

Talking Retreat, Romance, and Writing with Kelsang Lhamo

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I interviewed writer and scholar Kelsang Lhamo at my home in Boston, in the fall of 2025. She had just written a long essay about a squatter in her New York apartment which won the Yeshe nonfiction contest, so it felt like a good time to speak with her. She had also recently published a biography of Gene Smith, the scholar and preservationist of Tibetan books who built the premier Tibetan Buddhist digital library. Working under Gene Smith, Kelsang developed into a formidable Buddhist scholar—she honed not only her scholarship, but also her commitment to cultural preservation and transmission. She first rose to fame with her debut book, a mix of prose and poetry, written while she was a nun on retreat in the hills of Dharamsala, which is now being translated into English. I spoke with Kelsang about her education in Tibet, journey to India, writing, and more.

What inspired you to start writing? Can you tell us how you first began writing?

In middle school in Tibet, one of our textbooks had selections from Victor Hugo’s diary. Hugo wrote that if a people don’t have their literature, it’s as if they are in prison without a key. That was when I first became interested in writing. At the time, the weekly newspaper *Tibet Daily* published these short essays called “nyuk sar” and I started to read them.

I began to write and sent my writings to the *Tibetan Art and Literature journal*. They paid 1 or 2 yuan for a word at the time. I collected folk songs and sent them to newspapers. I started to write Ka-shey, which they published. Dechen Dolkar, the founding editor of *Tibetan Art and Literature*, was very supportive of my work.

Then *Lhokha Art and Literature* invited me to a literary workshop that Dungkar Lobsang Trinle was teaching. He had written a commentary on the *Mirror of Poetry*, *Tsigyen Rigpai Gochey*, and he taught us that. It was a 3-month workshop, and along with Dungkar Rinpoche, Chapel Tseten Phuntsok, Sholkhang Thupten Nyima, Gen Khedup, and Ugen Dorje also taught us.

There were sixty-five of us taking this workshop—I was one of two girls there. Most of the other participants were teachers, so I was the youngest at the workshop. When I met Dungkar Rinpoche, I prostrated in front of him. I was the only one to prostrate—it wasn't so restricted, but people didn't prostrate back then—and he took a lot of interest in me. He took me on a pilgrimage to the south of Central Tibet with him, to the Tibetan emperors' tombs and Yumbu Lhakhang and so on.

Tell us more about your education in Tibetan literature.

After I came back home, my mother didn't want me to go to school anymore. We were semi-nomads, *samadrok*, and she wanted to keep me at home. I was doing very well at school, and I wanted to study, so I left home and went to Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche (1906-1992) to learn Tibetan medicine. Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche was a tertön who

lived at Tsayul hermitage, and he was the guru and the doctor in our area. When I asked him to take me on as a student, he agreed. I memorized the *Gyushi, The Four Medical Tantras* root text, and learned the diagnostic methods of pulse and urine checking. But more than medicine, I was learning Tibetan and Buddhist history and literature. I learned Tibetan *namthars* and Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* from Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche, and it changed my life.

Rinpoche had so many ancient texts with him, texts that had been hidden away to keep them safe. And because they had been hidden for so many years, they were all stuck together. Rinpoche's son and I had to take the pages apart, clean and dry them. I copied the *namthars* at night, and I gave them to publishing houses to print. I read Gyelse Thokme Sangpo's text all night and copied it—because the text is all about generosity, I started to feel a lot of renunciation. Rinpoche taught me the Ngondro texts, and *Words of my Perfect Teacher*, and many other texts. I realized that I needed to learn so much more.

My parents wanted me to get married, but I had bigger ambitions than that. I wanted to go to India for further Buddhist study, so Rinpoche helped prepare me for the journey. Rinpoche's cousin also wanted to go, so she and I left together as travel companions. Because of Rinpoche's influence, my family was not punished even though I had left for India; Rinpoche explained that I only went to study the Dharma, and our farmland was not seized. I was the first disciple that Rinpoche took on, after the fall of Tibet. All of Lhokha knew that I was Rinpoche's student, and people were kind to me because of it. I didn't tell my parents that I was going to India. I just left.

Tell us about your journey to India. What were your first years in India like?

I walked for eleven months and passed through Kailash and Mustang to get to India. It was May when we left Lhokha, going first to Lhasa and then Shigatse. We stayed at Kailash, Gang Rinpoche, for three months. The reincarnation of Shabkar was rebuilding a monastery—Lho Trugo Gon, where Yidrok Lhamo bathed in the Choegyal Norsang story—and we stayed and worked there for three months. We earned one yuan a day, in return for food and a place to stay. There were fifteen of us at that point. In September, we left—Shabkar arranged our way to Nepal, and the journey took maybe ten or fifteen days.

