



Blue Ridge Serenity by Joan Duncan Oliver

Tricycle Magazine Feature on Serenity Ridge

Joan Duncan Oliver has been a Buddhist practitioner for 40 years and is a graduate of The 3 Doors Academy and 3 Doors Compassion Project. She is an award-winning journalist and author whose most recent book is [Buddhism: An Introduction to the Buddha's Life, Teachings, and Practices](#).

*In this article for *Tricycle* magazine (Winter 2019), she shares some of the history and beauty of Serenity Ridge, Ligmincha's Retreat Center in Virginia.*



Ask the Bon Dzogchen master Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche whether setting is an essential aspect of spiritual practice, and his response is unequivocal: “The building and the environment are both very important for our inner personal development and spiritual development.” Hence the key role they have played in the development of Serenity Ridge, Tenzin Rinpoche’s retreat center in Shipman, Virginia, which is also the headquarters of Ligmincha International, founded to preserve and disseminate Bön Buddhist teachings and Tibetan culture. “In both the exterior—the colors, the paint—and the interior decoration, I wanted the buildings to look

Asian/Tibetan, to support a Tibetan wisdom tradition,” he emphasizes.

Bön is Tibet’s oldest indigenous spiritual tradition, and Tenzin Rinpoche—a geshe (equivalent to a Ph.D.) and former monk—was one of the first teachers to introduce Bön to Westerners. Having come to the US in 1991, he had already established a small Bön center in Charlottesville, Virginia, when he began looking for a permanent place to hold retreats. He was drawn to the Blue Ridge Mountain area “for its spirit and energy”—and its resemblance to Tibet and northern India, where he was raised. But much of rural Virginia is spiritually and socially conservative, wary of outsiders with unfamiliar practices and views. After the first property that the search committee pursued fell through, they regrouped and found a place in Nelson County, which had already welcomed several spiritual groups.

The property seemed ideal: 19 wooded acres, along with a few modest buildings and spectacular views. It remained for Tenzin Wangyal to check it out. “Before I came to Serenity Ridge the first time, the weather had been a bit dramatic—a lot of rain, water almost up to the bridge. The day I went, the rain stopped, the water went down, and when I arrived at Serenity Ridge, there was a full rainbow shining there. I felt an instant connection. Without looking any further, we decided to make this our home and a home for the Bön tradition in America.”

It was an inspired choice. The initial 19 acres acquired in 1997 have since expanded to some 90 acres through a joint purchase with an environmental group. With the addition of several new buildings, the center now resembles a small Himalayan village perched on the ridge that gave it its name.



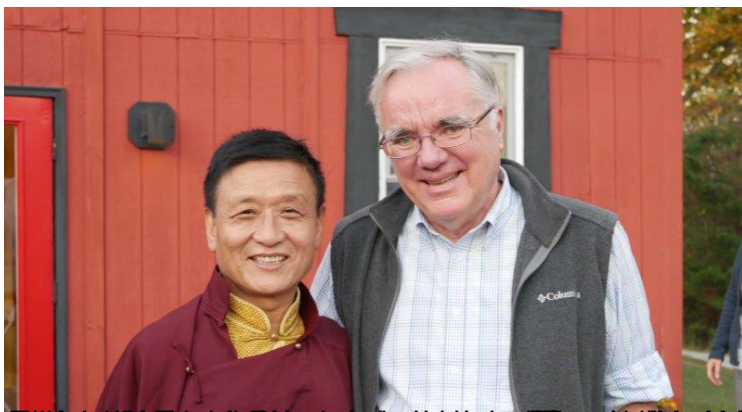
The previous owners’ 1970s redbrick ranch house became Lama House, quarters for Tenzin Wangyal and visiting lamas. A nearby “mother-in-law” cottage was redeployed as an office to coordinate the retreats and workshops hosted by the center throughout the year. A storage

shed on the premises was repurposed as the gompa—Tibetan for temple or meditation hall—with altars, thangkas, water offering bowls, and other ritual trappings replacing the tractor and lawn mowers.

The first structure the Bön community built from the ground up was Garuda House. Linked to the gompa by a covered loggia, it is organized around a classic Tibetan-style pavilion with a shrine room housing rare manuscripts and an outdoor balcony from which a conch shell horn is blown to summon meditators to practice. Wings on either side contain living quarters for retreatants. Constructed in stages from 1999 to 2007, Garuda House, like the gompa and office, is faced in wood siding painted red—another traditional design element. The upswept roofs of the wings evoke the wings of the garuda, a mythical birdlike creature that is a protector deity in Bön and a symbol of primordial nature in Bön dzogchen teachings.



The heart of the community now is Kunzang Khang, a monumental, 12,000-square-foot, three-story building that opened to great ceremony in April 2019. Kunzang, Tenzin Rinpoche explains, “means ‘good for all,’ accommodating all ways and means, all approaches.” And all activities. The building houses a dining hall and kitchen, a place for socializing, a meeting-room-cum-practice-area-cum-performance space, a rooftop meditation deck, and offices for Ligmincha International. There is also a state-of-the-art recording studio: Tenzin Wangyal has been recording teachings since 1999 and podcasts on YouTube as well as on Ligmincha’s Facebook channel. “Good for all” also refers to the center’s open-door policy: when not in use for Tenzin Wangyal’s retreats, Kunzang Khang is available to other spiritual groups, including The 3 Doors, his spinoff nonsectarian meditation program.



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