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The Ensa Oral Transmission

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo



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PROJECT

dben sa bka' brgyud ces grags pa

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Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The present composition, an excerpt from a collection of miscellaneous historical notes in Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's collected works,¹ is a summary of Yongzin Yeshe Gyaltsen's account of the lives of the great meditators of the Geluk tradition's esoteric Ensa Oral Transmission lineage² as presented in his *Biographies of the Lineage Masters of the Stages of the Path*.³ Other sources from which Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo drew information include Pañchen Lobzang Chögyen's *Short Biographies of the Lineage Masters of the Geden Oral Transmission*⁴ and Tuken Lobzang Chökyi Nyima's *Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*.⁵ Khyentse Wangpo also mentions the Ensa lineage in his notes on Tuken's text⁶ as well as in his monumental *Account of the Lineage Holders of the Old and New Schools of the Mantrayāna*.⁷

The central practices of the Ensa Oral Transmission, named for Ensapa Lobzang Döndrub and his affiliation with Ensa Monastery in Tsang, include Mahāmudrā, guru yoga, Severance, and the deity trio of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Vajrabhairava, which are said to allow the skilled practitioner of this lineage to attain awakening in a period of only twelve years.⁸ The teachings of this transmission lineage and its distinctive token, *The Emanated Scripture*, were initially kept strictly secret and were passed down from the master to only a single disciple for several generations. Its recipients were bound by oath not to mention them to others. This text lists the following lineage masters in order of descent:

- (1) Mañjuśrī
- (2) Tsongkhapa Lobzang Dragpa
- (3) Togden Jampal Gyatso
- (4) Baso Chökyi Gyaltsen
- (5) Chökyi Dorje, aka Dharmavajra
- (6) Ensapa Lobzang Döndrub
- (7) Khedrub Sangye Yeshe

(8) Paṇchen Lobzang Chögyen

Khyentse Wangpo must have certainly been inspired by the ecumenical spirit of the early masters of the Ensa Oral Transmission as is evident in the following statement of Ensapa Lobzang Döndrub:

Anyone who claims to study the Dharma without thoroughly investigating all the traditions of the Mahāyāna, and who likes to bicker over the slightest points of language, saying “You say this, but I say this,” completely misses the point.⁹

དབེན་ས་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད།

The Ensa Oral Transmission

The Ensa Oral Transmission consists of (1) the general teaching system successively handed down since the glorious Atiśa, with its three standard lineages of profound view, vast conduct, and practice and blessing; (2) the special direct transmission Je Lama Tsongkhapa received from the revered Mañjughoṣa through Lama Umapa, which forms the essence of the standard lineages; and (3) the uncommon Aural Transmission the revered Mañjughoṣa imparted directly to Je Rinpoche Tsongkhapa.

[62]

Tsongkhapa passed on some of its teachings to Khedrub Gelek Palzang but gave the entire transmission, including *The Emanated Scripture*, to Togden Jampal Gyatso, who, born in the land of Tsongkha, was among his eight pure attendants. Having been graced by Mañjuśrī, Togden's visions of the deity were trusted as authentic even by Je Tsongkhapa himself. Togden Jampal Gyatso and Khedrub Je both gave the transmission to the latter's younger brother Baso Chökyi Gyaltsen, whose qualities of scriptural learning and realization were beyond comprehension. Other than giving it to three worthy recipients,¹⁰ he kept the teaching tightly restricted.

One of the three recipients was the great adept Dharmavajra, who was born at Tanak Dorjeden. His parents, Kunga Gyalpo and Palzom, came from a place near to Tsongkha in the eastern region. At age eleven, he came to Geden Monastery and for five years followed Baso Chöje, who gave him general empowerments and instructions, as well as the teachings of the Aural Transmission. Later, he studied Madhyamaka, Prajñāpāramitā, and so forth, and, having taken full ordination, he planted the victory banner of spiritual accomplishment in unknown places within the folds of the snowy mountain ranges. The Dharma king Tsongkhapa appeared to him in a vision and bestowed the instructions of the Aural Transmission. [63] As stated in his biography,

Dharmavajra eventually attained the vajradhara stage of union and thus became a vidyādhara with control over his lifespan, allowing him to remain in Pemachen Hermitage for as long as space endures.

