

**A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT
FROM THE WORDS OF
GOCHEN TULKU RINPOCHE, SANG-NGAG TENZIN
June 8, 2000**

Hello and best wishes!

Q: What does the word "tulku" mean?

A: In general, it refers to an "incarnation," in the sense of a buddha, a bodhisattva, or an advanced practitioner (someone who has gained a degree of freedom) taking conscious rebirth for the sake of others.

Q: What about your title, Gochen Tulku?

A: Initially there was a master named Gyalwa Chokyang, accomplished in the practice of Hayagriva, who was one of the nine so-called heart children of Guru Rinpoché. One of his incarnations, a great tertön (a revealer of hidden treasure teachings) named Drimé Lingpa, was a contemporary of His Holiness the sixth Dalai Lama. Drimé Lingpa studied with his principal master Rigdzin Tukchok Dorjé, the son of the great tertön Tzasum Lingpa, and devoted his life to spiritual practice, showing real signs of attainment.

In particular, Drimé Lingpa was graced with visions of Guru Rinpoché and his consort, who both prophesied his personal destiny, which led to his revealing about four volumes of profound hidden treasure teachings. He had many students, including the seventh Chakzam incarnation and Rigdzin Jigmé Lingpa. When Drimé Lingpa passed away, he prophesied that he would have two parallel rebirths, one in Bhutan and the other in the eastern Tibetan province of Kham. The latter incarnation was born in Doshul and named Gyalwa Gyatso. It was he who founded Gochen Monastery. His incarnation was Pakpa Gyatso, followed by Tsewang Tendzin and a succession of incarnations up to Namkha Tsewang, the previous tulku. I was given the title of the sixth Gochen tulku.

Q: How were you recognized as the Gochen tulku?

A: To begin with, when I was three my family and a large group of other people were harvesting hay in the fields. I was left sitting on a boulder at the foot of a cliff, and left a very clear footprint in the rock as though in soft clay. Because of this, people talked of there being a

tulku in our valley, but no one was sure whose incarnation I was. My father's family was responsible for the hermitage of Namchak Ritrö, the historical seat of Tzasum Lingpa, and three generations of Tzasum Lingpa's incarnations had been reborn in our family. Because of these circumstances, my parents and neighbors felt that I was the tulku of Namchak, and this rumour became very prevalent.

At that point in my life I was still a child and would carelessly talk about things that I remembered as a holdover from the lives of the previous Gochen tulkus. This did not please my parents, who for the time being kept my comments a secret. I have heard other talk of my parents' hopes that I was the Namchak tulku. At a certain point, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoché came to Namchak Ritrö and we were introduced to one another. After talking with me, Kongtrul Rinpoché said, "He is indisputably the Gochen tulku." But I am told that my parents begged him not to tell others of this, saying, "We have hopes that he will benefit our monastery."

Later on, the community of Gochen Monastery sent one Lama Tenpa of Drong to see Jamyang Khyentsé Chökyi Lodrö with a request that he formally recognize the Gochen incarnation. Khyentsé Rinpoché conferred the title of Gochen Tulku on me. However, at that point in time the border troubles with the Communist Chinese forces had resulted in Gochen Monastery (which lay on the border) being sacked, so the traditional place for my enthronement no longer existed. Accordingly, a lama named Nyima Özer performed the enthronement and bestowed the refuge vow on me at Gadra Ritrö, a subsidiary of Gochen Monastery. At the same time, he also bestowed on me all the empowerments and oral transmissions of Tzasum Lingpa's teachings.

Q: Who were your principal masters?

A: The one who formally recognized me was Khyentsé Chökyi Lodrö and my first teaching master was Lama Nyima Özer of Gadra. The master who really caused me to mature spiritually was Tulku Orgyen Chemchok. In particular, Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoché was very kind to me, providing me with food, clothing, and spiritual teachings (including empowerments, oral transmissions, and instruction). Because we have a connection as master and student over lifetimes, the tertön Padgyal Lingpa was also very kind in formally recognizing me as a custodian of his hidden treasure revelations and bestowing the ripening

empowerments and liberating teachings for this cycle. These are my principal masters.

Q: What were your spiritual training and practice like?

