



of a buddha

By Karma Phuntsho

REMEMBERING GURU

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

Karma Phuntsho is a long standing disciple of and interpreter for His Holiness Penor Rinpoche. He teaches Buddhism and Himalayan Studies and is a researcher at the University of Cambridge.

When I first met H.H. Drubwang Penor Rinpoche in 1987 in Kathmandu, I was a young novice seeking admission into his college in Mysore, which was by then the leading Nyingma monastic centre offering an excellent programme in Buddhist studies. The room was filled with an ineffable presence and aura. With an affectionate smile and a whole-hearted touch on my head with his two hands, His Holiness agreed to take me into his fold while reminding me of the diligence and forbearance required by the rigorous course.

"Don't let pride come in the way of your learning," he advised me. His Holiness Penor Rinpoche was an extraordinary master, blending the rigour of a traditional discipline and the compassion of a Buddha. Most of us who have had the opportunity to see His Holiness may also remember him as a master with

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a formidable power and presence. Yet, dressed in a pair of bata rubber slippers and simple monastic robes, His Holiness lived the life of a simple approachable monk.

The demise of H.H. Drubwang Penor Rinpoche on 27 March, 2009 is a great loss to the Buddhist world

in general and the Nyingma tradition in particular and is still mourned by thousands of his disciples around the world. His Holiness was suffering from diabetes for many years and was admitted at the Columbia Asia Hospital, Bangalore for medical treatment earlier that month. On March 27,

with Indian police escorts provided through assistance from the Royal Government of Bhutan, he returned to his seat, Namdrolling Monastery in Mysore, South India. After arriving there 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 8.30 in the evening.

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 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* (thunderbolt), 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 *phowa* 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 *phowa* again to revive the corpse. 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 empowerment of the Nyingma

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tradition. "If I am not able to give the entire teachings, instructions and empowerment to Penor Tulku, there is no point to my life," he 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

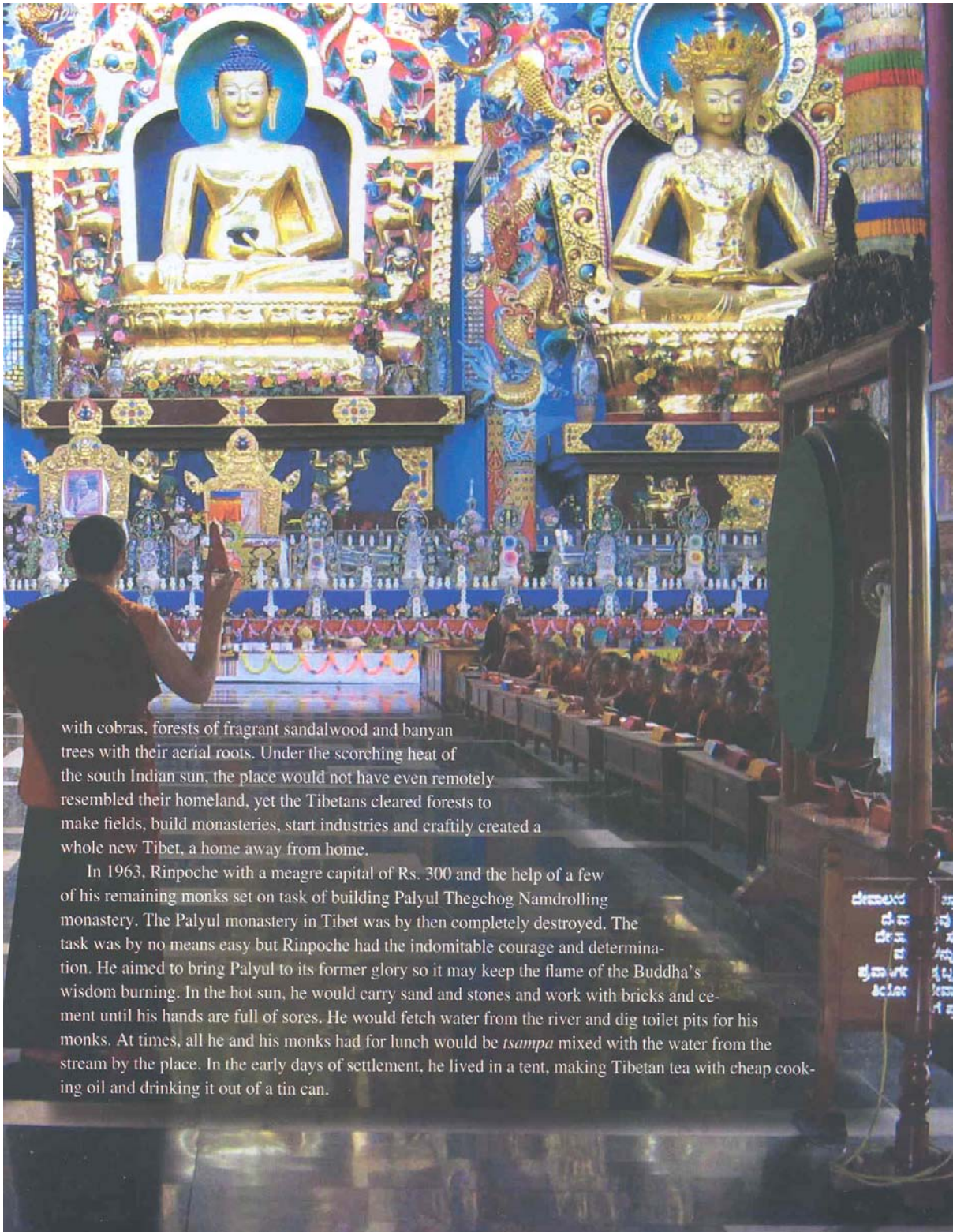
large entourage made a journey to Lhasa on pilgrimage. There, they visited numerous monasteries, ancient temples and sacred places which spoke in volumes of Tibet's glorious past. He also visited H.H. the Dalai Lama at his winter palace – the Potala – and received empowerment for long life. Lhasa Mönlam 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.

