

# REVIEWS

## THE TIBETAN LEONARDO



### THE TREASURY OF KNOWLEDGE BY JAMGÖN KONGTRUL

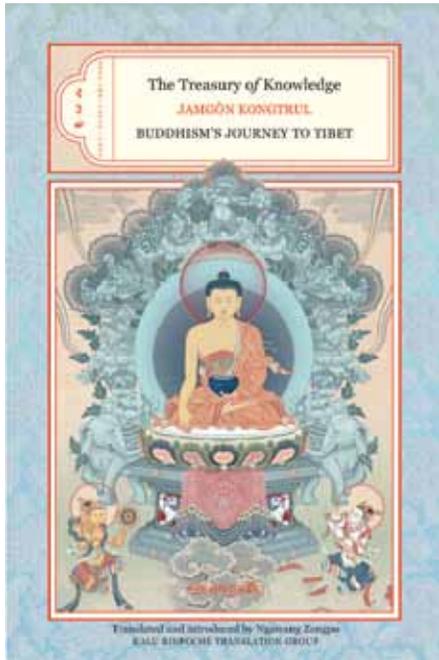
10 volumes

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Reviewed by Roger R. Jackson

Addressing a dinner for Nobel Prize laureates in 1962, President John F. Kennedy quipped that never before had so much genius been present in the White House—“with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” The same might be said about Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye (1813–1899), the Tibetan spiritual master, scholar, poet, artist, physician, diplomat, and overall polymath, who was the brightest star in the cluster of brilliant figures behind Rimé, a cultural and religious movement that occurred in nineteenth-century eastern Tibet. The scholar who first drew attention to Kongtrul in the West, the late E. Gene Smith, described him as “a nineteenth-century Tibetan Leonardo”; modern Tibetan Buddhists, especially but not solely those in the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages, regard him as a crucial source of much of what is best about their traditions in the twenty-first century.

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Thus, when in 1986 the great Kagyu master Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989) asked some of his closest disciples to form a committee to translate key Tibetan works into English, the text he chose for them was Kongtrul's *Treasury of Knowledge* (*Shes bya mdzod*), a ten-book summation of virtually every branch of Tibetan Buddhist learning, from the structure of the cosmos to the nature of buddhahood. Covering both the sciences and a wide range of religious ideas and practices, it is as erudite and comprehensive an overview as ever has emerged from Tibet. A work of such scope and depth poses immense intellectual, practical, and financial challenges for any would-be translators. Thus, it is no surprise that the English version of *The Treasury of Knowledge* has come forth very slowly. But come forth it has, and now with the publication of the final two volumes this fall, the project is complete, and Kongtrul's masterpiece is available to a whole new Buddhist audience—far different from any he likely imagined as he sat writing it 150 years ago in his hermitage in eastern Tibet.

Jamgön Kongtrul lived in Tibet in the nineteenth century—after the tumultuous wars and Chinese interventions of

the eighteenth century and before the disasters that lay ahead in the twentieth. Although free from major outside intervention, during this period Tibet was a land of more than passing interest to the Russians, British, and Chinese, who regularly meddled in its affairs. It was politically and religiously divided, with the Gelukpa government of the Dalai Lamas and their regents dominant in Lhasa and much of the west and northeast but less powerful in Kham, the populous southeastern region where the Kagyu, Nyingma, and Sakya lineage schools as well as the pre-Buddhist tradition of Bön were influential.

It was in Kham, near the major town of Dergé, that Kongtrul was born in 1813. His father was a Bön adept and so Kongtrul mastered Bön doctrines and rituals in his youth. His obvious intelligence and knowledge of Bön practices attracted the attention of several Nyingma lamas, and he eventually found himself at Shechen, a major Nyingma monastery near Dergé, where, at twenty, he became a monk, intent on study and practice. A year later, however, he was conscripted as a secretary by the powerful Kagyu monastery of Palpung, seat of the Situ incarnation lineage, and there was made to retake his vows. Some years later, he nearly was drafted to serve a government official in Dergé, but his identification as a reincarnate lama conveniently freed him from the obligation.

