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# Sutra and Tantra: The Profound and Miraculous

ROBERT A. F. THURMAN

## Lesson 1: The Spiritual Life of Tsong Khapa

Reading:  
*A Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages:  
Teachings on the Guhyasamāja Tantra*  
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# A LAMP TO ILLUMINATE THE FIVE STAGES

*Teachings on Guhyasamāja Tantra*

Tsongkhapa  
Translated by Gavin Kilty



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## Translator's Introduction

### *Tantra*

Buddhist tantra of the kind found in Tibet and other Himalayan regions was mostly brought from the Indian subcontinent between the eighth and eleventh centuries in two great waves known as the early and late translations. These tantras were gathered by a few brave souls who made the perilous journey from Tibet to India to locate them. Sometimes they were translated in India with the help of experienced Indian pandits. Occasionally, Indian pandits traveled to Tibet to assist in translation. A few Indian Buddhist masters journeying to Tibet brought tantras with them that were then rendered into Tibetan.

So what is a tantra, and how does it differ from that other genre of Buddhist teachings known as *sutra*? All Buddhist teachings are designed to lead the disciple from the unsatisfactory state of existence, known as *samsara*, in which we are prone to a host of unwanted experiences grouped under the term “suffering.” The essential component of *samsara*, the “cycle of existence,” is that we are not in control of our destiny but languish under the sway of various mental afflictions that bring about this suffering. The teachings of the Buddha are designed to place us on the path that leads to the cessation of suffering (*nirvana*) or to the higher state of the enlightenment of buddhahood. For practitioners on the bodhisattva path of the Mahayana, there is also no difference between *sutra* and *tantra* in terms of the motivation animating the practice; in both cases, the practitioner is compelled by a special mind called *bodhicitta*, the wish for complete enlightenment in order to be best able to liberate all beings from *samsara*.

The practices that lead to the cessation of suffering and especially to enlightenment can be grouped under the headings of method and wisdom. *Method* deals with goal-oriented, aspirational practices such as the development of love and compassion, patience, perseverance, and so on, while *wisdom* concentrates on penetrating the depths of reality. Method and wisdom

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are said to be the two wings of the bird that flies to enlightenment. Two wings are needed because the goal of buddhahood is essentially twofold: the resultant and enlightened state known as the *dharmakāya*, or “wisdom body,” which refers to the unencumbered knowledge of a buddha, the enlightened mind, and the resultant embodiment of that enlightened mind, known as the *rūpakāya*, or “form body.” The wing of method accomplishes the *rūpakāya*, and that of wisdom accomplishes the *dharmakāya*.

The reality or final truth of all phenomena, which is obscured by our omnipresent unknowing state of mind, is sought out by the practices grouped under the category of wisdom. This reality is not something invented by the Buddha or added by later Buddhist commentators. In that sense, it is not a Buddhist truth; it is the actual way phenomena exist, and has existed, since time immemorial. Because of this, any Buddhist wisdom practice—sutra or tantra—aimed at discovering this truth is seeking out the same reality. There is no difference between sutra and tantra in terms of the ultimate truth.

However, the practices of method in tantra are generally recognized to be superior to those of sutra. This is especially true in the highest class of tantra, known as *highest yoga tantra* (*anuttarayoga tantra*). There, *method* refers to two exclusive practices not found in nontantric Buddhist practice. First, *method* can refer to the *type* of mind that focuses on the ultimate truth, or emptiness. Normally, a mind dedicated to the perception of emptiness belongs to the wisdom side of practice as mentioned above. But in tantra this mind is combined with a great bliss that is produced by bringing the inner winds, or energies (*vāyu*), into the central channel (*dhūtī*) of the body. This manipulation of the bodily winds is achieved by a variety of methods, described in the present text. The bliss and the consciousness focused on emptiness are united as one. Such a bliss-consciousness is a very powerful and fast method to develop the wisdom that understands emptiness. The bliss consciousness also is transformed through yogic practice into the form of the deity of the tantra. This is method, and the mind cognizing emptiness is wisdom. Because these two are essentially one entity, method and wisdom in tantra are said to be of one mind. This is not found outside of tantra. In sutra practices, wisdom is supported and supplemented by method practices such as compassion, and method is accompanied by the wisdom practices of understanding impermanence and the nature of phenomena, but they are never of one entity.

