

## Excerpt From Dana Sawyer's Biography of Khensur Rinpoche Lobzang Tsetan

*Please note that this excerpt is still in draft form*

It was during his third year in the monastery that Rinpoche (still named Dondop at this time) became resolved to study in Tibet. He increasingly realized that he had a talent for grasping and conveying complex ideas, predisposing him toward further study — especially in philosophy, which he had come to love. As a child, he had assumed there was simply a set of teachings called “Buddhism,” but at the monastery he learned there were not only three main branches of Buddhist tradition (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana) but, within Tibetan Buddhism itself, there were four orthodox schools of philosophy: Madhyamika, Yogacara, Sautrantika and Vaibhasika. Dondop engrossed himself in trying to grasp the nuances of their various positions, spending long hours in discussion with the lamas or sitting on the monastery’s roof, deep in thought. He was aware, like all Buddhists, that the highest knowledge — the knowledge that liberates one from all suffering — is the experiential truth that only dawns when one reaches Enlightenment, but a clearer understanding of the Buddha’s teachings and the various interpretations of them was increasing his resolve not only to reach Enlightenment but to go to Tibet. Intellectual knowledge wasn’t everything, but it had its place. He was seeing more clearly the elegance of Buddhist philosophy and the beauty of its wisdom, and this increased interest suggested a direction — east.

After many conversations with his parents, it was decided he would apply to the great monastery of Tashi Lhunpo, in Shigatse. One reason for this specific decision was that an uncle named Namgyal was living there — having himself made the long journey from Ladakh. Namgyal had offered to secure Dondop a sponsorship to cover his room and board once he arrived — since he would need to pay his own expenses until he was formally accepted into the monastery, which would require him to take another examination. Dondop had thought about studying in Lhasa, at one of the renowned monastic colleges near the Potala Palace, but his family didn’t have the resources to sponsor him and he had no family members there. Besides, Namgyal’s invitation was equally attractive. Tashi Lhunpo included not only the monastery with its four thousand monks, but four colleges with an excellent curriculum in philosophy. Dondop might even see the Panchen Lama himself, second in the eyes of Tibetans only to the Dalai Lama.

“An age-old tradition of investiture”

“Panchen” derives from the Sanskrit word *pandita*, meaning “scholar,” and the current Panchen Lama indeed had a reputation for great knowledge. Moreover, he stood in an unbroken lineage going back to 1385, when the fifth Dalai Lama, impressed with the wisdom of Lobzang Choekyi Gyaltsen, his primary tutor, deemed the man a *tulku*, a lama who would reincarnate in every generation to help lead the Tibetan people. Moreover, this particular *tulku* would be an incarnation of Amitabha, the Buddha of Compassion who resides in the Western Paradise.

In Mahayana Buddhism, including the Vajrayana variety found in Tibet, the Buddha is said to manifest in three “bodies,” the *trikaya*. In his *nirmanakaya* body, the Buddha is as most westerners think of him, a human being who lived in the 5th Century B.C.E. and achieved enlightenment while sitting under the Bodhi Tree. But who or what was the Buddha *really*? Is the essence of what the Buddha knew — and what made him the Buddha — something that died

when his body died? No, the truth of the Dharma, the Buddha's living insight, is contained in the blueprint of Reality itself, existing whether or not its truth is realized by human beings. This *kaya* or "body" of the Buddha, the *dharmakaya*, is eternal and immutable, like an invisible sun broadcasting the rays of its truth eternally. The man who became the Buddha was mortal, but the Dharma is forever. In addition, there is one last *kaya* or body based on the view that there were others who reached Buddhahood even before Shakyamuni, who was the Buddha of our epoch. Put another way, there were Buddhas before the Buddha, and these previous Buddhas are thought to still be with us — thanks to their loving-kindness. These Buddhas are emanations of the *sambhogakaya*, the third "body." Let me explain.

