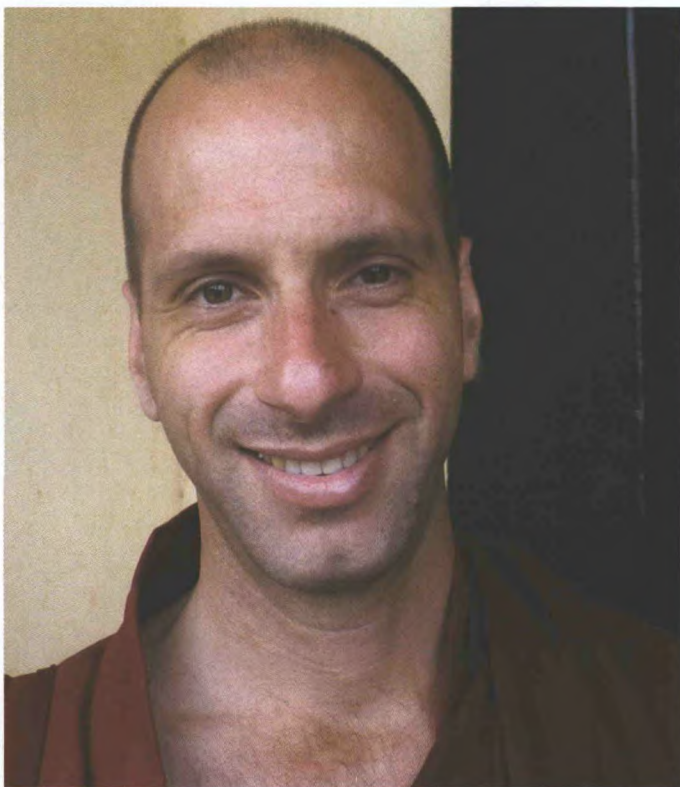


Life at Sera Je

So you think your life is too hectic and it would be nice to live in a monastery? Read on, as Ven. Tenzin Legtsok tells it like it is ...



“Woke up, got out of bed, dragged a comb across my head¹.”

Stop. Cut. There’s no combing of hair in this scene.

A typical day’s schedule at Sera Je Monastery involves hundreds of tasks but no combing hair. There are countless other deeds we don’t do here also, in the name of abandoning non-virtue, but these are not the topics under discussion at present. Rather, I’ll attempt to give you some idea of the main activities that occupy the monks from waking to sleeping, and how they vary from day to day.

Our activities can be roughly divided into those related directly to study and those related to prayer. Prominent in the first group are debate, class (in which a teacher explains a text), memorization, and independent reading/contemplation of texts in one’s room. Prayer activities can be divided into

that of doing pujas (or reciting and meditating on the meaning of prayers in assembly), and one’s personal prayer/meditation practices. Within each of these categories there are many various endeavors. For instance, in some debate sessions we debate in pairs of two, in others we sit in groups of twenty or so, at other times the monks of one regional group (*kangtsen* in Tibetan) debate against those of another, and sometimes all the monks of the monastery sit together while a few geshe candidates are examined through debate. All these multifarious religious activities are combined in various ways each day to create a daily routine that is consistent in its skeletal structure, but continually shifting in pace, mood, and character. Thus, while each day is crammed with a whole host of meritorious doings, the days do not become monotonous or oppressively repetitive. We have attained liberation from the nine-to-five grind.

Wake up between 5:00 and 6:00 A.M., breakfast at 6:30, have lunch at 10:30 A.M, dinner at 4:30 P.M, evening debate at 6:00 P.M, to sleep by about the midnight hour. This is the skeleton schedule into which all the other parts fit. No eight hours of sleep per night here, sweet dreamers, there’s a big fire in hell that’s got to be put out fast.

The next most important aspect of the schedule to know about is “on-debate” periods and “off-debate” periods. Most every day in the year is included in one of these two according to a traditional monastic calendar established years ago. The former means that we have debate in the morning from 9:00 to 10:30 A.M, and in the evening from 6:00 to about 10:00 P.M. Whereas, during off-debate periods there is no debate in the morning, and evening debate is shorter, ending at about 8:45 P.M. Off-debate period is meant primarily for memorizing textual passages in preparation for the coming on-debate periods. These two different types of debate periods alternate through the year lasting anywhere from seven days to one month each. During off-debate time, the pace of days is slower and more relaxed. A monk gets to spend more time at his house and in his room reading and memorizing. During on-debate periods things get a little more frantic and exhausting. We often find ourselves trotting from class to

¹ From ‘A Day in the Life’ by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

debate, to pujas, to meals, and back again. You've got to keep setting a bodhicitta motivation and keep your mind on all the merit being generated to keep from getting disgruntled. If you're longing to lounge on a couch and watch some tube during the on-debate periods you'll get a little testy.

