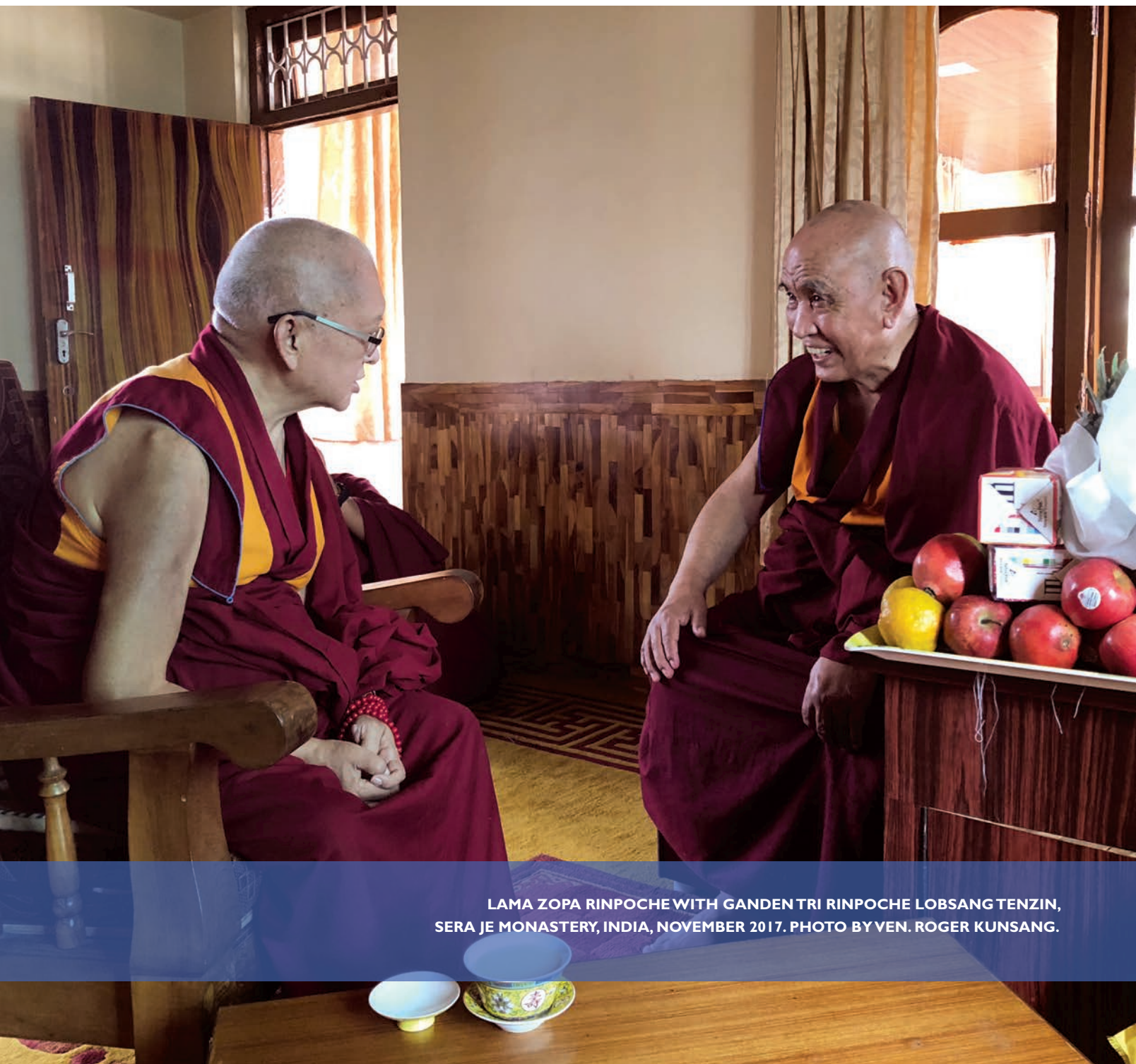


A LIFE DEDICATED TO DHARMA:



LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE WITH GANDEN TRI RINPOCHE LOBSANG TENZIN,
SERA JE MONASTERY, INDIA, NOVEMBER 2017. PHOTO BY VEN. ROGER KUNSANG.



