

Review

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu — The Master Who Revealed Dzogchen to the Western World

Paolo Roberti di Sarsina ^{1,2,3,*} Alfredo Colitto ³ and Fabio Maria Risolo ³

¹ Charity “Association for Person Centred Medicine”, via San Vitale 40/3a, Bologna 40125, Italy; E-Mail: medicinacentratasullapersona@medicinacentratasullapersona.org

² Observatory and Methods for Health, University of Milano-Bicocca, Via Bicocca degli Arcimboldi 8, Milano 20126, Italy

³ International Dzogchen Community, Merigar West, Loc. Merigar, Arcidosso (GR) 58031, Italy; E-Mails: office@dzogchen.it (P.R.S.); leunar@yahoo.com (A.C.); fabio.risolo@email.it (F.M.R.)

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: paolo.robertidisarsina@unimib.it; Tel.: +39-335-8029638.

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Abstract: Chögyal Namkhai Norbu is one of the last great masters of Dzogchen to have been born and fully educated in Tibet, before the Chinese takeover. He was soon recognized as a great reincarnated lama. This short biography is divided in two parts: the first retraces his steps from his birth in the Tibetan region of Kham until his flight from Tibet to Sikkim, reporting also teachings and initiations he received from his Masters. The second part starts when he arrived in Italy in 1960, invited by Professor Giuseppe Tucci, the greatest Italian Orientalist of his time, to work at the IsMeO, now the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO). In the 70s Chögyal Namkhai Norbu began to teach Dzogchen to his first students. Interest soon became widespread and having received invitations from all continents, he began to travel and teach throughout the world, founding the worldwide Dzogchen Community, whose main objective is to preserve and develop an understanding of Dzogchen, as well as preserving Tibet's extraordinary cultural patrimony.

Keywords: Dzogchen; Chögyal Namkhai Norbu; Tibet; Shang Shung; Yantra Yoga; Gar/Ling

1. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's Birth and Life in Tibet

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (*chos rgyal nam mkha'i nor bu*) is one of the foremost living masters of Dzogchen¹ (*rdzogs chen*) [1–11]. He belongs to the last generation of Tibetans to have been fully educated in Tibet.

Chögyal, meaning “Dharmaraja” or “Religious King” is a title conferred upon a special class of temporal and spiritual rulers. Master Namkhai Norbu holds this title as an acknowledged reincarnation of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (*zhabs drung ngag dbang nam rgyal*, 1594–1651), the first Dharmaraja of Bhutan and the unifier of that nation.

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu was born on December 8th, 1938, first boy after three sisters, in Geug, a small village inhabited by only seven families. Geug was part of the kingdom of Derge, in Kham, Eastern Tibet. His father,² Tsewang Namgyal, of the Trokhe family, was a high government official. His mother, Yeshe Chödrön, was the sister of the Dzogchen Master Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug Rinpoche (*mkhyen brtse chos kyi dbang phyug*, 1910–1960).

From the day of his birth, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu was believed by the local people to be the reincarnation of Adzom Drugpa Drodul Pawo Dorje (*a 'dzom 'brug pa 'gro 'dul dpa' bo rdo rje*, 1842–1924). This was due, among other things, to the fact that Adzom Drugpa, shortly before his passing away, had donated to Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's family some sacred objects symbolizing Body, Speech and Mind and many other personal belongings. The first one to recognize him as the reincarnation of Adzom Drugpa was his paternal uncle Ugyen Tendzin (*u rgyan bstan 'dzin*). In 1940, the reincarnation was officially confirmed by the VI Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche (*zhe chen rab 'byams*) and the Palyul Karma Yangsid Rinpoche (*dpal yul kar ma yang srid*).

