

Teaching the Language of an Ancient Culture in a Modern World

Nestled in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana is a unique organization. Sporting goods stores, bars, taxidermy shops, gas stations – Montanans expect to find these things. But a business grounded in knowledge gained from an in-depth study of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and focused on teaching Classical Tibetan to Western students? This falls a bit outside the realm of the expected.

By Erin Keskeny



Anam Thubten Rinpoche, Gochen Tulku Rinpoche and David Curtis (center) with students at a 2005 summer seminar in Montana

Yet Montana is a good home in many ways for the **Tibetan Language Institute (TLI)**. The mountain landscape mirrors that of Tibet, and the tranquility is conducive to study. Right outside the door of the office wild turkeys gobble in response to every rumble of a summer thunderstorm; hummingbirds mine the blossoms that surround the office in the spring and summer.

TLI's beginnings were in a very different environment. In 1993, shortly after completing his traditional three-year retreat at Dakshang Kagyu Ling, Kalu Rinpoche's flagship center in France, David Curtis began teaching private students in Los Angeles. This seemed a natural direction for him, given his desire to help Western students deepen their relationship with the Dharma. David has written:

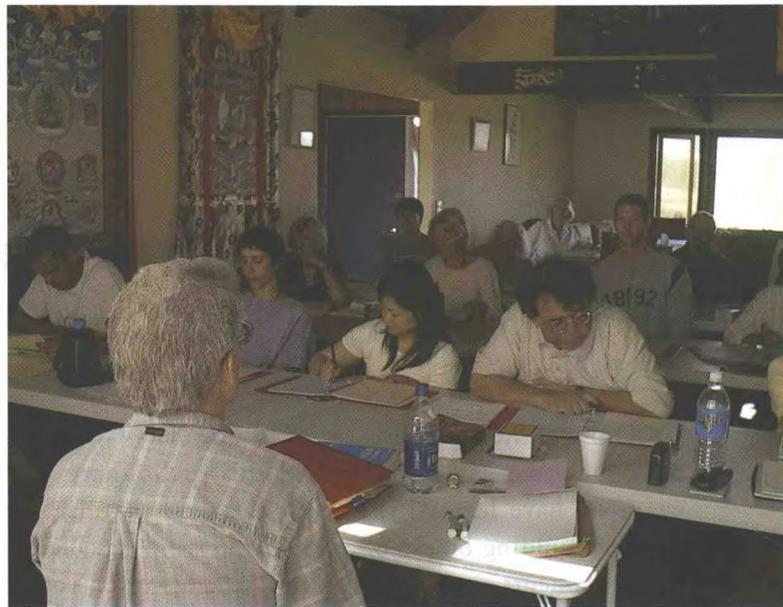
"The Tibetan language is beautiful, powerful, and interesting in its own right. But what's more, knowledge of Tibetan can contribute significantly to one's Dharma study and practice. In fact, to study Tibetan is to practice the Dharma. The texts were written and translated by realized masters who were also great literary masters, and their sole motivation was to liberate beings. Looking into the specialized language they created to convey the innermost essence of the Buddha's teaching can be profoundly inspirational."

David founded the Tibetan Language Institute as an educational non-profit dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture through the teaching of the Tibetan language. Beginning in 1994 with the Los Angeles Summer Seminar, TLI hosted Anam Thubten Rinpoche (head of the Dharmata Foundation) and Sarah Harding (of the Naropa Institute) to teach a ten-day seminar focusing on Tibetan calligraphy and the *Heart Sutra*. Students raved about this seminar and instructors – an auspicious beginning.

This set the stage for the way TLI continues to operate to this day. There are two main branches: instruction in Tibetan for Dharma students, and the development of materials for that instruction. Students can learn through self-study, seminars, and private telephone lessons for focused students. The self-study curriculum uses a set of materials that have been exclusively developed for those who would like to study on their own, from the alphabet all the way to being able to begin reading/translating Tibetan texts. David also teaches at various Dharma centers. Since 2000, he has held over 40 workshops around the U.S.

Some students trained at TLI have continued their studies at formal institutions such as Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Virginia. Others have entered into extended retreat, including the traditional three-year retreats. Still others are now sought-after translators around the U.S. or are Tibetan teachers themselves. As Dianna L., one of his students at a seminar in L.A., put it, “David is a great teacher, of language, its roots and the Dharma it reveals.”

The Tibetan Language Institute as it exists today in Montana is an interesting confluence of dynamics. It is an organization dedicated to the preservation of an ancient language and culture, yet it utilizes modern technology to further this goal: phone lessons for individuals and virtual group classes, air travel, electronic dictionaries, DVDs, and email are all central to how TLI operates. The office itself is run by a small staff and a group of volunteers. Yet, with David’s inspiration they have built an organization that reaches an international community of Buddhist practitioners and Tibetan scholars – TLI has students everywhere from Seattle, Washington to Sydney, Australia.



David Curtis and students

David’s dedication to the Dharma was recognized recently when Gochen Tulku Rinpoche of Ewam Sang-nak Ling conferred on him the title of Lopön (or *acharya* in Sanskrit), which means “Dharma teacher and scholar.” In a speech to those present at the conclusion of his sixth *sheydra* retreat at Ewam, Rinpoche cited David’s work in teaching Tibetan in America for the last fourteen years, his teaching of Tibetan at Rinpoche’s *sheydra* for the last five years, and his teaching of Dharma for the last two years at Rinpoche’s request as reasons for this appointment.

TLI has not abandoned good old-fashioned classroom teaching: This tradition is alive and well. A recent three-week summer seminar in Arlee, Montana at Gochen Tulku Rinpoche’s beautiful retreat center enabled beginning students to start with basics like the alphabet in the first week and end the third week with a rudimentary ability to read/translate basic texts. Anam Thubten Rinpoche came as a guest teacher for the third week, which was focused on the *Heart Sutra* — the seminar closed with the same guest teacher and text that helped make TLI’s first seminar such a success thirteen years ago.

And perhaps Anam Thubten Rinpoche said it best: “Learning Tibetan language enhances one’s understandings of the Buddhist teachings. By participating in [the various seminars offered by TLI] and supporting the Tibetan Language Institute, we’ll be helping to preserve the teachings of the holy Dharma. What can be better than that?”

TLI has developed and sells on-line Tibetan language materials, including workbooks, CDs, tapes, and instructional DVDs. For more information go to www.tibetanlanguage.org, email info@tibetanlanguage.org or phone 1-406-961-5131. ☉

Erin Keskeny is a freelance journalist based in New York. She is a recent graduate of New York University.