The other type of method found in tantra is the development of a form known as the *illusory body*. This body is created from the subtle inner winds

and is in the aspect of the resultant buddha form that is the goal of the practice. This illusory body is the exclusive cause of the form body of a buddha, the rūpakāya. Alongside this practice is the wisdom development of the mental state of clear light. This is in the nature of a very subtle level of mind and is the exclusive cause for the enlightened mind, or dharmakāya. These two practices are explained in great depth in the text and are not found in the sutra path. Tantra, therefore, is a fast method for gaining the two enlightened forms and is characterized by exclusive method practices.

#### GENERATION STAGE

The practice of tantra follows an order of two stages: the generation stage and the completion stage. This work deals exclusively with the five stages of the completion stage. The generation stage, which must precede the completion stage, is characterized by the repeated visualization or imagination of yourself and your personal environment as enlightened forms. The purpose of these complex practices, known as *sādhana*s or *self-generation practices*, is to displace the ordinary view of yourself and personal environment and to replace it with a divine or enlightened view. This is only an imagined process and not an actual transformation; the generation stage is a preparatory ripening before the completion stage, during which these imagined enlightened forms are made real.

Generation-stage practices, therefore, consist of sequenced visualizations, usually beginning with a dissolution of the ordinary self and environment. From that state of emptiness arises a Sanskrit syllable, which by way of a few more transformations arises as an enlightened form such as a deity or a mandala. These transformative processes are repeated many times during the recitation and practice of the *sādhana*. In the form of the deity, many enlightened activities such as initiations and blessings take place, all performed to reinforce the imagined transformation of yourself from an ordinary being to a divine one. Repeated practice ripens you for the higher completion-stage practices, in which these imagined processes are made real through manipulation of the inner winds and psychic penetration of various vital points in the body known as *cakras*, or channel wheels.

#### COMPLETION STAGE

This text begins at the point where the yogi, or practitioner, has been ripened by prolonged practice of the generation stage, which itself has to be preceded by an empowerment or initiation (*abhiṣekha*) into the practice of that

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particular tantric deity by a qualified master. The completion stage completes or perfects what was begun on the generation stage.

The completion stage itself is subdivided into stages. Commonly there are five, giving us the “five stages” (*pañcakrama*) in the title of this book, but the first one is itself divided into two, giving us six in all: body isolation, speech isolation, mind isolation, illusory body, clear light, and union. Another way of dividing the completion stage is in terms of the “six yogas.” These are described in the eighteenth and final chapter of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, which is also classified as a separate work called the *Guhyasamāja Later Tantra*. These six yogas are also the means by which the completion stage of the unique *Kālacakra Tantra* is taught.<sup>1</sup> Tsongkhapa spends a lot of time correlating the six yogas with the five stages.

### *The Five Stages*

#### THE THREE ISOLATIONS

The three isolations of body, speech, and mind are so called because through their practices the yogi isolates body, speech, and mind from ordinary perception. This is different from the imagined transformation from the ordinary to the divine found in the generation stage because the completion stage is characterized by the yogic practice of bringing the winds into the central channel, or *dhūtī*. These inner winds are of vital significance in the realm of tantra. The winds exist within the human body and were first created at conception alongside the other components of the physical body. They are classified into five major, or root, winds and five secondary winds. Classification is according to function. These functions essentially concern the inner mobility of the human body and include such things as breathing, digesting food, and expelling waste. They also have their areas of the body in which they primarily operate. The main wind is called the *life-sustaining wind* (*prāṇa*), or just *life wind*, which as its name suggests is the most vital wind of the body. Imbalances in this wind can cause serious illness and even death.

