

The key to Dzogchen is the Ngondro, Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin says

written by Jitka Polanská

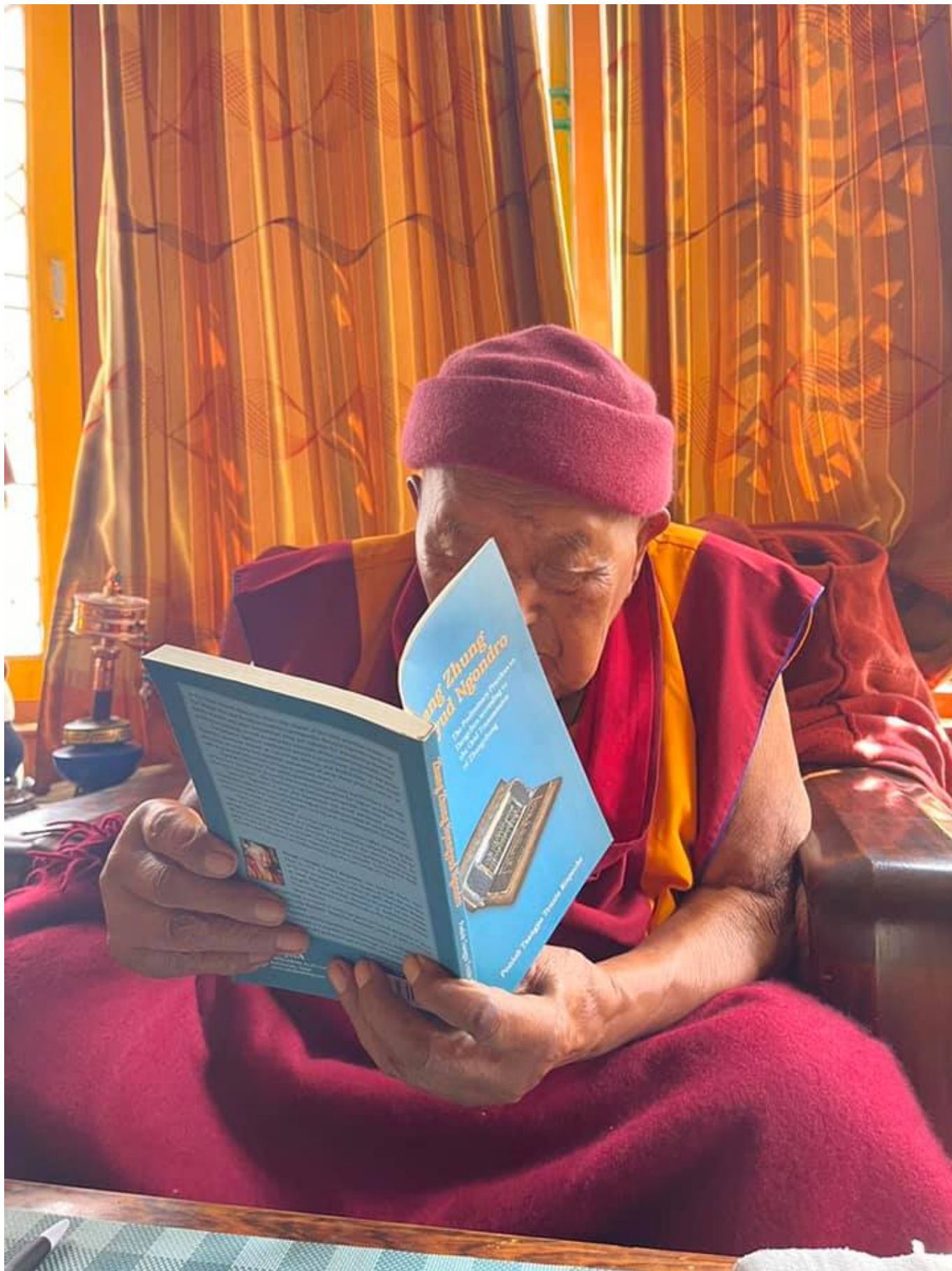


“Gyalwa Chaktri is an experiential text. Its author, Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung, describes stages in his own practice which led him to a full realization - and the manual begins with the *Ngondro*,” Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche says, to emphasize the importance of the preliminary practices in Dzogchen. Gideon Makin, the editor of Rinpoche’s book about the preliminary practices published last year by Vajra books, kindly agreed to present our questions about the *Ngondro* to Rinpoche on the occasion of his teaching at Shenten in May 2022. Khenpo Gelek Jinpa kindly agreed to be a translator of the interview.