AN INTERVIEW WITH GANDEN TRI RINPOCHE LOBSANG TENZIN

The position of Ganden Tripa, which can be translated as “holder of the Ganden throne,” is the head of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike reincarnation lineages, the Ganden Tripa is an appointed position, held for seven years, and alternately filled by the Jangtse Choje and the Sharpa Choje. The 104th Ganden Tripa was enthroned in a ceremony August 4–5, 2017, at Gaden Tri-Thok-Khang in Mundgod, South India.

The current throne holder, Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin, was born in Tibet in 1934 and ordained as a monk at the age of seven. He entered Sera Je Monastery in Tibet at age sixteen. In 1959, he fled Sera Je and went into exile in India, where he continued his studies. In 1979, he was awarded the geshe lharampa degree. He then entered Gyume Tantric College. In 1981, he was chosen to serve as master of discipline at Gyume. He was appointed abbot of Gyume in 1985, holding the position for six years.

Since then he has taught widely in India and the West, including at many FPMT centers. He was appointed to the position of Jangtse Choje in 2010, which placed him in line to become Ganden Tripa.

In June 2017 just after his appointment by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin visited Maitripa College and FPMT International Office in Portland, Oregon, US. Leigh Miller, program director at Maitripa College, and Laura Miller, managing editor of *Mandala*, had the opportunity to interview Ganden Tri Rinpoche and were joined by Maitripa College president Yangsi Rinpoche, who served as the interpreter during the interview.

Ganden Tri Rinpoche spoke of his experience as a young monk in Tsang, Tibet, the impact of Chinese military activities on his studies, his decision to flee Tibet, and his thoughts regarding the current state of monastic education in India.

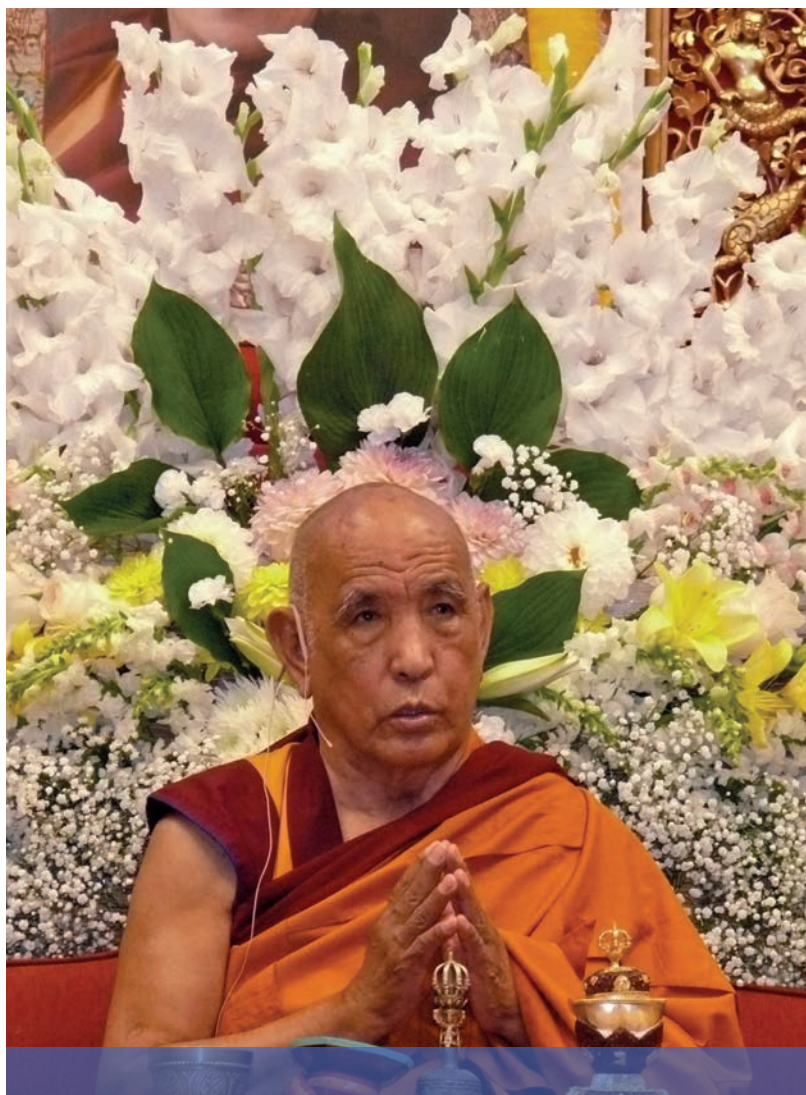
Leigh Miller: Was it your own wish or your parents’ wish that you became a novice monk at Lhatse Chode in Tsang?

