



P R I N C I P L E S O F
BUDDHIST TANTRA

Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
IAN COGLAN AND VOULA ZARPANI

Principles of Buddhist Tantra

A COMMENTARY ON CHÖJÉ NGAWANG PALDEN'S

*Illumination of the Tantric Tradition:
The Principles of the Grounds and Paths of the
Four Great Secret Classes of Tantra*



Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché

Translated and edited by
Ian Coghlan and Voula Zarpani



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Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché, circa 1993, Dharamsala, India. Photo by Andre Antonietti.



Translators' Introduction

Tantra is the hallmark of Tibetan Buddhism. While it is ostensibly an esoteric practice suitable for only a tiny elect, in practical terms, it has come to inform every aspect of the tradition. Images of meditational deities dominate Buddhist temples, and the special protocol of the relationship between vajra master and disciple holds in even nontantric contexts. Tantric empowerments are given regularly to large assemblies. However, many who have received such empowerments have only a dim notion of the practices and vows that are incumbent on a tantric initiate. Thus, there is a great need for clear and reliable information on this complex but fundamental set of practices.

This work contains a translation of *Illumination of the Tantric Tradition: The Principles of the Grounds and Paths of the Four Great Secret Classes of Tantra* by the nineteenth-century Mongolian lama Chöjé Ngawang Palden along with contemporary commentary on that text by the late Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche (1926–2006) drawn from oral teachings he delivered in California. Ngawang Palden's colloquial style makes this work well suited for an introduction, and in fact his text is frequently used as such in the curriculum of Geluk monasteries. Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché was one of the foremost interpreters of Tibetan tantra teaching in the West, and he served also as a Kālacakra guru to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The term tantra implies a thread connecting the past to the future and thus an unbroken continuum. In the highest sense Buddhist tantra refers to the continuum of the extremely subtle clear-light mind that all beings possess, the methods by which this mind is purified and transformed into the path of enlightenment, and the transmission of the four classes of secret mantra that explain these methods. Buddhist tantra presents a profound reinterpretation of the mode of practice of the standard Buddhist path. Chöjé Ngawang Palden states:

In general our Master (Śākyamuni Buddha) taught three types of conduct: (1) the nonattachment of the Lesser Vehicle for those who are inclined to lesser practices, (2) the perfections of the Perfection Vehicle for those who are inclined to great and extensive practices, and (3) the dharmas of attachment of the four tantric divisions of secret mantra for those disciples who are fully inclined to profound practices.

The three vehicles are not differentiated by view, for each is fully grounded in the reality of the four ārya, or "noble," truths, where the third truth—cessation—refers to emptiness and the fourth truth—the path—refers to the means of realizing emptiness, the supreme method for purifying the mind. The three vehicles are instead differentiated by the motivation and inclination of those who enter these vehicles. Those attracted to nonattachment enter the Hearer Vehicle

(Śrāvākayāna) and engage in limited or select practices to accomplish the enlightenment of a limited number of beings. Those attracted to the perfection enter the Perfection Vehicle (Pāramitāyāna) and engage in great and extensive exoteric practices to accomplish highest enlightenment for all beings. Those attracted to profound practices enter the Tantric Vehicle (Tantrayāna, or Vajrayāna) and utilize afflictive emotions such as attachment in order to swiftly accomplish highest enlightenment at the deepest and subtlest level.

Tantra transforms the naturally occurring, ordinary processes of death, intermediate state, and rebirth into the four buddha bodies (kāyas). It uses yogic practices to gain control over the subtle physical body represented by the channels, winds, and drops in order to fully purify the extremely subtle wind and mind, eliminate the two obscurations, and thereby attain enlightenment. Tantra is profound due to its skillful techniques for tapping into the subtle and extremely subtle states that form the basis of sentient existence. These methods are not revealed in the sūtras.

CHÖJÉ NGAWANG PALDEN

Chöjé Ngawang Palden, the author of *Illumination of the Tantric Tradition*, was born in 1797 in the region of Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, a great monastic center where thousands of monks studied the texts of the three great Tibetan Gelug monasteries. His special qualities were recognized early, and he soon began an intensive program of study. At nineteen he entered Tashi Chöpel College and at thirty-five successfully completed his kachu examinations.¹ Three years later, in 1836, he was appointed chöjé, or preceptor, of Khuré (Ulaanbaatar), and as a preceptor he visited Tibet in 1843 in connection with the death of the Fifth Kalki Rinpoché. Then, in 1847, eleven years after becoming preceptor, he resigned to concentrate on composing texts.

