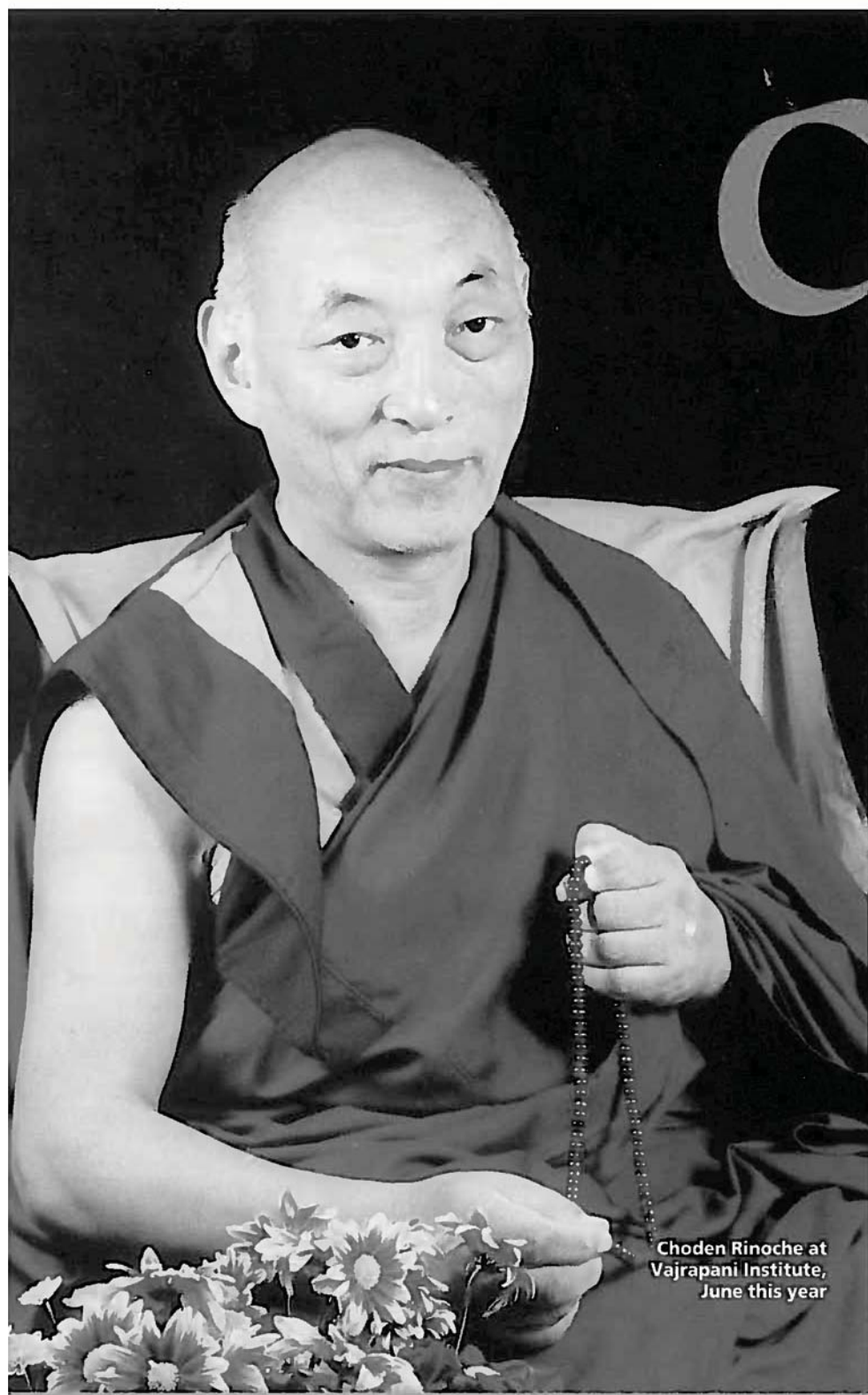


THE LIFE OF A HIDDEN MEDITATOR

The Life of a Hidden Meditator Choden Rinpoche



Choden Rinpoche at
Vajrapani Institute,
June this year

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

PHOTO Eryan Salinger

"He spent all his time on that bed, meditating," says Rinpoche's attendant, Sera Je monk Ven. Tseten Gelek.

