

OUR JOURNEY TO MEET THE "GOLDEN CHILD"
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By Michael Erlewine

Although today it seems like some far off dream, only a few short years ago I was high in the mountains of Tibet at Tsurphu Monastery (the seat of the Karma Kagyu Lineage), where I met His Holiness Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. All of this is even more remarkable since my friends know that I hate airplanes and seldom travel far from my home in mid-Michigan. Although I have been interested in Buddhism for many years, I never seriously considered going to Tibet. Then suddenly, in less than a month, I am in Tibet, along with my wife, two daughters, and young son. How does such an event happen to a middle-aged businessman? It happens when your lama tells you to go to Tibet as soon as we could manage it. Here is our story:

My wife and I are long-time students of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dhamachakra) Monastery. Rinpoche was sent to the U.S. in the mid 1970s by His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, to represent the Karma Kagyu Lineage in the United States. Just as the Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, so the Gyalwa Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And incidentally, the Karmapa's lineage (stemming from Marpa and Milarepa) is the older lineage, with His Holiness the Karmapa representing the first tulku (reincarnated lama) in the history of Tibet, and all other reincarnations of this sort being subsequent to the Karmapas.

Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

The Karma Kagyu lineage comes from the Adi Buddha Vajradhara, who imparted teachings to the Indian saint Tilopa, who in turn taught (also in India) his student Naropa. Marpa, the Tibetan translator, traveled to India and received these teachings from Naropa, and brought them to Tibet, where he imparted them to his main student Milarepa (Tibet's greatest yogi). Milarepa went on to teach his student Gampopa, who taught the first Karmapa (Dusum Khyenpa). The entire line of the Karmapas (17 incarnations) have been successive reincarnations of that same essence. In fact the lineage today represents an unbroken chain of students and teachers that culminates in the young 17th Karmapa, who resides in Tibet. The Karmapa is the reincarnation around which the movie "The Golden Child" was based.

Over the last 20 years, Khenpo Rinpoche and another Rinpoche (Bardor Tulku, Rinpoche) have worked to build an extensive monastery complex near Woodstock, in upstate New York, including a vast shrine hall, an 11-foot gold Buddha, and even a traditional 3-year retreat center (one for men and another for women). A visit to the KTD monastery, high on Meads Mountain, is an unforgettable experience.

Each year we journey from our home in Michigan to KTD Monastery for a 10-day intensive teaching that Khenpo Rinpoche offers to senior students. Now in something like its eighteenth year, it is a chance for the students to practice and be together and to receive Rinpoche's teaching. In recent years, Khenpo Rinpoche has been giving advanced Mahamudra teachings, not because we students are particularly ready for these teachings, but because (as Rinpoche puts it), if he is to teach this material (due to his age), it will have to be now.

During our stay there this last July (1997), we had requested and received permission for a

personal interview with Rinpoche. At that interview, I had outlined certain fairly severe business problems that I had been going through over the last year or two. Working with a translator, I laid out my questions and Rinpoche began to answer.

But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he was not going to answer further himself, and that, instead, we should take these questions to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa and ask him directly. Karmapa would be able to answer our questions.

We all looked at each other in amazement, because His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery, deep in the reaches of Tibet. I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, well, perhaps next year, next spring or something, but Rinpoche said: "No, this Summer, as soon as you can arrange it." By this time, Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face as if he were very, very happy for us. We were speechless. He then went on to speak about impermanence, how life is short, and that none of us know the time or manner of our death. He was directing us to go to Tibet soon, this very summer.

Talk about turning your world upside down. Me go to Tibet? What a novel idea! I almost never travel and had never seriously thought of going there. I had always said, a little smugly I confess, that I was interested in the Buddhism in 'Tibetan Buddhism' and not particularly in the Tibetan culture. Anyway, I left that interview in a daze, my head spinning, but also knowing that I had better go home and pack my bags. "Rinpoche wants us to go to Tibet," I mused.

For years I had worked with Khenpo Rinpoche and each year during our personal interview, I would always ask him if there was anything particular I should be doing. Aside from encouraging me to keep practicing, he never gave any specific direction. I was always a little disappointed that there was not ever something more specific he wanted me to do. And now this. Rinpoche had just told me to go to Tibet, and, this summer. It was already mid-July. After the surprise cleared away, we knew that we were pumped.

In fact, we were so charged up that we went out and climbed to the top of the local mountain that same night, something we had never done in all the years we had been coming to the monastery. Starting about 7 PM, with the Sun already dimming, most of my family climbed to the top and surveyed the valley in the distance below us, with all of the twinkling lights, later coming down the mountain in complete darkness. Our heads were right. We were 'good to go' and when we returned from the teaching to Michigan, we managed to prepare and take off within a month of our directive from Rinpoche. From that first day, we were as good as gone to Tibet.

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