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# The Sixth Tseten Zhabdrung, Jigme Rigpai Lodro

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## The Sixth Tseten Zhabdrung, Jigme Rigpai Lodro

ཚེ་རྟན་འབྲས་བུ་དང་ལེ་འཛིག་མ་མེད་རིག་མཁན་པའི་

ཚོ་ཤོས།

b.1910 - d.1985

TBRC P1646

## INCARNATIONS

Tseten Zhabdrung

## TRADITION

Geluk

## GEOGRAPHY

Amdo

## HISTORICAL PERIOD

20th Century

## INSTITUTION

Kumbum Jampa Ling

Labrang Tashikhyil

Tseten

Tak Monastery

Tuwa

Dentik

Jakhyung Monastery

Rongwo Monastery

Ditsa Tashi Choding

Karing Tashi Dargye Ling

Yonghegong

## VOCATION

Translators

**Name variants:** Gendun Shedrub Gyatso; Jigme Rigpai Lodro; Lobzang Chopel; Tsering Dondrub; Tseten Zhabdrung 06 Jigme Rigpai Lodro; Yangchen Rigpai Dojo



Jigme Rigpai Lodro (jigs med rigs pa'i blo gros), the Sixth Tseten Zhabdrung (tshe tan zhabs drung), was born on May 31, 1910, the twenty-second day of the fourth month of the iron dog year in the fifteenth *rab byung* cycle. He was the second youngest of eight children born to his father Yang Cai, whose Tibetan name was Lobzang Tashi (blo bzang bkra shis), and his mother, Lhamotar (lha mo thar). His birthplace, Yadzi (ya rdzi), is more commonly known today by its Chinese name, Jishi Town (Jishi zhen 积石镇) in today's Xunhua Salar Autonomous County of Qinghai Province. Although his patrilineal descent was Chinese, in his autobiography, Tseten Zhabdrung stated, "Starting with my father's generation, my ancestry is a mix of Chinese and Tibetan ethnicity; but if I base my own ethnicity on written and spoken language, habits and residence, then I am exclusively Tibetan." At age two, he was recognized by Amdo Zhamar Paṇḍita **Gendun Tendzin Gyatso** (a mdo zhwa dmar paNDita dge 'dun bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, 1852-1912) of **Ditsa Monastery** (lde tsha) as the reincarnation of the Fifth Tseten Zhabdrung (tshe tan zhabs drung 05). He had been called "the grandson of Tsering Dondrub (tshe ring don grub)" until this time, when he was given the name Lobzang Chopel (blo bzang chos 'phel) by a Rebkong Nyingma lama called Alak Namkha Tshang (a lags nam mkha' tshang).

Since the late seventeenth century, the Tseten Zhabdrung incarnations shared the throne of the Six Garwaka monasteries (sgar ba kha drug) with the lineage of Tseten Abbots (tshe tan mkhan po), while Tseten Zhabdrung also had his own monastic seat at **Tak** (stag) Monastery. Beginning with age six, Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro took up his seats at these monasteries.



Tak Monastery was moved to its current location at Dajiayan near the village of Shidacang to the east of the Hualong County seat of Bayan in the early 1990s under the direction of **Shardong Lobzang Shedrub Gyatso** (shar gdong blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho, 1922-2001/2). The Six Garwaka are now located in far eastern Hualong (in Jinyuan township) and western Minhe counties of Qinghai Province. The main mother monastery is **Tseten Monastery** (tshe tan; Ch: Xing'er 杏儿 or Caidan 才旦). **Tuwa Monastery** (mthu ba; Ch: Tuwa 土哇) historically a retreat center also became a small printing house under the leadership of Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro in the 1930s. **Dentik Monastery** (dan tig; Ch: Dandou 丹斗) is historically the most important of the six monasteries as this is where **Gongpa Rabsal** (dgongs pa rab gsal, 953-1035) took his monastic vows in the late 10th century, a marker of the Tibetan Buddhist historical period known as the second propagation of the dharma. The three other monasteries are: Chenpuk (gcan phug; Ch: Zhaomuchuan 赵木川), Katung (ka thung; Ch: Gadong 尕洞), and Gongkya (kong skya; Ch: Gongshenjia 工什加).

