

**THE LABRANG GOMCHEN**

# Five Nyingmapa Lamas in Sikkim

Marilyn Silverstone

## 1. The Ven. Chöda Lama (The Labrang Gomchen)

The Ven. Chöda Lama is one of the two respected elderly "Gomchens" ("Great Meditators") of Sikkim, known as the Labrang Gomchen from the name of his birthplace.

He recounts his life quite simply: "I was a bastard; my father didn't care for me—I was put with my uncle." Here also life was hard, and at 13 he ran away to Gangtok and worked for his bed and board. Finally he ran away again, and in Chumbi fell in with a group of lamas for whom he helped to collect alms. With a little money he had earned, the boy bought a maund of rice, and with only this for food, retired to a cave where he says he lived only on this raw rice for six months. A monk found him and persuaded him that this was no way to live, so the boy accompanied him to Tibet. Here his first teacher was the great Tokden Sakya Shri, whose photograph he keeps, even in the old photograph a compelling presence with his Lord Siva-like wound topknot of hair and air of coiled energy. On the death of Sakya Shri, his guru became Ladak Tupen Rimpoche, a disciple of Sakya Shri's, whose photograph shows him a man of calm, impassive strength, broad high cheekbones and centre-parted white hair flowing to his shoulders, looking much like the American Indian chiefs of the same period.

But Ladak Tupen Rimpoche's patron kept him virtually a prisoner in his house to perform religious ceremonies for him. So one night he escaped, and the young disciple stayed on in the house for a year to perform the religious duties of his master. Then he too left and wandered all over Tibet before finding and rejoining his teacher.

At last he returned to Sikkim and has wandered all over, meditating in the forest, living for a while in a hilltop meditation cottage above Taktse, a few miles from Gangtok. Then he found a wife—now he lives, when he is there, in a small house perched Sikkimese style on bamboo poles over terraced

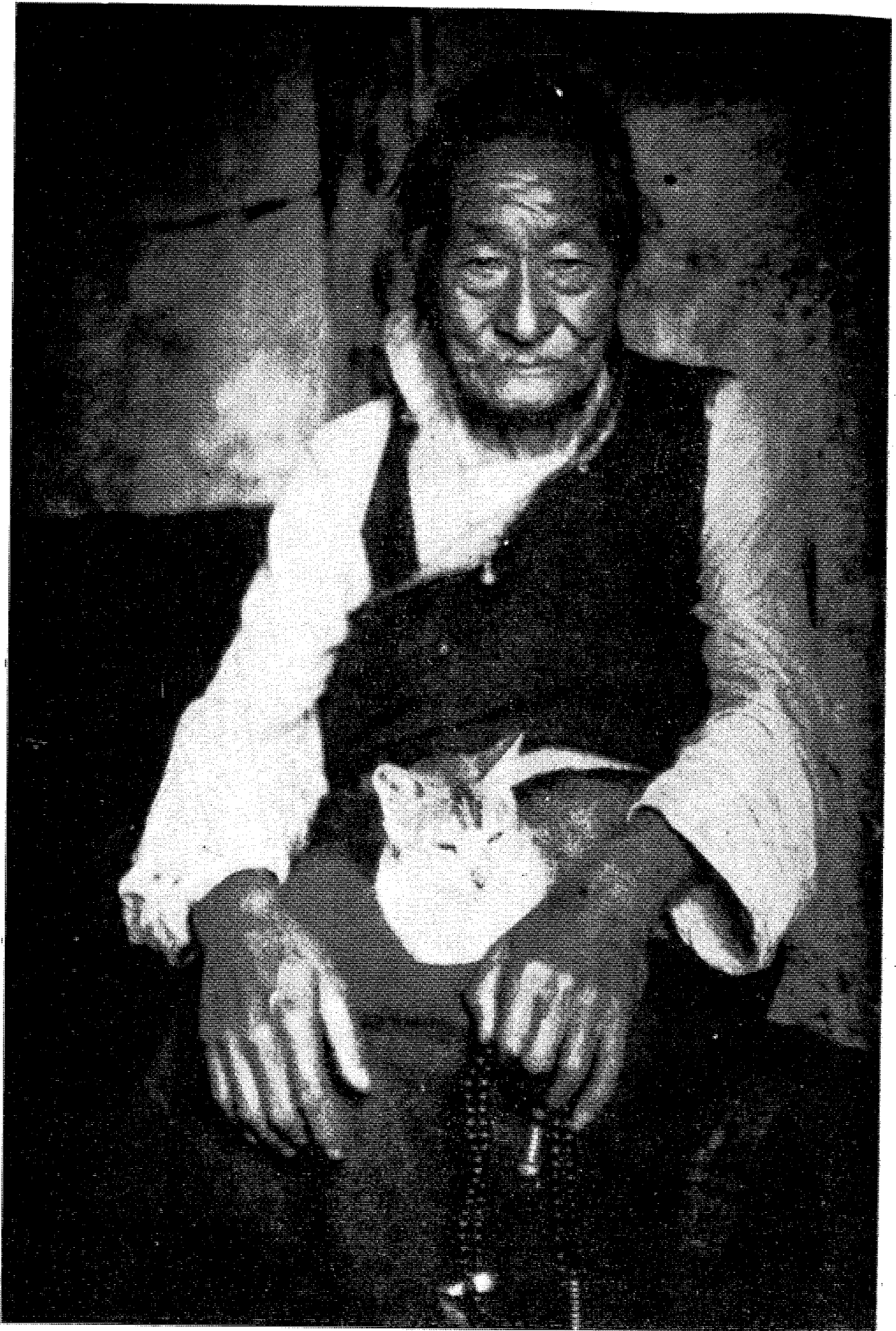
corn and paddy fields high on a hillside facing a changing view of mist, cloud, and mountains, a few miles north of Gangtok.

