



The Life of My Teacher

A Biography of Kyabje
LING RINPOCHÉ

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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Translated by Gavin Kilty

Introduced by Thupten Jinpa



Introduction

KYABJÉ LING RINPOCHÉ was a towering figure among the great Tibetan spiritual masters of the twentieth century. Born in 1903—the very year of Colonel Younghusband’s short-lived British incursion into Tibet—and passing away in India in 1983, Ling Rinpoché’s life of eight decades witnessed the unfolding of the Tibetan nation’s tragic twentieth-century history.

The augustness of Ling Rinpoché’s position, especially in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, goes back to the early eighteenth century. The First Ling Rinpoché, Hor Döndrup Gyatso (1655–1727), became the Forty-Eighth Ganden Tripa, or Ganden Throneholder, the holder of Tsongkhapa’s seat at Ganden Monastery, and also served as the main spiritual teacher to the Sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso. The Second Ling Rinpoché (1728–90) was a close disciple of the Seventh Dalai Lama and a renowned scholar. The Third Ling Rinpoché passed away young, at the age of nineteen, according to one source. The fourth, Ngawang Lungtok Yönten Gyatso (1811–55), was a formidable master who became the Ganden Throneholder at age forty-one and served as a tutor to the Eleventh Dalai Lama. The Fifth Ling Rinpoché, Losang Lungtok Tenzin Trinlé (1856–1902), was a famed yogi of Vajrabhairava, an important cycle of esoteric teachings in Tibetan Buddhism. He also served as a tutor to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

The Sixth Ling Rinpoché, the subject of our biography, was also a truly great master. A consummate scholar of Buddhist thought, he was a kind and inspiring teacher, a dedicated practitioner, and a highly accomplished yogi. In his youth Ling Rinpoché studied at the great Loseling College of Drepung, reputedly the largest monastery in the world in 1959 when many Tibetans fled into exile in India along with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He received teachings from the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and was mentored by the famed Geluk master Phabongkha Dechen Nyingpo (1878–1941)¹ to be a custodian of numerous transmissions of Tibet’s sacred teachings. In 1940, Rinpoché was formally appointed a tutor to the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Together with his colleague Kyabjé Trijang Rinpoché, Ling Rinpoché accompanied the Dalai Lama during his official visit to China in 1954–55 and during his subsequent, clearly more joyful, visit to India to celebrate the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of the Buddha’s nirvana. Part of this India trip included pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites of central India. In March 1959, Ling Rinpoché again accompanied the Dalai Lama to India, this time into exile, never to return to his homeland Tibet. In 1965, Rinpoché ascended to the throne of Jé Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), becoming the Ninety-Seventh Ganden Tripa, and thus the head of the dominant Geluk school. By then, hardly a single member of the Geluk school had not received teaching from this great Tibetan master.

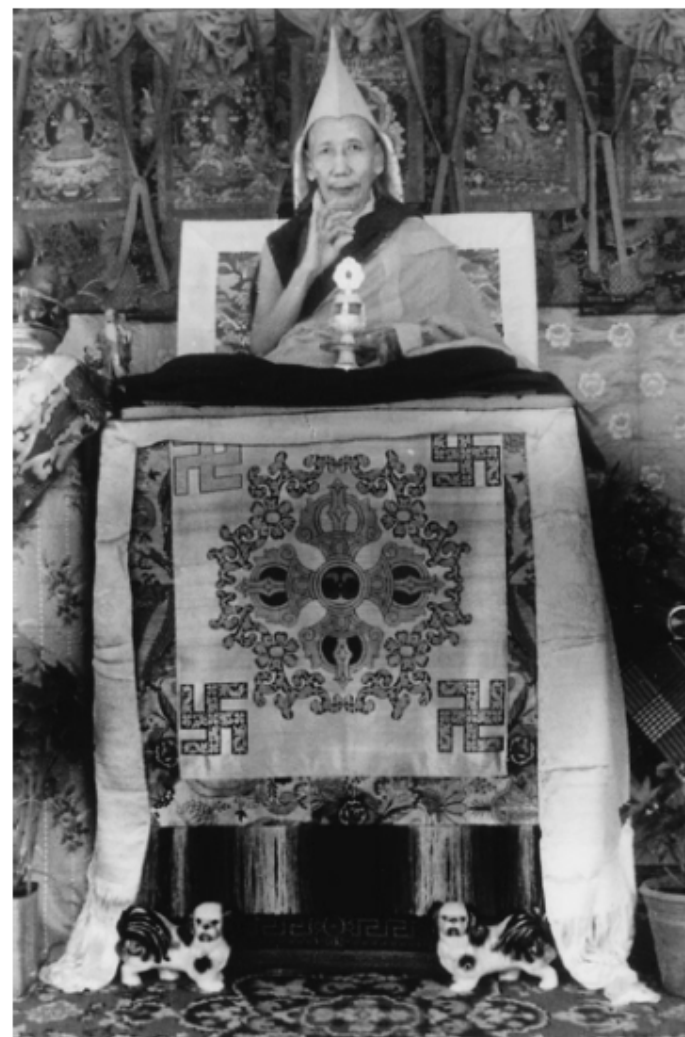
When Ling Rinpoché passed away on December 25, 1983, he remained seated cross-legged in *thukdam* for thirteen days—a state in which all vital signs have ceased yet the body remains without decomposition. According to Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, Rinpoché was at that time in the state of the clear light of death, when all gross levels of mind have ceased with only the subtle pure luminosity remaining. Tica

