



SHAMBHALA
THE KALAPA COURT

A Letter from the Sakyong, Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche:
A Day of Retreat in Pharping, Nepal

Often people ask me what kind of retreat I am doing, what kind of practices and so forth. It varies, depending on what I am emphasizing for that particular period. From here in Pharping, I wanted to share a day in the life of this retreat that has been going on for five weeks. As you may know, we are concluding it with a Gesar drupa, “The Accomplishment of Gesar.”

We are practicing in a beautiful setting—Rigon Tashi Choeling, a monastery nestled against the green hills of Pharping. Chatrul Rinpoche, one of the great old masters of the Nyingma lineage, said that the hills are the eight auspicious symbols. Some of you might recall that Chatrul Rinpoche was mentioned in the memoirs of Thomas Merton during his trip to India in the 1960s. In this particular place of Pharping is one of the most sacred sites of all: where Padmasambhava meditated and manifested as Vajrakilaya before he went to Tibet. The shrine hall where we are practicing the drupa is the only shrine hall in the Himalayan region that is dedicated to the practice of Gesar.

My day here starts at around 4:00 in the morning, one of the most peaceful parts of the day, when I am able to do my early practice. Since the rest of the day involves mostly sitting, I do prostrations at this time, usually between 300-500. I also do yoga and some other exercises. I am developing a series of exercises that can be done on retreat to help the practitioner keep his or her body supple. At around 5:30 AM, I get my bucket bath. There is supposed to be hot water, but that doesn’t seem to manifest on my side of the monastery. Then I get a quick cup of tea before the first session of the day begins at 6:00. I meet His Eminence, Namkha Drimed Rinpoche and we are led into the shrine hall with gyalings, or Tibetan horns.

Upon entering into the lhakang, or shrine hall, we both do three prostrations to the three-dimensional Gesar mandala. It has four sides and contains the outer, inner, and secret mandalas of Gesar surrounded by tormas of the various deities, as well as offerings and tormas of the various protectors. The secret-most aspect of the mandala is covered by cloth.

At the ultimate level, Gesar is Samantabhadra-Vajradhara, the Primordial Rigden. At the expressive-nature level, Gesar is the embodiment of the three great bodhisattvas: Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrapani. At the embodiment level, he manifests as the enlightened warrior-king who brought enlightened society to Central Asia at a time of great turmoil. He is said to be completely inseparable from Padmasambhava and also

manifests as the twenty-fifth Rigden of Shambhala. His stories are considered to be the longest oral epic.

After prostrating, we circumambulate the mandala and sit down. They have prepared a throne for me right in front of the mandala. To my immediate left is His Eminence. To my right is Tulku Tsepa Rinpoche, an elderly, humble lama who is one of the main teachers of the Tibetan community in Boudhanath. He has a very strong connection to Gesar. Tulku Karma Shedrup, the younger brother of His Eminence, sits on the far left and often leads the chanting, as he is the expert and has an incredible voice. He is famous in the Tibetan community for his oratory skills. He is able to sing and chant from memory long sections of the Gesar epic and sadhanas.

There are other senior lamas who sit on opposing rows, followed by monks—essentially the band—who play all the musical instruments. The first section plays the cymbals, followed by those who play gyalings, then the ones who blow white conches, then those with the large, hand-held drums; next are the monks who play the dungs, the extremely long horns. Last are the monks who play the very large drums, and with the other hand, the short trumpet. Finally, at the back, there is the disciplinarian, a monk who watches everyone to make sure they are behaving.

Immediately after assembling, we begin our sadhana. Sadhana means “to accomplish.” Essentially it is a tantric ritual whereby through visualization, chanting, meditation, and mudra—or symbolic gestures—one completely embodies one’s basic goodness or buddhanature.

The ritual will take all day and go into the evening. The first session is dedicated to opening the mandala. We begin by reciting lineage chants reflecting on all the great beings who accomplished this practice and passed it on to us. We raise appreciation, devotion, faith, and a sense of gratitude for being able to do this practice. There is a recitation of the Buddha’s sutras. There is a section requesting permission from the earth and local deities to do the practice. This assures a positive and peaceful environment in which to practice. If one does not do this, sometimes the meditation becomes discursive; various obstacles can arise in the practice or various sicknesses can occur. All these rituals are done according to stylized chanting, sometimes very melodious, sometimes very descriptive, sometimes very penetrating or wrathful. The music—the ringing of the bell and drums—must be played precisely.

The electricity in Nepal has been sporadic. There is a schedule for when the lights come on, but that seems to change everyday. So occasionally we use battery-powered lamps. Occasionally, there are only the butter lamps, which make the hall more mysterious but the texts hard to read.

These periods of practice are broken up by brief tea breaks—and when I say brief, I mean brief. While we stop for a moment before we drink the tea, there is of course, a short dedication chant. There are various famous chants that have been handed down through the centuries dedicated to Gesar, to Padmasambhava, to King Trisong Detsen, to Jamgon

Mipham, to the lineage. The tea break provides an opportunity to quench the thirst and soothe the throat. The majority of the time the tea is Tibetan tea: black tea with milk, salt, and butter. Junior monks bring in large pots of it, going down the aisles and serving it to everyone.

There are generally one to two tea breaks during each session. There is usually one bathroom break per session, which lasts ten minutes.

At around 8:00 AM, we conclude the first session and it is time for breakfast. The breakfast break lasts about thirty minutes. The monks go to the dining hall. They usually have Tibetan tea, bollep (Tibetan bread), timo (steamed bun), a chili and cheese dish. Occasionally, they'll have tsampa, or roasted grain, which they mix with their tea so that it becomes a doughy substance. Usually I have some variation of eggs. Depending on how inspired my machen is, they are just boiled or sometimes made into an omelet with chilis. With breakfast I usually drink Tibetan tea. The breakfast break gives us just enough time to eat, go to the bathroom, and maybe a few moments for something else, but usually right after I finish eating, the gong begins ringing again for everyone to assemble.

