Pearls of DailyGelek 2: LEAVE IT AS IT IS

written by Jitka Polanská



As a response to the covid times and the imposed seclusion, for a couple of years Khenpo Gelek Jinpa gave support to Shenten´s community with his regular online teaching from Gyalwa Chaktri, the famous practice manual of Bon Dzogchen. At the beginning, those one hour long meetings took place every day, and combined thirty minutes of teaching with meditation. They were attended by up to three hundred people and many of them expressed their gratitude to the lama. During those encounters, Khenpo la repeatedly shared his key instructions. We decided to collect some and present them as a series of daily reminders. We continue with "LEAVE IT AS IT IS" **and what it means in the context of Dzogchen practice.**

> Whenever I shared a worry with my master, Yongdzin Rinpoche, he used to say: leave it as it is. I repeat it to myself when I feel disturbed.



Khenpo Gelek Jinpa

Leave it as it is

Do not chase after the past, do not create the future, do not modify the present – these are traditional recommendations about how to keep our mind when we meditate, how to detach it from our usual rush after thoughts and make it still.

It is a healthy attitude in general, not only in the practice.

Whatever happened, is gone. We should not lock it in our heart. Good things, bad things – let them go. Do not get obscured by your past.

As for the future, nobody knows what it will be, so we should not spend much time in thinking about it. The future is not ripened yet, so do not shape it with your worries. With too much thinking, concepts become more and more concrete, it is like water becoming ice.

Be relaxed instead and help other people to relax about the future. Relaxed does not mean lazy, it means being able to release the stress from our mind and our body.

And what does it mean “do not modify the present”? Accept without judgment whatever arises in your mind. Do not elaborate it. Abide in the presence of it. Whatever comes, if you do not grasp at it, it will be liberated by itself. It is easier to say than do, but it is not too hard either. It is possible.

Whenever I shared a worry with my master, Yongdzin Rinpoche, he used to say: leave it

as it is. I repeat it to myself when I feel disturbed. I try to leave the mind unpolluted with negative thoughts and avoid negative reactions. Do not hold on those thoughts, and do not block them either – it is the best way how to deal with them.

We should keep this advice in our hearts. These are challenging times but worrying does not help. So do not worry much, whatever happens, take it as a result of our collective karma and a sign of the reality of impermanence.

Leave it as it is, leave everything in your mind freely. And if I cannot do that for the moment, then I pray, I at least pray as much as I can for everybody´s release from suffering. This is helpful for me and for others.

What matters is what is inside our hearts, our minds. There, you can cultivate peace and compassion, deep understanding for yourself and others. We all can.

(Daily sessions on ZOOM were called DailyGelek initially; later, Geshe Samten, Geshe Lungrik and Geshe Kalsang joined and the meetings were renamed DailyShenten).

Photo: Jitka Polanská, Largen Lama

We are dedicated to a non-sectarian view of the Dharma, promoting also Bön, says founder of RIMÉ Association

written by Jitka Polanská



Paolo Roberti di Sarsina is a long-time dzogchen practitioner, a disciple of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. A year and a half ago he founded RIMÉ Association in Bologna, Italy, dedicated to spreading and promoting an atmosphere of tolerance and respect between various schools and traditions of Tibetan (and non-Tibetan) Buddhism. The name of the association – RIMÉ – recalls the non-sectarian movement started in the 19th century in Tibet to which the great dzogchen master of the Bön tradition, Sharzda Tashi Gyaltsen, belonged.

Paolo, since when have you been following Dharma?

I took refuge in 1982 in Pomaia, at the Lama Tzong Khapa´s Institute, more than forty years ago, with His Holiness Dalailama, the first time he came to Italy. I had been interested in Buddhism for some time before; my father gave me the first tome of the UTET edition, a publishing house specializing in Buddhist texts, when I was still in high school. After taking refuge I followed the Gelug school, the Dalailama´s tradition. In 1995 I joined the Dzogchen Community of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and I still belong to it today. With our Dzogchen community center, Gegenling, in 2010 we organized a teaching of the Master here in Bologna, where the oldest university in the world is located. On that occasion, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche gave a master lecture on Tibetan medicine, a heritage of humanity. For this event, we obtained the patronage of His Holiness Dalailama, as well as the Italian Prime Minister´s.

How and when was your Rimé Association for the Non-Sectarian Practice, Promotion and Diffusion of Dharma born?

It was founded in February 2022, and inspired by our Master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. He himself was a great exponent of non-sectarianism having received teachings from many lineages.

There is a story that illustrates his open attitude. In 1988, he was invited to the famous conference of several masters from various schools and lineages organized by His Holiness Dalailama. Everyone had to have a 'badge' indicating an affiliation to a school. But the Master was not easily classified. When they wanted to write 'Sakya' on it, he said 'I am not Sakya though', and this even if he was very connected to that school. "So Nyingmapa, maybe?" they asked him, knowing of him being close to that school. "Not even," he replied. "I am a dzogchen master and I am not from one side," he added. And that is non-sectarian: include everything in one's mind. It is wonderful!



Paolo Roberti di Sarsina con Federico Ballarin and Clara Lovisetti, dzogchen practitioners and translators of teachings by Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and other Shenten lamas.

"Rimé" is a movement established in the 19th century in Tibet. The great Bön master, Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (1859-1934) was a Rimé exponent. Can you tell us something about the origins and purpose of the initiative?

The 'ris med' movement had two main creators: Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye (1813-1899) and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-1892). The name derives from the Tibetan words ris (sectarianism) and med (refutation) and literally means 'without sides', hence 'non-sectarian'. The movement emphasized the unity of the different Dharma transmissions and the need to go beyond all sectarianism. It inspired a great spiritual rebirth. It referred back to the original sources of the Dharma teachings and aimed to transmit and teach the multiformity of lineages while preserving their variety.

The movement and especially its principles still inspire the dialogue among the different Tibetan religious schools, right?

Yes, they do. The greatest contemporary exponent of the ´Rimé' is certainly His Holiness Dalailama. On our website you can find, for example, the transcript of His Holiness' speech at the Twelfth Rimé Conference held in Dharamsala in 2015 where he, among other things, talks about the distances and mistrust bridged between the Gelug School and the Bön.

RIMÉ Association tries to find and connect examples of the non-sectarian approach to the Dharma in the West…

Yes, we have set up the 'Rimé Network', which is a voluntary collaborative network of Dharma centers that share a non-sectarian view. The idea is to join forces in the promotion of events, whether they are organized by the centers themselves, by our association or our center, Gelegling. The network currently includes six centers, including ours. Two of them are Bön: Ligmincha Italia and Kunsang Gar Meditation Centre of Geshe Dangsong Namgyal, located in California.

I would like to mention here how much Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche studied and researched Bön. In light of his close and highly respectful relationship with Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, he invited him in 1997 to Merigar to transmit the Yetri Thasel´s dzogchen cycle.

In addition to setting up the network, you organize various events of different schools of Dharma. This year, a few of them have been related to Bön. Can you list them?

Last July, we had the honor of receiving teachings from Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche. A big part of the group took refuge with him and Rinpoche accepted our invitation to return next year. On that occasion, I expressed my hope to Rinpoche that the Congregation of Shenten Dargye Ling would like to support us.





During the retreat with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, in July 2023…

In September, we will collaborate with Ligmincha Italy for a retreat with Menri Ponlop Trinley Nyima Rinpoche. We also had an online presentation of the book on the life of Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, written by Anne Brunila and based on Khenpo's account, and in October, there will be a presentation of the translation of the book by Alejandro Chaoul, disciple of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, on the Tibetan yoga.

Our idea and ambition is to establish the first Dharma center in Italy exclusively dedicated to promoting the non-sectarian movement, disseminating information and organizing events from various schools and lineages.

Besides connecting Dharma centers, as an association, you offer an opportunity to become members to Dharma practitioners. Which benefits does the membership bring?

Currently, we have eighty members. We provide them with information on events organized by us and beyond. Our website, which is continuously updated, presents various interesting materials including the history of the original Rimé movement. We try to create a community of members respectful of the various traditions and schools, although this does not mean eclecticism but rather a harmony within a diversity.

The retreats you organize at Bologna have a splendid setting in the Hermitage of Ronzano, a monastery founded in the 12th century in the hills of Bologna. The Hermitage is a few minutes' drive from the city center, yet still isolated. How did you find this beautiful place?

The Hermitage belongs to the Order of the Servants of Mary and is run by lay volunteers. Various activities and events are hosted there, but only those which the prior finds trustable. We have built up a very good relationship with the people in charge over time. It is truly a beautiful place. Khenchen Rinpoche and Geshe Samten liked it very much.



Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung, Geshe Samten and Alexander Pincin at Eremo di Ronzano.


Eremo di Ronzano is surrounded by beautiful and rich vegetation.

Paolo, could you tell us something about your professional background?

I graduated in Medicine at the University of Bologna in 1979 with a thesis on yoga therapy. In 1983, I specialized in psychiatry, also at the University of Bologna, and worked as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. For several decades, I have been committed to promoting the centrality of the person in healthcare and have organized various initiatives in this field, including a National Symposium at the Senate in Rome, in 2016.

You are president of the Foundation for Salutogenesis. Can you explain what the word means and what you are involved in?

The term Salutogenesis is formed from the Latin word salus, salutis – health, and the Greek word genesis – origin, beginning, derivation. It is a neologism coined by an Israeli sociologist, Aaron Antonovsky. Salutogenesis is everything that creates health, enables people, even in situations of great adversity (trauma, chronic illness, disability, poor socio-economic conditions), to make choices that lead to health, using their internal and external resources.

Salutogenesis, therefore, deals with the 'causes', or rather the 'sources', of health. For us, it is the reference model for the promotion of health. For me, at the center of the health care process must always be the person, the patient.

Many valuable information can be found on the website of RIMÉ Association: https://www.associazionerime.org/

Pictures: Jitka Polanská

Pearls of DailyGelek 1: JOYFUL EFFORT

written by Jitka Polanská



As a response to the covid times and the imposed seclusion, for a couple of years Khenpo Gelek Jinpa gave support to Shenten´s community with his regular online teaching from Gyalwa Chaktri, the famous practice manual of Bon Dzogchen. At the beginning, those one hour long meetings took place every day, and combined thirty minutes of teaching with meditation. They were attended by up to three hundred people and many of them expressed their gratitude to the lama. During those encounters, Khenpo la repeatedly shared his key instructions. We decided to collect some and present them as a series of daily reminders. We start with JOYFUL EFFORT **and what it means in the context of Dzogchen practice.**

(Daily sessions on ZOOM were called DailyGelek initially; later, Geshe Samten, Geshe Lungrik and Geshe Kalsang joined and the meetings were renamed DailyShenten).

> In the teaching of Dzogchen we hear about “effortless state” or “effortless meditation”. Some people may misunderstand this. “Effortless” is a meditation that does not fabricate anything, this is the main characteristic of Dzogchen, compared to other kinds of meditation. But it does not mean at all that a Dzogchen practitioner should not be diligent and energetic. “Develop joyful effort” is what Tonpa Shenrab recommends to his disciples when he leaves them to go to for teaching in other places. When we know the

purpose of our meditation and we trust in the result, then we naturally develop dedication and enthusiasm for it – joyful effort. When we have it, we do not divide our time between “practice time” and “leisure time”. Our mind does not wait for a formal meditation session to practice, it is naturally more and more engaged all the time. When we have joyful effort, we do not need to force ourselves to practice. Our practice does not feel dry and tiring, it is energizing and leads to a relaxed state. It is what we want to do more and more.

Photo: Yana Karamari

My son will continue the family tradition of Tibetan arts of healing, says Amchi Nyima

written by Jitka Polanská



Amchi Nyima Gurung is a *menrampa*, a doctor of the Tibetan science of healing, sowa rigpa. He has been coming to Shenten for many years, practising *kunye*, Tibetan massage and giving medical consultations. Besides that, he teaches foundations of the massage, holding a workshop about it every summer.

Amchi la, when did you come to Shenten for the first time?

