

**ACCTIL 14A1 - Tibetan Literature**  
**Week 8:**

**Gendun Chopel, Dhondup Gyal and the  
Trajectory of Modern Tibetan  
Literature**

# Gendün Chöphel (1903–1951)



A portrait of Gendun Chophel in India 1936

# Life of Gendün Chöphel

- He lived a life bracketed by two of the defining moments in modern Tibetan history, the entry of British troops into Lhasa in 1904 and the entry of Chinese troops into Lhasa in 1951
- Many questions remain concerning the most basic events of his life.
- We know from his writings that he traveled extensively and was in South Asia (India and Sri Lanka) for approximately 12 years, but his itinerary was unclear as are the dates for his return to Tibet and subsequent incarceration.

# (Uncertain) Life of Gendün Chöphel

- Born in Amdo 1903. Prior to his birth, a prominent Nyingma Lama known as the Tulku of Dodak Monastery (Rdo rje brag Monastery) had visited Chophel's parents and announced that he, the lama, would be reborn as their son, leaving behind his ceremonial hat as an omen.
- Chophel's parents subsequently set out on a long pilgrimage from their home in Amdo to the holy city of Lhasa, a journey of many months. Chophel was conceived en route! Parents returned home to Amdo to raise him there
- He was regarded, at least locally, as the incarnation of Dodak Tulku and was known by that name.
- His birth nam was Rigzin Namgyal. When he was seven years old, he was invested as an incarnate lama in a ceremony at the Nyingma monastery of Trashikhyil
- He continued to study, both with his father and other local lamas, gaining particular recognition for his skills as a poet.
- At age fourteen Chophel entered a local Dge lugs monastery of 500 monks, called Rdi tsha, where he studied Buddhist logic for 3-4 years and developed a reputation as an excellent debater.
- It was at Rdi tsha that he was ordained as a Buddhist monk and was given the ordination name Dge 'dun chos 'phel



# Pilgrimage years (1934?-1945?)

- Spent 12 years in India, Sri Lanka from 1934 (?) to 1945(?)  
Went to India for pilgrimage (Varanasi, Bodhgaya)
- Sri Lanka: Admired the monks for their monastic discipline.  
Translated *Dhammapada* from Pali in a team with Dhammananda.
- Worked with Russian Tibetologist George Roerich on the translation of the Blue Annals
- Stayed in Calcutta after translation work. This was when he studied erotica
- Then Kalimpong, Darjeeling near Sikkim 1944-5 (last 2 years of stay in India?)
- Chopel was critical of the Tibetan government and in particular of the Gelukpa monasteries.
- Returned to Tibet 1945, arriving January 1946.
- Accessed some Dunhuang texts and the Tang Annals (with the aid of a Chinese scholar) and started composing his *White Annals*
- Was popular for a short time after his return to Lhasa. People requested teachings.

# Return to Lhasa (1946-1951)

- Was popular for a short time after his return to Lhasa. People requested teachings.
- In 1946 he was arrested on charges of distributing counterfeit currency (later discovered to be fabricated)
- Put in a separate room, and given access to food and bedding (from his friends), but interrogated repeatedly.
- Given 3 year sentence. Released 1949 or 1950.
- Was given housing behind the Potala and a stipend to continue writing his *White Annals*..but he never did.
- Died soon after his release in 1951.
- Not certain whether alcoholism started before or during his jail stint, but it was rumored he displayed signs of alcoholism in jail and so his disciples sneaked in alcohol to him in jail. He was in bad shape by the time he was released from jail.

# Literary Life of Gendün Chöphel

- When in Tibet, he was a monk –engaged in debate and memorization of texts; no time for writing
- Wrote extensively during his 12 years in South Asia
- Some of his writings are missing—allgedly left in his room when he was arrested but were gone when he was released.
- Composed poems in jail
- After released from jail (1948/9) was given a stipen to finish writing his *White Annals*...but he never did.



# Literary Life of Gendün Chöphel

So what did he write?

- Travel journal: *The Golden Surface, the Story of a Cosmopolitan's Pilgrimage*
- Guidebook to Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India
- Work on erotica (*Treatise on Passion*)
- *The White Annals* (unfinished)--Chophel's attempt to demythologize the Yarlung kingdom
- Various poems recorded from within his various writings and found on pieces of paper in jail.
- Sometime either shortly after his release from jail or shortly before his incarceration he gave teachings on the Middle way to students which was published shortly after his death. (Ornament of the Middle Way)
- Translated the *Dhammapada* from Pali to Tibetan, translated other texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan, Tibetan to English



*What features distinguish Gendün Chöphel's poetry from what we have read so far?*

*What were your reactions?*

*What surprised you in particular?*

## Poem 2

Your form, the deeds of all the victors of the three times;  
Friend to the host of beings seeking liberation;  
Mother who loves all miserable migrators.  
I pray at the feet of lady Tara.

