

## 17th Karmapa

HIS HOLINESS the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, was born to nomadic parents in 1985 in the Lhathok region of Tibet. The parents, who had many daughters and one son, wanted to have another boy. They were told by the yogi abbot of Kalek, a Karma Kagyu monastery, that they might have a son but if they did they must place him at Kalek monastery. They agreed and a short time later they had a son.

The boy was called "Apo Gaga," which means "happy brother," a nickname given to him by his older sister. Apo Gaga spent four years at Kalek monastery, where he received a special education and was treated as an unrecognized reincarnate lama. During this period, he also spent some time with his parents.

In 1992, he suggested to his parents that they move their camp early. This decision to move placed them in the spot where the predictive letter written by the Sixteenth Karmapa had said the Seventeenth Karmapa would be found. Apo Gaga told his parents his monks were coming for him, and packed his things.

Miraculous events and signs that occurred during the pregnancy and birth of Apo Gaga--the locale in which he was living matching exactly the place described by the prediction letter left to Tai Situ Rinpoche by the Sixteenth Karmapa; the names of the parents, also in the prediction letter; the appearance and manners of the young boy himself--all led the monks from Tsurphu to determine this boy, born to nomads, was the Seventeenth Karmapa. His Eminence Tai Situ and His Holiness the Dalai Lama confirmed the identification. After a short time spent at Kalek, preparations were made for the journey to Tsurphu. Before the party left, three suns appeared in the sky and were seen by many hundreds of people in the surrounding area.

On September 27 of the same year, the Chinese government officially allowed the recognition of Ogyen Trinley Dorje as the seventeenth incarnation of the Karmapa. This was the first time the Communist government allowed the recognition of any reincarnate lama. The hair-cutting and naming ceremony was held in Lhasa's famous Jokhang Temple. It was only the second time that a Karmapa had received this ordination there.

The enthronement was held at Tsurphu Monastery that day, September 27, 1992, where over 20,000 pilgrims assembled. His Holiness concluded the enthronement by giving his personal blessings to the crowd that completely surrounded the monastery. The enthusiasm and overwhelming numbers of people trying to enter the monastery forced the blessing to be continued into the following day. That following morning, 25,000 people filled before His Holiness to receive his personal blessings. The following day, the Seventeenth Karmapa bestowed his first formal empowerment, Red Chenrezig, at a monastery rooftop.

Upon his arrival at Tsurphu in 1992, His Holiness was involved primarily in dharma studies. This early education began under the direction of His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, His Eminence Goshir Gyaltzab Rinpoche, and the abbot of Tsurphu, the late Drupon Dechen Rinpoche. Umdze Tubten Zangpo, who served the Sixteenth Karmapa at Tsurphu and Rumtek monasteries, was His Holiness's reading tutor until Umdze's death in 1997. Other learned monks and lamas, including Lama Nyima, continued to tutor His Holiness.

In 1994, His Holiness made visits to major sacred sites in central Tibet, including the Jokhang Temple and the Potala, and Tashilhunpo, Drepung, Sera, and Ganden monasteries, where he recited prayers and made offerings. Shortly after returning to Tsurphu, he departed on a formal visit to Beijing at the invitation of the government of the People's Republic of China.

During his stay in Beijing, he met with numerous officials and was formerly introduced to President Jiang Zemin and Chairman Li Peng. The Karmapa attended events commemorating the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the government of the People's Republic of China, during which he was excited to see his first fireworks display. He made pilgrimages to the famous shrine of the Buddha's tooth relic outside Beijing, and also to Wutai Shan (the Five Sacred Mountains of Manjushri) where the Third Karmapa, Ranjung Dorje, had given teachings over six hundred years earlier. His tour continued with a first visit to the seashore and stops in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Chengdu before returning to Tibet. This trip provided His Holiness with a first-hand view of contemporary urban life in China as well as modern transport and technology.

Once he was back at Tsurphu, the Karmapa continued his studies of Buddhadharma including philosophy, debating, ritual practices, and sacred dance. Each day at 1:00p.m. he would receive visitors--pilgrims from throughout Tibet and around the world--and offer his blessings. On special festival days when large throngs of pilgrims set off treks to Tsurphu, His Holiness would offer blessings individually to thousands of people in a single day.

As he grew older, he began to bestow more empowerments and play the primary role in various rituals at the monastery such as the annual Mahakala dances leading up to Losar, the Tibetan New Year.

Beginning in 1994, His Holiness began to fulfill his legacy of predicting and recognizing the rebirth of incarnate lamas, or tulkus. The first such recognition was of Pawo Rinpoche, an important Kagyu lama who had passed away in Nepal in 1991. The Karmapa wrote a prediction letter specifying the details of the location and time of year of the child's birth, as well as clues to the names of his parents and information on the environment surrounding their home. After a search was conducted based on this prediction letter, the young Pawo Rinpoche was discovered in Tibet, and until 2001 resided at Nyenang Monastery near Tsurphu. He has since been moved by the Chinese government to Lhasa.