As mentioned above, the winds are formed through a gradual process at conception and birth. Likewise, at death they follow the reverse process, dissolving gradually into the center of the heart cakra. In this process of creation and dissolution, or *withdrawing*, the winds carry with them various conceptual states of mind. These states of minds, which are called *intrinsic natures* (*prakṛti*), become increasingly coarse as they are created in the womb and increasingly subtle as they withdraw at death. Winds and the mind, or

consciousness, are together like a horse and its rider. The horse is equated with the winds and the rider with the mind, because like the horse, the winds carry the mind to where it is directed. Mind has no power to move without the accompanying horse of the winds. The natural arising and withdrawing of the winds is used in tantra to achieve its aims. In fact, many of the body's natural functions are harnessed to various tantric practices.

As the winds and conceptual states of mind withdraw during the death process, so the winds and consciousness become subtler. The subtle mind and subtle wind are ideal for the development of the respective causes of the dharmakāya and rūpakāya of a buddha. Therefore it makes sense to use them for this purpose by recreating such subtle states while still alive and employing them on the completion-stage path. Just as the winds withdraw into the central channel at death, so completion-stage practices, such as the three isolations, bring the winds from the two side channels into the central channel through the psychic penetration of the cakras, which loosens the channel knots there. Such a practice brings forth the subtle mind accompanied by the subtle wind, and this mind is then focused on the nature of reality, or emptiness, as described above.

Therefore, although body isolation involves similar practices to the generation stage in its visualization of various parts of the body as different deities, it is characterized by the bringing, or the ability to bring, the winds into the central channel. Nevertheless, as Tsongkhapa points out, there are good arguments for including body isolation at least partly within the generation stage.

Speech isolation is not an isolation of actual speech in the sense of separating the articulated sounds of the vocal cords from ordinary existence. It refers to practices called *vajra repetition* and *prāṇāyāma*. These make use of the inner winds and breath, which are often regarded as the root cause of speech. *Vajra repetition* refers to the exclusive form of mantra repetition on the completion stage, which is not vocalized chanting but an identification of the tones of the movement of the inner breath with the three fundamental syllables—*oṃ*, *āḥ*, and *hūṃ*. *Prāṇāyāma* was a yogic practice well known in ancient India. It involved manipulation of the breathing process as a way of increasing lifespan and promoting good health. In Buddhist tantra the manipulation of the breath is an integral part of *prāṇāyāma* practice, but as this work shows, the goal and purpose are vastly different. Speech isolation follows body isolation because mantra recitation exclusive to the completion stage has to be recited by a practitioner who has gained the *body vajra* of body isolation.



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The final isolation, isolation of mind, is practiced because in order to attain enlightenment, the practitioner must understand the nature of mind in tantric terms and use that mind to focus on ultimate reality by way of the exclusive tantric methods described above. This practice involves understanding the intrinsic natures and making use of the processes of withdrawing the winds, accomplished in vajra recitation, to develop the wisdoms associated with each stage of the withdrawal process.

This withdrawal process corresponds to the normal withdrawal process at death, during which various signs and appearances occur as the consciousness passes through the process of death. The same process is initiated in life by the experienced completion-stage practitioner who deliberately withdraws the inner winds to the heart center. If practitioners are unable to perform this during life, they will make use of the process as it naturally occurs at death.

The first signs to occur are those indicating that the four elements are withdrawing into each other. The elements withdraw in the order: earth, water, fire, and air. The signs accompanying these withdrawals are appearances resembling a mirage, smoke, lights in the sky, and a flame, respectively. The last sign, the flame, is the sign of the air element withdrawing into the consciousness. After this process the consciousness itself goes through a process of withdrawal whereby it becomes increasingly subtler. There are four stages to this withdrawal of consciousness, each resulting in a particular appearance. These four appearances resemble the whiteness of moonlight known as *appearance*, the reddishness of sunset known as *increase*, the darkness of night known as *close-to-attainment*, and the clarity of a cloudless sky at dawn, known as *clear light*. These four are also known as the *four empty states*—first empty state, the very empty state, the greatly empty state, and the all-empty state. The last of these is known as *death clear light* in the ordinary dying process and *illustrative clear light* when activated in meditation. This clear-light mind represents the subtlest level of consciousness and is the ideal mental state to use for focusing on emptiness, or ultimate truth.

