



PILGRIMAGE TO TIBET

By Ven. Sarah Thresher

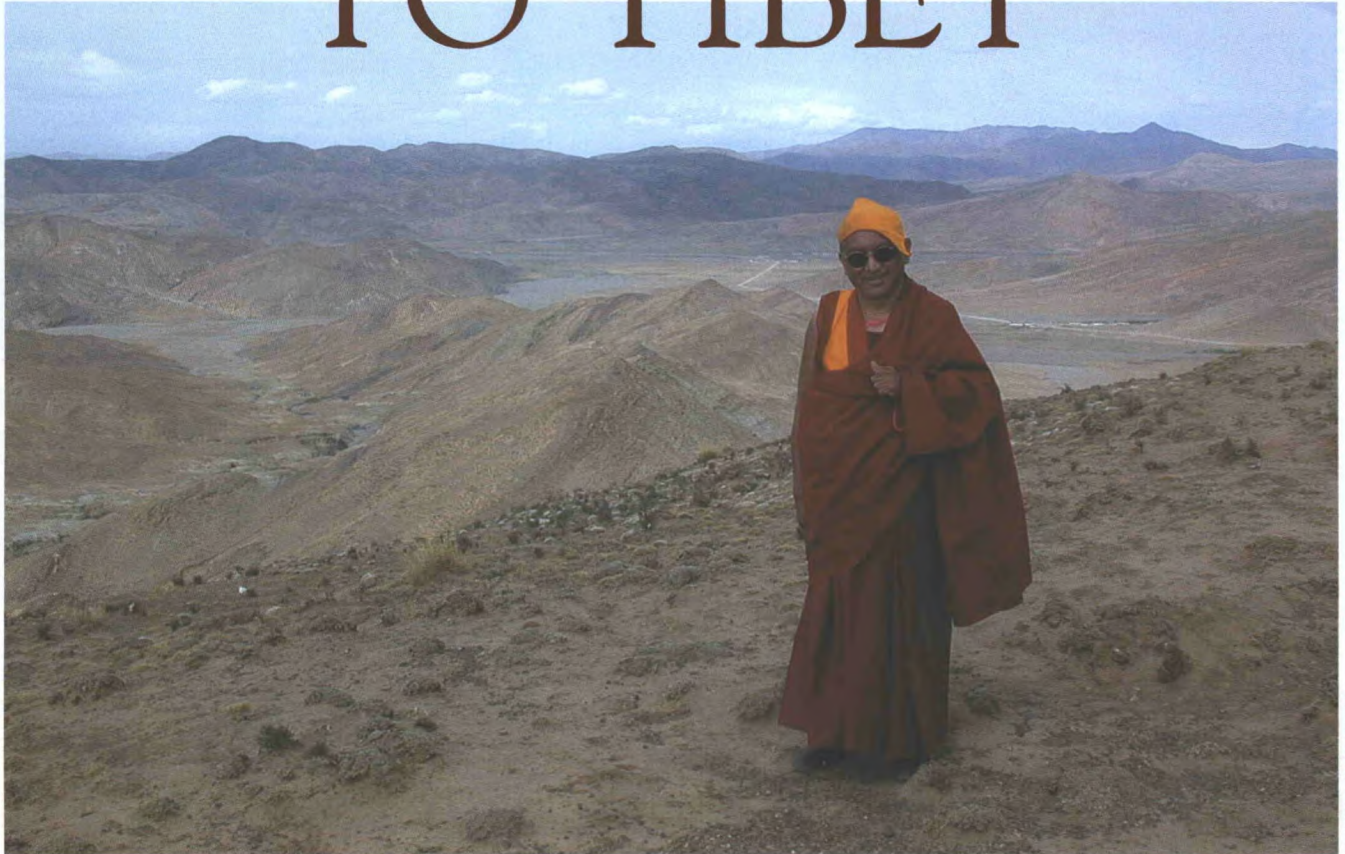


Photo Ven. Roger Kunsang



SOMEHOW, THIS TRIP TO TIBET “JUST HAPPENED.” Several hundred people originally signed up for a pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash with Lama Zopa Rinpoche. This changed to a long-life retreat at Maratika Cave, Nepal (which was scrapped due to Maoist activity,) and became a Mahamudra retreat at Lapchi, where Milarepa meditated. Finally, due to snow-bound passes, sixty people, who gathered from around the world for a final briefing in Kathmandu in May, discovered they were now heading for a pilgrimage around Central Tibet.

Two days later we bundled onto buses headed for the border of Nepal and Tibet disguised as tourists on a camping trip. Western sangha were not allowed to

wear their robes. Only the Nepali monks – Rinpoche, Geshe Sherab, and two monk attendants – were allowed to actually be monks. I will never forget, as we crossed over Friendship Bridge into Tibet on a group visa, filing slowly past Rinpoche and the other monks who waited to see if they would be allowed into the country. Somehow Rinpoche made himself invisible, the passports were stamped and this dream of a pilgrimage began.

Later that night, booked into Chinese hotels on the border, Rinpoche began the trip in earnest with a teaching on how to do Vajrasattva purification in the restaurant. The staff were enthralled – and I realized that Rinpoche was not going to be low-key on this trip.

