings of the Kagyu in general and the Karma Kagyu lineage in particular. To demonstrate the importance of Goshir Paljor Dhondup in his life, the fourth Shamar documented the teachings he received, titled *A Recording of Teachings received from Lamas* starting from Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

In the *Collected Works of the Fourth Shamar*, there is a letter titled "A Letter Offered to Drung Goshir Khenchen Paljor Dhondup", which offers further insight into the significance of Paljor Dhondup and the fourth Shamar. Below is a full translation:

You are the embodiment of all the Buddhas,  
You made my life most meaningful by introducing me  
to the teachings,  
And ordained me into the Vinaya which is the noble  
teaching,  
You also bestowed upon me the complete profound  
instructions, blessings and empowerments,  
The kindness of this makes me remember you often,  
I think of you single-pointedly,

May you send me your love from afar with your noble  
heart,  
This samsara is impermanent and under the influence  
of conditions,  
The great Buddha was emancipated from those  
conditions,  
By the power of that fact, may your lotus feet remain  
firm,  
May this supplication bring result.

Generally speaking, the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak had many other important teachers, but primarily there were two: Goelo Zhonnu Pal and Trimkhang Lotsawa Sonam Gyatso. However, the lineage these masters followed is disputed. They must have been either Phakdru Kagyu or followers of Pandita Nakyi Rinchen from India. The fourth Shamar, though, is an important Karma Kagyu tulku, and for that, Goshir Paljor Dhondup and Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo play a very significant role.

Despite the seventh Karmapa's younger age, the fourth Shamar is traditionally considered more as a disciple of the seventh Karmapa, although their connection as master and disciple was limited. The fourth Shamar received more teachings from Jampal Zangpo, Paljor Dhondup, and Lama Gyaltzen of Naynang mon-

astery (which was built by the first Shamar.) In his biography of Paljor Dhondup, the eighth Karmapa writes:

Shamar Choekyi Drakpa, who was the reincarnation of Shamar Choepal Yeshe, is known as the omniscient one in this land of Wu and Tsang [Central Tibet]; this too is due to the kindness of being blessed by this great Bodhisattva [Paljor Dhondup].

In *Reponses to Questions*, Karma Trinleypa presents this account of the position the fourth Shamar held in the Karma Kagyu:

Knowledge, legacy for the teachings, benefit for the beings, wonderment at the *Collected Works*, biography of a great master, in all these aspects, among the reincarnations of Shamar, none are greater than Khachoepa and this Chennga Rinpoche. That this one also served as the Chennga of Thel monastery and as the Lama for the kings of Nedhong palace, whenever there is a gathering of rulers, he is the greater one in terms of position and reverence.”

As Karma Trinleypa mentioned, in serving as the seat holder of Thel monastery of Phakmo Drupa, the fourth Shamar even influenced Tibetan political history.

Karma Trinleypa continues:

After Gyalwe Wangpo [seventh Karmapa] passed away, I don't think there is anyone who received more teachings than him [fourth Shamar].

This is undoubtedly true. There are approximately nine volumes of *Collected Works of the Fourth Shamar* recently published from Tibet. Upon reading the works of the various Shamars, I personally believe that the fourth Shamar is the greatest among the reincarnations of Shamar. In terms of words and meaning, his writing truly demonstrates a scholastic quality, for which he received the highest tributes from other lineages.

The recent Karma Kagyu scholar Tobga Yugyal writes in *A Drawing of Various Thoughts*:

For example, though the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak epitomized scholars and masters, he had too many activities dealing with the wheel of works. Fearing the possibility of being contaminated by worldly dharmas, he was not included in the Golden Rosary of the Kagyu lineage.

However, this assumption is not rooted in a proper examination of historical facts. The main reason the fourth Shamar was not included in the Kagyu Golden Rosary was because in the Karma

Kagyü, Karmapas are the backbone of the lineage, and the fourth Shamar did not have the opportunity to meet the eighth Karmapa.

Because the fourth Shamar was not included in the Golden Rosary, he is not as celebrated within the Karma Kagyü. However, as there is a Tibetan saying that only scholars know the value of scholars, he is universally celebrated in all other Tibetan Buddhist lineages. For example, the fifth Dalai Lama often criticizes the Kagyü in general and the Karma Kagyü in particular, but he speaks highly of the fourth Shamar and clearly regards him as an authentic and valid scholar, often quoting particularly intelligent words and offering descriptions such as “the omniscient Shamar.”

It is in the nature of great beings that the younger ones respect the elder ones, and elder ones are kind to the younger ones. Thus, even though Paljor Dhondup and the fourth Shamar did not spend much time together, many sources cite their love for each other as teacher and student. For example, the fourth Shamar mentions in his autobiography how he was in Central Tibet when he heard about Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and Goshir Paljor Dhondup’s arrival at Tsurphu from Eastern Tibet. He then swiftly went to visit them:

On the twenty-sixth of that month,  
At Chaktsal Gang of the Tsurphu monastic seat,

Jetsun Lama Goshir came with joy to receive me,  
In the personal room of Tashi Sarma,  
I visited the incomparable Karmapa.

This clearly demonstrates that despite being the highest Lama in the Great Encampment after the Karmapa and despite being in his sixties, Paljor Dhondup personally received the fourth Shamar to express his care and affection. This can be seen as a wonderful quality of Paljor Dhondup. He is both selfless and humble, and, more importantly, he cares about everyone.

Finally, here is a full translation of the fourth Shamar's personal letter to Goshir Paljor Dhondup, in which shows their close bond as teacher and student:

Om Svasti Mangalam!

The one whose ocean of wisdom is profound,  
And unsurpassable, endowed with the smile of pure  
lotus with hundred petals,  
High in the host of beings,  
The spiritual master who is like the hundred petals,  
may you be victorious.

The moon of your physical body is not affected by un-  
favorable circumstances,

The fragrance of your fame is carried by the wind,  
You have become the place for rest even for the  
conceited ones,  
I am happy to hear all these from the messengers.

I am caught in many sufferings,  
There are many who would understand me else I say  
anything to help them,  
I will be taken as naive and brainless if I try to  
cooperate with everyone,  
I will be taken as a stone pyramid if I don't say  
anything,  
If I talk, they will say it's like a parrot's speech.

Whatever I do, my behavior has become such  
That I can't please everyone.  
But I have taken your words as guidance,  
I have forsaken to do anything otherwise,  
Thought single-pointedly without carelessness,  
worked for the teachings and practice,  
But I have been distracted by the sudden conditions,  
So I am left to take a deep sigh only.

In the scriptures, it says a Khenpo should be like a  
father,

And yet why I was devoid of that opportunity?  
Why you have forsaken me?

In the course of conversation, I request you not to neglect your health, the well-being of teachings and the guiding of disciples.

The land of turquoise is decorated by the precious  
jewel crown,  
Filled with clouds of various colors and pours the rain  
of nectar,  
The river has overflowed and moving with pleasant  
sound,  
The Gampo which is a centre of many great masters  
and scholars,  
I send you this letter of lamentation with the cry,  
May it soon reach your hand,  
Grant me an opportunity to have a joyful mind.

In this letter from Choekyi Drakpa to the Guigongpa Great Khenpo Paljor Dhondup (which is also included in the *Collected Works of Fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak*), the fourth Shamar is expressing regret at not being able to spend much time with Goshir Paljor Dhondup. This is because he had to leave for Kongpo when he was around twelve years old after he was rec-

ognized. Unlike Paljor Dhondup's close relationship with the seventh Karmapa, the fourth Shamar was unable to spend much time with Paljor Dhodup, although they did meet again later for a brief period in Tsurphu. Nevertheless, their care and respect for each other endured.

## THE TREASURE HOLDER OF KAGYU LINEAGE

Another of Paljor Dhondup's most significant legacies was his reception of the lineage teachings and his subsequent transmission of these teachings to his students, thus ensuring their endurance for many generations to come. This common practice among Lamas is critical to the continued existence of their lineages.

Prior to the twelfth century, importing teachings from India was a most crucial activity for Tibetan Buddhism. Drokmi Lotsawa, Goe Lotsawa, Marpa Lotsawa and other translators were immensely significant because of their role in bringing teachings to Tibet and making them accessible. Subsequently, the preservation and transmission of the teachings became crucial. Scholars like Buton Rinchen Drup are important for these reasons.

When we consider teachings like Mahamudra, and the Six Yogas of Naropa, the practices of the three main Karma Kagyu deities (Vajrayogini, Gyalwa Gyatso or Red Chenrezik, and Mahakala), and the two special Karma Kagyu instructions known as the Inseparability of Wind and Mind and Introducing the Three Kayas, we can confidently state that there is scarcely a Karma Kagyu teaching that did not come from Paljor Dhondup. Thus, we can get a sense of how important his activities have been to the history of the Karma Kagyu history.

Some of these teachings were transmitted solely by Paljor Dhondup, while others came from both Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup.

View and conduct are the two main points of the sutra tradition, with the bodhisattva vow seen as the essence of conduct. Within the Karma Kagyu lineage, Goshir Paljor Dhondup also transmitted the view of the Middle Way, as mentioned by the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje in his commentary on Chandrakirti's *A Guide to the Middle Way*.

In his commentary on the *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa mentions Paljor Dhondup as one of the main figures:

The one who is meaningful to be seen and heard, the  
Gyalwa Karmapa,  
The one who achieved Glorious Wealth and  
Accomplishments, the Great Goshir,  
The one who achieved supreme siddhi, Sangye  
Nyenpa,  
The one who is the embodiment of all the Buddhas of  
the three times, Mikyö Dorje,  
I prostrate to all the Lamas of root and lineage.

