



Only the Impossible is Worth Doing

Recollections of the Supreme Life and Activity of
Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche



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Recollections of the
Supreme Life and Activity of
Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche

Written by students of Rinpoche

*Edited by Gelong Thubten & Gelong Trinley,
with special thanks to Lama Zangmo*







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The Karmapa

Foreword

I first met Akong Rinpoche at Karleb Monastery, in my homeland of Lhatok in eastern Tibet. The search party from Tsurphu Monastery had already reached Lhatok and announced that I was the Karmapa, and I was then invited to stay at Karleb Monastery. It was there that Akong Rinpoche, representing Tai Situ Rinpoche, and Sherab Tharchin, representing Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, came specially to meet me. They arrived later because they had come from India. From the very beginning, I always felt naturally close to Akong Rinpoche, and that closeness between us is evident in photographs taken at the time. Then, at Tsurphu, Akong Rinpoche was present for the enthronement. After that, we met several times while I was at Tsurphu until obstacles arose. Some Chinese government officials in Lhasa claimed that Akong Rinpoche was too closely connected to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India, and, though Rinpoche continued to come regularly to Tibet and Lhasa, he was no longer allowed to come to Tsurphu to meet with me. I did, however, see him once more in Tibet, at Chengdu in 1999. There, we were able to spend some hours together in private and have a meaningful discussion without being interrupted. Little did I know at the time that it would be our last chance to meet and talk openly together.

Later that year, I left Tibet for India, and in India there were more problems. The Indian government was suspicious of Rinpoche because of his work in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan areas of China, which necessarily depended on links with the Chinese authorities. He would have been unable to do the work he did without Chinese permission and support. As a consequence, he was refused an Indian visa. Hence, we never met in India. Finally, in 2008, when I was in the USA, I was able to meet him one more time, though very briefly, and yet again, restrictions imposed on me at that time meant that we could not meet and talk privately.

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Nevertheless, even though there were difficulties in meeting physically, the heart and mind connection between us remained. We kept in touch over the years. Rinpoche would send me messages and keep me informed about his various activities, and thus we maintained our close connection. Then suddenly he passed away. I was utterly shocked by the news of his death. I had never thought that he would die in such a terrible way, even though Rinpoche himself had told me the previous year that he had a premonition of danger. He had sensed an obstacle to his life and requested some items for his protection, which I sent to him in Scotland. Later, I heard that on the day he was murdered, he was caught off guard. He was relaxing at home in Chengdu and was not wearing the special protection because he had no reason to suspect that he was vulnerable in his own home.

Although his life was cut short, it was marked by two great achievements. The first was that he spread the Dharma. At the behest of the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa, he went to the West at a time when few people knew about the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism. In the beginning, he faced great hardships, and, I suspect, it was probably the most challenging time in his life. In Tibet, he had been held in high esteem as a respected trulku. In England, he found himself in a strange land where he could barely speak the language, where his particular skills and training were no longer valued, and where he had no status. He had no recognised educational qualifications and consequently was forced to work in a low-level job as an unskilled hospital porter. He must have felt like an alien, but he stayed strong and overcame these difficulties. Later, he built Samye Ling and established Samye Dzong centres in different countries. He introduced the Tibetan Buddhist Dharma to the West and enabled its flourishing in Britain, across Europe, and, especially notably, on the African continent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

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His other great achievement was through his social service. He was one of the few Tibetans who, having become a refugee and lived in the diaspora in the West, returned to Tibet, and selflessly worked for the benefit of the Tibetans in Tibet. He helped thousands of people by building or sponsoring nunneries, monasteries, shedras, schools, orphanages, and hospitals, as well as assisting many individuals financially. He also worked to preserve the unique Buddhist scriptures of Tibet and sponsored publishers and publications within Tibet. Because he passed away so suddenly, everything came to an end. His death was a huge loss, not just to his family and students, but to the thousands of Tibetans who relied on him; it was immensely sad. I believe he was uniquely capable of doing that work. He dealt in a direct way with the Chinese authorities, while maintaining his integrity; he was very courageous in this, and, I think, the Chinese respected him.

In Britain, also, he was active in developing new ways of helping people with psychological difficulties, utilising the training he had received in Tibetan medicine, Buddhist insights into the mind, and his earlier experience of working in the National Health Service. After the initial shock of his passing, I think that people began to realise and acknowledge how great a contribution he had made both to the welfare of Tibetans in Tibet and to the world beyond Tibet.

Finally, I should like to thank all those who have contributed to this publication. It is essential to have a comprehensive record of Akong Rinpoche's life and achievements, and one written by his students, friends, and those who knew him well will be of particular value for the future. He was not just a great teacher, he was also a good human being, and even though we never had the chance to spend much time together, he is always in my mind and heart.

A large, fluid, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long, sweeping horizontal stroke at the end.

17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje
28 July, 2020

ཚོ་སྤེལ་པ་གཤམ་རྒྱུ་



KALON
RELIGION & CULTURE

Date: October 17, 2013

Dear family members of late Choje Akong Rinpoche and the Rokpa Foundation,

We are extremely stunned and saddened to hear about the tragic loss of life of Choje Akong Rinpoche and his two attendants last week.

Rinpoche is a highly respected lama and a pioneer to establish Buddhist monastery to promote and preserve Buddha dharma in the west. Besides his services to Buddha dharma, he has made remarkable contributions with his benevolent humanitarian services through establishing schools, hospitals, old people's homes and orphanages which touched and benefited the lives of many needy Tibetans.

We express our deep condolences to the bereaved family members & friends, his students and the Rokpa Foundation. We take this opportunity to appeal all the people connected with late Rinpoche in the meritorious activities to take his legacy further and fulfill the visions and aspirations for which he has worked so hard for his entire life.

With prayers,

Sincerely,

Pema Chhinjor
Kalon



Sakya Dolma Phodrang

Dear Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche,

It is with profound sorrow that His Holiness the Sakya Trizin has learnt of the untimely demise of Chöje Akong Rinpoche. His Holiness is currently in strict retreat and is only given news once a week, and so he conveys his sincere regret for the belatedness of his condolences.

This devastating news comes as an incalculable loss not only for Akong Rinpoche's family and sangha as well as for all those who were beneficiaries of his kindness, wisdom and tireless effort, but also for the Dharma itself, of which Akong Rinpoche was one of the truest exponents.

While his contribution to bringing the gift of Dharma to the West was outstanding in blessing countless students with inner peace and a deeper understanding of life, the work that he carried out through Rokpa was of inimitable help to the sick and destitute worldwide, and of immense value to the preservation of the culture and religion of Tibet.

His Holiness ardently prays that Akong Rinpoche's noble aspirations may live on through the institutions that he created and that he may swiftly return to guide beings along the path to wellbeing and happiness.

With kindest regards,


Dagmo Kushok

11th October 2013

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The Twelfth Tai Situpa

༡༡། །ཆེད་དུ་བརྗོད་པ།

ད་ལམ་ཚོས་ཇི་ཙམ་དཀོན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་སྐོ་བྱུང་དུ་སྐྱེ་ཆེ་ལ་བར་ཆད་བྱུང་བ་དེ་རིང་སོས་མ་ཐག་སྤྲོད་པ་གང་ཐད་ནས་སྐོ་པམ་གཉིས་ཆེན་པོ་བྱུང་། ཐོག་མར་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་བསམ་ཡམ་སྤྱིང་གི་དབུ་འཁོར་གཙུང་པོ་ཚོས་ཇི་ལྟ་མ་ཡེ་ཤེས་སྐོ་གསལ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་གཙོས་ཡུམ་སྲས་སྲས་མོ་སོགས་ནང་མི་ཐམས་ཅད་དང་། དགོ་འདུན་བཅུན་པ་དང་བཅུན་མ། དམ་པ་སྤྱིང་གཙོས་འཛམ་སྤྱིང་གར་རྒྱབ་ཀྱི་ཆོས་ཚོགས་ཡན་ལག་དང་བཅས་པའི་འགོ་བྱེད་དང་ལྡན་སྐོབ་ཚོགས་ཡོངས་ལ་སྤྲུགས་གསོ་དང་ཆབས་ཅིག་གདན་ས་ཆེན་པོ་དཔལ་སྤྱད་ས་དང་ཆོ་བ་སྐོབ་མ་ལྷ་ཁང་བར་མི་རབས་མང་པོའི་རིང་གི་དཀོན་མེ་ལག་གི་འབྲེལ་བ་ཚོས་དང་དམ་ཚིག་གཙང་མའི་གདུང་སེམས་མཉམ་བསྐྱེད་བྱ་རྒྱུ་ཡིན།

དེ་མཚུངས་འཛམ་སྤྱིང་རོགས་པ་ཚོགས་པ་དང་དུ་ར་རོགས་པ་བཅས་ཀྱི་ཚོགས་གཙོ་དང་ལས་བྱེད་སྤྱིན་བདག་ཁག་དང་། ཞིང་གཤེགས་ཨ་དཀོན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་ནས་བོད་ཡུལ་སྤོང་སྤྱང་བར་གསུམ་དུ་གསུམ་བསྐྱུང་དང་རོགས་སྐྱོབ་གནང་བའི་སྐོབ་གྲུ་བརྒྱ་བཀའ་གཉིས་ཅམ་དང་རིས་མེད་དཀོན་སྤེལ་ཁག་དང་བཤད་གྲུ་ཁག་སྤྱིན་ཁང་ཆས་གསོ་གཙོང་གསོ་དུ་སྤྲུག་སོགས་འབྲེལ་ཡོད་ཐམས་ཅད་ལ་གདུང་སེམས་མཉམ་བསྐྱེད་བྱ་རྒྱུ་ཡིན།

ཞིང་གཤེགས་ཚོས་ཇི་ཙམ་དཀོན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་མཚོག་ནི་ཐོག་མར་རྒྱབ་སྤྲོད་ཀྱི་ཡུལ་དུ་གཙུག་ལག་ཁང་གསར་བཞེངས་ཀྱིས་གཙོས་ཚོས་ཀྱི་བྱ་བ་རྒྱབ་སྐྱོར་ཆེན་མཛད་ཅིང་། དེ་ནས་བོད་གངས་རྒྱུངས་ཀྱི་ས་གནས་ཡོངས་དང་བལ་ཡུལ་བཅས་སུ་དུ་སྤྲུག་དང་དབུལ་པོ་

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རྣམས་ལ་རོགས་པའི་སྐབས་ཆེན་གནང་བ་དང་། རིམ་བཞིན་བོད་སྐད་དང་བོད་ཡིག་གཙོས་
 ཆོས་དང་རིག་གཞུང་གི་ཞབས་འདེགས་གཞན་མན་ཁོ་ནར་དམིགས་ཏེ་སློབ་གྲྭ་གསར་
 འཛུགས་དང་དགོན་པ་དང་བཟང་གྲུ་སོགས་ལ་ཞབས་འདེགས། དབུལ་མོངས་རྣམས་ལ་
 རོགས་པའི་གནང་བས་མ་ཟད། ཡོ་རོབ་དང་ཨ་མི་རི་ཀ་སོགས་སུ་སེམས་ཁམས་གསོ་བ་
 དང་དབུལ་སློབ་སོགས་གོང་དུ་འཁོད་པ་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱི་ལས་དོན་ཐོག་རྒྱུན་མ་ཆད་པར་རང་
 དོན་སྡེ་གཅིག་གི་འབད་བརྩོན་མེད་པར་གཞན་པའི་ཁོ་ན་གནང་ནས་སྐྱ་ཆོ་ཉིལ་སོ་གཏོང་
 མཁུ་གྱི་སྐྱེས་བུ་ཞིག་ཡིན་པར་བརྟེན། འགོ་བ་མི་རིགས་སྤྱི་དང་བོད་གངས་ཅན་པ་ཡོངས་
 རྫོགས་ཁྱད་པར་དུ་མགོན་སློབ་མེད་པའི་སྐྱེ་འགོ་ཡོངས་ལ་དྲིན་ལེན་ཏུ་ཆེ་བར་བརྟེན་ད་
 ལམ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་མཆོག་དང་སྐྱ་ཆོ་གཅིག་ཞབས་གྲུ་གཅིག་བཅས་རྒྱུན་ལམ་དུ་སྐྱ་ཆོ་མ་ཟིན་
 པ་ནི་གོང་སློབ་ལྷན་གྲོང་གུང་ཆོད་མེད་ལགས་ཀྱང་སེམས་མཐུན་དང་ལྷ་དཔེ་བྱེད་པ་ཁོ་ན་
 མ་ཡིན་པར་དམ་པ་དེ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་དགོངས་པ་བསྟན་དང་འགོ་བའི་དོན་ཆེན་མཁུ་བྱ་རྒྱུ་ལ་
 ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱིས་འབད་བརྩོན་གནང་གུབ་པ་ལྷུ་རྒྱ་དང་བཅས། སྐུལ་པའི་སྐྱ་དེ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་ཡང་
 སྤྱིད་སྐྱར་དུ་མེབས་པའི་སློན་འདུན་ངོས་ཀྱི་འབྲེལ་ཡོད་དཔལ་སྤྱངས་གདན་ས་མ་ལག་དང་
 བཅས་པ་ནས་བྱ་རྒྱ་དང་། ཆོས་ལུགས་རིས་མེད་ཀྱི་སྐྱེས་ཆེན་དམ་པ་རྣམས་ལ་དེ་ལྟར་
 གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་པ་ལགས། དགོན་མཆོག་གསུམ་དང་རྩ་བ་གསུམ་ལ་གསོལ་འདེབས་
 ཟབ་མོ་བཅས།

འཕགས་ལུལ་གདན་ས་དཔལ་སྤྱངས་ཤེས་རབ་རྣམ་པར་རྒྱལ་བའི་སྤྱིད་ནས་
 ཀུན་ཏྱིང་རྒྱའི་སི་ཏུ་པས། ཡེ་ལོ་ ༢༠༡༩ ཡེ་ལྷ་ ༡༠ ཡེ་ཆེས་ ༠༥ ཉིན་སྤེལ་བ་དོན་དང་ལྷན་
 པར་གྱུར་ཅིག ། །



Condolence Letter from Kenting Tai Situ Rinpoche

October 8th 2013

Today, as soon as it was heard that the precious life of Chöje Akong Rinpoche had been abruptly cut short, a terrible distress was felt everywhere. I want to offer my condolences first of all to the Abbot of Kagyu Samye Ling, Akong Rinpoche's younger brother, Chöje Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche; to Rinpoche's wife, sons and daughter and all his other relatives; to the monks and nuns of Samye Ling; to all the directors and faithful disciples of its associated Dharma centres and their branches in other countries West and East and especially on Holy Isle. At the same time I want also to express my deepest, heart-felt sympathy because the great monastic seat of Palpung and Dolma Lhakhang of Tsawa Gang have been like a mother-centre and its branch, connected by a strong link of pure Dharma and samaya over many generations. Likewise, I offer my deepest, heart-felt sympathy to the directors, workers and sponsors of Rokpa International and Tara Rokpa; to the many institutions founded or supported in the three main areas of Tibet by the late

CONDOLENCE LETTER FROM KENTING TAI SITU RINPOCHE

Akong Rinpoche – about two hundred schools, non-sectarian monastic communities and monastic colleges (shedra), clinics, care for the elderly, TB care centres, care for orphans and so forth.

First establishing a temple in the West, the late Very Venerable Chöje Akong Rinpoche primarily devoted himself to launching a great wave of Dharma activity; he then started a large scale action to help and benefit orphans and the poor all over Tibet and in Nepal; in turn, with the welfare of others as his only purpose, he served the Dharma and culture of Tibet chiefly through supporting Tibetan medicine and Tibetan language, founding new schools, monasteries, monastic colleges and so forth. Besides helping people in need, he strove continuously in Europe and in Africa to further his many activities of therapy, charity and the others mentioned above, working for the sole benefit of others and without ever trying to gain the slightest advantage for himself. All of this highlights how much he was one of those noble beings who dedicate their whole lives to others. He showed very great kindness to everyone in general and to Tibetans especially, and more particularly to all those with no one in their life to protect them or care for them.

Now fatal circumstances have interrupted the course of the precious life of the Very Venerable Rinpoche, along with those of his nephew and the monk who assisted him. As mentioned before, although our loss is beyond measure, we should not let ourselves be totally overcome by sadness and grief but continue fulfilling the noble intentions of this holy person of serving the teachings and beings, and I request all of you to do your best to achieve this. Connected as we are regarding praying for the swift return of this

CONDOLENCE LETTER FROM KENTING TAI SITU RINPOCHE

tulku in a new incarnation, we will devote ourselves to this in the monastic seat of Palpung and its branches; in a spirit of non-sectarianism, we shall also pray to the saintly masters of other religious traditions and address our deep prayers to the Three Jewels and the Three Roots.

Written by the Kenting Tai Situpa at his monastic seat of Palpung Sherab Nampar Gyalwe Ling in India, on the 8th of October 2013. May this writing be of consequence.



His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

October 10th, 2013

Ven. Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche
Kagyü Samye Ling Monastery & Tibetan Centre
Eskdalemuir, Langholm
Dumfriesshire DG13 0QL, Scotland
United Kingdom

Dear Lama Yeshe Rinpoche,

I am deeply saddened by the tragic passing away of Choje Akong Rinpoche and his two attendants. I offer my condolences to you and all other members of Rinpoche's family, the sangha at Samye Ling Monastery, Rokpa Foundation, disciples and everyone involved in Rinpoche's many charitable projects benefitting Tibetans and the needy in the Himalayan region. I pray that Akong Rinpoche's activities will continue smoothly and his wishes fulfilled.

Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

Condolence Letter from the Twelfth Gyaltsab Rinpoche

Dharmachakra Centre, Rumtek

The Dharma-lord Akong Rinpoche, brilliant sun illuminating the Kagyu Teachings, devoted his entire life to the noble purpose of serving all sentient beings and the Dharma and, more specifically, to spreading and furthering the Buddhadharma in the West; to establishing new schools in many parts of Tibet, teaching traditional Tibetan medicine, Tibetan language and a full range of subjects; to helping the poor in Tibet and in many other countries.

From the heart, I beseech you to recollect these excellent deeds, so worthy of praise. At the same time, while I am deeply saddened by the sudden loss of Akong Rinpoche's precious life and that of two of his assistants on the 8th of October, I urge each and every one of you to contemplate the impermanent nature of all composite things: please reflect on this, all of you, the monks and nuns and the whole community of his seat, now earnestly engaged in prayers appropriate for the completion of his compassionate work of this life; his family, to start with Lama Yeshe Ösal Rinpoche, holder of

CONDOLENCE LETTER FROM THE TWELFTH GYALTSAB RINPOCHE

the wealth of the Three Trainings; his wife, children and all his relatives; his disciples, both in Tibet and in all the other countries; Rokpa International's directors and workers, all the people in need and their dependents.

It is of utmost importance that instead of grieving you strive to find the means to ensure the continuity and growth of the outstanding work of this great being. With auspicious and constant prayers that this may come true, I offer this message of condolences to comfort your heart.

The 12th Goshir Gyaltsab, October 9, 2013.



NAMO BUDDHA BUDDHISTS MEDITATION AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE Thrangu Tashi Choeling Monastery

Ref. No.:

Date:

༄༅། ཚོས་རྗེ་ཨ་དཀོན་མེན་པོ་ཚེའི་སྐུ་མཚེད། གསུམ་མོས། སྐུ་ཚོ་རྣམས་དང་། བསམ་ཡས་སྤོང་གི་ལས་བྱིན་སོགས།
ལུན་མོངས་ལ།

ལྷགས་གསོམ་འཚོམས་འདྲི་ཞུ་རྒྱུ། ལྷིང་དཔེས་ཀྱི་ལྷན་པར་དེ་ལྟར་བྱ་བྱེ་སྤོང་མི་ཤོང་བ། ལྷན་རྣམས་པ་
ཚམ་མ་ཡིན་པར། རང་པ་སངས་རྒྱུས་པའི་ཚོས་སྤོང་ལྷགས་པ་བྱུ་དང་། ལྷག་པར་བོད་རིགས་ཡོངས་རྒྱགས་གཞན་
ཡང་། འཛོམ་སྤོང་ལ་གནས་གང་སར་མ་བོད་པའི་དབུལ་པོངས་ཅན་སོགས་ཀྱན་གྱི་པ་མ་དང་ཐལ་བ་ལྷ་བྱུང་བ་
རྟེན། འོན་ཀྱང་ཁོང་གི་ལྷགས་ལ་བྱམས་པ་དང་སྤོང་རྗེ། ལྱང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་ཀྱི་ཀྱན་སྤོང་། ལུན་མོང་མ་ཡིན་པ་ཞིག་
མངའ་བས། མཚན་པ་བཟང་པོ་དང་། གཞན་ལམ་སྤངས་ཚེན་ལོན་གནང་བར་བརྟེན། མི་ཤིང་བར་མཚོག་གི་སྤུལ་
སྐྱ་སྐྱ་བསོད་དང་དབང་ཐང་ལུན་སྤུམ་ཚོགས་པ་ཞིག་འཕྲོན་རྒྱ་ལོ་བཟང་མི་དགོས་པ་རེད། དེའི་ལྷིང་ལྷགས་ངལ་
དང་སེམས་ཁུལ་མ་གནང་སོགས་ཞུ་རྒྱུ་དང་། གལ་ཆེ་བ་ཁོང་གི་མཚན་བཟང་རང་པོ་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱིས་བརྟེན་མི་
ལྱང་བར་རྗེས་སྤྱོད་དགོས་པ་ལོ།

ལྷིང་བོད་གངས་ཅན་གྱི་རྒྱུང་ལྷན་པར་སྤུལ་བ་འདེལ་ཞིང་རྒྱས་ནས་ཉེ་མ་ཤར་བ་ལྷ་བྱ་ཞིག་བྱུང་
མོད། འོན་ཀྱང་གངས་ཤིའི་ཤིང་པའི་ནང་མ་གཏོགས། གངས་ཤིའི་ཤིང་བ་ལས་བཀལ་བྱལ་བ་ཞིག་མ་བྱུང་ལ།
དུས་རབས་འདྲིར་བསྐྱེད་འཛིན་གྱི་སྤྱོད་ཚེན་མང་པོས་གངས་ཤིའི་ཤིང་བ་ལས་བཀལ་ནས་རྒྱལ་བསྐྱེད་སྤེལ་བའི་
ཤིན་ལས་བྱུང་བ་ལྷན་ཁོང་ཡང་དབུལ་བ་མ་ཉམ་བའི་བྱིས་ཤིན་ལས་སྤོང་བར་མ་ཟད། སྤར་ཡང་རྒྱ་ཚོམ་ཚེན་པོ་
བཀལ་ནས། ལྷི་སྤོང་གི་ལུལ་བྱ་རྣམས་སྤུ་ཚོས་ཚོགས་བསྟོགས་ཏེ། སྤང་དོར་གྱི་གནས་བསྐྱེད་པའི་སྤོལ་གསར་དུ་
གཏོང་བ་དང་།

གཞན་ཡང་། ལྷ་གསུམ་བལ་ཡུལ། བོད་བཅས་སྤྱི་དཀོན་སྤེལ་ལས་པ་གསོ་བ་དང་། མི་ཉམས་པར་
སྤོང་བའི་སྤེལ་བསམ་དང་སྤེལ་ཡང་དཔལ་འཕྲོར་བྱི་རྒྱལ་བརྟེན་དེ་ཚམ་མེད་པ་རྣམས་ལ་རྒྱལ་སྤོང་གནང་བའི་ཚེད་
དང་། ལྷི་ལྷ་གསར་དང་། བོད་ཀྱི་སྤོལ་རྒྱུན་ཤེས་རིག་བསྐྱབ་ལྷ་གཞུགས་པའི་ཚེད་དང་། ལྷི་དབུལ་པོངས་རྣམས་
ལ་ཟས་ཤོས་ཀྱི་སྤེལ་རྒྱུན་ལྷན་གནང་བའི་ཚེད་དེ་དགོས་པ་ཚེན་པོ་གསུམ་གྱི་ལྷིང་དཔལ་འཕྲོར་རྒྱས་པ་རྣམས་ལ་རོག་
རམ་འབོད་བསྐུལ་བྱིས་བསོད་ནམས་བསགས་པའི་སྤོ་བུ་བར་མཚན་དེ་རོག་པ་ཞེས་པའི་ཚོགས་པ་བསྟོགས་གནང་
བ་དང་།

ནང་མཉམ་ཅན་ནང་ལས་སྤོང་བའི་ཚེད་རྗེ་བསྟན་སྤེལ་མའི་ཚོགས་པ་ཞེས་པ་བསྟོགས་གནང་བ་སོགས།
མཚན་བཟང་རྒྱ་ཆེ་ལ་འོ་མཚར་བའི་ཤིན་ལས་ཚེན་པོ་གསུམ་དེ་མ་ཉམས་རྒྱུན་རྒྱུངས་གང་དུག་གནང་སོགས་ཞུ་
དང་། ལྷག་དམར་པ་ཡང་ཉོན་མོངས་དུག་སྤེལ་ནོན་ནས་རང་དབང་དང་ཐལ་བར་སྤུར་པ་ལ་དགོངས་ནས། ལྷམས་
པ་དང་སྤོང་རྗེ་གནང་བ་ལས། ཞི་ཐང་དང་ཁོང་ལོ་གཞོད་སེམས་སོགས་གནང་མ་ཤོར་བ་བཟང་དྲིན་ལྷ་ཞེས་ལྷ་
འགྲུ་སྤེལ་མེད་པས།།



Condolence Letter from Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

To the brother, nephew, immediate family and relatives of Chöjé Akong Tulku Rinpoche and to the members of the Samye Ling community and so forth:

I offer my deep condolences at this time when the incomprehensible has happened, through an appalling conjuncture of circumstances, through which not just yourselves but in general the whole Buddhist community and especially the entirety of the Tibetan people and furthermore the poor and deprived people of our world are like orphans, having lost the one who was a parent for them all. His mind was one filled with loving kindness and compassion and his motivation was that of a true bodhisattva. Through having those qualities in a most extraordinary way, his deeds were deeds of excellence, accomplishing an enormous wave of activity that was entirely devoted to the welfare of others. Due to this, there is no need to explain further the fact that the causes are well in place for the swift return, in absolute splendour and magnificence, of this supreme tulku. This being so, I sincerely request

you not to let distress and worry overwhelm you: rather it is very important for you all to bring constantly to mind all of his excellent, positive activities that it would be so wrong to forget.

In general, it is known that the Enlightened One's teachings spread and flourished in the snowlands of Tibet, like the shining radiance of the sun. Furthermore, although it was the case that they had not spread from there beyond the snowy ranges within which they prospered, it somehow happened that, in this present age, many great beings, true holders of the teachings, travelled across the ranges of snow-capped mountains to spread the teachings abroad through their enlightened activity. Akong Rinpoche not only supported and fostered their works shoulder to shoulder but also travelled himself across the great oceans and established Dharma centres in various areas of other lands, bestowing to those places the traditional sacred teachings of what it is appropriate to develop or abandon.

Besides this, he established the organisation known as ROKPA, opening the door to creating great merit through fundraising among the wealthy in order to support three major aims in India, Nepal and Tibet, i.e. 1) to support those who had the noble intention of restoring damaged monastic communities or aiding those that were intact, but who lacked the slightest financial backing for so doing; 2) the establishment of schools training in both the new disciplines and traditional Tibetan ones and 3) setting up humanitarian aid for the hungry and the poor.

As well as those, he established the Tara therapy organisation to protect and support those afflicted by illness.

CONDOLENCE LETTER FROM KHENCHEN THRANGU RINPOCHE

I, known as Thrangu Tulku, sincerely request that you do all you possibly can to help these three areas of his wonderful activity, so that they never diminish but continue in the healthiest of ways and I also request that, in whatever concerns his murderer, you be kind, considering him as someone who lost control of himself and fell prey to the five poisonous defilements. Please give rise to love and compassion alone, thereby not allowing harmful thoughts, anger, hatred and so forth to arise.



རྒྱ་གར་གྱི་ཡུལ་གྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་

青海玉树当卡寺

Qinghai, Yushu, Damkar Monastery

། །ཉམས་ཐག་སྐྱེ་འགྲོ་ཡོངས་ཀྱི་ཡབ་ཆེན་ཨ་དགོན་རིན་པོ་ཆེ་མཆོག་ཞིང་གཞན་དུ་
བཤེགས་པར་སྤྱངན་དང་སྤྱགས་མགོན་པོ་གང་གི་མཛད་བཟང་ལ་རྗེས་དྲན་དུ།

འདྲ་བློང་གི་ལྷོ་གཞུག་སྐྱིད་དང་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལོངས་དང་ལྷོ་གཞུག་དོན་ཉམས་ཐག་བོད་མིའི་ལྷོ་གང་
སྤོང་བཟུང་ལྷན་ལ་ཆུན་མེད་པའི་མཛད་རྗེས་བཟང་བོ་གནད་པའི་མགོན་པོ་གང་ཉིད་འདྲི་ལྷར་
ཡུལ་ལ་སྐྱབས་སྐྱོད་གསུང་དང་དུ་དག་གི་ཞིང་ནས་ཉིད་ཉིད་ལ་རྗེས་དྲན་ལྷ། སྐྱེ་གང་བོད་བསྐྱབ་
འགྲོ་དོན་ཆེན་ལ་བཅོན་པའི་དམ་ལ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་གངས་མེད་ཀྱི་དུ་སྤྱག་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལ་བུམས་བཅུ་མ་ལས་
ལྷོ་གཞུག་པའི་སྐྱེ་ལྷོ་བསྐྱབས། བདག་མེད་ལུས་མེད་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལ་གཏེས་པའི་བུ་ལས་དགའ་
པའི་བཅུ་གཟེགས་གནད། ཉམས་ཐག་པའི་ནད་པ་དང་དུམ་པོ་དག་ལ་སྤྱགས་དང་རིས་སུ་མེད་
པའི་དགོས་འདོད་ལོར་ཀྱིས་གནད་སྐྱེ་བ་སྐྱབས་ལ། སྐྱེ་བའི་ལྷོ་གཞུག་གི་པའི་སྐྱེ་བའི་སྐྱབས་
པོད་ཀྱི་ཆོས་དང་རིག་གཞུང་ལ་ལྱུང་སྐྱོབ་ཀྱི་སྤྱགས་སྐྱོན་མཛད་པ། མདོར་ན་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལྷོ་གཞུག་
ནད་གི་རིག་གཞུང་གང་ལ་བསམ་ན་ཉེར་གཏེས་དུས་རབས་ནད་དུ་འཛིན་སྐྱོང་དང་བོད་མི་སྐྱོང་
ལ་སྐྱབས་ཆེན་ཀྱི་སྐྱེས་ལུ་འདྲི་དམ་ལ་ཉིད་ཉིད་ལོ་ནའོ། །ཉིད་ཉིད་ཉམས་ལྷན་མགོན་མེད་རྣམས་ཀྱི་
སྐྱབས་མགོན། རྒྱ་གསལ་གཞིན་ལུ་རྣམས་ཀྱི་བཤེགས་གཉེན། མ་མེད་དུ་སྤྱག་ཆོགས་ཀྱི་ལུས་
ཆེན། བོད་ཁ་བ་ཅན་ཀྱི་ཆོས་དང་རིག་གཞུང་གི་ལོ་ལ་འཛིན། ཉིད་ཉིད་ཀྱི་བག་འདྲིན་ས་ཆེན་
པོས་མི་ཐེག་ལ། ཉིད་ཉིད་ཀྱི་མཛད་རྗེས་བཟང་བོ་དང་གངས་ཅན་པའི་སེམས་ཀྱི་ནད་ནས་ནས་
ཡང་ཡལ་མི་སྲིད། མཆོག་གསུམ་རྒྱལ་བ་རྒྱ་མཛོའི་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལ་བཞེད་ནས་མགོན་པོ་གང་གི་
མཛད་བཟང་མཉམས་ཅད་དམ་འབབ་ཚུའི་རྒྱན་བཞིན་ལྷོ་གཞུག་དུ་སྐྱེ་བ་ཞིང་འབྲེལ་སྐྱོས་
སེམས་ཅན་རྣམས་ཀྱང་གཞན་སྐྱབས་མི་འདོད་པའི་ཉེར་འཛེལ་ས་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལ་མཛད་གཞན་བཤེའི་གོ་
འཕངས་མཛོན་དུ་འབྲེལ་པའི་སྐྱོན་འདྲན་བཅས།

འདྲ་བློང་གི་ལྷོ་གཞུག་སྐྱིད་དང་ལྷོ་གཞུག་ལོངས་དང་ལྷོ་གཞུག་དོན་ཉམས་ཐག་བོད་མིའི་ལྷོ་གང་

青海省玉树州（县）结古镇东凤村
ཧྲེ་ལོ་༢༠༡༩ ལྷ་ ༡༠ ཚེས་ ༡༠ རེས་པའི་ཉིན་ལོ།
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Condolence Letter from Dulmo Chöje Rinpoche

A tribute composed in deep grief to commemorate the wondrous deeds of the great Akong Rinpoche, caring father of all beings in need, now gone to a Pureland.

Following your murder, I am weeping and full of grief as I write this tribute to your memory, great protector who has left the magnificent imprint of his unsurpassable deeds on this world of ours and its inhabitants—each and every living thing in it, human beings in particular and especially the Tibetan people in need.

Saintly, noble being that you are, you worked diligently during your entire life to serve the Buddhadharma and all living beings. With an infinite kindness, greater even than a mother's tender love, you nurtured a flock of countless orphans; with a love greater even than the care of a cherished son, you looked after the many old and invalid people who are helpless and with no one to support them; with the finest generosity and with no bias or preference, you bestowed the gift of fulfilling the needs and wishes of the weakest—the sick and the poor; with the aid you provided, you gave a renewed

CONDOLENCE LETTER FROM DULMO CHÖJE RINPOCHE

strength to the Dharma and culture of Tibet that had become like a lamp with no more fuel.

To sum up, whether we think in terms of the living world around us or of the culture within it, you are unique in this 21st century as a holy person who has had an immense beneficial influence on the world and especially on Tibet. You are the refuge and protector of the weak with no protection; the friend and mentor of the bright young people; the caring mother of so many motherless orphans; the holder of the tradition of Tibetan Dharma and culture. Even our vast, great Earth could not hold the immensity of your kindness, and the magnificent imprint of your great deeds will never vanish from the mind of the Tibetan that I am. I pray that, through the blessing power of the Three Jewels and the ocean of Victorious Ones, all your excellent activities may increase more and more, like the majestic flow of the Ganges waters, and that each and every being linked to you may be free from harm in the short term and ultimately achieve the state of everlasting happiness.

Written at Damkhar Lhündrup Déchen Chökhör Ling by the 18th bearer of the name Dülmo Chöjé, on October 10, 2013.

Introduction

Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche was a reincarnate lama from Tibet who brought profound and lasting benefit to the world. With unconditional compassion and deep wisdom, Akong Rinpoche was prolific in three major areas: spirituality, charity and therapy. Through his enlightened activity, Rinpoche was a leading light in establishing Buddhism's place in Western society. The humanitarian projects he created in his homeland of Tibet and other parts of the world have saved and transformed the lives of thousands of people. Rinpoche also introduced a special system of mind-training, a therapy programme, which has helped a great number of individuals in many different countries.

Tragically, Rinpoche left our world on 8th October 2013 to enter the Dharmakaya. His teachings and projects, however, continue with great splendour at his monasteries of Dolma Lhakang in the Tibetan highlands and Kagyu Samye Ling in Scotland, at his many Dharma centres worldwide, in his extensive activities in the fields of charity and therapy, and through the work of his many followers around the world. Rinpoche's brother, Choje Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche,

INTRODUCTION

continues to oversee and guide this work with deep commitment, compassion and wisdom.

This book was conceived following a conference held in May 2014 at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, to commemorate Rinpoche's life and activities. The event was presided over by Serthar Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche, one of the most prominent lamas and scholars of the renowned Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in the Eastern Tibetan region of Kham. The conference was organised by Dr Mingji Cuomu and myself.

The speakers were individuals responsible for assisting Rinpoche's main activities around the world, and the talks were filled with devotion, profound memories and deep emotion. After the conference, Dr Mingji and I requested each speaker to create a chapter based on their presentation, the results of which are presented here within this book with some further chapters added. Gelong Trinley of Samye Ling joined the project and provided us with his excellent editorial skills.

From the depths of our hearts, we all pray that Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche will swiftly choose to bless this world again with his enlightened presence, and we offer this book for the inspiration and benefit of all who read it.

*– Gelong Thubten, monk and attendant
of Akong Tulku Rinpoche, January 2020.*

Serthar Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche's Opening speech at the Oxford Commemorative Conference



Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche at the Oxford University Conference

Courtesy of Chico Dall'Inha

Today I would like to extend my greetings to all of you from all over the world attending this memorial conference on Akong Rinpoche. Personally, I have two feelings concerning this event. The first of these is that I have come to Europe for the first time and yet have not had the opportunity to meet Rinpoche here, and that makes me feel really very sad. Rinpoche did so much for Tibetans and so many things in Tibetan areas, but he was also a really close, wonderful friend of mine. Therefore I feel that if he was still alive and was here today, it would be a very happy occasion for all of us, a happy reunion. My second feeling is that to have the opportunity

to attend this conference gives me great joy. In Tibet we place great significance upon what we call *tendrel*, that which is auspicious. Although I have not been able to meet Rinpoche on this visit because he is no longer alive, to have the opportunity to attend this memorial conference I regard as a great auspicious sign.

The reason I say this is because Rinpoche undertook educational and health programmes inside Tibet at a very early stage. We became acquainted and then came to know each other quite closely for about four years. The first time I had the opportunity to meet Akong Rinpoche was at a conference on the environment organised by him in Chengdu. After that we developed a really close, intimate relationship, and he showed so much love to me. I am here at this memorial conference because of that.

Today, amongst those of you gathered here, some of you will have been good friends and some will be devout disciples of Akong Rinpoche. Regardless of whether friend or disciple, his passing will have engendered much suffering in all of us. Be that as it may, we should not give in to that suffering and sadness, because we will meet him again soon, we have hope that we will see him really soon.

Akong Rinpoche achieved so much, accomplishing great results inside Tibet regarding education, the environment and so on. I do not need to go into details about these achievements, of which I am sure you are all aware. To give but one example, Akong Rinpoche took care of orphans in the area of Yushu, where he brought them up and gave them a really good education. They graduated from their schools; some even went on to study Tibetan medicine and are doing great work.

Naturally it is not only Akong Rinpoche's disciples in Europe who are experiencing sadness, his disciples in Tibet are experiencing the same suffering. Therefore in Tibet, lamas, disciples, teachers, students and intellectuals have been expressing their anguish over Akong Rinpoche's death. They have been delivering speeches and writing poems; many activities have taken place in connection with the commemoration of Akong Rinpoche.

To have this much suffering in us is quite natural. However, there is not much benefit in letting the suffering endure for too long. So what can we do? The principal thing you can do as disciples of Akong Rinpoche is to put his Dharma teachings into practice, and this is also one way of remembering him. The second thing is that Akong Rinpoche did so much all over the world in terms of humanitarian charity, providing education and the alleviation of poverty. He has done marvellous work, and I believe he is one of the first Tibetan lamas to do this on a global level. Therefore, for his followers and disciples to continue to perpetuate his achievements, to continue his endeavours, would be extremely constructive. According to Tibetan Buddhism, the ultimate offering to one's lama is to continue to expand upon their positive deeds.

When we look from the Mahayana perspective, the main way to serve one's lama is not to provide personal assistance or to make material offerings to them individually. To benefit other beings and to undertake altruistic endeavours is what pleases one's lama. The greatest and most effective way for the disciples to remember their lama is to put Dharma instructions into action and thus achieve really meaningful Dharma practice. The second is to carry out activ-

ities that benefit others, and to perpetuate their great deeds. So these are the best ways of commemorating Akong Rinpoche. By so doing, even if your lama does not physically abide in this world, from a Buddhist perspective that does not mean that you have become separate or that he has become very distant: there is no great distance, death does not create distance.

When one has sincere devotion and faith, one can meet one's lama in dreams and experiential visions; so there are still these opportunities to meet one's lama. Usually any death, for instance the death of one's parents, also produces dreams. They appear in your dreams immediately after death for some time, but that is different from this kind of dream. For example, a lama might appear in your dream, and if you have made a mistake, the lama would scold you or give you guidance. This kind of dream does occur. Likewise, if you have performed great positive deeds, your lama might appear in your dream and praise you. This kind of dream can also occur. If one encounters difficulties or hardships in one's life, or during one's spiritual practice, one's lama may appear and bestow their blessing. This type also takes place. Also, your lama can appear in your dream to help you tackle your doubts. If you have challenges and doubts in your spiritual quest or regarding your tasks in life, or you are facing a challenging dilemma and you are unsure what to do, your lama can appear and offer you direction in your dream.

These phenomena are described in the secret tantras of Tibetan Buddhism; they are not only descriptions given in texts, if you carry out sincere prayers and practice, one may encounter these visions in one's own spiritual experience. Therefore when esoteric tantras

advise us to seek out a lama, it does not mean to do so for just this life, for just a single life, or for the next life. In terms of worldly family existence, our parents, kin and relatives, we are talking about a relationship that is within a single life. The relationship between lama and disciple described in the secret tantras is not a single life relationship. That physical existence might come to an end, but the spiritual relationship does not end. Therefore the lama appears to disciples in different forms, for example as a human being or deity: the physical form changes, the form of life changes, but the spiritual connection does not change.



Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche speaking at the conference

Courtesy of Chico Dall'Inha

Of course, from a worldly perspective the passing of one's lama causes great suffering, but from a spiritual perspective, the spiritual

relationship with one's lama never ceases. Therefore it is not necessary to endure so much suffering, we do not need to be that sad. The important thing that is required to perpetuate this spiritual relationship, to make it everlasting, is one's faith, great sincere faith, intense faith, to abide by sacred vows and to undertake spiritual practice and prayers.

My own lama passed away ten years ago. I did not feel that I was closer to him when he was alive, or had become estranged from him when he died. I do not tend to have these feelings. The important thing is not to feel dejected or depressed by one's lama passing away. The most important thing is to continue to engage with one's spiritual practice.

So this morning, due to time constraints, that is all I have to say and I would like to thank you all very much.

Only the Impossible
is Worth Doing

CHAPTER 1

Early Years



The Early Life of Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche

by Chöje Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche

I would like to thank Akong Rinpoche's long-term devoted students in different fields for contributing to this book about his life and activities. Each of them has written a wonderful chapter about Rinpoche and also about how they have benefitted from their long connection to him. This book will be translated and printed in Tibetan, and Tibetans will be amazed to see how devoted, loyal and committed Rinpoche's students are. He is not here to thank you personally and I am the only surviving brother, so on behalf of Rinpoche and his family I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart very, very much.

I am glad to have this opportunity to speak about my brother, so that all his students around the world will know more about him, now even more than when he was alive, because Akong Rinpoche was never a self-promoter. He never talked about himself except in the service of humanity.

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHÖJE AKONG TULKU RINPOCHE

If you look into the activity of lamas of all levels, some have managed to build monasteries, some have many monks and nuns, some have written lots of books and there are many who have achieved something for a certain period of time. Akong Rinpoche was different in the sense that he built up a really solid foundation, and he had a vision that he could help when he saw suffering or poverty. A refugee, he was nevertheless able to raise tens of millions of pounds for his charity ROKPA, helping Tibetans in almost every aspect of their lives. He was also totally non-sectarian: I discovered that he was helping Bonpos, he was helping Gelukpas, he was helping Nyingmapas, and Sakyapas, setting up colleges and so on.

When he first returned to Tibet in 1983, one of the things he observed was that the Tibetan women work much harder than the men – they have to milk the animals and look after the children. He saw the need to focus on education for women, giving them more opportunities in life, and so he started a girls-only medical college. Thirty-six students have now graduated as doctors. With the exception of one who passed away, every one of them now has a clinic of their own. That is a major achievement! Seeing that Tibetan medicine is very effective, he brought students from the college to the UK to learn how to cultivate medicinal plants. In this way the production of Tibetan medicine will continue through people in Tibet learning to grow the various plants rather than picking them in the wild. Since Tibetan medicine has now become so popular everywhere, even among the Chinese, he saw that in the long run there is a high chance that the plants used in Tibetan medicine may cease to exist.

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHÖJE AKONG TULKU RINPOCHE



The first return to Tibetan regions 1983.

Seeing how many European people suffer with mental and emotional problems, he set up what is called Tara Rokpa Therapy, which has been very successful, particularly in Germany. And as for those people who run this, they are highly respected European doctors, or therapists, and psychiatrists. There is also the charitable organisation, with many projects including the feeding of poor people.

What he has been able to build has very solid foundations – it has been based on tradition. There was no attempt to create something just to please people. We have a magnificent temple at Samye Ling. He did not create top quality buildings which would have nobody in them, but his wish was to serve and reach everybody. Since Akong Rinpoche was a great upholder of tradition, the head of every school came to teach at Samye Ling: His Holiness the Dalai Lama came twice, His Holiness Karmapa, Sakya Drolma Phodrang, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche blessed the

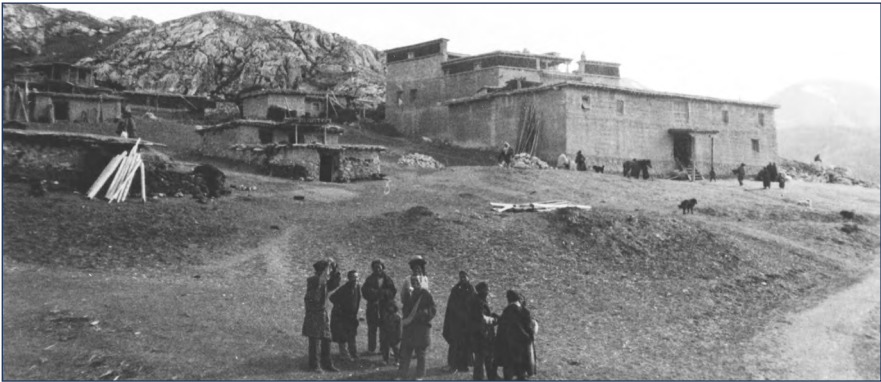
temple foundations, Kalu Rinpoche came many times, Gyaltsab Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Shamar Rinpoche also came many times. No one monastery either inside or outside Tibet has ever been able to receive so many lineage masters.

Akong Rinpoche sponsored the printing of many precious Kagyupa texts, he had the rarest books printed, so that he could supply them wherever they were needed. Some people are now saying that Samye Ling may also have more relics and teachings from all schools than anywhere else, because Rinpoche sponsored Gelukpa texts, Nyingmapa texts, Sakyapa texts, whatever was getting printed. His intention was for Samye Ling to be a safe place, where everything can be preserved and protected. I believe he has done more for the Tibetan cause than almost any other lama has ever done! Some other lamas, whether they be Kagyu, Nyingma, or Sakya, have built big temples, but that was all. Akong Rinpoche did more than this: he helped every single person who came to stay at Samye Ling, showing them how to be independent. He was more than another example of *Ka* – just talk – he never used to say much, but he was extremely active in many fields. He created a charitable organisation that reaches almost every place, you have this system of therapy which is very effective, you have his *Taming The Tiger* book, which was first printed in 1994 and since then has been printed again and again – it is going all over the world and into many languages, so it is very effective and many people are benefiting.

Akong Rinpoche made sure Samye remains as *Samye*, a place of wisdom. Not only that, recently Samye Ling was listed as the tenth

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHÖJE AKONG TULKU RINPOCHE

most visited place in Scotland; now it is more popular than ever before. He established something that will never go away. Chogyam Trungpa was very successful and powerful when he was alive, but whatever Akong Rinpoche began continues to get better and better, and that is a big achievement by anybody's standards. Everyone agrees that this all became possible not because of Akong Rinpoche's clever-talking teaching but due to his good example, fearless goals, seeing what needed to be done, never thinking 'I wonder how we are going to pay for this'. My brother taught one thing, *vision is what makes things work*. And it is true. There has been so much achievement.



Dolma Lhakang retreat & retreat cabins in the 1980s

I am going to speak about Rinpoche's early life. What was the relationship between the two of us? In fact I only came to know my brother when I was eight years old.

Akong Rinpoche's monastery in Tibet is called *Dolma Lhakang*. The monastery is at such a high altitude and so cold that no trees can grow there, and for half of the year the ground is frozen. The

THE EARLY LIFE OF CHÖJE AKONG TULKU RINPOCHE

monastery is situated at fifteen thousand feet and the air is so thin that non-Tibetan visitors sometimes need to bring their own supply of oxygen.



Dolma Lhakang Monastery

When the First Akong Rinpoche passed away Dolma Lhakang was not even considering recognising a tulku; the monastery had never wanted to have a tulku before then. They had a tradition of having very highly realised lamas, and they relied upon them, but they did not have a tulku tradition. However, the Second Kongtrul Rinpoche arranged for it to happen. The Second Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche was very realised and he was also the son of the Fifteenth Karmapa Khachap Dorje. He had a very good connection to the previous Akong Rinpoche, because the latter had saved his life: the Second Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche had come to the Dolma Lhakang area with an apparently incurable disease, which the First Akong Rinpoche managed to cure. They may also have received Dharma

from each other, the giving and receiving of teaching, and they built a strong relationship. Therefore he told the monastery they really had no choice but to recognise the Second Akong Rinpoche, because he is special, he is an emanation of Sangye Menla (Medicine Buddha), the very highest level of realised being. And then he offered to help accomplish the discovery of the new tulku. Being a leading lineage holder, the Second Kongtrul Rinpoche went on to become the teacher of the Sixteenth Karmapa, and he was able to ask the Sixteenth Karmapa to recognise the Akong tulku.

The Karmapa's monastery Tsurphu is actually even further than Lhasa from Akong Rinpoche's birthplace. My brother was born in Darak Village in the region of Chamdo in 1940. It was a very comfortable but remote area of Tibet, in a place where the Karmapa had never been, but he precisely recognised where Akong Rinpoche would be born, what direction the family door was facing, what the year and the parents' names would be, and they found my brother. Dolma Lhakang was unwilling to leave him with his parents too long: I think he was taken away when he was around four years old. He was enthroned as the second Akong, with the full name *Karma Shedrup Chokyi Nyima Trinley Kunchab Pal Zangpo Sok Le Nampar Gyalwe De*, and known as Akong Tulku Rinpoche. I did not know him because of the age gap between us – when he left, maybe I was born, maybe not, but we had no connection at that time.

Dolma Lhakang was actually not the monastery which those in our village relied upon. Generally in Tibet everyone has a monastery where they have a connection and our whole family was connected to the Talung Kagyupa, and in particular to a very big monastery

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in Riwoche Kham. We also have a very strong connection to Neydo Karma Chagme Rinpoche, who wrote the major text *Mountain Dharma*. He was the most well-known lama for my family, and they sponsored him to come and do text-reading, water-offering pujas in nomad places, and other pujas in people's houses every year. We always invited lamas from his monastery.



Akong Rinpoche's birthplace, Darak

When my brother was taken to Dolma Lhakang, he was well cared for, but the monastery had a very strong regime, and was strict with him, since a tulku will be expected to take charge of a whole monastery from a young age. As a tulku you are actually not taught much Dharma: you are taught to read as fast as you can, because you have to perform a lot of oral transmissions; if you are asked to give the oral transmission of the entire *Kangyur*, one hundred and eight volumes, and you are a slow reader you will really be a disgrace! You have to learn the skill of extreme fast-reading: I remember my brother telling me that he had to finish reading a whole page with one breath, and as he was reading his eyes were already on the

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second page. And they got him the toughest teacher – highly disciplined. When they were teaching there was really no sympathy.

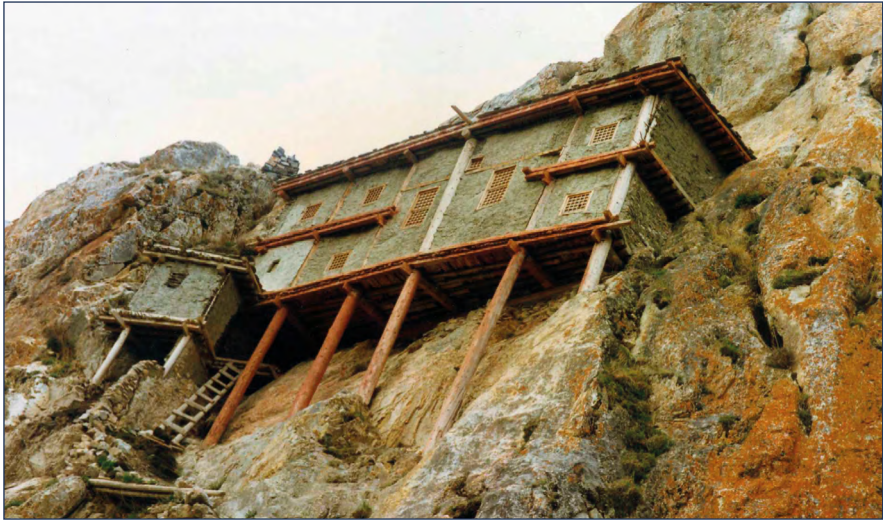


Returning to Darak, Rinpoche's birthplace in eastern Tibet 2006.

His tutor was really the biggest influence upon him. My brother said one tutor, who was the toughest, used to beat him maybe almost every day to teach him how to read. He was called Sa-ngo Rinpoche. When Akong Rinpoche went back to Tibet in 1983, the first thing he wished to do was to find out where his tutor was. In contrast to European students he felt before anything else he should go and help him. Rinpoche found his tutor was no longer there but his daughter was still living in the area; my brother went to her and helped her financially and in every way he was able. It was like repayment for him because it was through this tutor that he had become who he was; he was very grateful despite having received a

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lot of very heavy treatment. That kind of teacher is actually the one who brings you up – teaching you how to be a good person. The oral transmissions, the Dharma teaching, spiritual teaching, came from Shechen Kongtrul Rinpoche, but you need someone else to teach you how to be humble, how to be simple. They also teach one how to read at high speed. He came to read so well that he was told that he was one of the fastest readers in Kham. Dolma Lhakang now felt they had a very capable tulku.



Retreat centre at the old Dolma Lhakang, with precarious access from below.

The previous Akong Rinpoche also had a long and strong connection with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, so then they sent my brother to Surmang Monastery, far away from Dolma Lhakang. Traditionally the monasteries want their tulku to be strong, independent and able to absorb any suffering – therefore they decided that he would be allowed only one attendant to take him and then just leave him

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there. And so he was left there at the age of perhaps no more than fifteen, with no attendant, no helper, living at Surmang Monastery, where Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was based. They went from there along with many top Drukpa and Karma Kagyu lamas such as Thrangu Rinpoche, to receive all the oral transmissions, such as the *Dam Ngak Dzö* (*Treasury of Oral Instructions*), and the *Rinchen Terzö* (*Treasury of Precious Termas*), from the great Kongtrul Rinpoche of Shechen Monastery. Also present was the renowned Khenpo Gangshar, who was teaching the *crazy wisdom* path, and from whom they each received the *mind transmission*. In terms of transmissions, Akong Rinpoche became one of the very richest of lamas amongst the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa lineages.



Arriving at the new Dolma Lhakang Labrang House 2006.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

Whilst at Shechen Monastery he was sending word to the family that he would return via the family home: he wanted to please them by expressing his wish to take his brother back with him to Dolma Lhakang. So that was me. He had been telling them to bring me to his monastery where the plan was that I would help him. My family did not know he had been sent to Derge to receive teachings, and since my father often used to go to the Dolma Lhakang region, he took me to Rinpoche's monastery. My brother of course was not there, and they said he was far away receiving teaching, so my family brought me back to the house. Then my brother visited my family on the way back, and he told them to take me to him straight away, which they did. I think he was at least fifteen years old by then, and he was strong – he took complete charge of the whole monastery. If any monks misbehaved they would be made to regret it – he was really tough. He was completely in charge of the monastery.

As he wanted me to be like him he began to teach me to read Tibetan. That was a disaster because he was so strict! Since he was teaching me, I had to get up every morning as soon as the sunlight made it possible to see the palm of my hand. Then he would teach reading to me very rigorously, “*Sa rata sa ...*”, and so on, so forcefully. After a while I completely lost my voice. Then the tradition was that they would get a doctor, who rolled up my tongue in a piece of wood, and made an incision under the tongue – there was a lot of blood! Then my voice seemed to come back. Of course I was thinking, “What did I do to earn such torture?”

This is true: at that time I did not make a genuine connection to my brother, he was like my torturer. But I had one older brother

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who was in the Nyingmapa school, and they sent him to us; he was older than Akong Rinpoche so he took charge of all our needs, and because he was so kind he became like a father and mother to me. He really could not bear to see Akong Rinpoche giving me a hard time, so he was the solution to my problem. But then again, Akong Rinpoche, because he was young and really energetic, was still the boss.



Long procession including 200 horses and 300 motorbikes waiting to greet Akong Rinpoche on his arrival at Dolma Lhakang 2006.

There were hundreds of nomads linked to Dolma Lhakang, and in the summer Akong Rinpoche was invited to go out to visit their families. He would go out with a few monks and the nomads would offer him whatever butter they had. In that way all his needs were taken care of. For his part he would say prayers and do rituals for them.

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Rebuilding Dolma Lhakang 2006.

Back at the monastery there was a traditional meditation retreat. While my brother went away he would lock me up in it! It was a two-storey building without any windows facing the outside. Inside there was a very highly educated retreat master who was very skilful in calligraphy, so I had to go to him to learn that, but afterwards I would refuse to study. At those times another elder brother was put in charge of me, but because he was so kind to me I would refuse to recite anything. He used to tell me, “You’d better recite it because Rinpoche is going to come back and beat you up!” And I would say, “No, I’m not going to read any more!”

Akong Rinpoche’s own living space was in a building which was itself like a temple. There was a big courtyard, then above that was a big temple with large statues – upstairs we had a room with more statues. I was really naughty because I knew Akong Rinpoche was

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away. There were no other children to play with, but sometimes there were pigeons in the shrine-room which was open to the outside. I would get sticks and throw them at the pigeons. I even killed them. I was really bad! Below the toilet on the outskirts of this building was a place where many deer used to gather, so there I would always find plenty of entertainment with them.



The view from the new Dolma Lhakang Monastery 2006.

Food was plentiful: I could get food such as raisins or other dried fruit. But only for a few days would I be free, before my brother would come back, and then I would suffer. My relationship with him was really not good, because he never shared any feelings or emotion, he just knew he wanted to make me the very best. I learnt to read very fast. Luckily I had only two years under his regime.

When we escaped Tibet in 1959 I thought I was on holiday – I was so happy that we were escaping! I was very naive, so I really

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saw it like that. It was a long journey and I had a beautiful horse to ride. I was so lazy, and I never listened to anything my older brother said, so when he told me not to always ride the horse up and down so much, my response was, “No, I’m going to ride it as much as I like!” One day, the horse must have been tired, and because I was so weak I was unable to direct it; it went under a low tree and I was left hanging from a branch! Then we came to a place where gradually we lost all our animals. I was leading one of my horses when he fell over a cliff and died. After a while we no longer had any horses to ride.



Akong Rinpoche & Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, with Palden Drakpa, Jigme, Chogyal, Kami (Akong Rinpoche's 3 children), wife Yangchen & sister Zimi circa 1985.

As you see our relationship was still very tough. I blamed him for everything: I blamed him, thinking he was the main reason why I

suffered, because at home I had been able to play like any other child, being hardly made to do anything; my father was kind to me, my mother was extra-kind to me, so I learned nothing. I thought this happiness had all been taken away by my brother and that he had been so harsh on me. I rebelled all the time.

During the escape we never had a map, we never knew where Tibet was in relation to other countries. There was no clear road or path, we had to find our way in the night for many months to avoid being seen by the Chinese. We found out that Lhasa had been taken over by the Chinese and the Dalai Lama had already escaped. So our group passed to the north of Assam near the Brahmaputra River, but there was no path and the route beyond Tibet passed through Nagaland, which Tibetan people always avoided because the indigenous tribes used to hunt with poisoned arrows and would eat people! At this time the Tibetan Government had given them many yaks so that thousands of Tibetans could pass through safely.

We were also on the wrong side of the Brahmaputra River which we had to cross in the night; we had about two- to three-hundred people to ferry across with a very small leather coracle, which we made in the forests with sap from trees to seal it. What we had not seen was that the river was split in two, with an island in the middle. My older brother and Trungpa's attendant Yonten were rowing, so they brought us to the other side, left us there, then went back to get the others. However, the Chinese were everywhere, shooting at us. They had been waiting for us to cross. Chogyam Trungpa had a relic box containing many precious malas from previous Trungpa tulkus; putting half on me, half upon himself, Trungpa's attendant

took me by the hand, then we descended into the water to escape across the remainder of the river. It was almost daylight by then with Chinese soldiers everywhere, and it was winter, the middle of winter. Everywhere there was ice.

My elder brother and Yonten had rowed back. Yonten ran for it but my brother got caught. Like the others he had his hands tied and was taken away. I later heard from him that while in captivity, he was so worried for us that he was unable to eat for days. There were two young nuns and a young boy there who the Chinese soldiers allowed to come and go, so my elder brother told them to explore, to find an escape route and to get food. When the Chinese were changing guard they all escaped, found food, and met us further along the road. He would have been taken to a labour camp with everyone else had he not escaped, but he became our saviour because he managed to get some food.

We had weeks of tortuous journey over mountains, unable to use the normal paths, running out of food and having to boil up our leather shoes and belts to eat, wearing frozen clothes and so on. We did manage to survive, but no more than six or seven escaped in our group including Akong Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche. In all fifteen people escaped out of the three hundred. Otherwise, of those who did not get shot, everybody was caught or died from hunger.

Finally, we were escorted by the Indian authorities to Buxa. In the *Akong: A Remarkable Life* film you can see my picture there. I am the one in the picture who is really skinny, almost emaciated. That was me when we arrived in Assam. Actually you would never believe that was me – I was so thin, really tiny, and I am so lucky

that I did not die. But my mind was still bad, always fighting against my brother, thinking it was due to him that I had been forced to leave my mother, father and family; I did this inwardly, this war, fighting, lacking any wisdom.

Then my eldest brother caught tuberculosis in Buxa. So many people died and he also passed away when we first arrived as refugees to this terrible camp, where almost everybody was dying. Sister Palmo, or Freda Bedi as she was then, was in charge. This was before she was ordained as the first Western Buddhist nun and she used to wear saris. She had been put in charge of the refugees by the Indian Government. She was very open-minded. When she saw a few of us had nobody to look after us, and we must have looked quite lost, she really felt sorry for us. Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche were the same age and I was a bit younger. She invited us to her place, gave us tea and cookies, and taught us English. Trungpa was mentally very sharp, but I was not so clever! I did not learn anything, but they learned English.

They sent most of the able refugees up to mountainous places to build roads. However, Karmapa sent a letter that he was authorising us to join the college in Buxador. Through Karmapa's blessing, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, his monks, myself and my two brothers, all went there. In Buxador College there were about 1,500 or more monks, from all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Chogyam Trungpa was very clever, so once we were there he must have asked Sister Palmo for her address and telephone number. He had got himself invited to Kalimpong by Khamtrul Rinpoche, where they had more money. So Trungpa went there. From there he contacted Sister Palmo, and she

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said to come to Delhi where she was. Trungpa called my brother, and they went to stay with Sister Palmo in her own home in Delhi. Her son Kabir Bedi, who later became a really famous actor, says that bringing total strangers into her house made her own children at first feel very jealous. Sister Palmo had worked for the United Nations in Burma, where she developed a strong connection to Buddhism, and she went so far as to make her son Kabir take monks vows for a year or two.



From left, Trungpa's attendant, Akong Rinpoche, Jamdrak (Lama Yeshe Rinpoche), Trungpa Rinpoche, Freda Bedi

They really were all very visionary: Sister Palmo started to talk about starting a school for all the tulkus from each of the different lineages, where they could be taught English. This was agreed and Sister Palmo found enough sponsors, so that they were able to start the *Young Lamas' Home School* in Delhi, in a very beautiful area, with

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perhaps ten or twenty lamas. Trungpa was the intellectual, eventually doing a lot of teaching on texts such as *A Letter to a Friend* and *The Three Vows*, and Akong was more like the administrator. Akong Rinpoche really cared for me, so he came and picked me up, and that is how I came to stay with Sister Palmo. Sister Palmo had a bank job but she also found time to teach Trungpa Rinpoche and my brother some English. In those days she used to take me with her to the bank. She would go to the bank and I would sit out there in the car park, just hanging around.



Akong Rinpoche visits Jamdrak (Lama Yeshe Rinpoche) in hospital with TB before leaving for Oxford, 1962

I did not have a sharp mind for learning, in fact I had no interest in learning anything! That was how it was, this resistance to learning anything, because when you suffer you have no appetite to learn

anything. But gradually Trungpa and Akong learned enough English. If I had wanted to study I could have studied anything, I had every opportunity. My brother provided me with anything I could ever want: he would even do my washing and ironing for me. Still I never stopped blaming him, never thinking I had done anything wrong but that he was the root of all my suffering. This stupid head of mine could never stop blaming him. Instead of studying at the Young Lamas' Home School I used to burst the young lamas' balloons with this pin I had. One day I was so mischievous that my brother beat me with his leather belt.

Anyway, since Delhi was very hot and very expensive, they looked for a place in Dalhousie. They found a very funny house from the British era in a remote area, right up on a hilltop; Indian activists had been imprisoned there when the British were running India. So they settled there. Many other tulkus came, then many European volunteers came. I had caught tuberculosis in Delhi and was sent into a massive tuberculosis hospital, where they said my lung was so bad it would need a major operation. Through contacts of Akong Rinpoche, an American surgeon operated on my chest. They told me it was the first time in India that this operation had been performed in the area of the heart. Lama Zopa Rinpoche also had tuberculosis and went to the same hospital as me. That was in about 1963 or 64. Akong Rinpoche arranged for Ato Tulku, who had taken over from him at the Young Lamas' Home School in Dalhousie, to look after me and bring me there as soon as I was better.

In Dalhousie I had the chance to learn English with everybody there. We used to eat well with Sister Palmo – the lamas had their

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own kitchen. I had to look after the English volunteers with one other person. That entailed getting bread, eggs for omelette, all the things they would eat in the morning. We would fetch them, so that all the English volunteers could have their own preferred breakfast, but my main job was, if possible, to see three Hindi movies every day! I used to run all the way down from the hilltop to watch Hindi movies. I could run up and down there without any problem. I got so healthy.



The Young Lamas Home School

Sister Palmo really liked a lot of flattering. You had to call her “mother”, “mummy, mummy, mummy”, and you really had to please her. I was unaccustomed to all this and I would not play along. There was one other layperson of a similar age who was the nephew

of a high Gelukpa tulku. He was very good at doing all that. Sister Palmo predicted that he would be a future Tibetan prime minister and I would be nobody, because I did not listen to her! She said she was going to write to my brother because I used to do the very opposite of what she wanted me to. Then what happened was that we got this chance to join a very nice Tibetan administrators course. The one who was going to be the future prime minister and one very big Khampa nobleman, they were the first two young Tibetans to go to America. That was when America was at war with Vietnam, and they started taking drugs – both of them went mad. They had to bring the Gelukpa tulku's nephew back and he had become useless. And the other one I think he really had gone mad. I did not go mad ... though I did not become prime minister either!

Then Sister Palmo told Akong Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche there was an opportunity for them to move to Oxford, and so they went. From there Akong Rinpoche called me to say not to worry, that he would bring me to where he was. My brother made every effort to save money, and then he brought me to the United Kingdom, but I was still blaming him for everything. Trungpa and I had escaped Tibet together and we were more friendly, more close than my brother and I. He was always so easy to be with, so understanding; he used to say, "If we have our own monastery, *I* will take care of you in my monastery. Not Akong Rinpoche!" He was very kind, my brother was always tough.

Eventually I came to Samye Ling. At that time there was only Johnstone House. Staying there were Chogyam Trungpa, my brother, Uncle Sherab and generally no more than a dozen other people,

who at that time were all smokers, all wearing filthy clothes, and with all sorts of bad habits. I felt it was a very bad place to have come to because they were all mentally unwell! Being extremely fond of Indian music I got a big radio and used to sit in my room listening to it. My brother started bringing me food – probably thinking I was going to go cuckoo!

For five whole years at Samye Ling I never went into the shrine-room. I thought it was for crazy people! Kalu Rinpoche came, His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse came, other great masters came, but I never took any teachings from any of them. For five years Akong Rinpoche had really given me everything – money, clothing, anything I ever said I wanted to have, even a business – a shop, but I never showed any appreciation.

After five years though, something happened that made my mind tune in properly. I met a big Scottish businessman who had a building firm in Dumfries and we became friends. I was so proud. He told me about his club in Dumfries and promised to help me become a member. And I thought, “Oh that’s a big deal! I can become a club member.” They were all very wealthy, playing snooker and other games, gambling – and whoever lost had to buy whisky for everyone. They used to compete over whisky drinking, so in due course I could actually drink fifteen shots of whisky without any effect. I thought I was doing wonderfully well! I was the only Asian man ever to be permitted to join this businessman’s club. Then because he was very wealthy, with a Jaguar and a caravan – he had the biggest building company in the region – he told me that we

were going to go on a camping holiday and go fishing. I said, “Oh no problem, I’ll come with you!”

Gradually we went from Dumfries to Orkney up in the far North, where there are many lochs and where he knew a family with whom we stayed. He collected worms, hired a little boat, and we went out onto the loch. One thing I really did not like was touching the worms. Then he put these worms on the hook and gave them to me. I do not know why but each time I cast I caught a fish. I did not want to kill them, but he kept saying, “Give it to me! give it to me!” And he just took them, hit them on the gunwale, and put them in the bottom of the boat. One day he put all the dead fish together and took pictures.

When we came home he showed the photos to my brother. Tears appeared in Rinpoche’s eyes and he said, “Look, I took you from our father and mother, I took total responsibility for you. I thought I could make you into someone. Now how can I ever tell our mother or father that I have failed?” As I recollect this, there are tears in my eyes all over again. His words made me feel as if my heart would burst, it was so painful. Finally I said to myself, “I’ll make you proud!”

My mind had been so stupid, unable to change, but that day led to me becoming a monk. I did my very best, and now I assure you he would be proud of me because I am protecting and preserving all the activities that Rinpoche established.

So, that is the type of person he was: so much tolerance, so much compassion, giving everything he had away. Without a positive mind though, one will not necessarily recognise this. But those words that he spoke on that day, and how he spoke them, completely changed

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my whole life. After that I did everything in my power to be a worthy person. I thought, “Okay, I’ll make myself into a good person.” All this was kept in my heart, I never said anything to him about how I was changing.



Even now I still think, “How can I ever let him down?” I was nobody, no-one, no education, coming from nowhere. Yet I was able to eat with and actually stay with the highest lamas all thanks to my brother: breakfast with the Dalai Lama, months of time with Dilgo Khyentse, Situ Rinpoche, Gyaltsab Rinpoche, the highest lamas were around me because of my brother. This is why I cannot afford to be selfish. How could I let down someone who had been so totally tolerant towards a person like me. If he did not have that quality I could have become completely broken, I could have become nothing! I drank so much, maybe I could have killed myself just like my friend did; I saw him when I came back from America: due

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to his having drunk so much whisky he had no liver left. And I was doing that too, following his example. When I think about this it is very painful for me: how was I unable to see this? Anyway, at that point I thought, “Maybe if I have messed up the first part of my life, at least I can do something with the second half.” If I had left it any longer I would have been unable to do anything to serve Rinpoche.



With brother & sisters in Lhasa. From left, Yangchen, Akong Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, Zimi & Palden Drakpa 1996.

Nothing I do is for my own personal benefit any longer, never thinking how successful I am, but rather, whether he is here or not, only that I am serving him, looking after his interests – nothing more, nothing less. So that is our connection. That is all I have to tell you because there is nothing other than that, we were never

able to be together as brothers in a worldly home, in a monastery you are in a spiritual home. And if ever we did find ourselves in any kind of worldly situation this ignorant person (me) was always fighting against him. In the beginning we did not build a strong relationship. But then I became a monk, I went to retreat, and did the dark retreats, and I assure you he *was* very proud of me. And I think he must have felt that he had fulfilled his responsibilities, there was no more need to think he had not done so. If he were to have seen our parents it would have been okay.

That is the sort of person that he was, he really was the most ‘*one taste*’ human being you will ever come across. I am quite serious! Once he was given the most expensive cashmere sweater money can buy, he just put it on, went off, and came back looking like a naughty boy: he had been working, digging in the mud, and everything was muddy. He got beautiful expensive shoes and wore them in all the mud! He just went anywhere in any shoes. If he got nice shoes I would have the first turn, then he would wear them. Nice clothes? Just the same! Between the two of us we never had what is known as “yours and mine”; then because I was more selfish I always thought I should be the one who had things first. So I am sharing this with you, even though when I talk about all of this, it still really makes me cry ... how skilled he was, how tolerant he was, he never said no to me – for example I set up a shop, spent a lot of money, wore the very best clothes, ate the best food, and did all kinds of things – he never said no. He never distinguished between what people call good clothes or bad clothes. Touching shit, filth, cleaning sewage, he never minded, he just did it. That is what is called ‘one taste’. I

finally came to know that when Khenpo Gangshar the Great introduced the mind transmission to him, Chogyam Trungpa and Thrangu Rinpoche, my brother said he understood – he got it. As I see it, that is why he never could be shaken: he never had preference, he always thought only of compassion, tolerance.

Someone once came to my brother in tears, saying “I’m suffering, my wife has taken everything, I have no money,” and so on. My brother was just listening, because he knew him very well, he knew he needed money. With no words, my brother just went out and got the money for him, saying, “Now you don’t have to cry any more.” He just gave him the money and never asked for it back. Is that not what we call being a bodhisattva? He was always there for poor people.

When His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa returned to Kham from meetings with Mao Zedong in Beijing in 1955, he gave a Mahakala empowerment which is considered to be extremely precious. There were hundreds of tulkus, some wealthier, higher, but Karmapa specifically chose a certain number of them that included Thrangu Rinpoche, Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche. All those he picked out turned out to be the ones who escaped Tibet.

Karmapa is the “Knower of the Three Times”: he had chosen those he knew would be helping him in the future.

The Arrival of Akong Rinpoche in the West

by John Maxwell



Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche at Land's End, England

THE ARRIVAL OF AKONG RINPOCHE IN THE WEST

When Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche escaped from Tibet in 1959 they were befriended by Freda Bedi who later became a nun and was known as *Sister Palmo*. She encouraged the two lamas to come to England. Freda Bedi was an Oxford graduate, from St. Hugh's College, and she used her Oxford connection to secure some sponsorship.

Mr and Mrs Spalding established the Spalding Trust in the 1920s. The purpose of the trust was “to promote a better understanding of the great cultures, by encouraging a study of the religious principles on which they were based”. The Spalding Trust agreed to finance the passage of the two lamas to England and to provide some financial support for one year. The sponsorship was granted to Trungpa Rinpoche only but it was hoped that the money would be sufficient to finance both lamas. In 1963 the two lamas sailed to England and for a few weeks they stayed in High Wycombe with Joyce Armstrong, whose daughter Cherry had been working with Freda Bedi for the Tibetan refugees in India.



Rinpoche with daughter Kami and shih-tzus, Sintu & Pema

They then came to Oxford and stayed at Queen Elizabeth House, which belongs to Oxford University's Department of International Development. It was there that I met them within a few days of them arriving in Oxford, I had the great blessing to be at the right place at the right

time. I was an undergraduate at New College studying law and I was the secretary of the Oxford University Buddhist Society. A fellow undergraduate at New College, Mark Webster, had met the lamas in India and told me that they had arrived in Oxford and were staying at Queen Elizabeth House. I went to Queen Elizabeth House to look for them. I did not know exactly where they were staying, and I just wandered around hoping to see them! Then, as I was walking up some stairs two lamas came down the stairs, and as I approached them I greeted them in Tibetan and they looked absolutely astonished. They turned round and led me to their room. Trungpa addressed Akong as “Tuk” and in a rather imperious tone told him to make tea. Akong had virtually no English, was very subservient, and appeared to be Trungpa’s attendant monk.

It soon became apparent that the grant from the Spalding Trust was insufficient to finance accommodation in Queen Elizabeth House and they moved to a cheaper flat at 104 Banbury Road. Later they moved further from the city centre to a flat in Summertown. And later still to a flat on St. Margaret’s Road.

The two lamas became active in the Oxford University Buddhist Society and also started to visit the equivalent society in Cambridge, where a group of students became committed to them. One of these was a young man who was later ordained as Lodro Thaye, the ordination taking place in the house on Banbury Road in Oxford. When they were living in the flat on St Margaret’s Road they were joined by several friends, including Lodro Thaye, then Sherab Palden Beru (the master artist of the Karma Gardri style), and Chime Rinpoche, who had arrived in the UK shortly after Akong and Trungpa

THE ARRIVAL OF AKONG RINPOCHE IN THE WEST

Rinpoches, and has since also been active in spreading the Dharma in England and Germany. Lodro Thaye recalls, “The main room had a small shrine and was decorated with ancient *thangkas* loaned to us by John Driver. For seating there were mattresses on the floor, some covered with Tibetan carpets and others covered with colourful textiles. The lamas slept in the main room while I had a small bedroom which later I shared with Sherab Palden. At the end of the day we had our meal, and then the day was concluded with meditation and some chanting.”



The flat in Oxford 1970

Trungpa Rinpoche was sociable and skilled at networking, and quickly stepped back into the role of lama. We referred to Trungpa by the honorific *Rinpoche* but Akong was not then known as Rinpoche. John Driver, the person from whom they had borrowed thangkas, was a very close friend of Trungpa's. He was a research fellow at St. Antony's College, a specialist in Tibetan, Sanskrit and Chinese. Trungpa himself was also an ardent student: he took lessons

to perfect his English, and also learnt about Christianity, Western philosophy and culture. On the other hand Akong Rinpoche took a job as a hospital porter at the Radcliffe Hospital to supplement their slender finances. He had made hardly any impression on me but one day I was sitting with Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong came home from work. He told me that he had wheeled a patient into the operating theatre and the patient had died on the operating table, and that he had then wheeled the body to the mortuary. I looked into his eyes and I saw a radiance of compassion and this was my first moment of realisation that Akong Rinpoche was a special person.

It was anything but an easy life for Rinpoche. At the time I did not discuss Rinpoche's work as a hospital porter with him. Then it did not seem extraordinary in the way that it does now. The idea that Rinpoche was a high lama and that there was such a contrast between sitting on a throne and running a monastery on the one hand and doing menial work as a porter on the other hand was not something we thought about. Trungpa was quite imperious and bossed Akong about and Akong behaved as if he were an attendant monk. He was so humble that it seemed quite natural for him to do menial work. Later, though, I talked to Rinpoche about it and he told me of his experiences. It was only then that I came to some realisation of what a shock the work must have been to him. He was treated with no respect. I do not think that this troubled him because he had no desire to be respected, but it was more difficult to fit in with the moral culture of the workplace. If he was paid to do work it was his instinct to work hard, but to work too hard

incurred hostility from his colleagues: if they thought that a job should take five minutes they disapproved if Rinpoche did it in three minutes. All the staff including the doctors helped themselves to food from the canteen to take home at the end of the shift. I remember Rinpoche teaching about honesty and instructing his students that they should not keep even a paper clip which was not theirs. He worked in an environment which did not honour these high standards. Rinpoche did not put his high morals on show, but lived his life as an ordinary person: it would have been unskilful and arrogant to tell the doctors that they should not take food from the canteen. His natural humility required him to accept his colleagues on their terms and according to their standards. There is so much that we can learn from Rinpoche's life and his time as a hospital porter provides us with valuable insight into the attitudes of a humble lama.

I had a family friend in Oxford called Mrs Esme Cramer Roberts. She was interested in all things spiritual and mystical, particularly in the Gnostic Christian tradition. I used to take her to the meetings of the Oxford University Buddhist Society. One day I took the two Rinpoches to have dinner with her and she asked Trungpa if she could write a book for him. He agreed and this collaboration led to the publication of *Born in Tibet*.

Esme felt a little sorry for Akong, who was always in the shadows, and seemingly unnoticed by everyone. She decided to invite him for dinner on his own, without Trungpa, and later she told me what happened. She told me that Akong was very sad and said to her, "I'm not clever like Trungpa".

“But *you* are the disciple who washed the master’s feet!” she replied. The notion that Akong was himself a master was something that was quite inconceivable at that time. The publication of *Born in Tibet* provided the impetus for the founding of Samye Ling. In every copy of the book was a flyer encouraging people to support the project.

Shortly after leaving Oxford in 1964, I got married and Trungpa gave me a wedding present of a painting that he had done, and also an embroidery of *Om mani peme hung hri*. Many years later, Akong Rinpoche saw that embroidery hanging on the wall of my home and he recognised it as *his* work. When Trungpa gave it to me he did not acknowledge that it had been made by Akong, I thanked Trungpa for the present but not Akong because I simply did not know that he was the one who had made it!

With a growing following the lamas decided the time was ripe for them to start a Dharma centre. They were driven to a variety of places, and even offered a mansion in Wiltshire for a peppercorn rent, which, to everyone’s surprise they refused. In the meantime, Trungpa had become friendly with Venerable Ananda Bodhi, a Canadian-born Theravada monk, who was the incumbent of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. He regularly gave talks to the Buddhist Societies in Oxford and Cambridge, and set up a number of meditation centres, to which he invited Trungpa and Akong to teach. Lodro Thaye remembers that Trungpa Rinpoche did teach, and was forever pushing Akong to follow suit. Perhaps his English was insufficient, perhaps he remembered his commitment to feed and heal people rather than engage in formal Dharma teaching. Anyway, he

skilfully managed to avoid 'sitting on thrones and teaching' until much later, mainly by simply refusing to be drawn on the subject.

One of the centres they were invited to was Johnstone House in Eskdalemuir, Dumfriesshire. In 1964 Ananda Bodhi announced his intention of returning to Canada and disposing of his centres including Johnstone House. Bob Copley, a solicitor from Huntingdon, was a close friend of the two lamas, and he acted for them in the acquisition of Johnstone House. The latter was then in the ownership of Johnstone House Trust of which Ananda Bodhi was a trustee. An arrangement was made whereby the trustees resigned and new trustees including Trungpa and Akong were appointed. Thus the property was acquired without any money changing hands. Johnstone House was renamed Kagyu Samye Ling.

When I first came to Samye Ling in 1967, both lamas were then still in robes, and as in the days at Oxford it was Trungpa Rinpoche and plain Akong. Trungpa was the lama. One evening, we were in the shrine-room, doing calm-abiding meditation, and there was a dog snoring gently. Suddenly it let out a loud snort that made us jump. This set Akong off giggling uncontrollably, and Trungpa slowly turned his head to look at him with disdain, and then turned his head back to continue with his samadhi. Akong recovered for a short time but then relapsed into further giggling. Akong was the naughty boy who disrupted the meditation. He was in charge of the kitchen and the laundry, but nobody thought of him as a lama.

The next time I came to Samye Ling, Trungpa had gone to America (in April 1970) and Akong had taken off his robes. He was in charge, but did not publicly assume any role as a lama, and one might say,

actively avoided adopting that role. His title was “administrator”. I talked to a resident of Samye Ling, who was lamenting the departure of Trungpa. He said, “We do not have a lama now. Akong is just a hotel-keeper!” I started to take teaching from him on meditation but his English was still poor and I found it difficult to understand him. In those early days there were a number of huts and every time I visited Samye Ling I occupied a hut for a semi-retreat. Akong would visit me in the hut to advise on meditation. At this stage he was giving one-to-one instructions on meditation, but soon after that he started group teachings on meditation and massage.

In the early seventies, when I was doing a period of semi-retreat in Samye Ling, Akong Rinpoche came into my room, not to provide more instruction but to put a pile of papers on my bed, and he said that there was a legal problem, and could I sort it out! This was the commencement of a role, which lasted over forty years, of giving legal advice to Akong Rinpoche. I have never been a very active Dharma practitioner, instead focusing my energy on the legal profession and my family. Once I asked Akong Rinpoche if I ought to be doing some sort of regular practice, such as the Four Foundations. “No!” he said. “You haven’t got time to do that, you focus on your legal career. But purify your motivation.”

In 1973, I took Refuge with Akong Rinpoche and I am not sure why, because I did not have any particular faith in him, but the results were immediate and dramatic and changed my life utterly. As a young barrister there was a real problem of having life compartmentalised: there was work and there was Buddhism, and there

seemed to be a barrier which kept the two separate. I would be sitting in court waiting for my case to be called, with nothing to do but wait, and I would try to meditate, but it was quite impossible. It seemed to me that there ought to be a unity of life, and that work should have some sort of spiritual dimension, but this I could not achieve.

Then came the taking of Refuge, and the first day in court after taking Refuge I was prosecuting a villain, cross-examining him to show him as a dishonest liar. And somehow the distinction between me as prosecutor and the villain as defendant blurred. There was a detachment from the process of prosecuting. Since then I have heard teachings about non-duality and merging the meditator with the object of the meditation, but those teachings were completely unknown to me at that time. The experience of the blurring of the distinction between prosecutor and defendant was not contrived to fit in with ideas about non-duality. Neither did it detract from my role as prosecutor, the cross-examination and final speech to the jury were as good if not better than anything I had done before. The jury convicted him and the judge sent the defendant to prison. The fact that this was my very first day in court after taking Refuge left me in no doubt that it was Akong Rinpoche who had brought this strange thing about. It inspired faith, and from then on the practice of the law was Dharma practice, and it stayed with me for the rest of my time practising as a barrister and then sitting as a judge. I had previously told Akong Rinpoche of my wish that the practice of the law and the practice of the Dharma should be less

separate. Without saying a word he planted something in my mind which answered the question.

I have spoken to many people who had similar experiences with Akong Rinpoche. He was a lama who had a profound and intuitive understanding of people's inner problems and of their potentials. He did not teach on an intellectual level, he taught from the heart; his teachings were often not expressed in words, but he was the very embodiment of compassion. From 1972 I saw Akong Rinpoche as a great lama but this was not universally obvious, because he had not assumed the trappings of a lama. He told me that when he was in Tibet he used to give empowerments but not now, and he did not intend to do so.

Things changed in 1974 when His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa came to the UK. His Holiness empowered Akong Rinpoche as *Dharmacharya*, a master of Dharma, and Rinpoche then ceased to be the mere administrator of Kagyu Samye Ling and took the title of abbot. From then on he became more and more powerful and famous. Now that he is dead, we surely want to look to the future and the certainty that he will return to continue his work.

Of all the legal tasks that Akong Rinpoche set me, far and away the most challenging was his instruction to create a legal structure for his *labrang*, the institution tasked with maintaining the continuity of his work until the next incarnation. If you go to a law library, you will not find a single textbook on how a living person can set up a trust fund to facilitate the finding and identification of his next incarnation, and to provide for the upbringing and education of the future child, so as to enable him to continue

his work and preserve the lineage. Such things were unknown in English law and it appeared doubtful whether such a trust would be legally valid, but when Akong Rinpoche is your boss it is not an option to say, “Sorry, but what you want is impossible!” One must push the boundaries of law, and I am sure that we all feel immense gratitude to Rinpoche that he did plan for the continuity of his lineage and established a labrang. But having a labrang is insufficient, there must be a means of keeping the lineage alive until the next incarnation is ready to resume his work. There must be a regent. Akong Rinpoche entrusted the lineage to his brother Chöje Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, with his nephew Lama Katen next in the succession, and it is a great cause of joy to us that he appointed regents who are sincerely and utterly devoted to the preservation of this lineage. Thus we need have no worry or doubt that everything will be in place when the time comes for the third Akong to take the reins.

CHAPTER 2

Outer Container Inner Wisdom
The Establishment
of Samye Ling



A New Samye – Getting Started

by Vin Harris

Samye in the West

Kagyü Samye Ling Tibetan Centre is located in rural South West Scotland. It is very colourful and aweinspiring, built in the traditional architectural style of Tibet, certainly not the kind of building that one would expect to find in Scotland. For a significant number of the thousands of people who come to visit, whether they spend a few hours, a few days, sometimes even years, it feels like their spiritual home. It is a place of refuge, a place to learn and find direction, somewhere removed from the stresses and strains of modern life where people can go to find some inner peace before returning refreshed and inspired to make their contribution to the world. At the same time Samye Ling is a spiritual fortress designed to protect and preserve Tibetan culture as well as the wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism for future generations. This initiative has global significance in an age of rapid change when it would be so easy for the heritage and the great wisdom that it expresses to be lost forever.



HH the 14th Dalai Lama & Akong Rinpoche in Kagyu Samye Ling May 1993.

Buddhism was established in Tibet in the eighth century by Guru Rinpoche. History tells us there were many obstacles to be overcome before Samye Monastery was eventually built as the first great seat of learning and practice in Tibet. Samye Ling Tibetan Centre was founded in 1967 by the Eleventh Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the Second Akong Tulku Rinpoche. Because it was the first major Tibetan Buddhist centre to be established in the West, it was named after the original Samye Monastery in Tibet. Over the years, we too have certainly faced many challenges and there have been delays in completing the Samye Project. Whenever we became impatient for progress, Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche reminded us not to expect it to be easy: “People should understand that this is not just an ordinary building, what Akong Rinpoche has created here is truly

Samye in the West”. This chapter of Akong Rinpoche’s biography tells the story of how a traditional country house in Scotland came to be transformed into an establishment of international renown, an environment where the study and practice of the Buddha’s teachings came to take root and flourish in a strange new land.

Building a Community

During the late 1960s and early 1970s the Samye Ling community was very small with people living in every nook and cranny of Johnstone House. There was a muddle of caravans, camper vans and huts scattered around the grounds and along the riverbank. The presence of Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche had attracted a curious mix of the young hippy generation as well as older people from the Gurdjieff movement, each in their own way enthusiastic if somewhat unconventional seekers of truth and spiritual fulfilment. Trungpa Rinpoche had always been the charismatic leader and teacher whilst Akong Rinpoche had been content to remain in the background, attending to the day to day practicalities of the ever-expanding community.

In a world without websites, email, social media or smartphones, there were rumours circulating about some mysterious gurus from Tibet living in Scotland. The pop star David Bowie referred to them as “some far out Tibetan dudes who really know where it’s at.” Word started to spread that something special was happening, and curious pilgrims headed north to see for themselves what was going on.

A NEW SAMYE – GETTING STARTED

Many of the old cars they arrived in broke down as soon as they made it to Samye Ling and were abandoned there to rust in peace. In those early days it is fair to say Samye Ling (and the people who lived there) could be untidy and a bit messy. When it rained, which it often did, there was a lot of mud. Maybe some people were put off by what they saw and decided it was not for them, but some of them could see the lotus hidden in the mud and stayed to take a look below the surface.



With Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Sherab Palden Beru & Sintu circa 1970.

When Trungpa Rinpoche, who had spent relatively little time in Samye Ling, then left for America in 1970, it fell to Akong Rinpoche to provide spiritual and practical leadership. This chapter shows how he did this in his own way, steering Samye Ling through a period of consolidation and steady growth. The lifestyle in the Samye

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Ling community was very basic, accommodation far from luxurious, without much heating in winter, and food was wholesome yet simple; we made the most of what limited funds we had. From the outside we may have looked poor but on the inside our lives were enriched with a wonderful sense of purpose. We felt that we were genuinely blessed to be participating in the making of history by contributing to Akong Rinpoche's mission of bringing Dharma to the West.



Akong Rinpoche with family

Rinpoche could probably have developed Samye Ling more quickly, but that was not his way. He was more concerned with organic sustainable growth. In fact, in both practical and spiritual matters, Rinpoche had an innate mistrust of anything that appeared too easy or happened too fast. He would say that if you throw petrol on a fire it might blaze for a while but it soon burns itself out. He likened his preferred approach to putting logs on a fire which might start

slowly but would then keep you warm for a long time. This could be part of the reason why he was not interested in attracting wealthy sponsors. He was reluctant to allow money to influence the integrity of his decision making about the long-term future of Samye Ling. Actually, even though funds were scarce, Rinpoche was more interested in how he could help others to fulfil their potential than in pleasing people who might help him to make his own life easier. He often said, “I’m not one of these ‘have a nice cup of tea lamas’”. In other words, he never flattered anyone in the hope of personal gain and he was never afraid to tell the truth that needed to be told for fear of offending someone’s pride.

Right from the beginning, Rinpoche did not feel it would be appropriate for community members to take money from the state, even though they might have been entitled to it. This wish to be independent felt ethically sound, free from compromise and expediency that inevitably creep in when a small community gradually develops into an institution. The economics were straightforward: for each resident who was paying to stay at Samye Ling to study and practise, Rinpoche’s rule of thumb was that we could afford one staff member or “house person” as we were called in those days, who worked for their keep. During the winter months, when there were not many paying visitors, some of us would need to go away and find short-term work to help keep the community financially viable. We needed to be adaptable but we were all in it together and somehow or other it always worked out. Rinpoche led by example and he did not depend on Samye Ling to support him and his family, who had their own home in Dumfries where they ran a

bed and breakfast business. Rinpoche would be in Samye Ling during the week and spend the weekends with his wife Yangchen and their three young children. We were so inspired by this unusual Tibetan lama who had learnt first-hand about the pressures of life in the West and was able to show us that there does not need to be any separation between daily life and spiritual practice.

Meditation in Action

Life in Samye Ling was very different before it grew into the large institution it is today: families with children were allowed to make their home in Samye Ling, and monks and nuns were the exception rather than the rule. However, the lay people living in the community or in the surrounding area were all keen to learn about Buddhism. When not engaged in study and practice, members of the Samye Ling community were kept busy with cooking, cleaning, gardening, and looking after the dairy cows, chickens, cats, dogs and various other animals who came to join us. We were like a big family and Rinpoche was at the centre of it all. He took full responsibility for organising the work, caring for everyone equally whilst clearly recognising their different capabilities. Time after time, I was amazed at how Rinpoche placed people in situations that allowed their latent capabilities to flourish whilst they were serving the needs of the organisation. Looking back after all these years, I still do not really know whether it happened through magical divination or common sense, but it was very effective.



Dolma Jeffrey & John Chinnery
making a mould of the head of
the Buddha for the temple

Rinpoche instilled in us all the importance of practical care for our own environment. He encouraged us to use what we had and only get new things when absolutely necessary. The community was helped by the generosity of friends, who gave us furniture, crockery, building materials, tools, books, bedding, clothing and more besides. Rinpoche never forgot the friends who had helped when we had nothing; he always did his best to look after them and found thoughtful ways to repay their kindness. Many of the early build-

ings were made from salvaged materials and it was not uncommon to find Rinpoche himself cleaning cement off old bricks or straightening bent nails so they could be used again. Similarly the sheets and blankets for residents and visitors were not thrown away just because they were showing signs of wear, Rinpoche ensured that they were carefully repaired. On the occasions when we did need to buy new things he showed us how to make sure we negotiated a good deal. This was not the sort of initiation the love and peace generation had expected when they sought out exotic teachings from mystical Tibetan lamas.

Rinpoche always had plenty of projects in hand. There were artwork, sculpting, woodcarving, pottery, weaving, sewing, and printing happening, as well as the establishment of a vegetable

garden and a small farm with dairy cows. As the community grew we started doing small scale building projects besides attending to building repairs, maintenance and decorating. Rinpoche had great enthusiasm for everything practical and became involved in designing and building workshops for the various craft activities. We also built greenhouses, extra accommodation, cowsheds, and a shop. Akong Rinpoche was never fond of theory: he liked action better than thinking and talking. He told me that he particularly enjoyed building work because when we build something, we can see the results. By making the commitment to build something and then following through on that inspiration with hard work, we make manifest something useful that was not there before. With hindsight all of this community activity, with Rinpoche present in the midst of it, was preparing the ground, planting the seeds and nurturing some early signs of growth, as a precursor to undertaking the Samye Project. The period of establishing a community and gathering momentum continued from 1970 until 1978. The number of people living in Samye Ling was constantly changing but throughout this phase of development it varied between fifteen and fifty.

A Reluctant Teacher

Throughout his life, Akong Rinpoche never was the type of leader to keep himself separate from his followers. This surely contributed to the exceptional bond of trust and enduring loyalty which he

inspired in others. Every day, the Samye Ling community lived, learnt, prayed, worked and ate together with Rinpoche. It allowed us to absorb the teachings in a way that is impossible to imagine now that Tibetan Buddhism has become so popular. We were all very clear that our small community did not just exist in order for those who lived there to have a pleasant alternative lifestyle! We witnessed many people who came to visit leaving happier than they had been when they arrived; this alone would have made our efforts worthwhile. However, it also became apparent that we were actively participating in Rinpoche's longer-term mission. We recognised that we were learning from a genuine spiritual master, an authentic 'hidden yogi', and at the same time we were helping him to establish the Dharma in our culture. This was a rare and precious opportunity not to be missed.

Many of us living in and around Samye Ling were engaged in completing the *ngondro* practices in the Kagyu tradition. We then came together for the daily pujas in Johnstone House in what was then the main shrine-room, now the Chenresig shrine-room. We chanted the Guru Yoga of the Eighth Karmapa before breakfast and Chenresig prayers in the evening. There were also silent sitting sessions twice a day. For many years we upheld the tradition of keeping silence and doing extra practice on the days of the full and new moons.

