When I clean rooms and do laundry, I recite A KAR A ME, Cristela says

written by Jitka Polanská



Cristela Trujillo has been coming to Shenten since 2008 and everyone knows her magic hand. She is a karma yoga queen. When she became in charge of the laundry, sheets and towels stood in no time in perfect, one-color stacks and the place changed its vibes completely. And when she cleans rooms, as quick as wind, she purifies herself too.

I have been living in New York for quite some years. I do mainly housekeeping and baby-sitting. I have several jobs at a time, actually, to earn as much money as I can (she laughs). I came to the city when the owners of the store in Valle de Bravo, where I worked for a long time, had to close their business. There was nothing to do in Valle de Bravo and *narcos* began arriving in the area. I thought the time had come to go and try something different, somewhere else. I knew New York because I had lived there when I was young, with my husband and my little daughter. She was two-year old at that time. The marriage did not work well, and we decided to split up soon after. I moved back to Mexico, to Valle de Bravo because my mum is from there. I started to work there in a gym, as a spinning trainer, and in my spinning classes I met a nice lady. We became friends.

She was the owner of the store selling ethnic furniture. One day she asked me if I could take care of her business for two months because she was going on holiday abroad with her family. I said yes. The shop kept me busy only at weekends, while during weekdays I still worked at the gym. When she

came back, she offered me a steady job with her because she was happy with how I had managed. And sometime later, she invited me to join her for meditation in her friend´s house. Finally, one day she asked me if I wanted to go with her for a retreat. I said yes. Why not? It was a retreat dedicated to Red Garuda practice with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, in 1999. I liked it, I felt very connected right away with the teacher and the teaching. Bon seemed to me like something close and familiar.

Since then I continued going to a retreat every year, and I went to group meditation with my friend every week. In 2008 the Mexican group of Bon followers invited me to come with them to Shenten. I did not feel like going. I had surgery to remove a cancer two months earlier and I was very weak. They insisted that I should come, and offered financial help. That year the teaching was about the healing practice of Yeshe Walmo. So I joined them.

When I saw Yongdzin Rinpoche for the first time, it was a shock. I felt fire in my chest. It was very touching. I remember me, during the teachings, leaning on the wall in the gompa, very weak, sitting still, my heart filled with this strong, special, emotion of awe. It was a kind of love for Yongdzin Rinpoche. I cannot explain in words what I feel each time I see him. And each time that I come to Shenten I feel his presence. When I see his photo, wherever I am, it is as if he is looking at me.

That time, when I came to Shenten, I also spoke with Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, I told him about my illness, and he said: keep your practice of Red Garuda. I did not tell him about it, but he knew somehow.

When I was leaving Shenten for Mexico, I promised to myself: I have to come back, this must not be my last time here. But I continued having health issues and my condition did not allow me to come the following year. In 2010 I would have loved to come when His Holiness and Yongdzin Rinpoche were at Shenten together, but I had my second surgery. My Mexican friends all sent me photos from Shenten, and I followed events from a distance. I remember being happy.

I only came back to Shenten in 2013 and I felt immediately at home again. Each time I come to this place it feels like coming home. From then on, I came in 2015, and 2016… every year.

I always try to do something for the place, offer my help, mainly cleaning. To me it is like cleaning my house, and I really love cleaning a place where Yongdzin Rinpoche spent so much time. In 2017 organizers of the summer retreat asked me to take care of the laundry. It was my pleasure.



The laundry of Shenten has changed its vibes under Cristela´s magic hand. Shenten, August 2022.

In 2018 I decided to take a year off work and go to do a work retreat where I was needed. I saved money for that beforehand. First, I went to the center of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, Serenity Ridge, in Virginia, and I met Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche there. He came to teach. From there I moved to Kathmandu and continued my karma yoga at the monastery. Finally, I arrived at Shenten. It was in April and there was nobody there, only Khenpo Gelek and Geshe Samten. Then, Yongdzin Rinpoche came. It was his last year at Shenten. I spent several months in Shenten in his presence, and it was a blessing. I saw him every day when he went out in the afternoon. When he passed by the laundry, going back, he would say “goodbye” to me. I was very lucky. I knew that his room was just above the laundry and I worked with joy in my heart.

In October of that year, Shenten organized a big ceremony of DUTRISU. I took part, and since then reciting A KAR A ME Du TRI SU is my constant practice. I clean and recite the mantra. I still have some health problems and I have to be careful. When my body tells me to stop, I have to take a rest. But my illness is in remission, and I am confident in my practice. In general, I have lots of energy and I like moving, working. I am very focused on what I do and I recite the mantra with it. This is meditation for me. While I am cleaning a room or doing laundry I purify myself.



Cristela: “In general, I have lots of energy and I like moving, working.” Shenten, August 2022.

Photos: Jitka Polanská

Language of prayers is difficult to understand, Ponse Yigme Tenzin says

written by Jitka Polanská



Tulku Ponse Yigme Tenzin has been recognized as the reincarnation of Lopon Sangye Tenzin, the teacher of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and the first Lopon of Menri monastery in Dolanji, India. This led him to study Tibetan language so that he could understand and eventually teach the doctrine of Yungdrung Bon. This is the second part of an interview which took place in August of 2022.

How long did it take you to learn Tibetan language to the level that you can read texts of the teachings?

It took many years, actually, but with interruptions. I started very early, when I was five or six. Lamas and geshes used to come regularly to my home, and some of them had been teaching me Tibetan. I started with the Tibetan alphabet when I was six, and then they taught me how to read *uchen* and *ume*. *Uchen* is a Tibetan writing used in printed, western style books. *Pecha* books, the traditional Tibetan books with separate pages, are written in *ume*, which is similar to *uchen* but you have to learn it as well, by only knowing *uchen* I could not read *ume*.

> First you are a tulku just by the name, but then you have to earn it
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> *"One day, when they were already in Menri, it was raining and my father found a shelter on the porch of a building of the monastery. He did not know that the building was the house of His Holiness Menri Trizin. When it stopped raining, His Holiness came out and asked my father: "You are Jorge Valles, aren´t you? I just came out of a three-day long meditation where I was asking for signs, and you are the first person I met after I left, and you see, there is not one, but two rainbows in the sky, stretching from east to west."*

This is how my father tells the story. Also, His Holiness pointed out to a cuckoo sitting on a tree nearby, which is considered another auspicious sign."

When I was seven, I started to go to the Menri monastery for two three months each year, together with my parents. When I was twelve, I spent an entire year there, on my own. It was then when I started to study in a more consistent way. I had four classes per day with my tutor: reading, grammar, some degree of comprehension, and writing. Then I had also ritual classes: how to perfom Yeshe Walmo and *gom cho nam sum* and *chod*. After one year my Tibetan improved a lot.

Then you had to finish the school in Mexico...

Yes, I came back to Mexico and continued my school. Then Yungdrung Tsultrim, my tutor from Menri, went for one year to Mexico, and I studied with him at home. Not so intensely as at the monastery, because I had to combine them with my regular school. After he left I did not have any regular classes for some years, I just went to the retreats and spent time with monks trying to understand them. But honestly speaking, my Tibetan was still quite poor. I could read since I was very little, but the meaning was not there. And I could talk only about very superficial things.

When I finished my high school, I went to Lishu Institute in India for three months and then I studied at a university in Mexico Financial administration. For my fourth semester I went to Budapest to an affiliated university. I was there when Holiness Menri Trizin passed away, he entered the parinirvana in 2017.

I went to Menri monastery for the funeral ceremony, after quite many years that I had not been there. That time Menri Ponlop Rinpoche and Chongtrul Rinpoche and other lamas encouraged me to deepen my studies of Bon. It was their impuls that made me take a decision to learn Tibetan properly.

I searched for a good school for that, and I was advised to go to Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo Translator Program in Dharamsala, India, by a few people whose opinion matters to me.



Tulku Ponse Yigme Tenzin at Shenten Dargye Ling, August 2022

What is the studying program there?

It is two years of intense training in the school in India followed by a two-year course for translators done more practically and outside the school. Usually people become translators of Tibetan teachers into other languages enroll. I enrolled only for the first part, in the years of 2018 and 2019. The program starts from the very beginning and for about two months, I could use my previous knowledge, but not more. When the second module began, it was all new for me. The first year we studied modern, colloquial language. The classical Tibetan was taught only once a week and not very well, I built my knowledge mainly by myself, I studied many manuals of classical Tibetan on my own. To learn grammar and structure of sentences does not take so much time, for classical Tibetan. The hard part starts when one has to interpret what the texts say. We studied a text from the Gelugpa tradition, to which the school belongs, *Lam rim chenmo, Stages of the path to enlightenment.*

The second year we had classes only in Tibetan, and when I completed eight modules out of nine, I felt that I was ready to continue my studies in the Bon tradition, and I went to Triten Norbutse.

Do you still need a somebody´s help to understand a text?

Yes, in each text there are words for which I need an explanation. Also, sentences in the texts of teachings are quite long, some cover several paragraphs, and the verb is always at the end, so you need to read the whole sentence before you catch the meaning. With lots of practice, it comes. I am also in the Shedra, the two-week dialectical course organized by Shenten. We read a quite difficult text, Salaam –*Path and Stages to Enlightment*, written by Nyame Sherab Gyaltsen.

I realized that sometimes can be easier to explain a part of the text than to translate it. Translating needs to be close to the text and some figurative expressions is really hard to deliver. The traditional texts are also written in a very concise, condensed way.

There is a tendency of omitting some words which then should be deduced. This of course applies to lots of texts of the teachings written in the antient times. For example, I was just studying a text with Khenpo Rinpoche from the first of Nine vehicles of Bon. There is a word – *sung-wa* – which means to protect something, to guard something. Sometimes in the text it is used in a way that it may seem that you should protect yourself by doing wrong things, but this only because a particle is omitted, while it means, in that context, that you should protect yourself from doing wrong things. For this, you need an explanation from someone knowledgeable.

Is the language of the prayers even more difficult to understand?

It is. Understanding a text of teaching is comparably less difficult than understanding prayers. Old prayers are written in verses and some omission in the prayers are due to the need to have the same number of words, or syllables, in one verse, for example. That´s why translating prayers is very difficult. Sometimes key words or concepts are missing, and you have to understand them from the context or experience and add them in the translation.

> **Lopon Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche** was the first lopon, or head teacher, of Menri Monastery in India.
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> Born in 1917 into the Jyab ‘Og family, an esteemed lineage within the Bön tradition, he lived his early years in the nomadic region of Hor, Tibet. He studied for many years in the Drepung Monastery of the Gelug tradition, as well as under masters of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He became an accomplished master of sutra, tantra and dzogchen. He lived a simple life, much of it in solitude, yet he was considered by many to be the greatest Bön scholar of his generation.

Photos: Jitka Polanská

Ponse Yigme Tenzin: First you are a tulku just by the name, you have to earn it

written by Jitka Polanská



Tulku Ponse Yigme Tenzin has been recognized as the reincarnation of Lopon Sangye Tenzin, the teacher of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak and the first Lopon of Menri monastery. How did it happen and how does he feel about it nowadays when he is twenty-six years old?

You met the Yungdrung Bon at a very young age and in very unusual circumstances: you were recognized a tulku, a reincarnated lama, as a new-born child. Can you explain how it happened?

My parents were both catholics – Mexico is a catholic country – but they did not feel quite comfortable with this religion, and they had this in common when they met. They had lots of questions and were not satisfied with the answers they got. Also, they felt there was no method to do anything, as if you are just supposed to pray for things to happen but there is nothing you personally can do to make it happen. These dissatisfactions led them to search for some other source of spirituality. Those years, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche used to come to Mexico to give teachings on Dzogchen every year. I do not know how my parents got interested in this kind of teaching, they had found out somehow.

In 1995 Namkhai Norbu was sick and he recommended to the local organizers to invite Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche instead. They followed the advice and Tenzin Wangyal gave a teaching in Mexico City in May that year. My parents could not go but two people of their hometown, Chihuahua, went to the event and when they were back home, they said to my parents that they liked the teaching very much and that they invited Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche to teach in Chihuahua the following year, and that he accepted, to their surprise. They had no experience with organizing retreats and also little financial resources so they were a bit worried about how they would manage. My parents reassured them that they would help: they bought the flight ticket for the lama and offered to host him at their place. Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche came to our home in September of 1995. It was the

first time my parents met him and connected with Bon.

