

Voice of Clear Light

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Finding Common Ground

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche Explains His Commitment to Nonsectarian Cause

From June 6 through 8, 2013, a diverse group of esteemed Tibetan teachers met in Richmond, California, to participate in the Third North American Nonsectarian Conference of Tibetan Religious Schools. Their primary purpose was to exchange experiences, ideas, and support related to teaching Western students. Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, spiritual director of Ligmincha Institute, chaired this year's conference. Here, Tenzin Rinpoche explains his deep commitment to this cause and his hopes for the future.



Photograph by Tom Maroshegyi

I have always had a personal interest in the Rimé nonsectarian movement, which fosters an appreciation of the differences between the various Tibetan Buddhist traditions and promotes open dialogue toward finding common ground. For example, five years ago I had an opportunity to talk with Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, a prominent Rimé master from the Kagyu tradition, and I proposed to him the idea of inviting lamas of the various Tibetan spiritual traditions who live and teach in the West to gather together, engage in dialog, and share support. He was very

receptive to the idea, but nothing came of it. In early 2012 I had a similar conversation in Charlottesville, Virginia, with Lobsang Nyandak, the New York representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was also very open to the idea.

But as I soon discovered, plans for such a collaboration were already well underway. One month after talking with Lobsang Nyandak I received an invitation to meet with some Tibetan teachers on the West Coast. I took this invitation as a very positive sign.

In 2011, a few teachers of the Nyingma school of Tibet, including Khenpo Choga Rinpoche, Orgyen Chowang Rinpoche and Anam Thupten Rinpoche, had been engaging in conversations about their mutual interest in getting together regularly as both friends and lamas, so they could connect with each other, share their experiences of teaching in the West, and discuss how to communicate better with their students. In September of that year a small group of Nyingma lamas got together for that purpose. Because of their wonderful experience of sharing, they later decided to open up their periodic meetings to other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and a second meeting was called.



When I accepted the invitation to participate in that second meeting, I felt very good about how open the people in this group were about sharing their experiences and knowledge. The group is not registered as a legal entity, but it has an elected president, vice president, secretary, and

treasurer. Toward the close of the meeting the officers explained that they had reached the end of their two-year terms and that it was time to vote for their replacements. I was elected to a term as president, Khenpo Jampa Tenphel Rinpoche was appointed as vice chairman, Drupon Gonpo Dorje Rinpoche was elected as treasurer, and Tulku Yeshe Rinpoche was elected as secretary. Attending members of the nonsectarian conference come from all major Tibetan schools, including Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu, Jonang, Gelug, and Bon.

At this year's third annual meeting, other Bon lamas joined me in participating, including Lama Khyimsar Rinpoche, Geshe Dangsang Namgyal Lama, Geshe Chaphur Rinpoche, and Geshe YongDong. During the recent meeting, all the participating teachers discussed the common challenges we share in establishing new dharma centers and in conducting religious teachings in the West. We discussed the importance of not only having a good knowledge of our own teaching lineages, but also understanding and respecting the traditions of other schools. We talked about issues related to introducing Tibetan religions and culture to Tibetans in exile, especially young Tibetans. We agreed to make an effort to encourage attendance from as many representatives as possible within our respective traditions. (See "Agenda and Resolutions," below.)

Next year's Nonsectarian Conference will be open not just to participating lamas but to any Tibetan Buddhist or Bonpo living in North America who would like to observe the meeting in progress. Next year's agenda is likely to be similar to this year's.

My personal hope is that these conferences will enhance understanding of the different traditions and bring ongoing harmony, mutual respect and support, and the sharing of knowledge between traditions, while promoting positive social change among Tibetans living in the West. Already, I have been meeting with one of the participating Nyingma lamas, who I have found to be very knowledgeable in these issues, and we have been sharing our thoughts with each other.

