

**A LONGING
TO CHANGE
VEN RENÉ
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Ven René Feusi talked to Ven Robina Courtin at Kopan Monastery in Nepal in December 1995 about his two-and-a-half-year retreat at Osel Ling in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Spain.

Tell us why you went into retreat, René.

René: I think at some point when one studies Dharma one wants the experience to be deeper, one wants some taste of it. That's the main reason I decided to do a longer retreat. And when the idea came about, Lama Zopa Rinpoche said, "That's a very good idea, but first you do the nine preliminary practices." I had the opportunity to do a three-year retreat with a Kargyu group of people, but Rinpoche said it's more beneficial to do the retreat alone. I was twenty-two at the time; I was ready to do a three-year retreat in a group but I didn't feel I was ready to do it alone.

The nine preliminary practices took me seven or eight years, because some are difficult to organize, like the *tsa-tsas* and the water bowls. I did them in a retreat situation, but in between I would study at Nalanda Monastery in France.

One thing that is very important is to have studied thoroughly before retreat, to be clean-clear about what you are doing; to know what you aim at and what practice you are doing, and to have had all the teachings clear, and to know the antidote to the problems when they arise. So when you are in retreat you don't need so much help from teachers. You're completely clear. I found this very very helpful. Eventually I was ready to start the actual retreat. I would have preferred to do it in the East, because of the blessing, but it's more difficult to arrange visa-wise, so I went to Osel Ling in Spain.

You didn't do a Great Retreat?

René: I didn't do that type. In the morning I would do prayers, like *Lama Chöpa* or *Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga*. I would change from time to time so that the mind wouldn't get too bored. And then I would meditate on the lam-rim, the various stages of the path to

enlightenment. And in the afternoon I would do the generation stage of the deity.

Every day like this?

René: Yes, every day like that.

So you didn't have a commitment?

René: I didn't have a commitment to do a certain practice. The idea was to become familiar with the whole path. Eventually my main emphasis was to develop more concentration, because I felt that was the key. If you don't have some concentration, you don't get anywhere. If you want to go deeper into something, you have to have concentration.

How did you do that?

René: First I studied carefully the explanations for developing single-pointed concentration, *shamatha*. I had the notes from a teaching by Geshe Lama Konchog of Kopan, and the teaching from the book by Gen Lam-rimpa and in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche. I used these three.

Usually I would practice concentration in the context of the sadhana. Each time there's an absorption of the guru in your heart, I would stop there and meditate on either the clear nature of the mind or on emptiness, taking either of them as the object of concentration. And then again during the actual generation stage of the deity.

How long would your session be?

René: Well, my session would take the whole afternoon, basically. Because I would just meditate as long as my mind was fresh. Whenever the mind was tired, I would take fifteen or twenty minutes' break, walking around, and then I would go back to the session, to the point in the sadhana where I had stopped. My sadhana would therefore take the whole afternoon, the whole evening.

Basically, you'd do one session?

René: Yes, but with breaks.

You just decided to do it that way?

René: Yes, I just decided like that.

How much of this time were you actually concentrating? And did it grow and grow?

René: The emphasis was not on the duration of the session of concentration. I was mainly interested in getting the quality of the concentration, by first finding the object of meditation and then staying on it; then having the mindfulness that observes whether excitement or dullness come about, then applying the antidotes. And finally, when the mind can stay there without ever going away, to settle down, sticking there.

When you first enter into retreat you have lots of distractions because of the memories of what you did before – you know, your experiences with people, with parents, with relatives. During the first six months all these images come up in your session, what you did or what you said, so one of the main things you are doing is letting go of the past.

After six months, since there's been no more input of information, the mind simply calms down by itself without much effort, simply due to lack of information. So, just naturally you reach a certain mental peace without having done anything for it. But other things arise in the mind. At the beginning, you know the cause of the memory that arises, but as time goes by, it seems that things come from much much deeper, and you don't remember the causes. So you have moods arising, and it's a bit awkward, because you don't know the cause. But you know it's some past experience that comes up, which you purify.