It was in 2009. I returned to France in 2012 after that, invited to a school of massage in Paris, to show them *kunye*, the Tibetan massage. That year, I also visited Shenten and have continued coming every year since then, except for the “covid” years of 2020 and 2021.

You offer the Tibetan massage to people who come for retreats at Shenten and to people from the neighborhood and you also teach the Tibetan massage. What kind of people attend your workshops?

Different people. Some are professional masseurs, but others are completely new to massage.

Can you say what is characteristic about *kunye*, how it differs from other types of massage we know in the West, such as thai or ayurveda massage?

I cannot compare the Tibetan massage to them because I do not know these massages well. I can only describe what we do in *kunye*. *Ku* means to apply something, and *nye* means rubbing. Basically, we apply oils and rub the body with them. The second phase of the massage is called *chi* and means cleansing. We clean the impurities which the body releases with the massage by applying tsampa, a roasted barley flour. But if a person suffers from what we call a wind imbalance, we do not remove the oil.

There is a special procedure for the lung imbalance, right?

Yes, it is called *tsu´*. We put a mix of herbs into ghi (melted butter) and apply it on specific points of the body; on the temples, or on the back, palms, the chest, feet… Butter does not burn skin, that’s why it is suitable for this healing.



How did you learn kunye?

From my teachers and from traditional Tibetan medicine texts. They are part of the canonical corpus of texts of *bumzhi*. Some are very old. Some of them focus on specific parts of the body, others deal with the whole body. Also, they may focus on different diseases.

You are an *amchi*, a menrampa – doctor of traditional Tibetan medicine. How long did you study for that?

Nine years.

And where?

First in India, with His Holiness 33rd Menri Trizin. I arrived in India in 1979, from Nepal, when I was a nine-year-old boy. My father is an amchi, my family holds a lineage of amchis. But my grandfather died when my father was a young boy and so he could not get the full knowledge of the *sowa rigpa* from him. That's why my parents decided to send me to Menri to learn the traditional Tibetan medicine there. They also wanted me to learn Tibetan language and culture in general. In my village, the local school does not teach them.

Was it difficult for you as a young boy to leave your family?

Well, it seemed an opportunity to learn something new. I entered the school for children in Dolanji, which at that time had only five classes. After that, I continued my studies with Menri Trizin when he had time. I learned a lot from him, but it was not a systematic study.

How long did you stay with His Holiness?

Around seven years. After that I returned to my family back home in Nepal. I was around twenty years old. I started helping my father in my village, Jharkot, in lower Mustang. He taught me about medical plants, and we went collecting them together. We also went to healing pujas in the village.

After approximately a couple of years, Yongdzin Rinpoche sent me to the medical school in Dorpatan. This school had been established there about five years earlier. I completed my studies under the guidance of Tsultrim Sangye, called Gege, the founder of the school. It took me seven and half years.

When did you get your degree as *menrampa*?

In 2001. I graduated at Triten Norbutse monastery, together with two other people. Then I returned again to my home in Mustang.

Until 2009, I stayed all year long in the mountains, helping patients. And I still continue to do so for a large part of the year, but I also continue to visit Shenten and Kathmandu to offer massage and healing.



You have a family in Mustang. Will your children continue the family tradition of amchis?

Yes, one of my two sons studies Tibetan medicine at the medical school of Triten Norbutse. He is twenty now. The younger one is in the eleventh grade at a school in Mustang.

photos: Jitka Polanska

Debates are a method how to test your knowledge, the organizers of Shenten´s Shedra say

written by Jitka Polanská



In 2019, Shenten Dargye Ling included in its program a course called "Shedra", focusing on Bon philosophy and the art of dialectic process of disputation. In the course, Western followers of Yungdrung Bon learn how to debate as monks do. Sara Bertók and Wolfgang Reutter, the organizers of Shedra, disclose how it is organized and what they find challenging.

Why was Shedra, the course on philosophical aspects and debating in Yungdrung Bon, introduced in Shenten´s program? I heard that it was a wish of some practitioners, of you, Sara, in the first place. Is that correct?

Sara: No, the idea belonged to our lamas. It was a project of Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and Khenpo Gelek Jinpa. It came up when I was at Shenten organizing a summer retreat and as I was interested in such a course, I offered to organize it. I got involved a lot in it and later I asked Wolfgang to join as a co-organizer, because I did not have the capacity to do it all by myself.

Wolfgang: I was very interested in approaching the philosophy in Yungdrung Bon. When I heard that such a course was being planned, I immediately wanted to participate. And so I did. The first year of

the cycle was organized only at Shenten, not online. It was before the “corona” started. I was there. After that Sara asked me if I could step in with the organization of it and so, from the second year on, we have been doing it together. That year, I was also elected as a member of the Council of Association of Shenten Dargye Ling.

Sara: Most of the work went on Wolfi’s shoulder. I support him when I can.

I heard that the lamas were quite skeptical to whether a course on philosophy makes sense, and they are still uncertain about whether it is worth putting energy into it.

Sara: Yes, I can understand that they are skeptical about it and how successful it could be. It is a new subject with a new format, and what we have done can be viewed as a pilot project; to evaluate when the cycle is completed.

Philosophy is a very vast topic in Yungdrung Bon, it takes years to learn it and even more to master it. And this knowledge is necessary in order to debate about it. So, the question is how to do a meaningful course dedicated to Bonpo philosophy when you have only a couple of weeks at your disposal within a year? I think this cycle offers us a very good opportunity to learn from the experience. And we can reflect on how to shape it better, maybe, in the next cycle.

The first part of the five-year-long cycle was held in 2019, right?

Wolfgang: Exactly, it was three weeks all spent together at Shenten. It was wonderful for all of us. It was a real retreat, including regular meditations and offerings. It was a big challenge also, for everybody.



What was the challenge about, specifically?

Wolfgang: It is a huge field of study. Monks study it for years, as Sara said, and we were all just new.
Sara: It was challenging also because we did not follow the monastic system of how they learn. If we had gone the gradual way as the monks do, from the very beginning, it would be very slow and not that interesting for us, and so we started in the middle, reading a quite complex text and then trying to debate over the text. Many people had no experience with the Sutra texts. Most of us know about Dzogchen, from our masters. The Sutric view is very different. The idea of debating about the concepts expressed in these texts was very new for many of us. The first year Khenchen Rinpoche tried to give us an overview of the whole system, talking about the Nine ways of Bon in a structural way, and we started to read the text that we analyzed and debated on throughout this and following

years, a text called Salam, The self-commentary of the Magical Lamp of the Stages and Paths, by Nyamme Sherab Gyaltsen.

The method of philosophical analysis that Tibetan monks use is different from how it is done in the field of Western philosophy. You derive your arguments from the text. It is not free reasoning, rather you need to learn quite strict rules and understand the text very well to be able to debate.

I assisted in a couple of sessions the second year, with your kind permission, to get an idea of how the course was, and I could see that there is a pattern in the debate, a certain way of reasoning, but I could not find out easily what the pattern was. It was not possible to use just "common sense" logic.

Wolfgang: Yes, the debate has a strict procedure with rules. There are also different roles: a defender and a challenger. It is a bit like a dance with the rules. You gather and deepen your knowledge with the debate.

Why is the course focused so much on debating? Debate is a complex thing that involves communication, reasoning, gestures… Would it not be better to just read and analyze a philosophical text with a teacher?

Wolfgang: I think that you cannot separate philosophy and debate. It is through debates that knowledge develops. It is really important to know how the tradition developed the knowledge and how it tested it through debate for themselves and with other schools. The course refines logical thinking, in this way. And you can apply those methods we have learned in everyday life, when you become more skillful, of course. Now we are just beginners.

Sara: Debating is traditionally considered to be a very important learning method. It was also used as a way to compete with other spiritual schools. Nowadays, the main purpose is to refine one's knowledge, your understanding of this knowledge. When you just listen passively to what a teacher says, you may think that you understand. But when you start debating on the subject, following the rules, it really tests your understanding. Your opponent may ask you something that catches you by surprise. You cannot just answer superficially. Your answer must be specific, clear, and very precise. At the first sight what you say may seem correct, but then the challenger puts more pressure on you, and you find out that you have no sufficient arguments, your knowledge is weak.

Debating also teaches resilience, you have to withstand somebody who is insisting on proving your position as not right. Also, it is good training for speaking in public. My impression is that monks who went through it are less shy to speak in front of others, while many Westerners are very shy. Maybe Western schools should introduce debating in their program.

Wolfgang: And it is fun. The more I do, the more I enjoy it. I imagine that it is very pleasurable when you can do it well, including all the movements.

But you do not train it as a performance, right? Since the second year, the Shedra moved online and so you do not meet physically. Did you try it in the first year, at least?

Wolfgang: Not really, we had too little knowledge for that.
Sara: We needed first to learn syllogisms, the patterns of arguments.

Do monks debate from the very beginning of their course on philosophy, or do they have a preliminary course where they get familiar with the subject and rules? I've seen very young monks debating.

Wolfgang: Monks learn the basics of philosophy first. We jumped into reading a text that the monks meet only later on in their studies, not immediately. Salam is regarded as the highest text in Bon Mahayana tradition.
Sara: I think that at the beginning, monks train debating on some very easy subjects, like debating on colours, pillars and so on, not on philosophical subjects.

How many people started the course of Shedra that you organize?

Sara: We were fifteen in the first year. We just reached the number fixed by Khenchen Rinpoche as a minimal number to start the program. In the second year there was covid, and we did not know how long it would take and how it would go. We decided then not to consider it as the second year of the course but more as a repetition year.

Wolfgang: And it was also shorter that year, only eight days. The following year, we went back to a full program, but only online. In 2022, it was organized both online and onsite.

So, now four years are completed and one more is ahead, right?

Wolfgang: That's correct.

How many people are in the course now?

Sara: Quite a lot. Just a few dropped out. And at the official second year, we let new people join.
Wolfgang: This year we were around twenty.

How is the program structured and what do you do, specifically?

Wolfgang: In the first year, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung and Khenpo Gelek both taught us, later, Khenpo Gelek took over the entire teaching. In addition, we have had Tibetan lessons with Charles Ramble in each course. We started with spoken Tibetan, and then we proceeded to the classical Tibetan. We have two sessions per day, each one for a different level of participants. This year all was concentrated in the afternoons. The philosophy session was every day from three to five pm. Plus the morning and the evening meditation. All on zoom.



The first year of the cycle was at Shenten, and Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung gave an overview to the participants.

What do lessons in Tibetan look like?

Sara: We have a beginners´ course of spoken Tibetan and a reading class. There are people in the group who are complete beginners, some others with just very little knowledge, others who are intermediate and then some with a really good level of knowledge. We started with two groups. When you approach the Tibetan language, even if you do it with the aim to read dharmic texts, you must learn the alphabet, pronunciation, reading and writing letters. This is quite a long process in Tibetan, and in general it is advisable to start with spoken Tibetan before starting to learn classical Tibetan.

Wolfgang: Charles is a wonderful teacher. In the second year, he went on with us after the closure ended. It was really a precious opportunity. For me, personally, learning Tibetan is very challenging. And I will not be the only one, I guess. Many people tell me the same story. They start, then they drop, then they pick it up again.

As for the results, sometimes I do understand, and some other times I do not understand at all (laughs). But I started to understand the structure of a Tibetan sentence, this was very helpful, and it keeps me going. When you do not know a word, you can find it, but the understanding of how phrases are built is of key importance. I am very much motivated to go on.



Khenpo Gelek used to be a skilful debater during his studies at the monastery.

Dharmic texts are concise and condensed. Lamas themselves learn how to interpret them.

Sara: Yes, philosophical, and especially ritual texts, need the support of an oral tradition for interpreting them. A very specific language is used. And you also need the background knowledge to get the meaning well. In a way, it is similar to philosophical texts in Western philosophy, as you also cannot understand them easily without being introduced to their historical and cultural context. And Tibetan texts are even more distant from us, culturally, and also, as we said, the logic which they use is different.

