

*The Life of*  
*Thrangu Rinpoche*  
**with Pictures**

**Note:** This Summary of Thrangu Rinpoche's Life and his activities is obviously not complete. If you want to make corrections or add something, please send it (and/or Photos) to Clark Johnson at [clarkjohnson2011@gmail.com](mailto:clarkjohnson2011@gmail.com).

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Picture 1

*Picture taken of Thrangu Rinpoche in 2013*

*The Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche was born in 1933 and is the Ninth incarnation of the Thrangu Tulkus. Because Thrangu Rinpoche's monastery and all its records were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, there are only scant records of his early life. In this text, we have combined several written accounts that have been translated into English into a coherent biography. The sources of these accounts can be found in the footnotes.*

## THE THRANGU LINEAGE

### **The Nine Thrangu Tulkus are:**

1. Nyedon Drubgyu Singye
2. Drubwang Karma Namgyal
3. Karma Rigsang
4. Karma Gedun Singye
5. Karma Sherab Gyatso
6. Karma Kunkyab Nyima
7. Karma Nyedon Gyatso
8. Karma Thinley Rabgye
9. Karma Lodro Rigluk Mawy Senge, the present Thrangu Rinpoche

*There is a wonderful book on the Thrangu Lineage called The Glory of the Dharma<sup>1</sup> which has a painting of each of the Thrangu lineage holders, a brief biography of each in Tibetan and English and a calligraphy of the holder's name done by His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa. A painting and biography of each of the Thrangu Tulkus can also be downloaded from [www.rinpoche.com](http://www.rinpoche.com) under "biographies" and then "A Precious Line of the Thrangu Tulkus."*

*Below is a much briefer recounting of the Thrangu Lineage given by Khenpo Kathar.<sup>2</sup>*

"The texts which had the sacred biographies of the seven Thrangu Rinpoches were burned during the Chinese invasion of Tibet; so I (Khenpo Karthar) must rely on what I remember and what I have heard."

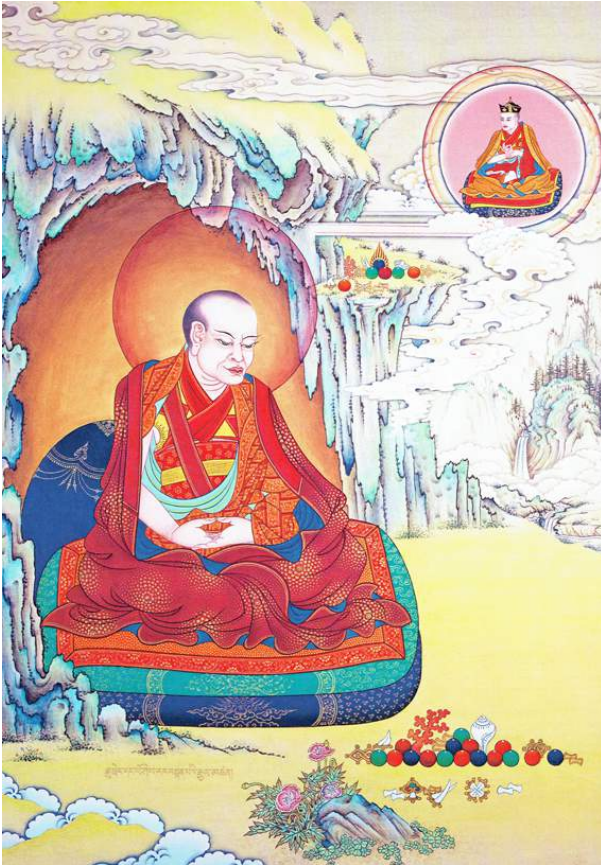
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<sup>1</sup> *The Glory of Dharma*, Published by Thrangu Monastery in Canada, 2012. The website [rinpoche.com](http://rinpoche.com) under "biographies" and then "The Precious line of Thrangu Gurus has each biography and a color picture of the Thrangu Tulku.

<sup>2</sup> Talk by Khenpo Karthar on the Thrangu Lineage given at Gampo Abbey on June 29, 1991. Translated by Jules Levinson.

## THE FIRST THRANGU LAMA, SHERAB GYAMTSO

The first Thrangu lama appeared at the time of the seventh Gyalwa Karmapa (1454-1506) whose name was Chodrak Gyamtso. The name of that Thrangu lama was Sherab Gyamtso. In a previous lifetime he has been one of the 25 close students of Guru Rinpoche whose name was Shuwu Palgyu Senge. That was the family name and Palgyu Senge means “Glorious Lion.” He took birth as the first Thrangu lama and was the Lord of the Teachings of the Thrangu monastery.



Picture 2

*Painting of the First Thrangu Rinpoche with the Seventh Karmapa in the background.*

## THE SIXTH THRANGU TULKU

The Sixth Thrangu lama, Kunkhyab Nyima, (which means “all-pervading sun”) was particularly skilled in the practice of Inner Heat (Tib. *tummo*). At the age of 40, Kunkhyab Nyima together

with four monks went to a snow mountain that was near the monastery which was a place that had been blessed by Padmasambhava (Tib. Guru Rinpoche) and where hundreds of people would circumambulate. He went with four monks and while they were climbing up the mountain there was an avalanche. The Sixth Thrangu lama was buried in the snow and the four monks he was with were swept away but didn't die. But the Thrangu lama was completely under the snow and there was nothing to be done except to wait for the summer when the snow melted and recover the body. So the Sixth Thrangu tulku remained there and eight months later when the monks went back to where the Thrangu lama had been lost, they found that the snow had completely melted away around him and in the center he was sitting in meditation. They were delighted and ran up to him to grab him. When they touched him, a little trickle of blood came from his nose and at that point they killed him because when someone is in deep meditation, you can't just jerk them out of it suddenly. Had they treated him gently he probably wouldn't have died.

#### THE EIGHTH THRANGU TULKU, TENZIN THRINLEY RABGYE



Picture 3  
*Painting of The Eighth Thrangu Tulku*

The Eighth Thrangu Tulku was born in Tibet in a place called Rum-bo. His father was a *nagpa* who is someone married with a household, but at the same time practices meditation and also magic. This Eighth Tulku came from an extremely poor family and at this time Thrangu monastery was also extremely poor because the previous Thrangu incarnation had not gone out and travelled around and done all the things necessary to raise money. The previous Thrangu tulku also died very young before he could benefit the monastery. Even though the family and monastery were poor, the young tulku told the lamas from Thrangu Monastery, “When you look at me, you just see a poor boy. But in the future, the great landowners and high lamas in this area will come to see me and will make great offerings. Right now all I have is a goat with a little beard that hangs down. But in the future I will have a wonderful large horse with a splendid saddle to ride on.” This is what Tendzin Rabgye said as a small child.

This eighth Thrangu Tulku, Tendzin Rabgye, was then taken to Thrangu monastery and there he engaged in the discipline and study of his monastery. When he had completed his studies, he was taken to Tsurphu to receive teachings from the 15th Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje (1872-1922). He received the oral instructions and practices of the Kagyu Lineage from the Karmapa. Having received these precious practices he became renowned throughout Tibet as having extraordinary qualities, great potency, and remarkable enlightened activity.

When Tendzin Rabgye received teachings from the 15th Karmapa, the Karmapa instructed him not to spend time studying the sutras and normal philosophical Buddhist texts but to simply practice the quintessential instructions.<sup>3</sup>

He was quite different from many other lamas of his time. In particular, when people were sick, he cured them. They would come to him and just by blowing his breath at them, he would be able to cure their illnesses. Or when people would come with illnesses that no medicine could cure, he would touch them with his hand and they would be healed. One time during a great celebration Tendzin Rabgye mounted a large horse with a splendid saddle and took out a jeweled sword and rode up and down along

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<sup>3</sup> These are the oral instructions by one’s lama (or guru) about how to practice and realize the nature of mind.

the crowds at a very alarming pace waving the jeweled sword. When he did so, many people's illnesses in the crowds were cured and it is well known in Tibet that using a sword in this way is an indication of having achieved great achievements or *siddhis*. In this way he was known as a lama with great ability or power.

