

# The Crazy Wisdom Interview – Tibetan Buddhist Lama Gelek Rinpoche Talks About His Years in Tibet and India, American Politics, and the Evolution of Jewel Heart.

*Gelek Rinpoche is the founder and president of the Jewel Heart Center for Tibetan Culture and Buddhist Studies, located on East Washington Street in Ann Arbor. He is an incarnate lama within the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. ("Rinpoche" means "precious jewel" in the Tibetan tradition, and it is an honorific most often given to someone recognized as a reincarnation of a previous master.) He was recognized as a lama, and ordained as a Buddhist monk, at a very young age. At age 20, he fled Tibet and settled in India for much of the next quarter century. (In the 1950's, and particularly from 1959 to 1960, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans made arduous and perilous journeys across the Himalayas, to escape Chinese Communist rule.) He has been residing in the United States since 1984, primarily in the Ann Arbor area. During his time here, he has been committed to teaching Western students, and to bringing Buddhist spirituality into lay life. He, himself, has not been a monk since 1963.*

*Rinpoche has emerged as one of the very important Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders currently teaching in the United States. The community which he founded, Jewel Heart, is rooted in Ann Arbor, where it has hundreds of members, but it has grown to include centers in a number of American cities, as well as in Asia and Europe.*

*I met with Gelek Rinpoche on a cool, clear October day, at Jewel Heart. We sat in the meditation room, which is richly appointed with thangkas, statuary, photographs of respected Tibetan Buddhist teachers, colorful pillows and cloths, and ceremonial objects. Rinpoche was wearing a bright orange shirt, and he was welcoming, in his own relaxed and yet courtly way. Rinpoche talks quietly and precisely, with a lilting expression in his voice. He laughs easily, and often. Tea and cookies had been set out for us, and we began the interview.*

**Bill Zirinsky:** Thank you for letting me do this interview with you.

**Gelek Rinpoche:** Thank you for interviewing me (laughs).

**Bill Zirinsky:** I wanted to learn more about your biography, your personal history, in addition to talking about some of your teachings.

**Gelek Rinpoche:** Okay.

**Bill Zirinsky:** There are many people in southeastern Michigan who read *The Crazy Wisdom Calendar* who are not part of Jewel Heart, but nonetheless have a keen interest in you and in your life, and in Buddhism, and may not know much about your personal background. So, would that be an appropriate place for us...

**Rinpoche:** No, no, no. It is no problem at all. Whatever you want, I'll be happy.

**Bill Zirinsky:** I was reading one of the bound volumes that you sell at the Jewel Heart store, which consist of transcripts of some of your talks – that one was called *Odyssey to Freedom*. I found it very interesting, you speak so articulately, and the transcript captures your speaking style. On the back of the transcript I read that you were born in Tibet in 1939.

**Gelek Rinpoche:** Yes, I was born in Tibet, and the year happens to be 1939. As a matter of fact, tomorrow is my birthday, the real birthday.



Gelek Rinpoche, founder and guiding light of Jewel Heart, was carefully tutored by Tibet's greatest living masters. A member of the last generation of lamas to be born and fully educated in Tibet, he now lives in the Ann Arbor area. He teaches Tibetan Buddhist principles of discernment, detachment, kindness and compassion to students in the West.

**Bill Zirinsky:** Well, happy birthday.

**Gelek Rinpoche:** Thank you.

**BZ:** Do they celebrate birthdays in Tibet?

**Rinpoche:** Some people do; some don't. Some people do on their birthday and many of them treat the changing of the year, New Year's Day, and many treat the changing of the year on the Winter Solstice as a birthday. A few people celebrate their real birthday.

**BZ:** I was wondering, do you get days off?

**Rinpoche:** Me personally? I think I'm off all the time (both laugh). I don't have to go to 9 to 5 office work, so I'm off all the time (laughs).

**BZ:** I read somewhere that you were born in Lhasa.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. I was born in Lhasa. Fortunately I belonged to a very good family. A family that was known – it's not the *family* that was known, it's my father who was a very well known reincarnated Lama. He happened to be the Regent of Tibet a number of times between the Dalai Lamas, between the seventh Dalai Lama and the eighth, and then again ninth and tenth or tenth and eleventh.

**BZ:** So previous incarnations of your father were the Regent for the young Dalai Lamas?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, the Regent for the Dalai Lama's administration. When the Dalai Lamas were young or not there, the Regent functioned. So he happened to be the Regent for a number of times – four times or something – between the seventh and thirteenth.

**BZ:** So you were from a prominent Tibetan Buddhist family?

**Rinpoche:** That's right. Prominent Tibetan Buddhist set-up or whatever (laughs). I am not sure whether *family* is the right word or not. I'm not sure. My father also happened to be the nephew of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. So that's why a "prominent family" – that's good. So, into a prominent Tibetan family I was born.

**BZ:** And were you in those early years raised in a village or in the city or in a small town?

**Rinpoche:** The City of Lhasa, which is a village when we look at it now. We call it the city of Lhasa, I lived in Lhasa proper. The first thing that I do remember is I am the candidate for the Panchen Lama. I don't know how many kids – probably hundreds of them – they shrink the list into 25, shrink it to 20, 15, 10, 7, 5. I happen to be the fourth one. For a long time I was a candidate for the Panchen Lama selection.

**BZ:** Were you a four- or five-year-old boy at the time, or older than that?

**Rinpoche:** Younger than that, probably one or two or three. Then the Panchen Lama selection finally falls to two kids, from what I understand – two kids, one in China and one in Eastern Tibet. So the Tibetan government then, not now, wants it to be the boy from Tibet. And the Panchen Lama's retinue in China would like it to be the boy from China. Then I was dismissed from the list and then I believe I was considered for a couple of different well-known incarnate Lamas. Finally I landed on whatever I am now (laughs). I saw last year my father's photograph had been published by a magazine in China and saw in there a

photo of myself as a child, wearing monk's robes.

**BZ:** Age six or...

**Rinpoche:** It looks like four.

**BZ:** You hadn't seen those photos...

**Rinpoche:** I hadn't seen those photos at all until recently when the Chinese published my father's photos as the first photographer of Tibet. So a lot of photos survived the Cultural Revolution and among them they published this photo of me as a child. And it says, "Living Buddha of Drepung Monastery" (laughs). So that is how the Chinese perceived it.

**BZ:** That could be thought of as quite a burden for a four-year-old.

**Rinpoche:** I don't know whether it is a burden or pride or... I don't know... I don't remember very much, but I don't remember it being a burden. Kids want to be center stage and I had that, in my childhood. Now I don't want to be the center of attention; I want to avoid it. But *then* I wanted to be the center of attention. And I don't remember it being a burden. I was unhappy when I was told I'm not the Panchen Lama, I do remember that.

## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Gelek Rinpoche (continued)

**BZ:** You were old enough to remember that?

**Rinpoche:** I do remember, whether I was old enough or not I don't know.

**BZ:** I read that your father had a monastery.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, he had a number of monasteries, a number of monasteries.

**BZ:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**Rinpoche:** I do. I have four brothers living in Tibet and one sister in Washington.

**BZ:** Are either of your parents alive?

**Rinpoche:** No. My father died in 1973, just coming out of the Cultural Revolution. And my mother died from torture and imprisonment.

Fortunately I belonged to a very good family. A family that was known – it's not the *family* that was known, it's my father who was a very well known reincarnated Lama. He happened to be the Regent of Tibet a number of times between the Dalai Lamas...

**BZ:** During the Cultural Revolution?

**Rinpoche:** During the Cultural Revolution, yes, that's right. My parents did not have a problem in 1959, and 1960 and 1961. They survived – not a good way, but they just managed. But during the Cultural Revolution – and of course he happened to be one of the highest incarnate Lamas available in Tibet – so naturally he was a big target. No doubt about it. And in addition to that, the Chinese discovered certain correspondence that had been maintained with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India. So they accused my family, they accused him of being the Dalai Lama's agent, and therefore a Western agent. So my mother said, "He knows nothing. It's all me." So she received very serious punishment – very, very serious.

From what I understood later, she tried to commit suicide three or four times in the prison. She failed. It's not a 'prison'. It is a very strange set-up. It's called a house, but it's really a prison. You have 24 hours, including at sleeping time, there are two or three people with you, and they will wake you up. They will not let you sleep, they will torture you, they will beat you, they will do all that. She used to have long, long hair and they said she had the same hair when she went under house arrest. Later, her hair was shorter than you and I have it. They would grab her hair, beat her up, hang her upside down, and they hung her from the ceiling with her hair and all that type of thing. She used to have a jade bangle she couldn't take off because she had put on a lot of weight, so they dragged her up and down with the jade bangle. So finally she told a friend of mine that she had been able to bang the bangle against the wall and break it. They used her hair after that. She went through a very, very hard time. She was released before she died – three or four days before – but then they said she was totally unstable. She didn't know what she was saying, she tried to jump through the window, she tried to jump into boiling hot water, tried to put her head in it, all that type of thing. She was totally insane, gone crazy completely.

**BZ:** They drove her crazy.

**Rinpoche:** They drove her completely crazy and they said her body had so many scars and so many things. And her hair that reached to the waist had gone shorter than – I mean, you have very short hair and I have very short hair, and they say shorter than this. Which means almost pulled and all cut up. Can you imagine hanging a person by the hair? She was very heavy, extremely heavy.

**BZ:** I can't imagine it. It sounds like she suffered greatly.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, she did. But she took total blame, saying that my father had nothing to do, it is all me in his name. So whether it is true or not, she took the blame. That's what she did.

**BZ:** And your father, what happened in his path then?

**Rinpoche:** Well, during the Cultural Revolution period, he was not under house arrest. He was left alone in his house, but it was a very severe observation. In other

words, he could not close his bedroom door, he could not close his quarters. They took him out of his big house and gave him a small quarter, like a three to four room quarter, and he had to leave all doors open. Somebody would come in the middle of the night and check whatever they were doing. He was not physically tortured, but on the other hand I have a photograph that shows that they dressed him up in one of those "protector's" robes and took him through the main street.

**BZ:** The way they did with many people...

**Rinpoche:** Many people...

**BZ:** ...paraded him through the streets...

**Rinpoche:** Paraded him, and all sorts of older Tibetans, old nobility, incarnate Lamas, head of monasteries, and business people. All of them were paraded. My father was the first one in the parade, even before the ex-cabinet minister. He was the first one and he was with my mother. So mother was dressed up in the usual ceremonial dress, carrying a tray, which had her jewelry, relics, and watches – that type of thing. My father was dressed in the protector's robe, and they took him through the streets. At that time they might have kicked him a couple of times, but actual physical beating they didn't do to him and they didn't lock him in. However, he was kept in his home and he could not close the doors. He had to leave his doors open 24 hours. Anybody could walk in.

