I follow in the footsteps of my teachers to preserve Bön culture, says Khenpo Lungrig Nyima from Ladakh

written by Jitka Polanská



Khenpo Lungrik Nyima was born in Ladakh and returned there in 2000 to support his community. In this interview, he explains the purpose and activities of the center he leads. The interview was conducted by Jitka Polanska, Anna Sehnalova and Wolfgang Reuter in Kathmandu in February 2025, during the centenary celebration of the birth of His Eminence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.

Khenpo Nyima, you are originally from Ladakh, aren't you?

My mother and father came to Ladakh from Tibet as refugees. My mother was from Ngari Prefecture, near Mount Kailash. My father is from Nagchu in Kham. They met and married in Ladakh. I was born there, and so were my brothers and sisters. I have four sisters and five brothers. We are ten siblings.

What did your parents do in Ladakh to make a living?
My family was mainly nomadic. We had yaks, sheep, and goats when I was a child. In 1990, the family moved to Choglamsar, a large Tibetan refugee settlement about eight kilometers from Leh, the capital city of Ladakh**.** There, they could not keep animals anymore.

Tibetans who live in the settlement live usually on some kind of business. Some open a small restaurant, many sell sweaters in the winter, this is what Tibetans who live in India mostly do. Some work as tourist guides in the summer, taking visitors on tours with horses. Or they cook for people

who go on pilgrimage.

Does your family still live in the settlement?

Yes, my parents and some of my brothers and sisters still live in Choglamsar. One brother became a teacher of traditional Tibetan arts at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi. Another brother moved to Switzerland.

Were your parents Bonpo?

Yes. My mother followed both the Nyingma tradition and Bön. My father was a Bön follower.

In 1994, the Bön cultural center in Choglamsar was opened. Whose initiative was it?

It was initiated by some local senior people. They built the first construction, which served as a committee hall, a big room designed for all kinds of gatherings. It was built next to the river Indus that passes through the settlement.

You were at Triten Norbutse at that time, as a newly graduated geshe, and worked as a teacher there. Tell us more about your life before you returned to Ladakh. You studied at Menri Monastery in India, right?

I was ten or eleven years old when I became a monk. I liked it; my parents did not force me. Before that, I studied Tibetan a little with my father. He tried to teach me the alphabet, but I did not learn much. Then my parents brought me to Menri Monastery. They stayed with me in Dolanji for a year. By the way, my father was a close Dharma friend of Yongdzin Sangye Tenzin, the teacher of my teacher Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche. They went together on a pilgrimage to Kongpo Bönri, which is a very holy place for Bönpos.

After a year or so, my parents left and went back to Ladakh. Originally, they might have planned to move to Dolanji permanently, but it was not easy to find work. They had been nomads for most of their lives and did not know English or Hindi. Knowing Hindi is important for any business they could eventually do there.



Khenpo Nyima as a young monk with his teacher Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche



So they left Dolanji and I stayed in the monastery. I studied the alphabet again with the 33rd Menri Trizin, Lungtok Tanpai Nyima. We were around twenty little monks. We studied early in the morning. Around eight o'clock, the other children went to school to receive modern education, but I was not interested in it and stayed to study Tibetan and some prayers with Rinpoche. Later I joined the Dialectic School and became a geshe in 1992.

Then you left for Triten Norbutse…

Yes, I decided to go there to join Yongdzin Rinpoche and study Dzogchen with him. I practiced Dzogchen meditation at the monastery together with Khenpo Nyima Wanggyal, Lama Sangye Monlam, Trulku Sherap Lodoe and some others, we were one group. I also taught monks poetry, creating mandalas, and similar subjects. For a few years I served as a *gekkö* (master of discipline). But I mostly gave advice to monks; I was not strict.

Why did you go back to Ladakh?

It was upon the request of His Holiness the 33rd Menri Trizin, His Eminence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, and also some people in Ladakh. They insisted: "If you do not stay here, we will disappear," they were saying. So I returned, it was in 2000. I was thirty something years old.

You are the only Bonpo *geshe* from Ladakh, aren't you?

That´s correct. So, I went back, but with no experience of practical life, I had no idea how to build a center or what to do. I had lived in a monastery all my previous life. First, I tried to fundraise money. I went to other places in India—Dehradun, Sikkim, Dharamsala—and asked for donations, but I collected only one hundred rupees, very little.

But slowly, slowly, we built our *gompa*, our temple. In 2002, the first floor of it was finished. Now, besides that, we have a building with four rooms. Before, everything happened in the *gompa*: guests stayed there and meetings took place there. Now we have a guest room and a kitchen. We are also building a bigger library—before we had only a very small one. My plan is to build a meditation place in a more remote area. A meditation place is important for anyone who wants to practice. Our place is close to a highway, it is quite noisy, so we need to build it a bit further.



What are the main activities organized by Bön Culture Preservation Society under your guidance?

The main purpose is to keep and transmit Bön religion and culture as the root culture of all Tibetans. Children from Bönpo families, but not only, come to the center to learn Tibetan, reading, writing. They attend SOS TCV School, where Bon culture and tradition are not taught. So, at the monastery, I teach them some aspects of Bon culture and tradition, especially during the long two-month winter vacation. They come to the center for a few hours every day. Those who are interested and come from Bönpo families I also teach about Bön and Dharma, some prayers too.

Besides that, sometimes researchers come and ask questions. They are mainly students from the local university, but also foreign researchers drop by. Last year, Muslim students from Ladakh came to me. By the way, I also have a Muslim friend who is a teacher; he often comes. His ancestors followed both Islam and Buddhism. Mixing of religions is quite typical for Ladakh.

Is your center a monastic institution?

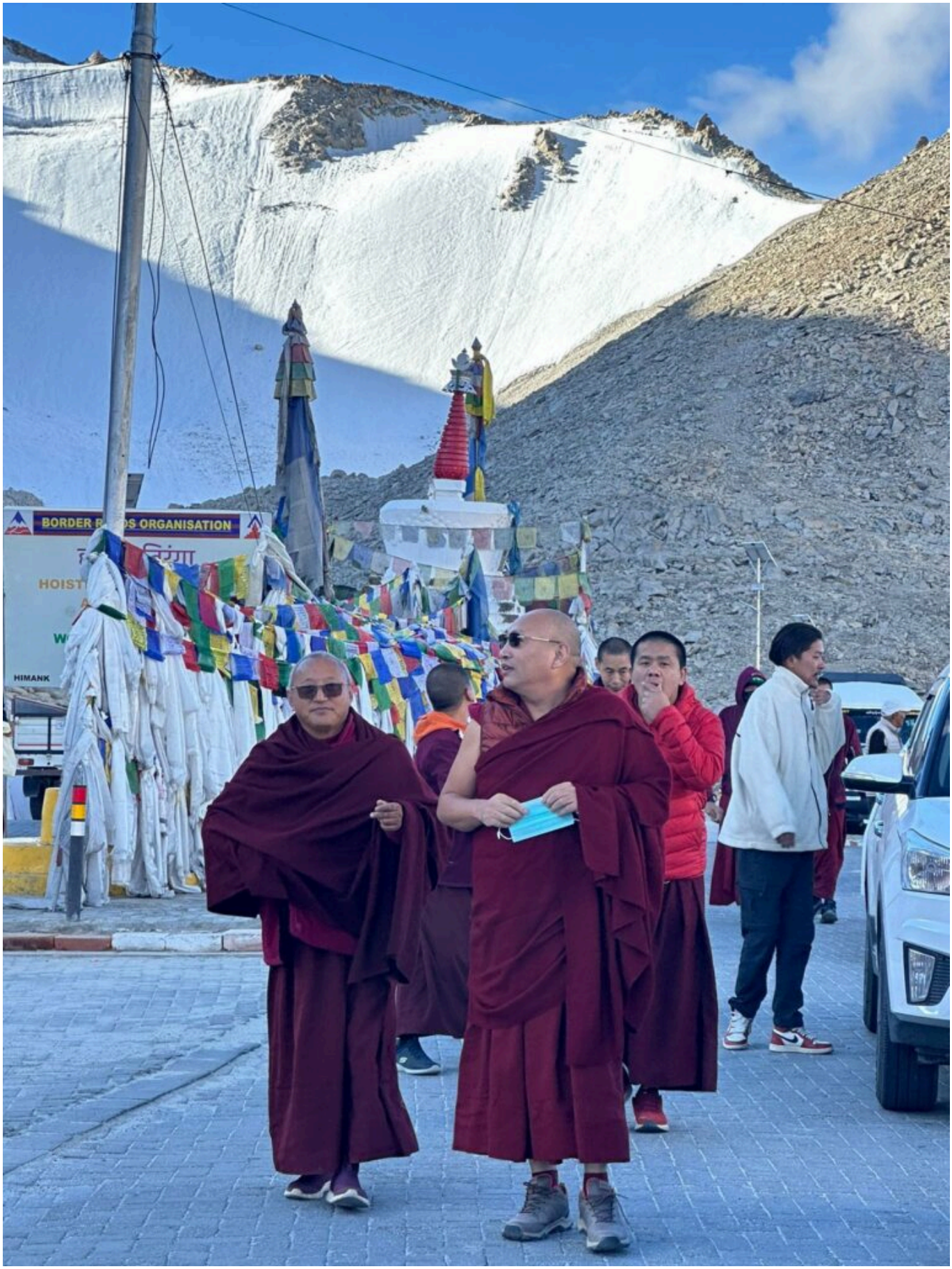
Not really, we are only two monks there. The other people who take care of the center are lay practitioners. On special days, like full moon days, we do a *puja* and read sutras. We do long-life prayers for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness Menri Trizin, His Eminence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche and we prayed for a peaceful existence of the whole human society.

In 2024, you invited His Holiness the 34th Menri Trizin Dawa Dhargyal Rinpoche to Ladakh. What was his program there?

Yes, finally we could do it. Rinpoche stayed for one week. For that occasion, other lamas gathered too. Fifteen monks came from Triten Norbutse and more than twenty monks from Menri. Some families from Dolanji, the village connected to Menri Monastery, also came. Many *geshe*s who could not come supported me with donations. The lamas performed the consecration of our temple, and Rinpoche gave initiations to people. I think it was the first time in history that a Menri Trizin came to Ladakh. It was important for Bönpo families to receive his blessing.

We also invited other Tibetans, non-Bönpos, to Rinpoche's talk. Two to three hundred people came to our event. There is not much information about Bön as a source of Tibetan religion and culture. This was an occasion for people to understand it better. We also invited representatives of the settlement, of the Union Territory of Ladakh, and the head of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. In the past, Bön was seen negatively in Ladakh, as in other places. Now it is quite okay. There are no big troubles.

His Holiness Menri Trizin also visited some holy places in Ladakh, like Pangong Tso, a lake with salty water. It is a very famous place. We went with him to see the highest motorable pass in Ladakh, Umling La, and we performed *sang chöd* there.



With 34th Menri Trizin *Dawa* Dhargyal Rinpoche

Ladakh was a part of the Zhang Zhung empire before the seventh century, and researchers discover traces of Zhang Zhung culture here, mainly rock art. There is some evidence that in Zhang Zhung the anticlockwise movements were common in the rituals which is something that Bönpo rituals

have as well.

Do you plan to offer monastic education at your center, to train young monks?
I cannot take care of young people who would like to become monks. You have to provide everything for them, and I cannot do that. But I would like to organize more Dharma teachings in the future—not only for monks, but for lay people too. Dharma is a medicine for the mind.


On the roof of the bon temple in Ladakh

You carry out a large project with limited resources, and you are far away from your home monasteries. What helps you not to get discouraged when it feels difficult?

Sometimes I feel I am making very slow progress. Some other lamas can accomplish in two years what I do in twenty years. I am like a turtle—very slow (laughing). But I am steady and not discouraged. I came back to Ladakh following the footsteps of our root masters, Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Trizin, in their efforts to preserve our tradition and culture. I know it is the right thing to do. That makes me keep going.

Special thanks go to Kunga, a younger brother of Khenpo Nyima Lungrik, teacher of traditional Tibetan arts, who helped to check the interview and added some contextual information.



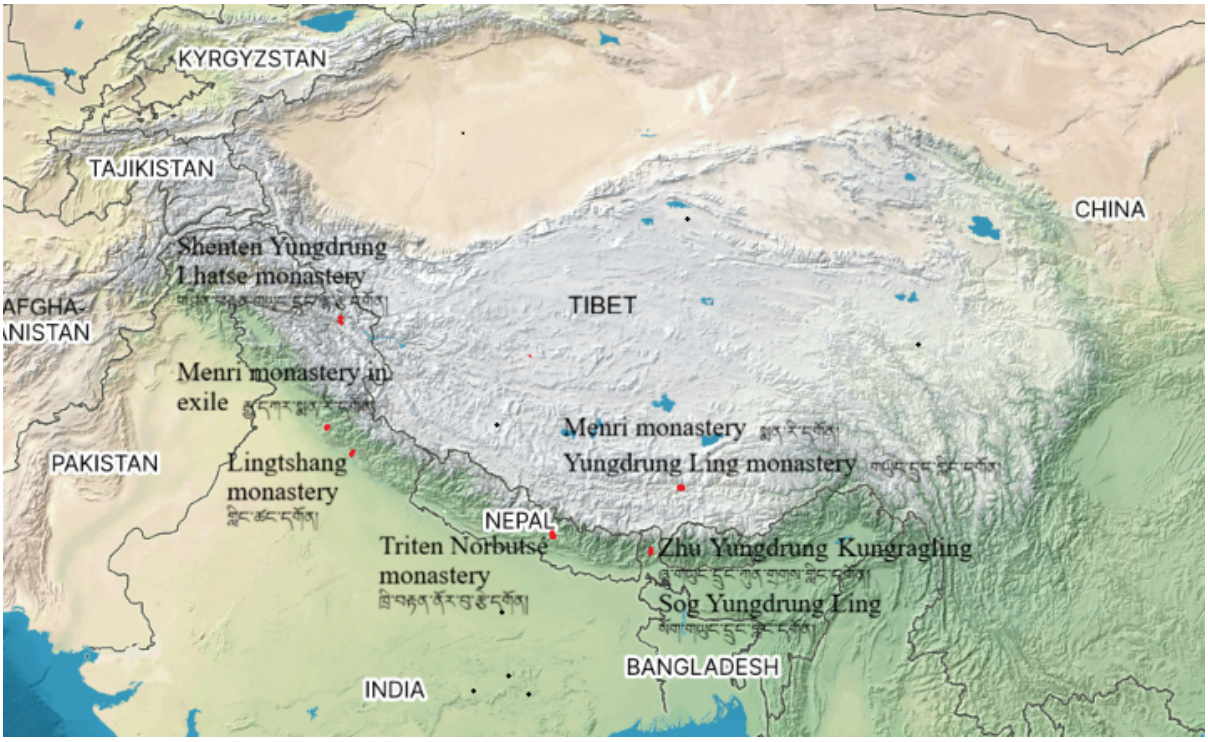
Clicking on the picture you will be redirected to the website of the Bön Culture Preservation Society

pictures: Khenpo Lungrig Nyima

Researcher Anna Sehnalova (currently based at The Chinese University of Hong Kong) brings some context to the described initiative:

> Khenpo Nyima-la is to be congratulated on establishing the first institution of Yungdrung Bon, Shenten Yungdrung Lhatse monastery, in the region of Ladakh in the Western Indian Himalayas. Unlike Nepal, with traditional Bonpo communities in Mustang and Dolpo that go back many hundreds of years, India and the part of the Himalayan range there have historically not hosted prominent Yungdrung Bon communities that we would currently have substantial remnants of.
>
> This changed with the influx of the Tibetan refugees into India since 1959. Among them were Bonpos, eager to save and practise their traditions. First came Menri monastery, originally established in Central Tibet in 1405 (with the nearby and much later Yungdrung Ling monastery from 1834). Menri in its exile manifestation appeared near Solan in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in 1969. It arose from the efforts of Tibetan Bonpo refugees led by Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and is the first Yungdrung Bon monastery in India.
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> A second Yungdrung Bon monastery soon followed, already in 1974, albeit private and much smaller – Lingtshang monastery in Dehradun in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, again in the Western Indian Himalayas. It was a revived institution from eastern Tibet pursued by Trinle Gyatso from the nearby Lingtshang refugee settlement.
>
> The Eastern Indian Himalayas gained their Yungdrung Bon monastery in the 1980s, namely Zhu Yungdrung Kungragling, set up by Yungdrung Tshultrim in the Indian state of Sikkim, historically an independent kingdom governed by hereditary kings adherent to Tibetan Buddhism similarly to Ladakh. Although the monastery was a local initiative, its administration fell under the exile Menri monastery. Another monastery in southern Sikkim appeared in 2013, Sog Yungdrung Ling founded by Khenpo Yonten Gyatso from the exile Triten Norbutse monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal (established in 1987). It has

an affiliated elementary school for children from deprived backgrounds.