## THE UNION OF THE TWO TRUTHS

The last three stages involve the practice of uniting the *illusory body* with the *clear light* to form the final stage of *union*. This indivisible union is the second type of method-and-wisdom union described above. “Method and wisdom united” refers either to the union of bliss and emptiness, as was done earlier, or to this type of union in which the illusory body is method and the state

of clear light is wisdom. Method illusory body is also referred to as *conventional truth* and wisdom clear light as *ultimate truth*. In sutra teachings, the two truths are levels or modes of existence, but in tantra they are also the two causes for the two enlightened forms. *Conventional-truth illusory body* is the exclusive cause of the rūpakāya, and *ultimate-truth clear light* is the exclusive cause of the dharmakāya.

The creation of an illusory body is necessary because without it the yogi would have no exclusive or substantial cause of the rūpakāya, or form body. It is an exclusive cause because it is formed from the subtle wind within the body, and the form body too must be a product of the subtle wind. They are therefore in a direct causal chain. The illusory body is also a nonexclusive or cooperative cause of the dharmakāya, which is in the category of wisdom. The exclusive cause of the dharmakāya is the following stage of clear light. Therefore the illusory-body stage comes before the clear-light stage. This subtle wind from the illusory body is activated or induced through the processes of withdrawing the coarse winds in the isolation meditations. Although this illusory body is separate from the coarse body, and can even travel outside, it is not a separate identity.

In a normal death process, the consciousness withdraws through a series of stages, during which various appearances occur, as described above, until it reaches the death clear light. This is a very brief state, often not even noticed by the dying person. After it passes, the person, now officially dead, passes into the intermediate state, or *bardo*, in the form he or she will adopt in the next life, which is determined by the karma that has ripened at that time. This intermediate-state physical form is not one of flesh and blood or even matter but is constructed of the same subtle wind that creates the illusory body. The intermediate-state body is even said to be a *kind* of illusory body. It is these normal life and death processes that are manipulated in completion-stage practice. Therefore, during the death process, yogis will replace the intermediate state with a deliberately created illusory body in the form of the deity of the tantra they are practicing. Moreover, as mentioned, the advanced completion-stage practitioner does not have to wait for death but can recreate the same illusory body during meditation in life. The often-repeated statement that in tantra you can attain enlightenment in one life is based on the fact that if you achieve an illusory body in life, you will attain enlightenment in that life or at death.

The illusory body is generated to enhance the potency of the wisdom of clear light, which will eradicate the final hindrances to enlightenment

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known as the *obscurations to omniscience* (*jñeyāvaraṇa*). This is done by withdrawing the illusory body into the clear light. As we saw, an actualization of clear light occurs naturally in the death process. Many instances of clear light are also manifested by yogic practices on the earlier stages, where they are used to focus on the reality of phenomena, or emptiness. However, here *clear light* refers to the direct realization by innate bliss of the very subtle reality. When the illusory body withdraws into this clear light, the illusory body itself disappears, but the remaining clear light is known as the *actual* clear light, as opposed to the *illustrative* clear light found on earlier stages. Only when the illusory body itself is purified by the clear light will the illusory body remain and not disappear. This is achieved by using the withdrawing and creating processes, which correspond to the processes of death and the intermediate state. The clear light is first achieved by the withdrawal, or dissolution, of the illusory body, and in the subsequent process of creation corresponding to the arising of the intermediate state, the illusory body is again produced, but this time in a purified form. This purified illusory body will not vanish when the actual clear light is actualized. This is the beginning of union, the last stage.

The stage of union represents the union of method and wisdom, conventional and ultimate truth, pure illusory body and actual clear light, and when perfected, the indivisible union of the rūpakāya and dharmakāya of the enlightened state. These two wings of practice run alongside each other throughout tantra—and in sutra practice too. Complementing and supporting each other, they reach their zenith when inseparably joined as bliss and emptiness or as illusory body and clear light. The development of these two is the very essence of all Buddhist practice, but in tantra they take on a special significance, becoming fast and powerful methods for attaining the state of a buddha.

