



Maha Siddha Nyingmapa Center

A Handbook for Mahasiddha

**What Every Member Should Know About
How it Came to Be the Way it is and
Why It Does the Crazy Things It Does**

Mahasiddha members, prospective members, and friends,

I've come to realize that those of us who have worked closely with Rinpoche for many years have been remiss in our responsibility to inform others, especially newcomers, about the development of the center, Rinpoche's wishes for it, and the reasoning behind our policies. This sometimes leads to misunderstandings. I've written down what I think is important material for all members to know. It got a bit long, but I think you'll enjoy some parts and find other parts edifying. Please take the time to read it when you get a chance.

Please enjoy,
David

Introduction

Our center is unique. It is neither like monasteries in the East or other Dharma Centers in the West. We try to follow Rinpoche's advice which is specific to our situation and his skillful means. It is often difficult for newcomers to appreciate what this place is and why we do things the way we do. I thought it would be useful to write down some of the history of the center, Rinpoche's views and the reasoning behind some of our policies. In the first section, I recount some of the major events in the development the center and Rinpoche's advice about them. For those of us who lived this history, it should be a joyful reminder. For those newer to the center, it might serve to help you understand and perhaps even appreciate our eccentricities. In the second section I present how some of our policies on various topics came about and the rationale behind them including Rinpoche's advice about them. This is by no means complete but I thought even a brief sketch would be useful to give some perspective. I have tried to be as accurate and objective as possible. Please excuse any flaws that may have crept in. I am also not a writer so the style leaves something to be desired. Please overlook these and find something to appreciate about the content.

Section I: A Brief History of Mahasiddha

Early Years

In the beginning, we were all hippies. We lived like paupers, had no money and thought it was evil. The little dharma that was available in English translation at the time was full of errors so we were attached to all kinds of strange ideas about Dharma. Rinpoche had offers from much wealthier and more knowledgeable groups but for some reason, he stuck with us. We didn't have a clue what we were doing but we had a kind of intense natural faith in Rinpoche. A bond was formed and the center was created. From the beginning and many times since, Rinpoche has said that he is not interested in having a big center but that he would much rather have a small group of dedicated students than a large group of uncommitted ones.

Gradually, Rinpoche worked on correcting our understanding of Dharma and managed to convince us that money isn't always evil and can be used to support Dharma. Some of us wanted to do long retreats at that time but Rinpoche pointed out that first it's necessary to accumulate sufficient merits (i.e. good karma) otherwise there could be major obstacles to meditation. We embarked on a series of construction projects over the next few years.

The First Temple

We first built our original temple. It was a sort of glorified cabin with an Asian style roof. It housed statues of Shakyamuni, Guru Rinpoche, and a small chorten which Lama Jigtse and Khenpo Thubten made. It was small but big enough for our needs at the time. The backbone of the effort was one of the founders, West Abrashkin. West is no longer with us so there is no chance of someone becoming overly flattered by giving credit here. I'll leave individual names out from here on. We had a dues system at the time, but we all had to give extra and help with the labor in order to get it done. At the end of the visit in which the temple was completed, Rinpoche said that now we have improved from the point of creating more bad karma than good during previous visits to the point that we are now creating more good than bad karma.

The Chorten

The next major project was the chorten (stupa). Rinpoche pointed out the significance of this chorten which is the first enlightenment chorten built in the US. He was very excited about this project and worked extremely hard. He jokingly referred to himself as Kulee Rinpoche (kulees are menial workers in India). Rinpoche displayed great skill at both the dharma and construction aspects. He explained that the zung (rolled mantras) and special objects placed at particular places in the chorten were like the organs of a body and that precision was necessary in order for the chorten to function properly as a vessel for blessings.

We were in work mode again: this time giving lots of money and spending weekends or more if available constructing the chorten. We became accustomed to contributing money and work far beyond the dues requirement. This is why we sometimes find it difficult to understand when some newcomers complain about paying just the minimum dues rate and not doing any work. Working together on the chorten seemed to bring a harmony to the group which we had not experienced so much in the past.

When the chorten was completed, Rinpoche had an auspicious dream which he interpreted as meaning that major obstacles had been cleared. After the consecration, he spoke about the tremendous merit accumulated by building a chorten. He told us about the amazing benefits that come as a result of making offerings to or repairing a chorten or even just circumambulating. He said it's very important for us to take care of it and that since we cannot always be with our lama, we should understand that the chorten carries the same blessing, i.e. it is the presence of the Buddha's or Lama's mind. Later, when Khyabje Dudjom Rinpoche was in the US, we invited him to come to bless the chorten. Dudjom Rinpoche was one of the greatest Nyingmapa lamas in recent history and our Rinpoche was very close with him. Whenever I saw Dudjom Rinpoche, he used to remind me that he and Dodrupchen Rinpoche were father and son in their previous incarnations or that in this life he knew the previous Dodrupchen Rinpoche and they are really the same. Dudjom Rinpoche said that he was too old to make the journey but that he often visits our chorten with his mind. To this day I sometimes feel his presence there.