Top to Bottom:

The group, led by Lama Zopa, prostrates to the Tsipri mountain range – practice place of chöd yogi Padampa Sangye, Milarepa and others

Rinpoche takes a break from teaching in Milarepa's 'Sheep Stomach' cave

Rinpoche teaches in Old Tingri

Photo Bob Cayton



THE NEXT DAY WE DROVE THROUGH TO NYALAM [approx 4,600 metres/15,000 feet] where there is a famous Milarepa cave. We arrived late afternoon and as our Sherpas were pitching the tents, we visited the cave, which has a small gumpa attached. Rinpoche had been there twice before and the monk in charge had in fact made a guru-disciple connection with him on a previous trip.

Rinpoche began explaining how to get the greatest benefit from holy objects when you visit a temple. We did prostrations, made offerings and prayed while taking blessing from the scriptures, statues and so forth. This was to become a familiar procedure. On that whole trip I never saw Rinpoche pass by a holy object without making prostrations, offerings, prayers and extensive dedications, and we tried to do the same.

When we arrived in Milarepa's cave Rinpoche advised us to pray strongly to actualize guru devotion as Milarepa did, to be able to sacrifice even one's life to obtain the guru's advice and to bear great hardships to accomplish it. It was very powerful. We returned to the cave the next morning to receive Milarepa initiation from Rinpoche along with a very moving motivation based on Pabongka Rinpoche's *Calling the Guru from Afar*. Rinpoche seemed to enjoy it very much and thanked us for giving him the opportunity to give the initiation in such a holy place!

Outside the cave at Nyalam we met a young boy whose body was hideously deformed by a skin disease. He was begging and explained to Rinpoche that he was born normal and had become like this due to disturbing local *nagas*. Rinpoche did prayers and told us all to do *tong-len* – imagining taking on his suffering. Many villagers gathered asking for Rinpoche's blessing, especially to blow mantras on them to cure their eye diseases. This was to become another familiar scene throughout Tibet, and Rinpoche explained that this has come about due to mental and physical pollution in the country in the past decades, particularly because of the destruction of so many holy objects and due to smoking cigarettes, which disturbs the local spirits.

Photo Ven. Roger Kunsong



Photo Ven. Roger Kunsong



Later that day we drove over Lalung-la Pass [4910m/16,000ft] to Tingri. By now most of the pilgrims were suffering from altitude sickness. Already one had been evacuated and that night a decision was made to stay over for a day at Tingri to give time to evacuate several more.

The campsite was in a valley surrounded by mountains and the beauty of Tibet was overwhelming. Around were herds of yaks, goats and sheep. Rinpoche wrote mantras in gold on one goat's horns and told us to chant mantras loudly for the animals – mainly Maitreya and Medicine Buddha mantras. Meanwhile, Rinpoche sat outside his tent meeting with local people who began arriving to seek his help and doing pujas to clear away the obstacles to the trip. Later that afternoon Rinpoche explained that in his two previous trips to Tibet nobody had experienced such obstacles from altitude sickness. He gave a talk on how to use all the difficulties we experienced on the pilgrimage to purify and accumulate merit. "Pilgrimage," Rinpoche explained, "is to subdue one's own mind; to use every opportunity to do the most extensive purification and to accumulate the most extensive merit so that we can have the realizations of the path." Rinpoche told us to keep our minds constantly in Lam-Rim, use our speech to recite mantras and prayers and then the body



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bears hardships traveling long hours on the bus, walking, prostrating, etc. From that talk onwards the mood of the group changed – we were no longer tourists having a hard time, but pilgrims using every hardship to purify our minds.

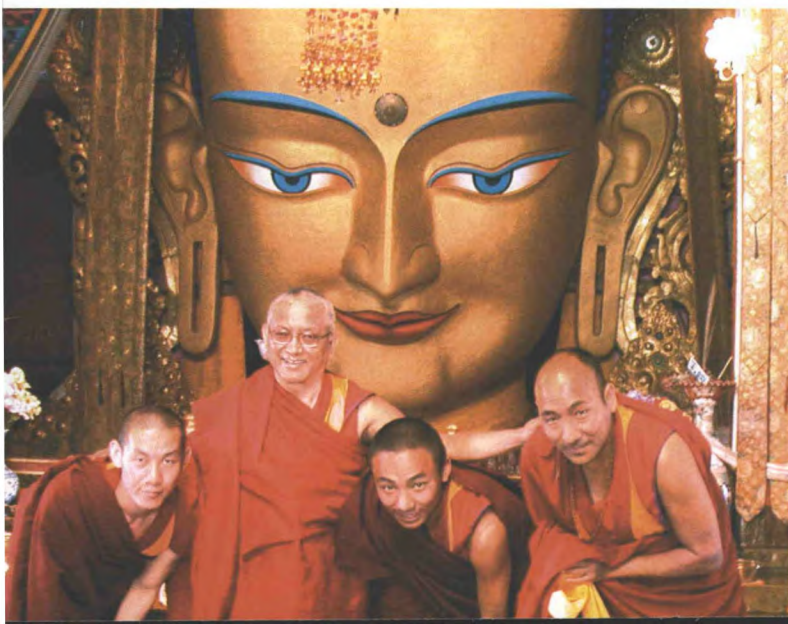
Tingri is a very holy place and nearby is Tshipri Mountain where Milarepa, Padampa Sangye and other great practitioners stayed. It is said to be a Heruka holy place like Mt Kailash. Rinpoche invited one of the old villagers of Tshipri to come and talk to us. The next day before we left camp we lined up in the main road behind Rinpoche making full-length prostrations towards the mountain – much to the amazement of passing trucks!

