

an extraordinary
modern-day
MILAREPA

By Ven. Robina Courtin

Since he was a small child, Tenzin Zopa would prefer to be with Geshe Lama Konchog in his cave rather than at his home in the nearby village of Tsum in the northeast reaches of Nepal where it borders Tibet. "Even from the time I could crawl, I would follow Geshe-la when he returned from the village to his cave. Often from early morning I would sit under his cloak as he meditated, playing or sleeping, sometimes all day. I was completely content there." So close were they that Tenzin Zopa assumed that this meditating monk was his grandfather.

Then, when the boy was seven, "Grandfather" moved down the mountain, eventually to settle at Kopan Monastery near Kathmandu.

Now himself a monk of 26, having become ordained at the age of nine and spending his life serving Geshe Lama Konchog Tenzin Zopa was charged with overseeing the ceremonies and rituals at the funeral of his precious guru, who passed away at Kopan on October 15.

Only now is it becoming known to the hundreds of monks, nuns and laypeople devoted to Geshe Lama Konchog, the extraordinary qualities of this modern-day Milarepa. His students have known that he meditated incaves for twenty-five years, for example, but few have been aware of the details. Over the years Tenzin Zopa has meticulously noted down the accomplishments of this great yogi, and is compiling information for a biography.

Losang Puntsog, as he was known as a boy, was born in the Year of the Fire Rabbit, 1927, in the village of Shangbu, near Lhasa. He was a sickly child; an oracle consulted by the parents instructed them to take special care of him and only to dress him in yellow or red, the Tibetan monastic colors. "And you must send him to a monastery, otherwise he will not survive."

When he was six, his parents wanted to send him to nearby Drepung, one of the three great Gelug monasteries in Lhasa. But already the young boy was displaying a quality that would be central to his life: he knew exactly what he wanted and would pursue it with single-minded determination. He declared that he wanted to attend Sera Monastery instead. As he had an

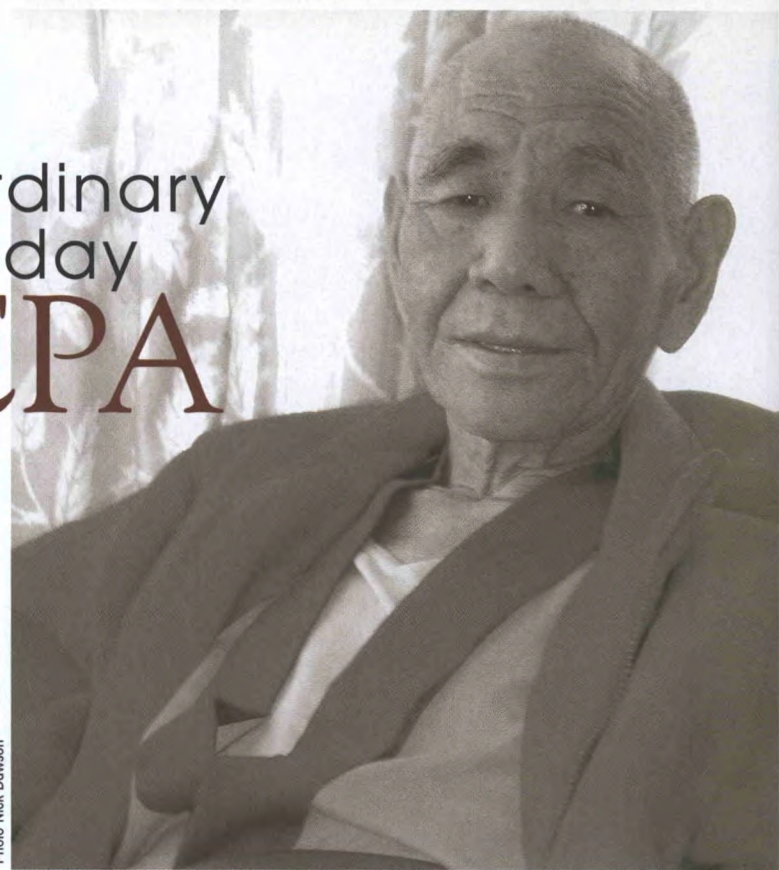


Photo Nick Dawson

Geshe-la in March 2001 at Kopan Monastery

uncle there, his parents relented.

