KONG-SPRUL YON-TAN RGYA-MTSHO

—TASHI DENSAPA

Kong-sprul Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho, the nineteenth century Bya'-brgyud-pa Bhu-ma, is not an unfamiliar figure in the literature and religion of Tibet. His name appears in almost every literary text, as well as religious work, and it is verbalized daily in the chantings of numerous monks and laymen of both Bya'-brgyud-pa and Nying-ma-sta Sefis. He was born in the Water Bird Year of the 14th cycle of the Tibetan lunar calendar (i.e. 1813 Christian Era) at Kong-sgrub in Zal-mo-gyang of Chou-tsho gling-grub in Khamb (Eastern Tibet). His father, who passed away a few years after his birth, was Kyung-po Bhu-ma Gyung-drung bstan-'dzin and his mother’s name was Bka'-shi’s 'tsug. He was brought up by his step-father namely Bshad-nams ‘phel, who taught him the basic education when he was 5 years old. From an early age the boy displayed his talents of learning and within a short period he was able to fluently read and write with perfection without much coaching.

When he was 3 years old, Gtsang sman-rts Mi-khanpo Bshod-nams bo-gros took the first sample of Kong-sprul’s hair as a sign of acceptance into the Sangha. At the age of 10 years he had mastered the art of calligraphy and copied 3 volumes of prayers. When he was 14 years old he studied the subject of herbs and herbal medicine and learnt the art of diagnosis based on pulse reading and urine symptoms from Kar-ma Phun-thogs a well-known physician. He learnt the basic forms of the graphic art of Sman-lugs tradition from a well-known Chab-mdo artist and sculptor at the age of 16 years. While staying in Zhe-chen Ri-khrod he received teachings and initiations in all the five sciences from Bhu-ma Gyur-med Mtha'-stobs Raam-rgyal of Zhe-chen.

The local chief had observed the brilliance and talents of this youngster and had taken him along to Dpal-glings. It was here on the 6th day of the 10th month of the Water Snake Year (1832) he received the monastic ordination (dgangs-long) to embrace the Dharma as a profession for life, and take the vows of purity, austerity and strictly to follow the rules and regulations as laid down in the Vinyeya. In this auspicious ceremony the 9th Si-tsa Pad-ma Nying-bye drung-po was the Mthuk-sod skyes-ma and Dben-rgyan; Kar-ma Theg-chos-hug Bal-bzhed was Gyung Ston-pa; Tas-byed Kar-ma Dpal was Dus-po ba; Kar-ma Mi-khan-btsun was Bshi spro-cligs and Byang-'dren; and Kar-ma Theg-med was Kha-skong. They conferred upon Kong-sprul the vows of Stod-Adol pan-chen lugs and gave him the name “Kar-ma Ngan-dbang Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho Pten-len Kus-bhyi Dpal Bang-po”. The local chief being fully aware of the talents and quality of the youngster consulted the Si-tsa about the possibility of this young man to be reincarnate. And so, the Si-tsa requested him even before the entry of Drepas who were very powerful could take him away in their service. The Si-tsa fully recognized and supported the idea, and after meditation announced his spiritual finding that the young boy was the reincarnate of one of the previous Si-tsa’s close disciples, Kong-po or Seng-sprul, as a result of which the youngster became known as Kong-sprul.
At a young age, Kong-sprul had received the teachings and initiations of the Nying-ma-pa Sect and had known the dispersed and obscure sources. He foresaw the possibility of the traditions of Dbang (Initiation) and Lung (Freezpt) in the Gter-chos becoming extinct unless the writings were compiled into one collection. Therefore, in the Water Dog Year (1862) at the age of 40, he met Gter-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa and 'Jam-dbyangs Mkyhan-brtse, a dbang-po whom he had met earlier and was constantly his encourager. With their cooperation and encouragement, Kong-sprul started the collection of all the Gter-chos, the discoveries made by all the well-known and authentic Gter-chos. Earlier in the Iron Bird Year (1861) he had a vision that one of the five treasures he had aimed at compiling must be named Gter-dzod; thus he named it Rin-chen Gter-dzod (store of precious gems). 'Jam-dbyangs Mkyhan-brtse also had the vision that it was destined that the Mdzod-Inga must be compiled by Kong-sprul. On the 7th month of the Water Monkey Year (1872), having arranged all the collection of the Gter-chos he delivered the second Dbang and Lung of the Rin-chen Gter-dzod. Finally in 1880, with the help of Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mdzes 40 volumes of the Gter-dzod was completed after proof-reading. By 1893 Kong-sprul had completed the entire compilation of the Dzod-Inga (Five Treasures) and he records that all his longings and wishes have now been fulfilled.