Many of them are ancient, which creates another barrier.

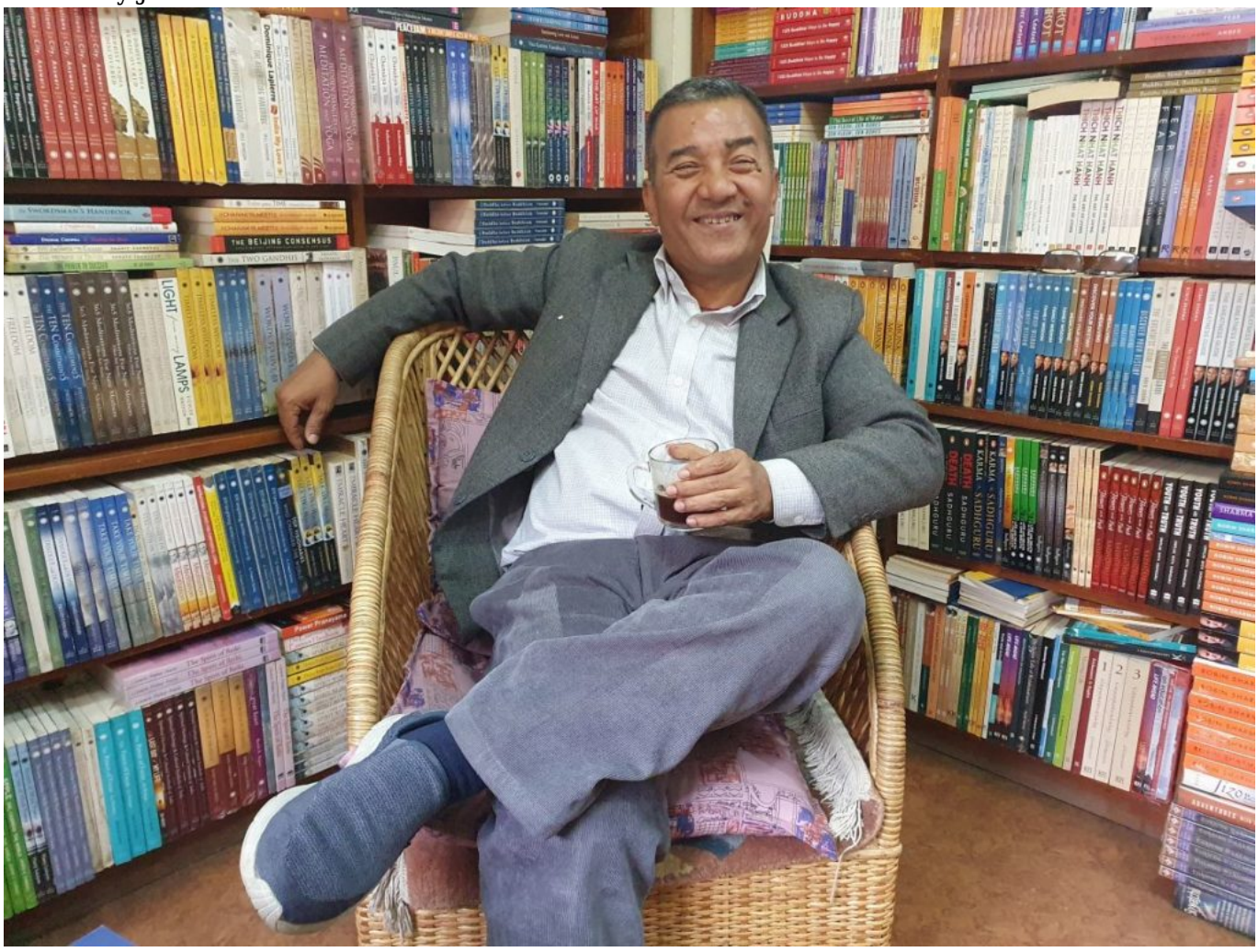
Sara: Yes, the text we read in the course was written in the 14th century. We are attempting to translate it into English, by the way.

Will it be finalized and published; do you have such aspirations?

Sara. It will be cool to publish it at the end. People in the group have been putting lots of effort in it, and they have good skills. It goes very slow, but I have this goal in my mind. It would be a big support for participants in the forthcoming courses, if Shedra continues. And also for anyone who cannot read Tibetan and just wants to know more about Bon philosophy.

Bon is popular, the time for expansion has come, the owner of Vajra Books says

written by Jitka Polanská



Vajra Books, a publishing house and a bookstore with the same name, both located in Kathmandu, are an important reference point for readers interested in Buddhism and the Himalayan culture, including Bon. "I decided to put books about Bon at the top of the list," Bidur Dangol, the owner of Vajra Books, says.

Many people from our community come to your bookstore, Vajra Books, to buy books about Bon and not only Bon. And your publishing house has released quite a few titles related to Bon. How many, to be precise?

In total, our production counts approximately 300 titles until now, and 30 of them are about Bon. We have just published Drenpa´s Proclamation, The Rise and Decline of the Bon religion in Tibet by Per Kvaerne and Dan Martin. I think it's a very important book. I invest lots of money in such books as I really want to publish them. It was released in our new book series, Vajra Academic, as its third volume. I started Varja Academic during the lockdown. It was not easy, but it has been worth all the effort. I am grateful to Roberto Vitaly who has encouraged me in many ways to go this way.

Has the market been changing, for Bon literature?

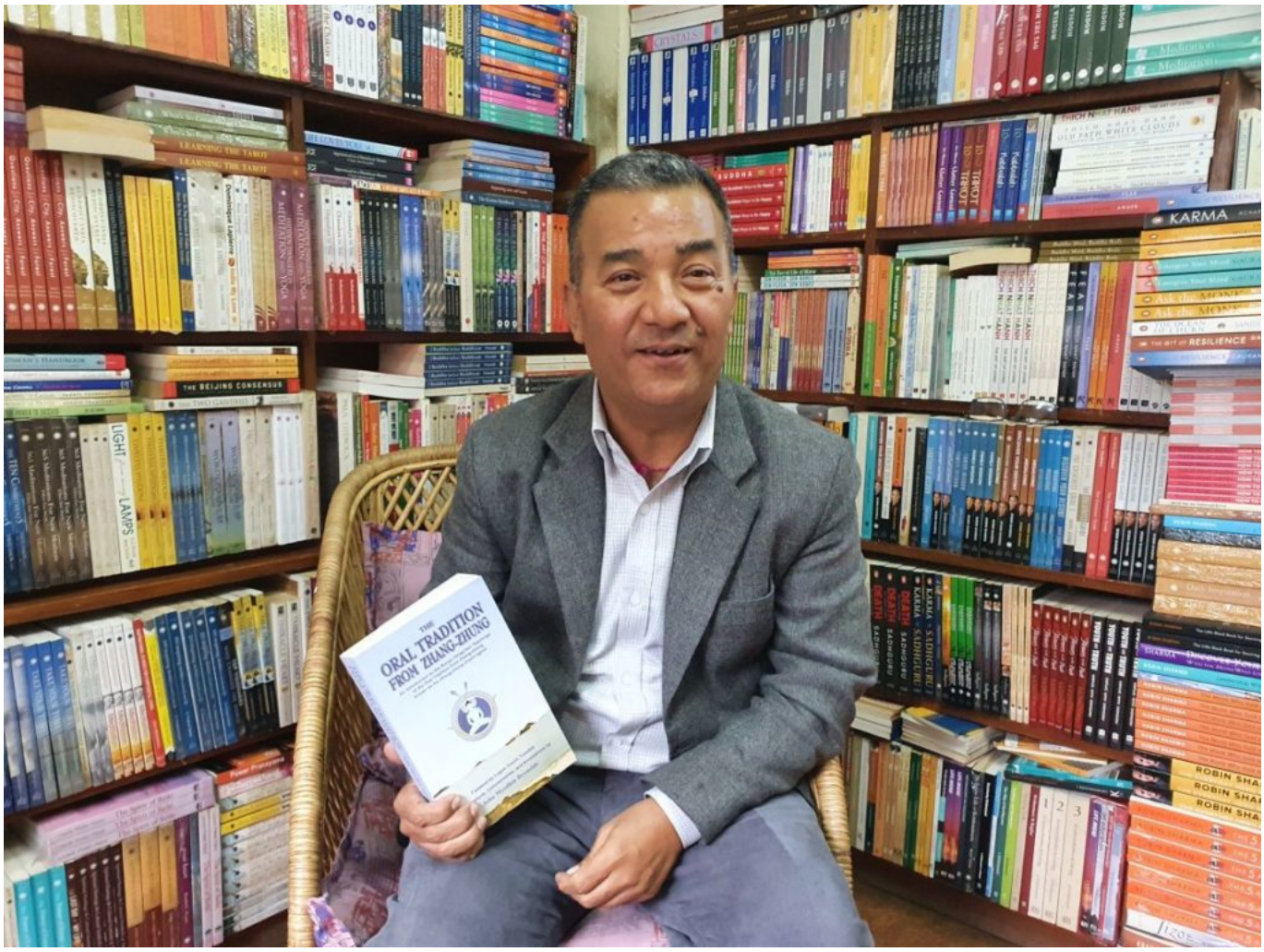
In the last twenty years, knowledge of Bon has spread a lot. Now books about Bon are popular. Bon is being researched as a part of cultural heritage. It was different even just twenty-five years ago, when I started publishing books about Bon, it was still a taboo among many Tibetans. It was seen as something external and hostile to their tradition.

I had very good connections with researchers, such as Samten Karmey and Charles Ramble, also John Vincent Bellezza, and I saw them as very serious people; so I did not have any prejudice against Bon. On the contrary, I promoted it. Now there are more and more readers interested in it. The market for Bon books has increased. There is lots of curiosity about Bon these days..

And I am also perceived as the one who knows what is going on in the Bon community and somehow connected to it. People even come by and ask me how to get to the Triten Norbutse monastery!

In 2005 you published The Oral Tradition from Zhang-Zhung by John Reynolds. This book is a very valued source of information for many Western Bon practitioners.

I am not a practitioner, but at that time and on the occasion of publishing it, I went to meet Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche to receive his blessings. I did not know anybody in the monastery, so I felt a bit shy, but it was a very nice meeting. Lopon offered me a coffee and cookies and said he knew me already. “Many people speak about you, Bidur,” he told me. I felt very blessed. And I told him: “I will put books about Bon at the top, giving them a priority.”



Your bookshop offers a wide variety of books. How long has it taken to build such a richness?

