

SEIZED by the SPIRIT

An interview
with the
VENERABLE
THUPTEN
NGODUP
State Oracle
of Tibet



by TSERING TASHI &
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Like in many ancient societies of the world, oracles remain an important part of the Tibetan way of life, and they rely on them for various reasons; to foretell the future, and sometimes to act as healers. However, their primary function is to protect the Buddha teachings and its practitioners from harm.

The Tibetan State Oracle is a tradition many centuries old where the spirit of a *Dharmapala* (protector of Buddhist teachings) called *Dorje Drakden* enters into the body of a Buddhist monk, in order to give advise to the Dalai Lama and the



Would you tell us something about your background and childhood?

I was born in Tibet on July 13th, 1958 in Phari, bordering Bhutan. My parents come from a peasant family. Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 my parents lost their freedom and experienced hardship under the Chinese rule. Then in 1966, during the so-called 'Cultural Revolution', my parents escaped from Tibet to Bhutan, with me. I am the only child in the family but have a half-brother who is now living in Dharamsala. In Bhutan, we were temporarily resettled in a Tibetan refugee camp.

My father was a descendant of a well-known ngakpa² family which belonged to the Khon lineage of the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. My mother comes from the Nanying district of Gyantse, and later got settled in Phari, where I was born. Unfortunately, both of them have passed away.

My father was a good *chod* practitioner¹, and after our arrival in Bhutan, he often told us about his ambition to go to India to receive HH the Dalai Lama's blessings and then leave this worldly life to become a hermit. Later, along with other Tibetan refugees, we left Bhutan for India to seek our second asylum in exile, and arrived in Dharamsala in early 1969.

My family found a home near the Tibetan Children's Village. We were like the present-day new arrivals from Tibet.

The Tibetan government in exile therefore organised a new camp for our group, and we worked as road construction labourers to earn our living. The road above the Tibetan Children's Village, leading to the Indian village, was constructed by us. I was around ten years old.

Education opportunity was

given to all Tibetan refugee children, but T.C.V. accepted only orphans and my parents were reluctant to send me to a far away place. So for two years I worked as a coolie with my parents.

What about your early education and monastic training?

As a child I had a natural inclination to do anything religious. I even told my parents of my desire to become a monk, which they agreed would be worthwhile. So in 1969, after our return to Dharamsala from Kulu, I was initially admitted to Gadong monastery and remained there for a year.

At that time I knew nothing about Nechung monastery, which was then temporarily located at Nazara Kothi (1km below Gangchen Kyishong, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile). Every day I had to go to Nechung monastery for *pujas* (prayers) and study, and return to Gadong the same evening. This is how I spent about a year.

But to be frank, deep down in my heart I started feeling closer to Nechung; so my father, knowing the trouble of my daily walk between Gadong and Nechung, suggested that it would be better for me to join Nechung, as there is technically no difference between the two monasteries. So this is how I joined Nechung in 1971.

Since 1971 I received all the basic religious training at the monastery. After completion of the basic training at Nechung, a monk could chose either of the two lines: *sung-zang* (the chant master's line), or *chod-zheng ba* (the ritual master's line). Since I had a natural interest in the skills of creative arts and crafts, I joined the second group and gradually rose to the highest rank. In 1981 I became *Cho-pon* (the ritual leader).

CONSULTING THE ORACLE

The Oracle's elaborate costume consists of several layers of clothing topped by a highly ornate robe of golden silk brocade, covered with ancient designs in red and blue and green and yellow. On his chest he wears a circular mirror which is surrounded by clusters of turquoise and amethyst, its polished steel flashing with the Sanskrit mantra corresponding to Dorje Drakden. Before the proceedings begin, he also puts on a sort of harness, which supports four flags and three victory banners. Altogether, this outfit weighs more than seventy pounds and the medium, when not in trance, can hardly walk in it.

The ceremony begins with chanted invocations and prayers, accompanied by the urgings of horns, cymbals and drums. After a short while, the Oracle enters his trance... Then, as the first prayer cycle concludes and the second begins, his trance begins to deepen. At this point, a huge helmet is placed on his head. This item weighs approximately thirty pounds, though in former times it weighed over eighty

Now the Oracle's face transforms, becoming rather wild before puffing up to give him an altogether strange appearance, with bulging eyes and swollen cheeks. His breathing begins to shorten and he starts to hiss violently. Then, momentarily, his respiration stops. At this point the helmet is tied in place with a knot so tight that it would undoubtedly strangle the Oracle if something very real were not happening. The possession is now complete and the mortal frame of the medium expands visibly.

