

~ On Retreat with My Teacher ~

An Interview with Lama Tashi

Tergar International: Thanks again for doing this! What inspired you to go on this retreat?

Lama Tashi: You know, Rinpoche always talks about meditation and going on retreat, and I have been following Mingyur Rinpoche and Tsoknyi Rinpoche off and on, so somehow it is deeply implanted in me. Of course, I have been kind of busy, but deep down I also wanted to do some retreat. That was somewhere deep in my heart.

When Rinpoche suddenly disappeared, that was a big shock and an inspiration. Everybody knew he was going into retreat, but nobody knew exactly where he was going and all of a sudden he was gone.

Then, when I met him around Boudha unexpectedly, I followed him. I met him at this bus station motel — a small, very rugged motel. When I met him it was very shocking to see him. It was like, “Is it real or is it a dream?” I followed him for maybe forty-five minutes, but when I really saw him it was kind of shocking. It was not really like an emotion. I was in a state of shock, also because he looked very different. But I could really see in his eyes that he was so clear and so happy. At that moment, I really did not know what to say or how to begin, so I told him, “I am Tashi.” (Laughs.) And he said, “Yes, yes! How did you know I am here?” And then, of course, I explained to him. Then he explained where he had been and what he had been doing. Then I explained everything that had happened while he had been gone — what had happened to the monastery, family, Rinpoches, and he was pretty sad to hear that Lama Soto had passed away. I saw that he got maybe a little bit emotional. But after that, he was totally fine. When I looked at him, he was very bright, like a light, as I said. At the same time, he looked so thin and dark. He had a lot of beard and looked rugged. For me it was, at the same time, kind of sad. I wished he would

have been a little stronger or something. So, immediately I told him, “I want to follow you.” and he said, “No, no, no. You do not have to follow me. Now I have all the news about what is going on, and it seems like everything is going fine and,” he said, “I am fine too. I am good, in fact, very good, everything that I planned is going very well.” Then he said, “You do not need to come. This is what I choose to do, so I do not need any help.” It was very shocking to hear, but at the same time, you kind of like do not know what to ask. (Laughs.)

Then I told him how he used to talk about — even when we were in Tibet a long time back — he used to point up at the caves and say, “What a wonderful place to be! It would be so good. Maybe you can also come.” I was just reminded of that. So, I forced him quite strongly. I felt inspired as I looked at him. He was very bright, very happy, and very free. When I saw him, I saw him as Mingyur Rinpoche, but at the same time I saw him as a very simple yogi — very free, very relaxed, and at ease. It really touched me, and all of a sudden I said, “I want to go. I really want to go.” And all of a sudden he said, “Can you go for three years?” I said, “Yes, I can go.” He said, “If you come, it is only because of one reason, and that is because you want to practice. If so, you can come.” I said, “Yes, I want to practice.” And, of course, on a deep level I also wanted to serve him if I could be of any help. But (laughs) he said, “You have to practice. That is the only reason you can come.” And I said “Okay, I want to come.”

That moment, that was my inspiration. All of a sudden this decision came, because he looked so light, so bright, very normal. I saw kind of like many different kind of persons within one person. He looked rugged, he looked very normal, he did not even look like Mingyur Rinpoche. He had long hair, long beard, and it looked like he had not taken a really good shower for months. (Laughs.) But he looked so happy. That immediate way he looked at me, that eye-to-eye connection was very inspiring. I forgot everything. I did not even think about anything besides just wanting to join him. So he said “Okay”. (Laughs.) That really inspired me, the way he looked at me, the way he was. I was immediately certain about my decision. I did not even think. Even though I was ready to drop everything and follow him right

there, he said, “No, no. At this time you cannot come.”

He had come back from Helambu. that is like Sindhupalchowk. He did some retreats up there. Then, he was on the way to Dolpo, another mountain place. So he went to Boudha to get *tsampa* and butter and dried cheese. (Laughs.) That was his food. He was carrying that. I saw that. He said he was there, in Boudha, for that reason. He told me, “At this time you cannot come. You just write down your phone number for me and I will carry that, and when I am ready for you to come, I will call you.” The next morning he went to Dolpo by bus. That was how I met him. (Laughs.)

