

Monsoon Meditation

By Edith Odor

Have you ever considered following the ancient Buddhist tradition of retreating for the monsoon season to a monastery and spending all those rainy days with studies, meditation, and practice? Maybe there is no rainy season where you live and this idea has never crossed your mind. For a Westerner like myself, who lives in Asia, the monsoon has always caused some headache: how to escape all those hopelessly flooded roads, the sometimes knee-high wading in black, muddy water which carries the filth of a Nepalese street, the impossible traffic, and all the rest that pours down along with the rain. Thus the prospect of getting away from it all and turning those dreaded days into the most worthwhile period of the year has always borne an attraction for me.

When I met Ani Fran in Kathmandu's Thamel district in early June and heard of the three-month FPMT Basic Program that was just about to start at Kopan Monastery, I was quickly convinced that instead of trekking in tourist-infested Ladakh, Kopan was the place to go until the monsoons ebbed in mid-September.

The FPMT Basic Program is an integrated, intermediate-level study program made up of nine modules that cover a vast area of Buddhist studies from the Graduated Path (*Lam-Rim*) to Highest Yoga Tantra. A number of FPMT centers all over the world offer it in different time frames on either a residential or non-residential basis. The organizers at Kopan Monastery decided to teach the program in yearly modules of three months over a period of five years, starting from June 2007.

This year's subjects were Lama Tsongkhapa's Middle Length Lam-Rim, along with *Lo-rig* or Mind and Cognition. The former has always been one of my favorites, so being able to study it in depth for three months sounded like a real treat. *Lo-rig*, as it was explained to me, is a system of Buddhist psychology, shedding light on the intricate workings of our mind. Well, I definitely needed that light to get more insight into the tricks of the crazy monkey living inside my head. Thus the possibility of studying in my beloved Kopan gompa seemed a brilliant solution for the monsoon blues, and so it was over the coming months.

If you have ever visited Kopan, you might know the clinic building, that modern, three-story house just down the hillside from the main gompa and the dining hall. Overlooking lush green rice paddies and a landscape, dotted with villages that stretched all the way to the mountainous northern borders of the Kathmandu Valley, it soon became a cozy home, a gompa and school for ten eager Dharma students from all over the world.

I had never before experienced being a part of such a well-functioning community of Dharma practitioners. Equanimity, loving-kindness, and compassion unfolded naturally among us, nurturing a beautifully conducive atmosphere for our studies. The different rhythms and patterns of our lives – some of us travelers, some “householders,” and some sangha members – soon melted into a harmonious balance of study, contemplation, meditation, and rest.

We got a real taste of Gelugpa monastic life during the course, led by our kind teacher, Ven. Fedor Stracke, who himself spent more than a decade in South India at the Tibetan monastic university par excellence: Sera Je. Fluent in Tibetan and extremely well-versed in the scriptures, Ven. Fedor made sure that not a single line of the texts we were studying was misunderstood or not understood. He presented a rare and unique combination of the Western and the Tibetan approach, helping to make the vast and profound material more digestible for us, without diluting the meaning of the Dharma even in the slightest way. In addition to his thorough and deep presentation of the study material, he also introduced us to the magical art of debate.

At the beginning of our debate study, our minds were struggling with the seemingly screwy and twisty ways of this intellectual “martial art,” but soon quite a few of us developed a taste for it. The evening debate classes became the favorite of some students, but even the less enthusiastic dotted their conversations at the lunch table with phrases like: “take the subject,” “there is no pervasion,” or, “the reason is not established.”

The highlight of the study week was no doubt Friday evening, when our most beloved Khenrinpoche, Geshe Lama Lhundrup, would kindly come and visit us in order to follow our progress and answer all of our endless questions. He never tired of our qualms concerning the difficult points of *Lo-rig*, and all of our miscellaneous curiosities: for instance, the possibility of the extraterrestrial origin of the Tibetans, or the ideal placement of the home altar in our house, harmonized with the principles of Feng Shui. He mastered it all with his enlightened wisdom, and loving, warm heart, thus pouring new energy into us at the end of a long week, just when we thought our minds could not cope with any more.

The study program was cleverly designed to leave most of the weekend free for study and leisure. Strolling down from Kopan hill to the magnificent Boudhanath stupa was always our favorite weekend pastime, one that we enjoyed either individually or together with the whole group. We charmed the

monks of Chinni Lama's gumpa in Boudha with our ability to chant the Padmasambhava mantra – I guess they never believed that “injis” were capable of so much enthusiasm and stamina in mantra recitation. We offered many lights to the stupa, circumambulated together with the Tibetans, and rejoiced afterward over heaps of apple pie and chocolate cake in a nearby café. We celebrated surprise birthday parties, and received a generous cake donation from an anonymous benefactor from Kathmandu, to whom I would like to give heartfelt thanks.

We also had the once-in-a-lifetime experience of going on pilgrimage with Lama Lhundrup to Parping, where we saw the amazing Guru Rinpoche cave, self-emanaing Tara statues, and a beautiful little Vajrayogini temple where we recited the Guru Puja.

All in all, we enjoyed the thunderstorms, the soft, long rains and morning sunshine, the lovely environment in Kopan,

and the friendly support of everyone at the monastery. We had an unforgettable time there, and quite a few of us agreed at the end: We will come back for more!

If you too happen to consider following the ancient Buddhist tradition of monsoon retreat, dear reader ... see you next year!

If karma allows, see you next year, dear Ani Tenzin Namdrol, Venerable Gendun, Nana, Liraz, Judy, Jonathan, and Luis, and thank you for being such a great study group. And in the name of us all: heartfelt thanks to our kind teachers, Lama Lhundrup and Venerable Fedor, thanks to Ani Fran for always being there for us, and thanks to everyone at Kopan Monastery who made this brilliant program happen.



Front row from left: Jonathan Fahima, Liraz Rafael, Edith Odor, Judith Lin. Second row: Luis Ortiz, Lama Lhundrup, Nana Bazelam. Third row: Ven. Tamir, Ven. Gendun, Ven. Fedor, Ven. Tenzin Namdrol, Ven. Fran.

Edith Odor is from Hungary and has been traveling in Asia since 2006. She attended the November course at Kopan last year. She is hoping to start a Dharma center in Hungary, possibly teaching there in the future.



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