

Short Biography of Chone Drakpa Shedrub

Summary:

Chone Drakpa Shedrub was a Geluk scholar and yogi famous for his knowledge of sutra and tantra, who stood out even amongst the most learned scholars of his time. Educated at Sera and based at Chone, where he did most of his teaching, he authored many commentaries on sutra and tantra, which are collected in eleven volumes.

Biography:

Chone Lama Drakpa Shedrub (co ne bla ma grags pa bshad sgrub) was born on the morning of the eighth day of the first month of the wood rabbit year, 1675, in Chone (co ne), Amdo. His father, Zunggyab Bum (gzungs skyabs 'bum), was a local Bonpo practitioner known for his writing and reciting skills. His mother, Kelzang Men (skal bzang sman), was a devout woman who had continuously recited the Tārā and Sitātapatrā prayers since her youth.

At the age of five he learned the alphabet and is said to have memorized certain texts just by listening to monks reciting them at his house. At age seven he could read, write and memorize texts without difficulty. In 1683, in the tenth month of the year of the pig, when he was nine, he took the initial monastic vows from Gedun Drakpa (dge 'dun grags pa, d.u.), the throne holder of Chone Gonchen Ganden Shedrub Ling (co ne dgon chen dga' ldan bshad sgrub gling).

From then up to the age of fifteen he memorized the practices of Sarvavid Vairocana, Amitābha, Yamāntaka, different dharma protectors and prayers and fire pujas done at his monastery. At sixteen and seventeen he memorized sādhanas and ritual texts relating to Guhyasamāja and Medicine Buddha. After this he memorized the Mañjuśrī Nāmasaṃgīti and sādhanas relating to Cakrasaṃvara. During this time he had responsibilities at his home that limited his memorization to the above.

In 1693, at the age of nineteen, he set out for Lhasa, hoping to study at Sera (se ra) Monastery. Unfortunately he was unable to proceed, and spent the next two and a half years at Tsokar (mtsho khar) where he studied Tibetan medicine with Menpa Takri Gelong (sman pa stag ris dge slong). He memorized the Nerve Sutra (*rtsa mdo*) and Water Sutra (*chu mdo*) and performed some examinations of patients. Reflecting on his study of

medicine, he wrote "Just to know medicine is easy I think, but to identify the hot and cold channels I see as immensely more difficult." During this time he also memorized a text on Vinaya by an earlier Panchen Lama and every verse in forty pages of songs by Milarepa, about which he wrote, "Reciting it brought something that looked like renunciation to my mind."

In the autumn of 1695 he found a group heading for Lhasa and joined them. Unfortunately, upon arriving in Nakchuka (nag chu kha) they contracted a sickness and two people died. He also became ill, but, as he later wrote in his autobiography, was determined to delay his death: "If I were to die in this place it would be really unsuitable. I have to make it to Lhasa and pay homage to Jowo. Then I can die without regrets." He continued on despite lingering illness, and when he finally arrived at Sera Me in early 1696, his sickness cleared away and he began his studies.

His prodigious memorization skills immediately earned him notice; in the first month at Sera he memorized both the Abhisamayālaṅkāra and the Madhyamakāvatāra. In the spring of 1696 he formally entered the debating courtyard and also started to memorize a Collected Topics (*bsdus grwa*) text on Greater Cause and Effect, but found this difficult. His teacher, Tashi Pelzang (bkra shis dpal bzang, d.u.) expressed surprise, given Drakpa Sherab's earlier accomplishments. Thinking that the problem lay in his unfamiliarity with the genre, he set about memorizing a wide variety of Collected Topics texts, focusing on a forty-page text by an author named Ponlob Tsenpo (dpon slob btsan po, d.u.). After a month he became proficient in the genre, writing, "During this time I would engage into memorizing and recitation of texts with great enthusiastic effort and I would regard having to eat or drink as an interruption keeping me from the texts. During this time I was able to recite between two-hundred and three-hundred pages of Collected Topic texts."

Over the next ten years he proceeded to memorize a vast amount of commentaries on the Abhisamayālaṅkāra, Madhyamaka, Abhidharmakośa and Vinaya, more than other practitioners would read in one lifetime. For example, in his sixth year at Sera he memorized the complete set of commentaries by Jetsun Chokyi Gyeltsen on the Abhisamayālaṅkāra, both the general and the specific explanations, including the auxiliary commentaries, as well as Jetsun Chokyi Gyeltsen's Specific Commentary on Madhyamaka (*dbu ma'i mtha' dpyod*), and would recite them in relation to each other.

In his seventh year he memorized Jetsun Chokyi Gyeltsen's General Commentary on Madhyamaka (*dbu ma'i spyid don*); in his eighth year he memorized the Abhidharmakośa and the complete Vinaya and also recited ten thousand praises to Tārā and ten thousand Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī. In his ninth year he memorized the commentaries on Abhidharma

by the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (tA la'i bla ma 05 ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682).

