

Geshe Tenzin Namdak, the first Dutch Geshe

"I had no intention of becoming a geshe, but the teachers saw it differently."



He once started taking classes at the Maitreya Institute as a youngster of barely twenty three years old.

Twenty four years later, in 2017, he became the first Dutchman ever to obtain the highest degree in Buddhist philosophy, the 'geshe' degree. Lama Zopa Rinpoche then appointed him as a permanent teacher at the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, where he has been living and teaching since 2019. Who is this remarkable teacher and what path led him from being a partying young student at a Dutch university to becoming a highly respected spiritual teacher of Buddhist philosophy?

In Tibetan Buddhism, the degree of Geshe is the highest and most difficult degree to obtain. To get it, it requires at least twenty years of study at one of the Tibetan monastic universities in India. Those who manage to pass the difficult exams year after year and go through the entire curriculum are highly revered as a sort of superprofessor in Buddhist philosophy.

Seven years ago, a Dutchman achieved this title for the first time. The monk of Dutch origin, who is now respectfully addressed as "Geshela" around the world, began his Buddhist path at 23° at the Maitreya Institute.

Besides Jamyang's students, a number of Maitreya Institute students are taking the Exploring Buddhism course taught by Geshe Tenzin Namdak in London through Zoom, in English. In late September, Geshe Namdak, as he is commonly called, visit Loenen in the Netherlands, where he spent a weekend teaching in Dutch on Death and Impermanence.

Susanne Bulten got the change to interview him on behalf of Maitreya Institute.

We came to Maitreya Institute in 1993 at the same time as newcomers. I find it very special that I get to receive lessons from you now. You have come an impressive way and I think this can be particularly inspiring for anyone, young and old, who is getting acquainted with Buddhism. I see the fact that you have done this as an encouragement to all of us, a proof that this is attainable for us Westerners too, if only we work hard for it. A person entering here for the first time could, in fact, be a Geshe in say 25 years from now. (Ed: recently, the Geshe exam has also been opened up to women).

How did it all start? How did you come into contact with Buddhism?

Geshe Tenzin Namdak: I studied Hydrology at Van Hall Larenstein University in Velp. Like many students, I was quite active in nightlife. I went to house parties, had a girlfriend, danced all night at raves. At 21, I thought, "There must be more." I lost interest in relationships and nightlife.

I then started studying Chinese health science on weekends because I wanted to help people. I also did Taekwondo, Kung Fu and Tai Chi. That was more than just sport, there was a philosophy behind it.

In October 1992, there was a conference at the Jaarbeurs in Utrecht.

I still remember the moment, which was very special, when I walked into the building there and there was an announcement: "The lama's speech will start a little later." My attention was immediately caught and I went there. The lama giving the speech was Geshe Sönam Gyältsen of Maitreya Institute.

The speech appealed to me. I thought, "There is a lot in this. With medicine one can help people in this life, but that's only temporary."

After the lecture, I stopped by the Maitreya Institute's stand. There was a leaflet there telling me that a new course would be taught by Geshe Sönam Gyältsen in January 1993: the Lam Rim - the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. I went there. That weekend changed me.

What hit you like that?

The ideas of compassion and loving kindness. And in addition, the aspect of not just believing things, but exploring them first. That appealed to me tremendously. I became very enthusiastic.

In fact, in March 1993, already spoke about becoming a monk!

I spoke to Venerable Eugène (Jampel Parchin, a Dutch monk living at the institute at the time), and later to Geshela. Geshela said, "Take it easy. Go and study the Dharma for a year first and then we'll see."

At that time, the Netherlands still had compulsory military service for young men. On ideological grounds, I refused service and had to do alternative service. That meant I had to do work that benefited the community.

My alternative service consisted of a hydrological research project in Zwolle. The Maitreya Institute was in Emst at the time, conveniently located near Zwolle. I moved there and stayed for a year.

In late 1994, I went on a trip to India and Nepal. The idea of becoming a monk still lived with me. Buddhism was and is the only path for me. Maybe not for everyone, but for me it is. The way it is so clearly structured appeals to me enormously.

If you really want to understand it then you have to dedicate your life to it. I thought, "Well, let's do that."

In 1995, I was ordained as a monk by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Were you planning to become a geshe then?

I wasn't planning to become a geshe myself. But some teachers might have had those plans already!

