

The Story of Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa

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I am going to tell you a story, the life story of Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa. He is quite young and in good health, so this story is hopefully ongoing. His story will tell you something about the repression and politics of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and also about the culture and politics of the Tibetan exile community in India. It also touches on why Tibetan Buddhism has been successfully transplanted to North America and Europe, and why this offers hope for the eventual restoration of Tibet's spiritual heritage to its homeland.

It will not be possible to explain Buddhism in the short time that we have. Perhaps we can talk about that later in this course. For now, it would be very helpful to keep in mind that most popular ideas about Buddhism are incorrect, and that having an open attitude of not knowing and not having too many opinions would be very helpful.



Ogyen Trinley Dorje was born on June 26, 1985 in eastern Tibet. His parents were poor nomads. His predecessor, Rangjung Rikpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa had died of cancer in a hospital not far from Chicago on November 5, 1981. Ogyen Trinley Dorje was identified as being the 17th Karmapa by Tai Situ Rinpoche when he was seven years old. Tai Situ Rinpoche was living in India at that time in a Tibetan exile community. The Chinese authorities allowed him to travel in Tibet and help conduct the search for the child who would become the 17th Karmapa. The Chinese authorities proclaimed that this was the correct child and Tai Situ arriving shortly thereafter confirmed this. Unknown to the Chinese, the Dalai Lama also proclaimed that Ogyen Trinley Dorje was the correct choice, a rare case of the Chinese and the Dalai Lama agreeing on anything.

After he was identified, he moved to Tsurphu Monastery, the traditional home of the Karmapas. It is a traditional practice for children who are recognized as important tulkus or reincarnated teachers to leave their parents at a young age to be trained in a monastery. They need special training from early childhood, and this is best done in a monastic setting. This was a long journey from eastern Tibet as Tsurphu is only 70 kilometers from Lhasa. During the Maoist years, the Chinese policy had been to stamp out religion and culture by destroying buildings, confiscating relics and books and imprisoning and executing monks. By the late 1980s, policy had changed. They wanted these institutions restored, but they wanted to be in control of how it was done¹. Tsurphu Monastery had been destroyed during the

¹ For example, Catholic bishops in China must be approved by the government.

Maoist era, and then was allowed to be rebuilt. By raising Ogyen Trinley from childhood in this environment, they hoped he would grow up to be loyal to the Chinese.

But he was well aware that the teachers he really needed to be with lived in India, and toward the end of 1999 he started to plan his escape from Tibet. This was a dangerous undertaking, and he would be severely punished if he were caught. His plan was to announce that he was going on retreat in his room. This required accomplices who had to pretend that they were visiting him in retreat and bringing him food and supplies. In the meantime, he disguised himself, used false documents, and actually drove over the Himalaya to India in winter in a Jeep using a circuitous route. The journey was dangerous and several times he barely escaped being caught by Chinese patrols. He arrived at the Tibetan exile quarters of McLeod Ganj on January 5, 2000. This is very close to the Dalai Lama's residence in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh. He showed his political astuteness at the age of 14 by not bad mouthing the Chinese authorities in any way. He simply explained that he needed the guidance of specific teachers in order to develop spiritually and fulfill his duties, which was completely true.

Since arriving in India, he has devoted much time to study and meditation. His command of the English language has become quite good, and he has gradually expanded his role as a teacher. He has travelled widely including three visits to North America and Europe.

The 17th Karmapa has often advocated vegetarianism, which is not that common for Tibetan teachers. Almost everywhere he goes, he discusses climate change and the need for international cooperation to avoid ecological disaster.

Ogyen Trinley has been quite careful not to make public political statements. The Chinese have never publically denounced him or revoked their recognition because he has never given them reason to do so. But his spiritual strength, leadership skills, and wisdom are becoming increasingly visible over the years. The Dalai Lama is old and is clearly concerned for the welfare of the exile community when he dies. He has made it very clear that there is not going to be a 15th Dalai Lama born in Tibet where he would be controlled by the Chinese. He has given thought to another political problem which is divisiveness between various factions of the exile community. His personal leadership has been an inspiration to both Tibetans and to vast numbers of people throughout the world. The Dalai Lama is the leader of the Gelugpa sect which has controlled the government and politics of Tibet from 1642 until the Chinese invasion. But the other lineages are not happy about this, and there is no obvious Gelugpa who could command the worldwide spiritual authority of the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. The Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are very close friends, so the Karmapa may have an important worldwide role eventually.

I want to leave you with one thought, and that is that the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet is much more than an important part of indigenous Tibetan culture. It is that, of course, and a vital part of Tibetan identity. But it has taken wings and flown far beyond, and has landed and taken root in the West. My own teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, fled Tibet in 1959, and then travelled to England, Scotland, and North America where he was a leader in the cultural transition of the Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism of Tibet for Western people. He is of the Kargyü lineage as is the Karmapa. He made it very clear to us that we owe a debt of gratitude to Tibet, and that we

might be instrumental in bringing the teachings back to Tibet. I feel that the 17th Karmapa will have an important role in doing this. No one form of repression lasts forever. The genocide and cultural destruction of the Native Americans of the great plains by the United States Army in the late 19th century was every bit as horrific and criminal as what the Chinese did to Tibet. The legacy of loss of identity, culture and spiritual traditions, and the despair, depression, suicide of reservation people are still with them today. There is a feeling of guilt and regret on the part of all white Americans who are aware of this, and a realization of how wrong it was and is. China will come to see this too in time. It is already starting to happen. There are already many wealthy Chinese who are patrons of Tibetan teachers and support their rebuilding. Tibetan culture has been driven underground. But it has not been destroyed, and in fact it is being rebuilt.

References:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=980CE6DF143EF93AA15754C0A9679D8B63>

This is a very useful article written during the second visit of Karmapa to the United States. It discusses many details of the political situation that rose around Karmapa in India since his arrival, and also about his relations with the Dalai Lama.

http://www.karmapaamerica2015.org/?page_id=15

The official website of Karmapa in America: This gives you access to many resources and news articles.

The Dance of Seventeen Lives by Mick Brown, ISBN 1-58234-177-X

This is a very valuable book covering the life of Ogyen Trinley up to his arrival in India. It was written in 2004, so it is not up-to-date. It has a lot of useful information about his upbringing, recognition as a tulku, and the details of his escape journey and his reception in Dharamsala by the Dalai Lama and others. It also covers much of the life of the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje. It includes a description of the Karmapa's remarkable meeting with the Hopi (p. 71). A fragment of this can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8TuX6e50r8>. This is also recalled on www.chronicleproject.com/stories_202.html.

If you would like to view Tibetan Buddhist art on the web, visit <http://himalayanart.org>. The Rubin Museum of Art in Manhattan sponsors this website. The collection is fantastic and is shared in very high resolution. There are thankas, hand implements and much more.