

the harmony

French monk and former musician, VEN. THUBTEN ZANGPO (François Fontaine), faces his demons on long retreats. Recently he did a one-year calm-abiding retreat in New Zealand. He spoke to two Australian nuns, VENS. DEKYI LEE and LOSANG CHODRON, who had serious retreat commitments of their own to fulfill, and shared his experiences openly and honestly.

At the beginning of retreat there were these thoughts coming, huge and heavy to bear. When you are alone, a lot of things come up that you're not used to – things that would come into your life anyway, but you don't recognize them because you escape: you talk to friends, make telephone calls, go here and there. When you are completely alone, with no one to talk to for days and days, things come up very vividly. I don't know if it was the power of the practice or just the nature of my mind, but I would find myself thinking about being selfish to someone: "Why did I behave like that – it's so bad." You feel the same effect as if you had killed somebody! Because you can see that this selfish attitude was so bad, you want to cry, you cannot bear it. It's amazing.

Then when a thought came up, I would just recognize it, and let it go. I would say to myself, "OK, you want to think this way, do it," and I didn't freak out. I was witnessing how my mind was behaving, so a part of me was satisfied:



Painting by Karma Phuntsok

of retreat

"Oh, so that's the way it works!" If the selfishness was hard to bear, like you'd want to straight away write a letter to this person and say "I apologize, I'm sorry, how can I please you," and you couldn't do it for some reason, then you could say, "OK, I keep you in my heart and in my next life I will try my best to never do this thing again."

I noticed that slowly, slowly the power of these thoughts – so powerful by themselves – would just evaporate, because deep in my heart there was the attitude of thinking, "I'm going to benefit others, that's the reason why I'm here; because of that I'll feel happy, and take responsibility." First it was the wish to practice, and now you are engaging in the practice, now you're doing the actual job.

Next came attachment to beautiful objects. Because I had been a musician, a lot of music came into my mind, especially at night when I was sure to get a symphony! So I said, "OK," to my mind, just like talking to a child. "If you want to play, then play!" Once in a morning session this song came to me, and I wanted to express it. Immediately there was a noise just in front of me, like "Urgh." It had never happened before. I said, "Sorry, sorry." In retreat you feel the guru is really present.

In my late 20s I had been making art using colored mirrors, so visually beautiful things also came into my mind. Five or six months into retreat I really felt the need to be with friends. Maybe that's on a more subtle level in your mind, wanting to enjoy company. So something [music, pictures] is eliminated and then you get another thing in return. By the end of the retreat, this feeling of need evaporated.

My main difficulty however was food – having enough fresh food for the body. To have contact with the person who brings the food was not my wish but I had to accept it. Sometimes I did my own shopping. This [difficulty] I took as purification, as a big blessing from my guru. I would think, "Oh, the guru is giving me this and that's very important," and because it comes back to the selfish attitude, this selfishness is now purified. One day when I have to be confronted with others, or let's say I have to study, then I'll have more patience. I build up this state of mind during hardship to accept whatever happens.

more about the practice

Before starting the actual retreat, Khensur Rinpoche from Auckland told me to start petitioning the merit field, which I did for one month, two sessions a day. I didn't count the

length of the sessions as I didn't have a watch – I did not want to have a little policeman with me. I did try [to note the time] for two days and then I gave it up. You see the shadows of the sun on the pillars and so you know approximately.

Another lama told me, "You should eat coarse food, solids and fat things, and make your mind relaxed. Do a very short session and have a break in between. Make your mind always at ease; never squeeze it. Go for a walk so when you come back you are happy, you've seen different scenery, take it easy."

At the beginning it was very difficult to do the calm-abiding practice because thoughts come vividly to your mind and you don't feel at ease, even though you try hard. Then slowly, when these start to get eliminated, you start feeling comfortable and your mind becomes a little more peaceful. You feel happiness in doing this practice and because of that, it enhances the feeling of no need for a friend, no need to play music. Even though you have to walk along the shore to keep your body fit, you don't have a *need* to do so. You feel happy to keep your session going.

But this takes months and months, and the main thing is not to feel guilty about whatever happens to your mind.

As Westerners we are built to feel guilty about *anything* so accept that part of you and say, "OK, you want to feel guilty, feel guilty, you're welcome." Just accept any uncomfortable feelings.

Sometimes I looked at the Buddha statue, my meditation object, and said, "Oh please, talk to me or move or do something." He remained a big iron or copper being, although sometimes there was a shadowy sense that his face was changing a little. I found it useful to focus on one point, the *ushnisha*, the hands or the feet or the shoulders, and I tried to keep my mind on that because it seemed as if [concentrating on] the whole statue was too difficult. If I did have the whole statue in mind, it would be dark and I would only be able to hold the image for a second or two, but when I focused on part of the body it was much easier.

Also, since we're attached to realizations, then we want clarity, and if the image is not clear, it seems as if you messed up the session and this is a big trap. At first you must have a little stability and just focus on that. Do not expect something to be clear right away. If you try to make the object clear then you get excited, many thoughts arise one after the other. It's better to make your mind very relaxed and just focus on one thing. So as soon as desire [for clarity] comes, let go. At the beginning I didn't understand this very well and for months I

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had obstacles. There was no other choice but to give that up.

Potentially a bigger problem comes when you think you're succeeding – you say "I've got it," you focus on it and then you say, "Oh, tomorrow I'll do the same." You create obstacles for yourself for at least a month because your mind gets excited with the idea of your success. So don't grasp – don't grasp at anything.

The goal was to do a one-year retreat and whatever happens in that time, happens; no need to go in expecting to get realizations. I even said to the owner of the house [where I was on retreat], "Any time you want the house back, take it." I was completely easy going. I was ready for any possibility.

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Reading the *lam-rim* was the main thing that stabilized my mind. It is really important when you come to set your motivation. The mind is engrossed with worldly affairs and when you go through *lam-rim* (at least one session in the



morning before starting your actual session on guru devotion, and precious human rebirth, and death and impermanence), it definitely focuses your mind on something much more virtuous. I could feel my mind less engrossed by worldly matters. With no distractions, the reading is so good, and clear. One line goes straight into your heart.

Everything should be organized before starting retreat – the money, enough food, debts paid off – otherwise it will be very distracting once you are in. But then again I think, "It's the blessing of my guru if I have difficulty in this way, so I have to accept it." ☸

Ven. Thubten Zangpo was born on Reunion Island in 1952. In 1982 he took teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and subsequently studied with Dagpo Rinpoche, becoming a monk at his suggestion. In 1985 he met Lama Zopa Rinpoche in South India. Later, at Lama Zopa's suggestion, he did retreat in New Zealand for four years. After two years of meditating in India, he returned to New Zealand this year for long retreat.



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