### *The Guhyasamāja Tantra*

The topic of this great work by Tsongkhapa is the completion stage of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*. This tantra belongs to the highest yoga tantra class, which means it contains special methods for attaining the two enlightened forms described above that are not found in the three lower classes of tantra. For the three lower classes of action (*kriyā*), performance (*caryā*), and yoga tantras do not contain methods for bringing the winds into the central channel. The Sanskrit *guhyasamāja* means “a gathering of secrets.” According to

one tradition, this refers to a gathering or bringing together of the secrets of the body, speech, and mind of the enlightened state. According to another tradition it means a place where the meanings of all other tantras are gathered. "Secrets" does not mean something deliberately withheld but something so difficult to comprehend that its meaning is not apparent.

The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* holds a special place in the tantric tradition. It is referred to as the root of all other classes of tantra. Tsongkhapa says, "In the *Root Tantra*, in the section on the title, it states that every secret of the body, speech, and mind of every tathāgata is contained within this tantra." He devotes a whole section on its merits. There he recounts how just to read, study, or even come into contact with this tantra is of immense benefit, and that as long as the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* remains, the teachings of the Buddha remain also, because "it is the amulet carrying the Buddhadharmā."

The tantra itself still exists in the original Sanskrit and was translated into Tibetan during the second wave of translations in the tenth century, although it may also have been translated during the early translation period.<sup>2</sup> It consists of seventeen chapters with an eighteenth chapter, the *Later Tantra*, classified as a separate work. The chapters describe the various practices and rituals of the generation stage and stages. Each tantra will have its own main deity and own "residence," or *mandala*, which also usually contains a number of other deities. Depending on the tradition, the main deity of the Guhyasamāja generation stage is either Akṣobhyavajra or Mañjuvajra, and the number of deities is thirty-two or nineteen. According to tradition, most tantras were taught by the Buddha in his tantric form of Vajradhara or as the main deity of the mandala. It is also accepted traditionally that some were taught by the Buddha in his lifetime and others by way of various manifestations after he had passed away. The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* is one of those taught by the Buddha in his lifetime. The Buddha is present throughout the whole tantra, teaching and revealing the secrets to the large assembly.

#### EXPLANATORY TANTRAS, COMMENTARIES, AND TRADITIONS

As mentioned above, tantra is known as "secret practice" not due to some parsimonious attitude of not wanting to share it but because its subject matter is profound and difficult to access. Because of the way it makes use of various bodily processes, such as those involved in sexual practice, and of its attitudes toward matters generally regarded as "unclean," it is also open to misinterpretation and denigration by those who know very little about it. Moreover, and maybe because of this reason, much of the writing in the

tantras is enigmatic and subject to interpretation. Some of the phrases have varying levels of meaning. Because of this opacity, explanatory tantras often coexist with the tantras. These are also accepted as tantras taught by the Buddha. The eighteenth chapter of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, for instance, is viewed as an explanatory tantra of the first seventeen chapters. One tantra can have many explanatory tantras—the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* has up to five.

Still, even the explanations in these explanatory tantras need elucidating, and so there arose a corpus of commentaries by Indian masters. Because of its prominence, many commentaries on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* appeared in India. This led to commentarial traditions being formed, united by the similarity in their presentations of the Guhyasamāja path. The two main traditions were known as the Ārya tradition and the Jñānapāda tradition, each named after the initiator of the tradition. “Ārya” refers to Nāgārjuna and “Jñānapāda” to Buddhaśrījñāna. Both masters’ seminal works on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* spawned traditions of subcommentaries.

