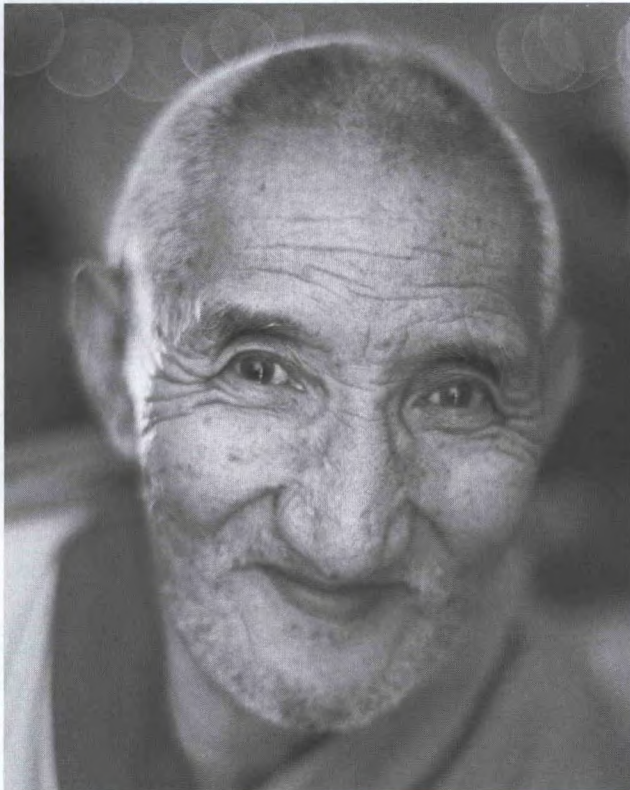


# ATTENDING THE LAMA

THOUGHTS UPON THE PASSING  
OF RIBUR RINPOCHE



Ribur Rinpoche 1923 - 2006 and his holy bones and relics.

*The revered lama Kyabje Ribur Rinpoche passed away on January 15, 2006  
at Sera Me monastery in southern India, at the age of 83.*

*Rinpoche's long-time translator and attendant, **Fabrizio Pallotti**,  
recalls the passing of his perfect teacher.*



The morning of January 15, as I was readying to leave for India in order to visit my guru, Ribur Rinpoche, I received a surprising message: Rinpoche had passed away. In my terrible state of mind, I could only think: *The sun has set forever.*

I met Rinpoche in Dharamsala in 1988. I was doing a retreat at Tushita and met up with a friend who wanted to do an initiation with a lama at Namgyal monastery [the

monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama]. He asked me to come and translate. Initially, I said, "No, I don't have the time, and anyway, I have so many great teachers, I don't need to meet a new lama," but finally I agreed. "Okay, Okay," I said, "but I'll just come to translate and after that I'm going to split!"

On the way to meet this lama, we saw off in the distance an old monk in yellow robes watching us; as soon as he saw



Kyabje Ribur Rinpoche in the fourth day of clear light meditation.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche in procession before the cremation.

us, he disappeared. It turned out to be Rinpoche! When we went to his room, I made three prostrations, and I was very surprised that immediately I was taken with him, without a single word spoken.

We sat down and Rinpoche started to talk to me, asking me who were my gurus, what practices I did, and so forth, and then I asked many questions of him. It was funny because my friend didn't understand any of this and he was the reason I was there! After my friend requested the initiation, Rinpoche looked at me and said, "Would you like to be my translator?" I couldn't say anything but, "Yes!" "Would you also like to take the initiation?" he asked. Our relationship really started from there.

Since Rinpoche was in Dharamsala and I was in retreat at Tushita close by, I would come to visit him daily and I began to take many teachings and initiations from him. Due to his kindness I was able to have a close connection with him, like his child. One of the side benefits was that while I was in Dharamsala I could accompany him to many private teachings in the palace with His Holiness. What a dream come true it is to meet the perfect lama! Nothing in life can be more beneficial than this.