We return to the shrine hall and begin the recitation session for the various meditation deities. This is the fully elaborate Gesar mandala, the visualization and practice of Gesar in all four directions, the four karmas—pacifying, magnetizing enriching, and wrathful. The chanting meditation continues with various rituals.

It has been very moving to be with His Eminence Namkha Rinpoche as he does this practice because it is part of his being, who he is, his bones. It appears that he has memorized the entire complicated sadhana—the mudras (the various gestures) and the slight tonal variations in the chanting. He does it with complete perfection and power. He is known as a tantric master, and you can see why.

This sadhana, being a generation and completion stage sadhana, is a unique mixture of spiritual practice with worldly endeavors. This practice allows for the removing of obstacles from one's spiritual practice and worldly aspirations. Since obstacles arise due to past and present karmic actions, this practice allows for the purification and dispelling of those karmic seeds, which are said to have come about from previous lifetimes and ripened in this life. These powerful sadhanas arrest those issues. At the root, one's mind should never waver from the deep understanding of the second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma, that of unfabricated emptiness and clear-light wisdom knowledge. With this sadhana, one cannot really get distracted for long; one has to remain awake, mindful, and somewhat vigilant. I like to think of it as like being in an army on the march, traversing the terrain of the mind. All of us in that shrine hall are sitting still, but mentally we are marching through this sadhana and the deep wisdom it reveals. Just like on a march, if you step aside to tie your shoelaces or pick a flower, everyone is immediately off and ahead of you.

The second session is marked by the emphasis on Dorje Tsegyal—the Indestructible Lord of Life—one of the most well-known sadhanas on Gesar, a practice made famous by Jamgon Mipham Rinpoche. Dorje Tsegyal is considered to be the main peaceful aspect of Gesar. It is an especially important practice for good life-force energy and for fulfillment and success in one's activities. His Eminence is considered by many to be the expert in accomplishment of this very powerful sadhana.

This period of practice continues till around noon, concluding with a series of protector offerings. Then there is the biggest break of the day for lunch. Usually we are out of the hall at around 12:15. The monks dart off to their rooms to grab their noontime rice and dal. I proceed to my room, where I usually have some kind of stir-fry. Then I try to get in my all-important nap, which usually lasts for twenty minutes or so, enough to make me feel rested. By 1:25, we are headed back to the shrine hall.

The sadhana continues with a series of protector practices—the ritual to remove negativity, and help in the dissolution of ego. Various elaborate tormas are offered, representing the practitioner and the release of arrogance, anger, jealousy, as well as emphasizing one's life-force energy and windhorse. Throughout the practice one continually meditates that one is no different than Gesar, complete with those enlightened qualities. There is a celebration of this fact like a feast; food and amrita are offered and consumed. The practice continues with a series of chants promising to overcome one's own negative attitudes, acknowledging or confessing. There is a brief bathroom break at 3:30.

The tea, the butter lamps on the shrine, the ritual tormas, and the flowers and other offerings, are sponsored by various individuals—sometimes laypeople, sometimes monastics. The senior monk stands in front of the assembly and reads the name of the individual who is making the offering along with their wish and intent. That person may be present; if so they make offerings to the shrine, to His Eminence and other lamas, and to myself. By doing this they make a karmic connection to the sadhana, gaining the merits of the practice, and are considered to be practicing it themselves.

This session ends with a short break at around 5:00 or 5:30. The next session continues into the evening, when the sadhana is concluded. The aspirational and longevity chants are then recited. The final chant is a very beautiful aspiration for bliss and joy for all beings—peace for the entire earth. The chant is sung slowly. It concludes the day very beautifully. There is a very settled feeling at the end of the day—a feeling of accomplishment, sacredness, and relaxation that pervades the mind.

I usually conclude my evening with a light bowl of soup. Normally, there are a few odds and ends to do; sometimes the monks have questions about the monastery or the next day's ritual. Then I am off to sleep to do it all over again the next day.

This practice continues for seven days. On the final day, the most elaborate version of the sadhana is done. In order to do that, we had to arise at 2:30 in the morning with the sadhana beginning at 3:00 and concluding eighteen hours later.

The last part of the sadhana is performed at night, outside, with all the monks and lamas wearing their ceremonial hats. A giant lhasang is conducted and there is a further ritual to remove obstacles. The whole assemblage is led by the Lingdro, or Gesar, dancers. They are male and female warriors dressed in traditional clothing, the clothing of Gesar and his enlightened court. It is a sacred dance, a deep meditation celebrating one's own basic goodness.

I was happy this year that many Shambhalians made offerings and wrote aspirations. These were read at the practice. It felt like a further coming together of our communities and I am happy to say that my wife Khandro Tseyang represented Shambhala, standing up and making the offerings to the mandala on behalf of all those who requested. I am hoping that this sadhana can become part of our Shambhala lineage practices.

Traditionally, this sadhana has been done towards the end of the year as a way to culminate the yearly cycle, removing obstacles and entering the new year with windhorse. His Eminence has been requested by many individuals to perform this sadhana, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It seems like this sadhana will be of benefit to our mandala, with the many plans we have this year.

For myself, these periods of retreat are incredibly important, a time for me to deepen and refresh. One of my kusung mentioned that he didn't realize how intense my retreats are, but I find the discipline to be very relaxing. I certainly hope that all of you can do a retreat whenever the opportunity arises.

Written following the practice of "The Accomplishment of Gesar" at the sacred place of Rigon Tashi Choeling, Pharping, Nepal, where Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, manifested as Vajrakilaya.