Would you label this experience a delusion?

René: Delusion, no, I wouldn't necessarily say that . . . well, yes, delusion in the sense that it's not clarity. But it can be mental dullness, it can be sleepiness, it can be manifesting more as moods, not necessarily desire or attachment or anger. It would be heaviness of mind, for example, or lack of enthusiasm, the mind being a bit low, and you don't have any reason for it, it just kind of happens. Or restlessness, so you cannot stay sitting; you have to walk. And there doesn't seem to be a reason for it. Also, you would also have

moments of great clarity, great lucidity. What's sometimes difficult is that you don't see a direct link of cause and effect between what you're doing as a practice and these states of mind. They just happen. You just have to let go and accept them. At least it was like that for me, I don't know how it is for other people.

What does this indicate to you?

René: Well, for me it indicates that this spiritual practice is a very long journey, not something that you do in a few years or even a few dozens of years. It is something that would take a whole life, thirty, forty years of constant work – many lifetimes, in fact. Sometimes in the West we think that after a few three-year retreats you become a lama, or you're almost Buddha! But what we're working with is beginningless habits – it's not just the habits of this life. They are deeply ingrained ways of behaving, ways of seeing life, and these concepts can't be overcome by just a few years of a retreat.

Anyway, it makes you more realistic to think this way, and the mind becomes more relaxed with that attitude, more happy. Because sometimes it can make the mind unhappy to think, Oh, I have to get there quickly, quickly, quickly. But if you feel you have plenty of time, and you do well each moment, you do the best you can each moment, it gives you some peace. Of course, for people who have done a lot of practice in their previous lives, you cannot say. But for ordinary people, I think it takes time.

Of course, definitely Dharma works if you put it into practice; you do get some experience. That's the key. One achieves a much deeper knowledge of oneself. You become honest with yourself. No longer do you put things on somebody else. So that knowledge is very interesting. But it's nothing stable and permanent; don't think you reach a certain level and it's never going to degenerate again. You get experience, but this experience depends again on this privileged situation you are in, the retreat situation. Of course, if you cannot keep this situation, the mind degenerates again quite fast.

Could you say what level of the nine stages of concentration you got to?

René: Well, at some point I think I got to the fourth or fifth stage. But again, it's not something stable. You lose it very quickly if you don't practice for a while, or depending on the weather, depending on the food you eat. I know how to get back to it but I don't have it all the time.

But even at the fourth or fifth stage, there's definitely a satisfaction that comes in the mind, a state of mind that I never experienced before, a stability of mind, a satisfaction that is not dependent on sensory pleasure, a satisfaction that comes from the stopping of the delusion. As it says in the teachings, what concentration does is prevent the delusions from arising.

So you didn't experience unbelievable ecstasy of mind and body?

René: No, not that! I think that comes with the eighth or ninth stages. But once you have reached the fourth or fifth stage, you realize how agitated the mind is normally, even when you think it is quiet. So when the agitation subsides, when the mind really rests, this is very refreshing. It is something you have never had before.

Did it take you the two and a half years to get to this stage?

René: No, I think it was after six months.

You didn't progress beyond that in the next two years?

René: No.

You were doing something wrong?

René: I think it had something to do with the place. That is my feeling. At a certain point, I became very very sensitive to the environment: cars and people coming and going would be quite disturbing. And then also the weather: if there's a strong wind, the concentration doesn't work. There are many conditions like that that easily influence the meditator.

When your concentration was good, how long could you stay?

René: I think between half an hour and an hour. The limitation was mainly because of the body, pain in the body – this caused distraction.

For many of us in the West, we feel there's a big distance between us and single-pointed concentration. We don't think it's possible.

