

THE STORIES & WORDS OF GREAT BUDDHIST MASTERS

VOLUME 2



A MANDALA EBOOK

FPMT

The Stories & Words of Great Buddhist Masters

Volume 2

A Mandala Ebook

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Introduction

This is the second volume of our anthology of *Mandala* magazine pieces celebrating Tibetan Buddhist masters. Most of the lamas highlighted in this volume occupy a special place in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. They are part of the generation of monks who lived through the Chinese takeover of Tibet and who have carried the priceless teachings back into India by re-establishing the great Gelug monasteries of Tibet and into the West through their compassionate and patient nurturing of non-Tibetan students throughout the world.

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 these masters and inspired by their example to develop and deepen their own practices.

Mandala has been blessed with many opportunities to talk to and hear stories of these precious teachers over the years. Because of this bounty, we published *The Stories & Words of Great Buddhist Masters* in two volumes. *Volume 1* was released as an ebook in March 2016 and contains stories published in *Mandala* between 1995 and 2000. *Volume 2* shares stories published from 2001 to the present. We hope you enjoy these moving and inspiring stories, teachings and interviews.

1. The Inner Realizations of the Dalai Lama

By Ribur Rinpoche, Translated by Fabrizio Pallotti

Mandala June 2001

Renowned historian, biographer and yogi, Ribur Rinpoche (1923-2006), had a close relationship with His Holiness the Dalai Lama who described to him, with typical humility, many of his inner realizations. But first, Rinpoche tells of the important role of the regents in Tibetan Buddhism, and the recognition and enthroning of the young Dalai Lama.

The first time I arrived in Lhasa from my original place in Kham in 1935, the Great Thirteenth Dalai Lama had passed away, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama wasn't found yet, and the regent at the time was the fifth Reting Rinpoche, Thubten Jamphel Yeshe Tenpe Gyaltzen.

At that time the major task of the Tibetan government was to find the whereabouts of the would-be Fourteenth Dalai Lama in order to invite him to Lhasa. The entire population of Lhasa, Tibet's capital, was also completely devoted to finding him.

In particular, the regent, Reting Rinpoche, felt an unbelievable sense of responsibility to find the unmistakable reincarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, to a degree I didn't understand at the time. I only found out many years later, when I lived in Dharamsala, India and was involved in composing the biography of the fifth Reting Rinpoche. His almost obsessive dedication to finding the Fourteenth Dalai Lama stemmed from a prediction made by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself.

When I was in Dharamsala – many, many years after Reting Rinpoche had passed away – His Holiness the Dalai Lama told me that although there were some general accounts on the religious life and general happenings in the life of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, there was no comprehensive biography encompassing all of his great activities, which were vast and extensive from the point of view of Dharma practice and the point of view of his political activities. I embarked on the task of composing this biography, and upon completion I offered it to his Holiness the Dalai Lama.

His Holiness said, “This is good, and what we need now are biographies of Reting Rinpoche and Talung Rinpoche,” both of whom were regents of Tibet, one after the other, before the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's time. Talung Rinpoche was the first tutor of His Holiness, as well as Tibet's regent before Reting Rinpoche. His Holiness felt that since other people were already involved in the task of composing his own biography, it would be extremely beneficial to have the two regents' political and life activities, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's activities would be plugged in for continuity.

To Reincarnate – Or Not

In the process of composing the biography of Reting Rinpoche, I had studied various sources of information about his life and previous lives and I came across the following information.

The fourth Reting Rinpoche was a wealthy throne-holder of Reting Monastery, which was a well-established monastery in the Gelug tradition. Before he died, he called the administrator of the monastery and told him, “There won’t be any more need for my future reincarnations to be recognized. Therefore, bring all the keys of the storerooms, storage, and treasure-house, and whatever wealth there is of the household and monastery, pack them up and as soon as I pass away, bring them to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and offer everything with the request not to search for my reincarnation.”

As soon as Reting Rinpoche passed away, the administrator went to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and offered him all the Reting wealth, telling him that it was Reting Rinpoche’s wish for his reincarnation not to be recognized.

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama said, “Yes, I know he had this in mind, but there are two great purposes that he was to accomplish. Therefore, take everything back to the monastery, and we will recognize the next reincarnation. He has to come back.” Then the Thirteenth Dalai Lama passed away, and the fifth Reting Rinpoche was recognized and enthroned at Reting Monastery, where he engaged in all his studies and contemplation until he became a geshe and was established as a lama.

The first of the two great purposes was to construct a great reliquary in the Potala Palace (winter seat of all the Dalai Lamas) that contained the remains of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The second was to search out and recognize the unmistakable reincarnation of the great Fourteenth Dalai Lama. This is why when I saw Reting Rinpoche in Lhasa, he was almost obsessed with finding the exact reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and bringing him back to Lhasa. As soon as he accomplished this second task, he passed away.

He visited Lhamo Lhatso lake in 1935 and after intensive prayers and rituals over several days, had a vision of the golden and turquoise roofs of the monasteries in the Kumbum [which is where the reincarnation was found]. He also saw three Tibetan syllables – Ah, Ka, Ma – which identified the name of the region in which the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was born. Throughout the whole search process, there were lots of obstacles to be eliminated, things to be produced, pujas to be done – he checked over every single thing, and personally checked the signs of the young potential candidates.

Reting Rinpoche sent a delegation to Kumbum with some of the belongings of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. These were mixed with similar objects of the same type, such as prayer beads, walking stick and so forth, the correct ones of which the young Dalai Lama recognized without fail. Reting Rinpoche was indispensable in finding this Dalai Lama – what he did was unbelievably beneficial.

Once the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was recognized, Reting Rinpoche organized the various events involving the young boy and his entourage en route to Lhasa. This meant lots of tents and invitations – the main tent site outside of Lhasa was almost as big as Sera Monastery. All the high lamas who were recognized reincarnations had their thrones in the main tent.

Meeting His Holiness for the First Time

I was invited to meet the Fourteenth Dalai Lama when he was very young – probably around four years old. He had an unusual and extremely powerful presence and appearance on the throne. He was a young child with a farsighted gaze that almost always went into space – just one look at him and we could already tell he was remarkable.

In 1940, the Dragon year, the young Dalai Lama was formally enthroned in the Potala Palace with a royal feast of a display of auspicious signs and symbols and dances. My mind was so taken by this display that I really thought this was Arya Chenrezig taking rebirth for the benefit of the people of the land of snows. I felt all the gods and protectors were coming down and paying their homage, displaying their happiness and rejoicing.

A few years later, I was lucky to be in attendance when His Holiness was invited to give teachings for the first time at the Great Prayer Festival (Mönlam Chenmo) in the courtyard of the Jokhang Temple. We were the first to receive the very first spill of the nectar of his teachings. He gave the transmission of the guru yoga of Lama Tsongkhapa, Ganden Lha Gyama, and the Foundation of All Good Qualities – a short writing by Lama Tsongkhapa on the stages of the path.

He was still so very young, and yet he went through the motions of giving teachings like a consummate Lama Tsongkhapa throne-holder. I watched as the Nechung State Oracle – who was in a trance – came over to His Holiness to whisper in his ear. His Holiness was so small, he was completely covered by the Nechung Oracle. Normally a boy of that age would be completely frightened by something so physically overwhelming, but His Holiness the Dalai Lama didn't move for a second; he didn't show any signs of fear or unevenness. Actually, when the Nechung Oracle moved away, His Holiness was smiling. A normal boy of that age would be scared his whole life! These are real exceptional signs of the actual qualities, even at that age.

When he was 16 years old, he gave the Kalachakra initiation to many hundreds of thousands of people at the Norbulingka, during which he wore the full bone ornaments of the Kalachakra. His Holiness had a particular attention and respect for ascetic, highly accomplished masters. One of them was T. Khepong Rinpoche. His Holiness saw him sitting in the middle of the crowd of lay people and called him forward. By paying special attention to that kind of practitioner, he already displayed some of his inner qualities at an early age.

Gradually the young Dalai Lama engaged in his studies, going through the motions of enthronement in the three great monasteries (Drepung, Sera and Ganden), and was principally taken care of in his studies by the first senior tutor, Talung Rinpoche, and his junior tutor, Ling Rinpoche. His attendant was Trijang Rinpoche, principal debate master at the time. Trijang Rinpoche and Ling Rinpoche were the auxiliary help in philosophy and debate, while Talung Rinpoche was His Holiness' main teacher.

When His Holiness completed his studies, he took his geshe exams in 1959 in front of the highest philosophical authorities at the time. Among them were Sera Me abbot Lama Dragpa, and the

abbot of Sera Je, Lozang Wangchuk. When His Holiness debated with them in front of thousands of people, his sharpness was so acute that it astonished them. They looked at each other, puzzled at the depth of his philosophical authority. Many high philosophers and learned ones later debated in front of His Holiness, but His Holiness stood so far in front of everybody with his learning that I was amazed by the extent of his studies and his understanding.

His Holiness Shares His Realizations

Against my wish, I was stuck in Tibet for 26 years under the Communist Chinese, until I was released and traveled to Dharamsala due to the Dalai Lama's kindness. After I arrived, I offered my services in writing and composing whatever His Holiness asks me to do. Thus I've had the chance to meet with His Holiness again and again.

During one of our meetings, His Holiness told me about a time he was reading and meditating on the commentary to Madhyamika by Lama Tsongkhapa. As he read about the simile in which a rope at nighttime can be mistaken for a snake, all of a sudden, in deepening his understanding (conventionally speaking, this is what he was telling me) all the constructed appearances ceased in his perception, and he had this very strong – even physical – sharp feeling coming through him. For almost 20 days without cease, his mind did not perceive as true whatever appearances appeared to his senses.

Immediately I said, “This sounds like the direct realization of emptiness,” and His Holiness kind of downplayed it. Keeping it slightly hidden, he said, “Well, as far as direct realization of emptiness, probably something similar – no, not even similar.” And he moved on. This shows conventionally that he's achieving this kind of realization, and in actuality, he's Arya Avalokiteshvara.

During another meeting, His Holiness told me, “I'm really paying a great deal of attention to bodhichitta, to great compassion and great love. I'm engaging my mind very seriously, and strange things are happening. Even if I hear outside the cry of a dog who's been hit by a stone or something, right away I feel pain like I've been hit myself.” When he told me this, strong faith came that this is actually Arya Avalokiteshvara, although on a conventional level he's showing us ordinary beings the development of great compassion.

Another time when His Holiness just returned from one of his teaching trips to Ladakh, I went to see him, and he said, “I'd like so much to liberate animals whose lives are in danger, but I cannot do it around here because there is no space to put them. I will do it in Ladakh where I have a huge space where I put animals, and I have a lot of sheep.

“One day all of these sheep in the meadow in front of my place came by, and as I was looking at them – at their stupidity, their pitiful state – I had this overwhelming compassion thinking what a pitiful, pitiful ignorance they are in. It was unbearable.” This is a clear sign of his having developed great compassion.

Another time, His Holiness was in Ladakh doing a Hevajra retreat, when early one morning, as soon as he woke up, he heard a distinctive sound of a melodious bell and damaru [small ritual drum] playing. The music was highly unusual and very distinctive.

He figured it must be the monks of the monastery, but when he inquired about the music, they said no, they hadn't played any ritual instruments. His Holiness told me, "At that time I realized it must be a sign." That's all he said about it. I think in reality the music was the sound of damarus and bells from the pure lands, coming down to wake the yogi up for his practice.

One time I went to see His Holiness, and after prostrating I requested permission to write the secret biography that shows his inner achievements. His Holiness contemplated this for a while, then said yes, I could do it. I want to talk with his close attendants, who are constantly with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and who witness his behavior and all the signs for telling his inner realizations and the particular circumstances that brought them out. However, since I'm constantly traveling and going from place to place, this hasn't been done yet. I have notes in my room in India, taken from many instances when His Holiness expressed his inner realizations to me.

We are so fortunate to witness the display of someone who has even conventionally realized bodhichitta and emptiness. Especially with regards to emptiness, those of us who have taken many teachings from His Holiness can understand by his very unconventional, profound yet easy-to-understand way of explaining emptiness, that it is only by having directly realized emptiness that he could have this understanding. As disciples, it is a rare stroke of luck to be with this lama who even conventionally appears with such exceptional qualities.

2. The Exemplary Life and Death of Geshe Yeshe Tobden

Mandala June 2001

The way Geshe Yeshe Tobden, Dharamsala meditator and beloved teacher to students around the world, lived and died is an illuminating example of Dharma in practice. Centro Terra di Unificazione's Giovanna Pescetti interviewed one of those closest to him, his attendant Ven. Lobsang Dhonden.

Geshe Yeshe Tobden had escaped from Tibet by himself in 1960-61 after years of terror and Communist occupation. He was already well known in his monastery in Tibet – Sera Me – because of his very strict and rigorous practice. He was like St. Francis; he lived according to a very strict discipline, in poverty, humility, and chastity. Thousands of monks knew him and called him a saint from that time. Even the Chinese respected him.

Since his time in Tibet, Geshe-la [the affectionate name for a revered teacher] was a well-known disciple of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from whom he had received the Kalachakra initiation. His Holiness took care of him until the last days of his life. Other teachers of his, like Ling Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche [the senior and junior tutors respectively of His Holiness] considered Geshe-la as one of their most important disciples.

After two attempts to flee a Chinese prison, he finally escaped and arrived at the refugee camp in exile, Buxa in India, where he resumed his studies and obtained the highest degree – the degree of Geshe Lharampa – at the age of 37.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama sent him to the University of Varanasi to teach Buddhist philosophy for three years. But Geshe-la was not happy there because his highest aspiration was to meditate in a small grotto on the mountain. At that time the conditions to be able to do it were truly difficult. All geshe could not go away to the mountains, and thus Geshe-la submitted to the wish of His Holiness and went to Varanasi.

In Varanasi there were many other important geshe, among them Geshe Rabten who came to know of Geshe Tobden's profound desire. One day, while in discussion with His Holiness, he had the chance to talk to him about it. His Holiness then saw Geshe Tobden personally, asking him if he still wanted to go to the mountain and what he would do there once by himself. And Geshe-la said that he would like so much to meditate on renunciation, bodhichitta and emptiness.

His Holiness greatly appreciated Geshe-la's genuine desire and proposed that he go to Dharamsala, saying that he would take care of Geshe-la's material needs, would talk to the director of the university in Varanasi and ask for the collaboration of the Indian state so that Geshe-la would be released from his teaching duties before the end of his contract. Geshe-la was able to leave immediately.

From that time on he would be considered as a member of the Dalai Lama's own family; His Holiness would always have time to receive him, regardless of his duties. Geshe-la was so happy.

The other professors asked him not to go and leave the nice house and a very good salary, one of the highest, higher than that of the minister of the provisional Tibetan government. He was living a good life in Varanasi, worked relatively little and wanted to leave all that! In the eyes of the other professors he seemed a little eccentric.

Thus in 1971 he went to the mountain where he lived in a small house near the temple of His Holiness and adapted to his needs. Some Tibetans had built, in only two days, a humble hut made of stone and sand. He lived in it, just as it was, for 29 years. In the beginning Geshe-la lived there all year round, but from 1979, when His Holiness first sent Geshe-la to Italy, he spent every winter either in Italy or in Bodhgaya – Christmas in Italy with his disciples, and January in India. He returned to Dharamsala when the climate was warmer.

This came about because Geshe-la had become ill with tuberculosis, and Lama Yeshe, who was his friend, told him to come down from his mountain hermitage. Geshe-la was very thin, looked like Saint Milarepa, only bones, and he did not take care of himself. He did not want to take Western medicines because he said that they inhibited his mental capacity to meditate. He took them for a while and then he “forgot,” and thus the cure could not work.

Lama Yeshe offered him a beautiful house in Tushita, where he could stay and be cured. He remained there for about a year. Thanks to Lama Yeshe, some Italian disciples – Piero Cerri, Claudio Cipullo and Luca Corona – had got to know him better, since they lived in Tushita close to him. Although Geshe-la never spoke, and was always lying down to meditate, they could tell that he was indeed a great meditator, a great yogi.

These Italian students requested an audience with His Holiness and asked that Geshe-la be appointed resident teacher at the newly opened Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Pomaia. With his gentleness and clairvoyance, His Holiness understood that Geshe-la would be just right for the Italians. When Geshe-la later went to speak to His Holiness about his practices, he was very surprised at the sudden proposal that he go to Italy.

Remember that Geshe-la had never thought of going away from India or visiting the West, much less teaching in Italy. His great goal and profound desire was to become and remain a meditator up to his death. During that discussion His Holiness explained that he had done a *mo* [divination with dice] that came out very good, and that by going to the West he could also be cured (Geshe-la was very weak at this stage). His Holiness had to insist on getting an answer through more than one encounter, until one day Geshe-la responded, “*Lama khyen, Gyalwa Rinpoche khyen,*” “You know everything. You who are Gyalwa Rinpoche, you know everything.”

In June 1979, he went with Luca Corona and stayed at the Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa for two years as a resident teacher.

In those two years many students invited him to various parts of Italy and when he decided to return to India and to his mountain, his disciples tried every way they could to retain him. Geshe-la was immutable and explained that he also had a need of his teacher, and that his teacher was in Dharamsala. When the moment of departure came, his students shed many tears at seeing him go.

I also missed him a lot; for two long years we had been separated. As soon as he returned, he gave 90 percent of all the gifts that Italian disciples had given him to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the rest to his monastery, Sera Me. He did not keep anything for himself.

From 1983 he made a trip to Italy every second summer until 1997. The second time, my friend Ngawang Khechog [a former monk and disciple of Geshe-la's who had introduced Ven. Lobsang Dhonden to Geshe-la, see below for the story] and I accompanied him. I asked permission to stay in Italy and to learn Italian, but Geshe-la said no. Now I thank him for that, because life in the West for a monk, particularly if he is Asian, can be very, very hard!

Geshe-la and I went to America for the first time in 1987. In 1989 we toured FPMT centers in America. In 1993, His Holiness sent Geshe Tobden to the University of Wisconsin, to Geshe Sopa's Deer Park Buddhist Center.

We had already been to Italy, so that was a very long trip. Scientists, who had organized a conference on the mind at Deer Park, attached him to wires connected to a computer and were surprised to observe his high level of concentration. Geshe-la responded to specific signals for a long period. They said that an ordinary person would have managed to stay focused for only about 10 to 15 minutes, after which they would have felt fatigue or pain. Geshe-la also visited Switzerland, France, and Canada.

From my experience and memory of this great being, I can say to all students and Western practitioners that if they really want to achieve anything in this life, it is important to practice constantly, and with continuity. I have noticed that Westerners have little consistency and lack the knowledge of what devotion to the guru really means. I lived and traveled a lot with Geshe Tobden and this is also his advice: when there are no good roots, even if one does high practices like Yamantaka, Heruka or Vajrayogini, they do not work.

Mandala November-December 1999 and *Siddhi* magazines have both written about how Geshe-la left his body - the extraordinary signs, the period in which he remained absorbed in clear light and so forth. I would like to add that Geshe-la was gravely ill in the last four months, from April 6 to July 31, 1999. He went back to his mountain where two Tibetan doctors checked him daily and disciples helped him day and night.

What struck me the most is that in all these months I never noticed a moment in which he was preoccupied with his own suffering; instead, he was happy, paying attention to us, hospitable with everyone, never sad for himself, always content and serene. He was a great practitioner; the best practitioners face death with joy, like a child who is going to his parents' house after months at college. I never saw him sad. But when I remembered sometimes that he was very ill, I became very nervous, agitated and stressed, and easily angered. I believe that he was so serene and content because of his practice. I have no doubt about that.

On July 30 Geshe-la appeared to be very ill. When we left for the hospital, he was sleeping deeply and his head was resting on my arm; he had stopped talking and had fallen into a profound sleep. He looked serene and luminous.

Geshe Yeshe Tobden stopped breathing on July 31, 1999, just before entering the hospital in Chandigarh in India. When his body was returned to McLeod Ganj in Dharamsala, he was laid on his bed for 12 days, during which there was no decomposition of his physical body. His disciples gathered around and recited the texts that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had advised until on August 12, in the late afternoon, Geshe-la showed signs of having left his body.

Through this example, Geshe Tobden showed his disciples how great a being he was. He left them in silence, with gentleness, strength, humility and love, showing them that it is possible to live and die like a saint, a bodhisattva, developing one's positive capacity for the benefit of the others. It is thanks to this last teaching of his that it is easier to be "separated" while we pray every day for his speedy rebirth.

Practice and Patience

From Geshe Yeshe Tobden's introduction to his commentary on Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara, translated from Italian by Manu Bazzano:

It is not essential to be a monk or a special person: anyone can practice the Dharma perfectly and there is no difference between being in retreat, with the family, in the office or anywhere else. Many yogis have said that if we practice, nirvana is within the walls of our home, but if we do not practice, we create the causes of an unfortunate rebirth, even though we might be on solitary retreat.

The Buddha we refer to is not a legendary character, but a historical one who gave his first teachings in Sarnath, near Varanasi. At first Buddha was an ordinary human being like us, full of shortcomings and faults, but these can be completely eradicated, and all virtues completely realized, as he proved by succeeding in attaining enlightenment; it is possible to understand logically that we can do the same. Buddha reached this state thanks to his perseverance and his great effort, whereas we continue to wander in cyclic existence from beginningless time due to our indolence.

We also find ourselves having to endure various problems: some of us perhaps do not eat regularly and others sleep badly. We endure many kinds of discomfort for some gain or other. But if we work long hours at the office, for example, the result is limited to this life. What we gain by listening to the Dharma and enduring the difficulties of practice, on the other hand, go far beyond this. Simply hearing the name of a Buddha or a bodhisattva is in itself a great purification, and we benefit simply by listening to the story of the Buddha, or by wishing to be like him, that is, one who has purified all negativity and accumulated all virtues.

If we possess solid foundations in the Dharma, even the ordinary dimensions of our daily life will not present us with difficulties. It will not benefit us, on the other hand, to put spirituality aside and dedicate ourselves exclusively to the material aspects of existence. If we compare a person whose whole life has been dedicated to these material concerns to someone who also took care of his own development and mental training, we will notice that the latter has not only suffered less

in this life, but that he has something to take with him after death. Those who follow a spiritual path will have difficulties, but also realizations. However, one should not cultivate the kind of haste that makes us desire to achieve great results the very next day after hearing the teachings. If we plant the seeds of a tree, we cannot possibly expect it to bear fruit the following year. Even in sowing grain or wheat we need to wait five or six months for the harvest. We have the opportunity to listen to the teachings and embark on our spiritual training, but in order to see the results we must be patient and wait.

How I Became Geshe-la's Attendant

By Ven. Lobsang Dhonden

I met Geshe Yeshe Tobden for the first time in 1975. I was in the military and had gone to the Tibetan refugee camp of Orissa to find my mother and my little sister Dechen. There I met a dear friend, Ngawang Khechog (now a famous flute player who lives in Colorado) who had become a monk and disciple of Geshe Tobden on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Ngawang had been a very lively young man who bragged to everyone, but from the time he had become a disciple of Geshe-la he had become humble like him. My mother wondered who had succeeded in changing the boy who was once so aggressive and turbulent. She asked Ngawang to take me with him, because she wanted me to become a monk like him. She did not like my being a soldier, but I needed to earn money to help my widowed mother raise Dechen.

Thus Ngawang took me with him to Dharamsala. My mother gave me money for the trip and once I got to Dharamsala I lived with a family in a village. Ngawang, who was already a meditator, lived in a small hut near Geshe-la.

I was a layman for the first six or seven months until I took monk's vows from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Aside from His Holiness, Ngawang had a very strong devotion to Geshe-la, while I hardly knew him. When I went up the mountain it was to take food to Ngawang because although he had presented me to Geshe-la, I was not immediately accepted as his disciple. Students are observed first very calmly, and only after a good bit of time does the Master accept you.

Ngawang falls ill

In 1976 Ngawang became very sick with tuberculosis and we had to take him to various hospitals. Finally, with the help of the Private Office of His Holiness we went to Delhi, where he recovered completely. But his mind was changed. Instead of returning to Dharamsala, he disappeared. He wrote me a brief letter. "Please Lobsang, help my master, Geshe Yeshe Tobden, I will not forget your kindness."

Therefore, Geshe-la was left alone up there in the mountain, but in the meantime I had started to know him better. During Ngawang's illness, we had gone together to help Geshe-la, who slowly started to accept me much more deeply.

At the beginning we were like friends. I respected him very much because Ngawang had told me so many times that Geshe-la was a great saint, a studious practitioner and a great yogi. I had much devotion, but without having sufficient courage to advance myself in his favor. At that time he was about 50 years old, still youthful; he spoke very little in a low voice, he was always very thin, all skin and bones, and he was often lying down, doing his meditations in that position.

Although he did not call me often, I went just the same to help him as best I could; I did not have money, I was extremely poor, and I could not offer him anything – zero! – but when I could manage it, I bought him something to eat and ran up the mountain to offer it to him. Ngawang had asked me to do that.

