

A Meeting with Drukpa Kagyu Masters

Part I – In Honor of Geagen Khyentse and Amila Urgyen Chodon

It was in the late summer of 1974 that I found myself on the road to the “Valley of the Gods” dangling from a bus as it weaved its way along the shoulders of a jagged Himalayan mountain road. Since the seats on the bus were quite small, I decided to hang a head and a shoulder outside the window from time to time. The fresh air felt good and made it worth it in spite of often having to veer down into the abyss to the river far below. The tires of our bus gripped the cliffs’ edges on uncertain gravel and, as if driven by a mad demon, the bus proceeded at a frantic pace trailed by a plume of cascading avalanches of pebbles and cobbles. Having just days earlier been in a bus accident near New Delhi, I imagined the worst would happen at every bump and turn on the way.

I was on my way to Apho Rinpoche *Gompa* in Manali, Himachal Pradesh. Just a few days earlier I had arrived in India on a cheap Aeroflot flight from Moscow. On this leg of my journey, through unbelievable fortune, I met a young woman named Lin Lerner who was returning to India for the second time in pursuit of her dream to learn “Lama Dancing”, something traditionally reserved for men only. She connected me with the Kumar family who happened to be patrons of this *Gompa*. I was to learn that, most unfortunately, the great Drukpa Kagyu yogi Apho Rinpoche had passed on at a young age just a bit earlier that year. Still, it was said that several other masters were associated with the *Gompa* and this seemed as good a place as any to start. After all, this was the lineage that had brought me on this journey. I had encountered a text on *Mahamudra* by Padma Karpo, a master of the glorious Drukpa Kagyu at the age of 14 while living in Germany. Now, having reached the ripe old age of 18, I suddenly found myself in Manali, breathlessly ascending a short trail to this Drukpa Kagyu *Gompa* in Manali. I had no idea what to expect.

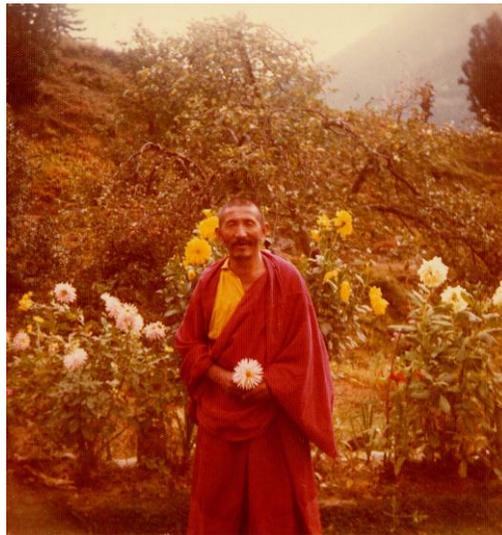


Upon arrival, I was very warmly greeted by everyone who seemed very curious about this young, skinny, long-haired American. Amila, the wife of Apho Rinpoche, welcomed me into their circle and offered to teach me how to read Tibetan. I have the fondest memories of her, and her kindness and inspiration to me proved beyond measure. There

were also some Westerners there at the time, including Ani Tenzin Palmo, Yeshe Dorje, Ani Jimba, Shakya Dorje, Tamcho, and “New Zealand” Dave. Geraldo was also there but I only got to know him through his chanting; I stayed at a cabin not too far from his, on a mountainside adjacent to the Gompa. I spent the first few days simply adjusting to the high altitude.

“Practice the Dharma as much as you can for the benefit of all beings. Though you are young now, life is quickly passing and the time of death uncertain. So it is very important to practice now while alive in this body.” – Amila Urygen Chodon, 1974

I was told that the teacher who had taken over responsibilities at the Gompa was also a great meditation master and that his name was Geagen Khyentse. I soon found myself being introduced to him. My first recollection of Geagen was a beaming toothless smile with warm, translucent eyes gazing at me as he descended the stairs within the Gompa. A genuine warmth and humility was really immediately evident in this man. In my first formal session with him, with Shakya Dorje translating, I remember asking the question, “Aren’t all beings really Buddhas?” To this he quickly replied, “Do you think you are a Buddha?!” Both Shakya and he laughed heartily. I was completely taken aback by the response, but Geagen then continued to elaborate that indeed all beings have Buddha nature and the importance was in coming to realize this nature. For this, the precious human birth provides such a rare and unique opportunity, which we must be careful not to waste.



I was impressed with the continual unassuming nature of this fine teacher and over the days felt moved to request Refuge from him. He was very happy to perform this ceremony and teach the importance of it and the accompanying vows. Over the next month, he provided me with detailed introduction to the practice of Chenrezig, and I had the golden opportunity to establish practice of it under his careful guidance.

