

Biography of Kalu Rinpoche

Compiled by Hans Taeger

Kalu Rinpoche was born in the district of Treshö Gang chi Rawa in the Hor region of Kham, Eastern Tibet, in 1905. This mountainous area, bordering on China, is known for the independent, rough and wild spirit of its people. His father, Karma Legshe Drayang, the thirteenth Ratak Palzang Tulku, was noted for his skill in the practice of medicine, as well as for literary accomplishments and mastery of Vajrayana meditation practice. He and his wife, Drolkar (White Tara) Chung Chung, Rinpoche's mother, were students of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Taye, Jamyang Chentse Wangpo and the famous Mipham Rinpoche, all founders and leaders of the Rime Movement which revitalised the religious life of Tibet towards the end of the 19th Century by minimising the importance of sectarian differences and emphasising the common ground of the lineages and stressing the importance of meditation.

Both husband and wife were devoted to practice, and immediately after their marriage undertook a religious retreat. They saw little of each other during this period, but one night together each dreamed that they were visited by the great meditation teacher and scholar, Jamgon Kongtrul, who announced that he was coming to stay with them and asked to be given a room. Not long afterwards Drolkar Chung Chung discovered she was pregnant.

The dream had been auspicious; the pregnancy passed joyfully, without complications. Drolkar Chung Chung continued to work with her husband, and was gathering medicinal herbs with him one day when she realised the baby would soon be born. As they hurried back to their house, they saw the sky full of rainbows.

Such signs were interpreted in the neighbouring countryside as portending the birth of a special incarnation. Conventionally, a "tulku" (reincarnated lama) would have been taken to be raised in a monastery at the earliest possible age, but Karma Legshe Drayang refused to follow this course. If the boy were not a high incarnation, he said, he would be quite capable of seeking the appropriate teachers and education for himself. That is just what he did.

"In his early years," the young man, " when he had awakened the excellent habits of virtue, and abandoned concerns for possessions and pleasures of this life, wandered at times in the wilderness of mountains and gorges, cliffs and crags. Spontaneously, uncontrived longing and resolution arose in him to nurture Dharma practice."

Travelling freely in the mountains, Rinpoche would chant mantras, blessing the animals, fish or insects he might encounter.

At home, his education was supervised, rather sternly, by his father. After a preliminary training in grammar, writing and meditation, Rinpoche began his formal studies at Palpung monastery at the age of thirteen. At that time, the eleventh Tai Situ Rinpoche, Pema Wangcho Jalpo, gave him ordination (getsül), naming the young monk Karma Rangjung Kunchap. The prefix "Karma" identifies Rinpoche as a practitioner of the Karma Kagyu tradition, and "Rangjung Kunchap" means "self-arisen, all-pervading".

At Palpung and elsewhere in Kham, Rinpoche studied the teachings of the sutras and tantras, receiving both instruction and empowerments from many of the great lamas. At the age of fifteen, during the traditional rainy-season retreat (yarnay), instituted by Buddha Shakyamuni, Rinpoche gave a profound and instructive discourse on the three vows before an assembly of a hundred monks and lay people and by this exhibited the characteristics of a spiritually advanced being.

At sixteen, Rinpoche entered Kunzang Dechen Ösal Ling, the retreat center founded by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Taye, one of the two retreat facilities associated with Palpung monastery. Here he completed the traditional three-year retreat under the direction of his retreat master and Root Lama, the Ven. Lama Norbu Tondrup, from whom he received the complete transmission (empowerments and liberating instructions) of the Karma Kagyü and Shangpa Kagyü traditions, the old and new translation schools, and in particular, the instructions and practice techniques of the Five Golden Teachings of the great Siddha Khungpo Naljor. Before and after this retreat, he studied, meditated on, and practised many cycles of ripening empowerments and liberating instructions, which he received from teachers of all traditions, including: Tashi Chopel, a disciple of Jamgon Kongtrul, Situ Pema Wangchok, Khyentse Shenpen Ozer, Palden Khyntse Ozer, Pawo Tsuklak, Mawe Wangchuk, Tsatsa Drubgyu, Dzogchen Rinpoche, Zhechen Gyaltsap, Zhechen Kongtrul, and Khyentse Chokyi Lodro.

At the age of twenty-five, his heartfelt aspiration was to practice meditation in a mountain retreat. So Rinpoche departed to do an extended solitary retreat in the desolate mountains of Kham (e.g. at Lhapu, in the region of Derge), wandering without possessions, practised strictest asceticism, taking shelter wherever he could find it, seeking and needing no human company.