In Tibet it is customary to go to a high lama and ask for advice about the future to guide one's life. Quite frequently people would come to this eighth Thrangu tulku and ask about difficulties they were having with livelihood, or with their health, and ask about what they should do. Rinpoche did not give vague predictions to these persons but gave very precise predictions such as "in two years, such and such will take place. Until that time the situation won't improve, but at that time you should do such and such."

Thrangu monastery was about fifteen days by horse from a monastery where the people supporting the monastery were all followers of the Gelug tradition. This monastery was also the birthplace of Kalu Rinpoche. These people were mostly traders and businessmen but they would come all the way to Thrangu monastery to get advice and in return give great offerings. That is how Thrangu monastery became wealthy as predicted by the Eighth Thrangu Tulku when he was a small boy.

This Eighth Thrangu Tulku didn't spend much time studying, but devoted himself to practice as he had been advised by his root guru the Fifteenth Karmapa who had also advised a great many other Kagyu lamas at the time to spend their time practicing instead of studying. The reason for this was that there was a very influential khenpo in Kham named Khenpo Shenga (1871-1927) to whom these Kagyu lamas would have gone to receive teachings. This khenpo was trained principally in the Nyingma and Sakya traditions, moreover, this khenpo was said to have been the rebirth of a student of the great translator Vairochana of the eighth century who had broken his samaya with Vairochana. The Fifteenth Karmapa therefore felt that to establish a relationship with this particular khenpo would create great obstacles for the spiritual progress of these students, so he advised them to practice meditation instead of studying. So Tendzin Rabgye spent his time practicing and was not very learned in Dharma and did not do a great deal of teaching.

Towards the end of Tendzin Rabgye's life, the famous lama Mipham Rinpoche came to see him and stayed in retreat outside Thrangu monastery for three years. At the end of Mipham's retreat Tendzin Rabgye was 57 years old and said to Mipham, "I've not done much to disseminate the Buddha's teachings. The reason for

this is the command of my guru who told me to spend my life practicing instead. Now I'm an old man and won't be able to teach. However, if there is a Thrangu Tulku in the next lifetime, please extend your compassion and your vision to him and make an aspirational prayer that he will benefit many sentient beings.” Mipham Rinpoche took Thrangu Rinpoche by the hand and said, “Well done, thank you very much. As I am departing from the time that the sun shines over the peak of that mountain to time it is fully in the sky, I will set my mind in that thought of how I will benefit that person [the new reincarnation] in the next lifetime.”

It was only about three years from the time that Mipham departed that Tenzin Rabgye fell ill and on his death bed and his servant, Karma Monlam came to him and said, “Please don't die. Please don't pass into nirvana.” The Eighth Thrangu Tulku said to him, “I'm really sick and this body is beset with illness. There is really no way to do anything about it. But don't worry because Mipham Rinpoche has established this aspiration toward our having a relationship in the future. To fulfill this I'll take rebirth and come back quickly. It won't be very long.”

So he died and the body was cremated and as is the case with lamas who have high realization, all sorts of miraculous signs and rainbows appeared in the sky. From the time of his death until the time that his reincarnation entered into his mother's womb was only a period of forty days. Usually it takes a much, much longer time between the passing away and conception in the next womb.

One of the ways in which the place of a lama's rebirth is determined is by noticing the direction in which the smoke goes at the cremation. In this case the smoke went to the North-East and in that direction there was a family that was extremely rich and had a big field. Even though usually there were no deer in the area, five deer appeared and people thought “That is very strange.”

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE'S BIRTH

*Tenzin Namgyal, Thrangu Rinpoche's brother-in-law, was the personal secretary of His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa for the last 30 years of his life. He then came to work for Thrangu Rinpoche and at the Fourth Namu Buddha Seminar in 1989 he was asked to tell the story of Thrangu Rinpoche's life as he heard and experienced it. Tenzin Namgyal says:<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Talk given at the Fourth Namu Buddha Seminar in Nepal in 1989.



I have been with Thrangu Rinpoche for 28 years, which was just about a year after Thrangu Rinpoche left Tibet. I have spent a lot of time with him and have been very interested in his life. Many people have asked Thrangu Rinpoche where he was born and so on. So Thrangu Rinpoche retold these things and I wrote them all down in a book. Unfortunately, I don't have this book with me, so I won't be able to give a complete description of everything.

Thrangu Rinpoche was born in the tenth day of the tenth Tibetan Month in 1933. Tibetans don't really keep track of or celebrate their birthday, but Rinpoche is sure of the date because his father was away at a religious festival which is celebrated each year on this particular day.<sup>5</sup>

I have asked a lot of questions of Rinpoche's mother about his birth. Nothing was unusual except that when she had been pregnant for about three or four months, she had a dream in which she went into a monastery and all the monks were sitting there in the temple. There was a big ladle that they used to give out food and she was giving food out to all the monks. It was a very vivid dream and throughout the day, it stayed in her mind and wouldn't go away. Later when Thrangu Rinpoche had been recognized and was brought to the monastery with his mother and when she went through the door of monastery, she saw that this monastery that she had never visited before was exactly like the one in her dream and very familiar—just like seeing one's own house.

Thrangu Rinpoche was born in the winter in Tibet. In front of their house was a frozen river. But on the morning of his birth, the river thawed. It thawed before the sun came up and people were very surprised and wondered what it meant that the ice had melted so early in the morning. After the ice had melted, all these birds came to wash themselves in the river, which was also quite unusual. They also heard a cuckoo, which is never present in that part of Tibet in the winter. It's only in the summer that they have the cuckoo bird, but the cuckoo was heard quite clearly.

Rinpoche's family consists of his father, mother and two sisters. His mother died in Rumtek in 1986 and his father died several years before that. One of Rinpoche's sisters married Tashi Namgyal (the author of this part of the story) and lived near Rinpoche's monastery in Nepal and helped with Thrangu

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<sup>5</sup> The actual day was November 17, 1933, but since Tibet uses a lunar calendar, the day changes slightly each year.

Rinpoche's primary school. Thrangu Rinpoche's other sister owned a shop near the Boudhanath stupa a few hundred yards from Rinpoche's monastery.

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE'S EARLY LIFE



Picture 4

*A rare photo of all four previous rinpoches of Thrangu Monastery. Thrangu Monastery was rather unique in that at any single time it had four rinpoches, instead of just one. Left to right: Eighth Thrangu Rinpoche, Traleq Rinpoche, Lodro Nyima Rinpoche, and Zuru Tulku.*

*Tenzin Namgyal continues:* Thrangu Rinpoche's family were practitioners of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. When Thrangu Rinpoche was about one year old, his father took him to the Sakya monastery, Chigyu Monastery, to see Jnana Tulku, who was an emanation of Satja Gomchen, to give Rinpoche a name. Jnana Tulku said, "Someone will come later to give this child his name. So I am not going to give him a name. But the child does have a very big obstacle. If you do the necessary things to eliminate this obstacle, this child will benefit all beings and spread a lot of happiness in the future. But the giving of his name will have to wait." The father took the child back home. But Thrangu Rinpoche's father was a very quiet person, so when he got back

home, he didn't really say anything about what had happened. He just kept quiet.

When Rinpoche was two years old, the previous Traleg Rinpoche, who was the head Rinpoche of Thrangu Monastery at the time, sent a message to Thrangu Rinpoche's father asking him to come see him. So Thrangu Rinpoche's father went to the monastery and Traleg Rinpoche said that this child born in the year of the bird (1933) had been identified by His Holiness Karmapa and by Tai Situpa Rinpoche as being the ninth Thrangu Tulku. The 16th Karmapa had recognized Thrangu Rinpoche and made an aspirational prayer for his long life which is said daily to this day in Thrangu Rinpoche's monasteries:

*Karmapa Lodro, splendor of the teaching,  
Excellent flourishing Dharma, may these good qualities  
spread throughout space.  
May your lotus-feet remain firm and may your activity of teaching  
and practice be victorious in all directions and its glory shine forth.*

So Thrangu Rinpoche's father was told that his son was a tulku and he should take care of him by keeping him very clean and so on. Rinpoche's father returned home and was quite convinced that his son must be the Thrangu Tulku. He was very happy and when he returned home, he said to the family, "Our child is the Thrangu Tulku because he's been identified as such by Situpa Rinpoche and the Karmapa." But his mother had an older brother who was a monk from Chikung Monastery who said, "It's just that Thrangu Monastery is trying to get hold of our child, it's not because he's a tulku."

