

Part 18 – Keep Promises

After Chetsang Rinpoche received his novice monks' vows in Dharamsala from the Dalai Lama, he took a journey to Ladakh, in the most northern part of India bordering Tibet.



He wanted to go there because for centuries there had been monks and monasteries in his lineage, the Drikung Kagyu, in Ladakh. He thought it would be like returning to Tibet, or even Drikung, in the old days before the Chinese Communist takeover.

In 1978 there were no flights to Ladakh except on army planes, so Rinpoche went by army plane to Leh, the capital of Ladakh. When he arrived, many VIPs came to greet him – leaders of villages, of the military, and of religious groups.

Rinpoche rode in an open Jeep with over twenty vehicles escorting him to the main temple in Leh, where thousands of people lined the streets to greet him with cheers.



He thanked them for their open-hearted welcome and said that he was so happy to see that Buddhism was flourishing in India although in Tibet it was disappearing.



The next day he went to Phyang, the main Drikung Kagyu monastery in Ladakh (photo). For days there were ceremonies, receptions, lama dances, mandala offerings and speeches, which brought back memories of his childhood.

Afterward, Rinpoche traveled around Ladakh for two months visiting many villages and local monasteries. Rinpoche met with the leader of the Phyang Monastery, the Ninth Togden Rinpoche, who also was a tulku, and they began to make plans for preserving and renovating the monasteries.

The biggest problem was that there was very little education for the monks in Ladakh. Chetsang Rinpoche was disappointed to see that there were no young students at all. Monks weren't able to study in the monasteries because they were too busy out in the fields doing farm labor so they would be able to eat. The people in the area were poor and didn't donate enough to support the monks. The young men thought, "Why be a monk if I will be only working like a farmer?" so they joined the army or found some other employment instead.

Chetsang Rinpoche decided to do something about this situation immediately. He planned to build a school for monks and meditation center. But how was he going to convince the young men to study and receive education at the monastery? He contacted one of the teachers from his school in Drikung, Khenpo Togdrol, who then arrived in Ladakh with some relatives ready to immediately build a new school in Ladakh. Soon a small building was constructed and they opened the school with eleven students. Khenpo Togdrol wasn't discouraged by the small number of students. They opened another school, but problems soon arose - sometimes there wasn't enough food for the students because many local villagers didn't understand why they should make donations for a school, so they didn't. Only a few students completed their studies there and after seven years they had to close the second school.

Rinpoche made a plan to get the monks out of the fields and back into the monasteries. He decided to lease land owned by the monastery to farmers who would grow crops on it. But there were difficulties. Some farmers were afraid that they would be attacked by protector spirits if they cultivated land owned by a monastery. Rinpoche was patient, and over time he leased out all the major lands owned by the monasteries so no monks had to work in the fields. To generate more income, small buildings were built along main roads and rented out as businesses and roadside restaurants to encourage tourists to come. Soon the monasteries made enough income to support the monks living there so they could receive a good education.

Now that Chetsang Rinpoche had established the monasteries and education for monks in Ladakh, he needed to work on his own Buddhist education and training.



He went to visit an ancient, crumbling monastery called Lamayuru in Ladakh where Naropa, the second lama in the Kagyu lineage, had meditated in a cave about 1,000 years ago. Rinpoche decided that this would be the place for him to do his three-year meditation retreat.

(photo of Lamayuru by Dmitry A. Mottl - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=75978242>)

Lamas and tulkus in the Drikung Kagyu tradition do a retreat for three years to train intensively in meditation, staying isolated in a simple hut continuously without leaving. Lamayuru Monastery didn't have even the most basic modern comforts or conveniences – for example, no flushing toilets - and didn't even have decent food in those days.

When lamas and officials from Drikung monasteries heard that their lineage leader was going to do a three-year retreat at Lamayuru Monastery, they remembered how they pleaded with the Dalai Lama to persuade Chetsang Rinpoche to return to India from the United States, because they were terribly afraid that he would never come back. They also remembered that noble beings almost never make big promises, but when they do, it is as if the promise was written in stone - they wouldn't break a promise to save their life - because a noble being doesn't just change his mind or forget. Now it was obvious that Chetsang Rinpoche had given the promise of a noble being before he went to America – that he would return to India. The Drikung people were ashamed that they had mistrusted him, thinking he wouldn't return. He had not only renewed his vows to be a monk upon his return, but also he immediately began building up the Drikung monasteries and monks' education in Ladakh. And after having enjoyed all the modern comforts in America, he was going to take his monks' training very seriously by doing a three-year retreat, and what's more, in a very humble monastery without basic conveniences! They were astounded.



