Khenpo Gelek Jinpa: Finally we met again here, at Shenten

written by Jitka Polanská

For the past two years, Shenten Dargye Ling has not hosted any events for the public. Nevertheless the monks and the lay people, who live onsite, have continued to be active there during this time. Lots of work was done and now, the first onsite retreat has finally taken place. "I received lots of messages during these times when the coronavirus hits the planet in all ten directions," Khenpo Gelek Jinpa says. "People were telling me about how much they missed Shenten. So, even if the coronavirus was still with us, we organized our first onsite teaching, and it went well, although we had to face some complications too," he says.

Last April, Shenten hosted the first onsite retreat open to the public after two years. How did it go?

We decided to try and organize the teaching traditionally held in April by Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, even if the pandemic was not yet over. We have had many people contacting us and saying how much they miss Shenten and the real in person meetings with teachers. We restricted the capacity of the retreat to forty people, the number we can handle with some social distancing. In the end, there were around thirty people all together. The teaching was wonderful, Shenten was shining in the sunny weather. We prayed constantly for favorable conditions here and

in the world.

But then, on the fifth day of the retreat, one person resulted positive with covid.

Yes, the moment we found out that was stressful. But then we acted and took measures that allowed us to continue. We isolated the sick person, wore masks in the gompa and in general inside, and kept a safe distance from each other. The nice weather allowed us to be outside as much as possible, in the open air, we ate outside… Even with all these limitations the retreat was wonderful, full of light, and our spirits were high. But, of course, we need to think about what to do in the future to avoid this situation from repeating itself. Later on, when they got home, a few more people tested positive, fortunately with mild symptoms. Anyway, this is a strong signal for us that the for the next onsite teaching with Ponlop Rinpoche we will need to do maximum to protect him and the participants.

From March 2020 until March 2022, Shenten was closed to the public, except for the Gomdra meditation program which did take place onsite in autumn of 2021 (but not in 2020). Online teaching was set up and served as a replacement of meeting face to face at Shenten. Did you support the idea of going online?

I am not an online guy (laughing), and I was hesitating at the beginning whether it is right or not to give teachings online. However, it seemed we had no other choice. Some people were really isolated in their homes, without many connections to others. Some people were sick, not only with covid, some had cancer and doctors told them they were close to death. We felt we needed to do something for them. And so, we started the daily sessions and soon, they became the highlight of the day for many of the participants; including myself. And later, when I saw Khenpo Rinpoche giving online teaching and also Yongdzin Rinpoche giving online messages to our sangha, I felt there is a strong connection, even over physical distance, there is a feeling of interaction, of closeness, through the use of the internet. When I experienced this, I changed my mind and became more open to the online teachings.

You spent almost two years secluded at Shenten. Lots of work has been done in that time, is it right?

Yes, we did lots of cleaning and painting and restructuring in 2020 and 2021. Almost every day myself and our fellow Shenten monks did manual work. We painted guest rooms, the corridor in the pavillon and we renovated the registration office in the Castle. Also, a new room for Khenchen Rinpoche was created in the Castle, very nicely, and he has now moved there from his previous house. We also have started a larger renovation project at the Longère, the building located alongside of the Castle and next to the dining hall. It was absolutely necessary to begin this renovation to repair and fortify its walls. Otherwise the building would have collapsed within two to three years. The roots from the trees behind the building reached into the walls and pipes and had to be removed. The rain gutters, sewage systems and water pipes needed to be replaced. We had to hire professional people with special skills to do the most demanding work. This outside works cost have been about 20 000 EUR. Fortunately, Shenten gained some money with the online teaching, but definitely not as much as will be needed.

Once the building is renovated, what do you plan to use it for?

In the past, one of the rooms in this building was used by Yongdzin Rinpoche for interviews. He usually went there after lunch, during the summer retreats. In another room there is a kind of storage of bikes, old chairs… These two rooms could be suitable for long-term retreats. There is a place for a bathroom and a small kitchen, next to them, for those who want to make their own food.

Khenpo Rinpoche' s previous house can be also be rearranged as a place for long-term retreats. It will be beautiful but all those renovations cost a lots of money. The doors and windows of the Longère have to be changed too… I hope that the sangha will be able to help us because all these changes will benefit the sangha.

Do you think you can complete the work this year?

My wish to have it completed before the summer retreat, but it is not certain. You know, it will be a wonderful place. From the side of the lake there is a wonderful view for skygazing. When Khenpo Rinpoche came to the site he said there is no effort needed to enter the natural state (laughing).

There is also a plan to build a gate at the entrance to the parking lot. Does Shenten need a gate?

Yes, we think it is a necessary protection for the monastery. We already once had some things stolen and more strangers are coming, to the parking place, there was a car with a fake registration plate, arriving regularly, with people who asked for money. Of course, if we put a gate it has to be well-done, beautiful, to match well with the beauty of Shenten. Which means it will not be cheap. The one that we liked most costs 25 000 EUR and we cannot spend such a big amount on it. So we are choosing something cheaper but still very nice, made in iron, which would cost around 12 000 EUR, plus we have to build good pillars.

In December, you returned to Kathmandu, and stayed around three months there. I imagine that it was mainly to see Yongdzin Rinpoche.

Yes, of course. For me, seeing my teacher, our Living Buddha, means a lot. When I knew, last year, that he was not feeling well, it crushed me. And when I saw him again in very good health, I was so happy, so very happy. I could not see him every day, when I was at the monastery, omicron was spreading in Kathmandu during this time, so actually, I saw him maybe only five times all together, but I was going under his house and touching the wall of his residence with my head and staying nearby meditating. Knowing that he is close, just a few meters from me, made me so very happy. Rinpoche also gave me some holy objects for Shenten which I brought with me here. Beside that, I attended various rituals done in the monastery. There was also an extensive puja ordered by my friend Usha, which took many days to prepare and perform. I went two-three times to Swayambhu, the sacred mountain close to the monastery. We believe it is a place which Tonpa Shenrab visited and there is a small stupa commemorating this. So I went there to hang prayer flags… One bonpo text from the 14th century says that if you hang five color cloth it is like a victory banner which would not allow you to fall into the lower realms. I really believe these things, you know, I am an old-style person. All those stories about miracles and things happening through our devotion – the old books are full of them and I like reading them.

After that you spent three weeks in Thailand. What was the purpose of your journey there?

I go usually every year, to do an individual retreat with Loel Guiness, who is my personal friend, and we practice together for a long time. Maybe some sangha members do not know that we established Shenten thanks to his generous donation. I was still doing DailyShenten sessions from there. Time shift is 7 hours so instead of 5-6 Shenton´s time I started at midnight and finished at 1 am. The body was ok with that, but the mind felt the difference.

How did you find Shenten, when you came back?

Very well kept and taken care of. Anna, since 2020 our onsite manager, does a very good job, as

well as geshe Lungrik and others.

What are your plans for the next few months?

If there is a possibility to get a visa for Mexico I want to return there and finalize the documentary of the Yongdzin Rinpoche film. We need to complete it with original music, which is still missing. I need to return to Shenten for Shedra, our course in Bon philosophy, held in July.