In 1977, Geshe-la encouraged me to study in the Buddhist school. With his help I was enrolled and admitted. Geshe-la paid for my school food – 60 rupees a month – and thus I was able to advance in my studies. I considered him my father, he was my most important point of reference.

In the meantime, my mother had died at age 49 in Dharamsala. Geshe Tobden did pujas for her and helped with all the necessary arrangements. After her death he continued to protect not only me, but also my little sister, who was at the Tibetan Children's Village. I knew I had to follow his wishes and help him there on the mountain.

We went on like this from 1977 to 1999; we became like a family, Geshe-la, Dechen and I; whatever problem arose we confronted it together: food, clothes, other difficulties, whatever. Until the last day we divided everything evenly. I felt that my duty was to help and serve Geshe-la in the best way, and I did it with all my heart. Nobody asked me to do this, neither Geshe-la nor His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Only my dear friend, Ngawang. I have said always that with that little letter he gave me a light, I was living in the dark, and he illuminated something truly precious, as if he told me: Take this thing, and it will be good for you.

3. An Extraordinary Modern-Day Milarepa

By Ven. Robina Courtin

Mandala March-May 2002

Since he was a small child, Tenzin Zopa would prefer to be with Geshe Lama Konchog in his cave rather than at his home in the nearby village of Tsum in the northeast reaches of Nepal where it borders Tibet. “Even from the time I could crawl, I would follow Geshe-la when he returned from the village to his cave. Often from early morning I would sit under his cloak as he meditated, playing or sleeping, sometimes all day. I was completely content there.” So close were they that Tenzin Zopa assumed that this meditating monk was his grandfather.

Then, when the boy was seven, “Grandfather” moved down the mountain, eventually to settle at Kopan Monastery near Kathmandu.

Now himself a monk of 26, having become ordained at the age of nine and spending his life serving Geshe Lama Konchog, Tenzin Zopa was charged with overseeing the ceremonies and rituals at the funeral of his precious guru, who passed away at Kopan on October 15, 2001.

Only now is it becoming known to the hundreds of monks, nuns and laypeople devoted to Geshe Lama Konchog, the extraordinary qualities of this modern-day Milarepa. His students have known that he meditated in caves for twenty-five years, for example, but few have been aware of the details. Over the years Tenzin Zopa has meticulously noted down the accomplishments of this great yogi, and is compiling information for a biography.

Losang Puntsog, as he was known as a boy, was born in the Year of the Fire Rabbit, 1927, in the village of Shangbu, near Lhasa. He was a sickly child; an oracle consulted by the parents instructed them to take special care of him and only to dress him in yellow or red, the Tibetan monastic colors. “And you must send him to a monastery, otherwise he will not survive.”

When he was six, his parents wanted to send him to nearby Drepung, one of the three great Gelug monasteries in Lhasa. But already the young boy was displaying a quality that would be central to his life: he knew exactly what he wanted and would pursue it with single-minded determination. He declared that he wanted to attend Sera Monastery instead. As he had an uncle there, his parents relented.

His uncle, however, was a *dob-dob* – one of a group of monks who were basically self-appointed “policemen” found at most Gelug monasteries – who actively discouraged the young boy’s wish to study and practice and would beat him regularly.

But nothing could deter Losang Puntsog. In the monasteries it was forbidden to take tantric initiations until one had completed the study of the five major treatises. However, at the age of nine he joined a group of lamas and monks to take the Vajra Yogini initiation from his root guru Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

“He was so excited, like a young child anticipating New Year,” says Geshe Jampa Tseten, the abbot of Samten Ling in Boudhanath, not far from Kopan, who lived in the room next to Losang Puntsog during their many years at the Je college of Sera.

“But when we arrived for the initiation, seven of us discovered we were not yet qualified to receive it and had to leave. The rest of us didn’t mind, but Losang Puntsog was distraught. He cried all the way back to his room. ‘How unfortunate we are,’ he lamented. ‘How unlucky! What a terrible loss! What kind of negative karma must we have created in the past?’ He cried the whole night and was moody and sad and didn’t eat for three days. We thought he was crazy.”

Now, the abbot is full of admiration for his schoolmate. “To have such wisdom at the age of nine, and to have such a strong emotional feeling for receiving an initiation, is extraordinary. Even now, at the age of 73, I do not have such strong feelings,” he told Tenzin Zopa.

By the age of 10, Losang Puntsog was displaying other extraordinary qualities. “During the night he would regularly perform Chöd. He would perform it for hours and hours, using the most amazing tunes. We had no idea where he learned these things,” says Jampa Tseten.

He remembers an occasion when they were doing retreat together. Losang Puntsog would go off to join the nuns in various practices. “He had the most beautiful voice, the best female voice. And in between sessions he would also perform dakini dances. For twenty-four hours he would be practicing: doing the cham dancing, especially dakini dancing, and then going off at midnight and practicing Chöd for hours. The other monks would laugh at him, but he would dismiss them: ‘I am blissful! Don’t bother me, leave me alone!’

“Sometimes to divert the attention of the monks he would perform Lhamo dancing, making them laugh hugely, and then he would just disappear again to secretly perform his dakini dancing and Chöd.

“Often we would hear loud noises from his room, keeping us all awake. Now I am sure he was practicing the Six Yogas of Naropa.”

Between the ages of 11 and 15, Losang Puntsog – known by now to his classmates as “Lama Konchog” [the Lama Refuge] because of his straightforwardness and single-minded devotion to study and practice – attended all the major initiations offered by the high lamas such as Pabongka Rinpoche, Ling Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and Bari Rinpoche. “And not only that,” says Jampa Tseten, “he would request permission to stay on at the lama’s house and complete the commitments and retreat of each initiation, even if it took months. Then he would return to his studies. He put everything into practice immediately.”

For years, since he was a young boy, the abbot remembers, Lama Konchog could be heard in his room talking animatedly about the Dharma. “During the day, at night, any time, we could hear him talking deeply about various topics. He’d be quoting such logical reasons, talking about such profound things, especially impermanence and emptiness. We would listen at his door. Sometimes we would go into his room, and there he would be, sitting on cushions piled high, giving teachings, his hand in the teaching mudra and his eyes closed. We thought he was crazy! Now I am convinced that he was teaching to non-human disciples whom only he could see.”

Throughout his years at Sera, beginning when he was a child, Lama Konchog would disappear for months at a time, traveling to various places around Tibet to take into his astonishing mind a whole range of skills, rarely found all in one person. “He was expert in so many fields,” says Tenzin Zopa. “Apart from the sutra and tantra teachings of all the four traditions of Tibet, he also accomplished cham dancing, rituals, sand mandalas, astrology, making divinations, architecture according to the Vinaya – his knowledge was astonishing.”

For Geshe Jampa Tseten, it is clear now that his “crazy” schoolmate was not an ordinary being. “He was a holy being, a great meditator, since he was a small child.”

During his twenty-five years of studying at Sera Je, Geshe Lama Konchog mastered all the texts required. “He was so humble,” says Jampa Tseten, “yet when he debated he was fierce! No one could defeat him!”

He was qualified to go for his Lharampa degree, but the uprising against the Chinese Communist invaders intervened. In fact, two months before the events of March 1959, 32-year-old Lama Konchog had a dream that predicted the uprising and its violent aftermath. He told his friends, and said he was leaving. As usual, they thought he was crazy, and stayed put. He left Tibet carrying “a leaky pot,” – as he told Tenzin Zopa later – “a bowl, a set of robes, a small sheepskin and essential Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug texts.”

According to Lama Lhundrup, the abbot of Kopan Monastery, the route that Geshe Lama Konchog followed out of Tibet was revealed in his earlier dream. The route took him to the village of Tsum, just over the border into Nepal, and to the cave of Tibet’s beloved yogi and saint, Milarepa. The cave is known as Cave of the Doves. It is said that dakas and dakinis transformed into doves to listen to Milarepa’s teaching. It was here, also, that Milarepa was offered robes by his sister.

Lama Konchog left his belongings with a family in Tsum and headed down the mountain to India, to take teachings in Bodhgaya from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who by now had also escaped from Tibet. He then planned to join his friends and fellow monks at Buxaduar in the north. Fortuitously he met his guru Trijang Rinpoche in Kathmandu, who told him that “his studies were finished” and that he should “return to the mountains from where he’d just come, and meditate.”

He hesitated, but after an admonishing from his lama, during a second chance meeting on a train bound for Varanasi in India, he returned to Tsum. Collecting his texts and leaky pot, he effectively

disappeared. He made his way to the Cave of the Doves, high in the mountainous jungle, where only tigers and other wild animals lived.

According to his own account to Tenzin Zopa, Geshe Lama Konchog trained himself during the first few months “to have an empty stomach. I lived on nettles, and gradually was able to practice wind chulen” – a method whereby the meditator can “take the essence” (*chulen*) from nature. The usual method practiced by yogis is to take the essence from rocks and flowers, then make them into pills. But Lama Konchog decided to do without all sustenance. He literally took the essence from the air, and was able to survive.

And he didn’t sleep, either, according to Rinchen Wangchuk, another meditator from that area. From two in the morning until eight in the evening he would meditate on the various deities, mainly on Vajra Yogini, and from eight in the evening until two the following morning he would prostrate. And he took the Eight Mahayana Precepts every day, in the context of the Nyung-ne fasting practice.

Wanting very much to make water bowl offerings to the Guru Buddha, he told Tenzin Zopa that he dug out holes in the rock face and then chipped away at the rock leading from the nearby waterfall, digging a groove, which allowed the water to flow into his “bowls.” For mandala offerings, he used rocks from the stream.

“I can’t even imagine how hard he worked,” says Tenzin Zopa. “One night at Kopan, when I was about 15, I came back home after my evening debate and because I was tired I went straight to bed. Normally we are supposed to review our memorization from the morning. Geshe-la came into my room and scolded me.

“You will never achieve what you are supposed to achieve acting like this! Everything is so luxurious for you people these days! When I was in the cave, I had no food, one set of robes, and one sheep skin. In the winter the snow was higher than you. The whole day I did sessions and at night I prostrated. I had no sleep for years and years. You people cannot go without sleep for even one day!”

“I felt so sad and cried. I then went outside and chanted and chanted, trying to stay up all night. Hours later Geshe-la came out in his underskirt with some butter tea for me. ‘Go and sleep,’ he said. It had a deep effect on me.”

Geshe Lama Konchog lived like this for some nine years: full of utter determination to achieve realizations, compelled by great compassion, and delighting in his solitude, with only the tigers and deer for friends. Asked later how he felt about conditions in the West, he said, “It is all contaminated! The best food I ever had was in the cave. The best place I’ve ever lived in was the cave. The best friends I ever had were in the cave.” The cave needed to be climbed into, and the deer “would support each other in order to get in. Sometimes they would sit all day and night. We’d stay peacefully together with no fear. For me, that was a pure land!”

It can only be imagined how, after nine years of this unbelievable rigor, the blissful meditator appeared to some shepherds who ventured up into the mountains, wanting to set up a village. “They thought he was a demon or even a yeti!” says Tenzin Zopa. “There he was, this wild, skinny person, with long hair and beard, and scanty rags to cover only his secret parts. At first they ran away!”

The following day, more people came and tried to chase him away. But they realized he was human and attempted to encourage him to come down the mountain. “If you want to eat human food, come and work for us,” they offered. “I’ve got the best food here,” Lama Konchog said. “Just try not to bother me!”

But chase him away they did. Unable to find another cave, the determined yogi found a heavily overhanging juniper tree near Tsaarak Mountain. Reinforcing it with branches and sticks, astonishingly he made this his new home. With complete control over his own elements he was able to effortlessly withstand the external elements, living through the fierce winter snows, with no food, no clothing, no sleep. All he had were the bliss of his meditation and the blessings of the holy beings.

Some eighteen months later he was again forced to find another home. This time, says Tenzin Zopa, he walked up the mountain and then down towards the middle part of Tsum, the village he’d first encountered after leaving Tibet. About an hour away he found a partial cave known as Galdung Gompa, which he built up and enclosed with rocks. Here he lived for another fifteen years.

From this cave he gradually become known, and revered, by the villagers. He worked on their behalf, in the beginning especially using his powers to remove the harmful spirits from the village. “He was able to communicate with the spirits,” Tenzin Zopa says. “He could subdue them with ease, even the powerful ones who, apparently, had been practitioners in previous lives but had died with strong attachment and reincarnated as spirits. Also, he was able to control the weather, and with the power of mantra he would heal people.”

Tenzin Zopa was the first of six children, born in 1975, not long after Geshe Lama Konchog moved close to Tsum. “My father was chosen by Geshe-la to marry my mother,” he says. “Our family became very close to him.”

In 1969, now out of his strict retreat and visiting Boudhanath near Kathmandu, Geshe Lama Konchog met Lama Thubten Yeshe again for the first time since their days together at Sera Je. The meeting was a surprise: “Suddenly someone hugged him tightly from behind and wouldn’t let go,” Tenzin Zopa says. “He wondered who this crazy person was!” It was Lama Yeshe, so happy to see his old friend again, after ten years apart. “They had great affection and respect for each other,” Tenzin Zopa says. “Both were very similar: great practitioners living simple, unassuming lives.”

“We were not just ordinary friends, who shared food with each other,” Geshe Lama Konchog said later. “We were Dharma friends.” Lama Yeshe asked him to join him at Kopan, but he said no, he had his own things to do.

He did, however, visit Kopan. Thubten Pemba remembers: “We all wondered who this rough looking monk was.” Like all holy beings, he was a hidden yogi: his unassuming “rough” appearance showed nothing of his marvelous and astonishing inner qualities. In reality, “Geshe Lama Konchog lived in Vajra Yogini’s Pure Land,” Lama Zopa Rinpoche declared later.

In 1984, after Lama Yeshe passed away, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche wrote to Geshe Lama Konchog and again requested him to come. This time he accepted.

“When Lama Yeshe passed away,” said Rinpoche, “the smiles at Kopan went away. But when Geshe Lama Konchog came, the smiles came back.”

For eighteen years, he lived at Kopan, devoting himself to the monks and nuns and giving them the gift of his unbelievable qualities and knowledge. “He was our father,” says Tenzin Zopa.

The holy body of Geshe Lama Konchog was offered to the fire at Kopan on October 22, seven days after this beloved father passed away. Kopan’s lamas and three hundred monks and nearby Kachoe Ghakyil’s three hundred nuns, as well as many devoted students from abroad, attended the Yamantaka fire puja, held at a site chosen by Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

According to Tenzin Zopa all the details of his own passing away were under Geshe-la’s control, including the date, the type of rituals, the practices to be performed by various monasteries.

“On the day after Geshe-la passed away, Geshe Jampa Tseten came to visit Kopan. He advised me to be very careful with the arrangements for the cremation, because Geshe Lama Konchog was definitely an extraordinary being. Suddenly I remembered that Geshe-la had left on his table, open at the appropriate pages, various texts that explained exactly what to do: the various substances to use for the fire, the rituals, and so on. He knew it was far too complicated for me, so he prepared everything.”

Tenzin Zopa was with him before he passed away. “Geshe-la said to me, ‘It seems there is nothing I haven’t done in my life. I feel completely satisfied and I have no regrets.’ I was holding his hand so tightly, and I was crying.

“Then he gave me instructions about what to do after he stopped breathing – after he had started his meditation, in other words. ‘Don’t touch the body; no one should touch it. Don’t put any new object in front of my eyes because it might distract the concentration. And don’t move or shake the bed. Don’t ask the doctor to do anything, either. And do not light more than one butter lamp because it disturbs the clear light meditation. And don’t cry.’ He also gave instructions about what practices and pujas to do. The main one was to be Medicine Buddha.”

Around 8:15 on the evening of October 15, Tenzin Zopa and others were with Geshe Lama Konchog. Remembers Tenzin Zopa, “Geshe-la said to us, ‘Now the vision of the mirage has appeared’ – the first of the eight internal signs of death – ‘so please go and start the prayers.’ We

all left except my brother Thubten Lhundrup, who recited Geshe-la's daily prayers for him. At 8.40 P.M. his breathing stopped." Again, the smiles at Kopan went away.

Prayers were performed in Geshe-la's house throughout the day and night during the seven days that he remained in meditation. On October 22, his holy body was carried in solemn procession to the site of the fire puja, which lasted for several hours amid auspicious signs of rainbows and a drizzle of flowers from the sky. At the end, the specially constructed stupa containing the fire was sealed.

At 4.30 A.M. on the third day after the fire puja, under the supervision of the young Cherok Lama, Lama Lhundrup, Thubten Lhundrup, Geshe Kosang Jamyang, Amtso, Drakpa and Tenzin Zopa, the stupa was broken open and the search for relics begun.

An astonishing number of relics were found – signs of the greatness of this holy being. "So many relics were found that what was supposed to be a two-hour job turned into eight," Tenzin Zopa said. Hundreds of pearl-like relics, some black hair, the heart, tongue and an eye – commonly, such organs of high tantric practitioners don't burn – and many other relics were found. "Lama Lhundrup said it is as if Geshe-la's whole body was a precious jewel.

"At 2:30 P.M. we invited Geshe-la's relics to the gompa," Tenzin Zopa said, "with music and auspicious banners and flowers, and everyone prayed strongly for his reincarnation to come quickly."

With the speed of Vajra Yogini, for the sake of all of us, may he do just that!

Postscript

Six weeks after the relics were taken from the fire and laid in containers on the altar in Geshe Lama Konchog's house at Kopan, great changes have been occurring to them, says Tenzin Zopa. "One set of two relics has multiplied to become thirty-seven relics, and another has multiplied into twenty-eight. The bones are constantly producing pearl-like and golden-type relics; and from the ashes relics are manifesting as well. On the tongue there is a clearly visible self-arising Tara image becoming more prominent every day. And the heart continues to decrease in size, at the same time producing red relics. One tooth is taking the form of a counter-clockwise conch shell."

According to Lama Lhundrup, the multiplying of relics – which are the holy body of the yogi is an indication of the strength of Geshe Lama Konchog's realizations.

4. The Passing of a Noble Lama: Obituary for Bakula Rinpoche

Mandala April-May 2004

Bakula Rinpoche, recognized by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama as a reincarnation of Bakula Arhat (one of the sixteen arhats who were direct disciples of the Shakyamuni Buddha), passed away in Delhi on November 4, 2003. He was 86 years old.

His wisdom and compassion put him in the front rank of influential Tibetan Buddhist masters, yet he was always modest.

He was born in the royal family of Ladakh, but as a Buddhist leader, he guided his followers through his personal example of a humble life as a celibate monk. He dedicated his life to the core principles of the Buddhist teachings by caring for others, especially for those who were less fortunate and in great need.

He was deeply engaged with a number of welfare and minorities' rights issues from remote places like Ladakh to the vast areas of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India. His support, enthusiasm, and determination played an important role in helping the Ladakhi people sustain their ancient Buddhist religion in the controversial political environment of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. As a man with a great sense of practical reality, he was a guiding spirit for Ladakhi people to develop their way of life through a combination of traditional and modern education. This won him the title of "the architect of modern Ladakh."

Though he made no claim to being a Tibetan leader, many of his works, dedicated to mobilizing support for the Tibetan refugees when they first arrived in India, seemed to make him one in practice. He was highly revered as a lama and greatly respected by the Tibetan people as a human rights campaigner. To His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Rinpoche was a close friend and a dedicated fellow advocate of Buddhadharma.

As a skilled administrator and Member of Parliament, he held some of the highest ministerial posts in the Government of India, including being head of the Minorities Commission. As a diplomat, he served as Ambassador of India to Mongolia for over 10 years starting in 1990. In 1986, in recognition of his distinguished service of high order to the nation, the President of India awarded him the second highest honor, "Padma Bhushan."

Over a period of ten years, he helped re-open ancient monasteries and organize Buddhist peace conferences. Under his guidance, Pethub Stangey Choinkhorling Monastery and Dechen Ling Nunnery in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, developed into important centers of learning for Mongolian Buddhists. In 2001 the President of Mongolia awarded Rinpoche one of the highest honors of the country, "The Polar Star."

He traveled extensively promoting the importance of interfaith harmony, peaceful reconciliation of conflicts in the world, and awareness of environmental conservation. Rinpoche focused his

attention and efforts to reach people in countries and regions where circumstances had made it impossible to practice the Dharma. He visited the former Soviet Union for the first time in 1968 and Mongolia in 1969 and remained active in the region until his last days. He first visited Beijing in 1989 and developed close Dharma connections with many of his followers in China.

In 1954 he led the Indian delegation to the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon, Burma. He was a founder member of the Asian Buddhist Conference for Peace established in 1968 in Mongolia. In 1980 he joined religious leaders of the USA, Japan, and the former USSR together with peace activists from throughout world to denounce the escalation of the nuclear arms race. He was a Presidium member of the World Assembly of Religious Workers for Saving the Sacred Gift of Life from Nuclear Catastrophe.

Bakula Rinpoche visited San Francisco, California, in 1995 at the invitation of Mikhail Gorbachev, former President of the USSR, to attend the State of the World Forum. He was a cofounder of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation established in 1995 along with leaders of the world's major religions and the MOA International, Japan. He was also among the founding members of the World Buddhist Conference based in Japan.

In 1997 he was invited by Dr. George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, and James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, for a meeting at the Lambeth Palace, London together with key members of nine major religions of the world and representatives of the World Bank to discern opportunities for common understanding and action in tackling the critical issue of global poverty. He was invited to dine with Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace in November 2002 and met with King Norodom Sinahnuk of Cambodia in 2001; these events indicate his stature as a world religious leader.

“Rinpoche’s passing was sudden, as he was doing fairly well after he was discharged from hospital in Delhi where he was treated for pneumonia,” said Bakula Rinpoche’s secretary, Sonam Wangchuk, who attended Bakula for the last twenty-five years. “Rizong Rinpoche was present during those difficult days and was a great support. He led the funeral ceremony, which was also attended by Chamba Rinpoche from Drepung Loseling.

“There were some amazing signs during and after the funeral. The sky was clear and sunny on the day we were collecting the ashes. A small cloud appeared just over the place, which is a mountaintop, and we saw a thick snowfall. It was a brief spell only in that one spot, but it covered everyone there in white. It was as if the heavens were showering flowers! The same evening a neula (a mongoose, the symbol of Arhat Bakula) was seen below Rinpoche’s seat in the courtyard of Pethub Monastery. It is the same animal that Arhat Bakula carries in his hands and that you see in thangkhas. It was strange as the monks had never before seen the animal anywhere around. Rizong Rinpoche also saw the animal and was very pleased.’

Sonam later took Rinpoche’s ashes to Mongolia where the people and the Government received the ashes “with the utmost respect. A large number of people came to the airport including the city Governor. The ashes were escorted to the monastery with all the honors, including police escorts.

Police had lined up the entire stretch of road from the airport to the monastery and traffic was not allowed. People flocked to the monastery to pay their respects. It was a moving experience.”

“We are all praying for Rinpoche’s incarnation to appear soon,” Sonam said.

Thanks also to the Tibet Foundation for this article.

5. My Life in Chinese-Occupied Tibet and India

By Khensur Lobsang Tsering, Sera Je Monastic University (as told to Ken Liberman and Ven. Michael Losang Yeshe)

Mandala February-March 2005

A tireless teacher even at age eighty-one, Khensur Lobsang Tsering is one of the precious jewels of Sera Je Monastery. Khensur Rinpoche is a long-time teacher of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and many other respected Tibetan teachers, including Namgyal Khenpo Jhado Rinpoche, Yangsi Rinpoche, and Khanser Rinpoche, and the Western scholars Georges Dreyfus, José Cabazon, and John Makransky. He is valued by his students at Sera especially for the keenness of his intellect and the clarity of his explanations on emptiness.

I was born in the central Tibetan village of Nesar Lhanying in the year 1923. When I was 19, I left our monastery to study at Sera Je Monastery in Lhasa, completing my principal studies in 1957. Following this my teacher, the former abbot Lhundrup Topkye, asked me to return to my monastery to become the spiritual teacher there. Our monastery was a branch of the large Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, which is the largest monastery in Tsang and the seat of the Panchen Lamas.

When the Chinese overran Tibet in 1959, many of my teachers and colleagues in Lhasa were able to escape. But isolated in a remote district of Tsang, I had no means or knowledge of how to escape. Because of our affiliation with Tashi Lhunpo, the Chinese exerted very close control over us. At first they promised us assistance if only we would cooperate with them, but they were only tricking us. When they realized the extent of my commitment to Buddhism, they arrested me under charges of corrupting youth, and I was kept aside with those prisoners who required extensive interrogation.

In the prison of Shigatse, where I spent eight years, there were more than a thousand prisoners. We suffered terribly from starvation. Each morning we were permitted one spoonful of boiled spinach without salt or flavoring. Occasionally, leftover spoonfuls became the object of fierce arguments among the prisoners. Many died of starvation.

