


Born to Practice: The Sakya Jetsunma Phenomenon

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n *Women in Tibet*, the editors Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik state that “little is known about the actual sociology and experience of Tibetan women.”¹ They express the hope “that more scholarly attention will be directed at preserving and gathering information on contemporary Tibetan women.”² With this paper I hope to contribute to this lacunae. While I was searching for eminent women in Tibetan Buddhism, I was delighted to discover that the distinguished Sakya Khon (Sa skya Khon) family, whose history begins in the eleventh century, has had several eminent female religious adepts and continues so until today. The daughters of the family are referred to as a Jetsunma (rJe btsun ma) or “Venerable Woman”. One can find this title of Jetsunma used for other highly realised female religious adepts outside of this lineage, such as Jetsunma Shugseb (Shug gseb) or Ani Lochen, but in the Sakya Khon family all of the daughters are referred to as Jetsunmas.

In this article, I will concentrate on a few Jetsunmas, both contemporary and historical. The main contemporary Jetsunma is Her Eminence Jetsun Kushok (rJe btsun sKu shog). Named Jetsunma Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche (‘Chi med phrin las klu sdings), she was born in 1938 in Sakya, and lives today in Richmond, BC, Canada.³ I will concentrate only on her early life in Tibet (1938-1959). Based on extensive interviews with H.E. Jetsun Kushok herself, I am reconstructing this part of her life. Also I will present a brief biography of one of the most renowned Jetsunmas, Chime Tenpai Nyima (rJe btsun ma ‘Chi med bstan pa’i nyi ma) who lived from the mid-eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century. Both these Jetsunmas provide excellent examples of a life of a Sakya “Venerable Woman”. Their lives stand for what is considered as essential in nurturing and providing the best conditions for the spiritual growth in relation to a

¹ Gyatso & Havnevik 2005: 1.

² *Ibid.*: 8.

³ I had numerous interviews with Jetsun Kushok and most were conducted at her home in Richmond, BC, Canada (April 2005, July 2007, August 2009, June 2013 and August 2013).

specific form of “female autonomous religious specialists”.

1. Sources

Though the Sakya Khon family has had many daughters as well as sons, the paucity of information about the Sakya Jetsunmas is disconcerting. There are only a few brief biographies written about some of them. In contrast, the proliferation of elaborate and extensive biographies of the sons who become the throne holder of the Sakya sect, or Sakya Trizin (Sa skya khri 'dzin), is characteristic of the gendered logics of Tibetan historiography as astutely described by Carole McGranahan:

...As crucial as class is on many grounds, I find gender to make a bigger difference than class in making different modes of production or narration.⁴

Such biographies will sometimes mention a sister or daughter but not much more than that. The most extensive, available historical sources for the Sakya Jetsunmas are the Sa skya *gdung rabs* or *Genealogies of the Sakya Families*.⁵ Some of the more famous are the *Extensive Genealogy* or the *gDung rabs chen mo* which was written by Jamgon Amezhab ('Jam mgon A mes zhabs, 1597-1659), the Twenty-seventh Sakya Trizin in the seventeenth century and its continuation by Kunga Lodro or Kunlo (Kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783), the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin. Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen, 1871-1936), Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin, wrote the final update.⁶ Within these genealogies, one is still lucky to find the names of the Jetsunmas mentioned at least, or who their parents and possibly their teachers were. Occasionally, if a brother or uncle was an important Sakya Trizin or significant scholar, one will find an episode when they visited Lhasa together or attended a teaching given by an important lama.

In addition to the genealogies, an important textual source for information on Jetsunmas was written by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen, who from the time he was eight years old,

⁴ McGranahan 2010: 776.

⁵ There are numerous genealogies of the Khon family, some of the earlier ones written in the fifteenth century are by sTag tshang lo tswa ba Shes rab rin chen and by Mus srad pa rDo rje rgyal mtshan. I thank Cyrus Stearns for this information.

⁶ Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen 2009. Information about the Jetsunmas is interspersed throughout the book.

kept diaries, which were compiled into two large volumes (each is over eight hundred pages) and are known as the *Autobiographical Reminiscences* of Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (*rDo rje 'chang Drag shul phrin las rin chen gyi rtogs brjod*). These provide contemporary information especially about two exemplary Jetsunmas. The first one is Jetsunma Tamdrin Wangmo Kelzang Chokyi Nyima (*rJe btsun ma grub pa'i rTa mgrin dbang mo skal bzang chos kyi nyi ma*, 1836-1896) who is one of his principal teachers and his great paternal aunt.⁷ The second Jetsunma is his younger sister, Jetsunma Pema Trinley (*rJe btsun ma Pad ma phrin las*, 1874-c.1950) who is considered a major lineage holder for the important Vajrayoginī teachings and the paternal great aunt of H.E. Jetsun Kushok.⁸

Alongside the textual information there are the oral traditions of the Sakya Khon family, primarily the Dolma Palace branch.⁹ Having known the present and Forty-first H.H. Sakya Trizin for more than three decades, I asked him for his help in this research, which he offered with enthusiasm and interest. His immediate approval of the project opened many doors for me. Due to his consent and support, whomever I asked for an interview, readily accepted. However, the two main people whom I have relied on most are H.H. Sakya Trizin himself and his elder sister, H.E. Jetsun Kushok. Like many Tibetans, they left Tibet in 1959. Their oral information on the topic is invaluable and precious.