There followed a long drive to Shigatse and Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, seat of the Panchen Lamas. I had not traveled this route since my first trip to Tibet with Rinpoche, Geshe Lama Konchog and a party of about seventy pilgrims in 1987. Those days sangha could wear robes, we could practice openly, Rinpoche could teach and meet with the locals and there was relative freedom. I remember that wherever we went people would flock to us, begging for photos or His Holiness and crying as they told their stories and asked for blessings. This doesn't happen any more.

I also remember that fifteen years ago, as we drove from the border to Lhasa, the whole route was dotted with ruins of monasteries, nunneries and other holy places – old Tibet had at least 6,000 monasteries and nunneries, all but a handful of which were completely destroyed. Now these ruins have crumbled back into the earth. I was saddened to see how empty this country had become. How could this be Tibet and yet hardly a

Rinpoche, Geshe Sherab, Lhundrup and Jinpa in front of Tashi Lhunpo's enormous seated statue of Maitreya

Photos Ven. Roger Kunsang



sign of the Dharma or practitioners as we passed through crumbling Tibetan villages and modern Chinese settlements?

BUT THE GREATEST SURPRISES WERE YET TO COME – Shigatse and later Lhasa. In 1987, Shigatse had seemed a thriving Tibetan market town and Tashi Lhunpo, which had escaped destruction, seemed to be functioning with little interference due to the status of the Panchen Lama, who was then still alive. But now Shigatse is bustling and modern, complete with all the trappings of city life – taxi cabs, shiny tiled banks and hotels, malls, highways, gas stations, rows and rows of square concrete Chinese shops and nightclubs with prostitutes. And Tashi Lhunpo, though still magnificent and outwardly looking like a functioning monastery, has an underlying aura of fear and control that was to become very familiar. It was a shock to discover that holy places are now run as museums and sightseeing places for tourists with entrance fees and exorbitant charges for using a camera or video. We walked into a prayer session at Tashi Lhunpo, which seemed impressive enough – only to be told that straight after the prayers monks were obliged to attend regular lengthy re-education sessions on Chinese policy and so forth.

Still, at Tashi Lhunpo we were allowed to conduct a private Maitreya puja in the temple of the largest Maitreya statue that exists so far. As Ven. Marcel led the lay people reciting prayers in English at Maitreya's feet, Rinpoche and a handful of sangha were permitted to climb up perilous old hand-carved stairs to a balcony overlooking the blissful face of Maitreya and there the puja was beautifully chanted in Tibetan.

We gave donations for the monks and to make butter lamp offerings and then made our way to make offerings to the oldest, most precious statues of the monastery. We passed through a courtyard painted all around with the Thousand Buddhas of this Fortunate Aeon, each buddha exquisitely represented with a verse below expressing how enlightenment was achieved. Rinpoche told Ven. Marcel he wanted the same thing for the Maitreya Buddha statue, and he led us in prostrating and making offerings to these buddhas – thinking of all of them as inseparable from the guru.

We drove down the Brahmaputra River gorge to Lhasa. Our mission was to spend the next day – the 15th of the Tibetan fourth month and the holiest day of the Tibetan calendar – accumulating as much merit as we could with the holy objects of Lhasa. But arriving late that night, we were informed that it was simply too dangerous to be seen doing any kind of religious activity as a group. So the next morning, as Lhasa buzzed from

Top: The Jokhang's famous Shakyamuni Buddha statue blessed by the Buddha himself

Bottom: Lama Zopa and pilgrims in front of the Potala Palace – which is now more a state museum, than a place for religious practice

early morning with the sound of pilgrims praying, and the streets filled up with Chinese police and soldiers armed with guns, we converted a conference room in our hotel into a small gompa where we received the Eight Mahayana Precepts from Rinpoche.

After lunch we split into twos and threes and headed to the Jokhang – the most holy temple of Lhasa, which houses the famous Shakyamuni Buddha statue blessed by the Buddha himself and said to be crucial in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet – to do some circumambulations before returning to the hotel to do *Guru Puja* with tsog. That day Rinpoche went privately to make many auspicious offerings to the holy statue of the Buddha on behalf of the organization.

HOW STRANGE IT WAS TO BE IN THE HOLY CITY OF LHASA as a nun and unable to wear robes or even pray openly! I remember that fifteen years ago, we had gone to the Jokhang nearly every morning and evening to do extensive prayers, prostrations and circumambulation, while the delighted Tibetans had flocked to us, offering butter tea, sticking coins in our mandala sets, asking for blessings and just staring, listening and drinking it all in, amazed and overjoyed to see Westerners practicing Dharma. Now, dressed in my lay clothes (our “other uniform” as Rinpoche called it), with a large sun hat hiding my short hair, my mala tucked into my pocket, a prayer wheel kept very discreet and my eyes cast downwards so as not to attract attention, I walked round the inner circumambulation path trying to be inconspicuous. At one point I remember thinking to myself, “Well, this way nobody will realize I’m a nun!” but looking down I saw a little child staring up at me saying, “Ani-la!” [a Tibetan word for nun]. I realized that you can’t hide from Tibetans, because for years they have become used to their own monks and nuns having to hide their identity and their practice.