In November 1993, Lama Zopa Rinpoche came to the Maitreya Institute. That was my first meeting with him. We were all lined up in front of the villa in Emst with a katag (ritual shawl for offering). Rinpochee looked at me and said, "You should study Tibetan and become a Geshe." I thought: "What?!"

Upon becoming a monk, I had no intention of becoming a teacher. I thought, "I just want to study quickly and then do retreats. I'll do it in English, not in Tibetan, then I can go on retreats quicker." However, Geshe Sönam Gyältsen, Lama Dagpo Rinpochee and Lama Zopa Rinpochee advised me to learn Tibetan. Because of their advice, I started doing so anyway, for a year, in Dharamsala.

After that year, the teachers advised me to follow traditional education, as it was taught at the School of Dialectics in Dharamsala, or at Sera. At that time, it was difficult for Westerners to stay in Ganden for long; a special permit was required. That's why I went to Sera. It was easier to stay there.

What was the most difficult aspect to get used to?

It actually went quite smoothly. The interest was there and I had a lot of confidence in my teachers' advice. That made me think, "I'm just going to do this." When I asked them, "Can I do this for so long?" they would say, "Yes, you can." That gave me the strength to persevere.

Buddhism was the only way for me to find answers to the life questions I had as a young student. What is the point of it all? Why do some suffer more than others? What happens after death? What is the most important thing to do in this life?

I didn't think hydrology was my future. I wanted to help others, which is why I started studying Chinese health science. Of course it's excellent to help people. But it is still only a temporary solution. Buddhism gave me more fundamental answers to the question: what is the fundamental cause of all this, of suffering and so on?

Then you see that you can do something about it and think, "Okay, this path leads to liberation from suffering and enlightenment. It may take several lifetimes but it is possible." Buddhism is a more profound philosophy of removing suffering, not temporarily but permanently.

What were the biggest challenges?

The language! It was challenging to study in a foreign language. For the first few months, I was in Dharamsala in a monastery where they didn't speak English. That wasn't easy. But learning Tibetan ended up benefiting me a lot.

At one point, I went to Geshe Sönam Gyältsen's monastic house (khangtsen) in Ganden for a while. I had some friends there. I thought I was going to study and learn some more Tibetan first. But when I got there, I was told, "You are going to the debate tomorrow night." I was immediately thrown in at the deep end! Later, when I went to Sera monastery, they spoke a different dialect there. That was a bit tricky again, the first year. But once you get through that, after a year or two, it works.

What was it like, socially, to be among all those people from different backgrounds?

There were three thousand Tibetans in Sera Je and maybe five or six Westerners. I wanted to dive right in so I sought little contact with other Westerners. After a year or two, I did interact more with them and we met every free day to have tea and chat.

As a newcomer, you do get treated differently anyway - whether you are Western or Tibetan. They first take their time to see if you are serious. Once you have proven yourself in debating and talking to the others, after two or three years, and they see that you are seriously invested and come to the activities, then you automatically get respect. As a matter of fact, they respect you even more for coming all the way from a Western country to study there.

Who were your teachers there?

I had a number of teachers in Sera: Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Delek, Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tsering, Geshe Ngawang Sangyela.

Did you ever see Geshela (Sönam Gyältsen) there?

Geshela I saw annually at His Holiness' classes in India.

Have there been times when you wanted to give up?

There are times when I have struggled, but never so much that I wanted to give up. Conditions in Sera were not perfect in the beginning. Where we lived for two years was a construction site, with lots of noise and dust. There was no shower and the toilet didn't look great either. As several Westerners had a hard time with this, one of the Western monks asked Lama Zopa Rinpoche for advice. Rinpoche advised having a house built especially for Westerners. And so we did, together with an Australian monk, Venerable Jampa Kälden. The house for westerners had 20 rooms. I was assigned by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to supervise the construction. Every lunch break, I would go to the construction site to consult with the builders and then quickly return to my room to study.

At difficult moments, what helped you keep going?

My teachers were constantly advising me to keep going. I always thought, "What else can you do? Retreat is beneficial, but there is no other place where I can study Buddhism as well as here."

When we look at our teachers, we see what's possible. We see that the difficulties pass again. Those teachers were examples for me. When I was struggling, I would read biographies of great teachers. I would then think: "They overcame so many difficulties. Compared to that my problems are a piece of cake!"

Take the Buddha's past lives, for instance. I also read the biography of Vajrochana Lotsawa, the translator of texts in the Kangyur. It's written in there that he faced a lot of obstacles and never gave up. The same, of course, applies to Jetsun Milarepa.