René: I think the main point with concentration is to know very well the method to develop it. It is very important to study well the methods beforehand. Many people can stay for many hours in meditation, they can sit, physically, but actually the mind goes all over the place. During retreat, it was very clear that actually it is much better to do five minutes of good meditation than a half hour of just sitting and the mind going out.

Spacing out.

René: Exactly, spacing out. It's very easy to have this dullness in the mind, because the mind naturally falls into half-sleepiness. And actually there's a well-being there; it's cozy, so you feel it's all right, and you stay complacently in that state. But it's not really clear meditation. The main thing in the beginning is to have the clear instruction on how to do concentration.

As they say in the teachings, the first very important tool is determination. So important, determination: I'm not going to move from this object of meditation. And if the mind goes away, I will bring it back. And if the mind falls asleep, has dullness, then I will wake it up in such a way. Strong determination. This is very precious, because without it there's no power to keep the mind on the object.

And then the first level is forceful engagement. A lot of effort is needed, actually, for the mind to stay on the object, because the mind naturally wants to go away. At the beginning of the session, it's a lot of struggle: I'm not going to move away. You hold it very tightly – and even sometimes you're tight with your body, because you don't want to let go, right?

As this forceful engagement develops, you can stay much longer on the object, and then you loosen up the tightness without losing the object. You reach the point where actually you stay on the object, the mind not going all over the place. So this comes through forceful engagement.

They say usually you should start with very short sessions – three minutes, five minutes, just till you lose the object. Then you relax and you start again. If you do it this way, you make very fast progress. It

goes very fast, because each time you lose the object you stop the session, and of course next time you want to make the session longer. So you do your best to stay, because if you lose it, you think, Oh no, I've got to start the session again. So like that, you get strong concentration.

One thing that I find very helpful is the sitting position: when I was doing concentration I would sit as much as possible in full lotus. The position makes a huge difference: automatically the mind is clear and more stable. Another thing that I found very helpful is the preliminary prayers. Usually I don't find it so helpful for my mind to make extensive prayers. But definitely refuge, bodhichitta and guru yoga – these are really the key. Strong prayers to the guru, strong requests, and then to absorb the guru, and from that base start the concentration practice. Because definitely blessings help to start.

I think devotion is very very important. For me, I would say the emotion of devotion is that which makes the heart soft and open. The problem we Westerners have, we know all the techniques, we know so much but we don't get the experience. Why? Because the heart is a piece of stone, is a rock, you know? It is only when the heart is soft and light that the experience can come about. And that's the function of devotion. When you have devotion, compassion is very easy, understanding the suffering of samsara is very easy – all the rest becomes very easy when your heart is soft and mellow, all the rest follows from that state of mind.

When you see all the highly-realized beings in any tradition, whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, they all have incredibly strong devotion. The inner experience is incredible devotion. From there, all their experience came. Sometimes one gets too much into the intellectual aspect of how to develop devotion – the important thing is to get it, have the emotion, the reasoning doesn't matter so much. Just get it, experience it.

For me one precious way of getting it is by realizing my own limitation. How limited the I is, and how much I want to change. Devotion for me is a strong longing to change. It has to come from

the heart, to burst up. I want to change, I don't want to be this limited being any more, I want these walls to fall down. And from that comes the feeling that there must be something higher, something perfect, something pure, something realized. You think there must be beings who have reached that perfection. Pray to this, to whatever help one can get.

I think the key is from one's own side to open up towards this aspiration. For me this was the most important part in devotion, this aspiration, this yearning. Because if you just think, Buddha up there, but from your side you have no emotion, you're just sitting there and you recite the mantra and you visualize the blessing coming, and there's no yearning from your side, it doesn't work somehow. From purification, accumulation of merit and devotion, I think all the rest comes quite easily.

I carry this one teaching from Lama Zopa with me [brings it out]. It's the importance of purifying and accumulating merit, a teaching I had from Lama Zopa. And it's so true. These practices have a profound psychological meaning. Purification practices are very important, not only because they purify negative karma of the past, but somehow they make your mind clear and you gain some level of self-respect, of being together and being clear.

