

The Venerable Khandro Rinpoche

By Laurie Bodley

During her annual North American retreat, which now takes place at Lotus Garden, her *Rimé* (non-sectarian) practice center in Virginia, the Venerable Khandro Rinpoche has her most senior students sit in the front rows. She calls on them first to answer questions, and often proceeds rapidly from one student to the next to give as many as possible the chance to speak and experience being on the spot. When she catches any student being unkind, she is unrelenting. "You cannot sit here in the shrine room serenely practicing and then walk out that door and treat each other badly ... If you meditate in perfect peace and then flash someone an irritable look because they make noise or their child cries, you are entirely missing the point," she will say in her precise English with a slight Tibetan accent.

Khandro Rinpoche is one of the most renowned Tibetan teachers currently teaching in the West. Her knowledge of the dharma is vast, her desire to share it insatiable.

Khandro Tsering Paldrön was born in the monastery of Zangdok Palri in Kalimpong, India. The Sixteenth Karmapa Rigpe Dorje and His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche recognized her as the reincarnation of Khandro Ugyen Tsomo, consort to the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakyab Dorje, and one of the most well known female masters of her time.

Ugyen Tsomo became H.H. Karmapa Khakyab Dorje's consort at the age of sixteen in fulfillment of dreams instructing him to take a consort who was an emanation of the yogini Yeshe Tsogyal, in order to prolong his life. Ugyen Tsomo was this emanation. His Holiness was seriously ill, and she prolonged his life for nine years by performing a purification practice called Dorje Namdjoma every day. After His Holiness passed away, Ugyen Tsomo lived at the retreat center in Tsurphu doing many retreats and guiding others. She became known as the Great Khandro of Tsurphu. When the nuns who attended Ugyen Tsomo at her



The Venerable Khandro Rinpoche
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time of death asked her to take birth again, she explained that she would take rebirth in Zangdok Palri.

Khandro Rinpoche is the daughter of His Holiness the Eleventh Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche and Sangyum Sonam Paldrön. The Mindrolling monastery is one of the most important Nyingma monasteries within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The Mindrolling tradition is unusual because it contains three lines: the Trichen family line in which each head of the lineage is the child of the previous lineage holder, the Khenchen line of vinaya holders who bestow the precepts on Mindrolling's monks, and the Jetsunma line, which is a line of many great female masters.

Beginning with Jetsun Mingyur Paldrön (1699 to 1769), the daughter of Chögyal Terdag Lingpa, up to Khandro

Rinpoche herself, Jetsunmas have been the daughters of various Mindrolling Trichens over the years. The activities of the Jetsunmas continue a tradition that can be traced back to such remarkable women as Yeshe Tsogyal, disciple of Padmasambhava; Machik Lapdrön, known for developing Mahamudra Chöd (applying Buddhist teachings to transform negative mind states into compassion and fearlessness); in addition to Khandro Ugyen Tsomo.

Khandro Rinpoche holds the lineages of both Nyingma and Kagyü schools, and received teachings and transmissions from some of the most accomplished masters of the twentieth century. These include H.H. the Dalai Lama, H.H. Mindrolling Trichen Rinpoche, H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, H.E. Trulshig Rinpoche, H.E. Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche, H.E. Tenga Rinpoche, and H.E. Tülku Ugyen Rinpoche. She completed a Western education from St. Joseph's Convent, Wynberg Allen, and St. Mary's Convent, all in India. She speaks English, Tibetan, and various Hindi dialects fluently and began teaching in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia in 1987.

In addition to helping her father in Mindrolling Monastery in Dehra Dun, India, she runs the Samten Tse Retreat Center, which she started in 1993 in nearby Mussoorie. Mindrolling Monastery is home to about five hundred monastics, and Samten Tse provides a place of study and retreat for forty-five nuns (both Eastern and Western) and twenty-five Western lay practitioners.

Khandro Rinpoche also runs various charitable institutions and projects. These include projects of Buddhist education and scholarship, health care and education in remote areas, the Leprosy Project, and supporting the activities of the Tibetan Women's Association. Rinpoche also supports the activities of some other monasteries.

In an open letter she wrote to her Western students last December, Khandro Rinpoche ends by saying, "Please continue to practice and engage in all activities with awareness and compassion. Be kind to one another and practice the precious Dharma with a sincere heart." This is what she teaches through words and by example every day. •

Khandro Lhamo

By Greg Zwhalen

She was a fearless and devoted practitioner and played a key role in expanding Shechen Nunnery in Bhutan, which is a model of education and practice for women. She spent her life in practice and contemplation while also leading an active life as the wife of one of the greatest and most influential teachers of the twentieth century.

