

# Pema Lingpa: The Life and Lineage of Bhutan's Greatest Spiritual Master

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## Part I: The Origins of the Pema Lingpa Lineage

The Pema Lingpa lineage dates back to the 9th century, when Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, first brought Vajrayana Buddhism from India to the lands of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. Guru Rinpoche's vast spiritual activities left behind an enduring legacy that has survived vibrantly through many ensuing centuries. It is said that Guru Rinpoche visited Bhutan three times. Although he was able to subdue negative forces in order for Vajrayana Buddhism to take hold, Guru Rinpoche also foresaw obstacles that would hinder the Dharma in coming generations. To overcome these difficulties, he blessed the region with hidden treasure texts (Tib. terma) to be revealed at the appropriate times to be of maximum benefit for sentient beings in the future. It was Pema Lingpa who was destined to reveal many of these treasures.

During his years in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche prophesied who the treasure-revealers would be, as well as the appropriate times and circumstances for their treasure texts to be discovered. These esoteric teachings were hidden in the varied landscape of the Himalaya among the mountains, cliffs, trees, rivers, lakes and caves, as well as in the very mind-streams of disciples who, as reborn spiritual masters, would be led to discover the terma through dreams, visions, and spontaneous realization. There have been one hundred major and one thousand minor treasure-revealers that have revealed thousands of these concealed teachings of Guru Rinpoche. Among them were the five great Terton Kings, of which Orgyen Pema Lingpa was the fourth.

The legacy of Orgyen Pema Lingpa began in Tibet with the death of Lacham Pemasel, the daughter of King Trisong Detsen, who died unexpectedly in her eighth year. Seeing the king's great sorrow over his only daughter's death, Guru Rinpoche drew Princess Pemasel's consciousness back into her body. When she had regained consciousness, Guru Rinpoche transmitted the secret doctrine of the Khandro Nyingtik, or Heart Drop of the Dakini to her, and empowered her to reveal those teachings in a future lifetime. He also blessed her from his heart and gave her the prophesy that in a future life she would be reborn as the Terton King Pema Lingpa, and she would reveal his hidden teachings related to the cycles of the three heart practices: The Lama Jewel Ocean, The Union of Samantabhadra's Intentions, and The Great Compassionate One: The Lamp that Illuminates Darkness.

Princess Pemasel did indeed reveal the Khandro Nyingtik, and taught it in her next incarnation as Pema Lendreltsel, who later took rebirth as the great master Longchen Rabjampa (Longchenpa). Pema Lingpa was the direct and sole incarnation of the omniscient Longchenpa.

Longchenpa was called the "all knowing lord of the doctrine" because his understanding and explanations of the dharma were so exquisitely vast and profound. He could read and write easily by the age of five. Before the age of twenty he had completely mastered all the Buddhist sciences of grammar and logic; his understanding of the teachings was beyond compare. When Longchenpa was thirty-two, the dakini Vajravarahi appeared before him during a retreat at Rimochen in Chimpu, and told him that in his present life he would serve a great number of beings through the teachings of Dzogchen, and that in his next life he would emanate in Bumthang as the one called Pema Lingpa in order to serve an even greater number of beings.

## Part II: The Life of Pema Lingpa (1450-1521)

Rigdzin Pema Lingpa was born in Chel, part of the central Bhutanese region of Bumthang known as the “Wheel of Dharma.” His father was Lama Döndrup Zangpo of the Nyö clan, and his mother, Drogmo Pema Drolma, was bestowed with all the signs of a dakini. Their son was born among many miraculous signs. As an incarnation of the Omniscient One Drimé Ozer (Longchenpa), Pema Lingpa was extraordinary even as a child. He learned everything from reading and writing to ironwork and carpentry without receiving any instruction.

On the tenth day of the first month of autumn in a Monkey Year, Guru Rinpoche appeared before Pema Lingpa at the holy site of Yigé Drukma, blessed him, and placed in his hands an inventory of one hundred and eight major termas to be revealed. However, due to the karmic disposition of beings at that time, Pema Lingpa revealed only about half of the prophesied treasures. Nevertheless, the revealed treasures of Pema Lingpa contain the essence of all 108 treasures, which are summarized in the cycles of the three heart practices transmitted to Princess Pemasel by Guru Rinpoche: The Lama Jewel Ocean, The Union of Samantabhadra's Intentions, The Great Compassionate One: The Lamp That Illuminates Darkness.