His disciple Gyalwa Lobzang Döndrub was born in the vicinity of the Gegye Jema Ling temple on the bank of the Tsangpo river in Yeru. The Dong clan, to which he belonged, produced adepts in the Early Translation tradition and masters such as Rechen Paljor Zangpo, who was a recipient of oral transmissions.¹¹ Lobzang Döndrub took novice ordination at Chökhör Uding Monastery and studied under many tutors; chief among them were his most kind spiritual masters, the revered Kyabchogpa and the great adept Chödorwa. He met the latter when he was seventeen and received from him the uncommon Aural Transmission in its entirety at Garmo Chödzung. Having severed the conceptual elaborations associated with the eight concerns, he persevered one-pointedly in the essential yoga of the profound path and thus perfected his meditative concentration. After he reached the far shore of learning and accomplishment, he proclaimed:

These days I alone uphold
The Aural Transmission, the essence of the teachings
Of the master hailed as Lobzang Dragpa,
Supreme and foremost son of Mañjughoṣa.¹²

Later he received full monastic ordination from Gendun Gyatso. [64] He had a meeting of minds with the omniscient Legdönpa (of Tashi Lhunpo). When his physical body dissolved at the end of his life, special signs occurred.

His disciple Khedrub Sangye Yeshe was the son of Naljor Wangchuk Lama Rinchen, who was descended from Yagde Pañchen and numerous other sublime beings. His mother was named Chöten. He took novice ordination from the universal spiritual teacher Yönten Zangpo. At age fifteen he went to Tashi Lhunpo to begin his philosophical studies. Later, he received teachings on Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa from Tanak Gendun Lobzang and others. Having studied Prajñāpāramitā, Vinaya, and the *Abhidharmakośa* to perfection, he performed on the debate circuit at Palkhor Dechen.¹³ He studied Tantra at Geden Monastery. He eventually received all instructions of the Aural Transmission from Lobzang Döndrub at Ensa Monastery and diligently put them into practice. From the same master, he also received full monastic ordination. Later, a great commotion arose about his learning and meditative accomplishment, which attracted numerous disciples from Ü and Tsang. He passed into nirvāṇa at the age of sixty-seven, accompanied by wondrous signs.

His main disciple was Ensa Lobzang Döndrub's reincarnation, Pañchen Lobzang Chögyen. He was born into the Ba clan in a place called Drukgya in the Lhen valley at the border of Tsang Rong. [65] His father was the physician Kunga Özer, and his mother was Tsogyal. From a young age, he displayed wondrous signs beyond

imagination. Beginning at the age of five, he received an ocean of empowerments, reading transmissions, and pith instructions from Khedrub Sangye Yeshe before going to Tashi Lhunpo to study Dharma with many other tutors. He completed the study and contemplation of the commentaries on the *Guhyasamāja* and *Kālacakra* tantras and the great treatises of the Sūtra teachings. Meanwhile, he performed the approach and accomplishment practices of a vast number of tutelary deities and thereby reached the far shore of spiritual accomplishment. He served as the abbot of Gangchen Chöpel¹⁴ and later also of Tashi Lhunpo, and he became the head of both Sera and Drepung. He lived to be over one hundred years of age¹⁵ and received many Dharma teachings from numerous teachers. His activities and the benefit he brought to beings were as vast as the sky, most notably his explanations of the *Guhyasamāja* and *Kālacakra* tantras. Paṇchen Lobzang Chögyen was one of the extraordinary late Gedenpa lineage holders.

