

A PORTRAIT OF GESHE NGAWANG WANGYAL:
INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWELLED STAIRCASE
By Joshua W.C. Cutler

I bow down to my kind root lamas, source of the teaching's treasures.

The author of this book, Geshe Wangyal, passed away on January 30, 1983 at the age of eighty-one. Geshe-la had profound insight into Buddha's teaching, and through his great compassion was the unexcelled teacher to many people, myself included. He manifested this knowledge in his everyday life and that life itself serves as a great inspiration to those who aspire to practice Buddha's teaching.

Were I to write this introduction according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it would be most appropriate to set forth Geshe-la's biography in order to show that he was qualified to translate and edit the teachings in this book. That biography, however, is so rich and varied that it would be a book unto itself. Therefore, although Geshe-la had a deep understanding of all Buddha's teachings, I will illustrate his knowledge of just one teaching by choosing certain events in his life, as he recounted them to me. That teaching is on the awareness mindful of impermanence and death, one of the most fundamental mental trainings in Buddhist practice.

One might well wonder why I choose to explain Geshe-la's awareness mindful of death and impermanence over the many other knowledges that he mastered. Actually, I did not choose it. I once attended an interview of Geshe-la in which the interviewer asked what teaching was most important in Geshe-la's life. He chose the teaching on impermanence and death. Furthermore, Geshe-la told me many stories about his life, and he would often ask me to

recount the number of times that he came close to death. He would always point out that these experiences helped to extend his life. Also, in choosing the various sections of this book, Geshe-la conspicuously left out the teachings on the awareness mindful of impermanence and death. Though Geshe-la declared the manuscript for this book "ready" well before his death, he put off adding the final touches, and he never did have the time to finish it. Therefore, it seems fitting that a presentation of Geshe-la's life from the viewpoint of his awareness mindful of death and impermanence should be the final addition to the teachings in this book, for his death itself brought out the importance of cultivating such an awareness.

Geshe-la dedicated his entire life to the practice of Buddha's teaching. Above all, he was a teacher. He said that from a young age he had great confidence in his knowledge and in his ability to instruct others and take responsibility for their lives. He himself lived in accordance with what he taught. Therefore, by looking at his life we can see a reflection of the teaching itself: by choosing to look at his life from the viewpoint of his awareness mindful of death and impermanence, we can see how the teaching on death and impermanence is fundamental to the Buddhist path. That it is fundamental is also clear from the scriptures themselves. The mental training in the awareness mindful of death and impermanence is the first and thereby most basic mental training set forth in the "stages of the path" (lam rim) literature for those who would enter into the practices of the Buddhist path. The "stages of the path" teachings have their origin in Buddha's Perfection of Wisdom discourses. They present the path as a gradual process of transformation for one practitioner, beginning with the mental trainings for a being of small capacity, proceeding to the mental trainings for a being of middling capacity, and ending with the mental trainings for a being of great

capacity. The awareness mindful of death and impermanence is the first mental training of a being of small capacity and hence is shared also by beings of middling and great capacity. Thus, it is the basis for the production of all of the realizations on the Buddhist path. In his Door of Liberation, Geshe-la translated the following teaching of the great Ga-dam-ba (bka' gdams pa) geshe, Bo-do-wa (po to ba), from Precepts Collected from Here and There (bka' gdams thor bu), a collection of Ga-dam-ba teachings:¹

Geshe Bo-do-wa was asked by a lay practitioner (upasika), "To actually practice the Dharma [Teaching], what is most important?"

"The most important thing is the meditation of impermanence. Meditate on impermanence, the imminence of death; it will cause you to begin practicing the Dharma. This will create conditions impelling you to do virtuous work, which will then assist you in realizing the equality of all things in their nature of existence."

"Meditation on impermanence will also cause you to decide to renounce the enjoyments of this life, which will create the conditions for ridding yourself of all worldly desire, and thus assist you to enter the path of nirvana."

"When you have meditated on impermanence and have gained some understanding, you will seek the Dharma. This will create the conditions for the achievement of Dharma and thus assist in its final accomplishment."

"Meditating on impermanence and finding some understanding of it will cause you to commence the efforts of armor, which will create the conditions for commencing the effort of religious practice. This will assist you in commencing effort to the stage of nonreturning."

From the time I met Geshe-la in 1970 when he was sixty-nine years old, he constantly talked about his imminent death. This was very disquieting to me as a new student, but Geshe-la's older students reassured me that he had been doing so from as early as any of his American students could remember. He did not just talk about it, but seem convinced that he would die soon. When he retired from employment at age sixty-two, he had refused his Social Security check, thinking that he would not live long enough to find it useful. It was certainly not his health that led him to this decision, for he was still renovating houses at age seventy-nine.

Where had this striking awareness mindful of his own impermanence come from? To answer this question, we must look into Geshe-la's life prior to coming to the United States.

Geshe-la came to the United States in 1955 to serve as a priest for a Kalmyk-Mongolian community that had been relocated to New Jersey after World War Two. Geshe-la was born in 1901 amongst the Kalmyks, who are Tibetan Buddhists, in the region of Russia west of the Volga River known as Astrakhan Province. The Kalmyks had settled there in the early seventeenth century. Geshe-la was the youngest of four children and had chosen at age six to enter the monastery as a novice monk. Before he started his formal studies he had shown a clear sign that he would be an unusual student -- he was able to recite in Tibetan the prayer for taking refuge in the Three Jewels without having previously heard or seen it.

