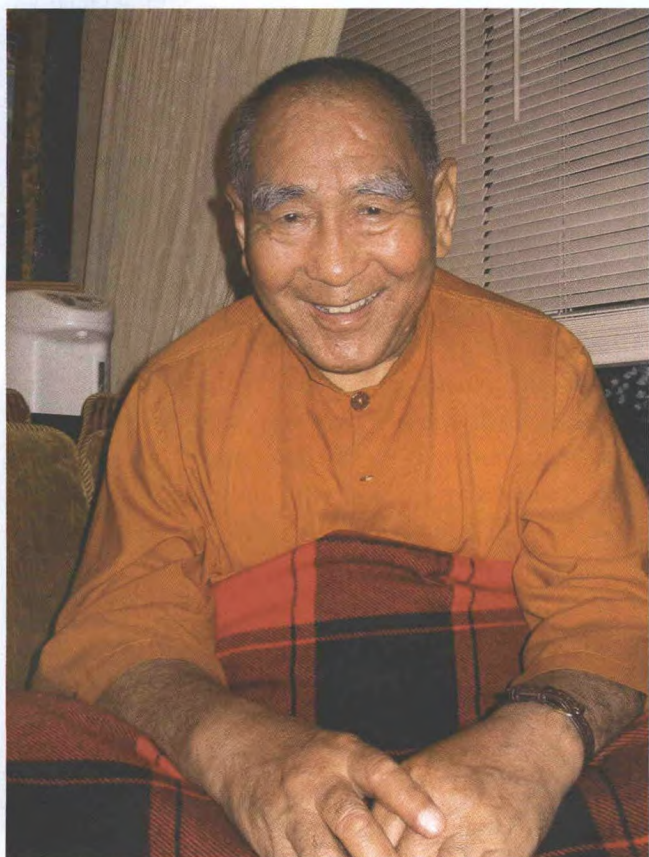


A Young Monk Runs Away: The humble beginnings of a legendary Geshe



Notoriously humble and self-effacing, it can be difficult to get a Tibetan master to open up and tell the story of their amazing life. *Mandala* is very pleased to offer an excerpt from a forthcoming autobiography of the renowned Geshe Lhundup Sopa by Geshe Sopa and Paul Donnelly. It is a reminiscence of childhood that shows a young monk beset by the rigors of monastic study ...

When I was still a child, there was a time early on that I was so unhappy at the monastery, I ran away. It was during the period when I had to memorize the thick text that contained all the prayers and ritual recitations of the monastery. It was the fundamental teacher's job to decide who the young monk's text teacher would be. There are some text teachers who are stern and fierce and some who are patient and gentle. My fundamental teacher, my uncle, chose a monk named Gelong Dompelpa-la, who was very well known and respected, but was a very strict teacher. Everyone was frightened of him, including me. He made me work very hard on my memorization and chanting. He insisted that I do my chanting loudly and very clearly. I had to memorize the passages very

quickly too. The end result was good, but at the time I couldn't really look at it that way. It was the custom to stay the night at the text teacher's house, and the student only returned to his own home in the afternoon of the next day. I had to go to Dompelpa-la's house in the evening and had to read a portion of this text over and over. Then later I had to recite that section to prove that I had learned it. In the beginning I had a little difficulty with this and my teacher became angry with me. One day I was unable to do the recitation and he became very angry and scolded me and beat me. He told me that I had to work harder. The next day I was still unable to recite it and again I received a scolding and a beating. Then my teacher showed me two whips that were hanging from a post in his house and he told me that

Then my teacher showed me two whips that were hanging from a post in his house and he told me that if I didn't do my recitation properly the next day he would whip me with them.

if I didn't do my recitation properly the next day he would whip me with them. I was very frightened. I didn't think I would be able to do the recitation the next day and would have to face a whipping. When I returned to my home the next afternoon, my uncle tried to be encouraging in his stern way, but all I did was worry about the whipping. I decided then to run away that night.

When it was time for me to go back to Dompelpa-la's house, I went instead down to the main gate of the monastery and hid behind the open gate. I knew I couldn't make it home in the night, so I sat there for a long time, crouching behind the gate. I knew that the gatekeeper came around midnight to close and bolt the doors, so when it was close to that time, I ran to the doorway of a house nearby. It had a step down into the door, which made a small space where I could hide. I stayed there until the gatekeeper came and closed the gates. Then I returned and hid in the space of the gates, up against the doors. The gatekeeper would come out every so often on his watch so I would have to keep running back and forth between the gate of the monastery and the doorway of this house.

At one point when I was crouching in the doorway of the house it began to rain. I was protected from the rain by the doorway. However, just outside the doorway, there was an indentation that quickly filled with water. A small dog came by and began to drink from the little pool. Sometimes children do strange things, and for some reason I decided to scare this dog, which could not see me. I jumped out and the dog ran off, terrified. Unfortunately, when I did this, my foot bumped the door against which I was crouching and it got the attention of the monk who lived there. He called out, "What is going on there?" and I had to run back to my spot by the main gate. He came out with a lantern and looked around, but did not see me. I spent the whole night going back and forth between the two spots. When morning approached I knew that the gatekeeper would reopen the gates, and the monks would begin to come out and gather for the morning assembly. So I found another spot to hide and waited. I thought that once all the monks were in the assembly hall, I would have

an opportunity to escape. Finally, when the gates were opened, and all the monks were in the assembly hall, I ran from the monastery.

It took me nearly all day to get back to my home but when I got back to the village I was afraid to go home because of what my parents would say. For a while I hid in a hay barn. I stayed there until I was so hungry and thirsty that I could no longer bear it, and finally, I went home. My mother scolded me and said that it was foolish and dangerous for me to walk all that way by myself. She was worried about me. When my father came home he didn't scold me much. He said that it was too late in the day to take me back to the monastery, but he would take me back in the morning. My mother then said that since I had come all that way I could stay a day or two, and then I would have to go back. They sent a message to my uncle to let him know that I was safe.

After several days my father took me back to the monastery though I really didn't want to go. I was afraid of what my uncle would say and even more afraid of my text teacher. To my surprise, my uncle was not very angry. He asked me why I had run away and caused everyone so much worry. I told him that I was afraid of my teacher, that I had not been doing well, and was afraid of being whipped. My uncle went to see my teacher and told him that there was no need for me to be hurried through my memorization; I could do it at a slower pace. This made matters much better. My uncle interceded on my behalf, and my text teacher became more patient with me from that time on. ❁

Geshe Sopa came to the U.S. in 1962, eventually settling permanently in Madison, Wisconsin where he accepted a teaching position at the University of Wisconsin. He very quickly began to attract students and soon established Deer Park Buddhist Center, which hosted His Holiness the Dalai Lama's first granting of the Kalachakra initiation outside of India in 1981. Deer Park hosted numerous Geshes and Lamas over the years who came to teach and give other initiations. Geshe Sopa retired from the University in 1997 and has since concentrated his efforts on making Deer Park an exemplary monastic center and resource for the study and preservation of the Dharma.

The above is an excerpt from the Autobiography of Geshe Lhundup Sopa by Geshe Lhundup Sopa and Paul Donnelly, which is forthcoming in 2008 from Wisdom Publications.