**BZ:** It was a very intrusive house arrest, where they harassed him and kept him awake and psychologically abused him in a sense.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. No physical beating. Otherwise he was kept in his home, he could not lock the doors. They were open for 24 hours.

**BZ:** Were you, more than your brothers, considered to be an incarnation of a holy Tibetan and your brothers were not, and so you were educated differently than your brothers?

**Rinpoche:** I am the oldest of all and my next brother is 10 years younger than I am. When I left Tibet I was 20 years and my brother was only 10.

**BZ:** Ten and younger?

**Rinpoche:** Ten and younger, that's right. So I can't answer that question. However, one of my brothers is also considered to be an equally important incarnate Lama. So, it was a funny thing. I was recognized as a different incarnate Lama and I joined Drepung Monastery. I studied in Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, up to 20 years of age, and then I fled Tibet. I continued to be in the monastery in India for about four or five more years, that's about it. And then I became a lay person.

**BZ:** From the age of 6 until 20, were young Tibetan monks like yourself meditating and studying and being educated in Buddhism for many hours a day?

**Rinpoche:** It depends on the person. Not all kids in the monasteries are that educated. Most of the incarnate Lamas had it different. But I had a very different situation because education was a first priority for me. Education and meditation were first priorities for me, so I really had a 24-hour education from the age of 4 through 20. Really, 24-hours a day. Even after coming to India, my education continued in Dharamsala, so it's almost from age 4 to 24, except the one year that we had been traveling – escaping from Tibet to India.

**BZ:** Were you traveling on your own or with a group of people? I know many people were leaving the same time

place near the Bhutan border called Buxaduar, where all senior monks of all three great monasteries were sent. So I was sent there as well. Not only the three great monasteries, but monks from all the sects – nyingma's, kagyu's and sakya's – were sent there. Sort of a small camp, which used to be the prison that was built for India's Independence Movement. It had been used to imprison people who were arrested by the British colonial government. So that was the place. And so we were sent there.

**BZ:** A place for political detainees?

**Rinpoche:** Political detainees, yes. And we were sent there. It's not a very big camp. I don't know, maybe about 1000 or maybe 1500 or something like that – maybe a little more. I am not good at numbers and dates. I am very bad on numbers and dates (laughs). So I was there about a year and then I moved to Dharamsala. When I moved to Dharamsala, there was a grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Foundation for saving the Tibetan culture and religion. Under that grant, the Dalai Lama and his teachers selected 10 of us to continue to study and teach in Dharamsala. Out of 100,000, 10 of us were selected.

**BZ:** The grant provided for you to be further educated...

**Rinpoche:** A complete education and training for teaching. That was only 75 rupees per month, which is not very much. But at that time, you could live on it. So that is how I landed in Dharamsala.

**BZ:** So, in a sense, as a young man you were being given a stipend to live and pay for your food and to continue learning to become a teacher?

**Rinpoche:** That's right, for the preservation of that culture. For both purposes – to teach to the Western people, universities, or whatever. What the Rockefeller Foundation really did was give a dual grant; one grant they gave to the Tibetans in Dharamsala, to the Dalai Lama, to continue, and another grant was given to the universities to hire us.

**BZ:** Universities in India?

**Rinpoche:** No. Universities throughout the world. Many of us went to Germany and a couple of us went to other places, like Seattle.

**BZ:** And Chogyam Trungpa went to Oxford, in England?

**Rinpoche:** Trungpa is different. Trungpa is a good old friend of mine. There is a woman named Freida Bedi. She was British, married to an Indian political leader, so she got that Bedi name – Freida Bedi. She is also the mother of this actor called Kabir Bedi, an Indian actor. So Kabir Bedi's mother. She was very interested in the Tibetans. She took an interest right from the beginning. She was a very close friend of Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister. So she came a couple of times to the Tibetan camps way before we moved to Buxaduar, to prepare the Tibetan kids to receive Nehru. So they all taught the kids to wave to the Indian flag and sing, "Cha Cha Nehru, din ba ba". That means "Uncle Nehru, victory, victory, Uncle Nehru." She taught them all this. And along with that, she was looking out for the Tibetan people who were coming through the Tibetan refugee camps. Tens of thousands there – it's almost because of her. So she is looking through and she took an interest in me and the Trungpa Rinpoche. Trungpa Rinpoche and I were her favorite young Tibetan Lamas.

So she used to send me a little money here and there, give extra quarters and things like that. And to Trungpa. Trungpa Rinpoche was not sent to Buxaduar, he

I hadn't seen those photos at all until recently when the Chinese published my father's photos as the first photographer of Tibet. So a lot of photos survived the Cultural Revolution and among them they published this photo of me as a child. And it says, "Living Buddha of Drepung Monastery" (laughs). So that is how the Chinese perceived it.

you...

**Rinpoche:** A group of other people with me. There were like 25 to begin with, and then finally it came to four or five, so when we landed in India we had five or six people, maybe seven people.

**BZ:** Were you in danger at all, or were you...

**Rinpoche:** A couple of times, yes. But not all the time. A couple of times we encountered the Chinese soldiers here and there – very, very close. But not so much.

**BZ:** And then you arrived in Dharamsala?

**Rinpoche:** No, I arrived in India, the northeast frontier of India, and spent a couple of months here and there with different Tibetan refugee camps. Finally I landed in a

went to Kalingphung; and I was sent to Buxaduar. She traced me and she traced Trungpa Rinpoche. So she found me in Buxaduar. She came to Buxaduar to visit. And then she wanted me to come to Delhi to her house. She wanted me and Trungpa brought to her house and kept in her house. But at that time I was asked to go to Dharamsala, so I chose to go to Dharamsala. And Trungpa Rinpoche straight away went to her place in Delhi. So then she occasionally asked for a holiday for me to come and visit her in Delhi. So from Dharamsala I went very often to Delhi to have a holiday in her home.

**BZ:** I imagine you would have gotten exposure to the larger world through someone like her?

Photo by Linda Lawson



**Rinpoche:** She was the window. She wanted to bring up me and Trungpa Rinpoche. Whenever I went to Delhi, she tried to teach me English and let me read. She did all that. She tried to teach me mathematics. She didn't put too much effort on that; she put her efforts into teaching me English. She would say things like, "I am standing," "I am sitting." She had a matchbox and pulled it out. "The box is open," "The box is closed." Trungpa Rinpoche speaks much better than me because he'd been there with her all the time. But I probably had – on and off, if you put all the times together – I probably spent about six months to a year in her place.

**BZ:** So you were a frequent house guest.

**Rinpoche:** *Frequent.* She treated me as a member of her family. She tried to make me Trungpa Rinpoche's brother, which didn't work (laughs). Somehow we didn't pick up that projection at all! It was never in the Tibetan old system and we didn't get it. In those days, Trungpa Rinpoche was a very strict monk, who wouldn't eat in the afternoon, who did not do anything of that sort. He was a very, very strict monk in those days. So that's how I know Trungpa Rinpoche. He's a very old friend. We had to sleep together – we had to share the same bed, in other words. We didn't play around or anything (both laugh).

**BZ:** He became less strict as the years went on, I guess.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, I hadn't seen him for many years. When I first came to America in 1984, on the invitation of Aura Glaser, from Crazy Wisdom, Aura and Sandy Finkel... at that time Trungpa Rinpoche contacted me.

**BZ:** How did that happen? That was one of the questions that I wanted to ask you. How was it that Aura Glaser met you?

**Rinpoche:** Aura and Sandy were young women traveling and living in India. They landed in Dharamsala and were studying Tibetan Buddhism. I happened to visit Dharamsala one day and this big guy named Bruce Wilson, who I know, and this young woman, who I don't know, were standing near the library, having peanuts and chatting with Mel Goldstein, a friend of mine. I said hello as I passed by. The young woman offered me peanuts and I took a few and stopped for a few minutes. The young woman happened to be Aura. We were introduced and then I went away. Then, a couple of months later, Bruce showed up with Sandy in Delhi. So that's how I met both Sandy and Aura.

**BZ:** At that point in Delhi, we're talking maybe 1980 or 1981?

**Rinpoche:** I don't know. You better ask Aura the date, because I am terrible with dates. (*Editor's note: Aura Glaser confirmed that Rinpoche was talking about late 1980 and early 1981.*)

**BZ:** So you were already – we've skipped some years in there – but at that point were you in Delhi, did you have a

community of students, or were you working practicing as a...

**Rinpoche:** I was working for His Holiness. I set up the cultural center called Tibet House in Delhi. I was the secretary general of that organization. Then they fired me.

**BZ:** They fired you?

**Rinpoche:** They fired me. They didn't fire me, they were making jokes, they kept me there without responsibility. So we used to make jokes saying, "Minister without portfolio." (laughs) So as a consequence of that, the government of India noticed that and they asked me if I would like to teach the Tibetan language to a couple of Indian officers. So I said, "Well, His Holiness has not fired me yet, so you want to talk to His Holiness." So they said, "Yes, we can." So they talked to His Holiness and they asked His Holiness, "Would you loan him for 18 months to teach a couple of Indian officers the Tibetan language?" So His Holiness said yes. So, I was teaching the Indian officers...

**BZ:** Military or political officers?

**Rinpoche:** It was a mixture. There was one four-star general, a couple of colonels, about 11 or 13 majors, and there were a lot of civilians too. So they were all taken out of office. They didn't have to go to the office; they had no responsibilities. They were put there for 18 months to learn the Tibetan language, including the general. So here was a general, civilians, everything – no office, except learning Tibetan. And each one of them when they passed quarterly examinations got 100 rupees extra every month. The increase was a very big incentive. And when

they were done with 18 months if they could get up to a 60% mark, they were going to get 100 rupees extra for the rest of their lives. If they got a 70% mark, they got 200 extra. If they 80%, they got 300 extra.

**BZ:** And why was the Indian government so interested in teaching these ranking officers Tibetan?

**Rinpoche:** I think because of the 1962 border problem and the communications and all this. So for 18 months I had to teach those officers. So at the end of the 18 months, I don't think that the general had scored 60% (laughs). I don't remember. I do remember there was a lot of political pressure and the director of the school came to talk to me, saying that you cannot fail the general and all that type of thing.