At Palpung, Kongtrul studied Kagyu philosophy, tantra, and Mahamudra but also learned the doctrines and practices of many different systems and became expert in a variety of secular sciences, including medicine, architecture, poetics, and Sanskrit. He gained renown as a teacher, traveled widely in Kham, and became an important figure in the region's life, devoting nearly as much time to administration and diplomacy as to study and retreat. In the 1850s, he negotiated the release of the parents of the young Situ tulku, who had been held hostage near Lhasa by the

## THE COMPLETE TREASURY of KNOWLEDGE SERIES

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### Journey and Goal

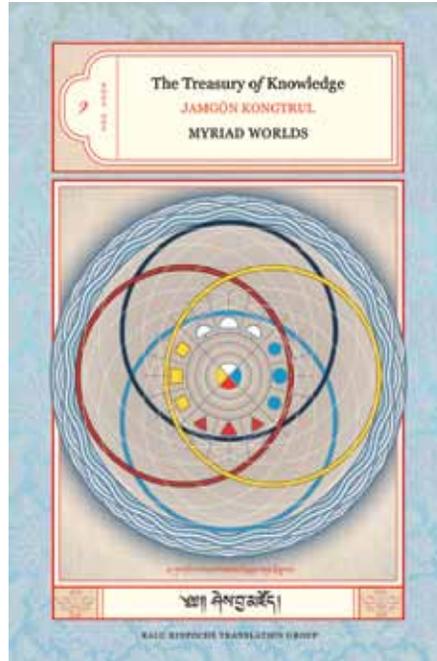
Translated by Richard Barron (Chokyi Nyima)

Geluk-dominated Tibetan government. In 1865, when a central Tibetan army occupied Dergé in the wake of a long and bloody war in the area, he saved Palpung from destruction and/or Geluk appropriation through a sort of “medical diplomacy” by curing an important Gelukpa monk of a life-threatening disease.

Although he lived out his life in more peaceful circumstances after the war, Kongtrul was deeply affected by the political and religious conflict that shadowed his early and middle years, and a keynote of his intellectual and spiritual activity was the attempt to transcend the sectarian divisions that bedeviled him and so many of his compatriots. Toward this end, he collaborated over many years with several younger lamas from Kham—above all Jamyang Khyentse (1820–1892), a master equally learned in Nyingma and Sakya traditions, but also with the Nyingma treasure revealer Chogyur Lingpa (1829–1870), the great Nyingma philosopher Mipham Gyatso (1846–1912), and others. He and his colleagues exchanged teachings and initiations, collected rare texts, and revived important Buddhist practice traditions, regardless of origin. They placed special emphasis on careful study of Indian Buddhist classics, preservation of revealed treasure traditions, and revival of the controversial zhentong (extrinsic emptiness) approach to explaining the true nature of buddhahood.

The outlook forged by Kongtrul and his colleagues came to be known as Rimé (*Ris med*), meaning “nonsectarian,” “impartial,” or “many-sided.” Its fundamental tenet was that there was value in all the different Buddhist traditions of theory and practice that had arisen in India and Tibet, and that each was worthy of preservation, study, and exposition. In Western terms, the Rimé viewpoint was ecumenical and inclusive. It was not, however, eclectic or synthetic: no one was asked to abandon their own tradition or practice a mishmash of traditions, nor was any

attempt made to forge one overarching super-tradition like the Geluk. Thus, Rimé was not a new school of Tibetan Buddhism so much as an unofficial confederation of masters who continued to follow (and even prefer) their own distinct traditions, while also appreciating the practices of other schools and accentuating the similarities among them all, rather than the differences.



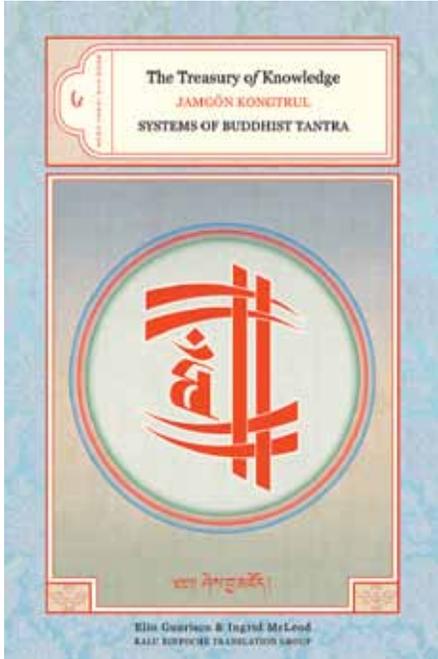
Kongtrul stands apart from his Rimé colleagues for his encyclopedic learning, his ceaseless spiritual and temporal activity over many decades, and, above all, his literary productivity. With a corpus that exceeds ninety volumes, he is among the most prolific of all Tibetan authors. His work is divided into five “Treasures”: *The Treasury of Knowledge*; *The Treasury of Kagyu Mantras*, a collection of lesser-known tantric teachings from the Nyingma and Kagyu, including those of Marpa’s disciple Ngoktön; *The Jewel Treasury*, an anthology of texts related to Nyingma and other terma traditions; *The Treasury of Instructions*, a systematic presentation of the key practice teachings transmitted by all the major Tibetan traditions; and *The Uncommon Treasury*, a miscellany that includes important

texts on philosophy, tantric practice, and Mahamudra, as well as Kongtrul’s autobiography, which has been ably translated into English by Richard Barron (Snow Lion Publications, 2003).

