

The Thirty-Third Menri Trizin, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima

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Lungtok Tenpai Nyima was born in 1929 in a town called Kyangtsang (skyang tshang) in Sharkhok (shar khog) in the southeast of Amdo, in present-day Sichuan. Sharkhok is also called Zungchu (zung chu), and now the region is known as Songpan. His father was called Yang Gyelo (yang rgyal lo) of the family Jongdong Tsang (ljong sdong tshang). His mother was named Barongza Tsomo (ba rong za mtsho mo), which means Tsomo, the Lady of Barong. The fifth of six children, he was given the name Lama Tar (bla ma thar).

At the age of seven he started to learn how to read and write Tibetan under Jatsang Sungtar (bya tshang srungs thar). At the age of thirteen he began to learn liturgies of the Bon tradition and under Tenpa Lhundrub (bstan pa lhun grub) he started to take up medical practice of the Tibetan medicine following in the footsteps of his eldest brother Yang Tsultrim (yang tshul khrims).

At the age of seventeen Sherab Tenpai Gyeltsen (shes rab bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan), a lama of Kyangtsang Monastery (skyang tshang dgon) also known as Phuntsok Dargye Ling (phun tshogs dar rgyas gling), granted him the vows of novice monk and gave him the name Sherab Namdak (shes rab rnam dag).

At the same time, he began to study philosophy and logic of the Bon tradition under Horwa Drungrampa Tendzin Lodro Gyatso (hor ba drung rams pa bstan 'dzin blo gros rgya mtsho, (1889-1975), the chief teacher at Kyangtsang Monastery.

At the age of twenty-five he took the geshe (dge bshes) degree. After completing his studies he was sent by his master Tendzin Lodro Gyatso to the palace of the king of Trokyab (khro skyabs), one of the eighteen principalities of Gyalrong (rgyal rong). This involved a long and perilous journey on foot. His task was to have a complete Bon Canon consisting of more than 200 volumes printed from woodblocks which were kept at the Trokyab Palace. With funds sent by his master, he had the Bon Canon printed and transported back to Kyangtsang Monastery, again on foot.

In 1955 at the age of twenty-seven, with the encouragement of his master, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima traveled to Lhasa. The following year he went to see Alak Nangsel Namkha Gyeltsen (a lags snang gsal nam mkha' rgyal mtshan) in Dza Adrak (rdza a drag) not far from Nakchukha (nag chu kha). In the same year he also went to Drepung ('bras spungs), the famous Geluk monastery near Lhasa to study Buddhist philosophy and logic which naturally helped him to widen his attitude towards other Tibetan religious traditions. While studying in Drepung he began to teach a young layman of a Lhasa noble family astrology. It was expected that other young laymen students would join his layman student. However, in March, 1959 his monastic life at Drepung was suddenly interrupted by the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

He fled to India via Nepal where as a refugee he worked with Samten Karmay (mkhar rme'u bsam gtan rgyal mtshan, b. 1936) to publish Bon texts, some of which he himself had brought on his back from Tibet. In search of more texts to be reprinted he also traveled from India to Dolpo in northwestern Nepal. It was in Dolpo that he met Professor David L. Snellgrove (1920-2016) who was doing his fieldwork there and was looking for Tibetans who might be interested to work with him at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Snellgrove had obtained grants for inviting Tibetan refugees from India from the "Special funds for Tibetan Studies" that the Rockefeller Foundation allocated to its Humanities program for the year 1960. David Snellgrove brought Lungtok Tenpai Nyima along with his colleagues Lobpon Tendzin Namdak (slob dpon bstan 'dzin rnam dag) and Samten Karmay to London in 1961.

In London Lungtok Tenpai Nyima began to take an interest in the life of Christian monks. He was attracted to the self-sufficient way in which Christian monks led lives in their monasteries, and appears to have been the first Tibetan monk to make a detailed observation of how Christian monks lived. He made visits to Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight, a Catholic Benedictine Monastery, and particularly admired the food products all made by the monks themselves on the monastery grounds. In addition he visited other Christian monasteries in Britain as well as those on Mount Athos in Greece. To crown his knowledge of Christian monastic life he sought and obtained a private audience with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican in 1964 and received a silver medal as a gift. He was the first Tibetan monk to meet with a pope.



His close contacts with the Christian monasteries in the West had a notable influence over how he later ran his own Bon monastery at Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India. In the same year, he returned to India to participate in establishing a school for the Tibetan refugee children in Moussorie with the help of the Ockenden Venture, a British charity organization, but soon was invited to work with Professor Per Kvaerne (b. 1945) in the University of Oslo. While he was in Oslo in 1968, unbeknown to him, he was elected by lot as the abbot of Menri Monastery (sman ri dgon) by the Bon refugee community in India. Thus he became the Thirty-third Menri Trizin, the holder of the Menri throne. He received the name Lungtok Tenpai Nyima as his enthronement name.

Menri Monastery was completely destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Beginning in 1970 Lungtok Tenpai Nyima built a new Menri Monastery in Dolanji, and within a decade later it had become a flourishing monastery with over 300 monk students coming from central Tibet, Amdo, Kham, Ngari, Dolpo, Mongolia and the exiled community in India. The Menri Trizin took to the role of administrator rather than educator. Monks follow the eight year course of philosophy and logic and the studies of what is known as the five sciences (rig gnas lnga) as well as courses in Tantric and

Dzogchen teachings that finally lead to obtaining the geshe degree, officially recognized by the Tibetan exile administration. As of 2017, 122 monks have graduated with geshe degrees from the monastery.

Lungtok Tenpai Nyima encouraged about thirty of these graduates to go back to Tibet when there was an opening at the beginning of 1980s, to help rebuild monasteries that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. This had a far reaching beneficial influence in restoring what was lost not just for the Bon people but for the Tibetan people as a whole. To enhance this initiative he undertook visits to Tibet in 1994 and 1996 to guide his students there on their mission.

Coexistence between Buddhist and Bon communities in Tibet has never been easy, with many instances of intolerance and discrimination over the centuries. In a decree issued in 1679, the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1617-1682) expressly recognized the Bon tradition as an official religion of Tibet, encouraging tolerance and understanding. In 1988 Lungtok Tenpai Nyima invited the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (ta la'i bla ma 14 bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, b. 1935) to Menri Monastery in Dolanji, and worked with him to promote goodwill between the two communities. The Dalai Lama visited again in 2007 for the opening of a new monastic library that housed both the Buddhist and Bon Canons as well as the manuscripts and printed texts collected and brought back from Tibet by Lungtok Tenpai Nyima on his visits to Tibet.

In 2001 Menri Trizin founded the nunnery Ratna Menling (rat+na sman gling) near Menri Monastery in India. Over fifty nuns currently follow a similar course in their studies to that of the monks.

In 2016, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima began to have health problems and made trips to the United States to have medical treatments. Despite a brief improvement, on September 14, 2017, the Thirty-third Menri Trizin, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima died at Menri Monastery surrounded by his close disciples. He was eighty nine years old.

In a tribute, in Tibetan, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama wrote: "In this moment when it is the most weak and helpless period in Tibet's political and religious history, we shared our joy and sorrow together as refugees. He generally carried on his activities that beneficially served the Tibetan political and religious interests. A few months ago when I was in Delhi he came to see me and confided to me his thoughts concerning many important public and private matters. I truly feel sad as his words now come back to my mind."

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