

THE RIMÉ (Ris-med) MOVEMENT OF JAMGON KONGTRUL THE GREAT

by RINGU TULKU

Dip. Tibetology, NIT, ACHARYA, Ph.D.

7th CONFERENCE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR TIBETAN STUDIES

June, 1995

ABSTRACT

The different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism keep their identity through a particular lineage of teachers. Sometimes misunderstanding occurs because the teacher confines his studies to the literature of his own tradition. However, the philosophical differences are so subtle that they are extremely difficult to grasp in the right perspective.

Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, one of the leading scholars of the nineteenth century, broke the sectarian confinement and forged a deep understanding of rival philosophies. With great courage and ability, this fine scholar compiled the basic teachings of all Tibetan Buddhist Schools in his encyclopaedic work "The Five Great Treasures". This work saved the traditions from destruction during the recent cultural crisis in Tibet.

The paper will mainly discuss the principle of "Rimé" (Wylie: Ris-med) in Jamgon Kongtrul's view on debated subjects such as, Rangtong and Shentong philosophies and criticisms on New and Old Tantric Schools.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

THE RIMÉ (Ris-med) MOVEMENT OF JAMGON KONGTRUL THE GREAT

by Ringu Tulku

In the 1970's I was doing research work on the Rimé (Wylie, Ris-Med) Movement. This gave me 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. One of the questions I asked was whether they believed that other Schools of 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 felt insulted, deeply saddened that I, a monk, could ever have such doubts. They would not speak with me until I persuaded them to believe 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 Schools of Buddhism practise the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Moreover, the Schools of Buddhism in Tibet have even more common ground. They all base their main practice on Anuttara Tantra of Vajrayana. Madhyamika is their philosophy; they all base their monastic rules on the Sarvastivadin school of Vinaya.

One of the unique features of Buddhism has always been the acceptance that different paths are necessary for different types of people. Just as one medicine cannot cure all diseases, so one set of teachings cannot help all beings - this is the basic principle of Buddhism.

One chooses the most appropriate Sutras and / or Tantras from the Buddhist Canon and bases one's own practices on these. This is the origin of different Schools in Buddhism. There are no "sects" in Buddhism because there are no break-away groups from the main School. Different lineages came into being even among those who practised the same teachings.

In Tibet, like other places, these different Schools practised and studied in their own isolated environments and thereby lost much of the contact with other Schools and lineages. Non-communication breeds misunderstanding. Even where there was no misunderstanding or disrespect to other Schools, some practitioners, in their ardent enthusiasm to keep their own lineages pure and undiluted, went so far as to refuse any 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. This is the area where the Rimé movement of Jamgon Kongtrul (1813-1899) and Jamyang Khentse (1820-1892) had most to contribute.

What is "Rimé"?

Ris or Phyog-ris in Tibetan means "one-sided", "partisan" or "sectarian". Med means "No". Ris-med (Wylie), or Rimé, therefore means "no sides", "non-partisan" or "non-sectarian". It does not mean "non-conformist" or "non-committal"; nor does it mean forming a new School or system that is different from the existing ones. A person who believes the Rimé way almost certainly follows one lineage as his or her main practice. He or she would not dissociate from the School in which he or she was raised. Kongtrul was raised in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions; Khentse was reared in a strong Sakyapa tradition. They never failed to acknowledge their affiliation to their own Schools.

Rimé is not a way of uniting different Schools and lineages by emphasising their similarities. It is basically an appreciation of their differences and an acknowledgement of the importance of having this variety for the benefit of practitioners with different needs. Therefore the Riméteachers 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. To retain the original style and methods of each teaching lineage preserves the power of that lineage experience. Kongtrul and Khentse made great efforts to retain the original flavour of each teaching, while making them available to many.

Kongtrul writes about Khentse in his biography of the latter.