The New Temple

A few years later, some vets suffering from post traumatic syndrome burned our temple down. To the credit of our group, no-one was angry but rather had compassion for anyone suffering enough to do such a thing. In a way, it was fortuitous because we were beginning to outgrow the original temple. Rinpoche wrote us an encouraging letter from Sikkim with some advice about the type of temple we should build. When the plans were drawn and estimates made, it was clear this was a very ambitious project. Though we had grown a little in numbers and were in better shape financially, this was clearly a stretch for us. We wanted to do it without a loan so that in the future members would not have to pay high dues rates to cover mortgage payments. We had to give until it hurt, some people donating half of every pay check. Some who lived nearby worked through the week and many living in the Boston or Providence areas would drive up every weekend to work. Those with skills did the challenging jobs and the rest of us hauled supplies or learned to do minor carpentry, etc. One complete summer was spent like this and periods of time in subsequent years to finish up or make improvements as we were able to accumulate enough funds. When Rinpoche first saw it, he was surprised at the size. He had said to make it big enough for 100 people in the shrine room but he was thinking of Eastern style. Here we each take up more room! It took a lot of hard work and at the end we were all tapped out financially, but we were joyful.

When it was completed, Rinpoche did the consecration and had some important things to say. He told us that we had accumulated great merit by building this. He said that the Lama is like the father and the altar is like the mother and that's how we should think of the temple. He said that we need to take very good care of it and each do our share. He pointed out how special this place is saying that we should come to practice here from time to time and that practice here is not the same as practice at home. He said even if you don't come for practice, just come and lie in the grass and see if you don't feel something special. Since then he has given many wangs in our temple and that has added to the special feeling of the place. Several times lamas, practitioners or even non-buddhists have commented to me about feeling very high just by being there. Rinpoche named the temple Kunzang Choling.

The Caretaker Cabin

Since our original temple had been burned down by vandals, Rinpoche pointed out that we need to protect the new one because offering this temple up like the first one might be difficult for us. Rinpoche said we must always have someone resident there to keep up the temple and protect it against vandalism. We already had the caretaker cabin which had previously been used for retreats. Rinpoche personally paired up all of the students and set up a rotation system whereby each pair was to spend two weeks per year living in the caretaker cabin and taking care of the temple. He thought this was good for the students as well as the temple and hoped that it would foster a deeper sense of connection to the temple among the students. He was surprised to find that some people were reluctant to do this. After a couple of years the system fell apart and was replaced by finding a member who would stay for longer periods of time.

Recent Years

After the chorten was completed, Rinpoche pointed out that the more we build, the more we will have to take care of. He said now we have what we need and we must take care of that much. Instead of any new construction, now is the time to devote energy to practice. He encourages us to practice with joy in any situation, not just limited to the shrine room. He says being a community and occasionally practicing together is not dependency but rather reinforces each other's good qualities and strengthens us.

In recent years, Rinpoche has been encouraging some members to move closer to the temple and to be closer to each other. He points out that years ago we were all young and healthy, but now some of us have died, others are seriously ill and we are all getting older. He would like us to take care of each other as we grow old.

Section II: Policies and Organization

Rinpoche never sat down and spelled out all of his thoughts about how our organization should be set up. Largely he let it evolve and would give advice in little pieces as necessary. Over time, he got to know our nature and we gradually understood more and more of his way of thinking. He frequently mentions how he prefers to have a small dedicated group and points out that with many people it becomes difficult to keep damtsig (samaya). He said wants only his own students to be members and newcomers must wait until they can meet him before they can join.

As for running the center, in brief I think there are two basic guiding principles: 1) All members should contribute their fair share or more of money and work and 2) structure, administration and politics should be kept to a minimum to allow more time for practicing dharma. I'll go through the policies about several topics:

Dues

The center has always been supported by dues. Rinpoche is a strong advocate of requiring dues here. Whenever asked, he has routinely told his American students they should join Mahasiddha and support the center by paying dues. With the dues system: We each contribute a fair share; Paying dues demonstrates ongoing commitment; and We don't have to be dependent on drawing

people to events like a business. An added advantage of this system is that we don't have to charge for our member-only events so none of us need to become ticket-takers or guards at a time when we'd rather be focussing on what Rinpoche is doing.

The income from dues is spent primarily on common expenses which are relevant to all of us. As the group grows in size and diversity, it becomes more difficult to define a common expense. I would say that at the very least 75 percent of our budget goes to bare necessities for bringing Rinpoche here and maintaining the facilities. Most of the rest are still expenses that the majority agree on. Projects which are of more interest to some than others are funded by contributions made separately from dues. I'll explain those restricted funds later.

