

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 way 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