

## 2014 Year End Report for David Ledebour

*"Well begun is half done." - Aristotle*

The image that comes to mind to describe this first 8 months of my retreat is that of a space ship – “Yogi 1”. There were many preparations prior to launch, a great thrust of effort required to boost the ship out of earth’s gravitational field, a “shakedown” period of setting up systems and routine, occasionally checking in with mission control. After this time of earth orbit our Dharmanaut is primed to head into the deep space of the mind on his mission. All systems are “go”.

### **The Location:**

I had the good fortune to find an extremely supportive location for retreat. I am living at the “Great Space Center”, 400+ acres of land owned by the granddaughter of Dr. Franklin Merrell-Wolf, or “Yogi Woolf” as his students called him. A fascinating man and one of the first Americans to seriously pursue a path of “non-dual” meditation, Dr. Woolf lived and taught here for decades until his death in 1985. The land is 10 miles from Lone Pine, California, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. For more information see <http://www.franklinmerrell-wolff.com/educate/the-great-space-center/>

Doroethy and Ron Leonard, the owners of the property are very supportive, very happy that I am in retreat here. They have hosted other yogis before, including Alan Wallace who also taught here several times. They are also very well boundaried: leaving me to my practice unless there is a practical need to communicate.

I arrived here in the middle of April to prepare. I was given a tiny trailer on a piece of land near the lower edge of the property to use. There were ongoing problems with the trailer, which had not been used for 5-10 years. It was tilting over to one side, no toilet or running water, what I had thought was a refrigerator was just an insulated box, the propane stove had a leak that could lead to an explosion, the local raccoon had made a nest under the trailer which it occupied noisily each night and a colony of ants was living under one corner. But other than that, it was great!

Other tasks that needed to be done were: buy and set up a smaller solar system to charge my cell phone and laptop, change my cell phone provider as my current one had no coverage, register with the local county administration to move my health coverage to Lone Pine, set up a new bank account as my current bank had no offices within 100 miles and find where I could shop for healthy food, etc. Lone Pine is small and isolated and 55 miles from the nearest town and also in a part of California far from my usual home and on the edge of the Mojave desert so the climate is quite different than what I’m used to.

I found that I loved Lone Pine, loved the land I was on and felt that each of these tasks was intimately connected with my retreat and practice. I am someone who has never been "handy" or good at fixing things, etc. Each task was difficult enough to be frustrating but simple enough for me to take care of and I dealt with each of them as they arose.

I stayed in the little trailer for two months, until the unstoppable invasions of ants combined with the potentially deadly propane stove leak led me to ask Dorothy if I could move into the mobile home at the upper edge of the property. Our original plan had been that I use the small trailer in the summers and the mobile home in the fall, winter, and spring but now I will be in the mobile home year round – leaving only for 2 one week periods each summer when she hosts large gatherings.

My current hermitage is like a slice of Dewa Chen in comparison with the little trailer. There is a living room for practice, full kitchen with stove and refrigerator, hot and cold running water, a heater and toilet and a comfortable bedroom. More isolated, it has excellent spacious view to the east across the valley and the Sierras directly behind to the west.

In my pre-retreat interview I said my weakest ability in retreat was cooking. So I have been happy to come up with a diet that is healthy and simple.

### **The Practice:**

I began formal retreat on May 1<sup>st</sup>, which seemed appropriate, sacred as it is to both Druids and Socialists. As I mentioned in my application I am a student of Lama Drimed Norbu, a lineage holder of Chagdud Rinpoche. I was able to contact him by phone for guidance throughout the year. In his lineage long retreats are always done solo and he has guided many students in retreat so I feel great confidence in his knowledge in this regard. He gave direct and helpful advice for each of my questions.

For the first month I began each day by reading a section from books about great lamas. These were "Blazing Splendor" by Tulku Urgyen, "Lord of the Dance" by my root lama Chagdud Rinpoche, and "Masters of Meditation and Miracles" by Tulku Thondup. I found these stories incredibly moving and inspiring - each day brought tears as I read.

