

TRAKTUNG DUDJOM LINGPA

A CLEAR  
MIRROR



*The Visionary Autobiography of a Tibetan Master*

FOREWORD BY LAMA THARCHIN RINPOCHE

TRANSLATED BY CHÖNYI DROLMA

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TRAKTUNG DUDJOM LINGPA

*A Clear Mirror*

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# A CLEAR MIRROR

*The Visionary Autobiography of a Tibetan Master*

Traktung Dudjom Lingpa  
Supreme Treasure Revealer and Buddhist King

Translated by Chönyi Drolma



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# *Table of Contents*

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*Cover*

*Rangjung Yeshe Books*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Foreword*

*Publisher's Preface*

*About This Translation*

*Acknowledgments*

*Translator's Introduction*

## **The Outer Autobiography**

The Origin of My Clan

An Envoy of Enlightened Activity

Your Father's Wealth

This Appearance of a Young Boy

Gods and Demons

A Lama Who Inspires

Child and Guardian

The Sacred Practice of Space

The True Meaning of Sublime Insight

The Union of Bliss-Emptiness

Eastward toward Golok

Bring Forth the Treasure

Great Perfection

How Should I Conduct Myself?

An Authentic Treasure Revealer

A Hidden Adept

Traversing the Swift Path

Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain

Dynamic Dance of the Mamos and Dakinis

Symbolic of Your Disciples

Direct Confrontation

When I Reign with Four Cycles

Not a Single Lama in This World  
The Ancestor of the World  
The Spectacle of Potala Mountain  
In the Presence of Patrul Rinpoche  
Renown for My Powers  
That Dzichen Witch  
Signs of the Dakinis' Agitation  
Time for Your Eradication  
Wealth and Livestock  
Song of Tidings  
Armies and Major Turmoil  
New Flower of Her Praise  
Colophon and Concluding Verses  
Printing Dedication

## **The Secret Autobiographies**

Details of My Lifetimes  
Spiritual Heritage  
A Little Boy with Excellent Fortune  
Appearances as the Deity  
The Nectar of Bliss-Emptiness  
What Is Called "Meditation"  
A Lucid Dreamer  
Thirteen Holy Disciples  
Custodians of My Doctrine

**The Secret Autobiography That Briefly Relates Replies to the Queries of a Wisdom Dakini**

**A Supernova of Blessings**

*Appendix 1: An Exalted Family Line*

*Appendix 2: A Living Legacy*

*Bibliography*

*Notes*

MY TEACHER, one of the highest, most realized lamas in Tibet, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche gave this advice: “If you want to engage in Buddhist practice to attain fully enlightened buddhahood, it’s very important to read the life stories of past sublime beings. You will come to understand how they attained realization, what practices they did, and what kind of realization they gained. You can then follow their example. If you aim to accomplish your practice, these sublime beings’ words and stories will act as your witness.”

Following Dudjom Rinpoche’s advice, I read many life stories, and they proved to be the most effective, profound teachings. Such stories offer models on two levels: how these masters practiced and the level of realization they gained. I would always measure where I was against these two examples, my aim being to emulate those masters’ integrity in practice and their profound realization.

This doesn’t apply only to me — all past masters have followed the path of sublime beings before them. We say in Tibetan, “In life, we imitate others; whoever is the best imitator succeeds.” Similarly, because all Buddhists imitate the Buddha, whoever imitates him best will become a buddha.

These days, however, people have become disconnected from the source of the practice — the lama. Patrul Rinpoche once said, “In ancient times, people would sit around drinking tea and chatting. Mostly they discussed things like, ‘My lama says this, my lama does that.’ These days when people sit together and have tea, all they talk about is, ‘My horse is better, my gun is better.’ They never talk about their practice or lama anymore.”

Generally, according to the Vajrayana point of view, the sole source of happiness is the sublime teachings — the Dharma — yet what is the source of all teachings? It is the lama. The lama’s qualities are equal to those of all buddhas, yet in terms of kindness in relation to us, the lama is kinder than any buddha. To explain, the lama’s qualities are equal to those of all buddhas because he or she has completely realized the dharmakaya level of enlightenment, beyond sentient beings’ field of experience. The lama’s kindness exceeds that of all buddhas because he or she makes their experience available to us in a tangible form, the nirmanakaya. We can see them and hear their teachings. Therefore, talking about the lama, thinking about the lama, and following the lama’s example is most important for us.

Almost all lamas have received their education and training from other human teachers, yet Dudjom Lingpa’s story is completely shocking and unique. Particularly now, among this generation, he remains a most powerful master. No human guide educated Dudjom Lingpa; his connection came straight from different buddhas’ teachings and empowerments. His lineage is truly direct, unlike any other. He didn’t even learn to read and write from a human lama, but from Yeshe Tsogyal. In his visions, he was like Yeshe Tsogyal’s child and Yeshe Tsogyal was like his mother. In his autobiography, Dudjom Lingpa describes how, even as a baby, he traveled to various pure lands and buddha fields.

Now, especially in this degenerate time, we don’t have such a model. Although we have plenty of intellectual, knowledge-based models for our lives, realization models are very rare. Before Dudjom Lingpa’s time, his life was prophesied in the ancient treasure texts of twenty



treasure revealers. What follows is a brief account of those predictions.

One day in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal were talking as they walked up a mountain. At one point, they sat and meditated. Yeshe Tsogyal heard Guru Rinpoche say, “Ah ka ka!” which means “Oh no!”

“Rinpoche,” she asked, “Why did you say ‘Ah ka ka!’?”

Guru Rinpoche answered, “In this degenerate time, sentient beings’ afflictive emotions are very wild and turbulent. Such gross emotions are difficult to subdue by any buddhas and their teachings. A really terrible time will come in the future.”

Hearing this, Yeshe Tsogyal offered prostrations to Guru Rinpoche, respectfully placed her hands on her head, and cried as she requested, “Since these kinds of wild sentient beings are impossible to tame, please send an emanation powerful enough to subdue them!”