There is one event I want to share that may indicate more than anything what a fine teacher and master he was. One time I found myself waiting in a room as tea was being brewed over a small fire. We had *pecha* or scripture before us on a cloth, on a beautiful cushion and he was reading it. A translator had not yet arrived. The tea had been boiling for some time, so I decided to get up to begin to serve it. Before I could lift myself even

an inch off of the floor, I felt Geagen's hands firmly holding me down. I was surprised and did not understand why he had done this. So I pointed to the tea and once again tried to get up, this time a bit more forcefully. Again, Geagen grabbed me quickly and so firmly I could not budge. I was astonished and didn't know what to make of it. Then Geagen pointed to the *pecha* before us and indicated that, in the way I was getting up, I would be moving my feet over this most sacred text. I finally realized what was going on. I thanked him and backed out first and then proceeded to get up to get the tea.

Even today this act of awareness and kindness brings a welling of tears to my eyes. This simple act, based on a fully present and lightening quick alertness, I have come to regard to be a profound teaching of the importance of mindfulness, alertness, and caring. It also points to the importance of an attitude of utmost respect and regard for the Buddha Dharma. It is the foundation for the practice of harmlessness and respect for living beings, since it is with this very same spirit that one should avoid even one non-virtuous act or intention. This is the kind of teaching this master could provide and the depth of the impression it would leave. This is a kind of teaching that you don't easily forget and carries a special import to it beyond the simple words of description.

After the third week, I asked Geagen whether he would perform the Chenrezig *wang* or empowerment for me. He had given the *lung* to me at the outset. He was persistent in saying he was not worthy of doing this and that I should go to Drukchen Thuksay Rinpoche to receive this. When it became clear he wouldn't budge and that he wanted me to make this trip, I made up my mind to follow his wish and travel to see Rinpoche. The problem for me with this request was that Thuksay Rinpoche was in Darjeeling, several hundred miles by train across India and I had very little money along, as I had no support on this trip. In the next section I would like to share with you some brief recollections of my meetings with Drukchen Thuksay Rinpoche and young Sey Rinpoche, Jampal, and H.H. Drukchen Rinpoche. This lineage of wisdom and kindness was found to be wonderfully evident at every turn in Darjeeling as well.



For several years thereafter I kept contact with Amila and Geagen until it was clear that my lack of finances would prevent me from making a return trip for the foreseeable future and I focussed on raising a family and simply "making ends meet." I cannot help but feel a bit of regret that I have practiced and mastered so little of what they have taught

me. Really this is true. The following excerpt from a letter may give you an indication of the continued activities of these fine masters:

“Geagen Khyentse has gone to Ladakh, where he will spend the winter teaching Rinpoche's disciples there. He will stay mostly at Gotsang Ritröd, the isolated hermitage above Hemis Gompa where the monks do 3 year Naro-Chö-Druk retreat and where Apo Rinpoche and the children and I lived for 3 years - just like the caves and hermitages in Tibet!” - Amila, 1976

Recently I reconnected with Khandro Trinley Chodon, the daughter of Amila and Apho Rinpoche, in California. I was so pleased to know that she and her brothers were all doing well and that Geagen's and Amila's legacy continues through their dedicated efforts. At one of her first teachings in the West, she relayed a story where a Westerner kept referring to Geagen as “Rinpoche” and how, during this, Geagen kept looking around as if searching for someone else in the room. Geagen finally asked the translator, “Is there someone else here? Who is this Rinpoche he keeps referring too? What is he talking about?” This humility is something rare today, in these difficult times where so many are in search of fame and recognition, and the eight worldly dharmas run rampant even in many of us who have received such precious teachings.

Without question, the efforts of Apho Rinpoche, Amila Urgyen Chodon and Geagen Khyentse have benefited and will continue to benefit limitless beings both in years past and in the years to come. I cannot help but feel that their spiritual descendants, too numerous to mention, will continue to serve as the true lifeblood of this most precious lineage.

Part II – In Honor of Ven. Drukchen Thuksay Rinpoche

After spending what seemed like a small eternity on trains going across India, I finally found myself on a jeep going up to Darjeeling from the hot and rugged border towns of the Indian plains. I had been given a letter to present to Dukchen Thuksay Rinpoche so I assumed he had no idea I was coming. When I was waiting in the hall of the Forrest Villa Monastery, I felt nothing but joy at having made the journey successfully and finally having a chance to meet this great master.

As I entered his room, Rinpoche had just met with another older Westerner who looked quite uncomfortable and perplexed by my arrival and the welcome it triggered. I have never felt so warmly welcomed anywhere in all my life. It really felt like the skies opened up with trumpets or, more appropriately, conch shells blaring and everything shared in the joy of our meeting. After offering three prostrations, Rinpoche extended his warm hands and generous smile to me in greeting. I was really surprised and touched by this reception.