Nāgārjuna, of course, is well known in the Buddhist world as the influential author of several philosophical works on the ultimate nature of phenomena. According to tradition, he also composed works on Guhyasamāja and other tantric practices. Some deny that the sutra Nāgārjuna and the tantric Nāgārjuna are the same person because the dating of the two developments does not add up unless you accept that he had an abnormally long life. However, the sutra Nāgārjuna was a towering figure, and his philosophical heirs such as Āryadeva and Candrakīrti are also credited with works on the Guhyasamāja in keeping with the interpretation of their master. Nāgārjuna is said to have reached the stage of an *ārya*, or “exalted one” in his spiritual practice, meaning he had attained the level of a direct, nonconceptual cognition of ultimate truth. It is for this reason Nāgārjuna’s tradition is called the Ārya tradition. Nāgārjuna heard the Guhyasamāja from the yogi Saraha, but apparently the latter did not compose any specific works on this tantra and therefore is not credited as the tradition’s founder. Instead, Nāgārjuna’s *Five Stages* became the authority for the Ārya tradition of interpretation.

Buddhaśrījñāna received his teachings on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* in a vision directly from Mañjuśrī, the personification of the wisdom of the Buddha. He then composed several influential works on the tantra. Tsongkhapa says that Buddhaśrījñāna in his main work, *Oral Teachings of Mañjuśrī*, concentrates on the *Later Tantra*, which explains the tantra using the six-branch yoga rather than the five stages. Of the two traditions, Tsongkhapa clearly favors the Ārya tradition, and this work focuses on that tradition.

The *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, along with the *Later Tantra*, most of the explanatory tantras, and much of the commentarial literature from these two traditions, was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan during the later translation period, as described above. It is because of this great accomplishment of translation that Tsongkhapa and many other Tibetan masters were able to study and investigate the Indian teachings on the Guhyasamāja generation stage and fivefold completion stage.

Practice or teaching lineages of Guhyasamāja require an actual transmission of the texts and the oral tradition in the form of face-to-face teachings from an Indian master. According to Tsongkhapa seven Guhyasamāja teaching lineages appeared in Tibet by way of the great Tibetan translator Marpa (1012–97), who traveled more than once to India and Nepal to collect teachings. He received teachings and transmissions on both the Ārya and Jñānapāda traditions of Guhyasamāja from seven masters, although his main teacher in India was the Indian pandit Nāropa. Subsequently, the widespread Marpa Guhyasamāja tradition in Tibet relied on the works and teachings of Nāropa, especially his *Clear Compilation of the Five Stages*.

The eleventh-century translator Gö Khukpa Lhetsé traveled to India twelve times, where he studied the Ārya tradition of the Guhyasamāja literature from nine Indian teachers. He brought back to Tibet not only textual explanations of the classic texts but also the collections of core teachings that had developed around the classic texts. Tsongkhapa makes it clear that he holds the lineage of Gö in high regard. There was also an oral-tradition lineage of the five stages that was transmitted by the Indian master Jñānākara to the Tibetan master Naktsö (1011–64). Tsongkhapa mentions that there were, apparently, other Guhyasamāja traditions in Tibet in the early days, started by one or two Tibetan translators but that they did not last. The *Blue Annals* states that the Buddhaśrījñāna Guhyasamāja tradition was introduced into Tibet by the great translator Lochen Rinchen Sangpo and subsequently by the pandits Smṛti and Śūnyaśrī.

According to the *Blue Annals* and the Sakya master Amé Shap's *History of the Guhyasamāja*,<sup>3</sup> the Marpa tradition and the Gö tradition were transmitted eventually to the great scholar Butön Rinchen Drup (1290–1364). Also, the *Blue Annals* states that many masters of the Marpa Guhyasamāja tradition studied the Guhyasamāja of the Gö tradition. These include Tsurton Wangi Dorjé, an actual disciple of Marpa, and Tsurton's own disciple Khön Gepa Kirti. Tsongkhapa received the Marpa Guhyasamāja tradition from Khyungpo Lhepa Shönu Sönam, who had received it from Butön Rinpoché.

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He received the Gö tradition from Khyungpo Lhepa as well as from Rendawa Shönu Lodrö, who was one of his main teachers.