Ganden Tri Rinpoche: I was young at the time, so it was mainly my parents who encouraged me to become a novice. They were the ones who facilitated my taking ordination in the monastery.

Leigh: Were your parents very religious people?

GTR: As far as my parents being practitioners, they mostly did things like making offerings and saying prayers. They had a great deal of faith. They made offerings and prostrations—they did things like that. But as far as knowing about the meaning of Dharma, they really did not know much.

Laura Miller: What were your studies like at Lhatse Chode?



**GANDEN TRI RINPOCHE LOBSANG TENZIN DURING LONG LIFE
PUJA AT DEER PARK BUDDHIST CENTER, WISCONSIN, US, 2015.
PHOTO BY KALLEEN MORTENSEN.**

GTR: We had to memorize and have exams on about 500 pages of texts from the Abhidharma, the Vinaya, Madhyamaka philosophy, the *Ornament for the Sutras*, and others. When you had an exam, which is an oral recitation of everything you had memorized, it wasn't just with a teacher. Rather, you were required to give the exam in an assembly, when all the monks had gathered.

Until the age of sixteen, I stayed at Lhatse Chode following the course of study, doing as much as I possibly could, memorizing texts, and beginning the study of philosophy. Then I went to Sera Je Monastery to deepen my studies.

Leigh: How was the decision made to go to Sera Je Monastery from Lhatse Chode?

GTR: It was my own wish to do so. It has nothing to do with the monastery or the teachers, but rather I had a desire to really pursue my studies more seriously. Those from our monastery wanting to deepen their textual studies had the option of going to either Sera or Drepung. So once I entered Sera, I began my studies of the great texts, covering the topics of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the Middle Way, the Abhidharma, and so on in a sequential way.

Lama Yeshe [who with Lama Zopa Rinpoche founded the FPMT organization] was in the class ahead of me at Sera. We had many of the same teachers, including Geshe Ngawang Gedun, the previous incarnation of Yangsi Rinpoche. Except for the fact that we did not come from the same *khangtsen* (monastic house), our education in the monastery in Tibet was very similar, the same teachers, classes, and course of study. Even when we left for India and arrived in Buxa, our paths were very similar.

Lama Yeshe had the opportunity to go to Nepal and started what became Kopan Monastery there, so he did not have the opportunity to go to tantric college for studies. He left, however, with an intention to benefit others through spreading Dharma. So our journeys were largely the same until this point of divergence. I continued after passing my geshe exams to the tantric college.

Leigh: As a monk at Sera Je, what was your experience of the escalation of tensions with the Chinese military, the political situation in Lhasa, and going into exile in 1959?

GTR: When we went to India, we all thought that we were going to return to Tibet, that this wasn't going to last very long. We had no desire to remain in India for an extended time. We believed that we would return after the situation changed.

Leigh: Can you describe what you witnessed when Sera Monastery was shelled in March 1959?

GTR: We were staying at the monastery, and then in the night, maybe at midnight, the first shelling occurred. And then the next day there were many bombs falling, mostly on the hills around the monastery.

I heard the sounds of this shelling as we were staying in the temple at Sera. There was lots of shelling happening around various parts of Lhasa. There was talk going around that the following night at eleven, while we were resting, they would shell the

monastery itself. So upon hearing this, we fled from Sera. Some of the young monks wanted to try to join some kind of military, but most decided to try to return to their own home monasteries. It was because of hearing that the monastery would be bombed that most decided to leave.

Leigh: Some monks fought and some fled. How were those decisions made?

GTR: We, most of us, did not even have the thought of fighting; so other than fleeing, we didn't see another option. We had no interest in picking up guns, and we had no training or anything. Other than fleeing, there was nothing to do.

As we were trying to leave the monastery along the road, they were bombing from planes. None of them hit me, but it was very scary. They were bombing all around, so it was safer to move at night and hide during the day.

Leigh: What did you carry with you when you fled?

