

Obituary

Our former Director, Bermiok Rinpoche Tashi Densapa passed away at Manipal Central Referral Hospital on the morning of November 13, 2021. With his passing, Sikkim and the Buddhist world lost a leading light and luminary.

Bermiok Rinpoche was born on January 10, 1942 to Bermiok Athing Tashi Dadul Densapa and Chamkusho Yonten Dolma, sister of Gyalyum Dechen Dolma of Sakya Phuntsok Phodrang. At an early age, he was recognized as a reincarnation of his paternal uncle, Bermiok Kusho Karma Palden Choegyial who was the State Lama of Sikkim and through him as the third reincarnation of Simick Rechen Drubwang Wosel Dorjee by His Holiness the XVIth Gyalwa Karmapa.

However, Bermiok Athingla eschewed a monastic education for a western one for his son. Rinpoche got his schooling from Mount Hermon School, Darjeeling, majored in Political History from St. Stephens, Delhi University and subsequently went on to do his post-graduate studies at Washington University, Seattle, U.S.A. Upon his return from the States, he had a brief stint as the Assistant Director at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology which he would return to helm later in his life. Rinpoche then joined government service and ably served in various departments such as Tourism and Culture and in capacities such as Managing Director, STCS and Resident Commissioner of Sikkim House in New Delhi before ultimately superannuating as Secretary to the Government of Sikkim.

Post retirement, Rinpoche took over the reins of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) on March 14, 2002 as its new Director. This marked a definitive and most productive epoch for both Rinpoche and the NIT. He went on to dedicate almost two decades of his life to the NIT and distinguish himself during his stint- the longest ever by any incumbent- as a visionary leader of unwavering commitment and unsurpassable zeal; he infused fresh life into and lifted the institute out of the doldrums and steered it towards its acme. It was under his peerless guidance that the NIT went on to reclaim its position as a premier institute for the preservation and promotion of Buddhist ethos in the trans-Himalayan region thus keeping alive the dream of our Founder President Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal.

Rinpoche expanded and revitalized the academic thrust areas by initiating the Sikkim Studies that focused on Sikkim-centric research, of particular note the Sikkim Ritual Video Archive and the Historic Photographs of Sikkim projects. Concurrently, he got on board Tibetan Buddhist scholars to spearhead research on various aspects of Buddhism with a special focus on Sikkim which resulted in a large number of important publications in both Tibetan and English to serve as a corpus of resources for the benefit of posterity. He was always keen that we research and document as much as we could before it was too late.

He used his strong networking skills and leveraged his many alumni and other contacts in various Ministries of the Central Government to get the requisite funding for the many new projects he implemented at the cash- strapped institute while simultaneously getting funding for the digitization of the existing resources of the NIT. With the help of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Government of India, he took great initiative in developing the digital Tibetan language and making the digitized wealth of Buddhist wisdom in the collection of the NIT easily accessible to the Buddhist world at large.

A progressive and able administrator, under his stewardship, the NIT infrastructure grew to include perimeter fencing against encroachment, the addition of the new Conference Hall and Library complex and new hostel and apartment accommodation; NIT concurrently grew in leaps and bounds

in its organizational skills and was soon organizing and hosting international conferences as well as a series of workshops and lectures on topics as varied as Science, Spirituality and Education and Quantum Physics and Emptiness in Buddhist Philosophy.

However, Rinpoche always voiced his concern over the continued future of the NIT and felt that the way forward was to morph into a Buddhist university. Interestingly, in 2016, the State Government mooted the proposal for the establishment of the first Buddhist University in Sikkim, and NIT was entrusted with this huge responsibility. Rinpoche proved himself more than equal to embark on this ambitious project, and along with the new OSD Mr KN Bhutia, he actuated a plan of action that included the starting in 2017 of the Post Graduate programme in Buddhist and Tibetan Studies and the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa under the Sikkim University as per UGC norms and with the due approval of the State Government. The Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India sanctioned funding for the infrastructure development of the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa which today boasts its own academic block, hostel block, pharmacy, clinic and herbal garden and is on the verge of churning out the first batch of newly minted Amjilas of the BSRMS course equivalent to MBBS. The MA Buddhist and Tibetan Studies programme is in its third intake.

It was primarily to consolidate and see his passion project to successful completion that Rinpoche opted to serve from mid-2019 until his retirement in February, 2021 as an Honorary Director with only a nominal salary. He left on a high note with the Institute on a sustained growth trajectory and a legacy hard to match forget surpass.

Outside of his activities at NIT, Rinpoche was very active in the preservation and promotion of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the social, religious and cultural ethos of his native Sikkim. While possibly not an exhaustive list, some of the various positions he held are:

Founding Member of the International Buddhist Confederation, New Delhi

Member of the Mahabodhi Society of India, Kolkata.

Advisor to HH Gyalwa Karmapa Orgen Trinley Dorje and Chairman of one of his Charitable Trusts

Advisor to Sakya Dolma Phodrang Foundation, Dehra Dun

Advisor to Rumtek Labrang

Advisor to Mingyur Rinpoche's Labrang

Chairman of Sakya Tashi Choeling Trust

Member of the Executive Council of Sikkim University

Rinpoche was also a generous philanthropist and donated land at Alu Bari, South Sikkim to Sakya Tashi Choling and Mindroling Penam Rinpoche for the establishment of their monasteries. He also re-built the Simick Sangag Dudul Ling monastery of his predecessor at Simick Lingzey. This was the first monastery in Sikkim to incorporate earthquake-resistant engineering design. He also built the Nyama Lhakhang at Simick. Simick monks came on record to state that Rinpoche in his lifetime had expressly evinced his desire to be cremated at his monastery there, but this was sadly not to be.

Rinpoche's untimely demise has been a monumental loss not only to us here at NIT and Sikkim in particular but to the entire Buddhist world at large. His Dharma activities were diverse and innumerable, and his demise leaves a huge vacuum. But in the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we take succour in the fact that he 'lived a meaningful life in the service of others.' We condole his family and share their grief in this darkest hour.

As a mark of respect for the departed soul, the Director, NIT has declared November 16, 2021 as a holiday for the institute. A huge prayer meeting was held on November 15, 2021 in the NIT Conference Hall with the full attendance of NIT staff as well as the Faculty of Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist and Tibetan studies. Tsogbhum and Tongchoe will also be offered by the NIT at the Chorten monastery on November 19, 2021. Monlom recitation and Gyamchod will be offered every morning henceforth at the NIT until the 49 th day for the swift rebirth of Rinpoche.

Om Ami Dewa Hri!

Director and Staff of Namgyal Institute of Tibetology