

The Rime Movement of Jamgön Kongtrul the Great

CHAPTER I OF "THE RI-ME PHILOSOPHY OF JAMGÖN KONGTRUL THE GREAT: A STUDY OF THE BUDDHIST LINEAGES OF TIBET", SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS (2006)

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The Meaning of Rime

While doing research work on the Rime [Rimé, Ri-me]* movement in the 1970s, I had the opportunity to meet and interview a number of prominent Tibetan lamas, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the heads of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I prepared a questionnaire, and one of the questions I asked was whether they believed that the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism showed the way to attain buddhahood. I have never been so rebuked in my life as when I asked that question! All of them, without exception, were shocked and insulted, feeling deeply saddened that I, a monk, could ever have such doubts. They would not speak with me until I persuaded them that this was one of those unimportant, procedural questions that are part of the modern university system.

"How can you say such a thing?" they rebuked me. "All the schools of Buddhism practice the teachings of the Lord Buddha." They went on to discuss how all four Tibetan schools share the same monastic code, the Sarvastivada Vinaya, and practice the Mahayana way of training the mind. All of them investigate the ultimate truth through Madhyamaka philosophy, and follow the two great charioteers, Nagarjuna and Asanga. On top of that, all the Tibetan Buddhist schools one-pointedly take the Anuttarayoga tantras as their main, heart practice. Therefore, there is no actual basis for sectarianism, and all the schools essentially follow a Rime approach.



Taken a few years ago, the picture above shows His Holiness the Dalai Lama with other members of the Sangha, including the then heads of the four traditions, standing under an image of Buddha Shakyamuni.

What Is Rime?

Ri or *chok-ri* in Tibetan means "one-sided," "partisan," or "sectarian." *Me* means "no." So, *Ri-me** means "not taking sides," "nonpartisan," or "nonsectarian." It does not mean "nonconformist" or "noncommittal," nor does it mean forming a new school or system that is different from the existing ones. Followers of the Rime approach almost always follow one lineage for their main practices. Although they respect and learn from other traditions, they would not dissociate from the school in which they were raised. One can take,

for example, the founders of the Rime movement, Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1899) and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–1892). Kongtrul was educated in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions, and Khyentse was raised in the Nyingma and Sakya traditions. Although these two scholars and meditation masters received, collected, practiced, and transmitted the teachings of all eight practice lineages, they never failed to acknowledge their affiliation to their own schools.

One of the unique features of Buddhism is the acceptance that different paths are appropriate for different types of people. Just as one medicine cannot cure all diseases, so one set of teachings cannot help all beings this is a basic principle of Buddhism. One chooses the most appropriate sutras and/or tantras from the Buddhist canon and makes them the basis for one's practice. This is how different schools of Buddhism begin. There are no "sects" in Buddhism because there are no groups that break away from the main school. Different lineages have come into being even among those who practice the same teachings.

In Tibet, like other places, the different schools practiced and studied in rather isolated environments, without much contact with other schools and lineages. A lack of communication breeds misunderstanding. Even where there was no misunderstanding or disrespect to other schools, some practitioners, in their enthusiasm to keep their own lineages pure and undiluted, went so far as to refuse teachings from the masters of other lineages, and would not study the texts of other schools. Ignorance is the most fertile ground for growing doubts and misconceptions.



Jamgön Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (1813–1899)
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Jamgön Kongtrul on Sectarianism

Jamgön Kongtrul disagreed so thoroughly with a partisan approach that he asserted that those with sectarian views cannot uphold even their own tradition. Kongtrul says:

*Just as a king overpowered by self-interest
Is not worthy of being the protector of the kingdom,
A sectarian person is not worthy of being a holder of the dharma.
Not only that, he is unworthy of upholding even his own tradition.*

And again:

*The noble ones share a single ultimate view,
But arrogant ones bend that to their own interests.
Those who show all the teachings of the Buddha as without contradiction can be considered
learned people,
But who would be foolish enough to think that those who cause discord are holders of the
dharma?*

Rime is not a way of uniting different schools and lineages by emphasizing their similarities. It is basically an appreciation of their differences and an acknowledgment of the importance of variety to benefit

practitioners with different needs. Therefore, the Rime teachers always take great care that the teachings and practices of the different schools and lineages, and their unique styles, do not become confused with one another. Retaining the original style and methods of each teaching lineage preserves the power of that lineage experience. Kongtrul and Khyentse made great efforts to retain the original flavor of each teaching, while making them available to many.