**BZ:** You have to pass the general.

**Rinpoche:** There were non-commissioned officers – three of them – who really became very fluent and read and all this. They got the highest marks; they probably got 98% or something. The general might have gotten 60-something.

**BZ:** This was after you had been working as the Secretary General for the Tibet House in Delhi?

**Rinpoche:** That's right.

**BZ:** And is it at that point that Aura came to the Tibet House?

**Rinpoche:** No. I think it was either during that period or a little after, after the 18 months I had been working with the Indians. At the same time, the Indians wanted me to head the Tibetan Language Broadcast System.

**BZ:** Radio?

**Rinpoche:** Radio, yes. They had that since the 1950s. They wanted me to head that and improve that.

**BZ:** Was the radio broadcast just for the Tibetans in the refugee camps or to broadcast into Tibet?

**Rinpoche:** To broadcast into Tibet.

**BZ:** I see. Kind of like a Voice of America.

**Rinpoche:** Like a Voice of American type of thing.

**BZ:** So that they would get genuine Tibetan news that they could not get from the Chinese...

**Rinpoche:** That's right. Our main target area was inside Tibet. Along with that we include the northern Himalayan region, Indian subjects who speaks Tibetan. So, all of those. So I think Aura and Sandy came during that period. Maybe even after that.

**BZ:** I will ask them.

**Rinpoche:** Then I was fired from that job too. Then I went to Texas in 1977. I almost stayed there, but they sent me cables, they sent me telegrams, they sent me letters, they called me...

**BZ:** They wanted you to come home.

**Rinpoche:** Come back. Even the Indian Embassy in Washington called me in Texas to come back, and I didn't

go back. I had a three-week leave, and I might have stayed three or four months. I'd been fired there too (laughs).

**BZ:** You liked Texas.

**Rinpoche:** I like Texas.

**BZ:** So you came to Texas not because of Aura.

**Rinpoche:** That's right.

**BZ:** Something else drew you to Texas. You went and you liked Texas and you liked the United States...

**Rinpoche:** No. There was a healer called Norbu Chen. Norbu Chen was a very well-known healer, a very good healer. He claimed that his healing power was coming from Tibetan Buddhism. So he came to India to visit the Dalai Lama and the Dalai Lama's teachers. He came into contact with me in Delhi. I don't know how he came into contact, but he did come into contact with me. He came with a very famous and rich woman called Doris Duke.

**BZ:** Oh, Doris Duke! How interesting that your life would intersect with Doris Duke's life!

**Rinpoche:** Yes. Doris and he came together in Delhi, and they came and visited me. And since they came, as long as they were there, they showed up before I got up – early in the morning – and they would stay there until I went to bed, both of them.

**BZ:** Studying?

**Rinpoche:** No, chit-chatting, talking, making jokes, and all kinds of things. And finally, both Doris and Norbu Chen wanted to go see His Holiness, so they wanted me to go with them. So I went with them to see His Holiness, and I went with them to see His Holiness's teachers – very famous teachers, Trijang Rinpoche and Ling Rinpoche. So Norbu Chen asked Trijang Rinpoche to give him a big initiation, a kalachakra type of thing. And he gave a short one and he said, "The other one you should do in

**Rinpoche:** I was unhappy when I was told I'm not the Panchen Lama, I do remember that.

**BZ:** You were old enough to remember that?

**Rinpoche:** I do remember, whether I was old enough or not I don't know.

Texas." So then he invited him to come to Texas and he said no, "I am not going. Take him." So that is how I came to Texas.

**BZ:** When you got to Texas, you must've found it...

**Rinpoche:** Well, I like Texans. I like it there. That doesn't mean that I'm going to vote for George W. Bush (both laugh). But I like Texas and I like Texans, and I like America on the whole.

**BZ:** When you got here, you liked America?

**Rinpoche:** I liked America from Tibet. When I came here first in 1964 to Cornell, in Ithaca, New York, and went back, the Tibetans in Delhi used to give a nickname to me, saying "American Rinpoche." I'm barefoot talking about America, so they called me American Rinpoche.

**BZ:** They already knew that you were...

**Rinpoche:** Very fond of America.

**BZ:** Attracted to America...

**Rinpoche:** Yes.

**BZ:** You had come here and been a student at Cornell for a semester?

**Rinpoche:** For one year. Four of us from India and two here, so six of us, I think, selected by both the Dalai Lama's office as well as by American officials.

**BZ:** Tell me about the relationship between the U.S. and the Tibetan exile community?

**Rinpoche:** The U.S. and Tibetan exile relationship today, and the U.S. and Tibetan exile relationship in those days, are different.

**BZ:** Very different?

**Rinpoche:** In those days, it was not an interest in Tibetan culture. It was not an interest for Tibetan spirituality. It was not an interest in Buddhism. It was not even an interest for the women's rights issue in Tibet. These days it's a genuine American interest, genuine American people's interest for spiritual reality, for women's rights, and all this. In those days, I don't think the interest was for women's rights or anything. It was simply...

**BZ:** ...a geopolitical interest...

**Rinpoche:** Geopolitical, that's it, there you go. So, that's my background (laughs). Do you want to go a little more into detail or is that good enough for you?

**BZ:** What happened at a later point that Aura Glaser and you connected, and you came to Ann Arbor?

**Rinpoche:** Aura and Sandy asked me to give a big teaching, and so whatever they asked me, I did it. The teachings were in New Tibet House.

**BZ:** In New York?

**BZ:** Did that bother you?

**Rinpoche:** No. At that time, no. Only after America it bothered me.

**BZ:** What do you mean, only after America?

**Rinpoche:** When I got over here and I couldn't take credit for that. Then it bothered me. So, not 'til then.

**BZ:** Yes, this was major historical preservation...

**Rinpoche:** Major text. And now people look at the catalog and I say, "I did this." And they look at...

Dalai Lama. Even that assignment was changed overnight after telling them I had gotten it.

**BZ:** You were excited about joining the political world, and the next thing you know, you weren't.

**Rinpoche:** So since then I've kept myself away from political life.

**BZ:** During those years, from 1960 to 1975, when you had other kinds of worldly jobs, did you continue to meditate?

**Rinpoche:** Oh yes. I did not break my commitment or anything. But I was against being a teacher and teaching. I was against being a Lama, being an incarnate Lama – period. I changed my name from the incarnate name to Ngawang Gelek. I didn't purposely change it, but something happened in Dharamsala. And I didn't want to be called Rinpoche and that type of thing. So I preferred to be called Ngawang Gelek rather than Rinpoche in those days. Now I prefer to be called Rinpoche (laughs). *Change of times.* So, anyway, I was running away and they kept me in. Even my jobs had to be teaching Buddhism – in a school or religions instructor or something like that category.

**BZ:** Were you living a non-monastic life in India?

**Rinpoche:** Yes. Since the age of 24, I'm no longer a monk. I liked to drink, I liked to smoke, I liked to try things I couldn't do as a monk. Everything you're not supposed to do, I liked to do, and I did it without any sort of hesitation. I didn't indulge in non-virtuous acts like killing, stealing, or that type. But I liked to be involved in drinking, smoking and...

**BZ:** ...some hedonistic activity...

**BZ:** Are either of your parents alive?

**Rinpoche:** No. My father died in 1973, just coming out of the Cultural Revolution. And my mother died from torture and imprisonment.

**Rinpoche:** In Delhi. In New Tibet House, for about 30-45 days. We started every afternoon about 12-ish and we finished about 5:30 or 6:00. Aura, Sandy, plus there is one guy who is now in California — who speaks very good Tibetan and is a good musician, named David Molk — and also there were a number of others from the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition teaching in Delhi at that time. So there were maybe about 8, 9, 10 people attending.

**BZ:** They had organized a 30-45 day program in Delhi that you were going to be teaching for Americans?

**Rinpoche:** Aura and Sandy asked me to give that particular teaching. We didn't talk about it that much, and a number of other people joined in. That's what it was. There was nothing organized. We just set up the time we would go there and then did it. So it was about, I think, about 30-45 days – I don't know. It was so hot. I remember, it was so hot. And Aura didn't have money, nor did Sandy. But Aura had a friend and they lived in the southern area. She walked in that heat. My God, it was the hottest time of the year and the hottest time of the day. So she walked from that place to Tibet House and walked back. Walking back it was a little cooler because it was after 5:00. Walking in was terrible; it was about 12:00 – midday. I mean, it was not a short walk. It was maybe 3 miles or more. She walked every day. And the temperature was 114 degrees or 113 degrees. And so I was amazed at her – what do you call it – endurance. I had a car to drive; she didn't. I had a car in Delhi to drive, but she didn't. She didn't have the money to get a bus or taxi or rickshaw.

**BZ:** So she walked every day...

**Rinpoche:** She walked, yes. So that was amazing, shocking to me. But I did not express my amazement or shock at all. Plus, she was sick. On top of that she was sick. So, that's what happened.

**BZ:** In those years when you were teaching the Tibetan language and before that when you were at the Tibet House, it sounds like those jobs were teaching language. In the Tibet House you were doing probably a fair amount of cultural outreach.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. I was the Secretary General. One of the major jobs for me was to identify the images, the thangkas, to see what it was and what it was not, and to accept or reject or buy all those – number one. And number two, to organize Tibetan spiritual books – organize them, catalog them, and all this. I did have a couple people working with me, but that was my major job. Plus administrate.

**BZ:** That job of cataloguing the books strikes me as a very important job in terms of the preservation of Tibetan history and Tibetan religious history, because you were, in a sense, in a race against time.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. And also those thangkas and images. So I produced the first catalog for the Tibet House collection, and the second and third catalogs. I did not get credit for the first catalog. You know why?

**BZ:** No, why?

**Rinpoche:** I didn't speak English well. So the catalog was credited to a guy who came from Burma – a Burmese Indian. And there was one translator. And so the translator and Richard Bartholomew got the credit. Not only that there were four or five great Tibetan teachers – really senior, well-known teachers – who worked with me. We didn't get credit (laughs). The credit went to Richard Bartholomew and the translator. The second and third catalog, I got credit, and the team got credit. But the first one, I had no idea what's going on (laughs).

**BZ:** They look for your name.

**Rinpoche:** There were many *big* Rinpoches involved: Trijang Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, Luding Khenpo, Dudjom Rinpoche and many others were involved. Credit went totally to Richard Bartholomew (both laugh). It is so funny. But that's what they did.

**BZ:** In those jobs you were obviously doing important cultural preservation...

**Rinpoche:** ...and religious too...

**BZ:** ...cultural outreach and religious. Were you also teaching spirituality at that point?

**Rinpoche:** Not until 1975. In 1975, I began to teach. Until then, I was doing a lot of cultural things and religious things, but the teaching was the last thing I wanted to do. I was against everything. I am sort of a late teenage rebel.

