RETREAT

The secret of happiness

As Petra McWilliams came out of her three-year deity retreat, she was invited to talk about the most important realization she had during that time. "There's no way!" was her first thought — so much had happened. Four and a half seconds later, she knew what she wanted to say:

For me, the most important aspect of this retreat was really experiencing the difference between understanding things intellectually, and even whole-heartedly believing that they were true, and having a real heart-felt life-transforming realization. The lamas always say that there's a difference. I'd experienced so many lam-rim topics that for me were intellectual, or something I whole-heartedly believed in, but feeling them transform into realizations was one of the most striking and significant aspects of my retreat. I want to talk about one of them, because this one happened early on, and set the tone for a lot of the rest of my work in retreat.

It happened on January 15, 2001, the first year in retreat, and the birthday of the great bodhisattva Martin Luther King, Jr. As I was doing my prostrations — usually when I woke up, around 3:30 or 4:00 A.M., I would do a round of prostrations to the 35 confessional buddhas, and I found that a large number of my epiphanies happened then, face down on a cold floor — I suddenly flashed on my mother, who had passed away twenty years ago. I thought about my selfishness and lack of kindness to her, especially as a rebellious teenager. In that moment, I had an enormous realization. I spontaneously reviewed my entire life. I thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering and lack of kindness to her, especially as a rebellious teenager. In that moment, I had an enormous realization. I spontaneously reviewed my entire life. I thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering. I thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering. I thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering. I thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering.

I realized once again that what the lamas have always said, and I had heard over and over again for years and thought I believed: that self-cherishing is the source of my suffering. I had a thousand-fold stronger experience than any feeling of happiness or bliss that I'd ever had in my life. It hit me like a ton of bricks!

For the next three days I just sat on my cushion crying almost non-stop. I spontaneously reviewed my entire life, and saw that every moment of suffering that I'd ever experienced, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life, from a moment of slight irritation to the worst of my life. And I saw how renunciation leads directly to bodhicitta: out of the ashes of this level of renunciation rises the phoenix of bodhicitta.

I saw from my experience that to get to this point you need to be willing to give up everything you've thought since beginningless time would give you happiness, comfort, security; you just need to strip it all down and give it all up. And what you're really doing is just releasing yourself from this prison that keeps you trapped, trapped in this prison called "self-cherishing," and that's what keeps you trapped in samsara.

Because I've had a taste of this experience, I just keep trying; being willing to go to the edge — so that I can live there all the time, that I can get to the point where bodhicitta is my permanent address! And just having the taste of that experience, and knowing what real happiness is, and what the cause of that happiness is, is by far the most significant experience of my retreat. And I will never give up until I get there.

Petra McWilliams was last featured in Mandala June 2001. She will continue doing retreat under Lama Zopa Rinpoche's instructions later this year.