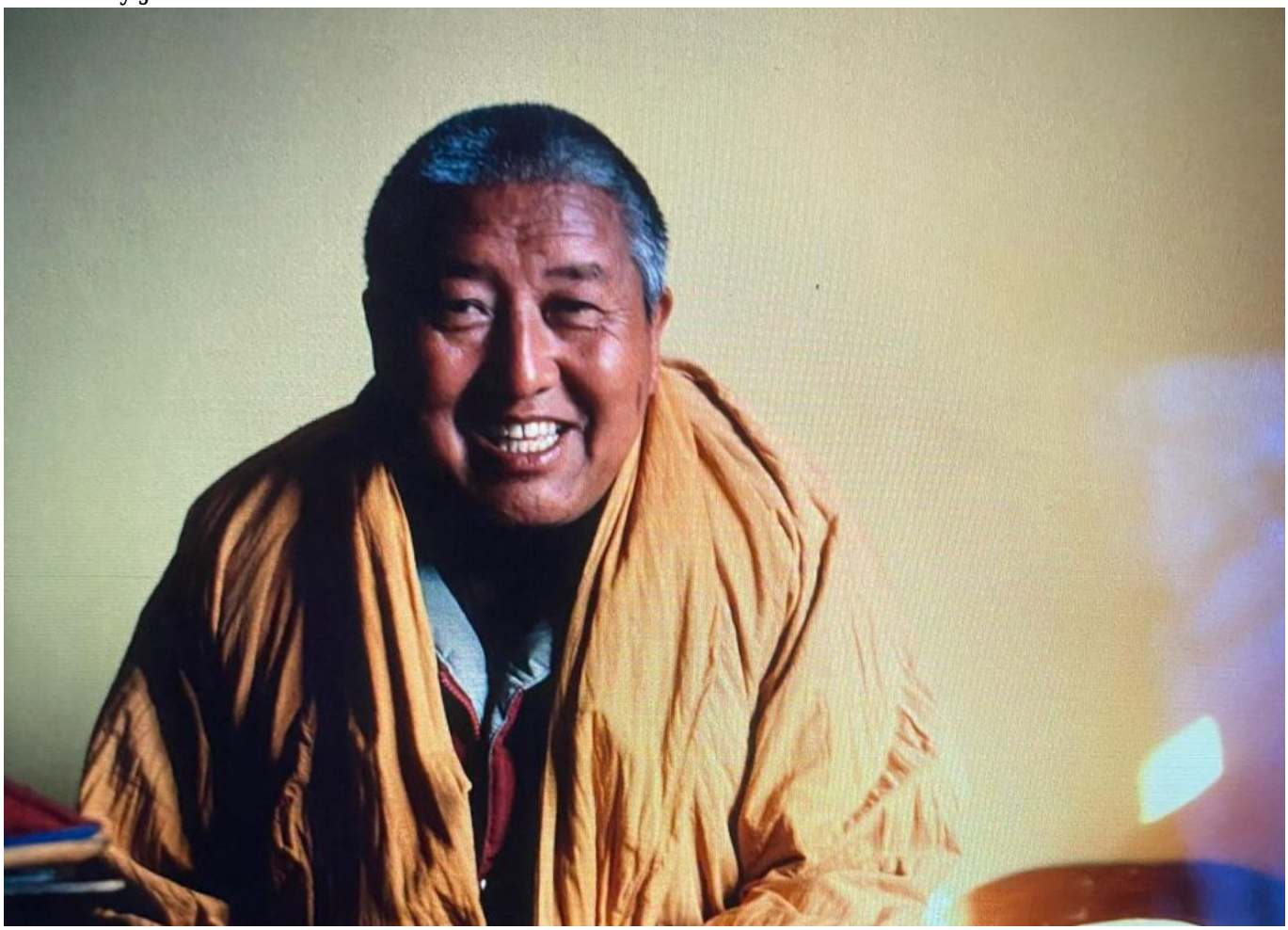
Khenpo Nyima-la's centre in Ladakh, a centre for laypeople and essentially a small monastic unit, is therefore the fifth Yungdrung Bon monastic establishment in the Indian Himalayas and in India in general. It testifies to the progress of the second exile Bonpo generation, being started by someone born in the exile and trained in the exile Menri monastery. Like most of the previous cases, its location aligns with a Tibetan refugee settlement and reminds us how the Tibetan exile situation reshapes the religious landscape of the Himalayas. It further shows how exile centres directly derive from the important old centres in Tibet in both their constitution and by their names. Without doubt, Khenpo Nyima-la's work constitutes a significant step for Yungdrung Bon.

Sources: Geshe Samten-la from Triten Norbutse monastery, Kathmandu; Karmay, Samten G., and Yasuhiko Nagano (editors). 2003. *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya*, Bon Studies 7. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology; https://bonladakh.org/; https://www.sogyungdrungling.com/; https://mapy.com/

Anna Sehnalova, an anthropologist and tibetologist, has spent several years in Tibet and the Himalayas engaged in studies and research, along with pursuing doctorates at Oxford University and Charles University in Prague. She is primarily interested in how people understand and relate to their ecological surroundings. She explored this, for example, through the Bonpo medical tradition and the Mendrub healing rite (writing a PhD thesis on the subject) or by looking at how Tibetan mountain deities are understood—a topic she discussed at the most recent International Conference of Bon Studies, held at Triten Norbutse monastery in February 2025.

He was laughing so often! Researcher Krystyna Cech recalls conversations with Yongdzin Rinpoche

written by Jitka Polanská



For more than two years, from 1982 to 1984, Krystyna Cech lived in Dolanji, the main Bönpo refugee exile settlement located in the Solan district of Himachal Pradesh in India, observing the life of the community. She based her doctoral thesis on that fieldwork. During that time, Krystyna spent many hours talking with Lopon Tenzin Namdak – as he was humbly and commonly called at that time – the lama who played a key role in securing a safe place for Tibetan refugees of the Bön religion to settle and who was to become the most revered teacher of the global Bön community. His Eminence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche – "Lopon" – passed away on the 12th of June of 2025, after reaching one hundred years of age. This interview is dedicated to Rinpoche´s memory and is published the day after all the purification rituals were concluded at Shenten Dargye Ling, on the occasion of the Bön Losar falling on the 19th January this year.

Krystyna, what went before you started your research in Dolanji? How did you choose it?

After I finished my first degree, which was in sociology, I travelled to Asia. I spent some time in Japan and when I was slowly making my way back home to England, I stopped over in Kathmandu, where I intended to stay only briefly, but ended up staying for two years. I applied for a Royal Nepal

Academy fellowship to do a project about women. I chose to do it in a village near Dhankuta in eastern Nepal among the Athpariya Rai people. The project was accepted. I lived in the village for six months observing the way of life of the villagers, especially that of the women. On one of my treks north of the village I came upon a train of yaks coming along a trade route (carrying salt, I think) through a small town from further up north. For some reason it made a huge impression on me – an intimate encounter with the people and animals from the northern area of Nepal where the culture was influenced by Tibet. After that, I wanted to find out more about Tibetan culture. When I returned to England and was planning my PhD at the University of Oxford, I decided to do it in anthropology, not in sociology, and the aim was to continue to explore the life of people rooted in Tibetan culture.

The title of your thesis is *The Social and Religious Identity of the Tibetan Bonpos with Special Reference to a North-west Himalayan Settlement*. Did you choose this subject right away, or did it emerge in the process?

At the time I was choosing the subject, not much had been published about Bön. When it was mentioned in the literature, it was described mainly as a kind of shamanic religion with somewhat mysterious and magical rituals. I got intrigued and wanted to know more about this "Bön religion". But in the process, I discovered that many of the rituals attributed to Bön were also present in Buddhism; they were more a universal feature of Tibetan culture than something specific to Bön alone. As I came to understand this, the focus of my research gradually shifted and I realised that Bön could not be understood without reference to Buddhism and Buddhism could not be understood without reference to Bön. I then started looking for a place and a community with whom I could do my fieldwork.

What brought you to Dolanji? How did you find the community living there?

I went first to Ladakh. There I happened to meet Tadeusz Skorupski, a Tibetologist working with Professor David Snellgrove from the University of London. Professor Snellgrove had invited three Bönpo monks to England in the 1960s to help him with his textual research. One of those monks had been Lopon Tenzin Namdak and the other two were, soon to become, Abbot Sangye Tenzin and the now renowned scholar, Samten Karmay. Tadeusz told me about the settlement of Dolanji where Tibetan Bön refugees had gathered and built a monastery. I decided to go and have a look. When I arrived at Menri monastery, I met the abbot, 33rd Menri Trizin Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, whom I knew as Sangye Tenzin. He was very welcoming. He spoke good English after his three years in England with Professor Snellgrove. When I explained that I wanted to do research on folk religion, he laughed and said: "I don't think you'll find it here." But he told me I could come and do my fieldwork. After meeting him, I met Lopon Tenzin Namdak and got his consent as well.



Krystyna Cech at Triten Norbutse monastery, February 2025. Photo Jitka Polanská

How old were you then?

I started my fieldwork when I was twenty-six, and this first visit was some months earlier, in 1981. On that occasion I stayed only for a couple of days, just long enough to see whether I could obtain permission to do my research there.

Why were they so quick to say yes, what do you think?

I think it was the connection with David Snellgrove, through Tadeusz Skorupski who had directed me there. Also, I believe that I was welcomed because both Lopon and the Abbot had a good impression of western-style research after living and working in an academic environment in England.

When exactly did you come, and how long did you stay?

I started my research in January 1982 and finished in May 1984.

Did you stay there the whole time?

Yes, I was there for most of the period, apart from one visit to Europe. Menri monks had been invited to perform cham, the sacred dance, on a tour that included France, Belgium and Germany, and I went along with them to help. It was very interesting for me to see how they were projecting their Bön identity. Lopon Tenzin Namdak did not go, but the abbot did and was in charge of the whole group of about twelve monks, all of them very young, in their early twenties, apart from two older monks. Before they left for the tour, there were plenty of rehearsals – they were just young things and had to be taught the precise dance steps. Then the costumes had to be made, and the Bön hats had to be made…

Where did you live in Dolanji?

There was one small guestroom at the monastery. It was basically just one room where anyone visiting would stay. There were visitors from the West already there at that time. For example, the excellent musicologist Ricardo Canzio came to record Bön ritual chanting accompanied by his wife, Priscilla, a photographer…

I stayed in that guestroom for a while, even though it was within the monastery. It was a bit unusual for a woman to be staying in the monastery, but it felt as if I had a kind of *carte blanche*; I was allowed to go almost anywhere. Not into the monks' rooms, of course – that was forbidden, and understandably so. I stayed in the monastery guestroom for three months, but I wanted to be in the community, in the village part of the settlement. So, Abbot Sangye Tenzin arranged for me to stay in a house down in the village in a row of houses called Amdo Line, where people originally from Amdo had settled. I lived in one of those houses.

What were your living conditions like? For example, what kind of toilet did you have?

There was an outdoor toilet. You had to walk a little way down the slope. I shared it with the family next door, who kindly allowed me to use it.

Did you have electricity?

Yes, we had electricity.

And water? How did you get water?

There were water tanks higher up on the hill. Each family could fill their own individual tank at certain times, through a water hose.

Did you prepare your own meals?

There were three families I regularly went to for my meals, taking turns from week to week. They were all from Amdo. Abbot Sangye Tenzin was from Amdo, so he knew those people well and, in a way, could keep an eye on me.

How did you speak with them – in which language?

They didn't speak English, but I was learning Tibetan and spoke Tibetan with them. The longer I stayed, the more fluent I became. It was full-immersion learning. One difficulty was that there were people from different areas of Tibet in the settlement, and they spoke different dialects. As I said,

there was a line of houses with people from Amdo, who spoke the Amdo dialect. Then there was another section of the settlement where people came from Ü-Tsang, the central area of Tibet, another where people were from western Tibet, and another from Kham. They all knew central Tibetan, but if they wanted to say something that I shouldn't understand, they would slip into their own dialects, and I had no idea what they were talking about. Once they spoke central Tibetan, however, I could follow.

There were only Bönpo families in the settlement, right?

Yes, they came to live there because they were Bönpo. They felt more secure there. In those days, the Bön religion was not regarded very favourably by other Tibetans. Lopon Tenzin Namdak chose the site also because it was not easy to reach. He thought their daily life and religious practices would not be interfered with so much by other Tibetans who were not Bönpo. The atmosphere at that time was somewhat fearful, the general attitude towards Bönpos was rather unfriendly.

Dolanji at that time was indeed difficult to reach. There was a bus from Solan to Kalaghat, and after that you had to walk about five kilometers to the settlement. There was no proper road. The monastery did have a battered jeep, which they used once a week to buy supplies in Solan, but the journey was quite precarious.

