

HOW I MET THE VAJRA MASTER

*A letter from Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin to the participants
at the 1980 Vajradhatu Seminary*

Dr. Jeremy Hayward: In previous years, the Vajra Regent has visited seminary, and at the beginning of the vajrayana section, he has talked to the participants, especially on the theme of devotion. This year, being in retreat, he has sent this message to us:

From the all-encompassing vajradhatu,
Indestructible nonthought beyond description,
From the vast dharmadhatu,
The unceasing play of energy and light,
The dharmakaya Vajradhara takes form
As the incomparable root guru, Chökyi Gyamtso.
The five poisons and the eight worldly dharmas
Are transformed into wisdom and skillful means.
Look! The aspirations and desires of sentient beings
are fulfilled.
With unceasing devotion I prostrate to the only father guru.
I offer all that is worthwhile and pleasing,
The wealth of all the universes.
I confess to lingering in the grip of samsara.

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I rejoice in your boundless generosity.
Please continue to turn the wheel of the dharma.
Remain with us in your undefiled splendor.
May all sentient beings attain enlightenment,
And may I never rest until samsara is thoroughly emptied.

For a long time I have thought about recording the events that have shaped my life over the past nine years, during which I have been under the protection and guidance of the vajra master. Although my experiences are personal to my journey, I feel it would be useful for my fellow students in the dharma to hear about them, not so much because these experiences happened to me, but because I think they illuminate the special power of the lineage in its continuity.

I remember these events as direct teaching situations from which I have benefited greatly in practice and understanding. To try to recount all of them would be difficult, and it would take too much of your time. However, since you are about to be instructed in the unsurpassable vajrayana, I offer these remembrances as a gesture of sharing the incredible good fortune of entering into this peerless discipline.

This is the first seminary I will not be attending due to a long-standing date with ngöndro practice. I feel as if I'm missing something, but that very feeling inspires me to communicate with all of

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you. Although my skill in writing is not very good, the timing is auspicious, for it provides me with an opportunity to record a sequence of events which recall the precious gem of instruction, without which my life would be meaningless.

I have told these stories many times before in conversation, and some of you may have heard what I am about to say. I apologize if what I say is repetitious and ask you to be patient and perhaps to smile, as you would when listening to your relatives telling the same old story again. I am especially pleased and honored that my dear and good friend, my dharma brother, Jeremy Hayward, is reading this. We have been students together from the beginning.

When I met the vajra master, I had been a student of the Hindu teacher, Swami Satchitananda, for some four and a half years. From him I learned a basic positive toward myself and the world, and also through him (and central to my meeting the guru), I made my initial relationship to the discipline of devotion. In the fall of 1970, Swami Satchitananda sent me from Los Angeles to Boulder to fill in temporarily for the director of the local Integral Yoga Institute. It was then that I met several students of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, who told me about him and informed me that he would be moving to Boulder. I returned to Los Angeles, and in February of 1971 I had a chance to go back to Boulder to visit some of my friends and to convey

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a message to the Tibetan lama, inviting him to what was called “the World Enlightenment Festival.” At that time I had little concern for meeting other teachers, but just the same I agreed to convey the message.

I met the Vidyadhara on a Sunday afternoon at his home in Four Mile Canyon. I was wearing a red ruffled shirt and red velvet pants, *a la* L.A., and was sporting long hair and a beard. I was ushered into the sitting room, where I was confronted by a person much younger than I had expected, surrounded by several students, some of whom I knew from my previous stay in Boulder. With a piercing gaze that seemed to comprehend my entire history, he greeted me courteously. We had a conversation in the company of his students, which lasted perhaps twenty minutes. He asked about Swami Satchitananda’s whereabouts and inquired as to his health. I invited the Vidyadhara to the so-called World Enlightenment Festival. He said that he would have to check his schedule, and I departed, not failing to notice a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label and a glass jar of orange juice beneath the table in front of him.

I recall driving down from Four Mile Canyon in a quizzical mood, which began to expand as the evening wore on. This particular mood took shape in the form of a question, which itself described the experience of meeting the Vidyadhara, and described my first taste of

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Buddhism as well. I had met many teachers, but none had ever evoked this question. I thought to myself, over and over, “How could anybody be solidly there like a rock, like a monument, and yet be empty at the same time?” Those were my exact thoughts.