Guru Rinpoche said, “Yes my daughter, you’re right to ask this. Among my twenty-five main disciples — all mahasiddhas, realized beings — the most powerful one, with realization equal to my own, is Drokben Kye-u Chung Lotsawa. Therefore, he will be this emanation’s body aspect. Yeshe Tsogyal, you and I have a connection over many lifetimes, and in this lifetime, you’re my consort. I have given you every teaching and prophecy, and I’ve empowered you to teach my entire doctrine now and for future generations. I’ve asked you, my heart student, to seal these teachings as treasure texts. You are powerful, so you will be this emanation’s speech aspect. As Padmasambhava, I will be his mind aspect. Among Guru Rinpoche’s eight manifestations, Dorjé Drolö riding on a tiger will emanate in Eastern Tibet as Traktur Dudjom Dorje.”

This incredible prophecy is unlike that of any other lama. Realizing this, when we have trust, faith, and devotion, we will receive blessings. Our original buddha nature is like fire, and these blessings are like adding oil — it makes our buddha nature blaze forth.

For me, reading Dudjom Lingpa’s life stories inspired me to want to practice the Dudjom lineage. Dudjom Lingpa is inseparable from His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, with whom I found myself connected. I’ve experienced so much satisfaction in having focused my personal practice on the Dudjom tradition. I’ve spent many years with this lineage, and discovered that the entirety of the Buddha’s teachings in eighty-four thousand categories, as well as the six hundred and four hundred thousand Great Perfection tantras, are complete and perfected within the Dudjom lineage. Nothing is missing from the Dudjom Tersar tradition of Dudjom Lingpa and his reincarnation Dudjom Rinpoche. I gained my connection with these teachings by reading Dudjom Lingpa’s life story. It is that inspiring.

Now I’m truly happy that Chönyi Drolma has completed this translation. Until now, we could read it in Tibetan but not in English. Chönyi is also a follower of the Dudjom Tersar lineage. She’s my vajra sister and recently finished a three-year, three-month retreat at the retreat center known as Drupnyi Dojö Ga-tsal, Joyful Wish-fulfilling Grove of the Two Aims, at Pema Osel Ling, Land of Lotus Light, this Dudjom-lineage Buddhist center on the West Coast of North America. She is continuing to do a total of six years of retreat focused on Dudjom Tersar practice. Chönyi maintains Dharma activities such as these, and I truly rejoice in her effort and motivation. I’m also requesting all readers, anyone at all connected with Dudjom Lingpa’s life stories, to make their connection meaningful: Please read this book and take Dudjom Lingpa’s life as a wonderful model to follow.

This is presented by the worst student of His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, father and so

the one by the name of Ngakben Tsédruk Tharchin, who wandered away from Eastern Tibet and who comes from the Repkong yogi family lineage of Palchen Namké Jikmé. I offer this with aspiration prayers and the utmost respect.

LAMA THARCHIN RINPOCHE  
*September 2010*  
*Drup-nyi Dojō Ga-tso*  
*Corallitos, California*

IN THE LATE FALL OF 2009 and early winter of 2010, an incredible event took place. A modern-day emanation of Padmasambhava in the flesh, Dungsé Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, blessed the people of Nepal by turning the wheel of the Dharma for three months in Pharphing, a holy site of Padmasambhava located there. His generosity in bestowing teachings, reading transmissions, and empowerments was extraordinary. Merely being in his presence was a shower of blessings and resounding confirmation that living buddhas still exist among us.

Nearly every night during those three months, Rinpoche practiced with a diverse group of people — high incarnate lamas, khenpos, monks, nuns, yogis, and yoginis of various backgrounds, Tibetan, Nepali, Bhutanese, Indian, Chinese, and Western. Each person participated in whichever way that they could, following along with the texts of the pujas, reciting mantras, or meditating. Everyone was extremely dedicated and well behaved. The power of the deep realization of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's wisdom mind captivated all ordinary minds and kept us, as much as possible, mindful of the opportunity we were granted. It was completely inspirational.

Thinley Norbu Rinpoche is seventy-nine years old<sup>1</sup> and not in the best of health, as he frequently reminds us. Yet his commitment to the lineage of which he is the holder and foremost propagator, the Dudjom Tersar, is astonishing. Pushing himself to the limit of his physical abilities, he did not refuse any Dharma requests. On the last night, when Rinpoche was receiving ceremonial scarves with love and respect from about five hundred people, I got a chance to talk to Pat, Rinpoche's remarkable longtime attendant. She said that Rinpoche took this hardship with no thought for himself because he felt that there were so many sincere practitioners, some of whom showed true signs of accomplishment. I was not able to go every night for those three months, but I do not see the slightest difference between Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and Padmasambhava.

Personally, my strongest karmic link is to another hidden-treasure lineage known as the Chokling Tersar, propagated by the three nineteenth-century masters Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Jamgön Kongtrul, and Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa. It has always been a bit perplexing to me to have the good fortune to have received the Dudjom Tersar — which I consider profound, beautiful, and astounding — from its major lineage holders and yet not practice it. Still, I study the instruction manuals by these lineage masters and I wanted to find a way to repay their kindness in revealing these teachings and bestowing them upon those of us lost in this dark age.

I had not found a way to express my appreciation until I met Chönyi Drolma. She quietly and fortuitously came into my life, as if an answer to my prayers, during the Tibetan New Year of the Tiger, 2010. Chönyi is a practitioner of the Dudjom Tersar who has completed a traditional three-year retreat under the guidance of Lama Tharchin Rinpoche. She was one of those devout people who went every night to be in the presence of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and as this book was being published, she entered another extended retreat on the Dudjom Tersar practices.

When we met the second time, it was next to the Boudha Stupa. She wanted some advice

on producing a text she had translated, “The Life Stories of Dudjom Lingpa.” Over tea at my place, she showed me her manuscript. I was immediately awestruck; the work was beautiful and appeared, upon that first cursory glance, to have been exceptionally well done. Here was my opening to show my sincere gratitude to the lineage of Dudjom Tersar, and I immediately offered to publish her manuscript.