The meditation master who was to lead the monks in a three-year retreat was Kyunga Rinpoche, who was highly advanced in meditation, having spent a total of 35 years of his life in retreat. He was strong, strict and extremely humble. He lived in a tent in Ladakh with his wife and family even during the bitterly cold winter months. He owned almost nothing.

(photo of Kyunga Rinpoche)

In autumn of 1978, the three-year retreat was to begin in Lamayuru under Kyunga Rinpoche's guidance.



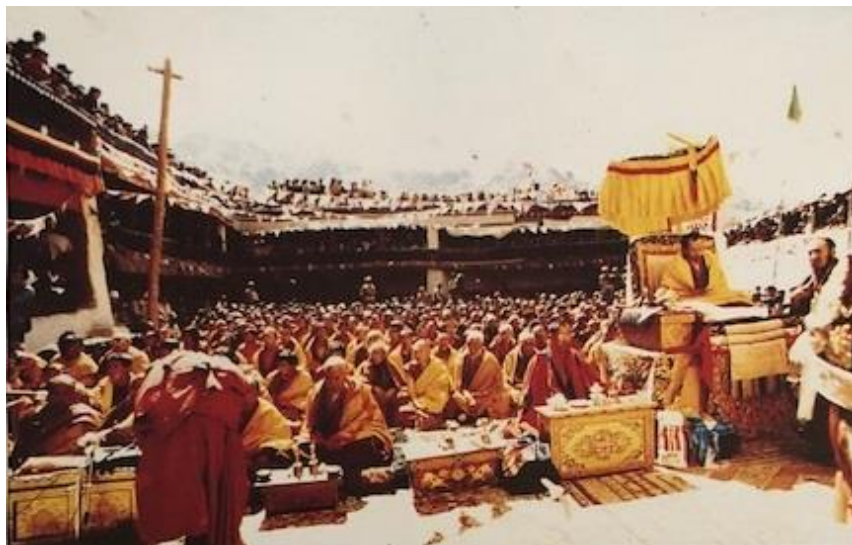
Before the retreat, Chetsang Rinpoche received very important teachings from Kyunga Rinpoche and from Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche (photo). Then he had to perform preliminary practices required at the beginning of a retreat. First, he had to meditate on the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to the Dharma: the precious human body, impermanence, karma, and the suffering of samsara. Next, he had to perform the Four Hundred Thousand practices – including 100,000 full prostrations, bowing stretched out on the ground. These are performed to purify the mind, get rid of laziness, pride, ego, and bad habits, and increase generosity and connection to the lineage gurus – including Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, Phagmodrupa and Jigten Sumgon.

Gelek Rinpoche went with Chetsang Rinpoche to the humble hut where he would begin his retreat. It had a dirt floor, a narrow bed with a thin blanket, and a low reading table. When Gelek Rinpoche saw where his friend would have to spend the next three years, he thought that it wasn't appropriate for the lineage leader, and that the Four Hundred Thousand practices were too much. He tried to negotiate with Kyunga Rinpoche, saying, "Rinpoche is the reincarnation of your teacher the Sixth Chetsang Rinpoche. He isn't just some ordinary person. He is a great being! He had to endure so much suffering in Tibet while it was occupied by the Communists! Please permit him to do fewer prostrations as a special consideration and give him the full practices quickly!"

But Kyunga Rinpoche refused. He said, "He is the reincarnation of the Sixth Chetsang Rinpoche and therefore he must practice more than the others, to give proof of his qualities." When the Dalai Lama heard what Kyunga Rinpoche said, he was extremely pleased, saying "Kyunga Rinpoche is a true guru!"

