

Trungram Gyalwa Rinpoche, PhD

Trungram Gyalwa Rinpoche, PhD, has rare access to the ancient wisdom of Buddhist teachings—and a rare ability make them easily accessible to westerners.

A prominent incarnate lama, Rinpoche has the distinction of having been taught by the heads of Tibetan Buddhism's four major lineages. Yet, even as a young boy, Rinpoche was aware that the great benefits of Buddhism would be limited if practitioners were restricted to traditional forms of study. First, he mastered multiple languages in order to more effectively reach people in different areas of the world. Then, after completing his eastern training, he realized that to teach western audiences, he needed a western education. When he graduated from Harvard University in 2004, he was the first incarnate lama to earn a PhD in the West.

BIRTH AND RECOGNITION

Rinpoche was born to a Sherpa family from Nepal. His father is a devoted Vajrayana practitioner. While in his mother's womb, his parents had dreams that pointed to a child of highly unusual qualities.

At birth, Rinpoche had some unusual markings, so when he was still an infant his parents took him to seek out His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, the supreme head of the Kagyu lineage. In a public audience, even before Rinpoche's parents had a chance to speak with the Karmapa, the 16th Karmapa recognized the child in the crowd. The Karmapa identified Rinpoche as the intentionally reborn manifestation (tulku) of a great Kagyu master, the 3rd Trungram Gyalwa, whom he likened to Milarepa. The Karmapa explained Rinpoche's marking as a symbol of his predecessor's realization of Mahamudra practice.

Karmapa cut some of Rinpoche's hair, gave him a monk's robe and the Dharma name Trungram Gyalwa Tulku Karma Tenpai Gyaltzen Trinlay Kunkhyab Pal Sangpo. The Karmapa also composed a long-life prayer for Rinpoche.

It is in the oral tradition that the previous Trungram Gyalwa Rinpoche stated he would adopt vegetarianism in the next life. From birth, Rinpoche has been a vegetarian.

Rinpoche was enthroned in Sikkim where Karmapa resided. He thus took on the role of a reincarnate master with great responsibilities in this lifetime.

EDUCATION

Rumtek

Rinpoche received a traditional monastic education at Rumtek monastery, the main seat of Karmapa. There he learned monastic practices and traditions, Tantric scriptures, sadhanas and so on. This was followed by studying treatises (shastras) and literature at Jamyang Khang School, Rumtek.

Nalanda

Rinpoche then entered the Karma Shri Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies, where he studied for many years, achieving the academic equivalent to an M.A. and graduating with First Class Honors.

His education at Nalanda included the five major domains of studies: literature, painting and drawing, medicine, epistemology, and philosophy. Philosophy of non-Buddhist tenets, history, arts, astrology and languages were also included in his course work, with special emphasis on Buddhist epistemology, ethics and the philosophy of three main Buddhist schools, Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

Rime Master

Reflecting the non-sectarian approach of his predecessor, Rinpoche's teachers come from all four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Geluk). He studied with some of the greatest masters of recent years, particularly the 16th Karmapa and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He received most of his teachings and empowerments from these two Rinpoches and from Khenchen Trinley Paljor Rinpoche (appointed by the 16th Karmapa to be Rinpoche's tutor). His other Buddhist teachers include Sakya Trizin, the late Ugyen Tulku Rinpoche, the late Khamtrul Rinpoche, Trulshik Rinpoche, the late Kalu Rinpoche, the late Salje Rinpoche and the late Gendun Rinpoche. He studied extensively under Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and Khenpo Choedrak Rinpoche.

Languages and Programs

In order to help people of various backgrounds, Rinpoche also became fluent in Tibetan, English, Nepali, Sherpa, and Chinese; he also speaks some Sanskrit, Hindi and French.

Besides traditional Buddhist education, Rinpoche studied liberal arts at Kirkwood College in Iowa, and later at Newbury College in Massachusetts, then worked as a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan Buddhist Research Center, where he was involved in teaching exchange programs and sutra translation.

Rinpoche also studied Chinese for six months in Taiwan at the Language Learning Center of National Taiwan Normal University.

Harvard PhD

Rinpoche entered Harvard in the School of Arts and Sciences as a doctoral student in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with focus on comparative studies. He was awarded a PhD in 2004.

Through such studies in the modern academic system, Rinpoche has become one of the few Tibetan masters with the ability to accurately translate the full subtlety and effectiveness of Buddhist practices for the western student. His dissertation on Gampopa—the most prominent disciple of Milarepa—analyzes in-depth the life and works of this important figure in Buddhist history and more particularly the development of the Kagyu School in its unique form in Tibet.

ACTIVITIES

Clearly seeing his future responsibilities, a non-traditional plan to benefit beings began to appear in the Rinpoche's mind as a young boy. Even then, Rinpoche knew very well that the great benefits of Buddhism would be limited if only the traditional forms of monastic and cave-dwelling yogic life were to be adopted by practitioners.

Traditional teachings

Rinpoche began teaching early in his studies at Rumtek Monastery. At the request of some eighty visitors from European countries, he taught the essence of Naropa's Mahamudra and the practice of Avalokiteshvara. The next year Rinpoche gave a teaching on the Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas to the monks of Rumtek and won high praises from all the khenpos and rinpoches present.

Soon, Rinpoche performed his first initiation, transmitting the essence of the Kagyupa Long Life Buddha practice. Since then, he has given teachings to Tibetan Buddhist teachers and sanghas from time to time.