About 1963, I thought I was going to die myself. The suffering was terrible, unrelenting. Some foraged for food among rats and worms, and for the seeds left in human excrement. So many of our relatives and friends were dying. It has been said by the Buddha that one's practice can grow best in conditions of suffering. Those who grieved terribly over their situation, especially over the loss of loved ones, became overcome with their sadness and soon succumbed themselves, whereas those who were able to use the situation to keep and even strengthen their Dharma practice mostly survived. The mind can have a powerful effect over the body. There was no opportunity to recite prayers aloud, but one could mentally recite and meditate secretly. I attribute my survival to my prayers and meditations on the suffering of living beings, which gave me some perspective in that situation.

During this time the Chinese communists tried to reform our thinking and gave us much propaganda. This permitted me to gain some understanding of their nature. They gave us booklets, including many authored by Mao Tse-tung, which spoke of the highest aims and goals for all the people, and they convinced us that the United States was very weak, a “paper tiger,” and incapable of stopping the advance of global communism, which they convinced us was invincible. When I realized that even with their high aims and purposes, in reality their policy of total control by brute force betrayed them and could only increase – not decrease – human suffering on earth, a great sadness arose in my heart. Believing their political assessments and fearing that the entire world was going to become communist, I nearly gave up my will to live. I wondered, “What could be the benefit of a precious human rebirth if all humans would live only under such conditions of oppression?”

At these times I didn’t care whether I was alive or dead. I offered this prayer: “If my extensive studies of Buddhist Dharma and years of serious practice can one day come to benefit others, then I pray that I can survive; but if an opportunity to help others can never come again in this lifetime, then may I die soon!”

Finally, after so much extreme suffering, I was released in 1967 and spent three years with my relatives in my hometown. Although I wished to go to India, I did not know the way, and in those days no one could be trusted. During this time there was not even a moment of happiness, and everyone was forced to labor in the fields for the Chinese, from dawn to darkness. The Red Guards had arrived in Tibet and destroyed most of the monasteries; they killed many people. It was worse than any nightmare: One could not dream events such as those.

There was a glimmer of hope in late 1968 when Tibetans demonstrated against these actions and for two or three months the Chinese did not respond. But in early 1969, the Chinese army was sent, and they killed many of the protesters. When they came to my hometown, the secretary of the town abandoned any hope of improvement. It was then that he, his wife, and I decided to escape together to India. We were convinced that there was no future for us in Tibet and that our lives had become purposeless.

It took us twenty-one days to trek to Sikkim, and we eluded patrols by traveling only at night. We became lost many times, but we didn’t dare ask anyone for directions. We ran out of food but never visited anyone for fear of spies. When we arrived in India, we were overjoyed to be free and our joy increased as soon as we learned that the world was determined to reject Chinese communism and also had the strength to oppose it.

I went to Sera Monastery, and in 1972 I was selected for conferral of my formal Geshe Lharampa degree. In 1978, I was elected the disciplinarian of the monastery, a two-year term. As if my prayer had been fulfilled, I had very many students. In 1986, His Holiness the Dalai Lama appointed me to the position of abbot. After two terms in that position, I retired and devoted three years to a retreat on Yamantaka. Following that, I returned to a full schedule of teaching. This involves as many as six classes per day, six days a week. And during my weekly day off from my classes at Sera, I go to Tashi Lhunpo Monastery nearby Sera for three ninety-minute classes there. Recently, at the

request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche I have begun to visit some of the FPMT centers in India and Taiwan.

I feel much joy to be able to spend my time almost continuously teaching Tibetan monks living in India, including the young monks who are recent arrivals from Tibet. I have also had several American students. I am happy to teach them also because I feel grateful to America for its interest in containing Chinese communism, and because I feel the Buddhist teachings are valuable for the world and not only for Tibetans.

Each day I rejoice over the fact that my most heartfelt prayer from the prison has been realized. Now my body is old, but I feel very fulfilled.

Khensur Lobsang Tsering passed away on July 1, 2014, in Bylakuppe, India, at the age of 91. See Mandala July-December 2015 for his obituary.

6. Lama Zopa Rinpoche Meets Westerners

Mandala June-July 2005

In a significant new book from Wisdom Publications, the story of two individuals, the first Lawudo Lama, Kunzang Yeshe, and his successor, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche unfolds. It is a story of reincarnation, of the life of Sherpas living in the harsh border territory between Nepal and Tibet, and of the education of a lama. In this excerpt, the six-year-old Zopa has been sent to Rolwaling, where his education is sponsored for three years by a man from the Sakya Khampa clan. Rolwaling nestles in a valley surrounded by high snow mountains – and the young Zopa nearly drowns in the river.

In those days very few Westerners visited Khumbu and Rolwaling, but I had heard about the *mig karmo*, the people with “white” eyes and yellow hair. For us they were something similar to the yeti: we had heard about them, but most of us had never seen them. Then one day, in October or November of 1952, a group of *mig karmo* arrived in Rolwaling. Below the gompa there was a large *chörten* and right across the river, a pleasant green meadow where they camped!

The Rolwaling people were astonished at their appearance and said that those strange people were probably bad because they were not Buddhists and were coming from a strange, faraway country, and that they most likely brought some evil spirits with them. They were afraid local gods and *nagas* would be angered at their intrusion into our country and would cause floods, landslides, earthquakes, avalanches, and bad crops. Therefore, at first the villagers did not want the Westerners to come into their houses, and least of all into the gompa. Taking photographs was also considered very bad because the blessings of holy objects or the life force of persons and animals would be taken away with the photo. Such was the general feeling toward Westerners among the Rolwaling Sherpas.

The *mig karmo* came accompanied by porters, some of them Sherpas who had been in contact with many Westerners in Kathmandu and Darjeeling. They told the Rolwaling people that their ideas about Westerners were wrong. These people were human beings just like us, and besides, they were generally very kind and generous. Sherpas are friendly by nature, so they relaxed a bit, and my uncle invited the Westerners into the gompa and allowed them to take pictures of whatever they wanted.

The first time I saw Westerners camping across the river I had the wish to bring them something, since they were our guests. Sherpas always give food and drink to whoever comes to their village. Accordingly, I asked my uncle whether I could bring some boiled potatoes to the *mig karmo*. *Aku Ngawang Gendun* was not very happy with the idea, but I insisted so much that finally he filled a brass container with potatoes and let me go.

I ran down the hill toward the river and went over the small bridge made of two tree trunks tied together, carefully clutching the potatoes and quite excited at the prospect of seeing the *mig karmo* at close range. When I reached the middle of the bridge, somehow the tree trunks began to move

and shake, and it seemed as if the bridge was upside down. The potatoes fell into the water and I fell after them, right in the middle of the river. The stream was neither wide nor deep, but the current was very swift and strong, and my little body was carried off toward a dangerous area with very deep waters. Sometimes my head came out closer to one shore and sometimes closer to the other. One time when my head came out, I saw my uncle running down from his house, which is actually quite far from the river. He had taken off his *chuba* and was wearing some simple pants, which he held up as he ran in the hope of catching me before I reached the dangerous area.

At that time I had no understanding about the meaning of emptiness or about the fact that everything, including ourselves, is merely labeled by name and concept. But at that moment the thought came into my mind, "Now this thing that people call the Lawudo Lama is going to die, is going to end." There was no fear at all in my mind. It will probably be much more difficult now to accept death, but at that time my mind felt quite comfortable.

Finally, my uncle managed to grab me and take me out of the water. He took off my wet clothes, wrapped me in a blanket, lit a big fire, and made me sit near the flames until I got warm again. Someone came with hot butter tea, so after a while I felt at ease again. Later I heard that one of the Western tourists had come running with a camera and had taken pictures of me while I was being carried away by the water!

My uncle did not punish me, but he scolded me very strongly, saying, "I told you not to go! Now you can see what happens when you disobey your teacher!" That episode was a good lesson about the advantages of following correctly the advice of spiritual friends.

The next day, the Westerners came to the gompa to attend a ritual ceremony sponsored by one of their Sherpa porters. They sat for a while drinking tea and chang and looking out of place. They took pictures of the beautiful paintings on the gompa walls, of Aku Ngawang Gendun beating the drum and clashing the cymbals, and of many other people as well.

The Westerners had blue eyes and yellow hair indeed, and talked very strangely, making funny sounds like "wee, wee." I had learned from the scriptures that in addition to the Southern continent called Dzambuling on which we live, there are three other large worlds, or continents, in the east, west, and north. I thought that the Westerners probably came from one of those other worlds because they looked so strange. As a matter of fact, they were extremely kind. To the children they gave something brown and sweet that they called "choclet." I did not like it at all and found the taste very boring because it was not spicy like our food. Many years had to pass before I managed to swallow some chocolate; in the late '70s, when we were driving from Sydney to Melbourne in Australia, I was so hungry that for the first time in my life I ate a whole bar.

They also gave us two tablets each, probably vitamins, and taught us how to swallow them. One of the Westerners was a doctor who managed to cure a very sick Sherpa man, and from that moment on many Sherpas came to him asking for medicines. Afterward, the Westerners left to climb some high mountains with their Sherpa porters and guides. We thought that too was very peculiar. Sherpas go up on the mountains to graze the yaks, to cut grass or masur bushes for incense, or on pilgrimage to the holy lakes and caves. No one ever thinks about climbing dangerous mountains

and going through ice and boulders just for the pleasure of doing it. When the Sherpas went to the mountains with the Westerners, it was only because they were well paid, as they needed the money. Life in Khumbu and Rolwaling was, and still is, very hard, and people were very happy to earn a large amount of money just by carrying loads up the mountain for the Westerners.

My sister Ang Kami came a few times from Thangme to bring me food and clothes and to collect rice as payment for clothes that Amala had made for some Rolwaling people. She also took a few tins of butter back home because Rolwaling butter was very good and cheap.

During those years I went only once to Thangme to attend the empowerments given by Lama Dondrub. Although I was already accustomed to life in Rolwaling and did not miss my mother so much, I was still very glad to spend a few days with my family. One day, my mother served a glass of arak to both my uncle and myself. I probably did not drink the whole glass, but when it was time to leave, I discovered that I was unable to move my arms or legs. I felt like a spider with long, unmanageable limbs. My uncle had to grab me and drag me all the way to Thangme Gompa. That was the second time I drank alcohol.

After a few years I began to understand the great kindness of my two alphabet teachers. The reason why I can now read as many texts as I wish and can try to understand their meaning is because of the kindness of my teachers. If they had not introduced me to the Tibetan syllables, how could I have become able to understand them by myself? Without the help of my teachers, I could never have learned how to read, and I would not be able to explain the Dharma to others. Therefore, the teachers who have given us such opportunities have been extremely kind to us, and we should always remember them with deep gratitude.

In Rolwaling I read the life and songs of the great yogi Milarepa three or four times. Although I did not know much grammar and was just reciting the words without understanding them well, what I had read had a very strong impact on me. I was quite young and my mind was clear and sharp, so I was able to remember all the details of Milarepa's life. It filled me with a great desire to find a teacher like Marpa, Milarepa's teacher, and to become a strong practitioner like Milarepa himself. That is how the Sangha Jewel guides us.

Excerpted from The Lawudo Lama: Stories of Reincarnation from the Mount Everest Region by Jamyang Wangmo with permission of Wisdom Publications (www.wisdompubs.org).

7. Attending the Lama: Thoughts Upon the Passing of Ribur Rinpoche

By Fabrizio Pallotti

Mandala April-May 2006

The revered lama Kyabje Ribur Rinpoche passed away on January 15, 2006, at Sera Me monastery in southern India, at the age of 83. Rinpoche's long-time translator and attendant, Fabrizio Pallotti, recalls the passing of his perfect teacher.

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

I met Rinpoche in Dharamsala in 1988. I was doing a retreat at Tushita and met up with a friend who wanted to do an initiation with a lama at Namgyal monastery [the monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama]. He asked me to come and translate. Initially, I said, "No, I don't have the time, and anyway, I have so many great teachers, I don't need to meet a new lama," but finally I agreed. "Okay, Okay," I said, "but I'll just come to translate and after that I'm going to split!"

On the way to meet this lama, we saw off in the distance an old monk in yellow robes watching us; as soon as he saw us, he disappeared. It turned out to be Rinpoche! When we went to his room, I made three prostrations, and I was very surprised that immediately I was taken with him, without a single word spoken.

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

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

I had been ordained since 1981, but there was one year when I went a little bit crazy and disrobed. I was doing well, working on a Tibet campaign, but after a while I got a call and it was Rinpoche. He said, "What are you doing? I'm at Vajrapani. Why don't you come over? It would make me

happy.” Even though I had set up many projects at work and it would be very difficult to leave everything, I immediately started packing. That was in 1997, and from then on I was always with Rinpoche. (One exception was a period in India when Rinpoche was in retreat during which time I helped develop the medical fund for the Gere Foundation India Trust, a project inspired by Rinpoche and supported by Richard Gere, which now provides full medical care to more than 900 destitute monks and nuns.) We traveled all over the world together, and Rinpoche inspired many Western students with his teachings, most especially due to the outpouring of unbelievable love and compassion that emanated from his whole being.

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

At noon on the fifteenth, Rinpoche was relaxing downstairs at his house, when he suddenly asked the attendants to take him upstairs so that he could be in front of Lama Tsongkhapa. Many years ago Rinpoche had ordered this life-size image of Je Rinpoche, a very powerful statue that contains some of the holy bones of Je Rinpoche and Pabongkha Rinpoche. During periods when Rinpoche was heavily medicated (due to the cancer) he would sometimes say things that appeared quite disconnected. For instance, he would often say, “I need to go back to the monastery; he is waiting for me.” At the time, we couldn’t figure out to whom he was referring. I now believe that he was talking about Je Rinpoche; in fact, when I told this to Oser Rinpoche, he said to me that recently Rinpoche had told him, “All that I have done in this life has been offered to the holy mind of Je Rinpoche.”

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

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

After five or six days, Geshe Losang Choepel, the attendant of the late Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, was called upon because of his great knowledge of ritual and how to handle the passing away of a high lama. He determined that Rinpoche was no longer meditating, and many preparations were done to anoint the holy body in the perfect way. An ablution of saffron water was offered to the holy body; we wrapped Rinpoche in new robes and deity ornaments and left him in the same

sitting position for one day while we made preparations for the cremation. Though it was quite hot, there was no decomposing, no smell, and no rigor mortis. His body was amazingly supple. Throughout this time, many lamas, geshe, and young monks visited Rinpoche, and many self-initiations were performed on a daily basis: Heruka, Vajrayogini, Yamantaka, and many other practices.

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

At the back of my mind, I always knew that Rinpoche was going to pass away, but I couldn't face it directly. Now, facing directly the reality of my lama who had passed away, seeing his holy body under those circumstances, watching as the holy body is cremated, I think it was the most powerful teaching I ever received from Rinpoche. Not only as a recollection of impermanence, of course, but in terms of the kindness of his teachings, his love, his affection, the way that he took care of us, never showing the slightest concern for himself or this life. One of his greatest gifts was to inspire me through his example to pledge the specific practice of guru devotion called "like the best child"; you never engage in new actions without the permission of the guru. These recollections totally blew my mind.

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

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

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

Rinpoche was among the last of his kind. He was in Tibet before the coming of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and experienced the golden age of Tibet. During the Cultural Revolution, he was able to do some of the most amazing actions for the benefit of the teachings and all sentient beings. He

discovered the lost statue of Jowo Ramoche, one of three images made at the time of the Buddha and blessed by him; as well, Rinpoche reestablished the great reliquary of Ganden and the stupa of Je Rinpoche, along with countless other holy images that had disappeared from Tibet when the monasteries were looted. Incredibly holy images would cross Rinpoche's path with seemingly no effort. For instance, in Drepung Monastery a conch shell is preserved that was given to Lord Buddha by a child. It is said that the Buddha prophesied the child would be the future Je Rinpoche, a second Buddha to propagate the teachings. Monghallana, one of Lord Buddha's students, then flew to Tibet and buried the conch in the mountains where Tsongkhapa later unearthed it. On that spot he established Ganden monastery. Centuries later, this conch was stolen and was nowhere to be found for several years. Then one day when Rinpoche was in Dharamsala, an old Tibetan man knocked at Rinpoche's door and handed him the very conch that had been missing.

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

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

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

8. Blessing the World's Waterways: Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche Travels to Antarctica

By Bruce Farley

Mandala October-November 2006

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, who was born in Tibet in 1926, understands endurance. He spent many years studying sutra and tantra at Kirti Monastery where he became abbot at the age of 26. At Drepung Monastery in Lhasa he was the great Kirti Rinpoche's debate tutor as he prepared for his Geshe examination. A year later he had to flee his homeland in the face of the Chinese invasion. He went on to survive a fifteen-year retreat in a cold, damp hut in the hills above Dharamsala, often eating his food raw and cold, listening to the mountain lions scratching outside.

Now the beloved 80-year-old learned teacher is experiencing ill-health, but while his students pray for his recovery, they are also rejoicing in his latest adventure. Bruce Farley tells the story of how Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, an inveterate traveler, finally made it to Antarctica, and the extraordinary environmental effects of his visit.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche first ventured to the West in 1992, covering eleven countries in eleven months. Since then, always accompanied by his loyal attendant, Alak Rinpoche, he has traveled the world extensively teaching sutra and tantra, and has bestowed the Kalachakra empowerment thirty-five times.

Of all the lamas and rinpoches I have had the good fortune to travel with, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche is notable for his sense of adventure, and his desire to perform numerous blessings and pujas wherever he travels.

I have been constantly amazed at the public's reaction. Rinpoche exudes a radiance that seems to pacify those around him regardless of their beliefs and status. I asked him about his constant travels and blessings. His reply:

“It is what we describe in the West as combining business with pleasure. I like traveling and visiting new places. It is part of my nature. But when I am out in these places I make sure that I bless the areas I visit. In particular, if there is a body of water in an area. This is because water is such a great carrier of blessings. So lakes, reservoirs, coasts, waterfalls, and rivers are always places I am interested in visiting.”

When Rinpoche arrives at a new destination, the first question is always, “Where is the closest lake or river?” Similarly, according to Rinpoche, high places such as hills and mountains are good to visit and bless. “For example, if you write some mantras on a rock in a high mountain pass, the winds will carry the blessing to a large area.” [See *Mandala* August-September 2006 “Buddhism in Latin America.”]

One day I asked Rinpoche about his fervor for performing these blessings. He gave a broad, environmental perspective:

“There has been so much pollution, so much mining of precious resources that should never have been extracted from the earth, that should have remained in the earth because as you are extracting you are actually depleting the earth, and then there is so much mass production and so much man-made pollution, and of course all the elements are now out of balance.

“It is important to understand that all these elements [earth, water, fire, air] are disturbed due to our activities, and there is not one element that has remained clean. Now each one of these elements is actually accompanied by deities, so you have the earth deity, the water deities, the fire deities, the wind deities, the atmosphere deities, and they are not very comfortable once their environment is polluted, so there is a general atmosphere of disturbance, and perhaps dissatisfaction, and Dharma practitioners from their own side should try as best as they can to pacify these deities.”

It was very clear that Rinpoche connected the seemingly increased frequency of “natural disasters” to the disturbance of these powerful deities’ environment.

Antarctic Adventure

And so to our latest adventure. During a lengthy stay with me and my wife in 2001, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and his long-time attendant Alak Rinpoche¹ traveled extensively throughout New Zealand. It was then that the Rinpoches asked Phillipa and me if we could take them to Antarctica. A little surprised at this request, nevertheless, Phillipa made enquiries. It seemed like a difficult and expensive undertaking and it got put on the back burner. However, the Rinpoches continued to raise the topic from time to time and in 2005 we received the official request that Rinpoche seriously wanted to go to Antarctica. This time guru devotion won out. Phillipa put months of energy into arranging and fundraising a journey that included South Africa, Argentina, Antarctica, New Zealand, and Taiwan.

Why Antarctica? According to Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, because it is the most southern pole of the earth, many water currents gather and disperse from Antarctica, finding their way all over the planet. Likewise, many of the world’s weather patterns stem from the southern ocean. Ninety percent of the world’s ice and seventy percent of the world’s fresh water are found in Antarctica. Rinpoche’s wish was to bless these currents with holy water containing blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as water gathered from all the oceans of the world, and from lakes, rivers, etc., visited by Rinpoche over many years. The blessed water also contained sand from many *Mandalas* performed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and by Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. It is believed that this mixing and unification of water coming from different origins, along with the power of various pujas, can bring about pacification of extreme weather patterns and stabilize and harmonize weather in any place, especially if the weather patterns are disturbed.

Secondly, Rinpoche wished to place a specially-made stone Buddha, carved in Bodhgaya, India, on the Antarctic ocean floor. (This was also done at the tip of South Africa where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet, and in Tasman Bay, Nelson, New Zealand.)

Before the statues were immersed in the water, they were offered robes as is traditional. In this case, the robes were represented by five khatas. Their five colors represent the five types of primordial awareness, and are offered as a means of accumulating the merit that established the major marks and secondary signs of a buddha. Of course, these scarves will eventually deteriorate in the water. But in the meantime, they act as a condition for all the sea creatures to develop the five types of primordial awareness. As for the statue itself, it will remain in the water for a long time which is why it was made of stone. Rinpoche says that for as long as these holy forms remain in the water they radiate the blessings of the Buddha. The water that comes in contact with these holy forms becomes blessed, and carries the blessing around the whole of the ocean. Subsequently, whatever comes in contact with that blessed water receives the blessing as well.

Thirdly, the Rinpoches wished to visit Antarctica in order to perform pujas on the actual Antarctic continent.

The Journey Begins

I met up with Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, Alak Rinpoche, and Ven. Amy Miller in Buenos Aires in late December 2005. After a couple of days in this large city, which included a little sightseeing, visits to two of the city's magnificent cathedrals, and a spectacular and vibrant New Year's Eve, we flew to Ushuaia on the tip of Tierra del Fuego, the most southern town in the world.

After much research, Phillipa had decided that the best means of getting Rinpoche to Antarctica was with Peregrine Adventures who use the "Akademik Ioffe," a 117-meter long Russian scientific ship. This was a great decision. It was perfect, staffed by a wonderful Russian crew and hosted by a Peregrine team of around eighteen people, including several naturalist specialists, Antarctic adventurers, two kayak guides, two chefs, and support staff. Basing the Rinpoches on a ship gave them the opportunity to visit this spectacular environment, make twice daily visits ashore, and experience a vast array of wildlife and scenery while still having a comfortable and warm cabin to come home to each evening.

We were all very excited as we steamed our way down the Beagle Channel and entered the Drake Passage heading for the Antarctic Peninsula. With the ocean surprisingly calm, we started preparing the stone Buddha, placing special prayers, mani pills, and other items around the statue. We also taped the names of all the benefactors to the base of the Buddha and then wrapped the Buddha in the five colored scarves. Rinpoche said that although the names will eventually wash off, all the benefactors will receive blessings as long as the Buddha statue remains.

Throughout the journey, the Rinpoches were constantly performing prayers. In Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche's words: "For us, this was not a mere cruise to Antarctica. It was a period of intense praying and blessing activities while traveling through a majestic landscape to a unique place.

During our trip, myself and my attendant, Alak Rinpoche, would recite the whole *Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam-rim)* and *Tantric Stages of the Path (Nag-rim)* every day. We would also perform the bathing ceremony as well as a number of other prayers and blessings.”

We will never forget our first sighting of Antarctica. After two days of foggy sailing through the convergence where the warm currents meet with the cold Antarctic waters, the fog suddenly lifted and there before us was a glistening panorama of white pyramidal towers sitting on azure waters. We had arrived, and the Rinpoches definitely manifested the appearance of excitement.

For ten days we were treated to the most magnificent vistas and experiences as we sailed down the Antarctic coast, through channels less than a kilometer wide with 9,000-foot mountains on both sides, and glaciers over a kilometer wide running to the sea. The pressure causes skyscraper-size building blocks of ice that tumble into the sea to form icebergs. There was the constant roar of cracking ice. In an ever-changing kaleidoscope, we experienced sun, eerie mist, thick fog, and snow. Twice a day we would board the zodiac inflatables and go ashore to experience the penguin colonies, seal colonies, or visit current and past scientific stations. Some days were spent whale watching, once with up to twenty humpbacks feeding close by. Other days we would go “iceberg cruising,” taking in the massive array of icebergs of every shape and size. The Rinpoches never missed one single trip, including sleeping on the ice one night in sub-zero temperatures. Kirti Tsenshab’s and Alak Rinpoche’s sense of adventure is amazing, and it was such a blessing to share this with them. Tears well up even as I recall this experience.