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

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

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

Choden Rinpoche was born in 1933 near Rabten Monastery at Rongbo in eastern Tibet. At the age of 3 he was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous Rinpoche, who himself had been one of the candidates for the Twelfth Dalai Lama, Thinley Gyatso. There were significant signs about the previous Choden Rinpoche's birth. After the reincarnation was chosen, they didn't want to leave him just like that, so they placed him as the lama of Rabten Monastery.

From the age of 3 to 8 I was tutored by an uncle who lived in a hermitage, and at the age of 8 I entered the local Rabten Monastery, where I learned all the prayers and rituals. I was 6 years old when I first met the previous Pabongka Rinpoche, and I took many teachings from him at Rabten Monastery. I also took novice ordination from him then.

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

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

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

Rinpoche debated with His Holiness during the 1959 Great Prayer Festival at the Jokhang in Lhasa, an annual event that attracted hundreds of thousands of monks, such as depicted here



PHOTO Tibetan Office of Information, Dharamala

"I was 6 when I met Pabongka Rinpoche. I really admired everything he did: the way he walked, the way he dressed, everything. I felt, 'If only I could be like him.'"

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

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

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

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



PHOTO Eastfoto

THE LIFE OF A HIDDEN MEDITATOR

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

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

scriptural authority. When you're able to do that, then whatever understanding you have is very firm in your mind [and therefore is a basis for realizations].

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

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

My teacher, Geshe Losang Wangchuk,

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

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

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

After the hour-and-a-half break you reconvene for a very long debate session, and that's followed by a session of prayers where you recite *The Twenty-one Praises to Tara* and prayers to the White Umbrella Deity – things like that. Then you go for another

PHOTO Steven Batchelor



PHOTO The Bettmann Archive



Ramoche Temple became a shrine to Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution

Chinese troops march into Tibet

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

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

With debate, you develop a very stable conviction yourself of what you understand because you use the logic, reasoning and

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

Philosophy is not formatted for meditation, so what you meditate on are things like various stages of the path to enlightenment, which is totally formatted for meditation. You can then take all the subject material, all the information of all the philosophical studies and you can apply it to enrich, to adorn your meditations.

AT TYPICAL DAY AT SERA: In the morning, just before the dawn breaks, the

period of debate, and when the sun is about to set you have another break. From sunset onwards, everything you've memorized you have to recite so you don't forget it. If you are in the higher classes you are allowed to stay in your room to do the recitations, but if you are younger you have to stay in the open grounds where all the recitations take place. By yourself, you chant out loud.

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

Debating with the Dalai Lama

RINPOCHE COMPLETED ALL THE NECESSARY STUDIES by the age of 28, reaching the highest Lharam class. Trijang Rinpoche and many high lamas asked him to get his geshe degree quickly, but his main guru at the time, who was abbot of Sera Je, did not allow him to become a geshe. He wanted Rinpoche to keep studying. He went over the studies again, mainly the texts about the monastic vows, the Vinaya. He studied them many times. Then the Chinese came.

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

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

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

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

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

THE TIBETAN UPRISING IN LHASA IN 1959: By the time of the uprising against the Chinese Communists, most of the monks had already escaped. So many soldiers had arrived and the monks were afraid the monasteries would be destroyed. There were thousands of monks before the occupation, but only two or three hundred remained at Sera. I remained at Sera.

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

We'd heard that in eastern Tibet the soldiers had rounded up all the monks and shot them dead, so everyone was frightened that would happen. From dawn to sunset the monks were all standing in the courtyard. Then they put the monks in a line and took them away — everyone said, "We're being



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

taken to be killed," but it didn't turn out like that; they just imprisoned everyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, the living conditions at the monastery were getting tighter and tighter all

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

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

RETREAT FOR NINETEEN YEARS: I did *Chulen* retreat for a while (see page 70), but the Chinese stopped me. They said you could practice Dharma, but when it came down to it there were many restrictions, and they felt Dharma was bad and the practices are essenceless. So until about 1964 I lived in Lhasa, doing the main practices of *Guhya-samaja*, *Yamantaka* and *Heruka*, and giving some teachings where I could.

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

In meditation for nineteen years

BY VEN. TSETEN GELEK, CHODEN
RINPOCHE'S ATTENDANT

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

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

He spent all his time on that bed, meditating. They had to change the bedding once a month because it got smelly from sweat, so he'd



get off while they changed it. He would sit all of the day and lie down at night for sleep. He used a bedpan for a toilet, as he was pretending to be an invalid. Until 1980 he didn't talk to anybody, only the person who brought food into his room. No one else even came to his room – if people brought food they'd give it to his family and they'd bring it in. My father and grandfather were his disciples and would bring him what he needed. They said Rinpoche had long hair and a very long beard. They said he is a very special person.

