

## *The First Teaching*

### *Retreat*

Basically, there are two essential qualities that we require in Buddhist practice. The first is that we be able to withdraw from society for a time, be it a few hours, a few days, a few months or a few years. The other requirement is being able to take whatever we have gained from our experience of isolation and bring it back to the world—to our relationships and into our everyday life. Like breathing in and breathing out, we need both.

Sometimes people are very impressed by hearing about the merit of retreats—three years, seven years, life-long retreats—and we have the idea that maybe if we could do that too, then we could really get somewhere. But we are ordinary people. We can't do that, so we feel that there is not much hope that our practice will become very profound.

But actually, it is not so much the quantity as the quality that counts. Anyone can sit in a three-year retreat with a distracted mind and not gain very much from it. Or anyone can sit for a three day retreat, very focused on what one is doing in the practice, and even in three days can experience some transformation. So I think it's not a matter of the length of time, or how

many mantras you do, how many prostrations you do, how many this, how many that. It is not a spiritual bank account that we are trying to accumulate. The important question we always have to ask is—fundamentally, has there been any change?

The great pandita of the 11th century said that the critical issue of judging any kind of retreat practice is whether at the end of it our negative emotions—our anger, our greed, the basic delusions of our mind—has been lessened or not. Even if we have been in retreat for 12 years, nothing has been attained if we still have the same internal problems, the same anger, the same clinging to things, the same attachment and greed, the same basic delusion of the mind.

It doesn't matter how many millions of mantras we have done, how many inner tantras we have accomplished. This is very important. All these practices are nothing if they do not transform the mind. If the mind is the same as the one we went in with, we have not progressed. Even worse, perhaps we are very proud because we feel we are great practitioners now. We are very pleased with ourselves, and we say, "I have done that retreat and I'm expert in this practice". In fact, that is adding defilements on top of the ones which we have not managed to remove. We now have new ones!

Please understand that this is very, very important. Any practice that we do is for aiding the mind, transforming the mind so that we can genuinely help

others. If this doesn't happen, and we just become kind of smart and satisfied that we are such good Dharma practitioners because we do three hours of meditation every day, always do our practice and let everyone know how often we do our practice and how early we get up—then what is the use? Do you understand?

### *Ego*

The whole of our Dharma practice is to reduce our Ego, not to increase it. We have to be careful of this. It is not good to become a professional Dharma person, making sure that everybody sees we are very spiritual, we are such good vegetarians, we never smoke, we don't go to karaoke bars, we are not like those worldly people. We are professional spiritual people. We are very pleased with ourselves.

Of course the Ego loves this. Ego really pets itself. "Look at me, I'm such a superior person to these deluded people around me, I'm so much more disciplined, I'm so much more controlled."

So we have to watch. We have to be careful that in the Dharma practice our intention is quite pure. Because our delusion and our tricky Ego can end up actually reinforcing the very problems which we are trying to eradicate. It just becomes another way for the Ego to sit back and feel very good. This is going to

happen with people who do retreats; they will have a sense of self-satisfaction that they have done this kind of practice.

### *The Benefit of Retreats*

Having said that, it is very good to take time out from our everyday lives, spend the whole day and what we can of the night totally concentrated on our spiritual practice and not be distracted during this time by our ordinary daily concerns. There is no doubt this can be extremely beneficial.

There is the question then of whether it is more beneficial to go into group retreat or solitary retreat. I personally would suggest that we start with group retreats. In a group retreat you have the support of everyone else around you. Also, because everybody is sitting in a group, you can't start dithering around or suddenly think, "Oh, this is useless," and go make a cup of tea. You have to sit, however you are feeling. Even if you wake up in the morning with a headache, you still have to sit. You can think of thousands of things you have to do, but you still have to sit. It reinforces the discipline.

Perhaps if one has never done a retreat before and one starts on ones own, it's very easy for it to start off quite strong and than get weaker and weaker and

in the end it doesn't exist any more. In a group that doesn't happen. Also, in a group there is usually a group leader or a teacher and that is also very helpful, because the teacher will co-ordinate everyone's effort in the same direction and give instructions and advice. If you have problems, there is someone you can ask.