Next, he leaps up with a start and, grabbing a ritual sword from one of his attendants, begins to dance with slow, dignified, yet somehow menacing, steps. He then comes in front of me and either prostrates fully or bows deeply from the waist until his helmet touches the ground before springing back up, the weight of his regalia counting for nothing. The volcanic energy of the deity can barely be contained within the earthly frailty of the Oracle, who moves and gestures as if his body were made of rubber and driven by a coiled spring of enormous power.

There follows an interchange between Nechung and myself, where he makes ritual offerings to me. I then ask any personal questions I have for him. After replying, he returns to his stool and listens to questions put by members of the Government. Before giving answers to these the Oracle begins to dance again, thrashing his sword above his head. He looks like a magnificent, fierce Tibetan warrior chieftain of old.

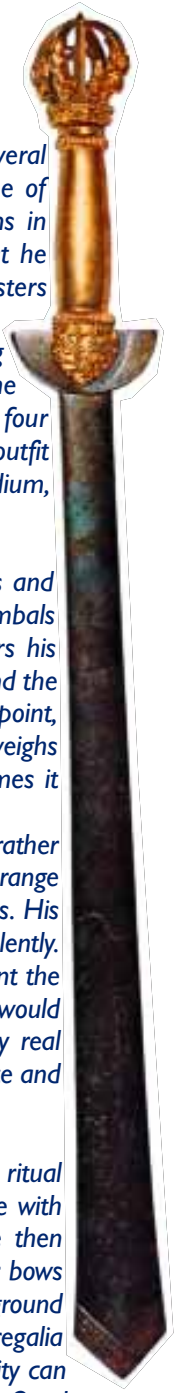
As soon as Dorje Drakden has finished speaking, the Oracle makes a final offering before collapsing, a rigid and lifeless form, signifying the end of the possession. Simultaneously, the knot holding his helmet in place is untied in a great hurry by his assistants, who then carry him out to recover whilst the ceremony continues.

Extracted from 'Freedom in Exile', His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Above: Tibetan Oracle's ritual sword.

Left: 19th painted thangka of Dorje Drakden showing him riding on a black horse surrounded by flames.

Insets: Ven. Thupten Ngodup, the State Oracle of Tibet in his monk's robes, and during the oracle ceremony at *losar*, the Tibetan New Year celebrations.



Tibetan Buddhist Oracles wear very elaborate ceremonial costumes which include a special large metal *melong* (mirror) which is worn on straps which run across their chests.

This use of mirrors by shamans and oracles is a very ancient tradition that has very close parallels to the use of ancient Chinese bronze mirrors by shamans in Mongolia and Siberia, a tradition which predates the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet.

Some of the mirrors used by Siberian shamans can be up to 2000 years old and they are normally made of bronze.

How and when were you recognised as the Nechung Kuten or the Medium of the State Oracle?

After the passing away in 1984 of the previous Medium, Venerable Lobsang Jigme, there was no Medium for the Nechung Oracle for about three years. His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote a prayer for the speedy return of the Medium, and commissioned Nechung monastery and the Drepung monastery, with whom the Oracle has a special relationship, to recite the prayer.

Then on March 31 1987, *Drepung Lhatze* ('Day of Drepung's Summoning of the Oracle') was requested at Nechung monastery. In Tibet, Drepung monastery observed this day every month, but in exile, since Drepung is far away in South India, they observed the day by offering an invocation rite in front of Nechung's *thangka* (scroll painting) at their monastery. But occasionally, when the previous medium of Nechung was alive, the Drepung monastery would send their representatives to Dharamsala during the annual teaching programme of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, at the main Theckchen Choeling temple, and perform the *Drepung Lhatze* at Nechung monastery.

And so it was that on March 31, 1987, a number of lamas from Drepung monastery came to Dharamsala to receive teachings from His Holiness, and later sought Nechung's blessings at Nechung monastery - as if there was a trance going on, although there was no Medium of the Oracle.

I was among the attendants holding incense pots in the hall. As the monks started reciting the text of the invocation, at an appropriate point - and all of a sudden - I was possessed by the spirit of the Nechung. This was the first time I was seized by the spirit.