You might think that this is what publishers do — acquire manuscripts and publish books — so why am I making a big deal about this? Other publishers do, but Rangjung Yeshe Publications had only ever published translations by my partner Erik Pema Kunsang and myself. However, as I read this life story, I felt as if the blessings of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche had descended upon me, and that motivated me to offer enthusiastically to produce Chönyi's work. I am overjoyed to do so.

Chönyi and I made aspirations at the stupa on the tenth day of the lunar month by lighting a butter lamp together. We finalized our agreement on the fifteenth day of the Miracle Month.

Since that time, I have checked the Tibetan original with her translation, to the best of my ability, and my initial enthusiasm has deepened and increased. Chönyi has done a remarkable job of translating the difficult, obscure, and poetic language of the text into English. The stories and teachings will speak for themselves — what a wonderful journey you, the reader, will embark upon, and many thanks to Chönyi for having given us the ticket to travel along.

So with my deep love for the Dudjom Tersar Dharma and my devotion to the supreme and exalted Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, I offer this small token of thanks, my involvement in bringing out this book. I will conclude with the aspiration prayer that I made as Chönyi and I held up the butter lamp at the Boudha Stupa:

*This illuminating lamp of original pure awareness  
I offer to the mandala deities of Vidyadhara Padmakara.  
May all beings, my mothers, wherever awareness pervades,  
Attain the dharmakaya level of aware emptiness.*

MARCIA DECHEN WANGMO

## *About This Translation*

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THIS TRANSLATION HAS ORIGINS both humble and incredibly exalted. Its humble origins are in a small cabin in a Dudjom-lineage three-year retreat center under the direction of Kyabjé Dungsé Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, where I began reading these autobiographies in Tibetan during intervals between meditation sessions. Reading yielded to wanting to fully understand and apply every single thing I read, which led to questions and finally to a translation. I figured if Dudjom Lingpa's autobiographies had changed my mind and practice so radically, then my retreat companions, and by extension Westerners in general, might benefit as well.

This book's exalted origins, beyond that cabin and my earnest but imperfect aspiration, are the lamas of the Dudjom lineage who very generously and patiently fed me the nectar teachings of the Dudjom Tersar tradition, which includes both Dudjom Lingpa's legacy as well as that of his immediate reincarnation, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche. These incomparable lamas include Dungsé Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, whose teachings formed the core of our retreat experience, as well as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Lopön Nikula Rinpoche of Bhutan, Loppön Jigme Rinpoche, Lama Tséring Gyaltzen, Lama Pem Dorje, Orgyen Chöwang Rinpoché, Dzatrul Rinpoche, Namkha Drimed Rinpoche, and Lama Sonam Tséring, the last of whom tirelessly manages both the three-year retreat center and the public center at Pema Osel Ling. It is only through the patient care of these lamas, whose teachings I gratefully received and whose kindness I have no way of repaying, that I was able to understand and profit from the incredible stories and instructions found in Dudjom Lingpa's autobiographies. Despite my extremely limited qualities as a practitioner, as I slowly cultivated my experience based on the lamas' vajra words, I found any questions that arose were answered both by my teachers as well as in the pages of this book. On some days, while I was reading, answers would magically appear mere moments after doubts or confusion had emerged in my mind. With deep appreciation for the Dudjom lineage, and for the lamas and disciples dedicated to this extraordinary and complete tradition, I resolved to see this translation through to its conclusion.

Dudjom Lingpa's writings, from recitations to meditation instructions, stand out as much for their profundity and beauty as for being, simply put, readable. In these translations, I endeavored to preserve those qualities, with a heavy emphasis on readability. Furthermore, although the command to pen these texts came from the heights of Yeshe Tsogyal's wisdom and speech, Dudjom Lingpa wrote them with a timbre that feels like home. When I read his accounts during retreat, it felt as if I was sitting at the feet of my lamas — as if the incredible stories and profound meditation instructions were being conveyed in the comfort of our own shrine room. Dudjom Lingpa's tone is familiar and accessible, and the language he uses is often quite colloquial (perhaps as a nod to his Khampa roots, a people renowned for not being stuffy in the least). So in my harrowing mission to imitate Dudjom Lingpa's style — elegant yet conversational in the same pen stroke — I've tried to preserve that sense of an intimate storytelling, even though the storyteller is one of the greatest masters of our era. That was my vision in general.

As for specifics throughout the book, the titles of all texts are translated into English. Most individual names, human, deity, and otherwise, are written in phonetic Tibetan with English translation on their first occurrence. In the case of central deities, English translation is paired with Tibetan names throughout the narrative. (Some names translate more gracefully than others, but in my limited experience, it's helpful or at least interesting to know what they mean.) Most terrestrial place names are left in Tibetan; the names of pure lands are translated. All endnotes after the first one are my own.

Regarding the three autobiographies,<sup>2</sup> for the outer account, the first and longest of the three, I have kept the form consistent with the Tibetan, rendering prose and verse as they appear in the original. In keeping with the English language custom of having long works divided into chapters, I used a phrase from the actual text to create each chapter division. The second text, the first of the two secret autobiographies is a treasure revelation written almost exclusively in verse in the original. I chose to render some sections in prose for the sake of flow and readability, keeping what appeared to be songs in verse. I also inserted several chapter breaks into what was otherwise a continuous text. The second secret autobiography, also a treasure revelation, is written entirely in verse, and has been translated as such.

One of the impressions I had while reading these texts in Tibetan was a sense of deep, continuous immersion in Dudjom Lingpa's reality. I felt like this consummate master was inviting me to go as far I dared to. With that in mind, I decided to let Dudjom Lingpa's narrative speak for itself. Rather than attach a lot of informative notes to the translation, I placed supplementary information in the introduction, appendices, and bibliography. Although every person, place, and incident Dudjom Lingpa recounts is likely a font of helpful and intriguing information, for the sake of preserving that sense of immersion, I decided to let readers stay in the narrative and see how deep it takes them. For fact-lovers, I suggest starting by investigating the books in the bibliography, keeping a copy of Gyurme Dorje's *Tibet Handbook* handy, and delving into the online wish-fulfilling jewel that is the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center ([www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org)).

