



*Background on*  
**Sakya Monastery**

## **Introduction**

Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism is a place to learn from highly qualified Tibetan lamas in a traditional setting. The Monastery occupies a beautiful renovated building, which houses a pristine example of a Tibetan Buddhist shrine that is one of only a few in North America. It is located in Seattle's Greenwood district near the intersection of Greenwood Avenue North and North 85<sup>th</sup> Street. While called a monastery, it is primarily a lay community of practitioners, with various levels of experience in the Buddhist tradition. It is led by its founder, His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya (called Rinpoche, meaning "Precious One" in Tibetan). He is a head lama of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, one of Tibetan Buddhism's four main Schools. [See background information sheets on H.H. Jigdal Dagchen Sakya, and also on Tibetan Buddhism.]

The term "Sakya" derives from Rinpoche's family name and spiritual lineage, and ultimately from the original Sakya Monastery in Sakya, Tibet, built by one of Rinpoche's ancestors in 1073. It received the name Sakya because it was constructed on a patch of earth (sa) that was pale (kya). The Monastery in Seattle is a seat of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism in North America. It is also a non-sectarian religious center, and hosts visits and teaching from leading lamas of all four Schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The Virupa Educational Institute (VEI) was founded by the Monastery, and is its educational branch.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the Monastery is to share and preserve Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture. It does this through the promotion of Buddhist teachings and practices and by upholding Tibetan customs and traditions. Since the purpose of the Buddha's teaching, as practiced in Tibet, is to develop loving-kindness and compassion, the main meditation practices at the Monastery focus on the cultivation of these qualities. In keeping with the emphasis in Buddhism (and especially in the Sakya School) on education and learning, the Monastery and VEI offer a variety of educational programs to foster a better understanding of the teachings of the Buddha.

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**Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism**

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## The Building

The Monastery's building was initially erected in 1928 as the First Presbyterian Church. Over the years, different Christian denominations have owned the building. In 1984, a Baptist group sold it to Sakya Tegchen Choling center (Sakya Monastery's predecessor). Since its founding in 1974, this center had successively outgrown accommodations in the Ravenna-Bryant, Capitol Hill, Wallingford, and University districts. When it moved to the Greenwood area, the center reorganized under H.H. Jigdal Dagchen Sakya, and adopted the name Sakya Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism.

Buying the large structure in Greenwood was a big step for the small center. A remarkable event helped catalyze the purchase of the building. While the search was being conducted for the center's new home, Rinpoche had a dream in which he saw the destined building. Upon waking, he had architectural plans drawn for the building as revealed to him in his vision. Amazingly, the Baptist Church was an exact match for these vision-based plans and the decision was made to acquire the building.

Since the purchase, many years of hard work and renovation by dedicated volunteers have brought the building to its present form and grace. At various stages of the renovation, the highest-ranking lamas in Tibetan Buddhism, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have consecrated the Monastery's building and its contents, imbuing them with the enlightened spirit of the Buddha and transforming the building into a North American home for the Buddha's teaching. In addition, the monastery contains many holy objects from India, Tibet, and Nepal.

Following the first year of renovation, the downstairs cultural hall began to be used as an interim location for the Monastery's religious services. For the next twelve years the main worship hall (the shrine room) underwent remodeling. Numerous Buddhist artworks were donated by the Monastery's members, friends, as well as by professional artists and Rinpoche's family. Extensive murals were painted on site. During this period, Bernardo Bertolucci shot scenes for the film *Little Buddha* at the Monastery. This venture helped pay for the new wood parquet floor in the shrine room. Outside the building, in keeping with the style of traditional Tibetan monasteries, a portico was added over the front entrance. By 1997, the remodeling was sufficiently finished so that the main shrine room could be used for meditations.

In 1998, the outside of the Monastery's building was painted in traditional Tibetan colors and a memorial *stupa* was erected to Deshung Rinpoche (the lama who co-founded the original Sakya Tegchen Choling center). The bell shaped *stupa* is located in front of the Monastery and symbolizes the Buddha's enlightened mind. In 2001, a library addition capable of holding at least 5,000 volumes was finished and opened.

## Two Levels of Religious Training

In Tibetan Buddhism, a religious community traditionally needs both a monastery and a retreat center. A Monastery maintains and preserves the teaching of the Buddha through teaching, training, and practice. It houses monks who are trained in the intellectual, moral and ritual teachings of the Buddha and is a focal point for religious activities of the lay community.

Nowadays, with the rapid changes taking place in Tibet, the monastery is also a place where Tibetans endeavor to preserve their unique Tibetan identity and culture.

The bustle of activity at a monastery means that it is not always conducive to developing profound meditative experiences. For that, an isolated retreat center is necessary. In 2000, a Sakya Monastery student made a house and 72 acres of forest and ponds located on Whidbey Island available for use as a place for spiritual retreats. Thus, with teaching facilities in Seattle and a mediation center on Whidbey Island, Sakya Monastery provides a complete array of traditional methods of Tibetan religious training for the lay community as well as monks and nuns.

## **Programs and Administration**

Sakya Monastery offers a variety of activities for its members and friends. Foremost are the public meditations: Chenrezi meditations for developing loving-kindness and compassion are held on Sunday morning at 10 am and Thursday evenings at 8 pm during daylight savings time (spring/summer) and 7:30pm during standard time (fall/winter). This is the main communal practice of Sakya Monastery. Calm Abiding meditations, which are useful for the development of concentration and mental stability, are held on Friday nights at 7:00 pm.

Numerous other ceremonies and meditations are held at the Monastery:

- Buddhist holy days – such as the birth of the Buddha, and lama memorials.
- Refuge ceremonies are regularly scheduled for people who wish to formally join the community of Buddhist practitioners and become a Buddhist.
- Initiatory ceremonies, called “empowerments”, are bestowed by Rinpoche and other lamas upon request. These are required as a basis for special meditation practices involving deities such as Chenrezi (the embodiment of compassion) or Green Tara (the grantor of protection).
- Monthly meditations are also held that have specific requirements for practicing – such as being a Buddhist, or having received a specific empowerment or level of empowerment.

Additionally, the Monastery offers a variety of other programs and resources: The Children’s Dharma School for children ages 5 to 9 is available every Sundays. The Monastery library, available to members and visiting scholars, houses 2,500 books on Buddhism, Tibet, and comparative religion, as well as audiotapes of teachings in Tibetan by noted lamas. The library has a connection with the Tibetan Works & Archives in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India (home of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile). The Virupa Educational Institute administers and organizes numerous classes, talks, book groups, discussions, and video showings held at the Monastery. These programs are open to the public and are widely attended.

Following Tibetan tradition, its Head Lama, H.H. Jigdal Dagchen Sakya, administratively leads the Monastery. He consults regularly with a fourteen-member Advisory Board. Ten of the Board’s members are elected by the members of the Monastery; the other four are the Head Lama, the Tibetan Cultural Advisor, the Executive Director, and an appointee drawn from the Sakya family.