

The Moment You See Him

An Interview with the Karmapa's Disciple Sister Palmo,



Sister Gelongma Khechog Palmo is a close disciple of the XVI Gyalwa Karmapa who accompanied him and served as a translator on his visit to the West in 1975. British by birth, Sister Palmo has lived in India for forty years, and for the past twelve years she has been a Buddhist nun, living primarily in Sikkim. A highly articulate and honoured devotee of the Karmapa, she spoke to Lex Hixon last winter, providing a loving picture of the Karmapa himself, including a description of the famous "Black Hat Ceremony" and a short discussion of some of the important elements of his teachings.

SISTER PALMO: It's really wonderful to have His Holiness in one's presence. He is about fifty years old and full of laughter. He couldn't be less serious. He streams great love to everyone and all you see him go back feeling better simply for having seen him. Within that great sunlike atmosphere he has, there are what you call in modern times "vibes." His "vibes" go right into the depths of people's consciousness and really change their lives.

His Holiness is the head of the Kagyupa sect, which has another representative in the United States, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. Trungpa has been interpreting Buddhism in modern psychological terms, putting it into language Americans can understand. That has a very big impact. His Holiness can't speak English. He is just bringing his presence. Just by being, he is blessing. He won't speak much in this country. He won't give a lot of lectures. He doesn't work that way.

LEX HIXON: Does he transmit spiritual power without words?

Without words! He is beyond words, you see. That is the point. Trungpa Rinpoche works with words because he has to meet intellectually the mind of the American people. But His Holiness gives different lessons and does various ceremonies which we believe have profound psychological and spiritual effects, like the sharing of the crown.

Sometimes it is called the Black Crown, or the Black Hat, but it is really blue-like in colour and has beautiful jewels on it. It is impregnated with centuries of “vibes.” In the ceremony he puts on the crown when he goes into meditation. His meditation is a very deep samadhi, a deep wordless state, and it is a very profound thing to see him in that state. The ceremony associated with it is very beautiful. He also gives initiations to help people start up the spiritual path, and mantras, the sacred words which people repeat. Simply coming in sight of him, having his hand on your head, or listening to him speaking in Tibetan is putting your foot on the path of liberation.

Could you say something more about the origins and significance of the Black Crown ceremony?

The ceremony goes back to the fifth Karmapa. The teaching has always been that the Karmapa can be seen by the devotee in meditation wearing a beautiful blue-black crown which is full of points of coloured light and golden light. In their devotions people saw this crown but could never explain to others what they had seen. The story grew that His Holiness was inseparable from his crown.

Finally, during the fifth incarnation of the Karmapa, one of the Ming dynasty kings of China saw the crown and was so inspired that he created a replica of the crown so that everyone could see what it looked like on his head. He made this crown with beautiful decorations. And His Holiness shows it in certain ceremonies today in which he puts the crown on his head and goes into a wordless meditation. People understand what it is like just by seeing him. The ceremony is also beautified by Tibetan music and exquisite fabrics that are placed on the throne where he sits.

The crown itself has been sanctified through the centuries. Traditionally it is said to have the power of liberation on sight. Of course, people would challenge that. How could just seeing a crown bring liberation? But certainly the deep and powerful spiritual vibrations that emanate from the crown affect people immediately. And seeing the crown *is* liberation if you understand it properly and don't put up any mental barriers against it.

You mean people are liberated just by seeing the crown?

Everyone is liberated whether they know it or not. The point is, do you *know* you are liberated?

Can you give us some idea of what His Holiness represents?

His Holiness represents the peak of the meditation tradition which is symbolized by the great yogi, Milarepa. He is the chief spiritual teacher of Bhutan and Sikkim. And he represents the peak of the Tibetan Buddhist yoga tradition. He is the head of one of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism, the representative of the Kagyupa lineage which goes back to the 8th century.

We believe a great deal in devotion to the guru. All sects believe in great devotion to the guru, but the Kagyupa sect is perhaps strongest on this point. We believe that to get through the forest, as it were, one must have a guide. Our guide is the Buddha, but the living guide is the guru. By Buddha we believe that he has reached the highest state of enlightenment and yet lives among us like anyone else, and he is able to teach and liberate us from our state of suffering. His Holiness, of course, is such a one. To us he *is* Buddha.

How does the Karmapa instruct Westerners?

Recently His Holiness was speaking to a group of Westerners who had been practising very hard for about a year. They wanted to know how to develop their practice. After thinking about it, His Holiness quite unexpectedly said that they should meditate on the Enlightenment Mind, the Bodhicitta. I hadn't heard him say that for a long time and I think he said it just for

them. We have to meditate on the Enlightenment Mind before going into any of the deeper practices which they had done already. Perhaps they had been meditating very devotedly but thinking a little too much about themselves and what they would gain. His Holiness inevitably knows what needs strengthening.

There are two aspects to the search for enlightenment - which is actually realizing enlightenment within oneself because it is already there. One aspect is for the sake of one's self and the other is for the sake of all beings. We call this *dun yee*, the two meanings, and His Holiness felt that they should broaden the meaning.

In its absolute aspect, meditation on the Bodhicitta is also the deepest meditation because the Enlightenment Mind is not just "I should help *others*." That is a dual concept. It is that state or depth of consciousness where the boundaries of *I* and *others* cease to have any meaning, where we are all one or, shall we say, not two. So this meditation which His Holiness gave to them was not only to help them develop a feeling for others in order to help them on the path to enlightenment, but also to bring them to the non-dual realization which Christians and others might call the Godhead, and which we call Bodhicitta. The highest aspect of Bodhicitta is radiant, without boundaries.

Could you say something of the Bodhicitta itself?

Who can say anything about the non-dual Bodhicitta! It's not something of which you can say, "it's like this," or "it's like this." In fact, in history, people have said, "not this, not this, and not this," because if you say what it is, it isn't, and you get off into dualities again.

In looking at His Holiness, he actually seems to be the Bodhicitta. He seems to radiate that.

That's exactly the case. That's very true, because he represents the highest Bodhicitta which doesn't even distinguish *me* and *you*. He's just with you. You're familiar with him the moment you see him.

What is a tulku?

A tulku is someone who has attained liberation from the wheel of existence, who has reached that place of freedom from suffering, the liberation into the blessed Buddha fields. He could choose to go away and sit in the blessed Buddha fields, the pure land. But being full of this Enlightened Mind, he is inspired to refuse to sit in his heaven and let other people suffer in ignorance. So he chooses consciously to be reborn, in order to help others find the spiritual path. And we have a way of consciously finding these people who have consciously chosen to be reborn. Not all tulkus have reached the heights of His Holiness, but they have all attained liberation. Otherwise they wouldn't be tulkus.

One sometimes hears people speak about the Karmapa losing some of the tulkus.

During the recent years some of them have been reborn anonymously as it were. But often the head lamas know where they are even though they might not announce it for some reason. Presently we have far fewer tulkus than in the past. In Tibet we had over 1,000 but today in India we have only about 120. So we don't know where some of them are. Some may be in Tibet and some may have been born in the West, because the lamas have started moving to the West. The only geographical restriction for the birthplace of a tulku is that it be someplace where he can meet his former teachers and get the teaching again in this life. It may very well be that some of them have indeed been born in the West.

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