Broch, who was one of the few Western disciples of Ling Rinpoché, describes her firsthand experience of being in the presence of Rinpoché remaining in thukdam. She writes, “When he went into meditation on December 25, the atmosphere of the house changed completely. It was hard to describe; I remember trying to convey the sensation by saying it felt like being in an igloo—such a feeling of light and peace, clarity, and stillness; everything seemed clear-cut and pure.”²

THE TEACHER, THE YOGI, AND THE HIGH LAMA

What I aim to do in these few pages of introduction is, first and foremost, to offer the contemporary reader a larger context to help appreciate the life and legacy of this remarkable Tibetan teacher. For those interested in the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, I hope that this introduction will also help them to relate to the life of traditional Tibetan teachers, such as the subject of this biography, in a way that illustrates what it means for someone to dedicate their entire being to the service of the Dharma.

My first personal interaction with Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché took place in February 1970, when I was eleven. The monastery I was a member of then, Dzongkar Chödé, was located in Dharamsala, and as was customary for all monks, I went to receive blessings from Rinpoché on the first day of Tibetan New Year. Known as Chopra House, Rinpoché’s residence was located on the edge of a flat base on the crest of the wooded hill overlooking the then-small town of McLeod Ganj. I recall the view from the garden as breathtaking.



The Sixth Ling Rinpoché, Thupten Lungtok Namgyal Trinlé (1903–83)

We all rushed into Rinpoché's audience room, prostrated ourselves, and took turns offering Rinpoché the ceremonial white scarf. He placed the scarf back on our bent necks and gave each a blessed red string. To an eleven-year-old boy, Rinpoché looked impressive. He had a heavy-set body, a shiny clean-shaven head with long ears, a large forehead and high cheekbones, and his eyes with fleshy upper lids looked almost squinting. In brief, he looked formidable, and I felt a mix of both awe and terror. A few weeks later, I was back in his presence, this time to receive my formal novitiate vows, which involved nervously having to repeat phrases after him. This was when I received my monastic name Thupten Jinpa, Thupten being the first part of Rinpoché's personal name, Thupten Lungtok Namgyal Trinlé.



The Sixth Ling Rinpoché, in the garden of his residence, Chopra House, Dharamsala

The seventies and early eighties were the heyday of Tibetan cultural and spiritual revitalization in India. Having just completed a decade of hectic work resettling a large number of Tibetan refugees, opening new schools, and establishing a functioning central administrative structure in

Dharamsala, the Tibetan exile community was ready for major cultural revitalization. This began with the consecration of the main prayer hall in Dharamsala and the Dalai Lama's first Kālacakra ceremony in Dharamsala in 1970, when around thirty thousand devotees gathered at the small foothill town. The two tutors of the Dalai Lama, Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché and Kyabjé Trijang Rinpoché, also began conducting formal public teachings in Dharamsala and began traveling to the major Tibetan settlements in different parts of India. I remember attending many of these formal teachings in Dharamsala, with Ling Rinpoché conducting empowerment ceremonies belonging to the so-called father tantras, such as Guhyasamāja and Vajrabhairava, while Trijang Rinpoché focused on mother-tantra teachings like the Cakrasaṃvara cycle.³



Ling Rinpoché, left, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, right, consecrating a new Akṣobhyaavajra statue at the Thekchen Chöling main prayer hall, Dharamsala

For those in the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in particular, to be able to receive an empowerment and the associated guide to Vajrabhairava practice from Ling Rinpoché is considered most auspicious. The Ling reincarnation lineage has a special connection with this particular Vajrayana practice, and there is a unique set of teachings associated with the Ling lamas on how to engage in the three-year retreat focused on Vajrabhairava. These instructions, known as the “eighteen steps” (*them skas bco brgyad*), are part of the sealed instructions open only to the initiate.

