

A Brief History of the Zurmang Kagyu

By Ziche Leethong

The Kagyu lineage is one of the four major lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and within it there are many sub-lineages. In the past there were what was called the four root and eight sub-branches of the Kagyu lineage. Among the four root lineages, the Karma Kagyu and Barom Kagyu still remain and among the sub-branches, Drigung Kagyu, Drukpa Kagyu and Taklung Kagyu still thrive. This classification of the Kagyu lineage is based on the 12th to the 15th century.

In the 15th century, Zurmang Kagyu, a major lineage of Karma Kagyu coming from the fifth Karmapa, Deshin Shekpa, emerged. Then in the 17th century, Neydho Kagyu, a second major lineage of Karma Kagyu coming from the Sixth Shamar emerged.

For centuries, Zurmang Kagyu has been an influential and important Kagyu lineage in Eastern Tibet and the monastery of Zurmang in Nangchen, Kham became one of the main centers of Karma Kagyu in Eastern Tibet. It is a lineage rich in great masters, having many collections of works.

In 2023, the 600th year since the founding of the first Zurmang monastery was celebrated. What follows is a brief history of six centuries of Zurmang Kagyu.

Mase Tokden Lodoe Rinchen

Zurmang Kagyu was founded by Drung Mase Tokden Lodoe Rinchen—a disciple of the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa. His dharma name was Lodoe Rinchen and he was popularly known as Mase Tokden.

His family was from Minyak, a place in Eastern Tibet which shares its ethnicity and culture with the ancient kingdom of Tanghut or Western Xia, which fell in battle to the forces of Genghis Khan, a battle in which Genghis Khan lost his life. Since the time of Sakya Pandita and second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, the Sakya lineage and Karmapa's lineage flourished widely around both regions of Minyak in Kham and Tanghut.

In Minyak, Eastern Tibet, there were the *Five Scholars of Minyak* who were famous even in Central Tibet: they had a deep connection with both Sakya and Karma Kagyu masters. Many of those masters followed the Karmapa and due to

this their monasteries were considered as Karma Kagyu monasteries. It was during this time that Drung Mase Tokden Lodoe Rinchen was born and became an important disciple of the fifth Karmapa, Deshin Shekpa.

Mase Tokden's father was a successful merchant and it was on the way to Central Tibet, in the Fire Tiger year of 1386 CE, that his son Mase Tokden was born. So while his family was from Minyak, Mase Tokden was actually born in the Chamdo district of Kham, which interestingly is connected to Nangchen where Mase Tokden's dharma activities would later flourish. There are many holy places associated with Mase Tokden in the area near his birth and so it seems that he lived there with his family for his early years.

When he was a small child, he was called Tselu. As early as three years of age, the young child showed great faith and respect in the sangha and in dharma as he would prostrate and make circumambulation whenever he came across monks.

When he was seven years old, his family decided to bring him back to Minyak in Kham, settling in a place called Mase. Because of this, he was later known as Mase Tokden. In his biographies, it says that even before he grew up and was ordained, he manifested many miracles such as healing people, demonstrating clairvoyance, and being miraculously protected from dangers.

At the age of ten, before becoming a monk he started his formal dharma training. For some years, he stayed at a monastery called Sambup Norbu Ling, which was one of the main monasteries in Minyak Rabgang at that time. His main teacher at that time was Khen Rinpoche Drakpa Dorje, from whom he received the Upasaka vows. From other teachers of the monastery, he learnt many philosophical texts of logic, vinaya and perfection of wisdom.

His family also encouraged him to seriously practice sorcery, saying that they had many powerful enemies and that he was too precious to lose. Yet Tselu responded that even though their intuition was well placed, he saw no interest in practicing that which only serves this life. His wish was to practice dharma that would be of benefit for all his future lives. Having stated that, he received empowerments and instructions of many important Tantras such as Vajra Bhairava, Yamantaka, Hevajra and so on, from a great yogi called Mira Ke Palbho.

Even though he was determined to become a monk, his family insistently said that even if he wanted to practice dharma, he could do so remaining a yogi and following the lifestyle of Shikpo Tsang. Shikpo Tsang was a family line of great yogis and Tselu studied from Mitsu Konchok Dorje who was an important lineage holder of the Shikpo Tsang. When he received empowerment, he received the name Kunga Gyalpo and for sometime, Kunga Gyalpo followed the lifestyle of Shikpo Tsang by keeping his hair long and wearing the robes of Shikpo practitioners.

The Shikpo lineage has a special teaching and practice of Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini. It was from this tradition that Mase Tokden first learnt the grand ritual dance of Chakrasamvara, which has around three hundred and sixty different steps. Traditionally, it is said that Mase Tokden learnt the ritual dance of Chakrasamvara from the fifth Karmapa. Hence Zurmang historians consider the former as the longer lineage and the one that Mase Tokden learnt from the fifth Karmapa as the direct or close lineage.

While living as a son of a wealthy family in Minyak Rabgang, he met the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa for the first time and made many great offerings. The fifth Karmapa had recently returned from China after having visited the Ming Emperor Yongle. Mase Tokden felt great faith in Deshin Shekpa and this was ignited even further after he had a vision of the third Karmapa telling Mase Tokden to take on the great responsibility of the teachings and to benefit beings extensively. In this period, he received teachings and studied with teachers such as Jamchoepa, so-called because he was expert in the teachings of Gyalwa Jampa, Maitreya. Jamchoepa was a student of Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltsen of Sakya, who had later become a disciple of the fourth Karmapa, Rolpe Dorje. Mase Tokden met many other masters in his home town and received the Nyingma teachings of Dzogpa Chenpo, practices of Shije Lineage and other various practices of different Tibetan Buddhist lineages.

While pursuing further instructions and practicing them, he married and fathered two children, one boy and one girl. Later, his son's family lineage was to be influential in his religious lineage. Even living as a married man, he built a monastery called Phakmo Gon (the monastery of Vajrayogini). This evolved through Mase Tokden expanding his personal retreat house. It was the first monastery that Mase Tokden established and is fortunately still preserved.

