

# Bringing Youthful New Leadership to JEWEL HEART



## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Spiritual Director Demo Rinpoche

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Interview begins on next page



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## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Spiritual Director Demo Rinpoche



By Madonna Gauding  
Photography by Hilary Nichols (and other photos courtesy of Jewel Heart)



*(Editor’s Note: Here’s some historical context for this in-depth interview with Demo Rinpoche, Resident Spiritual Director of Jewel Heart Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, based in Ann Arbor. Jewel Heart was founded in the mid-1980’s by Gelek Rinpoche, Aura Glaser, and Sandra Finkel. Gelek Rinpoche was an incarnate lama within the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. “Rinpoche” means “previous jewel” in the Tibetan tradition, and it is an honorific most often given to someone recognized as a reincarnation of a previous master.*

*Jewel Heart has had an impact not just locally, but nationally and internationally, as a center for Buddhist teaching.*

*A few years before Jewel Heart’s founding, in 1982, Aura Glaser founded Crazy Wisdom Bookstore, which she located on East Ann Street. She moved the store to North Fourth Avenue in 1984. Glaser sold the bookstore to Jonathan Ellis and Bill Zirinsky in 1989. Jon Ellis departed after four months but has remained a trusted mentor. Bill Zirinsky and Ruth Schekter, husband-and-wife, have shepherded forth the bookstore for the last 32 years. They moved the store to Main Street in 1999 and added a Tea Room. The Crazy Wisdom Journal began in 1995. In its January thru April 2001 issue (# 17), the cover story was Zirinsky’s multi-dimensional 16,250 word interview with Gelek Rinpoche. It is still available on our archive at: <http://bit.ly/gelekrinpoche>. So, Crazy Wisdom’s connectedness to Jewel Heart goes back many years.)*

*Demo Rinpoche, a 40-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk and incarnate lama, who has spent most of his life studying in monasteries in India with thousands of other monks, and under the Dalai Lama’s direct supervision, now lives on his own in a simple apartment in Ypsilanti, Michigan. He is the nephew of the late Gelek Rinpoche, founder of Jewel Heart Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center. Since 2018, he has served as Jewel Heart’s Resident Spiritual Director. He is available to teach anyone who would like to learn about the Tibetan Buddhist path.*

*Rinpoche has an impressive resume of lifelong monastic and religious studies starting at age five, when he entered Drepung Loseling Monastery in Mundgod. He officially joined the monastery in 1987 where he spent nearly thirty years of uninterrupted education in meditation, debate, memorization, philosophy, and composition under the Dalai Lama’s direct supervision. After completing his studies at Drepung, Rinpoche received the highest monastic degree of Geshe Lharampa from Gelugpa University in India in 2011. He continued his studies at Gyume Tantric College and was a visiting scholar under the auspices of the Dalai Lama at Sarah College of Higher Tibetan Studies in Dharamsala. At the request of the late Gelek Rinpoche, Demo Rinpoche came to the United States, where he received his master’s degree in Inter-Religious Engagement from Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 2018.*

*Please note: Demo Rinpoche spells “Rinpoche” with an “n” while Gelek Rinpoche spelled “Rimpoche” with an “m” later in his life.*





