

Mother, Father, Teacher, Friend: The Incomparable Kindness of Kopan's Treasured Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel



Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel, Kopan Monastery, Nepal, March 2011.
Photo courtesy of Jo Hathaway.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to visit Kopan Monastery in Nepal over the last 40 years has most likely been met by the gentle smile of Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel, who served Kopan Monastery in a variety of capacities for nearly four decades. He was officially bestowed the title of abbot by the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2001, although he unofficially held the position since the time of Lama Yeshe's death in 1984. In July, Lama Lhundrup stepped down from that role due to advancing cancer.

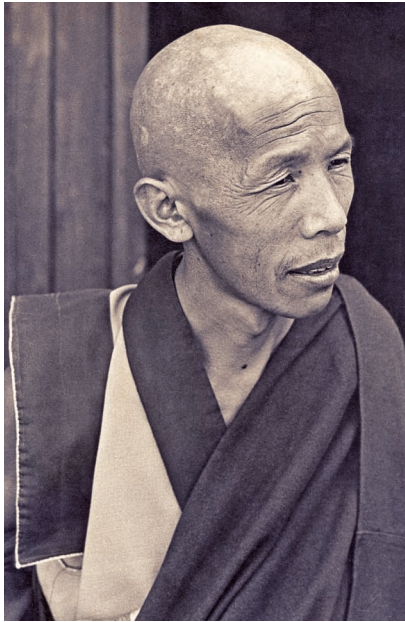
In this issue, Mandala wishes to highlight his incredible service to preserving and spreading the Dharma and to realizing the wishes of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Lama Lhundrup's tireless work and limitless kindness, offered to thousands of students at Kopan as well as to his students in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, stand out as an inspiration to us all.

As we go to press in late August, Lama Lhundrup continues to manifest a worsening condition and is quite ill. We will post updates to this story as they become known at mandalamagazine.org. You may also find all official FPMT updates, including updates regarding Lama Lhundrup's health at fpmt.org.

Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel (known throughout the world as Lama Lhundrup) was born in Tibet in 1941 to a poor peasant family. He joined Sera Monastery while still a boy, and in 1959 fled from the Chinese invasion of Tibet to India. In Buxa Duar, the refugee camp in north-eastern India where many of the monks were sent by the Indian government, he met Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and studied with great masters such as Geshe Rabten and others.

In 1972, Lama Yeshe sent a letter from Kopan Monastery in Nepal to Lama Lhundrup, who was then living in Mysore, India, helping to rebuild Sera Monastery. The letter said, "I have some monks, can you teach them? If so, then please come."

Lama Lhundrup wrote back to Lama Yeshe that he didn't feel he had enough knowledge to teach, but that he would very much like to see him and could perhaps come for three months. The abbot of



From left: Lama Lhundrup at Kopan, 1973. Photo courtesy of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. Kopan Monastery in 1972. Photo courtesy of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.

Sera Je told Lama Lhundrup at his departure, “You have permission for only three months, so when you arrive there you tell him [Lama Yeshe] that you cannot stay any longer, and then you immediately come back.”

When Lama Lhundrup arrived at Kopan, Lama told him, “You must become a teacher for my boys.” By this time, Kopan Monastery, which had been established in 1971, was looking after about 30 young monks from Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s Mount Everest Center in Lawudo and the need was growing for someone to oversee the young monks’ studies. Lama Lhundrup accepted Lama Yeshe’s request and remained faithfully at this post until July 2011, when the responsibility of abbot of Kopan was passed on to Geshe Thubten Chonyi.

Lama Lhundrup received his geshe degree from Sera Monastery in 1987. He traveled to Sera Je for the final debate, and it has been said that his debate was one of the most entertaining and brilliant debates in Sera’s recent history.

Since 1972, nearly 800 monks have been educated at Kopan Monastery, including the 370 who are in residence today. Kopan House at Sera Monastery, part of Tsawa Kamsen, now houses around 80 Kopan monks on their way to becoming geshe. Kopan monks also study at Gyume Tantric College and at the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath. Six resident geshe of FPMT centers are from Kopan. In 1986, the Kopan Nunnery, Khachoe Ghakyil, was established and since that time approximately 450 nuns have been educated there including the 350 currently in residence.