A: When very young, I received from Gadra Lama Nyima Özer the complete transmission of the hidden treasure teachings of Namchak, as well as the oral transmissions for the collected writings of Rigdzin Tukchok Dorjé. I then was taught to read and write. Although I tried to escape to India with my master in 1960, we were apprehended by Communist Chinese troops and taken back to our home region. From then until the Cultural Revolution began in 1969, I studied with my father, Namchak Tashi, learning our family's tradition of religious rituals and liturgies, as well as traditional Tibetan medicine. My practice and increasing efforts to teach Buddhism to others had to be carried out in secret.

During the so-called Cultural Revolution, the Communist Chinese authorities became aware of my activities and imprisoned me for the next ten years. During that almost unbearably difficult time, I prayed constantly to the Three Jewels as my only source of hope. But by some good fortune I happened to be incarcerated in the company of many lamas, tulkus, and great scholars who would have been difficult to meet otherwise. Since I was the youngest among them, my fellow prisoners treated me with great affection. I studied astrology with a Bönpo lama named Tsamkyap, and calligraphy and grammar with Lodrö Tayé, who had been the head administrator of the College of Dialectics in Chamdo. During that time our jailers killed many of the prisoners, so I experienced both fear and compassion.

With Lama Karma Zangpo I studied *powa* (transference of consciousness at death) and the mahamudra meditation technique called *né gyu rig sum* (awareness of mind at rest and mind stirring). When I meditated, I felt this truly benefited my mind, bringing me significant experiences of well-being, clarity, and nonconceptual states of awareness. In particular, I met Tulku Orgyen Chemchok, who was a heart son of Khenpo Ngakchung. He began by spending about nine months teaching me a one-hundred-day course in the technique known as "mental training" (*lojong*), alternating his teachings with periods of directed meditation. After that I recited the mantra for the

guruyoga practice, using a knotted string in place of the mala of beads that was forbidden to us.

Most especially, Tulku Orgyen Chemchok taught me the steps of the Dzogchen, or Great Perfection, approach according to the oral lineage—from the preliminary phase of “tearing down the hut of ordinary mind,” through the main practice of “direct introduction to pure awareness as one’s true nature,” to the concluding phase of “nurturing one’s meditative experience.” He presented each topic in order, combining it with practice and making the teaching come alive for me. We spent a year in this way, at the end of which he gave me an examination.

When I explained what I had understood, Tulku Orgyen Chemchok said, “Well, that’s fine. From now on, practice! If there is opportunity to explain these teachings to others, do so. I don’t have anything more to tell you. In fact, even if the naked blue primordial buddha Samantabhadra were to appear, he wouldn’t have any more to teach you, either!” I asked him, “Don’t I need to practice the techniques of *tögal* as well?” He replied, “The *trekchö* method, of cutting through the seeming solidity of mind and perception, is the most important. Practice *tögal* as a means of enhancing *trekchö*.” Delighted with my request, he bestowed the methods of *tögal* on me as well.

It was due to the kindness of my masters that I was able to feel compassion instead of hatred toward my captors. No matter how much physical hardship I underwent, my mind felt happy and at ease. This gave me profound confidence in my masters’ instructions and the Buddhist teachings. It was during this time that my spiritual practice really began. Eventually, when the Communist Chinese authorities relaxed their attitudes toward Buddhism, I was released from prison. Although I received official permission to restore Buddhism in my home region, I was depressed by the difficult times and wanted to spend my time from then on practicing in retreat. But I wasn’t able to stay in retreat for more than a year.

At that point, I reflected on the situation of Buddhism in general and undertook several projects to help restore the teachings. For example, we installed a new statue of Guru Rinpoché in a large temple; repaired the temple at the holy lake of Yeshé Tsogyal and installed a new statue of Tsogyal herself; repaired the site of Yangdzong in the region of

Drak, which had been the place that Nubchen Sanggyé Yeshé practiced, and installed statues of Guru Rinpoché and two flanking figures. Following this my guru prophesied that it was time for me to go to India. I first went to Bhutan, but I was told by the border patrols that I couldn't go any further, because the necessary permission hadn't been obtained from the Bhutanese government.

His Holiness Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoché, who was staying close by, vouched for me and I was allowed to enter the country under his personal guarantee. During the sixth month of that year, he bestowed the oral transmissions for the Kanjur (the Tibetan canon of the Buddha's words), as well as many empowerments and oral transmissions for such cycles as the Chetzun Nyingtik. At a certain point, Khyentsé Rinpoché told me that I should go into a strict retreat. I stayed in Sisinang in Bhutan. Then the Tibetan government in exile, in collaboration with the Indian government, summoned all newly-arrived refugees from Tibet, and I had to honor this directive.