**BZ:** A late teenage rebel, sort of?

**Rinpoche:** Rebellion from my tradition.

**BZ:** Well it's understandable. In a sense, from the time you were a little boy you were being inculcated to be a Buddhist monk and to be a Buddhist teacher.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. I was always looking for things, but there were all these great teachers – and particularly these two, Ling and Trijang, along with the Dalai Lama – somehow kept me, even when I was running around completely, somehow they kept me. Even the jobs that I got. I had to get a job because I had to eat and I had to live. So the jobs that I got, including the head of the Indian Broadcast System, all of them they manipulated somehow. Manipulated, influenced, and kept me working on bringing in the spiritual things, all the time. So, a job in Tibet House, working here, teaching the Tibetan kids – all of those – even before I went to America in 1964, I was a religions instructor for the Tibetan kindergartens and a religions teacher for the Tibetan junior high and high school.

**BZ:** So you were always keeping your foot in the door...

**Rinpoche:** Not me, they, they were always making...

**BZ:** They were always... wherever you were placed they still wanted to make sure you were within the Tibet world and in the spiritual...

**Rinpoche:** ...spiritual teaching positions. They made sure that I remained in that.

**BZ:** They didn't want you to get too far afield.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. They let me go, they didn't say anything, didn't do things like that, but whatever the jobs, the responsibility that I fell under – I'm sure these guys were behind those. It was very chilly one day and I got an assignment from the Dalai Lama's exiled government – something to do with a pure political thing. I was very excited about it because I very much wanted to get into politics and things like that. And I went in and saw one of those teachers. So I talked to him and he was a little surprised that I got that position, and I found the next day that my position was changed back to teaching (laughs).

**BZ:** It had been withdrawn.

**Rinpoche:** They told me there was a slight change. They never told me the reason. I said, "What is the reason?" They said, "I don't know." The guy really didn't know. He said it was something to do up there, referring to the

Photo by Linda Lawson



**Rinpoche:** Yes. And I always tried to do a little business, and it was never successful. Never successful.

**BZ:** You started a few little businesses?

**Rinpoche:** I started a lot of businesses and was never successful. You know why? Number one, I don't have so much capital and number two, whatever money I make, I spend it. So I can't continue (both laugh).

**BZ:** Jewel Heart certainly appears to be successful; it's not a for-profit business, but it is impressive as a Buddhist learning center and as a cultural foundation.

**Rinpoche:** At that I have been successful throughout my life – Tibet House, everywhere, whatever I started. It's always successful that way. But if I go pure business, I better get out of it. If I have to keep the money, I'm terrible. I spend it. Wherever the money is, it doesn't matter. I spend it. And I don't have it (both laugh).

**BZ:** I'm sure that makes you a good teacher on the subject of money.

**Rinpoche:** I don't know, terrible. I'm not a successful

businessman. I'm not a successful politician, but I'm very interested in politics, very much. I even take a great deal of interest in American politics.

**BZ:** I was going to ask you about that. I am also very interested in American politics. Do you follow closely the American presidential race?

**Rinpoche:** Oh yes. Are you kidding?

**BZ:** Is there one of the candidates that you think is more likely to alleviate suffering?

**Rinpoche:** No, none of them this time. I don't see much difference between Gore and Bush, truly. Except one accepts abortion, the other is against and one would like to continue the Social Security as it is, the other would like to throw the Social Security – some of it – into the private sector. And what else? There's not that much difference between the two really, unfortunately. And Gore is supposed to be Ozone Man. Reagan called him Ozone Man, remember? But he didn't do much for the environment either. Now Gore was only vice president, but he didn't do that much.

**BZ:** It seems to me that Gore is having a hard time being himself.

**Rinpoche:** I don't think so. I don't buy that. This is because too many advisers are advising him, and I'm sure they are really sort of talking to him all the time and pushing him to the right extreme and the left extreme...the guy is completely confused. That's what it is.

**BZ:** He's getting buffeted by both...

**Rinpoche:** Yes, by all his advisers, and he doesn't even know what to do.

**BZ:** On the other hand, my feeling is that no man since I became aware of politics – 40 years – has been less deserving of the presidency than George Bush in terms of his life accomplishments.

**Rinpoche:** You mean no man is?

**BZ:** No man who has run for president as the Democratic or Republican party candidate, in the last 40 years, has done so little until he reached the age of 40, as George W. Bush. His father at least had a substantial record in government, and had major accomplishments...

**Rinpoche:** What did he do?

**BZ:** His father?

**Rinpoche:** Yes.

**BZ:** His father had been head of the CIA, he had been a vice president for eight years...

**Rinpoche:** And he was also the U.S.'s first Ambassador to China.

**BZ:** So he had real experience (Rinpoche laughs). I just think that the younger Bush...

**Rinpoche:** He has been twice the governor of Texas, and that is his experience.

**BZ:** That is his experience, yes.

**Rinpoche:** Very little.

**BZ:** Very little experience, yes.

**Rinpoche:** But he is also very empty headed.

**BZ:** Empty headed? That's what I think, too.

**Rinpoche:** Completely empty-headed; however, his head can be filled with bad advisers and I think they like that.

**BZ:** Like Reagan.

**Rinpoche:** Like Reagan. Yes. You said it (both laugh). But on the other hand, I couldn't believe it. We have compared his experience and Gore's experience. I don't like Gore. My conscience cannot vote for him. I would love to vote for Ralph Nader; however, that would be a waste of my vote.

**BZ:** I feel exactly the same way.

**Rinpoche:** That would be a waste. Not only will it waste it, it will also get Bush elected. If Bush is elected, there will be big changes – the Supreme Court judges, the choices will not come, the Roe vs. what is it?

**BZ:** Roe vs. Wade.

**Rinpoche:** ...and death penalties introduced in the states will be maintained if Bush is elected president. If Gore is elected president, one Supreme Court judge appointment will strike down all of those death penalties everywhere. And anti-environmentalists. The oil people are going to make a lot of money if Bush is elected. Bush and Cheney, are you kidding? Both oil men, Texan oil guys, so...

**BZ:** They really are about supporting corporate priorities.

**Rinpoche:** Corporate in general and particularly oil. It is almost the same old Bush team that will come back.

**BZ:** That's his father's team.

**Rinpoche:** His father's team.

**BZ:** Like Powell and Cheney...

**Rinpoche:** Cheney was already on his team as a defense secretary; he will be vice president. And Colin Powell may or may not join his cabinet. Colin Powell has his own integrity, too. But the secretary of state during the Bush period...

**BZ:** James Baker...

## A Visit With Jewel Heart's New Director, Bruce Conforth

Jewel Heart has been growing significantly in recent years, and with that comes organizational and administrative challenges. There is, in particular, the challenge of being a spiritually-based organization relying on mostly volunteer efforts, and at the same time having an expansive vision of providing humanitarian, cultural, environmental and educational programs to people in this region, and in general.

In December of 1999, Bruce Conforth had been working for three years as a Dean at a branch of Penn State in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and he was ready for a change. Already a student of Gelek Rinpoche, he was about to leave for a one month trip to Nepal, for a hilltop monastery, where he was going to spend the coming of the new millennium, when he saw an ad for the job of director of Jewel Heart. He hurriedly made out his application, and left for Nepal. When he returned, there was a message on his answering machine that they wanted to interview him.

"They needed someone with fund-raising experience, with administrative experience, someone who would be here, and I was a practitioner, also." Last March, Jewel Heart hired Bruce Conforth to become its director.

For Bruce, it is a very nice fit. "From the age of 2, something drew me to the Himalayan region and culture." At 12, he read and re-read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. "I can't tell you how much I retained, but I have a great affinity for the art, philosophy, religion and even the geography of the region."

Conforth grew up in Patterson, New Jersey, which was also Allen Ginsberg's hometown, and where Ginsberg's father was an English teacher. (Ginsberg became the best-known student of Gelek Rinpoche, and regularly visited Ann Arbor to see Rinpoche, and to participate in fund-raising events for Jewel Heart.) As a very young man, he used to go to Ginsberg's poetry readings *all the time*, and there's some pleasing synchronicity in that connection.

Conforth has had a rich and varied history. He was a painter as a young man, apprenticing with Willem de Kooning. Later, he played in a rock band. There was a time in his life, he says, when he was "spiritually promiscuous" but he has been most deeply drawn to Tibetan Buddhism.

Among a number of very interesting career turns, Conforth (who received a doctorate in transpersonal anthropology) was the director of Indiana University's Archives, which was an historical collection; and he was the first Curator and Director of Education for the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, in Cleveland. In that job, he helped to raise \$94 million, and worked with musicians, politicians, music companies and others to create the collection, and to turn the project into a reality.

Conforth hopes to be a help in turning the Jewel Heart vision into new projects, new realities. In the coming year, he says, Jewel Heart will be announcing exciting new service projects, and will also be turning the Jewel Heart building on East Washington Street into a "model green building."

"Jewel Heart has been here now for awhile, but in a sense, Jewel Heart is still nascent, still giving birth to itself," Conforth says. Asked how it is that Jewel Heart does such a good job of presenting and packaging itself, of seeming so sophisticated and yet earthy and tasteful, Conforth answered, "A lot of that has to do with Gelek Rinpoche. He has the great spiritual mastery but also there's a certain taste, discrimination, a certain demeanor that is elegant, that is professional, and those are things that are a part of Rinpoche, and who he is." He added, "It's a lot more complex than that, but Jewel Heart, in all of its manifestations, is a reflection of Rinpoche."

##



Photo by Linda Lawson

Bruce Conforth has had a passion for everything Himalayan for a very long time.

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Gelek Rinpoche (continued)

**Rinpoche:** James Baker, I'm quite sure, will be an important foreign affairs guy if not secretary of state again. And things like that. So all of those people will come back and (both laugh) be the same old Bush. It is almost like going back eight years, except it's father and son. It's going to be a Bush corporation with the son as the head instead of the father.

**BZ:** I was reading a very interesting piece, maybe four months ago or five months ago, by Kevin Phillips, who is a Republican theorist. He wrote that these restorations, whether it's John Adams and John Quincy Adams, or the French Napoleonic restoration, they're never successful. In restorations, there is an effort to restore what had been taken away, and Phillips wrote that they usually dissipate over a few years, that Bush really is not running as his own man.

