

THE STORIES & WORDS OF GREAT BUDDHIST MASTERS

VOLUME 1



A MANDALA EBOOK

FPMT

The Stories & Words of Great Buddhist Masters

Volume 1

A Mandala Ebook

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Cover image: Based on a thangka of the life of Je Tsongkhapa; photo by Piero Sirianni.

Mandala/FPMT, Inc., 1632 SE 11th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214 USA; fpmt.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[1. Remarkable Meetings with Lama Yeshe: Encounters with a Tibetan Mystic](#), by Glenn H. Mullin, Mandala September–October 1995

[2. Autobiography of a Yogi as a Child](#), by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Mandala November–December 1995

[3. The Mahasiddha Je Tsongkhapa](#), by Lama Thubten Yeshe, Mandala November–December 1995

[4. An Interview with Geshe Lhundup Sopa](#), Mandala November–December 1996

[5. Transforming Suffering into Pure Joy: A Talk by Ribur Rinpoche](#), Mandala March–April 1997

[6. A Kalachakra Master: An Interview with Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche](#), Mandala September–December 1998

[7. Obituary for Geshe Yeshe Tobden](#), by Massimo Corona, Mandala November–December 1999

[8. The Life of a Hidden Meditator: Choden Rinpoche](#), Mandala July–August 2000

[About the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition \(FPMT\)](#)

Introduction

Over the past two decades of our existence, *Mandala* magazine has been honored to share the stories of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist masters. These lamas occupy a special place in the history of Tibetan Buddhism as they are part of the generation of monks who lived through the Chinese takeover of Tibet. These incredible practitioners did not let the trauma and disruption of the period interfere with their devotion to the Buddhadharma. Instead, they went on to become teachers for a younger generation of Buddhists, both within the rebuilt Tibetan monastic system in India and within the growing international community of Western Dharma students.

We've chosen the articles, interviews and teachings that follow in this ebook with the hope that readers will be both educated about the experiences of the Gelug teachers that may be familiar to them as well as inspired to develop and deepen their own practices.

Because *Mandala* has been blessed with so many opportunities to talk to and hear stories of these precious teachers, we are releasing the anthologized pieces in two volumes. *The Stories & Words of Great Buddhist Masters, Volume 1* is what you see before you, and draws from the issues of *Mandala* published 1995–2000. We plan to release *Volume 2* in September 2016, which will share stories published 2001 to the present. We hope you enjoy these moving and inspiring stories, teachings and interviews.

1. Remarkable Meetings with Lama Yeshe: Encounters with a Tibetan Mystic

By Glenn H. Mullin

Mandala September–October 1995

Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) began teaching Western students in India and Nepal in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This led him to establish the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) in 1975 with Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the organization's current spiritual director. Canadian Glenn H. Mullin studied Buddhadharma in India in the 1970s. He describes his experiences meeting with Lama Yeshe.

Buddhism uses the simile of a blue lotus to represent events of extraordinary beauty, wonder and magic. The blue lotus appears but rarely, and always as an omen of great enlightenment activity, of a turning point in human civilization, when someone of incomparable spiritual genius appears and inspires mankind to break free from its habitual circular patterns of movement and stretch upward to new horizons of experience. When Lama Yeshe walked this earth, blue lotus flowers blossomed everywhere.

I first met him in 1972. It was a warm October morning in Dharamsala, and I had been studying meditation in the Tibetan Library for several months. Word went out that a great Tibetan lama from Nepal was in town, and that Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama's junior tutor, had asked him to give a talk on Dharma to Western students. Fifty or so of us – the entire Western student body in Dharamsala at the time – waited in the teaching room for him to arrive. The door opened, and we beheld a small elf-like creature standing there, a wide and somewhat mischievous smile lighting up his face, his eyes twinkling like the first evening star.

I say he was physically small, but it took some years of knowing him to decide on the matter. That first day it was impossible to tell. One moment he seemed incredibly tiny, and the next to completely fill the doorway. I had the impression that he was looking exclusively at me, but later learned that each of us had the same sense of being the exclusive focus of his attention.

And then he began to move. It wasn't a walk, really, because his feet didn't seem to be in action. It was somewhere between a shuffle and a glide, carrying him across the room to the teaching throne. He sat down, looked at us again, and began to chant the Muni mantra.

Words cannot express the sound that emanated from him. It was as though each individual sound wave was an explosion, as clearly defined as a wave on the ocean, and as explosive as a firecracker going off an inch from my ear. My body started shaking so hard that I thought an earthquake had struck. I don't mean that metaphorically. Dharamsala is an earthquake zone, and I had already experienced several tremors during my residency on the mountain. It was so intense that I had to put my hands on the floor to steady myself. Earthquakes can be scary things. "Calm yourself, Glenn," I said to myself. "Dharamsala tremors usually last only a second or two." But it continued.

The lama sat there chanting, seemingly oblivious to the danger we were in. I wanted to jump and shout an alarm, to scream out words saying that we should all leave the building before it was flattened. I tossed my eyes to the water bowls on the altar to check how intense the quake was. To my amazement, the water was utterly still. I looked back at Lama Yeshe. His eyes were on me, like suns blazing across a thousand universes.

Well, I thought to myself, so this is what Tsongkhapa meant when he said that, on meeting with the guru, some people clutch at their breast in fear.

Two and a half months later I left Dharamsala on pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places. The first planned stop on my itinerary was Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment. Before leaving I asked my philosophy teacher, Geshe Ngawang Dargey, if there was anything in particular that I should do while in Bodh Gaya. Geshe-la replied, "The Dalai Lama's senior tutor, Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, will be giving some special teachings there. Visit him and ask his advice." Therefore shortly after arriving I made my way to the main temple and requested an audience with Kyabje Rinpoche. The meeting was set for the next day. I entered the room, offered the traditional three prostrations, and popped the question. Kyabje Rinpoche picked up his little box with his divination dice, threw the dice a few times, and then replied, "In a few days I'm giving tantric initiation into the Yamantaka mandala. If you think you can do a few of the mantras every day, come to it."

I didn't know much about tantra at that point in my spiritual career, but the thought of receiving initiation of directly from the Dalai Lama's senior tutor, a lama legendary for his learning, wisdom and accomplishment, spurred me to take on the commitment. No translation was to be provided, so we five Westerners who were being permitted to attend the two-day ceremony would be more like sleeping dogs than active participants. This didn't dissuade us. At the end of the first day Kyabje Rinpoche had a young monk tell us that we should all watch our dreams that night, and that they would be significant. I knew nothing about the Yamantaka mandala until that evening, and had never even seen a photograph of it; yet from the moment of falling asleep until I awoke the next morning I received a most intense and remarkable introductory course. And it strongly involved Lama Yeshe.

The dream began with me sitting in a room reading a book. I remember being in a rather mundane state of mind in the beginning, but by the time I came to the end of the first chapter my sense of presence had undergone a distinct transformation. At one point the entire universe suddenly dissolved into light, and there was just me sitting in a chamber of light, my eyes locked in awe to the words on the pages. Each passage filled me with a wave of ecstasy, like being tickled within every cell in my body by a feather made of light that swept up and down. I would read a passage, and then be so overwhelmed with a sense of profundity, wonder and awe that the joy would wash over me like a great wave, totally encompassing every aspect of my being. The joy was so intense that I rolled over and over on the dream floor, laughing like a mad man and clutching the book to my breast as though my life depended upon it. The night seemed like a million eons, as I plunged deeper and deeper into the text, alternating between reading and being overcome by an ecstasy that hurled me into a realm of uncontrollable laughter and bliss. Again and again billions of Yamantakas would fly at me like snowflakes driven by a wild wind, melt into me, and fill me with joy.

By early dawn I had almost completed the book. Somewhere in the process the bliss and awe became so intense that my entire being seemed to contract into a single impulse, as though I were the smallest, most dense speck of substance in existence. This seemed to last for an immeasurable period of time; and then again millions of mandalas dissolved into me, followed by a massive explosion. The only image that conveys the experience is that of having an atom bomb of bliss explode at the center of one's body, with no loss of consciousness. My body expanded outward at an incredible speed, until it filled the vast extent of space. I had the distinct sense in my dream of having achieved enlightenment.

It occurred to me that I did not yet know the authorship of this most astounding book I was reading. There were a few pages left in it, but I could not contain my curiosity, and skipped to the colophon at the end. The words stated, "Composed by Lama Thubten Yeshe."

In the morning I awoke, and my dream enlightenment evaporated. Nonetheless I had the distinct sense that a subtle shift in my center of gravity had taken place.

Such was my second encounter with Lama Yeshe.

For the remainder of the 12 years that I lived in Dharamsala, I met Lama many times. He usually came to town twice a year: once in the spring to attend the Dalai Lama's annual Losar teachings and initiations; and then again in the autumn in order to make meditation retreat. He always met with the Dalai Lama and the Dalai Lama's two gurus in order to seek their advice on his own teaching activities around the world.

During the 1970s His Holiness would give one public discourse in the main temple in Dharamsala, and then a more exclusive tantric teaching in his private chapel. His teaching style in the private discourse would be to stop at subtle passages and challenge the senior abbots, tulkus and geshe to debate with him on possible interpretations. One year he taught Tsongkhapa's commentary to the Heruka Chakrasamvara tantra, entitled *Throwing Light on Hidden Meanings*. One particular passage brought him to a halt, and he called for interpretations. None of the dozen or so attempts that were forthcoming seemed to impress him, and he easily dispensed with them by means of a few debate movements. After half an hour or so His Holiness chuckled and said, "Well, we have the abbots of both Gyume and Gyuto tantric colleges here, but nobody seems to be able to figure out this line." He then suggested that for the moment the interpretation offered by Bakula Rinpoche be tentatively accepted, but that everyone should regard the point as unsettled. He then continued with his reading.

Lama Yeshe was not an abbot, tulku or geshe, and therefore was not seated in a front row. Nonetheless he waved to His Holiness in order to indicate that he wanted to offer a suggestion on the matter. "I think it's just a spelling mistake," he said.

His Holiness asked, "Well then, where is it?" Nobody answered, and so eventually His Holiness commented, "If we can't say what the mistake is, then we can't say it's a mistake. We might just as well go back to Bakula's interpretation." He then again began to read on. A moment later Tara Tulku waved at His Holiness. "I agree with Lama Yeshe," he said. "It's a spelling mistake." Tara Tulku then proceeded to point out how it was the participle *ni*, located between the auxiliary verb and main verb, and that this should read as *mi*. *Mi* is a negation, thus 100 percent turning the meaning of the sentence from a positive to a negative. His Holiness burst into laughter, looked at Lama Yeshe and said, "Today this yogi from Nepal has put all our greatest scholars to shame."

I relate this story because during his life Lama Yeshe became renowned as a great meditator and mystic; but in scriptural learning he could stand with the best.

In 1977 I went to visit Kyabje Ling Rinpoche in order to check a few obscure points in a text I was translating. When I arrived at his house his attendant told me, "You can go in, but keep the audience to about half an hour, because he has a monk in with him at the moment." I entered Kyabje Rinpoche's room, and was delighted to see that the visitor monk was none other than Lama Yeshe. I put a dozen or so questions to Kyabje Rinpoche, and he answered all of them without difficulty. Then one passage came up on which he expressed doubt. He asked Lama Yeshe for his opinion. Lama at first hesitated to speak, for Kyabje Rinpoche was the Ganden Tripa, the official head of the Gelugpa, and thus the final authority on matters of scriptural interpretation; but Rinpoche would have none of it, and began forcing Lama to argue with him on the passage. Then for 15 minutes they both forgot my presence, and spun off in a traditional debate on the

passage. They then burst into laughter; Lama looked at me and said, “It probably means ...,” and gave me their conclusion.

After my audience I sat and meditated in the field above Rinpoche’s house. A couple of hours later Lama came walking along the path. His health looked terrible, and he leaned heavily on his cane as he moved. He saw me, and came over and sat with me. At the time we were all worried about his health; he had had a bad heart for years, and in 1974 some doctors in America had told him that if he didn’t have an operation he would be dead within three months. He had telegraphed Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche for advice, and had been told that it was better for him to rely upon his meditation. I asked him how his health was holding up. He laughed and replied, “In 1974 the American doctors told me I’d be dead in three months. When I went back the next year they looked at me and said, ‘What! You again! You not dead yet?’ They said the same thing when I visited them in ’76, and then again this year. So I don’t know. Something seems to be keeping me alive.”

A few weeks later I visited him in his meditation hut at Tushita on the mountain above Dharamsala. He was just completing a retreat. When I entered the room he stood up on his bed, jumped over the table in front of it as nimbly as would a twelve-year-old boy, rushed over to me, and touched my forehead to his. “I tell you a secret, baby,” he said. “The more meditation, the more happy.” His walking stick was nowhere to be seen. He stuffed my pockets with some Hayagriva healing pills that he had made during his retreat and sent me on my way.

My physical encounters with Lama were always magical, enlightening and inspiring. They remain as vivid as though they had occurred only a few hours ago. Each one of them left me with some lesson in spiritual living. Yet even more remarkable were his appearances in my dreams.

Perhaps the most amazing was a dream that occurred the last day of my first Yamantaka retreat. In my dream I was sitting on my meditation cushion, when I heard a sound from the far corner of the room. I looked over, and there was Lama. He was dressed in his yellow under-robles, and looking at me intensely. A black nun entered the room, and the two began caressing each other. I was utterly shocked, for they both were ordained, and thus held vows of celibacy. He glanced over at me again, his eyes burning into me like sunlight concentrated through a magnifying glass. Then, without looking away, he slowly pulled the nun toward him, and the two sat in sexual union. His gaze never left me for a moment, but his face began slowly to transform, becoming ever more passionate and wrathful, until he had become Yamantaka. The black nun similarly transformed, although she wasn’t paying any attention to me at all. Both of them were emitting deep growls of laughter. Then he very slowly and intently placed one of his hands to his face, inserted two fingers into one of his eye-sockets, and ripped out the eyeball. The empty socket blazed with light, and droplets of blood spilled out from it. The other eye held its gaze intensely upon me. Then he

reached out and placed the extracted, bloody eyeball in my hand. It was hot, and melted into my palm.

I awoke from the dream, my body covered in perspiration. I looked down at the palm of my right hand. A blister the size of a marble had formed where the eyeball had been placed.

The great beings, it is said, live for as long as the meritorious energy of the trainees remains strong. When the meritorious energy wanes, they pass away in order to give an example of impermanence to their disciples, and to inspire the world with a sense of the transmission of responsibility from one generation to another.

Lama's passing certainly was a combination of the two. In Europe there was bickering in one of his Dharma centers, even squabbling over property rights. As the scriptures put it, it was a bad omen, "... like a vulture in a peacock garden." I was passing through London in late 1983, when the bad omens were at their worst. Those close to Lama were extremely worried, but there seemed to be no way to turn the flow of events.

Geshe Rabten, one of Lama's childhood gurus, was approached by one of Lama's Australian monk disciples for a divination on the matter. Geshe-la replied, "If he lives until the New Year sunrise, he'll live for another 12 years." Geshe-la recommended that a number of prayers and rituals be done in order to increase merits and mitigate obstacles. Unfortunately the monk mentioned this to Lama, who commanded him not to have the rituals done. He passed away shortly before the New Year sunrise.

Later when the Australian monk related the story to Lama Zopa, Lama Zopa wept and said, "How I wish you would have spoken to me about Geshe Rabten's advice, and not to Lama."

Yet even the darkest clouds also have their blessings, bringing shade from the hot sun and releasing rain that brings new life and beauty to the planet. I happened to be in Dharamsala some two and a half years after Lama's passing, when a young Spanish boy was first brought to Dharamsala for testing and certification as Lama Yeshe's reincarnation. He was only 14 months old at the time and had just learned to walk. When he was brought to the house of the late Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, where I had witnessed Kyabje Rinpoche and Lama debate over a scriptural passage almost a decade earlier, the child spontaneously prostrated to Rinpoche's throne. On entering the temple room at Tushita where Lama had frequently received people in audience, the child instantly ran up to the altar and, from among the many images on the altar, picked up the statue that had been Lama's favorite. He then proceeded to walk around the room and touch it to the heads of all who were present as an act of blessing them, much in the same manner as Lama had frequently touched it to the heads of those who had come to visit him.

A traditional Tibetan account of a great master usually concludes by saying something to the effect that the deeds of the mighty bodhisattvas are beyond ordinary comprehension, and that what can be put into words is like the drops of water on a blade of grass compared to the waters of the oceans.

This certainly was true of the life of Lama Yeshe. One could easily write a 1,000-page book on the subject of a single meeting with him. He was born of humble stock and was never recognized as a tulku; but he became a teacher to tulkus. He completed his geshe studies, but chose quiet meditation on the mountains over the prestige that results from standing for the geshe exam. He held no exalted position in the Tibetan spiritual hierarchy, but rose to become a mahasiddha in a garden of siddhas. His life was an example of the purity, freedom, power and dignity that is aroused by application to the Buddha's teachings, and he dedicated it to the attempt to inspire these qualities within others.

2. Autobiography of a Yogi as a Child

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Mandala November–December 1995

Lama Zopa Rinpoche, FPMT's spiritual director, is the reincarnation of the Sherpa Nyingma yogi Kunsang Yeshe, the Lawudo Lama. Rinpoche was born in 1946 in Thami, not far from the cave at Lawudo, in the Mount Everest region of Nepal, where his predecessor meditated for the last 20 years of his life. From time to time whilst giving teachings at various centers around the world, Rinpoche would tell stories of his childhood: in Thami, then in Tibet, where he went when he was 10, and finally India, where he first met Lama Thubten Yeshe, with whom he would remain as heart disciple until Lama passed away in 1984.

I don't remember what my father looked like. I think he died when my mother was carrying my brother, Sangye, and I was a baby. People say that he had a beard and didn't speak much; they describe him as a placid person who didn't get upset very easily. I don't know whether he was ever a monk, but I was told that he was very good at reading texts and doing pujas for other people.

My father was sick for some time before he died. One day after coming back into the house from working in the field, my mother saw my father sitting quietly by the fireplace. She called to him, "Father, do you want anything?" but he did not reply. His body was upright; it is possible that he was in meditation, but I think my mother didn't realize this. She went to tell her friends, but they didn't know what to do. She should have asked a lama, but I think her understanding was quite limited. Her friends must have thought he was dead, so they told her to take the body outside and burn it.

My mother didn't go to the cremation because it is not the Sherpa custom. I think it is possible that my father was not actually dead when he was cremated, that his mind had not yet departed from his body. The people who burned the body told my mother, "He looks so alive. He doesn't look dead."

All I remember of my father are the clothes he left in the house. As very small children, my sister, brother and I would all sleep together at night in our father's *chuba*, which was lined with animal fur. Sometimes we would say to each other, "This belonged to our father."

When my father was alive, our family was a little better off than other families. We had many possessions, though according to Western standards of living we were probably only rich in garbage. However, after my father died, because my mother was in debt, our possessions were

taken away by force. She had great difficulties, especially after I was born, when many of our animals – *dris*, goats and sheep – died.

My mother had to take care of all the work in the fields and then go to the forest to collect the firewood, which took many hours. Only my sister could help her. My brother and I just played in the field all day with stones and pieces of wood, coming back home when my mother shouted from the window that our food was ready.

When I was very small my best friend was a boy who could not speak. Every day we would play together. He and I liked to play games involving rituals. Near our house was a large rock with mantras carved into it. I would sit a little way up the rock and pretend that I was giving initiations, while the other boys had to try to take them. I didn't know any prayers, so I would just make some kind of noise and pretend I was praying. (Actually, I think I am still playing like that now.) We also pretended to do pujas. Some boys would imitate the sound of cymbals, while others would be the benefactors. We would mix earth and water on small flat stones and the benefactors would serve this as food to the other boys.

Because there were some rumors going around about my past life and because I had a strong wish to become a monk, when I was three or four years old my mother sent me to one of my uncles, a monk in the local Thami monastery, to learn the alphabet. I was carried there on someone's back.

I was very naughty at that time and only wanted to play, so I wouldn't stay in the monastery. My uncle used to teach me the alphabet outside in the courtyard in the sun, and when he went inside to the kitchen to cook our food I ran away to my mother's house, which was very close to the monastery. I was very small and alone. Like most mountain children, I didn't walk slowly, but like water falling I ran down to my mother's house, never stopping to rest along the way. My mother would then scold me and send me back to the monastery. I escaped to my home quite a number of times.

Because of this, my mother sent me with another uncle to Rolwaling, in a much more secluded part of Solu Khumbu. I was carried there on top of the luggage. There is no way I could escape from Rolwaling to my home because you have to cross very steep and very dangerous snow mountains for two days. Sometimes when people were crossing the steep snow slopes, there would be an avalanche and all the people would disappear.

