

TFACS Year End Report of Nyingnor (Tabea Rittgasser)

It is not possible to fully describe and express my deepest gratitude for Tsadra Foundations support of this years solitary retreat endeavour. It has deepened tremendously the bond with my beloved Guru and Yidam, the understanding of this precious Yidam practice has increased to some extent as I had wished for and somehow, even being here all alone, I never have felt that connected with all sentient beings - and that all especially thanks to your kindness!

First of all I would like to provide the information regarding the retreat place and set up which had changed due to the location shift: I am living right now in the most beautiful retreat hermitage I have ever seen. It is located in the woods of Intimanes/Dordogne, nearby three houses of Dharma practitioner, but hidden from the unpaved street. It is surrounded by a wild garden and a natural fence out of bushes and trees build up the most outer retreat boundary. And this compound has even an open meditation cave. The house itself is two-storeyed, downstairs a storage room with a fridge and above the main retreat area with one large room for mediation and a sideboard kitchen plus a bathroom. It is such a sublime and quiet place that makes it not difficult to see it as a pure realm!

Visualized in the retreat boundary are altogether six persons, respectively our wonderful Holy Masters and their supportive sangha who all made this retreat happen and keep it run: Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche and Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, John Canti (doctor), Dawa Horeau (official matters and SOS), Etienne Horeau (official matters and house maintenance) and Yeshe (main retreat helper and shopping). After I had fallen badly this summer, I have a telephone through which I can send text messages in case of serious problems and emergencies, but other than that it is not in use. Normal communication goes through the wooden box at the entrance where Yeshe places the shopping every three weeks as well.

Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche (named in short 'Rinpoche' in the following description) advised me not to disclose my yidam practice, so only Tsadra Foundation and my close samaya friends do know about this very retreat practice, but not yet my retreat helper. That's why, for the time being, I keep the name and specific practice details in this report more common.

Right before retreat start I had a sort of outer, inner and secret obstacle attack in a single day, of course on the Torma preparation day. At night I had the worst nightmare since years, got a herpes on my lips and a food poisoning plus a mirror had fallen into the bathroom sink which broke the sink and out of time pressure I left it unrepaired. Welcome to retreat...that must have been the manifestation of all my doubts and fears!

The retreat started on January, 15 2015 with an elaborate Mahakala puja, Cha Sum Torma offering and Incense puja. Afterwards all necessary retreat start rituals like invoking the 4 Great Dharma Kings and installing the retreat boundary, a special room blessing and a long Yidam puja with Tshog were performed. I am keeping with the tradition of 4 sessions a day, the first starts at 3:30h and ends at 6:30h. As next I am doing my daily sadhanas. The second session is from 8h to 11h followed by the midday break, which has developed into the activity part of the day: refreshing the offerings and cleaning the shrines, puja preparations, cooking, and either taking shower, washing, cleaning and in rare cases garden/house maintenance or in most cases reading and khora time. The third session is from 13:30h until 16:30h and includes the room blessing, long Torma offerings, elaborate prayers and a special Torma offering to the Protectors. In this very session I also perform the Yidam and Protector pujas which take by now between 3.5 to 4 hours. The evening break is mainly reserved for reading and prostrations. The last session of the day starts at 18:30h and ends at 21:30h until I proceed to the sleeping yoga.

As I have to accumulate a specific number of mantras in the course of the three years, I have a fixed number of mantras I recite each session, little more in the two morning sessions. Therefore, this year I have chanted the third part of the whole amount of mantras I need to accumulate. And as suggested by Rinpoche and this Yidams retreat guide you should concentrate on Ngoendro beside the kyerim and the minor dzogrim practices at the beginning of the retreat. Later on, when the kyerim has become more stable, you can proceed to the major dzogrim practices. The first year I followed this outline and spend simultaneously and the most time after Ngoendro on the different stages of the kyerim practice (according to H.H. Sakya Trizin I did not need to do again a full set of Ngoendro, so only a partly Ngoendro was done). And only now I get the full picture why my Root Guru H.E. Chogye Trichen Rinpoche advised so strongly to conduct this retreat in three years instead of one. Nearly the whole session would consist of mantra accumulation whereas the mantras would need to be chanted very fast. Hence there would be only little time for additional dzogrim practices plus examining the mirror of the mind with all its projections. I will draw a little on that in the following more detailed description of the past months:

January/February: Firstly I had to adapt to the retreat modus and my new living condition, but I could find back to where I had stopped last retreat without too many difficulties. Practicewise I started to spend long time recollecting the four reminders and focussed lengthly on the refuge and Vajrasattva part of the sadhana. Besides, I studied Ngoendro teachings and H.H. Sakya Trizins transcribed Yidam teachings; it has become my main encyclopedia. The first obstacle I encountered through my knee. Only two weeks after retreat start my left knee overstretched and a sort of big and uncomfortable 'ball' protruded at the back of my knee. It became difficult to walk, sit cross-legged and prostrations needed to be postponed until it was fully healed.

February/March: I continued on with focussing on the Ngoendro part of the sadhana and read the newest Yidam teaching of H.E. Chogye Trichen Rinpoche I had received from a friend - I was carried away and it had deep impact on the retreat. Rinpoche came and gave explanations on retreat in general, the four reminders, Ngoendro and this particular retreat practice, especially the vase retention. I had planned to read a few more general Buddhist teachings, but Rinpoche allowed only Yidam teachings and biographies of Holy Masters. At the end we talked about all my collected questions, he dispelled some personal doubts and solved some problems that had occurred since the last contact.

So basically the first two months I was in a state of great joy, could simply not believe my fortune to be in retreat and that all good conditions had come together so quickly. I kept and keep on thanking all and everyone in my prayers and pujas; especially all my Gurus and Lineage Gurus and their line of blessings, the whole Tsadra Foundation and Songtsen/ACEC Chanteloube, my family, especially sister and friends. But looking now back, this shower of blessings and joy was also a bit of a bribe to prepare myself for being more nakedly confronted with my ego and all its strife...as this year has become one of the most blessed, equally painfullst years since long and beside all the struggle it brought so much benefit, that I can never repay all and everyones kindness!

March/April: In the third month slowly things became a bit more difficult. With spring came the tiques, I got bitten by two and had unfortunately the symptoms of an infection. John Canti prescribed the strong antibiotic 'Doxycycline' for three weeks which weakened me. I continued on with the Yidam practice as usual, but had difficulties to start through with the mandala offering. This reminded me of the first Ngoendro retreat back in 2005. I had in mind to do 'nice and neatly' refuge, bodhicitta, prostrations and Vajrasattva in 3 months, but my Root Guru had added mandala and 'of course' none of them could be completed in time; I learnt a lot. Also slowly it dawned why H.H. Sakya Trizin had sent me back home to Germany right before the retreat, it was the first, longer time since years. Due to this time in my old, familiar surrounding I could see more clearly

to which extent I had understood my ego cycle and its habitual patterns, how much maybe has changed and, most likely, which I oversaw or did not see in the right light. Thanks to this I realized that I had not paid enough attention to one important aspect of my ego which became the starting point of diving more deeply into the wilderness of my mind...

April/May: Practicewise I kept on concentrating on the Ngoendro part of the sadhana and could finally start with prostrations. Likewise I studied my Root Gurus Yidam teachings plus a shorter biography of one Lineage Guru. To diminish the ongoing tique problem I had to do several days of hard garden work which included cutting branches of trees, bushes and grass all around the house and pathways. Rinpoche told me not to overdo it, so this kind of work will stay limited to twice a year, spring and autumn.

May/June: The practice had become more focussed and I did mainly Guruyoga beside the normal sadhana. I also performed long pujas in 'Saka dawa' like throughout the year on Buddhist festival days. I found great inspiration in the Yidam teachings of Jetsuenma Kuenzang Tendrol, the late sister of my Root Guru. The mindwork continued and I was quite shocked to see how much I had fooled myself in the past months with one aspect of my ego. When I told Rinpoche later on he was laughing and said that we are all fooling ourselves all the time, no worries! Teeth and general health problems plus the fall as described earlier made up the purification of my negative karma in the 5th month.

June/July: Practicewise I stopped officially Ngoendro, but did continue with prostrations for the sake of the vajra body. With this time visit Rinpoche gave additional Yidam instructions and a teaching on how to liberate thoughts. During the same time a stranger had entered the retreat compound through the main gate, inspected everything and even banged against my door; luckily I could hide in time. So I had been busy trying to fix the entrance and needed to put some additional signs.