TI: So you did not have the aspiration to do a three-year wandering retreat before this? It is not something you have always wanted to do? Like Mingyur Rinpoche wanted to do it since he was very young.

LT: I did not really want retreat, but I was hoping to do a little longer retreat. I did not even think of three-year retreat before, because I was still working partly for Tsoknyi Rinpoche, partly for Mingyur Rinpoche, and also working for the monastery. I knew that someday I wanted to do a retreat, but I did not really plan a three-year retreat or, of course, a wandering retreat. It requires a certain kind of courage and very strong stability, otherwise it is very tough. You are gone, you have no base. So, I did not really (wanted to do retreat), in the beginning. Of course, since Mingyur Rinpoche left I always wished I was with him. He had been gone for two years and some months already. At that time, people were worried about where he was, if he was healthy — all the students, the family, and people he know. They always asked, but we did not have an answer. So, I also wished I was with him in whatever he was doing. But I really did not think that solidly by myself.

TI: You saw him in Boudha getting into a taxi, and he had already bought *tsampa* and cheese and so forth, right?

LT: Yes, normally I go to Boudha from time to time for work. Since I have a car, I always miss going for *khora* around the stupa. But that day I was quite free. Somewhere around 3:30 or 4:00 I had time, so I said, “Why not, just do one *khora*.” So, I went for *khora*, and as I went

for khora, halfway, coming down — there is one road going down, I had already entered, and then you have to go like this to get out, and he was walking there. I saw him maybe ten meters away. At that moment, I saw this guy who looked kind of . . . At that time there were not many people. Normally Boudha is full of people, but at that time there were less people. People usually do early morning khoras or evening khoras. So I could see him very clearly. He had a robe, long hair, and I just thought he was some newly arrived Tibetan or someone who had come out of retreat.

I saw him, and I could not avoid him because he was just in front of me. But the way he walked, somehow there was something familiar about his body language. I still did not pay attention, but he kind of stuck in my mind. Then, all of a sudden, he went on the corner side. The stupa is on this side, and he went the way that I was thinking to walk. I went a little faster and I saw him. I looked at him and then I felt really strongly, “I know this person — the way he walks, the gestures. It is someone close to me.” I was really feeling this very strongly. I could not stop thinking of him — not Mingyur Rinpoche, but the person I saw.

I could not stop looking at him and I wanted to ask this guy who he is. But, of course, there are so many people and things happening, but I slowly, slowly went after. He kept walking and it was definitely someone with whom I am very close. So, I really forced myself to go. I went a little faster. And he sort of turned. He did not turn to me but he turned towards the stupa. And then I recognized him. “Wow! that is Mingyur Rinpoche!” All of a sudden my hair was standing, my body was tingling, and I even had this kind of unbalanced walking. (Laughs.)

He was carrying two bags, and he went straight from the gate and stopped a taxi. Now I knew he is Mingyur Rinpoche. I did not immediately go to him because it was in the streets, and I was really shocked. But I did not want to lose him! So I followed him. He took a taxi, and then I also took a taxi and followed him. He went to the bus station near Swayambhu, where there are a lot of small motels and hotels. He was there. I met him there.

TI: You have served Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, one of the greatest retreatants and proponents of retreat of our time. You have also served each of his sons. Would you share with us some of what they said about the benefit of retreat?

LT: What they said?

TI: Yes, what they have said. If you have heard them talk about the benefit of retreat?

LT: Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche and also Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche — I have served all of them, especially Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Rinpoche. In early times I also served Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche and also received teachings, many teachings — evening teachings and morning teachings from Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. But basically, of course, all the lamas — especially Kagyu and Nyingma lamas — they always encourage you to do retreat.