The next most consistent engagement we have after debate (voiding food and sleep of course) is classes. These occur anywhere from 7:00 to 9:00 A.M and 1:00 to 6:00 P.M each day depending on each monk's own schedule. All the monks in a same year or grade of study will be studying the same sections of a text at the same time and debating on it together. But, we receive explanations of and different arguments about the text from different teachers. You can see then that the more monk students and teachers there are in a monastery the more minds are converging to unravel and discuss any given topic. That's one reason the Three Monastic Seats (Ganden, Drepung, and Sera) are regarded so highly.

Any one monk may have from two to eight or more classes in a six-day week, each class period lasting about one hour. Whether we have more or less classes depends on how many textual teachers we decide to take. Having two main teachers, now I have five class periods a week. A friend of mine only goes to class with one teacher twice a week. Others have four teachers. Each teacher gives class from their own house, often in their bedroom or a larger room set aside for that purpose if they have more students. We monk students sit on the floor, books in our laps, following along. (As an aside, our teachers are the best and brightest of the geshe and higher class students. They worked incredibly hard studying for years and, as teachers, give nearly all their time to the task of educating the younger ones. Yet they receive nearly no monetary compensation whatsoever from the monastery or their students, teaching instead out of incredible kindness.)

The third major element of our study schedule is memorization of new material and recitation of texts we've already memorized. Serious students try to spend at least one hour each morning memorizing and one hour each evening reciting. (I'd highly recommend this for any Buddhist who can make the time for it, as texts and prayers that are saved in your mind allow you to use and reflect on them anytime, anywhere you are. For example, you can recite the Heart Sutra or Praise to Twenty-One Taras while driving, and the Confession of Downfalls while prostrating, etc.) However this varies greatly, depending on what else is going on in the day. Memorization and recitation are like the screen savers of the pre-lunch and post-evening debate periods respectively. Working at those fills up the time not taken up with the windows of puja, class, and personal commitments at those hours. For example, during an

off-debate period a studious monk might well memorize continuously from 5:30 until 10:30 in the morning with only short breaks for breakfast, to give a memorization exam to their house teacher, or just to rest a bit. And in the evening most kangtsens have a rule that all monks must recite outdoors until 11:00 or 11:30 at night. The most persevering monks may well be heard pacing up and down rapidly reciting aloud until 1:00 or 2:00 A.M. Older monks say it used to be common to hear a few monks outside reciting longer works such as Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltzan's "General Meaning of the First Chapter" (of *The Ornament for Clear Realization*), and Je Tsongkapa's "Essence of Eloquence," etc., all night long. Try this at home and you may get booked for disturbing the peace.

Often my favorite time of day is after waking from the noon nap, and before going to dinner at 4:30 P.M. This is when we study quietly in our rooms, reading and reflecting on the texts. Just after lunch, most monks study Tibetan grammar and handwriting, because the mind is more sluggish then, and those topics are less difficult to comprehend. After dinner, people relax and chat a little, or do some last minute memorization of quotations and other preparation for the evening's debate. But during the mid-afternoon, one feels rested having napped, cool and clean having washed, and you have a little time to follow your fancy in unraveling the meaning and import of a text.

Finally, we come to the pujas' aspect of the schedule. Pujas can happen more or less any time of the day or night, except during debate times (although there are even some special pujas which supersede debate). Usually they are scheduled at meal times, because the sponsors offer a meal to the sangha. And the most common meal offering is breakfast, from 5:30 – 7:00 A.M. because it's the cheapest meal to offer. You want to get more prayer for your money as a sponsor. There are different kinds of pujas, not only in terms of what prayers are done of course, but – and here this is more important – in terms of which group of monks convene. The largest and thus least frequent assembly is of the monks from both Sera Je and Sera Mey. Next largest, in number of monks, are the pujas convened for all the monks of Sera Je. These are the most common kind of assembly. Then there are also pujas convened by each of the thirteen kangtsens that make up Sera Je Monastery. These have to be scheduled so as not to conflict with the monastery pujas or debate times. Finally, individual house groups also hold pujas that the monks of their house must attend. The frequency of all these assemblies depends primarily on how many sponsors come forth and request prayers to be done. At times we may go several weeks or more without having any pujas, and the

study program rolls along very evenly. At other times many pujas will be requested by the Tibetan government, or Lama Zopa Rinpoche, or sponsored by the monastery itself, etc. and we'll have four or more pujas daily for a week with hardly any time to look at the books.