Karuna Cayton, current FPMT board member who worked side by side with Lama Lhundrup at Kopan from 1975-1988, said, “The impact that Kopan, through its monks and its courses, has had on thousands of lives throughout the world is amazing. I believe it is accurate to say that without Kopan there would be no FPMT centers.

Kopan Monastery's New Abbot

Khenrinpoche Geshe Thubten Chonyi, born in Nepal in 1962, was ordained by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1974. Khenrinpoche has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre (ABC) in Singapore since 1999. In July 2011, he was requested to take over from Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup as abbot of Kopan Monastery. Geshe Chonyi was the first Kopan monk to become a lharampa geshe, completing his studies at Sera Je Monastery and Gyume Tantric College. After spending some time teaching at Kopan Monastery, Geshe Chonyi was asked by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to teach in Singapore. For the time being, he continues to teach at ABC eight months a year, spending the rest of the year at Kopan, where he says his goal is to “continue with what already exists and to maintain the monastery and nunnery well as it was before.” There will be a formal enthronement of Khenrinpoche Geshe Thubten Chonyi later in the year at Kopan.





From left: Karuna Cayton, Pam Cayton, Nick Ribush, Thubten Tsering and Lama Lhundrup in the office at Kopan circa 1981. Photo courtesy of Karuna Cayton. Lama Yeshe teaching at Kopan, 1974. Photo by Ursula Bernis.

And without centers, countless students may never have met Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe or the Dharma path. And without Lama Lhundrup, perhaps there would be no Kopan.”

In addition to the hundreds of monks and nuns Lama Lhundrup took care of over the past 40 years, he also has many students in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong where he would travel on regular occasions to give teachings. Several thousand students have attended the annual meditation courses offered at Kopan over the years and Lama Lhundrup’s impact on and benefit to those students, through giving refuge vows, teachings and advice, and in turn the impact those students ended up having on others, cannot be calculated.

“Of course there were many other important figures in the early development of Kopan such as Lama Pasang, Gelek Gyatso, Tenpa Choden and a host of volunteers,” Karuna said, reflecting on Kopan’s development. “But it was Lama Lhundrup who was always there. He was the glue that held Lama Yeshe’s vision together, both before and after Lama passed away in 1984. Lama Lhundrup felt responsible for every wish Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche had for Kopan. When Lama Lhundrup felt he had let Lama Yeshe down he would have the same look on his face that a mother has when not being able to provide her child with safety and nurture. But, at the same time, after being reprimanded by Lama Yeshe – while I would be upset, often stunned and speechless – Lama Lhundrup would turn to me and softly giggle. He knew Lama Yeshe’s love. Lama Lhundrup knew he was doing his best. He knew we would get better and we would fulfill all of Lama Yeshe’s wishes. Lama Lhundrup

understood Lama Yeshe’s extraordinary qualities and was never fooled by the mere manifestations Lama Yeshe would use to guide living beings.”

One of Lama Lhundrup most significant accomplishments at Kopan was establishing the philosophy studies program that leads to a Geshe degree. The program was officially recognized in 2010 and has produced around 15 rabjampa geshe already with many more coming. Because of Lama Lhundrup’s years of dedicated effort, Kopan Monastery joins the three great Gelug monasteries (Sera, Gendun, and Drepung) and Tashi Lhunpo as institutions bestowing Geshe degrees to its monks.

Lama Lhundrup also established philosophy studies for the nuns of Khachoe Ghakyil Nunnery. In a few years, there will be the first nuns obtaining the rank of geshema because of this work. Lama Lhundrup also took responsibility for oversight of Rachen Nunnery and Mu Monastery in Tsum and Shedup Ling Monastery in Solu Khumbu.

Lama Lhundrup helped to establish the Nepal Gelug Great Monlam Prayer Festival which Kopan leads every year. He also helped to create the Nepal Gelug Education Forum with all of the Gelug monasteries in Nepal coming together every year to debate during Jayang Guncho, the annual inter-monastic debate. In 2010, the first Gelug Exams were held for these monasteries. The exams are an important step in continuing philosophy studies at Sera Je.