"Many people these days become involved and confused in the assertion and negation of so-called philosophical differences such as Rangtong and Shentong, etc. They try to win everybody over to their side to the point of breaking their necks! When he (Khentse Rinpoche) taught, he would give the teachings of each lineage clearly and intelligibly without confusing the terms and concepts of other teachings. He would then advise his students and would say:

'The ultimate subject we need to define is the Ultimate Nature, or Dharmata, of phenomena. The Prajna-paramita Sutra says, "Dharmata is not knowable (with the intellectual mind) and cannot be perceived in concepts". Even Ngog Lotsawa, the jewel on the head of all Tibetan logicians, says, "The Ultimate Truth is not only beyond the dimension of language and expression, but it is also beyond intellectual understanding". The Ultimate Nature cannot be fully measured by our samsaric mind. The great saints (Siddhas) and scholars examined it from different aspects, and each of the ways outlined by them has many reasons and logical sequences. If we follow the tradition of our own lineage and study our own lineage masters in depth, we shall find no need to feel sectarian. However, if we confuse the terms and systems of different traditions, or if we try to introduce the ways of other systems because we do not have a deep understanding of our own tradition, we shall surely make our minds as muddled as the yarns of a bad weaver. The problem of being unable to explain our own traditional teachings arises out of ignorance of our own studies. If this happens, we lose our confidence in our own traditions; neither are we able to copy from others. We become a laughing stock for other scholars. Therefore it is best to understand thoroughly the teachings of our own School.'

This way we can see the harmony of all paths. All teachings can be seen as instructions and therefore the roots of sectarian feelings should shrivel and die. The Lord Buddha's teachings will take root in our minds. The doors to the 84,000 groups of teachings will open up at one time."

The Rimé concept was not original to Kongtrul and Khentse - neither were they new to Buddhism! The Lord Buddha forbade his students even to criticise the teachings and teachers of other religions and cultures. The message was so strong and unambiguous that Chandra Kirti had to defend Nagarjuna's treatises on Madhyamika by saying, "If, by trying to understand the truth, you dispel the misunderstandings of some people and thereby some philosophies are damaged - that cannot be taken as criticising the views of others" (Madhyamika-avatara). A true Buddhist cannot be but non-sectarian and Rimé in their approach.

Doctrinal Disputes

Why then, are there so many debates and criticisms among the different Schools of Buddhism? There is an old saying in Tibetan:

"ITa.wa.mThun.na.mKhas.pa.min. dGongs.pa.ma.mThun.na.Grub.thob.min."

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

It is accepted that all realised beings have the same experience but the problem is how to describe this to others. Almost all debates are basically concerned with ways of using language. For example, the main debate between Sautrantika and Prasangika Madhyamikas is whether to use *Don.dam.par*, (ultimately), or not. For example, whether to say, "The form is empty" or "The form is ultimately empty".

The legendary, ten-year debate between Chandra Kirti and Chandra Gomin is a good example. Both of these masters are regarded as realised beings by all sides. What were they debating then? They debated on how to phrase the teachings to present the least danger of misinterpretation.

Rangtong and Shentong

There has been a great deal of heated debate in Tibet between the exponents of Rangtong, (Wylie, *Rang-stong*) and Shentong, (Wylie, *gZhen-stong*) philosophies. The historic facts of these two philosophies are well known to the Tibetologists. This is what Kongtrul has to say about the two systems:

"Rangtong and Shentong Madhyamika philosophies have no differences in realising as 'Shunyata', all phenomena that we experience on a relative level. They have no differences also, in reaching the meditative state where all extremes (ideas) completely dissolve. Their difference lies in the words they use to describe the Dharmata. Shentong describes the Dharmata, the mind of Buddha, as 'ultimately real'; while Rangtong philosophers fear that if it is described that way, people might understand it as the concept of 'soul' or 'Atma'. The Shentong philosopher believes that there is a more serious possibility of misunderstanding in describing the Enlightened State as 'unreal' and 'void'. Kongtrul finds the Rangtong way of presentation the best to dissolve concepts and the Shentong way the best to describe the experience."