By the time I had the good fortune to receive teachings from Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché, he was already a highly revered lama and the senior tutor, or *yongzin*, to the Dalai Lama himself. Ling Rinpoché was particularly famed for his empowerment ceremonies, guiding initiates through a series of visualizations, often with long pauses of silent meditation. For a twelve-year-old young monk, to be part of such collective silence amid hundreds of people felt quite powerful.

At times though, when some of these afternoon sessions went on for hours, way beyond sunset, I remember becoming quite restless as the thought of having to walk back in the dark through the wooded area to our monastery loomed large in my mind. Once I grew older, I was able to appreciate the preciousness of these ceremonies, and the feeling they produced of being guided through powerful, deeply absorbed states of mind. Some classical texts speak of “savoring the taste of meditative states” (*ting nge 'dzin gyi ro nyong ba*), and this is something Ling Rinpoché was a master at invoking for his disciples during these empowerment rites.

Many came to view Ling Rinpoché as a great yogi whose identity had become fused with that of the meditation deity Vajrabhairava. I grew up hearing the Tibetan lamas referring to Ling Rinpoché as “Vajrabhairava in the flesh” (*rdo rje 'jigs byed sku sha rlon pa*). The late Chogyé Trichen Rinpoché reported to His Holiness the Dalai Lama that when he was attending Ling Rinpoché's commentary on the single-deity Vajrabhairava in 1976, he had a vision of Ling Rinpoché in the aspect of Vajrabhairava with blue ornamented horns. Alexander Berzin, who had served on occasions as the translator at those rare teachings Ling Rinpoché gave to Western students, describes this widespread perception of Rinpoché as Vajrabhairava in the following: “As a widely recognized human

embodiment of Vajrabhairava, the forceful form of Mañjuśrī, the buddha figure incorporating the clarity, intelligence, and wisdom of all the buddhas, Yongzin Ling Rinpoché exuded this forceful energy of clarity around him while being a solid rock of support.”⁴



Ling Rinpoché conducting a Vajrabhairava initiation in exile.

On the personal level, Ling Rinpoché remained humble and kind-hearted throughout his life. Dagyal Loden Sherab, a high-ranking Tibetan reincarnate lama, shares a moving story. Ling Rinpoché and Trijang

Rinpoché were waiting for the Dalai Lama to begin a formal ceremony in Tezpur in eastern India, the first major town reached following his arrival on Indian soil in 1959. A room had been prepared for the two tutors, and on a table sat a plate filled with fruit. Ling Rinpoché called the young Dagab Rinpoché in and gave him a banana, saying, “This fruit is called banana, and it’s delicious as well as good for health. Come, take it.” Dagab Rinpoché had never tasted banana before and was surprised at the unique taste of this tropical fruit. He also relates how, on their long trek from Lhasa to the Indian border, every now and then Ling Rinpoché and his colleague Trijang Rinpoché would insist on traveling by foot so that their horses were not too taxed.

The presence of Ling Rinpoché and Trijang Rinpoché—referred to as *kyabjé namnyi* (literally “the two chief refugees”)—close to the young Dalai Lama was a source of profound comfort and confidence for many Tibetans during their early years of exile in India. Growing up as a child in northern India, I always saw the photographs of the trio—His Holiness flanked by his two tutors—in almost every home or monk’s cell I visited. I later found out that both tutors would receive on a daily basis any Tibetan devotee—monastic or lay—that would turn up to seek blessing or spiritual counsel. According to Jhampa Shaneman, who occasionally interpreted for Ling Rinpoché between 1971 and 1983, Rinpoché set aside Wednesdays for Western visitors and students to visit. He was always kind and patient, even when the questions and requests involved things that were culturally quite alien to him.