It was Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche who indicated you as a tulku, right?

Yes. He arrived in Mexico the following year, in September 1996. I was born one month earlier. He stayed again at our house and told my parents that before coming he had dreams in which Lopon Sangye Tenzin, who was also his teacher, appeared to him dressed in Western clothing and told him he was going to reincarnate in the West. Later on he had more dreams which led him to think that his teacher would reincarnate in our family. At the same time my mother started to have unusual dreams as well. She practiced guru yoga a lot and got very connected to this practice.

> ***Lopon Sangye Tenzin Rinpoche*** *was the first lopon, or head teacher, of Menri Monastery in India. Born in 1917 into the Jyab 'Og family, an esteemed lineage within the Bön tradition, he lived his early years in the nomadic region of Hor, Tibet. He studied for many years in the Drepung Monastery of the Gelug tradition, as well as under masters of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He became an accomplished master of sutra, tantra and dzogchen. He lived a simple life, much of it in solitude, yet he was considered by many to be the greatest Bön scholar of his generation.*
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> *Source: www.Ligmincha.org*

Tenzin Wangyal said to us that he informed Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Trizin about those dreams since they were the only authority which could confirm that the dreams were carrying an authentic message. They both were a bit skeptical about it because it did not make sense to them why Lopon Sangye would reincarnate in Mexico, instead of Nepal or India. But the dreams contained some convincing signs and so both Yongdzin Rinpoche and Menri Trizin started to look for signs themselves.

In February 1997, when I was six months old, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche organized a trip to Menri monastery which my father joined. One day, when they were already in Menri, it was raining and my father found a shelter on the porch of a building of the monastery. He did not know that the building was the house of His Holiness Menri Trizin. When it stopped raining, His Holiness came out and asked my father: "You are Jorge Valles, aren´t you? I just came out of a three-day long meditation where I was asking for signs, and you are the first person I met after I left, and you see, there is not one, but two rainbows in the sky, stretching from east to west." This is how my father tells the story. Also, His Holiness pointed out to a cuckoo sitting on a tree nearby, which is considered another auspicious sign.

At that point, did the lamas and the family accept the reincarnation as a fact?

Yes, they did. And when I was three years old, I went to Menri Monastery and Triten Norbutse to be enthroned as a tulku, I took refuge and received my Tibetan name.

This must have turned the life of your family upside down.

I think my parents together with Yongdzin Rinpoche and His Holiness handled everything wisely. Traditionally, when a tulku is recognized the family gives the child to the monastery at the age of two or three. My parents did not want to do this. They agreed to having lamas around their son and accompanying him to the monastery for a certain period every year, but before agreeing to more than that they wanted to wait until my discernment was strong enough so that I could decide if this is what I wanted.

I remember that when I was nine, I spoke with Yongdzin Rinpoche during my stay at Triten Norbutse, and he said to me: “How about spending a year at Menri after you finish middle school and before going to high school?” And this was what we, my parents and I, decided to do. As I said, when I was twelve, I went alone to the monastery for the first time and stayed there for the whole year.

I think this was a good approach which avoided risks that this condition could have brought. I read a book about tulkus born in the West. Most of their families followed the traditional Tibetan way and delivered the little child to the monastery, but when they became teenagers, they dissociated themselves from it all and wanted to go back to the West and live a normal life. They felt like someone stole their childhood from them. And this happens not only to the Westerners, but sometimes to Tibetan tulkus too.

His Holiness Menri Trizin and Yongdzin Rinpoche also emphasized that I needed a good secular education as well. When I finished the year´s stay in the Monastery, His Holiness told me: “Now you go to Mexico and finish all your studies. Go, play, enjoy life there and then come back and continue your studies.”

Do you think that being a tulku has helped your development as a human being and as a practitioner?

Yes, I think so, although in some periods of my life I had my doubts about all these things, especially as a teenager. I was thinking “what do I want to be in the future?” Being a tulku seems so much out of “Western” context, I would say. I felt that the responsibilities and expectations were sometimes heavy, I felt overwhelmed with all that pressure. People coming and telling their stories of how they have a good connection with me… Also, the assumption that I would become a teacher, assuming that I must become one. The pressure was pushing me on the wrong side, putting a question in my head “what if I do not become good enough?”. But when I engaged more deeply with the teaching, with a good knowledge of Tibetan, I started really to appreciate the opportunity to absorb all that knowledge. This tradition has an incredible insight in epistemology, the way we know things, how thought works… I like the philosophical aspect of the doctrine very much. It is uniquely profound, and unknown largely in the West.



Tulku Ponse Yigme Tenzin at the teaching of Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung at Shenten Dargye Ling, August 2022

Is the institution of tulkus emphasized in the Yungdrung Bon tradition? My impression was it is less important in Bon than in other Tibetan schools.

It is only my opinion, I do not know much about it, but I think that the difference is that other Buddhist schools think that just by being born a tulku one has all the necessary favorable conditions, while Bon insists on the fact that you still have to create all the conditions. You have to study, you have to learn. You are a tulku by the name, but you have to earn it, to become it by heart. But I am not sure if this difference really exists. Being born as a tulku is a karmic seed that has to meet the necessary secondary conditions.

You chose to study financial administration at the university. Why not philosophy, or Tibetan studies? Was there any particular reason for it?

In Mexico no university offers Tibetan studies, so I would have to go to the US or Europe. Also, I was always very good at math, it was my favorite subject at school. That was one of the reasons. Another reason is that my father has a construction company in Mexico, he is an engineer by education. My sister and my brother have artistic inclinations, my brother studied cinematography, my sister is a fashion designer. Neither of them wanted to administer the family company when my father retires. It was always said that I would be the one who would run the family business and I was always ok with that. But it would not have been necessary to go to the university, I could have learned just by spending time with my dad.

There was another reason why I entered the university in 2015. It was my plan B. At that time, I was applying for a visa to India in order to go to the Lishu institute for three years, but the process was very difficult, the visa did not arrive, so I registered to the university to avoid wasting time in case I will not be given the visa at the end. I will have to study a lot in my life, and I did not want to lose a year. If I had got the visa, I would have got tuition fees back. Then, I went only for three months, because I did not get the visa for a longer period and continued to study financial administration. I cannot say that I did not like the studies, I liked them.

Besides that, both Yongdzin Rinpoche and His Holiness always thought that I should have a degree from a western university. Every time I went to see them, they asked about it. They were saying: "How is it going with your university? Have you already graduated? You have to graduate!"

What is your plan for the next decade?

I do not like planning too much ahead, especially since that time when I did not get the visa. I had a plan to go for a three-year course and it did not happen, which disappointed me a lot then. After that, I told myself I was not going to plan my life more than necessary, possibly just for one year at a time. Next year I want to go to Nepal and stay there for up to three years. After that, I would like to come back and start being more involved in the family company and in teaching the Bon to others. This is the plan, but I will see how things will turn out. The objective is to pursue my Bon studies and to work for the company at the same time. I have to see how to manage it. Besides that, I also would like to study philosophy at a university.

You are at an age when relationships and searching for a partner are very important. Is there space in your life for it?

I just came out of a relationship. We were together for almost one year and it was my second girlfriend. They both understood that this is what I am, and they knew that there would be a time when I would go to India or Nepal and spend a few years there. And when I am there, I usually shut my chat to avoid being distracted. When I was in India in the translators´ school, I deleted my social media and changed my phone number, because I really wanted to immerse myself in learning.

I personify the Bon tradition, the way I act is according to these teachings, I also want to be a teacher of Yungdrung Bon one day. My partner will have to agree with all that. So, if it is meant to happen, it will happen. I do want to have a son, my own or adopted one. The teachings often speak about the mother and the child and about a special, unique character of their love, and I want to experience this kind of love.

photos: Jitka Polanská

the second part of the interview:

Language of prayers is difficult to understand, Ponse Yigme Tenzin says

Cédric, Shenten´s IT man: I´ve always been in favor of online teaching

written by Jitka Polanská



Cédric Hubaux is the person who has built Shenten´s infrastructure for the online teachings. He is launching, supervising and troubleshooting all of the streamed teaching sessions. "Especially at the beginning it was quite stressful. Everything was new, the internet at Shenten was very bad, and I had to instruct Khenpo Gelek from a distance on how to do as I could not go there," he says.

Cédric, do you remember exactly when Shenten started its online teachings?

Just after the first lockdown in France began, in the first half of March 2020. I would say on the 17th March, I would need to check. The first one was Khenpo Gelek's one hour teaching and practice session which then became the regular and popular "DailyGelek", and later "DailyShenten", when other lamas from Shenten started occasionally to take part in it.

DailyShenten accompanied all of us through all those difficult lockdown periods and it was free of charge for the whole first year; Khenpo Gelek taught every day and his sessions were only interrupted when there were other teachings on the program.

People from around the world responded with lots of enthusiasm and support. At the start of those

teachings we had close to three hundred attendees for each session, later between one and two hundred people showed up for a session.

Most of us had never heard about zoom until the online teachings started. Did you have an experience with a streaming platform before?

Absolutely not. But I knew that zoom was already being used by some other centers before the covid. Privately people used skype mostly, and messenger, but these two do not allow to organize webinars.

As the situation with the covid worsened in February 2020, the Council of Association Shenten Dargye Ling started to discuss with Khenpo Gelek the possibility to stream teachings from Shenten.

And we agreed finally that we should do it. We collected some info about various platforms existing – it was a very quick search only – and we decided for zoom.

You had to learn quickly how to manage the system…

Yes, I remember that for a few days I was fully immersed in the youtube tutorials, trying to figure out how it all works and how to make it work for our purposes. Translations were a difficult part of it; how to organize them. When we started, people faced some difficulties on how to connect with zoom. All the attendees had to be connected to their own zoom account in order to be able to join the webinar, but many weren´t and just clicked on the link and it did not work. Now it is not necessary anymore to be logged into the account and problems are much less. Sometimes they still happen with the translators.

You have been the main technical support of all the infrastructure for streaming. Is it an enjoyable, or a stressful experience?

Especially at the beginning it was quite stressful. Everything was new, Internet at Shenten was very bad, and I had to instruct Khenpo Gelek from a distance on how to do. I had to install apps on Khenpo´s computer, using a remote control for it. I remembered that there was a webcam somewhere at Shenten but I was not sure where it was, so we were on the phone with Khenpo Gelek and I was guiding him to various places where it could be, until we found it. I was thinking constantly about how to improve this or that. My head was full of ideas, but I was far away, there was a lockdown!

As soon as we were allowed to travel, I went to Shenten to improve things. We added a better mic, a bigger camera. I worked quite hard to put the wifi in important places of Shenten. And later, I think it was just before the third lockdown, I could put the wifi close to the gompa and the streaming was done from the gompa since that time. It was a surprise for people attending and I remember that many were happy to see the gompa.

You were a fan of streaming from the very beginning, right?

Yes, I was in favor of it two years before the covid arrived. The Dutrisu ceremony in 2018 was partially streamed, because I had insisted, it was a kind of test of what could be done with it. I have always liked the idea of giving teachings online and I suggested it a few times to both Khenchen Rinpoche and to Khenpo Gelek. But before the pandemic they both strongly refused. I remember that they were very much against it. Two years later their attitude changed because we were forced by the circumstances. Now I think both of them see advantages of teaching online.

There are advantages but also risks, would you agree?

Actually, I do not see many risks and instead I see many opportunities. What I have seen as a risk was just that many people could connect through one computer and doing so they could watch the teaching for free. And I was also afraid that if we introduced the online teaching, less people would be coming to Shenten physically, and this has happened, we are facing it this year. *(Note: for example, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche´s teaching held traditionally in April was attended onsite by around 25 people this year, while in the past it was double and more).*

With the streaming, more people have access to the teaching for less cost, which is good. On the other hand, there are less opportunities to correct misunderstandings when people listen from their homes, instead of coming physically to a place where there is a community of teachers and practitioners.

For many people coming to Shenten is quite costly. Some could not come even if they wanted to. Now there is a possibility to listen to so many more teachings, compared to the time before. Considering all the factors together, I would say it is better now. But it is a bit weird for me to see Shenten emptier than before, I had got used to lots of movement there, lots of people spending time together. This year, during retreats, Shenten is more quiet.

