

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
JAMGÖN KONGTRUL**

A Gem of Many Colors

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé

Translated by
Richard Barron (Chökyi Nyima)

SNOW LION PUBLICATIONS
Ithaca, NY
Boulder, Colorado

Translator's Introduction

When there is such an overwhelming range of actual teachings that those who are interested in practicing (or simply interested in) the Buddhist path might study, why read a biographical account? Throughout history, Buddhist masters and other practitioners have devoted much time and energy to recording the deeds of former generations. The great pioneer Tibetologist, Professor Giuseppe Tucci, wrote, "Tibetans show a particular interest, if not precisely a great accuracy, in recording facts."¹ The standard reason the Tibetan tradition gives for reading biographies is that these accounts of the lives lived, and examples set, by figures in the past inspire our own faith. In the case of Jamgön Kongtrul, we have the life example of someone who rose from very humble origins to change the course of his country's history, not through the wielding of political power (although he came to have such power), but by his staunch and uncompromising adherence to the values of tolerance, understanding, and personal integrity in a world that, like our own, was often trying to undermine those qualities.

The approach of Westerners to traditional biographies can fall into either of two pitfalls. On the one hand, some may see these accounts as highly idealized and almost too good to be true; on the other hand, others may have rather too naive a view of traditional Tibetan religious culture. Kongtrul describes the case of Kuntrul, a Kagyü *tulku* (albeit a minor one), who took his grudge against Kongtrul's guru Situ Rinpoché, Pema Nyinjé Wangpo, to such lengths that he tried to have Kongtrul killed in retaliation. We have only to read of such events to realize that, like people everywhere, Tibetans were and are only human after all. Rather than presenting a rosy vision of everything, Kongtrul takes as his theme that of "dignity in the face of adversity." His life and writings are full of hope and inspiration, but he does not gloss over the hard times.

Jamgön Kongtrul is famous as one of the principal figures in the nineteenth-century revival known as the *ri-mé*, or nonsectarian, movement. The term has gained some currency among followers of Tibetan traditions of Buddhism in Western countries, but an accurate understanding of what the *ri-mé* masters themselves envisaged is still a bit elusive. I have often felt that people use the term as a lofty-sounding title for their own specific approach, or attempt to mix all kinds of spiritual paths and techniques together in the name of so-called ecumenicism. My first teacher, Kalu Rinpoché, was himself by training a product of the *ri-mé* approach and someone respected by all lineages. Rinpoché was a rebirth of Kongtrul, although he was never formally recognized as such; in his autobiography (*The Chariot for Traveling the Path to Freedom: The Life Story of Kalu Rinpoché*), he recounts how his father elected to educate Rinpoché himself, instead of sending him to Palpung Monastery to be trained. In his teens, Rinpoché undertook a three-

year retreat in the center founded by his illustrious predecessor, and following the program that the previous Kongtrul had developed. During the time I had the honor to serve as his interpreter (from 1980 to 1983), Kalu Rinpoché often addressed the *ri-mé* model, either in the context of a lecture or in response to a question from someone in the audience. He would use the metaphor of people mixing all kinds of foods inappropriately and at random on their plate. His point was that too simplistic an approach to the *ri-mé* ideal would result in a similarly unappetizing result.

In the mid 1980s, I had the opportunity to interpret a public talk given by the late Jamgön Kongtrul Rinpoché in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. During that evening, Rinpoché spoke of the *ri-mé* approach. He defined this quite succinctly: "To adopt the *ri-mé* approach means to follow your own chosen path with dedication, while maintaining respect and tolerance for all other valid choices." The operative word here is "valid"; what is meant is not a blanket acceptance of anyone's doctrines. A *khenpo* of the Nyingma School recently remarked to me, "We are to maintain a pure outlook toward all other beings, but not necessarily toward their opinions." This is anything but a sloppy approach. In insisting on the freedom for everyone to choose a spiritual path, and on the validity of all authentic alternatives, the *ri-mé* approach is broadminded, avoiding the all-too-common pitfall of exclusivism, but does not promote simplistic beliefs. Our prejudices concerning spiritual matters may come from issues that are personal, ideological, or cultural, but regardless of their origin, these prejudices can place severe limits on our own ability to grow spiritually. Jamgön Kongtrul also stressed, in that evening talk, that it is important for the values of Buddhism to imbue a culture, not for those of a culture to imbue Buddhism. The *ri-mé* approach was not intended to serve some other agenda, but to provide a context for honoring the contemplative life in all of its manifestations.

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé was born into a culture that had been host to the Buddhist teachings for a millennium. Throughout its long history, the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism has seen many periods of mutual tolerance, particularly in the early stages of its development, when there was much interaction between the schools. We find accounts of many individuals who studied with masters of all schools and who in turn taught students from all schools. But there have been just as many times when political rivalries and power struggles led to sectarian polemic and even outright hostility. In a few cases, entire schools were suppressed. It would be bad enough if the grounds in such cases were (as claimed) doctrinal, in the name of keeping the teachings pure, but all too often a more mundane purpose was being served. For people interested in more details on this subject, I can highly recommend Chapter 17 ("Jam mgon Kong sprul and the Nonsectarian Movement") in Gene Smith's excellent book *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of*

the Himalayan Plateau. The extent to which Buddhism imbued Tibetan culture over the centuries is nothing short of remarkable, but the extent to which that culture imbued the Buddhist teachings often resulted in unfortunate consequences.

