

Email sent to the sangha 3 January 2018



Subject: Announcing Rigpa's Vision Board

Hello

As a challenging year draws to a close, and a fresh, new year begins, we are happy to share with you some heartening news about the leadership of Rigpa. News we have all been looking forward to!

For many years Sogyal Rinpoche has said that eventually he would transfer responsibility for the overview of Rigpa's work to a 'spiritual body'. In the attached letter, Rinpoche announces the new Rigpa 'Vision Board' to whom he is handing over, and the role of an advisory group of lamas who will support the Vision Board.

The second document is from Philip Philippou. It shares the story of how the Vision Board came into being, how its members were selected, more about its functions, and how it will honour Rinpoche's legacy and serve the sangha.

To ensure you have the full picture of this significant turning point in Rigpa's history, please take time to read both these documents.

We will also share updates and more information about the Vision Board at the January Sangha Gathering and in future 'Sangha Connection' newsletters.

With all our best wishes for you in this coming year
From Gill and Catherine,
On behalf of the International Holding Group



Sogyal Rinpoche

28 December, 2017

To all my friends and students,

For a number of years now I have been sharing with you my thoughts about the future of Rigpa in times to come, even beyond my own lifetime. As you know, it has always been my desire to hand over to a ‘spiritual body’—a group of students trusted by both the Sangha and myself, helped and guided by those lamas who have a close connection with us, and share a deep understanding of my vision for Rigpa.

Over the years, I have reflected on this deeply and discussed it with my lama friends and close students. As a result, we came to recognize that there were certain Sangha members who stood out on account of their understanding, experience, knowledge and dedication. Their names were all presented for divination, and a group of seven was identified, who will now form a Vision Board, to guide Rigpa forwards. Their task will be to oversee the culture of study and practice we have developed, care for the Sangha, nurture teachers, and strengthen links with other Buddhist teachers and organizations—all in the spirit that we have sought to cultivate in Rigpa over the last forty years. The Vision Board is composed, alphabetically, of: Valerie Baker, Mauro de March, Seth Dye, Patrick Gaffney, Verena Pfeiffer, Philip Philippou and Vinciane Rycroft.

To give this Vision Board precious guidance and advice, we look to the visionary lamas of today, such as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and Mindrolling Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche, who are key figures in interpreting Tibetan Buddhism in the modern world. At the same time, great scholars and holders of the tradition, such as Khenchen Namdrol, will be consulted in detail, so as to be sure to maintain the authenticity of Rigpa’s work. Thinking of the future, I must also mention that great master Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and the special relationship that he recognized between us during his unforgettable, auspicious visit to Lerab Ling in

1993. Although I was unable to take up his invitation to visit Larungar Buddhist Academy in Tibet, over recent years I have become very close to his disciples—particularly his heart sons, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and Khenpo Sodargye—and I know that Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s students hold a special place in their hearts for the Rigpa Sangha, a relationship that we all hope will flourish and grow even deeper in the very near future.

The Vision Board then will serve as a vessel to receive the wisdom, the experience and the guidance of all these eminent masters, and as time goes by, other lamas will be invited to give their advice. Naturally, I shall continue to give spiritual teachings and advice on practice to my students as much as I am able while deepening my own practice, and depending on my state of health.

I have every confidence in this transition process and all those involved, and I am certain that you too will give them all your support and goodwill as Rigpa continues to evolve into the future.

In truth, there has never been a moment when I considered that Rigpa was ‘my work’, or ‘my organization.’ For me, Rigpa has been, and will always be, an expression of my infinite devotion and gratitude to my masters, who cared for me with such immeasurable kindness. My whole life has been dedicated to serving their vision, to remembering them at all times, and to communicating their boundless wisdom and compassion to as many people as possible. Rigpa is nothing other than a vehicle for the authentic teachings of such great masters; I have simply been their instrument, their humble servant.

It is my prayer now that this spirit of service will be upheld by my students, in particular the new Vision Board, and that Rigpa will ever remain a vibrant and authentic vehicle for the Buddhist lineages of Tibet, for the benefit of all humanity.

As always, I place my trust in our great masters of the past, the blessings of the lineage and the truth of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And every single day I think of you with the greatest love, care and appreciation, and I keep you all within my heart.

