

Pamela Gayle White interviews the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje

## Diamond-like Resolve

When I entered my first three-year retreat in France, in 1991, the 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, had been gone for ten years already, and speculation about how the next Karmapa would manifest and why the recognition process was taking so long was a common topic within our lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapas are the supreme heads of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and indeed the tradition of Buddhist lineages headed by reincarnate Bodhisattvas formally began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the Karmapa line. Eventually, the official recognition of new emanations of departed masters would be adopted and codified by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The recognized incarnates are called “tulkus,” from the Tibetan *sprul pa'i sku*, a term that actually designates the material manifestation of enlightened being. The most famous example alive today is, of course, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of the Gelug line. Over the centuries there have been many tulkus, among them men and, rarely, women, of great wisdom, power, and extraordinary kindness; tulkus who have been prolific, unorthodox, clairvoyant, exacting, adventuresome, artistic—or simply forgettable.

Traditionally, tulkus inherit qualities, responsibilities, disciples, and property according to their spiritual power and rank. They receive a special education, usually in a monastic setting. High-ranking tulkus have often formed allegiances with mighty leaders, notably in Mongolia and China, and tulkudom has also been subject to the intrigues and dealings that inevitably go hand in hand with temporal power.

I didn't know much about the subject when I entered retreat. So some months later, when friends sent me a letter saying that the Karmapa had finally been identified, and included a photo of a handsome boy with ruddy cheeks, I was delighted. After all, this was the long-awaited return of the bodhisattva whose line we addressed our prayers to during our daily practices; the man whose predecessors had penned the *Mahamudra Aspiration Prayer*, *the Ocean of Definitive Meaning*, and countless other spiritual gems.

My heart teacher and retreat master, the late Gendun Rinpoche, was very close to the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, who had entrusted him with establishing the lineage transmission in France. The next time Rinpoche came to our retreat center, I joyfully trotted up to him and showed him the photo of Ogyen Thrinley. His reaction took me by surprise. He looked at it long and hard before stating, “That's not the Karmapa. He's surely a high-ranking tulku with great spiritual potential, but he's not the Karmapa.” He then handed me back the photo and continued walking.

In the following weeks and months we learned that there were two main contenders for the Karmapa title, seat, responsibilities, and the black hat or crown that symbolizes his spiritual reach and connection to enlightenment on every plane of existence. Important Kagyu masters disagreed on which one was authentic. I had received transmission from all the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's dharma regents; my main retreat sponsors, some of my favourite teachers, and many dharma friends were connected to the "other" Karmapa, and we still didn't know who "our" Karmapa was supposed to be. The situation was confusing and, frankly, irritating. These guys were meant to be realized bodhisattvas, after all. How could they be quarrelling?

Gendun Rinpoche repeatedly told us to focus on our practice and assured us that the transmission we were receiving was unsullied and authentic. These situations happened, he said, when motivations and actions became polluted by veils, greed, and politics, but they were not our immediate concern. He also told us that once he himself had left this world behind, we would be well advised to follow the lead of Karma Kagyu lineage holder Shamar Rinpoche and trust his judgement.

Of course, we did learn who "our" Karmapa was: Thrinley Thaye Dorje, a Tibetan boy whose parents were the third Mipham Rinpoche, a prominent master of the Nyingma school, and Dechen Wangmo, said to be a direct descendent of Tibet's legendary King Gesar of Ling. He had been formally recognized by Shamar Rinpoche. His carefully orchestrated (and very hush-hush) escape from Tibet to India in 1994 received no media attention, and his low profile made it possible for him to continue receiving the education, transmissions, and practice time necessary to develop the spiritual qualities required for his calling.

