

# What is a Geshe?



Among the sects of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug school places the most rigorous emphasis on philosophical study, administering a scholastic degree in large monastic universities that can take two decades or more to complete: the “Geshe” degree. These universities are modeled after the Indian monastic institutions of the past, such as the historic Nalanda and Vikramasila universities, which gave rise to a tradition of philosophical rigor and debating prowess as the foundation for deeper realization that has defined the Gelug school for centuries.

Contributor Geshe Thubten Wangchen gives a brief introduction to this hallowed degree ...

The title “Geshe” is not just a name for a graduate. In the monastic system we believe that to graduate as a Geshe is to create the karmic imprints to take rebirth in Shambhala. “*Ge*” means “virtue” and “*she*” means “knowing.” Geshe thus means one who knows virtue, one who knows what should be practiced and what should be abandoned.

There are four levels of Geshe degrees categorized under the set criteria of a Gelugpa university – *Lharam*, *Tsokram*, *Rigram*, and *Lingse*. To qualify for the monastic degree of Geshe, the student must undergo the vast and extensive traditional monastic studies on the five major treatises of Buddhist philosophical texts [The Perfection of Wisdom (as elaborated upon by Maitreya in the *Abhisamayalamkara*); Chandrakirti’s commentary on Nagarjuna’s root text on Madhyamaka; Dharmakirti’s *Pramanavartika* – Compendium on Valid Cognition; Vasubhandu’s *Abhidharmakosha*; and *Vinaya* – studies in monastic discipline].

The specific commentaries on these five treatises which are studied are not fixed. Some read more and some read less. It depends on how enthusiastic is the student. It also depends on the university. To enable a clearer understanding

of the theories put forth in the treatises, the monasteries use *Yigchas*, mainly collections of chosen commentaries that are similar to textbooks.

According to the Sera Je monastic study system, a minimum of seventeen year’s study is required. The best students who are able to meet the required standards are then granted the privileged eligibility to study for the Lharam Geshe degree. Only the students who get into the first and second divisions are allowed to go for examination. For the Geshe Lharampa degree a further six years of study is needed prior to examination – a total of at least twenty-three years of rigorous study. When it is time for examinations, the three main Gelug monasteries of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden hold their exams together.

On completion of a Geshe degree, one can leave the monastery to take up tantric courses in either of the two tantric colleges of Gyuto or Gyume. It is compulsory for the Geshe Lharampas to study in Gyuto or Gyume for at least one year. They mainly study tantric philosophy and the varieties of the drawing of mandalas, and so forth. Non-Lharampa Geshees can also study in the same way.

Due to health problems or the region of the monastery in which they live, or for other varied reasons, some top stu-

dents cannot wait for many years to achieve the Geshe Lharampa, and so they go for the Tsokram, Rigram, or Lingse degree. Some Geshe become teachers in the monastery, or in Tibet, or work in the administration of the monastery. Some will teach in Dharma centers in foreign countries. Some will work in university administration, research, education faculties, libraries, etc.; others will go on retreat for three years or for the rest of their lives. Some will go to other universities and engage in further study, such as

in the area of science (physics, biology, astronomy, neurology, and so on).

In my opinion, the system that we had in Tibet was excellent, but I also believe that the system we have now is as rigorous as the old Tibetan one. However, because of the degeneration of these times, it is very difficult to achieve the levels of the past. ❁

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## Where are Geshe trained?

Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet, a vast architecture of monasteries dotted the Tibetan landscape, many of them large monastic universities that trained the scholar-monks in ways that are so critical to the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Those few monasteries that survived the Cultural Revolution continue today in Tibet in a much weakened form, unable politically and lacking the resources and teachers to offer the requisite levels of scholastic training. In exile, however, all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism have successfully recreated some of their monastic universities. The following institutions currently offer training which can lead to a Geshe degree.

### THE "THREE SEATS" OF THE GELUG SCHOOL

All three of the famed Gelug monasteries – Sera, Drepung, and Ganden – have been rebuilt in South India. Sera was rebuilt by two-hundred refugee monks from the "Old Sera" in Tibet, and the monastery has grown to over 5,000 monks. Drepung has more than 4,000 monks and Ganden currently supports around 2,500. All three universities offer a rigorous Geshe curriculum that closely echoes the training of pre-1959 Tibet.

### KOPAN MONASTERY

Kopan Monastery was founded in 1969 by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche outside Kathmandu, Nepal. Kopan offers preparatory training toward the Geshe degree as well as debate. Kopan has also begun a Lama Gyupa training in Tantric ritual and commentary. Serious students transition from Kopan to one of the three seats to complete their Geshe studies. Kopan also offers monthly meditation programs for western students and in July, 2007 will start FPMT's five-year Basic Program of philosophical study.

### THE CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF HIGHER TIBETAN STUDIES

In 1967, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies was established in Sarnath, India. The Central Institute is a fully-accredited Indian university offering B.A., M.A., and PH.D degrees to both lay and monastic students. All students have a double-major in 1. The great Indian Buddhist treatises, and 2. Either Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, Gelug, or Bonpo commentaries. Some students continue their training toward a Geshe degree at one of the three seats, and teaching opportunities are available for post-degree Geshe. Others continue to work as professors or research scholars at the Institute.

### THE INSTITUTE OF BUDDHIST DIALECTICS

In 1973, the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics was founded in Dharamsala by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is non-sectarian monastic institute which admits both monastic and lay students for free. In 2005, the Institute introduced a two-year Tantra study program on top of its 14-year Buddhist philosophy study program. Institute students can now receive a "Rime" or non-sectarian Geshe degree from the Institute, with four students graduating with a Geshe degree this year. This newly-created degree is an alternative to the traditional Geshe degree levels of *Lharam*, *Tsokram*, *Rigram*, and *Lingse*. It is based on the same five primary treatises and commentaries of the traditional Gelug curriculum which all Geshe study. In addition, what makes the degree non-sectarian is the study of texts by scholars from the other Tibetan schools. Past Western Geshe who studied at the Institute before completing their studies at one of the three seats include: Georges Dreyfus, Sherab Gyatso, and Graham Woodhouse.