

> NORTHWEST DHARMA ASSOCIATION HOME  
 > BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS  
 > CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE

# Sangha News



Northwest  
Dharma  
News

## Seattle Welcomes Abbot of Tibet's Gebchak Nunnery

The nuns of Gebchak Gonpa in eastern Tibet, depicted in the documentary film "Blessings", uphold a vital and pure tradition of rigorous practice and realization. The largest nunnery in Tibet, Gebchak offers women specialized training in Vajrayana and Dzogchen meditation. The results of the nuns' practices often seem, for us in the west, incredible and mind-boggling. So does the fact that they number not just a handful, but actually in the hundreds. Many leading male Tibetan masters admit the Gebchak nuns are unrivaled in the purity of their practices and the scale of their yogic accomplishments.

Gebchak Wangdrak Rinpoche, abbot of Gebchak nunnery, visited the Seattle area in late May at the beginning of a tour of the western United States. He offered teachings, shared information about the Gebchak nunnery, and met with spiritual leaders from other traditions.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, an internationally acclaimed English-born nun in the Tibetan tradition, planted the seed for Wangdrak Rinpoche's US tour in 2007 when she made a visit to the remote nunnery. Tenzin Palmo is dedicated to improving the status of nuns, who have suffered socio-cultural inequality over many centuries. Encouraging Wangdrak Rinpoche, she believed the US was primed to learn more about this unique community and its relevance in a modern world.



Gebchak Gonpa nunnery in the Kham region of eastern Tibet.



Gebchak nuns in their main temple conducting a prayer ritual.

Seattle became Wangdrak Rinpoche's base in the US. Arriving at the end of a month of intense relief efforts following a devastating earthquake in the Yushu region near Gebchak, Rinpoche gave his first talk at a gathering of the Seattle Dharma Punx. Despite jet-lag and exhaustion, he loved it!

Offered by a dharma group that neither practices Tibetan Buddhism nor includes monastic members, the Punx's open-hearted welcome made a lasting impression on Rinpoche: "In America I experienced a lack of sectarianism. Even beginners were very interested in learning about the dharma regardless of lineage. People's open-minded interest was coupled with a sincere motivation of bodhicitta and really wanting to create a better world for everybody. I loved that."

Western audiences were equally impressed by what they learned about the Gebchak nuns. Like enclosed orders of Christian nuns, the yoginis of Gebchak remove themselves from the affairs of the world in order to maintain a life-long rigorous spiritual practice for the benefit of others. All nuns devote themselves to meditating, as well as sleeping upright, in 3-foot square meditation boxes, sharing cramped retreat quarters. Despite their austere lifestyle, Rinpoche insists the community is the most harmonious and peaceful he has ever experienced. Their example, he believes, has much to offer a troubled world.

Professor Alan Marlatt at the University of Washington commented, "I was very impressed with Wangdrak Rinpoche's presentation at the Addictive Behaviors Research Center. His work on training women to be meditation teachers is a model program with excellent outcomes."

Michelle Kleisath, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology, added, "I was excited by Rinpoche's response [to the question why a man heads a nunnery] because it seemed an effective strategy for responding to structural oppression based on sex, a kind of oppression that he appeared to have thought through at some depth. Wangdrak Rinpoche appears to me to be a fierce ally for Tibetan women, and allies are a crucial part of any movement for social change."

At other secular venues hosted by Antioch University, Women of Wisdom, and East West Bookstore many were stunned that Rinpoche could be such an eloquent advocate for women's issues without ever having read a sentence of western feminist discourse.

The key word for Gebchak these days is "preservation". The Tibetan nomad system has drastically dwindled, causing the nuns' traditional support to evaporate. Rinpoche reiterated the interdependence between the nuns and those who support them from afar: "By virtue of preserving this unique, ancient and pure tradition we will benefit the world because the nuns are developing love and compassion through their practice... If we have faith and pure perception there is a distinct connection with blessings that we can fully receive."



Gebchak Gonpa senior nun, Tamke Wangmo.



Celebration at Camp Brotherhood during Wangdrak Rinpoche's visit to the Seattle area. From left to right, Rigdzin Tingkye, Wangdrak Rinpoche, Father William Treacy, and Lummi elders Jack and Beverly Cagey, and Solo.

Wangdrak Rinpoche thoroughly savored formal and informal contact with Seattle area sanghas Karma Thegsum Choling, Seattle Insight Meditation Society Eastside, Chagdud Gonpa, and Sakya Monastery, as well as groups in California where he also spoke at Google headquarters and Humboldt State University. Listeners consistently enjoyed Rinpoche's delight in discussing the nitty-gritty of meditation experiences as well as his infectious outbursts of laughter.

Nalanda West marked the grand finale to Rinpoche's Buddhist talks. Rinpoche was deeply struck by Nalanda's generosity in offering him an opportunity to speak about the nature of mind as trained in Gebchak. A large cross-section of various sanghas attended together with the wider community, and again, Rinpoche delighted in this living proof of non-sectarian openness.

An inter-faith celebration honoring Rinpoche was the concluding public event. Sponsored by Camp Brotherhood in Mount Vernon, the gathering attracted over 60 people from all different faiths—Muslims, Christians, Sufis, Mongolian Buddhists, and others. Sitting next to Rinpoche was the 91-year-old Catholic priest and Camp Brotherhood co-founder, Father William Treacy.

Representatives of the Native American Lummi Nation welcomed Rinpoche with drumming and singing, wrapping him in a traditional blanket. Rinpoche had never before experienced such diversity under one roof and relished the joyous atmosphere. Now back in Asia, Rinpoche says he often recalls that day with great fondness: "I really respect Father Treacy. He is peaceful, subdued, he has an open mind to all religions and he has got a big heart".

Wangdrak Rinpoche hopes to return next year to the US.

[NEXT SANGHA NEWS ARTICLE >](#)  
[< PREVIOUS SANGHA NEWS ARTICLE](#)

*For more information about the nuns of Gebchak, please visit:*  
[www.gebchakgonpa.org](http://www.gebchakgonpa.org)

*To donate, go to:* [dglinitiatives.org/donate.html#gg](http://dglinitiatives.org/donate.html#gg).

*Contributor: Caterina De Re.*

*Translator (Rinpoche quotes): Ani Tenzin Chozom.*

*Photos: Camp Brotherhood photo, Caterina De Re. Others courtesy of Gebchak Gonpa.*