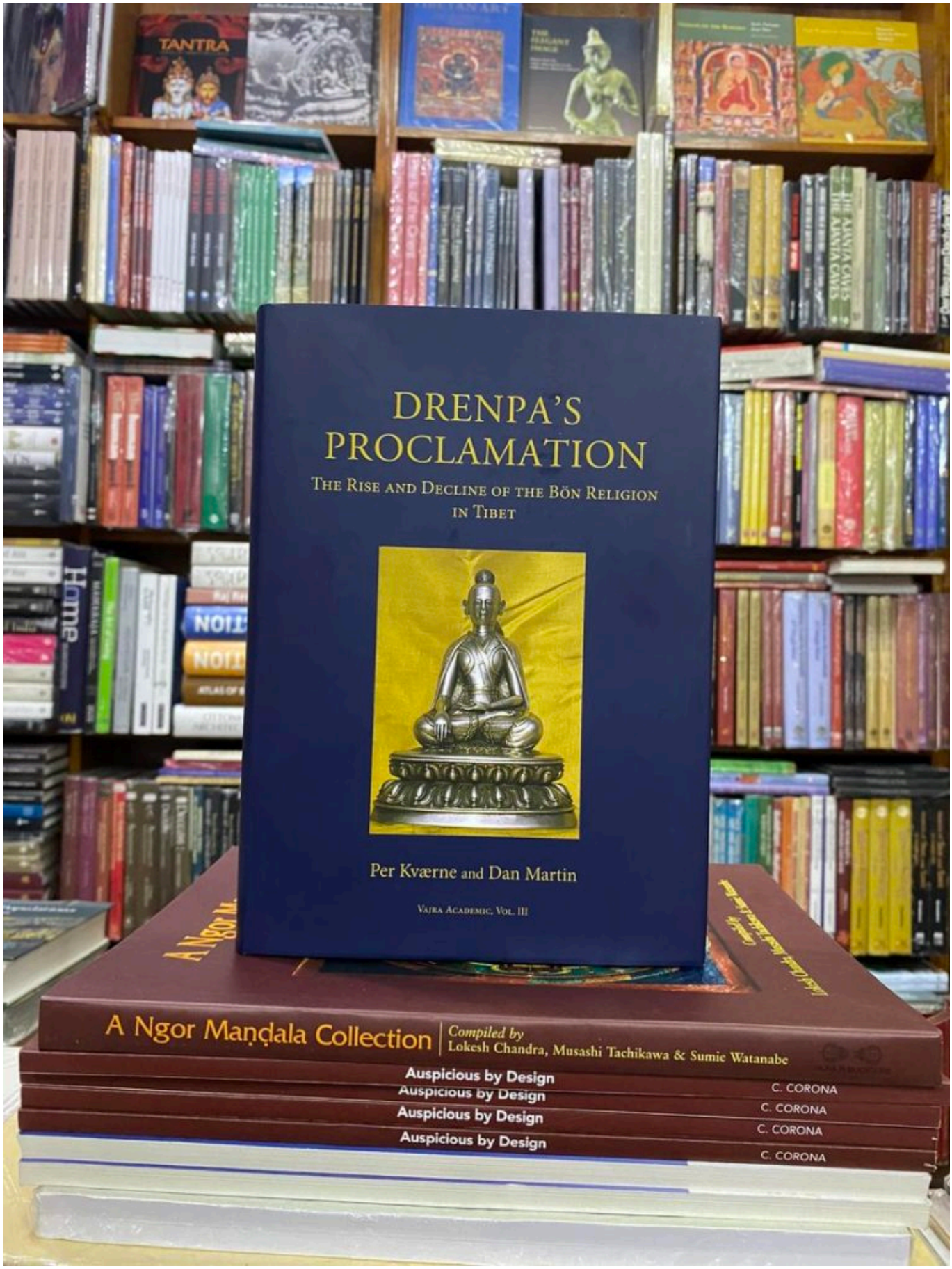
I have been in the book trade for almost thirty years. I was interested in Buddhism from the very beginning. When I opened my own bookstore, I pursued my way. I did what I wanted to do, publishing books about Buddhism, including research and related matters by anthropologists and sociologists.

How many books are at your bookstore, currently?

Around ten thousand.

When I was here in Kathmandu 2020, just before the pandemic started, I saw John Reynolds coming to your bookstore every day, making corrections, just before sending a book to print. What book was that one?

Yes, that’s right. I was sending a taxi to collect him every day. The book, The Cult and the Practice of the Bonpo Deity Walchen Gekhod, was published then, during the lockdown that followed soon thereafter.



Vajra Books about the book: Drenpa's Proclamation, dating from the 12th century C.E., is the earliest known coherent account, told from the perspective of the Bön religion, of how and why it came to pass that Buddhism was introduced into Tibet during the Tibetan Empire (a period that ended in 842 C.E.). Bön emerged in the 10th-11th century C.E. in Central Tibet, in the context of the

‘Later Propagation’ of Buddhism in Tibet in the same period, but was viewed by its adherents as distinct from Buddhism and as having flourished in Tibet for centuries before the advent of Buddhism.
Drenpa’s Proclamation is here translated in its entirety for the first time. It contains unique insight into how Tibetans in the 12th century envisaged the religion of their ancestors, and a wealth of information about cosmological, mythological, and ritual topics.

2020-2021 must have been hard for you…

Lockdowns were devastating for me. The shop was closed but we kept our employees and, of course, we lost lots of money. But we continued our publishing activities – I worked from home – and we released a couple of books. One of them was the John Reynold´s book.

How many people are in your team?

We are five in the shop, in the publishing section we have five, so all together we are ten people. My son helps me at the shop, you may see him at the counter, and he is also one of the book designers.

Are you originally from Kathmandu?

Yes, I belong to the Newari community. Newars are the historical inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. They are known for their contributions to culture, art and literature, among other things. Traditionally, they were farmers but now many of them are in business. We are hard workers. Our language is different from Nepali, it is even from a different linguistic group, as it is one of the languages of the Sino-Tibetan family.

Have you traveled far, for your business?

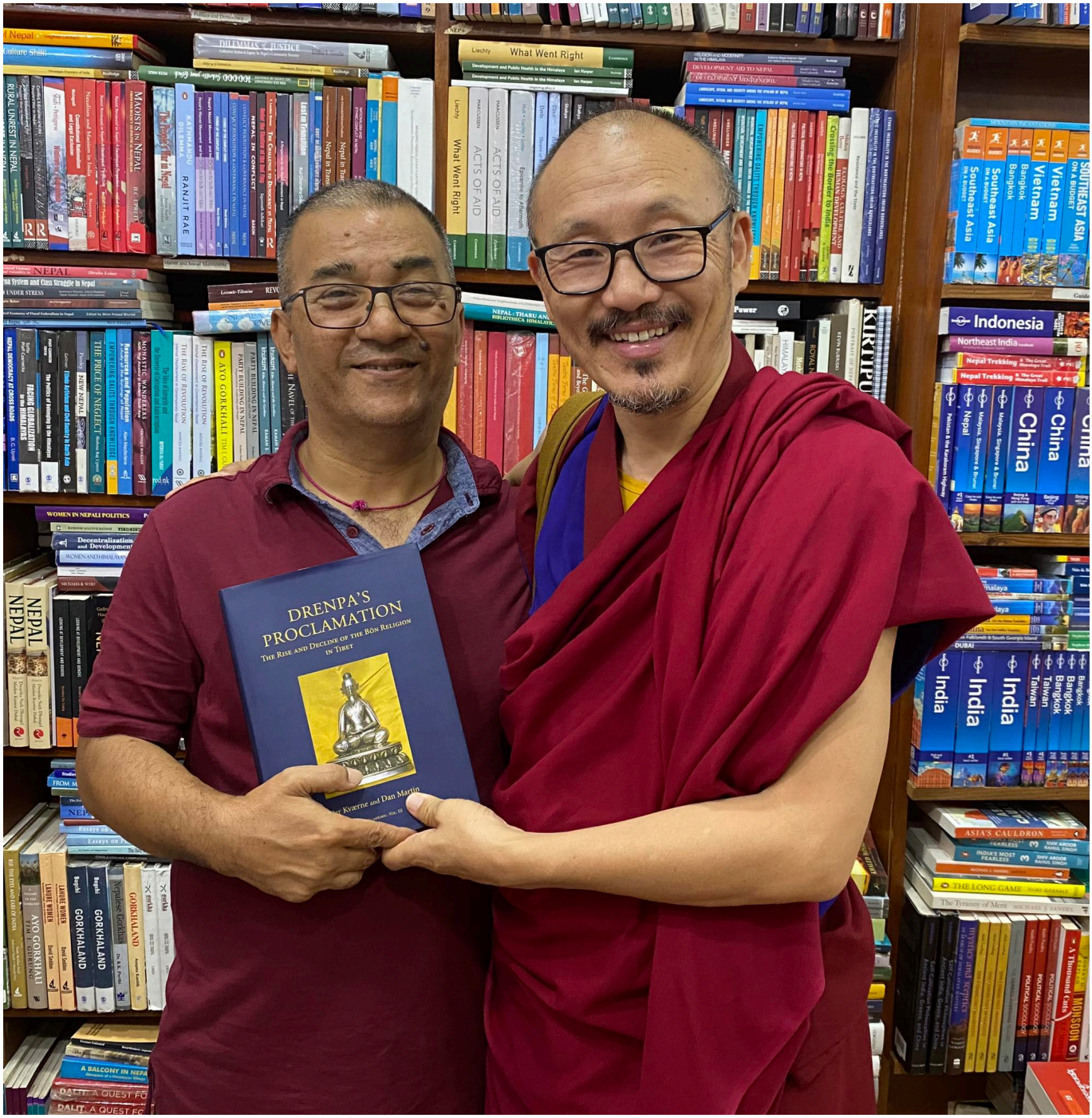
Yes, I used to, but for the past three years, I have not. A few weeks ago, I traveled to New Delhi to attend a big book fair. It was my first trip in quite a long time. In 2019, I was in Paris for a conference, and I was planning to go to Prague last year, for a conference organized there. But I had a problem with my leg and could not go, at the end. Charles Ramble told me, jokingly: “You can stay home, we did the publicity for you!” (laughing).

Are your books sold in bookstores in Europe and the US?

Yes, we have good distribution channels. Now we are, among others, stocking our titles in the famous Watkins Books in London. In August, Dimitry Ermakov will present his book, Bo and Bon, there. It was published by us in 2008. We also sell in the Namse Bangdzo Bookstore in the US.

Also, I cooperate well with Garuda Verlag and its online bookstore located in Switzerland. Peter Eisenegger is a friend.

We were small for a long time, but now the time for growth has come; for Vajra Books and for Bon. There are now quite a few Bonpo geshes who write texts and come along to present them to us asking if we would publish them. And, as I said, there is an ever increasing interest in Bon both within the scientific community and by readers worldwide.



Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche visited Varja Books recently.



Anne Brunila, the coauthor of the book about the life of Khenpo Gelek Jinpa, handing the book to Bidur Dangol at Vajra Books.

Sonam Norbu: Education breaks the chain of misfortune in poor families, I witness it

written by Jitka Polanská



Sonam Norbu has been working for more than twenty years for the benefit of underpriviledged children from the Himalayas. As the President of Sherig Phuntsok Ling Bon Society, the founding organization of TISE Himalayan International School, he is tirelessly onsite for the children who study and live at the school. He and his small team organize the life in the school's hostel, including after-school activities, and take care of the physical and mental well-being of more than one hundred sixty students. This is the story told us by him.

I was born in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India, where a Bonpo community settled and has resided for many decades. I went to CST – Central Tibetan School there, from nursery until class VIII. Then I studied for six years at Menri Monastery. In 1998, I went to Nepal and entered Gomdra, the meditation school of Triten Norbutse Monastery. I finished it in 2002 and then left for Mustang. Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung, the abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery, asked me to go to the newly opened Chasey Kengste Hostel in the village of Lubra, as a teacher and a superviser.

The hostel was built after many Bonpo families from the area asked to have a place where their

children could study Tibetan and receive an education in their culture. It is associated with a local government school.



Distributing clothes…


PUMA
AUTHENTIC



Each student has something remarkable…



My original plan was to be there for one year, but when the year was over, I was asked by the people in charge to stay longer. I said that I would rather not but if it is the wish of Khenpo Rinpoche, then I would stay. Also the tibetologist Charles Ramble, who has been involved in helping the school, asked me to stay and so I did. Finally, instead of one year I stayed for fourteen years!

At the beginning of my experience, there were no roads, no electricity and no internet in Mustang. A very hard life there. I was the only monk in the hostel, all together we were three four adults. Five or six more teachers were at the school on the other side of the valley. At that time, the school had only five classes.

My main task was to teach Tibetan and elements of traditional Tibetan culture and also to guide prayers. Later, I also became a manager of the hostel.

After fourteen years spent in Mustang, I was called by Khenchen Rinpoche to help at THIS, Tise Himalayan International School in Siliguri, using the experience I gained in Lubra. At the beginning, I traveled between Siliguri and Mustang, because an important building project was taking place in Lubra. Gradually, I settled at THIS and now I am stably there and fully focused on my work for the school.



Selecting news teachers with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and Geshe Monlam Tharchin, Educational Director of the school.

