

THE LIFE OF JIGTEN SUMGÖN PART 1 – Listen to Your Conscience or Follow Others?

Jigten Sumgön was born in the year 1143 in the land of Kham, the southeast part of Tibet, to parents who were yogis. He was an extremely intelligent child, and could read and write perfectly by the time he was six years old, which was unusual especially in those times. Not only were his parents Dharma practitioners, but his uncle was too. His uncle, who had 500 Dharma students, taught the young boy how to meditate, and by the time he was nine years old, he was teaching meditation to others. He was able to meditate so deeply that he could stay in meditation for three days without eating. He even meditated while he was watching his family's herd of animals in the evenings.

His father passed away when he was 15 years old. He then took care of his mother, but she soon passed away also. Sometime later, one of his Dharma teachers passed away. After losing his loved ones, when he was 19 years old, he moved away from his home and traveled south, and made a living by helping others with Dharma activities, including reading them spiritual texts. When he was 22, he began a long meditation retreat, staying alone in a hut where he could stay silent and undisturbed without talking to anyone, and where people would support him by providing food and other basic needs.

After he stayed one year in the meditation hut, a woman named Nyasang traveled a long distance to see him. She brought a huge block of sugar and other offerings, hoping he would talk to her. But he refused to see her. He didn't want to interrupt his long, silent meditation retreat, because it creates very great merit to help all beings, which is better for the world than interrupting his meditation just to talk with her, one person. So, he accepted her offerings through a tiny window, just like he accepted offerings of other devotees, in silence.



A year later, she returned to his meditation hut and again wanted to see him. She heard that his health was not so good anymore. She thought maybe he wasn't eating enough, or was living in harsh, cold conditions for too long. So, she brought things that might make him healthier, like tea, butter and meat. He agreed to see her then, out of compassion for her.

As it turned out, her insistence that she get his attention although he was in retreat didn't give her the satisfaction she craved. She would have been more satisfied if she had practiced meditation herself. He later explained to his students,



“The more one tries to get the attention of others, the less one receives it. But if one simply practices Dharma meditation, all good things result. This is how it was with Nyasang.”

He continued his meditation practice and after some time, he had the power to cure serious illnesses. One day, a man who had been very sick for 12 years came to see Jigten Sumgön and receive his blessings. Before he even arrived, his illness was gone. On a visit to another man who was dying, Jigten Sumgön cured him by giving him blessings and refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (monks and Dharma practitioners).

There were some other powers which caused him some concern. One day, when he was in his meditation hut, a robber came up to his hut and said, “Give me all your things.”

Jigten Sumgön replied, “I am a Dharma practitioner, so I have nothing to give.”

The robber said, “I’m going to come inside and see for myself.”

Jigten Sumgön warned him, “Be careful, because my Dharma protector is very powerful.”

The robber didn’t take him seriously, and thought the Lama was just trying to scare him. He went in and looked around, but couldn’t find anything to steal.

Later, the robber was sitting with a group of friends drinking beer at a tavern. Suddenly, he fell off his chair and immediately died. In those days in Tibet, if someone suddenly fell over and died, people suspected it happened because of a black magic spell. The robber had told his friends that he had visited Jigten Sumgön earlier that day, so the friends suspected that he had killed the robber by black magic. Soon, word spread that Jigten Sumgön could cast powerful spells that kill people! But he hadn’t cast a spell or done anything to harm the man. Perhaps a Dharma protector, an unseen being who protected great Dharma practitioners, had caused the man to die.

Jigten Sumgön said to his students, “I received power and many magnificent blessings. Now, whenever anyone dies after a conflict with one of my friends, people will say it is because of my spells! That’s not good. So, don’t focus on having an ability to cast spells. And, if someone dies, don’t assume it is from a magic spell. Having strong power is my misfortune (bad luck).”



He used his powers only to do good and help others. When no rain had fallen in a long time and there was a drought, causing the crops to dry up so people wouldn't have food, he went to a place where there were nagas – snake spirits who have power over water.

He said, "I am a realized yogi. Please cause the rain to fall." Immediately, there was a great shower of rain.