It was possible to arrange a private interview about Dharma practice or to ask Rinpoche for his advice on one's personal life, although he often shared his most memorable gems of wisdom when least expected. Rinpoche would appear out of nowhere and casually

mention something of practical value which on reflection also pointed to a deeper truth. In my experience Rinpoche was willing and able to give wise guidance on practically anything, but he showed little or no interest in academic questions about Buddhist philosophy. If I ever asked him about concepts such as ‘enlightenment’ or ‘emptiness’, he would soon turn the conversation to more earthy matters such as whether we had enough food for the cows in winter or what building jobs needed to be done next. Others met with similar responses: I recall how one friend had confided in Rinpoche after a month in retreat that he believed he was either about to become crazy or else maybe enlightened. Apparently Rinpoche’s advice was “you should eat more”!

Akong Rinpoche had always been reluctant to teach but, at the insistence of his own teacher the Sixteenth Karmapa, he eventually began to transmit the Dharma to others. Throughout his life Rinpoche said that he did not consider himself to be a teacher and that he was not interested in having students. He was more interested in being a friend to everyone. Nevertheless, during the mid-1970s he taught three residential retreats to the residents of Samye Ling and the nearby village. The first formal course Rinpoche taught was a week of teachings and reflections on the Four Thoughts that turn the mind to Dharma. The next course was a two-week retreat on the practice of Guru Yoga and this was followed by a five-week retreat on Mahamudra. As well as these structured teachings, Rinpoche gave many impromptu short Dharma talks, often when we least expected them, but always when there was something pertinent that we needed to hear.

A NEW SAMYE – GETTING STARTED



(The previous) Khamtrul Rinpoche, Akong Rinpoche, Chogyal Rinpoche, Dodzong Rinpoche, and Jigme Tarap (Akong Rinpoche's eldest son) in front of Johnstone House, Samye Ling 1977.

The language and style of these early teachings was very simple, but through Rinpoche's realisation we gained some understanding of the most profound topics despite being beginners in the Dharma. Many of my friends have commented that the more they reflect on what Rinpoche taught us the more meaning they discover. This was one of Rinpoche's many extraordinary gifts. Although he did not seem to be saying very much, many times a few words from him literally had the power to transform someone's life for the better. Over the years I have had the good fortune to meet and receive teachings from other great teachers, but the essential meaning of

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those profound teachings was already familiar, transmitted by the straightforward heartfelt advice that Rinpoche gave us and by the example that he provided.



HH 16th Gyalwang Karmapa 1977, with Akong Rinpoche in attendance.

Both as a result of the introduction to Dharma and by the force of his own example, when the time came to start building the Main Temple Rinpoche had gathered around him a group of people who were far from what most lamas might have considered to be suitable disciples. However, we had been inspired and deeply touched

by the unmistakable qualities of this authentic spiritual friend and we wanted to do what we could to express our devotion and gratitude.

Devotion and Commitment to Action

In 1977 Akong Rinpoche announced that His Holiness Rangjung Rigpe Dorje the Sixteenth Karmapa had given his blessing for the Samye Project to begin. Because of unshakable faith in the Karmapa there was never any doubt in his mind that the ambitious undertaking would be achieved. It is impossible to comprehend let alone emulate Rinpoche's devotion to the Karmapa, but we wanted to help him because we knew we could trust his wisdom and compassion. When Akong Rinpoche undertook the great commitment to build the Samye Project it was a huge step up from our previous projects. We were a small community with plenty of goodwill but few resources. Legend has it that when Rinpoche started the Samye Project he had only fifty pounds. For him this was irrelevant: he told us that he never looked at the financial feasibility of his plans because if he did then he would never do anything. From a worldly perspective it is difficult to imagine how anyone could contemplate starting such a big project in this way. I find it even more astounding when I remember how young we all were. In 1978 when the building work began, Akong Rinpoche was not even forty years old and he placed his trust in an inexperienced construction team, most of whom were less than thirty years old.

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When the idea of the Samye Project was first mentioned I was involved in helping to look after the existing buildings in Samye Ling. I remember saying to Rinpoche, “We can’t even maintain what we have, how can we hope to do this as well?”

He replied, “Just because we can’t look after one building doesn’t mean we can’t build another one.” That kind of exchange often happened. Rinpoche’s questioning of a limiting belief based in conventional wisdom made immediate sense: it was the end of further discussion and a call to action.



Vin Harris with a temple-building team

Once we started building there was a palpable feeling within the Samye Ling community that the project was of great significance for the world and Rinpoche’s leadership consistently brought a genuine sense of purpose that is seldom found elsewhere in life. There was a regular building team of between five and ten people, although we sometimes had help from other members of the commu-

nity and occasional visitors. Whenever he could, Rinpoche would join us for work sessions and for the shared tea breaks which played a big part in bringing everyone together. Whether Samye Ling residents were building, creating artwork, cooking or cleaning it did not seem to matter. It was not always plain sailing but everyone was giving their best so that Rinpoche could fulfil his vision of establishing authentic Dharma in the West following the enlightened aspirations of the Karmapa.

People from all over the world felt themselves drawn to support Rinpoche's work and spent time living and working in Samye Ling. Many people settled in the nearby village of Eskdalemuir, others continued to live in Samye Ling for many years. Some people went back to their own countries to start centres on behalf of Akong Rinpoche and these spiritual outposts, known as Samye Dzongs, became an important part of Rinpoche's activity. No one received financial benefit from their participation in Rinpoche's projects. However, it was certainly not as though we gave something and received nothing in return. Rinpoche was able to see the potential in everyone: so many individuals discovered skills they did not even know they possessed, or they found an outlet for their hidden talents that had been waiting for the chance to shine. Anyone who participated in the Samye Project with good motivation can look back and rejoice in the fact that their time was spent in profoundly meaningful activity. Rinpoche's pure vision, wisdom and compassion, resonated with our latent aspirations and potential. He gave us the chance to do something positive that would be in the long-term best interests of ourselves and many others in our society.

Getting Started

It is definitely significant that the Main Temple was the first phase of the Samye Project to be undertaken and that it is higher than all the other buildings. This sends a clear message about what is considered most important, an early indication that worldly logic cannot be applied to this sacred activity. The construction of an elaborate shrine-room, capable of holding more than three hundred people, took more or less ten years. The fact that during that time the facilities and accommodation for residents and guests did not really increase much was not considered an issue. Rinpoche is said never to have worried about anything; he lived up to his own mantra, that “only the impossible is worth doing”. Perhaps this is why he had the courage to take on such daunting projects and consistently, against all the odds, he managed to accomplish what most of us would not even dare to dream about. By prioritising completion of the building to contain the spiritual and cultural heritage which Rinpoche had brought from Tibet, he demonstrated a leap of faith that revealed the power of pure conviction based on compassion and devotion. It was as if he knew that the circumstances for everything else to follow would inevitably fall into place at some point and this did certainly prove to be the case.

So in 1978, with very little money and an inspired team of enthusiastic volunteers, Akong Rinpoche initiated the process of clearing the site and marking out where his Samye Project was to be located. Drawings were prepared and a scale model was made to show the

scale and complexity of the dream. While others wondered whether it was feasible, Rinpoche consistently expressed his certainty that we could create a building that would last for a thousand years and bring vast benefit to the world. We believed him. We each chose to play our part with enthusiasm and to the best of our ability.

I still remember the point at which my involvement with the Samye Project became a reality. I was sitting in Rinpoche's family home in Dumfries. We were watching television together. It was a film about some prisoners working in terrible harsh conditions (I think they were actually building their own prison). Rinpoche had been silent for quite a long time and he turned to me and said, "We're going to start building the Samye Project and we're going to build it ourselves". Without a second thought I replied: "Well, I've always wanted to be a woodworker (this was true but it was something I had forgotten about until that moment). I'll go and learn woodwork then come back to Samye Ling and set up a wood-work shop. Yes we can do this." Other friends also went away during 1978 to learn skills such as bricklaying, metalworking and so on that would be needed for the work ahead. Meanwhile some members of the team stayed in Samye Ling and started preparing the foundations. We returned from our various skills training courses and by 1979 the project was well and truly underway.

I can remember many instances when people even less capable than us would turn up at Samye Ling. They could often be a bit spaced out and not even able to turn up regularly to work with us on the building site. We would sometimes get overwhelmed by the magnitude of what needed to be done by so few people. Whenever

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we asked Rinpoche whether we could not get some better helpers to do this project, with so much work to be done and so few capable people to do it, he just used to say, “Well, they all need to stay somewhere. And if I turn them away who’s going to look after them?” He never compromised his core value of compassion and he never lost sight of the true purpose of the Samye Project. The most important objective must always be to benefit all beings without exception. Even though we had such a big project to complete, he never abandoned anyone. Akong Rinpoche displayed endless patience.

CREATION Foundations and Structure



Akong Rinpoche on the Samye Ling Temple building site

When the building work started we did not have much money so it was a good thing that most of the work could be done by our

team of volunteers living and working in Samye Ling. The site was cleared, storage for materials was prepared, basic workshops built. All this work was done by hand. We had asked a local business to dig out the foundations for the Main Temple with their earth-moving machinery. So that it would not be too expensive they said they would do this when they had some spare time. We were beginning to regret making this arrangement as we had been waiting for them to arrive for many weeks. Rinpoche did not seem particularly concerned by the delay. At this time in 1979, Lama Gendun Rinpoche was visiting Samye Ling and giving teachings. One day Akong Rinpoche had asked him to preside over a ceremony which took place on the building site for blessing the land in preparation for the Main Temple. The rituals and chanting were just drawing to a close when the contractor in his huge earth-moving machine suddenly appeared over the horizon ready to start work!

The Main Temple needed to be built on solid foundations, so it was necessary to dig down until we found hard rock on which to build. At the south end we soon found solid ground. Unfortunately, it was further complicated by the fact that at the north end of the Main Temple we needed to excavate to a depth of around ten feet before we could use the ground for foundations. It ended up looking like we were making a swimming pool, fairly shallow at the south and really deep at the north, with massive thick brick walls enclosing the whole area of what is now the ground floor shrine-room. When these walls had been built and the supporting concrete pillars cast, there was still a vast space to be filled in with compacted rock and at Rinpoche's insistence this preparation work had to be done by

hand. People spent many months with hammers, shovels and wheelbarrows bringing rocks to fill in the great hole that was to become the solid earth on which the Main Temple rests.

Visitors and tourists passing by would sometimes ask what we were doing filling in this massive hole with broken rocks. We would tell them we were in the process of building a Tibetan temple because our teacher had been forced to leave Tibet and wanted to preserve the religion and culture of his native land. They were generally interested and polite but I am pretty sure they thought we had gone completely mad!

For a long time it appeared that not much was happening. Then slowly the shape of the building began to emerge from the ground and it soon became obvious that this was an extraordinary building: pillars and beams that supported the roof decks were cast in steel reinforced concrete, thick solid walls were built from bricks and blocks made from granite. Openings for doors and windows were formed with features that replicate the architectural details of monasteries in Tibet. Eventually the building was crowned with a curved pagoda-style golden roof. Although there was always a core team of dedicated builders, many helpers came and went, each of them making their contribution to the Samye Project. It was well understood that everyone who became involved in this project was doing something meaningful for the benefit of themselves and others.

It is said that given the right motivation, a sponsor or helper contributing to the building of a place where the Dharma can flourish engenders something special. It does not matter whether someone works on the project for a long time or if someone only

makes a small contribution to the work, the connection is established. One day Rinpoche explained how as long as one stone rests on top of another in the ruins of the Samye Project then all of the benefits of everything that has taken place there will ripen in the stream of being of anyone who has been involved in any way.



Ven Gyamtso adding the finishing touches to the temple roof ornament

Through Akong Rinpoche's great wisdom and compassion, we have been able to create an auspicious environment where the Dharma can meet the needs of the Western world. This will certainly benefit many thousands of people who will come here now and in the future. As they connect with the Dharma their practice will in turn benefit those who helped to make this possible. So one could consider that Akong Rinpoche was creating a vast and miraculous interconnected field of merit: or at the very least he gave us crazy young people the opportunity to stay out of trouble and do something useful with our lives!

Fitting out

The planning of the Samye Project, laying down foundations and building the structure of the Main Temple all revealed Rinpoche's vision and demonstrated his disposition for working on a grand

scale, which became a hallmark of many of his later projects. However, he also had a fine eye for detail and consistently insisted on the best of quality and design. He paid careful attention to what others would have considered minor details because for him only the best was good enough. His high expectations helped to raise the standards of many artists and craftspeople who did work for him in the UK, in Europe, in Africa or in Asia.

An important aspect of the Samye project was the need to preserve the architectural and artistic traditions of Tibet. The Main Temple in particular reflects this intention. From the beginning Rinpoche's lifelong friend, the master artist Sherab Palden Beru, had assisted Rinpoche with the design of the Samye Project. It was a challenge for a Tibetan artist, Western architects and builders to work together to create a building that preserved Tibetan heritage and at the same time complied with planning and building regulations of twentieth century Scotland. It was not always easy but Uncle Sherab, as he was known to everyone in the community, understood clearly what Rinpoche was trying to achieve. His rigorous attention to aesthetics of design and proportion was invaluable in making sure the reality was equal to Rinpoche's vision.

Once the outer shell of the Main Temple building was complete we began the fitting out stage: making windows, doors, decorative woodwork, panelled ceilings, laying wooden flooring, making shrines, thrones and purpose built furniture as well as installing the complex heating and lighting systems. Now that it is finished the overall effect appears somewhat opulent. It might be mistaken for an expression of great wealth but this was really not the case. It is

hard to believe that the craftwork of this magnificent building was carried out by our team of resident volunteers who were often learning on the job.

In the main shrine-room there is a magnificent crystal chandelier which Rinpoche himself chose. It was quite expensive and there is a story that someone said to Rinpoche: “What is it with you Tibetan Buddhists, you spend so much money on decorating a shrine-room but you don’t do much to help poor people?” Apparently Rinpoche took this to heart and he later said that this event had been instrumental in the decision to establish ROKPA, his organisation for providing humanitarian aid. Of course it was typical of Rinpoche that he did not see the choice as being either nurturing spiritual development or caring for material needs: he did both! As His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa has said, one of Akong Rinpoche’s unique qualities was his “good example for future generations of lamas and tulkus, that people can do both spiritual guidance and also social service”.

We were constantly encouraged by Rinpoche to achieve the highest possible quality without wasting anything and to make the most of our limited means by careful price negotiation, recycling materials and doing everything ourselves rather than bringing in experts. For example the polished hardwood floor of the shrine-room and upstairs apartments was bought for next to nothing from a school that was being demolished. Our team carefully removed it, brought it back to Samye Ling, cleaned it, installed it, sanded and varnished it. Of course this meant that the job took longer but we were learning to regard work as a spiritual practice. For Rinpoche

the end result and the way in which it was achieved were equally important. His influence permeates the whole fabric of the Samye Project and it is particularly apparent in the Main shrine-room: whoever enters is deeply touched by the profoundly spiritual atmosphere and the peaceful feeling they experience.

The area to the east of the Samye Project's main entrance is now a landscaped garden but for many years it was the site where a maze of temporary workshops sprang up. Within this ramshackle collection of buildings, some exceptional craftwork was being created. There was a wood workshop that served the building project from the time of making moulds for massive concrete pillars and beams at the beginning, right through to making fine furniture and paneling at the finish. The metal workshop did everything from repairing building site machinery to making wrought iron railings and intricate components required for drums and prayer wheels. There was a carving workshop and a casting room, where the architectural designs of Uncle Sherab that decorate the Main Temple were made first in wood and then cast in specially formulated resin. Moulds taken from these original carvings are a valuable archive which has since been used for various other projects in Samye Ling and elsewhere.

For a long time the inside of the main shrine-room was used as storage space for building materials and then as a workshop where the components for the distinctive pagoda roof were fabricated. Later on we used the same space for our purpose-built silk screen press. Samye Ling was a hive of inspired ingenuity and co-operative creativity: the artists who printed the exquisite dragons and cranes on the temple ceiling panels had learnt silk screen printing in London,

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producing tee shirts and posters for rock bands in the 1960s; wood-carvers found new ways to push the boundaries of their craft to bring Sherab's imagination to life in creating the fantastic dragons either side of the main shrine; metalworkers used electric gramophone turntables to spin prayer wheels containing a sacred mantra for every human being in the world; we invented a machine so that we could turn the hardwood temple drums; we worked out how to make a loom so that when Rinpoche's sister was visiting she was able to teach the traditional Tibetan method of weaving carpets. Maybe it was like this when Samye itself was being built in Tibet or when the gothic cathedrals were being built here in the West. For many of us it was one of those rare times in life when we found ourselves in the right place at the right time: there was nowhere else we wanted to go and nothing on earth we would rather be doing.



Inauguration of the dedicated Karmapa Shrine-room in the room in which HH 16th Gyalwang Karmapa stayed in 1979.

Artwork and Decoration

When the structural work had been completed and the ‘canvas’ prepared, it was handed over to Sherab Palden Beru. His artistic masterpiece began to take shape. Akong Rinpoche demanded the highest standards for the interior decoration of the Main Temple and he placed complete trust in his master artist to supervise every aspect of the artwork. In close collaboration with Akong Rinpoche, Sherab created bespoke designs for all of the shrine cabinets, thrones, prayer tables, panelling, doors, windows, walls, ceilings, pillars and beams. Every piece of carving, line drawing or colour mixing had to be given Sherab’s final seal of approval. If work was not perfect then it had to be redone. It was a slow and often painstaking process but it was well worth the effort. The spectacular end result speaks for itself. Sometimes Akong Rinpoche would commission the finest quality statues, metalwork and wood carvings from Tibet, China and Nepal. However, the work produced by the team of artists and craftspeople who came to Samye Ling and offered their skills to Rinpoche was at least as good as anything brought back from the East.

Akong Rinpoche had also given Sherab the mammoth task of painting a series of large traditional thangkas depicting deities, saints and gurus of the Kagyu Lineage. Each one of these magnificent paintings was incredibly detailed and would take one person at least a year to finish. Other than Sherab himself, there were no trained thangka painters available to carry out this highly specialised work. Fortunately there were several people with qualifications in

fine art; because of their devotion to Rinpoche they were willing to commit themselves for several years to be Sherab's dedicated apprentices. The painting studio for the thangka painting students was set up in the building that is now the Tibetan Tea Rooms. Sherab himself worked and passed on his sacred craft for many years in an inconspicuous room tucked away in the building called Tashi Deleg House. What is now the internet café was the sewing room and it was there that the finished thangkas were mounted in brocade ready to grace the walls of the Main Temple. Surely any normal person would have tried to find a way to avoid the daunting demands of this complex undertaking but Rinpoche thrived on challenges. The combination of his contagious enthusiasm and his steady determination enabled anyone who worked with him to believe that anything is possible.

It is said that we are living in a fortunate aeon when one thousand Buddhas will appear, our Buddha Shakyamuni being the fourth. In the centre of the shrine in the main temple there is a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha surrounded by one thousand small gilded Buddha statues. Each one of these one thousand gilded Buddha statues was carefully crafted by hand in the workshops at Samye Ling. When the resident artists were making them they were told by Rinpoche that it was very important to make each one perfect. He pointed out that the temple we are now building will one day be an ancient ruin where someone may find these images of Buddha in the rubble and dust: his wish was for the archaeologists of the future to be inspired and recognise that what had stood here was something meaningful and precious. Even during the time of creating

such exquisite artwork, Rinpoche was aware of impermanence. His aspirations for the Dharma and the wellbeing of the world are not restricted by the limited timeframe which most of us inhabit.

Consecration and Blessings

During the 1970s in preparation for the building of the Samye Project and throughout the years 1978 to 1988 when the Main Temple was under construction, Akong Rinpoche invited many high lamas to visit Samye Ling such as His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa. Rinpoche showed the greatest of respect and devotion to all of the spiritual masters who came: they were all received according to our limited means but always with great dignity and joyful celebration.

The lamas who visited Samye Ling were requested to give Dharma teachings, as described in later chapters, but Rinpoche also never missed an opportunity to invite them to bless the Samye Project by consecrating images, presiding over ceremonies and conferring initiations. At key stages of the construction, either Rinpoche himself or one of the many revered visiting lamas would place sacred relics or special treasure vases in carefully chosen locations within the fabric of the building. Akong Rinpoche did not stop there. He regularly sought guidance from Tai Situ Rinpoche in applying the principles of *Feng Shui*, sacred geomancy. Over the course of many years they worked together to create a feeling of harmony through the design of each individual building, paying careful attention to

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the orientation of the whole site and the relationship between each part. In this way they optimised the flow of energy and brought balance to our connection with the wider natural environment. Basically Rinpoche used all of the resources at his disposal to make Samye Ling the best possible place for the study and practice of the Buddha's teachings.



Situ Rinpoche & Thrangu Rinpoche with attendant lamas blessing the ground prior to temple construction

Many years later Rinpoche told us:

“Now that the Samye Project is built and Samye Ling is established, you don't need to go to India, Tibet or Nepal to visit holy places. What makes a place holy is that it has been visited by great spiritual masters who have given teachings there, and the place of study and practice is blessed and made sacred by their presence. That has

happened here, and thinking in this way Samye Ling is truly a spiritual place. We have created a spiritual place here in the West.”

Most of the time it was not easy to know what Rinpoche was thinking or how he was feeling but it is clear that he was very happy indeed about this remarkable achievement.

COMPLETION

Opening Ceremony and Beyond

On the auspicious and memorable date of 8th August 1988, the Main Temple was formally opened by The Right Honourable Lord David Steel and the consecration ceremony was presided over by His Eminence the Twelfth Chamgon Khentin Tai Situ Rinpoche and the Very Venerable Ninth Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. It was a day of celebration with many local dignitaries, supporters, family, friends and students of Rinpoche present, rejoicing in the completion of the first stage of his project.

It was during the phase of building the Main Temple that Rinpoche shared his enthusiasm for the vision and started the momentum for the Samye Project. The credibility of his organisation was established by demonstrating the ability to create such an impressive building. It would be an incredible achievement had it been built by a wealthy institution, a government department or a university, but this was the accomplishment of someone who had left his homeland and landed in Britain as a refugee. During the

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later stages of the Samye Project it didn't necessarily become easier, but with the completion of the Main Temple a tipping point had been reached. It was definitely going to happen; success was already certain and it was just a matter of time before the aspiration became a reality.



Opening of the temple: Tai Situ Rinpoche with Lord David Steel, former leader of the Liberal Party

The Samye Project was started in 1978 and eventually reached completion in 2012.

It was built in four distinct phases: the Main Temple; the south wing; the north wing plus eastern entrance and courtyard; the landscaping and gardens. For whatever reason, it was really important and a source of great satisfaction for Rinpoche to know that at least the Main Temple of the Samye Project was built as a direct expression of faith and devotion by the community itself in the same way as the ancient monasteries of Tibet. Rinpoche displayed unshakable equanimity: he patiently worked with whatever challenges or oppor-

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tunities presented themselves. It is tempting to find eloquent phrases to describe how Rinpoche took all appearances as the path and transformed them into a vehicle for teaching others. Rinpoche’s own words were straightforward and very direct. Whenever we tried to escape from a problem or avoid dealing with obstacles he would simply say, “We need to learn to face the situation”.



With Chamgon Tai Situ Rinpoche & Dulmo Choje Rinpoche.

Akong Rinpoche was involved in the overall vision throughout the Samye Project and particularly in the building, decoration and consecration of the Main Temple. However, towards the end of the time of building the Main Temple and then during the subsequent

phases of construction, he came to have many other significant and important responsibilities in his life. With Rinpoche not spending as much time in Samye Ling as he did in the early days, there was not quite the same feeling as when the whole community had worked together on the Samye Project. This is not to say that Rinpoche was no longer interested in the Samye Project: his influence was always felt to be present and his advice was available whenever it was needed. It is a testament to the devotion Rinpoche inspired in his friends and students, that they were eventually able to do what was necessary to bring the Samye Project to completion. Their commitment, together with the direction provided by Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, allowed Akong Rinpoche to achieve so much to benefit countless beings elsewhere, particularly in Tibet and Nepal, but also through a network of centres and therapy groups extending from Northern Europe to Southern Africa.

As it is Now

The Samye Project is the jewel in the crown of Samye Ling. It consists of substantial buildings surrounding the four sides of a central courtyard. The building work that began in 1978 was finally completed in December 2012, though the landscaping work continues to evolve.

The magnificent Main Temple on the west side of the courtyard was built between 1978 and 1988. On the ground floor there is the

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large shrine-room used for teachings, daily prayers, meditation sessions, ceremonies, rituals and initiations. The middle floor provides accommodation and reception rooms for the highest lamas. On the top floor there is the Medicine Buddha shrine-room. The view from the outdoor patio areas of the top and middle floors helps one to appreciate the sheer scale of the Samye Project and a sense of its place within the surrounding landscape.



The next phase to be built was the wing to the south side of the courtyard. The ground floor provides storage, cooking and dining facilities for up to three hundred people. During quieter times, half of the dining room can be separated by a special sliding partition. The upper floor has bedrooms and study spaces for monks and visiting teachers.

For many years after the temple and the dining room wing had been finished, the remaining area set aside for the completion of

the Samye Project was used as a car park. There was a growing concern that Akong Rinpoche would never witness the fulfilment of his vision during his lifetime, and that without his influence the Samye Project would remain unfinished. Fortunately, the causes and conditions eventually came together and we were able to build the north and east sides and finish off the courtyard by the end of 2012. It is good to know that Rinpoche saw the fulfilment of his vision for the Samye Project before he died in 2013.

The building to the north of the courtyard has retreat rooms and study space on the first floor. The ground floor is taken up with a large lecture theatre used for conferences and cultural events as well as a library of World Religions. The main entrance to the courtyard is to the east through a walkway with exhibition rooms and offices on each side. The first floor has the Abbot's office, a room for small conferences and meetings as well as Akong Rinpoche's private office and adjoining Tibetan library.

In true Tibetan style the Samye Project buildings have various hidden corners housing additional facilities that will be needed to accomplish the activity of Samye in the West. There are copper roofs containing large attic spaces. These are used for the storage of sacred texts, furnishings and traditional materials required for rituals and receiving lineage masters, archive records and casting moulds of the traditional decorations used in the construction of the temple, as well as more practical maintenance and storage facilities. In the north-west corner there are protector shrines, a modern recording complex with a secure archive vault and in the south-west corner there is an art studio. The courtyard itself and

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the walkways around it at various levels are all paved in a beautiful yellow limestone. To the east there is a beautifully landscaped garden with a lake and a bridge leading to footpaths along the banks of the River Esk.



With HH Dilgo Khyentse in Samye Ling's original shrine-room in Johnstone House, now the Chenresig Shrine-room 1982.

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The main entrance to the Samye Project is from the east via a pagoda style porch and huge doors with beaten copper panels portraying various deities and sacred symbols. Before entering the courtyard and discovering the amazing Main Temple, one sees a circular stained glass window portraying the great *Terton* Rigzin Jatson Nyingpo. This is a truly impressive project in scale, design and quality that reflects Rinpoche's wish that all who see it should feel inspired and recognise that this is a place of great significance.



The beautiful Akong Memorial Garden & entrance to Samye Ling August 2020.

There are many other buildings in the grounds of Samye Ling providing accommodation for the thousands of guests who come to study and practice, as the traditions of Tibetan Dharma and culture nourish those who seek peace and a deeper understanding of the human condition. There are gardens for growing food and

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medicinal herbs as well as ornamental gardens providing an environment conducive to contemplation and wellbeing. The original building, where the early teachings in Samye Ling took place, is still in use with guest bedrooms, a specialist printing room and office for the Akong Memorial Foundation (the charity founded to take care of that part of Rinpoche’s legacy associated with his monastery in Tibet, Dolma Lhakang). The original shrine-room is now dedicated to the practice of Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In all there are a total of seven shrine-rooms: in addition to the Main, Medicine Buddha, Mahakala and Chenresig shrines, there are also shrine-rooms dedicated to Amitabha, Tara, and one for the Karma Kamtsang Lineage (in the room in which His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa resided).



The Tara Healing Garden in 2012, with 20 petals for growing medicinal herbs.

(Courtesy of Alan Austin)

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There are also other impressive edifices: a large Victory Stupa, where the Amitabha shrine is housed and the ashes of the deceased are kept, an enclosed prayer wheel walkway, sixteen smaller stupas, a butter lamp house, ornamental lakes, a Tara garden with medicinal herbs laid out in the form of twenty-one petals of a lotus, large outdoor statues of deities and saints such as Guru Rinpoche, Tara and Nagarjuna. The massive entrance gateway to the south and fluttering prayer flags provide an immediate indication to any visitor as they arrive that this is no ordinary place.



Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche in the main shrine-room at Samye Ling 2013.

This brief description of the grounds of Samye Ling and the Samye Project will serve as a reminder to those who have been there, and convey to those who have as yet not had the good fortune to visit, something of the scale of Rinpoche's vision and accomplishments

here in Scotland. It was even more remarkable as he achieved so much when starting out with few resources and less than perfect circumstances.

Body, Speech and Mind

Akong Rinpoche often referred to the Samye Project as one of the most significant accomplishments of his life's work and it is certainly the most tangible expression of his activity in the West. By any standards, the Samye Project is impressive and it is there for all to see as a physical manifestation of enlightened activity that could not have been conceived by a mundane mind. The true scale of this achievement may not be truly comprehended by us, since we always tend to view what we call the world from our own limited and limiting perspective. Others may have a different perception but it does not seem to me that Rinpoche ever had a detailed master plan. He appeared to be doing almost nothing as he allowed events around him to unfold with no obvious felt need to intervene. However, he always had a clear sense of purpose and direction which, when combined with his unique down to earth spontaneous wisdom, operated in a mysterious way to bring lots of different strands together. Somehow, they mysteriously wove themselves into a fabric beyond the conception of normal intellect.

Quite often we read in history books how a king built a palace or how great spiritual teachers established monasteries. It does not generally mean that they actually did any physical building work.

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However, Akong Rinpoche manifested his vision by working with his body as well as his speech and mind. Akong Rinpoche was certainly an extraordinary lama and his many achievements came about by unconventional means. He was not only responsible for the grand vision of the Samye Project, but whenever he had the time, he really enjoyed coming to work on the building site; not just as a manager but to do hard physical labour, often gravitating towards the lowest and most menial of tasks. In Tibet it would have been unthinkable for a lama to do that kind of work but that did not prevent Rinpoche from doing what he loved.



Johnstone House & the Guru Rinpoche Pond at Samye Ling 2006.

Over the past few decades there have been some wonderful achievements by many lamas from Tibet who have instigated projects to build monasteries and facilities for the study and practice of Dharma

all over the world. Yet there was a very special singularity of purpose and method in the approach taken by Akong Rinpoche as he established the first major Tibetan Buddhist centre in the West. One could say that as a pioneer he paved the way so that those who follow might have an easier journey. The Tibetan cultural tradition of *namtar*, telling the life stories of holy beings, tends to present an idealised and selective representation of someone's life. To summarise this chapter of Akong Rinpoche's life in such a manner would not have done full justice to the efforts of many individuals who, through their connection with Rinpoche, became involved in the Samye Project. More importantly it might miss the point of just how special his life was: he lost everything but did not give up; he started again with nothing and achieved so much for the benefit of others.

Rinpoche was not able to rely on the authority and wealth of kings nor could he expect to find the obedience that Tibetan lamas had become accustomed to in their native land. He was in a new country where he found himself thrown into unfamiliar surroundings with some quite strange people. It was through his own lived example of wisdom and compassion that he was able to teach, inspire and motivate those around him: if this meant digging holes, breaking rocks, mixing cement, pushing wheelbarrows and laying bricks, then that is what he did. He did it in a way that not only resulted in the construction of an exceptional building in South West Scotland but it also enabled him to plant the seeds of Lord Buddha's teaching in the hearts of those who were fortunate to work with him. He used to find it amusing that in the West people thought he was too

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traditional and in the East people were shocked because he was unconventional. Another interpretation might be that he manifested perfectly the consistency of purpose and the flexibility of application required during an unprecedented time of transition when the Dharma migrated to a modern world that is as different from the land of Tibet as anyone could possibly imagine.



Kagyu Samye Ling temple & courtyard 2012.

(Courtesy of Peter Dixon)

The Future of Samye in the West

Thrangu Rinpoche came to visit Samye Ling on many occasions while the building work was happening. He gave profound Dharma teachings but he also gave inspirational talks about the value of the

project that we were working on. He said any activity to create opportunities for the study and practice of Dharma is of great benefit and working to bring the Dharma to a new country where it is not already established is particularly beneficial: it is also likely to be very challenging.



Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche
at Samye Dzong London

In a traditional namtar we may not hear about the detail of the spiritual master's life: the many obstacles that have to be overcome are respectfully swept under the carpet. In the case of Akong Rinpoche, knowing more about the way that he dealt with the difficulties of building Samye in the West, actually makes his life story more inspiring to present and future generations. If those of us who aspire to follow his example were to believe that he never had to deal with any serious problems, we might give ourselves the excuse that unless our situation is perfect then there is nothing we can do to live a meaningful life. Hopefully through learning more about Akong Rinpoche's life we will realise that we too can achieve more than we allow ourselves to imagine.

Rinpoche frequently insisted that he was not a teacher and it may be true that he was not a teacher in the conventional sense. However, in accordance with his pure aspirations, the seeds of Dharma he planted in our hearts may grow so that in time we may come to realise the value of what he shared with us. The challenge now is to honour his kindness by doing justice to what we have

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received. Perhaps these connections which can be felt but not seen will prove to be just as much a measure of Rinpoche's contribution to the world as the impressive institution he left behind.



With nephews & nieces at Samye Ling on the occasion of Akong Rinpoche's 70th birthday 2010.

During the last year of Rinpoche's life, I was sitting in conversation with him reflecting on the Samye Project and he said something quietly and sincerely that remains in my mind as an example of his deep humility. He spoke of how in Tibet there were so many monasteries and that some of them had more than one resident tulku, so there must have been many thousands of very special beings with great qualities. And yet, he went on to say, he often wondered why it had fallen to him to undertake the Samye Project, which is something that has such great importance for our world. I was really moved by what Rinpoche had shared, and replied that although

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there must have been many great practitioners in Tibet, for some reason my friends and I came to meet him in Scotland. I told him how grateful I am to have had the good karma to be able to help him.



Moving the Samye Ling yaks to fresh pasture June 2012.

(Courtesy of Peter Dixon)

We should not forget that whilst he was responsible for creating the magnificent Samye Project, Rinpoche's vast activity was at the same time benefitting so many beings through an interconnected mandala of satellite centres and hundreds of projects throughout our world. The true purpose and scale of Rinpoche's vision may only become clear in the fullness of time. Who knows what role Akong Rinpoche's Samye Project and all those fortunate to be connected through it may play in the preservation of Tibetan

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Buddhism and in the migration of the truth of Lord Buddha’s teachings to a new culture, at a time when compassion and wisdom are desperately needed.



Aerial view of Samye Ling circa 2010.

Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche's Role in Bringing Dharma to the World

by Dharmacharya Kenneth Holmes

Introduction

Akong Rinpoche's life was an outstanding example of enlightened activity: that of the best Buddhist masters. Tibetan texts often describe the activity under the headings of *benefitting the teachings* and *benefitting beings*. The first involves nurturing all the various aspects of Buddhism itself, from creating all its material supports and infrastructure through to spreading its actual teachings on wisdom, compassion and peace. The second means being a living example of the teachings not only by compassionately caring for human and other living beings, in all sorts of ways, but also by inspiring other people to do the same.

That the extent and diversity of Akong Rinpoche's life work was more than any of us could imagine is for certain. Throughout his life, a constant flow of people came to him for his wise and trusted counsel and, as someone working very close to him for over forty years¹, I was constantly discovering through chatting with them ever more

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and more projects he had either set in motion, been involved in or supported: projects that, until then, I never even knew existed. However, despite these seemingly endless activities, it is clear from the condolences written by so many eminent people that he will be remembered first and foremost for three things:

1. Being the first to establish and develop Tibetan Dharma in Europe,
2. Bringing the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa to Europe and helping find and establish the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa in Tibet, and
3. His vast humanitarian activity, particularly on the Tibetan plateau.



For the first two of these, as Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche said²: “Chöje Akong Rinpoche and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche were like a gate, opening the Western countries for all our great Kagyu masters, especially His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa and his ‘heart sons’. Because of these two Dharma masters, we now have so many wonderful Dharma centres in the West.”

Whereas Trungpa Rinpoche developed Tibetan Buddhism in the USA primarily through *his own* teaching activity, Akong Rinpoche pioneered Tibetan Buddhism in Europe by thirty years of continuous endeavour in *bringing many other* great Tibetan masters of the time to teach and transmit their specialities and lineages. The exception to this was in establishing Tibetan Buddhism in Southern Africa where he was the main teaching lama, since other Tibetan masters were not interested in going there. In bringing Dharma to Europe, he repeatedly displayed great skill and diplomacy in overcoming the many difficulties that inevitably occurred. This same sensitivity to local needs and circumstances and his ability to find wise responses were also to ensure his unique and now famous success in helping the people of the Tibetan plateau during the last thirty years of his life.

For the humanitarian activity, please refer to the special section in this work but also to the section below on Akong Rinpoche’s own understanding of the term “Dharma” as including psychotherapy and humanitarian work and not simply being a religious world apart.

Background

Although Akong Rinpoche's background is also explained elsewhere in this publication, let us consider some of the major factors that were to influence his life work:

1. The first eighteen years of his life were spent being trained to be the reincarnate lama (*tulku*) and abbot of his monastery, Dolma Lhakang, including a few busy years fulfilling that role for his monastery, its thirteen satellite hermitages and monasteries as well as for the people of a surrounding area of several thousand square kilometres. His training took place in various locations in Kham, Eastern Tibet, including several stays in large monastic institutions such as Palpung Monastery (the seat of the Situ, Jamgon and Ongen Rinpoches) and Shechen, the seat of Shechen Kongtrul. At Palpung he had been one of a gathering around the 16th Karmapa of almost one hundred Kagyu tulkus. This start to his life was enough to imprint him profoundly with the ancient ways and traditions of Buddhism that he would spend much of his own life striving to preserve, in general, and to implant in the West. It cemented his conviction of the need for any advanced teachings to be taught by their true 'masters'.
2. During that period, he received Dharma from some remarkable teachers, of note the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa, Shechen Kongtrul Rinpoche and the legendary Khenpo Gangshar.

During the last two decades of his life, the transmissions he had received took on special importance – with Akong Rinpoche devoting nearly all of his visits to European and African centres to bestow empowerments, rather than giving formal teachings.

3. Akong Rinpoche's forty-year active connection with the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa and his role in finding and establishing the 17th Karmapa were two of the key factors of his life. These great beings helped each other.
4. Due to the previous (1st) Akong's profound link with traditional Tibetan medicine, the 2nd Akong had been given medical training by his uncles ever since childhood. This was to influence many things in the various fields of activity throughout his life but particularly his work developing Tara Rokpa psychotherapy and supporting traditional Tibetan medicine.
5. He was on the brink of death from starvation during his escape from Tibet. This had a major impact on his own understanding of human needs and gave birth to his heartfelt commitment to help the poor and needy.
6. During the three years when he was doing menial work in an Oxford hospital, he was plunged into an experience of the working-class world and also suffered continuous humiliation and racial prejudice. The contrast between this and the elevated position that he had enjoyed in Tibet was a seminal moment for him. He also became very aware of the profound differences between Tibetan and British cultures and this powerfully influenced his own teaching work. He declared a

wish to preserve the vital essence of his native culture and religion yet to bring it in a meaningful and useful way into the modern, Western world.

All the above made a rich tapestry of prior experience and helps us understand what was informing the 27-year-old Akong Rinpoche as he started his Dharma work in the West, “co-founding” Samye Ling in 1967.

Early Days in Samye Ling

This phrase so often encountered – “co-founder of Samye Ling” – is technically true but rather misleading. Soon after the centre was created, the other co-founder, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, spent much time abroad or away from Samye Ling and hence, apart from the lasting mark made on individuals who met him then, left hardly any influence on the half century of development of the centre that followed his 1969 departure for the USA. His own enormous Dharma activity took place in America and everything that Samye Ling did for Dharma in Europe or elsewhere was *entirely* due to Akong Rinpoche. To call Akong Rinpoche the “creator of Samye Ling” would be more accurate.

During these first two years, a profound disagreement occurred between these two Rinpoches. This was triggered by Trungpa Rinpoche’s own highly unconventional behaviour and his deeply-held conviction of living out a ‘wild yogi’ type of engagement with

people. In this disagreement, the propriety of Trungpa Rinpoche's uninhibited behaviour was not in question. He was seen by some Tibetans, including Akong Rinpoche, as a *mahasiddha* and the latter are known for their sometimes-strange Buddhist activity. Akong Rinpoche only ever spoke respectfully of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche as a person and as a teacher. Their disagreement was entirely about how to present Tibetan Buddhism at Samye Ling, knowing that it was the first and only Tibetan centre in the West.

Akong Rinpoche was for a classical approach, establishing traditional Tibetan studies, training in rituals and meditation and so forth. Trungpa Rinpoche – and most particularly after his return from a retreat in the Taktsang cave in Bhutan, where he had received visionary revelations – wanted to modernise the Buddha's message to suit Westerners and to tackle people in an unconventional and confrontational way that would break down their ego-barriers and not give them the excuse of formal religious structures in which to get lost. As one resident at the time said of him, "It was like being in the cage with the tiger!" Trungpa Rinpoche willingly entered into an arena familiar to some of the 'flower generation' visitors to Samye Ling and met people there on their own ground.

He also wanted the prayers to be done in English and composed some new rituals in English.

Akong Rinpoche was convinced that this was giving this new world entirely the wrong message about Tibetan Buddhism. He wanted people to start from the beginning and go through a progressive, well-grounded training – one based in the abstinence, moderation and precepts of the basic teachings of the Buddha and

leading into the compassionate ways of the bodhisattva and, whenever and if ever the time would be right, the extraordinary path of the yogin: the sane yogin and not the crazy yogin. He also wanted to keep the Tibetan prayers and practices just as they had always been, among other things in order to preserve them in those difficult times when they might disappear forever. Yet Trungpa Rinpoche was not only his senior, within the Tibetan spiritual hierarchy, but also someone hard to criticise – he was a friend of many years with whom he had co-experienced discipleship under Shechen Kongtrul Rinpoche, the 16th Karmapa and Khenpo Gangshar, not to mention flight from Tibet and near death, the Young Lamas Home School, the journey West and several years in Oxford.

It must have taken extraordinary courage to confront the powerful convictions driving Trungpa Rinpoche. However, with the intensifying of the situation, Akong Rinpoche became obliged to consider the duty he had as manager, appointed by the Karmapa, of Samye Ling. Trungpa Rinpoche remained unwilling to listen to his reasoning and Akong Rinpoche realised that the only solution to their disagreement was to seek the Karmapa's own opinion and arbitration. The 16th Gyalwang Karmapa decided that it was not the right way to present the Dharma in Europe and that it would give a wrong reading of the Kagyu lineage: a lineage that embraces the entire wealth of the Buddha's teachings, for everyone, and not solely the way of the 'crazy yogi', for the one in a billion. This verdict by the Karmapa gave Akong Rinpoche the unenviable and most painful task not only of transmitting the Karmapa's decision to his friend and companion, but also of ensuring it was carried out.

Trungpa Rinpoche then moved away from Samye Ling and, after a period of reflection, accepted an invitation to go to the USA. His work there since then is well-documented.

The need for Tibetan Dharma to be established in Europe both along traditional lines and in a step-by-step way was set in motion by this historic disagreement. The correctness and suitability of the traditional approach was subsequently to be confirmed again and again, first by Kalu Rinpoche, during his 1970s visits, then by the Karmapa during his 1974 and 1977 visits, later by the Tai Situpa and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and thereafter by all Samye Ling's visiting teachers. Furthermore, the traditional approach has been persistently emphasised in recent times by the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa. Recently, the Tai Situpa said that it is not for Dharma to be changed for Westerners but for Westerners to be changed by Dharma. Akong Rinpoche had made the correct choice ... for Europe, at least.

Akong Rinpoche felt neither obliged to, nor inclined to, step into the 'guru' vacancy created by Trungpa Rinpoche's departure. He continued in the managerial role assigned him by the Karmapa and, in the meantime, while setting in motion the processes that would soon bring Tibetan Dharma teachers to Scotland, sought well-respected teachers from other Buddhist traditions to visit Samye Ling, primarily to teach meditation and also to teach some Dharma theory. The excellent teachers that he found came from the Thai and Burmese viharas near London, through contact via the London Buddhist Society, the focal point for Buddhism at the time. They had come to the UK primarily to teach the Thai and Burmese

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populations frequenting their viharas and most had little English. Their capacity to teach Dharma theory being limited by this, Akong Rinpoche asked them to focus instead on meditation instruction. Also through the Buddhist Society, some excellent Zen teachers came, of note in the earlier years the Ven Sochu Suzuki, founder of the London Zen Society and later abbot of the famous Ryutaku-ji monastery in Japan.



With Panchen Lama's daughter Yabshi Pan Rinzin Wangmo in Samye Ling. Akong Rinpoche was a good friend of the 10th Panchen Lama & his family.

The visits of these teachers, in the early 1970s, the courses they gave and the daily prayers (in Tibetan) and silent meditation sessions all gradually settled Samye Ling into being somewhat more of a traditionally-Buddhist centre than it had been in the late sixties. Those interested in receiving Dharma guidance, as either personal

advice or meditation instruction, could see Akong Rinpoche in private interview and/or talk with visiting Tibetans such as Chime Rinpoche. A small number of people in the community remained from the Trungpa years but the committed Buddhists were still in a definite minority, with most members either subscribing to their own views (spiritualism, theosophy, Gurdjieff and so forth) or bathing in the universalist views of the hippie enlightenment. Rinpoche was very natural with everybody, seeing the person rather than the label, the potential rather than the history. It was an apprenticeship of 'the West' for him.

Scotland has a strong puritan tradition. The arrival of a church, mosque or temple of any other faith in its quiet rural valleys in the 1960s would have been a shock anywhere. For many years, Tibetan Buddhism was openly called "devil-worshipping" by ministers of the Church of Scotland. The wild behaviour observed in the very early days and the advent of hippies to the remote setting of Eskdalemuir gave Samye Ling a difficult start with its neighbours: some visitors and residents bathed naked in the local streams and rivers and there were various rumours and incidents of drug-taking.

Rinpoche realised that this would take some time to heal but found an excellent way to accelerate the healing: the institution of an 'Annual Tea Party and Open Day'. In his own conversations with the friendlier locals, such as the Cartner family who helped out the centre or the Dalgliesh family that supplied our dairy products, he had realised that a major part of the problem was the mystery surrounding the centre and some fear, through simply not knowing what was going on there. The best solution, therefore, was to open

the doors of the establishment, in an annual tea-party. He made a point of inviting local council members, MPs, doctors, staff from local emergency services and tradespeople with whom we did business, welcoming them warmly and in person and showing the good things he was trying to achieve, all well-lubricated with tea and home-made sandwiches and cakes ‘on the house’. These tea-parties became an institution that continues to this day.

Akong Rinpoche’s Own ‘Aims and Objects’

In the latter decades of his life, Akong Rinpoche defined his Dharma work on numerous occasions through three main fields, expressing all three as being part of a sole holistic and compassionate duty of service, which he described as follows:

1. The humanitarian aid deals with the basic needs of humans – that must be addressed first and foremost – namely safety, shelter, nourishment, healthcare and education.
2. The psychotherapy deals with the emotional and life-management issues that humans experience.
3. Buddhadharma deals with humanity’s spiritual needs.

Furthermore, he defined these three as a deeper interpretation of Dharma compassion in the well-known fields (respectively) of body, speech and mind, wherein “body” means physical needs, “speech” is about communication and relationships (with others and within

oneself) and “mind” is about understanding the very nature of things and how they happen.



Akong Rinpoche at his desk

However, in the first two decades of Samye Ling, his therapeutic and humanitarian aid activities were not yet realities, even though some of what would later become the key therapy exercises were being given sometimes by Rinpoche in one-to-one advice to students. Samye Ling in those earlier times was regulated under the trust deed of the Johnstone House Trust, modified to reflect its new aims now that Tibetans had taken over from its founder, Anandabodhi. The main stated aims, often quoted enthusiastically by Akong Rinpoche in those years, were these:

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- To preserve and protect Tibetan culture and religion.
- To promote the Buddhadharma in general so that it could even further benefit beings.
- In particular, to preserve and promote the teachings of the Tibetan Kagyu³ lineage and especially those of the Karma Kamtsang⁴ line.
- To establish a forum for any worthy spiritual traditions to be represented.
- To be a place of peace and restoration for anyone of any or no faith.

His work dealt with the first three points as a synergy: people learning and practising the Tibetan Buddhist teachings of his tradition helped ensure its survival, as a living transmission. That involvement in turn generated the interest among people that would be vital for the wider and less obvious tasks such as translation of texts, sponsorship of monastic activities abroad (in Asia) and all the other things needed to truly maintain the drastically-weakened spiritual heritage of his homeland. There were three main aspects to this:

1. Setting up the infrastructure of temples, centres, Dharma artefacts and so forth.
2. Establishing a transmission of Dharma as concepts, i.e. study and study facilities, such as extensive Dharma libraries.
3. Establishing the Dharma as meditation practice and ethical living.

An Initial Hesitation

Most people associate Akong Rinpoche with endless building projects and a constant wish for expansion, in nearly all the fields of his very varied activity. He became famous for helping other people ‘see large’, by broadening (sometimes radically) their vision of what was possible and for helping them find the courage to aim much higher than they would normally. That was indeed the case but only so after the 1977 visit of the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa. Before that Rinpoche was decidedly reluctant to expand Samye Ling and happy to keep things low-key. There was already one extension project (the white building immediately next to Johnstone House, known for years as the “new building”) that had been launched very early on. This had been done not as an expansion for its own sake but through pure necessity, as the old property offered barely enough space to house the residents, let alone paying guests – the main source of income for the centre. To offer maximum dormitory bedroom space for guests, most residents at the time lived in small, highly inadequate spaces, such as tiny attics, converted ends of greenhouses and garden sheds – something possible in those early days before Health and Safety stringencies.

The author discussed material expansion of the centre on several occasions during the early 1970s with Akong Rinpoche. At the time, Rinpoche was still very unsure of the future of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK and the West and said we needed to ‘wait and see’ whether it would become a proverbial flash-in-the-pan or something that

would genuinely be of benefit and take firm root. For the material supports of Dharma – temples and artefacts – he wanted to wait until the demand determined supply and Samye Ling would be *obliged* to expand and to set up those things, not to mention it becoming able to do so financially, through the income motor generated by it being well-attended for most of the year.

In general – and this was true in many other domains – Rinpoche needed to intuitively ‘feel’ something before he could invest himself in it. The Gyalwang Karmapa’s 1977 visit, with the massively positive response it brought from people and furthermore the Karmapa’s own direct advice about Samye Ling’s future, led to the conception of the expansion plans embodied in the *Samye Project*. By some accounts, the Karmapa foresaw the centre as becoming something rather grand. From that time onwards, Akong Rinpoche ‘felt’ a potential for great growth and therefore invested much of his energy into developing the material supports that would be needed: first and foremost the temple, which kept him very busy from 1978–1988.

Establishing Firm Bases for Dharma Development

After the departure of Trungpa Rinpoche from Scotland, Akong Rinpoche travelled to India and met with the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa, to seek his guidance and to invite him to come to the West. Although the latter agreed in principle, both parties concluded that it was still too early for that to happen in practice, as the Dharma terrain was not sufficiently prepared. The Karmapa coun-

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suggested that the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche should first visit Samye Ling, the USA and Europe for a few years, in order to establish Dharma more vigorously. This would make a subsequent visit by His Holiness more meaningful. Kalu Rinpoche, who was also the lineage holder of the Shangpa Kagyu tradition and had, in Tibet, been meditation master of the great Karma Kagyu Palpung monastery in Kham, was ideal for this.



Kalu Rinpoche's visit to Samye Ling circa 1988

Kalu Rinpoche, in accord with the Karmapa's instruction, visited Europe at the end of 1972, in direct response to the requests of both Akong Rinpoche and his own Western disciples (mainly from France). He had already toured the USA and Canada in 1971, founding a centre in the latter country. At that early period of Dharma development, it was still too premature to invite the four main Kagyu 'heart-sons' who themselves were young and in the final stages of their education. Among their main teachers in Rumtek

monastery were Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, who later were to build the foundations and pillars of Kagyu Dharma theory in Samye Ling. In particular, the 9th Thrangu Rinpoche was becoming more and more recognised as being the main holder of Kagyu theoretical tenets and Akong Rinpoche knew that, when the time was right, he should be brought to the West. Furthermore, in a broad, non-sectarian approach, Rinpoche wanted the great lamas of the other main Tibetan traditions to visit Samye Ling and extended various invitations. As he told me, “At that time, the West did not hold so much appeal for the Tibetan masters as it did later. Primarily concerned with what was happening in India in those early days, very few were interested in travelling here.”

Although Kalu Rinpoche made the initial visit in 1972, the major development occurred in 1974 when he returned accompanied by a significant party, including five young Bhutanese lamas freshly out of long-term retreat, along with a full kit of ritual implements and musical instruments. On the evening of their arrival, the monks set themselves up on the front steps of Johnstone House and played *ja-ling*⁵ and *ra-dong*⁶ for several hours. These haunting and totally-new sounds echoed along the Scottish valley, in the chill, crisp air beneath a full moon and starry night, heralding in a new era in the centre’s development and fulfilling one of Akong Rinpoche’s wishes to bring his tradition West.

At Akong Rinpoche’s request and to his great satisfaction, Kalu Rinpoche gave traditional Buddhist Refuge, various levels of precepts, the bodhisattva vow and also empowerments to those who

wanted them or needed them for their practice. He also gave many Dharma teachings. Thus, in this milestone visit of great impact, many key aspects of traditional Tibetan Dharma were imparted. This seemed, in some ways, to seal the end of the hippie and wild era of the centre and make it a truly Tibetan Buddhist centre. More importantly, it drew in more people and set them on the path of practice, thereby developing the future audience for the Gyalwang Karmapa. Although a few motivated residents had already started the preliminary practices of Mahamudra privately, under the personal guidance of Akong Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche's visit made these more widely known and launched a new batch of people into prostrations.

An Initiator and an Organiser Rather Than a 'Teaching Lama'

- Akong Rinpoche's deeds, reflecting his expressed intention, often voiced to the author, showed that he had never once wished to make a centre (and later a whole organisation) based around himself as a personality and a teacher⁷. On the contrary, he wanted to manage Samye Ling in such a way that it gave the very best of Tibetan Buddhism to the world, knowing that the best way for that to happen would be to bring there the finest living Tibetan masters. This was perhaps one of the most important facets of his life work. He wanted the best for everyone, however

he could make that happen, regardless of himself. I observed many reasons for this:

- Rinpoche's own humility, whereby he genuinely saw himself as having to leave Tibet without having had the opportunity to either study fully in monastic college or to complete long-term retreats. He always insisted that those people teaching meditation should have in-depth meditation experience and that those teaching Dharma should have studied thoroughly under good teachers. He had no inclination to make himself an exception to this rule. He often told students that they had been "luckier than myself" to have had the opportunities to study or practise he made available to them.
- He understood the great breadth of Dharma and was unwilling to leave its transmission in the hands of any one master. Each teacher has a distinctive style and an emphasis, a speciality, on one or other aspect of Dharma. Likewise even the great meditators have trained each in their own way and tend to replicate that when training their students. Some are strict, others less strict and so forth. Without making a fuss about it, Akong Rinpoche was truly a master in the Rimay⁸ style, wanting to present to the modern world the best possible array of authentic Tibetan traditions and masters.
- His own sense of purpose. If one recalls that the first Akön was famed for his accomplishment of Guru Rinpoche practice and had 'face-to-face' meetings with the latter, it is not surprising that he felt an innate first duty to bring the Dharma to this new land in a way that would establish it firmly. To do that, it would

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be necessary to present pure Dharma in all its beauty and variety, as Guru Rinpoche had done in Tibet, rather than just to promote oneself as a personality.

- He was dedicated to following the guiding instructions from his guru, the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa, concerning the development of Samye Ling.



Lama Dancing with Akong Rinpoche & Sherab Palden Beru. Dulmo Chöje Rinpoche presiding 2006.

(Photo courtesy of Jhinpa Ramos-Gonzales)

By bringing teachers such as the Gyalwang Karmapa, the Dalai Lama, the four Kagyu ‘heart-sons’ – Situ, Shamar, Jamgon and Gyaltsab Rinpoches, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Ugyen Tulku, Khamtrul Rinpoche, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Lama Lamcho, Lama Ganga,

Lama Thubten and later Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, Dulmo Chöjé Rinpoche, Ringu Tulku, Khenpo Damchö Dawa and Khenpo Lhabu⁹ to Samye Ling, the very best Dharma was transmitted by these experts in each of their fields. Rinpoche firmly believed that for something to succeed in the long term, it must start in the very best way and he spared no effort or expense to get the very best teachings to Samye Ling. That he managed to bring this array of now legendary figures of Tibetan Buddhism to establish Dharma in the West was an outstanding and historic achievement.

The Secret Yogi and a Special Emanation

Although it was never formally stated on paper¹⁰, Katia and I came to understand that Akong Rinpoche was one of the 16th Karmapa's emanations in the world. This became clear to us through what we saw of the close interaction between the Karmapa and Rinpoche in six months travelling with them both and also through what a few of the visiting rinpoches confirmed to me. The 16th Gyalwang had at one time laughed loudly, in his inimitable and beautiful way, when asked whether he had other emanations in our world, and replied yes, many of them, at least nine in India¹¹. These other emanations of the Karmapa enable a vast range of activities to take place, outwith the scope naturally limited by the flagship role of being monastic head of the Karma Kamtsang tradition.

Visiting teachers, such as Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, often described Akong Rinpoche as a “secret yogi”¹², meaning not an obvious yogi wearing the white cotton yogi robe and living in a cave with long hair etc., but rather one who has the appearance of a worldly person yet behind the scenes is making much Dharma happen ... and very profound Dharma at that. The very nature of the ‘ordinary’ appearance enables something extraordinary to happen. Were the secret services of nations not so much in poor repute these days, one could describe the *sbas pa'i rnal 'byor* as the ‘secret agents’ of Dharma. To understand this point is far from easy in the case of someone like Akong Rinpoche. On one hand he was a prominent public figure and indeed became more and more so as he advanced in years. He was not – as some secret yogis are – totally ‘undercover’ by any means. Yet on another hand his secret yogi activity was constant and significant.

There are two aspects to consider that may be helpful at this point, namely the nature of his secret activity to help Dharma and beings and also the personal accomplishment and divine inspiration aspects behind what secret yogis do:

1. The Nature of the Activity

Behind the obvious and manifold activities of Akong Rinpoche, as described in this book and elsewhere, was a powerful inner and secret force enabling the Dharma to implant itself, in Scotland and

elsewhere, doing so by overcoming powerful local (national) energies resistant to Buddhism, using the skilful means known as *the four activities*¹³. These were also at play in him protecting the Kagyu lineage and especially so in respect of the Karmapa succession. He was constantly protecting disciples in their Dharma practice (often protecting them against themselves). All this took place on a subtle level of reality and did so behind an appearance of great ordinariness. Akong Rinpoche was well-known as being very ‘ordinary’, approachable and as someone never inclined to airs and graces. Realising that people often use notions of spirituality and religion to enhance their fantasies rather than reduce them, he played down any ideas of his own spiritual power and spiritual influence, often saying things like, “People ask me what my vision of things is – my vision of the future – but I have no visions. I tell them this again and again but they do not believe me,” or “I have no miracles.”

However, he did “have miracles” and these were witnessed personally by the author and have been recounted to the author as personal experiences by others. A small example: on one occasion, on a building site, a heavy hammer dropped and was falling directly towards the head of a worker below, who had no helmet. Someone seeing this shouted and saw Rinpoche look sharply at the hammer which then hung suspended in air until the person below looked up, understood and got out of the way.

Most particularly, although he may not have had clear and detailed ‘visions’ of the future, Akong Rinpoche certainly had his finger on the pulse of the present and sensed what needed to be done. On several occasions, at his request, I had to contact his disciples in

other countries or continents in order to warn them of an imminent danger that they did not anticipate but that he suddenly sensed. This literally saved the lives of several people. Sometimes this happened when there had been no contact for weeks or months. Rinpoche's own power of *samaya* – his compassionate and sacred connection with his disciples – made these things happen spontaneously.

2. The Personal Accomplishment & Divine Inspiration

This second aspect is connected with the above. Through Akong Rinpoche's own pure connection (*samaya*) with the Kagyu lineage and the other lineages he held, he literally became a tool in the hands of the pure Dharma forces at work in this universe: forces such as Guru Rinpoche or the Healing Buddha. I tend to see this in two ways: 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'.

The *top-down* view focuses on the macro forces at work in this world – for good or evil – and shows how a pure being such as Rinpoche, can be used, can be swept up, by a current of enlightened energy, in order to perform the necessary activities of the great buddhas and bodhisattvas. On occasions too numerous to mention, I saw this happen and witnessed Rinpoche's presence illuminated and powerful, doing or saying what was absolutely needed at the time. Perhaps the most significant instance was the powerful role he played in the Karmapa succession – an outstandingly high-profile one¹⁴ for a relatively unknown tulku from a small monastery. On another occasion, in Palpung, he saved many lives by stopping a

major battle between crowds hundreds strong; scores of people saw him as several times human size and with flames blazing from his head, telling people to stop.

For the ‘bottom-up’ view, a retreator once asked Lama Yeshe Losal, “Sometimes Rinpoche seems just like an ordinary person, talking or working with you in a very regular way, and then at other moments, such as during empowerments, he seems like Buddha himself. How does that work?” Lama Yeshe’s reply was, “Yes, it’s like he has a switch and can turn it on whenever he wants and then turn it off again.”

The main point being made in these sections is that Akong Rinpoche was of prime importance in bringing Tibetan Buddhadharma to the West but not through him being a high-profile teacher in public. In private however, his life was a daily flow of one-to-one encounters with people, often through heavily-loaded interview lists as he gave his time unsparingly. His counsel transformed the lives of thousands of people and Rinpoche himself thought of it as one of his strong points:

“I heard a talk – perhaps from the Dalai Lama – recently in which he describes the various sorts of Tibetan tulku and the mistakes they make. I think I have made all the mistakes and fall into the worst category but, despite that, I can say honestly that I always tried my best to advise people properly. Of course, one can never be 100% accurate but I truly believe I never let anyone down and that my samaya has always been pure and unbroken.”

This statement, made in 2012 to the author, was typical of Rinpoche's humility and scrupulous self-examination. It nevertheless shows the value he placed in those personal meetings. In the last fifteen years or so of his life, he categorically refused to give formal teachings yet was always available to see people personally. His visits to centres in Europe or Africa were rare and precious opportunities for people to see him for advice on the vital issues of their lives or their Dharma practice. His interview lists started early in the morning or went on until late at night, in an unlimited generosity. The one term that is heard again and again in people's descriptions of Akong Rinpoche is 'trust'. His advice came from such a deep and secure place that was always trustworthy. He was trusted, often more than any other teacher and especially when things 'came to the crunch'.

One final point here is that of the very meaning of the term "teacher". The Tibetan term *ston pa* can be rendered as both "teacher" and "the one who shows". Buddhism has always had those who taught with words (even songs), as well as those who *taught* mainly by *showing* an example – through their own deeds and by their presence. The accounts of the earlier part of Buddha Sakyamuni's life reveal again and again that it was simply his loving, mindful, radiant and peaceful presence that caused one person after another to drop everything and follow him. Tibetan masters will often quote and admire many erudite scholars but their top choices – the ones that make their own eyes light up with inspiration – are usually the Buddhist masters who 'walked the talk' and led exemplary lives: the likes of Milarepa, Patrul Rinpoche, Gyalse Tome and so forth. Akong

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Rinpoche himself taught mainly by presence and by setting an example, rather than formally through words and lectures. His life was one of constant activity and activation, in the sense of setting projects of compassion in motion and motivating those who would ensure their implementation. His ‘presence’, a perfect example of mindfulness throughout this activity, was one of great calm and reliability: again ... *trustily* showing the way it should be done.

Bringing the Gyalwang Karmapa to Europe for the First Time



HH 16th Gyalwang Karmapa at Princes Rd London

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By 1974, with the ground sufficiently prepared by the visits of the Very Ven. Kalu Rinpoche, the 16th Karmapa agreed to visit Europe on his return from the USA. Shortly before his arrival, Samye Ling had the honour of receiving Sister Palmo (Freda Bedi), or *Mummy* as she was so widely known. The residents finally met the person who had been so kind and motherly to Akong Rinpoche and so instrumental in bringing him to the UK. She interpreted for the Karmapa and shared with us her own deep experience of Tibetan Buddhism and her insights into its practice. As she had truly been like a second mother to Rinpoche, her own children, Kabir and Ranga, had become like his siblings.



HH 16th Gyalwang Karmapa meets HH Pope Paul VI

The 16th Gyalwang Karmapa landed at Prestwick airport in late 1974, with permission to be greeted on the tarmac as a VIP by Akong Rinpoche accompanied by the author. His Holiness and his relatively small entourage were then whisked directly to Samye Ling where he spent some three weeks, giving Refuge, vows, empowerments and some teachings. Those of us fortunate enough to be at the heart of

this visit and responsible for its good running discovered not only the magnificent and unequalled qualities of the Karmapa but also saw how close Akong Rinpoche was to him and we witnessed the deep affection and trust shown by His Holiness concerning Rinpoche. At Akong Rinpoche's request, the Karmapa conferred the empowerments of Milarepa, Karma Pakshi, Sanjay Minla, Manjushri (Mawi Senge) and Chenresig. He also conferred the Vajra Crown ceremony, three times in Eskdalemuir and once in a public hall in Edinburgh. This first ever visit of a Karmapa to Europe was again a magnificent and historical achievement by Akong Rinpoche.

After Samye Ling, Akong Rinpoche accompanied the Karmapa to France, where Rinpoche, Katia and the author helped organise the new Paris centre so it could receive the Karmapa properly. After visiting the land just donated to him, in the Dordogne, and Aix-en-Provence, with Akong Rinpoche as his main facilitator, the Karmapa continued to Italy where Rinpoche accompanied him in a private audience with the then Pope, Paul VI. Based on his experience during this first brief, trial trip to Europe, the 16th Karmapa subsequently appointed Akong Rinpoche as sole organiser for a future and much more extensive visit to Europe.

The Karmapa had allocated some six months for his tour, from June 1977 through January 1978. As the Karmapa's party would comprise some twelve people, including the Third Jamgon Rinpoche, and as the European tour looked like it would include over twenty destinations, stretching from Italy to Norway, north-south, and from Wales to Vienna, east-west, Rinpoche decided that the most practical and economical way to travel would be by bus. He arranged

for a suitable second-hand coach to be found and fitted out especially for the occasion, with one side to be mostly for the Karmapa and Jamgon Rinpoche, with large, comfortable armchairs and cupboard space for storage, and the other side to be for the Karmapa's own party and the European team: Akong Rinpoche, cook, secretaries and so forth.

Rinpoche thought it best to share the overall costs of the trip on a 'per-night' basis between the various centres, groups or individuals who were inviting the Karmapa.

Following a powerful five-week retreat in Samye Ling led by Akong Rinpoche from February to April 1977, Katia and I had been sent to France to organise ourselves for the first long retreat – to be established by Kalu Rinpoche in Burgundy. However, plans changed after Akong Rinpoche telephoned telling us that in the forthcoming European visit, the Karmapa would come to the new Dordogne property first. Rinpoche told us to come and join him there to help with preparations for the visit. Lama Gendun Rinpoche and the Karmapa's nephew, Jigme-la, were already in residence. In theory, it was Jigme-la's responsibility to prepare the place (an old farmhouse and land) for the visit but it was soon clear that little was happening and things could never, at that pace, be ready on time. I witnessed Akong Rinpoche's delicate respect for Jigme-la's position but at the same time his total frustration at the laid-back and unaware state of the community of volunteers. His solution was brilliant: to lead by example. Therefore, Rinpoche set to work with extreme diligence, not shying from any physical task, shovel or hammer in hand, working very hard and long hours, much to the

surprise of the community who had seen their resident Tibetans as brilliant examples of physical inactivity. The catalytic effect of Rinpoche's industry awakened an enthusiasm in the group and they joined in, one after another. Further, Rinpoche started giving informal talks to make it clearer how significant the Karmapa's visit would be and how everything possible had to be done to make it a success. A new dynamic emerged and the centre ended up ready for His Holiness.

The Karmapa and his party arrived in Paris on June 20th 1977. Akong Rinpoche was there to greet them all and to take them in the Kagyu coach to the Dordogne. In that initial visit, the Karmapa discussed further the future of the land donated to him by Mr Bernard Benson, the legal steps that needed to be taken and the consecration ceremonies that he would lead, later on in the trip. Akong Rinpoche coordinated the meetings between the Karmapa, Mr Benson and the solicitor M. Lebeau, with Katia acting as interpreter. During this visit, the Karmapa bestowed the Vajra Crown ceremony and empowerments of Manjushri, Green Tara and Red Chenresig.

The next stop was Kagyu Dzong in Paris. Katia and I were not yet part of the tour team. We had driven there mainly to help the Paris group organise itself as well as for the pleasure of seeing the Karmapa a little longer. The Paris visit was going well and, mainly through formal politeness, we asked to follow the group; in our car, on to its next destination, in Belgium. To our surprise, Rinpoche said, "I will ask His Holiness". This seemed a little over-the-top for a very ordinary request. Rinpoche then informed us – to our total amazement and joy – that we were to join the tour, myself as an

organiser and secretary to His Holiness and Katia in order to promote the large Dordogne property that had been donated by Mr Benson as the future seat of the Karmapa in Europe and advertise the November consecration ceremonies in each country we would visit so that many people could come and take part in this big event, scheduled for November. This was one illustration, among many, of how Rinpoche acted in the presence of his guru: all he wanted was to be a pure and efficient element in the Karmapa mandala – a total vehicle of the Karmapa’s will and not someone making his own decisions.

A similar incident occurred a little way into the tour. The Karmapa had asked Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso to leave aside his teaching duties in Rumtek and join the Europe tour to give formal Dharma teachings, leaving His Holiness free to give Refuge, empowerments and bodhisattva vow. We had heard something of this khenpo, who had a formidable reputation for strictness (at the time). After his arrival and once we had organised ourselves to join the tour, we found ourselves on the bus, in the good company of the illustrious lamas and Sangha of the party. Thus, we asked if, now that we were going to be travelling with the monks and lamas for six months, it might not be the right time to exchange some English language for Tibetan language with the Tibetans on board¹⁵. Once again, and somewhat to our surprise, Rinpoche said, “I’ll ask His Holiness”. The reply, from the top, was that rather than casually learn Tibetan from the others, we should take Dharma classes in Tibetan each day with Khenpo Tsultrim. This was to have far more repercussions than we imagined, for all of us, as it shaped Khenpo’s own destiny, ours and that of many

people. Whether the decision was entirely the Karmapa's or whether Akong Rinpoche made suggestions that the Karmapa agreed to, we will never know.

The tour proceeded through venues in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Denmark again, Holland again, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, many separate destinations in France, Belgium and the UK. Akong Rinpoche often went off in advance of the main party to make sure all was well prepared for the Karmapa and I often accompanied him.

Throughout the journey, Akong Rinpoche seemed to me to be the perfect example of all three levels of Buddhadharma:

1. Very aware of the powerful karma that was being established day after day, for individuals, for Dharma groups, for nations and for Europe as a whole, he worked tirelessly to help people receive the Karmapa in the best of ways. He had the Karmapa's Sangha treated with the proper respect and did much of the 'gardening work' that would enable the seeds of blessings sown by the Karmapa to take root.
2. As a bodhisattva, he set an example of selflessness and service, acting with strength yet humility and showing all the key qualities in practice, i.e. he was generous, immaculately-behaved, forbearing of all difficulties encountered without ever becoming angry or upset, extremely diligent night and day, always the image of meditative peace and lastly, very wise in his handling of the situations that occurred in this tour, mainly placed under his responsibility.

3. He displayed a perfect respect for the Karmapa throughout, becoming a constant example of how a Vajrayana disciple respects and serves a guru. The Karmapa's 'job' was to be the teacher of all the tulkus and this often involved teasing them and making them do silly things, as a counterpart to the way in which they were all put on a serious pedestal in their own Dharma-worlds. Akong Rinpoche had relatively long hair at the time – at one point more like an Afro hairstyle – and His Holiness would sometimes pull him around by the hair and call him *Africa Lama*. At the time, we all attributed this uniquely to Rinpoche's wild hair but it turned out to be another of the Karmapa's disguised predictions, as Akong Rinpoche was later to bring the Kagyu Dharma to Southern Africa and become the Kagyu representative there.

Rinpoche also acted as the Karmapa's main Dharma protector, ensuring his safety throughout (there had been threats, among them bomb threats and personal threats). In one incident, a psychotic person broke into the Karmapa's company, smoking a cigarette. It was frightening yet Rinpoche tackled him fearlessly, removed the cigarette and extinguished it by grinding it into his own hand and then escorting the person out of the room. The same man turned up again later, in Scotland, where it took five policemen and three police doctor's injections to subdue him. Akong Rinpoche was fearless and did not hesitate for one moment to put his own life at risk to protect His Holiness.

The reader is left to imagine the tremendous responsibility and work involved in this tour. There were many different venues, with accommodation, food and logistics to be sorted out adequately each time. There were many meetings, including one with the Austrian president and others with highest-ranking officials such as archbishops. There were visa and other formalities to be dealt with when travelling from country to country, made more complicated by His Holiness travelling on a diplomatic passport and some of his entourage only having a Bhutanese travel document – a single sheet of rice paper. There were teachings and empowerments to organise and so on and so forth. Rinpoche's team for this was a small one and he bore total responsibility. He succeeded brilliantly through his untiring diligence. Also, all the while he had to remain in contact with Samye Ling so that it be well prepared for His Holiness' stay, almost at the end of the trip.

Akong Rinpoche was the chief organiser of many empowerments¹⁶ and teachings during those six months. One major event in the tour was the consecration of the land at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling in early November 1977. Under Rinpoche's guidance, Katia had been promoting the new property of His Holiness and advertising the consecration event throughout the tour up to that point. Some five hundred people were expected and the logistics were correspondingly to scale. Akong Rinpoche could be seen everywhere, organising the raising of prayer flags, sorting out the large, hard-floored marquee that has been rented, going back and forth between the Chateau de Chaban, where the Karmapa and Jamgon Rinpoche were lodged and receiving people, and the new land, down the hill from

the chateau ... and so on and so forth. All went so well. This epic journey was history in the making and Akong Rinpoche played a very important role in it in so many ways.

1979 Pilgrimage and Furthering the Karmapa Connection

Akong Rinpoche was probably the first Tibetan to lead Westerners on a group pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites of India, Sikkim and Nepal, taking several months in an extensive tour and all the while explaining the true spirit of pilgrimage. The group visited the 16th Karmapa in Rumtek and Katia was asked to stay on there to translate some former life stories of the Karmapas.

In 1981, Rinpoche organised the public events of the Karmapa's last European visit, in London, as he stopped over on his way to America.

Akong Rinpoche and the Sixteenth Gyalwang's Passing

"I myself had the opportunity to serve him until his passing away in Chicago and there are many Kagyu rinpoches but somehow my role was important for the last few years of his life."

The 16th Gyalwang Karmapa spent his last weeks in a hospital in Sion, Illinois, and passed away there. Akong Rinpoche was in attendance for a significant part of the time, along with the Karmapa's

four heart-sons, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and other visiting rinpoches. He shared many intimate moments during the times alone or almost alone with the Karmapa, as the various masters took shifts to serve him and be by his side. There were three teams for this, interestingly as the following pairs: Akong Rinpoche and the Tai Situpa; Kongtrul Rinpoche and Bardor Tulku; the Kunzik Shamarpa and Tendzin Namgyal. Several important moments and stories emerge from this time in hospital.

The first was that at one point His Holiness called for Akong Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche to join him. He took their hands and placed them together, saying they should reconcile any differences they had as much as possible; such was his wish.

The second moment is a fascinating story. The Karmapa needed regular blood transfusions and insisted on it coming only from those in his close circle of suitable blood type. Akong Rinpoche was one of the donors. At one point, one of the members of the medical team responsible for the transfusion obviously thought that as long as the blood was of the right type it mattered little from whom it came and, ignoring the Karmapa's wish, set up a bag of blood from their bank that was not blood donated by the specified rinpoches. As soon as it started flowing, reported Akong Rinpoche who was there, the Karmapa looked very wrathful and physically took the drip needle out of his arm saying, "This is not the Rinpoches' blood but that of an American, an African-American." Not of course that there is anything wrong with being American or African-American but simply to point out that the Karmapa knew immediately whose blood it was, just by the 'feel' of it or through his 'clear knowledge'

siddhis. This of course surprised the nursing staff and embarrassed them. They returned with one of the bags specially given and stored for him. As the blood started to flow, he smiled and said, “Ah, this is the blood of my guru!” When checked, it was a bag of blood donated by the Tai Situpa. The previous Situ had been the 16th Karmapa’s guru and the present one, attending him, was to become the guru of the next (17th) incarnation.

A third point concerns a major three-day public event in January 1981 that had been planned a long time previously by Akong Rinpoche. It was in Brussels, hosting the Kunzik Shamarpa. The Shamarpa and Akong Rinpoche were excused from attending the Karmapa in order to allow them to travel to Europe for this event, which the Karmapa insisted should go ahead. However, it was precisely during the event that His Holiness’ condition worsened and he passed away. I would like to share the story here as Rinpoche told it to me, as I have seen it told slightly differently by others. Before leaving for Europe, in a private moment with the Karmapa, whose death was now obviously just a question of time, Akong Rinpoche had asked him to leave word that he (Akong Rinpoche) could have one of his teeth as a relic after his passing. Tibetan lamas can be quite candid about this type of thing. The Karmapa agreed but never had the actual opportunity later to tell his attendants about the ‘tooth bequest’. As Akong Rinpoche himself had not mentioned this to anyone else, he let the matter drop. In the 1990s, during one of his visits to the 17th Karmapa, the young reincarnation asked him to stay overnight – something difficult for Rinpoche due to the extra altitude of Tsurphu – he normally returned to Lhasa

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at nights. He stayed, of course, and the next morning the Karmapa gave him one of his milk teeth that had come out overnight, saying: “I made you a promise before but was unable to keep it. Here it is now.” Akong Rinpoche told me that he had never once doubted that Orgyen Trinley was the authentic Karmapa but that this incident astounded even his rock-solid faith.



With HH 17th Gyalwang Karmapa at Tsurphu 1994

“Only the Sixteenth Karmapa and myself knew about that,” he told me, “And I was so surprised because it helped me realise that even my own faith could be shocked into something deeper, when I thought it was already as deep as it could be.”

Akong Rinpoche's Role in the Karmapa Succession

Tibetan Dharma works first and foremost through the power of the lineages through which its teachings are conveyed. Tibetan Buddhism is in fact defined by the eight great streams of teaching transmission that came from India, known as the Eight Chariots. In the Karma Kamtsang lineage, the role and activity of the Karmapa sits at the heart of its Marpa Kagyu tradition, both in an external sense – of the Karmapa's activities over the generations in establishing the supports of the Three Jewels and the Three Roots – and the contemplative sense of the Karmapa being the main axis of transmission of its empowerments and teachings. There have been seventeen Karmapas to date. Their specific skill of reincarnating again and again to guide their community gave rise to the tulku (reincarnate lama) tradition in Tibet.

The Karmapas are unique inasmuch as they consistently left a letter before dying, to indicate the place and time of their next reincarnation, even going as far as to name the new parents. They 'chose' their own future incarnation rather than waiting to be found. As the years passed following the 16th Gyalwang's passing without any traditional prediction letter being found, tensions grew. Before his death, he had insisted his four regents – Gyaltzab Rinpoche, Jamgon Rinpoche, Shamarpa and Tai Situpa – act together as a team when he was no longer there, appointing Kalu Rinpoche to guide them in that. This did not work, mainly due to the Shamarpa's assumption of being his natural heir and 'senior' of the four. The

following quote and others in this section are from Akong Rinpoche, in his talk to the Samye Ling community after his return from Tibet in 1992:

“There are many Kagyu rinpoches but somehow my role was important for the last few years of the 16th Karmapa’s life. Even so, I never expected that I would get the job to find the Seventeenth [laughter]. There are several hundred Kagyu reincarnations, much wiser than myself, more learned than myself and many of them far better understanding but, in the end, I had to play a big part in the finding.

“Now, we all realised that it has been delayed for so many years. After his passing away, the regents were not able to find a prediction letter. They know that there is one but they cannot find it so at one point they had to pretend ... and tell tiny lies ... and say that there is a prediction letter that remained in Rumtek. Although that was not really true, on another hand, they really believed there was a prediction letter, so it was true in one way ... (hesitation) ... but anyway they had looked everywhere and asked many people but they cannot find one. Then, the Tai Situpa remembered that several years before, His Holiness Karmapa had given him a protection, which is wrapped in yellow-gold coloured material, something like this one [Akong Rinpoche takes a yantra from inside his shirt to show it] but much bigger ... and when he (16th Karmapa) was in Calcutta he had said, “You should not leave this behind. This is for your protection. One day you may find this is something useful!”

Besides having been very present in the final years of the 16th, Akong Rinpoche is referring to his presence in meetings of the four Karma Kagyu regents concerned with finding the Karmapa reincarnation and, to that end, discovering the famous letter. Once Tai Situpa had found it and convened a meeting with the good news, in 1992, the regents decided that Jamgon Rinpoche should go to Tibet to find the reincarnation according to the letter's very clear instructions. Sadly, very soon afterwards, Jamgon Rinpoche was killed in a car crash, following which another, emergency, meeting of the regents was convened in Rumtek monastery, with Akong Rinpoche invited to attend. The Shamarpa declined to attend.

“At the same time, Jamgon Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche and Situ Rinpoche had some kind of intuition ... and on the 19th and or the 20th March decided there should be three letters, sent for the preparation of Jamgon Rinpoche coming so that Jamgon Rinpoche would not have to do so much travelling. They asked me to go to Beijing on March 29th to take three letters to three particular people instructing them to start looking for the reincarnation. I was involved therefore at quite an early time. My job was to take the letters to the right people and then to come back and wait until July 29th. Then following the passing of Jamgon Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche asked me to come for the funeral ceremony for seven days. I went to Rumtek on May 1st and when I got there, Gyaltsab Rinpoche and Tai Situpa had had many meetings between themselves. They had also invited Shamar Rinpoche but unfortunately Shamar Rinpoche said that he had to be in retreat. We knew there was some urgency to find the 17h Karmapa.

“Then both rinpoches asked me would I be able to go to Tibet to find the Seventeenth Karmapa and to carry out the job which Jamgon Rinpoche was meant to have done. I told them that I had only the one suit I was wearing and not much money in my pocket but Rinpoche told me “You can buy suits in every shop and that’s not an important (reason) to go back to the UK” and that they can arrange some money for me but this is very urgent and very important and I have the responsibility. So I ... there is officially and unofficially. Officially, I am the representative of Situ Rinpoche and Sherab Tarchin is the representative of Gyaltsab Rinpoche and our job is to go to many monasteries that have a connection with Jamgon Rinpoche within the forty-nine day period of prayer. That was our “label”: we have to go to Tibet in order to request prayers for forty-nine days. Unofficially, our job is communication with Tsurphu to find the Seventeenth Karmapa as soon as possible, to bring (him) back to Tsurphu and then the two rinpoches will come to do the first ceremony which is hair-cutting ceremony.”

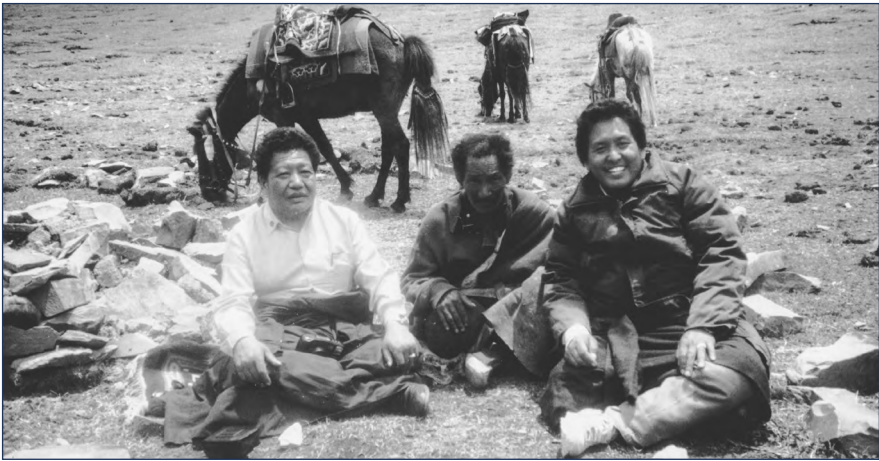
One of the three letters was delivered to Tsurphu monastery, requesting them to establish a search party. Although they could ostensibly search for and find the new Karmapa, Akong Rinpoche and Sherab Tarchin were the official representatives able to confirm the recognition and to perform an important ceremonial ablution and re-clothing, symbolising the transition from worldly life to *sacred status*.

“We went to Nepal on May 9th and on May 16th we arrived at Tsurphu. Before we left Nepal, we communicated to Tsurphu and requested that, as we are not able to act officially, could they go as a search party, four or five days earlier than us, so that it is not something obvious that we are coming to find the child. When we left Tsurphu we said it was very urgent for us to get to Palpung monastery because that’s Jamgon Rinpoche’s monastery. The Chinese government gave all the permissions needed.

“When we arrived in Chamdo, the search party had found (him) successfully and we met up in Chamdo. They told us all the good news of what they found and where he was found, in a place called Lhatok and a village called Bagur. When they were in the Lhatok area they said they came from India and have many letters and they have to give a letter to someone called Mr Loga and so they asked whether there is someone called Mr Loga in the Bagur village. The answer they got was that there was a woman called Loga but no man called Loga. So they have one clear sign, because the Karmapa’s mother is called Loga. Then they asked what was Loga’s husband’s name and they were told Dondrup. In the prediction letter it says that the father’s name is Dondrup and mother’s name is Loga, so there is no more question. The boy was eight years old and born in the Wood Ox year. So there is no kind of question raised about everything predicted in the letter and they have 100% trust. Then they went there – to Bagur, the homeland – and brought His Holiness to a place called Lhatok, into the monastery, until we arrived there.

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“Since we are the representatives of Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche, our duty is to still investigate, to make sure this is the right one. Also, we have all that is necessary, the yellow clothing in which he should be dressed, the special protections that should be offered to him and so on ... that’s our job to do (those things). Once we saw there he is without doubt the Karmapa, we offered and dressed him in this yellow chuba; the first official offering.”



Search party: Akong Rinpoche & Sherab Tarchin

Akong Rinpoche then revealed the second purpose of his visit to the Chinese authorities and obtained permission from them to further the Karmapa recognition and to accompany him to the monastic seat at Tsurphu, in faraway Central Tibet. Rinpoche was in a unique position. Being one of the first Tibetan lamas to return to his homeland after the Cultural Revolution, he had been obliged to negotiate further visits and then aid projects there and knew more than most high-profile exiles about dealing with the Communist

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system in power. Furthermore, he had already negotiated and organised the first visit of the Tai Situpa to Tibet in the mid-80s, which was the first 'high lama' visit since 1959: one involving tens of thousands of participants. Through his skill, the Karmapa Urgyen Trinley Dorje became not only officially recognised by his own lineage but also by the heads of other Tibetan lineages and – a first – by the Chinese government. Rinpoche put in place arrangements for the new Karmapa to travel to Tsurphu, in Central Tibet, and for the official enthronement to take place later in the year. This involved permissions for the Tai Situpa and Goshir Gyaltsabpa to come from India to install the Karmapa, and perform the traditional hair cutting ceremony. The latter happened auspiciously before the famous Jowo image in the Jokhang at Lhasa.



HH 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Chamgon Tai Situ Rinpoche, Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche & Akong Rinpoche on the roof of Tsurphu Monastery, June 1992.

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Akong Rinpoche played a significant role in organising the enthronement ceremonies in Tsurphu in a gathering of Kagyu representatives from all over the world and Tibetans from all over the plateau. It was a huge and successful event. In the years that followed, until 2000 and the Karmapa's flight from Chinese territory, Rinpoche was a yearly visitor to the Karmapa.



Making an offering to HH 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, USA, 2008.

Bringing the Dharma as Teachings to Europe

In Tibet, the teachings of Buddhadharma¹⁷ were principally transmitted through the monastic colleges, known as *shedra*. Each major tradition developed its own body of literature of commentaries on

these theoretical teachings and these became the defining criteria of the various shades of belief and understanding held by each school and sub-school. With the intention of Samye Ling eventually having its own shedra, Akong Rinpoche wanted to prepare for it by laying the best foundations of study. He consulted with the 16th Karmapa, Khenchen the Ninth Thrangu Rinpoche and the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche concerning which texts should be taught first, in the shorter term, whenever the opportunities for their proper study were in place at Samye Ling.

Their answers concurred and were adopted as the master-plan¹⁸ for coming decades. These great masters shared the view that, among all the major works used in Kagyu study, two texts were the most vital. Akong Rinpoche sometimes quoted the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche in this respect: “Even if someone is going to spend their whole life in meditation in a cave, they must know Gampopa’s *Dhagpo Tarjen* and Asanga’s *Gyut Lama*. Otherwise all the time and effort to meditate may be of little use.”

Thus, a connection was established with Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso during the second Karmapa tour. At the Karmapa’s suggestion, he started teaching us constantly but also a handful of people, a synoptic version of the *Tarjen*, on a daily basis or as time allowed. The result was surprisingly good for us all. In agreement with His Holiness and Khenpo-la, Akong Rinpoche organised a six-month course in the Dordogne, in which Khenpo would teach *Tarjen* and *Gyut Lama*. Rinpoche wanted Katia and myself to work intensively with Khenpo-la and Acharya Tenpa Negi, checking the texts in a very thorough way with a view to mastering their content and

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making translations, according to the expressed wish of the Karmapa. Subsequently, as Khenpo Tsultrim and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche taught in Samye Ling, these two texts and the other texts mentioned above were presented there, in their entirety, as the main tools for Dharma study in our tradition.



Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and translator Tenpa Negi

Of note, in this pioneering work to bring Tibetan Buddhadharmā to a new world, was Rinpoche's insistence that each new text be taught by the very best person possible. He believed very much in *tendrel*, the notion of inter-dependence, whereby the first link in a process is a very important one, colouring all that will follow. He truly saw it as his duty to get a pure, wise master with powerful lineage transmissions of a text to be the one who taught it first in the West and who gave its scriptural transmission – *lung*.

With Katia Holmes interpreting, most of the texts mentioned above were taught in Samye Ling in a very intensive period in 1980 and 1981, due to Akong Rinpoche arranging a veritable cascade of eminent visits from the Tai Situpa, the Shamarpa, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Tulku Tenga Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche. Samye Ling also soon received the great Kagyu scholar, the Goshir Gyaltsabpa.

Deciding that the author had enough mastery of some of these texts, Akong Rinpoche set me to teaching Dharma in Samye Ling, starting with small groups in 1982 and giving my first publicised course (on the *Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra*) in 1983. Katia and myself had been, in some ways, Rinpoche's 'guinea pigs' for seeing how well Westerners might learn these teachings and then how well they would be able to pass them on. He asked each visiting teacher to give us as much private time as possible and stressed to us how important it was to receive the nectar of these teachings from such great masters. It was indeed a huge responsibility and a great blessing and pleasure to do that. As early as 1978, Katia was giving language and Dharma lessons based on Gampopa's text to the Samye Ling community.

In 1980, Rinpoche had asked us to visit whatever groups or centres (Brussels, Barcelona, Glasgow etc.) already existed in order to share the little knowledge we had, but given the busyness in Samye Ling at the time, the travelling could not start until 1982. 1981 saw the publication of our translation of the root text of the *Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra*. It was a great sadness and setback when karma caught up with Katia in late 1981 and ill-health put her effectively

out of public interpreting or teaching until the mid-1990s. Katia was much more gifted in language than myself and I would normally not have translated for visiting masters, being very occupied at that time assisting Rinpoche in a thousand and one things happening with the Samye Project getting under way. However, there was no choice and so I became an interpreter as well as a Dharma teacher of sorts.



Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche

Over the 1980s, Samye Ling had several teaching visits of considerable length (months on end) from Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and the Tai Situpa. With the Karmapa no longer present and Kalu Rinpoche more and more busy guiding his own growing network of centres, Akong Rinpoche turned to those two masters as his guides for the development of Samye Ling and, in particular, for their ongoing advice about what other texts should be taught and translated there. Rinpoche also organised a four-month tour of Europe by the Goshir Gyaltsabpa, with myself as interpreter. In particular, the Gyaltsabpa taught Shantideva's *Entering the Bodhisattva Conduct* and Mipham Rinpoche's *Entering the Ways of the Wise* during his visit and the author received transmission of these texts and was authorised to teach them.

The outcome of all this was for Rinpoche to instruct me to set up Samye Ling's first Dharma training programme. It was initially

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intended as a ten-year training, i.e. four years of initial training, based on texts, four years of retreat and then two more years on the two post-retreat texts. Rinpoche entrusted me with the teaching of the first section: the four years of study, based on a summer school and private study of the subject-matter. The syllabus was:

- Year 1: Gampopa's *Ornament of Precious Liberation*, Kagyu Hagiographies
- Year 2: Mipham Rinpoche's *Entering the Ways of the Wise*
- Year 3: Shantideva's *Entering the Way of the Bodhisattva*, Jamgon Kongtrul's *Torch of Certainty*
- Year 4: Asanga/Maitreya's *Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra*
- Years 5–8: Traditional four-year retreat of Kagyu *tap-lam*.
- Year 9: The IXth Gyalwa Karmapa's *Profound Inner Meaning*
- Year 10: Hevajra commentary (“*ta-nyi*”).

Alongside these main topics were teachings in Tibetan language and practical teachings related to the retreat, such as tormas-making and playing ritual instruments. The first four years of pre-retreat study, open to all-comers, was well-attended, not surprisingly so, as there was little Tibetan Dharma on offer in Europe at the time. Two cycles of this programme were successfully completed at Samye Ling, from 1985 to 1988 and from 1989 to 1992. Another ‘first’ due to him; the first European Tibetan Dharma study course.

By 1992, Lama Yeshe Losal had taken over responsibility for the running of Samye Ling, at Akong Rinpoche's request, thereby freeing Rinpoche so he could spend more time with his growing

international duties. Samye Ling at that time entered a new phase, one in which Lama Yeshe Losal invested his energies into fields more directly related to his own excellence, namely those of forming a larger Sangha and of vigorously developing the new Holy Island Project. He focused on inspiring people to follow his own example of meditation and ordination, seeing that as more directly suitable not only for the future retreaters but also more generally for people staying at or coming to Samye Ling. One of the tasks given to me by Akong Rinpoche during the late 1980s was to keep an eye open for promising people – those with enough commitment, integrity and intelligence to be trained (mainly by me) as future teachers of Dharma theory or as translators. I had previously identified one or two and had started training them.

Akong Rinpoche's own efforts to establish or re-establish good, pure academic training in Buddhadharma shifted to Tibet where, as the years went by, he created or established more and more projects dedicated either to primary and secondary education or supporting monastic colleges of all traditions. Many tens of thousands of young Tibetans benefitted from these. Back home in Scotland, in the one-to-one interviews, he continued to encourage suitable people to study, often sending them to the likes of myself as a tutor. He encouraged more structured study programmes in the Samye Dzongs of Europe and Africa. These met with varied success, for different reasons. The study programme in the Spanish Dzongs, established and run by Lamas Jinpa and Tsonдру, developed a large following and worked very well.



Guru Rinpoche Drubcho at Samye Ling 2006.

Several things happened in the 2000s to revive Akong Rinpoche's original hopes for studies in the European centres he had founded. One of them, due to the Holy Isle Project being now well under way, was the reinvestment of energy and human resources into the Samye Project, making the College re-appear as an approaching reality. Another thing was the creation of the Home Study Course – a three-year, distance-learning training programme developed by the author according to Rinpoche's basic wish to take people through a Hinayana-Mahayana-Vajrayana apprenticeship of Buddhist ideas. This has since been taken up by over a thousand people in thirty-five countries and it was something Rinpoche often encouraged people to join; more and more so in the latter years of his life. It is called *Nangi Shedra*.