His uncle, however, was a *dob-dob* – one of a group of monks who were basically self-appointed 'policemen' found at most Gelug monasteries – who actively discouraged the young boy's wish to study and practice and would beat him regularly.

But nothing could deter Losang Puntsog. In the monasteries it was forbidden to take tantric initiations until one had completed the study of the five major treatises. However, at the age of nine he joined a group of lamas and monks to take the Vajra Yogini initiation from his root guru Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

"He was so excited, like a young child anticipating New Year," says Geshe Jampa Tseten, the abbot of Samten Ling in Boudhanath, not far from Kopan, who lived in the room next to Losang Puntsog during their many years at the Je college of Sera.

"But when we arrived for the initiation, seven of us discovered we were not yet qualified to receive it and had to leave. The rest of us didn't mind, but Losang Puntsog was distraught. He cried all the way back to his room. 'How unfortunate we are,' he lamented. 'How unlucky! What a terrible loss! What kind of negative karma must we have created in the past?' He cried the whole night and was moody and sad and didn't eat for three days. We thought he was crazy."

Now, the abbot is full of admiration for his schoolmate. "To have such wisdom at the age of nine, and to have such a strong emotional feeling for receiving an initiation, is extraordinary. Even now, at the age of 73, I do not have such strong feelings," he told Tenzin Zopa.

By the age of 10, Losang Puntsog was displaying other extraordinary qualities. "During the night he would regularly

perform *Chöd*. He would perform it for hours and hours, using the most amazing tunes. We had no idea where he learned these things,” says Jampa Tseten.

He remembers an occasion when they were doing retreat together. Losang Puntsog would go off to join the nuns in various practices. “He had the most beautiful voice, the best female voice. And in between sessions he would also perform dakini dances. For twenty-four hours he would be practicing: doing the cham dancing, especially dakini dancing, and then going off at midnight and practicing *Chöd* for hours. The other monks would laugh at him, but he would dismiss them: ‘I am blissful! Don’t bother me, leave me alone!’

“Sometimes to divert the attention of the monks he would perform *Lhamo* dancing, making them laugh hugely, and then he would just disappear again to secretly perform his dakini dancing and *Chöd*.

“Often we would hear loud noises from his room, keeping us all awake. Now I am sure he was practicing the *Six Yogas of Naropa*.”

Between the ages of 11 and 15, Losang Puntsog – known by now to his classmates as “Lama Konchog” [the Lama Refuge] because of his straightforwardness and single-minded devotion to study and practice – attended all the major initiations offered by the high lamas such as Pabongka Rinpoche, Ling Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and Bari Rinpoche. “And not only that,” says Jampa Tseten, “he would request permission to stay on at the lama’s house and complete the commitments and retreat of each initiation, even if it took months. Then he would return to his studies. He put everything into practice immediately.”

For years, since he was a young boy, the abbot remembers, Lama Konchog could be heard in his room talking animatedly about the Dharma. “During the day, at night, any time, we could hear him talking deeply about various topics. He’d be quoting such logical reasons, talking about such profound things, especially impermanence and emptiness. We would listen at his door.

“Sometimes we would go into his room, and there he would be, sitting on cushions piled high, giving teachings, his hand in the teaching *mudra* and his eyes closed. We thought he was crazy! Now I am convinced that he was teaching to non-human disciples whom only he could see.”

Throughout his years at Sera, beginning when he was a child, Lama Konchog would disappear for months at a time, traveling to various places around Tibet to take into his astonishing mind a whole range of skills, rarely found all in one person. “He was expert in so many fields,” says Tenzin Zopa. “Apart from the sutra and tantra teachings of all the four traditions of Tibet, he also accomplished cham dancing, rituals, sand mandalas, astrology, making divinations, architecture according to the Vinaya — his knowledge was astonishing.”