A humble man with no pretensions, the Gomchen gives the impression of a man of the world and out of it. Recently in Ceylon, as head of the Sikkimese delegation to a Buddhist conference, he would slip off into meditation anywhere—on the platform, waiting at the airport. Once, on another delegation he walked oblivious onto the wrong plane, luckily to the right place, and when asked by perturbed officials at the other end where he had come from, simply pointed to the sky and said “up there!” Active and lively, his energy belies his age, said to be over 80—he walks over the hills to Gangtok faster than most can go the slightly more roundabout way by jeep. He is modest about his spiritual accomplishments, and he says he cannot perform anything very great as his learning is not enough, though he is most popular and respected by the people for his cures and prayers for them—a practical priest well grounded in local lore who uses his powers to help his neighbours. Asked about disciples, he shook his head. There is one who is doing quite well now on his own, but nowadays no one wants to come and stay, and if they do, they don’t want to learn—they don’t have the patience.

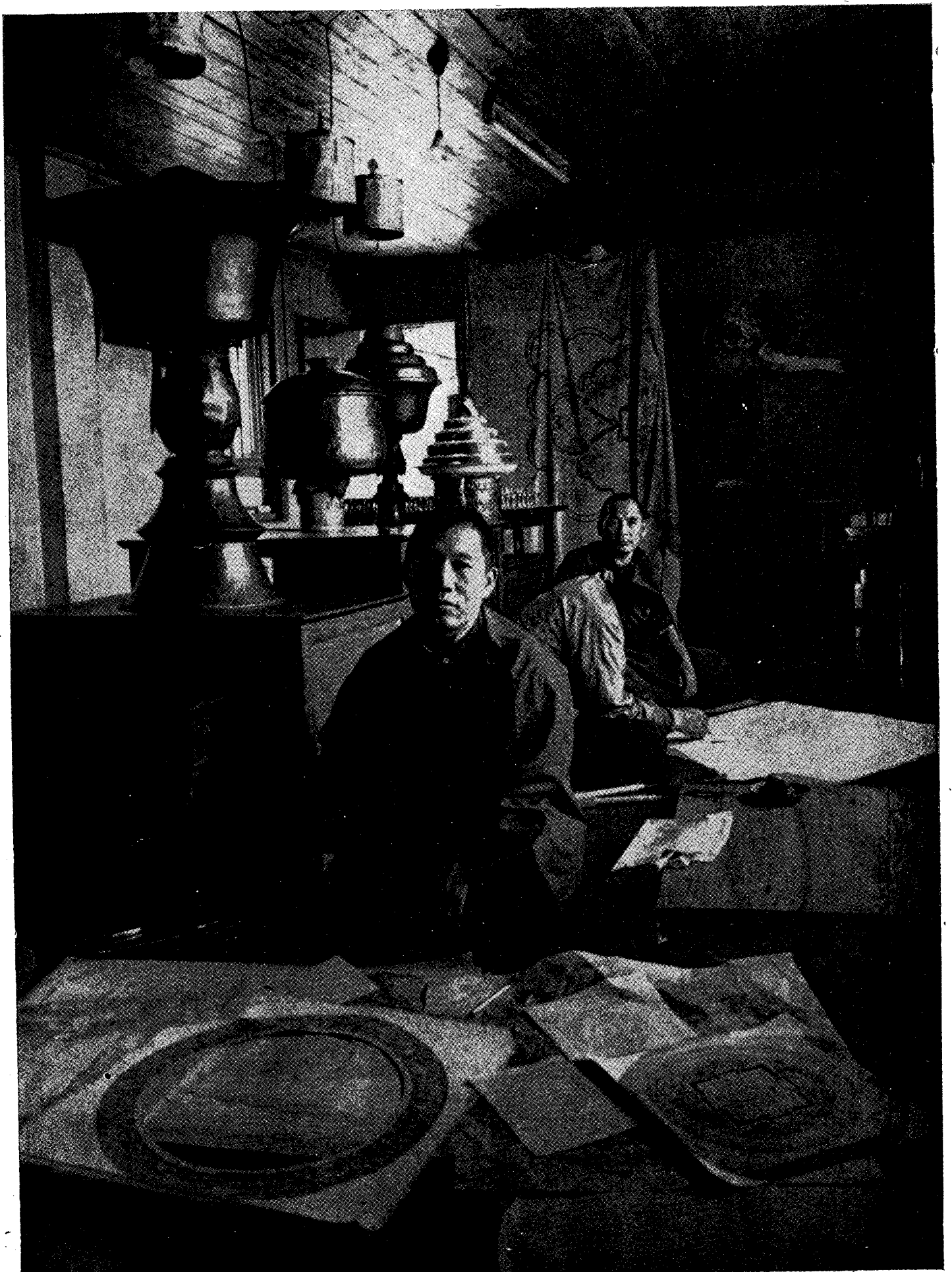
## 2. The Lingdok Gomchen

Tall, his stooped frame now frail, the Lingdok Gomchen emanates an aura of serenity and sanctity. The older of the two Sikkimese “great meditators”, the 87-year-old Gomchen is a celibate *gelong*, and for the past 27 years has lived in a meditation cottage on a forested hilltop near Taktse (the cottage once shared by the Labrang Gomchen), where his companions are a fiercely devoted *gelong* monk attendant and a cat. His whole life is meditation—for hours he sits on his meditation seat in a narrow veranda of the cottage facing a window looking out over the treetops of the forest. His wants are little—he lives on the offerings of people who make the pilgrimage up to his hilltop to ask him to pray for them. He is totally deaf. He can speak, which he does in a low, strong voice, but visitors must write their questions on a small slate kept by his side.

The Lingdok Gomchen came to his vocation later in life than the Labrang Gomchen. Oddly, they shared the same guru, but at different times. As a boy, the Gomchen was put to study with his uncle, a lama. “I learned,” he says, “but it did not really move me. I was learning words.” Then, at



THE LINGDOK GOMCHEN



25, he heard a sermon one day by Ugyen Lama. It changed his life. He realised that meditation was everything, looking inward to examine the soul. He made his way to Tibet and eventually became a disciple of Ladak Tupen Rimpoche. Returning to Sikkim he meditated in caves, at the Lukshama (northeast of Gangtok, the high hilltop which is the royal cremation ground). For a while he was at Enchay, the monastery on a hilltop overlooking Gangtok.

