

# The 17th Karmapa

## New Face of an Ancient Lineage

At 24, the Seventeenth Karmapa shares the concerns of his generation—peace, feminism, the environment. He is also the leader of a profound meditation lineage. As BARRY BOYCE tells us, how he combines them will help define Buddhism in the 21st century.

ON THE DAY HIS FIRST VISIT to America was unexpectedly announced, I booked a ticket. After the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa (“the Karmapa,” for short) is the third most important spiritual leader in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, and the one who may carry that tradition forward in the twenty-first century. I rearranged my schedule and jumped through some hoops to make the trip, but my little journey was nothing compared with his.

In 1999, at the age of fourteen, the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, made a stunning escape from Chinese-controlled Tibet that attracted the world’s attention, and the eyes of the world have remained on him ever since. The Dalai Lama has hosted him at Gyuto Monastery in India since his escape, and is thought to be preparing him to continue his global message of peace, cooperation, and human kindness. But what has made the Karmapa even more interesting is that he’s not afraid to rock the boat: he talks about the environment, vegetarianism, and the role of women—and how Buddhist institutions needed to align themselves more with the modern world on these issues. His youth contrasts markedly with the grandfatherly countenance of the Dalai Lama, and he has decades of work ahead of him, time to have a real impact on the world of my children.

As I sat in the cavernous Hammerstein Ballroom in midtown Manhattan waiting to hear his first public pronouncement in America, I wondered, What kind of a person is he? Will his voice resonate with people of a younger generation? How will he bring together his ancient spiritual tradition and his concern for the problems of today’s world?

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BARRY BOYCE is senior editor of the *Shambhala Sun*. He is co-author of *The Rules of Victory* and editor of the new *Shambhala Sun* anthology *In the Face of Fear: Buddhist Wisdom for Challenging Times*.

The first sight of him was deceptive. He peered out into the spotlights, unable to make out the face of even a single person in the crowd of three thousand. He looked his age—twenty-three—with an attractive face and manner and an inquisitive mien. Of course the crowd was predisposed to like him, but still they seemed taken by his innocent demeanor. He didn't appear to be shielded from the world by the solemn mantle of spiritual leadership. He was dwarfed by the monumental wall hanging of the Buddha behind him, and as he started to speak I felt certain he would be timid and intimidated. Who would not be, had they arrived the day before on a direct flight from India and faced



*The young Karmapa on his way to Tsurphu monastery after his recognition in 1992.*

a throng of twitching and buzzing New Yorkers. I expected to hear the tentative musings of a twenty-something who had led a controlled and isolated life. Maybe an orthodox recitation of traditional Buddhist categories. He was young, and perhaps not yet inhabiting his exalted role. I'd be all right with that.

But then he spoke, for the first time ever to an audience in the West. He was gentle and genuine, yes, but not tentative. He knew his mind. Far from isolated, he appeared as someone who understood the DNA of the world and could speak with some authority to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Orgyen Trinley Dorje was not playing a part, falling back on rote rhetoric and tidy doctrines. In the several days I heard him speak and spent time in his presence, he did not cling to dogma or judgment. He spoke plainly, from the heart, about his experience of mind and life, almost like a New York cabbie telling you what he thought about things while still keeping his eye on the road ahead.

"These terms like enlightenment and awakened mind," he said to the crowd, "seem so far away as to be useless." What we need to focus on is right now, he said, where we are, right in the midst of our difficulties, even in the midst of New York City, where

"the people and cars are rushing, where even the buildings seem to be rushing, growing higher." In such a place, he said, we might think it's impossible to attain any happiness and stability. But in the middle of Manhattan or in a cave in the Himalayas, we're all in the same boat. If we can learn to be present and aware in the midst of our difficulties—whether we can resolve them or not—we will "never let them destroy our peace of mind."

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY in Tibetan Buddhism is commonly vested in *tulkus*, masters who consciously take rebirth with the intent of helping others, as tradition says the Buddha did himself. Generally recognized when they are children, they're trained in Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and meditation to carry on the lineage of their predecessors.

So far there have been seventeen Gyalwang ("Victorious") Karmapas. Theirs is the Kagyu lineage of Vajrayana Buddhism. It is called the "ear-whispered" or practice lineage because of its emphasis on meditation practice and direct, personal transmission from teacher to student. Closely associated with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and its famed practice of Dzogchen (the "Great Perfection"), the Kagyu lineage specializes in the ancient teachings known as Mahamudra, the Great Seal.