The main benefit of retreat is actually that all of your time, the whole time — three-year retreat or one-month retreat or whatever time — is dedicated to practice. You have more time. Also, the benefit of retreat is application. You really have to apply the teachings, whatever you have learned. If you stay in retreat, then you have full time that you can apply whatever teachings you have received. You can really learn, you can really absorb the teachings. That is the whole purpose of retreat. Of course, if you can do a three-year retreat, like a traditional three-year retreat, that is actually very much what all the Rinpoches, especially Kagyu and Nyingma Rinpoches, will really ask you to do, if you are ready to. They really admire that. But I do not really remember any particular things that they individually said. But this is general for everybody. Students always wish to do retreat but, at the same time, it is really hard, and most students are always waiting for the time to do retreat. That is the obstacle.

TI: So you cannot think of anything specific that they might have said? Or with Mingyur Rinpoche, you knew that he wanted to spend time in a cave. You said you would be out walking somewhere, etc.

LT: Yes. one thing I remember is, even in public teachings — I

remember one time, I was in America, and he told me to do retreat. And I told him, “Yes, I will do.” I remember that during one of the teachings somewhere in America he said, “I have so many students, but only one person promised to do a three-year retreat — that is Tashi!” (Laughs.)

In that sense I was ready. I was looking for a very good teacher to guide me and to do a three-year retreat. A lot of my friends went on retreat but, of course, the way they received teachings and the way I received teachings was a little different. I received more through life experience, kind of direct teachings. And my friends had first gone through studies and then they went on retreat. I was looking for more direct-experience teachings. Somehow I did not really feel inspired to do a three-year retreat earlier, as would be traditional, but still I received certain teachings from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche and other Rinpoches. So I was actually looking to do a three-year retreat. And when I met Mingyur Rinpoche, that was perfect.

Also, he was not easy on me. It was not an easy retreat, I have to say. When I met him and he accepted that I could come I said, “What should I bring?” He told me that he did not need anything, but if I wanted to practice I had to prepare the texts for the *ngöndro* practice, and then also he said to bring a text for Mahamudra. it is called *The Ocean of Definitive Meaning*. This is very famous, very big, and he asked me to bring it. He also asked me to bring the Vajrayogini sadhana. For him, he said if I could bring a dzogchen historical two-volume work that Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche had put together and edited. He said, “If you can bring that for me, that would be great!” Other than that, he did not need anything. Then he said, “Whatever you want to bring you know for yourself.” I said, “Okay.” (Laughs.)

I was so excited. Before I joined him, I had a gap of almost one-and-a-half months. I was totally silent, because he said, “In the meantime, you do not need to tell anybody. I know everyone is good — except Lama Soto who has passed away already — but I am good, so you do not need to bark, you do not need to tell. (Laughs.) You have to keep quiet.” And I promised.

In the meantime, I had one-and-a-half months to prepare. Since I had seen him looking so thin, dark, very yogi, free, and we were going to the Himalayas — in fact it was also for myself, I cannot stay in the Himalayas without the right clothes— so I bought a lot of stuff like we were going on an expedition. (Laughs.) I bought really good sleeping bags, very good thermos, jackets, trekking shoes. And then I bought dried foods, coffee — everything, like a big expedition. I bought two big sacks of things. I had time, and every night I went shopping. “I have to get this, and I have to get this.” (Laughs.)

That was my preparation. And what I mean by “he was not easy” is this. He gave me the four foundation teachings exactly in the traditional way, and then I had to practice very hard. Sometimes in the cave we stayed together, like in a small room, and he woke up every morning at four o’clock and we had to do practice together. And, of course, I was always late. He did not wake me up so I was always late. And he laughed. Even in the early mornings when I woke up, he would laugh because I was always late. (Laughs.)

I had to do all this practice with him, and get teachings. Later, after I finished the four foundations, he started Mahamudra. It took almost six, seven months. We went bit by bit and he made sure that I practiced. It was like that. After that, he gave me the recitation of the sadhana of Vajrayogini and I had to do that. But normally I did not count, he gave me a time frame. “You have to practice this one-and-a-half months, this twenty days, fifteen days, ten days.” And then later, once I finished all of those practices, he said I could practice, it is called *nyen gyu* (oral lineage of the Great Perfection). He gave me teachings that he had received from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. That took eight months. We were practicing in the mountains and meditating. To catch him, to practice, to try to serve him without having any certain place, and even at the ledge, we did not have anything. So it was very, very tough.

