

This interview was first published in the Gentle Voice, April 2006 - a newsletter of Siddhartha's Intent. Siddhartha's Intent is the worldwide dharma organisation of Tibetan Master Dzongsar Kheyntse Rinpoche and can be accessed at www.siddharthasintent.org

Gentle Voice Interview with Khandro Thrinlay Chodon

“As a great-granddaughter of the renowned Drukpa Kagyü master Drubwang Shakya Shri, Khandro Thrinlay Chodon was born into a family of great meditators. She recently spoke to the Gentle Voice.

Could you please say something about your family background for the readers who haven't met you?

I was very fortunate when I opened my eyes on this earth. I was born in the most beautiful landscape of the northern Himalayas in an area known as Lahoul. And I was in the lap of my amazing mother and compassionate father, Apho Rinpoche.

My great-grandfather was known as Drubwang Shakya Shri. He was an accomplished *yogi* who started out as a cook in a monastery. He was born in a very humble nomadic family in the Kham region of Tibet and from there he bloomed into one of the great yogis of the time. My great-grandfather was brought up in a Drukpa Kagyü monastery and he did a lot of practice in that lineage and accomplished the highest realisation in *mahamudra*. Later he met Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and from him he received all the Nyingma transmissions and teachings and mastered *dzogpachenpo*. He was very involved in the *rimé* (or non-sectarian) movement of the time and in his later years he became well known and had students everywhere. People used to flock from the Himalayan regions like Lahoul, Ladakh, Pangi, Zanskar, Bhutan and Nepal. This is how we are connected to that land. Our connection comes from that time.

I believe you went to a Catholic school, while being of Tibetan background. That must have been a great contrast for you?

Yes, it was a great contrast. I think my father wanted me to understand the western way of thinking as well as the Tibetan. At first they were planning to make me a nun. But later my father said that since his elder daughter had died, I couldn't be a nun; I had to study. They found a very good Catholic school, which was only two hours away from home. Maybe my father knew that he was going to die soon because he wanted his children to be very close. And he didn't live long after that, so it was a very good idea to have us close. I was born in a beautiful family, but this beauty vanished one by one.

And your father died when you were six?

Yes, after my father passed away I was sent to Catholic boarding school. I experienced quite a bit of prejudice from the Indians. Tibetans were considered very dirty and they would tease me by saying, "The Tibetans eat cow meat." The school was kept very clean and was quite fancy and sometimes I would look at the Tibetan settlement near our school through their eyes and I would see the Tibetans living in tents and looking very dirty and I would feel ashamed. Then I'd go home and my family would talk about *bodhicitta* mind, we would sit and do *pujas* together and I would melt into the practice and none of what the Indian children said would matter. When I was home, I was totally lost in our tradition. But when I came back to school I would hear nothing good about it. It was very confusing. Yet I knew deep inside that the Tibetan tradition was the right path for me, although for a time I had to be at school, which was also very important for me.

I'm glad you survived and drew strength out of it and got the English language skills.

I was a very good student. Church was part of the curriculum and because I would get so much devotion out of singing, the teachers thought that I would become a very good Christian. When I went home I would sing Christian songs and I would be so devotional about Christianity. Ama-la got so worried that she told me, "You go to church, but you visualise the Dalai Lama." For me as a child it was very beautiful

because I didn't see a difference between Christ and the Dalai Lama –so my devotion to the Dalai Lama was only strengthened by this and to this day it grows.

What did you do after you finished school?

After school I did my bachelor's degree at Chandigarh. And then I spent a lot of time with my master Gegen Rinpoche. I used to serve him, massage his feet and look after him. At the same time I was being courted by many suitors because of my youth and good family. There were many proposals from esteemed Tibetan families. For Tibetan women it is important to have a good husband with lots of money. That is the ultimate kind of salvation! But I didn't want to get caught up in that, preferring to stay with my teacher, although at times part of me was tempted.

If I wasn't to get married, it was at least expected that after achieving my B.A I would start my career. Again I had to choose, this time between my master and my career. I stayed according to my heart and when I looked back later, I said to myself, "It doesn't matter that this part of my youth has gone to my master. It was the biggest offering." Practice was very important to me from a young age. Even in Catholic school I wanted to do my prostrations as my mother had instructed and I used to prostrate in the bathroom because all the children mocked you if they saw you prostrating.

And later you completed an M.A. in the United States. How did that come about?

I had met the American author and peace activist Joanna Macy in Tashi Jong. She became my American mother and this meeting set in motion events that led to my going to America and meeting my future husband, Shabdrung Rinpoche. We fell in love and, while I was studying in America, we had a long-distance relationship – it was very beautiful, always spending money on calls! Then Gegen Rinpoche died and I came back to India for his cremation in 1997.

In 1998, I finished my M.A. and went to New York to visit Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's father. Shabdrung Rinpoche came from India to America and we were married by Joanna Macy. It was very beautiful. That was when my life as wife of an important rinpoche started, which was devoted to supporting him in his activity. However, our happiness was short-lived and in 2003 Shabdrung Rinpoche got cancer. It was very difficult – he spent six months in hospital before he died and I was by his side at all times. When he died I felt I could hardly grieve for him. I had to be strong for all his followers and make sure that all the ceremonies went well and were beautifully accomplished. With all the death I've experienced I feel it has helped me to understand impermanence truly. Now I want to devote my time to fulfilling my mother's dream of providing for the women practitioners who find it very hard in our culture to get support. It's important for me to provide firstly for twenty-one nuns who are very devoted and will form the cornerstone of achieving education and spiritual support for women and children in the remote areas of Ladakh.

Would you like to say something in conclusion?

What I would like to say is that even though outwardly it seems that we are in a much-degenerated time in some ways, please realise that we are nevertheless in a time when so many wonderful masters exist. And if we have pure vision, they're inseparable from the great masters and Buddha himself. So just open yourself totally without any doubts. And if we keep ourselves open, Guru Rinpoche, Tara and all the bodhisattvas are there, right in front of us, blessing us all the time. Whether we are Easterners or Westerners, our physical appearance doesn't matter; the blessings are always there. So therefore pursue your practice and be aware!

For more information about the work of Khachodling Trust and the nuns of the Himalayan regions supported by Khandro Thrinlay Chodon, please go to www.khachodling.org “