Pema Lingpa discovered treasures throughout Bhutan as well as north of its current borders, but his activity centered mainly in the area of Bumthang and the Tang Valley (where he was born). His revelations usually involved instructions revealed to him through dreams, and they were frequently carried out in a state of trance. Pema Lingpa brought forth the first of his prophesied treasures at the age of twenty-seven. The discovery of his second treasure was one of his most famous revelations, and occurred at Burning Lake (Tib. Mebartso) in Bhutan. When it was time for the treasure to be revealed, word spread and Governor Thupa of Chokhor assembled a large crowd of people on the rock above the gorge. The governor was suspicious that Pema Lingpa might be a fraud, so he told Pema Lingpa that he would reward him if he could reveal the treasure, but that he would punish him if he did not. Standing on the Naring Drak above the swirling waters, Pema Lingpa called out to Guru Rinpoche: “If I am a genuine revealer of your treasures, then may I return with it now, with my lamp still burning; if I am some devil, may I perish in the water!” Surrounded by a multitude of people (a crowd of onlookers invariably witnessed the discovery of his treasures), Pema Lingpa leapt without hesitation into the water with a burning butter lamp in one hand.

Some of the onlookers thought he had jumped into the water out of shame. Pema Lingpa’s parents were present, and many people told them that their son must surely have drowned. Both parents began to cry. The governor was horrified and ashamed at his part in all of this. He apologized to Pema Lingpa’s parents, saying that he would become their newly adopted son to replace their great loss. With that, Pema Lingpa emerged from the water with a statue the size of a fist and a treasure casket of joined skulls about the size of a large clay pot tucked under one arm, and the butter lamp still burning in the other. Miraculously airborne, he was once again standing beside the crowd on top of the rock again. Everyone was moved to faith and amazement, and the governor became both patron and disciple of Pema Lingpa. Following this treasure revelation, the reputation of this great master covered the land like the light of the sun and moon.

The profusion of sacramental objects, images, books, stupas and representative images of Guru Padmasambhava that Pema Lingpa discovered surpasses the imagination. For example, he unearthed the Kyercu Lhakhang, originally built by the famed 7th century Dharma King Songsten Gampo. Similar to

the temple of Peltsap Sumpa at Samye Monastery in Tibet built a century later by King Trisong Detsen, Kyercu Lhakhang was one of only two temples King Songsten Gampo built in Bhutan; these are the oldest temples in the country. Pema Lingpa uncovered the temple by clearing rock and soil from a ravine with his own hands. Rainbows shown from all four directions like shafts of color coming from the earth, and all those present experienced a rain of flowers. Kyercu Lhakhang then became visible to everyone and can still be visited today. About a year after his visit to the temple, Pema Lingpa returned to reconsecrate Kyercu Lhakhang after extensive construction and restoration work. At the time of the reconsecration he transcribed the terma text All-reflecting Mirror of Prophecies (Lungten Kunsel Melong); in a trance he wrote out a total of fifty-seven pages in one morning. All those who witnessed this were amazed.

Late in his life, Pema Lingpa accepted a commission from the king to turn the wheel of the dharma, and erected the amazing temple of Lhundrup Chöling. In it was a statue of Vajrasattva that Pema Lingpa had revealed, three statues of Guru Rinpoche and his retinue (their hollow interiors filled with samaya substances such as yellow scrolls, the four kinds of relics, etc.), images of the Buddhas of the Three Times, and images of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. Once the temple and its contents were complete, Rigdzin Pema Lingpa and Khenchen Tsultrim Paljor performed the full consecration ceremonies. With that, Pema Lingpa's work of guiding his students in that lifetime came to an end. Having lived to the age of seventy-two, he passed into a state of peace on the third day of the first Tibetan month in a Female Iron Serpent Year (1521).

The extraordinary enlightened activities of Pema Lingpa magnetized a following of ordinary people as well as many significant political and spiritual figures of his time. He was highly regarded by all four of the principal schools of Vajrayana Buddhism. Pema Lingpa spent his life revealing the precious treasures of Guru Rinpoche, giving empowerments and teachings, meditating in isolated locations, building and restoring monasteries, and establishing a tradition that endures to this day. Moreover, Pema Lingpa prophesied that in the future he would return as the Buddha Dorjé Nyingpo in the pure land of Pemakö, and that those connected with him would be reborn in Pemakö as Buddha Dorjé Nyingpo's students.

The entire stream of the Pema Lingpa lineage of empowerments, transmissions and guidance continues today without decline. It is carried on through the three lines of the Body, Speech, and Mind emanations of Pema Lingpa: the Gangteng, Sungtrul, and Tukse Rinpoches, all of who traditionally reside in Bhutan.

The primary sources of information for this brief essay are:

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