During his life Ngawang Palden composed nearly one hundred works, including *Annotations to the Great Presentation of Tenets* (Grub mtha' chen mo'i mcha' 'grel), commentaries on the classical Indian treatises *Abhisamayālamkāra* and *Madhyamakāvātāra*, as well as *Celebration of the Clear Mind* (Blo gsal dga' ston) and an explanation of the debate manuals of Gomang and Loseling colleges of Drepung Monastery. He composed *Illumination of the Tantric Tradition* in the year of the monkey (1848), when he was fifty-two.

ILLUMINATION OF THE TANTRIC TRADITION

Illumination of the Tantric Tradition explains the basic structure of the tantric path and the way a practitioner of tantra may progress to higher levels of realization within the mantric vehicle. As the title implies this work seeks to show

light on the tradition of tantra. Tibet received the Sanskrit tradition of Indian Buddhism in three parts: the monastic discipline of the Mūlasaravāstivāda sect, the Mahāyāna teachings on bodhisattva activity and the perfection of wisdom, and the corpus of teachings on tantra, or secret mantra. Unlike the other regions where Mahāyāna Buddhism spread, Tibet received the complete transmission of all four classes of secret mantra. The dissemination of the tantric tradition took many centuries—between Buddhism’s advent in Tibet in the eighth century and the disappearance of Buddhism in India in the fourteenth century—and involved both Tibetan scholars and translators traveling to India to train with Indian masters and Indian masters visiting Tibet to teach. After Buddhism’s decline in India, the remote and isolated Tibetan plateau remained a haven and resource for the Indian Buddhist traditions of both sūtra and tantra. But the genius of the Tibetan intellect also supplemented this heritage with its own philosophical and esoteric contributions. The tantric tradition flourished in Tibet until the Communist revolution in China forced many Tibetan masters into exile in India and subsequently into contact with the modern world.

This text is subtitled *The Principles of the Grounds and Paths of the Four Great Secret Classes of Tantra* (Gsang chen rgyud sde bzhi’i sa lam gyi rnam gzhag). Therefore it belongs to the grounds and paths (sa lam) genre, which charts the structure of the path to enlightenment. In general the term path refers to a mind of uncontrived renunciation—a genuine and constant aspiration to leave saṃsāra—while ground refers to the basis that supports the generation of enlightened qualities. A path begins when we enter one of the three vehicles, whether hearing bodhisattva, or tantra. From there it leads progressively to higher grounds, or levels, until we attain the ground of enlightenment through that vehicle. The genre of text therefore presents the reader with a map for progressing to enlightenment through the vast and complex terrain of the mind.

Ngawang Palden’s text on the grounds and paths of tantra follows an earlier work of this genre by Yangchen Gawai Lodrö (1740–1827) called *Field of the Fortunate*, which has been published in English translation as *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamaja According to Arya Nagarjuna* (LTWA). In his work, Ngawang Palden quotes Yangchen Gawai Lodrö and refers to him as “my guru.” While it is evident that Ngawang Palden is influenced by his teacher’s work, it differs both in structure and content. In particular he builds on his forebear’s efforts by adding a major section on Kālacakra. Not long after Ngawang Palden composed his work, Kirti Losang Trinlé (1849–1904) composed another major tantric summary called *The Essence of Nectar*. Kirti Losang Trinlé visited Mongolia several times, and it is possible that the young Kirti Rinpoché met Chöjé Ngawang Palden toward the end of his life. Kirti Losang Trinlé’s seminal work was certainly based on the earlier scholarship of Yangchen Gawai Lodrö and Ngawang Palden.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Illumination of the Tantric Tradition presents the paths and grounds of the four classes of Buddhist tantra—action, performance, yoga, and highest yoga tantra. These four are distinguished by the degree of attachment they skillfully transform into the path. Respectively, these four degrees are characterized by the attachment induced by observing, smiling at, holding the hand of, and embracing a visualized consort.

