

Stepping into the Abyss: Experiences on Retreat

A group of 51 intrepid students began the seven-year FPMT Masters Program in January 1998 at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Pomaia, Italy. Designed and taught by Geshe Jampa Gyatso, the program had been envisioned by Lama Thubten Yeshe in the 1980's. Twenty-two students graduated from the program; a portion of those graduates also completed a nine-month retreat held at the conclusion of their studies. Post-retreat, several of these graduates are now teaching in Dharma centers around the world.

Four of these new teachers offer dispatches from the edge as they reflect upon their experience of retreat ... of stepping into the abyss of their minds

Half-way through his retreat in August 2005, PATRICK LAMBELET spoke with contributor Diana Carroll ...

D [Diana]: Patrick, describe what it was like to do a retreat on Lam-Rim?

P [Patrick]: There are a thousand ways to do a Lam-rim retreat. But the focus is Lam-Rim – the motivation is bodhichitta, emptiness, renunciation – the three principal aspects. I had never put that much time into meditating on Lam-Rim, so it's been quite a revelation to see how profound it is, how deep it is.

D: How would you describe your state of mind now – how is it different to be in retreat than when you were studying at the Institute?

P: When you're by yourself, you're looking at your own mind and everything that comes up in your mind – a lot of stuff that has come up in my mind has not been very pleasant [laughter]. It's not that you just sit there and meditate and have nice, great blissful visions or something. Retreat is really just dealing with what comes up, dealing with who you are, and not having anywhere to run away from it. The more you do that and become familiar with it, the more you see that it's not such a big deal. You start to see things more like, 'OK, I'm not perfect, I'm human.

I don't have some amazing ability as a meditator.' You start to see what your limits are but you also begin to accept them, rather than feeling like you should be a better person, a better meditator, or have some great understanding, or not get angry, and so on. I'm not somebody else, I'm not some great yogi, I'm not Milarepa. In fact, I read Milarepa's life story and it was really frustrating at first [laughter] because I began comparing myself to Milarepa, which can be dangerous because it's such a high standard. Eventually, you start to get more relaxed and accepting about yourself.

D: What about support on an inner level – you've talked about accepting how you are. What else have you found has supported you if sometimes things get difficult?

P: Impermanence. You just have bad days. Maybe more at the beginning, you have days where many things come up in the mind that are very difficult, especially when you're doing purification practice. And it's easy to grab onto that, to grasp it, and then you start to freak out, you think, "This is horrible, the retreat's going horribly, what am I doing here?" You start to have all these kinds of thoughts. But then you find that even later in the day, or the next day, it just changes, your mind changes, the circumstances change. And you just think about the impermanence of it, how things really do just change naturally.

Also, it helps to think about karma, to think that this situation is just karma that's coming up now; causes and conditions have come together and formed this particular situation, this feeling, this emotion, whatever. Those causes and conditions will break apart and some other causes and conditions will come up, and then you'll feel really happy, and then that will break apart, and so on. You have to try and look at it as a constant process of change, karma ripening and dissolving.

Also, if you think about death, thinking, "I could die today," you think about what's really valuable, and you can ask, "Do I really need to panic about this or should I just accept that maybe my knees really hurt today, or that there's physical or mental pain." And you just try to do

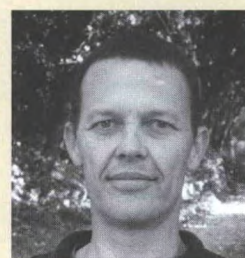
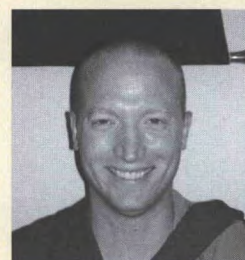
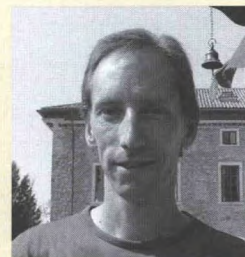
whatever practice you can as well as possible, even if you're distracted, and you just go through it and go on to later that day, or to the next day. And then it's gone, and it's just a memory!

You don't have to be some kind of great practitioner or someone with incredible abilities to do it. I'm a normal person, and I think that anybody can do this, if they put their mind to it. You need to go slowly in that direction. It's not that you jump in at the beginning and do a nine-month retreat, but I think it's really important that people see that doing retreat, and looking at yourself, looking at the mind, is something very valuable.

