

# PREPARING FOR A LONG RETREAT

## *A personal experience*

*We asked a Western monk who is about to enter retreat what he had to do to prepare — mentally, spiritually and practically. Australian-born Ven. Thubten Gyatso, who was formerly based in Mongolia, had hoped to do a retreat in an idyllic part of Tasmania, Australia's island State. But the best laid plans ...*

Ever since I was ordained in 1975, it has been my constant wish to do a three-year retreat. Although I never directly asked my lamas if I could do a long retreat, I prayed to the buddhas to be able to do so. One day Lama Zopa Rinpoche told me, "In four or five years you will do a three-year retreat." I could not have been happier and, as Rinpoche's words were spoken five years ago, I am now immersed in preliminary practices to accumulate merit for success and to purify karmic obstacles that may hinder this retreat.

More recently, Lama Zopa Rinpoche instructed me to ask Khensur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche for advice on doing retreat. Khensur Rinpoche began with the story that when he was staying at Tushita Mahayana Meditation Centre in Shantiniketan, New Delhi, his attendant complained many times that Western Dharma practitioners were utterly crazy. Agreeing with this sentiment and not put off, I persevered, and Rinpoche eventually explained to me the stages of mental development, the pitfalls, and how to avoid them.

As Khensur Rinpoche implied, our biggest problem is our unsubdued minds. Although we may have an intellectual understanding of Dharma, our minds follow the whims of anger and desire without control. Just as political extremists can only see things within their own narrow frame of reference, we are deeply accustomed to our samsaric view of the world so that we simply cannot see things within the perspective of renunciation, bodhichitta, and emptiness. When an impulse conditioned by ignorance arises, we follow it immediately. There is no space in our minds to modify our behavior according to Dharma wisdom. It is meditation that opens up such a space in our minds. Meditation allows us to learn to recognize samsaric urges for what they are and to respond skillfully.

"Three years? I couldn't remain alone without speaking for two days" is a common reaction when I tell people my plans. They don't know the half of it. The real challenge is to navigate the uncharted

waters of one's own mind. When people ask what scares me most about this retreat, I tell them, "My mind." One has to be well prepared. When Mandala's editor asked me to write something on how to prepare mentally, spiritually, and practically for retreat, I initially saw her request as an obstacle

is completed. My point is that in the twenty-eight years I have been hoping to do a three-year retreat I have been involved in helping establish FPMT centers all over the world. As each of those years has passed, the thought has occurred to me, "Thank goodness I didn't go into retreat before doing what I've done and learning what I've learned this year." So, do not leap into retreat before you are ready. I think the best way to prepare your mind for retreat is to work for a Dharma center.

Forget about bodhichitta and the wisdom realizing emptiness — during my three and a half years in Mongolia I learned that I lack renunciation. I thought I would need a long retreat to achieve renunciation, but it slowly dawned on me that the opposite is true: I need renunciation in order to achieve success in a long retreat. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has told me several stories of Westerners who began three-year retreats but whose meditations came to an abrupt end due to a lack of renunciation.

A lack of renunciation is when we see food, music, entertainment, the bodies of others,

and the pleasures we derive from these things as inherently good. We feel it is our duty to please ourselves; otherwise, we will be deprived of some essential vitamin of life. We are pleasure extremists: our minds are focused only upon attaining personal pleasure and avoiding displeasure. If we try to meditate with such a narrow outlook, we are doomed. Our mind will enter endless fantasies of self-indulgence. As the *Sanghatasutra* says: Despite the misery that surrounds them, the young and beautiful are hell-bent upon pleasure with the belief, "It won't happen to me," and the wrinkled veterans are hell-bent upon pleasure with the belief, "It won't happen to me again."

To fulfill the editor's request, all I can say is that to prepare for a three-year retreat we must cultivate renunciation. Do I have renunciation? Not yet. Perhaps this is why Lama Zopa Rinpoche told me to do my retreat in California rather than in Tasmania. ●



PHOTO: UELI MINDER  
Ven. Thubten Gyatso at the airport with Geshe Nyima Dorje when he left Mongolia.

to my preparations. Then I thought, It may help others, and if I write quickly, I can go back to my tsa-tsa making without too much interruption.

As you all know, there are several prescribed preliminary practices, such as prostrations, Vajrasattva practice, mandala offerings, and so on, the purpose of which is to purify karmic obstacles and to accumulate the merit required for attaining realization. These should be done according to one's own lama's instructions. Many years ago, Kyabje Zong Rinpoche said that working to establish and maintain a Dharma center is equivalent to doing all the preliminary practices. The merit of creating the conditions by which people can meet and practice the Dharma is immeasurable.

One of my special preliminaries is to recite the *Sanghatasutra* 500 times, and those who have read the sutra will know that if I try to give an analogy to describe that amount of merit, my allotted 800 words for this essay will be finished long before the analogy