

H.H. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsho: A Tribute and a Translation

*Karma Phuntsho**

With the demise of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsho Jungnye on the evening of 6 January 2004, the Buddhist world lost one of its greatest luminaries and Tibet one of her foremost leaders. Aged 70, Khenpo Jigphun had been admitted to the 363 Military Hospital in Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan province with heart problems on 29 December 2003. He has been suffering from ill health for a number of years and also from the pressure of Chinese restriction on his movements and religious activities.

Most of us who have come across Khenpo Jigphun may remember him as the formidable lama who hung his rosary on his ears and held his puppy at his chest even when he met the Dalai Lama. But to the thousands of Tibetan Buddhists, whose life he has shaped and whose hearts his message touched, Khenpo was a modern day Manjushri walking in human flesh. A scholar, monk and *gter ston*, Khenpo Jigphun was a champion of Buddhist revival in Tibet following the liberalization of religious practice in 1980.

Khenpo Jigphun was born in 1932, the third day of the first month of Water Bird year in the Golok Sertar region of Kham, where the open expanse of grasslands bestrewn with yaks and nomadic tents render a landscape that is both stupefying and enlightening. His biographers have it that he came out of his mother's womb in a meditation posture and recited as soon as he was born the mantra of Majushri, *Om ah ra pa tsa na dhi*, the mantra which he was to chant over 13 billion times throughout his life. He adopted Majushri as his personal deity and he is said to have had visions of him several times including one in 1987 when he visited Wutaishan, the holy mountain abode of Majushri in China. Like most of his visionary experiences, this event unfolded

* Cambridge University

with an extemporaneous hymn of celebration. Such acts of extemporary composition or revelation of religious teachings, *dgong gter* or Mind Treasure marked his entire life making him the foremost *gter ston* of modern times.

He was recognized in 1937 as the reincarnate of Tertön Sogyal alias Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926), the Nyingma guru of the 13th Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatsho and became a monk at Nubzur Gonpa, a branch of the Palyul monastery in Sertar. However, he received his formal religious training at Changma Rithro in Dzachukha under Thubga Rinpoche undergoing much hardship. Finishing his education, he became the abbot of Nubzur at the age of twenty-four but his religious career was soon interrupted by the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Following the occupation, many of Khenpo's people succumbed to the severe famine that resulted from Mao's policy of Great Leap Forward. By 1959, the revolutionary spirit of the Red army escalated into the madness of the Cultural Revolution, a tragedy that wiped out almost the entire cultural heritage and religious civilization of Tibet. Compulsory lessons on Communist ideology replaced religious training, political denunciation sessions took place instead of religious gatherings and communal farming supplanted the traditional way of life.

Khenpo however succeeded in eluding the Chinese authorities throughout the tumultuous period herding a small flock of goats and sheep in remote mountains, engaging in meditation and teaching Buddhism to a small circle during the nights. Despite all their efforts, the Communist officials could not bring Khenpo to a denunciation stand to publicly renounce his religious faith and accept the party lines. According to a story, when the Chinese caught Khenpo, his face miraculously swelled, which the Chinese authorities feared to have been caused by some infectious disease and thus let Khenpo return to the remote mountains. Another story reports Khenpo's power to make himself invisible whenever the Chinese soldiers came in search of him.

With the relaxation of religious restriction at end of 1970s, Khenpo resumed his religious activities of teaching and writing. A major educational achievement was the founding of Larung Gar Buddhist Academy in 1978 in Sertar with the aim of providing an ecumenical training in Tibetan Buddhism. The slopes of Larung Gar were soon hosts to a rapidly expanding shanty town built by the community of disciples who flocked around him. Registered as an educational establishment rather than as a monastery, Larung Gar became a renowned hub of Buddhist scholarship. At its height in the turn of this millennium, it had close to 10,000 monks and nuns, and produced hundreds of young erudite Khenpos who spread Khenpo's teachings far and wide. The monastic sprawl spread over hills with its three *quartiers* for lay disciples, nuns and monks each forming a community on its own. Almost two thirds consisted of nuns and Khenpo's niece, Muntsho, who was recognised as a *sprul sku*, headed the nuns.

A very committed monk, Khenpo also undertook in 1980s a project of 'cleansing' Buddhist institutions by evicting from his centre all corrupt monks and nuns, and persons who betrayed their teachers during the Cultural Revolution. Simultaneously, Khenpo travelled extensively across Tibet and China teaching Buddhism and rediscovering hidden treasures. In 1989, Khenpo left China to visit India at the invitation of H.H. Penor Rinpoche. During his visit to India he taught at various monasteries, including the Nyingma Institute in Mysore. At Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama resumed the connections they had in their previous lives by receiving teachings from Khenpo for a couple weeks.

It was during this trip that Khenpo's entourage also made a brief sojourn to Bhutan. In the midst of a *sgrub chen* in Kyichu Lhakhang, conducted by H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and attended by His Majesty and The Royal Queen Mother, Khenpo had one of his spontaneous revelations of *dgongs gter*. The 'rediscovered' tract is a discourse of seven verses praising Bhutan, her King and the people in an elegant

and vibrant poetry. It also touches on Bhutan's future prospects in a figurative style that is typical of *gter ma* prophecies. Ever since, Khenpo had been an ambassador for Bhutan speaking highly of the beautiful country, the pious people and the rich and thriving Buddhist culture. Many Bhutanese monks have become his disciples and one, Lam Nidup of Shingkhar, has even become a well-known person in Khenpo's centre.

The following year, Khenpo toured Europe and North America at the invitation of Buddhist centres there. However, the sophisticated and materialistic West did not appeal to his deeply spiritual inclinations. While on the West Coast, Khenpo is reported to have even broken down in tears in middle of his sermon, lamenting the commercialization of Buddhist teachings in the West. The act of imparting profound teachings such as Dzogchen by selling tickets saddened him beyond all measure.

On his return to Tibet, Khenpo came under constant Chinese government scrutiny and surveillance allegedly for the link he had made with the Dalai Lama during his trip to India. Besides, the number of his Han disciples gradually increased as devotees from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong poured in. Of almost 10,000 followers in 2001, over 1000 were Han Chinese. Although Khenpo was never involved in politics, his soaring influence on both Chinese and Tibetan public disturbed Beijing, which was then bitterly smitten by the Falun Gong. In August 2001, the People's Liberation Army and Public Security Bureau marched into Larung Gar and demolished over 2000 cottages and evicted thousands of members including all Han disciples on the grounds of security problems. A ceiling of 1400 monks and 500 nuns at one time was imposed and Sertar was closed to foreign visitors. Soon after that Khenpo was hospitalised in Chengdu for his deteriorating health.

The community at Larung Gar continued under the supervision of Khenpo's senior disciples, with frequent

skirmishes between members and the PSB who were residing there. In autumn, 2002, Khenpo returned to Larung Gar, still suffering from failing health. Upon his return, the nomadic people from surrounding regions flocked again in spite of Chinese restrictions. Although the scar left by the Chinese crackdown on both the landscape and peoples' mind was still very fresh and clear, Larung Gar revived to full life. His health very weak and voice very frail, Khenpo Jigphun resumed teaching an audience of over seven thousand people. Disseminating the words of the Buddha was his mission in life and this he did until his last breath. By doing so, Khenpo has left an indelible mark on the history of Buddhism and the Nyingma tradition in particular.

In a press conference in Washington, Khenpo was asked the purpose of the long and tiring journey he made from his remote hermitage in Kham to the US. Khenpo plainly replied, "to bring peace and happiness to the people". Asked how he was going to achieve this, Khenpo said unpretentiously, "I ask people to develop a kind and compassionate heart". To another journalist who asked what Khenpo would do if he were depressed, Khenpo candidly replied, "Whether I am happy or sad, I pray to the Three Jewels". So great a master and so simple a message, thousands of people the world over pray for his swift reincarnation.

འབྲུག་ཚེས་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་ལོ་ལ་གཏམ་དུ་བྱ་བ་གསལ་བྱུང་མགོན་པའི་རྒྱུད་སྤྱི་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།

A Song of an Adventitious Traveller: A Discourse to the Religious King of Bhutan

རྒྱལ་བ་ཀུན་གྱི་འབྲིན་ལས་གཅིག་བསྐྱེས་པ། རྟེན་གསལ་མའི་རྒྱུད་པ་འཛོམས་ལ་གཅིག་ཏུ་དབལ། །

ཨོ་རྒྱན་རིག་འཛོལ་བརྒྱུད་པར་བཅས་བ་ཡིས། མི་བདག་ཁྱེད་ལ་དུས་ཀུན་བསྐྱུང་གུར་ཅིག། །

May Padmasambhava, who is the embodiment of the benevolence of all Buddhas and the one singly heroic in destroying the misfortunes of degenerate age, along with his line of saints, bless Your Majesty.

ས་སྐྱོང་རྗེ་བོའི་དབྱ་འཕང་དགུང་ལས་མཐོ། །འབངས་ཀྱི་སྐྱོ་བོ་རང་དབང་བདེ་དགེས་འཚོ། །
ཀུན་ཀྱང་ཐོག་ཆེན་བབ་མེད་དབལ་ལ་སྐྱོད། །ཚོས་ལྡན་རྒྱལ་འབ་འདི་ལ་ཡིད་ཅེ་སྐྱོ། །

The glory of the ruling Monarch is higher than the sky. The people live in freedom, peace and righteousness. Everyone enjoys the beneficence of profound Mahayana. It is very joyous to be in this Buddhist kingdom.

དཀར་རྒྱལ་ཁ་བའི་འོ་བོ་རབ་མཛེས་ཀྱང་། །བདེ་སྤྱད་ལྷོགས་ཀྱི་སྣང་བ་མི་བརྟེན་བས། །
ལྗང་ལྗང་འབྲུག་བར་འཕར་བའི་འོག་སྣང་གིས། །ཡུན་དུ་འཕྱུད་ན་ཆབ་ཀྱི་སྤང་བོར་འགྱུར། །

The white round snow mountain is indeed magnificent, but the bitter-sweet light of the friend is not reliable. Should the rays from the west embrace it for long, it will be reduced to a mass of water.

སྐབས་གསུམ་ཀུན་འདུས་ཨོ་རྒྱན་ཐོད་འབྲེང་དང་། །ལྷ་མཚོག་རྗེ་རྩེ་ཕུར་བའི་བརྟེན་སྤྱབ་ཀྱིས། །
དཔོས་གྲུབ་སྤྱིན་སྤང་ལྷོགས་སུ་འགྲུགས་ཅུས་ན། །རབ་བརྗིད་གངས་ཀྱི་འོ་བོ་སྤྱིད་མཐར་བརྟན། །

If the cloud of blessings is obtained through the meditative practice of Padmasambhava, the essence of Three Jewels, and the supreme deity Vajrakila, the majestic mountain will endure until the end of the world.

སྐྱོན་སྤྱད་མི་བབ་དེའི་འབྲེལ་གཞན་དབང་གིས། །སྲོག་བདག་སྲོག་ལ་འགན་ལྷ་འཚོལ་སྲིད་ན། །
འཇམ་དབྱངས་ལྷགས་སྤྱུལ་མི་ཡི་ལོ་རྒྱུད། །མ་གཏོགས་སྐབས་གཞན་སྲིད་འདིར་རྟེན་བར་དཀའ། །

Due to the force of terrible incidents of the past, should a *srog bdag* spirit become a threat to life, it is hard to find in this world a savor other than the gem of mankind, the heart emanation of Majushri.

བཀའ་བརྒྱན་བརྟན་པ་གསེར་གྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ཅེས། །སྤྱི་ལྟུང་ཚོན་མིའི་རྟོག་འཚང་འདི། །
 ལྷོ་ནམ་ལྷ་རྩེ་འདེགས་པའི་རྟོན་པ་བསྐྱེད་ན། །ཚོས་སྲིད་ལེགས་ཚོགས་ཡར་ལྷའི་མཚེད་དུ་འགྱུར། །

If the golden victory banner of Kagyu teachings, on the tip of which rests the wish fulfilling jewel of the Nyingma, is held high, the virtues of both spiritual and secular endeavours will increase like the waxing moon.

བསྐྱེད་དཀོན་མཚོག་གསུམ་གྱི་བདེན་པ་དང་། །བདག་གི་ལྷ་ག་བསམ་རྣམ་པར་དག་པའི་མཐུས། །
 ཡུལ་འདིར་དགོ་ལེགས་རང་གིས་འབེལ་བ་དང་། །འགལ་རྐྱེན་མཐའ་དག་ཞི་བའི་བཀྲ་འཕྱིས་འོག། །

Through the power of the truth of the Three Jewels and of my sincere affection, may the good increase spontaneously and the auspiciousness, which pacifies all adversities, bless this land.

ཅས་ཚོགས་བཅད་བ་རྒྱལ་སྲིད་སྣ་བདུན་གྱི་གངས་ལྗན་འདི་ནི་ཚོས་རྒྱལ་སྲོང་བཙན་སྐམ་པོའི་ཡང་
 འདུལ་གྱི་གཞུག་ལག་འབང་ཚེན་པོར་འབྲུག་རྒྱལ་བོད་རྒྱལ་འབོར་ལྷན་རྒྱས་ལ་མཇལ་འབྲུན་བྱེད་སྐབས་
 དག་དབང་སྡོ་གྲོས་མཚོངས་མེད་ཀྱི་ཡིད་རོར་འཤར་བ་བཞིན་མཁའ་པོ་བསོད་དར་རྒྱས་ཀྱིས་ཡི་གེའི་
 གཞུགས་བྱས་པ་དགོ་ལེགས་འབེལ། །རབ་བྱུང་བརྒྱ་བདུན་པའི་བོད་ལྷ་གས་རྟ་ཟླ་ ༥ པའི་ཚེས་ ༡༡
 ལའོ། །

These seven verses concurring with the seven jewels of a universal monarch were written just as they appeared in the vision of Ngawang Lodoe Tshungme, during his meeting with the King of Bhutan and his retinue at a yang 'dul temple of the religious emperor Songtsen Gampo, on the 22nd of 7th month, Iron-Horse Year of 17th Rabjung. The scribe was Khenpo Sod Dargay.

'Jigs med Phun tshogs 'Jung gnas (2002), Chos rje dam pa yid bzhin nor bu 'jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas dpal bzung po'i gsung 'bum, Serta: gSer ljong Bla ma rung INga rigs Nang bstan Slob gling, vol. III, pp. 111-2