Nyingma and Sarma

Kongtrul dealt in the same way with the problems of the Old and New Translation of Tantras. Kongtrul said that there are two reasons why these Tantras are genuine. Firstly, the original Sanskrit versions were found and secondly, both the old and the new translations of Tantras have the same perspectives and understanding. Kongtrul has made this very clear in his works *Vol.Ta* entitled *ITa.wai.'Bel.gTam*.

"Thus the Mahamudra path was clearly stated in all Sutras and Tantras. It is the same as the *Sems.sde* teachings of Zogpa Chenpo. The five great Sakyapa Lamas also stood for the ultimate Madhyamika philosophy and the Mahamudra view. Although Sakya Pandita criticised (some aspects of Kagyu way of practices) his actual views are clearly stated in *bDag.med.bTod.'Grel*. The final view of Je Tsongkhapa is also indisputably the same as Zogpa Chenpo. Please refer to *Shus.len.bDud.tsi.sMan.mChog*."

The Rimé understanding of Buddhist paths is clearly described by a highly respected Nyingma Master of the eleventh century, Rangzom Chokyi Zangpo.

"All the teachings of Buddha are of one taste, one way - all leading to the truth, all arriving at the truth. Although there are different Yanas, they neither contradict each other nor reject the basis of each other. The things that are fully made clear in the lower Yanas are neither changed nor rejected by the higher Yanas but accepted as they are. The points that are not made completely clear in the lower Yanas are made clear in the higher Yanas but the basic structure is not changed and none of the points that are already clear are contradicted.

Therefore different Yanas and Schools do not go in different directions and they do not arrive at different conclusions". (Rough translation)

"*bsTan.pa.thams.ced.'gal.med.du.rTogs, gzung.lugs.thams.ced.gDams.par.shan*."

"See harmony in all doctrines. Receive instructions from all teachings."

This is one of the most important sayings of the Kadampa masters.

If we examine the lives of the great masters of any School we find how many teachers of different Schools and lineages they studied with and how much respect they had for them. The conflicts between lamas and monasteries, and sometimes regions of Tibet, are often presented these days as religious or doctrinal conflicts. However, almost none of them have anything to do with basic

doctrinal or even philosophical disagreements. Most of these conflicts were based on personality problems or mundane establishment rivalries.

The Rimé movement of Kongtrul and Khentse 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 Khentse was the source of inspiration and greatly contributed towards this effort, it was Kongtrul who actually put together the gigantic work, "The Five Great Treasures". The compilation and transmission of the teachings of "The Five Great Treasures" of Kongtrul, together with sGrub.thabs.kun.bTus and rGyud.bDe.kun.bTus., broke the isolation of single lineage teachings in the majority of Tibetan Buddhist Schools. A tradition of receiving the teachings of various lineages and Schools from one teacher in one place became established.

Take the example of gDams.ngag.mZod. A compendium of most of the essential teachings of all the eight Practice lineages (sGrub.brGyud.Shing.ta.brGyad) is now preserved in one lineage. Teachings of these kinds have become not only common, but popular among the masters of all Schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The great success in this field also goes 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. There were many among his wide range of students who could spread the lineage in their own Schools and monasteries. Kongtrul was also able to have almost all of his major works published (wood blocks) while he was still alive. When Tibetans came out of India in 1959, the full set of "The Five Great Treasures" of Kongtrul was available. H.H. the Karmapa and H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche started to give the teachings of different collections in India from 1960-61 onwards. The only Tibetan books Chogyam Trungpa brought to Europe when he and Akong Rinpoche first came to England in the early 1960's, were a set of Kongtrul's She-bya.dZod (Treasury of Knowledge) besides their daily practices.

His Holiness, XIV Dalai Lama, has been strongly influenced by some great Rimé teachers such as Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyatso, Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche and the 3rd Dodrupchen Tenpe Nyima. Due to their efforts in recent years, there has been more interchange of teachings amongst different Schools of Tibetan Buddhism than ever before. Following the traditions of Rimé, the Dalai Lama has been receiving and giving teachings of all Schools in their respective traditions and lineages.

Ringu Tulku

Dip. Tibetology, NIT, ACHARYA, Ph.D.

June, 1995.