The most important practices of the Kagyu lineage are the Tantras of Vajrayana. Originating from Marpa himself, there are seven main tantric practices known as Seven Mandalas of Ngokpas. There are also other tantras of Marpa that did not come from Ngokpa, who was one of his chief disciples, but from other disciples such as Tsurton.

At a later point, Jamgön Lodoe Thaye put together a complete collection of these practices known as Treasury of Kagyu Tantras, and he noted that many of these practices were transmitted from Paljor Dhondup to the seventh Karmapa, the fourth Shamar and others.

Goshir Paljor Dhondup played a crucial role in introducing many teachings from other lineages into the Karma Kagyu, one of the most important being the practice of Yoga Tantra, which is one of the four classes of Tantra. The Kagyu (and the Karma Kagyu in particular), did not have many transmissions of Yoga Tantra as they were not brought to Tibet by Marpa. It was the sixth Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen and Goshir Paljor Dhondup who introduced these teachings into the Karma Kagyu, thus enriching the lineage with many important practices.

In *Granting Liberation to those Who Seek Liberation*, his Explanation of Yoga Tantra, the eighth Karmapa provides further insight into how Yoga Tantra flourished in the Karma Kagyu:

In this Snow Land, the Great Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo and the omniscient Buton have been benevolent generally to all the teachings, and only they have been the most kind in particular to the teachings of Yoga Tantra. He [Buton] had many disciples like Thuksey Lotsawa Rinchen Namgyal, Zhaluwa Drakpa Gyaltzen and so on. Among them, the top disciple was Thuksey Lotsawa who bestowed complete cycles of Yoga Tantra to the great master Zhalu Lotsawa Chandrapa. He [Chandrapa] then passed the teachings to Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen like one vase filling another.

That [Thongwa Dondhen] too in turn wrote the text of self-practice, mandala worship of Vajradhatu and the manual of dances of yoga. He completely taught these to Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, Goshir Paljor Dhondup and Jamyang Dhondup Ozer [Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo]. From them, the teachings were transmitted to many disciples like Lobpon Lama Gyaltzen. In particular, they transmitted the complete teachings of Yoga to the reincarnated masters the Black Hat one, Choedrak Gyatso, and Red Hat one, Choekyi Drakpa. They wrote many texts of Yoga; the Black Hat one writing texts on Sarvavid, and the Red Hat one writings texts on Vajradhatu. The complete cycle of the teachings was transmitted to my root guru Jetsun Great Nyenpa. I also received some of these and comprehend well too.”

Paljor Dhondup not only contributed to Yoga Tantra but also to Father Tantra (one of two divisions of Anuttarayogatantra and the highest of the four classes of Tantra). Initially, the Karma Kagyu did not have a proper tradition of the tantra of Yamantaka, a wrathful form of Manjushri and an important Father Tantra. Around the time of the sixth Karmapa and Paljor Dhondup, however, the Yamantaka practice entered the Karma Kagyu from Buton’s lineage, which is called Zhalu. Jamgön Kongtrul’s *The*

*Treasury of Kagyu Tantras* indicates that one Yamantaka tantra came from Thongwa Dondhen and Paljor Dhondup. It is also interesting to note that some old thangkas of Paljor Dhondup depict Yamantaka; possibly because this was one of his personal deities as it was also the main deity of the first Guigongpa, Rinchen Pal.

Although it was not transmitted from Marpa, Milarepa, or Gampopa, the *Kalachakra Tantra* has been important to the Karma Kagyu since the time of the third Karmapa. In some of his writings, Mikyö Dorje mentions Goshir Paljor Dhondup in the lineage of Kalachakra within the Karma Kagyu. Also, in *E-Wam Mudra*, Mikyö Dorje states that there are buddhas of different levels such as Buddhas of Sutra, Buddhas of lower class of Tantra, and Buddhas of higher class of Tantra, and that among these, the highest is the Buddha of Kalachakra. He also argues that it is impossible to achieve ultimate Buddhahood without achieving enlightenment through Kalachakra.

One of Paljor Dhondup's main contributions to Tibetan Buddhism was his reception of the transmission of all the important Indian texts on Mahamudra.

The seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso assembled the *A Collection of Indian Mahamudra Texts*, which is comprised of several volumes. The oral transmissions of almost all of these texts, came

from Goshir Paljor. It is thought that he received the Tengyur (the translation of Indian commentaries), and offered it to Choedrak Gyatso, who compiled and propagated this collection. So, it is thanks to them that the oral tradition for these teachings endures to this day.

This is significant because although the transmission of the Kangyur, (the collection of Buddha's words) is available, the oral transmission of most texts from the Tengyur is not.

Karma Chakme mentions that many important and well-known practices of Chenrezik, (or Avalokiteshvara) came to the Karma Kagyu through Goshir Paljor Dhondup. These include the special instructions transmitted from Bhikshuni Palmo, and another Chenrezik instruction from a great master named Tsembhu from Tibet. In addition, yet another instruction for Chenrezik practice came from Bodhisattva Jangsem Dawa Gyaltzen, who was a contemporary of Gampopa and an important teacher to Phakmo Drupa.

Goshir Paljor Dhondup played a significant role in bringing these important Chenrezik practices lineages into the Karma Kagyu. Perhaps it is because of these practices that he was often called Bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup and was even considered to be an emanation of Chenrezik.

His importance extends far beyond the Karma Kagyu. Many Nyingma historians mention Goshir Paljor Dhondup when referring to Nyingma teachings practiced in the Karma Kagyu. In particular, there is a very important practice known as *Lama Gongdu*, a treasure revealed by Tertön Sangye Lingpa. It has a few important lineages, one of which was transmitted from Sangye Lingpa's son to Goshir Paljor Dhondup. It was then transmitted to the Nyingma lineage. Due to this connection, it is said that Gyaltshab's Red Crown was blessed by Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso through the practice of *Lama Gongdu*.

In the Drikung Kagyu lineage, two of the most special instructions are *Single Intention* and *The Essence of Teachings*. When the Drikung Kagyu mentions the lineage of *The Essence of Teachings*, they note that it was transmitted from Paljor Dhondup to Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, who in turn transmitted it to the Drikung Kagyu masters. This was a crucial transmission because at the time, the Drikung Kagyu lineage faced extinction on account of so many monks of Drikung monastery following Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk tradition. In helping them to restore their lineage, Choedrak Gyatso gave many texts and teachings on these important instructions to the seat holders of the Drikung lineage.

Other teachings transmitted from Goshir Paljor Dhondup can be found in the *A Record of Teachings Received* by many great masters.

In summary, Goshir Paljor Dhondup preserved the Karma Kagyu's teachings and helped to propagate many other lineages. Moreover, he introduced many important teachings and enriched the Karma Kagyu tradition. During the time of the sixth Karmapa, Goshir Paljor Dhondup and the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, the Karma Kagyu reached its pinnacle. It had all the transmissions of sutra and tantras, practices for all four classes of tantras as well as monks studying all important philosophical texts of sutra.

Therefore, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso wrote:

The Lord Lama Paljor Dhondup,  
The one who holds the treasure of Kagyu instructions.

Undoubtedly, he was a very important treasure holder of the Kagyu teachings. As the Karma Kagyu spread worldwide and the activity of Paljor Dhondup flourished globally, we could say that in a sense, all Karma Kagyu students are directly or indirectly his followers.

## RAISING GREAT DISCIPLES

Goshir Paljor Dhondup's primary ambition was to benefit both the Buddhist teachings and sentient beings. To achieve this, he needed to raise disciples capable of carrying out this task. Among these, his two main students were the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak, who became such eminent masters that their fame not only permeated the whole of Tibet but also elicited invitations from the rulers of China and India. The Sanskrit version of the invitation letter, sent by an Indian King of Magadha to Choedrak Gyatso, remains extant.

Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak became teachers to many prominent masters from the various lineages within Tibetan Buddhism. They include Chennga Neuthangpa of Gampopa's monastery, Chennga Drakpa Jungnay of Densa Thil (the main monastery of the ruler of Tibet at that time), Wang Rinpoche and Kunga Rinchen of Drikung, Cha Jamyang Choedrak, the fourth Gyalwang Drukpa of Drukpa Kagyu and Taklung Ngawang Drakpa of Taklung Kagyu. As well as these, there were Doring Kunpangpa, Gongkar Dorje Denpa, and Panchen Shakya Chokdhen, who were some of the most significant masters and scholars of the Sakya tradition.

In addition, there were Jamyang Gawei Lodoe and Panchen Yeshe Tsemo of the Geluk tradition, Pawo Chowang Lhundup of the Nyingma, and Drangsong Trachak Med of the Bonpo tradition.

While most of these were the primary seat holders and leaders of their respective lineages, the others are also revered as being among the most important masters or scholars in their lineage of all time.

In addition, other exemplary individuals received teachings from either Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso or the fourth Shamar Chennga Choedrak, including Goelo Zhonnu Pal (one of the most significant Tibetan religious historians), Zhalu Lotsawa Choekyong Zangpo, a prominent scholar of Tibetan literature and Zurkhar Nyamnyi Dorje, the founder of the Zurluk tradition of Tibetan medicine. Thus, it can be argued that, in terms of dharma and commitment, no lineage in Tibetan Buddhism is unconnected to Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

Although not as renowned as the Karmapa or Shamar, Sangye Nyenpa Tashi Paljor was another prominent disciple of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, and one of the most revered and celebrated yogis of the Karma Kagyu.

In his biography of Sangye Nyenpa, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje states:

During that time, the Lord Omniscient One [seventh Karmapa] was nineteen years old. Including him [seventh Karmapa], Kunchen Jampal Zangpo and Bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup, three of the great masters, he [Sangye Nyenpa] relied upon them for seven years single-pointedly without being separated even for a moment.”