For twelve years he lived like this, perfecting his practice and offering everything to develop impartial love and compassion for all beings. "There is no higher siddhi (magical perfection) than Compassion", his Root Lama had said. In this manner of life he would have been content to continue, had Situ Rinpoche not finally sent word that it was time for him to return to the world and teach.

Kalu Rinpoche returned to Palpung and assumed duties as retreat master (drup pön) of the three-year retreats at the two retreat centers, Naroling and Niguling. At this time Rangjung Rikpay Dorje, the late sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, recognised Rinpoche as the activity emanation of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Taye. It was recalled that Jamgon Kongtrul had prophesied that his activity-incarnation would be a Rime master, dedicated to promoting practice and retreat.

In the 1940s he began visiting monasteries, traditional centers of many schools and lineages, all over Tibet. He also bestowed the ripening empowerments, liberating instructions, and supportive scriptural transmissions for the Five Golden Teachings of the Shangpa Kagyu tradition to many beings. On a visit to Lhasa he gave teachings to the Regent of the young Dalai Lama.

In 1955, a few years before the full Chinese military occupation of Tibet, Rinpoche visited the Gyalwa Karmapa at Tsurphu, who asked him to leave Tibet in order to prepare the ground in India and Bhutan for the inevitable exile. In 1957, at the request of Princess Ashe Wangmo of the Kingdom of Bhutan, His Holiness The 16th Gyalwa Karmapa appointed Rinpoche as the abbot of Jangchub Choling Monastery in the Kurto region of Bhutan, and as chaplain of the royal family. Rinpoche practised, protected, and propagated the Dharma for many years, establishing two retreat centers for the teachings of both the Kamtsang and Shangpa traditions, and building stupas. He also ordained three hundred monks. Proceeding to India, he made an extensive pilgrimage to all the great Buddhist sites. In 1965 he established his own monastery, Samdrup Tarjay Ling, at Sonada near Darjeeling. A few years after founding the monastery, Rinpoche established a three-year retreat facility there, and founded others elsewhere in India.

In 1973, at the request of the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rinpoche bestowed teachings to the four Karma Kagyu Eminences, Shamar Rinpoche, Tai Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Gyaltsap Rinpoche. The teachings included instructions for the path of skilful means of the Karma Kamtsang practice lineage -- the Six Doctrines of Naropa that derive from the tradition of the four transmissions - and the path of liberation, Mahamudra. Moreover, he bestowed the complete cycle of the Five Golden Teachings of the

Shangpa tradition. Similarly, at the request of H.H. the Dalai Lama, Rinpoche bestowed empowerments and scriptural transmissions to Gelugpa Lamas at the monastic college, Namgyal Tratsang, and to those of the upper and lower tantric colleges. Included in the teachings were the Five Golden Teachings of the Shangpa tradition, the cycle of the Thirteen Empowerments of the Protector, and Dorje Phurba of the New Treasure tradition.

Since 1971 Kalu Rinpoche has travelled many times to Europe, North America, Canada and Southeast Asia, establishing Dharma centers and facilities for Westerners to undertake the traditional three-year retreat. Rinpoche established more than 70 Dharma centers world-wide and 20 retreat centers, and built 20 stupas. These centers were entrusted to more than 30 lamas, who were his students and had completed the three-year retreat. At Sonada in 1983 he gave to the four great heart-sons (-close disciples or successors) of the late Gyalwa Karmapa, as well as to thousands of tulkus, lamas, monks, nuns, and lay people, the great cycle of empowerments called the "Rinchen Ter Dzö", one of the "Five Great Treasuries" of teachings and empowerments gathered by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Taye.

In 1988, Rinpoche began a construction of a 100-foot stupa in Salugara, near Siliguri, West Bengal, in the eastern part of India. To further the understanding and practice of the three vehicles of Buddha's teachings, in 1986 Rinpoche established "The International Translation Committee" for the translation of the Encyclopedia of Knowledge ("The Great Treatise", "All-Pervading Knowledge", "The Condensation of the Ocean of Buddhist Sutras, Tantras, and Culture"). Translators from various western countries are working on this project, with the guidance of Tibetan scholars of all traditions. Khayad Je Kalu Rinpoche was one of the greatest Buddhist saints of this age, known and highly respected by the heads of all major and minor tantric schools in Tibet. His Holiness Karmapa once said Kalu Rinpoche was an incarnation of Milarepa, a 12th Century yogi who is perhaps the most famous and admired of all Tibetan saints. His respect for all religious traditions and his love for all living things was expressed in every action, word and gesture. On Wednesday, May 10, 1989, Kalu Rinpoche passed from this world.

Literature: Kagyu Thubten Choling, Kalu Rinpoche (eds.): *The Dharma That Illuminates All Beings Like the Light of the Sun and the Moon*, State University of New York Press, 1986;

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