The benefit of learning poetry and grammar

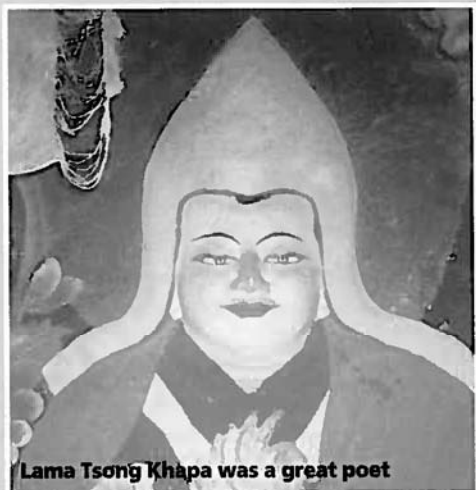


PHOTO Ven. Thubten Kunsel

Lama Tsong Khapa was a great poet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

statue was and one room of the religious kings, they completely emptied the entire temple.

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

With the Cultural Revolution I stopped all outer practices completely. I lived with relatives in Lhasa. I stayed inside without ever going out. During this time I was sleeping (see box). I stayed in a room in the house of my cousin's wife, who was half Tibetan, half Nepali. The Chinese would come any time of the day or night – sometimes very early, sometimes late – to check what I was doing, whether I was sleeping, to see if I was really sick or not. When they were gone I would get up and do practices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From the point of view of religion, of Dharma, there was great accomplishment in living this way. And from the point of view of this life, there was also great benefit. In this life, if I hadn't done what I did, I would have had to gone with the Chinese and gotten a house, car and high rank, but then I would have had to torture people and cause so much suffering for the ordinary beings. And if I had gone as an ordinary being, with no high rank, etc., I would have had to undergo so much suffering, just like all the Tibetans did. But I didn't have to experience any of this in this life. These are advantages to my living like I did.

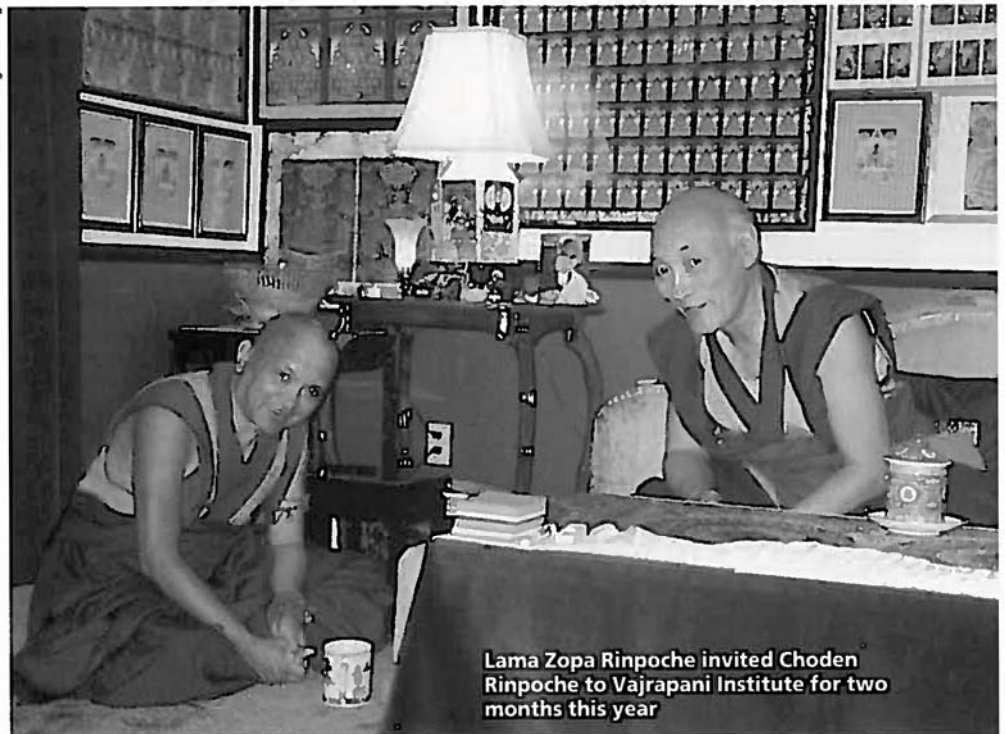
Another advantage is that I got the reputation of doing retreat for twenty years: this is also a benefit concerning this life! It will cause others to think, "That's interesting. Maybe Dharma is really helpful, maybe it's true." It may benefit others for the Dharma in this way.