This incident was immediately brought to the notice of His Holiness the

Dalai Lama by the abbots, officials and representatives of the monastery. After two days I was summoned by His Holiness and I went to him with Venerable Thupten Phuntsok.

His Holiness asked many questions of us - and particularly of me - concerning various signs I had, some in dreams. I reported every single incident from the beginning. His Holiness then asked me to carry out a retreat and accordingly, I fulfilled the commitment.

Briefly tell us about the dreams and other signs you experienced before being recognised as Nechung Kuten or the Medium of the State Oracle?

I personally consider that to become a medium is definitely a result of one's past karmic connections and prayers. Also, as a child, I used to have very strong feeling of closeness with the Dharma Protector, and I had a special faith and devotion in him. After the passing away of the previous Medium, I dreamed of the Dharma Protector in trance on several occasions. In those dreams, the person in trance was not me. It was somewhat like the previous Medium and sometimes it was even not clearly recognisable.

In 1985, during the *Kalachakra* (Wheel of Life) initiation in Bodhgaya, I bled a lot from my

nose and mouth. The blood I swallowed was vomited out. In between, I lost hope of survival, although I felt no special fear of dying. I also had a very special emotional experience, though I could not understand what it meant at that time. I began experiencing more and more unusual signs and wondered what these emotional feelings could mean to me. But gradually, I recovered from the illness and was able to attend the actual Kalachakra ceremony.

Then one night, during the same occasion in Bodhgaya, I dreamed of a long staircase where a lot of monkeys accorded a ceremonial welcome. The monkeys were holding fruits in their hands, and one of them held my hand and led me through the higher steps. Upon reaching a platform, I saw a big tree which had a hole into which I was led.

It is commonly believed that seeing monkeys in one's dream signifies connection to the Dharma Protector. Although at that time I had no such thought. Nevertheless, when I had this dream, I really experienced a pleasant feeling, so peaceful and gentle, a very unusual feeling.

I also had other significant dreams. These dreams, no doubt, gave me a very pleasant and an ecstatic feeling. I felt full of peace and serenity in my heart.

However, it was a year later on March 31st 1987 that I was actually seized by the spirit of the Dharma

Protector. For a week or so before I felt



Tibetan divination mirror, partially gilded silver set with turquoise.

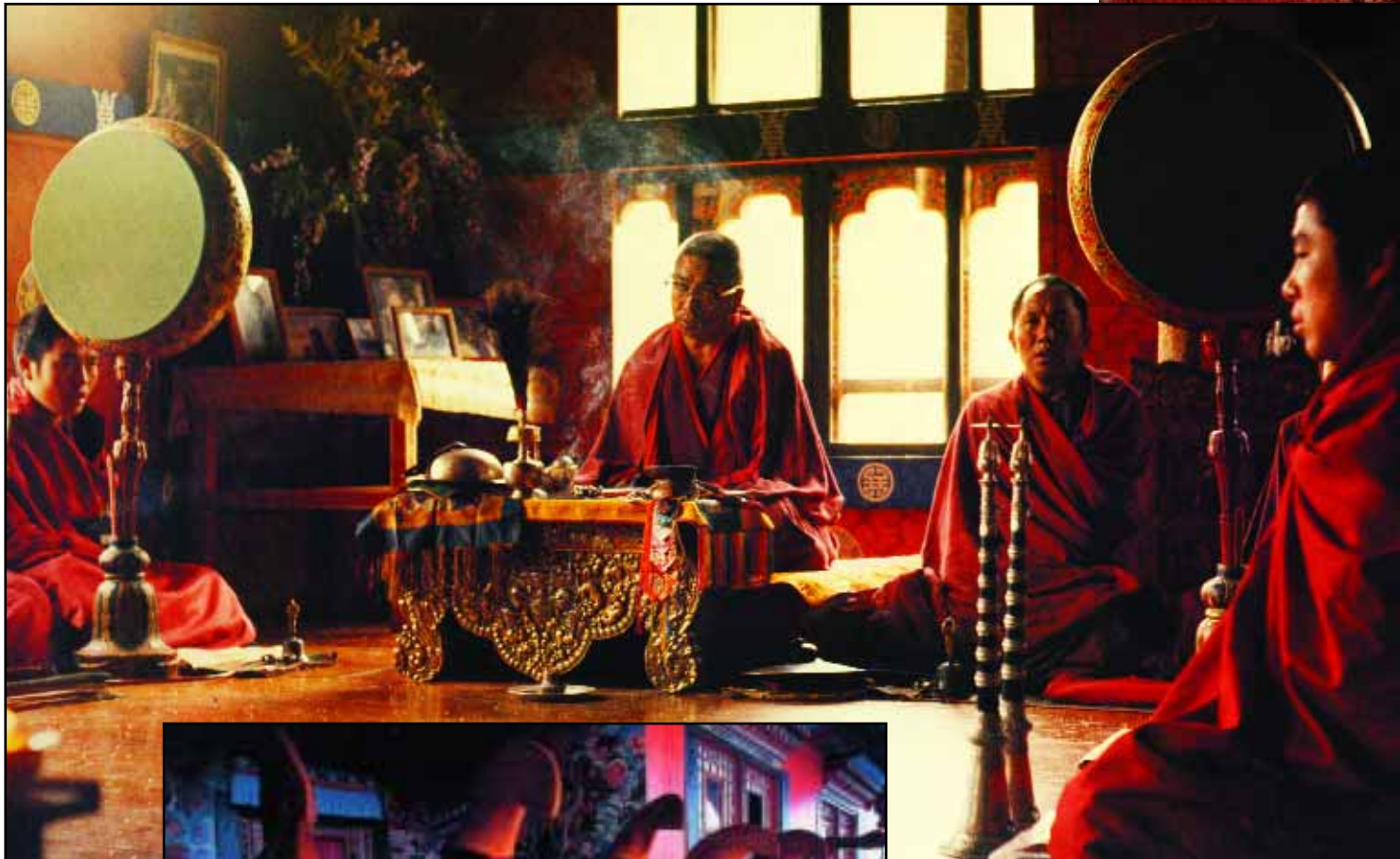
mentally very disturbed. At that time HH the Dalai Lama was giving teachings on the *Lam-rim* ('Graded Path') text. I felt reluctant to accompany the other Nechung monks to the temple for these teachings, and stayed behind to go last, and alone. Also I wished to

