DZONGSAR NGARI CHÖDJE THINGO RINPOCHE (1945-2008) A SHORT OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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Our beloved Ven. Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Thingo Rinpoche passed away very peacefully on the morning of May 20, 2008 at Cologne. Ngari Tulku has been a great scholar, radiating happiness and kindness wherever he went. He helped many in this world to achieve true Dharma and become better human beings.

Late Ven. Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Thingo Tulku was recognised at the age of one and a half as the 17th in line of Ngari Choedje of the monastery of Derge Dzongsar Tashi Lhatse in Kham, eastern Tibet, now part of the Chinese province of Sichuan. He was the Abbot and Throne-Holder of the Dzongsar Monastery until he passed away on the day of Saga Dawa. His 'shegu', or 49th day after his passing away, fell on July 8, the anniversary of his late great master H.E. Vajradhara Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe (1894-1959), who had recognized Ngari Rinpoche as the incarnation of his predecessor Champa Kunsang Sherab Tulku (1877-1942), the 16th in line of Ngari Choedje.

The 17th Ngari Choedje Rinpoche was born in Terlung, district of Me-shod in Derge, Kham, on January 10, 1945, in the 16th Rabjung Wood Bird year. His father, Tsering Dhondup, was from the Thingo Tsang family and his mother, Kalsang Tso, was originally from the Galu Tsang family. Ngari Rinpoche's Dharma name, given by H.E. Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe was Tsering Tashi, and his Dharma name, given by Ven. Ngor Khangsar Khenchen Ngawang Khyentse Thupten Nyingpo, was Shenphen Thinley Norbu Nyingpo. His Dharma name bestowed upon him by H.H. late 16th Gyalwang Kharmapa was Karma Tenzing Khedrup Gyamtso.

Until the age of twelve, Ven. Ngari Tulku received his classic Buddhist education—consisting of liturgy, literature and philosophy at the Dzongsar Monastery as one its three throne-holders where he also mastered the Buddhist ritual practices and learnt about pre-Buddhist traditions and Tibetan Medicine.

The Dzongsar Monastery was founded in 1275 by Ven. Drogon Choegyal Phakpa (1235-1280) on his way back from China. The complex comprises of 23 large and small temples with more than 300 rooms. Choegyal Phagpa was one of the five great masters of the Sakya school to which the Dzongsar Monastery belongs. Ngari Rinpoche was

educated in the Ngor Sakya tradition, founded at Dzongsar Monastery by the Ven. Ngor Khenchen Palden Chokyong (1702-1758) where H.E. Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe had been Ngari Rinpoche's main spiritual teacher. At the time, he also received, among others, teachings in Shamatha meditation from H.H. Dilgo Khyentse. In 1957, Ngari Rinpoche accompanied Dzongsar Khyentse to Gangtok's Palace Monastery where they had been invited to stay by the Chogyal of Sikkim. At the age of 13, Ngari Rinpoche went for further teachings to Central Tibet at the Ngor Monastery where he received ordination as well as the Sutra, Tripitaka and Tantric teachings from H.E. Khangsar Khenchen Ngawang Khyentse Thupten Nyingpo and Buddhist logic teachings together with Ven. Khando Tulku and Ven. Khenpo Dawa Tsering from Khenchen Dosib Thubten Gyaltsen. From Ven. Khenchen Appey Rinpoche he obtained several important teachings including Shantideva's Way of the Bodhisattva. Ngari Rinpoche knew this text by heart and could give a commentary on any section of it at any moment.

He then visited Lhasa and the Sakya Monastery of H.H. Sakya Trizin, with whom, together with his spouse Gyalyum Chenmo, he kept a close relation until his last days. He traveled to the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo in the Tibetan province of Tsang for further education but was eventually compelled to return to Sikkim following the deteriorating situation in Tibet. Ngari Rinpoche could never again revisit his home country and only re-met his brother forty three years later in Kathmandu.

When his root master Dzongsar Khyentse Choekyi Lodroe passed away in 1959 in Sikkim, Ngari Tulku went to Kalimpong with his General Secretary Jamyang Zangpo to study with H.H. late Dudjom Rinpoche for some time, who also became one of his root masters. He obtained the Rinchen Terdzod teaching from him before returning to Sikkim. He then again studied with H.H. late Dilgo Khyentse, one of his main revered root teachers, who introduced him further to the practice of Dzogchen, as Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche later did.

Ngari Tulku was then invited by the Gyalyum or Queen Mother of Sikkim to study at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok with the Director, Prof. Nirmal C. Sinha. He studied at the NIT as a scholarship holder under the Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, Govt. of India. He was one of the first students of the Institute where together with Ven. Mynak R. Tulku and Ven. Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, he studied Sanskrit, Hindi and English. They obtained their Buddhist philosophy teachings from Ven. Khenpo Lodroe Sangpo, the founder abbot of the Sakya Sa-Ngor Monastery near Gangtok, where Ngari Rinpoche became one of the founding members and trustees of the Sakya-Ngor Choetzog. Until recently, Rinpoche would perform Long Life initiation rituals and give special talks on Dharma at the monastery at the request of the Derge Mani Dündrup Association when visiting Sikkim.

