Creation and Completion

Essential Points of Tantric Meditation

Walk the path of tantra—from creation to completion.

Creation and Completion represents some of the most profound teachings of Jamgön Kongtrul (1813-99), one of the true spiritual and literary giants of Tibetan history. Though brief, these teachings offer a lifetime of advice for all who wish to engage in—and deepen—a tantric Buddhist meditation practice.

The original text, beautifully translated and introduced by Sarah Harding, is further brought to life through an in-depth commentary by the contemporary master Thrangu Rinpoche. Key Tibetan Buddhist fundamentals are quickly made clear, so that the reader may confidently enter into tantra’s oft-misunderstood “creation” and “completion” stages.

In the creation stage, practitioners visualize themselves in the form of buddhas and other enlightened beings in order to break down their own ordinary concepts of themselves and the world around them. This meditation practice prepares the mind for engaging in the completion stage, where one has a direct encounter with the ultimate nature of mind and reality.

“Kongtrul’s writings shine with lucidity and transparency. Sarah Harding has rendered a great service.”
—Ken McLeod, author of Wake Up to Your Life


“Creation and completion meditation is the cornerstone of tantric Buddhist practice and draws upon a rich array of techniques and presumptions relating to moral cultivation. This book will be of great interest to both scholars and practitioners of tantric Buddhism.”
—Janet Gyatso, Hershey Chair of Buddhist Studies, Harvard University

Khchen Thrangu Rinpoche is one of the most highly respected lamas of the Kagyu lineage with students around the world. The author of many books, he is the senior tutor to His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

Sarah Harding has been a Tibetan Buddhist translator and practitioner since 1974. She is the author of The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa. She has served for twenty-two years as a faculty member at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

Wisdom Publications • Boston
www.wisdompubs.org

Produced with Environmental Mindfulness
A Note from the Publisher

We hope you will enjoy this Wisdom book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without “digital rights management” (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you’d like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at wisdompubs.org.
Contents

Foreword vii
Preface ix
Technical Note xi

Introduction 1
  Buddhism 2
  Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma 2
  Buddhism in Tibet 6
  Deity Practice 7
  The Guru 11
  Creation Stage 13
  Completion Stage 16
  Jamgön Kongtrul 20
  Literary Works 24

Creation & Completion: The Root Text in Tibetan and English 27
  The Essential Points of Creation and Completion That Will Benefit the Beginner Who Has Entered the Path 29

Commentary by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche 83
  Introduction 83
  Essential Points for Approaching the Path 84
  Essential Points for Traversing the Path 94
  Purification 106
  The Emergence of Confusion 120
  Working with Confusion 134
  Cultivating Lucidity 141

Notes 155
Bibliography 177
Index 181
The end of this twentieth century is a time when people are extremely busy, whether engaged in their work, family, or assimilating a constant stream of new information. Finding a place for the practice of Dharma within such a complex and demanding world is not always easy, and so there is a need for clear, succinct presentations of meditation theory and practice.

This distillation of essence requires the most accomplished master, one who not only knows deeply a vast range of texts, but who has also realized the meaning of which they speak. Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye was such a master. One of Tibet's greatest scholars, he was also a realized siddha, who through his compassionate desire to benefit sentient beings, composed this text on the central forms of practice within the Vajrayana, the creation and completion stages of meditation. There is an almost uncountable number of texts dealing with these topics, too many for any one person to study or practice, and so this text summarizing the key points is extremely useful. For new students, who do not know where to turn, it leads the way along a direct and clear path; and for old students, it gathers into one place and codifies the main points of myriad explanations.

Several years ago I suggested to Sarah Harding that she translate this composition, and I am very glad to see her work brought to completion. May it be the cause of immense benefit for sentient beings limitless in number.

Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

Post Box 4017, Kathmandu, Nepal.
While in retreat from 1976 to 1980, I started reading Tibetan texts on the subject of visualization in an attempt to understand what it was that I was supposed to be doing, and why. There is a wealth of information in Tibetan, and my research proved to be rewarding and reassuring. Since the retreat, I’ve met many Western students of Tibetan Buddhism doing visualization practice but without the benefit of explanation. Although there is surprisingly little inquisitiveness—a sign, no doubt, of great faith—I felt a desire to help fill this gap in the transmission of the Dharma. In 1987, I translated a short text (bskyed rdzogs nyams len mdor bsdus kyi gtam) of uncertain origin on this subject to use as a teaching text. During this work, I asked Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtsa Rinpoche and his assistant Tenpa Gyaltsen for clarification on certain points. At that time, Khenpo Tsultrim introduced me to this text by Jamgön Kongtrul (bskyed rdzogs gnad bsdus; Creation and Completion) and suggested that I translate it. I found it listed in two separate tables of contents of Kongtrul’s collected works as being located in volume cha of the Treasury of Vast Precepts (rgya chen bka’ mdzod). However, the diligent efforts of Susan Meinheit at the Library of Congress, and my own search through the library of the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, failed to turn up the actual pages. Later, information from Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche revealed that this text had been missing (“borrowed” was the word) from the original volumes when the more recent woodblocks were being produced. So all that came into my hands was the mysterious photocopy from Khenpo Tsultrim.

It sat on my desk for years. In 1990, during a time of intense personal crisis, I turned for some reason to this text for refuge, translating furiously for several weeks. At the time I thought that if I could have only one book on a desert island, it would be this one. I reworked it over several years, asking questions of whatever generous and learned lama passed my
In this regard, I would like especially to mention Bokar Rinpoche, successor to Kalu Rinpoche and holder of the Shangpa lineage, Khenpo Dönyö Rinpoche, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche. In checking the translation with the original, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche and Lobsang Lhalungpa were extremely generous. And in reading the English translation and the introduction, Dr. Reginald Ray, Joey Townsend, and Fletcher Chamberlain offered useful suggestions and encouragement. There were many others who contributed one way or another. I thank them all. Finally, with the support of Constance Miller and Emily Bower at Wisdom, it has at last reached some form of completion. In the translation of such a profound teaching, the work of improvement could have continued on for much longer, perhaps forever. But it seems time to share it with others, according to the original intention, and accept responsibility for any errors or mediocrity, praying that the original power comes through despite such failings. The effort is dedicated to the continuing beneficial influence of the activities of the great Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche.

