

Helping Buddhism Strengthen and Grow in Russia:

AN INTERVIEW WITH TELO RINPOCHE



**TELO RINPOCHE,
MOSCOW, RUSSIA,
JUNE 2015**



When we think of the historic religions of Russia, we probably think of Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam. But what about Tibetan Buddhism? The presence of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Russia – primarily from the Gelug tradition – stretches back to the early 17th century when it spread with the Mongols. Over the decades and centuries, temples and monasteries were established in Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia. Buddhism became a significant enough religion in Russia in the early 20th century to lead to the building of a large Kalachakra temple, consecrated in 1915, in St. Petersburg. But after the Russian revolution in 1917 and during the Soviet era, Buddhists from Kalmykia, Tuva and Buryatia faced brutal oppression and persecution.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, a Buddhist revival was able to begin. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama made his first visit to Russia, specifically Tuva, in 1992.

Today, Telo Tulku Rinpoche serves as the honorary representative of His Holiness in Russia and is responsible for helping rebuild Buddhism in the historically Buddhist regions of Russia. Telo Rinpoche has been active in the reestablishment of Buddhism in the Russian state of Kalmykia since being chosen as its head lama in 1992. He is currently based in Moscow. But his journey to this position began in the United States, in Philadelphia, where he was born in 1972 to immigrant Kalmyk parents.

In a café in Moscow in June 2015, Ven. Roger Kunsang, Lama Zopa Rinpoche's assistant and CEO of FPMT, interviewed Telo Rinpoche while Lama Zopa Rinpoche listened attentively. (Lama Zopa Rinpoche was in Russia giving teachings organized by Ganden Tendar Ling, the FPMT center in Moscow.)

Telo Rinpoche tells Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Ven. Roger about his early years and the path to becoming His Holiness' honorary representative in Russia.

Start with before you were born.

Telo Rinpoche: My predecessor was Mongolian and ordained. He was widely known in Mongolia as Dilowa Huthuktu, “Huthuktu” being a title that was given by the Manchurian emperor and “Dilowa” being the Mongolian for “Tilopa,” one of the mahasiddhas. My lineage comes from that particular lineage. The last four incarnations were born in Mongolia and my predecessor was very

famous in Mongolia, not only because of his religious studies and knowledge, but because he was also very politically active in the time when Soviet Communism was being introduced into Mongolia. He was totally against Communism and he was very active in trying to prevent Communism from being spread in Mongolia.

Unfortunately, he had to go into exile. First, he went to Inner Mongolia. But at that time, China was going through



**TELETULKU RINPOCHE AND
LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE IN
MOSCOW, JUNE 2015**

change, and again he had to go into exile, this time to Taiwan. After some time, he came back to China and was based in Nanjing. In the early days, His Holiness' older brothers, Gyalo Dhondup and Thupten Jigme Norbu, met with Dilowa Huthuktu when they went to study in Nanjing and he introduced them to Chiang Kai-shek.

In the late 1940s-early 1950s, more changes to the region took place and he had to permanently go into exile in America. He was probably one of the very first Tibetan Buddhist lamas who immigrated to America. This is also when the Kalmyk immigrants started to flourish in America. Because of the Second World War, our people were exiled and deported to Siberia from Kalmykia and there was a group that eventually went into exile in America. When Dilowa Huthuktu heard about the Kalmyk immigrants that had settled in Howell, New Jersey, he decided to move from New York to live among them. He became their lama and lived among the community until the end of his life, which was in 1967.

Now, let's talk about you.

I was born in 1972 into a Kalmyk family. Both my parents came from Kalmykia. They immigrated to America in the late 1940s-early 1950s. At a very young age, I was attracted to Buddhist images, like thangkas. There are a few temples in Kalmykia whose images I was very attracted to. Other kids wanted to be president or firemen or police officers or a doctor or whatever. In my case, it was always clear that I wanted to be a monk.

I come from a very big family; I have five brothers and three sisters. I'm the youngest. Both my parents, and especially my grandparents, were very religious people. My parents considered themselves Buddhist, but they had very limited knowledge because they went through so much during the Second World War and lived as refugees in the Eastern part of Europe for a while. They had very limited access to religion or information,

but nevertheless they were very devout Buddhists.

In 1979 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama made his first North American tour, I had a chance to meet with him. At that time, I was already living at the Kalmyk Buddhist temple in Howell with four or five monks from Kalmykia, Mongolian and Inner Mongolian. My parents were there at the meeting as well as one of the monks.

My mother said to His Holiness, "This boy wants to become a monk, but we don't know what to do. What do you suggest doing?" His Holiness said, "Send him to India. That's where he can get proper Buddhist training. There's no such place in America where he can get an education in Dharma."