One thing I've seen the importance of a lot in this retreat is guru devotion practice. For years, I heard so many teachings on guru devotion, and I always had some difficulty with it, but then really meditating on it, reflecting on it a lot, you start to feel how important the guru is, and how much that relationship completely affects your practice and determines how your practice goes. You start to develop the faith and confidence that your teacher is actually helping and guiding you, and that by doing retreat, you're doing exactly what he has asked you to do. Then you start to feel that even if you are having a bad day or bad conditions, at least I'm practicing guru devotion, and this is what it is – they never said it would be easy [laughter], and if they did, then they were lying [more laughter]!

One time during the Master's Program I went to Geshe Jampa Gyatso and asked him, "Why can't I just go into retreat? Does this actually make it quicker, to have understanding by doing study?" and he just looked at me and gave me a very strong and sharp glance, very powerful, like Yamantaka, and said, "MUCH quicker!" For a while, that really destroyed my doubts. So when you see your teacher, who really knows what he's talking about, give you that lightning-bolt expression, it can be very helpful!

Patrick Lambelet was interviewed by contributor Diana Carroll at O Sel Ling retreat center in Spain, in August 2005. Patrick Lambelet is now teaching in Pomaia, Italy, at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa.



From top, Patrick Lambelet, Emily Hsu, Ven. Lobsang Chogni and Glen Svensson

At the conclusion of his retreat in May 2006, GLEN SVENSSON spoke to contributor Meredith Hughes ...

M [Meredith]: Of your experiences on retreat, what surprised you?

G [Glen]: You know, I thought that once I got going in the retreat I would be quite keen, but throughout it was necessary to keep motivating myself to meditate every day. I was always trying to come up with these mental excuses, and it was a little surprising how much I needed to keep myself pushed, how easy it was for my mind to say, "well, actually, maybe today I can slack off a little bit."

M: What are you going to take with you from this experience?

G: The main thing to come out of this was an understanding of the situation we're in, this precious human rebirth, understanding that we've got this wonderful opportunity and we're not going to be here very long. Maybe tomorrow we will be dead, which is a real possibility. We have this very precious opportunity and we should do something about it. We should make our life as meaningful as we can while we have the opportunity; we shouldn't waste it.

M: Is it this understanding of the preciousness of this human rebirth that supported you to continue in your practice when it got tough?

G: Yes, I think so. There are various different things that can motivate you, like the fear of suffering of lower realms and so forth, but what motivated me more was the fact that we have this opportunity and it's not going to come again. If you waste it now, that's it, it's finished. And even if you are here for another twenty or thirty years, each day you age, and each day it gets more difficult, so the best opportunity is today.

M: Are you planning on doing future retreats?

G: Absolutely. This was the other understanding that really came out of this retreat: an appreciation for the need to do not only a regular daily practice, but at least once or twice a year to do a longer-term retreat. What I found in retreat was that it really gives you momentum and brings your practice to a new level. If you don't do that, if you just are doing your daily practice, to make significant progress is very difficult. In fact, I've already signed up to go back to O Sel Ling at the beginning of next year to do a four-month retreat. For me, this is very important.

M: What will you focus on in the upcoming retreat?

G: Meditating on emptiness is very important because this is the main thing that really sets Buddhism apart from other spiritual traditions. Most other spiritual traditions talk about love and compassion and all of these things, but the basic fundamental difference is that Buddhism says, well, you have to understand the nature of reality if you really want to get rid of your problems. Without an understanding of emptiness, it may be difficult to develop compassion on a higher level. So, for me, this is crucial, and I suspect it will play a major role in my next retreat.

M: Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

G: Religion can be an escape for some people. You know, people sort of understand the theory, have some intellectual knowledge, and they feel good about that. I must admit I fall into this trap a lot. But, unless you integrate this understanding into your daily life, then it's not really a spiritual path, it's not meaningful. This was reinforced in my retreat, especially when I did some work with lo-jong [mind training] toward the end of my retreat. The Gelug tradition has an emphasis on academic study, but we need to be careful that we don't fall to the extreme of making it just intellectual knowledge. You need to have a balance, especially in something as intellectual as the Masters Program. We need to make sure that there is the element of practice.