How did you structure your survey in the settlement?

Initially, I had a set of questions and went from house to house with them. First, I asked where people had come from, who they had come to India with, and the story of their escape from Tibet. It wasn't that long after 1959, just a little over twenty years – so they had very vivid memories of escaping, and of the hard life they had at the beginning in India. The settlement wasn't founded until 1967, so between 1959 and 1967 they were scattered in different places and doing very hard physical work. Many of them had helped build roads, both men and women, and it was extremely demanding physically.

What did they do to make a living by the time you were there? What was their work then?

Mainly trading, and a little agriculture, although the land there wasn't very good for farming. In the winter season they used to buy Indian-made machine-knitted acrylic sweaters and then they went to places like Calcutta for two or three months to sell them. There was great demand for these sweaters in winter because it does get chilly in north India. Many of them earned enough money to live quietly in Dolanji for the rest of the year.

The population of the settlement went down in winter because so many people left to do this trading. They all returned for Losar in February, bringing money and new clothes for themselves and their families. I'm not sure if they still engage in this kind of trade. When I was there last year, I didn't have enough time to find out.

What did you ask them about their religion?

I was interested in domestic rituals – in the situations when a family or household would ask monks to come and perform a ritual for them. Almost invariably, it was when someone was sick. The ritual didn't have to be performed in the monastery; it could be held in their homes, as each house had its own household shrine. Four to six monks would come to perform a commissioned ritual. If the household was wealthy, they might commission the rituals in the monastery itself. It seemed to be the rule that the householders would always invite monks from the region of Tibet that they came from originally to perform rituals for them.

During those more than two years, you spent many hours talking with Lopon Tenzin Namdak, or Yongdzin Rinpoche, as many call him. What were the circumstances of your conversations, and what did you talk about?

He was very busy teaching the monks in the Dialectics School, but I always felt welcome. Perhaps he wanted to speak English to me. Sometimes, more rarely, he was busy and said: “Oh no, not now.” Otherwise, I was always given tea and made welcome to sit and listen.

He shared the story of his life. But it was not just about himself; he would tell you all about his village and his family. He spoke very fondly of his mother. He often mentioned, with a certain pride – if that is the right word – that she had lived to a great age. I think she reached 104. Perhaps that is where he got his longevity from.

We also did some translations together. He would read a text in Tibetan and then give a rough translation in English. I would write that down and then put it into slightly better English. The last thing we worked on was his Pilgrimage Guide to Tibet, and I am very sorry that I did not finish that translation with him. We probably got about two-thirds of the way through. For each place mentioned he could add so much more information, because he had been there. He had an extremely good memory.



Was he curious about the West and your life? Did he ask you questions, or was it more you asking and him explaining?

No, he wasn’t particularly interested in western things. He had already seen the West with his own eyes. He was not inquisitive in that way, and he was not a worldly person. He was more intent on teaching his monks and helping them become geshes. The abbot, Sangye Tenzin, by contrast, was very interested and always curious about how things were. He liked gadgets – for example, a wristwatch with many functions.

They were very different from each other. The monks used to call them the father and the mother of the monastery. Sangye Tenzin was the father, he was more strict, he was the disciplinarian. I could never imagine Lopon Tenzin Namdak disciplining anyone. He would talk to the monks, tell them they were wrong about something, but he would not discipline them as such. I never saw or heard of him doing that.

Did the two lamas have meals together?

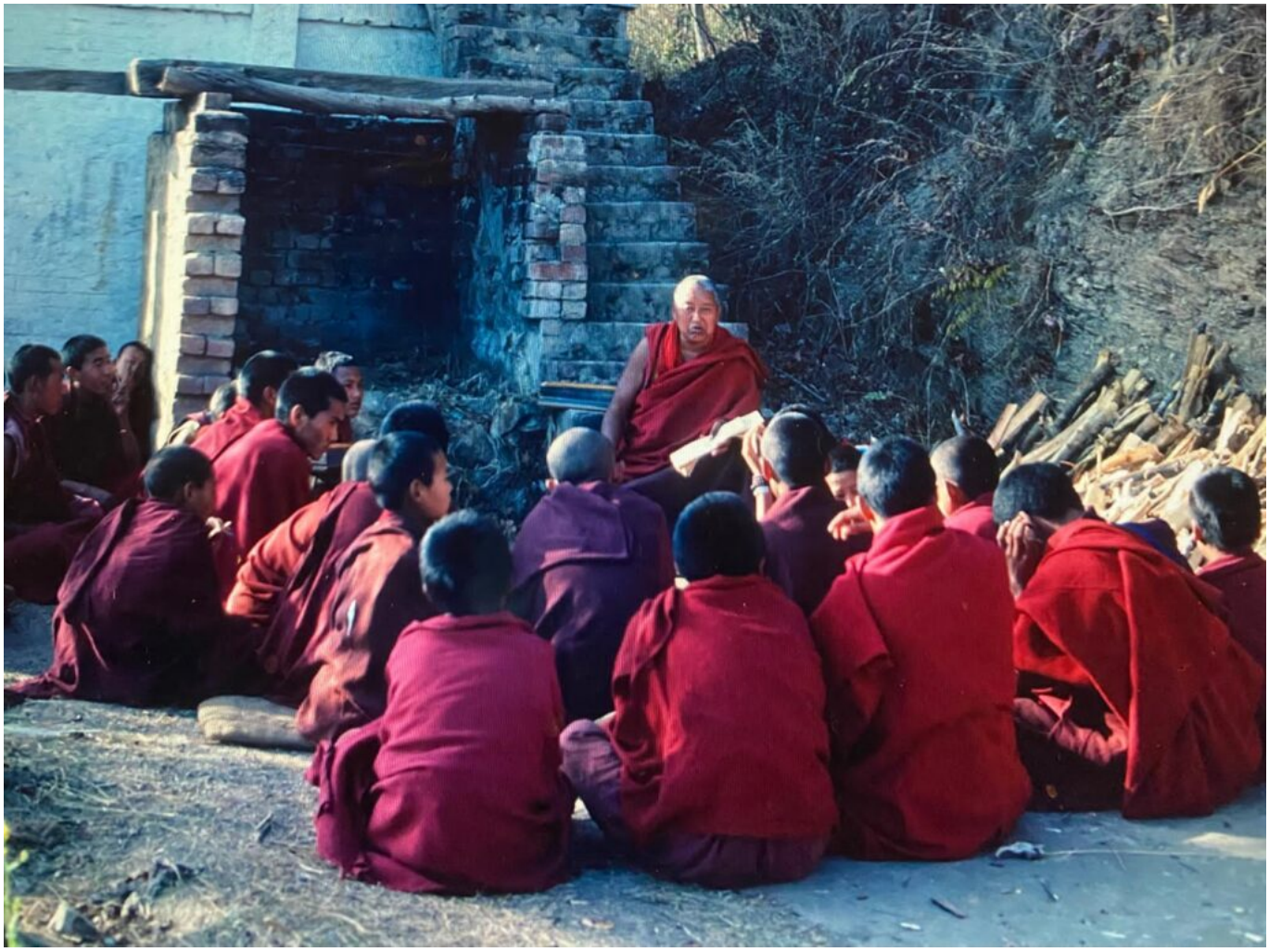
No, they ate separately. Lopon Tenzin Namdak's house was outside the monastery. He had his own little private life down there, teaching. He came up to the monastery for rituals and so on, but they did not eat together; they had separate establishments.

Did Youndgzin Rinpoche – Lopon Tenzin Namdak – teach in his own house?

Yes, there was a teaching room there, but quite often he taught outside, in the courtyard.

Who was cooking for him?

His monks. He had a group of monks living with him, and they cooked for him. One of them was Tenzin Wangyal, who later became a renowned teacher in the West. He was a very young monk then, and extremely hardworking at his studies. He was probably the star pupil of Lopon Tenzin Namdak. He was very generous with his time to me as well. When I had questions, I often asked him, and he would ask Lopon. He was an important influence on me while I was there. When he was in London last year for several weeks, I arranged to see him and we talked about old times. I showed him all the old photographs, and we spoke about the monks from his group whom I had met in Dolanji. "He's in Norway, this one is in Germany." They are scattered. There is a demand for them to teach.



Did you have lunch with Lopon sometimes?

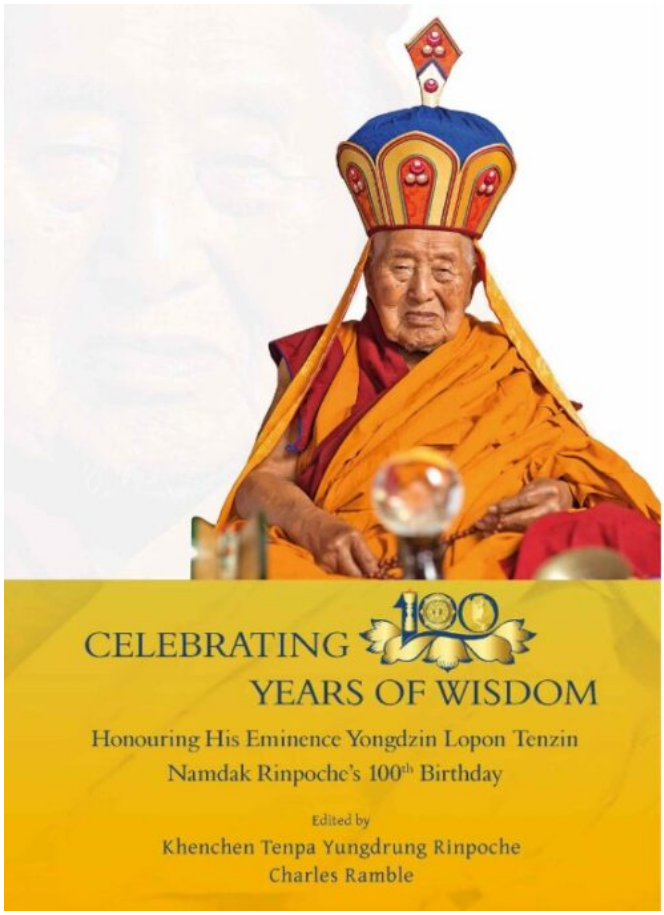
I didn’t really share meals with him. I used to have tea with him. But I did share meals with Abbot Sangye Tenzin. Quite often I would simply eat what he was eating. He liked to digress over meals. If I asked him a question, he might begin to answer and then digress to something else, or someone would come in wanting something, and we would end the conversation without really reaching the point. Whereas Lopon Tenzin Namdak would stay very focused on what you were asking.



Would you say that spending so much time together created a bond, a closeness, a friendship?

I don’t think so. I was there to do research, and they were very happy about that, because they wanted people to know about Bön. For that reason they were happy to answer my questions. I think my attitude was one of deep respect for both of them and their achievements. But I don’t think we connected on a deeper personal level.

We did keep in touch afterwards, more with Abbot Sangye Tenzin than with Lopon Tenzin Namdak. Lopon was always so concentrated on his work and his teaching that it didn’t feel quite right to seek an ongoing exchange with him after I left. Also, I am not a practitioner. I told them both at the beginning that I was a Roman Catholic. They were very accepting of that. They had had contact with Catholics before; they had visited Catholic monasteries when they were in the West.





The text A Glimpse of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche in the 1980s – which inspired this interview – was published in the collection of texts Celebrating 100 years of wisdom. The book is available for purchase, click on the picture to go to the website of Vajra Books.

Did you go back to Menri after that?

I went in 2024 for the Mendrup ceremony. It was amazing to see how many changes had taken place in the monastery, the settlement and the school. The monastery has grown up! I wasn't there long enough to really find out what all the monks and geshes were doing.

Before that, I had gone only once, in 2007, just for three or four days. My daughter was in India, so we met and went together. By then, Lopon Tenzin Namdak had left and was already in Nepal, but the abbot, Sangye Tenzin, was there.

You went to the celebration of Lopon Tenzin Namdak's hundredth birthday last year – we met there. Did you meet Yongdzin Rinpoche on that occasion?

I didn't ask for an appointment, to be honest. The number of people there wishing for contact with him was overwhelming. I didn't put myself forward for a private meeting. I was simply happy to be there. I could see him from a distance.

You took very good pictures while you were in Dolanji for your research. They accompany the article you wrote for *Celebrating 100 Years of Wisdom*, the collection of texts published for Yongdzin Rinpoche's hundredth birthday. One photograph of him is particularly striking, the one which is the title picture of this article.

It's really him: his lovely smile, his soft eyes. He was such a kind person. And you know, he was laughing quite often. He laughed a lot.

After your thesis was done, did you continue exploring Tibetan culture as a researcher?

I had a long break. Life took over. I have three children. So, I didn't really continue with it. I attended a few conferences, wrote a few conference papers, and that was it. It is only since last year that I have begun to come back to it. When I was in Kathmandu, a friend recommended that I go to Vajra Publications and talk to them about my thesis of forty years ago. I went, and they agreed to publish it, so it may be coming out. I need to update certain parts and write a new introduction, so it will take some time. I am also planning to process some of my other research. I am finishing my work at the university in an administrative job, and after that I want to spend more time on my research.

Pictures of His Eminence Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche: Krystyna Cech

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I have studied the trulkhor of many schools and now I teach it my way, says an accomplished master of Tibetan yoga

written by Jitka Polanská



Akarpa Lobsang Rinpoche has studied and practiced hundreds of techniques of Tibetan yoga and teaches the *trulkhor* to Bön and Buddhist practitioners and to broader public all over the world. The story of his life that he agreed to share with the readers of the *Speech of Delight* shows the uniquely extensive knowledge he has accumulated in this field throughout the years, starting in his own Bön tradition and continuing in other contexts. The interview with Rinpoche took place at Triten Norbutse on February 18th, 2025; the Anthropologist and Tibetologist Anna Sehnalova kindly translated from Tibetan to English and reviewed the text.

I come from Amdo, one of the three main historical and cultural parts of Tibet: Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo. The area where I grew up is called Ngawa. I come from a nomadic family. When I was a child, my two uncles were monks at Nangzhig, the largest Bönpo monastery in the world, located in Ngawa. The uncles inspired me to follow in their footsteps, and I entered the monastery when I was five years old. The younger of my uncles, Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen, was a great scholar and practitioner. For many years I studied with him and other learned lamas of the monastery.

When I was eleven, I went with a group of monks to the Murdo mountain in Gyalrong, also in Amdo. For Bönpos, it is a sacred mountain. We went there to meditate in caves and stayed for one year and a half. It was very difficult for me, I was just a kid, with the needs of a normal kid who wants to play, have friends around and eat normal meals.

Instead, we were living in extreme conditions in caves in deep mountains, with lack of food, bad weather, surrounded by wild animals, and we had to repeat the same practice day after day. All this was very harsh and boring. I dreamt of escaping and going back to the monastery, where there was enough food, warm shelter and friends to play with. But I did not dare to do that alone. After some time though, my attitude toward my practice changed.

