

Pabongka Rinpoche

A Memoir by Rilbur Rinpoche

My guru, kind in three ways, who met face to face with Heruka, whose name I find difficult to utter, Lord Pabongka Vajradhara Dechen Nyingpo Pael Zangpo, was born north of Lhasa in 1878. His father was a minor official, but the family was not wealthy. Although the night was dark, a light shone in the room, and people outside the house had a vision of a protector on the roof. Pabongka Rinpoche was an emanation of the great scholar Changkya Rolpai Dorje (1717–86), although initially it was thought that he was the reincarnation of a learned Khampa geshe from Sera Mae Monastery. Rinpoche entered the monastery at the age of seven, did the usual studies of a monk, earned his geshe degree, and spent two years at Gyuetoe Tantric College.

His root guru was Dagpo Lama Rinpoche Jampael Lhuendrub Gyatso, from Lhoka. He was definitely a bodhisattva, and Pabongka Rinpoche was his foremost disciple. He lived in a cave in Pasang, and his main practice was bodhichitta. His main deity was Avalokiteśhvara, and he would recite 50,000 maṇis [the mantra, om maṇi padme hūṃ] every night. When Kyabje Pabongka first met Dagpo Rinpoche at a tsog offering ceremony in Lhasa, he cried from beginning to end out of reverence.

When Pabongka Rinpoche had finished his studies, he visited Dagpo Lama Rinpoche in his cave and was sent into a lamrim retreat nearby. Dagpo Lama Rinpoche would teach him a lamrim topic and then Pabongka Rinpoche would go away and meditate on it. Later he would return to explain what he'd understood: if he had gained some realization, Dagpo Lama Rinpoche would teach him some more, and Pabongka Rinpoche would go back and meditate on that. It went on like this for ten years (and if that's not amazing, what is!).

Pabongka Rinpoche's four main disciples were Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, Khangsar Rinpoche, and Tathag Rinpoche, who was a regent of Tibet. Tathag Rinpoche was the main teacher of His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he was a child and gave him his novice ordination.

I was born in Kham, in Eastern Tibet, and two of my early teachers were disciples of Pabongka Rinpoche, so I was brought up in an atmosphere of complete faith in Pabongka Rinpoche as the Buddha himself. One of these teachers had a picture of Pabongka Rinpoche that exuded small drops of nectar

from between the eyebrows. I saw this with my own eyes, so you can imagine how much faith I had in Rinpoche when I finally came into his presence.

But I also had a personal reason for having great faith in him. I was the only son of an important family, and although the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had recognized me as an incarnate lama and Pabongka Rinpoche himself had said I should join Sera Monastery in Lhasa, my parents were not happy about this. However, my father died soon after this, and I was finally able to set out for Central Tibet. Can you imagine my excitement as I embarked on horseback on the two-month voyage? I was only fourteen, and becoming a monk really was the thing to do for a fellow my age. I felt that the opportunity to go to Lhasa to get ordained and live as a rinpoche as the Dalai Lama had said I should was all the wondrous work of Pabongka Rinpoche.

At the time of my arrival in Lhasa, Pabongka Rinpoche was living at Tashi Choeling, a cave above Sera Monastery. We made an appointment, and a few days later my mother, my changdzoe (the man in charge of my personal affairs), and I rode up on horseback. Although Rinpoche was expecting us that day, we had not arranged a time. Nevertheless, he had just had his own changdzoe prepare tea and sweet rice, which freshly awaited our arrival. This convinced me that Rinpoche was clairvoyant, a manifestation of the all-seeing Vajradhara himself.

After we had eaten, it was time to visit Rinpoche. I remember this as if it were today. A narrow staircase led up to Pabongka Rinpoche's tiny room, where he was sitting on his bed. He looked just like his pictures—short and fat! He said, “I knew you were coming—now we have met,” and stroked the sides of my face. While I was sitting there, a new geshe from Sera came in to offer Rinpoche a special tsampa dish that is made only at the time of receiving the geshe degree. Rinpoche remarked how auspicious it was that this new geshe had come while I was there and had him fill my bowl just like his own. You can imagine what that did to my mind!

The room had almost nothing in it. The most amazing thing was a pure gold, two-inch statue of Dagpo Lama Rinpoche, Pabongka Rinpoche's root guru, surrounded by a circle of tiny offerings. Behind Rinpoche were five tangkas of Khaedrub Je's visions of Tsongkapa after he had passed away. The only other thing in the room was a place for a cup of tea. I could also see a small meditation room off to the side and kept peeking into it (I was only fourteen and extremely curious). Rinpoche told me to go inside and check it out. All it contained was a meditation box and a small altar. Rinpoche called out the

names of the statues on the altar: from left to right there were Lama Tsongkapa, Heruka, Yamāntaka, Naeljorma, and Paelgon Dramze, an emanation of Mahākāla. Beneath the statues were offerings, set out right across the altar.