Any errors in meaning, word choice, or understanding are entirely my own, and I ask for the forgiveness of the deities and guardians of the doctrine for all mistakes made out of unawareness, lack of experience, or otherwise. May this book be a source of inspiration and illumination, and may all beings benefit.

## *Acknowledgments*

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THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT of incredibly fortunate circumstances and a network of supportive individuals that stretches around the world. I must first express my deepest and complete gratitude to my amazingly kind and patient wisdom lamas, with whom I pray to remain inseparable throughout all my lifetimes — Kyabjé Dungsé Thinley Norbu Rinpoche and Lama Tsédru Tharchin Rinpoche. Though it's utterly impossible to repay your kindness, I make sincere aspirations to follow your enlightened example as closely as possible.

The teachings of these lamas, and those mentioned elsewhere, form the core of this translation. Further, Lama Tséring Gyaltzen who completed three-year retreat under His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche's direction, and attended Sanskrit University in India at his bequest, acted as the primary consultant for questions about the translation. He applied the depth of his personal practice and knowledge to answering hundreds of questions throughout the process, leading me to new levels of insight regarding the teachings in this book. Lama Ngawang Zangpo, my Tibetan language teacher for close to a decade, found time in his busy schedule to help me with the translation at every stage, including serving as a second reader when the translation was nearing completion. I must also thank my retreat companions, who inspired me to start translating the autobiographies into English.

During the period of time following retreat when I re-emerged into the world and was determined to finish the translation, without funding, and find a publisher, without a clue, my incredible family and friends supported me in every way. In particular, I'm grateful to my parents, Gloria and Rob Holland, and my sister Susan, for their bemused support throughout my Buddhist life and budding translation career. The same goes for my grandparents (one grandmother is sure I was in retreat with "that nice actor Richard Gere"), and my California family, Paul Holland and Linda Yates, as well as Don and Jane Yates. Many thanks to my friends in Brooklyn and Manhattan, who found me work so I could continue with the translation, and frequently took me in for indeterminate periods. Great swaths of the translation came together over many meals in the apartments of my dear friends, Aaron Wong, Rabbi Jordie Gerson, and Alison Laichter, director of the Jewish Meditation Center in Brooklyn.

This book only exists as a book due to a serendipitous encounter one evening in Nepal paired with the intrepid vision of Marcia Dechen Wangmo, who decided to take on the project and provide her considerable skills as an editor and organizer. Her generosity of spirit, long-term experience as a translator and editor, and, most importantly, deep personal practice have all informed this translation and seen it through to completion. In addition, thanks go to the front-matter editor, Michael Tweed; the copy editor, Meghan Howard; the book designer, Joan Olson; the cover artist, Maryann Lipaj; and the proof readers, Dr. Lynn Schroeder and Michael Yockey.

Finally, sincere gratitude and appreciation goes to Richard Gere and the Gere Foundation with its magnanimous director Mollie Rodriguez for their support in this production. May this work serve as a meaningful connection to the incredibly alive, deeply pure lineage of the Dudjom Tersar tradition, and may all beings benefit.

YOU ARE ABOUT TO EMBARK on an autobiographical account of a saint, a genius, a virtuoso. He has given us full access to his incredible inner life, which runs from the mystifying to the magical. I have translated his three autobiographical accounts in their entirety, now in your hands, be it whether in their original language or in English, I am left breathless, awestruck, by the chronicle. To say the least, Dudjom Lingpa (1835–1904) was not your run-of-the-mill saint. Then again, what saint is?

If across cultures and religions we share any conventional presuppositions concerning the lives of the saints who seem to grace all lands and peoples, it may be the expectation that they experience a bolt from the blue — a confrontation with a larger, higher truth — followed by a life of service to that inspiration. Be it Saul on the road to Damascus or Mother Teresa on the train to Darjeeling, the arc of a saint's life can appear familiar and known. In Western religions, sainthood (whether the individual so named is recognized by ecclesiastical authorities or not) is something thrust upon its recipient by a divine being or by a worldly crisis that conspires to elevate the saint among us.

Things are a little more complicated in the East. In India for example, cultural expectations allow that avatars, saints, and other great beings are regularly born, generation after generation, to seemingly random families throughout the country. These individuals become authentic spiritual guides. Indian saints can become so by dint of religious training that leads to a significant spiritual breakthrough, through a life shift or flash of inspiration, or simply by being born that way. In the Tibetan world, that of Dudjom Lingpa, the situation gains an entirely new level of complexity: The culture's spiritual renewal was and is still based upon the recognition of reincarnate saints and their training to reassume their previous life's (or lives') work.

Whatever mold we might have for saints' lives — Western, Indian, or Tibetan — Dudjom Lingpa shatters it in this series of autobiographies. The scope of his inner life of visions and dreams is simply too overpowering. He informs us obliquely at the outset that he knows the conventions of normal autobiographical accounts, by treating us to a few daunting pages of detailed family history, acknowledging his ancestors before leaning across the table, smiling, and searching our face, then saying, "Well, if you really want to know who I am ..."

And then we are lost, drawn into his tale spanning almost seventy years with rarely a nod to the outer world and its reference points. He composed twenty-one volumes of writing (the trio of autobiographical works comprises one of them), fathered eight reincarnate sons by several mothers, lived in perpetual motion, built at least one major Buddhist center, and filled Tibet with his disciples. Yet throughout his narrative, we rarely surface to register change in his circumstances before hurtling once again into the maw of his inner life.

