

**MEETING HIS HOLINESS IN TIBET**  
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Taken at Tsurphu Monastery, Tibet  
Our Journey to Meet the 'Golden Child'

Although today it seems like some far off dream, only a few short years ago I was high in the mountains of Tibet at Tsurphu Monastery (the seat of the Karma Kagyu Lineage), where I met His Holiness Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. All of this is even more remarkable since my friends know that I hate airplanes and seldom travel far from my home in mid-Michigan. Although I have been interested in Buddhism for many years, I never seriously considered going to Tibet. Then suddenly, in less than a month, I am in Tibet, along with my wife, two daughters, and young son. How does such an event happen to a middle-aged businessman? It happens when your lama tells you to go to Tibet as soon as we could manage it. Here is our story:

My wife and I are long-time students of Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery. Rinpoche was sent to the U.S. in the mid 1970s by His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, to represent the Karma Kagyu Lineage in the United States. Just as the Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, so the Gyalwa Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And incidentally, the Karmapa's lineage (stemming from Marpa and Milarepa) is the older lineage, with His Holiness the Karmapa representing the first tulku (reincarnated lama) in the history of Tibet, and all other reincarnations of this sort being subsequent to the Karmapas.

Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

The Karma Kagyu lineage comes from the Adi Buddha Vajradhara, who imparted teachings to the Indian saint Tilopa, who in turn taught (also in India) his student Naropa. Marpa, the Tibetan translator, traveled to India and received these teachings from Naropa, and brought them to Tibet, where he imparted them to his main student Milarepa (Tibet's greatest yogi). Milarepa went on to teach his student Gampopa, who taught the first Karmapa (Dusum Khyenpa). The entire line of the Karmapas (17 incarnations) have been successive reincarnations of that same essence. In fact the lineage today represents an unbroken chain of students and teachers that culminates in the young 17th Karmapa, who resides in Tibet. The Karmapa is the reincarnation around which the movie "The Golden Child" was based.

Over the last 20 years, Khenpo Rinpoche and another Rinpoche (Bardor Tulku, Rinpoche) have worked to build an extensive monastery complex near Woodstock, in upstate New York, including a vast shrine hall, an 11-foot gold Buddha, and even a traditional 3-year retreat center (one for men and another for women). A visit to the KTD monastery, high on Meads Mountain, is an unforgettable experience.

Each year we journey from our home in Michigan to KTD Monastery for a 10-day intensive teaching that Khenpo Rinpoche offers to senior students. Now in something like its eighteenth year, it is a chance for the students to practice and be together and to receive Rinpoche's teaching. In recent years, Khenpo Rinpoche has been giving advanced Mahamudra teachings,

not because we students are particularly ready for these teachings, but because (as Rinpoche puts it), if he is to teach this material (due to his age), it will have to be now.

During our stay there this last July (1997), we had requested and received permission for a personal interview with Rinpoche. At that interview, I had outlined certain fairly severe business problems that I had been going through over the last year or two. Working with a translator, I laid out my questions and Rinpoche began to answer.

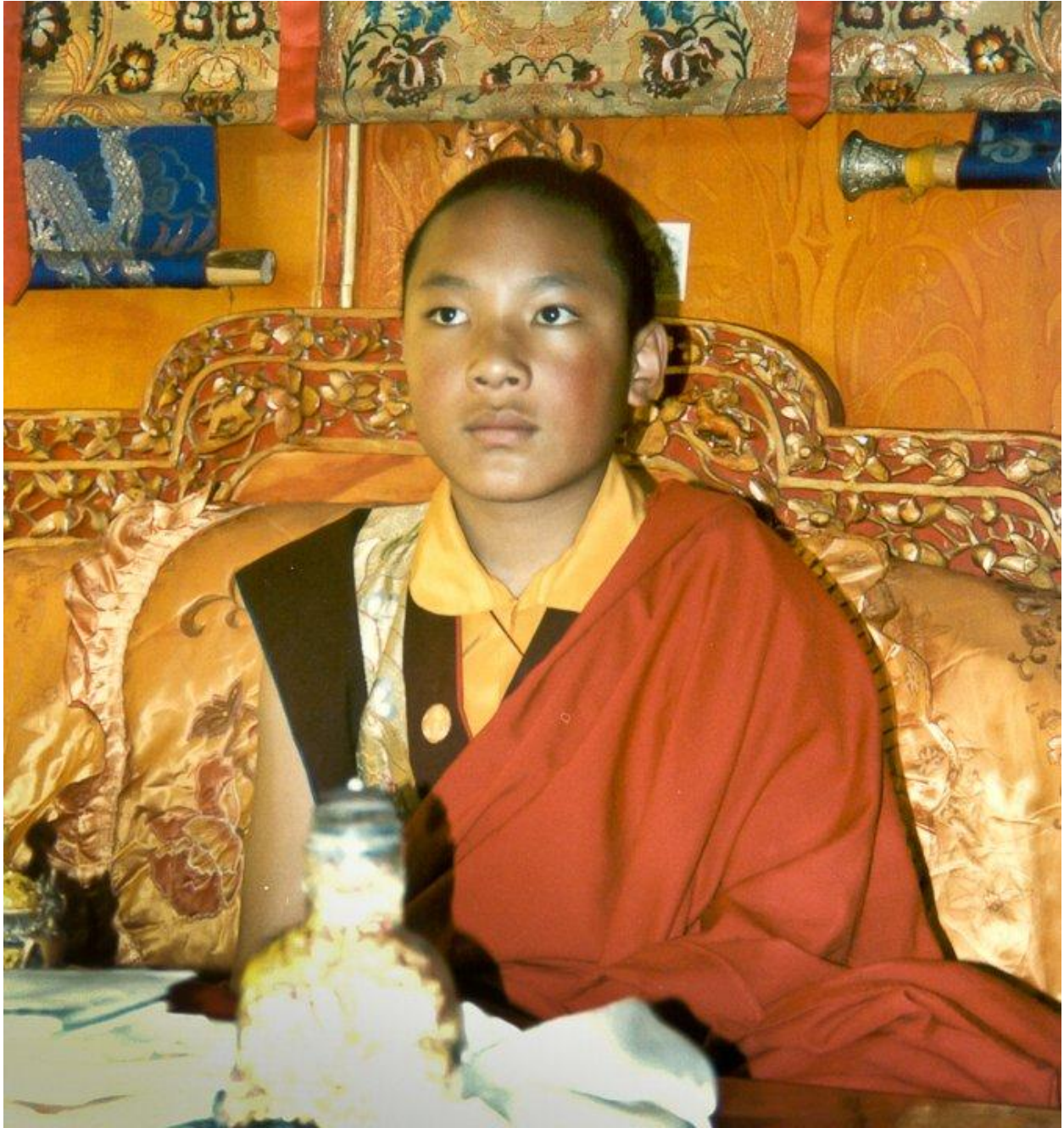
But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he was not going to answer further himself, and that, instead, we should take these questions to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa and ask him directly. Karmapa would be able to answer our questions.

We all looked at each other in amazement, because His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery, deep in the reaches of Tibet. I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, well, perhaps next year, next spring or something, but Rinpoche said: "No, this Summer, as soon as you can arrange it." By this time, Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face as if he were very, very happy for us. We were speechless. He then went on to speak about impermanence, how life is short, and that none of us know the time or manner of our death. He was directing us to go to Tibet soon, this very summer.

Talk about turning your world upside down. Me go to Tibet? What a novel idea! I almost never travel and had never seriously thought of going there. I had always said, a little smugly I confess, that I was interested in the Buddhism in 'Tibetan Buddhism' and not particularly in the Tibetan culture. Anyway, I left that interview in a daze, my head spinning, but also knowing that I had better go home and pack my bags. "Rinpoche wants us to go to Tibet," I mused.

For years I had worked with Khenpo Rinpoche and each year during our personal interview, I would always ask him if there was anything particular I should be doing. Aside from encouraging me to keep practicing, he never gave any specific direction. I was always a little disappointed that there was not ever something more specific he wanted me to do. And now this. Rinpoche had just told me to go to Tibet, and, this summer. It was already mid-July. After the surprise cleared away, we knew that we were pumped.

In fact, we were so charged up that we went out and climbed to the top of the local mountain that same night, something we had never done in all the years we had been coming to the monastery. Starting about 7 PM, with the Sun already dimming, most of my family climbed to the top and surveyed the valley in the distance below us, with all of the twinkling lights, later coming down the mountain in complete darkness. Our heads were right. We were 'good to go' and when we returned from the teaching to Michigan, we managed to prepare and take off within a month of our directive from Rinpoche. From that first day, we were as good as gone to Tibet.