They can remove the sense of guilt, of feeling inadequate, you know, of feeling that you are not at the right spot, or you're not doing the right thing. Purification gets rid of that, and makes you feel, All right, although I haven't done everything right, at least I've purified what I could. And then you have a sense of well-being.

I think this is very very precious, and sometimes we forget. We just think, Oh, I have done purification practice so many times, what am I still purifying? I don't remember anything more to purify. But one forgets the positive results of purification.

And then accumulation of merit. I think this improves this positive energy, this positive potential; this well-being increases. You are doing something worthwhile with your life. You have a feeling of well-being, of doing okay, as a result of this practice. The sense of

self-respect, of being happy with one's life, increases. And this gives joy, a joy which comes with being happy with oneself.

The main point is to have this soft heart. And from that, whatever meditation you do, it works. And if you don't have that, whatever meditation you do, it doesn't work. It's as clear as that. We hear it so many times. But now I see really how it works on the mind, that really if that is not there, you don't catch it. You don't catch it.

Tell us what you learned about emptiness, what you learned about the object to be refuted, the I.

René: Well, what is beautiful about retreat is that finally you have plenty of time to read all your notes, to study all the teachings, on emptiness: Jeffrey Hopkins's *Meditation on Emptiness* and *Emptiness Yoga*, Geshe Rabten's *Echoes of Voidness*, George Dreyfus's teaching on emptiness – I really enjoyed that. And you have the time after having read something to sit down and reflect on it, to see how it works. That I found very very precious, to be able to observe the mind and how the ego would point his nose.

Tell us about that. Tell us about the object to be refuted. How does it feel, what does it look like? Did you recognize it clearly? In terms of the four stages, you were very clear on the first one?

René: Well, it seems like the other stages are very easy once you've got the first; the whole problem is the first one. The rest just follow. One thing that was very helpful was first to find the basis of imputation: to recognize what the body is, how the body's changing from moment to moment; and what the mind is, what the awareness is, what the thoughts are, what the emotions are, and how they are changing from moment to moment. So first is recognizing the basis of imputation of the I.

Usually I would start with guru yoga, and after absorbing the guru in the heart I would stay in that space of awareness. At some point in that space of awareness, the I would arise. And it became very clear that the I appears to be inherent, something existing from its own side. It doesn't appear to be just imputed on this body and mind; it

appears as something more than that. The I doesn't appear to be changing, he appears very concrete there, somehow in control.

Then, while maintaining this sense of I, if you search for it with a corner of the mind, within the five aggregates, within the thoughts, emotions and body, you discover that none of these parts, nor all of them together, can be the I, because they are all changing from moment to moment. There is nothing solid there to support the I. And there is nowhere outside the body-mind where this concrete I can be either.

When you see that clearly, the I has nowhere to hold on to and so it disappears like a soap-bubble being poked. The first experience is of not finding what you expected to be there: it's like the shock you get when your car or your money-belt are not where they are supposed to be. The shock at finding this absence of I-ness is even stronger: it shakes at the very root of oneself.

There is no I there, it's merely imputed on the body and mind. There's no I there anywhere. The I doesn't exist at all. Usually the experience is that there's some sense of I, kind of a cloud, a feeling of I somewhere; even if one cannot find it, there's a sense of I-ness somewhere. But in meditation, you're completely sure there's no I at all, it's a mere name put on something which is not the I, which is the body and mind. What comes to the mind is an absence, a void, then a spaciousness: it is very joyous and very light. Great freedom. You feel, Wow! Finally I can breathe. It's very spacious, very nice.

When the intensity of the experience decreases, and as you obviously still exist, more so than ever, you check how the I exists. You see that you exist by mere imputation on the aggregates. There is no me anywhere there, but as long as the base (the aggregates) is there it is valid to be called "I," because the body-mind can perform the function that one expects of an I. And that is all it needs in order to exist.

