

AN OLYMPIC DHARMA CHAMPION:

Geshe Tsultrim Tsulga

Geshe Tsultrim Tsulga [Mandala July-September 2010, p. 28] was resident teacher at Kurukulla Center in Medford, Massachusetts, USA since 1995. Geshe-la passed away peacefully on November 21, 2010 [see page 66] an excellent monk, a selfless man, and inspiring teacher, and in Lama Zopa Rinpoche's words, "an Olympic Dharma champion."

Geshe Tsulga-la's Final Days

By Geshe Ngawang Tenley

Several months ago, when I informed Geshe-la that the Tibetan Office had confirmed his private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Toronto, Geshe-la was very happy and said, "If I have not transgressed any commitments with my Guru Vajradhara, then I will be able to see him before I die." Despite weakened health, Geshe-la was undaunted by the four-day road travel this trip would require. As we approached Toronto, two rainbows appeared an hour apart.

His Holiness led Geshe-la by the hand into His Holiness' room and showed much concern for Geshe-la's health, as well as great delight upon receiving his various offerings and requests. Among the offerings was a biography of the Sixteen Arhats which Geshe-la had composed during his illness. His final request was for His Holiness to give a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Praise to Satisfying Sentient Beings* at Sera Monastery's main temple. Geshe-la would sponsor the teaching, even if it were to take place after his death.

After accepting to teach and saying that he plans to live for around 113 years, His Holiness recited many verses of prayer and dedication with Geshe-la, and gave him a blessed pill to take at the time of death along with advice on what to do at that time. After tying a vajra knot on a yellow khata and blessing it, His Holiness held it together with Geshe-la's hands and said, "We two are like a string of a cloth that is inseparable from life to life. We have had a very pure relationship. Now keep peace of mind. Pray to be born near me as my student, and I will do the same. Take a new birth and come back. Go with an ease of mind." Repeating,



His Holiness the Dalai Lama with Geshe Tsulga, October 2010.

"Go with an ease of mind," His Holiness led Geshe-la by the hand and accompanied him to the door.

Back in Boston, Geshe-la continued to advise his disciples on what to abandon and cultivate, unconcerned with his health or difficulties. After losing his voice, he whispered his advice.

Two weeks before passing, Geshe-la stopped accepting all visitors in order to "relax." He did this in order to contemplate the essence of practice as advised by His Holiness, as well as to prevent others from becoming



Geshe Tsulga's Final Words to His Holiness the Dalai Lama

“Your Holiness, though you have great compassion towards all beings of the three realms and pray for them constantly, please do not pray for me, Geshe Tsulga, to not be sick or to not die. What is most important is for Your Holiness to live long, for you are the root of peace and happiness for the whole world; and whether the purposes of the Tibetan people are accomplished or not depends solely on you. It doesn't matter if thousands of people like me disappear. But should a protector like you pass away, it is certain that all Tibetans and others would become like a blind person lost in the middle of a desert with no refuge and no protection. Hence, O Incomparably Kind Protector, please pray to live for a long time and to accomplish all your holy wishes spontaneously”

Geshe Tsulga-la made these requests to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Kollegal, India, February 18, 2009, three months after cancer diagnosis.

“Now I'm going to die. I have no regrets thinking that I have not done such and such ... but Your Holiness is the root of peace and happiness for the whole world in general and in particular for the Tibetan people and their culture as both face extinction. If Your Holiness exists, they exist; if Your Holiness does not exist, they do not exist. At such a time, please, please live for a long time”

Geshe Tsulga-la made these requests to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Toronto, Canada, October 23, 2010, four weeks before passing.

distressed upon seeing his condition. Then two days before passing, while Geshe-la was having difficulty arising and speaking, his nephew Ven. Thutob arrived. Upon hearing the news, Geshe-la sat up slowly and welcomed him saying, “You came at the right time. I'm very happy to see you.” Regaining his voice, Geshe-la narrated his meeting with His Holiness, had Ani Sue videotape him as he relayed a message for his students at Sera, and displayed renewed energy throughout the day. Then at dinner he announced, “Tomorrow or the day after, I will take the blessed pill from His Holiness.” He joked, “Do you understand that I'm going to die tomorrow or the day after? Ha! Ha!”

The following night, Geshe-la woke Ani Yeshe up around 2:30 AM by appearing in her dream and saying, “It's time for me to die now. Don't be sad. You take care and tell others. It will be over in ten.” When we arrived at his bedside, he asked to take the blessed pill around 3:00 AM. Geshe-la looked at and touched the pictures of his gurus and of the deity Hayagriva placed nearby, lay down in the lion's pose and entered uninterrupted meditation for 17 hours. Then for about 20 hours, he stayed in absorption and later showed signs of arising from absorption. Unlike ordinary dead bodies, Geshe-la's body remained very flexible as if he were merely sleeping.