Yet Geshe-la apparently has no such innate, clear realization with respect to death and impermanence at this early age. This can be seen in Geshe-la's story of the death of one of his uncles, which he would relate with great regret at his own ignorance. At the time Geshe-la was nine years old.

This uncle, also a monk, was special to Geshe-la because he had taught him how to pronounce Tibetan. The uncle's pronunciation was unusually good, for, unlike most Kalmyk monks, he could pronounce the Tibetan letter "nga" correctly.

When a Kalmyk became very ill, the most common cure prescribed was to give the patient only hot boiled water, never any food. Thus when Geshe-la's uncle became terminally ill, he was allowed only boiled water. Early one morning the young Geshe-la and a friend were playing near the uncle's bed when the uncle asked for food. Geshe-la answered, "Oh uncle, you know that you can't have anything to eat," and did not give him food. Then the uncle appeared to fall asleep.

Geshe-la later noticed that the uncle was no longer in the bed and asked a relative what had happened to him. His relative quite bluntly told him that his uncle had died. Geshe-la remembered thinking, "Oh, so death is like that!", for he had not understood that his uncle actually had died when he appeared to fall to sleep.

When Geshe-la told this story he regretted that he did not know enough to give his uncle something to eat. He felt pity that he had refused his uncle in his moment of great need.

Though Kalmyk country was part of Russia, the Kalmyks were left mostly on their own by the Russian peoples. Those Russians who lived nearby tended to stay out of the Kalmyk area because the young Kalmyk men would rough up unwanted visitors who strayed too far into the center of their region.² The Russian Orthodox church did have enough influence to make sure that Buddhist temples looked more like Christian churches, and the Czar's government conscripted young Kalmyk men into the armed forces and attempted to control epidemics by inoculation. Aside from these infrequent

intrusions, life in Kalmyk country was quite free of outside influence. This made life for the Kalmyks easier in some ways and more difficult in others. In particular, the lack of proper medical help made epidemics a regular occurrence in the summers.

Each summer one out of every three persons would die from disease. Geshe-la fell ill every year but no illness was as severe as the one he had at age eighteen. His older brother, Gunsang, who was also a monk and Geshe-la's teacher, was the first to come down with the disease, which consisted primarily of a very high fever. Gunsang became delirious and had hallucinations of the messengers of the Lord of Death coming to take him away. He then broke into constant song until the fever finally broke. About twenty days passed before he was completely cured. During this time Geshe-la's mother was infected by the illness. Shortly thereafter Geshe-la also became sick.

Geshe-la went into a coma for twenty-three days. His mouth became full of scabs and his only sustenance was drops of boiled water poured through a tube into his mouth. He was cared for at home. Though sick herself, his mother would clean out his mouth with her tongue. (Geshe-la often told this story to illustrate a mother's loving-kindness to her child, an important model in Buddhist teachings on developing compassion as a part of the process of generating the altruistic aspiration to highest enlightenment for the sake of all beings.) Soon after this, before he regained consciousness, Geshe-la's mother died.

Geshe-la came out of his coma by awakening from a dream in which his mother had placed some food under his pillow. He awoke saying, "Please give me the food that my mother put under the pillow." An uncle who was attending him was so surprised to hear Geshe-la talk that he thought that

Geshe-la was showing his last signs of life.

Gunsang had been watching over his brother while he was in his coma and then supervised his recovery, which was almost as tortured as the illness itself. At first he was allowed only to drink boiled water. Then a piece of meat was boiled in twenty cups of liquid and the resultant soup -- but not the meat -- was given to him. The strength of this soup was increased gradually.

Geshe-la was so hungry that he tried hard to obtain something more substantial. After ten days he persuaded a friend to give him a piece of meat and immediately his condition worsened. Gunsang was furious and the doctor ordered him back on boiled water.

Fearing that Geshe-la would have a relapse, Gunsang had been very careful not to tell Geshe-la that their mother had died. But two weeks after coming out of his coma, a young niece blurted out the sad news. Just as Gunsang had feared, Geshe-la had another relapse, weeping uncontrollably. Even after his full recovery he wept deeply during a visit to his eldest brother.

Geshe-la remembered the great adversity of this illness as being an important factor in extending his life. He often remarked that the extended period without food had strengthened his body. However, he was also critical of the extreme method of cure, saying that going without food for such a long time saps the body of the strength needed to fight the illness. Geshe-la said that he had survived only through his great physical strength and will power. These two characteristics helped him to live a long life, but, as he often said, they were also indications that his death would not be easy.

When Geshe-la was twenty-one years old, he left Kalmyk country to continue his studies in Lhasa, Tibet, for Tibet was the holy country for the Kalmyks. Even the word, "Tibet", may have its origin in the Mongolian language. In Mongolian, the term "Tibot" means "central region", which

Geshe-la said refers to Tibet as the center of Buddhist religion. Thus, to study there was a great privilege. Geshe-la's brother Gunsang cried for a whole week before Geshe-la left for Tibet. He was not crying over the loss of a brother, but was only overjoyed that his brother was going to study in the holy center of religion.

Geshe-la left Kalmyk country just after the end of the Bolshevik Revolution, a very turbulent and dangerous time. Many Kalmyks died in the fighting or of starvation. Geshe-la's life was threatened more than once by revolutionaries and brigands. He also endured great hardships on the journey to Tibet, which was expected to take just four months, but lasted over one year. At the end of the trip, his caravan was near starvation. However, Geshe-la did not consider any of these instances as unusually close brushes with death, but rather to be just part of the difficult and harsh life in these countries.

