

# **A LAMP DISPELLING THE MENTAL DARKNESS OF DISCIPLES**

**An Essential Biography Of The Great Virtuous Friend Geshe  
Thubten Dawö Who Is Beautified By The Ornament Of The Three  
Higher Trainings And Possesses The Qualities Of Scripture And  
Insight**

**Written by Denma Geshe Sönam Gyurme  
Translated by Ven Fedor Stracke**





## Happy Monks Publication

The base biography was composed by the Denma Geshe Sönam Gyurme. It was translated and added to by Ven Fedor Stracke.

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## **A Lamp dispelling the Mental Darkness of Disciples -**

**An Essential Biography of the Great Virtuous Friend Geshe Thubten Dawö who is beautified by the Ornament of the Three Higher Trainings and possesses the Qualities of Scripture and Insight**

Beautiful body born from the two collections,  
Precious speech eliminating all misery with its melodious sound,  
Loving wisdom mind illuminating clouded consciousness,  
*Son of Sātsang*<sup>1</sup>, always rescuing those without protector.

Dispelling the pain of the migrators of the three realms  
With the healing nectar of the profound and the extensive,  
Radiating white moonlight illuminating the Able One's teachings  
I prostrate to the extremely kind supreme guru.

If the words expressing the honest biography  
Of him protecting disciples in this realm  
And preserving and spreading the conqueror's teachings  
Increases the mindfulness of the fortunate ones,

Gurus, deities, Dharma protectors and guardians,  
Please, so that I the yogi may complete this feat,  
Bestow the tree of realisations through  
Your peaceful, increasing, subduing and wrathful activities.

You become perfection for the ears of superior bodhisattvas,  
Lamas and incarnations, virtuous friends and their hosts of students,  
Ordained and lay possessing supreme and inferior qualities,  
In short for all those listening with faith and respect.

In order to further here even one drop of the ocean of  
The enlightened activity of body, speech and mind  
I write this not just out of obligation,  
But with strong faith in my mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Shakyamuni Buddha, whose father was king Sātsang.

## Introduction

Having thus preceded the actual biography with verses of homage I will now put Geshe Dawa's actual life story into words.

Vajradhara, the definitive Buddha, attained complete enlightenment many aeons ago. But he still continues to liberate the countless pure and impure sentient beings to be subdued by appearing to them in various aspects relative to their different wishes and dispositions.

As stated by Chenresig in the sutra *Putting in the Basket*,

'I will teach the dharma in whatever form needed to subdue sentient beings ready to be subdued.'

Vajradhara appears as scholar, siddha, ascetic, wheel turning king, king's servant, minister, householder, woman, bird, animal, boat, bridge, food and drink, resting place and so forth. His activities are as vast as space and beyond the comprehension of an ordinary mind.

Due to our fortunate karma Vajradhara manifested for us in the aspect of the virtuous friend Geshe Thubten Dawö endowed with realisation as well as knowledge.

Even superior bodhisattvas are unable to express the qualities of his body speech and mind, and someone like me does not even stand a chance. Even though I do not possess the qualities necessary to write the biography of a great being like Geshe-la, I have read many biographies of holy beings, and always felt a great sense of rejoicing in their actions while doing so. Since Geshe-la's activities and practice equals theirs, I feel that by putting his life story into words he will become an example for the likes of me, and thus his biography will benefit those individuals in particular, and the Dharma in general. This is one reason for writing this memoir.

Secondly, even though there are many holy beings that have benefited sentient beings equalling the expanse of space with their activities, it is difficult for their life story to inspire later

generations if it is not written down. I felt it would be a great loss if that were to happen to the life story of Geshe Dawa, and therefore I wrote it according to my ability, relating Geshe-la's life to the three circles of dharma: (1) Study, i.e. listening and contemplating, (2) achievement, i.e. mental stabilisation, and (3) action, i.e. enlightened activity.

### **About Geshe-la's Birthplace and Family**

The great country of Tibet is known as the Land of Snow because it is surrounded by lofty snow mountains and crisscrossed by high ranges and valleys. But it also encompasses grassy highlands, lush forests, fresh mountain springs, clean rivers and unsullied lakes, some with mystical properties, all of which are populated with a variety of animals too diverse to enumerate. To mention some, there are snow leopards, bears, foxes, deer, wild horses, eagles, falcons, mountain goats and sheep, and of course the ever present yak. Some years ago even a prehistoric horse thought to be extinct was discovered in a remote part of Tibet.