Yungdrung Dargye: Taking care of Shenten´s green is not always easy

written by Jitka Polanská



Yungdrung Dargye – Guillaume Lassalle took us for a walk around the area of Shenten and talked to us about its various flora. "I am very fond of all kinds of plants, medicinal plants, fruit trees, vegetables, whatever. In my family, we all like plants very much, and since I was a child, I learned about them. I also studied agriculture. Here at Shenten, this knowledge can be useful," he says.

Shenten is a very large property and taking care of all its green space is not always easy. We do what we can, for now, but we can do even better! Plants provide us with food and they can decorate our environment, including our temples. So instead of buying flowers for pujas, we can decide which plants we want to cultivate, choose the healthy ones, those with long lasting perfume, and use them in our interior spaces at Shenten.

Let's start with the area which is behind the dining hall. We have tried to build a vegetable garden there. Next to it, we planted a small vineyard; about five years ago. It is a special ancient French variety of grapes, very perfumed and with a fine taste. This year, we built supports for the vines which will give them a good exposure to the sun.

Next to the vegetable garden, there is an orchard. I planted most of its fruit trees. There are several different varieties: plum, apricot, cherry, and apple trees. Before there were peach trees but many of them died. Grass competes with the roots of the trees, and peach trees are a bit too weak, they do not live long and can die easily, so they did not survive the competition. Three or four died.

This year, we pruned half of the fruit trees in this orchard, so more sunlight can easily reach the inside branches of the trees. We will do the rest next year. I hope the fruits are not destroyed by the

early frost this year as has happened in the past year. At least the cherries should be safe, as they blossomed after the big frost that we had this spring.

Continuing our walk, you can see that we planted some fruit trees recently next to the *pigeonerie* and we have also saved some of the very old rose bushes on this side of the *chateau*.

Now we are entering the allée of the lime trees – which is part of the *cora* around Shenten. You can see that the crowns of these trees are not as full as before, as we were required to cut some of their branches due to electric wires with internet cables passing too close to them. However, the branches will be back again, within two years, as they grow quite fast. I hope the trees will all survive and in good health this big intervention. It could not be avoided, we must obey the law.

The big sequoia, the tree which one can see from a distance when arriving at Shenten and which everyone who has been here knows, is around one hundred fifty years old. It was once struck by lightning, about twenty years ago or so, and its crown burnt at that time. Otherwise, it would have been even more impressive than now. We all love this majestic and noble tree.



"Next to the pavillon, on the right side of the road that goes from the parking lot to the hearth, we have another orchard."

Lime trees form also the central allée which unites the parking lot and the entrance to Shenten. In the spring these trees all have green sprouts which are edible. You can try! It is like lettuce salad!

Next to the parking lot and along the *cora* you pass by bushes of lilacs. They have had some difficulties growing there because of many stones in the ground – the same stones that were used to build *the chateau*. Perhaps, originally, there were the walls protecting the castle. It was difficult to

dig holes to plant the lilacs there and also for their roots to make their way through stones. I have to help them to grow, with some natural fertilizers like dead leaves, or lawn mowing clippings and sometimes even nettles.

In the space between lama's wing of the *chateau* and the parking place, on the right side from the central allée, we have chestnut trees and walnut trees. We have more walnut trees on the other side of Shenten, near *pigeonerie*. Those have even better exposure to the sunlight. Yongdzin Rinpoche used to crack walnuts from these trees, in the afternoons, while sitting on his white bench next to the laundry.

Located between the new stupa and Rinpoche´s room, there is a tree that Yongdzin Rinpoche planted, a ginkgo biloba. Ginkgo biloba is a survivor; plants of its species lived on the earth hundreds of millions of years ago.

On the walls of the lama's wing of the castle, also facing the new stupa, there are white roses with a very nice perfume. They blossom even in the shadows, which is why they were planted on the northern side of the building.

Next to the pavillon, on the right side of the road that goes from the parking lot to the hearth, we have another orchard. Here, we planted around twenty trees, quite recently, Christophe and me. We will have mirabelles, apples, apricots, peaches, pears from those trees.

We also have many aromatic plants at Shenten: fennel, salvia, rosemary, lavender, along with many flowers.

People bought flower plants earlier this year for Shenten and gave them as offerings: Lowell, Huguette, Alexandra, and others. Khenpo Gelek planted many flower plants along with other Shenten lamas who helped him.



Lowell Britson and Yungdrung Dargye choosing flowers for Shenten, during the retreat with Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche in April 2022.

We also have many juniper and cypress trees at Shenten. We cut and burn their branches in the hearth, at the daily morning sang offerings. These trees need to be shaped anyway.

Anyone who has been to Shenten knows there is also a palm, in a quite central place, between the two wings of the castle. The school that earlier owned the Shenten property encouraged gardening and their students planted this palm. It was very small when we arrived here but it has now grown quite large. It is a resistant variety of palm, which can survive in the frost, up to minus fifteen degrees.

In the small gardens, quite close to the palm tree and next to the laundry, dahlia flowers used to grow. These flowers were much loved by Yongdzin Rinpoche. Now there are not so many, but we will plant them again. During the pandemic, the gardens had less care than needed, as it was difficult to keep up on the usual maintenance. But now we are getting back to normal, with our joint efforts.



“Getting back to normal, with our joint efforts.”

photos: Jitka Polanska

The key to Dzogchen is the Ngondro, Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin says

written by Jitka Polanská



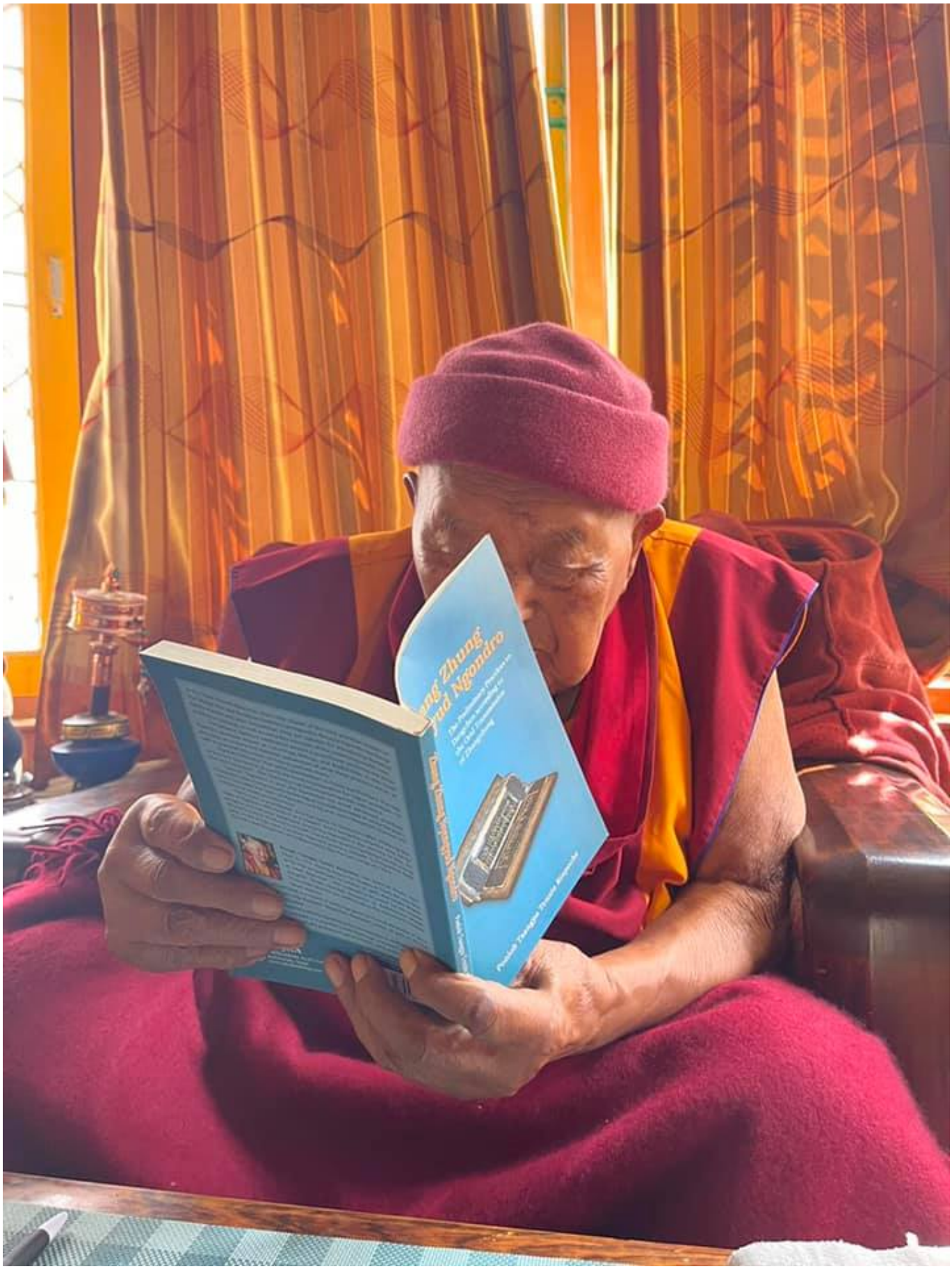
“Gyalwa Chaktri is an experiential text. Its author, Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung, describes stages in his own practice which led him to a full realization – and the manual begins with the *Ngondro*,” Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche says, to emphasize the importance of the preliminary practices in Dzogchen. Gideon Makin, the editor of Rinpoche´s book about the preliminary practices published last year by Vajra books, kindly agreed to present our questions about the *Ngondro* to Rinpoche on the occasion of his teaching at Shenten in May 2022. Khenpo Gelek Jinpa kindly agreed to be a translator of the interview.

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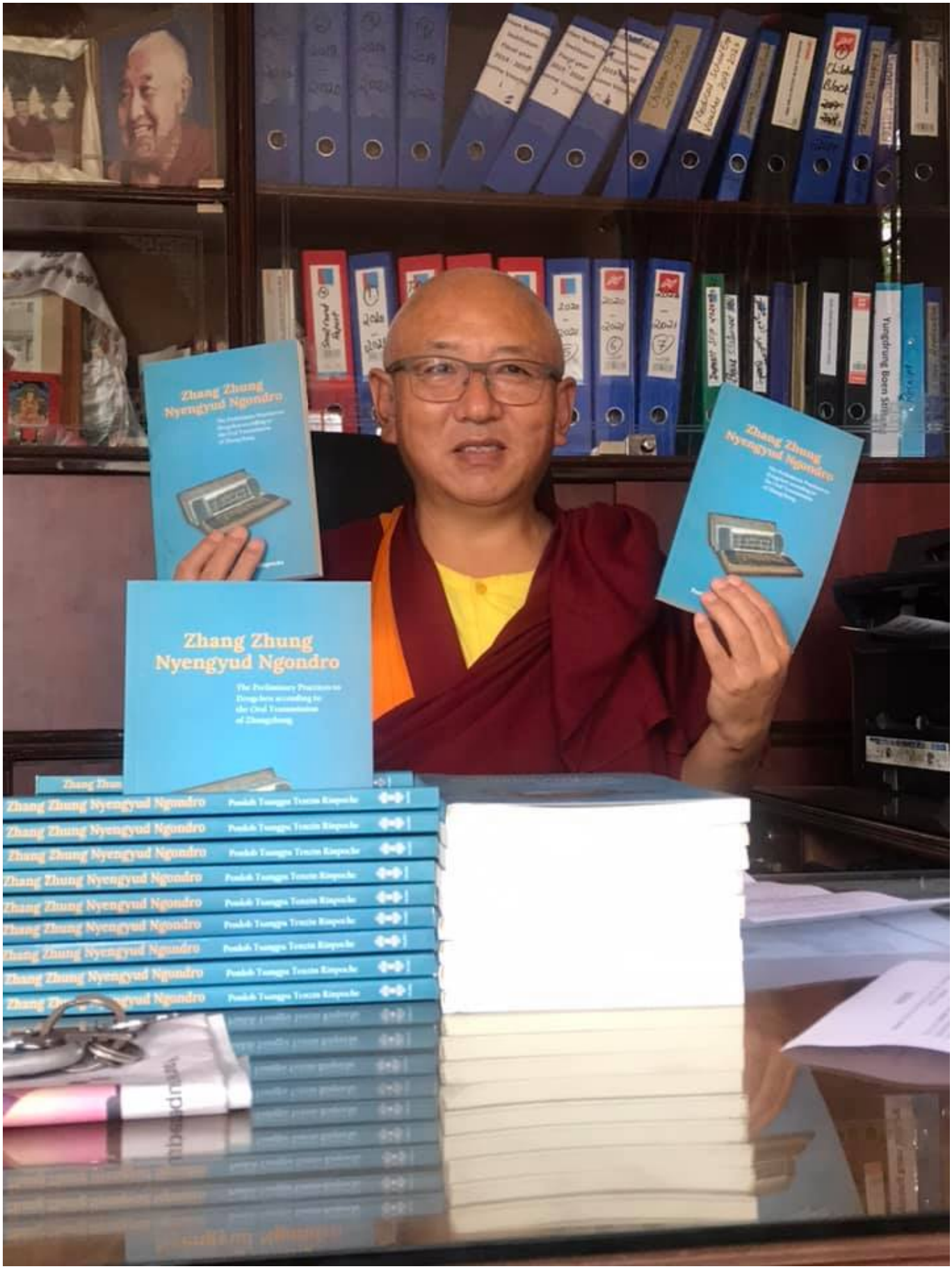
Dzogchen teaching says that the Dzogchen meditation on the natural state is the most powerful way to purify one´s mind and to remove afflictive emotions. It is said to be one medicine for one hundred diseases. Rinpoche, how would you explain to the Western students of Dzogchen that even if this is true, the preliminary practices should not be neglected? To them, they might seem less effective and harder to do.

