
THE MAJOR SCHOOLS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

By Pema Khandro

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

1. NYINGMA LINEAGE

- a. Pema Khandro's lineage. Literally means: ancient school or old school. Nyingmapas rely on the old tantras or the original interpretation of Tantra as it was given from Padmasambhava.

- b. Founded in 8th century by Padmasambhava, an Indian Yogi who synthesized the teachings of the Indian MahaSiddhas, the Buddhist Tantras, and Dzogchen. He gave this teaching (known as Vajrayana) in Tibet.

- c. Systemizes Buddhist philosophy and practice into 9 Yanas. The Inner Tantras (what Pema Khandro Rinpoche teaches primarily) are the last three.

- d. It is not a centralized hierarchy like the Sarma (new translation schools), which have a figure head similar to the Pope. Instead, the Nyingma tradition is de-centralized, with

every Lama is the head of their own sangha. There are many different lineages within the Nyingma.

e. A major characteristic of the Nyingma tradition is the emphasis in the Tibetan Yogi tradition – the Ngakpa tradition.

However, once the Sarma translations set the tone for monasticism in Tibet, the Nyingmas also developed a monastic and institutionalized segment of the tradition. But many Nyingmas are Ngakpas or non-monastic practitioners.

f. A major characteristic of the Nyingma tradition is that it is characterized by treasure revelations (gterma). These are visionary revelations of updated communications of the Vajrayana teachings. Ultimately treasure revelations are the same dharma principles but spoken in new ways, at new times and new places to new people. Because of these each treasure tradition is unique, this is the major reason behind the diversity within the Nyingma.

g. For example, a major master of the Nyingma tradition was Dudjom Rinpoche.

h. Dzogchen, a non-dual tradition is only practiced by the Nyingmas originally.

THE SARMA OR NEW TRANSLATION SCHOOLS

They rely on the “new translations” which re-wrote Vajrayana teachings from the view of Sutra and monasticism. These schools rely on the new translations of the dharma that happened during the second wave of the dharma in Tibet.

1. SARMA SCHOOL #1 – KADAMPA – THEN GELUGPA LINEAGE

- a. Kadampa tradition was founded by Dromtonpa, a non-monastic practitioner and disciple of the famous Buddhist Master, Atisha. Atisha played a major role in the development of the new Tantras and the inception of the second wave of Buddhism in Tibet.
- b. This is the lineage that later became the Gelugpa lineage.
- c. The central focus of this lineage was monasticism and later during the second wave, monasticism was also incorporated into the other schools.
- d. Not to be confused with the Kadampa lineage. There is currently a modern Buddhist order known as the “New Kadampa lineage” founded by Kelsang Gyatso, they have eleven hundred centers and groups throughout forty countries. Controversy: Gyatso and his school practice a Dorje Shugden practice was previously banned by the Dalai Lama based on a complicated history.

e. Tsongkhapa was a major founding father of the Gelukpa lineage, he also lived in the fourteenth century, a defining period of the Nyingma lineage as well (when Longchenpa lived).

2. SARMA SCHOOL #2 - KAGYU

a. The Kagyu lineage was founded by Gompopa, a disciple of Milarepa. Kagyus also descend from the MahaSiddha tradition, but Gompopa was a monk so the Kagyu lineage he founded was based on that. Gompopa's teacher was Milarepa. Milarepa was a disciple of Marpa who was a disciple of Naropa and Niguma, two MahaSiddha, who we also have connection to in our lineage.

b. The Kagyus, unlike the Nyingma do have a centralized hierarchy, led by the Karmapa, who similar to the Dalai Lama reigns over his school's spiritual and practical affairs and views as the highest Lama.

c. There is overlap between the Kagyu and Nyingma in practices and lineage figures. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was a Kagyu and a Nyingma

d. There are some Ngakpas in the Kagyu tradition but it does not predominate the way it does in the Nyingma tradition.

e. Red Hat sect (red empowerment hats).

f. Sequential Yana Approach where Vajrayana is only practiced after many years of Sutra. The Vajrayana that is practiced is the “new tantra” or revised version of Tantra.

g. They have non-dual tradition, Mahamudra, very similar to Dzogchen.

3. SARMA SCHOOL #3 - SAKYA

a. Founded by Drogmi a scholar and translator. One of his teachers was Naropa.

b. Hereditary lineage passed down to sons of the Khon family.

c. Currently headed by a Ngakpa, Sakya Trizin.

d. Emphasizes monasticism.

e. Sequential Yana Approach where Vajrayana is only practiced after many years of Sutra. The Vajrayana that is practiced is the “new tantra” or revised version of Tantra.

4. SARMA SCHOOL #4 - GELUGPA

a. The Dalai Lama’s tradition, and the most well-known. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of all the Gelugpas.

b. Tsongkhapa collected three Kadampa lineages and systemized them along with Sakya Kagyu and other teachings into a new lineage, which became the Gelug school, but was also known as the “new Kadampas.”

c. Sequential Yana Approach where Vajrayana is only practiced after many years of Sutra. The Vajrayana that is practiced is the “new tantra” or revised version of Tantra.

5. SARMA SCHOOL #5 - BON

Bon refers to two things - the indigenous teachings of Tibet and the new-Bon which are the Buddhist sect which adapted indigenous elements along with Dzogchen and Sarma elements. Previously traditional narratives named four major schools of Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Geluk). But now there are official five major schools of Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Geluk and Bon).

F. OTHER LINEAGES

a. Rime is a non-sectarian movement started by Nyingmapas in the eighteenth century, wherein one studies the major texts of each school systematically. Each lineage of practice is practiced as it is, they are not mixed or modified.

b. Jonang and many sub-lineages of the Kagyu such as Shangpa Kagyu, Drukpa Kagyu, Taklung Kagyu and so forth

c. Tibetan Buddhism is very diverse, so there are many other categories. Some of these movements were lost during the centralization of religious and secular authority in the seventeenth century, some are small local lineages. There are also many sub-lineages of the major lineages.

EVERYONE IS CONNECTED TO EVERYONE ELSE.

1. Most Tibetan Buddhists have connections with teachers of more than one lineage.
2. One's lineage refers to one's root teacher, and one's practices. Even if a person has received many teachings or learned in various schools – the root teacher (their closest and most important teacher) and the practices they do define that person's 'lineage.'
3. Sectarian boundaries were often crossed, even though they were sometimes rigidly maintained.
 - a. For example - Dudjom Rinpoche pointed out that there is not one Tibetan lineage that is not also connected to the Nyingma lineage. This could be said of all the lineages. In that case, with all that cross-pollination what is lineage? It refers to particular practices, views and specialties handed down from ones root teacher to oneself.
 - b. Yet at other times, sectarian boundaries were maintained by military might, social persecution or philosophical battles.

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