GTR: We didn't carry anything with us; we left everything, even our *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), as we were fleeing out of fear of being bombed. There was no planning or packing, but when word spread about the Chinese plans to bomb the monastery that night, most of the monks made the decision to flee. There was a line of monks leaving.

Leigh: So there were monks going in all directions, and you decided to return to your home monastery of Lhatse Chode.

GTR: Yes, I planned to go back to Lhatse Chode in Tsang. Tashi Lhunpo, which was viewed relatively favorably by the Chinese, is in that area and had influence and an affiliation with Lhatse Chode, so I felt there wouldn't be problems there. I went to Tsang, and, at first, there weren't any real problems. But then the Chinese military truly arrived in the area. They began tightening restrictions, implementing the reeducation campaign, destroying religious objects, and so forth.

At first the monks at the monastery tried to remain, but slowly they went into exile. I stayed in the monastery for four or five months, but they made it very difficult for monks to remain, so I decided flee from there.

Leigh: It sounds like the patriotic reeducation campaign and the *tamtsig* (struggle sessions) basically took over the whole environment at Lhatse Chode.



LHASA CITYSCAPE WITH THE POTALA PALACE AND SURROUNDING MONASTERIES AND TEMPLES. SERA MONASTERY IS REPRESENTED IN THE UPPER RIGHT CORNER. MONGOLIAN, 1900-1959. COPYRIGHT © 2018 HIMALAYAN ART RESOURCES INC. PHOTOGRAPHED IMAGE COPYRIGHT © 2005 ZANABAZAR MONGOLIA NATIONAL MUSEUM.

GTR: There were three things they said they wanted to “cleanse” or destroy: the Tibetan monasteries, the aristocrats, and the government. During the reeducation campaign, they would imprison people from the monastery, those who were educated, those who were officials, those who were wealthy, and so forth, and they would make the worse-off people criticize and insult them.

If they didn't take part in the divisive criticizing, they were beaten. Those with wealth or status or education from the monastery endured great difficulties at that time. They endured a great deal of suffering. If I were to explain, it would never end. At that point there was no opportunity to study, so I left.

Leigh: What effect did this treatment have on the monks' minds?

GTR: Well, we certainly experienced sadness, mental unhappiness. However, most turned to thoughts of karma and the collective karma of the Tibetan people that was ripening. We accepted the situation as a result of karma. The pain was lessened by turning the mind to this point of view.

Leigh: What were some of the factors going into a monk's decision of whether to stay in Tibet or to leave?

GTR: There are a variety of choices the monks could make. Some, thinking of their relatives or the difficulties of traveling such a long distance, felt they could not bring themselves to leave and decided to stay. In seeing what was happening in Tibet, I decided to make the trip to India, practicing and meditating as I could along the way.

Due to His Holiness's kindness and blessings, we were able to go to India and create new conditions for continuing our studies. With help from His Holiness, the Indian government, and various other groups and NGOs, we were settled at Buxa, where we were able to continue our education. It was a good period of time, we were able to study and practice.

Laura: What was your experience of the Buxa refugee camp? And how did the conditions there impact the ability of the monks to study and to progress?

GTR: Buxa was good because we had the freedom to study and practice. One significant difficulty, however, was the poor sanitation conditions and water in that area. During the time of the British occupation of India, there had been a prison camp there, which left it in a bad condition, particularly the water. There was a lot of disease. Many monks got sick during this time. I myself got sick; I contracted tuberculosis. I had to go to a hospital for treatment, including a surgery. That was the one major difficulty.

But the Indian government took care of all of the expenses for the monks' medical care, and many, many monks needed medical treatment. They covered all of the costs for that.

Laura: Where did you complete your geshe lharampa degree?

GTR: I started my coursework leading to a geshe degree during my time in Tibet, but I completed the remainder of my studies in India, at Buxa, and in South India [where Sera Je Monastery was reestablished]. Most of my studies were in Buxa. I had my final exam in South India in the 1970s.

Laura: Can you talk about how it was that the monasteries came to be rebuilt in South India?

GTR: At the beginning, we did not have plans to move to South India, but rather had the thought to go near Dharamsala. However, if we only thought of those of us who had escaped in 1959, about the 1,500 monks living in Buxa, eventually we would be gone, and there would be no one left to carry on.