My formal practice was the Ngöndro of the Chetsun Nyingtik. The CN Ngondro is to be done as a sadhana rather than focusing on first on one accumulation then moving to the next. So I did one session each day spread out over 4 thuns. Lama Drimed had specifically instructed me not to follow a strict time based schedule, rather to connect with the natural time of the sun, the moon, the weather and natural world. So I did not set an alarm clock but woke up following my body's rhythm. Then all day I would practice, stopping for breakfast in the late morning, a second meal in late afternoon and a vigorous walk each evening. Each day I averaged 12 hours of

practice, ending with the CN protectors and Ekajati practice, dedication, aspiration and prayers.

Despite taking great care to start slowly and only gradually increase the number of prostrations, after a few weeks I began to have serious knee pain in my left knee. Both knees have been problematic most of my adult life due to deformities and despite surgery on my left knee 2 years ago I found myself limping and in pain. Lama Drimed released me from this accumulation. (I have done well over 100,000 prostrations in the past so felt OK about this)

Every few days my practice would be interrupted by one of the many problems with the trailer, the water line, keeping food cold, etc. and I would have to make repairs or improvise solutions. Often this involved a trip to the local hardware store in Lone Pine. I found this very frustrating but realized this was a sort of Ngöndro in itself and quite purifying. I had consulted an intuitive reader before the retreat and she had told me Ekajati would be very important and would be giving me teachings related to my body and the physical world. I felt all of these problems to be part of her teachings.

I completed the Ngöndro in 6 months, from May to the end of October. During this time I had Giardia, facial numbness and swelling, an eye infection and a collision in town that damaged my car. I felt each of these were a sign of purification. I had many afflictive emotions arise and subside, including especially frustration and anger. I also began to notice love and compassion arising spontaneously - especially noticeable on trips to town for groceries when I spoke with the clerks in the stores. I lost stress related weight and an acid reflux problem resolved itself. In reflecting on it I began to see that each trauma in my life had been a gift and each misstep been some kind of guidance - so the practice was changing my view of the past as well.

After finishing the Ngöndro I spoke with Lama Drimed and described these and other experiences I had had and changes that had occurred. He said that these were good signs and that the practice had been effective. (One interesting one was I was moved to give away many special objects of dharma, art, etc. that I had had a long time.)

In the course of the Ngöndro I saw just how unsteady my attention was, how out of control my mind and energies were. Despite my best intentions and efforts my mind would wander from the visualizations, prayers, etc. As a result of this I decided to devote at least November and December of this year mainly to Shamatha practice, with some time each day to continue the CN sadhana.

My main instruction in Shamatha has come from books and recordings of Alan Wallace, who specializes in this teaching. Interestingly enough, Dorothy Leonard told me that he himself did a 9-month retreat in my current hermitage. In the course of engaging Shamatha intensively I have also used guided meditations by Reginald Ray, called "Your Breathing Body". For me these seem designed to address the issue

of our/my general dis-embodiedness. And this in turn is connected in my case with a childhood history of trauma. I've done a large amount of psychotherapy dealing with my biographical issues so I don't feel overwhelmed by any material that has arisen in retreat. Rather it is fruitful, powerful and exciting to be using various Buddhist yogic practices that address subtler levels of the energies of self, contraction, and disconnection and that then continue along the spectrum of experience to insight and liberation. Again for me Ekajati feels to be a powerful teacher and support in the body, my relationship with being here on earth, powerful emotions and the great space of awareness and clarity.

After this time focusing on Shamatha I notice some real progress. There is a much greater clarity and stability of attention and a deeper quiet even in post-meditation. Perhaps related to this I recently had the first lucid dream of the retreat. I now find myself naturally waking up at 4-5 AM and my energy is becoming increasingly abundant.