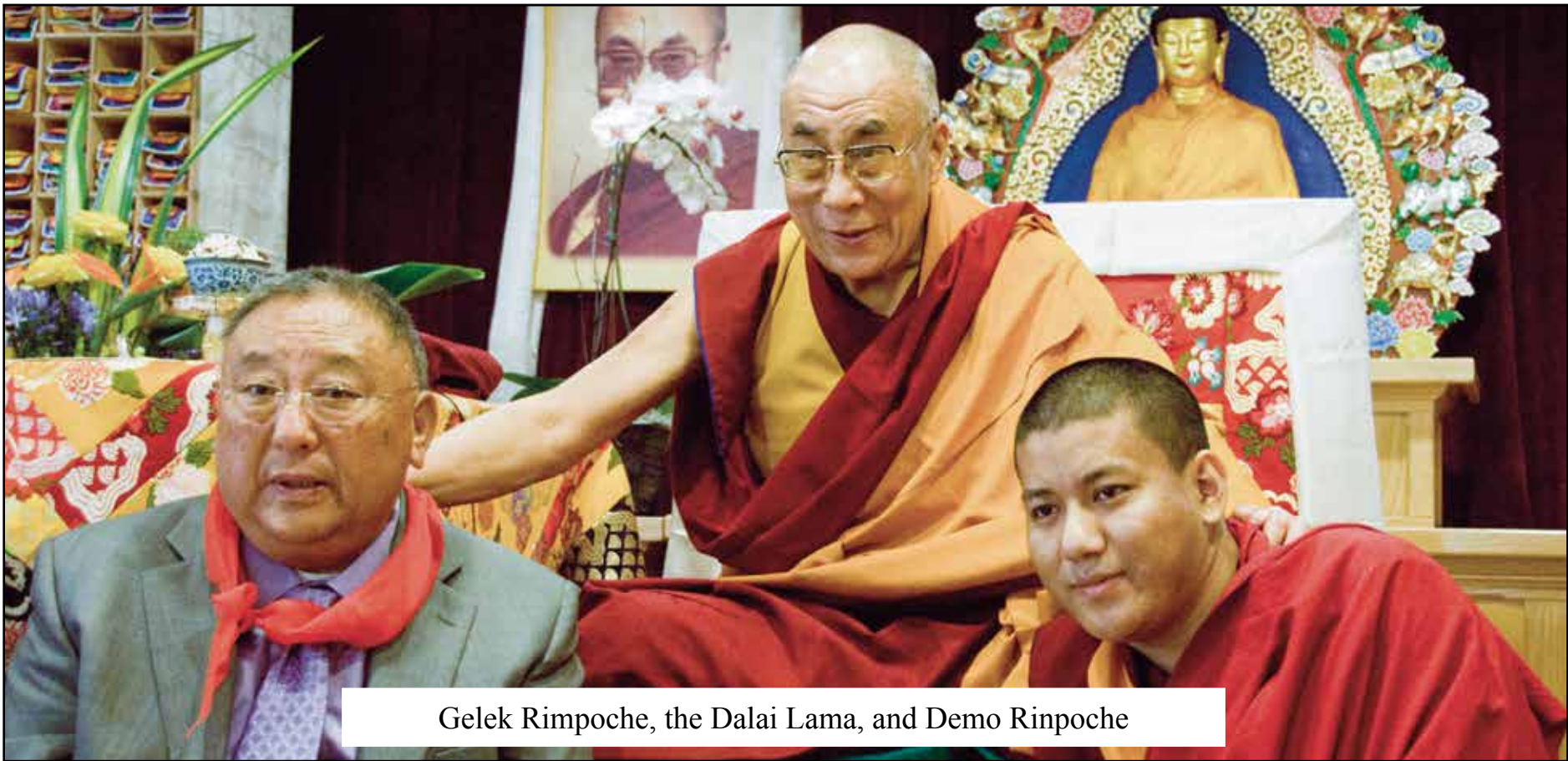


Photo by Peter van Wanrooij

Gelek Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and Demo Rinpoche

**Madonna Gauding:** Hello Rinpoche, it’s great to have this opportunity to talk with you. I would like to introduce you to the Crazy Wisdom community, let them know about your background and how you came to teach at Jewel Heart Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in Ann Arbor. Let’s start with your relationship to the late Gelek Rinpoche, the founder of Jewel Heart, who passed away in February of 2017. Can you tell me how you are connected?

**Demo Rinpoche:** In this life, Gelek Rinpoche was my uncle. I am the son of his youngest brother. That is one relationship. Then, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we have this system of reincarnation. In that system, I am the reincarnation of Gelek Rinpoche’s father, who was also my grandfather, the late Demo Rinpoche. My grandfather was the 10th reincarnation of the first Demo Rinpoche, and I am the 11th.

**Madonna Gauding:** When did you first know your uncle, Gelek Rinpoche?

**Demo Rinpoche:** I met him for the first time in India, in 2001, when I was about 20 years old. At that time, he invited me to visit him in Ann Arbor and to meet his students at Jewel Heart. My first visit was in 2006, and after that, I visited him often, about every two years. During that time, he encouraged me to consider a Western university degree after I completed my monastery training. In 2016, at his request, I began my studies toward a master’s degree in Inter-Religious Engagement at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Unfortunately, my uncle, Gelek Rinpoche, passed away in 2017. It was his wish that, after I finished my degree, I make myself available to teach Jewel Heart sangha members. Even though Jewel Heart has branches in New York, the Netherlands, Singapore, and elsewhere, I felt it would be best to be with the community in Ann Arbor. In 2018, after I completed my degree at Union Theological Seminary, I moved to Ann Arbor and became the Resident Spiritual Director of Jewel Heart.

**Madonna Gauding:** A lot of people are intrigued by the reincarnation system in Tibetan Buddhism, so I would like to explore that a little further. How old were you when you were identified as the reincarnation of your grandfather, the 10th Demo Rinpoche?



**The first moment the Dalai Lama saw me he said, “Welcome Demo Rinpoche!” That was a bit of a shock.**

**—Demo Rinpoche**

**Demo Rinpoche:** I was about five years old when several incarnate lamas recognized me as the reincarnation of Demo Rinpoche. They felt I was different than other kids my age and saw several other signs that led them to that conclusion, but they wanted to know if His Holiness the Dalai Lama would agree. Around that time, my parents had wanted to visit His Holiness and they took me with them to his residence in Dharamsala, India. The first moment the Dalai Lama saw me he said, “Welcome Demo Rinpoche!” That was a bit of a shock. Six months after that meeting, after conducting special meditations and tests, the Dalai Lama confirmed I was the reincarnation of my grandfather, and I became the 11th Demo Rinpoche. After my official recognition, His Holiness arranged for me to go to Drepung Loseling Monastery in Mundgod, India because, before the Chinese takeover, when Drepung Loseling was in Tibet, all the Demo Rinpoches had trained there. So, in 1987, at the age of five, I joined Drepung Loseling.

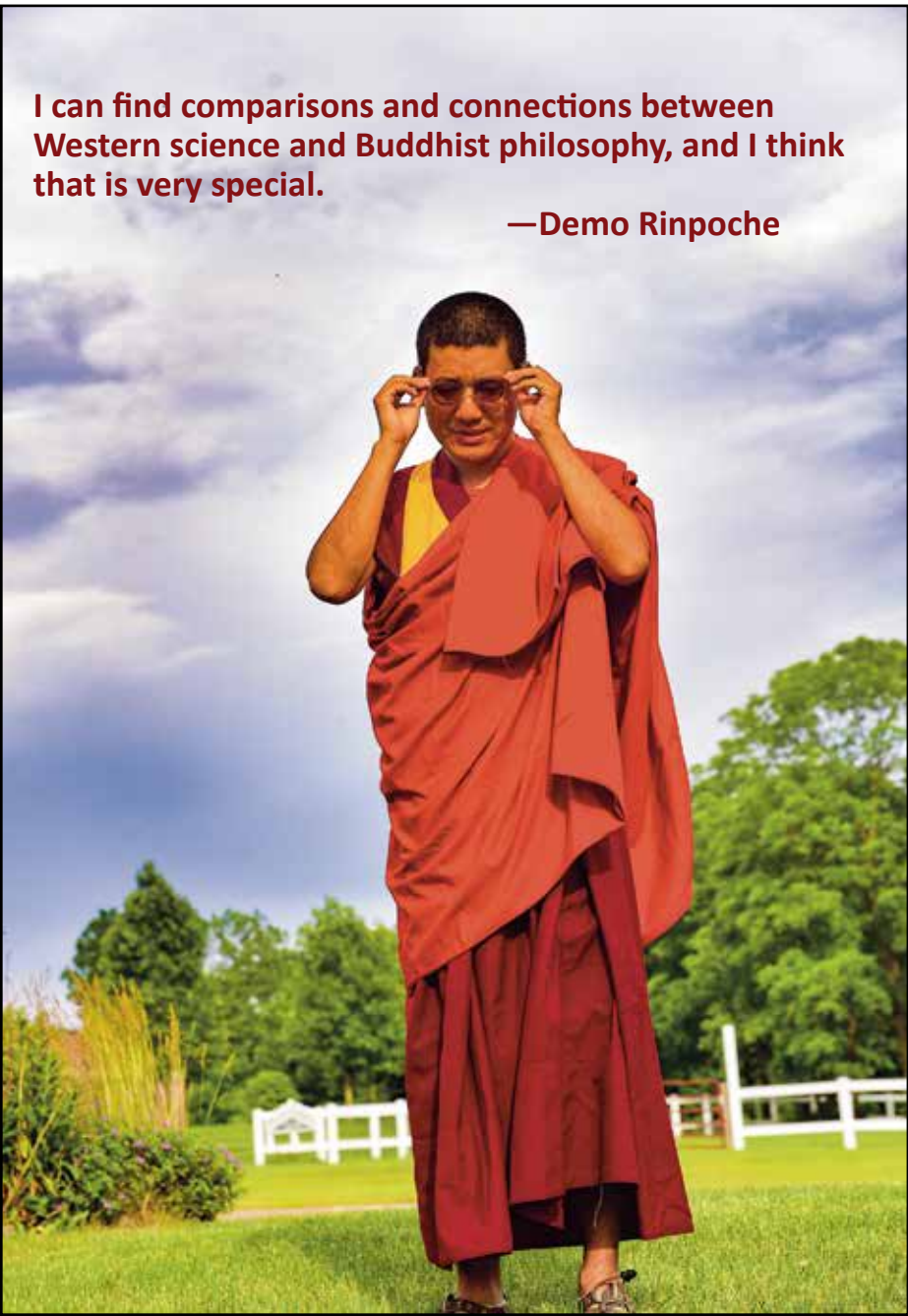
**MG:** Was it hard to leave your parents and your family at such a young age?