Sarah Harding
Boulder, Colorado, 1996

Acknowledgments to the Revised Edition

The publisher wishes to thank Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche for kindly allowing the inclusion of his commentary in this new edition of Creation and Completion. The commentary is based on an oral translation by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso that was transcribed by Jan Puckett and the staff of the Rigpe Dorje Center in San Antonio, Texas, where the teachings were given. Pema Tsewang Shastri input the Tibetan text in this new edition, and Lyn Miller and E. Gene Smith provided invaluable editorial assistance.
Technical Note

The problem of presenting Tibetan works to the English-speaking public is complicated, but I will attempt to clarify my logic here. The academic world uses a system of transliterating Tibetan into roman letters developed by Turrell Wylie at the University of Washington. This I have used in the notations for the benefit of those involved in Tibetan studies. But since the Wylie system is illegible to the uninitiated, I have also used my own phonetic system with Tibetan names and commonly known terms in the introduction and translation. There is no single system of English phonetics for Tibetan, due in part to the variety of Tibetan dialects, but mostly due to the fact that the English sounds just do not correspond exactly to the Tibetan. Therefore, my system is to write down as closely as possible what it sounds like to me when spoken by, say, a civilized Khampa, while still keeping it very simple. The only exceptions are words whose spellings have become commonly accepted, such as Rinpoche, rather than Rimpochay (and certainly not Rinbochay).

Sanskrit equivalents are given in the footnotes following the Tibetan, using the accepted diacritic notation. Diacritics have been dropped in the main text as unnecessary and not aesthetic. When no Sanskrit equivalent appears in the footnotes, it is because I was unable to find one. Occasionally, common Sanskrit words are used if they are more recognizable than their Tibetan or English equivalents, such as “buddha” or “karma.” Only the first occurrence of a Sanskrit or Tibetan word is italicized. My purpose throughout is to try to present the impact and beauty of the original meaning without encumbering the reader with unnecessary impediments. English is an extremely rich, subtle, and flexible language, unjustly accused of being inadequate to convey spiritual truths. While we wait for some standard in the field of Buddhist studies, it seems best to employ that wealth for the sake of communication, rather than depend too much on the safety of foreign terms.
Introduction

The Tibetan text translated here is a concise yet thorough exposition of the essentials of Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice by one of the most brilliant minds of that tradition, Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye (1813–99). The Tibetan title of the text is lam zhugs kyi gang zag las dang po pa la phan pa’i bskyped rdzogs kyi gnad bsdus, “The Essential Points of Creation and Completion That Will Benefit the Beginner Who Has Entered the Path.” It is known to Tibetans simply as Kye Dzog Ne Dü (bskyed rdzogs gnad bsdus), or “Essential Points of Creation and Completion.” Creation (or development) and completion (or perfection) refer to the two stages of meditation involving deity visualization practice, a meditation technique for which Tibetan Buddhism is widely known. The text is not a specific meditation in itself, but rather describes the meaning and effect of such practice, and in doing so the essential Buddhist outlook on the nature of mind and reality. It describes with masterful clarity the profound view and vast method within which meditation practice must occur.

Jamgön Kongtrul designed this text as a guide to meditation practice. It is written entirely in verse, in the style of the songs of realization and other inspirational spiritual literature of Tibet, following a very similar tradition in ancient India. It is not an in-depth analysis or scholarly treatise. Jamgön Kongtrul, a masterful scholar, was above all interested in the actual application of the teachings in meditation. His intention in this text was to convey just what was necessary for effective practice. The intention in translating and publishing it is the same: simply to make it available for people interested in Buddhist practice. Although each verse warrants a volume of commentary, this might just result in obscuring the essential points. So what is offered here is a minimum of commentary, just enough to provide some context.
Buddhism

The Buddhist teachings originated in India in the sixth century B.C.E. with Gautama, or Shakyamuni Buddha, the prince who renounced his kingdom in search of wisdom. After an inner journey of many years, he experienced a total awakening, or enlightenment, and went on to teach about this experience for forty-five years.

India at that time already had a strong tradition of contemplative practice, but these new teachings were unusual not only in their content but in that they reached across social and religious boundaries in their appeal. They offered to everyone equally the possibility of achieving liberation through personal effort. During the forty-five years that Buddha Shakyamuni traveled around India imparting his profound knowledge, many different aspects of it were presented in many different ways to a great variety of people. This special talent to present the truth (Dharma) in the way that is most practical and appropriate to a particular audience is called skillful means. It is symbolically represented in the account of one of the Buddha’s special qualities of speech: that he could deliver a discourse to a group of people all speaking different languages, and they would each hear it in their own language.

Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

The First Turning
The great variety of Buddhist teachings that arose in India over the next millennium are classified into the three “turnings of the wheel of Dharma.” They are all said to originate with the Buddha Shakyamuni during different phases of his teachings, at different places, speaking to different audiences, sometimes simultaneously to different audiences. In the first phase, the four noble truths were emphasized: the truth of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Since the first pair describe the reality of our experience of life—cyclic existence (samsara)—and the second pair encompass all the modes of transcendence of it (nirvana), there is nothing not included in this simple classification.
Among the important concepts revealed during this phase was the explanation of the totally dependent and interrelated nature of all phenomenal reality. This is said to be the overarching vision that the Buddha experienced during the night of his awakening. If one can understand the intricate relationship of all phenomena, and particularly of one’s own emotional and conceptual patterns, then the cycle of suffering can be broken. An in-depth analysis of the process of suffering also reveals that the notion of an intrinsically, independently existing “self” is at the bottom of it. This is considered to be a false notion, since upon direct examination through meditation and analysis, such a self cannot be found. Ignorance is the belief in this myth of the self and the dualistic thinking that it spawns. In protecting the self and distinguishing what is other than it, the emotional reactions of attachment and aversion along with many other “afflictive emotions” occur. These in turn give rise to actions and their consequences (karma). These are the sources of suffering. So the idea of nonself is another crucial idea presented in the first turning teachings. These concepts form the basis for all further developments in Buddhist thought.

The people who received, practiced, and accomplished the teachings of this early phase of Buddhism were called arhats. This group includes most of the earliest disciples. The lifestyle that was stressed was one of renunciation and moral discipline, and the goal was to attain one’s own liberation from the cycle of existence. These teachings developed over time into at least eighteen separate schools. Today they are represented by the School of the Elders (Theravada), prevalent in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. This path was later called the “Lesser Vehicle” (Hinayana) by other traditions.

