

A Day in the Life of Western Monks at Sera Je

Sera is one of the three great Gelug monastic universities where monks do intensive study and training in Buddhist philosophy. The original Sera, with its two colleges, Je and Me, was established in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1419. At Sera Je-in-exile, established in the early 70s, some 2,400 monks live and study – eleven of them from Western countries, including Lama Tenzin Ösel Rinpoche, the 14-year-old reincarnation of Lama Thubten Yeshe, and his brother Ven. Kunkyen, who are Spanish.

Ven. Fedor is the director of IMI House, Shedrup Zung Drel Ling, at Sera Je.

Here he talks to fellow student Ven. Guy Eggington about life at Sera.

I came to Sera in May 1990. I had been a monk for three years. I came for two reasons: I wanted to learn Tibetan and I had the wish to study Buddhist philosophy in more depth. So I asked Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche whether Nalanda Monastery in France, the Buddhist School of Dialectics in Dharamsala or Sera Monastery would be the best for me, and he recommended Sera.

I was impressed by the size of Sera and also I felt that it had some kind of glow to it. I felt very happy when I first came here.

What are the differences between studying here and studying in a Western monastic environment?

The obvious advantage here is that if you want to study Tibetan it is good because very few people speak English. You are forced to use Tibetan all the time. Even in Dharamsala everybody wants to speak English with you. The study program here is very intensive, so if you are a really serious student it takes up all of your time.

Another advantage is that you have the opportunity to debate for hours about the meaning of the texts, which is a great tool for getting insights into them. Usually it is said that you get 50% of your understanding from debate, 25% from teachings and 25% from reading. Also, at Sera you have a great choice of geshes and lamas you can go to for teachings. And because there are many monks here, if you go to puja you can really create a lot of merit because your prayers become that much more powerful because of the large group.

Tell us about a day in the life of a monk at Sera.

The general schedule starts with the morning puja at 5 a.m., which lasts until about 7. The morning debate starts at 8 o'clock and lasts until 10, with some prayers in between. Between 10 and 11 in the morning you are pretty much free to do what

you want – many monks go to class with their teacher, do memorization or study, or do their commitments. The communal lunch of the monastery is from 11 o'clock until 11:25, after which many monks will have a nap.

Between 1 and 2 o'clock classes in Tibetan grammar and English are offered, which many monks attend very enthusiastically. Otherwise the afternoon is used for study, memorizing, going to classes or whatever you have to do.

Dinner is quite early, at 4:30 p.m. Then at 5:30 the evening debate session starts, which lasts until 9 o'clock, with one and a half hours of prayers in between. Many monks stay on and continue their debates until late at night. Usually after debate the monks go back to their rooms and have a short rest before they do more memorizing and recitation of the texts they have already memorized.

The schedule is intense, but you can put your own variety into the schedule and nobody is telling when you should go to bed or now you have to do this and now you have to do that. The fixed times are the debating times and the puja times. Even so, you do not have to go to puja all the time. I sleep longer in the morning but I stay up later in the evening, going to bed about 1 or 2.

As a monk is there a difference between living in India and living in the West?

There is definitely a difference. Here in India I wear my robes wherever I go. In the West usually I feel uncomfortable doing that. Also here in India one is less exposed to all kinds of distractions as in the West. That's why I feel very comfortable here in India.

What is involved in studying to become a geshe?

The study program at Sera Je lasts for at least 15 years, depending upon which geshe degree one is aiming for, and revolves around five ancient Indian Buddhist texts. Those are *Commentary on Valid Cognition (Pramanavartika)* by Dharmakirti, *The Ornament of Clear Realization (Abhisamayalamkara)* by Maitreya, *Entering the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara)* by Chandrakirti, *The Root Sutra of Vinaya* by Gunaprabha and *(Abhidharmakosha)* by Vasubandhu.

Those texts are commentaries on the sutras of the Buddha as well as the main source for our lam-rim teachings. The monks at Sera Je use textbooks composed by Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen as well as commentaries by the great Lama Tsongkhapa and his two main disciples, used as a basis for understanding the meaning of the sutras and the ancient Indian texts.

During the first three years one goes through the three *Collected Topics (Du-ra)* classes in which one studies *Mind and Awareness (Lo-rig)*, Buddhist Tenets (*Drubta*), *Grounds and Paths (Sa-lam)* and other texts. After this come the five *Perfection* classes during which one studies *The Ornament of Clear Realization*. And from there one goes on to three years of Madhyamika studying Chandrakirti's *Entering the Middle Way*. The last four years are spent on Vinaya and Abhidharma. The study of *Pramanavartika* is broken up; we do one or two months every year.

