



The stupa at Kunsang Yeshe Retreat Centre, Australia 2013. Photo courtesy of Kunsang Yeshe Retreat Centre.

Curiosity, Disillusionment, Knowledge

By Ven. Tencho (Tenzin Chodzin)

Ven. Tencho's personal story illustrates how powerful studying the Dharma can be. Her journey from prison inmate to ordained nun to Basic Program student at Chenrezig Institute to center director at Kunsang Yeshe Retreat Centre is offered with the hope of inspiring all of us in our practice of transforming our minds.

Like most children, I loved learning about the world around me, questioning how things worked, why this, why that. My siblings and I were taught to read from an early age and there were plenty of books in our house to satisfy curiosity and expand our learning. Beginning school was an exciting prospect because there were more things to learn, and I would be able to ask lots of questions. I was like a sponge drinking in the world.

But when I was 11, my mum died, and my worldview splintered. I felt confused, angry and disillusioned. My education hadn't prepared me for close emotional loss and my school teacher's platitudes about heaven and God's will left me feeling estranged from faith, hope and religion. Formal studies suddenly appeared pointless, and my efforts with them deteriorated. I became rebellious and skeptical, in both attitude and behavior. Alcohol and drugs began playing a significant role in the suppression of and protection against emotional pain while seemingly offering a more profound perception of the world.

My formal school studies ended at 15 when I was caught selling marijuana at school and was asked to quietly leave. My

life took another trajectory as employment meant money, independence and parties. Risk-taking, recklessness, addiction and excitement became dominant in the following years until I was eventually unemployable, living on and off the streets, in and out of prisons and generally screwed up. I didn't lose hope completely; I just put it aside for a couple of decades.

In the 1990s, I was introduced by a good friend in the prison education block to meditation and some basic Buddhist principles. I found the views and practice enticing and my curiosity in the world was reignited. During one period of release, I even attended some classes at Tara Institute in Melbourne, but wasn't convinced that happiness couldn't be found within the worldview I held and the lifestyle I had lived for so long. More years of misery and disillusionment followed.

By March 1998, I was older and tired of the cycle. I exited the prison gate one final time and was driven by friends to Atisha Centre in Bendigo, Victoria, Australia, where the directors had generously allowed me a three-month trial live-in situation. My curiosity for exploring and understanding myself and the world

around me was willingly nurtured by the kind students, patient mentors and inspiring teachers I met there.

Later that same year, I left Australia to attend the Kopan November course in Nepal. There, I met and heard Lama Zopa Rinpoche for the first time. I couldn't understand a word he said the first couple of days and became quite depressed. I hit the floor prostrating early each morning, hoping to clear away whatever karmic obstacles I had. His teachings eventually came to me clearly, and my confidence in his knowledge and personal qualities grew with each day.

I surprised myself by asking him if I was suitable to become a nun, which was something that had not been on my list of things to do in this life. But although I was so new to Buddhism, I was not new to suffering. I'd seen and experienced enough to be convinced that attitudes, incorrect beliefs and behaviors determined one's suffering or happiness, certainly in the everyday experience of life, let alone considering future life experiences.

I received *rabjung* vows from Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Root Institute in India in December 1998, returned to Kopan for a three-month Vajrasattva retreat (there was quite a bit of purification to be done), and spent 18 months offering service at Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala, during which time I received *getsulma* vows from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I eventually returned to Australia to undertake the five-year *Basic Program* at Chenrezig Institute.

The formal studies at Chenrezig Institute were challenging on many levels. I was now 42 years old, hadn't formally studied since my teens and here were blindingly new ideas and concepts in exasperating and convoluted philosophical language, with countless mind-bending definitions to memorize. But there was also

beautiful poetry and illuminating glimpses into a reality beyond conception, piquing one's imagination with the potential for absolute freedom from suffering and making sense of intertwining pathways and practices for becoming something more than we think possible. Did I understand everything? Of course not. The studies were like a web, and I struggled against it many times. But just like a web when viewed in its entirety, the strands expose an exquisite map of connectedness and purpose. It becomes a thing of beauty.

I may not get to immerse myself in another serious study program in this life, who knows? But I value the teachings I received. I value the many texts and commentaries I slipped into. I value the Dharma conversations I had with others. I value the teachings I attended, particularly when certain phrases triggered my memory and strengthened my wish for knowing. And I value that each moment of practice, in whatever form that takes, leads me closer to understanding and living something beyond words, something beyond suffering.

Now I have hopes to bring together the strands of creativity, meditation and Buddhist principles in developing Kunsang Yeshe Retreat Centre as a place of self-discovery and transformation. It'll be a residential center that benefits others by offering creative youth programs and food training skills in a commercial café, by supporting local community groups alongside meditation retreats, and by offering formal and informal Buddhist study opportunities with our residential and visiting qualified teachers. It'll be a place of learning and hope for everyone.

Ven. Tencho (Tenzin Chodzin) is an FPMT registered teacher and has *Basic Program* and *Discovering Buddhism* certificates. She serves as the director of Kunsang Yeshe Retreat Centre (www.kunsangyeshe.com.au) in New South Wales, Australia.

