

Interview with the Venerable Gonsar Rinpoche about Tibetan Spaniels and Tibetan Dog Breeds

Q: Venerable Rinpoche, could you please tell us about the various Tibetan dog breeds and how they are called by the Tibetans?

A: “Do Khyi” means “a chained dog”. These large fierce dogs guard the houses and goods of their owners. The best Do Khyis are also called “Sang Khyi” after their origin Sangri, which is south of Lhasa.

Lhasa Apsos as well as Tibetan Terriers are quite widely spread. They can be found with people in Lhasa as well as with nomads.

The Tibetan Spaniels are also called “Simkhyi”, which means house dog, room dog or even bedroom dog. They are the dog of highest order and are being kept as Lama dogs or with aristocrats. The Tibetan Spaniel is a lively dog with a good length of nose. Jemtse Apso, meaning shaven Apso, is not a name used in Tibet for Tibetan Spaniels.

“Gya Khyi” is what we call a Pekingese dog. This dog is very popular with monks and aristocrats. The Gya Khyis have very flat noses and they don’t move much. They differ from Tibetan Spaniels mainly due to the flat nose and the long and extensive coat.

“Haba” is the Mongolian word for small dog. This expression is being used for all small dog breeds.

The name “Bora” is not familiar to me.

Tibetan Terriers are also called “Rapso” which means goat-haired.

“Sha Khyis” look like short-haired huskies. They also have a curled tail and pointed ears, but no blue eyes. They are mainly herd dogs which move around freely. They protect the herds from wolves and help drive the herd. Sometimes they are also used for hunting (not FCI recognized).

“Go Khyi” is the jewel amongst Tibetan dog breeds. About one per cent of vultures are Tibetan bearded vultures (tib: Gowo), which lay three eggs: the first with a snake, the second with a dog and the third with a bird. If you ever hear a dog bark high up in the mountains near a bearded vulture’s nest, you will find a very small dog there. This dog is called “Go Khyi” and is the most respected dog in Tibet (not FCI recognized).

Q: Often we can read that Lhasa Apsos and Tibetan Spaniels are considered as holy dogs by the monks. What is behind that?

A: We believe that any human or even a Buddha, a Bodhisattva or any other high being can be re-incarnated as a dog to help these beings. You cannot see this from the outside. Therefore we treat all creatures with much respect.

There are many Lamas in high positions who were and still are dog lovers. I can show you many pictures of Lamas with Tibetan Spaniels. Often the dogs sit next to the Lamas or on their laps. As the Lamas often sit still for a long time and meditate, the dogs feel very comfortable on their laps.

These dogs often behave very much like human beings. I had for example a Lhasa Apso which turned almost 18 years old. This dog gaged for cats, other dogs and puppies. Once when he had to do his business and could not go outside, he got hold of a piece of paper and went on the paper. When babies were visiting and they started to cry, he would go to them, console them and try to comfort them. He clearly showed traits of compassion and altruistic behaviour.

Q: How do dogs live in Tibetan monasteries? What are the daily routines of a small dog compared to a Do Khyi? How are they fed? Where do they sleep?

A: This question is not put entirely correctly. In the large university monasteries such as Sera, Drepung or Ganden, the house rules forbid and continue to forbid the keeping of animals. Even the high order Lamas are not allowed to have dogs.

Often large packs of half wild dogs live around the monasteries. These are often mixes of various dog breeds. As the monks, like all Tibetans, like dogs, they look after them. They feed them and observe them, and the young monks play with the puppies. People say that these dogs live so close to the monasteries because they sinned as monks and by carmic consequence they are now re-born as dogs. Because of their past, they stay close to the monasteries.

In remote smaller monasteries, dogs play an important role. I have my own monastery, the Gonsar monastery, which is located far away in the mountains of Lhasa. The Do Khyis are kept there for protection from thieves and other attacks. They are attached on both sides of the entrance. It is very impressive to pass near these big animals barking with their thunderous voices, jumping up and down, and being held back only by the chains.

