

A Brief History of the Jonang Tradition

By Michael R. Sheehy

One star-lit morning in the 6th century B.C. beneath a Bodhi tree near the village of Bodhi Gaya in Northeastern India, a man named Śākyamuni is said to have become a “Buddha.” In an attempt to classify his enormous body of teachings as they were recorded over his 45-year teaching career, the later Māhayāna Buddhist tradition arranged his discourses into 3 distinct sets of teachings or "turnings of the dharma wheel." Each of these 3 "turnings" is regarded by the living traditions to have been a complete cycle of explanation—unveiling varying degrees of reality that were sensitive to the timing, circumstance, and varying spiritual dispositions of individuals—corresponding to the infinite diversity of sentient beings.

The Buddha’s initial "turning" in Deer Park near Vārāṇasī is said to have described the dependently co-arising nature of phenomena that allows for the possibility of freedom from suffering. In general, this and related teachings of the 1st turning are understood by the later tradition to have been intended for those who accept the relative existence of reality as ultimately true, and were eventually categorized largely by the body of texts on inner sciences and psychology known as the *Abhidharma*. During his middle "turning," most famously delivered at Vulture Peak Mountain near Rājagṛha, the Buddha is said to have taught how all phenomena lack intrinsic or ultimate existence. In order to liberate beings from their psychological and emotional fixations on even the subtlest aspects of reality, this "turning" elaborated on the mind’s capacity for discerning insight and became known as the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* or the *Transcendent Wisdom Scriptures*. Śākyamuni’s 3rd and final "turning" is most renowned by his discourses at Mount Malaya and Vaishālī that elucidated how an enlightened essence pervades all beings. This final "turning" is said to have been taught to free beings from their habitual patterns of clinging to reality as existent or nonexistent, and became known as the “*tathāgatagarbha*” or “Buddha-nature” teachings. This 3rd cycle of the Buddha’s discourses identifies the boundless luminous nucleus of Buddhahood with the basic

nature of all beings and serves as the philosophical foundation for the Buddhist tantric techniques of self-transmutation.

Among the unexcelled non-dual Buddhist tantras is the *Kālacakra-tantra* or the *Wheel of Time Continuum*. The root text of the *Kālacakra-tantra* is regarded by the tradition to have been first revealed by Śākyamuni as the magical manifestation of the *Kālacakra* deity to King Sucandra of the mystical land of Śambhala who traveled to India in order to request and receive this tantra. According to tradition, at the glorious Śrī Dhānyakaṭaka Stūpa in South India, a year after his enlightenment, the Buddha displayed the "Wondrous Lunar Mansion" maṇḍala, performed the *Kālacakra* empowerment, and taught the tantra to King Sucandra and countless other beings.

Upon returning to Śambhala, this narrative tells us that King Sucandra began teaching and transmitting the *Kālacakra-tantra* and that it is this text that was passed down through the lineage of the kings and kalkī of Śambhala. Later, Kalkī Yaśas—who was regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī—is attributed with the composition of the *Condensed Kālacakra-tantra* while his son, Kalkī Puṇḍarīka composed the primary commentary on the tantra titled, *Vimalaprabhā* or *Stainless Light*.

Then, as this legend is told, one day in the 10th century while walking along a path in India, the master Jamyang Dorje had a vision of his meditation deity Mañjuśrī who instructed him to follow the path northwards. Along his way, Jamyang Dorje encountered an emanation of Kalkī Gyalka, the 11th Kalkī of Śambhala who performed the entire *Kālacakra* empowerment and transferred this tantric lineage of esoteric realization onto him. After then meditating for 6 months on the profound yogic practices that he received from the Kalkī, Jamyang Dorje is said to have been able to transport himself to Śambhala. While there, he studied the *Kālacakra-tantra* further with Kalkī Gyalka before returning to India. Upon his return, Jamyang Dorje became known as "Kālacakrapāda the Elder."

The *Kālacakra-tantra* and its commentary were then passed on through Kālacakrapāda to his younger successor Śrībhadrā or "Kālacakrapāda the Younger." The lineal descent then continued on to Nālendrapa otherwise known as "Bodhibhadra," and then on to the Kashmiri scholar Somanātha. This succession of transmission passed from Somanātha to his student, the Tibetan translator Dro Lotsāwa Sherab Drak. Then,

together with Somanātha, Dro Lotsāwa translated the *Stainless Light* commentary from Sanskrit into Tibetan, initiating the Dro lineage of the *Kālacakra-tantra* in Tibet.

Another one of Somanātha's disciples, the *Kālacakra* master Yumo Mikyö Dorje (b. 1027) is regarded as one of the earliest Tibetan articulators of a *zhentong* view—a contemplative understanding of the absolute radiant nature of reality. Emphasized within the *Kālacakra* and the Buddha's final "turning," this view would later become emblematic of Jonangpas. From Yumo Mikyö Dorje, this tradition then passed on through the lineage-holders Dharmeśvara, Namkha Ödzer, the female master Machig Tulku Jobum, Drubtob Sechen, Jamyang Sarma and Chöku Ödzer.

Then, in 1294, Kunpang Tukje Tsöndru (1243-1313) settled in the valley of Jomonang, South Central Tibet and from that time onwards, the spiritual tradition associated with that place was referred to as "Jonang," and those who adhere to the practices preserved and transmitted at that place were known as "Jonangpa."

