

The benefits of wearing robes

A conversation with Lama Zopa Rinpoche





Not long after her ordination, Ven. Lobsang Kalden was stopped in the aisle of a grocery store in Arizona by a young girl, who was probably no more than sixteen years of age. "I really like your outfit," the girl said. "It reminds me of Gandhi; it's so peaceful."

When Ven. Lobsang mentioned this to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, he said: "That is great. I am very happy to hear that. You should know that is your benefit to the world. Just to be sangha, that is the benefit of wearing the robes."

Ven. Lobsang, who was ordained in April 2006 by Lama Lhundrup, Abbott of Kopan Monastery in Nepal, is the former Barbara Oquest, retired clinical psychologist. She was married with a new house, two cats, and a new car, living the American Dream.

"I said to Rinpoche, some time in November 2005, that if I weren't so old (68) and married I would like to be ordained. He said that that didn't matter – and the rest, as they say, is history."

Ven. Lobsang Kalden is now in Tucson, Arizona, following Rinpoche's advice and establishing the Manjushri Wisdom Study Group.

Earlier this year she visited Lama Zopa Rinpoche at his California residence, Kachoe Dechen Ling. Her conversation with her guru continues:

Sangha out
and about on
the streets of
New York.

Lama Zopa: “If you were sangha but you didn’t wear robes, then people would not know [that you were ordained], but with robes on there is no question. That is how the robes have such incredible benefit for the mind. It is planting the seed for enlightenment when people show respect to your wearing of the robes, or to the robes themselves: This is planting the seed of liberation, and is a way of benefiting sentient beings.

“Some people find they are attracted to the robes, even having the wish to be like that. And if they can’t become sangha in this life, just thinking about it is purification. By generating the wish even one time, they create karma so that in their next life they become sangha.

“What other comments have you had wearing your robes?”

Ven. Lobsang Kalden: “People do ask me questions. One man came up to me in a coffee shop and said, very respectfully, ‘May I ask you a question?’ and I said, ‘Yes, but I may not know the answer.’ The question was: ‘What does Rinpoche¹ mean!’

“You never know what people are going to say when they approach you. That was his way of starting a conversation, and then he went into a dissertation on how he has asked other people questions and although they think they know the answer, they usually don’t. Then he says he meets people who say they don’t know anything – and they know a lot. Those are the ones who really know something, he believes.

“He stood there talking for a long time, and finally I said, ‘Please have a seat.’ ‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘I would never presume to be so disrespectful as to sit before you invite me.’

“One day I was at a gas station pumping gas. The woman in the car in front of me said, ‘What religion are you?’ I said ‘Buddhist,’ and she said, ‘That’s what I thought.’ She went on pumping gas, and then turned to me and said, ‘Do you like your religion?’

Lama Zopa: “That’s a very important question because of what’s happening in the world. Because of some religions, so many people die; they harm others in the name of religion.”

Ven. Lobsang Kalden: “I answered her by saying, ‘Yes, I love it,’ and then she said, ‘I’m glad, because I hate mine.’ She really said that! When she was ready to leave, she said, ‘Have a nice day.’ I think what she was trying to do was to say thank you for something.”

Lama Zopa: “That’s great! When you go out you are bringing great peace. You should be so happy, you should be rejoicing all the time.”

Ven. Lobsang Kalden: “I do, I do. You probably already know this, but before I go out I try to be mindful enough to always say, ‘May the minds of all those who see these robes be blessed until they reach total enlightenment.’”

Lama Zopa: “It is very good to motivate in this way. What you should pray as a motivation or also as a dedication, is this:

May any of the three times merit collected by me, collected by others, may anyone who sees me, touches me, remembers me, who thinks about me, talks about me, who sees my pictures, may all their negative karma get purified, may they never ever get reborn in the lower realms – immediately.

May they find faith in refuge and karma, refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and karma, then actualize bodhichitta, vast like the sky. After they have actualized bodhichitta, may all their wishes be successful according to the Dharma. (It is very important that when you make this prayer it is for *after* they have achieved bodhichitta, otherwise maybe somebody has the wish to harm the world, and then you are creating the wish for their success. So you have to add ‘according to the Dharma,’ and that makes it very clear. Otherwise you could be praying for someone to harm another, or even for someone to commit suicide, some people want to die.)