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

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

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

From 1965 to early 1980, when I was living in total seclusion, my cousin would not allow anyone to visit me. Ribur Rinpoche came to visit and my cousin argued with him and wouldn't allow Ribur Rinpoche to visit.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche invited Choden Rinpoche to Vajrapani Institute for two months this year

The main reason Ribur Rinpoche came is because the government was forming a committee of *tulkus* to look into the heritage of Tibet, like the statues and scriptures. Although the government formed it, the high lamas were doing the work because they were the most well-educated. Around this time everyone the Chinese had put down were being reinstated because they had the capacity and the knowledge. They were called the Norbulingka committee.

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

Rinpoche tried for three years to get a passport to go to India, and finally a close friend of his, Paggala Gelek Namgyal, the highest lama of Kham in Tibet and third highest in Tibet, was holding a high rank in the Tibet autonomous region (he now holds the post of the Panchen Lama), and he helped Rinpoche get a passport. In 1985 Rinpoche finally got a passport and was able to leave for India legally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rinpoche first came to the West in 1998.

A Subtle Form of Revolution

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lama Zopa Rinpoche requested a lung of a whole text of Je Tsong Khapa and his main disciples, thirty-six of them, but there was no chance to do this. Lama Zopa Rinpoche asked Choden Rinpoche to come give a Secret Vajrapani initiation at Vajrapani Institute in California and to teach during the retreat (see box).

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

Rinpoche's great-grandfather, grandfather and father were all great practitioners. His great-grandfather and grandfather were Kagyupas and his father was Gelug, but they are all lam-rim holders. They spent most of

their lives in retreat, although not like Rinpoche, who didn't come out at all. They are all lineage holders. Rinpoche was surrounded by all of these practitioners.

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

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

The Vast Space of Stillness: Choden Rinpoche Visits Vajrapani Institute

BY VEN. AMY MILLER

It's hard to imagine how dramatically life can change when you're simply putting together a spiritual program at a retreat center. By the fall of 1998, I had an agreement from Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche to visit Vajrapani in the spring of the following year. Lama Zopa Rinpoche then advised me to request Rinpoche to give Secret Vajrapani initiation and commentary. The commitment was that the center had to hold the retreat on this practice within a year. When Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche was unavailable to lead the retreat, I began a long and interesting search for an initiating lama.

With the help of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, we set the retreat dates for May and June of 2000. For the first few months of the year, I made lists of lamas, began writing request letters, phoning, faxing, emailing. By the time I left for the CPMT meeting in Australia at the end of March, the hopes of offering the initiation were dissolving, but awaiting me was a message from Ven. Roger: He had found a lama, Choden Rinpoche, a senior teacher at Sera Je Monastery.

The arduous process to secure visas and

plane tickets for Rinpoche and his attendant, Ven. Tseten Gelek began. Assisted by Trisha Donnelly in Bodhgaya, Geshe Dawa, Ven. Yeshe Choden and Renuka Singh in Delhi, and ten days of Tara pujas by the community at Vajrapani Institute, two visas and air tickets were secured at the last possible moment. Many obstacles appeared, including the U.S. embassy in Delhi losing Rinpoche's Identity Certificate! However, finally all cleared and on Thursday evening, May 4, Choden Rinpoche came into view, exiting the gate at the airport in San Francisco.

I have had the good fortune to have met many lamas. However, nothing prepared me for this great stillness, this vast open space of overwhelming wisdom that Rinpoche exuded. Choden Rinpoche was the sun, the moon and the stars. He was swept away in Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Vajra Van and greeted by a swarm of retreaters, auspicious signs and melodious songs at Vajrapani Institute. After two days' rest, my dreams came true, and Choden Rinpoche gave the Vajrapani Chagdor Khorchen initiation on May 6 and 7 and the retreat started with auspicious teach-



PHOTO Eytan Salinger

Vajrapani retreaters with Choden Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Lama Yeshe's stupa

ings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Usually, it is a great blessing and fortune to have one great Rinpoche residing at a center, leading a group retreat and giving unbelievably precious teachings. We had started the retreat knowing that Lama Zopa Rinpoche was due in Mongolia the end of May and that Choden Rinpoche's return ticket was June 4. One month of their presence was unbelievably kind. However, the karma changed and obviously the benefit was huge as we hosted both of these great masters for the next two months with Choden Rinpoche staying in our teacher's house and Lama Zopa Rinpoche living in my office.