After our death, we are driven back into rebirth by the force of our karma from previous lives; that is, we're driven back until we reach enlightenment and purify our karma via altruistic actions toward others. When our karma is purified and our minds awaken, we are free to take *moksha*, "liberation," from the Wheel of Life. However, sometimes those who have reached enlightenment do not — and, in the past, did not — want to take full liberation, hoping rather to stay in the world to help others. Their minds were free of the *kleshas* and awake to the true Dharma, so they weren't driven back into existence because of their ignorance, but rather they chose to return, using the force of their *bodhicitta* ("altruistic mind") to make this happen. Furthermore, when they took rebirth, they returned in bodies that were not as subject to decay and death as our own; they incarnated in celestial bodies with higher faculties to better be of service, residing ever after in one or another *loka* or "world," from which they can extend help to those still in ignorance. In the "Western Paradise," Amitabha Buddha, a celestial Buddha who was once a man, resides, and from there he incarnates in each generation as the Panchen Lama. Related to this, he is accompanied in that *loka* or paradise by Avalokiteshava, the "Lord who looks down," the Buddha who is most special to the Tibetan people. Avalokiteshvara too incarnates as a man in each generation, and each time he comes back, he is again the Dalai Lama.

In 1953, when Dondop was making his plans for Tibet, the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo was presided over by the 10th Panchen Lama, his predecessor having recently died and himself having been confirmed by the Dalai Lama as the new incarnation. This was an iteration of a regular pattern. Whenever a Panchen Lama dies, the Dalai Lama assigns a cadre of experts to find his next incarnation; that having been done, the Dalai Lama eventually confirms the new incarnation. Similarly, when the Dalai Lama passes on, the Panchen Lama performs the same tasks, each confirming the other's new rebirth in every generation. Moreover, each Lama takes responsibility for educating the other as they grow from childhood, ensuring a stable leadership in the structure of the religion. When and if Dondop was able to reach Shigatse, he would find a bustling city, but he would also stand in a revered center of learning, with the 10th incarnation of the Panchen Lama supervising over all.

### "Early preparations"

Preparations for the trip to Tibet took some time to arrange. Dondop's father, Norbu, would act as guide, escorting his son to Shigatse and settling him into his new life. Dondop knew such a trip would not be possible without his "Abe-la," the common Ladakhi nickname for "dad."

The shortest distance to Shigatse as the eagle flies would entail crossing directly into Tibet, which borders Ladakh, and then heading southeast. But that way was entirely impossible. Trying to do so would mean attempting to traverse the most challenging and dangerous

nine-hundred-mile-stretch of the Himalayas, most of it without any trails to follow or villages to visit for supplies. Consequently, there was only one choice: they would walk southwest out of the mountains down into India and go from there, eventually and altogether, traveling a distance of more than 1,500 miles, one-third of it on foot.

Norbu prepared their map, noting they would have to first make their way through several high passes (three of them above 17,000 feet) before reaching the Rotang Pass, the last pass before the plains of India. There they would move by buses and trains — something new for Dondop! — as they followed the wall of the Himalayas east, moving across the crown of India — nearly to Calcutta — before turning north again toward Tibet and Shigatse.

Looking at the map, Dondop realized the first test of their stamina would come while they were still in Ladakh itself. The first leg of their journey, from Leh to Manali, required that they hike a distance of two hundred and seventy-fives miles, with constant danger of bad weather, wild animals, and angry village dogs. After that, and given that their journey could only occur during the summer, they would face blistering heat and monsoon rains when they reached the plains. However, Norbu was confident of their chances, and grateful for the company of his close friend, Tsering Mudrup, who had decided to assist him. Actually, Dondop and his father would have two companions. Yeshe Sherup, a boy from the monastery — the same age as Dondop — would also come along. At Shigatse, he would rest briefly before continuing on to Lhasa where he had a sponsor.