NOTES

1. For cataloging purposes, Khyentse Vision Project created the following title for this previously untitled compilation: *A Miscellaneous Collection of Historiographical, Biographical, and Other Notes*. See Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, *lo rgyus dang rnam thar sogs sna tshogs kyi zin bris phyogs bsgrigs*.
2. This tradition is also referred to as the Geden or Ganden Oral/Aural Transmission (*dge ldan / dga' ldan bka' brgyud / snyan brgyud*), “Geden” and “Ganden” here being synonyms of Geluk. The Tibetan terms *bka' brgyud* (“oral transmission”) and *snyan brgyud* (“aural transmission”) are used interchangeably in this context.
3. Yongzin Yeshe Gyaltsen, *byang chub lam gyi rim pa'i bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam par thar pa rgyal bstan mdzes pa'i rgyan mchog phul byung nor bu'i phreng ba*. An English translation of the excerpts from this work related to the masters of the Ganden Oral Transmission can be found in Willis, *Enlightened Beings*. Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, chapter 7, also contains short biographies of these masters.
4. Pañchen Lobzang Chögyen, *dge ldan bka' brgyud rin po che'i zab lam brgyud pa'i rnam par thar pa mdor bsdus gter gyi kha byang lta bu*. For a summary of this work, see Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, chapter 9.
5. Tuken Lobzang Chökyi Nyima, *grub mtha' shel gyi me long*. This work has been translated in full in Thuken Losang Chökyi Nyima, *Crystal Mirror*. The section on the Ensa tradition can be found on pp. 291–92.
6. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, *thu'u kwan grub mtha' las btus pa'i lo rgyus 'ga'*, 36.4–37.2.
7. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, *gangs can bod kyi yul du byon pa'i gsang sngags gsar rnying gi gdan rabs mdor bsdus ngo mtshar pad+mo'i dga' tshal*, 480.
8. Willis, *Enlightened Beings*, xv. English translations of several works of great importance for this lineage, such as Pañchen Lobzang Chögyen's *Offering to the Guru (bla ma mchod pa)*, *Highway of the Conquerors (dge ldan bka' brgyud rin po che'i phyag chen rtso ba rgyal ba'i gzhung lam)*, *A Lamp So Bright (dge ldan bka' srol phyag rgya chen po'i rtso ba rgyas par bshad pa yang gsal sgron me)*, and others can be found in Jinpa, *Stages of the Path*. For more information on the Ensa lineage, see Jinpa, *Stages of the Path*, 20–22.
9. Translation taken from Willis, *Enlightened Beings*, 62.
10. These were Dharmavajra (chos kyi rdo rje), Palden Dorje (dpal ldan rdo rje) of Tölung (stod lung), and Rinchen Dorje (rin chen rdo rje) of Kham, collectively known as the three Dorje brothers (*rdo rje mched gsum*).

11. Khyentse Wangpo dates Rechen Paljor Zangpo's (ras chen dpal 'byor bzang po) birth to the seventh *rabjung* cycle (1387–1446) in his notes (*byung rim dang bstun zab mo gter gyi 'khor los sgyur ba 'ga' yi mtsban tho*, 12.2–4). He is known for starting transmissions of teachings he received directly from Guru Rinpoche and Niguma.
12. Lobzang Döndrub, *rang la gdams pa bde chen gter mdzod sogs thor bu'i skor*, 58.4. See Jinpa, *Stages of the Path*, 21, and Willis, *Enlightened Beings*, 68.
13. See Akester, *Guide to Central Tibet*, 491–95.
14. See Akester, *Guide to Central Tibet*, 640.
15. Note that this is a hyperbole. Pañchen's dates are 1567/70–1662.

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GLOSSARY

Ba clan

ལྷ་འཇིགས། • *sba'i rigs*

One of Tibet's ancestral clans, whose history goes back to the imperial period. It produced figures such as Ba Salnang (sba gsal snang), one of King Trisong Deutsen's (khri strong lde'u btsan) ministers, who is said to have authored the famous *Testament of Ba* (*sba bzbed*) chronicle.

Baso Chökyi Gyaltsen

བ་སོ་ཚེས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན། • *ba so chos kyi rgyal mtshan*

Baso Chöje (1402–1473) was the sixth throne holder of Ganden Monastery.

Retrospectively he was identified as the first in the Tatsak Jedrung (rta tshag rje drung) incarnation lineage that later established its throne at the Kundeling Monastery (kun bde gling) in Lhasa.

Chökhör Uding

ཚོས་འཁོར་དབུས་ལྷིང་། • *chos 'khor dbus lding*

This small monastery in the vicinity of Ensa Monastery was founded by the Second Pañchen Lama, Sönam Choglang (paN chen bla ma bsod nams phyogs glang, 1439–1504), who also established Ensa.

debate circuit

གྲུ་སྐོར། • *grwa skor*

A tour performed by monks as part of their scholastic studies, wherein they travel to different monastic centers known for a particular subject, make requests to the heads of the monastery, and then engage in study and debate on the great texts.

Dharmavajra; Chökyi Dorje; Chödorwa

ལྷ་མ་བཟླ། ཚེས་ཀྱི་རྡོ་རྗེ། ཚེས་རྡོར་བ། • *d+harma badz+ra; chos kyi rdo rje; chos rdor ba*

More commonly known as Chökyi Dorje (ca. 1455–ca. 1555), and abbreviated by Khyentse Wangpo as Chödorwa, he was renowned for his dedication to the ascetic lifestyle of a wandering hermit and is considered an immortal mahāsiddha.

direct transmission

ཉེ་བརྒྱུད། • *nye brgyud*

As opposed to the more common way of transmitting the teachings from master to disciple in a long line (*ring brgyud*) stretching back to the founder, a direct or close transmission typically involves a visionary encounter between a contemporary master and the original master or deity of the lineage.