So Tai Situpa Rinpoche and His Holiness the 16th Karmapa wrote another letter identifying Thrangu Rinpoche. In the letter it said that to the east of Thrangu Monastery in a place called Rarunda there is a wealthy family. The door of their house faces the East and the mother's name is Kelsang and the father's name is Tundrup. All this was completely accurate. The town was right, the door faced the right direction, the mother's name was Kelsang Droma, and the father's name was Kunga Tundrup. The Karmapa also said that on the roof of the house was a prayer flag and at the base of the prayer flag was a stone with a shortened version of the ten-syllable Kalachakra mantra standing upright against the base of the prayer flag. No one in the house knew whether there was such a stone there or not. When they read this in the letter, they all went up to the roof and found this small stone with the Kalachakra

syllables on it. No one else knew about this stone, yet it was just as it was described in the Karmapa's letter. When the brother who was the Sakya monk saw this, he was quite amazed and felt a very great conviction that the boy was indeed the Thrangu Tulku. He put the letter on top of his head [which is a sign of respect in Tibet] and said that from now on he had total conviction in it and made all the arrangements needed for recognizing a tulku.

Thrangu Rinpoche has been asked if he remembers his past and if he really is a tulku. The times I have heard him answer he remembers little about his previous life. He has also said that he has no special powers or abilities and that sometimes when the Karmapa is asked to recognize a tulku and that tulku has gone beyond being reincarnated, the Karmapa "looks around" for a worthy candidate and says that person is the reincarnation. Rinpoche says that he is most likely one of those tulkus. Others believe that Rinpoche is just being overly modest. This conviction is based on events that Tenzin Namgyal obtained from Rinpoche's family members.

When Thrangu Rinpoche was still very little and just started to speak, every day he kept saying, "I've got a white dog and a white mule. Bring me my white dog and my white mule." So one day his family went on a pilgrimage to a place called Jnana Mani where they circumambulated a large mani stone. They saw a white dog, bought it, brought it back and said, "We've brought you your white dog." But Thrangu Rinpoche became very upset and angry and said, "You know this is not my dog!" and stamped his feet and cried. "This is not my dog. You are all very bad. You brought me this dog. It's not mine." This all happened because the previous eighth Thrangu Rinpoche had a white dog and a white mule. When he passed away, these were kept at Thrangu Monastery.

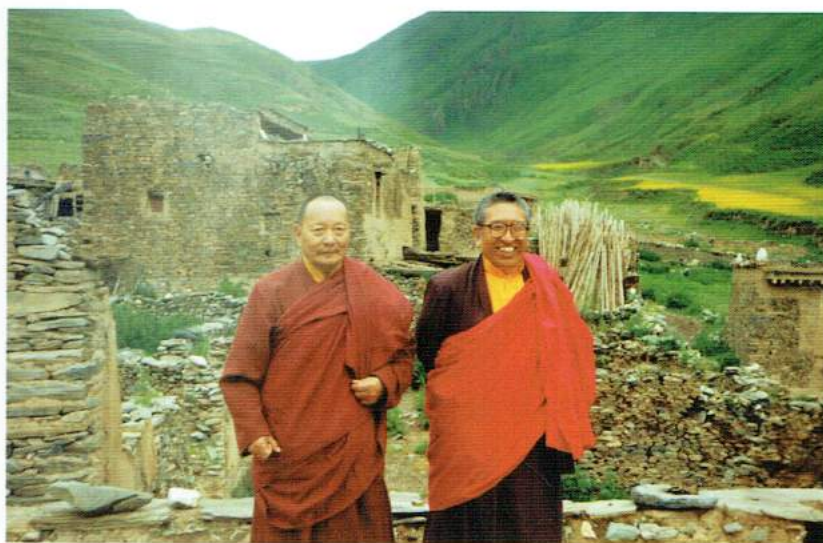
The 16th Karmapa had given Thrangu Rinpoche the name of Karma Lodro and in 1937 there was a great ceremony of enthronement in the monastery of Thrangu Tashi Choling.<sup>6</sup> When Thrangu Rinpoche was taken to Thrangu Monastery, he was still asking for his mule and dog. An attendant of the previous Thrangu Rinpoche said, "It is true. There is this white dog and a white mule that belonged to the previous Thrangu Rinpoche. They are here, but they are both very old." So they brought them and Thrangu Rinpoche was overjoyed when he saw them and was

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<sup>6</sup> Tenzin Namgyal in *A Summary of the Deeds of the 9th Incarnation of the Great Scholar Thrangu Rinpoche*. Available at [rinpoche.com](http://rinpoche.com).

happy to be with them.

Tenzin comments, “This is a clear indication of reincarnation and a very clear sign that Rinpoche was the reincarnation of the previous Thrangu Tulku. All these events are things that all the people around there saw. The young Thrangu Rinpoche also passed the test where he correctly identified other possessions of the previous Thrangu Rinpoche that were mixed in with ones he did not own.”



Picture 5

*Khenpo Karthar and Rinpoche visiting Thrangu Rinpoche's birthplace in Gapa in Kham, Tibet. Picture taken in 1994.*

*As with all history, different people hear different stories. Khenpo Kathar describes this time slightly differently and gives more details about the recognition of Thrangu Rinpoche.<sup>7</sup> Khenpo Karthar relates:*

When the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, (1924-1981) was eight years old (1932), he went to Lhasa and to his monastery at Tsurphu for only a year. At that time he was with (the previous) Traleg Rinpoche who is the protector of the teachings of the Thrangu tulkus. Both Traleg Rinpoche and the Karmapa were quite young and playing as children do. They gradually went further and further away from adult supervision until they were all alone

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<sup>7</sup> Khenpo Karthar gave this talk on the Thrangu Lineage at Gampo Abbey on June 29, 1991.

together. At that time Traleg Rinpoche told the Karmapa that Thrangu Rinpoche had been reborn. It had been just three years since the Eighth Thrangu Rinpoche has passed away and the Karmapa at the age of eight told Traleg Rinpoche “He has taken a rebirth in a place called Rang-da.” Karmapa had never been in Kham at the time. Traleg Rinpoche then said that there were two places called Rang-da and the Karmapa replied Thrangu Rinpoche was born in the town where there was the largest tower of mani stones in Tibet [Mani stones are stones with OM MANI PEDME HUNG carved on them] and the tower is square. He said, “If you go to the eastern side of the tower, you will see the house where Thrangu lama has taken rebirth. His father’s name is Ju-ku, his mother’s name is Kelsang and the house faces the East. Also in front of the house there is a large red dog. I don’t know how to write yet, so you should write this down.”

So Traleg Rinpoche wrote down what Karmapa had said to him and then the two of them went to Palpung monastery which is the seat of the previous Tai Situ Rinpoche. Traleg Rinpoche was not sure whether the eight year old Karmapa was playing with him or making a serious prediction, so he asked Tai Situpa “It has been three years since Thrangu lama has passed away. Do you know where his reincarnation is?” Tai Situpa thought, “Oh, he’s testing me to see whether or not I know.” Then he said, “Well, he’s been born and is three years old, his father’s name is Kunga Thondrup and his mother’s name is Kelsang Wangmo.” It turns out that the Karmapa had called his father Juku which was his father’s nickname when he was a child and Tai Situpa called his father Kunga Thondrup which was the name his father used as an adult. Then Tai Situpa said, “The child is three years of age, but in his fourth year, there are great obstacles to his life, so you must perform ceremonies during his fourth year until he reaches the age of five.” He continued, “If you perform these ceremonies, he will survive this dangerous period in his life, and will then be of great benefit to sentient beings.

