Lama Tsongkhapa’s Secret Biography

Je sang wai nam thar zhug so

by Jamyang Choje Tashi Palden (1379-1449)
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O sun-like Prince of the Conqueror,
Whose wisdom, vast as the heavens, has the brilliance of knowledge
That sees what ultimately is and what merely seems to be

O Venerable Lord of Dharma, most perfect guru,
The dust of your feet I place on the crown of my head.

Even the buddhas and bodhisattvas who fill the ten directions

Cannot describe the excellence of your body, speech, and mind;

Yet out of passionate inspiration I shall sing of them;
DÄ PÄ PEL LA CHUNG ZÄ NYÄN PAR GYI
   Pray, listen for but a few moments.

YÖN TÄN GYA TSHÖI TÖ TSHIG ME TOG GI
   As a blossoming garland of flowers
THRENG WA PEL LEG LO SÄL DRIN PÄI GYÄN
   To adorn the necks of the clear-minded
DÄ PÄI SÖ NAM PEL WÄI RIN CHHEN NI
   And as a precious jewel to enhance the force of conviction
DAG GI DRUB LA KHÄ NAM GYE PAR DZÖ
   This song in praise of your oceans of splendor to delight all sages,
    I have composed.

KHYÖ KIY LEG PAR CHÄ PÄI SÖ NAM TRIN
   Like a cloud, the merit of your superb deeds
DÜL JÄI GE LEG PEL WÄI CHHAR GYÜN CHÄN
   Releases a torrent of rain that swells the virtue of those to be trained
ZAB DANG GYA CHHEI NYÄN PÄI DRUG DRA DROG
   And proclaims with a dragon’s thundering roar the sweetness of the vast and profound;²
PÄL DÄN LA MA CHHU DZIN WANG PO ZHIN
   O glorious, powerful, billowing Lama.

TING DZIN JE WA MANG LA WANG GYUR ZHING
   Foremost of tantric adepts, the mighty yogi
LEG SHÄ TSOM DANG DRUB LA NGÖN TSÖN PA
   Who mastered the many millions of samadhis,
NÄL JOR WANG CHHUG NGAG RIG KÜN GYI TSÖ
   Composed faultless expositions and made true effort in practice,
PÄL DÄN LA MA LÜ CHÄN TSUG NA GYÄL
   Most resplendent of Lamas, you tower over the heads of all.
NGÖN TSHE DORJE DÄN DU GYÄL WA LA
At Vajrasana³ in a former birth to the Victorious One you offered
RIN CHHEN SHEL GYI THRENG WA GYA TSA CHIG
A rosary of one hundred crystal beads.
LEG PAR PHHÜL TE JANG CHHUB SEM KYE NÄ
Thus you acquired the fortune
YANG DAG TA WA TOG PÄI KÄL DÄN GYUR
Later to attain the perfect view,⁴
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

DUNG LO DÜN NÄ JE TSÜN SANG DAG DANG
At the age of seven you directly perceived
SHING TA CHHEN PO PÄL DÄN MAR ME DZÄ
Dipamkara Atisha, the great Path Clearer, and Vajrapani, Lord of the Secret.
NGÖN SUM ZIG SHING GYÜN DU JE ZUNG WA
The exhortations of both the sutras
NGAG DANG PHA RÖL CHHIN ZHUNG DAM PAR SHAR
And tantras dawned upon you;
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

YIN DRA NI LÄI DOG TAR RAB NGO WÄI
O Jetsun, Lord of phenomenal existence,
RAB DZE Ö ZER NGA YI DRA WA CHÄN
You directly perceived Manjushri,
SHIN TU DUM PÄI BÜ SU JAM PÄI JANG
Bodhisattva of the wisdom of emptiness,
NGÖN SUM JIG PA JE TSÜN CHHÖ KYI JE
As the color of a perfect sapphire;
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.
DE NÄ TSAM TE JÉ TSÜN KHYEN PÄI TER
   From this time onward, O High One,
NAM DÖ JIG SHING PÄL DÄN DÜ PA DANG
   Whenever you desired you could invoke Manjushri, Treasure
   of Stainless Wisdom,
SHE RAB PHA RÖL CHHIN ZHUNG ZAB MÖI DÖN
   And constantly listen to the teachings
GYÜN DU SÄN PA GYÄL SÄ CHHÖ KYI JE
   Of both Sutrayana’s Transcendent Wisdom and Tantrayana’s
   Secret Assembly;⁵
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
   O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