Relative to most of Tibet its capital Lhasa is regarded as lying at a low altitude despite being three-thousand meters above sea level. Due to its altitude and lack of pollution Tibet possesses fresh and clean air, is a place of health and rejuvenation, and many sicknesses abounding in lower lying countries are unheard of there.

Due to its inaccessibility and remoteness Tibet preserved Buddhism for over one-thousand years, and is the only tradition today where all the lineages of sutra and tantra are complete.

Tibet consists of the upper region of Ngari, the middle region of Ü-tsang, and the lower region of Do-kham. Ngari is divided into three districts, Ü-tsang into *four wings*, and Do-kham into what is referred to as the *six plateaus*. Our precious teacher's birth place lies in Kham in the district that, out of the six precious lakes of Gawa, is positioned in the Precious Upper Gawa Region, and lies situated on the banks of the golden coloured river Drichu, in the

mountain range named after the great place protector Da-gyal Melong.

This auspicious region, which is a divine place with the conducive condition of well balanced elements of fire, water, wood and so forth, is the birth place of many distinguished great teachers. It is made up out of grassy plains as well as lofty mountains, and is the living place for both farmers as well as nomads. It is a blessed place where in winter the sun shines in the south, where in spring is refreshing and clears the mind, and where in summer rain clouds settle their debts and picturesque rainbows shine, the trees unfold their leaves, and multitudes of flowers bloom, while celestial birds sing melodiously and bees fly happily from flower to flower.

In this special place Geshe-la took birth on 25.10.1930 through the ripening of manifold pure dharma prayers made in many previous life times. His fathers name was Tsesang Trashi and his mothers name was Ngawang Lhamo. They had eight children altogether, five sons and three daughters, and our teacher Thubten Dawö was the fifth child. Three out of the five sons become monks, and the oldest, Ven Thubten Palden, also went to Sera and studied the five great treatises, but died before his time in Sera in India. The other three sisters and three brothers died in Tibet, under the oppression of the Chinese communist government.

The family was not exceptionally wealthy but had enough for their own needs, and the children very looked after very well with lots of love and compassion. It was a family where faith in the dharma was always present.

### **A Brief History of Lab**

Buddhism got first introduced to Tibet at the time of Lha-totori Nyen-shel, the twenty-eighth king of the snowy mountain fortress of Tibet. At that time Bönbo Shenrab, a teacher of Bön, the first

religion of Tibet, was in power in the magnificent region of Dodö, and Bön was also dominant in the Gawa and Lab regions.

But the actual spread of Buddhism started during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, the thirty-third king of Tibet. Then, during the reign of Drisong Detsen, the thirty-eighth king, many Pandits were invited from India to Tibet, and the spread of the Buddhadharma increased like the waxing moon. With the forty-second king, Langdarma, who nearly eradicated Buddhism in Tibet, the time of Tibetan kings, which is referred to as the early period of Dharma, ended.

After that Lachen Gongpa Rabsel rekindled the dying flame of the dharma by starting the *Lower Vinaya Lineage*, due to which many holy beings who had been studying the dharma in Ü-tsang returned to their own country, and the dharma started to gradually spread again. In such a way the second period of the dharma in Tibet was initiated.

During this time the great Indian pandit Mitri-dzana-kiti praised the Ga-lab region as a supreme place of the gods. He also composed the constitution of rules for the monastery, hid many holy treasures in the area, and made predictions such as that in the future a great monastery would thrive there.

Especially, the human emanation of Manjushri, who is the physical aspect of the exalted wisdom knowledge of all the buddhas, the great dharma king Lama Tsong Khapa Losang Dragpa, by way of opening one-hundred doors for the Buddhadharma in Gawa and all the sentient beings there, gave to his heart disciple Dema Khenchen, who was one of his six supreme champions of the dharma, his own ceremonial robe, some of his crown hair, one gold statue being made in his image, and one of Tara Jiudrö-ma, plus a mask of Dharma raja made by Khedrub-je himself. He specified that they were for Lab monastery.

Then, in agreement with Jamchen Chöje from Sera, the building of Sera and Lab monastery started on the same day in 1419, the



year of earth-pig of the seventh epoch<sup>2</sup> of Tibet. Subsequently also many subsidiary monasteries were build in all directions and the dharma flourished for over five hundred and eighty years. The monasteries became places where the five great treatises<sup>3</sup> were studied continually by following the three steps of listening, contemplation and meditation.

However, in 1959 the teachings and those practising it were greatly harmed by wickedness and malevolence, and the Buddhadharma declined greatly.