Alak Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro's two main teachers were **Giteng Lobzang Pelden** (sgis steng blo bzang dpal ldan, 1880/1-1944), also known as

Yongdzin Paṇḍita (yongs 'dzin paNDi ta) and **Jigme Damcho Gyatso** ('jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho), a.k.a. Marnang Dorjechang (mar nang rdo rje 'chang, 1898-1946). In 1915, at age five, Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro and the Eighth Tseten Abbot Jigme Rigpai Nyingpo ('jigs med rigs pa'i snying po, 1910-1958) became “vajra brothers” after they received their first tantric initiations on the single deity form of Yamāntaka from Jigme Damcho Gyatso. At age six, Tseten Zhabdrung received the initiate monastic vows from the Fifth Seri Maṇipa **Gendun Tendzin Gyeltsen** (gser ri'i na Ni pa dge 'dun bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan, 1896-1944) at Tuwa Monastery, and was given the name Gendun Shedrup Gyatso (dge 'dun bshad sgrub rgya mtsho). Soon after that he learned to read with his paternal second cousin Ngawang Chodzin Pelzangpo (ngag dbang chos 'dzin dpal bzang po), a fully ordained monk at Ditsa Monastery.

At the same time, the young Tseten Zhabdrung began to study sections of liturgical texts such as *Guru Puja* (*bla ma mchod pa*) with Geshe Lobzang Dawa (dge bshes blo bzang zla ba). In 1918, his father succumbed to illness, and he returned to his family home in Xunhua for a short time. After returning to Tuwa Monastery in the same year, he committed to memory Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan*) and Candrakīrti's *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*dbu ma la 'jug pa*). In 1920 at age ten, he began to study *The Collected Topics* (*bsdus sgrwa*). In the same year, he met Giteng Rinpoche for the first time and received from him teachings on *Three Principle Aspects of the Path* (*lam gtso*) and tantric initiations on the Collected Mantras of Cakrasaṃvara (*bde mchog sngags btu*) and the Thirteen Forms of Mahākāla's Speech (*mgon bka' bcu gsum*).

When Tseten Zhabdrung reached the age of thirteen, in 1923, he requested to finish his monastic studies with Jigme Damcho Gyatso who promptly brought him before Giteng Rinpoche. At this time, Giteng Rinpoche instructed them both on the foundation of Tibetan classical poetry using the Fifth Dalai Lama's commentary to the *Kāvyaḍarśa* called *Songs of Sarasvatī* (*dbyangs can dgyes glu*), and by looking at examples of *kāvya* by **Bokepa Mipam Gelek Namgyel** (bod mkhas pa mi pham dge legs rnam rgyal, 1618-1685) and Amdo Zhamar Paṇḍita. Tseten Zhabdrung was to become one of the true masters of Tibetan poetics in the 20th century. In 1928, the earth dragon year, Tseten Zhabdrung took full vows and received the ordination name Jigme Rigpai Lodro in the presence of his two main teachers.

Tseten Zhabdrung's autobiography details his impressive monastic, tantric and scholastic training. He received and then further transmitted numerous tantric initiations, reading transmissions, and empowerments. Although he was a Geluk lama he was also well versed in teachings from all other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, besides the standard Geluk cycles of Chakrasaṃvara and Yamāntaka, he also received full instruction in the Sarvavid Vairocana cycle often associated with the Sakya school. He was similarly well-versed in Nyingma literature. According to the custom of the tantric communities in the region of the Six Garwaka monasteries, he initiated the monastic constitutions and led prayers according to the Nyingma tradition. He also delighted in the company of a Bon lama called Changtrul (lcang sprul) from Songpan for his mastery of Tibetan poetics. In this way we can see that

Alak Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro had an ecumenical approach to understanding Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism.

Tseten Zhabdrung wittily relayed that he adhered to his monastic vows throughout his life, despite crying when his head was first shaved at age six. Crying during this important ritual was often viewed as a sign of an impending renunciation of monastic vows ever since the Sixth Dalai Lama, **Tsangyang Gyatso** (tshang dbyangs rgya mtsho, 1683–1706), famous for his promiscuous lifestyle, had cried during this rite of passage. In any case, Tseten Zhabdrung instructed on the necessity of upholding monastic discipline. Although this is a common trope in Geluk literature, Tseten Zhabdrung's adherence to the Vinaya as a way of life is indicative of his perseverance to uphold the values of his training in a Tibetan Buddhist monastic setting, especially in light of the fact that he personally witnessed a mass renunciation of vows, either voluntarily and/or mainly through coercion, for nearly twenty years, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s.

By age of twenty-four, Jigme Rigpai Lodro had already launched his incredibly prolific literary career. In that year, 1934, he not only compiled and edited the fifteen volumes of his teacher Jigme Damcho Gyatso's *Collected Works*, but also initiated the construction of a printing house at Tuwa Monastery to print them. In the early 1980s the woodblocks for these tomes were re-carved and the printing house rebuilt also under Tseten Zhabdrung's direction after being burnt to the ground in 1965 or 1966. They were housed there until they were moved to **Rongwo** (rong bo) Monastery in Rebkong (reb kong) in 2000. The woodblocks for Tseten Zhabdrung's nine volume *Collected Works* are currently kept at this small monastery at the edge of the Tsongka mountain range.