The Second Turning
The second phase of teachings coincided with the wisdom literature, a new phase of literature that began to spread between 100 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. and continued to develop for centuries. The two great ideas emphasized in this phase were emptiness and compassion. Emptiness is a further development of nonself and of the interdependent nature of phenomena. Not only was the self discovered to be empty of any independent existence, but so too was all phenomena. The lack of independent existence of
phenomena is emptiness, and this truth is called the absolute truth.\textsuperscript{13} On an ordinary level, the interrelated existence of phenomena and the functioning of cause and effect (karma) are considered the relative truth.\textsuperscript{14} To comprehend these two truths simultaneously is to maintain a “middle path” without falling into extreme notions of either existence or non-existence. With no ground to stand on and no concepts to cling to, the causes of suffering are no longer operating. This is wisdom, the opposite of ignorance, which must be perceived experientially through meditative practice, not only by philosophical contemplation.

Compassion is the recognition that other beings are embroiled in lives of suffering exactly because they lack this understanding of emptiness. Their suffering is not inevitable, but it is self-perpetuating unless insight into the cyclic pattern arises. The person who begins to comprehend the true nature of emptiness naturally feels less self-cherishing and develops concern for others who exist interdependently. Compassion in turn promotes the experience of selflessness. Thus compassion and emptiness, or wisdom, are seen as the two necessary qualities to cultivate together on the Buddhist path, like the two wings of a bird.

The people who received, practiced, and accomplished these teachings were called \textit{bodhisattvas}.\textsuperscript{15} The lifestyle emphasized was one of great compassion and good deeds for the sake of others, as well as meditative discipline. For this, a monastic life was not necessarily relevant, so laypeople could be equally involved. The goal was the full enlightenment of all sentient beings, and thus it came to be called the “Great Vehicle,” or \textit{Mahayana}.

\textbf{The Third Turning}

The third phase was again based on these same concepts, but with a further development, that of \textit{buddha nature},\textsuperscript{16} the inherent potential for enlightenment. This seemed to spring out of the meditative experience of a radiant awareness, or knowing capacity, inherent in the mind that could not exactly be just empty. Speculation on emptiness can lead to the question of whether the essential nature of everything is empty of a concrete self and other dualistic notions, or whether everything is truly empty in and of itself. The direct experience of intrinsic awareness would tend to
indicate the former, and this essence that could be experienced came to be called buddha nature. This nature is an integral part of every single sentient being and endows that being with the opportunity to become enlightened. Enlightenment then comes to mean the recognition and full realization of this true nature of the buddha that one already is.

The goal is still the liberation of all sentient beings, and so the teachings of this turning belong to the Mahayana, and the practitioners are bodhisattvas. The literature connected with this phase as well as with the first two turnings are called sutras, the discourses attributed to Buddha Shakyamuni. The idea of buddha nature that developed in this last phase is crucial for an understanding of another kind of literature that existed in Buddhist India, that of the tantras.

**Tantra**

* *Tantra*\(^\text{18}\) refers to a special kind of literature of esoteric teachings and also to those teachings themselves and their practice. The path of tantra is also called *Vajrayana*,\(^\text{19}\) the “Indestructible Vehicle.” Thus it is often classified as a third vehicle, although it is actually part of the Mahayana since the intention is the liberation of all beings. Another name for it is the “secret mantra,”\(^\text{20}\) reflecting the widespread use of special sounds and syllables called *mantras*. There were both Hindu and Buddhist tantras in ancient India, and it is unclear how much one influenced the other. The Buddhist tantras are said to have been taught by the Buddha Shakyamuni manifesting in various forms on specific occasions to special groups of adepts. The main emphasis in Buddhist tantras is the natural purity or intrinsic perfection of all being. The method for realizing this is to cultivate pure vision,\(^\text{21}\) or sacred outlook, at all times. The lifestyle tends to emphasize the unconventional in order to break through ordinary barriers and personal inhibitions to a nonconceptual understanding of true nature. The techniques that are taught in the tantras are visualization of enlightened forms (deities and mandalas)\(^\text{22}\) and cultivation of the subtle energies of the psycho-physical body, along with recognition of the ultimate inherent nature. These two are the stages of creation and completion that are the subject of the text translated here.
Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism in Tibet and the other Himalayan regions not only preserved all of these strands of Buddhist thought without denigration or contradiction, but it also maintained a tradition of actual practice incorporating all the vehicles in an effective way. In addition, it encompassed the practices of the native Bön religion already present in Tibet when it first spread there, thus becoming the rich treasure of spiritual wisdom that we still benefit from today.

Buddhism may have entered Tibet as early as the fifth century C.E., but it was during the reign of several religious kings from the seventh to ninth centuries that it became the established religion. King Trisong Detsen invited the great scholar-monk Shantarakshita, who founded the monastic lineage, and the tantric master Guru Padmasambhava, who brought the esoteric teachings of Buddhism and subdued opposition from local forces. This first spreading of the Dharma in Tibet established the Nyingma, or Ancient, School, which continues today. After a dark period, when the anti-Buddhist king Langdarma suppressed the religion, the later spreading took place in the eleventh century, with a new influx of great teachers from India and new translations of sacred texts. Eight main practice lineages flourished, as well as many smaller ones. From those, the four main schools, which are well known today, were established: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug.

Many great saints and scholars from these traditions have appeared continuously in the Himalayan regions and have contributed richly to the great treasury of Buddhist literature that had been brought from India and translated into Tibetan.

In terms of practical application, scholars such as Jamgön Kongtrul have simply classified all those teachings and practices into the two approaches of sutra and mantra, representing, roughly, exoteric and esoteric. The sutra approach encompasses the general methods and ideas expressed in the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma. In our text, Kongtrul summarizes that approach with the famous verse:

Doing no unvirtuous deed whatsoever,
engaging in prolific virtuous activity,
completely controlling one’s own mind,
this is the teaching of the Buddha.\textsuperscript{31}

The approach of mantra (Secret Mantra Vehicle) or tantric Buddhism is basically the two stages of creation and completion. But to try to practice them without the ethical foundation and mental control gained through the sutra approach is considered useless, at best. Kongtrul thus advises us in this small meditation guide on ways to practice all of the characteristic methods of both approaches. He summarizes them into three techniques for dealing with the afflicitive emotions: rejection, transformation, and recognition (\textit{spang bsgyur shes gsum}). These three techniques for dealing with emotions that would interfere with the meditation process clearly correspond to the three phases of teachings described above as the three turnings. Rejection of afflicitive emotion reinforces the attitude of renunciation so important in the First Turning teachings. The second turning teachings are applied in transforming so-called negative states into conducive conditions on the spiritual path through meditations based on compassion and the realization of emptiness. Finally, recognition of one’s own true nature, which is intrinsically pure and pervasive even within one’s affects, represents the ideas of buddha nature expressed in the third turning \textit{as they are applied} in the practices of secret mantra. In Tibetan Buddhism this involves primarily meditation using visualized forms representing the awakened mind: the deities and mandalas.