Liberation through Education:

An Interview with Liberation Prison Project Student Raven Jones about the *Masters Program*

Raven Jones holds the unique distinction of being the only FPMT Masters Program student to complete the intensive six-year study component of the program entirely from prison. He's already begun a one-year retreat. He is currently a prisoner at Idaho Correctional Institution-Orofino (ICIO) in the United States. Tim Burruss, a Liberation Prison Project Dharma friend, helped Mandala with this interview.

Mandala: How did the opportunity arise to take the *Masters Program* (MP) and why did you decide to take it?

Raven Jones: In 2004, I started corresponding with the Liberation Prison Project (LPP) and Ven. Robina Courtin, who put me in touch with an LPP Dharma friend, Tim Burruss. Over the next year, LPP provided me with several modules of the *Discovering Buddhism* series, then I worked through the *Basic Program* with Tim.

Continuing with my goals, Ven. Robina Courtin gave me refuge and individual liberation vows in 2005, and bodhisattva vows

in 2007. Tim continued providing information and constant feedback to me, and in January 2008, told me I was being considered for the upcoming *Masters Program*, which I said would be great! In February, I received a letter from Ven. Sangye Khadro saying that she would be doing the *Masters Program*, had volunteered to help one inmate, and that LPP had assigned me to her! I was beyond words.

Although I felt I knew a fair amount about Buddhism, I knew it wasn't enough. So I made myself a personal promise: I would study, learn, meditate and share (where permitted) everything given to me, and that I would complete the course. And I did!

FPMT IN-DEPTH BUDDHIST STUDY

Mandala: What are the challenges and benefits of doing the *Masters Program* in a prison environment?

RJ: The main challenges are logistical: figuring out how much material and how many books you can receive at any one time, whether materials have to be sent through the prison chaplain or regular mail, etc. Also, during this period, I was moved every six to eight months, so it was important to send LPP each change of address.

Another challenge was the delays. I would send my questions and answers to exams through LPP in the US to Ven. Sangye Khadro in Italy, and she would respond through LPP. Eventually, we found it easier to communicate directly [which is an exception to standard LPP procedures], first through my mother and then through my sister, Cindy.

As for benefits, those of us in prison don't have as many distractions as students outside. Since we are provided with the basics – food, clothing, shelter – we can dedicate more time to study and meditation. If the prison environment isn't a serious hell realm, an inmate can integrate the information provided, and by observing the various levels of suffering one experiences and sees, develop more durable bodhichitta.

Finally, one of the greatest challenges/benefits is being able to work on and discover the selflessness of oneself and of others, just the sheer impermanence of phenomena in the prison environment further aids MP studies.

Mandala: What was the process like?

RJ: As an Idaho inmate, I have no Internet access, and due to the frequent moves, audio recordings weren't viable either, so from the beginning I received books and printed materials. Usually one of the MP students or Ven. Sangye Khadro would take weekly lecture notes in Italy, and these plus charts would be sent to me. Without the diligence and great compassion of the MP students and the incredible MP teachers, it is certain that neither I nor anyone participating in this program at home or from prisons could have completed it.

Mandala: What would you advise others in similar situations?

RJ: If someone has what they believe to be a good understanding of Buddhism and they are offered the opportunity to take the MP, I would say, "Do it!" Through the program you will discover more about Buddhism than you thought possible. Once you decide to enroll, investigate how your institution will allow the incoming materials. This program may be one of the most difficult experiences of this lifetime, yet it will provide you with a wealth of knowledge, and indescribable experiences, so commit for the long haul.

The Tibetan teaching style is different from that of the West, so it will take some getting used to. Be persistent and if you have any questions, ask whomever is providing your materials.

Mandala: What is next for you in terms of practice and studies?

RJ: Through the guidance of Ven. Sangye Khadro and Olga Planken (*Basic Program* and *Masters Program* coordinator), I am now doing a year-long intensive lam-rim meditation on different topics in three phases. In the morning, I meditate on how the topic applies to me; in the afternoon, on how it applies to others; and then in the evening, I meditate on it through my understanding of emptiness or dependent arising. In addition, I am reviewing all the materials from the MP so that they are more firmly integrated in my continuum, and I use a lot of sutra materials to influence how I guide beginning- and intermediate-level Buddhist groups here at ICIO.

I plan to continue learning from FPMT and my Dharma sisters and brothers throughout the world. Once released to parole, I hope to find an FPMT center or group in the US where, after taking novice vows, I can learn, work and contribute to a community of monastics and lay people, all sharing a common goal.

I want to thank the following people and organizations for their incredible help and compassion: Lama Zopa Rinpoche; Geshe Jampa Gelek; Ven. Robina Courtin; Ven. Sangye Khadro; Tim Burress; the teachers and students of the 2008-2013 *Masters Program*; FPMT; LPP; my mom; my sister, Cindy; Olga Planken; and Heruka Vajrasattva. Without their help and great compassion, not only would it have been impossible to participate in the *Masters Program*, I wouldn't even be on the Dharma road.

May all of us attain full Mahayana enlightenment as quickly as possible for the benefit of all sentient beings everywhere.

Thank you! ♦



To learn more about the Liberation Prison Project, visit www.liberationprisonproject.org or write to International Office Liberation Prison Project, PO Box 340, Blackheath, NSW 2785, Australia, or US Office Liberation Prison Project, PO Box 33036, Raleigh, NC 27636, USA.

For more on FPMT education programs, see fpmt.org/education/programs.

Raven Jones.
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and Liberation Prison Project.