In 1941, His Holiness the XVI Gyalwa Karmapa (1924–1981), His Eminence the XI Tai Situpa Rinpoche (1886–1952) and other lamas, recognized him as the Mind reincarnation of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (*zhabs drung ngag dbang nam rgyal*, 1594–1651), the first Dharmaraja of Bhutan. Later that year, the king of Derge Tsewang Duddul presented him with the palace Rongpo Khang, in Derge Gonchen, inviting him to live there until his 20th birthday, when he would decide whether or not to go to Buthan. Tai Situ Rinpoche, for his part, gave him an initiation of White Tara and the hat and seal of the Dharmaraja.

In 1943, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu started studying in Derge Gonchen, where he had a private tutor, and memorized several texts. That summer he went to the retreat place called Tsarashab, where his paternal uncle Togden Ugyen Tendzin was living in a retreat cave [12]. Togden (*rtogs ldan*) means

¹ Adriano Clemente, foreword to [12]: “*Dzogchen*, or ‘*Total Perfection*’, is a Teaching which reveals the original state of every individual, a condition which is presented as “perfect” because of its infinite potentiality to manifest in the variety of all phenomena of existence. Once directly introduced by the master, this perfection is experienced as one’s innermost nature, the Nature of Mind. Continuous awareness of this nature, then, is the fundamental practice that leads to the unveiling or manifestation of one’s primordial potentiality”.

² Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's close family, as compiled by Adriano Clemente from original sources, is: Tsewang Namgyal (*tshedbang nam rgyal*), father, 1889–1960. Yeshe Chödrön (*ye sheschossgron*), mother, 1904–1965. Jamyang Chödrön (*'jam dbyangschossgron*), sister, 1921–1985. Sodnam Palmo (*bsodnamsdpalmo*), sister, 1924–1988. Tashi Yangdzom (*bkrashisg.yang 'dzoms*), sister, 1929–2006. Pema Gungtsen (*pad ma gung btsan*), brother, 1940, 1960. Jamyang Phuntsog (*'jam dbyangshuntshogs*), brother, 1943–1948. Tsering Yangdzom (*tshe ring g.yang 'dzoms*), sister, 1946.

“Endowed with Realisation”, and is a title accorded to highly realised yogis in Tibet. Here Chögyal Namkhai Norbu saw for the first time the practice of Yantra Yoga, a discipline combining breathing and movement, of which his uncle was a great master [12,13].

At the end of the summer, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu went back to school, where he took an examination with very good results. He continued his studies, memorizing more texts, learning to paint and build mandalas with colored sands according to the Ngor system of the Sakyapa tradition.

In autumn of 1945 he went back to his family house, where he received the initiation and instructions of the Longchen Nyingthig (*klong chen snying thig*) from his uncle Togden Ugyen Tendzin. At the end of the year, he was recognized as the reincarnation of Jamyang Loter Wangpo (*'jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po*) by the Sakyapa head-lama Ngagwang Thutob Wangchug.

In autumn of the following year, 1946, his paternal grandmother Lhundrub Tso died in Wontod. To officiate the funerary rituals, the family invited Khyenrab Chökyi Ödzer, (*mkhyen rab chos kyi 'od zer*), head of the Wontod college. Also Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche's maternal uncle, Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug, was invited.

In 1947 he went to Galenting, where he received teachings from both Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug and Kunga Palden (*kun dga' dpal ldan*, 1878–1950). While his uncle Khyentse Rinpoche and Kunga Palden were doing a retreat in the dark, also Chögyal Namkhai Norbu did his first dark retreat, for a week. In spring, he started studying at Wontod College.

The following year, 1948, his younger brother Jamyang Phuntsog suddenly died, and to officiate the rituals Trungram Gyatrul Rinpoche was invited, along with Negyab Rinpoche. After that, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu went to Negyab to receive initiations and Dzogchen teachings from Negyab Rinpoche. He also did a retreat of the Ngöndzong Gyalpo practice, he passed an exam at the college and he received the Ngöndro,³ (*sngon 'gro*) or preliminary practices, of the Longchen Nyingthig.

