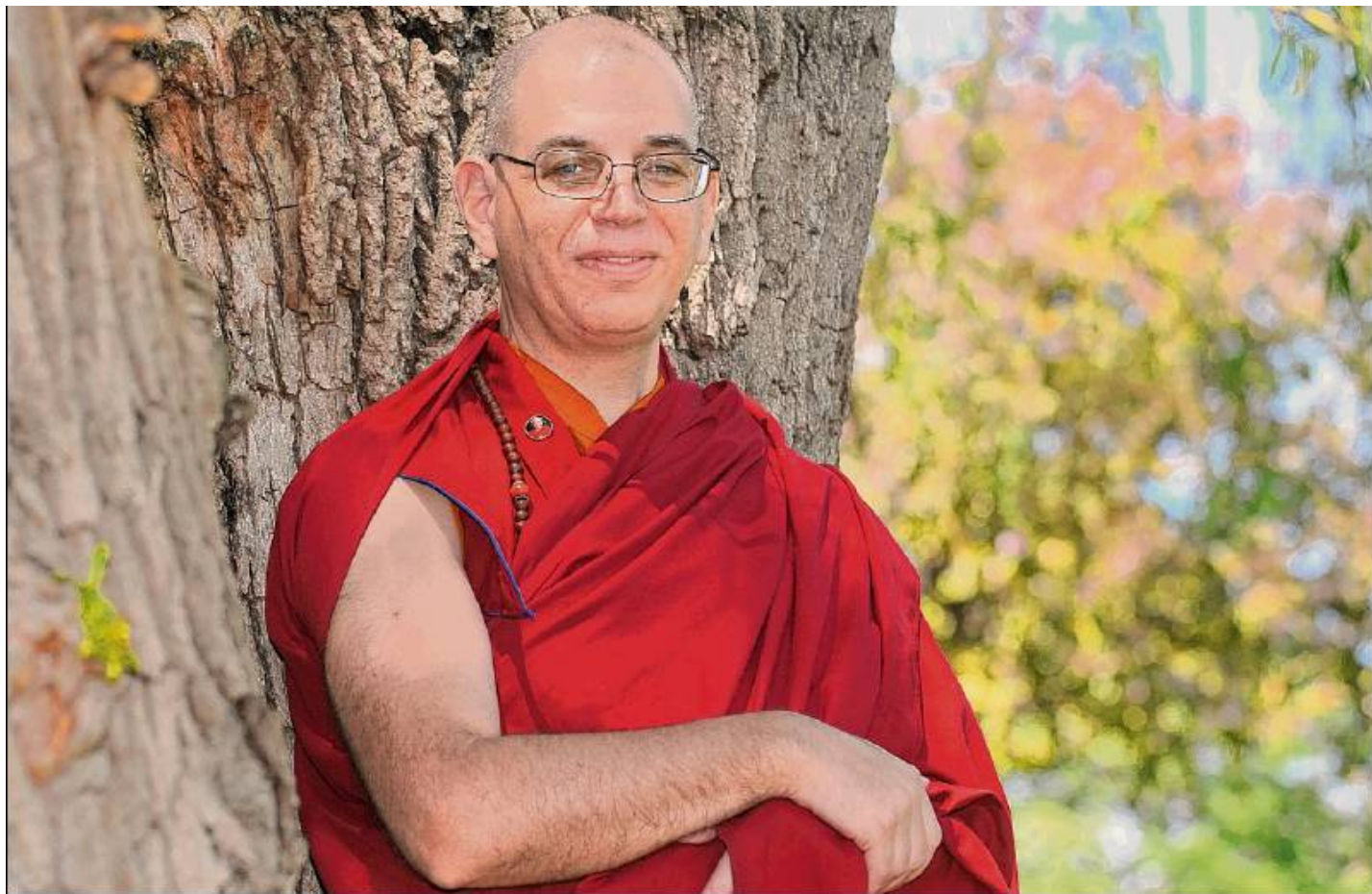


A guide on the path of Dharma

LAMA ZOPA TARCHIN



Lama Zopa Tarchin of the Albany Karma Thegsum Choling Buddhist Center gives teachings on Buddhist philosophy and practice, and leads group meditations and prayers. The Kagyu lineage to which he belongs is one of four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Its supreme leader, the 17th Karmapa, recently spent two weeks at the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in Woodstock. Lori Van Buren / Times Union

Background: Born Peter Bordin, he was raised in New Jersey and studied Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan language in India and Nepal. He is the resident lama at the Albany Karma Thegsum Choling Buddhist Center.