At the foot of the wooden steps to the veranda of the Gomchen's cottage above Taktse is a pan of ashes for visitors to rub on their feet and legs to dispel the leeches gathered during the long walk up through the dripping forest. The faithful *gelong* ushers the visitor into a dim, quiet room with an altar at one end. In a few moments the tall old man enters, his hair braided over his head in old Sikkimese style, rosary in his hand. He sits down and serenity pervades the quiet room. A grey and white cat comes in and curls into his lap, and as he talks, the Gomchen breaks off and feeds it bits of Tibetan biscuit dipped in the tea which the *gelong* has served. This *gomchen's* way is strictly the way of contemplation. He feels that the best way he can serve is to meditate for himself and all sentient beings on the heart of the religion, which is love—the bells and the trappings do not matter—it is the essence which counts. Asked how all that he must have learned over so many years of meditation can be passed on, he said that it was not something to be broadcast around—he was old now, but if anyone really wanted to learn and came to him and stayed, he would teach them.

The sound of the rain pattered against the window and on the tops of the trees below. My companion asked the Gomchen to keep his rosary for a while on his altar. We slipped to the floor in front of his table and asked, in the darkening room, for his blessing.

### 3. Dodrup Chen Rimpoche

Dodrup Rimpoche, or the Rev. Dodrup Chen, as he styles himself in a booklet-sized biography of Maha Pandita Vimalamitra which he has published in English, was born in Golok, in the Amne Machin range in the Tibetan far east. Born into a poor family, he was recognized as an incarnate and taught to write at five, then studied for 18 years. Trouble between the Chinese and Tibetans – “thrashing”, as the Rimpoche put it—had erupted in Golok, so Dodrup Rimpoche, carrying his old mother on his back, left for Lhasa. Lhasa, he says, was tense, so he came on to Shigatse, still carrying his mother on his



back. At Shigatse he found a man who would carry her the rest of the way. He knew two other lamas from Golok who were then in Sikkim (the late Ken-Tse Rimpoche and Tru-Sik Rimpoche) so he came on here. Now he lives in a long building behind the great Choten at Gangtok, near the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. "I came from nothing," he says. "Now I am happy. I can do my work."

Dodrup Rimpoche's work is most remarkable. A man of bounding energy and ideas, his "workshop" is a long room with a procession down the middle of huge incense burners, mandalas, and trays of butterlamps. The floor is spread with books and papers; two monk assistants, one with a large wooden compass, are plotting a mandala on graph paper. His own place is cluttered with different sized photocopies of other mandalas which he is working on. Knowing nothing about the working of a camera, he has gotten hold of one, and figuring it out himself, has hit on the idea of photographing a mandala which he has drawn large size, then reducing it by making a photographic print the size he wants, then making printing blocks of the reduced-size mandala for mass-producing and giving to the people who ask for them. Writing out the words on the mandala, photographing—he does the whole thing himself. The big mandala on the floor in the photograph is the mandala of Rinzing Lama. He was not satisfied with the result, and had cut out the border to paste onto another sheet and redo the center. Scattered about are smaller diagrams—part of another current project—reproduction of the 100 *sung-wa* of Guru Rimpoche. These are mystic letters in the centers of appropriate diagrams (each in a frame of eight petals representing eight forms of the Guru) to be worn as the talismans against 100 different perils. By reducing them to the size of a 2 1/4 x 2 1/4" negative, they become convenient to wear in modern conditions where no one can easily wear a bag of folded thick papers as in the old days.

Yet another project has been the printing of a set of 27 color reproductions of Padma Sambhava and his 26 main followers. Rimpoche got an artist to copy these from a set of wood block prints from Derge Kathok, part of the Rinchen Ter-mZod, then got the blocks made in Calcutta. Now his ambition is to translate a book on these disciples of Padma Sambhava into English. He has already printed a summary of the life and works of the Guru boiled down to six pages. His briefcase is a file overflowing with scraps of drawings, diagrams, paintings, and 100 ideas for combining old faith with

modern means. His parting gift was a blessed and folded *tak-dol*, a diagram of the *Bardo thö-dol*, to be kept with one for enlightenment at the hour of one's death.

#### 4. Khempo Dazar

Both the Khempos—"learned ones, expert in the five branches of knowledge"—are haunted by the prophecies of the end which perhaps they, as learned and disciplined men, are more poignantly aware of than others, and see in perspective.

