

**Lama Tzong Khapa Day,
with Venerable Thubten Chodron
December 26, 2005**

I wanted to talk for a couple of minutes about Lama Tzong Khapa, about Je Rinpoche, since this is his birthday that we are celebrating. It always falls around Christmas, and it usually coincides with Hanukkah, so there's definitely something about the season of lights—in the heart of winter, when we've just had the equinox and now the days are going to get longer. Lama Tzong Khapa lived during the late 14th and early 15th centuries in Tibet. He was born in Amdo, which is in the eastern part of Tibet, and I was there in 1993 and it's quite a remarkable place. I can't remember the story exactly... but when he was born they buried the placenta and then a tree grew out of it. You can go to where the tree is and there are letters—*Om Ab Hum*—in the bark and the leaves of the tree. It marks the place where he was born.

He was quite inquisitive. It's interesting how his tradition has evolved. It eventually became known as the Gelug tradition, but Je Rinpoche himself was completely non-sectarian. He studied with Nyingma masters, Sakya masters, Kagyu masters, the Kadampa masters. He studied with everybody, because he really wanted to learn. He went to central Tibet and studied with quite a number of teachers there. He attended a lot of the debating sessions that they used to have, because he had quite a mind and really wanted to fathom the depth of the teachings. He used debate and reason as a way to really go deeply in order to be able to see actually how things exist—and how they don't exist.

Of course, he never intended to start a major tradition within Tibetan Buddhism. (I don't think any great spiritual leader ever has the intention to start a movement. They just teach what they do.) He was both a scholar and a practitioner, both things put into one, which is a rare combination. Sometimes you meet people who are very scholarly, but they don't really know how to practice so well; other times you meet people who practice a lot, but they don't have the study behind them, and as a result, they can't really explain in words to their disciples what they've realized as easily. But Je Rinpoche had a very unique combination of the two things.

He also had a direct line to Manjushri. He used to ask one of his lamas to ask questions to Manjushri for him, and then finally he got a direct line himself. (laughter) He used to have visions of Manjushri and ask him all of his questions. These were usually questions about the ultimate nature of reality... it wasn't: "I'm sad today, what do I do?" (laughter) It was really, "how do things exist?" At one point, Manjushri sent him off to do some more practice, because he needed to do more purification and more accumulation of positive potential in order to fertilize and purify his mind so that he could gain the realizations.

He went to this one place called Olka, which I had the fortune to visit in 1987 when I was in Tibet; we went there on horses. He made 100,000 prostrations to each of the 35 Buddhas in the confession practice that we do. Not just 100,000 prostrations to the 35 Buddhas, but 100,000 to each one of them, so that's 3,500,000! They said that as he was doing that, he had a vision of the Buddhas. Actually, the way the prayer used to be—you know how now we say, "To the One Thus Gone..."—initially the sutra didn't have the phrase "to the One Thus Gone," it just had the name of that particular Buddha. He was just reciting that actual name, and part-way through the practice he had a vision of the 35 Buddhas, but he couldn't get their heads. They were without heads. Then he decided that he needed to redo it, and

then he started saying, “To the One Thus Gone (the Tathagata)...” After that, he had a vision of all of the 35 Buddhas complete—with heads. (laughter)

He was doing his prostrations— his 3,500,000 prostrations— and he didn’t have these nice comfortable boards, or the cushion for your knees, the cushion for your head, and your blanket [like we have here]... (laughter) You know how it takes you five or ten minutes to lay everything out beforehand, so that you can be totally comfortable while you’re doing your few prostrations? He didn’t do it that way. There was just a rock. He did his prostrations on the rock, and as a result you can see the imprint of his body on the rock where he did his 3,500,000 prostrations. I saw this. Also, at Olka, he did 100,000 mandala offerings, and again, not a nice pretty place like we have, very smooth and everything... He just used a stone. When you do the mandala practice, you have to rub your forearm three times clockwise and three times counter-clockwise, and he did that so much that, of course, his skin actually started to bleed. The stone where he made his mandala offerings, on it—and again, I saw this too—it has self-arisen flowers and different things on it: [seed] syllables, flowers, decorations, and ornaments. In Tibet, there are several of these self-arisen things, which occur when a great practitioner comes to practice in a certain place. That’s where he did his mandala offerings.