The incredible lives of saints go beyond ordinary human bounds — this is why they achieve timeless eminence. Yet be they Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise, these individuals have a background of belief systems that make it possible to understand how their lives unfolded, and to follow in their wake. While Dudjom Lingpa's experience often leaves knowledge of reality behind and may at times startle even seasoned Buddhists, we must endeavor to



understand some outlines of his belief system in order to accompany him along the way.

I find myself in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being your unqualified guide for this journey. I can only offer the limited experience of having immersed myself in the study and practice of Dudjom Lingpa's writings and meditations, guided by some of the leading holders of his lineage. In the following introduction to his shared accounts, I will try to prepare you, as much as one can, for engagement with Dudjom Lingpa's amazing reality. What threads, spiritual and mundane, can we follow among the fantastical events of his life? Who are the members of the endless cast of characters he meets — masters, wisdom deities, dakinis, gods, and demons? How did his corpus of work take shape? What impact did this unique life have beyond its time? Exhaustive answers to these questions lie beyond the limits of this book. I hope in this introduction, in the appendices, and in the bibliography to provide some indications as to where readers who find this saint as compelling as I do can learn more about him and his world.

PRESSED TO WRITE a single sentence to situate Dudjom Lingpa in the world of Buddhist discourse, I would say this: He was a treasure revealer and Great Perfection master in the Nyingma, or Ancient Tradition, order of Buddhism in Tibet.

Although every word in that sentence belongs to the English language, only “Buddhism” and “Tibet” may carry any meaning for most people. We might reasonably expect that reading the autobiographies translated here will better inform us, but such hopes are in vain. Dudjom Lingpa's life story accelerates quickly into the miraculous, with little or no indication of what the above description means. Faced with this lack of basic information on classical Tibetan Buddhist reference points, I will survey the panorama of his accounts from two vantage points, starting with the philosophical and moving to the tangible.

I begin this introduction by presenting some of the background information necessary for us to understand the major landmarks in Dudjom Lingpa's life — his spiritual compass. This necessarily begins with a brief introduction to Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal, the primary founders of Dudjom Lingpa's belief system. This pair lived in Tibet a thousand years before Dudjom Lingpa was born, yet they consistently appeared to him throughout his life, providing his main source of guidance and inspiration.

Second, I will briefly address the theoretical underpinnings of Dudjom Lingpa's experiences. For the sake of our journey, I will focus on the areas of Buddhism he embraced himself, and then teaches to others throughout his life — Tantra and the Great Perfection. These topics may initially seem formidable to some, however I can offer firsthand assurance that everything Dudjom Lingpa relates is part of a well-tread path happily relied upon by all sorts of people worldwide. That said, we will jump into the deep end of Buddhism, and some Buddhist jargon or code words are regrettably unavoidable. These will include a glimpse of the belief system at the heart of Dudjom Lingpa's spiritual legacy, the view of all phenomena as self-manifest in infinite purity, evenness, and emptiness.

This perspective, signature Dudjom Lingpa, will help us better understand the next topic — a brief exploration of the origins, cast members, and purpose of the prolific and incredible visionary experiences that form the main fabric of his life stories. The introduction ends by delving into various key aspects of the amazing life that unfurls from these reference points and beliefs.

IT IS VERY RARE to receive such an intimate glimpse into a saint's life, so it's worth our while to try to understand where Dudjom Lingpa is coming from. For Buddhists, this is a book filled with essential, clear instructions. Yet this is not merely a Buddhist book; it's a book about awakening, about manifesting our deepest altruistic potential beyond any presupposed limits — that seed within each of us that compels us to explore, to meditate, to read on, and to trust ourselves to discover and tread paths that might at first appear uncertain, but in time prove to be right and noble. Many great individuals have gone before us on these paths. Shared accounts such as this one bring their timeless, brilliant presence into our lives, opening us suddenly to new and unforeseen possibilities.

### *Wisdom Guides*

WE HAVE THE DEEP PRIVILEGE of exploring Dudjom Lingpa's reality in the company of two spiritual revolutionaries who established Buddhism in ninth-century Tibet — Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal. We encounter them at the start of this great nineteenth-century master's narrative not as historical figures but as living presences. In compassionate concern for the state of the world, they press Dudjom Lingpa to take rebirth, then repeatedly strengthen and reassure their envoy in visions throughout his life. Guru Rinpoche appears to Dudjom Lingpa on at least twenty occasions, Yeshe Tsogyal even more frequently.

Guru Rinpoche's previous incarnation, Shakyamuni Buddha, is familiar to most people. Born Prince Siddhartha Gautama in northern India in the sixth century BC, his life story has long served as an epic adventure and source of inspiration. Shakyamuni Buddha stated that he would return in a future emanation to give teachings related to Tantric, or Secret Mantra Buddhism. In *The Concise Tantra of the Complete Unsurpassable Meaning*, he foretells, "Twenty years after passing into enlightenment, I, the victor most supreme among all worlds, will emerge in the land of Oddiyana. Called Lotus-Born, I will expound the teachings of Secret Mantra."<sup>3</sup> Shakyamuni Buddha did return as the individual known as Padmasambhava, the Lotus-Born, and became renowned as Guru Rinpoche, the universal lama to whom tantric practitioners pray for spiritual accomplishment with deep faith and gratitude — the one who established the tradition, taught an exalted circle of disciples, and ensures the continuation of Tibetan Buddhism to the present day.

Yeshe Tsogyal was one of Guru Rinpoche's original disciples, as well as a principal lineage holder and his spiritual consort. During her life, she assumed a variety of exceptional roles to ensure Buddhism would endure and flourish. Like Guru Rinpoche, Yeshe Tsogyal vanished from the human world. Yet she remains constantly accessible to practitioners at any level. To synthesize her limitless qualities, Yeshe Tsogyal has a threefold role within Tantric Buddhism in three aspects which figure prominently in Dudjom Lingpa's life stories. First, as a historical figure, she was a model of Buddhist practice, particularly in her unwavering devotion to her spiritual master, that art which is so central to Tantric Buddhism's unique and swift effectiveness. She accomplished, preserved, and conveyed every teaching she received. This includes the immense task of recording and concealing teachings and objects known as terms or treasures, such as those Dudjom Lingpa revealed and propagated. Second, as a visionary persona, she continuously reveals herself in dreams, visions, or real life to guide and inspire faithful practitioners. Third, her human incarnations continue to be reborn in the world.

guiding others in whatever capacity is needed, impartially working for the welfare of the Buddhist doctrine and all beings.