Back in Los Angeles, I thought again and again about this man and the way I had experienced his state of being.

A month later I had the opportunity to return to Boulder. I had been talking about my experience with Chime Heller, who had been a student of Swami Satchitananda and was now a student of the Vidyadhara. When she found out I was going back to Boulder, she said, “Let’s call him and tell him you’re coming back.” I was too shy to talk to him, but she said she would talk to him first and then put me on the phone. She cautioned me, saying, “Don’t say you want an interview. Say you want to hang out.” (In those days, that was the expression for spending time with the Vidyadhara.) When Chime handed me the phone and the Vidyadhara greeted me with an unabashed “Hello!” I immediately blurted out, “I’m coming back to Boulder. May I hang out with you?” He told me, “Come right along.”

When I returned to Boulder in March of 1971, I rang up the Four Mile Canyon house, said I had been invited to visit and asked when I could come up. The voice on the other end seemed rather sharp, and said that I could come by tomorrow. I did, and when I arrived I was

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seated in the breakfast area off the kitchen and told to wait. As I sat there by myself feeling completely out of place, as if I had a gigantic head, arms, and legs, various students walked by without saying hello or inquiring who I was. Needless to say, that made me even more apprehensive and unsettled.

After about an hour or more, I suddenly looked toward the doorway leading to the kitchen, and at that moment the Vidyadhara appeared. He walked slowly but directly to the table and sat down next to me. “Hello. So you’re here,” he said, after which he said nothing for what seemed to be fifteen minutes. He had an eight-ounce glass of scotch in his hand. When it had been refilled, he turned to me, lifted it, and said, “Here.”

I had not had a drink of liquor in five years, and I asked him, “Is this *prasad*?” which, loosely translated, means “the guru’s grace.”

“Yes,” he said. “That means you have to take three big sips,” which I did.

After a while, he said, “Three more,” and still later, “Three more.” Years later, he remarked that the incident was like the first meeting of Gampopa and Milarepa.

I stayed two weeks in Boulder. During that time many memorable things happened, including the birth of Taktruk Tendzin Rinpoche,

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the Vidyadhara's son. One incident particularly stands out in my memory, less for what was said than for the directness of the communication between two human beings. I was to see the Vidyadhara again one night at Four Mile Canyon, and I arrived while he was in a meeting that lasted three or four hours. While I waited, I managed to finish off a bottle of red wine with Polly Monner. When I was finally escorted to the Vidyadhara's bedroom, I found him sitting bare-chested in a chair and not having much to say. After a short conversation, which was inconsequential, I asked him a question that had been prompted by my friends in Los Angeles. They had been imploring me to ask the Vidyadhara why he drank. Coming from a tradition where drinking liquor was contrary to the discipline, I could understand the motive of their question, but I was embarrassed to ask. Nevertheless, as I was about to leave, I asked him, "Why do you drink?"

"Sometimes it is necessary to insult in order to communicate," he said.

Then I said directly, "In that case, what about the body?"

And he said, "Let the body be as it is."

Finally, I said, "If that is so, what about the thought of the body?"

"We have to cut through," he said. That ended our interview.

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In the late spring of 1971, the Vidyadhara came to Los Angeles to give a seminar. At that time I introduced him to my wife, Lila, and to my oldest friend in the dharma, Mr. Ken Green. The seminar, which was called “The Battle of Ego,” took place in Hollywood, and Mr. Green, my wife, and I were the cooks.

Ken and I had decided to leave the Integral Yoga Institute even before we had met the Vidyadhara, but the events that I have described cast a particular color on that departure. We had great hopes and dreams. We would find a retreat place and do a bardo retreat, which we had heard about from some of the Vidyadhara’s students. We were flushed with the idea of retreat. As for myself, I was personally pained about being a teacher without having had any real experience. This was not the fault of my previous teacher as much as it was my own naiveté regarding spiritual practice. Nevertheless, I was feeling hypocritical and resentful and eager to start out on a new journey with the promise and excitement of studying with Chögyam Trungpa.