Kongtrul writes about Khyentse in his biography of the latter:¹

Some people are very fussy about the refutations and affirmations of the various tenets, becoming particularly attached to their own versions, such as Rangtong or Shentong Madhyamaka. There are many who try to pull others over to their own side, to the point of practically breaking their necks. When Jamyang Khyentse teaches the different tenet systems, he does not mix up their terminology or ideas, yet he makes them easy to understand and suitable for the students.

In general, the main point to be established by all the tenets is the ultimate nature of phenomena. As the Prajnaparamita Sutra states:

*The dharmata is not an object of knowledge;
It cannot be understood by the conceptual mind.*

In addition, Ngok Lotsawa, who is considered the crown jewel of Tibetan intellectuals, agrees with this understanding when he says:

The ultimate truth is not only beyond the dimension of language and expression, it is beyond intellectual understanding.

So, the ultimate nature cannot be established by the samsaric mind, no matter how deep that mind may be.

The scholars and siddhas of the various schools make their own individual presentations of the dharma. Each one is full of strong points and supported by valid reasoning. If you are well grounded in the presentations of your own tradition, then it is unnecessary to be sectarian. But if you get mixed up about the various tenets and the terminology, then you lack even a foothold in your own tradition. You try to use someone else's system to support your understanding, and then get all tangled up, like a bad weaver, concerning the view, meditation, conduct, and result. Unless you have certainty in your own system, you cannot use reasoning to support your scriptures, and you cannot challenge the assertions of others. You become a laughing stock in the eyes of the learned ones. It would be much better to possess a clear understanding of your own tradition.

In summary, one must see all the teachings as without contradiction, and consider all the scriptures as instructions. This will cause the root of sectarianism and prejudice to dry up, and give you a firm foundation in the Buddha's teachings. At that point, hundreds of doors to the eighty-four thousand teachings of the dharma will simultaneously be open to you.

— JAMGÖN KONGTRUL

The Rime concept was not original to Kongtrul and Khyentse, nor was it new to Buddhism. Shakyamuni Buddha forbade his students to criticize others, even the teachings and teachers of other religions and cultures. This directive was so strong and unambiguous that in the *Entrance to the Middle Way*,

Chandrakirti felt compelled to defend Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka treatises by saying:

If, in trying to understand the truth, one dispels misunderstandings, and therefore some philosophies cannot remain intact, that should not be considered as criticizing others' views.

Rongzom Pandita's Clarification of Higher and Lower Views

We need to realize that all the Buddhist traditions ultimately arrive at the same point, and that, in general, the Buddha's teachings do not contradict themselves. True followers of the Buddha cannot help but be Rime, or nonsectarian, in their approach. This view is elaborated by Rongzom Pandita Chokyi Zangpo in his *Points to Remember about the View*:²

In the treatises of the Buddhist teachings, one can make distinctions of higher and lower views, where the higher ones clarify points in the lower ones. Other than that, they do not improve on the lower ones or go against them. In clarifying what needs to be clarified, they do not undermine the basic principles or repudiate the lower teachings. Therefore, all the teachings of the Buddha are of one taste; they are seeking the nature of suchness and they end up with the nature of suchness. All of them are like that.

There are no differences in the basic teachings, like there being one tenet that asserts the self does exist and another that asserts the self does not exist. By discussing selflessness, all the yanas, lower and higher, examine the root of phenomena and teach the nature of things more and more deeply. They are not discussing different bases. Since the Hinayana and Mahayana and the higher and lower views have no separate bases or separate paths, that means they have no separate results. This needs to be understood.

