

AN INTERVIEW WITH

GESHEMA NGAWANG CHOKYI



‘IF I MAY BE ABLE TO BENEFIT OTHERS, I SHOULD TRY’



In December 2016 in Mundgod, India, twenty nuns from Tibet and the Himalayan regions of India and Nepal made history. In a ceremony presided over by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the prestigious geshema degree was officially awarded to these nuns.

The centuries-old path to the geshe degree, which represents the completion of twenty to twenty-five years of intense study of Buddhist philosophy, had until recently been open only to men. Prior to December 2016, only one woman had been granted the degree, German nun Geshe Kelsang Wangmo in 2011. The conferring of twenty geshema degrees on the dedicated, accomplished nuns in Mundgod in 2016 signaled the beginning of a new era for women studying and teaching Dharma within Tibetan Buddhism.

One of these hard-working nuns has a special relationship to FPMT. Geshe Ngawang Chokyi is the niece of Lama Thubten Yeshe, who founded FPMT with Lama Zopa Rinpoche. She left Tibet in 1991 as a young nun and came to live and study at a nunnery in South India.

While visiting in Dharmasala in February 2019, Geshe Chokyi was interviewed by Ven. Tenzin Legtsok, an American monk currently in the geshe studies program at Sera Je Monastery in India. Geshe Chokyi had recently completed the one year of tantric study traditionally done after completing the geshe studies training.

Ven. Legtsok spoke to Geshe Chokyi in Tibetan on a number of topics, including growing up in Tolung (also known as Doilungdêqên District) in Tibet, how Lama Yeshe is remembered by his family, and her experience of becoming a nun and engaging in long-term Buddhist study.

Ven. Tenzin Legtsok: How old were you when you became a getsul?

Geshema Ngawang Chokyi: I think was seventeen when I became a getsul. I took ordination at a nunnery in Lhasa called Ani Tsamkhung. Now I'm fifty years old. I came to India when I was twenty-three.

Where were you born?

In Tolung, near Lhasa in Tibet. You go up [the valley] from Drepung Monastery. Where I was born is near the Karmapa's monastery, Tsurphu. To get to our village you go a little up from there.

How are you related to Lama Yeshe? How many siblings were in the family?

My mother and Lama Yeshe are siblings, they have the same mother and father. Lama Yeshe is my mother's older brother. My mother has died, but their youngest sister is still living.

There were about seven siblings who had the same mother. There is Lama Yeshe and above him [his

GESHEMA NGAWANG CHOKYI (CENTER, LOOKING TOWARD THE CAMERA) DURING THE FIRST GESHEMA CONVOCATION, DREPUNG MONASTERY, MUNDGOD, INDIA, DECEMBER 2016. PHOTO BY OLIVIER ADAM.

half-brother] Geshe Thinley and two elder [half] sisters. Then below there's my mother and one younger brother, Rinchen, and one younger sister. All have died now except for the youngest sister. She says she's about eighty years or older now.

Did you meet Lama Yeshe? Was he still living when you came to India?

When I first came to India, Lama Yeshe had already passed away. But once I met him in Tibet, after he had lived in India. [See "Lama Yeshe in Tibet," *Wisdom* #1, May 1983.] At that time, he came to our house with a group of foreigners and stayed for ten or fifteen days. Panchen Rinpoche was also in Tibet then and Lama Yeshe took us all to meet Panchen Lama. Otherwise, we would never get a private audience with Panchen Rinpoche like that. We went to Lhasa to meet Panchen Lama and stayed in Ani Tsenla's [Ven. Thubten Dekyong's] family home in Lhasa. Later when Lama Zopa Rinpoche came we also stayed in her home. Lama Zopa Rinpoche came two or three times. Gen Pasang and Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup have also come to our home.

Is Tolung where Lama Yeshe was born?

Yes, my house was the home of Lama Yeshe and my mother's parents. The two elder sisters had been married into other families and the three boys all became monks, so my mother stayed at home and her husband, my father, came to live there with her.

How many siblings do you have?

There are four of us. My elder brother has already died. My younger sister is in Tibet, and my younger brother is a monk at Drepung Loseling in Tibet.

Did your family consider Lama Yeshe very special?

Yes! I remember when he first came back, it was like something you see on television. We had only ever seen foreigners on television, the way they hug when meeting each other and so forth. They did those kinds of things. My eldest aunt was alive at that time and she led everyone out to receive him. At that time my mother had already died. She died about a month after giving birth to my youngest sibling, having never recovered well from the birth.