Late the next morning, there was a surprise announcement that we were going to the Potala and everyone was to jump into a rickshaw and head that way. We arrived around midday and sneaked into the Potala just as it was about to close for lunch. At first, we were surrounded by Chinese tourists, but gradually the crowds dispersed and we were greeted by two old Namgyal monks, who looked like Dharma protectors: one of them had fingers so buckled and twisted that there was no doubt he had experienced years of torture. They appeared to know all about Rinpoche and whisked us off on an unofficial tour of the Palace, including many of the private rooms used by His Holiness that are normally closed to visitors. For what seemed like hours, we prostrated, made offerings and prayed in the presence of a spectacular array of statues, stupas and other holy objects. The Potala is a truly magnificent and unique Dharma palace, which took centuries to build and complete. Rinpoche



Photos Ven. Roger Kunsang



Photo Bob Croyton

advised us to simply “rejoice” at all those who had constructed, funded and contributed to its existence. What a simple and wonderful way to practice!

At one point we were taken to the room where His Holiness was enthroned when he first arrived as a child in Lhasa. Clearly visible on the throne was a picture of the Maitreya statue wrapped in His Holiness’ coat and, as we stood in front, the monks spontaneously burst into chanting the extensive long life prayer for His Holiness. As there were security cameras watching us in every room, I couldn’t imagine how this totally forbidden situation was taking place. Then, as we sat crouched in a corner of that room, one of the old Namgyal monks told us the story of how His Holiness had



been recognized. Rinpoche was translating and when it reached the part where the search party discovered the young Dalai Lama, who declared that “I am the one who works for all beings,” there was a silence and then the sound of loud sobbing as Rinpoche broke down into tears, overwhelmed by the compassion of this great being. “His Holiness has such great work to do and times are becoming more and more difficult,” the monk told us. “Please pray for his wishes to be fulfilled.” We also did special prostration and requesting prayers from the Nyung-ne practice in front of the very precious self-arisen Chenrezig statue. The monks commented how fortunate we were that miraculously when Rinpoche declared his wish to do prayers no other visitors appeared, otherwise we would have had to immediately cease praying – the Potala is, after all, a state museum, not a place for religious practice.

As we left, Rinpoche told the monks that our party had come from many places around the world and had spent a lot of money to do this trip, but that it was all worthwhile just to spend that one day in the Potala. He also expressed how happy he was because every day he makes offerings to the holy objects in Tibet and now he could more clearly visualize all the precious objects that he was offering to.

From the Potala we went to the Jokhang Temple for a private viewing. The Jokhang is quite simply amazing. It was constructed by the religious king Songtsen Gampo, an emanation of Chenrezig, when Buddhism was first being introduced to Tibet, in order to house the precious holy statue of Shakyamuni Buddha brought to Tibet by his Chinese wife. Another temple, the Ramoche, was constructed about a mile away to

house a precious statue of the Buddha brought to Tibet by his Nepali wife. There are many grottos and small rooms containing other precious holy images, paintings that talk, and so on. Rinpoche told us that although the temple appears to our ordinary impure view as an old temple with many paintings and statues, actually it is a manifestation of Chenrezig’s holy mind existing for us to purify negative karma, accumulate merit and plant the seed of enlightenment. Even the workmen who built it were emanations of Chenrezig, and Rinpoche also commented that the statues inside are the most lifelike he had seen anywhere – they appear living.

When you visit temples in Tibet you take armfuls of *khatas* (offering scarves), stacks of small notes, and a bag of butter to add to the burning butter lamps. For me, a visit to the Jokhang was like going to Buddhist Disney-pure-land. I began to develop a rapport with certain statues – different prayers to different ones – and I felt that I could happily spend my whole life going round and round the temple making offerings.

Our original plan had been to spend just two nights in Lhasa and then continue on to Reting, where there would be a Mahamudra retreat. We had permits and everything was in order, but now the authorities knew that Rinpoche was in the country, and they were worried. Representatives were sent to inform Rinpoche that he was not to do anything that would “inspire the people.” That meant no public prayers, teachings or blessings. Rinpoche was not to meet with the local people and he was no longer to travel with us in the bus but in a designated jeep with a government-appointed driver. It was amazing how much panic this one Sherpa tulku was able to generate in

Lhasa is now a huge Chinese city –
here seen from the Potala rooftop



Photo courtesy of Tibet Information Network

the Chinese authorities. As Rinpoche commented, “Just having the name Rinpoche strikes fear in their hearts.” Even after so many years of repression, they have not managed to eliminate the devotion in people’s hearts.

So an extra day was spent in Lhasa. In the morning Rinpoche gave long-life Amitayus initiation in our hotel-gompa to the mother of the hotel owner, an extraordinary woman who had been tortured for many years. She declared to Rinpoche that her daughter wanted her to take this initiation: for herself, she was happy to die now, and with tears in her eyes she begged Rinpoche for the one thing she cared about most – to pray for the long life of His Holiness. It was a familiar plea from the older Tibetans whose devotion was so deep and so strong that it seemed beyond human; but this older generation is now dying away.

The afternoon was spent at Sera Monastery, which is now located behind the city dump. Again there was sadness. Last time we visited Sera there was an atmosphere of hope and new beginnings. That time there were many young monks studying and debating and there were great masters who had survived the years of terror teaching them. But now these great masters have passed away and since it is virtually impossible to do real Dharma study in Tibet, the enthusiastic and serious young monks have escaped to India. Rinpoche explained that the monks there try to read the texts and do some debate, but it’s very difficult without a teacher. I felt the huge monastic halls had a sad feeling of emptiness and neglect. Rinpoche commented that tourists who don’t know what the monastery was like before might be impressed by Sera because they wouldn’t realize that in the past it had been a huge monastic city with thousands of



Old Lhasa has been and still is being torn down at an alarming rate – this is part of the Barkor area that was thought to be “protected”.

monks and many more buildings and statues that have now perished. He felt it might be “hard for tourists to believe that so much destruction had happened.” We made offerings to the monks for prayers and butter lamps, and stopped at the special Secret Hayagriva statue to make prayers and dedications for the organization.