### *Tsongkhapa's Guhyasamāja Legacy*

Tsongkhapa then went on to become one of the most influential figures in the reform and subsequent development of the Guhyasamāja tradition in Tibet. He saw the Guhyasamāja tradition in Tibet as being in a state of decline, and he took on the responsibility of reforming it. He speaks of “the darkness of unknowing and misunderstanding surrounding the five stages,” and says, “The teachings in general, and specifically the Ārya tradition, have for a long time been severely weakened,” and concludes, “With a pure motivation for the severely weakened Guhyasamāja Ārya tradition to be restored and remain strong for a long time, I composed this work.” He felt empowered to take on this task because, as it says in the colophon, he received “special signs of permission to compose this work.” His confidence in approaching such a mammoth task derives too from his identity as a “Guhyasamāja yogi.” Driven by this reformist motivation, the tone and structure of the work is very much one of a close examination of the Indian and Tibetan Guhyasamāja literary traditions followed by conclusions based on reasoning and scripture. Therefore Tsongkhapa’s rejections and refutations of presentations of various aspects of the tantra put forward by a few Indian and Tibetan commentators, and sometimes of entire compositions, is done not to further his own views but in the spirit of restoring the tantra to an uncorrupted state. In this sense the work is far more than just a presentation of the fundamentals of the tantra.

The importance Tsongkhapa gave to the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* can be seen from the number of works he composed on this topic. Even after composing his groundbreaking work on the tenets of tantra in general, *Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*, he set out to write several works covering the path of Guhyasamāja. These ranged from annotations to commentaries on the initiation procedure, explanatory tantras, Indian compositions, and the generation and completion stages of the Guhyasamāja path. Although generally he leaned toward the Gö tradition, he brought out and developed parts of the Marpa tradition too. These include composing a short work entitled *Explicit Instructions for the Five Stages Complete on One Seat*, which is based on the Guhyasamāja teachings of Nāropa. In this present work also he expands on and evaluates aspects of the Marpa tradition, such as the instructions on the nine mixings.



Tsongkhapa's significance in the development of the Guhyasamāja teachings in Tibet cannot be overestimated. The *Blue Annals* states: "Generally, the master Tsongkhapa was of immense benefit to the doctrine, and specifically he was the one who spread the Guhyasamāja in this land."<sup>4</sup>

In the lineage list provided by Amé Shap, the Guhyasamāja lineages received by Butön made their way into the Sakya tradition. He states that of the two main Guhyasamāja lineages, the Sakya masters hold the Gö lineage as their main tradition. Marpa is regarded as the father of the many offshoots of the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism, and clearly the Marpa Guhyasamāja tradition became its main Guhyasamāja practice lineage. Tsongkhapa also received the Marpa and Gö Guhyasamāja lineages, and as he clearly favored the Gö tradition, it would seem that the subsequent spread of the Guhyasamāja in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, of which Tsongkhapa was the founder, relies more on the Gö tradition. The main seat of Geluk Guhyasamāja practice is in the Upper and Lower Tantric Colleges, the centers of Geluk tantric instruction. There a tradition of teaching the Four Commentaries combined<sup>5</sup> is followed.

The Guhyasamāja continues to be a main tantric practice of the Geluk school today. Despite the above declaration from the *Blue Annals*, it is not practiced today in the Nyingma school. In the Sakya school the practice of Guhyasamāja has declined. This is also true in the Kagyü tradition, although recently the head of the Karma Kagyü, the Karmapa, assigned different tantras to various monasteries in an attempt to revive them. The Guhyasamāja was among these tantras.

### *Structure of the Book*

*A Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*, as its title suggests, is a work on the Guhyasamāja completion stage. Its aim is to arrive at a conclusive presentation of its five stages by way of a thorough examination of all the available Indic and Tibetan material on this tantra. At that time, there were evidently many differing and contradictory assertions on the practice and theory of the five stages among the traditions in Tibet and in the works of Indian masters. There was even doubt as to which Indian works were valid authorities on Guhyasamāja. In general terms, there was disagreement on what intrinsic characteristics delineated the class of highest yoga tantra into *father tantra* and *mother tantra*. It was this mass of seeming confusion that Tsongkhapa faced when he composed this work—his last, incidentally, before he died.