Near Olka, there was a place where he made at least 100,000 Amitayus tsa-tsas. Amitayus is for long life. We went there as well. We also went to Reting, which was way out. It was an interesting trip getting to Reting: hitchhiking, riding animals, all sorts of different things. Anyway, we got there: the place where he began to compose the *Lam Rim Chenmo* (*Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*), which is one of his great texts, one that we rely on so much. I was able to go to the place where they say he actually started writing it. It was outside; there was just a rock there and some trees around. But when you’re at that place, when you really think of how much someone’s teachings have benefited you—not just benefit, but completely transformed your whole life... And not just transformed this life, but many, many lives because when you study and practice something like that this life, it influences future lives. An incredible feeling of gratitude to Je Rinpoche came to me.

The day we were there, there happened to be some government officials. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, because of course the people at the monastery had to be on their best behavior with the government officials there. But at the same time, they took the government officials way, way up in the mountains—we were invited to come along with them—it was above Reting, the place where he started to write the *Lam Rim Chenmo*, it was above the mountain, and then way around the side of the mountain, way up on the top there was this big boulder field. Before we went there, they told us that it was a big boulder field, and that in the rocks you would find the letters *Om Ab Hum*, but also a lot of *Ab*’s. They said that’s where Je Rinpoche meditated on emptiness, and *Ab* is the syllable that represents emptiness. So they said that the *Ab*’s fell from the sky when he was meditating on emptiness, and landed on the stones.

So me, who has such great faith, thought, “Yeah, okay... We’ll go see.” (laughter) Anyway, there really were *Om*’s *Ab*’s and *Hum*’s in those rocks. And it wasn’t stuff that was carved in, either; it was really in the rocks. Not carved, but the veins in the rocks made the shape of the letters. It’s quite remarkable, but you had to climb way, way up and across to get there.

What Je Rinpoche gave, what he bequeathed to us, is something so remarkable. Lama Atisha had begun systematizing the teachings when he wrote *The Lamp of the Path* and spoke

about the three levels of the practitioner, but Je Rinpoche really unpacked that further, and really got the lam rim quite well organized. The text has been translated into English now; it's three volumes. How he wrote that without a computer where you could go back and edit it, I don't know! (laughter) I could only imagine being his student, being the scribe who wrote it, having to go back and rewrite things. It's a tremendous work that really tells how to practice from the very beginning of the path to the very end. He starts telling you about how to set up your altar, the very beginning thing—how to set up an altar, how to sweep your room and things like that—all the way up to the *lbag.tong*, the special insight, the *vipashyana* section.

Then he wrote the *Ngag Rim Chen mo*, which is the great treatise on the stages of tantra. *Lam Rim Chenmo* deals with the sutra path: renunciation, bodhichitta, wisdom; and the gradual tantric path deals with the four classes of tantra and how you practice all the different tantras. His works are in 18 volumes. Again, how do you do that? When you think about that, writing so much and then the way it got printed—you had to carve all the letters backwards into a piece of wood because they would print everything on rice paper—it's truly remarkable that somebody could write so much, and then have it printed!

Some of his great contributions were of course, the *Lam Rim Chenmo*, and especially how he clarified so much about emptiness. There was a lot of confusion in Tibet at the time he lived. Many people had fallen to the side of nihilism. In his prayer on the Three Principal Aspects of the Path, he talks about the two extremes: one was absolutism, that's the extreme people were in at the time of Nagarjuna, and at the time of Je Rinpoche, in Tibet, many of the people had gone to the side of nihilism, saying that emptiness didn't exist, or that emptiness was inherently existent.

There were many wrong conceptions. He really refuted those wrong conceptions and established very clearly the middle way path. When you study these texts, you really see what genius was involved in doing this, and how easy it is to go to one extreme or another, because our mind is always going from one to the other. (laughter) Because we confuse existence with inherent existence, and emptiness with non-existence. We're always confusing those, so we keep falling into absolutism or nihilism. He really clarified that very fine line of how to walk.

He clarified many points on tantra as well. There's always so much confusion in people's mind about how to practice both sutra and tantra. If you don't have the correct view on how to do these things, you can do a lot of practice, but you don't get the right results.