If one is by oneself, then there are problems. One may or may not be disciplined, or one may be too disciplined and force oneself too much. Also, dealing with the mind is always a very delicate operation. In one way, the whole of the universe is contained within our own mind; we have infinite levels, infinite depths. Normally we access just a very, very small and shallow level of the mind's potential. So during a retreat when we are giving all our attention to our practice, when the surface of the mind begins to calm down, it opens up the flood gates of all kinds of experiences and many unknown levels of the psyche. We have not had access to this before, and what is happening can be very frightening. Even good experiences can be frightening. You don't know what the mind is going to throw out.

In the mind there are both angels and devils, and one doesn't know which one is coming through the open gateways. Therefore it is very beneficial initially when one is practicing to be in the hands of qualified teachers to guide one, and to be in the company of others. If initially one thinks to do a intensive retreat,

one would be advised to do so in the company of others.

This is because then one learns how to practice correctly and learns the kind of pace which we should adopt in our practice. Because this is also another point. There has to be a balance between being too lax—you know, not putting enough effort into it, not spending enough time on it in which case not much will be achieved—and pushing too hard. On the whole, for most people who are in retreat by themselves, the fault is usually the second one. People push themselves too hard. Our expectations of what we should be achieving are too high and unrealistic.

### *On Achievement*

A word about achieving. You know, Singaporeans feel they must always be achieving. “I must achieve something, I’m going to get something out of it in this retreat, right. Got to do it.” That is very counter-productive. It just creates more tension in the mind, more stress. These qualities of mind of wanting to achieve, of wanting to get something, are tremendous barriers in themselves. And usually people just end up with what we call Loong—a kind of imbalance of Qi, when the subtle elements of the body become completely unbalanced. Then people can be very sick. They get

violent headaches, they feel very ill—they feel very angry, irritable and tense.

It's quite a serious thing because when that happens, it is very difficult to do any practice. Any practice one does will make it worse. It's like a vicious circle, because then when you do some practice, you get more tense. Then that tension will create more Loong and it will just go round and round and round. So it's very important when we practice, to be really in tune with our inner sense of what is appropriate, and not to have an outer goal that we are trying to achieve.

We are not taking a business attitude into the Dharma realms. The whole idea of achievement is Ego, and we are trying to drop all that. "I did a hundred million mantras, they only did ten." We are back again to this quantity issue of "I did this much, I accomplished that much." This is totally counter-productive. This is not what we are meant to be doing, carrying that worldly Ego-driven mind frame into our Dharma practice. We are trying to see through that, relax the mind and learn how to drop and see through the Ego and all the Ego's aims and goals.

Somebody asked the lama, "What is the aim and goal of meditation?" He replied, "In a way, meditation is dealing with the very idea of having an aim." Why don't we sit and practice the practice, just because it's a nice thing to do and not because we want to achieve anything? We don't want to get anything out of it, we

just find it nice to sit. Really, it's just very nice to sit, do your practice, do your meditation—what could be a nicer thing to do? That in itself is enough, and if we can relax our mind but at the same time completely absorb ourselves into our practice because we enjoy doing it, then the results will take care of themselves.

So we mustn't look at the retreat situation as a kind of tutorial intensive before the exam. It's a time to really just be completely knowing what we are doing right now, and just doing it.

### *Opening The Mind to the Beauty of Practice*

On this subject, I also have to add that it is very helpful to encourage our mind to co-operate. If in our practice our mind is resisting, is bored, is pushed to do something just because you think you should do it but you don't really want to do it—then that would create a situation of conflict and tension. So it is important at the beginning of any practice we do to really sit and think of our motivation. Why do we want to do this?

Then we can encourage the mind to realize what a helpful and joyful thing practice is—that this is not hurting the mind, that this is going to help the mind. And to convince the mind to be co-operative, because



if the mind co-operates and undertakes the practice with enthusiasm, that is already almost half the battle.

For example, if we are watching an interesting movie or reading an interesting book, we don't have to force the mind to concentrate. We are completely immersed in the drama or the book. The mind is already there. The problem is if somebody tries to take us away from the movie or the book. With no one standing there to tell us to concentrate, we are there. The mind is enjoying what it's doing, and we must bring that kind of quality to our practice.

