

# the master's voice

The great yogi, **RIBUR RINPOCHE**, (MANDALA June 2001) was in Taos, New Mexico, recently for week-long teachings and public talks. **MASSIMO CORONA**, executive director of **FPMT Inc**, took the opportunity to ask him how Westerners who take robes can retain their vows for a lifetime. Even after 15 or 20 years, many Westerners give up being monks and nuns. Some cite lack of community support as the reason; others say it is the difficulty of keeping all the vows. **RIBUR RINPOCHE** gives some of the answers through his translator, **FABRIZIO PALLOTTI**.

The very first thing that is needed [before even considering ordination] is to have the mind subdued by the force of the lam-rim practice. What makes the difference between those who stay and those who leave is whether or not the person has been successful in subduing his or her mind. If the mind is not subdued, after a while it gets overwhelmed with delusions and on the basis of that people disrobe.

The transformation of abandoning the household life and entering into the perfect conduct (*rabjung*) is based on the force of renunciation; and that can only come about with lam-rim practice. So the mistake is not relying enough on lam-rim practice.

When I was in Italy a few years ago, I noticed many Western monks and nuns were very scattered in the ten directions. They wander here and there from center to center and there didn't seem to be a really stable establishment, a monastery or nunnery for them to feel at home in, and to be able to stay there.

It seems to me also that Westerners need experiential learning, and I hear that both His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Lama Zopa Rinpoche are very supportive of the idea of encouraging new geshe coming out of the three main monasteries [Sera, Ganden and Drepung] to undertake

an experiential course or training, based on lam-rim.

**Massimo Corona:** *Some of the geshe are exceptional teachers from the point of view of teaching difficult philosophical points. But perhaps the way they teach does not take into consideration how to develop experience by using the topics in meditation. That is possibly a shortcoming that needs to be addressed in the context of people leaving ordination.*

**Ribur Rinpoche:** This is not a fault to be attributed to the geshe, because they impart the training and education system exactly the way they have been trained. Newly ordained people need to progress through the stages of the path, beginning with renunciation up to the point at which the stages of the path have left an authentic imprint

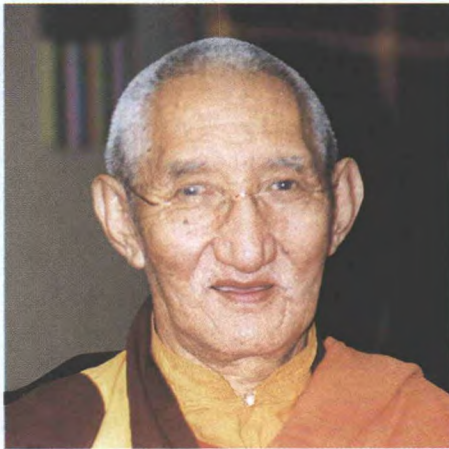


Photo: Ven. Roger Kunsang

in their mind: on the basis of that they can begin the philosophical training.

What is happening is the opposite way around. You become ordained and immediately get into the philosophical training of basic texts such as *dura* and *lorig* which are expositions of philosophical tenets. Without the strong basis of having some true experience of the Three Principles of the Path (renunciation, bodhicitta, pure view of emptiness), it is more difficult.

Also Sera, Ganden and Drepung monasteries (called 'the three great

seats'), are different to smaller monasteries like Nalanda in France and Tharpa Choling in Switzerland. Why? Because the three seats have thousands of trainees, not 20 or so.

The three seats are also called 'the great oceans' because in an ocean you find good and bad – treasures, corals, beautiful fish, sharks and other bad creatures. So too do the three great seats provide different quality levels. Out of so many thousands of trainee monks, there will be a portion that comes out extremely good. Then there'll be a portion of middling quality and a portion that comes out not good. With Western monasteries so much smaller, we should strive to have everyone coming out as good quality.

Monks and nuns have the forces of external rules and regulations, an external agent pushing, but what works best is what comes out exclusively from within the mind of the individual. If that happens in enough people, it provides the perfect example for future generations.

Liberation discipline is taken care of by the individual. Once they have been told what kind of discipline they have to maintain, then it's up to each individual to sustain the practice. You need the basis, and that works best where monks and nuns live together, a place in accordance with the Vinaya rules.

When monks and nuns live together it's up to them to preserve their own morality and it's not up to an external agent pushing them to do so or 'father' rules framing people; that does not work.