### On To Tsurphu

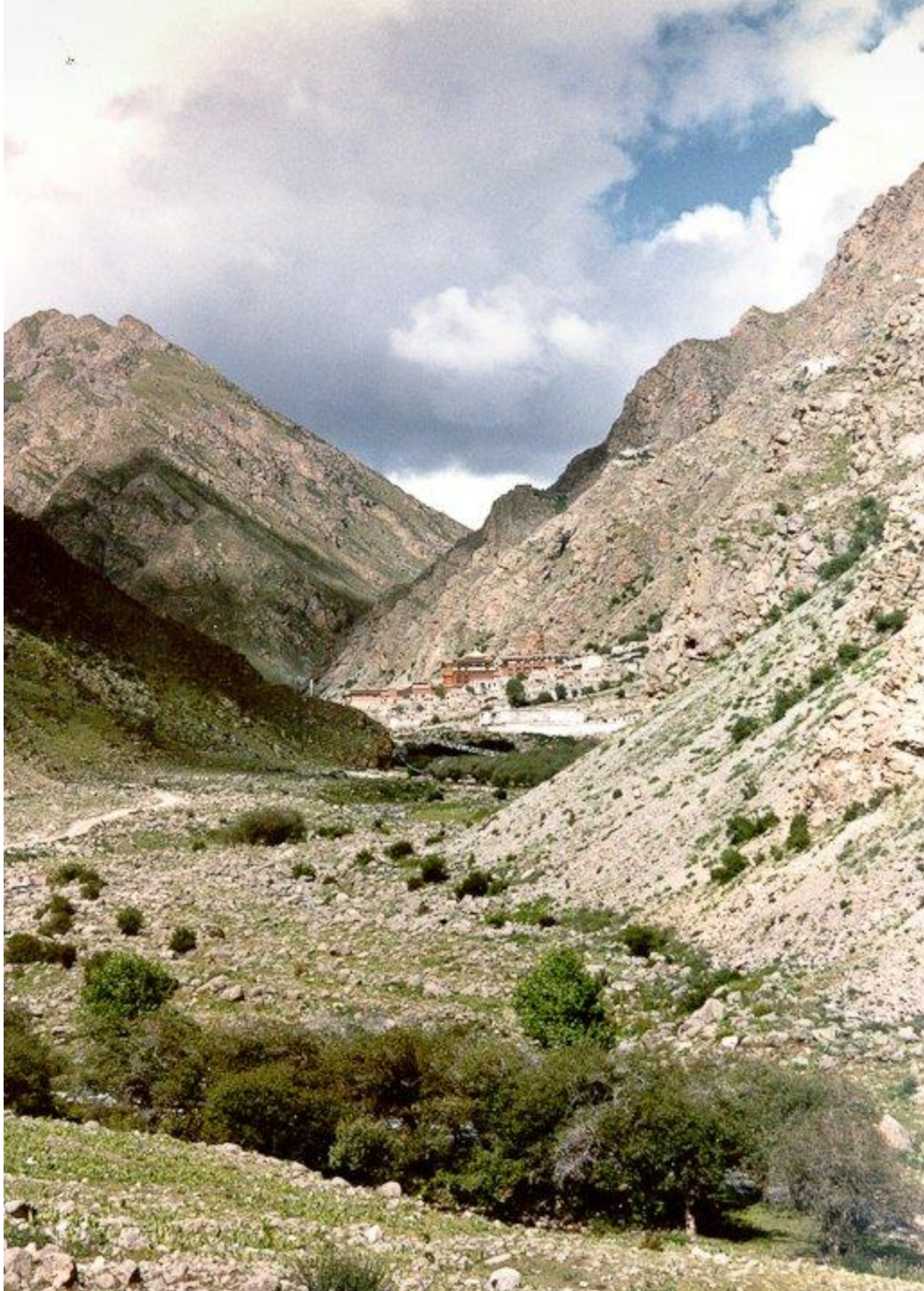
I am going to jump ahead in our story and get right to our visit to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa at his ancestral home in Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet.

... So, we waited out the three days in Lhasa until we could head toward Tsurphu and His Holiness. I still had altitude sickness, but it was now time to go on with our trip's schedule and we headed northwest, out of Lhasa, in a large van. The road was paved, but became progressively more bumpy, including sections where it consisted of squares of rock laid

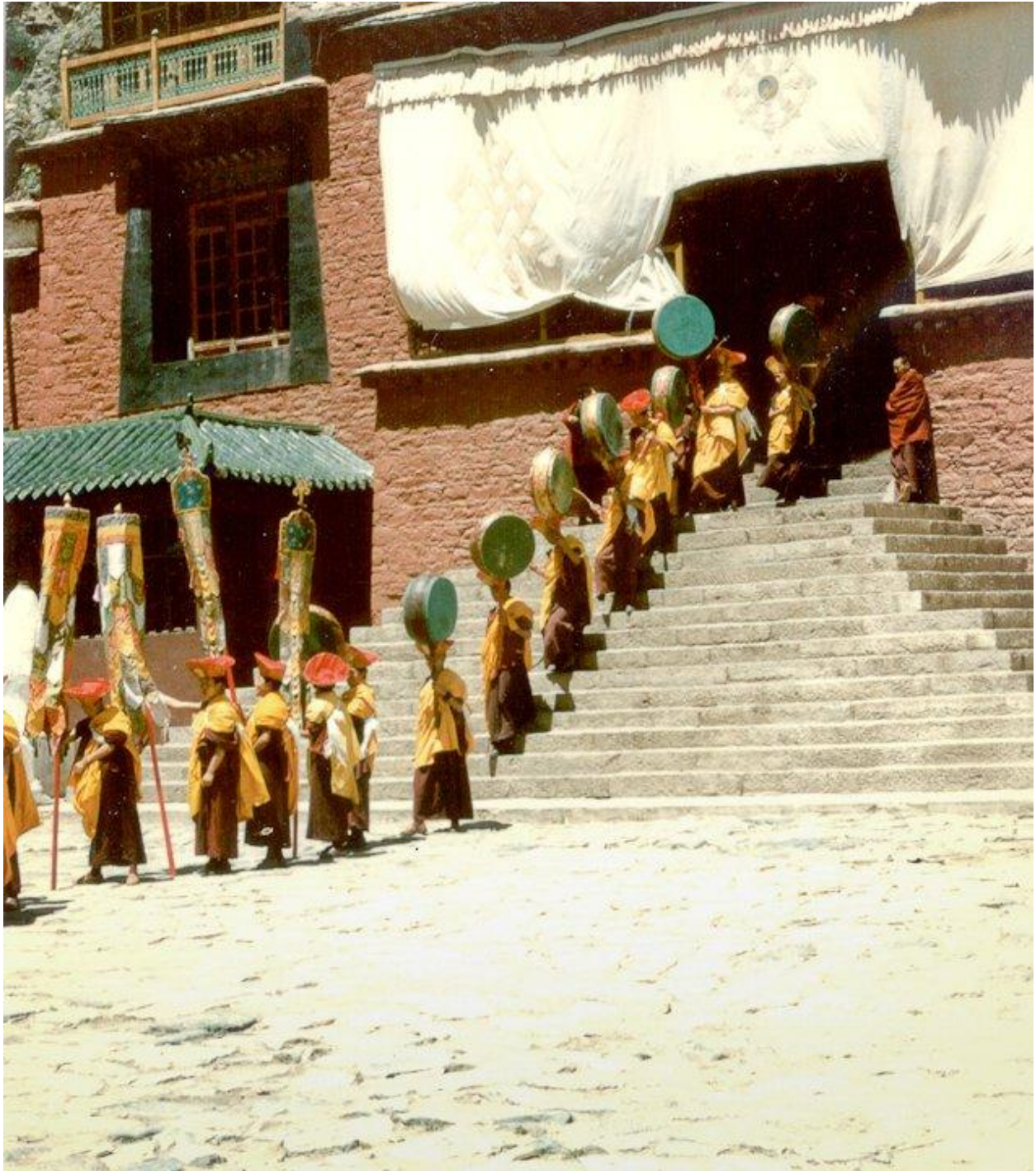
together. I asked about the bumpiness and our guide said that it gets a little bumpy after we turn off the road we were on. "Gets a little bumpy. What then is this now?" I wondered. But he was so right. It did get bumpier. After some time, we made a sharp left turn across a very narrow bridge above a river and began to head up the Tolung Valley on almost no road at all. We soon got used to the steady pitch and roll of the vehicle moving very slowly up the valley trail. It was like an endless series of speed bumps, placed side by side.

Bumps and sickness aside, the 3-hour journey up the Tolung Valley toward Tsurphu was brilliant and fresh. It was early autumn and all the barley fields were golden ripe and ready for harvest. The barley from the Tolung Valley is reputed to be the best in Tibet and there are hundreds and hundreds of fields. We moved slowly along the rocky road toward Tsurphu, mile by mile, so there was plenty of time to see. Everywhere, mountain streams rushed by, over, under and even on the road itself. At places the road became a stream bed. As we moved farther upstream, yaks appeared both up close and far off – sometimes scattered on the mountainside around us. As to other cars: there were none. And the traffic? As soon as we crossed the bridge from the main road, we were just out there by ourselves. Here and there were small villages and everywhere people were working in the fields. Harvesters and workers waved to us; children raced toward us, waving and saying "Hello," perhaps the only English they knew.

We continued on, heading up the valley toward where the two mountain skylines converged before us, always moving very slowly. After crossing the arch of a lovely stone bridge, our guide pointed to a speck on a mountain in the distance. "Tsurphu," he announced. And I could almost see it, something sparkling on a mountainside. And as we moved on (time now slowed by our eagerness to arrive), that speck grew steadily larger. Now I could see reflecting golden roofs in the sunlight, but it was still so far away. And then it would be lost for a long while around yet another curve. Would we ever actually get there? We were ready.



Tsurphu Monastery, that remote dot in the distance finally becomes reachable.



Tsurphu Monastery at Last

At last, we were just below Tsurphu, passing by the Karmapa's lovely summer palace, now less than half a mile to go. Winding up the last of the trail, we passed through a narrow walled road, emerged into the courtyard of Tsurphu, and arrived before the large stone steps of the monastery itself. It was an imposing and welcome sight.

We came armed with many letters of introduction, from our own Rinpoche Khenpo Karthar, from Tai Situ, Rinpoche (acting head of the lineage), etc., letter after letter. We also brought a Western doctor to treat the ailing Drupon Dechun Rinpoche (suffering from advanced diabetes), the man who single-handedly saw to the rebuilding of the monastery after the Chinese destroyed it. But just who we were, the monks gathering around us must have wondered. We proceeded to seek out monks who sought out still higher monks, etc. until we found someone to present all of our letters to. We laid them before a small tribunal of monks in the corner of a very dusty, room. From the letters, the monks could see just who we were and that we were not a danger to Karmapa. We were not even searched for weapons, as I have been told most are. A family of five and two additional ladies, we were harmless enough. Our group was then led inward to an open courtyard, where we climbed to a second level and into a good sized room. It was there that we were first served the legendary Tibetan butter tea.