When we define Dudjom Lingpa as a master in the Ancient Tradition order of Tibetan Buddhism, that order traces its central roots to Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal, who are still considered the prime catalysts for accomplishing one's spiritual aims within the tradition.

### *A View from the Summit*

AN ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT is necessary as we journey through Dudjom Lingpa's life. In Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal's Ancient Tradition, many worthy approaches to reach enlightenment exist. There are nine in fact, each replete with different teachings, structures, and meditation techniques. One can begin at the beginning and progress from one to nine; it is equally acceptable to start elsewhere, at level three for example, and assimilate what has preceded one's entry point. As readers traveling on the Dudjom Lingpa express, however, we advance directly to the summit: Tantra and Great Perfection.

Tulku Thondup Rinpoche explains, "In *tantric* teachings, the view is indivisibility of cause and result... [T]he world and beings are equally as pure as the Buddhas and Buddha-fields. While it may be difficult to fathom reality experienced in this way, this startling insight is the view relied upon by realized guides like Dudjom Lingpa. Referred to as "pure view," this is the recognition of all-encompassing purity, not glimpsed after arduous self-improvement, but right now, corresponding to every creature's and every thing's inherent nature.

Primordially pure, all phenomena are a seamless tapestry woven from the spontaneous perfect qualities of enlightenment. As Dudjom Lingpa states, "I, a practitioner of Great Perfection, realize all phenomena to be naked awareness."

Dudjom Lingpa's narrative returns to this direct perception of awareness again and again amid epic visionary voyages. His is an immediate experience of the all-encompassing equanimity and infinite purity of all phenomena. Good or bad, enjoyable or unwanted, everything seen, felt, and known has equal value, and most importantly, nothing is "other," other. Dudjom Lingpa wrote volumes on this view of reality, on its many implications and subtleties, and on the path that leads to this summit of all Buddhist theory and practice. This is a key aspect of this great master's revealed experience throughout his life stories, and a hallmark of his doctrine.

### *Metameetings: Layers of Visionary Engagement*

IN ORDER TO SHOW others his path to awakening, Dudjom Lingpa shares with us his process of self-revelation. This takes place mainly in copious visionary encounters (both in waking life and in dreams), and these occur within the context of his belief systems — Tantra and Great Perfection — with which he assumes readers are comfortably familiar.

How does Dudjom Lingpa gain access to his alternate world of pure vision? More often than not, mystical female figures are the conductors of his visionary life. Almost all his expeditions to visit deities and pure lands are led by ephemeral entities called dakinis. *Dakini*

is a Sanskrit word that in Tibetan (khandro) translates literally as “one who moves in space.” Dakinis are considered mysterious and powerful, manifesting as both worldly and wisdom beings. Worldly dakinis can be caring, or capricious, or even misleading. Their transcendent counterparts include Yeshe Tsogyal. Rather than languishing in the enclosure of ordinary dualistic reality, wisdom dakinis operate in the space of the nature of reality — they move unhindered within the expanse of the wisdom of nondual awareness. It is to these mystical beings that precious troves and teachings have been entrusted, sometimes concealed for centuries until a suitable audience appears in the world. In many stories, dakinis pluck the seminal teachings and sacred objects meant for Dudjom Lingpa and his disciples from the timeless space between layers of solid reality.

On this level of the narrative of his autobiography, the “how” question concerning Dudjom Lingpa’s visions is easy to answer. In many cases, he accepts female enlightened beings’ invitations to leave the mundane world behind. The “why” question — what was the purpose of these meetings?—has a number of answers.

Some of Dudjom Lingpa’s visionary encounters are largely practical in nature. They are the context in which he receives the transmissions of tantric teachings. Tulku Thondup Rinpoche explains, “The transmission of teachings and the esoteric power that comes from the primordial Buddha through master to disciple is the basis of the tantric tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Tantric Buddhists at all levels accept as part of their spiritual path the task of seeking and receiving transmission from qualified lamas. This is a deeply important part of their training. Conventionally, such transmission transpires between a human master and a human disciple, but Dudjom Lingpa’s experience, however, completely defies such convention. Instead, the dakinis who possess the blueprints to his visionary journeys often have him meet exalted figures such as buddhas, deities, and past adepts of India and Tibet called awareness holders whose accomplishment during their lifetimes affords them timeless eminence. From them he receives the transmissions needed for spiritual practice wholesale, en masse. His visionary rendezvous dispel the limitations of time and space, as if the entire timeline of tantric history has folded upon itself and spread out before him. Directly from the source, Dudjom Lingpa receives his share of the inheritance of the Buddhist wisdom of the ages. He then cultivates its experience in his personal meditation practice and passes its transmission to his disciples.

According to Buddhist taxonomy, the deities he meets in such visions belong to the different categories of Tantra. These meetings fill in a major gap in Dudjom Lingpa’s experience as a Buddhist practitioner: He has no human meditation teachers. Awareness holders and deities act in their stead, offering the guidance, criticism, and confirmation normally provided by an individual’s lama. For his part, Dudjom Lingpa condenses the usual process of gradual training into an instant of pure awareness — he vaults directly into the middle of each deity’s universe.