Unlike the Do Khyis, small dogs are allowed to move around freely and follow their masters everywhere. This way they can take part in the rituals, prayers and mantras of their masters and absorb their effect.

Often Tibetan Spaniels accompany their master to the Koras. These are clockwise walks around sacred monuments which the Buddhists complete, praying and sometimes prostrating. It is amazing how healthy old people who regularly do their Koras are. The dogs always take part in these rituals. Sometimes, in earlier times, people also took "saved" sheep and goats with them to the Koras. These animals were decorated with special jewellery on the ears - red wool and small bells.

Often during the rituals, tormas (small figurines made out of roasted barley flour known as tsampa) and butter are offered. After the rituals, the tormas are given to the big ravens on the roofs and to the dogs in front of the monastery.

Tibetan dogs mainly eat tsampa and leftovers. The small dogs are particularly keen on "pag" fed from the hand. Pag is tsampa mixed with butter. Every Tibetan eats pag

at least once a day. The Do Khyis are fed on tsampa in large bowls. From time to time, tsampa is cooked in broth from bones and a bone is added.

Snow leopards are a big threat to the small dogs: The snow leopards jump on the roofs of houses during the night and grab small dogs. (Tibetan houses have flat roofs which are used as terraces.) The snow leopard smells the small dogs and, when the leopard approaches the house, the dogs go on the roofs to peek and bark. That is when the leopard attacks and grabs the dog easily. That is why sometimes we also call snow leopards dog leopards. I have lost a Shar Khyi that way. The Do Khys only sometimes win a fight against a snow leopard. If that happens, the snow leopard will never return to that place.

The nunneries very much rely on the protection of Do Khyis. Without their Do Khyis, the nuns would be vulnerable to danger.

Large properties are also often guarded by groups of Do Khyis, with one group on each side of the house.

I was born into a Tibetan aristocratic family. Most of these families keep Tibetan Spaniels. Pekingese dogs are also popular with aristocrats. The dogs are treated as members of the family and often sleep in the bed of their owner; my dogs sleep in my bed with me.

Q: Is it possible that a monk re-incarnates, by humbleness, as a monastery dog?

A: This is unlikely. A dog's life offers much less possibilities than a human life. But it is possible that a monk fails and as a consequence re-incarnates as a dog. Life as a dog is not so bad. Dogs are known for their enormous fidelity and loyalty towards their masters. Often, dogs also show empathetic and caring behaviour. And, in general, dogs are also well cared for. So that's not a bad life at all!

Q: What's the reason behind a dog being born as a dog and not as a cat?

A: All phenomena are a consequence of causes created in the past. When the external conditions are fulfilled, it comes to a manifestation. So there is always a cause behind every effect. I would say that the value of an existence as a dog follows right behind that of a human being. To be born as a dog is much more positive than to be born as a cat. Dogs generally do not kill other animals, while most cats frequently kill insects and other animals frequently.

Q: How can we help our dogs to develop spiritually?

A: By letting them take part in our spiritual life; dogs feel the rituals, mantras and prayers. This puts wholesome marks on their spiritual continuum and helps them lead a happy and fulfilling life.

Q: How long does it take until a dog who died can return to us?

A: The main question is, if the dog re-incarnates again as a dog. From one incarnation to the next one, it takes 49 days.

Q: I would like to ask you also about dog breeding. Obviously, Tibetan Spaniels were being bred to look like little lions. Are there dog breeders among the Lamas? What are the selection criteria amongst parent animals, in particular regarding looks and character?

A: It is true that Tibetan Spaniels look like little lions. If a dog lives alone, he will not normally have any puppies. If dogs live in a group, they will likely breed. We let nature take care of itself.

It can happen that a Do Khyi bitch is brought to a very good Do Khyi sire. The appearance should not be over-estimated.

Let me tell you a short story, which describes the relationship of the Tibetans to their dogs. I am friends with a Tibetan family who lived in Switzerland. They had a St. Bernard. This dog resembles in many ways the ideal Do Khyi: very big body, big head and impressive bark. When the parents retired, they went back to Tibet. The children stayed in Switzerland. However, the parents took the dog back to Tibet with them, where he received a lot of attention and admiration. When people noticed he was a very gentle dog, they were surprised and said: Why do you keep a dog that neither barks nor defends its owner but still eats a lot?