His Holiness' throne. This feeling was so involuntary, it was overwhelming me.

When everyone had a break, I still did not feel like joining them, but got up and stood in the corridor - almost lost in thought. That day the emotional currents in me were

be a precious opportunity to be able to serve the Buddha Dharma. If it turns out to be true, I shall serve the Dharma and Tibet to the best of my ability. May all the obstacles be removed." I was really doubtful at the time but it grew stronger and stronger.

Music forms a very central part in the ceremonies of the Tibetan State Oracle.



leave the temple last, at the very end of my fellow-monks. This disturbed the state of mind lingered for a few days and the unpleasant feeling started growing more intense as days passed by.

When I found out that in a few days time the Drepung monks were to perform the Drepung Lhatze, I felt so insecure, and intense fear gripped me. The day before the Drepung Lhatze was to be performed, I had a severe headache, but took courage to bear it because HH the Dalai Lama was giving a public teaching on *Vipassana* (Special Insight). It was not the kind of headache I would normally suffer and I felt like being closer to His Holiness' presence, walking nearer

extremely unusual. When friends sitting around me noticed this behaviour, they asked me, "What is the problem." I said, "No, nothing, just a little headache." I sat bending my head down. I simply wanted the teaching session to finish earlier.

As soon as the session was over and His Holiness had left, I went inside the temple and prayed in the presence of *Guru Rinpoche*³ and *Arya Avalokiteshvara*⁴. At that moment I wondered if this meant I was going to be the Medium of the Dharma Protector, so I prayed "If I am going to be so, this would

Later I left the main temple behind the rest of the monks. When I reached our monastery, I found that Khamtrul Rinpoche had left a clay stupa for me to fix. The top-knot had fallen apart. So that night I spent quite some time fixing it so I could return it to Khamtrul Rinpoche the next day. This done, I felt a bit more comfortable.

But the same night in my dream I saw mushrooms everywhere on the lawn around Nechung monastery. It was early in the morning and the monks were about to perform the Drepung Lhatze. I saw myself walking on the roof of the temple, from where I could see a rainbow wrapping the temple. I then picked mushrooms and collected them in

The thunder of big drums and the rattle of small double headed damaru drums; together with the crash of cymbals, the ringing of bells and the blare of trumpets accompany the prayers and readings which enable the spirit who the oracle will embody to appear before the gathered questioners.