In a final interview during the Vidyadhara’s stay in Los Angeles, Ken and I presented our case: we wanted to leave the Integral Yoga Institute, and we wanted to go on retreat. The interview took place in Bel Air, on the balcony of a comfortable house which had been lent to the Vidyadhara for his stay. At that time he said, “It is necessary for you both to receive the blessings of the guru. Otherwise, we can’t go any

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further.” He exhorted us to go back to Swami Satchitananda and request that we might leave.

We traveled across country to New York, my wife pregnant with our first child. We had our final interview with Swami Satchitananda. That wonderful gentleman said farewell with great dignity and openness. I am indebted to him for that.

The Vidyadhara had also instructed us to perhaps forget about the bardo retreat for the time being, and to move to Vermont to take up residence near Tail of the Tiger (now Karme Chöling). He said it was necessary for us to settle down and relate to the earth. This was an interesting proposition for us, coming from the somewhat glamorous pseudo-spiritual world of Los Angeles.

We arrived at Tail of the Tiger in the summer of 1971 and spent two weeks there before renting a house in the town of Kirby, about a half-hour drive from the community. Relating to a domestic situation for the first time was indeed earthy, to say the least. In considering the question of livelihood, we came up with the notion of starting an organic bakery in the house. Helen Green had some bread recipes, and so we launched the Trikaya Baking Company. Our main customer was Tail of the Tiger, which was obliged to buy our bread at the Vidyadhara’s request. There was a singular fact about our bread that irritated the residents of Tail of the Tiger, who delighted in snacking

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on bread and peanut butter throughout the day. The truth about our bread was that it crumbled when you tried to slice it. This crumbling tended to lengthen the time it took for snackers to successfully peanut-butter their bread and go on about their business. The result was irritation.

We lived in Kirby for a year, during which time we tried to make ends meet, depending a great deal on food stamps. During that year, two events occurred that had profound significance for my life. One was the birth of my first son, Vajra, in September, 1971. In retrospect, the story of the attempted home delivery is poignant and comic. In any case, the boy was born in St. Johnsbury Hospital.

The second event was learning that I would be the Vidyadhara's successor and his Regent. . It is meaningful to us now, and so I should recount it in some detail.

While the Vidyadhara was visiting Tail of the Tiger that fall, Ken Green and I had a joint interview. After a few minutes, the Vidyadhara asked Ken if he would leave. When Ken had gone, the Vidyadhara turned to me.

“I have something to ask you,” he said. “Do you know what it is-,”

I was slightly dumbfounded and made some vague stab at it. “Well, you want to send Ken somewhere and keep me here in Vermont.”

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“Well, somewhat,” he said, and laughed. “This is slightly embarrassing, somewhat like proposing marriage. Can you guess?”

My mind was blank. “No,” I said.

“Then I’ll tell you. I want you to be my Gampopa, my successor.”

I was utterly shocked. “Me? Are you sure?”

“Quite sure. Do you accept?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Just like that?” he said.

“Just like that,” I said.

“Good. From now on there is no turning back. If you do, you will be destroyed by the dakas, dakinis, and dharmapalas.”

The Vidyadhara talked about his eventual death. I made some feeble remarks about how awful that would be, and he laughed. “For me that is no problem at all,” he said.

When I was about to leave, he beckoned me closer and gave me a copy of Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, which he had inscribed, “To my son, with love for Kagyü family. “He placed the traditional white scarf around my neck and told me not to take it off until I got home. He cautioned me to keep what he had said secret,

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except from my wife and Ken and Helen Green. Then he said, “Come back tomorrow and tell me your dreams,” and I left.

I came down the stairs with eyes wide open and the scarf around my neck. All I could say to my wife, or to Ken and Helen and Chuck Lief, who was driving us home, was “Let’s go. “I didn’t say a word all the way back to Kirby, and they didn’t say a word to me. I was stunned. That night I told my wife and Ken and Helen what had happened. I could hardly sleep. Each time I fell asleep, I dreamt I was dreaming and woke up. This continued well into the early morning, when I fell into a deep sleep. At that time I dreamt that I awoke in the same house in Kirby and heard the voices of my friends and relatives of the past and present all congregated in the kitchen downstairs. I walked down the stairs and said that I was hungry and wanted an egg. At that point all my friends and relatives protested, saying I couldn’t have an egg. And I said, “Of course I can,” and proceeded to swallow an egg whole. Then I woke up from my dream.