Q: Could you please tell us something about the different colours of the the dogs?

A: For guard dogs, Tibetans prefer black and tan. The dark colour usually impresses intruders the most. The spots above the eyes also give the impression that the dogs are awake, even when they are asleep. Furthermore, the “four eyes” also see demons and protect the houses and their occupants.

With respect to Tibetan Spaniels, the black and tan colours are also very popular. However, mostly we like black dogs with a white spot on their chest. The white spot on the chest stands for a pure heart. What we don't like to see is a white tail-end, as we associate this with stolen tsampa. White feet are acceptable. A white spot on the forehead is also an auspicious sign. We call this a Buddha Mark, a sign of Buddha. We also like yellow and gold-coloured dogs.

Q: What do you recommend to western dog keepers and breeders?

A: Nowadays, there are tendencies to exaggeration. That is never good. It is selfish and childish to shape beings according to our own wishes. My recommendation is to keep the Tibetan dog breeds as they are: healthy and robust and adapted to their life-task.

I don't think it is good to feed them with much meat. Today, it always has to be meat. This can cause disease.

I also regret that dog owners are willing to put their sick dogs to sleep. That is like killing a member of the family. Of course, we should help the animal and keep him from suffering. But often it is a selfish decision, as we are not able to cope with the illness, additional work and suffering at hand. Death always causes suffering; we cannot escape that.

Q: Could you imagine continuing the tradition of breeding temple dogs?

A: You cannot really speak of temple dogs. However, you could call the Do Khyis temple dogs as they guard temples. I would call the Tibetan Spaniel a Lama dog or a Lama lap dog. As I already have two dogs, I do not want to have any more for the time being.

Q: Could I please ask you to organise a “Tibbie-meeting” at Mont Pelerin with all the Tibetan dog breeds and their owners present? The dog owners and their dogs would like to hand you a “Khata”.

A: Once we finish the building of the new temple, I would be very happy to welcome you. We can then take a tour of the monastery and have a Tibetan meal.

I thank you most Venerable Rinpoche from my heart and hope that this interview will be spread around the world for the good of many people and their dogs.

Le Mont-Pèlerin, September 23, 2009

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About Gonsar Rinpoche

The present Gonsar Rinpoche was born in 1949 in Shigatse, Tibet, to an aristocratic family known to be descendants of the ancient Tibetan kings. At that time his father was governor of the province Tsang, in western Tibet. At the age of three Gonsar Rinpoche was recognized as the fifth incarnation in the line of the Gonsar Rinpoche's, which was confirmed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. At the age of six he entered Sera monastery, the second largest Monastic University of Tibet at that time. From the very beginning he was raised and tutored under the kind care of Venerable Geshe Rabten. Gonsar Rinpoche received a great number of teachings and transmissions from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many other masters, in particular from his root gurus Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang and the Venerable Geshe Rabten.

In 1959, when Tibet fell under the power of Red China, Gonsar Rinpoche fled with his master to India and continued his studies there. At the same time he learnt English and Hindi. In 1969 he started to translate into English the Buddhist teachings given to western students by his master Geshe Rabten.

Ever since the Venerable Geshe Rabten passed away in 1986, Gonsar Rinpoche, after spending thirty-three years as his closest disciple, has continued his master's activities. At present Gonsar Rinpoche is director of the center 'Rabten Choeling' in Mont Pèlerin, as well as the centers in Austria and Germany. He gives regular teachings directly in French, English, German or Tibetan.

The first Gonsar Rinpoche was famous for his particularly vast and profound teachings on the complete path of mental development to full enlightenment. The present Gonsar Rinpoche is renowned as one of the very few contemporary masters capable of transmitting every aspect of the Buddha's teachings as a clear and moving experience to Western as well as Tibetan audiences.

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