

SANG-NGAK-CHO-DZONG  
AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE APPRENTICE PROGRAMME

by Ngakpa Chogyam Rinpoche

(Presentation for the March 1994 Conference of the Network for Western Buddhist Teachers with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala)

The evolution of Buddhism in the West, and what possible part I could play in that, has been my primary interest and concern for over ten years. I have in that time, together with my students, created an individual context of practice that may be of interest here. What we have established isn't perfect but it functions very happily, having evolved out of the hard work and kind-hearted commitment of a small number of enthusiastic people. For this reason I would like to introduce some aspects of our history, and the ideas that led to the establishment of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong in Britain and the US.

Sang-ngak-cho-dzong is the name we were given by His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, specifically for the work in establishing a Ngakphang Sangha in the West. The word Ngakphang, means 'mantra holding' and applies to those who take Tantric vows and live as non-celibate householders. Ngakphang practitioners are usually called Ngakpas (male) and Ngakmas (female). They have uncut hair, and maintain the Tantric samayas. They wear robes which are more or less like monk's or nun's robes, but the skirt or shamthab is usually white (Ngakphang Sangha members sometimes wear red shamthabs, especially outside the Nyingma School). They also wear a red, white and blue striped shawl called a Ngakphang Sen.

Sang-ngak-cho-dzong, which has recently become a Registered Charity, is a relatively small but enthusiastically committed group of Nyingma practitioners who attempt to live by the principles of Kindness and Awareness. We are a Ngakphang Sangha, or White Tantric Community, and attempt the practice of being Vajra brothers and Vajra sisters, in terms of trying always to see each other with pure-vision. In practice, this means relating to what is intrinsically good in each other, rather than giving undue weight to each other's confusion and neuroses. This is a quality that we endeavour to apply in the outside world as well, with regard to feeling a genuine kindness and good heart towards everyone. We maintain a respect for each other as practitioners, based on the shared commitment to living the View of our tradition. We place a lot of emphasis on genuine kindness, and genuine friendliness; as well as sincere courtesy and real tolerance. We view tolerance as that which allows for the differences and opposed views of different traditions and approaches, without the need to take any kind of hostile stance. The 'tolerance' which has to make everything the same in order to be tolerant, we view as an immature form of tolerance. We try to take the approach in which it should be possible to be friendly with anyone. We maintain that to disagree with a person's view or approach to Buddhism (or anything else) doesn't have to preclude an otherwise warm and humane interaction.

We regard humour, enthusiasm, naturalness and spontaneity as crucial in our approach to being a functioning Sangha. We have attempted to create an atmosphere, within our Sangha, in which no one has to modify their personality or language in order to be accepted. New Apprentices are unconditionally welcomed and made to feel part of the Sangha. There is no

'inner circle' to break into by being seen to be 'special' in any way. There is a continually advocated proscription against engaging in the discussion of Buddhism as a method of 'making conversation'. Apprentices are encouraged only to discuss Buddhist topics when they actually have the need to know something, or when the subject arises naturally in terms of shared experience. The reason behind this is to eliminate the tendency to gravitate to stilted forms of cultic conversation; or, to using Buddhist technical vocabulary as a form of status enhancement. I encourage this atmosphere of 'ordinariness' by spending a lot of informal time with Apprentices. In such 'informal time' conversation can take many forms, with Buddhist teaching weaving in and out of many different topics -- in an atmosphere of good humour and frequent hilarity. We endeavour to create an atmosphere of interpersonal acceptance and mutual support, in which no one ever offers anyone gratuitous advice or criticism for any reason. We try to remember that, at best, our negative subjectivity is subjective. We therefore try only to express our warm and positive subjectivity. Each person is considered to be responsible for their own motivation, and if problems arise between students I regard it as my responsibility to help them come to a kind and open-minded understanding of each other. We endeavour to be good examples of what it is to be a Buddhist of any School; but, at the very least, we simply try to be kind, open and friendly people.

Non-sectarianism has always been a central theme of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong, and we have continued to try to establish friendly contact with other Buddhist organizations. We have become a member of the 'Network of Buddhist Organizations'; which is currently being founded in Britain, and view this as a wonderful opportunity to overcome the suspicion that sometimes exists between the Buddhist organizations of different schools and traditions. We hope to see far greater exchange and co-operation between groups, and are committed to participating to the furtherance of this end. I feel that it is useful for students to remain as open to teachers of other Buddhist traditions as possible. I feel that a broad range of contact with other Buddhist traditions is essential for the purpose of students having a wide and detailed understanding of Buddhism.

