



MEET A TEACHER

Karma Yeshe Chödrön and Karma Zopa Jigme

The cofounders of Prajna Fire marry classical teachings with a modern sensibility.

By Daniel Ilan Cohen Thin

AT THE TURN OF THE millennium, Ivonne Prieto Rose was practicing law in northern California and Christopher Rose was studying literature at Pomona College. Now known as Karma Yeshe Chödrön and Karma Zopa Jigme, respectively, the two have since spent three years in retreat, received authorization as teaching lamas in the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and cofounded the Prajna Fire online sangha—all as a married couple.

They met in Kathmandu while studying at the Rigpe Dorje Institute (RDI), an international program rooted in traditional Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and translation. Though they both came to RDI looking to deepen their Buddhist practice, neither one anticipated finding both a life path and a life partner.

“I was a lawyer in Silicon Valley right around when the tech bubble was mushrooming and about to implode. When I had a chance to leave that position, I figured I’d take a year or two off and study in Asia—I had just encountered the Tibetan buddhadharma a couple of years before, and I was in that stage where I just couldn’t get enough of it,” said Yeshe.

Zopa, a New Mexico native, was exposed to Buddhism at a young age through Lama Karma Dorje’s residency in Santa Fe. He met several Tibetan lamas and took refuge with Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche (who would become Prajna Fire’s root guru), but he didn’t get serious about the dharma until graduating from college in 2000. “My parents got me a plane ticket to Asia to go on a pilgrimage, and that kind of just hooked me—it really wasn’t my initial plan.”

After hitting it off at RDI, the two

planned a three-year retreat together— together but separate, that is. “We were so looking forward to separate male and female wings and being in retreat as individuals,” Zopa said.

Yeshe added that as a married couple “you end up with each being half of a couple all the time. So it was a nice idea to not be that for a little while.”

But apparently karma had other plans. Vajra Vidya Retreat Center only had one wing and a total of five retreatants, and when the pair drew numbers for rooms, they wound up next door to each other. They ended up happily working closely together throughout the retreat and jokingly called themselves the “Dharma Marines” because they took their work so seriously.

In 2016, soon after completing the three-year retreat, Yeshe and Zopa founded Prajna Fire as “an offering of gratitude and respect to their teachers and a portal for Western students to access time-tested methods for studying and practicing the buddhadharma.” Through a variety of channels, Prajna Fire seeks to balance “traditional methods for cultivating experiential understanding of buddhadharma with a modern inflection”—the gray area that many contemporary Western teachers must navigate.

Yeshe describes their teaching style as an “integrative” approach—a shorthand adaptation of their Kagyu background that emphasizes “listening, contemplating, and meditating” as a practice framework. “It’s a way of bringing the dharma from *out there somewhere* into your head and then down into your heart, where it becomes almost like the operating system for your life. . . . When you get down to the nitty gritty, it’s about teaching us how to have this inner dialogue with the Buddha and the lineage masters so that we can examine our own assumptions.”

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