It made me see: "That I don't have a shower, a little noise, bad food or a dirty toilet, that's a picknick compared to what they endured...." Considering, on top of that, that it's not for a temporary purpose but for liberation and enlightenment, you see that those difficulties are but small things."

Ganden Tri Rinpoche used to say, "Namdak, you study for about ten or twenty years, then meditate on it for about ten or twenty years. Do that for a number of lifetimes and then it becomes very stable."

What was your goal? Buddhahood?

In the beginning, I didn't have such an end goal. I was quite short-sighted. The teachers had a long-term vision. I can see now that they were right. That short-sightedness was not very constructive. I've always followed their advice. If you do that, step by step you move in the right direction. Step by step.

We humans are short-sighted. We say: "Four years, five years of studying, that's way too long." But if you have the long-term vision, it gives you much more peace of mind and stability. I never wanted to become a Geshe. I wanted to study and go on retreat. My teachers were very clear. Lama Zopa Rinpoche kept saying I should go on for the Geshe degree.

If you are just starting with debate and still have 20 years ahead of you and get into a debate with the upper class monks, who are in the 15th year, for example, that seems such a long way to go. But before you know it, you're in the 15th year yourself.

Who is your most important teacher?

I have a lot of teachers. Geshe Sönam Gyältsen was my first teacher. Lama Dagpo Rinpoche is also very important to me. Not to mention His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Lama Zopa Rinpoche too, whom I saw every year. Lama Zopa Rinpoche was my guide. He told me how to deal with study and practice. He was also always instructing me to do things. I was secretary to Lama Ösel for a while. Then I had to get that building built for Western monks in Sera. When that was finished, stupas had to be built again. Then I had to set up a centre in Bangalore. Rinpoche always gave me projects. It was all extra work, but it allowed me to accumulate merit, which made things go more smoothly.

As Westerners, we often think that studying and meditating are everything, but it is very important to purify negative karma and generate positive karma. In the traditional system, you spend two-thirds of the time purifying negative karma and generating positive karma, and one-third of the time studying, meditating and contemplating. That's how important collecting merit and purifying is!

How was your relationship with the other western monks?

For the first two years, I was more on my own and didn't want to hang out with them too much. After that, I sometimes started asking older Western monks for advice. After three or four years in the monastery, the project to build that house for westerners came about. Since then, Western monks have been living there together.

How did graduation go?

Every year you have different exams; debate, written exam, memorisation exam (memorising texts), grammar, history, a certain text or biography. You do this for twenty years. At the final graduation, you have a debate every morning and every evening for a week. You then go to all twenty classes to debate about the material they are studying. The best monks in that class debate with you. You have to prepare well for that, because of course with time there are things that are no longer fresh in your memory. You have to go through all the material again carefully.

If you're smart, in preparation you ask people from those classes what they are debating that year. Once you know that, you can review those topics to prepare for the debate.

I liked that final exam because you go through the material and I like debating.

On the last night, you have to defend yourself in a debate and you are quizzed on things you had to memorize. I had to recite 25 pages by heart, in front of a large group of monks with camera and lights. For the first few seconds, I was momentarily lost. My friends sat next to me and helped me a bit. Then I thought: "Namdak, close your eyes and imagine you are in your room. And then it went smoothly." The last night of graduation is a bit special. The custom then is that you sponsor a meal for the monastery as a thank you. Then you get your certificate. In 2017, I graduated.

And then?

Then, in keeping with tradition, I went to the Gyume tantric monastery. That was very intensive. To give you a little idea: my hydrology studies in Velp were like a holiday compared to Sera. And Sera was like a holiday compared to Gyume!

There were seven of us in a room, very close together. We each had a bed with a small table, a mat, a plate, a spoon and a cup, nothing more. There were nights where we had to get up at two, three o'clock for a prayer service. That went on until about five in the afternoon and then we would go to debate in the evening. However intense, it was very inspiring, especially if you are interested in the Vajrayana.

Did you ever struggle to stay awake during those sessions?

(laughs:) I was still drinking coffee then and had a strong cup prior to the pooja.

Here you can also see the power of the monastery. When I'm not in a monastery and I only get a few hours of sleep a night, I get sick after a few weeks. But in the monastery, you don't get sick. It shows the strong blessing of the monastery. You don't really tire. That is extraordinary.

