

Voice of Clear Light

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Historic Homecoming

First Meeting of Bon Lamas Who Live and Teach in the West Held at Serenity Ridge



Photograph by John Jackson

To a casual observer, it might have been no more than a comfortable gathering of Tibetan monks and other countrymen, laughing and chatting like the old friends they were. For those knowledgeable, however, the two days of meetings in October 2013 in central Virginia were truly historic. For, this was the first time since the Bon teachings were brought to the West that these nine Tibetan Bon lamas had an opportunity to meet, support each other and share their years of experience and knowledge related to teaching Western students.

Some had been teaching in the West for decades with little support from their peers. Among them was Geshe YongDong, who first began teaching in Paris and then British Columbia in

1999 and who, four years later, founded Sherab Chamma Ling, a Tibetan Bon Buddhist center in Courtenay B.C., Vancouver Island, Canada.

“It’s very difficult when you come to a different culture, different language, different people,” explains Geshe YongDong, affectionately known as GesheLa. “Most of my life was in a monastery as a monk. Suddenly, I came to the West and everything was different. Even going to restaurants—I had never before used a fork and knife.

“As soon as I heard about the lama meeting planned for Serenity Ridge, I thought it was a wonderful idea,” GesheLa adds. “Many Bon lamas have come to the West to share the sacred Bon teachings. But we all have busy Western lifestyles, and even if we have had the intention to get together, until then we had not had the opportunity.”

The indigenous spiritual tradition of Tibet, Bon is among the world’s most ancient, unbroken spiritual lineages, tracing its oral history back 18,000 years. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution this rich heritage was gravely threatened. Countless monasteries in Tibet were destroyed, and many monks lost their lives. During the conflict only three senior lamas managed to flee the country; under great hardship they bore the responsibility for founding new monasteries in India and Nepal in the hope of preserving the sacred traditions. There, they taught new generations of monks—some of whom, like Geshe YongDong, chose to bring their knowledge and training to Western students.



Another of these young monks was Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who first arrived in Italy

in 1988 and soon went on to teach in the United States. In 1992 Tenzin Rinpoche founded Ligmincha Institute; and in 1998 he established Ligmincha Institute at Serenity Ridge, the retreat center in central Virginia where—fully 25 years after his initial arrival in the West—the historic meetings took place.

“I had been feeling a need to gather all the other lamas who teach in the West to do something collective and collaborative,” Tenzin Rinpoche says of his recent efforts to pull together the meetings. According to Rinpoche, his 2012 attendance at the [Second North American Nonsectarian Conference of Tibetan Religious Schools](#) in California reinforced the need for all Bon lamas teaching in the West to meet for a similar purpose. H.E. Menri Lopon Trinley Nyima Rinpoche and Latri Nyima Dakpa Rinpoche were instrumental in supporting the effort.

Most of the assembled teachers had already met each other, most of them at Menri Monastery near Dolanji, India, one of two main Bon monasteries outside of Tibet. “But really getting to know someone requires spending time with each other, sharing and exchanging,” says GesheLa, who adds that almost all their waking hours at Serenity Ridge were spent chatting and sharing.

“Having this whole weekend to connect was extraordinary. There was no ego involved. We were meeting heart to heart, not head to head. I could sense this was everyone’s feeling. Sometimes it was very emotional, and sometimes we couldn’t stop laughing. I have never seen anything like this.”

According to GesheLa, all the lamas expressed the same intention: to develop the sacred Bon teachings and benefit students. “When we talked about how our Tibetan culture and spirituality were destroyed, and how difficult the challenges were for the masters we learned from, tears came.

“When the lamas can connect like this, our students can also connect better with each other. These meetings have given me a lot of energy and strength that I will carry on my return to [my center on] Vancouver Island.”