\textit{Deity Practice}

Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice centers around the deities in its devotional rituals and meditation techniques. It may be disconcerting for those who have heard that Buddhism is a “nontheistic” religion to discover an elaborate system of worship with a pantheon of goddesses and gods. It is for this reason that some other Buddhist schools have considered the Buddhism in Tibet to be corrupt or untrue to its original form. However, these deity practices are deeply rooted in the very foundations of Buddhist thought and represent an exceptionally skillful use of technique to evoke realization of those ideas on the deepest levels.
One can impute emptiness logically when an independent reality of the self or of other phenomena is sought and not found. One also experiences it directly through meditation when the mind abides without ideas of existence or non-existence or both or neither. Meditators experience emptiness as a kind of fullness. Emptiness allows for the unimpeded radiance of intrinsic awareness. In the experiential sense, then, it is not only a lack of something, but also a quality of knowing, or pristine cognition, a luminous quality that is the actual nature of the mind that can be experienced once the veils of concepts and emotions have been cleared away. This experience is often referred to as clear light or radiance (’od gsal) and also as “compassion.” It is not something other than emptiness, for without emptiness it could not occur. It is the radiance-awareness that is the primordially pure basis of all manifestation and perception, the buddha nature.

This very nature of mind was always already there and is never corrupted or damaged, but only covered up by confusion. As such, it is the basis of spiritual practice, and also the goal or result. For this reason, tantra is called the resultant vehicle, because the approach is to rediscover the result already within. Buddha is not found anywhere outside of the intrinsic state of one’s own mind. In the traditional breakdown, then, of ground, path, and fruition, the ground is one’s own true nature, the fruition is the discovery of that, and the path is whatever it takes to make the discovery. Kongtrul describes the identity of ground (basis) and fruition when he says:

The basis of purification is the eternal, noncomposite realm of reality that fully permeates all beings as the buddha nature.

Since every aspect of ourselves is intrinsically pure, the path can employ any method to bring us back to our own nature. The deities used in tantric practice are a manifestation of this pure nature. In one sense, they exist as a method to undermine our pathetic projection of ourselves and our universe as flawed, a way of connecting with our true human/buddha nature. At the same time, they are that nature.

Due to the complex process involved in engendering and maintaining a sense of a substantial self and of the world around us, we have lost touch with our basic nature. It is often explained that the actual emptiness nature of mind is misconstrued as a self, while the clear or radiant aspect is pro-
jected outward as the separate, external world of others. As the confusion proliferates, the concepts of duality, feelings of attachment and aversion, and consequent karmic actions and imprints become self-perpetuating. Thus it is called cyclic existence and is “characterized by the experience of suffering.” But the essential nature of emptiness and clarity has never for a moment been absent.

In contemplative practice we can watch this process in our minds moment by moment and recognize how we create our world. Then there is the possibility of creating it consciously. Now, because of the complications of our confusion, we visualize the world and ourselves as a mixture of bad and good, creating a constant tension of dissatisfaction. But we could choose to regard it as continuously manifesting the basic purity of emptiness/awareness. The deities represent an alternate reality that more precisely reflects the innate purity of our minds. In any case we visualize and create a world with its beings. The tantric approach is to use whatever we have, whatever we do already, as the method. So we use this capacity of projection and creation, which is really the unimpeded radiance of mind, as the path of meditation, but with a radical shift. Instead of imperfect women and men, we have goddesses and gods embodying the buddha qualities. Rather than run-down houses, there are brilliant palaces in divine configurations. The whole sorry world, in fact, is the buddha realm of magnificent glory manifesting as the mandala pattern of enlightened mind.

Emptiness and pure awareness allow us to do this. Deity visualization may seem contrived, and it is acknowledged as such, but if the fact that we create our own version of reality is deeply understood, it is very reasonable. We perceive water as something to drink, a fish perceives it as something to live in. We perceive the world now as impure, but we might as well see it as pure, which is closer to the truth if one considers its essential nature. The deities are forms that display the immanence of buddha nature in everything. All the different ways of relating with deities are ways we already have of relating to our experience. In this sense, the practice of deity meditation is a skillful way of undermining our ordinary mistaken sense of solid reality and moving closer to a true mode of perception.

The natural array of perceptions and feelings that arises can be regarded differently through deity practice. For instance, in Jamgön Kongtrul’s last example of transformation, when desire arises, it arises as the deity, and we
relate to it, or to ourselves, in that form. The deity shares some familiar characteristics with desire, has the same energy, but is by nature a pure manifestation, untainted by ego’s complications. The deity in this meditation might be an embodiment of pure (com)passion, such as Chakrasamvara, and thus represent an aspect of enlightenment. But the process itself also recaptures and demonstrates that the essential nature of neurotic thought is none other than buddha nature, whatever its shape. By creatively using forms that recall innate purity, the habitual mistake of relating to thoughts and emotions as other than pure is reversed.

This does not mean that tantric deities are merely an abstract, symbolic form representing something other than themselves. This again would be a dualistic concept. They are enlightened form, and they are intrinsic as part of buddha nature. Even the specific forms are understood as an integral part of awareness. This is a difficult point to comprehend. Jamgön Kongtrul refers to this truth when he says:

The basis of purification, which is this very buddha nature, abides as the body with its clear and complete vajra signs and marks. A similar form is used as the path and leads to the fruition of purification: that very divine form that existed as the basis.

“A similar form...used as the path” is the deity visualized in creation-stage meditation. Such practice leads to the realization of that divine form as it already exists within the true nature of mind. The idea of the intrinsic qualities of enlightenment, including actual physical attributes, can be found in such early texts as the Uttaratantra and other sutras and commentaries associated with the teachings ascribed to the third turning. Qualities and activity manifest from the fundamental enlightened nature in response to the needs of sentient beings, and yet are inseparable from that very nature, not something added on to it. In the Uttaratantra, thirty-two specific attributes of the form manifestation are listed, concluding with the reminder that they are intrinsic and inseparable:

Those qualities of thirty and two are distinguished through the dharmakaya;
yet they are inseparable like a gem’s radiant color and its shape.\textsuperscript{39}

Different dimensions or manifestations of the enlightened principle, buddha, are traditionally called \emph{bodies (kaya)}. The most common division is into three bodies.\textsuperscript{40} The \emph{body of reality (dharmakaya)} is the ultimate true nature, beyond concept. Buddha nature refers to the same thing when it is obscured by the incidental veils in sentient beings. Although itself without form, this body of reality manifests spontaneously in ways to benefit beings, just as our intrinsic awareness radiates naturally from emptiness. The enlightened manifestations are called the \emph{form bodies (rupakaya)}. They are the \emph{body of perfect rapture (sambhogakaya)}, only visible to those of high realization; and the \emph{emanation body (nirmanakaya)}, the actual manifestations of the Buddha to our normal perceptions. The Buddha Shakyamuni is said to be such an emanation body. The deities visualized in Tibetan meditation practice for the most part represent the body of perfect rapture. When visualized for purposes of meditation or ceremony, the deity is called \emph{yidam}, that which binds the mind.