I am the President of the founding organization of THIS, Sherig Phuntsok Ling Bon Society. I do all the official work connected with this role. I am also in charge of the healthcare of all the students. When someone is sick and needs hospitalization, I go with them, also because I can communicate in hindi. Fortunately, our children are mostly healthy and since the beginning, we have not had any serious sickness or injuries. For minor health problems, we have created a hospital room in our hostel where sick children can stay and recover in a peaceful environment.



“When someone is sick and needs hospitalization, I go with them…”



I spend lots of time with the children and teach them good habits. Education is important but good habits are also important, they will support them in their lives.

In 2017, I was a member of the team who went to visit families in Dolpo, to see their situation and to announce that we were opening a school for children from poor families. Because of my long experience in Mustang, I know quite well the situation in remote villages of the Himalayas and the problems connected to life in the mountains. Dolpo is less developed than Mustang, in some areas it looks like Mustang at the time I first arrived there; bad or no roads, lack of medical care and poor education.

The story of TISE Himalayan International School:

> Education, values, dignity! A school where modernity blends with tradition

We saw families that had nothing. We saw children without a mother or father, with parents who live separately, with fathers who drink. Food comes sometimes only once a day, sometimes more times a day, without any regularity. Some children were sent up to the mountains, to graze cattle, and left alone for long periods of time without any shelter. When they can come back and attend the school in their village, they are very happy. They like learning.

The situation in the mountains has been improving slowly. When I arrived in Mustang in 2002 there were nomad children who were completely illiterate. I remember one boy, dressed in sheepskin, who hardly talked to anybody and could only speak in a Mustang dialect. Now it is getting better. Some children that attended the school in Lubra later have received a scholarship and went to the US, others got very good jobs in the area. Compared to what it was like in 2002 when I arrived, it is a big change for the better. Sometimes I meet former students, in Kathmandu, as already grown-up young adults, and both I and them are very happy to see each other. They come to me and say “Kenla, so nice to see you!” Sometimes they give me some money as a gift for the school in Siliguri. “Buy something for those children!” they say.



Visiting a tea garden nearby the school, during the summer holiday.

Our THIS brings a big change in the life of its students. Children are very smart and learn quickly. Once a year we organize a trip to Triten Norbutse Monastery and some parents come to visit them there. They are surprised and happy to see their sons and daughters developing so well. “We are very lucky,” they say. Most people in Nepal and India think that charity schools are of low quality. But in our school – which is also a charity school – you can really see children in good health and progressing.

Sonam Norbu with THIS children in a tea garden nearby the school. A summer holiday event!

Schools like ours break the chain of unfavorable conditions of poor families. Thank to them children get more freedom and can do many more choices in their lives.

Helping them makes me happy, even if it means that I do not see my own family for long periods of time. This year, finally, I had a break and could go to a large family gathering, after years when I

could not spend time with them.

Pictures: Jitka Polanská

Read about the school and its hostel in Lubra:

> When you are there and observe, you can see what is really needed

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

written by Jitka Polanská



His Excellency Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche was almost eighty years old when the political situation in Nepal became very unstable. Instead of retiring, Rinpoche decided to

take on another challenge, building a center for Yungdrung Bon in the West. Florens Van Canstein was one of those helping him. As a senior student of Rinpoche, he is a source of precious memories about many events in Yongdzin Rinpoche´s life and experiences in the West. In 2001, Florens became vice President and then later President of Association Shenten Dargye Ling and held that position until 2016.

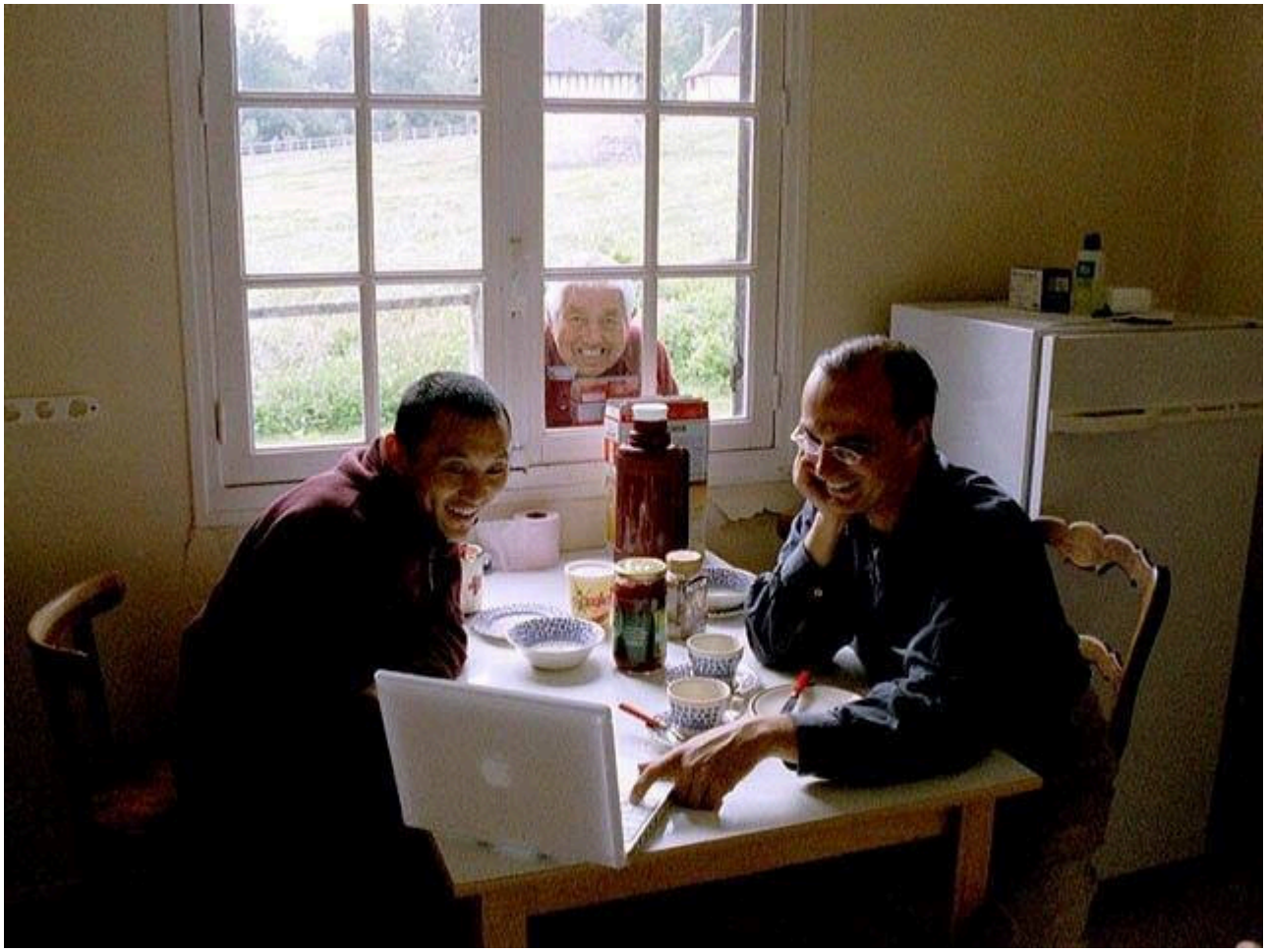
Do you remember when Yongdzin Rinpoche started thinking about establishing a Yungdrung Bon center in the West?

I think Rinpoche was having this idea already in the early nineties when he was coming to Europe for teachings. I remember him saying jokingly "we are like gypsies now, but at some point, we have to settle". Later, during Rinpoche's visit to the Netherlands in 1999 and following his encouragement, Sebastian Doerler, Gerd Manusch and myself formed a task force in pursuing this goal.

In 2000, we decided to concentrate all of Rinpoche's teaching in Europe within France because Rinpoche wished to build a center in France. During the summer retreat in Blanc, we organized a fundraiser and we received commitments from the Sangha members for two hundred forty thousand euros, to be paid once a place was found.

Later that autumn, when Rinpoche was staying at Jean Louis Massoubre's place in Paris, we began working on the by-laws of a new Shenten Dargye Ling Association.

A very strong impulse to persevere arrived in 2001, when king Birendra and queen Aishwarya of Nepal and other members of their royal family were violently killed. To have another center in a prosperous and politically stable country became even more urgent.



Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung and Florens were working on plans for Shenten in Normandy at Loel Guiness' place, in 2000, while Yongdzin Rinpoche appeared jokingly in the window.

A new association was established with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche as its president and myself as vice-president. Rinpoche made it very clear that now we really had to get it done.

He asked for help from Sipe Gyalmo, practicing a hundred thousand offerings to her, in accordance with the annual cycle at Triten Norbutse Monastery.

And an unexpected offer arrived. That's why Rinpoche calls Shenten "a gift from Sipa Gyalmo".

It was an offer by Lord Loel Guiness. Originally, the idea was to build the center on his property in Normandy. But it did not happen, in the end, why?

Loel Guinness, who is a practitioner and one of the constant supporters of Yungdrung Bon, conceived, together with Yongdzin Rinpoche, an ambitious building in a traditional style to serve both as a retreat and meditation center and an academic research center. However, when the design was presented at a public hearing, some of his neighbors opposed the plan. It was decided to not go against their will even if their attitude was a big disappointment for Loel Guiness. As an alternative, he offered an amount of money to Rinpoche to buy a place elsewhere in France. The Yungdrung Bon Sangha both in the West as well as in Nepal has a lot of reasons to be grateful to him!

How did you find the Chateau de la Modetais where Shenten has its seat?

Sebastian Doerler came up with a list of possible properties, and in 2004 we went to visit them during the summer retreat held near Vimoutier in Normandy. I remember we went in two cars: Khenchen Rinpoche, the personal assistant of Loel Guiness, Horacio, who is now the treasurer of the Congregation Shenten Dargye Ling, his wife Margot, Sebastian of course, Christophe Moulin and myself. We saw a few places but Chateau de la Modetais was a clear choice. We knew that it was the right place.

When we returned to the retreat place, Yongdzin Rinpoche was waiting for us. It was late at night, eleven or twelve o´clock. Sebastian and I went to report to him. Rinpoche asked us: "Gentlemen, do we have a deal?" and jokingly banged his fist on the table. It seems he already knew that we had found the place. The next day, we wrote a fax letter to the real estate agent that we were interested in buying the Chateau. One year later, in the spring, teachings started at Shenten.


Florens at Shenten Dargye Ling in the summer of 2022

What was there, at the Chateau, before it became Shenten?

It functioned as a boarding school for children and young people with difficulties, behavioral problems. It was empty though by the time we saw it, the school had closed. There were stories running about some irregularities, bad management, even about cases of abuse. The non-profit organization which ran the school wanted to sell the property as soon as possible in order to concentrate on another school they were running and maybe also to avoid depreciation and so they were happy when we presented ourselves.

Did Rinpoche have any preferences as for what the place should look like?

Yes, and they were quite precise. In 1999 I asked him for the requirements and committed this to paper. I went back to discuss it again with him a few times to be certain I had understood him correctly. The amazing thing is that Chateau de la Modetais precisely met these requirements. Regretfully, I have lost the description when I changed computers. Many people would be interested to see it, I would guess.

Rinpoche wished that it was located on a flat landscape, not in the mountains as some may think. And in fact, Shenten nests in a very flat countryside. He also thought that the surface should not exceed 10 acres. Shenten is slightly over 8 acres, which is around thirty and something thousand square meters. Rinpoche also wanted it to be a quiet place but close to some larger towns and not very far from Paris. And the number one criterion was that it should be in an area where it is possible to maintain good relations with neighbors. And this also came true. The neighbors did not particularly like the school that had been here before so, for them, it was definitely a change for the

better and relations with them are good.

With time, you have become responsible, together with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, for the teaching program at Shenten. Was there a particular reason for you to get involved in this?

I was quite familiar with the curriculum of Triten Norbutse, spending periods in the meditation school there, joining the monks. And I used to invite Rinpoche to Europe for teaching since 1991, requesting teaching from him, I was a reference point for him and for Khenchen Rinpoche in this area.