When Geshe-la reached Tibet he entered the Gomang College of Drebung Monastic University in Lhasa. Traditionally, Gomang was where the monks from the Kalmyk and other Mongolian regions would continue the studies they had begun in their homelands. The Tibetan Buddhist course of philosophical study is founded on the treatises of the most renowned Indian commentators on Buddha's teaching. The method of education involves study of texts with a teacher, memorization, and debate that draws upon the content of the first two. The novice monk begins with the study of logic and then pursues five topics of study in the following order: 1) Collected Topics of Valid Cognition; 2) The Perfection of Wisdom (prajnaparamita); 3) Middle Way (madhyamika); 4) Discipline (vinaya); and 5) Treasury of Manifest Knowledge (abhidharmakosa). At the end of the course of studies, which can take as long as thirty-five years, one is awarded the degree of "geshe" (dge bshes), literally, "spiritual teacher".

The Kalmyk students had a great advantage over the Tibetan students because they had already begun these philosophical studies in their home monasteries and would enter their course in Tibet by repeating the study of the Perfection of Wisdom. Geshe-la had excelled in his studies in his homeland and did not want to spend his time just repeating material that he had already learned very well. He made better use of his time by simultaneously studying the next topic of studies. Geshe-la thus made great effort, at times to the point of overstraining himself. This strenuous study in combination with a custom of consuming as many as fifty cups of very strong Tibetan tea every day was responsible for his next close meeting with his own death.

During this time Geshe-la shared a room with a number of other monks, including the Kalmyk teacher, Geshe Chim-ba, who was renowned in Tibet for his deep insight into Buddha's teaching. Geshe-la was not Geshe Chim-ba's student, but was close to him because Geshe Chim-ba was from the first class to graduate from Kalmyk country's first school of Buddhist philosophical studies. One night Geshe-la arose from bed while still asleep and walked towards the open window. Fortunately, Geshe Chim-ba was awake and yelled loudly, waking him just before he walked out the window and fell to certain death a number of stories below.

This was not an unusual occurrence in the monasteries. The strain of rigorous study affected such a number of students that there was even a name for the result -- "geshe disease". In Geshe-la's case it was a temporary ailment, for he never had another occurrence. Realizing that he was pushing himself too hard, Geshe-la found a better pace, though he did not abandon studying two topics at once.

Geshe-la continued his studies at Gomang until 1935 when he decided that he should return to his homeland to find the financial support that was

necessary to obtain his geshe degree. The Kalmyk students in Tibet received financial support from family and friends back home. Before Geshe-la had left for Tibet, he had sold some of his family's livestock in the Russian market in nearby Volgograd (then called "Tsaritsen"). With the money he received, Geshe-la bought Russian embroideries, which were highly valued in Tibet. In addition, Geshe-la's brother, Gunsang, had sent more embroideries after Geshe-la had been in Tibet for a few years. Thereafter, no money came from Kalmyk country because of the severe Communist repression. However, the money which Geshe-la did have supplied his needs well until it became time to return home to obtain the money needed to make the required offerings for his degree.

Again the trip involved great hardship. This time the route home was by way of Peking, and Geshe-la's companions abandoned him on the way, leaving him to fend for himself, unable to speak any Chinese. In addition to this mental hardship, the physical conditions were very difficult. For example, Geshe-la once suffered frostbite sitting on the frozen deck of a merchant steamer. However he eventually reached Peking and stayed there after some Buryat Mongol monks warned him of the severe repression of religion in Russia.

Although Geshe-la could not converse with anyone on the way to Peking, he did know two words: "Peking" and "Yung-ho-kung". The latter was a large Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Peking, and was the place where Geshe-la stayed. It also came very close to being his final resting place.

At Yung-ho-kung, Geshe-la shared a room with another monk. In the winter the rooms were very cold but the beds were heated by lighting a charcoal fire in a little compartment under the bed. The heat from this fire then circulated under the bed, making it quite comfortable to sleep in.

However, the fire posed the danger of carbon monoxide fumes. This was obvious to Geshe-la but not so to his roommate. Geshe-la constantly argued with the man to keep a small window open at the top of the wall.

One night, Geshe-la was sound asleep when his roommate came in late. Without waking Geshe-la, he lit his fire, closed the small window, and fell asleep. Slowly the fumes started to affect the two sleeping monks. The roommate was conscious enough to realize that something was wrong and tried to get up. As he did so, he fell out of bed with a thunderous crash.

The walls between the monk's rooms were literally paper thin. Though it was late, three monks were still awake in the adjoining room. They heard the noise and rushed in, finding Geshe-la almost unconscious in his bed and the roommate struggling to his feet. They grabbed Geshe-la, dragged him out into the cold winter night, and laid him down upon the icy ground. This brought Geshe-la to his senses. His head was pounding and he felt very groggy. The cold became difficult to bear and he pleaded with his rescuers to bring him back inside. But the three monks would not listen because they knew that only the cold fresh air would restore him. He lay like that for what seemed a long time until finally he was conscious enough to go back inside.

Geshe-la had been working in Peking on a research project that was sponsored by Western donors. His job was to compare different editions of the Tibetan collections of Buddha's word (bka' 'gyur) and of the treatises of Indian commentators (bstan 'gyur). He made a respectable monthly salary of thirty Chinese dollars. Therefore he was able to reward his rescuers with enough money to make them very pleased.