YÄN LAG DÜN PÄI CHHO GA DZÄ PÄI TSHE
   When practicing the seven-limbed ritual
SANG GYÄ SUM CHU SO NGA NGÖN SUM DU
   Of the thirty-five Purification Buddhas,
RANG RANG KU YI JIB DANG CHHAG TSÄN SOG
   Continually and clearly you beheld them
JI ZHIN GYÜN DU JIG PA CHHÖ KYI JE
   And all their forms, mudras, and symbols;
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
   O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

YÄ YÖN CHHAG GI CHHÖ CHHÄ CHHAG GYA CHÄN
   Seated in the auspicious posture, hands in the Dharma teaching mudra,
SANG PÖI ZHUG TANG DZÄ PÄI JAM GÖN GYI
   Buddha Maitreya prophesied that
LAR WANG TOB CHU NGÄ WA SHEG WA ZHIN
   Just as the sugatas who possess the ten powers
GYÄL WÄI DZÄ PA DRUB PAR LUNG TÄN PA
   You will one day perform the twelve acts of a supreme,
   universal teacher;⁶
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
   O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.
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Victorious Master of both life and death,

Truth visions you received of Amitabha Buddha, the Medicine Buddhas,

And that teacher of men and gods, Shakyamuni, Prince of the Shakya Throne,

Each with a retinue vast as the oceans;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Saintly Tara, source of all siddhis,

Ushnisha Vijaya, the one exalted and radiant,

Ushnisha Sitatapatra, dispeller of obstacles,

And other such mystic female buddhas

Again and again you directly perceived;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Bodhisattvata Nagarjuna, Aryadeva,

Holy Buddhapalita, Magnificent Chandrakirti

And the mighty yogi Nagabodhi?

Appeared to, then constantly cared for you.

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.
Exalted Asanga, who delights the three worlds,
The Brother, Vasubandhu, a Second Buddha,
And Dignaga, child of Manjushri,
Appeared to, then constantly cared for you;
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Dharmakirti, a moon amongst teachers,
As well as Gunaprabha, Shakyaprabha,
Shantideva and the glorious Abhaya,
Appeared to, then constantly cared for you;
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

All the mahasiddhas of India and Tibet,
Such as Indrabudhi, Saraha, Luipa,
Krisnacharin, Tilbupa, Tilopa, and Naropa
Appeared to, then constantly cared for you;
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Clearly Manjushri prophesied
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That, relying upon these lineages,
You would produce colossal spiritual boons for yourself and for all sentient beings.
Great Bold One who spontaneously fulfills the wishes of the world;
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

When the samadhi of the yoga combining mental tranquility with cognition of emptiness
Increased like the waxing moon,
You beheld the form of the Destroyer Yamantaka, “Opponent of the Lord of Death,”
Complete with all mudras and expressions.
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Having touched your heart
To the wisdom sword of Manjushri,
A stream of undefiled ambrosia flowed into the depth of your being,
Spontaneously arousing the propitious absorption of highest joy.
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.
Prayer for Rebirth in the Land of Bliss

And An Eulogy of the Perfect Intent of the Dauntless Protector Maitreya Buddha,¹¹

As well as their graduated levels of meaning

Manjushri lucidly conveyed to you, who recorded and skillfully presented them;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Whenever you consecrated a religious image,

The wisdom beings actually entered into the symbolic beings.

This host of deities that you summoned

Still generates fields of merit within beings;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

One night you dreamed of Nagarjuna and his five spiritual sons

Amongst themselves discussing the fabric of dependent origination.

From their midst came Buddhapalita, who touched you with a scripture.

The very next day within you arose the mind of a High One;¹²
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

GYÜ KIY THAR THUG PÄL DÄN DÜ KHOR LÖI
By focusing on the pith of the six branches of Kalachakra, ‘The Wheel of Time,’

YÄN LAG DRUG GI NÄ NAM GONG PA NA
You directly perceived his Buddha-form.

CHOM DÄN DU KYI KHOR LO NGÖN SUM JIG
He foretold that soon you

DA WA SANG PO DRA WAR LUNG TÄN PA
Would equal even King Suchandra,¹³

PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

CHHÖ KIY LHA SAR CHHÖ THRUL CHHEN PÖI DÜ
When for the first time you led the Great Prayer Festival of Lhasa,

NGO TSHAR TRA ZHI NA TSHOG GYA KÖ PÄI
A hundred magical omens appeared.

