KONG-SPRUL YON-TAN RGYA-MTSHO

-TASHI DENSAPA

Kong-sprul Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho, the nineteenth century Bu-steg-shred-pa Bla-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 Bu-steg-shred-pa and Nyung-shes-pa Sects. 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-sgam of Chos-ten sgam-sgrub in Khams (Eastern Tibet). His father, who passed away a few years after his birth, was Kyung-po Bla-ma Gyung-drung stobs-rten and his mother's name was Bka-thos rten. He was brought up by his step-father named Bsud-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-can Mikharpo byod-nams bo-bros 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 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 Pâu-mtsho a well-known physician. He learnt the basic forms of the graphic art of Smas-lugs tradition from a well-known Chab-mdo artist and sculptor at the age of 16 years. While staying in Zhe-chhen Ri-khrod he received teachings and initiations in all the five sciences from Bla-ma 'Gyur-med Mthu-stobs Ra'am-rgyal of Zhe-chhen.

The local chief had observed the brilliance and talents of this youngster and had taken him along to Dpal-sprungs. It was here on the 6th day of the 10th month of the Waze Usaka Year (1832) he received the monastic ordination (dgongs-long) to embrace the Dharma as a profession for life, and take the vows of purity, ordination and strictly to follow the rules and regulations as laid down in the Vinyula. In this auspicious ceremony the 9th Si-tu Padmas Nyin-byed Sheng-po was the Mikhyar-drub Drung-ma and Dpon-gyen; Kar-ma Theg-chedog Bral-phel was Gsang Ston-pa; Tsho-byed Kar-ma Tshe-dpal was Dus-go ba; Kar-ma Mikha-bstan was Brus spred-pa and Byang-den; and Kar-ma Theg-ma was Khon. They conferred upon Kong-sprul the vows of Stod-Adol pan-chen lungs and gave him the name "Kar-ma Ngaw-chen Yon-tan Rgya-mtsho Phren-las Kus-slyab Dpal Bang-po". The local chief being fully aware of the talents and quality of the youngster consulted the Si-tu about the possibility of this young man to be a reincarnate. And it is, requested the Si-tu to recognize him even before the entry of Derge who were very powerful could take him away in their service. The Si-tu freely 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-tu'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 (Frecept) in the Gier-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 Gier-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa and 'Jam-dbyangs Mkyhen-brtses, 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 Gier-chos, the discoveries made by all the well-known and authentic Giers. 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 Gier-dzod; thus he named it Rin-chen Gier-dzod (store of precious gems). 'Jam-dbyangs Mkyhen-brtse also had the vision that it was destined that the Mdzod-linga must be compiled by Kong-sprul. On the 7th month of the Water Monkey Year (1872), having arranged all the collection of the Gier-chos he delivered the second Dbang and Lung of the Rin-chen Gier-dzod. Finally in 1880, with the help of Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mdzhan 40 volumes of the Gier-dzod was completed after proof-reading. By 1893 Kong-sprul had completed the entire compilation of the Dzod-linga (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 Tseg-mchog Rdo-rje (1798-1868)
Brug-chen Rin-po-che
Dyin-bo-dtaug-lag Cho-rgyal (8th)
'Jam-dbyangs Mkyhen-brtse (1820-1892)
Gier-chen Mchog-rgyur Gling-pa (1829-1870)
Dbon-rten Tseg-mchog Bstan-po
Zla-brang Rin-po-che
Smin-gling Khri-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 Mika-khyab Rdo-rje (1871-1922)
The 10th Si-tu Padma Kun-brang (1854-1885)
The 11th Si-tu Padma Bding-mchog Rgyal-po (1886-1952)
The 9th Gnas-nang Dpa-bo-Gtug-lag Nyi-ma'i sde (7-1910)
Mkhan-chen Kar-ma Bka-shin 'Od-zer
Kar-ma'i Mka-shin-po Rin-chen Dae-rgyas
Ri-boche'i Rje-dring Phrin-las Byam-pa'i 'Byung-gnas
Stag-lung Ma Rin-po-che
Lhag-bsam Bstan-pa'i Rgyal-mdzhan

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From the Dr-o-skye Sect
Thar-ri Dpon-lob 'Jam-dbyang Blo-gter Dhang-po
Ngoc Kham-pa Mi-khan-chen Nyang-dbang Bod-nams Rgyal-mthson
Rdzong-sar Mnga’ris Chos-rgya Kuns-dpal ’Jam-dbang

From the Nying-ma Sect
The 5th Rdzogs-chen Rin-po-che
Dpal-yul Gyang-rgyas Bes-tan-Drin and Dza-ka-mchog
Sprul Kun-bzang Rnam-rgyal
Ji Mi-pham ’Jam-dbyang Rnam-rgyal (1846-1912)
Rdo-grub-che Gigs-med Bes-tan-pa Rgyal-mthson
Rdzogs-chen Mi-khan-po Dkon-mchog De-zer
Nyang-ba Byang-chub Sem-dpas’i Blo-gros Bzang-po
A’-droni Brag-pa Rin-po-che ’Gro-lod Dpa’bo Rdo-rje (1842-1924)
Gter-rson Las-rab Gling-pa (1856-1920)
Sa’ogin Bes-tan-ni Sprul-sku Byang-chub Chos-seng

From the Dge-legs Sect
Rgyal-smad Mi-khan-po Dge-shes Ye-shes Cong-pel
Brag-grab Gdongs-kong Sprul-sku Ngag-dbang Dam-pho rgya-mtho

From Nobility
Regent Rs-sgrng Ngag-dbang Ye-shes Tsul-thrim Rgyal-mthson (1845-
1955 Regency)
The King and Prince 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’i Mdzod 10 volumes
Zab-mmo Gter-Mdzod 61 volumes
Gdam-po Mdzod 10 volumes
Miscellaneous 7 volumes

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