We were thrilled to be there. Waiting in that room, the Sun pouring through the thick, almost opaque, windows, we were anxious to know if we would be granted an interview with His Holiness, and, if so, when. We sat on low bed-like couches, each covered with a Tibetan rug, slowly drinking our tea. Every few sips of tea found the monks filling the cup up to the rim again, as is the custom. This strange salty buttered tea was a new, but satisfying, taste for me. I almost inhaled it. And there were the ever-present sugar-filled cookies and candy. It was a little cold up here at 15,000+ feet and smoke from the kitchen downstairs found its way into our room, mostly through the open doorway that, due to the constant coming and going of the Tibetans, was impossible to keep closed. Faces peered in on us, some monks, but mostly lay persons wondering who these Westerners were.

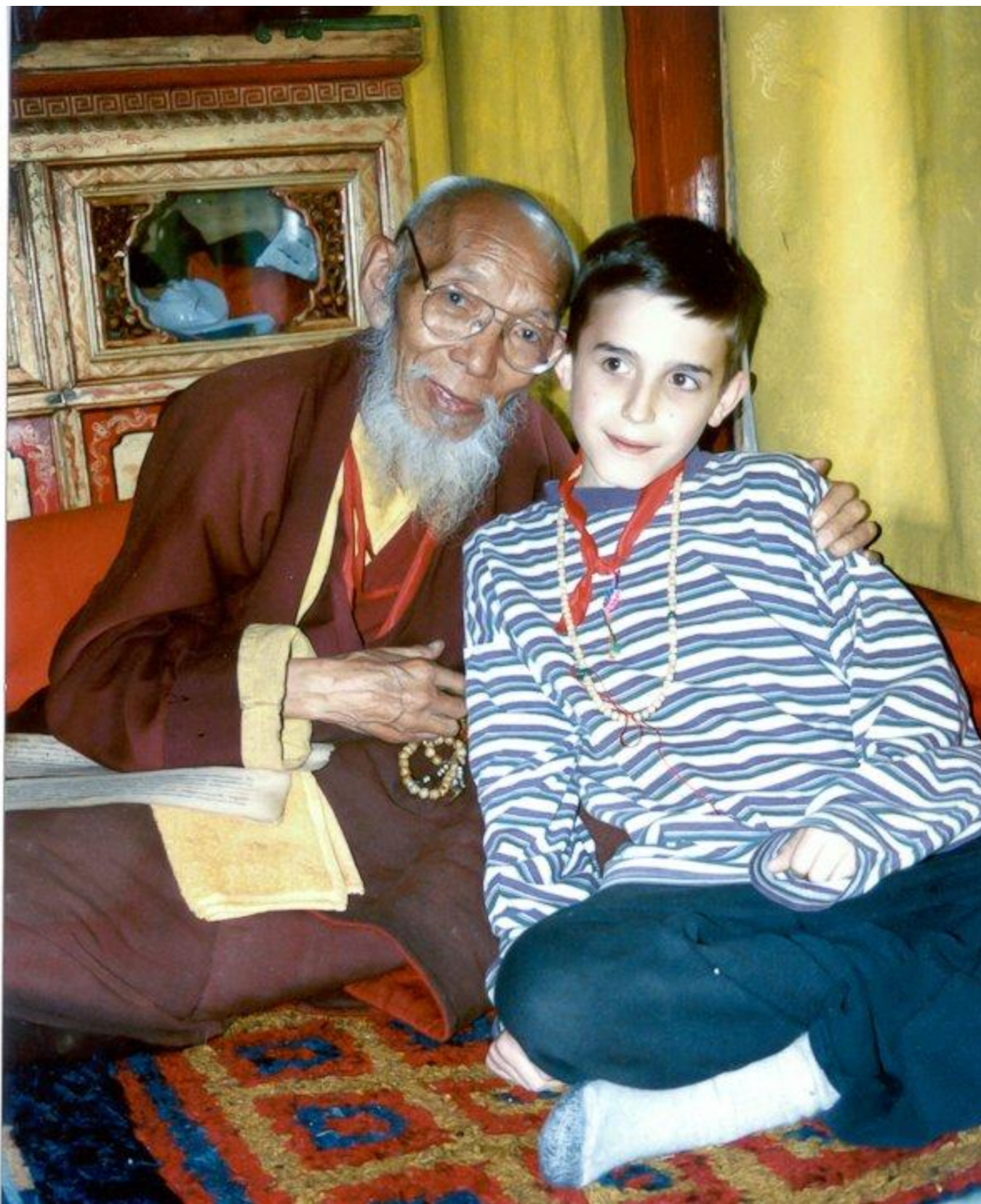


Photo: Our Son Michael Andrew and Karmapa's teacher

And then there was lunch. Brought to us in large bowls, there were noodles and a big bowl of dried yak meat that seemed (at the one taste I gave it) a little funky and old. But food of any kind was good after the long drive and we were thrilled to be getting what apparently was VIP treatment. We ate and then just waited until a monk came and we were told that we would see



his Holiness that day, at least briefly. We were to hang loose and would be told when. Until then, we could relax and wander around the monastery a bit.

And there was a lot to see. Soon after our arrival, a long procession of monks poured forth from main shrine hall and down the front monastery steps. Wearing tall curved red hats, they carried large flat drums that they held up sideways. Here was some ceremony, but for whom? We were hours and hours from any city and there were few, if any, local people witnessing the event. The answer, which was so hard for my modern-world mind to grasp, is that they were doing it for its own sake, just for themselves. How odd!

## Monks and Ceremonies

Outside the room where we parked our stuff, along the inner face of the second-story courtyard, were a whole series of small shrine rooms dedicated to the fierce Tibetan protectors, the dharmapalas. Above these rooms and stretching along the whole courtyard were a series of carcasses, mostly of yak heads (and the bodies of other local animals), all in various states of decay. I was given to understand that these animals had been found dead, killed by poachers, and were here for prayers and as an example of what should not be done. The effect was eerie and smelly.

All along this upper courtyard, beneath the carcasses, were small shrine rooms, which were dark, candle-lit, and most often smoky. In each room was either a lama or a lama and an assisting monk or two, who were busy, making tormas (food offerings), practicing some puja, or just watching over the place. It looked like some of them might live in these rooms, for there were bed-like couches in most of them. I wandered from room to room along the open corridor, deciding finally to attempt some practice in one that had my particular favorite protector, the fierce form of Vajrapani, in it. Using hand gestures, I asked if I could sit and do puja and was motioned to go ahead and take a seat.

Everywhere that I practiced like this in Tibet, monks would surround me. Perhaps they had never seen a westerner practice before. They would sit close, right next to me (often on both sides), behind me, and most disturbing, often just in front and facing me, looking right into my face, less than a foot away. It made for a difficult practice, to say the least (I am used to practicing in a room by myself). In this particular case, the resident lama (a lama is a monk who has done the traditional 3-year solitary retreat) wanted to see me do the vulture posture which leads to the dissolution of the visualization, and resting in Mahamudra meditation, for those of you who understand this sort of thing. He showed me how he did it, looking for all the world like Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa. Then he took off his watch, handed it to me, and asked me to time him while he held his breath in the traditional vase-breathing position for as long as he could, which turned out to be about a minute and a half. Of course, he wanted me to do the same for him. I am afraid (particularly with the low oxygen) that I did not put in a very good performance, not to mention not being exactly in a competitive mood. I had to laugh. It was all in good fun, but a bit crazy too.



Photo: My Son and Some Monks

And they all liked Michael Andrew, my 11-year old son. I don't mean just a little. Monks surrounded Michael, shaking his hand, putting their arms (or robes) around him, taking him off on side trips with them – whatever. We just got used to it. Perhaps it was because he was so young and a male. Perhaps it was because he had his mala and used it. Who knows? We liked to think it was because of what the lady oracle near the Ramoche Temple in Lhasa had to say about Michael Andrew, which is a bit of a story itself. Here goes:

#### The Ramoche Oracle

We were told by a monk from Rumtek (in Sikkim), who was visiting us at our home while we got ready to leave for Tibet that, if we got to Lhasa, we should try to find a famous woman oracle who uses a small copper mirror to tell you about yourself and the future. She was very well known. The monk also had a personal question he wanted answered. Would we take his questions?

Since we had plenty of time in Lhasa (waiting for the altitude adjustment to take place), I was willing to try to locate here and one morning we drove to the Ramoche Temple and just asked around. Did they know of such an oracle, a lady? Did they ever. We were led by a young girl down roads and alleys, finally to a door just on a courtyard, where people were washing up. We knocked and were shown into a small room. In it was a lovely shrine and two long bed-like

couches, on one of which sat the lady oracle. She had nothing of the Jeanne Dixon look of so-called 'psychic' readers here in the West. Middle-aged and very reserved looking, she was kind of lovely, in a very serious way. We liked her at once. This is what a reader – an oracle – should look like, I thought. There was no show-biz here. We sat down in front of her on the floor.

### The Ramoche Oracle

She used a small bowl of barley kernels, in which was stuck a round copper mirror. The mirror was not really capable of showing much, as it seemed kind of old and more opaque than reflective. The woman asked the year of our birth and with that information retrieved the animal (and element) for our birth year, as per Chinese astrology. For example, I was born in the year of the Iron Snake. She then took a pinch of barley from her bowl counted out several grains and then began to speak. I, of course, asked her about some business problems that I was involved in and received a clear and positive answer about their resolution. And we asked about our four children and also got clear and very helpful responses for each one. She went down the list of our kids, starting with our oldest daughter.

