



Background on
H.H. Jigdal Dagchen Sakya

Introduction

His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya was born in 1929 in Sakya, Tibet. He was educated to be the head of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the successor to the throne of Sakya, the third most important political position in Tibet in early times. But the Communist Chinese occupation of Tibet, and the peril that ensued, precipitated his departure from the world his family had known for generations, and led him to a new role as a leader in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

His immigration in 1960 makes him one of the first Tibetans-in-exile in North America. He is the first Head of the Sakya Order of Tibetan Buddhism to live in the United States. From the Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism in Seattle, Washington, and its precursor (which he co-founded in 1974), he has taught and preserved Tibetan culture and religion. Because he is also a non-sectarian master within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, he has defined Sakya Monastery as a non-denominational and ecumenical center for teachings about Tibetan Buddhism. His work has also included the foundation of Tibetan Buddhist communities overseas in India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Nepal, Bhutan and Southeast Asia, and teaching at Buddhist centers around the world. He is truly a pioneer among religious leaders.

His formal title of “His Holiness” indicates the high degree of esteem with which the Tibetan Buddhist community holds him. Dagchen is a title meaning “Lineage Holder.” Among his followers he is known as Dagchen Rinpoche, or simply as Rinpoche (“Precious One”).

His Revered Ancestors

Lineage is all-important in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and Dagchen Rinpoche’s lineage is noble and revered for its holiness. It extends back for over a thousand years. His father was Trichen (“Great Throne-holder”) Nawang Tutop Wangchuk, the last great throne-holder of the Sakya Order of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, and his mother was Gyalyum (“Mother of the Khön Children”) Dechen Drolma.

Rinpoche’s family lineage is thought of as divine because family records and Tibetan histories state that his family is descended from celestial beings from the realm of heavenly clear light. Five generations of these celestial beings are said to have lived in Tibet. A famous ancestor of his from the late eighth century was Khön Lu’i Wangpo (Nagendrarakshita), one of the first

seven Tibetans ordained as a Buddhist monk, a noted translator, and a personal disciple of Padmasambhava (who erected the very first Tibetan Buddhist monastery called Samye). Since the 11th century, the Sakya male progenies are also regarded as emanations of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, or Vajrapani, Bodhisattva of Power.

The Sakya Name

In 1042, Atisha, the great Indian Buddhist master who helped revive Buddhism in Tibet, was traveling in Tibet spreading the Buddha's teachings. At the side of a mountain where there was "pale earth," he foresaw the emanations of three bodhisattvas whom he knew would spread the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet: Avalokiteshvara (the embodiment of compassion), Manjushri (the embodiment of infinite wisdom), and Vajrapani (the embodiment of infinite power).

It was at the same site of pale earth some thirty years later, in 1073, that Khön Gönchok Gyalpo (1034-1102), ancestor of Dagchen Rinpoche, built the first Sakya Monastery. The monastery took its name from the pale earth (in Tibetan "sa-kya") where the monastery was founded. Subsequently, the town that arose there, the family of the monastery's founder (the Khön lineage), and the school of Tibetan Buddhism took the name of the monastery: Sakya. The Sakya name is also renowned for having lamas as rulers of Tibet. The Sakya patriarch, Chogyal Pakpa (1235 – 1280) was given temporal authority over Tibet through the patronage of the Mongol rulers of China. Subsequently, the Sakya lamas governed Tibet for over 90 years.

The Sakya School is one of the four great Schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The Sakya masters developed a tradition that emphasized study and meditation in equal measure.

A Special Kind of Tibetan Buddhist Lama

In Tibetan Buddhism there are several ways to become a lama (a spiritual teacher and guide). Some lamas are recognized as rebirths of former lamas called Tulkus. Some of these are also considered to be emanations of bodhisattvas. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama is a good example, being the thirteenth reincarnation of the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup, and an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Some, through their spiritual development in this life, are deemed to become lamas, but are not regarded as rebirths of previous lamas.