Then one has the choice of either taking a lower geshe degree or joining the *Iharam* class where one has to spend a few more years before taking the *Lharampa* Geshe degree.

What are you studying at the moment?

I am now in the second year of Madhyamika.

Wouldn't it be better to do lam-rim retreat for 15 years rather than the geshe program?

With regard to study it completely depends on the personality. For example, previously in Tibet there were many different kinds of Kadampa geshe. Some would get some brief instructions from their teacher about what meditation to do and then they would go back to their caves and just meditate on that. But there were also Kadampa geshe who would try to attain enlightenment through studying the great texts and then meditate on their meaning.

I personally like to read different texts and think about their meaning. If you combine your meditation of lam-rim with the study of the great texts, you will get a clearer idea of the different stages and important points of the path to enlightenment than if you only study and meditate on the lam-rim.

For example, studying the eighth chapter of the *Abhisamayalamkara*, which explains the four Buddha bodies, is very beneficial for one's practice of guru devotion, refuge and bodhichitta because you get a clearer idea of what it means to be a buddha.

If we want to become enlightened, usually we think the most important thing is to meditate all of the time. But if you want to go to a place you need to know the way very well so as not to get lost and to know all the shortcuts. In the same way, to become enlightened you need to know the most direct route very well. If one has a clear understanding of the spiritual path, of the result one wants to attain, then you know where you are on the path and how much work you still have to do. If you

don't have this understanding you might practice Dharma for some time and then give up and move onto some other spiritual trip because you never had a clear understanding about what you were trying to achieve and what was required to achieve it.

Also from the point of view of wanting to benefit others (since it is unlikely that I will achieve enlightenment meditating on the lam-rim for 15 years in this lifetime), study is a very useful way to benefit others through translating or teaching.

What is the process of debate?

Debate follows the rules of logic. During debate you use logic to analyze whether a statement is correct or not. Ultimately you try to find out what is reality and what is not, using logic. Usually most people think that logic is something completely unrelated to their lives. Actually our way of thinking follows the same process that we use in debate.

In debate you have the three steps of subject, predicate and reason. Take sound for example: it is impermanent because it is produced. In our ordinary way of thinking we use the same three steps: this time take me as an example. I will be happy if I have a red Mercedes. So we use logic in our day-to-day thinking all the time. We think that if I have this then I will be happy; we use this as a reason for what establishes happiness. But usually we don't use correct reasoning. We use reasoning where there is no pervasion; there is no necessity that if you have a red Mercedes you will be happy. You can posit many people who have a red Mercedes but are not happy, so it is not a valid reason. So, using logic is not something that is foreign to us, but usually we use incorrect logic.

With regard to the actual process of debate, well, you have two parties: a questioner and an answerer. The answering party is sitting down and the questioner is standing up. When the questioner asks questions and starts to debate he uses different gestures. Every time he makes a point he will draw his right hand far back behind the head and clap it strongly on his left and clap it strongly on his left hand, which is held out in front of him; the rosary is usually dangling from the left arm. During a debate you get quite a lot of clapping and as the debate progresses people get more and more excited and involved.

You already said that the monks do five hours of debate a day.

Yes, that is during the on-season. During the on-season you have two hours in the morning, including some prayers, and in the evening you debate from 5:30 until 9 with one and a half hours of prayers in between.

What is the benefit of debate?

There are many benefits. For example, you read about the four noble truths and then you think you have actually understood what the four noble truths are. Then at debate someone is asking you all these questions about the four noble truths and he is really doing deep and giving you a hard time debating and you are required to hold your own point. That makes you think more deeply about the subject. Also he might approach the subject from a different direction and ask you points you hadn't thought of, which gives you a whole new perspective of the subject.

It has happened to me so many times that I realized that I didn't understand at all what at first I thought to be very clear. After you have debated the subject for some weeks it becomes clearer what the four noble truths actually mean, and this makes it easier to meditate on them. For example, when you do retreat, if you want to meditate on the four noble truths you don't need a book to look them up and think about what they mean because you can just recall what you debated about and meditate on that.

So the benefits of debate are: You get a deeper understanding of the subject, you don't forget it easily, and I think you can actually get realizations of the subject during debate. If you have the proper motivation then debate can be just like an analytical meditation and you can get actual insights during it.

So debate is actually meditation?

Yes, if you have the proper attitude debate can be analytical meditation.

When you came here how well did you know Tibetan and how well does one have to know Tibetan to be able to participate in debate?

When I came here, even though I had already studied Tibetan for 2-1/2 years, it was not very good. But I went to debate anyway because my teacher told me to. I found it very useful because of the constant need to communicate.

