A Short Biography of Ven. Geshe Dhamcho Gyaltsen

Born in 1934 in a small village in the eastern province of Kham, Tibet, Ven. Dhamcho Gyaltsen entered Thupten Nyishar Ling Monastery at the young age of five. Cared for by his teachers, he quickly learned reading and writing and soon were memorizing prayers and compositions by great masters. He mastered the Buddhist ritual protocols by the age of eighteen. Realizing the need to understand the profound implications and meanings of the rituals he left his homeland for Central Tibet to study the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni. After several months of journey across Tibet's rugged landscape he finally reached Lhasa, the Land of gods, in 1952 and joined Drepung Loseling monastery. Under the tutelage of great masters such as Gen. Lhakyab, Lochoe Rinpoche, Gen Pema Gyaltsen and Gen. Nyima Gyaltsen he began his formal study of Buddhist philosophy starting with Buddhist logic, epistemology and philosophical tenets. He devoted years of hard work and mastered the subtle views of the Middle Way School, the vast metaphysical interpretations of abhidharma and the intricate yet complete stages of Buddhist paths.

The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the subsequent subjugation and suppression of the Tibetans completely disrupted the lives of all the Tibetans and eventually forced hundreds of thousands of Tibetans into exile in 1959. Along with hundreds of monks from his and other monasteries, Ven. Dhamcho followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama into exile. Under the auspices of the Indian government temporary institutions were set up at Buxar, in northern India, for the thousands of monks who were pouring into India and who had nothing but the robes on their bodies and rosaries on their wrists. Amidst chaos and confusion a small order was established and monks went back to the routine of studying and practicing in strange and harsh conditions. In Buxar he was appointed the House Master with responsibilities to care for hundreds of monks. Because of shortages of qualified teachers, senior students who had excelled in scholarship were asked to teach. Thus, began Ven. Dhamcho's career as a teacher. He mainly taught Perfection of Wisdom and Madhyamika to his students.

Despite all these responsibilities Ven. Dhamcho worked hard to finish his own studies and at every opportunity he consulted his teachers to unravel Buddha's ultimate view. In 1970, the Three Seats (of scholars) were shifted to the southern state of Karnataka. The shift involved plenty of hard labor including cutting down forests, felling trees and breaking ground to plant crops, constructing new houses and monks’ quarters, laying roads and digging wells. All the monks irrespective of their age participated in the works. Like other monks he toiled hard in the fields during the day and studied at night to complete his study of the Five Major Treatises. In 1979, at the age of forty five he took the Geshe exams and received the highest degree of Geshe Lharampa.

A year later he received a letter from the Private Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama instructing him to teach at Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD) in Dharamsala. With long and extensive experiences in teaching he became one of the main teachers at the Institute and the students immediately loved his teaching style. In 1995, Geshe Dhamcho
traveled to the United States at the request of the Department of Cultural and Religious Affairs and visited some twenty seven Christian centers and monasteries. He met with abbots, abbesses and many religious heads, sharing with them the Buddhist view and mode of conduct. In return he was introduced to Christian way of life and Jesus' teachings which Geshe la feels enriched his own understanding of the world religious traditions. Over the years he had traveled to numerous times to Taiwan, Japan, Mongolia and Israel to teach Buddhism.

In April 1997, Geshe Dhamcho was appointed as the Director of both the IBD and the Sarah Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies by His Holiness after the sudden demise of the former Director Ven. Lobsang Gyatso. Geshe Dhamcho Gyaltsen has since then been developing the two academic institutes which have garnered strong reputation in the exile community. His profound understanding of the views of the Buddhism and clear explanation of the subtle differences of the path has earned Geshe Dhamcho immense respect and love from his students. His gentle personality and warm heart have attracted students from all over the world. Yet Geshe Dhamcho remains epitome of humility and a true practitioner.

1 This biography was compiled by Tsondue Samphel from Jamtse (Love & Compassion), Vol. 1, 1998, published by Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, pp. 133-134.