

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa

One of the oldest FPMT centers is in a beautiful old castle in Pomaia, Italy. Massimo Corona recalls how it all began at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa.

It all started around the fall of 1976 when Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche were in Italy for the Second Meditation Course there. We rented an old hotel, which had not been used for at least two or three years. It was near a lake in Tartavalle in the Alps, north of Milano.

Piero Cerri, Claudio Cipullo, and I were the course organizers. One night, halfway through the course, Lama Yeshe called us into his room. It was quite late, and I remember I was exhausted.

Lama was lying down on his couch, and he said, "Okay, are we doing the center or not?" At that time, Claudio, Piero, and I were studying debate in Switzerland with Geshe Rabten, so Lama Yeshe wanted to be sure that we really wanted to start a center. We said, "Yes, Lama," and he asked, "How do you want to do it?" Piero answered, "Well, we could come down once a month." And Lama said immediately, "No, no, no! No way! These people are new to the Dharma; they need to have you here full time; otherwise, we make no center!" That was a big thing for us; it meant we had to interrupt our studies.

Anyway, we said, "Yes, Lama," and he said, "Okay, which name do we give? You can choose between Atisha Center or Lama Tzong Khapa Center." So we chose Lama Tzong Khapa. Then he said, "Okay, now, who is going to be the director, who's going to be the secretary, and who is going to be the spiritual program coordinator? Let's be democratic, let's vote: I vote for Massimo as director, who do you vote for?"

And of course what could the other two say? Nothing!

So that's how it started. We had to go back and tell Geshe Rabten we were leaving the school.

But even before that, during the course, Lama Yeshe had asked me to take him to see my parents. He knew my mother, but he didn't know my father, who actually had a very bad opinion of Lama Yeshe. He thought that Lama was in it for the money.

So on the weekend we drove to my parents' country house. As soon as we arrived, Lama Yeshe imme-

diately started to talk to my father, sitting with him outside on the veranda. In less than an hour, my father was crying. With real tears he said, "Lama, whatever you want to do I will help."

In the following months, I searched for a suitable place for a center in different parts of Italy. Areas near Venice were too expensive, Piemonte was a bit too foggy, and central Italy was better. Tuscany was beautiful, and also it's in the middle of the country, an equal distance from the north and from Rome.



A castle in Pomaia can house 140 visitors.

The place we found near Pisa was ideal for us because it was immediately livable, and it didn't need tremendous renovation right away. It was a castle in the small village of Pomaia, made of big stones with a tower, and we could see the ocean from it. It was probably built around 1830 because we found a brick that had that date on it. But it was built in different phases so maybe something had existed before. It belonged to a noble family called Ciampolini, and originally it had 2,000 hectares of land.

During the Second World War it was a command post of both the German Army and the partisans. We found a big machine gun with lots of ammunition plastered into double ceilings, and many, many bullet holes. They must have shot a lot of people around there.

It was sold over the years in pieces, and eventually it was sold to a marquise in the early 1950s. When her son died nearby in a terrible car accident, she hated the place, and she sold it to a group of farmers who kept the land and eventually sold just the castle with a few hectares around to the man who eventually sold it to us. Negotiations were very difficult: The owner was

really dishonest, but in the end it became ours in May 1977.

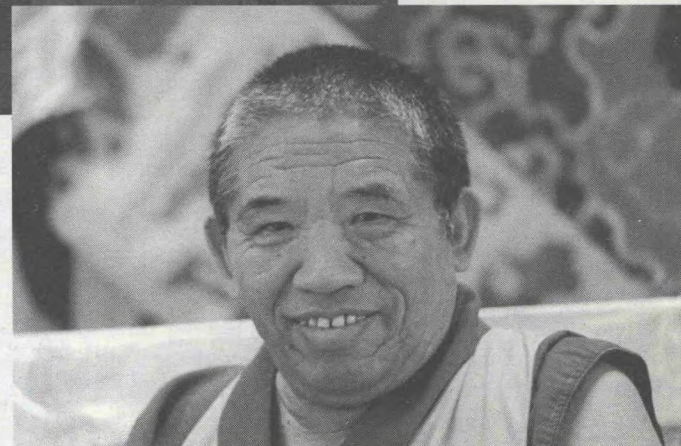
On the first night, I slept there alone. There I was, the director, and I was the only person in the center.

Slowly, people came. We started the renovations by painting the old walls. In the fall of 1977 my father kept his promise and gave us the money, not only for the purchase but also for most of the cost of the remodeling. Other people gave money, but between

85 and 90 percent of all the money was given by my family.