With my love,
Sogyal Rinpoche



RIGPA

Vision Board

What is the Vision Board? How did it come into being? How were the members selected?

Last September, a delegation of four long-time Rigpa students (Seth Dye, Mauro de March, Philip Philippou and Patrick Gaffney) journeyed East to visit Sogyal Rinpoche, prompted by their shared concern for his health (the news had only recently been received of his diagnosis of colon cancer), and their wish to clarify as far as possible the implications of his retirement as spiritual director of Rigpa. In parallel, Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche and Lodi Gyari Rinpoche both expressed their wish to visit Rinpoche at the same time, as a gesture of their deep friendship, and to support our discussions. The meeting came about quite spontaneously, with minimal planning or preparation; it felt timely and very necessary.

During the week spent there, discussions were held each day, sometimes just between the four of us, sometimes with Rinpoche's two 'Lama-friends', and, when he was well enough, with Rinpoche too. Whilst we all felt an acute sense of urgency owing to the gravity of the situation—for Rinpoche, the Sangha, and the work of Rigpa—we never felt hurried or unduly pressured. Looking back, it was remarkable that all our talks had such a reasonably relaxed and open feeling, and good spirit. The two Rinpoches shared the benefit of their insights and life experience, while never trying to dictate to us what we should do. They were sensitive, concerned, and truly supportive. It's important to add that at no time, not from a single person, was there anything but a genuine concern and effort to understand those who had raised complaints against Rinpoche and Rigpa.

In brief, there were two tracks to our talks: firstly, the question of spiritual succession—who would continue Rinpoche's spiritual legacy beyond his lifetime?—a question we all knew would need to be faced, one day. This instigated a survey of the different ways in which spiritual succession occurs in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, such as by incarnation, hereditary heir, realized disciple, and so on. While no clear conclusion was reached as to which system might be the most appropriate in our context, it was important that the discussion was opened and for this now to be a topic of continued reflection.

The second and more pressing focus of our talks concerned the immediate question of who would hold spiritual oversight of Rigpa until the long-term succession plan had been clarified? On this point Rinpoche was, and indeed has for some years, been quite clear—the responsibility would rest with a group of his closest students, who together would ensure the continued spiritual integrity of Rigpa, so that it might always remain true to its original vision. While Rinpoche already had some names in mind, there was open discussion about how many people should be part of such a group, and the importance of having a good balance of experience, perspective, age, gender, and so on.

Concerning the size of the group, we debated whether it should be small, for efficiency of decision-making and ease of meeting, or large, to accommodate a wider breadth of viewpoints. Eventually, we settled on a group of seven, ever considered an auspicious number. One line of reasoning for this decision was the likelihood that at any one moment in time, one or two members of the group would be unavailable, because of being on retreat, on pilgrimage, on tour with a visiting Lama, or teaching in a far-flung part of the world. We are, after all, a spiritual organization and should wholly support all such pursuits! Hence a quorum of five members would be a realistic and achievable goal for whenever we came to meet, and this felt like the appropriate size for such a responsibility.

Another reason for leaning towards a larger-size group was the desire to include a wider breadth of experience and knowledge, as well as greater balance of age, gender, and cultural background. These considerations had a guiding influence when we came to prepare a short list of names as candidates for the Vision Board. Our suggestions included the names Rinpoche had already put forward, as well as others that we thought might be well suited. After much reflection, a short-list of 13 names emerged. Of course, the list was only a fraction of the very many extraordinarily gifted and dedicated students who already serve Rigpa in a multitude of ways worldwide. Our selection did in fact seek to avoid depleting leaders and teachers who already hold vital positions at a national or international level. This needs to be acknowledged and understood.

The names were then put forward for divination, a process that has always played a significant role in key decisions taken in Rigpa. Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche is of course renowned for his gift of prediction and has demonstrated an uncanny capacity, over the years, in the accuracy and wisdom of his divinations for Sogyal Rinpoche and Rigpa.

One morning, therefore, we brought the names to Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche and requested the divinations. Conscious of the importance of the decisions, Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche sat in focussed meditation and invoked his yidam, to reveal signs. Then, one by one, he made the divinations using his mala. Remarkably, at the end, we arrived at seven names who received positive results to join the board.

