Khenpo Gelek Jinpa: With Yongdzin Rinpoche´s 100th birthday coming, I contemplate the good he has done

written by Jitka Polanská

Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the most senior living master in the Yungdrung Bon tradition who is celebrating 100th birthday soon, has changed the lives of many people. Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, the abbot of Shenten Dargye Ling, is one of them. In this account, Khenpo Gelek recalls his first encounter with Rinpoche and connects the awakening of his spiritual pursuits to the inspirational personality of the beloved teacher.

The celebration of Yongdzin Rinpoche´s centenary is coming soon and I take the opportunity to contemplace all the good Rinpoche he has done for me and others.

The first time I heard about him was at the beginning of the eighties. Tension between China and India weakened a bit at that time, more information was passing through the borders; people could send letters to each other. I was a young boy then and I lived in Kham in Tibet with my family. One evening – I have a very clear memory of the situation – my father said at the dinner that Chime Yungdrung was alive, living in India where he had founded a settlement and a monastery. Chime Yungdrung is the name Yongdzin Rinpoche received by his parents. My mother´s mother and Yongdzin Rinpoche´s mother were relatives, they are from the same family, and I remember my

mother saying that Yongdzin Rinpoche´s mother was surely happy to have the good news and that she was lucky to have such a great son.

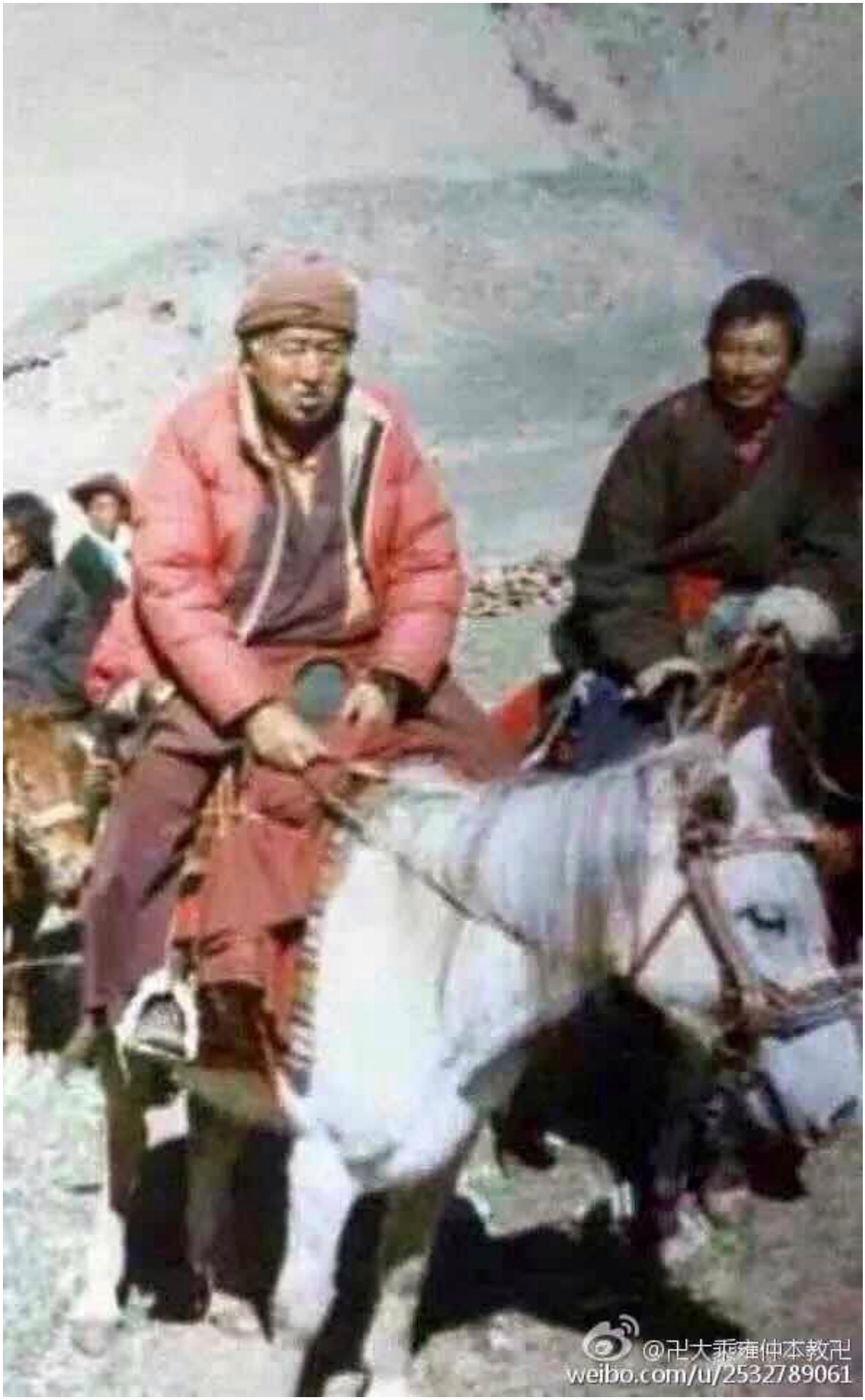
My first meeting with Rinpoche took place some years later, in 1986. I was nineteen years old then, working as a nomad, taking care of the cattle of our family. It was late spring and at that time of the year, villagers usually ask for a ritual to protect their crops. My father told me to come down from the mountains for the ritual. I went and heard many people talking about an important master who was visiting our region, Khyungpo, and was giving initiations. I went to see the master, together with others. It was Rinpoche and I was blown away. Hundreds of people were waiting for him, some crying, some laughing and showing much joy. His relatives were so proud of him, you can imagine.