He continues:

[...] for those seven years, he [Sangye Nyenpa] did not speak with anyone other than those three masters.

As Mikyö Dorje’s biography of Sangye Nyenpa is more detailed than his biographies of Goshir Paljor Dhondup and Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo, we can gain additional insights about Paljor Dhondup from this work. For example, he mentions that Paljor Dhondup bestowed full monastic robes and a horse upon Sangye Nyenpa, who gave these robes to his parents as a blessing object. Declaring that, “a horse could be an emanation of one’s own Guru”, he vowed never to ride a horse from that day forward.

Mikyö Dorje continues:

On another occasion, Drung Goshirpa instructed him (Sangye Nyenpa), ‘You should reside in the inner tent, memorize the ritual texts of the main mandalas of the Karma Kagyu tradition, and receive your meals from within.’ To this, Sangye Nyenpa replied, ‘I have always harbored the wish that, as long as I am among the retinue, I do not want to be someone who is contaminated by white clothes and food.’

In saying this, he requested not to be given any food or clothes. Subsequently, he subsisted only on whatever food was left over from the Inner Tent and Colorful Tent of the Encampment, and whatever remained from the Torma of Mahakala’s shrine house. He had to compete with birds and dogs for sustenance, earning him the moniker Wonpo Jachiwa [The Nephew with Bird and Dog].

This story clearly demonstrates Goshir Paljor Dhondup’s compassionate nature towards those around him. The first Sangye Nyenpa was not a tulku and was essentially on a par with any other monk in the Karmapa’s Great Encampment. It is important to note how Goshir Paljor Dhondup played a crucial role in his upbringing and guided him after Sangye Nyenpa had renounced everything and was looked down upon by everyone. This shows an extraordinary ability to discern his disciple’s destiny and hid-

den qualities. Thus, we can surmise that Goshir Paljor Dhondup served as a father figure to everyone in the Karmapa's Great Encampment.

Mikyö Dorje provided a comprehensive list of the important empowerments and teachings that Paljor Dhondup imparted to Sangye Nyenpa:

From the Bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup, he [Sangye Nyenpa] received the empowerments and oral transmission of Dakini Sahara [an important version of Chakrasamvara]; the Luyipa, Krishnacharya and Ganthapada traditions of Chakrasamvara; the three traditions of Hevajra; *The Essential Practice of Hayagriva, Peaceful and Wrathful Form of Guru*; *Nakgya Phaksum* (Mahakala, Gyalwa Gyatso and Vajrayogini); *The External, Internal and Secret Practices of Amitayu* from Thongwa Dondhen; Mahamaya; Vairocanabhisambodhi; Sarvavid, and Akshobhya. Additionally, he received the initiations of Black Hayagriva, Ten Wrathful Deities, Blue Acala, Mahakali, Vaishravana, Ngakdhak, Damchen, Singon and Zhingkyong.

He also received the instructions of the Six Yogas of Naropa written by himself [this must be the instructions on *The Inseparability of Wind and Mind* by Goshir Paljor Dhondup

that is still available]; the Mahamudra instructions composed by Rangjung Dorje, Rolpe Dorje and Thongwa Dondhen; the seven classes of Mahamudra; all the instructions of the Six Yogas of Naropa such as *The Vajra Lines*; the entire *Collected Works of Gampopa* and the six Karmapas [that the seventh Karmapa's collection of works were yet to be compiled during Paljor Dhondup's time]; the *Collected Works of Khachoepe* [second Shamar] and Jamyang Chenmo; plus all the instructions and practices found in these texts. By receiving all these, he [Sangye Nyenpa] considered him [Paljor Dhondup] as his supreme root guru.

Nyenpa Tashi Paljor was the most significant teacher or the root Lama of the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje. Mikyö Dorje frequently referred to him with profound devotion, addressing him as “Mahasiddhi Dhenma, my refuge who resides in the form of deity.” As he often based many of his important philosophical understandings on Sangye Nyenpa's teachings, there is scarcely a work of Mikyö Dorje's that does not mention, or quote from him.

Mikyö Dorje had four principal teachers: Nyenpa Tashi Paljor, Dumo Tashi Ozer, Khenpo Choedrub Sengge (who conferred full ordination upon him), and Karma Trinleypa (who instructed him in philosophical texts). Among these, Nyenpa Tashi Paljor and

Dumo Tashi Ozer are considered to be his two primary gurus. When referring to them, Mikyö Dorje is quoted as praying to “the two of my lords, two Tashis.”

*A Rosary of Crystal Moons* indicates that Tashi Ozer also received monastic ordination from Goshir Paljor Dhondup in his youth, before he going on to study philosophical texts at a Geluk monastery.

Many disciples who visited the Karmapa also received teachings from Paljor Dhondup. *The Feast for Scholars* states:

Generally, when the lord [seventh Karmapa] was young and two Lamas offered teachings to him, irrespective of where the Encampment settled during summer or winter, there would be a small room where he would only stay for retreat and mostly engage in listening, reflection, and meditation. To the important people who followed him, Goshir Rinpoche gave empowerments and explained the tantras and their practical application, while Lama Rinpoche [Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo] gave the instructions of Chö, Mahamudra and Six Yogas of Naropa.

One master who received teachings from Paljor Dhondup while visiting the Karmapa was Dushabpa Shakya Wangchuk, whose

biography can be found in the Zhalu tradition originating from Buton Rinchen Drup. He authored important texts on Kalachakra and astronomy and established a monastery called Sangngak Ling in the Dhakpo region. He was also the main philosophical teacher of Jamyang Choedrak, the third Gyalwang Drukpa.

His biography states that when, “[he] went to Kongpo to visit the Karmapa and receive Guru Yoga. He received the Six Yogas of Naropa and *Inseparability of Wind and Mind* from Goshir Paljor Dhondup.”

The historical account of Zurmang Kagyu, a subdivision of Karma Kagyu that flourished in Eastern Tibet, records that numerous masters who were prominent during the era of Paljor Dhondup received teachings from him.

For instance, Jangchub Lodoe received instructions from Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, Jamyang Chenmo and Paljor Dhondup. In addition, the second Chetsang Tulku, Sonam Drakpa received his bhikshu vows from Jampal Zangpo and Paljor Dhondup, along with various other teachings. The second Drungpa Tulku, Kunga Zangpo was also a disciple of Paljor Dhondup’s teachings.

Of particular significance is Jodhanpa Lodoe Drakpa, the grandson of Mase Tokdhen who founded the Zurmang Kagyu tradition.

Jodhanpa Lodoe Drakpa is believed to be the reincarnation of Mase Tokdhen himself and one of the preeminent reincarnations of Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche.

He received many teachings from Paljor Dhondup, and from that time to the present day, the Gyaltsab lineage has maintained a close historical connection with the Zurmang Kagyu tradition.

The fact that Paljor Dhondup primarily dedicated his life to raising and guiding the seventh Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso is alone sufficient to fulfill his role as regent. This, along with his nurturing of the fourth Shamar and the first Sangye Nyenpa, can be surely be considered as his finest contribution to the Karma Kagyu lineage. His immeasurable kindness can never be adequately repaid.

## QUALITIES OF PALJOR DHONDUP

If we ask what kind of qualifications or qualities did Goshir Paljor Dhondup possess in order to raise such great masters and be worthy of such great reverence, we can find answers from the words of Paljor Dhondup's own disciples.

Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso composed the following supplication:

The embodiment of compassion, Avalokiteshvara  
incarnate,  
Who sees all with eyes of compassion,  
In this degenerative era, you liberate beings with  
skillfulness and compassion,  
Paljor Dhondup, to you I pray,  
May you bless all sentient beings and gaze upon us  
with your compassionate eye.

Elsewhere, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso elucidates Paljor Dhondup's qualities more explicitly:

Known popularly as Rechungpa and Repa Shiwa O, and as one who is Thongwa Dondhen [Meaningful to See]. Yet these appellations are too profound to fully comprehend

The vast ocean of this great lord's life,  
I shall not attempt to traverse with my butterfly mind,  
Rather, I should perceive the qualities of his body,  
speech, and mind,  
As they manifest in my devotional consciousness.

Mere sight of him instills certainty,  
A glimpse engenders faith and devotion.

Attempts to comprehend him reveal unfathomable  
depths.

Hearing of him evokes wonder.

All these, I have personally witnessed,  
Yet they do not encompass all that I have seen,  
For he functions as do all the Buddhas.  
Thus, to the one known as Paljor Dhondup,  
The renowned great Jetsun,  
The protector of beings, I prostrate myself.

This was composed by his disciple, Choedrak Gyatso, at  
Lho Palbar monastery, at Nyima's request to write in full  
accordance with his [Paljor Dhondup's] actual life.

There is also this supplication by the fourth Shamar Chennga  
Choedrak:

Your physical form is enchanting, and to the minds of  
beings,

You manifest various forms to benefit countless  
individuals.

You are magnificent among the host of many masters,  
Paljor Dhondup, I supplicate to you.

Your speech, uninterrupted,

is as sweet as the gandharvas' lute,  
And the chirping of the kalapinka bird,  
With such a voice, you amplify the faith of fortunate  
beings,  
Paljor Dhondup, I supplicate to you.

Your heart is suffused with bodhichitta,  
You revel in the ocean of samadhi,  
Free from thought, interruption, and instability,  
Paljor Dhondup, I supplicate to you.

Through the blessing of this supplication,  
For those whose river of compassion has run dry,  
Due to the firewood of negative emotions igniting the  
flames of anger,  
May you pour forth the river of blessing with your  
love.