Some traditions discuss slightly different ways of entering the path, but these can easily be joined into one system. For example, the Shravaka system clears away all doubts about the selflessness of the person within the aggregates, sense fields, and consciousnesses. The Mahayanists do not say they have a different understanding of personal selflessness, and that it is higher or an improvement on the Hinayana understanding. Nor do the Mahayanists say that the Hinayana understanding is wrong.

The Mahayanists see a need to clarify further that the aggregates, sense bases, and consciousnesses are not substantially existent dharmas. However, they do not undermine the basis of the Hinayana understanding by asking questions about the aggregates, consciousnesses, and sense bases, like where they exist, to whom they are known, what their characteristics are, and so forth. They do not undermine the basic understanding by statements like "the self and the world do exist, but the aggregates, sense bases, and consciousnesses do not exist." If that were the case, then the higher Buddhist tenets, like Yogachara, might say something completely different. But it is not like that; all the Buddhist teachings have the same basis.

All the Buddha's teachings are of one taste and one way; nothing is excluded within the state of vast equality. For example, all the small streams flow into large rivers and then accompany the large rivers to flow into the ocean. Within the vast ocean, all the rivers have the same taste of salt. Similarly, all the small entrances of the lower yanas are small rivers of understanding personal selflessness, which wash away the dirt of the belief in substantial entities. They join the large rivers of the Mahayana sutras and all of them end up in the great ocean of Dzogpa Chenpo. There is not even a particle of dust that does not become of one taste with this great, vast equality.

Accordingly, within the yanas, the lower views have certain points that need to be clarified by the higher views, and certain points that do not need to be clarified. The higher views do not repudiate nor try to improve whatever is already clear in the lower views. In relation to what is unclear in the lower views, the higher views do not repudiate their basis nor undermine their basis. In these four ways all the Buddha's teachings should be understood as being of one taste and one way. We need to understand the differences between the higher and lower views, and this is one aspect of knowing the various views. However, the heart of the matter is that even with their differences, all the Buddhist traditions are fundamentally of one taste. Please hold this as the highest and most essential understanding.

— RONGZOM PANDITA CHOKYI ZANGPO

Those are the words of Rongzom Pandita. There are many other teachings that similarly clarify this point, such as the *Scripture of the Embodiment of the Realization of All Buddhas*, which states:

Manjushri, the karmic obscuration of rejecting the noble dharma is a subtle one. When one thinks that some of the Tathagata's teachings are good and others are bad, then that is rejecting the dharma. By rejecting the dharma, a person is criticizing the Tathagata and expressing negativity toward the sangha. If someone says, "That is right and this is not right," then that is rejecting the dharma. If one says, "This is taught only for the bodhisattvas," or "This is taught only for the shravakas," or "This is taught only for the pratyekabuddhas," then that is rejecting the dharma.

Khenchen Kunpal on Clarifying Misunderstanding

So, does this mean that the treatises written by the great, learned masters of the past that criticize certain views and establish other views are useless? No, it is not like that. Those treatises were not just criticizing each other; they came from unbiased minds in order to show how ordinary beings can have misunderstandings. If you thoroughly examine their main points, their clarifications become a source of deep understanding. It is as Khenchen Kunpal says:³

Those who are very learned from their study of the five branches of knowledge and other topics, and those who have reached the stage of warmth in their meditative experience, receive predictions and are directly cared for by their lamas and special deities. These learned and accomplished masters truly benefit the teachings and beings through their activities of teaching, debating, and writing. Those who use reason and debate meaningfully to refute misunderstanding and establish right understanding are great masters, whether they come from our tradition or another tradition. If we look deeply to find their real intention and do not look in a wrong way, their presentations strengthen our understanding. Rather than causing harm, they are highly beneficial.

If you do not approach other traditions with an open mind, and you criticize them by exaggerating and denigrating their views just because of hatred, then you will cause great harm. Those who are ignorant, from the cowherds upwards, will be like the storybook animals who were alarmed by a rabbit running scared at the sound of a branch falling in the river. Like those forest animals, they will join the panicking crowd and have wrong views about the genuine dharma. They will make baseless allegations, and that is a serious fault. Your criticism will bring others to disaster, and you will be a long way from the liberated lifestyle of a noble being. Devastated from the desire to talk too much, you

will expose your dirty guts for all to see. You will stray far from the teachings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and that is highly inappropriate.

