



Brief Biography of Drogön Chögyal Phagpa

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin



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By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



Editorial Preface

Why was Drogön Chögyal Phagpa chosen as the Imperial Preceptor to the Yuan emperor? And why did he steadfastly refuse to unify all Tibetan Buddhist traditions under a single school? What insights can we draw from the extraordinary life of this legendary master?

As we read his biography, we might ask ourselves: is it enough to simply learn about his life, or are we truly ready to follow in his footsteps and bring his teachings into practice?

May this study not only deepen our understanding, but also open our hearts to the blessings that flow from genuine Dharma practice.

Brief Biography of Drogön Chögyal Phagpa

According to the lunar calendar, the anniversary day of Chögyal Phagpa is the twenty-second day of the eleventh month. This year, that falls on the twenty-fourth of January. It is also the anniversary day of Jetsunma Chime Tenpei Nyima and our guru Khenchen Appey Rinpoche. For this holiday, Tsechen Kunchab Ling asked me to speak about the life of Chögyal Phagpa.

The Sakyapa tradition was established by the Khön family and, in particular, by Khön Konchok Gyalpo. The Khön family is known by three special names: the Clear Light of the Celestial Race, the Stainless Khön Lineage, and the Sakyapa. The first, Clear Light of Celestial Race, is the name for the first five generations of the family. The name comes from the fact that the Khön family begins with three brothers who descended from Clear Light god realm. Their names were Chiring, Yuring, and Use^[1]. Yuring had a son named Masang Chiye, and Masang

Chije had a son named Khortse Pambota, or Togtsa Pawo Tag. Togtsa Pawo Tag had a son named Lutsa Tagpo Öchen. Lutsa Tagpo Öchen had a son named Yapang Kye. These are the five generations of the celestial race.

From the sixth generation, the family is known as the Stainless Khön Lineage, which begins with Khön Bar Kye, the son of Yapang Kye. From Khön Bar Kye, we have Khön Palpoche, Khön Dorje Rinchen, Khön Sherab Yongten, Khön Yonten Jungne, Khön Tsultrim Gyalpo, Khön Tsugtor Sherab, Khön Gekyab, Khön Getong, Khön Balpo, Khön Śākya Lodrö. From Khön Bar Kye to Śākya Lodrö, there are eleven generations which hold the second name, which is the Stainless Khön Lineage.

Khön Śākya Lodrö had two sons: Khön Rog Sherab Tsultrim and Khön Konchog Gyalpo. The younger brother, Khön Konchog Gyalpo, established the Sakya monastery in 1073 according to the wish of his older brother, Khön Rog Sherab Tsultrim. From that time forward, the family also holds the third name, Sakyapa.

Khön Konchog Gyalpo was born 988 years ago in 1034, and he entered mahāpārinirvāṇa in 1102. His son was Lama Sakyapa Kunga Nyingpo. Lama Sakyapa had four sons: Kunga Bar,

Loppön Sönam Tsemo, Jetsun Dragpa Gyaltsen, and Palchen Önpö. The eldest went to India to study, and he passed away there. The youngest son, Palchen Önpö, had several sons, including Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen and Zangtsa Sönam Gyaltsen. Zangtsa Sönam Gyaltsen was Sakya Paṇḍita's younger brother, and he practiced Gaṇapati—not the worldly Gaṇapati, but the supermundane deity in the form of Gaṇapati.

Gaṇapati himself asked a great practitioner named Satön Ripa to take rebirth as the son of Zangtsa Sönam Gyaltsen. Thus, Satön Ripa took rebirth as Lodrö Gyaltsen, which is the personal name of Drogön Chögyal Phagpa, born the son of Zangtsa Sönam Gyaltsen. Drogön Chögyal Phagpa was born in 1235, the year of Wood Sheep, on the sixth day of the third month. His birth was accompanied by many extraordinary signs, both at the time of entering into the womb of his mother, Machig Kunchi, and at the time of birth itself. There were many auspicious and extraordinary signs, and these continued to manifest even when he was an infant. For example, without having learned, he was able to read and write. Later, he knew many subjects without ever having studied them, and he understood all that he knew without difficulty. He remembered his past life as the great practitioner Saton Ripa, who had spoken directly with Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of all the

Buddha's compassion. When Satön Ripa's disciples heard that he had been reincarnated in Sakya, two of them went to Sakya to establish whether this was a real incarnation or not. When Chögyal Phagpa saw them, he not only recognized their faces but knew their names. This amazed them and generated strong and unshakeable faith and devotion in them, so that they paid great respect to Chögyal Phagpa.

At one time, Chögyal Phagpa was accompanying his uncle and his root guru, Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen, as he traveled. They went to a place called Gyilrong, where there were many monks. At that time, there was an old monk named Tashi Döndrup, who had been the assistant of Satön Ripa. When Chögyal Phagpa saw this old monk, he recognized him and said, "My assistant, Tashi Döndrup." He remembered not only the assistant but his name, too. The old monk became very emotional, and tears flowed from his eyes as he held Chögyal Phagpa's feet and paid him great respect.