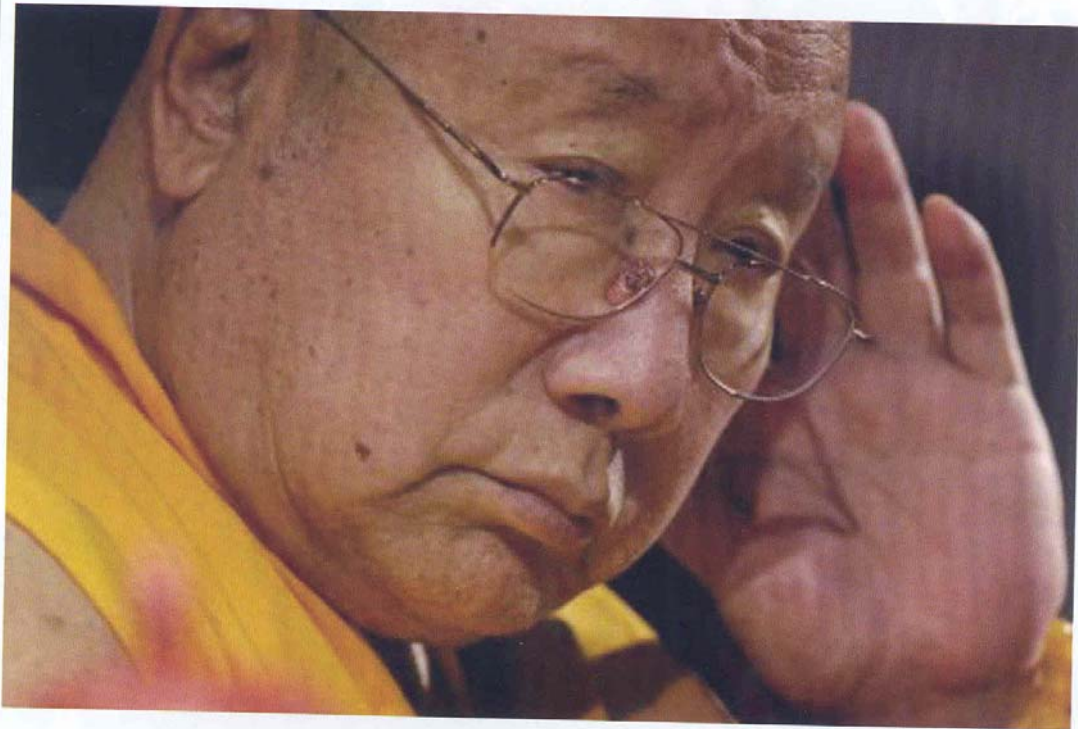
Rinpoche moved to Mysore in 1961 with many other Tibetan refugees. The refugee settlements sprawled in the midst of wet cornfields and bamboo thickets infested



with cobras, forests of fragrant sandalwood and 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 toilet pits for his monks. At times, all he and his monks had for lunch would be *tsampa* mixed with the water from the stream 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.

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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 5,000 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 declining then. This wish is now 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.

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During the last twenty years, one could find at any time about 500 Bhutanese monks and nuns from almost every gewog studying at Namdrolling Monastery, most of them in NNI and others in the nunnery and school. The NNI is the main destination for nearly all Bhutanese students travelling to south India to study Buddhism and many hundreds of Bhutanese scholars have finished the nine-year long intensive training. They make up the majority and the best of those who have received the khenpo and lopen titles from NNI. Their return to Bhutan has led to an unprecedented growth of Buddhist scholarship in the country.

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 compassion 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 Bhutan and other Himalayan countries to give spiritual teachings to the Buddhist population. His last visit to Bhutan was in 2001 at the invitation of Royal Grandmother Kesang Choden Wangchuck and Gangteng Trulku Rinpoche, when he gave a month-long sermon in Bumthang. The teachings were attended by over twenty thousand people regularly and by approximately one hundred thousand in its final days.

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 empowerment from the Namcho and Nyingthig cycles and he is the only Tibetan lama to have given the complete Rinchen Terzod empowerment in the West. Among the Western Buddhist world, His Holiness also became well known after his recognition of Catherine Burroughs, a new age spiritualist, as the rebirth of Akhion 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.

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

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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 whole-hearted 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 His Holiness.

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. Being a meditation master par excellence, he imparted his instructions with an exceptional skill. "Meditation is a simple thing if you know how to do it," he often said. When I took leave after finishing a retreat in upstate New York last

summer, his last words for me were "Relax your mind." In fact, throughout this last meditation retreat he conducted, his overriding advice was on pacifying one's thoughts and stilling the mind and to merge one's mind with the guru's enlightened spirit in the state of blissful Clear Light.

His Holiness entered thugdam, that immanent state of Clear Light on 27 March. According to reports from the monastery, his body has remained radiant emitting a sweet fragrance, the mark of perfect monastic chastity, and rainbows encircled his temple after his death. The thugdam ended on 3 April and the body was moved to the main temple hall to allow his students and devotees from all over the world to pay their respects. There are now plans to keep the body at least for one year before it is cremated or embalmed in a stupa.

A charismatic leader, a skillful 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.