2. The Jetsunma phenomenon

Firstly I will provide a brief exposition of the Sakya Jetsunma phenomenon, which is not well-known among neither Tibetans nor Tibetologists. Jetsunma is a Tibetan term that is both a special and uncommon title reserved primarily for particular women practitioners.¹⁰ It is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *bhaṭṭārikā*, a word with many meanings, the most appropriate one being in this context “venerable”

⁷ She is the daughter of the paternal grandfather's uncle, Ngawang Kunga Rinchen (Ngag dbang kun dga' rin chen, 1794-1856).

⁸ See Benard 2012a and 2012b. I will not present their biographies in this article but they are significant Jetsunmas who provide further understanding of the Sakya tradition and help us to understand how H.E. Jetsun Kushok fits into this lineage.

⁹ I interviewed H.H. Sakya Trizin at the Dolma Palace (sGrol ma pho brang) in Rajpur, UK, India and at Walden, NY, USA on several occasions during February 2004, December 2007, June 2012 and June 2013. I also interviewed members of the Phuntsok Palace (Phun tshogs pho brang) family, yet at fewer and shorter times.

¹⁰ In Tibetan, one of the words for a nun is *btsun ma*; but not all Jetsunmas are nuns, nor are all nuns Jetsunmas.

or “person worthy of worship”. It is used as a title for both deities and learned people, especially in Buddhism. It is unclear when the title Jetsun became popular in Tibet, but by the eleventh century, the famous yogi Milarepa (1052-1135) was known as Jetsun Milarepa (rJe btsun Mi la ras pa). Jetsunma, the feminine form, is sometimes translated as Venerable Lady. Compared with the many male spiritual masters who carry the title of Jetsun, there are far fewer females who have this title.

So, who does have this title and why? There seem to be, at least, two important ways of acquiring the Jetsunma title. One is by inherited status; the other by achieved status, that is by developing one’s own spiritual abilities that are then recognised by the religious and lay communities. The two are interrelated or can be overlapping. Inherited status means that by being born as a daughter in either the Sakya Khon family or in the Nyingma Mindroling Trichen (sMin grol gling khri chen) family, one is automatically given this title Jetsunma at birth, since Tibetans believe that baby girls can be born into such families only by their meritorious actions and practices in earlier lifetimes. H.E. Jetsunma Chime Luding Rinpoche is an example of a Jetsunma who was born with this title. She is an extraordinary teacher, who has dharma centers throughout the world. Another amazing and contemporary Jetsunma is Mindroling Jetsunma Khandro Tsering Paldron Rinpoche (sMin grol gling rJe btsun ma mKha’ ‘gro rTse ring dpal sgron) who was born in 1968 in Kalimpong, India.¹¹ She is the holder of both Nyingmapa and Kagyupa lineages and has many disciples in both lineages. Both of these Jetsunmas were born respectively into these spiritual families and received the title at birth.

The second way to receive the Jetsunma title is by developing one’s spiritual practices and subsequent accomplishments, achieving thereby the reputation of an accomplished practitioner. This recognition can be given by the Tibetan community-at-large, as in the case of the well-known Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (rJe btsun Lo chen rin po che, 1852-1953) from Shugseb, a remarkable yoginī who had numerous disciples and lived for more than a hundred years.¹² Many of her practices were Nyingmapa or Kagyupa based, but she considered herself to be a *rime* (*ris med*), or a non-sectarian, practitioner and was best known for her *choe* (*gcod*) practices.¹³ Another way is to be recog-

¹¹ The Sixteenth Karmapa in 1971 recognised her as a reincarnation of the great *ḍākinī* of Tsurphu Monastery, Khandro Orgyan Tsomo (mKha’ ‘gro O rgyan mtsho mo). As for the title Khandroma, see Jacoby and Schneider in this volume.

¹² See Havnevik 1999.

¹³ *Choe* (*gcod*) or “severing the ego” is a Tibetan Buddhist meditative practice that involves the visualization of cutting up one’s body and presenting it as an offer-

nised by an eminent lama who bestows the title. As a recent example, the British born Bhikṣuṇī Tenzin Palmo, who lived in solitary retreat for 12 years in a cave and had undergone many other rigorous spiritual practices, was honored with the title of Jetsunma by the Twelfth Gyalwang Rinpoche of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. In February 2008, in an elaborate and public ceremony in the Drukpa Amitabha Mountain, Kathmandu, Nepal, he said that he was bestowing this title onto her “in recognition of her spiritual achievements as a nun and her efforts in promoting the status of female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism.” He stated:

Men were always given the privilege to do all practices, but it was not given to women. This is very sad. But now it is different. It would be unkind if I would not give the title of Jetsunma to Venerable Tenzin Palmo for the benefit of all females in the world and the Palden Drukpa lineage.¹⁴

The unusual and almost unique status of Sakya Jetsunmas compared to other autonomous religious women in Tibet is all the more significant in the light of other *jetsunmas* and, more generally, a common cultural reluctance to support women and their spiritual practice. Ani Lochen is a prime example of a woman who was mistreated, even by her own teacher. The following incident is only one of many examples of the difficulties that she faced:

Lochen had met her lama in the summer. In winter, he moved from his cave to another small nunnery nearby, where he gave extensive teachings and their food begging alms and wherever Lochen went, people showed her great respects and generosity. Close by was a lama who received far fewer alms than Lochen and consequently highly resented her popularity. Finally, feeling he could bear it no longer, he went to see Pema Gyatso and told him that Lochen received a great deal of offerings. Pema Gyatso asked what was wrong with that and he replied, ‘Nothing, but she goes around saying she is an incarnation of Dorje Phagmo’. Pema Gyatso said nothing, but when Lochen appeared before him a few days later with offerings she received, instead of accepting her gift, he grew very angry and accused her of lying and pretending she was an incarnation of Dorje

ing to others. By being able to do this skillfully, one develops generosity and an understanding of absolute reality.

¹⁴

Cf.

http://tenzinpalmo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=1, accessed June 2008.

Phagmo. As she stared at him in disbelief, he grabbed her offerings. Climbed up to the roof of the nunnery and flung them down at her along with his boots. Though Lochen was hurt, she crouched down to pick up the boots, and placed them on her head as a mark of respect. After this incident, Lochen continued to attend her lama's teachings though he ignored her.¹⁵

Various texts discussing Tibetan views of women reiterate that women must endure more suffering than men due to their female bodies and their dependency on their families to support them. Many also stress the basic Tibetan view that women by virtue of being born as a female are *skye dman* or of "lesser birth", meaning having produced worse karma than men in their past lives. The possibility of liberation from cyclic existence is remote, since due to their lesser merit, they will have fewer opportunities to practice. Furthermore, women's bodies make them more vulnerable if they choose to live alone in an isolated place. Tibetan spiritual biographies or *namthars* (*rnam thar*; literally "stories of liberation from cyclic existence") frequently recount the difficulties of practice for both women and men. Whereas men are encouraged to be monks and have the monastic community to support them, some women who are spiritually inclined must marry under duress, suffer ignobly under an unsupportive mother-in-law, or else have to sever ties with their families in order to be able to devote their lives to spiritual practices.¹⁶ Comparing the spiritual biographies on female practitioners with those on men, it is rare to find a case where a family provides a daughter with the means and place to pursue concentrated and sustained spiritual practice.

Yet the Sakya Jetsunmas do not face these difficulties. Instead they are akin to the male-dominated prestigious recognised reincarnations or *tulkus* (*sprul sku*). While Jetsunmas are not considered recognised reincarnations the similarities with *tulkus* are noteworthy. First, one is born into the Sakya Khon lineage only if one has already accumulated a lot of merit in their past lives; and many sons are considered reincarnations of their grandfathers or uncles or someone else.¹⁷ Se-

¹⁵ Cf. <http://theyoginiproject.org/yoginis-her-story/wisdom-dakinis#tab-id-10>, accessed October 2015.

¹⁶ For one example, see Schaeffer, 2005: 106. Nun Orgyan Chokyi (O rgyan chos skyid 1675-1729) wants to be reborn as man because of all the difficulties that she faces as a woman practitioner. In her list of difficulties, she includes her "dissatisfaction with the family structure inhibiting (her) ability to practice meditation."

¹⁷ The present H.H. Sakya Trizin is seen as both a reincarnation of his paternal grandfather and the incarnation of Nyingma Terton Orgyen Thrinley Lingpa (gTer ston O rgyan phrin las gling pa, 1895-1945), also known as Apam Terton (A pang or A pong gTer ston).

cond, like *tulkus*, Jetsunmas are given opportunities for spiritual study at an early age. Third, everything is provided for the Jetsunma, and after her death, her property is saved for future Jetsunmas in much the same way that property and belongings of a *tulku* are passed down to the next reincarnation.

The Sakya Khon family began in the eleventh century when Khon Konchok Gyalpo ('Khon dKon mchog rgyal po, 1034-1102) established the Sakya sect seat in a place, which became known as Sakya (lit. "pale white earth"). The family has undergone numerous divisions, but ever since the early nineteenth century, there are two main branches: Dolma Palace and Phuntsok Palace. Until 1959, both had their main residences in Sakya and both provided residences or *labrang* (*bla brang*) reserved exclusively for their daughters. The *labrang* was a place to live, study, meditate and perform religious rituals. Prior to 1959, Jetsunmas were encouraged to live as nuns to pursue religious practice, yet they did not live in Sakya nunneries, but in their own residences, a *labrang*.¹⁸

Considering the original situation, H. E. Jetsun Kushok responded to interview questions as follows:

Q: Why there are so few female lamas?

A: ...Now, after the revolution (1959), it has changed. Otherwise, traditionally, I could not have married. Once you were born a woman in the Khon family, you would automatically become a nun. It was your choice whether you took the vows and became nun or not, but you had to wear the robes. Then you would receive empowerments like Hevajra and Chakrasamvara, and on those occasions you would take Vajrayana vows. In the Vajrayana vows there is a kind of nun's vow included. These are serious vows and therefore you could not marry.¹⁹

Q: So once you were born as a woman into Khon family, you could not lead a worldly life?