**DR:** In the beginning I missed my parents, but after a short while I became used to life in the monastery. None of the other kids had their parents with them and my tutors took good care of me, so I didn’t feel lonely. When I first came to the

monastery, I was a little kid and not yet capable of learning Tibetan philosophy and dharma teaching. So, my first years were spent learning how to read, write, and memorize. Then, when I was ten years old, I started my formal monastic training and began attending dharma teachings. I lived and studied there for quite a long time and eventually received the highest monastic degree, the Geshe Lharampa degree, in 2011.

**MG:** I understand that monastic training involves a lot of memorization. That’s something we don’t do in the West. Our kids rarely learn to memorize. After you got your Geshe Lharampa degree, you went on to study at the Gyume Tantric College in Karnataka, India. Was the training different than at Drepung Loseling?

**Continued on page 72**



**I can find comparisons and connections between Western science and Buddhist philosophy, and I think that is very special.**

**—Demo Rinpoche**



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## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Spiritual Director Demo Rinpoche



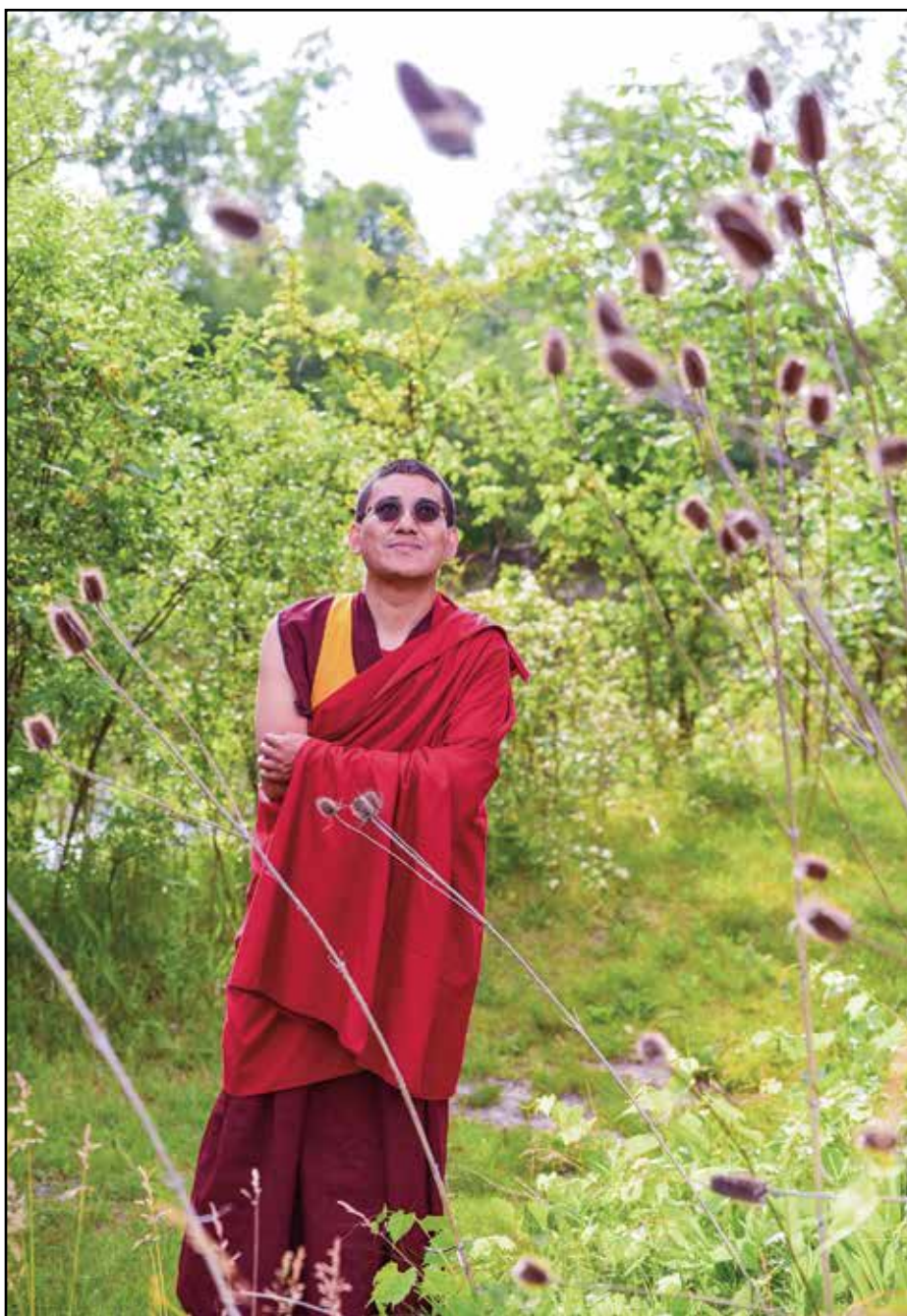
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**DR:** Both the training and daily life were different at Gyume. We had some religious studies, but we spent a lot of time doing spiritual practice, saying long prayers and sadhanas. We would get up really early in the morning, sometimes one or two a.m. They would tell us at the last minute in the evening when we were going to be awakened the next morning, and it would be different every day. We would be in prayer session until the afternoon, maybe three or four o'clock. It was really just a lot of intensive practice. We could take a break for maybe 15 minutes. That was it. At Drepung Monastery, we had our daily spiritual practice, but we spent a lot of time in teachings. Then, we would also practice debate. Our way of debating is a special invention of Tibetan Buddhism. In India, there had always been religious debate, where two people would present opposing views of a topic. The Tibetan system is unique. It is very formal and physical and takes place outside in a debate yard. There are lots of rules. One person sits and the other stands, and every point the