An ongoing issue in a tradition like that of Tibetan Buddhism is the role of study *vis-à-vis* practice. There is a well-known saying that someone who tries to practice without first studying is like a blind person wandering on a vast plain, unsure of his or her direction, while someone who studies but never practices is like someone without arms, who can see the top of the cliff but is unable to climb up to it. These are obviously extreme cases, but the fact that they require mention demonstrates that tendencies toward such extremes exist in us to some degree. Without the balancing element of authentic contemplative practice, intellectual knowledge of the teachings in itself does not free the mind in the way the teachings intend that it be. In the century preceding the rise of Kongtrul and his fellow *ri-mé* masters, there had been a growing tendency in Tibet toward codification of the teachings of various schools, and this had led to rigidity of thinking and religious controversy almost for its own sake. Relations between the schools were often strained.

Kongtrul himself encountered intolerance in various forms throughout his life. After a childhood spent mastering the teachings of the pre-Buddhist tradition of Bén, he began his Buddhist training at the age of sixteen, when he entered the Nyingma monastery of Zhechen. There he came under the guidance of the Önrul incarnation of that institution, Jamgön Gyurmé Thutop Namgyal, who also taught the famous Dza Paltrul Rinpoché. The devotion that the young man had for this master is evident in his descriptions of their relationship. Once he had reached his majority, the future Kongtrul received full monastic ordination from Zhechen Önrul. "On that occasion," he writes, "I had an appropriate understanding of the symbolic meaning of what was going on, and a feeling of certainty that I had really received it, and all of it seemed very appropriate." [*Autobiography*, fol. 1 6.a.5] It was also at Zhechen that he had experienced his first glimpse of the nature of his mind—an enormously significant event for someone committed to the life of a contemplative.

Just over a year after his ordination, Kongtrul was conscripted by the more powerful Palpung administration and forced to move to that monastery. It was deemed necessary for him to formally change his affiliation, to the point that he was required to take his ordination again, this time from the Ninth Situ Rinpoché, Pema Nyinjé Wangpo, the ruling incarnation of Palpung Monastery. His distress at this heavy-handed treatment was compounded when he was recognized as a *tulku* officially aligned with Palpung, further ensuring that he would remain with this institution. Perhaps the newly-appointed Kongtrul could hear the advice of his first Buddhist master, Jamgön Gyurmé Thutop Narugyal, ringing in his ears:

When I went to say goodbye to my spiritual master,... [h]e gave me very instructive advice, saying, "Always focus your mind, rely on your mindfulness and alertness, and don' t be sectarian."[*Autobiography*, fol. 17.a.5-6

We cannot overestimate the impact of such events on a sensitive and insightful mind like Kongtrul' s. While he carried out his duties and responsibilities at Palpung faithfully, in less than ten years Kongtrul had obtained Situ Rinpoché' s reluctant permission to establish Kunzang Dechen Ösel Ling, the hermitage near Palpung that would serve as Kongtrul' s personal residence and the center for his activities for the rest of his life. It was when he met Jamyang Rhyentsé Wangpo in 1840 that Kongtrul found the kindred spirit who, more than any other mentor, would foster in him a profound respect for all the spiritual traditions available in Tibet, including the Bön tradition that had been his birthright. Throughout his life Kongtrul managed to balance his commitments to a specific school and structure with his love for all manifestations of the spiritual life that existed in his culture, and his desire to preserve and promote these methods.

Kongtrul and his contemporaries did not so much invent the *ri-mé* ideal as rediscover it. Indeed, Kongtrul saw himself as the inheritor of a legacy that went back centuries. In his accounts of his past lives, the themes that emerge are those of tolerance, intelligent investigation, and a commitment to the authentic principles of spiritual development. As a writer and a compiler of large collections of texts, Kongtrul was a synthesist, always trying to emphasize the common ground shared by various traditions and interpretations. In these endeavors he was not unique. Again and again in Tibetan history, there have been great masters who have risen above dogmatic limitations and emphasized the fundamental principles underlying all truly authentic spiritual traditions. Such "*ri-mé* masters," if we may call them this, have always emphasized the need for study as a necessary basis for practice, but their approach to study was one of returning to the basics, rather than becoming ensnared in abstruse nit-picking over the finer points of logic and sophistry. Kongtrul and his associates were entirely in agreement with this approach. As Gene Smith writes:

The nonsectarian tradition emphasized a different aspect of religious education... The trend was toward simplification...[which] it was felt, would eliminate many controversies that arose through variant expositions of the same texts by different Tibetan exegetes. There was a parallel tendency to reject that theory that to identify and name the opponent [in philosophical debate] is paramount to defeating him. In other words, many of the great

nonsectarian teachers rejected labels. [*Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*, p.246] [square brackets mine].

The legacy left by Jamgön Kongtrul is still with us. His Five Treasuries constitute an extraordinary body of literature; in compiling these collections, Jamgön Kongtrul ensured that teachings that might otherwise have died out have been brought back "into the mainstream." As well, Kongtrul' s incarnations continue to manifest among us. I feel fortunate to have lived to see two of my teachers reborn to carry the *ri-mé* ideals on into the future Chökyi Nyima, the rebirth of the Third Jamgön Kongtrul recognized in 1996 by the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ugyen Thrinlé Dorjé; and Kalu Yangsi, the rebirth of Kalu Rinpoché and another "Third Jamgön Kongtrul," who was born in 1990. They are tangible expressions of the aspiration and vision of this great master. It is my hope that this account of the life of one who, perhaps more than any other, defined this vision will contribute to an increase of mutual understanding and open-mindedness between the various schools of spiritual thought and practice (Buddhist and otherwise) that are emerging in the West.

Richard Barron
Weaverville, CA
November 27, 2002

¹ *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol. 1, p. 139.