So that's when the meditation goes well. It doesn't work each time, of course. It's funny, even though the process is the same each time, each time is a bit different.

Then from that basis of emptiness I would start the sadhana. Actually when the emptiness part works well, the whole sadhana is pervaded by it. But if you don't have it at the beginning, all the visualizations seem to be concrete, mind-made. Also, I found that the sadhana has a definite structure that is actually very intelligent. There's a logic to it, such that if you do one part well, the next part comes well. Whereas if some part doesn't come well, the next part also doesn't come well.

By doing the praises to the lineage gurus you get the inspiration from all these masters, it gives you confidence in the practice; some blessing comes. And then the Vajrasattva practice is to remove the obstacles to actual practice, and if you do this well, the guru yoga comes well. And if you do Guru Yoga well, you get a lot of blessing, and this helps emptiness come easily. And if the emptiness comes easily, then the whole building of the mandala comes well. It was very interesting to observe this process.

Did you memorize your sadhana?

René: I memorized *Lama Chöpa*, in English. I usually did it every morning, so it was worth the time to memorize it. It makes it much easier, because you can stop and visualize without having to open your eyes and be involved with the text. Most of the sadhana of the *vidam* I memorized also, although sometimes I would leave out most of the words and just follow the visualization and say the mantras and the prayers. This is what felt comfortable.

And also what was quite nice was to stop in the sadhana at many points and meditate on concentration. It was easy at the beginning of the session, when the mind is fresh and you can keep your body in a good position. Then when the mind began to get a little tired, I would just keep on with the prayers, and the rest.

What other objects did you take for meditation? You said before that you'd meditate on the clarity of the mind, for example.

René: In different situations, I found other objects more helpful, more easy. For example, because of the blessing of the guru when you absorb him in the heart, you are in this space. Sometimes I would

take that space of the mind as an object; it was there, so I didn't look for another object. I simply stayed there and tried to develop concentration on that.

What would you call that object?

René: The nature of the mind, an image of the mind. And then when that was stabilized, it's natural that the I would pop his nose in. So then I got interested in using that, because the nature of the mind is an affirming object, and emptiness is a non-affirming negative. Actually, when emptiness is the object, it's very easy to degenerate again to the nature of the mind. You lose it as a non-affirming negative and it becomes again just space of the mind.

At other times, during the generation stage of the sadhana I found it quite helpful to stabilize the whole mandala instead of just the deity's body. Sometimes to have the whole picture was useful, because there is a panoramic vision, and the I is less involved, therefore distraction is lessened. You have this overview, and this seems somehow easy to stabilize. As Lama Tsong Khapa explained, from that you can go in, and you move out again, you look at the different aspects. This rests the mind.

To even think of visualizing a mandala is something very difficult for most Westerners.

René: First one gets acquainted with the visualization by building it up through the sadhana.

Like painting a picture.

René: Yeah, there is this, there is that. And once you know the whole thing by heart, you just stabilize it, the whole picture. But it's not necessary to see the whole picture, it's not necessary to see the details; just to know it's there, to have a rough image, and to stabilize that. Actually it's quite easy to stabilize. If you are not perfectionist, wanting to see the detail, you just stabilize.

There's an order to it: First you develop stability, then clarity, then intensity; these are the three stages in order when you develop concentration. First you try to stabilize whatever appears. And then you look for some clarity. When you can keep it, you improve the

color, the shapes. I think the mind becomes more vast. Your mind can expand, and that's a very nice feeling, this feeling of expansion. And then to go back and forth, as explained in the sadhana at that point: you alternate analytical meditation and single-pointed concentration. Actually single-pointed concentration would just be to stabilize whatever appears without looking for anything more. When the mind gets tired of that, you do an analytical meditation for a while, you improve the color and the shape, you try to see the different things. And then when you've had enough of that, you go back to the single-pointedness of whatever appears. You alternate. The analytical meditation helps the concentration, and the concentration helps the analytical. So Lama Tsong Khapa praises very much that technique.