Some people have the notion that we shouldn't charge for dharma. Rinpoche points out that when dharma came from India to Tibet, all the gold went from Tibet to India. Rinpoche has vast projects for preserving dharma. He also feeds, houses, and trains hundreds if not thousands of monks and nuns. Our own center has bills to pay as well. All of these things cost money. Also, it's necessary for practitioners to accumulate merits by making offerings. As Rinpoche's students, we should always be looking for ways raise money for dharma. Whatever isn't needed to run the center is offered to Rinpoche. As an example of how he feels about setting rates: When we finished the mandala project after years of work, I contributed money to make all the prints. The plan was to sell them and give all the proceeds to Rinpoche's monastery. Rinpoche thought it's good for the buyers to have accurate mandalas for their practice and good for the monastery to get money. He asked me what we should charge. I calculated the cost per item to make them and added a small amount. Rinpoche laughed at me and said, "We did a lot of work. Isn't that worth something?" Then he said something really significant: **"If we don't charge enough, people won't value it."** He went on to say that we are not being greedy because the money is for dharma, not ourselves.

Of course, there are individual circumstances which may make it difficult for someone to pay our full dues rate, currently \$45/month. Years ago we implemented a system whereby someone could claim financial hardship and pay a lower rate determined by a review of their circumstances. Applicants were required to submit financial records. Some people had the job of reviewing these applications and negotiating a lower rate if justified, but never less than half the full dues rate. This process was humiliating for the applicants and often aggravating and time-consuming for the administrators. We decided to simplify the system and introduced the current associate membership option. Basically, we allow those who feel their individual circumstances warrant it, to choose an appropriate rate less than the full dues but not less than half. They only have to give up their voting privileges. People paying a lower rate are in effect being subsidized by the full members - a sort of dharma welfare program. The theory is that by generously offering a discount as low as half-price, this should cover any situation and since it's based on the honor system, no administration is necessary. It was really intended for hardship cases but has come to be used by some people for other individual circumstances as well.

Restricted Funds

Restricted funds are for donations given for a specific purpose. The purpose may be anything within our charter. We are obligated by law to track these funds and use them only for the intended purpose. We can refuse donations or return portions of them if we can't or do not wish

to use them for the intended purpose. Anyone may donate to any existing restricted fund or in effect create one by contributing to a new project or purpose. In order to be tax deductible, the donor may not specify a recipient for whom a direct donation would not be deductible. For example, no individual or foreign organization may be specified as the recipient.

Restricted funds are commonly used to fund projects which are either too big for our general budget or do not have enough common support of the membership to justify paying for it out of dues. Examples of such projects are: the original chorten construction, chorten repairs, proposed sang khang project, gardens, prayer flags, etc. If there is sufficient support among the membership, we sometimes contribute some money from the general funds to a restricted fund.

Frequently, members wish to contribute money to Rinpoche or his monastery through Mahasiddha to get a tax deduction. Legally, this is not acceptable. To accommodate this, we set up the Monastery Fund which supports Longchen Nyingthig monasteries and activities. Rinpoche acts as an advisor as to how the money is spent. We have always spent the money exactly as Rinpoche wishes and always intend to, but for contributions to be legally tax deductible, donors must accept that Mahasiddha has the final say as to the distribution of the funds provided it is within the purpose of the fund. The Nubri fund will have to be set up in a similar way.

Work

Anyone who has been around to see Rinpoche work on a project knows how he feels about importance of doing work to accumulate merit. Even though we are many years his junior, he has often exhausted teams of workers before he himself gets tired.

There are a number of tasks required to maintain the organization and facilities. We try to do as much as possible with volunteer labor to save cost and also to give a chance for members to accumulate merit. In order to make sure that necessary tasks get done and to coordinate projects, we set up a committee system. Members are expected to volunteer on at least one committee. The current committees and coordinators are:

- 1) Evaluative Committee: Martha Irwin
- 2) Building Committee: Richard Weiss
- 3) Grounds Committee: Thom Chiofalo
- 4) Gardening Committee: Ann Lachman
- 5) Decorating Committee: Connie Bigony
- 6) Shrine Room: Ken Rocke

Any volunteer work should be discussed with the appropriate coordinator first.

Rules

Rinpoche is a strong believer in making rules and sticking with them. Over the years he has shared many stories of how he has solved problems at Chorten Gonpa Monastery by creating appropriate rules and applying them evenly. Here, he is reluctant to be heavily involved in rule-making because he cannot be here much of the time to administer them. One prominent example comes to mind, though. Rinpoche once gave a series of wangs and announced ahead of time that

students must attend all of the wangs or else they could not come to any. Khenpo Thubten at first decided not to attend since he had these wangs before. After the first wang, he changed his mind and asked Rinpoche for permission to attend the remaining wangs. Rinpoche would not even make an exception for Khenpo Thubten saying that if he does, then he would have to make an exception for others!