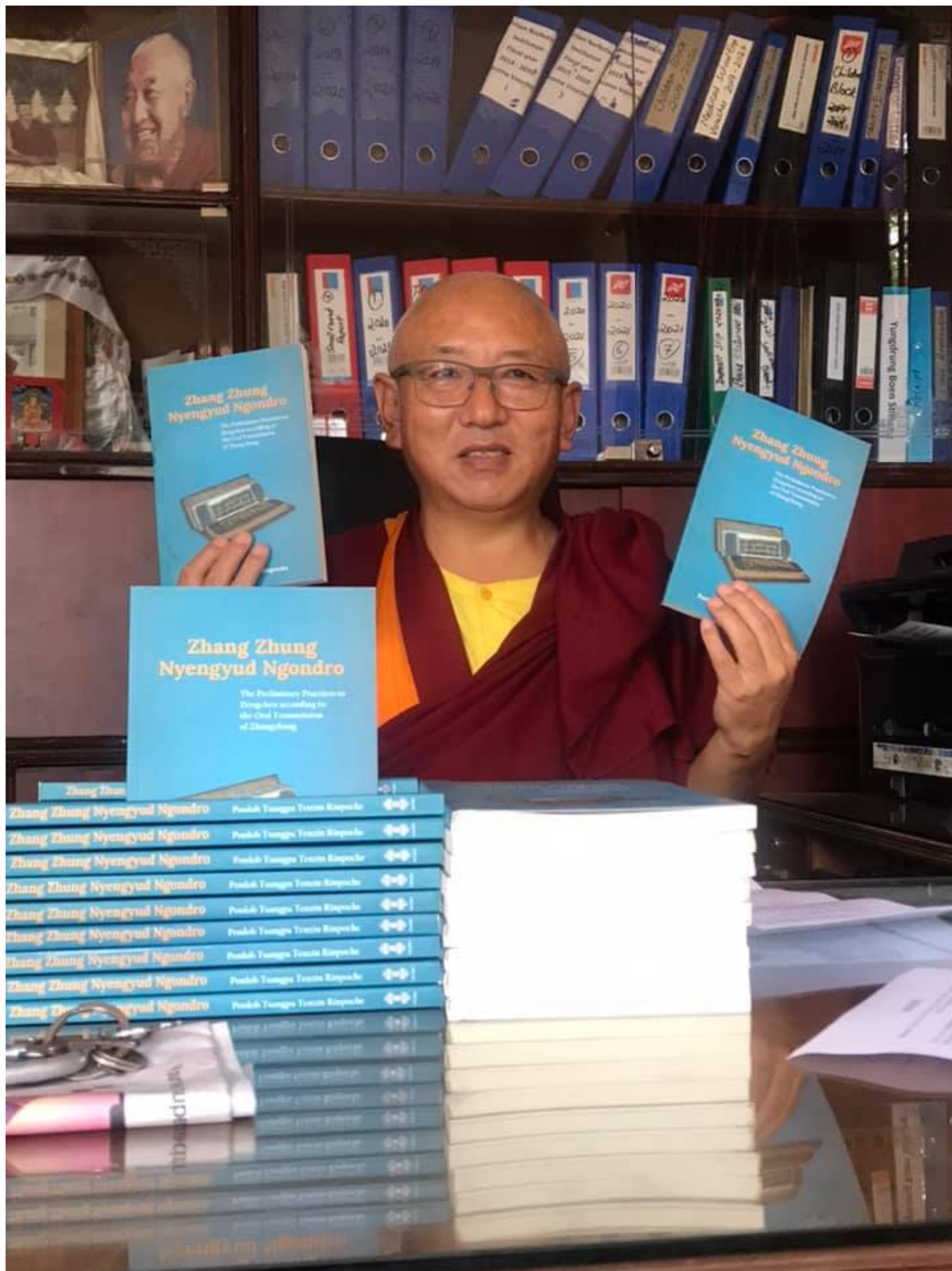
Dzogchen teaching says that the Dzogchen meditation on the natural state is the most powerful way to purify one’s mind and to remove afflictive emotions. It is said to be one medicine for one hundred diseases. Rinpoche, how would you explain to the Western students of Dzogchen that even if this is true, the preliminary practices should not be neglected? To them, they might seem less effective and harder to do.