On our way back to the bus, we met a lone pilgrim who approached Rinpoche holding a computer-generated image of the Maitreya statue, which nobody had ever seen before. He told Rinpoche that he was on pilgrimage making prayers to be able to see this statue before he died and asked if Rinpoche knew anything about it or the people building it. We were all amazed and offered him some money for his trip. It seems that many people in Tibet have heard of FPMT’s Maitreya Project – building huge statues of Maitreya is a tradition of the great lamas of the past – and are very excited about it.

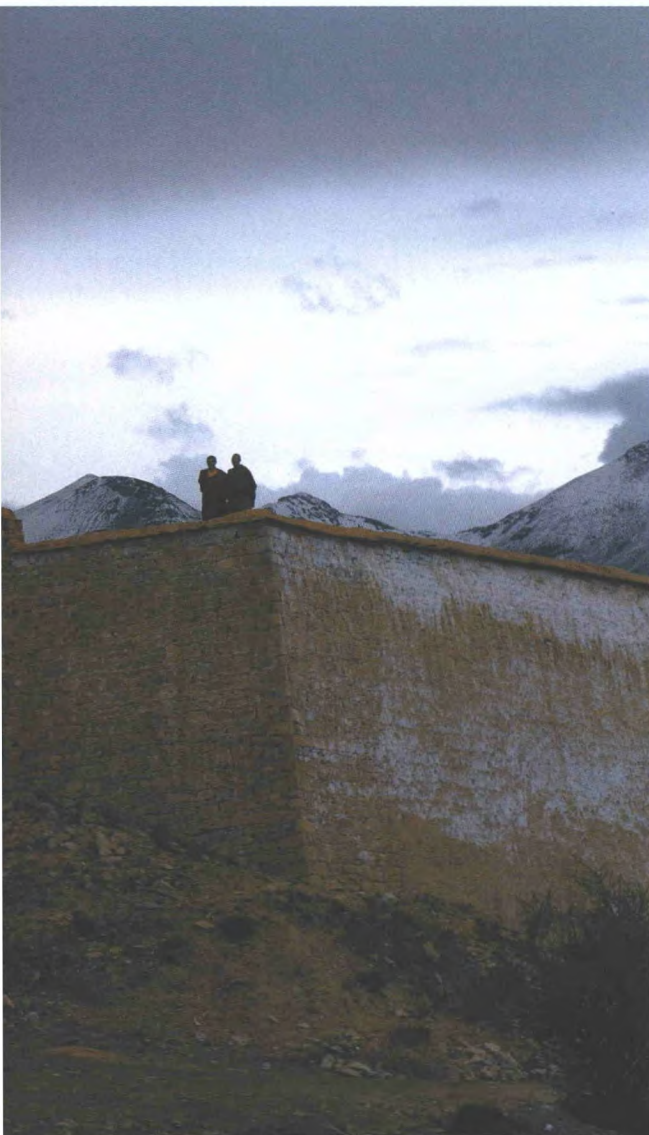
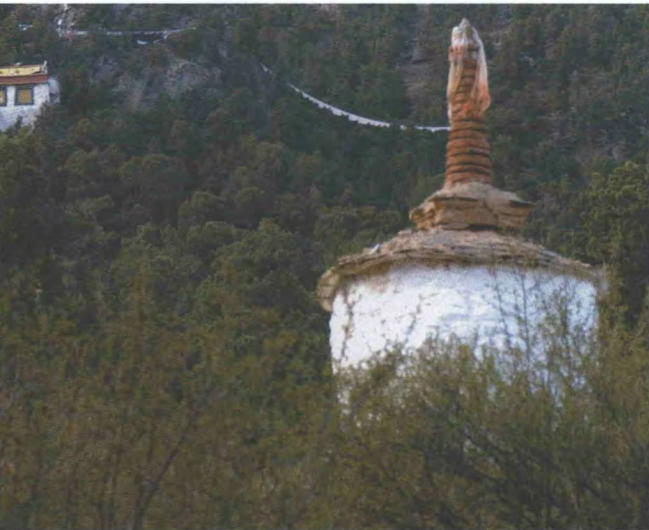




Top: Hermitage Stupa at Reting

Bottom: Reting Monastery

Photos by Bob Cayton



We had planned to stay longer at Sera, but our drivers were told to return to the hotel for a meeting with the police. Still, as we left the monastery, Rinpoche delayed to lead prayers near the entrance at a large new stupa, which had a very modern feel about it. This was a stupa Rinpoche himself had sponsored and built for his teacher, the Mongolian lama Geshe Sengye, who was abbot of Sera the last time we visited. It was constructed of a special type of stone block by Shiwo Rinpoche, a disciple of Geshe Sopa, and Rinpoche commented that this was the first time such a stupa had been built. It was perhaps the most modern stupa in Tibet. As we circumambulated, chanted and prostrated, the monks and laypeople stared aghast at this open display of Dharma practice.

FINALLY A VISA WAS GRANTED FOR RETING, but for just a few days, not the full week we had requested. Instead we were permitted to visit Tsurphu monastery, seat of the Karmapas, so we got back into our buses and headed off. Tsurphu is not far from Lhasa, but it is in a valley off the main road and at the end of a long unsealed track. It was amazing to see how such an important monastic establishment could be situated in such an out-of-the-way place, but that's how things are in Tibet.