The next day I told the Vidyadhara my dream, and he said, “That is good. The egg symbolizes the unborn wisdom within, like the garuda’s egg. When it hatches, the garuda is fully formed.”

After that day, the Vidyadhara made no reference to what had happened between us for nearly six months. I went through a period of elation, pride, fear, doubt, and bewilderment. I would say to my wife,

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“He must have made a mistake.” I would say to myself, “He does this to his students just to test them.” I would think, “This is absurd. I have no qualifications to join that lineage.” When I thought of Telo, Naro, Marpa, and Mila, I felt like a fool. In fact, I didn’t know which way to go. The Vidyadhara said nothing further, and no one else knew except the people I have mentioned. I tried to keep myself to myself. At the same time, I could not forget what had happened. It seemed as if life had become a dream of that particular evening.

When the Vidyadhara visited Tail of the Tiger again, in the summer of 1972, I had become a member of the executive committee and the head cook in the kitchen. At an executive committee meeting one afternoon, one of the members began to complain about the fact that the Vidyadhara had initiated a policy at Karma Dzong without telling us at Tail of the Tiger. (In those days there was a kind of rivalry between the two centers.) In the middle of the discussion, the Vidyadhara turned to me and said, “What do you think?” “Well,” I said, “I think you should do whatever you want to do, and that would be best.”

That night, as the Vidyadhara was lying in bed about to go to sleep, he called me to his side and said, “What you said today at the meeting was not good enough. You should always remember who you are.”

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Then he said good night. It was the first reference he had made to our meeting six months before.

In the fall of 1972, the Vidyadhara took his first retreat, which lasted three months, at Charlemont, Massachusetts. For the first six weeks he was attended by Karl Springer and for the rest by myself. The time I spent with him marked a significant change in our relationship and also in the structure of the community as a whole. It was during those three months that the formation of Vajradhatu was conceived and planned. The Vidyadhara decided to choose three directors for Vajradhatu: one from Tail of the Tiger, Fran Lewis; one from Karma Dzong, Marvin Casper; and one director at large, Ken Green, whom he had sent to the Snow Lion Inn in Wyoming. He told me that to begin with it would be better if I were not a board member. He felt that at first there would be tremendous resistance to initiating such a thing because of our adolescent connection with the lineage and the hangover of our commonplace notion of democracy. He didn't want the negativity he anticipated from forming Vajradhatu to create difficulties for me in my future role as Regent. Consequently, I was not appointed a board member of Vajradhatu until the 1973 Seminary.

The retreat was a wonderful experience. It was the last time that the Vidyadhara and I actually spent more than a few days together in a retreat situation. Sometimes we would stay up all night waiting for the

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dawn, talking about this and that. These conversations were punctuated by long periods of silence during which I was not concerned about what to say next. I trust we will have some similar opportunity again, but who knows?

In any case, we had an interesting laugh together during the retreat. When I arrived, the Vidyadhara very excitedly showed me a drawing he had made for the design of a house. He knew that I was interested in design; so he asked my opinion of the drawing. I said, “Well, to tell you the truth, Rinpoche, it looks like a box.” Then he said, “Let’s work on it together.” So we made a few sketches, which we thought were really good. A few weeks later a visitor arrived, and we very proudly showed her our sketches and asked her what she thought. “To tell you the truth,” she said, “it looks like a box.” We laughed on and off for what seemed like a full half hour.

During the first seminary, in 1973, the Vidyadhara and I discussed the possibility of my wife and me moving to Boulder. He thought it would be a good idea, and he invited us to be his guests at the Four Mile Canyon house when we arrived. In my naiveté I had no notion of what I would do when we got to Boulder, but in the back of my mind was the idea that I was his successor, and therefore everything would be provided for me.

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We had been in Boulder two weeks when my wife asked me, “Well, what are we going to do? Where are we going to live? How are we going to support ourselves?” I had heard nothing at all from the Vidyadhara in this regard, and I began to think, “If I am such an important person, why isn’t he thinking about what I’m going to do?” I concluded that perhaps he didn’t want me to work at Vajradhatu and that I should consider getting an outside job. I had experience working in physical therapy in hospitals. So I said to my wife, “Since the Vidyadhara hasn’t said anything, I should plan to work in a hospital.”