We are probably quite unusual as a Buddhist organization, in that we are small by design. Although our organization may possibly grow larger, it is enshrined in our charitable constitution that we will never develop in a pyramidal manner. As soon as there are other Ngakphang Lamas working within Sang-ngak-cho-dzong, I will automatically cease to be the central figure. This is something I instigated at the outset in order that the future development of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong would remain as free as possible from spiritual imperialism, even if I were no longer alive. I have a deep sense of responsibility for the future in terms of the organization that is growing around me, and my strongest wish has been to prevent Sang-ngak-cho-dzong becoming an unwieldy monolithic empire with me or anyone else at its head. To this end, I have always involved my students in terms of how Sang-ngak-cho-dzong has evolved.

I have often been saddened the superstar Lama phenomena in which students have almost no personal contact with their Teachers. I have been saddened by the appalling accounts of sexual abuse that have come to my attention from such quarters, and convinced that there must be some better way to proceed. I have been especially saddened to meet people whose financial or family circumstances have prevented any real sense of being involved with Lamas or their Sanghas. Because of this, I felt it important to attempt to establish an alternative model; at least for people who wanted to study and practise with me. The model was to be one in which people were able to have a high degree of access, especially in times of crisis. The model was to be one in which those who were interested in the Nyingma Ngakphang tradition could gain access to someone who had some degree of experience. On the basis of limited student numbers it is only possible for Sang-ngak-

cho-dzong to grow laterally; that is to say, with a greater number of teachers, rather than one teacher with an unwieldy number of students.

Because of the problems that I saw inherent in the large student numbers, I decided from the outset to limit the total number of Students to between 50-60 people. I based this number on the average extended family gathering at a wedding. This was a somewhat arbitrary choice, but one that was established in terms of how many people it was actually possible to know individually. My decision was based on the great importance that I saw in being able to relate as personally as possible to each student. It has been a crucial consideration for me, especially in terms of the teaching and practice of Tantra, that the teacher-student ratio be kept small. With regard to my own understanding of Tantric view, meditation and action, it is not easily possible to give guidance to hundreds of students; many of whom may be unknown to the teacher. Perhaps for Enlightened masters this is possible, but for an inconsequential eccentric yogi like me, it can be quite hard work sometimes keeping abreast of the life circumstances of those with whom I currently relate as a teacher. I have 49 Students at the moment, and there is currently a waiting list for men, because I am concerned about the experience of women living in a male dominated society. For this reason I have committed myself to working with a larger proportion of women students, and to giving them greater support. This is one of the stated aims and objectives of our charitable constitution. I correspond with all my students on a fairly regular basis, and am also available by telephone and FAX almost where ever I travel. I am also able to see them all individually according to personal need. They are all able to visit me, and to invite me to their homes in order that our personal connection is maintained and nurtured through informal domestic contact. I would not feel that I was being of any real help to these people if I knew any less about them than I do at the moment. I also make a practice of thinking about them all every day, and sometimes write to them purely because I wonder how they are getting on. On a more formal basis we have established regular private group retreats for my personal apprentices where I am able to teach and give short private interviews. These retreats are held several times a year.

These are all things that I would have valued myself as a student -- so these are the circumstances I decided to make available for others. Some of these things I experienced and appreciated very deeply with His Holiness Kyabje Khordong gTerchen Tulku Chhi'med Rig'dzin Rinpoche in particular, such as informal personal time and the possibility of receiving letters which maintained a sense of contact. My students and I have been involved in this effort together, and we have all been inspired with the idea of creating something different, something that could possibly serve as a model for other people wanting to organize themselves around any particular Lama. We have made a practice of looking at the functioning of the student-teacher relationship together over the years, and what we have arrived at seems to suit our respective needs as a group.

My needs are met in terms of being financially supported. This allows me to: lead retreats; give individual guidance and solitary retreat schedules; give individual tuition to such Apprentices as our Thangka painter and to others involved in art and craft work; give public teachings; write books; edit teachings and interviews that have been transcribed; answer Apprentice letters and telephone calls; be available to receive Apprentices at my home; and, to travel to their homes. I also send out periodic 'Apprentice Letters' which keep Apprentices informed about my travels, plans, and ideas; interwoven with aspects of teaching that spring naturally out of these topics. Their needs are met in terms of allowing me to function in the ways I have described. They are aware that they always have the possibility of making other needs known to me, and that I will respond to the limit of my ability. We are committed to each other.