The Rinpoches’ presence on the ship became a topic of conversation among the other guests, and the ship soon became “Tibetanized.” Our morning newsletter, which initially had a Russian phrase translated for the benefit of communicating with the crew, soon had a Tibetan phrase each day. I took a long string of prayer flags with me, and in a special ceremony these were hoisted from the bow of the ship right up to the front mast – they looked fantastic flying in the Antarctic breeze. At journey’s end, they were taken down and hung around the walls of the ship’s library as a permanent fixture. The Rinpoches performed a mirror blessing of the bow of the ship as we sat in one beautiful harbor with many people attending and cameras going crazy! The Rinpoches were the only guests to be hosted by the ship’s Captain and during an exchange of gifts the Captain was clearly moved by the experience.

Our first few trips ashore were to islands just off the coast. The first time we actually set foot on the Antarctic continent proper, Kirti Tsenshab and Alak Rinpoche performed a forty-five minute puja. The place was appropriately called Paradise Bay and it befitted its name. Again, many of the passengers and staff sat through the whole puja – it was very moving.

The Buddha statue was discreetly placed overboard at the southernmost point of our journey, in 3,600 feet of water, where it will presumably sit for centuries blessing the oceans, the oceans’ inhabitants, and ultimately the entire planet, I am sure.

Our journey back to Ushuaia was one of the calmest crossings the ship had ever encountered, and I couldn’t help but think that there was a little divine intervention occurring. In fact, our

expedition leader, Aaron, said that performing the puja in Paradise Bay was one of the greatest highlights of his seventy-four trips to Antarctica.

As mundane human beings, I suspect that we will never realize exactly what occurred during this particular Antarctic expedition. However, I have no doubt I was witness to a profound journey of immense benefit to our planet and its inhabitants. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and Alak Rinpoche were extremely happy. They said they achieved everything they set out to do, and that the journey was a complete success. Alak Rinpoche told me we have no idea of the extent and immeasurability of the blessings of Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche in this world. Lama Zopa Rinpoche recently told us that of all the Dharma activities we have ever been involved in, serving Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche has created profoundly more merit than anything else. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche is performing blessings all over the planet at this time in history when degeneration is rapidly escalating.

They have asked that I pass on their heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to this profound adventure, and a special thanks to Phillipa for months of organizing and fundraising and being able to fulfill a special wish of one of the planet's great saints.

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche passed away on December 16, 2006, in South Delhi, India, at the age of 80. See Mandala February-March 2007 for Rinpoche's obituary.

Bruce Farley served as a co-director and Phillipa Rutherford continues to serve as director of Chandrakirti Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre in Richmond, New Zealand.

Notes:

1. Alak Rinpoche is a high lama in his own right. He was captured by the Chinese and placed in a hard labor camp where the atrocities were horrendous. To purify the negativities of breaking his vows while imprisoned, Alak prostrated from Amdo to Lhasa. This took two years or more to complete, enduring starvation, freezing cold, and being robbed. He has been looking after Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche since the 1980s.

9. The Very Beginning: Lama Thubten Yeshe, Founder of FPMT

Mandala April-June 2009

The origins of FPMT can be traced to the birth of Lama Thubten Yeshe, born close to Lhasa, Tibet in 1935. Clearly a special child, he was soon recognized as the incarnation of a great yogini, Ache Jampa, the learned abbess of Rakor Gumpa, near Chimelung, a popular pilgrimage spot and home to about one hundred nuns of the Gelug tradition.

As a young boy, Lama Yeshe spent many days at the nunnery attending various ceremonies and religious functions. At his parents' home he was taught the alphabet, grammar and reading by his uncle, Ngawang Norbu, who studied at Sera Monastery.

From a very early age he expressed the desire to lead a religious life. Whenever a monk would visit his home he would plead to leave with him and join a monastery. Finally, when he was six years old, he received his parents' permission to join Sera Je, a college at one of the three great Gelug monastic universities located in the vicinity of Lhasa. He lived there with over 10,000 monks, under the charge of an uncle who was also a monk there. At the age of eight, he was ordained as a novice monk by the Venerable Purchog Jampa Rinpoche.

Lama Yeshe lived under the rigorous monastic discipline of Sera Je until he was twenty-five years old. There he received spiritual instruction based on the educational traditions brought from India to Tibet over a thousand years ago. From Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Junior Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he received teachings on the lam-rim, the graduated path to enlightenment. In addition, he received many tantric initiations and discourses from both the Junior and Senior Tutors to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as from Drag-ri Dorje Chang Rinpoche, Song Rinpoche, Lhatzun Dorje Chang Rinpoche, and many other great gurus and meditation masters. In addition, he studied the famous Six Yogas of Naropa, following a commentary based on the personal experiences of Lama Tsongkhapa.

This phase of his education ended in 1959 when, as Lama Yeshe explained, "The Chinese kindly told us that it was time to leave Tibet and meet the outside world." Escaping through Bhutan, he eventually reached northeast India where he met up with many other Tibetan refugees. In spite of considerable difficulties in such an alien environment, these Tibetans continued their studies at the settlement camp of Buxa Duar. While in Tibet, Lama Yeshe had already received instruction in *Prajñāparamita* (the Perfection of Wisdom), Madhyamaka philosophy and logic. In India his education continued with courses in the vinaya rules of discipline and the abhidharma system of metaphysics. In addition Tenzin Gyaltzen, the Khunu Lama, gave him teachings on Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (*Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*) and Atisha's *Bodhipathapradipa* (*Lamp of the Path to Enlightenment*). He attended additional tantric initiations and discourses and, at the age of twenty-eight, received full monk's ordination from Kyabje Ling Rinpoche.

It was here in Buxa Duar in 1962, that a young disciplined lama, called Zopa Rinpoche, came to Lama Yeshe as a disciple. Nine years younger than his teacher, Zopa Rinpoche was the reincarnation of the Lawudo Lama, Kunzang Yeshe, an accomplished and realized Sherpa lama from the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal. Educated at the Dungkar Monastery in southern Tibet, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, too, had fled his country.

The special relationship that would grow between these two lamas would benefit countless others and play a great part in fulfilling the prophecy of the eighth-century Tibetan saint, Padmasambhava, that “when iron birds fly, and horses run on wheels, Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth and the Dharma will come to the land of the redskins.”

For more on Lama Thubten Yeshe, please visit FPMT's Lama Yeshe page: <http://fpmt.org/teachers/yeshe/>.

10. Working for Others in Every Movement: A Tribute to Lama Yeshe

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Mandala April-June 2009

Six weeks after Lama Yeshe's passing, Lama Zopa Rinpoche gave a personal tribute to his guru:

For those of us who have received teachings directly from Lama Yeshe, he was incomparably kinder than all the buddhas of the three times. He took care of us like babies, not only by giving teachings. Lama was more than a mother, more than a father to us, suffering as he did in everyday life for us.

He not only looked after our present life, but our future lives also. He led us, helped us make preparation for happiness in this life all the way up to enlightenment.

For all of us it is the greatest sadness that Lama has passed away. We have lost our heart jewel, our wish-granting gem. The remarkable aspect that we can see, that we can communicate with, that we can hear advice from: This has gone.

I think it must be the greatest sadness not only for us, but for many other people also, Tibetan and Western, who are not his disciples; people who have just talked to Lama, or met him briefly when he was traveling. Or for those who have only read Lama's teachings or just heard his holy words. All these people who have felt Lama's great warmth, his special character, his great loving kindness, his unbearable compassion; I think Lama's passing must be a great sadness for them, too.

Many Tibetan lamas from all the traditions, not just Gelugpa, had heard of Lama and knew about his extensive benefit to people in the West. I have received many letters since Lama passed away from other centers and lamas of other traditions saying how sorry they are about Lama.

Lama's mind was open, you see. His heart was open to all traditions, to all religions. His mind was not tight and narrow. He had such a broad view, he could see far into the distance. He was not like those who tie themselves to the mountain with a rope because they are afraid of the danger of falling down the mountain.

Just seeing Lama's holy body somehow made people happy. Just seeing him could bring peace and joy. This was a quality of Lama's holy body.

Even just seeing a picture of Lama can make people happy. Since I was a child at Buxa [Duar] I had one pen-friend who took care of me for many years, exactly like a mother, and when she died her cousin continued to look after me. When we started writing I sent her a picture of Lama and

even though she had never met him, she told me that when she saw him in the group of people in the picture she felt his warmth. Many people feel this way.

As for the qualities of Lama's holy speech, I don't need to say much. Those of us who have received teachings from Lama, his students, it is our own experience. However, most teachers when they give talks to the public, for example in the West where there are completely new people to the Dharma and not so much acceptance, in these situations most teachers like myself teach only what they themselves know and not so much according to the needs of the people. But Lama, whenever he gave teachings nothing was fixed, he didn't just talk about one subject. In the audience there would be people with various problems - spiritual problems, personal problems, family problems. Lama would speak to all of them. First he would talk about one thing, then another, then another - rather like different dishes. When various dishes of food are served, everybody has a chance to enjoy something.

So, after a one-hour talk from Lama everybody would have received some answer to their problems, whether they were higher class, middle class or lower class, intelligent or not intelligent. In the beginning some might have come just to see how a Tibetan lama looks and others might have come sincerely wanting peace. When Lama had finished, they would all go home with a happy mind.

Even for old students, something similar would happen. In that hour, no matter what Lama would be teaching - bodhichitta, lam-rim, tantra, renunciation - in that hour you could almost transform your mind into that realization.

All this shows the qualities of Lama's holy speech.

Regarding Lama's holy mind: you can understand from your own experience about Lama's great compassion, his constant thought of loving kindness; he wanted only to cherish other sentient beings. Even when Lama showed his unhealthy aspect it was incredible just how much time he spent for us: giving teachings, giving personal advice, writing to us, solving our problems, traveling everywhere. Years ago, doctors said that he would not live long, yet he lived for years more, doing so much activity for others. He never stopped dedicating his life to others.

Even an ordinary, healthy person could not possibly do all these activities. What kept Lama alive so long was his unbearable compassion for us. Now, though, we don't have the good fortune to have Lama in that aspect any longer, to receive his guidance. We ran out of merit. But until now, I think Lama tried to live for us and dedicate all his life and time and energy completely to us, day and night.

So you can see from this, without me saying any more, the qualities of Lama's holy mind: he completely renounced himself and cherished others.

One time Lama was telling me that the whole point is to transform everything into Dharma, every action should be turned into the Dharma. He said that for some people even breathing became work for other sentient beings. Besides teaching and other normal activities, eating, sleeping, sitting, even the breath benefited others. Every movement becomes work for others.

When he said these things I always felt very much that Lama was describing himself, all his own qualities, his own actions, the realizations of his own holy mind, his own bodhichitta.

Actually, in one way it looked like Lama already had realizations, that Lama was a bodhisattva from the very beginning of his life. I remember one time when a great meditator friend of Lama used to come to see him and they would teach each other. This yogi would say for example that “training the mind in the three principal paths is very old-time talk, very ancient talk.” For him you see, this work was finished ages ago. Anyway, he would talk like this. And Lama said one time, “Oh, *shunyata*, I realized that while I was debating in the courtyard,” when he was young, at Sera Je.

Lama would always meditate immediately after hearing the teachings, after each session. So, to me it seems that Lama generated bodhichitta at that time; according to the general view it seems like that. But also, Lama was born with bodhichitta.

Lama always used to take a rest after lunch for one or two hours; wherever he was he would do this. At first I thought it was just ordinary rest, but gradually I realized that these were Lama’s meditation sessions. At these times he would continue to practice the meditation on clear light, developing realizations.

I remember one time at Kopan during the ceremonies for the investiture of Yangsi Rinpoche, in 1975, Lama spent time with Rinpoche’s father, Jampa Thinley, who was a very close friend of Lama. This time Lama did not have time for his rest after lunch. I remember noticing how he sat there: It seemed like such a great loss, like a normal person having lost something valuable.

So, to ordinary people who didn’t know Lama’s level of mind, who didn’t know that Lama was a great hidden yogi, Lama would simply have a rest after lunch.

Lama had the power to know exactly a person’s mind. He was able to give people exact advice, suitable advice. Even the jobs that he gave, they suited each person’s karma so perfectly. I found this so many times, that only that particular person was able to do a particular job.

Lama was always so incredibly busy, he never stopped working for others. At Kopan, for example, he would always look after everything. He would look after me, all the boys, even the kitchen, the library, right down to the dogs. He was so busy yet he even washed the dogs and looked after the puppies who were sick.

People would often criticize Lama, “Oh, he is not keeping vinaya,” because he touched everybody. However, I felt completely when I saw Lama touch people that from his head down to his feet he was filled totally with compassion for that person. Like His Holiness the Dalai Lama; I almost cry when I see His Holiness, seeing his unbearable compassion. So, like that. Instead of individual attachment, Lama was completely under the control of compassion, bodhichitta. He renounced himself and cherished others, and was able to see things as illusory.

And Lama had such great scope, great vision, the power to see and have huge plans that would benefit many people. And he actualized these plans.

All this is very briefly what I felt about the qualities of Lama Yeshe's holy body, holy speech and holy mind.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's original tribute was recorded as a ten-hour video. An extract was first published in Wisdom Magazine 2, 1984; the version here is edited further for space. This tribute, plus many others from the time of Lama's passing are available at: <http://www.lamayeshe.com/article/tribute-lama-yeshe-1935-1984/>.

11. Intimate Reflections of Lama Yeshe

Mandala April-June 2009

Twenty-five years after the passing of Lama Yeshe, students who were there in the early years remember their time with this extraordinary guru as if it were yesterday. This section is devoted to the intimate reflections of those early students, forever transformed by the guidance and care of their Lama. Step back with them as they recall the precious advice, the amusing stories, the first Kopan courses, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's perfect partnership and the end of this particular dream when Lama Yeshe passed.

Nick Ribush – current director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, attended eight Kopan courses – on the third Kopan course, 1972:

There we were, about fifty out-of-control Westerners from all over the world, strangers stuck together for a month, most of us listening to Dharma teachings for the first time. Up at 5:00 A.M., out into the cold, to sit cross-legged for an hour and a half's meditation. A one-hour break for breakfast, then the morning discourse until lunchtime. After lunch, a group-discussion period followed by the afternoon discourse. Chai at 5:00 P.M., more meditation at 6:00 P.M., dinner at 8:00 P.M., bed at 10:00 P.M. This went on relentlessly for thirty days. For the last two weeks we even skipped breakfast and dinner and got up an hour earlier. Most of us had never disciplined ourselves that much before. Most of us enjoyed it immensely.

Barbara Vautier, early student, on the third Kopan course, 1972:

The course of my life led me to Kopan in 1972. A refugee from war-torn America, fatigued and deeply grieved as a result of the US involvement in the Vietnam War, the political violence, the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, I needed a long vacation from America. The riotous years of the late '50s and '60s were leading me to seek a deeper understanding of life. I didn't know that the object of my disgust and disillusion would later be identified as samsara.

Peter Kedge, at the time a Rolls-Royce aeronautical engineer from England, on his experience at the second Kopan course, 1972:

There were about a dozen hippies there. They were too freaky for me and I was sure if you turned them all upside down you wouldn't get more than one hundred dollars out of the lot of them.

A student taking refuge vows from Lama Yeshe on July 3, 1976, in Australia, who had "partied hard before the refuge ceremony":

I fronted up feeling ill and dirty. Even the flower I presented to Lama Yeshe smelled bad. But when it was my turn to stand in front of him, something remarkable happened – my awful hangover disappeared and I felt incredibly clean and fresh. People told me I even looked younger. I will never forget that one smile he gave me and felt I really had taken refuge.

Suzi Albright, “a biker girl from Arizona” who attended the sixth Kopan course, later became a nun and did a twelve-year retreat:

I swear he was glowing! I only went to Kopan to see a friend. I was not interested in Buddhism. In fact, I was completely turned off by the whole scene. Many of the people there seemed unhealthy, both mentally and physically. I thought if this is meditation, who needs it? I was really only an observer and refused to prostrate. However, my first sight of Lama Yeshe changed all that. I immediately sensed he knew things most people don't. I'd met a lot of highly educated people, but none who were wise. Lama Yeshe was as wise as you could get. His compassion and wisdom were so apparent that one was really struck by his presence. I regarded him as a buddha, because if he wasn't, I don't know what he could be. After seeing him, I began doing prostrations.

Jacie Keeley, early student, former secretary to Lama Yeshe and FPMT Central Office director:

He looked very sick, all soft and squishy, and his skin was a yellow-grey putty color. This grey little man walked into the big room, climbed up on this huge throne and sat in meditation. By the time he spoke he was big, golden, and powerful. I was impressed. I wore dark glasses to every talk Lama gave because I cried through every one. On my twenty-eighth birthday I went to Lama, told him I wanted to follow the bodhisattva path and was willing to help him in any way. I was absolutely hooked.

Carol Royce-Wilder, early student, photographer:

[I] burst in on Lama, sobbing hysterically. His eyes widened and he looked very concerned. I just blubbered, out of control, a real spectacle. “What is it dear?” he asked, taking my hands in his and drawing me close to him. Looking around he found flowers someone had given him and said: “Here dear, these are for you.” I said, “No, no, Lama, it's me who should be offering them to you!”

He handed me some fruit and said to take it, too. “No, Lama, you don't understand, nothing helps. Not fruit, not flowers, it's useless! I'm totally isolated and alone. I can't feel anything. I'm dead. Nothing means anything to me, not even you, Lama!” I shrieked and sobbed.

He said: “Not even me? Impossible, impossible!”

Then he opened his eyes very wide and drew my eyes to his, and what felt like my whole being went ... somewhere. I haven't the words to describe what happened. I felt like he took me into the deepest recesses of his being, and I saw, I knew, that there was nothing there. Absolutely nothing at all. There was just an empty silence, a black hole. There was simply no person called “Lama” inside. It was awesome. In that moment I realized that the friendly, smiling, personable Lama Yeshe I knew was a figment, a persona he'd created solely for our benefit; that behind the charismatic exterior lay unbounded empty space. Lama had allowed me to catch a glimpse of that for one brief, but eternal, moment.

Paula de Wijs-Koolkin, early student, FPMT board member, former director of Maitreya Institute, speaking of a 1972 experience:

[Lama Yeshe] went away for a while and I missed him badly. Then one day I sensed he was back. I went up to Kopan in the pouring rain and sure enough, there he was. Everyone was having dinner when suddenly, and without making it in any way obvious, he put his hand on mine and said: “You came to see me, dear? You have something to talk about?” I told him I wanted to take refuge and precepts, something Carol Corona had explained to me. He thought for a while then said: “No dear, you go to Lawudo. You take refuge from Lama Zopa up there.” I said I didn’t know Lama Zopa. I was actually a little scared of what I’d heard about him. Such an ascetic! But apparently Lama Yeshe wanted me to have my refuge connection with Zopa Rinpoche, so I would have a strong connection with both of them.

Sylvia Wetzel, a “dedicated leftist lesbian feminist from Berlin” who attended the tenth Kopan course, former director of Arya Tara Institute:

One day during a meditation session that she was leading, Ven. Thubten Wongmo told the students that she prayed to be reborn a man in the next life, influenced no doubt by a traditional Tibetan view that it was better to be born male. These were fighting words. I couldn’t listen to anything more because I was so angry I couldn’t even speak. I missed Wongmo’s next session because I couldn’t stand it. Then along came Lama: “How are you dear?” I said, “I am not fine at all, because Thubten Wongmo prays for a male rebirth and I think that is incredible. So what do you think Lama?”

Is it a true teaching that male is better than female or is it just a historical thing?”

He looked at me in silence for one minute then said: “Are you having any problems with being a woman, dear?” Then it was my turn to be silent for one minute. I thought: If I say yes, that would mean women have difficulties in this life. If I say no, I’d be lying. So I think I got the message. Then Lama told me: “I think what she said is a historical teaching. I think both men and women have the Buddha nature equally, and are equally able to attain enlightenment. Sometimes in this world it is even better to be a woman, because you are more open to certain aspects of the teachings. Women are not so intellectual; you feel it in your heart.”

Marcel Bertels, on the third Kopan course, 1972:

[Lama Zopa] Rinpoche was the most unusual and mystical being and the fact that Rinpoche was still so young (maybe around 27) made it even more special. These were the days when Rinpoche was doing almost twenty-four hours of formal meditation each day, with short breaks for meals and occasional teachings. Rinpoche was also available for interviews between 4:00 P.M. and 5:00 P.M., fifteen minutes maximum per interview; many were shorter and I can’t remember Rinpoche engaging in any small talk with his students.

Ven. Ann McNeil, one of the first ordained Westerners, attended the first six Kopan courses, former director of Chenrezig and Vajrapani Institutes:

Lama Zopa Rinpoche worked so hard. Hardly slept. Not only did he attend and give all the teachings of the lam-rim, he also attended all the meditation periods and led them, the early morning ones to the last one at night. He was truly with us all the way. We were so fortunate in

those beginning years. He was literally spoon-feeding us the Dharma. In that way we learned how to study and meditate and actualize it. He forced us to internalize our own suffering so we could recognize it in others. But first thing, every morning, he would go on and on about, “What Shantideva says, compassion, compassion, compassion,” and then every afternoon for three weeks, “Suffering, suffering, suffering.” Did we get it? To apply compassion to our own suffering? To heal ourselves?

From Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe:

Life with Lama Yeshe was never dull. Peter Stripes, whom Lama had recently (in 1976) helped to find a Tara statue in Delhi, wished to return the favor. He bought a little red Fiat 500 car for him and sent it up to Chenrezig by train. Yeshe Khadro and Canadian monk, Jhampa Zangpo, had the unenviable task of teaching Lama to drive, but what he lacked in know-how, he made up for with boundless enthusiasm. In the clear country air, the roaring and grinding of gears provided a backdrop to Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s teachings on lam-rim. Much to Yeshe Khadro’s horror, Lama often took both hands off the wheel while bowling along, turning to her with a huge grin.

Jhampa Zangpo, too, was beside himself. “Lama said I got too hysterical, but his antics were hair-raising. He had so much gusto and absolutely no interest in taking things slowly,” he said.

Peter Kedge, leaving Australia with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche on August 4, 1976:

On the flight back to Hong Kong, Lama Yeshe was sitting in the row behind me. At one point he leaned forward and said something I didn’t hear properly so I asked him to repeat it. He leaned forward again and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seat belts.” I thought it mildly amusing and feigned laughter, but a couple of minutes later the plane began shaking most violently. People were screaming, cabin attendants lost their trays: it was probably the worst turbulence I have ever experienced. It was clear too that Lama was already aware of what had not shown up on the weather radar.

Marcel Bertels, early student, former director of many early FPMT businesses:

Having lived in the East for a number of years, “being professional” was something far removed from our daily reality, and many of us had gone through our lives questioning and rejecting this very idea of “professionalism.” Even if students did hold jobs, it was usually a low paying one, and many of us were in our twenties or early thirties. The result was very little income and Kopan and all the new centers were all living hand to mouth.

Clearly Lama wasn’t happy with this and campaigned continuously for all of us to be “professional” in whatever we did, and not reject society. In meeting students, the general focus was clearly Dharma advice, but at the same time Lama put a lot of effort for students to do better in life. Lama often suggested people to finish their education or gave advice on how to develop themselves otherwise.

Even though Lama had this clear and vast vision for the organization and personally guided its development, the lack of experience and skills of those inducted in the process was a huge problem. Lama worked very hard at trying to improve our skills.

As an example, around 1976, Lama Yeshe came up with the idea to send four of us (Yeshe Kadro, Nick Ribush, Peter Kedge and myself, all ordained at this time) to a summer course in Business Administration at a US university. All four of us were deeply involved in admin and business projects for the organization and all of us were held back by our inexperience and lack of suitable education. We had tremendous energy for our projects but simply lacked the necessary skills. Lama clearly thought that some additional education would greatly help us. In the end, Lama dropped the idea, no doubt concerned about our ordination. Nevertheless, looking back over these years, I know such a BA course would have made a big difference in being able to do my various jobs for FPMT much better.

Sherpa monk Thubten Monlam, cook for Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Kopan in 1976:

Lama liked cooking very much, always chopping things very, very fast and saying mantra: “Ommmmmmmm pham pham pham,” while making a big mess for me to clean up. But he didn’t burn anything. He always cooked for Mummy Max because he knew what she liked. I only knew thukpa, momo, bread, Tibetan tea and khapse. That’s all.

Lama Yeshe never drank Tibetan tea – he didn’t like it at all. But Lama Zopa liked it. Lama Yeshe liked sweet Indian tea with milk and sugar served separately, like the Injies. I put it all on a tray and took it to him in the early morning. He also ate bread then and sometimes an egg. Sometimes he ate in his room, but most times he ate out on the patio roof with the little dogs.

Ngawang Chotak, early student, former director of Wisdom Publications:

We did a lot of cooking together, Lama teaching me how. For breakfast he liked French toast with lashings of butter and syrup, as well as sausage or bacon and strong coffee with whipped cream. If Anila Ann had seen that she would have gone nuts. She was always on at me about his diet. I agreed with her at the time but Lama claimed nobody knew his body like he did. “I need strong food to keep it going – steak and milk.” He made these big momos but wouldn’t let me buy ground beef for them, it had to be the best steak and he’d chop it up himself. He didn’t like ground beef: “You don’t know what’s in that!” He loved his coffee. He started adding half and half but said it wasn’t strong enough, so moved on to whipping cream.