Samye Ling Shedra studies

The other main factor that revived study was the appearance in the Samye Ling mandala of one of the finest contemporary masters. This was the extraordinary and much sought-after Drupon Rinpoche, Khenpo Lhabu, who had progressed from being a young and unknown monk to being installed as a master of Mahamudra and a lineage-holder, all by the age of thirty-two. He had subsequently been ‘head-hunted’ from Tibet by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, to care for both the latter’s retreat centres and study institutions – *shedra*. Akong Rinpoche asked him to take charge of the Samye Ling long-term retreats and also to establish some shedra studies in Samye Ling, which he has done very successfully, having taught intense study courses each year for six years, covering many of the main topics originally envisaged through Akong Rinpoche’s own dialogues with the Karmapa, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche. I served as interpreter for these six years and was in frequent dialogue with Rinpoche about his intentions. He was particularly keen for the Sangha and for ex-retreaters and

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even his lamas not only to upgrade their knowledge but also to benefit from this great master's own vision of Dharma. Thus there was, from 2008 onwards, the Shedra, the Nangi Shedra and the upcoming College.



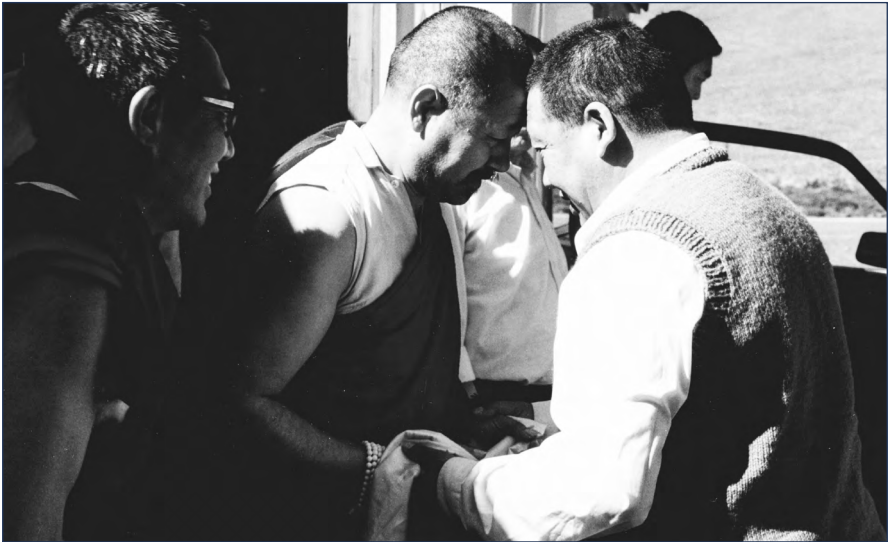
Taking Sojong vows with Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma Lhabu at the first UK Kagyu Monlam 2018.

In the 2000s, Rinpoche often said that the completion of the College was the last item on his list of major things to be done. Tragically, ironically, he died only months after the completion of its construction.

One thing in this domain of Dharma studies strikes me very vividly as I look back on the past twenty years. Anyone who has given a major part of their life to pioneering a project or even to doing a singular job will know the difficulties of subsequently having to hand it over to someone else. In reviewing the life journeys of Chöje Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, one is struck

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by the qualities of acceptance shown on each side as Akong Rinpoche handed over the reins of Samye Ling to his brother. Akong Rinpoche had to accept the experience of observing the organisation he had nurtured so carefully pass into, and then change, in the hands of his brother. Lama Yeshe, engineered reluctantly out of his own chosen path – strict retreat – by his elder brother, was obliged to take on the tasks given, out of his deep devotion to the Dharma and his respect for his brother.



Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche greeted by his brother on return from retreat

Their joint story gives great grounds for reflection and for admiring them both. One can note Akong Rinpoche's perfect acceptance of the situation. The respect that he showed for Lama Yeshe and the power and freedom he gave him, interfering as little as possible, was admirable. He gave us a textbook example of how a bodhisattva acts.



Guru Rinpoche Drubcho at Samye Ling.

Establishing Buddhadharma as Practice

This can be viewed in terms of the three levels of practice: basic, bodhisattva and Vajrayana. For the first, it would be impossible to estimate the enormous goodness brought to our world by Rinpoche's direct, personal advice to thousands of people, helping them each be more tolerant, peaceful, loving, forgiving, ethical in their behaviour, honest, respectful, caring for the environment and so forth. He particularly stressed *acceptance* of karma, *appreciation* of difficulties and enemies, *humility* and *caring for one's parents*. He also encouraged people (also in the literal sense of giving them the courage) to take precepts, from one to five of the five basic Buddhist

precepts through the *upasaka* commitments to those of the monk or nun. This is treated below in the section on the Sangha.

Realising that, during his lifetime, only a minority of people in the West could become monks or nuns and that, likewise, few people would be able to fulfil the strict requirements of true Vajrayana practice, Akong Rinpoche put great emphasis on the bodhisattva teachings. He knew that the advice and methods of these would be of great benefit both to individuals and to society at large. One of the earliest textual tasks he gave me in the 1970s was that of preparing a good English version of Ngulchu Tomay's *37 Practices of the Bodhisattva* as a basis for teachings in Samye Ling. He often taught from that text himself or had it taught in his centres. He also vigorously encouraged people to put into practice the teachings of Shantideva's *Bodhisattva Way of Life*. For those seeking a more thorough grounding in the bodhisattva path, he set up courses on Atisha's *Seven Point Mind Training* and it was probably the latter that he cherished the most and saw as the most appropriate set of techniques for the modern world. Although most people confuse the bodhisattva path with loving kindness and compassion (which belong to basic Buddhism), Akong Rinpoche knew its real meaning as being the solemn and total commitment to enlightenment that is embodied in the *bodhisattva vow*. Whereas he promoted the bodhisattva trainings whenever possible, he emphasised what a serious step it is to take the bodhisattva vow itself: "Better not to take it than to take it and break it". He only wanted people to receive that commitment from the purest living bodhisattvas, such as the Karmapa or the greatest rinpoches, and was very reluctant

to either give it himself or to have just any rinpoche give it in his centres.

Many Buddhist masters, all over the world, were establishing these basic and bodhisattva levels of Buddha's teachings. Akong Rinpoche was one of the first but he will be remembered historically for his work in bringing and establishing the specific Vajrayana teachings of the Kagyu lineage to the West. These will now be treated under the headings of *drol-lam*¹⁹ and *tap-lam*²⁰.

Bringing Mahamudra or Drol Lam

Akong Rinpoche treasured all the Buddhadharma, on all its levels, but it must be said that the Mahamudra teachings were perhaps closest to his heart. Mahamudra exists as two aspects:

- Sutra Mahamudra, which is anything about it that can be taught through words and concepts, sometimes in public, and
- Actual Mahamudra, which, being directly experiential and not conceptual, can only be practised and which was traditionally taught on a one-to-one basis.

In order that Mahamudra be properly understood, Rinpoche asked his early, visiting teachers to explain texts like the Third Karmapa's *Mahamudra Prayer*, Jamphel Bengar Zangpo's *Short Prayer to Vajradhara* or Kongtrul's *Ground, Path and Fruition*, along with their commentaries. He also always keenly encouraged people to read the lineage

masters' biographies, as faith and devotion are essentials for Mahamudra.



Chamgon Tai Situ Rinpoche
teaching at Samye Ling

In the reality of Mahamudra training, there are what is known as the “foundations” (*ngondro*), followed by the “actual practice” (*ngözhi*). Akong Rinpoche had set a few people onto completing the eight foundation practices in the first years of the 1970s, giving personal instruction in each practice himself. As it was, we each received our Mahamudra meditation instructions from him individually, on an *ad hoc* basis, as well as from great visiting masters of these practices such as Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. As people trained in Mahamudra or came out of the long retreats, we were encouraged to ‘share notes’. Akong Rinpoche was curious to know the conclusion of our discussions and remained curious throughout the following thirty years. He wanted to see which methods worked best for Westerners, as well as which difficulties they encountered and which benefits they found.

In the 1980s the connection between the Twelfth Tai Situpa and Akong Rinpoche deepened and deepened, as the Tai Situpa devoted much of his precious time to visiting Samye Ling to teach. Akong Rinpoche had also accompanied him to Tibet on his historic returns there. Following much discussion between them and in response to Akong Rinpoche’s earnest request, in the 1990s, the Tai Situpa committed to teach Mahamudra publicly, as meditation practice

instructions and transmission, in Samye Ling. He would base his teaching on the text *Mahamudra, Ocean of Certainty*. There were to be strict requirements asked of those following these teachings and the training would be based on a yearly course at Samye Ling, during which time practice instructions for the coming year would be given, along with a schedule. The Tai Situpa also agreed to direct the students through personal interviews, supervising their progress. This idea crystallised into a plan for two courses – a five-year programme and a seven-year programme – thereby making the course available to those with more time or less time available in their lives for practice. The training would take people, as a group, through the *shamatha* and *vipasyana* exercises of the text up to the stage of ‘pointing out’²¹, if the candidate was deemed ready (Tai Situpa would decide that). Those who were ready would receive and then continue their practice individually, as group training from that point of understanding onwards made little sense.

The Tai Situpa taught Mahamudra successfully according to this plan, from 1989 through to 1997. The five-year group completed the course but the seven-year group could not finish as planned, because travel document difficulties prevented the Tai Situpa from leaving India. With the Tai Situpa no longer able to return to Samye Ling, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche was requested by him and by Akong Rinpoche to teach Mahamudra in the West. Mingyur Rinpoche made a three-year programme for doing this. This proved helpful for many people.

After Mingyur Rinpoche’s teachings were completed and he was no longer available to lead future courses, Akong Rinpoche next

vigorously encouraged any of his disciples who could manage it to attend the Mahamudra trainings being given by the Tai Situpa in India in the 2000s, saying:

“You are the most lucky people in the whole world. The Tai Situpa has become the main lineage-holder for our Karma Kamtsang tradition and is our greatest living guru, the highest holder of Mahamudra. There is no one better to receive these precious transmissions from. I myself would love to receive these teachings from him but circumstances do not allow. You are all far more fortunate than I am. Not just that ... the whole reason that the Gyalwa Karmapa escaped from Tibet and risked everything was for one purpose, one reason only and that was to receive this Mahamudra transmission from his guru, the Tai Situpa. You will have the opportunity to receive the same thing as the Karmapa, the deepest treasure of our lineage. You should really appreciate this and do everything you possibly can to learn these teachings properly and to practise them as he tells you.”

Groups from Samye Ling and the various Samye Dzongs – some relatively large ones from Brussels and London – did attend these teachings. Rinpoche was pleased with that but also, as time went by, became once more disappointed²² by the lack of impact on many of the students of even the Tai Situpa’s Mahamudra teachings, so perfect in themselves. It seemed obvious to him that either people were not putting in enough hours of practice for each step of the training or else that they lacked the renunciation and devotion that are the vital prerequisites for Mahamudra meditation to work.

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Probably both factors were present. There was often a curiosity, an appetite for the ‘deeper teachings’ but no real awareness of how incredibly precious they were, provided you practised them enough. He was rather saddened by the way in which, in some places, the Mahamudra students deserted the very centres through which they had linked up with Dharma and Mahamudra, and had become either a group apart or simply individuals practising alone, disconnected from their Dharma roots. On more than one occasion Rinpoche told them in no mean terms, sometimes with tears in his eyes, how now was the time to pay back the kindness from which they had benefitted and to *actively help* the centre. However, in many cases, his words fell on deaf ears. He had spent his life making it possible for Westerners to get access to one of the very finest jewels humanity has ever encountered ... but found that the jewel – Mahamudra – was being treated just like any ordinary thing because most of the students had not ‘tasted’ the real thing yet.



October 2018 teachings by
Drupon Rinpoche Khenpo Lhabu

A new development in 2008 revived Rinpoche’s hopes for people to gain authentic appreciation of Mahamudra: the advent in Scotland of Khenpo Lhabu, now widely known through his title of Drupon Rinpoche. Akong Rinpoche’s nephew, Tsultrim Palbar, had been studying in Thrangu Rinpoche’s monastery in Nepal and had then entered the long retreat there, directed by Khenpo Lhabu, who had

subsequently become his own guru. Through his own success in retreat, Tsultrim Palbar became, at Akong Rinpoche's request, appointed as "Kating Lama" by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and was being groomed to be the future abbot for Samye Ling. Kating Lama, now renamed by HH 17th Karmapa as Lama Katen, wanted very much for Khenpo Lhabu, Drupon Rinpoche, to come to Scotland, for his own and everyone's benefit and Akong Rinpoche recognised the great benefits this could have, as Drupon Rinpoche had so many qualities. In particular, he was known as a very gifted master of Mahamudra, a possessor of a very direct Mahamudra meditation method of provocative questioning that enabled suitable disciples to progress very rapidly. He was also a master of *tap-lam*. He was requested to take charge of the long retreats on Holy Isle and Arran, which he did, even though they were nearing their end when he first came. Most importantly, he was asked to take charge of subsequent long retreats and to prepare the retreatants for Mahamudra alongside their *tap-lam* training. Just as Akong Rinpoche had vigorously encouraged people to attend the Tai Situ Mahamudra, so also did he encourage them to attend Drupon Rinpoche's teachings, knowing him to be one of the rare, 100% authentic and very gifted lamas of our time.

Above, it was mentioned that *ston pa* means one who teaches but also one who shows. Although Akong Rinpoche did teach Mahamudra to some people personally and also gave one public course based on sections of *Mahamudra, Ocean of Certainty*, he was not known publicly as a "teacher of Mahamudra", in the sense of giving formal instruction. By contrast, his life day after day was one, non-stop,

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living example of Mahamudra being practised. The way in which he moved, spoke and so forth was the textbook example of Mahamudra mindfulness. The Tai Situpa once remarked that Akong Rinpoche had reached a very high level of attainment indeed, demonstrated by his being able to go hour after hour, day after day, week after week, in a state of Mahamudra, without ever “needing time out, to recover” ... “as I do”, added Tai Situpa, in modesty. Rinpoche remained constantly centred in deepest truth, never leaving the primordial space of Dharmakaya, no matter what he did on the surface.



Teachings with Drupon Khen Rinpoche & translator Kunga during the Monlam festival 2018.

Establishing Tap Lam and the Long Retreats

In 1973, Akong Rinpoche started discussing the possibility of creating the first European three-year retreat in Samye Ling. He did so with Kalu Rinpoche²³, whom he wanted to lead it. However, soon after that, Kalu Rinpoche's French disciples bought the Chateau de Plaige, in Burgundy, and by 1975 were putting pressure on him to establish his first European retreat there. The discussions about possible location eventually centred around his retreat candidates' opinions about how to cost the retreat. Already experienced in running Samye Ling, Akong Rinpoche was quite lucid about the probable construction and overall running costs of such a retreat and hence the *cost per person*, i.e. the money each participant would have to raise, one way or another, to make it possible. The French however came up with very low estimates, based on simple calculations of everyone living off brown rice and of a 'self-build' accommodation using the cheapest materials. Kalu Rinpoche felt obliged to go along with them, for various reasons.

With the pressure off the rapid appearance of a long-term retreat in Scotland, Akong Rinpoche decided to send two of his main disciples at the time – myself and Katia – into Kalu Rinpoche's retreat at Plaige and, as mentioned above, we had been duly sent away to find the money and prepare, in every way, for it. In 1976, we assisted Akong Rinpoche on his visits to the new Karmapa land in the Dordogne and the Kagyu Ling centre at Plaige. One reason for his going to Dordogne was to visit Gendun Rinpoche

and Jigme-la, recently sent there by the Gyalwang Karmapa to care for the new site. He very much enjoyed his time with Gendun Rinpoche – an impressive master who had spent much of his life (twenty-plus years) in solitary retreat. The Dordogne land was in a very early stage of development and although it had the ideal retreat-master present, it would obviously be some time before it could be up-and-running as a place of retreat. Nevertheless, the rural setting made it an obvious candidate. As it happened, Gendun Rinpoche's retreats later started (in 1993) not there at Dhagpo Kagyu Ling but relatively nearby at Le Bost, following the donation of land by Arnaud Desjardins.

Our own personal plans – well under way – for retreat in Plaige were brought to an abrupt halt when two Canadian disciples of Kalu Rinpoche came there and begged him to be included in the retreat. As all the retreat places were already filled, Kalu Rinpoche spoke with Akong Rinpoche and then called us in, to ask us if we would not mind terribly postponing our retreat so that his own, very devoted and long-term, disciples could join their comrades. There is only one answer to such a question! This lack of openings in the Kalu retreat was one factor in Akong Rinpoche realising that he should push ahead with another, separate retreat in Samye Ling. He was very consoling to us about this sudden aborting of our (and also his) plans for the immediate future and promised us that we would be able to enter long retreat as soon as it became possible in Samye Ling. He observed very carefully all that was happening in Plaige, where the future retreaters had gathered, and he learned much from it.

On a hilltop several hundred metres to the south of Samye Ling was an architect-designed, seven-sided property built for a former NASA scientist, James Heath. Appropriately, it was named Sevens. When it came on the market in the early 1970s, it was purchased as a personal dwelling by one of Akong Rinpoche's earliest UK friends and disciples, the nun Ani Pema, formerly Josie Wechsler, who very generously entered a life-rights arrangement, concerning the main house, with Samye Ling having immediate use of the land and annexe. She wanted to spend the last part of her life as a nun in Samye Ling, living independently for as long as her mobility allowed. She lived in Sevens for some years and then moved into a room in Johnstone House (the main building at Samye Ling). Akong Rinpoche then installed Sevens as a residence either for himself or for visiting rinpoches and, among other things, started building up a large collection of Tibetan texts there. Besides this seven-sided house, designed as a beautiful residence for a couple, there was the small bungalow staff annexe and some land. Rinpoche had, from the start, ear-marked this land as the best site for a future retreat and decided that the bungalow annexe should become a much-needed, shorter-term, retreat centre, which it soon did. Because of the nature of the retreats there – several months for the likes of the Mahamudra preliminaries – he wanted it to be confined to one sex of occupant and it became the men's retreat. There being no corresponding, dedicated women's retreat house, ladies had to do their retreats in makeshift accommodation: single rooms or other spaces in Samye Ling such as attics or the small huts by the river that had served for retreats since the start.

Following the Plaige episode concerning the long retreat, Pureland was back on the agenda for the Samye Ling version. One day, Akong Rinpoche suggested that he and I walk the land there to find the best spot for building a retreat. An unusual and strange thing happened. As we walked around, we stopped on one spot, very near Sevens, which had a good feel. We were standing, admiring the view over the valley, when Rinpoche looked down and then stooped to pick something up from the grass. It was a gilded statue of Milarepa! Moreover, it was one that had belonged to me and that I had placed on the shrine in Samye Ling in 1973, when the Gyalwang Karmapa conferred the Milarepa empowerment, so that it would be blessed. The statue was one of a limited number (twenty, I believe) of copies of one of the Trungpa relic-treasures. Unfortunately, it had disappeared immediately after the empowerment and I had assumed it to have been stolen. And now, inexplicably, there it was, perhaps having been dropped accidentally in the grass by the person who had “borrowed” it some six years earlier. It was unmistakably my statue, recognisable by my own poor gilding. We will never know how it got there. Akong Rinpoche took the finding of it as an auspicious sign that the men’s retreat should be built there. The women’s retreat would be built as an extension of the bungalow annexe at Sevens. When the building work started, a year or so later, and the land was excavated for foundations, a natural spring welled forth on that very same spot where the Milarepa statue had been found, further convincing Rinpoche that this was the right place.



Participants from the meditation retreat commemorating the third anniversary of Akong Rinpoche's passing, in front of the entrance to Samye Ling Temple, October 2016.

A long retreat requires three essential things: a retreat-master, suitable retreatants and a suitable property, with shrine-room and yoga room. The search for a good retreat-master was solved by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, who told Akong Rinpoche that a certain Lama Ganga would be an excellent choice as retreat master. Akong Rinpoche therefore approached Lama Ganga, who, with a little encouragement from Thrangu Rinpoche, eventually agreed to lead the Samye Ling retreat and to visit Samye Ling prior to the retreat to give necessary teachings. In 1981 Akong Rinpoche announced that Samye Ling's first long retreat would start in 1984 and that training for it would start that year. The actual retreaters were to be selected from the broader Samye Ling community of Akong

Rinpoche's students and participating in its construction would be part of the preparation they would have to do. The building was happening at the same time as that of the Samye Temple and their participation was vital so as not to draw too many builders away from that. Akong Rinpoche himself worked very actively in the construction of the retreat, setting a high and enthusiastic pace and, of course, blessing the whole site by his input.

By the end of 1982, the main retreat candidates were chosen. As one of them²⁴, I attended the meetings between them and Akong Rinpoche. He insisted, among other things, on the whole vision of retreat as being one of humility rather than a raise of status. Rinpoche was not happy with the way in which those who had completed the first Kalu Rinpoche retreat had, simply through that fact, started styling themselves "lamas", whether they had realisation or not and no matter what had happened in the retreat. He explained that, although it was very tempting for people to carry the title "lama", they had misunderstood Kalu Rinpoche who had said, in Vajradhara Ling, that those who had been *successful* in the retreat and who remained as ordained Sangha afterwards could call themselves "lama" if they wished. Those who returned to a lay life might call themselves "yogi" (*naljorpa*). This, Rinpoche explained, was not the traditional Tibetan system but done to encourage Western people. He seemed to have found that in most cases this was an obstacle rather than a help, because it inflated people's egos rather than helped diminish them. He told the future Samye Ling retreaters, with tears in his eyes:

“When you come out of retreat you should wish to be the lowest of the low: to be like a broom, the lowliest of objects that deals with all the dirty things but really helps people. If ever I hear of any of you calling yourself “lama” after the retreat, I don’t want to know you anymore; you are nothing to do with me. I want that to be very clear. Retreat is there to make you humble, no longer concerned for yourself but only caring for others!”

The Dharma visits of the Goshir Gyaltsabpa, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso in 1982 and 1983 covered much of the initial training Rinpoche had envisaged for retreaters. Lama Ganga continued the training for the retreaters and the building work on the retreats progressed.

All was in order but in the meantime a new project emerged for Rinpoche. In the early 1980s, Tibet started opening up for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. Akong Rinpoche made his first trip back to his homeland and to Dolma Lhakang in 1983, returning with the skulls of his parents that the people back home had kept for him, should he ever come back. The Tai Situpa, with whom Rinpoche had a growing connection, wanted Akong Rinpoche to not only help organise a return trip for him to his seat at Palpung but to accompany him as facilitator. That would be a major event and the Tai Situpa would be the highest-ranking lama to return to Tibet since the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959. The Situpa wanted Akong Rinpoche to negotiate all the details with the Chinese authorities. Akong Rinpoche estimated the whole trip may last for some three months or more and he told me that he did not want to leave

Samye Ling for that long without either him or myself to “care for it”. He said that I may have to await his return before going into the retreat, which was due to start during his projected absence, but that I could “go in late and catch up, as you’ve already done the Foundations.”

As it happened, the negotiations took far longer than anticipated and the retreat started with Akong Rinpoche still in Scotland. I visited the retreat daily, to give Tibetan classes and to spend a moment in my room, awaiting my entrance in months to come. At first I was to enter the retreat three months late, then six months late, then nine months. By some eight or nine months into the retreat, all the visas and permissions and planning for the Tai Situpa visit were at last in place but once Akong Rinpoche’s return to Scotland was scheduled for beyond the one-year mark of the retreat, and the start of the Vajravarahi practice, he took me for a long walk and explained that he was very, very sorry but it would now be too late to enter the retreat and he really needed me there in Samye Ling during his absence, to manage it, materially and to some extent spiritually, dealing with people’s practice difficulties. He was so apologetic that it was embarrassing. I explained to him that it mattered less for me, as he had already been so kind in teaching me something of Mahamudra and that I was therefore not desperate for the retreat practices. He said that was true but that nevertheless it would be good to do the retreat practices as well and that he would guarantee that, no matter what, I would enter the next retreat, programmed for 1988: third time lucky!

In a lifelong acquaintance, like that with Rinpoche, there are always somehow a few snapshot moments that stand out as landmark memories and flag themselves up first whenever one strolls down memory lane. That walk, Rinpoche's concern for me and my spiritual progress, his kindness and his obvious discomfort that I should 'suffer' in order to make his project work ... all of that was one of the first moments of a different sort of intimacy with him, outside of the usual role-play of guru and disciple that is automatically generated by the disciple situation. The subsequent story of the retreats is told elsewhere in this work by Lama Zangmo. Although the retreats Akong Rinpoche founded were not the first in the West, they were the first Karma Kagyu ones based on the Six Yogas of Naropa²⁵.

Establishing the Supports of the Three Jewels and the Three Roots

This is a vital part of a great master's activity: part of what is traditionally called *benefitting the Dharma*. Akong Rinpoche's life was deeply dedicated to it in its following classical areas:

1) The Supports of the Buddha Jewel

Akong Rinpoche put much effort into making sure that Samye Ling, and later the Samye Dzongs, became properly equipped with all the

material supports they would need. He pre-empted future needs and therefore often had to overcome an initial reluctance on the part of centre people, usually overawed by the expense or scale of his wishes, based on future-proofing rather than current needs. In all cases known to the author, this initial resistance was always, with time, replaced by a great gratitude as, day after day, people in the various centres enjoyed their beautiful buddha statues, or used their high-quality ritual instruments or whatever it may have been. When it came to religious images – statues, stupas or thangkas – Rinpoche showed a double concern. Materially, he wanted them made to the highest standards but for him an image had little value, no matter how well-made or beautiful, if it was not properly consecrated and had not become the home of true relics. He often stressed the point that it is not the statue that counts but what is inside it. Rinpoche would often do the shopping of religious artefacts for centres himself, in Nepal, where he came to be known by the best statue-dealers and statue-makers.

In general, Rinpoche spoke of himself as someone who “knew very little” and was “a very ordinary person”. In reality, he was someone of exceedingly fine aesthetic taste when it came to art or to craft. This came to an apogee in his last decade of life, as he commissioned thangkas and statues for Dolma Lhakang in Tibet, by which time some of the best craftsmanship was to be found no longer in Nepal but in the large Tibetan community of craftspeople in Chengdu, Sichuan.

From the earliest years, he had shown concern that the very high standard of artwork set by Sherab Palden Beru, in Samye Ling in

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the 1970s, be maintained. To that end, he encouraged the creation of an art school around Sherab so that people could learn in the slow, traditional way, as apprentices to a master. In the later years, Rinpoche sought out the very best artists from Palpung and Chengdu, insisting on the finesse and detail he required of them for the works they were creating for Dolma Lhakang or the Samye centres.



Rigpe Dorje Shrine-room, with attendees including representatives from Rokpa Trust & Samye Dzongs worldwide, following the visit of HH Gyalwang Karmapa to the centre to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Samye Ling (May 2017).

(Courtesy of Olivier Adam)

For the Samye Temple, Rinpoche commissioned some one-third-life-size statues of the first six Kagyu patriarchs. He had statues of the first sixteen Karmapas made and also set up a statue-casting project in Samye Ling to cast the *one thousand buddhas of the golden age*. The casting workshop also produced many ornate items for the temple, designed by Sherab, while at the same time creating moulds

and templates that could be used later in other temples in the Samye Dzongs of other countries.



Master artist Sherab Palden Beru

Akong Rinpoche set Sherab and his students to the task of painting major thangkas for the Temple, mainly depicting the great Buddhist masters of India and the Kagyu lineage masters, as well as those of the four Maharaja divinities seen as protectors of the world. From metal-smiths he ordered prayer-wheels, to be driven by electrical mechanisms and to be filled with mantras either micro-printed or on microfilm. One of these wheels had one mantra for each human being on Earth. While ordering some wood-carving for the first-floor shrine from the world's finest Tibetan wood-carver in Asia, Rinpoche also set in motion a Samye Ling wood-carving workshop to produce artefacts for the temple, such as the dragons that flank the main Buddha image or the large wooden temple drums. A silk-screen printing workshop was created to print the dragon and crane ceiling panels for all floors of the temple building. A weaving workshop was also initiated. From 1979 through 1988, Samye Ling became,

under Rinpoche, a fascinating gathering of skilled craftspeople all focused on the one project. It was very evocative of the ancient times of cathedral-building in Europe.

Rinpoche himself was very present, maintaining enthusiasm, encouraging diligence and always trying to achieve the highest standard of work possible. One very important overall aspect of Rinpoche's Dharma work was belief in transmission through apprenticeship. Whether it be meditation, Buddhist studies, ritual arts such as instrument-playing or tormas-making or more general Tibetan arts and crafts, he believed in a living transmission that would serve a double function:

- Only by a hands-on learning process, under the guidance of an expert, would the newcomers learn correctly.
- At the same time, the process of transmission would help preserve the ancient wisdoms and skills as students in turn became masters.

Akong Rinpoche put great care and effort into the consecration of these images, either doing it himself or having it done by visiting great masters. Thus, not only were the images properly blessed but also these masters left something of themselves in Samye Ling or, later, the other centres in which they were requested to consecrate objects. Rinpoche himself said, of Samye Ling, on various occasions,

“You do not realise what a sacred place this temple has become, due to the great masters that have visited here, taught and given transmission. In the East, solely due to that fact of their presence and activity, this would be now a place well worthy of pilgrimage.”

Rinpoche was keen to have particularly powerful ‘presences’ located at key points in Samye Ling, according to the Tibetan science of *sa bcad*, ‘earth energies’. Besides the treasure-vases buried beneath the temple, he asked the Tai Situpa to place some rare relics in the Dharmachakra symbol on the top floor of the temple building and Rinpoche himself had a vajra from Guru Rinpoche which he embedded in the wall above the main entrance to the Samye Project, only months before his death. Rinpoche also consulted at length with the Tai Situpa concerning the location of the major stupa, containing relics, at Samye Ling, as its new presence would bring a change to the energy balances in the centre. The present location was chosen to bring balance between the Samye Project and what was, at the time, the retreat centre at Purelands. Not to mention the naga house, in the river.

2) Supports for the Dharma Jewel

Throughout his adult life, Akong Rinpoche put great effort into the preservation of Tibetan sacred literature. In the 1970s this manifested itself as working with others, such as the famous Gene Smith, to rescue and copy any Tibetan texts but particularly manuscripts and the annotated works of great masters. Rinpoche was very proud of his microfilm reader and the treasures he already had on film. Through the 1970s and 1980s he gathered as many of the publications emerging from India as he could and possessed an impressive collection of texts, stored in Purelands.



Leading a procession around the monastery on the occasion of Chöje Lama Yeshe Rinpoche's 70th birthday celebrations on Saga Dawa Wesak May 2013, with Lama Katen & Venerable Gyamtso.

Another aspect was his organising the training of translators: initially, Katia, myself, and soon after Peter Roberts (in Samye Ling) and later many others (through the school set by Khenpo Tsultrim due to Akong Rinpoche – see above). A first priority was to translate the liturgical texts needed for the daily prayers and other common practices and he created the correct circumstances for us to do this under the direct guidance of Khenpo Tsultrim and Khenchen Thrangu. He knew that the personal transmission from such masters was the only way to get a correct meaning. With time, he also had many other key teachings texts taught and translated.

Once there are the texts and valid knowledge-transmission of their meanings, there would need to be suitable study facilities. Rinpoche designed the Samye Project with extended libraries and

study spaces. As we saw above, Rinpoche encouraged study programmes in all his centres in Europe and Africa, as well as online. He also vigorously promoted the revival of classical studies on the Tibetan plateau, initiating or participating through Rokpa in the printing of major texts (such as the Indian and Tibetan Mahamudra collections) and of rare Dharma and medical books of which often only one copy had survived, printed or manuscript. Rinpoche was a keen rescuer of such texts and was prepared to go through a lot of trouble to procure them, often at great expense. He often came back from his four- or five-month Rokpa trips to the Tibetan areas of China with rare treasures that he was so happy to show us with the sweet pride of the truly humble. He was also very generous with the books he brought back and lavished copies on individuals and centres. He had, for years, supported a team of scholars, under the wise guidance of Khenpo Damcho Dawa, to seek out rare textual treasures, now often in the hands of the children or grandchildren of those brave Tibetans who had originally rescued them.

3) The Supports of the Sangha Jewel

Akong Rinpoche's respect for the Sangha was total and heartfelt. Many times, in public and in private, he explained that it was only thanks to the Sangha that the Buddha's teachings had remained intact as a living tradition until this day. With time, Rinpoche became famous for his pioneering work with Buddhism in the West and his vast humanitarian accomplishments but not first and fore-

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most for creating an ordained Sangha. There are several points to be borne in mind in this respect. In the 1970s, he realised that the new Buddhist *community*[26] that was forming was almost uniquely composed of lay people. The situation was so unlike that of Tibet, because many of these lay people were as devoted to deep Buddhist studies or a life of meditation as were some of the best of monastics in Tibet, where being a monk or nun is a widespread way of life.



First day of the first UK Kagyu Monlam in May 2018 with Lama Yeshe Rinpoche leading the invitation.

Akong Rinpoche saw little point in pressing people into the monastic life. He was, however, very keen to support people in their taking of precepts, on any level, if they seemed ready, including the higher precepts of celibacy and monasticism. Furthermore, whereas monasteries were secluded places apart in Tibet, by the 1980s he

was pioneering a remarkable Samye Ling, in which so much happened ‘under one roof’, metaphorically if not literally. It was at one and the same time a monastery, a lay Dharma centre and also a forum for many other activities – all taking place within a broad vision of compassion as true spirituality. He was interested in this situation and in seeing if it could work, as some sort of new model. However, at the same time, he was very aware of a future need to establish traditional, independent *viharas* for the male and female Sangha, where the spirit and purpose of their renunciation could be honoured in a proper, secluded and disciplined environment.



Offering a mandala during Lama Yeshe Rinpoche's 70th birthday celebrations in the Main Shrine-room, spring 2013.

As we review his life's work, he can be seen as someone diligently putting into place all the necessary supports for a successful Sangha

to thrive in the West. Once he was back in Tibet, Rinpoche vigorously supported the Sangha of all the main schools, in their various activities, providing sponsorships and help with education, both secular and monastic. Under his guidance, the Sangha of a regenerated Dolma Lhakang gradually developed too.

If we consider the Sangha in its fundamental sense of those who practise, preserve and propagate the Buddhadharma, then it is of interest how Akong Rinpoche formed a body of teachers in the West. His own preference would have been for this to have been more systematised than it turned out to be but nevertheless he did manage, with time, to establish systems that more clearly distinguished various categories of teacher. In later times, he set up three main categories of those he had authorised to teach the Dharma: *lamas*, *Dharma teachers* and *Dharma helpers*. Rinpoche clearly established the criteria that would define a *lama* within the Samye centres, namely:

- The person must have successfully completed two long retreats.
- The person must properly hold the monk's or nun's vows.
- The person must be sufficiently knowledgeable in the Buddha's teachings to be able to communicate them accurately and appropriately.
- The person must have devotion to the lineage.
- The person must have proved their kindness, forbearance and diligence by having served others (usually in Dharma centres) for some years.

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Altogether, Rinpoche created four people as lamas – three of them female. Throughout my knowledge of him, Rinpoche never brought male-female prejudice into his giving of Dharma teachings or recognition of an individual’s Dharma accomplishment, as the lama appointments show.



The Abbot and Deputy Abbot with
Lama Tsondru, Lama Zangmo and Lama Rinchen

The title “Dharma teacher” was given to those who could also be turned to as trusted teachers, of Buddhadharma and/or of meditation, but who had not necessarily completed the long retreats and who were not necessarily ordained Sangha. If they had not completed the long retreats then they could not, of course, teach the specific

practices involved. They teach the *shamatha* steps of meditation on three levels: beginner, intermediate or advanced. Some of them are authorised to teach a certain part of the Mahamudra practices. They could also teach the eight Mahamudra preliminaries and various daily practices, according to whichever of these they have sufficient knowledge and experience of. They do not give Refuge.

The name “Dharma helper” applied to those with less knowledge or experience than those of the previous two categories. These are people recognised to have enough skill in specific areas to be able to teach them. Some might teach beginner’s meditation; others a specific daily practice such as Tara; and yet others may be authorised to teach a certain study text.

Over the decades, Rinpoche made several attempts to codify and systematise an accredited teacher system, through his increasing awareness of the general lack of clarity in people’s minds about who was good enough to teach what. He discussed the matter at length with Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. They came up with the idea of creating a sort of Dharma passport, in which each teaching properly received and mastered was noted and next to it would be a seal or signature of a rinpoche authorising the person to teach it. Based on this idea, an effort was made in the 1990s to draw up a comprehensive list of competencies of all the people who were teaching in Samye Ling or in Samye Dzongs. However, the project met with some resistance and never took effect. In retrospect, I appreciate what a good idea it was.

In 2009, Akong Rinpoche, in the light of all that was happening in the European and African centres, as well as in Tara therapy

groups, convened a five-day meeting, by invitation only, for those who were teaching, in one capacity or another, including those teaching meditations in the context of Tara therapy, in order both to make his own intentions clear as well as to deal with certain issues that were starting to cause problems. There were sixty-three invitees. He was still looking for there to be more clarity about ‘teachers’ and expressed his wish for things such as peer-review to take place, with our teachers ‘sitting in’ on each other’s work to provide feedback. Rinpoche also had other concerns, such as possible conflicts or disharmony that might be brought about by the teachers of secular mindfulness, or perhaps also Tara therapists, being paid for their efforts whereas Samye Dharma teachers and helpers remained unpaid, with both groups teaching at times simultaneously in the same venue. It could be considered as ‘unequal opportunities’ for the Dharma teachers and helpers. He was also concerned about confusion between Buddhist mindfulness and secular mindfulness. Another issue was the procedures to deal with possible teacher-student abuse or accusations of such abuse. Several such situations had arisen over the years and the traditional in-house solutions were no longer suitable in an ‘accountable’ or ‘transparent’ West.

This meeting met with limited success, in terms of some of the practical outcomes envisaged by Rinpoche. However, it did make Rinpoche’s intention known to one and all and it served as an important platform for him to make public his choice of Lama Katen as future abbot of Samye Ling, as well as his total and heartfelt support for Drupon Rinpoche’s new input into both study and meditation at Samye Ling.

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Many of those who took either temporary or lifelong ordination will testify to the great love Rinpoche had of the Sangha and the way he supported them through the various problems that inevitably occur when that important life choice has been made. His advice was life-changing for them and often the consequent benefits for others were also considerable.



The official investiture of Lama Katen as Deputy Abbot of
Drubgyu Dargye Ling Monastery (Kagyu Samye Ling)

Rinpoche strove equally in establishing the body, speech and mind supports for the Three Roots (gurus, yidams and protectors). They are very similar to the above but in respect of the Vajrayana transmissions and are too complex to outline here.

Developing Dharma Centres

The main support of the Sangha, in its broadest sense of those intent on Buddhist study and practice, is the creation of Dharma centres and monasteries. In a synergy with his students and the growing

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demand from towns and cities to have their own centres, Akong Rinpoche was the key person in the development of over forty Samye Ling or Samye Dzong centres in fourteen countries on three continents (if we include Dolma Lhakang). The first of these, in Brussels and Barcelona, emerged at the time of the 1977 Karmapa visit and their stories are told elsewhere in this work. The material outcomes of his shaping of these centres and their beautiful artefacts is easy to see. However, the true outcome that he sought, i.e. the understanding, peace and compassion brought into tens of thousands of lives, is both incalculable and intangible but it is certainly one of the greatest fruitions of his life work.



After an empowerment: Akong Rinpoche,
his attendant Gelong Thubten and Ken Holmes

Akong Rinpoche was tireless in supporting his Dharma centres, visiting them whenever possible, constantly available to advise the people running them and striking a healthy balance between giving

them enough free rein but also enough strict and clear cut guidance. He particularly oversaw the teaching that was happening in the centres, either by persuading visiting Tibetan lamas to include them in their itineraries or else by choosing who, among the local Dharma people, could or would teach the various aspects of study or meditation. Whenever he visited centres, his interview list would be long and his patience and generosity in fulfilling people's expectations was legendary.

Conclusion

Rinpoche never drew a line between 'Dharma' (in the religious sense) and his other work, such as Tara and Rokpa. For him it was all *Dharma*. He in fact explained Dharma through its Tibetan etymology, meaning "to heal" or "to restore". He saw his duty as being to heal the world, on all levels. It was a fascinating part of Akong Rinpoche's own being and activity that he would labour to perpetuate all the myriad symbolic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism – the 'skilful means' – yet never fell into the trap of confusing the means with the end.

For the first, he became known as one of the most traditional Tibetan lamas in the West, wary of the innovative methods favoured by some and deeply concerned for the preservation of the Tibetan traditions, striving to make them living, practised traditions in the West. He was strict about Refuge, precepts, the Vinaya, the bodhisattva vow and tantric vows being taken and kept properly and traditionally. He put endless effort into getting religious arte-

facts – tormas, musical instruments, costumes and so forth – to a high level of quality and ensuring that they were then used correctly. This sometimes involved bringing experts over from Sherab Ling or elsewhere but he deemed it all worthwhile. However, while so doing he was crystal clear that all those things are symbols, the famous “finger pointing at the moon that should not be mistaken for the moon”, and knew that they symbolise wisdom and compassion in their many manifestations. He was one of the rare Tibetan lamas to recognise and/or foster the development of wisdom and compassion in many different ways not seemingly religious, whether it be through Tara, ROKPA, or other channels and to know them all to be equally ‘Dharma’. He himself was interested to see, as years went by, who would have the best insight into the mind: his Western lamas or his Tara therapy teachers. He observed whether it was his Rokpa people or his lamas, Sangha or mature lay people who developed the most compassionate hearts.

Akong Rinpoche’s love of traditional Buddhadharma affected three continents. He established Dharma centres and the teachings in Europe and in Southern Africa but was also responsible for so much positive reconstruction in Asia, on the Tibetan plateau. He nurtured literacy there on a large scale and especially the Dharma literacy in the monastic shedras.

He is remembered as someone, as partially described above, of enormous achievements in many areas of activity, including many ‘firsts’ in the West. He did so by knowing the secret of becoming our inspiration – the catalyst, the initiator, the collaborator or the support of our work. Sometimes he was an initiator and would start

a project himself, such as the Samye Temple, and gradually draw hundreds of people into the actual task. Sometimes he was a catalyst, a booster, who would take the idea or the work that someone else had already started, as with Rokpa in its early days, started through the inspiration of Jamgon Rinpoche in India and the Tai Situpa in Tibet, and devotedly enacted by Lea Wyler, into which he then invested his energy and made everything grow and grow, beyond everyone's expectations. Sometimes he would be an advisor, a collaborator, helping new and beneficial projects come into being as part of a team, as he did over the years with Edie Irwin and the key therapists of Tara therapy. Sometimes he would be a support, giving trusted advice to help people, already engaged in compassion, make the right decision or find the strength to carry on. I think when we look back, we can see the truth of the main way in which Rinpoche described himself: as first and foremost an *advisor*, even though he liked to 'do jobs', as he put it, and could so often be seen on a building site or behind a sewing machine. Rinpoche was an inspiration for thousands of people and it is through all their hard work that so much was achieved yet naturally attributed to him. In the *Prajnaparamita* teachings, it talks about one sighted person leading a trillion blind people to the citadel of happiness. Rinpoche was our guide to that city. He was trustworthy. We trusted him because his advice came from the deepest place. It was the best available.

There was not only what Rinpoche achieved but how he achieved it. His personal qualities were outstanding. Like sandalwood which is inseparable from its own beautiful fragrance and that leaves its delightful traces wherever it has been placed, Akong Rinpoche was

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naturally good, naturally compassionate and naturally ever-mindful and profound. He was the very embodiment of the enlightened qualities about which we read, showing us how they operate in practice. He left the sweet perfume of his courage, his kindness and patience and his total dedication in the hearts of all those who had the good karmic fortune and blessing to encounter him, be it for seconds or years. His tragic death was a great loss for the entire world and his last great teaching to us all, showing impermanence and the need to carry forward the flame of his inspiration.



Akong Rinpoche himself arranged a throne on the stage, while he stood on the floor to present offerings made by representatives of the various Samye Dzung centres and other individuals, on Lama Rinpoche's 70th birthday. On this occasion, the first time the lecture-hall was used, Rinpoche announced that his brother would succeed him as Vajra Regent.

The full version of this chapter can be found at www.akong.eu

The Victory Stupa

by Marian Dreyfus



The Stupa at Samye Ling

It is reported the Buddha said: “Homage to stupas, with and without form”, because a stupa is the mind of enlightenment. In the Vajrayana teachings it is said there is a crystal stupa under the earth supporting the Vajra Seat at Bodhgaya of which the Bodhi Tree is an adornment. Those with pure perception can also see a stupa in the sky above it.

THE VICTORY STUPA

From the first moment I saw Akong Rinpoche in 1978 during Samye Ling's celebration of the completion of 100 million *manis*, I felt sure that I had met the Buddha and Guru Rinpoche combined in one person. This was unexpected because he was not the first great Tibetan master I had met. So for me Akong Rinpoche is the same as a stupa, the presence of enlightened mind. After attending many teachings in my holidays from work for a few years, I began to live, work, study with him directly. I also realised how precious and rare was the opportunity to receive teachings and empowerments from the many great teachers visiting and to devote myself fully to his project and vision. So I became more and more aware of his subtlety, precision and changeless compassion as he gave the same attention to whoever came to him regardless of status, wealth, age, qualities or ability.



With the community – Marian is on the right

In our monthly community meetings he would write these words on a blackboard: “Compassion, Communication, Cooperation,

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Coordination”. No detail was too small, no task too vast for his notice. He continually drew our attention to details of careless conduct, untidiness, neglect, and negative emotions, and he would often be found during teachings from great visiting masters tidying our shoes, which had been left in mindless disarray. Our seven-day week was closely programmed with work, study and practice from dawn to dusk, which he oversaw and inspected personally. During those first years all his activity unfolded within Samye Ling.

Akong Rinpoche spoke very simply, quietly and sparingly and always to the point. He taught through his presence and his activity. His “actions were as fine as grains of flour” because his view was vast: he was living Mahamudra. So events and people organised themselves around him as colours and patterns appear in perfect symmetry around the empty centre of a kaleidoscope. His unchanging stable awareness drew beings to him like flowers turning towards the sun. It seemed to me that Rinpoche had everything worked out from the start and steadily, and unwaveringly worked to achieve those aims, never discouraged by any temporary setback.

The Victory Stupa

Usually in Tibet a stupa is the first structure built, consecrating and empowering a monastic centre of meditation and study. It roots, anchors and blesses with the Buddha’s presence, it is the core of the apple, the seed of the mandala, the centre and source of power. Khentin Tai Situpa made the first public announcement of the

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intention to build a stupa in Samye Ling and on Holy Isle in 1990. Lama Yeshe Losal had been called out of his long retreat to help Akong Rinpoche and had built two large prayer wheels which were being consecrated. Soon, through his effort and vision, Holy Isle and the Arran Glenscorrodale retreat centres were acquired to provide spacious and peaceful surroundings to nourish meditation and retreat. On Holy Isle the Interfaith Centre and organic gardens began to evolve. Within this context of vast activity, building a few small stupas and one larger one is a relatively small achievement. It was Lama Yeshe who set the ball rolling as part of his plan for Holy Isle by commissioning a scale model of a 108-foot stupa for Holy Isle which became the focus of publicity and fundraising. However, mindful of the already existing large hole in the Samye Ling garden which had been dug for a future stupa site, and had unofficially become known as “the swimming pool”, the management committee made the Samye Ling stupa a priority.

With no idea of the cost or complexity I was given responsibility for the outer project, the cost of materials and of bringing lamas necessary for the undertaking. Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe had already made the critical connection in Nepal with Lama Phuntsok, who held the lineage for all the inner work, and he agreed to visit with his monks to attend to all the details of this side of the task, which would include empowerment, ritual and prayers.

Lama Phuntsok arrived at Samye Ling to consecrate the site, requesting the earth to support the stupa and pacify whatever forces might create obstacles. Then we built the eight stupas in the driveway. Until then no one in Samye Ling had very much feeling

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or idea of what a stupa was, but when Akong Rinpoche called the community to help build them with him after evening prayers, everything changed. He was there every evening together with Kanze Lamdrak Rinpoche and his wife (who was teaching traditional Tibetan song and dance), Ven Gyamtso, and whoever else had the strength and interest to wheel a barrow, or keep the fires alight that smoked away the clouds of summer evening midges. That was how everyone learned about stupas, hands on, from foundation to spire. We could all see the inner contents of treasure vases and the life sticks wrapped in silk being placed inside, sealed and protected by the thirteen ringed spires.



Filling the small stupas
with Lamdrak Rinpoche

The real secret of the Stupa is Rinpoche's kindness and aspiration. It was this that built the reputation of Samye Ling and connected with those same qualities in thousands of people all over the world who gave artworks, jewellery, money, time, their weekends, who raised funds for pilgrimages, researched, laboured in the Stupa Office or on the building site.

It was international, ecumenical and inspirational from the beginning. Practically every artist exhibiting in the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art donated a work for the arts festival and fundraising auction in St Mungo's in 1996, but works also came from America and England – sculptures, photographs, glassworks, jewellery, wonderful wooden handmade tables

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and chairs, precious heirlooms and also the freely given skills of curators and auctioneers, the backing of Glasgow Cathedral and Council, banks and celebrities, and above all the Sangha dancing in front of the Council Chambers in George Square with full Tibetan and Scottish orchestra provided by Selkirk Pipe Band and arranged as a Tibetan/Scottish dakini dance. For two weeks there was drama, music and poetry amid the spring blossom around the cathedral and at the art exhibition at St Mungo's. All this was made possible by an international wish for a world of kindness, generosity and ecological healing and balance. The Stupa was seen as a prayer for healing of the world in the new millennium, where we would care for each other and all beings. There was a very strong emphasis on balancing the elements, repairing humanity's damage to Mother Earth herself, because this is the power of stupas and the reason for our mission: to create the first properly built and fully empowered stupas in the British Isles.

There were so many people, all with different levels of skill, knowledge and devotion involved. That was in itself a miracle of coordination and communication. For me it was a full-time effort for many years but everyone's input was a gesture of pure faith and generosity, a trust in the vision and spiritual technology of another culture and the only expectation in return for all this effort was that we accomplish our goal. Just as Akong Rinpoche had always taught us, a real gift is one given unconditionally without desire for any reward, so no grasping from beginning to end. The only part of the Stupa that we were unable to find anyone with skill and time to construct on a voluntary basis was the copper spire. The

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wooden core had to be driven all the way to Oxford to be covered with copper by a specialist commercial firm. In the end this was the only part that failed to meet the test of time. It was replaced by the devoted and much higher standard of workmanship of Akong Rinpoche's students, freely and unconditionally offered in harmony with the rest of the Stupa, and auspiciously available when needed, more than ten years later.

After the massive leap of faith that was the arts festival and auction, we found we had just enough money to begin laying the massive reinforced concrete foundations. The idea of the arts festival had arisen from my realisation that selling prints of Milarepa, Tara and Guru Rinpoche that I coloured in myself was not going to help much! So I began to write to friends and artists and sympathetic publications to advertise the idea of a fundraising exhibition, arts festival and auction. This was not just to raise funds but to start the *Stupa Project* and attract the right kind of visionary, creative energy in line with our motive to involve the whole world in building a beacon of transformation for the new millennium, which would also be a prayer for Akong Rinpoche's long life and unobstructed growing activity. I was really surprised by the response, even in the context of Lama Yeshe's and Rinpoche's quiet unwavering confidence. So that was another essential ingredient, confidence and faith, quite as necessary as bricks and mortar. After all, when I first came to Samye Ling there had been only trees and rock where the temple now stood, perfect and grand and all built by volunteers, a masterwork of craftsmanship and skill, all learned on the job.

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Painting snow lions on "Tashi Gomang" – the large stupa at Kagyu Samye Ling.

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To begin a project however big without worrying about money was itself a teaching of Akong Rinpoche. He would trust that effort and faith would naturally attract funds and skills through the interdependence of right motivation, commitment and selflessness. Small teams of ordained and lay practitioners who had taken the precepts of pure conduct and made the commitment to say prayers continuously during their work, began to make the thousand small stupas, called *tsa tsa*, which would hold relics needed for the internal structure. These and many other precious relics, prayers and treasures filled the hollow bumpa (the spherical central section). A red cedar tree was donated by Lowther Estates in Cumbria. Ordained and lay students went to prepare the tree for felling by reciting prayers of request and blessing around it before it was felled. This was to be the central spine of the Stupa, filled with relics and ritually carved, and called the “life stick”. The forester said with tears in his eyes that it was the first time he had seen people relate to his trees as he did, caring for them like living beings or one’s own kin.

An established student who was Rinpoche’s personal dentist made the Cumbrian connection. Since he was a seasoned Himalayan climber he also brought with him a climbing friend who was a building contractor along with climbers and Himalayan explorers Sir Chris Bonnington, Doug Scott, David Oswin, and Hamish McInnes. They provided much support, gave talks, mounted exhibitions and initiated fundraising pilgrimages to caves where Guru Rinpoche and Milarepa had meditated in the mountains of Nepal. It was their experience of Rinpoche’s compassion and stable commitment that created these connections. The building contractor became

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a devoted friend and supporter. He supervised all aspects of health and safety, donated materials and equipment, as well as working on the site during spare weekends.

There are two events clearly etched on my mind which were direct teachings. Sometime before the consecration of the Stupa Rinpoche was standing not far from me with an attendant monk looking through the safety barrier at the site. Wistfully the monk asked, “You must be very proud of Marian?” and Rinpoche’s totally truthful, and ultimately reassuring reply was, “It’s just interdependence!”

Rinpoche gave me two other teachings from the top of the Stupa, where the rings that symbolise the four limitless qualities of compassion, loving kindness, joy and equanimity are situated. The first was a warning concerning the obstacles that follow on a great positive effort: when you do something powerful, receive deep teachings, accomplish a good retreat, it activates or accelerates the appearance of past negative karma that needs to be purified. A mixed blessing! You have the opportunity for deep purification Rinpoche humorously pointed out, “It’s not too late, we can bury you under the foundations, it might be best!” I replied I was not ready for that yet! On another occasion he shouted down from the bumpa door, which he was helping Lama Phuntsok to secure on the morning of the consecration, that he needed something from his coat pocket hanging over a rail below. When a monk hurried over to pre-empt me I deferred to him, thinking I should respect his status and Rinpoche called down, in a voice that could be heard all over the site, “You are really useless, Marian!” to the delight of all bystanders!

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In one of my interviews with Rinpoche many years ago I had naively asked him how long it would take to become enlightened. He replied, “Have you seen the Himalaya? Thousands of miles long and thousands of feet high solid rock, stretching from Pakistan to China. Imagine you have a teaspoon, now imagine you have to dig a tunnel from one end to the other.” Of course if they were not solid, if you really saw them as rainbow light it would be much easier to make that journey, but we are imprisoned in our concepts of material reality. So we have to build stupas! That is why being in Rinpoche’s circle of energy was such a great and deep teaching. In his presence there was an unchanging calm that seemed to rearrange and rebalance the very particles in and around you. As Yongey Mingyur Tulku taught us, “The superior view of the stupa is that it is a symbol of the purified energy channels of the Buddha.”



Stupa consecration with Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche,
attendant Lama Rigzin, Lama Phuntsok, Sangha and lay members

After the consecration Akong Rinpoche had requested and organised a two week all day all night recitation of the *Vajra Kilaya*

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Sadhana led by Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche, to purify and clear away the negative forces and obstacles that the achievement might have aroused and to further empower the energy of the Stupa. The power of the prayers was so great and the circle of protection so strong that the whole valley lost phone and internet connection for a whole day. During this powerful *drup chen* Akong Rinpoche stood before the shrine in a tent, making spiritual medicine called “dutsi” in an enormous mortar, mixing herbs imbued with prayers and blessings to be distributed to cure physical, mental and spiritual illness or imbalance. These protection prayers were not just for Samye Ling but for the planet and for all beings. So again Rinpoche was enacting the function of the Stupa. His symbol or seal, the ‘AH’ that represents changeless space and enables all phenomena to appear and disappear and is their true nature, is represented in the Stupa by the space within the bumpa, that round hollow that holds the relics, treasure vases, the Buddha’s complete teachings and commentaries, and the lifestick. All this represents the path of Insight into reality, which is the basis for the progressive mastery of the thirteen levels of Bodhisattva realisation.

Rinpoche’s teaching was that only the impossible is worth doing, and so your work is never finished. There was still the inner shrine of the Stupa to complete, with 34 solid silver offering bowls which were donated, statues of the 35 Buddhas and the large statues of Amitabha, Chenresig and Vajrapani to be made. The inlaid wood and copper mandalas in the ceiling and floor were aligned so that a coffin could be placed before the shrine and the full blessing of

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the Stupa's energy transmitted through the lifestick from the copper mandala in the bumpa.

All this was nearing completion when a lady called Ruth Hirai visited to attend empowerment and teaching. She had come to find a resting place in the Stupa for her husband, a Japanese Zen master who had taught in Samye Ling in its first years. His bones were arranged ritually according to the tradition of his lineage in a brocade box much larger than the prescribed space for blessed ashes formed into stupas in the Stupa shrine. Naturally her husband's bones had to remain undisturbed as ritually placed. We sat in my kitchen over a relaxing cup of tea as she outlined her predicament. I went to Akong Rinpoche to ask what we should do. His immediate reply was that we should start fundraising and build a prayer wheel house that would surround the Stupa on three sides. This would be designed to house any size of box or urn or any other kind of memorial such as a photograph, so that the remains of people's friends and families could be freely viewed by them as they walked around. In addition there would be prayer wheels all containing microfilm of mantras and prayers lining the covered walkway. An architect was found among his students and building work began immediately, a task in which, as always, Rinpoche took part, laying the brick pathway, pick-axing rubble, ordering the prayer wheels in Nepal and the millions of microfilmed mantras they contain.

As this neared completion he asked me to turn my attention to restoring the lineage seats of Marpa Lotsawa in West Tibet and Je Gampopa's seat further east. So the 'Heritage Project' was begun to help restore Tibet's sacred sites and culture by building 108 stupas

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and eight large statues of Guru Rinpoche in especially sacred sites, such as the birthplaces of the Karmapas, to re-empower Tibet's spiritual culture and the land itself, and so protect the massively critical ecological balance of the Tibetan Plateau, mountains, rivers, glaciers and wildlife. This is increasingly endangered by deforestation, damming of important rivers and large-scale mining for oil and minerals, with implications not just for Tibet but for all the countries which its rivers and glaciers nourish in Asia.

Just being with him, seeing him around the grounds in his tracksuit ready to help and inspire, to reassure and criticise, was the greatest teaching of all. All the deepest teachings are wordless, with a force like a depth charge, a communication so crystal clear it both deconstructs and reassembles your reality.

The Buddha taught that all pure spiritual traditions should be respected as part of humanity's aspiration to transcend and transform its tendencies to conflict, greed, hatred and ignorance, so we can live peaceably and fruitfully together on this small sensitively balanced planet. Our effort to construct and empower a symbol of this aspiration gained positive support from many traditions and cultures. Amongst these there were most notably messages of goodwill and support from the president of the new South Africa, Madiba Mandela; the great Archbishop Tutu who sent African chants; the Prince of Wales, and the head of his School of Architecture Professor Keith Critchlow (who said it was the most important thing anyone could do at this time), and from those defenders of Highland culture The West Highland Free Press! This universal recognition of the value of the Stupa from such diverse minds known globally for their goodwill,

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courage and wisdom was also a sign that the mandala of transforming energies is gaining strength and power in our small world.

Rinpoche taught us all humility by his own example of unconditional, unrelenting service. He brought a pantheon of the greatest living teachers to instruct and transmit the Dharma, while he himself was often to be found during teachings tidying our confusion of footwear into neat rows outside. On the first Christmas I lived at Samye Ling in 1981 I cooked the Christmas dinner and decorated the dining room for the residents and for all Rinpoche's students and their families who lived nearby and in the valley. At that time it was his 'official' birthday. So I baked an enormous Christmas cake decorated with many candles that relit themselves. As I leant against the kitchen door with an aching back, in terminal exhaustion, I watched with apprehension and tried to intervene as he tried to blow out the candles, again and again. I had warned his children but told them to keep it a secret. But even after I had spilt the beans and told him they could not be blown out, he still would not give up! He persisted and went on blowing until they were completely finished. Then he said:

“Everyone wants to be the boss but the one who serves is the true boss, the real ruler. I will return amongst you as many times as it took for me to blow out these candles. It is very auspicious.”

A bird can never find the edge of the sky and words can never describe the power of the mind when it is freed. It is limitless, unbound by life or death. But while we have minds that we have

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not yet freed we need the great enlightened beings to manifest in our form to guide and care for us. So it was a great joy to be able to offer the Stupa to Akong Rinpoche on his sixtieth birthday, which coincided with the dawning of the new millennium, a prayer for his continuous presence amongst us. And the Stupa is here. We pray for his re-appearance amongst us in human form, but his mind is here with us wherever we are. As I see it, the Stupa is the promise of that.



Stupas at the entrance to Samye Ling

In the first fundraising meeting on July 24th 1997 Rinpoche said:

“My only concern is to do what is most beneficial for everyone in the world; to find new ways to bring humans together with greater tolerance and fewer wars ... The Chorten (stupa) gives this peace of mind through seeing and believing. It isn't just architecture and sculpture. It has a deep meaning. Many wise and compassionate beings decided on its shape and it contains holy relics, pieces of the Buddha's robes, relics of great teachers, of mahasiddhas and saints. Everything

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within the Stupa gives life to the form so that it radiates energy like the rays of the sun.”

In a Stupa Committee meeting on March 21st 1998 Akong Rinpoche said:

“The purpose of building a stupa is that wherever the wind blows it carries peace. It heals so that wherever there is a wound it is healed ... We in Tibetan Buddhism believe it is one of the most important things one can do, and that it can benefit all races, and also all species, such as birds, animals and insects.”

On August 2nd in the same year he said:

“This will benefit everyone, particularly, according to the science of ley lines or earth energy. Samye Ling is a very important place in the land, in fact it is believed Samye Ling may be one of the most important places in the world ... You don't have to believe in stupas, just as you don't have to believe in the rain, it will come down every day just the same; it just happens naturally if there are the right conditions.”

For me Akong Rinpoche was more than mother and father, an uncompromising teacher and friend, you could trust him completely. His standards were sky high, his care, affection and patience unfailing. How I wish I could have offered him better service and devotion. How I miss his presence and his wisdom. But his mind is here and everywhere in endless activity. In his physical and spir-

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itual presence and teaching Akong Rinpoche was just like a stupa, transmitting continuously the way to live as responsible aware humans and showing us our potential to achieve the impossible.



Stupas on Holy Isle

CHAPTER 3

Retreats & Satellite Centres



Reflections on Retreat

by *Lama Zangmo*

Through the great kindness of Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche I completed three retreats in the retreat place called *Purelands* in Kagyu Samye Ling. I feel very fortunate and so grateful to Rinpoche. I moved to Samye Ling from Denmark in the summer of 1977 when I was twenty-five years old, and I never looked back. I am now sixty-seven years old and although I have never been a great student, I feel very happy that most of my life has been focused on practising, studying and serving the Dharma. My life has been meaningful, all thanks to Akong Rinpoche. I spent 36 years under his guidance, and I am still amazed at this great good fortune of meeting such a precious being, a living Buddha.

In one of my first interviews with Rinpoche, when I asked him if I could stay in Samye Ling, he told me, “Yes, you can work in the dairy, you can make cheeses.” I anxiously replied, “Oh, but I don’t know how to make cheese!” And he said with a little smile, “Well, but you can learn while you are here, can’t you?” And in my mind I thought “Yes, yes of course, that is why I came. I came to *learn*.”

When I decided to go to Samye Ling, I had not thought of cheese-making as a possible part of the spiritual path! All I knew was that I wanted to learn to meditate, to understand the Dharma and to 'sort out my mind'. What I learnt early on from Rinpoche's example was that everything, including every practical aspect of life, is meant to become part of learning and of assimilating the teachings.

Whether cooking or making cheese, or being told to place our shoes in tidy rows outside the shrine-room, to clean our cups and bring them back to where we took them from, to lift our chairs quietly in the dining room – all of it was Rinpoche's way of training us to think of others. He was constantly teaching us how to integrate the dharma into all our activities, telling us to be mindful in whatever we did, and to think of the person coming next. It did not all come naturally of course, and we needed lots of training and many reminders over time!

To Rinpoche all of life seemed to be constant practice; in fact there seemed to be no difference for him whether he was in a great religious ceremony or tidying up everybody's shoes outside the shrine-room; or whether he was attending a puja or straightening out old bent nails on the building site, he was someone who had so clearly achieved the highest goal of Mahamudra, non-meditation. Whatever he did and said, he tried to train all of us to become one with the Dharma and to live our lives accordingly. He was a perfect example.

One of my very first impressions of Rinpoche was once when I saw him in the distance, standing on the lawn in front of Johnstone house, surrounded by a large group of people about to raise prayer-flags. In that moment when I saw him, I knew deep down that this

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person could only be reached through caring for others, not through selfish grasping. I knew he was someone with impartiality who could not be owned, and that he cared about everybody. He was beyond manipulation of any kind. Even though I was just a beginner I could tell that he was someone I could trust totally. I had never felt like that about anybody else in my whole life.



Early picture of Purelands

In December 1977 I took Refuge with His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje when he visited Samye Ling. During that historic visit, His Holiness Karmapa had discussed plans with Akong Rinpoche about the provision of a long-term retreat that would give Buddhist practitioners the opportunity to further their practice within the traditional Tibetan framework of the three year, three month retreat. They had also visited the proposed site for the retreat on a little hilltop half a mile down the road called “Sevens”, due to the main house having seven sides, also often referred to as the “Roundhouse”. It was a place that had been offered to Samye

Ling by a disciple of Rinpoche called Josie Wechsler, who later became Ani Pema, the first ordained nun in Samye Ling. His Holiness stayed at the Roundhouse during his first visit to Samye Ling in 1974 and it thereafter became known as *Purelands*. It was a blessed place, very suitable for retreat.

When Akong Rinpoche made a pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites in India in 1980 with a group of people from Samye Ling, he held further discussions with His Holiness Karmapa. As a result of these meetings it was decided to begin the first long retreat at Purelands in 1984. This would give future participants enough time to raise the necessary funds and also prepare themselves by studying the Tibetan language and various recommended texts, as described in Ken Holmes' chapter.

The retreat was to be run along traditional lines and would introduce Western students to all the main practices of the Karma Kagyu lineage, starting with the four foundations, through to the various *guru yogas*, the *vidam* practices, and the *Six Yogas of Naropa*. In order to allow for the difficulties with language and the newness of this type of retreat in the West it was decided to extend the length of the retreat from the usual three years and three months to a period of four years. This would also allow time for the practices of Guru Rinpoche and Amitabha to be included in the schedule, which Rinpoche felt would be of great benefit to the retreatants.

I had been living in Samye Ling for three years when Rinpoche asked me one day in an interview if I would like to do a three-year retreat. I remember feeling that three years seemed like a lifetime and replying that I was not really sure if I would be able to do it,

but that, yes I trusted his judgement. It was all very new to me and to everyone else who decided to join the retreat. It was wonderful and inspiring, and at the same time a little daunting. We were new to the whole idea of retreat and did not know what to expect.

In terms of the bigger picture, this was only sixteen years after the founding of Kagyu Samye Ling, the first Tibetan Buddhist centre in the West, in a non-Buddhist country. A lot had happened in those sixteen years, but it was still a very short period. When Akong Rinpoche came to Scotland and founded Samye Ling and consequently set up a retreat centre, his activities and the issues he had to tackle were comparable to when Guru Rinpoche first established the Dharma in Tibet in the seventh century. Guru Rinpoche faced many obstacles when building Samye, the first monastery in Tibet, training the monks, teaching the Dharma, teaching Sanskrit and how to pronounce it properly.

Similarly, now Akong Rinpoche was in Scotland with a group of Westerners who knew very little about the teachings and practically nothing about what being in long retreat entailed. He had to train all of us in the simplest, most basic things, let alone the vast and deep Dharma.

We did not know the Tibetan language and on top of that we had a Tibetan retreat master, Lama Ganga, who hardly spoke any English. We had no familiarity with the texts, the meditations or the recitations, nor with the ritual and hardly even with Buddhism itself, compared to what would normally be required in Tibet. We were really total beginners.

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Rinpoche set the training in motion. Over the following years there were teachings on Buddhist philosophy; there were empowerments, scriptural authorisations and instructions; *wang*, *lung* and *tri* given foremost by the great masters Khentin Tai Situpa and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche during their frequent, long visits to Samye ling. Teachings were also given by Gyaltsab Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, by Lama Thubten from Karma Ling in Birmingham, and by the retreat master Lama Ganga, who had completed two retreats in Thrangu Rinpoche's monastery in Tibet.

Everything had to be taught, including classes in torma-making and ritual instruments, and regular Tibetan language classes.



Haircutting before the retreat

The retreat buildings had to be prepared, and for the women there was talk about setting up the shrine-room in a tiny attic in the old building on site in those days. The attic was so small that you could barely stand up straight, and it was only just wide enough for a pair of long radongs (musical instruments) to be stretched out, so Rinpoche abandoned that idea; instead he had an extension built which housed the caretakers, the kitchen and the women's new shrine-room.

He was starting everything from scratch, having to make do with what was there, but it was clear

that he had complete faith in the power of practice. He also put a lot of trust in us as beginners and as Westerners, and put enormous effort into establishing the right conditions to help us practise and study the Dharma, and always with limitless patience.

Before the retreat started, Rinpoche asked Khentin Tai Situpa, who was staying in Samye Ling for several months over that period, to do a *mo* for each retreatant. This was a personal divination to give an indication of whether there would be obstacles to the retreat or not. We were then told to free as many lives as we were old in order to help overcome obstacles. There was a great ceremony where everybody together released hundreds of fish into the Esk River as part of the retreat preparation.

With the first retreat about to start there were various rumours circulating. One of the rumours was that we all had to have our hair shaven. In those days there were very few ordained Sangha around, and these were mostly monks. The only woman I had ever seen without hair at that time was Ani Pema, an older nun who lived at Samye Ling. The very first time I saw her she was coming down the staircase in the front entrance of Samye Ling and I had a sort of ‘whoosh’ sensation of inner shock at seeing her hair completely shaven. When questioned, Rinpoche told us all, “Oh, don’t worry, your hair will be cut just short enough to be comfortable for prostrations.” He kept telling us that whenever anyone would ask. Then the day before we started the eight pairs of *nyungney* fasting practice that preceded the retreat, Rinpoche told us to come up to the cottage to have our hair cut and he personally shaved all

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of our hair right off, down to the scalp! He was like a caring father putting his attention into every little aspect of the retreat.



Lama Ganga with the first retreatants, 1984 – 88

In March 1984 the first long retreat started with just seven men and nine women. My work in Samye Ling at that time was copying Dharma texts in the office. I had been very busy preparing all the texts for the retreat and was working up until the last minute to get them finished. There had not been time to have an interview with Rinpoche, and now it was too late. Everybody else had already gone to the retreat buildings and out of the blue Rinpoche said he would walk me up to Purelands. It was a strange feeling walking up the hill, knowing that I would not be back for four years. I was so grateful to Rinpoche; I could not think of any questions to ask

him but he used the walk to give me very helpful advice. One of the things he said was:

“During retreat there will always be a time when one feels great sadness. That is the time to put in more effort.”

Rinpoche’s words were deep and meaningful. He was like a kind father tenderly guiding his children, and his advice helped me focus my mind.

The great master, Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, who gave us most of the practice instructions in the first retreat, summarised the stages of practice like this:

“From the time of being a beginner one must practise according to the stages of the path. So that Dharmic tendencies arise and remain stable, one first begins with the common preliminary practices of the *four contemplations*, meditating on impermanence and so on. The very basis of all paths is *Refuge*, which is recited along with prostrations. The purpose of *Vajrasattva* practice is to pacify negative and coarse conceptualisations. The purpose of the *mandala* practice is to gather the accumulation of merit that creates the right circumstances for experience and realisation to arise in one’s mind-stream. Through the practice of *cutting through*, one’s body is made into an offering. Since whether the meditation goes well or not depends on blessings, one practises the general and specific *guru yogas* to develop faith and devotion.

“Mind training is to give rise to the special motivation of loving kindness, compassion and bodhicitta. One meditates on exchanging

oneself for others, on the equality of self and other. Those are the preliminary practices.

“The main practices are from the great classes of tantra with the general practice of the generation stage of the *yidam* deity, and especially the practices Lord Marpa Lotsawa received from Naropa, such as *Chakrasamvara* and *Vajrayogini*. It is the practice of *Vajrayogini* that mainly emphasises primordial wisdom. The generation stage is brought to perfection based on the accomplishment of the outer, inner and secret practices. The completion stage is practised based on the profound path of method, including the practices found within the Six Yogas of Naropa.

“So that one does not get lost in mere talk, dry understanding, or mere study, nor in fool’s meditation, blind faith or a mistaken path, one then receives empowerments that mature, explanations that liberate, and reading transmissions that support.

“In three years, the best retreatants fully accomplish the practice; the average one attains qualities, and the lowest one takes hold of the start of the path leading to liberation and omniscience. In this way retreat is endowed with many special benefits.”

Akong Rinpoche’s kindness was constant like that of a loving father and we were fortunate that in those days he visited the retreat often. He would often appear unannounced: sometimes visiting during the session, sometimes suddenly appearing at mealtime or at the end of a puja – reminding us again and again of why we were there, encouraging us to face everything with maturity and always remember our buddha-nature. He talked about the importance of lineage and of receiving the transmission of blessing, which is neces-

sary for realisation. He said that once a clear visualisation is established, faith is more important and we do not need to be anxious about the automatic quality of the prostrations or any other practice we do. He said, “If water runs through the mill, once it is going it may not need people to grind the flour.”

We were often reminded that the first three year retreat is not the occasion for going into great depths in the meditation, but to learn about the different practices and how to do them. Later we can focus in more depth. He emphasised that we are here to purify body, speech and mind: all physical sickness should be seen as purification for the practice. We should purify our speech through the recitations and speak less to avoid hurting or disturbing others. The mind purification comes through remembering we are here to benefit others.

Rinpoche quoted the famous Nyingma master, Patrul Rinpoche, saying: “If you talk less you’ll have less danger of losing mindfulness, less problems.” He taught us first to dedicate merit to the guru and pray for his good health and long life, then for parents and family and friends, and then for enemies, wishing that all their obscurations be removed. In this way all beings are included. He told us that the most important thing of all is to develop loving kindness and compassion, and that we should keep praying for the seed of compassion to grow in order to be able to help others.

It has been said, “The basis of virtuous activity is compatible friends.” With the encouragement of teachers and Dharma friends who want to follow the teachings sincerely, faith and diligence grow, and laziness and discouragement are transformed. Rinpoche empha-

sised the need for diligence and disciplined conduct. He expected us to keep session times strictly. If one or two people were not able to manage to keep the full schedule, that was not supposed to influence the others, and we were to take great care not to waste precious time. He told us, “Don’t sit in your meditation box thinking, ‘My practice is not succeeding’, or, ‘this person is creating problems for my practice’. That kind of thinking is what is meant by wasting time.”

Speaking about faith, devotion, and guru yoga he said:

“A compassionate motivation is like the ground. The four ordinary foundations are the seed and the blessing of the guru is the water. Without water the seed will never grow. Even if your visualisation is weak, if you call on the guru with complete faith, not just partial faith, you will still get the full blessing and benefit of the practice. During guru yoga you should surrender completely and pray to the guru like a child calling out to its mother.”

“Do not look for good or bad experiences, everything should be seen as the blessings of the guru, whether by the kindness of pleasant experiences or the purification of unpleasant experiences. Sickness, hunger, anger or aggression from others should all be seen as an opportunity to purify body and mind by the blessing of the guru.”

Rinpoche quoted from the Gampopa Sadhana: “First merge your mind with the guru’s; then establish clarity. Maintain and rest in it with stability. This will give rise to the experience of great bliss.”

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He warned us often to be very careful in speech, to talk as little as possible, and reminded us that in retreat we all become very sensitive and everything we do or say, negative or positive, becomes multiplied many times.

He told us how fortunate we were to be able to receive teachings on all the practices including the Six Yogas of Naropa that Milarepa himself achieved realisation through, and how fortunate we were to spend time meditating under the guidance of such great masters as Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche and Venerable Situ Rinpoche, from both of whom Tibetans would travel for many months to receive a blessing. He reminded us of impermanence, saying, “You are here to prepare so you are ready when death comes.” He also encouraged us to look at the mind, not to look outside, reminding us that all obstacles arise in the mind; he told us, “You have too many *namtok*, too many thoughts,” making us aware of how precious the retreat was.

In any situation Rinpoche always tried to encourage his students to work harder and to make the most of the opportunity we had. For example to all of us in the retreat he would talk about the example of Tibetans saying:

“The Tibetans have so much faith and devotion, they recite mantras wherever they are, day and night. They put up with any hardship for the sake of the Dharma. They do two fasting days instead of one when they do nyungney practice. They are willing to die for the Dharma.”

Similarly we heard that in Tibet he would show people clips of film of the retreatants doing *chod* (“cutting through”) practice together. He would tell them, “Look what the Westerners are doing! They have so much faith even though they are new to the Dharma; they meditate and chant in the Tibetan language even if they don’t understand it all; they do long retreat even though Buddhism is new in the West.” He told us it gave the Tibetans hope to see that Westerners practised the Dharma and used their language. It was encouraging for them to see the Dharma spreading outside their own country.

Rinpoche invited all the greatest masters to teach and give empowerments at Samye Ling in the early days, when they all had more time and were more available. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche took responsibility for the first three retreats that took place at Purelands, and came to Samye Ling every year. He gave precious teachings, practice instructions, empowerments and personal interviews. HE Tai Situ Rinpoche also came to give empowerments, teachings, advice and individual guidance. We were incredibly fortunate to have these two great masters visiting the retreat so often, and Rinpoche always reminded us of that.

His Holiness Dalai Lama visited the retreat in the summer of 1984, preceded by a security check. Knowing full well that no one had entered the retreat for many many months, Rinpoche still dutifully walked around the whole retreat complex with a bomb detector, not missing a nook or cranny, while the security team waited outside. A few of us were in the shrine-room when he did his round with

the bomb detector and he jokingly pretended to scan all of us for our internal 'ego-bombs'.

His Holiness then gave a talk and blessings in our small shrine-room and enquired about everybody's background. It was quite an informal visit, with just the nine of us women and Rinpoche there, and with His Holiness seated on the throne so close to us.

Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, Akong Rinpoche's brother, had already started visiting the retreat in 1985 when Lama Ganga was away for longer periods of time. He gave us encouragement and support and was especially helpful as he understood the difficulties we faced in terms of the language and the cultural aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, which were all foreign to us. Lama Ganga was very traditional, and with our limited understanding of the practices and his limited knowledge of the English language, it was not always easy to bridge the gaps. Lama Yeshe's joyful and positive approach was like a breath of fresh air.

Venerable Kalu Rinpoche visited us just before the end of the retreat and gave us valuable advice on coming out and how to continue the practices outside of the retreat environment.

Both Thrangu Rinpoche and Situ Rinpoche gave *getsul* and *getsulma* life ordinations on several occasions within the retreats. In a talk Rinpoche gave to the retreatants in Samye Ling shrine-room just before the first retreat started, he said that people wanting to get ordained would be able to do so at the end of the retreat. It seemed very foreign to me at the time: there were not many monks or nuns around in those days, but I and two others took getsulma ordination with Thrangu Rinpoche in the retreat in 1985 and by

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the end of the first retreat, six women and two men had taken ordination. Rinpoche commented that he felt Lama Ganga had done a good job as retreat master with so many people getting ordained. Each following retreat more monks and nuns got ordained and Rinpoche announced that Samye Ling was officially a monastery with an established Sangha.



Former retreatants practising *Chö* together

During his precious visits to the retreat Rinpoche told us,

“You must learn to sit and meditate, this is how your answers will come. Not through reading, not through writing and not through interviews, but through meditation.”

When we talked about how difficult it is to meditate, he said:

“That is why you are in retreat. If you already knew how to meditate, you wouldn’t need to be here. Illness never needs to be an obstacle for retreat. You can always practise if you are mindful. You

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can do sending and taking, tonglen practice, and make the sickness something meaningful for yourselves and beneficial for all beings.”

He said we should not hope or expect to improve our health through retreat. Even though the practices we do will purify bad karma, we don't know how much there is to purify, and we have no way to measure.

“You may have a whole mountain to move, and during retreat you may only manage two shovelfuls. Defilements are not finished through this retreat, but now at least you have a tool. If the defilements were a big rock in front of you, the tool is just a needle which you can use to break tiny bits off the solid granite. But now at least with practice the tool can get stronger and the rock less solid.”

When we asked why in that case do so many practices promise good health as a sign of successful practice, Rinpoche said that we have to accept that our practice is not yet that good! In a talk about the *bardo*, Rinpoche told us not to worry about the *bardo*, but to practise mindfulness, always remember mind training, and learn to stabilise the mind. He said:

“If you are able to be mindful all the time there will be no fear in the bardo. Fear comes from lack of mindfulness and loss of stability.”

Rinpoche encouraged us to put more effort into meditation and the practice of mindfulness so the periods without mindfulness become shorter and shorter. Regarding mindfulness during sleep he said:

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“In sleep we are mainly unmindful, being very rarely able to recognise that we are dreaming. You should make an effort to be mindful before you go to sleep, and again immediately when you wake up you should re-establish mindfulness. Gradually you will be able to be mindful twenty hours a day, then little by little twenty-four hours a day.”

Rinpoche reminded us that when we have strong dreams, any fear, suffering and enjoyment are the same as in daily life, but then we wake up and realise it was a dream. He told us that the bardo is stronger than any dream, and the only way to face the bardo is by developing very strong mindfulness. Encouraging us to practise he said:

“Mindfulness is achieved through constant effort and diligence. Everything can be made useful in developing mindfulness if we watch closely. Especially in the Kagyu tradition, faith and devotion are very important in helping to increase mindfulness. It cannot be bought or made, only diligence can bring it about.”

On one of Akong Rinpoche’s visits to the retreat, the main focus was his bestowal of the empowerment of Guru Rinpoche. We had been long and eagerly hoping for this, as he had promised it earlier on in the retreat. At Rinpoche’s request we had prepared for the initiation by practising the *Koncho Chidu* before his arrival that morning, but stopping just at the time of the tsok offering. When Rinpoche arrived he went straight to the shrine-room, first to give personal interviews, then after a lunch break he proceeded with

preparations for the empowerment. He had brought with him all the necessary shrine objects.

From the time we all entered the shrine-room there was a very wonderful atmosphere and no one could mistake the special nature of the occasion. Rinpoche wore a beautiful zen, white with red borders. Before beginning the empowerment itself, he spoke to us all. He said the empowerment we would receive was a combination of Koncho Chidu together with *Amitayus* for long life. He said he was very happy to give this because we had requested it many times. Nevertheless he also had this to say:

“A long life just in itself is not very useful. You should not be wasting it in retreat thinking, where will I live, what job can I get? This is no different from cows, dogs and rabbits, the animals we can see, all thinking about what to eat and where to sleep. We are human beings and should not see things in such a narrow-minded way. You have a chance for more than this and should make use of it. You should think of how you can benefit others, now and in the future. Practice will make you more pure and eventually you will be able to help. Now you should do your best to make the most of the time left in the retreat and not to worry about what you will do later.”

Rinpoche then introduced us to the sacred and precious relics he had brought with him for the empowerment. There was a hat of faded, dark red woollen material, which had belonged to the first Akong Tulku. Also a yellow monk's robe, which had been worn by one of the previous Tai Situpa incarnations. There was Rinpoche's

gold locket, which contained many precious relics including hairs of Guru Rinpoche and of Yeshe Tsogyal and of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Karmapas. Tied to Rinpoche's locket was a *dorje* of sky iron which had been recovered by the Tertön Rigzin Jatson Nyingpo along with a particular *terma* text of Koncho Chidu for which we would be receiving empowerment. This dorje had been kept by Sherab Palden Beru's monastery until they entrusted its care to Akong Rinpoche.

Rinpoche said that in receiving an empowerment, two things come together: the power of the relic, the text and the ritual on one side, and on the other side the purity and sincerity of the person receiving it. This determines how much benefit one will gain from taking the empowerment. He then proceeded to give the empowerment.

Before we came out of retreat Rinpoche gave us advice for the future. He said that some people may return to retreat, others may do retreat from time to time, and some people will go back to worldly life. But he warned us saying:

“Even in the future when the chance for retreat will arise, when you may have a chance to do retreat, then habit may prevent it. One can always practise anywhere if the motivation is strong enough, but in worldly life it is much more difficult. Here in retreat you have a positive environment for practice, so you should make the most of it.

“Those who are unable to meditate due to misunderstanding of Dharma, or strong emotions, delusions and obstacles arising, they

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will not be able to practise just because I say these words. However you should see that obstacles may appear because you allow them and even encourage them to appear. Obstacles are not started by anyone else, they arise only from our own minds. We create them ourselves. It starts from a small thing, an idea, a feeling, a few words, but we repeat it again and again. When a negative thing is repeated it becomes an obstacle.

“On the positive side, this is the time to dig for a tiny seed of the positive. You must try to develop that tiny seed, day by day, and watch it grow a little bigger. You should not try to get rid of the negative thoughts, emotions or patterns of behaviour, just leave them alone and take care of the seed of the positive. If you do this you will get some results.”

Rinpoche said that when we went home it would be too late to make use of this advice, but if we were to work hard during the retreat then we would be stronger and more able to face whatever might come after we left. He said:

“If you practise well, you will have a true spiritual identity, not just a uniform and credentials of retreat but a more mature mind and sense of peacefulness. Then you will have no doubt that these three years of retreat have had some meaning. When you leave the retreat, whatever understanding you have developed of the nature of mind and of compassion you must take it out with you.”

Rinpoche encouraged us with these words:

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“Your spiritual development will become a kind of preciousness, a form of nourishment like food which will sustain your own lives and allow you to nourish others. This does not necessarily mean becoming a Dharma teacher, but somehow due to genuine compassion one may be recognised as different to others in the worldly situation. Like sunshine: it is not necessary to use a lot of words [to describe] the sun, everybody knows [what it’s like]. What is important is what is inside, not how many prayers and texts you have memorised but an inner quality of genuine warmth. So whatever people may present to you – their anger, jealousy, hatred, even physical beating – you just develop a big stomach to take it all without minding. Surely to give Dharma talks has some benefit, but what has most benefit is what you have developed within yourself. So don’t waste time. Don’t use problems as an excuse. Be thankful for whatever experience comes: obstacles, sickness, others’ anger and blame. Appreciate all of it – you are the ones needing to be matured, needing to learn how to overcome the obstacles. Retreat is not for putting on a suit of armour to protect oneself from all obstacles, retreat is for learning to accept whatever comes. Once you start looking at obstacles then everything becomes an obstacle. But if you stop looking at obstacles and learn to see the benefit in all situations, then everything becomes useful.”

With his usual modesty Rinpoche said that he could not do this himself, but that this is what is taught in the Dharma, and that from what he was able to see it was true. He then advised us not to think just of practising for the time we have left in retreat, but rather for the rest of our lives.

Rinpoche said that when we make mistakes and suffer due to our mistakes, then we should appreciate the suffering. If we can do that it dissolves by itself. If we look for the cause of the suffering and end up blaming someone else, or ourselves, then the suffering will only increase. However if we look at the suffering and appreciate it with a positive mind, this will help us to mature. Rinpoche said that this may be difficult at first and does not happen instantly, but if it is repeated again and again consistently we will experience a change.

In relation to the relative merits of group retreat versus individual retreat, Rinpoche said that this was difficult to judge and it would depend on the individual. In Tibet both types of retreat were practised, he said. Usually the group retreat came first, for learning prayers, visualisations, ritual and for accumulating the number of recitations for each practice. The purification and accumulation aspect would be the main emphasis in a first retreat.

In a second retreat there would then be more emphasis on meditation and visualisation, even if one was still within the group setup and mainly following the same timetable. A solitary retreat would normally only be done as a third retreat. This would be in a separate place and concentrating on one's own practice. It could be in the same premises but away from the group. In group retreat people get the most benefit when everyone does the same thing at the same time, not people doing all different programmes. This gives most benefit and encouragement and value to the group as a whole, but not necessarily to each individual. How to balance the needs of individuals with the needs of the group is up to the retreat master.

Although the Vajrayana practices in retreat emphasise taking the result as the path, Rinpoche always talked about the importance of the four foundations. He told us that we would not have deep and profound practice without a strong foundation of renunciation. He would talk about impermanence, reminding us that we were in retreat in order to prepare for death. Each and every word he spoke was full of meaning, moving us to tears.

He advised that even if one's practice seemed to be going well, one should regularly go back and analyse according to basic Buddhist principles, otherwise the ego might take over. Although at this stage we were mainly there to learn how to do these profound practices, deep practice would come in the future, when we had matured and assimilated the teachings. He told us that to learn to appreciate our suffering is very beneficial, even if it is not considered a high practice.

The first retreat finished in early 1988. That year Lama Ganga, our retreat master, requested Situ Rinpoche to do a *mo*, a divination, to bring clarity on his future plans. As a result of the *mo* Tai Situpa told Lama Ganga: "If you don't die this year, you will live a long time." Lama Ganga was quite worried by this. The last time I saw him was a few days later when he was about to leave Samye Ling to go to Tibet. I was in my room with the window open and he put his head through the window to say goodbye. He said, "Please pray for me!" with such an urgency it brought tears to my eyes.

Later that summer I was in the office when Rinpoche asked me, "Did you hear the bad news?" Mentally I braced myself, knowing that if Rinpoche called something "bad news", it meant it was really

bad. He then told me Lama Ganga had become ill while travelling in Tibet and had died quite suddenly during a visit to Thrangu Monastery. His body is now enshrined in a stupa there. For a while Lama Ganga's death threw everything up in the air regarding the next retreat.

Between the retreats all the buildings were expanded and people going into the next retreat were asked to help as much as they could with the building work. Rinpoche himself was digging and wheelbarrowing; he was like a site manager and kept all of us motivated. He had his meals with everyone and during one of those lunches at Purelands he told a story of how the footprint of His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa appeared on a large rock near the gate.

He told us that a few days earlier he and Gyamtso had walked down to Samye Ling as usual. Due to all the building work and the digging going on at the site, a large rock near the gate, which was normally hidden by bushes, had now become visible. Pointing to the large rock Gyamtso said to Rinpoche, "If this was in Tibet people would say this is a footprint!" Rinpoche looked at the rock which had what seemed like a clear impression of a footprint on it. He told us he then remembered that when His Holiness Karmapa had stayed in the Roundhouse at Purelands in 1974, one day on their way down to Samye Ling His Holiness commented on the unusual large rocks and said he liked them. Rinpoche replied to His Holiness, "Yes, but without your footprints they are just ordinary rocks!" His Holiness then playfully jumped onto a rock, stood on it and pretended to leave his footprints there jokingly, and that was apparently the end of that.

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When Rinpoche now saw this rock ten years later with a footprint on it, he was clearly moved. He told the workmen to shift the huge rock with the big diggers that were on site already and place it in a more prominent position near the Roundhouse. He then told everyone, “Just leave the rock alone. Don’t take photographs, just leave it alone.” During the second retreat, while Lama Yeshe was in retreat in the Roundhouse, another footprint emerged clearly next to the first one and then gradually faded away again.



Procession at the end of the second retreat, spring 1993

In March 1989, with the paint barely dry inside the hurriedly built new houses, the second long retreat began. Akong Rinpoche had once again shaved everyone’s head and closed the boundaries and had installed Lama Yeshe Losal as retreat master. Along with that he had appointed four of the first retreatants as helpers and assistants, two in the men’s retreat and two in the women’s. This would help to make the path more smooth for those entering the retreat for the first time.

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We had heard a lot about Rinpoche's brother over the years while he was in retreat in Karma Triyana in America. Rinpoche would often tell us about Lama Yeshe's immense diligence and dedication and use him as an example of what we should aim for in retreat. He would tell us, "My brother only eats one meal a day in retreat," and, "my brother only sleeps four hours every night." Similarly Kalu Rinpoche had said publicly that anyone wanting Mahamudra instructions need look no further than Lama Yeshe Losal. He was well placed as the new retreat master. The fact that he had spent so much time with Westerners, combined with his great experience in meditation, made him ideally placed to guide the next retreat. His joyful, boundless energy and positive outlook inspired and gave the group a tremendous lift during the retreat. He particularly helped with guidance on the Six Yogas of Naropa and gave group talks and individual guidance.

The second retreat continued along the same lines as the previous one but with some improvements based on experience, better texts and more translations. The retreat buildings were also enlarged. The situation was a little easier this time as nine of the first retreat's participants had decided to go back for the second one. From then onwards each time a retreat started the number of retreatants increased, with forty-six men and women going into the second retreat in 1989. This came to a successful conclusion in the spring of 1993 and was then followed by a third retreat with fifty-four people joining from November 1993 until spring of 1997.

The acquisition of Holy Isle for the purpose of building a new retreat centre meant there was a break of several years before the

fourth and the following retreats could begin. Thanks to Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, and all those future retreatants and helpers who stayed there over a two year period in basic conditions, a purpose-built traditional retreat for men now exists on Arran, along with a beautiful retreat place on Holy Isle for women. The first long retreat for women on Holy Isle began in October 2002 and was completed in the spring of 2006. The men's retreat had to start later to allow time to finish building their retreat centre at Glenscorrodale on the Isle of Arran. It eventually started in the summer of 2005. Each of these retreats built on the experiences of the previous ones, and they have allowed some two hundred people or more to study, practise and benefit from the Dharma.

The retreatants on Holy Isle and Arran were fortunate to receive instructions from Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma Lhabu. Drupon Rinpoche trained in Tsab Tsa retreat near Derge in Eastern Tibet, where he is known to have engendered exceptional qualities of experience and realisation, as well as the signs of successful practice; he then received Dharma from accomplished masters from many lineages, notably in Serthar Dharma encampment under Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Meeting Kyabje Thrangu Rinpoche in Nepal in 1999, he eventually accepted invitations to teach in and lead the retreat at Thrangu Gompa in Nepal. Lama Katen, the Deputy Abbot of Samye Ling, was already a close student of Drupon Rinpoche. In 2008, with the blessing of Akong Rinpoche, Lama Katen managed to persuade his teacher to come to Samye Ling in the same capacity (as shedra teacher and retreat master), a role in which he has continued ever since.

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Thanks to the immense kindness and vast activity of Akong Rinpoche, who was like a father, a mother, a teacher and a guide to all those who were drawn to his quiet but powerful presence, large numbers of people have benefitted from his wisdom. He established the right conditions for retreat, brought great teachers to Samye Ling and thus enabled the seeds of Dharma to be planted and take root in the West.

Precious Rinpoche,
May we meet you again and again in future lives!

Purelands and The Holy Isle/Arran Retreats

by Lama Rinchen Palmo

Homage

Rinpoche

When you are near
There is stillness in the chaos

In the crystal palace of your presence
There is the sharpness that dispels drowsy smugness
The gentleness without complacency that allows trust to grow
The firmness that defies hidden fears
The wrath that shatters excuses ...

Your movements, unfailing mindfulness,
Describe blissful emptiness better than any book

Your words are like pills of sanity to the confused

Your mind of pure space is the only Refuge

And I pray that neither death, sickness, sorrow or elation
Ever, ever, pull me away from your vajra mind.

The first long Tibetan Buddhist retreat in the UK began in 1984. This is my personal account of the second and third retreats in Purelands, which took place between 1989 and 1993, and 1994 and 1997 respectively.

In the early eighties, my companion of twelve years and my father both died, and I went on a pilgrimage to India and Nepal, with a month of Dorje Sempa retreat in Namo Buddha. On my way back, at Samye Ling, I expressed my wish to carry on with practice to which Rinpoche answered: “Small retreats okay, long retreat better”. He invited me to take part in the long traditional three-year retreat that was to take place on the hillside named Purelands close to Samye Ling.

In a few key words, not even one sentence, Rinpoche had shaped my future for me, and for this I am forever grateful. Without his guidance, I can safely say that I would probably not be alive today, because as much as I appreciated the Dharma and meditation, so strong in me was the power of depression and suicidal tendencies that this ‘demon’ might have won if there had not been the goal of retreat to keep me on track.

Akong Rinpoche made sure we had all the proper preparations, teachings and initiations bestowed by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche prior to the retreats. And in 1989, I finally entered the long retreat

in a brand new building with each room equipped with its own water basin, meditation box and shrine, beautiful Tibetan style curtains in the windows ... such luxury! On reflection, I thought, “Well, that way, if we still manage to complain, we’ll have nobody else to blame but our own neediness!”

The day before the retreat started, Rinpoche shaved our heads with utter gentleness and skill. When it came to Rosie, his secretary for seven years or more, who had very long hair gathered at the back in a plait, he just shaved around the plait until he was left with the plait in his hand with her scalp impeccably shaved! He had done it all in one go without losing one strand of hair in the process!