The text divides the discussion of the four classes into three parts. The first part addresses the three lower tantras. Highest yoga tantra is then subdivided into two parts: the general highest yoga tantra of the mainstream tantras based on Guhyasamāja, and the specific system of Kālacakra. These two approaches differ in several ways. For instance, the mainstream tantras and Kālacakra present the channels, winds, and drops differently. A practitioner of the mainstream tantra may attain enlightenment in the bardo, the intermediate state between rebirth, but such a method is not presented in Kālacakra. Mainstream tantras also speak of innate bliss, while Kālacakra presents immutable great bliss. Further, the mainstream tantras describe methods for enhancing bliss that depend on the coarse physical body, while Kālacakra speaks of enhancing bliss by accumulating drops of “bodhicitta” in the central channel while deconstructing the coarse body. Finally, the mainstream tantras present methods for accomplishing an illusory body (māyākāya) established from the winds, while Kālacakra speaks of the body of empty form established from the appearance of the deities. Due to such differences, they are presented in two separate sections.

The first part of the text explains action, performance, and yoga tantras in a fourfold sequence. (1) We first become a suitable vessel for entering the practice of the three lower tantras by receiving empowerment, (2) we then guard the vows and commitments related to that tantra, (3) then we cultivate meditation on the deity, and (4) through meditating on the deity we attain siddhis, or enhance our faculties. Highest yoga tantra involves four different types of empowerment, but the three lower tantras confer only the so-called vase empowerment.

Deity meditation also differs in the three lower tantras. In action tantra we meditate on absorption with or without recitation. Absorption with recitation—through the yoga of the six deities—combines meditation on the deity with recitation of mantras. In absorption without recitation, we cultivate three absorptions, namely absorption on fire and absorption on sound to generate a stable mind, and absorption that bestows freedom at the limit of sound to generate penetrative insight. Both performance and yoga tantras divide deity meditation into yoga with signs and yoga without signs. Yoga with signs is deity visualization and mantra recitation without meditation on emptiness. In performance tantra it is practiced by means of what are called the four external and four internal branches, and in yoga tantra on the basis of the four seals. Yoga without signs refers to deity visualization and mantra recitation combined with meditation on emptiness.

The second part of the text describes general highest yoga tantra, and this section is also explained according to the fourfold sequence of empowerment: protecting the vows, deity meditation, and generating siddhis. Empowerment

requires the vase, secret, pristine wisdom, and word initiations. Deity meditation is further divided into the generation and completion stages. The generation stage consists of deity yoga, where we generate ourselves as the deity to mature our minds for the completion stage. The completion stage follows the generation stage and consists of meditation to penetrate vital points of the natural body, which is naturally complete in channels, winds, and drops. In mainstream higher yoga tantra, the completion stage has six sections, namely physical isolation, verbal isolation, mental isolation, illusory body, clear light, and union.

The third part, on Kālacakra, repeats this fourfold sequence. Empowerment requires sixteen initiations—seven emulating childhood, four higher and four highest empowerments, plus the vajra-master empowerment. Deity yoga again has both generation and completion stages. The completion stage is sixfold: (1) individual withdrawal and (2) absorption that respectively establish and stabilize the body of the conqueror; (3) vitality exertion and (4) retention that respectively establish and stabilize the speech of the conqueror; and (5) subsequent recollection and (6) concentration that respectively establish and stabilize the mind of the conqueror.

Ngawang Palden's classic work skillfully condenses the profound and subtle meaning of secret mantra. It presents the basic path of the tantric practitioner in the fourfold sequence, and it clarifies many points in the form of debates. It thus provides the scholar or practitioner with a detailed map of the complex arena of tantra's grounds and paths.

THE ORAL COMMENTARY OF KIRTI TSENSHAP RINPOCHÉ

Kirti Tenshap Rinpoché, Losang Jikmé Damchö, presented this oral commentary on the Illumination of the Tantric Tradition at Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek, California, in 2003 and 2004.

Rinpoché was born in Amdo in 1926 and recognized as the reincarnation of the former abbot of Taktsang Lhamo Monastery, Geshé Damchö Phüntso (1851–1925), a Drepung Gomang geshé praised for his understanding of Madhyamaka or Middle Way philosophy. After completing his formal education at Taktsang Lhamo, he was appointed abbot of that institution for three years in 1953, and then in 1957 he accompanied Kirti Rinpoché on his journey to Lhasa as his tsenshap (mtshan zhabs), or debate instructor. He fled Tibet after the failed Tibetan uprising against the Chinese Communist incursion in 1959, staying first at the Buxa refugee camp in West Bengal, then in Dalhousie and Dharamsala in the Himalayan foothills of northern India.