I also understood Yongdzin Rinpoche´s long term vision of Shenten Dargye Ling. Everything that he has built in his life is complete and fully developed. Menri Monastery and Triten Norbutse Monastery, they both are monastic universities where the tradition is maintained and transmitted in its entirety. So Shenten also was to be a stronghold for the tradition in the West. Obviously, a bit different from these large monasteries, but still a place where ultimately the full body of teaching was to be offered. And in fact, Rinpoche was able to complete the full transmission and teaching of the four major Dzogchen cycles, we have established a meditation school, we have held academic conferences, we host teachings for the local community, started a course on philosophy and dialectic – Shedra, and hosts teachings on Tibetan medicine. It is a lot, but there is still more that our tradition has on offer in the future!

Florens Van Canstein has written and translated the following books:

- Traveling with the Master, a pilgrimage to the motherland of the yungdrung bön with Yongdzin Tendzin Namdak Rinpoche
- The Four Wheels of Bon
- The Five Offerings
- The Pinnacle of the Great Expanse
- Inner Fire Practice in the Mother-tantra Tradition



Florens presenting his last book to Yongdzin Rinpoche, in 2022.

Are there any guidelines, concepts that you keep in mind when building a program?

Initially, Khenchen Rinpoche´s idea was to organize a teaching event in every season of the year. The easy part was the summer retreat. It became a tradition and the cornerstone of the whole Shenten schedule.

Then, we were a bit creative and thought that a one-week retreat at the end of August, which follows the summer retreat, can be considered as already belonging to the autumn season. In the winter we had teachings with other lamas, starting after Christmas and ending at the beginning of January. That was a less easy part because Shenten needs heating, and we were exposed to much higher costs than in the summer.

Since its establishment, Khenchen Rinpoche has guided a spring retreat around Easter time. Then, with time and with the increased interest of Sangha members, the program was enriched and now we have something more or less every month. Maybe it has become even a bit too crowded, considering the changes that the covid pandemic has brought. Now so many teachings are streamed on the internet. It can become overwhelming. Also, we have to think about the organization because we have only a limited number of people who can volunteer for that. From this point of view, input from the council of the Association Shenten Dargye Ling is important and relevant and is taken into account, when we are planning the program.



Florens Van Canstein *met Yongdzin Lopön Tendzin Namdak Rinpoche in 1991. Since then he has devoted himself to the study of sutra, tantra and particularly dzogchen in the bön tradition. Since 1998 Florens spends several months a year in Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal to receive teaching, study and meditate. He has received extensive teachings from many other bönpo masters: Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, Pönlob Tsangpa Tendzin Rinpoche, Khenpo Gelek Rinpoche, and Pönlob Kalsang Gyatso. Florens speaks and reads Tibetan and translates teaching for various lamas including Pönlob Tsangpa Tendzin Rinpoche. Since 2014 he organizes the annual teaching tour of Pönlob Rinpoche in Europe and accompanies him as his translator.*

One of the most appreciated events of Shenten is *gomdra*, a four-year cycle of seventy-day long retreats which combine teaching with intensive practice. Such a program is quite rare to be found I think. Was it your suggestion?

Yes, in 1999 when Rinpoche asked me to help establish Shenten, I immediately asked him to include a meditation school. When I was younger, I was taking part in *gomdra*, the meditation school at Triten Norbutse whenever I could, maybe for one month each year. I knew the structure of the school and its curriculum, lasting four years, each year dedicated to one Dzogchen cycle. I thought that to have a possibility to deepen one´s practice under the guidance of an experienced teacher would be something people in the West would also appreciate.

You yourself took part in the second cycle of Gomdra, right?

Yes, I was very lucky to do that, also because our retreats were blessed by the presence of Yongdzin

Rinpoche, who used to stay at Shenten from the spring until autumn, before returning to Triten Norbutse for the winter.

Thank you!

Pictures: Florens Van Canstein and Jitka Polanská

Celina: These kids are a part of our sangha, and of my heart

written by Jitka Polanská



When Celina Mejia was at Shenten Dargye Ling, last autumn, as a participant of Gomdra (seventy day long teaching and practice retreat), she was invited by a friend to give a donation for TISE Himalayan International School. "With this, I became more interested in the school, one of the heart projects of Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenchen Rinpoche – and I decided to visit. Since then, the children that I met there have not left my heart," she says.

These children are a part of our sangha

In March 2023 I visited THIS, the school in Siliguri founded and supported by Khenchen Rinpoche. I spent a few days there. It was a very touching experience to see how much all the staff of the school care about the kids, how much they are engaged. Norbu Lama and his team – they do a wonderful work, they are there for the children every moment, with all their energy.

I was talking to the kids, watching them playing, happily, I took many pictures and videos. It was a period just after the exams.

I was impressed. Older children are like brothers and sisters to the younger ones. All of them are kind and so polite, every time they met me they were showing me joy and interest.

Since I left the school I am thinking about how to transmit the feeling of closeness and connection that I took with me. Now I feel those kids are a part of our sangha. We should include them in our hearts.

Celina



Picture and video: Celina Mejia

More about the school:

Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung: I am inspired to help those children

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Sherab Chamma: At the beginning, I was the youngest student and the only girl

written by Jitka Polanská



Sherab Jamma is 24 years old and has a degree of Kachupa (an equivalent to a bachelor's degree) from the School of Four Medical Science of Early Tradition which belongs to Triten Norbutse monastery. She now continues her studies to become a Menrampa, a fully qualified doctor of traditional medical science, sowa rigpa. This year, Sherab Jamma is visiting Shenten – for the first time – and offering medical advice and assistance to participants of retreats. She will also be holding a practically oriented seminar about the

basics of Tibetan medicine.

Sherab la, what is the purpose of your stay at Shenten?

It is our Khenchen´s idea to send some students or graduates from the medical school to share their knowledge and also to get some teaching experience, an experience of how to speak in public. The main thing is to share the knowledge of traditional Tibetan medicine.

What are your main activities here at Shenten?

I give Tibetan massages and examine the state of health of people who come to me, by checking their pulse. Then I can also give them some advice for their lifestyle and offer some herbal medicine.



Sherab Chamma st Shenten in May 2023

How many people have come to you, till now (May 7)?

Around twenty five. When there are teachings, more people come, sometimes three or four in one day.

It is your first time in Europe, what was your journey like?

It is my first time anywhere outside Nepal. My journey was good and easy because I traveled with

Khenchen Rinpoche and Largen la. We traveled via Doha and our flight from Kathmandu was delayed so we did not catch our connecting flight and had to stay overnight in Doha and so we went to see the city. It was interesting. Also, in Paris, we stayed for two days and visited some places and hung around with some Tibetan friends living there.



At the School of Four Medical Science of Early Tradition of Triten Norbutse monastery


And in Paris…

How long will you be staying at Shenten?

Around two months.

Do you like the place?

Yes, I am very lucky to come here, where our root master Yongdzin Rinpoche was staying for long periods. It is very quiet, a good place for people to relax. People are nice and everything is well organized. It is a very good experience for me.

Sherab Jamma, when did you enter medical school at Triten, at what age?

It was in 2008. I was nine years old. I am from a village in Dolpo. My mother died when I was five-

years-old and so my elder sister and brother took care of me and eventually sent me there. Nyima Ozer, a lama from our village, brought me to the school. To get there, it took us four or five days. I visited my family in the mountains only after nine years, in 2017. But my brother and sometimes my sister and my father came to see me in Kathmandu. And also Nyima Ozer Rinpoche.

You were very young! Were there other children of your age?

For one year I was the only girl and the only child of this age but soon after more girls came and we became friends. Now, many girls study at the school.

Did you go to school before, in your village?

Yes, until grade 2. After coming to the medical school, I studied the basics first, Nepali, English and Tibetan. After that, I entered the five years course for Kachupas and a bit later I also went to a college, a governmental school in the city, to complete my higher education up to grade 12, starting from grade 8. I finished my secondary school in 2019.



During one-day seminar held at Shenten on 30th of April 2023

Your English is very good.

It was quite good after college – because we also studied in English – but then I did not practice it much. Now I have a good opportunity to speak English here at Shenten and I hope it will improve.

Are you from a family of *amchis*, doctors of traditional medicine?

My father is not an *amchi* but many older people in the village have some medical knowledge. I think that in every country in the past, people used to be like this.

You are still studying but you also help in the clinic. What do you do, exactly?

As a kachuba, we can examine patients and make and give medicine. I also teach younger students.

What do you want to do in the future?

I want to be a good doctor and help patients. I want to develop my knowledge in this Tibetan medical field. I feel happy that I have already completed one part of my studies and I can work and continue to deepen my knowledge. Also, I could come here, as a result of my studies.

Thank you for the questions.



In front of the medical school and clinic located just bellow Triten Norbutse monastery

Photos: Sherab Chamma, Jitka Polanska, Yana Karamari

Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung: I am inspired to help those children

written by Jitka Polanská



Many children in remote areas of the Himalayas will get poor or no education if they remain in their villages. Knowing this, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, the abbot of Triten Norbutse Bön monastery in Kathmandu, had worked hard for fifteen years to create favorable conditions for building a school where such children can learn what will support them in their lives. Finally, Tise Himalayan International School (THIS) was born, five years ago. Currently, it hosts around hundred sixty students. "They are enthusiastic to learn and talented in many ways. It gives me strength and motivation to keep on going no matter how difficult it is to finance and run the institution," Khen Rinpoche says.

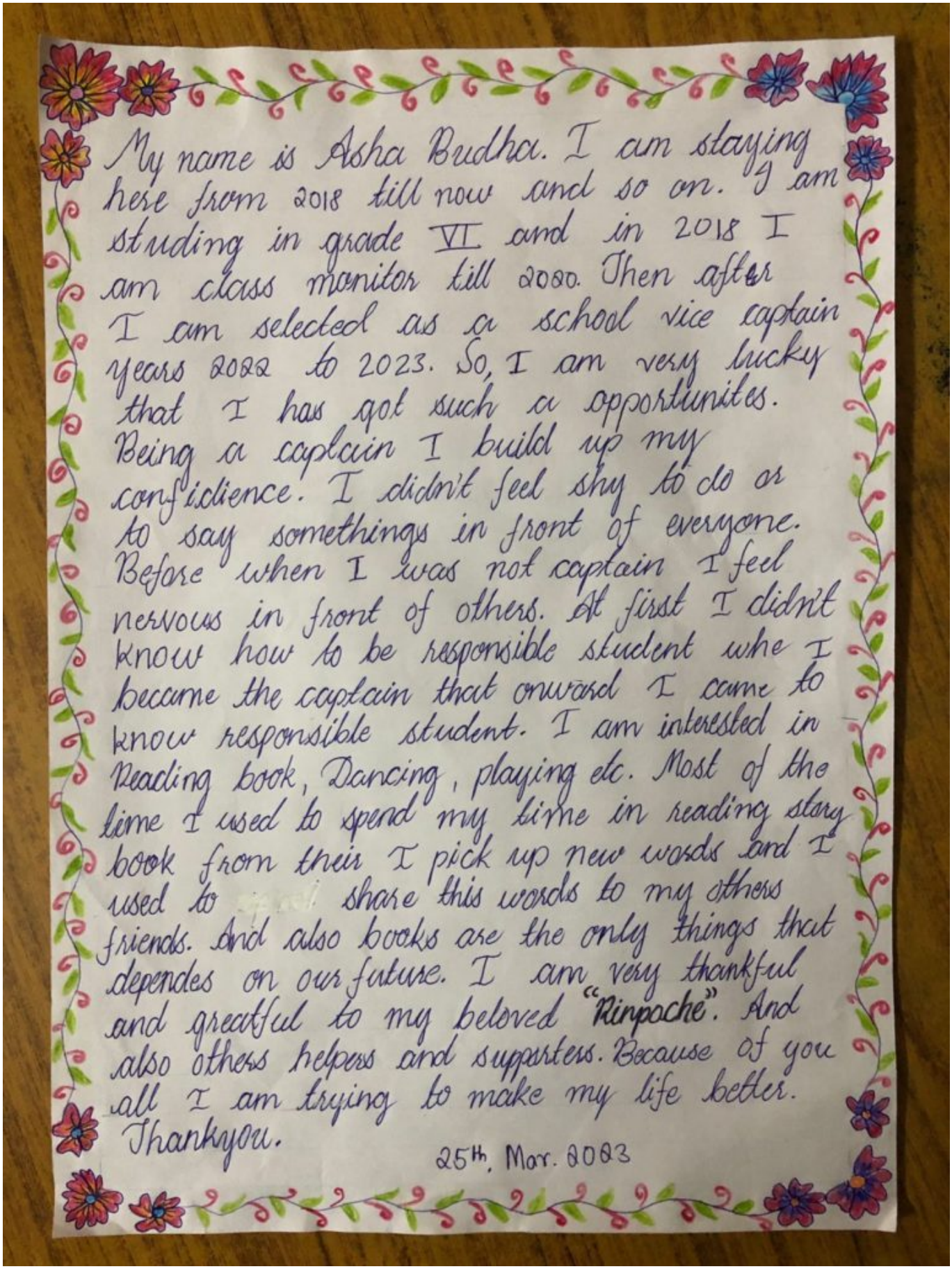
You go often to the school, being the leader of the school's team, and you have a chance to

spend time with the children. What would you say about them? What do you see?