Mase Tokden then decided to leave everything there behind and go to Central Tibet, to meet his primary guru, the fifth Karmapa, Deshin Shekpa. As a

preparation for that, he offered most of his properties, jewels, fields and much else. Then in 1411 when he was twenty six years old, he left his home town and headed to Central Tibet.

On the way to Central Tibet, he visited many monasteries of the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions, such as Karma Gon of the Karma Kagyu and Kathok of the Nyingma. He spent some time at each of these monasteries and encountered many masters. He both received teachings from and gave teachings to some of those masters.

When he finally arrived in Lhasa and visited the famous Jowo statue, Jowo looked unhappy and he took it as a sign of not being able to visit the fifth Karmapa for some time. Indeed, when he went to Tsurphu, he found that the fifth Karmapa was in retreat and no one was allowed to see him. He then returned to Lhasa and made prostrations and circumambulated the Jowo Temple until he finally saw Jowo's face smiling. He took it as a good sign of being able to visit the fifth Karmapa and so he returned to Tsurphu. On that day, the fifth Karmapa was giving a public audience, and he had the chance to encounter the Karmapa at the end of the audience. That night, he had a dream in which the fifth Karmapa appeared as Manjushri. He supplicated the Karmapa to accept him as his disciple and the Karmapa accepted.

The Karmapa went back into retreat and Mase Tokden went on pilgrimage around central Tibet. He first went to Yerpa, 94 kilometres to the east of Lhasa. There he met Yerpa Rinpoche Zonnu Sangye, a teacher of Dzogpa Chenpo, from whom Mase Tokden received the teachings of Dzogpa Chenpo and especially the practice of Ekajati, the protector of Dzogpa Chenpo. He practiced there for some time, and then decided to visit Tsari in Southern Tibet. Before his departure, his teacher Yerpa Choeje cried. When the students of Yerpa Choeje asked why their guru is crying on that day, he said I have met many practitioners who are considered to be great yogis but I never met someone like Minyak Yogin.

Mase Tokden then went to Tsal Gungthang, the seat of Tsalpa Kagyu; Dhensa Thil, the seat of Phakdru Kagyu; Dhakla Gampo, the seat of Lord Gampopa and finally to Tsari, a very popular and sacred holy place in Southern Tibet. There, he spent some time in practice.

After completing his pilgrimage, he returned to Tsurphu to see his guru, the fifth Karmapa. The Karmapa was giving teachings on the Khandro Nyingthik of

Dzogpa Chenpo and some other instructions. Not completely satisfied, he sought out the Karmapa's attendants, asking them to give him permission to visit the Karmapa personally, so that he could ask for some special instruction. However, the attendant of the Karmapa found Mase Tokden not only poor but also somewhat crazy. The attendant said, "The Karmapa has given such precious instruction and you are still not satisfied? What kind of person are you?" Saying this, the attendant even trod on the hair of Mase Tokden while the latter was doing prostration. Despite this, one day Mase Tokden managed to enter the Karmapa's presence. Shedding tears, he prostrated to Karmapa and said, "I am a poor yogi. I have requested your attendants many times. But they are not allowing me to see you. Please accept me as your disciple and give me the instructions of the Kagyu lineage."

Deshin Shekpa told him not to cry, gave him some presents and then, while giving some instructions about the thirty seven movements of yoga, Dheshin Shekpa suddenly appeared in the form of Vajrayogini with other dakinis making offerings, Deshin Shekpa gave empowerment to Mase Tokden, during which Mase Tokden felt he had reached another world. After returning to normal perception, Deshin Shekpa told Mase Tokden that this is how the empowerment is given and that, in the future, he would gradually give him the sacred instructions of the Kagyu and lineage transmission and that he could come whenever he (Karmapa) was not in meditation. Having said that, Deshin Shekpa told his attendants to give him complete freedom to come visit whenever the yogi wanted. In this way Mase Tokden received the most important instructions of Kagyu lineage, such as Six Yogas of Naropa, Gampopa's Sahaja Mahamudra, Karmapa's Introducing the Three Kayas and the Amanasi of Maitreya.

Mase Tokden then went to Nyenchen Thanglha which is in the North West of Lhasa where many ancient Kagyu masters practiced, such as Lorepa of the Drukpa Kagyu. As previously, he practiced meditation while solely relying on water to survive. He had been practicing this since his time in Kham. Later, his disciples and followers used this secret technique when practicing strict meditation. Deshin Shekpa would later tell him what Mase Tokden went through and how Deshin Shekpa had blessed him, even before Mase Tokden had chance to reveal his experience to the latter. Deshin Shekpa then appearing in the form of Chakrasamvara and gave him what were to become the most important instruction of Zurmang Kagyu, the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara. Deshin Shekpa then asked Mase Tokden if he would like to become a monk? Mase Tokden enquired whether the vows of Tantra he held would be enough to achieve enlightenment? Deshin Shekpa replied that for one's own practice, it

would be enough but to benefit others, monastic life can be more beneficial and so it was important for him to be ordained.

Mase Tokden took the decision to become a monk and received full ordination from Deshin Shekpa himself. Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa, in his *Feast for Scholars*, mentions other masters from who Mase Tokden received monastic vow. Mase Tokden's monastic name was Lodoe Rinchen and this became his formal name.

After practicing for some time in Nyemo of Tsang region, he went to visit Deshin Shekpa when Deshin Shekpa was in the Potala and receiving the grand offering of the Ming Emperor. During this time, Deshin Shekpa gave him the remaining instruction of the Whispered lineage. At this time, Mase Tokden asked many important questions about his practice to Deshin Shekpa and fully clarified his doubts about both practice and realisation. Deshin Shekpa also gave him some important teachings and empowerments that came from third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, who had a special connection and meaning for Mase Tokden. Although Mase Tokden was determined to dedicate the rest of his life to solitary practice, Deshin Shekpa advised him to benefit beings in the future. During his last visit to Deshin Shekpa before the latter passed away at the age of thirty two, Mase Tokden requested permission to return to Kham to visit his teachers there. Deshin Shekpa granted permission and prophesied the place where it would be beneficial for Mase Tokden to establish a monastery.