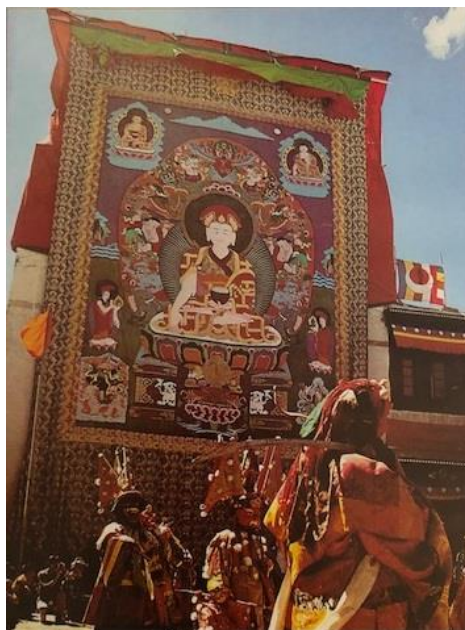
Chetsang Rinpoche wouldn't have accepted any special exemptions anyway. Within forty days he had done 100,000 full prostrations – an average of 2,500 per day! He only slept five hours per night and sometimes had to stop when he had to vomit. His knees had scrapes and cuts, and occasionally his forehead was bleeding where he repeatedly pressed it to the ground. But Rinpoche felt he should do even more, so he did an additional 200,000 prostrations!

His food was mostly just potatoes and turnips, and it was bitterly cold in winter. In the summer of 1979, almost one year into his retreat, although one is not supposed to leave a retreat, he went to lead a ceremony at Phyang Monastery that he had planned when he was in the United States, to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Drikung Thil Monastery. He had said that he would do it and now he had to keep his promise.



Although the sky was completely blue with no clouds, a rainbow appeared around the monastery – it showed the ceremony was being lovingly blessed.

Big crowds of about 20,000 people came to celebrate, overflowing the monastery.



Just as a huge thangka painting of Jigten Sumgön was carried through the gate, raindrops fell although there were only the tiniest clouds. This indicated a blessing from the lineage gurus. Lamas danced in elaborate costumes according to the Drikung tradition just below the huge thangka. It was Rinpoche's 33rd birthday, and also the anniversary of the first teaching of the Buddha. So it was a triple ceremony.

Then Rinpoche returned to Lamayuru to complete the final two years of his retreat. When it was over, he began a period of intense study of Buddhist philosophy and texts, staying in Ladakh at the Phyang Monastery. Next, he traveled around India to receive teachings and empowerments from the most advanced living Tibetan Buddhist masters, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, His Eminence Garchen Rinpoche (photo on right, with Chetsang Rinpoche), and the great meditation master His Eminence Drubwang Norbu Rinpoche (photo on left).



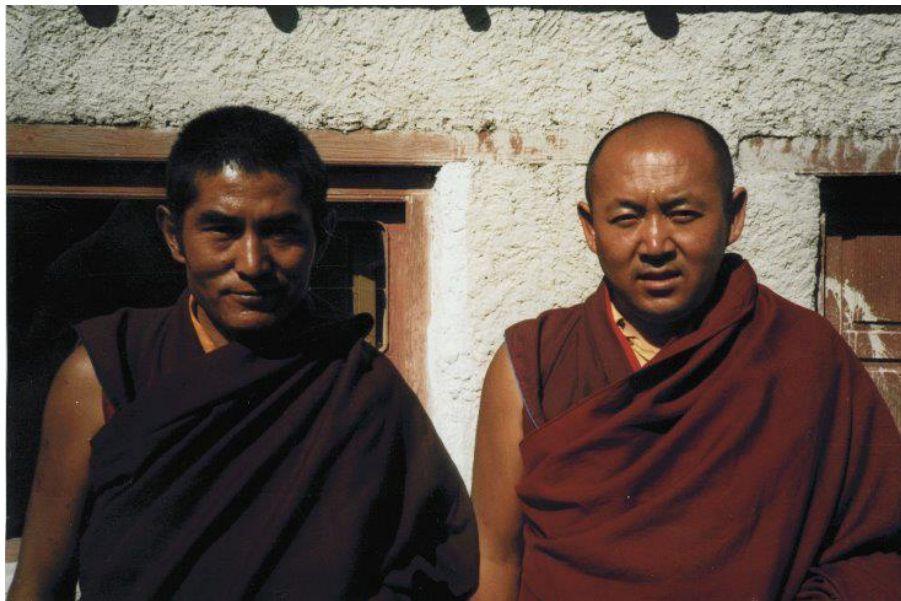
Both Garchen Rinpoche and Chetsang Rinpoche are incarnations of students of Jigten Sumgön, so they have a special connection, like meeting an old friend from many lifetimes. Also, they both had endured extreme hardships under Communist rule in Tibet - Garchen Rinpoche had been imprisoned for 20 years by the Chinese! But he had received teachings and meditated while in prison, so his dharma practice had continued.