For Geshe Jampa Tseten, it is clear now that his “crazy” schoolmate was not an ordinary being. “He was a holy being, a great meditator, since he was a small child.”

During his twenty-five years of studying at Sera Je, Geshe Lama Konchog mastered all the texts required. “He was so

humble,” says Jampa Tseten, “yet when he debated he was fierce! No one could defeat him!”

He was qualified to go for his *Lharampa* degree, but the uprising against the Chinese Communist invaders intervened. In fact, two months before the events of March 1959, 32-year old Lama Konchog had a dream that predicted the uprising and its violent aftermath. He told his friends, and said he was leaving. As usual, they thought he was crazy, and stayed put. He left Tibet carrying “a leaky pot,” — as he told Tenzin Zopa later — “a bowl, a set of robes, a small sheepskin and essential Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug texts.”

According to Lama Lhundrup, the abbot of Kopan Monastery, the route that Geshe Lama Konchog followed out of Tibet was revealed in his earlier dream. The route took him to the village of Tsum, just over the border into Nepal, and to the cave of Tibet’s beloved yogi and saint, Milarepa. The cave is known as Cave of the Doves. It is said that dakas and dakinis transformed into doves to listen to Milarepa’s teaching. It was here, also, that Milarepa was offered robes by his sister.

Lama Konchog left his belongings with a family in Tsum and headed down the mountain to India, to take teachings in Bodhgaya from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who by now had also escaped from Tibet. He then planned to join his friends and fellow monks at Buxaduar in the north. Fortuitously he met his guru Trijang Rinpoche in Kathmandu, who told him that “his studies were finished” and that he should “return to the mountains from where he’d just come, and meditate.”

He hesitated, but after an admonishing from his lama, during a second chance meeting on a train bound for Varanasi in India, he returned to Tsum. Collecting his texts and leaky pot, he effectively disappeared. He made his way to the Cave of the Doves, high in the mountainous jungle, where only tigers and other wild animals lived.

According to his own account to Tenzin Zopa, Geshe Lama Konchog trained himself during the first few months “to have an empty stomach. I lived on nettles, and gradually was able to practice ‘wind chulen’ — a method whereby the meditator can “take the essence” (*chulen*) from nature. The usual method practiced by yogis is to take the essence from rocks and flowers, then make them into pills. But Lama Konchog decided to do without all sustenance. He literally took the essence from the air, and was able to survive.

And he didn’t sleep, either, according to Rinchen Wangchuk, another meditator from that area. From two in the morning until eight in the evening he would meditate on the various deities, mainly on Vajra Yogini, and from eight in the evening until two the following morning he would prostrate. And



Geshe-la practices *Chöd*



Geshe-la with Ven. Tenzin Sopa

he took the Eight Mahayana Precepts every day, in the context of the Nyung-ne fasting practice.

Wanting very much to make water bowl offerings to the Guru Buddha, he told Tenzin Zopa that he dug out holes in the rock face and then chipped away at the rock leading from the nearby waterfall, digging a groove, which allowed the water to flow into his "bowls." For mandala offerings, he used rocks from the stream.

"I can't even imagine how hard he worked," says Tenzin Zopa. "One night at Kopan, when I was about 15, I came back home after my evening debate and because I was tired I went straight to bed. Normally we are supposed to review our memorization from the morning. Geshe-la came into my room and scolded me.

"You will never achieve what you are supposed to achieve acting like this! Everything is so luxurious for you people these days! When I was in the cave, I had no food, one set of robes, and one sheep skin. In the winter the snow was higher than you. The whole day I did sessions and at night I prostrated. I had no sleep for years and years. You people cannot go without sleep for even one day!"

"I felt so sad and cried. I then went outside and chanted and chanted, trying to stay up all night. Hours later Geshe-la came out in his undershirt with some butter tea for me. 'Go and sleep,' he said. It had a deep effect on me."