Once when he was staying at a place where people were hunting wild animals, he taught them Dharma and offered them refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. He didn't even have to tell them to stop hunting - they just stopped hunting and harmful activities after seeing him.

One day, a man from central Tibet spoke about several different yogis and Buddhist meditation masters, including Phagmodrupa. When Jigten Sumgön heard the name "Phagmodrupa," he immediately had feelings of devotion and thought, "I must see him."

So, he planned to take a journey to central Tibet immediately to see the great master and yogi monk Phagmodrupa, so he wouldn't miss a chance of seeing him. He asked another man who was traveling to central Tibet to go with him, but the man wanted to delay the trip so he could gather items that he wanted to bring on the trip. So, Jigten Sumgön agreed to delay the trip.

Then, one of Jigten Sumgön's devotees requested that he not go, asking him to promise that he would remain there for a while. Because of her great devotion and insistence that he stay, he felt that he had no choice but to do what she wanted, so he promised to stay for a while. However, something happened that forced him to leave sooner than he had promised.

He learned from that experience that he shouldn't have just done what they wanted. He shouldn't have waited, and shouldn't have promised to wait. Instead, he should have followed his conscience, the inner voice in the mind that knows the right thing to do.

He told his students, "Don't agree to the request of anyone who asks you to delay. When I did, I had to eat my promise." In other words, he had to break his promise. He added jokingly, "It was most delicious."



He was 25 years old when he left on his journey to visit Phagmodrupa. He received an offering of a horse and food for his travel, and off he went.

During the trip, he constantly thought about Phagmodrupa, and he could see a rainbow in the sky during the whole journey.

Knowing his deep connection to Phagmodrupa, he thought,

“Even if the Lama has 500 advanced students who have people holding white umbrellas over their heads, I will be chief among them.”

At night when he gazed up at the moon, he felt such great devotion to the great guru that tears rolled down his cheeks.



One night, he dreamed of Phagmodrupa, and when he awoke in the morning, the walls of the house he was staying in were covered with the Tibetan letters “Om Mani Padme Hung.”

Long before he started the journey, Phagmodrupa had predicted that a very highly advanced Dharma student who will carry on his Kagyu lineage will come to him from Kham, Tibet.

When Jigten Sumgön finally got close, he was so excited that he was finally going to see his guru that he traveled during the whole night and arrived before dawn, when it was still dark. He called out to be received by someone, and a student came out and showed him to a house to stay and rest. He saw a large flying bat and

thought,

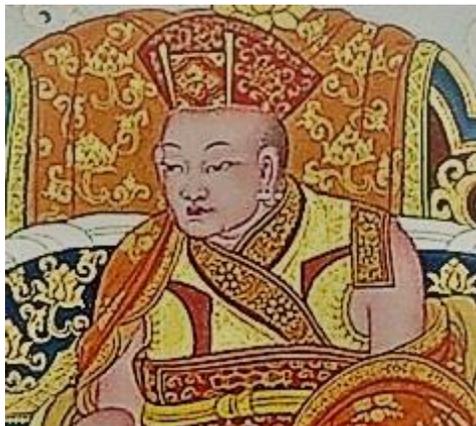
“This bat was projected by the mind of Phagmodrupa.”

Meanwhile, Phagmodrupa, thinking about Jigten Sumgön, said, “Now, my wish is fulfilled,” and turned to his close student and attendant, saying, “Don’t mistreat this practitioner. In ages past, I was the Buddha Khorwajhik and he was Chenrezig.” So, both Phagmodrupa and Jigten Sumgön were projections of enlightened buddhas!

He had to wait three days to see Phagmodrupa, but the Lama sent devotees to welcome him. When they finally met, he offered his guru fine cloth and silk, along with a horse, as he wanted to offer everything valuable that he had.

Phagmodrupa scolded him, saying, “If I accept the horse, it means I must either die or leave this place, so I can’t take it.”

Jigten Sumgön already thought of the horse as a gift, so he didn’t know what to do with it now. Should he just set the horse free? He asked, “Then should I release him on the mountain?”