I first laid eyes on His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Thrinley Thaye Dorje, in late 2000 during his initial visit to Europe, which began in France. The Karmapa "situation" was in full swing back then, and Thaye Dorje's supporters had had to deal with heavy political pressure, corrupt officials, misinformation, and worse; most likely those aligned with Ogyen Thrinley had grievances as well. I'd learned a bit about Tibetan politics since coming out of retreat in 1997 and was fed up with it all. I was feeling disgruntled and cranky when our van rolled into a chic Parisian quarter for the welcoming ceremony. The pomp, the protocol—it really wasn't the sort of dharma that inspired me. And then I saw the Karmapa, stood in line, felt his touch, received his blessing, and was instantly connected to something so vast, so open, so energized and pregnant with potential, that I was very unexpectedly and thoroughly blown away.

Now 29 years old, Thaye Dorje has just wrapped up a 12-country tour. Unlike Ogyen Thrinley, he has not yet taught in the United States or Canada, where it is not widely known, that there is such a thing as a "Karmapa controversy." At present, there is no formal resolution to the drama that has been unfolding since the early 90s, but communication

between the two sides does appear to be more cordial than it has been in the past.

I still don't like the politics, pomp, and protocol, and I have plenty of misgivings about the tulku system, which I've seen up close and personal enough to be awed and dismayed by turns. I can't state with objective certainty that I know who the Karmapa is, or that the whole idea is anything more than a fantasy. But I am deeply inspired by the universal message of Karmapa Thaye Dorje, a soft-spoken young man with an ingenious sense of humour and a *diamond-like resolve*. I sat down with him for a conversation at Karma Migyur Ling in the Vercors, France, in August.

## The Interview

*Pamela Gayle White (Q):* Your Holiness, what is a Karmapa?

*Karmapa (A):* Karma is a Sanskrit word that means action or activity. Pa is a Tibetan word; it means someone who embraces or holds that action or activity. In this case, the hidden meaning is a bodhisattva, meaning a person with a very kind heart and great wisdom, who holds and carries on the activities of the Buddhas.

**Q:** The Karmapas are the supreme heads of the Kagyu lineage. Can you tell me something about your lineage?

**A:** Beginning with the first Karmapa, Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa, the Karmapas have always maintained the Karma Kagyu lineage. Most often, the Karmapas and the Shamarpas recognize each other; they are the main individuals taking care of the lineage in turn. The different reincarnations of the Karmapas have transmitted the Buddhas' knowledge, the dharma, through a very unique method, not in that it's different from what the Buddha taught, but in terms of being expressed in a unique way. The teachings we hold are *the Six Yogas of Naropa* and *Mahamudra*, together with the *Lamrim* of the Kadampas.

**Q:** What is their focus?

**A:** Lamrim is basically a gradual path, a gradual process. This gradual progression is very important for anyone who wishes to reach a destination. To understand or accomplish something, we need to go from the first to the last step. There's a gradual path to reaching the



enlightened state of mind where one is free from the two main drivers of the conditioned world: *klesha*, disturbing emotions—in simple terms, confusion—and causality, *karma* or karmic debts. The absence of confusion is clarity, and the absence of karmic debts is that we have full control; we are not driven by karma. Actually, we can influence karma instead of karma influencing us.

The conditioned world also becomes conditioned in a gradual way—we don't have sadness or crises or anything [snaps his fingers] just like that. They happen as a process. One misunderstanding after another, and on top of it, first a little bit of confusion, then judgement, and somehow in our pursuit of clearing the confusion or disturbing emotions we develop false ideas, and again more layers of confusion, and all of this becomes a habit, becomes natural to us. And we think that this is who we are, that this is human nature. As a result, we finally have a crisis. The gradual path is a way to reverse that.

Mahamudra is the absolute view of what enlightenment is. Basically, Mahamudra is the goal, and the gradual path helps us reach it in a very peaceful and non-violent way. No one wants confusion; everyone wants clarity, transparency, peace. But the absolute truth can't be shown or handed to you like that [gestures quickly]. Mahamudra is a means, a unique process of examples and metaphors that teach that one can experience clarity of mind and full control of one's life.