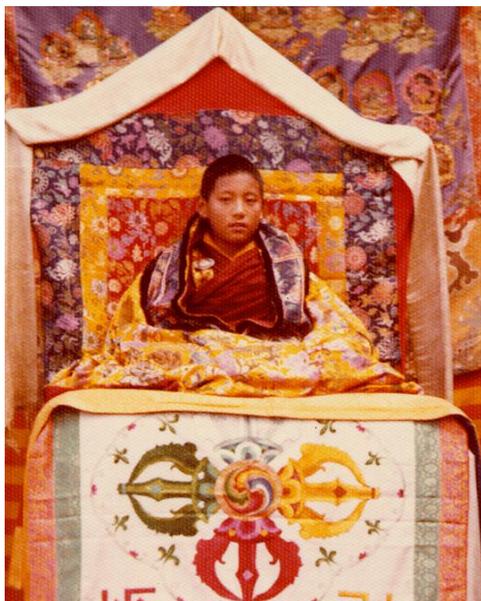
I had been told by someone that Rinpoche was on a “rare break” from his work, so I was uncertain how much I would have an opportunity to see him. In fact, when we met, he insisted to meet with me every morning for 2-4 hours of detailed instruction and arranged for a young *tulku* to be present and serve as translator. I still had an impure view of him and thought he could not be doing this just for me. He must be doing it to inspire the young tulku who was translating for us and who, on the surface, may have seemed more interested in Western gadgets than Dharma teachings.

I had never been able to express how special these teachings were to anyone until, many years later, I came across a particular book. If you want an inkling of what these teachings were like, please read *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche. Everyday Rinpoche would give me detailed instructions on the Dharma with emphasis on *ngondro* topics. He also agreed to give me the Chenrezig wang. Curiously, before I received it, he asked me to be sure I take detailed notes on it, notes that I still find useful until this day. This was a most moving empowerment.

Afternoons, I would literally “hang out” with Apho Rinpoche and Amila’s sons, Sey Rinpoche and Jampel Dorje. I was so struck by these young boys and in some respects they served as inspiration for me to have children of my own one day.



Upon my departure from Germany, I recalled that my father shook my hands stoically and wished me the very best. My mother, who was in tears and sure that she would never see me again, had a surprise present for me: a small camera with two rolls of film. That was all I had and so, during my travels, I took photos sparingly. One day I asked Rinpoche if I could take pictures of him. Rinpoche immediately replied, “Tomorrow please.” When I arrived at the Gompa in the morning, I was startled to find that an outdoor throne had been set up and all the abbots and all the monks had been invited to join in. Of course, I was overjoyed to find that H.H. Gyalwa Drukpa was at the core of this event; since he had been busy with his tutors, I had not seen much of him. I also was quite embarrassed to pull this small, inexpensive camera out – something unworthy of the company and setting I found myself in -- and yet I simply proceeded to shoot the remaining film that I had with me. With the help of high-altitude sunshine and beginner’s luck, these photos really turned out beautifully.

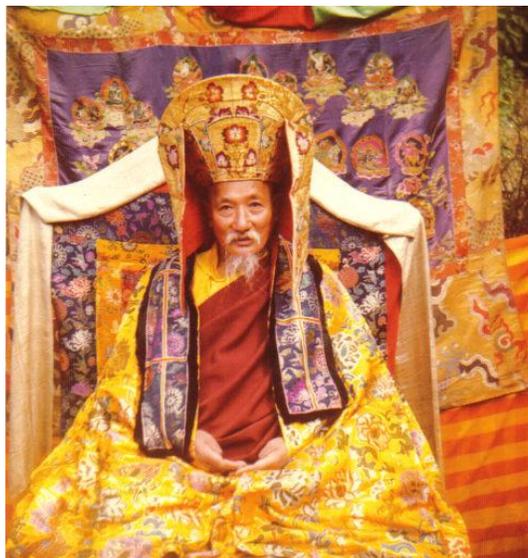


After ten days, I was very aware that my three-month visa was soon to run out and that I had a return ticket with a fixed date as my only way home. I had practically no money beyond train and bus fare left but was still committed to make an offering to Rinpoche.

That morning I bought a package of incense to bring to him as a gift. Usually, I would hitch a ride from town to the Gomba, and that morning was no different except that it was a truck driver who offered me a ride. As I climbed into the back of the truck, to my horror, I felt the incense break. Now, what was I to do? I am sure the poorest Tibetan refugee had never given a gift so unworthy to a teacher even upon a casual meeting. I decided I had no choice but to present it to him. I remember when the time came, there was a moment of genuine surprise on his face. My heart stopped. Then, in the next moment, this turned into the biggest smile and expression of sympathy. He kindly thanked me and carefully handed the incense as if it were a precious jewel to an attendant and then proceeded to provide me with teachings which were longer and harder than ever before.