I was not yet a monk, so Rinpoche's long-time servant Jamyang, who had been given to Pabongka Rinpoche by Dagpo Lama Rinpoche and always stayed in Rinpoche's room, was sent to get a calendar to fix a date for my ordination, even though I had not asked for it. Rinpoche was giving me everything I had ever wanted, and I felt he was just too kind. When I left, I floated out on a cloud in a complete state of bliss!

Rinpoche's changdzoe was a very fierce-looking man, said to be the emanation of a protector. Once, when Rinpoche was away on a long tour, out of devotion the changdzoe demolished the old small building in which Rinpoche lived and constructed a large ornate residence rivaling the private quarters of the Dalai Lama. When Rinpoche returned he was not at all pleased and said, "I am only a minor hermit lama, and you should not have built something like this for me. I am not famous, and the essence of what I teach is renunciation of the worldly life. Therefore I am embarrassed by rooms like these."

I took lamrim teachings from Pabongka Rinpoche many times. The Chinese confiscated all my notes, but as a result of his teachings, I still carry something very special inside. Whenever he taught I would feel inspired to become a real yogi by retreating to a cave, covering myself with ashes, and meditating. As I got older I would feel this less and less, and now I don't think of it at all. But I really wanted to be a true yogi, just like him.

He gave many initiations such as Yamāntaka, Heruka, and Guhyasamāja. I myself took these from him. We would go to his residence for important secret initiations, and he would come down to the monastery to give more general teachings. Sometimes he would go on tour to various monasteries. Visiting Pabongka Rinpoche was what it must have been like to visit Lama Tsongkapa when he was alive.

When he taught he would sit for up to eight hours without moving. About two thousand people would come to his general discourses and initiations and fewer to special teachings, but when he gave bodhisattva vows, up to ten thousand people would show up. When he gave the Heruka initiation he would take on a special appearance. His eyes became very wide and piercing, and I could almost see him as Heruka, with one leg outstretched, the other bent. It would

get so intense that I would start crying, as if the deity Heruka himself were right there. It was very powerful, very special.

To my mind he was the most important Tibetan lama of all. Everybody knows how great his four main disciples were—well, he was their teacher. He spent a great deal of time thinking about the practical meaning of the teachings and coming to an inner realization of them, and he had practiced and accomplished everything he had learned, right up to the completion stage. He didn't just spout words, he tried things out for himself. Also, he never got angry; any anger had been completely pacified by his bodhichitta. Many times there would be long lines of people waiting for blessings, but Rinpoche would ask each one individually how they were and tap them on the head. Sometimes he dispensed medicine. He was always gentle. All this made him very special.

I would say he had two main qualities: from the tantric point of view, his realization and ability to present Heruka, and from the sūtra point of view, his ability to teach lamrim.

Just before he passed away, he was invited to explain a short lamrim at his root guru's monastery of Dagpo Shidag Ling, in Lhoka. He had chosen the text called the Quick Path, by the Second Pañchen Lama. This was the first lamrim that Dagpo Lama Rinpoche had taught him, and Pabongka Rinpoche had said that it would be the last he himself would teach. Whenever he visited his lama's monastery, Rinpoche would dismount as soon as it appeared in view and prostrate all the way to the door—which was not easy because of his build; when he left he would walk backward until it was out of sight. This time when he left the monastery, he made one prostration when it was almost out of sight and went to stay at a house nearby. Having manifested just a little discomfort in his stomach, Rinpoche retired for the night. He asked his attendants to leave while he did his prayers, which he chanted louder than usual. Then it sounded like he was giving a lamrim discourse. When he had finished and his attendants went into his room, they found he had passed away. Although Tathag Rinpoche was extremely upset, he told us what to do. We were all distraught. Pabongka Rinpoche's body was clothed in brocade and cremated in the traditional way. An incredible reliquary was constructed, but the Chinese demolished it. Nevertheless, I was able to retrieve some of Rinpoche's relics from it, and I gave them to Sera Mae Monastery. You can see them there now.

I have had some success as a scholar, and as a lama I am somebody, but these things are not important. The only thing that matters to me is that I was a disciple of Pabongka Rinpoche.

The Venerable Rilbur Rinpoche was born in Eastern Tibet in 1923. At the age of five he was recognized by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama as the sixth incarnation of Sera Mae Rilbur Rinpoche. He entered Sera Monastic University in Lhasa at fourteen and became a geshe at twenty-four. He meditated and taught Dharma until 1959, after which he suffered under intense Chinese oppression for twenty-one years. In 1980 he was allowed to perform some religious activities, and he helped build a new stūpa for Pabongka Rinpoche at Sera, the Chinese having destroyed the original. He then came to India and lived for several years at Namgyal Monastery, Dharamsala. Toward the end of his life, Rinpoche traveled several times to Western countries and lived for a period in the United States. He passed away at Sera Mae Monastery in Bylakuppe, South India, on January 15, 2006.

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