

Excerpt

Q&A session with the Sakya at the 2005 Shambhala Congress

Q: The question is, does your current emphasis on Wema and Rigden and the practices and teachings from the Shambhala terma represent a de-emphasis of the traditional Kagyü and Nyingma lineage and teaching?

SMR: Is there a lawyer writing this? (Laughter)

Q: No. Some people have the sense that the Kagyü lineage in particular and also the Nyingma lineage have been at the center of what we do, and they feel that it is being marginalized.

SMR: I would not be one of those people. (Laughter) The best way to think about it is that we need a ground. Shambhala has to become the ground. Otherwise we will diversity into varied groups.

Fifty years down the road, we'll have people in groups doing various practices of Longchen Nyingthik, people doing various Nyingma practices, and others following the Kagyü tradition. There's a whole series of Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini practices in the Vidyadhara's own Surmang tradition. I am sure— translators being the way they are—they're going to translate all those. I will have to give those empowerments, and we will have those variations, and there will be less opportunity for people to come together in a particular feast practice.

Our situation is getting more complicated, and more diverse. We need some kind of binding factor. My inspiration is to lay the ground for that, and then those other practices can be protected and enhanced. It is very clear that the Kagyü tradition, and in many more ways, the Nyingma tradition, are at the heart of what we are doing. But what is that tradition? It is tantric tradition. Chakrasamvara, Vajrayogini, and the others—the yidams are the same in every lineage, whether it is Gelugpa, Sakya, Nyingma, or Kagyü. There's not a Kagyü Vajrayogini or a Nyingma Vajrayogini. Vajrayogini is the notion of prajna.

What makes it Kagyü is that someone received it from Tilopa, and then other teachers transmitted it, so that at the beginning of the sadhana, we supplicate all the teachers we received it from—Kagyü or Nyingma, whatever they were. Each tradition has a certain way of doing it, that's true. It all comes together at dzogchen and mahamudra. I think we have to go to the heart of it. We are not eliminating anything. If we are able to understand this plan—and I do feel like understanding is an important thing—we will in fact have more people doing Vajrayogini; we will have more people doing sadhana practice altogether.

For example, I might tell people who do the Shambhala ngöndro and really connect to it go ahead and do some Kagyü ngöndro. Do a few months of that and then go ahead and do some Nyingma ngöndro. I don't see what's wrong with that. But within the context of

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why you are doing Kagyü ngöndro, what makes Shambhala Shambhala? You could be doing it in a lot of other places.

I think we need to look at who we are. Are we a completely traditional Kagyü center? People often come to look at our shrine, and Tibetans don't even recognize it. It's not a Tibetan shrine. It's our own shrine. I know what a Kagyü shrine looks like. We can't operate under a false pretense. That's not being who we are. If we do that, then we are factionalizing; there are people who want to do Nyingma and other practices. We have to allow for those people to do what they are doing.

Q: The next question has to do with the planned new shrine. Many questions concerned removing the Kagyü and Nyingma lineage holders from the shrine, and whether that indicates a de-emphasis, which you've already discussed. I wonder if you could tell us about your vision for the new shrine, its meaning, and the time-line for it. When we can expect to see it?

SMR: Well, right now it's a concept. Again, we're looking who we are. For myself, it's kind of an awkward situation, because we have a shrine, and it would be good for it to represent who we are.

We are Shambhala. We are based on the principles of trying to create enlightened world. Within that, we do different kinds of practices. At the heart of that situation in terms of leadership is the lineage of Mukpo Dong, the Mukpo family lineage, which is represented in the sakyong.

The Druk Sakyong, of course, was Trungpa Rinpoche. He was a Kagyü teacher, and also a great Nyingma dzogchen master. The more he lived and taught, the more he taught from his heart, in the sense of who he was. He became more of a sakyong—a universal monarch or dharma king—trying to allow all these traditions to happen. If he had just said, "I just want Kagyü, or I just want Nyingma," we would probably have gone along with it. But he didn't. He incorporated a lot of other things.

What the Druk Sakyong expressed to me is that he wanted a family lineage of sakyongs, as opposed to a tulku lineage. That is the base of who we are in terms of leadership. That's why I'm saying that it's awkward for me. In terms of the shrine, we have Kagyü shrines with Nyingma pictures.