The two months were a whirlwind of holy activity. I was suddenly thrust into the center ring of the largest vajra circus I had ever organized. The retreat style was similar to that of the Vajrasattva retreat at Land of Medicine Buddha: Lama Chöpa/Jorchö as the first session, followed by two to three other retreat sessions, prostrations at all sessions and many other auspicious prayers, followed by tormas offerings and long dedications at the final session of the day. Most evenings were highlighted by teachings by Choden Rinpoche on the ear-whispered teachings of Lama Tsong Khapa and included *The Argument Between Ignorance and Emptiness* by Chökyi Losang Gyaltsen, teachings on shiné practice, *The Nine Attitudes of Guru Devotion*, *The Ten Innermost Jewels of the Kadampas*, *How to Meditate on the Lam-rim* and Recognize

Your Realizations, Ordination Vows Instruction, Drugchuma tormas offering, Kalarupa pujas, and *tsog* offerings. And, if that wasn't enough to satisfy our hungry minds, Rinpoche presided over three separate novice ordinations, May 18, June 8 and June 22 and welcomed nine new monks and nuns into the IMI (see page)

In between retreat teachings, Choden Rinpoche was able to visit the three other centers in northern California. At Gyalwa Gyatso Center in San Jose, Rinpoche gave teachings on *tong-len* practice, led meditation, and gave an amazing Chöd initiation. Great Medicine Buddha initiation and teachings were given at Land of Medicine Buddha in Soquel, and teachings and White Tara initiation were offered at Tse Chen Ling Center in San Francisco. And all of this due to the kindness and love of Lama Zopa Rinpoche who was able to connect us to this sublime master.

I remember standing at the back of the small room after the Chöd initiation in San Jose, totally awed by Choden Rinpoche's presence. He appeared to be such a humble being so easily content with whatever was around him, so simple in manner, yet again the stillness seemed fathoms deep, so utterly profound and stunning.

The retreat events culminated in the most glorious Saka Dawa I remember. The day began with the Eight Mahayana Precepts with Choden Rinpoche at 4:30 a.m. This was followed by a last retreat session and an

extensive long-life puja for Choden Rinpoche. During the lunch break, we received a surprise visit from Sogyal Rinpoche and then finished the long life puja in the late afternoon.

Extensive water offerings were made all around the stupa and gompa all afternoon in preparation for a Maitreya puja, and a near life-sized statue of Maitreya turned up to grace the glorious pure realm at the stupa. And since we didn't already have enough to do, Brian Halterman and I decided to become ordained and participated in a short ceremony at the feet of the Maitreya statue at the stupa. This was followed by the fire puja for the retreat until one in the morning, with Choden Rinpoche and Geshe Dakpa from Tse Chen Ling Center in attendance, followed by extensive dedications by Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the stupa until about 2:30 a.m.

There were times I thought it would go on forever, every evening leading Choden Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche to the gompa with incense, but finally the visa to Taiwan came through, the ticket was confirmed and I was standing at the departure gate at San Francisco Airport bidding this humble and hugely compassionate being good-bye.

You never know how things will turn out. There are many things upon which to reflect. Mostly now I remember the stillness, growing ever expansive.

PHOTO Tietjen



Lama Zopa Rinpoche making offerings to Choden Rinpoche during long-life puja at Saka Dawa

Rinpoche Answers Questions

Some questions from students on May 24, during the Vajrapani retreat.

What is the ultimate nature of the mind?

The ultimate nature of the mind is its nature of being empty of inherent existence or true existence. You have the conventional nature of the mind and you have the ultimate nature of the mind. That which is defined as being clear and knowing, or luminous and knowing is the conventional nature of the mind. And the mind being empty of true existence is the ultimate nature of the mind.

In the Madhyamika-Prasangika system, what is the mechanism for karma to go from life to life?

