



Rainbow Body: The Life and Realization of a Tibetan Yoggin, Togden Ugyen Tendzin

By Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

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Rainbow Body: The Life and Realization of a Tibetan Yoggin, Togden Ugyen Tendzin, presents the remarkable life story of Togden Ugyen Tendzin (1888–1962), a Tibetan yoggin who in death achieved the “rainbow body,” the release of the physical body in the essence of the five elements and one of the highest spiritual attainments of Dzogchen, recognized as the supreme level of Tibetan Buddhism. His nephew, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, one of the greatest living masters of Dzogchen, composed the book from his own recollections of his uncle as well as direct quotes from talks with the great yoggin himself and his disciple Sala Karma Samten. The book traces the yoggin’s childhood struggles, the circumstances that led him to his teacher, the eminent Adzom Drugpa, and his difficult path to self-realization. Finally, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu relates the story of Ugyen Tendzin’s death during imprisonment by the Chinese, when witnesses discovered that though his sheepskin robe still sat upright, his body was gone—a testament to its having dissolved into the rainbow body.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Chögyal Namkhai Norbu is one of the greatest Tibetan meditation masters and scholars teaching in the West."

—Lama Surya Das, author of *Awakening the Buddha Within* and *Awakening the Buddhist Heart*, and the founder of the Dzogchen Foundation in Massachusetts

About the Author

Born in Eastern Tibet in 1938, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu is an internationally known Dzogchen Buddhist teacher and author. The direct descendant of the first Dzogchen Tibetan master of Tibet, Norbu spent his childhood receiving many teachings from masters of various traditions. In the 1960s he was invited to teach in Italy. During his career he wrote many books on Tibetan culture and Dzogchen Buddhism. He is the founder of two nonprofit organizations including the Shang Shung Institute, which is dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture.

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Trial by the Chinese: A Passage from *Rainbow Body, The Life and Realization of a Tibetan Yigin, Togden Ugyen Tendzin*

By Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

This is what I heard directly from my uncle Togden Rinpoche:

When I had completed six years of retreat in all (1917) on two different occasions, practicing in the meditation cave above Namdrag, I received a letter from Drugpa Rinpoche, which arrived via Tsenam. In it was written: "This year, you can come to Adzom Gar for the summer teachings." According to this instruction, I ended my retreat in the first month of spring, on the occasion of Losar, the Tibetan New Year (January 22, 1917), and went to visit my old father. I also gave to him, to my brothers Sönam and Trasam, and to my young sister Trashi Chötsö, advice for their present and future lives. Then, after Losar, I crossed the Drichu River and went to visit the Norzang family in Geug. There, according to their wishes, I gave a long-life initiation and performed chöd and so on many times. This was the first time that I placed a torma on someone's head.

Tsenam told me that he wanted to escort me to Adzom Gar, but I thought, It is better if I bear hardships for the sake of the teaching, and decided to go alone on foot. I wore a robe of soft red wool of good quality and a hat of the same material that Tsenam had had sewn for me, and at the beginning of the second month of spring, I left Geug.

In that period there was much turmoil between Chinese and Tibetans, so that when I arrived at the Dotsön bridge, I saw Chinese soldiers camping everywhere around it. Some of them came toward me, and after asking a few questions, they arrested me and took me to the military camp. They said many things, but since I did not know a single word of Chinese, we could not understand each other. They bound my hands and feet and put me in a corner of the camp for the night, guarded by soldiers who took turns. The following day, they brought me inside a military tent on the plain near the bridge, where the bearded Chinese commander asked me, through an interpreter, "Are you Tibetan?"

“Yes,” I replied. “I am Tibetan.”

The chief laughed and said, “Right. You are a spy of the Tibetan army.”

“I am not a spy. I am a hermit who lives at the Namdrag retreat near Kamthog,” I replied.

The Chinese man raised his voice and said, “If you are Tibetan, as you say, how could you be a hermit at the Namdrag retreat near Kamthog? You are not a Khampa. Speak the truth.” Many Chinese soldiers who were present punched me everywhere. I tried to explain in so many ways, but they would not listen. Then the commander said, “If you are a Khampa, then why are you wearing a robe and hat of soft wool from central Tibet?”