A few years later, I went to the region of Sharkhog, also in Eastern Tibet. It is another stronghold of Bön. I stayed in the monastery called Garme Gompa for four years, studying the sutras, such as *Prajnaparamitas*, and *tsalung* practices with Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen, who was also one of the teachers of the 34th Menri Trizin Dawa Dargyal. Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen is a great Dzogchen practitioner. He follows strict discipline and is very knowledgeable. Later, I went to Central Tibet with him. We visited the monasteries of Yungdrung Ling and Menri. Close to Menri, Yeru Wensaka**–** the first monastery of Yungdrung Bön from the late 11th century AD – existed**,** before itwas destroyed by a flood. Prominent masters of Bön used to practice Atri meditation on its grounds. As we did, staying there for a few months and meditating. Again, it was not easy. The climate was harsh, my teacher was fully focused on his practice, and I had to provide food. I went begging in a village nearby, knocking on people's doors. Sometimes people gave little *tsampa* or even a bit of meat to me; other times I did not get anything. We lived on very little food.

After, my teacher and I moved to another important place for Bönpos, Kongpo Bönri, a sacred mountain in Southern Tibet. There, the food was much better, and the weather was warm, but it was raining a lot, and my blankets were soaked with water. My main aspiration was to learn and deepen my practice of Dzogchen and *tsalung*. I was not interested in doing circumambulations around the mountain at that time. I just practiced staying in Takla Mebar's cave.




TIBETAN TSALUNG YOGA

One day, after many months, we just came out of a retreat. As we were walking downhill down a mountain, we met an old lady. At that time, we had nothing left to eat. We were exhausted. Still, we had to walk for a few more days. The old lady noticed our exhaustion and warmly invited my master and me to have a dinner in her house. We stayed in her simple house for one night. She made *tsampa* with butter and fried vegetables. It was the best food I had ever eaten! The next morning she packed a bag of *tsampa* for us. I will never forget this experience.

After that we returned to Ngawa and I decided to deepen my studies in dialectics. I was strong in debating; I used to be the best debater in my monastery and I looked for further challenges. I decided to go to a Gelug monastery, Amchog Tsenyi Gompa, also located in Ngawa. Its school was renowned as the best for dialectics in the area. I did not speak about my decision with my teacher or family, I went home, stole my father's favorite motorcycle, and rode for 40-50 kilometers to reach the monastery.

At first, the monastery did not want to accept me, I was only a teenager of 15 or 16 years and coming alone. But when I performed my debating skills in front of a lama, they changed their mind and let me study with them. The monastery only provided teaching, and I needed to pay for my room and board. I sold my father's motorcycle to pay for my daily expenses. They allowed me to stay in a small space in the monastery which was used as a storage for cow dung. I lived there for about a year.

Afterwards, I went back to Nangzhig and spent many years there, focusing on various texts of the sutras, tantras and Dzogchen.

In 2001, I went to the Buddhist College of Minnan, a respected institution for Chinese Buddhist education in the city of Xiamen on the Chinese eastern coast. I studied various Buddhist schools at the college and got to know Zen for the first time. My masters said Dzogchen and Zen have similar teachings, and that's why I was very excited to start learning Zen.

At that time, I was the only Tibetan at the college. I knew no Chinese, but the monks were very helpful and strongly supported me. I made rapid progress and after a year and a half, I could understand almost everything. After two years, I could give a teaching in Chinese at the college and in some other places. I taught *ngondro*, preliminaries, basics of Mahayana Buddhism, and meditation.

Many monks who I knew in China belonged to Pure Land Buddhism and Zen (Chan) Buddhism. Zen was my favorite. I used to sit in meditation with a Zen master. We were friends and very close to each other. Although each of us was doing our own way of meditation, our core views on meditation were the same. I drank a lot of tea with him, the green tea typically served during Zen ceremonies. Because of my interest in Zen, later, I went to Japan many times and spent a few weeks in Japanese Zen monasteries. I experienced strict discipline and pure practice there. Not much was said by teachers, no big speeches on advanced theories. It was: just sit. We got up at 2:45 AM every day, and the bedtime was 8 PM.

In September 2005, I went to Beijing, to Peking University which is one of the top universities of China. I pursued my interest in different spiritual traditions and enrolled in comparative religious studies. A student must know three languages to be accepted to the course: besides Chinese, also English, and Pali / Sanskrit, or Tibetan. I did not have sufficient knowledge of English, but one of the Chinese teachers who I met at the university recommended me to his colleagues and helped me to be admitted. For one year, I studied various schools of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It broadened my horizons and changed my mind.

I realized that the essence of religious study is to develop oneself to become a better human being; just studying theories without putting them into practice is pointless. With this realization, I left my studies at the university after one year and devoted myself to the practice.

I decided to go to the retreat place of Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen Rinpoche in Kham, which was the most famous Bön retreat center in the region. There, I stayed for a year and dedicated myself to the study of *tsalung*, *trulkhor, tummo* and Dzogchen*;* I spent some time in the dark retreat too. After this, I went back to Beijing. But I had no interest in going back to the university. I also did not want to go back to Nangzhig, my home monastery. I wanted to learn more about yoga and decided to go somewhere far from home.

I once heard there was a group of Hindu yoga practitioners in Kathmandu, and I decided to go to Nepal and study yoga. My cousin helped to find a translator who knew Hindi and I practiced Hindu yoga in a traditional, private yoga center in Kathmandu for a month. The teachings there mainly focused on yoga philosophy and meditation.

One day, a friend who was from Ngawa and lived in Kathmandu asked me, "You are Bönpo and there is a Bönpo monastery here. Did you come to study at your monastery?" I was surprised to hear that. I asked: "Is this the monastery of Yongdzin Rinpoche?" He said: "Yes, exactly!"

I met Yongdzin Rinpoche when I was very young, when Rinpoche visited Nangzhig monastery. During Rinpoche's visit, my older uncle was one of the four attendants assigned by Nangzhig to support him. My uncle even invited Rinpoche to our home. But I was too young to remember the visit. Since then, my uncle has carefully kept his photograph with Yongdzin Rinpoche and hung it on the wall in our home. Therefore, I had been seeing Rinpoche's photo since then and remembered his face clearly. Rinpoche is very special to me. He felt very familiar. Even now this photo is still on the wall in the central place of our home. I had also seen Rinpoche many times in my dreams, and his monastery: a small monastery located in the mountains, surrounded by many trees. I located it somewhere close to the border between Nepal and India. I did not know it was right under my nose, right here in Kathmandu. That's why I did not go to visit it before my friend told me. We decided to go to the monastery, Triten Norbutse, together the next day.



Meeting Rinpoche was like meeting an old friend. Many people feel shy and almost afraid to approach him, but I was not. I was not nervous at all. I felt I could chat with him. I told him, "I am coming from Beijing, and I would like to request Dzogchen teachings from you." Rinpoche replied, "Dzogchenis not easy and it is very sacred. Students need to meet some conditions before they can receive it. I can help you with anything else you want to learn except Dzogchen." Rinpoche was 83 at that time. He had been retired for a few years then. Also, his assistants thought he could not teach me, but I did not give up.

In Triten Norbutse, there was a Geshe from Nangzhig who was very knowledgeable, and I used to discuss Zen with him. He said: "You have learned Zen, right? You can talk about the views of Zen with Rinpoche tomorrow. Perhaps that will make an impression on him." This was a very good idea. On the next day, I immediately said to Rinpoche that I had studied Zen in China. Rinpoche got very interested in it, and we talked for two hours.

At some point, Rinpoche said, "Oh, you understand Dzogchen! Bring the 21 Nails with you tomorrow. I will teach you." The 21 Nails is the innermost secret teaching from Zhang Zhung Nyengyu. Our study began the next day. That was February 2008. Since then, I spent 3 to 5 months each year studying with Rinpoche for 17 or 18 years.

In all these years, I also continued to learn the *trulkhor* and *tummo* tirelessly. I went to Tsangwa Monastery of the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism in Dzamtang in Amdo. The 47th Jonang Trizin Jigme Dorje taught me the Kalachakra *tummo* and *tsalung* practices. I received the lineage from him for all the Jonang Kalachakra *tummo* and *tsalung* practices.

I also studied the *trulkhor* of Lamdre, or Path and its Fruits, of the Sakya school with the lineage holder Lamdripa Jamyang Sengge Rinpoche around the same time at the Dzongsar Gagu retreat center south of Derge in Kham, and I received the lineage from him. After that, Rinpoche invited me

to go with him to visit monasteries in Inner Mongolia in China to teach the practice of *trulkhor* of Lamdre to hundreds of Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian monks. Jamyang Sengge Rinpoche introduced them to the theory in the morning and I led the yoga practice in the afternoon.

Moreover, I traveled many times to Bhutan and received the teachings of the Six Yogas of Naropa there. For five years, I studied different *tummo* practices with Trizin Ngawang Tenzin of the Drugpa Kagyu school and received their lineage of all the *tsalung* yoga and Six Yogas of Naropa. I had retreats in these practices there.

In Bhutan, I further went to the monastery of Shabshog to study the *trulkhor* of the famous Bhutanese siddha Ringzin Pema Lingpa. By the way, the practices and movements are depicted in the rare murals of the Lukhang temple behind the Potala Palace in Lhasa. At that time, this was absolutely revolutionary: the practice of yoga had been kept secretly only among a few privileged practitioners. There is a book about these paintings by Ian Baker called *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple*.

I also went to the retreat center of Sherab Ling monastery in India and stayed for one month there. I studied the Six Yogas of Naropa with Tai Situ Rinpoche and received the lineage. I also received teachings and lineage of the Shangpa Kagyu tradition in Kham, including the lineage of the Six Yogas of Naropa and the Six doctrines of Niguma.

For the Nyingma tradition, I went to the birthplace of Pema Lingpa in eastern Bhutan, and received all the yoga lineage of this master. I also went to the retreat center of the Nyingma master called Adzom Drugpa, the Adzom monastery in Serta in Eastern Tibet to receive the lineage of Jigme Lingpa and stayed for one summer there. (*Note: The monastery is in the region of Kandze in Kham, not far from Derge, and should not be confused with the well-known Serta Larung Gar Academy in the region of Serta further to the East*). Furthermore, I went to Nangchen in Eastern Tibet to Tsognyi Rinpoche's monastery and studied the *tummo* and *trulkhor* of Ringzin Rinna Lampa of the Nyingma school. In India, I studied *trulkhor* and *tummo* of the Nyingma school at Namdrol Ling. In addition, I went to Italy three times to study Yantra Yoga with Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and received the lineage from him. He gave me the name Akarpa.

Last but not least, Geshe Phuntsok of the Ganden monastery in India taught me the practices of Tibetan yoga in the Gelug tradition.

In all these years, I learned around eight hundred different varieties of Tibetan yoga and mastered them in practice. Besides my own practice, now I focus on teaching the yoga to others.

I also learned how to depict *trulkhor* movements and I dedicate my time to this. Usually, we know *trulkhor* from descriptions in texts and from oral transmissions, but I have not seen many of those techniques in drawings or paintings. I thus created a thangka center in Kathmandu, learned to paint a bit, and together with a group of artists who are my friends, we focus on documenting all the *trulkhor* systems in paintings. We have been working on the thangkas for 10 years and still have not finished. My goal is to document the essential practices and movements of all religious schools on the thangkas. If those lineages disappeared, it would be a big loss for humankind.

I quite like to engage in creative and artistic activities. I recorded more than forty Bönpo mantras and the albums are on different music platforms. I made a documentary, and sometimes I perform ritual dances adapted by me for non-Tibetan audiences. They are very popular in Japan.

To help modern people in cities, I developed my own style of *trulkhor* based on what I have learned from various schools. Students from both the East and the West find the practice helpful. Some

people may not like this approach, but I follow the rule “what is beneficial is good.” I spent more than 10 years developing the Himalaya cultural center in Beijing, and I founded Himalaya Dzogchen Ling in Hongkong in 2012. The aspiration is to spread the knowledge of Tibetan yoga outside Tibet. Those practices suit people in modern society very well.





I also teach the practice of Dzogchen. This is based on the Bön tradition. My meditation is purely Bön, unmodified Dzogchen meditation.

Usually, I spend a few months every year in Kathmandu. During this time, I practice in a small place behind the former Yongdzin Rinpoche's residence in Triten Norbutse. When I am out of Kathmandu, I stay in Beijing and Hong Kong where I established my centers, or I travel for teaching in other countries. From 2009, I started giving classes on Tibetan yoga and meditation systematically. My students are in part Buddhists and in part just common people. Many of them are very successful in their work but experience difficulties and disbalances in their body and mind. In many courses I teach them just breathing exercises, no movements. Besides *trulkhor*, I teach meditation, including a particular kind of meditation which involves all five senses. Sometimes my students and I do walk meditation.

My teaching for Buddhists is free of charge, and I do not collect offerings in any form. But the application process is selective. I choose students who have significant life experiences, have gone through ups and downs, resonate with the teaching about love and compassion, are able to take responsibility for their own lives, are courageous and able to take challenges. What does it mean to be a Buddhist? It means to challenge oneself to a new beginning. People without courage are not suitable for this path. And my students also need to be a bit crazy, not too serious about life. Life is a game, and it is absurd. So, don't take it too seriously. Mainly Chinese Buddhists take part in my courses. Some are very serious practitioners, and I give them all kinds of Buddhist teachings.

Instead, I do charge for my classes for non-Buddhists, and the price is quite high. To these, everyone who applies is accepted. I use the money to finance my other activities and to support beneficial activities of others.

I travel to teach around Asia and elsewhere as well. I have been to the United States many times, teaching mainly people of Chinese origin living there. I go to teach in Europe too: Norway, Switzerland, Spain, and France. This year, I will be traveling to Belgium, Germany, France and Switzerland. I teach mainly in Tibetan and sometimes in Chinese. My English is not good enough; I learned it only informally.

This year in June, I will be going to teach at Shenten Dargye Ling, for the first time. I am looking forward to it, but I wonder if in a monastic institution with a strict discipline like Shenten Dargye Ling I will be able to interact with my students as I usually do. My students and I like having fun together. In the evenings, we like dancing, playing, and talking together. We benefit from a relaxed and informal atmosphere.

The title picture: Jitka Polanska
The pictures inside the article: credit to Akarpa Lobsang Rinpoche

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Khenpo Gelek Jinpa: With Yongdzin Rinpoche´s 100th birthday coming, I

contemplate the good he has done

written by Jitka Polanská



Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the most senior living master in the Yungdrung Bon tradition who is celebrating 100th birthday soon, has changed the lives of many people. Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, the abbot of Shenten Dargye Ling, is one of them. In this account, Khenpo Gelek recalls his first encounter with Rinpoche and connects the awakening of his spiritual pursuits to the inspirational personality of the beloved teacher.