A: No, you would always be learning, reciting and meditating. Some nuns were doing handicrafts like sewing, knitting and

¹⁸ Though Sakya and the adjacent areas had nunneries, the Jetsunmas did not live or study at nunneries. See Cassinelli & Ekvall 1969.

¹⁹ All Jetsunmas receive Anuttarayoga empowerments, which is the highest tantric empowerment. When she as a tantric practitioner takes this kind of empowerment, she is required to keep three vows—*prātimokṣa*, *bodhisattva* and tantric vows.

beadwork and so on. These rules were not set by the Tibetan government, but by our family.²⁰

During one of my interviews, H.E. Jetsun Kushok explained that when Sakya Jetsunmas were born, they lived in the Palace and usually stayed until their late teens when they moved to a *labrang*, which was maintained from one generation to the next by the respective palace. Each palace had five *labrangs*. If there were more than five daughters in one family, some of the daughters would share a *labrang*. The daughters were also given nomads with female yaks (*'dri*) and yaks, fields and servants to provide an income. As H.E. Jetsun Kushok exclaimed:

Everything comes together. It is like being born in the heavenly desire realm when everything comes together—servants, belongings and so on. As long as they did their practice and did not misbehave, the family provided everything. When they died, the immediate family could do what they wanted with their personal belongings. But the fields and animals belonged to the *labrang*; they could not be sold. These must be kept for the future daughters.

Some Jetsunmas became great scholars and taught in Sakya and in Kham. Others kept a lower profile and did their practices and chanting quietly and peacefully. Since everything in the *labrang* was set up for practice with meditation rooms, some stayed in the *labrang* for their whole life. Basically it was a life-long retreat. Even if a Jetsunma did not do serious religious practice and simply enjoyed herself, having picnics in the summer for example, she could stay in the *labrang*.

She noted that there were some scandals of Jetsunmas marrying and leaving the Sakya area. However, these were the exception; most Sakya Jetsunmas had excellent reputations as committed nuns who did sustained spiritual practices. Another example of training from an early age comes from the Phuntsok Palace's Jetsunmas, Tsegen Wangmo (Tshe byin dbang mo, b. 1935) and Chime Wangmo ('Chi med dbang mo, b. 1939).²¹ H.E. Jetsunma Tsegen related:

We began studying at age six years old. First, we memorised the Tibetan alphabet, and then we learned how to read and

²⁰ See <http://vajrasana.org/chime1.htm>, accessed May 2009; this was originally from Freeman 1996: 95.

²¹ Personal communication in Jetsunma Tsegen Wangmo's home in Seattle, Washington, USA on August 28, 2007.

write.²² We had to memorise many texts; one of the first ones that we memorised was *Samantabhadra's Aspiration Prayer* (*bZang spyod smon lam*). At eight years old, we memorised the propitiation ritual to the Buddhist protector Mahākāla (*mGon po'i bskang sgo*). We would study every day from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, with a short lunch break. Our main holidays were on the eighth, fifteenth and thirtieth day of the lunar month. Our first teacher was Ponlop Shakya and our second teacher was Ponlop Kunga.

“When we became teenagers, we moved into a *labrang*,” Tsegen recalls.

When I was fourteen years old, I moved in with my older sister, Thubten Wangmo (Thub bstan dbang mo, 1922-1985) who was living in the Tashi Tse Labrang in the Northern Monastery area. The move was gradual. I would stay for a few days, then return to the palace, then stay longer at the *labrang*, and do this a few times until I moved in permanently. I did several retreats in the *labrang*. My first important one was Vajrapāṇi Bhūtaḍāmara (*Phyag na rdo rje 'byung po'i 'dul ba*). I was in retreat for one month together with my teacher, who was supervising me. I heard that my family was going on a holiday to the hot springs and I yearned to go with them, but I knew that I needed to keep my commitment. My understanding mother gave me many dried fruits after their return.

Later my oldest sister moved to Gyantse and my second elder sister, Kalsang Chodron moved in with me.²³ When I was eighteen years old, I did the crucial Hevajra retreat for seven months. At this time, my brother Trinley Rinpoche stayed at the *labrang*, too.²⁴

In the distribution of residences, H.E. Jetsun Kushok had received the Tashi Labrang also known as Nagso Labrang in the Northern Monastery complex area of Sakya town. In addition, her father had given her Ngatsi Labrang, which had larger landholdings than Tashi Labrang but was not close to the Sakya town. Her maternal aunt,

²² In traditional Tibet, girls from noble families were taught how to read and write but many other children learned only how to read. Tibetans did not deem it necessary to know how to write if one did not have an “official” position or belong to an “official” family.

²³ Jetsunma Kalsang Chodron (sKal bzang chos sgron) was born in 1926 in Sakya and died on 15 December 2007 in Seattle.

²⁴ His full name is Ngag dbang kun dga phrin las bkra shis (1934-1997).

