

The Buddhist Robes

On Wednesday 18th September a large audience of Women's Institute (WI) members and visitors met for an evening of fun and friendship. The main draw this month was the intriguing talk being given by our very own Woodhouse Eaves WI secretary Yung Tsang whose 'day job' is making and repairing unisex robes for ordained Buddhist monks and nuns. Yung describes her robe making as "meaningful and rewarding". She clearly pays great attention to every robe detail and takes pleasure in her work and contacts with grateful clients.

History of a small business:

Yung moved from Hong Kong to Ulverscroft in 2021 and started her Buddhist Robe making business, The Priory Robes, 3 years ago after annually attending week-long robe-making workshops for 4 years at the Madhyamaka Kadampa Meditation Centre in York. Yung was first inspired to study robe making having met a monk who couldn't find a tailor to repair or make robes. She worked hard during classes, which involved creating actual robes, each year concentrating on the intricacies of two pieces of the 7 required robes until she could create them unaided.

She now has a business supplying personally tailored robes to ordained Buddhist monks and nuns worldwide. It takes Yung around 50 hours work to create a full set of robes and she is kept very busy.



The robes:

Every part and colour of an ordained Buddhist's robes matters, with folds, garment design and even frayed corners on a garment holding significance for the wearer. The robes are always treated with respect and worn with undergarments to protect the robes from contact with the skin. In addition, the robes have to be designed to be functional for sitting cross legged and living active lives. Yung explained the significance of so many amazing details required to create each robe. Every colour used and many of the

stitches as well as the detailed design pattern of each piece holds a message. Every piece of the robes is designed to keep the monk or nun on a straight path to enlightenment by reminding them of all the Buddhist precepts to which they aspire. I have created a table (below) listing the robes and some of their features, for ease of access.

An ordained nun demonstrates the robes and talks about Buddhism:

We were very grateful that Buddhist nun, Gen Kelsang Dema, once a Social Worker and now a Teacher at the Tara International Kadampa Retreat Centre, joined us for the evening and was kind enough to demonstrate how the robes are worn and talk about wearing her robes in different situations. She also answered questions about her road to Buddhism having been raised in a Christian family, finding a spiritual connection with the Buddhist Tradition and becoming a nun to "make the world a better place and help people to become more content and peaceful".

Gen Kelsang Dema described her day which starts at 6.15am with Confession practice followed by Tantric practice from 7.00 to 8.20am. Each day work is allocated to the monks, nuns and lay people who help the centre. Dema is primarily involved in work promoting the centre through the education programme including school visits and meditation classes.



In the evening she teaches various classes and also teaches courses and retreats at weekends. She has no formal holidays but attends Buddhist festivals and enjoys the beautiful setting of the Centre. A warm welcome was extended to anyone wishing to visit the centre and its grounds or join a class or meditation session for the public.

Finish:

We ended our meeting in a novel way with a short meditation led by Gen Kelsang Dema using our breathing to improve our wellbeing followed by our usual vote of thanks.

Table showing the robes from the *Je Tsongkhapa* Buddhist tradition

Garment name (time to make)	Function	Colour	Notes (only a few features of many are mentioned below)
<i>Chögu</i> (20 hours)	Outer wear	Saffron yellow for wisdom	21 panels with downward flaps to signify that delusions wash off the wearer, frayed corner tags are a reminder of contentment
<i>Tsen</i> (3 hours)	Shawl	Maroon for concentration, method and compassion	worn inside and in line with the <i>Chögu</i> , only over one shoulder (one arm must remain bare)
<i>Donka</i> (13 hours)	Upper Garment - sleeveless	Yellow and maroon with blue cord armholes (the blue for tantra)	the V neck reminds the wearer of death and to live meaningfully always
<i>Shamtab</i> (5 hours)	Lower Garment belted at the waist	Maroon for discipline folded with 4 waist folds	panels made into one length of cloth; the 4 waist folds are for the 4 noble truths
<i>Undershirt</i>	To keep the skin from the robes	Yellow	or an under dress (yellow)
<i>Underskirt</i>		Maroon	
<i>Dingwa</i>	Seat mat	Maroon	Representing a lotus

Sue Young