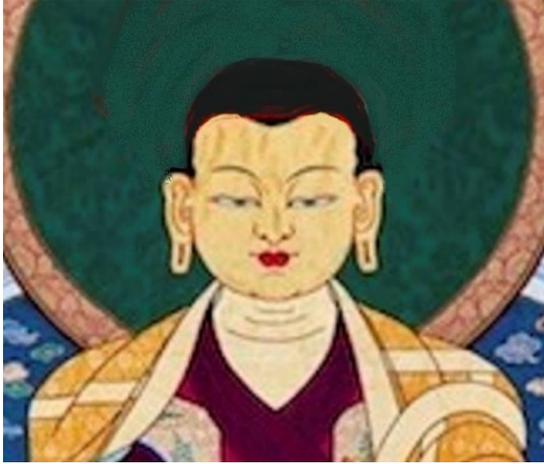
Phagmodrupa scolded him further. Jigten Sumgön wept with intense devotion until the Lama accepted him as a student. Phagmodrupa said tenderly, “I will give you special care. And I’ll grant you whatever you wish. So there is no reason for unhappiness, is there?”

Jigten Sumgön walked around him with devotion 80 times, and then offered him tea. The Lama accepted his offering of tea with joy, and later that day, gave him teachings. This made Jigten Sumgön so satisfied that he felt he needed nothing more.

But he received some more teachings, mantras and instructions in the next days. One day, he thought, “Now I have no need of receiving further teachings. I must simply do the practice.” So, he stopped going to the big hall with the other students to hear the teachings from Phagmodrupa.

Three of the other students thought that maybe he is so arrogant that he doesn’t think he needs any more instruction. One of them said to him, “What kind of person are you? In the beginning, you were so eager that you rushed to get here in the middle of the night, and now having actually seen the Lama, you sit in a corner and don’t attend the teachings.”

Jigten Sumgön thought, “What they say is true,” so he went to the hall to listen to the teachings. Then he made it a practice always to come into the hall early and recite a prayer several times before Phagmodrupa sat down on the throne. When the students quizzed each other on the Lama’s teachings, he was able to remember all of Phagmodrupa’s teachings without missing a single word. This amazing ability soon became big news spreading among the students.



Jigten Sumgön concentrated on his study and practice of Dharma and meditation, and didn't care much about eating tasty food with the others and having new or fresh clothing. He never built a fire to cook food or visited others to eat a meal.

Instead he kept silent and sometimes made a little soup, ate leftovers or drank some powdered ashes mixed with water.

When others were resting, he did prayers. Each morning he did a long session of meditation, and at midnight he went outside to collect birch tree leaves for other people to cook.

Other students from Kham, Tibet, observed him and told him that he was a disgrace to their people, the Khampas, by his behavior that was different from everyone else.

He answered, "The great lineage masters didn't create an easy life for themselves. Like Jetsun Milarepa, I too do not have time for cooking, so perhaps I am not a disgrace to the people of Kham."

The other students remarked, "He clearly has a lot of pride to speak in this way." But later they recognized that he really sincerely wanted silence so he could better practice meditation, and that he wasn't being unsociable or arrogant, or showing off.

Once Jigten Sumgön was given a big block of tea, and he wanted to offer it to his guru. He asked a monk named Setön if he should make an offering of it to Phagmodrupa. Setön said, "You'll need this for yourself, so don't give it away."

Later, Jigten Sumgön regretted that he had asked the monk about whether to make the offering. He had a good-hearted wish to make an offering, but Setön was compassionately thinking that Jigten Sumgön might need the tea for himself and that Phagmodrupa already had many offerings of tea. Jigten Sumgön wasn't happy just keeping the tea for himself. He wished he had listened to his own conscience, which was telling him to do something good, rather than asking someone else.

Later, he told his own students about the incident, advising them, "If someone asks you whether you should make offerings, always allow him to do it. I was misled by the kindness of Setön."