We should undertake our practice with genuine enthusiasm, because we understand the benefits and the joys of a well-tamed mind, a mind which is no longer completely dominated by our negative emotions. We should be encouraged to practice to attain a mind which is much more free, much simpler and clearer. We are not a task master standing there with a whip, disciplining the mind to be good. We are not beating the mind, we are skilfully persuading the mind to undertake this practice for its own benefit and also to benefit all those others around us and eventually the whole world, because what we think affects everything. We should bring this kind of attitude into our practice.

Suppose for example that you are doing Anapana-sati (breath concentration) or if you are doing a visualization on Chenrenzig. If you are visualising Chenren-

zig six times a day, day after day, week after week, it's like watching the same TV program. Can you imagine watching the same TV program six times a day, day after day, week after week? It would be torture!

But to my mind, that is the interesting thing about starting a retreat. Sometimes the first week you think, "God, it's so boring," and maybe the first week it is quite boring. But as you get into it and the practice itself begins to open up, it begins to reveal its own potential. And then the mind becomes very fascinated.

At one time I did a three-year retreat in which I did the same practice four times a day. And in the end, I was much more fascinated by the practice than when I began. Because if the mind knows what one is doing, it just begins to unfold like a little flower. As a bud gradually begins to unfold, you see its many levels of petals and finally it opens up to reveal its full beauty.

Every practice has this potential. When we first look at it, it is very interesting, like a bud. Within that bud is the potential of all these beautiful blossoms inside. But we have to be patient you can't just pull all those petals, right? That doesn't work. We have to quietly wait and every day give it the warmth and moisture of our attention. This repeated application will of itself eventually allow the bud to open. So that is why we have a retreat, because it gives us that time and space for things to unfold within.

Normally when we do our daily practice it is only a small part of the day. After that we have our everyday ordinary life, our families, our work and our social life. Although we may be disciplined, it is hard to maintain the practice in our everyday life. The power dissipates. It's like cooking food. It would be very hard to cook if you turned up the heat very high and then turned it off again, and then next day you come back and turned on the heat and then turned it off again. What you need is to have a constant heat that gives time for everything to cook.

That is what a retreat situation is all about, it's about being cooked. If you are in a very closed retreat situation where you don't see others and you are very intensively involved in the practice, it's like being in a pressure cooker, because none of the steam is going out. But because it is a pressure cooker, one has to be careful or the pressure cooker is going to explode. Maybe it is better to use a slow cooker. It will take longer but the food is also very delicious and doesn't burn.

Basically, that is what retreat is about. It's not something to be afraid of. The opportunity to practice, either with others or by oneself, is something to rejoice about. One should rejoice that one has made the good karma and causes and conditions to be able to have this opportunity to completely dedicate oneself towards the spiritual life.

## *Gently Training The Mind*

In the Tibetan tradition, retreats are usually divided into four or sometimes six sessions. Generally the same practices are repeated in each session, with the first and the last ones sometimes having added elements. But basically, you are repeating the same practices over and over again. In a way it is like a musician learning an instrument. You have to practice again and again until you get it right. But you do it just for the joy of practicing, not for the joy of achieving. That is a great joy, just being able to sit and be present, and absorb oneself in the practice. That's enough.

When one is in retreat, especially sometimes if one is by oneself, one also has to take care of the mind not just during the time of formal practice but also in the intermediate times. It is important at that time not to allow the mind to go wherever it wants, like the saying that the body is in the cave and the mind is in the bazaar.

So you don't spend your time wandering around shopping plazas or in your favourite restaurant, or even with your family. There's time for all that later. This is not the time for the mind to just wander on its habitual path. This is very important. One's mind should stay where the body is. One should keep the mind focused here and now, on what is happening here and now.

For example, if one is doing a Chenrenzig practice, then a retreat is a perfect opportunity to really integrate one's practice into one's daily life—to see oneself as Chenrenzig, to see one's environment as the Potala Pureland and to hear all sounds as mantras. I see myself as Chenrenzig and all beings are Chenrenzig. Or all the males are Chenrenzig and all the females are Tara. But it's more difficult when you have to deal with people if you are not used to that practice. You become very artificial.