The costume of Tibetan Buddhist Oracles, made up of beautiful Chinese silk brocade, is often very spectacular.

my *zan* (the maroon shawl worn by monks). Could this be an auspicious coincidence connected to the Dharma Protector?

Next morning, when I joined the others, everyone was busy. I felt extremely unpleasant, emotionally disturbed and short-tempered. When the Venerable Thupten Phuntsok asked me to prepare a black tea to be offered to the Dharma Protector, I got agitated and replied, "When there is no

offering the black tea." He further advised me to distribute *chag ne* (blessed grains) to the public.

Normally, during Drepung Lhatze, the monks perform an abluion ceremony at the corridor of the temple before they enter. So, while they were performing the abluion ceremony, I went and picked up the incense pot, though it was not necessary; I took it inside and left the pot near the Dharma Protector's throne. I then turned to move out of

the temple through the main door, but found it impossible. I felt as if there was some force that was dragging me to stay inside. My legs almost became numb and, despite effort, I felt I could not move. Finally I managed to go out through the back door and ran around the temple to join the monks at the corridor. By then the abluion ceremony was already over and the monks had assembled inside the temple for the invocation rite to be led by the Nechung monks.

When the rite began I rushed inside and picked up the incense pot. But as soon as I entered the inner chapel of the Dharma Protector, I felt a sudden electric current in me. Then instantly my vision went blurred, and my body started trembling wildly. I had no control of my own body. I looked around and saw Venerable

Thupten Phuntsok. All I could remember was handing over the pot to him.

Then, in a flip of a second, I was completely overwhelmed as if caught in an electric shock. It was so swift that I could not remember anything that must have happened to me.

How was the official ceremony of your recognition as the medium of the State Oracle conducted?

The ceremony took place in the early hours of September 4th 1987, in Nechung monastery's hall. Tibetan government officials and Nechung monks greeted me with traditional scarves. Then at 9am I went to receive blessings and advice from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Later, I went to Ling Rinpoche's residence, Serkong Rinpoche's residence and then to Theckchen Choeling temple. When I was seated on the throne, the members of the *Kashag* (Tibetan Cabinet) were first to greet me with scarves. They were followed by Tibetan Government officials and representatives from Namgyal monastery, Gadong monastery, Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, and many other organisations.

What feelings did you have on being recognised as the Nechung Kuten and did this change your life?

To become Nechung's Medium is not an ordinary duty. It is a responsibility of national importance. I feel that if it is able to render good service, especially to the Buddha dharma and Tibet, then my personal life is insignificant.

After becoming the Medium, I had to automatically resign from the post of the ritual master and, in accordance with our tradition, was expected to look after the affairs of the monastery as its head lama, even though I am not a very learned person as I ought to be.

I also have to study more, and meet more people and attend official functions and ceremonies. Many people, including journalists, come to ask all sorts of questions regarding the Dharma Protector and the Medium.

It is a tradition of Nechung Monastery that once you become the Medium you automatically become the abbot of the monastery as well. Taking this post is not merely a question of receiving the title, but one has to actually preside and lead the ritual ceremonies, many of which are of wrathful nature connected to the Dharma Protector's cycle of ritual traditions. These are very important.

In the past when we had Nechung Rinpoche, he would take charge of leading the ceremonies and the Medium did not have to shoulder these ceremonial



A photograph taken in the late 1920's showing an Oracle in full ceremonial regalia, standing complete with hat, ritual weapons and a large metal *melong* strapped to his chest.

Medium to possess the spirit of the Dharma protector, to whom should we offer black tea?"

Thupten Phuntsok felt it was unnatural of me to respond in such a manner because normally I would never dare to answer him that way. I have always treated my elders with respect.

Thupten Phuntsok told me, "Well, you are right, but let us think that the Dharma Protector is in trance, and simply imagine we are

responsibilities. But as I have been trained as a monk of this community since my childhood, I do not have much difficulty in joining the pujas and ceremonies. I may be lacking some qualifications but whenever I have to take the responsibility of leading a ritual ceremony, I sincerely pray from the depth of my heart to express the power of the truth or the ultimate reality.

Also, since I became the Medium, I have to some extent lost my personal freedom of movement. When I want to go for a holiday, for instance, I have to make sure that it coincides with the absence of His Holiness from the town. I must also seek permission from the Office of HH the Dalai Lama and inform the Tibetan government where I can be contacted. Then, in terms of my diet, I am required to observe certain dietary discipline. For instance, I am not supposed to eat fish, eggs and pork.