What led you to be a Buddhist?

I grew up Jewish but my family was never very religious. As a boy, I was philosophically inclined. When I was 16, I had many questions and was in search of answers. I read my first book on Buddhism at 17. I knew then that I was Buddhist. There was no question in my mind. My parents were supportive although at the beginning they didn't know what to make of it.

When you formally become a Buddhist, there's a ceremony called taking refuge in the Three Jewels, the three sacred sources of refuge and guidance: the Buddha as the teacher, the Dharma as the path and the Sangha as guide on the path. That came when I was 19, at a retreat near Fort Collins, Colo.

In 1996 and 1997, I studied in India and spent time in Nepal in the Kathmandu Valley where there are many Buddhist monasteries and temples. My training in meditation continued in 2000 in a three-year retreat at Karne Ling in Delaware County in the Catskills.

What's your role at the Albany KTC center?

When I came out of my second retreat in 2008, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, asked me to come to Albany as a lama for the affiliate center of KTD in Woodstock. We are a small group of about 25 members. We rent space from the Doane Stuart School on Washington Avenue in Rensselaer. I give teachings on Buddhist philosophy and practice, and lead group meditations and prayers. I guide others on the path of Dharma — the teachings of the Buddha. The point is to search for enlightenment with a teacher and to help others.

Dharma must be taught in a manner that does not involve proselytizing. We are happy to answer people's questions, but we don't look for converts. I'm a volunteer. I have sponsors who help me. I get room and board. I live a frugal life, which I am happy about. As a monk I live by precepts. Most basic are those that proscribe killing, stealing, lying, alcohol or other intoxicants, and sexual misconduct. For monks and nuns this means celibacy. For lay buddhists it refers to sexual relations outside of a committed relationship.

What's the source of your teachings?

Buddha is a title that means the Enlightened One. Gautama Siddhartha was a prince who left his kingdom in search of truth about 2,600 years ago.

After mastering the meditative traditions of the day, Siddhartha sat down under the Bodhi Tree, the Tree of Enlightenment, in present-day northern India, and awakened to enlightenment as the Buddha. He was asked to teach the Dharma he had discovered and his listeners became his disciples. The path of Dharma seeks to purify and transform the mind from the ignorance of delusion to the enlightened state of a Buddha. Meditation stabilizes the mind so that wisdom can arise within. Nirvana is a state of peace and well-being transcending thought and expression. It must be uncovered through a process of meditation.

Also important is the principle of ahimsa, a Sanskrit word that means nonviolence. We seek to help others through love and understanding — even those who may denigrate or harm us. Because the nature of Dharma is peace and compassion, there can be no justification for harming or killing living beings. If you eat meat it involves killing. I encourage others to be vegetarian or reduce the unnecessary consumption of meat.

What is distinctive about Tibetan Buddhism?

The Kagyu lineage to which I belong is one of four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The head of our lineage, the supreme master, is the Karmapa. He is the embodiment of the tradition. The 16th Karmapa passed away in 1980. Five years later, Ogyen Trinley Dorje was born in Tibet. In 1992, he was recognized as the 17th Karmapa, the rebirth or reincarnation of his predecessor. In 2000 he fled to India.

Now 30 years old, he recently concluded his third trip to the United States and spent two weeks at KTD monastery in Woodstock. He has the wisdom and compassion of his predecessors, but reincarnate lamas as children naturally don't remember everything about their previous lives. They are educated to reacquaint themselves. The Dalai Lama, while not of the same lineage, is closely related and a great master and inspiration. He is a teacher and adviser to the Karmapa. I've received many teachings from him. The Karmapa is extremely gifted in language.

Since he grew up under Chinese rule in Tibet, he speaks fluent Mandarin, and now he speaks English, as well as some Hindi, Korean and other languages. He speaks English much better than I speak Tibetan so when I need to speak with him it is always in English.