Only through a change in fortune in the political climate in 1978, the earth-horse year of the sixteenth Tibetan epoch, the Dharma was slightly revived by the great Trülku Tri-chen Jetsün Sonam Tsemo. Upon his return to his home country after his release from prison he endeavoured to restore the monastery. To mark the occasion he bestowed on the monastery the new name *Land of Joy of Lab, Sanctuary of intense dharma activities of learning and accomplishment of the Sutras and Tantras*. In these days there are over two-hundred<sup>4</sup> monks studying there.

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<sup>2</sup> One Tibetan epoch = sixty years

<sup>3</sup> Ornament of Clear Realisation, Introduction into the Middle Way, Abidharmakosha, Vinayasutra, Explanation of Valid Cognition

<sup>4</sup> This was at the time of composing the biography. Now there are over 500 monks studying.

## **The Dharma Circle of Study, i.e. Listening and Contemplation**

### **The Early Years in Lab**

When Geshe-la was nine years of age he took novice ordination with the supreme abbot Thubten Jamyang Nyima Jigme Namgyal Rinpoche, who was an emanation of Yamantaka. Thus he followed in the footsteps of the great Shakyamuni Buddha and went forth from being a householder to becoming a monk by accepting the novice monk ordination. He received the ordination name of Thubten Dawö and entered the monastery called the Sanctuary of Vast Accomplishment and Learning in the Sutras and Tantras - the Pure Land of Joy of Lab.

Initially Geshe-la studied for three years how to read and write, starting with the alphabet, and then studying texts on grammar and spelling. During this time he also memorised the basic prayers of refuge and bodhicitta, some uncommon lineage lama prayers of the monastery, and the *Ornament of Clear Realisation* as well as the *Introduction to the Middle Way*.

Then, at the age of twelve, he entered the debate courtyard and started to debate the very first debate text called *Small Collected Topics*. During his philosophy studies in Lab he memorise the *Small, Medium and Great Collected Topics, Tenets, Seventy Topics and Grounds and Paths*, as well as the *General Commentary of the First Chapter* until the topic of *Perfect Ending*, and debated them sequentially. In such a manner he studied and debated the texts of the monastery for many years.

At the age of twenty he took the full ordination vows from the great Kalachakra yogi Tengye Dorjechang Thubten Ngawang Losang Rabyang, who acted as the presiding abbot, and who was accompanied by four other abbots of Lab and the required number of monks. The need to protect ones vows and pledges like ones own eyes is explained in the Vinaya, and Geshe-la practised accordingly.

When he was twenty-one he also received many initiation, transmissions, and commentaries on Yamantaka and so forth

from the great abbot Great Vajradhara. He also received many initiations, commentaries and transmissions on Kalachakra and so forth from Tengye Rinpoche. Likewise, from Labtripa Rinpoche Sonam Tsemo he received Lama Tsong Khapa's *Great Exposition on the Stages of the Path*, the *Introduction to the Bodhisattvas Way of Life*, and the initiation and transmission of Cittamani Tara. At this opportunity he also completed the approximation retreat of Cittamani Tara in two months by reciting one million mantras and completing the firepuja in accordance with the lineage instructions lined out in the texts, and generated the realisations associated with the practise. During the retreat he abstained from an evening meal as was tradition in the monastery.

Geshe-la also completed the approximation retreat on the Twenty-one Taras while in Lab. He told me he just did it in his rooms sitting inconspicuously on his bed, without his room mate knowing. He said after this retreat he decided to go to Sera, and seemed to feel that the retreat was the deciding factor.

### **The Middle Period in Sera in Tibet**

One day Geshe-la asked his Uncle Yeshe Paljor about going to Sera Je Monastery. 'Uncle, I want to study the five great treatises in greater depth for a prolonged amount of time, because I feel that is the way philosophy has to be studied to achieve limitless benefit for oneself and others. I think that to study philosophy only partially for a short time is not so useful, and for that reason I have wanted to go to the Great Monastery for a long time.'

His uncle was very happy and decided then and there to send him to the monastery. He also gave him some advice for his time in Sera. 'Study well and behave yourself well at all times.' Upon hearing this Geshe-la experienced inexpressible happiness and joy greater than he had ever experienced before.

Even though Geshe-la had already made all the preparations to leave, he couldn't do so immediately because his parents did not want to let him go to Sera. They had difficulty with the idea of him

going to such a faraway place as Lhasa for a long time. However, Geshe-la felt very strongly that the practises of studying by listening and contemplation are the main responsibility of an ordained person, and in general should be part of any human's life.