This brief supplication was uttered by Choekyi Drakpa  
at Thimyul.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje writes in his  
biography of the great Nyewo Goshir:

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Thimyul refers not to Thimphu in Bhutan, despite Choekyi Drakpa's known visit there, but to a location in the Kongpo region.

To benefit beings, you not only performed the activities that are beyond the mundane world, But also, in accordance with the world, you benefited beings, Again, you manifested the emanation, to you, I prostrate.

This means that to abandon all the things that are contaminated by negative emotions and to complete the virtue that is beyond the worldly, he benefited beings in accordance with the conditions of the impure world. He brought them to virtue in this world by engaging in generosity and urging others to do so as well. He created texts and statues and urged others to do the same. He observed morality and urged others to do likewise. He refrained from harming others and urged the same for others. He remained with less desire and more contentment and urged others to do so. He purified all enmity towards others and urged others likewise. He repaid the kindness of his parents, dharma people and elders, and he urged others to do the same.

Thus he increased the virtues of the past, present and future in the mind-streams of beings throughout space.

His wisdom, compassion and power are not different from the three lords of the world: Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Vajrapani.

On the surface, this text may look like a conventional poetic biography of a revered master. However, closer analysis reveals a comprehensive summary of Goshir Paljor Dhondup's pivotal role in orchestrating the activities of the young Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso.

The biography of Choedrak Gyatso recounts how, from early adolescence, he traveled extensively throughout Kham and the Kongpo regions, and how he engaged in many significant activities in those places, including the construction of holy objects like scriptures, statues, and stupas, as well as transmitting teachings and empowerments.

In addition, he resolved regional conflicts, undertook philanthropic works fostering peace between regions, protected mountains, rivers, and wildlife and developed local infrastructures by building roads and bridges. He also maintained positive relations with various Tibetan Buddhist lineages as well as moderate connections with the political rulers of Tibet and China.

Choedrak Gyatso's young age at this time suggests that Goshir Paljor Dhondup played a crucial role behind the scenes, so we can infer that the eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, was acknowledging Goshir Paljor Dhondup's contributions when documenting these activities.

The fact that Paljor Dhondup was consistently motivated by a profound concern for the welfare of Buddha's teachings and the benefit of sentient beings may explain why his disciples frequently addressed him as Bodhisattva or Gyalsey (literally "child" or "prince" of Buddhas, but generally interpreted as "bodhisattva") in their supplications,

For instance, the fourth Shamar addresses Goshir Paljor Dhondup as:

The incomparable Lama who is the embodiment of all  
the Buddhas,  
Paljor Dhondup who is the embodiment of  
compassion.

In another work, the fourth Shamar states: "The incomparable bodhisattva Paljor Dhondup."

Similarly, Sangye Nyenpa supplicates his teacher thus:

You are Avalokiteshvara who is the protector of  
beings,  
You are the one who carries out the activities of  
Kagyü,  
Bodhisattva whose name is Paljor Dhondup,  
Lord Guigongpa, I prostrate to you.

These supplications genuinely reflect Goshir Paljor Dhondup's exceptional loving and compassionate nature as a living Bodhisattva and are not merely poetic appellations.

In Tibet, only those masters who truly embody the qualities of a bodhisattva are addressed as Bodhisattva or as Gyalsey. For example, Gyalsey Ngulchu Thokme (author of *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*) and Bodhisattva Dawa Gyaltzen (propagator of Avalokiteshvara practice). Within the Karma Kagyü lineage, Paljor Dhondup stands as a profound exemplar of this tradition.

Having examined Goshir Paljor Dhondup's personality, it is important now to consider his erudition. This is a fundamental quality for a spiritual master of his stature. In *Responses to Questions*, Karma Trinleypa said that during their era, no one surpassed Goshir Paljor Dhondup and his disciple Choedrak Gyatso in terms of learning.

Karma Trinleypa reached this conclusion after encountering some of the most eminent masters of his time across various lineages, including the Sakya and Kagyu. He himself served as an important teacher to several notable scholars, including Tsarchen Losal Gyatso of Sakya, Gampo Tashi Namgyal of Gampopa's monastery, and Karmapa Mikyö Dorje of Karma Kagyu.

Moreover, in his text on Avalokiteshvara practice, *A Treasury of Ocean of Benefiting Beings*, Karma Chakme, states:

It was then received by Paljor Dhondup, and it was said that there was no empowerment, transmission, or dharma that he didn't receive.

In his *A Record of Receiving Teachings*, Jamgön Kongtrul Lodoe Thaye noted:

The ones I marked with a swastika must have had their proper lineage, as it is said that Goshir Paljor Dhondup received the transmissions of an unbroken lineage in Tibet during that time. Yet I could not find a proper lineage list, and this should be sought in the future.

Collectively, these testimonies indicate that Goshir Paljor Dhondup was the most erudite figure of his time. Furthermore, Taklung

Ngawang Namgyal, author of the Taklung Kagyu's religious history *A Wonder of the Ocean*, states:

Among them, there are two main bearers of Karma Kagyu's teachings who are the most well-known. The one who is the emanation of Odran Palji Wangchuk and Raypa Shiwa O and who has all the Kangyur and Tengyur transmissions, Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

Here, he is referring to Gyaltsab and Pawo as the two masters.

In his concise biography of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, Karma Chakme says:

Nyewo Goshir Pajor Dhondup,  
Received inconceivable teachings from many teachers,  
Including the Kangyur and Tengyur.  
It is said that there is no teaching in Tibet that he  
didn't receive.

At this point, oral transmissions only existed for a limited number of Tengyur texts and the precise time of the loss of the complete transmission is uncertain. Numerous masters received the complete transmission of the Kangyur, but Goshir Paljor Dhondup appears to be among the last to also hold the full oral transmission of the Tengyur.

His transmission of the Kangyur played a significant role in the production of Kagyur in Tibet. Among the various productions of the Kangyur in Tibet, one important and well-known version is called Lijiang Kagyur, or Lithang Kagyur, so named because it was produced by the king of Lijiang and later preserved in a monastery in Lithang, Eastern Tibet.

Under the auspices of the ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje, this Kagyur was proofread by the sixth Shamar Choekyi Wangchuk. He states that he collated and arranged the texts in a sequence based on the important masters who preserved and propagated the transmission of the Kangyur. Mentioning Paljor Dhondup from the Karma Kagyu lineage. He states:

Based mainly on the authenticity of the rosary of oral  
transmission,  
From the record of teachings received,  
That came from the Karma Kagyu practice lineage.

He continues:

Most of the sutras came from Tengpa Lotsawa and  
Shakyashri,  
Prajnaparamitas came from Barek, Ngok Lotsawa and  
so on,

They were then transmitted to Bakton Zhonnu  
Tsultrim,  
Shakya Gyaltzen, Goshir Pajor Dhondup and so on.  
Many of these great masters sought the transmission  
with great importance.

In Tibetan Buddhism (and particularly within the Kagyu lineage), knowledge and morality alone are insufficient qualifications for a spiritual master. High realization is essential. Great scholars with numerous monasteries or leadership positions in both religious and political spheres did not automatically qualify for inclusion in the Golden Rosary lineage. One must have attained great realization through practicing the Six Yogas of Naropa and Mahamudra of Gampopa.

In his commentary on Drikung's *Single Intention*, the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje says of Paljor Dhondup:

He became the vessel of all the secrets and achieved the state of Vajradhara in a single lifetime through Vajrayana as a miracle. This lord, Choedrak Gyatso relied upon.

This clearly indicates that Paljor Dhondup achieved enlightenment in that very lifetime, akin to Milarepa.

Practitioners chanting the *The Ocean of Songs of Realization of Kagyu* encounter these lines:

The one who manifested the realization of profundity  
and luminosity,  
Lord Great Goshir, I supplicate to you.

Thus, Goshir Paljor Dhondup became one of the important gurus to whom everyone in the Karma Kagyu would pray and seek blessings in order to achieve realization.

Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa states:

The one whose knowledge is as deep as the ocean cannot be measured easily; all the great people of Tibet and China revere the great master, Gyalsey Paljor Dhondup.

Thus, we can understand that Goshir Paljor Dhondup was a leader of the teachings who embodied the qualities of a scholar. Pure and noble, consistently engaged in listening, reflection, and meditation, he became one of the Kagyu fathers. With compassion towards all sentient beings, his material and spiritual kindness pervaded all of Tibet. He shone brightly as a great spiritual figure endowed with all the noble qualities of a great master, an incomparable bodhisattva. Such an individual is rare not only in Tibet but in the entire world.

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF PALJOR DHONDUP

Here, I would like to provide a brief physical description of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, a particularly challenging task given the limited availability of sources.

Few biographies of Tibetan Buddhist masters offer descriptions of their subject's physical appearance. Notable exceptions include Potowa and the first Dalai Lama, Gedun Drubpa. These biographies typically focus on the positive aspects of the master, rarely mentioning any negative characteristics. Sometimes, the flaws of the predecessor can only be found in the successor or in the next reincarnation. For example, the biography of the first Shamar does not say anything about whether he had a good voice or not, but because the second Shamar is known to have had a very deep voice that could be heard over long distances, his biography mentions that his predecessor did not have a good voice.

There are no clear descriptions of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, but by looking at old thankas, we can maybe guess at what he looked like. In the Tibetan tradition of thangka painting, if a Lama is pleasant looking, it might not necessarily correspond to how he actually looked. However, if special physical characteristics such

as a beard or long hair are depicted in the thangkas, then it must be because the lama really had those features. They would not be in the thangka for no reason.

Although I haven't found any old thangkas painted during Goshir Paljor Dhondup's time, there are some dating back to the sixteenth century, the time of the ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje. There is a series of thangkas of the Karma Kagyu Golden Rosary at Nyide Gon monastery in Lhodrak, Southern Tibet, which scholars believe date from either the later stages of the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's life or from the time of the ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje.