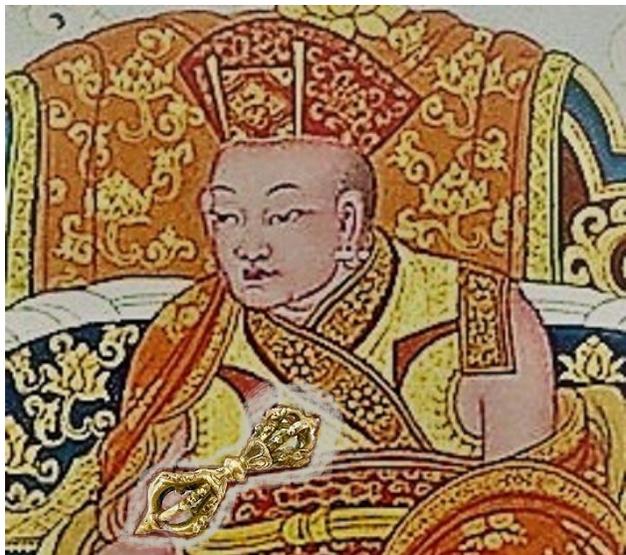
Jigten Sumgön made tea for the monks, and made hot, sweet cheese and other delicious foods for Phagmodrupa. Whenever he saw his guru and received teachings from him, he never went empty-handed, but made offerings of whatever he had, great or small.

Phagmodrupa urged Jigten Sumgön to become a monk, but he thought, “The life of a yogi is easier for practicing the Dharma. Even as a yogi one must have discipline, but a monk has so many more restrictions that he is like an ox whose back is broken from carrying all the rules that he must follow.” So, he decided not to become a monk. Phagmodrupa gave him a schedule of practices to do every day, although Jigten Sumgön was extremely advanced in meditation: he had to do 108 yoga exercises, 108 prostrations (bowing stretched out all the way on the floor), 108 offering rituals, repeating a mantra 108 times, and 108 times walking around a shrine, in six sessions per day. This would fill up the whole day and most of the night.

Once, when he was going to see Phagmodrupa, he saw several great masters gathered there. Phagmodrupa told them they could leave now, saying he had important work to do with Jigten Sumgön. After they left, he told Jigten Sumgön to sit in meditation posture. Coming forward, he pointed to Jigten Sumgön’s forehead, heart, and belly with his walking stick, and said “OM, AH, HUNG.” Then he said, “You will be a great meditator. Acting on the meditation, you will be a greater meditator. I am happy that you will be a great meditator. Now go.”

Later, Phagmodrupa gave him the name “Ratnashri.” One day, when Phagmodrupa was 61 years old, he started to show signs of becoming ill. Jigten Sumgön helped the Lama’s attendant to take care of him, and offered him some roots which were natural medicines. Phagmodrupa was pleased with the offerings and accepted them. He gazed at his many stacks of tea in large bricks that had been offered to him, and said, “Though I have so many supplies, they can’t help me now.”

Jigten Sumgön continued serving his Lama with great care and devotion, always aware of what the Lama might need. All of his belongings he used for the benefit of his Lama and for offerings to the monks.



Around the time that Phagmodrupa was passing away, a golden vajra with a slight stain (indicating that Jigten Sumgön wasn’t yet completely purified) appeared to go from the Lama’s heart and into the heart of Jigten Sumgön.

From the body of the Lama came many relics – small spheres that look like they are made of glass, that have great power to bless others.

Also, his footprints mysteriously appeared on the nearby rocks.

QUESTIONS:

1. What happened to Jigten Sumgön's parents when he was a teenager? (they passed away)
2. Why didn't Jigten Sumgön want to visit with the lady devotee Nyasang, who had brought him offerings of food? (he was in silent meditation retreat, to help all beings)
3. Why did he allow her to see him anyway when she returned? (he had compassion for her)
4. Did Jigten Sumgön follow his conscience, to go immediately to see Phagmodrupa, or did he follow what the man and lady devotee wanted, to delay the trip to central Tibet? (he followed what they wanted)
5. Should he have followed what they wanted, or should he have followed his conscience? (he should have followed his conscience)
6. When the other students wondered why Jigten Sumgön wasn't going to hear the teachings, did he change his mind and go to the teachings? (yes)
7. When the other students said Jigten Sumgön was a disgrace because he was eating by himself and keeping silent, did he change his mind? (no)
8. When Jigten Sumgön wanted to offer the block of tea to Phagmodrupa, did he listen to his conscience and offer it, or did he follow the advice of the monk? (he followed the advice of the monk)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Listen to your conscience or follow others?

