

Focus on the Twelve Primordial Masters

Date : August 2, 2018

Traditional texts state that from the most ancient times twelve great Masters or Buddhas have appeared in our world to spread the teaching. These twelve teachers that preceded Garab Dorje are described as *nirmanakaya* manifestations of the primordial Buddha Vajradhara and lived at different times and in different places, starting from an epoch when the life span was beyond calculation up to the manifestation of Buddha Sakyamuni. Thus the primordial Buddha manifested twelve forms to transmit the teaching according to the countless conditions and capacities of beings.

In Longchenpa's text "The Treasure of the Supreme Vehicle" (*theg mchog mdzog*), he lists the Twelve Primordial Masters, the places and times in which they lived and the teachings that they transmitted. Our presentation here is based on Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's "The Supreme Source" and "Ati Samten Gongdzöd – The Ati Treasury of Contemplation".

At Merigar West, in the Temple of Great Liberation (Dukhang Thongdrol), paintings of the Primordial Masters are depicted on the west side of the building, on a horizontal panel above the seat that Chögyal Namkhai Norbu uses when he is teaching. The figures were painted by Master Dugu Chögyal who is a reincarnation of Drugpa Chögyal Gyamtso, a famous tertön and Master of the Drugpa Kagyud lineage. Like his predecessors, Dugu Chögyal is a spiritual Master as well as being a highly gifted and well-known artist.

In addition to the Twelve Primordial Masters, the panel in the Merigar Gonpa also portrays the figures of Kuntusangpo and Vajrasattva as well as Shenrab Miwoche, the founder of the pre-Buddhist religion Bön. The descriptions that follow also include these three figures.

Chöku Kuntusangpo (Dharmakaya Samantabhadra)

This is the central figure in the panel portraying Samantabhadra, the Primordial Buddha, the essence of all Buddhas, primordial enlightenment beyond *samsara* and *nirvana*. Beyond the distinction between unity and multiplicity, he is present in all beings. He totally transcends all conceptual limits of origin and cessation, eternity and nothingness, being and non-being, vision and emptiness. He is the principle that contains *sambhogakaya* and *nirmanakaya* within himself. He is presented naked and blue in colour, symbols of his being without attributes, similar to the sky. In the Dzogchen teaching, Samantabhadra is the emptiness of *dharmakaya* that contains all manifestation in itself. The principle through which the infinite possibility that is inherent in the *dharmakaya* starts to manifest as sound and light is Sambhogakaya Vajrasattva.

Longku Dorje Sempa (Sambhogakaya Vajrasattva)

In the Dzogchen teaching, Vajrasattva is the principle from which all the diverse divinities of the *tantras* manifest. His body is white in colour symbolizing the source of all colours which then unite to create the visions of *sambhogakaya*. The figure of Vajrasattva is shown seated in the lotus position with his right hand holding a *vajra* and raised in front of his heart while his left hand rests at his left side holding a bell. His condition is beyond dualistic vision yet his ornaments and jewels are a symbol of the qualities of his potentiality which gives rise to countless manifestations. Vajrasattva is the source of the six million and four hundred thousand Dzogchen teachings that have been spread in the human world by the *nirmanakaya* Garab Dorje.

Khyeu Nangwa Tampa (Acintyaprabhasa)

At a time when the life span could not be calculated, all beings had bodies of light formed of the essence of the elements, were born miraculously and shone with their own light. At this time Buddha Vajradhara manifested in the divine dimension called Joyous Pagoda in the form of a white, eight-year-old child in the midst of a lotus with a thousand petals. He was called Khyeu Nangwa Tampa Samgyimikhyabpa or Supreme Child Inconceivable Vision. On each lotus petal an emanation identical to the central one appeared, foretelling the coming of one thousand Buddhas in that fortunate *kalpa*. The six million four hundred thousand stars that manifested in the sky represented the arrival of the same number of Dzogchen *tantras* and the seventeen that shone more brightly announced the seventeen *tantras* of the Man ngag sde series. He taught *The All-surpassing Sound (sGra thal 'gyur) tantra* and the two Bodhisattvas Nyima Rabtu Nangwa and Gaje Wangchug gathered his teachings.

Khyeu Ömitrugpa (Aksobhyaprabha)

When the life span diminished to ten million years, the light of beings decreased and the first passions appeared, in the dimension called Saha beings were born from five-coloured eggs made up of the substance of the elements. They were surrounded by a luminous aura, possessed miraculous powers and few passions, did not meet material obstacles and fed off the substance of the four elements. Buddha Khyeu Ömitrugpa (Child Imperturbable Light) appeared as one of them to two hundred thousand *dakinis* to indicate that the same number of female beings would be liberated in the future thanks to his teachings. He taught the five *tantras* of the Body, Voice, Mind, Qualities and Activities.