It is taught that the practice of visualizing deities plants the seed for our later manifestation of form bodies for the benefit of beings at the time of enlightenment. This is why the seemingly simple approach of directly apprehending the empty, radiant nature of mind is not enough. The body of reality alone would be the result of that apprehension. But that would be, in a sense, emptiness without form, and would accomplish only one’s own purpose. The body of reality must be accessible somehow to sentient beings in whom it is still hidden. That is the natural function of the form manifestations. It is still necessary to work with the whole phenomenal world, form and emptiness inseparable.

\textit{The Guru}

The single most important factor in effective tantric practice of any kind is the relationship between the practitioner and the spiritual master. Although a teacher is also stressed in the other approaches, it is only in the Mantrayana approach that this relationship \textit{itself} forms the basis of a spiritual
evolution. Thus the covenant (dam tshig, Skt. samaya) between master and disciple must be carefully guarded and honored at all times from both sides or the process won’t work. Given the difficulties of relationships in general, and the delicacy and profundity of this tantric relationship in particular, it is not surprising that many misunderstandings and abuses have occurred, particularly in the West, where a committed, devotional relationship to another human being is quite alien and often confused with a personality cult. Although these problems require extensive consideration, here we are discussing the ideal.

The relationship with the guru informs both creation-stage and completion-stage practice. In the creation stage, it constitutes the connecting factor between one’s own buddha nature and the visualized deity, which is always conceived of as essentially the guru. The guru becomes the external, identifiable form of the ultimate buddha. All buddha qualities are projected and identified with the guru. Longing and devotion directed toward the guru are so intensified that one is moved to the very core of one’s being; one’s heart is fully opened, providing the space for connection, that is, blessing, to occur. In the development of this relationship, there is more and more capacity for intimacy until finally full union takes place: the guru’s mind and the disciple’s mind are recognized as identical (thugs yid dbyer med), and all the enlightened attributes of the guru are reclaimed as one’s own. This is the fruition of deity practice and specifically the recognition attained in the completion stage. As the hallmark of tantric practice, guru devotion employs as its means perhaps the most powerful factor of human existence—relationship—both to others and to “other” in an abstract sense. Working with the general projection of self and other, and even more, with all the feelings and affections one develops in relationships, deity practice skillfully uses these affects themselves in devotional practice in order to transcend them.

Ultimate completion stage is direct recognition of our fundamental nature, but it is impossible to approach with the conceptual mind. How can we even begin to recognize nonconceptual pure nature? It is like the eye trying to see the eye. The mystery of tantra is that the only thing to do is to pray to the guru for realization to dawn, because there is no other thing to do. A pithy text on great seal (mahamudra), a practice for realization of the ultimate nature, says:

12
Mahamudra has no cause; 
faith and devotion are the cause of mahamudra. 
Mahamudra has no condition; 
the holy lama is the condition for mahamudra.41

In the usual sense of “cause,” there is nothing that can cause mahamudra, the ultimate realization. The relationship of devotion is the only attitude that creates the condition for it to happen. This is why the guru plays such a crucial role in Vajrayana. In *Creation and Completion* the pre-eminent role of the guru relationship is indicated in the first line of homage to Jamgön Kongtrul’s primary guru. It is taken for granted as the foundation of the practices that are being described. The consummating event in that guru-disciple relationship, the initiation or empowerment,42 is not mentioned, but assumed. Without empowerment from the guru, the practitioner will not reap the benefits of deity practice. It is customary for a student to request a ritual empowerment for each deity to be practiced in order to be fully empowered both in the sense of permission to do the practice and of establishing the relationship and receptivity needed for such practice.

*Creation Stage*

Visualization practice works with our relationship to the phenomenal world of appearance and seeks to undermine its solidity and shift it into an alternate, awakened perspective. The word often used for this process is *jong wa* (*sbyong ba*), which has a wide range of meanings, including to purify, purge, train, exercise, study, accustom, and cultivate. In this translation, “purify” is used in the sense of a thorough workover and radical shift. Four aspects of purification are mentioned as a framework for understanding. The basis, or ground, of purification is buddha nature. That which needs purifying or removing are the conceptual and emotional obscurations to this nature, which are merely incidental and not intrinsic to it. That which does the purifying is deity practice. The fruition of purification is full recognition of the ground.

The discussion of the actual purification process can be very obscure, and this text really only gives us some clues, as do most Tibetan lamas.
Apparently this is all that is really necessary for it to “work.” Deity practice takes place within the framework of a ritual, liturgical text called a “means of accomplishment” (sgrub thabs, Skt. sadhana). There is great variety in the sequence of practices within these texts, depending on which level of tantra and which tradition they belong to. Different relationships with the deity are cultivated, such as that of lord, friend, and sibling, and then total identification through visualization of oneself as the deity. But there are many common aspects as well. The general idea is that the process and sequence of visualizations correspond exactly to certain experiences of our life cycle, and that through “re-envisioning” them in this pure way, the process is basically recreated or purified, and can be recognized as the pure display of radiant mind.

Jamgön Kongtrul mentions four visualization sequences as corresponding to the four possible kinds of birth: womb, egg, moisture-warmth, or miraculous. The first sequence of five stages purifying womb birth is given as an example to convey this idea. Beginning with the three meditative absorptions (ting nge ’dzin; samadhi), the first, absorption of suchness (de bzhin nyid), corresponds to the experience of death in one’s previous life. This absorption is basically the meditation on emptiness, the pure ground from which everything arises. Along with this, the all-appearing or all-illuminating absorption (kun snang), corresponds to and purifies the previous experience of the intermediate state (bar do) between death and rebirth. This is the meditation of the clarity or compassionate aspect, the natural radiance of emptiness, the energy of the natural mind. Then the absorption of the cause, or seed (rgyu), corresponds to the process of conception in rebirth, the sperm and ovum coming together as the physical basis of the future body. Here it is described as the visualization of the sun and moon and lotus seat, the first appearance of form in the visualization process. In its pure, enlightened aspect, it is the inseparability of the previous two, emptiness and its radiance, compassion. Then there is the visualization of the deity’s seed syllable upon the seat, corresponding to the consciousness of the individual entering the womb with the combination of sperm and ovum. Just as all life begins with a seed or quintessence of that form, deities also emanate from a quintessential syllable or vibration. Then the visualization of the special implement or insignia (phyag mtsan), such as a vajra or a sword, representing the particular deity, corresponds to
fetal growth in the womb, when one’s distinctive characteristics begin to develop. Finally, the visualization of the complete body of the deity corresponds to and purifies the actual birth from the womb and the development into an individual. These five stages may also be correlated with the five wisdoms, the pure aspect of the five afflctive emotions.48