During the time when Thrangu Rinpoche was four years old, his neck was cut open by the horn of a *dzong-mo* which is a kind of yak. The cut was all the way up his neck and you can see the scar there even to this day. So the monastery did do the practices during this year and when Rinpoche was five, Karma Monlam who was the attendant of the previous Thrangu lama, got out the letters of recognition from Situ Rinpoche and the Karmapa and based on these predications sent some monks together with others to the town where Thrangu Rinpoche was said to be staying. On the day

that they were to arrive, the young Thrangu Tulku said to his mother, “Fix a lot of tea and set up a place where people can tie up their horses. We’re going to have a lot of visitors today.” His mother said, “What are you talking about?” When Karma Monlam who was now old, very large, and had a white beard showed up, Thrangu Rinpoche said, “Oh Karma Monlam, come here quickly.”



Picture 6  
*Thrangu Monastery before 1959*

#### RINPOCHE’S ARRIVAL AT THE THRANGU MONASTERY

*Returning to Tenzin Namgyal’s narrative:*

In his fifth year, Rinpoche’s father and mother went to Thrangu Monastery to give the new Thrangu Rinpoche to the monastery. There was an attendant of the previous Thrangu Rinpoche, and that first night instead of staying with his mother, he went to sleep in the room of the attendant. He was very glad to see the attendant and to be with him and didn’t even look at his mother.

At the age of seven in 1939, the young Thrangu Rinpoche started studying with the teacher Karma Wangchuk. Occasionally, he would go to see his parents, but usually he didn’t even think about them and concentrated on his studies. He was very intelligent and understood everything taught him.

Thrangu Monastery had its own protector deity which was called a *genyan*. This deity looked after Thrangu Rinpoche a lot. There was a monk at Thrangu Monastery who was a clairvoyant and could see many things others couldn’t see. When

Thrangu Rinpoche was brought to his enthronement at the age of five; this man saw the genyan with a retinue of many other deities come to greet him in an elaborate greeting.



Picture 7  
*Painting of Thrangu Rinpoche's Genyan*

Rinpoche was later asked about this genyan and he said that the genyan is a protector of the area around his monastery, in other words, a local deity who became a protector of the dharma, a dharmapala. The previous Thrangu Tulku had made many offerings to this genyan and when Rinpoche was growing up, he did not make any offering to it. Things were not going well and the clairvoyant monk told Rinpoche that the genyan was not happy and so Rinpoche began making offerings to it even though he had been taught that everything is just mind. [Also when Rinpoche is asked about these types of beings, he replies that just because you cannot see them with your eyes, you cannot assume that they don't exist.]

The previous Traleg Rinpoche and the previous Jamgon Kongrul Rinpoche, who were alive at the time, had said that there should be a monastic college (Tib. *shedra*) established at Thrangu Monastery which would be very beneficial in the future. So they



created this college at Thrangu Monastery and asked a khenpo from Sechen Monastery (a Nyingma Monastery) to teach there. The purpose was to have a college which would be specifically Karma Kagyu and would study the writings of Mikyo Dorje, the eighth Karmapa, and the other Kagyu masters so that these teachings could be preserved.

Thrangu Rinpoche was the principal pupil of the college and the khenpo from Sechen Monastery had previously received the transmission of the teachings of the Kagyu masters so he could transmit them to Thrangu Rinpoche and all the other monks and lamas in the shedra. Thrangu Rinpoche studied there and was the most student intelligent and most clever in his ability to learn and understand. He also had amazing diligence, with no one coming close to his diligence. So he was the very best student at the college.

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE'S STUDIES AT THRANGU MONASTERY

*The story of Rinpoche's education in Thrangu Rinpoche can be found in *The Ocean of Philosophy*.<sup>8</sup>*

#### EARLY EDUCATION

In the Earth Rabbit Year (1939), Thrangu Rinpoche began his studies under Karma Wangchuk, beginning with reading and writing, and then memorizing tantric texts and studying mandala rituals. He presided over offering rituals and fulfilled the expectations of faithful donors.

#### PILGRIMAGE AND PURIFYING OBSCURATIONS 16TH KARMAPA

In 1943 Thrangu Rinpoche at the age of ten went on a pilgrimage to the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and then he went to Tsurphu Monastery, the main monastery of the Karmapas in the Tsurphu valley. In Tsurphu he prostrated at the Gyalwang Karmapa's feet, supplicating him, and asking that the Karmapa out of his great compassion would accept him as a student and tell him which yidam deity would be best for him to practice. Since individuals who uphold the teachings need a long life, the

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<sup>8</sup> A special Kagyu Monlam edition of *The Ocean of Philosophy* published in 2010.

Gyalwang Karmapa told him to practice White Tara and go into retreat. During the retreat exceptional experience and realization arose within him and he received the blessings of the Karmapa's body, speech, and mind. He then visited the sacred sites of central and southern Tibet, purifying his obscurations and returned to his homeland.



Picture 8

*Thrangu Rinpoche and the Gyalwa Karmapa at Rumtek*

#### STUDY OF THE GENERAL SUBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE

With his tutor, Rinpoche also studied *Orthography: The Lamp of Speech* and Tokden Lhaksam's grammar *Exalted Light*, and undertook a detailed study in Situ Pema Nyinche's great commentary on grammar in detail. On the subject of astrology, he studied the five sections, the five planets, and calendars. He also studied *The Mirror* for poetry and Kalaps's text on Sanskrit according to Sazangpa's great commentary, by studying the sandhi diagrams in great details.

Rinpoche holds the transmission of commentaries particular to the Kagyu lineage and upholds the philosophical traditions of the Great Shentong Middle Way as presented by Rangjung Dorje and Situ Chokyi Jungne.

Khenchen Lodro Rabsal was invited from Shechen Monastery to Thrangu Monastery to establish a monastic college there, at which Rinpoche studied the five great topics as well as the *The Profound Inner Meaning*, the *Two Books* on Hevajra, and the *Uttaratantra* with continual and enthusiastic diligence day and night over the course of six years. When he took his exams, he was immediately able to answer all the questions about the fine details of classifications, reasons, and so forth without any mistakes. Although he was the youngest student in the college, everyone praised him as having the sharpest intelligence.<sup>9</sup>

#### RECEIVING THE MONASTIC, BODHISATTVA, AND TANTRIC VOWS

In the Wood Horse Year of 1954, while returning from a trip to China with other great lamas, the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa arrived at Palpung Monastery. At that time, Kagyu lamas and monks from all over Kham gathered to see the Karmapa. Thrangu Rinpoche being 21 years old also had the thought that it would be wonderful to receive the blessings of the three vows from a buddha such as the Karmapa, and since the opportunity presented itself, for that purpose he went to Palpung Monastery. He also offered representations of body, speech, and mind to the reincarnation of Situ Rinpoche during his enthronement ceremony.

As Thrangu Rinpoche had requested, on the festival day of the glorious Kalachakra, in the quarters of the omniscient Situ Chokyi Jungne, Thrangu Rinpoche, Surmang Garwang Rinpoche, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche took the three levels of pratimoksha vows from the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe. Then again in the temple they took bodhisattva vows in the two traditions. Then through his great kindness and compassion, they received tantric vows as part of the empowerments for “Eliminating All Obstacles” of Guru Rinpoche and the nine deities of Gyalwa Gyatso (Red

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<sup>9</sup> A more detailed accounting of what Thrangu studied can be found in Tashi Namgyal’s *A Summary of the Deeds of Thrangu Rinpoche*.

Chenrezig), as well as formal empowerment connected with the transmission of the wisdom protector.

Thrangu Rinpoche's own journals make it clear that up to that point he had been an intellectual who looked outward, but on this occasion there arose in his being the exceptional blessings of developing a not-inconsiderable experience of looking within. From the moment of that good fortune, he always saw his teacher as a real buddha and never again clung to him as an ordinary being.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SHEDRA AT THRANGU MONASTERY

*The building of a Shedra (a monastic college) at Thrangu Monastery with Thrangu Rinpoche being its main disciple actually had a world-wide implications to the Kagyu Lineage. Khenpo Karthar explains this point.*<sup>10</sup>

When Thrangu Rinpoche was fifteen years old, in accordance with the aspiration that the former Thrangu tulku had established when he asked Mipham Rinpoche for his blessing, he entered into a period of study and established a shedra within Thrangu monastery. This shedra was initiated by the former Traleg Rinpoche. They had invited the pre-eminent scholar at the Sechen monastery, Sechen Gyaltsap, who was a student of both Jamgon Kongtrul and Mipham. Sechen Gyaltsap's education had been conducted without any connection whatsoever with the other influential khenpo, Shenpo Sanga. And so it was possible to re-institute the tradition of study without the impediment of this violation of samaya. Sechen Gyaltsap who was also Trungpa Rinpoche's tutor was invited to Thrangu monastery to conduct the education of the Thrangu tulku shedra.