Your beautiful body, the color of turquoise, restores health;  
Your sweet speech dispels the longing for existence and peace;  
Your compassionate mind purifies the stains of the two obstructions.  
I pray at the feet of lady Tara.

You serve as a guide, showing me the path in an unknown land;  
You serve as an escort, protecting me on a frightening precipice;  
You grant the resources I need when I'm impoverished.  
I pray at the feet of lady Tara....

## Poem 11

Striking the palms together in debate  
Proudly making distinctions in the truth  
Found in conflicting scriptures on obscure topics;  
This does not adorn the king of reasoning's  
teaching.

# Poem 16

Homage to the Lady of Speech.

This supreme intellect Sarasvati  
Illuminator of speech;  
May you adorn my throat  
With words to clarify the world.

An ocean bears her, leading followers  
To the supreme path  
Of sacred diligence and reflection  
Upon the auspicious puranas.

The expanse of her intelligence  
Is a sky free of stars;  
This is no place for a ladder  
Leading to the shining sun.



## Poem 20

Who would reproach the shining of the full moon?  
Who would not bow at the feet of Suddhodana's son?  
What peacock does not rejoice at the thunderclap?  
Why would my mind be unsatisfied with the ambrosia of  
true dharma?

## Poem 21

Like a bee circling again and again  
Around a gently swaying lotus,  
In the vast and splendid temple,  
I am moved by devotion again and again.

## Poem 23

In order to refute their opponents over some fragments,  
Our learned ones set up the target and pierce it with a  
weapon.  
Yet by singing songs of praise to the gods of war,  
The hero of the other side is still not slain.

## Poem 31

Hey! After I had gone away  
Some nonsense-talking lamas  
Said that Nechung, king of deeds,  
Did not let me stay because I was too proud.  
If he is a protector who purifies,  
How could he permit those impure monks to stay,  
Wandering all over, the known and unknown,  
Selling tea, beer, and dried mutton?  
Their lower robe hiked up, folded like palm leaves,  
The worst carry weapons, knives, and clubs.  
If they'd been expelled, it would be fine;  
Between last year and this, there are more and more.  
Because I lacked faith, pure as Venus,  
Some say I was banished to far-off lands.  
Why weren't impure beings banished  
Like cows, female yaks, birds, and bugs?

...

## Poem 34

Up to the Kachu and down to the Nagchu  
There are many men whose rhetoric is lofty.  
Yet, if I think about it carefully,  
This pride of mine, a lover of words, is true pride.

# Poem 42

Walking with weary feet to the plains of the sandy south,  
Traversing the boundary of a land surrounded by the pit of dark seas,  
Pulling the thread of my life-precious and cherished-across a sword's sharp blade,  
Consuming long years and months of hardship, I have somehow finished this book.

Although there is no one to beseech me  
With mandates from on high or mandalas of gold,  
I have taken on the burden of hardship alone and written this,  
Concerned that the treasury of knowledge will be lost.

Though terrified by the orange eye of envy  
In the burning flame of those bloodthirsty for power,  
Accustomed to the habit of gathering what I have learned,  
My mind is attached to reasonable talk.

If it somehow enters the door of a wise person, intent on learning,  
Then the fruit of my labor will have been achieved.  
For the smiles of the stupid and the approval of the rich,  
I have never yearned even in my dreams.

When this ink-stained body's need for food and drink is finished,  
When this collection of bones-its thread of hope for gain and honor snapped-is scattered,  
Then may the forms of these letters, a pile of much learning amassed through hardship,  
Reveal the path of vast benefit in the presence of my unseen friends.



# Poem 44

...

Completing the whole cycle of twelve years  
Without seeing my delightful homeland and  
Most of all, not meeting my kind old mother;  
When I think about this, I feel pangs of separation.

...

At the monastery of the glorious and incomparable Narthang  
I met the omniscient supreme incarnation.  
Not regarding me as an inferior person,  
He generously engaged in pleasing conversation.

The commentaries on the Bodhicaryavatara,  
Of Chu-mig-pa, Yang-gon-pa, and so forth  
Fell into my hands, I, a seasoned lover of words.  
If they arrived, they would be the monastery's centerpiece.

The heat of the plain of India is hard to imagine,  
For those who have only heard of it.  
Unless they have gone there and felt it,  
You may ponder it, but it does not appear to the mind.

