



L A M A

# PHURBU TASHI

A COLLECTION OF WRITINGS

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སྐུ་འཕེལ། | GAMPOPA  
CENTER

Annapolis, MD



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PART ONE

# *Stories*

## **The First Time I Saw Him**

Kyabje Dorje Chang Bokar Rinpoche...the first time I saw him in my life was in a tiny bamboo hut where a poor old lady had died. In Tibetan tradition, after a person passes away, we do many different Buddhist spiritual ceremonies for the deceased. These ceremonies ensure the deceased's peace and provide a good journey for next life. We also invite holy spiritual teachers to transfer the dead person's consciousness to the Pure Land or to a good rebirth.

I was a student in Rumtek Monastery College. The monastery sent students whenever people requested ceremony services for their deceased. One day the monastery asked me to go to do the ceremony for a death. I went, and upon arrival I realized why they sent me instead of somebody else. There is a poor single old lady dead in her tiny hut; nobody else was willing to go.

However, I tried my best to be patient and do my prayers next to her foul-smelling corpse in that small room. Around midnight, Bokar Rinpoche arrived with a few of his disciples. He did a long period of meditation and performed a transfer of consciousness ceremony. I was really astonished to see a highly respected holy person visit a place nobody else was willing to go. I could see his expression of love and compassion towards the dead old lady. I got tremendous encouragement from his action of compassion.

Since then, I see him as an extraordinary human being. A few years later upon finishing my studies at Rumtek I went to practice meditation in Bokar Rinpoche's three year retreat center. After five years with him, in my vision, that extraordinary human being is transformed into an embodiment of a complete awakened mind. Even the footprints he left on the ground along his walking meditation route expressed his compassion and wisdom. I used to touch my forehead on the ground where he walked. I'd get blessed by his awakened mind instantly. My mind would become more natural, clear, peaceful and with less negative emotions.

## **When Grandpa Taught Me about Karma**

In 1985, in the middle of a long winter, my Grandpa and I were looking after our yaks on the mountains of Tibet. We got a lot of snow and it was very cold. I had a fever for a few days; maybe it was some kind of flu or cold.

I didn't know when Grandpa left the hut in the early morning but I woke up when he walked into our beautiful tiny hut and said "I saw some traces of wolves but all the yaks are fine." He left the door open. I saw the bright sunlight shining on the gorgeous snow peaks with clear blue sky background, and I heard the birds talking very loud. Or maybe they were singing.

We had a quite long conversation while my Grandpa was making a fire and I was still in my bed. Grandpa said, "How are you feeling today son?" I felt a little too lazy to talk, I just wanted to listen to the birds singing, so I was quiet. "Son?" he

asked again. I answered him. “I am feeling much better today but still have a little headache.”

Once I start talking to Grandpa, it is hard to stop, he always says interesting things. He started to burn an incense stick and handed over it to me. “I want you to offer this in front of Buddha’s statue, and then recite this–” he said, and he gives me piece of paper which has some prayers and mantras written on it. I looked at him and said, “Okay, but...” He interrupted me and continued his talk, “–and also do some prostrations while you are reciting the prayers.” I placed the incense in front of the statue and went back to my bed. I didn’t do any prostrations. I read the prayer from my bed:

*What little virtue I have gathered  
through my homage,  
Through offering, confessing,  
and rejoicing,  
Through exhortation and prayer-  
all of it,  
I dedicate to the enlightenment  
of all beings.  
Om mani peme hung.*

Later, I asked Grandpa: “I did the prayers and I will do the prostrations later when I get up. By the way, why do you ask me to do these things today?” He said, “Because this will purify your bad karma. You have been not feeling well and I want you to

get better.” I felt like there were hundreds of questions popped up in my head all at one time after listening to Grandpa.

I said, “Grandpa, how come I have bad karma, I am just a kid and I did not do any bad karma, except sometimes throwing stones on birds. Are you saying the reason I get sick is my bad karma? And you can change my karma?”

Grandpa put the teapot on the fire and waited for water to boil. He looked at me with his gentle smile and said, “My kid, you don’t have to be anxious. Let me explain to you what I know about karma, listen carefully and keep them in your mind. Surely we all have many good karmas and many bad karmas. Even if you are a kid you may have both good and bad karmas from your past lifetimes. It’s not only that the sickness is a result of bad karma, in fact everything we are experiencing in our life is a karmic result of karmic cause. It said in Abhidharma that all these different realms are created by karma, the world is creation of our own karma. So yes, your sickness is a result of your bad karma, and karma can change but I cannot change your karma. Only you can change your karma.”

Now the questions in my head multiplied even more, I had so many questions for Grandpa but of course I could ask only one at the time. I asked Grandpa, “How do I change my karma? Is it that I

am changing my karma when I eat medicines and get cured?” He jokingly said, “I should’ve let you sleep; now I am in trouble!” Then he holds his prayer beads in his left hand and contemplated for a while. I guess holding the prayer beads helps him to think clear.