I had been ordained since 1981, but there was one year when I went a little bit crazy and disrobed. I was doing well, working on a Tibet campaign, but after a while I got a call and it was Rinpoche. He said, "What are you doing? I'm at

Vajrapani. Why don't you come over? It would make me happy." Even though I had set up many projects at work and it would be very difficult to leave everything, I immediately started packing. That was in 1997, and from then on I was always with Rinpoche. (One exception was a period in India when Rinpoche was in retreat during which time I helped develop the medical fund for the Gere Foundation India Trust, a project inspired by Rinpoche and supported by Richard Gere which now provides full medical care to more than 900 destitute monks and nuns.) We traveled all over the world together, and Rinpoche inspired many Western students with his teachings, most especially due to the outpouring of unbelievable love and compassion that emanated from his whole being.

The last time I saw Rinpoche in Washington, D.C., where he had been undergoing cancer treatment, I spent a few days with him and took him to the airport. He said to me, "Look, do you want me to be here in a body like this, or do you prefer that a young body comes back?" At the time, I couldn't answer; I would choke up with tears. Now I realize that because Rinpoche had initiated so many incredible actions to develop world peace, to spread the Dharma, and to benefit sentient beings, he just wanted to take off and come back with a strong, young body to finish those actions. I have a few friends who went to visit Rinpoche a few days before he passed away, and they said that Rinpoche was totally strong, in an incredibly good mood, giving teachings, totally unconcerned for himself.

At noon on the fifteenth, Rinpoche was relaxing downstairs at his house, when he suddenly asked the attendants to take him upstairs so that he could be in front of Lama



The cremation.



Relics pile inside the cremation stupa.



Relics are collected.

Tsongkhapa. Many years ago Rinpoche had ordered this life-size image of Je Rinpoche, a very powerful statue that contains some of the holy bones of Je Rinpoche and Pabongkha Rinpoche. During periods when Rinpoche was heavily medicated (due to the cancer) he would sometimes say things that appeared quite disconnected. For instance, he would often say, "I need to go back to the monastery; *he* is waiting for me." At the time, we couldn't figure out to whom he was referring. I now believe that he was talking about Je Rinpoche; in fact, when I told this to Oser Rinpoche, he said to me that recently Rinpoche had told him, "All that I have done in this life has been offered to the holy mind of Je Rinpoche."

When he passed away, it was during the full moon of the Kalachakra, which is very auspicious. The monastery was nearly empty at that time, with everyone at the Kalachakra initiation. It seems as if he wanted to be alone, as if he didn't want anybody to be around taking care of him.

Two days after Rinpoche's passing, I arrived at Sera Me. (I had been having passport trouble, and it turned out I got my clearance the day before Rinpoche passed away.) When I arrived, my mind was totally in turmoil, in a very sad state. I went to Rinpoche's house, and even though his breath had stopped, he was still meditating, sitting up in front of his Lama Tsongkhapa statue, his holy body leaning slightly to the right and his head slightly to the left.

After five or six days, Geshe Losang Choepel, the attendant of the late Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, was called upon

because of his great knowledge of ritual and how to handle the passing away of a high lama. He determined that Rinpoche was no longer meditating, and many preparations were done to anoint the holy body in the perfect way. An ablu­tion of saffron water was offered to the holy body; we wrapped Rinpoche in new robes and deity ornaments and left him in the same sitting position for one day while we made preparations for the cremation. Though it was quite hot, there was no decomposing, no smell, and no rigor mortis. His body was amazingly supple. Throughout this time, many lamas, geshe, and young monks visited Rinpoche, and many self-initiations were performed on a daily basis: Heruka, Vajrayogini, Yamantaka, and many other practices.

We were able to build the stupa crematorium very quickly, and since it is the main disciple who should offer the fire puja, the ritual was performed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. During the puja, the mood among the disciples was of total desperation. We all felt like our one holy father had just left us for good. After less than one hour, not even halfway through the puja, one of the highest lamas at Sera Me, Oser Rinpoche, looked inside the crematorium and said that the body wasn't there anymore. I looked inside and Rinpoche's holy body had vanished.

At the back of my mind, I always knew that Rinpoche was going to pass away, but I couldn't face it directly. Now, facing directly the reality of my lama who had passed away, seeing his holy body under those circumstances, watching as the holy body is cremated, I think it was the most powerful teaching I ever received from Rinpoche. Not only as a recollection of impermanence, of course, but in terms of the

kindness of his teachings, his love, his affection, the way that he took care of us, never showing the slightest concern for himself or this life. One of his greatest gifts was to inspire me through his example to pledge the specific practice of guru devotion called “like the best child”; you never engage in new actions without the permission of the guru. These recollections totally blew my mind.