In 1949 he completed the Ngöndro's five Bums.⁴ During the summer he went to Dzogchen Monastery to receive from the Khenpo⁵ of that monastery the initiations of the Guhyagarbha tantra and of the Chöd Dzinpa Randrol. At the end of the summer he caught an illness, reputedly due to a provocation by a hostile deity called Gyalpo Shugden, and he developed a limp in his left leg. He then went back to Wontod, where he received the initiation of the Gyudde Kuntu (*rGyud sde kun btus*), the Collection of Sadhanas of the Sakyapas.

In 1950, the daughter of his elder sister Jamcho died of smallpox. To officiate the rituals the family invited Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug. From him, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu received an initiation of Guru Tragpo, and after practising his leg healed totally. Then he went to Gakhog with his uncle and he received various initiations and teachings from Khangsar Khen Rinpoche. After that, he and Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug went together to visit the Mahasiddha of Nalung, the Siddha of Chamten and other masters. In the summer he went back to college.

³ “Ngöndro” means ‘before going’. This term indicates the preliminary practices of Vajrayanabuddhism.

⁴ One bum is equal to one hundred thousand, thus five bums equal five hundred thousand repetitions of each of the ngöndro practices.

⁵ “Khenpo” is a title indicating the head of a monastery, and/or a senior lama who can also give initiations.

From his uncle Khyentse Rinpoche he received also the Konchog Chidu and Guru Tragphur initiations, respectively in Lhadrong monastery and Derge Gonchen. In the autumn of that year he received the initiation of the Drubthab Kuntu from the college Khenpo. In winter, Kunga Palden died.

In 1951 he received from the college Khenpo the initiation of the Ati Sabdon and several other teachings and initiations, thereby beginning the study of the Four Tantras of Medicine (*rGyud bzhi*) and of the Elemental and Zodiacal Astrology according to the Kalachakra system. During the summer he traveled to Dzachuka and other places, together with some monks. An account of this journey is found in his book *Journey Among the Tibetan Nomads* (LTWA, 1997).

In autumn, Khenpo Khyenrab Chökyi Ödzer advised him to request teachings from the great woman master Ayu Khandro Dorje Paldrön (*a yu mkha' 'gro rdo rje dpal sgron* 1838–1953). So he first returned home, then set off towards Ayu Khandro's place, with his mother and one of his sisters. There he received teachings and initiations on the Khadro Sangdu, the Khadro Nyingthig, the Yantig Nagpo and others.

In the summer of the following year, 1952, he went to Galenting to help with the reconstruction of the temple, and then he went to Dzongsar, where he received the Lamdre from Khyentse Chökyi Lodro. In autumn he started a six-month retreat at Sengchen Namdrag.

In 1953, he received teachings and initiations from Gyurmed Dorje Rinpoche, Adzom Drugpa's son. Then he went to see his uncle Khyentse in his retreat cave, where, together with thirty or so other people, all packed in that small cave, he received the Nyingthig Yabzhi. In autumn, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his uncle went to Tatsiendo, in the province of Sichuan, People's Republic of China, to attend a meeting convoked by the Chinese. He took the opportunity to visit the cities of Chengdu and Chongqing. He also accepted the invitation to teach Tibetan in Kangkar, in the region of Menyag. There he met Kangkar Rinpoche, (*gangs dkar rin po che*) from whom he received instructions on the Six Yogas of Naropa and other Teachings.

From 1954 to 1955 he taught Tibetan language at the South-Western University for Minorities in Chengdu, and thus he had the opportunity to learn Chinese. But during the holidays he returned home, where he received from his uncle Khyentse Rinpoche the teachings of Thangyal Nyenchod (a Chod practice linked to Thangtong Gyalpo's oral transmission) and Lhalung Chagdor (Vajrapani). Also, with his sister Jamcho, he went to the Dzogchen Monastery to receive the initiation of Tsogchen Dupa and others from Yabghen Ngawang Norbu.

