

A Life Foretold

*On Wednesday, a Sikkimese prince-turned-monk will visit Singapore*

## MY KARMIC JOURNEY

BY CALVINE LOW

From a Himalayan cave hidden by a waterfall to the back of a shophouse in Geylang. This was my karmic journey.

In November of '92, I had visited the cave of a 9th century Indian Buddhist saint in the northeastern Himalayas.

**In August this year, I met the current incarnation of that same saint, a Sikkimese prince-turned-monk, in his humble temple quarters in Geylang.**

It is a Buddhist belief that sentient beings are reborn in successive lives, their minds transmigrating from birth to birth in the Six realms of existence according to their karmic disposition.

So who exactly is this ancient sage and his contemporary incarnation?

According to Sanskrit Buddhist sources, the saint Tilopa lived from AD 988 to 1069. Tilokpur the little riverside town where his cave stands, still bears his name.

You won't find it in any travel guidebook - most people drive right by from Delhi, heading for the more famous Dharamsala, seat of the exiled Dalai Lama.

To reach historical cave, you take a downhill trail along a cliff-like riverbank and wade waist deep in murky green water to below its mouth.

Then, with a ladder borrowed from the Buddhist nunnery on the next hill, climb 2 m up to the

But a life of royalty was never Rinpoche's destiny.

**Even before he was born, he had been identified by the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Kagyud school, as the 12th Zurmang Gharwang.**

This unbroken line of incarnations first appeared in the 14th century - as predicted by Tilopa himself - after 13 generations of non-incarnate holders of his esoteric tantric lineage had appear since his own time.

"When my mother was about six months pregnant with me, she attended an important religious ceremony that was presided by the head of the Kagyud tradition, His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, at Rumtek monastery," Rinpoche explained in fluent, faintly American-accented English.

"During the part of the ceremony of the traditional Tilopa Dance, a jewel offering was made to the Karmapa.

**"Breaking with tradition, he declined and pointed to my surprised mother, requesting instead that the offering be made to her.**

**He then announced that she was carrying the 12th Gharwang Rinpoche."**

The previous Gharwang Rinpoche had died five years before.

This identification of incarnate lamas before birth is extremely rare, even within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition where incarnate lamas, like the Daiai Lama, are regularly identified through the traditional series of tests

. But any doubts to Rinpoche's authenticity were quickly dispelled - again by the clairvoyant intervention of the Karmapa - who sent his emissary with a party of monks to ceremonially welcome the child at

What did he remember of him princely life at the Sikkimese court?

"I don't remember much of my life as a prince," said Rinpoche, who preferred to play down his royal background.

Seven days after his birth, Rinpoche was separated from his mother's side at the royal court, and cared for by his father's elder brother.

"There was no particular reason for that arrangement," he explained. But it led to his enthronement at age 11, on 30 Oct, 1976, when he entered the Karmapa's monastery at Rumtek to begin his Buddhist studies.

On completing his formal Tibetan Buddhist studies and English language at 26, he left Rumtek and began the task of establishing his seat in Sikkim as well as re-establishing his seat in Tibet, and the setting up of branches in Jakarta, Kaohsiung, Taipei and Kuala Lumpur.

He has applied to start up a centre in Singapore, where he has been a regular visitor since 1988.

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## BUILDING PROJECTS

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Rinpoche spent six months improving English at the Mt San Antonio Community Collage in Los Angeles. He plans to return to the US for more years of English study, when he completes his building projects.

entrance, which is shielded by the waterfall.

Tilopa is the fountainhead of a lineage of esoteric Buddhist tantric teachings which the Kagyud school of Tibetan Buddhism helps keep alive.

He is traditionally depicted in paintings as a matted-haired Indian ascetic holding a golden fish in his right hand.

The scriptures record how, to test the faith of his main disciple, Naropa, he grilled river fish alive and ate them, only to miraculously restore the fish back to life as he cast their skeletons into the river.

Sitting in the freezing cave, that November of '92, tried to picture that baptism of faith all those 942 years ago.

Last August, in the heat of Geylang, I sat in the presence of Tilopa's ancient wisdom in its present incarnation, the 12th Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche. I had expected to be sufficiently unnerved. VEN Gharwang Rinpoche born a prince of the Sikkimese Court on June 30, 1965.

The reigning King of Sikkim then, Shri Palden Thondup Namgyal, was his mother's elder brother.

the very time of his birth.

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## MESSENGER

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This, without any forewarning of the timing of Rinpoche's birth, and from Rumtek, which is 24km away from the princess' residence in Gangtok.

"I was born in the early morning. My parents despatched a messenger to inform the Karmapa of my imminent arrival," said Rinpoche.

"And before the messenger could leave the house, Saljay Rinpoche (the Karmapa's emissary) was already at the door with an offering scarf from the Karma and a letter containing his blessings for my well-being."

Rinpoche has been teaching Buddhism since 1987.

"I prefer to teach in English to a foreign audience because it reaches them direct," said Rinpoche, who also speaks Nepali, Tibetan, Sikkimese, and some Hindi and Mandarin, which he picked up in Taiwan.

These heavy commitments have kept Rinpoche from visiting his old cave.

"I haven't had the chance," he explained, "But I will certainly visit it one day."

How close is Rinpoche to Tilopa?

The question made him throw his head back and laugh a kindly, relaxed laugh.

"Let's just say I am like a messenger of the enlightened mind of Tilopa," he said.

"And with the blessings from Tilopa and the Karmapa, I feel especially encouraged to devote my life further to the conduct of more Dharma work."