**We were not allowed to bring any books or notes into the debate yard, so everything had to be in our head. As you mentioned earlier about memorization, you have to rely on your memory of basic texts and other material to make your points.**

—Demo Rinpoche



standing person makes, he has to make a hand gesture and move in a certain way. He is required to follow certain rules of logic, and to use certain language. This is a very active and dynamic form of debate. There is no way one can debate in a sleepy mood. We were not allowed to bring any books or notes into the debate yard, so everything had to be in our head. As you mentioned earlier about memorization, you have to rely on your memory of basic texts and other material to make your points. Without memorization it is very hard to debate.

**MG:** It sounds like the Tantric College was much more practice oriented.

**DR:** Actually, there are two kinds of monks at the Tantric College. Some are long term. They study for ten or fifteen years. And then there are monks like me who had just completed their Geshe Lharampa degree at another monastery. We already have a lot of training, so we only spend a year there. Every month we study a different practice.

**MG:** After your time at the Tantric College did you go back to Drepung?

**DR:** In 2013, I went back to Drepung and worked for the monastery's examination board. All Geshe Lhampas are required to do this, however, because I am an incarnate lama, I could have been excused from it. One of my teachers said to me, "So far you have been conducting yourself as an ordinary monk. You never took advantage of your position to get out of exams or other work. This is your last job at the monastery, so you should do it and complete it." He thought I had handled myself well and I am happy I did it. His Holiness wanted me to serve on the examination board as well.

My job on the examination board was not that long, but it was an important job, and a big responsibility. At Drepung, everything depends on the annual exam. I was in charge of administering the exam to 1,500 monks. I had a team working with me. We had to not only administer the exam, but also make the results clear. Our team worked together well, and all of the monks were satisfied with the process. The exam is so important that if you fail the exam you have to wait a year to do it again. It can impact your whole life. If you did poorly on the exam, made many mistakes or couldn't finish it, you may be assigned a job by your superiors you don't really want to do.

**MG:** What did you do after working on the examination board?

**DR:** I was told by his Holiness the Dalai Lama that after I finished my Geshe Lharampa degree and other responsibilities, that I should come to see him. So, in 2014, I went to Dharamsala to discuss with him what I should do next. I asked him if I should focus on learning a language, like English or Chinese, or if I should focus on meditation. He said I should focus on my language skills and arranged for me to study at Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies in Dharamsala where I studied English and Chinese. At the same time, I was a visiting scholar there and taught Tibetan Studies to other students.

As I mentioned before, Gelek Rinpoche had been encouraging to me to get a Western degree, preferably one focused on studying other religions, and by 2016 I felt my English was good enough to go to university in the United States. I looked at a lot of different schools and settled on Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University in New York City. Gelek Rinpoche helped me get into the master's program and sponsored me while I was there. The school was a very friendly and welcoming place. It was very open to students from different cultures and backgrounds, and we had a very diverse student body. There were different races



**In the West there is a tremendous focus on making money. In this country if you don't have a proper job your life will be very difficult... So here, in the United States, people need a practice that will help them calm down, slow down, get some perspective, and feel some ease in their life.**





Photo courtesy of Jewel Heart

and ethnicities, men and women, and LGBTQ students. I learned a lot, not just about other religions, but about how different people think and feel. So that was a good experience.

**MG:** Clearly, you’ve been on a wonderful, long journey of religious study and learning. So now you are the Resident Spiritual Advisor of Jewel Heart in Ann Arbor. Do you see any unique problems that American Dharma students have in their spiritual and daily life?

**DR:** After being here for a while, I noticed certain difficulties in the West, one is that everyone is running. They cannot stop running. Running is part of this culture. Whether they are dharma students or college students, most have taken out big loans and they have to work to pay them off. In the West there is a tremendous focus on making money. In this country if you don’t have a proper job your life will be very difficult. Because of that a lot of people have stress—financial stress, stress over politics, family problems. So here, in the United States, people need a practice that will help them calm down, slow down, get some perspective, and feel some ease in their life.

In Asia, Tibetan Buddhists attend teachings because they think it is the “holy” or “auspicious” thing to do. They cling to their tradition, their clothes, their language, their rituals, because it is comfortable and familiar. They are not necessarily looking for help with their personal problems through study of the dharma. They prefer to say prayers because they feel teachings are long and boring during which they will often talk a lot and not listen. Dharma students are different in the West. You are not clinging to a tradition. You don’t necessarily think of practice or teachings as holy or auspicious although after you practice for a while, you may come to that feeling. Mostly, you are motivated to study the dharma because you are looking for help with your problems, and to make sense of your life.

When I studied different religions, it became clear that they all have their own way of helping people. Buddhism may not work for some, but another religion or spiritual practice might. People say, “I was born a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim or a Buddhist” but actually we are born as a human being. You are born into a family that may follow a particular religious tradition, but you may end up in another that serves you better. You can make a choice. Surely in Buddhism we have a basic foundation of non-violence and compassion. But that doesn’t make it special, other traditions have that as well. But if you want to go deeper in Buddhism, you can—as deep as you want. It is interesting for me as a teacher. If you don’t want to go beyond the basics, I am fine with that. That is your choice. But if you want to go farther, if you want to go deeper, you can. That is available to you.