At the age of 29 in the year 1414, he planned to return to his birth place, however, he learnt that his two most important teachers in Minyak had already passed away. He decided not to return to his home town and instead went to Porwu where he met his teacher Jamchoepa, who was still alive. There, he started teaching the Whispered Lineage at the request of Kudhu Tokden Choepal Yeshe and Lhayak Choepal Rinchen. These two were to become two of the eight main disciples of Mase Tokden.

Mase Tokden travelled around Chamdo, Nangchen and Dege to practice in solitary sites and to transmit his sacred instruction of the whispered lineage to very devoted disciples. He also built monasteries in these places, however, since the sources of these histories are written by great scholars such as Goelo Zhonnu Pal and Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa, who were both from Central Tibet and had never visited Kham it is difficult to know which monasteries to attribute to Mase Tokden.

When Mase Tokden learnt that his guru, the fifth Karmapa had passed away, at the request of one of his disciples, he wrote a short biography of the fifth Karmapa. It was lost for some time but has recently been found.

Zurmang Monastery

Zurmang monastery can refer to any or the major monasteries of Zurmang Kagyu, however it generally refers to Zurmang Lhundup Ling or Zurmang Namgyal Tse, built by Mase Tokden himself.

Mase Tokden had the intention of building a monastery ever since the fifth Karmapa had advised him to, however, it took him a long time to find the appropriate place since at so many of the potential places that he thought might be the site foretold by his guru Deshin Shekpa, he saw inauspicious signs and decided not to build there.

He finally found the right place ten years after he left Central Tibet. It was in Bumzong mountain in Chamdo. He was invited by Lama Lhatsang and Rindrak, a chieftain of Jang, who were from Zurmang of Nangchen. When he accepted their request and went to see the place, at first, the chieftain of Jang talked about the names of the place. They all sounded auspicious.

Then when reached a spot below the place where the monastery was eventually built, and he met an old lady and asked her if the site above was big enough to build a temple. The old woman said not just a small temple, it's even enough for a large monastery. This became the second auspicious sign.

The next day, when he went to see the site, he met another old woman. When he asked her, "Do you think it's possible to build a shrine hall here which has eighty pillars?" she looked at him carefully and by seeing Mase Tokden was physically weak and wearing only old robes, she sarcastically replied that looking at his face and clothes, it seems he was going to build a shrine house which had not only eighty pillars, but one hundred and eight pillars. This was the third auspicious sign he encountered.

Not only did he see these auspicious signs, he also knew that it was the very place foretold by his guru the fifth karmapa, Deshin Shekpa, who told him that he should practice widely in Kham and his activities would greatly flourish. In particular, there would be a red valley resembling the dead body of a horse,

open and with three horse shackles thrown away: there would be the mandala of Chakrasamvara and he should build a monastery there.

Having identified the place successfully, he built the monastery in 1423 when he was thirty eight years old. Mase Tokden lived until the age of forty three, and so his main monastery, the Zurmang monastery was built just a few years before he passed away in 1428. Soon, his eight chief disciples known as the *Eight Tokdens* also built personal rooms. Gradually, a large monastery evolved. This monastery would be later known as Pal Tashi Zurmang Lhundup Ling.

There are different interpretations about why it is known as Zurmang. In Tibetan, Zur means side or angles and Mang means many. So, some explain the name by saying that when Mase Tokden first built this monastery, he plucked many plants called Khenpa which is usually used to make incense. He then told his attendant to throw it all over. When his attendant returned, he asked him what happened, his attendant said more khenpa fell in the sides or corners. So, some people say Zurmang got its name from that account. Others are of the opinion that Zurmang was already the name of that area before Mase Tokden came there.

The monastery continued to evolve and is now constituted of the great shrine hall known as Trayerma, the Mahakala shrine hall, known as Dupung Zilnon, the retreat centre of the Upper Whispered Lineage and Middle Whispered Lineage, the House of Manjushri, the Namgyal Tse Palace, the Zurmang Institute of Five Sciences, the Publishing House of Zurmang, the Zangdok Palri shrine hall for lay practitioners and so on. For the inner monuments, it has an old painting of sixteen arhats, stupas of Mase Tokden and other Zurmang masters, religious instruments that belong to the Ming dynasty, old and precious statues of Buddha, Guru Rinpoche and the Kagyu masters. When it thrived in the past, it had around one thousand, three hundred monks and currently there are around seven hundred and fifty monks. It holds grand rituals of Charasamvara, Mahakala, Vajrakilaya of Ratna Lingpa tradition, Tsechu of Guru Rinpoche, thirteen mandalas of Marpa, one billion recitation of Vajrasattava and Vajra Guru, Parinirvana puja of Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa and Mase Tokden, grand monlam of Sukhavati for world peace, Ocean of Kagyu Songs of Realisation, Chod of Zurmang tradition and many others. Especially, there is the Zurmang Tsokgar or the Zurmang Ritual Dance which takes around twelve hours and is considered as the world's longest dance by some, is one of the three largest gatherings of Tibet. The two others are the Grand Monlam in Lhasa and Market of Dartse Do in Kham.

Having established Zurmang monastery, Mase Tokden spent the rest of his life there, occasionally going to nearby places to do retreat. It is said that in the winter time, he did retreat near the monastery and gave teachings in the spring and autumn. Some of his important works were also written while he was there. In total, there are seven volumes of texts composed by Mase Tokden.

When he was forty-three years old in the Earth Monkey year in 1428, Mase Tokden became slightly unwell and signs of a great being passing away appeared around the monastery. Mase Tokden himself had visions of the second Karmapa and fifth Karmapa. He declared that his channels, winds and drops were quite weak and that, generally, everything is impermanent. At one point, he pointed his fingers into the sky and asked his students who were around him, what did they see? They said they saw nothing. He replied that they did not have to see what he saw. By implying that he saw the ancient Kagyu masters, he finally passed into parinirvana. His students organised the cremation of his body and his head, undamaged by the fire, and relics that came from his body were kept as objects of great devotion.

Goelo Zhonnu Pal, one of the great historians of Tibet, writes in his *Blue Annals* that “By establishing Zurmang monastery and founding the lineage of Zurmang, among the disciples of Deshin Shekpa, Mase performed the greatest activities”. If one looks at the history of Karma Kagyu, one marvels at how the fifth Karmapa, Deshin Shekpa, despite living only for thirty two years, produced some of the greatest Mahasidhas and among them, Mase Tokden who despite living only to forty three, had one of the greatest legacies.

