



Young Lama Has Big Dreams

An Excerpt from Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's Talk in Boston, May 1993



Lopon Tenzin Namdak, Tenzin Wangyal and Lungtok Tenpai Nyima

This teaching is an edited excerpt from the Summer 1993 Voice of Clear Light newsletter. It gives us a glimpse of a young Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche speaking of his life and his deep commitment to bringing the Bön teachings to the West.

First, I want to say a little bit about myself by way of an introduction. I was born in India of Tibetan refugee parents. In my early years, my father was Buddhist and my mother was Bön. I lived in a Buddhist community, a Tibetan settlement in northwest India, until I was 5 or 6. After that I went to a Christian school, but I did not manage to stay there very long. When I was 10, my parents brought me to a monastery of the Bön tradition. There I met my teacher, Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.

When I finished my monastic education in 1986, I went to Tibet and returned to India. I worked in the library in Dharamsala, where I was appointed as a member of the Assembly by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but I did not decide to do that and wanted to pursue my studies. Norbu Rinpoche invited me over to Italy to do some work at the Institute there. I was also invited by some professors to give talks in Sweden and so spent time in Scandinavia. I did not originally plan to come to the West to teach. I came to learn, not to teach. But, while I was in Italy, many friends who knew about my practice asked me to teach. And this has continued all over the world for the past five years. I am not learning as much as I wanted.

I first came to the United States in 1990 at the invitation of the Dzogchen Community in Conway, Massachusetts, to teach. While teaching as the guest of various organizations I ended my trip in Houston, Texas, where I had no plan to spend time. But that has changed my life here. Professor Anne Klein of Rice University asked me to give a couple of talks there. Then they wanted me to come back for two weeks, all the way from Italy. Then they asked me to apply for a Rockefeller Fellowship and I got that and spent a year there doing research and teaching. I felt that I could learn more about Western culture in that setting, since I feel now that there is a mission for me in the West and I want to do it. I want to learn the best way to communicate with Westerners. It is a great challenge to grow up in one culture and then try to transplant the teachings in the West.

It is not always easy to get people to understand, really understand. In the West, it is not difficult to get people excited. The problem is to continue with it and make a deep space in themselves, where, no matter whether there is a teacher there or not, it will always be there and always grow. Making that kind of connection and making that kind of space in people seems much more complicated unless you really know how to communicate with people.

While I did not plan to teach in the West, and when I taught I was not sure if it was right or important for me to teach, now I do feel that it is important for me to do, and that this is a mission. It is like a secret that had been kept from me and is clearer now. Now I am sure because I am a Bönpo. I do not know how much you know about Bön or if what you know is very good. As I mentioned, my father was a Tibetan Buddhist, but generally I believe that every Tibetan is a Bönpo. There are no Tibetans who do not practice Bön, even if they do not call it that. It is not a question of what one calls oneself, but what one actually believes. Tibetan Buddhism has a character which cannot be separated from the indigenous tradition of Bön. The beliefs of that tradition are rooted in their bones, blood, mind and brain—every part of their existence. On an official level, my mother was Bön and my father was Buddhist and, as I told you, I also went to a Christian school. So I have a lot of combinations. Growing up and being trained in my monastic community and being very close to my teacher, I know how much responsibility he took on his shoulders in coming all the way from Tibet and coming to the West years ago. He also was sponsored by a Rockefeller Fellowship and came to the West in 1961

and spent about three years in the West. When he returned to India, he took on the responsibility to establish a community and monastery which keeps alive the word, the believers and the faith of the Bön tradition. He preserved a very important part of Tibetan culture.



H.E. Yondzin (Lopon) Tenzin Namdak with Rinpoche

While I was growing up with him, I did not see that aspect of his responsibility. I just saw what I needed to learn from him for me. Now, coming to the West and seeing a lot of things that happen here, I realize that the Bön teachings should be kept alive. There are so many centers in the West—I am not criticizing them—that it would not make much difference if one of them were not there, since there are so many others. But it would make a lot of difference if I don't do what I am doing. Nobody else is going to do it. Being here in the West, I see my face everywhere I go and say to myself, if you do not do it, who is going to do it?