— KHENCHEN KUNPAL

What Khenchen Kunpal says is true. That is why the two emanations of Manjushri, Khyentse and Kongtrul, together with their students and lineages, have the conviction that all the great tenets of Buddhism arrive at the same ultimate point. They do not act in sectarian ways; they do not try to bring people over to their side, nor are they attached to their own traditions and hateful toward others. They instruct us to hold all the teachings within our mindstreams without contradiction, and when it is our turn to teach the dharma to others, we should explain it and emphasize the main points just like the great charioteers of the past. We should not change the teachings or corrupt them even the tiniest bit.

Doctrinal Disputes

Then why are there so many debates and criticisms among the different schools of Buddhism? There is an old saying in Tibet:

*If two philosophers agree, one is not a philosopher.
If two saints disagree, one is not a saint.*

It is accepted that all realized beings have the same experience, but the question is how to describe it to others. Almost all debates are concerned with ways of using language. For example, the main debate between the schools of Svatantrika and Prasangika Madhyamaka comes down to whether to include the word “ultimately” or not. For example, whether to say, “Form is empty” or “Form is ultimately empty.”

The legendary, ten-year debate between Chandrakirti and Chandragomin is a good example. Both of these masters are regarded as realized beings by all sides, so why did they debate? Their debates rested on how to phrase the teachings to have the least danger of misinterpretation.

Rangtong and Shentong

In particular, there has been a great deal of heated debate in Tibet between the exponents of Rangtong and Shentong Madhyamaka. The lineages, philosophies, and debates of these two schools are discussed later in this book. In relation to this discussion of nonsectarianism, here is a quote from Jamgön Kongtrul summarizing the relationship of these two systems:⁴

For both Rangtong and Shentong Madhyamaka, all phenomena included in the relative truth are emptiness, and there is the cessation of all fabricated extremes in meditation. Their views do not differ on these points. However, in relation to post-meditation, to clearly distinguish the tenet systems, merely in terms of the way they use terminology, Shentong says that the dharmata, or true nature, is there, and Rangtong says the dharmata is not there. In the ultimate analysis, using the reasoning that examines the ultimate, Shentong says nondual primordial wisdom is truly established, and Rangtong says primordial wisdom is not truly established. These two statements delineate their main differences.

So, their difference lies in the words they use to describe the dharmata and primordial wisdom. Shentong describes the dharmata, the true nature, as ultimately real, while Rangtong philosophers fear that if it is described in that way, people might understand it as the concept of a soul or atma. The Shentong philosophers think there is a greater chance of misunderstanding if the enlightened state is described as

unreal and void. Their debates rest on how to phrase the teachings to have the least danger of misinterpretation. Kongtrul finds the Rangtong presentation best for dissolving concepts, and the Shentong presentation best for describing the actual experience.

Nyingma and Sarma

Kongtrul deals in the same way with the problems between the Nyingma and Sarma, or the Early and New Translation traditions, concerning the validity of the Nyingma tantras and the Dzogchen practice of Thögal. Kongtrul says there are two reasons why the Nyingma tantras are genuine. First, the original Sanskrit versions were eventually found, and second, both the earlier and later translations of the tantras have the same perspectives and understanding. Kongtrul makes this very clear in his *Informal Discussion of the View*:⁵

*The natural state, the Mahamudra,
Is clearly taught in all the sutras and tantras.*

The Rime position is that although the various Tibetan lineages have evolved different emphases and practices, they have a single ultimate understanding, and their teachings all arrive at the same essential point. Kongtrul Rinpoche bases his discussion on the instructions in the *Sutra of the King of Concentrations*, the Anuttarayoga tantras, the teachings of Maitripa, and the teachings of Marpa and his followers. For example, Kongtrul says the Mahamudra teachings of the Kagyu lineage arrive at the same point as the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingma lineage. He says about the Mahamudra instructions:

These teachings correlate with the Semde teachings of Dzogchen.