John Schwartz, Lama Yeshe’s attendant in 1980, former director of Vajrapani Institute:

I was always amazed at the amount of food Lama could eat, with all his physical problems. He’d often hold the palm of his open hand on a spot down near his waist and say: “Oh my heart!” I’d say, “Lama, your heart isn’t down there.” But he said it was. I don’t know what he meant by that.

He always had breakfast and I’d lay out a whole spread for lunch. He called it his “California lunch,” with salads and lots of pastrami, salami, cheeses – all the fatty foods. He just loved it. Then

he'd have his nap and two hours later he was calling out: "John Shore, where's my snack!" He loved cold cuts, even with tea, and at night he'd eat a big dinner.

We'd just finished one of these "California lunches" one day when he gets a call from this married Mongolian lama who lived nearby. This guy constantly did pujas and Lama always attended them when invited. So this lama rang to say that his wife just made momos. Well, that was the magic word! So he starts putting away these momos, looking up at me with sheepish eyes, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, as they brought him plate after plate of them.

Most of the time Lama ate good food. He was one of the few Tibetan lamas to understand about salads and fresh vegetables. He made a garden out the back of the house as soon as he got there, to maximize the growing time. He really had the touch – you never saw vegetables grow so big in just two months. People would come over and say, "I've lived in Berkeley all my life and I've never seen anyone grow stuff like this." He gave it away, a lettuce here, tomatoes there, supplying his students all summer. Lama knew about good food, but he ate junk too.

Beatrice Ribush, Nick Ribush's mother, in 1977, describing what awaited her after being sent away from her house for the morning by Lama Yeshe:

When I returned I noticed this wonderful smell. There was Lama, towel around his waist and laughing loudly, with every saucepan I possessed on the table, under the table, on the stove – the mess was indescribable. We sat down to a magnificent vegetarian lunch of many different dishes. Peter [Kedge] had taken him shopping in Chinatown for the ingredients.

Artist Andy Weber describing his first commission from Lama Yeshe, a large Manjushri thangka for a new center in England:

It took three months to complete and changed my life. Lama didn't want it painted in the traditional style, where you have the lineage holders at the top and bottom of the painting. He wanted just the one single image of Manjushri, which was an unusual request. He wanted it to be huge. He was always telling me, "Think big! Big paintings for big places!" Since then I have continued painting just one deity in thangkas. We Westerners have to learn to communicate with these on a one-to-one basis before we try and deal with many figures at once.

From Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe:

Towards the end of 1978, Andrea Antonietti, a twenty-one year old Italian man, arrived at Tushita and told Lama Yeshe that Kyabje Ling Rinpoche had agreed to ordain him in a few months' time. Lama asked if he had obtained his parents' permission. "Permission, Lama? I have lived away from home for some years. Why do I need their permission?" Lama Yeshe was adamant, adding that he could be ordained at Kopan once his parents consented. Lama Yeshe told Andrea to write a letter to his Catholic parents.

"He told me exactly what to write, word for word, admitting all the problems and worry I had brought them by hanging around with hippies and indulging in 'extra-sensory experiences.' He

told me to emphasize that my attitude had changed, that now I valued religion. My parents gave permission and said they were very happy to support me as a Buddhist monk,” remembers Andrea.

Paco Hita, father of Ösel Hita, the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe, speaking about his first meditation course, Ibiza 1978:

Words were not necessary with Lama Yeshe and we developed our own communication. Occasionally, when he came out from a lecture, he put his arm over my shoulders and said, “Good?” and I answered, “Very good!” Then I would put my right arm around his waist and feel how he was transmitting energy that filled my whole being with joy. I sat in the front row for his talks so I could get him whatever he needed. I hardly understood what he was talking about, even though it was translated into Spanish. The concepts were light years away from my mind. But now and then Lama pointed to me, and told the others that if they had questions they should ask me because I understood. I felt nothing could be further from the truth but what I did understand was the respectful, kindly and affectionate way he treated people.

Jon Landaw, early student, writer, editor and Discovering Buddhism teacher:

Lama had a unique teaching style. Instead of saying, “Do you understand me?” he’d ask, “Are we communicating?” He acted out what he was saying, which was so helpful, because not all of his students spoke English. Even those who did speak English often couldn’t understand him properly until they caught on to his unusual rhythms of speech. Lama communicated way beyond the meaning of the words, using facial expressions and sometimes just silences. When editing his teachings, I could only use the words he said and always felt there was something missing.

Ven. Connie Miller, writer, editor, early student, early organizer of Universal Education:

Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche were the perfect pair. Extrovert and introvert, outrageous and traditional, heavy and light, relaxed and disciplined, wrathful and gentle (but always compassionate!). And yet that’s altogether too simplistic. ... It is impossible to categorize them concretely as in “Lama was like this and Rinpoche was like that.” Both of them embodied all qualities, all polarities, just in different measures at different times, according to the needs of different people. In their relationship to each other, however, the love and respect and care and deference that each showed the other – and thereby demonstrated to us – was enormous, inexpressible in words.

Mary Finnigan, an English visitor to Kopan in 1970:

People tended to compete with one another to sit next to Lama Yeshe at meal times. Lama Zopa was so thin and ascetic. He ate so little so slowly it made him seem stern, but Lama Yeshe was heaven. He’d put his arm around you and enfold you in this mass of red material, and he had this incredibly clean slightly aromatic incensey smell. All you wanted to do was cuddle up and get closer to him. He’d hold your hand, roar with laughter and kick his legs in the air, which delighted us all enormously.

From Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe:

Lama Zopa came into Lama Yeshe's room, fell to his knees and started to pray. For the benefit of a student Lama pointed towards himself and said: "Dorje Chang," indicating that Rinpoche was seeing him in the aspect of Dorje Chang. ("Who is Dorje Chang?" a student once asked him. "The biggest Buddha, dear," Lama replied.) Rinpoche was often seen making offerings to Lama Yeshe with tears running down his face. At other times he would not look up at Lama at all. Lama Yeshe often addressed Lama Zopa as Kusho, meaning monk.

Nick Ribush, early student, current director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive:

One night [in 1975] when we were getting the passports and visas ready I went up to the Lamas' rooms to get them to sign some forms. I went to Lama Zopa's room first but he appeared to be asleep, so I went to Lama Yeshe's room and got his signature. "What about Zopa?" he said. I told him I thought Rinpoche was resting. He jumped up and rushed into Rinpoche's room, but he didn't stir. Lama Yeshe grabbed him by the shoulder, shook him, pulled him off the bed onto the floor and said: "Sign these papers. There's no time for sleep!" I felt terrible but that was Lama, the wrathful disciplinarian.

After the eighth Kopan course, 1975; from Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe:

At the end-of-course puja, with tsog piled high and happy faces all around, Lama bade farewell to those who were not staying on for a ten-day retreat, led by Ven. Marcel. "You people very beautiful," Lama Yeshe told them. "Lama is very happy. Thank you so much, soooo much! And remember as much as possible cultivate, activate wisdom action, stay unified much as possible with the universal compassion wisdom and never come down in supermarket. At Kopan we'll always pray for you people, we'll always be with you - in the sky, in space. Actually, we're always together in space - going, coming, going, coming. Absolutely, of course, there is no going or coming. So. Goodbye, thank you, everything okay. See you soon, on the moon!"

Big Love, the official biography of Lama Thubten Yeshe, began as a project of Adele Hulse in 1991.

Currently Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (www.lamayeshe.com) is overseeing the final editing and production of the book. To read more about Lama Yeshe as seen from the eyes of his students, visit the Big Love blog, which regularly shares new excerpts from Big Love: <https://biglovelamayeshe.wordpress.com/>.

12. A Genuine Guru: Jan Willis Remembers Lama Yeshe

Mandala April-June 2009

Three days before the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Professor Jan Willis, one of the early Western students of Lama Yeshe, gave a lecture on women and Buddhism at Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon. When this renowned African-American Buddhist talked to Mandala staffer Sandra Peterson, she remembered Lama Yeshe's unique and loving style of encouragement, and his sensible approach to issues of race and gender.

I know that you studied with Lama Yeshe. And there's a saying that history is written by the victors. To me, those victors are the "privileged." How would Lama Yeshe allow for the difference in the lens through which the ego is seen by a white male living in Manhattan, who has been to the best schools and by someone living in East L.A. [Los Angeles] without the same kind of advantage?

Or someone from the South who had to drink at a water fountain marked "colored"? It's also often said that history is his-story.

Exactly. Or would Lama distill it all down into ego and attachment?

Lama was a genuine guru who could tell what was best for a particular student. When he looked at me, he saw the battle I was having between pride and humility. I talk about this in my book, *Dreaming Me*. "Yes," he said, "pride and humility, they are so tough, so strong." It was as though he saw right to the bottom of me: I had this low self-esteem and had endured all those putdowns from the racism of the South, but at the same time I wanted to be strong; I wanted to be strong and powerful. There he was one morning, toothbrush poised in his hand, knowing that that was the conflict I was facing. Having a low opinion of myself and yet wanting to have a proud opinion – but not the kind of proud opinion that rubs it in anybody else's face, just one that lets you feel at home in your own skin. It was so amazing. He just bowled me over with just that simple statement – and then he went off to brush his teeth. I thought, "Whoa! He really knows me well!" He told me I was intelligent, he told me that tasks that I saw as impossible were easy.

What tasks were they?

When I was working on my dissertation, I said to him, "How in the world can I learn all these languages?" And he'd say, "Oh you can, that's so easy. You can do this, this and this." He actually made things seem easy. I'd talk with Lama Zopa (we were these young, thin, things together in those days), and we'd both say, "When was there the time for Lama to have read all these texts?" We would see him talking to everybody, taking care of everybody, being gentle with everybody, but when did he ever have time for himself? You'd ask him a question, and he would answer from some text. It was perfectly clear that he knew about it, had thought about it, and had done all these debates. He had an incredible, incredible intellect, but you couldn't imagine when he could have possibly found time for all that study. Did he ever sleep?

Lama Yeshe helped me through graduate school when I was so frustrated. “Go back again, that professor has problems, but you’ll be alright,” he’d say. “The professor has problems. It’s not your problem. Go back and do it and everything will be alright.” And things were alright, and with some things there was probably a little magic involved, certainly his blessings. In other ways Lama Yeshe encouraged me by forcing me to do things.

He’d come by the house and say that in two hours he would have to give a lecture. He’d say, “You write it.” What? “Write that lecture. Come on, it’s easy, do it. I’ll be back in two hours.” Then you panic. Your knees buckle. But you find yourself writing it because he’s coming back in two hours. There’d be these concrete examples of accomplishing things you never thought you could do.

I often think about the ways that Marpa treated Milarepa, and with me it wasn’t through any kind of hardship, rather it was always with encouragement. You can do it. Lama had no doubt. It was a real sense of giving me empowerment. And he did that for fifteen years – I think it actually took that long in my case.

I once got a call from Sister Max – it was just before Lama’s last trip to California in 1983. “Hi Jan, Lama wants you to do a month-long philosophy course with him.” Me? “Yeah, you.” Gee, whiz. Then we talked a little bit about where it might happen and then I got up the courage to ask, “Why me?” “He knows you teach philosophy. He thinks you’re a good teacher so who would be better? This is what he wants. And, he wants to read the things in the original. Get it ready.”

So I got the little packet together. Five pages from Plato, five pages from this one, five pages from that one and later Lama Yeshe read, studied and showed me, incredibly, what debate does for you in terms of sharpening your mind.

One morning Lama Yeshe said, “Before we start, this man Plato is wrong.” You think so? He hadn’t read Aristotle yet, but he knew that Plato was wrong. Why? “Because he says, you see beauty. But you no see beauty. You see beautiful thing. Examples: this, this, that. Beauty doesn’t exist. This man is wrong!” Of course this is exactly what Aristotle will argue: that you don’t see the universal, you only see the particulars. But as soon as Lama Yeshe read Plato, boom! He saw the mistake. And I’d think: where does it come from? Is that how sharp the mind becomes because it’s been training in the Tibetan system?

Did he ever attribute any significance to the inference that in his previous life he was a woman?

No. But I love it that he was. I think he was self-effacing in that regard. He’d say, “Oh that so silly, don’t worry about that.” But I think that many of us students, half-joking, would say, no wonder he gets along so well with women – because he was one, he really understands us in deep ways.

Did he ever speak specifically about racism or sexism?

Well, I tell a story in *Dreaming Me* about how he embarrassed me once in front of all these people. He pointed to me and said, “All of you, look up here. This is women’s liberation.” This was after there were rumblings about negative portrayals of women in some Buddhist scriptures during the course at Kopan.

About a week before that, I had given a little talk about a narrative that says a certain person was cursed to be born a woman. I think that's when my interest started with women and Buddhism. I had never felt that personally, though. I always felt so cared for by Lama Yeshe, and I didn't feel any discrimination around any of the monks. In fact, I had just been taken in by the Tibetans since I first met them. They were the caring ones, and it was wonderful.

Maybe Lama Yeshe was just using the rumblings about negative portrayals of women as an excuse to say, "I understand this." I don't really know what he was trying to say, but for me it was embarrassing and wonderful at the same time. Doubly so, because it was the encouragement he was always giving me. In ways beyond my control I was so fortunate to have run into Lama Yeshe. Perhaps he just put out a hook and reeled me home to his place. But it certainly changed my whole life around.

There I was, arriving with a low image of myself, wanting to be a better human being, and still with a lot of defensiveness and insecurity in the world. And he just loved me up. He called me "daughter." It was so endearing. I'm certainly proud of that.

Jan Willis is a professor of Religion at Wesleyan University. She has studied and taught Buddhism for over four decades. Willis is the author of several books, including Enlightened Beings, and Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey. Willis received the "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism" award in 2009.

13. The Dalai Lama Completes His Studies

By Geshe Lhundub Sopa

Mandala January-March 2013

Geshe Lhundub Sopa has led an extraordinary life by any measure. Born in 1923 in Tsang, Tibet, to farmers, he eventually became an accomplished scholar at Sera Je Monastery in Lhasa, where he taught Lama Yeshe and many other important future lamas. He witnessed firsthand the shifting political tides as Chinese Communist forces bared down on Tibet, eventually fleeing into exile in 1959. In the early 1960s, he went to the United States and joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin in 1967. In time, Geshe Sopa became a full professor and trained many prominent Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time, he continued to serve as a teacher for important Tibetan teachers, including Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Yangsi Rinpoche. He established Deer Park Buddhist Center in Oregon, Wisconsin, which hosted the first Kalachakra initiation given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the West in 1981. Geshe Sopa, now retired, continues to publish scholarly works on Tibetan Buddhism.

Like a Waking Dream is Geshe Sopa's autobiography, published by Wisdom Publications and edited by Paul Donnelly, one of Geshe Sopa's students. In the book, Geshe-la shares detailed memories of his youth and early days in the Tibetan monastic system, giving valuable insight into a now-vanished world. He offers a unique and heartfelt perspective on exile and establishing Tibetan Buddhism in the West. We're happy to be able to offer you a short excerpt from Geshe-la's autobiography in Mandala.

Though His Holiness had already taken leadership of Tibet by the end of 1950, he didn't take his geshe examination until 1959. Shortly afterward, things got much worse, and His Holiness fled to India. Interestingly, everything came to a head right after His Holiness finished his education.

... At the time of his geshe examination, the Dalai Lama had to go to each of the Three Seats: first Drepung, then Sera and then Ganden. At each monastery, he defended his thesis against the abbots and other high scholars who asked him questions. He also had to get up and debate with these scholars. The final examination took place during the Mönlam Festival, when all the monks of the Three Seats came to Lhasa. Each of the Three Seats selected several scholars to ask His Holiness questions in this examination.

During the Mönlam Festival there were three wet assemblies [assemblies with tea and a meal] and three dry assemblies each day. In the morning the Dalai Lama had to go to a place in Lhasa called Sungchöra. This is also where the Ganden Throne Holder gave teachings during Mönlam. This place had several levels. The Ganden Throne Holder and the abbots sat on the highest level, the geshe who were receiving their degree that year sat on the next level down, and the rest of the monks sat on the huge stone floor. During the morning dry assembly His Holiness had to defend his thesis there on the subject of logic, mostly on the works of Dharmakirti. At noontime His Holiness had to answer questions on Perfection of Wisdom and Madhyamaka in the big outer

courtyard of the Jokhang Temple, which is called the Khyamra. Finally he was examined on Vinaya and Abhidharma at the same place in the evening.

Every college at each of the Three Seats had to select scholars to examine His Holiness in the morning, noon and evening sessions. The scholars asking the questions in the morning tended to be younger, though they were still advanced scholars. During the noon session they would be intermediate-level scholars, and in the evening session the interrogators would be the abbots and the old geshe and lamas. In the case of Sera Je, the abbot selected the monks for this task, and I was chosen to be one of these examiners. Once we were selected, we had to prepare ourselves. We didn't know exactly what the subject would be until it was almost time, but we would know the general area based on which session we were doing. Since I was doing the questioning during the noontime session, I knew that the topic would either be Perfection of Wisdom or Madhyamaka. It wasn't necessarily the case that scholars in the Madhyamaka class, for example, would be assigned Madhyamaka subjects. It was simply a matter of the abbot selecting good scholars, regardless of their class. That was a truly wonderful experience for me. Being chosen was a great privilege, but it was also intimidating. I didn't want to look foolish in front of all those great scholars and, of course, in front of His Holiness himself.

On the day of the debate, all the great scholars from the Three Seats were there, as were government officials, the abbots of Sera, Drepung and Ganden, the tsenshabs [His Holiness' debate teachers and partners], and His Holiness' two tutors. And there I was, debating in front of all these people. I asked His Holiness questions, and he had to respond. It was not easy. There is some film footage of this session at the Khyamra. I can be seen debating His Holiness, though my face is not shown. The camera was behind me facing His Holiness, so you can only see me from the back. You can't tell that it is me, but I remember it, and I can recognize myself. It was just coincidence that I was the one who got filmed; not everybody who debated there was recorded.

I had to dress up for this event, so I had to borrow a good robe from one of my students because I didn't have anything all that nice. I didn't have to wear the silken kind of clothing that high officials and some lamas wore to debate His Holiness, but we ordinary monks had to at least wear good-quality, new robes. In our normal lives we wore pretty rotten clothing. That kind of thing was just not important. As the debate began we had to wear the outer robe a certain way then shift it to another way. Finally, we folded it down around the waist, and the actual debate started. That was the traditional, ceremonial way of doing it.

My debate topic was the Perfection of Wisdom literature, and I was assigned to ask His Holiness about the subject of the buddha-nature. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is said that although everybody has the potential to become a buddha, that potential is usually sleeping. Through study and learning, this potential can be awakened, and this is called *awakening the lineage*. There are many sutras on this subject, and it is discussed in Maitreya's *Uttaratantra* in many passages. I recall that it was one of those passages that formed the basis of my question to His Holiness. His Holiness reminded me a couple years later that this was the question that I had put to him during his exam, and we joked about it a little bit. Then he said that since I had done this, I had to go to America to awaken the buddha lineage there.

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14. Like a Waking Dream: Geshe Sopa's Students Share Their Stories of Their Perfect Teacher

Mandala January-March 2013, online content

Like a Waking Dream: The Autobiography of Geshe Lhundub Sopa is Geshe Sopa's autobiography, published by Wisdom Publications in 2012 and edited by Paul Donnelly, one of Geshe Sopa's students. In coordination with the publication of *Like a Waking Dream*, Mandala asked several of Geshe Sopa's students to share stories of their precious teacher.

Yangsi Rinpoche, a student of Geshe Sopa, is the reincarnation of Geshe Ngawang Gendun, a renowned scholar who was Geshe Sopa's primary teacher at Sera Monastery. Yangsi Rinpoche told *Mandala*, "This autobiography of Geshe-la will be very inspirational for scholars in universities, practitioners in centers and so forth."

What follows is a collection of more than a dozen remembrances of Geshe Sopa, published online by *Mandala* in December 2012.

More than Auspicious

By Yangsi Rinpoche

Once Geshe-la told me that he is an only child, when he left home for the monastery, his mother was quite sad. While they were leaving with the monk to the monastery, the sun shone on the path right in front of them, and the senior monk told Geshe-la this was very auspicious.

Geshe-la's life has been more than auspicious. My personal feeling is that, although not formally recognized, Geshe-la is the reincarnation of one of the great masters.

I am sure his book *Like a Waking Dream* will be very joyful and inspirational for people to understand a different perspective on Geshe-la's life. They will see an aspect of Geshe-la they haven't seen before.

Yangsi Rinpoche is the founder and president of Maitripa College. He completed his Geshe Lharampa degree from Sera Je Monastery in South India in 1995 and served as a resident teacher at Deer Park Buddhist Center in Oregon, Wisconsin, for five years. He currently also serves as the Spiritual Director of Ganden Shedrup Ling Buddhist Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Spiritual Director of Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle, Washington. Rinpoche is the author of Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo, published in 2003 by Wisdom Publications.

Pure Gold on the Ground Below

By Sharpa Tulku

Geshe Lhundup Sopa and I both belonged to Sera Monastic University in Lhasa, Tibet, Geshe-la to Sera Je Tsangpa Khamtsen (monastic house) and I to Sera Me Kongpo Khamtsen. Sera Monastery was known to have close to 7,000 resident monks at the time and was situated about seven miles directly north of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, itself home of Jokhang and Ramoche Temples built during the reign of the 33rd Tibetan King and first Dharma King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century to enshrine the sacred statues of the Buddhas which were brought to Lhasa as dowry of his Nepalese and Chinese queens.

Sera Monastery, which is one of the “three great seats of learning” (the others being Ganden and Drepung), is likened to the sun, moon and stars of the sky for scholarship. Over the centuries, hundreds of highly accomplished Buddhist masters following the ancient Nalanda tradition emerged from these institutions. By 1959, Geshe Sopa had been deeply engaged in the geshe lharampa program at Sera Je. He was known as Tsangpai Zoechung-la, the Junior Scholar from Tsangpa Khamtsen, because of his erudition. As we differed in age and monastic affiliation, I didn't have any close contact with Geshe-la at Sera Monastery. It wasn't until the mid-day session of the Great Prayer Festival in the courtyard of the Jokhang Temple during the geshe examination of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959 that I saw Geshe Sopa for the first time up close. This was the day Geshe-la had the great honor of debating with His Holiness the Dalai Lama on metaphysical subjects. I remember him a subdued and reverent monk in thick winter monastic robes pacing back and forth, putting questions to His Holiness. This was followed by dialectical examinations by the other learned masters from other monasteries. It was a most important and historical event, the last such ceremony held in the open court of Jokhang before it became the site of unthinkable atrocities during the Cultural Revolution.

As a young tulku, I was sitting near the front row with other ranking tulkus, high officials and scholars. It was a tense moment; the threat of Chinese aggression loomed as Sino-Tibetan relations was reaching its lowest point following the Chinese annexation of eastern parts of Tibet in 1951. Although outside the sanctity of the Jokhang Temple Chinese PLA soldiers aimed machine guns from the rooftops of the strategic houses they had occupied, everybody inside was enjoying this dignified and joyous occasion. His Holiness' ornate throne was at the center of the entrance to the inner chapel of Jowo Rinpoche, the most venerated statue of Buddha in Tibet. His throne was flanked by his tutors – Kyabje Ling Rinpoche on his right and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche on his left. The entire courtyard was decorated with the most beautiful appliqués and ornaments.

If I remember correctly, it was while Geshe Sopa was engaged in the debate with His Holiness that a high ranking monk official, Ta Lama Losang Jigme, the Nechung State Oracle's medium, was spontaneously possessed. He was quickly whisked away by the well trained Nechung monks who had been prepared and waiting in anticipation of such a possible occurrence. In the nearby Tara Chapel, Nechung monks had been getting ready with a full set of regal costumes and a heavy ornate headdress. Within minutes the Nechung Oracle in full regalia was escorted in front of His Holiness. This was the first time I have ever seen a protector in trance-debate with His Holiness.

After a brief exchange with His Holiness, a silk khata was put around the oracle's neck and while making gestures of prostrations to His Holiness, the oracle left the medium who had to be carried away in total exhaustion. This was a rare moment for a boy of my age and I remember every detail to this day.

I didn't see Geshe Sopa after this until months later when we all ended up in the same refugee camp at Missamari, Assam, India. Following the tragic events of March 1959, His Holiness and his two tutors, along with a core group of government officials, left Lhasa and proceeded to India, paving the way for thousands to seek safe asylum there. Determined by individual and collective karma, groups of varying sizes took different paths to safety. The path Geshe Sopa's group took was far less treacherous than ours. Others took a more dangerous path at the cost of many lives. After the initial processing of the refugees, Geshe Sopa and his group ended up in Dalhousie, a hill station during the British Raj in India, and our group ended up in a place called Buxaduar near the border of Bhutan. This was a vacant prison camp for Indian political prisoners during the Indian Independence Movement. There was a special room where Gandhi-ji and Pandit Nehru were held once during their struggle and this was where all the monks and nuns were sent to pursue religious studies. It was these monks and nuns that were later sent to the present-day monasteries in South India.