#### “Setting out”

Finally the day came — the first day of a journey that would take them more than ten weeks to complete. Family and friends turned out to see the travelers off, saying prayers and mantras for their safety. Dondop’s mother shed tears as she said goodbye to her son, but she also smiled with pride, encouraging him to remember — especially during difficult moments of the trip — that he was on a pilgrimage to the seat of a great Buddha. His journey would bring adversity but these challenges — as every pilgrim knows — help to purify the intentions of the traveler. Did he truly wish to go to Shigatse? Did a good education *really* matter to him? The journey would test his resolve in these matters. If his intentions were noble, they would be strong, bringing him to Tibet and accruing for him good karma. “You will reach there, I’m sure,” his mother whispered, touching her forehead to his in the usual Tibetan custom. Making eye contact, she smiled broadly, “You are a good son. I will say prayers for you. Someday we will be together again.”

Dondop hid his tears, remembering that he should set an example for his younger brothers and sisters, and waved goodbye to the whole village. Shouldering his pack, Dondop (correct spelling) and the others left Stok village and crossed the Lion River to the Leh side of the Indus valley. As the roar of the river died away, Dondop walked with Yeshe Sherup, while his father kept company with Tsering Mudrup. The boys chatted about how much they would miss the sound of the river and its constant companionship during their prayers.

The first day was quite easy, and that night they reached the village of Matho, where they were taken in by Norbu’s cousin, Thubten, whose family gave them dinner of *thukpa* soup and let them sleep in a shed. However, the next night, near Martselang, they were forced to camp in the open air, exposed to the elements, and this began an unpredictable rhythm. Sometimes they were fortunate and offered hospitality; other times they slept in caves or out in the cold. Along the way, moving slowly due to the high altitude, they passed through the villages of Upshi, Meru,

Gya and Dorzhan, begging for food at the doors of amenable Ladakhis or resting for yak butter tea when they could.

In the high mountains they encountered Indian and Kashmiri traders as well as local shepherds moving their flocks in search of scarce water and grass. But there were few other travelers along the way. The cold wind in the high passes was often terrible, even for Ladakhis, and on clear days there was no escape from the brutal sun. As a result, they had to choose carefully when to move and when to wait, and still their cheeks became burned and their feet swollen. Sometimes while sitting in their make-shift camps, they would watch wild, blue-colored Bharal sheep (a favorite prey of the snow leopard) grazing on the mountain sides, or marvel at eagle owls floating through the brisk air. These owls, with their tufted ears, native to Ladakh, can weigh six pounds and spread their wings to more than six feet. Dondop watched them catch updrafts and wheel into the sky as silently as ghosts. After the first time Norbu noticed his son's interest, he began pointing out the owls — along with other birds and animals — as they hiked along.

“And then there was snow”

One day, Norbu smiled and stuck his finger into the air, pointing at some Tibetan black-necked cranes — a sign the group had reached the high passes. There they also spotted several Chiru, the Ladakhi antelope from which comes *shahtoosh*, a high grade of wool used for true pashmina shawls. Another day, while hiking above a valley, they saw wild yaks moving slowly across a flat area far below them. The four travelers also passed by “mani walls,” where the pious had laboriously chiseled Tibetan prayers — including Avalokiteshvara's sacred mantra, “Om Mani Padme Hum” — into the solid rock of the mountainside. Another time they witnessed a “sky burial,” watching with respect as a corpse was dismembered and fed to hungry vultures, an ingenious way of disposing the dead in a part of the world where cremation is difficult for lack of wood, and burial, also difficult, attracts the attention of wolves and wild dogs scavenging for food.

After the small village of Darzhan, they stopped at Keylong, a larger town, to take rest before their last push into India. Keylong, sprawled across a high Himalayan valley, was — and continues to be — a green haven on the way south toward the Rotang Pass, and Dondop and Yeshe Sherup enjoyed strolling the bazaar to windowshop and to search for meager supplies. Their shoes, poorly made and of simple materials, often wore out, so Keylong presented a chance for new footwear — necessary before attempting the remaining passes.