Zurmang Lineage

Zurmang is not just the name of a monastery but that of an independent and complete lineage, which is a sub-sect of the Karma Kagyu lineage of the Kagyu in general. It is mentioned in many important Histories of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, in the *Blue Annals* of Goelo Zhonnu Pal, who like Mase Tokden was also a student of fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa, he writes that, “Even these days, it is known as Zurmang Whispered Lineage and it has extensively benefited others.” Tatsak Tsewang Gyal who was a Taklung Kagyu historian and a student of Sixth Karmapa, writes in the *Lhorong Religious History* that he heard of Mase Tokden established Zurmang monastery at Tsigyu and having disciples known as the eight Tokden that had flourished greatly. In the *Feast for Scholars*, Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa writes that Zurmang monastery is one of the largest and purest

monastery in Eastern Tibet and he also writes, “Even these days, Zurmang Kagyu is flourishing greatly and has great activities”. In the eighteenth century, Kathok Rigzen Tsewang Norbu, in his *Source of Precious Wise Sayings*, writes, “Pal Zurmangpa, which holds the Whispered Lineage of Kamtsang, has a banner of glory that moves in the Peak of Existence.” In the *Garland Of Moons* by Situ Choejung and Belo Tsewang Kunkyab, composed in eighteenth century, it says that, “There came the lineage of Zurmang Kagyu which has the profound teachings of Kamtsang in general, especially the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara, cycle of Chod practice, dharmas of Ratna Lingpa, and later Termas of Rigzen Rolpei Dorje Dark, the unbroken lineage of the empowerments, transmission and practice of these teachings”. In his *Succession of Seat Holders of Old and New Tantra in Tibet*, Khyentse Wangpo, writes that “Zurmang Kagyu, a division of Kamtsang Kagyu, flourishes greatly even these days”. In the *Treasury of Knowledge*, Jamgon Kongtrul classifies Zurmang Kagyu and Neydho Kagyu as the two lineages that came from Karma Kagyu.

As a lineage of the Kagyu in general and particularly of the Karma Kagyu, Zurmang Kagyu teachings include the instructions such as Six Yogas of Naropa and Mahamudra that are important for Kagyu in general and particularly for Karma Kagyu. Other important elements of the Zurmang lineage are practices of Dzogpa Chenpo and the Chod practice from Shije. There is a special lineage of Chod called *Zurchod* which means Chod of Zurmang. However, the essence of the Zurmang lineage is the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara.

The ones who spread the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara in Tibet were Milarepa and his disciple Rechungpa. According to the line of Ngokpa—a chief disciple of Marpa—Marpa did not have transmission of Chakrasamvara. But according to Milarepa’s tradition, Marpa did have the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara called *the Dharma Cycle of Formless Dakinis*, which was only given to Milarepa. When Marpa gave transmission to Milarepa, he told Milarepa to go to India in the future as he himself did not have the full instructions. Later, Milarepa sent Rechungpa to Nepal to get the rest of instructions, which he received from Tipupa.

Milarepa then entrusted those instructions to his three most important disciples; Rechungpa, Gampopa and Ngamzongpa. Which of these lineages was the more extensive one, is identified differently. However, most sources agree that the lineages that came from Rechungpa and Gampopa were more extensive and the one that came from Ngamzongpa was a shorter version. In the beginning, the one that came from Rechungpa was more popular as

Rechungpa's followers only focused on that practice and Gampopa's followers mainly focused on Mahamudra and other practices. In the fifteenth century, the one that came from Rechungpa was propagated all over Central and Western Tibet by Tsangnyon Heruka, the author of the popular biography of Milarepa. Even though Tsangnyon Heruka wasn't really a formal Drukpa Kagyu lineage holder, the transmission that came from him was later incorporated into the Drukpa Kagyu lineage and it ceased to prosper as an independent lineage. The one that came from Gampopa was transmitted only through Karma Kagyu, something that became publicly known only during the time of fifth Karmapa, who transmitted it to Mase Tokden, authorising him to break the seal of transmitting it to only one person.

According to Mase Tokden's biography, when he received that instruction from fifth Karmapa, the Karmapa appeared in the form of Chakrasamvara and there were countless Buddhas and Bodhisattavas in the pores of Karmapa's form. Mase Tokden also saw his own body filled with the sixty two deities of Chakrasamvara and those deities, along with Mahasidhas of India were performing the ritual dance of Chakrasamvara in that space. This ritual dance is known as Zurmang Tsokgar and is very popular in Kham. It has ritual dances of bringing blessings, the secret ritual dance, the ritual dance of accomplishing activities, the ritual dance of removing obstacles and so on.

The Whispered Lineage that came from Gampopa to the Karma Kagyu has since become known as Zurmang Nyengyu (the Whispered Lineage of Zurmang). According to tradition, it was first received by Tilopa from Vajrayogini. It was then transmitted only from one master to one disciple for thirteen generations. The lineage is usually the same as the commonly-known lineage of Kagyu: from Marpa to Milarepa and so on. In the case of Zurmang Nyengyu, that is unbroken lineage from Tilopa up to the fifth Karmapa Deshin Shekpa, as we find in the golden rosary of Karma Kagyu lineage.

The complete set of teachings or practices of Zurmang Nyengyu has five volumes of texts, known as *the five Chakras or wheels*. It has three empowerments for the father Chakrasamvara, three empowerments for the mother Vajrayogini and one more for them both. There are also the empowerments of the five deities of Vajrayogini and empowerments of Mahakala and Mahakali too. For the generation stage, it has twelve different sadhanas. As for the completion stage, there are the root text taught by Buddha Vajradhara himself, the *Condensed Tantra of the Wish-Fulfilling Chakrasamvara Whispered Lineage*, the *Nine Cycles of Dharmas of Formless Dakinis*, *Vajra Lines of the Whispered Lineage* and

Rosary of Jewels which came from Tilopa, and *Nine Scrolls of Six Yogas of Naropa* and so on. There is the commitment that if one receives the full transmission of these, one has to read daily some important sadhanas, altogether around seventy pages. This tradition is still kept alive by the masters and the practitioners of Zurmang Lineage. Most of the instructions of the Whispered Lineage of Chakrasamvara that came from Milarepa are preserved by the Drukpa Kagyu and Karma Kagyu. But over time, the one that came from Gampopa through Karmapa which later became Zurmang Nyengyu is the one that has the independent and unbroken lineage.