Therefore, when the traders of the houses of Lab Gyabgön Rinpoche, Tengye Rinpoche, and the monastery's procurer went on their yearly business trip to Lhasa, Geshe-la joined them in secret. The whole group comprised the traders, their helpers and one thousand pack animals, carrying all kinds of goods such as butter and meat.

He set out with them without telling his parents, undaunted by the difficulties of the trek, on a journey that would take them three months and twenty days to complete. He did not have any provisions, not even a bowl to eat food in.

They took three months and ten days to Nakchu, and from there ten days to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. The journey was extremely difficult and dangerous. There were no roads, many extremely steep high passes to be climbed, and many rivers to be crossed without bridges. There were no cars, and the whole distance had to be covered by walking, which was the general mode of transport in Tibet at the time.

When nearing Lhasa Geshe-la was overwhelmed by faith just from seeing the great Sera Monastery, and that very day he went to Sera together with another monk from Lab, Kelsang Sangpo. They stayed temporarily with Thubten Chöpel, also a monk from Lab, who had already been studying in Sera for some time.

Even though Geshe-la did not have good conducive conditions of food, clothing and so forth, he was undaunted by the difficulties and started studying immediately. After listening to the rules of the monastery he formally entered the debating courtyard of Sera Je Monastery, one of the three great seats of Buddhist learning.

When he went with Ven Jampa Chödrub to be introduced to the abbot, the abbot asked him which texts he had already studied in

his home monastery of Lab, and which class he had reached. Geshe-la told him that in Lab he had started to debate the topic of *Perfect Ending*, and had reached the *shung sarba* class. Thereupon the abbot advised him that if he were to pass a debate exam that would show that he had mastered all the required texts then he would not have to start over again by joining the *Small Collected Topics class*, but he would be allowed to jump straight to the *Sera Je shung sarba*<sup>5</sup> class, who were also debating *Perfect Ending* at the time. This was the tradition for monks who arrived newly in Sera but who had already reached a certain level of study in their own home monastery.

As it so happened, the *shung sarba* class was scheduled to be examined the very next day to select sixteen monks for *rick-chung*<sup>6</sup>. For this they have to take turns debating each other in the debating court before the assembly of monks, and the abbot also attends to observe.

Geshe-la came first, as the one who has to sit down and answer. He was debated by the best of the class whose name was Losang Tsültrim. But he could not answer well at first and he could not properly understand what the other was saying because of the differences in their dialects.

Then it was Geshe-la's turn to stand up and debate, and Losang Tsültrim had to sit down. Over the course of the debate, by confronting him with the faulty consequences of his views, Geshe-la skilfully brought Losang Tsültrim into a position where he could not answer anymore without contradicting himself.

That Geshe-la spoke in the pure accent of his region served as great cause of amusement for the abbot and the monks, who repeatedly broke out laughing during the debate.

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<sup>5</sup> *Shung sarba* is literally *new text*, and refers to the class where the study of the *Ornament of Clear Realisation* is started officially. It is the fourth year in the Geshe studies, and a very intense class where, during the intense debating periods, the monks debate for the whole night every other day. There are many intense debating periods in one year and can last up to one month.

<sup>6</sup> *Rick-chung* is an honorary exam for which yearly the sixteen best monks of the *shung sarba* class are selected. They are then paired up and debate respectively in front of the whole monastery the topics of Three Jewels, bodhicitta, buddha lineage, path of preparation, perfect ending, Dharma cycles, actual words and treatises, and buddha Maitreya.



Because he had debated well he passed the exam and was awarded a place in the prestigious *rick-chung* with the debate topic of bodhicitta, which he would debate in front of the entire assembly of seven thousand monks on the twenty-eighth of the sixth Tibetan month. This implicitly meant that he was of course also allowed to jump to the *shung sarba* class, who were debating the topic of *Perfect Ending* at the time.

In the mere nine years that Geshe-la stayed in Sera in Tibet, until the *New Madhyamaka class*, he memorized the following texts by Jetzün Chögi Gyaltzen: *The General Explanation of the First Chapter, the Twenty Sangha, and the General Explanation of Madhyamaka*. He also memorized Lama Tsong Khapa's *Essence of Eloquent Speech*, the *Precious Garland of Vinaya*, the *Treaties on Valid Cognition*, and various passages from other texts. Geshe-la would practise his memorisation in the early mornings and at night, often reciting the memorised texts until the early hours of the morning as an offering to his Guru.