Sang-ngak-cho-dzong came into being through the interest shown in a style of explaining the Tantric teachings that made them accessible to ordinary people. My primary feeling has always been, that of wishing to make something possible for people, that I believed was possible -- an association of practitioners who could work and play together in a spirit of real kindness and friendship. I believed from the beginning that it must be possible to undermine the tendencies that I saw as being so harmful; such as: gossip; 'Dharma' politics; the giving of gratuitous advice and gratuitous criticism; the formation of clique and inner circles; elitism; sectarianism; self-righteousness; the assumption of artificial 'Buddhist' personality; the cultivation of a style of piety designed for the enhancement of self-image; and, many types of dysfunctional interpersonal behaviour. We have created an ethos within Sang-ngak-cho-dzong where the adoption of an 'artificial Buddhist personality' is not only not required, but which is actually practically nonexistent. The adoption of an 'artificial Buddhist personality' is unnecessary, when all that group acceptance depends upon -- is being an Apprentice. The result of this is a wide range of personalities and styles of expression, united by an interest in the practice, teachings, lineage, and, a kind heart.

I was originally called upon to be of help to people in Cardiff Wales who were experiencing varying degrees of confusion in terms of their experience of Tibetan Buddhism. I had returned to live in Cardiff at the end of the 70's, having spent that decade in study, practice, and retreat within the Nyingma School under the guidance of His Holiness Chhi'med Rig'dzin Rinpoche; His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, and His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I had also studied with other Nyingma Lamas such as Lama Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche, Lama Konchog Rinpoche, Jetsunma Khandro Ten'dzin Drolkar, and Lama Yeshe Dorje. My main Transmission Lineage, the Aro gTer, however came directly from Jetsunma Khandro Yeshe Rema. As it is known, I am the sole surviving holder of this Lineage and so I have the considerable responsibility to keeping this tradition alive for the benefit of future generations.

When I returned to the West, it was with H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche's instruction to teach and establish the Nyingma Ngakphang tradition in the West. The beginnings of this teaching were quite organic, and came from invitations from people who came to hear of me by word of mouth -- simply as 'a person who lived locally' who could explain things in ordinary language. As you will know, I was recognized as the incarnation of Aro Yeshe, by His Holiness Kyabje Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche; and as the incarnation of Aro Yeshe's predecessor, 'a-Shul Pema Legden, by H.H. Kyabje Khordong gTerchen Tulku Chhi'med Rig'dzin Rinpoche, but this did not play any part in how my role as a Lama in the West originated.

The explanation of the Buddhist teaching in creative Western vernacular idiom has always been important to me, because I am not an intellectual in any sense of the term. I am also not endowed with excessive intelligence. I didn't find it easy to understand many of the books that I tried to read when I first became interested in Buddhism over twenty years ago; and although I have now learnt to read complex language, in abstruse cultural modes, I still find such books rather heavy going. Many of the available books are found to be highly inaccessible or totally alien to those people who study with me. I have always had immense sympathy and empathy with people who find Tibetan Buddhist literature impenetrable, and so my writings have been dedicated to providing material not only for my Apprentices, but for others who feel intellectually and culturally overwhelmed by what they try to read. I am also rather unsophisticated, so I have always felt for those who wanted to remain 'ordinary' at some level. I remember, with both amusement and affection, being described in a book review by Stephen Batchelor as: "the working man's Lama Govinda."

One of the main things I noticed in the West, was how people would enter into practice with great fervour, and then become completely overwhelmed by the nature of the commitments they had taken. Tantric commitments were often entered into quite inadvertently. Sometimes married couples would find themselves to have made vows to abstain from sexual contact with each other; and in the early days I was often being contacted to talk with those who felt guilty about wishing to relinquish commitments that they had never intended to take. Sometimes people would simply experience confusion. They would find it hard to understand why they were involved with in-depth studies of hell-realms when they'd originally come to learn about something that would help them in their lives; to be kinder, happier, more relaxed and peaceful. They were certainly interested in the development of wisdom and compassion. They were certainly interested in meditation, but were often simply bewildered by the cultural philosophical infrastructure that dominated the presentation of the teachings. People often stayed in this state of frustration for years, out of devotion to the Lama -- and then disappeared 'for no apparent reason', without ever having expressed their inability to make sense of anything. It seemed to me that people often suffered from some sort of 'Dharma burn-out'; they would seem to make valiant attempts to enter a Tibetan Buddhist cultural world-view, and then become disheartened when time and time again that world-view would clash with the reality of their actual situation. The 'good students' tended to be those who remained with teachers, and the 'bad students' were those who left. The 'good students' were those who didn't question much about the cultural aspects of the teaching, and the 'bad students' tended to be those who couldn't adapt to accepting statements as a matter of faith.