When she reached our youngest child, our son Michael Andrew, she announced that this was not an ordinary child, but a 'gelong', a monk in his last life who was capable of keeping all 250+ Buddhist rules that this high-level of a monk keeps. She went on to say that we should take very special care of him – keep him very clean. Of course, this was unexpected and started us to thinking about him in a new light.

I can say this. My son Michael Andrew is one of the few, perhaps the only, person I ever met who I would say is guileless. In other words, he does not appear to have a mean bone (no double-thinking) in his body. The oracle said to keep him pure, but he is already pure, nice work if you can get it.

I mention this, only because of the inordinate amount of attention he received from about every monk he met on our journey. Even in the famous Potala in Lhasa, the great past home of the Dalai Lamas, no less than a khenpo (an abbot) came forth and greeted Michael Andrew spontaneously and led him around on his own private tour, later presenting him with the traditional white scarf. We have picture after picture of Michael, surrounded by monks. We mentioned this fact to Bokar, Rinpoche, the main meditation monk in our lineage (and a tulku), and he said that he had no way of knowing whether it was true or not, but even if it is, the path to bringing out those qualities would be long and arduous. And of course, we have a picture of Bokar, Rinpoche with his arm also draped around Michael Andrew. At the very least, an interesting sidebar.



The Oracle of Ramoche Temple.

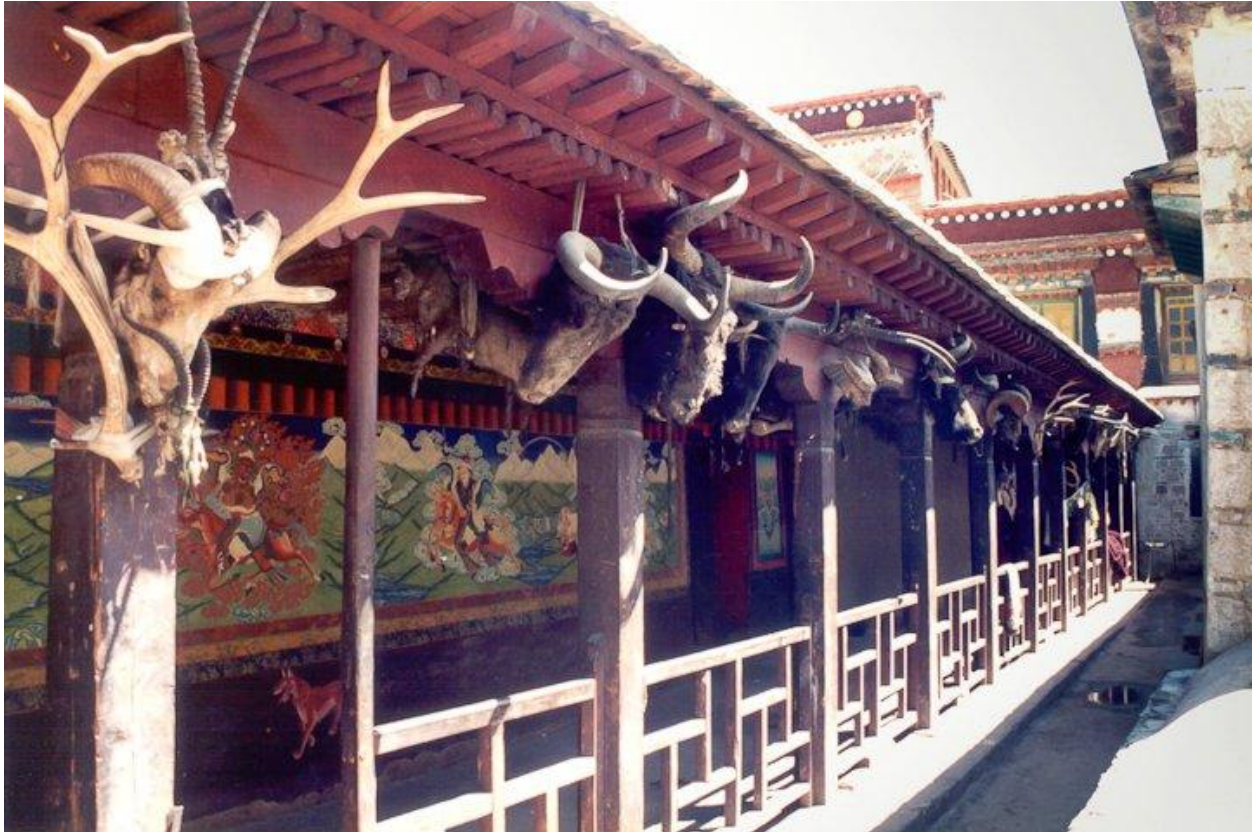
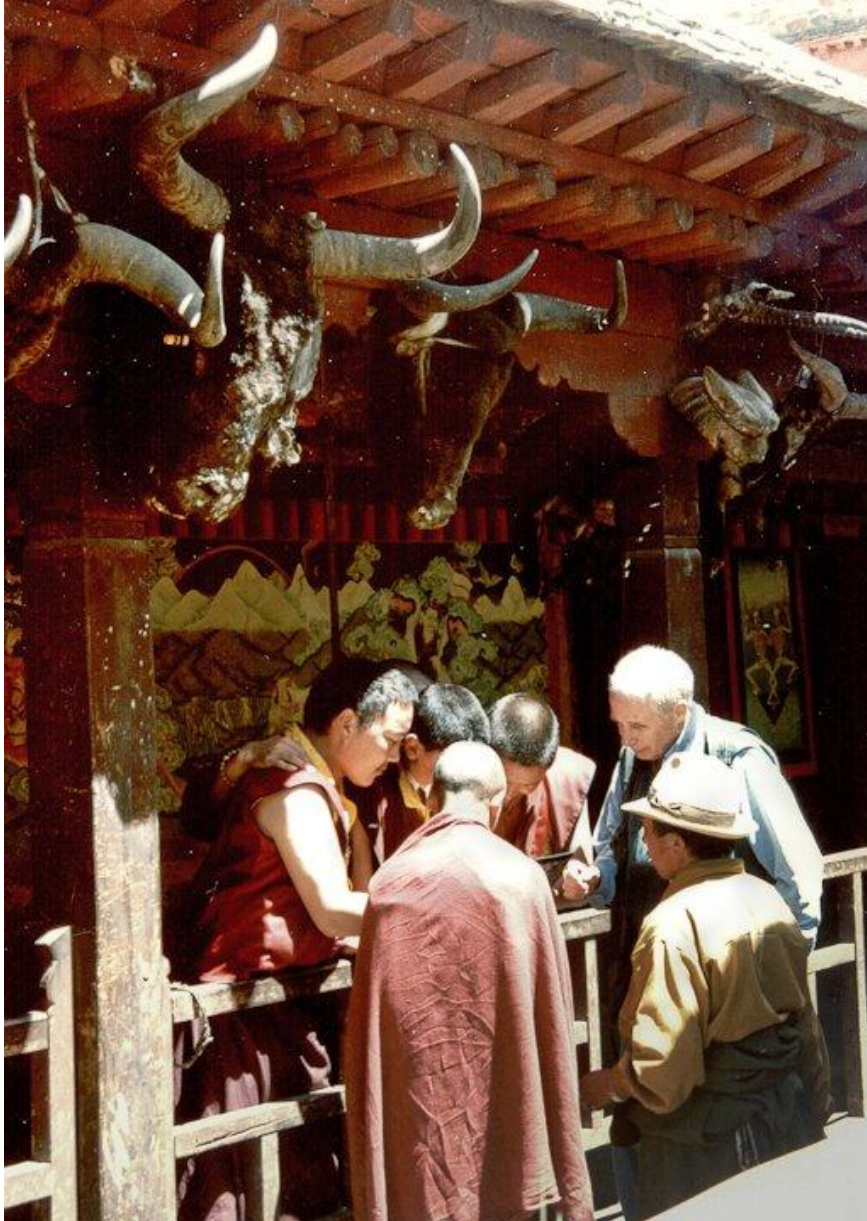


Photo: Dharmapala Shrines

Many small shrines dedicated to various dharma protectors. Notice the severed heads of animals all along the edge of the porch, remains of poached animals shown here to remind folks not to do this.



The Severed Heads of Animals

Inevitably, in all these kind of situations, I would end up showing the monk(s) the small photo album I had brought with me, with pictures of our center, our lamas, our place of business, and the house we lived in. They couldn't get enough of looking at those pictures and would crowd around until the small picture book would always float out of my hands and into theirs, taking on a destiny of its own. I would wait to get it back. And they all knew my teachers, Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche and Bardor, Tulku, Rinpoche. In fact, often you could hear one monk pointing out to others that "we" were Khenpo Karthar's. I was amazed that they knew who he was, being long gone from Tibet and so many, many thousands of miles away. But it was clear that they all know our rinpoche.



### One of Many Rainbows That Day

The next day, with all of our sleeping gear, we ground back up the same trek as before, this time certain as to where and when the end would come and more free to look around. Small villages of adobe were near and far along the trail. With very few windows and not much room at all inside, these solid fortresses were all that separated the Tibetan people from the harsh winters. And there are no trees at this height, so fuel is scarce and limited to whatever brush could be gathered, bound, and stored. The big thing to burn for heat and cooking were animal droppings and these were gathered with a science. They are worth a mention.

### The Road to Tsurphu Monastery

I am told that, because the atmosphere of the Earth forces clouds to exist only at a certain altitude, the high plateaus of Tibet are one of the few places where the clouds are just physically much closer overhead than elsewhere. Perhaps this fact explains the overpowering, even grand feeling these vast stretches of clouds had on me - overwhelming.