CHHÖ PA DE WA CHHEN POR JIN LAB NÄ
At your making this joyous offering,

CHÖG CHÜI GYÄL WA SÄ CHÄ NYE PAR DZÄ
The buddhas and their sons in the ten directions were filled with supreme delight.¹⁴

PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

THA MÄL NÖ CHÜ NANG TÖNG GYU MA DANG
Generating the form of a great-bliss deity

ZAB SÄL NYI SU ME PÄ NÄL JÖR GYI
Through the yoga of the non-duality

DE CHHEN LHA YI NAM PAR SHAR WÄI TSHE
Of profound luminosity and illusory appearances,

KU YI DOR JEI NÄL JÖR CHHÖ KYI JE
You attained the vajra yoga body;
By practicing the mantric science of inhaling
And exhaling OM AH HUM on the lotus heart,
The vital energies entered the central nadi, rested as breathing stopped, and then dissolved.
Thus, you experienced the clear light, mahamudra, the great seal, attaining the vajra yoga speech;

Raising the navel chakra’s mystic heat which rests at the base of the central channel,
The letter HAM at the crown of your head melted and fell to your heart
As simultaneously the experience of the blisses dawned upon you.
Thus you attained the vajra yoga mind;

Having been invoked as witnesses to your pure and perfect aspirations,
All buddhas and bodhisattvas came forth.
Only when you had summoned each of them into his respective position

Did you honor them with offerings;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

While contemplating the principal mandala of Manjushrivajra, Guhyasamaja,

You dreamed that Maitreya and Manjushri, who were speaking of Dharma,

Passed down to you a jeweled vase brimming with water,

Portending that you would master all teachings.

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

On a throne adorned with precious gems

Sat the omniscient Kargyu Lama, Buton Rinchen Trub.

A text of the Guhyasamaja Root Tantra

He gave to you, exhorting you to be its keeper;

O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

Accepting this responsibility,
LÄN SUM BU YI TENG DU JIN LAB PÄ
With mudras and mantras thrice you touched the text to your head.
LHO DRAG MAR PÄI GONG PA SE PHÖI NÄ
By its blessings it became obvious that the tantra Separating and Mixing
GYÜ DANG PHAG PÄI MÄN NGAG YIN PAR NGE
Obtained by Marpa of the Southern Hills is the true oral tradition of exalted Nagarjuna;
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

DEM CHHOG KHOR LÖI DRUB PA DZÄ PÄ TSHE
Your mind absorbed in the mystic circle of Heruka –
KYIL KHOR WA NAM NGÖN SUM SÄL WAR JIG
Chakrasamvara, the Wheel of Perfect Bliss – myriads
CHHI NANG NÄ SUM KHA DRÖI TSHOG NAM KYI
Of dakinis of the outer, inner, and secret places
DOR JE GU YI CHHÖ PÄ GYE PAR DZÄ
Made you offerings of vajra songs, transporting you in ecstasy;
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

DU PUNG ZHIL WÄI THUG DAM DZÄ PÄI TSHE
In meditation destroying the forces of darkness,
SER YANG TSO MÄI DANG TAR RAB SÄL ZHING
You beheld the radiant Buddha Mighty Demon Tamer,
NYI MA J E WÄI Ö KYI KHOR YUG CHÄN
Having an aura as pure as burnished gold,
DÜ DÜL CHHEN PÖI THUB PA NGÖ SU JIG
More brilliant than a million suns.
PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.
JE YI KU DANG GYÄL WÄI KU SUNG THUG
Your being having become indivisible from the body, speech,
and mind of all buddhas,

YER ME DZÄ NÄ Dü DE ZIL NÄN PÄ
The might of the power of evil was subdued.

TÄN SUNG NAM KYI Dü RIG TSÄR CHÄ TSHE
As the Dharma protectors crushed the demon families,

DÜ KYI MAG PUNG PHÄM PÄI DRA CHHEN DRAG
Shrieks of the defeated satanic forces resounded across the
universe.

PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

TÄN SUNG GYA TSHÖI TSHOG KYI NGÖN SUM DU
These multitudes of Dharma protectors

NGÖN TSÄR DOR JE CHHANG GI KHA TSHÄL ZHIN
That you brought under control

KHYÖ KIY TÄN PA DZIN DANG PEL WA LA
In a previous eon had been subjected by Buddha Vajradhara to

guard your doctrine.

LHAG PAR GÜ PÄI KYI TSHÜL ZHIN DRUB
With profound reverence they work this still;

PÄL DÄN LA MÄI ZHAB LA SÖL WA DEB
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

GAN DÄN NÄ SU MI PHAM CHHÖ JEI DRUNG
That you would, after entering parinirvana,

GYÄL WÄI SÄ PO JAM PÄL NYING PO ZHE
Sit in the presence of dauntless Maitreya in Tushita, Pure Land

of Joy,

JAM PÄI YANG DANG SANG WÄI DAG PO YI
And would be known as Wisdom Essence¹⁵

SÄL WAR LUNG TÄN JE TSÜN CHHÖ KYI JÈ
Was, O Lord of Life, rightly prophesied by both Manjushri and

Vajrapani.
O Illustrious Lama, at your feet I pay homage.