Also, seeing that others who are just like us, with similar wants and needs, don't have that clarity or those means leads to an inexpressible, unconditioned experience of *compassion*. It's not our usual idea of compassion; it's naturally there [Sanskrit: *karuna*].

**Q:** According to the classic biographies and texts, there's a magical, superhuman side to the great realized bodhisattvas. Many of the Karmapas are said to have great powers, such as the power of omniscience. Do you have special powers? Are you omniscient?

**A:** When one trains in the illusory nature of phenomena, there's a point where one gains certainty [about that nature], and then it's possible to sort of transform any kind of environment into a favourable one. But it's quite different from magic, I think. In terms of realized bodhisattvas, what look like supernatural powers are not exactly magic; they're just the realisation of how things work. Like, for example, initially it's very difficult to comprehend that a few hundred people are actually able to fly in space, in the sky, in a tube with wings. But if you realize that it's because of this formula, that composition, the engine, and all that, it becomes quite normal.

When we hear the word “omniscience,” again it sounds like magic; that's how we relate. But omniscience is not like that; it's also very logical, I think. Basically, if you are skillful in gaining experience, you could be omniscient.

**Q:** How were you recognized to be the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa?

**A:** I was recognized by my teacher, His Holiness Shamar Rinpoche, around the age of 11.

**Q:** There's controversy concerning your recognition by Shamar Rinpoche. A good number of Kagyu masters, the Dalai Lama, and the

Chinese government have recognized Orgyen Thrinley as the Karmapa. Would you like to address that?

**A:** There are always controversies, they're a part of life. There is no life without obstacles, there's no life without problems, there's no life without controversies. It's unavoidable. It's impossible to say: "I have a life, and I would like it to be completely peaceful."

As practitioners, as Buddhists, we try to use whatever obstacles are there and transform them into something meaningful. By doing so we actually learn so much about how to progress, and we develop a wider perspective of life.

**Q:** How can a lineage, your lineage, be a positive influence in today's world?

**A:** Well, we are trying to adapt and see what works and what doesn't work. We're looking to found more open institutes or universities, as well as projects with an emphasis on the environment, medicine, things like that. For example, we're in the process of building an institute [in Dordogne, France] so that people, particularly Europeans and young people, can have access to dharma—not in terms of promoting Buddhism, but giving access to knowledge: sciences of the mind, of the body, of the world. Prior to practice, we need to acquire knowledge.

Traditionally, our school mainly emphasizes practice; the Kagyupas are well known for their meditation. In terms of the core practice, the benefits of the lineage can only come from making sure we ourselves protect it, keep it as authentic as possible, and try to practice it in our lives. By doing so, we are able to overcome obstacles when there's a big crisis, and we become an example for others. Naturally, others develop an interest.

So the aim is basically to have a great lineage of practitioners and to show that it does work: the Buddha's teachings work. Just seeing that, I think, can bring some inspiration, instead of saying, "Well, you must practice this, otherwise the world is going to end."

**Q:** In a blog you posted on the UK Huffington Post last summer, you addressed the topic of wealth. Reading that blog brought home how radically different your world is from that of your sixteen predecessors. Could you please talk a little about what has changed, what has remained the same, and how the times impact your activity?

**A:** I am sure that starting from the first Karmapa until my predecessor, the 16<sup>th</sup>, each reincarnation had his own changes and had to adapt, definitely. But the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the most drastically changing era ever—even in the last 10 years, so much change. We also have to adjust to change. But in terms of the method itself, it's timeless; we don't really have to adapt it. People are always trying to find new trends in terms of cars, clothes, food, drinks—all the time, yes? But still, classics are classics: they're timeless. In the same way, I think these methods are timeless, they're classic. That will never change.

**Q:** The methods may not have changed, but the way that your activity unfolds has to have changed, hasn't it?

**A:** Of course. In the modern world, media is something that we cannot avoid and have to adapt to. We've come to an era where we have to connect with everybody and make known what we do and what others do. In a way there's actually great positive potential there, such as through transparency.

