

The Lam-rim Monastery

A Vision for IMI and FPMT

By Ven. Losang Monlam

The survival and spread of the teachings in the universe also depend on the community of the ordained ones. Through listening to the teaching one enters into the scriptural teaching and the very meaning one attains when one takes them into practice, one naturally generates within oneself and others' mind-stream the realization of the teaching. Through this way, the teaching is preserved and expanded. VEN. JAMPA TENZIN (REINCARNATION OF PABONGKA RINPOCHE)



Planting the seed

A lam-rim monastery? Now what is that! While I knew of monasteries specializing in tantric studies or Buddhist philosophy, I had never heard of a lam-rim monastery. In fact, I had often wondered why Je Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise* was never formally studied at the three great monasteries. So a lam-rim monastery was a new concept to me.

It all started with a meeting I had with Lama Zopa Rinpoche in October 2007. Ostensibly I was there to discuss the draft of IMI's ordination and monastic education policies. However, realizing the dire situation of the monks and nuns within the IMI community, I had also introduced the topic of monastic communities.

That is when Rinpoche introduced the idea of a lam-rim monastery. Of course, my previous meetings with Lama Zopa Rinpoche had given me enough experience to know that those few words were just planting the seed, and although I might not understand the meaning during the conversation, he certainly did. And although pressing him to reveal more, not much more was said.

I distinctly remember leaving that meeting very curious

about this concept of a lam-rim monastery. As he had the first time I met him, and many times thereafter, Lama Zopa Rinpoche had hooked me again.

Soon thereafter I was off to India, and although I had made some inquiries about the lam-rim monastery, I did not have much luck. My attention then shifted to preparing for the IMI planning conference held in February 2008 at Land of Medicine Buddha, California. The conference was meant to set the vision and development of the IMI community for the next generation.

Little did I know that the next chapter was about to unfold. In preparing for the meeting, I researched the history of the IMI, perusing some IMI documents that had been passed on to me in Hamburg some six months earlier. There among the first IMI newsletter, along with snippets about the founding of Nalanda monastery, etc., there was a copy of the FPMT Handbook section on Sangha from CPMT 1989.

The appendix included a section on Advice for Community Life and Practice, compiled by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1987. While not revealing itself as the text on the lam-rim monastery, the words "selected from Pabongka's text" caught my eye, enticing me to read further.

This was it! This was what Rinpoche had been referring to. I had actually found it, much like a *terma* buried for centuries only to be revealed at the appropriate time.

Interestingly enough, Ven. Yeshe Khadro had worked with Rinpoche in transcribing the translation. As a delegate to the IMI planning conference, she could provide the context. As it turned out, she would also be the catalyst for the next unfolding several months later in Australia.

In June 2008 I went to meet the Australia-based IMI Sangha, finally having the opportunity to read this document in detail. Wow, this was it: this document revealed a structure that had the possibility to address many of the underlying concerns of IMI and FPMT.

What is a lam-rim monastery?

A lam-rim monastery is a monastic community engaging in a one-year structured program of study, retreat and practice covering the lam-rim and the fundamentals of vinaya, the monastic code of conduct for monks and nuns. It is simple yet profound.

The overall structure of the program includes three to four days of teachings each month on the lam-rim, gradually moving through the entire lam-rim text over a one-year period. The teachings are combined with community practices such as *Jorchö/Lama Chöpa* as well as *Mahakala* and deity yoga. On days without teachings, the monastic is in retreat completing preliminary practices and four sessions on the lam-rim subjects covered in the teachings.

The main elements of a monastic community such as *sojong* (confession ceremony), alms rounds, and *jarne* (rains residence) are also preserved within the one-year program.

The lam-rim monasteries are fairly small in size – usually not more than fifteen to twenty people – and with a mixture of fully ordained and novice monks or nuns.

So, in effect, it is all there: study, practice and retreat, set in a monastic community and with an emphasis on lam-rim. The program is one year, but can be repeated, each time making further progress, taking the teachings deeper – even preparing the student for a three-year retreat.

Unique FPMT culture

The lam-rim monastery's distinct integration of study and practice on lam-rim accords with the FPMT culture, a culture that has allowed the FPMT to serve the Dharma so well over the last thirty-plus years.

Certainly anyone who has ever attended a retreat with Lama Zopa Rinpoche is familiar with the lam-rim basis for integrating study and practice. The retreats often push the student to their limits. How often has Rinpoche advised us to study lam-rim?

While many of our teaching centers with resident geshe, who have been trained at the great monasteries, have great programs, the emphasis is usually on Buddhist philosophical studies. Although the lam-rim is included in the Basic Program and Discovering Buddhism curriculum, the lam-rim monastic education program is different in that it can also serve as model for monastic training that accords with the unique FPMT culture. Also, if perchance the integration of study and practice in a monastic environment leads to realizations, this would only strengthen the service that monks and nuns would offer to the larger world community.

Currently, there is very little monastic training within the FPMT mandala. When monks or nuns ordain, sometimes

they are in study programs under a teacher, sometimes they are in communities, but there is no formal program for instruction in the vows or for helping them make the transition. When coupled with little basic material support, new monastics face particularly daunting challenges. They are often isolated from other monastics, and left to their own devices to study and find basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, etc.) as best they can.

Certainly, IMI is trying to change that reality. Within the last year, the IMI Development Plan has identified monastic education as a top priority.

The lam-rim monastery is key to the future of monastic training. It would provide a suitable training ground for any monastic making the transition to monastic life by providing opportunities for learning to live and function in a monastic community while being spiritually supported through the integration of lam-rim study and practice, and proper vinaya training.

For the student newly making the transition to monastic life, the one-year program is not too daunting. For others, the flexibility of a few years of lam-rim monastic training before service within the FPMT mandala is desirable.

Another clear priority is the need for the growth and development of sustainable monastic communities. We definitely need these communities in order to stabilize the ordination of our monks and nuns, to take care of new monastics, as well as the elders who have nowhere to go after their many years of service within the FPMT mandala. Small regionally-based sustainable monastic communities are envisioned.

Although the model of the lam-rim monastery is not meant for all, it has already met with enthusiasm from some monks and nuns of IMI. The prospect of an organized monastic program focused on study, practice and retreat is encouraging for many. Preliminary discussion is underway in several regions to determine where such a monastery might be located.

While geshe could serve as teachers on the lam-rim teaching several days a month, there would not be a requirement for a full-time resident geshe, with many of the positions in the monastery held by senior experienced IMI monks and nuns. This could prove to be quite a positive step forward toward the establishment of Buddhism in the West.

It will take time, but Lama Zopa Rinpoche has planted the seed. That seed will depend on so many causes and conditions to nurture it along. Sharing this vision is one of those causes. ☸

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