Rinpoche also has given Dharma teachings and initiations and helped form groups and centers for Buddhist studies in many countries, including Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bhutan, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Poland, Singapore, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

Academic teachings

In 2016, Rinpoche returned to academia, serving as the Numata Visiting Professor at McGill University, where he taught a course in Issues in Buddhist Studies.

Preserving Teaching Traditions

When Rinpoche visited the Trungram Monastery and the cave in Tibet where his previous incarnation practiced, he met with thousands of disciples. During this short visit, he took measures to preserve the Whispering Lineage (Nyengyu) tradition, a special oral lineage of Trungram Monastery that was near extinction at that time.

Rinpoche served as President of Dharmodaya, the National Buddhist Association of Nepal. In that capacity, he represented Nepal at the 1998 International Buddhist Conference, near Sydney, Australia. He is a lifetime advisor to the organization.

Teaching Wellbeing

In 2004, with Rinpoche's support, monks of the Trungram tradition founded Dharmakaya, a US-based Buddhist organization, for the express purpose of preserving and sharing the wisdom teachings.

In 2017 the organization opened the Dharmakaya Center for Wellbeing. The Center is

based on the fundamental principle that emotional and physical wellbeing are interconnected and equally essential; it strives to foster both through meditative practices.

Philanthropic activities

At a young age, Rinpoche founded the United Trungram Buddhist Foundation, first in Nepal, then expanding to several other countries; later he founded the sister organization the United Trungram Buddhist Fellowship (UTBF). These organizations share three goals: To preserve the wisdom teachings; to be a vehicle for educational activities; and to help those who most need it, with special emphasis on supporting disadvantaged children in Nepal and other underdeveloped countries. The foundation has been working to fulfill these goals.

In the wake of the 2015 earthquake that devastated Nepal, Rinpoche immediately organized aid for the villagers of Barpak VDC, Gorkha, the epicenter of the earthquake, providing food, medicine and temporary shelters. He then founded Buddhist Relief Services with the mission to bring relief to the victims of disaster.

Promoting peace and unity

Another of Rinpoche's projects, the World Center for Peace and Unity, at Buddha Shakyamuni's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, is intended as a locus for the growth of an all-encompassing non-sectarian spirit, and an example of 21st century Buddhism; it both contributes to a greener world and revives ancient art and culture. Inaugurated in 2011, it is located in a special development zone connected to the Lumbini UNESCO World Heritage Site. Unlike the other monasteries, it was specifically conceived to be a non-sectarian center for any Buddhist, or non-Buddhist, visitors to Lumbini, regardless of tradition or lineage, and especially for those who were not represented by the nations that built the other monasteries. Although it is the largest building inside the Lumbini United Nations Development Project Site, it is the most environmentally friendly, with cavity

walls, natural air circulation, and solar power. Rinpoche, who designed the building himself, feels this “green” approach highlights the importance of our interconnectedness, thus physically promoting peace and unity. The center’s design is based on the ancient stupa at the original Nalanda University. It includes elements of early Nepalese architecture, drawn from the style of the 7th-13th centuries, known as the premier era of Buddhist architecture

Educational initiatives

Putting great emphasis on education, Rinpoche often says, “Do you think Dharma is only for monks? No, it is for all who are in need. The right education can bring about nonviolence and peace.” Rinpoche's view on education is, “To foster a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood and tolerance towards all human beings, motivating one and all to dedicate themselves toward the creation of a peaceful, just, happy and meaningful life on earth.”

Rinpoche's main plan for solving the problems of poverty and lack of education in Nepal is through such education. A model secondary school, Trungram International Academy (TIA), has been in operation since 1995. TIA is a highly regarded private English Medium day and boarding school near Kathmandu, Nepal. Its more than 800 students span kindergarten through twelfth grade; many graduate with distinction every year.

In 2003, Rinpoche initiated work on the Trungram Gyalwa Foundation, which was formally established in 2015. The goal of the organization is to foster knowledge and wisdom through multiple channels, supporting the intellectual and emotional development of people the world over. Projects include traditional schools—expanding TIA to provide schools for Nepal’s earthquake victims; developing a Compassion curricula; preserving ancient teachings; and conducting scientific research into the tangible benefits of values such as compassion, care and tolerance.

Writing and lecturing

Rinpoche is a widely sought-after speaker, giving teachings and participating in conferences around the United States. A sample of engagements include:

- Aspen Art Museum (Aspen Colorado, 2023)
- POS Research Conference, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI, 2017)
- Facebook: Monks & Merchants, Three Moment Method® (Palo Alto, CA, 2013, 2015)
- International Association for Conflict Management, Annual Conference: Leading with Emotions: Mindfulness Practices Fuel Negotiation Success (Clearwater, FL, 2015)
- Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, Tenth Annual Summer Session on Contemplative Pedagogy: Applying the Three Moment Method in Education (2014)
- Mercury Insurance Company (Taiwan): Resilience in the Face of Stress (2014)
- Google: Mindfulness on the Mountain (Mountain View, CA, 2013)
- Contemplative Practices for a Technological Society (Virginia Tech, 2013)

He was a regular contributor to the *HuffPost* and has written for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.

Inventions

In 2015, Trungram Gylawa began collaborating on a computer-implemented system that monitors the user's current state of mind and provides biofeedback and auto-antidotes to help achieve a targeted state of mind. He and his co-inventor received patent approval in 2017. The initial use will be for meditators, but ultimately the system is applicable for all daily living.