These are some examples of the clairvoyance that he demonstrated as a young child. When he was three years old, he recited Druptap Tsokye,^[2] and other texts by heart, and those around him were filled with amazement. They all said, "This is truly a noble being," and his fame spread in all directions. This

is when he became known as *Phagpa*, meaning “noble one.” At the age of ten, he received the novice vow from Sakya Paṇḍita and traveled with Sakya Paṇḍita to meet the emperor of the Yuan Dynasty. At the age of seventeen, for the eyes of common people, he obtained all knowledge the same as Sakya Paṇḍita himself, and Sakya Paṇḍita recognized that Chögyal Phagpa was ready to take responsibility for upholding the Dharma. Therefore, Sakya Paṇḍita gave him the dharmic conch shell, a begging bowl, and other auspicious things, and he said, “Now it is time for you to do many Dharma activities and benefit sentient beings. You should remember your previous lives and promise.” In this way, Sakya Paṇḍita gave him responsibility for upholding the Dharma.

From Sakya Paṇḍita, his root guru, he received the precious and profound Lamdre teaching of the Sakyapa tradition and many other empowerments, teachings, pith instructions, and others. And at the age of nineteen, he went again to meet the Yuan Dynasty emperor. This time, he traveled by himself, and he gave the Hevajra empowerment to the emperor, the queen, and some of their entourage. In total, he gave the Hevajra empowerment to twenty-five people, establishing the Vajrayāna teaching in the kingdom and surrounding places. Drogön Chögyal Phagpa displayed miraculous signs to the king, queen, and his

entourage, impressing upon them his holiness and establishing that he was a true noble being. Through this, they generated stronger faith and devotion to him, their guru.

In return for giving empowerments and teachings to the emperor, the emperor offered Drogön Chögyal Phagpa administrative authority over the Land of Snow. Since Drogön Chögyal Phagpa was the root guru of the emperor, he also offered to make all the people of the Land of Snow become Sakya followers. This would have stopped all the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism and made only one school, the Sakya school. The emperor had the power to do this. But Chögyal Phagpa said no, there was no need to make all the Tibetans become Sakyapa followers; they should maintain their own schools and their own traditions. Because of this, we have all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This shows how wise and noble Drogön Chögyal Phagpa was.

Later, he received the vows of a fully ordained monk. Among his many accomplishments, he invented a writing system for the Mongolian language. When he was in Sakya, he made many offerings, building many beautiful shrines, and so on. For the eyes of common people, he received many teachings from many different masters. At the age of thirty-three, he again went to

meet the emperor and caused the Buddhadharma to flourish far and wide. He turned the wheel of Dharma to many different peoples and followers, and he gave many teachings.

Very large crowds came to hear him teach. Typically, when it is time to gather followers for a teaching or an empowerment, we use a gong to announce that the teaching will begin. But if there are tens of thousands of people and a person is standing in one spot holding a gong with their left hand and striking it with their right hand, the sound won't reach everyone. Therefore, at that time, the person who beat the gong rode around on a horse so that everyone could hear it.

Among the teachings he gave, there was, of course, the precious and profound teachings of the Lamdre. His main disciple who received the Lamdre was Zhang Khönchog Pal. Our Lamdre lineage from Drogön Chögyal Phagpa comes through Zhang Khönchog Pal, who transmitted it to his disciple, Naza Dragpugpa, and so on. Through this unbroken chain of lineage gurus, the teaching remains alive today.

He wrote texts on many topics: biographies of gurus, auspicious prayers, rituals, the "Gift of Dharma to Kublai Khan" to explain the holy Dharma, and the "Garland of Jewels," which is a book

of advice for the prince. He wrote many texts on both sūtra and tantra. Through teaching, writing, and in other ways, he devoted his whole life to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma in order to benefit sentient beings.

We call him Chögyal, which means “Dharma King,” because he was both king and guru of the Land of Snow. There are many other noble activities that I could recount, but due to lack of time, I will conclude here. I would like to wish all of you a very strong connection with Drogön Chögyal Phagpa. To accomplish this, we should not only listen to his biography but follow in his footsteps and follow his teachings. If we are unable to study profound teachings, then we can study basic ones like the “Gift of Dharma,” the “Garland of Jewels,” his teachings on refuge, bodhicitta, and so on. In this way, we can make a stronger connection and receive increased blessings. We can receive these texts from our own masters and study them, contemplate, and meditate, and this will bring his blessings to our mental continuum.

With this, I will conclude this very short talk on Drogön Chögyal Phagpa’s biography. I sincerely wish all of you will receive the blessings of our gurus, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. We should dedicate the merit of this to attaining buddhahood for

the sake of all sentient beings. In particular, we should dedicate all our merit for our root gurus, that they will have long life, good health, and that they will turn the wheel of Dharma far and wide. Thank you.

Notes:

[1] Sometimes spelled Yusu (Wylie *gyu su*).

[2] An elaborate Hevajra sādhana.



■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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