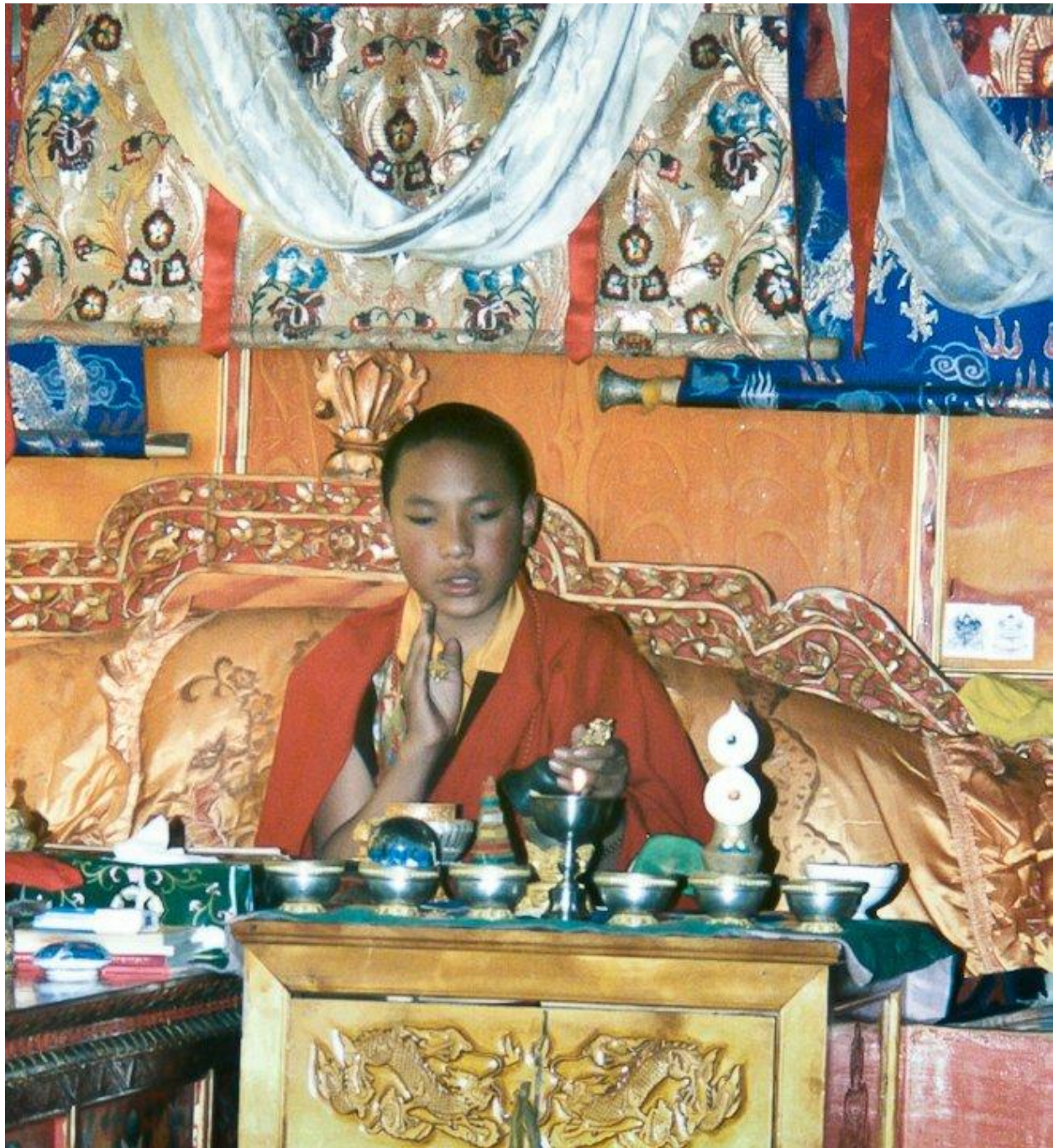


Photo: Mahakala Puja

The Karmapa

And now, back to Tsurphu, where we waited to be led into the presence of His Holiness, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. Every day at 1 PM, His Holiness has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to go to that, but were told to wait and that we would see him privately. The time ticked away on the slow track as we all waited, filled with anticipation. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, in his



previous incarnation, but we felt like we had been in endless touch with him through the lineage, all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual and temporal leader of a complete lineage of Tibetan Buddhists. Until one month before, we had little hope of ever seeing His Holiness, since it is very uncertain when the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, at a towering 15,000 feet in the mountains, and about to meet him in person.

And at last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So, off we went, in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And remember that I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, with bronchitis, still sick, and getting sicker. As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness, I had to stop and do heavy breathing just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath, as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You really climb. We came to a small courtyard outside where His Holiness was, where we took off our shoes. I had to sit down and pant. How embarrassing. And then another short flight of steep stairs to the room itself, where I arrived, still breathing hard. I sat down at the back of the room, while everyone else was up front prostrating to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset in this wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. I moved forward.



Photo: Our Family with His Holiness

### The 17th Gyalway Karmapa

And there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. Boy was I glad to see him. All I can remember is kind of getting through the prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him. He looked at me like I have never been looked at before. His eyes look straight into your eyes and then he ups the ante by focusing intently within you. His dark eyes seem most like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, moving in and out at high speed, trying to get the right focus. I have never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then still move in and out, getting a fix on you. But, that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds, as if time stopped in the grip of his eyes, and then all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a welcoming kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

In this short interview, we presented ourselves and what questions we had. In my case, I had written out two questions in Tibetan (or had them written out for me, since I cannot write Tibetan). These I presented to Karmapa. We all offered our scarves and whatever presents we had brought along. It was not a long interview, but we were told that he would see us tomorrow for a longer time and that we should come back then and he would have answers to our various questions.

We had also requested to stay overnight at Tsurphu, although this was no longer – in general – allowed, because there were too many liability problems that might reflect badly for Karmapa with the Chinese. However, they said that they would talk it over. Just before we left, they said that we could stay the following night and so, after spending a number of hours at the monastery, we started back down the Tolung Valley toward Lhasa over the same slow, crawling, bumpy road that we had come up on. It was a glorious sunny afternoon with all the barley fields golden in the breeze. Our heads were filled with Karmapa. Although it was not raining, all the way down the valley, we were greeted by a spectacular series of rainbows, one after another, some of them even double rainbows, a traditional sign of beings like His Holiness. We were high.

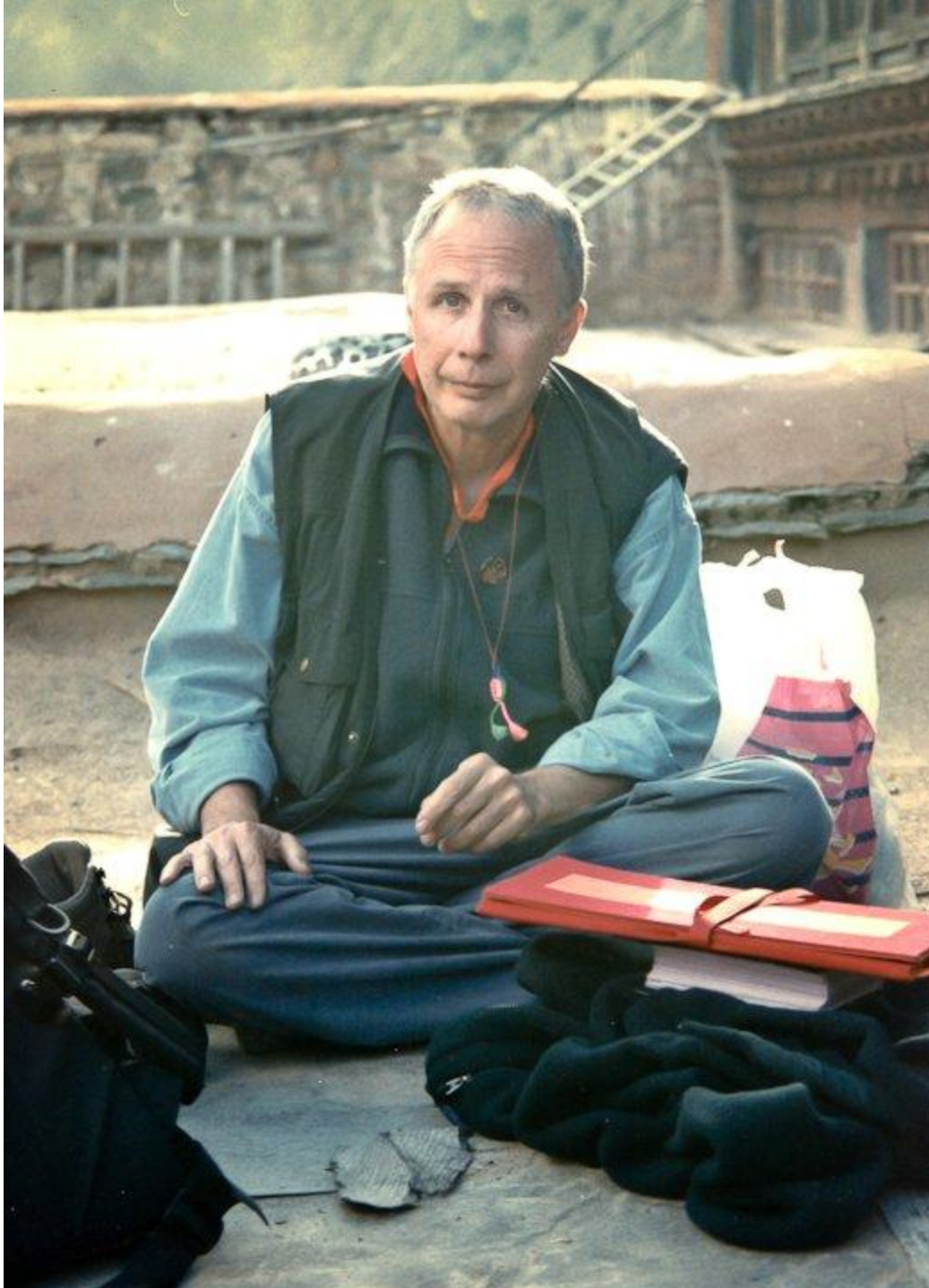


Photo: This is me after the audience with His Holiness.