The current edition of Tseten Zhabdrung's *Collected Works* comprises many volumes dedicated to his commentaries on Buddhist practice and philosophy, including liturgical texts such as “taking refuge” (in volume six), explanations on the Lamrim in no less than three volumes (nine, ten and eleven), while volumes twelve and thirteen contain information on several tantric cycles. Besides excelling in the training in the standard monastic curriculum, Tseten Zhabdrung was intrigued by mathematics and calculation of historical dates. Tseten Zhabdrung mastered Chinese astronomy (*rgya rtsis*) and wrote many essays comparing systems and methods of astrological calculations according to various Tibetan scholars. These essays were first published by Tseten Zhabdrung's nephew **Jigme Chopak** ('jigs med chos 'phags) in *A Useful Collection of Essays by the Great Scholar Tseten Zhabdrung* (*mkhas dbang tshe tan zhabs drung gi dpyad rtsom mkho bsdus*) and are now reprinted in Tseten Zhabdrung's *Collected Works*. Similar to the iconoclastic Amdo scholar **Gendun Chopel** (dge 'dun chos 'phel, 1903–1951), Tseten Zhabdrung instructed on basic geographical and cosmological knowledge, e.g. such as the world is round and the scientific reasons for an eclipse. Hence he was an accomplished scholar in many of the five major domains of knowledge or sciences and the five minor domains of knowledge.

In his autobiography Tseten Zhabdrung remarked on the “peaceful liberation” of his homeland in the following way, “At that time, with a thundering roar proclaiming the liberation of Qinghai Province, a great change occurred throughout the vast empire (*rgyal khams*).” After this interjection, Tseten

Zhabdrung reported in detail on the process of finding the reincarnation of Lama Rinpoche Jigme Damcho Gyatso, who had passed away of natural causes a few years before. This is followed by another several pages of various dharma activities. By the end of the summer of 1954, Alak Zhabdrung was called to Beijing to participate in the Tibetan translation of the new Chinese Constitution. In October of 1954, he met with both the Tenth Pañchen Lama, **Chokyi Gyeltsen** (paN chen 10 chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1938–1989) and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, **Tendzin Gyatso** (ta la'i bla ma 14 bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, b. 1937) who were in Beijing attending the National People's Congress. While in Beijing, he received teachings from the Dalai Lama in the **Yonghegong**. In 1951, Tseten Zhabdrung had received the Kālacakra initiation from the Pañchen Lama at **Kumbum Monastery** (sku 'bum). Thereafter, they had a close relationship that would last the rest of their lives.

After returning back to Qinghai, Alak Zhabdrung taught on the science of language, especially on poetics, and Tibetan literature at the new Qinghai Nationalities Institute. During his experience of teaching here, he realized that there was a need to write a textbook on poetry that accorded with modern times (*dengs rabs dang mthun pa*). Thus one of his most famous works, an introduction to the study of classical poetry, *A General Commentary to the Mirror of Poetics* (*snyan ngag spyi don*) was first composed at this time. Tseten Zhabdrung was highly prolific throughout the 1950s. One of his most important works is a local history, *Catalogue to Dentik Monastery* (*dan tig dkar chag*) in which Tseten Zhabdrung relied on both oral and written sources to write a historical narrative of this famous monastery and surrounding area. In his *Catalogue*, Tseten Zhabdrung argued convincingly that **Go Lotsāwa's Blue Annals** and **Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Peljor's History of Buddhism** are off by one year and one sixty-year cycle for the dates of **Gongpa Rabsal**. Tseten Zhabdrung held a deep admiration for Gongpa Rabsal due to his instrumental role in beginning the second dissemination of Buddhism. Tseten Zhabdrung wrote this local history in 1956. Some of his other famous works first written in the 1950s include: a manual on letter writing (*sprin yig spel tshul lhag bsam padmo 'dzum pa'i nyin che*), a treatise and history on Tibetan grammar (*thon mi'i zhal lung*), a bilingual Tibetan–Chinese dictionary (*dag yig thon mi'i dgongs rgyan*) as well as a collection of Gesar stories published in 1961.