In the more complex deity practices, the process continues through many stages, all the stages of our life. Finally there may be full-blown visualization of the entire mandala palace and surrounding environment, including many other deities as retinue in the mandala. This mandala corresponds to our complex life, with all of its relationships to beings, and to the environment surrounding our notion of ourself in concentric circles of importance all around. We have already created this mandala, but without awareness. Recreating the process in visualization, we see how we did it in the first place, and how, as the natural process of the creative energy of mind, it is essentially pure already.

Three Aspects of the Creation Stage
Traditionally there are three aspects, or techniques, to develop in visualization practice: clarity, recollecting purity, and pride. Clarity of form (rmam par gsal ba) is the art of visualizing with steady, vivid precision. The deity is held in the mind clearly, yet is always empty of solid reality, like a vivid rainbow. This is not only a focus for achieving one-pointed attention (rtse ge’ig) and stillness (zhi gnas, Skt. shamata), but also provides instant feedback on the state of one’s mind. It is immediately apparent that a relaxed mind is a necessary condition for sustained visualization, as it is for any kind of exercise in memory. Advice on how to cultivate this clarity is given in the text.

Recollecting the purity means knowing and remembering the symbolic meaning of each of the aspects of the visualized deity. These meanings are usually found in the course of the practice liturgy to refresh the memory for practice. For instance, the deity’s legs crossed in vajra posture indicates abiding in the inseparability of cyclic existence and transcendence; sitting on a lotus indicates utter purity of the form manifesting for beings, like a lotus growing in a swamp but untouched by its filth. None of these details are arbitrary, and as manifestations of the body of reality, they are naturally meaningful and potent. As such, one might wonder if they are equally
effective whether or not they are consciously remembered. It is interesting that in this text Jamgön Kongtrul goes against mainstream teachings in suggesting that all this recollecting might just interfere with the real meditation process, particularly for the beginner. He suggests that rather than cluttering the mind with these details, it is more important to simply recall that the mind projecting the empty, radiant deity is fundamental emptiness radiating its intrinsic qualities in the arising of hands, faces, and so on.

The third aspect to cultivate is called pride of the deity or divine pride (lha’i nga rgyal). Generally, this means maintaining the deep sense of actually being the deity, pure and perfect in every way. It is not the feeling of dressing up in a costume and mask, assuming another weird form, or superimposing an alien personality on top of the old one. A sense of confidence in being the actual deity counteracts one’s sense of ordinariness and frees one from all the limitations usually imposed by our mundane sense of self. As the deity, boundless compassion and wisdom are only natural, whereas normally we feel burdened by our own inadequacy in such matters. Many teachings emphasize this as the main point of deity practice. Even if the visualization itself is unclear, just this sense of actually being the deity achieves the purpose of the practice. However, pride of the deity is in no way to be confused with its opposite: ordinary, ego-oriented pride. Apparently Jamgön Kongtrul felt that this was very important: the two lines on the subject concern the benefit of meditating without (ordinary) pride.

Kongtrul’s discussion of creation-stage practice ends with a description of the signs of accomplishment, such as the deity arising effortlessly at all times and even being visible to others. But even if these experiences don’t happen and the visualization remains obscured, that obscuration itself is not different from the true spacious nature of mind itself. It always comes back to that. So the real accomplishment of the creation stage is the natural state of the completion stage.

Completion Stage

The true nature of mind and all phenomena is “beyond intellect and inexpressible.” There is no intentional effort that causes its realization except that, as the text says, “the power of devotion causes it to arise from
within.” This makes it difficult to write about, but a few points need to be mentioned.

The creation stage undermines attachment to the solid, impure phenomenal world, but can still leave us with the traces of attachment to this new manifestation that we have created or perceived. So in the completion stage, the whole new wonderful world dissolves back into basic ground, from which it never really departed. In the context of relationship with life cycles mentioned above, this stage corresponds to death. Recognizing that the visualization was created in the first place by mind, empty and radiant, and dissolves back into it, purifies or prepares us for the process of actual death, when this realization can result in full awakening.

Within the context of meditation, there is no longer a visualized form to work with, but there is still mind. So the discussion of the completion stage begins with a description of the mental process itself, so that the practitioner can be aware of exactly what is happening. The tradition of examining and analyzing the mental process has been a mainstay of Buddhist practice since its inception. It is sometimes referred to as Buddhist psychology. In this text the discussion centers on the eight aggregates of consciousness, a model of the perceptive process that emerged during the development of the Mahayana. The purpose of the detailed analysis is for the meditator to be able to recognize and interfere in the process at just that precise point before mental events imprint on the foundation consciousness and become karmically effective. The thought process is not expected to cease, as in any case it is the natural, pure radiance of emptiness. But the product of attachment—that is, karma—must be prevented to achieve freedom from the process. Working with the mind in this way, cutting through the very creation process of our self-imposed cyclic existence, is fundamentally the same as the practices of working with the afflictive emotions described earlier in the text.

Various experiences arise as this method becomes effective, but the meditator is warned not to fixate on them, for they too are unreal, passing away like everything else. The one single tool that is stressed continuously to get through all manner of mental events, obstacles, distractions, and even positive meditative experiences is called mindfulness, the ability to focus and know what is happening. Various ways of applying this mindfulness to different situations form most of the last part of this text.
Mindfulness develops initially in the meditation of calm abiding, which is held as the preparatory foundation for many practices that aim at direct realization of the mind’s nature, such as the mahamudra and completion-stage practice in its broadest sense. Only mindfulness sees one through the whole way and is the final technique. Then “ultimately, even mindfulness itself does not exist.”

The exceptional esoteric instructions of great perfection (dzogchen) are mentioned as an approach of total noncontrivance, requiring only naked awareness itself. Even the foundation of calm abiding is unnecessary. Kongtrul mentions this exceptional approach several times, as it is subtly, but profoundly, different. However, each mention comes with a note of warning, not in the sense of any doubt as to the edifying nature of the instructions, but to caution against the grave possibility of misconstruing these very fine points. Kongtrul claims it would be “better to tread the gradual path.”