When I met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama he said, "You should stay with Khyentsé Rinpoché, studying the teachings, contemplating, and meditating. Practice to remove any doubts you might have." Following His Holiness's advice, I spent the next fourteen years at Shechen Monastery in Nepal, serving His Holiness Khyentsé Rinpoché. From him, in a general way I received empowerments, oral transmissions, and instructions deriving from the long historical tradition and the hidden treasure teachings of the Nyingma school, as well as the "Five Great Treasuries" of Jamgön Kongtrul and other cycles. In particular, I was able to receive from Khyentsé Rinpoché the transmissions for such cycles as the Nyingtik Yabzhi and Seven Treasuries of Longchenpa—in fact, the entire range of pith instructions for the Ösel Nyingtik teachings, including the higher yogas, *trekchö*, and *tögal*. I found renewed confidence in the instructions my former masters had given me.

In addition, I have met and received empowerments and teachings from Trulzhik Rinpoché, Chatral Rinpoché, Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoché, Dzongsar Khyentsé Rinpoché and others, as well as Kalu Rinpoché, Tenga Rinpoché, Taklung Shabdrung Rinpoché, and other masters of the Kagyu school. I also served for seven years as vajra master and professor at Shechen Monastery in Nepal.

Nevertheless, when I first left Tibet, His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoché said to me, "Your primary spiritual lineage is that of Namchak, so it is your personal responsibility to ensure that these teachings, which are dying out, continue. Don't let them down!" Simply not to ignore his order, I collected some of the texts of these teachings from Tibet and published these with the sponsorship of Khenpo Palden Sherab and his brother Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal. But I have not been able to accomplish anything more than that.

Later on, Khyentsé Rinpoché reminded me, "To respect His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoché's directive, you should found a retreat center and publish texts." Accordingly, I had the texts that I had recovered from Tibet entered on computer, and founded Sang-Ngak Phurba Ling, a three-year retreat center in which the first group of retreatants has already finished the program without any obstacles.

As well, Khyentsé Rinpoché sent me to Almora in the north of India, appointing me spiritual master to the nuns from Shugseb in Tibet. I stayed and taught them the preliminary practices of the Longchen Nyingtik cycle, but conditions were hard there and the nuns were unable to stay long in Almora. In order not to ignore Khyentsé Rinpoché's instructions, I began soliciting sponsorship for building a retreat center for nuns in Nepal, and the first group of three-year retreatants has already completed the program. But the situation for nuns in general is deplorable and conditions of gender inequality are still the case.

To help alleviate the difficulties nuns face and to counter such negative cultural conditioning, Ani Marilyn Silverstone and the others responsible have been instrumental in establishing the Turquoise Leaf Nunnery Project, which has built the nunnery and planned for its future development. In addition, we have undertaken a number of projects for the future, such as the Ewam Shedra college and Ewam Publications, as well as plans for a hospital and a temple to honor great learned and accomplished woman masters. If you are interested in any of these projects, please read the literature we have prepared. Since my first visit to the United States in 1993, I have founded new centers and encouraged the practice of the teachings in the U.S., Taiwan, and several other countries.

Q: What are your plans for the future concerning the West in general and for the United States in particular?

A: My plans at present call for the building of Sang-Ngag Drolma Ling, the principal center of my Ewam Foundation, in Montana. As well, I plan to travel to different countries, spreading the teachings as much as I can. I want to foster both the study and practice of the mahayana teachings and those that form the basis for the vajrayana. For students who commit themselves to a long-term process of training, I plan to guide them, step by step, in the accumulations and purification of the preliminary practices; and in the main body of practice, which includes the stage of development, the stage of completion (including the higher yogic meditations and physical exercises), and the Dzogchen approach of *trekchö* and *tögal*. In teaching such students, I teach in accordance with the unerring and noble path established by the masters of the three lineages, which provides the means for anyone to attain the omniscient state of buddhahood. But whether or not one gains such attainment or awakens to buddhahood, depends primarily on one's own devotion and commitment to practice. As for specific details of my future projects, please consult the literature we have prepared.

I have answered these questions personally.

(Signed)

Tulku Sang-ngag Tendzin

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