One day, I received a letter from the Department of Religious Affairs informing me that I had been selected to go to the United States along with Geshe Sopa, Khamlung Tulku and Lama Kunga. I was so thrilled to leave Buxaduar and attend the Young Lamas Home School in New Delhi in preparation. It was started and run by a British lady, Freda Bedi, who later became a nun in the Kagyü tradition. She was assisted by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Tulku. There were many young tulkus from all the traditions. I learned enough English and Hindi to represent our school in reading salutations to Prime Minister Nehru and others during our outings and special visits. I was introduced to Nehru as one of the boys selected to go to the United States. He gave everyone a viewer of his visit to the United States and Parker ballpoint pens, which he demonstrated how to use. In March 1962 I met with the other members of the group in Dharamsala and we all felt a sense of great honor and joy to be selected to go the United States. (Although, I heard later that Geshe Sopa needed some special urging from Kyabje Trijang Ripoche to go.) With warm advice from His Holiness in a special audience, we took our leave and left for Delhi to get the necessary documents. With a short letter of introduction from the Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Delhi, on May 2, 1962, we boarded our first flight on Air France to Paris. After a stopover, we boarded a Pan Am flight to the United States and landed at Idlewild (now, John F. Kennedy) Airport in New York. We were met by His Holiness' elder brother, Thupten Jigme Norbu (Taktse Rinpoche) and others. Among the reception was Elvin Jones who wore a smart suit and a hat. For a long time we thought he was an important U.S. government official!

While residing at Labsum Shedrup Ling Monastery in New Jersey with Geshe Wangyal, Geshe Sopa-la had us lead a strict monastic routine with group prayers early in the morning and later in the evening. In between daily chores and learning English, Geshe Sopa-la taught us lessons on Abhidharma. Because of the demands and pressure of learning English and Western subjects, our Dharma studies suffered which made Geshe Sopa quite unhappy. Whenever we went outside the

monastery to visit other places, Geshe Sopa-la would insist on us wearing monastic robes or chubas, which the younger ones dreaded. Later on, he was very kind to let us wear less conspicuous Western attires.

Geshe Sopa-la is man of great learning so humble that the depth of his learning was not much noticed until certain people like Elvin Jones and Jeffery Hopkins made special effort to know him and probe into his knowledge. There is a saying in Tibetan that if pure gold is on the ground below, it radiates light in the sky above, and it seems that Geshe Sopa-la was content to adjust to his current situation and remain unknown. It was only when Dr. Richard Robinson discovered Geshe Sopa-la and invited him to teach at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that rare opportunities for so many students of Buddhism unfolded. He produced so many learned students with Ph.D.s in Buddhism, themselves continuing Geshe Sopa-la’s legacy.

Geshe Sopa-la is a person of courage and vision. Who other than Geshe Sopa-la would dare to host the first ever Kalachakra in the West against all odds? Personally, he has shown me kindness in many ways. When I eventually left the monastic order and came to the United States in 1976, he gave me kind words of advice and encouragement. Soon after I arrived in New York City, he sent me an air ticket and warmly invited me to come to Madison to visit him. Years later, when my family and two young sons decided to live in Madison, he and Elvin were so kind to us in so many ways. One day he surprised us with an unexpected visit to our humble apartment on Craig Avenue. His car pulled into the cul-de-sac in front of our apartment and he told me he had a gift for us in the trunk of his car. It was a color TV that he had bought at American TV on the way to our house. He told the sales person to sell him best portable color TV available and it became our first color TV, which we enjoyed for many years. These are just a few examples of his kindness on a mundane level.

Geshe Sopa-la’s work for the Dharma did not diminish when he retired from the university after 30 years. His courage and vision brought the fruition of Deer Park Monastery. During the dedication of the temple, His Holiness made an amazing declaration that either he or Geshe Sopa-la, whoever achieves enlightenment first, would care for the other. What more assurance can we hope for? All this may seem like a waking dream, but Geshe Sopa-la had the vision and courage to make the dream a reality.

Sharpa Tulku first came to the United States in 1962 as a 14-year-old. Geshe Sopa looked after Sharpa Tulku and his studies while in the America. Later, Sharpa Tulku settled with his family in Madison, Wisconsin, where he lives today.

The Bodhisattva on Bascom Hill

By James Blumenthal

The first time I met Geshe-la was about 20 years ago, not long after receiving notification that I had been accepted for graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin. The university had established the first doctoral program in Buddhist Studies in North America back in 1962 and

Geshe-la had been a faculty member there since 1967. I was attempting to decide between two potential schools and wanted to visit the campus and meet the person who would be my Ph.D. advisor. Geshe-la told me to come by his office around noon. On that day, I walked up Bascom Hill, made my way to Van Hise Hall, and up to the twelfth floor where Geshe-la's office and the Department of South Asian Studies looked out over Lake Mendota and the west side of Madison. I knocked on the door and he said, "Come in," with his soon-to-be-very-familiar and cheery Tibetan accent. I opened the door and saw his warm and inviting smile. He came across as very humble and approachable. His presence was infectious. This was the former debate examiner for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, arguably the top Tibetan scholar of Buddhist philosophy in the world, and teacher to many tulkus, lamas, geshe, top Western academics, and thousands of Dharma students around the world; and he could not have made me feel more comfortable. I knew I had found my teacher.

The scene proceeded in a way that will immediately be familiar to dozens of his graduate students over his three decades at the university: he slid half of his lunch (a sandwich and apple slices) across the table to offer to share them with me. I came to learn over the years that he did this virtually every day with one or more of his students with whom he was reading a text or discussing points of doctrine over his lunch hour.

Geshe-la instilled confidence at every turn. As humble as he was, there was never any doubt about the authority with which he taught Buddhist philosophy. He always encouraged us to question ideas, but he did instill some fear when he would throw out a question in a philosophy seminar that was intended to reel in a debate partner. "Who thinks production and disintegration are simultaneous for Dharmakirti?" No matter what the student opponent would say in response to his questions, they were in trouble. They were about to debate with the master. But it was an intellectual trouble that always served to sharpen their minds (and the minds of others in the class) and deepen their understanding. We all knew that he was a master teacher. One need only look at a short list of his students (Jantse Chöje Lobsang Tenzin Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Sera Je Khensur Geshe Donyo, Jeffrey Hopkins, José Cabezón, John Makransky, etc.) to witness the fruits of following his instruction.

Geshe-la's mind is razor sharp. In 20 years of receiving teachings from Geshe-la on a wide variety of topics, I never saw him pause with uncertainty. I never saw him hesitate for a moment to answer a student's question. It was always as if he knew it was coming and was just waiting for the prompt to give his response.

When teaching he often would quote Indian or Tibetan master's texts that he had memorized in order to support or help illuminate a point. The Tibetan tradition of memorizing texts is well known. But with Geshe-la, it was something extraordinary even in that context. He would regularly quote texts from memory that were well outside the standard texts required to be memorized in the geshe curriculum. Not only would he cite texts broadly from the Gelug and Indian sources, but also from other Tibetan lineages of thought and a wide range of Indian sources as well. Let me give an example to illuminate this point.

When I was near the end of my Ph.D. and was getting ready for my formal dissertation defense, I had a meeting with Geshe-la to go over some last remaining points and issues. Often when a doctoral student gets to this point they are more knowledgeable than even their doctoral advisor on their dissertation topic. I had translated and was writing on Shantarakshita's *The Ornament of the Middle Way (Madhyamakalamkara)*. Though it is certainly mentioned and discussed in Gelug literature, the text and its commentaries are not a part of the standard geshe curriculum in the Gelug tradition. So when I sat down with Geshe-la and argued for an interpretation of a particular point in Shantarakshita's writings that stretched a bit outside the traditional limits of the standard Gelug presentation of that point, I (naively) did not think Geshe-la would have ammunition to argue with me on the point. I was mistaken! I had Shantarakshita's root text opened in front of me and Geshe-la did *not* have a copy of the text in front of him (he had given me his personal copy as a gift when I began work on the dissertation). He heard my point and without missing a beat began his counter-argument by quoting stanzas from the root text word-for-word from memory as I read along in the open text on the table in front of me. He went on to elaborate on its subtle and implied meanings and then to argue his own point of interpretation, which was incredibly profound and insightful.

Suffice it to say I did not have the luxury of knowing my dissertation topic better than my doctoral advisor. But not having that luxury is just one small example of the extraordinary gift it has been to study closely with Geshe-la for 20 years. Geshe-la is a teacher in all the best and most meaningful senses of the term. He is not only an incomparable scholar of the tradition, but he thoroughly embodies and exemplifies what he teaches. Everything I know or understand about Buddhism is thanks to Geshe-la's kindness, skill, wisdom, compassion, and as he was so aptly named, "spontaneous patience." I pray that I have the merit to be his student again in future lives.

James Blumenthal, Ph.D. was an associate professor of Buddhist philosophy at Oregon State University and professor of Buddhist Studies at Maitripa College. He is the author of The Ornament of The Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Shantarakshita along with more than 40 articles in scholarly journals and popular periodicals on various aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. He worked with Geshe Lhundup Sopa on the latter's Steps on the Path: Vol. IV, a commentary on the "Shamatha" chapter of Lamrim Chenmo by Tsongkhapa. He passed away in October 2014, just six weeks after the passing of his precious teacher Geshe Sopa.

Fulfilling a Long-held Promise

By E. Ann Chávez

*First of all I should examine well what is to be done
To see whether I can pursue it or cannot undertake it.
(If I am unable) it is best to leave it,
But once I have started I must not withdraw.*

– *Shantideva's A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, chapter VII, verse 47, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives*

I had been studying Tibetan language at the University of Wisconsin in Madison with Geshe Sopa-la for a few years, taking third-year Tibetan more than just once or twice. During one semester we sampled style after style of Tibetan literature, jumping into the next one just as I was getting used to the current. I began longing to work on the translation of a long piece, uninterrupted. That was when Geshe-la invited me to help him translate *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems* by Nyima Chökyi Thuken. Little did I imagine we would be working on this project together for almost 25 years!

In about 1963, shortly after coming to New Jersey, Geshe-la was requested by Prof. Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University to write something about Tibetan Buddhism. At that time, there was very little available, unlike the large number of works in English on Zen Buddhism. Geshe-la felt very indebted to Prof. Morgan for all the help he had received from him and, wanting to repay that kindness, he promised that he would, all the time wondering, “How can I do that since I don't even speak English?”

He chose to translate the *Crystal Mirror*, which had been mentioned to him by his teacher Geshe Lhundrup Thabkhay many years before in Tibet. In 1978 at the university, he taught a seminar on the *Crystal Mirror* and assigned different sections of the text to the students to translate. Roger Jackson, who many years later became the editor of the final translation, was one of these early translators. Geshe-la told me that at that time, since he still didn't know English very well, he was unable to understand very well the students' questions and felt some of the translations were not reliable.

As time went on, he used the old translations in his Buddhist Doctrinal Systems classes and began at the same time to translate afresh the text. Now his English was improving greatly. All this time, Geshe-la held in mind the promise he had made.

Geshe-la set up the translation project now as an independent study. This consisted of myself and many other students over the course of years coming into Geshe-la's very small office on the twelfth floor of the Van Hise building, with a beautiful view of Picnic Point and Lake Mendota.

The first part of the hour and a half consisted of Geshe-la taking out his brown bag lunch and sharing it equally among the number of students present. First, he laid down a brown paper towel. Then with great precision cut the cheese and lettuce sandwich on whole wheat bread into equal sections with his Swiss Army knife. Next, the pickle, or, “sour thing,” as he called it; the carrot sticks; and finally, the Ripple potato chips on top. This luncheon mandala was passed around clockwise to all of us gathered at the small table. No matter how many partook, was anyone ever hungry afterwards? No! Was everyone totally contented and satisfied? Yes! After that ritual, we tucked into Thuken.

Once during the class, we were discussing how difficult Tibetan was to learn. One of the students joked, “Well, maybe next life I'll learn!” But Geshe-la very seriously said, “No. Now. No chance again.” And another semester, when I had gotten very far behind in writing out the translation,

Geshe-la said that if it wasn't written out, the project would never be finished. That was sobering, and I caught up.

One of the most vivid memories of that early period related to the section covering the life of Lama Tsongkhapa, which described all the texts that he had studied and mastered. It seemed impossible to me. I mentioned that to Geshe-la and he looked deeply at me. Then he quietly spoke, "Many people say that Lama Tsongkhapa is an emanation of Manjushri."

At Geshe-la's retirement party from the university in 1997, he introduced me to Prof. Morgan as "the girl who was helping him translate Thuken." I was very happy to meet the man to whom Geshe-la had made this promise about 35 years before.

About that time, Geshe-la invited Roger Jackson to edit the text for publication. Roger and I worked through questions in the translation with Geshe-la in his home at Deer Park. Roger would drive down from the Minneapolis area a few times a year and the three of us would meet together and go over questionable parts of the translation. Geshe-la took his time and was very thorough and meticulous. Sometimes we would be stumped: I don't know how much time we spent on the quote from Thuken's teacher Changya Rolpai Dorje about matter being "a many-colored tiger with stripes!" But, no atom or particle was neglected.

With help from our friends Michael Sweet and Lenny Zwilling on the China and Mongolia chapters, the translation and edit were now just about complete. But then Thupten Jinpa asked us if we wanted the text to be a part of the *Library of Tibetan Classics* series, which meant that Roger had to basically re-edit the whole text according a new editorial style. (It reminded me of how Roger's Ph.D. thesis had been stolen in India and he had to re-write the whole thing.) So, Roger did re-edit the complete book. He also made two glossaries that were so useful, and started a detailed index, which I completed, ironically, under intense time pressure for the publication date looming ahead. A few months later my copy of the *Crystal Mirror* arrived in the mail, and I was able to look up and answer a question I had that very day. In the past three years, I have often looked things up in this incredible reference book that I had the great good fortune to work on and finish.

In 2009, we mailed a copy to Prof. Morgan who was then 100 years old! His son told us how pleased he was. The next year, during His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings in New York City, Geshe-la went to Connecticut to have lunch with Prof. Morgan. Geshe-la was so happy to see him again and later laughed about both of them being in wheel chairs!

Ann Chávez is a long-time student of Geshe Lhundub Sopa. She helped translate The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems by Nyima Chökyi Thuken, an extensive survey of Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical systems found in Asia.

Reminiscences of Geshe Sopa

By Roger Jackson

I first heard the name Geshe Sopa in the fall of 1974, when my girlfriend (now wife) Pam Percy and I were attending the seventh Kopan course. Having survived and ultimately thrived at the sixth course and spent most of the summer studying at the Tibetan Library in Dharamsala, we both had begun to ponder what to do when we returned to the United States in December, after 15 months on the road.

By nature inclined to scholarship, I had begun to think that graduate work in Buddhism might be the ideal course for me. Serendipitously, a letter arrived from our friend Beth Newman (née Solomon), who had just moved to Madison, where she was studying at the University of Wisconsin with Geshe Sopa. “Roger,” she wrote, “he’s your intellectual dream come true.” I’m not sure that my hairs stood on end or tears spontaneously formed in my eyes when I read this, but I was overjoyed to know that there was someone in the States who was both a university professor and a Buddhist master – and who was, to boot, among the most respected gurus of my teachers at Kopan, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

I was accepted into the Buddhist Studies program, and Pam and I moved to Madison late in the summer of 1975. We shared a house on Lake Mendota Drive with Beth and Elyse Mergenthaler. Geshe Sopa was living in a small house just a few doors down, with his eccentric but indispensable assistant, Elvin Jones. Geshe-la had been in Madison for eight years at that point, and already had seen a number of fine scholars through the Buddhist Studies program at the university, including Jeffrey Hopkins. He also had given Buddhist teachings off and on, but never, so far as I know, within a formal organization.

By the fall of 1975, however, the number of Kopan and Dharamsala veterans in Madison, combined with interested locals, was sufficient that some structure seemed necessary. Thus was founded Ganden Mahayana Center, which began with Geshe-la teaching Tsongkhapa’s *Lamrim Chenmo* to a small group every Sunday morning in his living room. Typically, after beginning with a long, slow recitation of “The Foundation of All Good Qualities,” refuge and bodhichitta prayers, a mandala offering, and a brief meditation, he would quote from memory a verse from Shantideva’s *Way of the Bodhisattva*, then comment on it with great energy, insight, and humor, before turning at last to Tsongkhapa’s text. (His discourses on the *Lamrim Chenmo* would continue not just for years but for decades and are being issued by Wisdom Publications as a multi-volume set.)

As the group surrounding him grew, Geshe-la moved to a larger house across the street, teaching other texts during the week and beginning a tradition of summer courses involving discourses and initiations by visiting Gelug masters (including Lamas Yeshe and Zopa) and, eventually, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who first visited in 1979. In 1981, in anticipation of His Holiness’ visit to confer the first-ever Kalachakra initiation in the West, Ganden Mahayana Center became Deer Park Buddhist Center, and Geshe-la moved to the property in Oregon, Wisconsin, where he still resides (though the split-level ranch house now has been supplemented by a residential annex, a Kalachakra temple, a stupa, and the magnificent Deer Park temple, which was inaugurated by His Holiness in 2008).

While I lived in Madison, from 1975 until 1983, I was closely involved with Geshe-la's centers, and was able to witness first-hand how he dealt with the motley crew of American Buddhists who came to study with him: a mix of students, working people, and unreconstructed Dharma Bums who were alike in their dedication to the Buddha's teachings but not always certain how to apply them as lay people in the West. Geshe-la's own inclinations always have been monastic, scholarly and conservative, yet he developed a remarkable ability both to teach and counsel a group of disciples whose personal, intellectual and spiritual needs were all over the map. The name he was given at ordination, Lhundub Sopa - "spontaneous patience" - surely was prophetic, for it was a quality he would manifest again and again over the years, as he dealt with our neuroses, off-the-wall questions and crises of faith, all quite sincere, but far from what his geshe training had prepared him for.

From the time I first met him, my relationship with Geshe-la has been dual, for he has not only been my principal spiritual teacher but also my graduate-school instructor, my dissertation advisor and a scholarly collaborator.

I remember with pleasure sitting in seminars at the University of Wisconsin with the likes of José Cabezón, John Makransky, Beth Solomon, Beth Simon and John Newman, working through really difficult Tibetan texts with Geshe-la, trying to find just the right English equivalent for a Buddhist psychological term or understand properly what it means to say that "the two truths are one in essence but have different contrapositives." This is not everyone's cup of Tibetan tea, but for those of us prone to philosophy, it seemed the very inseparability of bliss and, if not emptiness, at least mental elaboration.

As my dissertation advisor, Geshe-la showed remarkable patience and flexibility. I worked on a Tibetan commentary on the second chapter of Dharmakirti's *Pramanavarttika* (*Commentary on Valid Cognition*), the source of the classic proofs of such basic Buddhist claims as the possibility of enlightenment, the existence of past and future lives, and the liberating power of the realization of no-self. Geshe-la labored tirelessly to help me understand the text and its ideas and accepted with good humor my doubts about some of the arguments, even when my views diverged from his own. He also, not without some bemusement, encouraged my persistent enthusiasm for Kagyü traditions, especially Mahamudra.

In the late 1990s, Geshe-la asked me if I would serve as editor of his long-in-the-works translation of Thukén Chökyi Nyima's great 1802 study of Asian religious thought, *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*. I accepted with pleasure, and worked for almost a decade with him, Ann Chávez, Lenny Zwilling, Mike Sweet and others to bring the work to completion. My fondest memories of that process are of sitting for hours on end in Geshe-la's room, usually with Ann, as we struggled through the knottiest passages in Thukén's text. Though Geshe-la was already in his eighties, it was Ann and I who always flagged first: even far into the session, his eyes twinkled as he eagerly awaited the next question.

So Beth was right: Geshe Sopa *was* my intellectual dream come true. But he's been far more than that: he's been a mentor, a friend, an advisor, an interlocutor and a father figure. Above all, with his humility, compassion, humor and a razor-sharp mind, he's been an example - a living proof,

really – of the power of Dharma. Whether scholars, practitioners, or both, we who have benefited from his life and teaching can only hope that we honor him by thinking clearly, living rightly and dedicating ourselves to the great task of Geshe-la's life: the benefit of sentient beings.

Roger Jackson is John W. Nason Professor of Asian Studies and Religion at Carleton College in Minnesota, where he teaches South Asian and Tibetan religions. He is the author of numerous books, articles, and reviews, including two books on which he collaborated with Geshe Sopa and others – The Wheel of Time: Kalachakra in Context and The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems: A Tibetan Study of Asian Religious Thought – as well as a collection of essays in honor of Geshe Sopa, co-edited with José Cabezón, entitled Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre.

Profound Equanimity that Constantly Perseveres

By John Makransky

When someone realizes and embodies such profound equanimity, it makes others feel deeply grounded to be in his or her presence. My teacher Geshe Sopa is renowned for his calm perseverance against seemingly insurmountable obstacles. He first came to America as a refugee who could barely speak English, although he had been famous in Tibet as a great lama scholar. Over the years he rose to become one of the most respected professors of Buddhist Studies in the United States. When he invited His Holiness the Dalai Lama to come to Wisconsin to offer transmissions and teachings new to the West, many of us couldn't believe what he had taken on. An incredible number of preparations had to be made in a very short time. Geshe Sopa took the responsibility to mortgage a new home with the necessary land for the event, to quickly construct a new temple, and provide housing for thousands of people. Many obstacles and problems came up, but he remained unfazed as he quietly, constantly persevered.

Eight years ago Geshe Sopa came to teach in Boston. He stayed in our home and just his simple presence made a profound impression on my older son Jonathan, who was then six years old. To this day, whenever Barbara and I talk about any Tibetan, Jonathan asks if we are talking about Geshe Sopa. Geshe Sopa was so deeply grounded in wise, loving equanimity, that Jonathan's memory, eight years later, is still pulled toward him like mental gravity.

Excerpted from From Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness, pp. 152-153, from Wisdom Publications.

John Makransky is a professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher, and author of numerous articles and From Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness, practical instructions for how one can actualize the qualities of love and wisdom into relationships, service and social action.

A Shining Presence: Geshe Sopa in Photos

By Kalleen Mortensen

When I heard that *Mandala* magazine would be highlighting our own Ven. Geshe Sopa at the time of the release of his autobiography, I tried with some difficulty to put into narrative form my respect, honor and love for this extraordinary teacher. Difficult only because I lack the skill to put into words his superlative qualities. I am, however, able to offer a history of him through the visual form of photography. In the final analysis, I decided I would leave it to the photos to reveal the shining presence that I have experienced over many years.

When I raised my camera to capture him at the moment he explained a particularly difficult philosophical point, or noted his radiance directed at a fortunate student, I often experienced him offering a gift by hesitating just long enough for me to capture the light in his eyes or his warm smile.

I first met Geshe-la in the spring of 1976, when I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and began my spiritual journey with him and around the time he began teaching to a group of Kopan course alumni, many former students of our gurus Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe. Many of us arrived in Madison about the same time, only to discover that each of us had received advice from our Kopan gurus to seek out this understated scholar upon our return to the U.S. (Perhaps we were chosen due to our special need of a teacher with great patience!)

Since those early years, Geshe-la has watched over us, taught us all the great treatises and offered up the most profound teachers and teachings imaginable, including many visits from His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Deer Park. It is a great honor for me to be able to share here a few of the images I have captured of Ven. Geshe Sopa in his many emanations from the 1970s to the present day.

You can view Kalleen's collection of photos at:

<http://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-for-2013/january/like-a-waking-dream/kalleen-mortensen/>

Kalleen Mortensen continues to live in Madison, Wisconsin, and regularly shares her photos with Mandala.

The Most Important Influence on My Life

By Beth Newman

I went to Madison, Wisconsin, in January 1975 to study with Geshe Sopa-la. I have been his student to this day. I have always thought of Geshe-la as the Atisha of our current age. Both masters left places where they were revered for their scholarship and spiritual practice to spread the Dharma in "barbarian" lands. Both Atisha and Geshe Sopa-la endured years of difficulty, responded to thousands of basic and really quite foolish questions, dealt with humiliating cultural misunderstandings with unflinching good humor, had to learn new languages and means of

communication – and did all this with love and compassion for students who could hardly appreciate the value of the teacher before them.

Geshe Sopa-la lived very quietly and humbly in the United States. It was amazing to see how venerated he is by Tibetans in India, Nepal and Tibet, and then compare that to how he was treated at home in Wisconsin.

He has been the most important influence on my life and I know that is true for many others.