Then, he started the three great monasteries, the three seats: Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, which became the largest monasteries in the world—at least Drepung was at one point. Before 1959, Drepung had over 10,000 monks in it, which is quite remarkable when you think about it. Je Rinpoche revived the monastic tradition; the monastic tradition in Tibet had gone up and down, up and down many times, but he really valued it as the foundation for practice, and so set it up quite strongly. The monasteries really thrived until 1959, when, of course, they were destroyed, although they re-rose in India.

The first monastery Je Rinpoche began was Ganden, which is about an hour outside of Lhasa by bus—it's up on this mountain. When he passed away, they built a stupa around him, and at some point the communists made the Tibetans desecrate the stupa and take out his body. His hands were crossed at his chest (VTC folds her arms like so), and his

fingernails had still been growing—they were wrapped around his body—and his hair had still been growing. Remarkable. I don't know what happened after that.

He left to us such a vibrant tradition that's come down through the centuries, that has reached our ears. We're really the fortunate ones, to have been able to hear Je Rinpoche's teachings. And to see by his life example. It really impressed me how he was totally non-sectarian and studied with the great masters; how he was really not content with a little bit of information, but really thought about the teachings quite seriously and in depth; how he was not just someone who intellectually knew the teachings, but actually practiced—beginning with the foundation practices of prostrations and mandala offerings—he didn't just say, "Okay, I can see Manjushri, I don't need to do the rest of this stuff." He did it all. He took eight of his disciples with him when he did it. Fortunate disciples, they probably didn't sleep much. (laughter)

His life was a tremendous example to us. Another way I think that his life was as example, there's different ways of explaining—some people say he attained Buddhahood, some people say he was at the Path of Seeing or one of the other paths, so there are different ways of explanation. In any case, whatever it was, and there is one way of explaining it that he had attained at least the Path of Seeing and in tantra was a fit disciple to do consort practice and if he had done consort practice in that life he would have attained Buddhahood in that very life. But because he had such regard and respect for the monastic tradition and he was a monk, he didn't want future generations to get the wrong idea. Therefore, he kept his monastic vows purely, he did not do consort practice and instead he attained enlightenment in the bardo. So it's said that that's also one of his great kindnesses, because he postponed his own enlightenment so that we, the stupid people in future generations who want to have samsara and nirvana together (laughter) would get the message that it's incredibly important to keep one's monastic vows purely. So I have tremendous respect for Je Rinpoche.

At the beginning of my practice I just heard Lam rim and I didn't even know who Lama Tzong Khapa was very much and I would think, "Okay, guess the guy who wrote this was good." But then as you study the Lam rim more and more, and especially get into his explanations on emptiness—which are not easy to understand. They're not easy to understand because you keep falling off to the two extremes. I think when you get it, it's probably pretty easy. But the more I study his texts the more my respect for his incredible kindness and his realizations increases. I think this happens kind of automatically... If you have the fortune to study the texts of some of the masters, you begin then to really see their greatness because the texts have a very strong impact on one's own mind.

There's one other story about Je Rinpoche that I like. When you do the visualization of Je Rinpoche, there are two disciples: Gyaltsab Je and Khedrup Je. So Gyaltsab Je was an older monk at the time Je Rinpoche lived, and he heard about this young 'upstart' Tzong Khapa, who was giving these teachings. Gyaltsab Je said, "Yeah, we know all about all of these young upstarts that everybody raves about." But he was in the area so he went to one of Je Rinpoche's teachings. So, of course, the teacher always sits higher and the disciples sit on the floor. Well, Gyaltsab Je, he wasn't going to sit on the floor, you know with some young upstart teaching, so he sat on a seat that was the same height as Je Rinpoche's. Then as Je Rinpoche started to teach, then Gyaltsab Je kind of quietly got up and sat on the floor. (laughter) He began to realize that this was no brash, arrogant young upstart; this was a highly realized being. So Gyaltsab Je and Khedrup Je became Je Rinpoche's two chief disciples. The first Dalai Lama was also one of his disciples.