In 1972 he entered solitary retreat above Dharamsala. From time to time Rinpoché would emerge to give and receive instruction and transmission, including passing the transmission of Butön Rinpoché's ² commentaries and annotations to Kālacakra to the Dalai Lama, as well as the transmission of the

Stainless Light Kālacakra commentary to Serkhong Rinpoché (1974, 1980), who in turn passed this lineage to the Dalai Lama. He gave this transmission five more times to audiences such as Kirti Rinpoché, Pangnang Rinpoché, Gen Lamrimpa (1983), and Bakula Rinpoché³ (1984). He gave the Zurka Gyatsa⁴ twice (1987, 1993), as well as the Mitra Gyatsa⁵ three times (1987, 1990, 1993), the first requested by the Dalai Lama and conferred in Drepung Monastery and the second requested by Lama Zopa Rinpoché.

In 1985 he attended the Kālacakra empowerment by the Dalai Lama in Bodhgaya and at the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoché taught Kālacakra Six-Session Yoga—the daily practice commitment for Kālacakra initiates—an adaptation of Maitreya's Uttaratantra to Western students. From that time he continued to teach Tibetan and Western students both in Dharamsala and at various centers around the world. Outside of Dharamsala, he taught primarily under the umbrella of Lama Zopa Rinpoché's organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). From 1989 until he passed away in 2006, he gave the Kālacakra empowerment a total of thirty-six times, including thirty-four times overseas.

Rinpoché based his presentation of Ngawang Palden's work on Kirti Losang Trinlé's *Essence of Nectar*. Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché's previous incarnation was a heart disciple of Kirti Losang Trinlé. Rinpoché also consulted commentaries to the *Essence of Nectar* by three recent scholars of Kirti Monastery, namely Losang Palden, Könchok Tsültrim, and Jikmé Rigpai Lodrö. Both Losang Palden (1881-1944), who composed the *Opening the Eye of the Fortunate*, and Könchok Tsültrim (1892-1972), who composed *Cloud of White Lotus Offerings*, were direct teachers of Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché. The third author Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö (1910-1985), who composed the *Great Secret Sun and Moon Maṇḍala*, may or may not have been a direct teacher. Rinpoché considered all three texts to be very important and frequently used them as his own reference. When Rinpoché fled Tibet he brought with him his own copy of *Cloud of White Lotus Offerings* by Könchok Tsültrim. In India he even made a handwritten copy of this text to offer to the Dalai Lama both out of respect for its scholarship and out of fear that the work may be lost in Tibet. In time copies of the other two works were also brought to India, and now all three texts have been published and stand as important sources for those wishing to study these subjects in depth.

Rinpoché provided copies of the three commentaries to the translators and suggested that the root text and commentary be further elaborated and supplemented with notes from these texts. He said, "My wish is to open the door of debate and analysis for those who seek to understand these issues in detail." Rinpoché felt that this would serve those interested in a more detailed presentation while others could simply read the root text and the commentary alone. These annotations therefore act as a second level of commentary to supplement Rinpoché's explanation, adding new information or noting divergent positions by these three scholars on the same point.

The teachings in Vajrapani Institute relied on a translation of the root text initially prepared by Ian Coghlan for the Buddhist Studies Program in Chenrezig

Institute, Australia, in 1999. He then completely revised this translation prior to Rinpoché giving his oral commentary at Vajrapani Institute in 2003 and 2004. Voula Zarpani interpreted the teachings the first year, and Venerable Tsewang Dekyong interpreted the second year. Voula transcribed the teachings and then checked the transcripts against previous teachings Rinpoché had given. In accordance with Rinpoché's instructions, annotations were added, and these were further supplemented with charts. The entire work was then checked by Ian. Both translators acknowledge any mistakes in the preparation of this work as their own and request patience from both practitioners and scholars.

We wish to acknowledge the assistance of countless friends in the production of this work. At the center is Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoché himself, who provided essential guidance at every level, who suggested how to structure the commentary for the reader, who provided Tibetan reference materials for the annotations, and whose very life was a pure example of Dharma practice. We thank Alak Tsangla, Rinpoché's attendant for nineteen years, who accompanied Rinpoché on his many overseas tours and who provided sustained and invaluable support for the project. We also thank our editor at Wisdom, David Kittelstrom for his clear, erudite, and insightful suggestions that have greatly improved the work, along with Megan Anderson, who patiently proofread the manuscript, and Laura Cunningham, who skillfully guided it through its final stages.