Completion-stage meditation, the simple state of resting in intrinsic awareness, is rife with pitfalls and challenges. Methods for identifying and processing all of the experiences that could arise in this stage constitute the bulk of the literature on the subject. Otherwise, there is nothing to say.

One last clarification about the term itself: completion stage actually has two applications, and this could cause some confusion. In the context of this present teaching, it is the second of the two stages of deity practice, and usually corresponds to the actual dissolution of the visualization, where mind rests without contrivance in its own nature. Since this is ideally the ultimate realization, the term may take on a very expansive meaning.

The other use of the term is in describing a different series of meditation practices, more commonly known as yogas (rnal ’byor), that involve working with the channels, chakras, seminal drops, and vital winds in the psychophysical body. This includes such well-known practices as mystic heat (gtum mo), ejection of consciousness (’pho ba), and dream yoga (rmi lam), as well as techniques practiced with a partner to develop and deploy sexual energy (phyag rgya). These are all called completion-stage practices. Some of these practices are mentioned briefly toward the end of the text. Since they involve a considerable amount of technique, including extensive visualization, it is not immediately apparent where the connection is with the formless, uncontrived apprehension of the natural state that is also called the completion stage in deity practice. They are, however, related.
According to the teachings of Vajrayana, there is an intimate relationship between the mind and the movement of vital energy or “wind” in the body. It is said that the mind rides the wind, or that mind and wind are inseparable. This can be noticed when calm abiding is stabilized. When the ultimate realization of true nature takes place, what happens on the psychophysical level is that the wind enters the central channel (dbu ma, Skt. avadhuti), the main artery of movement of energy in the body. On the other hand, a practitioner may choose to work at it from the other side, that is, to cultivate these energies intentionally and cause the wind to enter the central channel through various physical techniques, spontaneously bringing about realization.

The first approach is termed the path of liberation (‘grol lam) and the second the path of method (thabs lam). The first is the direct approach of recognizing mind nature, already described in the previous discussion of completion stage. Although it may seem more direct and, to some people, more attractive, it is evasive and difficult. It is one of the skillful methods of tantra to work first with the physical energies of the body, for there the mind will follow. The well-known yogi Milarepa was an example of a practitioner of this path. But generally one practices both, often in conjunction, and, since the goal is the same, they are mutually supportive. This is the relationship between the two uses of the term, and one need only be informed of which method, form or formless, is under discussion. The relationship between the terms is explained in the following quotation from Gyurme Tsewang Chogdrup:

…to meditate [visualize and perceive] all the appearances without differentiation as the Buddha-bodies of the deities, (in form or structure) similar to the phenomena of the three existents [worlds], combined with great compassion and contemplation of the bliss of melting, which causes the three Buddha-bodies to mature (within oneself) is the essence (Ngo-bo) of the development stage… To merge the energy/air, mind and thoughts (rLung Sems Yid) into the central channel and to actualize the blissful and empty primordial wisdom directly is the essence of the completion stage… The stage of the training [yoga] on channels, energies, and subtle essence and the stage of (training in
using) consorts (S. mudra) which cause the energies to enter, be maintained and dissolve into the central channel is not the actual completion stage, but since it causes one to achieve it, it is [also] called the completion stage.58

In addition to some of the completion-stage yogas, the text concludes with advice on other daily practices and techniques that enhance realization in spiritual life. Tantric practice is not an isolated technique used only for achieving altered states. These practices form a part of an entire lifestyle with a fully intact ethical basis that is assimilated into every aspect of daily living. This is the case with all Buddhist practice, and all the more so in Vajrayana, which seeks to radically alter our mode of perception to rediscover ourselves. Every moment must be steeped in awareness, and any method that enhances that must be employed. One must never lose sight of remembering impermanence, cultivating love and compassion and devotion, and acting with integrity and an awareness of karmic cause and effect. Creation-stage and completion-stage practices are set within this context of a wholly spiritual and awakened life. So it is said:

Therefore the view is higher than the sky;
karmic cause and effect is finer than flour.59

Jamgön Kongtrul60

Jamgön Yönten Gyamtso Lodrö Thaye61 was one of the spiritual and literary giants of nineteenth-century Tibet. The scope of his accomplishment is enormous, and his tremendous influence in the religious development of the Himalayan region cannot be underestimated. He is renowned for his crucial role in the nonsectarian (ris med) movement of Eastern Tibet (Kham) that was revitalizing the religious life of the time. This cultural renaissance was an exciting period of spiritual and intellectual evolution that gave rise to a great many exceptional religious figures: Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–92), Mipam Gyamtso (1846–1912), and Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa (“Chokling” 1829–70), to name a few. Even among these great masters, Kongtrul’s name looms large.
Kongtrul was largely successful in his lifetime in accomplishing the three main goals that characterized this eclectic nonsectarian movement: to preserve the various practice lineages that were verging on extinction, to discourage the narrow-minded sectarian bigotry that had plagued Tibet for centuries, and to re-integrate religious study and practice in a meaningful way in the lives of its practitioners. The acute necessity for these changes came as the result of the long history in Tibet of power politics invading the realm of religion and the resulting degeneration in authentic spiritual practice. Fortunately, the pure lineage of practice was never lost entirely, and throughout the history of the region there have continued to be great masters who have risen above sectarianism through the power of the true teachings. Jamgön Kongtrul is certainly such a one, and perhaps his own personal experiences with the unsavory side of religious politics and pettiness contributed to his greatness.

Kongtrul was born in December of 1813 in Rongyab in Kham, Eastern Tibet. He was raised by his mother, Tashi Tso, and her husband Sōnam Pel, who was a village lama of the pre-Buddhist Bön religion. Kongtrul was thoroughly trained by Sōnam Pel as a Bön priest, and quickly mastered that tradition. He described himself later as gentle and shy, but with an early spiritual propensity.62

Around the age of fourteen, his life and training were abruptly interrupted. Due to a local feud, authorities from Derge, the capital of the area, captured Sōnam Pel and took him off to prison, where Kongtrul followed in order to help sustain him. There he made connections with some teachers of the Nyingma school, who were greatly impressed with his knowledge of Bön. This led to his acceptance into the Nyingma monastery of Shechen, which he entered in 1829 and received full monastic vows in 1832. The monastic institutions of Tibet were bastions of power and intrigue, and an established monastery with good connections could wield a great deal of power. Though Kongtrul was apparently quite happy with his studies at the Nyingma monastery, his exceptional talents caused him to be requisitioned as a secretary for a high lama of Palpung, a powerful Kagyu monastery. He moved there in 1833 and was advised to retake his monastic ordination under the principal head of that monastery, Situ Pema Nyinche.63 Presumably the ordination he had received just one year earlier didn’t “count” because it was from a different order.64 His objections were overruled and the vows retaken.
This occasion may have marked Kongtrul’s first disillusionment with the petty sectarianism of the monastic world, but a further political maneuver was to follow. The Palpung lamas were concerned lest his outstanding qualities attract the attention of the Derge government, which could requisition him for its own purposes. So they devised a plan to install him as an incarnation of a previous Palpung personage, which would assure his permanent position there. They chose the late servant of the previous Situ incarnation, a position not too high but still an incarnate lama, which would serve their purpose adequately. He was “recognized” as such and received the name “Kongtrul.”