MASTERS AND DISCIPLES

Among the numerous great masters from whom he received teachings and initiations, to mention a few, were:

The 14th Kar-ma-pa Theg-mchog Rdo-rje (1798-1868)
Brug-chen Rin-po-che
Dyu-lho-dusug-lag Cho-rgyal (8th)
Jam-dbyangs Mkyhen-brtse (1820-1892)
Gter-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa (1829-1870)
Dbon-rgyan Theg-mchog Bstan-phel
Zla-brang Rin-po-che
Smtn-gling Khei-chen 'Gyur-med Yid-bzhin and his consort.

With his vast learning, Kong-sprul attracted many students from all the four Sects as well as the nobility, most of whom became great scholars in Tibet. We mention a few here:

From the Bka'-brgyud Sect

The 15th Kar-ma-pa Mchka-khyab Rdo-rje (1871-1922)
The 10th Si-tu Padma Kun-brang (1855-1885)
The 11th Si-tu Padma Bbang-mchog Rgyal-po (1886-1952)
The 9th Gnwa-nang Dpa-bo-Gstug-lag Nyi-ma'i sde (7—1910)
Mkhan-chen Kar-ma Bkra-shis 'Od-zer
Kar-ma'i Mchub-po Rin-chen Dar-rgyas
Ri-boche'i Rje-dzong Phri-las Byam-pa'i Byung-gnas
Stag-lung Ma Rin-po-che
Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mdzes
From the St-skya Sect
Thar-rtshe Dpon-slob 'Ja-za-dbyangs Blo-gter Dbang-po
Ngoc Kham-pa Mikan-chen Nying-dbang Bod-nams Rgyal-mtsan
Rdzong-sar Mnga'-ris Chos-ri Kuns-dga' Jam-dbangs

From the Nying-ma Sect
The 5th Rdzogs-chen Rin-po-che
Dpal-yul Gsang-rgyas Bes-tan-'Drin and Dza-ka-mchog
Sprul K'un-bzang Rnam-rgyal
'Ja-Mipham Jam-dbyangs Rnam-rgyal (1846-1912)
Rdo-grub-ches 'Jigs-med Bes-tan-pa'i Rgyal-mtsan
Rdzogs-chen Mikan-po Dkon-mchog Dz'er
Nyag-bla Byang-chub Sems-dpa' Blo-gros Ibszang-po
A'-donri Brag-pa Rin-po-che 'Gro-'lui Dpa'-bo Rdo-rje (1842-1924)
Gier-ston Las-rab Gling-pa (1856-1920)
Sud-ogtan Bes-tan-ti Sprul-sklu Byang-chub Chos-seng

From the Dge-lugs Sect
Rgyal-smad Mikan-po Dge-shes Ye-shes Cong-pel
Brag-grub Gdongs-kong Sprul-sklu Ngag-dbang Dam-chos rgya-mtsho

From Nobility
Regent Re-sgrong Ngag-dbang Ye-shes Tsul-khrim Rgyal-mtsan (1845-
1955 Regency)
The King and Princes of Derge
And many other kings and princes of Kham and neighbouring countries.

Works of Kong-sprul
It appears, when one examines the record of Kong-sprul that he spent
his lifetime receiving teachings and initiations; while when one looks at the
record of his own students one would feel that he had devoted his lifetime
giving initiations and precepts; yet in another one finds that he had devoted
his lifetime in meditation and performing religious rites, on the other hand
when one sees the list of books credited to him, one cannot but feel that
Kong-sprul had spent his lifetime contributing to the Tibetan Religious
Literature.

He has more than 90 volumes of Tibetan Religious Literature where he
either was the editor or the author of these collected works. The important
ones were:
Shes-bya' Mdzod 3 volumes
Bka' a' Mdzod 10 volumes
Zab-lugs Gter-Mdzod 61 volumes
Gdams-rgag Mdzod 10 volumes
Miscellaneous 7 volumes

Having spent most his life time in receiving teachings, giving teachings,
collecting and contraring rare writings and collecting them, as well as

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writing explanatory notes, composing, and making clarification of deep and
difficult teachings, he led a life of endless effort to preserve and spread the
Dharma. He passed away at the age of 87 in 1899. In addition to all
these meritorious deeds he had performed, he even found time to help,
restore and renovate old monasteries, paintings, to carve wood blocks, help
the preservation of manuscripts and to enlighten and purify the sangha.

This is but a very small fraction of the important events in the
biography of Kong-sprul. If one intends to write a complete biography
it would cover a number of volumes to justify his long and meritorious
life.