We all gathered in our home and later the adults all went to Lhasa. Lama offered many butter lamps and sponsored very extensive pujas and tsog and other elaborate offerings to Jowo Rinpoche in the Jokhang. We children stayed at home because they were fearful of the Chinese. If the Chinese see a group of people traveling with children and ask questions, a child might say the wrong thing. Then, when back at our home, just before he departed Lama Yeshe said, "From now, in the future if I die you shouldn't worry if you can then make offerings just as we've done together."

Later when Lama Zopa Rinpoche came, he brought even more foreigners. [See "Visiting Lama Yeshe's Family," *Mandala*, October 1987.] We set up tents, and they all stayed in our village for some time. When Rinpoche came the time after that, the Chinese were stricter and not so many people could stay. [See "Pilgrimage to Tibet," *Mandala*, December 2002-February 2003.] That first time there were many foreigners, one monk called Max [Redlich] and a nun called Jampa Chokyi. They liked *tsampa* [ground, roasted barley] and would eat *pak* [tsampa and butter tea kneaded into a ball]. At that time I was still quite young, not yet a nun.

How did your wish to become a nun first arise?

My uncle, Lama Yeshe's younger brother Rinchen, the one who remained in Tibet, he was a monk. In our home we used to recite prayers together every evening before dinner—"Praises to the Twenty-One Taras," His Holiness' long-life prayers, and so forth. Rinchen would lead us in prayers.

So from a young age I wanted to become a nun. I would say, "I'm going to be a nun. I'm going to be a nun." My parents and others would urge me to go to school saying, "You should go to school." I would reply, "I don't want to go school. I want to be a nun."

They kept pushing me to go to school and eventually I said, "If you don't let me be a nun, I'm going to run away." After that they relented and my uncle helped me become a nun at Ani Tsamkung Nunnery in the city of Lhasa. That was 1987. Then in 1991 I came to India. My family didn't know when I came. I just ran away and came to India.

You didn't tell your family! And, did you come by foot to India?

Yes, I came by way of Mount Everest. I walked for twenty-five days.

How many companions did you have?

I had sixteen companions. From the nunnery I only had three friends who came, but we met other people along the way and joined up. When we got to Mount Everest we gave money to a Nepali person and he guided us into Nepal. In Nepal I stayed at the refugee reception center [near Boudha in Kathmandu]. Eventually, Gen Lhundrup [Lama Lhundrup] came to know of my being there, and he sent Ani Tsenla to fetch me.

Why didn't you go straight to Kopan Monastery? Did you know that Lama Yeshe had a monastery in Kathmandu then?

I think I knew, but we didn't understand how to go about doing anything really. There were so many new arrivals at the refugee reception center then. At that time, the Kopan monks and nuns were staying together up at the monastery. Construction was just



beginning downhill on the Kopan Nunnery. One day Ani Tsenla said to me, “We’re going to buy land for the new nunnery, come along with me tomorrow to buy land.”

I stayed at Kopan for some time, and then the Tibetan Administration sent all of us new arrivals to Dharamsala to meet His Holiness. Some others were returning to Kopan. But given the option to stay in Dharamshala for a while, I stayed on. Then, people there said, “You should go to Mundgod in South India where you can study Buddhist philosophy.” So I went to South India and joined the nunnery there in Mundgod. Geshe Tsering scolded me a lot for deciding to do this.

Is Geshe Tsering one of Lama Yeshe’s siblings that you mentioned earlier?

No, Geshe Tsering and Lama Yeshe just had the same father. Their mothers were different.

Geshe Tsering said, “You’re not going to join Kopan and instead going to South India, why?” He scolded me so much. I think he didn’t speak to me for a year or two after that. [Laughs] Gradually he would speak with me later on.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche said, “Wherever you stay is fine, Anila.” When I first came to India, I met Rinpoche in Bodhgaya or Vara-

THE FIRST CLASS OF GESHEMAS WITH HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA AT THE GRADUATION CEREMONY, DREPUNG MONASTERY, MUNDGOD, INDIA, DECEMBER 2016. PHOTO BY OLIVIER ADAM.

nasi. “Anila, wherever you stay is fine. Stay wherever you like,” he said. Gen Lhundrub said, “If there’s any problem or it’s too difficult in India, then you’re always welcome to come stay at Kopan.”