Dagmo Trinley Zangmo,²⁵ advised her to take Tashi Labrang, but H.E. Jetsun Kushok did not want to stay there. Tashi Labrang was not so pleasant since it stood in the town and was situated below and west of the political/spiritual Zhitog-building (*gzhi thog*).²⁶ Furthermore it looked like an ordinary house. On the ground floor of the *labrang* was a protector deity shrine room, which was popular with visiting pilgrims. H.E. Jetsun Kushok felt that the area was too busy and too many people lived near it. She reiterated her desire to live in the Ngatsi Labrang to her aunt, but the latter was not yet persuaded. H.E. Jetsun Kushok elaborated that the Ngatsi Labrang looked like the other religious buildings in Sakya; it was painted in gray and had the distinctive Sakya vertical stripes in red, white and blue.²⁷ Finally her aunt relented, "Since you are a nun, you do not need all of Ngatsi's land for your income. Stay in Ngatsi Labrang, but swap its land with that of Tashi Labrang." H.E. Jetsun Kushok accepted. She wanted to stay in Ngatsi Labrang because it was separate, quiet and next to the Dolma Palace, where her brother lived. So in the end, H.E. Jetsun Kushok got Ngatsi Labrang, but as she remembers wistfully, "Unfortunately within two years, we lost Tibet; so I never had a chance to live there and only stayed briefly."²⁸

²⁵ Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo ('Phrin las dpal 'byor bzang mo, 1906-1975) was the first wife of Jetsun Kushok's and Sakya Trizin's father, since she was unable to conceive, their father married her younger sister, Sonam Dolkar (bSod nams sgröl dkar) who is the mother of Jetsun Kushok and Sakya Trizin. Unfortunately Sonam Dolkar died in 1948 and their father died in 1950. Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo had to handle everything. Both Jetsun Kushok and Sakya Trizin praise their aunt as insightful, persistent and decisive. It was due to her that they were properly trained.

²⁶ See Venturi 2013: 520 ff. Please note that footnote 393 (p. 172), Venturi states that the spelling is inconsistent between *bzhi*, which means four and *gzhi*, which means basis. Venturi opts for *bzhi* or four (referring to floors) but Jetsun Kushok was emphatic that it was *gzhi*, which means basis or foundation.

²⁷ Many Sakya sacred buildings have the distinctive colors of a gray background with red, white and blue stripes. Red symbolizes wisdom or the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, white symbolizes compassion or the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and blue symbolizes power or the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi. Since the *labrang* was painted in these religious colors, Jetsun Kushok felt that it was a conducive place to do religious practices.

²⁸ H.E. Jetsun Kushok's paternal grandfather's younger brother, Jamyang Thubten Zangpo ('Jam byangs thub sbtan bzang po, 1885-1928) built Ngatsi Labrang. He originally built this as his residence but later it became a *labrang*. According to popular belief, his reincarnation was the Phuntsok Palace's son, Trinley Rinpoche ('Phrin las rin po che, 1934-1997).



Fig. 1. India, 1960s: Dagmo, Sakya Trizin and Jetsun Kushok.
Photo: Courtesy of Jetsun Kushok.

The Jetsunmas were given equal opportunity to study with all the religious preceptors or lamas who taught their brothers. H.E. Jetsun Kushok likes to emphasise that when they lived in Tibet she received the same teachings and did the same retreats as her brother, H.H. Sakya Trizin. One of the most important teachings and practices in the Sakya tradition is *Lamdre* (*Lam 'bras*; "The Path and Result to Liberation"), a complete and gradual system that combines both the sutras (exoteric teachings) and the tantras (esoteric teachings) to provide a guided path to Buddhahood. *Lamdre* emphasises that the mind is the root of both *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, as well as the combination of luminosity and emptiness. Ideally every son and daughter in the Sakya Khon family should receive the transmission and learn how to do the accompanying meditations, chants and rituals explained in *Lamdre*. All sons are expected to become lineage holders of *Lamdre* and to continue its "unbroken" transmission to others.

H.E. Jetsun Kushok was 12 years old and H.H. Sakya Trizin was five years old, when they began their studies of *Lamdre* together, in 1950. It took them almost four years to receive all the teachings and accompanying requisite rituals from various lamas while also being involved in other activities during this time. After much studies and effort, H.E. Jetsun Kushok anticipated with joy to begin this important stage in her religious practice. By late 1954, after completing all necessary preparation, H.H. Sakya Trizin and H.E. Jetsun Kushok were ready to undertake the required long retreat of Hevajra and

Nairātmyā, the principal deities in *Lamdre*, that is based on the *Hevajra Root Tantra*. Their teacher guided them throughout the retreat. H.E. Jetsun Kushok was 16 years old and H.H. Sakya Trizin was nine years old when the retreat began in the seventh lunar month of 1954. They did the retreat in their home, the Dolma Palace, but in their respective apartments.²⁹ The retreat involved the chanting and visualisations of the *Hevajra Sādhana* four times a day, plus the required recitations of the mantras of both Hevajra and Nairātmyā. To perform all the obligations, they stayed in retreat for seven and a half months. H.E. Jetsun Kushok recalled that she and her brother would keep in touch by sending notes to each other via their teacher and they had decided that they would begin and end the retreat on the same days.