The celebration of Yongdzin Rinpoche´s centenary is coming soon and I take the opportunity to contemplace all the good Rinpoche he has done for me and others.

The first time I heard about him was at the beginning of the eighties. Tension between China and India weakened a bit at that time, more information was passing through the borders; people could send letters to each other. I was a young boy then and I lived in Kham in Tibet with my family. One evening – I have a very clear memory of the situation – my father said at the dinner that Chime Yungdrung was alive, living in India where he had founded a settlement and a monastery. Chime Yungdrung is the name Yongdzin Rinpoche received by his parents. My mother´s mother and Yongdzin Rinpoche´s mother were relatives, they are from the same family, and I remember my mother saying that Yongdzin Rinpoche´s mother was surely happy to have the good news and that she was lucky to have such a great son.

My first meeting with Rinpoche took place some years later, in 1986. I was nineteen years old then,

working as a nomad, taking care of the cattle of our family. It was late spring and at that time of the year, villagers usually ask for a ritual to protect their crops. My father told me to come down from the mountains for the ritual. I went and heard many people talking about an important master who was visiting our region, Khyungpo, and was giving initiations. I went to see the master, together with others. It was Rinpoche and I was blown away. Hundreds of people were waiting for him, some crying, some laughing and showing much joy. His relatives were so proud of him, you can imagine.

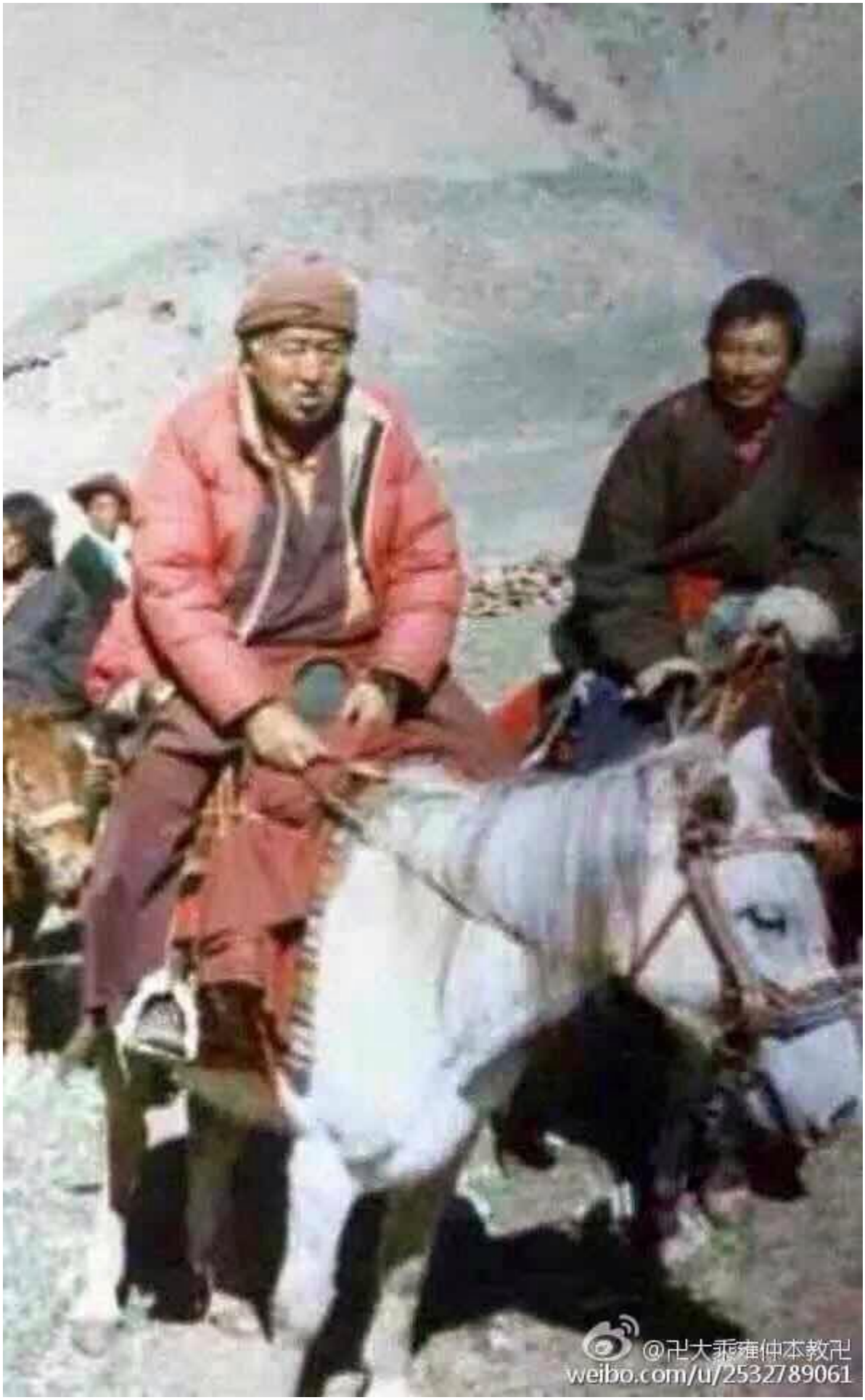
Shortly before, our village lama told me that I should become a monk. He planted a seed of this thought in me. After I met Rinpoche, the thought became much stronger, and I decided to take this direction in my life. I took basic monastic vows and started studying Bon philosophy with my first master, who was one of the first geshes – graduates from Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India. He taught us very clearly.

In 1992 Rinpoche came back to Khyungpo for a visit. At that time, I was already a fully ordained monk. During his stay, I and a few other fellow monks decided to follow him abroad. I did not have any other wish than receiving teachings from him, as he was a single lineage holder for some most precious instructions. While Rinpoche was still in Tibet, we set on a perilous journey to Nepal through the bordering mountains. In our group, there were some lamas who distinguished themselves afterwards, such as Ponlop Tsangpa Tenzin, the head teacher of Triten Norbutse, or Geshe Samten Tsukphud, the resident lama at Shenten and others.



We crossed the mountains safely and stopped in Kathmandu, waiting for Rinpoche there. When he arrived, he told us we could not stay with him and should go, instead, to India, Menri monastery, to complete our studies. I was very disappointed. Personally, I had no wish to become a geshe, I just wanted to receive precious teachings from Rinpoche and practice it. I obeyed him, of course, what else I could do, and we went to Menri. But there, my mind was never relaxed. The monastery is great, it gives excellent education, there was His Holiness Menri Trizin Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, but

still, I was not happy. We were monks with low status and could not get teachings directly from His Holiness. So, I was thinking: why did I undertake such a dangerous journey, risking my life, if I still cannot study with the greatest masters?


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After two years, I could not go on anymore. I decided to leave the monastery and reach Yongdzin Rinpoche in Kathmandu. I hoped he would not chase me away. Later, the other monks from my group joined me.

Rinpoche did not say anything. He accepted things as they were. The most beautiful period of my life started. We were there, with him, receiving teachings from him, it was wonderful. Every day we learn and practice. Finally, I graduated at Triten Norbutse and received my geshe degree there. Rinpoche gave us complete instructions in sutra, tantra and dzogchen, and all the necessary initiations. And not only one time. I think I received Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud five times, from Rinpoche. Each time, you get more understanding, more clarity.

I also received personal advice from him on different occasions, throughout the years. I remember it when I feel disturbed. This happens, of course, I am an ordinary being and can feel angry or disappointed or jealous, all these things. Thanks to Rinpoche, I keep focusing on integration of my practice to the difficult moments of my life. Some of his sayings have helped me greatly to pass through hardships. He used to say: “Do not follow people’s mouths. If you do that, you will have to cry hundreds of times because someone said bad things about you, and you will have to laugh hundreds of times, because someone said nice things about you. You will be completely dependent on others. You will not be yourself.”



“Do your best,” he said, “and don’t worry too much. Don’t expect too much either. What is supposed to come will come. Whatever. Do your best. You cannot do more than your best.” And then he said: “Be honest. Be honest and truthful and transparent.”

And I also remember him saying: “Leave it as it is. Human beings worry often about nothing, we worry about the past, which is not there anymore, we worry about the future which has not happened yet. The past and the future, they are both nothingness. Even if bad things happen, let them go. We can remember them, but we have to let go, not hold on. Otherwise more stress and anxiety will come. Do not chase after the path, do not create the future, keep your mind clear.”





I learned so much from my master. Sometimes he did not fulfill my expectations, and I learned from it too. This is, you know, the biggest instruction. It happened once that Rinpoche gave us teaching on the outer cycle of Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud but refused to give us the inner cycle of the teachings. We were already senior teachers ourselves, at Triten Norbutse, and we felt humiliated by this decision. He crushed our egos.

With time, Rinpoche became somehow inseparable from my mind. I bring him with me all the time. His presence, blessings are always with me. I see him around me all the time, really, no joke. I feel so lucky. I'm really fortunate to have spent so many years with him.

I think many people from our sangha feel the same. He has had a great impact on the lives of all of us. That's why so many people are planning to come to Kathmandu to celebrate Rinpoche´s birthday. It is good to celebrate and commemorate all Rinpoche´s achievements together.

There was nothing before he came to India and Nepal. Now, two great monasteries that he and His Holiness Menri 33rd Trizin founded preserve and spread the tradition of Yungdrung Bon – dharma teachings, arts, culture – outside Tibet.

I am very happy that my team and I completed the documentary about Yongdzin Rinpoche last December, just in time for Rinpoche´s 100th birthday. It was not planned this way, but it happened. Both Tibetan and English versions are ready and will be screened during the upcoming celebrations. I think it is very auspicious.

Photo credit: Khenpo Gelek Jinpa

I wanted to be with an inspiring lama, says Gideon

written by Jitka Polanská



At some point of his life, Gideon Makin, a fifty year old university lecturer in philosophy at that time, set out on a trip to Kathmandu. He did not know how long he would stay, and it would have surprised him to know that in the end, he would spend six years there, in close association with the home monastery of his master, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.

Usually, I start with asking people when they met Yungdrung Bon. In your case I would be curious about what came even earlier. Are you British, or an Israeli? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I do not know which one I am (laughing). I was born and raised in Israel. Both my parents moved there from England. We spoke English at home, and I have a family in England to this day. I got my undergraduate degree in philosophy and history in Israel and when I was thirty six, I went to do a doctorate in philosophy at Oxford, in 1990. After completing my degree I got research fellowships and lectureships in various universities in England and Scotland. I stayed in the UK until 2006. Then I moved to Kathmandu.

Let us say that I see myself as both Israeli and English. When I lived in Britain, I identified myself as an Israeli; in England I could not get away with saying I am English. In Kathmandu, I presented myself as English. I am a British citizen from birth. For this and other reasons it was more comfortable to identify myself as British there, although some people weren't fooled by that

(laughing).

Do you recognize your Jewish identity?

Definitely. My parents clearly identified as Jewish. Not so much as strict practitioners of the religion. Their identity was driven by a sense of belonging to a specific group scattered around the world and not having their own home. A dream to have their own state was very strong among Jews in the thirties when my parents were young.

What was their life like after they moved?

Very tough. Many of the people who emigrated to Israel at that time left eventually because life there was so tough. It was a poor country, Israel, and people worked very hard, but they were full of idealism.

When did you start being interested in Buddhism?

It was later on, when I completed my doctorate. After a few years of being a researcher and lecturer elsewhere I got a job at the University of Stirling in Scotland. In 2001, Lama Khemsar Rinpoche came to give a talk for the students of the university. I went to the talk mainly out of curiosity. Nevertheless, the lama made a very strong impression on me. But it does not mean I jumped into Dharma right away. He came again the following year and only then I got more involved. There was a group in Glasgow then, six or seven people, all the lama's students, who met every week to do *ngondro*, the preliminary practices. I joined them and it brought me into it. If it was not for that I would not have stayed in the Bonpo tradition I think. Such groups are very important, to keep continuity and motivation.

It is quite unusual that an academic approaches Buddhism starting from something so repetitive as the *ngondro*, isn´t it?

I was drawn to it but I did not understand much of it. It seems even strange to me, to think about it now, I wonder why I did it and how I found time for it, every day. I do not know. I think a strong impulse for approaching the teaching was the impression Lama Khemsar made on me. He was a person I looked up to.

The beginning was slow, you said, but already in 2006 you moved to Kathmandu. It looks like an acceleration in your dedication. What took you there?

I wanted to see Yongdzin Rinpoche. He and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung came together to Lama Khemsar´s center, near London, and both gave talks, in 2004, if I remember well. That's how I got to know them. The same year, by the way, I went on a pilgrimage to Menri monastery in India. Lama Khemsar organized a trip with his students to Menri and Sikkim, that year. Because it was during the academic year, I could not go, but I went by myself during the summer holiday, following the same route. So, I developed a connection, but it was anything but "suddenly I saw a light" or something like that; it was quite gradual.

I went to Shenten Dargye Ling once, to see Yongdzin Rinpoche; I did not know most of the people there. I got to know most of the western sangha members later, during my stay in Kathmandu, when they would come for short visits to see Rinpoche.



Gideon with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche at Shenten Dargye Ling, in the summer 2024.

Why did you go to Kathmandu, what was the plan?

There was no plan. I just went to see what it was like and to visit Rinpoche. Although somehow, I think, I was ready for the possibility of staying. I kept in mind what Rinpoche told me in one of our conversations. He said: ”Why don’t you come to Kathmandu? Living costs are just one euro per day.” It turned out not to be exactly that, by the way (he laughs).

When my job at the university of Birmingham – my last academic position – ended, I thought: “There will always be time to look for a new job, let us go to visit Kathmandu and the monastery first”.

When I arrived, Rinpoche was not there. He was somewhere, travelling, and nobody could tell me when exactly he would be coming back. I remember that I was surprised not to find him there. I imagined him being always there except for short periods.

I went to the monastery right from the airport, all excited, and all those whom I met there were very

relaxed. “Sit down, no rush,” they told me, “Rinpoche will come maybe in one month”. They seemed to me people from a different planet, or at least a different epoch.

Did you know where to stay?

I did not arrange anything before but Tsewang, the secretary of the monastery at that time, took care of me, and he found me accommodation. With those people, I felt at home very quickly, or at least very welcome. Geshes did not have their own dining room at that time, they used to have lunch and dinner in the guest dining room, so we guests had meals with them and we spent hours talking. Some of the geshes spoke little English. Tsewang spoke good English and he used to translate.

We had a good time. Lots of Rinpoche´s students came to visit too, for a week, two, three, and during those visits everyone had a lot of time to sit and talk. A bit like here at Shenten, there is time to talk. No one is in a hurry.

You stayed for six years, in the end…

Yes, I only went once every year to visit England and Israel, for three weeks, and the rest of the time I spent in Kathmandu.

How did you maintain yourself?