Over the years, the shrine itself has evolved. One of the initial shrines Rinpoche had in the early seventies was a picture of Khyentse Rinpoche and a picture of Sechen Kongtrül. The Karmapa was not there. Later the Karmapa came, and we put up the picture. Later the Dalai Lama came and we put his picture there. Then we took it down. (Laughter) People have come and gone from that shrine many times. I'm looking at the pictures saying, "Now I have pressure to put the Dalai Lama's picture on, and the reincarnation of this tulku and that tulku. This is a lose-lose situation.

We need to look at the basic principle of who we are. In terms of the Sakyong lineage,

there's the Vidyadhara. Currently, there's myself. Hopefully, there'll be more in the future. The shrine needs to reflect clearly who the lineage is. Within that, we can host a big variety of people. In my mind, we have to simplify; at the end, we'll have less confusion that way. We won't have someone saying, "I just met this guy, and I want his picture up there," or, "We're Shambhala. We should have everything up there." The shrine would end up being like a Christmas tree.

I actually believe in this principle so much that I'm happy to take my picture down and leave the Vidyadhara's picture up there. Otherwise, we'll be putting pictures on and taking them off all the time. I went to visit the seventeenth Karmapa, for example, but there are people who don't agree with that, so if we put his picture up, we eliminate them. There's Khyentse Rinpoche, and now there's his tulku. There's obviously Trungpa Rinpoche. The Tibetans say, "You don't even include the Dalai Lama's picture." Well, why are you looking at me? I hate to say it, folks, but it's politics; it's also heart connection.

This process doesn't mean we are eliminating people; we're clarifying, distilling. It's not a matter of personal choice. It's like meeting the queen of Sweden and then going to England and suggesting hanging her picture in Parliament. You're in England; you have that queen's picture. I feel like the Rigden represents the heart of who we are. We need an image that is manifest.

On some shrines, it's hard to have Vajradhara, because Vajradhara is a sambhogakaya-level buddha. Sometimes it's hard to have just Shakyamuni Buddha, because as an exterior image he represents the hinayana vows, and we are a vajrayana tradition—even though Shakyamuni is perfectly kosher. Somebody's stuck Padmasambhava up here this time. Before another program I taught, they told me that they had a couple of thangkas, and I said, "Well, it probably has to be Padmasambhava." So we put his picture up and then people said, "Oh, Rinpoche's making us Nyingmapas." (Laughter) What's wrong with Padmasambhava? He was a great guy, the root of all Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Someone suggested that people put up whatever picture they want. There's a place where you can do that, and it's called your home. (Laughter) I won't mess with that. But right now we are in the process of clarifying.

We're going to make a chöten that represents the first time the Buddha taught the Kalachakra in the tantric tradition. We will probably stupa representation of that, and keep the shrine very simple, with the notion that the Rigden—which I think we need to learn more about—represents wisdom, but also the human aspect of how one can lead one's life representing domine rigden, the Rigden of basic goodness. Here is the Rigden of basic goodness. Here is the image of those individuals who are Rigden, holders of basic goodness, or the vajra nature. That is what the shrine is representing—our own basic goodness. That is the visual image. Ultimately, these images dissolve. That's what we call dharmata. But relatively, we need these images to help us stabilize our mind.

The shrine has been an issue because it is complicated; it brings up divisions in people's ideas of things. I'm attempting to look at the future for myself and for the next

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generations of sakyongs. I'm sure there will be lots of kids and they will have offspring; the way the Tibetan world works, they will probably be recognized as various tulkus. It needs to be very clear who's in charge, so that the situation doesn't break down into bickering. Other Tibetan teachers—whose pictures, by the way, people have put on our shrines—have actually said to me, “Rinpoche, there are so many pictures for your students; less would be better. Just make it clean, because this is your center. With all those pictures, it's a little confusing whose center it is.” They say, “Has this now become this or that kind of center?”

So hopefully we can go ahead with the new shrine. Certainly, people have been sending me all kinds of ideas. But ultimately, I have to make some sort of decision. Maybe we should just have a big white space and we can project whatever we want onto there. (Laughter) Then people would accuse me of being a coward. It doesn't work, anyway.