Akong Rinpoche came to visit the retreat quite regularly. I still remember his first visit. We were all looking forward to it with great eagerness. When we all gathered in the shrine-room with him, I had this strong impression that, as Rinpoche looked all around, the whole room suddenly was totally sealed, impregnable and the air within the room totally charged up, pregnant with energy. Then, as we all looked up towards him with intense expectancy, he declared, “You are here to prepare for death. You are queuing up in the slaughterhouse, you are not even in the fields anymore, not ever since you were born.” These words said with total calm and an even tone of voice left everyone breathless and you could have heard a pin drop! Rinpoche had an amazing skill at using the very few words that count.

The majority of the retreatants were actually women who had spent many years in Samye Ling working in different areas – the

dairy, offices, thangka-painting – or had been in the first long retreat, so many had been very close to Rinpoche. So he said, “You do not need me anymore, the questions you may have will find their answer in the meditation box.” And this advice has helped me for the many years that were to come. He was always encouraging us to be stronger, more courageous and responsible. He would say:

“Do not waste precious retreat time. [Your mind is] like a piece of wood without much value as such, but if carved skilfully, it can be worth thousands of pounds. If not, it might not even be enough to boil one cup of water!”

He showed us how to use negativities as mind training; how, when sick or depressed, not to fight it in order to try to have a bright meditation, but instead to just have a “low meditation” – but to continue meditating nonetheless. Also, he would warn:

“You are here to train yourselves, not to train others!”

Another special memory: on the last day of a long and intensive deity practice involving six months of total silence, we had invited Akong Rinpoche to join us for lunch. We had completed the two weeks of *drubpa* and were in a mood of joyous celebration. It was early summer and really sunny and vibrant, everything around looking fresh and sparkly, one of those magical days Scotland offers once in a while to make up for the rest of the year. We were eating out on the grass in the little garden, all shiny and euphoric when Rinpoche spoke up: “A big hotel in Bombay has been serving little

babies as meat to their customers until one of them found a finger in his plate.” This information hit us all in various ways like all the Buddha’s teachings do. For me, at that very moment, the message was: do not forget compassion even when you are feeling as high as a kite. Suffering, insanity, barbaric behaviour are still happening even though they are not ultimately real. Do not become indulgent here in your protected enclave, thinking that you have got it all figured out. Rinpoche himself did not elaborate, but let our minds assimilate it in their own time. Rinpoche was not here to please but to make us grow and purify our poisons, and he did so with utter fearlessness.

Rinpoche was very keen on people doing retreats and he took great care that we were provided with all the necessary instruments, ritual objects, texts and so on. When we settled into our individual rooms, in my first retreat, he came around to each one of us and checked the books we had brought with us, telling us which ones to keep and which ones to stash away in the attic until the end of the retreat! Basically, his recommendations were very simple: “All you need is *Milarepa Gurbum (The Songs of Milarepa)*, and or, the *Kagyü Gurtso (Rain of Wisdom)*, one change of clothes, one cup, one bowl, one pen and notebook, one picture – the Refuge Tree – because all the beings to be practised are represented there.” Of course, I must confess that most of us did not stick to this strict order but it did give us a gauge of what we should aim for.

“No writing, no reading, just dealing with your mind. You are not in school here: you are in retreat!”

At one point, he came to see us unannounced during our session and managed to open each of our doors without making a sound, so that he could surprise each one of us. Judging by the smile on his face, he seemed to be greatly amused!

When someone was sick, he always tried to provide medicine if he could. Like a loving father, when he came back from his long journeys, he would bring back some presents, such as malas, dutsi, prayer flags and so on, that we cherished very much. He always remained very low-key about his healing powers but I remember the time when during the retreat, I went to see him with a nagging pain down my right arm that had been with me for a while and did not want to go away. Rinpoche stroked down his own arm saying, “Yes sometimes people get a pain there,” and when I left the shrine-room, the pain had gone. Another time, one retreatant was having painful cramps in her womb because her periods were long overdue. As Rinpoche was leaving us, he passed by her and just gazed at her womb. The same evening, her periods came. I also heard about him walking on someone’s back to alleviate backache. In the first retreat, in the men’s house, he also took care of someone’s toothache by linking the tooth by a string to the door handle and slamming the door! That was that! Whatever was required, he would provide. His advice to us about being ill in retreat was:

“Practise tonglen. Make your sickness meaningful and fruitful. This is practice. Never confuse retreat and sickness: two different things. You can be sick outside as well as inside of retreat. Never expect

retreat to cure sickness nor think that retreat makes you sicker. Sickness is just sickness. That's all."

His presence itself was healing. Not by indulging our weaknesses but by making us face up to our great attachment to self and the emotional conditioning that goes with it, would we be healed. He would say:

"Negativities are not stronger in retreat, just more detailed. Out in the world is like being in a car on the motorway. The countryside passes by very fast. You see it but not every flower, every blade of grass.

"When in retreat, [if] you see you are getting worse, it means you are getting better. Clarity: see clearly in detail what is happening – but [without] clinging, thinking that negative feelings are wrong and positive feelings are right. Just accept thoughts. If you experience negativity all the time, try to let your negative feeling pass through you, do not sink in it. If you analyse the nature and the cause of it, it increases. Look face to face the negative, not to run away, not to create. When thoughts arise, just look at the nature of the thoughts. Look through the thoughts. Thought disappears like a drop of water dripping on a hot iron."

He would never stay very long as he also had to visit the men's retreat and then attend to all the other matters down in Samye Ling but his visits were truly a shower of blessings, his words like

so many gems. In his loving kindness for us, there was no room for complacency. As he said himself about therapy:

“Therapy is like giving children a lot of sweets all the time so they’ll have to go to the dentist for the rest of their lives. Therapy without compassion is rubbish! We are in retreat to develop compassion!”

“Compassion is the field; the four ordinary foundations are the seeds; purification is the work; the guru’s blessing is the rain.”

And when we got discouraged:

“We cannot judge our changes and results when it comes to purification because we do not know how much there is to purify, how much has accumulated over a limitless number of lifetimes. So we are purifying but maybe it is just light superficial work and still lots to be done for many more lifetimes to come.”

And when things got heavy: “Rinpoche, but what about the pain?”

“Meditate on it!”

“Rinpoche, what about depression?”

“Depression is part of the retreat. Meditate on it! Turn everything into meditation.”

“What about conflicting thoughts?”

“Just sit back and let them conflict!”

“Leave negativities alone. Do not try to wipe them out. Just let them be. But turn to the seed of positive and cultivate it. Slowly make it grow.

“To be positive is a duty. Negativity is there already in all of us, no need to create more. What we should want is to simplify our lives, not to think that we need to have other and other things – practise without expectations – don’t think too much or over-analyse. When the practice is pure, then the action is automatically the right one. But until that stage one must act with extreme mindfulness, always practising with the right motivation. The most important thing is to train the mind in a secluded place. Retreat is a way of helping people because by training the mind, one can help people. Mind is like boiling water, until it cools down, you cannot tell how much water is in the pot. Until you calm down your mind, you cannot tell what is ego and what is not in your motivations. In retreat, one must not give importance to feelings. Buddhism is freedom.”

When asked what would be a good result of someone coming out of retreat, Rinpoche replied:

“Kind, patient, able to digest any suffering; humbleness ... willing to serve, willing to help; not looking all the time at the negative in people but look at the positive in others; not looking for miracles. I think failure in retreat is to leave with too much ego and no compassion.”

He also said: “The whole purpose of retreat? Death without fear ... and to be able to face whatever situation arises in your life.”

Retreats on Holy Isle



The women's retreat buildings on Holy Isle

Holy Isle, a small but beautiful island off the west coast of Scotland, was acquired by Samye Ling in 1990. Its history of spiritual endeavour and peaceful location make it an ideal place for retreat. The women's retreat was relocated there from Purelands from 1997, while the men's retreat was built by the retreatants themselves a few miles away in an isolated glen on Arran. The first men's long retreat began there in 2005.

On Holy Isle there were one-year *ngondro* retreats from 1997 to 2002, and two traditional three-year retreats from 2002–2005 and 2011–2014. Since then the retreat has been occupied by nuns taking part in a retreat course designed by Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma

Lhabu, with daily teaching received from him via the internet all the way from Nepal.

On July 16th 1999 Akong Rinpoche gave this talk to the women's retreat on Holy Isle:

“For all of us here the purpose is to prepare for our future lives and how not to waste this precious human body.

“When Lama Yeshe and myself purchased Holy Island, we were not looking for a way to become famous or to feed our egos, we are sincerely trying to establish and preserve our spiritual tradition and especially maintain the growth of Buddhism in European countries. If we don't take it seriously, Buddhism could become like a showpiece. If people talk about Buddhism but there is no experience of the deep nectar of the experience of it, then Buddhism will disappear. It is our duty to preserve and develop the precious spirituality which exists in Tibet.

“Tibet does not have modern developments based on technology, but there are many precious people there who have achieved or realised the mind. In the West we have achieved a lot materially but we are very weak in our minds. The difference between Tibet and Europe is that Tibetans generally have a happier character because they are satisfied, not by material things but in their minds. We Westerners are not satisfied in our minds: although we feed our material desires this does not bring permanent happiness. The kind of happiness it brings is like flowers which grow and then disappear and then you have to get another pot of flowers. Therefore, in our Western countries

we have more people who are mentally disturbed because we have not found this preciousness [in our minds].

“Last year when I went to Tibet two great yogis achieved rainbow body. Rainbow body means that after they died, their bodies disappeared within seven days, leaving only their hair and nails for their disciples to remember them by. The place where this happens becomes a holy place. None of us thinks that this still happens in Tibet, but although Tibet is now much more modern, there are still many people who live as hermits, like we read in the story of Milarepa. If we are not able to bring that quality of Buddhism to Europe then we will not be able to benefit from Buddhism here. Our Buddhism will be artificial.

“Now is a time of transition: the lamas are here but we will die and you people will have to take over Buddhism. Language doesn't really matter. I am sure that within your lifetimes every prayer that we say will be said in your own language – you won't have to study Tibetan language anymore. But the fundamental thing is applying it in your own mind. If you don't apply it, it will become like the Church has become in Europe: the Church has lost the spiritual side. Meditation, the deep nectar of the Church is mostly no longer available. I am sure there are some people who have it, but generally it is like a kind of entertainment you have on Sunday, spending one or two hours saying prayers. And when you say prayers, you are also thinking about your business or your cooking or your cleaning. You are not really concentrating on the prayer itself. If we don't do

something then Buddhism will be just like that. Maybe Buddhists will do Monday prayers, Christians Sunday prayers. After saying the prayers we forget and do all sorts of bad things and there is nothing developing inside us.

“So here in the retreat you have a great responsibility about the kind of Buddhism you are going to pass down to future [generations]. It is all in your hands. It is the most precious thing because all human minds of the future, all of Western civilisation, are in your hands. You have to achieve something before all the Tibetans have disappeared.

“Of course there are good Tibetans and bad Tibetans, so the first thing is to know the difference between good and bad. It is also very important that you get that particular knowledge from those who have it. This has no price: it is beyond price. It has no price because through it human minds are going to be happy. If we are going to end people committing suicide, if we want to end crime, if we want to end drug-taking then we need to feed people’s minds. This doesn’t mean giving them a new car or a better house: it has nothing to do with the material aspect – people can be very happy just living in a tent. People can be very satisfied with just having something to wear, it doesn’t matter what, doesn’t have to be rich cloth.

“In order to achieve that it is necessary to have monks and nuns. Buddha taught that if you want to establish Buddhism, there have to be people who have given up worldly life and family life, who totally dedicate themselves twenty-four hours a day. If you want to

dedicate yourself like that, then you have to be by yourself: there shouldn't be people depending on you and you shouldn't be depending on other people. If you want to be free from samsaric life then you have to be a monk or nun.

“Also, until you become a monk or a nun, you won't be able to see all the desire in your mind because you are always feeding your desire – you are not cutting your desire. When you become a monk or nun you are not allowed to drink, you are not allowed to smoke, you are not allowed to have relationships, so then you start to see what kind of a nature you have. You will see yourself nakedly. Before you artificially covered [yourself with] all the beautiful things. Now when you look clearly you see it all: I have this problem, I have that problem; I have so much desire for this or that. You can no longer escape that desire, you have to ride that desire.

“Sometimes people say, ‘Monks and nuns are not necessary because we can practise the Dharma as lay people.’ But a lay person's time is limited: if you have children, you are bound to your children. You cannot say: ‘I am a Buddhist so I can have children but I don't want to have responsibility for them.’ If you have a family then you have to take responsibility. You can't give up responsibility as soon as you become Buddhist. You should be responsible for whatever commitment you have made.

“Therefore, the whole idea about Holy Island is to give people a chance to acquire this knowledge, to develop this understanding. Not just like reading: reading the songs of Milarepa for example is some-

times quite nice, but it doesn't mean anything significant until you experience them and really understand them.

“People meditate: someone who has done meditation for one month may have some idea. But if you have done meditation for many years then when you read Milarepa's songs, it will not be just an idea but you will really see what is written. So meditation is very, very important. One should not devalue it.

“Holy Island is a precious place where we can preserve this holy place itself, we can preserve its precious plants, its precious natural food ... have compassion for nature. But the most holy thing is learning to deal with the mind and how to overcome all the mind poisons. If we know how to overcome the poisons, the poisons themselves become very precious.

“The most precious medicine is mercury. If you don't know how to make it precious, mercury is the most poisonous. But if you know how to deal with it, it becomes the most precious substance for aiding the body: it can help grow new hair, can change white hair to black, old people can become young again. It can give just what we Westerners are looking for!

“In the same way, through meditation, even our physical form changes. That is the method you people are here to achieve. Holy Island will not be a place for entertainment. This is a place where you practise, for one year or three years. And in the future, we hope many of you will become life-long solitary retreatants, not going back and forth,

like a kind of holiday, but Holy Island becomes your life; and I hope that many people will achieve the rainbow body on Holy Island.

“You cannot buy that achievement of the rainbow body. You have to work at it, and each of you is responsible. We don’t have to wait to develop a big retreat. That may take twenty or thirty years, we don’t know. But you people are here in retreat now. You need to put a little more effort into your practice. Just being on Holy Island will not achieve anything. Coming to Holy island to sleep does not solve your problem! It is most important to practise. And I hope that many yoginis, many very precious yoginis, will eventually come to remain in caves on Holy Island!

“There are a few holy people in Tibet who eat only seven grains of barley a day, drink only one or two drops of water a day and wear one cotton robe. They have no other possessions and sit and meditate day and night. I hope we achieve that here – then I will have the feeling that I have achieved something for the future of Buddhism. If we are not able to achieve that, then I really feel we have wasted all our efforts. We will have kind of dancing Buddhists, which is not what we need. What we need is solid Buddhists, who are able to give the precious Dharma to limitless people for limitless lives. We don’t need so many of them, but we need a few – maybe one or two out of a hundred. I don’t think everybody will be able to achieve that: out of six million Tibetans, I think that less than ten really achieved something. But these ten are like the sun and moon: they shine through

the whole of Tibet, even the whole world. So my suggestion is that you do a proper retreat.

“It is most important to talk less: silence is a precious thing. People chat and talk and the day disappears. They don’t remember what they talk about: about the weather, their friends, about the same things, repeated again and again, every day. But in the end nobody has any result. The worst kind of talk in retreat is gossip: ‘She is writing, I saw the letter; she is seeing somebody; she must be thinking that or doing something!’ Maybe even: ‘They could be going to kill me!’ The mind is so strange: you can make a whole world out of nothing. So be positive. Help each other – helping each other does not mean gossiping. It is most important to stop talking.

“Another thing is to stop moving your hands: hands are very, very bad when you are in retreat, because as soon as you sit in the meditation box you see there is dust, so you want to get up and clean. Then, once you have done that, you see this is a little twisted, so you straighten it. Then you see there is a little hole so you start sewing. All the time, sitting in your box, you see things and are never able to stop. Then one hour is over and still you haven’t done the meditation or practice you should have done.

“As soon as you are in your box, no matter what is happening, you stop moving your hands. You shouldn’t have a pen or pencil or needle when you go to retreat. These things you can do when you are out of retreat. Study should not be done in the retreat room: if you have the idea of studying then you will only study and not do any medi-

tation. In the meditation box you must discipline yourself: no sewing, no knitting, no writing, no marking texts, no ideas of telephoning – you must stop all that.

“Meditation must be applied diligently: mindfulness must be applied throughout the whole day. Mindfulness means being mindful of your actions, being mindful of your thoughts, being mindful of what you say. Especially be mindful in a group: your actions must be something positive for the next person – although it doesn’t mean you become a slave to the other person. If you take your shoes off, for example, you put them in the right place so that the next person to come along doesn’t think bad things: ‘Look at that silly person putting their shoes in the wrong place!’. You should think of how to be helpful, how to be useful, even in small things. When you wash plates, think of the next person so they don’t have to do the job again and have bad feelings. If you do that you don’t cause anybody any suffering or pain or negative feelings.

“Here in the West, if you have toothache you have to go to the dentist. In Tibet we don’t have dentists anyway, so you just pull your teeth because it is not a big deal. If there is too much pain you take the tooth out. Then if you are still alive it’s not a big deal! But here you have first to find the money, then go to town again and again, and then worry: ‘I have to work. I must earn money to pay for my teeth!’

“Don’t run away from the pain – face the pain! If you get a little headache, meditate! Don’t look for an aspirin, often medicine is not very good, you feel you need it because you are not able to control

PURELANDS AND THE HOLY ISLE/ARRAN RETREATS

your mind. You analyse your body ... where is the pain? Where is there discomfort? You look for pain. When you look for pain, you think there is pain in the top of your finger, in your knee, even in your hair! That's because you are creating it. If you face things, you will find a much better way. Your life will be much better and you will save so much time and energy."



Samye Dechen Shing, the first men's retreat on Arran 2005. Seated in front row from left: Lama Zangmo, Akong Tulku Rinpoche, Sherab Palden Beru and Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche.

Akong Rinpoche's Activity in Belgium

by Carlo Luyckx

I had the great fortune of meeting Akong Rinpoche at the tender age of seventeen, several months after having left the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp without a diploma. My experiences with psychedelic drugs and yoga led me to discover Tibetan Buddhism through some friends who had travelled to India.

When I heard about the existence of a Tibetan centre in Scotland and the presence there of a high lama named Akong Rinpoche as well as of a thangka painter by the name of Sherab Palden Beru, I asked my mother to help me get enough money together to go to Scotland so that I could take Refuge and study thangka-painting. She very kindly helped me by secretly selling three diamonds she had received from her late father. I only realised the symbolic value of this generous act many years later upon telling Rinpoche the story.

Arriving at Samye Ling in the summer of 1971 I finally met Akong Rinpoche, although I was slightly disappointed to find him dressed

like a European. I asked him to give me Refuge, as well as the initiations of *Chenresig*, *Mahakala*, *Chakrasamvara* and *Hevajra*! He asked me if I had read any books about Buddhism and I very proudly enumerated lots of grand sounding titles. After a very long moment of silence, he told me, "I may give you Refuge, but I have to think about it." I left his office completely terrified. From that moment onward, I was unable to stop thinking about him. I was always on the lookout for him, but whenever I saw him coming around the corner, I would not know where to hide. Two weeks later, I finally dared to ask him for another interview and insistently asked again if he would please give me Refuge. He looked at the calendar and chose the day of the full moon. He told me to do a solitary retreat for three days leading up to the ceremony in a room in what was then called "the new building". During the ceremony I remember him saying that from that moment onwards, wherever we would be, even on the other side of the world, we would never be separated.

I did not manage to avoid falling back into old habits. After a year, I realised that I was not making any spiritual progress and so I decided to leave Antwerp for good and ask Akong Rinpoche to allow me to live at Samye Ling. He told me to come back after a year, since Kalu Rinpoche would be giving a whole month of teachings and initiations. The latter corresponded perfectly with the image I had of a high Tibetan lama, whereas Akong Rinpoche was dressed like any Westerner, walking around like an ordinary person without any attendants to serve him.

AKONG RINPOCHE'S ACTIVITY IN BELGIUM

Samye Ling was the ideal place for this historical visit, which was a real milestone in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. There were teachings every day and we got all the initiations we would need for many years or even a whole lifetime. It seemed to me that Akong Rinpoche was behaving very humbly in the presence of the old Kalu Rinpoche, but at one point I saw him beaming so much and so joyful that I imagined he must have been receiving some special transmission. There were people from all over Europe attending the course. At some point Akong Rinpoche gave a talk in which he told people that if they wanted to offer flowers to the lama, it was very good but that they should first make sure that they only offered flowers grown by themselves, which actually did succeed in getting people to stop picking the flowers from the beautiful garden of Samye Ling.



Carlo thangka-painting

Akong Rinpoche agreed to my request to do *ngondro* retreat for two months, and this retreat was the real turning point in my life; I would not be a hippie any longer, at least not from the point of view of wasting my time taking psychedelic drugs. As for my outer appearance, there needed to be a transition: I was very proud of my long hair and liked to imagine myself looking like Milarepa. I was very much in need of somebody who could tame me like Marpa did with Milarepa, and Akong Rinpoche was perfectly fit for the job!

The day before the Karmapa arrived in November 1974, I was sitting at one of the tables in the dining room when suddenly the people in front of me stopped talking. I felt a presence behind me, and before I could turn around, Akong Rinpoche grabbed me by my long hair, which at that time almost reached my bottom, and said with a firm voice, "You cut your hair!" I did obey him by cutting it up to my shoulders. It took another six months before I really did cut it seriously.

Meeting His Holiness The Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa and a New Centre in Antwerp

The Karmapa arrived and stayed for three unforgettable weeks at Samye Ling. I remember him giving the empowerments of *Karma Pakshi* and *Gyalwa Gyamtso*, as well as several Black Crown ceremonies. On one occasion His Holiness gave an empowerment in the village hall in Eskdalemuir and at a certain point he handed the initiation vase to Akong Rinpoche to place it upon each person's head, which Rinpoche refused to do. His Holiness insisted and obliged him to do it, saying clearly, "You are a tulku!"

Afterwards I was fortunate to be able to follow His Holiness across Britain, Denmark, Germany, Holland and France. Akong Rinpoche was also travelling with His Holiness on his tour throughout Europe. Although I was not involved in the organisation it appeared to me that Akong Rinpoche was the strong man and that lots of decisions were made with him. He would not always be the kind and gentle

person people wanted to meet. For example, in Copenhagen, I remember Akong Rinpoche instructing people, just before an empowerment, to take the cushions out, telling them, “If you want to get the initiation, you have to sit on the floor, otherwise the initiation will be for the cushion.”

In Amsterdam, the Black Crown Ceremony was performed in the *Kosmos*, which was at that time *the* holy place of hippiedom in Europe; when I realised that His Holiness would travel by bus straight through Belgium to Paris, I asked Akong Rinpoche whether it would be possible for the party to stop for lunch in Antwerp. Two days later Akong Rinpoche told me, along with friends Roland, Yildie and Mike, who had come from Antwerp to Paris, to follow him upstairs in the small Kagyu Dzong centre to meet with the Karmapa. His Holiness told us to start a centre in Antwerp under the name of *Karma Samten Ling*, and appointed Akong Rinpoche as president. After following the party to Kagyu Ling in Plaige, where I finally ran out of money, I asked Rinpoche if it would be alright if I helped my friends for a few months to set up the centre and then came to Samye Ling to do the three year retreat, to which he agreed. I could not know at that time that these few months would last for another forty years!

Back in Antwerp, we quickly found a house with a little garden in a quiet area and, with the exception of Mike, we all moved in. We painted the whole house in Tibetan colours and made a nice shrine-room on the ground floor. Our small community was joined a few months later by Brigitte and Marc and we practised the preliminaries and had daily pujas of Chenresig, and Guru Rinpoche.

We only had casual jobs and sometimes lacked even the money to buy food.

The first visit of Akong Rinpoche felt like a historical event to me. It was only a few months after we had started the Antwerp centre. We had made a throne which was actually too narrow for him to sit on and a bed out of palettes, which was much too high and large! The day he arrived at the centre, I was amazed to see him acting in an extremely kind and gentle manner, because up to that moment I had mainly known him as rather awe-inspiring and sometimes wrathful. On his arrival, we asked him to do a ceremony for somebody who had died and Rinpoche did the Karma Pakshi puja. During the ritual a terrible thunderstorm broke out and we were so impressed that I still remember it very vividly today, forty years later.

Akong Rinpoche came once or twice a year but we used to call him by phone almost daily to ask his advice, until finally one day he told me that I should write my questions down and send them by letter! Our telephone bills went down drastically and I realised that while reflecting on how to formulate the questions in writing, the answers would come automatically. The five of us formed a Dharma community of people all very devoted to Rinpoche. As for the decision making process, everybody would always refer to Rinpoche, which was sometimes difficult because we used to have disputes in which everyone would invoke the authority of Rinpoche who had said this or that in a similar situation. The quotations usually proved to be contradictory and the only solution was to call Akong Rinpoche and ask his opinion. His advice on the problem

was always very simple and clear; so obvious that nobody had even thought about it. This was just one example of how his wisdom helped us be successful in the things we did.

In some cases, his instructions were not always so easy to understand and could even make us hesitate to act in the way he recommended. At those times I realised that it was possible to talk issues over, that it was sometimes useful to bring more information to the table, and I was surprised to hear him even change his position sometimes. Nevertheless, if in spite of presenting other arguments he maintained his position, it was clear that it was best to do as he said, even if my own reasoning would have pushed me to do the opposite. I think that I almost always followed his recommendations, and I never had cause to complain about the results. His vision clearly reached far beyond ordinary rational thinking and thanks to his advice we managed to avoid many obstacles which he seemed to foresee, be it for the development of the Dharma centres or in my personal life.

Rinpoche's visits to the Antwerp centre were extremely inspiring and I felt very privileged because we would spend hours with him. I clearly remember him at that time giving me private, very clear teachings about the practices I am still doing today. Karma Samten Ling was the first centre outside of Britain linked to Samye Ling. We were also very lucky to have the visits of very high lamas like Kalu Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who came with a party of nine, including his grandson Rabjam Rinpoche who was seven or eight years old at the time and for whom the narrow throne we had made for Akong Rinpoche proved to be the perfect size!

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche gave several initiations. We also had a good connection with Kagyu Dzong in Paris and Dhagpo Kagyu Ling in Dordogne. Lama Gendun Rinpoche came several times to Antwerp to teach and give initiations, as did Lama Jigme, the nephew of His Holiness. We also had visits from Lama Gyurme from Paris and from Olé and Hannah Nydahl.

By the end of 1976, Lama Uryen, who had done a three-year retreat under Kalu Rinpoche, arrived in Antwerp as a resident lama. We got on very well in the beginning, before his translator arrived a few months later. By that time, Akong Rinpoche was preparing a new adventure for Brigitte and I.

Kagyü Samye Dzong Brussels

Before Lama Uryen arrived, Rinpoche had told us that HH Karmapa would visit Europe again in 1977. He said that since Brussels was the capital of the European Community, it was important for His Holiness to have a centre there. In January 1977, we started looking for a place big enough to host His Holiness and his party. In the beginning a friend drove us around in his van. Later Brigitte and I went every weekend to Brussels in her car. We visited several houses which were either not suitable or too expensive. At a certain point we got quite desperate and when Kalu Rinpoche came to Antwerp, we asked for his blessing and advice. He told us we would recognise the place.

AKONG RINPOCHE'S ACTIVITY IN BELGIUM



Stained glass ceiling at KSD
Brussels

Akong Rinpoche also told us not to worry and to continue looking for a suitable place. He said, “If you wait for the money it will never come.” We took his advice literally and kept it in mind for many years as one of our main guidelines. During our weekly expeditions to Brussels, driving around just following our intuition, we realised that we were always coming back to the same area, and passed several times down the same street, where we had already visited a house. One day, at the beginning of April 1977, we stopped and parked the car in front of a magnificent townhouse situated on Rue Capouillet, where a ‘to let’ notice was posted. The huge wooden door happened to be open and we walked inside the marble

stairs porch to discover a beautiful hall. The sunlight came through a stained glass ceiling, in which we clearly recognised a marvelous double dorje in art nouveau style. We were absolutely convinced that this was the sign Kalu Rinpoche must have seen in his vision. We phoned the owner and signed a nine-year rental contract.

Akong Rinpoche organised for Sherab Palden Beru to come to Brussels with his student Dolma during the month of May. During

his stay he painted a picture of The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje appearing in the moon to fit in the oval moulding in the shrine-room, and also drew a life-size Dusum Khyenpa, the first Karmapa. Later on Sherab Palden accepted me as his student thanks to the intervention of Akong Rinpoche, who convinced him that I would respect Sherab's three conditions: not to alter the *Karma Gadri* style or mix it with other styles, not to commercialise *thangka* painting, and to study with him for at least seven years, which I did.

On the twenty-sixth of May 1977, Akong Rinpoche phoned to say he was coming to Brussels the very next day for three days. We quickly organised a teaching in what was to become the shrine-room. It was a great joy for us to see how happy Rinpoche was about the new place. During this visit, HH Karmapa called him on the telephone from New York and during a long conversation, His Holiness chose the name *Karma Shedrup Gyaltso Ling* for the centre.

Visits of Great Lamas and Lineage Masters

Only three months remained in which to prepare for the Karmapa's visit. Mission impossible, and yet we succeeded. Bearing in mind what Rinpoche had told us about not waiting for money, we completely relied upon the blessings of the buddhas and after one month a lady by the name of Rose Linz gave us 100,000 francs. Her son Guillaume had been coming every day to help us paint and prepare the house, so she knew all about the centre. The next month she provided the same amount and the third month again, which

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made it possible to get the house ready, build a throne and a shrine, rent the hall for the *Black Crown Ceremony*, print posters and leaflets and receive His Holiness together with HE Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and Akong Rinpoche as well as some fifteen lamas and attendants. They all slept in the new centre from the 17th to the 22nd of July 1977.



HH 16th Karmapa bestowing
empowerment in the Brussels Centre

We had been working until the last minute and when we offered the traditional welcome ceremony in the shrine-room with tea and sweet rice, the cups were sticking to the tables because the paint was still not completely dry. His Holiness performed the Black Crown Ceremony in the centre on the eighteenth, and on the nine-

teenth he bestowed the empowerment of Karma Pakshi, chosen by His Holiness as the yidam for the centre. We organised a public Vajra Crown Ceremony in a hall for about three hundred people in the presence of the Indian Ambassador. Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche gave daily teachings and many people were able to meet His Holiness.

Following disagreements between Akong Rinpoche and Lama Urgyen, His Holiness had a meeting with them, during which Rinpoche said that it was not his wish to be in charge of the new centre since he already had too many responsibilities with Samye

Ling. Brigitte and I said that we had only started this centre because Akong Rinpoche had told us to do so, after which His Holiness appointed Akong Rinpoche as president and asked Lama Urgyen to come from time to time to teach.

During this visit the news arrived that a former Minister of Dege, the father of His Holiness' attendant Tsultrim Namgyal had died. With the windows open in the middle of the summer night, His Holiness led a puja with all the ritual instruments including *gyaling* and *radong*, which must have woken up the whole neighbourhood. At some point Akong Rinpoche seemed to warn His Holiness about the noise but the puja went on for hours. Nevertheless, we never heard a single complaint afterwards.

After one week of intense activity, including visits to many bird shops, His Holiness left for the United States and asked us to keep about two hundred birds in the centre. His attendant Tsultrim Namgyal would also stay to look after them. One of the rooms was literally transformed into a birdcage! His Holiness came again from the 17th until the 22nd of November 1977, thus firmly leaving his blessing present in the centre.

Following the two visits of His Holiness in 1977, Akong Rinpoche came once or twice every year for one or two weeks, or whenever there was a special occasion such as an international conference or visit by a high lama. Thanks to his intervention, many of the highest lamas have come to the centre to bestow teachings and initiations. During the summer of 1979 Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche gave a three-month course for about forty resident students, who were staying all over the house, all the way up to the attic. I had

to sleep for three months in the office. Those years were very intense. Since there were not yet many centres established, and because Brussels is geographically very central in Western Europe, most of the high lamas touring Europe visited our centre. For example, in 1981, we had Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso for one month, followed by the visit of HE Tai Situpa for three weeks, HE Shamarpa for three weeks, followed without a break by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche for another month. We had regular visits by Lama Gendun Rinpoche, Ringu Tulku and Tenga Rinpoche, as well as Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, who used to come every year for a month during the eighties and the nineties. Kalu Rinpoche came several times. He said that in Vajrayana it is extremely important to please one's guru, and that Carlo and Brigitte had succeeded in pleasing their guru by founding and developing the Brussels Dharma centre.

Akong Rinpoche received His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche in Brussels in the early eighties and the centre was also blessed by the two-week visit of Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche in October 1980. In November 1980, November 1981 and November 1982, the centre organised international Dharma festivals in big halls with eminent Western speakers and important lamas like Khentin Tai Situpa, Shamarpa and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, always in the presence and under the guidance of Akong Rinpoche. Each year about a thousand people attended these special events which contributed greatly to the good reputation of our centre in Belgian society and on the international level. On the 26th of November 1983, Akong Rinpoche was invited as a guest speaker at a congress on traditional medicine which the centre co-organised in the Royal Library. On

the 16th and 17th of November 1985 we organised the international days on World Peace with the participation of HE Khentin Tai Situpa and the heads of the Belgian branch of Amnesty International, *Médecins sans Frontières*, the Red Cross and some well known Belgian philosophers. In addition to many other renowned lamas in the eighties, HE Gyaltsab Rinpoche came twice for ten days in 1982, and we also had the visit of HH Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche the same year.

We have always had a special connection with Khentin Tai Situpa who in 1985 became the Honorary President of the centre at the request of Akong Rinpoche and came many times to Brussels between 1980 and 1997. His Regent, Palpung Ongan Rinpoche, who had been appointed in 1979 by His Holiness Karmapa as resident lama to the Brussels centre, finally arrived in January 1986 after having been delayed by health problems. He gave many teachings and initiations and left a deep imprint on our centre.

On the 24th of April 1990 the centre received the historical visit of HH the Dalai Lama, who blessed the temple and gave a teaching, and in the evening we organised a public talk in the *Palais des Beaux Arts* of Brussels entitled "Peace through Non-violence", which was attended by over two thousand people.

From 1993 Akong Rinpoche sent several experienced Sangha members, who had all completed long retreat, to look after the spiritual side of the centre. Firstly Rinpoche sent us Ani Dechi Palmo who stayed until 1997. That year, Karma Shenpen was sent to Brussels by Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe, and is still here today. In September 2001, Gelong Drime was sent to look after the

spiritual activities. Drime returned to Scotland in 2006 but continued to come from time to time to lead short retreats. In 2010 Akong Rinpoche enthroned Ani Rinchen Palmo as lama of Brussels.



Lama Rinchen receiving the title of
lama in 2010

Lama Rinchen came to Brussels on a regular basis, leading the annual eight pairs of *nyungne* and *drupcho* of Karma Pakshi. In September 2014, when her responsibility for the women's four year retreat on Holy Isle had ended, she came to the Brussels Centre to settle as resident lama – one last gift

from Akong Rinpoche, and a guarantee that the centre will be maintained and nourished until the third Akong Tulku returns to re-assume its direction.

Teachings and empowerments by Akong Rinpoche

The most important reason that Brussels Kagyu Samye Dzong has developed over the years and is still alive and flourishing today is that, throughout those thirty-seven years, Akong Rinpoche visited regularly. He supervised the running and development of the centre with great attention to detail, giving teachings and seeing the thousands of people who came for private instructions.

Akong Rinpoche's teachings were very particular. He never provided a subject for his teaching and we usually announced that he was going to talk about the practice of Buddhism in everyday

life. His teachings were always very well adapted to his audience and individual people used to have the impression that he was talking about their own personal situation. It often proved to be the case that extremely high teachings were given in a very simple way, very spontaneously. Sometimes he would just ask people first if they had any questions and afterwards, he would talk for about an hour. Everything would have been answered, but in a very unexpected way. Rinpoche used few words but managed to transmit very deep meaning. We were very lucky to have Katia Holmes as his translator into French. She was the only one who not only translated the words but also the meaning. Rinpoche spoke in a slow way, but his voice had a kind of magnetising power, and by just listening to the sound of his voice his deep blessing would be transmitted.

Rinpoche was not always diplomatic in his teaching style, saying things quite bluntly and clearly without any fear of displeasing anyone. Akong Rinpoche often used to say that one had to be very careful about choosing one's teacher and that before deciding to take a teacher as one's *root lama*, one ought first to know that person for at least three years in order to observe and see whether he or she really had qualities of wisdom and compassion, how the individual was earning their living and so on; then the teacher would need to see whether the student was capable of having the patience and diligence necessary to practise the teachings, and whether there was a favourable karmic connection to make the transmission possible. He used to warn people not to trust teachers on the basis of them seeming very kind, because there are those who are like wolves, more interested in your money than in really helping you.

After the enthronement of the Seventeenth Karmapa in 1992 the main activity of Akong Rinpoche in Brussels was to bestow empowerments. Although his long-term students knew the strength of his blessings, it was from the time that he started to give initiations that many people discovered his special blessing power. Rinpoche's yearly visits usually lasted around ten days. The first time he gave public empowerments in Brussels was in January 1994, and after that each time he came he gave between four and six initiations, mostly Chenresig, 1000-Armed Chenresig, Green Tara, Karma Pakshi, Medicine Buddha, Milarepa, Amitabha, White Tara, Dorje Sempa, Guru Rinpoche, along with long-life initiations.

From that time onwards, Rinpoche gave public teachings only very rarely and eventually refused every time I asked him if we could announce a teaching in the programme, leaving this for Ken, Katia and Gelong Thubten. By using tricks such as announcing that Rinpoche would give a talk about the future of the centre, we sometimes did succeed in getting him to teach anyway, but in the end even that no longer worked.

The empowerments, however, were often an occasion for Rinpoche to start teaching spontaneously about the benefits and power of that practice, or else at the end he would give a teaching on another subject which was always very inspiring. He always asked Ken and Katia to give detailed explanations about the initiation while he was preparing, and during the ceremony he would explain what we had to visualise.

During his last visit to Brussels Samye Dzung in May 2013, after the empowerment of Karma Pakshi, Rinpoche said that in Tibet

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people used to do pilgrimages to places which had been visited by Guru Rinpoche, or Milarepa, or by important lamas like the Karmapa and Tai Situpa. He then said that many of these great lamas had come and blessed our centre so that it had become like a pilgrimage place; people did not necessarily have to go to the East, and that it was extremely beneficial to come and practise in the shrine-room since it has such a strong blessing.



Akong Rinpoche leading the Guru Rinpoche drupcho at Samye Dzung Brussels

Buildings and the Stupa

In 1977 we had rented the building housing the centre. Rinpoche told us that we should try to buy property, because renting was like throwing money out of the window every month, and in the end we would have nothing to show for all of it. In 1979, the house next

to the centre came up for sale. Although smaller, it was also a good quality house, built at the beginning of the twentieth century with high ceilings, a nice facade, a marble stair entrance, and a garden. Due to the advice and blessings of Rinpoche we managed to buy it for a good price.

In 1982, five years had passed since we had entered into the contract for the main house. This was renewed every three years, so we asked Rinpoche what to do. Having invited the director of the company that owned the house it transpired that he had just come back from a trip to India and Sikkim, where he had met with His Holiness Karmapa in Rumtek, a wonderful coincidence. Akong Rinpoche told him that we wanted to buy the house, and he demanded six million Belgian francs, which is currently about 150,000 euros. Rinpoche told him we were willing to spend only two million francs, which he said, sadly enough, he could not accept because his board of directors would never agree to it, and told us that six million francs was “already a very good price”.

With only three months of the contract left I called Rinpoche to ask what to do. Somewhat surprisingly he told me to write a letter saying that we did not wish to renew the contract. We were quite confused about the way things were developing, but Rinpoche said not to worry, but that we might have to move the shrine-room and everything to the house next door. When the three months came to an end, I called Rinpoche and he told me to contact the owner by phone and ask him how we should proceed with giving back the keys of the house. In reality we had actually not moved anything. The representative of the owner was at a loss to know what to

answer and just asked me to bring back the keys. Then Rinpoche told me, “Now you write a letter and you say our last price is four million.” A positive response quickly ensued and we were thus able to purchase for only 100,000 euros a property in a quiet area of the centre of Brussels, which is worth over two million euros today (2020), all thanks to Rinpoche’s skill!

After Samye Ling had inaugurated its own beautiful stupa, Akong Rinpoche suggested that we build a stupa in the centre garden. The preparation and building of the stupa was an important and unforgettable episode in the history of the centre, involving many people. Rinpoche wanted the stupa to be six metres high. We got permission to build one, but only to a height of four and a half metres. Since I knew the Director of Urban Planning, I asked her if she would allow us to make it six metres high as requested by Akong Rinpoche if we removed one metre of earth, since our garden was higher than the neighbouring ones. Fortunately enough she agreed. It was an enormous job, with over ten huge containers of earth to take out. Akong Rinpoche arranged for the Nepalese ‘Stupa Lama’ (Lama Phuntsok), who had supervised the building of the Stupa at Samye Ling, to come to Brussels several times to oversee its construction in the proper traditional way. Rinpoche himself brought many relics and precious substances to put inside, and since then we have felt the good influence this stupa has on its surroundings.

Rinpoche laid the foundation of the Stupa in 2007 with Charles Picqué and Laurette Onkelinx, Vice-Prime Minister of the Belgian Government and then Minister of Justice and Religion. During her

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speech in the shrine-room, Laurette Onkelinx announced that she was working on legislation directed at the official recognition of Buddhism in Belgium. Akong Rinpoche invited both ministers to throw weapons like guns and swords into the two-metre hole in the garden and cover it with a plate, on which a double-dorje was drawn, so as to bury violence and hatred.



Samye Dzong Brussels stupa consecration 2007

Life, Politics, and Personal Guidance from Rinpoche

During the first seven years of the Brussels centre, my two main activities were to run the centre and study thangka-painting with Sherab Palden Beru, hitch-hiking back and forth, spending alternatively three weeks at Samye Ling and one month in Brussels. It was a wonderful and very inspiring period of my life, being so close to

all those high lamas who came to Brussels and receiving the transmission of the Karma Gadri artistic tradition from Sherab Palden, who himself was a very wise and realised practitioner. Akong Rinpoche told me that Sherab Palden was happy each time I came because I was painting quite fast and working often until late at night, and thus the huge work of finishing the big thangkas for the temple progressed. It was also a privilege to see the close relationship between Sherab Palden and Akong Rinpoche, who came almost every day to see him in the thangka room. In the early eighties, Sherab Palden was invited to the United States by Trungpa Rinpoche and stayed for a few months, during which time he painted a beautiful thangka of Naropa. When he came back to Samye Ling he told me that he liked Trungpa Rinpoche very much, and had been invited by him to settle in the United States, but that he preferred to stay at Samye Ling. He then added in his unique English, “Akong Rinpoche very reliable.”



Carlo's Gesar thangka

Rinpoche often used to hit me, sometimes on my back, sometimes on my shoulders, sometimes on my chest, sometimes on my head, but always unexpectedly and quite hard. Sometimes it made me see stars but it never left a trace of pain or injury; it had rather the effect of opening up my mind, like a special way of blessing. On several occasions he would make fun of me in front of

others who were close like Ken and Katia, thus helping me very skilfully overcome my pride. One of the most recent examples came about because of a little thangka I had made of Gesar of Ling, of which I was very proud. When Rinpoche saw it, he started teasing me again and again because the knee of the horse on which Gesar was riding was slightly protruding. On some occasions Rinpoche could be extremely kind and attentive, whilst on others he would completely ignore me and sometimes would even be wrathful; however, I never saw him nervous, stressed or angry in a worldly way. Every instant in his presence was a teaching, like spontaneous buddha activity.

At one point in the early eighties I had been talking about things he had told me concerning controversy rising within the Kagyu Lineage. He called me into the office and told me, "If I tell you something and I don't say clearly that you can tell this to other people, then it means that you have to keep it for yourself. If you are not able to do that, I cannot tell you anything anymore!" Trust was indeed a very important thing for Rinpoche. He had the tendency to trust people only after he knew them for a long time. Whenever I asked him whether I could entrust somebody with some responsibility in the centre, he would often say that he had not known the person long enough. He had the same attitude toward lamas he did not know and it was a rule in the Brussels centre not to invite any teacher unless Rinpoche had given his approval. Rinpoche sometimes said that he had no disciples. He was nevertheless extremely attentive to those who were close to him and had considered him as their teacher for many years.

I have always had the impression that Rinpoche's activities were going far beyond our worldly experience and that he was active in other dimensions of existence, unimaginable to our limited capabilities. His capacity to be simultaneously involved in different activities, each of which require full concentration for a normal human being was amazing, and I am sure that he was active even in sleep.

Whenever I was very worried about some complex problem, simply discussing it with Rinpoche would solve the situation or make me see the futile nature of it. He was somebody one could totally rely on, one who could be called upon for advice over decisions of life importance. His answers were examples of deep wisdom, and his advice always proved to be conceived from a long-term point of view.

* * *

In 1989 I finished my studies in Political Science and in International Law. My thesis on the position of Tibet in international law was received with great distinction. I presented a copy to His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he came to Brussels in 1990.

Following my studies, I asked Rinpoche what would be most useful in the framework of my Dharma activity: the cultural or social fields, or a political career? Rinpoche told me that it did not matter as long as I got to the top! He added, "When you get high enough, before you start going down, I will call you in retreat."

Not long afterwards, I went to see Charles Picqué, who in 1989 had recently become Minister-President of the Brussels Capital Region, to propose to him a project: to consolidate Brussels as the capital of Europe. I entered his cabinet in 1990 to develop the project and the following year became Director of the Brussels-Europe Liaison Office which I am still today. Since 1995 I was elected to the local Council of Saint-Gilles and in 2000 I was elected Deputy Mayor. I was re-elected in 2006 and in 2012 with responsibility for culture, population, public cleanliness, mobility, religions and European affairs.

Rinpoche had said, “I never thought you would ever be able to really get an important job”. He sometimes used to tell people, and once even during a public talk in a big hall, “Look at him. When I first met him, he was just a hippie!”, which was quite embarrassing.

Rinpoche told me several times that he appreciated my involvement in these activities, since they have definitely helped the development of the centre. He has always encouraged and advised me in my political career, while simultaneously asking me to put great efforts into the development of the centre and the practice of Dharma. Each year I did retreats, which made it possible for me to get some distance from the jungle of politics, where there is a very real danger of falling into all sorts of pitfalls, such as taking oneself too seriously. I think the teaching Rinpoche has been giving me is to learn how to use the hectic life of politics, which is a constant power struggle, as a laboratory to check and improve patience, motivation, diligence and altruism, turning worldly activities into a Dharma practice.

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Carlo, Deputy Mayor of Saint-Gilles, celebrating the mayor's wedding

One of the benefits of my career has been that it provided a means for Akong Rinpoche to meet some of the most influential Belgians in the fields of public and cultural life. For example I arranged a meeting in the centre between Akong Rinpoche and Mr Claude de Valckeneer, Adviser to King Baldwin of Belgium, and they had a long talk about Buddhism. Mr de Valckeneer was again invited a few months later by Akong Rinpoche for a meeting with HE Tai Situpa. During the conversation, Mr de Valckeneer mentioned that the King, a devoted practising Catholic, had told him that he was unhappy with the vanity of public life. Situ Rinpoche gave him a Buddha statue to present to the King. The next day a motorcycle policeman arrived from the Royal Palace with a letter from the King addressed to Tai Situpa and a beautiful gilded Japanese statue of a standing Buddha.

During the same period, Akong Rinpoche also received the visit of the Catholic Bishop of Brussels. In 1984, we arranged for Akong Rinpoche to have lunch in the centre with two of the deputy mayors,

which was the first official contact we had with the municipal authorities.

In 1986 HE Tai Situpa and Akong Rinpoche were received by the young new mayor, Charles Picqué, a rising figure in Belgian politics, to whom Tai Situpa also offered a small Buddha statue, which still remains on his office desk. Shortly after that Charles Picqué became a Member of Parliament, then Minister of Social Affairs, and in 1989 the first Minister-President of the Brussels Capital Region, where he remained until last year. Charles Picqué always attended and gave very positive speeches at the celebrations of the 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th, 30th and 35th anniversaries of the centre and thus became a friend of Rinpoche.

Rinpoche often repeated that he wanted me to get as high in my career as possible, and that he would tell me before I started to descend again. He noted that it is always better to stop when in a high position but that usually people make the mistake of trying to hold onto their power when it begins to slide away. When Rinpoche came for his last visit to Brussels in May 2013, I told him that my term as Deputy Mayor would run until 2018, but that in 2014 there would be elections in Belgium for the European, federal and regional parliaments, and I asked whether I should stand for election, which would mean it would be time to prepare. He told me, "For me you are high enough. Enjoy your life!", which I later felt was a very wise counsel. Moreover, in March 2014 the President of the Belgian Buddhist Union resigned, I was offered the position and got elected, something which would not have been possible if I had been running for parliament. My election got wide press

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coverage and came at a crucial time since Buddhism was on the point of getting officially recognised in Belgium. I am sure that from his buddhfield, Akong Rinpoche can appreciate this.

The Origins of Dharma in Spain

by Lama Tsondru

This is the story of how Akong Rinpoche came to Spain to turn the Wheel of Dharma and to start the first ever Buddhist centre there. His activity in our country spanned thirty-eight years.

In 1975 I first made contact with Buddhism when I took Refuge in England with Chime Rinpoche. In the same year I met Kalu Rinpoche. I sensed that we Westerners could benefit greatly from Buddhism, so I asked both Chime and Kalu Rinpoche if they would please come to Spain to teach and to open a centre. At that time there was really no Buddhism in Spain, although one could find the odd Buddhist book translated into Spanish from South America. Both Rinpoches declined the invitation.

I first heard about Akong Rinpoche when I visited a Buddhist centre in France that same year. Strange as it may sound, his name made such a deep impression on me that I immediately decided to go and meet him. At that time I was feeling a great need for a teacher who would be my refuge and my guide. Up until then, the lamas I had met were very nice, but did not seem to be interested

in being a close guide, nor in taking responsibility for my inner development.

So in 1976 I travelled to Samye Ling to meet Rinpoche. He was not there when I arrived, so I decided to wait until he came back. Every time I saw someone who looked Tibetan I would eagerly ask, “Is *that* Akong Rinpoche?” And each time, the answer would be “No!” Then one day in the garden I saw an ordinary-looking oriental man who was carrying a child on his shoulders. Someone told me that the child was Rinpoche’s son, so I naturally assumed that the man must be Rinpoche’s servant. Later on in the evening when I went to the Mahakala puja I saw the same ‘servant’ leading the puja, and it was then that I realised who the servant actually was!

Next day someone came to tell me that Rinpoche had been asking whether someone had arrived from Spain. The person said it must be me who Rinpoche was expecting, and I was told to go and see him straight away. I was only twenty-five, and very shy, and with my legs shaking I went to his house to meet him for the first time. Because I had been obsessed by the idea of doing retreat ever since first hearing about it, I immediately said I would like to do a retreat and I asked for teachings from him. He told me to do a week of retreat straight away, giving me instructions and coming to see me frequently.

I spent another few weeks in Samye Ling after my week of retreat; by then I was completely sure that he was my guru and that I did not want anything other than to dedicate my life to the Dharma, so I went to him to offer him my life. He then asked me if I liked Samye Ling and if I would like to start something similar in Spain.

I was very glad because this was what I wanted, but I told him I had no money to start a centre. He said it did not matter and that he would come to my home if I had a spare bed, and eat whatever we had. He made it so easy and simple. I went back to Spain feeling like someone who has found the greatest treasure.

In this state of mind and due to his blessing I was able to give some public Dharma talks, as he had requested me to do. Buddhism had yet to reach our shores and was quite unknown in Spain at that time. But after these talks I gathered a group of people together who were interested in Dharma and in meeting Rinpoche. Rinpoche first came to Spain in January 1977. He visited Barcelona where he gave a few lectures and led some meditation sessions in several different places, and at the end of his visit a number of people took Refuge. In fact, they took Refuge not because they knew about Buddhism and liked it – they took Refuge because they loved Akong Rinpoche. The name of his tradition did not matter much at that point. Of course afterwards it came to matter more.

In February 1977 at Samye Ling, Rinpoche led a long meditation retreat of six weeks, something that he never repeated. A couple of years earlier, during the visit of His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa to Samye Ling, some students had been complaining that, due to his great humility, Akong Rinpoche was not one for giving teachings. As a result HH Karmapa had asked him to teach, and so Akong Rinpoche gave several meditation retreats, this six-week one being the longest. Rinpoche insisted that I should attend this retreat, saying that in the future it would be of benefit in Spain. Accordingly, I left my job and my family behind and went to do the retreat with

him in Samye Ling. And it was worth it: Rinpoche was with us all the time, meditating and giving teachings. Although the topic of the retreat was supposed to be the preliminary practices, we were surprised by the inclusion of some new and unusual techniques which later came to be known as his *Tara Rokpa Therapy*.

Rinpoche's constant presence during that retreat was a very special gift that probably changed many of our lives. I remember how, one day, someone came to Rinpoche holding a bird, a dove perhaps, that had just died. In the midst of our respectful quiet he laid his beautiful hand on it for a few minutes. Time stood still – I think our minds did too. There was so much love.

Meeting with The Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa

His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa came to Europe around this time, and Rinpoche was the organiser of the trip. He said we should go to meet him, so together with some friends we went to France, to Dhakpo Kagyu Ling and we had an incredible audience with His Holiness in June 1977. He also expressed a wish to come to Spain, which up until then he had not been able to do.

During this interview His Holiness gave us a name for the first Kagyu centre in Spain – *Karma Lodro Gyamtso Ling*. In fact this was the very first Buddhist centre of any kind in Spain. He also appointed Akong Rinpoche to be his representative in Spain, approved our constitution, and the Karmapa himself became the President of

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Karma Kagyu Spain. This was one time when I saw Akong Rinpoche extremely happy.



HH 16th Gyalwang Karmapa empowers Akong Rinpoche
as his representative in Spain, June 1977

So in May 1978 during the Wesak festivity, we hired a small hall and Akong Rinpoche inaugurated the first Buddhist centre in Spain. For the first few years he would come to Barcelona twice a year. This was the golden age for us, there was no hurry during the visits, and the group consolidated.

Two years later, in 1980, we hired a bigger place and four of us went to live in the centre, which made it much more stable. Some of the greatest lamas of the lineage came to that centre: Situ Rinpoche, Gyaltsab Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul, Kalu Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim, Lama Gendun and others. Akong Rinpoche had asked all of them to come, out of his concern for our education as Buddhists: it was his great gift to us. Rinpoche also told us we should go frequently to Samye Ling to receive teach-

ings from Tai Situpa, Thrangu Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche, who he called “the best teachers in the universe!” And so we did. Every summer I spent several months of my school teacher holidays having the incredible fortune of receiving teachings from these great teachers.

Land in Olot and New Centres

By the early eighties we already had a centre in the city and we wanted to find a place in the country as well. We eventually found an old farmhouse in beautiful surroundings in the mountains near the town of Olot. When Rinpoche came to Spain and we told him of our plans, he proceeded to make a diagram of the kind of place he thought would be suitable: he drew a valley enclosed by mountains on all sides except the east, out of which flowed a river. In fact this description exactly matched the land that we had found and were wanting to buy. Rinpoche was very enthusiastic when we took him to see it. He climbed to the top of the mountain, which towers over the house and there, in a small cave, he buried a large snail fossil as a symbol of the Dharma, so that Dharma would grow in that area.

In 1985 he invited Khentin Tai Situ Rinpoche to visit the property. I think his plan was that Situ Rinpoche would also become involved in the project. People from the centre built a small hut for the two lamas and their companions to stay in during their visit. Rinpoche seemed very happy about everything that was happening.

To bring them food people would joyfully carry it down the path from the main house.

Situ Rinpoche would give teachings while sitting casually on the throne in the position of Maitreya. Or the two Rinpoches would sit together on a rock chatting and laughing happily. Tai Situpa enjoyed the place very much and thought that it had “almost perfect” feng-shui, but in the end he never did get involved. Perhaps one day he will!

For years afterwards we used the small hut where they had once stayed as a retreat. It remains the perfect place to do retreat.

In 1984 I went to do the first traditional four-year retreat in Samye Ling, and then in 1988 I continued with the next long retreat. During that time, in 1986 some people from the Barcelona centre began raising funds, and they purchased a very nice big apartment in the heart of the city. The location was perfect being so easy to get to. Rinpoche would always insist that we purchase rather than spend money on renting a centre. Because we followed his advice we now have more properties than any other Buddhist organisation in Spain.

Akong Rinpoche always treated those who lived there with kindness and compassion, and I think he recognised the effort being made to get the centre going at a time when everyone had full-time jobs. He would sometimes take the residents out for dinner to the Chinese restaurant a few doors down from the centre. When his students did Rinpoche’s laundry they noticed how worn a lot of his clothing was, sometimes even with holes. So people would go out and buy him new clothes, but Rinpoche was so genuinely humble

that he did not mind wearing hand-me-downs, and even his wife once told us that she would just buy second-hand clothes for him.

Rinpoche said we should be helping poor people, so in 1991 some people from the centre started a soup kitchen. In this way, Rokpa's charitable wing began to function in Spain. They worked alongside the neighbourhood association of *Ciutat Vella*, helping families and old people in need, taking them food once or twice a week, and keeping them company. Sometimes they went to the Northern Bus Station with sandwiches and hot drinks for the homeless who slept there. Later Rinpoche saw that there were already other organisations doing this work, so he thought it better to offer help in countries such as Tibet and Nepal where there was greater need.

At about the same time we were able to start offering Tara Rokpa Therapy, with a visit by Edie Irwin in 1989 and a rebirthing retreat in 1991.

Retreats

By 1984 Rinpoche had arranged for Samye Ling to begin holding traditional long-term retreats. I had the good fortune to join the first two. After the two retreats, Rinpoche sent Lama Jinpa Gyamtso and I to Spain to be fully responsible for the Barcelona centre. He gave us freedom to run the centre as well as to teach Dharma as we saw fit. Soon after, with his blessing and inspiration, we began to start other centres in Manresa, Las Palmas, Madrid and Palencia.

THE ORIGINS OF DHARMA IN SPAIN

Our own retreat centre requires special mention. The first time Rinpoche visited La Fradera (the future retreat) was in 1996. Some friends of the Barcelona centre were letting the house and they had offered Rinpoche the option to buy it at a very good price, in order to establish a centre in the countryside. He decided to come and see if it was a suitable place. The night before he arrived it had been raining very hard, and there was surface water running everywhere. In particular the small stream had grown a lot, and as we tried to cross it the car got stuck in the riverbed. It was a big powerful off-road vehicle, but still we could not get it free. This had never happened to us before, and it has never happened since. Rinpoche was the first to react and he began to direct operations, helping people out of the car (and the water), putting logs under the wheels and so on, to no avail.

While we walked the last kilometre to the house Rinpoche began to tell us that something similar had happened to him and Trungpa Rinpoche the very first time that they visited Samye Ling in Scotland. Their car had got stuck in Eskdalemuir and they had had to walk the rest of the way. Trungpa Rinpoche said at the time that it was a highly auspicious sign indicating that all of the land that they were having to cross on foot would eventually become theirs.

Rinpoche felt that this breakdown was similarly a very good omen, and in fact he was right, because we ended up becoming the owners of both La Fradera as well as a nearby house with land. A successful retreat centre began to take shape there, and our community grew a lot.

We needed a lama to lead the retreat, because although we had both helped people during the second retreat in Samye Ling, we were still just a monk and a nun. Then in 2001 Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche decided to grant us the title of lamas, which Rinpoche did in Barcelona in an emotional ceremony in front of many people.

Lamas and the Establishment of Dharma in Spain

Rinpoche's unusual way of doing things is demonstrated in the story of how we quite suddenly became lamas. In 1993 Lama Jinpa and I had finished our second retreat and were sent to teach the Dharma and take care of the centre in Barcelona. For the next eight years we did this as best we could. Then, during the annual visit of 2000, Rinpoche gave a talk in which he repeated again that Samye Ling was not in the habit of giving the title "lama" to retreatants. During the same visit Rinpoche wanted to know from us which texts we had studied, and from which Rinpoches we had received empowerments. He wrote down all our answers.

Upon returning in 2001 he announced that he had something important to say to us and he wanted everyone to come to a meeting. At the same time he arranged for someone to build some strange boxes behind closed doors. We wondered what was brewing because all we heard was the sound of hammering coming from the closed room. On the day of the meeting about a hundred and fifty people squeezed into the shrine-room to hear what Rinpoche had to say.

Rinpoche had two newly built thrones placed, one on either side of the altar. As usual Lama Jinpa was translating Rinpoche's talk into Spanish, when Rinpoche suddenly stopped him, saying that now someone else would have to translate what he was about to say. Then he began to talk – first about the studies of Lama Jinpa, and then of mine, the retreats we had done, and the merit we had accumulated. He went on to say that because of all of this, as well as the eight years of retreat and eight more years serving the Dharma, and by the power given him as Spiritual Head of Samye Ling and its various centres by the Sixteenth Karmapa (showing us His Holiness' letter), he was appointing us as lamas for our sincere dedication to the Dharma and for helping other beings. He placed around our shoulders a kata and a red yogi belt. Then he had us each sit on one of the thrones while everyone filed past to offer us a kata.

It was an emotional moment with many tears. At the end of it all Rinpoche said we lamas should stay sitting to meditate on the throne for twenty-four hours, and with that he departed, as did everyone else. A few hours later he returned, kind and smiling, telling us that we could get off the throne now, and that it would be sufficient if we spent an entire day wearing the meditation belt. He had such a wise and compassionate way of doing things!

The fact that for so long, and as recently as the previous year, Rinpoche had been saying that he would not be giving the title of lama to anyone, meant that the eventual announcement in front of so many people carried a special weight and importance.

THE ORIGINS OF DHARMA IN SPAIN

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One day someone asked Rinpoche which one of his many activities he considered to be the most important. He replied that all of his activities were very important but that amongst them the most important one for him was to give the opportunity to people to do traditional long retreats. He said that a long retreat benefits a person not only for a short while, or even for this lifetime, but that the effects are felt for many lifetimes to come.

In 2003 Lama Jinpa and I initiated the first traditional long retreat in Spain. Following the advice of Rinpoche, the retreat lasted three years and seven months instead of three years and three months. Lama Yeshe Rinpoche was responsible for closing the doors and creating the protective circle for the retreat. He was assisted by the Spanish lamas as well as Lama Zangmo and Ani Lhamo. During the course of the retreat, Akong Rinpoche would visit each year to offer support and advice to the retreatants. His spacious presence and wise counsel were always eagerly received.

The end of retreat in 2007 coincided with the celebration of the 40th anniversary of Samye Ling. Rinpoche decided to pay a visit to all the Samye Dzong centres in Spain, taking with him the lamas and all of the retreatants. He was also accompanied by his nephew Tsering Tashi. We made a large and colourful group as we passed through the airports with our robes and a variety of instruments: *jaling*, *radong*, drums and so on.

We visited La Coruña, Madrid, Manresa, even Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, just like a group of travelling musicians on tour!

Being able to travel and spend so much time together with Rinpoche during this time was like a wonderful dream. When we arrived in Las Palmas Rinpoche's luggage had gone missing, and in his luggage had been all the ritual objects he was to use when giving empowerments in Las Palmas, including the ceremonial vases or *bumpas* as they are known. Unable to make do without these, Rinpoche set off with the Sangha to find some substitutes. We went to the large department store *El Corte Ingles*, where, as we walked through the television section, to our great surprise, there appeared His Holiness the Dalai Lama on every television; the interview lasted the entire length of our visit to that section.

Beyond the television section, the closest thing to a *bumpa* we could find was a glass salad-oil dispenser, and we bought two of them. It seemed a ridiculous thing to use for a solemn event like an initiation, but on arrival back at the centre, Rinpoche got busy directing those who could sew to make little *bumpa* covers using appropriately coloured fabric, so that the little department store salad-oil dispensers were transformed into appropriately fine and beautiful initiation *bumpas*. These are still fondly kept at the centre in Las Palmas.

Also during this period following the first retreat, there was a group preparing to start the next four-year retreat. This group of eight had seen the benefits of their first long retreat, and wanted to do a second. Five of them also wanted to take ordination vows. At Akong Rinpoche's request, HE Khentin Tai Situ Rinpoche gladly agreed to give these vows (*getsul* and *getsulma*) to them; in addition he set aside many days to give the entire group the necessary initiations for the retreat.

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And so in October 2007 a group of about fifty, including the future retreatants, set off for Sherab Ling in India. There, over the course of ten days, Situ Rinpoche gave teachings and initiations, and ordained the new Sangha members. In February 2008 the new four-year retreat began.



Spanish retreatants procession

When the second retreat ended in February 2012, the retreatants went directly from retreat to Bodhgaya in India to attend the *Kagyü Monlam Chenmo* prayers at the suggestion of His Holiness Karmapa. In addition, four of them took ordination, with HH Karmapa performing the haircutting ceremony for them at the Mahabodhi Stupa in Bodhgaya. So in total eleven people from Rinpoche's Spanish centres were ordained.

Over the last few years Rinpoche's annual visit to the centre in Manresa would be celebrated with a meal in the garden of Antonio and Encarna. About fifty people would come to enjoy a huge vege-

tarian paella cooked by Antonio and friends. After the food Rinpoche would sit with us, telling stories and answering our questions. In 2013, as he sat with us during what was to be his last visit, he took from his reliquary a piece of Guru Rinpoche's robes. Then, in a devoted hush, we each came to receive the blessing from him, and he gave each one of us a thread.

Monastery

With new ordained Sangha members we now needed a bigger centre to accommodate them as well as the lay community. We had spent many years searching for a suitable, large property. Amazingly, in October 2011 we found the perfect place just down the hill from our retreat centre. Although Rinpoche always had many questions about what we were planning to do, when I tried to explain about the property, he refused to let me talk for long, but told me, "This place is meant for you. Buy it quickly! This week would be better than next week!" In fact he was right because we found that it was almost bought by someone else. So we went ahead and signed the deeds in January 2012. Interestingly, although Rinpoche did not ask us to send pictures of the house he nevertheless seemed to know exactly how it was and what changes and work we had done when he finally visited in May of that year. He said that we had achieved a lot in a relatively short time.

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In the monastery grounds

Previously, when we acquired some property for a centre, he had always been very involved, giving guidelines on how to open up the spaces, what work to do, and so on. This time I was surprised at how little he got involved. He only gave us some advice about geomancy (*feng shui*) for the exterior, such as which trees to cut, or where to place the septic tank. Even though we asked about how we should do things inside the house, such as which rooms to use for high lamas or His Holiness Karmapa, and how to arrange the second floor, he declined to answer anything. It was only later on that I realised that Rinpoche knew that this project was not for his intervention.

We noticed how, during the last summer of his life, he was distancing himself from the things that he had previously been involved with. I found him to be distant, and I thought it was just with me, but it turned out that many other people felt the same.



Samye Dechi Ling Monastery

Since Rinpoche's death, most people have said a lot about his incredible activity in charity and social work in Tibet. There has been less said about his spiritual activity because it was less obvious, happening inside people's minds. I would wish to highlight the deep spiritual impact he had on many Westerners. For many he has been father, mother, friend and guru, the light illuminating their lives. Through his acts and his actions he taught us that buddha-nature is love, compassion and wisdom.

Teachings

He was an unusual teacher because he did not like to give talks or to teach Dharma officially, particularly in the last years. But he was teaching all the time, by his example, and by the impact of his presence. He took every opportunity to teach in this direct way.

Here are two examples of this style. The first one took place on the beach at Las Palmas, which Rinpoche used to enjoy walking along and back, about three and a half kilometres each way. One day after walking on the beach with some people they noticed that, while their feet were covered in sticky old tar that had washed up on the beach, Rinpoche's feet were perfectly clean. So they asked

how he had managed that. He laughed at them all with their dirty black feet, replying, “It is just mindfulness.”

One night while he was staying at La Fradera, he spent the night receiving phone calls from all over the world. Next door the caretaker was finding it difficult to sleep with all the noise. Early next morning she found Rinpoche sitting in the garden looking very fresh and happy, and so she asked him: “Aren’t you tired, Rinpoche? I heard you busy on the phone most of the night, and you could not have had much sleep.”

Rinpoche smiled and said, “I didn’t come here to sleep.”

Another striking thing about him was his perfect impartiality towards everyone. One person recalls how Rinpoche gave the same quality of compassionate attention towards a fish dying in a pond at one of the centres as he gave to the next person he had for an interview.

If his equanimity was boundless, so also was his patience. Once while having lunch with a group of people including my aging father, Rinpoche took a piece of watermelon, carefully cutting it into bite-size pieces and removing the seeds. Then he offered this to my father piece-by-piece, making him very happy with the treat. Then Rinpoche looked across at me and said, “This is how old people like to be treated.”

Whenever he came to Barcelona he would spend most of his time giving interviews, because he used to say, this was his main way of helping people. Sometimes he would have a list of up to one hundred people, all of whom he would see within the few days he was there. There have been people who have had very

difficult problems, such that no matter how they try, nobody has been able to help them. Then they would finally go to see Rinpoche, and within minutes would come out with a big smile, because everything had become okay. Rinpoche would have said to them something very simple like, “Don’t take it seriously!” His words always carried great power.

Many people in Spain depended on him to decide important things in their lives. They would wait the whole year until he came, in order to ask him his opinion or advice. It is interesting that despite this capacity to know precisely what to do to help a person, he would never interfere unless asked to do so. But if he was asked he would give just the precise, most appropriate words needed.

In actual fact, in many cases no words were necessary at all, and his mere presence would be the teaching or help that was needed. Simply being near him could pacify the kleshas of a person, while good qualities like love, tolerance, and compassion would grow. On more than one occasion I saw him visit people who were dying in hospital, after which, to the great surprise of the doctors, they would make a miraculous recovery. When people were with him they felt that it was of no importance to him what was their belief or religion, because Rinpoche was beyond making distinctions. You felt accepted by him. He would not judge you, even if you were doing things that were not ‘dharmically correct’.

During one of the last visits to Spain, at a meal with a group of students, he began looking around the table at all the people, and he said, “I have known you all for a long time, some of you for thirty-seven years, others for less time.” It is quite unusual for a

teacher to have had a following of students for so many years. I asked him why he thought it was like this. He answered that it was because “rather than having disciples”, he had “friends – and friends are forever.” But he was no ordinary friend. He would say:

“An ordinary friend always wants to please you, so they tell you how nice and good you are. But this does not really help you: real friends point out your faults. If you expect me to compliment you all the time and spoil you rotten you will be disappointed. I am your real friend, and I will always tell you the truth.”

One of the most important things I have learnt from him is humility and closeness. I recall once when he returned from a trip to Tibet we prepared a high throne for him, because in Samye Ling he used to sit on the floor and we wanted to treat him more like Tibetans would do. When he saw the throne he smiled, and I think he was pleased because it was an offering. Nevertheless he refused to use it because it would have separated him from those present, and for him it was very important to be at the same level as people. He said, “There are already many lamas who sit on high thrones.” Later on he began to give empowerments and on those occasions he would sit on thrones.

I believe that his insistence that he was no one special, not a teacher, simply a friend without disciples, together with his enjoyment of being with people in ordinary situations, was something that helped people experience him as approachable and accessible. At the same time people could not help but experience him as an extraordinary being.

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On his second-to-last visit to Spain in 2011 he asked to visit all his centres. It was unusual: he generally never visited them all in one trip because that would require a long visit. Las Palmas was the last centre he visited on this tour. There, having seen all the Spanish centres, he made a point of saying how very pleased he was by the way the Dharma had developed in Spain. He could see a good number of people who had completed the four-year retreat, some of them twice, and said that the real practitioners he could see in Spain showed that the Dharma was flourishing. He expressed his happiness with the job that his lamas had done.

As for the change he made to my own life, I know that Akong Rinpoche fished me out from the middle of samsara. He gave me the opportunity to grow as a human being, and in addition, the ability to help others by virtue of teaching and creating spaces where Dharma could flourish. If I have been able to do anything useful in this life it is due to him.

Here is the simple experience of Montse Moncosí, the first person who took Refuge with Akong Rinpoche in Spain. It explains in few words how he was with us: “While at first I was not fully aware of all of Rinpoche’s qualities, over time I gradually came to know his dimension beyond human appearance. Through his teachings and advice he guided us profoundly, each of us in the right amount with a wide variety of teachings. He has also facilitated our access to the deepest teachings and greatest teachers. But the best teacher, for me, was Rinpoche.”

To me, Akong Rinpoche has been a father, a mother, a brother, a friend, a teacher, a guru, and a Buddha. By displaying skilful means,

he managed to reach into our hearts and provide just what was required according to the capacity of each. He taught us that the essence of *buddha* is loving kindness, wisdom, compassion; not only did he teach this through words but also through his actions and example.

A simple, kind, approachable, accommodating, willing person and a strict one if necessary, I think we could say he has been ‘the wish-fulfilling jewel’ to us, since he always gave the best advice, seeking to help us fulfil our wishes. He warned us against mistakes but if we made them he did not scold us. He was always pushing the doors of our limitations wide open, always looking on the positive side, always encouraging us to reach beyond in order that we might glimpse all the possibilities of mind beyond the human body, to make us brave enough to overcome the challenges of life and karma, and to break the boundaries that we ourselves sometimes set.

His work has been prodigious, constant and tireless activity; his love for all sentient beings has been an example and a gift to us. I am just looking at a photograph from a few years ago, Rinpoche smiling and beautiful as usual, with his compassionate gaze, with this human quality, so close to us despite his greatness; perhaps Rinpoche has been so close because of that greatness.

LONDON CENTRES

The Dharma Study Society and Rokpa London

by Jhinpa Ramos-Gonzalez

In the early eighties Akong Rinpoche had students all over London. For a short period a group of them were meeting up weekly at several of their houses. Akong Rinpoche said that he wanted them to move around, to take turns meeting in each other's homes. There was a small, brown leather suitcase which contained a Chenresig text, a notebook, a cloth, an eighteenth century Green Tara statue, a photo of Akong Rinpoche and even a stupa holding remains and relics of His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa. The case was taken to each meeting as a portable shrine.

Having made it clear that they were not a Samye Dzong, Rinpoche said that they should choose a name for the group. When it was put to discussion everyone was envisaging very lofty names such as "The Milarepa Mahamudra Temple", but when he next visited them

Rinpoche said that he thought they should be called “The Dharma Study Society”! In time the other venues petered out until the only one remaining was Pat and John Ramos-Gonzalez’ council house in Dalston.

During those early years, Akong Rinpoche would stay there whenever he came to London. He would give teachings, empowerments and Refuge in Pat and John’s bedroom, which was designed to quickly transform into a spacious shrine-room. During a visit in 1988 Rinpoche asked Pat and John to start a soup kitchen to feed the homeless. They in turn asked their son Jhinpa to help. One night John and Jhinpa drove around Spitalfields, stopping to talk to any homeless people they spotted, asking their opinions, and it quickly became clear that there were many homeless people in the area but no soup kitchens.

At first *Rokpa London* was only active in one location and only on Saturday evenings. After a few weeks they started going out on both Saturday and Sunday. In 1992 they started going to two locations on both days, and later still they started another run in Seven Sisters. Towards the end, there was so much food that they started to take parcels to the homeless at Ridley Road Market on Wednesday evenings. The numbers of people coming for food fluctuated greatly: sometimes it would be as few as about twelve, but most of the time it would be between 60 and 150.

At the house two large pots of soup and hundreds of sandwiches were made each Saturday. There were also regular donations of cakes from a couple of local bakeries. As well as food and drink, blankets, sleeping bags and clothes were also provided. On two occasions a

man called Seamus McGuire offered a large truck load of provisions, although John and John Foley (a close friend and dedicated volunteer) had to drive to Tipperary in Ireland to collect them! Over the years, the London Rokpa Soup Kitchen became a beacon that drew hundreds of volunteers from all walks of life and from up and down the country, some of whom were only one step away from homelessness themselves.

The relaxed and open atmosphere in the kitchen provided a place to chat and chill out for many people, some of whom found it very therapeutic. The food they served was famous within the homeless community, but an important part of the soup run was also to respect and listen to the homeless people who came. They were delighted to have the opportunity to chat while they ate their sandwiches and soup. So Rokpa London provided an excellent social opportunity for the homeless but the volunteers used to love the interaction too. As the years passed, everybody in London who worked to help the homeless knew about Rokpa London. They had become the standard to which everyone wished to aspire.

The rules were explained clearly to everyone: not to evangelise, (although most of the volunteers were Buddhist, the soup kitchen was non-denominational); to feed everyone who came for food, no questions asked; not to argue or be provocative in any way; not to give out the Rokpa London address.

The soup kitchen lasted for fourteen years. During those years a total of around £150,000 was raised for food, through a combination of collections, carol services and car boot sales, not to mention a two-day non-stop sponsored *mani* recitation. In all that time there

THE DHARMA STUDY SOCIETY AND ROKPA LONDON

was only one day cancelled, which was due to the van having broken down. Pat and John were there to manage every single run. The dedication with which they undertook this task was remarkable, immense and unwavering.



Pat & John Ramos-Gonzalez with Rinpoche

Kagyü Samyé Dzong London

by Trinley Dorje

In 1997, while the soup kitchen in London was going from strength to strength, Akong Rinpoche's wish for a large centre was also about to be realised. Thirty years after the founding of Samyé Ling it finally all happened in an auspicious way: a sponsor was found, and a suitable building was located by Ani Chodron. To everyone's surprise a large white conch was mysteriously uncovered under the floor in one of the buildings. The location was Waterloo, within earshot in those days of both the Eurostar train and Big Ben. The property comprised a former Victorian primary school on one floor, with spacious rooms and grounds. When she came out of retreat, Ani Zangmo, as she was then known, was asked to run the centre.

Akong Rinpoche was involved in every single aspect of the creation of this centre, in terms of designing the shrine, and providing all the requirements, such as statues and ritual instruments. He produced relics and blessings that made the centres feel like places of refuge. Rinpoche left Ani Zangmo to conduct its affairs on a day to day basis, but he was available for general guidance and was very

much involved with overseeing who was visiting and teaching there. Every year he came to give several empowerments, and he and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche also came annually to teach, bringing together the community with their unstinting warmth and inspiration, and generously giving their time for personal interviews. Akong Rinpoche also succeeded in bringing many of the great lamas of the time to the centre: there were HH Sakya Trinzin, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Dulmo Chöje Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, Ponlop Rinpoche, Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma Lhabu, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, amongst many others.

In the summer of 2001, two former retreatants in Spain were appointed by Rinpoche as lamas – Lama Jinpa and Lama Tsondu – the first of his students to receive such an honour. People must have started to wonder whether something similar was about to happen in London, and sure enough very soon Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche both arrived there. It was uncommon to find both the Spiritual Director and Abbot of Samye Ling in one shrine-room, and, as Rinpoche began to describe the extremely rigorous qualifications needed for a lama, it must have slowly dawned on people what was about to happen to Ani Zangmo. Rinpoche said,

“... when Western people wanted to develop their spiritual side, most Tibetans presented Dharma in a Tibetan style, with Tibetan ideas, in the Tibetan way. That’s the only way we knew. We were not trained to teach Western people, but Dharma is dealing with the human mind, so East or West doesn’t really make much difference.”

You may talk different languages, you may have different habits, but when dealing with the mind, we are really all the same.

“So today is a very good day. It’s a special day, an auspicious day for Samye Ling and Samye Dzong. From our side we believe we have chosen great people [to become Lama] this year. This is a seed so that Dharma will continue to grow in the European countries. We have offered Tibetan culture to Europe and these people will be the ones in the future who will carry on the spiritual aspect of Tibetan culture in the future and especially the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.”

Lama Gelongma Zangmo amused everyone by doubting whether they would remember her newly elongated name, setting the seal on an extremely joyful occasion. For the new lama, it was the culmination of twenty-one years living at Samye Ling, of which eleven and a half were spent in strict retreat, while for the London Karma Kagyu community it marked the beginning of a new era with a qualified lama at the heart of the centre, someone who was utterly committed to representing the lineage sincerely and faithfully, and would provide the benefit of clear leadership. At the ceremony Rinpoche presented Lama Zangmo with a meditation belt, and said, “This is given to somebody very special, somebody capable of teaching.”

In fact the ceremony, like the one in Spain, was an important landmark. For anyone harbouring any doubts as to whether women would receive the same opportunities as men in this Buddhist organ-

isation in the West, Akong Rinpoche had provided the clearest of answers.

This first centre at Carlisle Lane is remembered fondly by many, but it was not to last: we had to leave that location and start again elsewhere. Initially the centre relocated to Manor Place, previously a public bath house, on loan from Southwark Council for a limited period. Those two centres were run together: Manor Place was the health and wellbeing centre, with a popular programme of alternative health treatments for those on low incomes, while Carlisle Lane continued as the (equally popular) Dharma centre. Carlisle Lane and Manor Place both provided beloved homes for many residents over a period of ten years each, and brought the Dharma to both old and new students of Akong Rinpoche, but it was clear that a permanent building was needed in order to secure the long-term future of the centre. When Lama Zangmo asked Rinpoche what could be done to overcome any obstacles to this search for a permanent property, he recommended an annual Guru Rinpoche drupcho. This was a feature each year for five days for many years, with Rinpoche also presiding on occasion.

Prayers and blessings for a new centre were also often requested, most notably from His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa in India: Lama Zangmo went with a big map of London and asked His Holiness where to search. He duly drew several circles on the map that he thought would be worth looking into, including one around the region of Buckingham Palace! The first thing he said though, was “somewhere near the river would be good.” Finally in 2009 Rokpa Trust managed to buy a large former library in Bermondsey,

KAGYU SAMYE DZONG LONDON

just fifteen minutes walk from Tower and London Bridges, thus at least partially fulfilling the directions of The Karmapa. As it turned out the keys were handed over on His Holiness' birthday, the 26th June 2009.



Kagyu Samye Dzong London

When Akong Rinpoche first came to see the newly acquired centre, he stood opposite it in Spa Gardens Park, looking up at the grand old building with its stucco male and female figures from mythology, and its beautiful symmetries of Victorian brickwork, and he pronounced one word with evident satisfaction, “Perfect”. During the inauguration speech he said, “ I have been waiting for this moment for 40 years.”

From the beginning of the London Samye Dzong story until relatively recently there has been almost continuous building work. One especially noteworthy aspect of this development was the creation of the *Rangjung Rigpe Dorje Shrine Room*. The centre is home to two large shrine-rooms, one downstairs in what was once an auditorium, and one upstairs in an impressive light-soaked room with huge windows. The talented and engaging Lama Rigzin, who first came to Samye Ling as a young attendant of Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche in the year 2000, was appointed to design and oversee the decoration of the upstairs room, which required three levels of scaffolding to the domed ceiling. The whole was painted with traditional motifs over several months by volunteers, sometimes as many as forty at a time, with Lama Rigzin regularly instructing helpers to go more slowly, much to their surprise. Despite Lama Rigzin having had very little English in those days, the result is truly spectacular.

The shrine itself was filled with a thousand bronze Buddha statues, which Rinpoche had shipped from Tibet. Each one needed a certain amount of painstaking preparation: they had to have their insides scraped clean, faces painted and gilded, then they were filled with an array of relics, mantras, mandalas and flower petals, before finally being resealed with beeswax and placed on the altar by Rinpoche himself. Rinpoche had set an auspicious date for the inauguration of the shrine, which basically seemed increasingly impossible the nearer it loomed! He arrived at Heathrow perhaps a week beforehand, and, on the way back to the centre, I asked him if he thought we had any chance of finishing ... “With diligence anything is possible,” he replied. After a few days with perhaps

twenty or so volunteers working with faith deep into the night, it started to seem as though this might after all just possibly be true. Kating Lama and friends were then drafted in from Samye Ling as reinforcements, driving down overnight. Rinpoche would appear from time to time to see how we were doing, provide guidance, and fill successive shrine cabinets with the newly completed statues. Someone asked him whether we should aim for speed or accuracy. Of course the answer was both!

It was certainly difficult to feel confident about finishing, but Rinpoche had said it was going to happen so we carried on to the very best of our ability. Somehow, with the help of many of the regular Samye Dzong practitioners who were there to attend Rinpoche's teachings, one of whom had even worked for fifty hours straight, we did finish filling the statues just after 1 am, and the gilding at 5 am, the day of the consecration. Perhaps since we had managed so well, Rinpoche then instructed the gilding team to do a bit more! There is a large Refuge Tree cast that also needed gilding, which was completed as the first people began to arrive for the ceremony. The latter took place in a packed room with BBC London there to broadcast an achievement nobody involved will ever forget. One especially pertinent aspect of the inauguration is that it was the last major part of the centre to be finished, and Rinpoche was able to be there to see it completed and to bless it in April of 2013, a matter of months before he passed away in October.

Samye Dzong London is now a fully functioning Dharma centre where Dharma teachings are provided for free, with an ongoing programme of activities that are benefitting people in and beyond

the city of London; at weekends you might find a Dharma course in one shrine-room, meditation classes in another, people reading in the library of buddhist books, as well as a yoga class in the workshop room and Dr Soktsang, the Tibetan doctor in the treatment room.



Rigpe Dorje Shrine-room

When Rinpoche was visiting he would selflessly spend free time with the sangha members and pivotal lay volunteers such as Colin (who led the refurbishment with or without a team for many years). One such evening we were sitting upstairs in the lamas' apartments, when Rinpoche turned to me and said, "Do you know why Samye Dzong London has become such a success?" He paused, and then answered, "because Lama Zangmo has strong faith." And for all the numerous contributions of so many people here, this is undeniably true: Lama Zangmo's devotion has been exceptional. No doubt this has been easier because of the presence of totally reliable

lamas, foremost amongst these being Akong Rinpoche himself. As she points out, Akong Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche have

always been very much involved: “They have been guiding and supporting me and doing everything possible to make this centre a success.”



The inauguration of the Rigpe Dorje Shrine-room at
Kagyü Samyé Dzong London, April 2013.

(Courtesy of Gerry McCulloch)

In 2011 Akong Tulku Rinpoche visited London to receive an award, the “Sixty Years, Six People” accolade: Home Secretary (as she was) Theresa May honoured six individuals who had arrived as refugees and went on to make an inspiring and meaningful contribution to life in Britain. There can be no doubting the extensive positive influence Rinpoche has had in the UK, and his activity in the capital itself has been a prime example.

Kagyü Samyé Dzong Dublin

by John O'Neill

In the autumn of 2013, obituaries for Akong Rinpoche appeared in the two main Irish daily newspapers. As one of them noted, “he had a long and deep relationship with Ireland”. Thirty-six years earlier, in 1977, and just ten years after the founding of Samyé Ling, a handful of Irish Buddhists set about establishing its first branch in Ireland. Invitations were issued and re-issued. So it was that in March 1979, Akong Rinpoche sailed across the sea from Scotland and headed south to Dublin, with Ken Holmes as his driver and assistant.

Rinpoche gave his first public talk in Dublin on St Patrick’s Day at the old East/West Centre in Crow Street. Despite his imperfect English, or perhaps because of it, communication was good. Indeed his ability to bend the language, producing direct and sometimes unexpected meanings, is fondly remembered by many who had occasion to smile at his words and dry humour. This would be the first of sixteen visits of varying duration to Ireland; the final one being in the spring of 2013. In addition to Dublin, Rinpoche also travelled

a couple of times to teach in Cork city. He also went to see the site of Saint Molaise's monastery and his holy well in County Carlow.



With President McAleese at
Arus an Uachtarain, 1998

Courtesy of Colum Kenny

These beginning years saw a long series of 'firsts' for the Dublin Samye Dzong and for Ireland: from the first alms round by visiting Theravada monks (up and down O'Connell Street) to the first Vajrayana empowerment (given by Khentin Situ Rinpoche in Inchicore); from the first mention of succession by reincarnation in an Irish legal document

to the first visit by a European Head of State (President McAleese) to a Buddhist centre in Europe. The President was welcomed on that occasion (the centre's twenty-first anniversary) by Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche. When he next came to Ireland, she invited Akong Rinpoche to a private lunch at her official residence.

After three years of renting rooms and using members' homes the centre bought its own premises, first in Inchicore and thirteen years later, in the adjoining historic area of Kilmainham. During his first visit to the latter, Rinpoche casually divined, hidden beneath the centre garden, what appear to be the waters of the ancient holy well of Kilmainham, lost for almost a century. Kilmainham takes its name from the cell, or hermitage, of the early Christian Saint Maignenn, a contemporary and comrade of Saint Molaise of Holy Isle. Rinpoche's warm, melodious voice often filled the shrine-room,

leading meditation liturgies (including a Guru Rinpoche drupcho in 2007) or reciting texts to confer *lung* (scriptural transmission). In 1996, he began to give Vajrayana empowerments in Ireland, continuing to do so during each visit from then on.



With Panchen Otrul Rinpoche

During his stays in Ireland, Rinpoche always made himself completely and tirelessly available to the large number of individuals who came to seek his advice and guidance, and made time to see those who wished to see him but were confined to hospital or home. The quieter hours were used for other action: touring the botanic gardens out of his interest in healing plants; buying and freeing live fish into the wild; inspecting Tibetan items held in Irish museums, and so on. With his characteristic combination of energy and calm, he oversaw the establishment of Tara Rokpa Therapy and Rokpa Aid (Ireland) and the Irish charitable companies formed to safeguard the various branches of his activity into the future. Irish Government officials met with him and provided funds to treat the victims of ‘big bone disease’ in a Tibetan area of China. He facilitated the visits to Ireland of some of the leading lamas of the Kagyu tradition, including Khentin Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche and many illustrious teachers, among them the steadfast Ringu Tulku Rinpoche who has stayed at the centre almost every year starting in 1990.

KAGYU SAMYE DZONG DUBLIN

One of the highlights of those years was the installation of the main Buddha image. At the centre's request, Akong Rinpoche arranged the casting and fire-gilding in Nepal, as well as shipping to Dublin. Over two days in March 1999, he carried out the complicated, traditional consecration procedures. Painting the eyes himself, he placed many precious relics from his personal collection within. A beautiful symbol of Buddhist Refuge, it remains also a tangible and enduring reminder of his time in Ireland.

Additionally, Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Chöje Lama Yeshe Rinpoche established Samye centres in Cork, Edinburgh, Glasgow, by Loch Ness, Cardiff, Scarborough, Surrey, Nidrum and Beaumont in Belgium, Kirchheim in Germany, Helsinki, Assisi, Venice, Vicenza, Reykjavik and in Africa as described next.



Teaching at Kagyu Samye Dzong Dublin

Kagyü Dharma in Africa

by Rob Nairn & friends

“I think the Buddhadharma will grow in Africa. There is a parallel with the history of Tibet, a country that was originally quite rough and wild. People had little understanding of good and bad, or of tolerance and compassion, and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas saw this. They saw that Tibet was a place of great human suffering, so they decided to help. Through their compassion they went there and established the Dharma. So the Dharma may grow more in a place that starts off more wild than in other places, because the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas go where there is the most suffering.”

Chöje Akong Rinpoche’s activity in Africa extends from Cape Town on the southern tip of the continent, through Zimbabwe as far north as the tropical jungle of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Concerning the centres Rinpoche started or fostered, he said:

“Centres are alive only if they have something beneficial to offer the people of the country. They need to adapt to the needs of people and their own cultures. All Rokpa centres are doing spiritual work, but they focus on different areas that emphasise four main activities:

- *Mind training, which is largely the area of Dharma practice.*
- *Healthcare and therapy to improve mental and emotional health.*
- *Charity, to care for people.*
- *Conservation, to preserve the environment and wildlife.”*

Recent Kagyu history in Africa has been guided by Chöje Akong Rinpoche, though the current centres initially also evolved through the historic contributions of others. Although there were scattered individuals interested in Buddhism previously, the current era might be said to have begun in 1972, the year Sister Palmo (Freda Bedi) visited South Africa. Sister Palmo was authorised by His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa to give Refuge and initiations. Within a short time she had inspired people to form their own meditation groups, including centres in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Johannesburg, under the name His Holiness Karmapa recommended, “Karma Rigdol”.

Those early times were fairly wild because most people did not know much about Buddhism, but what was clear was a growing sense of connection to the lineage and His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, and the establishment of groups who thought of themselves as Kagyu.

In 1980 I resigned as Professor of Criminology from the University of Cape Town and took a plunge into the unknown to further establish Kagyu Buddhism in Africa. We found a location in the Northern Cape in the wide open spaces of the Karoo semi-desert, at Nieu Bethesda, where we purchased a cottage for five thousand rand, a lot of money in those days. From the outset we were doing

what would delight Akong Rinpoche, attempting the impossible! Despite having no capital or regular income, properties were bought, centres established, legal entities registered, books published, everything done that had to be done to establish the Dharma in a new continent – always without having the money to do any of it. When students asked either Akong Rinpoche or Lama Yeshe Rinpoche how funds would be raised for purchases of land or projects they famously replied, “Funds will come from where they are.”

The Nieu Bethesda days saw the making of a national Kagyu identity, because people from all over South Africa, and even Zimbabwe and Kenya went there, practised together and forged friendships. It is also the place where Akong Rinpoche first taught and gave Refuge in Africa. In fact Rinpoche’s first teachings included the exercises that formed the basis of his book, *Taming the Tiger*. There is no doubt that Nieu Bethesda was a special, if brief, era in our African Kagyu history, and many people recall it with a happy nostalgia. A range of people became connected with the Dharma, a surprising number of whom are now pivotal members of the centres, having begun their Dharma careers there.

It was in 1982 that Akong Rinpoche made his first visit to South Africa, having been explicitly instructed by the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa to do so. Akong Rinpoche told us that the Karmapa selected him because of his physical resemblance to Africans! As he recalled in an interview:

“His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa told me to go to Africa. He said that I was dark-skinned, so I was the ‘Africa Lama’.

I refused to go. His Holiness told me again, I refused again. He told me a third time, then I went. I kept refusing because I didn't think I was a wise enough person. I didn't think that I knew enough to have anything to offer to this 'dark continent'. There was a general perception that people were totally confused there, they had no sense of right and wrong, and there was much chaos. That's how I saw it. Maybe it was called the 'dark continent' because of other people's ignorance about it.

"But since His Holiness insisted, I went, and decided to do my best. I also realised that there weren't that many Kagyu teachers available in those days, so it had to be me. I think that His Holiness was interested in Africa because he wanted to help people, you could think of it as spiritual charity. Charity, or generosity, is one of the Six Paramitas. Dharma charity is the highest that humanity can receive. We can think of it that way."

Here in South Africa Akong Rinpoche initially only gave Refuge, and two initiations, Chenresig and Guru Rinpoche; later he gave Medicine Buddha and Milarepa empowerments. The Dharma teachings were of a more practical nature, for example, the importance of learning how to get along with people, being kind, and avoiding harm.

"We live in the first days of the Dark Age when karmic forces are stronger than before ... So consequences of actions are magnified. Never pass up the opportunity to do the smallest beneficial act, and

never even do the smallest negative, no matter how unimportant it may seem.”

So after this first visit in 1982 *The Karma Kagyu Trust* was formed and all the Karma Rigdol centres now came under the spiritual direction of Akong Rinpoche. Later that year the Kunzik Shamarpa, who was one of the regents of the Karma Kagyu School, appointed him as the lineage’s representative in South Africa. Rinpoche visited again in 1983, when I was duly authorised as his representative there, and the South African centres became affiliated to Kagyu Samye Ling in Scotland, with Akong Rinpoche as their new abbot. Nieu Bethesda became Nieu Bethesda Samye Ling and the other centres became Samye Dzongs.

Akong Rinpoche returned to South Africa in 1987 for a month-long visit which included teachings over a ten-day period at Nieu Bethesda Samye Ling. Rinpoche taught the *Ngondro* (the preliminary Vajrayana practices), held a Refuge Ceremony, and gave private interviews. Sixty people attended from all over Southern Africa, and it was a magical and memorable time.

In February 1990 Akong Rinpoche visited again, this time accompanied by his wife Yangchen. Curiously the Nieu Bethesda visit coincided with the release of Nelson Mandela after twenty-seven years in prison. It was Akong Rinpoche who announced his release to the sixty participants. One of them asked Rinpoche privately about Mandela, since due to his long imprisonment people knew very little about him. Rinpoche answered briefly: “Lama Nelson Mandela Rinpoche.”

This was a ten-day visit to Nieu Bethesda by Rinpoche which included Refuge, a Back to Beginnings retreat, and also rain prayers as the region had been experiencing a long drought. To everybody's delight it started to rain and people were dancing in the rain. Rinpoche also went to Cape Town and Johannesburg.

During the visit an event of truly historical significance took place, when we met with Credo Mutwa, the well known Zulu spirit medium. When Credo Mutwa first saw Akong Rinpoche he gasped in amazement, flung himself on the ground at Rinpoche's feet, put Rinpoche's feet on his head and exclaimed, "Oh my God! You came to see me, you came to see me!" Credo presented Rinpoche with a four hundred year old relic. It seems that sometime in the sixteenth century a great Zulu spirit medium had predicted that, in the future, a powerful saint would come to Africa from the East and bring great blessings to the people of this continent. He prepared a relic which was to be preserved and handed down through his lineage until the day came for its presentation. The custodian of our time was Credo and he offered it to Rinpoche, thus fulfilling the prediction and sealing Rinpoche's connection to Africa.