When I go there, I see happy, bright and healthy children enjoying themselves and willing to learn. Older ones can read and write in Tibetan, all of them learn Tibetan and English every day, as well as Nepali. They are inspired to succeed in the school subjects, and they like arts and sports. It is a pleasure to see them playing football or dancing. They are good at it!

How would you describe the material conditions of the school?

We do not have many things. As the children grow, I see more and more needs that are not fulfilled yet. Material conditions are modest. Of course, everything is relative. When a western visitor comes, they may see all poor and run down, but compared to some other “charity” schools we do well I think. And we constantly strive to do better. I wish that those kids had things that all children wish to have.

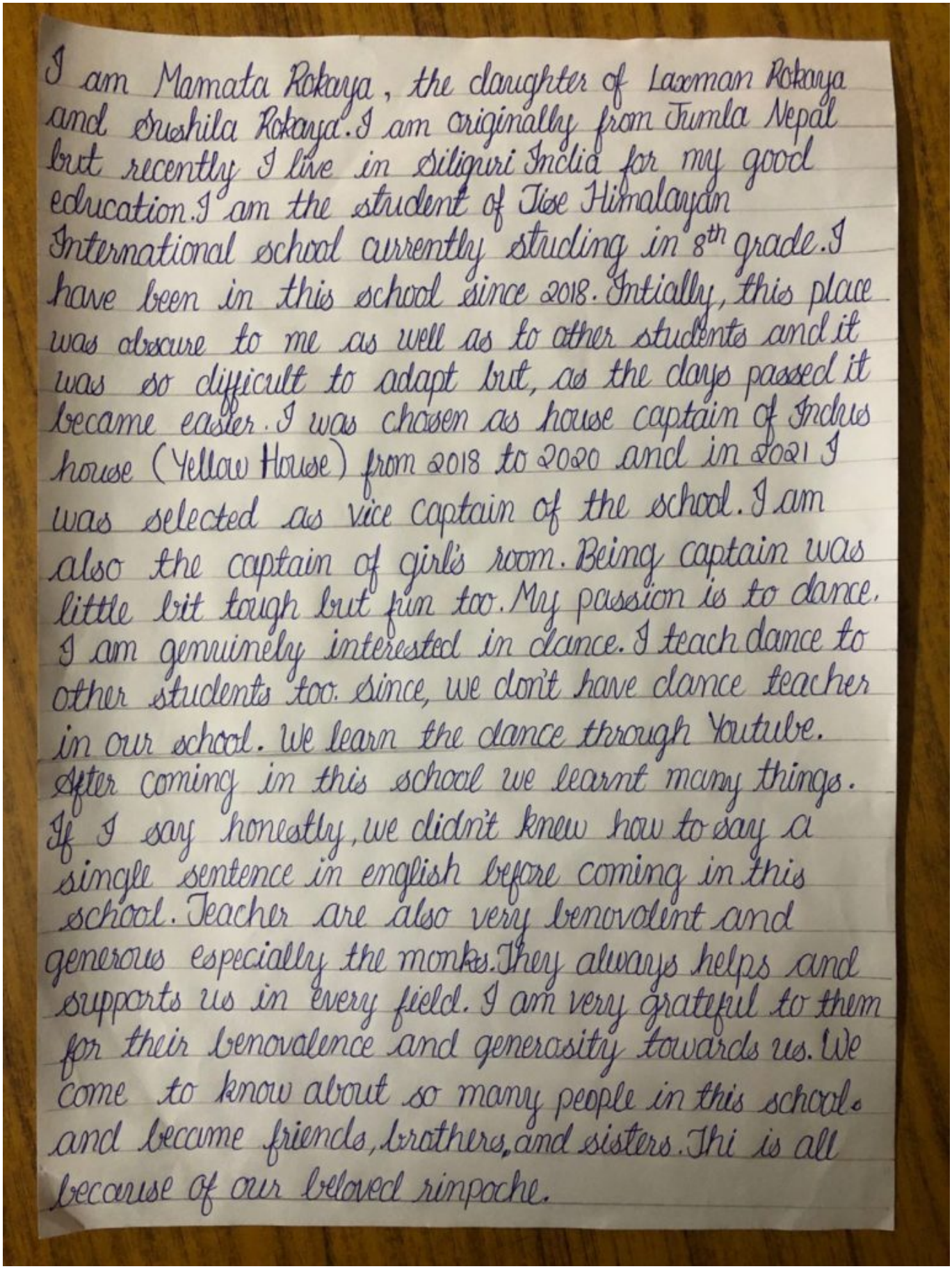

My name is Asha Budha. I am staying here from 2018 till now and so on. I am studing in grade VI and in 2018 I am class monitor till 2020. Then after I am selected as a school vice captain years 2022 to 2023. So, I am very lucky that I has got such a opportunites. Being a caplain I build up my confidience. I didn't feel shy to do or to say somethings in front of everyone. Before when I was not captain I feel nervous in front of others. At first I didn't know how to be responsible student whe I became the captain that onward I came to know responsible student. I am interested in Reading book, Dancing, playing etc. Most of the time I used to spend my time in reading story book from their I pick up new words and I used to share this words to my others friends. And also books are the only things that dependes on our future. I am very thankful and greatful to my beloved "Rinpoche". And also others helpers and supporters. Because of you all I am trying to make my life better. Thankyou.

25th, Mar. 2023

Asha and Mamata were asked by a western visitor to write down their story which they gladly did…



Asha is thirteen and wants to become an English teacher


I am Mamata Rokaya, the daughter of Laxman Rokaya and Sushila Rokaya. I am originally from Jumla Nepal but recently I live in Siliguri India for my good education. I am the student of Tise Himalayan International school currently studing in 8th grade. I have been in this school since 2018. Intially, this place was obscure to me as well as to other students and it was so difficult to adapt but, as the days passed it became easier. I was chosen as house captain of Indus house (Yellow House) from 2018 to 2020 and in 2021 I was selected as vice captain of the school. I am also the captain of girl's room. Being captain was little bit tough but fun too. My passion is to dance. I am genuinely interested in dance. I teach dance to other students too. Since, we don't have dance teacher in our school. We learn the dance through Youtube. After coming in this school we learnt many things. If I say honestly, we didn't knew how to say a single sentence in english before coming in this school. Teacher are also very benovolent and generous especially the monks. They always helps and supports us in every field. I am very grateful to them for their benovalence and generasity towards us. We come to know about so many people in this school and became friends, brothers, and sisters. Thi is all because of our beloved rinpoche.

"Honestly, we did not know a single sentence in English before coming in this school."



Mamata (in the yellow T-shirt). “Our wish? To stay in a room with just three or four people.”

What are the things which are not there yet and would be necessary?

Better shoes and clothing, especially sports shoes, for example. Also, we would need to furnish our library with more books, maybe putting some board games too, we would like to buy a couple of laptops for the library. We do not have these things. We should improve the conditions for doing sports. At the moment there is a playground for football and that’s all. The children are very creative in playing with the little they have, they are very lively, but of course, I would like to give them more and they deserve more.

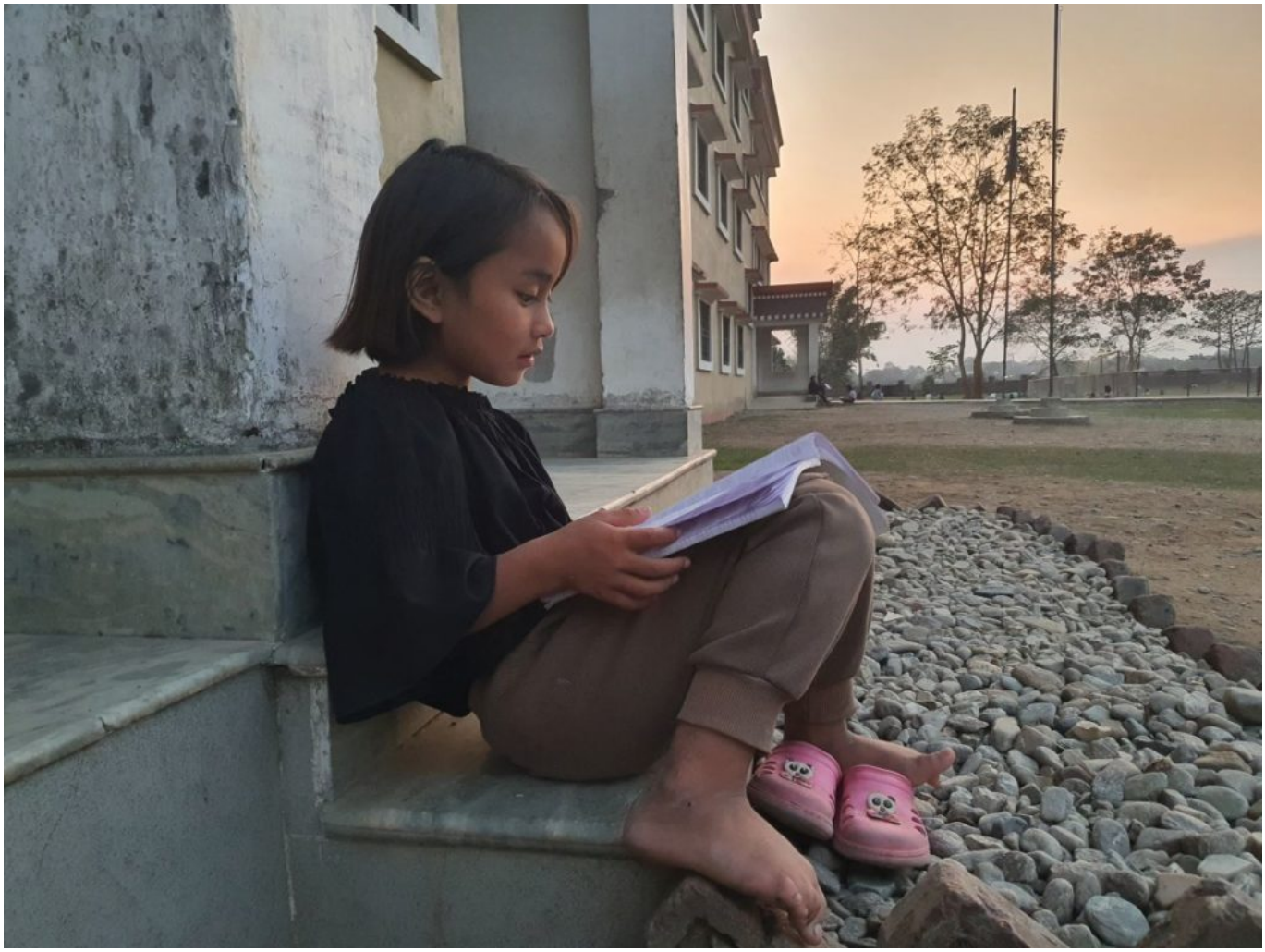


Teenage children also may need more personal space.