**MG:** I’ve heard you are very interested in the arts, that you are a photographer, that you like to draw, that you like to write poetry. I’m wondering how your spiritual practice influences your creative expression. Do you see your art as an extension of your spiritual practice?

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# Bringing Youthful New Leadership to Jewel Heart — Spiritual Director Demo Rinpoche —

The photos on this double-page spread are courtesy of Jewel Heart.



Photo by Kathleen Foxworthy Laritz

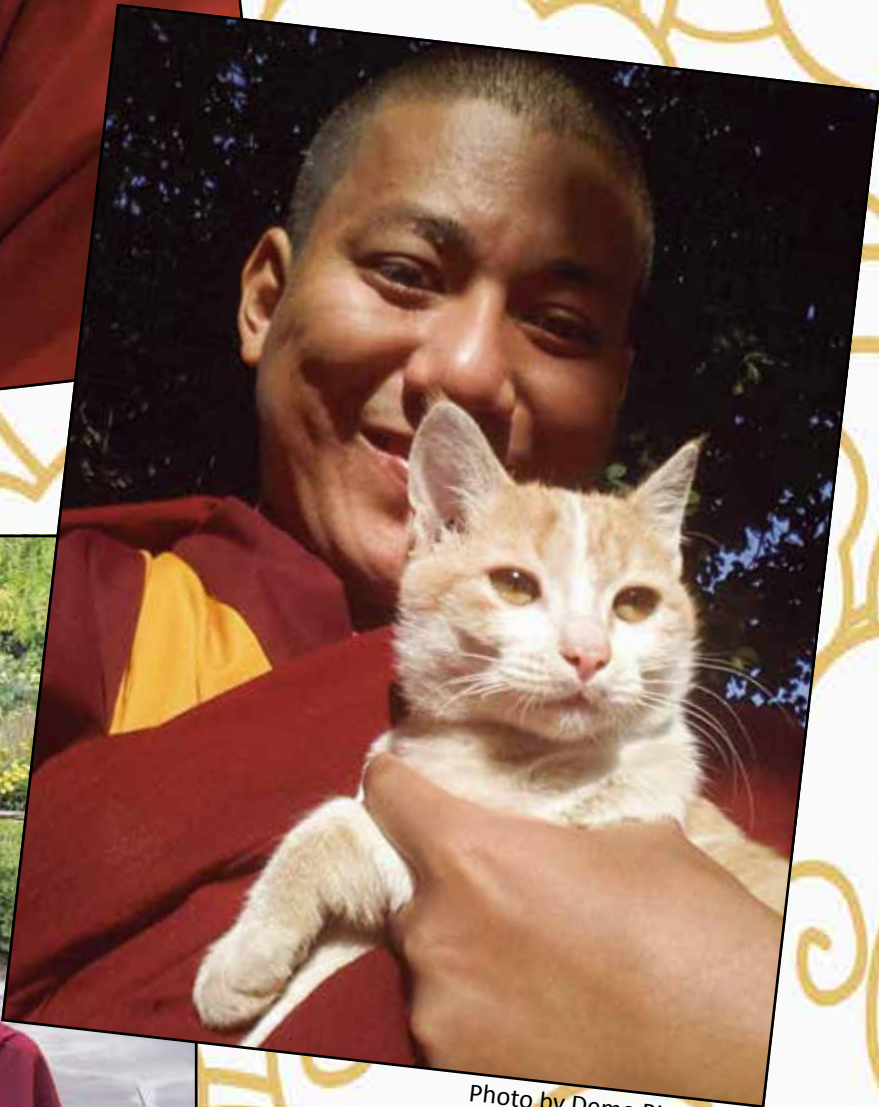


Photo by Demo Rinpoche



Photo by Wendy Weiner



A group from Jewel Heart enjoying breakfast after a teaching by Demo Rinpoche on the Four Seals of Dharma—Buddhism in a Nutshell.





In the lobby of the Jewel Heart Center in Ann Arbor, a few members of the local sangha with Rinpoche after his November 29, 2019 program in honor of the 600th anniversary of Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa tradition.



Photo by Kathleen Foxworthy Laritz

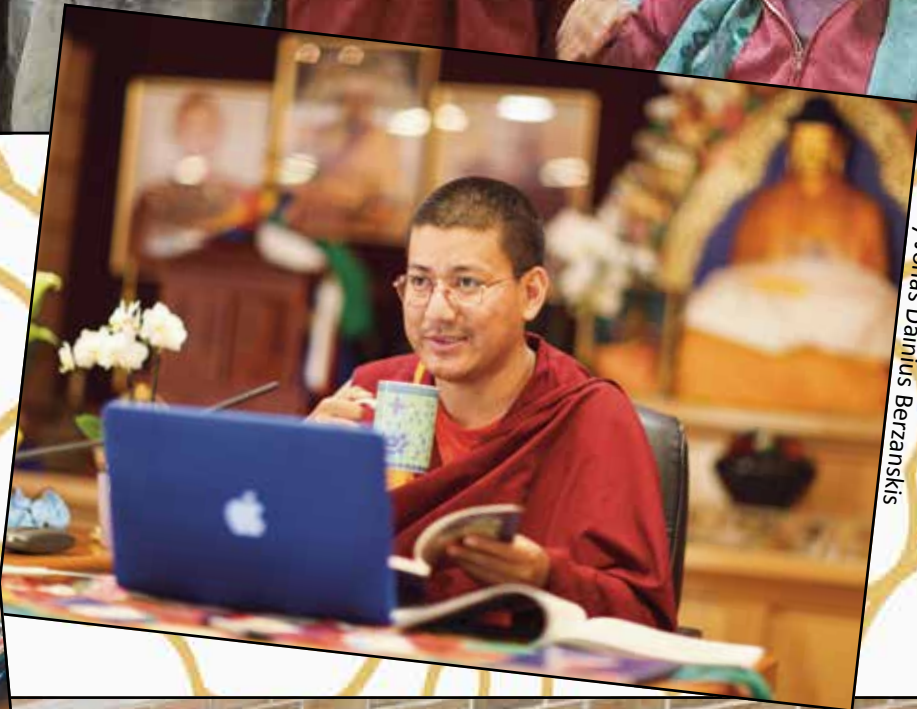


Photo by Jonas Dainius Berzanskis



April 20, 2008 - His Holiness the Dalai Lama inaugurated/ consecrated the new Jewel Heart Center while in Ann Arbor for the programs JH hosted at UM Crisler Arena. Photo by Peter van Wanrooij.