What year did you go to Mundgod? What is the name of the nunnery there? And when you first arrived had the buildings already been constructed and the philosophy program begun?

It was about 1992 when I went. I had stayed about a year between Nepal and Dharamsala. The nunnery name is Jangchub Choeling. Yes, when I first arrived the first buildings had been completed, and the philosophy program had started. There are two graduating classes above me. So, from then I stayed in Mundgod.

When did you earn the geshema degree?

In 2016. I was in the first group of geshemas.



GESHEMA NGAWANG CHOKYI, DHARAMSALA, INDIA, FEBRUARY 2019. PHOTO BY VEN. TENZIN LEGTSOK.

So you studied Buddhist philosophy for about twenty-four years?

Yes, Collected Topics for three years, Awareness and Knowers, and Signs and Reasons for one year, then we studied [Dharmakirti's] *Commentary on the Compendium of Valid Cognition* for two years, one year on the first chapter and one year on the second. Now they only study it for one year. After that I studied the Perfection of Wisdom for six years, the Middle Way for four years, Abhidharmakosha for three years, and Vinaya for one year. In 2009 I had graduated from all the classes in South India. At that time the geshema degree did not exist; it did not exist from

before. I stayed at the temple and did some work and taught a little on the initial topics in the Collected Topics.

I participated in these for four years, 2013–2016. In 2016 I graduated with the geshema degree.

Where were the geshema classes held?

In the first year the classes were held at Jamyang Choling, the second year at Dolma Ling, the third year in South India, and the fourth year at Geden Choeling. Then in 2017 the certificates were awarded, and the study of tantra remained to be done. At first the plan was to study tantra for two years, but later they said we should study it for just one year like the geshe from South India. So, just recently on February 1 all our exams were finally completed.

Our teacher for tantra was Gen Norsang at Gyuto. He teaches a new class of geshe for only one year every year and teaches many other classes in the monastery. He said that if he had to teach us the same thing separately for two years he wouldn't be able to make time in his schedule. In one year we studied the *Great Treatise on the Graduated Path of Tantra*, *Grounds and Paths of Tantra*, *Taking the Three Bodies into the Path*, and then there are also many oral transmissions that the precious abbot gives.

So you went to class together with the geshe?

Yes, they combined the geshemas from 2016 and 2017 so there were about twenty-three of us. Generally, there were twenty geshemas the first year and about six the second but some of them didn't go to study tantra. We all went to Gyuto to study, not to Gyudmed. They said that because we could stay at Dolma Ling [Nunnery] nearby Gyuto then it was better to study there.

What are your plans now?

We just finished our final exam about three weeks ago. My nunnery is in South India and asked me to come back right away after finishing the exams. I asked the nunnery for permission to stay in Dharmashala a while to receive teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and also from Professor Samdhong Rinpoche. My nunnery gave permission but says to come back right after that. When I go back I don't know if they'll give me work to do or what. If the nunnery says to do something, then you have to do it.

Is the abbot of the nunnery a nun or a monk?

It's a monk. At our nunnery for three years a geshe from Ganden Jangtse acts as abbot and then for three years a monk from Ganden Shartse acts as abbot. They rotate.

When did Lama Zopa Rinpoche first ask you to teach in the West?

A long time ago, from about 2004. I was in Vinaya class then. Rinpoche said I should go to Mongolia. I said to Rinpoche, “I don’t understand Dharma, Rinpoche, but I want to keep studying.” And Rinpoche said, “Okay Anila, whatever you like to do it’s okay.”

Has Rinpoche asked you recently again to teach?

Yes, and now that I’ve finished, I told Rinpoche that I’ll do whatever he says to do. It’s not good if I always say, “No, no,” right?

Ven. Roger Kunsang [Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s assistant] told me that you’ll be teaching in the West soon, that it’s basically been settled on.

From a long time ago Roger has always told me, “Study English, study English.” Now, what to do? I haven’t learned any English yet.

Did you teach all the topics from the three years of Collected Topics at your nunnery before?

For two years I taught the initial topics from the first year of Collected Topics and taught Awareness and Knowers for one year. After that I began going to the geshema classes and exams. But explaining Dharma is really difficult. First of all, it’s very difficult just to understand the Dharma texts well.

