



Dr. Ngawang leads a women's group on pilgrimage. Below, he teaches a large audience in Japan.

What is a Tibetan lama?

A lama is a highly respected and highly trained teacher and counselor.

Only after years of one-on-one instruction and long solitary retreats spent memorizing and practicing traditional texts does an individual receive the title of "lama," which literally means teacher. He or she can also perform the ritual services of a minister or priest.



He has also worked with National Geographic photographer Thomas Kelly in Nepal's Mustang and Dolpo regions to chronicle endangered Himalayan medical plants, and in the Dolpo region with American Fulbright scholar Sienna Craig to improve the knowledge of health and hygiene especially among the women in the region, completing one illustrated book on the subject in the local Dolpo language. This public health effort has brought together modern social services and traditional medical practices in a series of training sessions that have enhanced greatly the ability of regional women and local amchis to keep families healthy and productive. So great is his reputation that wherever he goes in the region, even on his research trips to Lhasa itself, patients materialize and queue up for diagnosis and treatment.

Having researched the correlation between Himalayan amchis being unpaid and losing old knowledge, Dr. Ngawang has also helped to bring together six hundred amchis from the different Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Dolpo, Bhutan, Sikkim, Kalimpong, New Delhi, Darjeeling, and Lhasa, to form the Himalayan Amchi Association (himalayan_amchi@hotmail.com). For the first time, organizations such as the High Himalayan Area Cultural Development Group and the World Wildlife Fund can systematically help to compensate amchis, whose presence means greatly improved local health conditions. He has also worked to break recent precedent and begin training interested young women as amchis, finding and funding promising candidates from villages in the Himalayan region. Moreover, Dr. Ngawang's systematic interviews with older amchis, training seminars for young practitioners, and regional congresses for the HAA membership have done much to preserve and disseminate this priceless knowledge.

Tibetan medicine engages skillfully with the interaction among physical symptoms, social and cultural issues, and the inner life, and Dr. Ngawang has concerned himself extensively with these other dimensions in his patients' conditions. With the help of Japanese funding in 1993, Dr. Ngawang planned and built the Jomsom Eco-Museum (praised in all the trekker's guidebooks as a must-see), which features western Nepal's only international public library, and sample displays on archaeology, geology, anthropology, medical plants, indigenous animals, and local dress, languages, and religious practice. The museum is not only for trekkers, of course, but stands as a source of local pride in