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**DR:** When I was a kid, I was a little bit different. I was more of a creative person. I wanted to create my own things, I wanted to make things by my own hand. I liked fixing things. If I got a toy, I would take it apart and see how it was put together. Later on, I started writing poems. I'm not really a good poet, but I like to write poems. If I want to express something, I write a poem. The drawing I do is kind of a funny thing because I never learned art. But when I see something in my imagination, immediately I want to draw it. Most of the time I finish it in two or three minutes. My drawings are very small. I don't do big paintings. I chose photography over art as my main expression because I didn't want to spend that much time making art. With photography, you can make an image in a really short period of time.

As far as my spiritual practice informing my art, when I write a poem, surely a lot of things are coming from my Buddhist background. I may think "Oh, this is a symbol of suffering, or impermanence, or the mind's negativity." In my photography it is the same. My dharma training influences both my poetry and my photography, especially things that are hard to explain through ordinary language. I get an image in my head and I want to create it. I also take photographs simply because I enjoy it. Photography takes me into a different kind of world. My focus is on the picture and the subject and I'm not thinking about anything else. Sometimes I call my camera "my friend." Some people like to hang out with their dog. I like to hang out with my camera. After I take a picture, I may not look at it for a long time. It will just stay on my hard drive. I think it's the process of taking a picture that I like. Poetry is my "weekend friend." When I was in the monastery, my teacher told me not to write so much poetry, and that I needed to focus on my studies. So, I decided I would not write on weekdays, just weekends and holidays, which I still do.



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—Demo Rinpoche

**MG:** I have also heard you are interested in science, and environmental issues.

**DR:** We can't ignore climate change. We have to talk about it. Nobody can ignore that. Add to that toxic landfills, and the extinction of animal species. Because we live on this earth, we are at the very least responsible to learn about these issues, care about them, and talk about them. About science in general, since I was a kid, I've always been a curious person. When I was five or six, I wanted to know if the Earth was round, how the sun goes across the sky, and the moon goes through its phases. I was fascinated that the earth was round and if you traveled as far as you can in one direction you would end up in the same place. Later, I studied cosmology on my own, and how the universe functions. I had a hard time explaining to some very old monks, things like a solar eclipse, or the phases of the moon. Having no Western science education, they thought the moon physically gets bigger and smaller. I would try to explain by rigging up light bulbs with shapes blocking the light and so on. They liked learning Western science because Buddhist cosmology doesn't explain these things. They liked to argue and it was fun trying to explain things. His Holiness has always been interested in science, not so much in cosmology, but in how things exist, and if they truly exist or not. He is interested in quantum physics and how it relates to the Buddhist concept of emptiness. I can find comparisons and connections between Western science and Buddhist philosophy, and I think that is very special. I've attended some of the Dalai Lama's Mind and Life conferences ([mindandlife.org](http://mindandlife.org)) which try to bring Western science and contemplative wisdom together.

**MG:** I've heard you are fond of dogs. Is that true?

**DR:** I've had many dogs in my life. We had a dog in my family and we really cherished that dog. When I was in the monastery, when I was eight years old, there was an elderly monk in my house who really liked dogs. He told me one day he would bring me a dog that is red in color with a black mouth. I told him I would like a dog. So, I started looking for a dog and got my first one when I was nine years old. Unfortunately, it passed away soon after I got it while I was away at teaching in Varanasi, India. That was a sad story. After that, the old monk decided I should have a small dog, not a big dog, and he brought me a small female dog. She was very special, and I had her for fourteen years. I had other dogs after her. I've always had dogs in my life up until I came to the United States.

**MG:** Are you going to get a dog?

**DR:** That is a question I haven't answered. I would say currently, no. With my responsibilities as a teacher, and sometimes having to travel, I don't know. I like dogs very much. Dogs are animals you can exchange feelings with. The Dalai Lama has always had dogs, and in general, Tibetans are really into dogs. There are many stories of dogs saving families and children.

**MG:** I want to change the topic to politics and social issues. In the past four years, with the Trump administration, and the Covid-19 pandemic, life in the United States, for many of us, has been difficult. I'm wondering what you think about the social and political situation in the United States and where you think we are headed?

