

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 Gyaltzen'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 Ritro 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 Chagri, 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 time students 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 they rested 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.

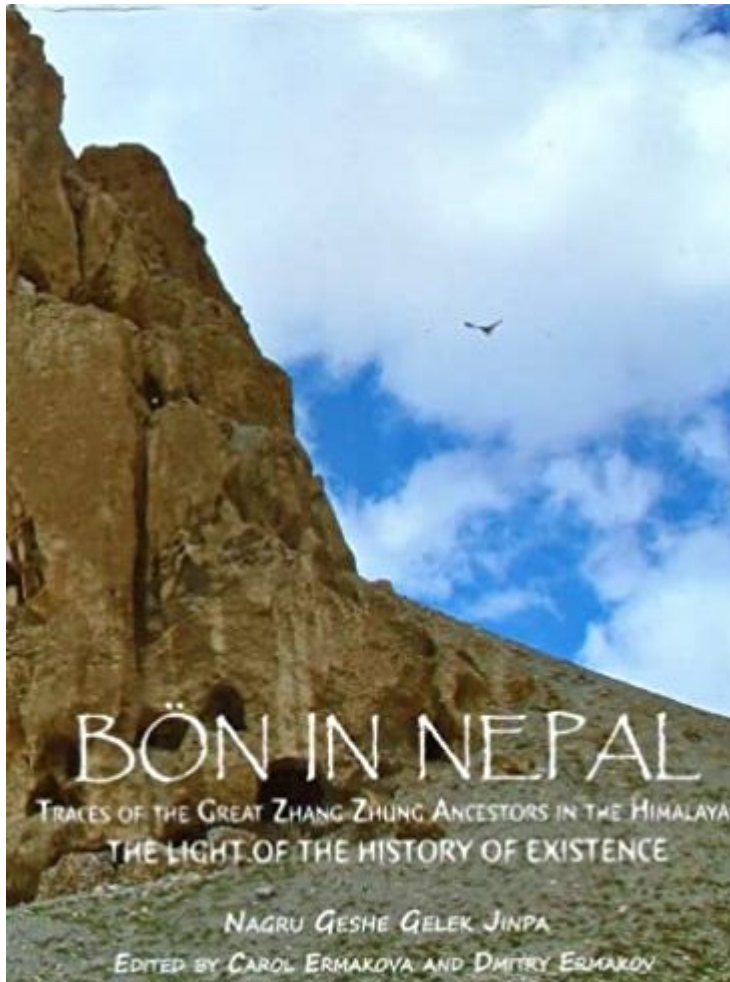
In 2019 I organized a Yungdrung Bön pilgrimage for sixteen practitioners from Germany, Austria, and The Netherlands. On that tour, we spent some days in Lubra. Just at that time, the village and school community organized a beautiful, memorable opening ceremony to conclude the project.

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: there 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 HIMALAYAS
THE LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF EXISTENCE