Even when the breeze blows, it is like a tongue of flame  
Even when you drink cool water, it is like black tea.

...

## Poem 44

...

My longtime pundit friends  
Set out to act for the welfare of all beings.  
To the writing of this unrequested book  
They may respond with criticism and derision.

More than that, there is a sense of loss;  
Although I have gone on pilgrimage to India and Tibet  
I have not felt my obstructions being purified,  
Though my wisdom has clearly increased.

With two-thirds of my life now gone,  
I have the teaching on achievement but not the teaching on conduct.  
Because I am a person from a faraway land  
My affection for my homeland is stronger than before.  
What is it that will show me the love of my friends?  
I yearn to return quickly to my own land.

...

## Poem 52

In my youth, I did not take a delightful bride;  
In old age, I did not amass the needed wealth.  
That the life of this beggar ends with his pen,  
This is what makes me feel so sad.

## Poem 59

Wherever the bee flies  
There the eye moves  
Today suddenly this frightening flesh  
Engulfs you in the form of an ugly woman.

On a cloth of stainless white silk  
Filled with magical electric light  
Is the queen of illusion, laughing and crying,  
Making a show for visitors of the three realms.

Lacking the oil of compassion that benefits others,  
Those skilled in the arts, with the sorcery of electricity,  
Show the crooked path to honest humans.  
Beware the race of golden-haired monkeys.



### Poem 90

Because men and women are so different,  
If they were not joined by coupling,  
The world would be split into two factions  
Always in quarrels and war.

### Poem 91

If coupling was abandoned in the realm of humans,  
It would surely become empty in an instant.  
And if there were no human beings  
How could there be monks and the Buddha's teachings?

### Poem 92

Of course, these days I am a madman.  
Those who are not mad might wish to laugh.  
But the experience of bliss is not of small meaning;  
The creation of families is not of small meaning.  
To sustain the path of passion in a state of bliss and  
emptiness,  
How could that be of small meaning?

## Poem 97

To excellent beings, you display the nature of reality  
To benighted children, you play tricks  
Indefinable, you have defining marks  
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

You appear to nonmeditators and to the mind of a fool,  
You befriend all and all are your friend.  
Seen by everyone, understood by no one,  
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

Dancer in the sky, unclothed by convention,  
Magical forms, all without color or shape,  
Casting the meteor of awareness, glimpsed but not grasped,  
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

Where the rainbow of diverse emanations dissolves,  
Where the ocean of illusion is free from waves,  
Where even the wavering mind does not waver.  
I bow down to self-arisen great bliss.

The eyes of the Buddha see without blinking,  
The learned know it by severing speech,  
The ungrasping mind meets it, without concepts.  
I bow down to the sphere of self-arisen bliss.

## Poem 99

With little shame in myself and great faith in women  
I am the kind who chooses the bad and discards the good.  
Although I have not had the vows in my head for some time  
The guts of pretense were destroyed only recently.

The customs of river fish are deep in the water;  
What one has experienced is most familiar.  
With this in mind, it was my lot  
To strive to write this treatise.

If monks condemn it, that's not untoward,  
If tantrikas praise it, that's not unfitting.  
To the old man, its meaning is small;  
To the young man, its meaning is great.

The author is Gendun Chopel,  
The place it was written is the city of Mathura,  
The difficult texts were explained by an old Brahmin,  
The practical lessons were given by a Muslim girl.

The explanation is rooted in the Indian treatises;  
The verses are arranged in Tibetan style, easy to understand.  
Thus, from causes cumulated completely,  
I feel a marvelous fruit is certain to appear.

The monk Mi pham wrote from reading.  
The wanton Chopel wrote from experience.  
The difference in the power of their blessings  
A passionate man and woman will know through practice.



## Poem 99 continued

Yet if there are faults of excess or deficiency here, Being too much for  
those without desire,  
Being too little for the passionate,  
I confess it from my heart, concealing or hiding nothing.

Do not lay on a lowly person [like me]  
Whatever your own faults might be:  
Destroying the ways of monastic friends and  
Debunking pretense and deceit.

By this virtue, may all like-minded friends  
Cross the dark road of vague desires  
And see the sky of the meaning of reality  
From the summit of Sixteen Pleasures Peak.

Yudon, Ganga, Asali, and the others,  
The women who joined with my body,  
May they persist on the path, from bliss to bliss  
To arrive at great bliss, the place of the dharmakaya.

May all humble people who live on the broad earth  
Be delivered from the pit of merciless laws  
And be able to indulge, with freedom,  
In common enjoyments, so useful and right.