Akong Rinpoche was always completely there for us, like a massive rock. It felt as if he was always with us, even after he passed away. When Rinpoche was touring in Africa, I had to go ahead to prepare the way. One time I asked for his blessing before setting out for the airport. Rinpoche laughed and hit me on the head saying, "You don't need my blessing, I'm always with you!"

Most of us do not properly understand how enlightened teachers like Rinpoche operate, as we tend to judge them as we would ordi-

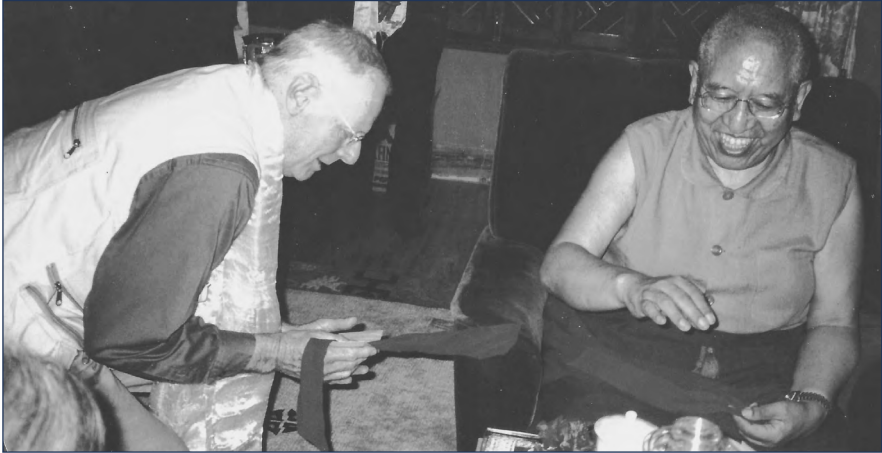
nary people. This is a common mistake because Rinpoche always said and did only what would truly help us on the path to liberation from our mind poisons and deluded beliefs in egocentric existence. In practice this meant saying and doing things we did not like or want to experience. This often made his advice difficult to follow and did not always make him a popular lama. Maybe this was deliberate. I once (in fact more than once) arrogantly challenged him about his activity. Rinpoche replied, “I cannot take on more than one hundred students if I want to help them properly. They have to be serious students.”

What does serious mean? I think it has something to do with being seriously honest with ourselves in a kind, accepting and hopefully humorous way. Without this simple honesty, it must be difficult for Rinpoche to reach us because we will remain barricaded behind our defences of denial, false piety and projections. If we understand this, it brings the subject of our Dharma practice into a simple and workable perspective; there is no need to do endless clever and complicated things, we just need to be kind to ourselves and others, in an open, honest way; never miss the opportunity to do the smallest beneficial act, never casually do the smallest harmful act, and train our minds to the best of our ability.

In February and March 1994 Akong Rinpoche visited Nairobi, Harare, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, giving Dharma talks, Refuge, and initiations. During his visit to Southern Africa in 1997, Rinpoche was accompanied by Donal Creedon, and he gave the same programme of vows and initiations as in 1994. This pattern was to be repeated during his 1999, 2001, 2004 and

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2006 visits. Donal Creedon remained a regular visitor, teaching in the centres, as have Ken Holmes and Gelong Thubten, and of course Lama Yeshe Rinpoche. In 2002 Rob led a South African group on pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sites in India.



Rob Nairn on pilgrimage in Sarnath paying respects to Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

Apart from Rinpoche's regular visits to his Southern African centres I would visit Kagyu Samye Ling in Scotland each year while Rinpoche was staying there. On one occasion I was doing my best to avoid Rinpoche for some reason. To avoid talking to him I hid in a boiler room at Samye Ling and waited for the coast to clear. Before long the door to the boiler room opened, and Rinpoche entered and just stood there looking at me! In fact this happened on more than one occasion.

Kagyü Samye Dzung Cape Town

In 1994 Rinpoche asked his students to sell Nieu Bethesda and buy city-based centres in Johannesburg, Harare and Cape Town, to make the centres more accessible to the students and more of the population of Southern Africa. As the Trust sold up in Nieu Bethesda, the money and assets went first to Cape Town, and then to Johannesburg. One should not imagine this means we had all the money we needed for these purchases, because we definitely did not. But at least it was a start, and gave us the courage to stick our necks into the mortgage bond nooses. So the energy of Nieu Bethesda flowed to the cities and made the buying of buildings possible. Rinpoche's students were amazed how quickly the purchase of properties for centres in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Harare happened under Rinpoche's guidance.

The first Cape Town Samye Dzung was bought in 1994 in Auburn Road and a second was acquired in 1999 in Kenilworth, where a large shrine-room was built to accommodate the growing number of practitioners. The Cape Town community carry out programmes to feed the hungry amongst other community and charitable work. On one of his visits to Cape Town Akong Rinpoche visited the place where this feeding arrangement takes place. That day an unusually large number of people arrived and the servers were becoming concerned that the food would run out before everyone had been fed. However it proved otherwise: as recipients reached the servers more and more food was available. The large pot from which

Rinpoche was serving was still half-full by the end, and he had fed easily 500 people.

Kagyü Samye Dzong Johannesburg



Kagyü Samye Dzong Johannesburg

At the end of 1977 the Kagyü centre in Johannesburg evolved from a group that used to meet for meditation practice at Geoffrey Hardacre's house. It might be fair to say that the early years at Johannesburg were characterised for many by a tendency to move freely between different traditions, and it also took time to find the right venue. Akong Rinpoche said the following about the establishment of centres in Africa:

“The development of the centres has been very good. Samye Ling has been going for forty years and South Africa for thirty-five. Sometimes

I lose patience, feeling we could do better, but then we realise that Tibetan Buddhism always has to start with zero – no capital, no foundations, like a new family starting out in business. So we have to find new people and begin generating new income. Other organisations, for example Christianity, have been established for hundreds of years so it is easier for them. We have no past accumulation to rely on, so our growth will be slow. Having said this, some of our achievements have exceeded my expectations even though there have been obstacles. But we have not experienced obstacles like those in Tibet at the time of establishing Buddhism. We need to remember that once we are in the world there will be obstacles. We have hard times, learn new things; make mistakes, get new input, and these are all good because if we accept them, we will learn from difficulties. The Dharma is growing faster in Africa than it did in Tibet.”

During his visit in February 1994, Akong Rinpoche asked his students to identify properties for sale in Johannesburg with a view to purchasing a centre. While visiting one such property in Kensington, one of our students saw a house that he recognised from a dream the previous night. The owner of the house was busy on the phone talking to her estate agent as she had just decided to sell it! Meanwhile her estate agent informed her that she had just taken a group of Buddhists to a nearby house that was for sale that morning. When Rinpoche heard this he told those present that he was responsible. The parties negotiated the sale of a beautiful large house in a stunning location at a much reduced price.

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By July that year we moved into this house and the management committee took out a mortgage on the property that would become Johannesburg Samye Dzung. From February to June 1995 I led a long course on Buddhism there, which was well attended. Regular Dharma talks, weekend retreats and Tara Rokpa Therapy workshops were held at the centre during this time.

In June 1996 the Dalai Lama made the first of three historic visits to South Africa. During his first visit was the joyous meeting with Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Walter and Albertina Sisulu. His Holiness also gave Dharma teachings to large crowds of people and, the highlight for us, blessed our shrine-room and planted a Bodhi tree.



In 2002 Akong Rinpoche arranged for the Nyungne practice to be performed in Africa for the first time, eight pairs each in Johannesburg and Harare.

A ROKPA soup kitchen was established in 1995. Rinpoche spoke of his aim to feed all of those in the world who need food. By 1998

through Akong Rinpoche's guidance and the efforts of willing students, corporate funding was obtained for our small soup kitchen. Rinpoche's advice for those working in the soup kitchen was to think that the people one was serving food to were the Buddhas. For the next five years the hot meals increased from 60 to 600 a week, as well as providing medical care and clothing for homeless people, children, and refugees in Johannesburg's inner city.

Serving the poor sometimes had a funny side. We discovered that the street people had difficulty getting potable water, so we bought a trailer with a 500 litre water tank on it. When we arrived at the feeding point this would be unhitched and pulled to one side. One evening when one of the servers turned to get water, he found that the tank had gone! He raised the alarm, and upon launching a search, we saw a group of our 'customers' making off down the street with it.

Kagyü Samye Dzung Randburg

During his Southern African visit in 2001 Akong Rinpoche gave his students the challenge of finding a new centre in the Greater Johannesburg vicinity. Rinpoche asked his students to take a map of this area to the Seventeenth Karmapa and ask him to point out where the centre should be located. Rob, during a pilgrimage to India, gave the map to His Holiness who pointed out an area in the northwest of Johannesburg to search. (One of the most expensive areas in Johannesburg!)

The group started looking for premises. In 2004 a house was rented at 305 Long Ave, Ferndale. The big turning point came in 2006 when Akong Rinpoche visited this Randburg centre for the first time, and the shrine-room was packed to overflowing. After Rinpoche's visit the numbers attending Tuesday evening sessions grew steadily and activities became a little more structured. In March 2006 Dr Melanie Polatinsky began to give regular teachings at KSDR on alternate Tuesdays.

And then Chöje Lama Yeshe arrived in March 2007, with prayer flags and frenetic preparations. What a splendid evening – Kagyu Samye Dzung Randburg felt it could finally claim the title! The small intimate group had grown to a community of one hundred plus. After Lama Yeshe's visit, everything changed – the community continued to grow and more evenings were introduced to offer other study topics such as lojong. Many weekends were added so that relaxation therapy and study of the five elements could also be taught. The Randburg group had outgrown their centre.

In October 2009 both Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe Rinpoche gave their blessings for Kagyu Samye Dzung Randburg to start looking for premises of their own, and in March 2011 KSD Randburg bought a property. Since then the centre has grown from strength to strength. It now has activities four or five times each week and has been blessed to host both Lama Yeshe Rinpoche and Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, as well as Lama Tsondru and Lama Zangmo.

Tara Rokpa Centre

When Akong Rinpoche first came to South Africa he spent a lot of time with people doing ordinary things, such as having picnics in the country, walking in the hills or beside streams. He spoke a lot about geomancy and the importance of working harmoniously with nature and natural forces, maintaining balance and preserving the environment.

In April 1999 Akong Rinpoche visited a farm in a valley in the Groot Marico district of the North West Province that his students had identified as a possible place for a rural retreat centre, about three hours' drive from Johannesburg. He had asked a student called Mark Bennet to look for somewhere in the country near Gauteng. When he and Geoffrey Freeman walked into a local B&B, which they had booked into in order to investigate the area, they were amazed to see on the wall three black and white pictures of Guru Rinpoche and a form of Tara. Their host said they had been her late mother's and she knew nothing of their significance. On seeing the site himself, Rinpoche lost no time in telling his students to buy land there, saying the property would be suitable for development as a healthcare project.

On the first morning of this first visit by Rinpoche I went to his house, to be met by Rinpoche striding purposefully out through the front door. Without pausing for greetings Rinpoche announced, "Today we are going to buy property, lots of property!" He then produced a sling, and very quickly a group

gathered around him. Rinpoche selected four fist-sized rocks and proceeded with astounding skill to whirl them round and release them hundreds of feet in the four cardinal directions. When asked the purpose of the exercise Rinpoche cryptically remarked, “removing obstacles.”

That day Rinpoche identified three properties for us to buy. When someone foolishly asked who would pay, Rinpoche grinned mischievously and said “Rob will find the money.” We were still finding money to pay off two other properties so we did feel a little as though we were staggering under a king-sized burden. But Rinpoche did let up and got ROKPA to help out.

Amongst the natural blessings of the valley at Groot Marico are an abundance of pure water, rich soils, quiet places, and an invigorating bushveld climate. The initial land for Tara Rokpa Centre (TRC) was bought by students paying for life rights on the property. Eight such life rights were sold to students, some of whom have since built houses there, enabling the centre to own its first land. And so in 2001 Akong Rinpoche founded what was originally named “Tara Rokpa Healthcare Centre”.

One of the first properties bought was for a training centre and a school for small children. This was financed by ROKPA, as Rinpoche wanted it to be used for community projects and skills training for impoverished local people. He described his guiding vision for Tara Rokpa Centre thus:

“To establish a place of healing and healthcare. The people of Gauteng need a place where they can go to meditate or just rest, because they

have so much stress. Although we are Buddhists, this centre should be for people of any or no religion. It should be open to all, and encourage harmony between people of all persuasions.”

A few short retreats were initially held. However, it was only from June 2003 when Philippa Cope started living there full-time that it was able to develop the necessary infrastructure to support a centre with diverse functions and more events each year, including retreats, which I oversaw, that were attended by people from as far away as the UK.

Here is Pippa's account of life at TRC, and of Akong Rinpoche's memorable visits. "I was not present at Rinpoche's first visit to the valley, but have heard wonderful tales. The first which I experienced here was in 2004, not long after finalisation of purchase of the first piece of land with the farmhouse. As ever, Rinpoche's visits felt like a tornado hitting the place while he remained totally calm in the centre. Under Paul Marais' guidance and hard work his house was nearing completion but not yet finished until well after four am on the morning of his arrival. The finishing work was further hampered by a huge thunderstorm which caused flooding of the whole house as there had not been time to put in place the necessary storm water precautions. While doors were being hung, an exhausted group of us bailed and mopped the house, trying to make it reasonably habitable.

"On his arrival we lit welcoming smoke fires at the entrance, lining the dirt track as we held out our katas. He stepped out of the car and, ignoring us all, bent down and began to pull out

weeds on the side of the path. In confusion most put aside their katas to join in with the weeding. This was the first of many silent lessons ... He always said TRC needs 'active Buddhism'.

“Rinpoche’s instruction via Rob was that during his visit he wanted to meet with neighbouring farmers under the name Dr Tarap, so a morning *koffee* gathering was arranged. Just before the gathering he called me and said I must also invite the *Tswana* people from the local informal settlement (*the Stad*). This is still a highly racially divided area where there is almost no social contact between farmers and their workers and families. I told him in my opinion it would be difficult on both sides but would do as he requested.

I watched with interest to see what outfit Rinpoche would choose to wear for the meeting, as from previous experience I know he has many, often surprising outfits! To my surprise, this time he emerged dressed exactly in the fashion of the farmers in khaki. Rob formally introduced him in broken Afrikaans, then Rinpoche addressed them, expressing his hope for peaceful cooperation, and skillfully fending off some aggressive questions. The Tswana folk we invited were hanging back behind one of the temporary buildings out of sight, so he told me to summon them for tea with the farmers. They finally agreed they would come forward to dance and sing and skilfully began their little show by singing the Afrikaans national anthem. At this point most of the farmers chose to leave. Once they were out of the way the locals came in for food and drinks and entertained the TRC folk for some time with singing and dancing, which was joined by many.

Just before leaving they wished to offer thanks to Rinpoche saying that it was the first time they had ever been allowed to drink tea from the same cups as whites.

“Early the next morning I was summoned by Rob to join Rinpoche for breakfast. His mission for the morning was to go out and buy more land. I knew of one farm that was possibly for sale but not on the market, and told him what I knew about the other farms, and so Rob, Rinpoche and I went visiting. Within 48 hours agreements had been made to buy two farms (as ever with no money), and within a few months we had purchased another one in surprising circumstances. One sum of money was loaned by ROKPA to buy land for skills training, but the rest came from, in Rinpoche’s words, ‘where it is’!

“Amidst an endless flurry of unplanned activities, often involving objects pulled out of his belt which I assumed were changing the valley’s energies, the first management committee was formed, his vast and daunting vision for the centre set in place, alongside a formal Refuge ceremony and empowerments. As many know, all who gather to hear his talks interpret them differently, most of us subjectively hearing what we want to hear, so it was interesting over the next few years to learn of different interpretations of his vision and try to find consensus!

“On this visit I received many instructions on the area surrounding the main site, while Paul received instructions on future buildings. A lot of trees surrounding the house were to be cleared, more (preferably food) trees and healing herbs to be planted. Since I had grown attached to a huge productive fig tree close to the house, one of the

only ones we had from which I could harvest the fruit before the monkeys and birds, I left it out of the cull. On Rinpoche's next visit in 2006, one of the first things he said to me was, 'That tree is still there', so it had to go!

"The visit in 2006 had a formal programme along with much informal activity. This time the jointly invited community were invited to the Training Centre where the creche was situated. Only a handful of the white neighbours came, but most of the Stad folk did come, some of whom had begun growing vegetables for themselves on the site. A particularly memorable part of the formal activity was a wonderful Green Tara empowerment, during which he blessed all those present with an amazing small Tara statue from Tibet, which was reputed to have spoken. A huge blessing!

"As we had new property and half-finished buildings, on this visit it was the usual mad rush with builders moving out of back doors while guests moved in through the front! Alongside the formal programme much informal time was spent with Rinpoche along with Rob, Thomas, Mike and Dave, walking the property and listening to his advice on development and use.

"All his activity was spontaneous, unexpected, and often inexplicable: he would travel with a normal-sized suitcase from which a multitude of things would appear, costumes ranging from very smart suits for formal meetings with diplomats, to khaki outfits to fit meetings with the local farmers, brightly-coloured *Madiba* shirts, and bright silk pyjamas, plus a multitude of sacred objects including a tooth from HH Gyalwa Karmapa, the tiny Green Tara statue which came to him miraculously from Tibet, replicas of a sacred

Guru Rinpoche statue, many gifts for centres including silk wall hangings, thangkas, photographs of lineage holders, sacred books, *rupas*, *dutsi* and much else besides. He would depart with a multitude of things such as gems, gold, herbs obtained from traditional markets. How he got through security checks is a mystery to me!

“We established a custom of painting sacred symbols and mantras on local slate, which he said was good and that we must do much more. When I told him that all those we had painted and placed on Temple Hill had been taken to a shack in Die Stad, his reply was, ‘Good it will benefit the people, do more.’

“Throughout my time at TRC I have felt hugely supported by Rinpoche, despite physically seeing very little of him, but all his personal advice remains with me. I have found that it is often only years later that a glimmering of the deep meaning of his advice begins to penetrate.”

By the end of 2007 TRC owned two hundred and seventy hectares of beautiful farmland and indigenous bushveld and a spectacular waterfall. Another natural feature of the area is the underground source of the Groot Marico River, which emerges spectacularly as pure, healing water from deep underground. From the beginning a positive and sustainable approach to the environment has been emphasised at the centre. Organic vegetables are grown, so that as far as possible homegrown vegetables are used for catering. The land is now being used for a biodynamics project called “Tikologo”. Recent developments have included the introduction of swales that serve to reduce water runoff so as to maintain water levels, to dam water in specific parts of the property and to encourage the growth

of plants and vegetables in their vicinity. Courses on permaculture have been attended by young unemployed people living on the land in the surrounding area. In 2019 the nourishing herb production was developed into a range of homegrown and processed organic herbal teas for sale.

Buildings have also been constructed along eco-friendly lines and in accordance with Akong Rinpoche's guidance in many cases, using the best choices for efficiency and renewable energy. Just as in Harare, Akong Rinpoche's house and my own were constructed using the rammed earth method; at Tara Rokpa Centre the walls of buildings were constructed using straw bale, mud brick, along with other eco-friendly building methods.



Rinpoche planting trees

During Rinpoche's last visit to Southern Africa in 2010 he planted treasure vases at the proposed site of the temple at TRC as a way of restoring the balance of the elements in the area. His vision also included the acquisition of more land for the protection and conservation of wildlife, particularly leopards. When asked how we would find the resources to do all the above his answer was "dig for gold!" Presumably we can regard this as a joke, or at least a metaphor, in the light of his very strong opposition to the depletion of the earth's underground resources. In connection with this, as early as 2010 Rinpoche said:

“It has been said that ‘in a beautiful forest the tiger is the main beauty. No tiger, no beauty of forest’. If animals go, the human world cannot function by itself because there will no longer be beauty and balance, we help and protect each other. Birds and animals give enjoyment and pleasure: our minds become tranquil when we see and experience them, so they are very, very precious.

“I would like ROKPA to play a big part in protecting wildlife and forests, and in growing food: not based on making big money but rather on health for people. Health and protecting the environment are very important.

“It is also our responsibility to preserve minerals and the precious elements in the ground. The planet is like a body and precious substances are like its organs: they must be in the earth to produce the proper qualities of the earth. We can’t prevent mining, but we can look after areas over which we have control. We must care for and preserve what we can, so that we leave a better environment for our children.

“Precious metals and gems are like the organs in the system of the planet. Oil is like its blood. Extracting them is destruction of vital organs and the body will die. The planet will no longer be able to support life because it is slowly dying – manifesting as disruptions of the seasons, droughts, floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes.

“The problem with mining is they take minerals and give back nothing. We should return something to the earth, and planting peace bumpas

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(vases) is one way to restore the balance of the minerals and elements to the earth.

“One of our big lessons is that all aspects of life, ranging from the world we inhabit to the subtle balance of our minds, are interdependent. If we continue to live greedy, selfish lives, we will surely destroy our world and ourselves along with it. The remedy is individually to halt the harm and begin healing and balancing.”



Shrine-room at TRC Groot Marico

Courtesy of Sylva Olsen

Akong Rinpoche developed his vision for Tara Rokpa Centre in 2010 during his last visit to Southern Africa. It is a place which relies upon “Four Wings”, bringing together the four activities of therapy, charity, spiritual growth and environmental sustainability. In accordance with this vision it is a therapy centre, in which a variety of healing methods are offered. In particular it is also the

headquarters of Tara Rokpa Therapy in Southern Africa, and serves as a basis for trained and experienced Tara Rokpa therapists to practise and spread its programme. The charity wing comprises projects such as education, permaculture, building skills, and hand-crafts.

It is also a Dharma centre in which regular retreats have been held in a secluded spot established by Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche during his 2012 visit. Since then Alan Muller has led two six-month *Ngondro* retreats, and individual or group practice retreats are now also held during the year. Rinpoche inspired his close students by telling them that Tara Rokpa Centre was his *labrang* in Africa. The scope of the vision for the future can be glimpsed through Rinpoche's expressed wish to see a thousand hectares of land purchased for conservation, an administrative block for forty staff members, and on one of the hills a temple dedicated to Tara for a thousand people!

Pippa Cope sums up the way it feels to be one of those whose job is to make all this manifest: "His vast vision is daunting when trying to assist with implementation, but often unexpected help and skills arrive when needed, funds come from seemingly nowhere and his all encompassing compassion and wisdom is available here in his 'Tara mandala', whether or not he is physically present.

"It is a huge privilege and challenge to be here at TRC, a multifaceted place dedicated to healing with Tara's energy. I have always felt like a very small cog in a huge Rinpoche mandala, supported by wonderful visiting teachers and facilitators, many dedicated volunteers, committee members and others who prefer to help in the background offering a variety of skills where needed. I have made a few attempts

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to leave, as I am inevitably running out of energy, but Rinpoche has said ‘You are still strong,’ and, ‘there is time to rest in the bardo!’



Meeting with residents of TRC valley, Groot Marico 2003.

“On the Thursday night when I had just received the news that Rinpoche’s body was being cremated at Dolma Lhakang, I sat out on my balcony between 11 and 12.30 pm, feeling as if I was practising while connected to so many throughout the world who have been involved with Rinpoche, and sharing the devastating loss of his current form. There was a red glow in the north-east, the direction of Dolma Lhakang, which was radiating off a huge uncontrolled bush fire; simultaneously the first much needed rains fell along with thunder and lightning, moistening the parched earth. His energy and support felt palpable so I trust I have the strength and courage

to continue here until much needed younger energy and ideas come forward to develop the centre in line with Rinpoche's vast vision to benefit many beings for thousands of years."

Centres in Zimbabwe



With members of the Kagyu Samye Ling Zimbabwe community

There are now affiliated centres in Harare, Chitungwisa, Dzivaresekwa and Susurumba, but when I moved to Salisbury (Harare) in the early 1960s of course none of these were there. I discovered the Theosophical Society, amongst whose members were a number of Buddhists. We formed a small group focused on study, meditation and the annual celebration of Wesak.

This group continued to meet when I left Rhodesia (soon to become Zimbabwe) and it grew until it numbered 30–40 people who met regularly. They began to focus increasingly on practice, so once a year or so they rented accommodation at an events centre, and I would travel from South Africa to help facilitate retreats. In time this group became a solid ongoing Dharma community who

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bought a number of properties in Monavale, a small suburb west of Harare. Quite quickly a shrine-room big enough to hold 70–80 people was built, and an office, library and events room were added to this. The centre also bought a large property on the top of Carlton hill adjacent to the other properties. In time a large shrine-room big enough to hold four hundred people was built on this property, the biggest in Africa. Akong Rinpoche was part of the original building team, and was able to demonstrate his bricklaying and plastering skills, which we tried without success to emulate.



With the Zimbabwe trustees

Lama Yeshe Rinpoche inaugurated the shrine-room in 2007. There are two satellite centres on the outskirts of Harare: Chitungwisa has its own land and a huge, hangar-like building while the Dzivaresekwa group meet in a private home. Through the kind help of David Sheehan, another centre was established more recently in a location in Harare which is more accessible for those who live on the other side of town.

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During Akong Rinpoche's 1997 visit to Johannesburg he spoke about Guru Rinpoche, the great mahasiddha who lived in eighth century India. His mission was to foster and spread the particular approach and practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. Guru Rinpoche was invited to Tibet by King Trisong Detsen, who was facing seemingly insurmountable problems in bringing Dharma to his kingdom, the wild land of Tibet. Once there he proceeded to adopt the powerful nature spirits as Dharma protectors, and prepared the land for the establishment of Buddhism. Consequently, Samye Monastery, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, was built towards the end of the eighth century.



Rinpoche's house at the Harare Buddhist Centre, Kagyu Samye Ling Zimbabwe

Similarly, Akong Rinpoche urged Rokpa Harare to initiate dialogue with traditional spiritual leaders, which had a formative influence on the development of centres in Zimbabwe. Rob befriended Louis Chipfupi, who presented him with a symbolic gift which made them spiritual brothers. Louis has sadly passed away. Much of Rinpoche's focus in Africa seemed to go beyond the merely human level, and one day I asked him about this:

“Yes, I met some of the spirits in Zimbabwe and I consider that contact to be important. Most people nowadays don’t respect spirits and spirit mediums. They often look upon mediums as crazy. I feel that if one goes to a new country the first thing is to respect the beliefs and traditions of the country, not to think ‘I know better and they know nothing’. It is important to respect the local gods and the people who believe in them.

“The local gods in Zimbabwe are quite strong, but in order for there to be contact, people have to be open to them. They can be powerful and useful forces in our lives and many are stronger than humans. They directly affect us through their ability to control the elements. They can control the weather, cause droughts and floods, affect crops, the daily life of humans, and can cause certain sicknesses, for example HIV/AIDS. People contract this due to their lifestyles, but also due to the influence of other forces if their lives are impure. If people have no respect, the local gods may feel that humans are useless and abandon them, not helping them to preserve their lives and health.

“There are many categories associated with different geographic features. Where there are dams and streams nagas dwell. Other local gods are attracted to beautiful mountains, cliffs, forests and so on, and that’s where they live.”

This is one reason why Rinpoche was always so insistent that people should not smoke cigarettes on Dharma centre properties. He emphasised that the smoke makes the gods sick and drives them away. What about marijuana, I asked.

”If you take Vajrayana initiation and smoke that, it is like inviting Guru Rinpoche into your house, and then waiting at the door with a big stick to hit him on the head.”

Akong Rinpoche made a strong connection to two spirit mediums (*sekurus*) in particular. Firstly, there was Sekuru Louis, the *Chaminuka* medium, who regularly goes into trance for a few hours on Saturday mornings in a room on his property. When Akong Rinpoche and his party arrived at the gate to visit, the spirit immediately announced that somebody important had arrived. So Rinpoche went into the room where Sekuru Louis was, and sat down. Without preamble Rinpoche said, “Who are you?” The spirit replied,

“You know very well who I am, why do you ask me? You don’t have to ask me, you know who I am and I know who you are.” Rinpoche just laughed and continued,

“I am bringing the Dharma to Africa.” The spirit again commented, “I know you don’t have to tell me.” So then Rinpoche elaborated, “I want you to become a protector, to protect the Dharma.” *Chaminuka* agreed to do that. So it went on for quite a while and Rinpoche was challenging towards the spirit, but the spirit handled it very well. It was almost as if they had to test each other and establish a pecking order between themselves.

Sekuru Louis made a heartfelt connection with Akong Rinpoche, with whom he took Refuge, and it was he who founded the Chitungwisa Centre, which is situated about twenty-five kilometres from the Harare Centre. Akong Rinpoche expressed his view that in Africa, practices such as *Chenresig* could be adapted so as to be

sung and danced, as this was perceived as a way that Buddhist spiritual practice could be made more accessible to black Africans. So this became an extremely popular feature of spiritual expression in Rinpoche's Zimbabwe centres.



With the Mutota

Rinpoche also met with the most important spirit medium in the whole of Zimbabwe, Monomatapa, known locally as “the Mutota”. The Mutota medium came to visit Rinpoche, causing about a hundred Buddhists to gather to celebrate this great occasion. A huge all-night party called a “Pungwe” soon developed. This consisted of much eating and drinking, traditional music, dancing and general merriment. At first the Mutota sat by himself, but after a while Rinpoche went and sat beside him and they spoke (through a translator) for many hours. We were all very curious to know what was

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going on, but never found out. At midnight Rinpoche stood up, pulled him to his feet, and started dancing. They danced together for some time with a very natural flow. This was an amazing thing to see.



Akong Rinpoche lending a hand with the building work for the temple in Harare, Zimbabwe 2006.

Pippa Cope, previous to her relocation at TRC was also present, and was also amazed by the resilience and stamina of her teacher during this visit, as she describes, “On one visit he carried out all his scheduled daily and evening activities, then spent all night, on two consecutive nights, up with the sekurus and their followers playing drums and *mbiras*, dancing and never seeming to tire. I remember falling asleep under a table exhausted and being woken up by Rinpoche at about 3 am and told to dance!

“A few hours later, changed, washed, and appearing fresh he appeared wearing brightly coloured silk pajamas for a committee meeting with major and minor centre issues under discussion. The transformation from sitting on a throne to carry out an empowerment in a Buddhist shrine-room dressed in traditional Tibetan attire, to a humble being in simple clothes and sitting on a grass mat alongside a sekuru, while drinking traditional beer from a *calabash* in a matter of hours was also quite astonishing.

“Another memorable event was a humble rural blessing ceremony under a thorn tree, where for hours Rinpoche offered the three traditional blessings and handed out blessing cords to a huge throng of folk who seemed to materialise endlessly from the bush with their children on their backs, and goats and chickens in tow. The ceremony finally ended with food. Rinpoche seemed totally at home seated outdoors on a traditional floor mat happily consuming traditional food with his hands, surrounded by children clambering all over him while he fed and played games with them, no language needed! The whole ceremony had been scheduled to take about two hours but actually took at least six!”

Rinpoche visited Zimbabwe for the second time in February 1997 and stayed at the Rokpa Harare centre for ten days, where he gave a Dharma talk, two Refuge ceremonies and a series of empowerments. A group of Congolese students made the very long and difficult journey to Harare to attend Rinpoche’s empowerments and lectures. This same group has built a Congolese centre for over a hundred, where they hosted Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma Lhabu and Lama Katen in 2018.

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Lama Yeshe Rinpoche teaching at Kagyu Samye Ling Zimbabwe Temple, complete with newly consecrated Guru Rinpoche statue, March 2019.

The event which made a very strong impression in people's minds during the 1997 visit, though, was the Refuge Ceremony that took place in Chitungwisa. One evening about fifty people, most of whom were Sekuru Louis' followers, took Refuge with Akong Rinpoche in a very moving ceremony. Later there was a traditional song, "The Light has come to Africa". Many attendees felt that the light had indeed now come to Africa in the form of Akong Rinpoche and his teachings.

Copper Coloured Mountain

When Guru Rinpoche had completed his life work in Tibet he is said to have flown off in a south-westerly direction, where he continues to reside in his pureland, “the Copper Coloured Mountain”. For all those who tend to see such ancient Buddhist stories as myth, it might be intriguing to hear that Akong Rinpoche asked his students in Southern Africa to search for this Copper Coloured Land, saying it lies somewhere inside the old Northern Transvaal region, a land now partly Zimbabwe and partly Zambia.

Akong Rinpoche and his students have searched these parts of South Africa and the Masvingo area in the south-east of Zimbabwe, by travelling in these regions and asking local *sangomas* and *inyangas* (traditional doctors and mediums) about the mountain. It turned out from discussions between Akong Rinpoche and Credo Mutwa that there are some remarkable correspondences between Tibetan Buddhist oral tradition and an African tribe living somewhere in the Zambian copper belt. Guru Rinpoche is traditionally believed to be living on a mountain inhabited by ‘man-beasts’: in fact this tribe has the custom of hunting in animal outfits. The tribe has a sacred mountain, where a spirit known as *Om Guru* resides! Tantalising enough, but further explorations have uncovered no more as yet.

Since Rinpoche’s tragic passing, the centres in Central and Southern Africa have continued to function and bring the Dharma to the people of this region, a testament to the solidity of the foun-

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dations Rinpoche established. The Dharma has now taken hold in an area from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Central Africa to the tip of Africa in the Cape, over 4000 miles away. More than 250,000,000 people now have a chance to encounter the precious teachings of the Lord Buddha and attain liberation.

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CHAPTER 4

Healer of Body & Mind



Pioneer of Tibetan Medicine in Europe

by Katia Holmes

Foreword:

Connecting to Rinpoche as a healer of body and mind

I had the great good fortune to know Akong Rinpoche for forty-four years, having first met him in 1969, two years after he co-founded Samye Ling with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Besides the precious gift of his spiritual guidance, I owe him my life which would have come to an untimely end in 1982, had it not been for his wise help and kind care.

My purpose here is to give a first-hand account of Rinpoche's qualities and activity as an extraordinary healer of body and mind, and to record his key role in the development of Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Europe. My wish is to offer an eye-witness testimony as a modest and grateful tribute to his boundless kindness.

My connection with the medical side of Rinpoche's activity can only be explained in the light of my experience with him over the years. With apologies, I will use my own case as the simplest way

for me to bear witness to Rinpoche's special healing qualities and to illustrate his rare skills.

Samye Ling was only two years old and I was twenty-two when I visited it for the first time in the Summer of 1969. I intended to spend a couple of days there, on my way to the Edinburgh Festival, but ended up staying for two months. This was to be my first meeting with Akong Rinpoche who was then twenty-nine.

To this day I marvel at the fact that nothing other than the wind of karma could have driven me to Samye Ling to meet him as, ostensibly, there was no reason at all for me to go there: I was not looking for Buddhism (or any other 'ism') or for a teacher, all the more so as I had just been sincerely engaged in the student 'revolution' of 1968 in Paris, a year before. Thanks to wonderful, kind parents, life was good and easy for me, with bright prospects. Surprisingly enough, at that stage I had had no personal experience of suffering and little awareness of it in others. I had great ideals but no idea how to translate them into a living reality. All I had was an undefined wish for some universal good, with no clue as to how to make that happen. Blissful ignorance ...

During my first stay in 1969 and a second brief one at Easter 1970, I was quite unaware of who Rinpoche was or of his remarkable qualities. This impression was in part due to this being my first exposure to anything 'Tibetan', but also very much due to the way things were at Samye Ling at the time and to Akong Rinpoche's own attitude.

In the summer of 1969 Samye Ling was a very casual place, a large country house in the low hills of southern Scotland – an

ex-hunting lodge, we were told – cradled by a few noble beech and lime trees, surrounded by meadows speckled with sheep and bordered by the gentle river Esk. Space, quiet and greenery. A handful of ‘residents’ lived there, joined by another handful of colourful visitors, confused or sophisticated seekers of all kinds – hippies, drifters, eccentrics. The place looked and felt like a sort of benevolent and pleasant commune (these were in fashion at the time). It was friendly and totally informal.

Rinpoche went around in ordinary clothes, often in cheap camouflage trousers and top from army surplus, always busy doing jobs around the place (dustbins, tidying, sewing and some admin). He looked like a nice, young Tibetan boy, rather quiet, with a timid and gentle smile; he mingled naturally with people but didn’t hang around chatting or drinking cups of tea. When asked his name, he simply said “Akong” and everyone called him so. By nature very modest and unassuming, he was not the sort of person to swagger around and display titles or credentials. His simplicity was obvious and put people at ease (so much so that it would actually take some years before everyone realised who he was and started addressing him as Rinpoche). Nonetheless, he did chant prayers in the shrine-room, morning and evening, wrapped in a cloak, with a Tibetan monk named Samten and the resident artist Sherab Palden Beru, who played the cymbals and seemed to act as prayer leader, so that no external mark or protocol showed the uninformed visitor, such as myself at the time, that this young man was very special.

I could not recognise any sign of hierarchy or special reverence. Yet, this impression of ordinariness soon vanished whenever one

approached 'Akong' to ask for advice or help. With patience and kindness, he listened to whatever questions, problems or stories brought people to him and he readily shared with them a wealth of wisdom and understanding. His words were few but rich in meaning and whatever may be lacking in his command of English was more than made up by the immediacy of understanding that took place in his presence: he obviously had a clear sense of the person in front of him and what was on their mind. One felt understood, even far beyond one's usual 'image'. A word or a simple sentence of advice he gave could remain engraved in your mind for months and years, like a slow-release medicine delivering its beneficial power over a long period of time, available for use whenever needed, even much later on. This trait, typical of Akong Rinpoche, has been noticed and treasured by all those who sought his advice and took it to heart.

It was only in 1971 that my close relationship with Akong Rinpoche was formed, rooted in healing from the very beginning. I had been based in Paris where, after completing a Masters degree in Political science, I was finishing a Masters in Economics, while engaged in post-graduate studies and part-time lecturing at a new branch of Paris University. This rather intense living meant that, by the end of June 1971, I was quite burnt-out (the term was unknown at the time), with a constant, sharp stabbing pain in the back. Fortunately, an intelligent doctor prescribed total rest for the whole summer at least, he stressed, and it occurred to me that Samye Ling would be the best place to do this.

By that time, after two previous visits to Samye Ling, I had heard that Rinpoche was also a Tibetan doctor, so I asked him if he would kindly help me to overcome the constant pain and the exhaustion, adding rather naively that I would also appreciate his help in trying “to understand the meaning of life”. After all, I had three months ahead of me, I thought innocently ... Kindly, Rinpoche did not laugh, but gave me a very comprehensive schedule to work on.

Upon reflection, I feel that disclosing the experience here could highlight an interesting point: as early as 1971, Rinpoche was using original healing methods which, in retrospect, may appear as a forerunner of the core techniques he was to employ, over twelve years later, to devise the *Back to Beginnings* exercises in collaboration with Edith Irwin, an American therapist, as they developed what has become known as the Tara Rokpa Therapy system.

Besides prescribing rest, fresh air and a bit of light work, Rinpoche gave me two different ‘tasks’, one for the morning and another for the evening.

I was to spend a good part of every morning reviewing my life, going back in time, reflecting on each year, one by one, and writing down everything I could remember, month by month whenever possible – at twenty-four, this was still partially workable. At the end of each year’s review, I was to draw a balance showing what had been good and useful and what had not been so. Once I had reached the earliest point of my memories, I was to reverse the process back up to the present, while still assessing the value of each year. Every night, before going to sleep, I was to imagine as

vividly as I could that I was dying – dying a different death each time.

Used jointly, these exercises proved extremely powerful. I applied myself whole-heartedly to Rinpoche's 'prescription' for some eight weeks. Throughout this period of investigation and imaginings, I experienced a profusion of vivid dreams, even though I normally did not have much recall of dreams or any particular interest in them. Some even seemed significant and instructive at the time.

Thanks to the skilful combination of rest, fresh air, a little light work, and mental exercises under Rinpoche's kind supervision, the pain faded after a time and, gradually, some energy returned, but the most significant result was the mind changes that took place.

This process led me to reassess my life. By the end of the summer, I had identified two possible ways of making the best use of my life: I now felt a strong wish to go into medicine, as a means to relieve suffering, and an equally strong drive to gain more understanding of 'the meaning of life', before even attempting anything else. The hour of choice had come: either returning to Paris without delay to start medical studies or remaining at Samye Ling for a sabbatical year, provided Rinpoche was willing to help me in my quest. This would involve no Buddhist commitment, as I had made clear from the start. It should be stressed that Rinpoche never made this a condition for anyone seeking his guidance.

I put my request to Rinpoche who set a period of three days' reflection for himself and myself, coinciding with a full moon day (the days immediately preceding or following a full moon day are considered quite powerful). Three days later we met again and he

accepted me. I had of course mentioned to him my newly-discovered aspiration to go into medicine and I asked him to think of me if ever he decided to teach Tibetan medicine one day.

This request was voiced in 1971, as I was only freshly embarking upon what was to stretch far beyond the initial sabbatical year to become a lifetime's journey. However, Rinpoche would not forget, as time would tell twenty-three years later, in 1994.

Getting acquainted with Akong Rinpoche was like the endless exploration of an unspoilt new continent, forever full of discoveries and wonderment. To approach the depth of his being and his amazing wealth of qualities, it is helpful to recall that Rinpoche had a long past behind him.

The Long Past of Akong Rinpoche

Akong Tulku came from Tibet as a penniless nineteen year old, with a rich spiritual and medical inheritance. As an accomplished Vajrayana master, he was to be in the vanguard that established Tibetan Buddhism in the West. As an exceptional healer of body and mind, he helped countless people and laid foundations for the development of Traditional Tibetan Medicine (TTM) in Europe.

His rare qualities may be best understood in the light of his long past, with reference to the life of Lama Karma Miyo, whom, in retrospect we call the First Akong. The Sixteenth Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje had indeed recognised the very young Akong as the authentic reincarnation of Lama Karma Miyo, whose spiritual real-

isation gave him a depth of understanding and compassion that made him a great healer. Discovering these qualities in Karma Miyo's life story was particularly moving for me, as I could see them echoed by Akong Rinpoche's talents as a healer of body and mind.

The Life of Karma Miyo, Lama Akong

That there was an 'Akong Tulku' at all is quite clearly a consequence of Lama Karma Miyo's accomplishments. His elevated spirituality nurtured extraordinary healing skills which enabled him to save the life of Karse Kongtrul, then holder of all the Kagyu lineage transmissions. This great service to the lineage was to motivate the search for a new incarnation, a *tulku*, after his death.

Tulku means an emanated body. For most of us, the physical elements which combine with a mind to create an existence unravel at death, and the unique combination we call a 'person' comes to an end. We lose consciousness. No longer 'anchored' to a physical reality by the body, the mind is controlled by the power of karma, i.e. the driving force of our former actions – physical, verbal and mental.

However, some rare beings of advanced spiritual maturity develop a mind so lucid and stable that they remain aware throughout the process of physical disintegration. At death, their awareness merges with its true nature, buddha-mind, while remaining focussed on their profound commitment to help others out of suffering. The tremendous power of that resolve directs their well-trained mind

to any form of emanation suited to fulfil their compassionate pledge. This could account for a seeming continuity in the particular talents and style of activity of some tulkus, as indeed in the present case.

Traditionally in Tibet, the life-stories of lamas or other accomplished spiritual persons are told through what is known as a *namtar*. These are not biographies in the Western sense, they do not seek to paint an accurate picture of a living person, full of the vivid, personal details we love to find in a Western biography. They are meant as a record for posterity of the spiritual progress, the accomplishments and the Dharma activities of a master, in order to inspire present and future disciples.

Reading a *namtar* may leave us hungering for more, but it will certainly serve as an inspiring example. We see how another human being like us managed to overcome the inevitable difficulties of life to reach spiritual accomplishment, and often to help numerous people. It can fire devotion and rekindle our wish to persevere with practice despite obstacles. Akong Rinpoche often advised his students to read the biographies of great masters such as Milarepa, particularly at times when they experienced difficulties, poor motivation or when they might feel jaded.

The life story told here is mostly based upon the *namtar* written by Lama Pema, one of Lama Akong's close disciples at Dolma Lhakhang monastery in Tibet. It also draws on two other sources: a very brief account collected by Akong Rinpoche himself when he visited Dolma Lhakhang in the mid-eighties and a chapter from the *History of Dolma Lhakhang*.



A chance encounter with Lama Pema, main biographer
of the 1st Akong, in Bodhgaya 1980

Karma Miyo came from a family of doctors in which medicine had been practised for generations. Very bright, by the age of seven he had acquired all the basic skills of literacy, able to remember anything he read once. Keenly aware of the sufferings of existence, his only wish was to become a monk. He joined the monastery when he was eight, took novice ordination at thirteen and studied very extensively from the age of fifteen, becoming a considerable scholar. From early on, his peers appreciated him for his gentleness and perfect monastic discipline. He took full ordination at twenty.

He entered his first, traditional three-year retreat at twenty-three and attained the highest accomplishments both in Mahamudra and the Six Yogas of Naropa, of which he had special mastery. Texts speak of miraculous manifestations that took place during his retreat, witnessed by all, such as red light filling the retreat house and *amrita*

boiling in the offering bowls. “He gained many direct experiences of Buddha presence and ‘visited’ many pure lands such as the Copper-Coloured Mountain, land of Guru Rinpoche, Shambala and so on”. He no longer saw a difference between the dream body and the woken life body, having “attained the victorious abode of an ocean of Kagyu siddhas”.

He was still only in his late twenties when his fellow lamas and monks decided to choose him as their head. Later on, in his thirties, he spent some time looking after his communities, while also receiving transmissions and empowerments from great masters. He then did a second set of three years of practice in strict seclusion, during which he kept complete silence and only ate the ‘three whites’ – yogurt, milk, butter – and a spoonful of tsampa a day. Lama Pema gives a moving account of Karma Miyo’s realisation:

“He had all the signs of success in his meditation (creation and completion). As a result of the blessings of Body, Speech and Mind, his body acquired great radiance; the activities of teaching, religious debate and writing were unimpeded; unshakable in meditation, he could direct his vital energy wherever he chose to.

“Other signs were that his butter-lamps would not go out, the water in his offering bowls would turn into milk, the amrita would boil, rainbows would appear on the tormas and long-life pills would float about freely in his room and outside of it. All these were clearly visible to others.

“His body exuded the delicate scent of pure conduct and a very pleasant smell came from his mouth when he spoke. Having mastered the samadhi wherein meditation and post-meditation are no longer separate and lucid clarity is ever present, it made no difference to him whether he ate food or didn’t.

“Through strong diligence, the two sorts of siddhis had become part of his experience ...”

Lama Pema adds:

“He had realised the two aspects of bodhicitta, so that limitless compassion was born in him and he possessed unobstructed, direct knowledge of things and minds.”

These were precious qualities for the head of a monastery, responsible for the spiritual and material welfare of a monastic community of monks and nuns, of several retreat centres and a local community of villagers and nomads.

It is interesting to note how some of the great lamas related to him. Lama Akong is “the light from the compassionate mind of Chenresig”, commented the Tenth Trungpa Chökyi Nyinche, who composed a guru yoga in which he said, “The essence of the guru is Lama Akong, his manifestation is Chenresig with the Three Jewels”.

On the occasion of a full transmission of the *Rinchen Terdzö* he had just given, Jedrung Rinpoche, the influential abbot of Riwoche and main lama of the area, recognised Lama Akong’s qualities in a formal ceremony: “Jedrung Rinpoche joyfully put on Karma Miyo’s

head a pandita hat with long flaps he had had made specially, saying: ‘I solemnly empower you as Lord of Dharma of Tsawa Gang Dolma Lhakhang. Work for the good of the teachings and beings!’ He advised all present to take Lama Akong’s words to heart.”

The Sixth Karma Chagme Rinpoche, Tsultrim Gyamtso, came to see Lama Karma Miyo, then in retreat, to request instruction on the subtle yogic practices of the Six Yogas. He had dreamt of Lama Karma Miyo in the form of Saraha instructing him; being a very modest man, Karma Miyo strongly protested that he was not a suitable person to teach such a great master as Karma Chagme, who completely ignored his protestations and kept badgering him until Lama Akong agreed to give him the instructions he wanted.

Besides being a man of high spirituality, Lama Karma Miyo was also very knowledgeable. He had a rich background, having studied the *Five Sciences*, one of which is medicine. Before entering the monastery at eight, he had grown up in a family where, on his father’s side, medicine had been practised for generations. His father was himself a doctor.

Karma Miyo was around forty when his understanding of medicine and healing seems to have come to a full blossoming, as a spontaneous outflow of his realisation. Lama Pema explains this as an “awakening of profound medical knowledge from former lives”. According to Lama Pema, Karma Miyo regained familiarity with the theoretical and clinical aspects of Tibetan medicine.

“Around the age of forty, mental imprints left by former training and skill were awakened and he knew how to identify and remedy each

illness specifically, in relation to the seasonal variations of human physiology, as taught in the Fourfold Treatise (the four medical tantras) and the major commentaries of Tibetan medicine.”

None of the biographies depict Karma Miyo’s healing activities in medical terms. Instead they all highlight the qualities of the first Akong as a very special healer. The specificity of his healing talents was that he cured people not only with medicines but also by spiritual means. These could be formal practices, such as the appropriate sadhanas and rituals, but informal and intangible ones too: the healing power of his great compassion and the blessing of his holy presence, full of the peace of realisation, wherein there is no longer any separation between the healer and the healed. Sometimes, even the mere contact people had with him was enough to overcome many difficulties. Does this sound familiar to some of us?

For the record, this is so similar to what I and others experienced with Akong Rinpoche that, studying Lama Karma Miyo’s namtar, I found myself thinking at times that I was reading an account of the way Rinpoche cared for his motley flock of sick people, those of us who had to face illness of one kind or another. I often had the uncanny impression that Karma Miyo’s ways were present as a watermark under Akong Rinpoche’s image, regarding their relationship to Dharma, to others, to medicine, to the sick or the maladjusted. At times, the two layers of biography, the first and the second Akong’s, seemed to form a subtle sort of 3-D image of a timeless Akong Tulku, healer of body and mind, whose healing qualities sprang from the depth of deep understanding and compassion.

Another trait of his medical practice was generosity. Lama Karma Miyo trained three monks in medicine, insisting that generosity be their priority. This is very significant in the context of Tibet where it was customary for patients to offer lavish gifts in payment for their treatment: people would give “horses, dzo, dri or yak (Tibetan livestock); gold, silver, silk rolls or the like” – any valuable possession. Lama Pema reports Karma Miyo’s recommendations to his three students: “Give the medicines for free to patients who have no one to support them, to the poor and destitute with no resources. Giving life by protecting it from destruction is the highest kind of generosity.” They should have no expectation of high fees or reward, and not consider small gifts as negligible. Urged by Lama Akong, they joined him in his pledge to give medicines for free and “thus they all brought tremendous benefit to others.”

Karma Miyo’s emphasis on generosity is rooted in the bodhisattva ethics of the Mahayana which form the ethical basis of Tibetan medicine. Indeed, the *Fourfold Treatise* mentions it as one of the essential qualities of a doctor.

There again I hear an echo of this attitude in the choices made by the Second Akong Rinpoche, who wanted the poor to receive free medical care and medicines in the Rokpa clinics he set up in the various Tibetan areas of Chinese provinces such as Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan, Sichuan, and in Nepal. It was also my personal experience that, whenever needed, Rinpoche gave Tibetan medicines from his own reserves to me and others, even very rare and costly ones he had procured with difficulty for his own use.

This is the place to stress an important point: Rinpoche always did everything for free. Whether he was helping someone with health problems; personal, home or professional difficulties, or with Dharma advice, never did he charge a penny for anything. This trait was very typical of Rinpoche's approach and, to us, a real example of bodhisattva conduct. This is particularly remarkable and inspiring in this day and age when skills, genuine or assumed, are sometimes little more than money-making devices. Rinpoche would offer free interviews for hours on end, often early in the morning or late into the evening so that he could still conduct his other activities during the day.

After Lama Karma Miyo became the abbot of Dolma Lhakhang, he continued to live in retreat, except to grant empowerments, textual authorisations and practice instructions to the retreat centres. He also gave advice to the community, sometimes in the form of *dohas* he sang, of which – sadly – only a few fragments survived, preserved by some of the older monks. Lama Pema's biography does quote part of a *doha*.

Knowing that Karma Miyo started his medical activity around the age of forty and trained three students as doctors, we can infer that, from then on, he was called upon to look after the sick in the monastery and in the surrounding lay community. Caring for the sick, the dying and the dead would have been a natural part of his duties, which could be why the *namtar* makes no particular mention of this medical activity over the years. The first we hear of it is when Lama Akong is requested to help Karse Kongtrul, who had suddenly fallen critically ill.

Saving the Life of Karse Kongtrul

Karse Kongtrul was regarded as the mind emanation of the great Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Taye. As such he was the Second Kongtrul, Khyentse Oser (1902–1952). Being the son of the Fifteenth Karmapa Kachap Dorje, he was widely known as ‘Karse Kongtrul’: *Kar* is short for Karmapa, *Se* means son – the Kongtrul who was Karmapa’s son. In more ways than one: not only was he Karmapa’s biological son but also his heart-son and spiritual heir. One of the great lamas of his time, renowned as an accomplished Mahamudra master, he received full transmission of the lineage teachings from the Fifteenth Karmapa. This made him the lineage holder through whom the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, would receive the innermost teachings of the Karma Kamtsang.

That made him a vital figure for the whole Kagyu tradition and had such a precious lama met an untimely death, it would have been a disaster. Preserving his life was possibly one of the most significant services anyone could have rendered at the time to the Kagyu Lineage in particular and to all beings in general.

Kongtrul Rinpoche Palden Khyentse Özer had come to Tsawa Gang at the private invitation of officials, their families and many faithful benefactors, in order to perform a sequence of seven *Drubchen*. Before that, he came to Dolma Lhakang where he celebrated a *Guhyasamaja Drubchen* and gave a public talk and blessing. Some 100 monks took part in the event and many women took ordination.

While in Gangsib Jonang, he was suddenly struck by a strong, severe illness, attributed to harmful obstacles. Prayers and rituals were started in earnest in all the monasteries of the area and a messenger was sent to Karse Kongtrul's seat at Palpung. Kongtrul himself gave all the possessions he had in his encampment – personal belongings, offering materials and so forth – to be used for purification; no harm would come to him, he predicted, if he could receive a great many long-life empowerments from Lama Akong. He and his entourage immediately invited Lama Akong to come, as he was now the only one who may know how to save Kongtrul's life. Karma Miyo found himself in an awkward position: being a modest man, how could he dare give empowerments to the great Kongtrul Rinpoche? He did however accept the overwhelming responsibility of such a delicate situation.

He came heading a party of some fifty monks. For nearly a month, they performed powerful long-life prayers and special purification rituals. Assisted by Lama Thöga, Lama Akong gave Karse Kongtrul a long-life empowerment every day. All this “brought a great improvement in his condition. Meanwhile, twenty monks in retreat at Dolma Lhakang were keenly engaged in rituals”, adds Lama Pema.

Although Kongtrul Rinpoche's body had been weakened, his illness gradually cleared up so that, within just two months, he became able to sit firmly on a horse. As he was about to leave for Palpung with the Tenth Trungpa Chökyi Nyinche, one of his teachers, he is known to have turned his face in the direction of Palpung and declared: “If I can sit on the fearless lion throne and

live on to benefit the teaching and beings for a long time, it will be due to the kindness of this lama.”

Karse Kongtrul even went further to recognise the greatness of being of Lama Akong: “He enthroned him in a special ceremony called ‘same-status-as-myself’, thus according him his own elevated rank.” This is mentioned in a concise biography of the First Akong drawn from material given to Akong Rinpoche when he visited Dolma Lhakhang in the early eighties. Rinpoche even added that, although this was a great honour, Karma Miyo did not care for the fuss and ceremony involved in having such status.

Karma Miyo’s curing of Kongtrul’s illness is entirely described in terms of spiritual work: giving empowerments, doing prayers, mobilising many monks and lamas of Dolma Lhakhang to do the appropriate rituals, and so forth. Whether Karma Miyo did also treat Kongtrul with medicines or other medical procedures or not, is not mentioned in the biographies. In true namtar fashion, they mostly aim at showing Lama Akong’s spiritual realisation, source of his healing abilities.

Lama Akong’s Healing Feat Led to Seeking His New Incarnation

Saving Kongtrul’s life highlighted the spiritual accomplishment of Lama Karma Miyo, now obvious to all. The tremendous value of Karma Miyo’s deed most likely inspired the heads of the lineage to look for a tulku after his passing. It is said that several great masters

of the time recognised Lama Karma Miyo as “an activity-aspect of the Medicine Buddha. He cured people not only with medicines but also by the blessing of his holy presence and, sometimes, the mere contact people had with him was enough to overcome many difficulties.” Again, this may sound oddly familiar to some of us ...

Lama Akong’s great spiritual accomplishment became clear for all to see when he died. His body remained erect in meditation for five days and when he came out of this ‘tookdam’ (*thugs dam*) on the full moon, he had shrunk to the size of an eight year old child. After three days of cremation, extraordinary relics were found, as for instance a piece of skull with the letters OM AH HUNG inside it. The heart, eyes and tongue were intact; there were bones with sacred letters on them and *ringsel*, tiny pearl-like relics.

Nonetheless, it seems that the community of Dolma Lhakang needed some friendly convincing and encouragement to look for a tulku. Surprising as it might sound to us, this had nothing to do with lacking devotion to Karma Miyo, who was indeed much loved and venerated, but with the particular context of the monastery.

Up to that time, Dolma Lhakang had seen a succession of great masters at its head, men of wisdom and realisation chosen by their peers for their exceptional qualities. “As there had never been a tulku by name, it was felt that the monastery would not be equal to the responsibility of having one and the community had no such expectations.” They certainly had a point: having never had a tulku before, Dolma Lhakang had no ‘labrang’, which rather complicated the issue.

When a tulku is established as the recognised incarnation of a master, he has a labrang, his own office and administration, distinct from that of the monastery, as it is for instance the case nowadays with the Seventeenth Karmapa, Tai Situpa and other great lamas, and we now also have an Akong labrang. The labrang deals with all aspects of the tulku's life, material and spiritual, but above all it plays a crucial role in the interim phase between the death of an incarnation and the birth of the next one.

A labrang looks after all the heritage of the tulku, material – property, money – as well as personal and spiritual – personal and ritual objects, papers, books, photos, images, documents of all kinds, sacred relics, precious substances and so on. The labrang plays a crucial role on several counts: it is responsible for launching the necessary investigations to find the new incarnation; for preserving the tulku's estate during the interim phase, however long, to be restored to him or her once he or she is found; and for providing the necessary resources for their education.

Lama Karma Miyo was, by all accounts, an extraordinary being but, as he had not been officially recognised as a tulku in that life, he had no labrang. Had there been one, the labrang would have acted appropriately to ensure that the tulku was found. In the absence of a labrang, others were to be the driving force.

Another reason may explain Dolma Lhakhang's reluctance to have a tulku: we know from Akong Rinpoche himself that this was a highly spiritual place where the prime goal was to practise Dharma, to attain liberation in order to help all. As shown by the example of Karma Miyo's own life, monks, lamas, nuns and retreaters there

were totally dedicated to meditation practice; for generations, they had functioned very well under the wise leadership of their heads, chosen amongst their peers for being the natural elders, those with the most wisdom and experience. With no interest in titles, status or prestige, they felt no need for an officially recognised tulku. It is a great responsibility for a monastery to nurture a tulku and give him the special education needed for all his qualities to blossom, as Akong Rinpoche often mentioned to us.

However, the Tenth Trungpa Rinpoche of Surmang told the community of Dolma Lhakhang that there would be a tulku. Karse Kongtrul himself wished to help find a new incarnation, well aware of Karma Miyo's rare qualities and precious service to the lineage in saving his life. He also came after Lama Akong's passing and declared there would be a tulku, stating that, in fact, there was no way in which they could not search for him. The lamas of Dolma Lhakhang then requested him to find the tulku, but he replied: "There will be an incarnation, but I will not choose it myself, I will ask Karmapa ... No need for me to look while there is a Karmapa who can see the past, present and future, but I will make it my responsibility to ask him."

Finding The Akong Tulku

In due course, Karmapa gave Kongtrul instructions on where to seek a boy born in the dragon year who would be the Akong tulku. A party of two lamas from Dolma Lhakhang first went to Riwoche

where they saw one dragon boy, then to Upper and Lower Ngom valley, where they found six likely candidates. Thus, they made a list of seven names, which a party from Dolma Lhakang later presented to the Karmapa, when he came from Palpung to Karma Göñ. Karmapa declared that, beyond any doubt, the third boy listed was the Akong tulku and he gave him a name: Karma Shedrup Chökyi Nyima Tinley Kunchap Pal Zangpo Choley Nampar Gyalway Dey – “Sun of Dharma, All-Encompassing Activity, Good and Excellent, completely Victorious Over All Things”. (The Sixteenth Karmapa actually used this full name in the long-life prayer he wrote for Akong Rinpoche.)

Along with the official letter of recognition, the Karmapa also provided very detailed information on where to find the boy: name of the parents, description and orientation of the house, dog sitting on the doorstep, and so on. The Dolma Lhakang’s lamas left the Karmapa’s room feeling slightly overwhelmed: it had all happened so fast that they started to wonder whether they had really got it right. Had they understood properly, was it definitely this third boy? Flustered and embarrassed, because they did not want to appear to doubt the Karmapa’s words, they decided to go back in for confirmation, to make sure they wouldn’t go searching for the wrong boy. Akong Rinpoche’s own account of this incident was that, as they were approaching the Karmapa with the list of names in their hands, he said: “I already told you!” pointing to the list, where a small hole appeared next to the name of the boy he had chosen.

That an accomplished mind took birth in this world was the fruit of his wish to continue caring for those he had helped as Karma

Miyo; that he was recognised as the ‘Second Akong’ was a direct consequence of his having saved the life of Karse Kongtrul.

The Second Akong Tulku’s Connection with Medicine

As a young reincarnation and abbot of Dolma Lhaxhang, Akong Rinpoche received the special, very comprehensive education of a tulku, intended to provide a wide range of skills, from an understanding of the essential principles of Buddhist philosophy to a fluent knowledge of prayers and rituals, which, in the Vajrayana, include knowing how to confer empowerments and give textual authorisation (*lung*). Rinpoche actually had a special gift for delivering these readings at the high speed required, whilst the words remained clearly intelligible.

On the medical side, he was trained by two of his uncles who were doctors, although his many duties to his monastery, nunneries, retreat centres and to the local lay community did not leave him enough time to follow the extensive training of Tibetan doctors in full. Also, we should keep in mind that he was only nineteen when he had to leave Tibet. Nonetheless, I do remember him describing how he used to be called upon to visit the sick of his area; he helped the dying and the dead, using mostly spiritual means, such as prayer, the power of blessing and empowerments. He once told Ken Holmes and myself that he had a particular interest in the field of eye problems and would have liked to develop his skills further in that area, had time allowed.

Advice from The Sixteenth Karmapa

In 1963, before Rinpoche left India for the UK with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Eleventh Trungpa, the Sixteenth Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje advised Akong Rinpoche to teach Tibetan medicine in Britain. “The Karmapa signed a certificate making Akong Rinpoche a teacher of Tibetan medicine and sealed it with a large seal”, as Ken Holmes found out.

Akong Rinpoche had absolute devotion to the Karmapa and was prepared to do anything to serve him and the lineage but, for a number of reasons, the conditions for him to bring TTM to Europe would not be right for some decades. In actual fact, Akong Rinpoche would have to wait thirty-one years until, in 1994, circumstances became right for him to lay foundations for the development of Tibetan medicine in Britain.

Akong Rinpoche had come to the UK as a refugee. His immediate needs were to learn English and find some way of making a livelihood for himself and the little ‘household’ he formed with his companions: Trungpa Rinpoche, actively engaged in studying at Oxford University and initially Chime Rinpoche too. The young tulku who was a qualified doctor and held a fairly high rank in the social hierarchy of his country ended up working as an orderly in a hospital, mostly cleaning, emptying bedpans and such like. This was also a time when some degree of racial prejudice still prevailed in Britain which tended to look down on its Asian immigrants, seen as only capable of doing menial jobs unwanted by British whites.

Akong Rinpoche sometimes alluded to the pain experienced at the time, which he took as a powerful teaching on impermanence: one day he was a tulku living a sheltered life, respected by all and able to help them greatly; a young man who, as part of his status in the traditional society could command the service of fifty-five people if he ever needed it, not even free to go to the toilet alone, as he complained jokingly. The next day, he was a poor immigrant, a Nobody and a ‘Paki’ (one of the racist insults of the time), just good enough to clean toilets, floors or bedpans, with no prospect of ever contributing his skills to a medical institution. Later on however, he was able to become a theatre orderly, which was more interesting for him, as he was given permission to watch some of the operations.

* * *

Having gained a little understanding of Akong Rinpoche’s long past and his connection with Tibetan medicine, we will first consider his exceptional qualities as a healer of body and mind. This will lead us, secondly, to discover how he pioneered TTM in Europe, generating numerous positive consequences.

I. An Extraordinary Healer of Body and Mind

“Healing” is taken to mean a capacity to heal sufferers of physical or mental ailments, based on medical skills nurtured by deep spir-

itual insight and compassion. We propose to use the word ‘healer’ to designate Akong Rinpoche, because his person and his deeds went far beyond the standard description of a ‘doctor’. His healing powers were not simply the fruit of medical studies and training but a natural offspring of spiritual realisation. The depth of his spiritual insight coupled with compassion was what gave him extraordinary healing powers.

The following is an attempt to sum up over four decades of first-hand experience of Akong Rinpoche’s ways as a healer. My personal relationship with him had really taken off after I approached him with health problems in 1971. Subsequently, he saved me from an untimely death in the early eighties and continued looking after my chaotic health, advising me and supporting me until the time of his own passing in 2013. As I write, I owe him thirty-eight years of extra life after a coma that should have been fatal without him; my being alive today is a testimony to his kindness and remarkable healing powers. Often, when I sought advice on the latest vagaries of my health, he would start by saying with a kind, teasing smile: “You are still alive!”

As a close student of Akong Rinpoche, observing his ways over forty years has made one point very clear: his unique understanding of all things related to medicine, therapy and healing owed less to formal training in this life than to his remarkable insight. His intuitive knowledge of healing and his healing power were a spontaneous expression of his qualities as a Mahamudra guru.

Rinpoche's Special Position as a Vajrayana Guru and a Doctor

Akong Rinpoche was above all a true Vajrayana master, whose every action betrayed his high level of accomplishment, even though he did his best to hide it under his humble ways of secret yogi, always insisting he “knew nothing”; he was not keen on being called a teacher or a guru, suggesting instead that he was “just a friend”. Indeed he was the truest and most dependable of friends, as all who knew him can testify! I do know that his Tibetan friends, great lamas and ordinary people alike, really valued that quality in him: one of his khenpo friends described him to me as a “*Mi tempo*” (*mi brtan po*), a really trustworthy and dependable person, which is one of the highest compliments that can be paid amongst Tibetans.

Under the seeming ‘ordinariness’ of a truly modest person, Akong Rinpoche had the deep insight and the unconditional compassion of a Mahamudra guru. These two qualities make the most powerful combination for healing: with compassion, you are ready to help selflessly whoever needs you; with insight, you perceive the best way to help and you have the power to do so. Therein lay the root of Akong Rinpoche’s great healing powers.

Insight – A Direct Perception of the Underlying Nature of Things

Western culture tends to split the universe in two: mind “inside” and matter “outside”. In this dualistic scheme, the jury is still out on the question of mind: is it material (in the brain or somewhere else in the body) or not? Even matter, which seemed so ‘solid’ and dependable up to recent decades, a ‘reality’ established forever, is now also challenged because science has so advanced that it can no longer pinpoint a ‘thing’ independent of the observer and the conditions of observation. At present, all attempts to define the smallest manifestation of matter only lead to finding finer and finer energy.

In contrast to this, Mahamudra insight brings a realisation of the underlying nature of things: the ultimate inseparability of mind and phenomena, emptiness and manifestation. Within the void nature of mind, nothing exists of its own accord but everything manifests interdependently.

Despite the infinite variety of phenomena, everything in this universe, animate and inanimate, is made of the same building blocks, just arranged differently. Modern physics has its own names for these building blocks, which have changed with time and with the advance of research. Asian philosophies and sciences have long used the terms ‘elements’, defining them mainly as five: earth, water, fire, wind, space.

The elements are not to be taken in the literal, everyday sense, but as name tags for the forces that constitute our universe: ‘earth’

corresponds to matter and solidity, ‘water’ is what provides fluidity but also cohesion (without it, nothing would hold together) – gravity or bonding; ‘fire’ is easier to understand, as energy, heat and the dynamics of metabolism; ‘wind’ is movement, and ‘space’ is the space in which everything else happens.

The ‘elements’ are not static, stand-alone units, they function interdependently, combining in various ways to form our environment and our bodies. The way they combine and interact is influenced by individual and collective karma.

The play of the elements in our body-mind also resonates with that of the elements ‘outside’, in our environment and in the universe. All is interconnected: when the elements work in a balanced way, we enjoy fine health, whereas their imbalance causes illness. This elemental interdependence is the very fabric of our ‘reality’.

This is expressed in a key principle of Tibetan medicine, fully holistic in its approach:

“The body, the sickness and the remedy are all of one and the same nature.”

The body, the sickness and the remedy are interconnected since they all partake of the same elemental nature, and this is precisely what makes it possible to change their relationship in order to restore balance.

Not only did Akong Rinpoche understand this elemental interdependence of things, he had a direct perception of it. This is not a conviction or a mere opinion on my part, I know it for a fact

which is substantiated by much evidence, as examples will make clear. His was an extraordinary gift: without any need to reflect or theorise, Akong Rinpoche could sense directly what was ailing someone and what could heal or alleviate the problem. Perceiving also what sort of person he was dealing with, he would know how best to help them: in function of their past (even before they discussed anything) and not only in the short term but as part of their long-term evolution.

How are we to understand such a marvellous ability? Direct perception is not a matter of knowledge or reflection, it is not a magic trick; rather, from within the heart of wisdom, all becomes clear. Once the core, the root of everything is penetrated, its branches and ramifications are no longer a secret. ‘Things’ become plain and obvious when the nature of mind is understood.

This has been expressed in many ways by great masters, as for instance here by Milarepa:

“Knowing one thing frees all;
Knowing hundreds of things, the one is spoiled.”

“Knowing one thing” – the true nature of mind, the ultimate unity of things – frees all understanding by dispelling dualistic misconceptions: everything else becomes clear. Knowing “hundreds of things – getting involved and lost in the detail of relative phenomena without seeing their common essence – clouds the ability to understand their fundamental sameness of nature and their interconnectedness.

Akong Rinpoche's understanding was of that elevated kind, as we, who knew him closely, were able to observe time and time again: it welled spontaneously from within, from the deepest core of his wisdom, independently of any external knowledge or information. Just in response to the need of others. The combination of being a Vajrayana guru and a Tibetan doctor made Rinpoche an exceptional healer, yet his healing power did not depend on his medical skills. These were secondary to the power of his qualities as a Vajrayana master, more like the cherry on the cake. Also, knowing body and mind to be inseparable, he could care for both simultaneously, which explains why he could be of such great and lasting help to people.

Unconditional Compassion is the Root of Healing

Unconditional compassion is the sap of any true healing. It accompanied Akong Rinpoche's every action, giving him the necessary empathy to have a fine perception of the person's state and feelings. He 'tuned in' spontaneously into the reality of whoever came to him for help. Most kind and generous of his time and effort, he was always ready to help anyone who asked him and to give them support in their difficulties.

His compassion was truly 'unconditional': there were literally no strings attached. I never heard Rinpoche complain that his endless lists of interviews were too much or that he was tired and must stop. Nor did I see him favour or reject anyone, he gave his time generously to all who needed him. This unconditionality was truly

impressive and a real inspiration for us. Most people are capable of some good, but usually on their own terms.

Rinpoche seized every opportunity to stress the crucial importance of compassion in any healing activity. Our friend Edie Irwin, who was later to develop the Tara Rokpa Therapy system with him, once asked him for advice in her massage practice and he answered: “Compassion is the best massage”.

Rinpoche’s Unique Qualities as a Healer

The powerful combination of insight and compassion gave Rinpoche a wealth of singular qualities in all aspects of healing: diagnosis, healing methods and remedies. We will now turn to examples to provide the best illustration.

Spontaneous Diagnosis

When someone came to see Akong Rinpoche with a physical or a mental ailment, he perceived the nature of the problem directly: he did not need to use the traditional diagnostic methods of TTM, such as taking the pulse or examining urine. Neither did he need to reflect and ponder. By just being with a person, or simply seeing their photo or even just being told about them, he knew what was wrong, as I and others had occasion to witness many times.

This clarity of perception gave him great certainty about his diagnosis, even when it happened to differ from an opinion given by conventional medicine – in which case he was usually proven right afterwards ... His diagnosis was incredibly accurate. In fact it would probably be more appropriate to speak of foresight.

Three examples will follow as illustrations of instant diagnosis and far-reaching vision. Though reluctant to use them, since they are personal, I cannot dismiss them as they are a first-hand testimony that shows beyond doubt Rinpoche's remarkable power of foresight.

In 1972, in the early days of my close relationship to Rinpoche and at the very beginning of what I still thought of as my 'sabbatical year' in Samye Ling, I woke up one day with a severe and acute pain on the right side of the lower abdomen. I reported it to Rinpoche who immediately exclaimed: "Appendix!"

The pain persisting, I went to the nearest hospital where the doctor thought it was an ovarian problem and recommended an operation to "find out and sort it out" ... Not very reassuring because I fully trusted Rinpoche's opinion and the doctor seemed very vague. When I told Rinpoche afterwards, he just had an amused smile ... It was with considerable misgivings that I had to sign the forms allowing the doctors to do virtually anything they deemed fit, whilst they had not even mentioned appendicitis, which I knew from Rinpoche to be the problem.

The outcome was that they opened me up with a long horizontal cut, like for a hysterectomy ... only to find an elongated appendix

wrapped around the bowel. Rinpoche had been right from the start, as he, Ken and I had known all along.

Akong Rinpoche's clarity of perception gave him far-reaching vision: I and others know for a fact that he was aware of the long term (indeed the very long term), both in the past and in the future, as his advice made clear.

Awareness of the Past

Rinpoche was deeply attuned to whoever came to him for help, and he could sense whether a person was suffering from what TTM calls a 'karmic illness'.

Illness is generally due to an imbalance of the elements, in our body and in their interaction with the elements of our environment. The classic teachings on karma say illness is the consequence of former actions to destroy or damage the physical life of another sentient being. Illnesses qualified as "karmic" in Dharma texts and in the *Fourfold Treatise* are those which become a dominating factor in someone's life; they differ from ordinary diseases insofar as the karma involved is stronger and rather specific. They are often life-long, chronic and multi-factorial pathologies, which can take various forms over time.

A typical feature of karmic disorders is that treatment doesn't really help, because they do not necessarily respond well or consistently to it, be it with TTM or with Western medicine. Another sort of remedy is needed, sometimes as a complement to conventional

treatment or even as a substitute for it, should all else fail. This is often of a spiritual nature, mostly in the form of purification practices, either done by the patient or by others on his or her behalf. Such practices alleviate the karma in question, much in the same way as a fire will stop burning when its fuel has been consumed. Purification may bring periods of respite or even improvement.

An even greater form of help can come from “blessing”. If the source of blessing is pure and strong and the recipient is open, trusting and has a pure link with the source, blessing has the power to cut through the difficulties of a situation, even to ‘clear up’ some negative karma. This could make the illness easier to bear or, if one has the good fortune of a pure link and enough merit, it may even bring a significant change for the better. The Black Crown Ceremony performed by the Sixteenth Karmapa was justly renowned to bring tremendous blessing. If the conditions of faith and karma are right, similar benefits can also be found in the presence of a power house of blessing such as Karmapa himself or one’s own lama.

Another source of help for karmic illnesses could be described as a “crystallization of blessing” in the form of a mixture of medicinal herbs, ‘charged’ with the blessing power of the prayers and pure intentions of the lamas who made it over many days. Most of us will know this as *dütsi* or amrita, ‘Dharma medicine’. Rinpoche very kindly gave some to me regularly over the years; it has been and remains of considerable support to me. Generally, he was very generous with it, giving it liberally to all who needed blessing in facing their obstacles of any sort. It may be useful to know that the little packets of *dütsi* and other sacred pills, sometimes given by high lamas at empower-

ments, can be helpful in the case of karmic illnesses, especially when other means don't work. Taking a small quantity of these when the going is hard can be a significant support. Rinpoche recommended a good way to take them: leaving dütsi or sacred pills to soak in hot water and sipping that water over the following days, topping up the water and stirring it until, eventually, all is dissolved.

Rinpoche's ability to understand the endless complications of long-term illness unidentified by conventional medicine was a wonderful source of relief. I felt so fortunate and grateful to have his guidance and help! I remember discussing this point in the 1980s with my friend Edie Irwin, co-developer of the Tara Rokpa Therapy with Akong Rinpoche, saddened by the case of a lady she helped who, like me, suffered from a complex, chronic illness. As doctors were unable to understand her condition and help her, the lady had just been referred to a mental hospital where she was just medicated, totally lost, while her ongoing physical problems received no proper attention.

If such diseases are so hard to treat and to live with, it is in great part because neither the problem nor the remedy is clearly identified. It is a great suffering, added to sickness, to have to face such long-term difficulties alone, without reliable help or guidance. Imagine how extraordinary it is to find someone who understands what is going on and who can give advice, however difficult to follow!

Akong Rinpoche was exceptionally helpful, insofar as he was able to recommend the most appropriate course of action at any given time. He had a perfect sense of timing: he could tell me when it

would be beneficial to use all available means to try to improve the situation (doctors, medicines, operations), and when this wouldn't help and the best attitude was to accept the situation.

From very early on, Akong Rinpoche had repeatedly insisted that my illness was physical and not mental. His comment had surprised me because both he and I knew this and it seemed obvious; I had wondered why he had told me so. The amazing skill of his advice to me was to be fully revealed after some tests undergone in hospital had proved inconclusive: the doctor in charge put on his nicest bedside manner to suggest that, now the tests had revealed nothing, I may like to know they had a very good psychiatric wing in this hospital ... Just as politely, I thanked him for the offer and declined it, assuring him that, as far as mental care went, I had all I needed at home, and of the finest kind! There seemed to be no point then to mention that they had only paid attention to the quantitative results of the tests, omitting to notice that I had nearly lost consciousness during the process. How I wish Edie's poor lady could have had the same support!

Awareness of the Future

Akong Rinpoche's forewarning saved my problematic eyesight. A rare, congenital eye problem revealed in my teenage years had been corrected since then by special lenses fitted at eighteen, which restored some sight. In the mid-seventies, complications occurred when, aged twenty-four, the corneas started ulcerating and could

no longer tolerate the contact lenses that gave me sight; something glasses cannot do in that condition. The remedy had become the cause of a new problem. Not only was there pain and infection, but also severe headaches.

Rinpoche then dropped a bomb on me: “If you carry on wearing your lenses, you will go blind. I can’t say when, but it will happen.” So great was the shock that I had to pause for a moment before speaking: lamely, I objected I had practically no sight without lenses, I would be unable to function. With glasses, as suggested by Rinpoche, the world would be a fuzzy mist and I would become useless.

A promising life came to an end in one instant. Rinpoche listened kindly: the choice was mine, he said, I should think about it. I came out of the meeting staggering, in total shock. Of course, I didn’t doubt his diagnosis for a moment, quite the reverse, I trusted it 100%. This only made it harder because I knew I could not afford not to follow his advice. Yet accepting it would be so very painful as it would mean living in a thick fog of indistinct colours and vague shapes, where nothing could be identified until it was right under my nose.

To spice up the challenge, Samye Ling, being in dire needs of funds at the time, was going to host a Transcendental Meditation course – TM was very much in vogue then – and every member of the community was to work to deliver the service expected. Rinpoche said I could choose: go away for the duration to stay with kind friends ready to welcome me, or stay and work. Obviously not cooking, as I had been doing at the time, but

preparing tea for each meal, laying the tables, cleaning the dining-room and so on.

How could I ignore Rinpoche's kind warning? The only possible answer was full trust, at whatever exorbitant cost in the present. I bit the bullet and stayed, learning to battle with the fog and the fear inspired by not seeing. It was so scary, even just having to prepare big pots of tea with boiling water from huge urns ... So much mindful caution was required to overcome the fuzziness! Yet the hardest thing was perhaps not seeing people who thought I could see them, so that they resented me for not returning their glances or their smiles, thinking me aloof. I became very isolated and timid.

However, Rinpoche's advice did save my eyes. Naturally, it would take years, a corneal graft and many painful adventures before I could wear lenses again and have some sight restored, but I would certainly have lost any chance of this, had I not accepted the years of fog, followed by further years of one-eyed partial vision. Accepting this was only possible because of Rinpoche's tireless guidance and support throughout. As many of us experienced, one of his master words was always: "Accept"!

Rinpoche's extraordinary foresight and the benefit of trusting his advice, even when it seems nearly impossible, couldn't be made clearer. Later on, his timely forewarning was to save my life.

After my health collapsed at the end of 1981, Akong Rinpoche advised me to go to my mother's in the South of France. I spent a couple of months there, still very ill despite my mother's loving care and efforts, along with an attempt to seek medical help. Meanwhile,

Ken Holmes was in Samye Ling, working as Rinpoche's secretary at the time.

Ken phoned one day with a message from Rinpoche, saying that "I should return as soon as possible, I was in great danger." I was so poorly that the very prospect of travelling was insurmountable, yet Rinpoche's words carried with them, as always, the blessing and the energy needed to follow his impossible advice, provided you trusted and tried.

I did undertake the journey, picked up at the airport by Ken who had driven hundreds of miles. After a night at Samye Ling, I saw Rinpoche. He sent me to a Langholm doctor who immediately referred me to the Carlisle Hospital. Admitted in the afternoon, I fell into a coma that same evening. The hospital phoned Ken in the night, advising him to come soon as I might not pull through. He told Rinpoche who gave him a very rare and special relic pill from the Karmapa, instructing him to put it in my mouth. Ken managed to do so and I survived the coma.

Clearly, without Rinpoche's warning, the coma would have happened in France, where I would have been unable to receive the one remedy that could save my life at the time. I measure the immense debt of gratitude I have to Akong Rinpoche for saving my eyes and my life. The very fact that I am alive is a testimony to his greatness as a healer and to his active compassion as a guru.

Instant Healing

Besides his foresight, Akong Rinpoche had another rare gift, illustrated here by Jin Cheung's striking testimonies. He could heal someone without prior knowledge of them or their sickness, with no need for time, reflection, words, mantras, sacred objects, special gesture, medicines or anything.

“My mum, Alice, came across Buddhism when she was eighteen and living in Hong Kong. Inspired by Milarepa's story, she became a devoted practitioner and has been since then. She married my father and emigrated to the UK in 1984. Shortly after, she gave birth to me and, in 1986, to my little brother, Wing.

“One day, someone she met by chance mentioned Akong Rinpoche's name and told her that he had a monastery in Samye Ling. Upon hearing his name, my mother felt she had to go to see him. At that time I was in Hong Kong, but she took with her my one-year-old little brother, ill with chickenpox. It was important for her to meet Rinpoche as she had felt an instant connection and spontaneous devotion upon hearing his name. After a long drive to Samye Ling from Cardiff, they finally arrived in the evening. She headed straight towards the Temple. Standing at the bottom of the steps looking up, she saw Akong Rinpoche appearing from one of the doors. He looked at her and started walking down the steps. Excitedly, my mum began introducing herself to him. Rather than engaging her in a conversation, Rinpoche simply asked: ‘Is that your son? Please give him to me’. Mum handed over my brother to

Rinpoche, who held his pox-ridden body for a short while and handed him back to her. By the time mum was readying my brother for bed later on, all of his chickenpox had gone except for three small red dots on the crown of his head. Every time my mum recounts this story, she always has the same expression of amazement on her face, clearly in awe of Akong Rinpoche's miraculous abilities."

Another instant healing was reported by a close friend of the Cheung's, who wasn't a Buddhist but had great faith in Rinpoche. The Cheungs took their friend and her visiting relatives from Spain to meet Akong Rinpoche. As they were enjoying a private audience with him in his cottage, Rinpoche gestured to one of the ladies to sit next to him. While talking to the rest of the party, he took her hand and massaged it the entire time. After her return to Spain, the lady in question called her relative in Britain: "Unbeknownst to most of the family, she had lots of fibroids in her ovaries. On her next regular check-up, the doctor discovered that they had all disappeared."

Instant healing of this sort is what some may call miracles. Note that the examples above involved people who had strong trust and devotion to Rinpoche, albeit on an informal basis. Faith opens the door to blessing and healing, and the healing happens as a spontaneous response to the situation, with no need for examination, diagnoses and words, without prior knowledge of the case and even of the person. This is typical of the *siddhis* or spiritual accomplishments (*dnegos grub*) which are a natural expression of Mahamudra realisation.

Special Features of Akong Rinpoche's Ways of Healing

Responding to Change

Akong Rinpoche had a vivid perception of impermanence and often told us how important it was to keep it in mind at all times. Everything changes from second to second, from the microscopic reality of cells to environmental mutations, through the ceaseless shifts of thought and mental states, yet we tend to act as though this were not the case.

This acute awareness of change gave Rinpoche a great flexibility in all he did. It was particularly noticeable in his ways of helping others: he had no 'standard recipe', he sensed what a person needed, what a situation required, and offered a suitable response. Later, if conditions changed, he adapted accordingly, like a good surfer moves and shifts his weight continually, in tune with the energy of the waves. This was one of his most constant pieces of advice: "Be flexible!"

We were around Rinpoche on many occasions when he had to face difficulties or obstacles that would have daunted anyone else: he always took the news or the situation in his stride, adapting to events and people with remarkable equanimity. In over forty years with Akong Rinpoche, I never saw him swayed by his feelings: never did I see him jump for joy, burst with anger or overcome by grief or depression. Not that he was an insensitive robot, quite the reverse in fact, but he was able to welcome everything that happened with a mind rooted in understanding. Perhaps this was a natural dispo-

sition in him, further developed by the extreme experiences he had had to face, from early on in life.

Somehow, it is almost irrelevant to speak of healing ‘methods’ in the case of Akong Rinpoche. He was creative, practical and hands-on: each treatment, each piece of advice was a pragmatic response, a brilliant improvisation, which would evolve as things changed and through the dialogue between Akong Rinpoche and the person.

Part of Rinpoche’s creativity came from knowing how to use the energy of situations to advantage, in the way of a tai chi master. Faced with difficulties, he did not fight them or remain passive, he seemed to have the art of letting solutions emerge from the situation itself. Then, with clarity and boldness, he could improvise what was required at each stage. Rinpoche’s spontaneous understanding of the energy of situations reminds us of his qualities as a Vajrayana master.

In their boundless variety, Rinpoche’s ways to help illustrate a fundamental tenet of TTM: “Everything is a remedy”. Indeed, everything on our planet can have a healing quality if used by wise hands, in the right way and at the right time. Even potentially dangerous things can be helpful when one knows how to use them: for instance, sun can help with rheumatic pains and to fix Vitamin D in the body, but too much sun is dangerous.

The Importance of Mind in the Healing Process

Akong Rinpoche always stressed the importance of mind in the healing process, helping people use their minds as a key factor in their recovery. Depending on the person and their circumstances, he might encourage different approaches, such as the few listed here.



Rinpoche at his table in Johnstone House dining room Samye Ling

Developing a Positive Mind

“Be positive!”, “Think positively!” were amongst Akong Rinpoche’s mottos. He strongly encouraged everyone to develop a positive mind and would often speak along these lines: “Instead of dwelling on what is wrong or missing, you should value whatever you do have in your life and try to use it in a way beneficial to you and to others.”

He once used a simile: “When you focus too much on a particular pain or problem, it is like looking in the mirror at a pimple on your face, until in the end you stop noticing anything other than the pimple. Your face has become nothing but a huge pimple and you have lost all sense of the beauty and other qualities of the face.” This positive state of mind he saw as essential to support the healing process. A point now supported and documented by medical science.

*Facing the Essential Truths of Life to Free the Mind
from its Conditioning*

Akong Rinpoche was aware that one can become quite stuck in the experience of suffering, physical or mental, which compounds the problem by making it mentally very ‘solid’; therefore, he would often propose strong themes of reflection, such as impermanence and death. These are part of what is known as *The Four Ways of Changing the Mind*, a powerful Vajrayana method to prepare the mind for the deep Mahamudra meditation. At the same time, impermanence, death, and suffering are universal truths which can be used to help anyone, so Akong Rinpoche did draw on his Buddhist knowledge to help non-Buddhists. Rinpoche may tell someone to reflect on the impermanence of life, knowing that such reflections on change could be a vital help in regaining perspective, in relativising one’s state or problems, as he had shown me early on.

*Using the Healing Power of one's Own Mind
Through Visualisation*

Rinpoche had a unique talent for proposing visualisations designed to help the healing process by relieving pain, tensions, anxiety, and so on. This could involve visualising lights, seed-syllables, deities or anything, according to what was necessary at each stage of illness; with or without particular breathing techniques.

Not only did these visualisations focus the mind away from pain or depressing thoughts but, through the subtle play of the interdependence of elements, they had a healing effect of their own. The colour of the lights or seed syllables he gave were not arbitrary but chosen with a deep knowledge of their elemental and energy connection with the human body and mind, which Akong Rinpoche knew from tantric methods and his own experience of mind. He introduced some of these techniques in the Tara Rokpa Therapy system, as explained in the next chapter.

The Many Facets of Rinpoche's Healing Gem

I saw Rinpoche use a rich array of healing methods and remedies over the years. We may get a little taste of this great variety through six examples, mostly drawn from my own experience, as first hand evidence, along with some others that came to my knowledge.

Anything Can Be a Remedy

On the principle that anything can be a medicine if used by wise hands, Rinpoche did employ some quite unusual remedies. Here are a few examples of some rather colourful ones I experienced over the years: extraordinary medicinal mixtures concocted by Akong Rinpoche himself in 1981, before Tibetan medicines became available – I recall one that included a large amount of butter, an egg yolk, whisky, a secret ingredient and Tibetan herbs Rinpoche had managed to keep; outlandish dietary recommendations: the worst for me was a soup made from an ox's heart, which even my friend Pema the dog, one of Rinpoche's shih tzus, refused to share; watching the moon at night to ease my eye problems (an old gentleman was told to watch the sun in the daytime); wearing an otter skin on the kidneys for cold, taken from an old coat of my mother's; after a wisdom tooth had been pulled out, applying on the gum a poultice of traditional pills made from herbs with natural, opiate properties; training myself to drink many small sips of water rather than the huge quantities needed to quench an unquenchable thirst.

Involving the Person in their Own Healing Process

Drawing and journaling were two means of involving a person in their own healing. Akong Rinpoche himself needed no 'props' to make a diagnosis but he would associate the person with the process

by sometimes asking them to draw whatever they felt like.

For instance, just after I had survived a coma thanks to Akong Rinpoche, he asked me to draw whatever came to my mind. He then gave me an impressive interpretation of the drawing, sketching a vivid picture of the elemental imbalances present at that particular point in the illness, along with a full history of its evolution over the years.

He was able to interpret the choice of colours and shapes to reflect the particular imbalances that affected my body. For instance, he remarked on the predominance of blues and greens, their shapes and their position on the drawing, in which he saw an excess of the water and wind elements in my system, whilst the fire element (yellows and reds) was deficient. The number of trees in a line also pointed to the number of years during which the trouble had been building up.

My feeling is that he used this device to help the patient understand their illness and to accept the course of action they may have to take. This ensured a better participation of the patient in their own healing. Drawing was later to become an important feature of the early stages of Tara Rokpa Therapy.

Journalling is another great way to gain perspective on one's life and to guide one's choices. I found it very useful, as one of the first tasks assigned to me by Rinpoche. It became part of *Back to Beginnings* in the early eighties, when he developed Tara Rokpa Therapy with Edie Irwin.

The Wheelbarrow Effect

This is a good example of Rinpoche's way of helping one to stretch the boundaries of mind to empower it. I was only getting back on my feet after the coma, timidly venturing to walk again, when Rinpoche suggested that I fill wheelbarrows with soil and push them about as Ken was digging the foundations for our new log cabin. Had I heard right, was it a joke? This sounded impossible, even outrageous, given my great weakness, but I knew that if Rinpoche recommended it I should at least try it. This I did and managed almost nothing at first but a little more each time, shovelful by shovelful. Day after day, Rinpoche would ask me: "How many wheelbarrows today?"

Akong Rinpoche had his way of giving us seemingly impossible tasks, which meant pushing oneself to the limit and, if this was reached, he would up the stakes, making us push the limit farther. There, he was actually encouraging me to push the boundaries of mind farther and farther. He was showing me that the mental limits we tend to set for ourselves, out of fear, are often narrower than the actual physical limitations, and that extending mental limits can actually help to stretch physical capabilities. Mind over matter: in other words, train to give mind more control over matter.

When the mind thinks: "This is impossible", nothing can be undertaken, let alone achieved; whereas if the mind decides "Why not try?" the energy of willingness will produce some outcome, albeit limited and short of the full result that could be anticipated

in normal circumstances. At least something will have been undertaken, were it simply an attempt, with the satisfaction this brings.

Akong Rinpoche was making it clear that resolve and determination can partially override physical constraints when a meaningful effort is required. This draws on the power of mind to take control of the body in difficult or vital situations, as we know from times of war or extreme hardship.

This way of encouraging someone to push the boundaries of mind is most typical of Akong Rinpoche's approach in general, not just in healing. It was always one of his main recommendations to everyone, whether they were engaged in Dharma practice or just trying to lead a good life.

However, he also knew when to encourage timely, intelligent rest. He passed on to me a most useful tip given to him by one of his friends in Tibet, in order to make up for lost sleep after the long overnight car journeys Rinpoche often took, so he could use the day to visit a ROKPA facility. "Whenever you do get a chance to catch up with sleep, don't set a limit, just sleep all the sleep you have in you, until you have none left." Rinpoche found this very helpful and so did I.

For all of us who worked close to Akong Rinpoche, the goals he suggested often seemed unattainable, even outrageous at times, but all had an interesting point in common: if you accepted the challenge and tried your best to follow his advice, he seemed to give you the strength to actually manage. This, to me, showed the extent of his power of blessing: his blessing empowered you to go beyond your limits. In fact, this worked in two stages: the willingness to

take up a challenge empowered your mind through resolve, then your trust in Rinpoche opened your mind to his blessing which conveyed the full force of empowerment, confirming your resolve.

This experience of empowerment was one shared not only by those of us who worked closely with Rinpoche but also by the great many, far and wide, who trusted his advice. We saw many lives transformed for the better, and great things made possible because someone had put their trust in Rinpoche. Such is the power of blessing when it meets with the openness of trust. ROKPA and Tara Rokpa Therapy are brilliant examples of this, as is the existence and development of the various Samye Dzongs. In every case, it all rested on the courage and dedication of brave individuals who had deep faith in Rinpoche and who worked against all odds to apply his recommendations. His blessing empowered them: it met with their selfless resolve and dedication to achieve great things.

Finally, may I be allowed to confide that completing this testimony in 2016 was a good example of the ‘wheelbarrow effect’: coming as it did during a long period of health difficulties, it was an impossible challenge, yet, as I finally accepted it, the power of blessing came to the rescue. Like many of us close to Rinpoche, I can bear witness to how his powerful blessing can still be healing and helping, even after his physical presence has gone.

Using Spiritual Means to Help the Healing Process

These were another important feature of Rinpoche's support, since they bring relief to mind and body both. To mention a few examples: I was advised to recite a huge number of Manis and blow on my eyes after each session of recitation; Akong Rinpoche also asked the artist Sherab Palden Beru to draw a special card, with eyes surrounded by sacred syllables, which I was to look at regularly. Other recommendations included sponsoring prayers or the release of animals; having Chöd prayers recited at my bedside; doing the usual practices for purification (Vajrasattva) and for the deepening of devotion (Guru Yoga); saying any mantras I felt like recalling to mind; using all sorts of visualisation, such as lights, colours, seed-syllables – static or in motion – yidams and so forth. Rinpoche was particularly knowledgeable in this area and most creative in his suggestions, always devising new ways to help me. I found his special visualisations very helpful; another advantage was that they can be practised even if the physical body is quite poorly, like when you are sick in bed, because they mostly engage the mind.

The Overriding Power of Blessing

Blessing has the power to cut through the difficulties of a situation, especially at times when nothing else seems to help. In fact, blessing

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was possibly the most significant single factor in Akong Rinpoche's healing, as I experienced it.

Rinpoche's kind and caring support was a powerful blessing that sustained me all along. In providing the only reliable source of help in an unreliable situation, he gave vivid meaning to the word "Refuge". Besides the intangible blessing of his presence, Rinpoche also helped me with sacred substances that may be regarded as 'crystallised forms' of blessing: *dütsi*, Dharma medicine (as mentioned above), and *rilnak*, 'Black Pills', precious relic pills made by the Sixteenth Karmapa, which became very rare after the Karmapa's passing in 1981. Rinpoche made sure I always had a generous supply of *dütsi* to support me on a regular basis. Black pills came as a last resort, as the only saving grace to stop irreversible degradation when all other solutions had failed.



