



1

Kalu Rinpoche on Teaching in North America

I have been four times now to the North American continent. My first visit was in 1971; the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was already teaching here and the characteristic style he had found it necessary to adopt was to present Buddhism from the point of view of Americans. Instead of teaching in the traditional manner, he found many skillful ways of presenting the teachings in the light of worldly fields of knowledge, so that people unacquainted with Buddhism could adapt their thinking to the Buddhist view. In this way he was gradually able to introduce the teachings to a large number of people.

This was a splendid undertaking, made possible by his own personal qualities, his superb command of English, and the fact that he was to reside regularly in the United States. For my own part, I was only staying here for about a year at most, that first time, so I felt very strongly that if I were going to accomplish anything, I would have to teach the Dharma in a traditional way, without combining it with any other viewpoints.

To do this as clearly as possible, I gave teachings that I felt were basic to the understanding and actual practice of Dharma. So I

taught extensively on the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind—the four basic contemplations in Buddhist practice—and, in particular, on the concept of karma, the law of cause and effect that shapes our experience.

Before the introduction of the Buddhadharma to Tibet, the Land of Snows was a very barbaric place; there was little difference between its people and cannibal demons or primitive savages. Then a king arose among the Tibetan people whose name was Song-tsen Gampo [Srong btsan sgam po] and who is believed to have been an emanation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezi. Because of his miraculous powers, this king was able to bring the entire region we know as Tibet under his control, and from that political base he spread the Dharma throughout Central Asia. He was particularly devoted to meditation on Chenrezi, and under his influence that teaching spread very widely. As a result, Tibet became a sphere of activity for the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and Chenrezi became so embedded in the Tibetan consciousness that any child who could say the word “mother” could also recite the mantra OM MANI PADME HUNG*. Through this widespread meditation on Chenrezi, many people came to Realization.

From this beginning, the entire corpus of Buddhist teachings, both sutra and tantra traditions, with all the root texts and commentaries, was gradually brought from India to Tibet, and was translated and transmitted effectively and completely, without any element missing, to the Tibetan people.

In the great hope that this same sort of transmission will occur in the United States, Canada, Europe and all the countries of the West, I taught the Four Thoughts, the four contemplations that turn the mind from samsara towards practice. With this as a foundation, I taught extensively the Buddhist concept of Refuge and gave the Refuge vows. I also encouraged practice of Chenrezi meditation by giving the initiation (*wang* [dbang]) and instruction (*tri* [’khrid]) for it wherever I went. The results I felt to be very favorable.

The concept of Refuge and actually taking Refuge are fundamental to Buddhist practice; without this initial commitment, any further level of ordination or involvement is impossible. Refuge is the indispensable foundation for travelling the Buddhist path to

*Tibetans often pronounce this mantra: OM MANEE PAYMAY HOONG.

enlightenment. During the actual refuge ceremony I gave ‘Refuge Names’ to the participants, each beginning with “Karma.” This is like a family or generic name, and indicates not only that these men and women had become Buddhists and had accepted the Three Jewels as sources of inspiration, but that they were connected, in particular, with the Karma Kagyü lineage. To the present day I have never changed my custom of giving this kind of Refuge name along with the vows of Refuge.

Because all meditational deities (*yidams*) are emanations of enlightenment, not one of them is without blessing—the power to aid and benefit beings. The form of Chenrezi, however, represents the quintessence and union of the love and compassion of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, of all enlightened beings. Meditation on Chenrezi can arouse that love and compassion in practitioners and thus can create a movement towards the realization of Emptiness and meditative absorption. That is why I chose this particular *yidam* to present to Western audiences.

The second journey I made to North America was in 1974. Because of the groundwork laid on my previous visit, I was able to present the Extraordinary Preliminary practices, the *Ngöndro* [sngon 'gro]. (These involve five practices each performed 100,000 times.) This stage of the teachings was emphasized during my second trip.

All the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism—Sakyapa, Gelugpa, Kagyüpa, and Nyingmapa—teach the Four Ordinary Foundations (the four thoughts that turn the mind towards Dharma practice) and the extraordinary preliminaries. I chose to teach the particular form of *Ngöndro* belonging to my own lineage, the Karma Kagyü; these practices are known as the preliminaries for the development of Mahāmudrā. In doing so, I encouraged people to focus on four aspects of meditation:

- To develop their devotion and sense of taking Refuge in the Three Jewels, and to develop bodhicitta—the enlightened or altruistic attitude of benefitting others which is based on love and compassion for all beings;
- To purify themselves of negative factors and obscurations through practicing the Dorje Sempa [rdo rje sems dpa'] meditation;

- To accumulate merit and deepen their awareness through the mandala offering; and
- To open themselves to the blessing of the lineage through Guru Yoga.