**Rinpoche:** Definitely not. What's going to happen is if Bush gets elected, people are going to be very upset immediately, within a couple of months. There are going to be a lot of difficulties and troubles. In two years, the Democratic Party will take over the Senate and the House if Bush is elected. If Bush is not elected, you never know. If Bush is elected, that's what's going to happen. They may even get it, the Senate. It depends on whom they're going to elect from Missouri.

**BZ:** That's right, Carnahan. Do you think that either of the two parties is better when it comes to policies about Tibet?

**Rinpoche:** No. Gore and Clinton had quite a close relationship with the Dalai Lama. The father of Bush did meet the Dalai Lama; however, I think George W. Bush will have a very close relationship with China – no doubt about it.

**BZ:** Let's go back to how you came to Ann Arbor. You were teaching this program for about a month in Delhi...

**Rinpoche:** A month, maybe longer. I'm not so good with dates and numbers. So then Sandy and Aura left...

**BZ:** Well you're maybe not so good with dates and numbers, but here you are talking about Mel Carnahan, the deceased Senator from Missouri.

**Rinpoche:** Well, I know what's happening. By the way, do you think Hillary will be elected?

**BZ:** Yes, I do. I think she will be.

**Rinpoche:** I think so, too.

**BZ:** She seems to be ahead in the polls ever since Lazio came out from behind his lectern and invaded her space. I think she'll be great in the Senate.

**Rinpoche:** She will be great.

**BZ:** She will be a real advocate.

**Rinpoche:** And probably, if Gore loses this time, she will probably be running for president in four years.

**BZ:** But so many people dislike her so much.

**Rinpoche:** That's true. At the same time, so many people

**Rinpoche:** I liked America from Tibet. When I came here first in 1964 to Cornell, in Ithaca, New York, and went back, the Tibetans in Delhi used to give a nickname to me, saying "American Rinpoche." I'm barefoot talking about America, so they called me American Rinpoche.

**BZ:** They already knew that you were...

**Rinpoche:** Very fond of America.

like her, too. You really have to see that. You know the half-empty glass is half full. So, many people dislike her, but so many people like her.

**BZ:** But the risk there is that she inflames a lot of passion, and I guess I'm always concerned when somebody from the progressive side of politics really excites people – at least in terms of American history over the last 30 to 40 years.

**Rinpoche:** You know that anti-Clinton thing will die out in four years' time, it will quiet down. And provided she doesn't take so much of a front role in the Senate, if she keeps low key, and then if she runs in four years, she could be the first woman president.

**BZ:** You're saying if she doesn't take too high a profile?

**Rinpoche:** Too high a profile in the Senate.

**BZ:** If she's not too strident?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, if she's keeps a little low key, everybody will feel a little comfortable. If everybody has to feel that "I have to compete with her all the time", then we won't like her. She is very good, but she is not elect-able. She is very, very good. She knows and does much more than Bill Clinton, but Bill Clinton is very elect-able. She is not.

**BZ:** She is not as human and personable. She doesn't show her vulnerability the same way he does.

**Rinpoche:** That's right. She could be the first woman president, if Gore loses this time. But if Gore wins, she

**Rinpoche:** I put a little time in with a writer in New York because my English is terrible. I also went to Italy for about 10 days – the Tuscany area, without any distractions, and we tried to finish that book – and at least we have a draft now. It hasn't been edited or anything, so it's going to go to the editor of the publishing company, hopefully, in December. Then it may come out.

**BZ:** Are you being published by Shambhala or...

**Rinpoche:** No. I decided on Riverhead. They published the Dalai Lama's *Art of Happiness*, and it's a part of Penguin. Wisdom and Shambhala had approached me about ten years ago.

**BZ:** Riverhead is a good publisher for a book by you, I



Photo by Linda Lawson

Not too long ago, Jewel Heart purchased a building on East Washington Street in Ann Arbor. It has been partially renovated, with more to come. The building now houses an ample meditation hall, offices, and the Jewel Heart Store.

could not run against Gore in four years' time. She has to wait another four more years – eight years.

**BZ:** I am also excited about her becoming a senator.

**Rinpoche:** I'm looking for her to become a president one day. She could be the first woman president. Anyway, we were talking about Aura...

**BZ:** My readers will be disappointed if I don't ask you some spiritual questions. If I only talk about politics...

**Rinpoche:** I know.

**BZ:** You were talking with Ram Dass, and I came.

(*Editor's Note: In October, Jewel Heart sponsored an evening called "Gelek Rinpoche in Conversation with Ram Dass" at the Power Center in Ann Arbor.*)

**Rinpoche:** That's right, you were there.

**BZ:** You jokingly said, "If I don't accept my reincarnation, I lose my job." (both laugh)

**Rinpoche:** I say that very often. I said that when I had a "Conversation with Spalding Gray" in New York. I did that same thing.

**BZ:** Who are you a reincarnation of?

**Rinpoche:** Well, there's an abbot of the Gyuto Monastery called Tashi Namgyal. So they recognize me to be the reincarnation of that abbot. There's a very long story about that separately. You will probably read it when my book comes out.

**BZ:** You are writing a book?

**Rinpoche:** Yes. About five years ago a couple of publishers approached me. I didn't have a proposal. A couple of publishers from New York approached me with the advance check in hand, "Would you like to write?" "Would you like to write?" "Would you like to write?" So one of them happens to be a friend of mine too, and also the check was bigger, fatter (both laugh). So I accepted. So then three years passed and I hadn't provided anything for them.

**BZ:** Did they want their advance back?

**Rinpoche:** They immediately, an automatic sort of thing, renewed my contract with them. However, this is now the end of the second renewal. As a matter of fact, I'm going into the third renewal now. They were telling me I better write something or I have to return the money. So I started looking through my house. Can I sell anything here to give the money back (both laugh). And there was nothing that I could sell and get that money to give them back.

**BZ:** Good. You must write the book now.

think. I think Riverhead is a good publisher for certain kinds of books on Buddhism that would be of interest to a wide range of people; if you were published by Shambhala or Wisdom, your book would be more narrowly marketed.

**Rinpoche:** Wisdom approached me many years, but they didn't give me a check (laughs). So did Shambhala many, many years ago. Riverhead gave me a three-year grace period.

**BZ:** From my experience in book publishing, that happens a lot. In December you're going to...

**Rinpoche:** I'm going to hopefully hand over the first draft. That was more or less on reincarnation. Basically, I'm talking about good life, good death in that book. I don't know what the title is going to be; I have no idea.

**BZ:** I saw in the Jewel Heart newsletter, which is called *From the Heart*, that you had given a talk on "Good Life, Good Death" up in Petoskey. Can I ask you something about that?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, go ahead.

**BZ:** You said that even on their death bed, most people will still go on talking about the future, and that the kind of death we are going to have is very much connected with how we live our lives.

**Rinpoche:** Did I say that in words like that?

**BZ:** There were some dots, but...

**Rinpoche:** Oh yes, dots between. So you are quoting from different areas. Okay. That's all they pulled out of it.

**BZ:** You said even on their death bed, most people still go on talking about the future.

**Rinpoche:** Yes.

**BZ:** I thought that was very interesting.

**Rinpoche:** Well, that is what people do normally. Because the dying person knows that "I am dying," but they never think they are dying now. I'm dying now, but the *now* is not *now*. Now is like a week later, a month later. So people will think that way. There are very few people who really think I'm dying *now*. Even when you are dying, you are disconnecting but you are not discontinuing. You are continuing. So the future is very much in question. And especially the unknown future can be very, very close to you – almost touching our nose now. So, that is what I feel. The challenge or the difficulty or whatever you call it. The dying person has that, touching

right under their nose. Unknown things are about to be known – that's what I think.

**BZ:** I was reading that you were talking about the way in which people, after they die, retain consciousness. Some people retain consciousness for a few hours, a day, two days, eight days – there is some consciousness.

**Rinpoche:** What do you mean?

**BZ:** Well, for instance, you were talking about when Allen Ginsberg died that there was still a presence, a consciousness.

**Rinpoche:** That's right, yes. A person's consciousness is not necessarily separate from the physical body when the doctors declare the person is brain dead – not necessarily. In the case of Allen, the brain death came to him around 2:00 in the morning and the final separation of the body and the consciousness was almost 11:00 p.m. the next day. So, there was quite a lot of time in there. I called Philip Glass, and I told Philip that Allen was still here. So Philip said, "Even I can figure out that." (laughs) "*Even I can figure out that.*" Allen's death was so funny. Allen had an open life and an open death. When he was dying, the day when I came in, his bedroom and living room were sort of an open loft, and there were probably 60-70 well-known musicians, actors, physicians, and lawyers – that type of thing. There were 60-70 watching there for all the time. So it was like a very open death too – open life, open death.

**BZ:** What's a good life?

**Rinpoche:** Good question. Happy, not so much negativity, don't hurt anybody, be able to help yourself from the spiritual point of view, from the economic point of view. You don't have to be a multi-millionaire, but you should be able to pay your bills and live reasonably comfortably. A combination of that and having kindness and compassion as the principles of your life. I think that should be called a good life.

**BZ:** It sounds good.

*Freedom*, "When you are learning, you have to put yourself in the position of being sick. You will not leave any stone unturned." And then a few sentences later you were talking about "We are sick with a chronic disease called attachment." And I wanted to ask you to talk about

theirs. I don't even push them to volunteer in Jewel Heart. I don't. That's not my job at all. That's their job. They are grown-up persons. They know what they are doing and what they want to do. That's up to them. I do not dictate their lives. I don't dictate what they do in their lives. It is

**BZ:** You were excited about joining the political world, and the next thing you know, you weren't.

**Rinpoche:** So since then I've kept myself away from political life.

**BZ:** During those years, from 1960 to 1975, when you had other kinds of worldly jobs, did you continue to meditate?

**Rinpoche:** Oh yes. I did not break my commitment or anything. But I was against being a teacher and teaching. I was against being a Lama, being an incarnate Lama – period. I changed my name from the incarnate name to Ngawang Gelek.

attachment, which of course is a huge subject.

**Rinpoche:** Well, everybody has attachments. Some people enjoy attachment; some people don't. Attachments give us sometimes things that are interesting... I call those "picnic spots of samsara," picnic spots of samsara. *Samsara* in Buddhist terminology means life based on suffering. The circle of life that is based on suffering is called samsara, and the circle of life that is free of suffering is called nirvana. So attachments sometimes give you a picnic spot in the samsara. Sometimes we enjoy that. We all enjoy it very much. However, it is in the nature of suffering. It creates pain. It creates difficulty. It makes other people uncomfortable. It makes yourself uncomfortable.