“Lama Lhundrup showed patience and care for every student and visitor of Kopan,” Geshe Thubten Sherab, who served as headmaster of Kopan Monastery’s school for four years, told *Mandala*. “He worked day and night, taking care



From left: Lama Lhundrup at Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s long life puja at Kopan, 2009. Photo courtesy of Wolf Price: Wanderwolf Media (wanderwolf.com). Lama Lhundrup at Kopan, 2003. Photo courtesy of Kopan Monastery.

of and listening to the grievances and problems of monks, nuns, students from around the world and all the visitors who come for advice and guidance. He responded with great concern, care and compassion but without any complaints or sense of pride. He was always trying to solve problems peacefully whenever they arose, without anyone getting hurt or sad.”

Lobsang Drolkar, a student from Amitabha Buddhist Center in Singapore, said in 2010, “Lama Lhundrup has made Kopan into a place where many students have had the experience of truly coming home. Over the years, I’ve had many opportunities to observe the way Lama Lhundrup works his magic on visitors and students alike – his all-embracing openness and kindness, the way he breaks out into peals of laughter, the paternal way he would grasp one’s hand as he listens so attentively to what one has to say (even when it’s gibberish!).”

Geshe Chokley, a Kopan monk who was head teacher in Tsum, related how from even 20 years previously, “Lama Lhundrup really looked after all the small monks as a mother would, wiping noses and dressing them. He dedicated his whole life for the monks and nuns, and that they become good makes him satisfied and happy.”

Ani Tenzin Jangsem, manager of Khachoe Gakyil Nunnery, said in July, “The kindness of Lama Lhundrup cannot be compared or measured. Even with his busy schedule, he would come down to the nunnery to teach us and give advice to the young nuns, tell them about the 10 non-virtues, how to be kind to others, how to have a good heart, etc. Other times he would teach the senior nuns how to chant. The nuns came from remote places such as Tibet

and other parts of the Himalayas. Whatever the nuns are currently enjoying – the nunnery being well known around the world, for example – this is all due to the kindness and blessing of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and hard work and guidance of Lama Lhundrup.”

Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the Kopan community became very concerned about Lama Lhundrup’s health towards the end of 2010. After several requests, Lama Lhundrup accepted the invitation to seek Western medical advice in Singapore and traveled there in early January, where he was admitted to the hospital and diagnosed with metastatic stomach cancer in mid-January 2011.

Jo Hathaway, a palliative care nurse from New Zealand and a student of Lama Lhundrup who has been staying at Kopan since January 2011 to help take care of him, told *Mandala* the following in July:

“Right from the first day that Lama Lhundrup came home to Kopan from the hospital in Singapore, his approach to illness was different from any other ‘patient’ I have cared for. As we began discussing new routines for feeding, Lama Lhundrup sat swinging the end of his recently inserted stomach feeding tube around in the air, laughing as he exclaimed, ‘Look, my new mouth!’

“No matter what the situation, Dharma is always the first thing on Lama Lhundrup’s mind,” Jo said. “Physical needs just don’t rank as highly for Lama Lhundrup as they do for most ordinary beings and he doesn’t seem to pay much attention to any changes in his body. This can make our job of trying to keep a handle on what’s happening a little tricky because, unlike most seriously ill people, he never complains of anything. Ever.



Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup with his two attendants Ven. Thubten Kunkhen and Ven. Lobsang Thardoe and Jo Hathaway, his palliative care nurse and student, Kopan, August 24, 2011. Photo by Ven. Thubten Kunsang. Lama Lhundrup and Osel at Kopan, July 2011. Photo courtesy of Jo Hathaway.

“Lama Lhundrup’s wish to make others happy also takes precedence over his own welfare. When we became concerned that physiological changes in his body may indicate that he was experiencing pain, I tried to ask him about it. The conversation started out well, ‘Do you have any pain?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Can you show me where the pain is?’ ‘Around here.’ Then I fell into ‘concerned nurse’ mode while asking the next list of questions. Instead of answering, Lama Lhundrup said to me with a relaxed smile, ‘You don’t like pain?’ ‘No, of course not, Khenrinpoche’ was my perplexed reply. (Nobody likes pain, right?) Lama Lhundrup simply responded, ‘Then I don’t have pain.’ And with that, turned back to his text and continued his evening prayers. End of conversation, end of my reason to be worried.

“Another time when we were again discussing pain I asked him how he would like us to treat it,” Jo continued. “He replied, ‘It’s better to experience it, for the sake of all sentient beings.’ Lama Lhundrup used the manifestation of illness to practice tonglen for others and he often tells people to send all their worries and sicknesses to him so they can be free from suffering. These days, I suspect out of compassion for us and to ease our worry, Lama Lhundrup accepts a small amount of pain relief medication, just enough to enable him to concentrate well when doing his prayers and practices but without the need for, or intention of, stopping the experience of pain completely. His views on illness are definitely extra-ordinary!”