Jigpa Kyob

When the life span decreased to one hundred thousand years and the light continued to diminish because of the passions, beings were born from heat and humidity. They started to eat plants and became subject to the first illnesses caused by imbalances of the elements. Buddha Jigpa Kyob (Mind that Protects from Fear) was born in a place called Trödsher Düpa Wödkiil Pungpa (Mass of Light that gathers Humidity). He taught *The Emptying of Samsara* ('*Khor ba dong sprugs*), *The Peacock's Entwined Neck* (*rMa bya mjing snol*), *The Exhaustion of the Four Elements* ('*Byung bzhi zad pa*) and other *tantras*, whispering them to six hundred thousand *bodhisattvas* to show that an equal number of male beings would be liberated in the future thanks to his teachings.

left to right: Jigpa Kyob and Vajrasattva

Shönnu Namdrol

When the life span had diminished to eighty thousand years and passions had become even stronger, the bodies of beings lost their light and the sun and moon appeared. Due to desire and attachment, the sexual organs of beings developed and while at first looking at each other was sufficient to satisfy their desires, finally beings started to come together and procreate. They would dress in cotton or the bark of trees and feed from the 'fat of the earth' but were so greedy that this was all consumed. When they started to eat rice, their growing feeling of 'I and mine', their hatred and pride made this food disappear as well. Buddha Zhönnu Rolpa Nampar Tsewa (Young Manifestation of Compassion) was born from the uterus in the form of a ten year old child at this time in the place called Chagjung Ngaldun Nangwa (Apparition in the Womb of Conception). He taught eleven *tantras*: the five root *tantras* and six secondary Semde *tantras* to one thousand *yaksas*.

left to right: Shönnu Namdrol and Jigpa Kyob

Dorjechang (Vajradhara)

When the life span had become seventy thousand years, the Buddha Sixth Vajradhara was born as a divine *bodhisatta* in the dimension of the Thirty-Three Gods. In the garden of the Young Doctor (*'Tsho byed gzhon nu*) he transmitted teachings on the six, three and eighteen *paramitas* that encompassed methods with and without effort, including the *tantras* of Dzogpa Chenpo, to the seven heroic Buddhas of our times. He spent seventy-five years with the *devas* and left his testament to his disciple Norwang, entering *parinirvana* where he remained in *samadhi* for seven thousand years.

Shönnu Pawo Tobden (Kumaravirabalin)

When the average life span had diminished to sixty thousand years, Vajradhara reawakened from his *samadhi* and, stirred by compassion towards beings, was reborn as the son of a *yaksa* and a ferocious *dakini* in the dimension of the Cemetery of the Secret Manifestation, in the frightening place of the *yaksas* northeast of Mount Meru. His name was Shönnu Pawo Tobden (Young Powerful Hero) and he appeared as a frightening dwarf with three faces and six hands holding the worlds of the six classes of beings, the *devas*, *asuras*, humans, animals, *pretas* and hell beings. He taught the *Tantra of the Spontaneous State of Pure Presence (Rig pa rang shar)* and other *tantras* to the seven *bodhisattvas*, who listened immersed to the navel in clouds, and to countless *dakinis*, *devas* and *nagas*. After staying with them for a thousand years, he left his testament to the *yaksa* Lechö and entered *parinirvana* where he remained in *samadhi* for one hundred thousand years.

left to right: Trangsong Tröpai Gyalpo and Tsewai Rolpai Lodrö

Trangsong Tröpai Gyalpo

When the life span had decreased to ten thousand years, Vajradhara awakened once again from his *samadhi* to be reborn as Trangsong Tröpai Gyalpo (Wise Wrathful King) in the dimension of the *raksas* on earth, in a western region where there were many *bodhisattvas*. He transmitted the “ten *tantras* to subjugate negativities” and other teachings to ten million *raksasas* in a cave that radiated the sound “*ru*”. He did not leave a testament and at the end of his life was reabsorbed in *samadhi* where he remained for fifty thousand years.

left to right: Serwö Tampa and Shönnu Pawo Tobden

Serwö Tampa

When the life span had become five thousand years, Vajradhara was reborn in the place on this earth called Vulture Peak. He was born into a royal family and named Serwö Tampa (Supreme Golden Light). When he was twenty-five, he cut off his own hair and took the vows by himself in front of a *stupa*. He taught the Vinaya and Prajnaparamita teachings to innumerable *sravakas*.