Chetsang Rinpoche traveled to Bhutan to receive teachings from His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a very famous lama and one of the Dalai Lama's most important teachers, who made use of every free moment to teach, from before dawn to late at night.

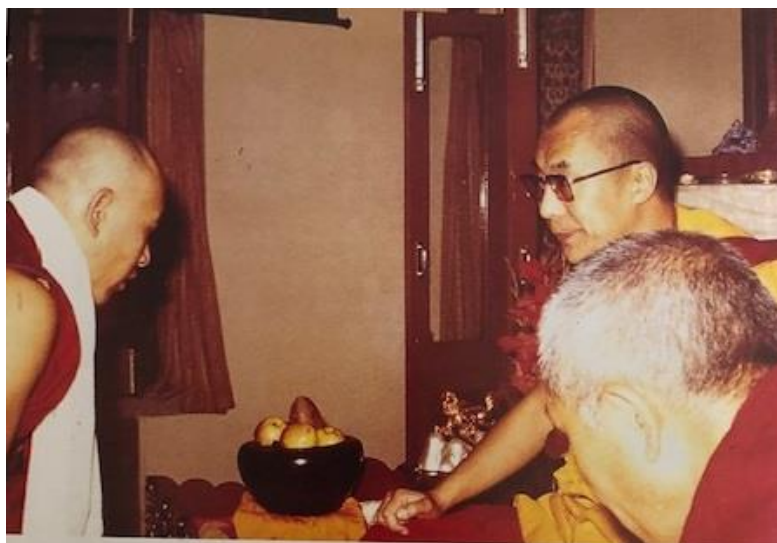
Rinpoche realized that Ladakh was not an ideal location to start a large-scale modern center for Buddhist education. The monasteries were too isolated, and there were too few teachers and students. So he decided to look elsewhere in India for land to start building, and found a piece

of land for sale in the Himalayan foothills that was a six-hour drive north from Delhi, in Dehra Dun. The weather there was cool and comfortable, and already other Tibetan people and Buddhist schools were located there, so it was a good area to build an education center and monastery. Money was borrowed from the Tibetan government, the land was purchased, and construction began on what would be called the Drikung Kagyu Institute.

Just then, in 1985, Rinpoche received news that Chungtsang Rinpoche was coming to visit! He had spent 23 years in Chinese prisons and labor camps, working under terrible conditions, often to exhaustion and sometimes until he was about to collapse. He was released from prison and given a position in the department of religious affairs, which gave him a respected position. But didn't actually give him any opportunity to restore religious life in Tibet. The department was intended by the Chinese Communists only to control religious activities and monasteries - it required tulkus to go to China for education and training.



Chetsang Rinpoche welcomed Chungtsang Rinpoche at the airport in Leh. His friend's face still looked serious, and he was more quiet than before. They traveled to Dehra Dun and visited the land for the new Drikung Kagyu Institute. Chungtsang Rinpoche (photo, left) had only limited time before he had to return to Tibet, so he visited family and other friends in India.



Chetsang Rinpoche went to Bodhgaya, where Shakyamuni Buddha attained Enlightenment and where the Dalai Lama was at the time. It was there in 1985 that Chetsang Rinpoche became a fully ordained monk by receiving ordination by Dalai Lama.

(photo of Chetsang Rinpoche at his ordination with the Dalai Lama)



Soon afterward, Chetsang Rinpoche traveled to Germany, Italy and other places in Europe to teach. His visits inspired people there to start new Drikung Kagyu centers.

