

Ven. Roger Kunsang Speaking at the 2024 Geshe Conference

So good afternoon everyone. So I thought to start with just a little bit, sort of at the beginning of FPMT, which is with, of course with Rinpoche.

So Rinpoche was, of course, born in Nepal in the Solu Khumbu region. I think the earlier part of Rinpoche's life was very hard, he had a very poor family. Finally, after spending a few years in the center of Rolwaling, he went from there to Pagri in Tibet, and there Rinpoche joined Domo Geshe Rinpoche's monastery.

Then, of course, Rinpoche was still quite young, but he had some disagreement with his uncles, I think, because Rinpoche decided he wanted to go Lhasa to join Sera Monastery.

Then, soon after that, the Chinese came, they were coming close to the monastery, and then I think one night they had to just escape across the border, and Rinpoche ended up in Buxa. Buxa is where Rinpoche met Lama Yeshe. First he made a Dharma connection with Geshe Rabten, then Geshe Rabten, I think, introduced Rinpoche to Lama Yeshe. So that was the beginning of a very important relationship.

After some years in Buxa, Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe made it to Nepal. And I think once they were in Nepal for a little while, Lama Yeshe, from Boudha, kept looking up at this hill here. So eventually they were able to buy this area on top of the hill. The only thing on the hill, at that time, was this small building where the King's astrologer lived.

I'll jump a little bit ... then Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe started to connect with Westerners who were traveling. And Rinpoche was, as he describes it, getting an overwhelming feeling of teaching to these Westerners. So he asked Lama Yeshe if this would be okay to do, and Lama Yeshe was happy that Rinpoche did that.

So that was sort of the beginning of Rinpoche connecting with Westerners and teaching. And of course Lama Yeshe was also involved. So early courses quickly evolved into being one month long, and started to attract a lot Westerners who are traveling in Nepal and India. So soon there was something like 250, 270, 300 was probably maximum of people attending.

So Rinpoche was teaching two one month courses in a year in the beginning. And the conditions were very basic. The toilets were sort of holes in the ground, with a piece of wood across so you didn't fall in and you could stand, and sort of straw partitions. And then we would sleep in different houses around the hill, on straw, or whatever. It's very basic. In those days there was a lot of sort of what they called, hippies. A lot of them were well-educated hippies.

Often they didn't hesitate to debate Rinpoche, you know, in the middle of the course stand up and start firing questions from science, or whatever, at Rinpoche.

What started to happen is students then went back to their own countries and they realized that the Dharma really helped, it was helping them, and it answered a lot of questions that they'd had for a long time. And so then they grew the interest to start something in their own country.

So the first center that started was Chenrezig Institute in Queensland. There was one large piece of land, nearly 200 acres, and four students who had come to the Kopan Course, they offered that land for a center. So that was the first course at Chenrezig Institute. And, so Lama Yeshe's arrangement was that Lama Yeshe and Rinpoche can supply the teachers, and from the side of the students, they supply the facility.

So that actually started to form a very important relationship that made things really practical, because from the side of FPMT, we don't start centers, it comes from the side of, or the interest of the students in their own areas, country, city, etc; that's where the wish comes from. And then from the side of Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe comes the teacher.

And then there was a need for Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe to have an office, because, of course, then we had to develop policies and guidelines, and other things, so that this relationship could work well.

So over time the organization organically grew up to, I think, just prior to Covid, there was 160 centers in 40 countries. So that relationship became very important between Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe, and the office they had, and the local entity, like, for example, Chenrezig Institute or it could be Nalanda. That relationship became very complimentary and very important. Also it was very, very complicated because of the legal aspect. Different countries have different laws, and so that became a huge challenge sorting out how to work together in that kind of situation.

So the center was responsible for a certain area, financially, legally it was independent and responsible, and then it had its teacher whose responsibility was teaching.

In 1984, Lama Yeshe passed away. So then the responsibility for FPMT went on Rinpoche's shoulders, and Rinpoche didn't accept and for a period of time, had tried to give the organization away to his gurus. None of them accepted and then Rinpoche went to see His Holiness, and then His Holiness advised Rinpoche he must accept.

So then, I think Rinpoche's way of taking responsibility for the organization was, Rinpoche went on the road to teach. So I think that was Rinpoche's way of leading the organization through teaching, through inspiration, because of his practice, etc., etc. His leadership was in the form of writing, teaching, and inspiration. So for the next, next 36 years, I think Rinpoche was on the road non-stop. I mean literally he didn't stop, seven days a week, and it wasn't just the days, it was the nights also. So I never experienced anything like that before in my life.

And not only that, but I think Rinpoche never took his robes off. Every two weeks you had to push Rinpoche to take a shower; that was the time he took his robes off. So otherwise, he would be either teaching or sitting on his bed reading texts. He always had texts everywhere around him, the luggage was two or three suitcases full of texts.

We always had trouble at the airport when we had to weigh in suitcases. Rinpoche wouldn't give up one text, he would take off his robes first, but he refused to give up the texts. I remember we sometimes had to pay two, three thousand dollars excess baggage, but he still wouldn't give up the texts.