Giving empowerment at Samye Dzong Brussels

Akong Rinpoche first saved my life with a rilnak ‘mother pill’ in 1982 and for many years afterwards sustained it with ‘baby pills’, which he generously supplied at crucial times when he thought it necessary to stop major deteriorations of my condition. Rinpoche’s ‘mother pills’ constantly produced more ‘baby pills’, a sign of the deepest spirituality. This is how he was able to continue giving these most precious of all pills to those who needed them, even long after they had become unavailable after the Karmapa’s passing.

‘Guarantees’

As many of us experienced, Akong Rinpoche had a great sense of humour and enjoyed playing and teasing. This story tells of an informal sort of blessing dressed in a humorous guise.

Akong Rinpoche had initially told Ken and myself to teach Dharma in 1978 but I could not do so at the time, too busy translating texts and interpreting for lamas. Again in 2007, Rinpoche told me to teach in our centres. Given my erratic physical condition, I began to ask him for his special blessing to support me on the occasions when I had to teach or interpret extensively. He would reply: “I guarantee you that you will be OK.”

This developed almost into a private joke: I would ask for a guarantee which he would playfully grant me ... but only for the duration of the event, not beyond! Remarkably, this informal blessing did help to go through the task, even if I felt really unwell

before the event and after it. I did venture to ask for a ‘permanent guarantee’ but Akong Rinpoche declined with a big smile: he would only give it for definite periods of time. (I was amused at the thought that, once these special ‘guaranteed’ moments were over, I was back to being Cinderella with her pumpkin carriage).

I could not be in Samye Ling in the Summer of 2013 before Rinpoche left for Tibet in September, never to return, so I asked Ken who was with him at the time to pass on a request for my ‘guarantee’, because we were about to leave for a couple of months’ teaching in Africa. Ken recalls that Rinpoche replied: “This time, she should give me a guarantee.” What sounded like a tease only made chilling sense in October 2013.

II. Pioneering the Development of Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Europe

Seeing the benefits TTM could bring to the West, Akong Rinpoche seized the long-awaited opportunity to fulfil the Sixteenth Karmapa’s wishes and his own, and launched the Tara College of TTM and clinics.

Rinpoche's Vision of the Benefits TTM Could Bring to the West

No one can claim to have known the full extent of Akong Rinpoche's intentions: his ideas were often so far-reaching that they produced far greater results than anyone could have anticipated. In bringing TTM to the West, he wanted to fulfil the Sixteenth Karmapa's wish and – quite likely – one of his own secret hopes. Keenly aware of the special qualities of TTM, he had come to see that these may help some of the health problems which beset those who live in a modern, Western society. What if TTM could fill some of the gaps left by an otherwise efficient medical system?

Akong Rinpoche had lived in Britain for some thirty years and was a well-informed citizen who liked to keep up to date with the advances of science and medicine. He had become familiar with the Western medical system and knew its many benefits. He appreciated the qualities of Western medicine which could save lives by its capacity to treat emergencies very swiftly. Hospitals could deliver speedy diagnoses through sophisticated equipment and laboratory tests, and surgery could do wonders.

However, another facet of his experience was the feedback he received from the many people who had come to him over the years with various health problems, seeking his help because no solution had been found for them. He had heard how patients were often treated as a collection of organs or as a disease rather than as a person, as a body-mind whole with complex feelings. He had also

seen how Westerners suffering from chronic illnesses didn't seem to find the support and treatment they needed and often ended up classified as mental patients, only to be given drugs and addictive medication.

Further than that, Akong Rinpoche was aware of a link between the degradation of our environment in modern times and the apparition of new diseases and complex ailments. For instance, the increase of chemical pollutants in the air, the water and the soil have weakened our immune systems and there are growing suspicions that this contributed to the rise of various polymorphic syndromes, such as Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.) and Fibromyalgia (F.M.). Such chronic illnesses are often undiagnosed or improperly diagnosed, so that they mostly remain untreated or receive the wrong sort of treatment.

Rinpoche was very concerned about this issue and its growing impact on people everywhere. With his wider perspective as a Vajrayana master, he regarded these 'new diseases' as a forerunning sign of the 'age of degeneration', predicted in particular by Guru Rinpoche. The age of degeneration is a time when people's moral qualities and merit have declined and material concerns dominate the life of mankind, with a constant search for instant gratification: insatiable desire leads to a plundering of natural resources and a fouling of the environment, without any regard for other living beings in it, visible and invisible. This in turn disturbs the delicate and subtle balance between mankind and nature, causing a disruption which breeds and triggers imbalances, source of disease. Rinpoche saw this as the cause of previously unknown illnesses and complex syndromes

such as M.E. and F.M. One of the consequences, he felt, was the worsening of already known conditions, such as cancer, which is on the rise.

Rinpoche also knew that medicines could be problematic. Western medication is based on potent chemical drugs, and the very power to procure rapid relief in the short term can also cause disturbances and damage in the longer-term, not just to a sensitive human body, but also to the mind inseparable from it. This raises the whole issue of negative side-effects, whereby medicines beneficial for a particular illness can simultaneously harm another part of the body or alter a mental function: you take pills to treat a specific ailment and you end up with a new problem. Such treatments are naturally even more detrimental to chronically ill patients, as they are on long-term medication. Some depressions and heavy cognitive losses are known to be induced by common, time-tested drugs taken to relieve specific illnesses but at the cost of damaging side-effects. Examples abound ...

Like all Tibetan doctors I met who were worthy of the name, Akong Rinpoche had tremendous respect for TTM and its special qualities, and he was justly proud of it. He felt that TTM had two particular features which could really help people with some of the problems they encountered: firstly its approach is holistic, and secondly its medicines are generally free of side effects.

TTM is by definition holistic: it views the patient as a complex set of interactions between body, mind and environment. All aspects of the patient's life must be considered, each factor taken into

account. Approaching a person in their totality gives a better chance to understand chronic illness and complex, multifactorial diseases.



With the renowned Doctor Gampar in Yushu

Treatment needs to be over the long term and can be painstaking but, at least, the patient feels supported and understood; he or she gains confidence, which is now recognised as a crucial factor in healing. Patients are no longer seen as a walking sick organ or a disease but as a person with an intelligent mind, feelings and a history, who also has a sick body. This gives them mental strength, which helps them to heal, if the disease is curable, or to bear up with it if it is not. In any case, the result is an improved quality of life: the chronically sick person learns to live with the illness and explore the best ways to use whatever resources he or she has left, and to take advantage of periods of remission. They become an active part of their treatment.

Another advantage of TTM is the relative absence of negative side-effects of Tibetan medicines, provided they have been properly manufactured from pure ingredients and prescribed by a good, knowledgeable doctor. This is of great benefit to all patients and more particularly to those with long-term chronic illnesses who must take medication over a long period of time.

In the TTM system, medicines do not treat symptoms, as is often the case in conventional medicine, they address their root cause. This has to do with the state of a person's body and mind in a given environment at a given time, the person's natural constitution and habits and their longer-term history.

Tibetan medicines are mostly compounds, in order to ensure that the medicinal formula has a balanced effect. To take a simple example, if an ingredient is used to bring more 'warmth' to an organ or a body system, another substance will be included in the formulation to prevent an excessive warming up and a spreading of the heat to other organs that may not require it. For this reason, when medicines have been prepared properly, they do not have harmful side-effects but work in synergy to balance out the whole system.

As Tibetan medicines are made from natural products, they act more gently. This means they need more time to produce an effect because they don't suppress symptoms but work to redress imbalances. They do not have the powerful immediacy of chemical medicines, which remain peerless in combating sudden infections, inflammations or life-threatening conditions. For instance, if you have a sudden headache, taking a pill of Tibetan Medicine will not provide the quick relief that you would get from paracetamol, but

if it turns out that the headache was the sign of a digestive problem or of a subclinical neurological condition, taking a treatment over a period of time will be beneficial.

The ideal medical system might be a combination of the two systems, often said our dearly remembered Khenpo Tsenam, great doctor and Head of the Higher School of Medicine at Lhasa. This would combine the techniques, equipment and treatments of Western medicine, in the domain of imagery, emergencies and surgery, with the holistic approach and the remedies of TTM to treat complex and chronic illnesses over the long term. He actually supported this joint approach in his country and introduced it in the medical curriculum of the Lhasa School of TTM.

On the basis of such reflections, Akong Rinpoche was convinced that TTM could bring some benefit to Western people. The idea was not to replace conventional medicine but to complement it by offering the possibility of using it when Western medicines could not help. TTM could also support a positive approach to caring for one's own health through intelligent prevention and through developing an understanding of the factors that concur to balance or imbalance our body-mind.

Seizing the Opportunity to fulfil The Sixteenth Karmapa's Wishes and His Own

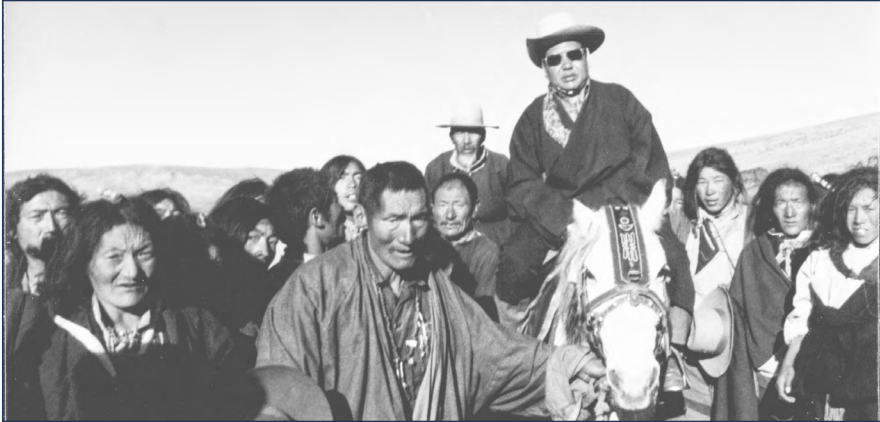
Despite Akong Rinpoche's total devotion to His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa and his willingness to do anything to serve him and the lineage, he would have to wait thirty-one years before he could fulfil Karmapa's wish to introduce TTM in Europe. Initially, various reasons made this a mission impossible but, with time, conditions changed. Rinpoche recognised that the circumstances were right and he was prompt to seize the opportunity.

Until the 1990s, Rinpoche had been fully mobilised by the task of establishing Dharma in Europe and making Samye Ling a firm basis for teaching and practice. It was only after conditions changed in Tibet and in his own activities, that he became able to reconnect with TTM.

Like all Tibetans in exile, Akong Rinpoche was unable to return to Tibet before the change of policy which took place in China in the early eighties, allowing some access to the country for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. In 1983, as soon as Tibet reopened to 'Tibetan nationals', Akong Rinpoche took his first trip to his homeland and to Dolma Lhakang. This relative relaxation of policy meant Rinpoche could start travelling there regularly. He became aware of the vast difficulties experienced by underprivileged Tibetans, particularly as regards education and health, both in the Autonomous Region and in the former areas of Tibet assimilated to Chinese Provinces (Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan). This

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led him to start his humanitarian work in 1985 through an international charity called ROKPA – help – he co-founded with our friend Lea Wyler to collect funds worldwide, for the purpose of “Helping where help is needed”.



First return to the Tibetan regions 1983

For the first time since leaving his homeland, Akong Rinpoche found himself in a position to help his country. From the nineties, he spent an increasing amount of time away from Britain, working on the ground to establish ROKPA’s humanitarian projects in Tibet and oversee their progress. This led him to entrust the care of Samye Ling to Lama Yeshe Losal as new Abbot of Samye Ling. Although Rinpoche continued to nurture Samye Ling, people there and in the UK branches and abroad, he effectively passed on the overall control of the centre to his brother. This freed him to devote more time to ROKPA’s work in Tibet and Nepal, which gradually developed on a large scale.

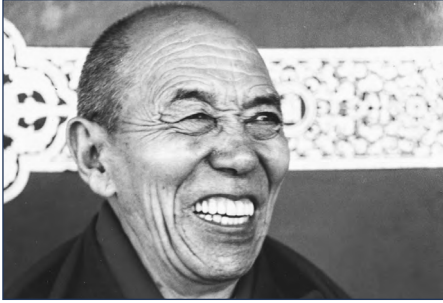
Akong Rinpoche's visits to Tibet also enabled him to meet various people, old and new. He renewed old acquaintances, as for instance with some of the older monks of Dolma Lhakang who had known the First Akong, whom he asked to write down what they could remember of Lama Karma Miyo's life. Naturally, Rinpoche also made a lot of new acquaintances: one such, significant encounter was with Khenpo Tsenam, the greatest Tibetan doctor alive at the time and Head of the Higher School of Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Lhasa. A close link formed between them over the following years, which would pave the way to laying foundations for TTM in Europe.

1994 offered a unique window of opportunity: the conditions were as favourable as they would ever be, in Tibet and at Samye Ling, for Akong Rinpoche to get a chance to act towards developing TTM in Europe. If ever there was a time, this was it. Rinpoche seized the moment with characteristic boldness: having discussed his plans with Khenpo Tsenam and investigated possibilities on the Tibetan side, Rinpoche decided to found a College of TTM headed by Khenpo Tsenam, with a view to holding a course of TTM in Samye Ling over a four-year period.

All the conditions required to launch such a daring project now seemed to be gathering: an excellent teacher, motivated Westerners to set up the College, and the prior existence of a legal body suitable for the purpose.

Rinpoche was keen to get the best possible teacher to launch this project; someone who, as it happens, was also the best Tibetan

doctor alive! In passing, we smile at Rinpoche's characteristic modesty for not thinking of himself as fit for the job.



Khenpo Tsenam

Once we discovered what a remarkable doctor Khenpo Tsenam was, we realised what a bold move it had been for Akong Rinpoche to ask him. Getting any good Tibetan doctor to come and teach in Europe would have been diffi-

cult, because of their own, local commitments to their patients and to their institutions. Asking such a great and famous doctor to go abroad to teach and oversee a four-year course at an obscure venue in Scotland was a wild ambition: getting such an eminent doctor to travel from afar to teach Westerners with no knowledge of TTM was like asking Einstein to impart the theory of relativity to a village kindergarten.

Khenpo Tsenam was indeed a very big fish in the pond of medicine in Tibet. After he had fortunately survived a long incarceration in the tumultuous times of the 1950s and 1960s, his outstanding skills and knowledge had been recognised by officials and were highly prized by the 'powers that be', as reflected by his position of Head of the Higher School of Tibetan Medicine in Lhasa and by the respect he enjoyed. However, as was customary in Chinese institutions, his role included a vast amount of administrative duties, with frequent meetings and discussions (it seems he did not particularly enjoy these time-consuming obligations which distracted him

from his medical activities). Therefore, the authorities were not keen on letting him go abroad for a couple of months a year, as Akong Rinpoche had originally requested. I have witnessed instances of Rinpoche's phenomenal bargaining power, and I am sure he used it to the full in order to persuade the board of the Medical School to give Khenpo Tsenam leave to teach abroad. As a skilled negotiator, Rinpoche must have offered convincing advantages for the Lhasa School of TTM to allow their head to go to Scotland.

In theory, teaching abroad would bring some prestige to the school but our small, unknown private outfit did not rate as very interesting in their eyes. They liked to deal with large universities and famous organisations which could do things for them or with them, preferably on a big scale. Therefore Rinpoche had our full admiration for having managed such an arrangement, whatever the terms!

Two other teachers were to assist Khenpo Tsenam in his task. One was Sönam Chime, his nephew and closest student whom he had taught and trained since childhood. Sönam Chime was then an assistant professor at the Higher School of Traditional Medicine in Lhasa. The other doctor Rinpoche invited to join the team was Thubten Puntsok, who had a particular interest in the history of TTM, which he taught at the University of Nationalities in Beijing. Jigme Dorje, one of Rinpoche's nephews, also came on board and helped dispense the medicines prescribed by the doctors.

The second favourable condition came after Rinpoche had secured the perfect teacher and head of the future college: motivated staff were available in Scotland. Two people had told Akong Rinpoche

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of their wish to learn TTM, if ever it was possible. One was our much missed dear friend, the late Gerry Smith; I was the other.



Khenpo Tsenam with Sonam Chime, Thubten Puntsok & Katia Holmes

Gerry Smith, an acupuncturist who practised mainly in Edinburgh, wished to widen his understanding of his art by learning TTM. He had discussed this in the early nineties with Akong Rinpoche who advised Gerry to wait a little: it might become possible for him to go and study at the Lhasa Medical School later on. Then, in 1994, he told him of his plans.

As for me, it turned out that Akong Rinpoche had not forgotten my request to him in 1971. Twenty-three years later, he surprised me, and Ken, by announcing, out of the blue, that he was planning to start a TTM course in Samye Ling. This must have been early March 1994 and I was told I had four months to prepare translations and get ready to interpret for the course. He was not joking ... Meanwhile, Gerry Smith was asked to take charge of organising and following the project, as Administrator of the College. Since

he would attend all the teachings himself, he would be in a good position to liaise with students on whatever issues needed attention.

This was wonderful news, yet the tallest possible order for me: a huge challenge after twelve years of battling with illness and coming to terms with living with it, despite reduced capacities. Not to mention the steep learning curve: Dharma had been the only focus of my initial years of practice and of the subsequent years of intense study, research, interpreting and translation, from 1977 until my health failed in 1981. Dharma Tibetan would not be of much help to understand the *Fourfold Treatise* and not just because of the medical terminology: the original twelfth century text was versified, couched in an archaic language, often hermetic to Tibetans themselves, but also because the need to fit all words into verses of nine feet made it too condensed to understand without explanations. Tibetan Medicine required learning a whole new set of concepts and vocabulary, and I had precious little time to gain familiarity with it all. Having gathered a maximum of documents, I quickly set out to learn the Tibetan name of every part and organ of the body, poring over anatomical charts.

Another member of the team was Ken Holmes, then a close assistant to Akong Rinpoche and a Dharma teacher. Besides acting as a backup for me and a general facilitator, he bravely tackled Tibetan ‘astro-science’, loosely called Astrology, which plays a part in TTM; this to my great relief, because I could hardly cope with my endless task and, truth be told, I had no particular inclination nor talent for astro-science, unlike Ken who took to it like a duck to water. He also had the responsibility of coaching students in the rudiments of this

and related subjects, such as the relationship between the elements. In time, he would also take on the huge task of establishing a database for the *Materia Medica*, with the hundreds of items that make up the Tibetan pharmacopoeia.

A key member of the team was Dr Brion Sweeney, very busy at the time with his professional commitments as a psychiatrist in Dublin, along with his activities in the Tara Rokpa Therapy. He came in as representative of the Tara Trust, which was to act as the official body organising the course and supervising Gerry Smith, Administrator of the College. Besides playing this administrative role, Brion had a keen interest in Tibetan Medicine and would attend teachings whenever he managed to find a free slot in his agenda. His presence on the course, even occasional, was very helpful: outside class times, I could refer to him as a source of reliable medical information when I needed to discuss the meaning of particular terms or concepts of Western Medicine. Indeed, one of the most delicate – and interesting – parts of my job was to see whether valid correspondences could be established between terms and concepts in both systems, so I could find which English words could or couldn't be used safely as equivalents of Tibetan medical notions, or when concepts were so different that attempts at equivalences should simply be forgotten. In such cases, one had to reflect on what was best in each particular instance: finding *ad hoc*, new terminology; or leaving some terms in Tibetan or in their Sanskrit equivalents, because they described a concept or a reality hitherto alien to Western science and thinking.

Finally, Bill Trotter also joined us at Rinpoche's request to record and later video all sessions. His faithful and benevolent presence was a hearty addition to the group.

The third favourable condition needed to materialise the College project was to have an adequate legal body. Except for a handful of scholars, researchers or travellers to the East, TTM was even more of an unknown quantity in the West than Buddhism had been fifty years earlier. In consequence, it enjoyed no official recognition or status, hence had no legal structure. Although Samye Ling could be the initial venue for the course, it could not offer a legal base for a college of Tibetan medicine, let alone for clinics. Fortunately, Akong Rinpoche had a trump card to play since the Tara Rokpa Therapy system had its own legal body, then called Tara Rokpa Edinburgh, and this could accommodate a college.

Thus, the Tara College of Traditional Tibetan Medicine was established in 1994 for the immediate purpose of organising courses and inviting Tibetan doctors to teach. Holding and managing clinics followed later and it was hoped that the College could also raise funds for research.

The Tara College of TTM and the Medical Course 1994 – 1999

The course was never intended to produce Western Tibetan doctors, but as a way to enrich the understanding of doctors and healthcare

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practitioners, to broaden their outlook by giving them a wider perspective on illness and treatment. Had someone wanted to get the full training, the course would only have been the first stepping stone for them, a mere introduction; they would have had to go on to study in Tibet.



Khenpo Tsenam with students of the college

Ideally, students would have been Western medical doctors or experienced practitioners of various forms of complementary medicine or therapies. In the end, only two medical doctors attended – one, a lady, was full-time; the other, Brion Sweeney, whenever his heavy commitments allowed. Rinpoche then realised the course would have to be opened to a wider range of people; in the end, the initial first-year group included a colourful collection of backgrounds:

osteopathy, homeopathy, acupuncture, midwifery, nursing, massage, botany, herbal remedies, psychotherapy, and various sorts of alternative therapies. Some were qualified and practising, some still in training. One was researching material for a PhD.

In any case, the course was intended to deepen the understanding of all participants, whether Western medical professionals, patients or Dharma students. Meeting Akong Rinpoche outside by chance, before teachings started, he told me: “Just now, we are standing here, on the ground, and you see things around you; when you have studied TTM, it will be like looking at the same landscape from the top of the hill. You will learn many wonderful things.”

How right he was! His prediction proved to be totally true. The experience opened a whole new dimension to my understanding of body-mind and was a great help to me in managing my own, ongoing chronic illness. I know for a fact that everyone who attended the course found similar benefits, each according to their own person and background.

A Comprehensive Four-Year Programme

As usual, Akong Rinpoche wanted the best programme possible: the initial syllabus he designed, together with Khenpo Tsenam, was quite ambitious and inspiring.

Spread over four years, with two one-month periods of study a year, the course covered all the main topics of the Tibetan medical

theory, such as expounded in the *Fourfold Treatise*. This programme included two months in Tibet: the first for a field trip to learn to identify medicinal herbs, probably in Yunnan, as a practical application of the *Materia Medica* study; the second month was to be held at Lhasa, with classes in the morning on some of the illnesses taught in the *Third Treatise*, followed by afternoon workshops, possibly at the Lhasa Higher School of Medicine, where Khenpo Tsenam taught and worked. There would be an opportunity to watch some medicine-making and treatment procedures. A most attractive proposition, this curriculum followed roughly the same pattern as TTM colleges in Tibet, since it was aiming at covering a large part of the enormous corpus of material contained in the *Fourfold Treatise*.

Akong Rinpoche's Quiet Satisfaction

Rinpoche was not in the habit of expressing his feelings but, to us who knew him, he appeared truly happy in July 1994, when he could welcome Khenpo Tsenam in Samye Ling to share some of the wonders of TTM with us all. During that first session of the course, he would sometimes sneak in and sit at the back of the class, listening attentively. I was on tenterhooks: it was the very beginning of the course, I was unused to the accents of the two assistant teachers and to the extreme speed of one of them and, despite my hard work of preparation, I was still very new to it all. As I soldiered

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on, bravely trying to keep my nose above the water, I could catch glances of Rinpoche sitting at the back, sometimes smiling discreetly to himself as he saw my efforts. But the general feeling of satisfaction that we got from him in that first month made us all very happy and was a great encouragement to us in our difficult task!

Akong Rinpoche always liked to share his ‘treasures’ with us, be they teachings, books, images, stories or new plans. He greatly valued TTM and we could feel how pleased he was to be able to offer it to us at last. There was a sort of sacred pride about this: he had managed to bring over the best Tibetan doctor alive and some of the wonders of TTM would be shared with interested Westerners.



Khenpo Tsenam invited to teach HH Karmapa at Tsurphu

Another treasure Akong Rinpoche wanted us to share in was the nectar of deep Dharma transmissions by Khenpo Tsenam. Being close to Khenpo-la – they obviously enjoyed each other’s company –

Rinpoche knew that, besides being an exceptional doctor, Khenpo Tsenam was a very learned lama and abbot who had led the life of a true bodhisattva. Akong Rinpoche requested him to teach *The Profound Inner Meaning*, known as *Zamo Nangdon* (*zab mo nang don*), a deep work by the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, necessary for the long retreats. Regretfully, I had no time to add this wonderful assignment to an already rich workload, so Ken took charge and interpreted for Khenpo-la.

Akong Rinpoche also asked Khenpo Tsenam to grant everyone the Yuthog empowerment, traditionally bestowed on medical students, and this was a very special moment for all.

Akong Rinpoche was not involved in the actual teaching activity but he was of course the driving force of the project, and certainly a constant source of inspiration. Although he was discreetly masterminding the operation, he clearly wanted each one of us to take responsibility for their own task and he left it to the College to make its own organisational decisions. However, we felt his support, knowing that he kept his finger on the pulse of the project, and we could always refer to him whenever needed.

Adapting to the Constraints of Reality

Sadly, several factors forced us to modify the initial plans and lower our ambitions. To begin with, the Tibetan trips fell through as, in the end, Akong Rinpoche could not obtain the necessary permis-

sions for the herb identification trip and for Lhasa. Our being a small, unknown entity had clearly not helped our case. This was a great disappointment for all, Rinpoche included.

Second disappointment: it soon became clear that the course time available would not suffice to cover the comprehensive syllabus: time was more than halved by the need of translation and questions from participants. This had been underestimated in the initial plans and we couldn't hope to cover the huge programme in the six months of teachings offered.

The worst blow came with the news that Khenpo Tsenam could not continue to come twice a year. Exceptionally, he had been given leave to come in July and December of Year 1, but it could only be once a year henceforth. His responsibilities in Tibet were the main reason, but the extra work and travel would be taxing for his health. (Khenpo Tsenam was sixty-nine years old when he first came but rather fragile, due to the eighteen years he had spent in a prison camp in the fifties and early sixties.)

If Khenpo Tsenam could only come once a year, this put paid to the idea of some of our colleagues to have new intakes every year, which meant running several groups of students simultaneously. This came as a great relief to me: I could never have managed to carry the extra work-load. As things stood then, not only did I have to interpret in class but also for medical consultations that took place afterwards, in-between classes, and above all, I had to find time to keep one step ahead in translating the text we worked from, which required a great deal of preparation before sessions. Even

working from early morning till late at night, there was just not enough time to do it all, let alone add extra intakes.

An initial group of some twenty-five people from ten countries came in July 1994. It thinned out by Year 2. A second intake was started but it soon appeared unrealistic to carry on with two separate groups of limited size. It was decided to merge the two groups, with some catch-up programmes so everyone would have studied the same topics.

A Rich Experience

Even though the initial plan had to be reduced, what was actually accomplished is rather heartening, in retrospect. Reading through the syllabus some 20 years on, I marvel at how much was actually covered over a mere six months of session time and with very limited means: truth be told, despite the impressive label of ‘College’, the whole venture actually rested on a few frail shoulders. Without the support of Rinpoche’s inspiration and blessing, and the outstanding transmission of Khenpo Tsenam, it would have been unthinkable for so small a venture to yield such positive fruit.

This is not the place to give a list of all the topics covered, as it might be tedious reading to most. We shall just extract a few gems to give a taste of the rare transmission offered by Khenpo Tsenam. He taught the fundamentals of medical theory, which are rich and extensive, so that each participant’s understanding of the workings

of body-mind was taken to a different level. Khenpo-la then introduced students to the traditional methods of diagnosis, demonstrating how to examine urine and take pulses, which requires years of practice to master. He was himself a great master of pulse-taking and, as I interpreted for him when he saw patients, I had many opportunities to admire the finesse of his diagnosis, nurtured by his total empathy with them. He tuned in to them and sensed them so deeply that even I, at his feet, could feel something. I personally experienced many times how just coming into his presence brought relief and healing.

In November 1995, he offered some memorable sessions of collective medicine-making, so everyone could get a taste of how it is done. For the exercise, Khenpo Tsenam chose two of the simplest compounds, with very few ingredients, and we made them in class: Sendru Dagné (*se 'bru dvangs gnas*), also known as Pomegranate Five since pomegranate is the main of five ingredients, and Dütsi Sumjor (*bdud rtsi gsum sbyor*), based on three substances.

Some other unforgettable moments were shared when Khenpo Tsenam demonstrated a particularly beneficial method of treatment called *Mongolian hot packs* (*hor gyi me btsa*), whereby small packs of medicinal herbs dipped in hot, melted butter, are applied on specific energy points of the body. He used a brave volunteer, the lady doctor on the course, and we still have video footage recording the expression on her face when the rather hot substance was applied to her xyphoid process, a small bone structure at the lower end of the sternum, between the breasts, obviously a very sensitive area, judging from her wincing as she courageously resisted shouting!

Khenpo Tsenam also showed a type of moxibustion based on a pea-size quantity of medicinal herb (*Leontopodium, spra ba*) attached to a needle positioned on the relevant point of the body and set aflame. As it consumes slowly, the heat and the medicinal qualities of the herb combine to produce a therapeutic effect on the patient.

It must also be recalled that, at Akong Rinpoche's request, Khenpo Tsenam gave the Yuthog empowerment a second time, with an explanation of the spiritual side of medicine.

Far-reaching Outcomes

In creating the College and starting the course, Akong Rinpoche actually initiated a series of ground-breaking events that would have far-reaching consequences. The course seemed to have acted like a seed, in the way a small acorn will give birth to a noble oak. Quite organically, one thing led to another in a virtuous chain effect: setting up the first TTM course in Europe would lead on to opening regular clinics in Britain, which would require seeking the official recognition of TTM in the UK and that, in turn, would have positive repercussions on the production of sustainable, quality medicines in Tibet.

This concatenation of goodness is an opportunity to point out another special quality of Rinpoche's that often amazed us over the years: his actions always seemed to produce a strong ripple effect. A sentence, a word even could change the course of someone's life;

what might look like a simple initiative could have very far-reaching consequences and on a much greater scale than anyone might have anticipated – there are endless such examples in every area of Rinpoche’s life, as we all know. I feel this is linked both to the power of his pure intentions and merits, and to his clarity as a Vajrayana master, which enabled him to sense the interdependent reality of things and people, and work with it.

The course itself was ground-breaking: it was the first time Tibetan medicine had been taught intensively in Europe over a six-month period. It certainly brought great benefit to all who took part and paved the way for future endeavours.

This first encounter with the theory of TTM seemed to open our eyes to a panoramic view of life, with a new awareness of the close relationship between the human body-mind and the universe. Discovering that all things shared the same elemental nature hit me like a sudden tear in the fabric of habitual thinking; it was an extraordinary experience, like the disclosure of the deepest secret, revealing dizzying new vistas. At times, one could almost feel the participants’ brains expanding with the widening of perspectives.

We gained more understanding of our body and what could cause it to be ill. The effects our diet, lifestyle, mentality and environment can have upon us, body and mind, became much clearer. Awareness of these factors is most useful to help us make the right choices in order to stay healthy or to cope better, if we have poor health. Taking an active part in managing one’s health instead of remaining passive offers a degree of freedom; this is particularly valuable for managing long-term or severe illness, since mental determination

is the number one force in fighting disease and surviving longer, in becoming cured even, provided our karma allows.

Whilst most participants never went on to continue studying TTM, they had received an abundant provision of food for thought that would nurture them for the rest of their lives and enrich their practice, be it spiritual, medical, therapeutic or anything else.

The initial hope was that the course would be a stepping stone to extensive research that could lead to various publications. The College was expected to raise funds to make this possible on a long-term basis. Some brave attempts were made, especially by Dr Brion Sweeney, despite his many occupations, but to no avail. To translate the parts of the *Fourfold Treatise* required for the course, I had had to engage in a great deal of research over the years, diving in all the commentaries, reference works and manuals I could get from Tibet through our doctor friends. Research had long been my predilection and I felt fully in my element, so to speak; I was determined to carry on with it, funding it myself. Khenpo Tsenam and his assistants had imparted so much knowledge during the course that I had a strong wish to preserve it and develop it further, so it could be shared – all the more so as interest in TTM had grown considerably since the early days of the 1990s.

An End Gives Way to New Beginnings

Normally, a second course of TTM would have followed the first, had it not been for a dramatic change of circumstances. In 1998, Khenpo Tsenam was suddenly struck by a severe illness which rapidly caused him to become blind. We were heartbroken to think of him deprived of sight: he was a born researcher, a very open-minded man with immense intellectual curiosity, who always went around with a little notebook which he filled with meticulous notes, recording facts and ideas inspired by his encounters. A warm and humorous person with a fine talent of impersonation, he showed great interest in people and places – he loved maps of the world – keen to learn more about the history of Western medicine, science and philosophy. Blindness did not alter the true bodhisattva resolve that had nourished his whole life and he carried on the transmission of his knowledge: without the support of his books and notes, he was able to distil from memory a lifetime of study, reflection and clinical experience into a precious commentary on the *Fourfold Treatise*, which he dictated to his closest former students over a three-month closed seminar. Rinpoche tried to arrange for Ken and I to attend this extraordinary meeting; Khenpo Tsenam agreed but there was no way we could have got an official permit. Recordings were made at Akong Rinpoche's request and the work in three volumes was successfully published in 2000.

In 1999, Akong Rinpoche asked Dr Karma Tsonyi of Xining (Qinghai, China) to come to teach the final session necessary to

complete the course. It was then decided to take a year's pause to reflect. The College needed to rethink its organisation; also more translated material was needed for students, perhaps in the form of a class manual, and I needed the time to do this.

As I had always been running only a step ahead of the course to prepare material, I was looking forward to a chance to spend time checking and clarifying delicate points of the teachings. I was hoping to be able to spend some time with Khenpo Tsenam in Chengdu (China) and also in Lhasa, if at all possible with visas. His assistant was also willing to help me. I had ended up with hundreds of pages of material (notes, translations, reflections) and piles of the best available Tibetan books on the subject, but it would need time and a lot of work to finalise anything.

Yet impermanence struck again during the year's pause: my mother became quite ill and, by the Autumn of 2000, it was clear that I would need to go and live with her in France, where I stayed with her until her passing, five years later.

In the end, the College never organized a second course of TTM but the first had accomplished one of its missions of seeding other activities, so its end coincided with the beginning of the clinics.

Establishment of Clinics and Recognition of TTM

To have clinics for people to enjoy the special benefits of TTM was certainly a wish close to Rinpoche's heart. The first clinics started

rather informally during the first year of the medical course. People would make appointments to see our doctors in-between class-times. Delicate cases were referred to Khenpo Tsenam whose reputation soon grew far and wide. For good reasons, as I could see when I interpreted for him during his consultations: he was an extraordinary doctor, whose compassion matched his medical skills. I witnessed a few spectacular improvements, particularly with neurological conditions. At Akong Rinpoche's request, Khenpo Tsenam had also taken up my case from the start and he helped me greatly throughout: without his kind care and support, I certainly could not have withstood the relentless pace of work, preparations, and consultations.

In order to establish clinics on a more permanent basis, Akong Rinpoche invited Dr Lobsang Donden to come from Dharamsala, India. Dr Donden first started consulting in Samye Ling, in Edinburgh and in London, accompanied by Jigme Dorje as his interpreter and medicine dispenser. Later on, a permanent clinic was established in Edinburgh, from which Dr Donden, now on his own because he had enough English, could visit other venues regularly.

However, it was soon realised that the clinics could not become a long-term concern unless TTM was officially recognised in Britain because this was a prerequisite for professional insurance and for compliance of the medicines with the EU rules.

Obtaining the recognition of TTM was one of Akong Rinpoche's ground-breaking legacies. It was an enormous achievement, which meant several years of toil and perseverance from all concerned. Akong Rinpoche was a constant inspiration and the driving force

behind the tireless work of Dr Brion Sweeney, Gerry Smith and a dedicated team including a professional herbalist, Marilena Hettema. They joined forces with another Tibetan lady-doctor, already long-established independently in London, Dr Tamdin.

It turned out that the only way for TTM to gain legal recognition was as part of ‘Herbal Medicine’, as defined by the EU with a precise set of rules regulating the plants allowed and the manufacturing processes. Becoming exclusively herbal meant a considerable narrowing of scope for TTM, since its rich pharmacopeia includes a wide range of ingredients including minerals, gems, metals, woods, and some animal products. These go through complex processes to eliminate toxicity and make them potent and assimilable by the human body. Used in compounds, they bring a strong healing power to the formulas, particularly to what is known as ‘precious pills’. These combine very special ingredients, up to seventy or more, in complex formulations tried and tested by time. They can be of significant benefit in disorders of the nervous system, particularly neurological conditions. We used some until we learned that we wouldn’t be allowed and I was a witness to the spectacular improvement of a patient on the verge of disability who was able to go back to work on a building site.

Therefore it was heart-breaking to renounce the use of medicines we knew for a fact to be powerful and very helpful. Yet, we had no choice; this was the price to pay for the greater good of having TTM recognised. Necessity made law. Fortunately, Tibetan Medicine had long developed fully-herbal substitutes to replace other substances and the next step was obviously to explore this possibility.

Innovations in Medicine Making

Without entering into details beyond the scope of my topic, my purpose here is to highlight three facets of Akong Rinpoche's innovative work regarding medicine-making: introducing Mipham's herbal formulas, upgrading the manufacturing process and ensuring sustainability.

The great Nyingma master Mipham Rinpoche (1846–1912), also a famous doctor and author, was aware of the high cost of some rare and precious ingredients used in medicine-making. Imported from India or China, these were hard to obtain in remote parts of Tibet and too expensive for most country doctors. He therefore elaborated a whole pharmacopeia of purely herbal compounds, based on what TTM calls 'substitutes' (*thsabs*), substances with very similar properties to those of the original they may replace. These herbal formulas were much cheaper to produce, as the plants were often available locally. Thus, Mipham evolved a whole system of herbal 'substitutes'.

Khenpo Tsenam held the transmission of Mipham's medicines. At Akong Rinpoche's request, he agreed to impart this knowledge to Dr Karma Tsonyi of Xining, who had been one of his former students. After training with Khenpo Tsenam, Dr Karma Tsonyi agreed to oversee the manufacturing of herbal medicines in Tibet for Tara Rokpa clinics and associates.

Seeking official recognition of TTM also demanded an upgrade of the manufacturing process. Not only did the medicines have to

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be herbal, they had to be produced to the exacting quality standards set by the EU for Herbal Medicines. These standards had to be learned and applied from then on to the manufacture of medicines used by our Tara Rokpa Clinics. Tibetan medicines had always been produced according to their own, demanding rules, as strictly defined in the *Fourfold Treatise* to achieve the non-toxicity, purity and potency of substances; adding the new rules to the old prescriptions could be regarded as adding a modern concern of quality standardization.

The third innovation introduced by Rinpoche was to ensure the sustainability of the medicinal herbs, in line with his overall priority of caring for the environment, also embodied in specific projects in Tibet. It was essential to preserve the plants used in herbal medicines.



Examining medicinal herbs

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

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Rinpoche put much effort into promoting the need for sustainability and educating people on the ground. He wanted Tibetan doctors in Tibet to be aware of the dangers of extinction of some plants that were being over-picked. The growing popularity of TTM in China had led to a high demand for some medicines, which was now threatening some plants, such as the famous *Cordyceps sinensis* (*dgyar rtsa dgun 'bu*). The problem was made worse because collecting those herbs had become a great money-earner for poor local people.



Khenpo Troru Tsenam during a visit to Edinburgh Botanic Gardens circa 1994.

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However, even assuming over-picking endangered herbs could stop, it would not suffice to protect fragile resources. Akong Rinpoche wanted to look ahead and introduce biodynamics methods to grow some of the endangered plants. Rinpoche arranged for some of the Tibetan medical graduates to come to Scotland and Germany to train in the methods of biodynamics as interns in established institutions, so they could go back home to apply the principles and teach them to others.



Doctors group Yushu 2010

By promoting the need for sustainability of medicinal plants, Rinpoche helped people on the ground to realise the fragility and preciousness of the unique Tibetan flora. He encouraged them to protect their environment, instead of plundering it to gain a quick

income and end up with nothing. Our young ROKPA medical graduates were to play an important role in applying the new ideas and techniques and in spreading them in their local communities.

Thus Rinpoche was able to make an important contribution to the preservation of the environment in the Tibetan areas of the Chinese Provinces where ROKPA was active.

Conclusion

Akong Rinpoche played a major role of transmission in the introduction of Dharma to the West and in laying foundations for TTM to develop in Europe, leaving a rich legacy.

If his main achievements at the time of writing regarding TTM were to be summarised for posterity, they could stand as follows:

1. He offered the first course of TTM in Europe
2. TTM is now officially recognised in Britain as part of Herbal Medicine and its practice is legal
3. Patients can now be treated in a permanent clinic in Edinburgh and in other venues where the doctor visits regularly
4. A regular supply of quality medicines is now produced in the Tibetan areas of China, according to all the standards and quality requirements of the EU
5. Wild herbs are only harvested in a sustainable way which respects their fragile environment and, wherever possible, the

same plants are cultivated locally according to the principles of biodynamics or equivalents.

6. Some ROKPA schools offered a comprehensive basic training in TTM, following which the best students were able to get admission to renowned medical schools of Chinese universities and gain doctors degrees

However, these are only the tip of the iceberg, the small visible part of the incredible amount of good things initiated by Rinpoche in so many places. The invisible part includes the immeasurable benefits brought to thousands of people everywhere, whose lives were saved or changed for the better by the rare combination of his power of blessing and his selfless dedication to all. As he told us in the early days of Samye Ling: “My monastery bought me from my parents, I belong to everyone.”

If I had to sum up Rinpoche in one sentence, it would be exactly this “I belong to everyone”, because it was not just words: he was truly available to each and every person who needed him, without preference or the slightest regard for himself. This was the driving force of his life, up to the very last second. His portrait is what I see when I read the *Bodhicaryavatara* and its inspiring description of the bodhisattva ideal.

As anyone who had the privilege of meeting Akong Rinpoche knows, he was a wish-fulfilling gem for each and every one of us, helping each person find whatever they needed most: be it material – food, shelter, medicines, family, education – or spiritual, showing

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us the way to our own inner treasures. May he soon manifest amongst us to shine his light in a world of confusion and turmoil!



A fuller version of this testimony, with notes and bibliographic references, can be found at www.akong.eu

Tara Rokpa Therapy

*drawn from the writings of senior Tara Rokpa therapists,
with special thanks to Edie Irwin*

“As far back as I remember my wish was always to help other people one way or another.” (Akong Tulku Rinpoche, Port Elizabeth 1990)²⁶

Rinpoche described the significance of the name *Tara Rokpa Therapy* in his book “Restoring The Balance”²⁷, and this provides the best starting point to understand the perspective underpinning his therapy.

“I would like to talk about the meaning of Tara Rokpa Therapy, to give a little interpretation of the name. There are three parts: Tara, Rokpa and Therapy or training or technique. Tara is a Sanskrit word, which in Tibetan is Dolma. Dolma means to free something, to be free or the method of freeing. Rokpa is a Tibetan word and means to help, help oneself or help by giving to other people in the sense of being useful. Therapy or training are English words. So the name contains three languages put together: Sanskrit, Tibetan and English.

“The Tibetan way focuses on purity of tradition: it’s something very pure, not made up by just anyone. All translations of texts into Tibetan start with the meaning in Sanskrit. In the beginning of a Tibetan book, the condensed meaning is always in Sanskrit. This symbolises that the text is not something that you made up, but that you are following the wisdom of somebody who has realised it.

Tara the mother aspect

“In this way, Tara is a mother aspect. This is not in the ordinary sense of our mother, somebody giving milk and doing housekeeping, but in a sense of the spaciousness and infinity of the mother aspect. Something that is able to digest anything that is happening. No matter how naughty the children are, if you are the mother you are able to give kindness and give care, because of the bond between yourself and the child. There is a sense of going beyond ordinary limits in being able to take care, to give up your own problems for your children, you are able to give up in a sense of spaciousness ...

Rokpa means ‘help’

“The meaning of Rokpa is help. Not a cup of tea kind of idea, but the sense of help to provide coordination and harmony. We become helpful, we are no longer useless. The most helpful aspect is that we

coordinate whatever is happening, coordinate within ourselves, with our friends, with the environment. Because our problem is that we don't coordinate, we don't listen to others, we don't understand the emotions or expressions that people present to us. We don't take the time to think or want to understand. Rokpa is based mostly on coordination, how to understand and how to overcome all these difficulties arising within ourselves or outside.

Therapy or training

“Therapy or training is learning not to be arrogant: ‘Other people don't know anything, but I am better.’ Training is mainly understanding by analysing oneself, looking into our positive and negative, looking into our relationship with others, and at the environment. Training has to do with maturity, with recognition, not picking up a new idea and putting it into our brain. All the ideas and techniques we have already inherited and are within ourselves, but we don't realise this. This training is understanding this by recognition ... With this understanding, therapy or training we learn how to simplify our life, not to complicate it. How to digest all the things that are happening to ourselves and outside of ourselves, to understand and to be given time to develop patience.

“The foundation for all this is compassion: compassion for oneself, not just for other people. We need it badly, to understand, to forgive

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and to have compassion for ourselves. We also need to have compassion for our friends, and for our enemies. Because the idea of enemy or friend, just like one's own problems, comes from misunderstanding and confusion, which is all created without any reason. So compassion is the main therapy that can enable us to overcome all our difficulties, whatever they are.

“This giving of everything is not punishment, but is the compassion one has for one's own child. The mother is able to give so much time and attention to the child, because she has great understanding and love. Tara Rokpa Therapy, the name, summarises all my ideas, and is the whole basis of Buddhist principles.”

Akong Tulku Rinpoche, like Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Chime Rinpoche, was a pioneer amongst the Tibetans who came to the West. One part of his legacy in Europe was an ostensibly new psychotherapy. In the West this system of “compassion-based psychotherapy”, or healing for the mind, could be described as unique, but it is also based upon *sowa rigpa*, the ancient traditional healing system of Tibet. In many respects it was also a skilful response to the many who arrived at Samye Ling looking for help. In a talk in Port Elizabeth in 1990 Rinpoche spoke about this:

“From 1967 up to now, on my doorstep there have been so many mentally unwell people from different organisations and institutions. For that reason I have no other choice except to offer some kind of therapy for those people who we believe are sick. The staff who have

to deal with these people also need therapy, I am sure I need therapy too! So therefore therapy is not based on any particular part of the community, but upon the whole structure of the community; otherwise what is the benefit?"

The basic fragility of Western people in recent times is diagnosed in the appendix to Akong Rinpoche's book *Restoring The Balance*. "In his early years of working with Western people he had seen that many suffered from a kind of immaturity based in fundamental insecurity at a human level."

There are of course many reasons for this. Amongst these there is the influence of an overwhelmingly materialistic outlook, in which the development of inner resources and strength are largely ignored; from an early age the majority of children are encouraged to focus upon outer accomplishments, and also to develop a mindset characterised by independence. Secondly, many of these children find themselves in homes where their parents are separated, or else largely absent due to work commitments. We have become accustomed to terms such as 'broken homes' and 'latch-key kids'; families are often unable to sit down together for meals. Even before our current era of pervasive social media, television was already a dominant influence.

So, although he saw that "... many Westerners had good intellectual development, the emotional and social basis for this was often fragile ... In order for such people to be ready for steady spiritual development or even normal adult responsibilities, some kind of 'therapy' was necessary." (*Restoring The Balance*)

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Dr Akong Rinpoche addressing a Tara Rokpa Therapy group in Germany

Akong Rinpoche's approach was formed of knowledge and insight, developed from early medical and Dharma training in Tibet and years of experience mentoring Westerners, which he brought to bear on whatever was causing people to seek his help. His ability to understand others through experience, skill and compassion was appreciated by those with physical and cognitive difficulties, relationship problems or existential crises. Those who were able to recognise their problems as arising from very deep feelings of loss or absence of love in their lives also benefitted from his guidance, as did many people with addictions. Most of all he was able to teach people how to help themselves. Once he conceived the idea of 'therapy', much of it was based on the concept of restoring balance.

Very rarely has a Buddhist master developed anything described as therapy. So why was it that Akong Rinpoche, a master of Vajrayana Buddhism as well as of Traditional Tibetan Medicine, came to feel it would be worthwhile to invest so much effort to develop a type of psychotherapy, something unheard of in the society in which he

grew up? Part of the answer must be that the language of therapy was one that people in the West already understood, although his was not going to be the kind of psychotherapy to which we are accustomed.

We can also look to the very early insights which Rinpoche expressed before the therapy had any kind of formal identity. He said in those early years that what he observed was that people came asking for Mahamudra, Dzogchen and other high teachings, but they did not really know what they were asking for. In most cases they probably had no idea: they were asking for meditation instruction because they did not know what other words to use. What they were really asking for was healing for body, speech, and mind, and especially the mind.

“He was aware that many people found it hard to follow the meditation instructions which he had given. They did not have the stability of mind to really undertake what was being asked of them. He saw that what people really wanted was help in facing the difficulties they faced in their everyday lives, in particular in relation to their emotional and physical well-being. A large percentage of the people coming to see him expressed dissatisfaction within themselves, their families, and their relationships, and what they really wanted was help to find a way to stop the endless cycle of suffering which seemed to be recurring in different areas of their lives.” (Spirituality and Psychotherapy²⁸)

So the therapy was partially intended for Westerners who aspired to the Dharma, but were lacking the self-knowledge, as well as the means of looking within, in the kind of sustained way that can lead

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to genuine inner understanding. Another set of beneficiaries would be those people carrying the burden of mental health diagnoses that left little space for personal growth. Tara Rokpa Therapy could help such individuals to emerge from being mesmerised under the diagnosis of something like schizophrenia. Such people may well feel that with such a diagnosis they have no place in society and no hope in life. They can find themselves trapped in diagnosis and treatment, stuck not just with the label but the heavy drugs that follow the label. There are some brilliant people for whom their diagnosis is just one concept too many: they just cannot think their way past it, they feel so impeded by the words, and Rinpoche wanted to address all of these things.



Lothlorien Therapeutic Community

For those people suffering from acute mental health problems, Garwald House was purchased in early 1986, to provide a safe home, while being easily accessible from Samye Ling. However, the idea was met with suspicion locally, and Rinpoche was forced to look

further afield. Thus Lothlorien, in South-west Scotland, was acquired by Rokpa Trust in 1989. Here there was a very large log cabin, and now several, with extensive grounds for residents, core staff, and volunteer co-workers to engage in health-inducing activities such as gardening and Qi Gong. Amongst other activities, there are also craft classes, and a regular programme of therapy provided by Tara Rokpa therapists. The model is one of therapeutic community living.

In general terms, however, when Akong Rinpoche used the word ‘therapy’, he was not thinking exclusively, or even mainly, of people with diagnosed mental health problems. People have often advised us not to call Tara Rokpa a therapy, because of the danger of people concluding that it was meant only for the ‘unwell’.

At a TRT event in Schwangau Germany in 1986, Rinpoche stated:

“In our society therapy has quite a bad name. If you say to your parents ‘I am going to therapy,’ the parents say, ‘What is wrong with you? Is there something that is depressing you, or is something wrong with you?’ When you talk about therapy then they treat you a little differently.”²⁹

He argued that the stigma attached to the idea of therapy is wide of the mark, since in his view,

“... therapy is happening every day of our life, everything we do is part of therapy. When we are hungry we eat food, it is therapy for the stomach, since it will overcome hunger. If you are thirsty you drink a cup of water: it is therapy for thirst. Every one of us prac-

tises therapy automatically. If you have a pain in your arm you move your shoulder to stop the pain. So therapy is just a common everyday part of life.”

We can identify three types of people for whom the therapy was designed:

1. “Those who have made an attempt at spiritual practice but for some reason have encountered obstacles or blocks, which make them feel less able to pursue their daily lives or their meditative practice.
2. Those who know that they need help to deal with the intolerable nature of their mental and emotional experiences, but are wary of any approach inclined to put specific labels or interpretations onto their difficulties. They only feel able to work in a process where their spiritual wholeness is respected.
3. Those who come because they have a nagging feeling that something isn’t quite right about their lives or who are looking for something other than the pursuit of the happiness on offer in the materialistic world.” (Spirituality and Psychotherapy, 2001)

Rinpoche was meeting people who were very different from those he had known in Tibet. He said that people there were so secure in their emotional and physical attachments within their family networks, that you have to give them a knock to get their attention as a prerequisite for the development of a true interest in medita-

tion. Contrastingly, in the West he observed that for many of us, on the day we are born we are taken away from our mother and put alone in a cot. He concluded that when they are still newborn babies, many Westerners experience the space of aloneness which is some kind of preliminary glimpse of emptiness. If they survive this shocking experience, there is still something which has not grown in the right order because the connection to the mother or caring relative, in the form of an unquestioning trust in love and nurture, may be somewhat tenuous or not fully present for the newborn from that time.

In speaking of our relative disconnectedness, he gave the example of the child learning to eat with a spoon. He said that if you just leave a baby alone with a spoon before they have learned to feed themselves, it starts like a game. The spoon goes towards the mouth, but due to lack of coordination it does not arrive, but falls down the front of the clothing. In the beginning this might be fun, but the baby is hungry. After a few misses the child becomes anxious about whether the food will come. With the anxiety, there is a weakening of coordination quickly followed by emotional upset and panic based in the fear of not being fed. The parent or carer may come along at that time and try to help the child by taking over the spoon, but it will probably be too late for the child to take in the food because the panic will have already set in, and so it will be very difficult for the baby to eat.

He said that many Western people he had met are like that baby. We do not know how to take nourishment from one another at the most ordinary human level. This is something we need to learn

through practice, through repeated new experiences where we do get what we need. Here he used the Tibetan word “*sowa*”, which means both to prevent a wound, as well as to repair or to heal it. The example he gave at summer camp in Schwangau, Germany in 1986 was that we wear gloves to protect our hands; without them our hands can get cut, and then we need to heal the wound.

“So first of all the therapy does not mean that there is something wrong with all of us. The therapy is two things: one, before anything happens it is how to protect ourselves, and the second thing is, if anything does happen, how to heal.”

He said that in the case of most Western people he had met, *sowa* was needed to repair the inability to give and take nourishment; to really love, accept and feel close, because we really do not have much experience of these. What Rinpoche saw was that our culture is typified by this inability to connect and stay connected. So his original idea was to create a therapy which would provide people with very particular conditions, as a means to begin to help them move through and heal these personal obstacles. This would be done in a way which was completely compatible with the first stages of development on any authentic spiritual path. The first of these conditions would be a close, but not rigidly closed, group of people who would work together over a period of two years or more. The second was a very particular set of extraordinary yet utterly simple exercises. These were designed to help people to come to terms with their own particular life circumstances, and to develop some matu-

rity with regard to their own psychological habits, their mental environment.

“So that is the first part of therapy: facing the situation, not to run away from the situation; because therapy is not to try to chase somebody from behind. If you have that idea of therapy you are never able to catch up. So what is the therapy? It is to face the situation – not wanting to run anymore; you have had enough of running, we have all had enough, now we are sick of running.”

It may be fair to say that Akong Rinpoche was unconvinced by the modern Western approach to dealing with the mentally unwell:

“To overcome that negativity you talk in a group, you do counselling, you talk about your problems: the idea is to overcome that negativity. According to my idea of therapy, you cannot get rid of your negativity simply by talking. If that were the case, of course we would all talk very fast to get rid of all our problems, and there would be no problems left!

“So my idea of problems is they are like our shadow. Until we are no longer in physical existence, according to the amount of light, sometimes you have a thicker shadow, sometimes you have very little shadow, but shadow is always there. We are not able to get rid of it; however much we try, shadows come immediately, one after the other.

“So therefore first of all we should know ourselves very well. That is very important. We should know the good side of ourselves, the reasonable side of ourselves, and we should know the unreasonable side of ourselves, the bad side of ourselves. Because none of you know yourself from beginning to end. You have only ideas. Those ideas were influenced by people saying you are terrible, you are ugly, you are stupid, oh you are nice, you are so kind, and your only basis is according to other people’s ideas, not your ideas. You don’t know, none of us know, ourselves.”

Another idea that Rinpoche challenged was our sense of what it means to be free:

“Now we always say that we want freedom, we want to achieve freedom. How you can achieve freedom, this is another question! The ordinary sense or idea of freedom is to try to be away from everybody. But trying to develop freedom that way, you actually have no way to achieve freedom. For example, if you want to achieve freedom from this tent we are in, you can go outside. You may have temporary freedom for a few minutes, but then you start seeing all the other people around you, so again you start wanting freedom. There is no place which is beyond worldly life and if you try to run away from worldly life then you still have to die, and still there is a projection of mind playing with you all the time. So there is no way to achieve freedom. But, if you do want freedom, you have to give yourself to everybody. Then you achieve freedom.

“So our Western therapy is one-sided.” (Schwanguau 1986)

We might interpret this to mean that in his view, Western psychotherapy, like the Western way of understanding freedom, often erroneously takes the individual self as its basic assumption, and its delivery from all kinds of psychological or environmental constraints as its fundamental goal. For Rinpoche, rejuvenated, solid egos were not necessarily a desirable goal; the nature of therapy, as well as its goal, was compassion. This, then, is what Tara Rokpa Therapy is meant to be: a vehicle for the development of mature compassion. For those who knew him Akong Rinpoche himself was the very model of this wise compassion. His capacity to give people what they needed, his capacity to communicate with powerful compassion, was the signature of everything he did. In a talk in Oberlethe, Germany, Rinpoche defined the kind of compassion he was referring to:

“According to Buddhist principles compassion is unconditional, which means that you are kind of giving up yourself entirely, and everything that is happening to you is to develop your compassion. It no longer depends upon the other being an extension of you, it no longer depends on good moods or bad moods, everything that is happening due to other people is part of appreciation. So the negative aspect is totally lost, everything becomes appreciation or loving kindness. When you want to develop loving kindness, everyone, whether they are good people or bad people, ugly or beautiful, whether they are teacher or slave, are actually all your teachers.”³⁰

Our capacity to practise as he did remains, of course, immature in all of us, but he did not leave us in any doubt as to what he wished us to do.

“So even in worldly life, when we say ‘this is a good doctor’, ‘this is a bad doctor’, ‘this is a good teacher’, ‘this is a bad teacher’, ‘this is a nice man’, or ‘this is not a nice man’, everything depends on how much compassion they have. A good doctor with a good understanding of compassion has much more benefit. A teacher with a good understanding of compassion is a much better teacher. Anybody with compassion has a special quality which will benefit others.

“Even if you look at an ordinary person, like someone who collects rubbish, the compassionate person puts the bin in the right place, he or she always thinks about what is most convenient for the next person ... Or a milkman who puts the bottle in the right place to protect the top, always thinking along the lines of what is useful for that person. Then you are happy! Nice milkman! Nice postman! So everything depends on compassion, those tiny, unexpected things. Those who have that, who may have been born with that, do what is beneficial for the next person.”

(Oberlethe 1999)

Rinpoche’s own kindness was exceptional. It is absolutely clear that whether we belong to those helping or receiving help, we are meant never to forget that this is the authentic foundation of the work. Whatever life situations we find ourselves in between birth and

death, our feeling for others should never be lost, our ability to stop and take care no matter how important our own affairs, should never be forsaken. In all aspects of his work, Rinpoche gave this incredible example of being available to help others at all times. In training others in his style of therapy, the essence of his teaching was the readiness to help others at all times without any of the unacknowledged tendency of wishing to encourage dependency. The approach he fostered was, do not expect others to need you, but be there in case someone does. Anyone who knew him will know that he never turned his phone off, he took calls from all around the world at any time of day or night. Though we may not be capable of fully emulating this, it is deeply inspiring to remember his complete openness.

The other notable thing about this emphasis on compassion is that it was also completely non-sectarian. He expressed this in a talk in Port Elizabeth South Africa, in 1990:

“I will always need to try to help other people. It doesn’t really matter what their religion is, that is not important to me. I don’t like to think of people through their religion – I hate this. I don’t want people to change their religion. I think everybody has their own religion and people have their own beliefs; I think it is excellent to maintain whatever they believe, whatever they belong to. I am a human being and whatever the suffering, and whoever wants to share their suffering, and wants to talk together as friends, that is my responsibility.”

TARA ROKPA THERAPY

In fact this approach extended far beyond the realms of religious difference:

“Since I started a Tibetan Centre in Scotland, at Samye Ling, I feel that my responsibility is to take everybody who comes whether they are believers in religion or non-believers, or even those who have been criminals. If somebody is needing help and wants to come or even does not want to come, my duty is to help as best I can. It’s not necessary for me to become a criminal or to become mentally sick, but to be as I am and to let them be what they are. So that is my policy.”

The Beginnings of Tara Rokpa Therapy



Senior Tara Rokpa Therapists & facilitators: from left, Dr Akong Rinpoche, Sylvia Wetzell, Edith Irwin, Carol Sagar, Brion Sweeney, Trish Swift, Dorothy Gunne, Uli Kuestner, Uller Gscheidel 1998

The collaboration with mental health professionals to create a set of processes that would be suited to Western people began in the early 1980s. Initially, the main collaborators were Edie Irwin (who had trained in psychotherapy), Brion Sweeney (a psychiatrist and psychotherapist from Ireland), Carol Sagar (an art therapist from the UK), Dorothy Gunne (a banker turned psychologist, psychotherapist, and family therapist from Ireland), and Trish Swift (a social worker and psychotherapist from Zimbabwe). It was only due to the huge charisma of Rinpoche that any of them ever became involved. “The initial therapists brought their own education and experiences to the training, which blossomed into a multifaceted endeavour illustrating the lasting impact of Akong Rinpoche’s therapeutic and educational vision.” (Uli Kuestner)

Carol Sagar was the first person to work with TRT. She initially connected with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in Hampstead as early as 1968. She had painted with Trungpa Rinpoche at his behest during a low period in her life, but it was Akong Rinpoche who advised her to study art therapy. At that time there were many people at Samye Ling with serious physical problems who were receiving help from Rinpoche, including Carol herself, who had very bad asthma. Carol remarked that everything at Samye Ling needed fixing, but whatever money appeared he would spend on the shrine! One day Rinpoche presented her with a box of crayons, and she felt in no doubt that she had also received an instruction. Carol’s great ability was to see clearly into the relationship between art, meditation, and feeling, and to be able to convey this to others; many people were inspired by this, and

learned from her the significant part of TRT which uses art as its medium.

Edie had made the decision to set aside her intention to become a psychotherapist at the end of an apprenticeship-based psychotherapy training founded by the brilliant and controversial Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing. “Meeting His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa in the Dordogne in 1974 I was recommended to come to Samye Ling to pursue my ambition to become a thangka-painter, which I did. I was instructed by Akong Rinpoche within a year of arriving, however, that if I thought I could help many people through painting, I should paint, but if I really wanted to help people he would tell me what to do!”

Brion Sweeney came to be involved through more unusual circumstances: “I had decided that I needed to find a teacher to guide my spiritual path ... around 1979 and ... began to use dream analysis, as in Jungian psychotherapy, to find a teacher who could lead me to a deeper understanding of myself ... I had a dream of a seated figure with a bowl of healing substance, a six-limbed being in informal meditation posture and I approached this being for healing. He was very present and had two major qualities ... He had a great loving heart but with wisdom and intelligence combined ... About two weeks later I saw a small advertisement in a local newspaper in Dublin, and went to see Akong Rinpoche, who gave voice to almost everything that was in my mind and that I wished for in my life.”

Prior to going into long retreat Brion practised as a psychiatrist in Dublin in the National Health System and was clinical director

for Drug Addiction Services for Greater North Dublin. He became more heavily involved in Tara Rokpa several years after his first encounter with Akong Rinpoche.

In the meantime Rinpoche had already begun the process of coaching another member of this early group, Brion's wife Dorothy Gunne, whose recruitment to TRT began in 1981. This is her account of this abrupt change of direction in her life.

"I had an interview with Rinpoche and somewhere in the conversation Rinpoche said to me, 'I think it would be a good idea for you to go and really study psychology'. I thought,

'What is he talking about? I am a banker!' And I was more than slightly amazed. And the next thing I knew was that I had applied to Trinity College in Dublin and was accepted to go and study Psychology. I did a Masters in Psychotherapy and then a PhD. He kept saying to me 'you have to do it to the highest level. You have to do it to the best Western standards available'. Three years later Rinpoche met Brion, who was my husband at the time, and said he wanted us to go and work with him.

"Eddie came to Dublin around the time he was starting off the therapy. She began to do the exercises with us in Dublin, and I was very intrigued. It seemed to be very closely connected with the elements, it was certainly quite different from the training I had as a psychologist up to that date. And yet the sense of Akong Rinpoche was he seemed just like vast space every time I met him, and it seemed that there was so much space available that I could open up to something that was different.

“So around 1992 ... he called us together, Brion and myself, and Carol Sagar, and said that he wanted to start a training in psychotherapy to the best possible standards, incorporating what was important for people to understand and come to know from the Western point of view. But most importantly he wanted to bring in the aspects that he himself had found to be healing in his own life, the parts that had been taught to him by his own teacher ... So I'm not sure who should have been the teachers and who should have been the students, but that's the way he drew on our experience at that time. So Brion and I began to develop a training as we went along. Meanwhile Rinpoche had chosen a number of people who were going to be students for the first psychotherapy training. So we started that from 1993 to 1997 and we had a crop, as they call it, of graduates.

“We ended up with two Germans, Stephen Storm and Dr Uli Kuestner; Lorna Hensey, who was Irish; and Annie Dibble and Lorna Watson (both English). Edie came out of a four-year retreat towards the end of the training.”

The final member of this core early group was Trish Swift, who first visited Samye Ling in 1988. At that time, she was lecturing at the School of Social Work in Zimbabwe and had a small part-time psychotherapy practice. She met Edie just before the Samye Ling temple opening and learnt from Edie about Tara Rokpa Therapy. We arranged for her to visit Zimbabwe soon afterwards to introduce the process. In 1990 Trish spent a sabbatical at Samye Ling and was surprised one morning at breakfast when Denny Tomecko, who ran a Kagyu Buddhist Centre in Nairobi, informed her that Akong

Rinpoche had mentioned that she would introduce Tara Rokpa Therapy in Nairobi. Coincidentally, Trish's return air ticket was already booked via Nairobi!

Based on Laing's experiments with incorporating the view of Buddhist meditation into psychotherapy, Edie's approach tended towards the philosophical, while "the real practice was to not allow oneself to be overwhelmed by fear". The other early collaborators came in more from the point of view of mainstream psychotherapy and psychology, though their motivation was also compassion, and they already had some acquaintance with Dharma and meditation, having received teachings from great lamas.

So if TRT had been a river it would have been formed from several tributaries in addition to its main source. Added to Akong Rinpoche's profound expertise in healing on many levels, and the skill he had developed in helping the minds of Western students, were a broad skill-set and the wide-ranging knowledge base of his Western collaborators. One of Rinpoche's great skills was to be able to draw talented people to him, and to use their knowledge to develop the approach or move beyond its limitations. Certain parts of the mix such as the art therapy will be very familiar to Europeans, while the philosophical basis and some of the other methods are less so.

The Five Elements and Techniques

The majority of the techniques employed in Tara Rokpa Therapy are visualisation exercises, though some, such as massage or painting,

are more practical. Central to the vision is the ‘theory of five elements’ (earth, water, air, fire, and space), as found in Tibetan Medicine.

Vin Harris has written in this book of his experiences of working with Akong Rinpoche in the early days of building the Samye Ling temple. Once Rinpoche jokingly called the temple his “earth element exercise”! People would sometimes come to Samye Ling showing signs of being quite ‘spaced out’, perhaps in need of some kind of psychiatric treatment. Rinpoche would send them first to dig on the building site or in the garden for their earth element exercise.



Working in the river

One such person who arrived in dire need of help was Larry Harrison, who was one of many people Rinpoche helped to overcome a powerful addiction. Here is his account of the way Rinpoche turned his life around. “Rinpoche had great understanding of the addictions and enormous ability to help. Before I met him (in the early 1960s) I had a heavy heroin and cocaine habit when it was available on prescription. For five years I was using 300 mg of diacetyl-morphine hydrochloride (heroin) every day, before I

stopped and turned to the Dharma. First of all Rinpoche found me a job in a Langholm mill moving bales of cotton. After this he made me work hard as his cowman at Samye Ling for several years, and then he encouraged me to train as a social worker. Eventually, under Rinpoche's guidance I became a university lecturer in social work. I designed specialist training for social workers to help people with alcohol and drug problems, using evidence-based practices such as *Motivational Interviewing*, instead of theistic approaches like the *Twelve Steps*. Many of my students went on to be great therapists. Akong Rinpoche really was able to make the world a better place!" Larry himself went on to be an adviser to the World Health Organisation, giving seminars at WHO conferences. It had all started, however, with hard graft, the grounding in the earth element.

Others were sent to the river to work with the water element. One time he sent a distraught visitor down to the river to let all of her thoughts and feelings flow into the water. She had fled to Samye Ling, not really knowing anything much about it, because her GP had wanted to admit her to a mental hospital. After a few sessions sitting by the river, practising with faith the exercise Rinpoche had given her, she did not need any psychiatric treatment. Even though she had never met him before, she immediately trusted his powerful kindness. Who knows what her future might have held without this intervention.

Coming to understand all five of the elements through practice is very important to this method, but the space element has proven uniquely valuable in giving many people a chance to start afresh in

learning to be at ease with their own mind. Edie describes: “My shoulder went from normal to completely frozen when I was thirty-two. I decided to give it time but was actually unable to use my left arm for three months, until one sunny day Rinpoche gave me instructions to heal it. I was told to go up the hill, and lie down with a cushion to support the shoulder. Gradually I was to take the cushion away, whilst continuously breathing the pain of the process into space, without force, just breathing it out. After an hour of this it was done and was then fine for thirty years! This was the first time I saw the potential of working with the space element.”

Working with the space element is not a fanciful approach, it means to really engage with a condition. We have a very stubborn belief in the solidity of things, but we were shown that this is purely notional. Rinpoche showed us that the apparently physical nature of our bodies is actually space, and that it is possible to use this insight in a healing context, especially through his blessing. This was really an introduction to a truth about body and mind that we would have been incapable of finding on our own.

Another key component of TRT is calm-abiding meditation. Just as meditation lies at the heart of Buddhist practice, TRT is unimaginable without the self-understanding derived through introspection. Here in the West there seemed to be a very real danger that the purpose and benefits of meditation would be misunderstood: since we are so used to directing our focus towards the world outside, we fail to recognise that it is the mind itself that requires our attention. Meditation can easily just get filed in the wrong drawer, but Rinpoche felt that without it, the introspection

needed for inner transformation would not happen. What he clearly saw was the necessity of developing inner knowledge and self-acceptance, earned through bearing witness to our own mind and our own karma in all its complexity. The process would take time to be really effective. Unlike many modern psychotherapies, TRT is definitely not a once a week for half an hour kind of a process. Without the investment of this self-familiarisation, the very purpose, genuine meaningful inner change, was going to get lost.

In the summer camp in Schwangau, Germany in 1986 a participant inquired whether it was always the case that an instant reaction to provocation would be necessarily motivated by anger. If for example someone spat at you, and you were to react spontaneously, before the anger had a chance to arise, would that not have been a neutral act? Rinpoche's answer was both unexpected and direct: he told the questioner to meditate more. "You should not act before you are fully aware of what is going to happen." And he gave the example of waking up in the middle of the night with a full bladder ... "You have to think about where the toilet is, you'd better not just go straight ahead and relieve yourself!" Likewise we need to familiarise ourselves with our minds to overcome blind impulsiveness. It is this awareness that we can develop through meditation practice.

As we see, Rinpoche was not one to 'beat about the bush'! He once said that as far as he could see, his students in the West were just jumping up and down in the same place, that there was no progression on the path because things just were not going in deeply enough. Rinpoche felt that the way Dharma was being taught to

Westerners would always be like bush fires, that experience would repeatedly blaze and fall, because Dharma was presented too quickly. Since there was the intellectual capacity in the students there was potentially the misapprehension on the part of the teachers that people understood properly. The problem is that in reality people actually often fail to understand anything deeply because we have been taught to live on the surface, not from the centre, from the core of our being.

So the idea of Tara Rokpa Therapy was to create a kind of medley of methods that would lead to an inner change, a way of working in which applying oneself superficially would just feel dissatisfying. The solution to these issues outlined here would be to provide people with the means for deep understanding and acceptance of their individual inner environment. The exercises that would facilitate this process found their written expression in Akong Rinpoche's first book, *Taming The Tiger*³¹.

Clive Holmes worked on the Dharma teaching part of this book – the exercises. Rinpoche then gave them to Edie to work on from the therapy point of view. It is a very bold book because it gives profound practices to anybody and everybody, it is a do-it-yourself manual. He actually did not want it to be in a version which was particularly challenging, he wanted it to be as accessible as possible, with the concerns of therapists embedded in the way the exercises are communicated. *Taming the Tiger* may be the only text that Rinpoche ever went over completely with a fine tooth comb. Clive and Edie would go in time after time to read to him all the changes that they had made, and that he had suggested. It took two and a

half years to finish, because he really wanted it to be as close as possible to his sense of what would be most beneficial to people.

In practice it turned out that working through the exercises without group support or prior preparation was too much for many people. It became clear that a period of self-reflection was needed prior to the exercises, and “Back to Beginnings” was born. A further addition was the insertion right at the start of a new stage to develop familiarisation with relaxation techniques. This follows Edie’s book, *Healing Relaxation*³². So finally we arrived at the current form of Tara Rokpa Therapy, which is a seven-step process, each step requiring a year or longer to complete. The programme consists of the following components:

1. **Learning to Relax** is pre-therapy: an introduction to simple relaxation methods. The reasons why we need to develop calmer states of mind and body are presented. Self-massage and massage are taught. The unique components are visualisation exercises taught by Akong Rinpoche which relate to self-healing of body, speech and mind and the development of universal compassion. It is open to everybody and can be taught in many different contexts. So far it has been presented in hospitals, clinics, schools, businesses, prisons, refugee centres and as general courses within various countries.
2. **Back to Beginnings** is a process with a two to three year commitment for those who have done Learning to Relax and want to go deeper. It is undertaken with a self-organised group

and with the guidance of Tara Rokpa therapists. It incorporates visualisation and relaxation exercises, massage and art work. Back to Beginnings requires a deep and systematic review of one's life by remembering the past in a thorough and balanced way. The process uses writing and free drawing and painting to record memories which are investigated from the present back to early infancy, then forward again to the present, then back a third time to infancy. The goal is to develop compassion for self and others through understanding of our lives so far. At the end of the third review there is a short retreat which allows participants to explore the time from conception through birth. The retreat is a rite of passage in which one ceases to look to the past for answers and is symbolically born into the present moment, facing forward to the future as it unfolds moment by moment. There is also an extensive investigation into the five elements which make up the universe: earth, water, fire, air, and space. **Working with the Elements** brings understanding of our total environment and the need to take responsibility for the way we live within it. At the end of Back to Beginnings the **Inner Elements** are presented as a way of balancing and stabilising changes within the body and emotions and as a transition to Taming the Tiger. The five elements are visualised as three dimensional shapes made only of light in particular colours and in particular places in the body, to bring all the inner elements into harmony for health and a peaceful mind. Participants may decide to end here, otherwise the groups will carry on to later stages which are more and more clearly part of a spiritual path.

3. **Taming the Tiger** was Akong Rinpoche's first published book, the first half of which comprises the third stage of Tara Rokpa Therapy. This stage takes approximately six months, during which time participants learn to 'face the situation' and take more seriously their responsibilities in mundane and spiritual aspects of life. Traditional topics such as impermanence are presented and explored in relation to one's personal experience. There are many exercises which help to break down the sense of a solid ego and begin to work with a visualised 'Buddha within'. In the visualisations Akong Rinpoche always provided alternatives to the Buddha within, such as a sphere of golden light or another figure symbolising wisdom and compassion for the participant – such as Christ or Mohammed – for those who are not Buddhist. This stage also introduces simple sitting practice with guidance on posture and method.

4. **Six Lights** takes about one year to complete. It is a graduated series of practices based on a commentary by the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khachap Dorje, *A Continuous Rain to Benefit Beings*. This commentary gives instructions for the practice of the *Sadhana* of *Chenresig*. It features a thorough explanation of the use of the syllables of the mantra *Om mani padme hum* as the very essence of wisdom and compassion. In *The Six Lights*, first the colours of the mantra are used as antidotes to the six negative emotional states, next a combination of coloured light and the sound of each syllable. In the final stage, the full mantra is recited with a tune while *Om mani padme hung* is

visualised in a single colour with a deeper contemplation of each of the mind poisons, and their transformation through deep understanding. The latter is achieved through meditation using the corresponding colour and practice of the *Six Paramitas*. At this point the ‘therapy’ stage formally ends and Tara Rokpa is seen clearly as a path of personal and spiritual development.

5. In **The Six Realms**, which lasts about six months, participants are provided with descriptions of the Six Realms of Samsara according to traditional texts such as Patrul Rinpoche’s *Words of My Perfect Teacher* and Gampopa’s *Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom*. The negative mind states such as anger are contemplated in relation to the corresponding realm, in this case the hell realms. Contemplation of the lower realms is practised lying face down imagining the sufferings of beings in each particular realm, looking deeply into the corresponding negative emotion which is the main cause. The three higher realms are contemplated lying face up. In each case, after contemplating the depth of suffering in each realm, participants sit and chant the *mani* mantra while visualising the mantra in the corresponding colour. Here participants are learning to relate to vast fields of intense suffering and to practise not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of all others. Participants also develop a keen awareness of how the negative states of mind lead to suffering, for example how involvement with

anger leads to hellish states of mind. Art work and dramatic improvisation is also part of this phase of the work.

6. **Taming the Tiger Part 2** lasts for three to six months. It returns to Akong Rinpoche's text and completes the final chapters on meditation and compassion, working more directly with our tendency to project and with the need to own our projections. The later exercises focus on taking suffering from others – first friends, then family, enemies, and finally everyone. It ends with a practice for the development of universal compassion.

7. **The Compassion Stage** lasts for three years. It begins with the *Seven Points of Mind Training (lojong)*, which is approached gradually with a strong emphasis on the *Four Ordinary Foundations* as the basis of deeper understanding. Participants still meet in groups led by senior Tara Rokpa therapists, but their role is quite different: to introduce practices and encourage personal engagement with daily meditation and with the challenging premises of the lojong teachings, which are designed to develop the ability to exchange our wellbeing with that of others. While the emphasis is on practice, participants are encouraged to study various classic and modern commentaries on the bodhisattva path and to see how they can be applied to daily life. Akong Rinpoche would also encourage the practice of Chenresig. This stage also includes

further exploration of the Six Paramitas, combined with the third phase of the **Six Lights**.

Beyond the three compassion years, Akong Rinpoche would instruct each Tara Rokpa participant individually in various deep practices originating from his profound spiritual training and understanding. Those who practised according to his instructions had no doubts about his extraordinary insight into the depth and uniqueness of individual karma. Due to this insight he was able to guide each person according to individual need and ability.

Akong Rinpoche encouraged all those who continue to this stage to spend some of their time and resources actively engaged in charitable and humanitarian work. This could take the form of activities such as feeding the hungry in their own area, or travel to Tibet, Nepal or Africa to help in soup kitchens, or to teach or offer medical services. Others might work together fundraising for humanitarian projects in poorer countries. This work is intended not only to benefit the recipients of charity, but equally those who have the chance to offer it: as well as providing an opportunity to understand others, it also allows people to penetrate to the true motivation, defined as compassion which expects nothing in return.

In terms of the results Akong Rinpoche was looking for in those who adopted TRT as a path of self-transformation, he said:

“If you look back into yourself and analyse how much benefit the Tara Rokpa process has, it is very much revealed in the maturity of one’s understanding, how much flexibility you had before compared

with now, how much you can digest all the things you didn't like before and now are able to digest. You can sleep wherever you happen to be; you can eat whatever kind of food there is; there is not the constant choosing of I like this, I don't like that. When you are able to accept everything, then it means you're getting benefit. And it also means that you have developed loving kindness and compassion. You are not insisting on conditions. Instead you are able to accept the place where you happen to be, and the food that is provided; you are able to accept your accommodation; you are able to accept it if somebody is stealing your wealth. If you are not going to inherit your parents' wealth, you are able to accept that very happily. That is the maturity of being able to let things go; whatever people are doing to you there can be the practice of appreciation: you think 'thank you that this is happening to me, and I hope the others get the maximum benefit'. If someone has done a bad thing to you, it means not going back to say 'You had no right to do that!' Instead what you have to think is 'I have no right to do anything, and whatever they want to do it's okay.'"

(Oberlethe 1999)

Training New Therapists

The therapy approach, which had been active in Southern Africa from the start, quickly spread from Samye Ling throughout Europe, to Ireland, Belgium, Germany and elsewhere. It has also been

presented and practised in the USA, Canada, and Australia. “People working with it from all backgrounds and cultures found something of true value in it.” (Spirituality and Therapy 2001). As we have seen, Tara Rokpa Therapy was developed under Akong Rinpoche’s direction by a core group of five Western psychotherapists who had worked with him for a decade or more. In the early nineties, having completed the process themselves, Rinpoche stated that they were now all sufficiently trained to share the process with others.

A second group of therapists was trained from 1992. By 1997 there were so many people seeking to learn this method, it was decided that a formal Tara Rokpa Therapy training should be established, so that there might be more therapists able to lead others through the process, and so that the therapy would become more durable moving forward. Rinpoche determined that his therapy should be no less than a Western professional psychotherapy. It should not be seen as something esoteric or fringe, and also not a cheap or watered-down form of therapy. It should contain what is valuable and necessary from the Western therapeutic experience, and be recognised and respected in a professional context. Only this would ensure long-term survival and broad availability of the method for as many people as possible.

Thus there were two further trainings starting in 1998 and 2010 respectively. Having already engaged with a six-year process themselves, new would-be therapists become eligible for a further four years of training, which qualifies them to work as fully-fledged TRT psychotherapists. Akong Rinpoche instructed his assistants to design the treatment process so that it would meet all the ethical standards

of European psychotherapy – for example, in areas such as confidentiality. He also required that they impose the additional discipline of recognisably Buddhist ethics.

With ten Tara Rokpa therapists from the second intake graduated and practising actively, the next task was to acquire full recognition and accreditation for TRT. Up to that point the therapy had happened informally, even though thousands of people had now participated in Tara Rokpa groups and courses. In addition, more than a hundred professionals from over fifteen countries had received advice from Rinpoche, participated in various stages of the therapy process and found it beneficial for their practice with patients and clients. To practise on equal terms with other forms of therapy, however, it needed to be fully authenticated as a valid method of psychotherapy in the United Kingdom and Europe. This was achieved by unanimous vote within the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) in April 2000.

Tara Rokpa Therapy keeps the methods taught by Akong Rinpoche as its core, but it also draws on several Western psychotherapy traditions. TRT and Tara Rokpa Therapy Training seek to build a bridge between these Eastern and Western traditions. While a deep exploration of limitless compassion as the key agent of healing remains the basis throughout, the training's variety of philosophical and cultural roots makes it both rich and complex. At its root is a vision of the mind as limitless potential, and therapy as a way of life as opposed to a diagnosis-based repair system. A modern and consumer friendly appearance is not Tara Rokpa therapists' first

priority, whereas staying as faithful as possible to the depth and subtlety of Akong Rinpoche's vision is an important consideration.

Rinpoche taught the methods and exercises very carefully and precisely, and insisted they should be passed on without changes. He was wary of our Western enthusiasms and our unwitting syncretism, and he emphasised that his therapists should stick meticulously to the forms and intentions that he transmitted. Implicitly this means staying true to the inheritance and transmission coming through him, with its roots in Tibetan medicine, in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

Rinpoche would insistently make the point that what makes the therapy different from Buddhism as it is sometimes perceived, is that therapy is offered without preconditions, without demands for purity, without commitments towards a particular school and its hierarchies, and without having to accept a belief system. He wanted the therapy to be an approach to a spiritual opening which could be completely authentic in the sense of lived experience, but without having the typical forms one would usually find in an organised religion. Nor did he care whether people actually became Buddhist or not, but he wanted the spiritual potential of each person to come alive:

“My wish is not that all of you become Buddhist, and you don't need to worry about that. I don't wish to be the boss, so that everybody who is doing therapy has to follow my words one hundred percent. You don't have to worry. My wish is that you develop freedom yourself, and that you yourself become a trustworthy human being. And

above all that you have great compassion. I hate to see people grow up without becoming trustworthy people ... Humans should be trustworthy, honest, sincere, compassionate. And this is the only thing I am looking for from people who do the therapy.”

(Oberlethe 1999)

As a teacher and leader Rinpoche did not rely as much as one might expect on words, but he became an example of how to behave, and likewise encouraged others to teach by example. However, he had certain exceptional qualities which he also fostered in the therapists, and there were important specified principles and clear overarching guidelines.

The first of these might be described as the cultivation of an open mind. Dorothy Gunne is the head of training in TRT. “There were a number of principles that Rinpoche really encouraged us to understand in terms of working with people, and things he actually said himself. One was that every single human being that comes into the room, no matter who they are, it’s a new person, it’s a different person. So there is no formula for fixing them, you really have to open to meeting the person from your heart, with your discrimination, and meet them on the way.”

There was also total determination that people really would benefit and if need be he was tough and uncompromising to make this happen. Dorothy describes a student of the therapy: “Lorna Watson was one of the most inspiring people, because she was extremely ill during the whole process of the training, and yet Rinpoche brought her back again and again and encouraged her to

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study and learn, and be compassionate towards other people. Lorna died shortly after completing the training. I thought if Rinpoche is encouraging people who are actually dying to go out there and use whatever they have for helping other people, what a privilege, and that was very inspiring for me.”



Dorothy Gunne leading a therapist training session

Another demanding characteristic of Akong Rinpoche’s therapy is the sheer amount of work it entails. It requires endless hours of therapy, a huge number of workshops, large amounts of input. Akong Rinpoche pitched in undauntedly with this, just as he did on the Samye Ling building site. Since he had invented it, there was nobody else in the beginning, and so he adopted the task of presenting his method tirelessly. Adding to Akong Rinpoche’s personal input, since the 1980s the small group of Tara Rokpa therapists have held more than one thousand workshops worldwide with long-term groups,

adding up to over two hundred thousand individual therapy hours delivered by Tara Rokpa therapists on the ground. This is not counting the individual work participants do at home, and all the stand-alone events such as introductions, training, or summer camps.

One more quality of Rinpoche's was his wonderful sense of humour, sometimes revealing our own embarrassing errors, often combined with words of self-deprecation. Nevertheless, although the tone might often be light, the words were never without wisdom: depending on the mind of the individual, the things he pointed to for us to notice could lead to something profound. Here we find him putting the case for living joyfully:

“We live in constant fear, fear of not having enough to eat, fear of not having enough to wear, fear of losing our jobs, fear of our responsibility, and from childhood until we die we live full of fear. That is something which is unnecessary, it does not help us, does not benefit us or other people. So instead of developing constant fear, if you accept living day by day in joy, then tomorrow is taken care of by itself. So every day very much depends upon you being in the present. If you make that present very happy, then your life is happy.”

(Oberlethe 1999)

In the Tara Rokpa Therapy there are two main mantras, especially during the period just before and during the exploration of the birth experience, since this seems to induce an increase of excitement and anxiety. The first is “no big deal” and the second “no expectation”. And then, “don't take yourself too seriously”, always said by Rinpoche

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with a twinkle in his eye. These slogans all point to one meaning: there is nothing that cannot be accepted or welcomed onto the path. Nothing is that important. He often said that it is not necessary to change anything, but you simply need to be aware, and he also once said that we need not try so hard to avoid making mistakes, because seeing where we have gone wrong is the most effective way to learn in life. If you are trying to change things all the time, you will never see who you are. Do not try to improve yourself all the time, but in every moment accept who you are.



In Kagyu Samye Dzong London,
April 2013

Tara Rokpa therapists insist less on theoretical positions than many other methods in the field. They try to take a position of openness, of not knowing, that is able to accept and compassionately support others in all their complexity and ambiguity. It is a non-expert stance, though not lacking in knowledge, training or experience! On the contrary, Akong Rinpoche was insistent that his therapists be very well trained, and that his method actually worked in practice.

In the last training, the faculty made the conscious decision to accept only trainees who had long-term, extensive experience with their personal Tara Rokpa process and were intensely motivated to pass on the benefit they had received as Tara Rokpa therapists in the tradition of Akong Rinpoche.

This worked out well, and we have now an amazing team of very dedicated and humble new therapists, and great hopes that on this basis we can make Akong Rinpoche's therapy flourish into the future. Thus it can continue to be available not only as a therapy in the Western sense, for unwell people, but for everybody who desires further development as a human being.

Diffusion of TRT in Europe and Africa

Akong Rinpoche's students came from many countries, and so the therapy spread internationally relatively quickly. Starting at Samye Ling, it soon reached continental Europe, Africa and North America. Rinpoche encouraged a strong institutional base in Edinburgh, where the therapy and Tibetan Medicine aspects of Tara Rokpa put down firm roots under his direction. He was concerned that without this institutional presence there, for all the hard work, the fledgling TRT might easily get lost. So one answer was accreditation, while another part of the solution would be that TRT acquire a firm base in Scotland's capital, which he regarded as a future centre of healing in Europe. With the intention that Samye Ling in the Scottish borders remain his seat in Europe there was obviously an additional advantage of future proximity. Therefore two properties were acquired in the city.

While strong roots were desired in Edinburgh, in Germany and Zimbabwe, various circumstances have produced a different type of trajectory, and a more rapid growth, though with the same

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therapeutic methodology. What follows is a section describing the spread of TRT in Germany by Uli Kuestner, and then a section on the development of TRT in Zimbabwe, which derives mostly from Jayne Pilosof.



Leading a Tara Rokpa Therapy group with Uli Kuestner.

Germany

Tara Rokpa has flourished in Germany. In 2018 we started the twentieth Back to Beginnings group in Germany, and celebrated our twentieth international summer camp. More than in any other country, many hundreds of people in Germany have so far taken part in a long-term Tara Rokpa process of several years or more, in addition to numerous introductory events and Healing Relaxation courses.

When Akong Rinpoche presented Tara Rokpa therapy in Germany for the first time, he chose the largest available stage: the Third Kagyu Summer School in 1986, at Schwangau in a picturesque Alpine setting, organised by Chime and Tenga Rinpoches. At that time, there was an unusually large gathering of Kagyu teachers present: Tai Situ Rinpoche, Shamar Rinpoche, Tenga Rinpoche, Chime Rinpoche and others.

Presenting his newly-developed therapy in such a context was an audacious move. Many Tibetan teachers had, and still have, reservations about non-traditional or secular presentations of Buddhist methods. By being very public with his presentation, nobody would later be able to say that anything was done out of sight. Akong Rinpoche skilfully defused possible antagonism by emphasising Tara Rokpa as a therapy, a way of dealing with our emotions. At the same time he was slowly and thoroughly laying down layer after layer of a foundation for a mind training in the context of a Mahayana Buddhist understanding. In this way the Tara Rokpa process goes way beyond the original therapy remit.

At that historic presentation in Schwangau, Akong Rinpoche taught three sessions of two hours each to a large tent full of people. He wore ordinary clothes, sitting beside rather than on the throne. Rinpoche was very serious about the need to understand oneself, and also extremely funny. He made fun of self-important Dharma students, of the whole situation and of himself, shaking many preconceptions and opening people's minds to a more personal understanding of the nature of the task. It was very impressive, even life-altering for some who are still with Tara Rokpa today.

“This teaching totally blew my mind and I knew immediately, this is what I want to do, this combination of Buddhism and therapy”, said one participant.

In the following years, Akong Rinpoche presented his therapy in many places in Germany, from Benchen Ling in the Black Forest, to Munich, Frankfurt, Berlin and Hamburg. In those early talks, Akong Rinpoche explained therapy as something that accompanies and matures our whole life. First, one needs to know oneself, arriving at a very broad, balanced view. He urged us to start by examining every piece of our lives. In these talks, Akong Rinpoche likened Tara Rokpa to the “four thoughts”: a close personal look at suffering, causation, impermanence, and the preciousness of this life. By looking at our own lives and minds, we find Buddhist principles and teachings in our own lived experience.

Small practice groups started up here and there. After a presentation at the main German Kagyu seat, Kamalashila Institute, Uller Gscheidel and Clarissa Schwarz invited Akong Rinpoche to Berlin to start a large Tara Rokpa process group. At the initial meeting in Berlin in 1990, over fifty interested people met. Akong Rinpoche called Edie Irwin in Edinburgh on the spot and asked her to start teaching this group. Later Edie was joined by therapists Carol Sagar, Dorothy Gunne and Brion Sweeney.

In 1996 in Berlin, 180 people attended a weekend conference with Akong Rinpoche and his four senior therapists.

“What we try to achieve is limitless space, so that the mind becomes like space. All the things that are happening in the mind, such as

happiness, sadness, joy and sorrow are like different buildings in that space. It doesn't matter how many buildings there are, still there is space, and this space can never be filled. If we imagine that our mind is like space, we are able to digest all our problems without any difficulties. This is the conclusion of what we hope to achieve by understanding Tara Rokpa Therapy or training.“

This conference started another round of new groups, eventually from all over Germany.

The Summer Schools

Buddhist summer schools were of course not a new idea: they were held in Tibet, and were pioneered in Germany in 1984 by Chime Rinpoche and Tenga Rinpoche. But to apply this idea to therapy was highly unusual. Who would dream of putting therapy clients and their therapists together in a holiday camp? Akong Rinpoche did!

When Rinpoche suggested a Tara Rokpa summer camp to Uller Gscheidel and I in 1997, he emphasised there should be lots of free time and space for families. In all other details, he gave us plenty of freedom. So we tried to get the right balance of seriousness and playfulness, holidays and work, offering childcare, stimulating active participation. When we heard of Hof Oberlethe, a sprawling farm-style seminar house in Northern Germany, with meadows, ponds and horses, we felt we had found the right place.

In 1998 and 1999 we held the first two summer camps. Akong Rinpoche, true to his idea of a family gathering, brought along his brother Lama Yeshe Losal. Those first two camps were actually madness: it rained most of the time, and the place was too small to cope with the unexpected numbers of participants. We had set up large marquees on the lawn, and Akong Rinpoche went from tent to wet tent, checking on proceedings. At night there were numerous people huddling around the fireplace and campers trying to find dry sleeping spots wherever they could.

But something had started, the idea had taken hold, and so after a short breather we ran a camp each year from 2001, making 2018 our twentieth summer camp. Over the years, the atmosphere has mellowed and matured in a way that was hard to foresee. Hof Oberlethe has grown and offers much more accommodation. Even the weather has improved! Participation numbers have evened out at around 120 every year, so now there is a sense of relaxed spaciousness to the camps, both externally and internally.

2010 was the last summer camp that Akong Rinpoche attended, though of course we could not know this at the time. Looking back, it is hard not to understand his talks at that time as a legacy and a wake-up call. He sketched a broad vision of Tara Rokpa Therapy as a way of life, including both meditation and compassionate action. Going from tense self-concern to relaxation, and then from relaxation to activity.

“Now you are awake, and I want you to be active!”

His prediction was, “*once we have the therapists and human resources, Tara Rokpa will develop in many directions.*”

Zimbabwe

A fascinating chapter in the history of Tara Rokpa Therapy began in Africa in the late 1980s. Edie Irwin began the process of introducing these methods of TRT in South Africa in the summer of 1986. As one participant wrote, “She was an ideal and strong candidate for this formidable task in a difficult era of great civil unrest, violence and turmoil, as the Apartheid regime tumbled and buckled. Her student years in an era of anti-Vietnam war activism in America, then her subsequent training with Dr Laing, and later guidance and practice under Akong Rinpoche, prepared her perfectly for her role as teacher, firebrand and matriarch.” It began with a series of public lectures and workshops in the region of Cape Town. At that time the process began with *Taming the Tiger*; meetings were held regularly on Signal Hill, which overlooks Robben Island, the infamous prison in which Nelson Mandela was still incarcerated.

If there were doubts or questions these would be put by a member of the group, Sean McGovern (latterly Choden) by phone to Edie in Scotland, who would relay them to Akong Rinpoche, with the answers returning via the same process in reverse. Edie also returned periodically to re-inform and refine the fledgling process, and to introduce each new stage. Akong Rinpoche visited the group in person in January of 1990 to oversee the ‘birthing’ stage of the

process at Nieu-Bethesda. During this visit, one lunchtime, as one of the participants recalled, “the mood soon turned to an electric buzz as Rinpoche was informed at the head of the table that the ANC had been officially unbanned and that Nelson Mandela was to be released from prison. The news spread like wildfire. The rest of the group was kept very busy at this time doing practices taught by Rinpoche, using sacred Tibetan syllables as antidotes to negative states of emotion. The programme was completed about a year later with a detailed course on Atisha’s *Seven Points of Mind Training*, taught by Rob Nairn.