H.H. the 17th Karmapa

In the afternoon, we were summoned to His Holiness and I slowly climbed the multiple sets (three) of ladder-like stairs, huffing and puffing. As we entered the interview room, there was a puja (ritual) going on, with his holiness leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of

monks. We were encouraged to sit up front and settled in. Gradually I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us. It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never one quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice and my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it and what it was about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing its essential nature.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mind, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of my practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character and I carried that strength or toughness to my practice. In fact I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came to mind and began to be examined inwardly, in a new light. But this was no idea that I was playing with. Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of myself, in this case, that part that had been doing my practice, the one who did the practice.

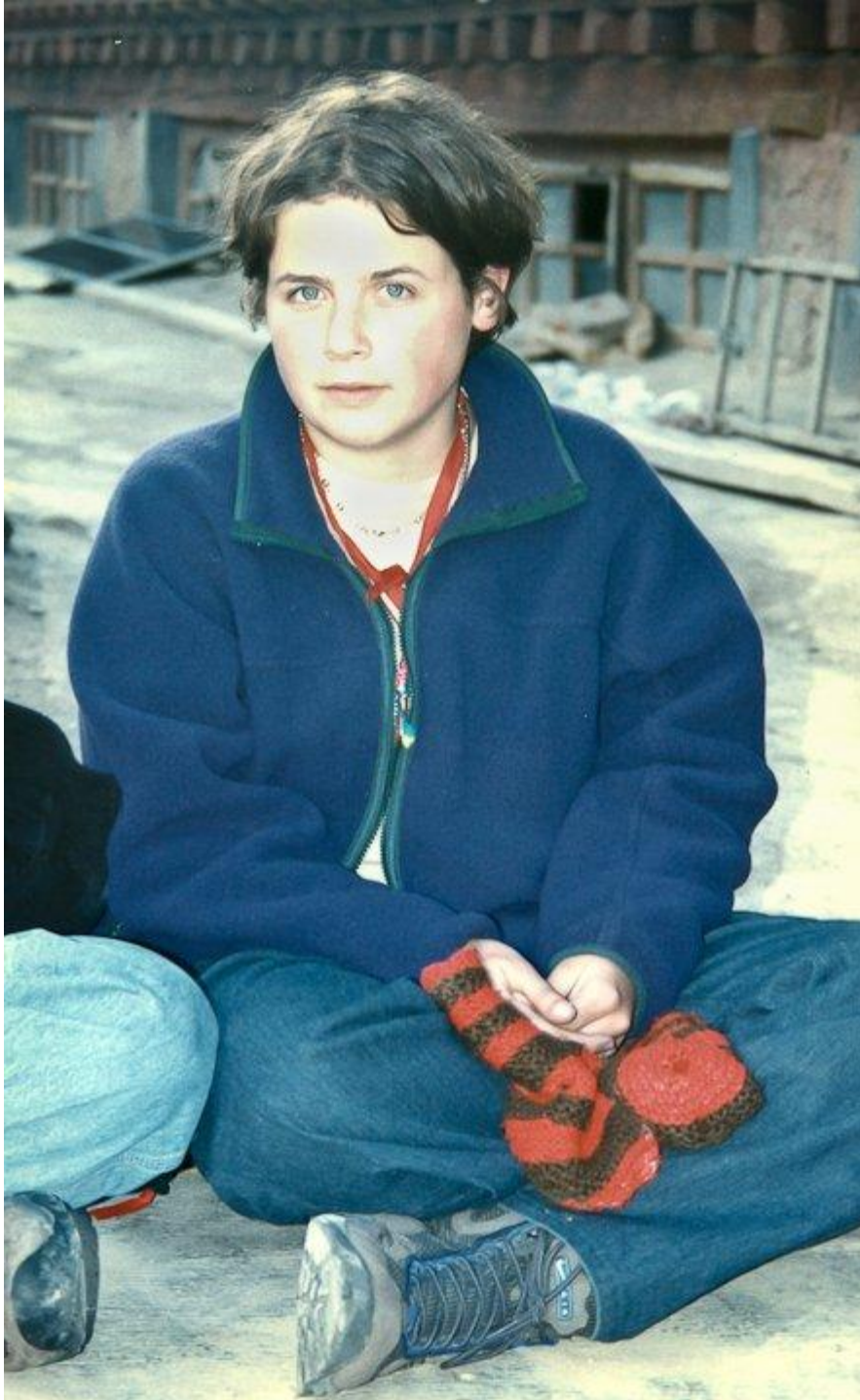


Photo: My Daughter May

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so ...so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather: the realization that I was (and always had been), at my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that

this was my natural state. Not something to strive for, but already in fact the case -- the state of my being, something to be uncovered, opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax, become aware of it, and let it shine through.

And, again, I should point out that this was not a concept or idea, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed, as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization. I was, in essence, very simple -- just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. I was easy and all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I feel I understood myself and my practice, all in midst of that Mahakala puja with Karmapa. I was clear and at peace.



Photo: My Daughter Michael Anne

After the puja, we spent some time together, during which Karmapa gave the answers to the questions that we had brought to him the day before. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And His Holiness gave me a name, which

was Tenzin Nyima, which means “Keeper or Holder of the Sun.” And although I had told him I was an astrologer (Tsi-Pa in Tibetan), he had no way of knowing that here in the west I am known as one of the very few helio (sun) astrologers. I was knocked out by that he could come up with something like that, but I should have known. That is why he is His Holiness.

And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of spent a little time with us. You can see from the photos of us from that time that we were all deep in the zone, our minds blown quite open. We were just sitting around, kind of in a good shock, feeling very open and whole.