After Keylong, they climbed over two high breaks in the ridge line before reaching Karcha, the last village before climbing to the top of the Rotang, and after only one night in Karcha, they began again to climb. Though the Rotang — at less than 14,000 feet — was not as high as several of the passes they had crossed earlier, it was closest to the side of the Himalayas with the greatest precipitation, so snow was likely. Each year as the monsoon rains march from south to north over the plains of India, they move unobstructed until they reach the high mountains. Once there, their moisture piles up against the wall of the Himalayas, finally exhausting itself against the towering peaks. The result is that the northern side of the Himalayas lies in a rain shadow, with very little annual precipitation, while the southern side is soaking wet. The result for Dondop and his companions was that once they reached the summit of the Rotang, they had to slog through knee-deep snow as they slowly moved toward the south side of the pass. Finally, after a last great push, they looked down into the verdant and bounteously Kullu Valley,

filled with apple orchards and terraces of rice paddies. There before Dondop spread a whole new world.

“A stranger in a strange land”

Manali, located in the valley of the Beas River, was their first rest stop on their way south to Mandi, where they would catch a bus — Dondop’s first! Then in Mandi, Dondop had his first close look at a culture other than his own. This was a part of “Hindustan” and a land of colorful saris, extravagant turbans, Kullu caps askew on storekeepers heads, old men smoking *chillums* and *bidis*, and with everyone wearing light cotton clothing. The bazaars were filled with people moving and making noise, and Dondop, feeling out of place in his rough wool robes, thought he was seeing his first big city, though Mandi wasn’t much larger than Leh, simply because it struck him as exotic. There was a range of people there, with tall Panjabis, bearded Muslims and blue-eyed Kashmiris, and lepers. There were also cars, buses and electric lights — more than Dondop imagined possible. Furthermore, it was also strange because of how green, humid and hot it was. Mandi sits at less than 3,000 feet above sea level, so the summer air was stifling. “No matter how slowly we walked, we would still be entirely wet,” Dondop remembered later. “We enjoyed the shade of trees when we could find it, but it seemed like the whole city was drenched with humidity. The air also constantly smelled of diesel smoke and sometimes we couldn’t even catch our breath! There may be more oxygen nearer to sea level but Ladakhi had much cleaner air.”

From Mandi they took a crowded bus to Chandigarh, affording a chance to look out of the windows but having to sometimes avoid the view as the bus made hairpin turns above terrible drops into the river below. Though the travelers were accustomed to heights, this was Dondop’s first experience of sitting helplessly on a bus, jammed into a seat, while imagining what a plummet off the road would be like. The bus ride soon became a novelty he would be glad to see finished!

Next, once they reached the plains, came a series of long train rides as they moved from Chandigarh to Shiliguri, a distance of more than a thousand miles. “The train traveled so fast,” Dondop reminisced later. “I couldn’t believe it. The bus had traveled quite slowly, since the roads were narrow and rough, but the train! The first day I couldn’t stop smiling at how fast we were going. The trees and buildings seemed to fly by us like something in a dream. I only realize years later — after I came to the west and rode on highways— that we weren’t really going that fast at all.”

Most of their sleeping took place during the train rides or in public spaces, and once they reached Shiliguri they felt they were at last entering the final leg of their journey, after nearly two months of constant travel. Shiliguri was — and is — a bustling city, with a large population. There they met Tibetans who had descended out of Sikkim, the small Himalayan principality dominated by the third highest mountain in the world, Kangchenjunga. Talking with the Tibetans in the marketplace, they learned the situation in Tibet was not entirely stable. Having emerged from the Chinese Civil War victorious, the People’s Republic of China had claimed sovereignty over Tibet in 1950, and though they still controlled the government of the Tibetans, they were definitely increasing their military presence in the country. Tibet was safe for the moment, but nobody was certain of its future or the Chinese army’s true intentions. It was, in 1953, a situation of wait and see, but the travelers were resolved to continue north in the hopes all would be well.