Tsongkhapa therefore begins this work with an examination of the criteria



for dividing highest yoga tantra into mother and father tantras. His approach here, and in all sections of this book, is to take prevailing assertions of the time, examine them using reasoning and the support of valid scripture, and come to a decisive position, which he then takes as his own position. In doing so, he avoids being dogmatic and is a reformer in the best sense of the word.

He then moves on to the Guhyasamāja father tantra and cites reasons and scripture for it being praised as the king of tantras. Part 1 of the book ends with a detailed and thorough investigation of Indic Guhyasamāja literature. This includes research into the tantra itself and its subsequent explanatory tantras followed by the commentarial traditions, with a special emphasis on the Ārya tradition and its main proponents. Tsongkhapa does not shy away from rejecting an Indian text as misleading or falsely attributed if it does not stand up to reasoning.

Part 2 begins with an account of how the Guhyasamāja traditions arrived in Tibet. This has been briefly described above. This is followed by Tsongkhapa asserting the importance of the student training well in the sutra path of bodhicitta and understanding emptiness before entering the path of the Vajra Vehicle. He then describes the necessity of following the prescribed sequence of initiation, maintaining pure tantric vows and pledges, and training well in the generation stage before embarking on the completion stage. It seems that there were misconceptions at that time questioning how necessary it was to prepare for completion-stage practice with prior generation-stage training, and Tsongkhapa devotes some space to addressing this point.

Part 3 deals with the essential components of completion-stage practice. This mainly concerns the union of bliss and emptiness, and the practice of focusing the mind and winds at particular vital points on the body in order to bring about this innate bliss. These are concepts that distinguish highest yoga tantra from sutra practice and lower classes of tantra and make essential reading for anyone who wants to understand this core component of this class of tantra.

In part 3 Tsongkhapa discusses the five stages in general terms, but he begins with an examination of the corpus of literature on Guhyasamāja known as *core instructions* (*man ngag, upadeśa*). This term is often applied to the oral teachings on sutra and tantra given by Indian and Tibetan masters that are then passed on, either orally or in writing, to become a lineage or transmission. In the tantric vehicle the purpose of these instructions is that they should open up the often inaccessible meanings of the tantras. In that sense they form an indispensable link in the chain leading from the root tantra to a good understanding planted in the mind of the disciple. Therefore

any core instruction on a tantra must have its source in the tantra itself. However, over time it can be seen that the link between the core instruction given by a lama and the tantra it supposedly explains could become stretched and even broken. It is this concern that Tsongkhapa addresses in this chapter. Clearly there were at that time some core instruction texts that had no basis in the great tantric works of India, and Tsongkhapa points this out.

Parts 4 through to 9 are the body of this work and deal with the five stages in order. Tsongkhapa also examines to see which of the six yogas correlates with each of the five stages. These chapters contain encyclopedic information on completion-stage practice and phenomena associated with it. For example, the chapter on speech isolation contains a lengthy presentation on the inner winds that includes descriptions, locations, functions, and associations. The mind-isolation chapter describes the four appearances and lists the eighty intrinsic natures. These phenomena are not restricted to Guhyasamāja but are found in much tantric literature. Part 8 establishes how all sutra paths must eventually join the tantric path if they are to lead to enlightenment, and part 9 deals with the final stage of union.

Part 10 breaks off from the order of the five stages and deals with the practice of *tantric activities*. This is a practice found on both generation and completion stages. It involves physical reenactment of the visualized practices found in the two stages and involves, for the most part, the staging of elaborate ritual activities involving other people as well as the main practitioner. Often these other participants mirror the number, position, and activities of the deities in the Guhyasamāja mandala. Hence masks and costumes play an important part. Not all tantric activities involve elaborate rituals. One type labeled *completely unelaborated* involves only the yogi. Since all such a yogi's activities are totally inward, outwardly he or she may appear to be someone whose only activities are sleeping and eating. Part 10 also deals with enlightenment from a tantric perspective.

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