At one point, when I could write Tibetan letters by myself (we didn't have pens, so we wrote on pieces of paper with charcoal), I wrote to my mother without my uncle knowing about it. I had a sneaky mind, so because I wanted to go home I told my mother that she must write to say that I should come back home. I gave the letter to someone who was traveling to Thami, but a funny thing happened. When he reached my mother's place, he could not find the letter. He had carried

it in his leather shoes, and he must have dropped it when he stopped along the way to shake the snow out of his shoes.

With my uncle teacher I went back and forth between Thami and Rolwaling three or four times. He carried me on his back and gave my food, which he had prepared before we left home. As we walked he passed the cooked meat and other food back to me. Only once was there an avalanche, a small one. The luggage was scattered all over the place and the people fell way down the slope, but they weren't worried. They were singing songs when they came up to collect their things.

There was a very dangerous mountain with water running down it and rocks, huge and small, constantly falling. The huge rocks would come down *wooroodoo!* and the small rocks would drop *tiing!* There were a lot of different noises. It was terrifying. I don't know why, but every time we had to cross this part we would stop and everyone would drink alcohol, the strongest one made from potatoes. The Sherpas make about 13 different foods from potatoes, which is their main food, and one of the things they make is very strong alcohol. In Solu Khumbu it is the custom that most of the people, including many of the monks, drink alcohol, though there are some who do not drink.

So everybody would drink some alcohol, then generate heat by rubbing their hands together. They were then able to carry their huge loads across, usually two or three square butter tins, plus their food and blanket and things to sell. Just hoping that it would be all right, they crossed, climbing up through the water and rocks to the top. We went back and forth several times, and somehow no rocks fell while we were crossing. However, every time we were resting and drinking after reaching the top of the mountain on the other side, the rocks would come down *wooroodoo!* Many times I thought, "Oh, somebody will be killed." But every time, the rocks fell right after the last person had crossed. All the way across everybody recited whatever mantras they knew. The main sect in Solu Khumbu is Nyingmapa, so most of the people recited Padmasambhava's mantra with single-pointed concentration.

I don't remember what I did during that time, whether I recited any mantras or not, but I do remember that I was carried by my uncle. Of course, as soon as everybody reached the other side, where there was no danger, all the prayers stopped.

I lived for seven years in Rolwaling. Rolwaling Valley has a river running through it and mountains all around. On one side of the river was a monastery, with a gompa surrounded by other houses in which lived my uncle, then a fully ordained monk, and other married lamas, practitioners who did a lot of retreat but were not monks. There was also a large stupa on some flat ground with a road running through the middle of it.

On the other side of the river was a very nice grassy place where Western trekkers used to camp. In the summertime and in the autumn, tourists would come to Rolwaling - not all the time, just sometimes. Sherpa porters would guide them there and sometimes bring them to my teacher's house, or sometimes we would go down to see them in their tents. Once or twice I went there to see them.

The bridge crossing the river to that spot was just two tree trunks tied together. You had to walk on that, and it wasn't very wide. One day I went to give some potatoes to the Westerners in their camp - I don't remember who they were. My teacher told me not to go, but I think I pushed him; somehow I really wanted to go to give the Westerners potatoes. So, my teacher put some potatoes in a brass container used for eating rice or drinking *chang*, the local beer, and off I went, alone.

I walked onto the bridge. The river was quite wide and when I reached the middle of it, in my view the bridge tilted, and I fell into the water. My head came up, then went down again. According to what my teacher told me later, at first I was facing upriver, then later downriver. I was carried along by the river, with my head coming up from time to time. All the time I was getting closer and closer to danger, to where the river was very, very deep.

One time when my head came up, I saw my teacher running towards the river from the monastery, which was quite far away. There was some flat ground, then a huge mountain with the monastery a little way up it. I saw my teacher running down the mountain to the flat ground, holding up the simple cloth pants he was wearing.

At that time, the thought came into my mind, "Now what people call 'Lawudo Lama' is going to die. This is going to end." I did not have much understanding of Dharma, and I had no idea of emptiness, but this thought just came. There was no fear. If death came now it would be difficult for me, but at that time my mind was completely comfortable. There was no fear at all - just the thought, "What people call 'Lawudo Lama' is going to die."

I was about to reach very deep water where it would have been very difficult for my teacher to catch me, when he finally grabbed me and pulled me out. I was dripping wet. I'm not sure, but I think he said, "I told you not to go!" I think the fact that I fell into the water and dropped everything, the container and the potatoes, must be a shortcoming of not listening to my teacher. I later heard from some people who were watching that one of the Western tourists came with his camera and was taking pictures as I was being carried along by the water.

I stayed in Rolwaling seven years, memorizing prayers and reading texts, including all the many hundreds of volumes of the Buddha's teachings, the *Kangyur*, and the commentaries by the Indian pandits, the *Tengyur*. Lay people would ask us to read these as a puja, so my teacher would read all day long. I don't know how long they took to read - many months, I think. Sometimes I went

outside to go to the toilet and would spend a lot of time out there, just hanging around. I didn't return to the reading very quickly.

After seven years, when I was about 10, I went to Tibet with my two uncles. The reason for our journey was to visit another of my uncles, who was living at Pagri, a major trading center. First we walked from Rolwaling to Thami, then from Thami to Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, and finally to Pagri. I have an idea that the journey took us six months, walking every day. Because I was quite small, I didn't have to carry anything; my uncles carried everything.

I spent seven days at Tashi Lhunpo, the Panchen Lama's monastery, but from the time we left Solu Khumbu, my heart was set on going to study at the greatest Nyingma monastery in Tibet, Mindoling, because all the Sherpa monasteries are Nyingma. My plan was to go to this monastery and practice. There were many other monasteries along the way, but somehow I had no particular desire to live in them.

Earlier, when I was seven or eight years old, I had read Milarepa's life-story three or four times, mainly to practice reading the Tibetan letters. Somehow at that time my mind was very clear, and I had a strong desire in my heart to be a really good practitioner by finding an infallible guru like Marpa, just as Milarepa had.

At Tashi Lhunpo I met Gyaltsen, a Sherpa monk who was like a *dopdop*; he had a black *shamtab* covered with butter and always carried a long key. He didn't seem to study or go to pujas, but mainly traveled back and forth between the monastery and the city. My two uncles were there with me and one other Sherpa man.

We didn't go to the pujas, but got into the line of monks to get the money when the pujas finished. I think Gyaltsen probably guided us. On the very last night before we were to leave, Gyaltsen insisted that I stay and become his disciple. I don't think I had any sleep that whole night! I was wondering how I could escape from this because both my uncles agreed that I should stay there and become his disciple. But I had not the slightest desire to become his disciple. I couldn't think of how to escape, of what I could do the next day. Fortunately, the next morning, my uncles finally agreed that I should go with them to Pagri.

My two uncles, my uncle who lived in Pagri, and one of his relatives who was a nun, all went to Lhasa to visit the monasteries and make offerings. While they were away, I just wandered around Pagri, wearing an old red chuba and an old hat. Somehow I had the karma to become a monk because one day, outside my uncle's house, I met a tall monk who was the manager of one of Domo Geshe's monasteries. It must be due to some past karma that he immediately asked me,

“Do you want to be my student?” and I said, “Yes, okay.” I asked him, “Can you be like Marpa?” and he said, “Yes.”

Because my uncles were away he talked to my uncle’s wife, and she accepted his suggestion. The next day she made a thermos of tea, filled a Bhutanese container made of woven bamboo with round breads (she made very good Tibetan bread, served with a lot of butter) and took me to the monastery where the manager lived, just a few minutes’ walk from where we were living.

In the beginning the manager did not know the story of how I was thought to be an incarnation, but somehow he came to hear of it. To make sure, he checked with an oracle. The oracle invoked the main protector related to the monastery and the manager then asked the protector whether the story was true or not. I can remember that the prediction that I was a reincarnated lama given by the protector came in a very powerful way.

When my uncles returned from Lhasa, they wanted me to go back with them to Solu Khumbu. I said that I wouldn’t go back. My second uncle, the one with whom I spent seven years, was very kind – although at that time I didn’t know he was being kind. He beat me.

When I rejected the idea of going back, my other uncle – the one who lived in Tibet and was a businessman – brought out a whole set of new robes with brocade, which he had bought in Lhasa, horse decorations everything! He piled everything up and said: “If you go back to Solu Khumbu I will give you all these things; otherwise you won’t get anything.” Somehow I didn’t have much interest in those kinds of things at that time. I don’t remember having any strong attraction to the things he was going to give me if I agreed to go to Solu Khumbu.

Because I rejected the idea of going back to Solu Khumbu, my manager went to check with one of the most powerful men in that area, a secretary to one very rich and famous family, great benefactors of Domo Geshe Rinpoche’s monastery. When my manager asked his point of view, the secretary said that I should be sent back to Solu Khumbu.

I then had to go before the district judge. Before the court case I was locked inside a very dark shrine room. The local benefactors actually thought I had been locked inside a cowshed; the ladies who knew me would visit me and push sweets and other things for me to eat into the room through a small hole.

The district judge arrive and I was called in front of him, naked (I don’t know why I was naked – I’ve forgotten that part of the story), and because the shrine room where I was kept was very dark and very, very cold, my whole body was shaking. The judge said that I had the right to make my own decision as to whether to stay or go.

So I spent three years in Pagri, doing pujas in people's houses every day, and I took *getsul* ordination there in the monastery of Domo Geshe Rinpoche, who is regarded as an embodiment of Lama Tsongkhapa. I wasn't a monk before that. I saw many monasteries, but somehow because of my karma, I became a monk only in that Gelugpa monastery.

In March 1959, the Chinese took over Tibet, but because that area is close to India, there was no immediate danger. Later that year I was instructed to do my first retreat, on Lama Tsongkhapa Guru Yoga, at a nearby monastery called Pema Chöling, a branch of Domo Geshe's monastery. I didn't know anything about the meditation; I just recited the prayer and some *Migtsemas*. I think I finished the retreat, but I don't know how I did it or what mantras I counted.

At the end of 1959, when the threat of torture was imminent, we decided to escape to India. One day we heard that the Chinese would come to Pema Chöling in two days. That same night we very secretly left. We had to cross only one mountain to reach Bhutan. One night, because it was very wet and we could not see the road clearly, we had a little trouble, sinking into the mud and slipping over. There were nomads at the border. If they had seen us, it would have been difficult to escape because we had heard that some of them were spies, but even though their dogs were barking, the nomads did not come out of their tents.

Eventually we reached India. We went to Buxa Duar, in the north, where the Indian government housed the monks from Sera, Ganden and Drepung Monasteries who wanted to continue their studies, along with monks from the other sects. All the four sects were put together in that one place. During the time of the British, Buxa was used as a concentration camp, with both Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru being imprisoned there. Where Mahatma Gandhi had been imprisoned became the nunnery, and where Nehru had been imprisoned became Sera Monastery's prayer hall.

Because there was a branch of Domo Geshe's monastery in Darjeeling, my plan was to go there. However, the head policeman at Buxa sent all the other monks in my group to Darjeeling, but for some reason stopped me. He said one other monk should stay with me in Buxa. It was because this policeman didn't allow me to go to Darjeeling that I came to study there at Buxa. I don't know why he stopped me from going to Darjeeling - it wasn't because he received a bribe.

At Buxa I, as well as many other monks, caught tuberculosis because of the poor conditions and climate. I was invited to Delhi by the second British nun, who was called Freda Bedi (the first English nun died in Darjeeling). She visited Buxa, where all the monks lived together, and she visited especially all the incarnate lamas. She invited many of the incarnate lamas to a school she had started to teach them English. Hindi was also taught, but I think her main aim was to teach English.

I spent six months in Delhi, and it was at that time that I developed TB. First I caught smallpox and had to stay 15 days in the smallpox hospital, which was very far from the school. When I came back, I got TB, and then went to the TB hospital. I cried three days in that hospital. The reason I cried was that there was no opportunity to learn English. At that time I somehow had a great ambition to learn English, so I cried for three days and wouldn't speak to anyone, not even the Indian boys staying in the same ward.

When I went into hospital, I had to change into hospital clothes, pants and a shirt. In the break-times, I would go outside, where I could see the passing traffic through the fence. I would stretch my legs towards the fence, put my English book between my legs, and then I would cry. The Indian boys would gather around and tell me, "Lama, don't cry. Don't be upset!" but I didn't speak to them for three days.

In the old men's ward I met one very nice Indian man, who agreed to teach me English. I had a book that contained normal conversational English, given to me by Thubten Tsering, His Holiness Ling Rinpoche's secretary. I liked this book and I used to go to see this Indian man in his bedroom and learn some of the words. Then I got better.

I stayed six month in Delhi then at the end had to do an English examination. They also arranged for us to have an interview with the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He was very, very old and his skin was kind of blue. He was lying down, but on a kind of chair, not on a bed.

I then returned to Buxa to continue to study. I did a little debating, but more like playing. Unfortunately I don't think I have created much karma to study whole texts. I have received teachings on some of the philosophical texts, so some imprints have been left on my mind.

At that time I think I spent more time learning English, but in a useless way, because I tried to collect and memorize English words the way we learn Tibetan texts. I once thought to learn the whole dictionary by heart. The Tibetan way of learning involves a lot of memorization, so I believed that if I memorized a lot of words, it would be okay. I didn't know that you have to concentrate on the accent and train in speaking. In any case there was no opportunity to practice in Buxa, apart from using a few words if you met some Indian officials. I memorized many, many words from different books, and all the *Time* magazines. I would forget and then memorize them again, forget and memorize again, forget and memorize again, just as with the Tibetan texts. I spent a lot of time doing this but it was useless; it wasn't the way to learn English.

At Buxa I was taught by Geshe Rabten Rinpoche, whose kindness is responsible for whatever interest in meditation practice I now have. And it is because of the kindness of Geshe Rabten that I recognized my root guru [Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche].

Geshe Rabten taught on emptiness and shamatha meditation, and even though I was very small I was interested. I tried to meditate on my bed after the mosquito net had been put down. I used to meditate on the silver cover of my Tibetan tea bowl, even though I didn't know how. I tried to meditate one-pointedly, but I fell down! I don't know what happened; my whole body fell completely. It happened several times and eventually I gave up. Anyway, in that house there might have been a small impression from a past life. This is why I have some interest in lam-rim, more than in meditation practice.

Anyway, after this Geshe Rabten was very busy and sent me to another teacher from Kham whose name was Yeshe. From this teacher I received the meditation and visualization on *Ganden Lha Gyema* and on the kindness of mother sentient beings from the part of the *Prajñāparamita* scriptures dealing with that subject. There was no text, so the teacher Yeshe had to say it by heart. I hadn't learned Tibetan writing in Tibet, just studied it myself so that I could read, and so I copied everything down. Then this teacher Yeshe wanted to lead a different life, so he left Buxa to wander around and stay in various places in India.

There was a monk in my class who most people know as Chomphel - he was Kopan's cook for many years. Along with Lama Pasang and other Tibetan monks, he was taking teachings from Lama Yeshe. At that stage I was only receiving teachings from Geshe Rabten and then only when he wasn't busy, as he had many disciples and had to teach many different texts to different classes.

After this other teacher Yeshe went away, Geshe Rabten had me taught by another geshe who is not here now, and later had the idea for me to go and take teachings from a Tibetan monk, Geshe Thubten. I was happy to have teachings from the geshe, but somehow I was reluctant to go and receive teachings from Lama Yeshe, whom Chomphel talked about.

At that time Chomphel used to be the leader of my class and kept pushing me to go and take teachings from Lama Yeshe. He used to go outside for a walk, for relaxation, and one day we started to walk outside the camp towards Lama's house. But I had no offering. When we came to the mango tree where there were seats, I said, "I want to go back," but he pushed, so I went a little further.

I stopped again and again, saying, "No, I don't want to go," but he kept pushing me. It was quite far to where Lama Yeshe lived on the mountain, about half an hour or an hour's walk.

Even when we reached the hut I wanted to go back, partly because I had brought no offerings. When you first make contact with the guru it is very important to perform the offerings correctly. How many teachings you receive depends on that; so much depends on that, as you know from the stories of Milarepa. For this reason I didn't receive many teachings at Buxa.

Chomphel had brought a bowl with some rice and a few rupees, together with a very poor, old offering scarf. He went in first to ask if Lama Yeshe would receive me. I think Lama Yeshe asked, "Have you received permission from Geshe Rabten?" and he replied, "Yes."

I had asked Geshe Rabten which teacher I should go to for teachings, but he didn't say which one. He was a very skillful teacher, knowing exactly what was best for the disciples.

On my first day I sat on the same bed as Lama Yeshe because of having the name "incarnate," and the others sat on the floor. The teaching was about cause and effect. I didn't understand anything at all - I think because I went with a bad motivation. I thought, "Why can't Lama Yeshe teach more slowly?" Although the others could understand, I couldn't.

Then on the second day I could understand a little better. I think that's because I have been guided by Lama Yeshe in many lifetimes. Even though I had no strong wish, there was a strong force, karma, between Lama Yeshe and me; there has definitely been contact in past lives. He hasn't only helped and guided me in this life, but he planted seeds in my mind in many past lifetimes. It is clear that all the happiness of the past, present and future depends on the guru.

3. The Mahasiddha Je Tsongkhapa

By Lama Thubten Yeshe

Mandala November–December 1995

“Lama Tsongkhapa’s special field is tantra, particularly the illusory body,” said FPMT founder Lama Thubten Yeshe in one of his last major teachings before he passed away in 1984. “The way he describes everything and gives meditation instructions has distinctive characteristics; it is incredibly clean-clear. When you understand them, you really get something helpful, and devotion arises. While giving this teaching, I have been feeling especially grateful to Lama Je Tsongkhapa. Because he explains the Six Yogas of Naropa in such a profound way, I feel much devotion to him. The way he puts things together, there is no question – he must be a mahasiddha.”

In the Western intellectual world, the common interpretation is that Lama Je Tsongkhapa was just a professor. Western people do not recognize him as a great yogi, a great practitioner, a mahasiddha. Actually, Lama Tsongkhapa taught and wrote more on tantra than on sutra, but because he did not show his mahasiddha aspect, Westerners get the impression that he was only an intellectual. Some people think that Gelugpas, the followers of Lama Tsongkhapa, don’t do non-conceptual meditation, for example. They think that only the other traditions meditate in this way and that Lama Tsongkhapa negated this point and taught only intellectual, analytical meditation. I have heard Westerners say, “Gelugpas are always intellectualizing, always squeezing their brains.” That’s not true. You know it is not true.

Lama Tsongkhapa was already a great meditator while he was still a teenager. And from the time he was a teenager, he did not have sicknesses as we do. When he had a small problem, he would cure himself. When there was a flood or an avalanche, he would say a prayer, and everything would stop. If you read his biography, you can see that Lama Tsongkhapa was a great mahasiddha.

The Monlam Festival, the great prayer festival held in Lhasa after the Tibetan New Year, was started by Lama Je Tsongkhapa. The monks and nuns and lay people of all the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism came together to make offerings and say prayers. At the first festival there were countless butter lamp offerings. Anyway, one day the many thousands of butter lamps in the temple became one mass of flame. Soon the fire was out of control, and everybody was scared that the temple might burn down. They ran to Lama Tsongkhapa crying, “Your offerings are going to burn down the temple!” Lama Tsongkhapa sat down, went into samadhi meditation, and suddenly all the flames were extinguished, blown out by one wind. This happened because of his inner fire meditation. We Tibetans consider that when you can control the four elements of your own nervous system through inner fire meditation, you can also control the outside elements. Lama Tsongkhapa didn’t need an ordinary fire engine; with his inner fire engine, the flames totally

vanished. This proves that Lama Tsongkhapa was a powerful realized being. Also at that time he perceived the 84 mahasiddhas in space above Lhasa.

Lama Tsongkhapa had no shortage of telepathic power. One time he was staying in a small retreat hut maybe thirty minutes' walk from the place where he later advised Sera Monastery be built. Suddenly he left, and nobody knew why. That same day some people sent by the Emperor of China, who had heard of Lama Tsongkhapa's fame, arrived with an invitation for him to come to China, but he was nowhere to be found. No one knew this was going to happen that day, but Lama Tsongkhapa knew, and he escaped over the mountain.

This shows that Lama Tsongkhapa had telepathic power, but it is also a good example of his perfect renunciation. He vomited at the thought of worldly pleasure. Can you imagine us in that situation? For sure we would accept the invitation! Me - I couldn't even resist the invitation of some rich man to come to visit him. Although Lama Tsongkhapa was incredibly famous, he never went to distracting places; he stayed in isolated places in the snow mountains. But we go to the most confused places. This shows how we are, that our renunciation is not perfect.