[Note: from here Ven. is referring to the *Lama Tzong Khapa Guru Yoga practice on page 28 of the red Pearl of Wisdom Book II.*]

So this practice, it's a practice of guru-yoga. We're trying to unite our mind with Je Rinpoche's mind and not just with Je Rinpoche as a historical figure but really thinking of Je Rinpoche's realizations and the realizations of our own spiritual teachers and the realizations of the Buddhas all being the same. So not differentiating the different forms that the guru's omniscient mind appears to us in. Well, we differentiate the different forms on a conventional level, but really seeing that the nature of inseparable bliss and wisdom is the same in all of them. It's quite powerful when you do it as a guru-yoga practice in that way.

It's essentially a seven-limb practice, if you look at it. The verses are in a little bit of a different order. We start out, of course, with refuge and bodhichitta, so I won't explain that. The first verse is invoking them to come:

**From the heart of the lord protector of Tushita's hundred gods,
Floating on fluffy white clouds, piled up like fresh curd
Comes the omniscient lord of the Dharma, Losang Drakpa.
Please come here together with your spiritual children.**

From the heart of the Lord protector of Tushita's Hundred Gods. You visualize Tushita heaven, and Maitreya is sitting there—Maitreya who is going to be the next wheel-turning Buddha, is in Tushita. Down from his heart comes a beam of light. And then *fluffy clouds piled up like white curd*: I guess that's a visualization that Tibetans like. (laughter) Sitting on top of this, on a throne and lotus and sun and moon, is Je Rinpoche; his ordination name was Losang Drakpa. *Please come here with your spiritual children*: that's with Gyalsab Je and Khedrup Je. They all appear sitting on the clouds.

**In the sky before me, on lion thrones with lotus and moon seats,
Sit the holy gurus with beautiful smiling faces.
Supreme field of merit for my mind of faith,
Please stay one hundred eons to spread the teachings.**

They're a *field of merit*, which means that—you usually grow things in fields, and what we're trying to grow is merit. So how we do this is by doing this seven-limb prayer and making offerings and so on to Je Rinpoche. We're saying, *please stay one hundred eons to spread the teachings*. That second verse is actually the verse requesting the guru and the Buddha to remain until samsara ends. Usually, in other versions of the seven-limb prayer, sometimes it's the fifth line; sometimes the sixth line. Here, it's brought up right at the beginning because you're invoking them and then asking them to remain.

The next verse is prostrating.

**Your mind of pure genius that spans the whole range of knowledge,
Your speech of eloquence, jewel ornament for the fortunate ear,
Your body of beauty, resplendent with the glory of fame,
I bow to you so beneficial to see, hear, and remember.**

First prostrating to his mind: *your mind of pure genius that spans the whole range of knowledge*. So that's omniscience. Then prostration to his speech, *your speech of eloquence, jewel ornament for the fortunate ear*. That means our ear is fortunate to hear. And then his body, *your body of beauty, resplendent with the glory of fame*. *I bow to you so beneficial to see, hear, and remember*. I think that's incredible, you know when we think about us, would anybody say about us that it's beneficial to see, hear, and remember us? How do people usually think of us? People usually think of us with attachment, with anger, with jealousy because we were either lording something over them, or making fun of them, or competing with them, because we didn't do so much that was so beneficial. So then, of course, when they see, hear, and remember us, it's like, oh you know this person. But when you live your life like Je Rinpoche did, it's so beneficial to see, hear and remember him. Wow! What an inspiring thought... May I become like Je Rinpoche, so that when people see, hear, and remember me it actually benefits them. It gives us a role model to aspire to be like.

The next verse is making offerings.

**Various delightful offerings of flowers, perfumes,
Incense, lights and pure sweet waters, those actually presented,
And this ocean of offering clouds created by my imagination,
I offer to you, O supreme field of merit.**

So those actually presented, the ones on the altar and *this ocean of offering clouds created by my imagination*; so like we do in the extensive offering practice, the whole sky filled with different things. So you can stop here and do the extensive offering practice at this point.

The next verse is confession.