Also, I thought I already had incredible faith in Rinpoche, but this was different. I’d been with him for more than fifteen years, and I’d taken many teachings from him on what happens when you die, but seeing it directly at work in Rinpoche was like a consolidation of the truth of the teachings. All of the disciples that were there, the great lamas and geshe, many very accomplished beings, they also were amazed by their faith in Rinpoche during this time.

After the cremation, we left the funeral pyre for one week before opening it. The first one to go inside was Khensur Rinpoche, the ex-abbot of Gyume Tantric College, who was one of Rinpoche’s students and who had already been appointed by Rinpoche as the teacher of his reincarnation. We weren’t expecting anything in particular because it isn’t necessary that the lama leave anything behind. (This perhaps depends on the merits of the students.)

Then suddenly, Oser Rinpoche called to me and said, “Fabrizio, look at this, look, look!” I looked inside and I could see a bunch of white, pearl-like pebbles: There were thousands of them. For me, and I think for most of us there, it was as if this was all happening in a dream. For the Western world what goes on at the monasteries, what the Tibetan lamas do, is almost like science fiction. Upon finding these holy relics, a ceremony was immediately done to purify and bless them, after which we did Lama Chopa, the offering puja to the guru.

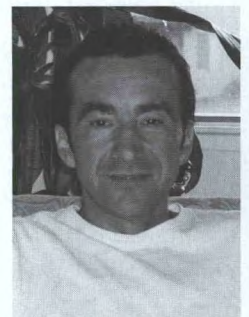
Rinpoche was among the last of his kind. He was in Tibet before the coming of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and experienced the golden age of Tibet. During the Cultural Revolution, he was able to do some of the most amazing actions for the benefit of the teachings and all sentient beings. He discovered the lost statue of Jowo Ramoche, one of three images made at the time of the Buddha and blessed by him; as well, Rinpoche reestablished the great reliquary of Ganden and the stupa of Je Rinpoche, along with countless other holy images that had disappeared from Tibet when the

monasteries were looted. Incredibly holy images would cross Rinpoche’s path with seemingly no effort. For instance, in Drepung Monastery a conch shell is preserved that was given to Lord Buddha by a child. It is said that the Buddha prophesized the child would be the future Je Rinpoche, a second Buddha to propagate the teachings. Monghallana, one of Lord Buddha’s students, then flew to Tibet and buried the conch in the mountains where Tsongkhapa later unearthed it. On that spot he established Ganden monastery. Centuries later, this conch was stolen and was nowhere to be found for several years. Then one day when Rinpoche was in Dharamsala, an old Tibetan man knocked at Rinpoche’s door and handed him the very conch that had been missing.

When he first came to India, Rinpoche told me he wanted to go to the mountains, to be in solitary retreat for the rest of his life. He was in retreat for some time, just he and Kusho la, Rinpoche’s nephew who was Rinpoche’s teacher in his past life. He had only a couple of hundred rupees with which to survive in the old Tsecholing monastery, then uninhabited and in ruins. However, when His Holiness called upon him, Rinpoche offered his services to His Holiness for many years. When Rinpoche began to travel in the West, he turned the wheel of the dharma of sutra and tantra with extensive teachings, benefiting many sentient beings. The karma that we had so as to be exposed to such a holy being is no longer there. And so, we are preparing everything to be ready to look for his reincarnation when it is the time to do so.

Before the Kalachakra, Oser Rinpoche went to visit Rinpoche and asked him, “Rinpoche, where should we search for your next incarnation? Should they look in the area of Makham where Rinpoche’s monastery is?” Rinpoche said, “Yes, this area is nice, but *Lhasa* is good.” This was one indication where he intended to be reborn.

Looking back on Rinpoche’s teachings, he most emphasized guru devotion and bodhichitta, and especially tong-len. Rinpoche relied on bodhichitta and tong-len like a panacea for all situations. He was the living embodiment of tong-len. Rinpoche taught everything, he taught the entire path – sutra, tantra, initiations, and commentaries – but guru devotion, bodhichitta, and tong-len were the main teachings he emphasized. That is the real indication of the perfection of the lama. ❁



Fabrizio Pallotti