TECHNICAL NOTE

This text is called Gsang chen rgyud sde bzhi'i sa lam gyi rnam gzhag rgyud gzhung gsal byed ces bya ba bzhugs so published by Serjé Geshé Jampa Khedrup and based on woodblocks held at Gyümé Tantric College.

Bracketed numbers in the root text refer to folio numbers. All Tibetan names are rendered phonetically in accordance with the style sheet prepared by Wisdom Publications. Sanskrit diacritics are used throughout.

Pronunciation of Tibetan phonetics

ph and th are aspirated p and t, as in pet and tip.

ö is similar to the eu in French seul.

ü is similar to the ü in the German füllen.

ai is similar to the e in bet.

é is similar to the e in prey.

Pronunciation of Sanskrit

Palatal ś and retroflex ṣ are similar to the English unvoiced sh.

~~c is an unaspirated ch similar to the ch in chill.~~

The vowel ṛ is similar to the American r in pretty.

ñ is somewhat similar to a nasalized ny in canyon.

ṅ is similar to the ng in sing or anger.

In the notes when both Tibetan and Sanskrit are given for technical terms, the Tibetan is given first.

ILLUMINATION OF THE TANTRIC TRADITION

The Principles of the Grounds and Paths of the Four Great
Secret Classes of Tantra



Introduction

The title

The title of Ngawang Palden's text clearly indicates that it deals with the four classes of tantra presented in the Kangyur, the canonical teachings of the Buddha. Of the 104 volumes in the Dergé Kangyur, twenty-six deal with tantra, seventy-seven deal with nontantric topics, and the last is an index. Any presentation of the four classes of tantra will necessarily be based on the twenty-six volumes of tantra.

Homage

The text begins with the homage, followed by the petition, and then the pledge to compose. First is the homage:

Namo Guru Sumati Munīndra Vajradharaya.

The homage is given in Sanskrit. Guru refers to one's own lama or teacher. Sumati refers to pure mind.⁶ Munīndra refers to Śākyamuni Buddha, and Vajradhara, or Dorjé Chang in Tibetan, is the source of the tantras. Though Buddha Śākyamuni and Vajradhara are the same being, different names are used for the sake of disciples with different propensities. Those drawn to sūtra will tend to follow sūtra paths that culminate in buddhahood, the state attained by Buddha Śākyamuni. Those more inclined to tantra will tend to follow paths that lead to buddhahood in the aspect of Buddha Vajradhara. The word namo means prostrate, salute, or pay homage. Therefore the homage may be translated as: "pay homage to the pure-minded guru, Śākyamuni Vajradhara."

Petition

**May the great Vajradhara,
the union of the ultimate clear-light innate mind
and the relative pure illusory body,
bestow great blessings on myself and other reincarnating beings.**

This four-line petition requests that blessings be bestowed on ourselves and all types of sentient beings.⁷ The source of these blessings is great Vajradhara, and such blessings consecrate our three gateways of action—our physical, verbal, and mental activity. The state of Vajradhara is described as a "union," and though there are many types of union, here it refers to the union (yuganaddha) of clear light (prabhāsvara) and the illusory body (māyākāya). Clear light itself is described as "ultimate, innate mind," while the illusory body is described as "relative" and "pure." These two are not separate but rather merge in Vajradhara, and it is this union that qualifies Vajradhara as "great."

In tantra, therefore, the ultimate result is the union of the illusory body and clear light manifesting on the path of no-more learning, while in sūtra the ultimate

result is the form body (rūpakāya) and dharma body (dharmakāya) of a buddha. Either result is attained by accumulating both the merit and the pristine wisdom that are the two basic aspects of the path. Such accumulation is accomplished on the basis of seeing the two truths, which are presented identically in sūtra and tantra. Still we need to train in the common sūtra paths before entering tantric practice, with its specific presentation of the basis, path, and result. Sūtra is the foundation of tantra and facilitates the attainment of the tantric path. It is significant that the author introduces the concepts of the basis, path, and result of the tantric path within the petition itself.

