

## THE RIMAY TRADITION by Lama Surya Das

The nonsectarian Rimay movement of Tibet is an ecumenical tradition started-- or more, accurately, revived--one hundred and forty years ago by the great Manjusri (wisdom) lamas of eastern Tibet renowned as the First Khyentse and First Kongtrul. It arose in order to preserve and help disseminate the many different lineages and practices of all the extant schools of Tibetan Buddhism, many of which were in danger of being lost. These extraordinarily learned and accomplished nonsectarian masters studied under hundreds of teachers and internalized the precious and profound Three Yana teachings, then taught and also compiled the bulk of them into voluminous compendiums, vast scriptural compilations such as the Rinchen Terdzod (Treasury of Visionary Revelations) and the Shayja Dzod (Treasury of Knowledge).

Rimay means unbounded, all-embracing, unlimited, and also unbiased and impartial. The Karmapas, the Dalai Lamas, Sakya lineage heads, and major Nyingma and other lineage holders and founders (such as Je Tsongkhapa and Gyalwa Longchenpa) all took teachings and empowerments from various schools and lineages, and later practiced and authentically transmitted those traditions.

The two enlightened nineteenth century renaissance-type masters, Khyentse and Kongtrul, were aided and abetted in this ambitious endeavor by the visionary Chogyur Lingpa as well as the younger and indomitable master Mipham, most of whom exchanged teachings and practices with each other in an unusually humble and collegial way. Other notable Tibetan Lamas widely renowned for their non-sectarian approach were Patrul Rinpoche and Lama Shabkar, Dudjom Lingpa and the Fifteenth Karmapa Khakyab Dorje. The present Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet himself embodies and promotes this important tradition; he always mentions the importance of this inclusive, tolerant and open-minded Rimay spirit, wherever he goes, in his teachings and talks today.

In recent times, extraordinary masters like the esteemed Kunnu Lama, Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (Chogyi Lodro) carried on this illustrious tradition and became the venerated lamas (vajra-masters) of countless lamas. Rimay is dear to the heart of most of the important grand lamas who left Tibet during the Chinese invasion of the 1950's and brought Vajrayana Buddhism to India, the Far East, and to the West. These include the Sixteenth Karmapa and Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, Khenchen Deshung Rinpoche, Tulku Urgyen, Khetsun Zangpo, Khenpo Thrangu Rinpoche, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Kangyur Rinpoche, Tarthang Tulku, Nyoshul Khenpo, and many other pioneers Tibetan refugee masters too numerous to name. Although exemplifying their own particular lineage which they uphold and represent, they each studied with masters of other schools and passed on their teachings and empowerments as well. I myself learned about devotion to my root guru by seeing the erudite and accomplished Sakyapa master Deshung Rinpoche place himself at the feet of Kalu Rinpoche daily during the latter's visits to his Dharma center in New York City in the late Seventies.

The Rimay movement came to prominence in the Nineteenth Century in eastern Tibet (Kham), at a point in Tibetan history when the religious climate had become highly partisan-- perhaps not unlike the global context of our modern world today. The aim of the Rimay renaissance was "a push towards a middle ground where the various views and styles of the different traditions were appreciated for their individual contributions rather than being refuted, marginalized, or banned." Today the eclectic Rimay spirit continues both within and without the Tibetan tradition as numbers of Buddhists study and practice in more than one school or lineage and teachers of different lineages even teach and conduct retreats and share disciples together. This seems inevitable given the melting pot of the society we live in, combined with the fact that here in North America, for the first time, all the Buddhist schools—not to mention other timeless Eastern spiritual traditions—co-exist in the same cities and towns, and sometimes even on the same street or even share a building, meditation hall or temple. The Dalai Lama himself has even taught clerics of other religions and also received instruction from them, especially Christians and Jewish leaders.

It is said that the 5th Dalai Lama "blurred the lines between traditions." In the West, where so many different Buddhist traditions exist side by side, one needs to be constantly on one's guard against the danger of sectarianism. Such a divisive attitude is often the result of failing to understand or appreciate anything outside one's own tradition and falling prey to narrow minded sectarianism along dogmatic opinions and beliefs. My teachers said that Dharma students from all schools would benefit greatly from studying and gaining some practical experience of the teachings of other traditions as long as they didn't become distracted or confused by the different approaches, philosophical views, rituals, and meditation practices.

Tibet's greatest yogi-saint and poet Milarepa sang, one thousand years ago:

“Clinging to one's school and condemning others  
Is the certain way to waste one's learning.  
Since all dharma teachings are good,  
Those who cling to sectarianism  
Degrade Buddhism and sever  
Themselves from liberation.

—Milarepa, The One Hundred Thousand Songs

The holy 14th Dalai Lama has composed a prayer for the Rimay movement, part of which says:

“...May all the teachings of the Buddha in the Land of Snows

Flourish long into the future—

...

All of them rich with their essential instructions combining sutrayana and mantrayana traditions.

May the lives of the masters who uphold these teachings be secure and harmonious!

May the sangha preserve these teachings through their study, meditation and activity!

May the world be filled with faithful individuals intent on following these teachings!

And long may the non-sectarian teachings of the Buddha continue to flourish!”

Following the great tradition of our teacher Lord Buddha, who said that all his Dharma teachings have the single savor of liberation just as all oceans have the single savor of salt, my late Dzogchen master Dilgo Khyentse explained that Rimay does not mean everything mixed up together but that each lineage and practice tradition—view, meditation, action & result—is preserved, taught and transmitted, realized and accomplished each in their own particular way, without bias or comparison. The Rimay movement is often mistaken as trying to unite the various sects through their similarities, which was not the case. Rimay was intended to recognize the differences between traditions and appreciate them, while also establishing a dialogue which would create common ground. It is considered important that variety be preserved, and therefore Rimay teachers are generally quite careful to emphasize differences in thought, giving students many options as to how to proceed in their spiritual training. This rigorous broad Buddhist study and practice approach is eclectic yet far from the superficialities of mere dilettantism. A person who believes the Rimay way still follows one lineage as his or her main practice, and would not dissociate from that particular school.

Buddha himself purportedly stated that “When I am gone, make the Dharma your refuge, and reliance; make the sangha your refuge and sanctuary.” The friendly Rimay spirit of inclusiveness and collaboration is a befitting evolution of the beloved community we call our sangha and Buddhist congregations today.

The seminal Rimay master, Jamgon Kongtrul I, said:

“One must see all the teachings as without contradiction, and consider all the scriptures as instructions. This will cause the root of sectarianism and prejudice to dry up, and give you a firm foundation in the Buddhas teachings. At that point, hundreds of doors to the eighty-four thousand teachings of the Dharma will simultaneously be open to you.”