Beth Newman has a Ph.D. in South Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she was a student of Geshe Lhundub Sopa. She has worked closely with Geshe Sopa, editing Steps on the Path: Vol. I and III. She also has published a translation of the classic Tibetan novel (with Harper Collins) called The Tale of the Incomparable Prince and is working on a translation of a volume for the Library of Tibetan Classics series at the request of Thupten Jinpa. Beth teaches cultural anthropology at the Ringling College of Art + Design in Sarasota, Florida.

The Simplicity of Great Authority

By John Newman

I first met Geshe Lhundub Sopa Rinpoche (I call him respectfully and affectionately “Gen Rinpoche”) in spring 1974. I had spent the previous eight months at Kopan Monastery in Nepal and when I returned to the United States, I dropped in on Gen Rinpoche with little advance notice. He was living in a tiny house in Madison, Wisconsin, with his American disciple and secretary, Elvin Jones. The first time I saw him he was wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt and a monk’s yellow underskirt, sitting on a small bed with his calico cat, Mama, eating thukpa, Tibetan noodle soup. He offered me thukpa, which I accepted. I told him that I had come from Kopan and was interested in studying with him. He said that was possible. I don’t remember much else about that meeting, except that he seemed very down-to-earth, very simple.

I later learned that this appearance of simplicity was deceptive. I first saw that when Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche visited Gen Rinpoche during their first visit to the United States. At Kopan, Lama Yeshe usually seemed lighthearted and playful, Lama Zopa was stern and self-assured. When they came to meet Gen Rinpoche, however, they behaved like very, very nervous children in the presence of someone of great authority.

Over the years I have heard abbots and great geshe adopt a tone of awe and respect when they speak of Gen Rinpoche. This is not primarily due to his intellect because these scholars are not impressed by scholarship alone. Instead, I assume, it is due at least in part to Gen Rinpoche’s extraordinary asceticism. He has spent much of his life as an isolated missionary in a rather coarse foreign environment, surrounded by people who have little or no appreciation for who and what he is. Throughout this time he has embodied the proper conduct of a Buddhist monk, and with unflinching kindness and compassion he has patiently worked to share his experience of Buddhadharma.

John Newman has studied with Geshe Lhundub Sopa since 1974, and completed a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison under his supervision. He teaches Asian religions at New College of Florida in Sarasota, Florida, and is editing Geshe Sopa’s lectures on Lama Tsongkhapa’s Essence of Good Explanations.

Both Father and Son: Geshe Sopa Rinpoche’s Omnipresent Blessing

By SuJei Own

There are so many intimate personal experiences with Geshe Sopa-la treasured in my memory that are worthy of being shared with other Dharma students. His wisdom and compassion, expressed in his unique style of pure teaching, has already become his trademark. That every fortunate person who has ever encountered Geshe-la is impressed by his eminent realization of enlightenment ornamented with patience, humility and spontaneous humor proves he’s one of the greatest teachers of our time. Yet, there are some subtler levels of his spiritual attainments not revealed in public that still need to be shared. Here, I offer two of my personal stories of Geshe-la to demonstrate his omnipresent blessing and teaching for his students.

During the second year of graduate school, after Geshe-la became my advisor for the Buddhist Studies Ph.D. program in Madison, my wife became pregnant. I was so happy to report this good news to Geshe-la. When he heard my exciting news, he smiled and said, “You fall into samsara.” I first expected his congratulations and felt a little bit surprised by his response. But I replied with an optimistic attitude: “Even so, I will make it a happy samsara.”

My wife was studying in another university on the East Coast at the time and so had to take care of her pregnancy by herself. Around the fifth month of her pregnancy, she called me one day and told me she dreamed of Geshe-la the night before. In the dream, Geshe-la had told her that September 6 is a good day. She wondered what the message meant, but I had no good explanation. Eventually, we decided to go back Taiwan to deliver our baby there and stayed the whole summer in Taiwan waiting for my son’s birth. Nothing happened and near the end of August, I returned with some disappointment to campus to continue my studies.

During a dinner on September 5, my wife mentioned to my mother about the dream. My wife didn’t think anything of it as there was no sign of labor at all. But after two hours, she suddenly went into labor, was taken to the hospital and delivered the baby exactly on September 6 as Geshe-la had predicted. We were both amazed. I later shared this story with Geshe-la with great sincerity and gratitude. But having heard my exciting story, Geshe-la laughed and said, “I am not responsible for that!”

Interestingly, that is the only dream my wife has had about Geshe-la, even up to now. For me, it is a great blessing from the Guru that Geshe-la fulfilled my wish to bring a much needed grandson to my family. My son has been a great joy to my whole family since his birth. Yes, I understand that samsaric existence is something to be renounced, but the journey of entering the path of enlightenment has been made easier and smoother with the Guru’s blessing.

The same kind of blessing appeared during my father's passing away. My father had lung cancer six years ago. That year, the summer course at Deer Park was about renouncing attachment to one's relatives in preparation for death. As I have been Geshe-la's principal Chinese translator, I naturally received his profound teachings directly and deeply. And during interpreting this teaching, I did feel a special, deep impact from his teaching on the impermanence of life that helped me reflect on all worldly existence as truly superficial. After the teaching and before my return to Taiwan, Geshe-la gave me one brown polo shirt. I had no idea of why Geshe-la gave me this shirt; I just brought it back to Taiwan.

Three months after my return from Deer Park, my father's cancer had been diagnosed as final stage. My family felt sad about this misfortune, but I was prepared for the worst and remained calm, remembering Geshe-la's teaching on impermanence and the benefit of renouncing attachment to one's close relatives. Two months later, Geshe-la was invited to Taiwan to give teachings during the winter. When I reported the bad news to him, he said to me that he would pray for my father's full recovery. After intensive treatment, my father did recover slightly.

The cancer returned after six months, metastasizing in his brain and leaving him in a short-term coma. After that event, my father totally accepted his destiny and became sincerely religious, even saying that he wanted to become a monk and asking me to find him a monk's robe. He said to everyone he had no fear of death. This was so surprising to me because my father, although he had always been a man of ethical integrity, never expressed a wish to be a Buddhist practitioner before. We had never taken any opportunity to discuss together the meaning of Buddhism, even after I had pursued Buddhist studies for so many years.

Just four days before passing away, my father's physical energy deteriorated seriously, so I telephoned Geshe-la about this situation. Geshe-la immediately told me his time is up. Without any hesitation, I requested Geshe-la's blessing for my father. He told me that he will help, but that I am the one who can help my father most. I did the puja for him and stayed around him all the time. His life force faded quickly without much pain, but his mind remained peaceful and clear. On the last day when he took his final bath, I suddenly remembered that Geshe-la had given me that one brown polo shirt, which I gave to my father as the monk's robe he had asked for. After putting the shirt on him, I took him to the hospital and he passed away, falling into deep sleep that night without saying a word.

What happened to my father and my son proves how the Guru's blessing and teaching are omnipresent. I could not think any other Guru kinder than Geshe Sopa-la who takes such good care of his students to the extent even their family's births and deaths are naturally included within Dharma protection. This is the true blessing of an enlightened guru who shows his disciples the true essence of Dharma - Tathagata.

Su-Jei Own is the former deputy secretary general of the Taiwan Tibet Exchange Foundation and a Chinese interpreter of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Geshe Sopa Rinpoche. In 1991, he became Geshe Sopa's first Taiwanese student at University of Wisconsin in the Buddhist Studies Ph.D. program.

A Privilege and an Immeasurable Gift

By Penny Paster

Geshe Sopa and my husband Zorba arrived at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1967. Zorba's method of learning life's lessons was the indefatigable-alphabet-soup method: pre-med, psychology, community organizing and dedicated Zen practice. But when he met Geshe-la, he realized it did not matter what you called your practice, but how you lived your practice.

A decade later, Zorba and I sat in a small room in Dharamsala and tried to decide where to live our lives. With His Holiness' words close to our hearts, there was always one factor missing in each consideration: a teacher with high integrity and a treasure chest of knowledge. Then we both laughed. Our teacher was already in America and Zorba had known him for 10 years!

We moved to Madison and soon discovered that many people who had been traveling in Asia had come for the same reason. Even in the late '60s and '70s, Geshe Sopa was becoming an anchor of Tibetan language and Buddhist Studies at UW-Madison. Additionally, he had lovingly been persuaded to teach students outside of the university setting. Many of us from those early years are still fortunate to be his students, regardless of where we now live. His scholarly reputation and writings are world renowned. For over four decades Geshe Sopa has invited Buddhist masters to teach at Deer Park, the center he founded in rural Wisconsin. We watch their reverence to our teacher and know that for many years before us, he was their teacher in Tibet or India.

Geshe-la embodies the attributes he is teaching us. Often he is deliberate and often very flexible to life's ever-changing situations. His infectious smile and quiet consistent wisdom help us guide our decisions and actions. Being a student of Geshe Sopa is a privilege. Living near Geshe-la and learning from Geshe-la is an immeasurable gift. He has changed our lives.

Penny and Zorba Paster live near Madison, Wisconsin. Zorba is a physician and the host of the nationally syndicated public radio show "On Your Health."

Ven. Geshe Lhundub Sopa Rinpoche, My Teacher

By George Propps

Geshe Sopa is one of the most renowned Buddhist Scholars in the world today. I have heard it said that his knowledge of Buddhism is second only to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's. Although Geshe Sopa denies it, several people have said that they believe two of Geshe-la's past lives have been Atisha (980-1055 C.E.) and Shantideva (8th century). A couple of years ago, I asked Geshe-la about this, and his answer to my question was, "No, no, no. That is wrong, don't even think that!" (However, I still believe that it is true.)

I first met Geshe Sopa in November 1974. I was new to Buddhism and had very little knowledge of the subject. What I had learned was from a book on Buddhism and a public lecture by Lama

Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Geshe Sopa was leading a weekend retreat in the hills of southern Indiana. I attended just to see what Buddhism was all about, but I got more than I bargained for. I was very taken with Geshe Sopa; he really impressed me. I could not get over the fact that he did not sleep during the night. His bedroom light was on all night and then went out around 5:00 A.M. every morning. Seeing this was very new to me.

After this lam-rim retreat was over, I asked Geshe Sopa if I could come up from Indianapolis, Indiana, to Madison, Wisconsin, to visit him some time, and he answered, "We will see." Two months later, I received a letter from him. In it he stated that his spring vacation from the University of Wisconsin was coming up in March and asked if I would like to come up and stay with him that week and that it would be good to do. I checked my schedule and sent him a letter that I would.

Geshe-la was renting a small three-bedroom house in Madison near the university. He had one bedroom; Geshe-la's friend and assistant Elvin had another bedroom; and John Newman, one of Geshe-la's students, was staying in the basement. The third bedroom was made ready for me. It had new bedding and towels. The room had just been painted and it was spotless. I knew that Geshe-la had been part of the painting crew because he still had a spot of paint on his arm.

For that whole week - morning, noon and night - it was Geshe-la teaching me *Lamrim Chenmo*. I was on a cushion on the floor and Geshe-la was seated on his bed. At the time, I had no idea what was happening. It was just a great experience for me. Even today, I still don't know why he did that for me. It was an incredible experience to be taught the *Lamrim Chenmo* by a living buddha.

Over the years we became very close. He would come down to Indianapolis to visit me during his summer vacation, and later, after my family moved to Florida, he would come to Florida to visit during the winter. Geshe-la loves the warm weather. During one of his winter visits, Geshe-la asked me to start a Dharma center in Ft. Myers. His request scared me to death. I told him that I could never do that because I was the dumbest person he could ever get to run a Dharma center. I was able to put it off that year, but he kept after me until I finally said yes. He said that I should keep it simple and when I had questions, that I should call him. I was so frightened of saying something that was not true that just about every week I was on the phone to Geshe-la who used to laugh at me for being so concerned. And after awhile, I had learned more Dharma than anyone that came to his normal Dharma group.

He named our group Ganden ChoJor, after his first monastery in Tibet. Several of the group became good students and have visited Geshe-la at Deer Park, Geshe-la's monastery just outside Madison. A couple of times Ganden ChoJor would set up a conference call with Geshe-la. He would be on the phone at Deer Park and the other end of the line would be the group in Ft. Myers with the speakerphone. People in the group would have a question and answer session with Geshe-la, which was very exciting for everyone.

For around 12 years, I was Deer Park's treasurer. During that time, Geshe-la built a new temple at Deer Park and as with most building projects, the budget got out of hand and costs soared. I was very worried about this and kept telling Geshe-la that we needed to cut back. Every time, Geshe-la

would tell me not to worry about this and that everything would be OK. And as always, Geshe-la was right. A group of very kind and compassionate benefactors came to our rescue.

One year, Geshe-la and I went on a teaching tour of California. He was the teacher and I was his driver. We went to San Francisco and then down to Land of Medicine Buddha. While we were there, Geshe Lobsang Donyo, a student of Geshe-la's, came to visit. I decided to make them a cup of Tibetan butter tea, a very strong black tea with butter and salt. I served it to them and they both, politely, drank it down. I asked if they would like another cup, but they both said no thanks. I asked if the tea was OK and both of them said, very loudly, that it was terrible and the worse tea they had ever tasted. Even today, Geshe-la will remind me never to make Tibetan tea.

One year we were in Miami, Florida, visiting George Chesrow, another student of Geshe-la. George had set up some teachings for Geshe-la in another person's house. This was to be a public talk and prior to the teachings, several people asked me what Geshe-la would be speaking about. I told them that I had no idea. Each person said that they would like to hear about a certain subject to help them understand some aspect of the Dharma. I did not tell Geshe-la their requests, but, as I knew it would, his talk included all they had requested. Many times Geshe-la did this very thing. He always seems to know what others want to hear.

During one of Geshe-la's visits to Ft. Myers, we decided to go to lunch at a resort on Sanibel Island. This was a very posh restaurant, overlooking the Gulf. When we were finished eating, someone who had recognized Geshe-la sent over to our table a piece of Key lime pie and a piece of chocolate cake. We decided to split each piece so that we could try both. I split it so that Geshe-la got the biggest pieces, but when Geshe-la saw what I was doing he said, "No, no, no. The big pieces are for you." And he took the smaller pieces instead. As we were fighting over them, we heard the waiter telling the people at the next table, "Why don't you have the chocolate cake? Look how much fun they are having with theirs!" Needless to say, that broke it up and we laughed all day about it.

Geshe-la has been my teacher for 38 years. He is my teacher, my protector and my friend. He is a living buddha, the one to whom I go for refuge. He has great knowledge on how to benefit all sentient beings. He is a compassionate, caring bodhisattva with a great sense of humor. He is generous, patient, ethical and has great perseverance. He is a meditator and fully understands the wisdom of emptiness. From the bottom of my heart, I can only say that Geshe Sopa Rinpoche means everything in the world to me.

Patience in Ascertaining the Truth

By Tenzin Dechen Rochard

Shantideva says:

*There is nothing at all
That does not become easier through practice.*

*Therefore, from accepting small problems
You will be able to bear great difficulties.*

Geshe Sopa Rinpoche often begins his teachings in this way – with a quotation from a renowned master. Shantideva is clearly one of his favorite authors, and the practice of patience one of his favorite topics. Indeed, his name, *sopa*, means “patience” – also translated as “tolerance” or “forbearance.” Here, I would like to share something of what I have learned from Geshe-la about this quality and what I have witnessed as his embodiment of it.

Patience, or tolerance, may be categorized into three types: patience in not retaliating when deliberately harmed; patience in accepting pain and difficulties; and patience in ascertaining the truth. We may be quite familiar with the practice of patience in the first two cases, such as when we are hurt by other beings or challenged by difficult circumstances. But the practice of patience in ascertaining the truth may be less familiar. In all cases, patience is employed as the specific antidote to anger or hatred, which is an extreme form of aversion.

Hatred is characterized as the intention to harm and its only function is to disturb the mind. It has no beneficial role whatsoever. Hatred naturally arises when we experience an unpleasant feeling. Usually, we think that the cause of our unpleasant feeling is something other than the causes and conditions operating within our own mind-streams. However, the cause actually lies within us and the external object merely acts as a trigger, a cooperative condition, for the unpleasant feeling and hatred to occur. Nevertheless, our hatred is usually directed towards something external, which we want to avoid, push away or destroy. Or, not understanding how hatred operates within the mind-stream, it is sometimes directed towards oneself as a person and one’s own precious life. But this is not what needs to be destroyed. Instead, we need to remove the wish to harm, which is the hatred itself. We remove it by developing patience.

The first two types of patience mentioned above temporarily stop hatred arising within the mind-stream; they have the characteristics of non-hatred, or love. The third type of patience has a more lasting effect, which Geshe Sopa explains as follows:

“The third type of patience is thinking about the nature of reality: causality and emptiness. Sometimes, when people are unfamiliar with concepts such as karma and shunyata, they become impatient or uneasy when the truth is explained. They do not want to hear about the nature of reality because they do not want to learn to think in new ways. This third kind of patience is being able to learn, analyze, and understand the subject, object, and the action of someone harming us from the perspective of ultimate truth. ... So this kind of patience – knowing the emptiness of things – is a deeper and more subtle form of patience. It is the antidote to our usual incorrect perception of things as truly real.”

Geshe-la begins by describing our usual attitudes to shunyata. We might experience irritation, aversion, or perhaps hatred, when encountering complex Buddhist teachings on the subject. Even a committed long-term practitioner may have unpleasant feelings arising when trying to grapple with teachings on emptiness. It takes several years, decades, or lifetimes, to become familiar with them. This process can be painful at times, though the pain is gradually replaced by joy as correct

understanding and wisdom develop. First we learn about how the mind functions in all its permutations; then we understand how certain mental factors misapprehend their main object of awareness; finally, we employ Madhyamaka analyses to remove that mistaken way of apprehending things. Combining ultimate analysis with calm abiding meditation, we eventually develop a direct perception of shunyata. At this point, the real work begins! Over a long period of time, this supreme wisdom of meditative equipoise gradually removes the cause of suffering – innate ignorance together with its seeds – from the mind-stream; and after that, it gradually removes its imprints, which obstruct omniscience.

Geshe Sopa likens the study of this subject to “chewing hard bones.” We mere beginners struggle profoundly with this, but Geshe-la chews them joyfully! He shows no sign of aversion at all! Anyone who has attended Geshe Sopa’s summer courses on Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka texts, as well as his other teachings over the years, will have observed this quality of patience manifesting in a number of ways. No matter how difficult a certain topic may be, Geshe-la delves into it wholeheartedly, draws out every detail, and presents it to us in a language close to our own, sweetened with his playful sense of humor. No matter how foolish a certain question may sound, Geshe-la makes every effort to understand both the explicit question itself, as well as what implicitly lies behind it, and addresses it on all these levels. Very patiently and steadily, he exercises enormous effort in providing us with every possible analytical tool that we could ever employ to remove our mental afflictions, their seeds and their imprints. We might wonder how we can use this huge collection of sophisticated tools.

This is where we need to practice patience. Geshe Sopa very patiently gives us the Buddha’s teachings in all their fullness, for the sake of all beings, not just ourselves. We need to receive them likewise, and accept the difficulties involved in working with them. We need not get upset with our own lack of understanding. We should go forth, as the Tibetans say, *kalé kalé*, gently, gently. If we proceed in this manner with courage, then any inner barrier blocking us from understanding a particular point will eventually dissolve quite naturally, when all the causes and conditions are present. We need to create those causes by listening, reading, discussing and reflecting – again, and again, and again – gently, gently, without expectation.

While working privately with Geshe-la over the past decade on the insight chapter of his commentary on Tsongkhapa’s *Lamrim Chenmo*, I have observed his constant quality of patience, both in his teaching and in his life. Living in the UK, I manage to work with Geshe-la only once a year, usually for a couple of months during the summer. In the earlier years, we would work together every morning and afternoon. I would play selected recordings of Geshe-la’s 1998 summer teachings, containing some words I had not understood, and Geshe-la would listen intently. Sometimes even he could not understand what he was trying to say, and we would both laugh uproariously! Then he would launch into a detailed teaching on the topic in question, which I would record and incorporate into my draft. If there was something particularly hard for me to understand, Geshe-la would gladly explain it in a variety of ways. There is one particular topic that I struggled with for at least five years. Every year I would ask the same question about this point. Every year Geshe-la would provide a detailed answer, and we would check all the texts and commentaries together. Unperturbed, he would say, “I want you to understand.”

Observing Geshe-la's way of being over the years, I have come to the conclusion that the most important quality needed for developing an understanding of the Dharma is patience: patience within the teacher and patience within the student; patience in study and patience in life.

Tenzin Dechen Rochard first received teachings on Buddhism from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Geshe Sopa Rinpoche in 1984. After engaging in a year of solitary retreat, she completed most of the geshe studies curriculum at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, India. Since returning to the UK, she has translated and edited Geshe Sopa's commentary on the insight volume of Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo and recently submitted her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Cambridge on Chandrakirti's analysis of the self.

Praises for Our Perfect Teacher Geshe Lhundub Sopa Rinpoche

By Rodney Stevenson

This praise was recited by Rodney Stevenson and Geshe Sopa Rinpoche's students from Deer Park Buddhist Center in Oregon, Wisconsin, at a long life puja offered on July 29, 2012. Students from Deer Park offer formal praises annually as part of their request for Geshe Sopa Rinpoche to live long and teach ceaselessly.

"Praise for Our Perfect Teacher Geshe Lhundub Sopa Rinpoche" follows the Tibetan liturgy syllabic verse structure, i.e. the same number of syllables per line for the verses in a section.

reader:

In this holy temple on sacred ground
we have the fortune to gatherer today
to praise a lion who strides across worlds,
to ask this lion to please remain here.

The fortune we share together this day,
a moment of time spent with our teacher,
is worth more than countless mountains of gold,
is worth more than endless oceans of jewels.

Should we prostrate to the thousand Buddhas,
should we offer to them all that we own,
should we rejoice in their heaps of virtue,
our merit would be far beyond measure.

all students:

Yet more than that, a billion times over,
is the countless merit that will arise

from prostrating to our perfect teacher,
from offering him flower garlands of praise.

Most precious teacher, Je Lhundub Sopa,
with all our bodies from previous lives,
with voices that carry throughout all worlds,
with our minds and hearts turned only towards you,
we prostrate, we offer all that we have,
we confess, we rejoice in your virtues.
Please remain with us and teach the Dharma.
Please hear and accept our heartfelt praises.

reader:

Sentient beings of the three realms of suffering,
those now in peace and those on the ten grounds,
wish with their hearts they were with us today,
wish that they could be here with our teacher.

All those not here have all been our mothers
who gave their bodies to bring life to us,
who risked their own lives to raise us safely,
who lived in suffering so we would know joy.

How can we ever repay their kindness?
How can we ever relieve them from pain?
How can we save them from seas of sorrow?
How can we bring them to freedom's great joy?

all students:

Our teacher knows the way to high rebirths.
Our teacher knows how to escape sorrow.
Our teacher knows the way of compassion.
Our teacher knows the path of the victors.
By practicing what our teacher has taught
we can repay our mothers' great kindness.

reader:

Clear light of a hundred full autumn moons,
he shows us the way of loving kindness.
Bright light of hundreds of thousands of suns,
he shows us the truth of stainless wisdom.

Body omniscient, body with no stains
his luminous body, bliss joined with clear light.
The rays of five colors swirl around him,
he carries all of the marks and the signs.

Bright candle flame that clears away darkness,
cool breeze that refreshes on stifling days,
warm fire that holds back the chill of winter,
cool water's relief on hot summer days.

all students:

Je Lhundub Sopa, font of all virtue,
master of method you guide us with skill.
Je Lhundub Sopa, sharp sword of wisdom,
master of knowledge you open our eyes.

Chenrezig, you are peerless compassion,
Manjushri, you are stainless sharp wisdom,
Atisha, you are a guide in dark lands,
Tsongkhapa, you are the light of the way.

reader:

No one should doubt our teacher's great power,
though he appears as a frail humble monk.
He is the chief of all Buddha families.
He is Vajradhara, master of all.

Some of us have known our teacher for years,
some of us have known him just a short time;
yet he holds us all with his compassion,
he bathes us all with his light of wisdom.

His clear eyes see into each of our hearts.
His precious jeweled words bring light to our hearts.
His radiant smile fills our hearts with joy.
With heartfelt love we offer our praises.

All of us are blessed by his compassion.
All of us are blessed by his endless love.
All of us are blessed by his clear wisdom.
For all these blessings, we offer our praise.

Should there be tears that well up within us
and fall from our eyes like warm summer rain,

may those tears be tears that come from great joy,
joy of knowing Je Sopa Rinpoche.

all students:

All of us are gripped by aging,
each moment our lives slip away,
once gone, our lives will not return,
kind teacher please show us the way.

When our breath leaves, when we grow slack,
lead us through lights, white, red and black,
protect us in the land of shades,
bring us to a new life well-made,
so that with you our days will pass
hearing your teachings on the path,
because we know that this is true,
we need no teacher but for you.

We know that we need not despair;
your love and care flow everywhere.
Though butter lamps will lose their light,
your wisdom shines forever bright.

