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

written by Jitka Polanská

**His Excellency Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche was almost eighty years old when the political situation in Nepal became very unstable. Instead of retiring, Rinpoche decided to take on another challenge, building a center for Yungdrung Bon in the West. Florens Van Canstein was one of those helping him. As a senior student of Rinpoche, he is a source of precious memories about many events in Yongdzin Rinpoche´s life and experiences in the West. In 2001, Florens became vice President and then later President of Association Shenten Dargye Ling and held that position until 2016.**

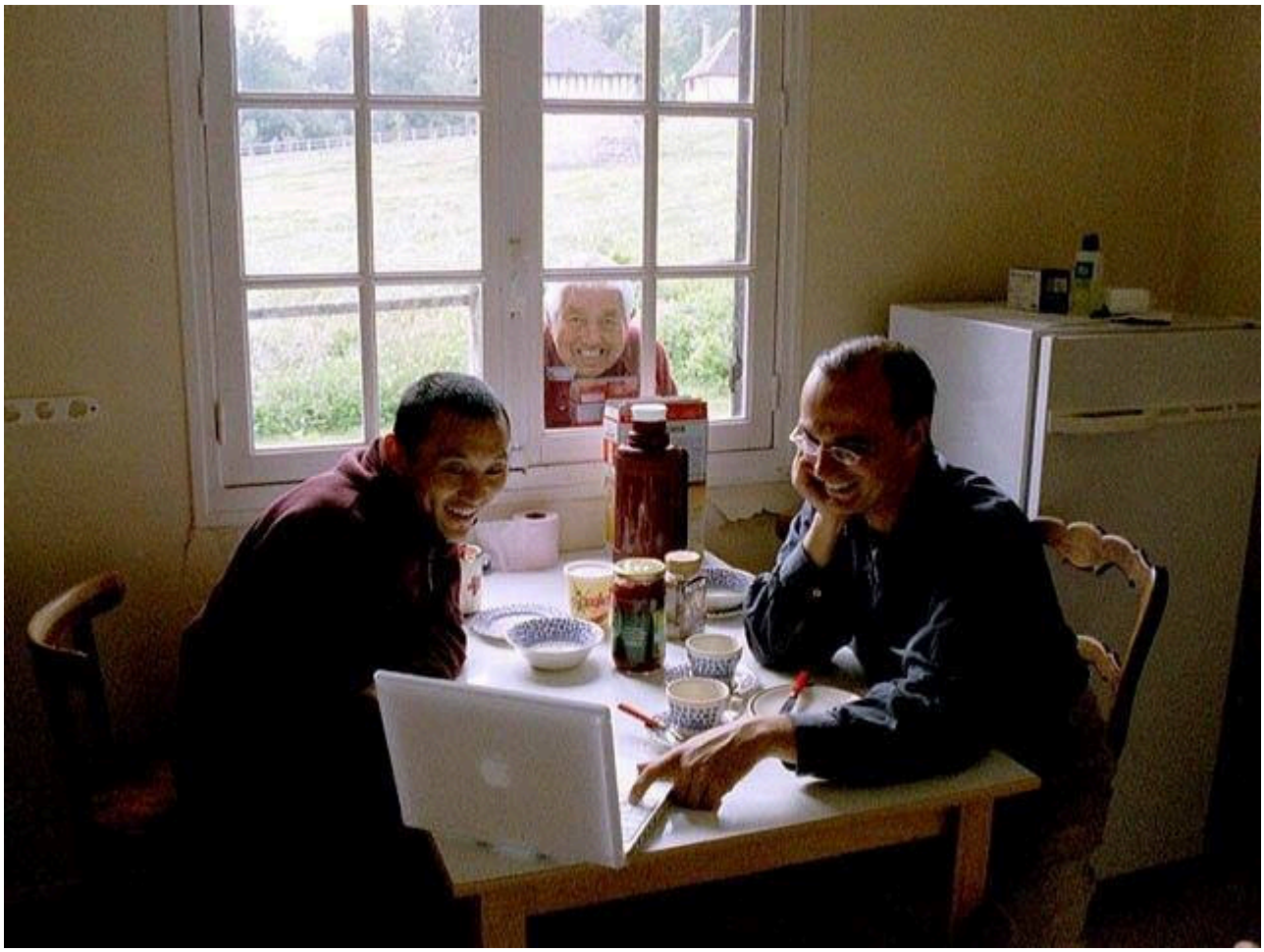
**Do you remember when Yongdzin Rinpoche started thinking about establishing a Yungdrung Bon center in the West?**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Loel Guinness,  who is a practitioner and one of the constant supporters of Yungdrung Bon, conceived, together with Yongdzin Rinpoche, an ambitious building in a traditional style to serve

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

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

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

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

Florens at Shenten Dargye Ling in the summer of 2022

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

It functioned as a boarding school for children and young people with difficulties, behavioral

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Florens Van Canstein has written and translated the following books:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you!

*Pictures: Florens Van Canstein and Jitka Polanská*