**May all supreme lamas,
the great adept Nāgārjuna, father and sons,
Candrakīrti and Losang Drakpa,
care for us until we reach enlightenment.**

Here the author requests that the great lineage masters care for us. He mentions a number of influential scholars such as Ārya Nāgārjuna, who composed many texts on sūtra, as did his five spiritual sons,⁸ including Āryadeva and Candrakīrti, who is well known for his work *Entering the Middle Way*. In terms of tantra, Nāgārjuna presented the Ārya system of Guhyasamāja, and later Candrakīrti elucidated the grounds and paths of the Guhyasamāja tantra in his commentary to the root tantra called *Bright Lamp*. Based on these works, Tsongkhapa composed his *Mantric Stages*, and in the chapters dealing with the three lower tantras, Tsongkhapa quotes extensively from the commentaries of these Indian masters. When he discussed highest yoga tantra, he took the Guhyasamāja tantra as his model for the presentation of the grounds and paths of other tantras, and thus these systems have only minor differences in terminology.⁹

Pledge to compose
Having completed the homage and the petition, the text continues with the pledge to compose.

**With the wish to place imprints on my mind
and to benefit others of equal fortune,
I present a short and clear explanation of the grounds and paths
of the four classes of secret mantra.**¹⁰

The author clearly states that the subject matter of the text is the grounds and paths of the four classes of mantra. The reason why the author will compose this work is firstly to place positive karmic imprints on his mind, and secondly to benefit those who are of equal fortune in their capacity to understand these matters.

Requesting permission to reveal tantric subjects
In the next verse the author requests permission to reveal this subject matter. Since this is a tantric text and not a sūtra-level text, we must first address the

Dharma protectors and ḍākinīs guarding and upholding the tantric teachings and request their permission to undertake this task before exposing the central meaning of the text.

For example, according to Buddhist cosmology, there are five important locations in Jambudvīpa,¹¹ namely (1) the central region of Bodhgaya where Buddha Śākyamuni manifested enlightenment, (2) the eastern region of Wutaishan in China associated with Mañjuśrī, (3) the southern region of the Potala associated with Avalokiteśvara, (4) the northern region of Śambhala associated with Kālacakra, and (5) the western region of Udhyāna in Afghanistan,¹² where secret mantras were entrusted to the ḍākinīs for safekeeping. It has been said that the great Indian practitioners gained access to tantra only after developing supernatural powers and traveling to Udhyāna. Moreover tantric empowerment was initially a rare and closed event and never conferred on a group of more than twenty-five people who possessed special qualities, appropriate karma, and skill in meditation. In contrast, at present tantric empowerments are given more freely to large audiences, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has stated that even if these words fall on untrained ears, great benefit still arises through planting mental imprints. We may infer therefore that the single most important quality that qualifies us to be students of tantra is strong faith in the Tantric Vehicle.

**Though the chance to properly meditate on this method is rare,
my resolution to practice this method is not inferior.
May the Dharma lords grant me permission
to present the Dharma in conformity with their intention.**

The author states that though the opportunity to study and practice tantra is rare and his merit is small, nevertheless his resolution and faith in the tantric method is pure and strong. On that basis he requests permission to reveal this subject matter.

How we should listen to these teachings

**May those who possess superior fortune and intelligence
and who take responsibility for their birth engage like peacocks
in the vibrant dance of explanation and debate
amid the thunderous roar of Losang's explanations.**

In this verse the author urges those who receive these teachings to listen with a joyful attitude. It is said that when the sky is heavy with clouds and the sound of thunder resounds in the forest, peacocks show their delight by dancing and displaying their plumage. Similarly, when we hear the presentation of the four classes of tantra in accordance with Mantric Stages, we hear the thunder-like speech of Tsongkhapa. We should respond with joy and listen carefully without wasting this opportunity.

The main teaching

In explaining the principles of the grounds and paths of the four great secret classes of tantra, there are two divisions:

- 1. A brief presentation of the way to progress on the path of the three lower classes of tantra [2a]**
- 2. A detailed explanation of the way to progress on the path of highest yoga tantra**

The basic structure of this text consists of a brief presentation of the three lower tantras followed by a more detailed explanation of highest yoga tantra. "The three lower classes of tantra" refers to the action, performance, and yoga tantras.