But if you are in the retreat not talking with people (because even if you are in a group, you are not speaking; everybody is very quiet and internalized), then there is a perfect opportunity to develop the sense of identity with the deity and to carry that into whatever activities one is doing. When one is eating, when one is walking, when one is looking at sky, when one is bathing or going to the bathroom or whatever.

Suppose we are practicing, for example, Vipassana or the concentration of the in-breath and the out-breath. We don't just throw that aside during the intervals between our formal practice—we carry that with us. If we are doing the meditation of breathing, then whatever other things we are doing, we can also be conscious of our breathing in and breathing out. We can be conscious of our body when it's moving—when we are sitting, or when we are standing or walking. It is the quality of integrating the practice with every

single thing we do, every thought we think—this is what we are trying to.

If we think that the practice is something which we do by just sitting on a cushion, then we do not understand what Dharma practice is. Dharma practice is to bring it into every area of our lives. There is no better way to learn how to do that than in the protective environment of a retreat.

### *The Retreat Environment*

In the retreat you have space. You don't have to interact with people, so you have the opportunity to begin to learn how to bring about the quality of awareness into everything you do. It is a very protective environment. When one understands it, when one gets a taste of that, then one can go out and begin to learn how to integrate that into one's everyday life which of course is much more challenging. But it's very hard to create that internal environment if you have no basis for it, unless one has had that first taste.

Retreats can be very helpful because they give us the opportunity to get some genuine experience, so at least there is some basis which we can then begin to build on and integrate with our everyday experiences. Otherwise, if one is just doing one's everyday practice

in the morning, it's much harder to learn how to take that feeling into everyday life.

So I would recommend that everybody try to go for at least some group retreats of a week or ten days. This is very helpful. You then see that everyone around you has the same problems.

Everybody who meditates has problems, but they think they are the only one and that nobody else has any. They think that everybody else just sits down and goes into Samadhi, that only they have discovered that they have thoughts when they try to concentrate. And that they are the first people who ever had aching knees and aching backs. But when they are with a group then they discover that everybody has the same problems, everybody has the same difficulties. They have the same physical problems, the same mental problems. It's actually very encouraging.

With patience and perseverance, one can go beyond these initial obstacles. Let's say you want to be a musician. Nobody ever sat down at a piano and played a musical piece straight off. It's not possible. You start by putting your fingers on the keyboard and learning a few very simple exercises. Your fingers hit the wrong keys and you feel so completely clumsy, that this is impossible, but you keep going. If you have a good teacher, that teacher will encourage you. Then one day you suddenly discover that you can play simple little tunes, and then you keep going and you can play more compli-

cated things. Until in the end suddenly you can play a Sonata, why not? But not in one day, and not without tremendous patience and tremendous perseverance.

The mind has never been trained, we have always allowed the mind to be totally uncontrolled. It goes where it wants to go and we follow behind it. The problem is out there, the problem is our neighbour, our partner, our children, our teacher, the world, the government. It's not me, I'm OK! It's all about these other people. Why can't they be like me?

It's only when we really sit and confront the mind and say, "No, you have to stay here and forget all this other stuff," that we will realize the mind will never do that. Its going to think everything else except what we want it to think, because it's a wild horse, a drunken wild horse. Like a wild horse, it goes everywhere except where we want it to go. We normally don't realize the problems until we try to tame the mind. When we attempt to tame the mind and understand it, then we see what a critical situation we have.

But there is good news. Every mind can be tamed. If it's tame and under control, we become the master instead of being a slave to the mind and our emotions. That is really extremely liberating. We don't have to change the whole world, we don't have to change all the people outside of ourselves, we just have to change ourselves. Isn't that nice? I mean, it is exhausting to change the government!



So retreats help us to do this. They help us to see the situation and to really go to work on it. When else do we have the opportunity, the time and space to really concentrate while on dealing with the mind and becoming one with our practice?

