

# THE UNION OF Study and Practice

BY VEN. TENZIN NAMDAK



# “STUDY IS A MIND TRAINING THAT BRINGS US CLOSER TO ENLIGHTENMENT.

**V**en. Tenzin Namdak, an International Mahayana Institute (IMI) monk, began the geshe program at Sera Je Monastic University in 1997 after taking ordination with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and finished his studies and exams in November 2015. *Mandala* asked Ven. Namdak to write about the benefits of long-term intensive study and practice:

When I first met the Dharma more than 20 years ago, I didn't think there was need to study too much. I wanted to do retreat and engage in what I thought was “real practice.” And I had already done quite a bit of studying in my “worldly life.” Fortunately, the kind gurus who advised me to learn Tibetan and go study at Sera Monastery had quickly recognized my shortsighted view. When I had my doubts about the long period of study at Sera, Lama Zopa Rinpoche said, “It will be very beneficial for your lam-rim.” Almost 19 years later, as I am completing the geshe studies program, I am extremely grateful that they encouraged me to pursue this incredible opportunity to study in the traditional way. Although low in intelligence, lazy by nature and with a mind difficult to subdue, I have seen many benefits over the years and have been inspired by the teachers who are great products of this profound system.

Misconceptions about long-term study are not uncommon. Many people want to practice instead of doing extensive study. And others think that it is more important to study than practice. However, study and practice should not be seen as contradictory; we need both on our path to enlightenment. They enhance each other. Even on a worldly level this relationship is understood. Famous organizational researcher Kurt Lewin, for example, said, “Theory without practice is sterile, practice without theory is blind.”<sup>1</sup>

Study can *also* be considered as practice. Study is a mind training that brings us closer to enlightenment. When reading a lam-rim book, for example, taking time to reflect about what we read is a form of analytical meditation. And the more we read, the more information we have to think about. By becoming familiar with a wide variety of ideas and reasoning, our analytical meditation becomes more profound.

In an audience granted to the residents of Sera IMI House, His Holiness the Dalai Lama joked that “the masters of the past made Buddhism difficult,” breaking into laughter in the midst of the seriousness of the point. He went on to explain how the afflictions are very difficult to remove, as we have become deeply accustomed to them over many lives. Further, he said, the tradition of Nalanda, from where Tibetan Buddhism originated, is unique in emphasizing the importance of prolonged and deep study to generate powerful antidotes to counteract these afflictions from many different angles so as to eventually be able to eliminate them completely. His Holiness also acknowledged that undertaking study and practice is not easy; it requires great effort over an extended period of time.

Study – in the form of receiving explanations of texts, individual reading, memorization and debate – together with prayers and meditations with thousands of monks, is the heart of the geshe program. This course of study covers the whole range of Buddhist teachings based on root texts and commentaries composed by both Indian and Tibetan masters on the five major subjects: 1) valid cognition (*pramana*) concerns how to use valid reasoning in analyzing issues related to the path; 2) Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāparamita*) explains how to develop realizations on the paths

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OLIVIER ADAM

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices*, Anol Bhattacharjee, University of South Florida, 2012



to nirvana and enlightenment; 3) Middle Way philosophy (*Madhyamaka*) clarifies the view of dependent origination and emptiness; 4) monastic discipline (*vinaya*) teaches how to live a moral life as set out by the Buddha; and finally, 5) through studying phenomenology (*abhidharma*), we learn about karma, the different aspects of our mind and the development of the paths. These texts explain the Buddha's thought and provide detailed explanations of all of the stages of the path to enlightenment.

An analytical approach is very important when studying Buddhist doctrine. We should not easily be satisfied with an answer, but instead always look for more information to get things clear and remove doubts. This will make our understanding stable and build up the familiarization needed to generate realizations.

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Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tsering<sup>2</sup> used to give teachings without even looking at the text. The first thing he would say during class was, “Where did you reach in the texts and what are your doubts?” Then he'd start to debate us. He would never give answers to questions about new material, instead he would say, “I don't know. Study and debate the subject more first and then we'll talk.” This was a skillful way of letting us first get familiar with the subject, identifying the difficult points and our doubts, after which he would help us to clarify the subject.

Some of the Buddhist scriptures are not easy. We have to read them again and again, receive teachings on them and repeatedly contemplate the essential points. Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Delek<sup>3</sup> used to say in class, “Although it is difficult now, just keep studying and analyzing the text; the mental imprints are planted so one day these will ripen and one will understand the difficult points completely. This understanding will eventually lead to realizations.”