Early Zurmang

As Mase Tokden was revered as a great master even at an early age while he was still in his home town and then gave teachings while he was on pilgrimage and doing retreat all around Tibet, it seems he had many disciples, all over Tibet. However, the key lineage holders of the Zurmang Kagyu are summed up as his Eight Tokdens, Three Jamos and Four Nuns (“Four Nuns who are the Ornaments”).

Most of the Tokdens were from Minyak Rabgang, the same region from which Mase Tokden himself came. Most of these eight Tokdens dedicated their time to Zurmang, once the Zurmang monastery was established. Each of these eight Tokden specialised in a different instruction and among the eight Tokdens, the most senior was Tokden Choepal Yeshe. He was a half brother of Mase Tokden himself, from the same mother but a different father and was the special holder of the lineage of empowerments, tantra and instructions of the Zurmang Whispered Lineage.

Tokden Sonam Yeshe, also known as Ji Gyaltsab, specialised in holding the lineage of the Six Yogas of Naropa and the practices of Yoga. He had studied with the Sakyapa before meeting Mase Tokden. He also received teachings from the sixth Karmapa, Thongwa Donden.

Tokden Kunchok Zangpo specialised in holding the lineage of living as a great Mahasidha. He studied with Jamchoepa, who was one of the main teachers of Mase Tokden, and he also received the teachings of Marpa Kagyu, one of the eight lineages of Phamo Drupa that flourished widely in Eastern Tibet around the 13th to 14th century. Konchok Zangpo went all over Kham and Amdo to practice and manifested as a great Mahasidha of ancient India. Like Mase

Tokden, he also relied on water only. He had followers in Amdo but there is not much information about that.

Tokden Khenchen Tashi Gyaltsen specialised in holding the lineage of Zurmang Whispered Lineage's protector, Mahakala. He propagated the complete oral transmission of Kangyur. He was the main abbot of the monastery and in one history of Zurmang, it says that all the monastic ordinations in Zurmang monastery was given by him.

Lhayak Tokden Choepal Rinchen specialised in the ascetic practice of the Whispered Lineage. Like Mase Tokden, his family was from Minyak but he was born in Phenyul in Central Tibet while his family was on a business trip. After returning to Minyak, he also received teachings from the fifth and sixth Karmapas. Mase Tokden himself praised him for his great realisation and compassion. He wrote some important texts on the rituals of the Whispered Lineage and the Three Levels of Vows.

Drawo Tokden Kunga Gyaltsen specialised in the lineage of the ritual dance of Zurmang Nyengyu. He built another important monastery of Zurmang lineage known as Dutsi Kyil or Dutshi Thil which is not very far from the main Zurmang monastery. The Zurmang ritual dance was transmitted through Kunga Gyaltsen.

Rakshi Tokden Sonam Paldup specialised in the Luminosity and Inner Heat practices among the Six Yogas of Naropa. Like Milarepa, he always wore only a thin cotton robe. In Zurmang, he founded the tradition of donning wet cotton cloth in the cold winter to demonstrate the power of Inner Heat, a tradition that is widely practiced by the Kagyu followers of Milarepa.

Tsabshi Tokden Ozer Zangpo specialised in the lineage of dedication to practice in retreat with great renunciation. It is said that he saw no difference between day and night. He also relied on water only, because of which he was known as Chusol Tokden or Water Drinking Tokden.

Of the three Jamos, we have no historical records of Zhak Sherab Zangpo and Ji Gyedor. Choeku Ozer Sengge mainly studied with Lhayak Tokden Choepal Rinchen, one of the eight Tokdens. From Mase Tokden, he received mainly Mahamudra teachings. His residence in Zurmang was known as Tsabshi monastery even though it was not a separate monastery.

The four Tsunmas or nuns of Mase Tokden are Thratsunma Yeshe Gyen, Tongza Yeshe Tsomo, Bumo Tashi Don and Adro Tsunami Ridden Rinchen Tso. Unfortunately, there is very little information about them in the Zurmang history.

After Mase Tokden passed away, the monastery was taken care of by Tokden Sonam Yeshe, known as Gyaltsab, meaning *regent* or Nangso which means *Inner Seer*—a title held by people who hold quite high political authority. However, soon after, the son of Mase Tokden, who was born before Mase Tokden became a monk, fathered Jodhenpa Lodoe Drakpa, born eight years after Mase Tokden passed away. He was considered to be the reincarnation of Mase Tokden and was later brought to Zurmang where the Tokdens offered him all of the instructions they had received from his former incarnation. It is said that he spent all his time staying in his room at Zurmang and practicing for twenty years. He received teachings from the seventh Karmapa and seventh Karmapa's two teachers; Bengawa Jampal Zangpo and Goshir Paljor Dondup, the first Gyaltsab. Sangye Nyenpa, the great yogi of Karma Kagyu and root guru of eighth Karmapa, also received teachings from Jodhenpa.

Thus, for some generations, Zurmang Kagyu followed the system of a family lineage, direct descendants of Mase Tokden himself, even though reincarnations of Mase Tokden and many Tokdens were recognised over time. They maintained a close connection to the successive Karmapas, Shamars and Gyaltsabs. Some of the Zurmang masters who were the descendant of Mase Tokden's family were appointed as both religious and political heads of regions that were under Zurmang monastery, which are collectively known as Zurmang Neydruk, the six regions of Zurmang. Trungpa Jatang Rinpoche was given the title Guanting Guoshi or Goshir by the seventh Karmapa, Choedrak Gyatso. Jatang Rinpoche once served as the leader of the Karmapa's Great Encampment when the eighth Karmapa was very young. Since then, Jatang Rinpoche, Zurmang's leader at this time, held the title of Guanting Goshir given by successive Karmapas. However, they were known as the Nangso more than Goshirs. Over all Nangchen, there were Lamas of two different lineages that held both political and religious authority: the Lamas of Barom Kagyu and those of Zurmang Kagyu. Zurmang's political power over their region remained until the Tibetan political changes in the 20th century. Even so, the lamas who held political authority engaged only in dharma and were involved very little in real political affairs.