I have a small pension. When you find yourself without a job, and are above a certain age, you are given the option of taking early retirement, (in the university’s pension scheme). I was fifty-one then. In England, that penstion would have been negligible, but in Nepal, it was enough to live on.

You look like a very regular person, not the kind of person who would go and stay for years in Kathmandu…

Yes, it is a bit surprising for me too. I am not a “new age” type of person at all.

How did you spend your time there?

I went to the monastery every day. I had lunch there. Not from the very beginning but after a while I started meditating with the monks of the Drubdra group, those who follow a four-year long program and are dedicated mainly to developing their meditation. It was twice a day and those two meditation sessions were the center of my day. There were other things which were interesting and nice, but the important thing about my being in Kathmandu was this discipline to climb the stairs to the monastery every day, at seven in the morning and at five o’clock in the afternoon, and do one hour of meditation there. I did this until my back started hurting at some points which made it impossible for me to sit cross-legged any longer.

I also taught some monks English, there was quite a demand for it among the Geshes.

Did you relate to the fellow monks with whom you meditated or you just joined them for the meditation?

We did not have a common language, but we made some contacts, they were very friendly to me. We used to shake hands, and they used to invite me to have tea in the restaurant just below the stairs to the monastery. I did not feel alone at all. Of course, I was not one of them but they were very welcoming. I made some friends among them.

I also made a special contact with Ponlop Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche, the head teacher of the

monastery. He spoke almost no English then, but even without words, we felt sympathy for each other. When he started to come to Shenten, in 2014, I went to many of his teachings there, and finally, I edited a book with his teaching on *ngondro,* a couple of years ago.

What did you do in the evenings?

I was at home. Around seven I would come back from the monastery. At that time, during the winter season, there was no electricity in the evenings. In all Kathmandu there was "power shedding". There was a table showing in advance which area would have electricity at what hours and which would not. We used candles.

I was full of new impressions collected during the day. Maybe because I was in a different country, and it was the first time I lived in the East, Nepal was very interesting for me. I was just looking to see how people dressed, how they behaved, what they did, just simply going around, only to buy milk, was interesting.

I spent my evening reading about Tibet but not only, there were and still are good bookshops in Kathmandu. I also worked on some articles in philosophy, which I promised to write before I left. Those years in Kathmandu were productive for me.

Did you experience any shift, development? Anything to tell about?

I think so. For example, my perception of the monastery changed a lot, gradually.

How?

At first, things struck me as very strange, or arbitrary, but with time they became natural and not at all strange. The strong devotion and respect to the lama, for instance, the strict hierarchy and discipline, the way things are managed may be unfamiliar or even strange for a westerner.

Initially, I had the impression that everything was very chaotic, but I gradually came to understand that it is just a different way of doing things. Ultimately they do get things done, but without the fuss… They just organise themselves differently, more quietly than we do.

Also, our western image of monastic life is of a slow and relaxed kind of existence, but Triten is always bustling with activity. Monks have a lot of duties to fulfill. I had more time to meditate than most monks would.

What brought the experience to an end?

After six years, my need or interest in living close to the monastery and going there daily faded. I felt like I got all that I could. I went back to England, then to Israel. It took me some time to adjust to a new phase of my life. Then, I began attending retreats at Shenten, from 2013 on. Sometimes, I stayed around Shenten after retreats too.

Once I came to Shenten just to visit Yongdzin Rinpoche. He was usually at Shenten from the spring to the summer, even in the periods when there was no teaching going on and very few people were around. I sensed an opportunity and asked if I could do a personal retreat with him, and he said yes. I stayed at the house nearby (where I usually stay whenever I come to Shenten), and met Rinpoche twice a week for about two months. In between I meditated a lot and kept strict silence. I remember I was always complaining to him about my meditation, and he used to say: "Don't push yourself too hard."

For me, the priceless thing was to observe a master of Rinpoche´s stature in everyday situations. I think I learned more from that than from teachings.

What did you learn?

His attitude to things, his neutrality, his genuine modesty, his child-like sincerity, and one thing one does not usually expect from a spiritual master, his being a thoroughly *practical* person. I had lots of opportunities to observe him already when I lived next to the monastery and went there every day. There were plenty of rituals which I attended, I sat in lots of pujas, getting soaked in the atmosphere. Also, sometimes Rinpoche would give teachings to a small group of visiting westerners, and I joined the group. Other times, I spent time alone with him asking about his life. I recorded many hours of interviews with him. I handed them to Charles Ramble as raw material to use when he was editing the biography of Rinpoche, The life of a Great Bonpo Master.

Rinpoche is such an inspiring person for me. This is what I expect from a lama, to inspire me. Each time I met him I felt an urge to go and practice, because I want to be as much like him as I could possibly be.

By far the most important opportunity to be close to Rinpoche and be inspired by him was during the tour of Tibet in the summer of 2007. There was a small group of westerners that travelled with him (Florens Van Canstein published a book about this journey), and I had the rare privilege of being among them.

Phoro credit: Gideon Makin

Donors are generous and loyal, says the treasurer of the Association Triten Norbutse

written by Jitka Polanská



Olivier Rousval met his master Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche in 1999 in Cergy, a small village situated about twenty kilometres from Paris, where Rinpoche's teaching was then organized. For the past eight years, Olivier has been treasurer of the Association Triten Norbutse. We asked him about the origin and activities of the Association.

Before the turn of the century, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche's French students used to spend a lot of time thinking about ways to support Bon in France, Europe and Nepal. It soon became apparent that a formal organization was needed to manage retreats and the connected financial flows.

L´Association Shenten Dargye Ling and l´Association Triten Norbutse were both created at the same year, 1999. The former to disseminate the teachings, the latter – l´Association Triten Norbutse – to support Triten Norbutse monastery, the headquarters of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Initially, the Association Triten Norbutse helped to meet the living needs of the Triten Norbutse monastic community. In particular, it collected money for the little "monks". (Technically, the children who live at the monastery are not yet monks. They wear monastic robes, but they take their monastic vows later, as teenagers). The support was conceived as a sponsorship for an individual child at first, but later, it was decided by the Association to contribute to the general budget dedicated to all the children instead.



The noticeboard in the main corridor of Shenten Dargye Ling dedicated to the activities supported by l´ Association Triten Norbutse.

Gradually, the Association has extended its support to other areas. “We helped with building a new kitchen and we also helped students attending the medical school belonging to the monastery,” Olivier recalls. “Also, after the 2015 earthquake, we helped the monastery to rebuild and repair some of its buildings that had been damaged by the disaster,” he adds.

Among other initiatives, members of the Association organized a public crowdfunding a few years ago for a monk’s urgent operation. Sufficient amount of money was quickly raised.

The Association has around twenty members who make monthly donations. Other people give occasionally. “We receive donations from practitioners all over the world. Many donors are very loyal and generous,” says Olivier. “It’s not so easy to send money to Nepal as an individual, so I think we’re doing a good service to those who want to help the monastery. We have the infrastructure to do so,” he explains.

The Association allocates the donated money to a specific project to which people wish to help. This might be living expenses of the monks, salaries of the nannies for the little “monks”, or costs of the medical school and clinic that are part of the monastery. “When donors transfer money to us, they specify how they wish it to be used and this is respected,” says Olivier.

In recent years and until now, the Association’s main objective has been to help Triten Norbutse’s abbot, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, with the construction of a new multi-purpose building on the monastery grounds, informally called “the temple”. “This is a huge project and the covid pandemic has made it even more complicated and expensive,” says Olivier.

The building contains much more than a temple. At the top a new residence of H.E. Yongdzin Tenzin

Namdak Rinpoche will be located. Just bellow numerous teaching and conference rooms have been built. The new, large temple is situated on the ground floor. In the first basement, more rooms have been created where monks and lay people will meet for various events. The second basement contains a kitchen and a refectory.

The construction of the “temple” is now complete, decoration and furnishings are currently underway. It will be presented to the public at the celebration of Yongdzin Rinpoche´s one hundred´s birthday scheduled for early February 2025. Like many other members of the sangha, Olivier is planning to travel to Triten Norbutse for the celebration. It’s the first time he is going. “I’ve never been to Nepal, although I lived for three years in India, in Mumbai, working there for a large French company,” he says.

The Association informs sangha members continuously and as much as possible about the progress of the construction. The board is in contact with the monastery management and with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, who is the project leader. The Association publishes a newsletter and feeds its Facebook page, which is followed by 2 600 people.


Claire Mosser, Olivier Rousval, Anne Demarty at Shenten Dargye Ling, September 2024.

The Association is managed by a number of dedicated people: Claire Mosser, President; Dordje, Vice-President; Olivier Rousval, Treasurer; Anne Demarty, Assistant Treasurer; Isabelle Martinez, Secretary; and Cendrine Lecaplain, Assistant Secretary. “Serge Thauvin also comes to give us a helping hand,” Olivier says. “Some of us, like Claire or Dordje, often go to Kathmandu, collect fresh news of the monastery’s projects and their progress, and they take photos. Donors want to know what is the result of their donations,” explains Olivier.

Photos: Jitka Polanska, l´Association Triten Norbutse

Martino Nicoletti: I moved from academia to the Dzogchen practice and dissemination of the Dharma

written by Jitka Polanská



Martino Nicoletti initially approached the tradition of Yungdrung Bön as a researcher in anthropology. He visited Triten Norbutse monastery in 1990, when there were only rice fields around it and H.E.Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche was living and working there with other monks in very poor conditions. Later, Martino developed an interest in Yungdrung Bön as a practitioner. Now he lives back in his native Italy where he regularly has been inviting Khenpo Gelek Jinpa to teach, and he publishes Bön dharma texts translated from English into Italian in his small publishing house.

How did you first meet Bön, Martino? Was it through a book, a teacher or your research?

It was in 1990, in Kathmandu, thirty-four years ago. At that time, I was a student in anthropology at the University of Perugia, and I was working on my master degree´s thesis. It was exploring relationships between the Bön religion and shamanism. I went to visit Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche at Triten Norbutse monastery for that purpose. I requested an interview with him and he kindly agreed. We talked not one time, many times, actually.

You already knew about the existence of Bön?

I was very much interested in shamanism during my academic studies. Beside other things I was studying shamanism in some ethnic groups of Nepal and I found out that Bön also had aspects intersecting with shamanism.

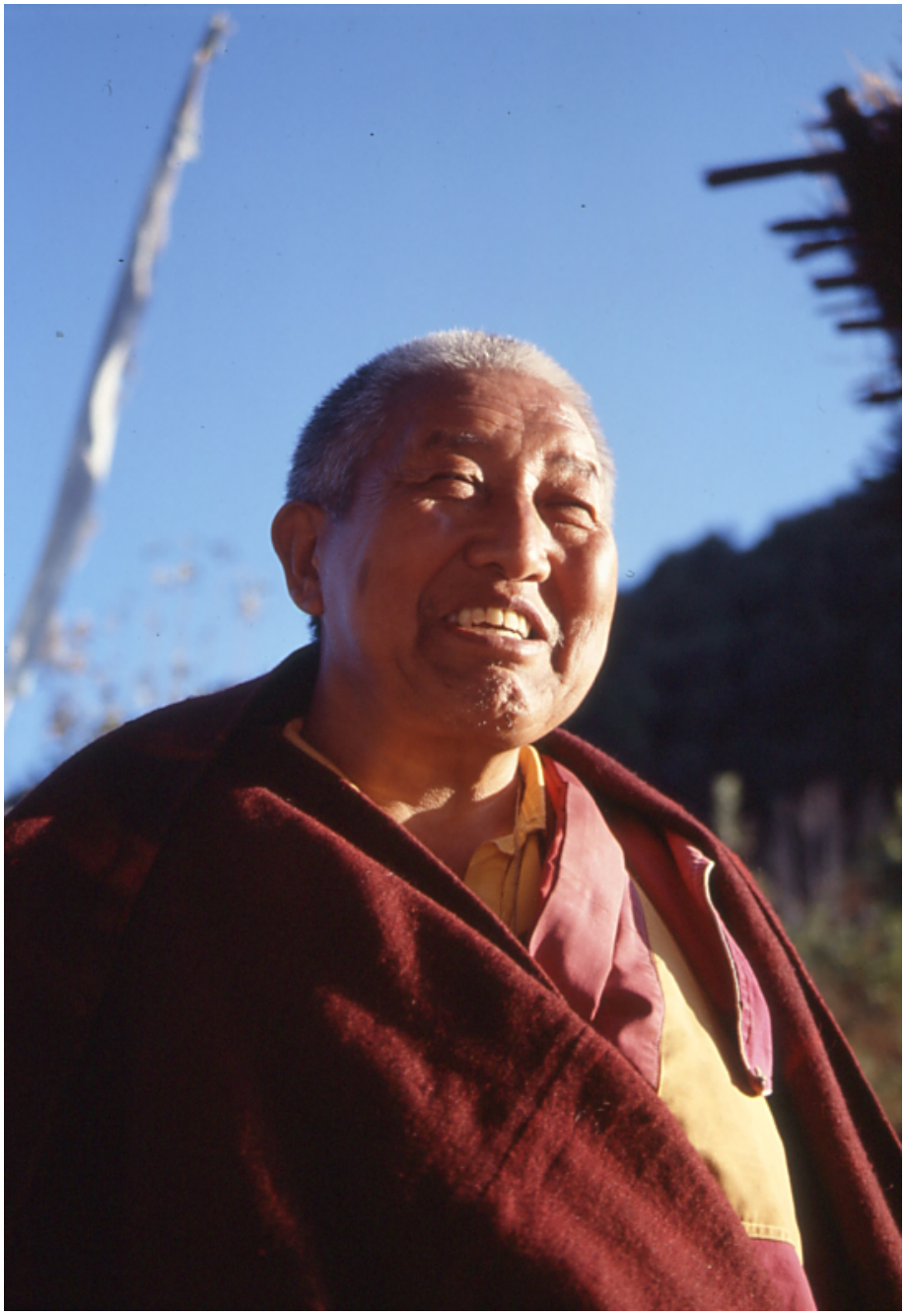
Many people identify shamanism with Bön but Bön lamas point out that Yungdrung Bön is much more than that. In which area, according to you, does Bön contain spiritual procedures of shamanism?

When I spoke with Yongdzin Rinpoche about this, the shamanistic background of the Bön religion, he often spoke about it as a background of Tibetan culture, not something specific only to Bön, but rather to be common to all Tibetan communities. We could say that they all share this as a heritage.

In the Yungdrung Bön all the canonical works are classified into nice “vehicles” or “ways”. Four out of these nine are called “causal”, which means they depend on a cause. And those contain very similar beliefs, rituals and techniques as shamanism does: divination, therapy, ransom rituals… The remaining five are called vehicles or ways of “result ”or “fruit”. The ninth is the way of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, which is the teachings received by many western students, which I became very interested in a few years later.