Some of the exiled Tibetan government officials with a long-term view, therefore, thought that it would be better to move to the Tibetan settlement areas and to set up something there that could be stable and lasting. By finding land and building a monastery, there would be a place for new monks to come and continue the tradition with the proper conducive circumstances. At first the monks in Buxa did not want to move, but eventually, they came to understand and agreed to the plans to go south.

So, we moved down to a Tibetan settlement in South India, and at first it was quite difficult. We were responsible for building up the settlement with the support of the Indian government. We labored at building houses, clearing grasses, planting fields, and so forth. The Indian government compensated us with two Indian rupees per day. We had to take care of all of the development of the settlement; everything had to be built from the ground up.

Laura: During those years, was there time to study at all? Or was most of your time spent doing labor?

GTR: During those first years, the majority of our time was spent working, building houses, or farming. There was only a little amount of time to study. After the first few years, there was much more time to study, and the monastery implemented a system whereby those who were interested in studies focused on their education, while others less inclined did more of the labor. Those pursuing a geshe degree were given the time to study rather than doing other work. We came through a lot of hardship.

Laura: How do people develop within the monastery into leadership positions such as disciplinarian, abbot, and so forth? Is it matter of one's own effort and interest, or is one chosen for the position?

GTR: Those who stand out within a given class can potentially be nominated for such a position. For the positions like disciplinarian and so forth, one has to reach a certain level in their classes to be eligible. Then based on seniority and rank within the classes, the position is decided by consensus and voting. With regard to the abbot, there is a process by which the individual is nominated by consensus from within the monastery, but His Holiness makes the final decision about the selection.

Leigh: This kind of democratic process, was this the way it was done in Tibet, or was this a new system for a new place?

GANDEN TRI RINPOCHE ON THE EDUCATION OF YANGSI RINPOCHE

Yangsi Rinpoche is the founder and president of Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon, US. Lama Yeshe first identified Yangsi Rinpoche as the reincarnation of Geshe Ngawang Gendun, who was a teacher of both Lama Yeshe and Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin at Sera Je Monastery in Tibet. Yangsi Rinpoche was enthroned at Kopan Monastery in Nepal in January 1975, when Rinpoche was age six. He received his geshe lharampa degree at Sera Je Monastery in 1995.

During the interview, Ganden Tri Rinpoche recalled his teacher Geshe Ngawang Gendun and how Lama Yeshe, Ganden Tri Rinpoche, and Geshe Lhundub Sopa became involved with the education of Yangsi Rinpoche. Ganden Tri Rinpoche told this story while Yangsi Rinpoche was seated next to him, serving as his interpreter, and showing the aspect of being a little embarrassed.

It was Lama Yeshe who sought out the reincarnation of our teacher and first identified the reincarnation. Geshe Ngawang Gendun was incredible, truly incredible. He was well respected among all the three seats [Sera, Drepung, and Ganden monasteries] as a very great scholar and practitioner.

So Lama Yeshe said to me, “I have found the reincarnation of our teacher, Geshe Ngawang Gendun; this has already been accomplished. Now it is our responsibility, all of us [his students], to see that he is properly educated, that all his good qualities flourish. So please come to Kopan, so we can discuss.”

Lama Yeshe planned for the reincarnation of Geshe Ngawang Gendun to be educated at Kopan Monastery. But I was not happy with that arrangement, and so I went to talk with a teacher of mine, Geshe Lhundub Sopa [who was also a student of Geshe Ngawang Gendun and a teacher of Lama Yeshe]. At that time, I explained the situation and asked him what should be done. I told him what Lama Yeshe had said to me and requested his advice. So first Geshe Sopa said I should go investigate the situation.

Having gone to Nepal to visit Kopan, on my return to India, I stopped in Dharamsala to speak with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I consulted with His Holiness, explaining my plans to have my geshe exam the following year and then go to Kopan to educate the reincarnation. His Holiness said that instead of

immediately going to Kopan to oversee the education of the reincarnation, I should go to tantric college following the completion of my geshe degree. So following the advice of His Holiness, after completing my geshe studies, I entered into tantric college.

Then His Holiness visited Sera Je Monastery in South India, and my teacher Geshe Sopa [who was teaching in the United States] was also in attendance for teachings and to witness some of the exams. His Holiness and Geshe Sopa were able to see the education programs for monks that had emerged at that time. New monks were debating and pursuing their studies with great enthusiasm. It made them both happy seeing the monks' education.