In 1955 he taught Tibetan language for one month in Derge. In spring he went again to Tatsiendo. He was offered a new job, but he refused and returned to Tibet. During that year, he met Rigdzin Changchub Dorje (*rig 'dzin byang chub rdo rje*, 1826–1961), his main Dzogchen Master, or Root Master, who was also a Tibetan doctor, and stayed at his residence in Khamdogar for six months. From Changchub Dorje he received the authentic transmission and experiential knowledge of Dzogchen.

In 1956 he received initiations from Gala Khenpo, Khen Gonpo and Dzogchen Rinpoche. He went to Lhasa with his father, and then he left for a pilgrimage to sacred places in India, Nepal and Bhutan. At the end of autumn he returned to Derge, where the anti-chinese riots were starting.

In 1957, while on his way to Lhasa with his family he received teachings on the Chod of Surmang tradition from Khyache Chodgen. In autumn, at Tsurphu Monastery, he received teachings and initiations from the Gyalwa Karmapa. He received teachings also from Dzogchen Ponlob and Polu Khenpo. He also went in pilgrimage to Samye and other Tibetan sacred places with his parents.

In 1958, he left Lhasa and went to live in Sikkim. He began also to study Sanskrit and Mongolian, and received teachings from Dudjom Rinpoche Yeshe Dorje. He did a personal retreat at Pema Yangtse monastery. At the end of autumn he went in pilgrimage to India.

In 1959, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, he tried to reach Tibet to help his family, but the situation was very deteriorated and in the end he wasn't able to leave Sikkim. So he went back to Gangtok, where he started working as an author and chief editor of Tibetan textbooks for the Development Office of the Government of Sikkim.

He never stopped trying to receive news of his family, but nobody seemed to know what had happened to them. Only many years later, when he had already been living in the western world for several years, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu came to know that his father and brother had been captured by the Chinese, put in prison, tortured and as a consequence, without being guilty of anything, they had died. His elder sister had also been imprisoned for three years.

As to his maternal uncle, Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug had been captured and put in the same prison with other two masters, Shechen Rabjam and Drukpa Kuchen. [14] They were in different cells and couldn't talk or communicate between them in any way. But one morning, the guards found them dead in their cells, all three sitting in the meditation posture.

Also the XVI Gyalwa Karmapa, fleeing from Tibet, arrived in Sikkim, and in that period Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche received from him teachings and initiations. He continued to study Sanskrit and learned a bit of Burmese. In the meantime, he received various and prestigious academic offers from different countries. Finally he accepted the invitation of the utmost Italian orientalist, prof. Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), who in 1933, together with the Italian philosopher and Minister of Culture Giovanni Gentile, had founded the Italian Institute for the Middle and Extreme Orient, IsMeO.

So, at the end of the year Chögyal Namkhai Norbu went to Dharamsala, in India, to meet the Dalai Lama, then he left for Italy.

2. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's Life and Work in the Western World [15]

In Rome, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu worked for a time at the IsMeO, now the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO). In cooperation with Geshe Jempel Senghe, he worked to establish and organise the Tibetan department, based on the large library of Tibetan texts created by Professor Tucci. The Rockefeller Foundation granted funds to Chögyal Namkhai Norbu for his academic collaboration with prof. Tucci.

From 1962 to 1992, he taught Tibetan and Mongolian Language and Literature at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, now Università di Napoli L'Orientale, the same University where professor Tucci taught Chinese language. The "Orientale" University of Naples, established on 7th April 1732 by Pope Clemente XII, is the oldest school of Sinology and Oriental Studies in Europe.

During that period, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu undertook extensive research into the historical origins of Tibet and Tibetan Culture, thoroughly investigating the autochthonous Bön tradition and the monarchic age connected to the Shang Shung (*zhang zhung*) Kingdom. His books, which include works on history, medicine, astrology, Bön and folk traditions, are evidence of his profound knowledge of Tibetan culture and his commitment to preserving this ancient cultural heritage. Prof.