Had the Eighth Thrangu tulku and others studied with Khenpo Shenga, they would have suffered the great tragedies that befell Khenpo Shenga's students. The intervention of the Chinese in Tibet would then have wiped out the tradition of study in the Kagyu tradition altogether were it not for the fact that Thrangu Rinpoche had been educated and had escaped from Tibet and fled to India. Had he not made it to India, there wouldn't be any Kagyu Khenpos. But because Thrangu Rinpoche did establish under the Karmapa's guidance the shedra at Rumtek, India after the Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> Khenpo Karthar gave this talk on the Thrangu Lineage at Gampo Abbey on June 29, 1991.

intervention, there are many Kagyu tulkus in a flourishing tradition of study and intellectual training within the Kagyu tradition.

The reason I [Khenpo Karthar] say that things would have been wiped out altogether is that there were a great many Kagyu lamas who were educated either directly or indirectly through the writings of this Khenpo Shenga and all these khenpos met with great misfortune. By the time these khenpos and lamas had reached the age of 30 most had either died or gone insane. There are three places I can think of that were not touched by the educational curriculum and the books of Khenpo Shenga. One was Thrangu Monastery, another was Surmang monastery of Trungpa Rinpoche, and the third was the monastery of Dabsang Rinpoche. The strange twist on the whole thing is that Khenpo Senga was a great enemy of the Shentong school. His students were strong proponents of the Rangtong Prasangka school. The negative karma extended even among the Nyingma monasteries and to the Dzogchen monastery where the same fate befell those who were educated using the book written by Khenpo Senga.

Among the Kagyu Lamas, except for Thrangu Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche, there was no one who holds these teachings of Jamgon Kongtrul and Mipham Rinpoche in an unstained manner. So had the two of them not made it out of Tibet, there wouldn't be any Kagyu tradition of study. And even between these two, Trungpa Rinpoche with his relationship with Khenpo Gangshar taught mainly in the manner of a siddha rather than the manner of a khenpo. This means that the survival of the khenpo tradition within the Kagyu lineage pretty much came down to Thrangu Rinpoche.

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE'S ESCAPE TO INDIA

*When Thrangu Rinpoche was twenty-five years old and still engaged in his studies, the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese began in 1958. Both of his tutors, the previous Traleg Rinpoche and the previous Zuru Tulku Rinpoche were very old at the time. Tenzin Namgyal describes the onset of the invasion very clearly:*

When the Chinese takeover of Tibet began in 1958, the new Traleg Rinpoche was very young, and the Zuru Rinpoche was very old, so all the responsibilities fell mainly on Thrangu Rinpoche. They all left Kham to go west towards Lhasa. There were thousands of Tibetans going west as refugees from Kham when the fighting broke out. The people were leaving in huge numbers

accompanied by many yaks. Thrangu Rinpoche was leading a small party of less than a hundred. They would stop and camp by setting up lots of tents at night. One night an extremely old lady appeared among the thousands of people camped with all these yaks with no one knowing where she had come from. People said that she was a spy for the Chinese and if they didn't kill her, they wouldn't escape. So the younger Tibetans were getting ready to kill her and Thrangu Rinpoche said, "No, you mustn't do that. The reason we are running away is to save lives. So if we kill someone, what will that be?" He said not to kill her, so they didn't.

The next day when they were traveling, a plane flew past to see where they were going. That afternoon they camped out to eat at about 3:00 PM in the afternoon. Then it got dark and they did not see that they were being completely surrounded by Chinese soldiers. The Chinese had machine guns and some kind of artillery. The machine guns started to fire and the people thought there was nowhere to go and just sat there. Thrangu Rinpoche said, "We mustn't just sit here, we must escape." So the machine guns were firing and the yaks were all panicking and running into each other. All the people were jumping on horses to escape. All the time bullets were flying by and a mortar or cannon fired and the shell came right down where Thrangu Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche and Zuru Tulku were. The shell landed right next to them with a thump. It made a hole in the ground, but it didn't explode.

Thrangu Rinpoche had a large white horse and a very strong person who looked after his horse. But the horse was uncontrollable in the panic and it was rearing up and the horse trainer just couldn't hold the horse. Then a large monk came onto the scene, grabbed the horse, pulled it down, got hold of Thrangu Rinpoche, and put him on the horse and Rinpoche rode off. If he hadn't been able to get on the horse, he would never have been able to get away. It turned out that Thrangu Rinpoche, Traleg Tulku, and Zuru Tulku all got away safely. Afterwards everyone was asking who this monk was. But everyone said, "No, it wasn't me." It turned out that this "monk" was the genyan, the dharma protector that appears in many different forms. Sometimes he appears as an elephant, sometimes as a kind of Hindu sadhu, sometimes as a lama in monk's robes, and so on. From this, one can see how Thrangu Rinpoche's dharma protector is always there at the right time and gives whatever help is needed. Tenzin continues:

The party was able to carry on and get to Tsurphu, the Karmapa's monastery in Tibet, to see the Sixteenth Karmapa. When Thrangu Rinpoche arrived, I [Tenzin Namgyal] was with His Holiness and heard with my own ears the Karmapa say that Thrangu Rinpoche was the main scholar, the most learned person of the Kagyu school. With him the continuity of the teaching of the Dharma will remain. So he was very important for the transmission of the actual teachings.

*Khenpo Karthar also told this story showing the suffering they endured.<sup>11</sup>*

Between 1950 and 1958, the presence of the Communist Chinese in Tibet brought political, economic, and religious changes to the Tibetan people, along with vast suffering and rampant destruction of their way of life. In 1958, Thrangu Rinpoche left the monastery with Khenpo Karthar, Traleg Rinpoche, Zuru Tulku, and other monks. Though many sacred objects and volumes of dharma texts were destroyed, Rinpoche was able to save some.

With small provisions of food and clothing and a few horses, Thrangu Rinpoche and his party began their long trek westward and were soon joined by a caravan of nomads with their flock of sheep. After fifteen days of travel, the rinpoches stopped to rest, only to find themselves surrounded by Communist Chinese soldiers. Since night was falling, the Tibetan refugees were able to escape via a nearby swamp, and readied three horses to carry Thrangu Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche, and Zuru Tulku. Zuru Tulku, who was the eldest, could not have survived on horseback, so Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's younger brother carried him.

Everyone headed in separate directions across the swamp, which was very flat but punctuated with small gorges and areas where one could easily and quickly hide. On the second day Rinpoche found a few of the monks and was relieved to know they were alive and unhurt. Gradually, the remaining monks were found and on the seventh day of their escape from the soldiers, they were joined by the rinpoches. The party survived those seven days without food since the mule carrying the provisions had disappeared. They ate snow to prevent dehydration and were forced to return to the place where the soldiers had surrounded them to look for food. The Communist Chinese were gone and almost nothing was left but a few utensils and a little flour.

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<sup>11</sup> This account can be found on the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra website.

Carrying the meager ration of barley flour, the lamas continued their journey. Their vision was blurring and they were so weak they had to avoid even the smallest incline by walking around it. After another week of travel, the rinpoches found a horse carrying *tsampa*, a staple food of roasted barley flour. They mixed this with water and although the mixture was very thin, a ten-course dinner could not have been more appreciated. A few days later, the lamas met some nomads who gave them more provisions.

Two and a half months later and without further incidents, the lamas reached Tsurphu Monastery, not far from Lhasa in central Tibet. The rinpoches spent a month at Tsurphu, which was still operating normally. But His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, with his profound understanding and vision was completely aware of the impending danger. He told the group they must leave Tsurphu and continue toward Sikkim and India. On March 7, 1959, His Holiness gave the lamas five yaks and supplies and three days later, they left Tsurphu. In fifteen days, they reached the border between Tibet and Bhutan.