By all accounts, Khandro Lhamo was a remarkable woman. The longtime wife of His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Khandro-la was also an accomplished practitioner, a skilled doctor of Tibetan medicine, and the revered matriarch of Shechen, a "mother monastery" of the Nyingma lineage where Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche undertook much of his training.

The circumstances of her birth, in Eastern Tibet to a farming family of modest means, did not augur the extraordinary life she would lead. Women such as she could have expected to endure closely circumscribed existences, marked by hard labor and perhaps by early death in childbirth or by disease. Khandro-la's dramatic shift of fortune began with an admonition rendered in verse:

*The young yogi with an A on his forehead
From the virtuous family of Sakar mansion,
To prolong his life, should wed the maiden born
in the Wood Tiger year.*

Khyentse Rinpoche, the yogi to which the verse was understood to refer, had become seriously ill. As a *terton* (a person who finds hidden teachings) he was expected to take a consort, and one of his main gurus, the illustrious Rimé leader Dzongsar Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, believed that if he didn't take one soon he would die. Arrangements were made to locate an appropriate girl. Khandro-la would later learn that the above verse, drawn from a religious text, was a decisive factor in her selection.

A party of lamas appeared at her home and led her through a dense forest to the small wooden hut that served as Khyentse Rinpoche's hermitage. Fearing she would not agree to be his consort, they did not tell her the reason for the trip. She would later joke that had she known the role she was to fill, "at least I would have been able to get ready and put on something nice."



Khandro Lhamo. Photographer unknown

When she encountered him for the first time, he appeared to be near death and not at all enthusiastic about the prospect of married life. As she recalled, "Rinpoche himself did not seem the slightest bit interested in having a wife. He did not care whether he died or not, he said; he only got married because his teacher had told him to. But after my arrival his health seemed to improve. One day he was up and about ... and he asked me to come and eat with him."

Khandro-la would thereafter see her husband most often during meals, joined by his brother. Otherwise, he spent nearly all of his time in silent meditation sessions. Rinpoche spoke little—only between lunch and dinner—and slept sitting up in a wooden box, in a retreat hut near the family house. The hut was too small to store texts or hold a shrine so Khandro-la fetched his texts and maintained the potted flowers that adorned a shrine on the veranda.

Khyentse Rinpoche and Khandro Lhamo were together for many years in Tibet, in retreat and traveling throughout the country. She remembered seeing Rinpoche perform many miracles, and received every empowerment he gave and many that he received. They had two daughters together.

When the Chinese invaded Tibet in the late 1950s, Khandro-la played a crucial role in Rinpoche's escape. Khandro-la was able to forward him a secret warning directing him to flee Kham to Lhasa. Then she made a daring escape of her own to join him. When, a few months later, the authorities were closing in on them again, Khandro-la skillfully deceived them, buying enough time for the family to flee once more.

The family settled first in India, where their youngest daughter died not long after their arrival.

The family later moved to Bhutan, at the request of the royal family, where Khyentse Rinpoche became a schoolteacher. Their eldest daughter, Chime Wangmo, gave birth to a son in 1966. The Sixteenth Karmapa recognized him as the Seventh Shechen Rabjam, successor to the founder of Shechen monastery. From the age of three, he was raised by Khyentse Rinpoche and received every empowerment his grandfather gave during their more than twenty years together.

The first monastic center that Khyentse Rinpoche founded was a nunnery, Shechen Orgyen Chozong in Bhutan. In 1980 Khandro-la and Trulshik Rinpoche, Khyentse Rinpoche's main disciple, proposed construction of a small monastery in Nepal as the future seat of Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche. Khyentse Rinpoche liked the idea and decided to build a grand, new Shechen monastery, which eventually became one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the diaspora. Khandro-la took an active role in its construction and maintenance. She also served as a medical doctor to close students and visiting teachers.

Khyentse Rinpoche died in 1991, and Khandro-la thereafter concentrated her energy on Shechen Orgyen Chozong Nunnery. She passed away at the age of ninety, after a brief illness, in March 2003, in Nepal, with her daughter, her grandson, and other lamas by her side. Her death was accompanied by signs of accomplishment befitting a practitioner as distinguished as she. •