Finally, in some special families, all family members with blood relations to the father are considered to be lamas. The Sakya-Khön lineage, Rinpoche's lineage, is just such a family. In each generation of the Sakya-Khön lineage, in order to preserve the family line, one of the males must keep the custom of the Lineage-holder (ngachang) – a white-robed, married lama. This tradition is distinct from the more common ordained (rapchung) – red-robed monk-lama tradition prevalent in some of the other Tibetan Buddhist schools. Thus, in each generation, some Sakya-Khön lineage lamas are not monks, but married lamas who continue the spiritual lineage.

In accordance with the prophecy of the great Atisha, these Sakya lamas are regarded as emanations of Avalokiteshvara (the embodiment of compassion), Vajrapani (the embodiment of Buddha's power), or especially Manjushri (the

embodiment of Buddha's wisdom).

Dagchen Rinpoche is in the twenty-sixth generation of the Sakya-Khön lineage descended from Khön Gönchok Gyalpo. Rinpoche is regarded as an emanation of Manjushri as well as the rebirth of a Sakya Abbot from the Ngor sub-school, Ewam Luding Khenchen (The Great Abbot from the Luding family) Gyase Chökyi Nyima.

A Family of Supernormal Abilities

Throughout its history Rinpoche's family has produced adepts with supernormal skills. In the Tibetan tradition, psychic powers and what appear to be magical feats are accepted as a sign of one's spiritual accomplishment. Some of Rinpoche's earliest ancestors are said to have been able to fly, others to hang their robes on sunbeams.

The five founding lamas of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, in addition to being masters of the esoteric and exoteric teachings of the Buddha, were all child prodigies and performed numerous miracles. For example, when he was twelve years old and on a long retreat, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158) received a teaching from the Bodhisattva Manjushri in a vision.

Sachen's son, Teaching Master Sönam Tsemo (1142-1182), accomplished the incredible feat of memorizing the Chakrasamvara Tantra and other esoteric teachings before he was five years old, and passed away without leaving his body behind, and took his puppy with him!

Sönam's brother, Reverend Drakpa Gyaltzen (1147-1216), recited the Hevajra Tantra from memory when he was twelve years old. Much later in life, when he experienced a surprise visit by the Kashmir Pandita Shakyashribhadra, the Reverend caused his ritual implements to float in the air.

The Reverend's nephew was Sakya Pandita (1182-1251), who knew Sanskrit as a child without being taught. As a teenager he had a dream that he slept in front of a large stupa. Following that Sakya Pandita was able to recall the teachings of the Abhidharmakosha from a previous lifetime without having been taught them in his present life. When Sakya Pandita was at the court of Godan Khan, the Khan's sorcerers tested him by creating a magic, illusory temple on an island on a lake. Sakya Pandita blessed it and made it into a real temple.

His nephew, Chögyal Pakpa (King of Religion, the Noble One) (1235-1280), as a young man, greatly impressed Kublai Khan, future emperor of China, by cutting off his own head and limbs, making a bloody mess. He then transformed his severed head and limbs into the five celestial Buddhas before making himself whole.

Rinpoche's own father was known to have performed miracles. When he beat a drum during a monthly protection ritual, the drum would emit flames. Once when his father needed to cross a roaring river, he caused the water to subside so his party could cross without mishap. Another time, the Tibetan government asked him to restore a Padmasambhava stupa (memorial shrine) on a mountain. When his party climbed to the stupa, they found no water. He scratched

some syllables on the ground and told everyone to leave the area alone until morning. When morning came, the party found a pool of water on the spot where the syllables had been drawn. They were then able to rebuild the memorial shrine.

Education and Early Adulthood

As imminent successor to the throne of Sakya, Rinpoche was first tutored by the abbot of the South Monastery of Sakya and by the Secretary of the Sakya Government. With these two teachers, Rinpoche studied the Tibetan alphabet, composition, classical literature, philosophy, and the Four Classes of Tantra (esoteric Buddhism). He also received teachings on the Sakya meditation deities. From Pönlop Sakya of the North Monastery, Rinpoche learned the fundamental esoteric religious rites of the Sakya tradition: religious music, mandala offering, dancing, and ritual hand gestures.