In his autobiographies, Dudjom Lingpa’s sole explicit organizing principle is chronological — this happened, then later that year this occurred, and so on. He presents the facts without much commentary, and we accompany him on a series of amazing but seemingly haphazard visions. To appreciate that there might be a method, a logic, to the kaleidoscope of his reality, we must look to Dudjom Lingpa’s seminal work, *Buddhahood Without Meditation*. There, he provides bare transcripts of teachings he received during his visionary encounters with over a dozen deities and awareness holders. Yet he does not give

us the keys to understanding the framework of his progress. Is there a pattern here? What does this vision follow the last? The translator of that book kindly includes a text by Dudjom Lingpa's reincarnation, His Holiness Dudjom Jikdral Yeshe Dorje, entitled *Structural Analysis and Outline*.<sup>7</sup> Even if we do not entirely comprehend the topics mentioned, the text still allows us to realize that every vision and teaching represents an identifiable step along a well-charted path. It all makes perfect sense, or if not to us, then at least to Great Perfection masters. (Incidentally, if a similar *Structural Analysis and Outline* existed for *A Clear Mirror*, I would have been delighted to include it as an appendix in this volume.)

Dudjom Lingpa's visions also function as a conduit for his activity as a treasure revealer. Tantric Buddhism's great strength is its spiritual technology; the treasure tradition is basically a very sophisticated information delivery system, as will be explained in more detail later. While many teachings have endured for centuries through pure lineages, passed from one individual to another, such lineages are subject to the vagaries of human existence. When a line of transmission grows thin and breaks, teachings tragically disappear. The immediacy of treasure transmission solves this problem. Over the centuries in Tibet, hundreds of men and women, reincarnations of Guru Rinpoche's first Tibetan disciples, have served as revealers of such treasures and thus restored some defunct practices and reinvigorated others. Dudjom Lingpa is one such individual. Many of his pure visions revolve around his destiny and role as a treasure revealer. In visions, he receives key information and prophecies regarding the locations of his treasures, who his consorts and doctrine custodians should be, and how he should live his life so as to actualize his potential as an authentic treasure revealer. Furthermore, the treasures themselves are sometimes delivered to him in encounters with enlightened beings.

While there is obvious purpose in these divine visionary engagements, what of the demonic? From infancy Dudjom Lingpa is plagued by apparitions and demonic incursions, and throughout his life "demons" in many forms challenge him or members of his entourage. Such events, experienced as crises, force Dudjom Lingpa to evaluate himself and to flex his meditative muscles. As if to say, "resistance to the present moment is futile," he uses these encounters to demonstrate the difference between reacting to experience as being "out there" versus owning it as being self-manifest. He chooses not to recognize challengers from a place of knee-jerk defensiveness, instead seeing them, with the poise of awareness, to be his own phenomena. We see this most dramatically in his encounters with demonic forces, yet the same spirit underlies even his grandest visions of buddhas and pure lands.

In the midst of his visions, everything appears just as solid and real to Dudjom Lingpa as our selves and surroundings do to us, and for the sake of his narrative he portrays what transpires in visions as external. Yet *A Clear Mirror* contains a number of "gotcha" moments. There are points at which the deities who appear to him in all their enlightened splendor question Dudjom Lingpa's experience of them as being "other," as being anything else than self-manifest expressions of his inherent enlightened nature. They mock him for allowing himself to be momentarily duped into believing that the length and breadth, heights and depths, of cyclic existence and the boundless majesty of displays of enlightenment's qualities are anything else than self-manifest adornments of the indwelling luminous nature of his own being.



WE NOW MOVE from the philosophical to the tangible, the circumstances of Dudjom Lingpa's life. If only this were the easy part.

In Tibet's literary culture, the genre of spiritual biography and autobiography is quite common.<sup>8</sup> These accounts are generally identified as outer, inner, or secret, either explicitly by the author or implicitly due to their content. An outer account of a life focuses on worldly events, often describing important people and places, teachings received and given, institutions established, and so forth. Inner memoirs provide a more personal perspective, often including private reflections and some recounting of meditative experiences, dreams, visions, and prophecies. With secret narratives, readers are privy to the author's deeper spiritual processes and self-reflections. Therefore, secret accounts can be far more esoteric; some sections may even be written in code or terminology that only practitioners with like experiences can fathom. At the very least, as Westerners living in a media-saturated culture where tell-all autobiographies are common, we open books deemed "secret" with the expectation of an intimate view on the person's life. In the Tibetan context, however, such access does not necessarily include details of the individual's public or private life, and the people, places, and intrigues that filled it. Conversely, outer or inner levels of autobiography could divulge such information without touching on the secret level of the person's being — the domain of their creativity, what made them grow and learn, live and breathe, their innermost level.

Dudjom Lingpa's first and longest autobiography is deemed to be an outer account, although its content resembles an inner or even secret account. While engrossing, he reveals very little about his public life. It's as if, instead of learning about Beethoven's career, family, and social life, we were able to read his private journal instead and gain a glimpse of the genius from inside his head and heart. This is exactly what Dudjom Lingpa does in his trilogy of autobiographies. Although he was brilliantly successful in his multifaceted career as a teacher to incalculable outstanding disciples, a prolific writer with at least twenty-one external volumes of composition that are still studied around the world, a treasure revealer in the teaching system unique to Tantric Buddhism, and a father of eight remarkable children, his stories offer us something else. In this book, we are shown the very thing that high lamas regard as most sacred and intimate — spiritual evolution via the lens of their innermost visionary life, cinematic in scope, filled with buddhas and beings both divine and demonic. Dudjom Lingpa grants readers access to his enlightenment process as only he could have experienced it.

As for the rest — details on the messy task of navigating an uncooperative reality and bringing together the conditions necessary to fulfill his impressive destiny — Dudjom Lingpa leaves us on our own. While thoroughly absorbing, *A Clear Mirror* reveals very little about the chart of his spiritual growth, rise to prominence, and formation of an enduring lineage of vast scope. For this, we often have to read between the lines. Dudjom Lingpa often leverages his visionary encounters as celestial therapy sessions. By using them to express doubts, seek clarification, and assess his own qualities and orientation in the world, he reveals in his own unique fashion his maturation process. In this most intimate and inspiring account, it is for us to search among the abundant gold and jewels he strews about to find the pieces of common

rock and earth with which to construct the outer story of his life. This includes themes and patterns we can all relate to, such as the challenges and successes in his saga that are patent to all human.