Lama Je Tsongkhapa had many thousands of disciples all over Tibet and constantly received offerings, but he had no bank account, no house, not even one piece of land upon which to grow his food. Everything he received, he gave away. He stayed clean-clear. Ganden was Lama Tsongkhapa's monastery, but he stayed there as if he were a guest: he came there, got things, gave them away, then left with nothing. Lama Tsongkhapa is the perfect example of living according to the Dharma.

Two or three years before Lama Tsongkhapa died, the Buddha Manjushri, with whom he had a special relationship, told him, "Now is the time you will die." Suddenly countless buddhas appeared and requested Lama Tsongkhapa not to die and gave him an initiation of boundless energy so that he could stay longer. Then Manjushri predicted that he would live until a certain age.

Shortly before Lama Tsongkhapa died, one of his teeth came out, and everybody saw that it emitted much rainbow light. He gave the tooth to Khedrub Rinpoche, one of his heart sons, but his other disciples said, "Oh, you gave this tooth to Khedrub Rinpoche, but can we have a little bit too?" Lama Tsongkhapa told them to pray for this, so Khedrub Je placed the tooth on the altar. Everyone did many prayers and much meditation. Radiant, rainbow light continued to come from the tooth.

After one week Lama Tsongkhapa said, "Where is my tooth? Bring my tooth here." When he opened the box, they saw that the tooth had become a Tara image surrounded by relic pills. Lama Tsongkhapa gave some of the pills to the disciples who had wanted them. He also predicted that

about 500 years later these relics would go to Bodhgaya. This prediction has come true: although the Chinese destroyed what remained of Lama Je Tsongkhapa's body, some of the relics went to India when Tibetans went into exile.

When Lama Tsongkhapa did die, he did it perfectly. First, he put everything in order. Next, he said to one of his disciples, "Bring a skullcup." He then did the inner offering meditation and took 33 sips of the inner offering. This was a sign that inside he was the Guhyasamaja deity. Finally, sitting in meditation in his full robes, he died. This is what distinguishes a mahasiddha. He doesn't have to announce, "I am a mahasiddha" – his actions prove it. Lama Je Tsongkhapa proved himself.

Can you imagine being able to die deliberately and clean-clear? When we die, we leave a mess. We should motivate and pray that we die like Lama Je Tsongkhapa instead of dying like a cow. This is our human right. Pray that instead of dying depressed, with a miserable expression, you will die blissfully. Try. There is a chance. Resolve, "When I die, as much as possible I will control my emotions and die peacefully." You must motivate, because motivation has power. When your time comes to die, because of your will-power you will remember your prayer. If you don't have strong motivation now, you will end up completely shaking when death comes and everything goes bananas. If you know what to do beforehand, you will remember at the time of death. I am telling you this because I believe it, not because I have realizations.

One time, after Lama Je Tsongkhapa had passed away, Khedrub Je was sad. Lama Tsongkhapa had explained everything thoroughly from beginning to end, from Hinayana to Paramitayana to tantra, the entire path to enlightenment. Thousands and thousands of people had meditated upon his teachings and achieved realizations. Khedrub Je was sad because he was thinking, "Now Lama Je Tsongkhapa's teachings are like lightning, like a mirage; they are disappearing. And unfortunately the Tibetan people are degenerating. He taught people not to cling to the desires of the sensory world, yet people are more grasping and have more desires than ever."

Khedrub Je had reason to feel this; there were many degenerations. He was so sad, and he cried and cried. Then he prayed and offered a mandala. Suddenly Lama Tsongkhapa appeared in youthful aspect on a jeweled throne surrounded by deities, dakas, and dakinis. He said to Khedrub Je, "My son, you shouldn't cry. My principal message to people is to practice the tantric path. Practice this and then give it to qualified people. Instead of crying you should help to do this as much as possible, and that will make me very happy." It's the same with you. If you practice, Lama Tsongkhapa will smile.

Another time, Khedrub Je had some technical questions on tantra but couldn't find anyone to answer them. Again he cried. His heart was breaking. Again he prayed strongly and offered a mandala. Lama Je Tsongkhapa manifested and gave him many teachings and initiations.

At still another time that Khedrub Je cried so hard and prayed so much, Lama Tsongkhapa manifested in a reddish-colored aspect, holding a sword and a skullcup and riding on a tiger. Later he also manifested as Manjushri, and at another time in his usual form but riding a white elephant. Five visions appeared when, for different reasons, Khedrub Je cried and prayed.

Why do I tell you these stories? It is good to know that Lama Je Tsongkhapa was a great yogi, a mahasiddha – there is no question – and that Khedrub Je had such inner realizations that just by calling on him, Lama Tsongkhapa would manifest. You should also understand that Lama Tsongkhapa's principal field was tantra. Even though we are degenerate, we have the chance to hear his way of explaining the tantric path and to try to actualize it. We are so lucky. Even if we do not know much about Buddhist things, if we practice what we do know, Lama Tsongkhapa will be very happy.

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4. An Interview with Geshe Lhundup Sopa

Interview by Ven. Elly van der Pas, Kalleen Mortensen, Mary Bennett and Carl Yoder

Mandala November–December 1996

Geshe Lhundup Sopa is the abbot of the Deer Park Buddhist Center located in the countryside near Madison, Wisconsin, USA. The center site was chosen to host His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who conferred the first Kalachakra initiation given in the West, in 1981. Geshe Sopa fled Tibet in 1959. Earlier that year he had been appointed as one of the Dalai Lama's debate examiners. He completed his philosophical studies in the Tibetan refugee camps of north India, and in 1962 was awarded the highest geshe degree.

Geshe Sopa came to Madison and the University of Wisconsin as a faculty member in 1967, and in 1975 began teaching privately to a small group of students (many of whom had previously studied at Kopan Monastery with Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Thubten Yeshe). He has continued this tradition to date and is currently teaching Nagarjuna's *Friendly Letter to the King*. The center has been fortunate to have teachings from such an eminent scholar as Geshe Sopa and the many great teachers invited by him in the past, including the Dalai Lama, Serkong Rinpoche, Zong Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten, Lati Rinpoche, Geshe Lobsang Tensing.

This interview is compiled from two interviews with Geshe Sopa. The first was conducted by Ven. Elly van der Pas in the spring of 1994 during a visit to Vajrapani Institute in California. The second, in the spring of 1996, was conducted by three interviewers: Kalleen Mortensen, Mary Bennett and Carl Yoder.

When did you first meet Lama Thubten Yeshe?

Geshe Sopa: I met Lama Yeshe in Sera Monastery in Tibet when he was very young, only nine or ten years old. His teacher, Thubten Wangchuk, who had the same teacher as me, Khensur Tobkay Rinpoche, the abbot of Sera Je Monastery, came and suggested Thubten Yeshe become my student.

What was he like when was little?

Oh! [Laughter.]

Was he a good student?

Yes, he was a very good student, and he was a very, very pleasant boy. He had quite a few brothers. I think his uncle was also a monk and he was taking care of him, acting as his father. He was a very

serious student. Some people, when debating, are very shy. They have sharp minds and deep intelligence, but sometimes in a debating situation, they don't do much; they're just too quiet. But some people have no shyness, and are able to debate in a playful way, joking and laughing. That's a very good way, and Lama Yeshe had those qualities, always. Students in the West know Lama was a very pleasant person, and he had the same nature when he was young. Very light and very pleasant.

In Tibet, you don't have classes like public classes here, with tutors who are paid. It is not like that in the monastery. We choose our own teachers – whomever we like in the monastery. Then we request the teacher to teach us. There is no payment. Once the teacher accepts, then the student is a disciple. The teacher always tries to give his students whatever they require, they try to help in many different ways, not just teachings, and personal advice too. You really trust your teacher, and you would ask him for whatever you need. He is the main person the students look to; the person on whom they rely. In Tibet, the spiritual teacher-disciple relationship is so deep and pure; following lam-rim.

Lama Yeshe had several teachers, which is the way in the monastery. My teacher was also his teacher. He was a very humble and good student; respectful of his guru.

What were some of the basic texts he studied with you?

He studied the many Sera Je courses, beginning with *Parchin*, the *Prajñāparamita* texts. Every year he advanced higher and higher in his studies.

Did you come out of Tibet together?

No. At around nine in the morning of the day that I left, he came to my place. He was crying and asking what was going to happen. Of course, I had no idea of what to do, of what to tell him. That day, the Chinese were shooting at the Potala Palace. All the people in the monastery were frightened. So I had nothing much to say to Thubten Yeshe. We were both sad. I told him I hoped we would both be okay. I had heard His Holiness had escaped, so I went that night. I don't know how long he stayed on, maybe a few days.

And when did you meet Lama Zopa Rinpoche?

I think in Buxa, northeast India, where most of the Tibetans went; he was with Thubten Yeshe. Lama Zopa had been at Domo Geshe Rinpoche's place, in Tibet near the border of Bhutan. From there, he was supposed to go to Lhasa, but then because of the problems he was not able to go. At that time in Sera, we knew this young lama was coming – actually, we called him the “Junior Domo Geshe Rinpoche.” Domo Geshe Rinpoche was already there and had taken his geshe degree.

When I escaped, I went to Dalhousie, and then in 1962 I visited Buxa. I saw Thubten Yeshe again there. After I left, he wrote to me from there, telling me how unhappy he was. He was feeling some sense of renunciation and wanted to go and do retreat somewhere. I was concerned about the physical conditions there, and I was also concerned about his starting but not finishing his studies, becoming a geshe. I wrote back, telling him to finish his studies. I don't know if he got the letter, but then I heard that he had left for Darjeeling, taking Thubten Zopa with him.

When did you see them again? In the United States?

I think so. They came in '74 to Madison, Wisconsin. Lama Yeshe had already become famous with Westerners. From Darjeeling he had gone to Nepal with Zina [Rachevsky, his disciple]. They were able to buy Kopan Hill. Lama Yeshe was always saying that in Tibet monasteries were on top of hills, looking down, and this was a nice kind of arrangement. In the '60s, there was the hippie movement and a lot of Westerners were going to Nepal. Lama Yeshe was really useful to these young people, teaching them Buddhism. And the people were beginning to accept. He was very young and enjoyable, always laughing, and people liked him; some loved him. Many people were studying with Lama Yeshe and coming to know him very well. And they were telling others about him.

Were you in contact with Lama Yeshe in 1984 when he was in California, just before his passing?

No. He had already been sick in India before coming to California, but I didn't have time to go to see him. I was thinking I could visit him in California, then he got very sick. And then it was the Tibetan New Year, which was the day he passed. Lama Zopa called me here and told me the situation. Later, I went to Vajrapani Institute for the cremation.

And when his reincarnation, Lama Ösel, came here, wasn't he about two or so?

I think so. He was very, very small the first time he came here, with his mother and father. I enjoyed seeing him. His face looked a little similar to Lama Yeshe and right away I was feeling it was interesting, his way of acting, everything. At first when he came here he prostrated, and of course I thought they probably taught him to prostrate. He talked a little bit and sat there. I gave him a toy. When he was leaving, without anyone telling him, he prostrated a couple of times, fully stretched out on the ground. For a long time he didn't get up. [Laughter.] He just lay there. And one time in the temple, Lama Zopa and I were doing a long-life puja. At the time they were giving me a mandala, Lama Ösel was crawling up the steps to me on the throne. And then he was trying to do the same things that we were; he was participating. He had no shyness; he was very, very friendly. It looked like he was enjoying the puja. When I next went to Vajrapani, to consecrate

Lama Yeshe's stupa, I arrived in the morning by car. Lama Ösel was playing near the stupa, and while people were greeting me, he right away came into the car. It was very interesting.

Please tell us more about yourself.

I was born in Tibet, west of Lhasa, in Tsang Province [in 1923]. When I was around 10 years old, I entered the Ganden Sherkal Monastery. It is a very good monastery, and it was very famous. It usually had four or five hundred monks. Its educational system was very similar to Sera's. I had heard much about Sera Monastery. Geshe and monks went there, and I saw some of them come back as very great scholars. Even the Ganden Tripa, my teacher's teacher, was there. I had a strong desire to go there to study.

My uncle was not a great scholar but he had great faith in study. He decided to send me to Sera when I was 18. He was my main sponsor during the years I was there. Just before 1959 I was ready to take my geshe examination. At the time I was teaching younger monks, I had many students, including Thubten Yeshe as I mentioned. But then I had to leave.

And you were still not a geshe then?

Not at that time. During the next two or three years, His Holiness, who himself was a great scholar, along with many of the monks re-established the monastic system in south India. The first geshe exam was in '62. Geshe Thubten Gyaltzen from Los Angeles and I were the two geshe who passed that year. He is from Ganden, and I, from Sera.

In that same year, I was chosen to go to America. I think His Holiness had been requested by Geshe Wangyal, who had a monastery in New Jersey. I was chosen to go with three young lamas from the Young Lamas Home School in New Delhi. An English lady, Freda Bedi, had organized for many young reincarnated lamas to learn English. Geshe Wangyal had a grant for three of these young lamas to come to America to learn English. They weren't to go to ordinary school but were to stay in the monastery. So I was chosen by His Holiness to go with them to teach them Buddhism. One of the lamas, Kamlung Rinpoche, was my student in Tibet, and I had lived with him in India. The others were Sharpa Tulku and Lama Kunga, a Sakyapa. Kamlung Rinpoche and Sharpa Tulku had attended Sera.

Of course at that time I didn't know anything about America. I thought, "It is so far to go at my age, so far from Tibet." I was thinking I would ask His Holiness for permission to stay in India. But then my guru, Trijang Rinpoche, told me not to ask. He said His Holiness was doing me a favor, asking me to go. My guru said it might even be good for me. "A lot of people want to go to America, why not you?" he said. "If you don't like it, take a plane back in one or two days."

So I went to New Jersey in 1963. It was for four years, and after 1966 I had to return. But then in 1965 or 1966, Geshe Wangyal requested His Holiness to allow me and Lama Kunga to stay as they needed the monastery in New Jersey to stay open. So I stayed there.

After a couple of years, I heard of a Wisconsin professor who was seeking a native Tibetan scholar for the study of the Tibetan language. He was Professor Richard Robinson, the chairman of Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin. He felt it was most crucial to find someone. A lot of Buddhist texts had been lost in Sanskrit when the Muslims conquered India, as you know. All of the Indian monasteries were destroyed and many texts were lost. But all of the scriptures and commentaries had been translated into Tibetan. Therefore, the Tibetan language is most crucial.

Professor Robinson heard I was in New Jersey, so he came to ask me to come to University of Wisconsin. I thought, "How can I go there? I can't teach because of my English." But he was very, very insistent, saying I should come. He said I could learn a little English and he could learn a little Tibetan and together we could teach a class. He was very, very strong in urging me.

I went to Wisconsin one year, then another year, then for a third year. Later, Professor Robinson was supposed to go to the University of Hawaii, but he had an accident: his house caught fire and he died. I was stuck there! So I moved there so that studying could continue in the philosophy of Buddhism.

During that time, there was a lot of interest in the teachings. It was during the Vietnam War and there were a lot of hippies, a lot of young who were interested in studying. These young people, while they were in America, didn't know there was a geshe here at the university. They slowly learned of me after they traveled in Nepal and India. As a result, I soon had quite a number of students around my house and studying at the university. Some of them are professors who now have jobs teaching Tibetan at universities. From the beginning, the studies got stronger, continued to develop. I also had private students. There were many people interested in studying, but not wanting to study at the university – many different types of people with different interests in Buddhism in general and in Tibetan Buddhism, specifically.

After I was teaching for some time, the group wanted to form a society, have a name and title so together they could do puja ceremonies for Buddha's birthday and so forth. In the beginning I wasn't interested. I was only interested in teaching then. But later, with more people, we decided we should have one, so we established the Ganden Mahayana Center. I finally moved to a local place, and right now my present place. Its name was changed to Deer Park Center.

His Holiness has come here three times. The first time was when he came to give a university lecture. The second time, in 1981, was for the Deer Park Kalachakra initiation, the first Kalachakra initiation in the West. After the initiation, we built a stupa, which is proper. The third

time was in 1989, when His Holiness got his Nobel Prize. We had 8,000 people come. He lectured, then gave the Avalokiteshvara [Chenrezig] initiation. Then, His Holiness did a dedication for the stupa. After that, a lot of people requested me to come and teach, and I had a lot of classes.

When one makes dedication, one makes prayers so that the wishes of one's lama might come to pass. What are your virtuous wishes particularly with regard to the flourishing of Buddhism in the West?

I have all kinds of wishes. [Laughter.] You can't explain all of your wishes. [Laughter.] We are in this period of degenerating times, and in general Buddhism is disappearing. Starting from its origins in India, it has gone outward, from southern India to Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, all those areas. Also, Mahayana Buddhism has gone to Nepal, Tibet, China and Japan. For centuries Tibetan Buddhism developed purely, with strong scholarship and yogic practice. It had strong influence.

All the Tibetan lay people believe that Buddhism is the heart of their country. For centuries the Mahayana teachings developed in Tibet, which was closed to the outside, undiluted with other religions and culture. Later came the destruction by the communists and all this influence was lost and degenerated everywhere.

Until 1959, Tibet was at a high point of its development and then suddenly it collapsed. But one fortunate thing was that not everything was destroyed under the communist Chinese. At that time, some were able to escape. His Holiness and many of the teachers and lamas were able to get out. Not everybody, but there were among them great senior lamas and teachers who came out and taught. All the Buddhist scriptures, the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*, had earlier been sent to America and England as gifts by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

We Tibetans call His Holiness "Yeshe Norbu," which means The Wish-Granting Jewel. Tibetans have for a long time considered him as Avalokiteshvara, who manifested for the Tibetan people. A reincarnated lama whom everybody respects and honors.

For me, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is the most precious. This Lama of Tibet had a very bad situation, something that had never happened before. It came at a time when he was just 16 years old. By then he had learned everything at the monasteries and taken the geshe examination. If we think about how unfortunate the situation could have been for the people of Tibet had the Dalai Lama been old and about to pass, or the communists had thrown away a young Dalai Lama baby, certainly that would not have been helpful. But His Holiness was right there, ready for the political and religious situation. Also, the Chinese weren't able to capture him. He was able to get out.

Once he got out, along with other Tibetan monks, he was there mainly to preserve Buddhist teachings, which are the special heart of the culture. He is the jewel of the world for everybody. He

especially established the three big monasteries, Sera, Drepung and Ganden, and tried to start the learning tradition in the monasteries. First starting with Buxa, and then continued with help from [Indian prime minister Jawaharlal] Nehru and the Indian government. They did a marvelous job for the Tibetans; whatever we wanted they gave us. His Holiness established the three main centers; also Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyü centers were established. Everywhere religion was strongly preserved and subsequently it spread to Westerners and over the whole world, to all people who were interested in learning.

In the last few years, I have visited different places and almost everywhere there are Tibetan Buddhist centers. People are interested so much so in this teaching and practice that they themselves are dedicated to bringing special teachers from India to centers in Europe, Canada, this country, Asia, Australia, South America. This way of spreading the teachings is not an attempt to convert people in the world; we don't do that. But people are particularly interested in the teaching, so we teach, and that is the way it should be. The desire to have this arises from people's hearts, because everybody wants to have peace and happiness, and nobody wants misery or suffering. The essence of the Buddha's teaching is individual liberation, freedom, and worldwide compassion and love. This is the heart of the Tibetan culture, and now it is not just kept in one small country but has gone everywhere. It has been of invaluable benefit worldwide, and I hope this will continue more and more strongly.

While there are many highly valuable scriptures and commentaries, most are not available in English. Many of them, however, are beginning to be translated. That is valuable because people can begin to read these scriptures themselves, can have the choice to do their own studying. This is happening. First the student is studying, reading, then is ready for more. With a taste of teachings, they want to go deeper. Nobody wants to proceed without knowing much, with only blind faith.

The source for the teaching is these translations. It will happen slowly but everything will be translated eventually. That, in general, is my wish. I'm not talking about my personal wish - I have a lot of personal wishes. [Laughter.] But in general, that is it.

There are so many problems in the world: misery, suffering, sickness, poverty and the environment of physical and mental destruction. The most essential help is in the teachings, the mental training. People in the world will develop peaceful minds, knowledge, wisdom, and then that excellent personality will spread everywhere. This will be the cause of peace, rather than that which is rotten, evil, and destructive.

Buddhist teachings, all spiritual teachings, are like medicine for the sickness of the world. That is what Buddhism is saying. Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryavatara* says that in the world all the fear, misery, suffering, all these problems, arise from egotistic view, selfishness, and wanting for oneself

one's own happiness. But having compassion, and the wish for happiness for others rather than just for selfish purposes, will create so much happiness.

