The mother monastery of Zhe chen bstan gnyis dar rgyas gling, the ‘Continent where sūtra and tantra flourish’, located in Kham, was founded in 1735 by the second incarnation of the Rab ’byams lineage: Zhe chen Rab ’byams II, ’Gyur med kun bzang rnam rgyal (1716–1769). According to Matthieu Ricard, the name Zhe chen itself corresponds to a locality, referring to a valley a little larger than its neighbour Zhe’u chung.¹

According to “The inventory of rnying ma monasteries of Tibet” (Bod na bzhugs pa’i rnying pa’i dgon deb, T.S. 13: 78–79),² the monastery had about two hundred monks and nine reincarnate lamas (sprul sku) before the Chinese occupation. It was not the most important of the great monasteries of this school which flourished in the 17th century; in chronological order of their construction, these are as follows:³

Thub bstan Rdo rje brag (founded about 1610): two hundred monks and three sprul sku.
Kaḥ thog Rdo rje gdan (founded in 1656): eight hundred monks and seven sprul sku.
Dpal yul (founded in 1665): six hundred monks and seven sprul sku.
O’rgyan Smin grol gling (founded in 1676): four hundred monks and three sprul sku.
Rdzogs chen (founded in 1685): eight hundred and fifty monks and eleven sprul sku.

¹ E-mail of 13 July 2008 in which he adds that “the most common etymology comes from ‘the big backbone’ (ze chen), in reference to a hill that dominates the Shechen valley, facing the monastery, and which is a little similar to the bent back of a dragon”.
² For the convenience of the reader, Tibetan sources (T.S.) are indicated by a number, and the complete references are given in the Bibliography.
³ Most of these monasteries have been established again in exile.
Zhe chen monastery was part of the group of *rnying ma* monasteries considered to be ‘the big three of Kham’, referred to collectively by their three initial syllables: KA thog, DPAL yul and ZHE chen. Among the great figures who contributed to Zhe chen’s renown, one who is worthy of note is Zhe chen dbon sprul ’Gyur med mthu stobs rnam rgyal, who left his mark during the early decades of the 19th century and who was teacher to the most important figures of the ‘non-sectarian’ (*ris med*) movement: ’Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1811–1899), Dza’ Dpal sprul (1808–1887) and 'Jam dbyangs Mkhyen rtse dbang po (1820–1892). He spent three years at Smin gro lging, where he was educated in all aspects of liturgical life: rituals, chanting (*dbyangs*), dance and *mandala*-construction. He transmitted his knowledge to a certain Dbang chen ’bum, enjoining him to write out a complete set of ritual manuals (cf. note 9).

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th were marked by two great masters: Rgyal tshab O rgyan theg mchog rdo rje, alias ’Gyur med padma rnam rgyal (1871–1926)—a disciple of Ju Mi pham (1846–1912)—and Zhe chen Kong sprul Padma dri med (1901–1960).

Zhe chen monastery suffered serious damage during the Cultural Revolution. Its restoration was progressive. It began in the 1980s and was stimulated and supported by the 1985 and 1988 visits of Dil mgo Mkhyen rtse rin po che (henceforth Khyentse Rinpoche), later accompanied by his grandson, Zhe chen Rab ’byams (henceforth Rabjam Rinpoche), who was born in 1966 and recognised as the seventh incarnation of the Zhe chen lineage.

I. THE NEW ZHE CHEN IN EXILE, IN NEPAL

Khyentse Rinpoche received most of his education at the Zhe chen mother monastery in Tibet, before devoting himself to years of solitary meditation. In 1959, following the Chinese invasion, he took refuge in Bhutan and became chaplain to the queen mother. At the beginning of the 1980s, he decided to build a new Zhe chen in exile. The choice of the site of Bodnath (Tib. Bya rung kha shor) stood out—no doubt because of the role played by Padmasambhava in the founding legend

---