He also proclaims the convergence of the Sakya and Kagyu lineages in their understanding of the ultimate:

*The five Sakya forefathers asserted
The tenet system of subtle Madhyamaka
And the view of Mahamudra.*

One might question Kongtrul's understanding of this because of Sakya Pandita's criticism of the Kagyu Mahamudra in his book *Differentiating the Three Vows*. Kongtrul says about Sakya Pandita:

*Because it was necessary in that context,
In Differentiating the Three Vows he refutes
The Dagpo Kagyu, the Mahamudra, and others.
But in his book the Commentary Praising Selflessness, he personally accepts the view of
Mahamudra.*

In Jamgön Kongtrul's *Informal Discussion of the View*, he states that the Gelugpa lineage also shares the same understanding, and that Tsongkhapa's presentation does not contradict the Dzogchen view. He says:

*The real point of Je Tsongkhapa's understanding
Is indisputably the same as the tenets of Dzogchen.
This is clear in his text the Sublime Medicine, the Amrita of Questions and Answers.*

Kongtrul also says:

When the Gelugpas explain the Six Yogas of Naropa

*They teach meditative absorption beyond concepts.
Also, in practicing Guhyasamaja, they mainly follow the system of
Marpa.*

Further on, he says:

*There is a commentary written by the first Panchen Lama,
Called the Geluk-Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra.*

These quotations should make Kongtrul's perspective on nonsectarianism apparent.

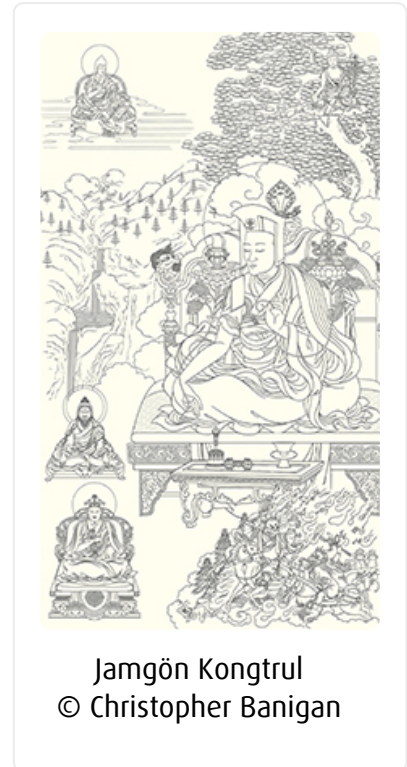
When we examine the lives of the great Tibetan masters of the past, we find that they studied with many teachers of different traditions and lineages, and had great respect for them. The conflicts between lamas and monasteries, and sometimes between regions of Tibet, have sometimes been presented as religious or doctrinal conflicts. However, almost none of them had anything to do with doctrinal or philosophical disagreements. Most of these conflicts were based on personality problems or mundane political rivalries.

The Rime movement of Kongtrul and Khyentse was not a new concept, but it was a timely and unique movement with great consequences. A great portion of Buddhist literature would have been lost but for the efforts of these two luminaries to preserve it. Although Khyentse was the source of inspiration and greatly contributed toward this effort, it was Kongtrul who actually put together the gigantic collection of the *Five Great Treasuries*. The compilation and transmission of the *Five Great Treasuries*, together with the *Compendium of Sadhanas* and the *Compendium of Tantras*, broke the isolation of single lineage teachings in the majority of Tibetan Buddhist schools.