So what is the best medicine? There are temporary cures, herbs, medicine, but the only permanent real medicine that leads to freedom from sickness and misery is the spiritual teaching, spiritual Dharma. Dharma is the medicine, the cure for the problem, the cure that brings peace and happiness. There are many different religions and every spiritual teaching is supposed to lead to peace, happiness and solving problems. Especially our Buddhist teachings exist mainly for that purpose. So I wish that spiritual teaching continues strongly and spreads everywhere, to every part of the world. In that way all people can have this medicine. Okay?

In the dedication chapter in *Bodhisattvacaryavatara*, Shantideva prays that the Dharma remains in the world as long as samsara is there. And, it will remain a long time with the assistance of certain kinds of wealth. Dharma centers need financial help; wealth, along with honor and respect. With that, these teachings may remain as long as samsara remains. That this teaching may remain with wealth and respect, is one of his dedications. So with that, I think that worldwide happiness would be very excellent.

This is my wish. But there are selfish wishes too. [Laughter.] Those I won't tell you. [Laughter.]

For beginners or anyone studying Buddhism, what approach or course of study is the most valuable?

I think the most valuable at the beginning is the summary of the essence of the whole Buddhist teaching from the beginning to the end, the lam-rim. Become familiar with that before taking each topic one by one. Especially for people who are interested in all of the Buddha's vast teachings. There are many lam-rims: small, intermediate, and more advance texts. They serve as a manual of Buddhism, an overview.

It is much easier to get interested in some deep scripture, but first you must learn how to practice, and how to live one's own life. For this, studying lam-rim is good. For example if you plan to visit another country, you need a map, a manual. It will tell you how many miles away is the city or town you are interested in. Then you go there, and every detail of how you got there and what you will be seeing, all of it is in the manual. This is what the lam-rim is in the Buddhist realm.

Can you say something about tantra coming to the West and, for those who study Buddhism, what approach is best to take?

Tantric teaching is the highest level of teaching and the most secret teaching. It requires so much preparation. To receive tantric teaching you require the three preliminaries: the special thought of renunciation; bodhichitta, special universal love and compassion based on the special spontaneous

mind of altruism; and the viewpoint of wisdom that understands reality or truth, *shunyata*. These three are called the three principal aspects of the path, the door to any kind of tantra.

The main meditation is the understanding of these three dominant aspects. Without these, the high tantric rituals and practices – powers, the wrathful deities, union with consort – can be misunderstood. On the surface it could look like you can kill others, steal from others, and have sexual enjoyment.

People just grab tantric teachings without developing the three preliminaries. They may get some kind of result, but the result will not be good, high. A black magical result may arise and, instead of getting a high result, the practitioner will create the cause for a lower rebirth by treating others badly and themselves too. Therefore tantra is a most dangerous area.

People should first examine, study and learn mainly lam-rim. Lam-rim provides the three principal aspects, as I mentioned. When you have them, your tantric practice will be good. But a lot of people are interested just in the results, rather than the cause. That is not good. But to have an interest in learning, studying, in order to know what is proper and what is the cause, that is good. The method side is the most important.

Jumping around too much is not good. If you want to fly somewhere in an airplane without learning how to fly, or even without knowing how to get to the airport, and you take the machine and try, you will be destroyed. You and your passengers are in a dangerous situation. So that is the analogy.

When you first came to America, there were few Americans who were Buddhists?

There were some Buddhists, mainly Japanese Zen, and a few Chinese Buddhists. But Tibetan Buddhism was almost unknown. People had heard about Tibetan Buddhism in a negative way; the essence was not known, nobody was teaching it. They didn't know deeply people who had studied Buddhism in Tibet. And some thought Tibet a backward country closed to Westerners: Shangri-la, a mystic country, something exotic.

This is slowly changing now that Tibetans are in India, and because of the many places in the West like Thubten Yeshe's centers, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's. The essence is being slowly discovered by Westerners. In the last several years, everywhere I've been in Europe and South America there are centers popping up like flowers. People are very, very enthusiastic and sympathetic. They really want to learn, want to do practice, and not just look on as anthropologists, but to study the real essence of the teaching. Geshes and lamas have been visiting, teaching the essence of lam-rim and giving tantric initiations.

People in the world are intelligent. When they really become involved – looking, examining, analyzing – everybody has the ability to know, to understand. Buddhist teachings are for all human society, not only for Tibetans. They are for everybody.

What do you think is important for the future of Buddhism in the West?

I think the future is that the best teachers continue to teach, and we have a good system and good centers, and people go there. Let the best part spread everywhere, but not the part mixed with the worldly, the Eight Worldly Goals: wealth, fame, praise – all these worldly common things. If you utilize the teachings of Buddhism as the way to get wealth, the religion becomes evil. That is a disservice to pure Buddhist teachings and, also, it will be a disservice to the public. And the public will dislike it.

The main thing is for people to have interest, to investigate, to open their minds. Once people have opened their minds, they have wisdom. People have special wisdom and intelligence in the West. People just don't want to go merely on blind faith; they want to know, to check scientifically and logically: the source, what, how, where. And Tibetan Buddhism is logical and scientific. It explains so many teachings: there are so many commentaries, sub-commentaries, all taught by scholars, monks and lamas who have trained for years.

So therefore that tradition, when built in a solid way, will spread and stay long in the West. It will not easily disappear. There are many people who are interested and that way, more and more will learn the teachings; more and more people will continue. I don't believe the whole of the West will come under the power of Buddhism. But it will go everywhere.

So I'm very happy that a lot of people are interested in the Buddhadharma and are establishing centers and foundations, groups and societies. These will greatly benefit people. But they should not mix up everything. This confuses people and it can be dangerous. They should try and present the pure essence of the teachings.

The most important and essential thing now is that the scriptures, commentaries, the real heart of the philosophy, are being put into English. Even though there are Tibetan scholars, having to translate the teachings makes it difficult. There are still language and communication barriers, but scholarship in Buddhism in the West is getting better, and I think this will go on. Finally all of the Buddhist scriptures can be put in to other languages, especially English.

Inevitably, with so much scholarship in the West, the pure philosophy will be mixed with other thoughts. This will happen, it is to be expected. But people will contemplate and publish ideas and write reviews, and in this way corrections can be made, making scholarship better and better. It is like finding gold. You need to analyze again and again; you need to purify it. In that way, the essential teachings can slowly be developed. Then you will have pure gold.

5. Transforming Suffering into Pure Joy: A Talk by Ribur Rinpoche

Translated by Fabrizio Pallotti

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The Venerable Ribur Rinpoche, in San Jose, California, at the Medicine Buddha's Healing Center since September last year, talked about his life to a group of students at Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek on October 4, 1996.

Rinpoche was confined in Lhasa, Tibet, from 1959 until 1976. During those years, he experienced relentless interrogation and torture during 35 of the infamous struggle sessions. "The things they used to do to us are something you would never witness in your life. If I told you what happened on a daily basis, you would find it hard to believe," Rinpoche said.

"Although these experiences were very painful," he told students at Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala in 1991, "they were also very beneficial, because I was using up all my negative karma from previous lives. So then I prayed that the suffering be as intense as possible. As a result, my experiences in confinement were transformed into nothing but pure joy."

At the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Rinpoche was given a job with the Religious Affairs Office in Tibet, working with the Panchen Lama to recover what they could of the holy objects that had been dismantled and shipped to China. "I managed to bring back to Tibet 600 huge boxes containing thousands of statues and pieces of statues." The most precious of these was the statue from the Ramoche that had been brought to Tibet during the reign of Songsten Gampo.

During his remaining years in Tibet, and since his exile in Dharamsala in 1987, Ribur Rinpoche, a great scholar and prolific author, has written biographies of great lamas, and an extensive history of Tibet, which includes his autobiography. He is working closely with His Holiness the Dalai Lama on a biography of the Great Thirteenth, the previous Dalai Lama.

Rinpoche lives at His Holiness the Dalai Lama's monastery, Namgyal, in Dharamsala, India.

So this old monk you see is called Ribur Tulku. My name comes from my monastery, Ribur Gumpa, Ribur Shedrup Ling, which is in a region of Tibet called Kham. It was a very, very old gumpa, established more than 700 years ago by a great Sakya lama, Drongong Chogyel Pagpa. It is talked about in the lineage and stories contained in the Heruka practice.

Ribur Gompa was one of the three or four great monastic universities established in this vast area of Eastern Tibet before the coming of Lama Tsongkhapa in Kham. Even so, the philosophical system and debate were already well developed there.

When Lama Tsongkhapa came and spread the teachings in this world, one of his main disciples was a monk from Kham, the bodhisattva Sherab Tsampo. He received a lot of teachings from Lama Tsongkhapa and went back to Kham and established a big monastery in Cham, the Chamdo Monastery. He went for a rains retreat at Ribur Gompa, which was Sakya at the time, and taught lam-rim for one and a half months. Within that time, sort of naturally, the whole monastery embraced Lama Tsongkhapa's teaching.

When the bodhisattva Sherab Tsampo went back to his monastery, he left one of his disciples at Ribur Gompa as the main teacher. This monk, Kunga Osel, is said to be my first recognizable reincarnation.

Until he was very old, Kunga Osel spent many years teaching the monks and then at a certain point he just left the monastery and went into retreat in the mountains. The retreat place is still there. He spent 12 years in strict seclusion and passed away there in retreat. From Kunga Osel, the first reincarnation, up to the fifth, all were the principal teachers at Ribur Monastery.

The fifth reincarnation, my predecessor, was extremely knowledgeable, a great scholar at Sera Me. After going through his studies in the monastery, he enrolled in the Upper Tantric College and eventually became the main debate and philosophy instructor of a very famous lama.

So probably my predecessor wasn't like me. He was really someone very special. The way people talk about him - I have to say, "Was he really like me or not?" I can't tell, I don't know. Even when he was recognized, it was done by a very famous lama, Lodrup Dorje Chang, who was known not only for his philosophical and practical knowledge, but also for his clairvoyance and power to manifest magical emanations. He wrote a poem, a praise to this young reincarnation, saying, "You will come down from the pure land of Vajrayogini to benefit sentient beings in this world." So that's why I say probably my predecessor was really someone exceptional. He lived to a very old age. When he passed away, for a while my reincarnation wasn't found, but then at a certain point I was found.

I was born in Kham, in Makham, in 1923. In that particular area, the majority of families weren't big or affluent, but the family into which I was born was the most influential there. At the age of five I was recognized by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of Ribur Tulku. The oldest monk of Ribur Gompa came, and we had an enthronement ceremony. I still remember sitting there, wearing the robes of my predecessor; they were so big! Of course I couldn't really

wear those robes so they just put them on me. I remember I was given offering scarves and drank tea while they were reciting the prayer of the Sixteen Arhats.

After that I started to wear a yellow robe, a chuba. For some years I stayed at home with my parents. I started to study writing and so forth around the age of seven.

My father was very good in business. He had only two children, me and my sister, so he started to think, "Well, this is my only son and if he is recognized as a tulku and I send him to the monastery, who will take care of the business?" He didn't want me to go to the monastery and become a monk. So I stayed home until I was 12, just studying literature and writing. No matter how many times the monastery pleaded to let me go, he kept me there. Actually, this has been useful in the later part of my life. Now that I live very close to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he uses me to write histories and biographies; I spend most of my time writing.

When I was 12, all of a sudden my father died, for apparently no reason. Then my mother was able to send me to the monastery. What happened, as the story goes, is that the protector of the monastery, Four-Faced Mahakala, the Brahmin form, hadn't been pleased at all about my being kept at home.

I had the formal enthronement in the monastery, and you know how the Tibetan tradition is, they really exaggerate all that protocol: people coming and meeting and seeing, and khatas and so forth! I've been through all that!

I spent two years in the monastery, studying with two main teachers, memorizing scriptures of sutra and tantra and a particular lam-rim text I was close to, written by a great scholar of that part of Tibet.

When I was 14, I went to Lhasa. At that time, 1935, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had passed away and the regent was Reting Rinpoche. I had to make a pilgrimage around the stupa of my predecessors, making so many offerings, doing this and that, and meeting the regent. I had to go through much of this; that's called a pilgrimage.

That was the time of the great lama Pabongka Dorje Chang, who was the most outstanding unsurpassable lama of that time. It was him and nobody else. I'm not saying there weren't any lamas except Pabongka - there were Kyabje Kansar Rinpoche, Tatra Rinpoche, and many other great lamas - but he became the principal teacher, the one who was giving continuous teachings. It was also the time of the young Ling Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche, but they hadn't yet manifested very extensive deeds.

Probably due to past life connections, when I was a kid in Kham, I really had a strong wish to meet Pabongka. Eventually I did, when I went to Lhasa, and for the first time I climbed up the hill to meet him at Tashi Chöling Monastery.

We went by horse, and I took with me some offerings I had brought from Kham. He was residing in the upper part of the monastery, which is like the penthouse. I arrived there and did everything very nicely: making all the offerings and everything that has to be done in a very auspicious way, one by one. Then I went up in his room, which was very small, just the extent of his bed-throne, where the lamas normally sit. Next to the bed there was a small throne all decorated with silver on which he had placed a very small statue of his lama, Dakpo Lama Rinpoche Jampel Lhundrup Gyatso, made of gold, all surrounded by amazing offerings, very neat, very well done.

I made three prostrations, and immediately it looked like he was very pleased, very happy, with lots of affection coming from him. “Finally! We’ve heard so much about this Ribur Tulku – Ribur Tulku, here and there. Finally, I’m able to meet him!” And then he said, “Okay, sit.” He started to give me tea and everything, one by one, the ritual that goes on between lamas. He was very knowledgeable about my monastery. “Oh, you have this monastery, the Ribur Gompa. It’s on the top of a mountain, the protector is Four-Faced Mahakala.”

Right at that moment, one monk who had gone through the training at the monastery and had just become a geshe brought up to Lama Dorje Chang a pot of noodle soup he had made to offer him. Pabongka immediately wanted to share it with me, and said, “Oh, this is really auspicious. It means that you’ll definitely become a geshe. Receiving *tukpa* from a geshe like that means you’ll definitely become a geshe; you’ll definitely be able to finish your studies.”

He was so pleased with me; he had so much affection. Then all of a sudden he called his attendant, a bald man, and said, “Bring the calendar, bring the calendar, I want to look at the calendar!” And he started to look at the calendar. “You’re going to become a novice monk, right? So let’s check the auspicious day.” I hadn’t asked him anything. “This is an auspicious day, okay? We’ll do it this day, I’m going to give you a *getsul* ordination, okay?” I was so happy just thinking about how much affection he had shown me. And exactly on the day he told me, I went up and I became a getsul. We were only three. The other two monks were staying on a permanent basis at the retreat center of Pabongka.

I went to Sera to study, and because my predecessor was considered very high, I was taken on a tour all around the holy places there, making offerings, the various shrines above the monastery, accompanied with sounds and music. Because you are a lama, you have a particular relationship with the monastery, and you have to come with a procession – it’s not like nowadays – with the horses all dressed up with brocade and ornaments on their heads and ears and saddles. I had to be involved in all that rigmarole: that was the tradition in Tibet.

It's not easy to enter a monastery like Sera, being a lama. It's very expensive! Many times you have to offer everything - food, tea and this and that - and there were seven or eight thousand monks at the time. Very expensive! Anyway, all the expenses were covered by my family. In the end I was placed in the room of my predecessor in the branch of the monastery called Tsawa, in the top room.

I had this teacher called Tsawa Lama, who was very knowledgeable in philosophy and in the teachings. He was actually the predecessor of Tenzin Rinpoche, my present attendant. I was in the middle upper class in the lama situation at the monastery. I wasn't the top and wasn't the bottom. I studied a lot. After three years of intensive study, I had to give my first public examination, in front of the assembly of Sera. This is the tradition. And it went quite okay.

Then after five years, when I was 19, I had to give the examination of the *Perfection of Wisdom*, and again it was so expensive! Any time I had to give an examination I had to undertake the expenses of offering food and tea, and I had to make a little offering to each monk. There were so many monks! Thousands and thousands!

After nine years I had to give another big examination, and after another year another one. This is the way of going through examinations in Tibet. You go through classes in which you study great texts, like *The Perfection of Wisdom* and *The Middle Way*. In *The Middle Way* you have many levels, and at every level you have to give an examination, if you are a lama, anyway. It was quite difficult. During the examination you face maybe seven, eight thousand monks altogether at once - alone. I gave the first part of my examination on the subject of generating bodhichitta.

Actually, it went quite well. You see, we don't do written examinations as you do. We actually debate. I had to debate philosophy with members of the top classes of the various monasteries of Sera Je in front of all the monks. My companion was chosen from among the best philosophers. He was a monk from Amdo, who was so much better than me in philosophy and in debate, and on top of that he was a real, pure monk, someone really content, an example. He knew what I could handle in debate, and he chose my opponents so I could face them without difficulty. He was very good to me. So my exam went quite well.

My opponent for the second exam, the more difficult one, was from Amdo again, a big monk with a beard. My classmates thought, "Okay, last year's opponent was much better than this year's but he has a very good attitude. Now this year you should take care because although he's not very knowledgeable in philosophy, he's a nasty one!" The way Tibetans debate in philosophy is really very complicated. It's a combination of physical performance with actions that you do in combination with what you say, questions and answers. It is full of tricks. Mine went very well.

In 1948, when I was 25, I became a geshe. The year after I would have become a geshe lharampa, but I was heavily pressured from my house and my monastery in Kham to go there as soon as possible and teach. For the geshe lharampa you have to meet all the monks four times for several months in a row. I did it only twice and then I left; I went to Kham.

During all those years at Sera, whenever I could, I went to take as many teachings as possible from Pabongka. The first teaching I received was *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, and the first initiation I received was the Great Compassionate Thousand-Armed Chenrezig.

At a certain point I had heard that Pabongka was giving the initiation into the full set of the 17 forms of Four-Faced Mahakala at his retreat place. I sent a message up requesting if I could attend the initiation. I was only 14 at the time, so he called me up and said, "Have you received a highest yoga tantra initiation yet?" And I said, "No, I haven't." So then Lama Pabongka Dorje Chang remained silent for several moments, contemplating. Then he said, "Well, this is something special. This a protector of your predecessor and a protector of your gumpa. I think you don't need a highest yoga tantra initiation; you can come and take this initiation." I was so happy, and I went there and received the full set of Four-Face Mahakala.

Again, Pabongka came to Sera Me to give the commentary on the eight great lam-rim texts, like the three lam-rims by Lama Tsongkhapa – small, intermediate and great expositions of the stages of the path – and all the lam-rims written by the Fifth Dalai Lama and the First Dalai Lama. He went through a full four months of teachings on the lam-rim, as well as all the biographies of the lamas who had written them, which I attended.

At the end he gave lots of blessings and initiations, like the White Umbrella Deity and Medicine Buddha, and lots of initiations, like Guhyasamaja, Heruka and Yamantaka that are normally given three at a time, in a set, one after another, and a special form of Amitabha, and the highest yoga tantra of Vajrapani, called the Great Wheel. I took them all.

Trijang Rinpoche came to take the Vajrapani Great Wheel initiation. So then Pabongka went on with the initiation of Heruka, the Body Mandala, with the full teachings, and Vajrayogini, with the full teachings.

When I was young in the monastery, I went through the general studies like everybody else. I was very lucky, though, because my *gen-la*, my close teacher, was a good one. On top of that, I had this incredible exposure to Pabongka Rinpoche as my direct lama, so my general frame of mind was quite good, it developed quite well. My close teacher was extremely kind, probably the most kind. You see, generally speaking, for the young incarnations the teacher is extremely important; the way the relationship develops, the way they train. My teacher was so kind, he would just tell me, "Okay, don't worry, we'll go through the text slowly, slowly, at ease, and whenever Lama Dorje Chang is

teaching, we're going to attend." This is something quite uncommon. When you're a child, a young lama like that doesn't go around taking teachings from the high lamas unless you've completed certain studies. So I was able to take all these teachings and to continue my studies thanks to his kindness.

Luckily, he was very good in philosophy, very well-versed, but not only that, he was a great practitioner, a Kadampa-style lama. He used to tell me stories about the old Kadampas, all the stories concerning guru devotion and so forth, to inspire me. So I was raised within the framework of this intense Dharma practice, with an atmosphere of strong affection from my teacher, who was himself a great meditator, a great Kadampa practitioner, and taking and receiving teachings and inspiration from Lama Dorje Chang a lot.

It looked like my mind was going to develop quite well. I used to study during the day, and for long periods of time, I didn't sleep at night. It was so nice just to stay up and look at the texts and stop every once and a while to meditate on them; and then when the early morning arrived, to rejoice, thinking that everyone else has been asleep and you've been up and meditating and studying Dharma. You feel you really used your time in the best, most useful way, and you feel like sleep is a waste of time. You would develop the habit. I used to rejoice a lot for that.

