

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

"...These people who are doing retreat are sincere, trying hard not to waste time. My wish is to have more retreat houses, to be able to offer service to more people who want to dedicate their lives to actualizing the path to enlightenment, the most worthwhile thing..."

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

The cause and solution for our happiness and sorrow comes from our own minds. Knowing that, many people are seeking to work on their wayward minds, and escape from worldly distractions, by going into retreat for short or long periods.

In the West there are very few places that meet the criteria for successful solitary retreat. Shiné Land (Land of Calm Abiding) – 500 acres in Big Sur on the California Coast – is such a place. Access to the property is by a rugged seven-mile road, a journey that takes over an hour, that can only be negotiated by a four-wheel drive vehicle.

There are currently six people in long retreat at Shiné Land, and many more are on a waiting list. These practitioners are seeking profound realizations that, in turn, should inspire us to seek refuge in the Buddhist path and to benefit others.

Here are some of their experiences.

TENZIN CHOGKYI (PETRA MCWILLIAMS)

I moved to Shiné Land in September 2003, after Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised me to continue retreat here at the conclusion of



A retreat cabin at Shiné Land.

a three-year retreat in Arizona. Rinpoche gave me a detailed schedule of daily practices, including lam-rim meditation, preliminary practices, and shiné. My daily schedule follows the traditional four sessions: one before daybreak, and one in the morning, afternoon, and evening. In addition, I have two formal study periods each day, during which I review lam-rim texts and commentaries on my practices and the three sets of vows.

I've done many retreats at various centers, including three years in a canvas yurt in the middle of the desert, and Shiné

Land is by far the most conducive environment for meditation I've ever experienced. It has all the conditions for retreat mentioned in the lam-rim texts: It is peaceful, extremely quiet, isolated, and free of distractions, interruptions, and extremes of weather. Our caretakers are incredibly respectful and supportive of our practice and very devoted to taking care of us.

Of course, working on one's mind in solitude year after year is extremely challenging and at times quite lonely, but I truly believe in the potential to transform into a being with all the



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qualities necessary to bring benefit to countless living beings, and I can't imagine a more ideal situation in which to attempt this transformation than living in retreat at Shiné Land.

LOSANG YESHE (STRIDER FAST)

I've been in retreat at Shiné Land for about eight years. Increasingly it has dawned on me how an effective retreat is just a deepening of the aspects of renunciation and full confidence in the guru, bodhichitta, and emptiness and how they interconnect, and that provides the continuity. Lama Zopa Rinpoche reminds us not to get too lost in the tantric details and miss the point.

Most of the practices revolve around three or four main meditation sessions. I usually do one of these sessions first thing in the morning, then commitments for the day, 35 Buddhas prostrations, then another main session (or not) and maybe breakfast. I have some outdoor activities like fiddling in the garden, or a session of water bowls, or a walk. The rest of the main sessions are done in the afternoon. Increasingly, I have been doing several sessions of yoga exercises. A meal falls in there someplace, and then in the evening there are some tormas offerings, and praises, and the rest of daily commitments. I usually read or study for an hour or so before bed. It is important to be responsive to and accommodate whatever is coming up with the mind and body, picking up on the signals and doing what is needed at the time, not just trying to plough through with a rigid routine that ignores what is arising.

Several years ago, Ribur Rinpoche told me that when strong mental afflictions arise, to deal with them immediately. I had been in retreat for several years then and hadn't especially noticed anything happening – and then it happened. There was some real emotional unraveling and depression, and what pulled me through was relying on the meditations to develop bodhichitta. Then quite recently, a great fear has been arising in my chest just upon waking. What seems to be able to penetrate that is the emptiness meditation suggested by His Holiness the Dalai Lama ("What is fear? Who is afraid?"). So these afflictive emotions can not only take these meditations out of the more abstract realm and give them real immediacy, but the

more powerfully these difficult emotions arise, the more powerful fuel they become to activate the profound potential of the practice.

SUMDEN LHUNDRUP (ROGER MUNRO)

I first came to dwell here at Land of Calm Abiding in the fall of 1998. I then spent the time up to May 2001 making the preliminaries for my second Great Nearing Retreat.

The first Great Nearing Retreat was completed at Milarepa Center in Vermont and took almost four years. So what am I doing here? The job description can best be summed up as this: living the life in solitary places, persevering in the hardships of practice, generating the mind into all the stages of the paths of sutra and tantra according to Lama Tsongkhapa's ear-whispered lineage, pleasing the minds of the holy gurus and offering the best example to those with the merit and ability to follow. That's it. Easy, right? Not so! It is a very tall order, and I would be deceiving you to say I am doing it all perfectly. Still, we give it our best shot. Even to just live in solitary confinement requires one to have special training and merits. As a punishment it is second only to the death sentence in our culture, so for the yogi or yogini to live in this way takes some fortitude.