Yes, as the number of children grows every year, it becomes more and more urgent to expand the hostel. Our priority is to build a hostel just for girls and offer them a space more in accordance with their needs, with more privacy and comfort, while the current building would be used only by boys.

There is a plan to offer not only primary, but also secondary education at the school, altogether 12 grades. Why is providing good primary education (8 grades) or primary and lower secondary education (10 grades) not enough?

Teenage is a crucial period in education. Children should deepen their knowledge of Tibetan and get longer exposure to value education. If not, they may lose what they learned because it will not be stabilized.



A period of exams…



Boys have dreams of becoming sports champions



Children help to keep the hostel clean



… especially on Sundays when there is no school



Children are agile



and can entertain themselves with all kinds of play


Many boys love football, they follow news about it in newspaper and they play it passionately

What would you say about the teachers? Is it difficult to find and keep them?

Some of our teachers are there from the very beginning, which we appreciate a lot, continuity and stability are very important. As for now, we cannot pay high salaries but still, we receive applications from valuable candidates. Recently, we hired a science teacher, a math teacher and an additional Nepali teacher.


Rakuten




Date-07/03/2023.
B. Garbhagriha.





Teachers…

This year you admitted twenty eight new children, aged 5 to 9. They may seem quite many to be integrated at once. Many things will be completely new for them. Is it difficult for the school to manage that?

We received more than fifty applications from parents or guardians, our plan was to take in twenty, maximum twenty-five children, then we added three more children because they were weak and vulnerable and we did not want to leave them out. I think we need to go on this way, and I believe that the school can manage. We have a very good system of self-organization of children in the hostel, older children help younger ones, also two nannies and other staff are there for everyone. I think we can manage, but of course, I do not say it is an easy thing to do. And there are plenty of things we have to improve.

Now in April there is the fifth year´s anniversary of the school. What would you say looking back and what are your next steps and goals?

When I look back, I see lots of accomplishments done in those five years, children are growing and responding well to the teachings, they are compassionate and respectful, along with good progress of other subjects including English, they can read and write Tibetan quite well, of which they had zero knowledge when they arrived; they progress. In April we opened the eighth grade and so now we have all eight grades of primary education. If we want to go further and offer secondary education, we need to apply for affiliation with the Central Board of Secondary Education (SBSE). We need to meet many requirements for the infrastructure of the school including the classrooms´

size and equipment for a science lab, a library, we need to have prescribed teaching materials, and the necessary number of teachers with proper qualification.



“There are many things to be done ahead of me, but I do not feel discouraged.”

You are responsible for a monastery and also teach the western students which makes you travel a lot. Besides that, you have put an enormous effort in founding the school and you have a big burden of sustaining it on your shoulders. Why has it become one of your priorities?

Lots of people of my generation, including myself, did not have an opportunity of getting a good education when they were children. People could not study, not because they were not able to, they are smart, but an opportunity was not there for them. I finally obtained a good monastic education, but many others have been left with their potential unfulfilled. This is somehow sad to see. And this is still true for many children nowadays. In today’s world, without education they become very vulnerable. Many problems in our communities are rooted in the fact that people could not study and remain underprivileged.

Village primary schools in the remote mountains are generally poor and limited, so children cannot learn much. Life is difficult there and schools lack teachers, good teachers. Often lessons do not even take place, teachers do not come. When parents have a possibility, they send children to private boarding schools as soon as children can go there, in nearby or even more distant towns; there, education is better. But many families cannot do that, they do not have any financial means to pay the fees. Our school is there for the families who cannot pay and wish for their children education including traditional values and language. But we do not admit children on the basis of

ethnicity. What matters is that families appreciate the curriculum and the opportunity that such a school gives to their children.

The school offers cultural and value education and teaching of the Tibetan language. Is it rare to get elsewhere?

Most schools in Nepal do not provide education in Tibetan which means that children of the mountainous regions, who are mostly ethnically Tibetan, lose the cultural background of their parents. Even if a family speaks a Tibetan (or Bhote) dialect, children are more fluent in Nepali and lack understanding of traditions which are all connected to the language. Our culture and values are less and less transmitted to the younger generation.

In the world which is changing dramatically in many aspects, it is a matter of urgency to save and preserve our language, culture and traditional values that have served humanity for thousands of years. They are still relevant.

Schools like the one we founded are very necessary to preserve the Himalayan cultural heritage. The formula is combining secular education with values and culture education, based on the knowledge of Tibetan language.

But the aim is not just to continue the ancient tradition. Such education will equip children well for their adult life. It will help them to find their identity and grow into knowledgeable and self-confident human beings. I can see it is happening, children at the school have blossomed wonderfully. It inspires me, it makes me see we have done the right thing.



Distributing new tracksuits, bought to children by a donor



Informal moments with children…



— show there is heart to heart connection



Selecting teachers, together with Norbu Lama, President of Shering Phunstok Ling (founding society) and Geshe Monlam Tharchin, Educational Director of the school.

Your monastery is in Kathmandu, but you built the school in West Bengal, in India. People may wonder why.

When we were deciding about the location of the school, Nepal was unstable politically and India seemed a more secure place. The city of Siliguri is well connected to Himalayan regions of India, Nepal and Bhutan, and is equipped with good infrastructure and modern facilities that are very important for education and health care.

It took fifteen years before the idea of building a school came to realization. Why so long?

Obviously, what has held us back mostly was lack of money. The school is financed with donations only.

We had to find a good location and purchase a piece of land for it, you do not do such a thing overnight.

Also, it took us quite some time before we got clearer ideas about how the school should be. Among other things, we created teaching materials in Tibetan language, reading books in Tibetan which contain stories related to the areas from where children come and explain various traditions of the people living there.

Then, when we had got some more money, we started building the school´s infrastructure. It is a boarding school, so we need facilities for both a hostel and classrooms. If we succeed in opening secondary education and have twenty five children per class, we would need a place for three hundred children.

There are many things to be done ahead of me, but I do not feel discouraged. It is worth all the effort.

Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche was born in Dhorpatan, a very remote area of western Nepal. At the age of 11, he entered the local monastery, Tashi Gegye Thaten Ling. After completing an initial course of study in Bön ritual texts and Tibetan calligraphy, he moved to Dolanji, India for further studies at the Dialectics School of Menri Monastery. In 1994, after successfully passing his exams and being awarded the Geshe degree, he went to Kathmandu, Nepal to continue his studies of Tantra and Dzogchen under the guidance of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche at Triten Norbutse Monastery. In 1996, he was appointed as its Ponlop (Head Teacher) and in 2001 he became abbot.

Photos: Jitka Polanská, Celina Mejia

Read more about the school in this article:

> Education, values, dignity! A school where modernity blends with tradition

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Aurore: I did not think I could find the precious teaching of Dzogchen in my country

written by Jitka Polanská



Aurore Lombard is French, and has pursued a spiritual path since a teenager, but she did not know of the existence of Shenten Dargye Ling until 2017. She met Yongdzin Rinpoche in Nepal. "In him, I had found my root master, finally, someone who would offer me the high, precious teachings and instructions of Dzogchen, after many years of searching," she says.

You live in Bali, Aurore. How did it happen?

I have mostly lived outside of France, since the age of eighteen, for both studies and work. I am a marine biologist by education and profession, specialized in pearls, and it was my job that brought me to Bali, about fifteen years ago. I started working in Thailand in this field twenty five years ago. I was twenty-four years old. Then, after five years I went to Tahiti for work, always in the pearls, and stayed there for five years. Then, I went to Bali and the place has kept me longer, already for fifteen years. When we arrived there, my daughter was five years old. We live here with her and my husband. Now I am not working anymore and dedicate my time to practice and dharma, trying to make pearls of wisdom.

What is the spiritual culture of people in Bali like?

The majority of Balinese join the Hindu religion although it is more a kind of syncretism between Buddhism and Hinduism, mixed with the local ancestral traditions. People of Bali see the world vertically structured in three dimensions. The highest is the abode of gods, the lowest is the home of

nagas, and in between there is the human realm who is supposed to keep the balance between the two.

Balinese live with invisible beings of the natural world, always trying to establish harmonious coexistence with them, similarly to what traditionally Tibetans do. Every rock, every tree, every river is inhabited by a spirit and people pay them respect, make offerings to them. You can find small shrines and temples in many places in nature, beside a river, for example, you will find a small shrine where you can put some flowers and incense in order to ask for permission to share the place for a while or use the water.

Balinese religion is also known to be the religion of consecrated water. They use mantric water in all ceremonies and believe in its power of purification and healing. They make many offerings to nature and the universe on special days, actually they live with the moon. Offerings are made of natural ingredients such as fruits, flowers, leaves, nuts and water. Each item has a spiritual significance and symbolism. Usually, women are in charge of preparing the offerings. Each family has a small temple in their home for the ancestors, they also make offerings daily to the gods, the protectors and the demons.

You focus on spiritual practice in your life. When did you start developing an interest in spirituality?

Already as a little child. I was born in France, but France always seemed to me a bit sterile, as for religion and spirituality, lacking the right balance between the material and spiritual, between the brain and the heart.

My grandmother was different though. She had lots of faith and she was my hero. She had a very generous heart, lots of love, many spiritual qualities, always praying for all family members. She was a role model for me.

When I was a teenager I started traveling to India. As soon as I touched its ground with my foot, I felt at home. I felt the energy of spirituality was still there. And that is where I met Tibetan Buddhism. It was a discovery that there was something meaningful in life, something higher and beyond the material aspect.

Where exactly did you meet with Tibetan Buddhism?

I went to Dharamsala instinctively knowing that I would be able to see His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet there. Already in France, during my childhood, I had enjoyed following news about him and collecting pictures of him in magazines.

In Dharamsala I attended a course called ‘Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism’ which literally changed my life. After that I continued to travel to India and Nepal every year whenever I had vacation from my job, to attend teachings and do retreats. This gave me good foundations in bodhicitta and emptiness. Teachings on compassion really deeply touched me. I thought at that time that I could not find anything higher, better, or more beautiful than this in the whole planet.

However, deeper inside I was searching for Dzogchen. The way of meditation which I had encountered during my journeys was very conceptual and didn’t really suit me, as I realized.


Aurore with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche during the “summer retreat” in 2022.

So I traveled everywhere searching for a qualified master. I loved reading Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche, Dudjom Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche´s teachings, and Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche.

One day I heard about meditation in the dark and I wanted to spend some time in a dark retreat. At some point, someone told me that among Bonpos it is very common to do dark retreats. It was the first time that I heard this word: Bonpo. By that time I also read some books by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and went to meet him in Virginia. There, I started to follow his cycle of teachings on Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud. It was in 2014.

But then I felt I needed something more conservative. I went to Menri monastery in India, and after that, to Triten Norbutse, in Nepal. For some reason, in my mind there was a conviction that I could not find authentic teaching anywhere in the West, neither in the US nor in Europe. Strangely enough, I did not know about the existence of Shenten Dargye Ling in France even though I am French.

How did you know, finally?

From Yongdzin Rinpoche, whom I met in his monastery, at Triten Norbutse, and not in France, even though he used to spend many months each year in my country. I would never have imagined that such high teachings and such a high precious master would be there in France all that time.

When I saw him for the first time, he started to speak some words in French with me, saying *Bonjour, ca va*… I had a strong feeling that my prayers were finally fulfilled, they had brought me to the one who was going to offer me the highest, most precious teachings and instructions of

Dzogchen, after all those years of searching in the whole world.

During this first encounter, Yongdzin Rinpoche advised me to go for teachings at Shenten and I did. I took refuge there with him when he last traveled to Europe, in 2018. Since then, I now follow the Yungdrung Bon tradition of Dzogchen under the guidance of Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, Khenpo Gelek Jinpa and other lamas who teach at Shenten.

Pictures: Aurore Lombard, Jitka Polanská