TI: That is really great. Were you with him all the time, or would you go off and see him from time to time?

LT: During the four foundation practice, when we found a place that

was suitable place for practice, I would practice my four foundation practice. He would give me the teaching, and then he would go. He would just wander. He knew where I was, and after a few days or one week he would come back. Most of the time we were together. But these things happened every time he gave me a practice, like for twenty days he would go and I would stay in one place. But if he asked me to follow, then I followed him. Whatever he said, I was ready to do.

It happened many times that he just took off, and I was practicing. And after one week or five days he would come back. And then he again gave me teachings and sometimes we practiced together. And sometimes, if I had to practice a longer time, then he just went off. But in the mountains and certain ashram places that we found, there he always stayed and practiced.

TI: Where were some of the places that you were doing this?

LT: We began from Shyabru, Langtang is on the way. We stayed in Langtang, in a cave there for a little more than a month. From there we went to Helambu again. But we could not stay there, because a person that Rinpoche called his sponsor — he was a very normal person, but Rinpoche treated him very special. He treated that person very special because he had helped Rinpoche to find the cave or something. But when we went a second time, to meet him and ask about another cave, he already knew that Rinpoche is Tulku Ugyen's son. So he had to run away. Early morning, he just took off. (Laughs.) He did not even say, "Okay, I am going, whatever you do, you do it." (Laughs.) He just took off.

From there, we slowly went to India. I spent quite some time near Kushinagar, where Rinpoche had his near-death experience. He was very eager to show me what had happened. Around there I did my four foundations. And then he just went off and came back, went off and came back. We stayed there about four months, and then we went to Shravasti, a place where Buddha spent a very long time. And there Rinpoche gave me the Mahamudra teaching, started there. We spent maybe four to five months around this area. Then we went to Ayodhya and then to some Hindu holy rivers and ashrams. There we spent

some time, I forgot the names. From there we slowly went towards Ladakh. We went to Ladakh for maybe another four months. And then we came down to Kashmir, a little bit around Kashmir. Then we came down to Punjab, where there is this Guru Nanak's place. We spent some time there. Then we went to Rishikesh. Around there we spent some time. From there we went to Badrinath, that is way up from Rishikesh. A very holy Hindu place. And actually it is very close to Mount Kailash, next to Tibet. Around there we spent quite some time. There he gave me dzogchen practice. From there we slowly came down towards Bodhgaya. That was the area we covered. (Laughs.)

TI: Were you wearing sadhu's robes as well, during this? Rinpoche been talking about it. To fit in, he said he wore sadhu robes.

LT: Yes, he wore kind of yellow — we did not know exactly what sadhus wear, but we got something similar. Because we were also kind of, of course, looking for food, and sometimes there can be violence for foreign people, especially if you are just one or two persons. If they thought we had some belongings, they might have wanted to rob us. So, we dressed like sadhus. I was wearing white, he was wearing saffron. (Laughs.) So we were very great. I was totally white, and he was saffron color. And people were really helpful. If we asked for something, they gave it to us. Or they always asked us if we wanted to sleep somewhere near the ashram. We ate a lot of ashram food with sadhus. (Laughs.) But we did not know if they were sadhu clothes, we just got something.

TI: What was the best part of your retreat? Did it live up to your hopes and expectations?