You found it worked?

René: Yes, I found it worked. Usually one does it before the recitation of the mantra. I would stop there quite a while, and I found that a very very nice practice. Identifying with something other than this ordinary René, this ordinary body, because at that moment you don't have this gross body or these gross feelings. At some point when you get some stability, you really feel you are the deity.

Robina: Divine pride, as they call it.

René: Yes, it's a very nice feeling. Actually, I still don't understand the symbolism of everything in the mandala, but simply the fact of being in the center of something; sometimes to identify oneself with the center, like the deity, and sometimes to identify oneself with the mandala. It's like sometimes you identify yourself as being the body sitting in the room, and sometimes you identify yourself as the room, and sometimes as being here, sometimes way over there. You are able to broaden your awareness and have exactly the same awareness of the thing, but on different levels.

Robina: Expanding your mind, literally.

René: Yes.

Robina: Is it hard to say how subtle your mind got?

René: Yes, I think this is very difficult to say, especially since it changed so much from session to session. I didn't get any stability or any realization that I could keep. During one session you would have a nice experience, and then the next session, nothing, and you don't understand why.

I guess it just shows how far one has to go before it is stable, before one can just call it up effortlessly.

René: Yes. I think for me it's a very long journey. But from the few glimpses I have had, I see it is possible. It is something within our own mind that we can reach. And when you have a small glimpse, you see that it's so precious. A mind free of delusion is actually so blissful, so happy, so nice, that at that moment when you compare it to sense pleasure, you say, oh, no, the mind by itself is so happy. It's so hard to get there, but when one has a small taste, it's really beautiful.

People need some glimpse of the experience, something. And then it closes up again. Then they ask themselves, Why does it not last? Why is it closing up again? Then you see what difference there is in the mind when that experience is there and when it's not there; you see the hardness of the mind when it's not there, you notice some kind of heaviness, stiffness. And sometimes the softness comes through the blessing of a spiritual being or by a beautiful spot, or by being somewhere or being with somebody. Sometimes your heart opens up, and then everything happens.

My emphasis when I have to teach or lead meditation for Westerners is to give people a taste, to try to make them have an experience. Because more than any theory about the lower realms or about karma or samsara, if you have some taste – you know, Lama Yeshe's way – if you taste the chocolate, it's your own thing, you know there's something else than just samsaric pleasure. And once you've tasted that, you can never forget it. You know that it's a possibility.

The perfect carrot.

René: Exactly! I think this is so important for people to have, because that's what keeps you going through all the struggle, the purification, because you know there's some light and some joy at the end of the road. I think this is very important for us Westerners. If you never get a taste of what's possible, one won't go through the process of purification, the struggles, and finally you give up at some point.

Tell us about your morning lam-rim meditation sessions.

René: I started with *Jor-chö*, but after a while I preferred *Lama Chöpa*, because it included the three-*kaya* meditations. Then the most helpful thing for me was to read something on one topic, to start the analytical process. I was concerned very much to speak to my heart, so the book I preferred was the commentary by the present Dalai Lama on the Third Dalai Lama's *The Essence of Refined Gold*. That was the one that spoke most to my heart. Also *The Path to Bliss* by His Holiness. Those were the two that touched me most. So, I would read something from His Holiness on a specific topic, let's say the precious human rebirth, in one of his lam-rim texts where there's the outline. It was very interesting, because he doesn't stop at the traditional presentation; he adds his own reflections from the point of view of a twentieth-century person, and this gives you the essence of what you try to achieve.

I have found that many of the traditional lam-rim reasonings don't work so well for my mind. For example, in the section on guru devotion it says to see your guru as Buddha, because Buddha said so at such and such a place, because Vajradhara said so. For me, this is not convincing, it doesn't work. But thinking of the obvious qualities I can see in the guru, this works very much for my mind. I can never come to a definite conclusion whether my guru is a Buddha or not – I don't even know even clearly what a Buddha is from my perspective. If I say my guru is Buddha, it would be utterly out of faith. What I can see is that he's much more evolved than me, but what that "more

evolved” is, I don’t know. I just see he has many more qualities, much less delusion than me. This feels very safe, because it’s based on my own observation. So there’s no place there for doubts to arise.