In those early days in Gangtok, Ngari Tulku also studied grammar, poetry and astrology with Prof. Barshi Kungmo from Tibet and was one of the founding members of the Sikkim Manjusri Trust for Himalayan Cultural and Religious Heritage.

Ngari Tulku received important initiations and teachings from H.H. the late 16th Gyalwang Karmapa at Rumtek Monastery. It was H.H. the Karmapa together with the Chogyal of Sikkim who, in 1965, sent Ngari Rinpoche to England to help Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Ven. Akong Rinpoche establish a Buddhist centre there as well as to look after the young Sikkimese princes who were then studying in the UK. During this period, Ngari Rinpoche worked together with Prof. David Snellgrove, Hugh Richardson and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf on the translation of Tibetan texts at Oxford and London. Some of his early students at that time were Michael and Anthony Aris as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, the later pro-democratic leader of Myanmar, who wanted to learn Tibetan language with him.

Invited by Mark Oppitz, Ngari Rinpoche visited Germany for the first time in the winter of 1965 to work together with him at the Institute of Ethnology in Cologne where Rinpoche became a member of the institute's research team lead by Prof. F.-W. Funke. The team studied Sherpa culture in the Khumbu-Himal area of Nepal, a project involving several scientists over a number of years. During this period, Rinpoche helped F.-W. Funke publish a book on the religious life of the Sherpa, and together with Marlies Schmidt-Thome, wrote a comprehensive book—the most fundamental work so far—on the material culture of the Sherpa.

From 1966, Ngari Thingo Rinpoche was invited to give lectures at the University of Toronto on Buddhism and Buddhist Art where Rinpoche studied restoration techniques and became a specialist in the conservation of paintings and thangkas. At that time, he gave many teachings to the students of Ven. Ananda Bodhi in Canada. One event that late Rinpoche always used to recall with joy was his memorable meeting with the great composer and conductor Igor Strawinsky in Toronto, who introduced him to western classical music. Rinpoche became a great admirer of Strawinsky and from then on loved to listen

to classical music. Being surrounded by artists who wanted to learn about Buddhist art and thangka painting, Rinpoche developed a love for painting. Inspired by western expressive styles, he started painting in a more figurative way and even had an exhibition in Toronto. Back again in Germany, Ngari Thingo Rinpoche met with well known artists such as Sigmar Polke and even worked for some time with Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf.

Another interest of Rinpoche was the promotion of Tibetan Medicine in the West which he worked on with personalities such as Prof. Marlene Putscher, Director of the Institute for the History of Medicine in Cologne and with well known Theologian Pater Cyrill von Corvin-Krasinski at the German Benedictine Monastery of Maria Laach.

In 1974-75, together with Prof. Roger Goepper, the Director of the Museum of East Asian Art, Rinpoche wrote a catalogue and developed the exhibition for one of the first Tibetan Buddhist collections in Europe—the Collection Schulemann. Rinpoche was then invited to give teachings, initiations and transmissions by different Buddhist centres in Europe and gave lectures on Buddhism, Buddhist art history and Himalayan anthropology at various universities in Europe and the United States. He organised a number of exhibitions on Buddhist art at various European museums as he had chosen this as his medium to bring western audiences to understand Buddhist art catalogues and publications such as the catalogue 'Leeidrad bij de Meditatie over de Sarvavid' in Antwerp in 1980, and did so in different languages since he was fluent in nine including Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Sikkimese, English, German and French.

Rinpoche helped organise the early visits of H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama to Germany and Switzerland, and it is still remembered that he arranged an official meeting with H.H. the Dalai Lama and the then Ministerpresident of the District of Rheinland-Pfalz, Dr. Helmut Kohl, which in those days was an important gesture from a politician. However, just before the scheduled meeting in October 1982, Dr. Kohl was unexpectedly elected in an overthrow of the old German Government as the new Chancellor of Germany, and in this new function was no longer able to meet with His Holiness, in order not to offend the Chinese. In this rather awkward situation, Ngari Rinpoche instead organised a meeting with the Archbishop Cardinal of Cologne. At the invitation of Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the City of Cologne H.H. the Dalai Lama visited the city again in 1989 to grace the exhibition 'Götter des Himalaya' with his presence. This exhibition was under the patronage of His Holiness, who had requested Ngari Thingo Tulku to help Gerd Wolfgang Essen to compile one of the most important collections of Buddhist art and prepare a publication, which became a double volume catalogue, published by late Rinpoche and G.-W. Essen. This important Buddhist art exhibition traveled to many museums in Europe and second catalogue on the life of the great Master Padmasambhava was later published in this context by late Rinpoche and G.-W. Essen. Moreover, His Holiness had wished that Ngari Rinpoche should work on the collection of statues of H.H. the Dalai Lama at the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives in Dharamsala, but unfortunately his life was too short to complete that project.