All of those that we encounter in the United States – all the divorce, separation of the family, the kids have to suffer in between parents. Their parents are separated and they don't even know where to turn, what to do. All of them are the consequences of attachment. At the beginning you have attachment, you like it. You don't

none of my business whatsoever. I don't tell them who to vote for; I don't propagate politics. I do encourage them not to have attachment, not to have hatred, and not to have jealousy. I encourage them to spiritually benefit from their lives.

**BZ:** In the conversation with Ram Dass, he started to say, "In the west, gurus are..." and you finished his sentence. You said, "a very dangerous fellow."

**Rinpoche:** (laughs) Did I? Interesting. I don't claim myself to be a guru. If people look at me as a guru, fine. That's why I don't even wear Tibetan dress. I don't want them to see something different. I wear western dress. I wear jeans, I put on a suit and tie, I put on those sport coats. Except sometimes in the winter retreat, which is purely strictly Vajrayana people. There I may sometimes wear some different clothes.

**BZ:** You may wear some ceremonial dresses.

**Rinpoche:** Sometimes, yes. Otherwise, I don't.

**BZ:** In things I've read that you've written and what you were talking about with Ram Dass that day, it sounded to me that you were encouraging people, in whatever spiritual path they follow, to use discrimination.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, very much. Because you have to remember, the people you are dealing with are American people. They are very well educated. They are really brilliant. You should never, never treat them as some kind of stupid...

**BZ:** ...unintelligent...

**Rinpoche:** ...uneducated, illiterate. You should never treat them... You must treat them as educated, as people who know what to do. You know what some people do? Some people say, "This is the spiritual path, you know nothing, you have no idea. I'm the only one who knows. So you just do exactly what I told you." Excuse me. Are you back in the 8<sup>th</sup> century or 7<sup>th</sup> century or something? No. Even in Tibet, good old Tibet, pre-Communist Chinese, in the 1930's, 40's and 50's, I was in Tibet as a grown-up person. We were extremely encouraged by all the teachers to argue, debate, and discriminate – never, ever encouraged to have blind faith. This is something new I saw in the west. This is not good. No one should follow under a blind faith. If you do so, that's why the group becomes dangerous. So in the 1960s, and with Jim Jones as well as very recently the Heaven's Gate – Hale Bopp, whatever it was called – and all of them because of non-discriminating people, which is not good. So, all of those are possible because of blind faith. You should never encourage blind faith.

**BZ:** Jewel Heart has grown a great deal over the years. There's a lot going on at Jewel Heart. Has it become what you had envisioned or hoped for?

**Rinpoche:** This is a funny thing, you know, how Jewel Heart was really born. We didn't have a plan to set up Jewel Heart. I came to visit with Aura Glaser and Sandy Finkel a couple of times and did a couple of teachings. Here and there we used to meet at the Friends Meeting House, and we had one retreat in Dexter, where Aura and Sandy used to live many years ago. And then I came to visit a couple of times, and finally I moved here. I did not move to Ann Arbor; I moved to Ohio. I worked with a professor there at Case Western Reserve University for Tibetan history. During that period on the weekends I came up here and did teachings in Ann Arbor.

I used to drive from Ohio to here. You know I'm not a good driver, so I skidded in the snow and ice a number of times. But I never got hurt. So I managed to get here. So, that's how I came here. Finally, when I finished the book with the professor of Tibetan history, modern history, then I moved here. So when I moved here, in order to stay in the United States I needed permission from the United States government – immigration. In order to get that, I had to have an organization of not less than 30 people. So Aura and Sandy and a number

Photo by Linda Lawson



The Jewel Heart Store specializes in books about Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan handicrafts and rugs, and Tibetan Buddhist statuary and ritual objects. Transcripts and audio tapes of talks given by Gelek Rinpoche are also available at the store.

**Rinpoche:** Maybe not exactly correct what I said. There are two ways of looking at a bad life. If you are completely driven by economic prosperity and you don't even have time for yourself or your children or your family – that is not a good life. I remember once I was giving a talk in Hong Kong. I think it was one of the big hotels – the Hyatt or something – in Hong Kong. A guy raised his hand from behind and said, "What do I do with my Rolls Royce?" I remember the reply I gave. I said, "As long as you drive the Rolls Royce, it's fine. You can have it. But if the Rolls Royce drives you, you're in trouble." That's what I mean. But on the other hand, if you are to remain below the poverty line then it's also not necessarily a good life either. Unless you are an extraordinary person or something. The good life to me is really happy in both ways – spiritually and materially. And then the most important thing is freedom. Freedom. If you have to be under Communist Chinese control, my God. That's not easy. Freedom – political freedom, economic freedom, and spiritual freedom. That's a good life.

**BZ:** You said in the unedited transcript called *Odyssey to*

really fall in love. No, you don't have true love. You have attachment symptoms that make you very excited, wonderful, and this and that. And then this commitment, whatever you do, you have, you can't keep it. And then you get into trouble. And then you fight and are miserable for a long time, and finally separate. And even the kids get into big trouble. These are the consequences of attachment. Attachment really is very sticky stuff, not a pure love. Pure love is wonderful. There's a big difference between pure love and attachment. Attachment is actually self-interest, self-serving, clinging desire. Pure love is not necessarily self-serving at all.

**BZ:** Do you encourage the students at Jewel Heart to form attachments with each other?

**Rinpoche:** I don't encourage *anything*. When it comes to the choices they make in their lives, I don't discourage *anything*. I do encourage not to have anger, not to have hatred, not to have attachments. I don't encourage their falling in love or getting married. That's totally up to them. I have nothing to do with that. My job at Jewel Heart is to present what little information I have. If I can be helpful, I help. I have nothing else to do. Their lives are

of people — Matthew Krichbaum and his mother, Ruby Webber, and all of those people, and Robert Thibodeau — got together and signed a piece of paper, which was actually borrowed from the Zen Center's rules and regulations. We just borrowed them and added our own name. First we were thinking of a Tibetan name, then we thought no, let's have an English name that everybody can



understand. So we decided on the name Jewel Heart. That's what happened. Before that, my talks were organized under Crazy Wisdom. After that, we switched to the Jewel Heart name for the teachings.

**BZ:** You already had the store?

**Rinpoche:** Aura had the store.

**BZ:** Had you been instrumental in encouraging her to start the store?

**Rinpoche:** She wanted to do that. I was still in India and I did not encourage her one way or the other.

**BZ:** Was the name her idea or an idea that she got from your teachings?

**Rinpoche:** I think it was her idea. She's very good. It was her idea, I'm quite sure.

**BZ:** So for a while you were doing some classes through Crazy Wisdom...

**Rinpoche:** In the beginning, I was teaching in Aura and Sandy's house. At the beginning there was only Aura and Sandy. Then it expanded to two, three, four, five...and then we continued through Crazy Wisdom. And then we used to teach in the back of the store on Fourth Avenue.

**BZ:** Around the corner on Ann Street?

**Rinpoche:** No, no. That was the first one there, that little tiny store which is now the hair salon. *(Editor's Note: The original Crazy Wisdom was on East Ann Street, in a tiny space now occupied by Vicki Honeyman's Hair Salon. Then it moved to 206 North Fourth Avenue, and it remained there from 1984 until it moved to its present building on South Main Street in April, 1999. Aura Glaser sold the store in January, 1989 to Bill Zirinsky and Jonathan Ellis. Jonathan Ellis stayed involved as an owner for four months, and since that time, Bill and his eventual wife, Ruth Schekter, have been the proprietors. Jonathan Ellis has stayed involved in the store unofficially, and Aura Glaser remains an honored customer.)* And then she moved in the front, next to the co-op. Then, over there we did teachings in the back, and she had a wisdom series running there. So as a part of the wisdom series we gave teachings there.

Then, finally, we signed that piece of paper and I applied for permanent residence in America. We did that because I needed a permanent residence; we did not plan Jewel Heart. Jewel Heart came out because there was a need for it. So then there was a living room where we were teaching on Brooks Street; the Crazy Wisdom back room had become too small. We needed a house. So all

three of us moved to Cherry Street — 508 Cherry Street. Then Cherry Street became too small. The landlord — Don Hunt (co-founder of *The Ann Arbor Observer*) owned Cherry Street, and he wanted to help. So he said, "I will renovate the garage top. Can you teach there?" He offered us a 50/50 arrangement to renovate the garage.

He would put in \$2,500 and we would put in \$2,500. But we didn't have \$2500. So Aura and Sandy put out their old clothes for a garage sale and all their friends brought in things, and we made more than that amount of money. So I joke sometimes that we started Jewel Heart by selling Aura and Sandy's underwear. But it was old clothes and we had a garage sale. That's how the Cherry Street garage was renovated, and then we began using it. Then more people came in, more people came in and people sat on the steps and all this. There was a very wonderful professor who died, Jack Meiland. His wife is still here. He died a few years ago — a very nice, older professor. He insisted we should move, and he started protesting. He said, "I like to come, but I'm not coming because..."

**BZ:** Because you need to move to a nicer place.

**Rinpoche:** He said he was afraid that the garage was going to fall down.

**BZ:** That the roof was going to?

**Rinpoche:** Not the roof, the first floor of the garage. He thought it could collapse because there were too many people there, too many people. There were 30 people or 40 people, sometimes more.

**BZ:** In a small room...

**Rinpoche:** It was too crowded in the small room. So he said one lawsuit could destroy Jewel Heart. He insisted, and that's why we rented the building on East Ann Street. And so we made a big partition here, and a big partition there, to make it look small. Then we started moving the partitions, because more people kept coming. Last year, we bought our own building on East Washington

Street. Last night, incidentally, I counted how many people were here. Every Tuesday night people come and last night was not one of those crowded days. It was not a slow day either. I counted up to 104 people, then I lost count.

**BZ:** And at the same time, it seems that over the last five to eight years you've created satellite branches all over.

**Rinpoche:** Not all over...

**BZ:** I don't mean all over. I mean in 10 different places or 12 different places.

**Rinpoche:** Maybe. I don't know. We have a big group in New York on Thursdays. Every Thursday, whenever I go there. Every Thursday. Again, you see about 80-90 people every Thursday. And then we have satellites that are in Cleveland; I was there last week. I think there were about 50 or 60 people in Cleveland. And then we have Chicago. There are not so many people in Chicago.