And when His Holiness the Dalai Lama, at four years of age, was brought to Lhasa in 1939, I was so lucky. I was there, I could see him, I went to receive him. During that time I thought my mind was quite good.

I wouldn't seek teachings from any other teachers besides Lama Dorje Chang, Pabongka. I'm really quite stubborn. Then came a moment when Pabongka was due to leave for the southeastern part of Tibet for a long teaching tour in Lokha. I went to see him and I received some initiations and blessings that I needed. And before we parted I told him that I'd had in mind to go to Lokha to receive teachings from him, but that for some reason it wasn't possible, and asked if he could please grant all his blessings so my mind would become Dharma and the Dharma become the path and the path would be without obstacles forever. He said, "Yes, I'm going on this tour, but don't worry, you should receive teachings from Trijang Rinpoche." So, you see, Lama Dorje Chang already knew he was going to pass away, that I wasn't going to see him again, and it was his wish that I begin to receive teachings from Trijang Rinpoche. I hadn't done that yet.

Lama Dorje Chang arrived in Lokha at the monastery of Dakpo Rinpoche, Dakpo Shedro Ling, which is, I think, in Gyatsa. He gave lam-rim teachings for a long time, and all of a sudden he passed away. We all were terribly devastated by the news, myself and all those lamas, like Pari Rinpoche and Latsu Rinpoche and so forth. Finally I went to see Trijang Rinpoche and explained to him that Lama Dorje Chang had told me, before leaving, to receive teachings from him. So from that moment onward I began my relationship with the late Trijang Rinpoche.

After my geshe examination in 1948, I went to see Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche and expressed to him my wish to dedicate all my thoughts for at least one year just to lam-rim practice; and he was very, very pleased. He immediately gave me the instructions on how to meditate on the lam-rim, what subjects I should emphasize and so on, and I left for Takten Ritro, the retreat place of Kyabje Pabongka, on a mountain behind Sera called Parongka. I went straight into the cave where he had achieved realization of the two stages. You see, at the time my only thought was of spending my life, no matter how short it would be, in a cave and meditating. I didn't have any other thought crossing my mind.

Then after one year, since I had finished my Geshe degree, my people from Kham really wanted me to go there to teach, so I went. From the moment I arrived in Kham, my mind became worse and worse.

It was the tradition that when a lama arrives in his place after study, he arrives in pomp and circumstance with all the music and people playing instruments and so forth, and everyone bringing many offerings. Yes, they asked me to give Yamantaka initiation in one place, Mahakala initiation in another, and so forth. And after every initiation I would be made more and more important, with more and more things coming, and there was nothing else for the mind to do but get worse and worse and worse. So that's really not good. Everybody coming in and asking this and that and with an attitude of refuge, and myself thinking that maybe I'm better and better. This is really bad; there's nothing that damages you like that.

Then the Chinese invasion began, at the beginning of the '50s. Slowly, slowly they came into Kham, and I had lots of delegations of Chinese coming and talking to me to do this and that. I had the clear impression that they wanted to pull me to their side. So what I did was I had a meditation hut built in the forest, and I just ran away and did my retreats. Actually they went quite well.

I began with the preliminary practices in retreat, in solitude. I went through all of them quite smoothly. I was very happy. I did the mandala, prostrations, Vajrasattva, Dorje Khadro, all those preliminaries. I had done Yamantaka, the Solitary Hero retreat, so then I began with the Thirteen Deities Yamantaka, and after that I did one deity after another. I did all those retreats, lots of them.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama was invited to China for his first tour, he traveled through Chamdo, another region of Tibet, and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, who was accompanying him, came to Kham, so I invited him to stay three days with me. He stayed in my room for three days, and I had a chance to ask him for teachings. He gave me teachings and initiations.

I had time to discuss with him what would be better for me to do in the wake of the Chinese invasion. Would it be better for me to stay in Kham or go to Lhasa? Trijang Rinpoche told me that if I stayed in Kham I would stick out, because nobody else was like me, like a lama; but if I went to Lhasa, I would mix in with many others and not be so obvious, so that would be better. Therefore, in 1955 I left for Lhasa.

At that time I began to take teachings from Ling Rinpoche as well, and Ketsang Rinpoche, the root lama of Ling Rinpoche and many other lamas. One year later, in 1956, I left for my first pilgrimage to India. Between teachings I did retreats, so I was able to get back the good thinking.

In 1959 we had this big eruption of circumstances, when everything degenerated with the Chinese. I was in jail for several months, not for a long time. Anyway, I didn't really experience the slightest difficulty during those adverse conditions. And this was due to the kindness of Lama Dorje Chang. From him I had somehow learned some mental training, and in those difficult times, my mind was immediately able to recognize the nature of cyclic existence, the nature of afflictive emotions, and the nature of karma and so forth. So my mind was really at ease.

I was placed in this prison, I don't remember the name now, and it was full. There were at least 200 important politicians and nobles there also, and all of them were really in great pain because they didn't know how to think. Generally, those people didn't practice Dharma. They were connected with the government and so forth, but they used to have a good time all the time, a really good time. You used to see them picnicking outside the Potala Palace, or coming through Lhasa. They had very rich houses and so forth; they were used to living the affluent life.

So at that time, they were really devastated, they didn't know what to do or what to think or what was going on. But people like me didn't have the slightest doubt about the nature of cyclic existence, so being in prison wasn't really a big deal.

For some reason I knew the Chinese translator in prison, so I was able to get out very quickly. Later on, I was put in charge of the religious organization of Tibet, under the Chinese, naturally, and given a very, very small salary for that. Around 11 or 12 dollars a month. It wasn't enough, but people used to help me. Anyway, I didn't experience much difficulty.

The difficult time arrived around the beginning of the '60s, when there was a reprisal, and the situation really deteriorated. The Chinese started to tear down all the monasteries; there was a moment when they began to do really professional destruction. I heard and I witnessed them pulling down all these images, the great holy places, like the Jowo Chenpo and the Ramo Chenpo, these big, very famous statues in Lhasa in the two temples, the Jokhang and the Ramoche, which are supposed to have come from the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. Monks were being put in prison and forced to marry and forced into labor camps or to work in fields and so forth. All this caused a

great deal of pain in my mind, witnessing all of this. That was really the worst period. Sera, Drepung and Ganden monasteries were completely torn apart, virtually razed to the ground, and that was very painful.

The Chinese probably razed around 6,000 monasteries and holy places, and we lost around 100,000 ordained people. If you keep hearing things and seeing things, then sooner or later your mind becomes unhappy. Whatever hardships I experienced myself – I was beaten, forced to do so many things – that really didn't matter because you know whatever you experience yourself is your own difficulty to get through, is your own karma ripening, and it's just your business. The point is, you accumulate karma, which brings forth those results, and you are bound to face them, so if you know this when you are experiencing difficulties, you are actually happy that those things are happening because you are able to recognize that in this way you're getting rid of a big load. And nobody else loaded this big load upon you but yourself. So I was even able to think, "Yes, the more that comes to me to experience, the more I'll be happy to receive it and to get rid of whatever load I have from the past." So from that point of view, really, there wasn't the slightest problem.

Also, knowing that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the two tutors, Trijang Rinpoche and Ling Rinpoche, were able to escape and arrive safely in India was a huge source of happiness. I was very satisfied that they were safe, so whatever happened, it didn't matter.

The real suffering, the real pain, was seeing and witnessing this destruction of the holy images and places, so full of history, so important. The places of Lama Tsongkhapa, the statues, so blessed over centuries and centuries. But there was nothing to do and I just thought, "Okay, it really doesn't matter, I just hope I die soon." But you see, there wasn't the karma; I'm still alive.

So my state of mind was like this. One day I was looking at the sky, and I saw this big vulture flying west towards India. I looked at him and thought, "How lucky is this vulture, he's free to fly towards India. Tonight he'll probably be resting in one of the forests behind Kalimpong, which borders Tibet, and tomorrow he can fly in India." I was in that state. So many times I found myself thinking in that way. I was just hoping that something would happen that I could die, in one way or another. I thought that many times, but it never happened, obviously.

We Tibetans were going through a really bad time. The Chinese officers were really nasty. The things they used to do to us are something you would never witness in your life. If I told you what happened on a daily basis, you would find it hard to believe, in terms of nastiness from the officers, not from the general Chinese population.

I was thinking every day of dying, that probably the next day I would be dead. During that period I just concentrated on keeping my vows as purely as possible, so I've done without interruption more than 2,000 self-initiations of the Body Mandala of Heruka. And so much *tonglen*, taking on

the suffering of others and giving away one's happiness. So I thought even if I die tomorrow, it really doesn't matter, at least my vows and everything are pure.

After the Cultural Revolution stopped, around 1976, the Chinese thought they could use me a little bit for some of their work, so I was employed for various things and I started to get a little money.

At a certain point I had a strong urge to preserve whatever was possible from all this destruction, at least those things from our history, especially the holy places of Lama Tsongkhapa, all the statues and so forth. So I wrote down the histories of all these places and the statues. I didn't care about becoming famous myself, I just didn't want everything to be completely lost. I did deep research on the Jokhang Temple and the Ramoche Temple, the two places in Lhasa with the two very important statues of Buddha Shakyamuni in the *sambhogakaya* aspect that the two queens of Songsten Gampo brought with them from China and Nepal. I did a great deal of research and I wrote down so much.

There was a place in Ganden Monastery where there used to be a huge stupa containing Lama Tsongkhapa's holy body, which of course was completely destroyed. In the same place, I put together another stupa, the same as before, with as much gold as I could and a statue of Lama Tsongkhapa in it.

His Holiness the Panchen Lama was there, and I had this incredible connection with him. I was working in the Religious Affairs Office of Tibet, in charge, along with him, of recovering whatever possible of what had been taken to China.

I was very concerned about the Jowo Chenpo and the Ramo Chenpo. It would take a long time to tell you how I went to China, how I got there, how I searched for these things among thousands and thousands of places filled up with broken statues and so forth. The point is, I managed to bring back to Tibet 600 huge boxes containing thousands of statues and pieces of statues. And finally I was able to re-establish the two statues in Lhasa.

Also I made one big statue of Lama Pabongka. I was able to recover the bones and ashes of his holy body from some of the old nuns who were left there in the retreat place of Pabongka. They gave them to me. There was a big statue of Pabongka made of silver in the monastery, and just the head was made of brass. The silver was gone, of course, but I was able to recover the head, which was left somewhere half broken, and I put it together. This was already 1981.

I didn't know what was going on in India with the exile community, but I knew there were so many things missing, and I was really sad. I wanted to compose one very accurate history, an historical account of the 99 Ganden Throne holders, from Lama Tsongkhapa and all his successors up to the ninety-ninth. And also the life story of the great lamas, like Ketsang Dorje

Chang. I spent a great deal of time writing. I didn't know if these biographies had been put together or not.

I was able to somehow communicate with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and at a certain point I asked him, "Maybe I'll come over." And he said, "Yes, come over," and so I went.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama told me that we'd been going through so many hardships, especially people like me who had been left there and witnessed all the destruction. He said they'd heard all the things that were going on, and it would be highly beneficial if I could write a life history of myself, right from the beginning up to now, so I did. I put together two books, altogether around 800 pages that were published in Dharamsala by the publishing house of the Tibetan exile community.

I've written the most important things with a great deal of detail; for example, about Ganden; how Ganden was established from the beginning, and under what circumstances; how Ganden was during the reign of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, its organization and everything else, and how its destruction began around 1959; and how in 1969 it was completely destroyed, and under what circumstances, and so forth. I wrote all this down with many details.

And the story of the Ramo Chenpo, how the statue was brought to Tibet the first time, the history of the statue itself, its powers and so forth, and how the temple was taken over, destroyed, the statue taken out of the temple, opened up, completely emptied out, taken to China, how it remained in the corner of a factory storehouse for seven years and was brought back to Beijing and stored in a different place for another 10 years. Seventeen years of history of the statue in China.

If we had time to go through and translate these two books, you would come to know many facts about Tibet, about the mind of renunciation, and a little about myself. So much you'd see about the dissatisfaction of cyclic existence; about the fact that there is no stable place; once you're up you go down, once you're down you go up; and so forth, like real facts; the history connected with Tibet, the Dharma, myself. Also for that it's beneficial.

I always carry with me a very small stupa containing whatever bones and holy hair of Lama Tsongkhapa were left, and a little of Pabongka as well. I have the container here with me. I brought it from Tibet. When I think of all my possessions, of everything precious I have in my life, this is it.

So now my biography account is finished.

The Story of the Precious Conch Shell

Sometime in 1995, an old Tibetan man showed up at Rinpoche's room in Dharamsala, saying something about a precious conch shell, which someone he knew had smuggled out of Tibet. This conch is believed to have been a gift of the King of the Nagas to Shakyamuni Buddha.

Buddha prophesied that in the future, a monk in the Land of Snows – in fact, Lama Tsongkhapa – would spread the Dharma in the ten directions, and while doing this he blew this conch. Buddha instructed Maudgalyayana, one of his closest disciples who was famous for his psychic powers, to take the conch and bury it in the snow mountains.

After his long retreat, when Lama Tsongkhapa went to the mountain where Ganden was to be established, he found the conch buried there. It was here that he established his first monastery, Ganden.

Ribur Rinpoche recognized the conch when the man brought it to him the next day. Before taking it to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he kept it in his room for a few days. Its sound is very powerful, he said; he blew it several times.

When His Holiness received the conch, he was so pleased that he raised the conch above his head and stood for some time in meditation while holding it.

6. A Kalachakra Master: An Interview with Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche

Interview by Merry Colony and Teresa Bianca

Mandala September–December 1998

Merry Colony and Teresa Bianca interviewed Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche for Mandala in June 1998 in Dharamsala, India, where Rinpoche lives. They explained to Rinpoche that this is the first of a series of interviews with Lama Zopa Rinpoche's gurus that we plan for publication....

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: I am very pleased about this idea. It is important to publish fewer words but rich in meaning. I am very pleased because through Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's kindness so many centers have been established in different parts of the world, and their numbers are still increasing. These centers have been of great benefit in the past, are a great benefit in the present and will continue to be of great benefit in the future. So we are also, through our connection with Lama Zopa Rinpoche and by doing our best to help all those who come to the centers, benefiting in such great ways.

Because nowadays I am getting older and am a little sick, I am not going around, so by this interview I can reach all the people I would like to reach. In 1992 I made a world tour as requested by Lama Zopa, who asked me to give teachings in the centers, but nowadays I have to take care of my health. Even if I go to a country, still I cannot go to every center, so this way I can reach everyone! And even if I go on tour again because some students insist very much, I will not be able to visit as many centers as in the past. So it is very good if through this interview so many can be touched.

Can Rinpoche give us some background about himself?

By the Western calendar I was born in 1926. At the age of 5, I was recognized by the previous Kirti Rinpoche as the reincarnation of the Kirti Gompa abbot. At the age of 7, I became a monk and entered into Kirti Gompa in Amdo. I was told at this time that my previous incarnation had gone to Drepung Loseling when he was young and after finishing at Drepung went to Amdo and did his geshe exams there. After that he became abbot of Kirti Gompa.

Between the ages of 7 and 12 I learned the basics of Tibetan education, language and such, and at 12, I started my debate education based on the same texts as Drepung Loseling (*Collected Topics, Pramana, Prajñāparamita, Madhyamaka*). I was not able to finish [the last subject] vinaya because as the previous incarnation was abbot, I also had to become abbot. From 27 to 30 I was abbot of Kirti Gompa, and then from 30 to 32 I had to rest due to health reasons. At 32, I joined Kirti Rinpoche

in Lhasa; he was small at that time. He was to enter Drepung Loseling Monastery, and I was to serve as his debate teacher. This was in 1957. In 1958 His Holiness the Dalai Lama started his exams for his Geshe degree. These exams were to take one year and were given in Drepung, Ganden and Sera Monastic Universities. His Holiness' last exam was on Losar of 1959. A few months later His Holiness left Lhasa and a few months after that I also left.

In the beginning, after the March '59 uprising, the Chinese were successful in deceiving all us Tibetans and monks. They told us we could continue with our studies and that life would go on normally. People were told to come back to Lhasa, but from then on things got tighter and tighter. For example, in Amdo, because the people are nomads we were very accustomed to offering a lot of butter and money to the monks on special occasions. But the Chinese said this was not ours to give, that these things belonged to all the people, not just the monks, so they told us we could not make our offerings. So at that time 15 of us, including Kirti Rinpoche and his tutors, left Tibet for India with only a blanket on our shoulders and a bag of *tsampa*.

We had to flee by walking in the night and hiding in the day. The shorter route to escape was to go from the back of Sera Monastery, but since His Holiness' escape, this route was all covered with military so we had to go north through the great high desert of the Changtang. We had to walk where there was no path and always during the night. Then from the Changtang the shorter way was to go near Mt. Kailash, which we did by continually asking the nomads where the Chinese were. The nomads were so kind, always giving us *tsampa* for nourishment.

We entered Nepal through Kirong in southeast Tibet. The journey took us five to six months. During our escape we sometimes had to lie, even to Tibetans, about our route and our intentions because if the Chinese caught people they would force them to give information. So we usually said that we were from Amdo making pilgrimage to Kailash and then returning to Amdo.

When I arrived in India at the end of '59, His Holiness was in Bodhgaya, so we met. Later I was in Buxa in the north from 1961 to 1964. Fifteen hundred young monks were supported at Buxa by the international organizations. All the rest of the Tibetans who escaped had to work on road crews in order to survive. After that, because one of Kirti Rinpoche's tutors who came with us from Tibet died, I went to Dalhousie as there was a geshe there who was to be his next tutor. However, I was only able to stay in Dalhousie for two months as this was the time when His Holiness was establishing schools for children coming out of Tibet, and I was called to teach in what is now the Soka Loptra school. I stayed at this school for four years and then went to the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala for another three years as a teacher. The first change of teachers came in 1970 and at that time I asked if I could leave the school to go meditate in the mountains.

I went to a place near the white stupa on the mountain behind McLeod Ganj and lived there from 1970 to 1983. During this time I would come to town twice every month to attend the monks' confession ceremony and to do my shopping. The conditions were very poor and in 1983 I became very sick. Because of my health – my respiratory system had become quite weak – I then had to move down near Chopra House where His Holiness Ling Rinpoche lived so that I could see the doctor regularly. From 1983 to 1985 I would spend the summers on the mountain and the winters near Chopra House. So for 15 years I lived like this doing meditation.

In 1986, when His Holiness gave the Kalachakra empowerment in Bodhgaya, I had contact with the FPMT for the first time. I was requested to teach the Six Session Guru Yoga. In 1989 I went again to Bodhgaya where I gave *Mita Gyatsa* and half of the *Suka Gyatsa*, the rest of which I gave when I came back to Dharamsala. At that time in 1989 Piero Cerri was in charge of the teachings in Bodhgaya. Root Institute did not exist, only a small house that Kabir Saxena lived in.

When I returned from Bodhgaya, Kirti Rinpoche said there were so many monks coming from Kirti Gompa in Amdo that we should find a way to help them study. Initially we got two rooms at Namgyal Monastery [His Holiness' monastery in McLeod Ganj]. Because I was still sick, Kirti Rinpoche requested me not to go back to the mountains but to stay at Namgyal, so in 1987 I came down from Chopra House. After this I never returned to my retreat place in the mountains. We then bought land and started to build our monastery anew and in 1989 moved into the new Kirti Gompa in McLeod Ganj.

At the end of 1991 I was at Kopan for the first time. In 1992 I made my first world tour on the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I went first to Europe, then to USA, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. I was gone 11 months and when I returned I went to Bodhgaya for the winter of 1992-93. At the end of 1993 I was at Kopan again and from there Hong Kong and on my way back I stopped in Bodhgaya. In 1994-95 I went to USA and visited all the FPMT centers there.

In 1992 during my first world tour I gave Kalachakra initiation five times, in Pomaia in Italy, Holland, Germany, USA and Australia. As I had given the initiation already in Bodhgaya, in a tent on the Root Institute land, this was a total of six. Then in 1993, for seven months following the tour, I gave a cycle of 100 initiations to many lamas from Kirti Gompa, and included in this was the Kalachakra initiation, making it seven empowerments. In 1987 or '88 His Holiness asked me to go to Drepung Loseling to again give this cycle of initiations and Kalachakra. Then during my 1994-95 USA tour I gave Kalachakra in New York where Khyongla Rato Rinpoche lives and in Montana, Vajrapani Institute and Boston. So that made a total of 12 empowerments.

In 1995 I again gave the Kalachakra in Ewam Center in Italy and after the Kalachakra in Barcelona conferred by His Holiness I was asked to give the Six Session Guru Yoga in connection with Kalachakra to 500 people. In 1997 I went to Geshe Sopa's center in Puerto Rico and gave the

Kalachakra empowerment for the fourteenth time. Last year I was supposed to go to Puerto Rico again but I was not able. Then I gave Kalachakra in London, totaling 15 empowerments. Now Holland, England and Venezuela, where there is a group of people connected with Puerto Rico, are asking me to give again the Kalachakra empowerment.

