

I realized today that all of the photographs on my shrine are of teachers who have passed. There's Dudjom Rinpoche in his big framed glasses, head cocked slightly to the right, right hand in mudra holding a dorje. His expression is one of divine assertiveness—not wrathful really—as if he's patiently burning our defilements with the sun of his eyes through the magnifying glass of his spectacle lenses. This photo is framed in azure dyed wood. There's a rare black and white photo of young Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, my root lama, with his long black hair down behind his back in some epic mountain yogi robes. The expression of his face belies a deep concern for the world full of suffering sentient beings and yet—characteristic of Lama Tharchin—an amused hopefulness as though he knows an inside joke...like “everything is just fine in the Buddha Realms and isn't it funny there's such a fuss down here.” This one is framed in brass. My aunt Regina gave me the picture and the frame one day when I was reluctantly helping her clean out her storage room. Of course both photographs capture the true, incomparable kindness of these great masters expressed in their unique presence. My favorite picture in the world, though, is of my brother at age two nestled confidently behind Rinpoche's pecha, looking right at home on the honorary throne and even belligerently wearing Rinpoche's sun glasses with an ear splitting grin. Rinpoche gazes down upon his wispy toe head with that look of such affection and amusement that we fortunate children of Lama Tharchin Rinpoche know so well.

But it's not just my shrine. My desk, my dresser and my bedside table all have pictures of Rinpoche staring at me. To any random guest who enters my room, (I'm a student and I live in Oakland and I have all kinds of secular friends and lovers who have never met Rinpoche) it must seem strange that I have at least half a dozen photos of this smiley brown man all over my ghetto cave. I haven't decided if I think it's weird to have all of these photos...especially now that he's died...or whatever he did. But when I look at his eyes all squinted up in his characteristic massive radiant smile, I feel this crazy tingle that goes all the way to my toes and I am not sad at all but I feel insanely grateful and utterly protected. So maybe I should get at least one picture of a living lama to place on my shrine just so I'm not living in some sort of sublime graveyard photo album. But who knows? I must ask someone about it. Those kinds of questions were never what I would ask Rinpoche when he was alive. In fact I rarely had any questions to ask him. Or if I did, they would all dissolve as soon as his little hand would grab mine. Anyway, I've been inching along on my Ngondro; (I've had more hours of direct instruction and in-depth commentary reading than actual practice) and I know all he wants is for me to be happy, to remain sober (because I have that wild gene that makes it impossible for me to drink or use drugs safely) and to continue with my western education for the time being.

I have two messages from Rinpoche saved on my answering machine. They are both the same. “Hi, sweetie. It's Popo calling. Give me 'call when you get a chance ok? I love you...” Most times when I'd call, our conversation would essentially be a slightly extended dialogue version of the message he'd leave me. So when he died I wondered only briefly if there was something I wished I would've said, or something I should have asked him. Then I remembered all that matters is those squinty eyes and that beaming look and that I continue my Ngondro. Being a neurotic, slightly obsessive compulsive perfectionist, it was mind blowing the one time I asked Rinpoche urgently exactly what he wants me to do. He didn't say 1000 prostrations every day. He didn't say I should always keep the guru in my heart and on my shoulder. He didn't say I should reel in my explosive, hormonal sensual appetite for anything and everything pleasurable in this world. He just said his greatest wish was for me to be happy. Then he added: “just don't drink and if you can practice, just a little bit everything else is like a bonus.”

So as I'm writing this rambling reflection I have no idea what I'm talking about. It makes me too sad and stresses me out way too much to attempt to capture some essence of Rinpoche or to share some individual perspective I might have from my angle since I've had the ridiculous good fortune to've been his student since age zero. I just know that he was my North Star for my whole life. I know that some of my first words were mantras, and I know that when I lost my way and nearly died as a teenage drug addict, it was his gentle urging and his generous kindness that saved my life. In good times and bad I squeeze the beads around my neck and feel like a rich man because Rinpoche was a treasure to me. When I say I'm not good at mourning, I don't mean that it's hard for me to grieve gracefully, I mean the channels that lead from my loss to my heart to my tear ducts are all twisted and clogged and I feel numb like my head is full of those foam packing peanuts. So when people sob I know it's sad for us that it appears we've lost our most precious treasure, and I wish I could cry more than I have, but when I look at all the pictures lurking and glinting in all the corners of my room I don't feel remotely like I'm looking at a dead man's face. Because if anything Rinpoche is closer than ever now that he's everywhere at once.