The Kagyu lineage can be traced back more than a thousand years to a wild Indian yogin named Tilopa. He passed his realization of Mahamudra on to his principal student, the scholar Naropa, who in turn transmitted it to the Tibetan translator and farmer Marpa. Marpa's leading student was the cave-dwelling ascetic and Tibetan national poet Milarepa, whose principal student was Gampopa, a monk and physician who established the first Kagyu monastery.

Gampopa's most significant student was Tusum Khyenpa, whose contemporaries gave him the title *Karmapa*, "the man of Buddha activity." Tusum Khyenpa decided that the best way to ensure the continuation of the lineage was to leave behind a letter telling the monastery how to find his next incarnation, who would then be installed as head of the lineage after a period of regency. The second Karmapa thus became the first formally recognized *tulku*, creating a system for maintaining continuity of the teachings that became widespread in Tibet.

It is the Karmapas' role to ensure that the transmission of the practice lineage remains fresh and intact, not so much by being a good leader, which is important, but mainly by embodying the spirit and realization of Mahamudra's true meaning. The actual experience of Mahamudra is beyond words, but Tilopa offered a pithy summation: "Mahamudra mind dwells nowhere." It's called the "Great Seal" because all that exists—good and bad, suffering and enlightenment, the beginning of the path and its fruition—is "sealed" with the mind's true nature, which is empty, aware, and blissful.

Such simplicity is born from extensive study, instruction, and practice. Over the centuries, the Karmapas acquired a reputation as highly adept meditation masters with a powerful presence and a palpable sense of caring for everyone they encountered. Until



*Contemplating the Seattle skyline during his first U.S. tour.*

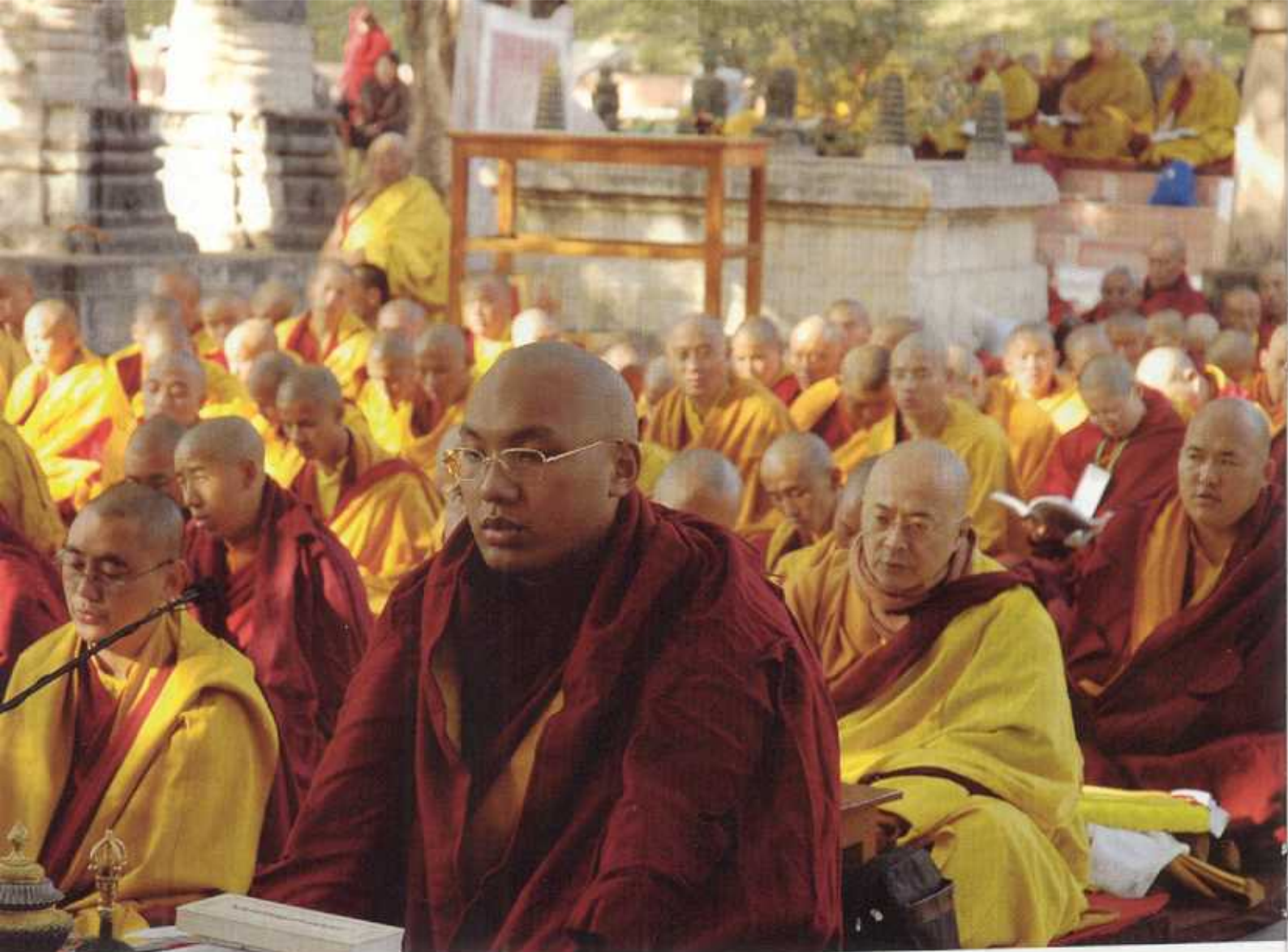
He loves art, music, and computers and has written several songs. He is deeply concerned about people his age and the world they are inheriting.