Tseten Zhabdrung continued an active involvement in religious practice, giving teachings and renovating monasteries up until 1958, when the political situation in Amdo became unbearable. This was the year that Tseten abbot Jigme Rigpai Nyingpo was arrested and murdered in Nantan Prison in Xining. Tseten Zhabdrung was unable to remain at his monasteries, and was sent to Beijing to do translation work, where he shared a room with **Muge Samten Gyatso** (dmu dge bsam gran rgya mtsho, 1914–1993). By late 1961 or early 1962, the extremely tense political atmosphere in Amdo subsided to the point that he could return home. After arriving in Xunhua County in Qinghai, he worked with the Pañchen Lama to restore the monastery in the Pañchen Lama's home town of Bido (bis mdo, Chi: Wendu), which had been left with seven monks after the religious reforms that had followed the massive anti-communist uprising of 1958. It is likely that at this time, he played a role in collecting information that formed the basis for the Pañchen Lama's famous 70,000 character petition.

A little less than a year after the official denouncement of the Paṅchen Lama, in 1964, Tseten Zhabdrung was also imprisoned. He served a twelve year sentence in Xining's Nantan Prison, where Tseten Abbot had been killed. After Tseten Zhabdrung's initial release, he recuperated for a couple of years in his hometown. Then in 1978, he was asked to join the Tibetan Studies Department of the Northwest Minorities University) in Lanzhou, Gansu Province. Alak Tseten Zhabdrung's students there comprise some of the most important people in Tibetan studies today including: the historian and translator Pu Wencheng; the current head editor of the Tibetan literary magazine *Light Rain* (*brang char*) Dawa Lodro (zla ba blo gros; Ch: Dawa Luozhi); the assistant dean of South-Central University for Nationalities and historian **Gao Rui** (gnya' gong dkon mchog tshe brtan); and **Pema Bhum** (pad ma 'bum), the director of Latse Contemporary Tibetan Cultural Library in New York City.

In addition to his classes in Lanzhou, Alak Tseten gave numerous lectures in the early 1980s including talks at secular establishments such as Tibet University in Lhasa, and monastic centers in Amdo such as **Karing Monastery** (ka ring) and **Jakhyung Monastery** (bya khyung). Many of his talks were recorded and available on CD. Others were transcribed and included in the 2007 edition of his *Collected Works*.

After being officially pardoned, Alak Tseten was given some compensation money from the government for being falsely imprisoned. He used this as seed money to start a scholarship fund for Tibetan Studies students in financial need at the Northwest Nationalities Institute. Alak Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro also played a major role in the reconstruction of monasteries throughout Amdo.

Alak Tseten Zhabdrung Jigme Rigpai Lodro passed away peacefully in 1985 of natural causes at **Labrang Tashikhyil** Monastery (bla brang) in Gansu. An elaborate cremation ceremony at Labrang followed which drew thousands of mourners. His main reliquary stupa is located at Dentik Monastery.

The Seventh Tseten Zhabdrung, Lobzang Jampel Norbu (tshe tan zhabs drung 07 blo bzang 'jam dpal nor bu, b.1988), a grand nephew of Jigme Rigpai Lodro, was recognized in 1993. In 1994, he began his monastic education with Shardong Rinpoche at Jakhyung Monastery. The Ninth Tseten Abbot Ngawang Lobzang Tenpe Gyeltsen (ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan) was recognized in 1991. Both took up their thrones at the Six Garwaka Monasteries in 1993.

**Nicole Willock** (Ph.D. Indiana University Bloomington, Tibetan Studies and Religious Studies, 2011) is an assistant professor of Asian Religions at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, where she teaches World Religions, Buddhism, and Religions of China and Tibet.

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## Teachers

**Jigme Damcho Gyatso** b.1898 - d.1946

**Name variants:** Abhya Tsenchen; Dzungkar Jigme Damcho Gyatso; Guru Wangchen Kyap; Jigme Mawai Sengge Mipam Yangchen Gyepa Nenga Rikpai Dorje; Manang Kuchok; Mipam Yangchen Gyepai Dorje; Rinjung Gegpai Dorje

**Giteng Lobzang Pelden** b.1880 - d.1944

**Name variants:** Geuteng Lobzang Pelden; Lobzang Pelden; Mipam Tsojung Zhepai Langtso; Pema Tashi; Yongdzin Paṅḍita Lobzang Pelden

**The Fifth Seri Mañipa, Gendun Tendzin Gyeltsen** b.1896 - d.1944

**Name variants:** Fifth Seri Mañi Paṅḍita Gendun Tendzin Gyeltsen

## Students

**dge 'dun blo bzang** b.1946 - d.2005

**The Fifth Shardong, Lobzang Shedrub Gyatso** b.1922 - d.2001

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