Being a renowned meditation master, could Rinpoche tell us when he made his first retreat and what he remembers of this?

While I was studying in Tibet I didn't really have the chance to do any long retreat; I only did a few short ones. But when I was around 17 years old in Tibet I was very sick and a lama told me to perform Six-Armed Mahakala retreat, which I did. One of Alak Rinpoche's teachers had done an observation, which said my previous life protector had been Mahakala and that if I performed the retreat I would get better, which I did. I remember that I was very happy and that my faith and devotion increased very much during this retreat.

Rinpoche mentioned Alak Rinpoche, who is now your devoted attendant. Could you tell us when and how Alak Rinpoche came to be your attendant?

The previous life of Alak Rinpoche was a classmate/debate companion of mine, and we had a very good relationship. When the present Alak Rinpoche came to India, Kirti Rinpoche told him that I needed a good, stable attendant, so for this reason he came to help me. When the Chinese invaded Amdo in 1958 Alak Rinpoche was only 11. He was a monk at the time, but because they only allowed very few monks to remain in the monastery for a few years, he had to do physical labor. Then he was allowed back into the monastery, but he left soon after on a prostration pilgrimage from our village to Amdo to the front of the Jowo in Lhasa. This took Rinpoche two years, prostrating the whole way, over very high mountain passes and the like. In 1988 Rinpoche escaped from Lhasa and was helped on the way by some Nepali who showed him the way through the mountains. He has been with me ever since.

As Rinpoche has such a karmic connection with Kalachakra can Rinpoche talk some about this, the Kalachakra retreats you have made and the lineage you hold?

When I was 14 or 15 I received the commentary on the Kalachakra tantra called *The Great Commentary of the Stainless Light* by Rigden Pema Karpo, the King of Shambala. This commentary had been given to the previous Kirti Rinpoche. The lineage was broken in Lhasa but was still existing in Amdo. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama went to Beijing in the 1950s he went through Tashi Kyil Monastery in Amdo and explained the situation and told us to take care not to lose the lineage of the *Stainless Clear Light*. I was young at the time, but others took very good notes. When His Holiness later came to India he asked if this tradition was still alive. So as requested by Serkong Rinpoche I gave this tradition to Serkong Rinpoche twice. Serkong

Rinpoche was then to give it to His Holiness, but after giving only half of it to His Holiness, Serkong Rinpoche passed away.

At the request of His Holiness, who was very much concerned about keeping alive this tradition, I myself gave this tradition once to the Drepung Loseling Panar Rinpoche; then once to Bakula Rinpoche, a Ladakhi lama; once to a khenpo of Kalachakra Tratsang in Kirti Gomba; and once to Khyongla Rato Rinpoche. In total I have given the transmission of this Kalachakra tantra commentary six times.

Once after Serkong Rinpoche passed away His Holiness requested me, the Ganden Tripa, the abbot of Namgyal Monastery and Gen Lamrimpa to do the 10,000-mantra retreat of Kalachakra. At that time I was still living in the mountains so I came down for two months to do this retreat. Then later at Chopra House for six months I performed the body, speech and mind retreat of Kalachakra, at the end of which I offered a huge fire puja. So I did the Kalachakra retreat twice.

When His Holiness gave the Kalachakra initiation in Mundgod two years ago I was not there, but I was told that His Holiness took the opportunity of having such a big assembly of monks together to tell them that it is very important not to let *The Great Commentary of the Stainless Light* decline and that the monks should do the retreat. Then the next year in Dharamsala, when His Holiness was giving teachings to the group of lamas from Drepung Loseling, I was present and at that time His Holiness mentioned that I have that lineage, that he received only half and that the lamas should try to receive it. Then last year while I was in Sravasti, His Holiness addressed the lamas attending the teachings at the end of the Losar teachings, again saying it would be nice if lamas and geshe could receive this lineage. So His Holiness has said this three times. I wonder if it means that soon I will be asked to give again the transmission of that commentary to a group of lamas, geshe and tulkus.

As Rinpoche has such a special connection with the Kalachakra practice and has given the initiation so many times, could you explain to us the special significance of Kalachakra and why it is often called Kalachakra for World Peace?

In Tibet it was His Holiness and the Panchen Lama who were the high lamas most associated with giving the Kalachakra initiation. The Kalachakra is different from other initiations, which can only be given to small groups of people. The Sakyas especially are very strict about this, giving initiation to no more than 25 at a time. If there are more attending the initiation, they have to give it twice. This is in order to keep the *samaya* as well as the instructions for meditation pure. But the Kalachakra initiation can be given to an audience of any size; there is no limit. In fact anyone who can listen can attend a Kalachakra, be they children or even animals! And there are reasons and advantages why it is given, for example the strong impression that it leaves on the mental continuum of the people who receive it.

Earlier, in Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave the initiation twice. His Holiness has now given a total of 26 or 27 times. The reason to give this initiation so many times is to bring harmony to the world. Due to the internal unsubdued minds in this time we are living in, there is the manifestation of outer fighting and disharmony because of political, religious and ideological differences. People nowadays talk about the environment being polluted, and it looks like because of the pollution that the four elements are rebelling and causing fires, floods, earthquakes, etc. So it looks like there is a big significance to giving the Kalachakra to so many people, that there is a connection between the Kalachakra helping to subdue the minds of the people and the outer planet's harmony.

The big connection Kalachakra has with this planet is because of the first two kings of Shambala. Rigden Pema Karpo, the second of the twenty-five Kings of Shambala, was a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is also a manifestation of this same deity. This king's father Rigden Jampel Trapa was the emanation of Manjushri whom the Panchen Lama is considered an emanation of. These two, the kings and these two great lamas, Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri, have always been working for peace in the past and will continue to work for peace in the present and future. They work for harmony within Tibet and for all the religions to be harmonious. Nowadays they work for stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world. So these past two kings of Shambala and the present Dalai Lama and the previous Panchen Lama always work for peace in the world.

His Holiness gives the extensive initiation of body, speech and mind of Kalachakra on the basis of a sand mandala, which is a very elaborate and very expensive ceremony as it requires the help of so many monks and assistants. Likewise there is so much benefit because so many people are involved in these Kalachakra initiations. Then after it is over the sand from the mandala is poured into the water and into the wind, thus blessing all the environment.

In the centers I go to it is not possible to give this elaborate initiation due to financial constraints but I give it because the people ask me, and instead of refusing I give the abbreviated initiation on the basis of a drawn mandala, which hopefully also benefits.

Having spent so many years in retreat could Rinpoche speak about the hardships a meditator is likely to encounter?

When I was in retreat in the mountains and also at Chopra House there were no facilities. We had to make a fire to cook and so it was absolutely necessary to have someone as a helper to buy the food and make the fire, otherwise there was such a waste of time. Also the food was not so good so I got sick, and the house was just stones so the inside was wet in the monsoon, which also made me sick. So the food and house were big obstacles.

When I was in the mountains the place was so small and not only was the fire inside but we had to store the wood inside as well. Even then in the monsoon the wood would get so wet we couldn't make a fire. Last year some people from Taiwan offered to the Private Office, which supports 85 meditators, the money to buy each meditator a gas stove. This is so much better.

Then because I would only get food twice a month at *sojong*, in the monsoon the food went bad very quickly and if you eat this also you get sick. The potatoes grow sprouts and the flour goes rancid. As a result of this time on the mountain, I have problems with my breathing and respiratory tract. I moved down to Chopra House for the last four years so that I could see a doctor regularly.

When you are alone in retreat you are very relaxed and you can organize your sessions as you like. When I did the Kalachakra retreat with Gen Lamrimpa, the Ganden Tripa and the Namgyal abbot it was not that great. It is best to do retreat on your own. The second time I did the complete Kalachakra retreat of body, speech and mind I had only one other monk with me. After this retreat there is a very elaborate fire puja to perform. There are 95 deities to offer to so I asked one attendant of Kirti Rinpoche to help me. For example we needed 4,000 *yangshing* sticks. I think the cause to be able to give so many Kalachakra empowerments is due to having done this very elaborate fire puja.

When we are looking for a place to make retreat, should the priority be a blessed place in the East, which may have many of the difficult outer conditions Rinpoche describes, or a solitary place in the West, with access to good food and the like?

When someone is considering a place for retreat there are several qualities one should look for. One is that there should be someone you can ask advice of, which in the West is maybe difficult. Then one needs to be able to do the fire puja - this is *very* important. Again in the West this may be difficult as one needs to have an attendant and all the various materials to offer. As for the food and a good place, this maybe one can find in the West. But if one can find all the conditions in the West then excellent. Also, if one is not doing a deity retreat but only analytical meditation, because there is no fire puja required then it is different.

When you are in retreat and you get a narrow mind, a type of *lung* that makes one depressed, it is good to read the biographies of the past great practitioners. Are these available in the West? Is there someone there who can explain things to lift the mind out of this state?

Between sessions, to help keep the mind happy and alert, walking is very useful. The West is very good for this as it is very clean and beautiful. If one is in India, the weather is so horrible. Half the time it is very dry and dirty and the other half it is so wet. In Tibet, because it is so high, the

conditions are excellent. In India all the caves are wet. In Tibet the caves are dry and the food is very nutritious and tasty. So Tibet is an excellent place to make retreat!

What about seeing people while in retreat? How important is it not to see people? Again, in the East this is very difficult whereas in the West it is not so difficult.

For sure I consider not seeing others to be very important. In the West people respect the rules and discipline. In the East people go to see meditators, they knock on the door loudly and so on while in the West both from the side of the meditator and from the side of others, people stay away. There is a mutual recognition of the need to be isolated. I consider this very important, not to see or speak to a lot of others. I was very surprised to learn that in the West when people live in an apartment building for example, that there are laws to protect your privacy, to protect you from being disturbed. I think this is so amazing. You cannot even play loud music or be disturbing in any way to others, otherwise people will call the police!

What about seeing or having a phone call with a parent if the parent is sick or having a hard time accepting that their child is out of contact for long periods of time?

In this kind of a case, when there is a need from the side of the parent, then to see them sometimes is not a problem, because if you do not see them in this situation, your mind would be thinking about them all the time anyway. Also, you accumulate merit by helping your parents. To stay with them a long time is not good, but if they need then it is okay to see them. In the Tibetan texts, which explain how to do retreat, it explains how in the beginning of a retreat you need to motivate properly and include in your mandala all those whom you may need to see: one's teacher, a doctor, like this. So at this time you should include the parent you may see, then there is no mistake. It is good also to include a hospital in this visualization so if you get very sick and need to go to hospital then again there is no mistake.

What about if a parent dies while in retreat? Should one go to the funeral rites or not?

If a parent dies and there are other relatives who expect or hope that you will be present at the funeral, then you should go. Otherwise these relatives will develop a disturbed mind. If this is not the case then it is better to remain in retreat and to meditate and dedicate for them as this will bring a positive result for the parent.

Rinpoche mentioned walking as a way of keeping the mind light. Is there other practical advice on how to keep the mind happy and relaxed in retreat?

If one experiences times of not feeling like being in retreat or the mind not being happy, this is considered an obstacle. At those times one can recite *The Heart Sutra* or Tara puja or the dispelling hindrances practice from *The Heart Sutra*. If one is in a high place that is clean and beautiful then

taking a walk is helpful. At these times one should reduce the session time and make the break time longer. When the condition changes, then again lengthen the session time and take shorter breaks. If the obstacle is small, then one can overcome it by oneself, but if the obstacle is big and there are other monks and retreaters around then you should ask them to do pujas on your behalf, as many people doing puja together is more powerful and the result for oneself is more powerful.

Tibetan meditators are known for sleeping very little, eating very basic food and undergoing many austerities. Is this something we should train ourselves in or does this come naturally with time?

There are innumerable kinds of people with innumerable kinds of dispositions, body structures, characters and different amounts of stored merits so we absolutely cannot say there is *one* way to be in retreat. Milarepa for example, was someone who had a huge mass of merit and consequently who was very healthy. So for Milarepa it was okay, but if someone who is not in his situation tries to imitate Milarepa they will most probably get sick or will get even bigger obstacles, so based on one's situation one should adjust the sleep and the diet accordingly.

Sometimes the mind is happy because the winds and channels are functioning well. For this, exercise, stretching, is very important. In the Tibetan tradition we have the Six Yogas of Naropa exercises. But to go outside and do exercise is good. In this case the channels will be more relaxed and stretched so the mind will be happier.

We should try to look for an appropriate place where one can stay healthy. As for sleep, according to the Tibetan texts the night is divided into three parts. It is explained to sleep in the middle part of the night is best. If this is too little then the meditation will not be good, so you have to adjust the sleep to suit yourself. Some people find it beneficial to have a nap after lunch. If you find your mind is getting fresher after that then why not adopt this habit!

Then also one has to consider age. When young, one needs less food and sleep, and when older, one needs more sleep and better food. We should not challenge our body. For example, my longest sleep used to be not more than three to four hours, but nowadays I am older, so I sleep from 9 p.m. until 4 a.m. My experience and that of many others is that the mind is fresher in the morning, but this is not true for everyone.

Rinpoche has described the hardships he endured coming out of Tibet and later in retreat in the mountains. We often hear of these kinds of hardships when we hear the life stories of great masters. Many of us don't necessarily have to face these same kinds of hardships, which seem to be a cause for generating the strong, determined mind seeking enlightenment. Is it possible to develop this sort of mind without the hardships?

If we study what Guru Shakyamuni said he declared that the perfect human rebirth is more suitable to developing realizations than a god form. This is because it is so difficult for the gods to develop renunciation. To realize emptiness directly on the path of seeing can be done only with the human form that has developed the determination to practice Dharma.

Westerners have good outer circumstances, but if some succeed in practicing Dharma they will be shunned by society; your society will think you are mad. From this side you will get the difficulties. There is a story about this. When Guru Shakyamuni Buddha was alive there was a king whose son was a very famous doctor called The King of Doctors. When this doctor would meet Shariputra on the road he would always get off his elephant and prostrate in devotion to Shariputra. When the doctor died he went to the god realm. Shariputra then went to this god realm to find the doctor. He recognized Shariputra but would only look at him from the sides of his eyes, that was all. There was no devotion. So this shows that the difficulties of the human realm are beneficial, helpful to the practice.

For example, in the East, in China and Taiwan, for many generations they have been exposed to the positive influence of Buddhist habits so they have respect for monks and nuns and they offer them food, etc. But in the West the Dharma has spread only for a short time so you have not yet gotten familiar with those virtuous Buddhist practices. Instead, the few people who do live in accordance with Buddhism are considered crazy by the majority, and due to this many interferences come to them. Also, Westerners who meet the Dharma think realizations will come very quickly so they immediately begin practicing with a great effort that has not been built up over time. Tibetans have a completely opposite outlook. They are very far sighted and feel they are just accumulating conditions for their future life. Westerners think realizations should come quickly, and when they don't they either get mad or they abandon the Dharma. This way of thinking is very dangerous.

As far as conducive conditions and obstacles are concerned, Westerners have the difficulty of experiencing discouragement because the people around you do not accept your being a monk or nun or practicing the Dharma. Your material situation is good, but you have this other difficulty. If you come to the East, people respect the Dharma but then you cannot get a visa or the money to stay, which makes practice very difficult. If there were monasteries in the West where monks and nuns could stay together, then the people practicing could be together and get support, but there is nothing like this.

If one is a Tibetan monk or nun there is the tradition that they will be supported if they have no money, but this is not the same for Westerners. And without money so many difficulties come. So if you compare the conducive situations and the obstacles of the East and West they come out about equal! For example, in the East where Buddhism is developed they receive alms, but for sure

Westerners cannot do this. Also, if red-robed sangha go to yellow-robed countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka then the people there do not believe in your robes, your tradition.

Rinpoche, with more and more sickness in the world, could you explain how meditation can cure sickness, as it did for Rinpoche himself when he was 17?

In the small scope of the lam-rim there are the teachings of karma. This is a very important subject when we get sick or have problems. It is important to remember that all the different kinds of sickness, wars and problems that we are more and more compelled to experience in this world do not come without a cause. Getting sick is physical karma ripening and its cause is the ignorance that grasps at the self as inherently existent. On the basis of this we collect negative karma as individuals. When we do actions out of ignorance as a group of people, then we collect negative karma collectively. In retreat one meditates on emptiness, which is the antidote to this ignorance that is the true cause of the problems. As well, we make fervent prayers to the deity so these things together slowly purify our karma. In the presentation of karma in the lam-rim it is explained that karma has a cause and that there are remedies, karma can be purified. This process, however, does not happen suddenly, but slowly, slowly it will develop.

There is one sentence in the mind transformation teachings that says, “All the faults and blame are on oneself.” This shows that whatever happens, one’s own karma is to blame. So the supplication to the lama-deity is to subdue one’s own internal enemy that causes one to behave in the way that brings one the negative results. Everyone has to experience karma and everyone can purify their karma. The sicknesses do not come from the society; do not blame society. The sicknesses come from oneself.

Here maybe we could talk about *tonglen*, giving and taking. This is a very high practice, but let’s explain how the Kadampa geshe used to recite, “Whatever happiness comes is due to the lama in the previous life who allowed me to collect good karma and all the problems are due to the unskilled actions I have done in my previous life.” They used to recite this verse and reflect on it continuously. These are down-to-earth, practical practices, not some high works.

Guru Shakyamuni Buddha also said, “Whatever happiness comes is from oneself, whatever suffering comes is from oneself,” so oneself can become one’s best protector or one’s worst enemy. For example, the tourist who goes very happily around, enjoying the country, can do so because they were given the outer condition of a visa. So if we experience a good life, good conditions, it is because we accumulated the inner cause, the inner visa. If we do not experience good conditions it is because in the past we did not create the conditions. So when we apply for an extension to our visa we are dependent on external people, but as far as the internal visa goes, others cannot do much to help or hinder you; you yourself are the creator of this. It is very important to understand what creates the good internal visa situation and what creates the bad internal visa condition.

Can Rinpoche speak about coming out of retreat and how to do this without feeling overwhelmed and instead to feel happy about coming back out into the world of others?

How one feels when coming out of retreat is dependent upon the motivation one had while practicing. If the practice is really for sentient beings, only to be able to serve others and not for one's own realizations and freedom, then there should be no obstacle to coming out of retreat and to go back into society. Guru Shakyamuni Buddha said in many texts on the precepts and behavior of a bodhisattva that no matter how many good qualities you may have developed inside, you should always be very humble and if you try, through the Dharma you have realized, to help others the best you can, then those qualities will increase in you and you will be able to help others better. So because this kind of behavior has been so much emphasized it will put the people who follow it in a position of being in society without facing problems. So one should be very willing and very happy to go out and serve. If not, maybe this is a sign that the motivation was not really Mahayana.

In the Hinayana tradition we find the hearers and the solitary realizers, of which there are two types: those who stay around other monks and those who are called "like rhinoceros" because they stay alone, they do not even rely on a teacher. Even if Guru Shakyamuni Buddha was here, these solitary realizers would stay alone.

But the Mahayana, the bodhisattva vehicle, means practicing mind transformation, which means the more obstacles the better. It is certain that when we meet others, the more it is necessary to have the mind transformation methods. When you find yourself among angry and nasty people your practice of patience will increase; and it's the same for all other perfections when you are among many people. So when you go among difficult people who are miserable and sick and who commit many nonvirtues, because of living in a country where there is no Dharma your practice will become stronger and stronger. Thinking in this way we should see this as a help to the practice instead of thinking that going among others is an obstacle.

The bodhisattva prays not only to be among other human beings but to be in even the horrifying places where animals are eating each other and the like. The bodhisattva *wants* to go to these places where the beings are very desperate in order to benefit them. There is a stanza from Nagarjuna that says the bodhisattva desires to become the four elements: the earth because this is the basis for all life, the water for living beings to drink, the air to breathe. The bodhisattva makes these incredible aspirations and prayers, and the more they are in difficult circumstances the more their practice increases and therefore the more their aspirations are fulfilled.

If one develops the opportunity to do extensive meditation practice, is it possible to develop such a level of aspiration and strength of mind within the context of the daily practice? How?

When we wake up in the morning, whether we first do physical practice such as prostrations or verbal practice such as recitation or mental practice of meditation, always visualize around you your father and mother as well as all sentient beings of the six realms in the aspect of humans. This visualization creates an auspiciousness. Then, for example, if you recite mantra, all the sentient beings hear this and they are blessed. When meditating on the lama-deity, whether in the heart or above the crown of your head, the rays of light and nectar that are emitted dispel the sufferings of all these sentient beings and bless them. All the realizations and aspirations of the bodhisattva do not come quickly but these daily practices plant the seed so in the next life these thoughts of others will grow still more and one will continue in the practice.