So that was Rinpoche's style, and I think that's how he led the organization. It was through his teachings, and through the inspiration that he gave to everyone.

So there was I, just go back in 1983 ... I just want to read a letter that Lama Yeshe wrote. This was Lama Yeshe in 1983. He said:

“Why have we established FPMT? Why are we establishing these facilities all over the world? I think we are clean clear as to our aim: we want to lead sentient beings to higher education. We are an Organization that gives people the chance to receive higher education.

“We offer people what we have: the combined knowledge of Buddha’s teachings, [repeats] the combined knowledge of Buddha’s teachings and the modern way of life. Our purpose is to share our experiences of this.

“We know that people are dissatisfied with worldly life, [repeats] dissatisfied with worldly life, with the education system and everything else; it is in the nature of our dualistic minds to be dissatisfied. So what we are trying to do is to help people discover their own totality, perfect satisfaction.

“Now the way we have evolved is not through you or me having said we want to do these things, but through a natural process of development. Our Organization has grown naturally, organically. It is not that “Lama Yeshe wanted to do it.” I’ve never said that I want centers all around the world. Rather, I came into contact with students who then wanted to do something, who expressed the wish to share their experience with others, and who then put together groups in various countries to share and grow with others.

“Personally, I think that’s fine. We should work for that. We are human beings, Buddhism helps us grow. It is logical that we should work together to facilitate this kind of education. And it is not only us lamas who are working for this. Actually, it is you students who are the instrument in creating the facilities for Dharma to exist in the Western world.

“Of course, it’s true, teachers help, but the most important thing is for the students to be well educated. That is why we exist.

“When we started establishing centers there was no overall plan, they just popped up randomly all over the world like mushrooms, because of the evolutionary process I’ve just mentioned and the cooperative conditions. Now that all the centers do exist, we have to facilitate their development in a constructive, clean-clear way. We have to develop properly both internally and in accordance with our 20th century environment.”

Lama Yeshe wrote that in 1983, from Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa.

The other thing that happened, I think, after some time, Rinpoche being on the road and teaching, requests started to come to him to help in the monasteries, etc. like that.

So that became, actually, a huge amount of work, starting with the Sera Je Food Fund. Rinpoche, In 1991 the abbot at that time made the suggestion to Rinpoche because, I think, it was the time Lama Ösel was going to enter the monastery, and this would be a good thing to do, to offer food.

So then gradually Rinpoche was able to cover the costs of all the food for all the monks. And then, on the side, then we started a fund for Sera Je Food, because the idea was that if we could raise enough money, then from the interest on the money invested in South India. In 2017 we reached 5.3 million dollars, and that was enough.

So that was invested completely under Sera Je Food Management. And then the main agreement was that the principle couldn't be touched. So the interest should always be enough for the food.

There's a lot of other projects that Rinpoche helped with, or sponsored. At Tashi Lungpo, a debate court, quite a few things.

And Rinpoche's attitude towards money was that he could not hold onto it. As soon as Rinpoche got money, he would give it away. And several times, many times we actually went into debt because Rinpoche gave away more money than he had. Rinpoche felt it was an awful thing to have money when there was so much need.

And then also, there are other kinds of projects that Rinpoche had, that still exist. Rinpoche got quite involved in supporting the elderly Tibetan communities in South India, and the schools for the young kids, especially in Nepal. So there were many things, and with Rinpoche passing, we still have those commitments we have to continue with. So that's one of the responsibilities the Board has.

In 2006, His Holiness said, "Rinpoche follows my guidance sincerely, very extensively, and with 100% trust. He has unwavering faith and pure samaya. Not only faith and trust, but whatever I instruct, Zopa Rinpoche has the capability to accomplish. So whatever dedications Lama Zopa Rinpoche makes, I also pray to accomplish this, and you should do the same."

And, of course, I think Rinpoche's main purpose was, in whatever way he could, he wanted to support and serve His Holiness. So it was one of the main purposes for Rinpoche in helping the monasteries, because Rinpoche felt it was one of His Holiness's wishes.

So everybody has heard about Maitreya, right? Maitreya Project. So, a few years back, Rinpoche was asked about the land in Bodhgaya. It was explained to him by His Holiness's secretaries that the land could be a good place to have, to be able to fulfill His Holiness's wishes, some of the projects His Holiness has the land could be used for. The conversation was very easy going, and Rinpoche said, "Of course, I am very happy to offer the land to His Holiness."

At that time, our lawyer had valued the land at 40 million US dollars. So it just went like that so quickly, and Rinpoche, I've never seen Rinpoche so happy [laughs]. Rinpoche was so pleased that, you know, that he could do something so directly for His Holiness.

So now this year they started construction on the property, and just recently when we were in Bodhgaya they showed me around, and where the plan for the Maitreya statue will be.

So we also have the Maitreya Project in Kushinagar. I think the local U.P Government in 2002, their Chief Minister wanted very much to have this project on the land. So they wrote on three different occasions to request His Holiness to talk with Rinpoche about doing the project in Kushinagar. So then, in the end, Rinpoche, of course, was happy to do that (at His Holiness's request).

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Transcribed by Ven. Thubten Munsel and edited lightly by FPMT International Office.*