**All the negativities I have committed with body, speech and mind
Accumulated from beginningless time,
And especially all transgressions of the three sets of vows,
I confess each one with strong regret from the depth of my heart.**

All the negativities I have committed with body, speech and mind from beginningless time... so we're not holding anything back. And then *especially the transgressions of the three sets of vows*, so the Pratimoksa vows: that refers to your lay precepts or any of the monastic precepts, or the eight precepts that you have taken. So that's one set of vows, the Pratimoksa. Then the second set is the Bodhisattva vows, and the third set is the Tantric vows. So again this lets us know it's important to keep our vows as best as we can. We confess them with strong regret from the depth of our hearts.

**In this degenerate time, you worked for broad learning and accomplishment,
Abandoning the eight worldly concerns to realize the great value
Of freedom and fortune; sincerely, O Protectors
I rejoice in your great deeds.**

In this degenerate time, you worked for broad learning and accomplishment, abandoning the eight worldly concerns to realize the great value of freedom and fortune. So the great value of freedom and fortune is the value of the precious human life and abandoning the eight worldly concerns. Is that easy or not easy? Not easy, is it? Not easy at all! The eight worldly concerns are really in there. It's said that one way in which Je Rinpoche abandoned the eight worldly concerns was

he had been invited by the Chinese emperor to go to Beijing and teach which, of course, was a great honor. And if you go there you live it up and get lots of offerings and you become quite famous. But Je Rinpoche turned it down. He thought it was better to stay and teach in Tibet rather than to go to Beijing. He gave up the perks of the eight worldly concerns that he could have had by having the luxury of the Chinese court. Instead, he worked for broad learning and really deep spiritual accomplishments. So we're rejoicing in that. That's also a really good example for us too, isn't it? Giving up the eight worldly concerns for the benefit of the Dharma.

The next is requesting teachings. To me this is one of the pithiest parts of the whole thing. It's funny—I never really resonated so much about the seven limb prayer about the verse requesting teachings until I went to Italy. Until then I had been in Nepal and India and there were plenty of teachings around, plenty of teachers. Then I was shipped out to Italy. When I first went there, there was no teacher living at the Center. So I saw, "Oh, I need to do this verse! This is an important part of the seven limb prayer. I just can't take receiving teachings for granted because here I am and there's no one around to teach me! So I really have to spend some time requesting and requesting and requesting and requesting sincerely." So here we are requesting.

**Venerable holy gurus, in the space of your truth body
From billowing clouds of your wisdom and love,
Let fall the rain of the profound and extensive Dharma
In whatever form is suitable for subduing sentient beings.**

From the space of the Buddha's omniscient mind, the Dharmakaya or the Truth Body. So within that space, *from the billowing clouds of your wisdom and love fall the rain of the profound and extensive Dharma*. Profound Dharma is the teachings on emptiness, the wisdom teachings; extensive is the teachings on Bodhicitta, the method side of the path. Let fall the Dharma *in whatever form is suitable for subduing sentient beings*. I think that has great meaning because sentient beings have so many different dispositions, so many different inklings. One way of teaching fits one person but it doesn't fit another person. One way of practice makes sense to one person; another person it doesn't. So to have that ability, and you really see Buddha's skill as a teacher and that's why there are so many Buddhist traditions. It's because the Buddha gave so many teachings because people have different interests, different dispositions. I think that a skill of a really great teacher is to be able to teach according to the faculties and interests of the particular disciples.

So really teaching in whatever form is suitable for subduing sentient beings. In saying this we're not just, "Okay, teacher, teach me and these are the teachings I want!" But it's for the benefit for all these sentient beings, some of which have to learn all these other *different* practices and paths before hand. "Please, teacher, whatever anybody needs at this particular moment that's going to enable them to live a life of virtue and create good karma so that slowly and gradually their view can be refined until they get the correct view." I think that has great meaning and it's really a tribute to the Buddha to be able to teach in that way. It's also saying to us why we should never criticize any other Buddhist tradition because it all came from the Buddha. It's fine to debate; it's fine to discuss. But we should never criticize because the Buddha taught different things for different people. So, just because something doesn't fit us, it might be very helpful for somebody else. And that's good.

The next verse is the dedication.