Khempo Dazar has been in Sikkim for the past six years as head of the bShad sGra (Sheda), the small Nyingma college attached to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok. A Khamba, he studied at the Rahor Gompa in Gyalrong, a branch of the great Dzogchen monastery near Derge. He came to India via Bhutan in 1959, and thence in 1966 to Sikkim.

"The government course here is five years," he says, "but you can't learn it all. It used to be 30 years!" The teaching of the Sheda is that of the traditional five great disciplines or branches of knowledge, and the five lesser disciplines. The five major subjects are: So-wa Rigpa (medicine), Da-Rigpa (science of words or language), Nangdeun Rigpa (meditation, introspection, or spiritual knowledge), Tsema Rigpa (dialectics and logic), and Zo Rigpa (mechanical arts—including painting, sculpture, etc.) The minor studies are: Ngon-jeut (synonyms), Deu-kar (dance-drama), Nyengnak (poetry), Kartsis (astrology), and Deb-jor (metric composition).

Nangdeun Rigpa is the "root of the tree" and the most important study in the Sheda: spiritual knowledge. There are two types of Nangdeun Rigpa, Khempo says, or rather two ways to the same destination: there is the Gomchens' way—to get understanding from top lamas and then meditate, and there is the way of reading books and then practicing. The desire is the important thing, whether the way is easy or hard. Even music comes as a branch of Nangdeun Rigpa, as under Nangdeun Rigpa you offer prayers and the five senses come into it.

Khempo Dazar is a quiet-spoken man of a kind of shining, bull-headed straightness and stubbornness. He cannot be shaken from what he thinks is right. He worries that his teaching may be lost when his students go home to their villages. Despite chronic headaches he refuses to give up his Chinese stone spectacles—made of a clear crystal-like substance with wavy white lines



across it. He believes that the cold touch on the vein below the eye helps the eyes despite the fact that his headaches worsen while wearing them (doubtless from the strain of peering through the white squiggles) and refuses to wear a German pair a well-wisher has sent him despite admitting that he does see better through them! He feels somehow that they may damage his eyes. On the other hand, when asked whether there was anything against photographing an image, he replied that "it all depends on your intention"—a very straight and not so orthodox reply.