Geshe Lama Konchog lived like this for some nine years: full of utter determination to achieve realizations, compelled by great compassion, and delighting in his solitude, with only the tigers and deer for friends. Asked later how he felt about conditions in the West, he said, "It is all contaminated! The best food I ever had was in the cave. The best place I've ever lived in was the cave. The best friends I ever had were in the cave." The cave needed to be climbed into, and the deer "would support each other in order to get in. Sometimes they would sit all day and night. We'd stay peacefully together with no fear. For me, that was a pure land!"

It can only be imagined how, after nine years of this unbelievable rigor, the blissful meditator appeared to some shepherds who ventured up into the mountains, wanting to set up a village. "They thought he was a demon or even a yeti!" says Tenzin Zopa. "There he was, this wild, skinny person, with long hair and beard, and scanty rags to cover only his secret parts. At first they ran away!"

The following day, more people came and tried to chase him away. But they realized he was human and attempted to encourage him to come down the mountain. "If you want to eat human food, come and work for us," they offered. "I've got the best food here," Lama Konchog said. "Just try not to bother me!"

But chase him away they did. Unable to find another cave, the determined yogi found a heavily overhanging juniper tree near Tsaarak Mountain. Reinforcing it with branches and sticks, astonishingly he made this his new home. With complete control over his own elements he was able to effortlessly withstand the external elements, living through the fierce winter snows, with no food, no clothing, no sleep. All he had were the bliss of his meditation and the blessings of the holy beings.

Some eighteen months later he was again forced to find another home. This time, says Tenzin Zopa, he walked up the mountain and then down towards the middle part of Tsum, the village he'd first encountered after leaving Tibet. About an hour away he found a partial cave known as Galdung Gompa, which he built up and enclosed with rocks. Here he lived for another fifteen years.

From this cave he gradually became known, and revered, by the villagers. He worked on their behalf, in the beginning especially using his powers to remove the harmful spirits from the village. "He was able to communicate with the spirits," Tenzin Zopa says. "He could subdue them with ease, even the powerful ones who, apparently, had been practitioners in previous lives but had died with strong attachment and reincarnated as spirits. Also, he was able to control the weather, and with the power of mantra he would heal people."

Tenzin Zopa was the first of six children, born in 1975, not long after Geshe Lama Konchog moved close to Tsum. "My father was chosen by Geshe-la to marry my mother," he says. "Our family became very close to him."

In 1969, now out of his strict retreat and visiting Boudhanath near Kathmandu, Geshe Lama Konchog met Lama Thubten Yeshe again for the first time since their days together at Sera Je. The meeting was a surprise: "Suddenly someone hugged him tightly from behind and wouldn't let go," Tenzin Zopa says. "He wondered who this crazy person was!" It was Lama Yeshe, so happy to see his old friend again, after ten years apart. "They had great affection and respect for each other," Tenzin Zopa says. "Both were very similar: great practitioners living simple, unassuming lives."

"We were not just ordinary friends, who shared food with each other," Geshe Lama Konchog said later. "We were Dharma friends." Lama Yeshe asked him to join him at Kopan, but he said no, he had his own things to do.

He did, however, visit Kopan. Thubten Pemba remembers: "We all wondered who this rough looking monk was." Like all holy beings, he was a hidden yogi: his unassuming "rough" appearance showed nothing of his marvelous and astonishing inner qualities. In reality, "Geshe Lama Konchog lived in Vajra Yogini's Pure Land," Lama Zopa Rinpoche declared later.

In 1984, after Lama Yeshe passed away, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche wrote to Geshe Lama Konchog and again requested him to come. This time he accepted.

"When Lama Yeshe passed away," said Rinpoche, "the smiles at Kopan went away. But when Geshe Lama Konchog came, the smiles came back."

For eighteen years, he lived at Kopan, devoting himself to the monks and nuns and giving them the gift of his unbelievable qualities and knowledge. "He was our father," says Tenzin Zopa.

The holy body of Geshe Lama Konchog was offered to the fire at Kopan on October 22, seven days after this beloved father passed away. Kopan's lamas and three hundred monks and nearby Kachoe Ghakyil's three hundred nuns, as well as many devoted students from abroad, attended the Yamantaka fire puja, held at a site chosen by Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

According to Tenzin Zopa all the details of his own passing away were under Geshe-la's control, including the date, the type of rituals, the practices to be performed by various monasteries.