Yes, the Western students sometimes come to me and say that they do not like the *Ngondro* much and do not find the will to practice it. They love Dzogchen, they say, but they do not like the *Ngondro*. This attitude is mistaken. In Dzogchen, there are three different categories of practitioners, depending on their capacity: practitioners of the highest capacity, of the medium capacity and of the least capacity. Those who fall in the first and second class do not need to practice the *Ngondro*. But those practitioners are rare, among one thousand people you can find not more than one. The vast majority of practitioners fall into third class and need the preliminary practices which are the key to the Dzogchen practice. *Ngondro* is like a pot which contains an

essence – the Dzogchen practice. It is like a foundation of the house. *Ngondro* is very, very important.



Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche with the book by Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin



Photos:Vajra Books

Gyalwa Chaktri, the commentary and practice manual of Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen cycle,

was based on the author´s experience with the Dzogchen practice. It is not an intellectual construction, it is an experiential text, and it begins with the *Ngondro*. After practicing it, the realization of Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung developed and he moved to the practice of the fixation of the mind. After mastering it, he moved to the practice of *Tregcho*, and finally, he practiced *Thogal*. He built his realization gradually and in this way he reached his result. That´s why I really felt it was important to start my teaching in the West with *Ngondro*, and I am very happy that the teaching was transcribed and made into a book released by Vajra books. After it was published I received messages from the Western students saying to me that they found the book very interesting and that it made them realize the importance of the preliminary practices. I am thankful to the people who made this possible, Sangmo Yangri who translated it and Gideon Makin who edited it.

When do the monks do their *Ngondro*, at the monastery? They are usually very busy with their studies. Are they given a period of time for it? And is it a condition for being introduced to the main practice?

At the monastery, there are two groups of monks and two courses of studies: some monks study at the *Gomdra*, the meditation school, and the others study philosophy, at the Dialectic school, the *Shedra*. While *Gomdra* is experiential, the students of the Dialectical School start with Sutric philosophical texts, cosmology and close subjects, and then continue with the *Vinaya* – a monastic code of conduct. They also study poetry and master various rituals, over ten years of studies. In the eleventh year, before entering into the class of tantric studies, they have a fifty day retreat during which they are supposed to complete their *Ngondro*. They are not allowed to leave the monastery in this period and are encouraged to practice *Ngondro* intensively, which means to accumulate one hundred thousand repetitions of each of the nine practices. Only then are they introduced to the natural state and receive the teachings on tantra and Dzogchen which follow. The complete curriculum of studies lasts thirteen years and for some students even much longer.

Also, the students of *Gomdra* have to complete the *Ngondro*, during a four year program. Usually they are supposed to dedicate one hour a day to it, as their first activity of the day, very early in the morning. The monks receive instructions and recommendations of Yongdzin Rinpoche who always stresses the importance of the *Ngondro* to them. If you want really to understand Dzogchen, you have to go through the *Ngondro*, he says to them.

Rinpoche, if it is comfortable for you, please share with us how you approached the preliminary practices and what kind of benefits you noticed.

I did my *Ngondro* when I was eighteen years old and I followed the text of Kalung Gyatso of Shardza Rinpoche. It is a commentary of the Atri Dzogchen Cycle dedicated to *Ngondro*. And I definitely felt the impact of the practices like contemplation on impermanence or Bodhicitta on my mind. My mind was really changed, it developed devotion and trust in the teaching. The practice has a very positive effect on the mind, without any doubt.

What are you in charge for as the head teacher of the monastery?

Generally speaking, I am responsible for the education of the monks of the Dialectic school, and specifically I focus on teaching higher classes of the thirteen-year curriculum, I teach the subjects that come in the eleventh, twelfth and the thirteenth year of the studies. Monks study in different classes and I teach each group for one hour a day, which is usually three hours a day, in the morning. No tea break between the classes (Rinpoche smiles).



Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche at Shenten Dargye Ling, May 2022. Photo: Christophe Moulin

What is the schedule of the monks? How many hours a day do they receive the teaching?

Usually, the monks start their day at around seven o´ clock in the morning. Their schedule includes

classes in philosophy, personal studies and debates till lunch. At three thirty they continue with other subjects, like poetry, for example, and they again practice philosophical debating. If they have no group program they are supposed to study or accumulate *Ngondro* repetitions.

For how long do the monks study each subject?

Usually for one year.

Do you also give some teachings to Tibetans who are not monks? If so, what kind of teaching do they receive and in which way?

Yes, Tibetan lay people come to the monastery on some occasions like, for example, the anniversary of the birthday of Tonpa Shenrab, and on that occasion I give them teachings, usually about the benefits of the spiritual practice, compassion, Bodhicitta, accumulation of virtues and so on.

Do you adapt the content or the style of the teaching to the lay practitioners or do you teach them in the same way as you teach monks?

The style is a bit different. With monks, the emphasis is more on philosophical reasoning. With lay people we do not need to go into these complicated things and teaching can be more direct. Also, of course it depends on whether the people I teach speak Tibetan. If they do not, I have to fill some language gap and the teaching cannot be exactly the same as when I speak to Tibetans public.

In 2020 and 2021 you could not come to Shenten due to the pandemic and instead, as did other teachers, gave your teachings online. How did you feel about it?

At the beginning, before the teaching on zoom began, I thought it would be really strange, and funny, because I was supposed to talk to people while there was nobody in the room. But when I started, surprisingly, I felt the same as usual. As if there was no difference.

Did the covid lockdowns change habits and routines in the monastery?

Monks could not go to Kathmandu due to the lockdowns. The monastery checked quite strictly, at the gate, to see that nobody goes out and so we were quite isolated from the disease and the monks focused on their studies more than usual. We kept teaching classes as usual but in general we taught more intensively, because there were less days off and no possibility of leaving on days off. I think that senior monks, at least some, appreciated that they could go deeper into their studies, with less distractions, while younger monks were more annoyed with the situation because they would have liked to have some distractions outside the monastery.

You have been coming to Shenten since 2014, with the mentioned two-year break. Is there something you like in particular about being at Shenten? And is there something that you miss, from your life in the monastery, during those visits?

What I like a lot about Shenten is that it is a very peaceful place. Kathmandu is a very noisy city and the monastery is a very lively, compared to it Shenten is an oasis of calmness and stillness. When I am in Shenten I always think: this place is really great for meditation. And I do not miss anything.

What are your other plans while being in Europe? Which places and countries are you planning to teach?

In the Netherlands, there is my teaching organized by the Tapihritsa center. I will then go to Poland, to Chamma Ling, and after that there is an invitation from Yeshe Sal Ling in Austria. After

that, I will be going back to France, for a teaching in Marseille, then I will go to Paris, for the last teaching before returning to Triten Norbutse.

If you were completely free to go to any place, what would you like to see, in Europe?

I do not have any particular wish to go anywhere, to a particular place, also because I do not know much about Europe, its history, and about what are the important places to visit. Usually I travel for teaching. It is like at Shenten. I do not know places around Shenten either. It's the same when I go to other countries. I do not usually travel around, so I do not know what I'm missing (Rinpoche smiles).

Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche is the head teacher (Ponlop) of the Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, founded by his master, Yongdzin Rinpoche. There, day by day, Ponlob Rinpoche truly embodies Yongdzin Rinpoche's spirit and values, dedicating himself fully to the education of "his monks," as he calls the students of the Yungdrung Bon Academy at the monastery. His first visit to Shenten Dargye Ling (and the West) took place in 2014. Since then, Ponlob Rinpoche has returned every year – with th exception of 2020 and 2021 – and almost immediately, he earned the deep affection and respect of the western Bon students, who praise him for his pure, humble conduct and his extraordinary teaching skills.



Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche in his home monastery Triten Norbutse in Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo: Jitka Polanska

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Anna, the onsite manager: We threw ourselves into work

written by Jitka Polanská



Anna Dziatko came to Shenten Dargye Ling in August 2020, directly from Kathmandu where she was stuck for six month due to the pandemic. In January 2021, she officially took on the position of onsite manager of Shenten Dargye Ling. What does she do, day by day?

What is a typical day of the onsite manager at Shenten Dargye Ling?

I usually wake up around six thirty every morning. After breakfast, I open the office to check and answer emails, but sometimes I can only manage during the weekends. In the mornings I often work in the chateau, as there is always something to do; cleaning, and arranging things. Sometimes I go

out for the shopping, other times I help in the garden. In short, I do whatever is needed for general maintenance of the centre, which comprises many unexpected things, as when something gets broken and we need to fix it. The biggest problem of this kind was when our machines for cutting grass broke, first the big one and then the small one too. It was a small crisis. We have managed till now with the small one which we repaired and also a neighbor helps us, but I think we need to invest in a professional mower very soon.

Back to my regular duties. I also take care of people who are in the dark retreat. When our cook, Marilyn, is not here, I cook for them. I also welcome our many visitors, and as a member of the board of the Congregation, I participate in many tasks of the administration of Shenten.

From September to November, you were also assisting the participants of the Gomdra. It is a 4 year intensive meditation course that lasts 70 days each year. Your daily routine must have been a bit different in that period, didn't it?

Gomdra was the first important event on the Shenten site since I took on my current position. It was a true challenge for me. We finished all the preparations just a week before people arrived. Then, I worked in the kitchen in the morning, helping the cook to prepare, did the shopping, did laundry and was available for whatever were the needs of the participants. I was very busy, from the morning to the evening.

On the outside, Shenten keeps the look of a typical French chateau, but inside, it takes on the aspect of a Tibetan monastery, with typically red doors, yellow walls and blue ceilings. Lots of painting of has been done, lately, hasn´t it?

Yes, and I think that the new colors have given the rooms some warmth. Originally, we thought to paint only one side of the wing of the castle and leave the other side for the following year, but once we started, the energy and enthusiasm of the crew led by Khenpo Gelek were great and we could not stop, so we went on and on. Now, only one room is left to be finished; the rest are completed. We have also painted almost all the rooms in the Pavilion. A new office of the Congregation was also created.. We also completed the office of the Association, next to the entrance to the chateau. As many people know, Shenten is managed by these two entities, which are, as Khenpo Gelek says, two bodies with one heart. In addition we also created a new room for Khenchen Rinpoche who moved from his former house to the lamas´s wing of the Chateau. We also replaced the lights of the corridors and in the bathrooms with LED neon ones with the timer. A new handicap access ramp was also built at the entrance of the chateau.

I see lots of furniture that was not here before… How did you get it?

