

A Room Full of Role Models:

The Geshe Conference in Sarnath



Twenty-seven geshe convened in a holy place of pilgrimage for a recent FPMT Geshe Conference. Center Services Director Claire Isitt of the International Office helped to organize the important event. She reports ...

It had been five years

since FPMT's resident geshe had assembled in Holland to address key issues for them within FPMT, and the time was ripe for another meeting. The decision was made to meet in Sarnath, India, in December 2006, the site of the Buddha's first teachings as well as the location where the geshe were offering a long-life puja to His Holiness the Dalai Lama following three days of his teachings. The teaching, which was co-sponsored by FPMT, drew over 7,000 participants.

Just prior to the Geshe Conference, His Holiness kindly gave a private audience for the FPMT geshe, where he encouraged the geshe to keep up their good work:

"As I mentioned earlier over there [*in the teaching tent*], so far you have all worked hard and I thank you for that. In every part of the world you can see Lama Zopa's Dharma centers and that is a huge achievement. Everywhere there are difficulties but again I am requesting everyone to work hard All of you are Lama Zopa's 'subjects' [Tib: *aptuk*]; since you are Lama Zopa's subjects, indirectly you also become my subjects."

The twenty-seven geshe who assembled the next day for the three-day conference came from FPMT centers around the world where they serve as resident teachers. Conference organizers were particularly happy to host very senior geshe such as Geshe Jampa Gyatso from Istituto Lama Tsong Khapa in Italy; Geshe Doga from Tara Institute in Australia; Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen from Maitreya Instituut in the Netherlands; and Khenrinpoche Lama Lhundrup, the Abbot of Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, the historic FPMT monastery which is the cradle of the FPMT organization today.

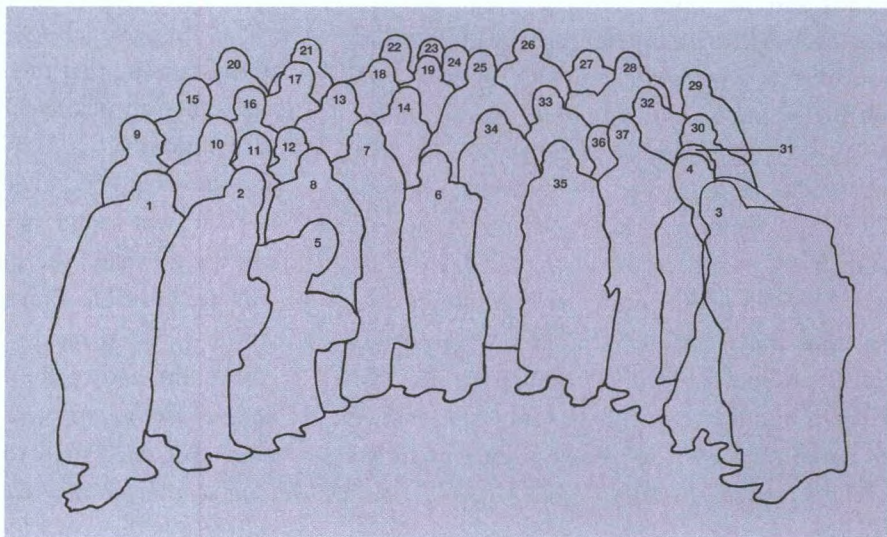
The conference's primary purpose was to consider key issues affecting the geshe's

role as resident teachers, to discuss new ideas, and to make recommendations for the future; it additionally served as an opportunity for old friends to catch up and share the latest news. The 2007 conference principally addressed final exams for the FPMT Basic Program, a five-year certificate course in Buddhist studies; pre-ordination procedures; improving conditions for resident geshe; FPMT policy; and an update on Universal Compassion for Wisdom and Peace (UCWP), an organization previously known as "Essential Education."

Successes of the conference included the formation of a Basic Program Exam Committee to comprise four FPMT geshe; their role is to select questions for the final comprehensive exam. Taking into account the advice of spiritual director Lama Zopa Rinpoche that the exam will assist students in reviewing the material covered during the five-year course, all of the geshe teaching the Basic Program at their centers agreed to host this final exam.