Before the political changes that took place between Tibet and Mongolia in the 17th century, two masters of Zurmang lineage were notable and prominent. One is the great scholar Zurmang Lekshey Drayang who is counted as both second Tenzin and second Jatang. The other was Trungpa Kunga Namgyal. Both of them were born in the line of Mase Tokden's family.

Later Zurmang

After the 17th century, the Kagyu lineage in general and the Karma Kagyu in particular suffered greatly under the Mongol invasions. Zurmang was not an exception and it suffered a few times. Before the attack by the Mongol army, Zurmang Namgyal Tse alone was home to two thousand monks and five great Tulkus. At first Konchok Tenzin, the fourth Tenzin, he was revered by the Mongolian chieftain, Tenzin Choegyal, and was offered the title *Behu* and a seal. The fifth Dalai Lama also supported him. Then, four years after Konchok Tenzin passed away in 1674, Lobsang Jinpa, the political ruler of Tibetan government in Lhasa, took control of Zurmang monastery for the following twenty-nine years. Trungpa Tenpa Namgyal, Gharwang Rinchen Nyingpo, Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso were taken and imprisoned in Chamdo for eighteen years. Tsoknyi Paljor, the second Rechung Tulku of Zurmang, who was born to a Mongolian family (and hence known as Sokpo Rechung Tulku, meaning the Mongolian Rechung Tulku) played an important role in getting Zurmang monastery back. With the permission from Tashi Batur Taji of Mongolia, Gharwang Rinchen Nyingpo took care of the monastery for five years and then passed away in 1710.

While Zurmang Lamas were in the Geluk monastery of Chamdo, that monastery's secretary Kunlek, who was a student of Namling Panchen—an important disciple of fifth Dalai Lama, Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso studied Tibetan and Indian sciences both in Kham and in Central Tibet. Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso had two students, Tsedrum Lama and Tserdrang Lama. From the former, a lineage of Tibetan and Sanskrit science went to the Sakyapa while from the latter, a lineage went to Karma Kagyu and thereafter to the Gelukpa and others. Therefore, Belo Tsewang Kunkyab, in his *History of Zurmang*, writes that the person who first established the system of these sciences in Kham was Sungrab Gyatso. From Sungrab Gyatso, many eminent masters and scholars received the teachings, such as Kathok Rigzen Tsewang Norbu, Situ Choekyi Jungnay and Khamtrul Tenzin Choekyi Nima. Situ Choekyi Jungnay established Pulpung monastery in Dege in 1727. Zurmang and Palpung became the two most important Karma Kagyu monasteries of Eastern Tibet: their connection started from Situ Choejung himself, who not only received teachings from many

Zurmang masters but whose most important student, Belo or Be Lotsawa Tsewang Kunkhyab, was also a monk of Zurmang Dutsil Kyil monastery.

After Gharwang Rinchen Nyingpo passed in 1710, Lhasang Han, a grandson of Mongolian Chieftain Tenzin Choegyal took control of Zurmang monastery for nine years. Zurmang Choekyong Namgyal, who was a student of Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso, met a Chinese emissary called Dha Lok Ye who came to Tibet. They met in Lhatok in Kham and the latter became a devoted disciple. He later gave permission for him to take over both religious and political authority of Zurmang. This was probably in 1724, as the history says it happened when Choekyong Namgyal was fourteen years old. As Choekyong Namgyal's activities greatly flourished, the Chinese emperor gave him the title *Behu* through a written imperial declaration. As the history says it happened when Choekyong Namgyal was twenty-four years old, it was in 1734. The history of Zurmang does not mention clearly who the Emperor was, but if it happened in 1734, it must have been the emperor Yongzheng of the Qing dynasty who reigned from 1722 to 1735. Since then, the Gharwang lineage became the supreme head of Zurmang monastery and regions. He was also charged with the political responsibility of taking care of law and politics. Thus, Zurmang monastery was restored successfully and became the centre of the Kagyu in Kham once again.

Another major change that took place in the history of Zurmang during the later phase was the emergence of *Tertons*—who are believed to have the power to reveal ancient texts of Nyingma lineage that were hidden by Guru Rinpoche in sacred places. There are three main Tertons of Zurmang: Rolpei Dorje, Namkha Dorje and Barwei Dorje.

Terton Ropei Dorje was one of the most important Tertons of the eighteenth century. He was a disciple of Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso. Situ Choekyi Jungnay also received teachings from him. Rolpei Dorje had eight volumes of works that include Termas that he revealed. He established Keyrong Phuntsok Rabten monastery. His brother, Ziji Gyalpo was also a Terton and a student of Chetsang Sungrab Gyatso. He established Bolyak monastery. Kathok Rigzen Tsewang Norbu received teachings from him.

During the time of fifteenth Karmapa, Khakyab Dorje, another Terton from Zurmang, known as Namkha Dorje, was considered as the personal Terton of the Karmapa. He was sent to Bhutan by Karmapa and he became an important master of the people of Bhutan.

Terton Bharwei Dorje was the reincarnation of Karma Sungrab Thrinlay Rabgye. He established Raktrul monastery in Nangchen in 1902. He played an important role in reviving the Barom Kagyu. There are nine volumes of Termas he revealed and two volumes of works composed by him. His later reincarnations were considered as the holders of the Barom Kagyu lineage.

Before the political revolution in Tibet in the 20th century, one important change in Zurmang's story was the establishment of *Shedras*. It produced many great Khenpos, many of whom were revered all over Tibet. The tenth Tenzin Lekshey Mrawai Wangpo established the Shedra or Study Institute in Zurmang by appointing Zurmang Pema Namgyal as its Khenpo. Pema Namgyal was probably the greatest scholar of later Zurmang. He was a student of Khenpo Shenga who was the key person in establishing many Shedras in the Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyu lineages. There are ten volumes of Pema Namgyal's works.