(photo of Rinpoche arriving at Frankfurt airport, Germany)

He went back to the United States, where Khenchen Rinpoche organized a trip for him to travel all around to many states and teach, from Washington D.C. to Hawaii. And as a result, new Drikung Kagyu centers arose in several places in America. Additionally, Chetsang Rinpoche found sponsors to help pay for construction of the monastery and education center in Dehra Dun.

When he returned to India, a small part of a building under construction was made into a classroom, and the first ten young monks arrived to start classes at the new Drikung Kagyu Institute. Like an architect, Rinpoche sketched designs for the buildings himself in traditional Tibetan style. Soon a monastery for monks and one for nuns - a “nunnery” - and a retreat center were built.



Rinpoche always emphasized the importance of preserving Tibetan history and language, which was quickly being destroyed by the Chinese Communist occupation. Years later, in 2003, he established the Songsten Library in Dehra Dun, containing books on all subjects

about Tibet and the Himalayan region, and all branches of Buddhism. It included many ancient and rare texts, to preserve Tibetan culture and religion. There is no other great library like this in India.

Rinpoche even wrote a book himself that is now well known, *A History of the Tibetan Empire* (2011). It is the only unbiased, authentic complete history of Tibet consistent with scientific evidence, that ordinary people can understand.



(photo of Songsten Library)

Rinpoche has certainly accomplished what he intended to do. He kept his promise of rebuilding the Drikung Kagyu lineage, as it has now become a leading Vajrayana Buddhist institute with many temples, monasteries, lamas, monks and practitioners around the world. And he continues to lovingly teach, bless and encourage devotees all around the world in the Dharma, for the benefit of all beings!

QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Chetsang Rinpoche go to Ladakh? (many Drikung monks and monasteries were there)
2. Why didn't young men want to join monasteries in Ladakh? (they would have to do farm work to support themselves, so they looked for other jobs)
3. How many prostrations did Rinpoche do per day in the beginning of his long meditation retreat? (2,500)
4. How long was the retreat? (three years)
5. Where had Chungtsang Rinpoche been for the past 23 years? (in Chinese prison and labor camps)
6. What did Chetsang Rinpoche establish in Dehra Dun, India? (the Drikung Kagyu Institute - an education center, monastery, nunnery, retreat center and library)
7. What was the subject of the book Rinpoche wrote? (Tibetan history)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Keep Promises:

Rinpoche had promised to return to India from the United States and lead the Drikung lineage. He had promised to lead the 800-year celebration of the Drikung Thil monastery. And he had promised to rebuild the Drikung lineage. He fulfilled all these promises.

But Rinpoche, like other very noble people, doesn't often make promises. People often plead with him to come to their temple, but he just smiles and speaks kindly. Usually he doesn't say "okay" or "I will," because that would be a promise that he will come. And what if he didn't come? People would be very disappointed. They may have made many plans and arrangements for him and if he doesn't show up, they would be upset. So noble beings don't want to say they are going to do something and then disappoint others by not doing it.

Have you ever said you are going to do something and then you didn't do it? It happens often, doesn't it? If happens because you forgot, or something came up that you didn't expect. Or you decided later that you didn't want to do it.

Have you ever been disappointed when someone said they would do something, but didn't do it? For example, did a friend say they would call you, or come to your house, or bring something, and they didn't? How did you feel?

It's possible that we may have disappointed someone because we didn't do what we said we would do. Sometimes we don't know that we disappointed someone. They might not say anything. But we can deeply disappoint someone, or disrupt their plans, when we don't keep a promise, when we don't do what we said we would do. That seems unkind and uncaring.

To avoid that, we should pay attention to whether we are making a promise we might not keep. If someone wants you to do something, don't just say "yes" or "I will" to please them if you're not sure you can, because you'll disappoint them much more later on if you don't do it.

What can you say instead of "yes," "okay" or "I will" so that you avoid making a promise? You can kindly say "I'll try" or "maybe" or "I hope I can" or "I am planning to" so you avoid making a promise. You could also say "I might forget, so please remind me" or "let me check first with my parents." Make sure to say it with honest intention and loving-kindness!