Although I told him the truth, the only effect this had was that I was beaten even more. At a certain point, the Chinese commander ordered something loudly to the soldiers, after which they took me out of the tent and bound me tightly with a rope to a bush a little way off on the plain. After a while, three Chinese soldiers pointed their guns at my stomach and shot many times. I visualized myself as Guru Tragpo as big as a mountain, and not even one bullet hit my body. However, I rolled on the ground and pretended that I was dead.

At dusk, the soldiers ordered some local people, “Remove this corpse from the ground.” Accordingly, they took me near the bridge, untied the rope that was binding me, stripped off my robe, hat, and boots, and threw me naked from the bridge into the river. I did not know how to swim, but I prayed fervently to Adzom Drugpa Rinpoche as nondual from Guru Rinpoche and held my breath in kumbhaka, and after some time I reached the other shore of the river. That night I traveled naked and in hiding until I reached the confluence (of three rivers) at Tsezungdo.

Proceeding along, a little above Tsezungdo I saw the house of a family on the side of the road. I slowly headed toward it, and some dogs jumped up and ran in my direction. I recited the Siddhi mantra a few times, and as soon as I made an invocation that the dogs’ wrath be appeased and that they become friendly, they fell silent. When I approached the entrance of the house, a dog came and sniffed at me, then remained quiet. Outside the door hung a woman’s black dress that had been left out to dry after washing. I stole it, and putting it on, proceeded toward the Alo Gotse pass. After some time, day dawned.

At one point, around that area, I saw the house of another family, and I went to beg food at their door, where I distinctly heard the moan of women crying inside. I waited for a little while, then an old woman arrived carrying a bowl full of tsampa, and she was still crying.

“Amalag, what’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“My husband used to drink too much arak, and because of this we found him dead in his bed this morning. In our family we have a son who is a monk at Palpung monastery. Another son, who knows Chinese, went to work as a translator for the Chinese at the Dotsön bridge. My daughter and I don’t know what to do now.”

“Amalag,” I reassured her, “I am a chöd practitioner. I was arrested by the Chinese soldiers at the Dotsön bridge and tortured. I was thrown into the river, and I had nothing left to wear. This morning, while on my way, I had to steal this woman’s dress and wear it. I’ll help you bring your husband’s body to the charnel ground.”

The woman was very pleased and let me inside the house. That day I carried her husband's corpse to a small charnel ground in the vicinity. Since I did not know how to dispose of the body, I tied it to a peg on the ground without cutting it into pieces and practiced chöd. Although I had no dāmaru, bell, and so on, after a while many vultures arrived and devoured everything, leaving only the bare bones.

When I returned to their house, the old mother, who was called Karma Tso, and her daughter pleaded with me, "Please stay one more week in our house to perform the death rituals," insisting that I accept. Therefore I had to promise that I would stay. Accordingly, every day, again and again, I would practice the chöd of the Laughter of the ?ākinîs, which was all that I knew. As a present, Karma Tso offered me all the clothes that had belonged to the deceased, but I took only a shirt, a red robe, and a pair of boots and gave back the remaining clothes, explaining to her, "Thank you. I don't need any more than these clothes."

One day, around the end of the first week, the son who acted as translator for the Chinese army came back home and discovered that his father had died. He came to meet me, and as soon as he recognized me, he started to cry, and prostrated many times before me. He and his mother and sister insisted that I stay for a second week, and although I tried to explain to them that I had no time, they insisted so much and in such a way that I had to remain for the second week too. While I was staying there, the story of how I had been tortured by the Chinese soldiers without dying and how I was now in that family at the Alo valley spread everywhere. It also reached Tsenam, who one day arrived with a mount to escort me to Adzom Gar.

Since two days were still left for me to complete the second week, I sent Tsenam to take the black dress that I had stolen back to its owners. During that time, the son who was a monk came back from Palpung and also performed a death ritual.

As soon as the second week ended, together with Tsenam as an escort, I left for Palpung monastery. There we stayed three days, meeting the lamas residing in the monastery and paying a detailed visit to the three sacred representations of that place. Then I insisted that Tsenam return home, and I proceeded alone, passing through the main charnel grounds and sacred mountain places where Togden Rinpoche Pema Kundrol had previously been. After about a fortnight, I reached Adzom Gar.

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Suzanne Macdougall:

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