Even though I could easily come here and teach in the university and survive myself, I cannot leave this other important responsibility that I feel to preserve the Bön tradition. It is not that I need to spread the Bön religion as a form of religion. It is a form of knowledge, an important tradition, that has many things to offer for this time and period, as many native traditions do, if people in the modern world have the ear to listen to it and the mind to think about it. There are so many things to learn from them. There is important value and wisdom there. If the few of us who know these traditions do not try to bring them out, they won't be there and won't grow; instead, they end.

My teacher, when he finished giving us the teachings and transmissions, said to us: 'Now I have

produced a new generation. It is up to you. I did not want to make a gap.' He did not make a gap, he produced teachers. So I feel very responsible, particularly when it is difficult to do it. As I said, it would not make any difference not to have another dharma center in the West. Many masters from the East have done it. But preserving Bön is very important. Every Tibetan knows that the Bön is a very important tradition and is the root of Tibetan culture. There is no way to explain Tibetan culture unless you know something about Bön. Even among scholars, they have so much training in this tradition and used it in their daily life, but they have not thought about what it really means. They do not look back into their roots.

The Buddhist way of looking at Tibetan history is not realistic. It is important to realize how much benefit it [Bön] brought into Tibetan culture. All the parts of the tradition—the texts, the beliefs, the rituals, the mythology—are disappearing. For example, the Bön Canon has over 170 books. Scholars in the West and many Tibetans do not know about these texts because they are not open in that way. I am trying to speak realistically about the situation now.

All our literature is disappearing. There is only one copy of the canon left in Tibet. Eight people hid the texts in the mountains during the Chinese cultural revolution. Half of those were killed by the Chinese but they would not tell where the books were hidden. These books are lost.

It is not like losing the books that are written here in the universities and in bookstores. It is not about the confusion of individuals; it contains the wisdom of individuals. Those books cannot be reproduced.



Students gather for meditation in the Serenity Ridge shrine room, where texts from the Bon Canon are preserved

I strongly feel my responsibility toward these things. A year and half ago, I founded the Ligmincha Institute. Ligmincha is the name of the king of Zhang Zhung. Zhang Zhung is the place where most of Tibetan civilization starts.

I have a plan and a form to teach continuously over the next many years. The dream is there; I dreamed it clearly. To manifest it takes time. Everything will manifest when it needs to manifest. If you want to collaborate with me in all of these plans that I have been making, you may do so in whatever form suits you. This is written in our newsletter. Please take and if you have thoughts, let me know.

Tonight, as a formal introduction to dzogchen, in the first place it is very difficult to say anything about dzogchen. It is difficult to talk about something that you cannot talk about. But you can always talk about it. What I am really saying that you can talk about dzogchen in a way that will not make much sense. In the same way, you can see books on emptiness. They are very thick books. It is very similar. You can talk a lot about how very difficult it is to explain.

I want to say a little bit about the tradition of dzogchen as far as it is connected to me. The reason is that in the Tibetan tradition, a very important part of the teaching, and preserving teaching, is to trace back the tradition of the teaching. We say "I am giving these teachings to you people, but I have been practicing and have received this teaching from somewhere." I need to trace it back to make it authentic and feel comfortable with it. If it is not something that is connected with the transmission, it is different. It is not a thought, it is not like going to a holistic bookstore to read 10 books on it giving me now something to talk about. Tracing the roots in the tradition is considered an important part of the tradition, the fact that it goes way, way back. One of the reasons it is preserved until today is because of that tradition.

If the way to deal with the teaching is the way it is generally treated in the West, it won't last as it has been kept until this time. People within the tradition know how to live in the tradition and follow it up and preserve it – preserve it not by confusing it with other traditions, but respecting its nature and giving value to its continuity in the future.



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