The Bhutanese would not grant immediate passage through their country, so the lamas were forced to spend one month at the blockaded border, where more than a thousand Tibetans died of starvation. Finally, His Holiness the Dalai Lama secured the permission of the Indian government for the refugees to enter India. They were given rations and the Bhutanese opened two roads through Bhutan. The rinpoches traveled through to Buxador, a town at the border of India and Bhutan. Former prison quarters served as their housing and food was provided by the Indian government.

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE RECEIVES A GESHE LHARAMPA DEGREE<sup>12</sup>

In 1960 Thrangu Rinpoche received in complete form the amrita of the genuine Dharma in the form of the Kagyu Ngak-dzö, the Damngak-dzö, the complete stages of commentaries on Mahamudra, the profound path of the Six Yogas, and so forth. He also received the Rinchen Terdzö, the Shejadzö, the Gyachen Kadzö, and many others. In brief, he received 17 teachings and guidance from both Kagyu and Nyingma scholars and spiritual friends who were masters. He had great faith in them filling his mind with the treasures of the Sutra and Tantra traditions. Among the seventeen these seventeen masters who introduced him to the

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<sup>12</sup> Tenzin Namgyal in *A Summary of the Deeds of Thrangu Rinpoche*



very heart of the true nature, none was greater than the glorious Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpai Dorje. Holding the position of the Defender in Debate, he receives the Degree of Karam, indicating he had achieved the Highest Level of Achievement in the Five Divisions of Study.

In 1962 according to the wishes of the glorious Karmapa, at Baxa on the border of India and Bhutan, in the midst of expert spiritual friends of all traditions, along with 1,500 sangha members, and a representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thrangu Rinpoche took oral exams on the five divisions of the great treatises which are common to all traditions especially the Kagyu *The Profound Inner Nature, The Two Volumes [on Hevajra], and The Uttarantra*. He also took the difficult position of the defendant in debate. All the people present were delighted by his performance and said how excellent it was. On this occasion, Thrangu Rinpoche generously offered tea, food, and money to the whole gathering. Before everyone, Thrangu Rinpoche left the imprint of his deeds as a scholar and meditation master becoming more famous than his previous incarnations.

With his performance His Holiness the Dalai Lama bestowed upon Thrangu Rinpoche the title of Kagyu Khenpo, and at the main seat of the Kagyu lineage in Rumtek, Sikkim, the glorious Karmapa showered him with praise, bestowing the title of Great Khenpo and stated that his mind stream was one with that of Ngokchö Kudorje, Gyedze Marpa Lotsawa's close disciple, who held his exegetical lineage.

#### THRANGU RINPOCHE ABBOT AT RUMTEK

After receiving this degree, Thrangu Rinpoche went to Rumtek, India where the Karmapa made him abbot of Rumtek monastery and of the Nalanda Institute of Higher Buddhist studies. This Nalanda Institute was the monastic college (or *shedra*) that all the young Kagyu tulkus were to be trained. Rinpoche's responsibility was to establish what was to be taught in this lineage and how it was to be taught. His Holiness Karmapa had brought out of Tibet four young tulkus who had been his teachers in previous lifetimes. Thrangu Rinpoche, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultim Gyatso Rinpoche were given the responsibility for teaching these four regents (Tai Situpa Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, Shamar Rinpoche, and Gyaltsap Rinpoche), as well as many other tulkus who were to preserve the Karma Kagyu lineage. To set up the entire

curriculum for the Karma Kagyu lineage required Thrangu Rinpoche to engage in the tremendous task of collecting all the Buddhist texts which had been completely destroyed in Tibet and copies were scattered in monasteries outside of Tibet. He also did some of the calligraphies on the walls of Rumtek Monastery and



*Picture 9*

*Khenpo Tsultrim and Thrangu Rinpoche (possibly at Rumtek)*

wrote a book on the *Life of His Holiness Karmapa* (in Tibetan, not translated) as well as many other texts.<sup>13</sup>

*Concerning this time Tenzin relates this story:*

One day Thrangu Rinpoche was talking to Tenzin and said, “I had a very strange dream last night. There was this large green plain and on the plain was a black bull. Then a voice said, ‘This is your rebirth.’ I thought this was rather disturbing. I mean, I don’t see why I should be reborn a black bull. I’ve been a monk and I’ve not harmed anyone and kept all my vows.” They then went to the Karmapa and told him about the dream and the Karmapa put his hands together in the gesture of homage and said, “This is really special. There is nothing bad in this dream at all. It’s only the great lamas who can spontaneously remember previous lifetimes. This is quite wonderful.”

Tenzin says that Thrangu Rinpoche has clairvoyant powers, so

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<sup>13</sup> These paragraphs were written by Clark Johnson

he sees deities, demons and other things, but he never says anything about them. If someone asks him about his clairvoyance, he just says that he doesn't have any.

But once in Rumtek he said that he had the idea of making a retreat center at Namu Buddha in Nepal. When he told others, they said that it wasn't really a good idea to put a retreat center way out there on that hill because people are not going to have food to eat and there would not be any support for the monastery." So people such as Tenga Rinpoche thought it was a bad idea. But Thrangu Rinpoche said, "No." He was definitely going to build a retreat center at Namu Buddha. It was like a prophecy.

In 1976, the Gyalwang Karmapa presented him with a certificate with the official square seal when sending him abroad to teach at many Dharma centers. The certificate states that Rinpoche is the embodiment of complete and unmistakable mastery over the essence of the Karma Kagyu's teachings of scripture and practice, and names him as vajra master who holds the three vows. After he was bestowed that certificate, Rinpoche founded over two dozen dharma and retreat and meditation centers in various countries for the study and practice of Buddhism.

In this year His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa came to Nepal and did the traditional pilgrimage of visiting the three most sacred places: Swayambhu, the Bodhanath Stupa, and Namu Buddha. The Swayambhu stupa in Kathmandu sits on top of a crystal mandala of Chakrasamvara which was frequently visited in by the kings of Nepal in ancient times.

The second was the Bodhanath Stupa, about five miles away, constructed centuries ago and blessed by Padmasambhava and contains the remains of one of former Buddhas. Finally, the third, Namu Buddha is about 20 miles away on a high hill. On this hill is a rock where it is told in the sutras that the previous Buddha cut the flesh from his arm and fed it to a starving tiger and her cubs. The traditional Buddhist pilgrimage consists of visiting these three sites in one day.

When his Holiness accompanied by Thrangu Rinpoche visited the Swayambhu stupa *ringseles* which are small colored rocks made by religious activity, not any natural phenomenon, spontaneously fell from the stupa. This was described in the book *Women of Wisdom* by Tsultrim Allione<sup>14</sup>. At the Bodhanath

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<sup>14</sup> Tsultrim Allione. *Women of Wisdom*, Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2000.

stupa His Holiness the eighteenth Karmapa made the prediction that if the stupa was surrounded by Buddhist monasteries, the Dharma would thrive for a long time. Since that time the Tibetans have built over twenty monasteries around the Bodhanath stupa.

After Thrangu Rinpoche was on this pilgrimage with the Karmapa, he remained in Nepal and lived at Chokyi Nyingma's monastery. During this time, he had his first contact with Western students. Thrangu Rinpoche spoke no English at the time and one student told me that she would communicate with him in Nepali when there was no translator. During this time it must be remembered that there were less than a dozen books in English about Tibetan Buddhism.

Rinpoche then decided to obtain land for the retreat center at Namu Buddha. He sent Tenzin to simply go and buy it outright.