Of course, if we look up at great scholars we don’t understand much compared to them, but compared to those who haven’t studied or find it more difficult to understand, I bet you understand quite well. Among the other geshemas how did you rank?

In the first year of geshema exams I ranked sixth. In the second, third, and fourth years I ranked around ninth, tenth, eleventh, like that. In the recent tantra exams I ranked ninth.

That’s very good. Do you remember from when you were small your mother and other family members speaking about Lama Yeshe? Were there stories and memories they spoke of?

Early on, no, because they were very afraid. The people who had gone to India were considered very bad [by the Chinese author-



GESHEMA NGAWANG CHOKYI, INDIA, DECEMBER 2018

ities]. At first [after 1959] it seems that our family underwent many hardships because Lama Yeshe fled to India and Geshe Thinley had fled to India.

Then, [much later] one day my Uncle Rinchen secretly went to Lhasa. When he returned, he and the other adults were very happy and spoke together at great length. They told us [children], “Go to bed, lay down, and go to sleep.” Only later did my aunt tell me, “You have another maternal uncle.” “Where is our uncle?” we asked. “He’s in India,” she said.

You mean they didn’t know what had happened to Lama Yeshe until then?

Yes, everyone had been suddenly separated, and they didn’t know where the others were. After that, Lama Yeshe’s younger brother, Rinchen, and one of the sons of Lama Yeshe’s sister went to India

to meet Lama Yeshe and His Holiness. That was before Lama Yeshe came to visit Tibet. They went with Lama Yeshe to Dharamsala and met His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his private residence. They were in India for two or three months I think. The night they came back it was a really big deal. All the people in our village gathered in our home. They talked for a long time, but all of us children were sent to bed.

The second time Lama Zopa Rinpoche came to Tibet my Uncle Rinchen was still alive. The Chinese took him away for interrogation for three or four days.

Why?

When Lama Zopa Rinpoche came there where a lot of foreigners along. Because of that, it seems they asked my uncle a lot of questions. At that time the rules were okay. Later though, Rinpoche couldn't come anymore.

Now my aunt, Lama Yeshe's youngest sister, is at home [in Tolung]. She always calls Rinpoche a buddha and ask if I've met him recently and how he is doing. She always asks, "How is buddha doing?" When I see Rinpoche he always asks me, "How is older sister, is she still keeping well?" She invites Rinpoche to come but he can't because it's very dangerous right. Rinpoche says to tell her that he's fine.

Is there anything you'd like to share with people who may read this?

No, I have no idea what to say really. Ani Tsenla sometimes tells me I should teach in other countries, but I always tell her I don't know how to explain Dharma at all. Then she says, "Don't worry, after you give talks once or twice, gradually you'll get used to it. It's okay if people benefit right." I reply, "It's okay if people benefit, but if no one benefits then what?" and she says, "Don't worry, don't worry."

I don't know how to teach though. Even though I've studied for many years, my anger hasn't really lessened. So I don't feel at all qualified to explain Dharma to others. But His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says we should set aside our selfish attitude and try to benefit other sentient beings, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche says the same thing. So, if I may be able to benefit others, then of course, I should try.

Interviewed in Tibetan, translated, and transcribed by Ven. Tenzin Legtsok in Dharamsala, India, February 25, 2019. Transcribed lightly edited by Laura Miller, April 2019.

Find links to archive stories about Lama Yeshe's and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's visits to Tibet on this issue's webpage (<https://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-for-2019/july/>).





Vultures Peak, Rajgir Mahabodhi Stupa Nalanda

**EXPERIENCE
THE HEART OF THE BUDDHIST WORLD**

**GUIDED PILGRIMAGES
IN & AROUND BODHGAYA (INDIA)**


Nov 12-16, Dec 6-9, Dec 17-20, Jan 10-13

**CUSTOMIZED GROUP PILGRIMAGES
ALSO AVAILABLE.
EMAIL US TO KNOW MORE**

Pilgrimage package includes
transportation, accommodation & meals,
and an experienced guide with advice &
texts on relevant prayers & practices



**www.rootinstitute.ngo
info@rootinstitute.ngo**

**BUDDHIST
ASTROLOGY**

Jhampa Shaneman

3026 Fifth St, Victoria, BC
Canada V8T 4B7
250-483-7355
jhampa@buddhistconsulting.com
buddhist-astrology.com