

# A Remarkable Feat by Extraordinary Men: The Western Geshe in Two Acts

Though access to the Geshe studies curriculum has opened up to Westerners in the last few decades, it is still a rare and courageous breed who penetrates the womb of Tibetan culture to undertake this intense course of philosophical study and debate.

In Act I, renowned scholar Geshe Georges Dreyfus, the first Westerner to receive a Geshe degree (and the only one thus far to receive the highest level of Geshe Lharampa), relates his first experience of Tibetan scholastic debate in an excerpt from his book, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*. For Act II, Ven. Jampa Kaldan writes to us from the Sera IMI House, a residential facility for Western monks undertaking Geshe studies at Sera Je Monastery.

And what of Act III? That is up to you. The stage is set for the Western Geshe to become more than a remarkable anomaly: It may change the face of Tibetan Buddhist teaching in the West.

## ACT I: The Beginnings of a Western Geshe

*By Georges Dreyfus*

My first encounter with Tibetan debates occurred during my stay at Nam-gyel in the spring of 1972, when monks from the three seats gathered in Dharamsala for a special session of debate. Because my Tibetan was then still rather poor and my knowledge of the tradition even more limited, I understood none of the debates. Nevertheless, I was fascinated by these dialectical encounters, which seemed so lively. I enjoyed their intensity and the dramatic atmosphere that surrounded them, an atmosphere that was greatly enhanced by physical gestures and sometimes playful verbal exchanges. I was also struck by the good humor of these spirited clashes. I remember watching the proceedings for hours, trying unsuccessfully to figure out what was being said. My experience was not unlike that of untrained Tibetans, monks and laity alike, who enjoy debate as a kind of spectacle. They may get a sense – at times misleading – of who is winning and who is losing, but they do not understand the topics debated.

I had a more intimate contact with debate in the late fall of 1972 when I began the preliminary study of debate with Lati Rinpoche together with my French friend. We started with the rudiments of logic and the procedures of debate, which Rinpoche taught from Pur-bu-jok's *Collected Topics*. At first, he did not insist on our taking part in debate, and

we resisted his suggestions that we do so. Right away, we responded differently to what was being taught. I remember trying to help my friend understand, but he had little interest in such intellectual gymnastics. "It's horrible, it's mathematics all over again," he would complain. That was the reason I liked it so much: it involved the same kind of logical manipulation as algebra. After a few weeks, my friend dropped out, leaving me to continue alone on a road that would turn into something quite different than what I was expecting.

When Rinpoche saw that I was becoming engaged by the topic, he decided it was time to see whether there was any hope for me. "Beginning tonight, you will attend the debates of the Nam-gyel monastery. What do you think you are doing? There is no knowing the great texts without debating," he declared, in typical Gelug fashion. I was annoyed, for I found the prospect of debating intimidating. How could I, who had but a limited command of Tibetan, stand on my own against all those trained monks speaking in their mother tongue? How could I avoid making a total fool of myself? Nevertheless, Rinpoche insisted and I had to give in. He was my teacher, and without some compelling reason I could not disobey him. That same evening, I went to the debating courtyard, which is where debates are held



in Tibetan monasteries. I felt rather lonely and miserable. The November weather was cold, and it was dark (at Namgyel, debates took place around dusk). I was invited to sit down with other students whom by then I knew well.

Obviously, I began with great difficulty. I had trouble understanding some of the students, who quoted passages and hurled what seemed complex arguments at each other at top speed. Such exchanges were difficult for anybody to follow, but for me, whose command of the language was minimal, comprehension was sometimes impossible. I remember a particularly humiliating experience, when I had been debating for a few months. I was able to follow simple debates and I had started to participate, playing a more or less normal role. My opponent that day was a young reincarnated lama, who had a real gift for speed recitation. He started his debate, hurling a few sentences at me rather casually. I had no idea what he was saying; I could not even recognize the language he spoke! I told him I had not understood what he had said and asked him to repeat it. The teacher was right behind me and told him to slow down. The young tulku asked his question again; he must have spoken more slowly, but to me his words seemed as fast and as incomprehensible as the first time. By then I knew I was in trouble. I asked him in a rather shaken voice to try to be

really patient. "I am a foreigner, can you speak a bit slowly?" I stammered out, probably sounding like a complete idiot. His third attempt came out as inscrutable as the first. Completely tongue-tied, I could not say anything. The young lama was utterly disgusted and walked away. The teacher was laughing and I was left alone, utterly crushed and dejected in my humiliation. Fortunately, the end of the debates came soon and I quickly retreated, protected by the darkness of the night. Needless to say, my participation was rather limited for the next few days! Yet I persevered and was lucky enough never to experience a similar encounter. ❁

