

ASK A LAMA

Advice on Long Retreats

Fabrizio Pallotti asks revered lama, **Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche**, the reincarnation of the former abbot of the Kirti Gompa, how best to bring the long retreat practice lines of the Gelug tradition into FPMT.

Q: Rinpoche, other traditions such as the Kagyu and Nyingma have very structured programs for a three-year retreat. For example, in the Kagyu approach, the first month is on the graduated path; the next six months are devoted to the preliminary practices; then for one year one meditates on the generation stage of the deity followed by a second year on the Six Doctrines of Naropa; and the last eight months are spent meditating on mahamudra: a total of three years and three months.

Moreover, Kagyu and Nyingma masters have established several three-year retreat places in the West, places which are used for group retreats and where a structured program is followed. Is a group retreat versus an individual retreat advisable for such a long period of time? And is there a structured system for long retreat in the Gelug tradition?

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche: In the Kagyu and Nyingma systems, as you mentioned, there is a tradition of incorporating the practice of listening, reflecting, and meditating in a three-year retreat period.

In most cases the first part of the retreat is dedicated to preliminary practices, for the accumulation of merits and purification. Then practitioners are instructed to undertake the practices of the generation and completion stages of tantra. In general, in order to receive the full benefits of the tantric practices, such as those of the generation and completion stages, one should be fully trained in the common path, what we call the graduated path to enlightenment, or Lam-rim.

In the Gelug tradition, the most important preliminary is the integration of extensive listening, reflecting, and meditating on the shung chenmo, or the great treatise-

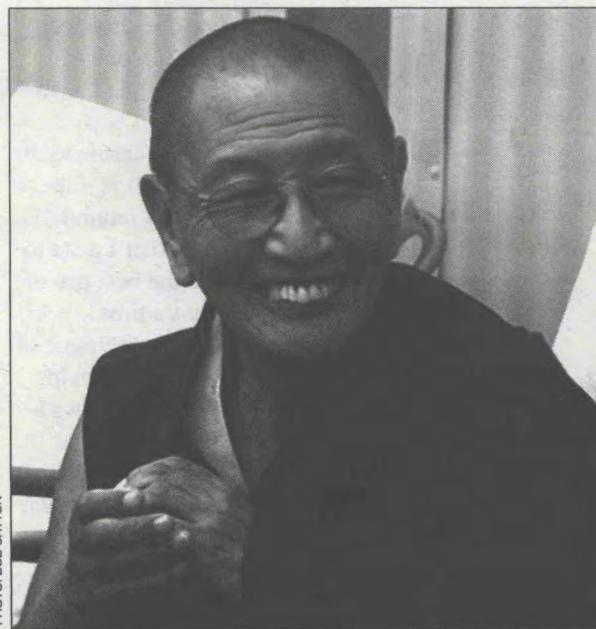


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Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche

es. This provides a very powerful foundation in the mind of the practitioner, who then integrates the vast meaning of the scriptures within the meditations of the graduated path to enlightenment. This becomes the main practice, and reflects the way that the education is structured in the three great monasteries of the Gelug tradition.

Once you have fully ripened your mind with the common path – that is, the three principal aspects of the path, renunciation, bodhichitta and emptiness – then you become fully qualified to undertake the practices of the generation and completion stages. Otherwise, you might think you are meditating on highest yoga tantra, and yet because your mind is not properly ripened with the preliminary path, those practices don't become actual generation and completion stage practices. Although you'll be able to leave positive imprints in your mind, you

won't be able to receive the full results.

While you are practicing deity yoga in retreat, you are also instructed to recite a great number of mantras of the deity. This is beneficial to receive the blessings of the holy speech, but the main focus of the retreat is the deity yoga, not the mantra recitation. Therefore, once again it is critical to have a strong foundation in the preliminary practices of the three principal aspects of the path.

If you don't have access to extensive listening, reflecting on the basis of the great treatises, then an additional set of preliminaries is devised for the sake of accumulating merits and purifying negative karma, such as Vajrasattva purification practice, mandala offerings, prostrations, and so forth. Sometimes such preliminaries come in sets of four or even ten different practices.

However, the most important preliminary is meditation on the graduated path to enlightenment, where you seek to develop the realizations of the three principal aspects of the path. If the mind is not fully ripened in these preliminaries also, the generation and completion stage practices cannot become fully qualified; the results will merely be good imprints in the mind.

Therefore, even just analytical meditation on the stages to enlightenment is said to be very powerful, more so than reciting millions of mantras or developing psychic powers.

To quote Aryadeva, the main disciple of Nagarjuna, "Even just wondering about the meaning of emptiness shakes the root of existence." Thus, one should understand the meaning of meditation from the great treatises such as Gom Rim, The Stages of Meditation of Kamalashila and so forth, and the great teachers of the past who have elucidated the teachings of Buddha. In a Gelug retreat center meditators should put their main effort into developing their realizations of the Lam-rim, gradually, stage by stage. ●

A Monastery experience

In Tibet, says **Ribur Rinpoche** (the reincarnation of the head lama of Ribur Monastery), the most important Gelug institutions for the practice of listening, reflecting, and meditating were the three Great Seats – Sera, Drepung, and Ganden.

"At any given time, among the thousands of monks comprising the population of these monasteries, many were engaging in formal retreats, long or short, some of them after the completion of their studies, some of them during their studies. Scattered around the country there were many small monasteries called *ritro*, or hermitages. These were small monasteries led by local lamas. In each of these ritro the resident monks (or nuns in the case of nunneries) would together conduct on a daily basis the practices related to the particular lineage of the lama of that place.

"However, there is not a system of long-time group retreat, where a group of people sit together

doing the same retreat. In the Gelug school, the tradition of for mal long retreat is the typical three-years retreat on a particular deity; this tradition was and is widespread even nowadays. There is also the tradition of *chak drel*, literally 'separating from desire,' that is,

separating from all mundane activities and dedicating one's entire life to solitary retreat. For instance, the contemporary Trehor Kyopon Rinpoche (who passed away in India in the 1960s), along with a group of 15 or 20 students, had left the monastery for retreat in the mountains. However, they were not living together or doing their practices together. They would meet only once a month in different solitary places in the mountains for *sojong*, the monks' confession ceremony. Then, if they had questions or meditation experiences to offer to the lama, they would submit them. Otherwise, they all scattered back to their solitary places. Even nowadays the mountains around Dharamsala, Dalhousie, Simla, and so on, are filled with many meditators."

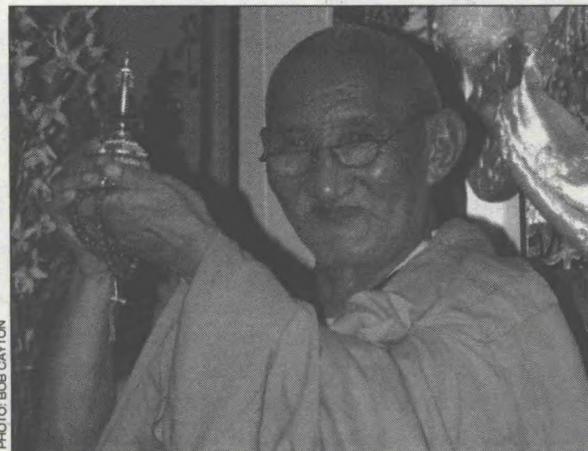


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Ribur Rinpoche