

# of trials and joys of a disciple

*“Out of pure devotion,” Geshe Rabten Rinpoche said, “some disciples nurse their lama when he is sick, and by doing so gain great insights . . . Such immediate, rather than gradual, insights are due to the disciple’s great faith in his guru combined with the guru’s blessing. To understand the profundity of this devotion, you need long experience in the Buddhadharma and a deep understanding of the stages of the path to enlightenment, as well as tantra.”*

According to Ven. Gonsar Rinpoche, who spent 33 years with him, Geshe Rabten Rinpoche was not only a great scholar, but a geshe renowned for his pure ethical conduct, compassionate nature, his total dedication to the practice and his meditative realizations. These realizations he attributed only to the blessings of his teachers. He had eight masters; the two most important being Geshe Jampa Khedrub and Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang. In *The Life of a Tibetan Monk: Autobiography of a Tibetan Meditation Master* [Edition Rabten 2000, ISBN 3-905497-30-1] B. Alan Wallace asked Geshe Rabten to relate the story of his life. Edited extracts in relation to his first master, Geshe Jampa Khedrub, appear below.

## The Meeting

Geshe Rabten was studying at Sera Monastery, Lhasa, when he met Geshe Jampa Khedrub, “...a tall, dignified white-haired monk wearing faded robes,” and spontaneously felt great faith in him. It was, he said, “a sign that he had taught me Dharma in many former lives.” This monk became his teacher.

“Although I have had many later gurus,” Geshe Rabten continued, “he was the kindest of them all and the true source of whatever good qualities I may have now...My attitude was greatly changed not only while he was teaching but even when he was silent. Not only was he very highly respected and accomplished in all fields of spiritual learning and practice, but he also showed compassion to all, especially the poor and sick.”

## The Parting

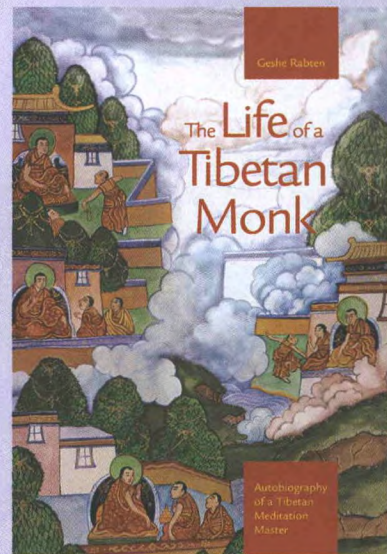
Soon after Geshe Rabten had completed his study of Collected Topics under Geshe Jampa Khedrub, the latter left Sera to become the abbot of Dhargye Monastery in Tehor, Kham. Geshe Rabten was left in the care of Chötse Ngawang Dorje, his oldest disciple.

Despite the distance, Geshe Jampa Khedrub was “of tremendous help to me in removing inner and outer obstacles and in sending me along the path of Dharma. Many times he appeared to me in dreams that were filled with meaning and even with prophetic implications.”

## The Reunion and the Test

As Master Chötse was to return to Kham, Geshe Rabten resolved to return as well – “I simply had to be with my guru again, at least for a short time.” As it was against monastic discipline to leave Sera without permission, he told no one for fear of being stopped. It took him three months to travel to Dhargye Monastery.

Geshe Rabten planned to see his guru the day after he arrived. “I was looking forward to that with great excitement,” he said, “but at the same time I was extremely apprehensive about his reaction to my having left Sera. My mind was rocking back and forth from delight to anxiety like the waves on the ocean.”



## RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TEACHER

On seeing his guru, Geshe Rabten offered three prostrations and a ceremonial scarf. "I felt such great reverence for him that I could not utter a word. My guru was an extremely skilful teacher. He did not say one word to indicate that it was good that I had come or that he was pleased to see me. Instead he said: 'I left you at a very good place for studying and developing your mind. It's unfortunate that you've left it. What you have done was a mistake.' He continued in this vein for a long time, giving me a sound scolding. As he spoke, I wept. I had nothing to say." Geshe Khedrub dismissed him and told him to return the following day.

"[That night] I had decided to place in his hands my welfare both for this life and for the lives to come. Thus, I felt that the master of my body, speech and mind was my guru, and no one else; so whatever he said, I would obey."

The next morning as Geshe Rabten arrived, he was told not to prostrate. "I have a question to ask you," Geshe Jampa Khedrub said. "Do you wish to listen, or not?" I replied that I would, and he continued: "Well then, you must go back and continue your studies. There you must work hard and complete your training. Will you do so or not? ... If you do not, then you never need set foot in my room again." He spoke very sharply; but the only thing that concerned him was my welfare and the cultivation of my mind. He was not thinking of his own interests at all.

"As I remembered all the reasons for coming to Tehor, and the long arduous journey back, I could hardly bring myself to agree to return. Yet I had already placed my welfare for better or worse in his hands. These two lines of thought were racing through my mind and left me tongue-tied; but finally I managed to say: 'I shall do as you say. I shall return.' ... Then I burst into tears. It seemed a long time before my master replied. 'All right. You shall return. Fine, I'll tell you when you should go, until then, speak of it to no one.'"

Geshe Rabten stayed in Tehor for ten months and lived near his guru. "I asked him many questions and practiced Dharma as well as I could. I continually received instructions on the stages of the path, with explanations of such texts as *The Joyful Path* and *The Swift Path*." He entered the tantric college at Dhargye Monastery, continued to recite the texts he had memorized at Sera and learnt others by heart.

Word came one day that he had eight days left before returning to Lhasa. "Having to be separated from my guru," said Geshe Rabten, "was like having my heart torn out; but this was his command."

Geshe Jampa Khedrub asked, "What do you plan to do once you have gone back?"

"I replied: 'I shall study and complete the training in the Five Treatises.'

"And when these studies are finished?"

"I hope to make a pilgrimage to the holy places either to the north or the south of Lhasa, then live in retreat in the mountains.'

"Have you no intention of becoming a geshe?" he asked.

When I said I did not, he replied: 'You should become one without fail. Return and complete your studies, then take the geshe examination.' I promised to do so; he said in conclusion: 'If I hear that you have arrived at Sera, then my wishes will have been fulfilled and I shall rejoice.'"

Rabten Rinpoche became a Lharampa geshe in 1963, aged forty-three. In 1964 he and Ven. Lati Rinpoche were chosen from hundreds to become His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Tsenshabs (philosophical assistants). While in India, he was invited to teach in the West. He eventually established a Dharma center, Rabten Choeling in Switzerland, where he stayed until his passing in February 1986. His incarnation Ven. Tenzin Rabgye Rinpoche was discovered in 1990, confirmed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and is now being educated in Switzerland under Ven. Gonsar Rinpoche's tutelage.


Geshe Jampa Khedrub spent the end of his life in a Chinese prison. In a letter, he comforted Geshe Rabten, saying that he was now in permanent retreat and thankful to the Chinese for this rare opportunity!



Geshe Rabten Rinpoche

Photo Uelli Minder


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