

The Confidence of Bodhicitta

Khenchen entered my life in 1991 shortly after I had started a small dharma group in Northern California at the encouragement of Thrangu Rinpoche. At that time, our group was working on study and practice of *Moonbeams of Mahamudra* by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal. Upon meeting Khenchen, I discovered that we had shared teachers in Darjeeling many years earlier, including H.E. Thuksey Rinpoche, who had specifically called *Moonbeams* “the most important sacred text.” At our first meeting, Khenchen shared his recollections of Thuksey Rinpoche and expressed that what he remembered most is that this “great master had worked so very, very hard to preserve his lineage (the Drukpa Kagyu).” He then also expressed his sincere heartfelt appreciation for Khenpo Noryang and some of his other teachers. The next day I was pleased to be able to present him with some old photos of both of them.

Of course, I was immediately struck by Khenchen’s genuine warmth and humor. Soon I was also to discover that he possessed an unusual command of the English language along with a penetrating intellect. It was from him that I first heard the pithy and illuminating phrase, “the confidence of Bodhicitta.” And in verses such as “A phantom crosses a mirage-river, dream-bees sips a sky-lotus, the son of a barren woman plays music and sings...” it seemed the poet in him shined forth and *dohas* of many masters came vividly to life. This grand command of language, united with his heart and intellect, all buoyed by a keen sense of humor, made it a delight to receive teachings from him. On one occasion, when interrogated about the Tibetan view that “the mind is at the heart” he suddenly beamed a smile and said, “Perhaps it is a helpful to look at it in this way: The mind’s office is in the brain; it’s home is in the heart.” Everyone laughed. Then he went on to point out that the past mind is already gone and hence cannot be found, the future mind is not yet here, so also cannot be found, and if one looks, even the present mind cannot found to be anywhere specifically. This was something exceptionally profound.

Early on it struck me that Khenchen would be the perfect person to provide a much needed new translation of the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, and I expressed this wish to him. A few years later, while providing extensive instructions on it to his students, he undertook this task and produced a masterpiece which I believe will serve English speaking people for generations to come. Embellished with his comments, the life-story of Gampopa and an associated short story collection, this is really a remarkable work of love serving Kagyu and general Buddhist students alike.

It was over the next fifteen years that we consistently received the help and support of Khenchen, particularly during his visits to the San Francisco Bay Area. During this time, he presented us with such a bountiful and inspirational array of teachings and empowerments, and served as a key advisor to our center. One of the most striking of his early teachings was on *Prayer Flags* and the different *dohas* of Lord Jigten Sumgon. The “poet” in Khenchen did service to those wonderful songs and it felt as if we had the purest of all introductions to the heart of this ancient great master. One of our members subsequently moved to Boulder Colorado, and started a center for the Drikung lineage there; another accompanied him on his pilgrimage to Mount Kailash.

I vividly remember an early discussion with Khenchen regarding two areas most troubling to Western Dharma students at the time. First, there was the matter of “widespread abuse” among some of the early teachers who had come to the West. The unbearable pain this had caused some was clearly still at play at the time and I shared my concerns about this with Khenchen. He replied with the utmost care, “Yes. You know, in Tibet, when someone caused trouble, we would just send them back to the parent monastery. Here, there are no such checks and balances, no controls and this makes things more difficult.” We then both agreed that perhaps the correct term for this would be “The Wild West.”

Second, many students found deity practice to be “very foreign” and regarded it to be a “Tibetan thing.” He laughed, “You know it always feels a bit strange to hear this since deity practice was not originally from Tibet and originally was foreign to Tibetans. In fact deity meditation comes from India.” He then pointed out the importance of Yidam practice as a skilful means, without which it would be more difficult to realize the nature of appearances, the purity of appearances.

One time, while waiting outside of Khenchen’s quarters to meet with him in Fairfax, California, I could not help but overhear things a bit as he took a take a call from a woman who was clearly at wit’s end. I did not pick up much in terms of content of the discussion, but I was struck by the fact that within about 20 minutes the discussion had turned from one of an air of utter desperation to one of sheer delight and joy. A sense of shared laughter and joy permeated the last several moments of the conversation.

A few years later, in Big Sur, one day I shared a walk with Khenchen in the garden of our retreat host. We came across a beautiful solitary strawberry, looking completely ripe, and juicy. To me it was beckoning to be picked and I thought surely the owner would be pleased if I pick it (and please make note of my good intention!) and offered it to Khenchen. Seeing what I was about to do, he quickly stopped me and then walked on rather hastily. This interaction was similar to what I recall of an old master’s teachings from Tibet, and it also demonstrates the power of the purity of a monk’s practice. In such a simple act, the possibility exists for a profound teaching to be received. Perhaps the words behind this could be, “First, it is important to not take what is not given. Secondly, every act of virtue and non-virtue matters, no matter how small. Thirdly, walk away from a non-virtuous thought; it is to be abandoned at once.” He did not say it and this made the teaching all the more poignant.