During this time, the Zurmang Shedra thrived so much that it had around one thousand five hundred monks. Some of the well known Khenpos of Zurmang were Khyenrab Tharchin, who because of his connection to Sakya, was requested by Sakya Trizin to teach at Ngor, one of the main monasteries of the Sakyapa in Central Tibet. Khenpo Karma Tseten was related to the Zurmang Terton's Tulku and because of this he joined Zurmang monastery. He then studied at many Shedras of various lineages. After being released from the jail during the political revolution in Tibet, he spent most of his time in a retreat called Thrachok whereby he was known as Thrachok Khenpo. He taught many followers widely when religious freedom was restored in China. Because of this, it is said that many lineages of Zurmang Kagyu, Neydho Kagyu and some important transmissions of the Karma Kagyu that are thriving these days came from him.

Zurmang Tulkus

It became a tradition of Tibetan Buddhism to recognise Tulkus whenever a great master passed away and in this way Zurmang Kagyu produced many great tulkus. This was especially true during the later phase of Zurmang lineage, after the family Zurmang lineage came to an end and the tradition was mainly preserved through the Tulku system.

In the history of Zurmang, the Tenzin Tulku lineage and the Gharwang lineage were considered as the highest, since they headed Namgyal Tse, the main

monastery of Zurmang, and they also served as both spiritual and political leaders of the Zurmang regions.

The Tenzin Tulku line is counted from Jatang Rinpoche while Gharwang Tulku started from Nangso Pema Lodoe, who was a son of Tsokye Dorje. The 16th Karmapa Rigpei Dorje, instructed that Mase Tokden and Jodhenpa were also to be counted in the lineage of Gharwang, and hence the present Gharwang Rinpoche is the 12th.

Zurmang also have the Tulku lineage called Chetsang and Chungtsang. This is similar to the Tulku lineage of Drigung Kagyu which also has main Tulku lineages of Chetsang and Chungtsang, started from two masters who were brothers, *Chetsang* refers to the one that came from the elder brother and *Chungtsang* refers to the one that came from the younger brother. In Zurmang, the Chetsang lineage started from Tokden Sonam Yeshe whose lineage so far has had twelve successive reincarnations.

The Zurmang Tenzin lineage and the Zurmang Jatang lineage started from the same master, Jatang Lodoe Gyatso. Lodoe Gyatso composed two volumes of works and also wrote a text on Gampopa's *Ornament of Liberation*. After the fourth incarnation, Konchok Tenzin (who is counted in both lineages), the lineage of Tenzin Tulkus continued via Konchok Rabten while Konchok Tensal furthered the Jatang lineage.

Three other important Tulku lineages of Zurmang are those of Rechung Tulku, Terton Rolpe Dorje and Drukpa. The first Rechung Tulku was a disciple of Zurmang Lekshey Drayang called Karma Paldup, although sometimes Tokden Sonam Lhundup is considered as the beginning of the Rechung Tulku line. Karma Paldup was a great scholar and there are eight volumes of texts composed by him.

Drukpa Tulku was originally a Tulku of a Drukpa Kagyu monastery, but since Wupa Jangchub Choekyi Nyima was born in the region of Zurmang, Zurmang monastery kept him as their own Tulku.

There is also the Raktrul lineage which started from Kunsang Dorje, a son of Terton Barwei Dorje.

These main Tulkus are usually classified into two sets. The first came from the family lineage of Mase Tokden. Those are the lineages of Gharwang Rinpoche,

Tenzin Rinpoche and Jatang Rinpoche. The second came from the disciples' lineages: those were the Trungpa lineage, Chetsang lineage and Rechung lineage.

The six Lha Khak of Zurmang are sometimes mentioned and this includes the Gharwang, Tenzin, Trungpa, Chetsang, Terton and Drukpa Tulku lineages.

Recently, there is the phrase *Zurmang Ghar Drung Ten Sum*, meaning the three Lamas of Zurmang which are Gharwang, Trungpa and Tenzin. In Nangchen, this phrase is often read like a mantra by people regardless of their own affiliation to a particular lineage.

Currently, Gharwang Rinpoche, recognised by the 16th Karmapa, lives in Sikkim, while Tenzin and Trungpa, both of whom were recognised by the 12th Tai Situ Rinpoche, live in Tibet.

Zurmang Monasteries

Around the 18th century, three monasteries of Zurmang were considered as the main seats of the Zurmang lineage. They were Zurmang Namgyaltse, founded by Drung Mase Tokden Lodoe Rinchen himself and maintained by the Tenzin tulku lineage, Gharwang tulku lineage and Jatang tulku lineage. Later, the Drukpa Rinpoche and Raktrul Rinpoche tulku lineage also resided in Namgyal Tse monastery.

Zurmang Dutsi Kyil (its full name is Dutsi Kyil Namgyal Rabten Ling) also in Nangchen was founded by Tokden Kunga Gyalten. The monastery was maintained by the Trungpa, Chetsang Rinpoche and Terton Rolpei Dorje Tulku lineages.

Drongpa Dogon was established by Tsachil Sonam Paldup in 1424. It was maintained by the Rechung Tulku lineage and the Lhalung Tulku lineage.

Other important monasteries of Zurmang Kagyu are Phakmo monastery in Dartse Mdo, founded by Mase Tokden but the year when it was established is not clear. Zurmang Triksa monastery was established in the Nangchen district by Mindrol Gyatso in 1483. Zurmang Kyere monastery was established in Lhatok in Chamdo by Rikzen Kyungdrak Nuden Thaye Tsal in 1613. Zurmang Kerong monastery in Chamdo was built by Drung Tenpa Namgyal in 1639. Zurmang Dokha monastery in Chamdo was built by the tenth Trungpa Choekyi Nyima in

1907. The latest major monastery of Zurmang Kagyu was built by the 12th Gharwang Rinpoche in Sikkim in 1992. In total, there are around one hundred and eight large and small monasteries of Zurmang Kagyu, some of which are retreat centres. Each of these monasteries could be listed one by one yet it would be too long for this presentation.