Chicago is almost like a suburb of Ann Arbor. There is a very strong core group of people — 10, 15, 20 — that comes up almost every weekend, drives up. So whenever there is something functioning — like this weekend, there is the

**Rinpoche:** He has been twice the governor of Texas, and that is his experience.

**BZ:** That is his experience, yes.

**Rinpoche:** Very little.

**BZ:** Very little experience, yes.

**Rinpoche:** But he is also very empty headed.

**BZ:** Empty headed? That's what I think, too.

**Rinpoche:** Completely empty-headed; however, his head can be filled with bad advisers and I think they like that.

**BZ:** Like Reagan.

**Rinpoche:** Like Reagan. Yes. You said it (both laugh).

initiation. At the initiation, I am quite sure there will be 15-20 people from Chicago who will come up.

**BZ:** So you didn't plan...

**Rinpoche:** No, no, no. Nothing's planned.

**BZ:** But in its growth over the last five or seven or eight years, have you felt happy about that?

**Rinpoche:** No.

**BZ:** Have you felt satisfied at the way in which it's grown?

**Rinpoche:** I have tried to avoid it. There is a group of people who would like to study and join Jewel Heart in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I told them no. There is a group of people from Pennsylvania that want to study and join Jewel Heart; I said no. Because I can't go. But these people are driving to New York. Can you believe it? They drive for four hours every Thursday.

**BZ:** Just to listen to you talk.

**Rinpoche:** Yes. That's true, I feel bad. But I don't want to encourage because I'm unable to visit... So, how am I going to manage? It's not possible. Not possible.

**BZ:** You don't want to overextend yourself.

**Rinpoche:** No. A number of people want me to move to New York, and I'm not doing that either. They are offering me a very attractive apartment, they are offering me a very attractive land, very attractive area everywhere. But I started here and I wanted to establish this, and so that's why I am here. And you know one thing? There is not a very good Tibetan Buddhist cultural center of

... the dying person knows that "I am dying," but they never think they are dying now. I'm dying now, but the *now* is not *now*. Now is like a week later, a month later. So people will think that way. There are very few people who really think I'm dying *now*.

Buddhists available in the Midwest. Of Tibetan Buddhist culture or Buddhist center — good ones. They are not available in the Midwest at all. There is a good one in Wisconsin. There are some in Minnesota. There is one in Indiana, but that has a lot of internal difficulties.

**BZ:** But it seems that Jewel Heart is becoming that.

**Rinpoche:** Hopefully we will be a good Tibetan Buddhist cultural center in the Midwest. And the Midwest is totally neglected by everybody. There is a lot in New York.

There is a lot in California. I have invitation after invitation in California, and I can't go much. We do have a little satellite thing in San Francisco. It is so easy to work in New York and so easy to work in California. I'm in New York constantly, and there are 100 people. They have a place just like this in New York, a meeting place. Everything is available there. It's very easy. And here,

over six or seven or eight years the people in the Midwest are a little harder to...I'm saying that I'm not for publicity. I don't publicize. You don't see any publicity for Jewel Heart. If you see any publicity, we will have a little publicity for the store. We don't publicize; we don't do it. I don't want to do that.

**BZ:** Do you like Ann Arbor?

**Rinpoche:** I like Ann Arbor. I enjoy Ann Arbor.

**BZ:** Does it feel like home at this point?

**Rinpoche:** Oh yeah. I think I'm a Michigander. Even in New York, I said I liked to be a Michigander and am not ready to be a New Yorker yet.

**BZ:** Do you miss Tibet ever?

**Rinpoche:** Oh yeah, of course. Who doesn't miss? But I couldn't get back. A few years ago I went to Beijing to get permission to go to Tibet twice; I did not get permission. Neither was it denied. My application was not responded to. I waited three weeks in Beijing. Three weeks! They didn't want to say no; they didn't want to say yes.

**BZ:** What has been a source of disappointment for you in building Jewel Heart?

**Rinpoche:** You know, I am a Tibetan and I came from the old Tibetan tradition, so I don't have any plans. I will do what I can do, and if I can teach and guide people. We're living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century...

**BZ:** ...in the Midwest, in the United States...

**Rinpoche:** ...the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we have so many, so many professionals in Jewel Heart. You want computer professionals, we have them; you want editors, we have them; you want lawyers, we have them; you want doctors, we have them; you want planners, we have them; you want trouble-shooters, we have them. But we don't have — what do you call it? Western style plan and program — planning and programming.

**BZ:** Planning and programming...

**Rinpoche:** Yes. Where would you like to go, what to do, how would you go? We have a vision. We have a very big vision. The purpose of the Jewel Heart mandala, is spiritual, humanitarian, cultural and educational. The





Photo by Ruth Schekter

Aura Glaser, a psychotherapist living in Ann Arbor, was instrumental in bringing Gelek Rinpoche to the area. She helped to found Jewel Heart, and she is a teacher there. She is also the founder and original proprietor of Crazy Wisdom Bookstore.

vision is there. But the difficulty and disappointment is a plan for bringing that vision through.

**BZ:** As an outsider, I see steady evolution. Now, maybe this is foolhardy of me because I'm talking about things that are impermanent, but you now have this building with a beautiful meditation hall; a store that is just beautiful and feels wonderful to be in; there are the second and third unfinished floors of this building, and surely the skilled people who are part of Jewel Heart, over the next three or four years, will help to make those floors as special as the first floor; and there are many published materials available at the Jewel Heart store, including the transcripts of your talks, and the *From the Heart* newsletter; the retreats that now seem to be twice yearly and very well attended; you're asked to speak at many different places around the country...

**Rinpoche:** Even do fundraisers...

**BZ:** Even do fundraisers.

**Rinpoche:** The "Conversation with Spalding Gray" and me was a fundraiser for *Tricycle* magazine.

**BZ:** For *Tricycle*. You're asked to do fundraisers. So to an outsider's point of view, it seems like the evolution of Jewel Heart continues at a very steady pace.

**Rinpoche:** That is natural growth. Nobody planned it. It's naturally coming that way. We have been lucky enough to be able to buy this building, with the help of different members of Jewel Heart. Pat O'Meara helped us to secure the loan, so the building belongs to the bank. It doesn't belong to us right now (laughs). Now I'm seeing...I have a vision for the upstairs on the third floor. It is going to be a big meditation hall that sits 350 people with a dome ceiling. I was told it requires \$1 million to renovate. But I am happy with this place because it is an old, nice building in downtown Ann Arbor. The building now belongs to the bank, but hopefully it will belong to Jewel Heart soon – not soon, but when the time comes (laughs).

And if we have extra money, we would rather build up, rather than pay the bank. But we have to pay our regular mortgage and we have to do all this. The store is also very nice. Originally, Aura had Crazy Wisdom and after she sold it to you, there was a big, long gap. So then we thought, well, Jewel Heart should have a store – not only for the fun of having a store, but a store should provide three things: one, to serve the community here in a sort of a gentle way of introducing Jewel Heart. People can come in the store or read books about spirituality and Tibetan Buddhism and what I do, and what His Holiness the Dalai Lama is up to and all that. They can read about it, they can watch videos, they can listen to tapes, they can read transcripts, they can read books, they can buy. It is a gentle way of introducing – that's the one purpose.

The second purpose is the handicrafts – things like carpets and other things – and there are two reasons: to provide good quality Tibetan arts and ritual objects to those who are already in Jewel Heart. They have good

quality. For example, I was telling them, "Don't buy junk, those junk images." We had a store manager before and she went out to India and brought back – my God! I told her, "You brought Jampot". Jampot is a road in Delhi where they sell all those junk handicrafts. She brought a whole jampot in here.

**BZ:** You see that in Katmandu, too.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, in Katmandu too. So that's why we don't want those. We really wanted high quality. There are silver vases, silver things, but I don't want just silver. I want old fashioned, 999 silvers only – no mixtures. Old fashioned – 999. That's all I wanted. And then maybe twice this store management was fighting with me. No one has, like Debbie was telling me, no one has \$500 to pay for seven water bowls. No one has that money. So you have to have...

**BZ:** ...less expensive pieces.

**Rinpoche:** ...less quality. I'm not for it. I really want top quality. If they have to have other less expensive things to maintain the store, okay. But the top quality is also a must. So provide good things to the community that we are serving. Hopefully, a good selection of Tibetan Buddhist books. And, of course, Allen Ginsberg has a very special relationship to Jewel Heart, so we have a Ginsberg corner, but otherwise Tibetan Buddhism is our focus. Provide good quality and a good selection. You do and then the other ones – Falling Water, and then Borders? And then Shaman Drum? They have their own area, and we are unique in our area. I was originally hoping to have the best selection of Eastern and Western philosophy. That was the original hope, but then I do need somebody who knows – like Aura or somebody. She isn't going to do it. So I'm going to stick with a Tibetan Buddhist specialty. Books specialized on that particular field, ritual items and then the handicrafts also, by

I don't encourage *anything*. When it comes to the choices they make in their lives, I don't discourage *anything*. I do encourage not to have anger, not to have hatred, not to have attachments. I don't encourage their falling in love or getting married. That's totally up to them. I have nothing to do with that. My job at Jewel Heart is to present what little information I have. If I can be helpful, I help. I have nothing else to do. Their lives are theirs.

Tibetans...made in Tibet.

**BZ:** ...which help to support...

**Rinpoche:** ...made in Tibet or by the Tibetan refugees, not by the Nepalese kids. That's what I emphasize. But my point is, only by the Tibetans – if possible, made in Tibet, by the Tibetans. I have no objection if it's made in Nepal, but made by the Tibetan refugees and these people get the benefit. What I don't want is Nepalese kids who worked on that. You remember in Nepal, you were there, all these kids – 11, 12, 13 – all of them are making carpets.

**BZ:** You're not really supporting the Tibetans.

**Rinpoche:** They're not supporting anybody. They're supporting the factory owners and their pockets. And then particularly these carpets, so far what we have is from Tibet. The truth is these support schools in Tibet. There are 50 schools supported by the sale of these carpets and other donations – 50 Tibetan schools throughout Tibet. And Jewel Heart also supports one handicapped school in Tibet. We are giving them lunch for 50 kids every day – 50 orphans with handicaps. Now there are a couple of kids who have a father but no mother – but mostly no parents and handicapped. We give them lunch every day, including Sundays.

**BZ:** Is that what you refer to in something I read as collective karma? You're spreading good collective karma?

**Rinpoche:** I don't know whether it's good collective karma or not, but whatever it is I consider it humanitarian service.

