

The Legacy of the Jonangpa

A transcript of a talk by Michael R. Sheehy at the Great Stupa of Jonang in Tibet¹
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So, the actual name of this place is Jomonang, which is the name of the valley. It is named "Jomonang" because the female local protector deity here is known as Jomo Ngag Gyalmo, who is said to live in the upper ridge right above you, but she oversees this whole valley. In the 13th century, a few hundred years after Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal inhabited this place, she discovered that there was this man called Kunpangpa (Kunpang Thukjé Tsöndru) who was living in a cave about three valleys away from here, who was a Kalachakra master and whose meditative realization had reached a point of perfection. She went to visit Kunpangpa. I have been to this cave where they met. It is up on a ridge that is a straight vertical drop down into a rushing river, a thousand feet or so – very, very high – its a precipice. Kunpangpa was living up there and she came to visit and said to him, "Oh, great Kalachakra master, I invite you to come and live in my valley and your so doing will allow the Kalachakra teachings to flourish in the Land of Snows." He then replied to her (something like), "Oh, thank you for the invitation, but I am very busy, as you can tell, and I have at least three more years I have to stay in this cave – some more realizations to accomplish, some more siddhis. But, after three years, if my meditation goes well, then I'll come visit you in Jomonang."

Kunpangpa then arrived here in this valley in 1294, or thereabouts, and he set up shop, if you will, on the other side of this ridge here, very close to where Jomo is said to live. He built there at that time a small monastery for the students that were following him here to Jomonang. "Jonang" is an abbreviation by the villagers here of Jomonang. Now, we don't have the time to go another day's walk up to that place, but it is just ruins at this point. There is really not much you can see there. Kunpangpa was raised in the Sakya tradition at Sakya Monastery that is over there a few days, not far south of here, and was a master of the Lam Rim teachings. He was also a lineage holder of the Hevajra teachings that are a famous Sakya lineage, and then was a major transmission holder of the Kalachakra lineage. Now, this is very important for what happens here. At that time, this is early to mid-1300s, the second transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet was occurring, but really having to do specifically with the Kalachakra tradition.

These teachings were coming largely from Kashmir and from regions that we now consider northwestern India or northwestern Himalaya, and were traversing across western Tibet and across northern Nepal, primarily from Kashmir, from Kashmiri and sometimes Indian masters, being received by Kunpangpa. Kunpangpa was really of the sixth Tibetan generation to receive the Kalachakra transmissions from various Indian masters coming from northern India and Kashmir. He then went around western and southern Tibet and received seventeen distinct transmission lineages of the *Kalachakra Tantra*. So, it is important to have a sense of this time period. These were coming in as streams and he was acting as a confluence of sorts – that is to say, gathering the momentum of these various transmission lineages and synthesizing them into one. He did the same with the Lam Rim tradition,

Chakrasamvara and Hevajra also, but Kalachakra was really his main practice and interest. As he then became the receptor and transmitter of these seventeen transmission lineages he began to write down what he understood, what he realized, to be the essential guidance instructions from each of these Kalachakra lineages. These writings then became the first written texts in the Tibetan language on meditation guidance instructions for the Kalachakra.

(Ends recorded fragment, begins notes:)

Kunpangpa was the main disciple of Chöku Odzer, under whom he studied Kalachakra. Kunpangpa's main disciple was Khetsun Yontan Gyatso. Around that time there was a young man from the Dolpo region of Nepal who had heard of the Kalachakra teachings being given at Jonang, and he decided to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa, with a stop planned at Jonang on his way. This young man was Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen. So, he set off to Lhasa and stopped here (at Jonang) and requested the empowerment of the Kalachakra from the lineage holder, Yontan Gyatso. Yontan Gyatso was very busy at that time and Dolpopa was told to come back three days later, when there would be an empowerment given. At this point Dolpopa was 29 years of age. That night, after Dolpopa's audience with him, Yontan Gyatso went to sleep and had a dream in which the Kalki of Shambhala came to him and said that this man who visited him today would raise the victory banner of the Kalachakra at Jonang, and that he should not waste time in delaying the empowerment. Dolpopa was summoned the next day and given the Kalachakra empowerment by Yontan Gyatso, at which time he asked for and received meditation instructions. He then went up into that cave above here at Jonang, and is said to have achieved the first stage of the sixfold vajrayoga practice (first stage of the completion practice of the *Kalachakra Tantra*). After that he went on to complete his pilgrimage to Lhasa.