To be able to debate you need to have a certain foundation, but your colloquial Tibetan doesn't need to be perfect. You do need to have the vocabulary of the text you are studying. Then as one studies the different texts one's vocabulary increases. Once you know Tibetan well enough, you can read any text and get the information you want. From that point on, studying becomes very nice because if you want particular information you don't have to wait until you ask a lama through a translator, because you can read any commentary by the old masters. My teacher Geshe Dawa told me that when I first started to study with him.

Aren't many of these words Dharma vocabulary?

Yes.

Do Tibetans also have to learn those words too?

Many words are also new for the Tibetans, and even if they know the word they have to learn the meaning. Most of the words in the texts are literary Tibetan, which many of them don't know.

Can you describe the experience of going to debate for the first time?

For me to go to debate for the first time was a shock. You go to the debating courtyard and everything is so loud. Everybody around you is shouting at the top of their voices and clapping their hands, so it is very difficult to understand a word of what is said. I was dumbfounded. When I stood up and tried to debate something, immediately I had a huge crowd of monks around me who wanted to see how the new monk was debating. Then of course I didn't have much to say and it was a little embarrassing. That was the first impression I got of debate! But slowly you become used to the noise and the others let you debate in peace.

Do you have to do any work in the monastery?

Western monks are exempt from working in the monastery. We don't have to do kitchen duty, field work or help with building. This has been a long tradition in Sera for non-Tibetan monks; for example, previously in Tibet Mongolians did not have to do monastery work. But there is no exception from the yearly examinations. Once you have entered the geshe program, you definitely have to attend the yearly examinations such as debating, memorizing and the written exam. But if you have aspirations for 18-hour kitchen duties then nobody will stop you. I sometimes go do field work.

What do you do on your days off?

Quite often I go together with other monks to a forest that is not far from here. It has wild animals, including elephants. There we have a small picnic and exchange the latest gossip. Sometimes you can see a wild elephant but luckily most of the time you see only the footprints.

Are Western monks accepted by Tibetan monks at Sera?

As long as you follow the rules of the monastery they will respect you as a good monk. One thing is, of course, that you will always be the "Injie" or Westerner, and

they accept you as such. I think that is okay. In general I find Tibetans quite easy to get on with, easygoing.

What will you do when you finish studying in Sera?

My idea is to divide my time doing practice in the mornings and evenings and then to do either written or oral translations during the day. If I find somebody who is willing to listen then I can also do some teaching.

How can Westerners who study the geshe program benefit the development of Buddhism in the West?

In general I think that Westerners who complete the geshe program can give some benefit to the West. If we want to bring the whole of Buddhism to the West then it is necessary for Westerners to come here and go through the whole program, become geshe and then take the whole thing back with them. Like in previous times Tibetans used to come from Tibet to India and study in the great monasteries there such as Nalanda, translate the various sutras and commentaries and then take them back to Tibet.

Westerners who have studied reasonably well here are qualified to be good translators because they have a good understanding of the texts, which I think is one of the main requirements of a translator. In addition, once you become a geshe you can go to tantric college, which is also very important if we want to become Buddhist lineage holders in the future. Until now no Westerner has done this. Western monks should also go to the tantric college and learn how to do the different sand mandalas, fire pujas, tantric retreats, etc.

What is the benefit for a Western monk to be at Sera?

There are many benefits. Even though the outer conditions are not perfect because there are not many of the amenities that you would have in the West – most people do not have hot water and the rooms are not of the same quality and so forth – you have very good conditions for study as you have very little distraction. And for Westerners it is very good to experience an original traditional monastic environment. Because this is a very big monastery with 2,000 monks you can get a very nice feeling about what it's like to live in a monastery. Maybe for Westerners it is also very good to get out of the Western environment in order to get rid of our old habits.

What are the living conditions like at Sera?

The conditions are very basic. One doesn't have many of the amenities in the West, such as running hot water. Also it can be difficult to find long-term accommodations because of the huge number of Tibetan monks. This is the reason we are now trying to build something for the International Mahayana Institute (IMI) monks who want to study here – which Lama Yeshe started for Western sangha.

Regarding food, it is up to yourself whether you want to take the monastery food or cook for yourself. If you cook for yourself then you can buy a gas stove and the vegetables and whatever you need in the next Indian town. All in all the conditions are very good for study here because the place is quite isolated and there are not many distractions.

At the moment how many Western monks are there at Sera Je?

Besides Lama Osel and his brother Kunkyen there are nine Western monks here, and I think that is the most we ever had at one time.

So, are you planning to establish a Western community in Sera?

We have the plan to establish an IMI community in Sera, which is not only for Westerners. The main aim of this project is to provide suitable accommodation for IMI monks who want to study here.