

THE KARMAPA IN PERSON

July 28, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I don't know how to begin telling you about His Holiness the Karmapa. First, many of you may be uncomfortable calling anyone "His Holiness," and I can sympathize. You would have to meet him in person to understand. I was lucky enough to meet him in 1997 when I took most of my family to Tibet to meet His Holiness the 17th Karmapa at Tsurphu Monastery, his ancestral home, located at some 15,000 feet in the mountains. I wrote about that in my book of that trip, which is a free read called "Our Pilgrimage to Tibet" at:

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig>

I last left off with my story when after my daughter's wedding on July 16th four of us jumped into a car and drove all night from Michigan to the mountains above Woodstock, New York in order to meet (you guessed it!) His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. It was Margaret, my daughter Anne, myself, and my dear friend Ngodup Burkhar, who is one of the Karmapa's translators.

We switched drivers, but there was no room for anyone to lie down, so it was catch as catch can when it came to even a few minutes of sleep. Thanks go to Ngodup who made the drive much easier by telling stories of His Holiness and generally making us laugh with his cut-ups. It was a thirteen-hour trip and we crawled into beds very tired. We were staying at a lovely house of a woman who was kind enough to make her house available to dharma travelers like us.

We got less than four hours sleep because we had to get up and go up the mountain to register and be ready to see his holiness that morning. I was one of the official photographers and Margaret was my assistant, carrying the extra lenses and what not. Sleepy or not, we were still high from my daughter May's wedding and the anticipation of actually seeing His Holiness in person.

For those of you just tuning in to the dharma world, just think of the Dalai Lama, but imagine that he is 26-years old. The Dalai Lama is the head of Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, while the Karmapa is the head of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Both are equals, but the younger Karmapa is very respectful of the Dalai Lama and traveled from India to be in his presence for the Kalachakra Empowerment that the Dalai Lama recently performed in Washington, DC.

In the history of Tibetan Buddhism the line of the Karmapas is older than the line of the Dalai Lamas. This is the 14th Dalai Lama, but the 17th Karmapa. I will spare you the history, but just know that both the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa are considered the living embodiment of loving kindness and compassion and deeply treasured by Tibetans. Both had to escape Tibet and reside in India. They are good friends.

It was hard for me to believe I was about to see the young Karmapa again. We visited with him for three days back in the summer of 1997 and he was glad to see my kids, one of which was his own age. Not many western children made it to the high mountains of Tibet in those years. We had a great time. As for his presence, well I don't want to sound too much like a groupie, so let me just say that I have never met a more profound presence in my life, and I don't mean austere and imposing.

When I first was going to meet the Karmapa back in 1997 I was prepared to see an austere figure, one that would command my respect and probably be very powerful to behold. This is what I had come to expect from great spiritual leaders. The actuality was anything but that.

When I finally met His Holiness the Karmapa high in the mountains of Tibet in 1997 I got a surprise. Instead of learning about the nature of the Karmapa or encountering a commanding spiritual presence, I found myself spontaneously learning about my own deepest nature, like who I really was inside all of my words and personality. In the Karmapa's presence I discovered for a fact that at heart I was a compassionate and loving being. It was beyond any knowledge I had of myself and left an imprint that is my reference point even today, many years later. Instead of a power person, I encountered a loving and kind person, the Karmapa. He brought out my own innate kindness.

This is why I call the Karmapa "His Holiness," because without the shadow of a doubt that is what he is. Here is a photo I took of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa only a few days ago. Tomorrow I will continue this blog and have more photos.



THE KARMAPA IN NEW YORK
July 28, 2011

As usual security around His Holiness was tight and I am not just talking about his personal bodyguards or our local sangha protectors, all whom wore suits. The state department sends a whole team of what must be part of the Secret Service to guard and protect distinguished foreign dignitaries like the Karmapa and they are armed and as a rule not very friendly. It is their job not to reveal anything about the itinerary or whereabouts of His Holiness.



[This photo where he is surrounded by body guards, Tibetan, local, and state department]

In fact, when we followed the Karmapa down to New Jersey where he gave an empowerment (a four-hour drive), it was 100 degrees out. The secret service kept one of their big black cars ready and running all the time, just outside the auditorium in case they had to make a getaway. They did pop the hood (but it was still latched) to let the car breathe a little, but there it sat running nevertheless.