The original Tsurphu monastery was a huge complex, but it seems that was totally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. What exists now is a smaller version constructed for the Karmapa by Tai Situ Rinpoche. Up until the Karmapa escaped two years ago, the monastery had been thriving and pilgrims came from around the country and the world to have audience with the young boy regarded as the embodiment of Chenrezig. Now, the familiar aura of sad emptiness greeted us. How does a monastery survive without teachers? The monks greeted us well and showed us all the holy objects, but there was the sense of a place that had lost its former glory. Rinpoche showed the greatest respect for the Karmapa, prostrating himself full-length on the dirt floor in front of his throne, and personally making offerings very humbly to each of the monks.

At Tsurphu Rinpoche gave another teaching on how to make the most of the pilgrimage, explaining different prayers we could make to each of the different statues, what to think when we offered money and khatas, and especially advising us to do guru yoga practice thinking that every single holy object is the guru – the manifestation of the Dharmakaya mind bound by great compassion.

"This way," Rinpoche explained, "you feel a connection with all the holy objects you see, that they are manifested to bring you to enlightenment. It is very effective." He also reminded us that, "We are doing pilgrimage. We have to understand the skies of benefit, what happens to this mental continuum. It's not just sightseeing or for pleasure. It is to purify the mental continuum of defilements, accumulate extensive merit and make the mind change into the realizations of the path to enlightenment."

WE GOT BACK ONTO THE MAIN ROAD for Reting, stopping to camp in the valley where Lama Yeshe was born. Although Rinpoche was permitted to visit the house of Lama's birth, he could not stay overnight, and it was only through the help of his driver, who distracted the Chinese spy with meat and *chang*, that Rinpoche was able to meet with the local people who flocked to see him. Needless to say, Rinpoche had won over the driver assigned to him – an ex-soldier and policeman – who was now manifesting great devotion to him.

Top: Reciting prayers at the place where Lama Tsongkhapa composed the Lam-Rim Chenmo

Bottom: Reting Monastery's jewel – the Jampal Dorje Sangdu statue

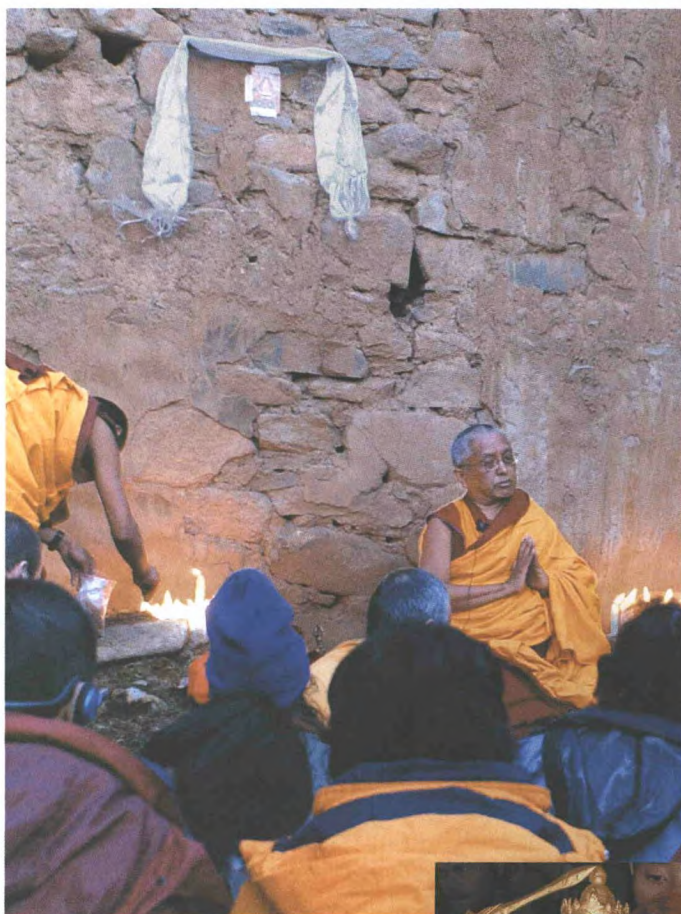
The Westerners were also allowed to visit Lama Yeshe's house, but we went separately from Rinpoche. The family offered tea and *kapse* and were very warm to us, while Ven. Marcel led prayers on guru devotion. For those who knew Lama, it was a very moving experience and since that village has no holy objects, Ven. Marcel devised a plan to build a stupa in Lama's honor, which Rinpoche approved.

We also visited Chosang Monastery in the valley, and the nunnery where Lama Yeshe had been abbess in his previous life. The nuns there had great devotion to Rinpoche and I heard that when he visited privately they spontaneously burst into song, chanting the extensive long life prayer for His Holiness in Rinpoche's honor, and the prayer for the freedom of Tibet composed by His Holiness called *Words of Truth*. Rinpoche commented that he was surprised since both were illegal and could have put them in a lot of trouble if the authorities had found out. That night, after much negotiation, we managed to get permission to do a puja below the nunnery in the place where Lama Tsongkhapa had had a vision of the entire mandala of Guhyasamaja. Formerly there had been a monastery where Gyuto monks did rains retreat, now it was ruined. Since the permit was for just one hour, the nuns sat down and immediately started chanting at high speed with ethereal voices in beautiful unison. The minute they stopped Rinpoche left. As it was nighttime only the local villagers were able to attend; but still, we had to protect Rinpoche from the mobs who came to receive his blessing.

