



# Living Dharma, Living Art

## VENERABLE DUGU

**CHOEGYAL RINPOCHE** is the 8th incarnation in the line of Choegyal Rinpoches, all of whom were outstanding artists and masters of the Drukpa Kagyu meditation lineage. Originally from Tibet, Choegyal Rinpoche has been active in the arts preservation and training programs in the Tashi Jong community in India, and also founded the Tibetan Heritage Project on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal. His artwork has been widely exhibited and is included in many prominent collections. See [www.choegyalrinpoche.org](http://www.choegyalrinpoche.org) to view more of his art.

Lodoe Drimey, a former student of Choegyal Rinpoche's whose work also appears here, is one of the foremost Tibetan painters of the younger generation.. He recently completed 21 Taras in collaboration with Rinpoche,\* and his work has been exhibited in the United States, Switzerland, Italy, Argentina, and Taiwan, and can be seen at [www.dharmaartworks.org](http://www.dharmaartworks.org).

\* Rinpoche, literally "precious one" is a Tibetan honorific title used here to refer specifically to Choegyal Rinpoche.

## THE PAINTINGS OF

# Dugu BY WILLIAM BOORSTEIN Choegyal Rinpoche







# Gold Leaf Optional..

**“LOOK AT THIS!”** said Alejandro, when I returned to our hotel room in Delhi a few months ago. His extended hand preciously cradled what looked like an old, small, broken, plastic Mylanta bottle. I carefully picked it up and turned it around to discover the treasure hidden within. Alejandro had brought a tiny statue of Milarepa to Choegyal Rinpoche to be blessed. (Milarepa was an 11th century Tibetan yogi).

Two days later, when Rinpoche returned the statue, it had received more than the traditional lama’s blessing. Rinpoche had fashioned a cave out of the plastic pharmaceutical bottle and placed a small wad of crumpled paper tissue on its floor as a rocky seat. Clamped under the closed plastic cap were a few more crude strips of tissue, these painted blue, representing the sky by day. The night sky manifested as a simple covering of aluminum foil on the back wall with two small glow-in-the-dark stars. Milarepa was seated quietly on the cave floor, gazing gently into space.

The tiny object had tremendous power. This was not the result of extraordinary technical craftsmanship, nor from gold leaf or other precious materials; these were absent. Rather, it was a piece of art, full of life and energy, a pure expression of *dharma*. Choegyal Rinpoche’s simplest definition of dharma art is “that which is positive, gives under-

standing, and has good energy.” Good energy is energy with no discrimination and which benefits all those who come in contact with it, whether by seeing it, by venerating it, or through any other type of connection.

Rinpoche gives the example of the old story of a *tsa-tsa* (a small, molded clay stupa or Buddha). One day a man made a *tsa-tsa*, a piece of dharma art, and placed it along the road. Soon it began to rain and a second man carefully set a piece of old shoe leather he found lying in the road over the *tsa-tsa* to protect it. A third man, shocked by the site of shoe leather on top of a sacred object, uncovered the *tsa-tsa*. All three made a connection with the *tsa-tsa*, which itself was connected to enlightened beings. The three were hooked like fish, sooner or later to be reeled in towards enlightenment.

“Ultimately there is no dharma separate from art,” says Choegyal Rinpoche. This explains his deep commitment to the preservation of the living tradition of the Tibetan arts. Historically, the Tibetan people engaged in the arts with faith, as activities of devotion and spiritual practice. Art was essentially free of comparison, competition, pride and attachment. This is very different from the West, where one can be considered important and gain great fame as an artist.

## NOTES TO PAINTINGS...

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### **Nine Dragons (Dugu Choegyul Rinpoche)**

poster color on Himalayan bark paper, 1982

This is based on a story Choegyul Rinpoche heard from several lamas who were present in 1953 when the current (8th) Dorzong Rinpoche traveled along the Yongten Ritra range in Tibet. Just after the local people gathered and began presenting offerings, these clear and striking signs appeared (the nine white stripes at top of painting). Many claimed these to be dragons. Rinpoche had never visited this area himself, but years after completing the painting, comparison with a photograph demonstrated remarkable accuracy in his depiction of the landscape.

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### **Flowers Ready to Dance (Dugu Choegyul Rinpoche)**

poster color on Himalayan bark paper, 1987

This painting of flowers dancing in space is a hybrid of Rinpoche's representational work and his works that emerge from pure feeling.

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### **Bardo Being (Dugu Choegyul Rinpoche)**

watercolor on rice paper, 2000

This is a watercolor sketch of the experience a practitioner might have upon passing away. It is based on many stories of practitioners dying, from the Bardo teachings, and from Rinpoche's "guesswork." The mind leaves the crown chakra and sees a world of light that manifests as a pure land or mandala. "The brush spontaneously created the world of concept and body below, in which everything is becoming dark and disappearing; the world above, which is open and beyond space; and the boundary separating the two."

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### **Buddha in Lotus (Lodoe Drimey)**

watercolor and poster color on Himalayan bark paper, 2001

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"Art, spiritual training, and meditation practice were inseparable since I was a young child in the Dugu region of Tibet. I spent much of my time mingling my mind with the *thankas* and spiritual art that surrounded me. During those first years in India, I devoted much effort to recreating, from memory, some of the great *thankas*, deity paintings, and other artistic treasures that were destroyed in the cultural revolution.

Later I began what might be called "spontaneous paintings." These works are the craziness of my flowing inner energy. They manifest as if by themselves. With brush and color I let everything flow and move without effort and without

inserting myself. These paintings differ from the traditional works in that they do not originate with a plan or concept, and in the process there is no judgement and no modifications are made. They are part of my experience—not an attempt to capture or convey the experience nor to create something to be known as an art piece. Each painting is the result of a unique experience; these arise from visions, feelings, sensations, and from the sparkling clarity of mind.



However, Tibetans have recently been flung into the world of modern Western ideas, including these notions of art. Rinpoche is concerned about the potential negative effect these “new” ideas may have in the coming years. This issue is largely moot at present because few Tibetan artists are in a position to suffer from excessive economic gains or fame from their art. But as Tibetan refugees continue to confront modern economic and career pressures, those engaged in the arts may be faced with the choice of altering their artistic direction to meet financial needs, or more likely, to begin to see art as a “luxury” they cannot afford. In Rinpoche’s characteristic clarity, he stresses that through the new influences Tibetans face, it is most essential to preserve the very essence of the dharma: its uncorrupted, pure nature, which allowed it to flourish for centuries in Tibet and is fundamental to both the dharma and art.

“It is not that there is a particular line or tradition of art that comprises ‘dharma art,’” says Rinpoche. “It can be abstract painting, Western painting, Eastern painting, it can be music, dance, football, skiing or anything; so long as the motivation is not polluted by negative emotions, it is dharma art.”



above right

### **Tara in Lotus (Lodoe Drimey)**

*watercolor on rice paper, 1988*

Tara is known as the mother of the Buddhas, the Wisdom aspect, in the form of a female Bodhisattva. She is especially known for protecting sentient beings from dangers and obstacle which they all manifest due to confusion and lack of wisdom. Here Tara, (Wisdom) is manifesting from an opening lotus of love, compassion, and supreme Bodhicitta mind.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

William Boorstein is a photographer ([boorstein.com](http://boorstein.com)), children’s book author, molecular biologist, and co-founder, with Choegyal Rinpoche, of the International Mandala of Bodhisattvas ([BodhiMandala.org](http://BodhiMandala.org)), an organization dedicated to direct, engaged, compassionate action, free of political and religious boundaries.