Though frequently the daughters were taught simultaneously with the sons, learned the meditations and rituals, and did the required retreats, few became lineage holders and transmitted *Lamdre* to others. However, in 1955, shortly after the completion of the Hevajra retreat, H.E. Jetsun Kushok's maternal aunt, Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo, asked her to give the *Lamdre* teachings. A large group of monks had traveled from Kham to visit Sakya and their hope was to receive *Lamdre* transmission from the ten-year-old H.H. Sakya Trizin. Yet at the time, he was in retreat as part of the preparation to be able to give the major empowerment of Vajrakīlaya. Her aunt, well versed in Sakyapa history, knew that previous Jetsunmas had taught *Lamdre* and she urged her niece who had recently completed the extensive retreat to follow in their footsteps. It was decided that H.E. Jetsun Kushok would bestow on the monks from Kham the short version of Ngor *Lamdre* lineage by Ngawang Chodrak (Ngag dbang chos grags, 1572-1641) together with the accompanying empowerments and other rituals.³⁰

Thus at the young age of 17 she expounded the teachings for three months, and she was the fourth woman in Sakya history to confer *Lamdre*.³¹ By presenting these prestigious teachings, her status was elevated considerably. Next year when she visited Lhasa, she headed the procession with a golden umbrella that was held above her, her head crowned with the characteristic red and gold Sakya hat worn by high Sakya lineage holders.

²⁹ Each apartment had a name—hers was called Tashi Palkye (bKra shis dpal kye), “auspicious circle”, and H.H. Sakya Trizin’s apartment was named Chime Deden (‘Chi med bde ldan), “eternal happiness”.

³⁰ See Stearns 2001: 24.

³¹ The four Jetsunmas who taught *Lamdre* are: Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima (see her brief biography below), Phuntsok Palace Jetsunma Tamdrin Wangmo, Dolma Palace Jetsunma Pema Trinley and present-day Jetsunma Chime Luding Rinpoche.



Fig. 2. Phuntsok Palace Jetsunmas. Photo: Courtesy of Jetsun Kushok.

Though they received the same privileges as their brothers, the Jetsunmas did not have the same obligations or responsibilities. Their brothers, especially the oldest one, were expected to marry and to produce a male heir; sometimes two brothers married one wife to ensure an heir.³² The male family members had to study; they were compelled to be knowledgeable about the significant Buddhist texts, and to be proficient in required religious rituals. They rarely had a choice between a single or a married life. Each was trained to be the next throne holder that is the Sakya Trizin. But only one would inherit this position, either from his paternal uncle or his father. However, the daughters of the family had no such obligations to serve the public. As Phuntsok Palace Jetsunmas, Tsegen Wangmo and Chime Wangmo, have underscored, “We were free. We were encouraged to study and practice (religion), but we could enjoy a more worldly life: it was our choice.” In other words, these Jetsunmas are wonderful yet exceptional examples of Tibetan women who were encouraged by their families and the society to be religious practitioners; and they were supported spiritually, materially and financially to pursue their religious study.

3. Sakya Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima

Looking back at earlier outstanding and autonomous religious women in the Sakya Jetsunma tradition, one great Jetsunma stands out.

³² See Travers 2008: 6-7.

Being one of the most eminent, Chime Tenpai Nyima (b. 1756-ca. 1850's) is remembered as an extraordinary practitioner and as teacher to four Sakya Trizins, their brothers, sons and daughters, including many other *tulkus* and significant teachers in the Sakya tradition. Her two most important legacies are that she is the only woman in the transmission lineage of the Sakya Nāropā lineage of Vajrayoginī and accompanying teachings and she is one of the four Jetsunmas who bestowed *Lamdre*. In view of the paucity of information generally available, I will briefly summarise her biography here. For this, I am mainly using textual information based on the final Sakya genealogy updated by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin.³³ This main but brief biography of Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima is embedded in the biography of Kunga Pende Gyatso's (Kun dga' phan bde rgya mtso, also known as E waṃ bzang po, 1766-1788) who was her paternal first cousin and son of Sachen Kunga Lodro. Also, H.H. Sakya Trizin has related his own findings and stories that are known about her to me in interviews.

Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima was born in Sakya in 1756 (the thirteenth sixty-year-cycle, Fire Mouse year) on the 22nd day of the 11th month. She was named Chime Butri ('Chi med bu khrid).³⁴ Her father was Ngawang Thutob Wangchuk (Nga dbang mthu stobs dbang phyug, 1734-1757), younger brother of the famous Sachen Kunga Lodro,³⁵ and her mother was Gerpa Princess Tashi Yangchen (sGer pa'i sras mo bKra shis dbyang can, birth n.d.). But sadly, her mother died shortly after giving birth and her father died the following year.³⁶

From a very young age, Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima studied with her illustrious paternal uncle, Sachen Kunga Lodro. He had a vision of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po, 1382-1456), the founder of Ngor Ewam Choden (E waṃ chos ldan) Monastery, who had once prophesied that Kunga Lodro would have four pillar and eight beam disciples. In fact, Jetsunma Chime Tenpai

³³ See Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen 2009: 342-343.

³⁴ This name Butri is ironical because it means to bring forth a son. Though this name is given to daughters in Tibet, it seems odd to give it to the daughters of the Khon family who were trained to be nuns.

³⁵ Sachen Kunga Lodro or Ngawang Kunga Lodro (Ngag dbang kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783) was the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin (1741-1783). He was a great practitioner, teacher, and prolific writer. Many illustrious lamas from various sects studied with Sachen Kunga Lodro, including Jigme Lingpa (Jigs med gling pa, 1730-1798) and the Third Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (Thu'u bkwan bLo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 1732-1802), who received teachings in Sakya while he was visiting central Tibet between 1757-1761.