Another problem with the practice is that if we only do it for a short period, there is the practice and there is the mind and they are sort of looking at each other. It's up in the head. Modern Singaporeans nowadays are probably like Westerners in that we think in our heads, and so we meditate in our heads. We are meditating in our heads with our conceptual minds and the conceptual mind is by definition dualistic. So therefore, there is the person who is meditating and there is the meditation. They are sort of facing each other. Here I am sitting looking at the breath coming in; I'm looking at the breath going out; and there is this person looking and there is the breath. They are separate.

So during a retreat, because one is continuing to carry on in this practice, (not only during the formal sitting period, but as much as possible during the break period too), at some point the division between the practitioner and the practice falls apart and one becomes the practice. When that happens, it is as if the practice moves from the head down into the heart. When the practitioner and the practice merge, you become the practice.

When that happens, there is naturally a transformation. The transformation does not take place in the head, it takes place in the heart. When the heart changes, then naturally the thinking which emanates from the heart will change too. But it's not merely changing the individual's intellectual patterns; you have to go much deeper. Our ordinary thinking mind is like a computer, but where is the energy driving the computer and who is programming it? It's not good enough just to change the superficial program, you have to change at a very deep level.

And retreat gives one an opportunity to be able to do that. It's as I said, on a slow cooker, giving time for the food to break down from its separate components and blend together. This is what retreats are for.

It gives us time. Otherwise when we sit down to do a meditation two hours a day, there are always thoughts like, "At seven o'clock I am going to have breakfast." There is a need to watch the time. Even if the meditation is deep, there are limits because you've got to go to work, you've got to take the children to school. But in the retreat situation, you have what seems like endless time in which you keep developing and opening up.

And if you have a skilful teacher in the retreat situation, then that can also be extremely helpful because s/he can give directions on how to help this process along. I think that is very clear.

## *Questions and Answers*

*Q.* When I meditate, I have a sense of my body and a sense of my entire being disappearing into space. These experiences were very frightening. Since then I have been very worried about meditating again.

*A.* As I said, the problem with practicing on one's own is that these experiences can happen. They are infinite in variety and you don't know which one is going to happen. For different people different things will happen, and because they are far outside of our very safe experience, they are terrifying. This is why having a teacher can help.

*Q.* What was your experience in the isolated retreat?

*A.* On the whole, it was a very happy experience. Because as I said, I did have this sense of infinite time and space, that for me is the greatest joy. Once the first snow fell, usually in November, then one knew that one wasn't going to see anybody until May. It's not that I don't like people. People asked, "Why she is so happy when for six months she not going to see anybody?"

But it meant that one had that tremendous time to really absorb oneself into the practice which to me was very liberating, just there alone. It gave my whole mind

the sense of great spaciousness. I stayed there because I couldn't think of any nicer place to be and because it's a very safe environment. It's very quiet and isolated.

During practice, of course there are times when one gets extremely blissful and there are other times of extreme agitation when the practice seems boring and you would rather be doing anything else rather than sitting there having to do it. This is natural, it's the nature of the mind. Sometimes one is going to be up, and sometimes one is going to be down. The point of these retreats is that, up or down, you just do it. It's just the waves of the mind. Sometimes a wave goes up and everything is wonderful and you are rushing forward and then you go down into a trough and everything is grey and dark and boring and you can think of a thousand things you would rather be doing, but it doesn't matter. You are going to do it. There is no question.

You get up at three in the morning and you sit. You don't ask yourself whether you want to get up or when you are getting up. You never ask that, you just get up. That is another good thing about retreat. When one gets into a routine, every day is very like the next day which would be like the day before or the day after. You know, for years you just have the same day. So after I had done the three year retreat, it was like I had done three months. I couldn't believe that three years had gone by.

Even now as I look back, those three years were really like three months because time has no meaning. Three months or thirty years doesn't have any meaning. It is more or less the same day. Time is irrelevant and it just flows. Sometimes you feel wonderful and sometimes you feel horrible. It's irrelevant. It's just a play of the mind. The practice is just the moment. You just carry on day after day.

*Q.* When you are doing retreats and you structure your day, how do you know, for example, when you have done your three hour session?

*A.* I didn't count, actually. But that is because in the Tibetan practice, every session is very structured. There are certain things which have to be recited, there are a certain number of mantras which have to be said and practices which have to be done. After a while, you more or less know the time that's going to take, three hours or less. But usually you get into your optimum speed, you know, not too fast and not too slow. That usually is the same one day after the other, so you don't need to look at the clock, but more or less every day you will finish around the same time like that.

