



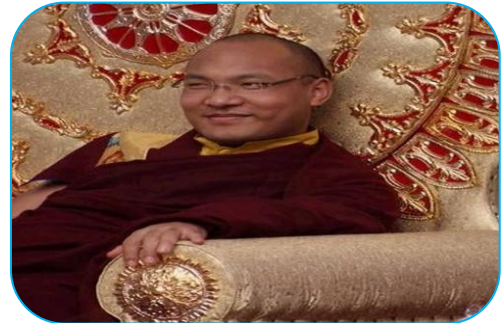
THE INFLUENCE OF THE SEVENTEENTH KARMAPA IN THE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT:

After the Buddha's Parinirvana, monks took on the responsibility of spreading the Dharma. In Tibet, Lamas are considered incarnations of Buddha and Bodhisattva. They were given many important duties to spread Tantric Buddhist thought. After the passing of the 16th Karmapa, the Seventeenth Karmapa continued the Kagyu lineage, which is one of the four major Buddhist schools in Tibet. In the process of spreading the Dharma, he demonstrated the temperament of an outstanding spiritual leader with the motto of cultivating an inner life based on compassion and wisdom. In this article, the writer presents the Seventeenth Karmapa based on two perspectives. The first thing to study is his biography. The second objective is to present his strategy for spreading Dharma by promoting environmental protection and gender equality.



KEY WORDS: *The Seventeenth Karmapa, biography, equality and environment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Karmapas are great enlightened masters who believe in arranging or mastering the process of rebirth. They are responsible for continuing to spread the teachings of the previous Karmapas. Up to the present time, Tibetan Buddhism has gone through seventeen Karmapa generations, and all incarnations have played the most important role in protecting and spreading Buddha Dharma. Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet is the traditional ancestral home of the Karmapa masters, who went through 17 incarnations, including the seventeenth Karmapa. He was born and raised during a time when Tibet was under the oppression of the Chinese government. Even though he lived and worked in an unfavorable environment, his process of spreading the Dharma brought great benefits not only to the Tibetan people but also had a great influence on the Buddhist community worldwide.

II. CONTENT

According to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Karmapas are considered Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who have the role of leading Buddhist lineages. Therefore, reincarnation is the form chosen by Karmapas to continue practicing the vows of a Bodhisattva. According to the prophecy of the Sixteenth Karmapa, the Seventeenth Karmapa was discovered and sent to Tolung Tsurphu monastery in 1992. From then on, his life turned over a new leaf with countless important roles and tasks.

II.1 Biography

The Seventeenth Karmapa was born on June 26, 1985 in Kham province, Tibet. When he was born, there was a five-colored rainbow appeared in the sky and the sound of the conch rising was heard throughout the village. Tibetans believe that the above event signals the appearance of a great teacher.

His parents named him Apo Gaga which means "happy brother". During his childhood, Apo Gaga was a boy full of auspicious energy and never spoke of any connection with the Karmapas. However, in 1992, he asked his family to move their residence to another valley, and he told them to wait for a visit from traveling monks. Not long after setting up their house in the new location, the disciples of the 16th Karmapa sought out that valley following the 16th Karmapa's esoteric instructions, in his prophetic letter. Apo Gaga's birth and other details about his life are consistent with the prophecy in the letter. On September 27, 1992, Apo Gaga was recognized as the 17th Karmapa in the presence and acceptance of the Chinese government. This is the first time the Chinese have approved this important event of Tibetan Buddhism.

At Tsurphu monastery, Karmapa began to study Buddhism. Every day, hundreds of guests from all over Tibet and the world come to visit him. He began to give empowerments and participate in a number of different ceremonies at the monastery.

While he was at Tsurphu, the monastery underwent extensive reconstruction to restore the pagodas, temples, and stupas. Reconstruction was completed as one of the main duties of the Karmapa. When China occupied Tibet in 1959, he came under increasing pressure from the Communist government. Faced with that situation, he and his entourage also orchestrated a daring plan to escape from Tibet to India in 2000. Although he left his native country, yet he never stopped travelling the world to practice and propagate Tibetan Buddhism.

II.2 The influence of the Seventeenth Karmapa on world Buddhism

The mission of Buddhist monks is not limited to any country or territory. When coming the house of Buddhism, they always carry within themselves the responsibility of practicing and training themselves to bring their enlightened energy to everyone. The same goes for Karmapa, although he left his homeland to seek refuge in India, he still did not forget to spread the progressive ideas of Buddhism to contribute to building a good life for humanity. Women's rights and environmental protection are two issues that His Holiness is particularly committed to supporting.