The issue of pre-ordination procedures ripened into a long and fruitful discussion. The geshe considered how best to ensure that those who ordained were sincerely ready and able to take on the

FPMT Geshe conference attendees (see diagram): 1 – 4: Ritual attendants. 5. Ven. Jinpa (Rinpoche's attendant). 6. Geshe Doga. 7. Geshe Lamsang. 8. Geshe Pema Tsering. 9. Geshe Sopa. 10. Geshe Gyurme. 11. Geshe Chonyi. 12. Geshe Thubten Choden. 13. Geshe Tenzin Dorje. 14. Khenrinpoche Lama Lhundrup. 15. Geshe Losang Zopa. 16. Geshe Konchog Tsering. 17. Geshe Ngawang Zopa. 18. Geshe Choekly. 19. Geshe Losang Sherap. 20. Ven. Pemba. 21. Geshe Tashi Tsering. 22. Geshe Ngawang Samden. 23. Ven. Tenpa Choden. 24. Geshe Thubten Wangchen. 25. His Holiness the Dalai Lama. 26. Geshe Tengkyong. 27. Geshe Tashi Dondup. 28. Geshe Lozang Zopa. 29. Ven. Khedup. 30. Geshe Tsulga. 31. Ven. Michael Losang Yeshe. 32. Geshe Thubten Sherab. 33. Geshe Tashi Tsering. 34. Lama Zopa Rinpoche. 35. Geshe Jampa Gyatso. 36. Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen. 37. Geshe Deyang. Note: Some conference attendees are not pictured and several FPMT resident geshe could not attend the conference.



What Does a Geshe Do for a Center?

Among the 147 centers and study groups that FPMT has established around the world, only 36 are fortunate enough to host a resident teacher. The rest have the opportunity to invite touring teachers to visit, and as they develop further through the use of FPMT programs and materials they aim to reach a stage where they feel ready to grow further by requesting Rinpoche to appoint a resident teacher for their center.

Among those centers that are blessed with a resident teacher are 30 that benefit from that teacher being a qualified Tibetan geshe. A degree hard-won in the Tibetan monastic universities by scholar-monks, the title represents not only more than twenty years of rigorous study, but just as many years spent debating philosophical material in monastery courtyards, pushed to deeply examine the truths set forth by the great Buddhist masters.

An FPMT geshe is a qualified geshe requested by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to serve in one of his centers, when that center has a stable, committed community that can support a residence and salary for the geshe, and that is ready to go deeper into Buddhist philosophy and practice. The geshe's responsibilities at the center are far-ranging. He is there to teach, to provide spiritual guidance, to inspire each student on their path to enlightenment, and is an object of merit as he is ordained. He may be faced with a student who walks through the door unaware of even the basics of Buddhism, as well as the veteran student who has been practicing for thirty years and seeks in-depth study and initiation. He becomes the heart of a center on Rinpoche's behalf, an invaluable illustration of the need for Tibetan Buddhist students to study and practice in depth in order to develop into qualified teachers for the future.

commitments of ordination. At the same time, it was discussed that such efforts should not unnecessarily block students from the merit of taking ordination. Rinpoche and the geshes concluded their discussion with recommendations for the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), an organization which aims to support the community of non-Tibetan FPMT monks and nuns. They also generally agreed that FPMT should follow the guidelines of the Private Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for those seeking ordination from His Holiness.

Ven. Roger Kunsang, CEO of FPMT, attended the conference as well as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and offered a helpful background to the organization as it has developed, including some of the challenges which have been and need to be overcome. The Geshe Conference also provided an opportunity to introduce the new FPMT Geshe Coordinator, Ven. Pemba Sherpa, a member of the board of FPMT, Inc. and co-director and resident teacher of Cham Tse Ling center in Hong Kong.

Throughout the conference, Lama Zopa Rinpoche offered advice:

"If geshes will learn the language of the country that will really help communication. Of course, the main thing is to expound on the Dharma teachings, but at the same time it is extremely important to have direct communication in the students' own language ... No matter how excellent the interpreter is, to pass the message across exactly as it is intended is extremely difficult. If you know the language, like Spanish for example, then you can benefit many other countries where that language is spoken, not only Spain."

All agreed that these meetings should be held more regularly, ideally every two years, as there never seems to be enough time for discussion. Nevertheless, the geshes commented that they were inspired by the meeting and were re-invigorated in their roles as resident teachers.

On a personal note, the input from the geshes and the level of understanding that their comments and suggestions displayed about the reality of making Dharma centers beneficial and functional was very impressive and inspiring. Seeing twenty-seven geshes all together, and knowing how much each one individually is valued and beloved in their own center, gave an enormous sense of the weight of good fortune we share; the sheer caliber of wisdom and great role models we have available – and which FPMT centers make available to the world – is amazing.

At the end of the last session, Khenrinpoche Lama Lhundrup and Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen, on behalf of all the geshes and with their eyes filled with tears, requested Lama Zopa Rinpoche to live long so that he may continue to carry on the noble work that was started together with FPMT's founder, the late Lama Yeshe. ☸