A few days later, while we were sitting around that same kitchen table in Four Mile Canyon, the Vidyadhara said to me, “What are you going to do now that you’re here?” I said that I could probably get a job in a hospital, since I had experience in that area. He said that sounded like a good idea.

The following week, as I was preparing a resume, he called me in and said, “I’ve decided that you should work for Vajradhatu.” So I joined Ken Green and Fran Lewis in our first office at 1111 Pearl Street.

Working as a Vajradhatu director was extremely confusing at first. The Vidyadhara had given me no definite guidelines. Vajradhatu had been formed in order to coordinate the activities of all the centers. Ken and Fran, who had been working at their jobs for some time before I

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arrived, had a certain routine. But I had none. I sat at my desk by myself, wondering what I was supposed to do. People started asking, “What does he do?” As the weeks turned to months, I was getting more and more frustrated. The Vidyadhara was away, teaching seminars. The eighty-one dollars a week I was getting seemed unjustified, and I agonized to my wife about the fact that I hadn’t been given any definite direction. I thought, “As soon as he returns, I’m going to tell him that I should resign. I have nothing to offer; it’s useless for me to be a Vajradhatu director.” Finally, I decided that instead of complaining, I was just going to sit at my desk, without apology and without waiting for something to happen. After that, people began to talk to me and ask my opinions about things, and I slowly became involved in all the workings of Vajradhatu.

The first visit of His Holiness Karmapa, in the winter of 1974-75, was the largest-scale project that Vajradhatu had coordinated up to that time. Everyone involved with the visit soon learned the value of acting promptly, without hesitation. We were not at all prepared for the intensity of what was about to happen, but through the Vidyadhara’s unceasing energy and effort, we found an example of how to get things done quickly and accurately. I can still hear him saying, “Do it now!” Throughout the entire visit, we were barely one step ahead of His Holiness and his party. Traveling around the country with throne

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cushions, brocades, serving dishes, silverware, chopsticks, and the rest, we would often arrive at a place the day before His Holiness was expected. We would work all night, outfitting shrine halls, audience halls, His Holiness' quarters, and the monks' quarters, just in time for their arrival. When we felt fatigued, exhausted, and bored, there was the Vidyadhara, still working.

The day before His Holiness was to arrive in Boulder, the shrine hall at Karma Dzong was not even close to being ready. We worked all day and all night, and everyone who took part in the work felt the strain. But at the same time, there was a certain delight in putting all our effort into it, even though we took frequent breaks. While the Vidyadhara directed the setup in the shrine hall, we took turns assisting him. We also took turns napping in Fran Lewis' apartment down the hall. The Vidyadhara didn't sleep at all.

An event that occurred during His Holiness' visit to the 1974 seminary still makes me smile. One morning he was to go down to the shrine hall at six a.m. to witness the students practicing. The Vidyadhara, Ken Green, myself, and several others got up at 4:30, dressed, and prepared to meet him. Ken and I had the brocade table covering and the brocade seat covering for his chair. We were about to leave when we discovered that someone had locked the keys to the Vidyadhara's car inside the car. The shrine hall was below the Eldorado

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Lodge, and the stairs that led to it were coated with ice. The Vidyadhara said to Ken and me, “Hurry! Go down there and greet him.” We took off, ran down the steps, across a lot, into the building and into His Holiness’ anteroom, quickly pinned the brocade on the chair and table, saw that everything was in order, and were still puffing and panting when His Holiness walked in.

After His Holiness had his tea and observed the meditators, he got back in his car to go up to the Eldorado for breakfast with the Vidyadhara. Suddenly, Ken and I realized that the same brocades were necessary for His Holiness’ breakfast seat and table. So as his car pulled away, we dashed back into the anteroom, removed the brocades, and ran back up the steps to the Eldorado, arriving at the same moment that His Holiness stepped out of the car. With the brocades tucked behind our backs, we bowed, and as he entered the building, we ran to a side entrance and into the breakfast room and quickly pinned on the brocades a moment before His Holiness walked in. He was smiling broadly as we bowed and left the room.