“Listen,” he said, “there is a way to purify your karma in causal level and there is a way to stop your karma in condition level. By doing virtuous deeds for purifying bad karma is removing the main cause of the problem in causal level. Taking care of yourself and eating medicine and so on is preventing bad karma to ripening in condition level, karma cannot ripen when there is lack of the right condition, but this doesn’t mean it is purified. When it is purified from causal level then it doesn’t matter even there is right condition, there is nothing to ripen and nothing happens.”

I could see the steam coming out from our teapot and marching into the sun light coming through the window. Grandpa puts away his prayer beads and starts making butter tea. The butter tea and tsampa with cheese was our breakfast. Tsampa is delicious and healthy food made from barley, even Sengtrug (our dog) likes it. “Get up now,” Grandpa said, “let’s eat something, you didn’t eat enough yesterday.”

I didn’t want to get up...it felt cold. “I remember once my friend told me that we became

friends because it is our fate. Is that same thing as karma?” I asked and Grandpa said, “No, that is not same thing, in fact they are totally different concepts. Buddhist doesn’t have the idea of fate, because in Buddhism everything is impermanent and they exist only interdependently. The idea of fate is as an ultimate agency by which the order of things is presumably prescribed; it is predetermined by ultimate power or some kind of unknown power, and it is not really related to your deeds in the past or previous life times. With fate whichever line is drawn for your life cannot be changed in both causal and condition levels. Karma, on the other hand, is impermanent, interdependent, and it is something to do with your own doing and deeds. As I said it can be purified in causal level and it can be stopped ripening in condition level.

“Karma is not something we only have to believe but it is also very logical. Karma is part of the doctrine of dependent arising and the scientists are heading towards the same direction with their discoveries.”

I was wondering how a yak man knows about science! “How do you know about these things, Grandpa?” I asked and he smiled and shook his head, and then he said, “I actually don’t know about science, I never had formal studies about those things, but I have seen pieces of information

from here and there, and gradually I became little familiar with that stuff.”

Suddenly I noticed Sengtrug is not at home, and then I thought why Grandpa is not curious or worried about him. Sengtrug is my Grandpa’s dog, they love each other and they are partners, Grandpa looks after the yaks in day time and Sengtrug protects the yaks in the night. He fights the predators and keeps them away from our yaks. When I was a boy, he was my hero.

“Oh, you may be wondering where Sengtrug is?” Grandpa said. Then he forcefully exhaled through his nostrils and hesitated a little to tell me. “He was wounded last night” he said, “He got few minor scratches and a bite, I put some medicines on his wounds and let him rest in his little house. Don’t worry he will be fine.”

I jumped out from my bed and went to see Sengtrug, he looked okay. I got curious about how Sengtrug got into a fight, to whom he battled and I was wondering maybe he killed a wolf or a bear somewhere. So our karma discussion was over for that day. After the breakfast we went up on the mountains to see if we can find the predator that died from the battle with Sengtrug.

## **Reincarnation**

I still vividly remember the unforgettable day when I was twelve year old that three senior monks from Gangkar monastery visited my family. They appeared with ivory-white silk scarves in their hands and expressed by their manners great respect towards my family. They offered my family some bundles of incense, a package of tea, and yak butter. The three monks looked at me with quite surprised faces. I thought they were strange, that something was strange, but I didn't know what was going on.

They talked to my mother and grandpa for few hours and left. My mother explained me the purpose of their visit. She smiled and said, "The monastery wants you, they recognized you as reincarnation of their previous master called Tsatsa Khenpo Thubten, but we don't belong to that monastery."

Of course I was quite confused. Honestly, I didn't know exactly what it meant – that I was a reincarnation of a lama. Before hearing that

message, I already had weird ideas in my head. Very often I was thinking about who I was. I frequently used to wonder when and how this formless awareness or knowingness that was thinking “me, mine, and I” got started. I became a little scared thinking about all this. I thought I might become crazy. I wanted to ask to my mother or somebody else about all these weird questions. But I couldn’t ask anybody, because I thought people might think that I was crazy or stupid.

My Grandpa was a just layman who barely could read. He did not go to any school or college but he definitely was full of insight and had a great memory. He was a kind of natural philosopher. However, he was the best person to tell me what reincarnation was. I asked him about reincarnation and mind.

He poured out some snuff on his thumb nail from his shiny little horn container, took some snuff in his nose with a strong inhalation, held his breath for a while, and then released it. “My little son, it sounds like you are a fortunate boy.” He put the rest of the snuff in his other nostril. Then he said, “The senior monks from Gangkar Monastery said you were their guru in your previous life. Several years ago the abbot passed away. He was reborn again as a little boy and that is you.”

“We change our body at every lifetime, but our mind continues. It is like a river - a flowing

continuum of moments of mere knowing, each leading to another. The stream of such moments of consciousness goes from hour to hour, day to day, year to year, and from lifetime to lifetime. Though our body cannot accompany us once our life force is exhausted, the moments of consciousness continue, through death and eventually into the next life, whatever form it might take. Each one of us possesses such a stream of consciousness. It has neither beginning nor end. Nothing can stop it. Our destructive emotions, illusions and defilements are temporarily in our mind, but they are removable. You are supposed to know about these things better than I do.”