A blessing is not so easy to explain scientifically. In the West, we do speak of group energy. In Buddhism, we talk about the power of the object. We see that even when people are sceptical, they still feel something. An example. When I had just recently become a monk, I visited Emst. My friends from the Dutch university came to see me there. A few of them were critical. "What are you doing with your life?" they said. When they entered the gompa, they fell silent. They felt something special there.

Another example. A camera crew from the programme Classmates once visited me in Sera to shoot footage. They spent hours each day setting up equipment and so on. At the end, they said, "There is a peacefulness here that we have never experienced before." It's remarkable that someone who is not interested can still feel something. That energy was very strong in Gyume.

How did you end up in Jamyang?

During the end of my studies in Gyume, Venerable Roger Kunsang (Lama Zopa Rinpoche's assistant) emailed me, "Lama Zopa has checked and sees that it is beneficial if you go to the Jamyang Centre in London. What do you think of this?" I thought, "Oops! Permanent teacher in the centre of a big city. There go my retreats". But Lama Zopa Rinpoche was very compassionate and said, "When you become a geshe, you will do some teaching, alternating with retreat. You can go on retreat every year." So that's what I do.

What's it like living and teaching in London?

It is very amazing to see the insights of the teachers. During my time in Sera, I sometimes had to go to the West because of my visa. I didn't feel at all at home in the West. But once in London, after just a week I did feel right at home. Lama Zopa Rinpoche had seen that correctly.

I live in a big city, while being a bit of a recluse. The first year I spent most of my time in my room. I never think I have any qualities to be a teacher, but I have great faith in Lama Zopa Rinpoche and that's why I started doing it. And I quite like it.

You have a lot of exchanges with scientists and can regularly be found at Oxford for that purpose. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

The Jamyang Centre has the Science & Wisdom LIVE project, which can be followed online. It includes dialogues between Buddhist teachers and modern scientists. For instance there have been dialogues with renowned neuroscientist Anil Seth on consciousness and with Pim van Lommel, the Dutch cardiologist who has researched near-death experiences. A dialogue on the illusion of the self will be due at the end of November, with renowned philosopher and neurologist Thomas Metzinger. In those talks, we juxtapose the Buddhist view and the findings of scientists. Sometimes those views agree, sometimes they differ. Short videos will be made of the dialogues and these will eventually form an online course.

I have also established a relationship with Oxford University's Continuing Education Department. During the Summer School there, I spent a week teaching Emotional Intelligence in Buddhist Mind Science. I found it very interesting because among the students were people from the departments of Leadership and Psychology. Engaging conversations arose with them and that made the lessons very interactive.

How does the scientific knowledge affect you as a Dharma teacher?

When I teach, I sometimes relate it to the findings from modern science. People from a Western background can relate to that from their own worldview, and they often like it. Especially when I give talks in a more secular environment, for example at the Google company, it becomes more accessible to that audience if I relate it to scientific findings.

What would you advise to a young person who wants to study the Dharma intensively?

Take it slowly, one step at a time. It's not a decision you should make quickly. Get advice from teachers and take time to figure out what you can and want to do.

A student from Atisha gave three points of advice:

- Keep a long term prospect: the enlightenment.
- Plan ahead.
- Don't overextend yourself. Don't try to do too much in a short time.

What are your plans for the immediate future?

I received advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I've been in London for five years now. It looks like I will stay here for more.

Are we going to see you back here in the Netherlands too?

Geshe Sönam Gyältsen has already asked me to come and teach here. So I definitely intend to do that.

Why this interview

"I first came to the Maitreya Institute in 1993 to take monthly classes there. One of the other newcomers was a young student, who is now Geshe Namdak. Within a year or two, he became a monk and left for India.

With all the people I got to know at MI during that time, I feel a special kind of bond. I can feel it even if I haven't seen some people for years or decades. You have memories together, have studied and discussed the Dharma together. That touches very deeply.



Of Geshe Namdak, I remember how equanimous and friendly his energy was even then. He also possessed a unique combination of serious devotion to the Dharma and light-heartedness. I can see this again now in his aspect as a teacher. When I look at him, it all seems so simple and attainable. That is also reflected in the things he says in this interview.

The motivation for wanting to bring out Geshe Namdak's story is that I find him one of the most inspiring teachers I know. I hope people who read this interview will also be inspired by it. Maybe they'll even think, "I want that too! And it's possible, I can do it too!"

And maybe, you never know, the next Western Geshe is already among the readers of this article...

Susanne Bulten