## **(English composition)- Repkong**

My feet are wandering neath alien stars,  
My native land,-the road is far and long.  
Yet the same light of Venus and Mars  
Falls on the small green valley of Repkong.

Repkong,-I left thee and my heart behind,  
My boyhood's dusty plays,-in far Tibet.  
Karma, that restless stallion made of wind,  
In tossing me; where will it land me yet?

Like autumn cloud I float, soon, there, soon here,  
I know not what the fleeting moons may bring.  
Here in this land of roses, fair Cashmere,  
My years are closing round me like a ring,

# (English composition)- Repkong

Fate sternly sits at Destiny's hard loom  
And irrevoked her tangled pattern weaves  
The winds are blowing round my father's tomb  
And I but dream of those still summer eves,  
When-child-I listened to my mother's voice,  
Whose stories made my youthful heart rejoice.

So far, so far I may not see those graves,  
Ah, friend, these separation pangs are sore.  
My heart is thrown upon the ocean waves  
Where shall at last I reach a peaceful shore?

I've drunk of holy Ganges glistening wave,  
I've sat beneath the sacred Bodhi tree,  
Whose leaves the wanderer's weary spirit lave.  
Thou sacred land of Ind, I honour thee,  
But, oh, that little valley of Repkong,  
The sylvan brook which flows that vale along.

## (English composition)- Milareppa's Reply

The earth and the sky held counsel one night,  
And called their messengers from northern height.  
And came they, the stormfiends, the bleak and the cold,  
They, who the stormwinds in grim fingers hold.

They swept o'er the earth, and then they called forth  
That glist'ning maid from the far Polar North  
In white trailing robe, the Queen of the Snow  
And she sent her flutt'ring plumed children below

And downward they flew in wild, whirling showers,  
While in black masses hung the threat'ning sky.  
Some were like large cruel sharp-stinging flowers  
Some pierced his chest with a fierce-cutting eye.

## **(English composition)- Milareppa's Reply**

Thus stormfiends, snow and icy frost blending,  
Came cold and sharply upon him descending.  
On his half nude from these shapes did alight  
And tried with his single thin garment to fight.

But, Melareppa, the Snow-mountain's child,  
Feared not their onslaughts, so cruel and wild.  
Though they attacked him most fiercely and grim,  
He only smiled,-they had no power over him.



# **Dhondup Gyal and the Trajectory of Modern Tibetan Literature**

# What have you come to expect about Tibetan Literature prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

*What of those expectations have been thwarted or challenged in some way by the readings you read for this week?*

# Recap:

## Features of Gendün Chöphel's writings

- Passion for travel and a desire to share with Tibetans aspects of modern life outside of Tibet: science, modern Indian culture, the lives of Sri Lankan Buddhists, travel guide books, pilgrimage guide books, erotica
- Reflect a dedication to Tibet's cultural heritage (White Annals)
- Reflect a dedication more generally to scholarship: (White Annals, translation work)
- Reflect critical engagement with Buddhist dharma independent of doctrine and religious institutions
- Critique Gelukpa monks and practices (institution of debate, political machinations)
- Written in a variety of styles and registers ranging from formal to informal, high literary to colloquial.
- Poetry varies vastly: often ethnographic and/or autobiographical in tone, especially regarding his various experiences in India; at times critical of political or religious institutions/practices; sometimes reflect his interpretations of Tibetan Buddhist history, literature, or Buddhist doctrine; or alternatively of scholarship more generally

# Trajectory of Modern Tibetan Literature

- Away from the formal and topical ‘restrictions’ of Indian literary conventions
- Emphasis on free verse poetry (aided by Dhondup Gyal)
- Emergence of new genres (novels, travelogues, free-verse poetry, etc.)
- Move towards secular topics and themes
- Increased openness to criticism of social, political, and religious political institutions
- Greater influence from Chinese, Mongolian, and more generally, World Literatures



*In the modern context what makes Tibetan literature ‘Tibetan’?*

*Given the features of Tibetan literature we’ve discussed so far over the quarter, can we speak of features that are uniquely ‘Tibetan’ in Tibetan literature?*

*Given the readings so far, how would you define ‘Tibetan’ Literature?*

*Recall from week 1:*

**How define boundaries of “Tibetan”?**

- Geographical
- Linguistic
- Political
- “Literary”
- Religious
- Cultural
- Ethnicity/Identity

# How define boundaries of “Tibetan Literature”?

- Geographical
- Religious
- Cultural
- Ethnicity
- Linguistic