He was scheduled to take his Geshe Lharampa (*dge bshes lha ram pa*) exam in 1705, but could not do so because of the death of the regent Sanggye Gyatso (sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653-1705). The Tibetan government ordered several tens of thousand monks to assemble for prayers in Lhasa for the deceased regent and suspended the awarding of Geshe degrees during that time. On the advice of his teacher Tsultrim Rinchen (tshul khrim rin chen, d.u.) however, he attended a separate examination at Sera, where he did very well. According to his account he was not contradicted once in two days of debate, an extremely rare accomplishment

The following year he went to Tsang where he took full ordination from the Fifth Pañchen Lama, Lobzang Yeshe (paN chen 02 blo bzang ye shes, 1663-1737). That autumn he entered Gyuto (rgyud stod) Monastery, where he sat for three debates. He also sat for debates in Ganden (dga' Idan) and Drepung ('bras spung) together with other Gyuto monks. In Drepung many scholars from the Gomang (sgo mang) College eagerly debated with him.

His plan was to stay at Gyuto for a further two to three years, but his turn to become the disciplinarian (*dge bskos*) of his house group (*khang tshan*) at Sera came up. The only excuse acceptable for declining the duty was to return to one's home country, and so in his own words, "As I did not have the slightest wish to become the disciplinarian, the thought of returning home started to arise in me."

In the spring of 1707 he joined a party of traders heading east. He arrived at Tsokha (tsho kha) on the fifteenth of the fourth month, where he stayed for six months. Upon his return to Chone later that year he established a hermitage close to his mother, who had requested him not to go into isolation. He stayed there until 1714, when he was requested by the local king, by the head lama of Chone and others to start a philosophy college in the monastery.

He accepted the request during the auspicious fourth Tibetan month, and for the next eight years served as head teacher. During those years he developed the curriculum; the first three years were devoted to the Collected Topics, which he taught himself mostly from memory. During the third year he taught Prajñāpāramitā.

Following his resignation, in 1722, he devoted himself to composing and publishing commentaries, and to his meditation practice. In 1727 he was asked to return to teaching. Two years later, in 1729, he was requested to teach at the new tantric college at Chone,

where he was soon made abbot. During that time he bestowed the initiations of Cakrasaṃvara and Guhyasamāja, and composed works on the generation and completion stages of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara and Yamāntaka. He also traveled to teach tantra at other places; most of the offerings he received he passed on to Chone or sent to Lhasa to be distributed to the monasteries and high lamas there.

He also continued to study, which he later reflected on in his autobiography: "Having returned from U-Tsang I did not stay idle but gave the transmission of the Kangyur once. I also repeatedly studied the sixteen volumes of texts that I had brought with me and my understanding of them increased. Especially while serving as teacher my discerning wisdom increased like the waxing moon, as I read repeatedly the great commentaries on Madhyamaka, the Prajñāpāramitā, Vinaya, Abhidharma and Pramāṇa, as well several commentaries on Prajñāpāramitā and individual part of the Kangyur, Tengyur and Lama Tsongkhapa's Works that I felt like studying.

"I had read [Tsongkhapa's] *Great Treatise on the Root Wisdom - Ocean of Reasoning* (*rtsa she tik chen rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*) and *The Great Treatise on Valid Cognition* (*rnam 'grel tikka chen po*) by Khedrubje Gelek Pelzang (mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang, 1385-1438) several times while in U-Tsang, but only understood one-third of the meaning. By reading them here again repeatedly in a summarized, extensive and complete manner, their meaning appears to me in the blink of an eye. It is without question difficult to have a complete realization of the meaning of both of them at one time, and to even have a mere understanding is rare even in U-Tsang. Here one is satisfied with even the thought of having a mere understanding. Having seen an ocean of scriptures, my joy and despondence compete with each other, but I do see that as the main achievement of my life."

He was not only a consummate student but also an enthusiastic and prolific commentator and writer. At the end of his life his writings consisted of eleven volumes and contained commentaries on Madhyamaka, the Abhisamayālaṅkāra, Vinaya, Abhidharma, Pramāṇa, as well as on many practices belonging to the four classes of tantra.

He also composed writings on Bon, but it is unclear whether these were ever carved into printing blocks.

In his autobiography he reflected on the process of beginning a composition, the value of writing, and the other religious practices in which he engaged: "When I retired to my room to compose a text useful for sentient beings I would receive auspicious omens. During that time I would also have many auspicious dreams. In one particular dream I am fairly

certain I got blessed by Nāgārjuna, but as it is impossible not to dream in a dream, I do have a certain measure of doubt.”

He continued, “In short, whatever of actions of body, speech and mind of a buddha one shows, that becomes one’s biography, and out of those three, the action of speech makes for the supreme biography. As it is stated:

'All actions are the path, the action of speech is supreme.'

Some may think, 'Well, if his purpose of composing was such, what practices did he do?' In general it is difficult to find the practice and purpose of the earlier great beings on a person of this age. Although I am mistakenly perceived as having good effort, as one can see some with little hearing and intelligence that engage in enthusiastic effort, I do not think of myself as possessing particularly great enthusiastic effort. I did few distracting and meaningless activities as I did little that was not one of the three: continually doing prayers, reading scriptures or composing. I did some approximation retreats, and regarding prayers I did those of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara and Yamāntaka and others, as well as their guru yogas, and the yogas of some other deities. I would recite the tantras of Cakrasaṃvara and Guhyasamāja, the Heart Sutra and Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti.

I recite many secret mantras and the names of many buddhas and bodhisattvas including requests to them. On a daily basis I am striving as much as possible in the heart points of the Lamrim, i.e. love and compassion, superior intention and bodhicitta, and the view. I do not want to go into greater detail.”

He passed away in 1748, the year of the earth dragon.

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