Glen Svensson was interviewed by contributor Meredith Hughes in Sydney, Australia, in May 2006. He was in retreat at O Sel Ling retreat center in Granada, Spain, from June 2005 – January 2006. In July, Glen will begin teaching at Langri Tangpa Centre in Queensland, Australia, as well as other centers.

EMILY HSU reflects on her retreat that ended in November 2005 ...

O Sel Ling was a wonderful place to do retreat, and I am very grateful to the incredible group of staff and volunteers who took good care of us, prepared our meals, did our shopping, fixed our houses, etc. – and they seemed so happy to do it.

Without first having done at least some years of studying, I believe that I would not have been able to do this retreat. Studying helped me to understand what I needed to do in retreat as well as how to do it. In addition, hopefully I

now have more realistic expectations and don't expect instant results (well, not as much). But, studying can also increase the busyness of my mind, being too much in my head, and doing retreat helps to settle my mind down and be more in the heart.

You can have a lot of ideas about what retreat will be like, and of course, it doesn't go as expected. The biggest surprise for me was *rlung*. The first few months were fine, but after that I had a lot of problems with *rlung* because I pushed too much and was hard on myself. So the lessons were to let go of expectations, let go of attachment to results, practice steadily and consistently with a long-term view, and have a lot of compassion. Let go let go let go, practice, and trust in the path.

Another discovery was that when you actually do the practice and apply the antidotes, the Dharma really works. This sounds rather obvious, but I like being comfortable, I like getting involved with my stories, I like justifying myself – and there is a part of me that doesn't want to let these go. But these attitudes have kept me in samsara for such a long time. It's important to be diligent, focused, and determined, and apply the antidotes again and again.

Secondly, I found that pretty much everything I do is tainted by self-grasping and/or self-cherishing. Even the supposedly virtuous things that I do – Dharma practice, Dharma studies, and even retreat – are all tainted by self-cherishing, wanting something for myself, wanting to be a better person, wanting to be more helpful/compassionate/wise/calm/etc. It is so easy to fool ourselves on the path, and this is one reason why the lama is so important. So, in order to get rid of this deeply-ingrained ignorance and self-cherishing, I need to meditate on emptiness and bodhichitta every day, serve others, practice a lot of tong-len, follow my lamas' advice, and do a lot more retreat.

Emily Tao Hsu was in retreat at O Sel Ling retreat center in Granada, Spain, from January – November of 2005. Emily Hsu is now teaching in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

VEN. LOBSANG CHOGNI reflects on his retreat that ended in December 2005 ...

Study, in my opinion, is indispensable for retreat. For example, when you are in retreat and you recognize a

mental affliction for the first time within your own experience, if you have studied the fifty-one mental factors you can figure out which affliction it is. And then you can apply the correct antidote. I remember thanking our gurus during my retreat for giving us such thorough and precise teachings for when such an experience arose.

The structure of my retreat followed Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Jampa Gyatso's advice. Basically, the idea was to do four practice sessions a day using *Jorcho*. My personal practice was to do ten minutes of reflective meditation (*Shar Gom*) within each session. Also, the practice included prostrations, water bowl offerings, and mandala offerings. In this way, over the course of the retreat, one could slowly work through the Lam-Rim using Pabongka Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* as the source text.

The most surprising thing about my experience was that as doubts arose, by reviewing transcripts of the Masters Program teachings I again and again found that Gen Rinpoche [Geshe Jampa Gyatso] had added a little bit here or there that directly and specifically answered my exact doubts. It was as if my doubts had been precisely anticipated beforehand. Other doubts which arose during the retreat were clarified by reading my past notes from personal meditation advice. As a result of having each of my doubts answered in this way, my faith in our gurus has perhaps deepened a bit. This added faith has helped me to follow our gurus' advice more closely with, for instance, taking big decisions like following Rinpoche's request to pack up and move to Centro Shiwa Lha in Rio de Janeiro to have a go at teaching.

Many kind Dharma brothers and sisters did a heroic job of assisting my retreat. The staff at Milarepa Center was exceptional. Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche came and blessed the retreat cabin and gave priceless advice around the time of the middle of the retreat. The benefit that Rinpoche brought is impossible to describe; suffice it to say that I am convinced the Buddha described the path to enlightenment perfectly, as we all will confirm to ourselves personally through our own meditation experience. ☸

Ven. Lobson Chogni was in retreat at Milarepa Center in Barnett, Vermont, from February – December 2005. Ven. Chogni has been teaching at Centro Shiwa Lha in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, since April.