Such collaborations can be beneficial in promoting harmony and support not just among different schools of Buddhism, but also within a given school. Here at Ligmincha Institute we have been inviting many Bon lamas and geshe to join us at Serenity Ridge and other Ligmincha centers. Whenever there is a new Bon center being established in the West, I try to give my personal support and I encourage my students to help out. At Ligmincha's Serenity Ridge retreat center, we also hope to feature teachers from all the Tibetan Buddhist schools at upcoming retreats and conferences, and to include more interfaith dialogues between the various schools.

I spend a great deal of my time throughout the year working, traveling, teaching, and being with my family. These are all priorities. But I also strongly value this opportunity to extend my time, energy, and financial resources toward this nonsectarian cause. I hope that all the Tibetan traditions will see the importance of participating. For, when collective efforts are more important than individual efforts, harmony is greatly increased and there is immeasurable benefit for all.

Geshe Tenzin Wangyal

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**AGENDA AND RESOLUTIONS
THIRD NORTH AMERICAN NONSECTARIAN CONFERENCE OF
TIBETAN RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS**

***June 6 through 8, 2013
Richmond, California***

ITEM 1

Each religious teacher introduces himself and shares his first experiences of teaching in the West

RESOLUTION

Teachers share common challenges in establishing new Dharma centers and conducting the religious teachings in the West. They must adapt as fully as possible to a new language, culture, and traditions. When imparting the teachings, it is important that they conform to their disciples' level of understanding when interpreting the teachings of their respective religious school, choosing vocabulary, and sharing their own deep philosophical experiences.

ITEM 2

A discussion of (1) what preparations are needed to introduce the Tibetan religions and culture to the West; (2) difficulties that must be overcome; and (3) steps that must be taken to move forward along the path of progress and development.

RESOLUTION

Each teacher should have proper experience and realization of what they are teaching. They should be able to adjust and conform their teachings to their disciples' level of understanding. Any misunderstanding or misinterpretation between teacher and disciple should be resolved with prudence and respect. Most importantly, the respective religious schools should move forward with the times without compromising the essence of their teachings.

ITEM 3

Participants share their experiences related to their contributions in promoting harmony among the various schools, and their suggestions for do's and don'ts in moving forward in the future.

RESOLUTION

It is important that the religious teachers have a good knowledge not only of their own teaching lineage, but also of the history and philosophy of other religious schools. While giving public teachings, care should be taken not to criticize or slander other schools of teachings. If a disciple is heard criticizing or insulting other schools, positive debate should be encouraged and effort should be made to prevent such negative comments in the future.

ITEM 4

A discussion of how to introduce Tibetan religions and culture to Tibetans in exile and particularly to young Tibetans. Can the Tibetans in exile absorb both the Tibetan and the foreign language?

RESOLUTION

A strong positive relationship should be maintained with the Tibetan community in each teacher's respective region. Under the aegis of the regional Tibetan association, talks on Tibetan religion and culture should be organized in consultation with other local Tibetan religious schools. All religious and cultural teachings in the respective locales should be publicized by Internet. Most developed countries use illustrated children's books to introduce their cultures to children; we should also adopt this method to promote our language and culture.

ITEM 5

A discussion of the differences in methods for introducing Tibetan religions and culture to the Tibetans versus to foreigners; and to explore whether similar methods could be used for each.

RESOLUTION

Societal situations and ways of thinking are different in the East than the West. We need to focus on the current needs of Western societies and carry out the teachings in a way that is relevant to those needs. It is important to introduce Tibetan religions and culture based on the disciples' level of understanding without compromising the essence of the Tibetan traditions.

ITEM 6

A discussion of how to promote the North American Nonsectarian Conference of Tibetan Religious Schools, and how each Dharma center can contribute to these promotions.

RESOLUTION

It is important to have the continued help and guidance of both incumbent and former members of the committee. Upon receiving an invitation to an upcoming conference, each member should make an effort to ensure that as many representatives as possible from their respective schools will attend. The name and identity of this North American Nonsectarian Conference of Tibetan Religious Schools shall be maintained as such for the time being.