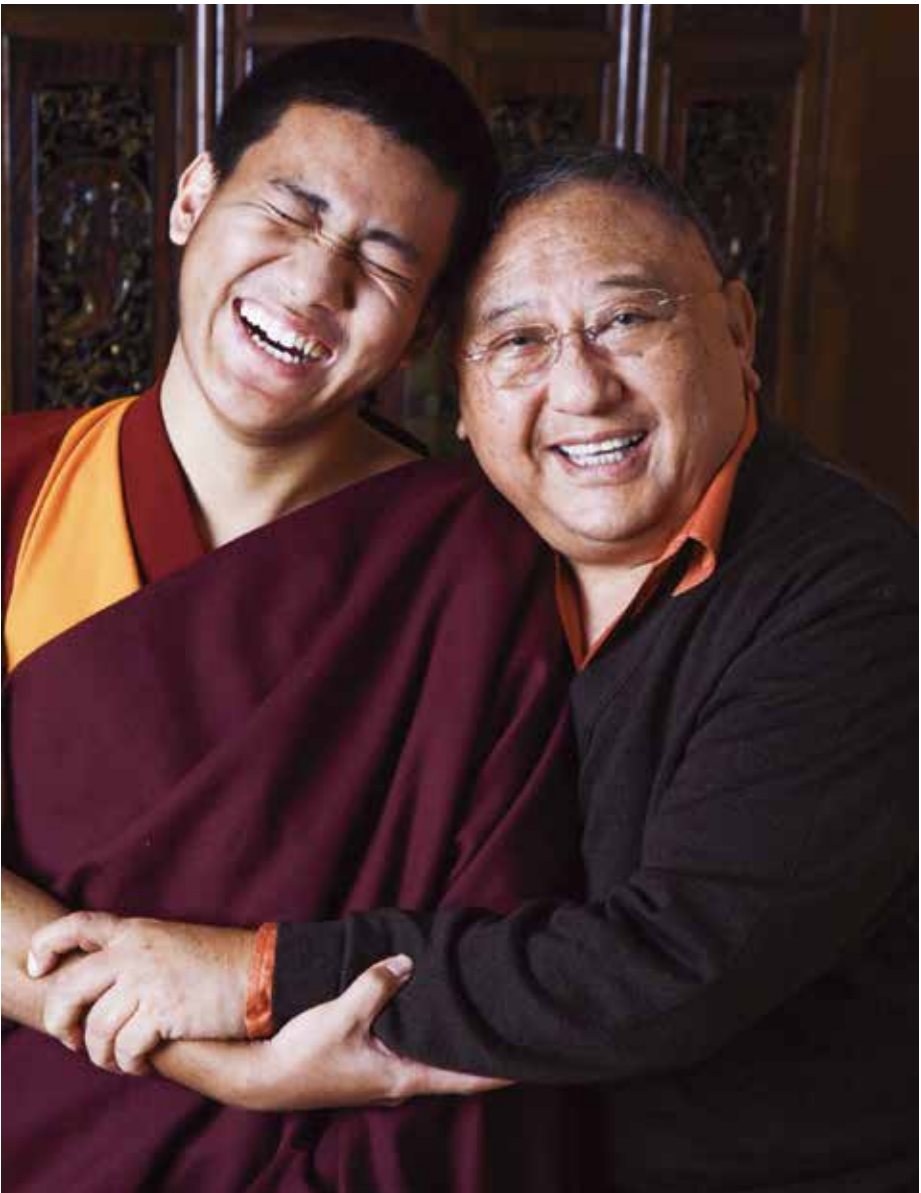


Photo Courtesy of Scott Stewart

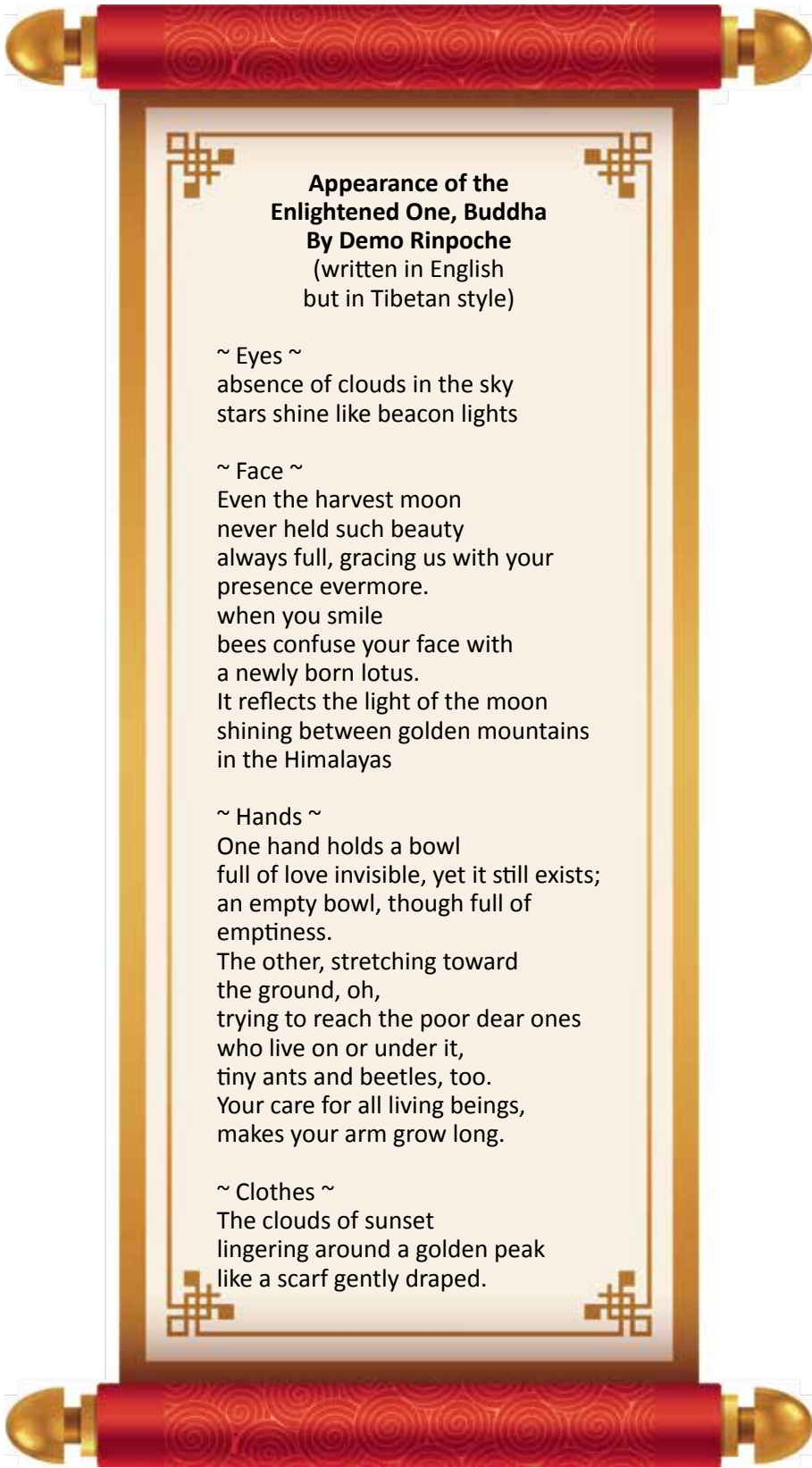


**I chose photography over art as my main expression because I didn't want to spend that much time making art. With photography, you can make an image in a really short period of time.**

—Demo Rinpoche

**DR:** That is a really big question for me. Sometimes it's hard for me to understand American politics. It is very intense. I have been asking American friends if it has always been like this. They say this is a bad time, the worst time for me to be in America. But I am an optimistic person. I don't feel this is the worst time. It's not that bad things are happening to me because I live here. I remember that, as human beings, bad things are happening to all of us, everywhere on the earth.





