



LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE WITH THE STAFF OF WISDOM PUBLICATIONS. DIRECTOR DANIEL AITKEN (IN BLACK SHIRT) TO RINPOCHE'S LEFT, FORMER DIRECTOR TIM MCNEILL TO RINPOCHE'S RIGHT.

The Beginning of THE FUTURE FOR DHARMA PUBLISHING: Daniel Aitken Talks about the Wisdom Experience

For more than thirty years, Wisdom Publications has been a top publisher of Dharma books. The nonprofit publishing house, based in Boston, US, grew out of Lama Yeshe's vision for "publications of wisdom culture" and is an affiliated project of FPMT.

Tim McNeill, a long-time student of FPMT founders Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, directed Wisdom's growth for many years. In 2016, Tim passed Wisdom's leadership on to Daniel Aitken, who had joined Wisdom in 2014 as the sales and marketing director. At that time Tim said, "Daniel's combination of academic training in marketing, years of senior level business management experience coupled with the highest level of scholarship in Buddhist philosophy makes for a precious rare find."

In November 2019, *Mandala* editor Carina Rumrill interviewed Daniel Aitken about his path to his current position as CEO and publisher at Wisdom Publications and about new developments there, including the recent launch of the ground breaking Wisdom Experience initiative.

What was the evolution for you becoming CEO and publisher at Wisdom?

Daniel Aitken: I became the publisher at Wisdom Publications in 2016. I took the helm from Tim McNeill, who had spent the last thirty years building Wisdom into the premier nonprofit Buddhist publishing house that we know and love today.

Prior to Wisdom, I worked in executive-level roles for multinational brands such as Canon and Westpac. I would regularly race from late afternoon business meetings to Geshe Ngawang Samten's classes at Vajrayana Institute, in Sydney, Australia, and I was always searching for the best way to balance my lifelong passion for practicing the Dharma with a successful career. This search set me on track to undertake a PhD in

Buddhist philosophy. While I was studying, I started doing some editing for Wisdom and upon completing my PhD, I joined Wisdom full time to lead the marketing department. This led to my promotion to CEO and publisher. Now I am in the fortunate situation that the two streams of my career and my passion for the Dharma are smoothly flowing together.

You have introduced many innovations at Wisdom already: the podcast, online courses, the *Wisdom Journal*, and, of course, the new online subscription platform called “Wisdom Experience.” What is the overall vision for Wisdom’s publishing future?

My vision for Wisdom is that I see it as a unique blend of tradition and forward-thinking innovation that brings Dharma-related content to people who wish to live inspired lives. I remember the books from Wisdom that inspired me on my Dharma path, and I want to ensure that these moments of inspiration are available to people for many years to come.

Even just ten years ago, if you were to ask most people how they first encountered the Dharma, probably ninety percent of people would answer that they were introduced to Buddhism through a book. Today, if you ask the same question, you will discover that people often first encounter Buddhism through online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, etc.

So even though Wisdom’s mission has not changed, there is a call for Wisdom’s content to be expressed across a variety of media types. This is why we have been creating audio and video content in support of our book-publishing program.

I think that Wisdom has an important role to play in this space: guiding people to authentic resources. In terms of Dharma, Facebook and YouTube are like the Wild West—there are all kinds

translations and other resources that support them as they continue their Buddhist journey.

What is the state of Dharma publishing these days? Where do you see it going?

There are different kinds of Dharma publishing, from the small Dharma centers that produce newsletters on up to big trade publishers like Simon & Schuster and Penguin Random House that publish bestselling Buddhist books. I’m seeing that the current conditions are making it quite difficult for smaller organizations to continue their publishing programs. However, for Wisdom, the future of Dharma publishing looks bright. Since Wisdom Publications is distributed by Simon & Schuster, we’re able to produce trade books on Buddhism that reach a wide audience, which then helps us to fund the more traditionally focused Buddhist books that have a smaller audience. This arrangement will continue to ensure a promising future for Dharma publishing at Wisdom.

