

Letter from Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche to the Rigpa Sangha

Dear Followers of the Rigpa Mandala, who have taken Guru Padmasambhava as their refuge in this life, the next life and the bardo states.

I write to you with a heart full of warmth and jubilation. There is no need for us to dwell on the rough and precarious road that the Rigpa Sangha has been traveling recently, but I must confess that for a while I wondered if you would manage to stick together. Now I realize that my doubts were the symptom of a kind of cultural conditioning that made me skeptical about whether westerners are even capable of grasping the Dharma, let alone that you possess the resilience and persistence to continue to follow the spiritual path in the face of such turmoil.

Make no mistake, we are in a very difficult situation. History has shown us that when faced with similar crises – both in the East and the West – whole Sanghas, lineages and institutions have become demoralized and discouraged. Some became so disheartened that they now no longer exist.

For many reasons – some known, some unknown – Sogyal Rinpoche appears to have mishandled, mismanaged and misread a number of events. This is why we find ourselves in the current situation. Yet, from what I hear, far from falling apart, the Rigpa Sangha is alive and well. Not only do you continue to function as an organization, but you still practise together and, in spite of all the uncertainty, you have maintained the continuity. How have you managed it? As I contemplate this question, I always remember one very important aspect of Rigpa: that Sogyal Rinpoche introduced an enormous number of people to a great and authentic lineage of teachings and to some of the most remarkable, learned and realized teachers of our time. You then thought about and contemplated everything you were taught and, as a result, have realized that there is much more to Buddhism in general and the Vajrayana in particular, than just one person. So the contemplation, study and all those introductions have borne fruit, and will continue to bear fruit long into the future.

Never forget that ours is a path that not only cherishes but also strongly encourages its followers to prepare themselves through 'hearing and contemplation' before they engage in any of the practices. The path of the Vajrayana is no exception. I can't help but feel frustrated when I hear that Buddhadharma is being labelled a 'cult'. Perhaps more than any other world religion, Buddhadharma actively encourages its followers to apply critical thinking to everything it teaches. By hearing, contemplating and analysing the Dharma, we develop an unshakable trust and devotion for the path. This must be what the Rigpa Sangha must have done because all over the world, despite of a roller-coaster eighteen months, you continue to gather together on the 10th day for the Guru Rinpoche tsok, the

25th day for the Dakini tsok, and for daily Riwo Sangchö, Tendrel Nyesel and Vajrakilaya practices. This suggests that somewhere along the way, you must have realized that the Buddhadharma is not just the Vajrayana and that the Vajrayana is not just a person called Sogyal Rinpoche. You must also have realized how much wisdom there is in the Buddhadharma and how many skilful means it offers to help both oneself and others. This is how you, as a Sangha, have kept the spirit of Rigpa alive. It is also why Rigpa hasn't fallen apart. And for me, if this is not confirmation that the Dharma has taken root in the West, that firm foundations have been laid and that the Dharma in general, and especially the Vajrayana, are now sprouting shoots, I don't know what is.

At the same time, I know that many of you are confused, disappointed, even desperate and depressed. And who wouldn't be in such a situation? What's impressive, though, is that however wretched you feel, you have all remained devoted to the path of Shakyamuni Buddha.

When any system is transplanted to a new place and culture – political, commercial, educational or religious – it often faces innumerable difficulties and challenges for a very long time before it can be said to be firmly established. This is doubly true for the sacred path of the Dharma. No one ever said that following a spiritual path was going to be easy! The teachings are full of information about potential obstacles that will continually test a practitioner's character, especially in the Vajrayana.

At this point, I would like to encourage all of you to continue to listen to and contemplate the Buddhadharma. In fact, I would like to request that you never stop listening to and contemplating the Dharma, particularly the Vajrayana, because by doing so, you will come to realize that it is utterly flawless. The more you listen and contemplate with an open mind, the more confident you will become about the path. As your confidence in the path and its result increases, even surrendering to a guru and following the path of the guru will become the exact opposite of precarious! In other words, what had seemed to be a risky path will instead be safe and secure.

Most of the Rigpa Sangha are practitioners of the Vajrayana, so undoubtedly, you will have taken the bodhisattva vow. As followers of the bodhisattvayana path, you know that your path is the path of long-term planning – in this case, your plan or aspiration is to enlighten all sentient beings. You also know that bodhisattvas mean what they say, so this aspiration is not just some kind of a feel-good fantasy. And having taken the bodhisattva vow, you know that the big vision of the bodhisattva path is to propagate, preserve and introduce the Buddhadharma to all those who have a karmic connection with it.

Rigpa has been a very effective vehicle for Buddhadharma. Through Rigpa, a great many people have been introduced to the Dharma. You should continue this activity.

Never imagine that the propagation and preservation of the Dharma is the job of just one person. I have always considered Rigpa to be very important in terms of upholding, preserving and introducing the Dharma to the western world. I still see it that way, now more than ever. Each and every Rigpa student should bear this in mind. Of course, I don't mean that you should all take on teaching roles! Rather that Rigpa's network of Dharma centres around the world should continue to provide everything students and practitioners need to study and practice the Dharma, including a good teaching programme through which those who are interested can meet authentic Dharma teachers. Basically, that Rigpa continues to provide a vessel that creates the causes and conditions through which the Dharma is upheld, preserved and introduced for the benefit of all, now and for years to come. This activity is so important and it also sends out all the right signals.

Yes, Rigpa's image has been tarnished over the past year or so. But for decades many of Rigpa's activities earned it a good and wholesome reputation. Rigpa's positive, beneficial contributions to the Dharma far outweigh the bad, so it would be silly to dwell on the difficulties. Instead, we must look at what we can learn from this situation, correct the misunderstandings and errors, and make Rigpa even better. This is what the bodhisattvayana path is all about. Bodhisattvas of the past have gone to extraordinary lengths to help sentient beings – some crossed oceans of fire and others willingly leapt into the hell realms in order to preserve the Dharma and for the sake of helping others. In the light of such heroism and valour, will we allow ourselves to be daunted by a few avoidable obstacles that are entirely transformable?

Many of you have taken the Vajrayana to heart. And despite everything that has happened, many of you also continue to feel an unwavering devotion for your master, Sogyal Rinpoche. This is your choice. If you choose to follow the Vajrayana path of your own free will, sensibly, soberly and with the utmost devotion – basically, if you know exactly what you are doing – all I can say is that I rejoice at your decision and am full of admiration for you. Other people may criticize your devotion for Sogyal Rinpoche, but their approval of your path is far less important than your decision to follow it.

There have been, are, and always will be people whose sense of personal dissatisfaction leads them to oppose, slander and, I dare say, even thirst for Rigpa's ultimate destruction. Instead of wishing such people ill, we must always remember that we are followers of the Buddha. We must therefore feel compassion for all those who stand against us and try to understand the cause of their pain – especially if they were once our Dharma brothers and sisters. Try to embrace them with compassion and pure perception. And rest assured, if their pursuit of the Dharma is genuine, sooner or later they will see the truth and find a path back.

Yours in Devotion to Guru Padmasambhava,
Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche
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