**Massimo:** *At the time of the Buddha, and in Tibet, the lay community supported and respected the sangha in an incredible way, with alms and so on. It was not strange to see monks going around in robes like it is in our world. Many people interviewed for this feature said that they feel the center of attention when wearing robes. Should we train the lay community in order to sustain the nuns and monks in a proper way?*



**Ribur Rinpoche:** When I was in Palermo I noticed people paid their respect when I was strolling along the street, but I also noticed the sharp and confused glances. That's natural because Buddhism is new in the West.

It depends on the type of behavior and attitude of the sangha community itself. If they keep abiding with morality and contentment, then slowly people with faith and devotion will come and support them.

Where the leader of the sangha community is a very learned geshe, he can impart the instructions based on the specific conduct of the Vinaya. That alone instills a practice and behavior which naturally subdues the mind, imbuing it with contentment and satisfaction which is the actual outlook of ordained people. With this outlook, lay communities will naturally help and sustain the sangha without the need to train the lay community.

A community of Chinese monks and nuns [living in New Mexico] came here to see me with their abbot. Their outlook is extremely subdued, a very clean and pure outlook that is dictated by Vinaya training. That's what our people should look like. We can learn from them, we can take from them things that are good for us and discard what we don't think is beneficial for us. Their behavioral outlook

is extremely important.

There are places of retreat where only monks and nuns are allowed to go, like Land of Calm Abiding [California], a place of great hopes and expectations run on the basis of Buddhist teachings; people who stay there are achieving results.

For people who cannot actually engage in ascetic practice, [it is good to] support people who can do so. Milarepa said that by sponsoring a meditator, due to that perfect condition of interdependent origination, the sponsor and meditator will achieve enlightenment together.

**Massimo:** *What advice do you have for a new nun working on an FPMT project who feels she is having to teach herself how to be a nun?*

**Ribur Rinpoche:** Sangha who live in monasteries and sangha who have decided to work or live in the modern

world are exclusively making their own choices. Westerners live in a democratic social structure where you have the freedom of doing whatever you want. You can be free to choose to meditate, or take a dip in the river. This does not accord very much with the rules and regulations of the Vinaya, of the dharma practice. The moment you mix the dharma and society and politics, you get into this kind of dichotomy.

Yet once the rules, regulations – and benefits – of living in a dharma environment are explained, and the people take them up spontaneously, not feeling it is imposed on them from outside, it should be a natural process of understanding.

**Fabrizio:** *His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that he does not understand why, when he gives initiations, many people will take bodhisattva and tantric vows without a problem; yet when it comes to taking ordination, they shy away. It is actually much easier to keep the vows of individual liberation (for external behavior which is much easier to control) than the bodhisattva and tantric vows, which are much more difficult because they are mainly of the mind.*

**Massimo:** *That makes me think that we don't have the faintest idea of what it really means to keep the tantric vows and bodhisattva vows pure. The only hope we have is to constantly purify our mind stream.* ☸

## a vehicle for realization

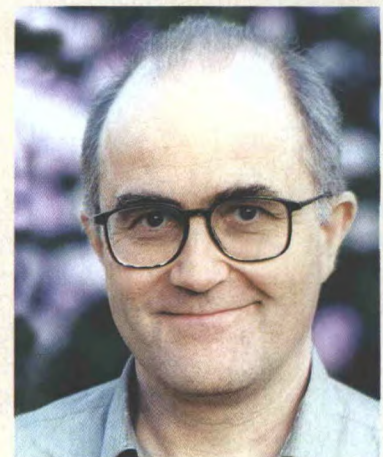
**STEPHEN BATCHELOR**, former monk in both the Zen and Tibetan traditions, now lectures and leads retreats worldwide. His books include *Buddhism without Beliefs*, *Alone With Others* and *The Awakening of the West*. He spoke to **NANCY PATTON**.

For me the Buddhist tradition is founded in one of the longest living human institutions – the *bhikshu* [monks] and the *bhikshuni* [nuns] of the Buddha. This is an institution that provides a

framework of training that has managed to survive throughout an enormously diverse range of cultures.

My time as a monk was effectively when I received all my intellectual and contemplative training. It is a well-tested framework. One might argue that some of the minor vows are anachronistic, dating back to 500BC India, and they haven't been updated to contemporary circumstances, but to me that's a fairly minor issue.

The core issue is the ongoing commitment to a way of life, which is completely dedicated to the realization of the Buddhist



Stephen Batchelor