Geshe-la stayed in China until he had earned enough money to make offerings for his Geshe degree, and in about 1937 he set out to return to Tibet

via India. When he reached Calcutta, he was introduced to the great English statesman, scholar, and explorer, Sir Charles Bell. Geshe-la had acquired a working knowledge of the English language while in Peking, and was thus qualified to become Bell's translator. He accompanied Bell on a trip through China and Manchuria before returning to Tibet. Eventually Geshe-la received his geshe degree, but he never again resided within the monastery. Instead, he used his capital and many contacts to make money with which he assisted many poor scholars to obtain their geshe degree, especially the Mongolians, who, like him, were cut off from support from home.

During the Second World War, Geshe-la would spend his summers in Tibet and his winters in India in a small hill station called Kalimpong, near Darjeeling. The trip from Tibet was a difficult ride on horseback down through Gangtok, Sikkim. One time when Geshe-la was making this trip he had a particularly wild horse whom he had nicknamed "Nyom-ba" ("Crazy"). When Geshe-la dropped behind the caravan, this horse suddenly became uncontrollable and charged ahead in order to catch up to the others. The trail was a steep and winding switchback. Instead of following the trail, the horse went straight down the hill, cutting across the switchbacks and heading right for a precipice. Geshe-la quickly understood that he was not going to be able to bring his horse under control, and just as he was approaching the edge of the cliff, he jumped off, holding on to his long reins. He landed on his buttocks, bruising the tip of his spine. At the same time he yanked the horse around, saving the horse's life. Fortunately, the horse knew what Geshe-la was trying to do when he yanked him back. He had barely missed going over the huge cliff. With his great presence of mind, Geshe-la had again narrowly escaped death.

It was around this time, at age forty-five, that Geshe-la decided to ask

Mok-jok Rimbochay, a famous reincarnate lama from Gomang Monastic College, to divine an estimation of how long he would live. Mok-jok Rimbochay was a very well-known teacher, who was also proficient at divination. Geshe-la had a firm belief in this lama's ability to see into the future for he had done so for Geshe-la one time previously. About four years after arriving in Tibet, Geshe-la ran into some misfortune and needed guidance. As previously mentioned, Geshe-la had brought with him to Tibet many Russian embroideries, and by gradually selling these off, he was able to finance his stay, as most of the Kalmyk students at the monasteries did. One day while he was praying at the monastic assembly, a Mongolian monk entered his room and stole the embroideries. The thief sold the goods at a shop on the outside of Lhasa, where one of Geshe-la's Kalmyk friends immediately noticed them. The friend informed the shopkeeper that the goods had been stolen and the shopkeeper was able to apprehend the thief.

The Drebung monastery magistrate (zhal ngo) banished the thief after confiscating all his possessions, including those belonging to Geshe-la. He did not return these to Geshe-la, but, because he was from Geshe-la's monastic college, he did spare him the usual intense questioning as to how he had acquired such valuable possessions when the vast majority of the monks were so poor. Although Geshe-la had broken no rules, he could have had a very difficult time because the magistrate had great authoritarian power and Geshe-la was still a new monk. Still Geshe-la was left without material support very early in his studies.

Geshe-la could see no alternative to making a return trip to Russia, but he decided to first consult Mok-jok Rimbochay. At this early time he did not know Mok-jok Rimbochay personally and asked a friend to act as mediator. When the friend asked the lama whether it was auspicious for Geshe-la to

make the trip home, the lama consulted his oracular dice.³ After casting the dice, the lama asked Geshe-la's friend whether he had heard that any of Geshe-la's friends had come to Tibet. The friend replied, "If I had, I certainly would not be here!" The lama, however, felt certain that Geshe-la's friends had arrived in Tibet, but he decided not to say so directly at the risk of speaking a lie. Instead, he advised that Geshe-la should wait a while.

At the very moment that the lama was being consulted, travelers from Russia had arrived at the Tibetan northern border town of Chang-nak-chu-ka, bearing new embroideries for Geshe-la from his brother, Gunsang. Two months passed before the caravan arrived in Lhasa and Geshe-la's goods were delivered to him.

Geshe-la was quite certain that there was no conventional way that the lama could have known about the foreigners' arrival at the Tibetan border. The only explanation was that Mok-jok Rimbochay possessed clairvoyance. Thus, this event established Geshe-la's faith in Mok-jok Rimbochay's knowledge and set a firm foundation for his later question regarding the length of his life. Moreover, when the lama answered that question and predicted that Geshe-la would not live to be more than fifty years old, Geshe-la produced the strong faith required to follow the lama's advice. The lama instructed Geshe-la to enter a retreat and devote himself to his special deity (lhag pa'i lha), the female Bodhisattva, Tara, by performing certain rituals and making a strong effort to recite the "Prayer to the Twenty-One Emanations of Tara" and the Tara mantra.

Mok-jok Rimbochay assured Geshe-la that, if he followed his precept, he could get rid of the obstacle to his life. Therefore, Geshe-la asked his closest friend, Geshe Cho-nyen, a Kalmyk monk who had accompanied him from

Russia, to bring him food each day, and went into retreat. He remained in prayer and meditation day and night for three weeks.