³⁶ See Kun dga' blo gros 2009: 738 for death of the mother and p. 751 for death of her father.

Nyima became one of the pillars, meaning that she was one of his closest disciples and would continue his teachings.

Sachen Kunga Lodro bestowed on her the important and essential transmissions of both the common *Lamdre* or *Lamdre Tsokshe* (*Lam 'bras tshogs bshad*) and the uncommon *Lamdre Lopshe* (*Lam 'bras slob bshad*) and all of the teachings concerning Vajrayoginī. He bestowed on her many major empowerments including Sarvavid Vairocana (*Kun rig rnam par snang mdzad*), the main deity of the *Sarva Durgati Parishodhana Tantra* ("Elimination of Bad Rebirths") that is performed when a person is recently deceased. She became very learned and the holder of different religious master lineages including *Parting from the Four Attachments*³⁷ and the principal Vajrayoginī (Naro mkha' spyod) teaching cycle. In the Vajrayoginī guru transmission lineage, she is the only female master.³⁸ Sometimes the lineage simply includes only her name, Tenpai Nyima, without the epithet of nun or Jetsunma. Since the name is used for both sexes, one would not know that this master is a woman.

In 1782, when she was 26 years old,³⁹ she took her *śrāmaṇera* (*dge tshul*) vows from the twenty-fifth abbot of the Sakya Lhakhang Chenmo, Jampa Chokyi Tashi (Byams pa chos kyi bkra shis, n.d.) who gave her the ordination name, Chime Tenpai Nyima. In the next year, 1783, her main teacher, Sachen Kunga Lodro died. As a holder of the Vajrayoginī teachings, she was requested to recite the Vajrayoginī prayers and accompanying offerings for 49 days after her teacher's death. The honor of being selected as a young woman to perform these important prayers and rituals indicated her mastery. It is said that the famous Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, 1820-1892) proclaimed that Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima was a veritable Vajrayoginī.

Later in her life, her fame as an emanation of Vajrayoginī spread. She was already elderly when she gave the Vajrayoginī teachings to one of her main disciples, Derge Drubpon Ngawang Rinchen (sDe sge sgrub dpon Ngag dbang rin chen, n.d.) and her eyesight was weak. But her eyesight improved all of a sudden while she was giv-

³⁷ *Zhan pa bzhi bral* by Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (Sachen Kun dga' sNying po, 1092-1158) as revealed by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. She is also in its lineage just preceded by Sachen Kunga Lodro. See Sakya Trizin 2011: 161.

³⁸ The guru transmission lineage from the twenty-seventh guru is Kunga Lodro (1729-1783), the twenty-eighth is Thartse Je Jampa Namkha Chime (Thar tse re Byams pa nam mkha'i 'chi med, 1765-1820), the twenty-ninth is Jampa Namkha Lekpai Lhundrup (Byams pa nam mkha'i legs pa'i lhun grub, n.d.) and the thirtieth is Chime Tenpai Nyima and the thirty-first is Ngawang Rinchen (Ngag dbang rin chen), also known as Tashi Rinchen, (bkra shis rin chen, 1824-1865), who was the Thirty-fifth Sakya Trizin.

³⁹ Water Tiger year.

ing him the teachings, her short biography states. Later she told her disciple, “Seeing a lama like you in Tibet restored my eyesight.” The present H.H. Sakya Trizin commented that this happened because of their strong lama-disciple relationship. Furthermore, it is said that when she gave Drubpon Ngawang Rinchen the Vajrayoginī blessing (*byin brlabs*), during the inner blessing ritual (*nang mchod*) the ambrosia in the cup started to boil spontaneously. Numerous bubbles surfaced. As the disciple drank the bubbling ambrosia, his understanding of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) expanded.

Her reputation spread. Many masters and *tulkus* from Kham (southeast Tibet) heard about her extraordinary abilities and spiritual insights. Though they did not have a chance to see her, they wanted to receive her lineage teachings of Vajrayoginī and made great efforts to do so. Many important lamas praised her highly. She had numerous disciples all over Tibet. Most of the Sakya Khon family members received common *Lamdre Tsokshe* and uncommon *Lamdre Lopshe* as well as the teachings of Vajrayoginī from her. These members included the four Sakya Trizins: Pema Dudul Wangchug (Padma bdud ’dul dbang phyug, 1792-1853), the Thirty-third Sakya Trizin and founder of the Dolma Palace in Sakya; his daughter, Jetsunma Kelzang Tsultrim Wangmo (rJe btsun ma sKal bzang tshul khrim dbang mo, n.d.) and his son, Tashi Rinchen (bKra shis rin chen, 1824-1865), who became the Thirty-fifth Sakya Trizin. Moreover she taught Dorje Rinchen, also known as Kunga Rinchen (rDo rje rin chen/ Kun dga’ rin chen, 1819-1867), the Thirty-fourth Sakya Trizin, the founder of the Phuntsok Palace; and his son, Nagwang Kunga Sonam (Ngag dbang kun dga’ bsod nam, 1842-1882), who became the Thirty-sixth Sakya Trizin. Other disciples included the two brothers of the founders of both Palaces, Kunga Ngodrup Palbar (Kun dga’ dngos grub dpal ’bar, 1801-1856) and Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen (Ngag dbang kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, 1792-1841),⁴⁰ and the forty-fourth abbot of Ngor Thartse, Jampa Namkhai Chime (Byams pa nam mkhai ’chi med, 1765-1820)⁴¹ whose reincarnation was Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. Moreover the forty-fourth abbot’s nephew, the forty-seventh abbot of Ngor Thartse, Jampa Kunga Tenzin (Byams pa kun dga’ bstan ’dzin,