"On the day after Geshe-la passed away, Geshe Jampa Tseten came to visit Kopan. He advised me to be very careful with the arrangements for the cremation, because Geshe Lama Konchog was definitely an extraordinary being. Suddenly I remembered that Geshe-la had left on his table, open at the appropriate pages, various texts that explained exactly what to do: the various substances to use for the fire, the rituals, and so on. He knew it was far too complicated for me, so he prepared everything."

Tenzin Zopa was with him before he passed away. "Geshe-la said to me, 'It seems there is nothing I haven't done in my life. I feel completely satisfied and I have no regrets.' I was holding his hand so tightly, and I was crying.

"Then he gave me instructions about what to do after he stopped breathing - after he had started his meditation, in other words. 'Don't touch the body; no one should touch it. Don't put any new object in front of my eyes because it might distract the concentration. And don't move or shake the bed. Don't ask the doctor to do anything, either. And do not light more than one butter lamp because it disturbs the clear light meditation, And don't cry.' He also gave instructions about what practices and pujas to do. The main one was to be Medicine Buddha."

Around 8:15 on the evening of October 15, Tenzin Zopa and others were with Geshe Lama Konchog. Remembers Tenzin Zopa, "Geshe-la said to us, 'Now the vision of the mirage has appeared' - the first of the eight internal signs of death - 'so please go and start the prayers.' We all left except my brother



Photo Nick Dawson *The cremation - Monday October 22, 2001*



Photo Nick Dawson *Pearl relics found in the ashes after Geshe-la's cremation*

Thubten Lhundrup, who recited Geshe-la's daily prayers for him. At 8.40 P.M. his breathing stopped." Again, the smiles at Kopan went away.

Prayers were performed in Geshe-la's house throughout the day and night during the seven days that he remained in meditation. On October 22, his holy body was carried in solemn procession to the site of the fire puja, which lasted for several hours amid auspicious signs of rainbows and a drizzle of flowers from the sky. At the end, the specially constructed stupa containing the fire was sealed.

At 4.30 A.M. on the third day after the fire puja, under the supervision of the young Cherok Lama, Lama Lhundrup, Thubten Lhundrup, Geshe Kosang Jamyang, Amtso, Drakpa and Tenzin Zopa, the stupa was broken open and the search for relics begun.

An astonishing number of relics were found — signs of the greatness of this holy being. "So many relics were found that what was supposed to be a two-hour job turned into eight," Tenzin Zopa said. Hundreds of pearl-like relics, some black hair,

the heart, tongue and an eye — commonly, such organs of high tantric practitioners don't burn — and many other relics were found. "Lama Lhundrup said it is as if Geshe-la's whole body was a precious jewel.

"At 2:30 p.m. we invited Geshe-la's relics to the gompa," Tenzin Zopa said, "with music and auspicious banners and flowers, and everyone prayed strongly for his reincarnation to come quickly."

With the speed of Vajra Yogini, for the sake of all of us, may he do just that! ❁

Postscript: Six weeks after the relics were taken from the fire and laid in containers on the altar in Geshe Lama Konchog's house at Kopan, great changes have been occurring to them, says Tenzin Zopa. "One set of two relics has multiplied to become thirty-seven relics, and another has multiplied into twenty-eight. The bones are constantly producing pearl-like and golden-type relics; and from the ashes relics are manifesting as well. On the tongue there is a clearly visible self-arising Tara image becoming more prominent every day. And the heart continues to decrease in size, at the same time producing red relics. One tooth is taking the form of a counter-clockwise conch shell."

According to Lama Lhundrup, the multiplying of relics - which are the holy body of the yogi - is an indication of the strength of Geshe Lama Konchog's realizations.

All stories, pictures, recordings relating to Geshe Lama Konchog can be sent to Ven. Tenzin Zopa at Kopan Monastery: PO Box 817, Kathmandu, Nepal. Email Kopan@ecomail.com.np