Another practice I introduced during this second visit was the practice of the Green Tara Meditation. This particular form of Tara is associated with her ability to protect and deliver us from fears and sufferings in this life and to aid us in our Dharma progress. With this threefold structure of formal practice—the preliminaries, the Chenrezi and the Green Tara Meditations—I established many centers that have continued to grow to the present day.

Although in each of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism there are lineages leading to complete enlightenment, and although there is no difference at that ultimate level between the schools, I felt very strongly that it was important to maintain the identity of the Kagyü lineage. There were several reasons for this. First, the transmission of blessing is likely to be broken if the lineages are confused or if there is a sudden breakdown in their continuity. Secondly, I felt it important for people to understand exactly each transmission of the teaching they were practicing, so that they could receive the particular blessing associated with that lineage. To keep this Kagyü Mahāmudrā lineage very clear, then, I composed a prayer to allow an unending identification on the disciple's part with the actual lineage of the Mahāmudrā teachings.

During my third visit, in 1977 and 1978, I felt it was time to take one more step in presenting the teachings, and I decided to emphasize especially what in Tibetan we call *shi nay* [zhi gnas] and *lha tong* [lhag mthong], respectively tranquility meditation and the meditation that develops insight into the nature of the mind. I emphasized both ordinary techniques, common to all schools of Buddhism, and also some special instructions which are particular to my lineage. This was the main focus of my third visit.

Up to this point quite a lot of ground had been covered. There had been a presentation of the particular preliminary practices associated with the Mahāmudrā lineage, and of the teachings of the Chenrezi meditation, and of the techniques of *shi nay* and *lha tong*.

When His Holiness the sixteenth Karmapa arrived in India from the West in 1980, he landed at Siliguri airport before travelling by car to Rumtek in Sikkim; everyone from my monastery came down from Darjeeling to meet him. He spent the night in a hotel in Siliguri, and that evening said something along these lines to me: "If we add them all up, we now have some three hundred twenty Kagyü centers throughout the world. Every one of them needs guidance and support so that the people associated with them can come to a pure and sincere practice of Buddhadharma. Now, even though you're quite old, you're presently enjoying good health, so it's necessary for you to go to the West again, to visit these centers and give them all the help and guidance you can."

His Holiness then insisted that I perform the Kalacakra Empowerment in New York City in order to aid the general process of transmitting the teachings to the West. He was quite firm about this. He wouldn't accept any answer but yes and wanted me to return to New York as soon as possible for this purpose. So I agreed and came here as soon as I could.

That Empowerment has now been given, and through receiving it, people have made a good connection with the teachings, since the Kalacakra may be considered a summit of the Vajrayana tradition. I feel, therefore, that at least one good foundation has been established for the presentation of Mahāmudrā, the pinnacle of Kagyü meditation. But in order to present these Teachings properly, I need first to discuss the concept of emptiness, or *Śūnyata*, and must first say something about the nature of consciousness. Without this I don't feel that actual Mahāmudrā teaching will be very effective or that people will be able to perceive its profundity or relate to it effectively. Nonetheless, certain foundations have been laid and I believe we can begin to think about the presentation of Mahāmudrā teachings. I sincerely hope that the benefits people have experienced so far will continue and help them benefit from further teachings that discuss the nature of mind.

In presenting teachings like these, I speak about anything and everything I can, as much as I can, in order to transmit what I understand about Dharma.

If we have a piece of white cloth and we want to dye it another color—red, yellow, green—we make a pot of dye and we dip the

cloth in. Now if that dye is effective, if it takes, the cloth changes color so that when we pull the cloth out it is no longer a white cloth but a green cloth or a red cloth or a yellow cloth. If we pull it out and it's still white, we know something's gone wrong, the dye hasn't taken. I feel the same way about teaching: if I teach and my teaching influences people's minds, changing their lives and benefiting them, then I feel that it has taken, that it has been effective. If on the other hand I teach and people don't understand, or having understood don't do anything about it, if they listen and don't practice, then the dye has not taken.