I was saddened by what I saw of Buddhism in the West, but soon realized that many of these things seemed to happen by default -- no one was guilty of doing anything on purpose. The interpersonal behaviour of students seemed to incorporate the use of 'insider language', and the assessment of others according to specific criteria, such as: extent of Buddhist vocabulary; knowledge of Buddhist technical categories; Empowerments received; and trips to India, Nepal and latterly Tibet. I could continue at great length on this subject, but it is not my wish or interest to be critical. I mention these issues simply to give examples of things I encountered in the West, and among Western people in the East. It was the attitudes I encountered, and the default mechanisms I saw in operation, that fuelled me with the strong wish to make some other possibility available. It struck me as very sad to see people with energy and enthusiasm for these teachings that I held so dear, fall away through inability to integrate them with their ordinary Western family lives.

The first three people who came to see me in Cardiff in 1982 eventually asked me to be their teacher. They are still my Students, and one, Khandro Dechen Tsedrup, became my wife. Khandro Dechen Tsedrup is an equal partner in all respects, and the fact that I am still her teacher doesn't play any part whatsoever in our domestic arrangements or personal relationship. We make this quite obvious in the way in which we live our lives. This means that Apprentices are fully aware that we are not replicating any form of hierarchic relationship which subverts her freedom and dignity as a woman. I do my share of house work as a worthwhile part of my life, because we regard everyday life as practice. I encourage her as much as possible in terms of her giving teaching input on 'Open Retreats', and it is my hope that at some point in the future we will travel and teach together as a couple.

Soon other people expressed interest in working with me; and the questions they asked all had the same purpose: "How can I make sense of this for myself?"; "How can I relate this to my daily life?"; and "How does the complex symbolism and ritual of Tantra relate to what I experience as the

actual nature of the world in which I live?" Because of the nature of my own personality, orientation and experience (and because of the nature of my own process of understanding) I found myself being able to speak with people in terms of realities, that were common to our everyday experience of existence. These first students organized weekend retreats under my guidance, and gradually other people became interested. It was a slow and gradual process, and one in which we were able to work together. I made a priority of adapting according to what I perceived to be the real individual needs of each student.

It was not long before I decided that it was vital to look carefully at what was coming into being around me. At one point in the evolution of my relationship with these first students, I suggested that they look to older, more qualified teachers in the Nyingma tradition; but they were quite adamant that this was not what they wanted. These particular people were all quite vocal in their unwillingness to involve themselves with the recitation of lengthy Tibetan liturgies on a daily basis. They expressed to me that they recognized from past experience that there was no possibility of being able to maintain such practices, or even generate the enthusiasm to begin them. The students who gathered around me were very enthusiastic to be engaged in practices that they could maintain, and they were happy about the style in which I explained the teaching. They wanted to have a teacher who facilitated the adaptation and essentialization of the practices to their life circumstances, and who encouraged them to question whatever they didn't understand. Because of this I decided to accept the challenge of continuing with them as their main teacher. This caused me a lot of problems in some areas of the Buddhist world, but I will not address that here. Suffice it to say that I became for a period of time the target of hostility, resentment, and gossip from certain factions of Western people and certain Tibetan Lamas who felt that I was encroaching of their territory.

I naturally regard this challenge as the most tremendous responsibility. It is also a most joyful and rewarding responsibility; but one that absorbs my life completely. From that point onward it became crucial to me not to fall, by default, into the problematic socio-political systems that I had seen in some other places. I decided to examine as carefully as I could, the 'default problems' I had seen, and organize Sang-ngak-cho-dzong in such a way that these could be avoided. I am aware, when I say this, that it not possible to create anything without problems; and for this reason I regard the structure we have created together as being continually open to adaptation. It has been wonderful to see the way in which my Apprentices have grown as people. They have been an inspiration to me and to each other, and continually encourage me in the belief that the essence of the Tibetan Buddhist teaching can really be of great value to ordinary working people with families in the West. We all hope that our practice, and the example we would hope to set, will be of some value to the world in general.

The most substantial factor in avoiding what I felt to be the 'default problems' that I saw elsewhere, was the 'Apprenticeship Programme'. 'The Apprenticeship Programme' is something that my students and I have devised together over the years of our association. It includes a systematic procedure for becoming an Apprentice that has the following features:

- a. Informational booklet that explains all aspects of Apprenticeship.
- b. Information about leaving Apprenticeship.
- c. Details of the Ngakphang Tradition.
- d. The mutual obligations of Apprenticeship (Entry into Apprenticeship requires that Apprentices have to refrain from smoking or using illegal

drugs).