*Excerpt from The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: the Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk by Georges Dreyfus, (c) 2003 The Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press.*

*Georges Dreyfus was the first Westerner to receive the title of Geshe after spending fifteen years studying in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. He then entered the University of Virginia where he received his Ph.D. in the History of Religions program. He is currently Professor of Religion of the Department of Religion at Williams College. His publications include Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti and his Tibetan Interpreters (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), The Svatantrika-Prasangika Distinction (Co-edited with Sara McClintock, Boston: Wisdom, 2003), and The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: the Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), as well as many articles on various aspects of Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan culture.*

## ACT II: A Home Away from Home

By Ven. Jampa Kaldan

In the late 1990s, a group of Western monks, who were undertaking the Geshe Studies Program at Sera Je Monastery, thought it may be beneficial to build a residential facility at the monastery for Western monks. After some discussions, FPMT Spiritual Director Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised that this should be done, and the construction of a cloister-style building was begun.

Completed in early 2002, with fourteen individual rooms, a puja room, library, teacher's room, office, kitchen, and bathrooms, it was given the name *Shedrup Zungdrel Ling*, commonly referred to as Sera IMI House. The House also serves as part of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), the Sangha branch of the FPMT.

The tradition at Sera and other monasteries is for monks from the different areas in Tibet to live together in their own house-groups, thus providing a home away from home. In accordance with this, for example, the Nepalese

IMI monks have a separate house-group at Sera called Kopan House. The purpose of this project, therefore, was to provide good quality accommodation and a supportive community for Western, and other non-Himalayan monks, modeled on the lines of these residential house-groups. The key aim was to make it more feasible for Western monks to be able to come and live long-term at Sera, and to be able to participate in the traditional eighteen-year program of studies leading to the Geshe degree.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche named the project *Shedrup Zungdrel Ling*, which means "sanctuary for the unification of teaching and accomplishment." This title actually describes beautifully the function of Sera Monastery in general: that is, a place to focus on the intensive study of the teachings of Buddhism within the context of being a monastic community devoted to the practice and inner realization of these teachings.





Lama Zopa Rinpoche visits Sera IMI House.



A view of the house from above.

The normal procedure for the newly-arrived Westerner is to enter the monastery as a Sera monk and then spend the first year or two studying colloquial and textual Tibetan in private study. This is necessary because all of the Geshe studies are undertaken in Tibetan language. During this time, he is able to participate in half of the life of the monastery, namely, the various pujas, the fortnightly Confession ceremony, and the two annual group retreats which all of the monks do together in the Sera Je temple.

Having gained some familiarity with Tibetan language he can enter the monastery debating class, around which the Geshe Studies Program is built. Each year, two to three hundred Tibetan monks newly arrived from Tibet will comprise the new class for that year, and the new Western monk will join in and become one of the class members. Over the years, the class gradually proceeds through a highly-structured program of study, which, as well as the daily debating class, includes lectures, private study, and memorization of the texts being studied.

The course covers the whole range of Buddhist teachings and philosophy based on various root texts and commentaries composed by both Indian and Tibetan masters. These texts explain the Buddha's thought as set out in the Sutras, and thus give the background to, and provide detailed explanations of, all of the stages of the path to enlightenment. All of this is only presented in a brief summarized fashion in the well-known *Lam-Rim / Graduated Path* texts. Both the content and the debate-based style of this educational process follow the tradition of the ancient Indian monastic university of Nalanda.

In effect, participating in the life and the study of the monastery is like doing a very long-term group retreat, and it is said that the best preliminary practice that one can do for serious meditation is this program. Of course, it is also the best preparation for the teaching and translation of the Dharma. Thus, there is great good fortune in being able to participate in this work along with thousands of Sangha members, and this is especially so because there are many senior Geshes and high lamas living at Sera. Their presence is the living example of the whole point of all of this effort, namely the putting into practice, and the mastery of, all of the teachings of sutra and tantra through the process of study, reflection, and meditation.

Over the last thirty years there has been a steady trickle of Westerners coming to participate in this process, including several who completed most of the Geshe studies and one who graduated as a Geshe at Sera Je. Of the five Western monks currently living at Sera IMI House, the most senior has just finished the tenth year of the Geshe Studies Program, and the newest is doing preparatory study of Tibetan language.

As monks and nuns traditionally live in separate institutions, nuns do not do the Geshe studies at Sera; however, similar programs of studies are being undertaken at nunneries at Mungod in southern India, Dharamsala in the north, and at Kopan monastery in Nepal. ☸

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