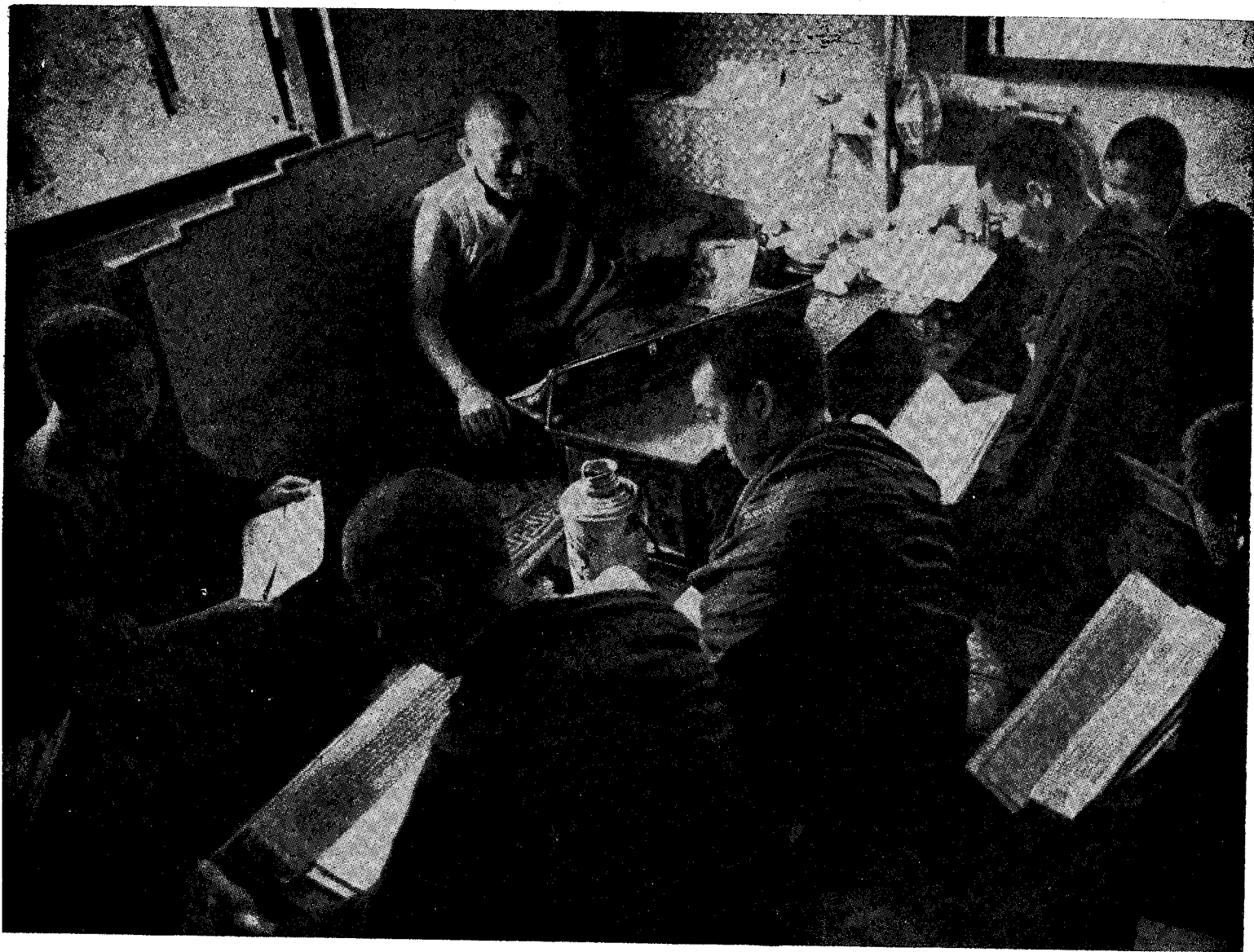
"Chos is the only thing we need. Whatever material things we have at death we will remember the chos . . . We are now in the age of the fourth Sangay Sakya Shoba. This will decline still further—there are still 1000 years to go. We are coming to the bottom. Then it will go up again, in the coming age of Sangay Champa. There is a prediction that the religion will spread to the West. Perhaps that is now happening."

"Americans are just like Khampas." Khempo's worried look left him for a moment. "You are more straightforward, like us—when offered tea you just say yes or no, more free and easy than the Bö-pas (Tibetans from Ü and Tsang, central Tibet) who go through all that ritual and formality of saying no!"

##### **5. Khempo Thupten with His Pupil Dzogchen Pema Rinzing**

Ascetic, frail, with a luminous smile and gentle manner, Khempo Thupten has been since January 1970 tutor to the seventh Dzogchen Pema Rinzing, a boy now seven years old, born to Khampa parents settled in Sikkim, and recognized soon after his birth as the reincarnation of the great Siddha especially revered in Kham. It is said that at the boy's birth, the seven cups of water on the family altar turned milky white, and he started speaking about his monastery when he was small.