NAGRU GESHE GELEK JINPA

EDITED BY CAROL ERMAKOVA AND DMITRY ERMAKOV









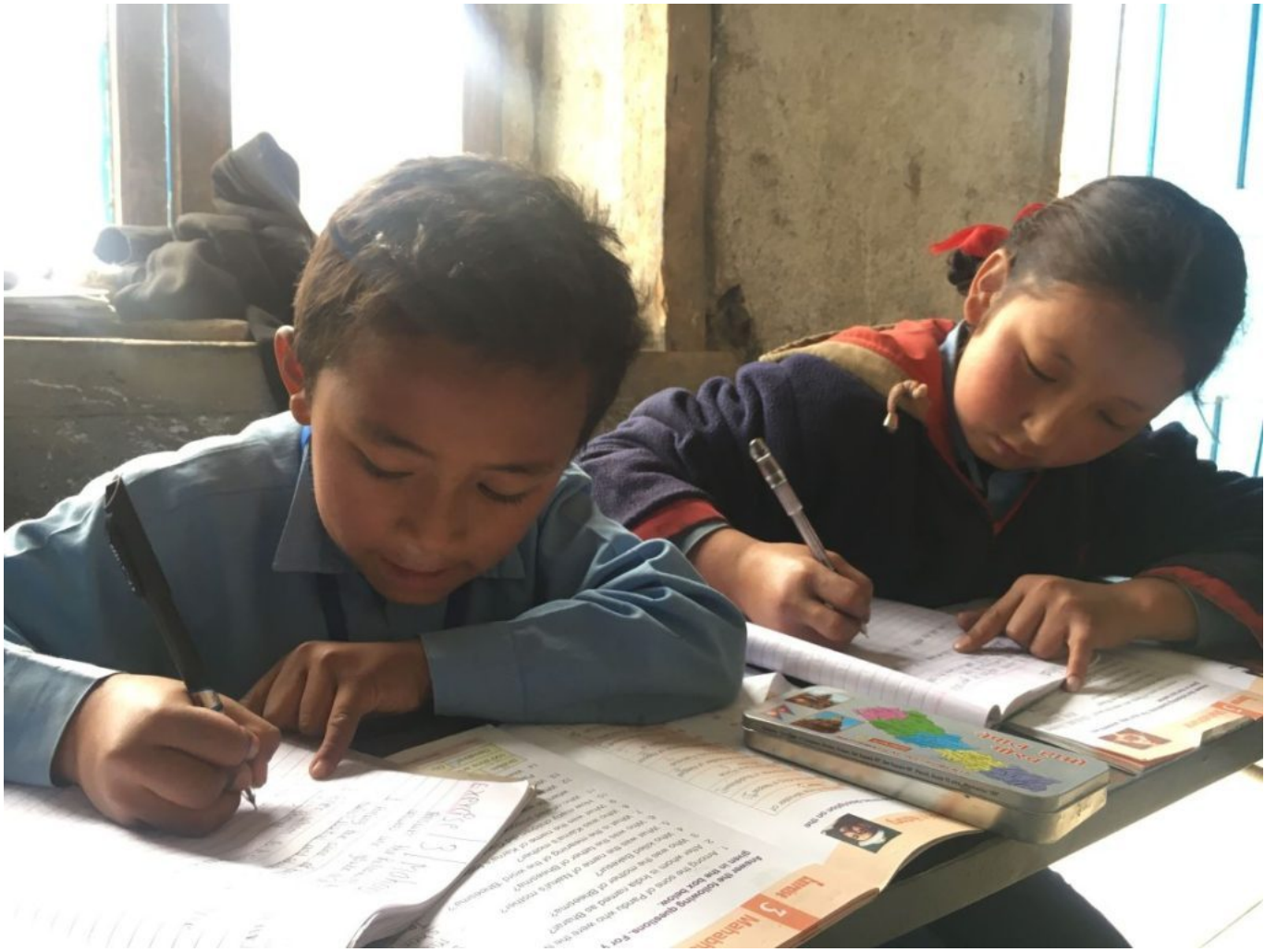








































Photos: courtesy of Amrei Vogel

[Life at Triten Norbutse](#)

written by Jitka Polanská



















A few pictures taken at Triten Norbutse monastery in Kathmandu, the home of His Excellence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Ripoché, the founder of Shenten Dargye Ling. If you have nice pictures of the monastery that you want to share with others, send them to us and we will publish them here.

Individual retreats with skygazing? Will be possible

written by Jitka Polanská



If you have a wish to support Shenten Dargye Ling, a place which has been blessed by many years of Yongdzin Rinpoche' s presence, a central place of gathering and practice of our community, you can do it now. A necessary and costly renovation of the farm house, the Longère, has been taking place since the autumn 2021. Khenpo Gelek' s plan is to transform the building into a facility for personal retreats. "There is a marvellous view over the fields and it is just perfect for the skygazing," he says. In the following letter, which we are happy to publish here, the team of Cogregation Shenten Dargye Ling explains what works need to be done. As a myriad of drops create an ocean, every, even small contribution counts...

Dear sangha sisters and brothers, dear friends of Shenten Dargye Ling,
We hope that you are all in good health and doing well despite this very difficult period we have been living through since March 2020. One good thing is that we have been able to get together and support each other via online teachings and practice. We hope and pray that the situation in the world will get better soon and that we can start the teachings and retreats again at Shenten Dargye Ling.