By the strength of this eulogy sung from the depths of pure love,
May the afflictions of beings limitless as the sky be extinguished.
In this and all future lives may all be nurtured by true teachers
And embraced by the sacred Dharma.

May the innate wisdom of great bliss rain throughout the world;
May the stains of erroneously grasping
Mind and its objects be uprooted;
And may all be inspired quickly to become like you, a jetsün lama.

May the wisdoms of learning, contemplation and meditation overtake the earth;
May the arts of deliberation, debate, and composition; flourish;
May the ordinary and supreme siddhis come to each and every practitioner;
And may all be inspired quickly to become like you, a jetsün lama.
Kün zang chhö trin nam khä nyam par bül
By the limitless oceans of merit of having presented, like Samantabhadra, clouds of offerings spanning the skies,

Thog me sāg pāi dig tung so sor shag
Of having bared every negative imprint and downfall accumulated since infinity,

Gyāl sā kün gyi ge la yi rang zhing
Of having rejoiced in the spirituality of those on the paths to enlightenment,

Nya ngān mi dā chhö khor kor war kül
And of having beseeched the lamas to turn the Wheel of Dharma and not to enter parinirvana;

De tār gyi pāi sō nam gya tsho de
May all beings experience peerless samadhi;

Dro kün ting dzin pāl la nam röl zhing
May goodness swell like the waxing moon;

Leg tshog yar ngöi da tār pel wa dang
And may the doctrine of Omniscient Tsongkhapa

Kün khyen gyāl wāi tān pa gyā par shog
Thrive until time’s end.

1 Tib. ji ltar and ji snyed. The former term, lit. “like whatever,” is synonymous with “ultimate truth,” “emptiness,” “thatness,” “suchness,” etc. The latter, lit. “whatever findable,” is synonymous with “conventional truth,” etc. The former is also the same as gnas lugs, “The way things are,” and the latter with snang lugs, “the way things appear.”

2 The vast teachings on the far-reaching activities of the conventional bodhi-mind and the profound teachings on the depth of emptiness, the ultimate bodhi-mind.

3 Vajrasana, modern day Bodhgaya, Bihar, North India.

4 The perfect view; the understanding that everything is empty of true existence.

5 Skt. Prajnaparamita and Guhyasamaja.

6 Many beings attain Buddhahood, but only one thousand each eon manifest the twelve deeds of a universal teacher. Buddha Shakyamuni was the fourth this eon, and Je Tsongkhapa will be the eleventh.
7 The lineage gurus of emptiness meditation that Tsongkhapa received from Manjushri, who in turn received it from Shakyamuni. See G. Wangyal Door of Liberation, pp. 45–52.

8 Ibid. pp. 52–54. The lineage gurus of bodhimind meditation that Asanga received from Maitreya, who had received it from Shakyamuni.

9 The eighty-four Mahasiddhas, great adepts. Tsongkhapa’s school, later known as “Gelug”, synthesizes three Indian lineages: the wisdom lineage of Manjushri, Nagarjuna, etc.; the method lineage of Maitreya, Asanga, etc.; and the practice lineage of the eighty-four mahasiddhas, such as Saraha, Tilopa, Naropa, Maitripa, etc.

10 The Terrific embodiment of the wisdom of emptiness.

11 bDe-ba-can sKye-bai sMon-lam and Mi-pham mGon-gyi yang-dag don-bsTod.

12 Skt. arya.

13 The Great Adept to whom Shakyamuni originally gave the Kalachakra Tantra teaching at Dhanyakataka Stupa in South India. Suchandra was King of Shambhala at the time and immediately took the tantra back there with him. Thus, the tantra did not appear in India until over one thousand years later.

14 The Great Prayer Festival of Lhasa, conceived and founded by Je Tsongkhapa, continues to the present day. During the first fortnight of the lunar New Year more than twenty thousand monks would assemble to commemorate Shakyamuni’s miracles at Shravasti. The tradition continues in the free Tibetan communities in India, though of course on a much smaller, scale. cf. The Great Prayer, Tangent Records, London.


Colophon:

Written at Drepung Chokyi Dechen at the request of the two meritorious Drung-trapa Palsangpo brothers, by Lama Tashi Palden, a Buddhist monk and teacher who had searched many hundreds of thousands of scriptures with the lights of his wisdom. Translated by Professor Robert Thurman. Reprinted here with permission. Tibetan phonetics by Kendall Magnussen, FPMT Education Services, December 2004.
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