It was Dodrup Rimpoche who recognized the boy as the reincarnation. It had been the fifth Dzogchen Pema Rinzing who had recognized Dodrup Rimpoche and had been his tutor. Now it was Dodrup Rimpoche's turn to point out his guru's reincarnation. The fifth had indicated his successors by prediction. He had said the sixth would be found in Kham, the seventh would be in the South, and described everything. The sixth Dzogchen died at only 25. Before he died, he told his monks, "Go south and we will meet again." Once recognized, the boy needed a tutor.



**KHEMPO DAZAR AT THE SHEDA (MONKS' COLLEGE), NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY, GANGTOK**

Dodrup Rimpoche and Khempo Dazar, whose monastery, Rahor Gompa, had been founded by the third Dzogchen, called upon Khempo Dazar's lifelong friend and monastery classmate Khempo Thupten, requesting him to become the boy's tutor. Now the young Dzogchen is Khempo Thupten's responsibility, to be with, to support, to educate, and to form.

Khempo Thupten was himself put into his monastery at seven and never returned home. At the age of 25, he and his friend Dazar left the monastery and wandered together around Tibet, meeting different lamas and learning. By the time they came to Lhasa, the Dalai Lama having already fled to India, the situation was "tense" so they, along with two other monk companions, made their way, hiding, and found themselves finally in Bhutan, whence they were sent to Buxar in the plains which for some years was a special camp for monks, and from there came to nearby Kalimpong and Darjeeling.