There are also paintings of the Karma Kagyu Golden Rosary on the wall of Karma Gon monastery in East Tibet, which are believed to date from the time of the ninth Karmapa. In addition, I also found a series of pictures of very old drawings of the Karma Kagyu Golden Rosary. There are depictions of Goshir Paljor Dhondup in all of them, and as there is not such a big gap between the time of Goshir Paljor Dhondup and the eighth Karmapa. In terms of both philosophical viewpoint and traditions, almost everything from the eighth Karmapa came to the ninth Karmapa intact and without any deterioration.

Moreover, making thankas of the Golden Rosary is a very old and important tradition, so these drawings and images must have been inspired and based upon a previous set. Therefore, we can more or less trust in their accuracy.

According to tradition, the first Karmapa looked like a monkey, the great scholar Buton had a big mouth, and Je Tsongkhapa had a big nose, but it seems Paljor Dhondup didn't have any distinctive and unusual looks. He appears almost the same in all these old thangkas: a magnificent middle-aged man of average height, with a fair and handsome face, he is frequently depicted as being bald with a moderate beard and mustache.

Many of these old thankas show lamas with a meditation hat, or the hat of a Pandita. The fact that Goshir Paljor Dhondup is not depicted with such hats could be because he refused to wear the Black Crown that the Chinese emperor offered him. Also, he had to oversee the administration of the Great Encampment, so he may not have had much time to spend much time in solitude.

In all of these thangkas, he wears the monastic robe of a Bhikshu: zen, shamthab and togak, (monk's vest), and on top of that, the yellow dharma robe and dagam (monastic coat). Paljor Dhondup was a monk, so there is no doubt that these were his usual clothes.

While there are many thankas of Lamas holding something like a vajra and bell, there are almost no images of Paljor Dhondup with anything in his hands. In most cases, his hands are pointing to the ground in the mudra of Buddha Shakyamuni, or resting on his lap in meditative equipoise. In one painting, his hands are in the mudra of giving teachings.

A notable feature of many of these thankas is the enigmatic black object depicted on Paljor Dhondup's forehead. While it bears a resemblance to eyeglasses, the anachronistic nature of such an item during that historical period, coupled with its unconventional placement, has puzzled many observers.

In my first Tibetan edition of this book, I was unable to address this intriguing issue. In this edition, although I propose a number of hypotheses regarding its significance, I cannot claim definitive knowledge of the true nature and purpose of this object.

There seems little doubt that it is migra or eye shades used in Tibet to protect one's eyes against the snow. Many Western scholars who visited Tibet in the past noted that many people wore eye shades. In addition, many Tibetan texts on the science of healing discuss them. However, this doesn't explain why Paljor

Dhondup would appear to wear such eye shades so often. It is possible that they had another purpose.

The Drukpa Kagyu has a tradition of certain yogis wearing eye shades. This comes from Tsangpa Gyare, the chief disciple of Lingray, who is the founder of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. *The Instruction of Eye Shades* states,

When the Lord Tsangpa Gyare was in Kharchu in Lhodrak, he did the practice of approaching deities. When he accomplished this, rays of light came out from his eyes, and he saw many beings get faint. Then, using method and wisdom, he took a tail of a dzo [cross between a yak and a cow] that he had and used it to cover his eyes. Then he saw these beings had no problem.

This tradition was propagated by Gyalwa Gotsangpa, who was Tsangpa Gyare's disciple. Usually, there are eight major and eight minor instructions of Drukpa Kagyu, and the instruction of migra is one of the eight minor instructions. These are also included in the *A Treasury of Instructions* by Jamgön Lodoe Thaye.

Kunpang Sherab Gyatso was a Drukpa Kagyu master who was the chief disciple of Ja Jamyang Choedrak, and who is included in the Golden Rosary of Drukpa Kagyu. He in turn was a student of

Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso. In the thangkas of Kunpang Sherab Gyatso, we see that he is wearing the same eye shades as those of Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

A short biography of Kunpang Sherab Gyatso by his disciple Kunchen Padma Karpo, the fourth Gyalwang Drukpa, states that Kunpang Sherab Gyatso achieved realization through performing union with Machik Labkyi Dolma, who was the founder of the Chö tradition. Hence, a question arises as to whether Kunpang Sherab Gyatso's eye shades have more to do with Chö than with the Drukpa Kagyu tradition.

In the paintings of Kyase Tokdhen Jampal Gyatso, a disciple of Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso who propagated the tradition of Chö practice, we see that he is also wearing eyeshades. However, his are quite different to Paljor Dhondup's eye shades and cover most of Jampal Gyatso's face.

I have also learned from someone that Goshir Dhondrup Ny-  
ingpo, a Khenpo of Shamar's monastery Yangpachen, also wears such eye shades in his thangkas, but at this point I have not seen these paintings.

In the *Collected Works of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo*, one of his notes gives us the reason why Chö practitioners wear eye shades:

When doing the *Torma of Water*, Geluk has the tradition of wearing face covering which looks like eye shades. The Geshes, when they talk about the reason for it in the instructions of *Torma*, say there are some of the guests for generosity, such as minor hungry ghosts, who would be terrified if they see the face of people and they would run away many leagues. To protect them from fear, they wear such a thing. Other than that, there seems to be no reason.

The eye shades worn by Paljor Dhondup may not be because of the Drukpa Kagyu, as there is no source saying that he received teachings from any important master of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. Also, I think it unlikely that his eye shades are because of Chö practice. Those worn by Chö practitioners are bigger than ordinary eye shades and cover most of their faces, whereas Paljor Dhondup's seem more like ordinary eye shades.

Also, between Bengarwa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dhondup, the one who was more associated with Chö practice was Jampal Zangpo. *The Feast for Scholars* clearly says that people who came to visit the Karmapa would receive tantric teachings from Paljor Dhondup, and that Bengarwa would give them Chö instructions. So, if even Bengarwa doesn't wear eye shades in the

thangkas because of Chö practice, there is no reason to assume Paljor Dhondup would have them.

Quite a few Western scholars have mentioned Paljor Dhondup in relation to *migra* or eye shades. In an article on the Himalayan Art website, Jeff Watt outlines a few reasons for wearing them in Tibet. One is simply for eye protection while traveling in the high snowy mountains. Another is for meditation and then they are also worn by scholars and editors working long hours on written texts. Among these, I think this last idea is most relevant in the case of Paljor Dhondup.

I asked some people who have a lot of general knowledge about Tibetan culture and customs. Some knew about the practice of scholars wearing eye shades to protect their eyes, but others had never heard of such a thing. If there really is such a tradition, I think it makes sense to think of Paljor Dhondup wearing eye shades to protect his eyes while reading texts. Because he had the full transmission of Kagyur and Tengyur and there was no teaching in Tibet that he didn't receive, he must surely have read a great many texts and he might, therefore, have used the eye shades, as depicted in the thangkas.

Other than that, I have heard that an important Lama once said that the first Gyaltsab wore eye shades because during the Ka-

lachakra retreat, one has to stay in dark retreat and eye shades are needed. Although I am not very familiar with the practices of Kalachakra, I have read the commentary of the *Kalachakra Tantra* along with its many instructions, and I must say that I never noticed such a thing. Even if there is a tradition of wearing eye shades once one comes out of dark retreat, they have been worn for other purposes also. Moreover, although Kalachakra was transmitted through Paljor Dhondup, there is no history of him practicing Kalachakra as the main focus of his meditation. So, I think it's difficult to say that Paljor Dhondup wore them because of Kalachakra practices.

Anyhow, these eye shades are so associated with Paljor Dhondup that if a statue or painting of him lacks these eye shades, one can almost say that it's not Paljor Dhondup.

## TURNING POINT FOR TIBETAN HISTORY

Historically, most Kadham and Kagyu masters regarded activities such as cultivating numerous disciples, constructing monasteries and managing religious and political affairs as worldly dharma that should be abandoned. However, it is essential to recognize that worldly conditions serve as a useful foundation for the

flourishing and preservation of the Buddha’s teachings in this world. Disregarding all “worldly dharma” would likely result in the inability of the Buddha’s teachings to endure.

For instance, the Kadham lineage, renowned for masters who eschewed worldly dharma, has since disappeared. Similarly, while Milarepa had many disciples who led pure lives free from the eight worldly dharmas, it was Gampopa’s efforts in building monasteries and skilfully guiding disciples that ensured the continuity of the Kagyu lineage to the present day.

In contrast to the approach of mountain yogis who abandoned worldly dharma, Goshir Paljor Dhondup, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, and Shamar Chennga Choedrak were concerned with the conditions necessary for preserving and protecting the Buddha’s teachings. The seventh Karmapa in particular, is considered the King of Dharma due to his active work for the benefit of all. Their activity was crucial for the Kagyu and Karma Kagyu teachings during a period when many lineages were threatened by the Geluk school.

In *The Blue Annals*, Goelo Zhonnu Pal wrote that all of Tibet was under the “one white umbrella” of Je Tsongkhapa. Drikung, which was previously part of the main Kagyu lineage, converted to Geluk and then declined significantly. Other Kagyu lineages,

such as Phakdru and Drukpa, were also diminished, particularly in Central Tibet. The Sakya lineage was so profoundly affected that eminent Sakya masters of the time, including Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo and Muchen Kunchok Gyaltsen, expressed great concern.