**Whatever virtue I may have gathered here,
May it bring benefit to the migrating beings and to the Buddha’s teachings.
May it make the essence of Buddha’s doctrine,
And especially the teachings of Venerable Lobsang Drakpa, shine forever.**

The essence of Buddha’s doctrine and the teachings of venerable Losang Dragpa shine forever. You have the seven limb prayer there and then the mandala offering. One way to do the Guru Yoga practice is to recite 100,000 *mig tse mas*—*mig tse mas* is the name of the request verse to Je Rinpoche. Actually this verse he originally wrote for one of his teachers, Rendawa. They were student and teacher to each other, and then Lama Rendawa said, “No, actually, I have to offer it back to you,” and substituted ‘Lobsang Drakpa’ in there for his name, and offered it back to Je Rinpoche. I think it’s very interesting when two people are student and teachers to each other; it’s like His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Tsenzhab Serkong Rinpoche—the previous one—they were student and teacher to each other. You sometimes find that happening.

**Mig me tse way ter chen Chen re zig
Dri may kyen pay wong po Jam pel yang
Du pung ma lu jom dze Sang way dag
Gang chen kay pay tsug kyen Tzong Kha pa
Lo sang Drag pay zhab la sol wa deb**

**Avalokiteshvara, great treasure of objectless compassion,
Manjushri, master of flawless wisdom,
Vajrapani, destroyer of all demonic forces,
Tzong Khapa, crown jewel of the Snowy Lands’ sages
Losang Drakpa, I make request at your holy feet.**

Then, in the request, usually when people do the 100,000 they do the four-lined one (we all want to do the shortest thing possible, don’t we?). (laughter) So then it’s the first, second, fourth, and fifth line here. I think this request is quite profound: it’s saying that Je Rinpoche is an emanation of Chenrezig, Manjushri, and Vajrapani, who are the chief bodhisattvas that represent the chief qualities of the Buddha. Chenrezig represents the Buddha’s compassion and bodhichitta; Manjushri represents wisdom; and Vajrapani represents the power or the skillful means of the Buddha.

Actually, when you start out “*mig me tse way*”—just those four syllables, when you think about it, you could study the meaning of those four syllables for years. “Mig me” means without object; what it means is without an inherently existing object. There you have all the wisdom teachings. “Tse wai” is compassion. So this is the compassion that is without an inherently existent object: someone who’s able to have compassion without grasping at truly existent sentient beings. Someone who is able to have compassion because he sees that sentient beings’ suffering is not a given, that it’s optional—because things are not inherently existent and that ignorance can be removed. Just “*mig me tse wai*,” that kind of compassion that sees without grasping at inherently existent objects—very profound—that’s method and wisdom and the path. And then “*dri may kyen pai*”: “dri may” is flawless, or stainless. “Kyen pai” is wisdom. “Wang po” is powerful, and then “Jam pel yang” is Manjushri. It’s the flawless wisdom that doesn’t fall to either of the extremes, that isn’t intellectual wisdom, but actual experiential wisdom from meditation. And then Vajrapani, destroyer of all demonic

forces, like self-centered thought and self-grasping ignorance. And then “Tzong Khapa, crown jewel of the snowy lands’ sages.” “Snowy land” referred to Tibet, but we get some snow here too. (laughter) It happened to melt by today, but...this is also a snowy land. So may we invite Lama Tzong Khapa here. And then “Losang Drakpa,” again, that’s his ordination name: “I make requests to your holy feet.”

While you’re reciting that, then there’s all the visualizations that are described in *Pearl of Wisdom Vol. II* on pp. 34-5, so you can read those. You can do one visualization one session, one in another—however you want to do it.

Then we make the special requests after reciting the *mig me tses* as many times as we want to, and then there’s the absorption. In the first verse, Je Rinpoche comes to the crown of our head. In the second absorption verse, he comes into our heart when we say “grant me the general and sublime realizations.” “General realizations” are the various psychic powers that are general to beings who have samadhi; “sublime realizations” are the real unique realizations of somebody on the Buddhist path with insight into emptiness and so forth. With the third verse—we had imagined a lotus at our heart—“please remain firmly until I attain enlightenment,” then that lotus closes after Je Rinpoche has come into our heart, making a kind of a drop with Je Rinpoche on the inside. And then we dedicate.

That’s just a little overview of this, but maybe it’s something that will help you when you’re doing the practice.