In April 1980, my mother took me to India. Historically, the Mongolians and the Kalmyks have joined Drepung Gomang Monastery, and my grandparents wanted to continue this tradition. Upon arrival, I don't think I faced any hardships. I blended in immediately. Like they say in the West, it was my fate or calling. I think karma definitely played a huge role.



Who would have known back in 1980, when I was recognized, that Russia would go through such political change? Who would have known back then that Kalmykia would need a Buddhist lama or leader to assist in the revival, development and reintroduction of Buddhism?

Could you speak the language?

I didn't speak Tibetan at all when I got there, but I picked it up quite fast. At that time, the abbot of Drepung Gomang Monastery was a Buryat Mongol named Ngawang Nyima and was one of the last Mongolian scholars that went into exile. I think he saw something unusual in me. His Holiness came to Drepung Monastery in July-August 1980 and he gave a month-long teaching. The abbot had a meeting with His Holiness and informed His Holiness about the unusual things he saw in me. His Holiness said to give him a list of Mongolian lamas or scholars that had passed away in the last 15 or so years. The abbot came up with a list of 15 names and one of them was the Dilowa Huthuktu. Later, in September I believe, that's when the recognition letter came from His Holiness' office.

Can you say what the signs were or what the abbot took notice of?

I remember a day before His Holiness visited the Drepung Gomang temple, the abbot and the administration were planning

the seating arrangements in the prayer hall. I lived next door and was running around and saw them planning. I remember walking up to the abbot and asking him in Mongolian, because I didn't speak Tibetan yet, "Where am I going to be sitting?" I remember him telling me that I was a newcomer and in the monastery we have seniority, which means I would be sitting at the very back.

I remember telling him, "No, no. I don't belong there. I belong up over there on the double cushions!" He said, "Not right now. If you study well then you can have five cushions!" I remember that very clearly and I kind of remember just sitting back and admiring those cushions. [Pearly laughter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche.]

They say that there were other signs, but I don't have any other recollections of them.

What about signs later in life?

It's a work in progress. It's a puzzle that comes together piece by piece. As you get older, you question yourself a lot, and I think every human being goes through that. I question myself a lot. I question Russia a lot. I also question Kalmykia a lot. But I think now that I'm more mature, I can see all the pieces of the puzzle that came into place.

Who would have known back in 1980, when I was recognized, that Russia would go through such political change? Who would have known back then that Kalmykia would need a Buddhist lama or leader to assist in the revival, development and reintroduction of Buddhism? There's definitely karmic relationships. My predecessor was Mongolian, but the later part of his life he spent around the Kalmyk community. He passed away with them, and the next reincarnation was born in a Kalmyk family; these are all karmic puzzle pieces that have come into place. I look back now and say, "Yeah, it makes sense." We accept it and move forward.

Do you want to say something about your time at Drepung Gomang?

Studying in the monastery was great. It was the most fun period in my whole life. [Lama Zopa Rinpoche starts laughing.]

All you wonder about is play; all you contemplate about is play; all you care about is play; everything is play. You are punished sometimes, but I think the fun that we had was worth the punishment.

Why did you leave monastic life?

I would not say I left the monastery with 100 percent free will; it was probably a mistake born from stubbornness, arrogance and ignorance. Those have probably been the biggest reasons that I left. There are many lamas who say that they left the monkhood

so that they could become a layperson and spread the Dharma and reach out to people more on a human level, but I don't believe in that. That's total denial of their own arrogance, ignorance and stubbornness.



When I went to Russia at 19, it was very challenging, because I was dealing with the Communist mentality and a completely different culture.

When I left in the early 1990s, I was frustrated with who I was and what it meant I had to do. When I became head of the Buddhists in Kalmykia, I was only 19 years old. When you grow up in a monastery, you're not trained or prepared for that responsibility. The preparation that the monastery gives is a good education and the information that you'll someday go out and teach. But there's nothing written that says, "From 19, you're going to go out and do this." Or, "From 25, you're going to do that."

When I went to Russia at 19, it was very challenging, because I was dealing with the Communist mentality and a completely different culture. I was a monk still at that time and I hadn't finished my studies yet – but there was no choice; there was no other candidate to go. I think I was also experiencing a lack self-confidence, a lack of belief in who I was told I was.

I had been in Kalmykia for a year and a half when I said, "I can't do this." That's where I took the wrong exit. Again, I think I left because of frustration and wanting to escape responsibilities, and not knowing how to find a better way. At the time, disrobing and not being bothered with it was what I could do. But that was not the solution, and here I am 25 years later.

After I disrobed in 1993, I ran away from everybody and myself for about two years. In 1995, when His Holiness gave the Kalachakra initiation in Mundgod, India, I decided to go there. His Holiness saw me and said, "Come and see me." I went and at the very beginning got a scolding. His Holiness' temper doesn't last very long, which I compare to an ignited match stick. Then, he was very compassionate and very compassionately advised me to go back to Kalmykia. "You have already planted some seeds there and made a relationship, even though you're not a monk. You probably won't be as effective as a monk would be, but that doesn't mean you can't do anything. Go back and continue." And so I decided I would go back. Frankly speaking, I was pretty lost,

and that's one of the things I said to His Holiness: "Guide me in the right direction, I'm lost."