LT: Well, I am really happy. Because Rinpoche really went through all the four different practices that I did. First the four preliminaries, then Mahamudra, then Vajrayogini sadhana — (mantra) recitation. It was a multi-year transmission, very thorough. It had both *trekchö* and *tögal*. He gave me everything so precisely, over a long time for all the explanations. As if he was giving teachings to very many people, exactly. He was very serious during the teachings. He sat like a big Tibetan lama — very formal, very precise. He taught exactly like it

was. That was very, very impressive. Every time I received a teaching, I always felt so grateful. He never had any hesitation to give. His compassion was so, so great. Every time I received a teaching, I was amazed by how valuable he is. Amazing! That was so, so touching. Every session was almost one hour, maybe sometimes one and a half hour every day. And then he would come back and I could ask questions. That was amazing. Really, I felt so lucky. Of course, I would put my practice aside if he needed me, but mostly he was more active than me. He cooked, he begged, he actually did everything faster than me. Anyway, in my heart, although he treated me just like a friend — except during the teachings, of course, then it was guru and disciple. Other than that, he treated me just like a friend, an equal, completely equal. He never expected any serving. Of course I could serve, but he never expected it. He was completely normal, completely free, completely at ease, so good. That was very, very amazing. And, of course, when he cooked he also cooked for me many times. (Laughs.)

TI: What was the hardest part of your retreat?

LT: The hardest part. Hmm. I had challenges practicing, and I had challenges catching up with him, following him. Also learning teachings. Whatever I heard, he taught only a few lines, then he explained and then I had to meditate. He really knew whether I was practicing or not. If I was not practicing, he said, “Not today! You did not do it. I can feel it.” (Laughs.) So that was tough! Because it was so great, but, at the same time, he was really watching. Even if he was far away, I could feel him really watching and thinking, “Is he really practicing or not?” So that was very challenging.

It was sometimes very tough and sometimes I did not have much time to sleep. During hot weather it was very good, because I could rely on hot weather to go to sleep. (Laughs.) Other than that it was really fine. Moving was pretty tough, pretty tough. But on a deep level, I never felt like giving up. Of course, right in that moment the physical conditions and circumstances were tough. Sometimes you get diarrhea. Sometimes get fever. Sometimes you do not have even a safe place to sleep — anything could happen. And, at the same time, you have to apply practice. I tried, I committed myself: “I want to do this every day,

no matter what. I want to do this much four foundations and this much meditation.” I committed. To do that was quite a challenge! (Laughs.)

TI: Many Western dharma students think that the most important thing is to engage compassionately in the world. What would you say to them about the relationship between retreat practice and engagement?

LT: I think it is important to have outgoing compassion, to do activities for others. I have been doing that for a long, long time. I dedicated myself from my early twenties until late forties to serve my community and Rinpoches. And I have realized that if you do not really practice, you can easily get burned by emotions while doing things for others. So, I think that if you do retreat, that really energizes you. You really understand, because you are completely focused on yourself. At that time you are not harming any other people, and mentally you are actually generating a compassionate feeling all the time. Somehow I think that really deepens in your heart. Then, whatever you can do for others later, you can do with tremendous positive energy. Whatever you do — generosity, helping, compassion or whatever you do — it will be really genuine because you have sort of developed that. Without that, you still have (these qualities) but sometimes you can get really burned and frustrated, and that is a big difference. Especially the way Rinpoche teaches awareness. If you can really apply that to yourself, then there is really space. There is a very good space for the person who is helping, and for the things that are to be helped, and for the person who needs the help. This boundless awareness is very clear. Then you have a clear purpose. Your energy is more genuine and your motivations are more genuine. So that is why I think retreat is important to do. Once you do the retreat, then, of course, compassionate activity is another key point.

TI: Many of us are inspired by the life examples of great lamas from the past and the present. Milarepa, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, etc., and all of the great lineage figures who have spent a large portion of their life in retreat. While this is wonderful, some Western dharma students find themselves feeling frustrated and

perhaps upset that they cannot follow this example. How would you advise Western students who are caught in this dilemma.

LT: I think that in the West, when people say retreat, they only think of the advantages of retreat. Being free, focusing on yourself, perfecting, having more space. In the West, retreat is less hard than normal life. (Laughs.) But if you really go on retreat... of course, it depends, if you are totally engaged, if your mind is totally dedicated, then no matter what difficulties there are, you can even go to the moon, that is no problem, right? Likewise, retreat has no problems. I mean, hardships are part of retreat. Retreat is not so easy. it is not the way Westerners think. Especially traditional retreat following the Tibetan retreat style, that can be tough. And I can see that for Westerners it is even more tough. Because they have double the difficulties — understanding the culture, understanding the rituals, understanding recitations, understanding prostrations, and all this. it is very, very tough.