the Sixteenth Karmapa made his first trips to the West, this reputation was largely limited to Asia. His visits to the United States in 1974, 1976, and 1980 were whirlwind affairs, with large groups of monks and fellow teachers journeying through Disneyland, the Capitol Building in Washington, Hopi Indian lands, and untold venues large and small. Many students like me fell in love with the Sixteenth, for his abundant warmth and playfulness. He died at fifty-seven, having spent the last twenty-two years of his life outside Tibet.

THE PERSON NOW KNOWN as the Seventeenth Karmapa began life as Apo Gaga, a boy born in 1985 in a poor nomad family in Chinese-occupied eastern Tibet. By then Tibetan monks had already started to search for the Sixteenth Karmapa's reincarna-

tion. In 1992, at the age of seven, with the Dalai Lama's blessing, Apo Gaga was declared to be the Karmapa tulku.

After his recognition, the young boy was installed at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, the Karmapas' ancestral home. He underwent the traditional training and education of a tulku and also oversaw the rebuilding of the monastery, which had been almost destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the government's apparent support, it eventually became clear that the Chinese would not allow the Karmapa access to the teachers and teachings he would need to fulfill his role. He resolved to leave Tibet. On December 28, 1999, the Karmapa pretended to go into retreat, but instead he dressed in civilian clothes, left the monastery, and began a secret and elaborate journey by car, foot, horseback, helicopter, train, and taxi. Seven days later, he arrived in Dharamsala, India, seat of the



*Officiating at the annual Kagyu prayer festival in Bodhgaya, India.*

Tibetan government-in-exile, and was greeted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Like his predecessor, who had escaped Tibet in 1959, another Karmapa had emerged into the wider world.

The Seventeenth Karmapa, however, entered the modern world at a much younger age than the Sixteenth did. He is fluent in Chinese and is learning English rapidly. While the Sixteenth loved birds, and seemed to be able to communicate with them, the Seventeenth's

## The Karmapa ensures the continuity of the Kagyu lineage and the transmission of the authentic Mahamudra teachings.

hobby is books. He loves art, music, and computers and has written several songs. He plays video games. At age twenty-four, he is fifty years younger than the Dalai Lama, and is deeply concerned about people his age and the world they are inheriting.

All of the Karmapas have adapted to the circumstances of their day, to ensure that the teachings remain fresh and timely, but the Seventeenth, who is coming on the scene during the digital revolution, the age of global climate crisis, and the mashing and muddling of cultural identities, must find his place in a world of rapid change his predecessors in isolated Tibet could hardly have conceived of.