Some people from the neighborhood donated quality furniture in massive wood and we found out that we can find more of it at an affordable price. The taste of French people has changed, and many do not want to keep classical furniture in their houses anymore. You can now find a bedside table in wood and marble for five euro and sometimes even less!



You arrived to Shenten directly from Kathmandu. Hundreds of westerners traveled there for the ceremonies in the monastery which took place in January and February in 2020. However, you stayed until August, and without planning it, right?

Yes, I arrived on January 7th and I was scheduled to leave March 13th. But I could not. My flight was from New Delhi in India. However, they closed the borders for French citizens that day and I could not board any plane from Kathmandu to India. Three days later Nepal also closed its borders and one week later they ordered a lockdown. Two weeks later we knew that we could leave with a charter flight organized by the Nepali government, but it was quite expensive. Since I did not have to really hurry, I decided to stay and wait. And I stayed until the August 29th. Actually, it was a wonderful period of my life. I was allowed to stay in the monastery guesthouse and I spent all my time there or in the monastery. I could not go to the city and the monastery had isolated itself. I took my food in the guesthouse and sometimes in the monastery. Once or twice a week we, a tiny group of people who stayed, received a teaching from Khenchen Tenpa Yundgrung Rinpoche. I also helped in the garden of the medical school of the monastery. Along with five young girls, students of the school, I went there every day around twelve o' clock for four months. I learned Tibetan, I assisted in the monastery rituals, and did lots of meditation. With one Tibetan nun, we met together for meditation every morning and every evening on the guesthouse roof.

Anna, how did you met Yungdrung Bon tradition and when did you come to Shenten for the first time?

I lived in Guadaloupe before, with my two children. I came to the island when I was nineteen years old. I have always been sensitive to my spiritual side, but I did not belong to any specific tradition.

Then, five years ago I had an inner experience which brought me to look for Yungdrung Bon. A word was repeatedly coming to my mind which I did not know, but I found out later that it was the name of the founder of this spiritual tradition, Tonpa Shenrab. I was searching on the internet, but I did not find anything at first, then I tried to spell it in a different ways and that time I got closer. Searching again I found Yongdzin Rinpoche´s photo and I felt a strong connection, but when I saw he was in Nepal, I gave up, and did not think I could travel that far. However, these feelings remained within me and I started to search again to see if perhaps there were teachers of Yongdzin Rinpoche´s tradition in France. I came across a web site where Bonpo lamas teaching in the west were listed. I contacted Geshe Lhundup from Paris, it was in 2017. In 2018 in May I came in Paris and I met him. Later I heard from him about the upcoming ceremony of DUTRISU being held at Shenten in the autumn of the year. I went for the first time to Shenten for this event. Some days later I took refuge with Yongdzin Rinpoche, on the day of the anniversary of parinirvana of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab.

> Do you to know who is in the teams administrating Shenten Dargye Ling? You will find their names HERE.

Khenpo Gelek Jinpa: Finally we met again here, at Shenten

written by Jitka Polanská



For the past two years, Shenten Dargye Ling has not hosted any events for the public. Nevertheless the monks and the lay people, who live onsite, have continued to be active there during this time. Lots of work was done and now, the first onsite retreat has finally taken place. "I received lots of messages during these times when the coronavirus hits the planet in all ten directions," Khenpo Gelek Jinpa says. "People were telling me about how much they missed Shenten. So, even if the coronavirus was still with us, we organized our first onsite teaching, and it went well, although we had to face some complications too," he says.

Last April, Shenten hosted the first onsite retreat open to the public after two years. How did it go?

We decided to try and organize the teaching traditionally held in April by Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, even if the pandemic was not yet over. We have had many people contacting us and saying how much they miss Shenten and the real in person meetings with teachers. We restricted the capacity of the retreat to forty people, the number we can handle with some social distancing. In the end, there were around thirty people all together. The teaching was wonderful, Shenten was shining in the sunny weather. We prayed constantly for favorable conditions here and in the world.

But then, on the fifth day of the retreat, one person resulted positive with covid.

Yes, the moment we found out that was stressful. But then we acted and took measures that allowed us to continue. We isolated the sick person, wore masks in the gompa and in general inside, and kept

a safe distance from each other. The nice weather allowed us to be outside as much as possible, in the open air, we ate outside… Even with all these limitations the retreat was wonderful, full of light, and our spirits were high. But, of course, we need to think about what to do in the future to avoid this situation from repeating itself. Later on, when they got home, a few more people tested positive, fortunately with mild symptoms. Anyway, this is a strong signal for us that the for the next onsite teaching with Ponlop Rinpoche we will need to do maximum to protect him and the participants.

From March 2020 until March 2022, Shenten was closed to the public, except for the Gomdra meditation program which did take place onsite in autumn of 2021 (but not in 2020). Online teaching was set up and served as a replacement of meeting face to face at Shenten. Did you support the idea of going online?

I am not an online guy (laughing), and I was hesitating at the beginning whether it is right or not to give teachings online. However, it seemed we had no other choice. Some people were really isolated in their homes, without many connections to others. Some people were sick, not only with covid, some had cancer and doctors told them they were close to death. We felt we needed to do something for them. And so, we started the daily sessions and soon, they became the highlight of the day for many of the participants; including myself. And later, when I saw Khenpo Rinpoche giving online teaching and also Yongdzin Rinpoche giving online messages to our sangha, I felt there is a strong connection, even over physical distance, there is a feeling of interaction, of closeness, through the use of the internet. When I experienced this, I changed my mind and became more open to the online teachings.

You spent almost two years secluded at Shenten. Lots of work has been done in that time, is it right?

Yes, we did lots of cleaning and painting and restructuring in 2020 and 2021. Almost every day myself and our fellow Shenten monks did manual work. We painted guest rooms, the corridor in the pavillon and we renovated the registration office in the Castle. Also, a new room for Khenchen Rinpoche was created in the Castle, very nicely, and he has now moved there from his previous house. We also have started a larger renovation project at the Longère, the building located alongside of the Castle and next to the dining hall. It was absolutely necessary to begin this renovation to repair and fortify its walls. Otherwise the building would have collapsed within two to three years. The roots from the trees behind the building reached into the walls and pipes and had to be removed. The rain gutters, sewage systems and water pipes needed to be replaced. We had to hire professional people with special skills to do the most demanding work. This outside works cost have been about 20 000 EUR. Fortunately, Shenten gained some money with the online teaching, but definitely not as much as will be needed.

Once the building is renovated, what do you plan to use it for?

In the past, one of the rooms in this building was used by Yongdzin Rinpoche for interviews. He usually went there after lunch, during the summer retreats. In another room there is a kind of storage of bikes, old chairs… These two rooms could be suitable for long-term retreats. There is a place for a bathroom and a small kitchen, next to them, for those who want to make their own food.

Khenpo Rinpoche' s previous house can be also be rearranged as a place for long-term retreats. It will be beautiful but all those renovations cost a lots of money. The doors and windows of the Longère have to be changed too… I hope that the sangha will be able to help us because all these changes will benefit the sangha.

Do you think you can complete the work this year?

My wish to have it completed before the summer retreat, but it is not certain. You know, it will be a wonderful place. From the side of the lake there is a wonderful view for skygazing. When Khenpo Rinpoche came to the site he said there is no effort needed to enter the natural state (laughing).

There is also a plan to build a gate at the entrance to the parking lot. Does Shenten need a gate?

Yes, we think it is a necessary protection for the monastery. We already once had some things stolen and more strangers are coming, to the parking place, there was a car with a fake registration plate, arriving regularly, with people who asked for money. Of course, if we put a gate it has to be well-done, beautiful, to match well with the beauty of Shenten. Which means it will not be cheap. The one that we liked most costs 25 000 EUR and we cannot spend such a big amount on it. So we are choosing something cheaper but still very nice, made in iron, which would cost around 12 000 EUR, plus we have to build good pillars.

In December, you returned to Kathmandu, and stayed around three months there. I imagine that it was mainly to see Yongdzin Rinpoche.

Yes, of course. For me, seeing my teacher, our Living Buddha, means a lot. When I knew, last year, that he was not feeling well, it crushed me. And when I saw him again in very good health, I was so happy, so very happy. I could not see him every day, when I was at the monastery, omicron was spreading in Kathmandu during this time, so actually, I saw him maybe only five times all together, but I was going under his house and touching the wall of his residence with my head and staying nearby meditating. Knowing that he is close, just a few meters from me, made me so very happy. Rinpoche also gave me some holy objects for Shenten which I brought with me here. Beside that, I attended various rituals done in the monastery. There was also an extensive puja ordered by my friend Usha, which took many days to prepare and perform. I went two-three times to Swayambhu, the sacred mountain close to the monastery. We believe it is a place which Tonpa Shenrab visited and there is a small stupa commemorating this. So I went there to hang prayer flags… One bonpo text from the 14th century says that if you hang five color cloth it is like a victory banner which would not allow you to fall into the lower realms. I really believe these things, you know, I am an old-style person. All those stories about miracles and things happening through our devotion – the old books are full of them and I like reading them.

After that you spent three weeks in Thailand. What was the purpose of your journey there?

I go usually every year, to do an individual retreat with Loel Guiness, who is my personal friend, and we practice together for a long time. Maybe some sangha members do not know that we established Shenten thanks to his generous donation. I was still doing DailyShenten sessions from there. Time shift is 7 hours so instead of 5-6 Shenton´s time I started at midnight and finished at 1 am. The body was ok with that, but the mind felt the difference.

How did you find Shenten, when you came back?

Very well kept and taken care of. Anna, since 2020 our onsite manager, does a very good job, as well as geshe Lungrik and others.

What are your plans for the next few months?

If there is a possibility to get a visa for Mexico I want to return there and finalize the documentary of the Yongdzin Rinpoche film. We need to complete it with original music, which is still missing. I

need to return to Shenten for Shedra, our course in Bon philosophy, held in July.

Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung: We should value our wonderful life

written by Jitka Polanská



The monastery of Triten Norbutse is above all an educational institution. This is what H.E. Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche has wanted for his monastic community: to be learned. How is the monastery´ s Yungdrung Bön Academy of Higher Studies organized? The abbot of Triten Norbutse and the beloved teacher of many western students Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche kindly answered this and other our questions.

The 25th anniversary of the Academy, celebrated in January of 2020, was attended by two thousand people, including representatives of the Nepali government. Around five hundred visitors came from the West. It looks like quite an accomplishment. But the beginning was, I guess, slow and hard.

It took five years of preparations to start the Academy. You have to meet all the necessary conditions. You need an infrastructure for basic necessities, enough qualified students and teachers

and enough texts which students can use. First, we introduced a nine-year program but as soon as it was possible it was extended to become the current full-size curriculum of thirteen years. Yongdzin Rinpoche wanted to make it even more complete than it was traditionally in our principal monasteries. Rinpoche has always emphasized the importance of studies and learning, in his life and in the monasteries which he built.

The core of the Academy is the *Shedra*, translated as the Dialectic School. How many monks enrolled in the first class of the Dialectic School?

Twenty-one. And up to now, in total around 80 obtained the Geshe degree. The studies are quite difficult and not everybody finishes them. The monastery has grown a lot, since then. Currently, we have 120 monks studying at the *Shedra*. Beside the Dialectic School, our Academy has two more branches. *Drubdra*, which is a practice-based four-year program for those who want to focus on meditation, and a school of traditional Tibetan medicine. The latter takes nine year and is open to lay people, both men and women.

At what age do the monks usually start their studies?

They can be of different ages, depending on when they came to the monastery, but not younger than 15. Traditionally, it could have been earlier, nowadays the custom is to wait until the person is grown up enough to decide for themselves if they want to become monks. Only the fully ordained monks can become students of the *Shedra*.

Can you describe the teaching subjects of the Dialectic school?

We classify them into the so called five sciences: external and internal science, science of medicine, language studies and epistemology. Internal sciences are the main doctrinal teachings, all the philosophy and spiritual practices, methods of meditation. These, together with epistemology and logic are at the core of the Dialectic school. Doctrinal texts are discussed by monks in debates, to train them to expose the teaching well. There is lots of emphasis on debating. Students start with them since the very beginning of the curriculum, and they debate two three hours every day. In the tenth year monks study *vinaya*, the complex of monastic vows. The last three years are dedicated to the teachings that are considered as highest, which are tantra and dzogchen, the Great Perfection.