Yes, the Western students sometimes come to me and say that they do not like the *Ngondro* much and do not find the will to practice it. They love Dzogchen, they say, but they do not like the

Ngondro. This attitude is mistaken. In Dzogchen, there are three different categories of practitioners, depending on their capacity: practitioners of the highest capacity, of the medium capacity and of the least capacity. Those who fall in the first and second class do not need to practice the *Ngondro*. But those practitioners are rare, among one thousand people you can find not more than one. The vast majority of practitioners fall into third class and need the preliminary practices which are the key to the Dzogchen practice. *Ngondro* is like a pot which contains an essence – the Dzogchen practice. It is like a foundation of the house. *Ngondro* is very, very important.



Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche with the book by Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin



Photos: Vajra Books

Gyalwa Chaktri, the commentary and practice manual of Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyud Dzogchen cycle,

was based on the author's experience with the Dzogchen practice. It is not an intellectual construction, it is an experiential text, and it begins with the *Ngondro*. After practicing it, the realization of Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung developed and he moved to the practice of the fixation of the mind. After mastering it, he moved to the practice of *Tregcho*, and finally, he practiced *Thogal*. He built his realization gradually and in this way he reached his result. That's why I really felt it was important to start my teaching in the West with *Ngondro*, and I am very happy that the teaching was transcribed and made into a book released by Vajra books. After it was published I received messages from the Western students saying to me that they found the book very interesting and that it made them realize the importance of the preliminary practices. I am thankful to the people who made this possible, Sangmo Yangri who translated it and Gideon Makin who edited it.

When do the monks do their *Ngondro*, at the monastery? They are usually very busy with their studies. Are they given a period of time for it? And is it a condition for being introduced to the main practice?

At the monastery, there are two groups of monks and two courses of studies: some monks study at the *Gomdra*, the meditation school, and the others study philosophy, at the Dialectic school, the *Shedra*. While *Gomdra* is experiential, the students of the Dialectical School start with Sutric philosophical texts, cosmology and close subjects, and then continue with the *Vinaya* - a monastic code of conduct. They also study poetry and master various rituals, over ten years of studies. In the eleventh year, before entering into the class of tantric studies, they have a fifty day retreat during which they are supposed to complete their *Ngondro*. They are not allowed to leave the monastery in this period and are encouraged to practice *Ngondro* intensively, which means to accumulate one hundred thousand repetitions of each of the nine practices. Only then are they introduced to the natural state and receive the teachings on tantra and Dzogchen which follow. The complete curriculum of studies lasts thirteen years and for some students even much longer.

Also, the students of *Gomdra* have to complete the *Ngondro*, during a four year program. Usually they are supposed to dedicate one hour a day to it, as their first activity of the day, very early in the morning. The monks receive instructions and recommendations of Yongdzin Rinpoche who always stresses the importance of the *Ngondro* to them. If you want really to understand Dzogchen, you have to go through the *Ngondro*, he says to them.

Rinpoche, if it is comfortable for you, please share with us how you approached the preliminary practices and what kind of benefits you noticed.

I did my *Ngondro* when I was eighteen years old and I followed the text of Kalung Gyatso of Shardza Rinpoche. It is a commentary of the Atri Dzogchen Cycle dedicated to *Ngondro*. And I definitely felt the impact of the practices like contemplation on impermanence or Bodhicitta on my mind. My mind was really changed, it developed devotion and trust in the teaching. The practice has a very positive effect on the mind, without any doubt.

What are you in charge for as the head teacher of the monastery?

Generally speaking, I am responsible for the education of the monks of the Dialectic school, and specifically I focus on teaching higher classes of the thirteen-year curriculum, I teach the subjects that come in the eleventh, twelfth and the thirteenth year of the studies. Monks study in different classes and I teach each group for one hour a day, which is usually three hours a day, in the morning. No tea break between the classes (Rinpoche smiles).



Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche at Shenten Dargye Ling, May 2022. Photo: Christophe Moulin

What is the schedule of the monks? How many hours a day do they receive the teaching?

Usually, the monks start their day at around seven o'clock in the morning. Their schedule includes

classes in philosophy, personal studies and debates till lunch. At three thirty they continue with other subjects, like poetry, for example, and they again practice philosophical debating. If they have no group program they are supposed to study or accumulate *Ngondro* repetitions.

For how long do the monks study each subject?

Usually for one year.

Do you also give some teachings to Tibetans who are not monks? If so, what kind of teaching do they receive and in which way?

Yes, Tibetan lay people come to the monastery on some occasions like, for example, the anniversary of the birthday of Tonpa Shenrab, and on that occasion I give them teachings, usually about the benefits of the spiritual practice, compassion, Bodhicitta, accumulation of virtues and so on.