Observing the rigor of the studies of the young monks at Sera Je, Geshe Sopa decided that the reincarnation should not stay at Kopan, but rather come down to Sera Je where I would watch over him. Although the kind of education program at Kopan was good, it was not like the three great seats, and Geshe Sopa believed it would be better for this young monk to be at Sera Je.

From the time that the reincarnation of Geshe Ngawang Gendun arrived through all of his classes until giving his geshe exam, I was the main person who watched over and advised him. He entered the monastery and proceeded sequentially through all of the classes up through completing his geshe exams.



**YANGSI RINPOCHE AT HIS ENTHRONEMENT,
KOPAN MONASTERY, NEPAL, JANUARY 1975.
PHOTO COURTESY OF LAMA YESHE
WISDOM ARCHIVE.**

GTR: In Tibet there was no system of voting and consensus. There, His Holiness would select the abbot, and then the abbot would be the one who appointed the disciplinarian, for example. That was the way it worked previously in Tibet.

Laura: Can we talk a little bit more about comparing the differences in monastic training between India today and the way that it was done in Tibet before 1959?

GTR: If you were to compare the two, the way of study was a bit stronger in Tibet. Today in exile the education is good in the monasteries, but it isn't of the caliber that it was in Tibet. What they are doing in terms of studying the great texts and philosophy, engaging in debate, and so forth, this is something good. They have even integrated the study of science and expanded the kind of education available to monks.

However, we see that for the young monks, there are many conditions that cause the decline of their studies. There are challenges with the amount of distractions that can weaken study. This is something that we have to be very careful about, and I think it is very important to address, as there is a real danger of a decline in learning.

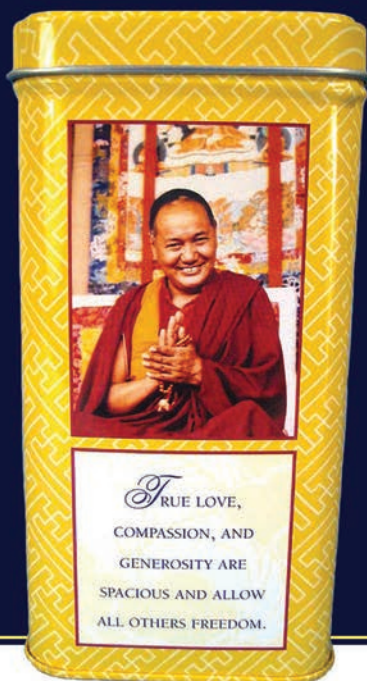
Laura: As the Ganden Tripa, what are the top priorities that you will be working on?

GTR: I don't have any specific new initiatives, but my main goal is to preserve and strengthen everything that is currently in place, in terms of education and so forth. In particular, I want to try to reduce the impact of modern distractions and preserve our tradition of education. I do not have in mind creating new initiatives, but rather my focus is on protecting and strengthening the systems we do have and on removing obstacles and challenges presented by our modern world.

I will try my best, but I am not ambitious in my goals. These days the Dharma has spread throughout the world, benefiting many who have encountered it. Then of course the goals include preserving the teachings of the Buddha, of Je Lama Tsongkhapa, and seeing that they flourish in the world for the benefit of others. I hope to do whatever I am able to in service of preserving the pure teachings for the sake of all.

From an interview given by the 104th Ganden Tri Rinpoche Lobsang Tenzin on June 24, 2017, at FPMT International Office, Portland, Oregon, US. Transcribed and translated from Tibetan by Katrina Brooks. Edited for inclusion in *Mandala*.

create merits at home, benefit Dharma communities around the world



Order your free Merit Box

The International Merit Box Project is an at-home generosity practice that benefits Dharma projects around the world. For over 15 years, students in the FPMT community have been making offerings into their Merit Boxes and creating vast merits.

These offerings in turn have led to over US\$1 million in grants that helped build holy objects, support others on retreat, fund new Dharma publications & libraries, and a wide variety of other compassionate activities.

Just think: gradual offerings of spare change into your Merit Box can help create a new stupa or Dharma text!



fpmt.org/projects/fpmt/merit-box/