Let us get back to your visit to Kathmandu in 1990. What did the monastery look like at that time?

It was very small, with only a few monks there. Living conditions at the monastery were very poor. And it was not easy to distinguish Yongdzin Rinpoche from other monks.



Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, Triten Norbutse, 1990

He was doing the same things that they were doing, no difference. This astonished me because I knew I was meeting a very important lama. Every time I went to meet him, I met a very simple monk, helpful, overflowing with kindness and patience. It felt more like being in a family than in a monastery. And in relation with shamanism: there were some Tamang shamans coming when I was there. Yongdzin Rinpoche told me they visited sometimes, asking him for some advice.


Group of monks and Martino Nicoletti in 1990 at Triten Norbutse, 1990

The monastery at that time was outside the city, right?

Yes, there were just fields all around. Kathmandu was surrounded with ring road and after that you had to walk for about 45 minutes to to get to the monastery.

After some years, you developed interest in Dzogchen meditation, you said, becoming a practitioner. The dharma world and the academic world often keep distance but you found yourself in both of them.

It is true but I personally did not care much. I had reached a balance within myself of those two aspects and later I left the academic world altogether focusing on practice and independent research.

When did you start practicing?

It was while doing my first PhD in anthropology which had brought me to Kathmandu once again. I spent several years in Nepal, with some breaks, carrying out my research work about religion, rituals and myths of the Kulunge Rai tribe of Soluhumbu. Slowly, slowly, I started to become less interested in studying the Bonpo religion and more and more interested in practicing it, especially the Dzogchen meditation. In those periods, I had a chance to get some teachings privately from Yongdzin Rinpoche and they were a real booster for me to practice.

I remember you did some research about *Chöd*, didn't you?

Yes, it was still within my academic work. I researched chöd practice in the Dolpo region of Nepal. I

focused on the C*höd* pilgrimage practiced in lower Dolpo, making a short documentary about it and I also wrote an essay and published it in English and Italian. We worked together with Riccardo Vrech on this research project. What I was mainly interested in was visual anthropology – using mainly visual means like photography and video for documenting research. We organized some exhibitions about the C*höd* in Dolpo in Italy. Khenpo Gelek was present at the opening of one of them held in Rome. It was important for me already then but more and more over time not only research but also to disseminate knowledge about Bonpo culture to a wide audience. Later, I wrote some other works on C*höd* and recently I have directed a documentary about Bardo accordion Bonpo tradition for French television. Khenpo Gelek features in this movie. Unfortunately, it is copyrighted so I cannot share it with sangha members even if I would like to.

You moved to France and lived there until recently, right? Now you are back in Italy?

Yes, after twelve years living in France I, together with my French partner, decided to live in Italy and moved there a few months ago. Now I live in Umbria, the region where I was born, close to Assisi, the birthplace of Saint Francis. Khenpo Gelek knows this region very well, he came several times and had very deep feelings connected to this area of Assisi and its surroundings. Sometimes, due to the nature of the landscapes we visited together and their specific energy, he told me he had the feeling of being In Tibet.



Khenpo Gelek JInpa and Martino at Shenten Dargye Ling

When did you invite him to Italy for the first time?

It was about fifteen years ago, I guess, and always in Umbria. And he was there this year too, in April, to give teachings.

Are Bön practitioners in Italy united, or rather scattered?

There are a few groups, not a unique sangha, but the number of people is growing. I personally feel a very close connection with Khenpo Gelek and that’s why I keep on inviting him to teach in Italy.

Out of the same connection, I decided to build an independent publishing house, a few years ago, called “Le Loup des Steppes” (“The Steppe Wolf”). The name is inspired by the famous novel by Herman Hesse. The aim is to make important Bön texts and essays about Dzogchen available to the Italian public, to people who cannot read in English or French. I closely collaborate with John Reynolds and Jean-Luc Achard publishing their works, and also publish some audio recordings of teachings made during retreats, transcriptions of the teachings by Yongdzin Rinpoche and some traditional manuals of practice (i.e. Guru Yoga, Powa, Yeshe Walmo, Chod, Surchod, Bardo Monlam…). I want to share tools with people about how to practice. It happens often that lamas come, they teach and when they leave, there is no trace left. So, publishing text that help people continue with their practice and develop it is my way to contribute to creating a sangha.

How many books have you published?

More than twenty titles have been published till now. I started doing it in 2016 in France, this year I moved the activity to Italy.

Who translates the books, you?

Yes, mainly myself and another dedicated practitioner, Lidia Castellano. She helps when sending it to the publishing house to go on. We are basically the two of us.

How much of your time does it take?

I would say ten to twelve days a month. I do everything by myself, including the paging, graphic design of books, distribution. It takes lots of time.

What do you do to make a living?

I currently teach body awareness and dance-therapy. To develop my work and to fluidly combine my personal background as an anthropologist with the body-based therapy, in 2011, I got a second (practice-based) PhD in the UK in Multimedia Arts. Besides that, in 2004 I started to study Japanese Butoh dance. All these experiences allowed me to directly integrate dharmic activities with my profession and research. All these streams are in harmony with each other.

Photo credit: Martino Nicoletti

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.*

Lopon praises our sangha for generosity and devotion, say practitioners from Mexico

written by Jitka Polanská



The presence of practitioners from Mexico always makes retreats at Shenten full of joy and warmth. Blanca, Sharo (Rosario), Adriana and Celina, all Mexican ladies who are followers of Yungdrung Bon, attend the summer retreats at Shenten. We had a conversation with them last year and brought it up to date now.

Sharo is originally from Chihuahua but now lives in Valle de Bravo. Until last year, she was a caretaker of The Great Stupa Bon for World Peace for six years.

Blanca comes from Zacatecas in the central part of Mexico, but she also lives close to the Great Stupa.

Celina is from Nuevo Laredo, which is situated in the northern part of Mexico and very close to the border with the United States. She now lives in the United States.

Adriana lives in Mexico City.

The ladies remember that Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, together with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, came to Valle de Bravo already in 1995. Blanca met them at that time. “They performed a very beautiful ceremony, but then I forgot about the event – I did not know them then. Only later a friend reminded me that I was also there. After some time, I attended Lama Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche’s teachings and I then also received a teaching about the preliminary practices, *ngondro*, from Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung,” Blanca says.

Adriana was first introduced to Bon when Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche was teaching in Mexico City, twenty years ago. Celina too had been a student of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche before she came to Shenten. “There were his teachings in Valle de Bravo taking place already at the end of the 1990s. The land for the stupa had been there but nothing had been built yet. There were only a teacher and students, and everyone slept in tents,” she recalls. “If I remember wel – and I may not – the first

teaching was on Chod," Celina says.

Valle de Bravo is a place with very beautiful nature and it is a popular holiday destination for many Mexicans. Now, it is also known for the Great Stupa Bon for the World Peace. Its construction began in 2003 and it was completed in 2010. In 2010, it was consecrated by H.E. Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche.



Mexican sangha with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung during his teaching in the Great Stupa in 2023



Blanca, who lives close to the stupa, had been hosting many teachers at her home throughout the years. “She took care of all of them, for many years,” Celina says. Nowadays, lamas can stay in the facilities on the land of the stupa.

Sharo, who started following Bon nine years ago, became the main caretaker of the place after two years she became a Bonpo. She was helped in this task by a team who was in charge for maintenance of the place.

“There are two kinds of visitors to the stupa. The first group are tourists who are just curious. The second are spiritual visitors,” Sharo says. She explained the meaning of the stupa to both groups and gave them the background of why and how it came into existence. “Even those who did not know anything before their visit, often leave with something positive, uplifting in their minds. They look different, smiling and happy,” she says.



Sharo and Celina with “Lopon”

“I explained to them that the stupa is exceptional both for its dimensions and because it has a meditation hall inside. Two hundred people can stay within, listening to the teachings, meditating. Every Sunday, there are meditations in the stupa, led by resident lamas, lama Kalsang Nyima and lama Yungdrung Lodoe,” Sharo says.

There must be approximately five hundred Bon practitioners in Mexico, the ladies estimate. A quite big group of them has been coming regularly to Shenten. “For the Grand Ceremony of Dutrisu in 2018 we were more than fifty, and at the summer retreats maybe twenty to thirty people used to come, even if flight tickets are quite expensive,” says Adriana. More than thirty people went to take part in the ceremony at Triten Norbutse monastery in Nepal, the seat of their beloved Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, in 2020, and many are planning to come next year to celebrate their master´s 100th birthday.

The love that Mexican students have for Lopon Tenzin Namdak is reciprocated by him. “Lopon likes the Mexicans for their strong devotion,” Adriana says. “There is a connection.”





Some Mexicans with their “Lopon”, H.E. Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, and with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche at Shenten Dargye Ling

“I think for Mexicans it is very natural to live this connection with the teaching and masters in a similar way the Tibetans do,” Celina says. “We know that monasteries and lay followers need to support each other; monks work for us with their prayers, and we help them to keep going. Lopon told us that he really appreciates Mexican sangha for being so generous and open-hearted.”

Mexico is a catholic country. How do the relatives of these practitioners see their adherence to a completely different religion? Blanca comes from a very large family, she has fourteen brothers and sisters. “My father studied in a catholic seminar when he was young, and still, he has respected my choice since the beginning,” Blanca says. “You follow what you want, he told me,” she says.

“My parents passed away but my children (I have a daughter and a son) they both are okay with what I do and follow. They see it is as a good path,” Sharo says.

Adriana says that she was looking for some meditation technique because her husband was sick with cancer. “I wanted to learn meditation to help to heal him, as it is said in many books that meditation is good for that. He did not start meditating but my life was changed. My family does not have any problem with what I follow. If you are happy like this, go for it, they say,” Adriana says.

“My mother was against it,” Celina says, “but after time she has changed her mind. She told me she could see good changes in me.”

When you ask the ladies how it comes they always look happy and cheerful, they say: “It is because we are so lucky. Lucky to be with our masters, to receive the teachings, to have met Lopon. In any case, many Mexicans are like us,” they add, laughing.

Photo credit: Ligmincha Mexico, Sharo Maldonado, Angel R Torres, Jitka Polanska

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At Shenten, I see my root master wherever I turn, says Khenpo Gelek Jinpa

written by Jitka Polanská



Soon, another three-week summer retreat begins at Shenten Dargye Ling. Khenpo Gelek shares his memories of past summer retreats, when they were blessed with the presence of Yongdzin Rinpoche, his root master. “It is important to carry on Rinpoche´s legacy, to celebrate it every summer with a gathering of us, his students,” he says.

Khenpo la, you are now in Mexico and finalizing the documentary movie about your root teacher, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche. What held you back from doing it earlier? It has been put on stand- by for years…

There is more than one reason. The covid slowed down everything, then I struggled a bit to get a visa, and then we needed to coordinate among all members of the team to be available at the same time. It was not easy. Also, I wanted to go very much to visit Tibet, and had been waiting a long time

to get a visa to China. Finally, I got it and could see my mum. That's also why I did not travel very much for teaching last year.

Soon you are going back to Shenten, to be there for the summer retreat, as every year. What does that event mean for you?

For me, it is a totally special event. Shenten is a place where I have spent a large part of my life, next year it will be twenty years since the "ling" was founded. For all of us, students of Yongdzin Rinpoche, it is a dharma home, a place blessed with his presence. But it is always open for newcomers too, for everyone who wants to approach Dzogchen meditation or is just curious about Tibetan traditional culture.



How would you describe the traditional summer retreats at Shenten Dargye Ling to someone who has never been there?

It is not just a regular teaching on something. The retreat was established as a part of the enlightened activities of my teacher, Yongdzin Rinpoche, here in the West. Although he had started coming to Europe many years before Shenten was founded, Shenten became his seat, the place of his residence. For many years, until 2018, he spent several months of each year there.

The summer retreat was a main gathering of the year – many, many students were coming to be in his presence and listen to his teachings. For Rinpoche, it was very important that practitioners of Dzogchen meditation in Yungdrung Bon tradition had a place where they can stay together for

longer periods, for teachings and practice. That's why he also, together with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, designed the Gomdra. It is a unique in-depth four year meditation program, which has been held at Shenten since 2009.

> For Yongdzin Rinpoche, building a center in the West became a priority in 2001, Florens says

I have been coming to Shenten since 2011 and I also have many memories of Yongdzin Rinpoche, during those summers. He taught exclusively Dzogchen meditation.

Yes, Rinpoche was convinced it was the most suitable spiritual path for people who live in the West. In all those years, he completed teaching on all of the major four dzogchen cycles: Zhang -Zhung Nyen Gyud, "Atri" system, Drakpa Korsum, and Yetri Thasel. By the way, Yetri Thasel will be the topic of the next Shenten Gomdra, beginning in 2025.



And it was not ordinary teachings! Rinpoche is an ocean of knowledge, he could teach entirely from his experience, but he always taught from the original texts, and in the traditional way. He holds the full and complete knowledge of Yungdrung Bon tradition, and he did not make it less so for Western students. He transmitted it fully and thoroughly. Instructions, transmissions, initiations – all were given properly and completely. He really believed in the capacity of his western students. And I think it is very important to carry on Rinpoche´s legacy, to celebrate it every summer, gathering together as a community.



There were also many precious moments outside the teachings. I remember that late afternoons – evenings, Rinpoche used to be outside, people sat around him, asking him questions, listening. I remember Rinpoche laughing and saying: "I like chatting."

For many years he was going to the *Longére*, in the afternoon, to hold individual interviews with students. It is the building next to the *chateau* which we recently renovated with the scope to welcome people for longer individual retreats.





People could come to Rinpoche at any moment, to talk to him, to greet him. He was and is very open and friendly; he likes talking about daily life situations. He is not the one who would tell people to run away from life. He always spoke about integration of the practice into everyday life.

People often say that getting so close to such a great master was a blessing for them. They say that Rinpoche was always strikingly available.

Yes, you could meet Rinpoche anywhere around Shenten. I have collected so many impressions. Now, when I am at Shenten, I see Rinpoche everywhere, in every corner, in all ten directions, we can say. Seriously. Those are very vivid memories for me. It makes Shenten very, very special.









Photos: Christophe Moulin

I do calligraphy to rest and relax, says Geshe Samten Tsukphu

written by Jitka Polanská



Geshe Samten Tsukphu learned various calligraphic styles of writing at a young age and can reproduce many different scripts. Shenten Dargye Ling asked its resident lama to lead a workshop on Tibetan calligraphy for those interested in learning the basics of this contemplative discipline.The seminar is going to take place in the month of June.

Geshe la, what are you going to teach the participants at the workshop?

To people who are interested in Tibetan calligraphy, I would like to show the two main types of script – which we call “black” and “white”. How they look and how to write them. Within both categories there are many writing sub-styles, but I want to keep the workshop simple, and will introduce only one example of each category.

How many writing styles do you know and can perform?

Quite many. More than one thousand.

Really???