Everyday he would attend philosophy classes with his new teachers, and attend without fail every debate and prayer session, hardly missing any during his stay in Sera. Not only would he attend all debate sessions, but he also penetrated the meaning of the texts in long debates that went on for many hours. He strictly kept the precious monastic discipline and always was equally respectful to all monks, regardless of whether they were younger or older.

### **The Daily Life of Monks in Sera**

Early in the morning with the call of a conch shell all the monks assemble in the main prayer hall for morning prayers. Here the monks accumulate merits by reciting prayers for over two hours for the purpose of self and others.

After the morning puja there is a short break and then the monks assemble for the morning debate session, which starts with a

short *damja*<sup>7</sup>, after which the monks recite more prayers until lunchtime. After lunch the monks assemble for the afternoon debate session, which lasts until dinner. After dinner the assembly call for the evening debate session comes, which goes for a long time, first with one on one debate<sup>8</sup>, and then with a prayer session where all debate prayers<sup>9</sup> have to be recited.

In the intervals between these different sessions the monks would go to class with their teacher or memorise and recite texts. In such a way the whole day is filled with the study of the Dharma, without time for anything else.

Many monks did all of this with very little sustenance and other worldly comforts. In fact, most of them were like ascetics living in retreat, giving up the comforts of this life for the happiness of future lives. For example, there were occasions when Kensur Losang Wangchuk and Kensur Ngawang Legden fainted because of not having enough food. But despite these difficulties they were not deterred from their studies, which is in accordance of the teachings of the Buddha who said that ordained practitioners should be content with little, and not engage into worldly activities.

## Completing his Studies in India

Due to a change in outer circumstances Geshe-la had to leave Tibet for India in 1959. Tibet was disrupted by war and the situation in Lhasa had become extremely precarious. The sound of gunfire filled the air continuously day and night from all directions, and to stay meant to risk death.

As many other Tibetans he set out for India, and due to the blessing of the Three Jewels and the power of his past pure

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<sup>7</sup> A form of group debate, where two monks sit at the head of an aisle formed by the other classmates, and then have to answer whoever gets up to debate them.

<sup>8</sup> Two monks debate together, with the answering party sitting down, and the debating monks standing up.

<sup>9</sup> A specific circle of prayers recited in the debate courtyard. Among others it includes the *Uncommon Sera Je Lineage Lama Prayer*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Twenty-one Praises to Tara*, a tormo offering to Hayagriva and prayers to Kalarupa and Mahakala.

prayers arrived safely at the Indo Tibetan border despite all the dangers along the way. They had to walk secretly on foot for many days on very difficult paths going over many high and steep dangerous passes, all the while having to hide from Chinese soldiers to avoid being captured by patrols that had been sent after them.

After having arrived in India many of the monks were relocated by the Indian government to Buxa in North Eastern India, which had served as a concentration camp in the Second World War, and where also Gandhi had been imprisoned for some time during his campaign for Indian independence. All in all there were about one thousand five hundred monks from all the four Tibetan Buddhist traditions: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Gelug.

The conditions were very difficult. Buxa is an extremely hot and humid place, and the Tibetans had grown up in the dry fresh and cool air of Tibet. There were mosquitos, foreign food, and diseases unknown in Tibet due to the high altitude, pure air and water, and the food was extremely poor. Many monks developed tuberculosis and other sicknesses, and there were many untimely deaths, and also suicides.

Most of them arrived in India with nothing apart from the robes they were wearing, and for some years many did not even possess a simple mattress or blankets. Instead they used straw and empty sacks. But due to the kindness of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the great help received from the Indian government the monks could continue their studies there despite all the difficulties.

Since no texts were available, especially in the beginning, the Geshes had to teach their classes from memory. For ten years the monks listened to and debated the Dharma in Buxa so as to preserve Tibetan culture and religion.

Regarding his time in Buxa Geshe-la said, 'For the nine years I stayed in Sera Monastery near Lhasa I was happy and peaceful even though my external conditions were poor, and I devoted all my time to the Dharma. I did not waste my time with meaningless

activities through being seduced by worldly actions. For the ten years I stayed in Buxa I devoted my life to the study and practice of the dharma in the same way, and when I think back now I feel that these ten years were the happiest in my life.'

But eventually the monks moved to Bylakuppe in South India, where the climate is more temperate, and where they were close to other Tibetan settlements. The land assigned to the monks by the Indian government was semi cleared forest, but with all the tree roots still in the ground.