And we had to wear all kinds of identification tags which restricted where you could walk. I had three badges, including one that stated I was an authorized photographer and could pretty much walk anywhere on the grounds. Margaret accompanied me, carrying the tripod and an extra lens. As a photographer I was part of many smaller and more private meetings, but we also saw him officially for work we had done for the monastery over the years. Dare I say that being in close proximity to His Holiness was wonderful? I was a little shy of disturbing his privacy with photography, but that is what I had been asked to do. Pictures can mean a lot.

The moment we arrived at the monastery and were tagged we slipped into one of the most delicious worlds, the mandala of His Holiness the Karmapa. How to explain it? Words don't do it justice, but I will do my best. Being with His Holiness, just being in the same buildings with him, the general vicinity of him, changes one. It is like there is no need to practice meditation or make any effort in that direction. You are already there as much as your mental receptors and mind can know. My mind becomes perfectly clear and it seems like I am transported to a perfect (at least for me) state of meditation. Looking around me, everyone else seems to be in the same state. It seems that everyone there had never been friendlier or kinder to one another than then. It is remarkable.

It was a great feeling to know that this bubble of clarity that I had entered would extend for most of a week. In fact my original intention to return home after just a few days gradually lost its resolve as we prolonged our stay again and again. It was like all of the distraction that ordinary life involves, working, making a living, etc. just fell away as life in the mandala of His Holiness took over. I mean it was very nice folks. I could do it forever given the opportunity.

And don't suppose that I am just a "believer" and that those of you in an agnostic state would have a different experience. Anyone with even a somewhat open mind would have the same experience. It does not require belief or dharma practice to appreciate the presence of His Holiness. Like the sun shining, all you have to do is get near the light. I know it sounds cultish, but it is just the experience you have when you are with the Karmapa. I am sure the same is true of the presence of the Dalai Lama. This is a spiritual experience for anyone and everyone, an experience not soon to be forgotten.

I wanted to blog while I was there but the Wi-fi did not seem to work for my iPad and the one computer available to me was so full of pop-up viruses and warnings that it was almost impossible to use. I did manage to get a few words out about the wedding, but that was about it. More as I can.

WITH THE KARMAPA AT KTD MONASTERY
July 29, 2011

I am back home and in my office once again. The last couple of weeks from my daughter's wedding, the all-night drive to Woodstock, and the ensuing week at KTD Monastery seem now as some far-off dream, a high upon high upon high that only now I am coming back from. Or am I?

As a photographer of His Holiness during the visit, I was swept into room after room, scene after scene, some in large open shrine rooms, some in small very hot rooms. And I was not outside the event either and made sure I was part of the events I naturally would have been part of, like various blessings and ceremonies for helping out at KTD, and so on. I have a small collection of pins, blessed rice, pendants, and so on that I accumulated during the week at KTD.

There were probably 700-800 or more people at His Holiness' teaching which were held in a very large tent. Teachings were given morning and afternoon for two days, and on the afternoon of the second day of teaching His Holiness gave an empowerment for the mind transmission of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha of this time who lived some 2500 years ago.

Aside from photographing the various events I did a lot of sitting around in the very large dining hall renewing old friendships and, well, just sitting around and gabbing. Being in the mandala of His Holiness automatically promotes everyone to their best self and so we were: happy, communicative, and kind. Ah, to be that always!

As day stretched to day, it was clear we were not going home after a day or so as we had planned. We just stayed on and hung around His Holiness, which was very, very easy to do. We moved from staying in a house outside the monastery into the monastery and then from room to room as needed. And there we just were. And I did some dashing around, driving four hours to New Jersey for an empowerment, driving back, going out to the retreat land where His Holiness was blessing the retreatants and the retreat cabins, producing photographs for various lunches, meetings, blessings, and what-not. I was not idle, but I was quiet inside like nothing was

happening.

Anyway, I don't want to go on and on about my stay at KTD, but just to share with you a rare opportunity to be in the presence of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa in what for me was Prime Time.

Photo of His Holiness at the Tea & Rice Ceremony at the Karme Ling Retreat Center. He looks kind of serious here, but was smiling a moment later.