Study not only helps our analytical meditations, but it also helps develop concentration. Some teachers in the monastery say that reading the great texts keeps the mind in virtue and focused, preventing distractions by the afflictions. As a beginner, while doing a mantra accumulation retreat, for example, they say that it's easy for the afflictions to become manifest and hence joke that such a novice “wears down the finger nails [with the mala] but not the afflictions.” This doesn't mean that we shouldn't do mantra

accumulation retreats, but we should do them having prepared well, mainly meditating on the stages of the practice, and engage in mantra accumulation only when the mind gets tired. This is an explicit instruction found in many tantric texts. His Holiness sometimes jokes by saying, “If you rush through the sadhana without meditating on the points, and then straight away start with the mantra count, then what do you do when you get tired?”

When the mind is trained by study, we can engage in more serious contemplation and meditation. Many Buddhist scriptures talk about three stages for generating realizations: 1) *listening* to teachings and studying, 2) *contemplation*; and 3) *meditation*. In the *Abidharmakosha*, these stages are explained with an analogy of learning how to swim. Initially, one needs to continually depend on a swimming board; in the second stage, one tries a bit by oneself and has to rely on the swimming board occasionally; in the third stage, one can swim all by oneself. The swimming board symbolizes dependence on the words of the scriptures and swimming by oneself illustrates dependence on the meaning of the scriptures.

We can see the results of the traditional system of study by looking at the great masters. These teachers are subdued, compassionate and have a mind of wisdom as sharp as a razor blade. They can quote and know how to analyze and explain the most difficult points in the texts from memory and retain this ability into their 80s and beyond, even after not having seen those texts for years. Having this “active knowledge” of the sutras and tantras makes one's meditation incredibly more powerful and profound than that of someone who hasn't studied well.

When His Eminence Choden Rinpoche did a 19-year solitary retreat he had all the texts needed for retreat memorized and had only a mala in his possession.<sup>4</sup> Although showing the aspect of a practitioner, he always advised students to first complete their studies before engaging in long-term retreat. Rinpoche also taught about the importance of receiving oral explanations and transmission of texts. When we are given transmissions, we receive the blessings of the author of the texts and of all the lineage masters who transmitted it in an unbroken way over the years, eventually reaching one's own teacher. These blessings help us to understand the text faster and realizations will come quicker. This can be understood with the story of the pigeon that sat in a tree outside the window of the scholar Vasubhandu. Having heard the recitation of the *Abidharmakosha* day after day, in his next life the pigeon became a great scholar of the abidharma literature.

<sup>2</sup> Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tsering was one of greatest teachers in Sera who passed away in 2014, see *Mandala* July-December 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Delek is another great teacher in Sera and who is the present abbot of the monastery.

<sup>4</sup> See “The Life of a Hidden Meditator,” *Mandala* July-August 2000

# IN SERVICE TO OTHERS: VEN. TENZIN NAMDAK

BY VEN. TENZIN LEGTSOK

In November 2015, Dutch monk Ven. Tenzin Namdak completed the final exams for the 19-year geshe studies program at Sera Je Monastery in South India. He is perhaps the only Westerner to complete this program from beginning to end at any of the three seats [Sera, Ganden and Drepung Monasteries]. Due to the rigor and length of the study program, the most extensive of Tibetan Buddhism available anywhere, less than a third of the Tibetan monks who begin the geshe studies program finish, and for Westerners, the dropout rate is much higher.

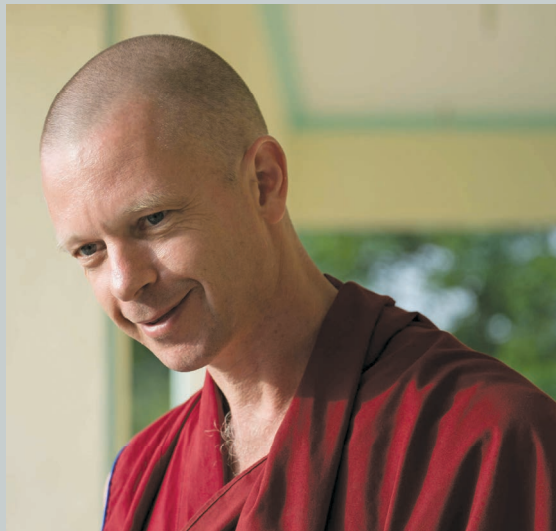
Once, while onstage during a public talk in Bangalore, His Holiness the Dalai Lama quietly asked Ven. Namdak which class he had reached at Sera. On hearing that Namdak had reached vinaya, or monastic ethics, His Holiness placed his palms together as a sign of his pleasure that a foreigner had come so far in the study program. Ven. Namdak has not only completed the full 19-year program but done so in grand style. However, to give an account of his efforts by measure of grades, reputation, or time spent debating and meditating – although impressive – is perhaps less meaningful than to relate some of his service to others over the past years.