What about external sciences?

They are taught mainly in the afternoon and include astrology and other, we say general, sciences, for example poetry. Monks also study the language in which the teachings are written, classical Tibetan. Music, dance and craftwork are not part of the regular schedule, monks are trained in them during some periods of the year, especially before important rituals. Everyone needs to know how to make ritual objects of offering, paintings, sand mandalas, and how to play all the ritual instruments, and the different melodies used in chanting.

Do you plan any changes or innovations in the curriculum, for the future?

We hope there could be different programs for studying some of those arts and sciences in our monastery, for example more extensive studies of languages or visual arts. In the medical science it is already like this. Medical studies are partly included in the program of the Dialectic School, but it is also possible to become a specialist, a doctor of Tibetan medicine, *amchi* in Tibetan, in a separated nine-year program.

Can you describe the daily schedule of the students? Do you consider it demanding?

Well, yes, it does leave little free time indeed. The program starts at seven o´ clock in the morning and ends at seven in the evening, in the winter it starts one hour later in the morning and ends a half an hour earlier in the evening. But many monks wake up much earlier, I think generally around 5 am, and use the morning time according to their individual needs, often for memorizing texts. Students of the meditation school have to wake up at 4:30 and perform morning prayers followed by meditation. The monastery´has a kind of alarm clock – a gong that calls those students to gather, at 4:30, and their loud prayers and chants wake up the others. In the evening, the monks go to bed around 11 o´ clock.

What is the program of the day?

There is one-hour teaching in the morning and one hour in the afternoon, from three to five there are debates and the rest is time for self-study and training. Beside this, the monks have to perform prayers and rituals requested by the public and benefactors of the monastery. This is traditionally the second function of the monastic community and also the main source of income: in exchange for this service people offer a donation. Monks do it in the breaks for breakfast and lunch and there are also four days in a month fully dedicated to the prayers, no classes are held in those days. Monks are divided in different groups and each of them performs different requested rituals. In this was they also learn, by the way.

Is there anything that you think would need an improvement, in the curriculum?

Well, sure, for example comparing it to Western higher education we do not train much our writing skills. A thesis is not a part of the curriculum. We have introduced written exams and encourage people to write, but more could be done.

As an abbot, you have a responsibility to feed and dress the monks of your monastery; how do you manage to provide for the basic needs of 300 people?

Thank to our benefactors we manage. One source of income is the offerings made for requested rituals mentioned before. Beside this, we also receive donations from individuals. Some people decide to sponsor a monk. The money goes to the general budget though.

The monastery looks very nice, colorful and cheerful, but at a closer look one discovers that conditions are quite basic, if not poor…

That is true. I think that we have built quite a good infrastructure over the years and our monastery is a good place to live. But still, living conditions are modest, we, as monks, can adapt and in many ways we compromise, so to say. There is only very simple food in most days, chapati and our Tibetan tea in the morning, lentils and rice and some vegetables for lunch and Tibetan noodle soup for dinner. Only during festivities and ceremonies food is richer. Two, three, even four monks usually share one very small room. Of course, there is no heating, as in most households here, in Kathmandu, and in the winter, nights are cold, the temperature can drop to 1 degree Celsius. Due to the lack of indoor space, the debates and some other activities, as well as examinations, have to be done outside in any weather. Monks also eat outside. With strong summer rains or when it is too cold, we have to interrupt activities. Our teachers teach monks in smaller groups in their bedrooms which is a traditional custom, but with the number of monks that we have now it has become difficult.

The monastery of Triten Norbutse in Nepal was built 30 years ago as the second big monastery of Yungdrung Bon´s tradition outside Tibet. The other one,

Menri Monastery, is situated in Dolanji, in Himachal Pradesh, India. Nowadays, Triten Norbutse hosts around 300 monks.

That´ s why you undertook a construction of a new building?

Yes, we plan to provide more spacious classrooms there, a dining hall and a new temple which can contain all of us and will function as our assembly hall. I have found courage to start the construction only after one of our benefactors promised to cover half of the costs of the project. For the second half we fundraise. It is not easy, but I have trust we will succeed.

The monastic education is evidently something that you see as meaningful even in the modern times. Can you share your view with someone who is not so sure about it?

When we call it monastic education maybe we make it narrower, smaller than it is. Traditionally, monasteries were cultural centers which trained people in all kinds of disciplines and arts, and not only monks. They were and still are a very important community centers, places of gathering. And they have served also as centers for medical advice and treatments. The religious aspect was not the only one. I believe that the monasteries can keep developing all those functions in today´ s world too.

You, following the wish of your root master Yongdzin Rinpoche, founded a boarding school for children from remote areas of the Himalayas, with the aim of giving them an opportunity for education in their own culture. It is located in Siliguri in India and it opened the first 4 grades in 2018. Is the Himalayan traditional culture in danger of extinction and if so, what are the reasons, in your opinion?

There may be many reasons: political, economical, geographical conditions, educational system**.** Also globalization has an impact. The more you are connected with the rest of the world – which is good, on one side – the more you are influenced by others and it is easy to lose your own language and culture, especially if it is a language not useful for practical purposes such as obtaining a good job. Tibetan language is very ancient and complex and it is a vehicle beneficial for all humanity, not just for Tibetans. We do our best to keep it alive. The aim of the school is to offer people from Himalayas an education in their own language, Tibetan, with a cultural aspect embedded in it.

Do you expect that after finishing their studies the children will go back to their villages?

We do not put such expectations on them. Of course, if they go back it is good, they help their communities to have better life, but to expect that all of them will do would not be realistic. If young people desire to broaden their horizon and go elsewhere, we should not force them to stay. It would not work anyway. And actually, maybe it is even good that they will mix with other people, carrying with them values that the school passed on them. They can share them with others, in this way, and influence the world positively.

Nowadays, in Western countries religion is left out of education and people are quite sensitive about what they see as indoctrination. Even the word religion is not very popular…

It depends on the background from which we look at the word “religion”, what kinds of associations it has. Maybe some people associate it with dogmas that have to be taken as they are or with there being no freedom of thought or something like this. But in our tradition, we do not perceive it this way. I have never felt restricted from thinking freely by my religion.

What does “religion” mean for you?

A quest for the absolute truth about reality. It can be named differently too. All are just names. In the past, the word religion was well-received, then it was replaced with the word spirituality which was regarded as more acceptable. Maybe, nowadays, people prefer to call anything trustable “science”… why not, after all (smiling).

What is the essence of the Yungdrung Bön religion, then? Why it is worth studying it?

Traditionally, our spiritual or religious practices are designed to help people find balance and unity in their body and mind. Make them freer from any kind of negative thoughts, emotions, actions. They teach us what are causes of suffering and pains in the life and how to be free from them. Also, what is the basic goodness residing in every human, every sentient being. Taking care of our mind, keeping it in a good condition, peaceful and not controlled by unhealthy patterns – this is the dimension of life which is addressed by our teaching. The ultimate goal, according to these teachings, is to free ourselves from all the conditioning of our minds. This is called real happiness.

Western people see the idea of life intimately connected to suffering as somehow gloomy…

In reality, recognizing that suffering is an inevitable part of life´s experiences helps us live better, more happily. It is a kind of assessment of life as it is. Bön does not disdain life. On the contrary, it encourages people to appreciate life. We should appreciate favorable conditions that we have, our endowment as human beings. Do we really and deeply appreciate, for example, that we have senses through which we can perceive, we can see, we can hear, we can touch? That we have a mind that can study and learn? We should refresh our appreciation for these things all the time, not take them for granted. Just this alone can be a source of happiness. When we get sick or meet some other problems, knowing that they are embedded in life by default and that they are impermanent, as is everything else, can also help us to bear them with more patience.

> **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, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche 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 Ponlop (Head Teacher) at Triten Norbutse Monastery, at the Yungdrung Bön Academy of Higher Studies, and in 2001 he became abbot.**



Photo Christophe Moulin, April 2022

Gomdra helps me to keep my practice alive the whole year long

written by Jitka Polanská



Esther Pérez de Eulate from Madrid is one of the thirty participants in Shenten´s in-depth meditation program – the Gomdra. She knows what it's like to stay for seventy days in a closed retreat and then go back to a life in a big city. "Yongdzin Rinpoche has been emphasizing the importance of integration and it is definitely a great topic for me. The Gomdra has helped me greatly to keep the Dharma alive, in my heart, even in the midst of my samsaric life," she says.

Esther, you are one of the practitioners who attend the current Gomdra. What did you do when the 70 days of this year´s retreat ended, last November?

I left Shenten with by brother Melchi, who is also in the Gomdra, and we went to our native town where he lives. I spent some time with my family there and then I went home to Madrid. Many things, many duties, were waiting there for me. Logically, I was more or less three months out of home.

How does it feel to go back to the usual life, after such a long period of retreat?

I attended the previous Gomdra too, so I spent six seventy-day periods at Shenten before – so I have some experience of how it feels (laughs). My mood depends on whether I have a task, a project, work, waiting for me, or whether I have to invent my life on my return.

There was a year in which I was in the middle of working on a documentary and I dived back into it, with great focus. A training of the mind such as the one in the Gomdra increases the ability to focus, among other things. That transition was surprisingly easy. In other times, it is more like: "what shall I do now?"

The Gomdra and the practice in general have changed my perception of life. Sometimes I feel in conflict with my ordinary life. There is a wish to go deeper in the practice, but it is not easy to cut the bond to the samsaric world. I do not dislike the cultural life, going out with friends etc.

Anyway, I found practicing seriously and producing and directing documentaries at the same time impossible, so I decided to stop creating documentaries on my own. I have done two and I know how much work it is.

What will you do, instead?

I can participate in a project of someone else, I can do short videos, I can help my friends when they need some audio-video material. But I do not want to do things that would be overwhelming because they would weaken my practice too much.

Why did you decide to take part in the Gomdra?

I went to Shenten for the first time in 2007, it was a five-day teaching with Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khenpo Rinpoche and I remember telling myself "this is my practice". The experience of the natural state was clear, I felt good. But when I got back home, my discipline and practice was much weaker. I know that it takes time to develop stability, I had been practicing before that with Namkhai Norbu and his community in Madrid, but still, with time, I felt that I would need to do something different to enhance my progress. I thought the Gomdra would be the opportunity for that.

You entered the second cycle of the Gomdra, starting in 2014, right?

Yes. The Gomdra was introduced at Shenten in 2009 and the second four- year cycle started in 2014. Besides me, my brother Melchiades and my sister Raquel took part. Actually, Melki made it possible for Raquel and me to be there, he was our sponsor.

Do you remember your impressions from the very beginning of the first retreat?

The beginning was hard for me. Waking up early with a cloudy mind and having to recite the morning prayers, sangcho, for half an hour of in Tibetan, day after day, was challenging. There is a lot of recitations in the Gomdra. Every day, the group performs the so called Four Generosities: sangcho, chutor, surcho, chod. It is around two hours of recitations. Besides that, at for o´clock, we accumulate mantras or recite the entreaty prayer to the lineage holders, for another hour. So, if you are not used to it (and I was not) it might be a heavy load. But I understood, from the very beginning, that it was beneficial for me, it was purifying me with strong energy and empowering me. Especially when it is integrated with the Dzogchen view.

> **The Gomdra was established in 2009. Each Gomdra consists of four annual 70-day long periods. Starting in September and finishing in November, around thirty participants stay in closed retreat. Currently the third cycle of Gomdra is taking place. The current cycle started in 2019 but was interrupted in 2020 due to the pandemic for one year. Between the cycles there is always a year-long break.**

There is also a teaching, every day?

Yes, one hour of teaching by Khenpo Gelek. In this way we were able to integrate the teaching with the practice of Dzogchen. For each Gomdra a different Dzogchen cycle is chosen. It was Zhang-

Zhung Nyen Gyud in 2014 and this time it is Yangtse Longchen, belonging to the Dzogchen cycle of Dragpa Korsum.

How did you cope with the tight schedule of the retreat?

The schedule is very tight indeed, we are busy from 6.30 to 21.30. This last time I did not miss even one session of practice, but in the past, there were days when I felt exhausted, and I skipped some. But that was exceptional. Usually I try to do them all as much as I can.