By seeing his infinite kindness, all that he has done for me – all that I have learned, all that I practice – and by reflecting on this kindness, some kind of heartfelt devotion naturally arises. This is on firm ground; I don’t need to base it on some quotation from some beings, which for me is not convincing, because how can I say? Basing it on my own experience is very down to earth, it is something I can verify. And then my practice grows. Because if doubt arises I can bring it back to something again very fast. It seems that for other people it works, but for me it’s very difficult.

How about compassion?

René: By doing the meditations it becomes clearer and clearer. It is interesting to observe that sometimes one feels closer to people when one’s far away, like in a retreat situation. You can feel the beings from inside instead of just superficially through the senses. You feel what it is to be a human being yourself, what it is to be alive yourself. You realize that all this inner struggle, all these inner things, all other beings have too. They have exactly the same sense of I, the same wish to be happy, the same problems. You feel this from inside, whereas usually one communicates with people just through the appearance. You have a feeling of likeness from inside. This was very beautiful. So even though one is alone in retreat, one doesn’t necessarily feel alone. You feel very close to others.

And also the practice of *tong-len* [taking on others’ suffering and giving one’s own happiness]: because one has time and has no distraction, it becomes almost automatic to practice it in the break-times. Usually what prevents us from practicing it is that we are always very distracted by this or that. But in retreat it’s quite easy to put it on the breath. But if it doesn’t come from the heart, if you don’t feel it, it degenerates. I think bodhichitta is very much like that: if you don’t keep on working on it, it tends to degenerate. You have to meditate on it every day.

Anyway, I would take one topic – precious human rebirth or karma or compassion – for my session and then stay on that. I would have two parts to the session: at the beginning I would do the analytical meditation, till the point where you come to a strong emotion: Ah yes, this precious human rebirth, this is really precious. Suddenly, you realize, Wow! This is unique and precious, I'm never going to have this again. It would feel very strong. At that point I would stop the analytical meditation and just continue with that feeling, that strong feeling of Wow! I get it! and stay there for a while. Then I would stop the session.

They say there are three ways of meditating on lam-rim. One is the glance meditation, where you just go over the parts but you don't come to the experience; you just glance over the points to give an overview. Then you have the effortful realization of the lam-rim, which means you meditate on the topic analytically till you get to that strong feeling, then you stay with that feeling. And then you reach the third stage which is called the effortless experience. At that point, you are so familiar with the topic that merely remembering it you can go to that strong feeling immediately, without having to use the reasons.

Usually you would meditate on a topic till you had reached that point of the effortless experience. And then you would move to the next topic, while keeping the first thought. So you would first go to the effortless experience of that, then you would use analytical meditation on the next topic. In this way you'd be in the total realization of the lam-rim.

So for two and a half years, every morning, you went over the various points of the path to enlightenment many many times, from the beginning to the end.

René: Exactly. Not necessarily in order. At the beginning I would go in order, but then, because they're all interlinked, I would start from one topic and I would see the whole lam-rim from that perspective. In this way you go more deeply into it. The more you develop one, the more you develop the others; they're completely linked. When one has the whole overview of the lam-rim, from one

point of the lam-rim you can take into it all the other points. Then you move to another point, and from that perspective you meditate on all the points of the lam-rim: from precious human rebirth you can meditate on compassion, on emptiness, on impermanence, like that.

You see that the lam-rim is simply how a Buddha sees samsara. It's actually an enlightened perspective. If you divide it, you have these fourteen topics, or however many you want to divide it into, but in fact it's just one state of mind.

How deep did you go on each of the topics? For example, the middle scope, how much did you do on that?