At the conclusion of my stay and in spite of my utter financial poverty, Rinpoche graciously invited me to stay at Gomba. I declined. I just did not see how I could afford to continue to stay, and with health issues, I had faced dysentery twice, and legal concerns, an expired visa, I was ready to return home. This was an agonizing decision for me but I was pleasantly surprised when Rinpoche acknowledged it with full understanding and additional parting advice. Every time he held my hands in his large hands, I was struck by their warmth and gentleness, which mirrored the warmth and gentleness of his heart.

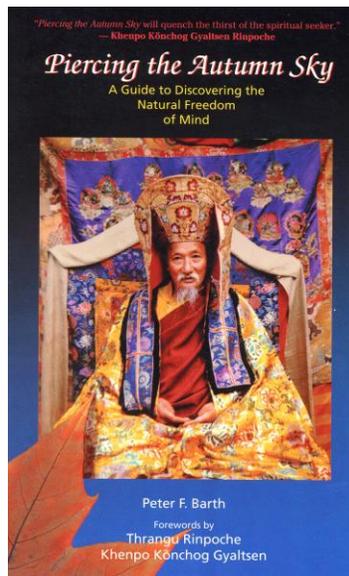
To this day, every time I offer incense, in recollection of his great kindness, I first break the incense. This is to remind me of this great master and his indescribable qualities. Each time I tell this story tears well forth from my eyes. I cannot help myself. Each time I offer incense, the heart of Rinpoche is right there with me.



Once I was asked why I sometimes seem to have little patience with students asking about *siddhis* or powers and with people telling stories about them with awe. To this I replied, "Please, when I was young, part of what I was looking for was evidence of all those powers I heard Tibetan lamas and yogis had. I really thought this was an important sign of spiritual advancement and proof of their accomplishment. And it was because of this completely mistaken idea, that I failed to see the exceptional kindness and wisdom

mind of my teachers. With this, I had thrown away such a golden opportunity and I failed to recognize the treasure which was right there before me. It was only much later that I came to understand that compassion is the only true sign of a successful mahamudra practitioner. Please don't make the same mistake I did."

Upon my return, several years later, one day I found out that *Moonbeams of Mahamudra* had been translated into English by Lobsang Lhalungpa. This is a text which Thuksay Rinpoche had called "the most important sacred text" so I was overjoyed. I subsequently was able to attend the first teachings by a master of this text in the West and subsequently started a small center largely built around it. It is in memory to his great kindness that I have done this, and perhaps I feel I may be of some small service to him in this way.



"It is necessary to get a good theoretical foundation. Without good theory, there will be no good practice." – Ven, Drukchen Thuksay Rinpoche, 1975

Finally, I remember that when I was leaving Rinpoche, in my complete naivete I asked him whether, upon my return to the West, I could teach the Dharma to anyone. One has to remember there were very few texts or sources and even fewer teachers of the Tibetan Buddhist Dharma in those days. He smiled and immediately responded that, "As long as there is one person interested in the Dharma, you should teach." Of course. This was most definitely not a statement endorsing me to be a teacher and I never took it as such. It simply was the core of what he had continually demonstrated at every single moment in our short time together. One thing evident from these great masters is that they use every possible moment and every expression of their wisdom mind to be of service to other sentient beings. To honor them, I feel we should try our best to do as they did, regardless of the apparent limitations of each and every situation we may find ourselves in.

"I advise you to practice Dharma teachings even if you are amongst people who do not do the Dharma." – Ven, Drukchen Thuksay Rinpoche, 1975

Part III - A Short Teaching by Geagen in a Letter in Response to a Question on Dreams and Practice – Oct 12, 1975

Whatever happens in your sleep is not real- dreams are just the play of mind. As for dreams which one interprets as good, one should not become glad about them but simply let them be. As for bad dreams, one should not cling to them and become saddened by them. As for fearful dreams, one should pray with great faith and devotion to a Lama who has given you a wang and also to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Pray that you can overcome all hindrances that bother you and keep your mind from wandering. Under no circumstance should you let your mind follow outside phenomena of any sort or it will cause you trouble and even potentially lead to madness. When fear arises and you lose the power to control it, you should pray to the Triple Gem and the Lama. This is very important. No one in Tibet ever practiced the Dharma (i.e. meditation), without the Lama and without the blessings of the Lama entering one's mind. By the blessings of the Lama entering one's mind, everything is easy...

Whatever experiences arise, whatever happens when one is practicing hard, whether these are experiences of light or rainbows or power, do not follow them but keep the mind in its own place, not wandering outside.

The human body is difficult to find and one can easily die. Only practice of the Dharma will benefit one. If one's practice is firm and strong, then if one dies it is OK. Therefore only think of doing Dharma and leave worldly concerns behind.

May the true practice lineages of Tibet flourish for the benefit of all sentient beings.

With best wishes,
Lama Thapkhay

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