Geshe-la would later refer to this retreat as a major cause in extending his life. Another cause was the complete change in his attitude towards his own death. At this point he decided that he would not live much longer. The experience of coming so close to death those four times, combined with the prophecy of Mok-jok Rimbochay, seemed to have had their effect. Moreover, there was another immediate factor that made him doubt his longevity. His longtime association with the British in Tibet, stemming from his job as translator for Sir Charles Bell, brought him under the suspicions of the Tibetan government. He was always worried that he would be falsely accused and arrested as a British spy.

Geshe Cho-nyen and he determined that it would be best to part now rather than suddenly at Geshe-la's death. Geshe-la also was concerned that Geshe Cho-nyen literally would die from worry if Geshe-la were to die first. They were very close to each other, "as if of the same mind," as Geshe-la said. They had not known each other well in Kalmyk country but had become very close on the trip to Tibet. When their caravan reached Ulan Bator in Outer Mongolia, Geshe Cho-nyen went to town with another monk from the caravan and got into trouble. The leader of the caravan wanted to banish them both but Geshe-la stood up for Geshe Cho-nyen, saying that the leader would have to banish Geshe-la himself as well. Thereafter, the two were fast friends.

Now Geshe Cho-nyen had an opportunity to serve the family of a government official in Amdo province. Geshe Cho-nyen -- medical doctor as well as geshe -- at one time had saved the official's life. It seemed like a much more secure situation. Geshe Cho-nyen was a good scholar in Buddhist philosophy but always had strong faith in Geshe-la's knowledge, though he

had no opportunity to receive teachings from him. Therefore, before parting, Geshe Cho-nyen bowed down to Geshe-la, received a short teaching, and made sincere aspirational prayers to be reborn as Geshe-la's disciple. Geshe-la arranged for people who lived along the way to attend to Geshe Cho-nyen's needs. However, the preparations did not prove to be enough. On the way to take up his new position in Amdo province, Geshe Cho-nyen contracted a stomach ailment and, ironically, died.

In the years immediately following, Geshe-la continued to travel between Tibet and India, and to assist monks to receive their geshe degrees. Finally in 1950 he decided to stay in Tibet. He was considering the purchase of a hermitage when he received news that the Chinese, who already had entered Amdo province, had started to move toward Lhasa. He immediately left for Lhasa to pick up all his belongings, and then set out for India as quickly as possible. He waited there for four years to get his visa to come to the United States to serve the newly settled Kalmyk community which had been displaced to southern New Jersey after World War Two, and finally arrived in New York City on February 5, 1955.

From the relatively young age of forty-five, Geshe-la felt certain that his death was imminent. For him to part with such a dear friend at a time that most would consider early in life certainly indicates the depth of his decision about his own mortality. That he lived another thirty-six years beyond this age supports his assertion that his awareness of death was helpful to extending his lifespan. His description of how such an attitude extended his life was based in the teachings of the Ga-dam-ba lamas, an early lineage descended from the great Indian teacher, Atisha, who was an important figure in the second dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet in the eleventh century A.D. The lamas in this lineage taught that when one has attachment to attaining a certain worldly

objective, its attainment will always elude one. But once one does not have such attachment to that objective, its attainment will come to one incidentally. In other words, once one is focused on spiritual objectives with the unselfish attitude of non-attachment, worldly attainments come as a kind of by-product. As Atisha himself stated in Precepts Collected From Here and There:⁴

If you act according to the Dharma [Teaching] from the depths of your heart, both food and necessities will come naturally.

This teaching is true with regards to Geshe-la's lifespan. From age forty-five Geshe-la never thought that he would live long. He gave up any thought of staying and was always prepared to go. But this did not mean that he gave up doing anything. On the contrary, as stated in the teaching of Geshe Bo-do-wa cited above, his awareness mindful of death impelled him in his practice, for the second half of his life was the most productive in terms of directly helping a greater number of people. After arriving in the United States, he worked to earn enough money to establish a monastery, Labsum Shedrub Ling, among the Kalmyks. He served as the monastery's head teacher until his death, guiding and inspiring many Americans into a correct understanding of Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Geshe-la also greatly aided the Tibetan monasteries in India with financial assistance as well as by sponsoring Tibetan monks' stays at his monastery. He was constantly focused on others' welfare, and it was clear that he had attained many good qualities that were a result of actualizing Buddha's teachings. It was as if these realizations had arisen from his basic awareness mindful of death and impermanence.

In addition to impelling Geshe-la to help others, his mindfulness of death seemed to give him a greater appreciation of and enthusiasm for life. He

used a variety of methods to inspire this in his students. He loved to play chess and sometimes would spend whole days playing against his students. Whether he won or lost, he never got tired of the play, constantly teasing and joking with his opponent. In the spring and summer he would rise early in the morning and take a walk outside just to breathe in the fresh air and enjoy the new smells and sounds.

He approached any work with the same energy. He loved to build, working late into the night and rising again early the next morning. It was very difficult for his students to keep up with him, although they were many years younger. He was always initiating new projects to improve the monastery's facilities, and he both joined in and directed the work, for he enjoyed working and used manual labor as a teaching vehicle. He had the same approach to cooking. He always prepared the meals, with his students assisting and learning more than just how to cook. In the same loving way, he also enjoyed spending many hours at sewing clothes for his students and friends.

Geshe-la's awareness of the imminence of death did not make him dour and unpleasant to be around. On the contrary, he attracted students because it was clear that for Geshe-la life was never boring or too difficult to bear. He had an inquisitive mind that was eager to learn new things. For instance, he started to learn Russian when eighty years old, hoping that he could see his homeland once more before his death. He never got stuck in the same routine. Even when he repeated a reading for new students, he would explain the teachings as if he were being inspired by the material for the first time.