Shortly before, our village lama told me that I should become a monk. He planted a seed of this thought in me. After I met Rinpoche, the thought became much stronger, and I decided to take this direction in my life. I took basic monastic vows and started studying Bon philosophy with my first master, who was one of the first geshes – graduates from Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India. He taught us very clearly.

In 1992 Rinpoche came back to Khyungpo for a visit. At that time, I was already a fully ordained monk. During his stay, I and a few other fellow monks decided to follow him abroad. I did not have any other wish than receiving teachings from him, as he was a single lineage holder for some most precious instructions. While Rinpoche was still in Tibet, we set on a perilous journey to Nepal through the bordering mountains. In our group, there were some lamas who distinguished themselves afterwards, such as Ponlop Tsangpa Tenzin, the head teacher of Triten Norbutse, or Geshe Samten Tsukphud, the resident lama at Shenten and others.

We crossed the mountains safely and stopped in Kathmandu, waiting for Rinpoche there. When he arrived, he told us we could not stay with him and should go, instead, to India, Menri monastery, to

complete our studies. I was very disappointed. Personally, I had no wish to become a geshe, I just wanted to receive precious teachings from Rinpoche and practice it. I obeyed him, of course, what else I could do, and we went to Menri. But there, my mind was never relaxed. The monastery is great, it gives excellent education, there was His Holiness Menri Trizin Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, but still, I was not happy. We were monks with low status and could not get teachings directly from His Holiness. So, I was thinking: why did I undertake such a dangerous journey, risking my life, if I still cannot study with the greatest masters?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After two years, I could not go on anymore. I decided to leave the monastery and reach Yongdzin Rinpoche in Kathmandu. I hoped he would not chase me away. Later, the other monks from my group joined me.

Rinpoche did not say anything. He accepted things as they were. The most beautiful period of my life started. We were there, with him, receiving teachings from him, it was wonderful. Every day we learn and practice. Finally, I graduated at Triten Norbutse and received my geshe degree there. Rinpoche gave us complete instructions in sutra, tantra and dzogchen, and all the necessary initiations. And not only one time. I think I received Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud five times, from Rinpoche. Each time, you get more understanding, more clarity.

I also received personal advice from him on different occasions, throughout the years. I remember it when I feel disturbed. This happens, of course, I am an ordinary being and can feel angry or disappointed or jealous, all these things. Thanks to Rinpoche, I keep focusing on integration of my practice to the difficult moments of my life. Some of his sayings have helped me greatly to pass through hardships. He used to say: “Do not follow people’s mouths. If you do that, you will have to cry hundreds of times because someone said bad things about you, and you will have to laugh hundreds of times, because someone said nice things about you. You will be completely dependent on others. You will not be yourself.”

“Do your best,” he said, “and don’t worry too much. Don’t expect too much either. What is supposed to come will come. Whatever. Do your best. You cannot do more than your best.” And then he said: “Be honest. Be honest and truthful and transparent.”

And I also remember him saying: “Leave it as it is. Human beings worry often about nothing, we worry about the past, which is not there anymore, we worry about the future which has not happened yet. The past and the future, they are both nothingness. Even if bad things happen, let them go. We can remember them, but we have to let go, not hold on. Otherwise more stress and anxiety will come. Do not chase after the path, do not create the future, keep your mind clear.”

I learned so much from my master. Sometimes he did not fulfill my expectations, and I learned from it too. This is, you know, the biggest instruction. It happened once that Rinpoche gave us teaching on the outer cycle of Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud but refused to give us the inner cycle of the teachings. We were already senior teachers ourselves, at Triten Norbutse, and we felt humiliated by this decision. He crushed our egos.

With time, Rinpoche became somehow inseparable from my mind. I bring him with me all the time. His presence, blessings are always with me. I see him around me all the time, really, no joke. I feel so lucky. I'm really fortunate to have spent so many years with him.

I think many people from our sangha feel the same. He has had a great impact on the lives of all of us. That's why so many people are planning to come to Kathmandu to celebrate Rinpoche´s birthday. It is good to celebrate and commemorate all Rinpoche´s achievements together.

There was nothing before he came to India and Nepal. Now, two great monasteries that he and His Holiness Menri 33rd Trizin founded preserve and spread the tradition of Yungdrung Bon – dharma teachings, arts, culture – outside Tibet.

I am very happy that my team and I completed the documentary about Yongdzin Rinpoche last December, just in time for Rinpoche´s 100th birthday. It was not planned this way, but it happened. Both Tibetan and English versions are ready and will be screened during the upcoming celebrations. I think it is very auspicious.

Photo credit: Khenpo Gelek Jinpa