During this critical period, the efforts of Karmapa Thongwa Dondhen, Goshir Paljor Dhondup, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, and Shamar Chennga Choedrak enabled the Karma Kagyu to thrive. Thereafter, the Karma Kagyu lineage developed a comprehensive tradition of studying sutra and practicing tantra, flourishing unlike any other Tibetan Buddhist lineage of the time. With the exception of Lhasa, where Geluk was dominant, the Karma Kagyu was ascendant in most other regions, including Kham in Eastern Tibet, Kongpo and Lhokha in Southern Tibet, as well as Tsang in Western Tibet.

The majority of political rulers during this period were adherents of the Karma Kagyu. For example, the Rinpungpa in the Tsang region held significant power in Tibetan politics. In addition, other important local rulers or chieftains from the various regions of Japa, Yargyabpa, Kurabpa, and Samdhewa were followers and sponsors of the Karma Kagyu. In fact, the rise of the Karma Kagyu contributed directly or indirectly to the resurgence of other lineages who had been perceived as a threat by Geluk.

Later Geluk scholars, including the fifth Dalai Lama and his minister Desi Sangye Gyatso, accused the seventh Karmapa and fourth Shamar of harming Geluk teachings through political engagement. However, there is no historical evidence to support these claims. The tension between the Kagyu and Geluk arose from conflicts between local rulers of Lhasa, who supported Geluk, and others who supported the Karma Kagyu. Each faction fought for political power, inadvertently drawing their respective religious lineages into the conflict.

Authentic sources like *The Feast for Scholars* indicate that numerous politicians throughout Tibet had urged Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso to take action against the Geluk when some monks tried to harm him in Lhasa. However, he refused to do this, reprimanding them for attempting to act something against dharma and that also in his name. In fact, careful examination of the historical situation suggests that Choedrak Gyatso may even have been protecting the Geluk lineage rather than threatening it.

Furthermore, the fifth Dalai Lama stated in the biography of his teacher Nyangto Tratsangpa that the fourth Shamar did not harm the Geluk lineage either.

Lacking knowledge of these historical facts and perhaps driven by prejudice, modern Tibetan scholars like Dungkar Lobbing

Thrinley strongly criticized the seventh Karmapa and the Karma Kagyu in his book *The Unification of Religion and Politics*. However, after further research during the latter part of his life, he wrote in his *Dungkar Dictionary* that the seventh and other Karmapas refrained from engaging in sectarian conflicts and lived perfectly in accordance with the Dharma.

After several centuries of the Karma Kagyu being the most influential lineage, it was challenged by the Geluk who, with the support of Mongolian forces, defeated the Tibetan King of the Tsang region (a follower of the Karmapa), and established a new Tibetan political era known as Gadhen Phodrang, led by successive Dalai Lamas. Sadly, while criticizing the Karma Kagyu for being sectarian, they adopted one of the most sectarian policies in Tibetan history.

The constitution of Gadhen Phodrang (known as *The Crystal Mirror*) states:

Since this Northern Land [Tibet] is for the activities of the Incomparable Tsongkhapa, it is inappropriate for monastics of other traditions to benefit beings with the words of gods and hands of demons. Therefore, anyone who does so should be imprisoned in their house and they should be robbed and beaten.

This is not a rumor but an actual text written into the constitution of Tibet. Such sectarian language had never appeared in the documents of any other political dynasty and religious lineages of Tibet.

It is important to understand that this is a problem of individual politicians, rather than an issue inherent to the Geluk lineage, as it contradicts the teachings of Je Tsongkhapa.

The first Dalai Lama once said:

These days in the land of snow mountains,  
There are those who claim to be the holder of the  
Buddha's teachings,  
But the holder of Buddha's teachings from other  
traditions,  
they consider as enemy.  
I have deep sadness for this situation.

Unfortunately, Gadhen Phodrang, led by the reincarnation of the first Dalai Lama, adopted a policy contrary to the first Dalai Lama's views. It is regrettable that we criticize others harshly while committing even more serious mistakes ourselves.

## MARVELOUS DEPARTURE

In examining the historical trajectory of the Karma Kagyu lineage, one observes that its zenith occurred during the era of Choedrak Gyatso. During this period, the Karma Kagyu produced some of the most eminent yogis and scholars of their time. Its administrative structure surpassed that of the contemporaneous Tibetan royal government in sophistication, eliciting admiration from visiting monarchs upon their encounters with the Great Encampment. No other Tibetan Buddhist lineage achieved comparable prominence or influence during this epoch. These accomplishments can be largely attributed to Goshir Paljor Dhondup's mentorship of Choedrak Gyatso, thus constituting Paljor Dhondup's enduring legacy.

Having fulfilled his objectives, Goshir Paljor Dhondup recognized the appropriate moment for his departure. *The Feast for Scholars* records:

With all his intentions fulfilled, he passed away at Tsurphu when the Tulku [seventh Karmapa] was twenty-five years old. Numerous great rains of flowers descended, and one white-blue flower with its stem is still preserved in the box.

*A Rosary of Crystal Moons* states:

He extensively disseminated the wheel of dharma to beings until the age of sixty-three/ He passed away at Tsurphu in the year of the Earth Dog. Upon the cremation of his body, rainbows manifested and various flowers rained down. A flower with its stem was subsequently preserved in the reliquary. The self-arising heart was retained among the relics of the Encampment. His skull was enshrined in a stupa at Zhungluk Ling.

It should be noted that Zhungluk Ling refers to a shedra or monastic college established by the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje in Yarto, Southern Tibet.

Immediately following Paljor Dhondup's passing, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and Shamar Chennga Choedrak performed the requisite pujas and works to fulfill their Guru's final intentions. While Choedrak Gyatso's biography offers no information regarding Paljor Dhondup's passing due to its earlier sections being authored by Paljor Dhondup himself, the fourth Shamar's autobiography provides additional insights, which will be discussed later.

Further information can be gleaned from Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's biography of Sangye Nyenpa, where it is mentioned that Sangye Nyenpa was initially designated to serve as a Lama for Densa

Thil. He was disinclined to accept this position, despite it being the primary monastery of Phakmo Drupa, which held considerable Tibetan political influence. On the eve of receiving this appointment, he absconded to Lhasa, to Mon Domsang (located in modern-day Arunachal Pradesh) and then to Lhaphu in the Tsang region. It was while practicing in these remote areas that he received news of his guru Paljor Dhondup's demise.

Mikyö Dorje wrote:

As he had not seen Paljor Dhondup prior to his passing, he journeyed from Lhaphu to Tsurphu in two days. The great being had passed away. Believing that participating in the cremation would confer additional blessings, he hastened to join the proceedings, despite Kunga Dhondup of Tsurphu being on the verge of commencing the cremation.

Even Sangye Nyenpa, renowned as one of the greatest yogis and most celebrated practitioner within the Karma Kagyu tradition, showed such profound devotion to Goshir Paljor Dhondup, revering him as if he were the Buddha himself.

## HIS LAST WORDS

Many ordinary individuals live their lives without making a significant impact, while other, more influential figures alter the course of history, their activity resonating even after their demise. Goshir Paljor Dhondup was one such individual. Even after his passing, he continued to influence the history of the Karma Kagyu even through his final words. Due to their brevity, these words are not found in the biographical sources. However, they appear in the autobiography of the fourth Shamar, as well as in *The Feast for Scholars*:

Generally, Goshir Rinpoche Paljor Dhondup uttered in his final words to grant his inheritance to Tulku Shamar. If not, grant the settlement of Kongpo to him as the residual activities of his [Shamar] two predecessors. In any case, the master and disciple should not be separated. Thus, he requested earnestly.

These words indicate that Goshir Paljor Dhondup passed away peacefully, or at least that his passing was not sudden. Judging from *The Feast for Scholars*, it appears that Paljor Dhondup left these final words to none other than Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso.

Goshir Paljor Dhondup probably did not have any plan regarding his reincarnation as he was the first Gyaltzab. Therefore, he recognized the importance of having someone who would work for the Karmapa, and he saw that there was no better candidate than the fourth Shamar. Moreover, he may have had the foresight to sense the potential danger of the Karmapa and Shamar separately leading their own groups, potentially causing conflict between their followers and a schism in the lineage. For these reasons, he left those final words, which then became a prophecy.

After Paljor Dhondup's passing, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso followed his wishes. In *The Feast for Scholars*, the biography of Shamar states:

Again on the fourth date of the eleventh month, he [Shamar] met Lord Karmapa. He was given the decree and work of Goshir Rinpoche, blessed with auspiciousness and appointed as the Guigongpa. But as he had too many activities, he was not able to remain an attendant in this life.”

Tsuklak Trengwa continues:

Immediately, he [Shamar] gave Guigongpa's position to Drongbu Goshir, the settlement of Kongpo to Middle Seat,

and he went to Central Tibet on Lord Goe's persistent invitations.

Unfortunately, the fourth Shamar did not have time to stay with Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and to lead the Karmapa's Great Encampment. Consequently, he gave his Guigongpa title to Drongbu Goshir, who might have been the seat holder of a large Karma Kagyu monastery in Sogzong, located today in Nakchu province. As recorded in *The Feast for Scholars*, during the latter part of his life, Shamar paid a heavy price for not being able to stay with the Karmapa. He was not allowed to have audience with Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, and was not permitted to meet Mikyö Dorje after he was recognized and came to Central Tibet.

When the fourth Shamar passed away, he stated in his final reflections that the position of Thel was very harmful to him (referring to his position in Phakmo Drupa's monastery.) Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa considered this to be a great stain of breaking samayas within a lineage, which it truly was. As a result, there were two candidates when the reincarnation of the fourth Shamar was recognized, and some did not accept the eighth Karmapa's candidate, Konchok Yanlak, for quite some time.