Eventually, Dolpopa returned to Jonang after completing his pilgrimage and began to study full-time with Yontan Gyatso from then on. After a few years Yontan Gyatso passed away, but before he did he named Dolpopa as his heir to the Vajra Seat at Jonang, making Dolpopa the 4th throne-holder at Jonang. If I recall, that was in 1329. He then began construction of and built this Great Stupa of Jonang as a tribute to his master, Yontan Gyatso. Rocks were conveyed from all four of the cardinal directions by hand and by mule. It took over four years to complete. During this time Dolpopa laid in residence in a house below his cave, which we see above us here, called Dzimkhang Dewachen or the "Residence of Great Bliss." He oversaw the construction of the stupa and would come down and build entire sections if he was not satisfied with the work, often dismantling the sections stone-by-stone and meticulously rebuilding them. It was said that he was seen in many places at once during this time.

At the same time as the stupa was being built, Dolpopa was overseeing the retranslating of the *Kalachakra Tantra* and the *Vimalprabha* or *Stainless Light* commentary. This eventually came to be known as the Jonang Kalachakra Tantra translation. This was completed by his main disciples – Jonang Lotsawa and Sazang Mati Panchen. Also during this time he had his first realization of zhentong, which he kept secret until the stupa was finished. The stupa was completed in 1333. At this time, Dolpopa described the stupa as the raising of the universal mountain Meru, a blessing from the Kalki of Shambhala that enabled his realizations to gush forth like the cosmic oceans. The shedra was in the area behind you, all in ruins now, with the debate courtyard in between there and the stupa. Many great debates were held there during Dolpopa's tenure. Looking to the hill on the left we see also the reliquary of

Taranatha's mother. We can see on the ridge behind us as well the meditation cave of Dolpopa. Many yogis would come to practice Kalachakra in the caves surrounding. It was a yogi's retreat center. Up above here we also see the caves of Chogle Namgyal and Nyawon Kunga Pal. Then here in the center is the cave where Tsongkhapa performed his three-year retreat on the Kalachakra, and where other great masters such as Tongten Gyalpo spent extensive periods in retreat.

During Dolpopa's life here, it is said that he would come out onto the stupa at the edge there where there is a sort of platform area, and that is where he would teach. The local oral tradition says that when he would descend from his residence Dewachen, a white conch shell would be blown, and upon hearing this trumpet noise, yogis would come flying out of their caves "like flocks of birds" in order to gather in front of the stupa to listen to Dolpopa teach. Dolpopa taught many of the classics of Buddhist philosophy as well as his own insights. It was during this period that his magnum opus, *An Ocean of Definitive Meaning: A Teaching for Yogis Who Dwell in the Mountains* was composed. It was written for those yogis who lived here in the mountain hermitages. All of Dolpopa's fourteen major disciples had caves here, though it's said that there were several thousands of students who would appear for Dolpopa's teachings in front of the stupa.

The nunnery we saw coming up the valley was built at the time of Dolpopa. It was restored in the late 1990s and there are 30-35 nuns there, largely in a caretaking capacity. There are only three active Jonang monasteries in southern Tibet today and they are all nunneries. There are, however, over seventy Jonang monasteries in Amdo in eastern Tibet, which is the only area of Tibet where the Jonang survived. In the 300-year period from the 14th-17th centuries before the Jonang were driven out, there were over forty Jonang monasteries in Tsang, southern Tibet. Now let's stroll around.

Endnotes

¹ This transcript is based on a partial recording and notes while at the Great Stupa of Jonang during the "Discovering the Jonang: A Pilgrimage through Central Tibet." Many thanks to Malvin Artley and Adrienne Gail Barkla for compiling it.