These collected works made possible a tradition that has developed in the twentieth century of receiving the teachings of various lineages and schools from a single teacher in a single place. Take, for example, the *Treasury of Instructions*, one of the collections of Kongtrul's *Five Great Treasuries*. This compendium of most of the essential teachings of the eight practice lineages is now preserved and transmitted as one lineage. Transmitting teachings of this kind has become not only common but popular among the masters of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The great success in this field goes back to the fact that Kongtrul gave these teachings himself, many times over, to a wide range of students, from the heads of schools to the humblest of lay practitioners. Many among his wide range of students spread these teachings in their own schools and monasteries. Also, Kongtrul was able to have almost all of his major works carved into wood blocks and published while he was still alive. When the Tibetans started coming out of Tibet in 1959, the entire *Five Great Treasuries* of Kongtrul were available. From 1960 onward, His Holiness Karmapa and His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche started giving transmissions of these collections in India. It is well known that the only Tibetan books that Chogyam Trungpa and Akong Rinpoche brought when they first came to England in the early 1960s, besides their daily practices, were the volumes of Jamgön Kongtrul's *Treasury of Knowledge*.

His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama has been strongly influenced by several great Rime teachers such as Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and the third Dodrupchen, Tenpe Nyima. Due to the efforts of nonsectarian teachers like these great lamas, in recent years there has been more



interchange of teachings among different schools of Tibetan Buddhism than ever before. Following the tradition of Rime, the Dalai Lama has been receiving and giving the teachings of all schools in their respective traditions and lineages.

At this time we Tibetans have little good fortune and little power. The only area in which we are fortunate is that the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tendzin Gyatso, is still alive. The Dalai Lama is a proponent of nonsectarianism, and his views accord with those of Jamgön Kongtrul. For example, the Dalai Lama publicly proclaimed in a recorded talk:

The slight understanding I have of the Dzogchen view has come from Je Tsongkhapa's notes called the Secret Explanation of the Forty Letters, which is a commentary on the Guhyasamaja Tantra.

So, there is no reason to doubt that all the Buddhist views are without contradiction. I would like to close this introduction to the Rime philosophy by composing a small verse:

*The noble ones are like bees who enjoy the nectar of instruction
In the garden of blooming flowers of impartial treatises;
While the sectarian ones with bad intentions are like caterpillars
Whose spit merely binds them inside their cocoons. ■*

NOTES

[1] *The Biography of Jamyang Khyentse*, p.65

[2] *Awakening Reverence for the View* by Rongzom Pandita, p. 10

[3] This quotation comes from the Khenchen Khunpal's *Commentary on the Beacon of Certainty*, p. 15

[4] From *The Treasury of Knowledge*, vol. VAM, beginning of p. 559

[5] Jamgön Kongtrul's *Informal Discussion of the View* is found in his *Collected Works*, vol. TA

* The Tibetan word རིས་མེད་ (Wylie transliteration *ris med*) is most often rendered phonetically in English as *Rime* or *Rimé*. The book by Ringu Tulku, however, uses the uncommon transcription *Ri-me*. For the sake of congruency with the more common transcriptions of the word, and to make the material more accessible, the online presentation of the first chapter of his book uses *Rime* instead of *Ri-me*.

Tony Duff's *Illuminator* dictionary offers the following entries for *ris med* and its opposite, *ris chad*:

» རིས་མེད་, ris med

» The opp. of རིས་ཅད་ [ris chad] q.v. 1) A general term with many uses. The base meaning is that one has not sided with one particular position, view, or faction. Hence "unbiased", "impartial", "non-sectarian". 2) The name of a renaissance movement that began in East Tibet in the mid-19th century and which became particularly influential afterwards. The movement developed around the first Khyentse and Kongtrul Rinpoches. The two were non-sectarian in the sense that they were willing to study all traditions and find what was good in all. Tibetan Buddhism at the time was very fixated on following your own system, whatever it was, and not even looking at what others had to say. Thus the name also implied "ecumenical movement".

» རིས་ཅད་, ris chad

» <noun> “Bias”, “partiality”, “sectarianism”. The noun form of རིས་སྲུ་འཇད་པ་ q.v. The opp. is རིས་མེད་ [ris med] q.v. When discussing the actuality of mind, as happens in discussions of the ground in Mahāmudrā and Mahāti systems, it is used to refer to the nature of mind not becoming fixed as any one thing or another. In that case, the term has the sense that the nature of mind just does not fall into becoming one side or the other of a dualistic situation.