July/August: In the hot summer season I began to focus more on other aspects of the Yidam practice and changed the time set of the Torma offerings as instructed by Rinpoche. Reading had started to become a little more like trying to figure a particular point out and having five different books on my lap, reading back and forth and making more notes. And as always things work together, my state of mind got tested outwardly through several incidents in a row which gave new impetus for the mindwork.

August/September: This month was very blessed as Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche came. How fortunate to have the emanation of one of your Lineage Gurus coming into your retreat! Two hours long he patiently answered all my questions, gave an explanation of the 5 skandhas, Yidam teachings, a transmission for the off-time yogas of the Yidam and much more practice advice. He also slowed me down, I had become a bit too over-ambitious with the practice which had manifested as slight lhung. Plus of course he was hinting on parts of my ego where I need to look closer. And, as he flew the next day to India, I could even send a message to H.H. Sakya Trizin! So accordingly, the kyerim practice continued a bit slower and of course I read the biography of Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche this month.

September/October: The Yidam practice got a bit stronger and more stable and I read different smaller teachings by various authors which a friend had given to me right before the retreat. Rinpoche came again, brought a teaching of H.H Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and gave an explanation of the 5 Buddha families. At the end of the summer John Canti decided to give the last shot of a vaccination cycle against a tique disease which I had started in Germany (I had meningitis as teenager). Around the same time I started to have some sort of pressure noise in my ears like 'clack-clack' when I chant mantras or sing. Luckily I could ask him about it and he gave some remedy ideas, but it could not be really resolved. So now I am living in such a quiet place

and it's noisy. But I got used to it and do more Chenrezig, only wonder where that strange karma stems from.

October/November: The Yidam practice continued without alteration and I read the book Rinpoche had brought; it is such an inspiring teaching and now the second favoured encyclopedia in my book shelf. The cutting though my ego cycle got thanks to Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche's advice and further guidance of Rinpoche a new bend. I am getting the feeling that my ego understanding has become little bit clearer and compact. But throughout the whole year there were just so many surprises, new insights and findings of blockages that needed to be cleared followed up by lots of painful, emotional purification, that I have stopped hoping for any ending and keep on wondering why I did not see it before. I just try to accept and open up to whatever comes next...so I can keep on cutting deeper and deeper. What it brought in addition and more than in other retreats before was a little more grown understanding of the general Buddhist teachings from 'inside', to see it from the purer experienced thought level, and this I fully embraced as greatest blessing.

November/December: This month I encountered serious skin problems, luckily the pharmacy could help and it is getting better. The Yidam practice went on with only little changes in focus as instructed. I did some revision on the Yidam teachings and wrote this report which was of real benefit for me as well. Thanks to this I reflected and evaluated the retreat practice and my state of mind more detailed which gave new impulses for the coming retreat time.

So all in all, beside the main practice and pujas, I tried throughout the year to keep the motivation fresh, lengthened the meditation on love, compassion and bodhicitta plus tonglen in the sadhana, and applied as much as possible the off-time yogas. The Yidam practice itself has become more stable and natural. I only need to be careful not to become over-ambitious again, only "strong will but at the same time very relaxed" is allowed according to H.H. Sakya Trizin. I have read all commentaries on the Yidam practice at least twice plus several biographies and selected teachings. My body has well adopted to the time schedule of the sessions and by now, thinking of the problems with my knee at the beginning of the retreat, I can sit very long in full lotus posture. But of course I would have wished that some things would have gone better and evolved differently as I am never really contented with myself. And as expected there was always something in obstacle form that tried to occupy either my mind or the retreat condition which was not always easy to dissolve, but more subtle than in other retreats. However, I encountered no bigger difficulties that made it impossible for me to accomplish the purpose of this grant, no lost day due to sickness or alike. For the sake of all sentient beings and as promised, I will keep on trying my very best in the coming two retreat years to draw a bit closer to the dissolution of this very defiled, illusory ego into its true nature, my beloved Yidam!

And I deeply thank Tsadra Foundation that it was possible to increase the scholarship grant from €400 to €550 per month to cover the additional costs of the retreat hermitage as asked for in my name by Etienne Horeau.

Concludingly, the scholarship grant received from Tsadra Foundation for the year 2015 was solely used for the purpose of long term contemplative retreat as outlined in the responsibility agreement contract from December 8, 2014.