As predicted, major preparations were completed within 10 days, culminating in a Guru Puja on Lama Tsongkhapa Day. Geshe-la's holy body was attired in divine garments, and hundreds came to pay their final respects. Due to state laws, we were sad to have to cremate the body like that of an ordinary person, not the way it would have been done according to Tibetan tradition. Despite this, we discovered many kinds of relics of different colors in the pile of remaining ashes and bone fragments. Among the various auspicious signs that materialized around Geshe-la's passing were a vast rainbow-halo that encircled the sun on the day we scattered his ashes and a big white cloud that appeared above Geshe-la's local monastery in Tibet during the 49th-day puja which dissipated like smoke after the puja ended. Many people reported seeing either His Holiness or Geshe-la inside the cloud.

During this difficult time of great loss and sadness, all the Western students and Tibetans in Boston came together to help in whatever way they could. I would like to thank everyone from the depths of my heart.

This brief account of Geshe Tsulga-la's final days was requested by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and subsequently composed in Tibetan by Geshe Ngawang Tenley. It was translated into English by Thubten Damchoe on January 24, 2011 at the Kurukulla Center in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and lightly edited and abridged by Ani Yeshe Chodron for publication in *Mandala*.

Geshe Tsulga Inspires Creation of Commitment Cards

By Sean González

Shortly before his passing and with his customary skillful means, Geshe Tsulga commented that we should “Read more Dharma, study more Dharma, practice more Dharma. Open your minds. This is what is most beneficial.”

Inspired by this, I thought of creating a commitment card – a simple, 8.5” x 5.5” [21.5 cm x 14 cm] card displaying the eight auspicious symbols, a picture of Geshe-la and our personalized practice commitment – and giving others an opportunity to do the same. We included our local community members, everyone on our email lists, and also Geshe-la’s students in Mexico. In this commitment card we expressed to Geshe-la that we heeded his advice, thought about it carefully, and recommitted ourselves to a practice that is ripe with meaning and purpose. With Geshe-la’s blessing, we advised everyone not to include the things that were already part of their daily practice but, instead, flex their Dharma muscles further into uncharted practices. The community response, local and remote, was overwhelming.

Geshe-la signed and blessed our commitment cards, which we distributed back to our community to put on their altars. Throughout this process, I was approached by many of our community members who were eager to share with me their experiences resulting from the commitment card idea. The consistent message was that, upon honest introspection, everyone realized that they could do so much more in their daily practice but hadn’t really spent the time to think about it. The offerings for new practices were broad in scope, covering reading a page of a book every day, saying additional mantras, various tantric practices, and volunteering. Everyone found something new to do and committed to doing it thanks to Geshe-la’s sage advice and a simple commitment card!

An Olympic Dharma Champion

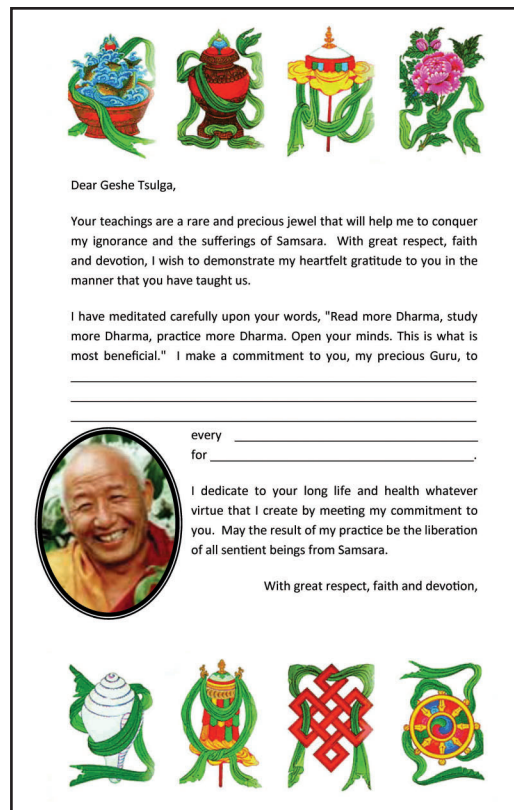
By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

... Geshe-la had no fear of death and knew what to do at the time. This gives inspiration. Geshe-la mentioned that he always kept His Holiness’ long life as most important, telling His Holiness that he doesn’t need to pray for him, but what it is most important is for His Holiness to live a long life for the world, to help all the people, etc.

I think this is amazing. Everyone, even non-Buddhists, want someone to pray for them but here Geshe-la is requesting His Holiness not to pray for him – that has great meaning. He doesn’t want His Holiness to waste even a few minutes on him. This shows Geshe-la is a great champion, like a Dharma Olympian, and how much Geshe Tsulga practiced Dharma. He was an Olympic Dharma champion. His practice for sentient beings, of bodhichitta, cherishing the numberless sentient beings, cherishing others, not cherishing I [shows that].

So this is an incredible inspiration – asking His Holiness not to pray for him – I have never heard of this before; this is a great inspiration to everyone in the world.

... Geshe-la said to me that he did not break or degenerate his vows. This is very inspirational: he is the real Dharma hero. ♦



This commitment card inspired by Geshe Tsulga helped many students commit to practicing the Dharma in new ways.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Tsulga, September 2010. Photo by Tsultrim Davis.