Among the many retreats late Rinpoche conducted in his life, a very memorable one was the Vajrakila retreat he carried out in Gangtok at his General Secretary's house for six months in 1991. In the following years, Ngari Thingo was involved in the preparation of various documentaries on Tibetan Buddhism and the Himalayan area for ZDF, ARTE and ARD, and worked in this regard with different well known film producers, including Theo Baltz and Sabine Christiansen. He introduced them to H.H. the Dalai Lama in 1993 and helped them develop a film and a book on Tibetan history. At that time he has been appointed as the Vice-Chairman of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, German Chapter.

In 1995, Rinpoche settled in Paris where was appointed as an adviser to UNESCO. In order to conclude the World Decade of Cultural Development, he was requested together with Susanne von der Heide to publish a catalogue and prepare an exhibition on 'Changing Faces of Nepal—The Glory of Asia's Past' at the UNESCO headquarters, Paris, in 1997.

In 1997, Rinpoche moved to Kathmandu where together with Susanne von der Heide, he founded the HimalAsia Cultural Heritage and Educational Foundation and Institute, whose Chairman he was until his last days. The HimalAsia Foundation promotes and develops social projects such as schools, Amchi clinics and income generating programs for women, but also supports preservation of the cultural and natural heritage in certain areas of the Himalaya. Ngari Tulku was particularly keen to initiate schools for young nuns and monks, in order to extend good education to children, in particular girls, thus helping revive the Buddhist Dharma in remote areas of the Himalaya.

Ngari Thingo Rinpoche always supported activities to safeguard the threatened biodiversity of the Himalayas and therefore supported projects for the protection and preservation of threatened medicinal plants. The HimalAsia Foundation was involved from 2003 until recently in a bio-prospecting project in collaboration with the Botany Department and RECAST Institute of the Tribhuvan University in Nepal and the VW- Foundation Germany, to discover, collect and taxonomically identify plants in selected regions of Nepal, and to determine their ethno-medical use, in order to identify and document them. Under the patronage of Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche, the first International Amchi Conference in Nepal took place at the HimalAsia Institute at Durga Bhawan in January 2004.

Around that time, Rinpoche established the Tibeto-Himalayan Herbal Medicine Remedy Institute at the Dzongsar Khyentse Mentsal Monastery in Gyalshing, West Sikkim, a place in the mountains where he liked to perform his retreats and give teachings, since Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Thupten Choekyi Gyantso, the reincarnation of his first spiritual guide and root master, spent his early years at this place.

Ngari Rinpoche was involved with the HimalAsia Foundation in various restoration and documentation projects with UNESCO and other institutions, as for example the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the German Foreign Office. A restoration project was launched in 2001/2 to protect the Ku-Tsab-Ter-Nga Monastery in Mustang where the great Indian master Padmasambhava had supposedly stayed on his journey to Tibet. Another memorable event was the documentation 'The Kathmandu Valley—Then and Now', marking the UNESCO International Safeguarding Campaign 1977-2001, which HimalAsia carried out in collaboration with UNESCO in 2001 and 2002 at different places in the Kathmandu Valley.

There was also the 14 days workshop held in 2005 for restoration specialists from museums and monasteries in India, Bhutan and Nepal on the 'Restoration and Conservation of Thangkas', under the patronage of late Rinpoche, organised by HimalAsia in collaboration with UNESCO and conducted at the Shechen Monastery in Bodhnath, which will remain in our memories. Unforgettable are his lectures on the history of Tibetan Buddhist art and the evolution of different styles of paintings that Ngari Thingo Rinpoche held every morning during the workshop, and the kind advice and explanations he gave concerning restoration. Fortunately, UNESCO produced a film of this workshop to promote the monastic heritage of the Himalayas. Rinpoche has been working together with Susanne von der Heide on two books: the first on the 'Development of Early Buddhist Art in Mustang' following their discovery of several ancient cave-temples in that area, and another on the 'Achievements and Challenges of Himalayan Medicine in Nepal'. Moreover, he had composed in recent years several significant Buddhist texts in Tibetan language and gave transmissions and teachings, for example, on the practice of Buddha Shakyamuni and the ritual of Chimey Pamey Nyingtik from the Khyentse/Dzongsar tradition.

Ngari Tulku was married and has one son. In Germany he had just established a new Dzongsar Ngari Dharma Mati Centre near Detmold in a beautiful forest area, were he wanted to conduct his retreats, give teachings on his traditional Rimed path and carry out further scientific studies. We hope that his reincarnation will use this special place in the future and we look forward to a swift rebirth of our beloved Dzongsar Ngari Choedje Rinpoche.

He was a living example of the enlightened path of Bodhicitta.

I would like to especially thank Mr. Jamyang Zangpo, General Secreatry of Dzongsar Ngari Labrang and Lodroe Phuntsok, General Secretary of the Dzongsar Monastery in Tibet as well as Dzongsar Khenpo Khyenrab Wangchuk, Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, Prof. Mark Oppitz, Lotsawa Andreas Kretschmar and Matthew Akester for their comments and support while writing this obituary.

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116 KUNGAYONTEN HOCHOTSANG