The Jonang lineage continued on through the masters Changsem Gyalwa Yeshe (1247-1320) and Yöntan Gyatso (1260-1327). Then in 1321, a 29-year old charismatic scholar from the Dolpo region of present-day Nepal arrived in Jomonang. A year later, after having traveled throughout Central Tibet, he returned to Jomonang to request the complete empowerment and transmission of the Dro lineage of the *Kālacakra-tantra* and its 6-fold completion stage *vajrayoga* practices. After spending several years in meditation retreat, this young man from Dolpo—Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (1292-1361) was requested to succeed his master Yöntan Gyatso to assume leadership as heir to the Jonang mountain retreat.

From 1330 to 1333, while constructing Tibet's largest embodiment of enlightenment—the Great Stupa of Jomonang—Dolpopa began formulating and codifying his meditative realizations. Then in 1334, Dolpopa instructed his disciples, the translator Lotsāwa Lodrö Pal and Sazang Mati Panchen to prepare a new translation of the *Kālacakra-tantra* and its commentary, *Stainless Light*. These Jonang translations are considered by the tradition to most profoundly explicate the hidden meaning within this tantra and its commentary, and they served as the textual basis for Dolpopa's innovative teachings.

Systematizing his teachings within the cosmological schema derived from the *Stainless Light* commentary, Dolpopa formulated his realizations of *zhentong*—the view that one's own enlightened essence is empty of everything other than the absolute nature of reality. Contextualizing his elucidations within the history of Buddhism and the 4 cosmic eons, Dolpopa emphasized how the *Kālachakra* and final "turning" teachings mark a Perfect Age.

Crystallizing in his masterpiece, *Mountain Dharma: An Ocean of Definitive Meaning* Dolpopa clarified how his realizations are in alignment with the Buddha's enlightened intent and are definitive in meaning (*nītārtha*, *nges don*) in contrast to teachings of the degenerative age that remain interpretive in meaning (*neyārtha*, *drang don*). While Dolpopa was alive, his formulations are said to have been secretive instructions that were circulated only within the intimate circles of his closest disciples. During the 80 years that followed Dolpopa's passing, his instructions became widely dispersed and popularized as "*zhentong*," allowing these teachings of the Jonang to flourish throughout the Land of Snows.

Then, in the early 16th century, the enigmatic figure Kunga Dolchok (1507-1566) sparked a renaissance in the Jonang. Compiling his *108 Essential Guidance Instructions* and bringing many of the new translation traditions together, the Jonangpa thrived. This spirit carried on through Kunga Dolchok's reincarnation Jetsun Tāranātha (1575-1635) who established Jonang Damchö Ling Monastery (Phuntsok Ling) in South Central Tibet in the year 1615. Known for his historical works on Buddhism, Jetsun Tāranātha was a foremost expert on the tantras of the new translation period. In fact, he compiled and arranged the *Kālacakra-tantra* as well as several other primary tantras into easily accessible practice texts, and composed some of the most lucid expositions on the 6-fold *vajrayoga* practices of the *Kālacakra*.

With surmounting factional rivalries and divided allegiances amongst Jonang and Geluk patrons in Central Tibet, and with the Mongol Army's solidifying of Geluk power, Jonangpa political and territorial influence began to wane during the early 17th century. As the Mongol military might enthroned and endorsed the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatso (1617-1682), and as the Geluk political administration ruled in the mid-17th century, the Jonangpa were lost to the vicissitudes of Tibetan politics. In 1650, the

5th Dalai Lama sealed and banned *zhentong* teachings throughout Central and Western Tibet, prohibiting the printing of Jonang literature throughout Tibet. Then, in 1658, the 5th forcibly converted Damchö Ling Monastery into a Geluk Monastery, officially initiating the demise of the Jonangpa in Central Tibet.

Although the sphere of Geluk political and military influence reached to the borders of Central Tibet, it did not penetrate into the northeastern Amdo region of Far Eastern Tibet. Here, in the remote Golok, Ngawa and Dzamthang regions, the Jonangpa took refuge. Beginning in the 15th century with the founding of Chöjè Monastery in the year 1425 by Ratnaśrī (1350-1435) under the imperial patronage of the Ming Court of China, the Jonangpa had already made their home in the vast countryside of Amdo. By the middle of the 16th century, the Jonangpa had consolidated their monastic complexes around the Dzamthang area to the extent that they were the local imperial regents. This isolated area is where the Jonangpa later centered themselves during their 17th century Geluk persecution; surviving outside the range of Geluk influence, building monasteries and transmitting their vital teachings on *zhentong* and the *Kālacakra-tantra*.

With the late 19th century luminaries Jamgön Kongtrul (1813-1899) and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-1892), the Rimè or eclectic movement was initiated in Kham, Eastern Tibet. The writings of these figures, including Kongtrul's *Five Treasures*, provided the occasion for a rekindling of interest in the Jonang tradition and the *zhentong* view. This period continued to produce and influence some of the greatest masters of contemporary Jonang thought up through the late 20th century including Bamda Gelek (1844-1904) and Khenpo Lodrö Drakpa (1920-75).

In the 1960's and 70's, many of the exemplars of the Jonang were forced out of their monasteries, and as they fled into the wide-open countryside of Amdo, they wandered as nomads or took shelter in caves as yogis. Over the next two decades, the Jonangpas lived without homes in their homeland, gathering during the summertime for their annual rains retreat. After the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Jonangpa began returning to their monasteries where they have been rebuilding and reviving their unique Tibetan Buddhist tradition ever since.

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