He's been talking about the environment ("We will not give up on this Earth!"); the place of women in the world ("From a Buddhist point of view, men and women are equal"); and social action ("It is very important that dharma be harmonious with the larger society in which one lives, that it be humanitarian"). And people are starting to listen. He intends to fulfill his traditional role completely, ensuring the continuity of the lineage and the transmission of the authentic Mahamudra teachings to practitioners of the Kagyu tradition. But he also wants to bring the message of liberation to as many people as possible, as the Dalai Lama has done. Professor Robert Thurman, a friend and important adviser to the Dalai Lama who was among those welcoming the Karmapa on his

arrival in the U.S., said to me, “Some teachers just sit on a throne and dish out spiritual initiations, and some are only interested in teaching Buddhists. But this Karmapa seems very likely to reach way out beyond Buddhism, to make an impact on the world at large, in the way the Dalai Lama has done.”

The Karmapa nimbly deflects questions about suggestions in the press that he will eventually take on a role equivalent to that of the Dalai Lama. “Since I have been recognized as an important spiritual teacher within Tibetan Buddhism,” he says, “I’m kind of an obvious suspect for people to look to.” But he seems content to fulfill the role he has been given in the best way he knows how, and let circumstances unfold. The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, the founder of Nalandabodhi and a prominent student of the Sixteenth Karmapa, directed the Seventeenth’s American tour and gained a deep appreciation for how the Karmapa works. He told me, “He makes plans, but at some point things take their own shape and we just follow that shape. Something happens that is beyond our reach.”

ULTIMATELY, THE KARMAPA has said, he would like to be “a twenty-first-century religious leader,” spend two months a year in the United States, and reach people beyond those of his own faith. At present, he is a guest of the Indian government, which so far has been conservative concerning his travel plans, and his 2008 U.S. tour is still the only time he has traveled outside the subcontinent. His monastery is open to visitors, however, and his website supplies information on how to come and see him. He also gets out and about in India, visiting and teaching a variety of groups.

On the International Day of Peace in September, the Karmapa spent the day teaching students, faculty, and staff of the American Embassy School in New Delhi. Students from first grade through high school were excited to meet a “holy man,” and during small group sessions they peppered him with questions about how he would make peace or what he would do if someone attacked him. Over the years of watching Buddhist teachers, old hands get good at predicting what the answer will be to a given question: impermanence, suffering, meditation, etc. The Karmapa surprises. In talking to the children and the staff, he took each of them into account and listened for what they really felt, and his response came from the heart, from his own experience. When he talked about “having hope in one’s heart, hope toward the future, and hope in one’s ability to contribute to the world,” he talked about it from the perspective of his own feelings, his own internal experience. Michele Martin, a Tibetan translator who has edited several books of his teachings, says that “the Karmapa knows the Western frame of mind very well. He speaks from a personal perspective, which is very common for Westerners but atypical for Tibetans. He directs his answers to the context of the person he’s speaking with. He is also able to be deeply rooted in a traditional Buddhist world and at the same time relate to the modern world in a very skillful way.”

When the Karmapa teaches in public settings, he expresses Buddhist principles in ways that transcend the traditional focus on personal enlightenment, which seems to have diminishing appeal for a younger generation looking for a more activist form of spirituality that transcends the division between politics and faith. Expressing concern that we could lose our world altogether, he wrote a song (which he sings in English on a YouTube video) called *Aspiration for the World*, which begins:

*World, we live and die on your lap.  
On you we experience all our woes and joys.  
You are our ancestral home of old.  
Forever we cherish and adore you.*

The Karmapa has put teeth into his aspirations and openly criticized monasteries for clear-cutting forests to construct buildings and selling timber for profit. At a recent weeklong conference on environmental protection for monasteries, he gave PowerPoint presentations on the cosmos according to Western science, on biodiversity, and on wildlife protection, with intricate descriptions of the food chain. The butterfly effect in chaos theory, he said, showed that “modern science has reached similar conclusions to Buddhism, that everything is interconnected and interdependent.”



*With His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

The Buddhist principle of interdependence is not a philosophy, he says, but a guiding principle for working with the Earth on a daily basis. When he visited Colorado, his teachings centered on healing the environment, and he said that “our outer environment is the most important condition for establishing peace of mind in the twenty-first century.” He said that all the world’s citizens are like “artists creating or painting the world.” The fact that the world has become smaller has made this easier to understand, and that makes this a fortunate age to live in. “The world has given us much, an environment to live in,” he says. “Now we should consider how to give back.”