Geshe-la's awareness of death continued to develop after he was forty-five years old. He used to say that in developing an awareness mindful of death, at first one is afraid of death, then one accepts death without fear, and

finally one can die happily. As Geshe-la translated in his Door of Liberation from Precepts Collected From Here and There.⁵

Geshe Pu-chung-wa (phu chung ba) said, "Though we have obtained the indispensable human body with its leisure and opportunity, we do not have the power to stay in it -- we have to die. At the time of death, we cannot take with us any of the enjoyments or concepts of this life, just as a tree sheds all its leaves. At that time the measure of our knowledge, our strength, and the wisdom of our goals will be clear. When we face death happily and with joyful anticipation, we are wise, strong; our goals are noble, and we will enter death clear-headed. But if at that time the form of Yama [the Lord of Death] and the distinct sign of lower states of rebirth appear, our goals are foolish and we are without self-mastery."

Geshe-la would often say in his later years how he was happy to die. He seemed content with what he had accomplished in this life. It was not that he wanted to die, for his compassion for others kept him actively teaching until his last breath.

Thus, being happy to die does not mean that one wants to die. I remember the Dalai Lama's late senior tutor, Ling Rimbochay, making this point to Geshe-la when I accompanied Geshe-la on a visit to India in 1978. Geshe-la considered Ling Rimbochay to be one of his root lamas and had a very deep reverence for him. Geshe-la and he were about the same age, so I imagined that death's immediacy was a concern for both of them. Ling Rimbochay told the story of the death of one of their contemporaries who was also an important teacher and with whom Ling Rimbochay had talked a few months before his death. At that time, the man had expressed a wish to die,

though he was not especially unwell. Ling Rimbochay seemed very disappointed in his attitude, especially when he told Geshe-la that the man died only a few months later. He pointedly said, "Death is not good!" At the end of the audience, he seemed to be supporting his point when he presented Geshe-la with a painting of White Tara encircled by other deities of long life and instructed Geshe-la to do the same Tara prayers and rituals that Mok-jok Rimbochay had told him to do, though not in a retreat.

Geshe-la never gave up his will to live. With it he made the suffering of old age seem quite bearable. But he never let his students think that old age was enjoyable and would often bemoan its hardships. On one such occasion I remember saying to Geshe-la that he was doing well and leading a comfortable life. He replied, "You think it's so easy. The only reason that I am still alive is because of my strong will!"

Yet, it was not a matter of simply giving up this will to live when Geshe-la did die. His students, myself included, would often ask him not to die, but to stay and teach. His reply would be, "If I had the power to stay, I would certainly do so. I do not want to die, but I do not have that power. When the Lord of Death comes for me, I have no choice but to go." In other words, when the merit that sustains one is exhausted, one must die. There is no choice at that time and the will to live will not carry one further.

Geshe-la often told a story of what he considered to be an ideal way to die. During the Bolshevik Revolution, the young Geshe-la had witnessed the death of one of the great teachers who was qualified to give teachings (lung) that transmitted the lineage from Buddha's time to the present, as well as initiations (dbang). He was about sixty-five years old, which at that time was considered quite old. This great teacher, called a "Bakshi" in the Kalmyk language, was visiting his nephew, who was the head teacher of Geshe-la's

temple. Because of the revolution, such famous teachers had to keep moving from place to place in fear of their lives. As he was just about to leave Geshe-la's temple, he decided to visit the outhouse. He sent his nephew ahead, and went with his very loyal and kind attendant. The Bakshi took an unusually long time in the outhouse, causing his attendant to open the door to see what the delay was. He found the Bakshi with his sash untied and quickly helped him to retie it, for the Bakshi had recently had a cold and the attendant did not want him to get a chill.

As the Bakshi was walking back to his horse cart, he suddenly sat down upon the ground. The attendant called to Geshe-la and his friends to bring a rug to put under him, and sent someone to bring the nephew back. The Bakshi sat very quietly, breathing deeply. Four monks very carefully carried him on his rug into the temple. He did not die before his nephew's return but sat still, and seemed to be reciting mantras internally, his breath becoming less and less perceptible.

When the nephew returned, he immediately started to quietly recite aspirational prayers, tears streaming down his face. The Bakshi's outer signs of life disappeared, except for a very slight breath that he was using to recite mantras. In this way he died very peacefully.

Geshe-la would conclude this story by saying that he did not expect to have such an easy death, and that he was too strong-willed to go easily. In the end, the intense suffering of his terminal illness was extremely difficult to bear. But his death was in a sense easy in that he was well-prepared and in control. Certainly, his death was a confirmation of the depth of his awareness mindful of death and impermanence.

Geshe-la's preparedness was such that he even understood well that his time to die was approaching. This was not easy for him to determine, for he

had a chronic lung problem that always threatened his life. In fact, he was again very close to death when he spent three-and-a-half months in a tuberculosis sanitarium in 1967. He recovered well and thereafter continued to work for others' welfare with great energy. He took responsibility for an increased number of students and built Labsum Shedrub Ling's retreat house and schoolhouse with own hands and his students' assistance. In the winters he had cold-induced asthma which frequently brought on pneumonia. It seemed clear to his students that his damaged lungs would eventually cause his death. To stave off that eventuality, some of his students invited him to warmer climates during the winter, starting in 1976. Finally, a group of his students bought a house in southern Florida for him in 1979. In the years prior to his death in January of 1983, he would move there with a few students for the coldest winter months.