So initially the monks had to work during the day clearing the land by pulling out all the tree roots, and building houses for accommodation and a prayer hall. The materials for the houses were provided by the Indian government. Then there was also field work to do, like planting corn, fertilising and so forth. During the planting season monks had to take turns in the night to protect the freshly planted corn from being eaten by wild pigs. Then, once the corn had grown it needed to be protected from wild elephants that came from the forest. To do this, the monks would tie old tire rubber to long poles, set it alight, and then go right up to the elephants to scare them away by waving the burning rubber in their faces.

Since they had to work during the day the monks put great effort into studying morning and night the five aspects of knowledge in general, and Buddhist philosophy in particular. There were great teachers to study with, such as Geshe Ngawang Legden, Geshe Losang Wangchuk, Serkar Rinpoche and the incomparable Jampa Chödrub who was the definitive guru kinder then all the three time buddhas.

About Gen Jampa Chödrub Geshe-la said, 'He was a great teacher who made a good human being out of me, and who shows the path both in this life and in future lives. He was always subdued and peaceful in all his actions, regardless of whether he was walking, sitting, or lying down, and whatever dharma understanding I developed is due to his kindness. Just hearing his

name fills me with faith, and I can never repay his kindness, even if I were to offer all the three realms filled with gold.'

Going to classes with these incomparable teachers the monks listened and contemplated untiringly. They abandoned worldly excitement, high status, and attachment for food and sleep, and practised enthusiastically analytical as well as placement meditation.

During this time they also received many teachings from His Holiness the incomparable fourteenth Dalai Lama, who had been their teacher and looked after them since he was a small child. He gave many initiations, transmissions, and commentaries, such as the *Eight Great Lam-rim* teachings, the *Introduction to the Bodhisattvas way of Life*, a *Commentary on Mind-training including the root text*, the *Great Exposition on the Tantric Stages*, the *Great Kalachakra Initiation*, a *Lamp illuminating the five Paths* and so forth. During that time Geshe-la also read and contemplated many other different sutras and commentaries, so that his time was filled with listening and reflecting.

Then, at the request of His Holiness, Geshe-la went with a group of other geshees to Varanasi. There he studied for three years a variety of subjects in the style of a normal school, passed the final exam there and received the Acharya degree.

In 1979, as the fruit of many years of study, he passed the Lharampa Geshe exam with honours. During the great prayer festival, when the monks from Sera, Ganden, and Drepung assemble to accumulate merits, he had to answer questions for the whole day on the five treatises in front of the entire assembly of eminent teachers, scholars, and learned students. In the morning session it was the *Treatise on Valid Cognition*, at noon it was *Madhyamaka* and the *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, and in the evening it was *Vinaya* and *Abhidharma*. During these sessions anybody is allowed to stand up and debate the examinees, but despite that he was able to answer without obstacles for the whole day.



## **The Dharma Circle of Achievement, i.e., Mental Stabilisation**

After having completed his studies in Sera he entered the Tantric college of Gyudme, which preserves the pure lineage of Lama Tsong Khapa's Secret Mantra tradition. There he studied, among others, the great commentaries on the generation and completion stages of Gujasamaya, Chakrasamvara, and Yamantaka, and the art of chanting, drawing mandalas and making mandalas out of sand. After three years he passed the tantric geshe exam with honours. During this time he also served as the disciplinarian of Gyudme for six months, which meant he had to act as example for the other monks. Thus he spent several years in this place blessed by previous holy beings meditating on the two bodhicittas and the two stages, which constitute the essence of the tantric path.

Geshe-la tried to put what he had listened to into practise, and aspired to always be subdued and peaceful in his actions. He closed the doors to downfalls such as discontent and trained himself to be content and of few desires, in such a way striving in the method to avoid downfalls. He always confessed the downfalls which he received individually and practised strong confession during the bi-monthly confession ceremony. He also regularly practised self-initiation to purify and renew his vows and pledges, and in such a way tried to cherish his vows and precepts as was taught by the Buddha.

Geshe-la completed the retreats of Guyasamaya, Solitary Yamantaka and Cittamani Tara with fire puja. While in Vajrayana Institute he also completed the retreats of Heruka Chakrasamvara, Yamantaka and Guyasamaya.

Geshe-la always liked to meditate, and my impression was that while in Sydney he emphasised the practice of calm abiding. He once said to me that really all that calm abiding was, was the clear and calm continual abiding of the mind, and that he felt that was something he could do.