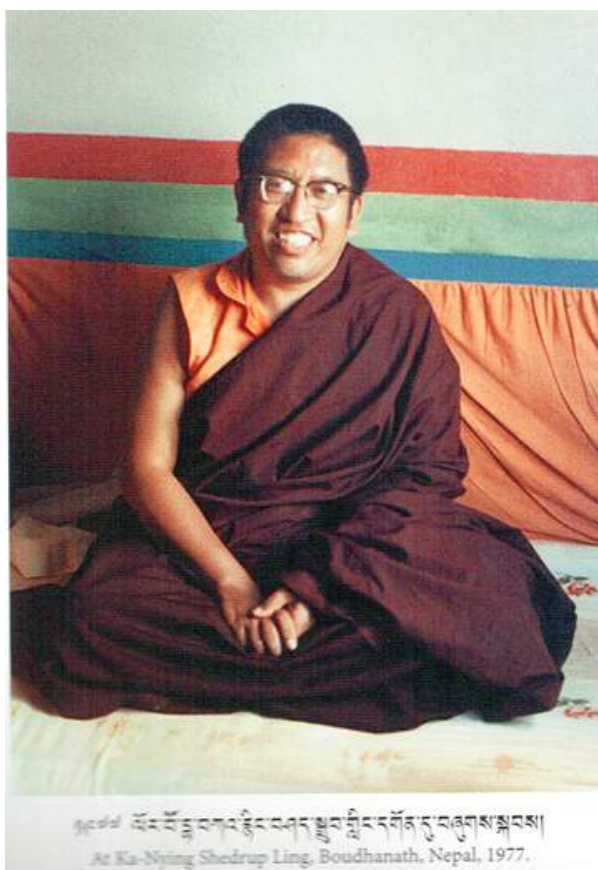


Photo 10

*Thrangu Rinpoche in his room in Chokie Nyima's Monastery,  
in 1977 before his monastery was built.*

*Continuing with Tenzin's account:*

The day I set off to go buy the land was the day of the nine bad omens, which is the worst day astrologically in the whole year. When I was about to leave, someone said, "Where on earth do you think you're going on this day? It's the nine bad omens day." And I said, "I'm going off to find ten good omens." And so I went off and along the road and came across Ani Dechen, a nun who was carrying a large load of grain. He thought, "Oh, this is a good sign." Later I told Thrangu Rinpoche about it and Thrangu Rinpoche, who usually doesn't say very much, said, "You know, this was a good sign because there were an uncountable number of little grains in the load, so the benefit coming from Namu Buddha would also be incalculable."

*And so Namu Buddha, one of the three most sacred spots in Nepal, was purchased by Thrangu Rinpoche in 1981. Thrangu Rinpoche began building a three-year retreat center at this very sacred place.*

#### RINPOCHE BUILDS AND TEACHES IN NEPAL<sup>15</sup>

After a pilgrimage with the 16th Karmapa in 1977, the 43 year old Thrangu Rinpoche decided to live in Boudhanath, Nepal and build a monastery around the Great Stupa. He stayed in a room at Chokyi Nyingma's Monastery. It was here he made contact with Western students including Dharma Dan, Sonny Sundowner, and Bob and Elaine Schroeder. Dharma Dan had received some money and bought an electric typewriter. This small group asked Thrangu Rinpoche to give teachings on practice and then typed these teachings out on the typewriter, thus publishing Thrangu Rinpoche's first works in English. In June of 1977, Thrangu Rinpoche gave his first teaching to Western students with Michael Lewis translating. The teaching was on Mipham's Four Skills, called the *Open Door to Emptiness*, and *The Sword that Cuts Delusion's Root*, a chod practice written by the 14th Karmapa. It was also in this year that Thrangu Rinpoche began to build his first monastery about 100 meters from the Boudhanath stupa. He once explained that to preserve the Kagyu teachings it was necessary to build monasteries staffed with 40 year old monks who would then teach the 30 year old monks who would then teach 20 year old monks so the Dharma would be passed on generation to generation. When Nepali

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<sup>15</sup> The following was written by Clark Johnson

families heard Rinpoche was looking for monks, they flooded into his monastery asking him to accept their sons (and later daughters when a nunnery was established).



Picture 11

*Thrangu Rinpoche at consecration of his  
Boudhanath Monastery in 1987*

Thrangu Rinpoche explained once that he thought that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was doing such wonderful work in the West that he had no idea he would have to take on the responsibility of teaching western students. In 1979 Thrangu Rinpoche visited the United States with His Holiness Karmapa. He visited Idyllwild, California (where today he has a center), Santa Cruz, and Lama Lodro's center in San Francisco. From there he traveled to Woodstock and to Dharma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD) the main seat of H. H. Karmapa in North America with Thrangu Rinpoche teaching in the morning and Khenpo Karthar teaching in the afternoon. From there he went to Samye Ling in Scotland. This was also the first place that Trungpa Rinpoche went after attending Oxford University. The summer of

1979 was incredible because Thrangu Rinpoche taught daily in the mornings and Tai Situ Rinpoche taught in the afternoons.

Of all the thousands of Tibetan texts, which text did Thrangu Rinpoche believe were the important texts for Westerners to understand? The first two texts he taught on were the *Uttaratantra* and Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. He also taught Shamatha Meditation (published as *Tranquility and Insight*), and the instructions for Ngondro practice. Thrangu Rinpoche was also invited by Khenpo Karthar to teach at Woodstock in the U.S. and taught Ngondro again and the Twenty-one Tara practices. In 1981, Rinpoche returned to Samye Ling and began a series of teachings on the Kagyu lineage holders Gampopa, Marpa, and Milarepa. These teachings initiated a complete series on the Kagyu lineage holders all the way to the present Karmapa. Rinpoche has always said that the spiritual biographies (Tib. *namtars*) were excellent inspirational materials for the practitioner who might have developed some discouragement in his or her practice. He also taught a long series of teachings on four of the five Maitreya texts which are studied in almost all monasteries in Tibet.



*Lamas gathered in 1983 for a picture in front of the Main Shrine Hall at Kalu Rinpoche's monastery in Sonada near Darjeeling, India. At the time Rinpoche was bestowing the six-month cycle of empowerments called the Rinchen Terdzöd to a great gathering of Kagyu tulkus, lamas, monks and nuns, and lay people. In the front row, seated left to right are Tai Situ Rinpoche and Kalu Rinpoche. In the back, standing, are Khenchen Tulku Rinpoche, Saljay Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoche, Tenga Rinpoche, Bokar Rinpoche, and Khenpo Dönyö.*

Figure 12

*Thrangu Rinpoche bestowing the Rinchen Terdzog at Kalu Rinpoche's monastery in 1983.*

In 1985 Thrangu Rinpoche completed the first phase of construction of his monastery in Nepal and had the main shrine room blessed by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. At that time the monastery had about 40 monks and also housed Zuru Tulku who has always had a close association with the Thrangu Tulkus. In this year Thrangu Rinpoche asked Clark Johnson and Marlene Forneigel to establish an annual teaching for Western students in Nepal. When asked what to call this event, Thrangu Rinpoche suggested "Namo Buddha Seminar." The first seminar was to be held in December, 1986 and just a few weeks before the participants arrived, a large four-story building which was to become the Sri Namgyal Dip Primary School was finished and the participants stayed there. The First Namo Buddha Winter Seminar had fifteen participants who came from Europe and North America. It lasted two months and included Thangka classes, Tibetan language classes, and a Tibetan medicine class as well as numerous pilgrimages to sacred places in Nepal. During this year, one of Thrangu Rinpoche's early students from England, Andrew Mitchell, together with Usha Singh formed a group in Edmonton, Canada which became Thrangu Rinpoche's first Canadian center.



*First Namo Buddha Seminar on Christmas Eve  
in Kathmandu, 1986.*



With the yearly seminars in Nepal which continue to this day Thrangu Rinpoche felt it would be good to provide an annual set of teachings for his European students and asked Cornelia Hwang to establish the Nammo Buddha Summer Seminars at Worcester College in Oxford in 1988. It was also in this year that Nammo Buddha Publications was formed with the goal of publishing all of Thrangu Rinpoche's teachings to Western students.

In June of this year the reverend David Tong established the Thrangu Centre in Malaysia, and Thrangu Rinpoche was able to visit Malaysia and consecrate this center on December 13, 1988. The center is located at Petaling Jaya, which is ten miles from Kuala Lumpur. At this is a large and thriving center Rinpoche also began a yearly series of empowerments sponsored by his Malaysian students beginning in Nepal beginning with the Kagyu Ngag Dzod, which covers the 27 main yidam practices of the Kagyu lineage. During this time, the Ven. Thubten Thong helped establish a center for Thrangu Rinpoche in Hong Kong. His Hong Kong presence has now grown to five centers.

With the generous support of Thrangu Rinpoche's students in the Far East, he was able to purchase a piece of land at Sarnath, India in 1988 overlooking the deer park where the Buddha originally taught. This was to become Thrangu Rinpoche's principal monastery housing over 200 monks.