Despite widespread criticism, Mikyö Dorje kept Shamar Konchok Yanlak (the fifth Shamar) with him and provided him with the

utmost care. He stated that the Karma Kagyu had to endure this schism as a result of their two predecessors being unable to stay together for long. When Mikyö Dorje passed away, he wanted the fifth Shamar to be his regent, and from then until the eighth or tenth of his lineage, the Shamar became the second highest tulku of the Karma Kagyu. The tenth Shamar was the final reincarnation before Gadhen Phodrang banned the practice of recognizing Shamar's reincarnation.

I personally feel that during Paljor Dhondup's time, it is quite clear from all these sources that he was considered higher than Shamar both in terms of his Karma Kagyu position and the official Chinese titles.

Some of his titles continued to be held by the fourth Shamar. Shortly before Paljor Dhondup passed away, the Chinese emperor of the Ming dynasty bestowed a new title upon him. However, as it was his intention to pass his inheritance on to the fourth Shamar, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso gave that title to the fourth Shamar. To ensure the title transfer was officially acceptable, the fourth Shamar sent a letter to the Chinese emperor, which is still preserved in his *Collected Works*:

Coming to the point, my abbot Goshir Paljor Dhondup received the position of Goshir, silver seal and decree from

Emperor Zhengtong. Later, during the thirteenth year of the Chinghua emperor, the emperor gifted the Kuanding Zongjiao Huangxian title, along with the golden seal and decree through Chanshi Rinchen Zangpo and others. But since my abbot has passed away, the decree and position were given to me by the Lord Karmapa. Khachoe Wangpo of my lineage was teacher to Dabao Fawang [Karmapa's title], and the Emperor Yongle gave great presents to Choepal Yeshe, the reincarnation of Khachoe Wangpo.

Now for me, I request you to change the decree and allow me to have this position. I request Your Highness' permission for this. The emperor, the lord of the people, the owner of the land, the king of dharma, I request your consideration.

In *Reponses to Questions*, Karma Trinleypa states that in the Year of the Bird, the Chinese emperor sent a decree for Shamar to accept and hold the position that was initially meant for Goshir Paljor Dhondup. The fourth Shamar proudly used this title on occasion. In his letter to Karmapa Mikyö Dorje, he writes:

To the emanation of the glorious Karmapa, the eighth one, Dharma Lord and Tulku, offered by Kuanding Zongjiao Huangxian Goshi.

## THE YEAR HE PASSED AWAY

Like his date of birth, the exact time of Paljor Dhondup's passing is uncertain. However, sufficient sources allow us to infer the years of his birth and of his passing. The year of Paljor Dhondup's birth was discussed in the introduction to this book. Here, to provide further clarity, I will focus on the year of his passing.

In *Reponses to Questions*, Karma Trinleypa asserts that Paljor Dhondup was inseparable from Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and was akin to the Karmapa's shadow until the latter reached thirty-one years of age. Given the undisputed fact that Choedrak Gyatso was born in the Wood Dog year of 1454, he would have been thirty-one in the Wood Dragon year of 1484. According to Karma Trinleypa's account, Paljor Dhondup passed away in 1484.

In *The Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa states that Paljor Dhondup passed away at Tsurphu when Choedrak Gyatso was twenty-five years old, in the Earth Dog year of 1479, so this should be considered the year of Goshir Paljor Dhondup's passing. *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* mentions that Paljor Dhondup lived for sixty-three years and passed away in the Earth Dog year. Given that most of the earlier parts of this text were based on or copied

from *The Feast for Scholars*, their consistency on this point is understandable.

In *The Dance of Vajrapani*, General Secretary Sherab Tharchin posits that Goshir Paljor Dhondup passed away in 1486. The reasoning for this theory is unclear, but it is worth noting that 1486 was the Fire Horse year, and Choedrak Gyatso would have been thirty years old at that time.

Among these sources, the *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* and *The Dance of Vajrapani* were written considerably later, which may limit their validity. Although both Karma Trinleypa and Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa lived in relative proximity to Goshir Paljor Dhondup's era, they did not personally encounter Goshir Paljor Dhondup, so it must be acknowledged that their accounts cannot be considered fully authoritative. Paljor Dhondup passed away before Karma Trinleypa met Karmapa and before Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa received monastic ordination from the fourth Shamar, who was a disciple of Goshir Paljor Dhondup and in his sixties at the time.

In this context, sources contemporaneous with Goshir Paljor Dhondup or from individuals closely connected to him are of paramount importance. Fortunately, such a source exists in the form of the autobiography of the fourth Shamar Chennga Choe-

drak, entitled *A Rosary of Utpalas*. This work, which is composed by versifying his daily diary, provides precise dates, including year and month, for numerous significant events, and is most reliable. In addition, the *Collected Works of the Fourth Shamar*, which was long lost and inaccessible to many, has recently been published in Tibet, and it offers crucial information about Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

According to the fourth Shamar's autobiography, in the Water Tiger year, Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso and Paljor Dhondup journeyed from Kham to Tsurphu, where they were met by the fourth Shamar. Subsequently, around the end of the fifth month of that year, the fourth Shamar embarked on a retreat of approximately twenty days at Tashi Gephel in Lhodrak, southern Tibet, the same region where Marpa Lotsawa was from. His autobiography states:

While staying in the solitude of Tashi Gephel,  
The one who is incomparably kind to me,  
The Lord Paljor Dhondup,  
Passed away into the pure land,  
I Did my best to fulfill his intentions.

*The Feast for Scholars* is based on the fourth Shamar autobiography. In it, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa states that the fourth Shamar performed the pujas for the passing of the great master Guigongpa.

For those familiar with this history, there can be no doubt about the identities of Paljor Dhondup and Guigongpa. The fourth Shamar is clearly referring to Guigongpa Paljor Dhondup, as there is only one such individual during that time.

Based on this most authoritative source, we can conclude that Goshir Paljor Dhondup passed away in the Water Tiger Year, around the fifth month of the Tibetan calendar. This corresponds to 1482 in the Western Gregorian calendar. In that year, the seventh Karmapa was twenty-nine years old, while the fourth Shamar was thirty.

To summarize, if we accept that Goshir Paljor Dhondup was born in 1420, and recall from the *A Rosary of Crystal Moons* that Khenchen Golonpa passed away in the year of the Ox, with other sources indicating that Paljor Dhondup was appointed as Guigongpa at age fourteen in the year when Golonpa passed away, we can infer that this appointment occurred in the Water Ox year of 1433.

If, according to the fourth Shamar's autobiography, we accept that Paljor Dhondup passed away in the Water Tiger year of 1482, this aligns with the account from *A Rosary of Crystal Moons*, which states that Paljor Dhondup lived to the age of sixty-three. This

calculation is based on the Tibetan method of age reckoning, in which sixty-three years would indeed elapse from 1420 to 1482.

In conclusion, after careful consideration of these sources, it can be asserted that Goshir Paljor Dhondup, the first Gyaltzab, was born in the Iron Bird year of 1420 and passed away in the Water Tiger year of 1482.

## WRITINGS OF GOSHIR PALJOR DHONDUP

Although five centuries have elapsed since the time of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, his teachings of transmission and realization continue to thrive. It would be worthwhile also to examine his writings, but alas, the majority of his works have been lost, thus limiting our discussion to the extant texts.

Several factors contribute to the loss of Goshir Paljor Dhondup's works. Firstly, when Mongolian armies intervened to support the Geluk school and established the Gaden Phodrang dynasty, numerous Karma Kagyu monasteries were destroyed, resulting in the loss of many relics. In addition, access to the few surviving copies of important writings by Karma Kagyu masters was severely restricted. The Cultural Revolution further decimated

this collection. So at present, there is minimal prospect of recovering the lost texts.

Moreover, the Karma Kagyu tradition in general, and Tsurphu in particular, experienced a period of intellectual decline after the seventeenth century. Educational pursuits, the study of writings by great masters, and the exploration of sutra or tantra were largely neglected. Instead, there was a preoccupation with expensive and luxurious decorations and materials. Even in the performance of rituals, there was no tradition of elucidating their meaning. Spiritual leaders such as the Karmapa, Tai Situ, Jamgön and Pawo demonstrated a greater inclination towards Nyingma teachings than those of the Kagyu tradition.

At Gyaltsab's monastery in Tsurphu, known as Choegar Gong or Upper Choegar, the majority of Gyaltsabs were solely focused on the Karmapa, to the point of neglecting their own lineage or interests. This attitude was mirrored by the monks of Gyaltsab, who despite only possessing a small monastery on a narrow plot in Tsurphu, refused to establish a monastery elsewhere. Leaving Tsurphu would entail separation from the Karmapa — a prospect they considered untenable. While this demonstrated a selfless and genuine loyalty to their guru Karmapa, it came at the expense of preserving Gyaltsab's legacy.

The works of successive Gyaltsabs were poorly preserved by their monastery and only recently have efforts been made to locate and collect their writings.

A Nyingmapa master known as Kathok Situ Choekyi Gyatso, who flourished in the late nineteenth century, visited most of the significant monasteries in Tibet and authored a renowned work entitled *A Guide of the Holy Places in Wu and Tsang*. In this text, he states, “In the Upper Choegar, there are numerous texts.” However, he provides no further elaboration on this matter. It is plausible that he lacked access to these texts, which may explain the paucity of information.

Based on oral tradition, *The Dance of Vajrapani* mentions that there were once eighteen volumes of the *Collected Works of Goshir Paljor Dhondup*.

Accounts from senior individuals suggest that prior to the Tibetans arrival to India in 1959, these *Collected Works* were housed at Pawo Rinpoche’s Nayang monastery, near Tsurphu in Tibet. The volumes were reportedly so substantial that each required two people to carry them. However, a list of the important relics of Nayang monastery records only having only one volume of Goshir Paljor Dhondup’s works, which is written in headed letters by hand.