In 26 years of study and practice, I have learned a thing or two about the paths of sutra and tantra, and my main job is learning, contemplating, and concentrating on them. To enhance that process, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Ribur Rinpoche instructed me to do this second Great Nearing Retreat in 1997!

What is a Great Nearing Retreat? The "great" means that it takes a long time, and a great deal of effort to get ready and to do and to complete it. The "nearing" is the heart of the matter; it means one is doing the daily methods of accomplishment (*sadhana*) of one's deity yoga to get as near to, and eventually to become one with, the guru-deity. The "retreat" means that one puts aside all the coming and going of this life to sit on the same meditation seat every day, non-stop, week after week, months, years, until the time, mantra number, or realization is complete.

My most cherished realization in this retreat has been in the realm of giving and taking. Toward the

end of the third year, I was having a hard time with the wild mind and was using the *tong-len* (giving and taking) method to deal with it. One night in a dream, His Holiness the Dalai Lama walked up to me and blew some mantras into my mouth. Suddenly, it was more real than this world's reality. His Holiness put his right arm around my shoulders and started explaining the *tong-len* practice to me. A dakini who was standing off to one side said, "This is a very auspicious event," as His Holiness and I walked by. All the while he was continuing to explain everything there is to know about *tong-len* and its result, *bodhi-chitta*. I awoke from that dream with a very special feeling of peace and blessedness, and I noticed over the next few weeks that whenever I did *tong-len* all those teachings and blessings were right there as realizations in the mind. I felt very close to my guru-deity and that this was the clean clear sign that my time in this retreat was not wasted.

Also during this retreat I was visited by both Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. They knocked on the front door of this little house of attainment, the only two visitors in the whole retreat. Such blessings they brought! When I started the fire puja section of the retreat, I told Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche that the night after each fire puja in my dreams there were many signs of the success in the action of that puja. His reply was that this was a sure sign of the power and blessings of my retreat.

ANONYMOUS

Basically, Land of Calm Abiding is a place where I learn to expect the unexpected and to go with the flow. It is a place where my negative karma ripens like the rainfall in a monsoon, a place where each meditator has a different karmic appearance.

I learned an important thing in my search for a retreat place. The energy of the place is very important; what is needed is at least one place in the world that has only the energy of people doing retreat without the other energies of tourists, visitors, and course people.

After nineteen years of searching for a retreat place in the West, Land of Calm Abiding is the only place I found where I can afford to stay – where we

have the time to train the mind and attempt to generate realizations. It is desperately urgent and important to have a place like Land of Calm Abiding in the world. People's lives are so busy, and few have the time to devote all their energy to spiritual practice.

I have been at Land of Calm Abiding for eight years. My practice is to subdue my mind. This is the hardest and most difficult work that a person can do. I apply the *lam-rim* to my mental afflictions, and use many antidotes. When an antidote does not work, then I try another antidote. It is like being a fighter in a battle. So much is happening in my mind that each year it feels like one thousand years have passed.

One year I worked very hard to overcome attachment to sense pleasures, which to many people is the basis of our worldly happiness. My experience was that it is very painful to give up attachment. It felt like I was ripping the heart out of my chest. I was in pain for weeks or months. It was surprising that it felt so painful to give up attachment. I had thought that anger brings pain, and attachment causes pleasant feelings.

After working for months on my attachment, I noticed that I had less desire, more satisfaction and more contentment. Strange things happened. I would start to write a shopping list and I could not think of anything to want. There was more peace in my mind. Definitely, less attachment means more peace in the mind.

Working with anger has been my practice here for many years. I was alone here, far away from the city, with no one to help me and with perfect conditions for anger to arise. I had the choice to be miserable and crazy with anger, or not to get angry. I decided to protect my mind from anger. Then something strange happened. I experienced a great peace and happiness in my mind. My mind became unbelievably joyful. Sometimes there was so much happiness that I wondered if I would ever be unhappy again. This experience was the result of not allowing anger to arise in my mind.

My wish is to remain in retreat for the rest of my life. I would like to spend this life generating *bodhi-chitta*, putting effort into understanding emptiness, the two stages of tantra, and so forth. This is the best way that I can benefit other sentient beings. ☸



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