Traditionally, people doing a Vipassana or Anapanasati retreat used incense sticks. You would decide how long will be comfortable for you to sit and find a piece of incense which will burn that long.

It's also important in a retreat, as I've said in the beginning, to learn the balance in one's practice between being too slack—too easy on oneself so that nothing is cooked—or putting up the flame too high so it all gets scorched and burnt. This is not only my opinion but one that is also found in books. One should do a practice until you get to the point where you are just only on the edge of having done enough. But it isn't yet to the point where the mind strays. Stop there, because the mind will then remember that it was a nice thing to do, that one was enjoying it. And if the mind carries that imprint of pleasure, then next time it will be happy to do it again. If we push it too hard, than the imprints will be of strain, stress and distress. And then if we want to practice, the mind will become resistant.

So as I said before, it is very important to learn to work with the mind and get it to co-operate. If the mind is co-operating then that's already half the battle. And also with one session, one should structure oneself—not pushing too hard but giving a little bit of a push. But at the same time, not so much of a push that we over exert ourselves. It is not easy.

**Q.** What is a meditation box? Please describe it and why you chose to stay so long in it.

*A.* Well, that's practical. A meditation box is just a box with a back; my meditation box was 36 inches by 30 inches. It raised me above the ground, because there were often floods. It had sides about nine inches to a foot in depth. In Singapore it won't work—your legs will get too hot. But in a cold climate it's very good, because you don't get the drafts. There was a padded cloth on which I sat—it doesn't fall anywhere, it's very contained. It's your own little world.

One sleeps in it. Normally when we sleep lying down, it's very hard at the time of falling asleep for the mind not to be dispersed. And then we fall into a very unfocused sleep. But if you sleep sitting up, there are Tibetan methods for sleep called dream yogas and sleep-yogas. At that moment when you are just falling asleep, meditation reproduces on a minimal scale the subtle dissolution of the consciousness at the time of the death. In order to make use of this very subtle dissolution of the consciousness at the time of the death, we must be able to recognize it. And one of the primary ways of recognizing it is to learn how to recognize it at the time of sleep.

So therefore, if you are sitting up to sleep, your awareness stays very centred and doesn't disperse so easily. Then you sleep very deeply but not very long—for two or three hours at most. When you awake, you are already sitting up. Your awareness is

like a thread, it runs all the way through, and this is much easier when you are sitting. And that's why people, especially in a retreat situation, usually choose to sit up.

*Q.* I am a cowardly deity practitioner who doesn't want to declare himself.

*A.* When one is in retreat doing a deity practice, it is essential to carry what you call the pride of the deity which in one sense is that one really is Kwan Yin, one really is Chenrenzig. One doesn't understand it, but actually really who else could we be? It's our Buddha nature. In the last lifetime we were Mr. Smith, next time who knows what we will be? Those are temporary identifications, but the reality is our Buddha nature, which is manifesting one as Chenrenzig or Kwan Yin, and carrying that sense of essential Buddha nature into our everyday practice. This is very essential for deity yoga. If we don't have that, it's not going to work. It's going to be an intellectual game of visualizing. It has to be here, this absolute conviction that this is the reality of the situation. That's what I'm trying to say.

*Q.* Does it mean avoiding everything?

*A.* Is letting go the same as avoiding? The whole question of letting go is that we don't cling. It doesn't mean



we cannot have or enjoy objects. It's a very important point. There is a story about this king in ancient India. He had a big palace, many beautiful wives, jewels and gold, everything he could possibly want. He had a Guru who was a yogi and very ascetic; all he had was one possession, a begging bowl. One time they were sitting in the palace grounds under a tree, and the Guru was giving teachings to the king. A servant came running out calling, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty, the whole palace is on fire! It's being completely consumed by flames, come immediately!" And the king said, "Don't bother me, I'm here with the Guru learning Dharma, you go and deal with it." But the Guru jumped up saying, "What do you mean? I left my bowl in the palace!"

