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Dear Tsadra,

Here's my year end report for 2015. Basic outline of the year's schedule: January-May Ngondro (Vajrasattva, Mandala, Guru yoga, Bodhicitta, Love + Compassion), June-July Chakrasamvara, August-November 4 Kagys, December Mahamudra.

In all honesty, this has probably been the worst year of my life. But, in all honesty, it has also certainly, without doubt, been the greatest.

I started out the year at a slow and steady pace and I admit I was a little concerned about GBI's past history of retreatant dropouts. I certainly didn't want that to be me. I tried to do the best I could on the ngondro - I came into retreat from practicing with groups of Nyingma practitioners who mainly practiced Shramatha. Mindful awareness, presence, and disidentification from thought were taught as the main focus of practice. During our ngondro teachings, I noticed Drupon never once mentioned the word awareness, although he definitely mentioned the word hardship more than once.

During the ngondro I felt like I had joined the Marines. I saw some new things about myself - I didn't even know what an angry person I was until I started ngondro. I spent a lot of time wondering if maybe I got into the wrong retreat. But I also thought to myself, "don't push too hard and just get through it and it will get better afterwards."

It got worse. In March we got Chakrasamvara teachings and I hit a low point. We did the teachings in about two - three days - probably about ten hours total -

which included translation time and questions (we use a translator because no retreatants speak Tibetan and Drupön doesn't speak English) and half of the teaching was on a much abbreviated and unusable text because the GBI office had not yet printed copies of the sadhana we were to actually use in practice.

To me, it felt like this: Drupön and the translator flew in, did Chakrasamvara in three days, Four Kayas in ~~two~~ days, did a brief empowerment for a morning, and then flew out. In my eyes, it was the same watered-down, inauthentic Tantra teaching given to every beginner at nearly every center in the Western World - no explanation or instruction in any visualization sequences or three absorptions, nothing about the realization of shunyata as a prerequisite for practice, no mention of the transformation of masculine sexual energy, no mention of Trulkhor, vase breathing or tummo, no introduction to the mandala, and so on. All we got was a rushed teaching on an abbreviated sadhana with brief mention of the three aspects - Clarity of form, recollecting the purity, and divine pride, a number of recitations to accumulate, and page turning instructions.

The way we "learned" it, the whole essence is taken out and we turn it into a ngondro-type practice. And then Drupön left. The teaching was in late March and I had just started Bodhicitta prostrations - we weren't even planning to start Chakrasamvara until June and Four Kayas until August - we had to do the teachings in March because Drupön and the translator are rarely here. Altogether in 2015, Drupön with translator have been here and accessible for about 14 days; about five days in March, one day for questions in October, and seven days for Mahamudra in November.

Aside from those days, Drapön himself has probably been here about eight weeks at various times throughout the year.

It was a rough two weeks for me after the teaching. I became so depressed and negative that there were some days I couldn't do the prostrations because my mind began to be so overwhelmingly negative. I felt really hurt by the apparent lack of the teaching. I felt let down.

I sat in Shamatha and tried as best I could to disidentify from the negative voice in my head. After some days I felt I just had to move on and do the best I could with what I was given.

I finished ngondro and started Chakrasamvara. Around that time someone gave me a copy of the book 'The Power and the Pain' by Andrew Holecek and that really changed everything for me.

It really introduced to me a proper view on hardship and the necessity to endure the emotional and physical traumas I was beginning to experience. Chakrasamvara was long hours - pain in my legs, sore throat from mantra recitation, lack of sleep - understanding how to suffer consciously and understand why we do it really set me on a better path.

I wanted to stop doing the bare minimum and really do all that I could. I did - and the next five months really became filled with a lot of pain.

It hurt. The intense Arizona heat, sitting through knee and leg pain, old lady retreatants writing me copious amounts of gratuitous notes, no retreat master to make sure I'm doing the right things. I cried a lot. From June to November I cried more than I had in the entire rest of my life. No doubt. I thought it was strange when Garchen Rinpoche gave us retreatants three handkerchiefs as a little gift, but there were days when three

handkerchiefs were not enough. I cried from places so deep I didn't even know they were there.

It hurt bad, but it felt cathartic. I could be in so much body pain, or get so angry and judgemental, and would try to bring awareness to it, to remain present.

The feelings would change and I would cry deeply and it felt like being washed. Sometimes a wisdom voice would follow - like someone saying - "you don't need to be angry about that anymore - here's how not to be."

November came and went and we started Mahamudra, which for me is really just Shamatha. The focus now is on awareness and not accumulations and so much pain and hardship. I sit in shorter sessions with awareness - there's less leg pain and more mental control so I don't get so overwhelmed by emotions - I feel much more peaceful currently. We'll do

Mahamudra until February and then move on.

All in all it's been a hell of a year. I can remember some of the conceptual patterns, storylines, and emotional outbursts that I've encountered over the past year. In retrospect, some seem hilariously absurd. Some I am still working on. There is no doubt in my mind that a good deal of these obscurations have been purified and released during my time here in retreat. The person I was before retreat, my life before retreat - seems like it was lifetimes ago, like a dream from a different world. I can barely identify with that person, or that life, anymore.

I look forward to the year ahead. As far as Tsadra, I don't know how to thank you enough. You've changed my life. I hope I can make you proud one day and return the favor.

I think last year you mentioned you also

wanted my daily schedule, which is generally
3-6 1st session, 6-7 breakfast, 7-10 2nd session, 10-11 break,
11:30-2:30 3rd session, 2:30-3:30 lunch/dinner,
4:30-7:30 4th session, 7:30-8:30 leftover obligations like
temple duty, getting hot water, etc 8:30-2:30 Sleep.

This has mostly been applicable for ngondro and
Four Kagyas - Chakrasamvara was constant, there are no breaks
apart from eating, tea, & sleeping. In Shunyata, sessions are
shorter and frequent throughout the day but the general
timeline is the same.

Much love,

Kevin