That fall we held the first course, even though we didn't have access to the entire building because there were still tenants. The previous owner had not told them to leave because he wanted their rent money. However, after witnessing our course, and our lamas, the tenants left immediately because they felt this was all too weird for them!

The building was divided into holiday flats, and we literally



Geshe jampa Gyatso, one of two resident lamas.

had to tear apart almost the entire content of the castle and reconstruct it; it was not easy because it was such an old building with very thick walls.

In 1978 we held a large course with Zong Rinpoche who was traveling around to the European and U.S. centers. During the remodeling, the National Railroad Company gave us some free canvas that we could use as a makeshift tent over a structure of scaffolding pipes. Having come from railroad cars that carried coal, the canvas were very dirty, and when it rained, it dripped black everywhere.

I remember that when time came for Zong Rinpoche to do a Yamantaka initiation, he refused to do it in the tent because, he said, "It's too open.

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Everybody can see. This is tantra, and tantra is secret." So we had to go inside to the biggest room in the castle, which was not really that big. Anyway, we squeezed in and received the initiation.

The major remodeling took place over several years. In 1979 we had a course with the lamas, and we had to work round the clock with big floodlights to be ready in time. We completely tore apart one wing of the castle and rebuilt the floors; that was a major effort. Pino Tomasi fell off the roof one morning because he had stayed up all night and lost his balance. But when he fell, he was just like a rubber ball. He just jumped up and didn't hurt himself. We were all so scared, though.

Everybody had to learn how to work on house renovations. I did some plumbing and electrical work. My plumbing was of such bad quality that years afterward it started leaking in one part of the building. We had to tear all the floors up and redo all the piping because my welding was not so good. But it was such a great feeling working all together for the center and for the lamas. It was really fantastic.

In 1980 we had a visit from Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, the senior tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was really amazing to have Ling Rinpoche there. He gave the entire commentary to the Yamantaka Tantra, including the generation stage and the completion stage, a teaching that is extremely rare.

His Holiness Sakya Trizin, the head of the Sakya order, also came. His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself came four times to the center, not only to teach but also to live. He actually slept on the premises. I think there is no other center in the FPMT that has hosted His Holiness so many times.

We have hosted Zong Rinpoche twice and Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche twice. Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche stayed with us for about six months. We were also blessed with the presence of many abbots, and later, Ribur Rinpoche, Gomo Rinpoche, Choden Rinpoche, and Denma Locho Rinpoche, who are now traveling and teaching in many FPMT centers.

Most importantly we have to remember Geshe Yeshe Tobten (also called Geshe Tudzub), our first resident lama. He was an incredible yogi who had lived all his life in meditation in the mountains above Dharamsala. When he passed away a couple of years ago, his death was full of miracles, and the ashes were full of relics. We were so lucky to have such a great meditator and yogi as our first resident lama.

Nowadays, Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa has about forty residents, two resident lamas (Geshe Jampa Gyatso and Geshe Tenzin Tenphel), and many monks and nuns living there. Geshe Jampa Gyatso is an incredible lama who has studied both sutra and tantra to gain the highest degree of Geshe Lharampa. He also completed his tantric college studies, but besides that, he is truly a lama who shows a very deep understanding of the mind of his disciples. He understands and speaks Italian and teaches in English. He has resided at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa for close to twenty years and is now an Italian citizen.

Live-in courses can be held for up to 140 visitors in addition to the residents. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama came, everybody slept with their sleeping bags in the gym and in the big rooms that are used for teachings – over 400 people were housed at the center. I think this makes it one of the biggest centers in the FPMT.

This is the first FPMT center to offer the Masters Program – Geshe Jampa Gyatso is the main teacher – and the Masters Program students are now entering their seventh year. In 2003 they received the commentary on the grounds and paths of tantra, and in 2004 they will study Guhyasamaja for an entire year using different commentaries, which will be a very intensive study. In 2005 the students will take the final comprehensive exam to graduate before entering into a nine-month retreat. It is thought that about fifteen people will most likely graduate.