**Appearance of the  
Enlightened One, Buddha**  
**By Demo Rinpoche**  
(written in English  
but in Tibetan style)

~ Eyes ~  
absence of clouds in the sky  
stars shine like beacon lights

~ Face ~  
Even the harvest moon  
never held such beauty  
always full, gracing us with your  
presence evermore.  
when you smile  
bees confuse your face with  
a newly born lotus.  
It reflects the light of the moon  
shining between golden mountains  
in the Himalayas

~ Hands ~  
One hand holds a bowl  
full of love invisible, yet it still exists;  
an empty bowl, though full of  
emptiness.  
The other, stretching toward  
the ground, oh,  
trying to reach the poor dear ones  
who live on or under it,  
tiny ants and beetles, too.  
Your care for all living beings,  
makes your arm grow long.

~ Clothes ~  
The clouds of sunset  
lingering around a golden peak  
like a scarf gently draped.



**Drepung Loseling Monastery in India**

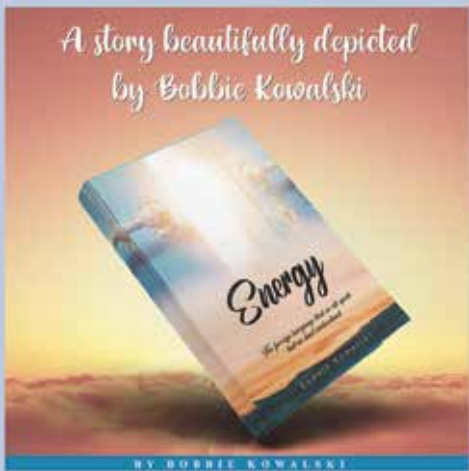
Drepung Loseling Monastery in Tibet, founded in 1416, was modeled after the great monasteries of Classical Buddhist India, namely, Nalanda and Vikramalashila, and was an institution dedicated to intense study of the traditional Buddhist arts and sciences.

Its training program requires twenty years of intense academic study, with rigorous testing and close supervision throughout, as well as six hours of debate each day. The focus of the program is the five major topics of Classical Indian Buddhism: philosophy, psychology, logic, metaphysics, and ethics. This is followed by an internship usually lasting five to ten years.

After completing this course of study and training, the student candidates are allowed to stand for the Geshe Lharampa degree. Drepung is one of only three monasteries in Central Asia with the authority to award this degree, regarded as the most prestigious honor in the Tibetan Buddhist world.

**Gyume Tantric College in India**

Gyümé Dratsang or Lower Tantric College is one of two the main tantric colleges of the Gelug tradition in Tibetan Buddhism along with Gyütö Dratsang. It was founded in Lhasa in 1440. The thirteenth Dalai Lama, Tubten Gyatso (1876-1933) made entrance into one of the two Tantric Colleges compulsory for all recipients of the two higher sutra Geshe degrees, one of which is the Geshe Lharampa degree. The main study at Gyume and Gyuto is of the tantric systems of Guhyasamaja, Chakrasamvara.



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In America, I feel the political and social situation is too sensitive. Even in family gatherings you cannot talk in a normal, open way. You have to be really aware of everyone's background and politics, who will think something is right or wrong, who will be offended. I think this is not only an American problem. Countries that have access to social media can cause every small disagreement to become a big one. Well-meaning people become wild online. You get the impression everybody is talking about something, but nobody is really communicating. My understanding of politics is that it should help everyone and bring us together. Bad politics tears down a society, allowing only a very few people to benefit.

**MG:** Do you miss living at the monastery in India?

**DR:** It depends. On a rare occasion, when disturbing or difficult things are happening, I may miss it. Surely, the monastery offers a very beautiful, serene life. And, in the monastery people are not overly sensitive. You can even joke about death. For example, we don't cry if somebody dies. Maybe only for a few minutes. Death is treated as a normal part of life. In general, the monks are not as emotionally reactive as people are here. As far as living outside of the monastery, my only requirement is that wherever I am living I need to be able to fit in. I need to be able to function on a daily basis and handle small problems as they come up. Wherever I am, whether in the monastery or here, I know I can make myself happy, I can be happy.

**MG:** I think of you having lived in a monastery surrounded by thousands of monks and yet here in Michigan, you live alone. That's a very different living situation than you've had most of your life.



**My understanding of politics is that it should help everyone and bring us together. Bad politics tears down a society, allowing only a very few people to benefit**

**—Demo Rinpoche**

**DR:** I don't have a big problem with living alone. I can manage living on my own and I'm happy with it. If I think only about myself, the monastery is like heaven. Monks don't have money, but they don't have to worry about it. They don't need social services. Everything is taken care of for them—food, shelter, clothing, health care. But it's not just about me and my needs. That's not the only consideration. Also, in my case, I always wanted to experience the world beyond the monastery.

**MG:** What is your typical day like in Ann Arbor?

**DR:** I do my studies. I read Buddhist texts. I do spiritual practice. People may think I have studied my whole life, and there is nothing more for me to study, but there is so much I haven't read or learned. I also study languages and I'm still learning English and Chinese. Then I participate in meetings and programs at Jewel Heart where I give teachings and hold retreats on a regular basis, and I have other meetings with individuals. Since Covid-19 these have mostly been held on Zoom. I also stay in touch with my friends in India via the Internet. Like everyone else, I cook my own food, I wash my own clothes, and I drive myself where I need to go. I exercise on a treadmill or a bike, and when the weather is good, I like to kayak. Because we have to social distance, the best sport right now is kayaking, out on the water away from everyone. I mostly kayak in a lake so I can go by myself and drive there myself. On a river I have to be picked up by someone else at the end.

**MG:** Thank you, Rinpoche for sharing your history and background with us. It's been great talking with you!

For more information on Demo Rinpoche's teachings and retreats visit [jewelheart.org](http://jewelheart.org).

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