Ling Rinpoché served the Dalai Lama, counseled the major monasteries, gave comfort to ordinary Tibetans, and maintained his own personal development on the path to enlightenment. He also conducted regular formal teachings in Dharamsala and the major monasteries in

southern India as well as taught annually in Bodhgaya, the holy site sanctified by the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. The famous *Guru Puja* by the First Panchen Lama, memorized by all young monks in the Tibetan Geluk tradition, contains the following lines, which capture the devotion many felt toward Ling Rinpoché:

When due to time’s dictates Buddha Shakyamuni’s sun has
set,
you urgently perform the enlightened deeds of the buddhas
for so many beings bereft of protector and refuge.
I entreat you, O most compassionate refuge and protector.

In 1968, five years before the Dalai Lama was able to travel to the West, Ling Rinpoché joined Trijang Rinpoché on their first European tour. Beginning in Switzerland, where the two tutors consecrated the newly built Tibetan monastery at Rikon, they visited Germany, France, and England, giving teachings to the Tibetan Buddhist communities in these countries. Twelve years later, Ling Rinpoché traveled to the West for a second time, this time visiting North America as well.

I had the fortune to attend Ling Rinpoché’s last major public teaching. This was his exposition of Tsongkhapa’s *Great Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lam rim chen mo*) at Sera Monastery in South India in January 1983. When Ling Rinpoché would explain important points of the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness from Tsongkhapa’s classic, he would often close his eyes, pause, and speak with total absorption, as if describing the intricacies of his own personal experience. I was then a student at Ganden Monastic University and already exposed to classical Buddhist philosophical thinking, hence in a position to appreciate the depth of Ling Rinpoché’s profound teachings. This particular teaching,

taught by a Ganden Throneholder and thus a successor of Tsongkhapa himself, was profoundly meaningful. Many in attendance felt how special this teaching was, a true transmission from a great master's heart to his disciples. When Rinpoché passed away in December 1983, his loss was felt powerfully by the entire Tibetan community, not least by the Dalai Lama himself, who writes in his preface here, "When he passed away in December 1983, I felt as if the solid rock I had leaned on for so long had suddenly vanished."



Ling Rinpoché teaching under the Bodhi Tree, Bodhgaya

UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS BIOGRAPHICAL WORK

This book, although composed in the traditional style of a Tibetan religious biography or hagiography, has the singular distinction of being the only biographical work ever written by the present Dalai Lama. For the Tibetan Buddhist world, the work has rare status, not just due to the importance of the subject but due to the fact that its author is none other than His Holiness himself. In composing this biography (assisted by Ratö Khyongla Rinpoché, another senior student of Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché), the Dalai Lama was honoring the age-old Tibetan tradition of disciples writing about the lives of their spiritual teachers.

Ling Rinpoché was the senior tutor to the Dalai Lama, responsible primarily for the young Dalai Lama's philosophical training, and he was also the master from whom the Dalai Lama received his full monastic ordination. In 2004, on the fiftieth anniversary of this ordination, His Holiness himself would bestow the same lineage upon the present Ling Rinpoché in India. In addition to philosophical teachings on Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Path* and so forth, His Holiness also received from Ling Rinpoché major tantric teachings and initiations. For example, over three days in 1952 in the Potala Palace, His Holiness received the Kālacakra initiation from Ling Rinpoché—the same initiation that His Holiness has since bestowed more than thirty times around the world.

The book opens with verses of salutation paying homage to important objects of reverence such as the Buddha and invoking inspiration for the writing. Since Rinpoché's life story is here being composed by a devout student, the Dalai Lama, and also given the memory of the subject's sanctified status as a great guru, even the opening paragraph stating the

author’s intention to write the work carries recognizably devotional tone. Even from the opening section, Ling Rinpoché is referred to in honorific terms, rarely using his personal name. Rinpoché’s life is treated as an illustration of the journey to spiritual awakening, with major life events acquiring significance beyond that of an individual. In fact, the Tibetan word for lamas’ biographies, *namthar*, literally means “thoroughly liberating,” conveying that the primary purpose of such works is to inspire the devout and lead them to true liberation. In a sense, traditional Tibetan lama biographies such as this one can be viewed in line with religious art, whose purpose exceeds its status as a mere work of art. The following sentences from the Dalai Lama’s colophon capture the kind of larger religious aspiration behind this book:

I was formally requested by the Ling Labrang⁵ manager Losang Lungrik to compile for the benefit of future disciples a biography of the life and deeds of this incomparably kind tutor, the Vajradhara throneholder and Ling incarnation whose very name is difficult to speak but out of necessity I mention is the most venerable and glorious Thupten Lungtok Namgyal Trinlé. These deeds in the eyes of his ordinary disciples consisted of entering the gateway of the precious teaching of the Buddha, followed by study, contemplation, and meditation on the vast ocean of scripture, composition, teaching, and debate, and working for the Buddha’s teaching and sentient beings through his wisdom, pure ethics, and compassion. . . . May all who see, hear, recall, or come into contact with this work be joyfully cared for by a Mahayana spiritual mentor such as this great master.⁶

For devout Tibetan Buddhists, especially the direct students of late Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché, one of the most important aspects of this biography is the detailed records it presents of the formal teachings Rinpoché himself received as well as the dates and places where he transmitted these teachings. This information, gleaned from the extensive diaries kept by Rinpoché himself or a close personal attendant, offer students crucial information about the transmission of important spiritual instructions, which require unbroken lineage traceable all the way back to their origins. Any disciple who may later be in a position to transmit the teachings to his or her own students needs to consult a biography such as the present one, to see whether he or she has received the transmission of that particular instruction from Ling Rinpoché. Once students can discern that, they can then check it against Rinpoché’s own record of teachings received to see from whom Rinpoché himself received the transmission. So, for a serious student of Tibetan Buddhism, the biography of the lama and his “record of teachings received” (*gsan yig*) are important resources to authenticate the lineage of the important instructions.

For a student of Tibetan cultural history such as myself, a unique merit of this biography lies in its meticulous accounts of the rites of passage at Gyütö Monastery. Gyütö is one of two tantric colleges of the Geluk school, the other being Gyümé. These two colleges sustain the formal study and practice of the rituals associated with the Vajrayana aspect of Mahayana Buddhism. Gyütö was founded in 1475 by Kunga Döndrup, a major religious figure of fifteenth-century Tibet. Until 1959 Gyütö was the custodian of the Ramoché temple in Lhasa. Ramoché once housed the sacred statue of the Buddha believed to have been brought to Tibet by Wencheng, the Chinese princess who married the seventh-century Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo.

Ling Rinpoché rose through the ranks of Gyütö Monastery, assuming the roles of its proctor and deputy abbot, and eventually becoming the tutelary head. Never have I read such intricate details of the life of a monk at Gyütö and how a calendar year at this monastery was structured in Tibet around specific studies, practices, and rituals. I have no doubt that this biography will remain an important historical resource as well as a guidebook to the members of Gyütö Monastery. For scholars and students of Tibetan Buddhism, too, this specific part of the biography will offer a valuable chance to appreciate how, in practical terms, the members of the Geluk monastic tradition combined the sutra teachings of general Mahayana and the esoteric Vajrayana Buddhism.

FOR THE MODERN READER

Beyond the details of one man's life, this work can be read as a detailed account of how an important religious teacher in Tibet was formally groomed and trained. From identification of a child as a reincarnate successor of an important predecessor to the training as a young monk, and from the study of key classical Buddhist texts to how such traditional education is structured, and finally to how, after obtaining the famed *lharam geshé* degree (equivalent to a doctorate in divinity), a lama enters into formal Vajrayana training—all of these can be understood in the context of the training of Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché. The book, therefore, offers the discerning contemporary reader a chance to appreciate how the intellectual and philosophical thinking of an elite Tibetan scholar monk comes to be formed.

Earlier, I spoke of how one key purpose of the biography is to record the formal teachings Ling Rinpoché received and gave. An important

dimension of such teachings is the platform they provide for forging and strengthening relationships between a lama and his close disciples and benefactors. It's commonly a benefactor or benefactors who formally request teachings and sponsor them, thus providing opportunities for many students to receive these teachings. Some of these students may emerge as future upholders of the lineage of these important teachings. A well-known prayer by the Seventh Dalai Lama alludes to this symbiosis:

May the lamas, the glory of the Dharma, live long.
 May the holders of Dharma pervade the face of the earth.
 May the benefactors of Dharma enjoy status and prosperity.
 Through such auspiciousness, may the Dharma long endure.

