



Threads of Awakening

—Buddhism in Art

By Alicia Doyle

IN 1992, AFTER A FEW MONTHS IN INDIA STUDYING BUDDHISM and living among Tibetans, Leslie Rinchen-Wongmo chose to formalize her commitment to the Buddhist path and was given a new name.

"Rinchen-Wongmo is my Tibetan name—it means Precious Empowered Woman," she explained. "For Tibetans, names can change several times in a lifetime. When great obstacles are encountered or significant changes take place in one's life, it's not uncommon to ask a lama for a new name. This shows a deep respect for the power of words and an awareness of the fluidity of identity."

› Discovering Her Purpose

Her name, Rinchen-Wongmo, was given by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, the Tibetan lama with whom she took refuge in the Buddha's inner path of freedom and well-being. "Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is, in layman's terms, the formal act of becoming Buddhist," she said.

For as long as she can remember, "I had always been drawn to an Eastern spiritual view. It simply felt natural to me from an early age, but I had no specific practice."

She had experienced Transcendental Meditation, as well as seeing the Dalai Lama in college during his first visit to the United States. "When I met Tibetan culture on my first trip to Ladakh, I felt I'd found a family to add to my already wonderful family in the U.S."

"Living among the Tibetans for nine years, I was Rinchen-Wongmo," she continued. "I learned to make thangkas as Rinchen-Wongmo."

Today, Rinchen-Wongmo is known for her thangkas, a Tibetan word referring to sacred pictorial scrolls. For her, this involves creating a particularly rare type of thangka which renders sacred Buddhist images and portraits from pieces of silk stitched together by hand.

› The Buddhas

A maker and teacher of sacred textile art, Rinchen-Wongmo has created numerous thangkas including a Medicine Buddha, also known as Healing Buddha. "I was moved to make this thangka as my mother entered chemotherapy and many friends and loved ones encountered health problems and loss."

In Buddhism, the Buddha is often referred to as a physician because he prescribes the treatment for overcoming the disease of mental affliction.

"In that sense, all Buddhas are healing buddhas," Rinchen-Wongmo said. "But this particular form, deep blue in color and holding a medicinal plant, is specifically associated with healing physical

ailments that can be obstructions to spiritual progress in this life or to the longevity conducive to making the highest use of this life."

"The traditional images are supports for meditation and spiritual practice," she explained. "They are rich in symbolism connected with a philosophy and practices aimed at waking up to our true nature, acting compassionately and ending suffering."

› Evolving Her Skills and Teaching

In her apprenticeship, she learned to create these traditional images out of silk, and she continues to create them on commission. "But now, I also use the same techniques to create portraits of real people, incorporating various methods of photo printing and machine quilting. Up to now these portraits have been of people in the Himalayan Buddhist world because that's what continues to inspire me. Their sincerity, hardiness, and closeness to the earth's rhythms move me."

Her teaching program, the Stitching Buddhas Virtual Apprentice Program, is now the focus of her energies.

"I teach spiritually-oriented, fabric-loving women the skills I learned in apprenticeship to Tibetan masters along with modifications and adaptations I've learned through my own experience," she explained. "In a six-month course conducted through the Internet, they learn the fundamentals of Tibetan appliqué and produce their own silk lotus."

Many students then choose to continue into a self-paced practice stage in which they apply their nascent skills to projects of increasing intricacy. "My most advanced students are now beginning to make their own thangkas after three or four years of practice and gradual adoption of new skills," Rinchen-Wongmo said.

Growing up, she was always visual. "I took painting classes as a child. I designed puppets and stage sets and put on puppet shows for the neighborhood kids as an even younger child. I created scrapbooks of family vacations before scrapbooking was popular or defined. I was also the class and thespian historian, creating scrapbooks for those groups, and made posters for events and campaigns in school."

In college, she studied environmental design, which led to a graduate degree in urban planning and management and work in housing and community development.

"I had intended to get an architecture degree but had back troubles. I realized I wouldn't be able to take the long hours over a drafting table and switched courses," Rinchen-Wongmo said.



In the same time period, she was learning to quilt and loving it. "That, too, was derailed by my bulging spinal discs. So for a decade, I was doing other things until, while serving as an economic development volunteer for the Tibetans in India, I saw my first silk thangka in production. I fell in love with the colors, the fabrics, the texture, and the connection with my spiritual path. I just had to start stitching again."

Shortly afterward, she entered a full-time traditional apprenticeship with a Tibetan master. "Working alongside several young Tibetan women who didn't speak any English, day in and day out for four years, I learned to stitch like the Tibetans do and create these vibrant—both in color and energy—sacred images."

› Her Work has Meaning

For Rinchen-Wongmo, this style of art is a merging of her spiritual study and practice, combined with her playful joy and creativity.

"I love that the images I create with my hands have helped many very special people to become free of suffering and to teach others about their true nature," she said. "I love being connected with them through these images and through this sacred creative practice. And I hope that in my small way, I can open people's hearts with my work, that I can provide some stimulus or inspiration for their awakening."

"Students tell me this work makes them more attentive and aware, and that this awareness spreads to other areas of their lives," Rinchen-Wongmo said. "They say that it's calming and centering, but also enlivening and delightful. They notice their own patterns come up in the face of the fabric and thread. The work is more challenging than they expect. There's a deep sense of satisfaction in the creation." **yh**



For more information on the teaching program, visit www.stitchingbuddhas.com

To see more of Rinchen-Wongmo's art and sign up for Weekly Wake-Ups, visit www.threadsawakening.com.