Namkhai Norbu's many influential and profound works have given a concrete stimulus to the diffusion of Tibetan Tradition and Culture in the West [16–22].

In the 1960s Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche was received by His Holiness Pope Paul VI and by Italian President Giovanni Gronchi.

In 1968 he married Rosa Tolli, started a family and acquired Italian citizenship. They had a son, Yeshe Silvano Namkhai, born in 1970, and a daughter, Yuchen Namkhai, born in 1971.

Later on, Yeshe was recognized by His Holiness Sakya Tridzin Ngawang Kunga Tegchen Palbar (*sa skya khri 'dzin ngag dbang kun dga' theg chen dpal 'bar*, 1945 -), 41st holder of the Sakya throne, as the reincarnation of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's uncle Khyentse Chökyi Wangchug. Sakya Tridzin gave him the name Jamyang Chökyi Nyima. Today Yeshe Namkhai is known with the name of Khyentse Yeshe and is an accomplished Dzogchen Master.

In 1971 Chögyal Namkhai Norbu began to teach Yantra Yoga, an ancient form of Tibetan Yoga combining movement, breathing and visualisation. The Yantra Yoga System of Vairochana, one of the oldest systems of Tibetan Yoga, dating from the eighth century, had been transmitted to Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche by his uncle, the yogin Togden Ugyen Tendzin, and by other masters in Tibet.

A few years later, in 1976, he started to give Dzogchen teachings to a small group of Italian students, with whom he founded the Dzogchen Community. To make them understand the correct pronunciation of Tibetan terms, he developed a special transcription system [23]. At that time Dzogchen was hardly known in the West and he was the first to transmit this teaching in a way that made it accessible to Western students amid the conditions of modern society. In 1981 he founded Merigar (*me ri sgar*), the first Italian Centre of the Dzogchen Community, in Arcidosso, Tuscany. Recently, in 2011, the Dzogchen Community gathered from all over the world for the 30th Anniversary Celebrations: "The Joy of Being Here".

In 1983 Chögyal Namkhai Norbu coordinated the organization of the first Convention on Tibetan Medicine, held in Venice and Arcidosso. He participated also in the first Convention on Tibetan Language held in Dharamsala, India, in 1992. And he was invited as a representative at the Millennium World Peace Conference of Religious and Spiritual Leaders [24], held at the UN-Headquarters, New York, 2000. In the course of the years, he has given conferences in prestigious American Universities, like Stanford, Berkeley, Columbia and others.

As interest in his teachings grew, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu dedicated himself to spreading Dzogchen and establishing "Gars"—seats of the Dzogchen Community—throughout the world. The Dzogchen Community is constituted by those who are interested in following and practicing the Dzogchen teachings and over the years thousands of people from all over the world have become members, giving it a great international dimension. The Community organization springs straight from Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's vision: *Gars* (*sgar*, "gathering place"—the larger centres) and *Lings* (*gling*, "island/place"—the smaller centers) form a great *Mandala* (*dkyil 'khor*, circle) which unites the different geographical areas of the world. Symbolically, the Mandala represents the Universe as perceived by the individual and, in this particular case, the places where the teaching is practiced. Within the vision of the Mandala there are no hierarchical relationships among or within the various Gars or Lings, but only a relationship of collaboration and cooperation. *Gar* in Tibetan means "Settlement", and it is the term used to designate Nomad camps. A *Gar* has a very precise meaning, according to Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche: it is a place where some practitioners live and apply

the practice in daily life, collaborating and working together, a place where the “spirit” of the Dzogchen Teachings should always be present, because that is the center from where all its energy develops and spreads, like the heart in a human body.

The Gars of the Dzogchen Community are: Merigar for Europe (Merigar West in Italy and Merigar East in Romania); Tsegyalgar (*rtse rgyal sgar*) for North America (Tsegyalgar East in Massachusetts, USA and Tsegyalgar West in Baja, Mexico); Tashigar (*bkra shis sgar*) for South America (Tashigar North in Venezuela and Tashigar South in Argentina); Namgyalgar (*rnam rgyal sgar*) for Oceania (New South Wales, Australia); and Kunsangar (*kun bzang sgar*) unifying practitioners from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Latvia and other countries of Eastern Europe and Asia.