In 1989, Thrangu Rinpoche suggested that an annual program for his North American students be established by Debra Ann Robinson. From this the first Mahamudra Retreat held at Big Bear, outside Los Angeles, was born. This retreat was organized with a great deal of help from Debra Ann Robinson and Karma Mahasiddha Ling. Rinpoche had previously given isolated teachings on Mahamudra, the principle meditation of the Kagyu lineage, but for the next four years Rinpoche was to give a definitive series of teachings devoted solely to the Mahamudra by teaching on the *Moonlight of Mahamudra*.

In 1990 the Nammo Buddha Seminars in Nepal were firmly established and have been occurring offered there for over 25 years. Thrangu Rinpoche had begun teaching in Europe, North America, Asia and occasionally even in South America and Australia and New Zealand. His numerous centers in fourteen countries with a total of forty study groups and centers are given on his website set up by Lee Miracle in 1997 at [www.rinpoche.com](http://www.rinpoche.com). Most of these centers are listed with their contact information on this site and therefore below only a few of

Thrangu Rinpoche's later activities will be mentioned.



*Picture 14*  
*Thrangu Monastery in Tibet in 1994*

Also I apologize to Thrangu Rinpoche's numerous Asian students whose numerous activities can be found on mainly Chinese speaking websites.

The year 1990 began with Thrangu Rinpoche teaching in Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, France, United States, Sweden, England, Brazil, Argentina, Chili, and Columbia.<sup>16</sup> Also in this year Thrangu Rinpoche after listening to the requests of his women students, decided to build Tara Abbey in Kathmandu at the sacred site of Swyambhu. Nancy Hodson and Sylvia Berkovich with Debran Ann Robinson began raising funds for a group of seventeen nuns. The nuns were given the opportunity to do a traditional three-year retreat and to a traditional five-year monastic college allowing them to receive the same education that Thrangu Rinpoche's monks received. The land was purchased in 1992 and in 1995 the first phase of construction was completed with Thrangu Rinpoche consecrating the nunnery which now had sixty nuns.

Thrangu Rinpoche in addition to teaching in Asia and the West

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<sup>16</sup> There are many photos of Thrangu Rinpoche visiting all these countries in *Selected Photographs of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche*. Published by Vajra Vidya Library in Sarnath, India in 2009.

in 1993 led a ten-day pilgrimage to major Buddhist holy sites in India. However, in the following year Thrangu Rinpoche turned 60 years of age and did no traveling to the West to teach because it was an inauspicious year for him to travel.

During this time established the Himalayan Children's Fund which up to today has funded Tara Abbey, supported Rinpoche's monks and nuns, and sponsored children in Thrangu Rinpoche's primary school, Shri Mangal Dvip school.

In 1996 Thrangu Rinpoche visited his original monastery in Tibet which had been completely destroyed and was slowly being rebuilt. He ordained over 60 monks there and under the direction of Lodro Nyima Rinpoche (who in his previous life was one of the original four Rinpoches that lived at Thrangu monastery) headed this effort.

Back in Nepal where Thrangu Rinpoche's main monastery, primary school, and nunnery was Thrangu Rinpoche decided to build still another monastery in India. He decided on to build at one of most sacred Buddhist sites in India by buying a plot of land in 1989 overlooking the deer park where the Buddha some 2,500 years ago gave his first Dharma teaching. The land for this large monastery was purchased in 1989 may be wrong and building began in 1993 and it was finished and consecrated in 1997.



Picture 15

*Karmapa and all the monks at the Vajra Vidya Institute at Sarnath, India in year 2001*

The year 2000 was a momentous year because His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa escaped from Tibet and arrived in India. The Dalai Lama gave the Karmapa a monastery very near to his own residence in Dharmasala, India and said that Thrangu Rinpoche should be one of his main tutors. Thrangu Rinpoche was finishing his monastery in Sarnath, India which had a large apartment for the Karmapa on the top floor. Since then, the Karmapa has visited Thrangu Rinpoche's monastery for a few weeks every year to give teachings to Rinpoche's monks and nuns and to study and practice. There are many more details on the website: [vajravidya.org](http://vajravidya.org).



Picture 16

*Vajra Vidya Retreat Center Crestone Colorado taken 2014*

In 2001 Thrangu Rinpoche approved the building of the Vajra Vidya Retreat Center in Crestone, Colorado which was to be Thrangu Rinpoche's first retreat center in the US. Crestone was chosen by Rinpoche because it had been visited by His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa and the area was blessed with a large Karmapa stupa as well as being the center of many other spiritual centers. This center was to help his students develop their practice more deeply and building was begun in 2003 and was completed in March of 2004. In July 2005 Thrangu Rinpoche sent two of his monks to help teach at Vajra Vidya (one who was Khenpo Jigme who is still head of Vajra Vidya). Since Vajra Vidya Retreat had only a small room for a shrine room, In 2009 work was begun on a full size shrine room which could hold 100 persons. The yearly ten-day teachings by Rinpoche in Crestone was held in the new

shrine room in 2010. Thrangu Rinpoche decided to turn the Vajra Vidya Retreat Center into a traditional three-year retreat and this was begun in March of 2013.



Picture 17  
*The completed Tara Abbey*

In 2008 Thrangu Rinpoche was able to consecrate the completed Tara Abbey. This abbey had been supported by the Himalayan Children's fund and by many others and now had several hundred nuns receiving the full Dharma teachings. Much more is on [thrangutaraabbey.org](http://thrangutaraabbey.org). Unfortunately, some of the building was damaged in the Nepal Earthquake of 2015.



Picture 18  
*The Completion of Tashi Yangtse Temple  
in 2008 in Namu Buddha*

The year 2008 also saw the completion of a large temple holding several hundred at Namu Buddha in Nepal which began with Thrangu Rinpoche building 8 retreat cabins and a kitchen in the 1980s to a large complex of buildings at this sacred spot. Much more can be found on [namobuddha.org](http://namobuddha.org) describing this complex now called Thrangu Tashi Yangtse Monastery.

In the year of 2010 there was a devastating earthquake in Jyekundo, Tibet. Rinpoche's rebuilt monastery which was 1,300 years old was almost completely destroyed and dozens of his monks. Thrangu Rinpoche decided that his monastery would have to move to a new site which was near the same town on flat land with a mountain in the background, a river flowing in front of it with a good road and utilities readily available. Construction was begun in 2012. The new monastery was built under the leadership of Lodro Nyima Rinpoche and in 2015 Thrangu Rinpoche traveled to his monastery in Tibet and consecrated it.<sup>17</sup>



Picture 19

*This is Thrangu monastery which has just been rebuilt in a new plot of land on a river, a road, all the utilities after the 1,000 year old monastery was destroyed by an earthquake in 2012. There are quarters for the four Rinpoches that traditionally resided at Thrangu Monastery, a large shrine room, and monastic college (shedra) and many monk's cabins. Just on the front one can see the small white monk's cabins.*

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<sup>17</sup> See [wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com) under "Thrangu Monastery" for more details.

The year of 2015 was a busy one because not only did Thrangu Rinpoche go to Tibet but there was a devastating earthquake in April of 2015 in Nepal that damaged Thrangu Rinpoche's monastery, the Shri Dvip school, Tara Abbey, the Nubri nunnery and three-year retreat center in Bakaphur as well as many of the Nepal villages where Thrangu Rinpoche's monks came from. Fortunately, Thrangu Rinpoche lost no monks or nuns, but had to live in a tent with his monks because for several months the after shocks and some major structural damage made the buildings unsafe.

His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa asked his Karma Kagyu monasteries that they were to put their efforts in helping the devastation of the Earthquake where tens of thousands had no drinkable water, food, or housing. All of the monks and nuns living in the Kathmandu area helped the general populace many of whom lost everything. Some of the senior monks rented helicopters to take food and medical supplies to stranded villages where the roads had been destroyed.

*Again, if you want to contribute to or correct this biography of Thrangu Rinpoche, please feel free to contact Clark Johnson at [clarkjohnson2011@gmail.com](mailto:clarkjohnson2011@gmail.com).*