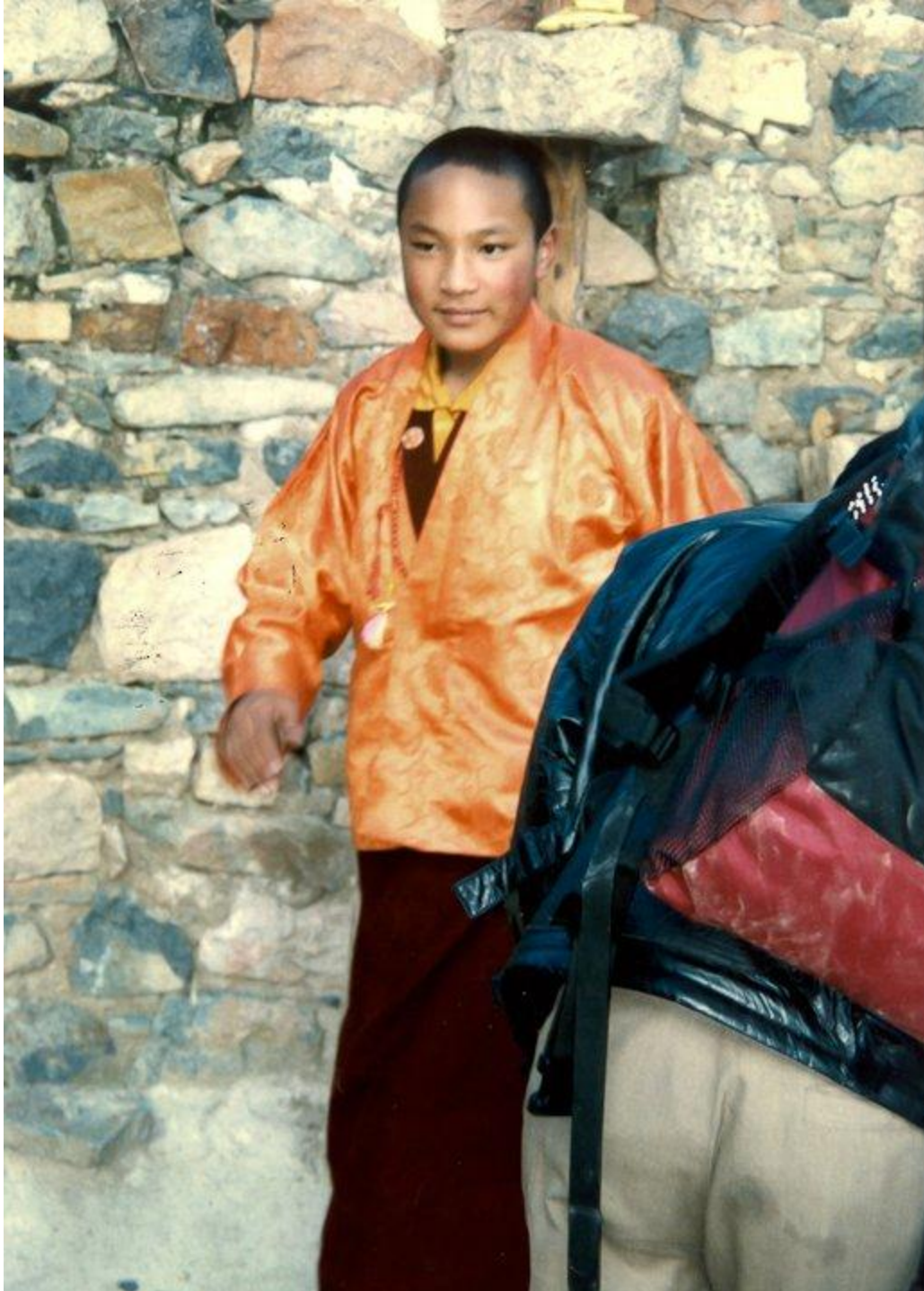


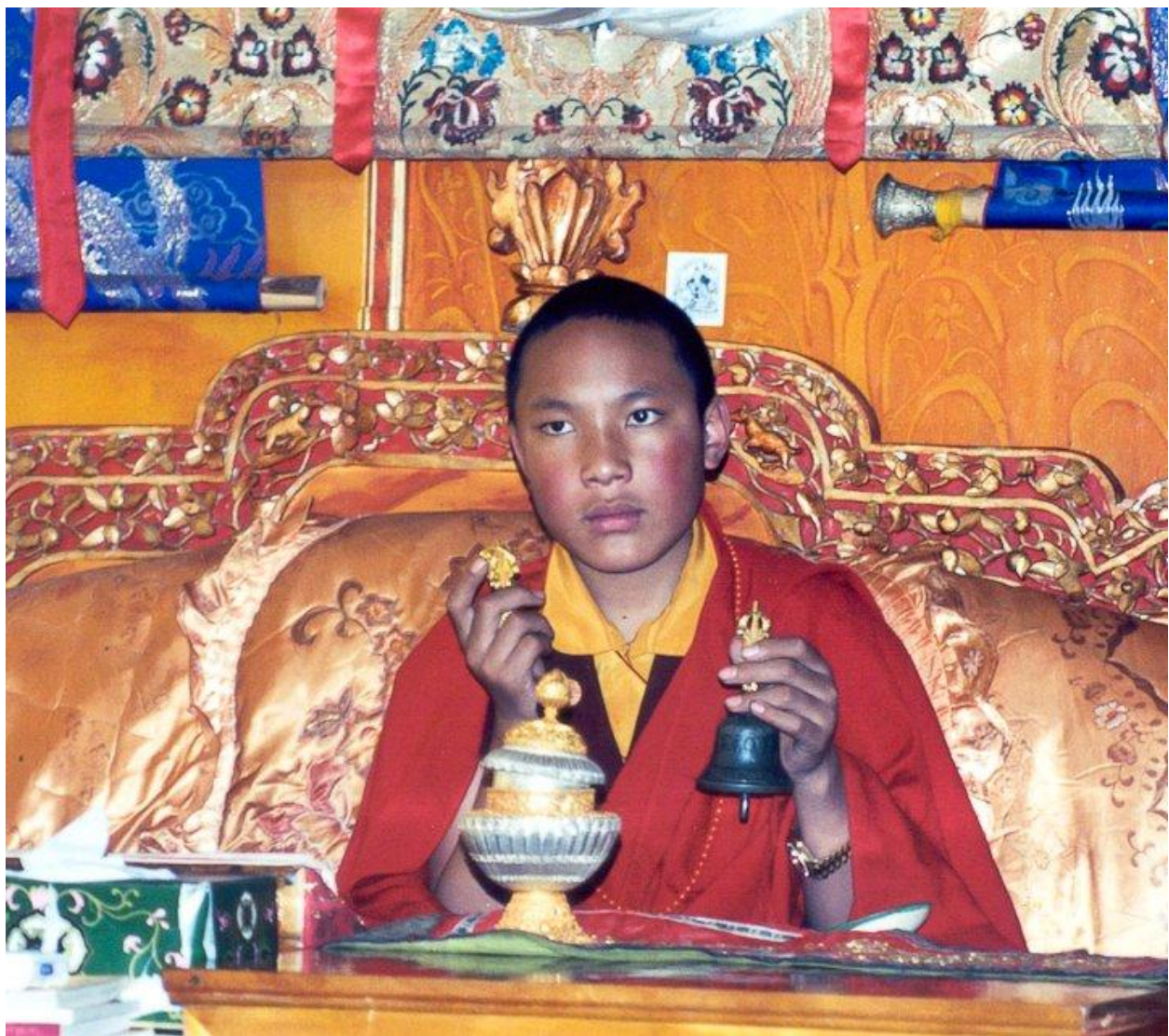
Photo: On the Roof with His Holiness

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this one and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to his extraordinary character. Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is, that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer largeness of his presence. And this kind of

thing defies words. How do you explain that when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself, who you are, why you are here, etc. I learned things about myself when I was in the presence of His Holiness that I never knew before, important things. The word is 'realization'. I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

We spent the rest of that day exploring further the various reaches of the monastery. Settled in our room, we had food brought to us by the monks. We ate what they ate: thukpa (a meat and noodle soup), rice, that sort of thing. And as night came, we hunkered down. And night came early and there was little else we could do. The single light bulb glowed for a short while, powered by a small generator and then the electricity ended. Aside from the candles, it was dark. We did what everyone else did in that area of the world when the sun goes down. We went to sleep.

The next day we paid our respects and went to see His Holiness for the last time on this trip. We all presented kataks and had them blessed and put around our heads by Karmapa. He gave us each a special blessed knot to wear around our necks.



Looking back, it was a special time that we spent in Tsurphu, a special state of mind that is difficult to put into words. It is not easy to describe the experience of being with His Holiness, and so far from anything we call home, but still so very much a part of him – a home for our hearts. Even looking at the pictures from that time, it is clear that we had entered into the mind and mandala of His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa. You can see it in our eyes, a certain softness and clarity. And the blessings of that trip have remained in my mind in the form of an ability to concentrate more on what is really important in life, working to realize ourselves. I am less distracted now by all the many entertainments available to me. I am reminded of what Bokar, Rinpoche said to his English translator, Ngodup Burkhar, my good friend. He said “Tomorrow or next life, which will come first?”



A Tibetan Horse Race

And on our journey, miles from any road-connected town, we came across a large group of Tibetans having themselves a horse race. Dressed in bright red, with tufted hats, and decorations of all kinds, came a procession of would-be riders and village people, led by one who carried some sort of holy picture (we could not make it out), perhaps of a rinpoche. Smoke swirled from the central bonfires and the participants were totally involved in this celebration – all of this many miles from what you or I would call anywhere. Where they all came from or what this was all about, we could not be sure, but a celebration it was indeed.



## Horse Races

We were told this was all part of the harvest festival, the harvesting of the barley in Tolung Valley. And the barley fields were all around, tucked away in every possible piece of land. Most were small to mid-sized and many small fields were planted side by side, rather than there being a few large ones. There were countless thousands of them, all golden in the Sun, waving in the wind their long extended tassels. After this experience, I must say that barley is perhaps the most beautiful grain in the world.



Here is a wall of fuel patties ready for Winter.



### Roasting Barley

In another room of the home, two women worked hot brush-fed stoves, roasting the barley corns on sand until they semi-popped, a little like our popcorn, when it does not quite pop full. Swirling, choking smoke engulfed these ladies who worked all day in it, while out on the lawn, on a huge blanket, mounds of fresh-popped barley corns were tossed to separate the last of the sand from the kernels. The whole effect was positively medieval and beautiful. We helped ourselves to the popped corns and I can say that it does not get much better than this.