The following morning, as we packed up camp, Rinpoche gave the lung for the Guhyasamaja root tantra. As we drove off he stayed to do puja for all the people in the valley who were suffering from sickness due to pollution.

We arrived at Reting early afternoon. The seat of Reting Rinpoche, it is the home of the Kadampa masters and was originally founded in 1057 by Dromtonpa, the principal disciple of Lama Atisha and a previous emanation of the present Dalai Lama. So many of the great masters we read about in the Lam-Rim spent time here, including Lama Tsongkhapa who composed two major texts here: the short Lam-Rim prayer *The Foundation of All Good Qualities* and the *Great Stages of the Path*. The situation of the monastery has a very magical almost fairytale feel to it. There are magnificent views across a river valley and facing mountains, while all around are mature juniper trees said to be manifestations of bodhisattvas. The monastery also has a very special circumambulation route, rich with stories of past great masters, and self-arising mantras.

As we drove into Reting we could see a large gathering of people and police. We later discovered that the locals were



warned of our arrival and told not to associate with us. As soon as we began pitching tents, local officials arrived, extremely worried about Rinpoche's presence, and we had to make promises that he would not teach openly and would keep very low-key.

Still we were assigned a monk to guide us around. He was extremely helpful and explained the special features of the monastery in great detail. We discovered that the special holy object of Reting was a 5,000-year-old statue of Sangdu Jampal Dorje. The statue had been made by Manjushri, sponsored by Chenrezig and blessed by Vajrapani, and had been in the pure lands until the monastery was built. It is kept in a special enclosure that only men can enter, so the first day we visited the monastery the women were unable to view it. But that day we made substantial money offerings to the temple to apply gold leaf to a new Maitreya statue they were constructing and also to offer gold for one whole year to this special statue. So the following day, the monastery invited us for tea and rice and quite unexpectedly – as incense was lit and music played – the statue was brought out and unwrapped for us all to see and take blessing. It was a very special moment. Rinpoche felt that this statue had a major role to play in Buddhism surviving in Tibet.

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He asked permission to make an extensive bath offering to it, which was granted. He also offered a pearl necklace and told us all to make very strong prayers for Buddhism to flourish again.

Delayed by this unexpected honor, it was almost dark by the time we had climbed up the hill to the place where Lama Tsongkhapa began to write the *Lam-Rim Chenmo*. We were led into a ruined room, where a huge Maitreya statue had once stood. Prayer flags were hung, a picture of Lama Tsongkhapa hung on the stone wall, candles and incense were lit and we began to do prostrations amidst the rubble and nettles. Because it was so late, we had to chant very fast and Lama Tsongkhapa's *Hymns of Experience* was read out for us to reflect upon. We clambered down the hillside late that night singing *Mig-tse-ma* at the top of our voices – another very magical experience.

We were up very early for a two-hour trek in the dark to the local nunnery. Since Rinpoche had arrived at Reting, nuns had come every day to invite him to visit. We walked into the gompa and began prostrating to the Thirty-five Buddhas, as had become our custom, while the nuns prepared tea. It turned out that this was the place where Lama Tsongkhapa had done retreat on Heruka and Vajra Yogini with just a handful of disciples, and the small spartan room where he had stayed was maintained exactly as it had been. Again I was overwhelmed by the purity of the nuns and how they flocked to Rinpoche with such devotion. We were told there had been many more nuns, but the Chinese had come and taken away a large group for re-education.

The nuns asked Rinpoche for observations and advice, which he willingly gave and, as had become the custom, we made a collection so that money could be offered to each of the sangha and an offering made of whatever they requested – in this case a bronze Maitreya statue. Rinpoche, as at every other place we visited, was totally wishfulfilling.

As we were driving through Penpo, we stopped at a monastery that turned out to belong to Gomo Rinpoche, who was one of Rinpoche's teachers, and went on to Nyalandra Sakya Monastery, the seat of Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, another of Rinpoche's teachers. Rinpoche commented that there seemed to be a very good program of study for the monks. We were shown so many sights of holy places of the great Kadampa masters that Rinpoche felt it would be important to return on our final day to do more pilgrimage and document

some of the stories and places that survived. But that night we had to return to Lhasa because of our visa regulations.

The next day in Lhasa was free, but all along Rinpoche had been recommending us to do the long circumambulation of the city – called the Lingkor – and this was the final opportunity. This day we also took the special risk of wearing our robes. Ven. Marcel walked down the stairs in his robes heading out of the hotel declaring that he was “going off to demonstrate!” and we headed off. The Lingkor used to circle the whole of the city of Lhasa and takes four hours or more to walk. I had done it once during my last visit. This time was far more difficult because,

whereas in the past holy objects and many pilgrims marked the route, now there are highways, computer shops, motorbike showrooms, huge shiny glass malls and banks. Old Lhasa has been, and still is being torn down at an alarming rate. Lhasa is now a huge Chinese city whose population outnumbers that of the Tibetans, an old city where the Tibetans live, and many army camps all around. It is hard to feel that the Lingkor is still a holy path. Still the point was made because, as Westerners dressed in robes, in our own quiet way we caught the attention of every Chinese and Tibetan who spotted us.