Early Translation tradition

སྒ་འགྱུར། • *snga 'gyur*

Another name of the Nyingma tradition, which relies primarily on the translations produced during the first dissemination (*snga dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet mostly during the 8th and 9th centuries.

eight concerns

ཆོས་བརྒྱུད། • *chos brgyad*

The eight mundane concerns are profit and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and defamation, and praise and blame.

eight pure attendants

འཁོར་དག་པ་རྣམ་བརྒྱུད། • *'khor dag pa rnam brgyad*

The eight disciples of Je Tsongkhapa, who took them along as attendants during his retreat in the Ölkha valley in the 1390s. Tsongkhapa chose them in consultation with Mañjuśrī, which was mediated by the mystic Umapa.

Ensa Monastery

དབེན་དགོན། • *dben dgon*

Ensa, literally “place of solitude,” is located at the head of the Lhakhu (lha khud) valley on the south bank of the Tsangpo, about 19 miles east of Shigatse.

Garmo Chödzung

འགར་མོ་ཆོས་རྫོང་། • *'gar mo chos rdzong*

Garmo Chödzung was Dharmavajra's hermitage in the vicinity of Ensa Monastery, to the east of Shigatse in Tsang.

Geden Monastery

དགེ་ལྡན། • *dge ldan*

An alternative name of Ganden Monastery, one of the three main seats (*gdan sa gsum*) of the Geluk tradition in central Tibet.

Gegye Jema Ling

དགེ་རྒྱལ་བྱེ་མ་གླིང་། • *dge rgyas bye ma gling*

One of the four temples of geomantic suppression (*ru gnon gyi lha khang bzhi*) constructed near Shigatse under the orders of King Songtsen Gampo.

Gendun Gyatso

དགེ་འདུན་གྲུ་མཚོ། • *dge 'dun rgya mtsbo*

Gendun Gyatso (1475–1542) was posthumously recognized as the Second Dalai Lama.

Khedrub Gelek Palzang

མཁའ་གྲུབ་དགེ་ལེགས་དཔལ་བཟང་། • *mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang*

Khedrub Je (1385–1438) was one of Je Tsongkhapa’s principal disciples. Together with Gyaltsab Darma Rinchen, these three Geluk masters form the “trio of the lord father and his sons” (*rje yab sras gsum*).

Khedrub Sangye Yeshe

མཁའ་གྲུབ་སངས་རྒྱས་ལེ་ཤེས། • *mkhas grub sangs rgyas ye shes*

The learned master Sangye Yeshe (1525–1591) initially trained with his teacher Tanak Gendun Lobzang and eventually received the esoteric teachings of the Ensa Oral Transmission from his guru, Lobzang Döndrub, who chose him as his successor and custodian of his lineage.

Kyabchogpa

སྐུབས་མཚོག་པ། • *skyabs mchog pa*

Je Kyabchok Palzang, abbot of Ensa Monastery, was, alongside Dharmavajra, the root teacher of Ensapa Lobzang Döndrub.

Lama Umapa

བླ་མ་དབུ་མ་པ། • *bla ma dbu ma pa*

Umapa Pawo Dorje (mid 14th–mid 15th century) was a famous medium for the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. He was an illiterate cowherd before being struck by a vision of Mañjuśrī, which he nurtured until it became a constant experience. Before attaining direct communication with Mañjuśrī himself, Je Tsongkhapa depended on Lama Umapa to mediate contact.

Legdönpa

ལེགས་དོན་པ། • *legs don pa*

Shangtön Kunkhyen Legpa Döndrub (shangs ston kun mkhyen legs pa don grub, 1479–1555) was the fourth abbot of Shartse Dratsang at Tashi Lhunpo. He was among Lobzang Döndrub’s principal disciples, who bestowed several teachings of the Ensa Oral Transmission upon him.

Lobzang Döndrub

བློ་བཟང་དོན་གྲུབ། • *blo bzang don grub*

Lobzang Döndrub (1505–1566), by tradition also referred to as “Conqueror Ensapa the Great” (*rgyal ba dben sa pa chen po*) and namesake to the Ensa Oral Transmission, was posthumously recognized as the Third Pañchen Lama. Likened to the yogi Milarepa, he was strongly inclined toward living as a peripatetic hermit and meditating in solitude—a characteristic feature of the contemplative masters of the Ensa tradition.