In 1996, His Holiness wrote his next letter of prophecy for the rebirth of Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. Again, the details in the letter, in addition to a set of sketches and maps drawn by the Karmapa, provided all the requisite signs and clues which led to the discovery of the Fourth Jamgon Kongtrul, then two years old. Today, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche lives at Pullahari Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The Seventeenth Karmapa has gone on to predict, recognize, and confirm the rebirth of other tulkus, including the young Dabzang Rinpoche who now resides at his seat in Kham, eastern Tibet, and an incarnate lama found outside of Tibet. Shelri Dolpo Rinpoche, a close disciple of the Second and Third Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoches, was found in Nepal and now lives with the young Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche at Pullahari.

Much of the physical rebuilding of Tsurphu Monastery and renewed dharma activity, which has historically taken place there over the past 800 years, reemerged since the Seventeenth Karmapa's return in 1992. Temples, shrines, stupas, a shedra, and residences were rebuilt and filled again with offerings, statues, and paintings. The giant Tsurphu thangkas were recreated and displayed on auspicious days, and sacred lama dances that had not been practiced for decades were once again performed in the main courtyard.

In 1999 His Holiness Karmapa made another trip to Beijing at the invitation of government and religious officials of the People's Republic of China. During this visit he attracted much attention from the news media and was featured on Chinese television in a special program chronicling his life and activities.

On January 1, 2000, while all Kagyu monasteries, nunneries, and dharma centers around the world celebrated the new millennium, as marked in the Western calendar, by offering prayers for world peace, long life and flourishing of the Karmapa's buddha activity, His Holiness began a new journey. Just a few days earlier, on December 28, the fourteen-year-old Ogyen Trinley Dorje, i.e. the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, left Tolung Tsurphu Monastery with a handful of attendants, and secretly escaped from Tibet. On January 5, he arrived safely in Dharamsala, India where he was met by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Since then, His Holiness Karmapa has been living temporarily at Gyuto Ramoche Tantric University near Dharamsala. At Gyuto, he has been able to continue his studies in Buddhist philosophy and receive instructions, transmissions, and empowerments of Karma Kagyu vajrayana practices from masters of the lineage. His principal tutor has been Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, an eminent scholar of the Kagyu lineage.

While in India he has received thousands of visitors from throughout the world, including religious leaders, politicians, film stars, and people from all walks of life--Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. Each week, His Holiness offers public and private audiences at Gyuto and on occasion bestows a public empowerment.

Since arriving in Dharamsala, the Karmapa has developed a strong bond with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The two have had many opportunities to meet and on one occasion in February, 2000, the Karmapa gathered with other heads of the five schools of Tibetan Buddhism to honor the sixtieth anniversary of the Dalai Lama's enthronement.

The Karmapa has been writing poetry characterized by scholars of the lineage as unusually sophisticated and refined for someone of his age. Several of his poems have been transcribed for music by the internationally acclaimed Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), which released a recording of these songs titled Melody of Truth.

On February 2, 2001, Kalon Tashi Wangdi, Minister of Religion and Cultural Affairs in the Central Tibetan Administration (Tibetan Government-in-Exile) announced that the government of India had granted formal refugee status to His Holiness Karmapa. This news was a great cause for celebration among the Karmapa's followers throughout the world as it paved the way for his ability to begin to travel.

Shortly following the granting of his refugee status, His Holiness embarked on a pilgrimage to some of the sacred Buddhist sites in India. He participated in religious activities and celebrations during Losar in Sarnath (at Varanasi), where Shakyamuni Buddha first turned the wheel of dharma. The pilgrimage also included a trip to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

After returning from Bodhgaya, His Holiness held his first press conference, attended by members of the international media, to explain the details of his escape from Tibet and reason for going to India. Since then, he has made a pilgrimage to Ladakh, and in December presided over the Kagyu Monlam at Bodhgaya.

In early 2002, His Holiness returned to Sarnath for several weeks, where he stayed at the Vajravidya Institute. During this time he joined His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Gaden Tri Rinpoche before the sacred Dhamekha stupa where they offered prayers. The Karmapa returned to his temporary residence at Gyuto Ramoche Temple near Dharamsla in February in time for Losar celebrations, and to continue his ongoing studies.

That spring, Time Asia magazine named His Holiness Karmapa one of its Asian heroes, an honor the magazine conferred on "individuals whose valiance inspires us." His Holiness was designated a hero from Tibet, whose "daring escape from China keeps hope alive for Tibetans."

In a formal ceremony on July 24, 2002, before hundreds of monks, His Holiness Karmapa received his novice monastic ordination from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, assisted by His Eminence Gyaltsab Rinpoche. The occasion was followed by several days of celebration at Gyuto Ramoche Tantric University. For more information on His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, please visit <http://www.kagyuoffice.org/> .