Most recently, in February, 2006, after a lengthy absence, we were overjoyed to have him return for a visit to California. Several of us made the drive down to Carmel Valley in what was quite a storm, bombarded by sheets of rain for the entire four-hour drive. As we entered the valley suddenly a beautiful rainbow appeared on the right hand side of it, slightly up the hillside. It turned out that the rainbow had appeared right above the temple where the teachings were to be and what seemed rather unusual was that the sky was still completely covered by clouds, with no opening for the sun.

In Carmel Valley, to everyone's delight, once again we were in his presence as he enthusiastically taught us the importance of refuge and Bodhicitta. In the past, he had given us much of what generally is regarded to be the most advanced teachings of the lineage, but we felt overjoyed to receive teachings on refuge and Bodhicitta, something he never let us forget was of supreme importance. Khenchen pointed out, "You know we go for refuge to many things. For example, many of, when it comes to food, take refuge in food. Isn't it?" He also talked about siddhis making clear that the real siddhi was Bodhicitta and how Milarepa was able to pacify both the panic-fear of a pursued deer and the aggression-desire of a pursuing lion simply by "the power of his Bodhicitta." The magic of spontaneous rainbows was nothing in comparison.

Finally, when asked, Khenchen shared that he did not become a monk until a little later than most, but that once he decided to do so, he applied himself whole-heartedly and diligently. This was such encouragement for us all since it helped us feel that, with the proper diligence, so very, very much would indeed be possible.

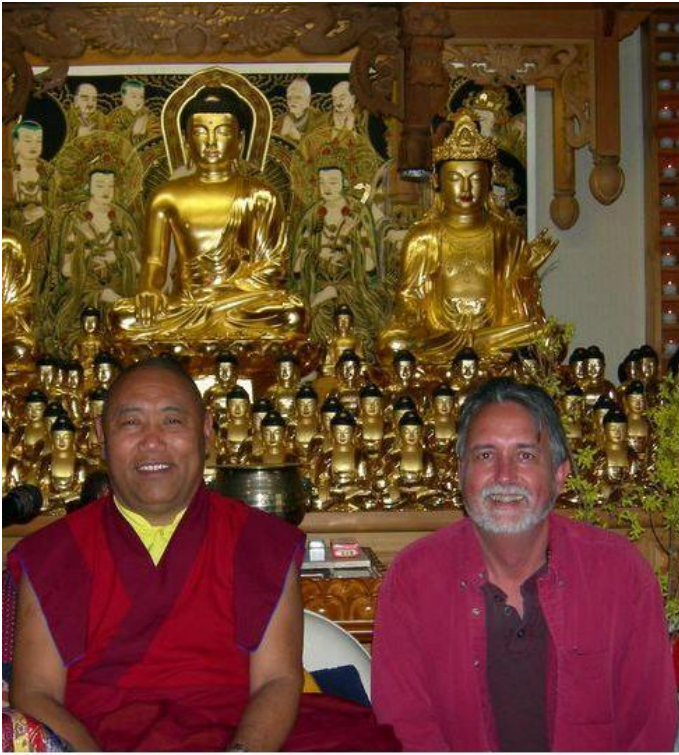
Khenchen was one of the first masters I had met who had been raised subsequent to the takeover of Tibet and who I have come to regard to be no different than the old masters of Tibet, some of whom I had the opportunity to meet. That this achievement was possible by even one of "the next generation," as was so vividly apparent from him, served as both a great source of joy and inspiration to us all. While he maintains "the view," he also practices attending to every intention and action with the utmost care. To me, he embodies "the confidence of Bodhicitta" in the deepest sense.

As he drove away from the Zen temple, he rolled down the window and waved goodbye. The rains had lifted for the entire weekend, but just then, started to come back in again. I stood there for a moment and reflected on how this country had not really heard of the Drikung lineage nor of Lord Jigten Sumgon before he had arrived. Even among those familiar with the Kagyu tradition, many didn't even know if the Drikung was one of the surviving lineages or one of the ones which been consumed by the play of time. And in coming to the United States, more importantly, many of us had an opportunity to achieve a glimpse of "the confidence of Bodhicitta."

I was struck by the fact that, just like Thuksey Rinpoche and with a similarly big heart, Khenchen had "worked so very, very hard to preserve his lineage."

But most of all, I felt fortunate to that I have come to know him. If even one person, through his efforts or example had achieved just "a glimpse of the magnificence of Bodhicitta," I knew he would feel that life had been meaningful.

With thanks from the bottom of the heart,
Lama Könchog Thapkhay
(Peter) Director, Mahamudra Meditation Center
(Khenchen Könchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche serves as Senior Spiritual Advisor to our center;
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With Lama Thapkhay in Carmel Valley, California, 2006



With Mahamudra Meditation Center members in Carmel Valley Retreat, 2006