According to Karuna Cayton, Lama Zopa Rinpoche told those upset about Lama Lhundrup’s illness, “You don’t

need to worry about Lama Lhundrup because he has spent his life fulfilling Lama Yeshe’s wishes.” Reflecting on this in early August, Karuna said, “I think this quality of Lama Lhundrup’s is just one of the qualities that make him so remarkable. Lama Thubten Yeshe was a visionary lama, a rebel of sorts, a renaissance man. In traditional Tibetan society, particularly the society of monastics, innovation was viewed suspiciously. And yet, Lama Yeshe saw the writing on the wall for the exiled Tibetans and Himalayan Buddhists and while his ideas might have seemed radical, Lama Lhundrup, from my experience, never faltered in attempting to fulfill Lama Yeshe’s dreams. Lama Lhundrup *knew* Lama Yeshe’s extraordinary attributes and thus attempted to carry out Lama’s ideas often upon faith alone.”

In 1995, Lama Lhundrup reported to *Mandala*:

My main job is to make sure that all the monks have a good education and develop a good attitude, then we are fulfilling Lama Yeshe’s wishes. So in the end, all these young boys, after they finish classes, after 15 years, they know at least Tibetan language, writing, reading, also general philosophy, so they can become translators, teachers, whatever. I want them to be good quality, to have a good heart; yes, this is my aim. ... This is Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa’s main monastery; they have no time, so I need to do this work for them. With that I am very happy.

With Lama Lhundrup’s health becoming increasingly delicate, Karuna Cayton and Osel Hita decided they would make a brief visit to pay respects to their old friend and teacher. They arrived at Kopan on July 4, unannounced

with the exception of Ven. Roger Kunsang and Lama Zopa Rinpoche knowing in advance they were coming. During their six-day stay, they visited with Lama Lhundrup almost daily. It was also the first time that Osel had been back at Kopan in 13 years, making it a homecoming for him as well. At the request of Rinpoche, Osel gave heartwarming talks at both Khachoe Ghakyil Nunnery and in the main gumpa at Kopan.

"I refer to Lama Lhundrup as my 'friend,'" Karuna explained to *Mandala*. "I do not mean this in an arrogant or derogatory way. He is my *kalyanamitra*, my spiritual friend. If you knew Lama Lhundrup, then I believe you know what I mean and you most definitely see him as your friend also."

A Western student who has been at Kopan 20 years made the following observation about Lama Lhundrup: "In all he made Kopan into the monastery it is today. He added one piece after the other, with patience and loving care, seeking advice from many and following the instructions of his gurus. These efforts unfolded into the Kopan Pure Land."

The life, accomplishments and dedication of Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup Rigsel are worth celebrating. As

a young monk, he dedicated himself to serving Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche and spent the next 40 years perfectly carrying out their wishes and caring as mother, father, teacher and friend for countless others. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche offered in praise years ago, Lama Lhundrup is "one lama you can completely trust." Please join the entire FPMT community in rejoicing in Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup's tremendous dedication to preserving and spreading the Dharma and for caring for Kopan, the very heart of the FPMT organization. ♦

In July of this year, the office of Kopan sent out the following request: Our Most Kind Guru Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised today that it would be very beneficial for Khensur Rinpoche if those who have karmic connections with him (e.g., have received advice, oral transmission, other teachings, or taken refuge with him) can do the Ksithigarba practice as many times as possible.

Many pujas and prayers are being done for Lama Lhundrup at Kopan and by students around the world.

You can find the Ksithigarba practice, updates on Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup's health as well as more reflections on Lama Lhundrup from Geshe Thubten Sherab, Karuna Cayton, Ani Tenzin Jangsem, Jo Hathaway and others at www.mandalamagazine.org.

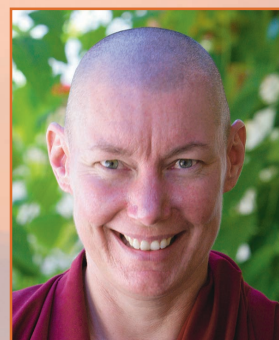
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*The people on the trip were all kind,
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