From small beginnings the biggest area of growth for TRT has turned out to be Zimbabwe, despite and also because of the immense difficulties of the Mugabe years. The first group of eight was formed following a talk by Edie in 1989. Tara Rokpa Therapy is specifically geared to include people of any religion or no religion, so the group did not only involve the Dharma community, although as in South Africa this was initially an all-white group. However, in contrast to South Africa in that era, where it is difficult to imagine the groups not being formed along racial lines, the inclusive approach in Zimbabwe has also led to the participation of the Shona people.

From the early days, Rinpoche specified that whatever Dharma or therapy was introduced was to be fully integrated with the traditional customs of the indigenous Africans. Rinpoche’s representatives in Africa, such as Rob Nairn, were instructed to make contact with the local holders of traditional wisdom, the spirit mediums, to integrate Rinpoche’s approach with theirs, and to try to support

the preservation of traditional culture. As a result of such efforts Rinpoche met the eminent national medium Sekuru Louis Chipfupi, and much common ground seems to have been found. Not only that, it seems that Akong Rinpoche was expected: his arrival was linked by Sekuru Chipfupi to a sixteenth century prophecy of a renowned Zulu medium. A strong relationship was formed with this principal elder, who welcomed the new working relationship, and had the kind of respect and trust towards Akong Rinpoche which has enabled their cooperation to bear significant fruit.

The first all-black group was led by Edie in 1990 in Chief Chipfupi's hometown of Chitungwiza, which was by then a suburb of Harare. She introduced relaxation techniques, with teaching and exercises related to the five elements, and afterwards spontaneous painting. Trish Swift describes the ensuing artwork: "The most incredible paintings came out. People then explained their paintings: there were prophetic aspects, psychological aspects and spiritual aspects, really amazing work."

In the capital itself there was a completely different diffusion of TRT into the black community, which happened very much in response to the dire need for help caused by mainly political upheavals. By 1996 ROKPA was helping in high-density areas of Harare with food distribution and other material assistance, as well as with other charitable activities such as care for the disabled. In 2005 Mugabe's policy "Operation Murambatsvina", literally "Remove the trash" was unleashed; ostensibly a crackdown upon illegal housing and commercial activities, it was a national slum clearance programme, referred to in Harare as "the tsunami", basically a way

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of punishing city-dwellers for having voted for the opposition. This devastating programme destroyed the livelihoods and homes of over a million people. It exacerbated the grievous issues caused by the forced eviction of whites from their farms, which had begun around the year 2000. The desperate problem of widespread hunger was compounded by an estimated forty percent of the country suffering from serious psychological stress. ROKPA responded to the exponential growth of people seeking help in the form of food to the tune of about three thousand recipients a month; then in 2006 with programmes such as “Talk Time” and “Positive Living”, mental issues also began to be addressed for some of those people, especially for those living with HIV/AIDS and mothers of disabled children.



Trish Swift, Edie Irwin with spirit medium Sekuru Augusta in Zimbabwe

That same year the coordinator and two staff members of what was now known as the Rokpa Support Network, attended the TRT summer camp at Tara Rokpa Centre at Groot Marico. They completed the Learning to Relax course and felt it would be bene-

ficial to those receiving assistance in Harare. Pippa Cope, a trained TRT helper, led the first such course with twenty-six disadvantaged black Zimbabweans, who had already been coming for material assistance. This group was introduced to Back to Beginnings by Trish Swift. In the same year two more similar Learning to Relax groups formed the second Back to Beginnings Group. As described by Jayne Pilosof, a senior Tara Rokpa Therapist, in her thesis on TRT in Zimbabwe, “Some of those who were HIV positive now had AIDS and were very ill or dying. The assistance Rokpa Support Network gave them (through food and medical aid) saved their lives ... They saw TRT as a continuation of their healing process.”³³

On the material level things got even worse in 2008, when an increasingly embittered administration tightened up and then stopped food distribution by NGOs. Despite this, members of the three TRT groups kept coming to Rokpa Support Network. Some of the participants from the first therapy group were interviewed in 2012 to discover why they had continued to attend the therapy sessions, even though they were no longer receiving food. One participant said that she came because of what she was gaining from the therapy: “Food you eat today, tomorrow you are hungry, but knowledge is power.”

Naturally there were difficulties associated with bringing these methods to an entirely different culture, one in which even the idea of psychotherapy was absent. The most obvious hurdle was the inability of the whites and blacks to speak each other's languages, which has been partially resolved by the training of two TRT helpers, Winnie Matapure and Charity Masube, who could then translate

between English and Shona. These two helpers are now also able to lead Learning to Relax modules, and they continue to work with the groups around Harare.

In addition to language issues there are also cultural issues and misunderstandings. Rinpoche originally advised that massage be omitted from the relaxation exercises for Shona participants, since there is no history of its practice in Shona culture, particularly between men and women. He also felt there might be less need for it as there is already more physical touch between people than in Europe. Eventually Pippa Cope managed to gradually and sensitively introduce the practice, and it turned out to be much appreciated, to the extent that members brought the practice of massage into their homes and communities. Participants suffering from AIDS in particular valued the massage since family members often feared their touch on account of being ignorant as to the transmission of HIV. Similarly TRT therapists and helpers have had to learn to explain exercises to new participants in terms that do not trigger participants' fear of falling under the sway of witchcraft.

Even though the pioneers of TRT in Africa have faced challenges such as these, the belief in the process, the skill of the therapists and the obvious need for help, have meant that difficulties have been overcome. In some ways the Shona people have also proved more culturally receptive to the TRT approach than Europeans, with our inbuilt modern tendency to scepticism. Akong Rinpoche said,

“Conscious ‘therapy’ is necessary when we have lost our basic naturalness and forgotten our instinctive humanity. Through too much

study and education we may lose touch with our lives, our friends and our bodies.”

This seems to be less of an issue for the Shona people. “Through my work with the groups,” Jayne Pilossof writes, “I’ve seen that these participants in the TRT groups still seem to have this connection with their basic naturalness and because of that they have complete faith that there are things that heal as well as or maybe even better than pills. This openness gives them complete trust in the exercises in the TRT. They totally accept that a blue light could heal their fear.”

As mentioned previously, Akong Rinpoche directed those involved in the programmes to ensure that TRT would complement traditional culture. When he first met mothers of disabled children in a high-density suburb of Harare called Epworth in 1996, he asked why they were all eating with knives and forks rather than following the traditional Shona practice of eating with one’s hands. He also asked why they were all using Western instead of Shona names, and encouraged them not to lose their culture. One of Chief Chikukwa’s sons seems to share this view, having this to say about psychotherapy, “I think it suits the present day society, but somehow we don’t have to sort of lose touch or lose connection with the traditional way or methods of resolving issues, because at times they really cut straight to the core of the problem.”

The questionnaires that Jayne presented to this group in 2012 revealed that every single member would recommend the TRT process to others. They indicated “... a fundamental improvement

in the mental health of the participants.” The following examples are the testimonies of several participants in the groups. One woman started coming to Rokpa in 2005 and in 2006 she started the TRT process. She had terrible pain in her lower abdomen, and every time she took a step her left side was in agony. Two years earlier she had been told she needed a hysterectomy, but she did not have the money for the operation so she just had to live with the pain. She found that doing the visualisations in the TRT helped with this pain, and very slowly it started to get better. She now has no pain. Another participant, with an adult child suffering from cerebral palsy, said, “I used to go to Harare Hospital, but there were no exercises like what we did here, but through coming here I learnt a lot. You know what, at the hospital they just teach how and why cerebral palsy is caused ... but they don’t take away your pain which is deep, deep, down in your heart.”

During Akong Rinpoche’s last visit to Zimbabwe in 2010 he asked people how they were getting on. Trish Swift remembers, “the examples ranged from a fellow chasing away some Tsotsis who came to steal from his shack after taking courage with the blue light, to disabled children benefitting from massage, to another man stopping beating his wife, to a woman who was healed from what she thought was cancer through the white light. Rinpoche was very pleased!”

Jayne Pilosof expressed her experience of the process of introducing TRT to black Zimbabweans in this way: “It has been one of learning, making mistakes and readjusting together, with lots of singing and dancing!”

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The latest Tara Rokpa Zimbabwe trainees. Translators Winnie Matapure is 3rd from left, Charity Masube far right

TRT has been expanding rapidly in Zimbabwe in recent years, so much so that Trish Swift is confident that someday soon they will even have overtaken Germany as the number one Tara Rokpa country, though she also points out that the development would have been impossible without the financial support of Tara Rokpa groups there. Every year at summer camp in Germany fundraising events have helped to provide resources for participant bus fares, training weekends, and the expenses of helpers and therapists. Without this support TRT in Zimbabwe could not have survived or evolved as it has. Another factor was Jayne Pilosof's completion of the Tara Rokpa Training in 2014 meaning that there were now two trained therapists in Zimbabwe, so the work with the groups has been able to grow quite rapidly.

The team decided to see how decentralising into local neighbourhoods would work, and in October 2014 the first group, with thirty participants, was started in Chitungwisa, a high-density area south of Harare. TRT proved to be of great benefit to the participants,

word spread, and in December 2018 the fifth group was set up in Chitungwisa. There are also plans to begin a group in Epworth, another high-density suburb south of Harare.

In 2015 Jayne was invited to Chikukwa, a rural village in the South East of Zimbabwe to see if the TRT would help a chosen group of women cope with trauma. The women requested a group with no men, and currently there are two groups of women meeting in Chikukwa. “TRT really resonates with the local people there, and a request from the husbands of the women followed that we start a men’s group too.”

Altogether there are now over 220 people involved in the TRT process at stages between ‘Healthy Living’ and ‘Six Realms’ in the groups in and around Harare, as well as eighteen more in Chikukwa. With demand for the therapy continuing to grow there are plans to start a Helpers Training in early 2019 to train additional Shona group participants. This will be made up of English speakers who have completed Back to Beginnings and Taming the Tiger, so that they become able to facilitate Learning to Relax workshops, and can translate for visiting therapists. Meanwhile there is now also supplementary funding from ROKPA INTERNATIONAL to have an audio version of the relaxation exercises in Shona, as well as to have Taming the Tiger and other written materials translated.

Due to the rapid growth in Zimbabwe, this section on Africa has concentrated mostly on the diffusion of the therapy there. One other extremely significant development was the founding of the Tara Rokpa Centre in Groot Marico near Johannesburg, which has become the headquarters of Tara Rokpa Therapy in Southern Africa.

This unique and inspiring development is covered in the chapter on centres in Africa.

Conclusion

Tara Rokpa Therapy developed out of Akong Rinpoche's wish to help people he encountered in different parts of the world, and its existence was something he presumably would never have imagined prior to his departure from his homeland. From small beginnings the approach has spread across cultures, races, and a variety of countries in more than one continent, illustrating the truth of Trish Swift's comment that it is applicable to people of all cultures.

These days there are many choices for people, and in our quick-fix modern world the long, deep, multi-faceted Tara Rokpa process is not an obvious choice. Of course the problem with quick-fixes is that they generally quickly come undone again. Akong Rinpoche had much bolder goals. At times he expressed his aims for those participating in the therapy in terms of the most basic of gains, and sometimes in terms of the highest of aspirations. At the very first summer camp 1998, Rinpoche stated:

"I like to see people just become normal, and be full of mistakes. What I like is that humans are good humans, and that is the only goal I want to achieve through the Tara Rokpa therapy process. If you perform miracles, and fly in the sky, I feel that I have been a

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failure with my Tara Rokpa therapy. If I see that you work as humans, act as humans, full of sickness, full of suffering, but you are able to deal with all those, then I would say the Tara Rokpa therapy has had some benefit.”

In the summer camp of 2005, Akong Rinpoche revealed the therapy’s true goal:

“When you finish therapy, when you see the house, everything around you, as like a palace, a mandala; when you see everybody as like Buddha, all beings – no good, no bad, all like Buddha; when you hear all the sounds like mantra; when your thoughts become like the thoughts of the compassionate Chenresig – when you reach that stage, then you don’t need any therapy. That is the end of therapy.”



Dancing at Samye Dzong Harare

CHAPTER 5

Buddhist Charity



ROKPA of Dr Akong Rinpoche

by Lea Wyler, President and Co-founder of ROKPA

I write this for you, the Third Akong Tulku Rinpoche – to remind you of how it was.

To finally express the full power of my dedication, devotion and love for you. And my admiration for who you were/are in this confused and confusing world – so often in turmoil and so often terrifying!

When everything shakes and the earthquake of our ignorance is upon us – you are the rock on whom we can place our hopes, on which we can build the foundation of a more bearable present and a more joyful future.

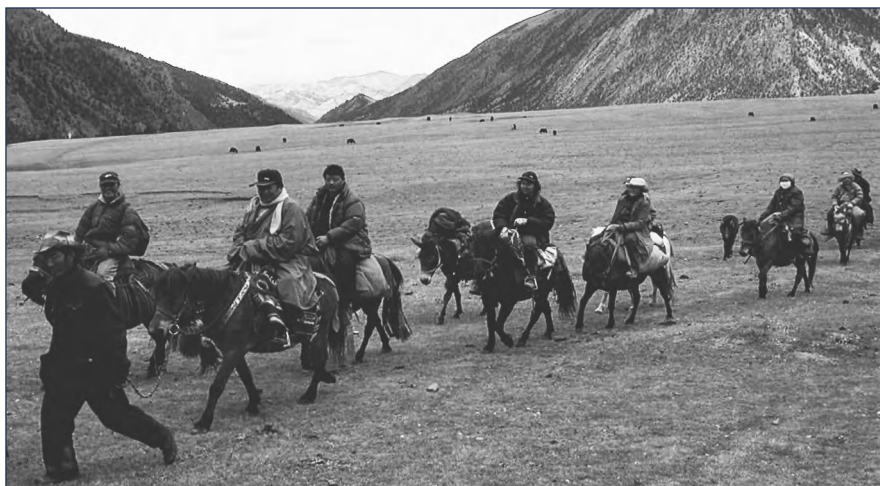
Welcome back to this world, Rinpoche. Our hope is with you.

Spontaneous Faith and Devotion Arise

I remember well my first trip on horseback in Tibet with Rinpoche. Unaccustomed as I was to horse riding, I felt frail and really quite

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scared, wondering whether I would survive the experience! Would I be able to keep up with the others? Would I embarrass myself and Rinpoche by breaking down in tears, unwilling and unable to go on, as I had done many times as a child on family treks into the Swiss mountains? But, once away from the road and sitting on my horse, a fierce confidence arose in me; here, I was home at last!



The only plausible form of transport in remote areas

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

My fear totally disappeared as I rode behind Rinpoche up steep mountains and down long valleys, crossing the bends in the river a total of thirty-seven times. (I kept count!) Sometimes the river was so high that I had to raise my legs up and could feel my back getting splashed with the icy water. I would retrieve my camera from the saddlebag, holding it high above my head to protect it from the water. The harshness of nature around me, the cold wind, the strong sun all melded together in that intense experience of

NOW. No thought of the past or the future, no regret, just the light, the horse and when I raised my eyes, Rinpoche's steady, broad back. Mountains everywhere, high beyond high, the smell of healing herbs, the sun, the clouds, and the sense of being at one with it all. No regrets!

This special experience of travelling with Rinpoche in Tibet was sadly far from the norm! Often we travelled for many hours in uncomfortable vehicles only to end up in a dingy guest house where the beds had thin, hard and mostly very dirty mattresses with no bedding. Sometimes there was a much-used blanket folded on top of the bed, which had clearly never seen soap and water. These trips were extremely taxing and would have been pure, undiluted hell, had they not been led by Akong Rinpoche, whose exemplary acceptance and deep commitment to help those in need – whatever the cost financially or to one's personal discomfort – was so unspeakably inspiring that one just swallowed, hoped for a hot shower sometime in the future, maybe in a month or two, and carried on.

On one journey to Nangchen, we travelled endlessly on bumpy and dangerous roads, finally sliding deep into the mud. Our car got stuck in the slippery earth and water and could only be freed by digging, pushing and pulling and then by towing it out with another jeep. Another time we slid on a thick blanket of black ice, with the result that the car spun several times, before finally coming to a stop pointing in the wrong direction. We drove over dangerous hanging bridges and rivers with the water sometimes reaching up to the window; once we had to get out of the car and walk uphill for a while, as the stones jutting out from the path were danger-

ously sharp, leaving us with no option but to lighten the load weighing down our car.

These trips were exhausting, especially for someone like me, who was not at all fit, but had to keep up with the pace of the sturdy young Tibetan men. Often my whole body ached and I could not catch my breath for long periods. Then there were those unspeakable toilets, holes in the ground with smells I do not care to describe; feet, legs, joints, aching, the feel of the night damp marauding through my veins. Oh for a hot shower and a fairy who would wash my mud-caked clothes! Travelling all the time, we were never in a place long enough for clothes to dry. The cold hard beds, the icy water, the wind, and most of all the lack of oxygen – so hard to breathe, so hard to move; even going up two steps I would be out of breath and my chest would hurt so much it felt as though it would explode.

Many times I felt I simply could not go on. But in those moments, I would look at Rinpoche who faced all hardships with immense courage, calm and total acceptance, no matter what was going on. Once our car was stuck so deep in a large pool of water and mud that it had tilted heavily to one side, making Rinpoche slide sideways towards the stuck door. He had to be pulled up towards the part of the car which was pointing high up in the air, and half lifted out; he just smiled, walked towards a relatively dry patch on the grassland and sat down on the naked ground, inviting us all for a picnic until the car could be pulled out of the little lake. Incidentally, after our ropes snapped, this was eventually achieved with a bunch of intertwined *katas* (ceremonial offering scarves)!

Akong Rinpoche always gave us all the feeling that as long as he was there, nothing bad would or could happen to us – that we were safe, even when falling, sliding, slithering, and half-drowning. There was always a sense of solidity, acceptance and safety about him and – yes – blessing. It enveloped all of us – humans, animals, and nature.

Of course I had no idea about any of the stress, hardships and pure joy that lay ahead when I first urged Akong Rinpoche to help me set up a charity.

Meeting Akong Rinpoche for the First Time

I first met Rinpoche in Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Eskdalemuir in Scotland in 1972. It was the sixth of November. I entered a long dark room, at the end of which sat an Eastern-looking person wrapped in a big cape. Because of the window behind his head, I was unable to see his face very clearly at first. Walking from the door to the chair to which he beckoned me seemed to take a long time, though in hindsight, it could not have been more than four or five steps. I sat down next to him on the chair, unaware that I should sit on the floor. It was only much later I learned that as a sign of respect one should sit lower than a lama who is teaching you. I looked into his face and something very deep and primordial happened that was unrecognisable to me at the time but which I now understand. I instinctively understood that he had the answer to all my questions, and something in me totally opened to him.

What can I say? I knew! When I first saw him I felt that this was the most beautiful face I had ever seen and was ever likely to see. His beauty ... at that time I did not know what it was but now I think I do; it was compassion beyond compassion, it was unconditional love and care. I did not know all these words. But I knew it hit me in my stomach. I could not explain then, but somehow I knew that he was the one: my teacher, my guru, my Refuge, my everything – and I felt it in the first moment. I think what I felt then was that this was someone I could trust implicitly, more than anyone else in the world.

The first ever teaching I received from Akong Rinpoche in this life (I had asked something ‘deep’ about the nature of suffering) were the words, “Don’t take it too seriously,” words he repeated to me as well as to others many times.

Later I heard that Akong Rinpoche was planning a pilgrimage to India and I decided that I would try to go with him, wherever he was going. It was on that trip that the seed for ROKPA was planted for me.

Pilgrimage

Actually, I had no particular desire to go to India; I just wanted to go with Rinpoche! I always say if he had gone to Leeds or to Timbuktu or anywhere else I would have tried to join him. I was not especially interested in India. It was the place the Beatles had

‘discovered’ and popularised. After their trip, lots of people under the age of twenty-five went to India and, since it is absolutely typical of my character that if everyone goes right I have to go left, India’s charms held no grip on my imagination then.

However, there was another, extremely compelling personal reason for me to join this pilgrimage. Not long before, my mother had died a terribly painful, horrible death. I had cared for her day and night for a year and a half but could do nothing to save her, or to ease her suffering. Shortly after her death, I really had lost the wish to live. But something in me reminded me of a promise I had made to myself, to go and see the Eastern man before doing anything drastic, should something in my life go really wrong. So, deeply traumatised, I wanted to be near Rinpoche. I felt I was going crazy with pain; I needed to be near him to keep my sanity.

So I went to see Akong Rinpoche in France, where he was preparing the second European visit of HH the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa. Being desperate and in grief I had no idea how to find the wish to go on, but Rinpoche knew. I was allowed to see him daily, despite the huge busyness that surrounds the visit of such a high being as His Holiness. Rinpoche did his own brand of therapy with me that later came to be known as Tara Rokpa Therapy. He took me through the deepest pain and led me out the other side of the tunnel. I remember feeling the slight cracks on my face that had been set in sadness for so long, when I smiled for the first time in two years, after a talk with him. Life was unfolding again.

The pilgrimage took place in 1979/80 with Akong Rinpoche, his wife and children, Sherab Palden Beru (the famous *Karma Gadri*

thangka painter) and about twenty others. The condition for joining the pilgrimage was that we had to work out our cost for the whole trip (flight, accommodation, presents and so on) and then double that amount for offerings to monasteries and poor people.

In the company of Akong Rinpoche we did *kora* (to circumambulate a holy place while saying mantras) and stopped to pray everywhere. Then, one day in Bodhgaya, three things happened that changed me forever and set me on the path to creating ROKPA with Rinpoche.

I was watching the beggars lining up along the main road. So many girls were only twelve to thirteen years old, holding their babies, keeping their tiny hands outstretched. They crouched on the pavements, fell asleep on the same pavements, rolled over and woke up there again the next morning, day after day. On this day, I could take it no longer, so I went to buy bread, which came cut into thin slices. I bought many packs, carefully bringing them to that street in my wide Tibetan *chuba* skirt. The result was complete chaos: the beggars rushed at me, clawed at me, nearly killed me. They were so very hungry. One agile little girl managed to duck in between everybody and grab two pieces of bread. An old woman approached and beat this little thing over the head with a stick. The dazed child dropped the pieces of bread and a dog sneaked away with them. By this time, everyone was fighting and all the bread had disintegrated on the ground. My first insight was that clearly, this was not the right way. Instead of helping I had caused anger and upheaval. I walked away with a troubled mind.

Here I should add, that at this time of my life, I was an actress, always on a diet. The only hunger I knew was not the kind that hurts. The backdrop for my hunger was a fridge full of delicious food that I was not supposed to eat. I had never in my life seen what real hunger looked or felt like. This experience was a wake-up call.

My next stop was the lunch tent. Usually, I took care to avoid the legless beggar always at the same entrance, a leper with no nose, his fingers stumps with open purulent wounds, always clinking his metal bowl with a coin stuck between two stumps, crying “*Baksheesh!*” As a result of the sound I had previously always been able to avoid him. This day he was not clinking and I was so preoccupied by my bungling, that I forgot to avoid him.

So preoccupied was I that before I knew what was happening, I stumbled upon this leper. Having no legs he was quite small. He only reached up to just over my knees. He touched my hand to attract my attention. In shock and disgust, I screamed and recoiled from this oozing stump. Instantly I realised that while I was in a healthy body this poor man had to wake up every day, perhaps having had wondrous dreams of health, in his leprous body, with everyone turning from him in horror.

My second insight that day was that here I was trying to help people yet I could not bear to be touched by this suffering man for one second! I was completely disgusted with myself and felt intensely ashamed! Tears spurted out of my eyes in the most unusual way and as the leper saw my tears, he cracked up laughing. For a moment we looked at each other. Who was the needy one now? In that

moment I took a vow that I would never again look away. I would always look suffering in the eye and never avert my eyes and thus cause yet more suffering.

So on this one day, I had messed up twice. To regain some self-respect, I changed money for a lot of coins so that I could throw a few coins (thus being quick and efficient) to each and every beggar. I went efficiently down the road tossing a coin to each person begging in that street. I came to a young boy whose blind eyes were rolling in their sockets; I threw the coin to him and his hands went out searching for it, but the old woman next to him had already grabbed the coin with a chuckle – now she had two, while his blind hands continued searching ... The whole line of beggars laughed at his useless endeavour. I thought of my blind grandmother who used to identify me by feeling all over my face. I remembered the Bible: “Do not put a stumbling block before a blind person.” Again I felt this searing shame for myself and for all Westerners in this consumerist world in which we have no idea what we are doing.

These three experiences changed my life. I vowed to redeem everything I had done to make people suffer, to turn my life around right there, right then!

The following morning we met as usual under the Bodhi Tree with Akong Rinpoche to say prayers. Although I had not told him about the experiences of the previous day, that morning Rinpoche said these simple words to no one in particular:

“Some people just throw money to beggars but do not realise that each of these poor people could be the Buddha himself in the form of a

beggar. Rather, you should make offerings with respect and kindness, bowing down to them so you can look into their eyes and offer whatever you have to offer with both hands and with a warm heart.”

And on these words of wisdom were laid the cornerstone for my commitment and the founding of ROKPA: *helping where help is needed.*

As I was to discover, much of what Rinpoche said was a teaching to those who were open to hearing it; even his silences could be teachings.

Following all the drama with the beggars in Bodhgaya the wish to help others grew in me. I must add that mine, at least in the beginning, was not a Mother Teresa-like altruistic aspiration but a self-serving wish of a kind. I saw those who were suffering so deeply with leprosy, blindness, many sorts of disabilities, depression, hunger and with babies they could not feed. And here I was, despairing about my mother's death, and the trauma I had experienced, and deeply entrenched in my own suffering. Slowly, I understood that I had to put my own suffering to one side and bear witness to the communal suffering of thousands there in Bodhgaya, where it was so much in evidence, as it is in so many other parts of India and indeed the world over. Such suffering! By simple comparison, mine had to be lighter than theirs! Just as I was unable to bear my own suffering, I was equally unable to bear theirs. So my only option was to help them, because that would also help me. I am the first to say this was and still is a selfish motivation, but later Rinpoche said to me,

“The best way to help yourself is to lose yourself in the help for others. We are not helpless when we help others.”

Now, having worked for ROKPA all these years, over forty at the time of writing, I fully understand the truth of this.

After all these experiences in Bodhgaya, Akong Rinpoche and our group went to Rumtek, His Holiness Karmapa’s monastery in Sikkim. The wish to help others continued to grow in me without my being clear about exactly what I wanted to do; it was just that I knew I needed to help. I needed to do something to truly improve somebody else’s life (at least one person’s) – understanding instinctively that all our lives are interlinked, interdependent and that by serving another, I would myself be helped in some mysterious way. I knew deep down in my guts that if I was to survive and stay sane, I had to ‘do something’ but not knowing what that ‘something’ was, you could say I felt helpless to help!

Many years later, I found out that while we were in Rumtek, HH Karmapa said to Akong Rinpoche, “You should help Lea create a charity. You should help Lea in her work.” When I first heard this, I was sure they must have got it wrong, but then I heard Rinpoche himself say it on a tape in an interview and when I checked with him, he said it was true. Karmapa knew ROKPA was going to happen long before I did!

Akong Rinpoche later recalled how ROKPA started, with these words:

“At the time we went on pilgrimage to India, His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa asked us, Lea and myself, to start a charity in order to help with the education of exiled Tibetan children and with older people’s healthcare. Many people had tuberculosis problems and needed money in order to buy medicine, so that also happened more or less at the same time. So that is how ROKPA started its projects.”

Back from the pilgrimage I tried to raise funds for this new charity but I was not very successful. Not many people believed me about wanting to help others. Some of those I approached for donations thought that maybe I even wanted the money for myself!

Eventually I asked Rinpoche to help me. I begged him, “Will you please work with me, would you help me, will you be part of this?” It took a year or more of pleading before he agreed. One day at Samye Ling I asked him yet again and Rinpoche, looking up from his prayers, simply said, “Okay,” meaning, “I will help you”, and that was it! Perhaps he waited that long to see whether I was serious about my commitment to the work.

This one word changed everything: prior to that I had become an actress who was not really an actress any more! Although I was still making a living through acting, my heart was no longer in it. I was asking people, accosting them actually, with requests for money for this or that, for this child or that monk, with people generally feeling I was very unpleasant and not wanting to be anywhere near me! I lost nearly all my friends. But that all changed when Akong Rinpoche stood up in the dining room at Samye Ling one day and

said, “This is what we are doing,” not this is what she is doing. The moment it was *we* instead of *she*, the whole thing turned around. Rinpoche was telling people, “If you only help yourself, you only help one person. If you also help another person, you have already helped two.” These one-sentence teachings really started to move people.

ROKPA Seeded in Rinpoche’s Heart

However, Rinpoche had a deeper reason for agreeing to implement the Karmapa’s suggestion to begin a charity project, and this arose from his own horrific experiences while escaping from Tibet, when he was just nineteen years of age. Here is Rinpoche’s account of this in his own words, since this is when the seeds for ROKPA were sown in his heart:

“Over 120,000 Tibetans left from 1959 onwards – it took several years – but most of them left at that time. In my party we were about three hundred people and we went on horseback for four months. Then there was no way to go with the horses so we walked for six months. And during those six months we were only able to move during the night-time and had to rest in the day-time, to try to escape from the Chinese military.

“It took six months but the food which we carried was only enough for one month; since our group was quite big – three hundred people

and we had many young children, the food was not enough. So you try to save your food to make it last longer. So we started eating very little food. In the end you can't go to the villages because you don't know whether they are Chinese army or Tibetan as you go further across, mountain to mountain. You can't make a fire or cook anything. So we had quite a hard time at the end. We had to try to eat leather bags, leather shoes; anything which exists in leather form we tried to eat in order to survive because there was nothing else to eat. There were no vegetables growing because you are crossing the mountain and can only eat snow.

“So we went on so many months and many of our group were dead due to hardship and then, with whatever food was left, they tried to save a few of us: and then that also ran out and many of our group died or were captured by the Chinese. At the end none of us had had food for three days, just a drop of water. We ate a piece of leather about four inches long for about two or three weeks in order to survive, and at the end the leather ran out, so there was nothing else to eat.

“So, waiting for death, there were thirteen of us sleeping in a cave. And who would die today? Who would die tomorrow? So then you can't walk anymore because everything is going round and round, the whole sky and ground is going round and looks upside down. You can't walk anymore so the only thing is you lie down and wait for who will die first.

“So at that time I myself kind of made my decision: ‘If I am not dead today or tomorrow and, somehow, if it means we are to survive then I will not sit on a throne to teach Buddhism (which I’m not very good at anyway) and so I will do charity work’. My conclusion is that humans only need something to eat and something to wear. If you have that then you don’t need anything else; all the other things are part of the causes of suffering and do not particularly give you any happiness; for each wealth, we say that if you have a horse then you have suffering the size of a horse and if you have a goat then suffering the size of a goat. So each one brings its own suffering, not any particular happiness. If there is some form of happiness that also ends up as suffering. So then I made up my mind that if I am not dead then I will give food for everybody and educate all the poor and give clothing for all others; and that was my promise.”

ROKPA is Born at Last

Finally in 1980, we (Dr. Akong Tulku Rinpoche, my father – Dr Veit Wyler, who was an eminent Swiss lawyer, and I) founded ROKPA, Tibetan for ‘help’ or ‘friend’, as an international charity; and together we drafted the ROKPA constitution in his lawyer’s office in Zurich. Rinpoche and my father would come to form a close connection, even a friendship.

My father was absolutely instrumental in not only establishing ROKPA but in its continued success. He helped me with money,

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legal advice, and contracts; he taught me how to get on with people and later taught me how to deal with staff (in all areas I am still learning!) He helped me every step of the way. He bought me my first computer and for many years he employed me, so that I had an income and could carry on with my charity work. Indeed, he continued to pay me long after he had replaced me with someone who could actually handle the professional work he needed to have done much better than me!



With Lea and Dr Veit Wyler

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

Rinpoche was the inspiration, the guidance and the wisdom, but the base was my parents and how they brought me up. My mother, Katja Wyler-Salten (daughter of the famous author of *Bambi*) had passed away three years before – in 1977, but she was and still is one of my major inspirations.

I began raising money for those people in need whom I had met on the pilgrimage and was a somewhat aggressive fundraiser. I would just talk people half to death until they agreed to support a child, just to get rid of me. Or if that did not work I would say things like, “Would you invite me for lunch? You’ve met me now, would you invite me for lunch?”

And they would reply, “Yes, why not?”

Then I would ask, “How much do you think that lunch would cost?”

They would reply, “I don’t know,” and I would suggest,

“For the two of us, a nice lunch, you seem like a generous person ... maybe 50 Swiss francs? Instead, why don’t I just make a sandwich each to eat and you give me the 50 francs, so I can pay for a month’s schooling and food for a child?”

That’s how it all started. People started to give – some willingly, some a little bit less so, but somehow it came together. I asked everybody. This question obsessed me: how to collect enough money to pay for the kids I had taken in already and for those sure to join my growing family on my return to Nepal. All my other interests paled in comparison to this one-pointed deep intent to fulfil a commitment that I had made unconsciously but which filled my being to the hilt. I asked bank managers to reduce or cancel fees and when they did not or could not, I pestered them for so long that they donated some money from a charity fund or gave me an old printer they had stored in a back office. I went to parties and accosted strangers, involving them in discussions that invariably led to ROKPA and possible donations – until I was no longer even

invited. I asked people to my home, offered them crooked little sandwiches and amateurish cakes and showed them photos or little clips of street kids and asked them for help until they did not want to come to see me anymore.

Our work began with individual sponsorships. I prepared photographs, stories and reports for the sponsors of the recipients we had chosen in India and Nepal, learning everything by doing. Then in 1983, Rinpoche was finally allowed to return to Tibet for the first time since his escape in 1959. He identified those most in need of help and brought back information as well as photographs about them, which I used as I began the search for sponsors for each individual. When some money arrived, I brought it to Rinpoche who personally handed it over to the beneficiaries. They were then able to go to school, buy medicines, clothes and food. Things really began to move when Rinpoche went back to Tibet again, I think in 1985, and then twice in one year. Managing it all involved a huge amount of work.

And most importantly, from the moment Rinpoche had said “Okay”, he was by my side, he was there! I could call him as many times as I wanted and he was always available. He and I discussed everything in detail. I could ask, “Little Tashi now needs a sweater. Is it okay if I ask this lady to knit one? Will you be able to bring it to Tashi next trip?” I asked him everything in the beginning and he directed me. And so it grew, all through his guidance.

Later, when Rinpoche started the projects in Tibet and far bigger amounts were needed, I asked my father for help. He became instrumental in making all this happen. He had wanted

me to go to university, something I had no interest in doing. I was an actress mostly earning very little money and he thought I did not amount to much, until he saw my commitment to these children and feeding the poor. Gradually, he started to get involved. He taught me many invaluable lessons – one of which I will mention here: I had written an appeal for a project in Tibet for a foundation whose lawyer he was, even though normally he kept me as far away from his clients as possible. During their annual meeting in his office it lay in the pile of appeals waiting for a verdict. How much for which charity? I was asked to serve coffee during the meeting – a lowly task that taught me a little of the humility I so often lacked – wise father! So I happened to be present when my appeal was discussed. The foundation's charity was connected to Israel and had no history of donating much to other countries – least of all in Tibet! So there was no real hope that they would even consider my appeal.

Enter Dr Veit Wyler! He initiated the conversation with, “I don't think you should give her the whole amount she's asked for!” It was a princely sum but I was taken aback. Why was he reducing my chances? He went on, “I suggest you start by giving her half of what she wants and check her progress, and then, if she does well and achieves what she has promised in her appeal, then next year we can give her the whole amount.”

It was amazing! In one fell swoop he had seeded the idea not to deny my appeal, which was probably their intention, but to accept it and still give me a large amount of money, and then to continue

the following year. Oh how skilful he was! That was 25 years ago and the foundation still contributes the same amount each year!

In the years that followed Akong Rinpoche's first visit, in the Tibetan areas alone, through his local connections Rinpoche created over 457 ROKPA projects. In nearly all the provinces, the contracts were signed by the local heads of the relevant government departments of education or religion, by the social services department or heads of local governments – while I and my growing staff at HQ in Switzerland wrote appeals and reports, and fundraised with the help of ROKPA branches in eighteen countries in Europe, Canada, USA and Africa. Each single year, amongst our many other programmes, we provided sponsorship for around ten thousand students in monastic and secular schools and colleges.

Just in Tibetan areas over the years, ROKPA has sponsored projects in fourteen of the eighteen counties in Sichuan Province alone. ROKPA sponsored twelve hospitals. Then there were three ROKPA environmental projects dealing with nature regeneration, including the replanting of just over ten million trees. Thus many poor families were given work. In addition, the places where these trees were planted became preservation areas for wildlife, and in some areas also sites for the preservation of precious medicinal plants. There were also two projects for the preservation of Tibetan culture and heritage, mainly woodblock printing or the publishing of books. There was an old people's care home as well as fifteen other different projects such as sponsorship of eye operations for about one hundred people, and other forms of surgery for those who could not otherwise afford it. There was

leprosy medicine sponsorship, and other programmes to help the needy.

Each time Rinpoche returned from Tibet, I would go to Samye Ling to meet him and we would spend sometimes a few days, sometimes a few weeks working together. Then he would pour into me much of his experience relating to this work of helping, such as how to deal with the many difficulties and obstacles we were facing – thus helping me to simply go on ... and on. He hardly ever talked about the tremendous obstacles and hardships he was facing, but I could guess sometimes. Generally though, Rinpoche never talked a lot, he was quiet and reserved, though not in a negative way. He never chatted and when he spoke it was always with truth and meaning. His silences were as much teachings as his words; whenever he taught or simply spoke, there was so much space around the words he had said – before, in the middle and after – that your mind could follow his meaning far beyond the words.

ROKPA Today: helping where help is needed

ROKPA helps where humanitarian aid is exceptionally difficult but desperately needed, and promotes respect for local cultural beliefs. Rinpoche attached great importance to the self-help approach and saw education as the best way to assist people to escape from poverty and protect themselves from exploitation and abuse. Through its educational schemes, ROKPA prepares disadvantaged children and

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adults for a self-determined life and contributes to creating an optimum environment through social, medical and ecological projects.



Courtesy of Lea Wyler

True to Akong Rinpoche's belief that charity is not a business, ROKPA is not run by externally hired managers, but by the founders themselves on a volunteer basis and with a great deal of commitment, with an international network of qualified workers volunteering their efforts and their knowledge. This allows ROKPA to use donation income directly and efficiently, while keeping administration costs to a minimum. The charity now has a small core of dedicated employees, with a network spreading over eighteen countries, (a few less since Rinpoche

passed away) where volunteers raise funds for over one hundred and fifty projects in Nepal, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Sadly, four years after his death, the vital door to Tibet closed, at least for now, but as we shall see, not before an entire generation of Tibetans became reacquainted with their culture, their language and their self-respect.

Working with Rinpoche

At the ROKPA Annual General Meeting in 2006, Akong Rinpoche remarked that quite often individuals were offering to ‘help’ while they themselves had no money, no work, no family, and therefore they became dependent on the organisation. The first thing that Rinpoche insisted upon was that regardless of which part of the organisation one belongs to, the first duty is to take care of oneself. Only then can one really start to consider what responsibilities to take on for the benefit of others. To say we work for this or that charity sounds good and creates a good reputation, but if people are themselves dependent on others, then what that person does cannot be considered as charity. Similarly, on the spiritual side, if one is confused oneself then one cannot be of much help to someone else, just as a mentally unbalanced person is not able to be someone else’s therapist. To do that one needs to have a good heart, good understanding and compassion, as well as some degree of mental stability.

To work effectively for any of the three branches of Akong Rinpoche's activities, one should be clearly aware of one's own behaviour and speech, and not be dependent materially on the charity or on others' help. One should be a hundred percent willing to work, not bargaining about who does what. He pointed out that when a person is competent and assured, people will be impressed and seek out that person, without any need for self-advertisement, any more than the sun needs to advertise its benefit to others.

In the later years many people who worked for and with Rinpoche, did so from the Conference Centre in Samye Ling. Akong Rinpoche had designed a huge table in many sections, so that arranged one way it is round, in another it becomes a long table with round sides; you could do anything with it. He was a brilliant designer! In the middle there were usually numerous plants under a glass ceiling, so they all grew like crazy. It was like being in a jungle with him sitting around this table, each of us with a little section of table working on a variety of tasks; there were people sewing thangkas, filling statues, writing newsletters, doing legal work, translating Tibetan into English and me doing the charity work. During my visits there, Rinpoche and I would sit together to discuss a particular project and work out the budget, which was always, always a problem. Either they had made a mistake when putting together a contract, or I made a mistake through not having clearly understood what had been translated from Chinese or Tibetan. Nothing was ever easy or clear.

There was work to do on a variety of levels and serious multi-tasking. Since we were already heavily committed to existing projects, things often became quite complicated. Rinpoche would translate the various contracts to me, but a lot was unclear because of cultural differences. Chinese and Tibetans tend to write long introductions; there is a lot of talk about dates and I would get confused about what was what, and in the middle of that – what did that mean and how really was that going to get implemented? So we had long meetings, and again and again, I had questions ...

Amongst other duties it was my task to translate the Tibetan way of thinking into our often sober Swiss way so that I could devise intelligible appeals to donors. Here is a taste of the kind of challenges I encountered: in this project you have fifty-seven students; each one gets so much, but only for so many months a year. Then the teacher, if he is not a *khenpo* – a Buddhist PhD scholar – gets this amount for x months a year, except in this particular year when he cannot come so often. This teacher is not a *khenpo*, so he gets less but he got further teacher training in Lhasa, the best place to learn, so we have to pay him more, or else he is not going to stay. However, for three months a year we send him or her back to Lhasa for further studies, so we have to deduct the wages but add the cost of his journey there and back. Nevertheless, during the Tibetan New Year he will want to go home, so we need to add these journeys but deduct xyz and so on and so forth.

It became more and more multidimensional. We would be discussing all this, but right in the middle when I was struggling

to understand, the phone would ring, somebody would call Rinpoche away or he would just get up and start walking around the table giving instructions to the others in the room.

Rinpoche was like a master chess player playing multiple games with different people all at once and I would have to wait until he had made the rounds. Once I was in the middle of a very complicated calculation, which really needed his answer in order to pinpoint what was needed for a particular project. I would have to explain the calculation in detail to my staff at home, so that they could prepare the necessary documents and help with the fundraising. They, in turn, would need to be able to explain it all to our potential sponsors. Rinpoche went to the sound system and put on a track with a woman's screeching high voice singing Tibetan songs, very loud, with a Tibetan string instrument going *dum, dum, dum* all the time causing this irritating vibration in one's body. Listening to this was truly painful to me! He put it on very very loudly, with all of us there trying to work and I thought I would not manage any of my jobs that day. When he was called away to take a phone call in the adjoining room, his bedroom, I tiptoed to the machine, turned the volume down quite a bit and managed to finish my calculations.

When he came back, walking very slowly indeed, he sat down next to me. Before I could say anything, he had this revelation for me: "You will suffer in the *bardo* (the period immediately after death)." In response to my startled plea for explanation, he replied, "If you cannot manage to accept the loud noise and the loud music now, how will you be able to bear the loud noises in the bardo

when you die?” That was it and then we went back to work. This is just one example of how he would teach us, all the time.

As the work in Tibet developed, I wanted to travel with him, but initially he refused. In the first years he went alone or with other Tibetans. My impression was that he was building the terrain for the future and that after that it grew organically. On his return he never said, “I want to do this or that”, what he would say was, “I’d rather like to help these people.” It was so soft and gentle and it instilled in me a near religious fervour that he be able to fulfil his wish because I knew that any wish he might have to help others would be a hundred percent spot on and right ... and totally selfless.

Much of what was happening in the Tibetan areas was hidden from me. I only knew bits of everything and since Rinpoche was not a talkative person I asked him many, many questions, again and again. Sometimes I felt sorry for him because I would generally travel in his car, sitting behind him and bombarding him with questions. Quite often, he would not answer or would do so in monosyllables. Once I complained, “If I am to do fundraising and work in these projects and help, I need to know everything there is to know! I also need to know things not to do with the projects, what is their context and what did you talk to this man about, what happened here, and what happened there?” And he would say, “I will tell you what you need to know,” which might only be ten percent of what had happened. That was also how he ensured that there was no wastage of energy or words. He did not like to waste words and he always endeavoured to keep everyone safe. So eventu-

ally I gathered information from what he told other people if there was a translator there, and through his very concise answers. If my questions were also concise, sometimes I would get an answer, but I would rarely get an answer if I asked, “What was the meeting about?” or “What do you think that man thinks?” This kind of general talk he had no time for.

Living our Potential

There are people in my life who bring out the worst in me. These days it strikes me that ‘the worst’ and ‘the best’ do not really make up the sum of any of us. Even taken together, the good and the bad that we see is still the equivalent of merely living in one single room of a mansion, where we are only slightly aware that other rooms, and beyond them, even other worlds may exist, yet we are completely unable to access them. It is like constantly living in a situation of having dreamt a life-changing dream, but on waking, the essence of the dream eludes you; you spend the day dissatisfied because you are certain there was, is, more but it eludes your grasp and you spend the rest of the day in a haze trying to remember.

By contrast Akong Rinpoche’s view was clear. He saw those other worlds, those other rooms in our mansions. He saw the potential in every one of us. He did not waste time nagging us about characteristics we are powerless to change, or complimenting us on our so-called achievements. He immediately saw not only what we

were but what we could become, and like a brilliant designer he took the existing materials, added his knowledge of geomancy to them, and guided us around our mansion, helping us rearrange furniture and plants and employing all the elements to create the perfect basis for achieving the fullness of what we might become. Rinpoche had huge motivation, which he was able to transmit to others and that is how he developed the potential he saw in people. He did not get tired, he did not get fed up, it was never too much, no burnout. He was like the most brilliant composer, using all the notes, half-notes and pauses, loud and barely audible notes to compose a symphony only he knew was there, or a conductor making full use of each member of the orchestra, using the power of the drum at just the right moment, as well as the frail and sensitive violin, to create a sublime experience.

Rinpoche taught everyone on the level on which they needed to be taught. This has become even clearer to me since his death. I meet with people all over the world who were close to him, and it strikes me that we all have our own special view of Rinpoche, yet put together, these views still fail to do him justice. He was, is, so much more than any of us was able to perceive. For example, I once stayed with someone in Africa; we talked about our memories of Akong Rinpoche and that person commented, “He was always very humorous, we laughed so much.” Another person said, “He was always extremely kind and careful with me, he never ever upset me; I could do whatever I wanted and he’d still be very gentle with me.”

My experience was completely different, it was all of this, but there were also times when he would seem quite strict. Rinpoche

could also be extremely funny. He had a very particular sense of humour. There were stories he never tired of hearing and every single time he would giggle over and again. When I was able to make him laugh, I used to think, “Let me die right now because this is the happiest moment of my life!” I’m grateful that that thought came quite a few times, because he carried such a huge burden, so much responsibility, with tens of thousands depending on him, that to provide him with a moment of lightness and laughter was a great joy.

Akong Rinpoche on the Buddhist Practice of Charity

Akong Rinpoche integrated Dharma and charity as a way of life. In 1999, he gave teachings in Dublin on the Six Paramitas and the meaning of charity. It was from this foundation that he served beings and *this* that underpins the vision of ROKPA. Understanding these principles enables a better understanding of who Rinpoche was and how he achieved all that he did for the sake of others. He said:

“The Buddhist way of giving to charity is called ‘charity without expectations’, where it does not really matter if you feel that a person is very kind and you have given [because you expect to receive] that person’s appreciation. Even if that person says, ‘How bad you are!’, ‘How stupid you are!’, ‘How ugly!’, ‘Why are you giving me this

food?’, it does not really matter because you are doing something in a very generous way, not a business way. You should appreciate whatever is the response from that person.

“In giving charity there is a normal [way to think about] our action, and action according to the Six Paramitas, which is quite different ... So for humans, it is very important to give something, to share something with other people, especially if you are Buddhist. The Six Paramitas are the path in the [Mahayana] tradition. The first paramita is charity, because it is the one which is easy to do – it is easy to give and you can also see the immediate benefit. In another way, it is in order to develop in yourself a deeper understanding of Buddhism when you start to share things with other people. Within the Six Paramitas, each paramita must have the full six qualities, so even if it is charity you must have the understanding or wisdom side, you must have the meditation aspect, you must have diligence – all these must be within each paramita itself. Therefore, especially for those who try to understand the compassion aspect, then I think charity is the most important part of the way of practice.

“So if we are kind towards humans, or if we have a spiritual approach, then it is important that one is willing to give something, because it is very useful to give rather than to accumulate all the time. But, at the same time, we should practice non-expectation; if you are able to get over that expectation [of reward] then your gift is a very pure gift. It will only bring positive and will not end up being the cause of negative accumulations. Giving is very important but at the same

time it is important to give in a very positive, and a non-expectation way. That is a kind of antidote. Don't go suffering due to your giving to somebody else!

“In Tibetan Buddhism, charity is very much the way to develop the accumulation of merit, the way to develop accumulation of positive karma: to do something based on positive motivation, to do many good actions, this is something that exists in the teaching itself. In Tibet, a gift from ordinary people is a way of developing positive motivation, so you give to monasteries, for the monastery's fund, for education or healthcare. We don't have [so much the practice of giving to] beggars because in early times there weren't that many in Tibet. There were some but not that many. First of all the population is very small, and the second thing is that each family unit is quite strong so that those in need are taken care of by all the relatives. There is no kind of institutional organisation required because the family unit does not break so often. The family is always united because that's tradition. The children are taken care of by the old people; old people are taken care of by the children, and the poor people are taken care of by relatives. Anything you spend in order to gain positive merit is [linked with giving to] a monastery and I was quite used to that kind of idea of charity until, I suppose, when I left in 1959.”

Akong Rinpoche explained that the Buddha always talked about generosity and that one of Buddhism's main practices is compassion, helping others. ‘Training the mind’ meant learning how to help

others. He believed that charity transcended national boundaries; all good people everywhere endeavour to help others. Or, for him, having overcome racism and sectarianism, we are all able to see the value of practising charity. Everyone can appreciate the charitable side of religion since it operates outside of politics. Wherever ROKPA works it operates without a political agenda, it functions without the strings of promoting a particular charity or religion.

Once Rinpoche was talking about an aspect of his vision and I giggled stupidly, and said, “Rinpoche, do you want to save the whole world?” It was a little provocative and he looked at me deadpan, and replied, “Why not?” When it came to helping others, Akong Rinpoche was not interested in where they were from, or which spiritual lineage they belonged to. If somebody needed help then that was what he did. It is rare for Tibetans to do what Rinpoche did: to not just help their own lineage, their own village and family, he was helping all four main Tibetan lineages and the Bön religion too! He helped the rich and the poor, those with a stable mind and those with mental problems, those who were Tibetan and those who were Chinese. A suffering being was a suffering being and nothing more needed to be known to him in order to do what he could to help and guide that person and lead that being out of suffering.

He was also very clear that spiritual charity should not be like a business: you buy something, you sell something; you serve your own ego, you decide who to help and you want people to say thank you. He once told me,

“Anybody can do charity, but the way of many charities is that it becomes a business. People work for the charity, they earn money, they take money home, and it’s just like another job. Or they do what they call charity; it’s not something very special. Instead of doing business somewhere, you do ‘charity’ somewhere.”

To illustrate what he meant, here is an example from my own experience. I had been helping a woman in Nepal for many years. We had sponsored her children through school and so on. Then we discovered that she was actually doing fine: she had a husband, she even had a colour television! Her husband had a regular income and even though they were certainly not rich, I felt there was no need for her to beg at all, so I told her, “You lied to me and I’m going to stop helping you!”

The next day she appeared at my house with one of those curved Nepali knives, a *kukuri*, saying, “I am going to kill you, you stopped my help. I’m going to kill you!” People had to chase her away and protect me. When I told Rinpoche, his response was, “What are you upset about? It’s not your job to judge whether she is rich or poor.” I have never forgotten that when I was outraged by this woman’s behaviour, he said, “You are like someone who pulls the skin off a snake instead of waiting patiently for the snake to shed its skin by itself. Whatever you do, do it gently! You could have told her that we will continue to support her and her family for one more year but then we will have to stop. This way she would have time to adapt to the new situation and your words would not feel hurtful to her.”

Rinpoche's way was always that of kindness and compassion. He knew I was worried about wasting our sponsors' money but he tried to teach me to not be so rough, so unkind and judgemental, even when it felt like somebody was cheating me. "What's the fuss?" he would say, "Everybody is cheating in some way. Do you think you are free of this? If you use your father's pen (I was working in my father's office at the time) for a private purpose, are you not cheating him? If you make a private phone call during the time you work for him and he pays you – are you not cheating him?" And when I asked him if people were cheating Rinpoche himself he answered, "Of course they are! All the time ... I don't mind!"

That is the kind of teacher Akong Rinpoche was.

On another occasion I felt so utterly cheated and lied to that I felt like stopping my work altogether. I got on my high horse and told Rinpoche all about it: *Imagine what happened! Look at that! Hear this! And this is what they said!*

He had no sympathy for me at all. Instead he said, "Even if people misuse it, even if they abuse it, you are not the one to judge. You are not God! You are not the one to judge who is poor and who is not poor. If somebody feels poor they *are* poor. If somebody feels rich, irrespective of how much money they have or how little, then they're rich and you are not the judge. You are only there to serve. Don't say, 'I'm helping', say, 'I'm serving!'".

Yet another time in Tibet, when I had a total meltdown, Rinpoche said,

"If you want to do charity you have to be like a rock! That doesn't mean you are frozen; you have to be strong. Only think of one

thing: to help! You should not have too many emotions. You should have *one* thought: to help! Not to be dependent on what others say or think. You should not care about being rejected or beaten; you should not mind if your guru makes a stern face or a nice face, thanks you or rejects you. Once you simply serve without any expectations, that is when true devotion and true charity begin.”

But Rinpoche also knew that other people did not necessarily agree with his style of serving others. Here he explained his approach:

“Sometimes people say, ‘Oh you spoil people giving them soup or a free meal; if you give in this way then they are no longer interested in working and earning an income.’ But I think that is beyond me: my help is only what I see is needed on that particular day; how useful is something to eat – you sleep with a full stomach rather than an empty stomach. That is my only responsibility. I am not trying to change the political aspect, I am not a politician. It is not in my power, or else I don’t know how to change it anyway. I don’t think that is my responsibility. My responsibility is to help with what people need at that particular time.

“So I think that normally when we talk about beggars as being silly and not doing things to earn money, I think this is the wrong way of looking. I think, if we have some understanding of Christian principles, they are all the emanations of Christ. So, therefore, in order to become pure or in order to develop merit we are offering to them rather than giving. According to Buddhism, if you have a good understanding of Buddhism, then it is said that every sentient being

has the essence of enlightenment or Buddha and, therefore, we also look [at it] in the same way as Christians. So, therefore, everyone becomes the emanation of Buddha and we are offering to those people in order to develop the accumulation of merit. So looking down on beggars is the wrong way. We should look upwards and have respect for people not as a kind of failure but as understanding that they appeared in front of us in order for the accumulation of merit for our benefit, not their benefit. So I think we should change our attitude slightly.”

“We have a soup kitchen in Nepal for three months of the year. Whoever comes to our soup kitchen we provide with food twice a day: breakfast and lunch. Many volunteers have very funny ideas, it seems to me, they say we should see who is rich and who is poor: ‘Why are these ones who are dressed quite nicely appearing at our soup kitchen gate?’ and, ‘These ones are poor and why are they not at our soup kitchen gate?’

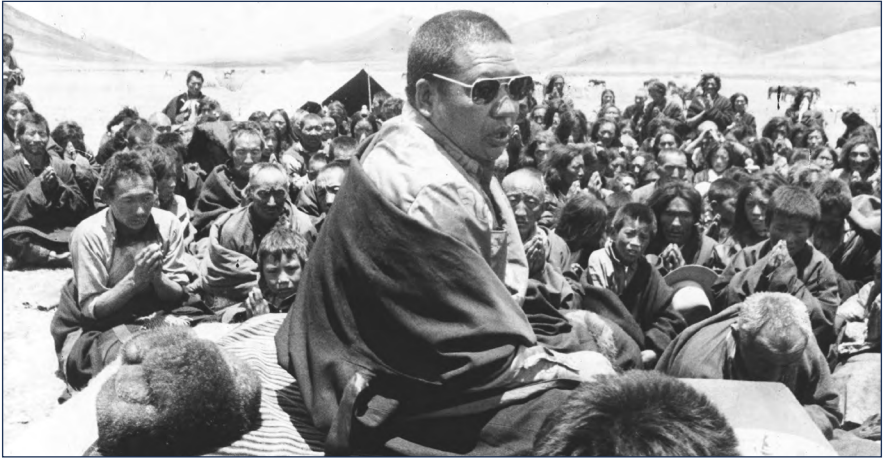
“Then my view is totally different. I think if a beggar comes in a Rolls Royce, it doesn’t really matter if his mind thinks, ‘I am poor!’ We should treat him equally the same as a poor person. Our job is not how to segregate, ‘You are rich, you own this much. You are poor, you don’t own anything. This is right, this is wrong’. I think right and wrong is their choice, not our choice. Whoever thinks ‘I need free food’, then we should give it very happily for that person. Otherwise we would never have a positive accumulation of merit. If we are thinking how to achieve something positive within ourselves

then I think we should not have these kinds of questions, we should not have strings with our charity work. We should cut the thread. We have invisible threads which are left hanging – where has my money gone? In which direction has it gone? Did they put it in their own pocket? Has it gone to the right place or the wrong place? Has it gone to their friends or somewhere else? I don't think that is important. What is important is your own motivation, your mind. If you're pure it does not really matter from your side [what happened to the money]. So, whoever took it is not important to us. That's my way of looking at it."

ROKPA in the Tibetan Regions of China

Help for the Roof of the World

"ROKPA has been helping orphans, the poor and homeless of many countries for many years now [at that time it was twenty-six]. The organisation is made up of volunteers who want to help those less fortunate than themselves. ROKPA is helping in India, Nepal, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Tibet. I left Tibet in 1959. When I came back to Tibet for the first time in 1983 I saw Panchen Rinpoche and Ngapu Ngawang Jigme and they asked me to help Tibet. During the Cultural Revolution I could do nothing but in 1989, the government finally gave me permission to help my country."



Akong Rinpoche's first return to the Tibetan regions

Through ROKPA, Akong Rinpoche supported the people of Tibet with numerous projects; the Tibetan regions of China are some of the poorest in the world. Comparable with Europe in area, only approximately six million people live there, scratching a living from arable land and livestock farming. Settlements situated 3–5,500 metres above sea level are the highest inhabited regions in the world. In contrast to other developing regions, the winters in the Himalayas are extremely long and cold and the summers short. Climate change constitutes an immediate threat to the lives of those living there, who have traditionally been farmers and nomads.

Akong Rinpoche focused ROKPA's activities upon Eastern Tibet, which extends over the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the four provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan and Gansu. Often in these very remote areas, there are few roads and these tend to be difficult to negotiate. The inhabitants live in humble conditions or in total poverty, with no support or basic medical care. Thanks to Akong

Rinpoche's ability to cooperate with the local authorities in Tibetan areas, for many years ROKPA was one of the few aid organisations able to provide help in this region.



A typical welcoming procession on Akong Rinpoche's visits to monasteries in the Tibetan regions.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

Preserving Tibetan Language

Preserving the Tibetan language was important for Rinpoche. He was deeply aware of the fundamental link between language, culture,

sense of identity, and well being, so keeping Tibetan language and culture alive went far beyond preserving intellectual property and heritage. It was about being able to return to one's roots, and restoring integrity and balance to each Tibetan person.

In my earlier trips with Rinpoche to some of the Tibetan areas such as Yunnan, it was apparent, even to me, that many Tibetans had become just like Chinese people. They had not kept up their traditions, not even their own language. Most of them no longer spoke Tibetan, even the older people; they spoke Chinese, or their own dialect. And everywhere, all the signs on the shops were in Chinese. When Rinpoche went there he found it was already nearly too late to do much, but wanting to try, he started to meet with heads of schools, and then told me to fundraise to get Tibetan teachers into these schools. He would call them 'special teachers' and slowly, over the years, he managed to establish the reintroduction of Tibetan language in many schools, so that the new generation started to learn their own Tibetan dialect again. Gradually the signs on the shops also began to appear in Tibetan, written smaller than the Chinese, but there they were. Tibetans started to identify with their culture again.

Akong Rinpoche recognised early on that the teaching of Tibetan language in schools was on the wane and in response he instigated a series of teacher training possibilities, while ROKPA began to sponsor whole teacher training classes in various areas. Thus we achieved a double gain: giving a chance to young people who would otherwise not get jobs and on the other hand contributing greatly to the preservation of the Tibetan culture and language.



Dege Parkhang: centuries-old wood-block printing works, previously sponsored by ROKPA, 2008.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

He also initiated various vocational training possibilities in many of our projects, such as secretarial education and an all-girls school built entirely by ROKPA in the Province of Gansu, and later heralded as one of the best girls schools in China! Here the girls studied the normal school syllabus, but also how to fix motorbikes, hotel management, cooking, sewing, and in other places carpentry, carving, statue-making, thangka-painting and so on.

Rinpoche did all this very discreetly, often through others who were possibly more acceptable to local government officials and who had the power to implement his advice and suggestions. Naturally there were local people who were sympathetic to Rinpoche

ROKPA OF DR AKONG RINPOCHE

and helped to advance his cause. Extraordinary as it may seem and due to his wisdom and merit, Akong Rinpoche virtually single-handedly transformed a significant part of that province. He needed to be very diplomatic and had to be careful not to push too hard, but he always sensed what could and should be said and to whom and when. His was a constant display of incredible skill on so many levels.



Vocational school 2006

Courtesy of Barbara Pfeiffer

On one of our later visits to the Tibetan Highlands I made the following entry in my diary:

“I came to Chengdu on September 10th to meet Akong Rinpoche and to start our yearly ROKPA project trip from here. This year its

beginning was exceptional as we were first invited to a grand Yunnan 50th Anniversary Festival. We flew to an unearthly beautiful place rightly called Shangri-La in Yunnan. We visited all our projects: schools and a monastery high up in the mountains. Such peace and beauty! Such serious study and peaceful meditation! Such poverty! Rinpoche has been re-introducing the Tibetan language and culture into this province. It had nearly totally disappeared. Thanks to Rinpoche's influence the street signs are written in Tibetan (as well as Chinese), while in the schools we sponsor the study of Tibetan is obligatory. The children are learning it and now they are even teaching their parents. We made many new contacts during this festival and hopefully more interest for our work will result. Yunnan was not really cold and has a gentle and sweet atmosphere. It was a soft start to the harsh trip that is bound to follow.

“Tomorrow we leave Chengdu – where we had a few days to sort out projects here – at six am, and have a twelve hour drive to Ngaba Dzamthang in East Tibet. Goodbye clean bed sheets and hot baths, bye-bye internet from my room and pizza at the nice place nearby – bye-bye Chengdu Town with the maniacal traffic, pollution and noise outside my window and hello snow mountains and bad roads and noodle soup and pigs' feet and chicken claws and snakes' insides ... Tomorrow we are off to the real thing!”

Every time Rinpoche went to Yunnan he made new contracts. He was a true bodhisattva on every level. I could not grasp all the levels on which he worked, so when he told me,

“Here is a new project, and now we need this much money for two more teachers, four more teachers, a khenpo, a language teacher, (and this and that),” I would reply,

“Well, we already have five projects here, why don’t we do something else, somewhere else (for less money)?” I was continually worried about the possibility of not getting enough funds to honour the contracts. Even more so since I knew that Rinpoche, being the signatory, faced real danger if he was unable to fulfil his side of those contracts.

Often I just did not get it! He knew what he wanted to do and perhaps I should have known better too, since he now took me with him on every single trip. I probably went with him to the Tibetan areas more than twenty-five times and maybe half as many times to Yunnan as well.

Caring for the Children: Yushu Orphanage

“When I first went to Europe I was desperately poor and forced to beg from others, but through my knowledge I am now able to help thousands. At that time I wasn’t even able to speak any other language, but now I can help because I have an education. We should all help one another – be ready to teach, to share our knowledge. Never be jealous, be compassionate and always keep a pure heart.”

(Akong Rinpoche to our students in Yushu)

ROKPA OF DR AKONG RINPOCHE

In the early nineties, Rinpoche began the Yushu Orphanage Project, combined with an in-house Tibetan medical school, as one of the very first ROKPA projects in Tibet. The children who attended were nomads from extremely poor backgrounds, all of them orphans or half-orphans. They had had no opportunity to go to school, to have a life outside the extremely hard work nomads have to do. Rinpoche decided that we would build a home for these children and worked together with the local social services to accomplish this goal.



Rinpoche giving blessings to Tibetans.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

In fact, the idea of charity was unknown in China until quite recently. I am not even sure there was a word for it. Charity, at least in the Western sense, was not in the culture. However, there was a department for social poverty and they sent their represent-

atives out to decide how many children from which province and then from which county, town, and village would come to the ROKPA sponsored orphanage. They would check each family and if there were orphans, they selected those eligible (only children from very poor families, orphans or half-orphans and only children below a certain age). We had no authority to choose which children were accepted into the orphanage.

At times, I found this very hard. For instance, I would be eating in some simple restaurant in town and a hungry, ragged child would enter timidly begging for food, in torn, thin clothes, even though it was always icy cold there when we travelled. There is a particular neglected look that says, 'no mother'. Mostly, these children would be chased out by the staff. It was horrible to watch, but understandable, since there were so many beggars and guests would avoid the place if they were 'bothered' too much. If the staff did not notice the child, I would quickly hand it my bowl of thick soup. I could always order another one. The bowl would be taken outside and the soup hungrily slurped down. My heart would melt and I would rush and ask Rinpoche if we could take this child to 'our' school. And mostly he had to say no. I could see on his face how difficult such a decision was for him but he always saw the bigger picture and understood that it would not do to upset or anger the authorities; the decision about whom to take into the school was clearly theirs and he knew he needed to accept their wishes rather than risk the whole school with its many poor children, for the sake of a single child.



With a young Jigme, future teacher of English at his school

Courtesy of Diana Dodd

Nonetheless, there were rare occasions when Rinpoche was able to bring an orphan to the home. Once, we were visiting Yushu and our car had a flat tyre. We had to wait in the blazing sun for the driver to fix the tyre, when we spotted a little boy with a serious deformity (scoliosis) in his back, playing on the road with other children. Rinpoche called the boy over – he was about ten or twelve years old – lifted up his T-shirt and touched his back with his hand, following the massively curved spine. I looked at the spine, then at Rinpoche and he raised his eyebrows in a question. I said, “Yes”. Or was it the other way round?

Our unspoken communication was, ‘Shall we take this boy to school and shall we have his poor spine operated on and shall we do whatever we can for this being that karma has so clearly sent to us?’ So Rinpoche asked the boy to take us to his family and

proposed to the parents that we help their son, to which they swiftly agreed with enormous smiles. Certainly they had no idea what this was going to mean for him, for them, for the future.

When our car reappeared, we brought the boy, Jigme, back to the orphanage, and Rinpoche asked the head of the orphanage to take care of him. A couple of years later, Rinpoche found this boy a host family in America, where he at last had his back operation. By chance, I met him again recently in Yushu, many years later. Jigme is now the English teacher at the very orphanage school that helped raise him. His English is excellent and he is happy and very proud to be back at 'his' school, giving back to others some of what he received.

Most of these children had grown up in some way alone, before they came to the Yushu Orphanage and Medical School. Even if they were adopted into an extended family, they would still have lost or not known their own parents and something deep inside was always yearning for *my mother*, or *my father*. So you can imagine how much healing Rinpoche brought to their lonely hearts. He was there in loving acceptance for each of them. He was there to teach and guide them, to nurture and comfort them when their pain and loss became overwhelming. He was simply *there* in their lives, in their being. And is there still, even if he is no longer physically among them. He *is* still their father, now that they are fathers and mothers themselves. They know how to parent their own children now, simply because he showed them.

Rinpoche cared for them so much, he loved them so much. Every year, we went back there and that was where we stayed the longest,

even though that might still be only one week or ten days, because we had so many other projects to visit. To some we might just go in the morning and leave at lunchtime, to visit somewhere else the same or the next day. Here in Yushu we knew we could wash our socks, and even dry them, because we always stayed for a few days!

The connection between the children and Rinpoche – especially the first intake of the Yushu Orphanage and Medical School – was very, very close. They loved him and whenever he came they were all over him. Each time he arranged for some kind of picnic. Blankets would be spread out on the ground and they would all sit around him. Those who could sit closest would be the happiest. Everyone was trying to touch him or be close enough to him to put their head on his shoulder. They were *his* children.

These were the times when I saw Rinpoche truly relaxed, so happy, so giving – a father with his children on a Sunday afternoon, when everybody is free and carefree. They would tell him little stories and he would provoke them and tease them; they would tease him back and he would laugh. Of course I was unable to understand what they were saying but the atmosphere was so special that we Westerners loved to join these events; we would sit at the very edge of the blanket or even on the grass to leave the space to the children and be spectators outside the warmth of that family. Yes, we belonged with Rinpoche, but this was his time with the children and these memories are very precious.

The children wanted to be with him twenty-four hours a day and would refuse to be sent to bed or to let him go; they just wanted to stay with him. Rinpoche was supposed to stay at the government

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guest house, which was dark and uncomfortable, while most of us would stay in extremely poor conditions in the school. There, you were stuck in the mud if you left the room. It was icy cold with cockroaches and bugs, dark and dismal. The toilet was a half-kilometre walk to a hole in the ground, ankle deep in mud. It was unforgettable! But we were used to it and there was so much love in that place that we did not mind for ourselves that much.



A ROKPA sponsored school

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

Of course we all wanted Rinpoche to go back to the government guest house in the evening, where at least he had an accessible toilet and some kind of half-comfort. But every year the children would beg him to stay. Before the earthquake of 2010, I remember there was a fairly large teachers' meeting room, with lots of painted

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benches along the walls. That was where we would have meetings with the eminent old Tibetan doctors, government officials and so on. The kids decided that Rinpoche had to sleep there so that they would not be parted from him. They ran to their dormitories in the middle of the night and everyone would bring a cushion, a blanket, another cushion, a little carpet, a doll, or whatever they had, and they would pad these two chairs that they had pulled together with whatever they could to make it comfortable so Rinpoche could sleep there with them.



With Lamdrak Rinpoche and his previous wife Trayang at the Kanze Girls School, which ROKPA sponsored for many years.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

After dinner, there were performances; earlier on there would have been all kinds of formal events, but now it was family time. Rinpoche would sit in a seat upon which they crammed all kinds of cushions

to support his back and then the children would approach him, coming close, holding his hand and he would rest his head on the head of another child. It was so close and warm and the kids would spontaneously perform for him, not plays or anything big, but they told stories or acted things out. I remember two little boys, maybe seven or eight years old pretending to be Khampa warriors having a dialogue, with Rinpoche nearly falling off his chair laughing. Then quite suddenly, a very shy girl stood up, hiding her eyes behind her hand, looking down, looking the other way, until with the others urging her on, she finally began to sing a Tibetan song in a surprisingly strong and beautiful voice.

Sometimes someone would bring an instrument like a little guitar and they would all sing together, and then they would ask Rinpoche to tell a story. You cannot imagine how much joy there was on these occasions. At some point I would fade, but Rinpoche would still be going strong. Sometimes he would also drift off into half-sleep while they were still performing and then at some point, maybe at two in the morning, they would finally allow him to rest. I often felt very conflicted because on the one hand it was so delightful and lovely, but on the other, I was worried because I knew that at five or six in the morning he would have to continue his work, and that meant that he would get no more than two or three hours of sleep. But this happened only once a year for a few days and during that time he accepted whatever they wanted. He would try to get a nap on those pushed-together chairs and then it would happen all over again the following day.



Encouraging schoolchildren in the English class in Chamten 2008.

(Courtesy of Barbara Pfeiffer)

Since the orphanage was also a medical school, all forty-eight children in this first ever class became accredited and accepted Tibetan doctors, and the government allocated hospitals or clinics for them to work in. This could not have been achieved by anyone else but Rinpoche who had had many discussions with the decision makers in the local government. These doctors and those in the groups that followed were sent back to their villages where they set up in practice. These are guaranteed jobs for life for them. What a career! Not dishwasher to millionaire, but from nomad orphan to healers in their own communities!

Preserving Tibetan Medicinal Skills, Herbs & Texts

Another important aspect of Akong Rinpoche's activity to preserve Tibetan wisdom and culture was the publishing of Tibetan medical books, such as the six-volume work of the famous Khenpo Tsenam, the most renowned Tibetan doctor in the whole country. Other texts, of which sometimes only one or two copies had survived, were also located and preserved. If such texts are housed in private collections, merely to borrow them can be extremely difficult or cost thousands of pounds. Some of these books are written in a sort of ancient shorthand that can only be decoded by Tibetan medical doctors. Rinpoche said it was crucial to reprint medical texts and that if ROKPA did not do so, they would cease to exist. Thanks to Rinpoche's foresight, ROKPA has sponsored several doctors to track down and interpret these written works and as a result ROKPA has managed to publish many medical texts that were previously unobtainable.

To understand the background and sheer impossibility of these efforts, one should know that during the Cultural Revolution, some texts were buried in the earth in order to save and preserve them; yet others were distributed or carried away by different families to different parts of the country. Now they were in disarray and had not been collected together again by anyone, until Rinpoche took up the challenge!



Dege Parkhang 2006

Courtesy of Barbara Pfeiffer

In Kham, I experienced a dramatic event in connection with this re-assembly of manuscripts: Rinpoche had spread the word that certain pages of a very precious text were missing. One evening, when dusk had already settled over Yushu, we heard the sound of a galloping horse, just like in the John Wayne movies! We heard the sound gradually approaching from far off, until, in the courtyard of the government guesthouse where Akong Rinpoche was staying, the rider dismounted and, still out of breath, asked to enter Rinpoche's room. It transpired that he had ridden for days to reach here before Rinpoche left, so that he could hand him over another few missing pages of a precious text. Rinpoche was delighted and so I came to understand that, all over the country, silently and without fuss, people were searching for a page here, three pages there – to bring back the missing links to this modern Guru

Rinpoche, and ensure the continuation of their culture. In this way, and often less dramatically, the true preservation of Tibetan culture was taking place, quietly and out of sight.

Akong Rinpoche's view was always very clear and far-sighted, and in many ways he was ahead of his time. He foresaw that many Tibetan medical herbs were in danger of disappearing, and that due to this another very precious part of the Tibetan culture and tradition was about to be lost. He invited the most eminent Tibetan doctors of the time to attend a congress in Yushu, which was a kind of home base for him. He also invited the whole class of our medical students who still had some years of study ahead of them.

“You must remember that the earth does not only belong to us as individuals, it belongs to everybody – now and to future generations – and so what we do must benefit all.”

He thus created a connection between the younger and the older generation from which grew a dialogue that continues to benefit both groups today. The young learnt from the deep concern of these doctors: Tibetan medicine had gained increasing respect in China and in the outside world, which caused the uncontrolled and mostly very ill-conceived harvesting of Tibetan herbs from the mountains. The uninformed extraction of the plants, together with their roots, all over the country, has, in some cases, caused terminal damage to a flora that had survived unharmed for centuries. Tibetan doctors were taught through lineage, the detailed knowledge being passed down from teacher to disciple, often from doctor father to doctor

son or daughter. The Tibetan doctors were now deeply worried. Through this congress the young generation was made aware of the dangers, and they in their turn later taught those who followed. Thus Rinpoche started a sequence of beneficial activities that continues today and will carry on into the future.

This destruction was due to the commercial production of Tibetan medicine by Chinese industry. It was being advertised on television, but without the centuries old knowledge of how to prepare the many ingredients. Akong Rinpoche also selected the brightest medical students and arranged for them to come to Europe to learn horticultural techniques such as seeding, planting and composting, all hitherto totally unknown to Tibetans, since they had never previously been necessary – plants simply multiplied naturally, to be harvested with great care and the knowledge of generations. These students then returned to their homes and taught others how to collect the herbs, to reseed them, to research the best areas in which to do that, and to ensure that at least in some places, those herbs which had nearly become extinct would survive. Akong Rinpoche thus saved some of the most endangered species, which were just on the tipping point of dying out. He also rented large pieces of land, where ROKPA trained doctors supervise the replanting and harvesting of these precious herbs, needed in such a variety of medicines, each with their own enormous power to heal.

“It is easy to read a Tibetan medical book but going and finding the right herbs in the mountains is a supreme challenge. Before they can give lifesaving treatment, doctors need to have a profound knowledge.”

Akong Rinpoche did establish some clinics but mostly he invested in and established education in all its forms. For example, in Sershul, an extremely cold and high place, nearly four thousand metres in altitude, ROKPA started *Mipham College For Doctors*, where lay people, monks and nuns could study medicine according to the medical teaching of the great Mipham Jamyang Namgyal, (1846–1912) a famous Nyingma master, writer and doctor. Mipham wrote many definitive works on Tibetan medicine which are still used today.

Over the years, this college has produced many physicians. In all ROKPA’s projects for educating doctors, each one commits to return to their village to serve the community there for at least six years. In each place there will be a population of at least a few thousand people, so a huge number of people have been, and continue to be, helped through this project.

Publishing Textbooks and Preserving Dharma Texts

In addition to the medical texts, ROKPA supported the publication of textbooks for Tibetan teachers at secondary schools. Until recently these books were only in Chinese, but ROKPA published

most of the thirty-two titles in Tibetan during Rinpoche's lifetime. The remainder, I am sure, will be completed when he comes back to us.

The third group of publications to be supported by ROKPA are university level texts from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Kagyu Dharma students have had to borrow texts from other traditions because the texts of our own tradition remained unpublished. Akong Rinpoche, however, saw to it that all twenty volumes became available through their publication. Furthermore, there is now a plan for teachings of the previous Karmapas to be published. Much has been lost, but whatever can be found has been carved into wood-blocks at the *Dege Parkhang* (the printing press established by the 40th King of Dege and the Eighth Situ Tulku). Rinpoche's intention was to continue with this task until there remain no unpublished texts by His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa. Testament to Akong Rinpoche's non-sectarian approach, ROKPA also supported the publication of teachings by other great masters from the other lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, to the tune of about ten to twenty volumes per year over many years.

There were more than thirty people working at different publishing projects, with ROKPA trained teachers and doctors doing the proofreading free of charge. This has been accomplished due to the willingness of those with precious and unusual texts to lend them for reprinting, but none of it would have been possible without Rinpoche's profound understanding of the necessity of preserving all aspects of Tibetan medicine, Dharma, and culture.

Rinpoche, Consummate Diplomat

Through a combination of his unique wisdom and his calm, understated and powerful way, Akong Rinpoche affected the lives of thousands of Tibetans, giving them hope and a future. Because of the content and manner of his activity, Tibetan culture continued or was even re-established where it had practically disappeared in its homeland; in a similar way he also re-established language, philosophy, Tibetan medicine and ecology. Of course Rinpoche did not do these things single-handed, but through compassion and deep empathy for everyone he met he was able to instil a similar aspiration in others. It was this that bore fruit in the end, and as a result ROKPA was able to work in Tibet relatively uninterruptedly for several decades, literally helping where help was needed. As Rinpoche's activity shows, there are often times when being wise is more important than being 'right'. Here are Rinpoche's own words about his work in Tibet:

“The Chinese [written] constitution makes it very clear that the minority peoples are allowed to study their own languages. They even use the example of Tibetans having their own language and medicines. It has religious rights and education rights and health rights. So it has many different [aspects]. If we look at the education right, it says that the minority counties have to study mainly their own language; on top of that they study [throughout] the country the international language, Chinese. In [the constitution] it is said very

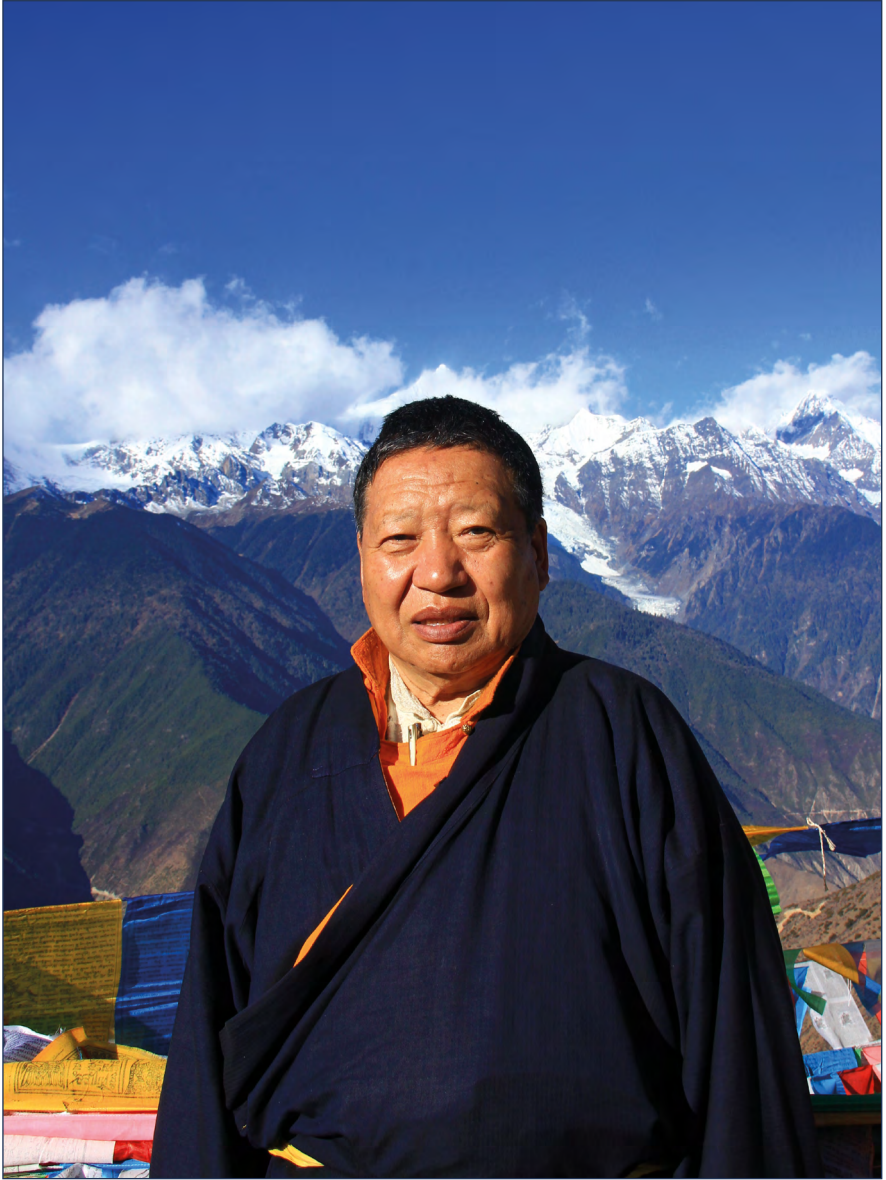
clearly that even Chinese people who come to minority areas must study the minority languages. It is made quite clear. So when I went back and had negotiations we talked about the minorities and about ROKPA coming to help with the projects.

“The other thing that is very good for us is that [as from] the year 2000, the government says that every child over six years must have education. But if you look at the local county level that is not possible. Not even half of the children are able to have schooling. But then in Beijing the Education Department says that somehow you have to start schools, and whoever is able to achieve this in each county will get prizes. So if you are able to achieve six schools in that county for the Education Department, they receive a prize, you get some money. So for us it is very good because they don’t have the money, we have the money and we work together to achieve the target – six new schools. So then they get prizes. We don’t get the prizes; they get prizes! So ROKPA has two benefits, the benefit of the constitution is very clear and I always read the constitution when we open a school.

“Each year when I go I read the rights to the students, the staff and others, and explain to them what the law is, what rights they have. Since last year the rights have changed slightly, but up until [the present day there are many guarantees].

Lenin said that if language is not equal and if people are not equal then it will not be communist. So those words are very useful.”

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At the sacred mountain of Kawa Kharpo in Yunnan Prefecture, where the First Gyalwang Karmapa stayed and practised, November 2012.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

Thus Rinpoche understood very clearly how to negotiate with the Chinese government to the benefit of the Tibetan people and the local county representatives.

Rinpoche's very unusual depth of understanding of human nature meant he encountered each person, first as a human being, rather than as a Chinese or Tibetan. I believe this made all the difference. There was never a tangible bias that this is a member of the Chinese authorities and this is a Tibetan monk, or that this is my own brother or nephew and so on. We all experienced him in the way he related to us, as our very best potential. For example he related to me not as I perceived myself, but as where my potential lies. He addressed my potential, rather than my actual state of being, so when I was in a total angry, negative mess, he would not relate to that part.

He always seemed to relate to the goodness in the person and that is exactly what made it possible for that goodness to shine through. It made me wish I could achieve my potential in order to prove him right. It felt like he *had* to be right. So I did everything I could to be the person that he saw. It seemed that he addressed my buddha nature and that was a part of me that I had no acquaintance with. He showed me that it existed and what it meant, and because of my love and respect for him I definitely tried to become a better person. I think that is how all of us felt.

And that is how it worked wherever Rinpoche went. When he met an official who was very harsh or decisive, or who had a certain job to perform, Rinpoche completely respected that person's situation, and somehow, by going beyond the person's title or task, he

looked into their heart and found a human being, rather than what they were presenting. He fully understood and respected the person beyond their job and the tasks they had to fulfil, though often the rest of us did not at all. Here was a government official who had to carry out this task, who had constraints and had to carry out checks, or whatever else they had to do. And because he respected that, and he also respected the person, that individual did not feel threatened and since they did not feel threatened, they could gradually open up a little bit and make things possible that might have not been possible before. They knew he would never betray or expose them. He never expected or demanded anything that could harm them or create problems with their superiors. First, he saw a human being and he helped that human being to respond to his love, kindness and wisdom. Even those who could be quite harsh and rejecting or simply not that interested, gradually, sometimes over hours, sometimes over years, mellowed and turned into friends.

As I see it, everything we achieved in Tibet became possible because of Rinpoche's approach; without that, the doors would have closed a long time ago. He was the epitome of kindness and generosity with his friends, as with everyone, and somehow over the years, they saw that he was no threat to anybody, that he was not taking anything away from anyone, that he was only bringing good. Once or twice he said, "The Chinese accuse me of being too close to the Tibetans, the Tibetans accuse me of being too close to the Chinese."

He knew very well that his was a precarious, difficult and complicated situation and the way he walked the edge of the razor blade

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was quite extraordinary. So often, I would hear from people (including high lamas) that no one else could have achieved what Rinpoche was able to achieve in Tibet. He understood both sides and every angle and he spread love, kindness, humour and wisdom wherever he went. He also had more courage than anyone I have ever known.



Consecration of the Tagong Guru Rinpoche Statue built by ROKPA in 2011.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

Another example of Akong Rinpoche's power to influence others I learnt of in a conversation with a government employee, a Chinese man who had been sent to 'take care of us'; really to keep an eye on us. Usually meals or meetings with government people were purely on the diplomatic level. Everyone is intent on being careful with their words so conversations were usually non-committal or

certainly impersonal. But this particular lunch turned out differently. They had talked about all kinds of things connected to our projects but then Rinpoche asked this official about his family. The one child policy was still in place in China at the time, so this man had only one son. I was able to follow their conversation because they spoke English with each other. Rinpoche asked if his son was troubling him, how were his studies going, or something like that. Suddenly it all poured out of this man. He and his wife were deeply concerned about their son, that he was not good enough at school, how they were afraid that he might fail, how hard they were pressing him to do his homework, how he would be up until midnight, and how very frustrating it was for them when he neglected to study properly ... All the worries of a father! But what you felt, what Rinpoche felt, was that man's despair; and now, he was no longer a Chinese government official sent for a certain task, he was a human being who was in pain.

Compassionately, kindly and not without humour, Rinpoche lovingly advised him,

“Your system is not a good system – you are teaching your children to become selfish because they do not have other siblings or other children to compare themselves with, or the opportunity to help and support others. If you put too much pressure on your son, it will backfire – just love him! Give him some space!”

And that was it. The man had tears in his eyes. Rinpoche's actual words were one thing, but his compassion was what really shone through. And no matter who was sitting at that table, everyone had tears in their eyes. That was pure Akong Rinpoche.

There was one Chinese man who was our driver and he was not especially congenial. In fact, he totally ignored those of us who travelled with Rinpoche, and although he was not actually rude, he was not particularly nice to Rinpoche either. He would stop the car when needed and he would open the door but that was it. He did not strike me as a very nice person and in fact I kind of disliked him. When I saw him at the wheel I would think, “Oh God, here he is again!” He never talked to us, he did not look at us and he did not really respond if we greeted him. And he was around us for years.

Then one day we got a different driver, and on the first dinner we had in that particular province, the previous driver was suddenly placed on Rinpoche’s right side. In the Tibetan areas or in China, where you sit at a table says everything, so if I was placed next to Rinpoche, I knew they respected me and they had given me the best seat. If they put me in the other room with the drivers, I also knew how they rated me – this was a good teaching for me. One has to learn a little humility, and in China it was unavoidable!

This time, they placed me at the opposite end of the round table – not a very good seat in their eyes but actually my favourite, because there I could watch Rinpoche and the others. It was always fascinating; you could learn a lot from their interactions. When that driver sat on Rinpoche’s right side, I could not help but think, how did *he* get there? So later, I asked Rinpoche, “How did that happen?” It transpired that he had been promoted and he was now the head of the group for which he used to drive. This meant that

all the time he was actually quite high up and he was a driver for a reason.

So after years of seeing him around, suddenly he was in a different capacity – he was there in the important meetings, he was there when the money was handed out and he was still not very nice to us. He just did not seem to like Western people very much, but one day, I had an idea. I thought, “He’s been travelling with us for about ten years, and now he has this high up position, why not interview him?” We had never dared to do this before, so I interviewed him and what he told me moved me to tears.

He said it was quite true that at the beginning he did not have much respect for any of us, including Rinpoche, but over the years he saw how incredibly hard Rinpoche was working to help people; how any time he passed his room there would be people waiting for him outside; how, even if the driver came back at midnight from an evening of drinking with friends, Rinpoche would still be up and working, yet he was always punctual and up very early. He also said that Rinpoche was always extremely amenable and friendly; that it did not matter whether you were the driver or the top boss. And then he said that he had deep respect and devotion for Rinpoche and would do anything for him. He added that because he understood that those of us who travelled with Rinpoche were serving him and making what he was doing possible, he even started to respect us a little.

For me that was just a wonderful example of how Rinpoche used to work by not confronting people, but by being who he was and changing people’s hearts; those hearts would change whenever the

time was ripe, so the skilful approach was to wait for something that could not be forced.

Preserving Tibetan Culture and Caring for the Environment

Another significant area of ROKPA's work in Tibet was a collection of projects to preserve the Tibetan people's cultural heritage by supporting the restoration of monasteries and temples, especially those monasteries that were repositories of the ancient wisdom of Tibet. For Akong Rinpoche, it was very important to protect the spiritual side of the Tibetan heritage so he focused on assisting universities, hermitages and retreat centres, which have increased in Tibet over the last few years. As he put it,

“As a Tibetan I want to help preserve Tibetan culture; but Tibetan knowledge is not only valued inside the Tibetan areas but it is also valued throughout the whole world more and more. Thus the preservation of Tibetan knowledge and culture benefits beings in the whole world.”

Akong Rinpoche's whole being was compassion in action, and that entailed the most basic of assistance. First he would give food to hungry people. After that the goal was to restore and reinvigorate Tibetan culture and uphold that culture to give people back the sense of integrity that they had been on the point of losing, or had

already lost. In the midst of their own homelands they counted for nothing. I remember one occasion when Rinpoche gave a talk in a nomadic part of the Tibetan area where most of the students were children of nomads and the first generation to learn to read and write. The children and their parents had heard a lot about government jobs and they all wanted one. Government jobs are safe; they are a guaranteed income for life. Who would not want that?



A warm welcome and scarf-offering from a young tulku.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

In that area many nomads' children moved away into towns, hoping for these government jobs. This would inevitably alienate them from their parents who know nothing about town life, whose concerns are completely different – the yaks, the cheese, the water, the rain and so on.



Namgyal Ling School 2008

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

Rinpoche gave the talk of a century at a school in Tibet, in which he fervently told them, “In the country where I now live, the food makes you ill. Here the food makes you healthy,” and he continued to talk about it in a way that sunk deeply into these children’s hearts. At the same time, he taught them to look after and preserve their land and their animals, to keep the integrity of who they are, to honour their parents and to uphold their culture and tradition.

In this talk, which lasted less than half an hour, Akong Rinpoche influenced the minds of those Tibetan children forever and instilled in them a respect for their roots:

“I have lived abroad for forty years. I have come here to let you know that in the West where I live, people who to you seem to have it all, struggle so badly; they have pollution in the air, they have pollution in the food, they have pollution in the earth. What they eat has no more nutrition, and they get terribly ill, then they need medicine and the medicine makes them even more ill.”

He went on to describe in very simple terms the sufferings we Western, so called civilised people have:

“People abroad, people in towns that you yearn to join, would be so deeply envious of everything you have. This is maybe the only place left or one of the only places on Earth where the air is clean, where the earth is unpolluted, where you eat the cheese and the yogurt that you yourself have made. It has profound nutritional value and makes you healthy rather than ill.

“The nomads and their work are very important for the population. So do not go back and disdain your parents and say, ‘You’re not educated, that’s why you’re stupid,’ don’t say to your mother, ‘you’re dirty, why don’t you wash your hands!’ The dirt does not matter, the dirt keeps her healthy. In my country, if they don’t wash every day, the smallest dirty thing makes them sick – here, it improves the health. You should never look down at or despise your parents because they are illiterate or not as clean as you may be here living in the school. Without them where would we be? It is they who provide us with milk and yoghurt and cheese and meat and tsampa, our staple diet. You all want to work for the government in town, have a steady job and steady income. But those government officials who you deem so high and important – what do they eat? They eat what the nomads provide! They cannot eat their paper, accounts or computers! Don’t say to your mother: ‘Why don’t you wash your hands more often? Or your hair?’ It is your parents who have provided everything for you – it is the nomads who look after the land and

the nutrition we all need. I live abroad and there people envy you! You nomads have the cleanest air – pure soil on which the best quality food grows. The butter and yoghurt are the best in the world and most of you are healthy and strong because of this.

“What you still have and most other countries and societies have long lost is enormously precious. Do not look down on your heritage, do not feel that being a nomad is not worthwhile and that it is better to have a job in town, which you consider would bring prestige and comfort. Any amount of income will not feed you if nomads don’t do what they do! Appreciate how precious your heritage is and go back to help your parents whenever possible! Remember that you are Tibetans – wear your own Tibetan clothes, stand by your own culture, wear your hair in the Tibetan style – don’t try to look like all the others. Being born a Tibetan you will always be a Tibetan – no matter what fashion you try to imitate!”

I will never forget that we came back to the same school a year later and one or two of the kids were asked to give a welcome speech to Rinpoche. One of the girls with very red cheeks and plaits in her hair, who had previously always worn those tracksuits with a Chinese logo that everyone wears, was now wearing a Tibetan dress with her hair in Tibetan style, and she stood up and gave a spirited talk.

She repeated nearly every word Akong Rinpoche had said the previous year. She did not say it as a quotation, but from her own heart, saying,

“I so much value my parents, because everything I am they taught me; I so much love my mother because through her I have learned what true love and unconditional love is; I so love my country because it is the earth that is unpolluted,” and so on.

Because I had been so deeply impressed by Rinpoche’s talk the year before, I was completely shaken up by this child quoting him almost verbatim, convinced that these beliefs came from her own heart. Yet again, I saw that Rinpoche’s is a spiritual teaching and training that reaches every level of a human being and it was an enormous privilege to see this year after year.



Environmental conference in Chengdu 2010

A Perfect, Blessed Connection: The Nuns of Kepcha Gön Nunnery

It was yet another long trip through the mountains of Kham, Eastern Tibet, in October 2003. We were travelling to *Tanag Monastery*, a very sacred place where *Gesar of Ling* had been, and where his hat and other pieces of clothing were preserved.

We had been on horseback for many hours and took a break halfway up the mountains in the middle of nowhere. Rinpoche's entourage consisted of some Tibetan friends, the King of Nangchen, a close friend of Rinpoche, and Namse the regional minister, and a few Westerners. We had a lovely picnic sitting on the ground, with the horses peacefully grazing around us.

Then, over the mountains four nuns suddenly appeared like phantoms in a dream; it was so unlikely that we would encounter other humans in this vast expanse devoid of human habitation. One of the nuns carried a big basket with something like doughnuts, as an offering for Rinpoche. It was truly astonishing! How had they known that Akong Rinpoche was coming and how did they know where to find him in this immense tangle of mountains and valleys? There were of course no phones anywhere in the area. They prostrated three times and then, with folded hands, asked Rinpoche to visit their nunnery. They needed his help.