For the whole period of seventy days, nobody of the retreatants can leave Shenten. Did it sometimes feel a bit claustrophobic?

When I heard about the Gomdra for the first time, I thought that staying in a closed group for seventy days would not be possible for me. But then, I wanted so much to take this opportunity to deepen my practice that I decided that I will not think about this, I will just try.

Yes, sometimes you feel like you cannot take more. You get tense, exhausted, sad sometimes. But you just go on and on, you do your practice, and you see that your mood changes. You have time to observe your mind and you see it is changing all the time. You really experience impermanence.

There are people from different cultures in the group, with different habits and behavior, which can sometimes cause irritations. Being together can help a lot, although it also brings with it some distraction and disturbances. But Khenpo Gelek has the quality of bringing joy into the group. He is a leader who shows the way and encourages us: “go, go, go!”. And the power of the group is in the design of the Gomdra. These group retreats are organized by the monasteries for their monks too, because it helps the practice to do it together.

What about food? This must be also a sensitive topic, people from different countries have different tastes and needs…

Yes, food was a hot topic at the beginning, in the first Gomdra. Food is very important in the retreat. It is not just a matter of “I like, I do not like”. If food is not good, you do not feel good. Also, a good food makes your day much nicer. You work hard all day long and then you want to eat some tasty food. But the first year of my first Gomdra the cook used lots of canned food and additives and many people complained and asked for cleaner and fresher food. Since then, cooking has improved a lot. I would say that food is good now and people are more or less happy.

After completing the program, the participant is supposed to be ready for the 49-day long retreat in the dark. Some do, some don´t. Did you go to the dark retreat?

Yes, I went and did the whole period, which I didn’t imagine I was able to do, but you really grow and develop your practice, in the four years. You really improve a lot, and you are better equipped to maintain your practice when you are at home. I do not have many Dharma connections in Madrid and sometimes I feel like I’m living on an island. The online teaching during the whole pandemic has been really useful. After I came back from the Gomdra, there was DailyShenten and other teachings and we practiced together with the teachers and the sangha. It has been very helpful for finding some good balance between my spiritual and samsaric existence. This is the main point, the importance of integration. Yongdzin Rinpoche has been emphasizing it. I can do it better and better, keeping the Dharma alive, in the heart, even in the midst of the samsaric life.

Esther Pérez de Eulate created “A day in the Gomdra”.

You can watch it HERE.

Anne and Amrei: how our lives got interwoven with Bön

written by Jitka Polanská



Anne Brunila from Finland and Amrei Vogel from Germany joined the Council of Association Shenten Dargye in 2021. This is their story with Bön.

Anne: With Bön, my practice and meditation has developed

My spiritual journey began when I was 16 and learned about Buddhism at school. At that moment, I had a strong feeling that I found something very precious for my life, and a place where I belonged. Everything I read resonated strongly with me. Since I wanted to understand emotions and thinking; how the mind works; what is the reality; what is the meaning of life and how to find true peace and happiness in one's mind, it is no wonder that I became deeply motivated to learn more about Buddhism.

I spent much time reading all the Buddhist texts and books which I could find in libraries and bookshops. Very soon I realized that I felt most connected to Tibetan Buddhism and the teachings of great Tibetan masters like Longchenpa, Gampopa, Patrul Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse, Namkhai Norbu, and of course, His Holiness the 14th. Dalai Lama. This reading gave me some basic understanding of Buddhist philosophy and the science of the mind. The more I read the more I wanted to learn and hoped that some day I would find a teacher and begin practicing.

I met my first teacher, Tarab Tulku Rinpoche, in the late 1980's, and it was then that I began

practicing daily. During the retreats Rinpoche explained the foundations of Buddhist philosophy, practice and meditation. I was his student for some years but left when he established a four-year training program on Buddhist psychology in Sweden. At that point we were a small group of practitioners pondering how to find a new teacher. We were taught that the most important thing is to make sure that the teacher is qualified. With this in mind, we decided to follow the teachings and initiations given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in various European countries and the US. I received my first Dzogchen teaching and initiation from His Holiness in 2000, in Montpellier, France.

In 2000 I moved to Brussels and found my way to Rigpa, and began going to Sogyal Rinpoche's teachings and doing the Ngöndro according to the Nyingma tradition. I also became interested in Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's teachings and took part in his summer retreats in Merigar, Italy. Because I had a strong belief that my disabled son, too, had a connection to Tibetan Buddhism, I took him with me. He first met some Tibetan monks and doctors a few years earlier, in a big exhibition of Tibetan culture in Helsinki. On that occasion four monks from Namgyal monastery were making the Kalachakra sand mandala, and after they had finished, four other monks made another big sand mandala. My son was so enthusiastic about the monks' work that I had to bring him frequently back to the museum where the monks were happy to see him. Since then he has felt very easy and close to all the Tibetan monks and lamas he has met.

I think it was 2009 when I first heard about Bön from friends who had been to Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's teachings. As soon as I heard the words "Bön" and "Tenzin Wangyal", it gave me a real thrill and I instantly realized that Bön is my tradition. Later, I found out that "Tenzin Wangyal" was also the name of Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen's master, and maybe it was because of this that I got some kind of inexplicable déjà-vu experience when hearing the name.

I wanted to attend Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's teachings as soon as I could to learn about Bön. I listened to his online teachings and when he came to Europe, I flew to Berlin to his Bardo teachings. The timing turned out to be especially indispensable: my father passed away only two months after the teachings and I still had them fresh in memory and could do the prayers and practices for him. I had already received Bardo teachings from Sogyal Rinpoche ten years earlier, shortly before my mother passed away. Thanks to the teachings I was able to assist her during the death process and do Bardo prayers for her.

In 2014 I got to know about Yongdzin Rinpoche and Shenten Dargye Ling. This was very fortunate because in the summer retreat Rinpoche started to teach the Twenty-One Nails (Zerbu) with Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche. Meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche and Khen Rinpoche was a life-changing experience for me. My practice and meditation developed more after that retreat than during all the previous years. I was so happy that I had finally found my heart teachers and the lineage. In the same year I also met my third heart teacher Khenpo Gelek Jinpa. I sometimes felt sorry that I had not found Bön and my precious teachers earlier, but this was my Karma. Yet I understand how fortunate I had been!

Encouraged by Khenchen Rinpoche we founded a Bön association and Sangha called Dechen Ritrö in 2016. This very auspicious name was given by Yongdzin Rinpoche, the same name as Sharda Rinpoche's famous retreat place in Tibet. We organized Khenpo Gelek's teachings since 2014 on Gyalwa Chagtri, and Khencen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche's teachings on Shardza Rinpoche's Heart Drops of Dharmakaya (Künzang Nyingtik) since 2018 in Helsinki, and recently on zoom too. Geshe Lungrik gave us teachings on the Medicine Buddha practice. Via zoom we have been able to open these wonderful teachings to Sanghas across the world.

During the past year I, together with a friend, translated Shardza Rinpoche's text into Finnish. Upon

Khenpo Tenpa Rinpoche's suggestion, and with Philippe Cornu's kind permission, we used his French translation for this purpose. The book has just been published and my wish is that it will be of benefit to the Finnish practitioners and to everybody interested in Dzogchen.

Amrei: I wanted to understand what I practice

I just finished my studies of Central Asian Studies at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, with a focus on Tibetan culture and anthropological methods. My final thesis was about death rituals in a Bön community in Dolpo, Nepal. How did it come about that my university studies and my path as a practitioner converged? I think that my parents played a role in it. My mother has a very critical mind, in a healthy, positive way, and she always encouraged me to understand deeply what I do; what I pursue; what I commit myself to; to explore systematically what I feel as a choice of my heart. Practically speaking, I wanted to understand words in prayers that I recite and so I started learning Tibetan. I also wanted to know the historical and cultural background of the spiritual school that has become so important for my personal growth. I wished to see places connected historically and culturally with Bön, so I went to Nepal. My life has gradually been permeated with curiosity and interests related to Yungdrung Bön.

Then I found a scholar here at the university in Berlin, Prof. Dr. Huber, who also did research on Bön, mainly as the pre-Buddhist culture in Tibet,. Also, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung´s suggestions were very important to me, and he supported my plans. I shared with him that I was not sure about what I should focus my master's thesis on, and he said: you could go to Dolpo in Nepal.It is an area where people are still practicing very ancient rituals connected to death and dying. I went there, in 2016 for the first time, and I started exploring the death rituals in one village. I returned several times and based my thesis on what I found and experienced there.

I have been connected with Bön my whole life, because it has been rooted in my family. My father was a practitioner for decades. Originally, he was a student of Chogyal Namkhai Norbu.Then, in the early nineties, maybe in the 1991 when I was born, he met Yongdzin Rinpoche for the first time and became his student. As a child I went with my father to teachings of both masters and he told me that I was very curious and paid attention to the teachings. Our house itself is a meditation center for the Dzogchen community of Namkhai Norbu´s students, the Yungdrung Bön Sangha, as well as various other Zen and yoga groups.

From about 2001, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung and Khenpo Gelek started to come to our home annually, and the fact that they were, in a way, part of my home created a close connection with the teaching, which grew slowly. When I was twenty three, I started practicing. I had just finished my bachelor degree and I did not want to continue to master studies right away. Instead, I wanted to go abroad, but not just to travel, I wished to work, to be useful somehow, and I asked my parents what I could do. My father said: you could go to Nepal, we know people there. I also asked Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, when he came to teach at our place, if he had some work for me in Nepal, and he said, yes, just come, we will find something.

In November 2014 I went to Kathmandu for the first time. I stayed in the guesthouse of Triten Norbutse for a period. It was the first timestudents of the boarding school in Lubrak, a village in Mustang, had enough money, given by a sponsor, to spend their winter holiday in Kathmandu. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung introduced me to them and to Norbu, the monk who was taking care of them. I then began teaching them English and some social studies. This is how I spent that winter. When they went back to their village, I joined them. It was my first time in a Bönpo village in the Himalayas. I established a close connection with the students and this made me come back again and again.

Afterwards, Amrei helped the boarding school of Lubra. Read the story here.

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

written by Jitka Polanská



Amrei Vogel from Germany was the force behind a project that improved the life of the children and teachers of the Chasey Kengtse Hostel. It is a part of the boarding school in Lubra, a village in Mustang where Bönpo communities had settled. Thanks to considerable funding from the German government that she administrated, the boarding school got a new kitchen, dormitories, a reading room, and a green house. The teachers were provided with training in modern pedagogical methods. This is Amrei´s account with more details.

Nepal is a very special for me, I feel a close connection with many places and people there. The school in Lubra which is a small village in Mustang, has existed for a long time. In the past, villages in Mustang probably all had their own tiny schools, but for practical reasons, later some schools started serving more villages. Boarding schools are very common in the mountains of Nepal, because villages are very far from each other. To give an idea: the closest village from Lubra is a two hours walk.

In the 1970’s or 1980’s the tibetologist Charles Ramble visited Lubra for his research. By the way, all the research about Bön culture in this village refers somehow to him. Having become familiar with the local community he also looked for support in the West and, as a result one big sponsor has been helping the school financially since then. It is a steady rock the school can rely on. A French organization called Club Tibet also helped greatly. When I first got in contact with them, the school could count on them too but more was needed. In the earthquake of 2015 one of the buildings of the school collapsed. I was in Nepal at that time and after my return to Germany I looked for ways to get further help to them.

> *Beside the Panda Khola river, between Jomsom and Kagbeni at an altitude of about 3,000 metres, lies the little village of Lubra (also spelled Lubrak or Lupra). The name means “the cliff (brak) of the serpent-spirits (lu)”. It is the earliest surviving community of the Bon religion in Nepal, and the only Bonpo in Mustang. This gives it special cultural importance. There are no monks in the community, but only married householder-lamas. The Bon religion is intricately interwoven with folk rituals and ceremonies. Since Lubra is a small village, most children come to the school from neighboring villages. Not only Bonpos, but also Sakya families and even some Hindu families send their children to the school.*

I found out that it was possible to get funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. In Germany, beside my studies, I work as a programme manager at the International Department of Humboldt-Universität. I have learned a lot about project management, organising, and such things. It feels natural to use those skills for the benefit of the Yungdrung Bön sangha and tradition.