I rise each day happy and excited to be in retreat so supported in so many inner and outer ways. All I want to do each day is practice and it is a joy to be able to do so. Still each day I am humbled by my obscurations and small capacities. My deep prayer is to attain enough wisdom, compassion and skillful means to be able to be of deepest service to my friends, family and all beings. Despite this being considered a long retreat I feel the press of time. As Lama Drimed tells me, "We have a lot less time than we think." So onward!

### **Guidance:**

I have been in contact with Lama Drimed by telephone as needed. I have traveled twice to see him in the SF Bay Area. The first visit I also was part of a small group of Lama Drimed's students who gathered at Lama Pema Dorje's temple in Oakland. We received the empowerment of The Rigdzin Srogdrub Tsalung of Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé. After completing the required accumulations we will gather sometime next year for Tsalung retreat. Despite my age (55 next spring) and condition of my knees I hope to make a deep connection with this practice. We shall see... ☺ I have always felt a strong connection to yoga in general and especially Tsalung so I'm hopeful. At the very least there will be auspicious connections planted.

After completing Ngondro in October I traveled to see Lama Drimed a second time to check in and receive more teachings on the CN as well as guidance on body awareness practices, health issues and general encouragement.

At my Lama's instruction I have also been doing some reading of Longchenpa's "The Precious Treasury of the Way of Abiding" as well as listening to recordings of Lama Drimed's teachings on CN from a retreat I attended last year.

In early January I will receive more teachings from Lama Drimed in the cycle of Chetsun Nyingtig

## **Time Away**

During the early summer I spent 2 days working with volunteers to re-roof "The Ashrama", a historic stone structure build by Dr. Woolf and his students starting in 1930. This was where his group gathered each summer to work and practice together. (See <http://www.franklinmerrell-wolff.com/educate/ashrama/> ) After checking with Lama Drimed I decided to take time out from Ngondro to help out.

There were 2 one week periods during the summer when by prearrangement I had to leave the mobile home to make room for participants in workshops the Leonard's lead each year. (This was the reason I originally was to use the small trailer during the summers.) I decided being in the wilderness would be the least disruptive and most affordable alternative. So each time I went backpacking in the mountains nearby. My formal practice was limited to morning and evening thuns. I spent each day hiking (and most nights shivering! It was cold...) For me this was a powerful time to experience nature as Guru and to lean into the lifestyle of the yogis of India and Tibet. (And be inspired to master tummo!) Lama Drimed has encouraged me to practice in nature each day but outside of those 2 weeks I have done all my practice indoors so far.

Please let me know if you would like any reimbursement for these times.

## **Summary:**

The location and circumstances posed challenges but the conditions now are close to ideal. My hermitage is quiet, peaceful and inspiring. I am in good health and excellent spirits. I have gone through the process of letting go of my friends, family and the outside world and my retreat boundaries are well defined. I am now in a longer solitary retreat than I've ever done and feel grounded and clear – happier than I have every felt.

I have completed the preliminary practices of the Chetsun Nyingtig cycle to my teacher's satisfaction. There has been purification on many levels and I feel a strong sense of renunciation and inspiration to practice for all beings. My confidence in myself, my teacher and the teachings have deepened. I feel more and more connected with the lineage of Chagdud Rinpoche, the Chetsun Nyingtig, the Great Perfection and of the Buddha. My stability of attention, compassion and loving kindness towards self and others have all grown. Just before coming to Lone Pine I had a dream and was given the title of a book. Recently I felt spontaneous poems arising (and vanishing, alas..) Perhaps these are the glimmerings of some writing that may appear.

As "Yogi 1" heads out deeper to the stars I have such amazement at the level of connection and support I feel in this journey. Not alone and separate and lost, but

one with all and guided in countless caring ways. This itself so directly contradicts my habitual neurotic view that it seems to be a great teaching and fruition. Deep blessing indeed.

I bow with deep gratitude towards the members of the Tsadra Foundation for making this retreat possible. I will continue to do my best.

David Ledebour

December 19, 2014