Going back to that period when you got frustrated and disrobed, what would you change? How would you change things to make it better for young nuns or monks in similar situations?

If they're going to run away, then they should have a plan for what to do next – a plan for their life. For me, it's a good thing I was born in the United States. Once I left the monastery, I went back to the US, but the mistake I made after returning was not taking advantage of the variety of options that were out there in terms of education and so forth. Once I went back, I needed to support myself, so I went to look for random jobs, which was very easy to do being an American citizen and being part of American society.

But in India, if a monk disrobes, where does he go? How are they going to support themselves? How many ex-monks go to the army because they have no place to go and the army is recruiting people? How many go and sell sweaters without any business background and how many fail? How many have the opportunity to go to school? They don't. Unless they are an ex-monk from Sera Je Monastery, where they have a good school system. I think they at least go through the 10th grade there. If they leave the monastery, at least they still have that certificate of 10th grade. They have just a final two years of high school and then they can go for higher education at university or college.

So that's the advice I would give: Always have a plan.

Most schools now have counselors that work with children as they're growing up, helping them think about what they might do in the future, and coming up with a plan. Do they have that kind of thing in the monasteries?

They don't have it. It's not a part of their culture, and it's not an easy thing to introduce. There are a lot of things that could be reformed, but I don't see that particular thing happening in the near future.

Would you like to talk about the work you're doing now?

It's not my intention to sound like I'm bragging, but here in Russia I think Tibetan Buddhism has a very good reputation because of the work that I've done, because of the effort I've put into it. And not just in Kalmykia, but in Russia in general. I'm treating everybody equally, having a non-sectarian approach, trying to fulfill their needs in terms of the Dharma

as a friend, guide and advisor. I think I've succeeded in many ways, and I think it's one of my proudest achievements. I'm in a place that nobody wanted to come to.

You mean the position.

Not only the position, but in a place where in the early 1990s, not even a lama wanted to set foot in Russia. Russia was poor. Russia did not have that many oligarchs at that time. But now Russia is a rich country, economically it is very rich although we may not see or feel it or have a taste of it. It's a country of great opportunities, more than what the world media portray. Now that people are getting to know Russia, slowly, many high lamas are reaching out to me and saying, "Remember you invited me back in the '90s?" [Laughter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche.]

Can you say something about the work you're doing now or would like to do?

Right now I am the honorary representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama here in Russia. His Holiness gives us advice and guidance. My main responsibility – unlike other Tibet offices – is non-political, although to a certain extent, when you speak about Tibet or the Dalai Lama, there are politics involved.

For centuries, Russia has had political and religious ties with Tibet, although nowadays the Central Tibetan Administration makes a big deal about having a relationship with America, the UK, Europe and so forth. But those relationships were established in the last 50 years. With Russia, it has been over 300 years. This relationship has to be honored. It has to be improved and cultivated.

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You mean the relationship with the Mongolian communities within Russia's geographical area?

Yes, the Mongolian communities in Russia – Buryatia, Tuva, Kalmykia – they have been part of the Russian Empire for 400 years. We played a big role way before the Americans, the Europeans and other countries set foot in Tibet. You probably heard in the last century or so in Tibet that no foreigners were allowed. The only foreigners that were allowed into Tibet were the Russians – the Buryats, Tuvans and Kalmyks. How did they get to Tibet if no foreigners were allowed? They must have been a special case.

Russia has a very bright future. Our job as the representatives is to reach out to these communities and to find ways to help them, because they all suffered under Communism. They lost a lot and Tibetans have preserved that. So Tibetans have a responsibility as well as the ability to share what was lost with the Mongolians here in Russia.

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And we have something to offer Tibet. We offer our experience living under Communism – what it felt like, what we lost, what we preserved, how to protect that. Look at

Kalmykia, look at me, a pure Kalmyk. Our culture, our identity, our way of life, what have we lost in this experience? We lost our language. Why? Because we became part of the Communist system. So, there are a lot of things that Tibetans can learn from us as well.

Going into the future, what is it that you want to achieve in this position? What would you like to see happen in Russia?

I think there are a lot of things that we want to happen, of course, but then again there's never going to be a satisfactory point where we say, "Okay, our job is complete. Now, we're out of here." That's never going to happen. What we would like to see is not only for the Dharma to grow, but also to see more exchange between Russian and Tibetan Buddhist culture, whether it's personal, academic or scientific. There's a lot that needs to be improved; there's a lot that needs to be done. We want to try to find ways to improve that exchange, strengthen it and make it grow. ■



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