We are very lucky to have been able to enjoy, over many years, the possibility of receiving teachings and initiations from our precious master and living Buddha Yongdzin Rinpoche, as well as from Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, here at Shenten. Thanks to our generous benefactor Loel Guinness they established this monastery and retreat center in 2005, and have been able to organize annual retreats with the help of many hard-working volunteers. Shenten Dargye Ling was recognized by the French Ministry of Interior as a Religious Congregation in 2006, confirming its status as a fully independent and authentic tradition.



The outside renovation was carried on by a team led by Monika Trojan. Monika, together with Pierre Averous and Alain Guéniot, is a member of the “building team” of Congregation Shenten Dargye Ling.

The buildings in Shenten are very old; the Château dates from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and the Longère from the 17th century. This means that it is absolutely necessary to carry out renovations and repairs continuously. Over many years, and especially in the past two years, we have been undertaking major renovations in the Château. In 2020-2021 the old sewage systems, water pipes and hot water boiler were replaced, and the rooms were painted. We also painted the rooms and corridors in the Pavillion.

Until now we have managed to keep the renovation costs affordable by doing a significant part of the work ourselves with the help of many volunteers. However, in the next phase we need to hire professional people who have special the skills and experience required for repairing old buildings. In this situation, we turn to you once again and ask your help and support in this project.

There is an urgent and unavoidable need to repair the Longère, the long building adjacent to the Château. The walls of the building have severe cracks all around, and the stones are becoming displaced. It is absolutely necessary to repair and fortify the walls before they start crumbling and the building becoming unsafe to use. Old rain gutters, sewage systems and water pipes, as well as windows and doors have to be replaced. We began this project this autumn, but in order to be able to continue in the spring 2022, we must hire professional people with special skills to do the most demanding work.

In the second phase of this project, Khenpo Gelek has a dream and an earnest wish to turn one part

of the Longère building into a long-term personal retreat facility for practitioners, with two rooms and bathrooms and a small kitchen. This would provide a perfect place to practice sun-gazing with a beautiful open view on the lake side. Khen Rinpoche's former house could also be transformed into a long-term retreat house with two rooms. For that, we need to build a small kitchen and fireplace and to install a hot water boiler.

Lastly, it is necessary to order and install a gate to improve the safety in the area and to protect the property from thieves.

All this costs a lot of money, which we cannot afford without your generosity. Our very rough estimate of the costs at this stage is around 60 000 - 80 000 euros. All contributions, however small, would be greatly appreciated and welcome in helping us to complete this important project in 2022.

A quote from Zermig, the middle version of Buddha Tönpa Shenrab's biography:

"If motivated by the mind of pure devotion, even one palmful of soil elevates the building and one palmful of water settles the dust, and each drop of water held in the palm and countless numbers of dust particles held in the palm are causes of joy, happiness and merit."

May Shenten Dargye Ling, the most important seat of the original Tibetan culture and tradition in the West, develop and flourish for years to come!

Please send you donations to our bank account specially for this purpose:

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Congregation Shenten Dargye Ling

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Another view of the Longère.

Editorial: Online magazine of Shenten Dargye Ling is born!

written by Jitka Polanská



Dear readers,

voilà the Speech of Delight, a new online magazine of Shenten Dargye Ling and its community which comes in replacement of the identically titled newsletter that our sangha used to have in the past. Welcome to its site! We opted for this format because we think it will allow us to deliver you interesting stories more fluently and also be more interactive.

Speech of Delight will focus on Shenten but we will also include stories of sangha members and their activities, as well as report about events and projects of Triten Norbutse Monastery, the home of the founder of Shenten Dargye Ling, our beloved teacher His Excellence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.

We would also like to disclose richness of bon and its different aspects to the public of both practitioners and readers who are just keen to know more about this spiritual tradition. We would like also to inform you about new publications and audiovideo material related to Yungdrung Bon.

Speech of Delight in its new coat has received blessings and encouragement from our precious teachers and leaders of our community Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche and Khenpo Gelek Jinpa. They also agreed, together with Wolfgang Reuter, who is a member of Shenten Dargye Ling Association, to sit on the Editorial board of the magazine.

We hope that you will enjoy reading it. We plan to add new content regularly and develop it gradually, with your help. Let us know your feedback and suggestions!

Jitka Polanská, editor-in-chief

Speech of Delight