Do you adapt the content or the style of the teaching to the lay practitioners or do you teach them in the same way as you teach monks?

The style is a bit different. With monks, the emphasis is more on philosophical reasoning. With lay people we do not need to go into these complicated things and teaching can be more direct. Also, of course it depends on whether the people I teach speak Tibetan. If they do not, I have to fill some language gap and the teaching cannot be exactly the same as when I speak to Tibetans public.

In 2020 and 2021 you could not come to Shenten due to the pandemic and instead, as did other teachers, gave your teachings online. How did you feel about it?

At the beginning, before the teaching on zoom began, I thought it would be really strange, and funny, because I was supposed to talk to people while there was nobody in the room. But when I started, surprisingly, I felt the same as usual. As if there was no difference.

Did the covid lockdowns change habits and routines in the monastery?

Monks could not go to Kathmandu due to the lockdowns. The monastery checked quite strictly, at the gate, to see that nobody goes out and so we were quite isolated from the disease and the monks focused on their studies more than usual. We kept teaching classes as usual but in general we taught more intensively, because there were less days off and no possibility of leaving on days off. I think that senior monks, at least some, appreciated that they could go deeper into their studies, with less distractions, while younger monks were more annoyed with the situation because they would have liked to have some distractions outside the monastery.

You have been coming to Shenten since 2014, with the mentioned two-year break. Is there something you like in particular about being at Shenten? And is there something that you miss, from your life in the monastery, during those visits?

What I like a lot about Shenten is that it is a very peaceful place. Kathmandu is a very noisy city and the monastery is a very lively, compared to it Shenten is an oasis of calmness and stillness. When I am in Shenten I always think: this place is really great for meditation. And I do not miss anything.

What are your other plans while being in Europe? Which places and countries are you planning to teach?

In the Netherlands, there is my teaching organized by the Tapihritsa center. I will then go to Poland, to Chamma Ling, and after that there is an invitation from Yeshe Sal Ling in Austria. After

that, I will be going back to France, for a teaching in Marseille, then I will go to Paris, for the last teaching before returning to Triten Norbutse.

If you were completely free to go to any place, what would you like to see, in Europe?

I do not have any particular wish to go anywhere, to a particular place, also because I do not know much about Europe, its history, and about what are the important places to visit. Usually I travel for teaching. It is like at Shenten. I do not know places around Shenten either. It's the same when I go to other countries. I do not usually travel around, so I do not know what I'm missing (Rinpoche smiles).

Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche is the head teacher (Ponlop) of the Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, founded by his master, Yongdzin Rinpoche. There, day by day, Ponlob Rinpoche truly embodies Yongdzin Rinpoche's spirit and values, dedicating himself fully to the education of "his monks," as he calls the students of the Yungdrung Bon Academy at the monastery. His first visit to Shenten Dargye Ling (and the West) took place in 2014. Since then, Ponlob Rinpoche has returned every year - with the exception of 2020 and 2021 - and almost immediately, he earned the deep affection and respect of the western Bon students, who praise him for his pure, humble conduct and his extraordinary teaching skills.



Ponlob Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche in his home monastery Triten Norbutse in Kathmandu, Nepal.
Photo: Jitka Polanska

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Anna, the onsite manager: We threw ourselves into work

written by Jitka Polanská



Anna Dziatko came to Shenten Dargye Ling in August 2020, directly from Kathmandu where she was stuck for six month due to the pandemic. In January 2021, she officially took on the position of onsite manager of Shenten Dargye Ling. What does she do, day by day?

What is a typical day of the onsite manager at Shenten Dargye Ling?

I usually wake up around six thirty every morning. After breakfast, I open the office to check and answer emails, but sometimes I can only manage during the weekends. In the mornings I often work in the chateau, as there is always something to do; cleaning, and arranging things. Sometimes I go

out for the shopping, other times I help in the garden. In short, I do whatever is needed for general maintenance of the centre, which comprises many unexpected things, as when something gets broken and we need to fix it. The biggest problem of this kind was when our machines for cutting grass broke, first the big one and then the small one too. It was a small crisis. We have managed till now with the small one which we repaired and also a neighbor helps us, but I think we need to invest in a professional mower very soon.

Back to my regular duties. I also take care of people who are in the dark retreat. When our cook, Marilyn, is not here, I cook for them. I also welcome our many visitors, and as a member of the board of the Congregation, I participate in many tasks of the administration of Shenten.