A guide took us to Bongpa, then we crossed a river and arrived in Mustang. We had to walk a whole day downhill, all day long. This was in 1987 or 88, and there was no security, no soldiers. In Mustang, we stayed at the palace. The Queen of Mustang found out there were two girls from Tibet, so she invited us to the palace, and we stayed there for a month. Then we walked down to Pokhara, and the whole way down the mountains were filled with Rhododendron flowers.

Once in India, we went straight to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving a Kalachakra initiation. There were so many monks, and they looked resplendent in their monks' robes. And I thought, if only we could wear such robes! Then one day we saw women wearing these robes too—nuns in their robes. Then we went to Dharamsala, and saw His Holiness, and he said we should go to Mentseekhang and study medicine. But we wanted to go on retreat, so we asked him to introduce us to a teacher. For nine years, my friend and

I lived in retreat at Rishi Bhavan in Dharamkot. Our teachers, who lived up at Triund, were Geshe Drubtob and Yeshe Topden.

But I was very interested in poetry, especially love poems, and then I started writing poetry. The writer Gonpo Tsering was interested in me, but I was still very committed to being a nun. It was very cold up in Dharamkot; so in the winter, I went to Varanasi. I began to learn Hindi, which was very easy for me, and I fell in love with Hindi poetry. And then I became a little interested in romance, I think!

How did you write your first book? How did it get published?

During my three months at Kailash on my journey, I started keeping a diary. I was very expressive in my diary and loved writing in it. I wrote letters to Gonpo Tsering in my diary, although I never sent them. I wrote to Dhonyoe la too. Sometimes when people asked me what I was up to, I just showed them my diary. It was Tashi Tsering from Amnye Machen who told me that I should turn my diary into a book. He said he will publish it. So I looked through my diary entries and pulled together the entries on my life in retreat and made a book manuscript. In 2000, Amnye Machen published the book. It was launched at Indiana University with me, Tashi Tsering, Elliot Sperling, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The book was about me and my fellow nuns, although I changed the identifying details. There were four of us, all from Tibet. One of the nuns—she was involved in the demonstrations there—went back to Tibet. Another was the sister of Tsipon Shakabpa. The third nun was Seldon la, who was Kungo Tara's niece. I wrote about her and Khenpo

Choga, who preyed on her—I called him just Khenpo in the book, but everyone knew who it was. I think this was the first Tibetan #MeToo episode. Seldon la ended up having a child, a daughter, whom she never sent to school. Eventually, they went back to Tibet.

Who are the poets and writers that you admire, and why?

I love Langdun Paljor's novel *Tsugyu* and Wangdor Tailing's *The Secret of Tesur House*. And Tsangyon Heruka's *Life of Milarepa* is just wonderful. Without Heruka, Milarepa would not be so famous. No one else writes like Heruka. I also like Dokhar Tsering Wangyal's biography of Phola and *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince*, and Dza Patrul's song collection. I brought these six books with me from Tibet. On the road, I threw away my clothes and my Tsampa because they were too heavy, but I kept my books.

I also love the big Chinese classics—*The Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, etc.—which were translated beautifully into Tibetan. *Water Margin* is about patriotism, and I think a lot of people learned to be nationalistic and patriotic because of this book. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a beautiful love story.

You were a librarian at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center for a long time. What's something about Tibetan books that people should pay attention to?

Every day there were all kinds of texts that we worked with, and it was such an education for me. I knew a little bit of Nyingma texts, and I knew some Geluk texts, but I didn't know other traditions. Gene Smith

wanted us to catalog a text only after we had read it in its entirety, so I learned a lot. We didn't just note the title, the lineage, the genre, and when it was written—we went beyond all that. For Tibetan literature, if you could only see one small corner before, now it was like seeing the whole park.

In the end, it's all the same source, there are just different branches. As a librarian, that's what you learn. In order to catalog, first read the whole text, don't rush. You can learn the essence of the book from the colophon. These days, a book's preface tells you all about the book, but before it was the colophon. Don't judge a book by its cover, or its title, you have to read the colophon. Reading the colophon is like reading the whole book. That's my advice. Even the lamas, when they talk, they give the essence of their talk at the end. It's the same with Tibetan books.

Looking ahead, I think the future will be very challenging for Tibetans, with Tibetan language and literature under great threat. The people I know tell me that in Tibet, the Tibetan language is disappearing. That's why it's up to my generation to save our language.