Amrei Vogel: When you are there and observe, you see what is needed.

I attended seminars about how to apply for this funding, because it is quite complicated, but it eventually worked. We received a grant of 127,000 EUR for a three-year project which started in 2017 and was concluded in 2019. Of course, they do not give you the money just like that. It requires thorough planning and tangible results. The criteria were quite strict and the project had to be sustainable. We did not get money just for building a house.

The Nepalese NGO Mustang Bön Action was established as the official organization of the project, and Charles Ramble was involved through the Kalpa Group, an organization that he had founded to support of Bön worldwide. On the German side, I worked on behalf of the foundation Yungdrung Bön Stiftung (YBS), because I could not apply for grants as a private person. By the way, the YBS got the same governmental funding for the medical school at Triten Norbutse, many years ago. That means

that we were already in the files of the government and there was some evidence that we could carry out the project, that we are reliable. That's why we were also eligible to apply for a higher amount of funding. So, officially it was a collaboration of YBS and Mustang Bön Action. On the German part it was me and on the Nepalese part, it was mostly Kemi, a friend originally from Lubra who worked as the project onsite manager, and Namgyal, the headmaster of the school who is responsible for the accounting of the Chasey Kengtse Hostel – the boarding part of the school.

Courtesy of Amrei Vogel

> more videos here , in our Youtube channel

Chasey Kengtse Hostel is separate from the classroom buildings, they are actually on two different hills. While the boarding part of the school is run as a private hostel, the school itself is partly governmental. That is why there are teachers appointed by the Nepalese government and others which are employed privately. A monk from the Triten Norbutse is part of the teaching staff.

> *Chasey Kengtse Hostel was founded by Mustang Bon Action and is associated with the governmental school in Lubra. It's an important establishment of education and the preservation of culture in Mustang. Before it opened in 2002 there had been a growing demand of Bonpo families in Mustang for a school where children could receive a high standard education and learn about their own religious tradition and the native culture of Mustang. From nursery to class eight, the students are taught in all common subjects of the Nepalese school system, such as mathematics; Nepali language; science; social sciences and English. Tibetan language and cultural events in the village, such as dances and rites and festivals complete this education. Students have half an hour of prayer time in the morning and in the evening, and they usually read prayers of the Yungdrung Bon tradition..*

What did the project include? We rebuilt the damaged building of the hostel, adding some new parts, including bedrooms, bathrooms and a new kitchen. Before, the kitchen was just a hut with a fire. Now the school has a proper kitchen using either gas or a wood fire. We also built a greenhouse, a building with stone walls and a transparent roof. The sun is strong there, as is the wind, so when plants are protected from the wind they grow well. With the green house, the school is able to grow vegetables. Families in the village have their own tiny gardens, but they cannot provide food for 80 children and 20 teachers.

The third part of the project was the teacher training. For this, we worked with the Rato Bangala Foundation from Kathmandu. Their approaches and methods are advanced and useful for Lubra. The training provided the teachers with some notions of children-centered teaching and active learning, teamwork etc. For one part of the training, teachers went to Kathmandu, further parts took place in Lubra. Teachers were taught techniques for using the natural environment in teaching. I remember that children were learning about natural elements and teachers told them to go out for an hour and come back with something which would represent an element. Simple and effective. You can teach mathematics outdoors too, students were measuring the school building, for example, and it was a joy both for them and for teachers. They learned how to invent little games that make learning fun and in the end the teachers told me that they enjoy teaching more than before.

For five years, I spent several weeks each year at the school where I was in daily touch with the life of the children and adults. I learned a lot in all those years – about education, life in the mountains,

and humans. I mostly stayed with the children and simply spent time with them. I engaged with them, observed and listened. This is how I learned about their needs and wishes.These observations are powerful. A simple example: I noticed that the smaller kids were so tired in the evenings that theyrested their heads on their arms and slept instead of doing homework. Others were running around, disturbing older kids who were trying to focus on their studies. Reflecting on this issue with the teachers, we decided to change the daily schedule; we introduced more breaks during the day and different bedtimes according to the age groups. Smaller kids went to bed earlier so that the bigger kids would have the silence necessary for studying. It was an improvement for everyone. And it was so simple, it did not cost any money, what was needed was just being there and seeing what was happening. The whole project developed in similar ways – all started from observing, listening, discussing.

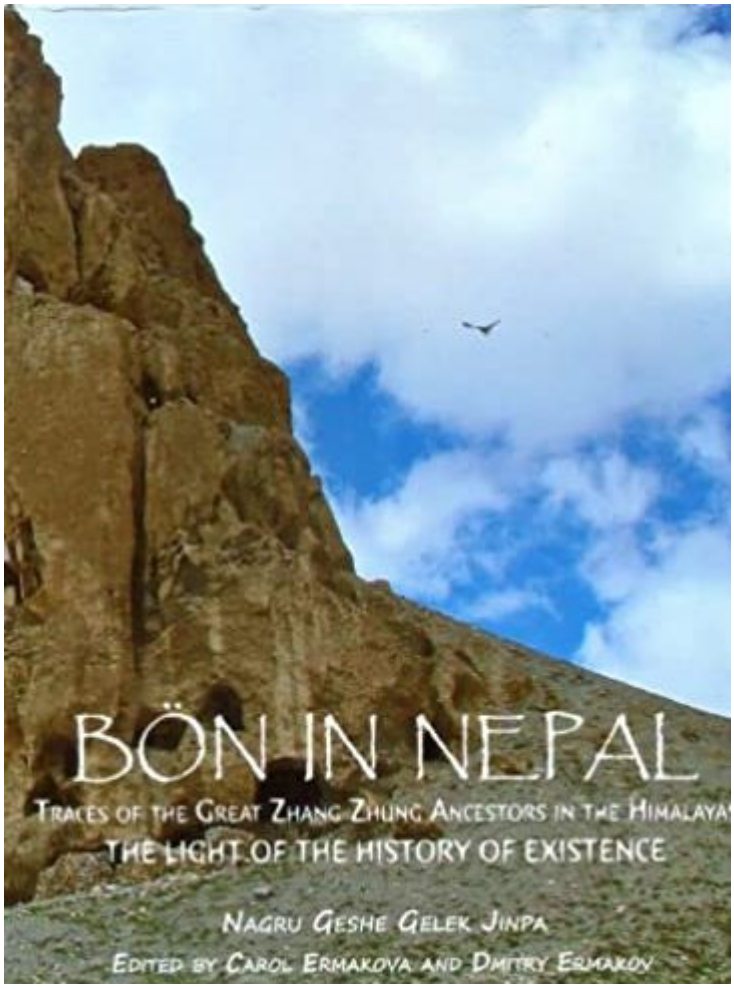
In 2019 I organized a Yungdrung Bön pilgrimage for sixteen practitioners from Germany, Austria, and The Netherlands. On that tour, we spent some days in Lubra. Just at that time, the village and school community organized a beautiful, memorable opening ceremony to conclude the project.

I'm very happy to see how the Chasey Kengtse Hostel is developing and the kids and teachers are living together in such a healthy natural and social environment.

(The pilgrimage that Amrei organized will be covered in another article. "Before the pandemic, my plan was even to offer pilgrimages every year – and I haven't given up on that dream yet," says Amrei.)

> *Travelling to Lubra*: t*here is a direct bus from Kathmandu to Jomson. If you start your journey in the afternoon, you will arrive in Jomson in the next morning. From Jomson, it is approximately two hours walk to the village. The road is not very comfortable, so it is preferable to take a bus halfway to a junction and then walk for another hour.*

Bön in Nepal by Khenpo Gelek Jinpa opens a window onto the lives of Bönpos in Nepal today, gracefully combining khenpo's personal diary with his meticulous research to provide the reader with a moving yet accurate account. By matching scriptural texts and historical documents with family histories and local folklore, Khenpo Gelek is able to pinpoint several important sacred sites previously lost to us. This book also contains a wealth of information on monasteries, ngagpa centres, family shrines, lineages and rituals regularly performed today in the Bönpo enclaves.


BÖN IN NEPAL
Traces of the Great Zhang Zhung Ancestors in the Himalaya
THE LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF EXISTENCE
Nagru Geshe Gelek Jinpa
Edited by Carol Ermakova and Dmitry Ermakov









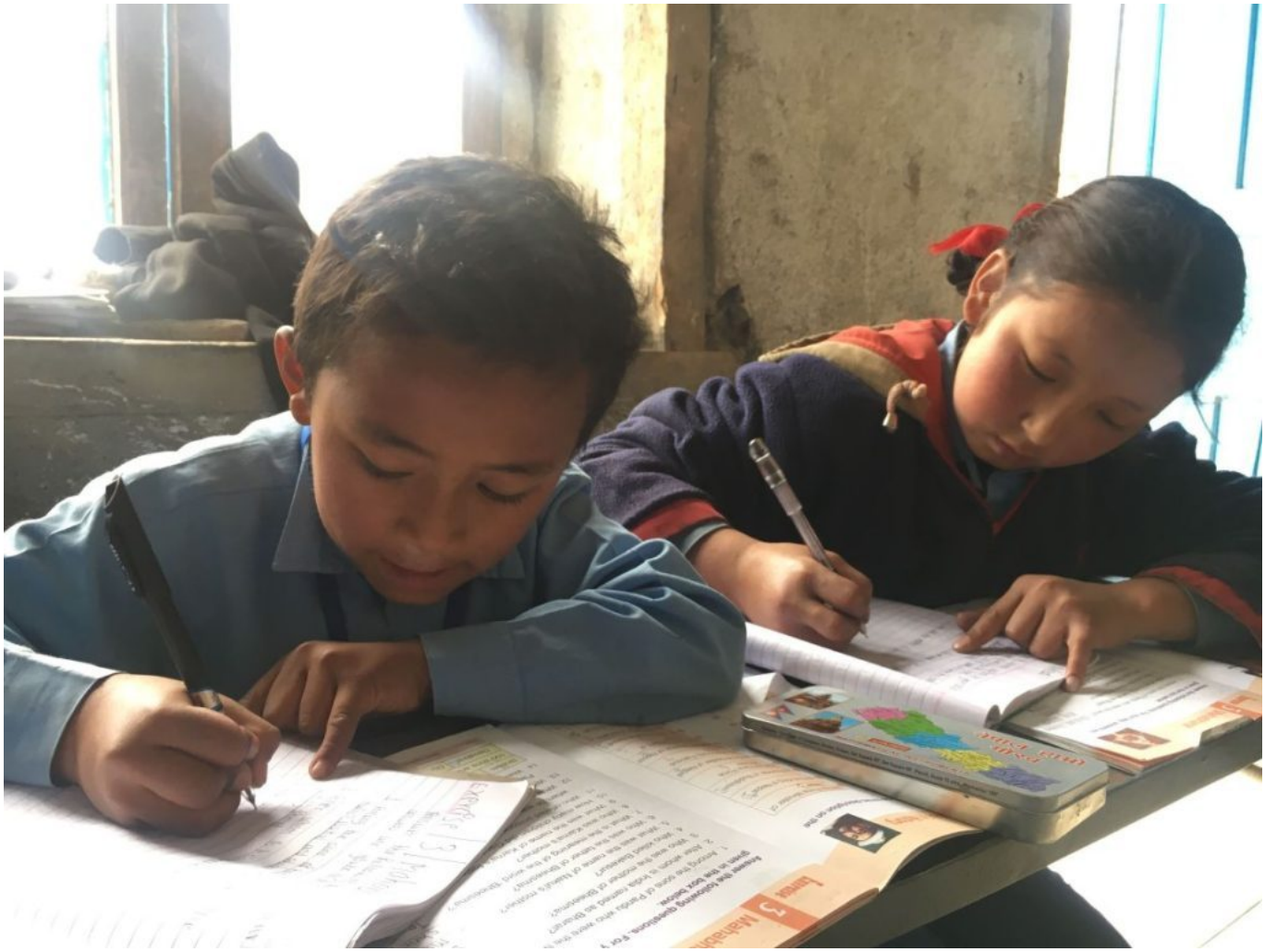









GAP
























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Photos: courtesy of Amrei Vogel