But basically not much has changed. Although many people advise me not to do 'ordinary' work, I still do things that interest me, and sometimes lead young monks in mundane tasks, like painting the monastery. I believe in dignity of labour.

Before going into a trance, what levels of change do you experience?

It depends on who requests the trance. Sometimes my inner feelings get disturbed a day or two before the trance, and sometimes only a few hours before. For instance, if His Holiness or the Kashag commissions the trance to take place, then it comes a day before and gets stronger as the time for the trance draws closer. The following morning - and especially when I wear the costume and sit amidst monks chanting the call for trance - the inner feeling becomes so intense that it is hard to describe.

The prophesies have so far been given in Tibetan. In future, will Nechung also give prophesies in other languages?

Until now, Nechung has spoken only in Tibetan. As for the future, I have no comments. Our senior monks say that in the past the prophesies were extremely poetic and difficult to understand.

Gradually the prophesies became more and more clear; and during my predecessor's time and now, Nechung's prophesies have become even more clear. But normally the prophesy is spoken in the form of a poem in stanzas, or prose style, or a mixture of both. The language however, is certainly not exactly like the common language. It is spoken with a tune unique to Nechung.

Do you recollect what has been said during a trance?

No, certainly not. Just before the trance, I see and sense what is going around me. But gradually even my senses dissolve and then in a kind of sleep-state I become totally absorbed, and do not correctly remember what has happened and been said. Normally, when I am seated on the throne with my costume on, I do my meditations while reciting mantras. Slowly I get possessed into a deeper state of absorption, and then gradually feel distant from my own identity and surroundings. It is like having a dream and not remembering it the next morning.

A news agency recently reported you as the 'spiritual adviser' to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. What is your reaction to this?

This is a misunderstanding on the part of the Press. Perhaps, the reporter mentioned this to elevate the position of the Oracle or the Medium. But he has made a mistake. I personally have not met any press men or others who raised this issue with me.

His Holiness does not need spiritual advice from the Protector. If he did, what about the interim period? From 1984 until I was recognised, there was no Medium. However, His Holiness never failed to lead the Tibetan government and its people during that time. I believe that Nechung acts as a divine colleague in the conduct of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's spiritual and temporal responsibilities, and not as an adviser.

What advice do you have for the Tibetan people?

I would advise the Tibetans to realise that Arya Avalokiteshvara, by virtue of his prayers, has come in different manifestations to guide the Tibetan people. This is because of our karmic connections and prayers. HH the Dalai Lama has always worked for



Left: A drawing from the Nyigmapa, red hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism, showing Pehar (Dorje Drakden), riding an elephant.

English translation of the Tibetan text: 'Long ago, coerced by the master Padmasambhava, as guardian of the glorious breadth and depths of Drakmar, you were bound in oath as the custodian of all dharma-wheels. Homage to Pehar.'

our benefit, especially since the Chinese invasion. The awareness of Tibet in the world is now growing. This does not merely come from political forces, but from our religion, culture and people. They have appealed to a worldwide audience. We must not forget this, and every Tibetan, including government officials, must work hard and sincerely for our common cause.

His Holiness and the Dharma Protector have said that in a few years time, a bright chance lies ahead for the people of Tibet. So this is what we must all concentrate on. Giving and receiving freedom will take only a day, but running a government and a nation is not an easy task.

Let us, therefore, all work together. The Dharma Protector has said on a number of occasions that "The achievement of Tibet's goal is the joint responsibility of both the people of Tibet and the Protectors." So if the people work hard and sincerely, the Protectors will always be enthusiastically with us.

Sacred Hoop would like to thank Tsering Tashi and Tibet House for their help with this article, which was abridged from one which appeared in the 'Tibetan Bulletin' magazine.

NOTES.

- 1: A Ngakpa is a lay Tibetan Buddhist tantric ceremonialist and magician. Their role is similar to that of a tantric shaman. See the article on Padmasambhava on page 12 for more information.
- 2: Chod (*cutting*) is a ceremony where the practitioner offers themselves as food to wrathful spirits summoned in the ceremony, in order to let go of the attachment to their body and their sense of self.
- 3: Guru Rinpoche is another name for Padmasambhava. See the article on page 12.
- 4: Avalokiteshvara is the Bodhisattva of compassion. See an article about his practice in Sacred Hoop Issue 35.