Ven. Namdak serves as director of Sera IMI House (Shedrup Zung Drel Ling), where Western FPMT monks live while studying at Sera Monastery. From its inception in 2002, Ven. Namdak has helped many Western monks find their way at Sera and provided continual encouragement to those who stay on. In 2004, Lama Zopa Rinpoche asked him to give Dharma talks to people in Bangalore. Gradually, a study group formed, and his initial groundwork has blossomed into one of FPMT's newest centers, Choe Khor Sum Ling. Six years ago, at the request of Sera Je Monastery, he set up and began teaching an extra-curricular program training monk-students to translate Dharma into English, which continues today as the Sera Je Monastic Translators Training Program. He was one of the main organizers of an extensive series of teachings by the late His Eminence Choden Rinpoche at Sera, beginning in 2006, during which the transmissions of many rare and important teaching lineages were passed on to thousands of monks. Finally, for the past five years, as requested by His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Private Office, he has led the annual pre-ordination course for aspiring monks and nuns at Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala.

This is to list some obvious achievements that, as those of us who have lived and worked closely with him can attest to, have arisen from following the advice of his gurus with single-minded devotion, mindfully maintaining pure moral conduct, using each day and hour meaningfully in recognition of the value and transience of this precious human life, and sincerely wishing to benefit other sentient beings and the Buddhadharma.

It is important to have a vast vision while studying and practicing. Jangtse Chöje Lobsang Tenzin Rinpoche, told me once, "We try to study the complete path as extensively as we can and put it in to practice. If we do this for a few lifetimes, then the realizations will definitely come." These kinds of statements help us to generate stable faith in the system of learning and give us a broader view of the path. It took the Buddha three countless eons to become enlightened, so what is a few years of intensive study?

We can also see that the great mahasiddhas from India, such as Padmasambhava, Shantarakshita, Naropa, Virupa, and so forth were renowned scholars before showing the aspect of great accomplished yogis. Lama Tsongkhapa is also a great example of such a mahasiddha. In the biographies of Lama Tsongkhapa we



VEN. TENZIN NAMDAK  
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can see that he studied very intensively until he was in his mid-30s. According to these biographies, he asked Manjushri if his view of emptiness was according to Svatantrika or Prasangika.<sup>5</sup> Manjushri replied that it was neither and advised him to do intensive retreat and focus on three pieces of advice: "See the lama and tutelary deity as inseparable; accumulate merit and purify defilements; and study the great texts."<sup>6</sup> Lama Tsongkhapa, who had done many short retreats earlier in his life, was now advised to engage in a long retreat in which he offered 3.5 million

<sup>5</sup> The Svatantrika and Prasangika are the two sub-schools of the Madhyamaka schools of tenets.

<sup>6</sup> This quote can be found in many biographies of Lama Tsongkhapa like the two – *Haven of Faith* and *Secret Biography* – written by Khedrub Je, one of his foremost disciples.

prostrations to the Thirty-Five Buddhas and 1.8 million mandala offerings.<sup>7</sup> Following the three-fold advice and by making strong requests to the lama over a long period of time, he achieved a genuine understanding of emptiness by reading Buddhapalita's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*. The night before this insight, he had a dream in which Buddhapalita blessed him with this commentary. After this insight, Lama Tsongkhapa generated the realization of emptiness and composed various commentaries on the view of emptiness using the works of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti as the basis. He went on similar study retreats in order to generate realizations of other aspects of the path to enlightenment and the stages of tantra.

Lama Tsongkhapa not only generated the realizations of these stages and paths, but also clarified – sometimes in discussion with Manjushri himself – all the difficult points in his oral and written commentaries for future generations. From Tsongkhapa's example we can learn that study *by itself* is not enough for realizations to come about.

Although these stories suggest putting our main emphasis on study before engaging in long-term retreat, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't do short retreats during the period of study. These shorter retreats will help us to get some experience of what is studied. Geshe Lama Konchog (1917-2001), a real yogi of our

time, for example, used to do a lot of shorter retreats during his studies at Sera in Tibet. After the completion of his studies, he engaged in long-term retreat and generated the realization of the path to enlightenment, which was clearly shown by the incredible relics produced from his holy body after cremation.<sup>8</sup>

If we wish to attain the realizations of the path, shouldn't we too follow this example? His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that it is not enough just to be able to explain calm-abiding, bodhichitta, and emptiness in detail. We need to make every effort to actually generate these realizations in our minds by meditating, on the basis of extensive study. If nobody does this in our time, then future generations will come to think that such levels of mental development are merely the myths of the past.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to the kindness of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's vast vision, the various study programs within FPMT have this traditional system of the union of study and practice. We are very fortunate to have this available in many countries, planting the seeds for enlightenment all over the world. ■

<sup>7</sup> See *Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa*, edited by Robert A.F. Thurman, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 2006

<sup>8</sup> See "An Extraordinary Modern-Day Milarepa," *Mandala* March 2002

<sup>9</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama is making these statements more and more during the annual lam-rim teachings in South India.



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