Despite this background of political intrigue, Kongtrul sincerely regarded Situ Pema Nyinche as his primary guru and Palpung Monastery as his seat. He continued his studies under this great lama, and came to consider himself as a holder of the Kagyu lineage. His primary interest had always been in actual meditation practice, so in 1842 he left the main monastery to take up residence in an old, abandoned retreat center nearby, which turned out to be near a sacred power site, known as Tsandra Rinchen Trak. This he eventually (1860) transformed into a three-year retreat center and designed a curriculum that is still the model for similar retreats today.

Before this, however, he had come to feel regret with what he considered a lapse in his connection with the Nyingma lineage, and he attributed this as the cause for later ill health and various mental and karmic obstacles. Gradually he worked through these problems, largely with the help of the great Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and Chokling Rinpoche. The two of them recognized him as a revealer of hidden treasures (terton), and bestowed on him the name Tennyi Yungdrung Lingpa. During the latter part of his life, he fulfilled this role, bringing forth many new hidden treasures, often in conjunction with Khyentse. The relationship between Kongtrul and Khyentse, the two “Jamgön Lamas,” was very profound and mutually inspiring, and it is often difficult to tell who was the guru and who the disciple. They became powerful forces in the entire region, and were able to pacify some of the conflicts that arose due to sectarian competition.

Kongtrul developed a profound faith in all aspects and lineages of the Buddha’s teaching. All manifestations of the Dharma are for the benefit of
beings, and rejecting any aspect of them basically amounts to rejecting the Buddha’s doctrine. The symptoms of the inner conflict caused by the sectarian and political problems seem to have been resolved by the time Kongtrul was forty years old, when he went on to establish the retreat center and continue his prolific writings. The program of the retreat included meditations from all of the practice lineages, some of which were disappearing within the overbearing monastic institutions of the four main schools. Thus through his teaching and writing, he preserved the rich variety of precious instructions of all lineages and fostered a sense of appreciation and mutual respect. The nonsectarian movement flourished in large part due to his contributions. It is still a powerful influence that all of the great lamas since Kongtrul have supported. The power of Kongtrul’s influence will hopefully prevail in the West, where hints of ignorant sectarianism sometimes creep in.

Kongtrul continued his activities until the time of his death in 1899 at the age of eighty-seven. The enormity of Kongtrul’s contribution was expressed by the late Dudjom Rinpoche as follows:

So if we examine Jamgön Kongtrül’s career, which produced over ninety volumes of wonderful scripture, it is as if he spent his whole life as an author.

None the less, if one thinks of his teaching and propagation of the empowerments, guidance, esoteric instructions, recitational transmissions, and so forth, of the ancient and new sūtras and tantras, and transmitted precepts and treasures, without bias, it is as if he spent his whole life teaching and propagating. And, if one investigates how, beginning with the preliminary yogas of accumulation and purification, he experientially cultivated the stages of creation and perfection associated with inconceivable myriads of maṇḍalas, it seems as if he passed the length of his life in a retreat house sealed up with mud.

Likewise, if one considers how Jamgön Kongtrül expanded the new monastic communities at the places of attainment in Tsandra Rincen Trak and Dzongshö Deshek Düpa, and how he renovated many old establishments, commissioned inconceivable numbers of new representations of the buddha-body, speech, and
mind, performed more than one hundred and fifty rites of great attainment involving maṇḍala clusters, offered worship to the Three Precious Jewels, and venerated the monastic community—in short, his legacy in connection with the ten modes of doctrinal conduct—it is as if he passed his whole life diligently engaged in the sphere of work and activity. In these ways [his career] was inconceivable, within only the reach of those who are truly sublime.69

Literary Works

The collected literary works (gsung ’bum) of Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye take up ninety volumes in the complete Palpung edition. Traditionally they are divided into five collections, called the Five Great Treasuries (mdzod chen lnga) listed below, and they fulfill the early prediction of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo that Kongtrul would produce five such treasures. Most of them were collected during the time of Kongtrul’s administration of the retreat center near Palpung, and many works were composed for the specific study program there. Together the Five Great Treasuries represent the entire range of Buddhist philosophy and practice of all the sects. Their very composition and arrangement is a testimony to Kongtrul’s non-sectarian approach. His intention in bringing together this vast collection was to reveal the essential similarities of the various approaches as well as to preserve them.

1. The Encompassment of All Knowledge (shes bya kun khyab) or Treasury of Knowledge (shes bya mdzod)70 in three volumes covers the full range of Indo-Tibetan knowledge, from the formation of the universe up to the history of Buddhist lineages and practices in Tibet. It includes the common sciences and all the philosophical viewpoints as well as religious history. This masterpiece in itself would have been a stupendous accomplishment for one person’s life.

2. The Treasury of Kagyu Mantra (bka’ brgyud sngags mdzod) in four or six volumes is a collection of esoteric teachings and practices from two transmissions of the Kagyu—Marpa and Ngog—as well as some from...
3. *The Treasury of Precious Treasure (rin chen gter mdzod)* in sixty or sixty-three volumes is not just a reproduction of the older cycles of treasure texts that are still extant, as is sometimes thought, but contains smaller basic texts, supplementary works, new liturgical texts, and introductory instructions for other treasures, all pertaining to the Nyingma. 71

4. *The Treasury of Instructions (gdam s ngag mdzod)* in ten volumes is a systematic presentation of the most important instructions of all the different lineages, especially of the Eight Great Chariots of Practice.

5. *The Extraordinary Treasury (thun mong ma yin pa’i mdzod)* and its auxiliary *The Treasury of Vast Precepts (rgya chen bka’ mdzod)*, comprising ten volumes, contains Kongtrul’s own revealed treasures as well as many other writings that don’t belong in any of the other Treasuries.

The text translated here is a tiny drop in this vast, deep ocean.