He also once mentioned to me how all the philosophical arguments of the debates came up in his mind when he tried to meditate on Mahamudra. This to me shows the purity of his mind, because for ordinary beings such as myself thoughts of attachment or anger would be the distracting factor.

### **The Dharma Circle of Action, i.e. Enlightened Activity**

Geshe-la's activities for the welfare of others are all encompassing. While in general working for the welfare of all sentient beings, he spent the next twenty-five years working for the welfare of the Tibetan and Western people. Through the force of his bodhicitta and prayers made in a previous life he benefited them through the four means of liberating disciples, guiding the beginner, medium, and advanced students according to their ability.

### **In Sera**

During the time he stayed in the monastery after having completed his Geshe degree he primarily looked after Lab Rinpoche, preparing him for his role as teacher, and taught his many students the different subjects of scripture.

### **In Tibet**

In 1987, due to a change in the political climate, the Chinese government made it possible for Tibetans in exile to return to Tibet for a visit, and so Geshe-la went to Lab monastery. He stayed there for one year during which he taught philosophy classes every day.

The next time he went to Tibet was in 2000 and 2001, after having resigned from Vajrayana Institute, where he taught from 1992 - 2000. During these visits to Tibet he taught again daily many philosophy classes, and also bestowed the initiations of Gujasamaya, Chakrasamvara, and Yamantaka to the monks of

Lab monastery. In-between he would meet with a never ending stream of daily visitors.

Specifically, in 2001, he conferred the novice and full monk ordination to many students, in such a way planting the seeds for liberation and enlightenment in their minds.

Also, during this period he started to build a house for Lab Rinpoche in the vicinity of the monastery, which was completed by the time he returned in 2004 with Lab Rinpoche. He also built a several stories high indoor copper stupa to Hevajra adorned with gold ornaments containing many precious relics, such as ashes of the 11th, 12th, and 13th Lab Rinpoche, and actual relics of Shakyamuni Buddha.

As part of his stay Lab Rinpoche conducted an ordination ceremony during which he ordained sixty new monks. During this ceremony Geshe-la acted as preceptor, yet once again benefiting the people of Tibet.

## **In the West**

Melbourne (1981 - 1985)

His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that especially during these dark days for Buddhism it is very beneficial for the Dharma in general and very virtuous for lamas to go to western countries and introduce those interested to Buddhism.

Therefore, in 1981, as a result of having been requested by Lama Yeshe to be the resident teacher in one his centres, Geshe-la went to Australia to be the resident teacher of Tara House in Melbourne. Originally Lama Yeshe wanted Geshe-la to be the resident teacher and abbot of Nalanda monastery in Southern France. But Geshe-la preferred to go to an English speaking country, and so chose to go to Australia.

He stayed at Tara House for four years teaching and building up the centre. It was a new experience for him, as well as for the western students.

Geshe-la said he used much of his spare time in Melbourne to study the dharma further.

As this was a new situation, both for him and the western students, he spent a lot of time in his flat, and used this time to read the collected works of Lama Tsong Khapa and his two sons. He told me that at one point gave the students an ultimatum: "Either they would come regularly to class, or he would return to India. After all his purpose of being there was to teach the dharma."

He also took regular English lessons, but as soon as the teachers had gone, he would return to his Dharma study.

Occasionally he also went to Buddha House in Adelaide to teach there as well. In 1985 he returned to Sera in India because Lab Rinpoche had started to go to debate and Geshe-la needed to be there to teach him.

Sydney (1992 - present day)

In 1992, when Lab Rinpoche had attained some independence in his studies, and already reached a higher class, Geshe-la went again to Australia, this time on the request from Lama Zopa Rinpoche to Vajrayana Institute in Sydney. Rinpoche wanted him to accomplish the same transformation with Vajrayana Institute as with Tara Institute. Geshe-la stayed at VI for the next nine years giving teachings and advice to the students. His primary aim was to convey an understanding of the fundamental Buddhist teaching on cause and effect. Geshe-la also performed pujas for students when needed, which were always beneficial.

He spent his spare time with meditation, getting up early every morning to practise mahamudra meditation. He would then spend the rest of the day doing his daily prayers, seeing students, usually go for a walk in the afternoon, and read texts to prepare for his classes.