The frail Khempo is haunted by the knowledge that the prophecies of the end of the religion are coming to pass. "The religion is now nearing its end. It's like a dream that you are being attacked by wild animals, then you wake and find you are in your bed. Like the dream, you are aware of it, but during the day you don't think about it." It was predicted in Tibet that the Dalai Lama would have to leave—even to the timings, he says. People were doubtful about the prediction but even the fact that the refugees have come to Sikkim was all in the predictions. The Khempo has spent four months at the holiest of Sikkim's holy places, Tashiding. "Sikkim's sacred places are better than others," he says gently. "The way is hard, and you think there will be nothing—but when you reach there you are happy and peaceful. Your mind is not distracted."

"There are two ways to look at the religion," he says. "The scriptures, preachings, to read and practice, and meditation against the desire, anger, and ignorance which govern you. Monks are needed to show the way, to teach. But where are the monks now? They are turned to material things. Of the Rimpoche's monastery (the Dzogchen monastery in Derge) of 1000 monks, only one has come with him." The prediction that the Chinese cannot conquer the "Hidden Land" (Sikkim) and that people would come here, but that the religion would come to an end ultimately—is now coming to pass quite obviously because without monks who can carry it on? Only when the religion comes to an end and Sangay Champa comes, will the religion revive. Even the fact that most of the learned monks seem, like the Khempo, to be ill and

poor, has, he says, been predicted.

In Tibet, the young Dzogchen and his tutor would have lived in their monastery. But here, at least for the present, they are lodged like honored guests, but apart, in a special Lhakhang (chapel) in the boy's family's house, the altar wall filled with images and khaos which his followers had brought from Tibet and now, since the boy's recognition, have "returned" to him as "his". Wherever they go now, tutor and charge, they will go with them.

The boy's first lessons are in reading. Already the young Dzogchen has taken his place on a seat of honor during the reconsecration of Sikkim's premier monastery Pemayangtse, reading strongly along with the other monks. Once his reading is perfected, the Khempo will start him on the five minor disciplines, and only thereafter, on the five major ones. The first year, the Khempo says, the boy was so brilliant, his progress was phenomenal. Then the Khempo had to go to India and in his absence the boy slipped up—now his learning has picked up again. "Just now his thinking power is still small," so it has to be checked on. The pace of study depends on the ability of the pupil and the judgment of the tutor. Once the boy is proficient in his own studies, the Khempo will find him a tutor for English.

Study hours are 6 AM to 9:30 AM and again from 3 PM to 5 PM. The rest of the time the little monk plays around, writes or draws. "Sometimes," his tutor gently smiled, "we call some other children for him to play with—football or archery, to make him happy." A toy train on the sideboard was evidence. Before Khempo took over, he says (and others agree), the boy was so wild, people said he was an incarnation of a devil, but since Khempo started teaching him he has become so "mild" everyone is astonished.

The unusual problems presented by their living in the boy's house are mitigated by the parents staying away during teaching hours, but the aim of the tutor is for them to have their own place to stay and ultimately to have their own monastery. The awkwardness of staying as strangers in the house of the boy's parents is evident.

The Khempo is as gentle with the boy as a mother; his affection and concern show in his voice and hands as he tutors the boy on how to sit, how to respond to the greeting of visitors who prostrate themselves or present scarves, how to read, to stand, and adjusts the folds of his dress. His worry is how to support the boy now given to his charge. Skilled in the monkly fine arts of drawing, painting, writing, modeling of images, carving, sewing,



**KHEMPO THUPTEN WITH HIS PUPIL DZOGCHEN PEMA RINZING, GANGTOK**

patchwork, and embroidery, he unrolled an exquisite "Nam-Chu-Wang-Den" which he had made by embroidery and applique on a brocade cloth for his charge. Innocent of the business world, the frail monk hopes that now with a little encouragement and backing to start, they may be able to organize a small community, which could support itself on its arts, at the same time preserving for a while longer these visible aspects of the religion from the encroaching darkness of the prophecy.

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