OK, you got that. It doesn't matter what we have, it's how we relate to it. Having or not having is not the point, objects are innocent. The problem is not the objects, the problem is our attachment or non-attachment to the objects.

**Q.** I'm suffering from a spiritual see-saw. Certain days I'm dedicated to my practice and I feel very good, and then on days following this I feel very down and unmotivated. I try hard to motivate and discipline myself to overcome this resistance. How do I conquer this problem?

*A.* This is a common thing. Nobody, including the great saints, were ever or always on an eternal high. Usually great highs are followed by deep lows.

The good practitioner just keeps going. The good practitioner doesn't get too high when it's high, and doesn't get too low when it's low. S/he realizes that this is the nature of Samsara, originating from Samsara. Waves go up and waves come down.

These are just clouds in the nature of the sky-like mind. And a good practitioner just goes on. There are going to be ups and downs, there are going to be beautiful meadows and deserts. We just carry on walking. Don't get too attached to the beautiful meadows and the streams, don't be disheartened by the deserts. Just keep going, that's all you can do.

Sometimes when you are doing meditation, you might feel, What a waste of time, this is really stupid, what am I doing all this for? But you do it. Another time it's absolutely wonderful, wow, really, I almost got enlightened!. Just do it, forget all that. Leave it. It's part of letting go. We let go not only of the good things but the bad things, we just hold everything light, let everything keep flowing. Everything is change, I mean it is impermanent. This was one of the essential teachings of the Buddha. So of course the mind, which is like this all the time, is going to change.

Why are we only attached to the high points in life? Why do we feel aversion to the low points? They are all the display of the mind, we cannot understand our mind if we only want the good parts and we would never be a genuine practitioner if we could only practice when we felt good. Everybody goes through that. I'll bet there's not a single person in this whole room who doesn't have this problem.

Everybody has this problem, even Milarepa and the great saints. It is just part of the mind. That is irrelevant, that is the point, so we just keep going. Step after step after step that's enough. And come what may, good times, bad times, rainy weather, sunny weather, it doesn't matter. Just let the weather pass. If we are always downcast when the weather is rainy and really happy when it's sunny, we are going to be miserable, right? You know sometimes it rains, sometimes the sun shines, but we go to work just the same.

*Q.* In the deity practice, one has to develop divine pride. What is the development of divine pride and can increasing our pride be an obstacle to our practice?

*A.* It shouldn't be, because not only our own mind is Chenrenzig, so is everybody else. I mean one half of the deity practice is to get the sense of identification with the deity, but the other part is to see all beings as Chenrenzig; all beings are Tara.

It's not just me in the middle of my mandala. One is seeing the Buddha's potential in every single being, every being, not just human beings. Insects, animals—they all have the potential for enlightenment. It may be dormant, but it's there. We all have this in common.

It's not my Buddha nature versus your Buddha nature. Buddha nature is indivisible, it's like the sky. It is not that this is my little bit of sky and that's your little bit of sky; you keep your little bit of sky up and I keep mine below. Sky is just sky. We can divide the land but not space. Sky is just sky.

If you are really doing it with understanding, then Buddha nature is also empty. It's not a thing, it's not something sitting inside you like a divine core. It's something infinite and vast like the sky, so how can you be proud of the sky?

*Q.* Could you explain what you mean by Buddhist practice? Does this mean prayers or meditation? Does it mean one has to chant prayers in Buddhist lingo?

*A.* What I'm talking about here is the practice, by which I mean meditation, formal meditation, chanting and the yogas or whatever you happen to be doing. Of course in general, Buddhist practice includes every moment. How we relate to others, developing loving-kindness, patience, generosity, ethical conduct, just how

we relate to those around us, to our families, to our colleagues and how we relate to situations in life when they come to us. Natural responses, whether they are skilful or unskilful, are all Buddhist practice. But here at this time we are talking about retreats. So yes, when I talk about Buddhist practice I am talking about formal meditation.

What is Buddhist lingo? In Theravadin countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, all the chantings are done in Pali. In the Mahayana schools when Buddhism spread to China and Tibet and so on, then the first thing they did was to translate the books and chanting into their own languages so that they could understand what was being said.