In Florida, Geshe-la would constantly remind us that when it was time for him to die, there would be no place from which to escape death. Therefore, when he contracted pneumonia in the summer of 1982, his words seemed to be coming true. But the weather was warm, and, as usual, he reacted well to antibiotics. Thus, he was able to recover without much trouble.

Later on that summer he told me that his dreams had never returned to normal after his recent bout with pneumonia. When Geshe-la's dreams were disturbed, he understood it to be a sign that he had some illness. However, as there were no outward signs of illness, I chose to ignore this sign, hoping that Geshe-la would overcome any sickness, as he had done in the past. However, knowing the strength of Geshe-la's awareness of his own impermanence, I am sure that he did not choose to ignore this sign. On the contrary, he read it as confirmation of an approaching death.

This was clear in what he said before he left for Florida. When Geshe-

la's lungs started to become affected by the cold weather, he prepared to go south. Before he left, he visited Geshe Dawa Sangbo, one of his monks who was staying at Labsum Shedrub Ling's New Brunswick, New Jersey monastery. Geshe-la said goodbye and then said that he would not see him again. At the time Geshe Dawa Sangbo thought that Geshe-la had made a mistake in his speech. But in retrospect it is now clear to him that Geshe-la was expecting to die.

Part of an awareness mindful of death and impermanence is the readiness to go at any time. It is said that one who has this awareness is like a person who is going on a trip, and the one who does not have it is like one who is staying behind.⁶ The best preparation for death is to practice Buddha's teaching, for one's practice is the only thing that one can take to the next life. Actualizing Buddha's teaching was Geshe-la's one-pointed focus. An aspect of this actualization was his non-attachment to worldly concerns, such that he was packed and ready to go at any time. Geshe-la manifested this aspect very clearly in his final months.

In October of 1982 Geshe-la transferred ownership of the Labsum Shedrub Ling monastery building in New Brunswick, New Jersey to the Tibet Fund, a charitable organization directly under the guidance of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. Geshe-la had been preparing for this event for almost two years. He had a special relationship with His Holiness and held him in great reverence as one of his root lamas. In an audience that I had in 1985 with His Holiness in Dharmasala, India, His Holiness himself appeared surprised when describing the closeness of their relationship. He thought that it must have stemmed from the historical relationship of the Dalai Lamas and the Mongolians.⁷

Geshe-la intended the building as an offering to His Holiness, saying

that he knew that His Holiness was far more able than he to do something with the building that would be of benefit to others. It was a large building and represented almost half of Labsum Shedrub Ling's assets. At the official ceremony to mark the occasion on October 17th, Geshe-la said in his speech that he considered this offering the culmination of his life's work. After giving his speech, he sat down and rubbed his hands in a gesture of conclusion of work well-done, reciting the Sanskrit phrase, "Sarva mangalam" ["May all beings be happy."] This phrase is often written at the end of Tibetan scriptures, and I had never seen Geshe-la do this on any other occasion.

Thus, before going to Florida, Geshe-la brought his life's work to a conclusion and was prepared for death. Of course, as Geshe-la would say in response to his students' requests for him to stay to accomplish his work, "There is no end to doing things." And as I have said, he did not stop teaching until his last breath. But, in a life dedicated to helping others, his offering to His Holiness was a culmination, for he gave without attachment a large portion of what he had worked his whole life to accumulate, and he gave it within the thought of others' greater benefit. In conclusion, he had dedicated to the happiness of others all the merit that he had accumulated from that act of giving.

Geshe-la's preparation for death even extended to being in control of the circumstances of his death. When he told Geshe Dawa Sangbo that he was going to his death, he was choosing a place to die. The Florida house was a place where he could retreat from his work and find relative peace. Ironically, it was the place that we, his students, had chosen for the sake of extending his life. It was as if Geshe-la was underlining his statement that when it was time for him to die, there would be no place from which to escape his death.

The Florida house was also a place where Geshe-la could be free of the

physical discomforts of his asthma. However, once freed of his lung problems, he had symptoms of a new illness. That illness proved to be cancer of the liver and colon. Geshe-la refused to seek treatment in a hospital, a policy that he had made known to his students since his return from the tuberculosis sanitarium, for he knew very well that he would give up any control of his situation if he went to a hospital. Instead, he was attended by physicians who were his own students, Dr. Peter Beskyd and Dr. Philip Hauptman. My wife, Diana, and I attended him as nurses.

From the time I came to stay with him in 1970, Geshe-la had constantly told his students what to do at the time of his death. Diana had come in 1972. Since arriving, we had both served him by attending to his personal needs, as well as assisting him in his work and receiving his teachings. Therefore, he had trained us well concerning what he would need when sick and dying. He could be confident that we would provide what he needed even if it became too difficult for him to talk.

Geshe-la always emphasized the importance of the time of death. It is a crucial juncture for the Buddhist practitioner, because the attitude at the moment of death determines where one is to be reborn. A virtuous state of mind assures a happy transmigration to the life of a human or god, whereas a non-virtuous one means a bad transmigration to the life of an animal, hungry ghost, or hell being. Geshe-la often cautioned his students against weeping when he was dying, for such actions might cause desire to arise in his mind, endangering his transmigration. Instead, he asked us to recite the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, om mani padme hm. He also expressed the wish to die looking towards an image of Shakyamuni Buddha. In this way he would be assured of a good state of mind at death.