From September to November, you were also assisting the participants of the Gomdra. It is a 4 year intensive meditation course that lasts 70 days each year. Your daily routine must have been a bit different in that period, didn't it?

Gomdra was the first important event on the Shenten site since I took on my current position. It was a true challenge for me. We finished all the preparations just a week before people arrived. Then, I worked in the kitchen in the morning, helping the cook to prepare, did the shopping, did laundry and was available for whatever were the needs of the participants. I was very busy, from the morning to the evening.

On the outside, Shenten keeps the look of a typical French chateau, but inside, it takes on the aspect of a Tibetan monastery, with typically red doors, yellow walls and blue ceilings. Lots of painting of has been done, lately, hasn't it?

Yes, and I think that the new colors have given the rooms some warmth. Originally, we thought to paint only one side of the wing of the castle and leave the other side for the following year, but once we started, the energy and enthusiasm of the crew led by Khenpo Gelek were great and we could not stop, so we went on and on. Now, only one room is left to be finished; the rest are completed. We have also painted almost all the rooms in the Pavilion. A new office of the Congregation was also created.. We also completed the office of the Association, next to the entrance to the chateau. As many people know, Shenten is managed by these two entities, which are, as Khenpo Gelek says, two bodies with one heart. In addition we also created a new room for Khenchen Rinpoche who moved from his former house to the lamas's wing of the Chateau. We also replaced the lights of the corridors and in the bathrooms with LED neon ones with the timer. A new handicap access ramp was also built at the entrance of the chateau.

I see lots of furniture that was not here before... How did you get it?

Some people from the neighborhood donated quality furniture in massive wood and we found out that we can find more of it at an affordable price. The taste of French people has changed, and many do not want to keep classical furniture in their houses anymore. You can now find a bedside table in wood and marble for five euro and sometimes even less!



You arrived to Shenten directly from Kathmandu. Hundreds of westerners traveled there for the ceremonies in the monastery which took place in January and February in 2020. However, you stayed until August, and without planning it, right?

Yes, I arrived on January 7th and I was scheduled to leave March 13th. But I could not. My flight was from New Delhi in India. However, they closed the borders for French citizens that day and I could not board any plane from Kathmandu to India. Three days later Nepal also closed its borders and one week later they ordered a lockdown. Two weeks later we knew that we could leave with a charter flight organized by the Nepali government, but it was quite expensive. Since I did not have to really hurry, I decided to stay and wait. And I stayed until the August 29th. Actually, it was a wonderful period of my life. I was allowed to stay in the monastery guesthouse and I spent all my time there or in the monastery. I could not go to the city and the monastery had isolated itself. I took my food in the guesthouse and sometimes in the monastery. Once or twice a week we, a tiny group of people who stayed, received a teaching from Khenchen Tenpa Yundgrung Rinpoche. I also helped in the garden of the medical school of the monastery. Along with five young girls, students of the school, I went there every day around twelve o' clock for four months. I learned Tibetan, I assisted in the monastery rituals, and did lots of meditation. With one Tibetan nun, we met together for meditation every morning and every evening on the guesthouse roof.

Anna, how did you met Yungdrung Bon tradition and when did you come to Shenten for the first time?

I lived in Guadeloupe before, with my two children. I came to the island when I was nineteen years old. I have always been sensitive to my spiritual side, but I did not belong to any specific tradition.

Then, five years ago I had an inner experience which brought me to look for Yungdrung Bon. A word was repeatedly coming to my mind which I did not know, but I found out later that it was the name of the founder of this spiritual tradition, Tonpa Shenrab. I was searching on the internet, but I did not find anything at first, then I tried to spell it in a different ways and that time I got closer. Searching again I found Yongdzin Rinpoche's photo and I felt a strong connection, but when I saw he was in Nepal, I gave up, and did not think I could travel that far. However, these feelings remained within me and I started to search again to see if perhaps there were teachers of Yongdzin Rinpoche's tradition in France. I came across a web site where Bonpo lamas teaching in the west were listed. I contacted Geshe Lhundup from Paris, it was in 2017. In 2018 in May I came in Paris and I met him. Later I heard from him about the upcoming ceremony of DUTRISU being held at Shenten in the autumn of the year. I went for the first time to Shenten for this event. Some days later I took refuge with Yongdzin Rinpoche, on the day of the anniversary of parinirvana of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab.

Do you to know who is in the teams administrating Shenten Dargye Ling? You will find their names [HERE](#).