The sacred language in Buddhism is probably Sanskrit, although the Buddha did not speak Sanskrit. The actual language which the Buddha spoke is no longer used. Even Pali is not the language of the Buddha, it's a West Indian dialect. So there is no language presently extant which the Buddha himself actually spoke. The Mahayana use Sanskrit, but nowadays there are no people practicing in Sanskrit any more.

Usually, people prefer to chant in their own language, Chinese or Tibetan, which are easier to chant in than English. English is extremely difficult to chant. This is still one of the big issues which people are wrestling with—whether to chant nicely together in a language not understood or to chant in one's own language

which is not so euphonious. Personally I'm waiting for the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, to integrate both and so solve the problem for us.

*Q.* Can you share with us what motivated you to do what you did and are doing, especially the cave experience? Was it difficult to come back to society?

*A.* The retreat was a vocation for me, I mean it was what I knew I had to do. This was what I was called to do in this lifetime for whatever reasons. Of course, from a Buddhist point of view, that was just my karma.

Obviously something I left unfinished in a past life. Something I needed to continue in this lifetime. I was very motivated by the discovery that here was a practice which was so perfect, and the teachers who were so enlightened and the Dharma which is so unexcelled. I wanted to give it my whole being and I didn't want to be distracted. I knew how easily I can be distracted! For me it made sense to try to be in a situation which was non-distracting so that I could give myself to the practice completely and absolutely. So that was what I did.

I felt that if I was eventually going to be of any benefit to anybody, I could only do that by really realizing the Dharma in my heart. When I myself was in a state of ignorance and confusion, how could I help others?

And it seemed for me that the perfect way to do that was to be in isolation.

Of course, all my Lamas always encouraged this. My Lama not only sent me to Lahoul in the first place, but always said to me, "For you, it is better to be alone." This is because he knows I'm a chameleon and I take on the colouring of whomever I'm with, so this is very dangerous. To me isolation was a way to come to terms with who and what we really are when we are not playing roles. Normally we are continually playing many roles in our lives. When you are alone for an extended period of time, it's very boring playing roles for yourself, so you begin to drop it. Retreat gives us this time and space in which we do it quite organically, not in a harsh way.

And I liked being up in the cave; I had a good time. People think I did it to rival Milarepa, but it was nothing like that. I was very joyful, I loved to be in there. I couldn't think of anywhere else I would rather be, anything else I would rather be doing. So that's why I lived there.

As for my family, on the whole most of them didn't have any say one way or the other. My father had died when I was two. I had one brother, but he was abroad. There was only my mother who had any impact on me, and she became a Buddhist about six months after I become a Buddhist in England. Then she spent a year with me in India with my teacher. She took refuge with

my lama and was devoted to Tara, so she was very supportive. For many years she even sent money to support me there, which was extremely hard for her.

When we talk about unconditional love I think of my mother because my brother was in Saudi Arabia, I was in India, and there she was all alone. But she never said, "Why don't you come home and take care of your old mother?" You know, she never used psychological blackmail even when she was really sick and nearly dead. I didn't even know. She didn't write to me because she didn't want my practice to be disturbed. She thought that either she would recover, in which case why bother me, or else she would die, in which case why bother me? I only learned she was ill from a friend of hers who wrote me an indignant letter, "Your mother is dying, why don't you come home?" I didn't know anything, my mother didn't tell me. She really understood.

In fact, she told some friends of mine that she always prayed that in her next rebirth she would come back again as my mother because she was afraid that otherwise I would have parents who didn't understand that I needed to lead a special sort of life. That's love. She died about fifteen years ago while I was in retreat. People mistake love as attachment, but real love is thinking of others, not yourself. My mother to me is a shining example of unconditional love.



When I first came out of retreat, I went to Italy. It was wonderful. Again there in Italy my friends were all on spiritual paths—Hindu paths, Christian paths or Buddhist paths. Very nice people. After that came this question of starting a nunnery and going around the world talking. Again I always met with very lovely people. Where are all these horrible people we hear about? I don't meet them. I only meet nice people, so it's been a very painless transition. And meeting with many people has also given me the opportunity to develop qualities which you can't do in isolation. So it's been fine.