The Gars are linked to the Lings, which form the core of the Community. Many of the Lings are located in large cities (such as Rome, Barcelona, New York and Moscow).

Apart from his spiritual activity, Prof. Namkhai Norbu is widely known for his activities on behalf of the culture and people of Tibet, especially through the organisations he has founded, including the International Shang Shung Institute for Tibetan Studies, A.S.I.A. Onlus (Association for International Solidarity in Asia, NGO), and the Dzogchen Community.

In 1988 Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche founded A.S.I.A. ONLUS NGO (Association for International Solidarity in Asia), an Italian ONLUS (Charity) and Non-Governmental Organisation recognised in 1999 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is mainly active in meeting the educational and medical needs of the Tibetan population in all 25 provinces of the original Tibetan homeland. ONLUS is an Italian acronym which means Non Lucrative Organization of Social Utility.

A.S.I.A. has realized more than 200 projects and built 20 schools where 3,000 Tibetan children learn Tibetan language and traditional culture.

In the year 2000 A.S.I.A. turned to some primary intervention sectors: education, the artistic and cultural heritage, water, health, nomadism and the environment.

In 2001 A.S.I.A. signed a partnership agreement with ECHO (the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission) for emergency projects and, following a series of climate catastrophes in Tibet, started to intervene in aid of the populations struck by natural disasters.

The same years saw development of A.S.I.A.’s work in Italy and Europe, with implementation of educational development projects to inform civil society about Tibetan culture and the real condition of Tibet, along with the problems of other developing countries.

In recent years it was decided to widen A.S.I.A.’s areas of intervention to other Asiatic countries and, following the catastrophe of the 2005 tsunami, the organization became involved in post-emergency and development projects in Sri Lanka.

In recent years, A.S.I.A. NGO was the only foreign NGO admitted by the Chinese Government to aid and relieve the Tibetan population after the Qinghai earthquake, especially the Khampa nomad families in the autonomous Tibetan prefecture of Yushu.

In 1989 Chögyal Namkhai Norbu founded the International Shang Shung Institute for Tibetan Studies, which has the task of safeguarding Tibetan culture by promoting and spreading it. The Institute was inaugurated by His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama in 1990.

Even today Chögyal Namkhai Norbu continues to travel constantly all over the world, giving talks and holding retreats attended by thousands of people: until now he has led more than 500 Dzogchen

retreats around the world (since 2005 transmitted also via webcast), and given lectures, public talks and seminars at many universities.

On September 11th 2010 the ancient Tibetan medical system [25–27] was the core of the Keynote Lecture given by Prof. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche in the main hall of Bologna University Anatomy Institute (Bologna University being the oldest university, at least in the West, founded in 1088).

The occasion of this address, entitled “Tibetan Medicine, Heritage of Mankind” [28–32] was the first time that the Auditorium of the Anatomy Institute hosted a public event.

The event, organised by the *Associazione per la Medicina Centrata sulla Persona Onlus* (Association for Person Centred Medicine Onlus, a Charity established in Bologna according to the Italian Law) in collaboration with the International Shang Shung Institute for Tibetan Studies in acknowledgement of its overriding importance [33–35], met with high-level political, academic and institutional endorsements (Organizing Committee: Paolo Roberti di Sarsina, Luigi Ottaviani, Nadia Gaggioli, Cesare Pilati). Honorary membership of the Charity was tributed to Prof. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche.

3. Conclusions

We did our best to outline both Chögyal Namkhai Norbu’s qualifications and enormous work as a Dzogchen Master and Lineage Holder and his academic research. We hope that this short biography will be of some help to develop pure understanding of Dzogchen, as well as preserving Tibet’s extraordinary cultural patrimony.

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