I think it depends on the level of understanding. If you think retreat is something for this present life, just thinking of this present life, maybe you do not need to undergo so much hardship. (Laughs.) But if you are really thinking of future lives, of enlightenment, some things that we talk about, then you can try. You can try. But I think it is really okay if you can bring whatever wisdom you learn, whatever teachings you learn — whatever makes sense — if you can start to practice that within your daily life. That could be an even more effective way to challenge your emotions or change your habits or whatever you wish. If you think of retreat as a kind of holiday with very nice mountains, beautiful lakes — this is true for a short moment — but if you spend longer time it is very tough.

I think Western people should really know the meaning of retreat and then, if they really know, if they want to do it, they should really do it. Other than that, they should not dismiss whatever practice they have. They should apply their practice during their busy lives. You should not avoid it.

Actually, you have a choice — you look for being busy, right? If you are not busy... I have been in America and some of my American friends,

when they have no job they are so depressed. It is worse than not being able to practice, not being able to go to the mountains. It is more suffering.

You can always design your retreat. If you are missing that, then you can create it. Even if you are busy, you should really create it. But if you really look for a traditional approach, inspired by Milarepa, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche they really... Even today I heard one lama, he said that where we went, to Lapchi in this Langtang area, near there — and we did not even know, we were just looking for a place to stay, not like tourists, we did not go on any site-seeing to beautiful places, we just tried to find a place to practice, that was our direction; we never said, “Okay, let’s go to a nice place.” No! we were always looking for nice place to challenge our practice — so this lama said that nearby that place Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche spent seven, eight months. And that area has nothing. Nothing. Just today, he told me that Tulku Urgyen went on a pilgrimage to that site. He asked me if we have been there, but no. We have just went one place and stayed there and practiced. We practiced and then moved to another place. So it is not easy. And Tulku Urgyen alone stayed like seven months. And, of course, I have also been in Tibet where he stayed. He stayed many months in closed retreat. It was a completely dark retreat and people gave food from underneath. If you have to do that, it is tough. But, of course you can always do it. And if you really can challenge yourself, I am sure there is tremendous purification, tremendous learning, tremendous experience, and if you are really smart and intelligent, I am sure you can go beyond.

TI: What will you do now that you are back?

LT: Right now, I do not have a plan. But I see that Mingyur Rinpoche is already making some plans. (Laughs.) He did not share them with me completely, but it looks like I have to travel a little bit with him. I really do not know. I will still practice. Even though I have been in three-year retreat with Mingyur Rinpoche, I did not master what he taught me. And I know I have a whole lifetime to practice what he has given me. So, my plan is that no matter where I am, no matter what kind of things I do in the future, I will carry the teachings that Mingyur

Rinpoche gave me. And whatever I practice, I will continuously try to apply those teachings. And then I wish to find . . . now I know and I am a little more familiar with a different type of life, so I hope I can do other steps. And then if I can be helpful to others, I am also happy to do that. But I do not have ideas about what I am going to do. That is not really planned. Something like that! (Laughs.) And I have not met Tsoknyi Rinpoche yet. He is in Argentina. He was so excited that he sent me WeChat on his mother's phone, and he is talking so much.

TI: When do you think you will see him?

LT: Maybe after three weeks I will see him here. I will wait for him here. Because Mingyur Rinpoche is leaving on the fifth to Bodhgaya. Actually, I did not even have time to adjust, you know. After two days Mingyur Rinpoche came, and he is involving me. "Okay, let's go! You do this and do that..." (Laughs.) I thought I would have one month at least. To see the Rinpoches, and be with them, and slowly again observe my mind, my body. But I did not have time. After he leaves and before Tsoknyi Rinpoche comes I have maybe two weeks. So I will kind of be quiet. (Laughs.)

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