The uncommon characteristic of the explanation presented by the Prasangika-Madhyamika system for describing the mechanism of karma that proceeds from lifetime to lifetime is that after accumulating the karma, that particular karma ceases. The ceasing of that particular karma, each ceasing of the karma is regarded as a functioning thing.

Usually the explanation that is given is that you have a karmic imprint, and then this karmic imprint is maintained. And then when various delusional minds act as the conditional factors, the karma ripens. That is how it is explained.

But in the Prasangika system, the karma is as a functioning thing in its ceased form. And each successive ceasing of a karma, maintained as a functioning thing, is what is carried forth from lifetime to lifetime.

We are taught that one of the aims of doing the absorptions of the time of death at the various stages of the sadhana is to retain awareness and to take this as the path to the

dharmakaya. But at the time of the Black Near Attainment, it is said that one goes unconscious. How, then, does one actually retain this awareness to experience the clear light?

You have Black Near Attainment With Memory and Without Memory. With the former there is memory, there is awareness. In the experience of the Black Near Attainment, although it is empty, to the appearance there is a pitch-black darkness. And then after that one experiences the unconscious state, without memory, without awareness.

It is said in the Yamantaka sadhana and very likely in other sadhanas that the experience of Clear Light [that comes next] will last as long as the experience of unconsciousness during the Black Near Attainment Without Memory; however long one remains unconscious at this stage is equivalent to the length of time of one's experience of Clear Light.

In tantric sadhanas, Vajrasattva gets initiated with wisdom nectar by empowering deities, after beams are sent from Vajrasattva to call for these deities. Does Vajrasattva need empowerment? Being a deity, isn't he always empowered?

This is from the tradition of when you celebrate a king's enthronement, there's all this sprinkling of water, etc. It symbolizes that.

The reason to do it is that, although we visualize ourselves as deities, sometimes we hold onto the appearance of ourselves as being ordinary. So visualizing the empowering deities, receiving the initiation from them and so forth, eliminate ordinary pride, ordinary appearance.

In the mind of a person who has bodhicitta is there any thought of liking some sentient beings more than others? Is there any dislike of sentient beings who are cruel, personally, or beings who have strong delusions and harm others?

No. No. Before generating actual compassion, you cultivate equanimity in one's attitude towards friend, enemy and stranger. In cultivating equanimity you've gotten rid of these attitudes of feeling close to some and distant from others. In fact, bodhisattvas care even more for the beings who are cruel or who have more strong delusions and harm others; they are even more concerned about the ripening effects of their karma upon them. Even towards sentient beings who harm the Dharma, bodhisattvas never lose their loving-concern for them, even though they might cut off worldly contact with those beings.

Please, can Rinpoche explain the logical reasonings for the cultivation of taking responsibility for sentient beings. How does one meditate to generate this sense of responsibility?

Prior to cultivating this extraordinary thought of responsibility for others, you cultivate loving-compassion, compassion wishing to free sentient beings from suffering. When this compassion of wishing to free sentient beings from suffering becomes even more strong then you think that "I myself alone will do that; I myself alone need to free sentient beings from suffering; I myself alone will do that." When such a thought comes, as a result of that thought, you achieve bodhicitta: wishing to attain enlightenment in order to accomplish these purposes. So, it is for this reason that you meditate on this kind of extraordinary sense of responsibility, on generating the special attitude of taking full responsibility for the welfare of other sentient beings.

How does one meditate on the dharmakaya? I do an analytical meditation but then don't know what to do next?

In the meditation of taking the death into the dharmakaya, after doing the outer absorptions, then you reflect on the clear emptiness. What appears to the mind is emptiness, and this mind experiencing emptiness is in the nature of bliss. That mind experiencing emptiness ascertains the lack of inherent existence, ascertains non-existence by its own nature, and the nature of the mind experiencing this is one of bliss. Then you identify this blissful mind ascertaining emptiness as the dharmakaya and cultivate the divine pride of it.

Could Rinpoche explain about dedication. Is it like a cake? If you dedicate for countless callers, everyone only receives a fraction.

It isn't like that. You dedicate, for example, "For the benefit of all mother sentient beings, may I quickly attain enlightenment." Without differentiating between sentient beings, you dedicate the merit to attain enlightenment. Whether you dedicate the merit to attain enlightenment for the benefit of one sentient being or for the benefit of countless sentient beings, the point is it's for the benefit of attaining enlightenment. The result – enlightenment – is the same, it's

Meditation: making the mind positive

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

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

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

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

Many lamas in the past did retreat for forty years, twenty years, some for twelve years, and they didn't get any signs of realization. It's possible. This is from the obstacles of negativities accumulated over many eons.

