

10 Years Songtsen House

Songtsen Gampo was the king who brought a political golden age and Buddhism to Tibet. This king gave his name to the *Cultural Centre Tibet Songtsen House* founded by Dechen Emchi and Dawa Sigrist some twelve years ago. It was their goal to make the old house in Zurich-Albisrieden a place for creative and engaged exchange with Tibetan culture: during teachings, presentations, talks, exhibitions, cooking courses and social evenings as well as encounters between the old and the young, between Tibetan and Swiss people.

Turning a Private Initiative Into an Association

On the anniversary of the Tibetan uprising against Chinese occupation, 10 March 2000, Dechen Emchi, Tsamcho Meier and others helped turn the ambitious private undertaking into an association. This made it possible to enhance the set of goals and to enlarge the spectrum of activities.

"The Cultural Centre Tibet Songtsen House", the statutes said, "is above all prepared to live, conserve and develop Tibetan culture in exile." Visitors should be given the opportunity to gain information about the situation of Tibet and its people and to exchange ideas with Tibetans. To quote the first head of committee, Philip Hepp: "We would like to show all the possible facets of Tibetan culture that are related to the Tibetans' way of life or to the relationship of Non-Tibetans with Tibet."

The centre continued to organize teachings, talks, readings, film presentations, workshops, music and dance performances. Visitors were welcome to view exhibitions, to participate in meditation, massage or cooking courses, to taste regional specialties, to celebrate holidays and to join guided tours. Many aid projects were first presented in the Songtsen House. Apart from all this, new courses were started: a course in Tibetan language, one in the Tibetan healing yoga Lu Jong and the German course "Nyima" (Tibetan for "sun") for Tibetan asylum seekers, free of cost. All these courses continue successfully until today.

By no means all highlights can be listed here. Let us mention the many shows on tour through Switzerland, three weekend camps for Tibetan children, the personal reports of Swiss Tibetans in the series "Tibetans tell about their lives" and the Songtsen House Café in Hall 9.

During the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Summer 2005 the Tibet Songtsen House set up a coffee shop; even though His Holiness could not attend personally, hundreds did and enjoyed the cosy atmosphere amidst the surrounding turmoil. Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, however, then head of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, did visit the Songtsen House in its first year and our spiritual patron, Jhado Tulku Rinpoche, former abbot of the Namgyal Monastery, gave teachings and was a guest at our fifth-year anniversary festivities. Almost every year we can welcome the members of the Parliament-in-Exile in Switzerland at our assemblies. The monks of the Monastic Tibet Institute Rikon are frequent guests; Geshe Jampel Senge has been giving teachings and leading meditations on a regular basis for the last six years.

Let us also not forget the presentations of the nuns from the Nepalese Thukche Choeling Nunnery for whom the Songtsen House organized their first tour of Europe. Other nuns were our guests, such as Ani Rita for teachings, Ani Choying Drolma who sang mantras, two nuns from the South Indian Jangchub Choeling Nunnery who presented an illustrated "Day in a Life at the Nunnery", Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedroen (Carola Roloff) who spoke about "Buddhism and Human Rights", and further groups of nuns performing chants and ritual dances on their tours.

Tibetan monks from the Namgyal monastery showed Cham dances, monks from the South Indian Gaden monastery created a sand mandala, representatives of the Shree Gaden Dargyaling monastery in Nepal formed butter sculptures and Lama Kunsang took us on a tour around the Kailash – albeit only in pictures.

Turning the Tibetan Centre into a Tibetan-Asian Cultural Centre

Songtsen Gampo, the Tibetan king, looked beyond the borders of his country. He got married to a Nepalese and a Chinese princess and thus not only ensured friendly ties with the two neighbouring countries but also enriched the culture of his homeland. In a similar way, in 2008 the Tibet Songtsen House started to widen the range of topics and to organise events concerning other Asian, mainly Buddhist, countries. Now called *Tibetan-Asian Cultural Centre Songtsen House* it turned into the only institution in Switzerland to deal in many aspects with Asian culture on the base of exclusively voluntary work.

One of the first events of the extended programme was an evening with Irene Marty whose Burma film shows the mechanisms of suppression known from Tibet in the context of another dictatorship. Series of films were produced by Tibetans and/or dealt with Tibet, while two cold January days were dedicated to the wide spectrum of Korean cinematography.

Other sets of events concentrated on Tibetan medicine, on the current situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan (accompanying a Gandhara exhibition in the Rietberg Museum) or on the situation in Tibet in 2008 – showing films, talks and a discussion between MP Mario Fehr, president of the Parliamentary Commission for Tibet, and Sonam Monkhar, member of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, among other events. The new series "Women in Asia", to be continued, encompassed presentations about the support of women in Afghanistan, the situation of Buddhist nuns and the living circumstances and attitudes of Tibetan women in exile.

The Asian continent east of the Ural was almost completely covered by presentations, slide shows and talks, such as a three-part journey on the Silk Road, talks and films about Pakistan and Afghanistan, a short introduction to Hinduism by Satish Joshi, a view of the golden pagodas and less golden daily problems in Burma, the presentation of a children's aid programme in Bali, Christoph Baumer's portrait of the Chinese holy mountain Wutai Shan, Endili Memetkerin's account of the situation of fellow Uigurs in East Turkestan, an exclusive report from North Korea, a photographic documentation of Japan, and numerous films, readings, travel reports and presentations of projects concerning the Himalaya region, including Nepal and Bhutan.

Apart from slide shows other events addressed the senses directly, as well: cooking courses and dinners serving special food from Tibet, Nepal, Korea, India and East Turkestan, exhibitions of photographs, thankas or modern art by famous or less-known artists, and field trips to Central Switzerland and its Alpine yaks.

Cooperation with many institutions and associations led to further successful projects; examples are tours of slide shows and performances by monks and nuns (in cooperation with the Swiss-Tibetan Friendship Association and the Friends of Tibet), guided tours in the Tibet Institute Rikon, the Rietberg Museum and the Museum of Anthropology in Zurich (with Manuel Bauer and Martin Brauen) and Buddhist Ceremonies in cooperation with the Zurich Forum of Religions and the Swiss Buddhist Union. During the last few years, about one hundred events, teachings and courses took place in the Songtsen House every year. You can find the summaries of some of them on our website. In order to stay independent, the centre is financed by contributions from the some 400 members, by private donations, room rent and the sale of books, calendars and handicrafts. Any profit is donated, for instance to the Tibetan Community in Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The fact that the centre is run by voluntary work of up to two days a week by the committee with its head Patrick Hagmann, the active members, most course leaders and the helpers allows for a minimum of costs. Last but not least we owe the positive balance to our loyal visitors who are open for old and new topics. We would be most happy to welcome even more interested visitors in the old house in Zurich-Albisrieden! (DR)