



## Biography of Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche



Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche was born in the area of Mon, at Lebo near Tso Na. The year was probably 1928. His father was Tsewang Dondrup, and mother Jampel. He was the middle one of three children. He entered the monastery of Tso Na at about the age of 13, under Gon Tsa Tulku. The original lineage of the monastery was from Jigme Lingpa, but at some point all of the monasteries in the area had been converted to Gelug, including Tso Na.

At about the age of 18, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche left Tso Na monastery and went to Bhutan, where he worked for about three years as a procurer for a businessman named Druk Shek Phuntsog Wangdu. He then returned back to his monastery, where he became a tutor, and then a custodial official (gon nyer). He performed many menial tasks, including gathering yak turds for fuel. After several years spent in such fruitless and unrewarding labor, he received the gift of a kapala (for inner offerings) from Gon Tsa Tulku, the head of the monastery, which created positive tendrel for his later practice of Dzog Chen. Then he decided to go to Lhasa on pilgrimmage.

In Lhasa, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche spent about a month in each of Drepung and Sera monasteries, and then he stayed for several years at the Ganden Jangtse Dratsang as an unofficial secretary and disciplinary official. He was not really studying the monastic curriculum. He did receive Getsul ordination while in Lhasa.

After being presented with the gift of Jetsun Mila's namtar(life-story), Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche gave rise to genuine renunciation for samsara, including the life of a minor monastery official, and decided he should emulate Milarepa's life example. He made many powerful aspiration prayers to this end.

Around this time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was making his first visit to India to meet Prime Minister Nehru. Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche left for India to meet His Holiness and to go on pilgrimage. He spent several months visiting the many holy places in North India, and then went over to Sikkim, and from there to Mugum Rong in Nepal. He spent several months in solitary retreat there, in the cave known as Jampalma, reciting the Mani. To this point in his life, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche was still nominally a Gelugpa, and had not met any Nyingma Lamas.

It was there that Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche met a traveling Lama named Serta(tSé-tar) Rinpoche, from Kham. Serta Rinpoche was already quite elderly. His root guru was the first Pema Degyal Rinpoche from Namkha Chung Dzong, who had been an actual disciple of Dudjom Lingpa. (Later, Pema Degyal accepted rebirth as the son of Serta Rinpoche).

Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche had spontaneous faith in Serta Rinpoche, and asked him for instruction. When asked what his dharma lineage was, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche replied that he was Gelugpa. Serta Rinpoche said he did not have any Gelugpa teachings to bestow, so Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche requested teachings from Serta Rinpoche's own lineage. Serta Rinpoche, seeing his faith, directed Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche to come to Mogu Karma Rong later on, when he would be teaching and giving empowerments to a large group of monks.

As directed, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche went to Karma Rong, where he received a complete set of empowerments for Troma, including a precious Rigpa Tsal Wong. He also received complete instructions on both the ngon dro and ngo shi practices of this cycle. He then traveled back with Serta Rinpoche to Namkha Chung Dzong,(a Ngakpa "monastery") where they traveled around a lot, never staying anywhere for very long, and sometimes passed by and practiced at Mt. Kailash. Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche felt that, in Serta Rinpoche, he had met Jetsun Mila in person, as this Lama lived very simply. At the time of Serta Rinpoche's passing, Lama Thubten observed his body shrink to the size of an eight year old child. Later, when Serta Rinpoche accepted rebirth, Lama Thubten saw this in his mind immediately and appeared at the door of the yang sid's family home the morning after his birth, with an offering of a silk scarf. He told the family that he knew his teacher had just been reborn there.

It was from Serta Rinpoche that Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche had learned that Dudjom Rinpoche would be bestowing many great empowerments in Kalimpong. When he heard the name of Dudjom Rinpoche, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche cried with faith and longing. He made his way to Kalimpong, where he received all of the Rinchen Terdzod, the Nyingma Gyubum, the Kama Gyud, and other teachings. This

would have been 1962. There were thousands of lamas, monks and lay people in attendance

After these empowerments during the daytime, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche received private teachings at night from Dungsay Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, on Guru Yoga and other topics.