It is also reported that ordinary monks were prohibited from touching the texts of the *Collected Works* which were held at Gyaltsab's monastery in Upper Tsurphu, due to their perceived sanctity. They were enshrouded in silk and received offerings. As a result, no one studied or even opened them.

At one point, however, Choepon Damchoe, who later became a prominent monk at the Upper Tsurphu monastery, opened one of these texts and discovered that the scripts were approximately one inch thick. Upon reading some pages, he found that the content pertained to Mahakala and Singhon, one of the five dharma protectors of the Karma Kagyu, who was considered part of Mahakala and Mahakali's retinue.

The most authoritative source concerning the *Collected Works* of successive Gyaltsabs comes from Gyaton Tulku Karma Ogyen Jigme Singge, who wrote a history of the Karma Kagyu lineage at the behest of his student Tashi Namgyal, the Choegyal, the king of Sikkim. Prior to the Tibetan political change in 1959, he journeyed to Tibet with the express purpose of researching the collected works of eminent Kagyu masters.

In his religious history (written in Sikkim), he explicitly states that the *Collected Works of Goshir Paljor Dhondup* comprise seven volumes, which were reportedly housed in the Yangpachen

monastery, associated with the Shamar lineage. This scholarly account provides substantial evidence for the existence of at least seven volumes of Goshir Paljor Dhondup's works, which were extant at least until the twentieth century.

Among the surviving writings of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, this discussion will focus on those works which were recently discovered and published by Paltsek Bodyig Penying Shibjuk Khang from Lhasa.

One of the significant extant works of Goshir Paljor Dhondup is the biography of Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso, titled *A Biography of Self Arising, Omniscient One, Saroruha Vajra, the Undefeated Dharma Raja*. This work is incomplete and lacks a colophon. Although the author is not explicitly named, there is strong evidence that it is Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

For instance, the seventh Karmapa's biography found in Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa's *The Feast for Scholars* frequently mentions information given or said to Guigongpa or Goshir, while this biography uses first-person references such as "given to me" or "said to me."

There appears to be a discontinuity in the biography where it relates Karmapa Choedrak Gyatso's travels around Kham and

his return to Karma Gon monastery. In contrast to the earlier portion of the biography, the chronology in this section becomes less precise, with years, months, and dates unclear.

First-person statements such as “he said this to me” or “I did this or that” are absent. Furthermore, the text includes information about events that occurred long after Goshir Paljor Dhondup’s passing. Thus, it can be inferred that the latter part of this biography was authored by someone else.

Initially, when this biography was discovered, some prominent individuals believed the entire work was by Paljor Dhondup. However, after extensive discussion, I was able to persuade them that this was not the case.

Given that Paljor Dhondup was one of Thongwa Dondhen’s principal disciples, one might question why he did not compose a biography of his teacher. The reason is difficult to ascertain. Firstly, it is unknown whether he wrote one or not. If he did not, it might be because others had already done so.

For example, Ratna Bhadra, Thongwa Dondhen’s primary teacher, authored a biography covering the sixth Karmapa’s early years, and Tsurphu Jamyang Chenmo also wrote a biography of Thongwa Dondhen. As Paljor Dhondup was a student of Jamyang Chenmo,

he may not have seen the necessity to supplement or duplicate his teacher's efforts.

Two short writings by Goshir Paljor Dhondup have also survived. One, approximately twenty-nine pages in length, discusses how the Kagyu lineage fathers were established through masters prophesying their disciples. The colophon states, "Compiled by Gyalse Paljor Dhondup."

The other, a brief text entitled *An Account of Successive Karmapas* presents concise information about each Karmapa, including their year and place of birth, family lineage, and year of passing. Although it lacks a colophon, the writing style suggests that this too was authored by Goshir Paljor Dhondup.

He also compiled the *Collected Works of the First Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa*. This is significant because, although Paljor Dhondup lived several generations after the first Karmapa, it was he who produced the final compilation of Dusum Khyenpa's works.

Consequently, the oral transmission of Dusum Khyenpa's complete works also came from Goshir Paljor Dhondup. To this day, two volumes of the first Karmapa's *Collection of Works* survive, and the oral transmission for these remains intact. The Contents

of Dusum Khyenpa is included in the *Collected Works of Dusum Khyenpa*.

Three additional writings by Goshir Paljor Dhondup merit attention. One is comprised of notes on the puja of Vajrayogini, while another contains notes on practicing Mahakala, the Black Cloaked One. Although neither text is extensive, they can be highly beneficial to practitioners of Vajrayogini and Mahakala in the Karma Kagyu tradition. The third text is the script for the chanting tune of Mahakala's puja, which is significant due to its antiquity.

Finally, *The Luminous Lamp*, which is the longest and most important of the extant works of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, is an instruction on the Six Yogas of Naropa, primarily focusing on the Inseparability of Wind and Mind. The visualization of Vajrayogini and the Inseparability of Wind and Mind are two crucial Karma Kagyu practices that the first Karmapa received from Gampopa, who in turn had received them from Milarepa, in both instances as a parting gift.

*The Luminous Lamp* was based on various texts on the Six Yogas of Naropa that were composed by Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, as well as the first, second, third and fourth Karmapa, and the second Shamar, along with Tsurphu Jamyang

Chenmo. Primarily, *The Luminous Lamp* is a commentary on the concise instruction on the Six Yogas of Naropa by the third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje.

Paljor Dhondup elucidated these instructions by drawing upon the fourth Karmapa's *Grand Instruction on the Six Yogas of Naropa*, which his disciple, the second Shamar, had transcribed, as well as on the personal instructions he had received from his own Guru, Thongwa Dondhen.

In the colophon of this text, Paljor Dhondup states,

This instruction on the Six Yogas of Naropa was written at the urging of some individuals who have faith in the Kagyu, such as Wuse Drungpa, while also hoping that it will benefit at least some people of lesser intelligence like myself. Regarding the points in Rangjung Dorje's instructions that lack clarity, I have elucidated them by relying on the kindness of Lord Thongwa Dondhen's nectar of speech. Having tasted a portion of this nectar, I have compiled the words of former Kagyu masters that are clear and easily comprehensible. By this merit, may I, Paljor Dhondup, and all other sentient beings enter the supreme path of Vajrayana, freed from all the negative emotions that hinder us, and swiftly achieve the state of great Vajradhara.

Although it is common in Tibet to use lofty titles such as great scholar, Maha Pandita, or Omniscient One, it is evident from this work that Paljor Dhondup's reputation as a great scholar was not merely empty praise. In the numerous records that speak of the teachings received by great masters, many refer to the masters receiving this particular text. Thus we can infer that *The Luminous Lamp* was both popular and significant in the past.

This text was published as a book by Thubten Phuntsok, a contemporary scholar from Palpung, with a preface by Sonam Gyatso, a teacher at China's University of Tibetan Buddhist Studies. Subsequently, it was republished by Thrangu Monastery in Varanasi, for which I wrote the introduction. With even more thorough proofreading and editing, Khenpo Ghawang and Tenzin Choephel of Palchen Chosling monastery have republished it a third time as part of the *Collected Works* of successive Gyaltsabs.

## VIRTUOUS IN THE END

Having completed this research and historical biography of Paljor Dhondup using the currently available sources, it is appropriate to conclude this work with virtue. To that end, I would like to

quote Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's words from his biography of Paljor Dhondup:

In the great ocean where many rivers of glorious  
wealth have gathered,  
Filled with the jewels of accomplishing both self and  
others' benefit,  
Great activities have filled all directions,  
The glorious Lama, may you be victorious.

In this verse, Paljor Dhondup's name is referenced through "glorious wealth," meaning Paljor, and "accomplishing benefits," meaning Dhondup in Tibetan.

Mikyö Dorje states:

When that happened, this bodhisattva played various roles: that of Maitreya by holding the throne of dharma and acting as the heir of those great victorious ones (the Karmapas); that of Ananda by holding the secret treasury of their dharma; that of Mahakasyapa to propagate and fill the ten directions with relics so that the heap of merit wouldn't come to an end; that of Brahma and Indra by protecting the entire horizon of their activities because of which there is no other like him, one who is skillful to

establish firmly the activities of all buddhas for the great benefit of beings.

Mikyö Dorje continues:

His knowledge, love, and potential for increasing and transmitting the virtues of the worldly and beyond-worldly to beings throughout space is not even slightly different from the Lord of three families [Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani].

Mikyö Dorje then refers to Goshir Paljor Dhondup's reincarnations:

From his mastery of manifesting reincarnations who would embody such life...

To date, there have been twelve successive reincarnations of Paljor Dhondup. Each of them has performed extensive activities benefiting the teachings and beings, and as a result, Paljor Dhondup's name continue to resonate throughout the world, and his legacy continues to flourish.

This concise historical biography of Paljor Dhondup is written by me, a disciple of the twelfth reincarnation of Goshir Paljor Dhondup, known as Gyaltsab Drakpa Mingyur Gocha. I am known as Ziche Leethong and I did my studies at the Karma

Shri Nalanda Institute of the Gyalwang Karmapa's monastic seat at Rumtek monastery. I composed this biography while in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, Northern India, commencing on November 21, 2013, at the age of twenty-eight, and completing the work in Bodhgaya on November 24, 2013, the day commemorating the Buddha's descent from heaven, despite interruptions due to brief travels.

Subsequently, upon arriving at Ralang Palchen Chosling monastery in South Sikkim, India, I made minor revisions and incorporated additional points. Minor changes and editions were made during my English translation of this version in September 2024. By the merit of this book, I pray that may we all consistently engage in the Bodhisattva's way of life.

Sarva Mangalam!



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by Ziche Leethong

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