Also, because we must eat every day, remember at that time the thousands of beings that exist within our bodies, all the microbes and such, then bless the food and offer it to the Three Jewels. This food will then become a blessing to the beings residing within our bodies to enable them to attain liberation. In the sutras there are mantras for one's spit, sweat, mucus, urine and kaka. Because these are things that are always coming from our bodies, we can say these mantras in order for the sentient beings who come in contact with these substances to be blessed.

When we eat, remember that the food, all of it, comes from the kindness of others. There are prayers that help you to remember the difficulties people underwent to get just one grain of rice onto our plate, and the kindness of the animals that give us milk, meat, etc. Likewise, when we put on our clothes, get in our car or go to our house, remember the kindness of all the sentient beings who made it possible for us to have these things and all the stages of work that were involved in this. When we dedicate and make prayers in all of these daily-life situations, this is called the practice of a bodhisattva. We are not used to thinking like this, but there are many teachings on how to develop this mind.

Is there anything else Rinpoche would like to add as a message to his students worldwide?

By the kindness of Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the first centers were established. This was due to their very open minds and their farsightedness. In this way they began an organization that has now grown very big, which so many people benefit from and will continue to benefit from. So many people who never would have had interests in Dharma are now interested and others who have interest can develop their Dharma further because of these centers. Also, young people who are unstable, who are extreme in one way or another, start to listen and to practice, and their minds start to get subdued. Then by their experience others come. So the main purpose is to pacify our minds, and the centers provide the conditions to do this as they have teachers, translators and old Dharma students. So many can be touched. People come not only to listen to words about Dharma, but to really listen, reflect and meditate on the essence of the Dharma, which is to transform our rough mind and eliminate all the mental problems so we can have peace and happiness. If by this one person is benefited, there is great meaning and more if

there are two and so on. Because of this organization, more people can be reached, so for this reason I thought to give the above advice, hoping that they will help to pacify and transform the minds of many people. Also the *Mandala* magazine, which reaches so many people. So for this *Mandala* I have added my advice!

Then specifically I would like to say that Lama Yeshe had the idea to build this Maitreya statue in Bodhgaya because this is the place where Guru Shakyamuni Buddha manifested enlightenment. Lama Yeshe's idea was not only to bring benefit to that small place, but by this method to extend peace in all the directions. Because of building this external Maitreya this becomes a cause to develop the inner Maitreya state of peace. By this statue being built all the elements and countries will be blessed, not just India, so I think there will be a significant benefit.

This last winter His Holiness went to Bodhgaya at the invitation of the FPMT and the Maitreya Project. His Holiness praised the value of building the statue, emphasizing the external and internal benefit in the environment that will derive from it. His Holiness always emphasizes two things: the behavior of non-violence and the view that should be according to what the scientists say. Now these scientists are saying that the relation between the scientific word and Buddhism is beneficial for both, that they are supporting each other. So whenever these two pillars are spread the people receive benefit. We are coming together. So the FPMT is spreading these two pillars of behavior and view.

His Holiness always emphasizes that a peaceful and happy mind is something everyone needs, whether one has religion or not. Communists also need this; Muslims and Christians also need this. So because Buddhism is very much in accord with science we can reach those without faith in a religion. Because the presentation of Buddhism is so broad, we can be of benefit to both religious and nonreligious people. Before, the scientists thought of religion as something that required blind faith, but now because of the scientific approach of Buddhism they say it is not a religion but a science.

His Holiness also speaks about these nuclear tests. Maybe there are seven countries now with nuclear capability. This is something very bad. Even if bombs are not used, just having this technology creates a pride in a country so they can bully others, and those countries without will then feel they should also become nuclear-armed. His Holiness says that absolutely we must dismantle the world nuclear supplies.

What we need instead is the nuclear weapon that will destroy the internal enemy so there can be happiness for self and others. With this external weapon we only make ourselves and others unhappy. So I want to emphasize that we need an incredibly powerful weapon to destroy this internal enemy. This weapon is the wisdom realizing emptiness. By this we will reach buddhahood, which brings all fulfillment and happiness. This external weapon will make only problems.

Thank you very much.

7. Obituary for Geshe Yeshe Tobden

By Massimo Corona

Mandala November–December 1999

If Geshe Yeshe Tobden's life story is an amazing example of Dharma, even more so is his death. Since last February Geshe-la's health became seriously weak. It was decided that this year he would travel to the West, but early in the year everything was put on hold due to the deteriorating condition of his health.

During June and July, his health got much better and he was set to leave. The day before leaving Dharamsala, July 26, [1999] Geshe-la, as he always did, went to see His Holiness to get his blessings and unexpectedly His Holiness told him not to go, to postpone the trip at least a month. On July 30, suddenly Geshe-la got much worse. His Holiness said that the conditions were very serious and that it could help if he were to be taken to the Chandigarh hospital.

On the morning of July 31 he was brought to Chandigarh, but his breath ceased when they got to the hospital at 9:25 P.M. They got back to Dharamsala at 4 A.M. and immediately Losang, Geshe-la's attendant, went to see His Holiness, who said not to despair, not to ask for divination but only to recite the Guhyasamaja root tantra and *The Praise to Interdependence* until the white and red drops came out from the nostrils [the sign that the consciousness has left the body].

So 17 yogi-meditators, most of Geshe-la's disciples, came down from the mountain and began the recitations. His body and face were not at all transfigured but lucent, and they remained in this manner until August 12 when the white and red signs appeared.

People who went to pay homage said that in the room one could smell perfume and would feel blissful and in peace. In the early morning of August 13 the body was carried near Trijang Rinpoche's stupa where His Holiness indicated that the body should be cremated.

The fire was lit at 4 A.M. and burned without smoke for 14 hours. The next morning at sunrise when the fire went out, a rainbow was seen. The last miraculous sign happened on August 16, when Geshe-la's disciples went to gather the ashes: in the middle of the fire slightly towards the west, they clearly saw the imprint of a child's foot.

May this compassionate teacher, great bodhisattva, quickly return among us and lead us to the freedom of enlightenment.

Geshe Yeshe Tobden was born in 1926 to a family of well-to-do farmers in a village one-day walking distance from Lhasa. At the age of 12, following the prediction of a great lama, his mother gave the child to Gen Damchö of Sera Me monastery so that he could take the monastic vows. When he was 18, his beloved mother died, soon followed by his young sister and his father.

Geshe-la, left alone, decided to sell his family house and property and offered whatever he obtained to the monastery. Not satisfied with that, in order not to be a burden for his gen-la, who was taking care of many young monks, he went to live alone in a small hut outside the monastery. Until the Chinese invasion, he lived there in absolute poverty but at the same time studied vigorously, mainly with his root guru Chu-sang Rinpoche.

In 1959, Geshe-la was arrested and imprisoned by the Chinese, but after four months he was able to escape and for one and a half years he traveled by foot across occupied Tibet to the Indian border. The border was closed as the flux of refugees had stopped long before, so he was again imprisoned by the Indian border guards thinking he was a Chinese spy. Luckily a Tibetan guard, who had been a Sera monk, recognized him and he was freed. He also sponsored him to go to Buxa where the Tibetan monasteries were being rebuilt.

Here Geshe-la went back to his studies and, at the age of 37, he became a geshe lharampa. After a teaching assignment to the University of Varanasi, his friend Geshe Rabten told His Holiness that there was this geshe whose only wish was to go into seclusion and meditate. His Holiness wanted to hear the motivation from Geshe-la himself, who in a simple manner told that he always had, since his childhood, the desire to meditate on renunciation, bodhichitta, and emptiness. His Holiness was impressed by Geshe-la's sincerity; consequently, he relieved him from the teaching assignment and guaranteed his support, including the permission to come and see him whenever Geshe-la needed advice.

At the age of 44, he finally fulfilled his life-long wish and retired to a small stone house above Upper Dharamsala, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama is based.

Although in 1976 he became seriously ill, he did not want to leave his retreat place. Eventually, at the insistence of Lama Thubten Yeshe, he accepted to come down to Tushita Meditation Centre, where he could enjoy better living conditions. A couple of years later, Lama asked His Holiness if Geshe-la could come to Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Italy as resident teacher. His Holiness, knowing how great was Geshe-la's desire to meditate in seclusion, agreed on the condition that it wouldn't be for long.

Geshe-la remained in Italy for almost three years, but so intense were his blessings and relationships developed with his Italian students that, moved by great compassion, he returned to Italy regularly to teach and care for his students in every possible way.

8. The Life of a Hidden Meditator: Choden Rinpoche

Mandala *July–August 2000*

Choden Rinpoche of Sera Je Monastery, one of the highest of the Gelug lamas, was virtually unknown outside Tibet until 1985. He neither escaped his country after 1959 nor was imprisoned. Instead, he lived in a house in Lhasa, never leaving his small, dark, empty room for 19 years, even to go to the toilet, and never cutting his hair and beard.

“He spent all his time on that bed, meditating,” said Rinpoche’s attendant, Sera Je monk Ven. Tseten Gelek.

“They had to change the bedding once a month because it got smelly from sweat. He used a bedpan as a toilet, as he was pretending to be an invalid. Until 1980 he didn’t talk to anybody, only the person who brought food into his room.”

“The main thing I wanted to do was to practice Dharma sincerely, no matter what external factors were arising,” Rinpoche told *Mandala* in June during a two-month visit to Vajrapani Institute in California. “This was my motivation, to be completely against the eight worldly concerns.”

Here, Rinpoche tells us about his life. (The words in italic type are from Ven. Tseten.)

The Early Days

Choden Rinpoche was born in 1933 near Rabten Monastery at Rongbo in eastern Tibet. At the age of three he was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous Rinpoche, who himself had been one of the candidates for the Twelfth Dalai Lama, Thinley Gyatso. There were significant signs about the previous Choden Rinpoche’s birth. After the reincarnation was chosen, they didn’t want to leave him just like that, so they placed him as the lama of Rabten Monastery.

From the age of three to eight I was tutored by an uncle who lived in a hermitage, and at the age of eight I entered the local Rabten Monastery, where I learned all the prayers and rituals. I was six years old when I first met the previous Pabongka Rinpoche, and I took many teachings from him at Rabten Monastery. I also took novice ordination from him then.

At that time I did not know much about practice. When I was 10, one ex-abbot of Drepung Loseling taught on the lam-rim and I attended the teachings, and it was around that time that my interest in practice began.

I don't remember too clearly my first meeting with Pabongka Rinpoche, but what I do remember is that Rinpoche was very happy with me and I really admired everything that Rinpoche did: the way he walked, the way he dressed, everything. I felt, "If only I could be like him," because I had such admiration for him.

Pabongka Rinpoche advised me not to stay in the local monastery but to go to the main monastic centers for learning near Lhasa, such as Sera, Ganden or Drepung. I entered Sera Je Monastery when I was 15. All of the local Gelug monasteries spread out over Tibet have allegiance to one of the three major monastic centers, so accordingly you follow that. The previous Choden Rinpoche studied at Sera Je and did the geshe studies there.

Going to Lhasa

The journey to Lhasa took a month and a half. Because there were no proper roads at that time, you'd just travel slowly with a herd of yaks and many other people, like a caravan. It was during the winter and was very, very cold at that time. You have to wear animal skin *chubas*, so you cannot travel in monk's robes.

I remember sleeping on the roadside and waking up sometimes completely covered in snow; because it's so cold it doesn't melt, and you shake it off when you wake up. There was nothing like a tent. You also had to carry everything you needed with you on the animals.

There was no signs of the Chinese army yet (it was 1948), although there were cases of small groups coming into Tibet. People were afraid of Communism, of having that kind of element in society.

In the beginning our group had horses for riding, and they also had a lot of yaks for carrying the supplies, but later we started to ride the yaks instead of the horses. I traveled with my father and mother and a brother. The family went to Lhasa to do a pilgrimage, to make offerings and do circumambulations at the temples in Lhasa; they went back home after five or six months.

The Power of Debate as a Basis for Realizations

I followed the regular curriculum of Sera Monastery, studying each of the main five texts. For the first part of the studies you do the same studies as the rest of the monks, but when the geshe studies begin they give a jump-start to the *tulkus*. I was in the same class as Geshe Sopa Rinpoche, Geshe Ugyen Tseten and Geshe Legden for two or three years.

At Sera Monastery the main program is philosophy, the geshe program. But there are different hermitages of different lamas, and they would give teachings. I attended many of them. The main teachers at that time were Bari Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and Ling Rinpoche. I enjoyed these teachings very much, although sometimes during the main curriculum of studies at Sera, when you get to a very important part of the text being studied, you didn't get permission to go to these other teachings.

I enjoyed debating and wasn't too bad at it. I studied with some of the best debaters at the monastery, like Geshe Loga and Geshe Losang Wangchuk. Having been guided by them I was able to debate very well.

What you would consider a good debater is a person who, when debating on a given subject, can point out to the other person their mistaken view; you can debate it by being able to explain why theirs is not the correct view, using logic, reasoning, and by quoting scriptural authority. By the way you debate you show them their wrong view and then can completely give it up. That's the sign of a good debater: being able to enlighten the opponent to their fault and create the basis of the correct understanding through logic and scriptural understanding.

With debate, you develop a very stable conviction yourself of what you understand because you use the logic, reasoning and scriptural authority. When you're able to do that, then whatever understanding you have is very firm in your mind [and therefore is a basis for realizations].

Generally, it is said in the debating courtyards of the monasteries [the ritual gesture of] simply clapping your hands in debate just once has more benefit than meditating for many years – such is the power of debate.

Usually in Sera, Ganden and Drepung you study the meaning of all the sutras; then you join one of the tantric colleges and study the meaning of all the tantras. All of this is what has to be meditated upon. You have people who, after their studies, take to a life of being a total hermit; they dedicate their whole lives to meditation. Other people live in the monastery and do all the meditations within the conditions of the monastery. Others choose to go back to their local monasteries in whatever village or town they came from, either to teach or do meditation.

My teacher, Geshe Losang Wangchuk, used to say it's more beneficial to stay in a monastery and teach than to go off to meditate, because when he expressed the wish to go off into retreat, Trijang Rinpoche advised him against it, pointing out the benefits of teaching others rather than going off by yourself to meditate. When you teach you're benefiting so many people, but when you meditate you're benefiting mainly yourself.

Philosophy is not formatted for meditation, so what you meditate on are things like various stages of the path to enlightenment, which is totally formatted for meditation. You can then take all the

subject material, all the information of all the philosophical studies and you can apply it to enrich, to adorn your meditations.

A Typical Day at Sera

In the morning, just before the dawn breaks, the morning prayers begin at the monastery, which takes two hours. Then the debate sessions begin. At around 11 you come in together for prayers, and tea is offered. That's your lunch time. The monastery only gave tea, so the monks would come with a handful of tsampa, and that would be their lunch.

After that you do debate, then prayers, then again you debate. After the last debate session you can go spend an hour and a half in your room.

There are no standardized classes – whenever there is free time there are classes. There are periods of time in the monastery where there are no debate sessions, and it's during this time that these philosophy classes are very vibrant.

After the hour-and-a-half break you reconvene for a very long debate session, and that's followed by a session of prayers where you recite *The Twenty-one Praises to Tara* and praises to the White Umbrella Deity – things like that. Then you go for another period of debate, and when the sun is about to set you have another break. From sunset onwards, everything you've memorized you have to recite so you don't forget it. If you are in the higher classes you are allowed to stay in your room to do the recitations, but if you are younger you have to stay in the open grounds where all the recitations take place. By yourself, you chant out loud.

During that time there may be people who chant their prayers all the way through the next day's sunrise. The *Madhyamaka* class and those who study the Perfections take turns to spend the entire night up. When one class is about to go to bed, the other class will begin their debate session, and they stay all the way through to the morning prayers. So in that way there is the sound of Dharma 24 hours a day. In the monastery there is never the occasion where you do not hear the sound of Dharma.

Geshe Studies

Rinpoche completed all the necessary studies by the age of 28, reaching the highest lharam class. Trijang Rinpoche and many high lamas asked him to get his Geshe degree quickly, but his main guru at the time, who was abbot of Sera Je, did not allow him to become a geshe. He wanted Rinpoche to keep studying. He went

over the studies again, mainly the texts about the monastic vows, the vinaya. He studied them many times. Then the Chinese came.

He never wore the special clothes for the tulku, and even though he was from the family of an official, he never had his own labrang, his own household, at Sera. He mixed with the ordinary monks, and everyone liked him.

Rinpoche's main gurus are Pabongka Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

His main purpose in studying since the time he was young was to be able to practice what he learned, so he focused on the meaning of the scriptures. When he was around 10, he had a great intention to practice what he learned.

I stayed in the *lharam* class for many years. One of my teachers who was an abbot told me, "You're still young. What is the point of hurrying to get your Geshe degree? Keep on studying." I was around 28 when I could have taken my Geshe degree. I was 29 when the Chinese came, so I never had the chance after that.

I completed my studies in about 14 years, but if you go according to the system of the monastery, it takes about 30 years. It therefore takes the monks a long time to get their Geshe degrees. This is because the meaning of the scriptures is very, very profound. The more you're able to analyze it, the clearer the depth of your understanding becomes. This system produces some of the best scholars.

Debating with the Dalai Lama

During the Great Prayer Festival, Monlam, in the spring of 1959, just before he fled Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had to debate as part of his geshe examination. All the main monasteries sent some of their best debaters to debate with him; Geshe Lhundrup Sopa and I represented Sera Je.

The ones who sit as the examiners are the abbots of the monasteries. But usually there are many geshes who have mastered all the subjects at the debates, so they can see how well a person does. Debate is not like written exams; everyone hears what you have to say, so it's very clear whether you make a mistake or whether you give a very smart answer.

The Great Prayer Festival is held during the first month of the Tibetan New Year, and all the monks from all the main monasteries and many of the smaller local monasteries gather around the Jokhang; there were probably several tens of thousands of monks there.

When His Holiness was learning debate, he would usually debate with an assigned debate partner (*tsenshab*), and they would debate in private. Therefore, no one knew how good His Holiness was because he'd never debated in any of the monasteries. They had absolutely no idea what his level of skill was.

Five main treatises make up the studies in the geshe program, so time is set for debating on each one of these topics, and all the representative geshe from all of the monasteries are given a part of the subjects to debate. Each debater gets his own topic, and each of them would debate His Holiness.

The subject debated in the morning for His Holiness was *Pramanavartika*, and the people debating at that time were Geshe Rabten and Gen Kalo, who was the abbot of the Lower Tantric College, Gyume. In the afternoon there's another debate session, and the subject then was *Madhyamaka* and the Perfections. During that time, Geshe Sopa Rinpoche and I debated. In the evening there is what is known as the great debate session where all the geshe of the major monasteries will debate.

There would be two hours of debating sessions in the morning, then many hours of prayers (since it was during the prayer festival), and there would be two hours of debate in the afternoon with many prayers, and then the debate session in the evening, which is the longest.

His Holiness was present for the debate for all together about three hours. When His Holiness debated in the evening, everyone was amazed at how good he was! That evening, for the first time, everyone had insight into the level of skill of His Holiness.

I had the topic of the two truths, conventional and ultimate. Twenty-five years later when I saw His Holiness, in 1985, His Holiness had such a clear memory: he said, "You were one of the debaters, weren't you? You debated on the two truths." This is a major debate with so many monks, and His Holiness knew not only that I was someone who had debated, but he even remembered the topic I had debated!

The Tibetan Uprising in Lhasa 1959

By the time of the uprising against the Chinese Communists, most of the monks had already escaped. So many soldiers had arrived and the monks were afraid the monasteries would be destroyed. There were thousands of monks before the occupation, but only two or three hundred remained at Sera. I remained at Sera.

One morning at daybreak, the Chinese soldiers surrounded the monastery and rounded up all the monks and put us in a courtyard. After this they ransacked the whole monastery. All the monks were circled by the soldiers with their weapons.

We heard that in eastern Tibet the soldiers had rounded up all the monks and shot them dead, so everyone was frightened that would happen. From dawn to sunset the monks were all standing in the courtyard. Then they put the monks in a line and took them away. Everyone said, "We're being taken to be killed," but it didn't turn out like that; they just imprisoned everyone.

I was in prison for about a month. Since they didn't have a prison set aside, they used one of the Sera Je main temples, and they wouldn't let anyone out, even to pee! We had to use a huge container that was usually used to hold the water for making water bowl offerings - you couldn't just go all over the floor.

Sometimes in the middle of the day they would give us lukewarm water to drink, and if people had *tsampa* of their own they would eat that with the water. We lived like this close to a month, two or three hundred monks.