In March, 1976, I was with the Vidyadhara in New York while he conducted a month-long program there. During that time, Khyentse Rinpoche arrived, and I accompanied the Vidyadhara to Kennedy Airport to greet him. We spent some two weeks with him in New York, during which time he performed the Chetsün Nyingthik abhisheka of

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Vimalamitra and Simheshvara for the first time in this country. There were about twenty people in the tantra group there at the time.

In April, 1976, the Vidyadhara announced my regency publicly for the first time, at a party for the entire Vajradhatu and Nalanda Foundation staff, held at Berkley McKeever's house. I was thoroughly surprised by the announcement, since the Vidyadhara hadn't told me in advance that he would be making it. The reactions of the staff, all people I knew very well, varied from elation to depression.

Soon afterwards, Khyentse Rinpoche came to Boulder. The day he arrived, my back went out of place. I had had a chronic lower back problem for years, but this particular episode was the worst I could remember. On the night that Khyentse Rinpoche was to give the same abhisheka that he had given in New York, I could walk only with great difficulty. Several friends gathered at my house before the ceremony. My wife had offered to stay home with all of our children, but I decided that since I had received the abhisheka once before, and since my back hurt so much, I would remain at home with the children.

As my wife and friends were leaving, the phone rang. It was the Vidyadhara. "Are you coming down soon?" he asked. "We are expecting you."

"Well, Rinpoche," I said, "my back is so bad that I thought I would stay home."

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“This is a very important occasion,” he said. “The entire tantra group will be here, and it is necessary for you to be here with me. Don’t give in to these little things. This is purely the temptation of Mara. You should come down immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and went down with my friends to receive the abhisheka.

After the abhisheka, we had scheduled a Vajradhatu oath ceremony. Before we were to go back into the shrine hall, the Vidyadhara asked me how I was feeling. I told him I was all right. He said, “I want you to give the talk tonight at the oath ceremony.” “All right,” I said, and we went in together.

In August, 1976, my formal empowerment as Regent took place in the Karma Dzong shrine hall. I was informed by David Rome on Friday night that the empowerment would be on Sunday. On Saturday I asked David what the ceremony would be, and he said he had no idea. The Vidyadhara hadn’t said anything to him or to anyone else. The sequence of the ceremony was composed early Sunday morning, August 22nd. My wife sewed the meditation sash that the Vidyadhara sent me onto my white shirt half an hour before I went down to Karma Dzong.

After my empowerment, the Vidyadhara gave me instructions in how to proceed. The most important one was this: “In our lineage, it is said that the grandchildren are more accomplished than the

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grandfathers. But there is one thing you should always remember: you have to earn it. My confirmation of you will only go so far. The rest you will have to do by yourself. If that were not the case, we would have been corrupted a long time ago.”

In 1977, the Vidyadhara took his year-long retreat and left me on my own, so to speak. For my part, I never felt he had left. And as I sit and write this, it is the same. In time I hope to write more, and as time goes on there will be more to write. For those of you who are about to hear the teachings of the vajrayana, I would like to make some brief remarks:

In order to be a good student, it is necessary to forget
about your self-importance.

How to proceed is to consider everything that emanates
from the guru as definite instruction, whether it seems
mundane or profound.

How to continue is to act on instruction immediately,
without self-conscious deliberation or analysis.

How to sustain one's effort is to have undiminished faith
in the power of the lineage as the real expression of
truth.

This is my advice according to my own experience. I wish you all great success.

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Dharma brothers and sisters entering the
immutable path,
Feeble as we are, we still have eyes and ears,
Fickle as we are, we still have an empty heart,
Arrogant as we are, we still have intrinsic awareness.
My friends, but for a flash of lightning, there could
be perpetual darkness.
Look at the precious gem, the guru, and see the
Buddha himself.
In the brilliant mandala of suchness, receive his
instructions with discipline and delight.
May all beings attain unsurpassable joy.
May all beings be prosperous.
May the victorious guru ignite the blazing fire of
ultimate wisdom.

This was written at the turning point when winter becomes spring, in the vajra retreat place in the rolling hills of the farm country of California, by Ösel Tendzin, the one who is fortunate to ride on the compassionate rays of the Maitreya Buddha, the crest-jewel of the glorious enlightened society. March 21st, 1980.

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