As soon as the names were shown to Sogyal Rinpoche, some time after, he concurred immediately and clapped his hands as if to say, 'It's done!'

This was how we arrived at the list of seven candidates for the Vision Board.

What relationship does the Vision Board have to the Tibetan Lamas who will have an advisory role in Rigpa?

According to Rinpoche's thinking, the Vision Board would serve as the main recipient of advice from the esteemed Lamas with whom Rigpa enjoys a close connection. The Vision Board's role would be to assimilate, align and integrate their input, so it might best support Rigpa's future development. Otherwise, there could be a risk that differing advice might stretch the Sangha in one direction and another, without any sense of coherence or consistency. It is crucial that Rigpa maintains a strong sense of identity and direction, true to Sogyal Rinpoche's original vision, albeit renewed and updated.

In terms of the Tibetan Lamas, we explored how different types of experience, insight and specialization might support Rigpa's development in different ways.

Some Lamas, such as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche, are progressive in outlook and approach, based on their experience of modernity—this can be an invaluable support to us as we plan for the future. Others, such as Khenchen Namdrol, are more firmly rooted in the traditional Buddhist culture of Tibet and the Himalayas, and can act as anchors, helping us to never compromise or stray from the authentic teachings and spiritual heritage that we benefit so much from. There are also the great lineage heads, such as HH Sakya Gongma Trichen Rinpoche, who we look towards for spiritual blessings and guidance of the most elevated form. Hence we understand that different Buddhist teachers might help support and guide us in quite different but precise ways. Overall, it is extremely important that we remain open to this diversity of view and experience.

One point that should be emphasized here is that any and all advice received from Tibetan Lamas needs to be shared with our Sangha, and their feedback continually sought and listened to. This is imperative for Rigpa to evolve as a community in the most open and inclusive way possible.

What is the role of the Vision Board?

The Vision Board's role is to safeguard the spiritual integrity of Rigpa, helping ensure all its activities remain true to its vision, values and culture. Hence its main areas of focus will be Rigpa's educational programme, traditions of practice, training of teachers, and relationships to other Buddhist teachers and organizations. It will also hold a keen concern for the well being of the Sangha overall.

The Vision Board is not concerned with organization, management and finance, which are the responsibility of the respective boards and executive teams of Rigpa organizations worldwide. This needs to be very clear.

What does this mean for Rinpoche's role in Rigpa?

Even though Rinpoche has retired as spiritual director of Rigpa (a formal guiding role in the organization), we understand, and the Lamas have emphasized, that his role as spiritual teacher to his students remains intact and undiminished.

The bond between a spiritual master and student is sacred and transcendent. A spiritual teacher can never relinquish his/her commitment to bringing a student to enlightenment. Therefore, it was clear in our meeting that Rinpoche would continue to teach his students, and that this sacred bond should continue to be nurtured, cherished and honoured.

Of course, immediately, we all recognize that the first and most important thing for Rinpoche to attend to is his health, to receive proper treatment for his illness. The opportunities for him to share teachings during this period will naturally be reduced. We all pray, however, that once Rinpoche has recovered and regained his strength, he may continue to teach his students as much as possible.

Postscript

This, then, is a summary of the week spent with Rinpoche, and the discussions we held about spiritual succession, and the immediate role of a Vision Board. After further reflection, Rinpoche came to announce these developments in his recent message.

Our understanding is that the Vision Board will start to meet and determine further its brief, way of working, and relationship to other groups in Rigpa, after the Tibetan New Year, 16 February. Time will be needed to establish these specificities so that the Board may best serve the Sangha and the work of Rigpa now and in the future.

The Rigpa landscape today is changing and one of the positive steps we have taken during these difficult times has been the opening of discussion, consultation, and lines of communication between the teachers and leaders of Rigpa, and the wider Sangha. There is incredible resource, intelligence, commitment and wisdom in our community. No one has all the answers to the challenges that we face today and it is imperative that these lines of communication remain open and alive. The Vision Board will not work in isolation, nor in any kind of authoritarian way. It will only exist to serve the Sangha and to honour Rinpoche's spiritual legacy.