A brief presentation of the way to progress on the path of the three lower classes of tantra

The first has two divisions:

- 1. The actual lower classes of tantra**
- 2. How to posit the five paths and the ten grounds for them**

The actual lower classes of tantra

The first has three divisions:

- 1. How to progress on the path of action tantra**
- 2. How to progress on the path of performance tantra**
- 3. How to progress on the path of yoga tantra**

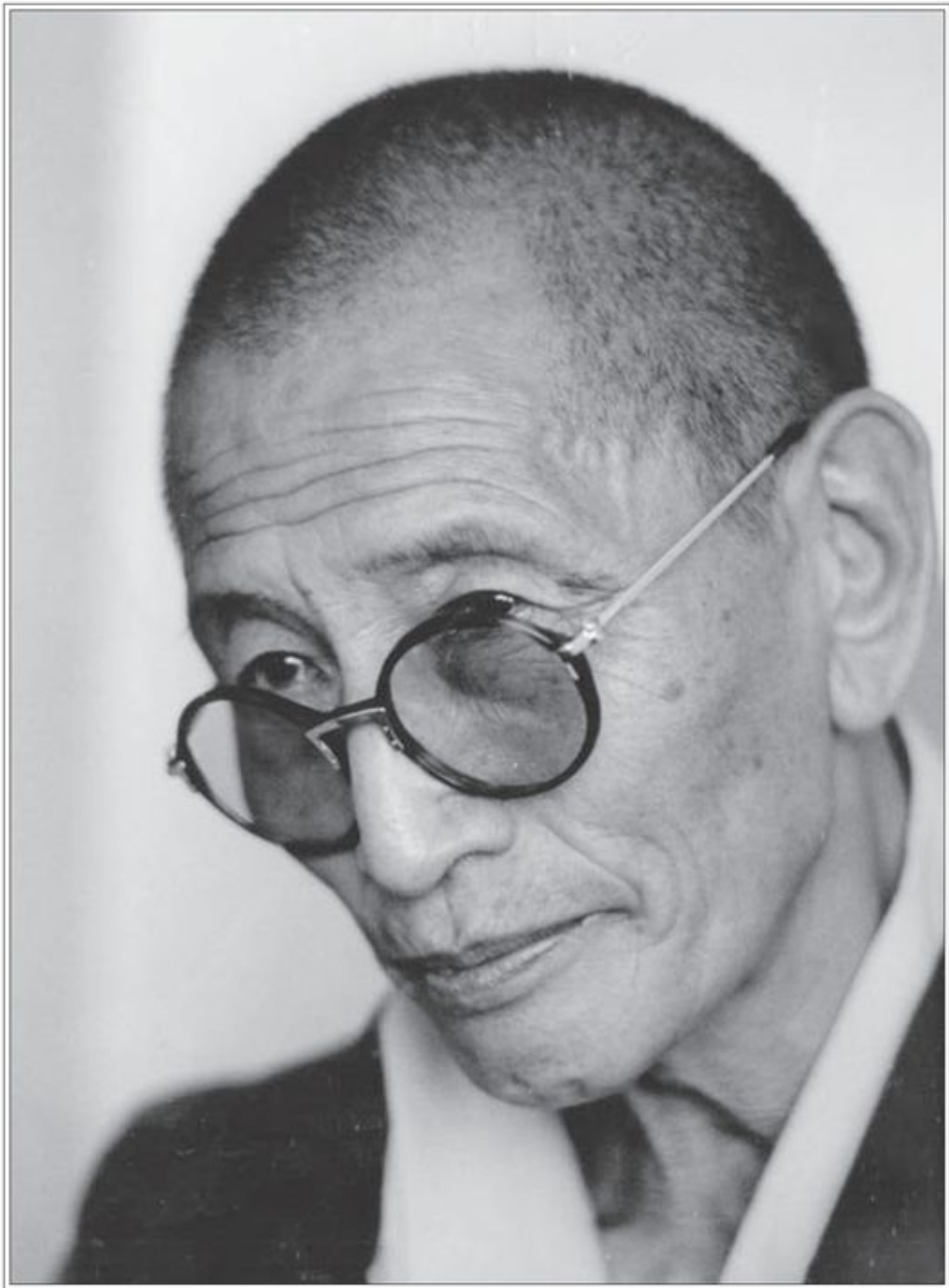
In his Mantric Stages Tsongkhapa presents a formula applicable to all four classes of tantra: (1) First we need to receive an empowerment, (2) then we must act according to the vows and commitments we accepted during that empowerment, (3) third we need to meditate on the stages of the path of this particular tantra, and finally (4) we need to understand the way to manifest the resultant state. Qualified practitioners, who follow the path correctly, ensure that they properly follow these steps in the prescribed order. Although they apply to all four classes of tantra, their presentation is relatively brief in the first three tantras. As such we may comprehend them more easily in the more detailed presentation given in the section on highest yoga tantra.

PART I

The Three Lower Tantras



Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche, circa 1992, Nepal.



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