



MEDIA RELEASE

5 November 2020

Interfaith to Suffer at The Great Stupa with Religious Leader's Visa Rejection

The Department of Home Affairs has controversially rejected the visa of Geshe Lharampa Thupten Rapten depriving The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion of a revered Buddhist leader who has been a keen advocate of its interfaith program.



Venerable Geshe Rapten is the abbot of Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery, which together with the Atisha Centre, shares 200+ acres of bushland property with The Great Stupa in the Bendigo region.

Ian Green OAM, Chairman of The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, said: 'Venerable Geshe Rapten plays a key role in our efforts to promote interfaith harmony. He helps us build stronger connections and understanding between different faiths in Australia'.

The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion is based on the design of the Gyantse stupa in Tibet and is the largest stupa in the Western world. It was built to:

- inspire people to seek a peaceful and spiritual path
- be a pilgrimage place for Buddhists from around the world
- provide a refuge of peace and serenity for all, especially those in need.

The Great Stupa's surrounding gardens showcase the recently created Peace Park, which contains religious symbols and statues from Catholic, Sikh, Islam, Hindu and Buddhist faiths. The Peace Park is a visual expression of interfaith accord; it promotes open dialogue between different faith groups, and to nurture religious tolerance and coexistence. Different schools and religious groups often visit the Peace Park.

Every November, The Great Stupa hosts Sikhs from all over Victoria to commemorate the anniversary of the installation of the large Ik Onkar symbol in the Peace Park. The Ik Onkar symbol represents a phrase in Sikhism that denotes the one supreme reality – a central tenet of Sikh religious philosophy. Abbot Geshe Rapten, seen here wearing a Sikh bandana at the consecration of the Ik Onkar symbol, has played a key role in these events.



The Great Stupa had planned that Abbot Geshe Rapten would be available to help establish a Sri Lankan vihara on the stupa's grounds. A vihara is a meeting place for Buddhist monks and the one at The Great Stupa is being created by the Sri Lankans of regional Victoria.

The Sri Lankan vihara will comprise a fenced area with ceremonial gate, Sri Lankan Buddha statue, Sri Lankan Buddhist stupa and a sapling grown from a cutting taken from the sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi fig tree in the Mahamevna Gardens at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

‘The cutting we have is from the oldest living human-planted tree in the world with a known planting date. The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi is 2255 years old today. It is one of the most sacred relics for Buddhists in Sri Lanka and it is respected by Buddhists all over the world. After all, the Buddha attained enlightenment under this tree’s direct ancestor,’ said Chairman Green.

Alongside the promotion of interfaith activities and harmony, Abbot Geshe Rapten provides spiritual guidance, and officiates over the liturgical practices and religious ceremonies at The Great Stupa.

The Buddhist master is also called on to give advice on the correct protocols connected with the handling and display of the many holy objects that fill The Great Stupa. Abbot Geshe Rapten further assists with the correct identification and description of items sourced for the Tibet Museum, which is established on The Great Stupa’s grounds.

‘It is difficult to understand the Department’s decision. It not only affects the monastery, which loses its abbot, but Atisha Centre is also significantly affected by the loss of a much valued and respected resident teacher. We at The Great Stupa are in danger of losing the guidance and support of a master in our religious faith,’ said Chairman Green.

The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion calls on Acting Minister Alan Tudge to overturn the Department’s decision.



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Further information

- Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery’s [media release](#) is available on its website.
- Atisha Centre’s [media release](#) is available on its website.
- FPMT in Australia’s [response to the Department’s decision](#) is available on its website.

Background

- The rejection of the visa is based on the Department’s view that the monastic environment in which Abbot Geshe Rapten lives and works does not meet its definition of a monastic or cloistered environment.
- The Great Stupa for Universal Compassion is a sacred Buddhist monument and pilgrimage site that attracted over 20,000 visitors last year. Prior to the pandemic, 50,000 visitors were expected in 2020. The Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions released the following

short YouTube video about The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion earlier this year:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJjGo1IN1yA>.

- A stupa is the most sacred building in Buddhism. It symbolises the enlightened mind and the path to enlightenment. A stupa is also a reliquary to house holy relics of the Buddha and other highly realised beings; The Great Stupa has hundreds of holy objects that attract many Australian and overseas visitors to the Bendigo region. Tours are run daily.
- The Great Stupa houses the magnificent Jade Buddha for Universal Peace, which is the largest Buddha carved from gem-quality jade in the world. The Jade Buddha toured the world for 9 years: over 10 million people have seen it. The Buddha is now in its final home.