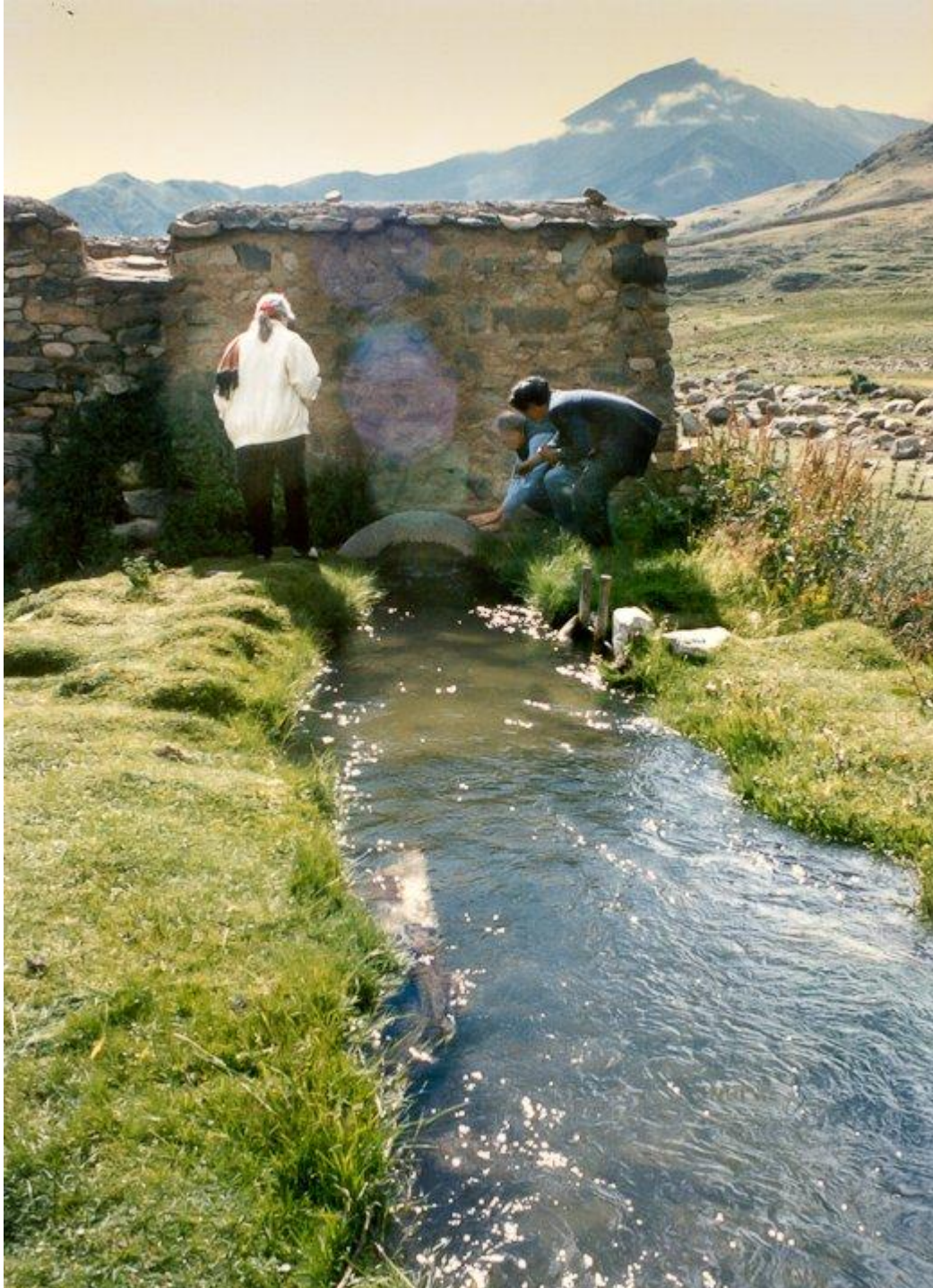


### Popped Roasted Barleycorn

Everywhere kids (and dogs) ran alongside our van, as we crawled up the rock road through the valley. They wanted pens to write with or money and were proud to say (over and again) perhaps the only word of English they knew, “Hello!” They were wide-grinned delighted when we answered the same back to them. Everywhere along the road, people were walking with horses or by themselves, always engaged in some sort of work or survival-related task. This kind of roadside activity was a far cry from the endless idle road traffic that we were to find later in our trip, in the hot plains of India and southern Nepal.

What a strange feeling it was to drive along in the middle of nowhere and come across a family having tea or lunch in the middle of a far field – just out there, by themselves. And everywhere, everyone, working. Always. Didn’t they know that they were alone, here in Tibet, far from the too-cool happenings of the modern world? How could they be so happy out here? It was scary

to me, so used to being wrapped in the news and flash of a cyberspace world. The modern world had not reached so far as this. Here things were as they had been for thousands of years, a somewhat terrifying experience for thoroughly-modern Michael. They were just out there by themselves. And perhaps that is just why they were working so hard.

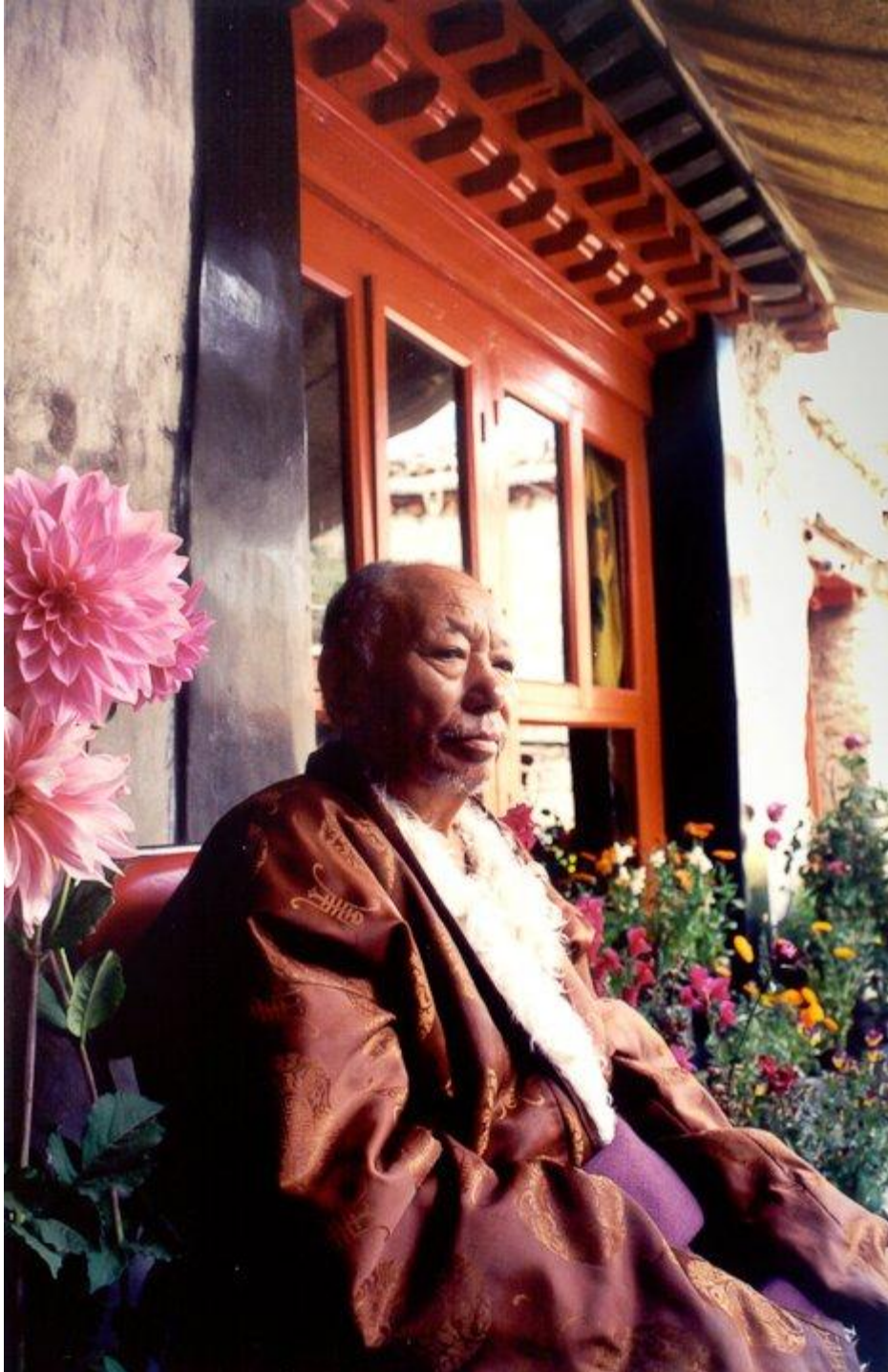




## Smalls Streams Run Deep and Fast

And a word about the water -- the small rivers and streams. First, there were many, many streams and they seem to be going in all directions, although always flowing (of course) down the valley and toward the general direction of Lhasa. As mentioned earlier, these streams crossed and re-crossed the small road we traveled and sometimes became the road itself as we drove up into the streams. And, for the most part, they were not shallow streams, but quite deep, more like channels. Only a few feet across, they were a foot or two deep and conveyed a huge quantity of pushing, rushing water, surging on. The Tibetans had very carefully (I imagine) helped to direct some of these streams over, under, and along the road, until you almost got the sense that they were like the deep roman aqueducts, carrying the most water in the smallest possible space. Or, perhaps more likely, these were all natural, just nature's way of handling the heavy mountain runoff.

And lest I forget, we were in a valley, one that never seemed all that wide, which meant that on two sides were rocky mountains thrusting up, channeling us, guiding us toward Tsurphu. And there were smaller valleys, on occasion, that shot off at right angles to where we were going, taking other travelers we know not where. But valleys, in Tibet, are where all the life is. There is nothing that can be done with the mountains themselves, other than to park the occasional monastery as high up on them as human hands can fashion. And there was the sky, a roof for the valley, always opening upward and filled with those classic Tibetan clouds, the kind they paint into thangkas -- so lovely and always grand.



Dropon Dechen Rinpoche

We could see how tired he was and as Kate began to examine him, all the while a perpetual stream of visitors passed through the room, offering kataks and receiving his blessing. The bad news is that not much could be done for some of the complications from the advanced diabetes other than to dress the wounds and confirm the diagnosis. The good news was that Kate did

manage to help him sleep and to relieve other equally troubling symptoms. Rinpoche was able to rest, to everyone's relief.

As mentioned, our second drive to Tsurphu was effortless and we felt like old-timers when we wheeled into the main courtyard, dragging our sleeping bags and other gear up to our allotted room. Once again, we waited to be summoned to His Holiness, filling our time by visiting the various shrines and observing the new buildings still under construction. Or perhaps new is not the right word, because these were recreations of buildings destroyed by the Chinese during the 1960s.

It is amazing to me that, as hard as Tsurphu is to get to, the Chinese found plenty of energy to drag their dynamite and munitions all this way and to completely destroy this fragile monastery perched high on the edge of the Tolung Valley. And the fact that it exists today is the work, in main, of one man, Drupon Dechen Rinpoche, who came from His Holiness' (the 16th Karmapa's) monastery at Rumtek in Sikkim and set about rebuilding the entire edifice, aided by the support of the surrounding people and the Tsurphu Foundation. As of late, Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche had been very sick and suffering from advanced diabetes and that, too, was part of our mission.

We brought with us one doctor, Kate White, and bags of medical equipment to see what could be done for Rinpoche. Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche was in a small apartment in a building separate from the main monastery, a room with many windows that was part of a small sunny courtyard. He had been very sick not only with the diabetes, but also unable to sleep and with still other problems. We were admitted to see him and, after prostrating to him, we offered the traditional white scarf or katak, which he graciously placed around each of our heads, while giving us each a special protection cord.



### Thousands of Small Barley Fields

And we stopped at one small building, where supposedly the best barley flour was made. Here was a family working together. They had harnessed one of the many fast-moving Tibetan mountain streams that, deep, like small aqueducts, run every which way down the valley. The stream ran into one side of their small house and out the other, powering a large grist mill in the center, above which a leather bag of roasted barley corns hung, dribbling its steady stream of barley into the mill.