Kongtrul’s works have deeply influenced modern Kagyu and Nyingma thought and practice, and *The Treasury of Knowledge* is the most influential of all. It is not actually a single work but a set of root verses—*The Encompassment of All Knowledge* (*Shes bya kun khyab*)—to which Kongtrul added his own commentary, *The Infinite Ocean of Knowledge* (*Shes bya mtha’ yas rgya mtsho*). The text is divided into ten books of uneven length, which cover, respectively: Buddhist cosmology (translated in *Myriad Worlds*); the life of the Buddha; the Buddha’s doctrine; the spread of Buddhism (all three translated in *Buddhism’s Journey to Tibet*); the *pratimoksa*, bodhisattva, and tantric vows (translated in *Buddhist Ethics*); the Buddhist scholastic curriculum (translated in *Indo-Tibetan Classical Learning and Buddhist Phenomenology, Frameworks of Buddhist Philosophy, and Systems of Buddhist Tantra*); training in wisdom (translated in *Foundations of Buddhist Study and Practice*); training in concentration (translated in *Foundations of Buddhist Study and Practice, The Elements of Tantric Practice, and Esoteric Instructions*); the paths and grounds leading to awakening; and the fruition of the paths and the enlightened state (both translated in *Journey and Goal*).

In the spirit of Rimé, Kongtrul presents a wide range of Indian and Tibetan doctrines and practices, including the perspectives of all the Buddhist vehicles—and of some non-Buddhist schools and sciences, as well. At the same time, the way he has organized the various books—moving from foundational to more advanced perspectives—makes it clear that he considers zhentong the supreme view, Vajrayana the supreme vehicle, and Dzogchen and Mahamudra the supreme practices. While reflecting positively on many different approaches

to spiritual life, he makes his preferences clear. It is a text from which any Buddhist may learn much, but while a Nyingmapa or Kagyupa might choose it as the one text to take to the proverbial desert island, a Gelukpa or Sakyapa—not to mention a Zen or Theravada practitioner—probably would not.



The methodology used in translating *The Treasury of Knowledge* into English was not unlike that of the Indian pandits and Tibetan *lotsawas* who translated Indian texts into Tibetan a millennium or more ago. In both cases, the process was highly collaborative. Here (with two exceptions), one or two lead translators who knew both English and Tibetan took responsibility for each volume, consulting regularly and intensively with Tibetan experts, all of them working under the supervision of the Kalu Rinpoche Translation Committee's director, first Bokar Rinpoche, then more recently Lodrö Dönyö Rinpoche. The lead translators, each of whom devoted many years to their labors, and some of whom undertook multiple volumes, deserve to be named: Richard Barron, Elizabeth M. Callahan, Gyurme Dorje, Elio Guarisco, Sarah Harding, Ingrid McLeod, and Ngawang Zangpo.

I cannot discuss the details of individual volumes in this brief review. Suffice it to say that all are ably and clearly translated and all, to one degree or another, contain a large and useful apparatus to help the reader understand Kongtrul's writings. Each volume includes a lengthy and informative translator's introduction, separate translations of Kongtrul's root verses and commentary, a detailed outline of the text, and extensive endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. In addition, certain volumes append a list of key terms or names and/or a glossary of English, Sanskrit, and Tibetan terms. It is worth noting that the translation committee did not establish a uniform set of translation equivalents, so in reading multiple volumes, readers occasionally may be puzzled as to whether they are encountering the same original term or different ones, but this is a small inconvenience compared to the wealth of understanding the translation as a whole provides.

The translation of *The Treasury of Knowledge* has taken nearly three decades to complete, and it has been worth the wait. The dedication of the members of the translation committee and the ongoing editorial commitment of Snow Lion Publications have been key to the process, but one other player needs to be acknowledged: the Tsadra Foundation, without whose financial support the project probably could not have been finished. In Tibet and China, translations were sponsored by monarchs and nobles. In the West, we rarely have such state support, so we must be especially grateful that foundations like Tsadra and a host of others have emerged to help underwrite translations of major Buddhist works into our languages.

In short, the completion of *The Treasury of Knowledge* is a signal event in the transmission of Buddhism to the West, and serious students of Buddhism will be grateful to have access at last to the full scope of Jamgön Kongtrul's extraordinary overview of everything important a Buddhist should know. **BD**