I call my personal students Apprentices, to distinguish them from the students of other teachers, and the people who attend public retreats on an irregular and informal basis. I lifted the word 'Apprentice' from the American Indian tradition, specifically from my friend Sun Bear, who first invited to come and teach in the US. I chose this word, because I wanted to establish a category of student who could be free to leave without the attendant problems that many people experience if they decide to leave a teacher. During my teaching over the last ten years, I have met many people who have experienced incredible distress in the process of leaving their teacher and their teacher's organization. People have given me tragic accounts of having lost their friends, because they had been 'excommunicated'. I saw this as being highly undesirable from my perspective, and decided that I would do what ever I could to avoid any manifestation of 'cultism' that I saw arising within Sang-ngak-cho-dzong.

So, today we find ourselves working toward the establishment of retreat land somewhere in North Wales. Up until now we have held our retreats the home of one of my Apprentices -- an old farm in North Wales where we regular convert a barn space into a shrine room. This would be sufficient for our purposes but for the fact that accommodation and frequency of usage is limited. I have avoided any move toward establishing a 'centre' up until now, because I have wanted people to invest in their own practice both in terms of retreat time and the acquisition of Buddhist symbolic supports for practice. This has resulted in everyone having a shrine at home, and owning their own vajras, bells, drums, and other supports of practice in the tradition we follow. It is wonderful to see the barn become transformed into a shrine room in an hour, with thangkas and rupas arriving from everyone's home. We have our own thangka painter who produces very beautiful thangkas for anyone who wishes to acquire one for their practice.

We produce a journal called 'Hidden Word', and a quarterly news-letter called 'Hidden Agenda'. The name Hidden Word is a loose translation of 'Sang-ngak', the first two words of our name Sang-ngak-cho-dzong. These publications are intended to provide information on the Nyingma Tantras, and on the Ngakphang Tradition. They also provide information on the Ngakphang Traditions of the other Schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

We provide Open retreats every year which can be attended by anyone. The Open Retreats have teaching input from my 7 disciples -- senior Apprentices who have been ordained into the Ngakphang Sangha. There are also various practice groups in Britain and the US which are attended by my Apprentices, and by the growing number of 'Friends of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong'. The 'Friends of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong' are people who are not my personal Apprentices or disciples, but people who like to attend the 'Open Teaching Retreats' and other Sang-ngak-cho-dzong events. Although we have evolved in relative isolation from other groups, it has always been our wish to interact with other Buddhist sanghas in the West. In the USA we have very cordial relationships with Lama Tharchin Rinpoche and Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. I go to the West Coast of America twice a year to give 'Open Teaching Retreats' at Tharchin Rinpoche's Retreat Centre of Pema Osel Ling. Students of Tharchin Rinpoche and Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche often attend 'Open Teaching Retreats', and my Apprentices often attend retreats and empowerments given by these two Lamas. My Apprentices are encouraged to attend the Teachings of other Lamas from all Schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon -- and from Buddhist Teachers in general; whenever they have the enthusiasm opportunity, interest or inclination. My Apprentices are particularly encouraged to study with my Vajra Brothers, Tharchin Rinpoche and Sonam Sangpo Rinpoche; and with my Vajra Sister Jetsunma Khandro Ten'dzin Dolkar. Tharchin Rinpoche will be coming to Britain this Summer to give some Teachings, and our British sangha are looking forward

very much to meeting him. Unfortunately we do not as yet have such good relationships with other Lamas and their Sanghas in Britain, but we hope that our affiliation to the 'Network of Buddhist Organizations' in Britain will facilitate a more open and accepting atmosphere for all the organizations who are part of it. We are very keen to promote a sense of openness, kindness, tolerance, and mutual respect within Buddhism; because if we fail to be able to befriend each other as Buddhists, what purpose is there in dedicating practice to the benefit of all sentient beings?

I would like to conclude by thanking Your Holiness, and every one here very much indeed for listening to my account. I would like to offer my warmest appreciation for having been invited here, and for this marvellous opportunity to participate in what ever way I am able. I look forward to a happy and creative future of friendly contact with you all.

Ngakpa Chogyam Ogyen Togden Rinpoche,  
Spiritual Director of Sang-ngak-cho-dzong

#### Notes

1. This article will also be published in the Summer 1994 edition of "Hidden Agenda".
2. Sang-ngak-cho-dzong is spelt with an umlaut over the "o" in "Cho" this has been removed in this version as have various other accent marks.
3. For more information about Sang-ngak-cho-dzong, please contact: the Secretary, Sang-ngak-cho-dzong, 5 Court Close, Whitchurch, Cardiff, CF4 1JR, Wales, U.K. tel: 0222 620332.
4. Sang-ngak-cho-dzong is a Registered UK Charity, No. 1019886.

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