Facilities

One time, a non-member came to visit Rinpoche. He arrived late in the day and expected to see Rinpoche the next day. He asked if he could camp overnight at the temple. He seemed nice enough and we seemed inclined to oblige him. Rinpoche somehow knew this was happening. He summoned a couple of us to see him and said that this person should not be allowed to stay. Rinpoche said that he has the power to know who is okay and who is not but since we do not possess that capability, we should make a strict rule that non-members are never permitted to stay overnight. Rinpoche called upon the most generous-hearted member who frequently welcomed such visitors to be the one to drive this fellow away in order to make clear the importance of setting boundaries. Rinpoche may have even extended this rule to not allowing visitors unattended in the temple but I can't remember exactly. Rinpoche explained that our own members support the center so they will take good care of it. Outsiders might be careless with our facilities or they might be doing practices which will have a negative effect on the spiritual environment.

A benefit of only allowing members stay overnight is that since they support the center anyway, we don't have to charge for someone staying for a night or two and there's no work for anyone to collect payment.

It is common among Nyingmapa to regard smoking as causing blockages in the body's energy channels and creating obscurations. We don't allow any smoking or illegal drug use on the premises. Rinpoche also has said that he wants only Longchen Nyingthig Dharmapala practices to be done at Mahasiddha.

Events

Rinpoche forbids us to advertise under any circumstances. He is quite adamant about this. He sometimes quotes a passage by Jigmed Lingpa in which he advises that practitioners in this age should take a low position and quietly go about their practice without drawing attention. He makes it clear that he is not criticizing other centers with big plans. Their circumstances may be different and there may be wisdom to what they are doing, but this is how he would like it to be for us.

Rinpoche sets different limits for who can attend depending on the type of event. For long-life or prosperity blessings, he allows anyone to come. For general wangs, he requires that they have taken refuge in the Three Jewels and they should be ready to accept damtsig. For high wangs such as Nyingthig Yazhi, Rinpoche required that only Nyingmapa practitioners be allowed to come.

For teachings, Rinpoche wants only his own students present. This is because various traditions and lamas have their own views and methods. Receiving teachings and advice from various sources introduces the danger of confusion or conflicting damtsig (samaya). Rinpoche says that when students follow what their lama says, it speeds their progress but if they don't, then it actually becomes unvirtuous karma which hinders progress. If he says something which a student cannot follow or contrary to what a student heard from another lama, it puts that student in a difficult position. Rinpoche speaks very freely when only his own students are present but says that when students of other lamas are present, his tongue gets blocked.

During Rinpoche's visits, we try to have events to appropriately accommodate the needs of the various circles of people. In recent years, we have emphasized member-only events and kept events for others to a minimum. Since time is limited, Rinpoche and we both seem to prefer this.

Relations with other Lamas and Dharma centers

Just as Rinpoche does not like to teach students of other lamas, as a general rule he prefers that we don't go to other lamas for teaching. Wangs and blessings are fine. There are a few lamas who have a good relationship with Rinpoche and depending on the student, Rinpoche may feel fine about particular students receiving advice or teaching from those lamas. Tulku Thondup, Lobpon Thegchhog, and Yangthang Rinpoche are within Rinpoche's immediate circle so there is no conflict. Rinpoche has asked that we never invite other lamas to the center without his permission.

Just as Rinpoche does not permit us to advertise, he objects to posting announcements about activities of other centers in our temple. When Dudjom Rinpoche was alive, we used to invite each other's students to events. Rinpoche encouraged us to see Dudjom Rinpoche but since Dudjom Rinpoche's passing, Rinpoche has advised us not to make any reciprocal arrangements with other centers. In addition to the usual concerns about compatibility, Rinpoche is concerned that too much time and resources might be taken away from practice in maintaining such relationships.

Some years ago, there was a movement afoot to create a conference of Buddhist centers and some kind of association of them. Rinpoche let us know in no uncertain terms that he was very much against this and no-one should represent Mahasiddha at such meetings. Rinpoche sees no benefit in such associations and avoids them himself. Again, he is concerned that too much time and resources may be lost. Rinpoche is fiercely independent and wants us to be that way. He says if we accept help from other centers, then we will have to reciprocate. Ultimately, there is the danger that we may no longer be free to do what we feel is right according to dharma because of such entanglements.

This was written at the repeated requests of Thom Chiofalo who made me realize that what was common knowledge to us old-timers was a mystery to newcomers. May this help to promote understanding and harmony in our sangha and appreciation for what we have so that the center may be a support for dharma.