It was a difficult decision for my family whether they should send me to the monastery or continue in my regular school. Since they had a strong faith in Buddha and his teachings they truly believed I was a reincarnation of that holy teacher and they wanted me to choose. I had a strong sense of connection to the monastery and was so excited to learn Buddha’s teachings. I already learned many wonderful stories of Buddha and his disciples from my Grandpa. I felt somehow I was familiar with the studies in the monastery. I could memorize and understand them easily, unlike the studies from the general school. So I chose to go to the monastery.

Recognized reincarnations in Tibetan are called “tulku,” which means manifested body. This term can refer to a few different levels of manifested bodies:

1. Enlightened ones who manifested in various forms in order to work for the welfare of sentient beings.
2. Highly accomplished beings, who by their deep and vast aspirations and compassion intentionally are reborn on Earth to lead others to be free of samsara.
3. Some great spiritual masters, who by cultivating extensive wisdom and compassion in this life and the influence of their merit and karmic connections to other beings, are reborn in the right time and place to continue their Dharma practice and lead their followers on the path to enlightenment.

In other traditions, there is no system for recognizing reincarnations. Even in Tibet there was no such thing until the Second Karmapa was born. One of the chief disciple of Gampopa, known as Dusum Khyenpa, was the First Karmapa and made predictions about his future rebirth, who was to become known by the title of the Second Karmapa. The young boy demonstrated his enlightened

qualities and pronounced that he was the reincarnation of Dusum Khyenpa.

Since then this practice of recognizing reincarnated Tibetan teachers spread throughout Tibet, and at the present time many hundreds of teachers are held to be reincarnations.

Tulkus recognized in several ways. Some predicted their reincarnation before they die. Some demonstrate their enlightenment qualities and remember their previous life. Others are recognized by another authentic renowned enlightened master and then are tested in several ways to make sure that the child is a true reincarnation of the previous guru.

Because of power, politics, and other reasons, people falsify tulkus as well, but that kind of falsely recognized reincarnation may not easily act as one. To be recognized as a tulku is not like becoming a king or important leader. It is rather like obtaining a doctor's title. It won't work if someone pretends to be a doctor without any medical qualification. Becoming a tulku is taking over all the heavy responsibilities and continually maintaining the activities of the previous guru. To be an ideal for Dharma practitioners, one must first train oneself and qualify through one's understanding. Then one must lead others on the right spiritual path with love, compassion and kindness. One must sacrifice

selfishness in order to benefit others and serve the Buddha's teachings.

In my case I didn't claim to be a tulku even after Gangkar Monastery offered me the title. I thought that if I was a reincarnated lama, I would naturally be of benefit to the Dharma and other beings. I wasn't sure I would be qualified to hold the title of a tulku. But I truly believed that I was the reincarnation of someone who followed Buddha and practiced his teachings. I felt a strong connection to Gangkar Monastery and its followers. I had an innate feeling of caring for others and to be earnest with everyone. I was naturally very connected to Buddha's teachings and I could memorize the sutras faster than any other children. I wasn't the kind of person that was seriously interested in dreams and signs. However I respected my mother's belief. From her side the reasons I might be the true reincarnation of Tsatsa Khenpo was her dreams and signs. She told me that she saw a number of auspicious signs and had amazing dreams while I was in her womb.

In 1986, when I was thirteen years old, I and my family made the decision for my future. I dropped out of the primary school and went to the monastery. I started by memorizing a prayer called The Praises of Manjushri, the Wisdom Buddha. This was at the time that all the monasteries were being reestablished in Tibet. All the senior monks

were doing all sorts of work to rebuild the previously ruined monasteries. The young monks spent their time partly working and partly studying. I didn't have to work, they wanted me to pursue my studies only. That was good in one way but on the other hand I felt my position was much harder than the other young monks. They were expecting so much from me. The followers of the monastery and the older monks would say, "You have to study hard now. In the future, when you grow up, you will have to lead us on the right spiritual path and teach us the Dharma. Especially when we are dying you will have to give us a peaceful death and perform Phowa, the transference of consciousness to a higher rebirth, for us and ensure our good rebirth." Those conditions pushed me into such a position that I had to try to be always pure, perfect, and the best among all the other kids.

A few years after I had been studying at Gangkar Monastery, I asked the old monks who had visited my home how they knew I was a reincarnation of their lama. Zhara Wangdu, one of those three monks, explained, "All the senior monks and the leaders of Gangkar Monastery gathered together and observed carefully the meaning of the instruction that Ngawang Norbu, the attendant of late Gangkar Rinpoche, got from Tai Situ Rinpoche. By following these instructions

we all decided that you were the unmistakable child as mentioned in the instructions.” Tai Situ Rinpoche gave them the instructions verbally, and they wrote it on paper with their signatures and gave it to me.