**BZ:** Each of these pieces is a part of fulfilling the vision for Jewel Heart.

**Rinpoche:** Yes, so far it has been that way, but we didn't plan it. It happened by itself, a natural course.

**BZ:** And now you'd like to see some more planning of how to get to the next steps?

**Rinpoche:** That's right. Until this level, it has happened naturally. It just happened by itself. It was not really thought about. I didn't plan it. But we do have a wonderful staff here, wonderful. I must thank Kathy Laritz, Debbie Burr, Kathleen Ivanoff and now we have Bruce Conforth. All are practically volunteer level. Bruce Conforth was hired this year as our director. So many people applied. He was dean of the Pennsylvania University. From there he chose to come here. We considered four or five people. Finally we came to two: one was Bruce, the other is a person who is in charge of all the prisons from Florida to New York.

**BZ:** Is that right?

**Rinpoche:** Yes. He wanted to work here. He said he read something somewhere. So he liked us very much and he wanted to do something good for his life before he died. He said he didn't care for the money, so he wanted to work here. That's him and this guy, Bruce. He was the dean of the school.

**BZ:** I'm going to talk to Bruce as part of this article. I'm going to have a separate short piece with Bruce about his background.

**Rinpoche:** Good. So, I am grateful for him to be here, to come and work – for a very small amount of money. It's almost volunteer work. And then Debbie, Kathy, and Kathleen are the three people in the office.

**BZ:** And for you, with the growth of Jewel Heart, do you ever feel that you're not only having to be...I don't know how to phrase this, but you're both the spiritual leader of the community – spiritual director – but you are also administering a growing enterprise. Do you find that interesting and challenging?

**Rinpoche:** I don't think I'm administering this.

**BZ:** I see, you leave it to the...

**Rinpoche:** They talk to me; I make decisions. I don't plan. I have no plans.

**BZ:** You don't have to worry about the details about the...

**Rinpoche:** Sometimes they will ask me so many details, and I'll go through them. I do, because they really ask me every detail. So I get to the level of maybe, maybe not, maybe you could counsel this person first, and then we

make a decision.

**BZ:** So you are very involved...

**Rinpoche:** I am very involved in that way, yes, very involved. Also I am very grateful to a number of people – people like Allen Ginsberg, Philip Glass, Paul Simon, Richard Gere, Paula Cole, Patti Smith. All of them are very supportive of Jewel Heart.

**BZ:** A friend of mine asked me to ask you, when Patti Smith performs for Jewel Heart, do you enjoy the performances, or are you being polite because she is doing a benefit for Jewel Heart?

**Rinpoche:** I enjoy her. I very much enjoy her. I enjoyed

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Gelek Rinpoche (continued)

her reading Allen's poems very much, but I also enjoyed her because she is honest and straightforward, no cover-up, you know naked – and that's what I like. I don't like people who are coated. They mean to say no, but they don't say no. They said maybe. I don't like that sort of thing. She is very naked. If she doesn't like it, she'll say that.

**BZ:** When you said that you don't like people who are kind of coated – say yes but they mean maybe...

**Rinpoche:** No, no. They mean no, but they say maybe. They are not straightforward, they are hiding behind something.

**BZ:** Right. You were saying when you were with Ram Dass that...the phrase you used was that people give other people the cold shoulder...you said "Everyone is a good person, but we give cold shoulders to people very often, to a lot of people, and that is what I try to remove – the cold shoulder. And the cold shoulder comes out of our negative emotions."

**Rinpoche:** Cold shoulder is something different. A lot of people do give cold shoulders to so many people. They do not embrace people and don't make them happy and comfortable. They make them miserable and uncomfortable. They turn away. A lot of people do that. That's what I mean by cold shoulder.

**BZ:** Do you use a computer?

**Rinpoche:** A little bit.

**BZ:** Do you use a cell phone?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, a lot.

It's really way out there. It's way beyond our normal understanding, beyond our usual laws of physics, beyond that. So *that* is really *crazy wisdom*. Like people walk through walls, ride on sun rays, and all that type of thing – fly over clouds and all those funny activities. Such persons are in the category of crazy wisdom. It's way beyond conventional thinking and laws governing matter. Persons who are capable of doing that. Their acts are called crazy wisdom.

**BZ:** You use a cell phone a lot?

**Rinpoche:** I'm a gadget person. I like a lot of gadgets.

**BZ:** I have a son who is six years old. His name is Sam. He is deaf and he is disabled. He uses a wheelchair. And his little sister, who is two, is also hearing-impaired. My son also has other medical challenges. And I think to myself sometimes that because he is a very young child and he suffers a lot because he often doesn't feel well, I often think that he is – in his own way – a very high little being because of the dignity and the patience that he exhibits. He is six years old and most little children don't suffer the way he suffers. He looks and sees the other children playing on a playground and can't do that, and he isn't part of the hearing world. He has a little gastrostomy tube in his belly because he does not eat, and because of his medical condition his tummy hurts a lot. Probably two days out of five he doesn't feel very well. I often feel that getting to father him, being his father, and fathering his little sister, is the greatest spiritual blessing that I could've been given for my life. And then other times I think I'm merely romanticizing the difficult journey of fathering special needs children. Do you have any comments on that?

**Rinpoche:** (Long pause) I'm sorry that boy has a very hard life. I would not know whether he is a high being or not but he must be a very, very good kid to be able to maintain that much dignity and that much function with all kinds of handicaps and difficulties. He's *got to be* a great kid. As far as you are concerned, it's very definitely a challenge and also a great spiritual opportunity for you not only to be able to father a good human being but father a good human being with handicaps or difficulties. It's a great spiritual opportunity for you. So it's almost like Ram Dass said, "My stroke is my Guru's grace. But it is a terrible grace," he said. Remember? Just like that. It is a great opportunity for you to be able to... You know, the bottom line of a spiritual practice lies in serving people

– serving, and helping, working with compassion and caring. And that is one of the most important things we can do.

And particularly serving, caring, and helping not only a human being but your own son gives you a tremendous amount of benefit from the spiritual point of view. It's more than just simply some handicapped kid. Like here, I'm telling you we feed lunch to 50 handicapped people in Tibet. Yes, we do. It is the people of Jewel Heart, their money, and their cause there – they feed and we rejoice. But it is not a direct relationship. And your son is a direct relationship, and that has a tremendous amount of benefit for you – not for him, but for you. So it's a good opportunity for you.

It's really a golden opportunity for you to make your spiritual upliftment within your long journey of a spiritual path, and linking your previous life to the present life to your future lives. So this is a great opportunity and a great boosting for your spiritual path. So you should appreciate that, and I know it's very hard, how hard it is to take care of a kid is very difficult. I used to say that. Now I have my nephew living with me, so I have begun to realize things that I didn't realize before. I have to make arrangements for everything – how he is going to get to school, how he is going to get back, what he is going to do while I'm going out. There is no elder person in the house, what is he going to do, so I have to get somebody here or have him stay with somebody else. Every day there

is a challenge of things like that.

This is a 17-year-old kid, okay. He can take a bath and go and all that. I even have to worry that much. But this one, it's much more. But it's an opportunity for you. The benefits are double or triple, the gain is double or triple.

**BZ:** Thank you.

**Rinpoche:** And I wish you all the best.

**BZ:** Is that your sister's son?

**Rinpoche:** That's right. She sent him here. I never realized I'd have to worry every day. Now I'm going to Malaysia and now I have to think about him, to make sure he is okay.

And I have some Tibetan monks staying with me, and helping to look after him. They want to go somewhere else and now I don't know where I'm going to put my nephew. (laughs).

**BZ:** It's probably nice for you, being here in Ann Arbor, to have these visitors from Tibet, to have your nephew come and stay. It must add some richness to your life.

**Rinpoche:** I don't know. I used to be a monk. I never had kids, never had a child of my own. So, I don't know.

**BZ:** You're on your way to Malaysia?

**Rinpoche:** Yes, I'll be going to Malaysia, Singapore, and all that. They have Jewel Heart there. Jewel Heart Malaysia, Jewel Heart Singapore, and Jewel Heart Holland. Jewel Heart Holland has 200-300 people. They meet regularly every day.

**BZ:** Every day. Wow!

**Rinpoche:** 200-300, in Holland.

**BZ:** I have understood the phrase Crazy Wisdom as unfettered wisdom. Can you tell me more about the meaning? I know that there's depth that goes beyond just a few words.

**Rinpoche:** Crazy wisdom is only referred to a great, highly developed spiritual person whose every deed – whatever it may be – even if it looks like a bad one, becomes a great one. Every single – excuse my language – damn thing they do becomes a great benefit to all living beings, not only to that person, but to everyone connected with them. It's really way out there. It's way beyond our normal understanding, beyond our usual laws of physics, beyond that. So *that* is really *crazy wisdom*. Like people walk through walls, ride on sun rays, and all that type of thing – fly over clouds and all those funny activities. Such persons are in the category of crazy wisdom. It's way beyond conventional thinking and laws governing matter. Persons who are capable of doing that. Their acts are called crazy wisdom.

**BZ:** In the way in which it's defined, do you consider yourself to be enlightened?



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**Rinpoche:** No way! I am just a stupid, uneducated, illiterate human being. Really. I don't have a Western education. I have a little bit of Tibetan thing. So I consider myself uneducated, illiterate, stupid one. That's all I think of myself.

**BZ:** Something that you wrote in the *From the Heart* newsletter, published by Jewel Heart, moved me deeply. You wrote, "How does spiritual development grow within a person? It is not going to suddenly hit you. It only works this way: You go and go and fall. And you get up and move and go and fall – fall down on your face, get up, clean it up, remove, wash it, put your dust off. Go and you fall again. It's doesn't matter. Get up. Go. Falling down doesn't matter. Get up. Fall down. It doesn't matter. Get up again. Get up 100,000 times."

**Rinpoche:** That's how we do. It's exactly how we do. Because in the West people think I learned, I meditated and I think about it, yet not enough happened. I've lost. I still get angry. I still have problems. So then they think they have not done well. That's not true. Are you going to fall? For sure. No doubt. There's no question we're going to fall. The temptation is so great. The habit is so strong. You're going to fall – definitely. But it doesn't matter. One fall is actually a boost for the next moment. If you give up, then you're gone. You're lost completely. So you get up and move again, get up and move again. Then you will make it one day.

That's true for everybody. That was the way in Tibet and that *is* the way now and that will be the way. There is no instant enlightenment – anywhere. There is no enlightenment without meditation and practice – years and years and years. There is no meditation and practice without learning, without knowing what to do. This is not a small thing. This is a cutting down of all your negative emotions and freeing yourself from their grip once and for all, totally. Enlightenment. Buddha means totally awakened state. That's important.

Okay? Thank you.

**BZ:** Thank you.

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