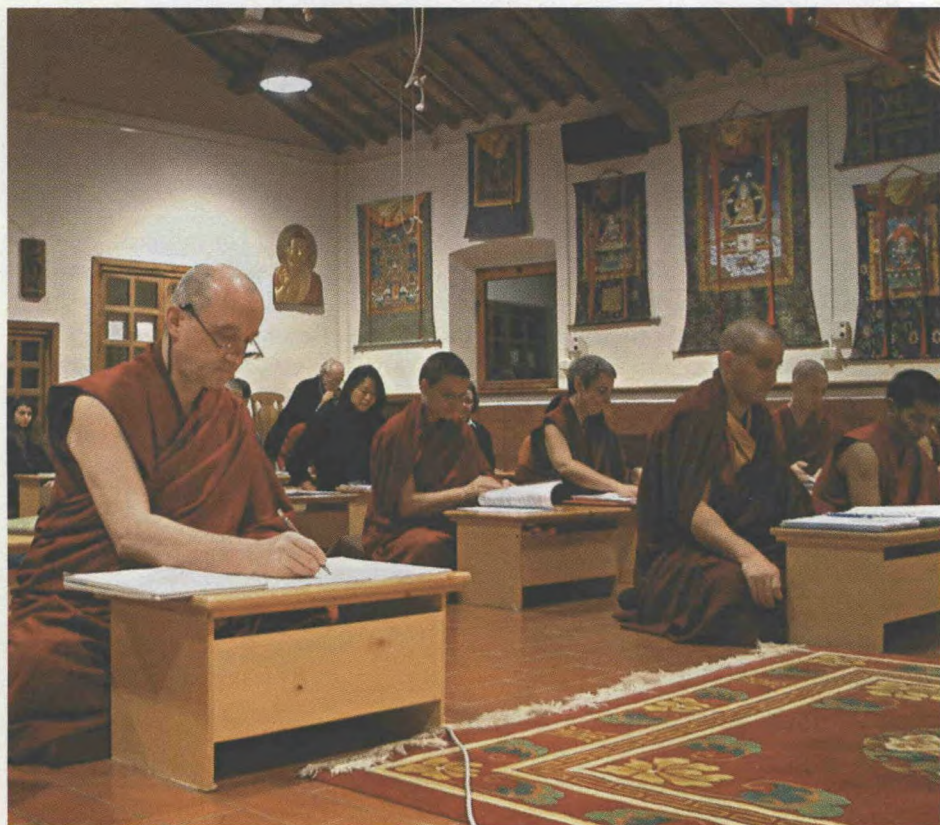
The ILTK premises now consist of the castle and a separate building, a villetta, where the resident lama and some of the monks live. Many log cabins have also been built on the property close to the main castle – there are maybe 30 cabins altogether with bathrooms. Four large stupas adorn the center, and the residents recently transformed an old unconsecrated chapel into a beautiful temple to Chenrezig with a painted roof. We hope to get permission to keep the ashes of students in stupas there after the ashes have been purified and blessed with the Jangwa ritual.

None of this would have been possible without the constant, tireless, and dedicated work of hundreds of residents and volunteers who have lived at the Institute for various periods of time throughout its 28 years of existence. Some have been living in or near the center from the very beginning. Their dedication is exemplary. Their work has created an increasing amount of benefit, not only for this but for future generations as well. ●

Massimo Corona is executive director of FPMT and publisher of Mandala.

THIS VERY LIFE

A Great Study Opportunity: Part I



Students at work at Lama Tzong Khapa Institute

This is the opportunity of a lifetime – any lifetime. For the first time, FPMT's Basic Program, which normally takes five years of weekly study, is being offered over an accelerated two-and-a-half years at Lama Tzong Khapa Institute in Italy, starting in January 2005.

Where else can a practitioner get these benefits described so aptly by Geshe Jampa Gyatso: "Study, any study at all, is of benefit. However, in this case the benefit is that we can purify the different kinds of afflictive emotions in our mind. In addition, we can gain wisdom and more mindfulness and perhaps also introspection. In this way our mind will become more stable."

Unique in the FPMT lexicon, this study program is helping to fulfill Lama Zopa's dream of creating the ideal study situation for non-Tibetans.

At Lama Tzong Khapa Institute, the study of the nine subjects that form the core curriculum of the Basic Program will be alternated with regular short retreats, and the program will conclude with two months of review for a final comprehensive exam and a three-month lam-rim retreat.

Teachers will be the Institute's two resident lamas, Geshe Jampa Gyatso and Geshe Tenzin Tenphel, assisted by two of the Masters Program students, Ven. Birgit Schweiberer and Ven. Olivier Rossi.

In the first of a two-part article, **Joan Nicell**, Masters Program Coordinator, asks **Geshe Jampa Gyatso** to explain the benefits of studying the Basic Program subjects. He says:

STAGES OF THE PATH

There are many subjects in the Basic Program. The first is Lama Tsongkhapa's *Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, the middling lam-rim