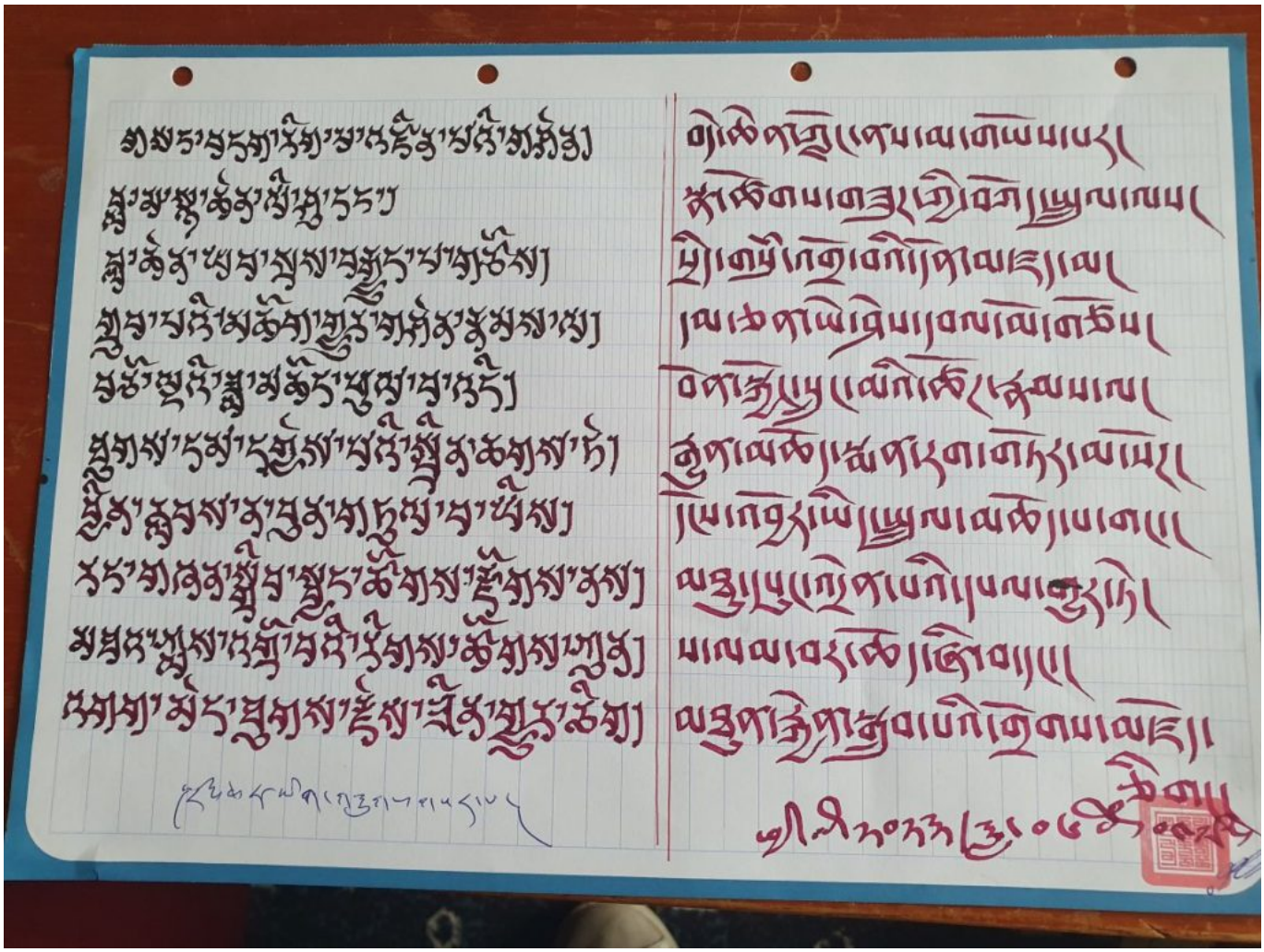
Just joking (*Geshe la is laughing*).

You remind me more and more of Yongdzin Rinpoche, there is a certain way of speaking and behaving that is common. Maybe not everyone knows that you are a relative of our root master, H.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche…

Oh! Good! (*Geshe la is laughing*). You put what is necessary in the interview, and what is not you please remove.

I would like to keep your jokes though. Now, back to the topic of calligraphy. Can you explain to us the "white" and "black" scripts, what is the main difference?

White calligraphy is called *yig-kar* in Tibetan, "*yig*" means a letter, "*kar*" is karpo – white. The white script is the one that is most familiar to Westerners, and it is also more commonly used among Tibetans. Scholars, Tibetologists, also usually know the white script. Not many of them know the black style. They need to learn whatever is more usable for their research. In the "Western style" books written in Tibetan, we use the white script.



We call the script "white" because there is more space within the letters. Letters in the "black" script, on the contrary, are more compact. Black script is often used in calligraphy. Also, small children are sometimes given a task to reproduce this script because it is more like drawing than writing and it functions to train their focus.

Your online magazine, *Melong Yeshe*, written in Tibetan for the worldwide Tibetan public, is written in white script, right?

Yes.

> An interview with Geshe Samten Tsukphud about the Melong Yeshe
>
> https://speechofdelight.org/geshe-samten-tsukphud-we-wish-melong-yeshe-have-qualities-of-mirror-like-wisdom/

So, do I understand well that the black calligraphy is more decorative, ornamental, and artistic?

Yes. We can find it in the ancient "*pecha*" books – the Tibetan traditional blocks of separate sheets of paper wrapped in a textile. Most Bonpo *pecha* books are written in the black script. Nowadays, it can also be found on prayer flags, for example, it is used in woodblock printing, as I think this script is easier to carve on wood.

Is Bonpo way of writing different?

We believe that both the white and black scripts came to Tibet from Zhang-Zhung. We have studied some Zhang-Zhung scripts, and they also had black and white styles. Bonpo culture is connected to the ancient culture of Zhang-Zhung. We believe the script used in Tibet was created earlier than the 7th century.



Geshe Samten Tsukphud in his room at Shenten Dargye Ling, March 2024.

How did you learn Tibetan calligraphy?

In my village school back in Kham where I grew up, I started to learn the white style. By myself, I got interested in the black calligraphy a little later. I studied different styles of black script and trained to reproduce them. I wrote down many prayer books in a calligraphic manner.

Is it possible to learn Tibetan calligraphy for a Westerner who does not know the Tibetan language, at least to some degree?

Well, the best way is a natural way of learning, just by seeing and trying. If you start to concentrate too much on all the rules that exist for writing, you get blocked, you will lose your natural flow. There are lots of instructions to follow but I think the best is just to relax and learn naturally.

During the June seminar, people will be able to observe me and then try themselves, at their own pace and according to their abilities. They will get familiar a little bit, both with calligraphy and with Shenten, which is a really beautiful place and good for meditation.

It is a bit surprising to me that people want to learn calligraphy and not meditation. But it is true that calligraphy is a contemplative activity. It has a positive effect on our mind, and it helps it with focusing. I use it to rest and relax.

Photos: Jitka Polanska

> *“Bonpo scriptures say that the Tibetan writing system came from the forty magical letters of Zhangzhung: thirty consonants, six vowels, and four pronunciations.”*
>
> *From A New Look at the Tibetan Invention of writing by Sam Van Schaik*

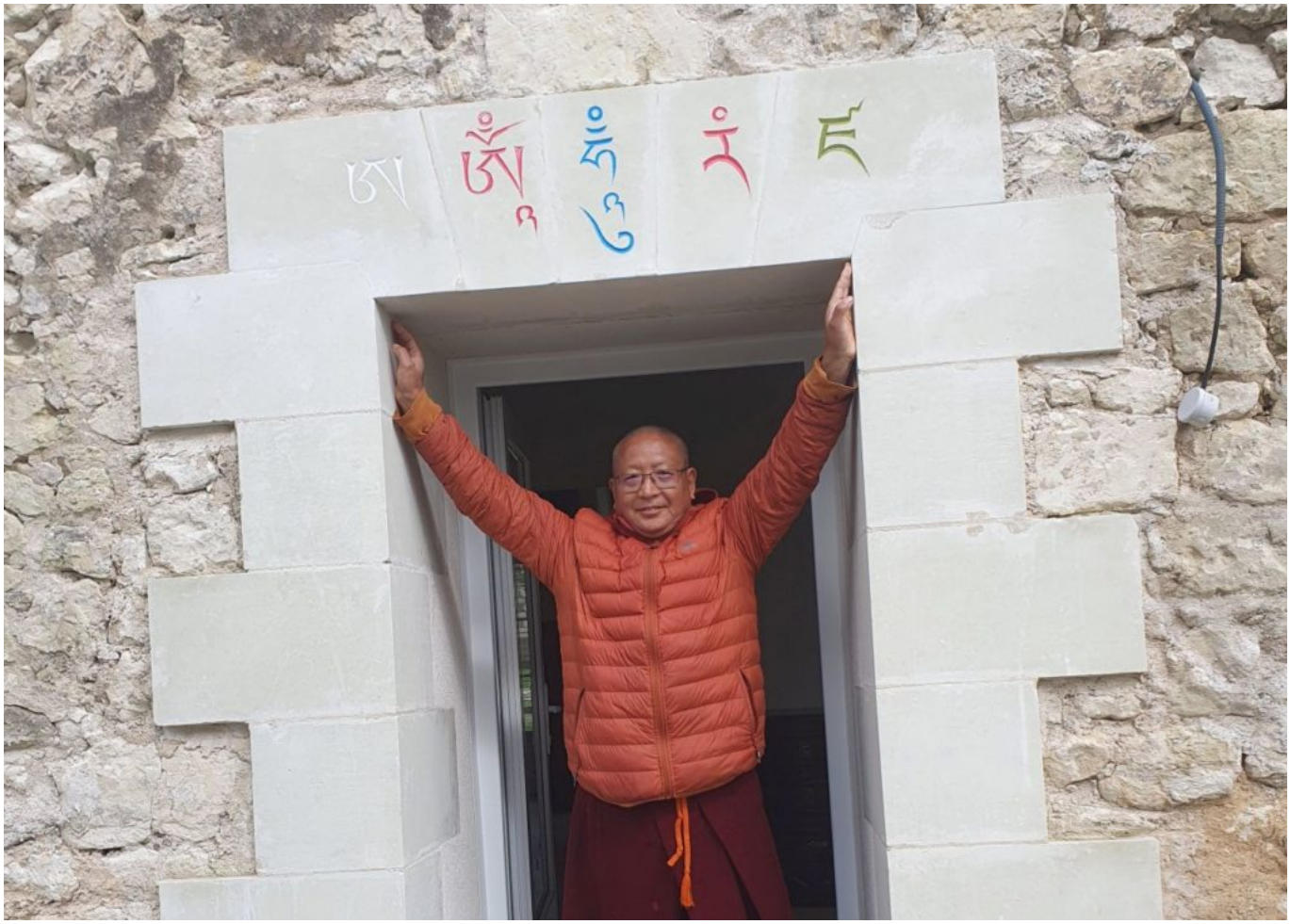
about the workshop:

Tibetan Calligraphy with Vinaya Khenpo Samten Tsukphu (June 16 – 21, 2024)

> Tibetan calligraphy is more than a visual art; it is a spiritual practice and a form of meditation in motion. Each stroke and form in Tibetan writing carries deep spiritual and aesthetic meaning. This ancient art is a way of expressing and preserving sacred teachings, offering a window into the rich culture and spiritual heritage of Tibet.
>
> In this seminar, you will explore the basics of Tibetan calligraphy, including its various forms and styles. Vinaya Khenpo Samten will guide participants through fundamental techniques, allowing everyone to connect with this unique form of artistic and spiritual expression.
>
> Whether you are a beginner or experienced in the art of calligraphy, this seminar offers a wonderful opportunity to learn and practice under the guidance of an experienced master. You will not only develop calligraphy skills, but also a deeper appreciation for the meditative and contemplative dimension of this art.

The place is perfect for skygazing, Khenpo Gelek says about the new retreat house

written by Jitka Polanská



“We have now a place at Shenten ideal for people who would like to practice skygazing and sungazing, in the similar way as they come to do a dark retreat,” Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, the abbot of Shenten Dargye Ling, says. It is the same place where Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, the founder of Shenten, used to have interviews with practitioners, for many years. It is freshly renovated and it has got a name. “Last time I was in Kathmandu I asked Rinpoche to give it a name, and he kindly called it The Treasury of Instructions,” Khenpo Gelek says. He himself put lots of his work into the renovation of the building, together with a team of sangha members. Other people from the sangha supported the project, which cost around 40 000 EUR, with donations. A lovely small apartment was created in the building. It contains a kitchen, two rooms and a bathroom, and is ready to host practitioners.

“Many people come to Shenten for a dark retreat, and I think it would be very beneficial to come also for a retreat dedicated to skygazing and sungazing,” Khenpo Gelek explains while we are sitting at the side of the building of Longere, adjacent to the main building of the Chateau and facing east, toward Shenten’s small lake.

“Skygazing is different from being in the dark though,” Khenpo Gelek explains. “The senses are not completely free from objects of seeing and hearing and therefore the challenge of integration comes into place. Integration is very important in Dzogchen practice,” he continues his reflections. “Skygazing is therefore a very powerful means of integration,” he says.

The Longère: a top retreat place to become. Update on renovation

Then he leads me to the apartment which he himself and other sangha members created with the aim to offer a place to people who would like to spend some days or even a month in a beautiful environment conducive to practice.

“Khenchen Rinpoche practiced some mornings outside there, doing skygazing, facing the sun rising above the lake. He said afterwards that the place was perfect for that practice, nothing more was needed,” Khenpo Gelek recalls.



“Such a beautiful place to stay, to practice…”

A kitchen, two rooms with wooden furniture and sacred images on the walls, a comfortable and nicely decorated bathroom – this is the place called The Treasury of Instructions by Yongdzin Rinpoche. “When I was in Kathmandu, I asked Rinpoche for a name, and this is really a beautiful one. I think that we all are treasuries of instructions, containers of teachings,” Khenpo Gelek says.

Some people may want to practice on their own, other people would wish to have guidance from lamas. “Many seasoned practitioners already know the instructions but for whoever needs them, lamas of Shenten would be here to share them and guide the practitioners in their retreats,” Khenpo Gelek says.

“Shenten was meant to have two functions by Yongdzin Rinpoche: preserving the ancient tradition of Yungdrung Bon and offering a place for a community of dedicated practitioners to develop themselves spiritually. The place was blessed by his presence for long years and it is really extraordinary, so beautiful to be here, to practice here,” Khenpo Gelek says.



The kitchen



The bigger room



The smaller room



The bathroom



The back door of the apartment, facing east. Sacred syllables A, OM, HUNG, RAM, DZA are carved

above it.

Individual retreats with skygazing? Will be possible

Photos: Jitka Polanska