Pañchen Lobzang Chögyen

པཎ་ཆེན་བློ་བཟང་ཆོས་རྒྱལ། • *paN chen blo bzang chos rgyan*

Lobzang Chögyen (1567/70–1662), also known as Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*), was the first to have been given the title Pañchen Lama during his lifetime. The previous masters, going back to Khedrub Gelek Palzang, were posthumously given the title, thus making Lobzang Chögyen the fourth in the line.

Pemachen Hermitage

དབེན་གནས་པདྨ་ཅན། • *dben gnas pad+ma can*

This retreat site, where Dharmavajra and Lobzang Döndrub meditated, is located at the Jomo Lhari Mountain in lower Nyang.

Tanak Dorjeden

རྟ་ནག་རྫོང་གདན། • *rta nag rdo rje gdan*

A monastery located in the Tanak valley in northern Tsang that was founded by Pagö Kunga Zangpo (pha rgod kun dga' bzang po), the great-grandfather of the Second Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso (1475–1542).

Tanak Gendun Lobzang

རྟ་ནག་དགེ་འདུན་བློ་བཟང་། • *rta nag dge 'dun blo bzang*

Jamyang Gendun Lobzang of Tanak (sixteenth century), a student of Lobzang Döndrub and affiliated with Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, became Khedrub Sangye Yeshe's main guru alongside Lobzang Döndrub.

The Emanated Scripture

སྤྱུལ་པའི་སྒྲིགས་བས། • *sprul pa'i glegs bam*

A text containing secret teachings on Mahāmudrā and guru yoga of the Ganden Oral Transmission. According to legend, it has the nature of light and is only visible to those who have received its transmission. Tsongkhapa was the first human master to receive it directly from Mañjuśrī and then passed it on to Togden Jampal Gyatso. Around the time of the Fourth Pañchen Lama, Lobzang Chögyen, it was returned to the protector Kālarūpa for safeguarding.

Togden Jampal Gyatso

རྟོགས་ལྷན་འཇམ་དཔལ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། • *rtogs ldan 'jam dpal rgya mtsbo*

The contemplative master and mystic Jampal Gyatso (1356–1428) was a close disciple of Je Tsongkhapa, whom he directly succeeded in the Ganden Oral Transmission. He became known for his intimate connection and visionary encounters with his tutelary deity Mañjuśrī.

Tsongkhapa

ཙོང་ཁ་པ། • *tsong kha pa*

Tsongkhapa Lobzang Dragpa (1357–1419) was the founder of the Geluk tradition. In visionary encounters with Mañjuśrī, he received the teachings of the Ganden Oral Transmission and its *Emanated Scripture*.

Tuken Lobzang Chökyi Nyima

ཐུ་བླན་བློ་བཟང་ཆོས་ཀྱི་ཉི་མ། • *thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma*

The Third Tuken, Lobzang Chökyi Nyima (1737–1892), was a Geluk scholar who spent most of his career in Beijing in the service of the Qianlong emperor.

vajradhara stage of union

ཟུང་འཇུག་རྫོང་འཆང་གི་གོ་འཕང་། • *zung 'jug rdo rje 'chang gi go 'phang*

Synonymous with awakening in the terminology of Mahāmudrā. “Union” (*zung 'jug*) refers to the culminating state of advanced tantric practice, where apparently dual aspects—

such as wisdom and method, subject and object, and bliss and emptiness—merge into complete inseparability.

Yagde Pañchen

གཡག་པཎ་ཅན་ • *g.yag sde paN chen*

Yagde Pañchen Tsöndru Dargye (1299–1378) was a great scholar who received teachings from many renowned masters such as the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339), from the Kagyu tradition; Rigdzin Kumarāja (1266–1343) from the Nyingma tradition; Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292–1361) from the Jonang tradition; Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltsen (1312–1375) from the Sakya tradition; Butön Rinchen Drub (1290–1364); and many other illustrious religious figures of his time. Among his disciples was the great Longchen Rabjam (1308–1364).

Yongzin Yeshe Gyaltsen

ཡོངས་ཡེ་ཤེ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ • *yongs 'dzin ye shes rgyal mtshan*

Yongzin Yeshe Gyaltsen (1713–1793) was born in the Kyirong area of southern Tibet. As a child he entered Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, where he devoted seventeen years to the study of the Buddhist scriptures. Around the age of twenty-five he began spending prolonged periods in retreat in southern Tibet. In 1782, he reluctantly took on the role of chief tutor to the Eighth Dalai Lama, Jampal Gyatso (1758–1804). Due to his extensive knowledge, deep meditative experience, and skill as a teacher, Yeshe Gyaltsen became one of the most important custodians of the Ganden Oral Transmission.