Our Tibetan teacher suggested growing Russian teachers of Bon, says Denis Scherbakov

written by Jitka Polanská

Denis Scherbakov is a student of Khenpo Rinchen Tenzin Rinpoche, a resident lama of Yungdrung Bon tradition in Russia who studied at Menri monastery in India. Denis is an organizer and supporter of many activities of his teacher, including a three-year long program of study and practice of tantra and dzogchen for Russian speaking people. He also sponsors a Russian "Drubdra", an intensive meditation program inspired by those offered by monasteries, covering all costs for seven practitioners who are enrolled in it. We asked him about how both programs are organized.

Russia is a big country. Is there only one sangha, or are there more communities of people following Bon?

It is not easy to answer this question. I was introduced to Khenpo Rinchen Tenzin Rinpoche, about ten years ago, by people from the Dzogchen Community of Namhkai Norbu Rinpoche. They told me there was a good bonpo teacher living in Russia who gives teachings and is also knowledgeable in Tibetan medicine.

I offered my help to him with spreading Tibetan medical practices and Rinpoche said to me: “I am a better teacher of dharma than of medical science so if we want to help people let it be in the teaching of dharma.” Rinpoche then wrote down a three year program of study and practice around that time and so in 2015 we opened this program to the first group of people. I was one of those people and went through all the twelve retreats. Since then, we have kept this program going. This year there is the tenth edition.

In 2023, Arta Lama Rinpoche, who is connected with Triten Norbutse Bon monastery in Nepal, encouraged his community of students to follow this program too. As a result, now we are all united through this program and also through other activities included in our project called Pure Lands. I would say we are all now one sangha in this sense.

Denis Scherbakov and his wife Albina during the Drubchen (Mendrup) ceremony in Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India, in April 2024.

How is the program structured?

It comprises twelve retreats within three years. Four of them last two weeks. The program is built quite traditionally, but adapted for non-Tibetan and non-monastic participants. Students have to go step by step, in the right order, starting from *ngondro*, the preliminary practices. After they are trained in *powa* and *zhine*, followed by four retreats focused on *trekcho*. Then teachings on *tummo*, *dream yoga* and *thogal* practices come. It is not possible to take part in the fourth retreat of *trekcho* if they have not gone through the first three retreats.

Retreats are shorter than the traditional ones, which means that practitioners have to do major work when they return home. Unlike in the traditional retreats which can last one hundred days, as for *tummo* for example, students in this program use the retreat mainly to get instructions and ask questions of the teacher. They are supposed to develop their practice according to the instructions before the next retreat comes. Just going to the retreats and not doing anything at home does not make much sense. Well, maybe it is better than nothing but still, the idea behind it is to practice intensively at home in between the retreats.

How many people have gone through the program till now?

1532 people registered and started and 426 people successfully finished.

Do participants meet offline, or online, or both ways?

The course was held in person in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk before the covid. This year the onsite retreat will be in St. Petersburg, in a retreat center that we built, and people who cannot come can join online. The online version has become more and more extended since 2020 when we all got used to it. More and more people are now doing all their retreats at home and connecting with the teacher through the zoom. And not only people from Russia, but also other Russian speaking people from Kazakhstan and other neighboring countries.

Does Rinchen Tenzin Rinpoche lead the program alone or do other teachers also come?

It was mainly himself for quite some time but later he was joined by other teachers, some from Menri, some others from Triten Norbutse monastery. All are excellent teachers chosen by him. It is very interesting to listen to how the different teachers expose the teachings. Also, because of this, some students who have already gone through the program may sit in on these teachings again. They can do so by paying only symbolic money.

I heard that last year you opened another, an even more in-depth program. Can you tell me something about it?

Yes, it is a four-year long "*drubdra*" – a meditation school designed similarly for those set by monasteries. A chosen group of seven people fully dedicate themselves to the study and practice. They live in our meditation center near St.Petersburg. They practice six days a week, one day is free. The first year they went through *ngondro* according to Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud dzogchen cycle.

They all have gone through the three-year course program. Now they are in the *drubdra*, and if everything goes well, they will get two more additional years of training. All together it will be nine years of studies and practice which will qualify them as teachers. Khenpo Rinchen Tenzin Rinpoche said to us: "If you want Bon to put down roots and spread in Russia, you need to grow your native teachers who speak Russian." And so we do.

Russian Drubdra practitioner at Triten Norbutse monastery, Kathmandu

The practitioners visited Triten Norbutse this year to receive blessings from His Excellence Yongdzin Rinpoche, and then continued their journey to attend the Drubchen at Menri Monastery in April.

How do they sustain themselves? Does the sangha help them, somehow?

I cover most of their living costs – having a business in logistics. Other people also contribute, according to their possibilities.

Not only those practitioners, but a large group of Russians took part in the Mendrup ritual last April at Menri Monastery. You were also there, I saw you in the pictures, with your wife. I also knew you both were mentioned as major sponsors in the official materials from Menri Monastery.

Yes, I could come for the closing part, not before. From Russia, there were many people, that is correct. We had a presentation of our activities to His Holiness 34th Menri Trizin and we also performed, on the eleventh day of the Drubchen, a tsok to Sipe Gyalmo by ourselves. It was the first time in its history that lay people had performed a tsok in the monastery.

You surely know Shenten Dargye Ling. Years ago, several dozens of Russian practitioners were coming for a few consecutive years to receive teachings from Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche. The group was led by Khenpo Arta Lama Rinpoche.

Sure, I know of Shenten Dargye Ling, but I have not yet been there. With great pleasure I will come to visit, if there is an opportunity. Talking about this, it comes to my mind that not long ago, we established a cooperation with Dimitry and Carol Ermakov. They did many valuable transcripts of the teachings of Yongdzin Rinpoche which took place at Shenten Dargye Ling and now we together try to make them accessible to our Russian practitioners. I think four publications have been released. There is not much dharma literature available in Russian as in English and so lots of work still needs to be done here in Russia.

The w*ebsite of the Russian sangha https://bon.su contains beside other information also articles about different aspects of Bon and the editors also translates and publishes chosen articles from Speech of Delight.*