❖ The women's right

Gender equality is the issue that many social sectors, especially religions, have expressed interest in participating in research. Buddha, during the course of teaching, he highlighted the idea of human life, cosmology, and above all, a profound issue of women's right. The image of a woman is recorded in the sacred texts through her daily life, social position, ordination and enlightenment. The laws of Manu wrote: Nothing needs to be done independently by a girl, a young lady, or even an elderly person, not even in her own home. A woman must always submit to her father while she is a kid, her husband when she is a young woman, and her sons when their lord dies.¹ The question for scholars is how far these laws were in force at the ancient period in India? In contrast to the social views of that time, Buddha declared a universal message, emphasizing the role of everyone in society without distinction of race, class or gender.

In some countries around the world, the birth of a woman is considered unlucky for them. Women only do the service of the family, give birth to children, they are even the subject of being killed in sacrificial ceremonies to the Gods. Women continued to face overt prejudice in India. The Buddha witnessed King Kosala's dismay when The Queen gave birth to a daughter. At that time, he taught that:

¹ G. Buhler, 1500 BC, *The Laws of Manu*, from: <https://constitutii.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/the-laws-of-manu.pdf>

*As the ruler of the people,
some women are, indeed, superior to males.
Sage and moral,
A devoted wife who honors her mother in law.
And when she gives birth to a son,
O Lord of the Land, he rises to fame.
Such a Blessed Lady's son
might even be the ruler of the realm.²*

In the time of the Buddha, the woman was limited to a certain extent. Through the development of history, although the position of the woman has been changed, it is still discriminatory, especially in the thinking of each person. Therefore, the Seventeenth Karmapa spoke up about gender equality in society. He said: I want to dedicate my life to alleviating their suffering and changing the challenging circumstances that women encounter, regardless of the outcome of my efforts.³ The Seventeenth Karmapa always understood that addressing this issue within the Buddhist Sangha was a prerequisite to demonstrating the spirit of gender equality. In certain nations, such as Vietnam, Taiwan, China, etc., women are allowed to become Bhikkhuni. Women are still not ordained as Bhikkhunis, though, in certain nations like Thailand, Tibet, Myanmar, and so forth. The Seventeenth Karmapa so desired to reinstate the Tibetan nuns' complete ordination.

The ordination of the nineteen female monks of Tibet was carried out by the Seventeenth Karmapa on March 11, 2017, in the Monlam Pavilion in Bodhaka. Under the solemn Bodhi tree, he is the embodiment of the Venerable Ananda, who has great compassion three times begging to allow the woman to be ordained. Despite being straightforward, the ceremony conjures up images of women during the Buddha's lifetime. Tsunmo Tsultrim Sangmo was one of the nineteen nuns who professed vows following the event. The three Dharma robes and the three trainings should never be separated from us, and we should always remember the precepts and uphold them as strictly as we can. All nuns have an obligation to fulfil this duty in order to enable the restoration of Bhikkhuni ordination within the Tibetan Mulasarvastivadin lineage.⁴



Bhikkhuni Shikshamana during the oath ceremony

Due to the Seventeenth Karmapa recognizing that in order for the Sanga to flourish, they needed to be able to convert *Fourfold Disciples*⁵, just as the Buddha had taught: I will not die until my Bhikkhus

² Sujato Bhikkhu, 2018, *Samyutta Nikaya, Kosalasamyutta*, Suttacentral.net, p. 80

³ Ogyen Trinley Dorje, 2013, *The Heart is Noble*, Shambhala publication, the United States of America, p. 44

⁴ The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, 2017, *The First Step Toward Full Ordination for Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*, from <https://kagyuoffice.org/history-in-the-making-the-first-step-toward-full-ordination-for-tibetan-buddhist-nuns/>

⁵ Fourfold disciples: Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka, Upasika.

and Bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, have attained the status of true disciples wise, disciplined, apt, and learned preserve the Dharma, live in accordance with the Dharma, observe proper behavior, and have learned the teachings of the Master.⁶

The ordination ceremony left great significance not only for Buddhism but it also had an impact on social consciousness. In the Sangha, Karmapa awakened the equal spirit of the woman. Simultaneously, it can be comprehended by all that women are more than capable of laboring and handling all social issue. In the lecture hall of Princeton University, he stated: It's crucial to keep in mind that the restoration of women's rights and their complete empowerment must transcend far beyond formalized mechanisms or structures and famous historical achievements like women's suffrage and even the election of a woman to the presidency.⁷ Thus, the Seventeenth Karmapa conception that the spirit of gender equality does not stop at only the words, but it must be concretized through clear actions. Women are entitled to vote, as is the case for all citizens, and they can potentially hold positions of leadership in society. Besides fighting to regain equal rights for women, the Seventeenth Karmapa also spreads the ideology of environmental protection, which is an important factor determining the quality of human life.

❖ Environmental Protection

Today, people are confronting many concerns as scientific and technological life is increasingly developing. Environmental pollution, social evils and moral degradation are urgent problems that need to be solved. For the Seventeenth Karmapa, environmental protection is also a core issue in the spiritual practice of Buddhist disciples.