After having successfully completed this training, Rinpoche received from his father the unbroken Sakya-Khon lineage transmission of Vajrakila (a meditational deity whose name means the “Dagger of Indestructible Reality”), and the complete Lamdre Tsokshey (*The Path and Its Fruit* in its more exoteric form), which is the main teaching of the Sakya tradition. Thus, Rinpoche’s first root lama (his primary spiritual teacher) was his father, Trichen Nawang Thutop Wangchuk, who is well remembered for his kindly leadership, clairvoyance, and miraculous deeds.

In 1950, at age 21, Rinpoche took a bride: Sonam Tsezom, who descends from a family of lamas and doctors of East Tibet (Kham). She is the niece of His Eminence Deshung Rinpoche III. When she married her name became Jamyang and her title Dagmo Kusho.

Later that year Dagchen Rinpoche’s father passed away. Rinpoche suddenly became the interim Throne-holder. Concurrently, Communist Chinese invaders were threatening Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. After a short reign as the head of the Sakya sect, during which Rinpoche’s right to hold the Sakya throne was put into question, he took a leave of absence as ruler of Sakya in order to travel to East Tibet to complete his religious education.

In East Tibet, Rinpoche received teachings from fourteen lamas. Among them were his root lamas, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Jamyang Chökyi Lodrö and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. They were renowned non-sectarian lamas, of the Sakya and Nyingma traditions, respectively. From Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Dagchen Rinpoche received initiations and teachings of the Sakya School’s most valued teaching, the seven-volume Lamdre Lopshey (*The Path and Its Fruit* in its more esoteric form) and the fourteen-volume Druptap Kundu (*Collection of Methods of Realization*). From Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Dagchen Rinpoche received teachings on the thirteen-volume Damngak Dzö (*Treasury of Esoteric Instructions*), a non-sectarian compilation by Jamgön Kongtrul, a great non-sectarian master of Tibetan Buddhism from the Kagyu School. Additionally, twelve other Sakya lamas gave him the teachings from the thirty-one volume Gyude Kundu.

Emigration to the United States

In 1959, owing to the violent changes taking place in Tibet, Dagchen Rinpoche and his family (including his younger brother Trinly Rinpoche and his wife's uncle Deshung Rinpoche III) fled to Bhutan and then to India. Professor Turrell V. Wylie from the Tibetan Studies Program at the University of Washington, the first such program in the country, invited Dagchen Rinpoche to participate in a research project on Tibet sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. This enabled Dagchen Rinpoche to bring his family to Seattle, Washington, in 1960. The research project funding lasted for three years. Following that, over the next decade Rinpoche had several positions at the University of Washington, including working in the Anthropology Department and at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture.

A Non-Sectarian Seattle Lama

In 1974 Rinpoche co-founded, with Deshung Rinpoche III, his wife's uncle, the original Sakya Dharma Center called Sakya Tegchen Choling. In 1984, the group reorganized under Rinpoche, and adopted the name of Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism.

For the purpose of the preservation of Tibetan culture and religion, Rinpoche has overseen the religious activities and administration of the center/Monastery since its inception. His spiritual leadership takes various forms: leading meditations, giving teachings and empowerments (spiritual initiations), conducting refuge ceremonies in which people formally become Buddhists, and holding special services upon request, either in the monastery or at peoples' homes. He can perform such services as house blessings, shrine blessings, consecrating religious objects, marriages, baby blessings, divination, and healing to subdue negativity.

Now that the Monastery is completed, Rinpoche is placing greater emphasis on education. The Virupa Educational Institute is devoted to the study of Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism in general, religions, cultures, and sciences from around the world. Non-sectarianism and education are major components to Rinpoche's teaching, in keeping with the beliefs of his root lamas. Sakya Monastery in Seattle has hosted visits from leading lamas of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, including H. H. the Dalai Lama.

Rinpoche's interest in ecumenism stems from his training as a non-sectarian master, and his experience as an immigrant who came to this country seeking religious freedom, as well as being a Buddhist in a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture. Like His Holiness The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Rinpoche encourages inter-religious and interdisciplinary meetings and encounters for Tibetan Buddhists. He regularly travels to teach in Asia, Europe, Canada, and throughout the United States.