### *Isolation and Independence*

THE SOLITARY, unrecognized genius: What could be a more predictable cliché? Yet, throughout most of Dudjom Lingpa's life, isolation was in fact the norm. He consistently lacked a peer group, whether familial, social, or spiritual. In his youth, he mentions no fellow classmates. Even as he grew older and gained prominence, he had no consistent companions at his own level. From an institutional perspective, Dudjom Lingpa was equally isolated. He never sought monastic ordination, nor did he live in a temple with a large community. He was never involved in the tulku system, in which individuals, often as infants or children, are recognized and sometimes enthroned as the official reincarnation of a great master's previous lifetime. One implication of this lack of recognition was that Dudjom Lingpa didn't receive training with other reincarnate youths, nor was he ever returned to the institution of his former incarnation, as is so often the case.

In Tibet, it was not uncommon for high-ranking Tibetan teachers to have other lamas or practice companions with whom they collaborated. Dudjom Lingpa's own contemporaries and geographical neighbors formed such an alliance. The trio of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–92), Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1900), and Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa (1829–70) served as teacher and disciple to one another. Their treasure revelations represented a concerted effort whose success relied upon a symbiotic dynamic.<sup>9</sup> As portrayed in Dudjom Lingpa's life stories, such relationships were absent from his own career as a teacher and treasure revealer.

While isolation can foster unfettered independence, Dudjom Lingpa frequently lamented to his visionary guides that he had no support network. While he demonstrated from a young age the ability to command respect from above (in visions) and eventually gathered a vast following of disciples, his complaints rang true. Especially early in life, he had very little lateral support and plenty of detractors. Dudjom Lingpa's claims to be a treasure revealer contributed to further distance and suspicion from those who might have otherwise been inclined to ally with him. It should be noted that in a culture where charismatic individuals who call themselves treasure revealers (whether authentic or fraudulent) can quickly achieve celebrity status, skepticism is a healthy attitude. Even revered masters sympathetic to the treasure tradition, such as Jamgön Mipam Rinpoche (1846–1912), wrote texts exposing the transgression of false treasures and their so-called revealers.<sup>10</sup>

Dudjom Lingpa's standing as an authentic treasure revealer was consistently challenged, both this-world and visionary confrontations. Among the great teachers of his time, Jamgön Kongtrul, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, and Jamgön Mipam Rinpoche were early skeptics. Initially they did not regard Dudjom Lingpa, who lacked a title, institutional endorsement, and formal education, as an authentic treasure revealer. Nor were his writings taken seriously, due in part to the occasional use of unconventional structures or statements that did not match classical Tibetan composition. (As so often happens, such deviation was not recognized as an indication of genius.) It was only after the rise of Dudjom Lingpa's star —

his doctrine flourished and his disciples showed true signs of spiritual maturation — that the trio of superlative masters came to regard Dudjom Lingpa as a true treasure revealer. This shift is confirmed by the fact that Jamgön Kongtrul eventually requested to be allowed to include Dudjom Lingpa's work in his encyclopedic *Compendium of Precious Treasure Teachings* (Dudjom Lingpa respectfully declined.)<sup>11</sup> In addition, Jamyang Kyentsé Wangpo sent one of his closest disciples, Gyurmé Ngédön Wangpo (19th–20th centuries), to Dudjom Lingpa. He ended up staying with Dudjom Lingpa until his passing and served as teacher to his reincarnation.<sup>12</sup> Further, Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche is reported to have written to Dudjom Lingpa, stating that having read his treasure texts, he found them, and their fresh nontraditional Buddhist vocabulary, both profound and authentic.<sup>13</sup> In the end, Dudjom Lingpa's spiritual evolution, teachings, and exceptional disciples inspired validation.

Perhaps his isolation and lack of approval allowed him to heed the stern advice of visionary teachers. Unlike many of his peers, especially those with prestigious titles and heavy institutional responsibilities, Dudjom Lingpa was free to do as he (and the deities he pleased) — to practice meditation in retreat, focus on his writings, and amass a circle of exceptional students at his own pace.

### *The Persistence of Poverty*

DUDJOM LINGPA'S EVENTUAL TRIUMPHS were preceded by decades of solitary struggle. Although his inner panorama — fantastic adventures and rapid spiritual progress — was rich with marvels, he found that miracles didn't pay the bills. A Tibetan saying has it that if your finances are sound, it is at the expense of your spiritual practice, whereas if your meditation is going well, your money situation is awful. As someone who did not follow any conventional, reasonable route to worldly success, this was true throughout most of Dudjom Lingpa's life. Much of his prosperity was based on trusting in advice prescribed through supernatural avenues. He would confide to visionary teachers his concerns regarding wealth and resources, and receive scant reassurance. Even in the case of positive indications or predictions of prosperity, he was more often than not forced to wait until later in life to enjoy the fruition of such prophecies.

For instance, at age twenty-one, Dudjom Lingpa received a magic egg in payment for bringing rain to a suffering naga community.<sup>14</sup> This gift was meant to increase his wealth, but even such a lucky charm failed to help his situation. Sometimes deities responded to his plight. At age thirty-six, while he meditated upon Great Wealth Lord Aparā, the deity actually appeared. Having endured nine years with only bare-minimum resources, the deity announced he would grant Dudjom Lingpa whatever he desired. The following year he could afford to build a house.

Yet balancing a domestic life with deep spiritual commitment was precarious, as it remained for so many devoted spiritual practitioners today. Throughout his life, seeking payments for religious services was a recurring topic, replete with pejorative and cautionary messages (usually involving demons). At one point Dudjom Lingpa bemoaned having to seek provision when he only wanted to practice meditation. In response, a visionary guide called Supreme Hungkara told him he had to choose between losing himself to “undeserved payments (kor) or persevering in spiritual practice. The Tibetan word *kor* has several meanings, including “religious wealth or materials offered out of faith.” However, one definition of a *kor*-



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