The monasteries and nunneries were the only places where Tibetan was still used totally purely and Rinpoche felt an urgent need to support this unique and precious nunnery as part of his

mission to preserve the purity of Tibetan culture. Before leaving Tibet in 1959, Rinpoche had visited many monasteries and nunneries, but not this one, and Kepcha was one of the few remaining traditional nunneries, acting as a large retreat centre. In part because of its inaccessibility, many traditions and lineage transmissions that had been lost elsewhere, were still intact there.

On the spot, Rinpoche decided that on the way back from Tanag we would stop at the little known Kepcha Nunnery (also spelt Gebchak). From that moment onwards, both Rinpoche and I, as well as many others, were forever connected to this unique and amazing place.

On our return from Tanag we duly did travel to Kepcha Gön. On our arrival, ten or more nuns were standing on the rooftop blowing their *gyaling* (wind instruments), as a respectful greeting to Akong Rinpoche. Another hundred or so nuns in full regalia, with colourful pointed hats, and silky yellow and maroon robes, walked down the mountain towards us playing gyalings and drums. Holding a huge yellow parasol over him as a sign of deep respect and devotion to a sublime being, they led his horse up the mountain in procession to the nunnery. There he dismounted and was escorted straight into the shrine-room and onto the throne, where he sat immovable. Looking at him, no one would suspect the many hours on horseback, the back-breaking ascents and descents that lay behind him on this day; his mind in clarity and harmony, enlightened!

The nuns flocked into the dark shrine-room, offering Rinpoche the mandala and joyfully welcoming him; each one offered him a

kata, the traditional white scarf representing the offering of inner purity, and received his blessing.

Then, he was once again led to his horse and ever further up the steep mountain to the little house where he would stay for two nights. Inside was a small dark room with a high platform serving as a bed. The glass in the windows was broken, the temperature freezing. In the smoky kitchen outside, the nuns prepared his meal; first, the thick salted butter tea, *momos* (traditional dumplings), and enormous chunks of yak meat, which he had to tackle with a big kitchen knife. Outside it was getting dark.

The Khenpo (Abbot) of Kepcha, and Tsayang Gyamtso Rinpoche, the tulku of the original founder of Kepcha, both lived several hours journey away in Nangchen, but joined us at the nunnery. The Khenpo, who visited on occasion to give teachings, spent some time with Rinpoche discussing the new retreat buildings, which ROKPA would sponsor.

Gradually more and more nuns appeared in the room, at first hovering around the entrance, looking modestly at the floor. They seemed dumbfounded to be in the presence of Akong Rinpoche, but slowly, their unease melted, joking, laughing, beaming and holding onto each other, a feeling of sisterhood, togetherness, sharing. The men discussing and planning, the women happy just to be here, to practise.

The Kepcha nuns have a very special lineage that exists nowhere else. It is totally unique. Rinpoche explained that they have very special meditation exercises, done only here in Kepcha, some of which can only be performed by women, and are unknown anywhere

else. As a result these women are great meditators, one-pointed and undistracted; many of them have reached realisation over the years. The Khenpo told us about one nun who had died in the first year of this retreat. She touched heads with every nun there (the Tibetan greeting amongst people who have deep mutual respect), and said, "Now I have to leave – Guru Rinpoche has arrived." She saw him, and then she died. I was astonished and blurted out, "But in their *first* year! All these nuns who are here must come here already having achieved some level, no?" and Rinpoche just replied, "Must be ... When you do retreat here in Kepcha, then either you come out mad or you will have achieved something. There is no other way!"

The first job a nun gets after ordination is to look after the nunnery's cows, while she learns how to read and write Tibetan. Next, they follow the foundation course, which takes about two years. After that, they work in the kitchens for some time, before going on to one of the twenty-four retreat houses, each of which contains between eight and twelve people. Each retreat practice lasts about a year and the nuns move from one to the next. They do not have separate bedrooms. Some are allowed out for the day if there is a public ceremony, but all return to their retreat house at night.

Their life is unimaginably hard. It is so remote there, high up in the snow mountains beyond the tree level. There is no electricity and of course no heating, with temperatures in winter dropping to minus thirty degrees Celsius and draughts everywhere. Water has to be carried in huge buckets from a faraway river and then up the steep mountain. They eat only what their families can spare, which

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may not be much – some tsampa, a bit of butter and tea, sometimes not even that; tsampa and tea, tea and tsampa every day. Those who receive food share with those who have none; the elderly nuns are fed by the younger ones with family. No one complains even though illness is quite common.



Kepcha nuns

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

That night, after that long hard ride, I started to feel cold and really exhausted. Sickness seemed imminent. An unwanted visitor, a bat, flew right into my sleeping bag, scaring me out of a light sleep and keeping me awake for the rest of the night. Next morning, my whole body was aching. I wondered if a little rest might be possible to get over the flu, which was clearly starting to settle into my exhausted body.

But it was not to be. Early in the morning I was called to join Rinpoche on the roof of a building where he was checking a structure the nuns were themselves building. They had carried a mixing

machine weighing one ton by foot from the valley below, as well as a large number of cement bags. There were no horses, no yaks, just nuns reciting mantras while they carried loads far too heavy for the strongest man!

I was standing next to Rinpoche on the roof of the building, when suddenly he turned and motioned for me to come with him, telling my translator and his own attendant, who had been getting ready to join us, to stay behind. He asked if I had my still and video cameras with me.

“I want you to come with me into the retreat house and document the way these women do retreat. It is unique. It is dying out and it will be forgotten. I don’t want people to forget how it used to be in Tibet.”

Even now as I write this, I would say that most of this old and very special culture has already gone. Every now and then, a black and white film-clip turns up showing how things used to be, but as far as I know, no one else has ever recorded how these nuns from this unique lineage practised for centuries.

I ran and got my cameras and followed Rinpoche into the retreat. I was extremely excited and a bit scared, and also filled with a strange, enormous joy. Such a privilege, especially as a foreigner, to be allowed into this three-year retreat where even close relatives were never allowed to enter; but I was also extremely nervous, not sure whether I could do justice to this unique task – a chance which would probably never return.

I followed Rinpoche up a shaky, slightly broken ladder that led into a small anteroom with a dark little kitchen off to one side and

the practice room on the other. A rough ladder, just a tree trunk really, with tiny cut-out steps, led deep down into the nuns' yoga room, below ground. It was completely dark. High up, there was a little window with a dirty black curtain over it. This was where relatives, who could visit once a year, would occasionally speak with a nun.

We entered the practice room, Rinpoche, the Khenpo, and me. It was a very special moment for me, and doubtless also for the nuns. We were greeted by a nun with short hair who was acting as cook and caretaker. It takes a while for one's eyes to get accustomed after the brightness outside. Then through a door to the left there are twenty-one nuns sitting side by side in their meditation boxes with very old blankets and whatever other property they have around them. Their food is hung in bags on high nails to stop it being eaten by the rats and mice. All is very simple, very old. The wood is ancient, shaky and well worn.

In the centre of the small room is a large pillar which supports the roof and serves as a mandala, with photos and mantras stuck onto it; statues, offerings and *tormas* sit on little shelves built around all four sides of the wide pillar, with old photos of lamas and of HH the Sixteenth Karmapa and others I did not recognise. I photographed it all.

Around the mandala sat the nuns, almost on top of each other. When we came in two of them quickly got out of their seats to bring a little board, another ancient piece of wood, which they put right in front across the sides of their meditation boxes, so that both the Khenpo and Rinpoche could sit. Some of the nuns were

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right behind them, while the others had the honour of having them sit near or in front of them. Only a few of them could see Rinpoche, because the huge mandala stood in the way.



Kepcha nuns in retreat

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

Since it was so dark I was convinced that none of my photographs would come out. I also took a bit of video film, thinking it would come out completely black, but “What the hell,” I thought, “let me try!” To my surprise and joy, it actually did work: you can see it and you can hear it. Even though it was poor quality I gave it to Chico Dall’Inha, director of the film *Akong: A Remarkable Life*, because I remembered Rinpoche’s wish that the way the nuns practised there should be preserved and known. You can see that unique footage now in his film.

Rinpoche sat with the nuns and the atmosphere was very calm, very joyful. The women were young, in their twenties and below, with very long hair. Despite the unusual situation none of them seemed disturbed in any way. I could not help thinking how nervous I would be if I had been in there for a year and a half doing continuous practice, and then, without warning, receiving a visit from someone of the stature of Rinpoche; I would be freaked out by the others making noise when they should not have, or not making noise when they should. I would be nervous and worried about so many things, so for me, each one of them was deeply impressive. They were true yoginis.

Rinpoche's comment about them either going mad or achieving something major was unusual for him: he was always very cautious about making big dramatic statements, but it was clear that he felt enormously close to these nuns and loved them for their total dedication and diligence. He spoke to them and they answered very softly; they were all so deep in meditation, very calm and very remarkable. It was a wonderful experience.

We stayed for a while and they offered Rinpoche some rice with *troma*, a rare root that is dug out from often frozen ground, cooked and served with a lavish amount of melted butter and sugar on top, on very special occasions. I filmed and filmed and filmed. I even went down to the yoga room, down the perilous tree trunk ladder. I went down there and filmed the dark, since there was nothing there except the black dark, but because I filmed it, I remember it and how it felt very vividly.

Then, as Rinpoche and the Khenpo started to leave, I had such a yearning to spend a little more time with these amazing young women and said softly, “Rinpoche, I’ll just stay for a little while.”

I expected him to say no, but he just ignored me and continued down the ladder. I was overcome by a really powerful feeling, “Now I am in, I don’t want to go out anymore.” I do not imagine I could have borne it there for more than a night but I experienced such a deep connection with these women; I felt breathless just being in their presence. I did not want to go out into the bright light and talk to anyone else about how it was. I felt I could not bear that. I shrank away from breaking the spell.

Now, we were out in that little anteroom near the kitchen where there was not even enough space for all the nuns to stand. There was this feeling of “Hey, NOW we can talk! Now we can say what we feel”, and the nuns became giggly young women; they stood around me and touched my hair and my face, as if they were saying, “Are you real?” Although I do not speak Tibetan, somehow we communicated. We giggled and then I said, “I would like to take a picture”. That picture of these long-haired, bright, beautiful, amazing, strong women still hangs in my flat.

It was strange, because I was happy just to take a photo of them as they were, but one young nun went into the tiny greasy kitchen and somehow found a fresh bunch of green leaves and held it like you hold a flower when somebody photographs you. I do not know what it was or where it came from because normally they do not have any vegetables, but I think that photo is probably the best one I ever took; because of that strong young woman

with a living green adornment in her rough hand, their dark red robes, long black hair and beautiful shining eyes. It is a beautiful picture.

Later, I went back inside with them, where we all sat together; they took me into the middle and called the cook, who took some photos of us all. Back home, when the photos were developed, I looked at them and I could not recognise myself, which I thought was peculiar because I knew I had been there. For quite a while I scrutinised each face until I saw, "Ah, that's me, there!" I seem to have simply melted into them. It was an unimaginable experience, a perfect, blessed connection.

Valuing the efforts of these devoted nuns, Rinpoche wasted no time in providing what he knew would help them. Soon after this trip he asked one of his relatives, a female Tibetan doctor, to move to the nunnery and start a clinic to tend to both the nuns and to those living in the next valley. ROKPA has sponsored the doctor and the cost of the medicine for many years. In time we also built a clinic with a separate storeroom for the Tibetan and Chinese herbal medicines as well as lodgings for the doctor. As for the three-year retreat house that we had visited, it was badly damaged in the 2010 Yushu earthquake. ROKPA has now also built a new three-year retreat centre with twenty-four retreat cubicles as well as two elongated buildings with twelve rooms each, in one of which the nuns do their individual long- or even life-retreats. The remaining building houses the other nuns and includes a yoga room and other shared rooms.

More recently, following the tragic death of a young nun who could have been saved had there been a way to get her to hospital quicker, ROKPA purchased a station wagon so that emergency patients could be transported more quickly to the nearest hospital, which is hours away. The doctor and her helpers also use the vehicle to reach remote areas where they gather medicinal herbs, which they make into the Tibetan medicines used in the clinic.

So that is Kepcha. Each year when we returned to Tibet there would be more projects. I fundraised, and when we got home, I would give talks and tell people about them, but also about Kepcha. There were always people who were not Buddhist, who had never been to Tibet and had no particular connection. And there were always a few who were stunned by the story of the nuns of Kepcha and wanted to sponsor them, who wanted to help.

The Guru Rinpoche Statues

After the Yushu earthquake in 2010, Akong Rinpoche unusually decided to build nine Guru Rinpoche statues. Guru Rinpoche is one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism and is venerated by young and old. Normally, Rinpoche prioritised meeting people's essential and basic needs, but the building of these statues, like everything he did, had more than one level. There was always more going on than any normal person was able to see.

The decision to build these statues began in my flat in Zurich, where Rinpoche met with a Tibetan seer who had lived in Switzerland for many years. He had gone to *Lhamo Latso*, a famous oracle lake near Lhasa, where people experience visions, and where, in particular, senior Gelugpa monks supplicate for guidance in the discovery of reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas. The seer had a vision of the Tibetan letter A floating on the lake with many Guru Rinpoche images. He heard a voice that told him that if a person whose name started with an A were able to build nine large Guru Rinpoche statues – that if that person were able to complete them there in Tibet, then peace would come!

For years the seer searched and contacted lamas whose names start with an A, but none was willing or able to help: either they did not have enough money, or had no idea how to achieve the task, or they felt the story had nothing to do with them. Then one day the seer, still intent on finding the solution to his vision, was searching the internet and stumbled on the Samye Ling website. And there it was, Akong Rinpoche's seal with the Tibetan letter A, formed exactly as it had appeared on Lhamo Latso so many years ago.

He found that Lama Yeshe Rinpoche was the abbot there, someone he remembered having befriended in India after their escape in 1959. So he phoned his old friend, told him the story, and asked him to request his brother to build the nine statues. Lama Yeshe was not sure whether the man on the line was in his right mind! He replied that obviously he could not ask his brother to do such a thing after nothing more than a mere phone conversation. "But," he confided, "my brother occasionally travels to Zurich for ROKPA

meetings and stays with Lea Wyler. You can try and meet him there and make the request yourself.”

The seer arranged to meet, having no idea what impact it would have on Rinpoche, myself and on so many Tibetan people who would eventually benefit. They met in my flat. Rinpoche listened very carefully to the story and replied that if another, specified high lama whom he named, would be willing to confirm the vision, then he would indeed take on the responsibility of building the nine statues in the Tibetan Highlands.

A few months later they went together to see the lama, who duly confirmed that the seer was no charlatan, that the vision was authentic, and that building the Guru Rinpoche statues would have huge benefits for beings. That day, I was serving the two men lunch and withdrew to let them converse in private. I had no idea what an historic occasion that meeting was. Akong Rinpoche informed me about my new additional task; I was already fundraising for over 120 projects in Tibet alone, never mind those in Nepal and Africa, for building Rinpoche’s new monastery in Kham plus the upkeep of all his monks and nuns there for decades. This additional task was daunting to say the least and I was both confused and troubled!

Why would we suddenly build statues when people were hungry and there was such a pressing need for education? How would I justify it to our sponsors? Try as I might I could not understand it. It transpired that to build even one of the statues would be exorbitantly expensive, more so than any of the other projects we had taken on so far. It seemed impossible to me. If you say to people,

we are helping children who live on the streets in the middle of winter and they need a coat or food, then money comes sometimes without too much difficulty, but you want to build a statue? – No way! Yet somehow it worked. Rinpoche would often say to me, especially in his last years, “I rely on my karma.” The statues were his karma – and it was my karma to get the money!

But why build Guru Rinpoche statues in remote areas, where there may only be scattered houses or a little village? When Akong Rinpoche explained the many levels of meaning and benefit to me, I stopped worrying and magically started to meet the right donors with the right motivation and the right understanding and for years – whatever funds we needed for building these powerful statues arrived at the right time and in the right way.

In these areas, there are also many old people who are alone, who barely leave the house and may not have children to look after them, but they would circumambulate a Guru Rinpoche statue. For these people, it would also serve as a place for social gatherings where they could meet other people; it would help them to stay healthy, because they would have a reason to walk about in the fresh air. Then others would also come to do pilgrimage and because of their presence, local people could start businesses, selling food, opening shops and so on. Gradually, more and more people would appreciate the fact that they can do *kora* in this special place, knowing that such a statue would carry blessing.

Recently I was in a really remote area where the most beautiful Guru Rinpoche we ever built now stands. This place is so very remote that when I arrived, monks came from every corner and

took pictures of me on their phones, which struck me as a strange role reversal!

Then someone explained it was because they had never seen a Western person before. This place is so remote, desolate and poverty-stricken that the monastery barely survived; hardly anyone came there to do pujas or make offerings as they do at the seat of a rinpoche or a high lama. For a long time they had struggled just to feed the monks. That is until the Guru Rinpoche statue was installed. Now the area is affluent and the locals all have strong faith that the power of Guru Rinpoche and the blessing carried by the statue are responsible for changing the karma of the place: continuous and painful scarcity has changed to a sense of sufficiency and affluence for everyone there.

The person responsible for organising this particular statue I remember as a simple middle-aged monk who suddenly appeared while we were attending an official dinner in Zatu (Province of Yushu – nearly 4000m high) some years ago. He stood quietly by the door and seemed rather shy when invited to the table. Although someone pulled up a chair for him, he refused to eat or drink. After the meal he spoke earnestly to Rinpoche. Later, Rinpoche told me that the monk had had a powerful dream in which Guru Rinpoche appeared to him very clearly, in a particular location on the monastery land. There were very clear signs and upon waking, he was absolutely certain that a statue of Guru Rinpoche had to be built there, but of course he had neither money nor the means to fulfil his dream. Then one day, someone told him about an extraordinary Rinpoche in the West who was helping many people and who had

been known to build Guru Rinpoche statues in different areas of the Tibetan Plateau. Thus the meeting was arranged. Rinpoche had no doubt that this had been an auspicious dream and that I needed to find the money to build this statue.

When Akong Rinpoche told me something like this I would be deeply moved and filled with absolute determination to fulfil his wish, whatever the cost, but I could also be a bit schizophrenic about it. One part of me was convinced without a shadow of a doubt that what Rinpoche wanted to achieve was absolutely the right thing and that it was a great privilege to be asked to help with such an important and worthy cause. But there was always also a place in me that was terrified and filled with doubt. Again and again it happened, despite the abundance of evidence provided by Rinpoche and my own experience that the sphere from which we usually act and experience is not the only one, that there are other realms of experience that have nothing to do with logic or Swiss precision, with how things work in the 'normal' world. This was not the 'normal' world, this was the experiential dimension of bodhisattvas. Sometimes I caught a brief glimpse of this, which would be enough to push me into action.

Until this day I have no clue how the money for these statues appeared, but appear it did, and how it appeared was as miraculous as the effect these statues have on those who encounter them and upon the environment around them. I have no doubt that the money would have continued to come until the vision was fulfilled, had the process not been interrupted by Akong Rinpoche's sudden death.

On the sixth of January 2009, Akong Rinpoche and four other tulkus consecrated the first huge statue in the Province of Yushu. In sub-zero temperatures and hazy weather, the crowds arrived from near and far in order to experience the official inauguration of the majestic Guru Rinpoche statue. Thousands of Tibetan men and women took part in the splendid ceremony, together with abbots, monks, Tibetan local authorities and Chinese delegates. About thirty monks, headed by five reincarnate lamas gathered in a low yak-hair tent, where they performed a puja, including prayers for the welfare of all beings in the locality, the country as a whole, and the world at large. Long Tibetan horns were sounded, drums beaten, conches blown – a stirring mixture of spiritual music and the monks' bass voices.

Then followed a ceremony of blessing outside in front of the statue. For the deeply faithful Tibetans this was a magnificent day, which they will remember and talk about for years. Many queued for hours to receive a personal blessing from Akong Rinpoche. The new landmark, built on a site of spiritual power, is as high as a five-storey building and dominates the entire valley.

A monk from the area told me that afterwards the whole area improved tremendously. Where previously every single year yaks would die due to heavy, prolonged snowfall and extreme cold, since the construction and consecration of the Guru Rinpoche statue, these heavy snows and storms have ceased and not a single animal has died! "It is quite miraculous, and people will not believe or understand," he said. But, having followed and observed Akong Rinpoche for so many years, having experienced what he can do

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and how profoundly his healing touches beings, I believe it. No further questions asked.



First Guru Rinpoche statue built by ROKPA in Choedrak,
Nangchen, Yushu Province

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

By the time of Rinpoche's death we had built six of the nine statues and we hope the work will continue in the future so that all nine statues can be completed soon. Together with ROKPA, Rinpoche will definitely fulfil the prophecy when he returns, completing the statues of Guru Rinpoche in nine different locations, and bringing peace in accordance with the prediction.

The Fruits of Rinpoche's Vision

Sometimes on our travels it would happen that, having ended up in a hotel in some town, suddenly a young Tibetan woman would walk towards us with a big smile and bow to Rinpoche with an offering scarf in her hand and say, "*Tashi Delek!* I am Yangchen Lhamo." And it would turn out that she had been taught in one of our ROKPA schools. After sponsoring that school for many years, class after class, we had the great good fortune of seeing the wonderful result of our work: here was a young woman who, without Akong Rinpoche's help, would now be washing clothes in an icy river and going to bed hungry. Instead of this she was now able to look after not only herself but also her whole family. I would often be in tears during such an encounter.

Similarly we might come to a monastic college (a Shedra) and discover that the khenpo had been a ROKPA 'child' now teaching succeeding generations in the wisdom of their forefathers. Or to a medical clinic where the doctor would turn out to be a ROKPA child who had been sponsored from grade one up to his doctoral degree. We would often hear that the 'ROKPA doctor' was the favourite, as they were especially kind and generous to their patients. In this way they were able to give back to society what they had received through Akong Rinpoche's kindness. This two-fold benefit was always wonderful to behold. It can be called long-term benefit since this mindset is even now being passed on to the next generation.



A ROKPA doctor

This talk by Dr Tempa, one of Yushu's orphanage graduates, in the House of Commons in London is wonderfully revealing of the profound benefit of Akong Rinpoche's work of service:

"In 1981, I was born into a nomad family with five children; we lived in a yak-hair tent and often suffered from cold. When I was about eleven years old, my father's lungs failed, and a few months later my mother also died.

"Shortly afterwards a representative of the government came to the village and we learned about the existence of a new school for poor children. I will never forget my first ROKPA days: for the first time in my life I got bread and two warm meals a day. My favourite subject at school was the Tibetan language. I was a hardworking pupil and won a prize every year.

“Later I followed a five-year education in Tibetan medicine in order to become a ‘barefoot doctor’. In summer, I did translations for physicians from Canada and Great Britain, which gave me interesting insights. When new laws came into effect, I continued my studies at the university for a further three years and graduated as a physician.

“When in 2007 I participated in a conference in Yushu, I learned that in Tibet many of our precious medicinal plants are in danger of extinction. So, thanks to ROKPA, I was able to obtain further training in biodynamic farming in Germany, and in Scotland I followed a course in biodynamic gardening. As soon as I returned to my country, I started teaching Tibetans how to grow medicinal plants and save endangered species.

“Without ROKPA I would still be leading a miserable life. But the education I received made me autonomous and able to take on responsibilities. I want to be a useful person and help destitute and sick fellow human beings.”

Rinpoche helped establish a clinic in Zatu, a very remote and high town, started and run by one of the girls from the first Yushu Orphanage class. She was deeply inspired by everything she learned and always felt, like most of our students, that she was so very lucky to have had the chance to be educated. She knew that without Rinpoche and ROKPA’s sponsorship, she would not even have had the chance to go to primary school. As it was though, she became

a good Tibetan doctor and she married a good Tibetan doctor. Then some ROKPA supporters from Europe visited them to teach them dentistry. As a result, her husband is the local dentist now, where there had never been one in the past. This means people now mostly get to keep their own teeth, even after the age of thirty-five or forty! In remote Tibetan areas you often see even younger people with teeth missing and many older ones may have no teeth left at all!

In the spring of 2009, while Rinpoche and I were back in the Tibetan Highlands, he met twelve of his Yushu students. As they waited to meet him outside his room I was deeply moved to see Rinpoche's vision becoming a reality. Here were his students, all doctors now, most of them married with children and ready to go on to the next level of their studies. For two to three years they would come back to Xining for forty days, twice a year, to get a degree of higher studies as doctors. This will enable them to get better jobs and earn a better income. And they were still so devoted and loving to Rinpoche, just as he was to them.

Also during that visit, Rinpoche received a grant application from Dr Tsechu, another former Yushu student. Dr Tsechu was working in a Tibetan hospital in a remote area of Yushu Prefecture, which did not have enough money to get Tibetan medicines; all they had was Chinese medicine and not enough of that. Dr Tsechu sent people out to collect herbs and then made his own medicines, but since his funds were insufficient he only managed to do a little. But he was determined to make a proper *Tibetan hospital* out of the current so-called Tibetan hospital, so when Rinpoche and his dele-

gation came to Yushu, Dr Tsechu travelled many hours and waited for Rinpoche for days in order to make his request. ROKPA sponsored him for two years, so that he could stock up on Tibetan medicines and get his clinic going.

All of these people have benefitted enormously from Rinpoche's and ROKPA's help, because those children had all come from such poor and suffering families. They had grown up being hungry, without proper clothes, having to share everything and to sleep on the ground in a nomad tent. Children would have to look after animals and carry heavy loads of water even from a very young age. They had had such a hard life and so when they came to school, it was simply paradise for them. It meant having regular food, it meant getting proper clothes, it meant getting knowledge; it meant learning and studying instead of standing in that ice-cold river washing somebody's clothes. So I think their hunger for knowledge was so big that later they developed into very successful people: it was not just down to us, I think the benefits happened because both sides gave everything they had, and that union of aspiration that they be free of suffering at least on the physical level – that wish truly bore great fruit.

When we reflect on the impact Rinpoche had on so many people it really is quite remarkable. Dr Tsechu, for instance, started off as a lonesome nomad orphan and ended up as a doctor in a hospital – and not only that, but also that his integrity and his determination has been such that he went on to help many people during his life as a doctor in a remote area of Tibet.

Remembering Rinpoche, Our Father

In 2016, I had a wonderful but also sad time with our students in Yushu. We went on a lovely picnic and many former students still living in the area came to meet me and to remember Rinpoche. Some of them came from hours away to see me and each other again; one or two brought their husbands and quite a few brought their children and it developed into a kind of memorial day for Rinpoche. They talked and laughed and remembered and cried and we all missed him so very much, but we were together and we did not feel alone in our grief. And this is the power of Rinpoche: even now he brings us together and reminds us why we are here – to help others!

In another place in the Tibetan Highlands, I met a group of our previous students after a gap of many years. Fourteen from a class of over thirty came (the rest of them now lived too far away). This meeting was also very moving. I remembered them from our yearly visits to their school and them growing up year by year, but still just students sitting on benches in class and standing up when asked a question by Rinpoche (mostly on Tibetan grammar or philosophy). It was a long time since we had been able to meet and when one of them heard I was in the area, the group planned this dinner and decided to take me and my friends out for a meal.

I suppose it is normal for now grown-up ‘kids’ who went to school and received further education, who are married, with jobs and earn money, but I was deeply moved when they put their money

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in a pot to pay for the meal, all totally unanimous that we were their guests! Perhaps I never really got used to the miracle Rinpoche brought about by nurturing these young people, who would otherwise be labouring in the fields as nomads; or nowadays they might have been herded into those artificial towns which have sprung up in many places, for nomads who had to leave the land and be settled, at a loss as to how to spend their days.



Akong Rinpoche with children supported by ROKPA in 2006.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

After the meal they told me their stories and what they had been doing since we last met. All fourteen of them had become either doctors or teachers. How happy Rinpoche would be to hear that!

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Later that evening I showed them a video our friend Bill had made about Rinpoche's life, along with video clips he had taken from 1982 till 2013. They all sat, mesmerised, with tears in their eyes. Each time I meet our previous students we talk about Rinpoche and show photos of him; we remember him, we pray to him. These occasions are like spontaneous memorials.

Another time I went to one place where we had a memorial gathering with all our students. Through ROKPA sponsorship in a medical college every single one of them had become doctors, the whole group.



Akong Rinpoche with Lea Wyler at Kawa Kharpo Mountain

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

Of course now they are grown up, they must be in their mid-thirties. Like our Yushu students Rinpoche had been visiting them

annually, nurturing and teaching them over the years. Asked what their positions were now, they replied, “I am now the director of the local hospital”, “I am a cardiology specialist”, “I am specialised in leprosy medicine”, and so on. With one exception, all of them had become doctors. It was really wonderful, also moving and also sad, because Rinpoche should have been there. We had many encounters like that. Rinpoche’s vision of offering the children a medical education had proved itself in every aspect: it now benefits not only each individual and their family, but many thousands of people for decades to come.

ROKPA in Nepal

After the pilgrimage with Akong Rinpoche, and driven by my experience of poverty there, I started what Rinpoche called a penfriend project, which went on for about ten years. While in India, I had taken photos of needy people (mostly children) and written down their stories and on my return, I started looking for individual sponsors in Switzerland or wherever else I was. We supported children from India, Sikkim and Nepal but neither Rinpoche nor I was satisfied by this, as only those fortunate enough to cross our paths could benefit, excluding other desperately needy and hungry people.

Starting out in Nepal – The Soup Kitchen

In 1989, the work in Tibet was yet to start and here I was, reliving the kind of grief I had experienced when my mother died all those years ago. This time, the cause was the tragic death of my life partner, killed on the streets of Brazil in very unclear circumstances. Once again I found myself in complete despair, unable to pull myself together. I felt like giving up. But somehow, through the darkness appeared a small flicker of light. I recognised this misery as the same powerlessness I had felt when my mother died all those years ago. All these deep questions coming up, yet no answers; how to go on in life, who to be, what is it all about, what is the point of it all? And it came to me that when I had felt this way before, ROKPA had begun; that sometimes good things come out of bad. I realised that in order to go on, I needed to do something that would help others and in doing so that would also help me.

I needed to start a project in which I could completely immerse myself. I spoke with Rinpoche and he suggested we start a soup kitchen to feed the destitute in Boudha through the winter months. He explained that there were many tensions between the Nepalese and the Tibetans in Nepal. When the Tibetans first arrived as refugees in 1959 and 1960, the Nepalese welcomed them and were very generous in allowing them to settle there. But within a short time, the Tibetans became relatively wealthy because they were very innovative and quickly spotted business opportunities, such as starting carpet factories, in which they employed Nepalis. At first

this was not a problem but as more and more Tibetans based themselves in Nepal, they began to build large and impressive monasteries, often even with golden roofs. This is very much part of the Tibetan culture and tradition and is a sign of respect for the Buddhadharma; Tibetans and others from Southeast Asia will often choose to donate towards the construction of monasteries and temples, rather than to sponsor the needy.

But suddenly, the previously destitute guests and refugees were wealthier than their hosts, creating a lot of jealousy among the Nepalese. There was so much poverty in Nepal with a large number of street kids and displaced people, and Rinpoche felt it would be both wise and useful to do a project there. If we started a soup kitchen, some of the monasteries and other Tibetans would join in and this would help appease the Nepalese. Unfortunately, although our charity projects there have thrived, this did not happen.

Prior to the Cultural Revolution, there had been no need for charity in Tibet, as families would take care of orphans or of any member who had fallen on hard times. Social structures were pretty much intact and people took good care of each other. This 'new' idea of donating to charity or helping street kids had not yet been integrated into their way of being.

Rinpoche suggested that we meet up in Kathmandu, which I had visited once before on the pilgrimage with him in 1980 and again, alone, in 1988. But I knew hardly anyone there and had very little idea how the country worked, so the idea that we would set the project up together came as a relief. I remember sitting in my living room in Zurich after that phone call and feeling so reassured. It

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was Rinpoche's project. It was his idea and he knew what we needed to do. All I had to do was to raise funds and follow his lead.



Visit to ROKPA Children's Home Kathmandu April 2007.

I started trying to raise money, appealing to people to give donations for this unknown project called “Soup Kitchen”. It was a little strange to fundraise for something I was not very clear about, but telling people that their donations were going to put food into hungry mouths actually struck a chord at that time. For me, it was a relief to finally get going, whatever the project turned out to be, as long as it was with and through Rinpoche. After so much grief I was finally in action, doing something to help others rather than being swamped by my own sadness.

By the time the travel day came, I had raised about twenty thousand Swiss Francs and I headed to Kathmandu to meet Rinpoche. Due to a delay in Delhi, I arrived very late at night and when I eventually arrived in Thrangu Monastery, where Rinpoche and I were both staying, I found he had gone out to dinner. By the time he came back at about ten pm I was practically unconscious from exhaustion. I went into his room and he said, "Oh, you're late!" All I could do was nod. I was so tired and he continued, "I'm leaving tomorrow morning at five o'clock."

The shock woke me temporarily from my stupor.

"But Rinpoche," I said, "I don't know what to do here; I thought we were doing this soup kitchen together. I don't know what to do or how to start!"

Seeing my distress, Rinpoche called Kunchen Lama, a Thrangu monk, with limited English but whom he instructed to help me. He explained to me in English what to do and I wrote it all down, or thought I did. But the weirdest thing happened. I was so shattered that I fell fast asleep yet kept on writing. Luckily, Rinpoche then explained everything to Kunchen Lama in Tibetan, and at midnight I finally went to my bed to sleep. At four o'clock, I woke myself up again to say goodbye to Rinpoche who flew off to Lhasa to see his family there.

The Soup Kitchen: Early Days

Kunchen Lama and I were supposed to start work that same day but when I finally woke up, I could not remember a word Rinpoche had said and there in my notebook was this writing that I could not for the life of me decipher. Luckily Kunchen Lama knew what was needed and I started looking for somewhere to borrow pots. I asked practically everyone I came across for advice until I discovered a Nepalese charity in town that agreed to lend me some. We bought the rice and other things we needed and trundled them across town in a makeshift wheelbarrow.

Thrangu Rinpoche had kindly allocated a couple of helpers to talk to the local government officials and we were allocated a little strip of land along the path down to the main stupa where, at the time, there were no houses or shops. There, we set up the fireplace and the pots under a rough shelter of bamboo poles and some plastic. The monks brought along a man called Shiva from Namo Buddha to help with the cooking, and he brought another couple of people to come and sleep there to guard the place. I bought some hay for them to sleep on, since I was determined to spend all the money on food! Later, when we decided to continue the project, we bought beds and bedding for the cooks and these days, we even have a little house for them.

So we started. They cooked the rice and daal – this being the Nepalis' staple diet – and then the monks carried these enormously heavy pots down to Boudha Stupa. I had a big ladle with which I

spooned out the food. Soon we realised that we had neglected to think about plates. To my astonishment the people were so desperate that they asked us to spoon the steaming hot food into their clothes! The women would open their chubas (wide Tibetan dresses), while the men would take their dirty shirts out of their pants, and ask us to put the food there.

Our beneficiaries were very happy because they all slept on the ice-cold ground around the Boudha Stupa, and in the mornings, they were freezing. To be served a hot beverage first thing warmed them until the sun came out. They loved us and we loved them. The street kids spent their days begging, stealing and being very naughty, but at least now, when they woke, there was hot sweet milk tea and bread. At that time, we had local bakers producing a few hundred extra loaves for us every day. Nowadays, our ROKPA bakery provides the bread buns for the soup kitchen, hundreds of them daily.

In the beginning, and for over twenty years, I did much of the work myself. We had occasional help, but mostly it was just the monks and me that first year. After that we recruited volunteers from all over the world, at one point from eleven countries! We got the help we needed and provided the volunteers with an insight into a different side of Nepal, which, as a mere tourist, one would not normally see. They were helping to cook the food and distribute it to the most destitute of Boudha – the children, the women begging in the streets, the drunkards (who finally got some hot food into their stomachs), and the disabled.

At that time, we poured the tea into plastic bottles: ROKPA may have been one of the pioneers of plastic recycling! I used to go around the tourist places (there were not that many hotels then, just a restaurant and one or two other guesthouses) and asked the tourists to collect their old plastic water bottles for me. We cut them across the middle creating two cups. Everything was done at minimum cost and we tried to use every resource we could get from those who were wealthier. I also asked the tourists for any old clothes they no longer needed and then I went and fetched them for the street people. In those years I also went around the Stupa in my free time and literally begged money from tourists so that we could buy more food for the poor.

In those days I would reach the Stupa at about seven in the morning when the people who had slept outside were just waking up, shivering and feeling miserable. The monks and I served them breakfast and, conscious of Rinpoche's words from the pilgrimage, I knelt down in front of each person, smiled at them and offered them the food, creating a moment's connection between us. I am adamant that it be done the same way today.

"Don't think, 'I am helping people', think 'I am serving people!'" Rinpoche had said to me.

In 1991, I returned to Kathmandu with a small group of volunteers and officially opened the ROKPA Soup Kitchen, which continues to this day. Lots of volunteers have come and gone over the years; many of them met Rinpoche and never forgot the deep impression he made on them. Some of their lives were deeply impacted and a number of them changed their life's direction and

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embraced professions focused on helping those in need. For example, one of the first volunteers opened her own children's home and now looks after 400 kids; another started a school for destitute children in Kathmandu and some others became fundraisers for other charities.



ROKPA Soup Kitchen Nepal

Courtesy of Lea Wylar

After twenty years of guiding this project and learning much in the process, Rinpoche handed it over to Margrit, another volunteer, to free me up for other work; she is still successfully guiding the ROKPA Soup Kitchen today.

A Thousand Children

One fateful day during the beginnings of the Soup Kitchen, I came across a little boy on the street; he was even unable to sit up to take the hot tea in his hands because he had been so badly beaten up. His nose was bloody and his shirt blood-soaked. His sweater was thin and he was freezing, wearing only sandals in the bitter cold. He looked so miserable! I sat down next to him and tried to find out what had happened, but of course he couldn't speak any English so I asked a passer-by to translate. I discovered that, like so many young street kids, he spent the day begging to make a little bit of money. The previous evening, the 'mafia gangs' – also street kids – had demanded his money. This was common; if a kid refused, as this boy did, because he had worked hard for that money, they would try to take their sweater off them. If they failed, they would cut it off with a knife, beat them up and take their money. I felt terrible for this boy. He was in a really bad way, so I took him to the hospital where they said he was very ill and suffering from various infections. They gave him antibiotics and I administered the first dose.

Not knowing what else to do, I took him to Pam, an American woman I had heard of, who was looking after street kids at her home. But when I phoned to check on him the following day, he had disappeared. Later I heard that Pam was a Christian missionary who picked children up to convert them and that if a boy did not want to pray she would beat him. I certainly was not going to

continue with her, but now this poor little boy was gone and I felt responsible. He was no longer just a street kid; he was someone who had inadvertently entered my life and for whom I had taken responsibility and I was really worried. What would happen if he didn't take the antibiotics?

I asked the other street kids if they knew this boy. His name was Bidur and I promised them extra food if they found him. They checked in all the places where the street kids usually hung out but there was no sign of him. By now, I was really really upset; I imagined him developing antibiotic resistance and dying. The full-on Jewish guilt trip was on the road!

At lunchtime the following day, everyone had eaten and we had put down the empty pots. As I chatted with the others, I looked over towards the very large rice pot and saw the lid moving. I thought I was hallucinating! You know how it is; you look away and then you do a double take. I walked over and lifted the lid and there was Bidur, scratching the leftover rice off the sides of the pot. He was scratching off the rice stuck around the rim with his nails and shoving it quickly into his mouth like a little squirrel. Since then, that is the image of hunger for me, but it is also the image of paradise.

That first night, I took him back to the monastery with me and looked after him in my room. I put him on one of the beds, covered him up and went out. When I returned, he was lying on the floor, protecting his head with both his arms – he was not used to sleeping in a bed! The next day, I went to buy clothes for Bidur – to my own astonishment I had turned into a mother overnight!

To my great joy, I found that Rinpoche was back, so before Bidur was to go to bed, I took him to meet Rinpoche. Rinpoche's wife, Yangchen was there and like the wonderful mother that she is, she said,

“Oh, what a sweet boy, what's your name, darling?”

I explained to Rinpoche that I had found this boy and did not quite know what to do with him, but that he needed a roof over his head. I was very emotional, but Rinpoche was quite unmoved. His only response was,

“You're a guest in this monastery and you bring in your own guests? You cannot do that!” So, next night I gave Bidur to the cooks to look after at night in the soup kitchen 'tent' with the hay.

Rinpoche eventually got his visa for Tibet and left us again and, while he was away, I took a few other children under my wing. This was when I started to look at children as beings especially in need of my help. I looked around and wondered why nobody else was doing anything to help these neglected street kids. “How can all these people just walk past them? Why is no one doing anything?” Eventually I realised that if no one else was going to do it – and surely somebody had to? – then obviously that should be the person asking the question! Only much later did I hear this quote from Mahatma Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see in the world”.

Once I started taking in children I could not stop. Instead of it being scary and weird (as I had first felt about the soup kitchen), it seemed the most natural thing to do. This was what I was born to do; this was what I had come into the world for. I still feel that strong sense of intent and fate, some kind of power that has urged

me on. And now I recall Rinpoche's then-mysterious response to me on the steps to Rumtek when we were on pilgrimage. I had asked him if I should have a child with the man who was then my partner. He replied,

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," and then continued, "You will have a thousand children."

Then, when I had thought of having a child, it was not so much that I wanted to be a mother but simply that I had received so much love from my own mother and now that she was gone, I was overflowing with it. I had to pass it on and how else could I do that, other than by having a child of my own? Rinpoche's enigmatic response had ensured that I was free for what was to come.

That year, in 1990, I took on six more boys and now I was a mother of seven. This had happened in the shortest of times, and in Rinpoche's absence.

Initially I put them in the 'tent'. By then, instead of being just a roof we had made it into a proper tent. The cooks slept on the floor on the hay and I just kept putting more children in between them. These dirty little children had great fun with each other. At first it did not seem to matter so much, but I did eventually wash them all and gave them clothes, though that took a little longer.

One of the really big moments of that year was Rinpoche's return. Not all the children had proper clothes yet, as there was very little money, but I bought a comb, made a parting in their hair and flattened it down with water so that it was neat and glued to their heads. When I knew Rinpoche was on his way, I lined them up in the corridor, each with a kata in their hands.

When he arrived I bowed to him, gave him my kata and told the boys to do the same. He was a bit taken aback and asked, “Who are they?” I replied,

“Rinpoche, these are all kids I’ve brought home from the streets and it looks like they’re now my children!”

He blessed each one of them and the kids were very respectful and very happy and crowded around him until he went to his room and I sent them back down to the soup kitchen. Then I went into Rinpoche’s room and asked him how I should continue. I had seven boys and no clue about children. If they had been girls, maybe I would have had a better idea, but boys? I had no idea how to deal with boys. “What am I going to do with them?” I asked, and in his deadpan way Rinpoche replied with one sentence: “Don’t start something you cannot finish.”

I was quite devastated, having hoped for a bit of praise and instead receiving what appeared to be a reprimand. It seemed obvious that there was no way to ‘finish’ what was happening here. Once again, my enthusiasm and my habit of doing things from my gut rather than my brain had landed me in trouble. Rinpoche’s words brought me face-to-face with my deepest fears and insecurities about not being good enough. My first thought was,

“Oh hell, what have I done now? I’ve gone too far,” quickly followed by, “These children are already with me, there’s no turning back now! I can’t very well throw them back out onto the street!”

And then I realised that was not necessary. Instead, I decided, just as Rinpoche had always advised, “Do the best you can, but if you can’t succeed, remember that worry does not solve the problem.”

Since then, this has been my constant mantra in just about everything I tackle. Before, my insecurity meant I was constantly holding back and worrying about right and wrong – whom to help and whom to avoid. Now, other words of Rinpoche’s suddenly got through to me:

“You give yourself up entirely. Everything that is happening to you is to help you develop compassion, it no longer depends upon whether or not you like someone, on good or bad moods; you appreciate everything, you feel loving kindness towards all people, bad people, ugly or beautiful, all are your teacher. There is no longer good or bad.”

The following year at a talk in Samye Ling, Rinpoche said,

“The best thing ‘we’ did last year was to take seven children from the streets.”

I was at once overjoyed and vindicated and even more determined to continue on this path life had shown me. In taking these children into my life, I had unwittingly found a way to share the love my mother had lavished on me and to support Rinpoche in fulfilling the commitment he made in the cave during his escape from Tibet.

Today, I can see that ROKPA has become an auspicious blend of Rinpoche’s unique skill and charitable intentions and my own need to work with the challenges and blessings my life has dealt

me. My devotion – and even my insecurities and my stubbornness – became the tools that Rinpoche used to set ROKPA on a firm footing. His words made me more awake, more aware of the consequences of my actions. His every word was a teaching – if only I could understand it; sometimes I could, and sometimes I just couldn't. And if I couldn't, it hurt. But if I did understand, its benefit was for life.

I started to do the rounds looking for schools, with the kids in tow, but we were shown the door at two or three schools. They did not want street kids. So I went to buy clothes for them, cut their hair and made them look a little more respectable. Then I took them to other schools; when the headmasters asked where the children came from, I replied that I did not know, “But they found me and now they're my children. I am taking care of them, so you don't have to worry about the fees. I will bring you the money.” Eventually, I found Tempa-la, who agreed to take them into his school but I only had enough money to pay for the first two months.

“The mind is always free and fresh. The brain has billions of possibilities. If you have the responsibility for 10 or 20,000 people these are only a tiny percentage of the world population,” was another of Rinpoche's teachings. Taking these words to heart, I went back home and begged from everybody in order to provide for 'my' children. Seven children were perhaps too many for a totally inexperienced mother, or maybe not enough! Not long after taking the first children from the streets, I had 22 of them in one of the few boarding schools in Boudha in those days, but to my shock, it

turned out that they were more malnourished in the paid boarding school than when they were begging in the streets! And so, on a single day, I took them all out of boarding and brought them into my home, where I had one large empty room.

Obviously, we needed a home of our own, and luckily we found a house nearby for rent. From 1994 till 2005, the boys lived in that house and the girls in mine, all meeting up for study and food. Each year, I took more children off the streets and each child got a cosy bed that came along with a soft cushion and a stuffed animal. After a while there were so many children that at least two of the little ones would share a bed.

Starting to find Tibetan schools for the Tibetan children and Nepali schools for the others, I grew used to this mother-role. I was able to tell each child's story back in Switzerland and bit by bit, I raised the funds for their education and their day-to-day needs.

Since 1990, I have returned to Kathmandu each year, sometimes for months on end, to develop our projects there and five of these first children are still in my life today; Bijay is the General Manager of the Children's Home in Boudha and of other ROKPA projects in Nepal.

After a while, it became clear that my hungry lean kids were growing into strong, healthy ones and both of the houses I had rented were bursting at the seams, yet the owners were also never quite sure for how long we would be able to continue to rent. We needed a proper ROKPA children's home! And as happens when one has the great good fortune to be included in the mandala of a great bodhisattva like Akong Rinpoche, we found a place, right

next to the boys' house where a piece of land was for sale. Rinpoche said to buy it.

Naturally, I protested – there was no money! Everything we had was needed for the children's education and the Soup Kitchen but Rinpoche just smiled and the money came. We bought the land and the money ran out. What to do? We needed more magic! One day, a couple came to see me. They had been attending a ten-day retreat on compassion, when they started to wonder about the validity of merely meditating on compassion, when every day they encountered begging and neglected street kids. They asked me what they could do and I replied,

“What we need is a permanent home for our children!”

And again, the magic happened. A few months later, the couple wrote to tell me they had persuaded a large donor agency in Holland to donate over half the money if ROKPA could raise the rest. In 2003, Rinpoche and the trustees broke the ground and together, we celebrated that proud moment.

Rinpoche advised us on the plans, the execution and every step along the way; I asked him about how to help traumatised children, their education, everything! “Be like a doctor! A doctor is there when the patient needs him – he will never run after the patient.” (More advice that has guided me through all these years!)

I asked him about their diets, how to organise their beds and study rooms, the meditation instructions I felt they should get ... “Don't force anything! Let them do what they want to do!”

And to the children, Rinpoche gave the simplest advice on how to be good people. He never told them they should become Buddhist,

he just said, “Never differentiate between rich and poor. Treat everyone the same, with compassion. Help everyone, even your enemy. Never fight except with words. Be kind to animals – feed them, don’t beat them. A child who follows this advice is a true ROKPA child.”

Every year our ROKPA children waited for the day Rinpoche would come to visit and sometimes, he came several times. Sometimes he gave a talk and at others, he would simply answer questions.

“As long as you remember my wishes: to practise Dharma regularly, to help people regularly, even if you are not capable of helping, as long as you are not an obstacle for other people, as long as you are not a cause for somebody becoming unhappy, then you are doing something very good for other people.”

All of this is deeply engraved in the children’s memories and some have told me, “Whenever I am in trouble or scared I remember Rinpoche’s words and become calm.” Even without having officially taken Refuge (the official ceremony to become a Buddhist), it is clear that to this day, Rinpoche is a Refuge for all of them. Large pictures of him grace the walls of our three buildings so his presence is forever with us. It is always heartening to hear older children who knew Rinpoche initiate a newcomer into the world of ROKPA, by quoting him, for example, “Taking what has not been given means stealing,” or “If you help yourself you have only helped one person, but if you help another one, you will have helped two!”

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Courtesy of Lea Wyler

On March 5th 2005, Akong Rinpoche opened the beautiful large ROKPA Children's Home in Boudha, with enough space for all the children who have come and gone since then. We had a big party with Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, tulkus and the representative of the Swiss Embassy, as well as many other VIPs; other guests included friends, our own children, of course, and many of the beggars from the Soup Kitchen who had heard there was entertainment and nice food to be had! All were joyfully welcomed and it turned out to be one of the highlights of our work. It was a proud and enormously satisfying moment.

I had moved into the new building with the children a couple of weeks earlier and Rinpoche helped me decide on furnishing, advising me on each and every aspect of making the most of our large new

building for the future of what we assumed would be hundreds, maybe thousands of needy children. His blessing is still felt in this house, as youngsters leave to start their own lives outside the protection of the ROKPA Children's Home and new ones arrive. Even today, many visitors, most of whom never knew Rinpoche, comment on the "special energy" in this and the other two associated houses.

That year, we also celebrated twenty-five years of ROKPA and I took ten of our most talented kids to Europe on a dance tour. We visited Switzerland, Germany and the UK and appeared on several stages in each place, thus making ROKPA better known in these countries. The children were housed with host families with whom many of them are still in touch, giving both parties an enriching glimpse into another culture.

The children basically dramatised their own stories. Rehearsals took place in Samye Ling and Rinpoche dropped in every single day as the stories of their lives unfolded in dance and song. He never commented but allowed the children's stories to take shape naturally. His daily presence was an incredible empowerment and encouragement that benefitted the performance, not to mention everyone who was there, enormously. Later Rinpoche travelled on tour with us for part of the way and watched many of the shows. The tour was so successful that we repeated it four more times and Rinpoche saw every performance at least once.

On 4th March 2005, the day before the grand opening of the Nepal ROKPA Children's Home, Akong Rinpoche gave this speech:

“I’m not going to say very much, because all of you know each other and I don’t know very much – I know less than you. Since you asked me to say something though, it’s my duty to give a talk.

“I’m very happy to share tonight Lea’s birthday and also to prepare the celebrations of 25 years of ROKPA’s existence. And ROKPA means to help those who wish to receive the help. It’s not like we are missionaries and coming to you to change your beliefs. We’re here to share what we are able to do. We are not here to change the policy of the country, we are not missionaries, we are not able to change the law of the country but we’re here to share what we are able to do for a short time. Like food – we give food for the people that we think need it, or those who come, without any conditions, those who come to receive our food, whether they are poor, physically or mentally, it doesn’t really matter to us. We are not politicians, so therefore, we don’t ask: ‘You have so much money in your pocket, why are you begging to us?’ That’s not our – it’s not our business. Our business is who comes, and thinks they are poor enough, and to help them for that particular day. And it’s all of us, we can say just because we’re born, when we’re born we don’t come with all our wealth, we came naked – everybody is the same, rich or poor, everybody comes the same way. But somehow, some people have more luck than others.

“And we talk about how poor, how bad street children are – like many of them, they sleep in cardboard boxes and when ROKPA picks up the children from the soup kitchens, and they eat what they can find, what the people threw away into rubbish. I also had the same

– same problem, not for a long time or for many years, but for one month [during my escape from Tibet] I cooked my own shoes, eating shoes – no food. So I have experience, I share your feelings – that’s why I always want to start to help somebody have something to eat. I don’t have any further kind of expectations, how they grow up, what they will do, but in human life it seems to me very important to have something to eat every day, maybe one meal, maybe two meals.

“But long-term for life is education – it’s very important. I had some education, so I don’t eat leather shoes every day! Now I am able to help you, but you are able to help others, because we have the same experience. It’s very important. In my way of thinking we need the experience because children, if they did not have the experience, they don’t know what it means to be poor, what it means to be hungry, what it means to share their happiness with others. You need some suffering in childhood, and the more suffering you had to experience, you will be more matured, so you can do many good things for the benefit of others.

“This is my belief, and I hope the ROKPA children will share this experience. And your belief – I don’t want you to believe a religion as such if you don’t want to, that’s not important. ROKPA is not trying to sell religion. I don’t want you – you believe what you want to believe! If you want to believe religion, it’s okay, you believe. If you don’t want to believe religion it’s up to you – as long as you wish to help others, it doesn’t really matter whether your friends or

your enemy, you should always help them. And you share your happiness and you do the right thing, the positive things. And don't kill people, don't steal things, don't tell lies, be honest to you and be honest to others – then I think that you're doing the right thing. And I hope that all of you do the right thing and help all other people, those who have difficulties. But your job is not to try to change politicians, I don't believe that. I don't believe to – to change other people's religions, but to feed every day, to look after every day, and to share everything, whatever you have, your wealth, to other people. If you do that, I think you will not make any mistakes. Thank you."

These were important words spoken with great kindness and many of those present that day continue to keep them in their hearts and try to act accordingly.

The ROKPA Guest House

The day after the opening of the Children's Home, I finally had a moment to just sit quietly with Rinpoche. Previously, this had been quite impossible, as Rinpoche had very kindly taken over the organisation of the event, which he accomplished like the amazing bright star he was. He made lazy people work and busy people achieve; he made dull people active and overactive people creative; and he showed each of us how to hold such an event successfully, while keeping one's calm and being kind to everyone.

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A huge amount of work and stress could finally be digested and there was an expectation that things would calm down; maybe there would even be time for a little rest for me? I should have known better.



ROKPA Guest House

Sitting with Rinpoche, reliving that special day, I suddenly remembered to share some information I had nearly forgotten during all the frantic activity. A Swiss lawyer I had been ‘encouraging’ for the past two years, now wanted ROKPA to do a project in his name. His idea was to start a computer school somewhere out in the country, basically a great idea, which I now shared with Rinpoche. I also mentioned that with this massive building project behind me, I was reluctant to start another right away. I revealed the offer in a ‘by the way’ manner not expecting Rinpoche to take much interest in it at this point: he was leaving in a few days and other big projects awaited. To my amazement, Rinpoche said,

“I met an old acquaintance I know from the time we were in India, after our escape from Tibet in 1959, going around the Stupa early this morning. He talked to me about his house nearby that he wants to sell. Want to see it?”

Our hot tea was left behind on the table and we walked towards the Stupa, turned right and right again, and all at once, there we were; out of the hustle and bustle of Boudha and into an oasis of beauty and peace. It was a tulku’s family home; a nice house, a beautiful garden with a bodhi tree in its centre, a patio and an open garage. Perfection! We stood on the balcony of the first floor and Rinpoche looked down into the beautiful garden. It was clear that he was enchanted with the place and equally clear that it was too good an opportunity to pass up! When I realised that it was only separated from the Children’s Home by the open piece of land, on which our kids used to play, all my doubts evaporated.

The deal was done in the shortest possible time. The price was agreed and the contract signed, even before Rinpoche left the country just a couple of days later. A match made in heaven! The price was high for those days but, thanks to Rinpoche’s fabulous diplomacy, quite a bit lower than I would have managed. And – here I was – with the pleasure and burden of not one, but two houses! Then came the tricky bit. This was not what ‘my donor’ had had in mind and now real money needed to be paid.

I breathed deeply in and out before I dialled his number with a pounding heart. If he was not okay with this – and with the contract already signed – where would I get this huge sum of money?

Rinpoche's magic again – the generous lawyer agreed immediately. Another problem solved!

Later, we enlarged the house and turned it into the ROKPA Guest House. And every year, from the nineties, till his last visit in February 2013, Rinpoche came to stay and clearly liked the place very much. He would do kora at six every morning; some of us would join him and many people flooded to him there to receive his blessing. Afterwards, Rinpoche would often shop for statues from renowned master craftsmen and for other items for the various Samye Dzongs and for his monastery, Dolma Lhakang.

But figuring out how to develop the Guest House was not easy. None of us had any experience, let alone training, in managing a little hotel. But mostly, our ROKPA kids rose to the challenge and kept it afloat. Then, for about a year and a half, Rinpoche's son Jigme Tarap came and helped transform it into a viable project, upgrading the rooms and service with his good taste and feel for quality.

Gradually, the ROKPA Guest House became known as a calm oasis just three minutes from the Boudha Stupa, where guests can relax and recover from the madness of Kathmandu, or the exhaustion after a trek. A number of our ROKPA children have contributed to our success, having taken jobs in housekeeping, management, cooking, baking and in service. Our last manager, having received an excellent education through ROKPA, recently opened his own chocolate shop and what felt a little sad at the time, has come to work in our favour; he now buys all the cakes for his shop from us and visits nearly every day. He also employs

our older ROKPA kids, giving them work experience and a small salary, helping empower these young adults.

The ROKPA Guest House has received the seal of excellence (9.6 out of 10) from different booking agencies for many years now and its fame has spread, mostly by word of mouth. Even strangers comment on the ‘special atmosphere’ they have never felt in the many other places they have visited in Nepal. I smile and nod. Though one can easily observe how professional and pleasant it is there, I know without a shadow of a doubt that the atmosphere comes from the fact that Rinpoche’s presence is still felt where he stayed over the years. To this day, his belongings are in his room, waiting for the third Akong tulku to reclaim them. In the audience room is a beautiful stupa, (like the one at Samye Ling), created under the direct supervision of, and generously sponsored by, Drupon Khen Rinpoche Karma Lhabu. It contains a gao with some of Akong Rinpoche’s relics and a statue bearing his likeness also sits on his seat. The room is very much alive and vibrant and is regularly used for practice.

Our ROKPA kids are now giving back and at the same time earning money for their families, as they work in all the areas of each project; in the Children’s Home, in social work, in the restaurant, the bakery, the Guest House, in the hospitality training programme, in management and in the Women’s Workshop. ROKPA’s projects in Nepal now form a complete circle of nourishment; our kind sponsors pay for the food in the soup kitchen, the soup kitchen pays our bakery for the buns, and the bakery gives the profit to the Children’s Home, which in turn, uses this money

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for the children's education – many of whom have come from the soup kitchen. A perfect merry-go-round!

In 2012, we bought the land between the Children's Home and the Guest House and this is where the Akong Rinpoche Memorial Centre now stands, housing our Hospitality Training Centre, the Women's Workshop with its Sewing Training Centre, seven extra hotel rooms and two magnificent apartments for rent, all of which help cover the expenses of the purely charitable projects. In 2020, we started building a Technical Training Centre, teaching those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds a vocational craft with an ethical basis.

Without Akong Rinpoche's presence in our lives up until his tragic death in 2013 and indeed since then, none of this would have been possible!



Akong Rinpoche Memorial Centre

In a way, all of us are, and certainly were, amateurs in the fields we now work in. I have never received any formal training to do what I have actually been doing for forty years now. It is, of course, partly thanks to the truly professional people in my office, that ROKPA was able to go from strength to strength in Switzerland. With good motivation and only the wish to help, but without experience and a professional skill-set, it is not possible to create an organisation that is highly respected and long lasting.

When I expressed my worries about the continuation of ROKPA without the two of us, Rinpoche responded,

“Most organisations will last 30 to 35 years and then disappear. Then others appear. That is how it works. Let’s see ...” At the time of writing, ROKPA is entering its 45th year, a very real tribute to the skill and diligence of Akong Rinpoche and his ability to inspire others. He may not have started all the projects in Nepal, but he is the inspiration behind everything that happens and his blessing is felt every step of the way.

I believe that everything I have described happened spontaneously due to the charisma, the compassion and the greatness of Akong Rinpoche. Unless you knew Rinpoche well, and so are already aware of this, you need to understand that we are not talking about an ordinary human being like you or me. Rinpoche truly demonstrated bodhisattva activity. He presented himself as an ordinary, simple person but in truth he was not, as is evidenced in the vastness of what he achieved in his quiet, humble way.

Akong Rinpoche was the heart – the essence, the knowledge, the strength, the power and the vision behind ROKPA. I was the mover

and shaker, the communicator, the fundraiser and public speaker. I worked extremely hard and was, and am I hope, a person (amongst many others) who carried out Rinpoche's wishes in the field of charity; in fact Rinpoche wished us to aspire to spiritual charity, which means that the giver, the helper, the facilitator, never expect anything in return. We should try to do everything we do within the context of the Buddhist ideal of compassion.

“Spiritual charity should not have any question about whoever is there wanting help. As soon as you investigate [someone's need] charity becomes artificial and is no longer spiritual charity.”

I had my own ideas and inspiration of course. Rinpoche allowed me to live my dreams, to start my own projects, always pointing me in the direction of positive mind, to achieve for the sake of others and to accept good and bad equally; to stop thinking of me, me, me, but to always think of others and how to be useful to them.

“You don't have to understand why things are as they are – why like this and not like that. Turn the switch around, from negative to positive, that's all! It takes ONE second! That's all.”

This powerful connection with Akong Rinpoche drives every action of all those of us who work on his behalf. It is because of this connection that ROKPA and Rinpoche's other projects have grown into what they are today; not because we have a very good computer system (which we do!). All of us come from different walks of life,

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different cultures, different backgrounds and have different baggage but nonetheless, we, his students, all gravitated towards this extraordinary being. Somehow, I and many others recognised that here is someone who can help me get out of the mess that my past and present lives have gotten me into.



At ROKPA Soup Kitchen, Kathmandu Nepal

Courtesy of Lea Wyler

That mess was something that we understood was there somewhere deep inside us. But we could also see that around Rinpoche there was clarity and beauty and kindness – all the things we aspired to. So we decided to try to practise what he taught us and to be what he encouraged us to be. Because he was there, each one of us, those who brought the most and the least money or other contributions

to our charity – because of him and the inspiration he gave us, all of us became a little bit kinder. Without him, I know I would have remained deeply buried in the mess my life was before I met him. Now, I am maybe only sixty-percent buried in it! Because of him and my extremely fortunate connection with him, I was able to do all the work I have done, to benefit others a little and that knowledge makes me truly happy.

“Just be like an artist: do every day as best as you can that day. In the end the whole painting is good.”

“For me, to help others is the most important.”

ROKPA in Zimbabwe

by Vivienne Kernohan

Akong Rinpoche's principles of spiritual charity equally found their expression in Zimbabwe through the work of highly-dedicated individuals there. Two of Rinpoche's students from Zimbabwe were present at Samye Ling in 1990 at important meetings, in which Rinpoche expressed his intentions in the field of charity. Thus in 1992 a trust was established on Rinpoche's recommendation in Zimbabwe to oversee his activities there. In 1994 land was bought close to Harare city centre, which remains the focus of the charity efforts.

During his first formal visit, Akong Rinpoche spoke on the importance of making sure people had food. Individual Buddhist members took up the call and this resulted in a number of charitable initiatives. Trish Swift joined with Sister Igna of the Harare Catholic Church and took donated food to families living in makeshift cardboard and plastic houses in a squatter camp on the outskirts of Harare. At the same time, another key founder member, Pippa Cope, was working with groups of mothers of disabled children in

her job as a community worker with a Non-Governmental Organisation. From these humble efforts, the *Food and Support Network*, later to become *ROKPA Support Network* (RSN), was formed as part of ROKPA Trust.

Rinpoche's first formal visit to Zimbabwe was in 1994, when the country's economic decline, aggravated by the HIV epidemic, was already in progress. Adult AIDS deaths rose to over 600 a week in the late 1990s, resulting in many orphans and the older generation being forced to take over caring for their grandchildren. By 2009, Zimbabwe had the lowest life expectancy in the world.

ROKPA Support Network really began working as a fully-fledged charity at the beginning of the 2000s, when the vast majority of the population was unemployed and living in dire poverty. In just a few years, it grew to be a recognised faith-based organisation, running a number of programmes sponsored by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Catholic Relief Services. Dealing with the most needy, RSN was running effective and well-organised programmes providing food aid to those living with HIV, which resulted in our being awarded a food distribution contract by IOM (the International Organisation for Migration) and WFP. RSN also participated in a large UNICEF managed programme, the 'National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children', which ran from 2006 to 2010.

As elsewhere the ethos engendered by Rinpoche was to maintain the dignity of those seeking help, so while we have developed criteria to allow us to identify the most needy, due to limited resources we

do our best to treat everyone who comes to us with respect, warmth and compassion. Rinpoche also said,

“Help is not a two-way bargain, but a hundred-percent from your side. When you give help, you mustn’t ask for anything in return.”



Visit to centre for parents of children with disability in Epworth 2006

Batsiranai – One of Our Success Stories

Lynn Poole, a visiting American Buddhist, mentored the *Batsiranai Cooperative* for many years in the early days of RSN. Batsiranai means “helping each other” in Shona. It was formed of a group of mothers of disabled children, who embroider detailed local scenes and animals on a wide range of products. The group began in 1998, when fourteen mothers of disabled children formed a support group, helped by ROKPA. Their collective talents, especially for embroidery, inspired them to begin making handicrafts to provide for their families. Today, Batsiranai is a successful women’s artisan group that

creates embroidered and painted handicrafts for the international fair trade market.

RSN supported Batsiranai to buy the two houses from which they now operate. These are used for their children's day care and physical therapy, as well as workrooms and offices for the embroidery projects. The centre provides hot meals daily and has a vegetable garden to feed the members and their children. Members have undergone a range of business-related training with RSN's assistance, from general business management to creative thinking. Batsiranai now has around a hundred members and an elected management committee; it is self-sustaining and operates independently from RSN, with only occasional guidance.

Rokpa Support Network's Programmes

On Akong Rinpoche's recommendation the three main wings of his activity in Zimbabwe were eventually separated, with one trust running the spiritual side, one for charity and another for Tara Rokpa Therapy. ROKPA Support Network was registered as a separate trust in June 2009. Rinpoche's advice to charity representatives was not to decide what people need, but to meet the needs that exist.

Today (2019) RSN helps well over 2,300 people and often their whole families, focusing on four main project areas that help the most disadvantaged in our society, especially children:

- Support for children and families with disabilities (based at Chitungwiza Relief Day Care Centre, with After- and Pre-School clubs, school fees assistance, nutritional support and summer camps).
- The Drop-In Centre (medicines and medical treatment, counselling and other emergency help).
- Food security – through low-input gardening for parents with disabled children and community members in Chitungwiza.
- Tara Rokpa Therapy – eight groups are running, each with an average of fifteen members and a waiting list for new groups.

In Zimbabwe people with disabilities and their families are often shunned both by society and by extended family. Fathers of children with disability often abandon or divorce their wives, leading to social isolation; families often spiral into extreme poverty. Initially, RSN worked with seventeen groups of parents of children with disabilities across Harare, to improve their families' nutrition by growing vegetables; we supplied training, seed and other inputs, monitoring the group and individual gardens on a regular basis. Our main training programme was in low-input organic gardening, teaching good nutrition, the growth and use of medicinal herbs, and the methods to create nutrition gardens, such as planting for water retention. Training was also provided in basic disability management, HIV and AIDS prevention and care, along with income support skills in projects such as embroidery, batik, peanut butter, candle, soap and floor polish making.

Caregivers Workshops for parents of kids with disabilities, and those caring for orphans and other deprived children were a significant feature between 2006 and 2010, when the fallout from the AIDS epidemic was at its worst. The caregivers were often frail and impoverished grandmothers or older children looking after their siblings. In five-day residential workshops they discussed how to care for and protect disabled, and/or orphaned children, and how to provide psychological and emotional support. Workshops also dealt with vital legal issues such as birth certificates, wills and property. This training was an impetus for the Tara Rokpa Therapy programme, which has been described in a previous chapter.

Zimbabwe's many economic challenges result in a great deal of food poverty, so from the beginning, RSN's efforts focused on providing food. In the early years, we bought staple food in bulk, and sold it on to the mothers of disabled children's groups at a discount. Then from 2005, as the numbers of people asking for food began to grow rapidly, we began providing food for the impoverished. These included, for example, those on antiretroviral medication and TB treatment, families with disabled children, orphans and their carers and the many homeless and unemployed. A monthly programme of providing 10kg food baskets fed over 700 people and their families for several years until 2009, when the government took over all food distribution. We continued to provide other essential items for the needy, however, such as medical assistance, blankets, school fees and so on.

The Drop-In Centre has an open-door policy and tries to help anyone who asks, especially important as greater numbers of people

become destitute and despairing. If we are unable to give the material help requested, we offer a compassionate listening ear and try to refer individuals to other sources of assistance. The numbers assisted each month have grown each year. In 2016 it was about seventy people a month, in 2017 well over a hundred. The Drop-In Centre has never advertised its services but has become a household name among the needy in the city.

Meanwhile the desire to help those suffering from HIV developed into a radio series called *Talk Time*, which aimed at increasing acceptance and coping strategies for HIV. After attending a few *Talk Time* sessions and openly discussing the issues raised by HIV, we found that people were more willing to go for an HIV test, and to accept their results, confident that there was support at places like RSN. It provided a safe space to come to terms with a diagnosis and gain the skills to help others in their communities. RSN then developed a 14-week programme called *Positive Living*. Groups met for one full day a week, to share their feelings and experiences, learn yoga for relaxation and learn basic information on HIV and AIDS, such as how the virus is transmitted and can be prevented; the benefits of HIV testing and the disadvantages of not getting tested. Group members support each other psychologically and many testify how this programme changed not only their outlook, but their whole lives. *Talk Time* and *Positive Living* graduates went on to set up HIV support and *Living Positive* groups in their communities, fulfilling the RSN dream of enabling those we help to help others in turn.

As mentioned earlier the HIV support program has evolved into a very successful Tara Rokpa Therapy programme, whose healing and relaxation sessions proved so beneficial for those living with HIV.

Finally, we should mention our life skills camps, which directly benefit disadvantaged children and are an extension of our education work. The camp consists of a four to five day trip to a National Park for around twenty-five disadvantaged children aged twelve to sixteen. The activities focus on reproductive health, HIV prevention, gender awareness, children's rights, and better communication; participants also play sports, and get to explore their artistic and drama skills. We aim for equal numbers of boys and girls, both able-bodied and those with disabilities. These camps help teenagers to learn new skills, play games, share experiences, eat well and get the chance to just be carefree children. For many, it is the first time they have experienced 'the bush', had a proper holiday and seen real wild animals!

Few in Zimbabwe are currently able to afford to offer their services free of charge, and so we are grateful for ROKPA's recognition of this, as well as their ongoing support as we strive to realise Akong Rinpoche's shared aspiration of "Helping where help is needed".

Changing Ourselves – Changing the World

by Lea Wyler

When ROKPA was twenty-five years old Akong Rinpoche was asked in an interview, “Have you achieved what you set out to achieve? And what more would you like to achieve?”

“I think ROKPA wishes always to achieve more – to wish to help the whole world if we can, but of course the whole world’s benefit is a big dream! When we start ROKPA projects in the beginning, there is sometimes the feeling that we are achieving what we are wishing to do and sometimes the feeling of failure, because people take advantage of you. Like for example the soup kitchen: sometimes quite rich people come to you and ask for food, sometimes for sponsorships for children’s education. Some Tibetans are very poor, they ask you for money; some Tibetans are quite wealthy; they also ask you for money. But then, I think when we look at pure charity from the Buddhist point of view I have always said, ‘You shouldn’t look at who is begging from you. Some people may be poor in the physical sense; some people

may be poor in their mind. Your job is to give to all those who think they are poor. You are not personally to say: you have the right – you don't have the right.

“... [Sometimes] you realise you made a mistake, ... but this realisation is part of the learning process, and we can improve in the future to make sure that we are helping people who need help. And [for some projects] like education ... we cannot see [results] in the first five or six years. Our projects in Tibet, for example, last ten or eleven years. Now the children have grown up and some of them are even the best students, they have good marks! Before, they slept in the street. So when you see one or two of them [and what they have become] it gives you the courage to go further.

“I think if we want to change the whole world, society, what we do in the West is to change policy, but we do not try to change humans. We always rewrite constitutions, saying ‘We want to improve this – now we have to have a new constitution.’ We hang up a piece of paper. That will not change the whole world. Changing means each individual has to change: if we change, then the world changes. There is no such thing as a world which does not depend upon humans. So I think our idea [should be] we have to change ourselves.

“We don't have to go to demonstrations [with this idea of wanting] to change the world, [whereas myself] ‘I don't want to change!’ So I think there's this difference: here each individual [is] hoping to change [others but] we don't want to change. For example, ‘greens’ want to

protect trees but when you come back to your own home you try to get the most expensive wood for your furniture; if you want to protect the trees outside then you should not use any furniture made out of trees. So you can't give up your desire, but you want other people to give up their desire. I don't think this is possible: changing ourselves is the most important."

In an interview with Akong Rinpoche for the twenty-fifth anniversary of ROKPA he shared these words:

"I feel that a human life, in order to maintain that life, you have to have three main things: water to drink, food to eat, something to wear to protect you. Thirst and hunger and clothes: these are the basic three things, which are required [for] everybody, either rich or poor – the same things. All the other things make the difference between rich and poor. Wealth is good for humans to have, but even if you don't have that you will not die.

"The baseline, what is very important, is that if you stop drinking you will not survive, if you stop eating you will not survive, if you do not have something to wear you will die. So those three things seem to me to be very important. But in order to maintain those three things you have to have some kind of education.

So the people who have more than they need can share with those who have not. But this comes through understanding and understanding is part of education I think. So therefore education is the

second most important and [it needs to be] the right kind of education. So what we should not do is merely spend all our time trying to accumulate wealth which is not that useful.

“So I think ROKPA’s aim is not to change the political side of things, and anyway we are incapable of doing that, but we can benefit some few people, those who are suffering. Also I think we can try to educate with loving kindness and compassion as the basis of our education, loving kindness and compassion towards other people and loving kindness and compassion for oneself.

“One of the things I always say to children in my talks to them is, ‘Don’t always be looking for a good education, but rather look for a good mind, because if you have very good education with a bad mind you will not be of benefit to anybody. But if you have a good mind, a good heart, whatever you learn will result in true benefit for you and for others. So I think that’s what we are hoping to do. And sometimes we are able to achieve this in certain places, it may not be necessary to achieve it all the time, but this is our aim.”

I Rely on my Karma

One day, when I was worried, yet again, about not being able to get enough money for the projects we had, let alone the new ones Rinpoche was always taking on, Rinpoche and I had an exchange.

Again and again, I would panic, thinking, “I’m on the edge, I’m at the absolute limit of being able to raise funds. I can’t do more, and it’s quite likely that next time there will be less money. And then another project! Twenty-thousand here, fifty-thousand there, ten-thousand there, it adds up (we’re talking Swiss francs here, not Chinese yuan!). I have to get this money somehow. Many of our sponsors pay twenty, fifty or one hundred Swiss francs a month which of course does not add up to the large amounts needed, and on top of it all, there was the money now necessary for the statues ... How do I get that kind of money?”

So I asked Rinpoche, “How are we going to manage? I don’t know how to manage.”

Finally he said to me, “How long have we been doing this work together?” It was twenty-six years. He went on, “How many times have you not been able to give me the money I needed?” The answer was ‘Never’. “So you always manage to bring me what I need?” This was true. “So what makes you think that next year will be different?” And that was that! On another occasion he responded to similar anxiety on my part with, “Oh, I rely on my karma – if it’s meant to be, it is going to happen.”

A little bit brazenly I replied, “Okay, if you rely on karma you don’t really need me. Then I can go on holiday, finally!”

“Well, it needs someone to do the job.”

I said, “Yes, but if it’s your karma, it’s going to happen anyway.” And he said,

“Maybe you’re part of that karma!”

Even though I was thrilled to hear this, I also sometimes desperately wanted, needed a break. But Rinpoche had different priorities. He knew that ROKPA's opportunities to help in the Tibetan areas of China were coming to an end; every minute counted so there was no time for holidays, for rest or relaxation; not for Rinpoche and not for me.

Our Last Conversation

My last conversation with Akong Rinpoche was on the 6th October 2013. It had not been a very good year for ROKPA, financially or in other ways. Less money, more problems – changes of staff at our Zurich headquarters and I had been very ill with massive burnout syndrome. This resulted in my being admitted into an Ayurvedic clinic for treatment and rest and I was thus away from the office for quite some time. It had been planned that Rinpoche would go to Chengdu ahead of me and I would follow about two weeks later, as usual. But for the reasons cited above, this year it was not certain that I would be able to travel with him. The doctor advised against it, as it would mean going to very high altitudes and it was to be very cold, while the problems with diet and the like would not help with my recovery.

Rinpoche, however, always had a different way to heal people. When I was still an actress I had started to have asthma again, just as in my childhood. It became so bad that once, on stage, in the

middle of my soliloquy, I was suddenly unable to breathe out. I had to leave the stage to inhale my medicine. It was very scary and, though, luckily, the audience thought it was part of the performance, it left me traumatised and I found it difficult to go back on stage after this.

My doctor had prescribed a very potent inhaler, filled, of course, with chemicals. I was at home when another massive attack hit me. Inhaler to my mouth, I was just about to press down on the capsule to release the potent chemical when I felt the urge to call Rinpoche. I felt very strongly that the chemical could actually harm me instead of helping. In answer to my question, “Should I, or should I not?”

Rinpoche replied, “Don’t. But now go and run for a mile!”

Every Western doctor would strongly advise against this. The normal advice for an asthma attack is to keep still to let it subside. I went to run. I came back. I never had another attack!

Thus, during that last conversation when Rinpoche advised me to come to Tibet with him I of course agreed, even though I had no clue how I would manage it physically. He said, “Come a couple of weeks later. This will give you time to recover and also to do more fundraising.”

I now think his response saved my life. Had I gone as originally planned, I would probably not be alive today.

On October 6th, two days before the tragedy occurred, I phoned Rinpoche in Chengdu to say that I had to finalise our payment list for the projects in Tibet. “We do not have enough money for all the projects, so I will need to take out a big chunk from the general

fund (reserved for emergencies). So, Rinpoche, if I do so – where should the money go?”

His immediate answer was, “Education.”

And thus his aspiration and promise from the time of his escape was fulfilled. As Rinpoche promised himself when he lay dying in a cave during his escape – if he survived he would not sit on thrones but be active in providing food, shelter and education to those who need it most.

During one of the last conversations we had, I said, “Now I’m getting older, I’m getting more tired, I really do need a rest some time.”

I had been working practically around the clock under quite a bit of stress for decades: the workload increased over the years as Rinpoche pushed on, creating more and more projects, poignantly aware that work in the Tibetan areas of China would not be possible forever. He answered, “How many years do we still have in Tibet? We don’t have that many years, it’s not like we have thirty years ahead of us, maximum ten years. So you have to work more, not less. Work more!”

There was no way to relax or rest or do something that you had always wanted to do that had nothing to do with charity. There was simply no time. “You can rest when you’re dead”, Rinpoche had said to me in the early days when I asked for a break.

And now that he has gone, now he is not here to make any specifications about how much money we spend on which projects and so on. The projects have reduced in certain areas and grown a

little in others. On a Sunday, I could stay in bed until midday if I wanted to now. But now I find I cannot. And I no longer want to.

I would give anything, anything and everything, to have continued when I thought I could not bear it any more. This is how we are, as human beings, isn't it? We are so weak. But his strength was another way that he taught; demonstrating strength and power and also total relaxation in the midst of that; you never saw him upset, you never saw him in a panic or rushing. Around him there was always such peace. He exuded such gentleness and gave us all refuge.

When requested to do or say something that he was too modest to do or say, he used to answer, "I am just a simple refuge from Tibet." Everyone knew that in his own brand of English he meant *refugee* but through the omission of that 'e' he described himself perfectly: Akong Rinpoche is the clearest example of the meaning of Refuge.

For more information on ROKPA please visit www.rokpa.org

Conclusion

Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche passed away in tragic circumstances in Chengdu, China on October 8th 2013, to the great shock of all his family and followers.

Akong Rinpoche has left behind a vast legacy of activity which is now being diligently upheld by his followers across the world, under the guidance of Chöje Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, whom Akong Rinpoche had already appointed as his Vajra Regent.

In 2019 Akong Rinpoche's nephew Lama Katen was appointed as Deputy Abbot of Kagyu Samye Ling, which he is managing energetically and with great dedication. Rinpoche's many followers and friends are now eagerly awaiting the return of the next Akong Tulku for the benefit of sentient beings everywhere.

THE AIMS OF CHÖJE AKONG TULKU RINPOCHE

1. *To engender peace and happiness through fostering greater awareness of the need for compassion and understanding in all areas of human activity*

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2. *To contribute to the spiritual welfare of our times*
3. *To give shelter, support and help wherever possible to all those in need*
4. *To preserve and respect the religious traditions, culture and languages of all people*

Concluding Words of Serthar Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche at the Oxford Conference

I am really delighted to have been able to listen to all these heartfelt talks by disciples and friends of Akong Rinpoche. You have really consulted your lama, and taken Refuge in your lama, exactly according to the instructions given in the Tibetan Secret Tantra Vehicle. I say this because it is incredible: here there are people who have been seeking, consulting and receiving teaching from their lama for forty or fifty years. To remain unchangingly loyal to one's lama with this sort of eternally steadfast faith is incredible.

It is not only the length of time you followed him, but also your practice, the undertaking of genuine spiritual practice and the contribution towards the great endeavours of Akong Rinpoche which I find inspiring. You have contributed towards Akong Rinpoche's activity greatly. It is really incredible and amazing that not only have you been devoted to your lama and followed your

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lama, but your devotion continues even after your lama has passed away, with this unchanging faith and constancy.

In sharing your personal stories of devotion and service towards your lama, we have seen how helpful this has been to respective individuals. So, not only have you gained benefit from your lama, but also your lama's deeds have become fruitful because of your endeavours and because of your devotion. Your own labour and endeavours have contributed toward the deeds of your lama, which has enabled them to flourish even more.

This is what we call the interdependent relationship between lama and disciple that has stretched throughout one's previous lives. We can see that your lama is from the other side of the world and so you are from opposite sides of the world, yet you both became united in such great endeavour. This is what we call the previous lama and disciple relationship being reawakened.

When Akong Rinpoche travelled across Tibet he underwent incredible hardship, he went through terribly difficult times, and arrived in this place empty-handed. I personally heard the same story from him that some of you have shared with us today. Your lama came here empty-handed, without any belongings in his hands, or any food in his stomach; he came here and he met you, and with your strong faith and trust in him you have achieved really wonderful deeds.

In Dharma this relationship is known as karma and the fulfilment of aspirations, the result of your karma and prayer: what you have achieved is the result of your karma and prayers coming together. And this union of karmic deeds and prayers can and will

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happen again; as I mentioned this morning, in future lives, wherever you are born, you will be reunited with your lama through this unification of karmic deeds and prayers. According to Tantric Buddhism, we say that lama and disciple never part company until they are enlightened.

The driving force, the factor that brings together this union, is one's faith, one's devotion and one's adherence to sacred vows. Judging by what has been said today, just in one day, I can tell that you have incredible faith in your lama. When you have that kind of strong, intense faith within yourself, you should not say that your lama has disappeared completely or that you will never come to meet your lama again. You should never think like that. Our task, our permanent task, is to perpetuate our lama's great endeavour and to practise guru yoga.



The last photo with Akong Tulku Rinpoche & Khenpo
Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche

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Many of us will not need to wait for the next life to meet our lama again, many of you will have the opportunity to meet him again in this very life. Therefore, one should not be attached to the physical appearance of one's lama: when he appears the physical appearance will be different. So, you have great faith, you have great aspiration, and when the lama's blessing comes it is dependent upon this strong faith, it arises out of it.

When we come to reflect upon the events surrounding the passing of Akong Rinpoche, it seems plausible that he might himself have anticipated what took place. The reason I say this is that I have this picture which was taken nine days before he passed away. One cannot tell, but this might be the last photo that was taken in the life of Akong Rinpoche, so I very much value and prize it. That is the reason that I am showing it to you. Just eight or nine days before he passed away we met in a vegetarian restaurant in Chengdu. There were several of us, but we had our meals separately: the others had their food in one place, while we went into a private room and had our meal together. This was the last time that I beheld Akong Rinpoche in this life.

Prior to this occasion we used to meet once in a while to have food together, but that day the atmosphere was very different. We had a really close relationship of mutual affection for each other, not that I have had the experience of having had a relationship with him like some of you for thirty, forty, or fifty years, but our relationship was really intense, it was very close. We shared great affection for each other. You should be able to tell that in my expression in this photo. While we ate we had a conversation

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together and he said two things. So, this could be seen as his last expression of advice to me.

In Yushu last June, July and August I taught at various monasteries and other places, and during that time Rinpoche attended some of my teachings. I agreed to visit a nunnery, whose representatives also invited Akong Rinpoche; he said that if I would visit the nunnery then he would also, otherwise he would not go. So he knew what kind of things I had been saying to the people and was familiar with my teaching.

When we were eating, the first thing he told me was that he had noticed that my teachings were very beneficial to people, to the devout, that they really benefit the minds of those attending. He commented that this was really good and that it is very important to give teachings that benefit people's minds and to undertake deeds that benefit people.

The second thing he pointed out was that there tends to be a lack of public-spiritedness, that we do not tend to think on the level of the group, for the public interest, that that seems to be lacking. He said it is not good to lack this collective concern, not to think in the interests of the wider group. In the old days, if a lama or teacher passed by a heap of rubbish, they might find a nail in it and they would pick it up and say, "Oh, this would be good for our monastery or for the temple." So that kind of public concern, that is lacking and he observed that it is not a good thing.

So that is what he said: you must keep these two in mind. Firstly to benefit other people's minds, to do things that benefit others, that is to carry out helpful deeds and to perpetuate whatever altru-

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istic deeds you have been doing. This is the first one. His other wish was that we have concern for the welfare of the collective, the common interest, that we are not just concerned with private interest. I think this needs to be kept in mind, so that you use your knowledge, your education, your skills and wealth to benefit others and to benefit those around us; to use these skills and yourself to carry out undertakings that are beneficial for the public interest.

When we finished eating our meal and were leaving, as a parting gift he gave me one of his rings, and told me to keep it. It is a ring that you can wear on your finger, but I have not worn it and I am keeping it in a really safe place. We used to have meals together, but he never acted that way before. Then before he left he invited me to Samye Ling. I agreed to come but have not been able to do so. Now our lama is not here and has passed away; I cannot visit Samye Ling at this time, but I have the intention and the wish to visit Samye Ling when Lama has returned.

So, he told me these four things during our meal and at that time I did not really take any notice of them. Nine days after that, when I heard of his passing away, then I realised the significance of these four points. I do not have anything else to say. Thank you very much.



Akong Rinpoche near Nangchen Kham, October 2012.

(Courtesy of Lea Wyler)

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Endnotes

Choje Akong Tulku's Role in Bringing Dharma to the World

- 1 I once calculated that I easily spent more than 25,000 hours in his unique company.
- 2 In an obituary message, 2013. Khenpo Karthar was the Abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra centre in New York and spiritual director of the vast network of KTD centres across the US.
- 3 These days one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist schools.
- 4 Within the Kagyu tradition, the Kamtsang is a line originating in Marpa and being passed down the generations through the line of the Gyalwa Karmapas.
- 5 Reed instruments, roughly like oboes.
- 6 Very long, straight metal horns.
- 7 One significant moment took place during the first European visit of the Gyalwang Karmapa, in 1974, and the story is perhaps worth telling via the way in which the author was reminded of it by Rinpoche himself no less than three times, with quite some impact.

For the first, I was in the Dublin centre, accompanying Rinpoche on a teaching visit there and having breakfast alone with him one day when, after a silence, he looked at me very seriously and said, It's all your fault! At first, I did not know whether he was joking or being serious but he looked rather sad and serious.

What? I enquired, What was? He simply said again:

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All your fault.

By now I was getting nervous and asked yet again what was my fault.

I never wanted to teach. You knew that but went and complained to His Holiness and he made me teach. I was perfectly happy doing sewing and other jobs. I never wanted to teach.

He left it at that. There was quite some powerful silence as I sat and recalled what he was talking about and then he huffed and changed the subject. He was referring to the Karmapa's first visit. A group of Rinpoche's closer disciples, probably headed by myself, were unhappy that Rinpoche barely ever taught. We had one public course from him, in 1974 but that was pretty much all we had been able to get him to do in years. I had been delegated to go and see the Karmapa to complain that we had a perfectly good tulku at Samye Ling but that he would not teach in public and that we would like him to but he would not listen to our requests. As a result of this, the Karmapa had instructed Rinpoche to teach Dharma in Samye Ling. The result was a great blessing for us all, as far as we were concerned but for Rinpoche it was something unwanted and done totally under duress.

I may have been in doubt about this last point were it not for the fact that in subsequent years (after Dublin) he repeated twice the same accusation, each time in Brussels, the first in front of a couple of other people and the second at a large meal gathering there. Each time it was my fault and he explained that he had truly never wanted to teach Dharma, because he felt inadequate. He also said this in the context of his own withdrawal later from teaching, saying that now there were Westerners who had studied and practised enough to present the teachings not only properly but also fluently in European languages, so there could not be the misunderstandings that might come through his English and his "poor" knowledge of Dharma.

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- 8 The ri med movement in Tibet some two centuries ago was an effort to overcome sectarian separation and conflict by a broader-based appreciation of the value of all the traditions.
- 9 This list is not exhaustive and all apologies for omissions.
- 10 One of the reasons for mentioning it here.
- 11 Having these emanations of various sorts, known as *birth incarnations* (*skye ba'i sprul sku*) and *various incarnations* (*sna tshogs sprul sku*) is one of the qualities of high-level bodhisattvas. This statement should not be confused with the erroneous argument for “two Karmapas” evoked by Thaye Dorje followers in recent years. The main Kagyu scholars have made it clear that there is only one Karmapa in the sense of an incarnation heading the Kamtsang tradition.
- 12 Tib: *sbas pa'i rnal 'byor*
- 13 The four modes of conduct of the yogi: *pacifying, increasing, empowering and subduing*
- 14 Even the more so behind the scenes.
- 15 The background to this is that until then, in the 1970s, Akong Rinpoche had kept the two of us strictly away from most Tibetan language or academic Dharma study so as to be able to invest all free time and effort into an intensive Kagyu practices regime.
- 16 Dordogne, France ... Vajra Crown, Manjushri Mawi Senge, Green Tara Red Chenresig
Antwerp, Belgium ... Vajra Crown, Chenresig Manjushri (given by Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche)
Brussels, Belgium ... Milarepa, Karma Pakshi
Kiel, Germany ... Chenresig
Oslo, Norway ... Amitabha (K16), Vajrasattva (JKR)
Stockholm, Sweden ... Chenresig, Gampopa, Green Tara

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Copenhagen, Denmark ..Vajravarahi, Gampopa, Vajrasattva (lung only for Shamar text) Teachings on the Direct Path to Enlightenment (JKR)

Hamtoeren (Vleuten), Holland ... Chenresig, Gyalwa Gyamtso, Karma Pakshi, Vajrasattva and Manjushri.

Germany (Frankfurt?) ... Milarepa and Amitayus

Rikon, Switzerland ... Guru Rinpoche

Dhagpo Kagyu Ling, France ... Chakrasamvara and Mahakala

Brussels, Belgium ... Vajrasattva, Tara, Karma Pakshi and Chenresig

Samye Ling ... Chakrasamvara, Vajravarahi, Mahakala & Vajrasattva

- 17 Buddhadharma exists in two areas: its concepts (teachings) and its practices. The conceptual content is classified in various ways:
1. In the Southern Buddhist traditions as the three collections (Tripitaka) of sutra, vinaya and abhidharma and as the various shastra written by subsequent great Buddhist masters explaining these.
 2. In the Northern Buddhist traditions also as the three collections but as an expanded version recognising the Mahayana sutras as also part of the Buddha's teachings and including the shastras of the great Mahayana masters, such as Nagarjuna, Asanga, Shantideva and so forth.
 3. In the Tibetan tradition (mainly but not uniquely) there is the Mahayana canon and also a fourth collection, that of the tantras.
- 18 • Two of the four famous Kagyu study texts: Gampopa's Ornament of Precious Liberation, a textbook outlining the main principles of Dharma, and Maitreya/Asanga's Mahayana Uttara Tantra Shastra ("Gyut Lama"), a specialist but very important work on buddha-nature, vital as a basis for understanding tantra.

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- Other major Mahayana texts outlining the ways of the bodhisattva: Shantideva's *Entering the Bodhisattva Conduct*, Atisha's *Mind Training* and Ngulchu Tomay's *37 Practices of the Bodhisattva*, being the main ones.
 - Works making clear the Mahamudra view: the Mahamudra Prayer of the Third Karmapa and its commentaries; the IXth Karmapa's *Distinguishing Consciousness from Primordial Wisdom* and *Pointing Out the Essence of the Tathagata*; the Kagyu Dohas and Jamphel Bengar Zangpo's *Short Prayer to Vajradhara*.
 - A good resume of the abhidharma teachings: the preference was for Mipham Rinpoche's *Entering the Ways of the Wise*, for which Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche had an exceptional transmission from the author, who composed much of it at Thrangu monastery.
 - Lineage hagiographies, especially those of Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa and Gampopa, as well as those of the Karmapas.
 - (With time, when people had a better dharma grounding) teachings on the Prajnaparamita and Middle Way (Mahayana and Kagyu versions).
- 19 *grol lam* or sometimes *sgrol lam* ...the former is how these terms sound and this is the Tibetan spelling. It means the *Path of Liberation*.
- 20 *thabs lam*. It means the *Path of Skilful Means*.
- 21 The Tai Situpa often joked about this phrase, as there is nothing to point to, sometimes adding that “pointing in” might be more appropriate.
- 22 It is sometimes strange to use terms like “disappointed” or “hopeful” in respect of an enlightened mind such as Rinpoche's, so much beyond hope and fear, yet nevertheless, to all intents and purposes he displayed those reactions and also explained them through discourse.
- 23 Who had been retreat master in Palpung, Tibet for many years.

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- 24 Katia was out of the retreat picture by then, stricken by ill-health.
- 25 Kalu Rinpoche's retreat was based on the Six Yogas of Niguma from the Shangpa Kagyu.

Tara Rokpa Therapy

- 26 *Edinburgh Tara Trust Spring 1991 Newsletter* (31.01.1990 talk Port Elizabeth SA).
- 27 *Restoring The Balance* by Dr Akong Tulku Rinpoche, Dzalendra Publishing, 2005.
- 28 *Spirituality and Psychotherapy*, edited by Simon-King Spooner & Craig Newnes, PCCS Books, 2001. Chapter 13 *Tara Rokpa Therapy* by Edie Irwin and Lorna Hensey.
- 29 Tara Rokpa Summer Camp Schwangau, Germany transcript, 1986.
- 30 Oberlethe transcript 30.07.1999.
- 31 *Taming The Tiger* by Dr Akong Tulku Rinpoche, Rider, 1994.
- 32 *Healing Relaxation* by Edie Irwin, Rider, 1999.
- 33 *An exploration of the need for psychotherapy among economically disadvantaged black Zimbabweans and an assessment of the benefit of Tara Rokpa Therapy (TRT) for this group of people*, dissertation by Jayne Pilossof, 2014.

Books by Dr Akong Tuku Rinpoche

Taming the Tiger, Rider, 1994

Restoring the Balance, Dzalendra Publishing 2005

Limitless Compassion, Dzalendra Publishing 2010



"His mind was one filled with loving kindness and compassion and his motivation was that of a true bodhisattva. Through having those qualities in a most extraordinary way, his deeds were deeds of excellence, accomplishing an enormous wave of activity that was entirely devoted to the welfare of others."

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

Revered master of Vajrayana Buddhism, eminent humanitarian and profound innovator in the fields of psychotherapy and medicine, Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche brought immense benefit to the world. After a dramatic escape from his homeland of Tibet in 1959, Rinpoche established and became the spiritual leader of Kagyu Samye Ling, Europe's first Tibetan Buddhist monastery. From there his activity flourished and gave rise to remarkable projects across the globe.

After Rinpoche's sudden and tragic passing in 2013, a conference was held at the University of Oxford to commemorate his life and achievements. The event was presided over by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche, one of the most renowned lamas and scholars of Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in the Tibetan highlands. The speakers were individuals responsible for upholding Akong Tulku Rinpoche's projects and activities around the world.

This book is the outcome of the conference, illustrating the life story of a truly compassionate leader of our time.

With a foreword by HH 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje