

The Selfless Acts of a Buddha

Karma Phuntscho pays tribute to the life and achievements of H.H. Drubwang Penor Rinpoche.

The demise of H.H. Drubwang Penor Rinpoche is a great loss to the Tibetan Buddhist world in general and the Nyingma tradition in particular and is mourned by thousands of his disciples around the world. His Holiness was admitted at the Columbia Asia Hospital, Bangalore for medical treatment from where through assistance from the Bhutanese government he was escorted by Indian police to his seat, Namdrolling Monastery in Mysore, South India on Friday, 27 March. After arriving there at 6.40 and saying prayers with the leading *tulkus*, *khenpos* and lamas who have gathered at his residence, His Holiness gazed around with a comforting smile and closed his eyes to enter the state of *thugdam* at 8.30pm on 27 March, 2009.



His Holiness Penor Rinpoche was an extraordinary master. Believed to be an emanation of Vajrapani and the great Indian scholar and mystic Vimalamitra, His Holiness was born in the twelfth month of Water Monkey Year, 1932 in Powo, a village in the Kham region of Tibet where the open expanse of grasslands bestrewn with yaks and nomadic tents render a landscape that is both stupefying and enlightening. At the time of his birth, sweet scented flowers are said to have miraculously bloomed in the middle of winter. He was soon recognized as third Drubwang Penor Rinpoche by Khenpo Ngaga, the leading Dzogchen adept of the time, following the prophecy of the fifth Dzogchen Rinpoche Thubten Chökyi Dorjee. At the tender age of five, Penor Rinpoche was brought to Palyul Monastery, the seat of his former lives and was enthroned as the reincarnation of the second Drubwang Penor Rinpoche Chogi Langpo.

Palyul Namgyel Jangchub Chöling, one of the six great Nyingma monasteries of Tibet, was then one of the largest monastic centres in Kham. With the patronage of Lachen Jampa Phuntsog, the king of Dege and Trichen Sangye Tenpa, Palyul was founded in 1665 and its first head was Rigzin Kunzang Sherub, a close disciple of Mahasiddha Karma Chagmed and Tertön Migyur Dorjee who rediscovered the Namchö cycle. By the time His Holiness took over as the eleventh throne holder of Palyul, the monastery was a famous centre of learning and meditation with some four hundred branch monasteries. Thousands of its monks are said to have attained the 'rainbow-body'.

Penor Rinpoche spent his early youth at Palyul and Dago studying and receiving teachings from many masters including Karma Thegchog Nyingpo, the tenth throne-holder, who prepared him to be the successor. When, as a small child, he was playing with a precious *dorje*, he accidentally dropped it, breaking it into two pieces. Fearing that his teacher would reprimand him, he quickly glued it back together with his own saliva making the *dorje* stronger than ever. On another occasion, Rinpoche was approached by an old man who insisted that Rinpoche practise *phorwa* on him. Rinpoche innocently complied with the old man's bidding but to his horror, Rinpoche realized that he had actually transferred the old man's consciousness and unwittingly killed him. He immediately did *phorwa* again to revive the corpse, which lay before him. To Rinpoche's great relief, the old man came back to life and said, "For heaven's sake, why did you call me back? I was already in the pureland of Amitabha." His youth was filled with such accounts of miracle and wonder.

Amongst his numerous masters, Penor Rinpoche benefited the most from a very warm and close relationship he enjoyed with his root guru, Thubten Chökyi Dawa. His Holiness received from him the vows of a novice at the age of thirteen and full monastic ordination at twenty-one. Thubten Chokyi Dawa gave His Holiness a vast number of teachings including the essential instructions and empowerments of the Nyingma tradition. "If I am not able to give the entire teachings, instructions and empowerments to Penor Tulku, there is no point to my life", he is said to have remarked even as his eye sight was failing. Following his studies, Penor Rinpoche undertook a long meditation retreat with this master in Darthang. His achievements in meditation placed him among the highest order of Tibetan lamas and made him in the words of H.H. the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, 'a master who has transcended all normal boundaries.'

In 1956, Penor Rinpoche with a large entourage made a journey to Lhasa on pilgrimage. There, they visited numerous monasteries, ancient temples and sacred places which spoke in volumes of Tibet's glorious past. He also visited H.H. the Dalai Lama at his winter palace – the Potala – and received a long-life empowerment. Lhasa Mönlam Chenmo was in progress and he offered tea and money to the entire assembly of monks. The political situation in Lhasa was by then very tense with increasing Chinese military control. With a heavy heart, Rinpoche returned to his monastery in Kham, where the Tibetan resistance movement has then begun to spread.

At the height of Chinese invasion in 1959, Penor Rinpoche fled to the hidden kingdom of Pema Koe in eastern India with three hundred others but only thirty people managed to reach India. The journey was long and dangerous; many were killed by the pursuing army. Bullets would fall by Rinpoche's feet sending clouds of dust. Hand grenades would roll at his feet and when he had moved forward to a safer distance, they would explode.

Rinpoche moved to Mysore in 1961 with many other Tibetan refugees. The refugee settlements sprawled in the midst of wet cornfields and bamboo thickets infested with cobras and in forests of fragrant sandalwood and of banyan trees with their aerial roots. Under the scorching heat of the south Indian sun, the place would not have even remotely resembled their homeland, yet the Tibetans cleared forests to make fields, build monasteries, start industries and craftily created a whole new Tibet, a home away from home.

In 1963, Rinpoche with a meagre capital of Rs.300 and the help of a few of his remaining monks set on task of building Palyul Thegchog Namdrolling monastery. The Palyul monastery in Tibet was by then completely destroyed. The task was by no means easy but Rinpoche had the

indomitable courage and determination. He aimed to bring Palyul to its former glory so it may keep the flame of the Buddha's wisdom burning. In the hot sun, he would carry sand and stones and work with bricks and cement until his hands are full of sores. He would fetch water from the river and dig latrines for his monks. At times, all he and his monks had for lunch would be *tsampa* mixed with the water from the stream that ran by the place. In the early days of settlement, he lived in a tent, making Tibetan tea with cheap cooking oil and drinking it out of a tin can.



Penor Rinpoche, as the Dalai Lama described later, was 'an epitome of diligence and determination.' This unwavering diligence coupled with his inexhaustible energy was to turn Namdrolling from a makeshift bamboo shrine into the largest Nyingma establishment with over 5000 monks and nuns today from all corners of the Buddhist Himalayas and other parts of the world. The monastery today includes a school, a college for higher education, a nunnery, a retreat centre and a hospital complex. It has also become a popular tourist attraction in the area.

In 1978, His Holiness also founded as part of Namdrolling monastery the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies and Research, a unique monastic college combining the routine of a boarding school, the academic rigour of a top university and the curriculum covering all aspects of Tibetan scholarship. The institute soon became renowned as a premier monastic centre for advanced Buddhist and Tibetan studies. It was Rinpoche's wish to produce at least a hundred learned *khenpos* to save the Buddhist scholarship that was fast declining. This wish is now nearly fulfilled and NNI's alumni make up the majority of Nyingma scholars today. With over 500 members and hundreds of scholars from many countries and traditions applying to study there each year, the institute continues to be a vibrant hub of scholarship.

Penor Rinpoche's vision was to make Namdrolling a centre of both intensive study and

practice. In the monastery's retreat centre, he introduced an intensive three-year retreat programme. He personally instructed the monks and nuns on their religious practices and gave numerous teachings each year including the month long retreats in the winter in which large numbers of monks, nuns and laity took part. He established Tshogyal Shedrubling in 1993 as a place for women to study and practice. Penor Rinpoche also ran a home for the elderly and opened a hospital to provide free medical facilities to those in need.

The compassionate works of Rinpoche also extended to the local Indian people through construction of roads and bridges and provision of free medical facilities. While both in Tibet and India, Penor Rinpoche is also famous for making timely rain, it was the local farmers of Karnataka who dared to nickname him "the Rain Lama".

Since the liberalization of political and cultural policies in Kham, Rinpoche returned to Tibet several times and successfully rebuilt Palyul monastery and many of its branches in Tibet. He also visited the Himalayan regions to give spiritual teachings to the Buddhist population. His Holiness frequently travelled to the West and the Far East where his students have set up over a dozen dharma centres. During these travels, he gave his students numerous teachings including the empowerments from the Namcho and Nyingthig cycles and he is the only Tibetan lama to have given the complete Rinchen Terzod empowerments in the West. Among the Western Buddhist world, His Holiness also became well known after his recognition of Catherine Burroughs, a new age spiritualists, as the rebirth of Akhon Lhamo, the sister of Kunzang Sherub, the founder of Palyul. During the Nyingma Mönlam Chenmo at Bodh Gaya in 1993, Penor Rinpoche was unanimously elected as the Supreme Head of Nyingma tradition, a position he held until he voluntarily resigned in 2003.

Dressed in simple robes and a pair of *bata* rubber sandals, His Holiness lived the life of a simple monk. Respected for his monastic purity, he has given ordination to several thousands of monks and nuns and is the first Tibetan lama to start a Western monastic *sangha*, which he did in Kunzang Palyul Choling in the US. His day normally started around 3am with meditation and finished with long sessions of teachings or private audiences he gave to people from all walks of life. Those who met him felt an intense energy and a mind-blowing presence around him. Yet, His Holiness was a gentle and compassionate figure who would give a soft smile and a



wholehearted touch to all those seeking his blessing. He dedicated his entire life to the promotion of Buddhism. "I move around like a stray dog to support you so that Buddhism may flourish", he would often remind his monks. The prosperous state of Nyingma scholarship and practice today is largely due to the hard work of Penor Rinpoche.

As a guru, his yardstick for spiritual progress was simple. "If you feel a little more humbled, it is a sign that your study is effective. If you feel a little more love and compassion for sentient beings, it is a sign that your meditation is improving", he told his students. During the last meditation retreat he conducted in upstate New York, his overriding advice was on pacifying one's thoughts and stilling the minds, and to merge one's mind with the guru's enlightened spirit in the state of blissful Clear Light. Today, His Holiness remains in *thugdam*,

that immanent state of Clear Light. Once the period of *thugdam* is over, there is a plan to keep Rinpoche's body for about a year to allow his students and devotees from all over the world to pay their respects.

A charismatic leader, a skilful teacher, a learned scholar and a consummate monk and meditation master, Penor Rinpoche was one of the very few eminent jewels from Tibet before Chinese occupation. He was, as H.H. the late Khenpo Jigphun repeatedly put it, an enlightened Buddha in our midst. His disciples, following the Tibetan tradition, will be praying for his swift reincarnation.

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