After Kalimpong, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche was part of a group of eight monks who were put in charge of a hermitage in Tso Pema for which Mi Nyak Khenpo (from Tibet) was responsible. This hermitage had been offered to Dudjom Rinpoche. There the monks continually performed Kilaya practice in the caves above Tso Pema, though they were not in strict retreat. Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche continued his Troma ngon dro practice as well. This was near the famous lake of Yeshe Tsogyal. News arrived that Dudjom Rinpoche was going to journey to Pema Kod, but for political reasons, the border areas and roads were closed, so that no one could journey to the Pay Yul (hidden lands). So instead of Pema Kod, Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche went to Orissa, where he remained for five years in retreat. (He actually built a retreat hut up in a tree, and has remained a great tree climber to this day, even with part of his foot missing.) It was in this period that Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche received Gelong ordination from Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche.

Through a personal connection (through the 2nd Degyal Rinpoche), Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche next found himself in Umla, where he stayed in the Ratna Karka Pug (cave) in retreat, including a three month dark retreat. He then moved down below to the Yangrak Taklung Pug, where he repeated his ngondro. While in that retreat he encountered a major obstacle, as he dreamed that his father had just passed away (which was true), which left him troubled and unable to remain in retreat.

He then stayed on with a local household in nearby Yangri. He met a young girl in the household named Pema Khandro, whose parents, after her birth, had decided that one day they would offer her as a consort to a worthy practitioner. And so, in time, she was offered to Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche, and he accepted her. He for the time being returned his gelong vows, and they married. They conceived a child (Lama Dawa) a year or two later. They lived in Bakri (Umla) for about 15 years.

Before his marriage, he had a posting from the Nepalese government to serve as the local religious official, and so Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche undertook single handedly to build a small temple in that place. One time there were many sick and dying sheep in that valley, as the grasses were tainted in some way. Using special healing mantras and blessed salts, Lama Thubten was able to avert the obstacle, such that the sheep could graze again without any harm.

Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche at one point went to Boudhonath to obtain guidance from Dudjom Rinpoche regarding the construction of the temple. Dudjom Rinpoche told him that, as there was a history of warfare in that area, he should construct statues of Dorje Drollo, Guru Rinpoche Nang Sid Zil Non, and Tuppa'i Wangpo. This he did.

He also regularly performed healing chod practice for local people, as there was no medical facility in the area.

Later, some conflict arose with the principal gyindak of the temple, a certain Nag Shang from Assam. Lama Thubten had some special zi stones which he intended to put inside the statues, along with other precious and blessed substances. The gyindak thought the stones were too valuable and ought to be sold, so Lama crushed them into a powder and put them in the statues to ensure that they would not be looted. This made the gyindak furious, and so Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche simply walked away from his position and went down to Kathmandu with his family.

They all obtained an interview with Dungsay Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and he advised them to complete ten million Vajra Guru mantras for each member of the family. They went to stay in Yangleshu, in Pharping, to accomplish this, where Lama Thubten Phuntsog Rinpoche remained in informal retreat for three years. Only after completing this mantra practice did Lama then meet Chadral Rinpoche, who became his next great teacher. Chadral Rinpoche told them to settle in Yolmo, which they did. Lama Thubten had been living and practicing intensively in Yolmo for some years when Khenpo Chimay Tsering asked him to come over to New York to help with his fledgling Pema Tsal dharma center. Even though he was already quite old, and had never been to the west, Lama Thubten consented to go if it would benefit beings. Lama-la has been here ever since.

He has practiced Chod in 108 charnel grounds. He has been a strict vegetarian for many, many years, emulating Chadral Rinpoche, out of great compassion for the suffering of beings. While in retreat at Blazing Wisdom in 2004-2005, for example, he asked his attendants not to cut grass or do any outdoor work that was likely to harm insects and other beings, though he did build flagpoles and hang hundreds of prayer flags from the trees by himself. He also is expert in constructing Mani prayer-wheels, and has left many wind and water powered Mani-wheels throughout Tibet, India and Nepal marking his passage. During his seven years in the U.S., Lama Thubten has gathered many disciples, to whom he has taught the preliminaries, Chod, and other practices. He has repeatedly conferred sem tri on the essential unity of emptiness and clarity, infused with compassion, in accordance with his own realization.