Dondop and his companions soon reached Kalimpong, the capital city of Sikkim, after an uncomfortable and tiresome bus ride back into the high mountains. Kalimpong, nestled on a ridge close to its neighbor city, Darjeeling (40 miles away), had once been under the control of nearby Bhutan, but was now once again part of Sikkim (today a principality of India). There Dondop and his companions would cross the Teesta River and soon resume their journey on foot, however, for a time they were able to rest in Kalimpong and gather news about Tibet. To understand what they learned, it will help to trace a bit of background.

“A short overview of Tibetan history”

Tibet is the highest region on the planet, with an average elevation of 16,000 feet above sea level, and with a short growing season and precious little arable land. Consequently, the majority of its people are nomadic herders of goats, sheep and other livestock, with small farming communities sprinkled across the region. The region has only a handful of cities, and most of these were traditionally monastic centers. Its culture is largely its own, having grown up in primary relation to those of South Asia and several central Asian kingdoms that have dissolved in the currents of time. These now-defunct kingdoms (including Scythia, Bactria and the Kushan Empire — of which Ladakh was once a part) were centered west of Tibet in what is today Kashmir, Panjab, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

The Tibetan language is closest to Burmese but the language's written form derives from the Brahmi script of India. Prior to Songtsen Gampo (604-650), the kings of Tibet were more mythological than historical. One reason Songtsen Gampo is so significant is that he united a large area of the territory under his control, fighting against the Chinese and Panjabis for annexation of the fallen kingdoms of Central Asia. However, another reason for his prominence, with the greatest repercussions for the Ladakhi people, is that he was the first benefactor of Buddhism in Tibet.

Songtsen Gampo had two wives, one a princess from Nepal and the other a princess from China (a daughter of the second emperor of the T'ang dynasty), both of them Buddhists. Together these two queens converted the king from the indigenous Bon religion of Tibet, with its complex shamanic practices, and with their help Buddhism — and Tibet itself — began to flourish. This trend toward consolidation of authority and growth of empire continued into the next century, reaching its apex in the last decades of the 8th C. For example, in 763, Tibet briefly took control of the Chinese imperial capital at Chang-an, and during this same period, Tibet controlled parts or all of what are today Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, China, Nepal, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

In 821, Tibet and China established a measure of stability by signing a peace treaty that would last for several centuries, though later in that same century (the 9th C.), Tibet would begin to fragment into several smaller kingdoms.

During most of the Medieval period, west and central Tibet were unified and ruled from Lhasa, while Kham and Amdo, regions to the east, enjoyed less structure and sometimes fell under Chinese control (one of the instances that Chinese authorities cite today for claiming Tibet has “always” been part of China). But in the early 14th C., all of Tibet, like China also, fell under the control of Mongol invaders led by Kublai Khan, and Tibet became a satellite state of the Mongol's Yuan dynasty (another talking point for the Chinese, who, having regained

sovereignty over their own territory in the late 14th C., continued to control Tibet for another hundred years).

In the 16th C., under the guidance of the fifth Dalai Lama, the Tibetan heartland was once more unified, and though it continued to be ruled at a distance by the Chinese, they instigated no move to annex the territory as part of their own country. Tibet established its present boundaries in the 18th C., and was considered to be, as it had always been, a separate nation of people with a different language and unique culture.

Ending this short history, by the mid-19th C., Chinese control of Tibet was largely nominal, so much so that in 1913 the country again became independent, a status it enjoyed for only 36 years before the Chinese again invaded in 1950. In October of that year came the Battle of Chamdo, with China aiming to defeat Lhasa's small army to demoralize the Tibetan government, urging its people to accept Chinese rule. Tibet, with a much smaller population, greatly inferior weapons and very little support from other nations, was forced to comply with China's dictates. The agreement was that the Dalai Lama would continue to rule on all matters cultural and religious, while the Chinese occupied themselves with secular matters and controlled the country militarily. This was the situation Dondop and his father learned of while strolling in the markets of Kalimpong. For the most part, it seemed a stable arrangement, even if it wasn't an agreeable one, so the travelers again decided to continue on their way. Saying that, let's return to their journey.