“So continue with:

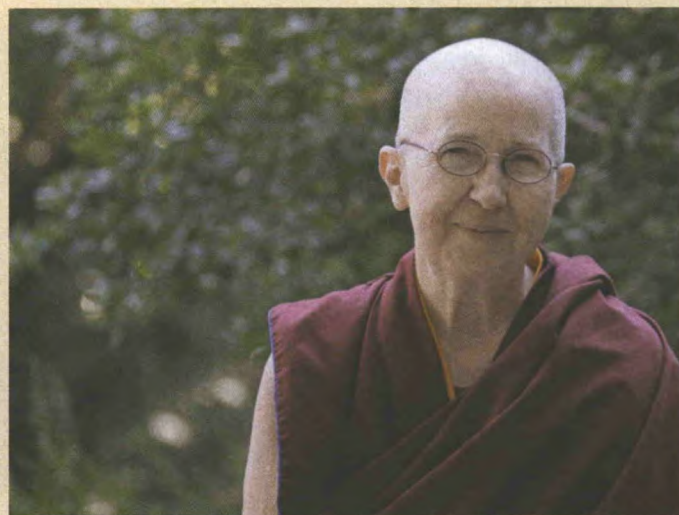
May they never be born in the lower realms, may their sicknesses immediately get healed as well as any sufferings of the body and mind, may they be free from spirit harm. May they achieve the path to enlightenment by quickly achieving bodhichitta, and especially may they be liberated from their negative karma and actualize Lama Tsongkhapa’s teachings.

“This is the way to pray. And when people ask you what the robes mean, it is good to have prepared the answer.

“A few years ago, Ven. Roger Munro (Lhundup Samten) and Ven. Paula Chichester (Lhundup Nyingje) had just taken ordination. Wherever they went people always wanted to talk to them, and many times they were asked what the robes meant. I thought it would be good for ordained people to answer in the same way.”

¹ Rinpoche: A Tibetan word meaning “precious one,” bestowed upon one who is recognized as the reincarnation of a great teacher, or who has achieved remarkable accomplishments in this life.

'I shave my head and wear robes, which is the easy way to practice Buddhism. The meaning behind this is to take freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth and from the cause of all afflictive emotions, such as ignorance and attachment, which bring all the pain and confusion in this life.'



Ven. Lobsang Kalden

Ven. Lhundup Nyingje (Paula Chichester) tells the story of how that came about: "One day some sangha members, including Ven. Lhundup Samten (Roger Munro) and myself, were sharing stories with Lama Zopa Rinpoche about how strangers in grocery stores, book stores, gas stations, etc., would come up to them, and either say how happy they are to see people in robes or ask about the robes' significance. One of us looked at Rinpoche, and asked, "What is the best way to reply to someone who asks me why I am wearing robes?" Rinpoche asked each of the group [the others were Ven. Roger Kunsang, Ven. Tsenla, Ven. Thubten Nyingje and Ven. Dagme] what each would say, and then he offered this recommendation:

'I follow the Buddha, who has compassion for all, who has shown the complete path to achieve perfect complete happiness and freedom. The foundation of our practice is to not harm others or ourselves, and to help benefit others as much as we can. For that purpose I shave my head and wear robes, which is the easy way to practice Buddhism. The meaning behind this is to take freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth and from the cause of all afflictive emotions, such as ignorance and attachment, which bring all the pain and confusion in this life.'

The group discussed the idea of carrying 'business cards' with their names, a beautiful picture of the Buddha or His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the address and phone number of the closest FPMT center, or FPMT International Office, the FPMT web address, and an email address on the front. On the back they could print the paragraph of Rinpoche's explanation.

"This would give monks and nuns a great opportunity, when people ask about their robes, to educate sentient beings. 'Otherwise they may think that we are like Indian sadus or suchlike!' said Ven. Thubten Nyingje at the time.

"Rinpoche said that sangha could elaborate or take the essence of this message depending on the circumstance and situation, including who the ordained person was speaking to, etc. He explained that 'of course if you know something better to say, then say that, otherwise you can say what I have suggested. This is just to give you an idea what to say; it's not like you should only say or just read what's on the card!'

"He also said: 'Each time you explain that you are ordained and give the reason why, this gives you the opportunity to awaken other sentient beings' minds and to enlighten them. It gives you the opportunity to free them from all the sufferings, and to bring them to ultimate happiness, enlightenment.'"

And as Ven. Lobsang Kalden concluded: "All I want to do in this life is benefit others; in my mind this can be done better if I am just an ordinary nun doing ordinary nun things. [By telling this story] I don't want the focus shifted from spreading the Dharma and benefiting others onto an illusory 'me'. However, maybe this is a way to benefit others. Maybe because I am an ordinary nun it will give it meaning."

[We firmly believe so, and thank you! Ed.] ❁

[Conversations scribed by Ven. Yanchen and lightly edited by Ven. Holly Ansett.]