They started to separate all the lamas, all the geshe, all those who had management positions of any kind. They categorized people, and the general monks were kept as one group. They used to say, "Ones without any titles are our friends, while ones who have titles are our enemies."

They would use the groups of ordinary monks to investigate the groups of people who had titles. If any of the general monks could guarantee that any of the titled people hadn't participated in the uprising and didn't say anything about the Chinese, they would also be released.

When I was at the monastery I usually mixed with the general monks, so some of the monks vouched for me, saying that although a rinpoche, I don't have anything that fits that title, so I was released.

They would hold political lessons in the monastery, teaching the monks to talk against religion, to talk against the monastery and any of the practices. One by one they would release the people with titles for a little while, and everyone - all the general monks - would have to beat up on this person. If they didn't, they would be considered supporters of the titled person. Some were beaten so badly they couldn't get up afterwards.

I had some sort of heart condition, so when I saw all of this happening I became terribly ill, so I got a pass to go to a hospital for a checkup. I went to Lhasa and spent five or six months there.

In the second month of 1960 they rounded up all the monks living in Lhasa and told us we couldn't stay but had to go back to whatever monastery we came from. I went back to Sera. I was still living as a monk and wearing robes.

Back at the monastery, there was all the criticizing and disparaging of His Holiness. When you're forced to attend these meetings and participate in these meetings, you have no choice, you have to participate in some verbal abuse. I wasn't well from before, so I managed to get by sleeping, and I didn't have to participate. The Chinese would bring doctors to come check my pulse, and since my heart condition caused my pulse to throb quite strongly, I was excused from these meetings.

Meanwhile, the living conditions at the monastery were getting tighter and tighter all the time. The people in Lhasa at that time were a little more free than the ones in the monastery, so when the lay people heard about the monks having such a hard time, they would say things like, "I hope I'm never reborn as a monk!" It reached a point where people were even saying things like that! After that I left the monastery and came to Lhasa, where I lived with a relative.

It never occurred to me to try to escape. The Chinese used to say over and over again, "There's absolutely no way you can escape," and people also had so little information about how to do it, that in your mind it was not even an option to consider.

A Subtle Form of Revolution

The Chinese said that religion is poison. However, in the beginning they said that if you can practice Dharma without having to rely on other people for food or clothing, then you can practice. They said you're a parasite if you have to live off the food of others, so many people decided that the practice called "taking the essence" - *chulen* - (which didn't require any food) was the best option and aimed to live in retreat in mountain hermitages.

To do *chulen* you need to get instructions, proper instructions. At the beginning I didn't get the instruction, but at last, after requesting so many times, some of us received the instruction and I did the retreat for three months.

I wanted to continue this practice for my whole life. The practice went well and I felt a lot of energy and mindfulness. But after three months the Chinese came and said that doing this retreat was actually a criticism of the Chinese government. They said that doing this meditation was a disgrace to the nation and that we were giving the message that the government couldn't provide for us - in essence that we were putting the Chinese down, that it was a subtle form of revolution. So we had to stop doing the *chulen* practice.

There are three kinds of chulen: flower chulen, stone chulen and water chulen. With flower chulen, there is a pill composed of many different kinds of flowers; you take three pills: one in the morning, one at lunch and one at night. That is all you eat, and it is sufficient. Then, when you get used to it, one pill is enough. And when you're totally used to that, you don't need to eat at all – you just use the visualization and absorb the elements directly into yourself. The energy itself is sufficient to sustain you.

When you do chulen you generate yourself as the deity, then you take the pill and you visualize taking the essence of the five elements – earth, air, fire, water and space. You absorb the essence of them into yourself. By doing this you don't have to rely on any raw food at all.

For Dharma practitioners, doing a chulen retreat helps you not waste time. You don't waste time gathering the food together and cooking it, which means you have more free time to practice Dharma, especially when you go do retreat in a cave. You don't need to rely on a benefactor to sponsor the food. And moreover it makes your mind extremely clear. It helps the energy in the meditation. The secondary benefit is that it prolongs your lifespan and it reduces your gray hair and wrinkles. It also makes your face and body more beautiful.

The best benefit is that these days we are accumulating so many negative actions with regards to food – attachment, killing, so many negative actions – and with chulen, all of this stops.

The Benefit of Learning Poetry and Grammar

From 1961 until 1965 I studied with a Sakya abbot in Lhasa. There was a lot of fear even to study like that – fear for the person teaching, fear for the student. I was the only one studying with this lama.

I studied grammar and poetry, then Sanskrit. You study what is known as study of the sound. There is another Sanskrit study where you put the letters together in the form of mantras. I also studied white astrology. I didn't study medicine at that time, but when I was back in my home town my teacher was a doctor, so from having lived together with him I knew for what sickness what kind of medicines would work.

The more well-versed in grammar you are, the more capable you are reading the scriptures to get an in-depth understanding of the Dharma. There's a way that through the study of the fine details of grammar you get a fine insight in reality. Grammar is very deep in Tibetan, so your insight is sharpened. And when you read texts you know exactly where the spelling mistakes are; Tibetan spelling is not like Western spelling – it's very subtle.

Learning poetry allows you to do prayers and praises in the most eloquent and effective way, where you take examples and analogies and form the analogy into a praise. And you can compose very poetically.

When you study poetry, there is a way you learn the art of a certain way of writing and reading, where if you read the lines forward there's a meaning, and if you read the lines backwards, there is also a meaning. Both ways convey a meaning.

There is one composition of Lama Tsongkhapa known as *The Thought Training of the Great Sound of Poetry* that can be read forwards and backwards; both ways you can read and teach on it. Lama Tsongkhapa was a great poet – there's nothing Lama Tsongkhapa didn't know! He's the all-knowing mind.

Most of what I've written are the long-life prayers for many lamas, and auspicious verses for new buildings. Many people have asked me to compose books, but I don't like to do that. The main purpose of learning poetry, grammar and astrology is to understand Dharma properly, and to put it into practice. I didn't learn it to compose books. When people ask me I say we have so many books – we have enough books. What's lacking is practicing the instructions in the books.

Retreat for Nineteen Years

I did chulen retreat for a while, but the Chinese stopped me. They said you could practice Dharma, but when it came down to it there were many restrictions, and they felt Dharma was bad and the practices are essenceless. So until about 1964 I lived in Lhasa, doing the main practices of Guhyasamaja, Yamantaka and Heruka, and giving some teachings where I could.

At the time of the Cultural Revolution in 1965, things became tighter than ever before. It was in August or September of 1966 that they started destroying the Jokhang temple, all the holy objects in the temples, and all the holy objects people kept in their private homes as well; it was massive destruction. Except for where the Buddha Shakyamuni statue was and one room of the religious kings, they completely emptied the entire temple.

The Potala wasn't destroyed as much as the other places. At Sera, Drepung and Ganden, some of the main temples were left in somewhat okay condition, but the others were destroyed. In 1969, that was the year they completely razed Ganden to the ground.

With the Cultural Revolution, I stopped all outer practices completely. I lived with relatives in Lhasa. I stayed inside without ever going out. During this time I was sleeping. I stayed in a room in the house of my cousin's wife, who was half Tibetan, half Nepali. The Chinese would come

anytime of the day or night – sometimes very early, sometimes late – to check on what I was doing, whether I was sleeping, to see if I was really sick or not. When they were gone I would get up and do practices.

At that time you could have absolutely no holy objects, no statues or scriptures. If they saw any scriptural texts you would be in big trouble. Even if you moved your lips without making a sound you would get into trouble, because they would think you were saying prayers. I had some prayer beads but they had to be kept hidden. I had a small one and when people came to investigate me, I would hide it in one of the two hidden pockets in my clothes, just over my knees.

Because I stayed inside like this without ever going out, people said I was doing retreat. But it wasn't proper retreat, with the offerings, ritual things, and so forth. During this time I would think about the various stages of the path to enlightenment, as well as Guhyasamaja, Heruka, Yamantaka, all the generation stage yogas. And when I had time, I would complete the mantra quotas of each deity.

In any case, you don't need external things to do Dharma practice. It's all in your heart, your mind. As for realizations: you do not experience the realizations of the three principal aspects of the path, but you do have a little renunciation, and because of that you are able to stay like that.

In Meditation for Nineteen Years

Rinpoche lived in his cousin's house in Lhasa from 1965 to 1985, without coming out. He acted like an invalid. His room had no window, only a small space for ventilation above the door. Rinpoche stayed in one room for eight years, then he went to another room for the remaining 11 years. I saw the second room and it was dark, really dark. When you walk in you can't see anything, but slowly as your eyes adjust you can make some things out. Even now at Sera when I come to open the shades in Rinpoche's room he says no, no. I think only for my benefit he lets me open the shades. He didn't take even one step out of those rooms for 19 years.

To do retreat, normally, you need texts, a thangka, drum, bell, vajra, all these things, but Rinpoche only had a rosary. There was no altar, no text, nothing. He had already finished all the memorization of all the texts and prayers during his years of study at Sera, so he didn't need these things. The Chinese were always checking what he was doing; they would come to the house several times a day, and if they found any religious object they would have taken him away. So Rinpoche did all the retreats using just his mind; everything was in his mind. But he would never say this himself; he just says he was sleeping, thinking a little about the Dharma.

He spent all his time on that bed, meditating. They had to change the bedding once a month because it got smelly from sweat, so he'd get off while they changed it. He would sit all of the day and lie down at night for sleep. He used a bedpan for a toilet, as he was pretending to be an invalid. Until 1980 he didn't talk to

anybody, only the person who brought food into his room. No one else even came to his room – if people brought food they'd give it to his family and they'd bring it in. My father and grandfather were his disciples and would bring him what he needed. They said Rinpoche had long hair and a very long beard. They said he is a very special person.

The Advantages of Living in Isolation

One reason it was good to stay inside in Lhasa was because if you went out, you had to do what the Chinese said, and then you'd accumulate so much negative karma. I didn't want to do anything at all that was contradictory to Dharma; I wanted to practice Dharma, so for that reason I didn't leave my house. The Chinese used many tactics to get me to work for them. First they tried to frighten me, and when it didn't work they invited me and many high geshe and lamas to live under their care; they said they would provide a house, car, food, money. But I didn't want to do this because then I would have to do whatever they said, which was all contradictory to the Dharma. The main thing I wanted to do was practice Dharma sincerely, no matter what external factors were arising. This was my motivation, to be completely against the eight worldly concerns.

The future life is more important than this life – this life is just like a dream. So if you went and did as the Chinese said, you would get a good house and car, you could enjoy so many things, but this would have caused you to fall to the lower realms, where you would experience sufferings for so many eons. Future lives are much more important than this life. In order to work for the future lives, I stayed inside to practice.

When we die we don't just vanish. We have to take rebirth, and we don't have any choice in that birth, only what our karma determines – whether we're reborn in the lower realms or upper realms. If you've done positive things in this life you can take rebirth in the human realm, and you can enjoy the result of these actions. If you do negative actions, the karma does not vanish; even the smallest karma accumulated you have to experience in the future.

The future is very long, many eons. This life is so short, it's just fiction, just a dream. Your mind continues infinitely, and when you die in the next life, again it doesn't vanish, and again you continue to the next life, and the next – many lives you have to go through. So all of these are determined by the present actions. You have no choice. So the present action is important. This life is so short, perhaps only 100 years – very small compared to the future lives. This is why the future lives are more important than this life.

From the point of view of religion, of Dharma, there was great accomplishment in living this way. And from the point of view of this life, there was also great benefit. In this life, if I hadn't done what I did, I would have had to go with the Chinese and gotten a house, car and high rank, but

then I would have had to torture people and cause so much suffering for the ordinary beings. And if I had gone as an ordinary being, with no high rank, etc., I would have had to undergo so much suffering, just like all the Tibetans did. But I didn't have to experience any of this in this life. These are advantages to my living like I did.

Another advantage is that I got the reputation of doing retreat for 20 years: this is also a benefit concerning this life! It will cause others to think, "That's interesting. Maybe Dharma is really helpful, maybe it's true." It may benefit others for the Dharma in this way.

I experienced very few problems during those years. I had only little problems with my stomach; and when I started walking there wasn't any pain, but I felt my legs were collapsing all the time! Other people noticed that I couldn't walk properly. Also, because it was dark in my room, I wasn't comfortable with light when I came out – it was too bright. Sometimes there was a little candle, but I didn't really use it. Even now in Sera I prefer to sit in the dark.

After 1979, a Little More Freedom

After Mao Tse Tung died in 1979 there was a little more freedom. Many lamas and geshe came to Rinpoche's house to receive teachings. He gave a few teachings, but not in public – only in his small room to one, two or three people. People knew about him. He cut off his beard and his long hair in 1979.

Then he received letters from the reincarnation of Shantideva at Sera in India and from the monastery itself to please come and give teachings, to pass on what he had learned. He tried to get a passport but at first it didn't work.

From 1965 to early 1980, when I was living in total seclusion, my cousin would not allow anyone to visit me. Ribur Rinpoche came to visit and my cousin argued with him and wouldn't allow Ribur Rinpoche to visit. The main reason Ribur Rinpoche came is because the government was forming a committee of *tulkus* to look into the heritage of Tibet, like the statues and scriptures. Although the government formed it, the high lamas were doing the work because they were the most well-educated. Around this time everyone the Chinese had put down were being reinstated because they had the capacity and the knowledge. They were called the Norbulingka Committee.

The Chinese wanted me to join so many of the committees they were forming, but since I didn't join any, they didn't like me very much. From '81 onwards they were issuing visas for people to be able to travel in India and Nepal, but although I applied, I was never accepted.

Rinpoche tried for three years to get a passport to go to India, and finally a close friend of his, Pagpala Gelek Namgyal, the highest lama of Kham in Tibet and third highest in Tibet, was holding a high rank in the Tibet

Autonomous Region, and he helped Rinpoche get a passport. In 1985 Rinpoche finally got a passport and was able to leave for India legally.

India

When I got to Dharamsala I arrived just in time for the initiation of Guhyasamaja, Heruka and Yamantaka from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I was very happy to see His Holiness, and His Holiness was also very happy. His Holiness said, “Your arriving in such good time to receive these initiations means we have very pure *samaya*.”

I received the Kalachakra initiation from His Holiness in 1985. I asked what I should do: return to Tibet or stay. His Holiness told me to stay and teach what I had learned and to spread the Dharma.

Later he told me that in Nepal there aren't many high Gelugpa lamas, so it would be good for me to go there. I stayed there for eight or nine months but became sick and had to undergo an operation, so I wasn't able to be of much benefit. He excused me from staying in Nepal because the monks from Sera Je in South India also asked me to come there to teach.

His Holiness told me not to ever break my present commitments and to teach whatever I had learned, so since then I have been living in Sera Monastery and coming to Dharamsala whenever His Holiness teaches.

For 15 years Rinpoche has mainly been teaching the Geshe degree program at Sera Je Monastery in South India. Usually he stays at Sera, and he gives teachings on the five main subjects of study. He does three classes in the morning and four in the afternoon; he has many students, from young boys all the way up to geshe. On Tuesdays, the day off at Sera, Rinpoche teaches grammar, poetry and tantra to some geshe. Sometimes Rinpoche will give initiations or lam-rim teachings at Sera, and so many monks come they have to use the main chanting hall.

His health is quite good. In 1996 we went back to Tibet, and we made a pilgrimage all through China and almost all the way through Tibet.

Rinpoche first came to the West in 1998. Ven. Massimo Stordi invited him to Italy, and a rinpoche in Italy as well as Geshe Soepa in Germany. Before that Rinpoche didn't go anywhere because Sera needed him; now Sera has many geshe, so Rinpoche is able to travel.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche requested a lung of a whole text of Je Tsongkhapa and his main disciples, 36 of them, but there was no chance to do this. Lama Zopa Rinpoche asked Choden Rinpoche to come give a Secret Vajrapani initiation at Vajrapani Institute in California and to teach during the retreat.

Rinpoche has studied the vinaya extensively. At Sera he is called the Vinaya Holder because he knows every step of the vinaya. He lives purely in morality and has ordained more than 600 Tibetans – and now in the West he has ordained people. He has an extremely good reputation in the monastery, and so many students come to receive his teachings, especially about the vinaya, because his morality is so pure.

Rinpoche's great-grandfather, grandfather and father were all great practitioners. His great-grandfather and grandfather were Kagyüpas and his father was Gelug, but they are all lam-rim holders. They spent most of their lives in retreat, although not like Rinpoche, who didn't come out at all. They are all lineage holders. Rinpoche was surrounded by all these practitioners.

His mother gave them eight brothers and five sisters, and five of the sons became monks. One of them, the third brother, attained high realizations. His name is Geshe Thubten Yampil. He mastered all the Buddhist teachings, attained realizations and he composed 50 volumes of books and gave the Kalachakra initiation in Tibet. The second one is also a renowned meditator. Rinpoche's father and mother have passed away, and all the sisters but one have passed away.

Now there is the present reincarnation of his second brother in Kham, Tibet, right in his family's house. There is also the third brother's reincarnation in Tibet, as well as the first brother's reincarnation. The second brother's reincarnation was able to recite the Buddhist scriptures without even seeing them; they came straight from his heart. When Choden Rinpoche told His Holiness the Dalai Lama this, His Holiness asked if he was a tulku, but Choden Rinpoche said no, it was his second brother from before.

Meditation: Making the Mind Positive

To meditate means to become familiar with your positive thoughts, positive mind [the Tibetan word for meditation, gom, means to “familiarize”]. You try to increase the positive potentials of the mind and reduce the negative imprints in the mind. If you can't do that it's useless to just focus your mind on the breath. It's meaningless. The main thing is to increase the positive potentials that are in your mindstream. That's called meditation.

At the beginning you think over and over the various positive thoughts, and gradually the mind gets familiar with them, your mind becomes of that nature; then, you don't even need to think or give a reason, the thought will rise spontaneously in your mind.

You practice the positive over and over, and when you're able to eliminate the negative thoughts gradually, then this will cause realizations.

It's impossible to get realizations quickly! We have been so habituated for many eons with negative thoughts, so we have to purify them first. If you're able to purify all these, as soon as you purify them you'll have genuine realizations.

Many lamas in the past did retreat for 40 years, 20 years, some for 12 years, and they didn't get any signs of realization. It's possible. This is from the obstacles of negativities accumulated over many eons. When Buddha came onto this earth, the disciples had less delusions and less negative thoughts than at the present, so for that reason they attained realizations in a very short period – within one or two days. Just upon receiving the Buddha's teachings they would attain realizations.

Asanga, the great Indian pandit is a good example. He did retreat for 12 years, and he never received any sign. He finally left the cave, and when he went outside he saw a dog that had an open wound on its stomach. The wound was infested with maggots, and the dog was barking in anguish. Asanga developed extreme love and compassion towards that dog. He thought that if he left the dog it might die, but if he took the maggots off they would also die. So he cut off some of his own flesh for the maggots to live on. He also saw that if he used his fingers to move the maggots they would die, so out of his great compassion he decided to use his tongue to move them. He closed his eyes and extended his tongue towards the dog, but he never reached it.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the Buddha Maitreya in front of him, who had taken the form of the dog. Asanga said, "I meditated on you for 12 years but couldn't see you. Why didn't you give me a sign in 12 years?" Maitreya replied, "I was always with you during these 12 years, but you couldn't see me because of your negative obscurations. But because you generated great love and compassion, it eliminated all of your obstacles and you could see me."

So our negativities obstruct our ability to obtain realizations, and this is why we need to purify in order to have the realizations. Does working for the lama and Dharma centers purify negativities? That totally depends on your motivation. If you do this work to serve your guru and promote the Dharma, and think this Dharma will help more sentient beings and bring happiness to them; if you think this way it will definitely purify your negativities.

If you think only about this life, and think that you're doing it to receive a salary or because you receive a nice house and good things to eat then it's not purifying the negativities. You have to generate the motivation that you're working for others.

As soon as you wake up you should think, "I'm working in the service of my guru, and I'm working to preserve and promote the Dharma, and to help sentient beings. This will help bring happiness to sentient beings." If you do this, your whole day will become positive. If you think

only of the things of this life without thinking of anything else, this won't increase the positive side.

Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition



The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is an organization devoted to preserving and spreading Mahayana Buddhism worldwide by creating opportunities to listen, reflect, meditate, practice and actualize the unmistakable teachings of the Buddha, and based on that experience, spread the Dharma to sentient beings. We provide integrated education through which people's minds and hearts can be transformed into their highest potential for the benefit of others, inspired by an attitude of universal responsibility and service. We are committed to creating harmonious environments and helping all beings develop their full potential of infinite wisdom and compassion. Our organization is based on the Buddhist tradition of Lama Tsongkhapa of Tibet as taught to us by our founder, Lama Thubten Yeshe and our spiritual director, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche. For more, visit fpmt.org.