### “Entering the Forbidden Kingdom”

After crossing the river and heading due north, the group enjoyed their first days back in the lofty mountains, where the air was less moist and the nights refreshingly cool for sleeping. The road often became little more than a jeep trail as they approached the border between Sikkim and Tibet, and once again they were traveling on foot with heavy packs. However, the walking was pleasant, filled with outstanding scenery and good company. So time passed quickly and soon they arrived at the border.

Once there, they were greeted by two Chinese guards with rifles, asking for their meager documents and inspecting the group with a suspicious eye, given that a superior officer was seated near them, watching closely. After fifteen minutes of scrutinizing papers written in Hindi, a language they couldn't read, the soldiers brought the group over to their commander, a stern and copious man who looked at the scruffy travelers suspiciously. “What is your name?”, he finally demanded, pointing his finger at Norbu, who immediately snapped to attention. “My name is Thurma,” Norbu answered loudly and without hesitation. The officer, after glancing at the others for confirmation that this was so, nodded his head approvingly. Next he said, again in a commanding voice, “It's all right. You can go!” Norbu thanked the man, picked up his backpack and moved his group up the road, away from the checkpoint. Once around the first bend, Dondop looked at his father quizzically and Norbu began to guffaw, shaking with laughter. What had happened? He had given his name as Thurma, the Ladakhi word for “spoon.”

During much of their trip from Ladakh, Dondop had been the slow poke, but he sped up noticeably when — a few days later — they came in sight of the magnificent city of Shigatse. Though it was still several miles in the distance, its towers and ramparts, painted white and maroon, stood out against the wall of mountains behind it. As they came closer, gilded rooftops and spires of gold, festooned with brightly-colored prayer flags, along with yellow canopies, also came into view. Eventually, they could make out the details of the monastery, sitting on a small

hill against the mountainside. The palace of the Panchen Lama was the most ornate of the buildings, followed by the maroon-colored temple dedicated to Maitreya Buddha, the Buddha yet to come. Further up the hillside stood Shigatse's renowned *thangka* wall, looking much like what westerners might confuse for a hundred-foot tall, drive-in movie screen. On this wall, every May, huge *tangkas* were displayed — to be venerated by thousands of pilgrims who came to the city for their blessings. For Dondup and Yeshe Sherup, wide-eyed and grinning at every step along the way, it was as if they were seeing Shambhala, the fabled kingdom of Tibetan myth, where all the population lives peacefully in a valley of living Buddhas.

Dondup's mother's dream was coming true. Soon they would arrive in the streets of the city, amidst the shops, temples and colleges, and soon they would be greeted by Namgyal, Dondop's uncle, then 35 years old. Dondop quickened his pace and the others followed, eager to arrive for their own reasons. Their long journey was nearly at an end.

#### “Shigatse and the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo”

Arriving in the city, the travelers immediately made their way to Tashi Lhunpo to meet Namgyal and get settled. Dondop's friend from Ladakh, Yeshe Sherup, would rest for only a few days before continuing on his way to Lhasa (165 miles further), accompanied by Tsering Mudrup. Dondop's father too was eager to get moving, and hoped to be home in time to help with the early harvest. However, out of concern for his son's welfare, Norbu would wait before leaving until Dondop had met his sponsor, Lobzang Michup (who greeted them warmly), and was settled in a hostel of the monastery. Eventually, one morning when the air was brisk and the sun bright, father and son knew it was time to separate. Sad goodbyes were given and received. Dondop, watching his father walking away down the rough stone street, knew he was now, and for the first time in his life, truly on his own.