"Don't agree to the request of anyone who asks you to delay. When I did, I had to eat my promise." (Jigten Sumgön, *The Great Kagyu Masters*, p. 234)

"Until I savor the supreme taste of the genuine Dharma, I won't let my mind be distracted by outer objects." (Milarepa, *100,000 Songs*, p. 546)

"Not staying alone and preferring distractions, unable to bear hardship and delighting in pleasantries, just wanting to chat when put to meditation, . . . with these . . . you will not attain liberation." (Milarepa, *100,000 Songs* p. 625)

“When meditating with undistracted concentration, don’t take time to meet with your friends. If you do then your friends will kill your spiritual practice.” (Milarepa, 100,000 Songs p. 605)

In the story, Jigten Sumgön had some decisions to make, to follow what someone else suggests or to follow his own conscience.

Following your conscience means doing what you know deep in your own mind is the right thing to do.

When Nyasang came to offer him food, although it would have been kind and polite to talk with her, he followed his conscience instead. Deep in his mind he knew that he should continue his retreat without interruption, and Nyasang would receive the merit from making her offering silently, like the other devotees.

Other decisions he had to make was about whether to follow what others wanted and delay his trip to see his guru Phagmodrupa, whether to follow the other students’ suggestion that he should continue going to the teachings rather than practicing alone, and whether to follow the other students’ suggestion that he was being disgraceful to eat alone silently, and whether to follow the monks’ suggestion to keep the tea and not offer it to Phagmodrupa.

In some of those situations – visiting with Nyasang, delaying his trip and keeping the tea for himself - he didn’t listen to his own conscience and instead decided to follow the suggestions of others. And then later, he regretted it.

In the situation where the other students suggested he should be attending the teachings, he realized that what they said is true, it was the right thing to do so he did follow their advice.

We also are in many situations where we decide whether to follow what someone else is doing, or suggesting, or telling us to do, but it might not be the right thing to do.

Of course, when it is a teacher or parent telling us what to do, they are almost always telling us to do the right thing.

But what about when another student or friend wants us to join them?

You might know deep in your mind that they are doing something that is disturbing or distracting others, or is unfair, or dangerous, or is in some other way not the right thing to do.

For example, should you join in with others who are talking when the teacher is talking? Or who are wrestling in the classroom? Or who are playing with something that isn’t allowed? Or who are talking unkindly about someone?

You might not even think about it - you just join in impulsively.

You might be tempted to join in because it’s fun, you want to please them, or you want them to like you.

But when we are more aware of these thoughts, and what our conscience knows is the right thing to do, then we can make better decisions.

And we can become good leaders, good examples to our friends and classmates.

ACTIVITY – Role play:

With role play, students practice refraining from joining in another student's distracting misbehavior in class, and instead listening to their own conscience, as follows:

Each student takes a partner, and thinks of a behavior that he or another student has done before that is distracting to others during class. One partner takes the role of initiating that behavior. The other partner, rather than joining in the misbehavior, must instead help the partner stop the behavior without further disturbing the class. For example, when one partner starts doing the misbehavior, and the other partner must discreetly and kindly signal the other to stop the behavior. Next, the partners exchange roles.

The other students vote, by raising hands, on whether the partner was discreet – didn't further disturb the class while signaling to stop the behavior.

This exercise helps students to be more aware of when they are following another student's misbehavior and to listen to their conscience to exercise self-restraint and to be a leader helping other students have more self-discipline.

Examples of misbehaviors during class include: laying on the floor, playing with a toy, sitting away from the circle the class is sitting in, playing with partner's hair, playing with a cushion, flipping or throwing pen or pencil, playing with jacket or other clothing, talking or whispering to a friend while teacher is talking, leaning on a classmate, or getting up and walking around without permission.