During his visit to Seattle, at the conclusion of his U.S. tour, the Karmapa caught people’s attention when he talked about how Asian countries have misinterpreted the Buddha’s teachings to sanction patriarchy and oppression of women. He declined to comment on patriarchal practices in the West, but he was emphatic that patriarchy “continues to be a problem in the East and must be abolished.” Many of the audience were surprised at how frank he was in addressing a subject that has been taboo for many Buddhist teachers. Longtime Buddhist Christine Keyser said at the time, “His Holiness’ overt feminism marked a clear demarcation from his predecessor’s generation and signaled an egalitarian vision bringing ancient Buddhist wisdom in line with contemporary social values. When the Sixteenth Karmapa visited the West, women were prohibited from serving him or even wearing pants in his presence. The sight of two young baristas serving His Holiness a mug of Starbucks coffee during the welcoming ceremony in Seattle underscored this generational shift.”

There is a word for this kind of talk in Tibetan, Michele Martin told me. “It’s called *danzig*.” It means straightforward speech, telling it like it is.

Concrete action in the world—how you live and what you do for others—is very important to the Karmapa, and so is setting an example. He became a vegetarian and declared that Kagyu monasteries outside of Tibet would change to a vegetarian diet. On his most recent birthday, he asked followers to forgo an extravagant celebration and instead distribute eco-friendly trash cans and mattresses to fifty organizations and schools and plant trees around the monastery where he lives.

Although he has been very clear that he is not a politician and that the Karmapa should not assume a governmental role, he seems a little more willing these days to talk about political issues. During his recent trip to Delhi to teach at the American Embassy School, he told the *Times of India* that some of China’s recent inflammatory statements may have resulted because “India is on the rise in the world and perhaps the Chinese government feels some type of impulse to blunt this rise somehow.” With respect to the future of Tibet, he said, “We have to do something quickly... If we were to wait fifty years, we would be in danger of losing a great chunk of Tibetan culture that could not be recovered.” When pressed once again about as-

suming the mantle of the Dalai Lama, he replied, “I’m already the Karmapa, that’s my role and it’s already one I feel quite weighed down by. It carries heavy responsibilities.”

Yet he doesn’t carry that heavy weight ponderously. In New York he spoke of the world and all our cares as an enormous weight, and our mind as a clear mirror that can reflect the image of the weight without the immense gravity. More than his ideas and causes, it is the incredible lightness of his being that people seem drawn to. He listens to hip-hop on an iPod.

Peter Volz, who was in charge of VIP hospitality during the American tour, found that the Karmapa seemed to have almost no cultural baggage. He relates to you human to human, not teacher to student, religious person to commoner, etc. He has spent, Volz notes, “almost his entire life in two small rooms in two very remote places, and yet he has instant rapport with everyone from the State Department security officer to the waiter in a diner. That bespeaks a person not burdened by baggage—cultural or otherwise. His sole interest seems to be being with people, not pontificating, not proclaiming.”

He lets go of traditional forms when they don’t fit the cultural context, including joyously receiving a bear hug (an unheard-of breach of Tibetan protocol). He erects none of the barriers that often exist between religious leaders and regular folks. As he was leaving America, he talked about what it was like to grow up from such a young age in the confines of his training and how delighted he was when someone from the West brought him a toy. But at a certain point he realized that his attachment to getting toys was silly. He didn’t need toys. What truly made him happy was just being with people and doing whatever he could to make them happy. He says he has no personal life, no private life, and he doesn’t need one.

Ponlop Rinpoche said to me that the Karmapa “connects with people by his presence, with or without speaking.” In San Francisco, he recalls, they were searching for a place to eat and ended up at a retro diner chain called Johnny Rockets. One of the customers was a father with his young child. The child started crying and screaming, but before long he approached the Karmapa, who began to calm him down, speaking with him, patting his head, giving him a balloon. Soon the father wanted to talk to the Karmapa, and they all began to hang out. “His Holiness made the child happy and then the father became happy—he had that kind of effortless effect,” Ponlop Rinpoche remembers. The father and son had no idea they were interacting with the Karmapa, the revered seventeenth incarnation of one of Buddhism’s greatest teachers. To them, Ponlop Rinpoche said, “He was just another Johnny Rockets customer.” ♦

*For more on the Seventeenth Karmapa and the Kagyu lineage, as well as a special section on the Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, go to [www.shambhalasun.com](http://www.shambhalasun.com)*