Zurmang in America

Zurmang in Sikkim

During the Tibetan political changes in 20th century, even though many Tibetan Lamas were able to escape to India and even though Zurmang had many masters, no Zurmang Tulku excepting Choegyam Trungpa went to India. At a time when many Tibetan monasteries were being established in India and other lands, and Choegyam Trungpa went to the West, Zurmang seemed like it was not going to have a monastery in India. That changed when the reincarnation of Gharwang Rinpoche who was born in Sikkim.

Gharwang Rinpoche, who is generally counted as the 12th Gharwang, was born in Sikkim in 1965 to its royal family. He was recognised by the 16th Karmapa as the reincarnation of Zurmang Gharwang in the most spectacular way, witnessed by many. When Rinpoche's mother was about six months pregnant, she attended a Tibetan opera played in Rumtek Monastery. It was a cultural program that the sixteenth Karmapa always enjoyed. In the opera, there was a part where a jewel should be offered to Karmapa. But on that day, Karmapa declined to accept it and pointed, indicating to offer it to the princess, saying that she is carrying Gharwang Rinpoche's reincarnation in her womb. Later, when Rinpoche was born, the sixteenth Karmapa had already sent emissaries to offer Khata and blessings even before they had the chance to inform Karmapa.

Rinpoche was officially enthroned when he was eleven years old and named as the Chochung Tenpa Namgyal. Rinpoche received many personal empowerments in the form of textual as well as oral transmissions from the 16th Karmapa. Along with many other young tulkus, Rinpoche joined Karma Shri Nalanda Institute in Rumtek Monastery in 1982 and studied with many great Khenpos, such as Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso and Khenchen Chodak Tenphel. He also received various teachings from many other important Rinpoches including the late Kalu Rinpoche, the late Tulku Urgen

Rinpoche, the late Khenpo Pema Peditse, the late H.E Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, the late Sharmarpa, the current Tai Situpa and 41st H.H. Sakya Trizin.

In 1991, Rinpoche went to Tibet to re-establish the original seat. Since 1987, he has taught extensively in dharma centres all over the world in Europe, America and Asia and he has established several Zurmang Centres in Singapore, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Medan, Surabaya, Pakan Baru, Taipei and Kuala Lumpur. The first Kagyudpa Dharma Centre in Indonesia was founded by Gharwang Rinpoche in Jakarta in 1996.

In Sikkim, near Gangtok its capital, Rinpoche established Zurmang Shedrup Choekhor Ling in 1992. It is one of the largest monasteries in Sikkim and is one of the main Kagyu monasteries in Sikkim, as well as being the main seat of Zurmang outside of Tibet. It has all the main facets of a great monastery, having a Shedra which is called *Lungtok Norbu Gatsal* and a monastic school called *Zurmang Mase School*. It has several hundred monks and follows all the important curricula and events of a Karma Kagyu monastery in general and of Zurmang monastery in particular. They take place every year. Rinpoche himself studied at Harvard and graduated with a Masters of Liberal Arts in Religion. For the last few years, Rinpoche also received many important empowerments and oral transmissions of the Kagyu lineage from the 12th Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. Currently, he is one of the senior Rinpoches of the Karma Kagyu. His moral conduct as a great monk, enthusiasm and activities for the teachings in general and for his own monastery in particular, his dharma practice, his simple and humble personality as a human being, everything that he is, have earned more and more respect and devotion among people from far and near who have had the chance to observe him in the last few decades. In summary, he is a great Tibetan Buddhist master of the present generation, a great inspiration and a model for many tulkus and monks of the next generation and a guide and teacher to countless followers all over the world.

Zurmang Today

At this time when many of the Tibetan Buddhist lineages are in danger of coming to an end and when many of the Kagyu sub-sects are either completely gone or else there remains nothing but a lineage in one or two monasteries, Zurmang lineage thrives more and more in Tibet, India and other lands.

In Tibet, there are both senior Rinpoches like Jatang Rinpoche Lungtok Choekyi Nyima and Drukpa Rinpoche Thegchok Tenzin Nyima while there are young Tulkus like Tenzin and Trungpa Rinpoche who are growing up with the finest Tibetan Buddhist education and environment. There are around fifty monks in Zurmang Tibet who are incredibly great practitioners, spending most of their time in the practice of meditation in either solitary places in mountains or alone in their retreat house. From the institute or Shedra of Zurmang, not counting those great scholars who came before 2000, more than thirty monks and nuns have become published writers, some of their works widely known in Tibet.

And in India, Gharwang Rinpoche's activities are flourishing ever more and the Zurmang monastery is continually developing. There are dharma centres of Zurmang Kagyu in both the East and the West. Most importantly, some Tibetan lineages have monasteries but the lineage of their practice is weak or transmission of many of their practices are being lost over the time. However, the complete transitions of the Zurmang lineage are still well-preserved by many practitioners in both Tibet and India. Therefore, the 600th year anniversary of Zurmang's main monastery Namgyal Tse is a celebration of a successful journey of six centuries and furthermore a celebration of continual growth.

Colophon

The general secretary Tsewang Nyima and Umze Choephel of Zurmang monastery in Sikkim, asked me to find someone who could translate a brief history of Zurmang written in Tibetan. But I was of the opinion that it would be best to write a new one in English, as quite often an English translation in traditional Tibetan style do not make much sense to the English reader. I also wanted to study Zurmang history for my own research purposes and as this is the 600th-year anniversary of Zurmang, important for many reasons, I wanted to contribute something from my own side. As a result, I finished writing this in three days, from the 9th to the 15th of February, 2023, while I was in Siliguri, India. As I couldn't find a history of Zurmang written in a fully researched version, I might have made many errors here, for which I would like to apologise. And for any merit there may be in this article, I would like to thank Zurmang monastery in Sikkim for giving me this opportunity, the monks from Zurmang monastery especially, Khamnyon Heruka, who readily provided me the information that I wanted and last but not least, I want to thank Dharmacharya Ken Homes, a very senior translator of Karma Kagyu and former European secretary to His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, for editing my amateur English

which is mainly a result of self learning. May the teachings of Zurmang flourish forever and everywhere. Sarva Manglam!

The text was again edited for this current publication.