When Buddha came onto this earth, the disciples had less delusions and less negative thoughts than at the present, so for that reason they attained realizations in a very short period – within one or two days. Just upon receiving the Buddha's teachings they would attain realizations.

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

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

So our negativities obstruct our ability to obtain realizations, and this is why we need to purify in order to have the realizations.

Does working for the lama and Dharma centers purify negativ-



Rinpoche at Vajrapani Institute in June

PHOTO Bob Cayton

ities? That totally depends on your motivation. If you do this work to serve your guru and promote the Dharma, and think this Dharma will help more sentient beings and bring happiness to them; if you think this way it will definitely purify your negativities.

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

As soon as you wake up you should think, "I'm working in the service of my guru, and I'm working to preserve and promote the Dharma, and to help sentient beings. This will help bring happiness to sentient beings." If you do this, your whole day will become positive. If you think only of the things of this life without thinking of anything else, this won't increase the positive side.

THE LIFE OF A HIDDEN MEDITATOR

equal. Whatever your objective is – for enlightenment, to have long life, to be free of sickness, whichever goal – whichever dedication your mind is more strongly inclined towards, it is towards that that the merit goes.

Is it true that the implements you use in a retreat – mala, dorje, bell, and damaru – should thereafter be hidden from others? Can you let others touch them?

Generally in the path of the Secret Mantra there is a feature of maintaining secrecy, and the implements that one utilizes in the practices are regarded as the pledge substances. And so, since they are pledge substances, by observing the secrecy of the practice, such as keeping them hidden and untouched by others, this helps to insure quick attainments. Also at the time of the initiation, one promises not to expose the details to the uninitiated or to those who, even if they are initiated, do not have faith.

If one has several vajras and bells and other implements, then whichever ones you identify as your *samaya*, or pledge, substances you should keep hidden; you can expose the others. Lama Atisha always kept on his right side a stupa (and every time he committed a transgression, right away Lama Atisha would do purification before the stupa), and on his left there was a container with all the secret pledge substances, and this he always kept covered.

Sometimes lamas give what appears to be

contradictory instructions. For example, one lama will tell you to do a particular practice and another lama will tell you not to do that practice. We are supposed to regard both of these gurus as enlightened beings. Could Rinpoche please instruct us on how this could happen, and what should we do?

If the instruction does not accord with the Dharma, then it is to be abandoned. Although the Buddha stated to practice in accordance with the advice of the lama, the guru, it is in reference to a valid guru, whose instructions accord with the Dharma. So, in a situation where the instructions do not accord with the Dharma, you can excuse yourself by explaining without using any kind of harsh words.

Also, another thing to take into account is to practice whatever is most beneficial to your mind.

What happens if we can't tell whether or not the practice is actually in accord with the Dharma because our level is lower than that of the lamas involved? One lama says that this is a legitimate way to practice, and the other one says, "No, that's wrong; that's harmful."

Whatever is most beneficial to your mind. You make the choice, abandoning one or the other, according to whatever is most beneficial to your mind. And then, regarding even the instructions that are in accord with the Dharma, one has to take into account the

appropriateness of the timing of those instructions.

For example, you have in the life stories of the Buddha, in a previous life, he gave his head a thousand times in charity to sentient beings. So, let's say you have two lamas: one guru is saying, "Yes, you should give your head in charity," and the other is saying, "No, you should not give your body in charity."

Which instruction you follow is dependent upon your own capacity. If you have the capacity to give your body in charity without any sense of regret, then you follow the instruction of the lama who advises you to do that and you forsake the other instruction. Whereas if you do not have the capacity to give your body, without regret and pure in compassion, then you do not; you obey the instruction of the other lama who said not to give your body in charity, thus forsaking the first lama's advice.

Can Rinpoche explain how one can best meditate on emptiness during mantra recitation?

It is not possible to have single-pointed concentration on emptiness while reciting a mantra. But, you can meditate on the emptiness of the three circles: the mantra being empty of true existence; I, oneself, being empty of true existence; and the action of the recitation, also, being empty of true existence. Thinking like this when one recites the mantra has great benefits. ❀



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