

X. HISTORY AND SYMBOLOGY OF THE ROBES

The **Choegu** is the yellow robe that is worn by Sangha members. It is sometimes called the teaching robe as it is worn when teaching or by those Sangha who are sitting in teachings. It is also worn during Sojong or Confession Ceremony. It is worn by Sangha who are not yet fully ordained. The fully ordained Sangha wear the **Namjar**. This robe has many more pieces and is worn for specific initiations and ceremonies. In Tibet, it was sometimes made of silk. If a person does not have a shemdap or a Choegu, it is a sign they do not belong to a sect. These robes are common to all the sects. A common size exists for these robes. They are 2 arm lengths long and 3 arm lengths in width.

Buddha established the design of these. When Buddha's disciples asked how the Choegu should be made, the Buddha replied that it should look at a field of magahda, which comes in patches. At the beginning, no border was present. A disciple Kunga Wo Asangha (sp?) offered a Choegu to the Buddha and Buddha said "It is fine."

In the words of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the patches and poor quality of material used for the robes is indicative of detachment from worldly goods: if it was of one piece and of good quality, you could sell it and gain something. The Buddha did not speak about any difference in the lower robe, or **Shemdap** among the different levels of ordained Sangha. However, according to the culture of the Tibetan Mahayana Tradition, 3 different Shemdaps have come into being. These 3 different shemdaps are designed to show the 3 different levels of ordination. Those people, who have left the householder's life and have taken the vows of Rabjung, wear a plain Shemdap. Those individuals, who have taken Novice vows, Getsul & Getsulma, can wear a Shemdap which has 2 additional side panels. However, many Novice Sangha continue to wear the plain Shemdap. The Fully Ordained Sangha, Bhikshu & Bhikshuni, members wear a Shemdap that is designed with the addition of several panels which are arranged at right angles to one another.

Not all the Sangha in the vinaya use **folds** in their lower robe. However, folds are used in the robes of the Gelug lineage and have specific meanings. The meanings of these folds are to be kept in mind when the shemdap is put on. The fold on the right side turned towards the back indicates that the monk or nun has left behind the ordinary life in the world with its concerns, along with all negative actions. The two folds on the left that turn towards the front are symbolic of following the Buddhist path and virtuous activities. The three front folds indicate the Three Principles of the Path and/or Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The four folds refer to the four Noble Truths. In addition, the folds in the shemdap make it easier to sit down.

The **Dhonka** is made of maroon or maroon and yellow cloths. Traditionally, in the Gelukpa, red and yellow dhonkas are only worn by those who have achieved their Geshe degree. However, western Sangha were encouraged to wear the bicolored Dhonka by Lama Yeshe; the International Monastic Institute (IMI) includes this in their literature as the recommended dress. Historically, the Dhonka has much significance because it did not exist at the time of the Buddha. Indian monks did not wear this, and dressed in the style of the Hinayana. It came into existence during the 14th century at the time of Je Tsong Khapa because it is very cold in Tibet. In one version, it is said that the Dhonka is patterned after an elephant skin¹. Different parts represent the elephant's ears, mouth and

tooth [see **Diagram X.a**]. Under the arms in the back, the cut of the cloth looks like two elephant tusks. This is representative of the lord of death; always we are reminded of the impermanence of life is as we are sitting in the jaws of death. The two shoulders represent a lion's mane². The lion is the king of beasts who has no fear of other beings, remaining relaxed and peaceful. The same is said of anyone following Vinaya; they need no longer fear the suffering of continual rebirths because they are on the path of liberation.

The **Dingwa** was made of wool and used to sit upon for meditation. It is used to not disturb the ground. It keeps dirt off of the robes, also. The actual size was 4 ½ arms square. But, since it has to always be carried, it has been reduced in size for ease of transport. The slit in the middle should always be placed towards the front as its purpose is to catch the blessings. It is customary to use the Dingwa while visiting; if you spill something, it will land on the Dingwa and not on the carpet or furniture of a host.

All cloths must be cut. Old patches are placed on new cloths, such as Dingwas to prevent attachment to new cloth. Robes are sewn from pieces to indicate poverty.

The Scripture said the **color of the robes** should be transformed; so red and yellow are allowed for monks and nuns. Black or white is not permitted. Master Shakyia said to only wear one color or at the most two, red and yellow. But Master Yendun said if Sangha want to wear completely red or yellow robes, it is okay. Also, monks may wear red or yellow Choegu; there is no difference.

The **blue trim** is not mentioned in the Scripture. It is reported to have come about by the following legend: The ordination of the Gelong, fully ordained Sangha nearly came to extinction in the 9th century. King Lagdarm assassinated his younger brother, who was king previously and who had developed Buddhism. Langdarma tried to wipe out Buddhism during his long reign and almost succeeded. According to the Buddha's rules of discipline, the Vinaya, five monks are needed to give ordination to someone. But only three fully ordained monks escaped to Amdo. So, Master Rabsel in India revived the lineage by inviting two Chinese monks who were fully ordained. At that time, the Chinese monks always wore some blue garments. To show gratefulness to the Chinese, the monks added a blue cord trim onto the Dhonka. Then the lineage flourished. The blue stitch is like the sky color, indicating that the heart should be like this; then you will progress.

The double tabs that are found on such articles as the Dingwa and the Choegu are like **ears** of animals. They indicate that the user is there to hear the troubles and problems of others.

“The Hat is worn during special ceremonies. The bottom part is yellow and has the handle in the back with two handles. Inside is white, symbolic of Chenrezig, the Buddha of Compassion; The handle inside is blue, symbolic of Vajrapani, the Buddha of Power; and the handle outside is reddish orange and symbolizes Manjushrei, the Buddha of Wisdom. The many threads standing upright represent the thousand Buddhas of this age on top of your head. The yellow represents the purity of the teachings, similar to how gold is considered pure and free of stains.”

This information in this synopsis was provided by **Venerable Geshe Dawa, the Abbot of Thechen Choeling Monastery of His Holiness the Dalai**

Lama in a personal interview with Ani Tenzin Desal in **2005**, which was interwoven with the information presented in an article by **Geshe Lhundrup Sopa** in a **Special Edition of Mandala, Magazine, July 2, 2000** in celebration of the **Monlam Chenmo Great Prayer Festival** in **Washington, D.C.**