These days, human life is greatly impacted by forest fires, water pollution, tsunamis, and frequent floods. The main reason is due to limited human consciousness. They do not understand that the environment is the lung of life. Therefore, people often over exploit forest resources, use wasteful water resources, that is the cause of the destruction of environmental resources. The Buddha understood the value of the surroundings for the Sangha way of living during his time.

*"In the city or the forest
In a valley, atop a hill,
Whether the Arahants reside
The earth is really lovely there."*⁸

The Seventeenth Karmapa always encourages people to live in harmony with the environment. We must always preserve the environment since we depend on it for our survival. Thus, there is a close interaction between humans and the natural world, both support and bring benefits in the life.

The issue of environmental protection was not only demonstrated by the Seventeenth Karmapa through his lectures, he concretized it with many practical activities. In order to inspire Buddhist community and monasteries in the Himalayan region to operate in sustainable and environmentally beneficial ways, he founded the Khoryug movement and an annual conference is held. His Holiness has discussed the threat to the Himalayan ecosystem at Yale and with numerous media outlets. He declared: Solving the problem of environmental pollution not only relies on scientific and political factors, but ethical behavior also has a great impact.⁹

For this reason, deeds that help the environment, ourselves, or other people are regarded as morally right in Buddhism. It is important for us to realize that preserving the environment also means

⁶ Vajira and Francis Story, 1998, *Digha Nikaya, Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Buddhist Publication Society, p.27.

⁷ The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, 2015, *Genuine Gender Justice and Full Ordination of Nuns*, <https://kagyu.org/gender-justice/>

⁸ Bhikkhu Khantipalo, 2012, *Dhammapada, Sahassavagga*, Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, Sri Lanka, p. 14.

⁹ The 17th Karmapa, 2017, *Greed is Our Greatest Obstacle*, from <https://kagyuoffice.org/portfolio-item/the-environment>

preserving life, as life encompasses not just human life but also the existence of all other sentient beings. In other words, the action that the Seventeenth Karmapa performed deeply uplifted the compassionate spirit of Buddhism. Because your love will push you to act to benefit not only the few people in your close circle, but your country and eventually, the entire planet.¹⁰

The natural environment is claimed to be connected to Tibet's cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions, and the Seventeenth Karmapa was born in a region known as "*the roof of the world*." Once, he felt: I feel like I'm resting on a mother's lap when I'm sitting on the ground.¹¹ Tibet takes elements from nature to make everything from luxury handicrafts to gas used in daily living. Thus, they always take pride that: Tibetans understand the worth of the planet not from science but from their religion and the tens of thousands of years of land protection practiced by their forefathers. There is more to land destruction and environmental degradation than just mining sacred mountains and lakes. It is against our religious convictions, our traditions, and the legacy of our ancestors.¹² However, the lifestyles of the inhabitants of Tibet altered and the interaction between humans and the environment progressively vanished as the Chinese Communist Party began to occupy this region. Therefore, the Seventeenth Karmapa performed the task of making human beings able to live with both heart and mind.

Karmapa decided to conduct a conference in Varanasi, India, to educate Buddhist monks and nuns about environmental issues after leaving Tibet. He saw that the monks and nuns in attendance at the meeting were profoundly impacted not just intellectually but also emotionally. That is to say, do not be afraid to practice compassion, because just by generating it, people can feel and be ready to support you. Karmapa acknowledges the need of protecting the environment, and so do the lamas of Tibet. The fifth Dalai Lama proclaimed the preservation of wildlife and the natural world in 1642. He said: Since the beginning of this Iron-Dragon year, the Tibetan government has ruled that no domestic animals may be killed for food or profit in any village or town in Tibet on the eighth, fifteenth, and thirtieth days of each month.¹³ This demonstrates that Tibet was among the first nations to pass environmental protection legislation.

III. CONCLUSION

In short, from a country completely isolated from the outside world, Tibetan monks brought Buddhist culture to every corner of the world. Both the Dalai Lama and the Seventeenth Karmapa are exemplary examples of several Tibetan monks who made significant contributions to the global Buddhist community. They have linked love and equal spirit among humans via their sincere teachings and deeds. Currently, the gentle energies of compassion and the ever bright Buddhist wisdom are perceptible to everybody, wherever the Tibetan monks travel. In the future, Tibetan Buddhism will have many lamas and Karmapa practicing the spirit of engaged Buddhism, they are ready to go into life to transform sentient beings.

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¹⁰ The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, 2013, *The Heart is Noble*, Shambhala publication, USA, p.75.

¹¹ The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, 2013, *The Heart is Noble*, Shambhala publication, USA, p. 88

¹² The 14th Dalai lama, 1950, Tibet's history and culture, from <https://freetibet.org/about/history> - religion-culture

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