

Voice of Clear Light

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Geshe Tenzin Yangton Now at Home at Serenity Ridge **New Resident Lama Serves Ligmincha and Area Community**



Geshe Tenzin Yangton

Two separate butter lamps, attached together on the same base. Two twin brothers from a remote village in Dolpo, northwestern Nepal, watching intently as the flames slowly burned down. Which brother's lamp would burn the longest?

It was the final test, after many others, the one that would seal the boys' fate and determine which brother would continue his training to become a Tibetan Bon Buddhist monk. That brother would travel far from his small village in the Dolpo region, which borders Tibet, to pursue his training. The other, needed to help his parents and other six siblings, would remain at home.

Tenzin Yangton's flame was the last one to burn out and he has, indeed, traveled far. His path has taken him to Kathmandu, Nepal; to Dolanji, India; throughout the United States, Europe and Russia; and now to Ligmincha Institute at Serenity Ridge in Nelson County, Virginia, where he is the resident lama.

"We are thrilled to have Geshe Yangton as our new resident lama at Serenity Ridge," says Sue Davis-Dill, executive director of Ligmincha Institute. "Geshe-la plans to conduct meditation sessions, rituals and retreats at Serenity Ridge, visit area sanghas and work to help those in the surrounding community. His schedule and activities are in the process of being finalized."



Brother Yungdrung Wodse and Geshe Tenzin Yangton

Tenzin Yangton and his twin brother, Yungdrung Wodser, were born in 1974 in Chharka (pronounced 'Tsarka'), a remote village in Dolpo. Their family is part of the ancient Yangton lineage, said to go back to the time of Buddha Tonpa Shenrap more than 18,000 years ago and traceable to Yangton Sherap Gyaltsen, who was born in 1077. Yangton Sherap Gyaltsen is revered as a great practitioner and scholar of dzogchen. He was the first to collect experiential dzogchen teachings—both his own and those of other lamas. Until that time, these teachings of personal experience (nyam ti), had previously only been taught orally from teacher to student. These dzogchen teachings still exist in the Yungdrung Bon tradition to this day. A number of families of the Yangton lineage live in the Dolpo region.

The Dolpo region is filled with devout lay and tantric practitioners of Tibetan Bon Buddhism, many of whose families came from across the border in Tibet. Both of the twins participated in a three-year training within the local Bonpo religious community. It was rare, though, for the brothers to see a monk in robes since there was no monastic community in the area.

Their uncle, however, was an exception. Yangton Lama Tashi Gyaltsen Rinpoche had become a geshe at Menri Monastery, the main monastery for Bon, in India and then returned home. "He was the first monk I saw, and he told me about the monastic life," Geshe-la recalls. "I said I wanted to become a monk and go to the monastery." His brother had the same desire, but his parents would not allow both brothers to leave. So his twin stayed to help the family while Tenzin Yangton set off on the path that was to carry him far from home.



Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche with Tenzin Yangton

In 1990, Tenzin Yangton traveled with Lama Tashi to Triten Norbutse Monastery. There, he took his vows as a novice monk from Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche. He studied mandalas (khyikhor), writing and grammar, learned many rituals and received teachings from Yongdzin Rinpoche.

In 1991, Tenzin Yangton traveled to Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India. In April of the following year, he enrolled in the Bon Dialect School in Dolanji, where he took the full 250 vows (called *dr agpa dangsong*) and attained his Geshe Degree in 2006.

Life as a monk was not easy for many, says Geshe Yangton. Many monks were not able to complete the rigorous schedule, which included study and practice of sutra, tantra and dzogchen; reasoning and debate; rituals, art and poetry; numerous initiations and special events, and long retreats, among other things. “To begin with, it was a little bit of a challenge,” Geshe-la recalls. “But for me it was not a big problem. I tried my best and I enjoyed it.” Days began early and ended late, but there were vacations or days off during the month, when the monks could do study retreats, contemplation or rituals for people in surrounding villages, or visit family, if they lived close enough.

The last three years of the training were devoted to dzogchen, the body of teachings and meditation practices aimed at realizing the nature of mind, or what Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche calls the “inner refuge.” During sutra and tantra teachings, there was a lot of debate in the monastery, but not so for dzogchen: “There is nothing to debate,” says Geshe-la. “Dzogchen is more your inner experience. Of course, it helps when we receive the teachings and history of dzogchen and the great masters,” he adds. “But mainly there’s not much to do. Your feeling, your understanding, your inner mind is the biggest thing for the dzogchen way.”



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