When we got back to the hotel I decided to continue this bravery by walking around the Barkor, the medium circumambulation route, in my robes. This was far more sensitive. The Barkor is where all the political protests are held. There are Chinese soldiers with guns, police and plainclothes police all around

the route, as well as police stations and surveillance cameras. This and Tiananmen Square must be the two most sensitive places in the whole of China. So, still encouraged by my previous trip, I walked twice around the Barkor chanting Tara Praises in Tibetan, trying not to engage anyone who came into view, but intensely aware that I was creating waves of interest. The third time around I stopped to buy a picture of the famous Shakyamuni Buddha statue from a Chinese shop. As I was putting money into the shopkeeper's hand, plainclothes police appeared from nowhere and closed the shop around me. I pretended not to notice, but, shaken, I walked straight back to the hotel.

It was then that I realized the extent of the terror and fear that Tibetans live with. The Chinese could not harm a foreigner wearing robes, but they could harm everyone who had contact



Photo Bob Cayton

Rinpoche gives blessings in the Penpo Valley

with them. That night we were allowed into the Jokhang courtyard to do *Guru Puja*, but we walked there in small groups, keeping very low-key, and Rinpoche did not join us. The doors were closed behind us and all the monks were kept away. As we sat chanting in this aged courtyard where the many Dalai Lamas had taught in the past to thousands of monks, and scores of holy beings had passed through, I was mindful that following our previous visit in 1987, monks had been flung to their death on these stones by irate Chinese soldiers reacting to political protests.

Now, nearing the end of our trip, we returned to spend a day in Penpo, visiting some of the Kadampa geshe's holy places. First we stopped at Gomo Tulku's monastery again, where lunch was provided, and Rinpoche was allowed to bless and give a teaching to the local people. Then, we went to Geshe Sharawa's monastery – now a nunnery – where Rinpoche gave a teaching on Lama Tsongkhapa's *Foundation of All Good Qualities*. We visited the monastery of Geshe Langri Tangpa, who composed the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*, taking blessing from a statue made by the great lama himself. Here Rinpoche gave a complete teaching on the *Eight Verses* in about half an hour, something so unusual for Rinpoche that he commented that he “must have been blessed by Geshe Langri Tangpa.”

Finally, we went to the monastery of another great Kadampa lineage master Neuzurpa. I was approached by one monk who asked me for a photo of His Holiness. When I explained that it was too dangerous for us to carry them, he looked at me with great sadness, saying, “My teacher is in India and I can never see him. What can I do?” Rinpoche also visited Geshe Potowa's monastery, now a nunnery, arriving late at night. Hearing the sound of a jeep in the dark, the frightened nuns took down the photo of His Holiness on the throne, thinking the secret police had arrived.

The final day in Lhasa, the plan was to visit a special cave above Lhasa where Pabongka Rinpoche had meditated. This is a very holy Heruka place, where even the water dripping inside the cave is said to be the sound of Vajra Yogini's mantra. Rinpoche had mentioned at the very beginning of our pilgrimage that this cave, and the sacred lake of Palden Lhamo, Lhamo Lhatso, were the two places he really wished to revisit from his former trips. We stopped on the way to visit a rock at Chakpori which is covered with hundreds of paintings of buddhas and mantras, a huge slate stupa of the entire Kangyur carved in stone. Seeing these amazing sites, Rinpoche simply told us to rejoice. We also stopped at Palhalupuk, facing the Potala, site of the first Dharma King Songtsen Gampo's retreat place, and at the nunnery at Pabongka where we did requesting prayers to Chenrezig in front of a self-manifesting Chenrezig statue.

Finally, just before dusk, we began walking up the hill to the cave, passing by Chusang Hermitage where the famous lam-rim teachings *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* were taught. Now, many of these sites are partly rebuilt ruins. It is a stiff walk up the mountain to the cave and Rinpoche stopped several times to allow us to catch our breath, writing mantras on the rocks with a black marker pen. On our arrival we were greeted by a nun who had just completed a long Vajra Yogini retreat the day before. The cave is very small. Inside there is a clearly visible painting of Heruka's third eye on a rock and above a natural appearing *chojung* (tetrahedral reality source). Apart from that, there is only room for a handful of people, so as Rinpoche and the Kopan monks sat inside doing Vajra Yogini tsog, the rest of us took turns to go inside and take blessing from the cave.

Rinpoche stayed there many hours, but unfortunately for the rest of us night had already fallen and so we left gradually for the long perilous descent in the dark since the next day we were to be up early to drive to the airport for our return flight to Kathmandu. Two o'clock that morning, when most of us had already climbed into bed for a short sleep before the early rise, there was a phone call from Rinpoche call-

ing us down to do final dedication prayers. So much merit that we had collected those few but very precious days and it was not to be wasted.

SEVERAL TIMES THAT TRIP RINPOCHE MENTIONED TO US HOW FORTUNATE we all were to be on the pilgrimage and even though old Tibet had now gone, I could not but heartily agree. As Rinpoche put it: “Tibet is such a holy place. So many holy beings have descended here over the centuries and shown the path to enlightenment. Even in one valley there are so many holy places to visit, take blessing and do practice. This just doesn't exist in the West. Even though America is such a huge country, with so much material development, but there is not one single place you can go on pilgrimage where people have generated the realizations of the path.”

I think that of all the comments Rinpoche made on the whole trip, that is the one that most sticks in my mind. Somehow it is the responsibility of each one of us in this organization, this amazing mandala, to not only study and practice, but actually develop the realizations of the path in our mind and bless our countries and world for future generations just as so many past masters have done over the previous centuries in Tibet.

Thank you Rinpoche, for a truly amazing trip. An you everyone who made it possible. ❁



Inside Pabongka's cave there is a clearly visible painting of Heruka's third eye on a rock

Photo Ver. Roger Kunsong