Rodney Stevenson has been a student of Geshe Sopa Rinpoche at Deer Park for 30 years.

Geshe Sopa passed away at the age of 91 on August 28, 2014, at Deer Park Buddhist Center, the center he founded in Oregon, Wisconsin. See *Mandala* January-March 2015 for Geshe Sopa's obituary.

15. Obituary for Khensur Denma Locho Rinpoche

By Ven. Sean Price

Mandala July-December 2015

Khensur Denma Locho Rinpoche passed away at the age of 88 in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India, on October 23, 2014, of natural causes.

As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said, “For the exalted ones, the changing of bodies might be likened to the way ordinary folks change their clothes.” In this light, as the exalted one, once known in honorific Tibetan as the Sublime, Foremost and Great Vidyadhara, Supreme Source of Refuge, Lobsang Oser Choying Gyatso, more commonly known to as Khensur Denma Locho Rinpoche, has, for the moment, left for the changing rooms of peace, I’ll take the liberty to relate a little of what I have heard of his life.

Rinpoche was born in Gaba, Kham (eastern Tibet), in 1925. At the age of six, he was recognized as the reincarnation of Gen Locho, a famous scholar from the nearby Shalkar Monastery and of Drepung Loseling. At the insistence of Tongpun Rinpoche, Denma Locho Rinpoche entered Drepung Loseling near Lhasa at the age of 12 and studied with Tongpun Rinpoche until he departed for China a few years later. Thereafter, he was tutored by the formidable Gen Nyima Gyaltzen. Awarded the first-place Geshe Lharampa degree at 25, Rinpoche then went to Gyume Tantric College where he spent six years.

It was during this formative time in Lhasa that Rinpoche met his principal gurus: Lithang Kyabgon (Shogdrung Rinpoche) and Lhatsung Dorje Chang, the two masters from whom Rinpoche received the unique lineages of Manjushri/Yamantaka and Vajrayogini that came to define him; Yongzin Ling Rinpoche; Trijang Dorje Chang; and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. From these and other masters, Rinpoche received an ocean of empowerments, transmissions and instructions.

His education complete, Rinpoche decided to spend the rest of his life in contemplative retreat. For this he was obliged to seek the advice and permission of the Nechung, Gadong and Tenma Oracles, all of whom assented to his request. But shortly after, the Chinese communist army initiated attacks in Lhasa, and Rinpoche followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama into exile in India.

Rinpoche held a number of official positions over the years, as research fellow, as visiting professor and as abbot of a number of small monasteries, usually at the request of His Holiness and his two tutors. From 1986-1992, Rinpoche was abbot of Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, India.

At the request of many, including His Holiness and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Denma Locho Rinpoche passed on all the lineages of empowerment, transmission and instruction, which he had received in Tibet, at various locations in India and Nepal.

Rinpoche was a great admirer of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and of the FPMT, which he saw as Rinpoche's manifested activity, and he made several trips to FPMT centers around the world.

On October 15, 2014, Rinpoche had a very intimate meeting with His Holiness at his residence in Dharamsala. A day or two later, his blood sugar level spiked but soon settled, and on October 23, after asking his younger brother and lifelong attendant Gen Yeshe Thinley for some blessed substances, he passed away, remaining in meditation for around three days.

His holy body was cremated at Gyuto Monastery on November 3, 2014. The head lamas present for the many services held in his honor were the Ganden Tripa, Rizong Rinpoche; Gyuto Abbot Emeritus Tongpun Rinpoche; and Gyuto Khen Rinpoche Jhado Rinpoche.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has composed a prayer supplicating for Rinpoche's swift return at the request of his students:

Invoking the Truth of the Tri-Ratna: A Supplication for the Swift Return of Kyabje Denma Locho Rinpoche

Shakyamuni, supreme teacher and most sublime expounder of the Dharma, Maitreya, Manjushri, and the seventeen most venerable masters of Nalanda along with the Victor Lobsang, his spiritual offspring and their lineage holders – pray bestow the magnificence of the three most rare jewels.

The *light of your fine* and most exalted *intelligence* illuminated the lotus grove of the sugatas' complete discourse and revealed the *ocean-like* profound peace of the *dharmadhatu*. Lama of beings in this most decadent of times, I supplicate you!

Your most sublime intention and bodhichitta ripened and you practiced the Buddha's teaching in general, and those of the Victor Lobsang specifically. Accomplishing them, you spread and increased them in each and every direction. But to our dismay, you suddenly retired into the sphere of peace.

Nonetheless, you know the general and specific teachings and have concern for others. And so, like the fine examples of the learned and venerable ones of the past, to increase the glory of the Dharma, and for the benefit of beings, please, quickly and without any hindrance, show us an emanation replete with the wondrous qualities of elucidation, debate and composition once again.

Through the infallibility of interdependence and the blessings of the ocean-like hosts of victors and the Three Jewels, may all we have prayed for come to pass in a smooth and timely way, without any obstacles.

COLOPHON:

This supplication for the swift return of the recently deceased Denma Locho Rinpoche, Lobsang Oser Choying Gyatso of Drepung Loseling, was requested by the late Rinpoche's estate as well as by his devoted disciples.

Holder of the title, "Dalai Lama," Shakya bhikshu and Dharma teacher, Tenzin Gyatso.

Provisional translation made at the request of some of the sublime master's devoted disciples by the idiot Sean Price (Gelong Tenzin Jamchen), January 1, 2015.

16. The Life of Khensur Jampa Tegchok Rinpoche

By Ven. Steve Carlier

Mandala July-December 2015, online content

Khensur Jampa Tegchok Rinpoche (affectionately known by students as “Gen-la”) passed away on October 28, 2014, in India at the age of 84. He studied at Sera Je Monastery in Tibet for 14 years before fleeing his homeland in 1959. He taught extensively at the former Manjushri Institute, UK; Nalanda Monastery in France; Land of Medicine Buddha in California, US; Kushi Ling Retreat Centre and in the Masters Program at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Italy. Close disciple and translator Ven. Steve Carlier shared with Mandala some personal memories from those days.

The life of Sera Je Khensur Rinpoche Gen Jampa Tegchog (Gen-la), has come to an end. What appeared out of the dharmakaya has merged back into the dharmakaya.

For his many students, there is a darkness inside and a sense of having lost their father.

He had many, many students from the East and West and affected many lives deeply.

Gen-la was born in 1930. I met him in 1979 at Manjushri Institute in the UK, on the day he arrived. I was living there then. I clearly remember seeing him get out of the car wearing a pair of sunglasses like mirrors, which I found quite odd.

He came from Sarnath, near Varanasi, in North India. He was one of the main teachers at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. His students retained a lifelong appreciation for his kindness. Many of them went on to find good positions and recognized that it was he who had equipped them with the education that made that possible. I don't think they necessarily appreciated him at the time. Several shared quarters with him. They had the back room and if ever they wanted to leave that room, they had to pass before him and be subjected to a dark, forbidding look that made them really think twice about whether they really needed to go out or not. That was how he got them to study.

He was a good friend of Lama Yeshe. It was Lama who had persuaded Gen-la to come to Manjushri to teach the Geshe Program. He had left a very good position at the Tibetan institute at Sarnath, well-paid and with a good pension. And, of course, he was living in a very holy place. He gave all that up to come to the West. In those days at Manjushri, he probably only got a very meager monthly stipend and certainly no pension. It was quite a sacrifice.

He told me several times, “Mao Zedong said Dharma is poison, so I thought to myself, ‘I think I’ll go to the West to plant some seeds of poison there.’”

Trijang Dorje Chang, one of Gen-la’s main gurus, told him before he left for the West in ‘79 that now that Westerners were taking tantric vows, they needed to know how to purify and restore

them with self-initiation, so Gen-la should teach them that. When he eventually came to Nalanda Monastery, he taught us in great detail how to do the Vajrayogini and Yamantaka self-initiations, and we used to do this practice regularly.

I don't know how Lama and Gen-la came to be such good friends, but they were. It was Lama who persuaded Gen-la to come to Manjushri Institute, and it was Lama who later persuaded him to come to Nalanda.

I remember seeing Lama and Gen-la in Gen-la's room, shoving each other about, probably each trying to make the other sit in the better seat. This kind of thing was a bit amazing for me, because one had expectations of decorum and piety from the lamas. They could be serious, too, of course, but they also played around. (Some lamas have a very interesting sense of humor. I was told that one time when the late Ganden Geshe Konchog Tsering was visiting Geshe Wangchen at the old Manjushri London center at Finsbury Park, the other students staying in the house once were woken in the middle of the night by a lot of shouting and shrieking. Geshe Tsering had got up to visit the bathroom and Gen Wangchen had followed him there and locked the bathroom from the outside!)

We used to attend classes in his room. I don't suppose there were more than a half-dozen in the class. Helmut Hohm was senior monk in our class, so he would offer the mandala for the teaching. He sat there chanting with his eyes closed. Gen-la held up a photo of a gorilla right in front of Helmut's face. Helmut opened his eyes and saw it. He wasn't able to finish the prayer for giggling.

When we had a festival at Manjushri Institute, there was a competition called "tossing the wellie," a "wellie" being short for a rubber Wellington boot. Lama and Gen-la were falling about laughing as they vied with each other over who could throw it the furthest.

I can remember a different time when Gen-la was at Nalanda and Lama visited, they went to a summer fair in town, in Lavour, and there was a game where you roll coins down a slope in the hope that if your aim is good a whole pile of coins will tip off the edge which you would win. There was a lot of screeching and laughing as they played that together. You could hear them a mile off. Of course, we were a bit disapproving of such frivolity. Well, I was, anyway.

Like a lot of Tibetans, Gen-la liked to joke. One evening, we were sitting together in his room at Manjushri. We had just been watching the news on an old black and white television which he had for a short while before he told the management to take it back to save on expenses. (The center was very poor.) He told me, "The Yorkshire Ripper stayed with me last night." "Oh," I said. "Where did he stay?" "Under that table there," he replied. I didn't know what to think! It couldn't be true, but because I was young and had strong faith that he didn't lie, it must have been true. It took me some time to realize Gen-la was helping me develop my own wisdom.

He stayed at Manjushri Institute until 1982. That summer he went back to India to renew his travel document. The following summer he came to Nalanda. Again, persuaded by Lama. He stayed until 1993.

While at Ocean of Compassion Center in San Jose, California, Lama Zopa Rinpoche mentioned in public and in Gen-la's presence that when Gen-la was at Nalanda, Gen-la had had to practice patience a lot. An old friend, the late Andrea Antonietti, told me he went to Lama and went on a bit about how terrible a monk and a practitioner he was. Lama told him off, and said to him, "My Sangha are angels." Well, Gen-la had his work cut out with this particular group of angels. Still, we did our best, and I guess he appreciated that, because he did stay 10 years.

In 1993 he was appointed abbot of Sera Je Monastery in South India by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I was standing there while he received the phone call in the office at Nalanda. For a brief moment, there was a look of joy in his eyes. But within seconds, that disappeared, and he said to me, "This is going to be difficult. This is going to be very difficult."

He was very popular with the monks during the seven or so years he served as abbot. He got some very important work done there such as building a sorely needed new Serje temple through an exchange of land between Sera Je and Sera Me that was only made possible due to his good relationship with the monks at Sera Je. He was also very good at dealing with people, creating harmony and promoting reconciliation. They considered him a precious jewel.

Although as abbot he did not have much of a role as teacher, from time to time he would be called upon to talk to the monks going to debate about the lam-rim. Some of these monks said that when he taught, you felt like you were just about to get the realization of whatever topic he was talking about. It was as if he was bringing you into his experience, and for that brief moment you really got a taste of what it was like. His teachings and advice were like nectar and I always found both very effective.

In 2004, after having lived at Sera as abbot emeritus for about three years, he accepted Lama Zopa Rinpoche's invitation to teach at Land of Medicine Buddha in California. I'd gone there separately from the UK to serve as his translator. A few days after I arrived, we received a message saying his arrival was to be delayed and I should teach in his place. He finally arrived ... two years later, in 2006! During that time, he taught about emptiness each Sunday morning. These lectures were intended right from the beginning to serve as the basis for a book. He had been saying for several years that he had spent a long time in the West, that that the West had been very kind to him, housing and feeding him, taking care of him, and that he would soon be gone and wanted to leave something behind as a gift in thanks for all that. Thanks to Wisdom Publications and disciple Ven. Thubten Chodron, his wish came true in the form of the book *Insight into Emptiness*.

He stayed at Land of Medicine Buddha until 2008 when he left to teach at Kushi Ling Retreat Centre in North Italy. It was only natural for him to go there because some time before Claudia Wellnitz had told him that if ever he wanted to go and live there, they had a place for him, even if he didn't teach, and if ever he was ill, they would take care of him. This was important, because he was 78 years old then.

Later on, he was persuaded to join Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa (ILTK). There he taught Madhyamaka philosophy in the Masters Program. It seems to have been a real tour de force. The students were very happy, and amazed. I can imagine. He taught emptiness so often and so clearly.

He told me that he really liked teaching Madhyamaka at ILTK, and really appreciated the opportunity he had of reading texts he had never read before and finding out things he hadn't known before. I was a little bemused by that, because I thought he must have read everything and that he knew everything.

Over ten years ago, probably in 2001, Gen-la kept saying that he wouldn't live much longer. I told this to one of his most dedicated students, who then sat down with him and explained many reasons why he thought Gen-la should stay longer. For a long time after that he stopped talking about how he was about to die. I have always thought that the reason he stayed on in the world for so long was because of that.

He was a really great scholar and a great meditator. His Holiness said to some of his students just after he passed away that they needn't worry and that Gen-la was a true yogi. I heard often that when he was young he was quite a ruffian, and then his brother died and after that he started studying and practicing seriously. He never told me that the story that way. What he told me once, while we were together at Sera, was that he had not been all that good until he got to the Madhyamaka class. Then he memorized Gyalwa Gendun Drub's commentary to the Madhyamakavatara and from then on he was always able to answer well in debate.

For sure he was a great, great master. A great scholar and a great practitioner of both sutra and tantra. Geshe and lamas used to go to him for clarification of the difficult points of sutra and tantra. When he gave initiations, it was always a totally amazing experience, with clear and detailed explanations, and again you really felt as you had been drawn into his experience.

Even on the level of ordinary appearance he seemed to have control over his subtle body – the airs, channels and drops. And therefore, he seemed to have had control over his life and how long he would remain. One of his students told me that one time Gen-la met with Gen Wangchen just before the latter was to undergo surgery. Gen-la told him, "That's good, you'll be able to watch the various signs as the consciousness absorbs," the ones which are similar to the inner signs that appear when we die. They also appear when you fall asleep, but most people don't notice. An accomplished practitioner will be aware and will be able to use the situation for profound meditation.

At LMB, Gen-la showed the aspect of falling ill. One morning during that period he told me that the night before he had seen the death absorptions. I always thought that meant he was dying and had reversed the process, choosing not to die.

I heard people speak of his clairvoyant powers, but I never saw any of that personally. I know that Kiko, the late director at the Tushita Centro de Retiros in Spain and persistent smoker, once visited Nalanda and went to visit Gen-la while he was there. Gen-la gave him a dried apricot. From that moment onwards, he never smoked again. Kiko told me that, and told me that for sure he attributed that to Gen-la and the apricot. There was another old friend who Gen-la was extremely fond of, Denis Huet. He was director at Institut Vajra Yogini in France for many years and was a dedicated smoker. He loved smoking beeties, little Indian cigarettes. He went to Sera and visited Gen-la one year and got a cold. From then on, he never smoked and he attributed that to Gen-la.

I didn't see any of that, but I listened to him teaching a lot, and that was pretty magical. He was not an ordinary person, that's for sure.

Ven. Steve Carlier is a senior English monk, who has studied at Sera Monastery and served as a Tibetan interpreter for Khensur Jampa Tegchok Rinpoche. He is an FPMT In-Depth Buddhism registered teacher and currently resides and teaches at Land of Medicine Buddha in California, US.

17. Obituary for His Eminence Choden Rinpoche

By Ven. Tenzin Gache

Mandala January-June 2015

Although his vajra mind, inseparably merged with the dharmakaya of great bliss, is not bound by the dichotomy of birth and death, in accordance with the karmic vision of disciples, and in order to subdue our clinging to permanence, His Eminence Choden Rinpoche, Losang Gyalten Jigdrel Wangchuk, displayed the aspect of dissolving his consciousness into the sphere of reality at 1:30 A.M. on September 11, 2015, at his home at Sera Je Monastery in South India. He was 81.

To ordinary appearance, Choden Rinpoche took birth in 1933 in Rongbo, Kham, in Eastern Tibet. Recognized at the age of three as the reincarnation of the master Losang Choden Rinpoche, he met Pabongkha Rinpoche at age six. Pabongkha Rinpoche gave Choden Rinpoche getsül ordination and became his primary teacher. He entered the local Rabten Monastery at age eight and completed his first major retreat two years later. At age 15, Rinpoche traveled to Sera Je in Lhasa, along with his brother Thubten Yarphel, who would also go on to become a great scholar-practitioner. (Gen Yarphel passed away in 1997.)

Rinpoche excelled at his studies, memorizing many thousands of pages of philosophical material and having such prowess as a debater that in 1959 he was chosen to debate His Holiness the Dalai Lama during the latter's geshe examinations. Rinpoche completed his geshe studies at age 28 and expressed the wish to enter retreat, but his teacher Geshe Losang Wangchuk, then abbot of Sera, advised him to stay a few more years and study more, especially focusing on vinaya. Rinpoche also studied auxiliary subjects such as Sanskrit, poetry and astrology with a private tutor in Lhasa.

During his years at Sera, Rinpoche maintained a rigorous daily schedule of meditation and recitation of the sadhanas of various tantric deities. Rinpoche also received many teachings from Trijang Rinpoche, Pari Rinpoche and Ling Rinpoche. After the Chinese invasion, conditions for study declined, and Rinpoche set off for retreat in the mountains. The ravages of the Cultural Revolution created obstacles even for solitary practice, and so Rinpoche arranged to stay in a small, unlit dugout beneath the home of a relative in Lhasa. Rinpoche did not leave this room for 19 years, all the while performing various retreats, reciting the rituals from memory. During this time Rinpoche also cultivated the practice of chü len, or taking the essence, thereby foregoing solid food for long stretches. Even after retreat, Rinpoche continued to eat only meager amounts of food.

Finally in 1985, Rinpoche made his way to India, eventually settling at the reestablished Sera Je in South India. There he commenced teaching as a *petri gen* – a philosophical debate instructor – for the younger generation of monks. His students, including the late Geshe Jampa Gelek, who was resident teacher at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, recall how he would frequently intersperse his debate instruction with practical advice from his own experience. Rinpoche maintained a

supremely humble aspect and when not teaching would spend all his time sitting in his room, studying or meditating.

Rinpoche held the monastic life in high esteem, encouraging the young monks to always attend the daily pujas and debate, and live simple lives, adhering to the regulations of the monastery. Occasionally, Rinpoche would compose short, practical texts at the request of students, but primarily he would focus on study and retreat, commenting that “there is plenty already written; what we need is people to put it into practice.” He eschewed any kind of position in the monastic hierarchy, preferring to remain a quiet yogi and teacher for devoted students. Nevertheless, his reputation as an immense scholar, meticulous vinaya holder, and supreme master of meditation spread, and his public teachings usually attracted the majority of the monastic population.

In 1998, at the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Rinpoche began traveling to FPMT centers around the world, touching the hearts of thousands of foreign students with his sincere, soft-spoken demeanor and precise, experiential teaching style. At the end of each year, he would return to give extensive public teachings at Sera to thousands of monks, including high lamas and lineage holders, and foreign guests. These teachings included the oral transmission of the complete works of Je Tsongkhapa, Gyaltsab Je, Khedrub Je, Jetsün Chökyi Gyaltzen, and the Vajravali Cycle of empowerments. Even during his years of almost constant travel, Rinpoche never wasted a single opportunity for practice. During car or plane rides, he would make mandala offerings and recite his commitments. During teachings, when he paused for the translator, he would quietly recite mantras and meditate.

“The first night I stayed at Rinpoche’s house in California after he told me to travel with him,” shared former attendant Gyaltän Sangpo, “I woke up about 5 A.M. with the idea to go circumambulate the house. I had some reluctance as I didn’t want to disturb Rinpoche by walking around his room. But when I turned around in bed to face the window, Rinpoche was standing right outside staring at me! ... Rinpoche had a delightful and playful sense of humor.”

After over 15 years of continuous travel, Rinpoche finally began to slow down in 2014, when a Taiwanese doctor diagnosed him with stage-4 stomach cancer. Surprising the doctor, Rinpoche made a temporary recovery and was able to give important teachings on the Manjushri Dharmachakra at Sera in December.

Rinpoche spent most of 2015 resting in Taiwan. In August, His Holiness the Dalai Lama observed ominous signs and urged Rinpoche to return to India. On August 29, His Holiness met Rinpoche in Delhi, praising him as a sincere disciple who had come to the end of a successful life. His Holiness also assured Rinpoche that they would meet again in future lifetimes, continuing to work together for the benefit of sentient beings.

On August 31, Rinpoche returned to his *labrang* (house) at Sera. Coming out of the car in a wheelchair, Rinpoche sat on his front porch as an assembly of monks came to offer khatas. Many of the monks were crying, but Rinpoche, smiling broadly, maintained his usual appearance of utmost peace and detachment. As though he had planned it ahead of time, Rinpoche then commenced the work of preparing to transition to his next life. A group of students, led by Sera

Me Gen Thubten Rinchen, performed the self-empowerments of Rinpoche's five main deities over five days: Yamantaka, Guhyasamaja, Heruka Chakrasamvara, Vajrayogini and Cittamani Tara. Lying in bed in the next room, Rinpoche listened through a radio. His attendant noted that despite being unable to move his body, Rinpoche perfectly recited all of the rituals from memory and performed the appropriate hand mudras.

After completing the rituals, Rinpoche took some fruit juice and yogurt and then stopped taking any more food or medicine. For several days, he meditated and made strong prayers in front of the statues on his altar, especially Avalokiteshvara. Shortly before passing away, Rinpoche sat up on his throne and successively displayed three mudras of teaching and meditation. He then lay down on his right side in the posture the Buddha adopted at death, the lion's posture. Calmly he said, "The most important thing is to remember the kindness of the Buddha and abide in that remembrance." Then he recited a verse from Arya Nagarjuna's *Five Stages*:

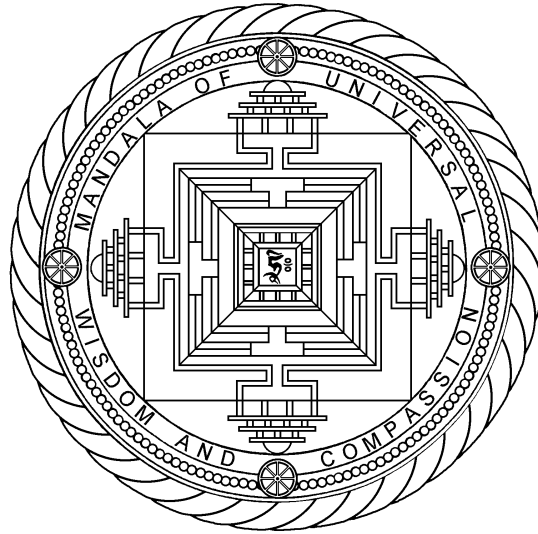
*Whatever a yogi observes,
He should view it as like an illusion.
Whoever sees things as similar to a reflection in a mirror,
A dream, an illusion, a water bubble,
Or a trick of the eye:
[The Buddha] said that one is the foremost [practitioner].*

As he finished speaking, Rinpoche entered a state of profound meditation, progressively actualizing the three emptinesses and the clear light. After he stopped breathing, he remained in meditation for three days as his disciples again performed the self-empowerments. Rinpoche had said he would not remain long in meditation so as to reincarnate and return quickly. Outside his house every evening, thousands of monks would gather on the lawn to recite great Indian and Tibetan philosophical texts with a substantial group staying until dawn.

Jangtse Chöje Lobsang Tenzin Rinpoche and monks from Gyuto Tantric College presided over Rinpoche's cremation on September 15 at Lhopa Khangtsen, Rinpoche's house group. Four days later, Gen Thubten Rinchen guided the process of opening the cremation stupa. Among the ashes, Gen-la discovered relics and some bone fragments with writing on them. Under the hearth, dust had condensed in the form of a small vajra. Rinpoche's students enthroned his relics in his house as an auspicious sign for his swift return.

Choden Rinpoche was one of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachers. Lama Zopa Rinpoche received news of Choden Rinpoche's passing during the "Essence of Nectar" retreat in Mexico. The next day Rinpoche led retreat participants in Lama Chöpa with tsog, emphasizing the importance of the tsog offering as a way of purifying negative karma created in relation to the guru. Read more about Choden Rinpoche on FPMT.org: <http://fpmt.org/tag/choden-rinpoche/>.

Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition



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