I've been trying my best to learn how to adapt the practices and teachings to the contemporary world, so that if there's a need for the Buddhadharma and the Karma Kagyu methods, these can be made accessible.

**Q:** How do you feel about the world? Optimistic? Confident? Pessimistic?

**A:** I guess, in one moment of my mind, everything. All in one. Probably that's the best way to describe it. There is panic because even with all these luxuries, people are still not happy. Actually, if my late grandmother were here, she would say—and I would agree—that modern society has everything that a human needs. Everything. So therefore it is quite shocking actually to see that there are still problems, you know?

I cannot understand why there is violence, when you have everything. In underdeveloped countries, that you can understand, yes? Because they're trying to develop, trying somehow to compete with developed countries, and a lot of anxiety and violence is the result. But in civilized nations and cities, still there's violence. What is wrong?

**Q:** Yes, what's wrong?

**A:** Well, it's all about outer wealth, and in terms of greed, it's endless, yes? First there's desire, and then you develop greed—you just want more, more, more. When you have something, you're not satisfied; you want something else totally. Of course, you need financial support to live, but money cannot provide everything. Material wealth has an end, and when the end comes, the mind is really disturbed.

It looks like only one thing can save us: *the development of inner wealth*. Then there's a perfect circle, everything is good. When we're in tune with our inner wealth—the qualities of compassion, contentment, patience, and so on—it's endless, it's timeless. Those are the qualities that we're born with. Everybody. *The whole process of meditation is all about trying to dig into this inner wealth, to access it.*

**Q:** How do we access our inner wealth?

**A:** Better start looking here [touches his heart].

**Q:** How?

**A:** First try to see, who has found inner peace. I'll help you: you can find it through Buddhism. It seems to me that this is why the Buddha taught the dharma, and we ourselves try to explain the meaning of dharma around the world. In particular, I think it's very relevant nowadays in the contemporary world, where there are many forms of crisis. Mainly we talk about the economic crisis, which has a lot to do with a lack of inner knowledge, inner peace, inner wealth. All forms of wealth, inner and outer, come from the mind itself; without the mind,

there's almost nothing else. That's why we target the essence, the inner state.

If you look, you'll see that the path to gaining inner wealth begins with a calm mind. If you calm the mind, then everything around you calms down also. At least devote a little bit of time to cultivating a calm mind; you've sacrificed enough on many, many unnecessary things. Time and energy are priceless, but billions of people have sacrificed them on so many unnecessary things. Instead, if you invest maybe five or ten minutes every day to calming the mind through meditation, I can pretty much guarantee that something good will come out of it.

**Q:** You've travelled the world and met people from all over. Any general advice?

**A:** Yes, over the last 10-plus years of travelling, I've learned so much from the people that I've met; it has been really helpful for me to understand the difference of mentalities and of cultures. And to see so much diversity on one hand, and on the other, that we're all the same. When there's a problem, it's a problem. When there's happiness, it's happiness. That's it. In fact, there are no barriers.

Everyone has the potential to be happy; we're born with it. The way to access it is simply to have a decent life, to have the patience to transform our obstacles, be kind, and have very few wants. In Tibetan it's known as *dö choung chok she*: having few desires and being happy with what one has.

**Q:** Do you have a hero?

**A:** Of course. We all have heroes.

**Q:** Would you like to tell us who your hero is?

**A:** [Pauses.] My hero has always been the yogi Milarepa. The poet with a white robe, or naked. Green. And who has everything.



Pamela Gayle White spent six years in retreat in France under the guidance of the late Tibetan master Gendun Rinpoche. She translates from Tibetan and teaches meditation and Buddhist philosophy in Bodhi Path centers in the Americas and Europe. She is also one of the editors of Tricycle Magazine in the USA.