An incident between Geshe-la and I in the first years that I studied with

him is a good metaphor for his careful preparation for the crucial and dangerous moment of death. We were working together, burning a pile of brush in the middle of the driveway. It was a difficult day for burning, and there was the constant danger of the fire getting out of control. I was very impressed by Geshe-la's control. He very carefully put on branches and made sure that any sticks to the outside were brought into the middle. He never put on too many pieces of brush such that the flames rose too high. We waited until it completely burned, and then poured water on the ashes. When the situation needed great care, Geshe-la could apply it very meticulously. That is the way he approached the moment of death.

Until the final month, it was not clear to us that he had a terminal disease. Although he said that he was dying, he had said so when sick many times in the past. Geshe-la spent his time reading and instructing his students much as he did in the past.

But finally he was very direct about his situation and started to put much of his energy into preparing for when he would not be around. He spent about two weeks working on a memorandum that contained final instructions for the administration of Labsum Shedrub Ling. He sat me down in his room and told me point blank that he was dying. He thereafter gave me verbal instructions on what to do in order to continue his work. He read a scripture on mind transference (pho ba)⁸ that he had always kept with him. He composed his legal will to pass on a few personal possessions. He even spent time with Diana to pack his clothes into his suitcases.

During the final month of his life, Geshe-la would try to keep active. He took an occasional walk, and went for rides in the car. Ten days before his death, he even played chess as well as ever. He kept up his daily morning prayers until the final two days. This was all an incredible feat of strength,

considering the great burden of his suffering.

One incident in particular highlighted the fact of Geshe-la's suffering as well as his continued desire to live. One week before he died, Geshe-la asked Dr. Beskyd to visit from New York. Although Dr. Hauptman was in constant attendance and Geshe-la was for the most part his own doctor, he had great respect for Dr. Beskyd's advice. When Dr. Beskyd arrived, Geshe-la asked him if he could do something to ease the intense suffering. Up to this time Geshe-la had never made it clear that his misery was so difficult to bear. Dr. Beskyd prescribed a mild pain killer. Geshe-la took one tablet in the course of the day and it seemed to help. That night he had a dream in which he was telling his students that he was recovering from his illness, much to his great surprise.

The next morning he called Diana and me into his room, related the dream, and asked if it was possible that the medicine would cure such an intense illness. We told him that the medicine was only for relieving pain. He later told Diana how much he wanted to recover and how disappointed he was that the dream was not true. He also refused to take any more of the pain killers.

Geshe-la resisted his great suffering with his strong will to live, but to live for the sake of others. Often sick persons succumb to a self-centered concern for their own welfare. I was always amazed that whenever Geshe-la became sick, he sustained his constant concern for others. If anything, his altruistic attitude was more pronounced.

His terminal illness was no exception. He constantly attended to his students' concern over his condition, and he continued to teach each according to what was helpful to him or her at the time. When some called, he would let them know that he was praying for them. When others would want to visit, he would ask them to pray at home. One, whom he had not seen for a while, he

asked to come to visit. In the same way, he would accept or refuse medicines and advice. He wanted to spare his students the sight of his suffering and himself the sight of their unhappiness. He was greatly concerned for those who attended him. For example, two days before his death, Geshe-la began to bleed internally. By this time he barely had the energy to talk, yet he told us to take a swim at the beach, because he was worried that we were becoming too unhappy at the sight of his misery.

It was only during these final two days that Geshe-la was bedridden. Up to this point one of us had always stayed in the room nearby and frequently looked in on him. For three weeks I had been spending the nights on a mattress in his room. Now we made sure that someone was always in the room. At 11:00 P.M. on January 29th he sat up in his bed and told me that he was in the final stages of the dying process. Of course, he did not have the energy to tell me what this meant, but I assumed that we should start to recite gently the mantra, om mani padme hm. He was very pleased when we did this.

The next morning I brought in a painting of Buddha that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had given Geshe-la in 1979 on the occasion of his first visit to the United States and Labsum Shedrub Ling. Previous to this, Geshe-la would not allow me to bring any holy objects into his room because his condition prevented him from keeping the room clean enough. Now I made sure that the image was always in his view, no matter what side of the room he was turned towards.

Geshe-la died at 4:25 P.M. that afternoon. We were greatly concerned that he would slip into a coma beforehand (a common occurrence with liver cancer), but that was not the case. He was too fortunate and too strong for that to happen; he was clearminded to the last breath. In that last moment he

looked at me and smiled, turned his head and looked at the painting of Buddha, and, peacefully closing his eyes, let go of his last breath.

Above all else, Geshe-la was a teacher. He once said to a group of his students, "When I die, you will understand." He was teaching us throughout his illness and death. He taught that the burden of illness can be used to increase our thoughts for others. He showed that death will certainly come, that it entails much suffering, and that we must maintain our will to live, while being accepting of our death. He emphasized that it is a crucial time for which one must always be ready. Proper preparation begins with a cultivation of an awareness mindful of impermanence and death, which then serves as a basis for attaining good qualities through actualizing Buddha's teachings. He showed how to die, but, more importantly, how to live. If we follow these teachings, there will be no reason for regret at the moment of death, and we will face it with optimism, just as Geshe Pu-chung-wa said:

At that time [of death] the measure of our knowledge, our strength, and the wisdom of our goals will be clear. When we face death happily and with joyful anticipation, we are wise, strong; our goals are noble, and we will enter death clear-headed.