Perhaps the most significant contemporary relevance of this biography is its role in helping us understand the influences on the present Dalai Lama, especially in his formative years as a student. Rinpoché was known for his mastery of the great Indian classics, his expertise in philosophical debate, and his laser-like focus in meticulously following intricate chains of thought. We can observe all these same attributes unmistakably in the Dalai Lama today. In speaking of Ling Rinpoché's role as a tutor, the Dalai Lama writes:

In terms of my own temperament and natural talents, I think I am closer to Ling Rinpoché than to any of my other tutors. It's perhaps fair to say that Ling Rinpoché has been the greatest influence on my life.⁷

In his special relationship with the Dalai Lama, first as a teacher and later as a close colleague and a confidant, we can imagine how Ling

Rinpoché must have served as a powerful anchor for the Dalai Lama as he gradually emerged as a spiritual and global leader. One area where the Dalai Lama's close collegial relationship with Ling Rinpoché proved to be a powerful source of strength was the Dalai Lama's initial dealings with the controversy surrounding the so-called Shugden practice.⁸ His Holiness has told me that the fact that Ling Rinpoché never had any association with the Shugden practice was a source of comfort and confidence for him. In His Holiness the Dalai Lama's grateful devotion to Ling Rinpoché and his strong identification of him as his key teacher, we see a side of the Dalai Lama—the deeply devotional and traditional Tibetan Buddhist—rarely observable in the contemporary literature on the Dalai Lama.⁹

For cultural historians of twentieth-century Tibet, in particular, an appreciation of the role of Ling Rinpoché is a must. Just like his colleague Trijang Rinpoché, Ling Rinpoché lived at the critical crossroads of old and new Tibet, overlapping the tenures of two Dalai Lamas. In between, Rinpoché also had substantial dealings with Tibet's two controversial regents, Radreng and Takdrak, whose personal conflicts split the Tibetan establishment and led to an unfortunate period of infighting. This inward turn left little space to appreciate the dangerous historical and political forces gathering momentum to the east. By the time the Tibetan establishment awoke to the threat of Communist China, it was too late.¹⁰

Second to Ling Rinpoché's relationship with the Dalai Lama was that with his close colleague and fellow tutor of the Dalai Lama, Trijang Rinpoché. The two tutors not only shared a dedication to the education of the Dalai Lama, they also received formal teachings from each other. The biography shows us how close and special this particular relationship was, and how the death of Trijang Rinpoché in 1981 weighed heavily on Ling Rinpoché's mind. Reading Ling Rinpoché's biography side by side with

Trijang Rinpoché's autobiography gives a powerful sense of the special relationship between these two remarkable Tibetan teachers, who together shaped the life, character, and thought of an entire generation of Tibetan teachers and scholars that continue to dedicate their lives to preserving and disseminating Tibet's cherished spiritual and cultural heritage.



The Thirteenth Dalai Lama on his teaching throne at the Norbulingka summer palace

In brief, whether serving the Dalai Lama as his senior tutor, traveling and conducting public teachings at the request of his students, deepening his own meditative realizations, or strengthening the bonds between

teachers, disciples, and benefactors, Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché's life was dedicated to one thing: serving the Dharma to help others find genuine peace and happiness. In a brief autobiographical note composed about a decade before his death, Ling Rinpoché wrote, "Until now I have dedicated my stay in India to restoring the waning Buddhadharma and to preserving the teachings of the second Buddha Jé Tsongkhapa, which are like a refined gold and present a stainless union of sutra and tantra."¹¹

It has been both an honor and a profound joy to be part of the team bringing the biography of Ling Rinpoché to the English-speaking world. I offer my deepest thanks to the present Seventh Ling Rinpoché, Tenzin Lungtog Trinley Choephag, for inviting me to be part of the team as the general editor. I thank the translator Gavin Kilty for excellently rendering the original Tibetan work into English, no small task given all the specific cultural and technical references to intricacies of Tibetan monastic life. My gratitude goes also to Dakpo Rinpoché, a senior teacher in the Geluk tradition and a former student of Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché, for funding the translation of this important biography. I would also like to thank the Ing Foundation for its patronage of the Institute of Tibetan Classics, which has enabled me to have the time to edit this precious book as well as write this introduction. Finally, I must express my deep appreciation to our dedicated team at Wisdom Publications, including especially our incisive editor David Kittelstrom and our publisher Tim McNeill.



Ling Rinpoché and Trijang Rinpoché in Switzerland, 1968

May the publication of this biography of Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché be a source of inspiration to many travelers on the path of awakening.

Thupten Jinpa
A humble student of the late Kyabjé Ling Rinpoché