⁴⁰ Drag shul ’phrin las rin chen (2009: 397-398). states that the powerful siddha (*grub pa’i dbang mo*) Chime Tenpai Nyima gave Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen the complete teachings of Vajrayoginī—the blessing, transmission and experiential commentary and the teachings of Hevajra. Note: He has the same father as Pema Dudul and Dorje Rinchen but has a different mother. Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen’s mother is the younger sister of Pema Dudul’s mother. She is known as the younger Rang Byonma Damtsig Dolma (Rang byon ma dam tsig sgröl ma, n.d.)

⁴¹ It is interesting to note that he was a major disciple of both Sachen Kunga Lodro and Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima.

1776-1862) and many others were her disciples, as were most of the Sakya and Ngor chief lamas.⁴²

She is regarded as a great female siddha or an “accomplished one” and an emanation of Vajrayoginī. Her last residence was the Rigzin Palace (Rig ’dzin pho brang), which was located near the Great Temple (Lha khang chen mo) in Sakya. People called her “the old noble woman of Rigzin Palace” (*Rig rmol rung*) or Jetsunma Modung Chime Tenpai Nyima, since she lived at least into her late nineties. It is unclear when she died but in Pema Dudul Wangchug’s biography, it states that after his death (1853) she was in charge of making *tsha tsha* (relics) deity statues from his pulverised bones. This means that she must have lived until the mid 1850’s.⁴³ When she died, a memorial statue of Vajrayoginī with a beautiful silver crown and ornaments inlaid with precious gems was made in her honor. Her relics were placed in the statue that was located in the Great Temple of Sakya.

It is noteworthy, that many practitioners daily recite the guru transmission lineage of the Vajrayoginī Sādhanā without a thought of who this nun may be. Her name is simply intoned with the rest of the lamas in the lineage but when one investigates her biography, one realises her mastery and her pervasive influence among the Sakya Trizins, the Ngor Ewam Choden abbots and significant lamas. This elite group provided the principal teachers for most Sakya monks throughout Tibet. In turn, their training influenced the next generation. It is an extraordinary discovery that a single woman could be so enormously influential on the legacy of popular and profound practice of Vajrayoginī from the Nāropā lineage.

Conclusion

It is to be hoped that when the Sakya genealogies are updated next, the Jetsunmas will insist on having their own biographical chapters written. For more than a millennium the Sakya Khon family has produced extraordinary women practitioners who have had lasting influence. Their hidden world needs to be brought to light and their achievements must surely be recognised in any account of spiritual lives of Tibetan women, past and present. In particular, because their autonomy and recognition is so rare, these Jetsunmas are a wonderful example of Tibetan women who were encouraged by their families and the society to become religious practitioners and even teachers of high social standing. They were supported spiritually, materi-

⁴² Jackson 1989: 57.

⁴³ Drag shul ’phrin las rin chen 2009: 381.

ally and financially to pursue religious study and were recognised by many other practitioners, both females and males.

The tradition can be expected to continue in the future. Though H.E. Jetsun Kushok and H.H. Sakya Trizin had only sons,⁴⁴ the Jetsunma lineage is continuing with H.H. Sakya Trizin's daughter-in-law, Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi (bDag mo skal ldan dun kyi b. 1978 in Kalimpong, India) who is married to his eldest son, Khondung Ratnavajra ('Khon gdung Ratnavajra, born on November 19, 1974 in Dehra Dun, India). Their first child is Jetsunma Kunga Trinley Palter (Kun dga' 'phrin las dpal ster, born on January 2, 2007 in Rajpur, India).⁴⁵ She is being home-schooled and trained in spiritual endeavors. The family has great hope that she will uphold the Jetsunma tradition and follow in her great aunt's and great and great aunt's footsteps.⁴⁶

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⁴⁴ H.E. Jetsun Kushok did have a girl but sadly she died in her infancy.

⁴⁵ You can follow her upbringing in <http://jetsunma.blogspot.com> (accessed September 2015). Also there is a brief article by Sakya Trizin in *Melody of Dharma*, 2011: 28-29. In this issue there is also a section about Sakya Jetsunmas: 22-29.

⁴⁶ More recently Jetsunma Ngawang Tsejin Lhamo (Ngag dbang tshe byin lha mo) was born on April 2, 2011 in Wil, SG, Switzerland to the younger son, Khondung Gyanavajra (born July 5, 1979 in Dehra Dun, India) and Dagmo Sonam Palkyi (bDag mo bSod nams dpal kyi, born 1984 in Wil, SG, Switzerland); see http://www.hhthesakyatrizin.org/pdfs/news_11_daughter.pdf (access date September 2015). And Jetsunma Kunga Chimey Wangmo (Kun 'dga' chi med dbang mo) was born on January 24, 2013 to the eldest son Khondung Ratnavajra and Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi.

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