I also see some exciting new opportunities for Dharma publishing in the future. The publishing industry, in general, has experienced a lot of disruption over the past ten years. Technological advances are not slowing down, and readers’ expectations are continuing to develop. This creates challenges for the larger trade publishing houses that are set in their ways. However, I think that herein lies an opportunity for savvy independent publishers that have expertise in a specific area and also have an enthusiastic niche audience. This specific type of independent publisher, of which Wisdom is one, can provide a very unique and rich online experience, which will allow them to reclaim their audiences from the dominant social media platforms such as Facebook and Amazon—disrupting the disruptors, if you like. You can get a sense of what I’m

You can get a sense of what I’m talking about with our new platform, wisdomexperience.org, where we have plans to make our nearly five hundred books available to read online and to further enhance them with multimedia content.

of messages out there! Wisdom, which already has an unquestioned reputation among the variety of Buddhist traditions, can provide a place where Buddhists can reliably find authoritative online content.

Of course, producing books will always be at the heart of what we do. We will continue to provide the books that inspire people on their Buddhist path and publish the important

talking about with our new platform, wisdomexperience.org, where we have plans to make our nearly five hundred books available to read online and to further enhance them with multimedia content. I believe this is the beginning of the future for Dharma publishing.

In what way do you see Wisdom Publications as providing a service to not only the FPMT community, but to Buddhists, or those interested in Buddhist concepts, worldwide?

I am told that His Holiness the Dalai Lama encouraged Wisdom to use its expertise to help publish books from all of the Buddhist traditions. And, indeed, over the years Wisdom has become important to, and treasured by, many different Buddhist communities. For example, we publish Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations of the Pali Canon, which are generally considered to be the gold standard by the Theravada community. And in our *Classics of Indian Buddhism* series, we publish a number of award-winning translations of Sanskrit texts that are important not only within a variety of practice communities but also in the academic context. We also publish quite a few translations of important texts and commentaries from the Zen traditions.

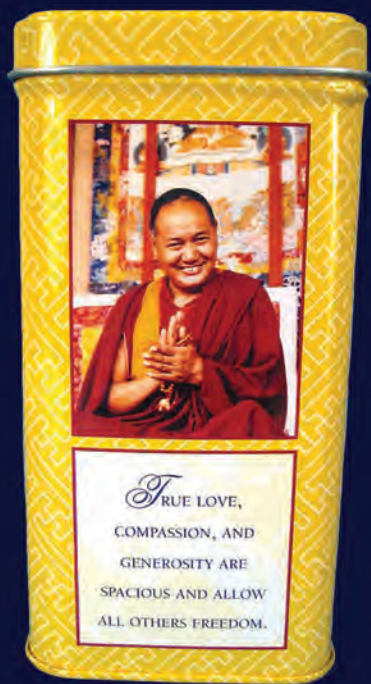
Find books, podcasts, videos, and much more from Wisdom Publications, including the new online subscription platform Wisdom Experience, by visiting WisdomExperience.org.

And we publish across all the traditions in the larger Tibetan Buddhist world; this is perhaps best highlighted by the *Library of Tibetan Classics* series, which we publish with Geshe Thupten Jinpa, and is helping to preserve the Tibetan literary tradition.

What can FPMT students look forward to coming from Wisdom in the coming years?

Wisdom, of course, has a special commitment to publish the teachings of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. We are working with the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive and FPMT Education Services to publish high-quality books from Lama Yeshe and Rinpoche that we can make accessible to a wider audience and that also complement their own publishing programs. In 2020, we are honored to be publishing two books from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, one on the six perfections and another on the perfection of patience. We are hoping that these books will be the start of a new series that focuses on Lama Yeshe's and Rinpoche's teachings; we intend to bring out two amazing new titles in this series each year.

The International Merit Box Project



It's time to send in your Merit Box offerings!

Merit Box collection season ends March 31st, 2020

All Merit Box donations received by March 31st, 2020 will be used for grants this year for local FPMT communities and projects that support the FPMT mission around the world.

For 18 years, the Merit Box Project has disbursed nearly 300 grants to restore Dharma centers, build stupas and statues, translate texts, support retreats, and more. Your Merit Box offerings make a huge difference!



fpmt.org/projects/fpmt/merit-box/