Tsewai Rolpai Lodrö

When the life span was reduced to one thousand years, Tsewai Rolpai Lodrö (Intelligence Manifestation of Compassion) was born in northern Mongolia, in the land called Yui Minmachen (With Turquoise Eyebrows), near a *bodhi* tree growing next to a self-arisen *stupa*. He transmitted the “seven special *tantras*”, including *The All-creating King (Kun byed rgyal po)* and *Total Space (Nam mkha' che)* to countless *bodhisattvas* who were his disciples, remaining there for one hundred and twenty years.

Ösung Drepo (Kasyapa the Elder)

When the life span became five hundred years, Buddha Kasyapa the Elder came from the world of the Thirty-Three Gods and took birth in the human world to reduce the suffering of old age. He gave many teachings including the *anuyoga* scriptures to seven disciples in the place called Vulture Peak. He stayed there for seventy-five years after which he went to practice asceticism remaining seven years in the lotus position. At the end of his life he dissolved into a body of light,

leaving no mortal remains. His testament remained with the Brahmin Gön Sem.

left to right: Ngöndzog Gyalpo and Shakya Thubpa

Ngöndzog Gyalpo

When the life span was three hundred years Buddha Ngöndzog Gyalpo (Perfected King) was born at Vajrasana (Bodhgaya) as the son of a brahmin. Not far from the tree under which the Buddha of the present era, Sakyamuni, would attain enlightenment, he came before the council of the Lords of the Three Families (Manjusri, Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani) and transmitted all the teachings concerning the real condition as well as other *tantras*. He taught for twenty-five years after which he entered *parinirvana* displaying the ordinary signs of death in order to show his disciples of lower capacity the truth of the suffering of birth, old age, illness and death.

Shenrab Miwoche

Shenrab Miwoche (The Great Supreme Man of the Shen) was the founder of Bön, the tradition of pre-Buddhist Tibet. According to biographies, he was born as a prince of the Shen clan around eighteen thousand years ago in the land of Olmo Lungring, the sacred land of the *bönpos*, probably located north-west of Tibet. At the age of thirty-one, he renounced the world and dedicated himself to spiritual life and soon started teaching the *bön* doctrine. His biographies describe his 'twelve great deeds', paralleling symbolism commonly found in tales of the lives of the Buddha, which include the spreading of the *bön* teaching and the subduing of its main enemy, the demon Khyabpa Lagring who eventually became one of his disciples. On the only occasion that he entered Tibet, he transmitted some ritual instructions but considered that people were not ready for his teaching, prophesying that it would flourish there in the future. According to his followers, his teaching which was broadly subdivided into Nine Vehicles and the 'Four Doors plus the Fifth, the Treasure' spread in the kingdom of Shang Shung as well as in India, Kashmir, China and Tibet.

Shakya Thubpa (Buddha Shakyamuni)

When the life span became one hundred years, the Buddha of our era descended from the heaven of Tushita into the human world to spread the Dharma, taking birth as Gautama Siddhartha. He was born to Mayadevi and Suddhodana, king of the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, lived a sheltered joyous life at court and as a young man married Yasodhara, who bore him a son, Rahula. Secretly leaving the palace that had been his sole abode, Siddhartha encountered a man afflicted by old age, a sick person and finally a corpse. These encounters showed him that no person is free from the suffering of existence. When he met a monk begging for food, he decided to leave his life at the palace and search for a spiritual path that would lead to liberation from suffering. Siddhartha practiced extreme asceticism on the banks of the Nairanjara river for six years but without attaining the fruit he hoped for. Then he came to the seat of Vajrasana and decided to remain under the *bodhi* tree until he reached enlightenment. In this place, Mara, the lord of demons, tried to trap Siddhartha with the three main passions of ignorance, desire and hatred but without success. Then, purified of all obscurations, Siddhartha obtained the Awakening, knowledge of the real condition of all phenomena and became the Buddha. He gave his first teaching, the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, at the Deer Park in the vicinity of Sarnath, near Benares. At Varanasi and other places he taught the Four Noble Truths and the different gradual paths. Later in his life, in order to show beings the impermanence of all phenomena, the Buddha became seriously ill, lay down on his right side and entered *parinirvana*.

Reprinted from The Mirror issue 108, January/February 2011, pages 13-14.

View and download issue 108 for free from our [archive](#)