In the year 2000 Geshe-la retired from Vajrayana Institute to live quietly by himself in a flat and give occasional teachings to close

students. Later, in 2001, on the request of these students he moved to a small house in Merrickville and founded a centre called Trashi Chöling. There he continued to teach and do his daily prayers of purification and accumulation of merit, thus continuing his work of spreading the Dharma in the West.

Later the centre moved to a larger house with less cockroaches in Bankstown, where he was joined first by Ven Damdrin as attendant. In 2009 the centre moved to an even bigger house in Padstow, where he was first joined by Ven Geshe Yeshe Gawa as additional companion. Later the small monks community was also joined by the Ven Lab Rinpoche and most recently by Geshe Sonam Peljor.

As Geshe Dawö showed the aspect of increasing old age and the possible associated problems due to our karma, Geshe Yeshe Gawa and Lab Rinpoche took on most of the teaching responsibilities.

He ordained many novice monks and nuns, some of which are able to teach the Dharma themselves as a result of their study.

He also started an annual Chenresig retreat, held in January, for the purpose of accumulating the precious *om mani padme hung mantra*. The first three days are always taken up by a general dharma teaching such as the *Three Principals of the Path*, or the *Foundation of all Good Qualities*, at the end of which Geshe-la would then bestow the initiation of Four Armed Chenresig. Then the students do the sadhana four sessions a day for a week, and most are able to complete one hundred thousand mantras. During this time Geshe-la gives a commentary on the practise of Chenresig, and comes to some of the meditation sessions. At the end of the retreat Geshe-la bestows a long life initiation and everybody dedicates the accumulated merits together.

Over his stay in the different centres Geshe-la benefited hundreds of students and placed the seed for liberation and enlightenment in their mind. He introduced them to the Three Jewels, the four noble truths, the presentation of karmic cause and effect, the six perfections, and all the other practices of the beings of small,



medium and great capacity. He taught many texts, such as the *Lam-rim*, the *Introduction to the Bodhisattvas Way of Life*, different Mind-training texts and so forth, in such a way illuminating the Western world with the light of the Dharma.

Whether living in monasteries or Dharma centres, he always emulated the lifestyle of a reclusive living in pure morality and showing complete disregard for worldly activities and happiness. When Geshe-la teaches he always does so on the basis of great compassion and bodhicitta, and not for material gain, fame or praise.

Geshe-la was very approachable and social, and he liked to chat about all kinds of things over a good cup of tea and biscuits. The centre kitchen was a very common place to find him.

He also bestowed the Vajrasattva Initiation many times, the Twenty-one Tara initiation several times, the Cittamani Tara Initiation many times, Guyasamaya initiation once, Solitary Yamantaka at least once, and 1000 Armed Chenresig at least once, and White Dzambhala once.

Taiwan

While teaching in Taiwan for six months he gave among other teachings the Vajrayogini commentary.

## **Dedication**

The holy being, free from attachment and anger  
From a young age, with extra strong love and compassion  
For those of less fortune, relying on a valid guru  
From his youth, studying and contemplating the  
Treatises of sutra and tantra; seeing him for an instant  
Makes the mind joyful, hearing his speech increases faith,  
Remembering him generates profound happiness.

May this biography, written by me, a person  
Without the abilities of a great being, a sinner  
Who creates non-virtue with his impure aggregate of blood and  
flesh,  
Make at least this day of my life meaningful.  
May by the merits thus created  
The Dharma spread and increase.  
May these merits become the cause  
For the happiness of all beings, for wellbeing,  
Prosperity and auspiciousness everywhere.

## **Colophon**

This brief biography of Geshe Thubten Dawö called *A Lamp Dispelling the Mental Darkness of Disciples* was written by the Denma Geshe Sönam Gyurme, who himself is also a monk of the monastery called *Land of Joy of Lab, Sanctuary of Intense Dharma Activities of Learning and Accomplishment of the Sutras and Tantras*, in the Buddhadharma centre Trashi Chöling, Sydney, Australia. I started writing on 5.11.2004, which is the twenty-third day of the ninth Tibetan month, during the waning moon, and it was completed on 17. 12. 2004.

To accurately compose this biography of a yogi who is adorned with the three higher trainings and vast knowledge of scripture I relied primarily on explanations from Geshe-la himself, but also drew on information from some of his long-time students. May it become the cause to be looked after by a qualified Mahayana teacher in all lifetimes.

Translated and slightly edited by the barely conscious Fedor Stracke (Tenzin Dongak) in Tara Institute in 2005. The sections in Helevicia Light were added by Tenzin Dongak to further flesh out the biography of a great master.

**SARVA MANGALAM**