It's a little nerve wracking for the first year or two you're here, especially as a Westerner used to things being planned and announced well ahead of time, because you never know what's going to happen next, be it a puja, or debate, if you have class or not, etc. Often no one seems to know for sure, and you hear all sorts of rumors about what's happening today or tomorrow. There is no monthly calendar posted, or any such thing, and even if there were, the monastery disciplinarian has power to change the schedule at will as he sees fit. Eventually though, one gets used to accepting whatever events come up, and you just go along with the flow of red robes wherever it's heading.

I'll leave you now with just one sample time-line for a day's routine to give you some idea what it is like living here. First, visualize yourself surrounded by thousands of monks who only speak Tibetan. In your right hand you're holding Yongzin Dudra (a beginner's debate manual), in your left hand a tea mug, over your left shoulder a dingwa (sitting cloth), from your belt hangs a wooden mala, and on your two feet you wear a pair of plastic flip-flops. Then go:

- 5:30 A.M. Wake up.
- 5:45 – 7:00 Memorize.
- 7:00 – 7:30 Breakfast in room.
- 7:30 – 8:00 Prepare for class.
- 8:00 – 9:00 Class.
- 9:00 – 10:30 Debate.
- 10:30 – 11:00 Lunch.
- 11:00 – 11:30 Morning prayer commitments in room.
- 11:30 – 12:30 P.M. Study Tibetan script and grammar.
- 12:30 – 1:30 Read a little and sleep.
- 1:30 – 4:30 Study in room.
- 4:30 – 5:00 Lunch.
- 5:00 – 6:00 Recite or relax a little, and do last minute preparations for debate.
- 6:00 – 10:00 Debate.
 - (6:00 – 6:30 with one partner, 6:30 – 7:30 in a group of 20, 7:30 – 8:45 recite prayers, 8:45 – 10:00 debate with partners.)
- 10:00 – 11:30 Recite outside.
- 11:30 – 12:30 Evening prayer commitments, and prepare for bed.

How are you feeling? Tired? Well, get some sleep, but not for too long, the house disciplinarian will be around at 6:00 A.M. to see that you're up.

More or less everyone gets worn down doing all these activities day after day, week after week. On our one rest day per week, we catch up on sleep, and do tasks like washing, buying necessities, cleaning our rooms, and e-mail which don't get done the rest of the week. When we need some extra rest we can get permission from our teachers to stay in for a night, but there is a lot of pressure to go to as many of the debates and pujas, etc. as we possibly can. Attendance is taken at debate and the more important pujas. For absent marks fines in rupees and grade points are given. Also the various disciplinarians of the monastery and kangtsens patrol the houses and streets to see that monks are where they ought to be when they ought to be there.

The most pressure and encouragement to exert oneself as much as possible in study and practice though, comes from one's peers and friends and teachers. There are very close social ties among the monks, so that every day we meet many acquaintances around the monastery. When one person is feeling frustrated or worn out or worried about something, the others inquire and try to give some good advice to bring the person round to a more positive way of seeing things. This constant comradeship, being surrounded and supported by so many companions in the Dharma, is to me the most precious invaluable blessing of living in a monastery. It is being part of a well-organized Dharma community that makes it possible for most of us to work so energetically at learning, and actually transforming our minds in accordance with what past Buddhist masters have taught.

For most Westernized monks coming here to study it is difficult giving up the freedom of doing what you want when you want to and doing it alone. That can be said perhaps of the Western Sangha in general. Here, you have to do what everyone else is doing, when they do it, and do that together with all the other monks. Often one's ego really doesn't like this. In terms of accumulating merit and purifying negativity though, it's much, much more powerful performing virtuous activities with a large number of people. Also, it's excellent for one's practice to be challenged by the discipline and rigor of monastic training at a place such as this.

Often times we can't see why activities are organized a particular way and feel they don't serve our needs as an individual particularly well. One finds, though, that having faith in the monastic system, letting go of doubts and condescension, and going along with the program bring a contentment and satisfaction rarely found anywhere else. ☸

Ven. Tenzin Legstok, 35, is from Virginia, USA. He was ordained in August 2001, and took full ordination with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in February 2007 in Dharamsala. He is currently studying at Sera Je Monastery in South India.