René: I think the two main ones for me were the unsatisfactory nature of samsaric pleasure and the uncertainty of samsara. You see that things keep on changing and that you have no control over what is going to happen. That as long as you're in samsara, anything can happen at any moment, there's no certainty at all. And that no matter how much you have of anything, you never reach a point where you say, I've had enough of it, I can stop that experience. These two I found very very powerful for my mind.

They are very simple; intellectually you don't need to think much, they are very easy to verify with one's own life, There's no way out of that. As long as we're in samsara, wherever you are, you always have these two. You're never sure of what is going to happen, so there's always fear in part of the mind. If you don't have what you want, this is craving, and if you have what you want, then you have the fear of losing it, because there's no certainty. So these two were very very powerful. Each implies the other one. Actually, sometimes it is easy to get depressed. Not only you are in this mess, but everybody's in this mess! So I think an important thing with lam-rim is to balance it.

With tantra?

René: Either with tantra or with concentration. If you can balance the lam-rim with the purity of the mind, the clarity, the concentration, or some bliss, some satisfaction, then you're able to accept what the lam-rim says. One helps the other.

You see, why Westerners come to the Dharma is because there's some kind of problem, existential problem, some kind of difficulty perhaps. Our minds are already low and depressed, with a low opinion of ourselves. If you enter the lam-rim in the usual way, it could bring you down, punch! And you didn't come to Dharma for that, you came for some kind of stability, some kind of clarity. Lama Yeshe saw that very clearly.

Actually, I always think you have to have something before the lam-rim. This became very clear for me. And that's why now when I teach, I'm very aware of trying to give to people some taste that is positive for them too. The intellectual information you can get from books, you can get from other teachers. But the taste, I think that's what high lamas give. More than what they say, it's what they are.

Tell us about the problems, the struggles you had during your retreat.

René: Well, there was not so much. The main problem I had was boredom with the routine of the practice. After more than two years of doing always the same thing, the same routine, I'd become bored. But, when you have a difficult moment, you know that other people are there [on retreat], and you know that you are not the only person having difficulties, the other person is too.

As Geshe Lama Konchog said when he talked about concentration, usually one has to be isolated from other people, but if there are other people doing the same practice, it doesn't matter how many people are in the same area, because you help each other. You have the same energy, and you inspire each other by doing the practice. And I found that for me this was very true, that sometimes when you are alone, the mind goes around in circles. When you speak with somebody else, the problem disappears simply by having the input of somebody else.

So that's what you did on your retreat?

René: Yes, for quite a few times. Sometimes every fifteen days or so I would meet another person doing retreat there, and we would go

for a walk, or have a cup of tea together, and discuss how our practice was going, and share information: Oh, I just read this information about that practice, you know. Giving tips to each other, what works for us, and what problems we face. So this was very precious. And also being able to share with another human being, this kind of feeling was very very nice. Support each other. So you support each other, even if you don't speak to each other, you know that the person is also going through that.

Why did you stop retreat?

René: Actually, it was a combination of things. My mother was quite sick and needed some help. And I saw at that point that six months more of retreat would not make a big difference, I would not make much more progress. At the end of the retreat, I realized that I needed to go to some blessed place and get some inspirations and blessing, do more purification, create more merit; to build up the energy again for going into retreat.

So, last July I went to work for two months to help my mother in her flower shop in Geneva. Coming out of retreat was interesting. On the one hand the mind was very peaceful, relaxed, and you don't jump into the old emotion as before, don't take things so seriously. You're able to watch the mind and, at the same time, you can work perfectly well and do what you need to be doing. That was nice. On the other hand, given the conditions, the delusions arise again. At the beginning because you just came out of retreat you get the feeling of being invincible almost.

But slowly you are reminded that the delusions are still there, that they just need the causes and conditions in order to appear again. It's interesting to be out there and to put into practice what you have learned during the retreat: always trying to be aware of emptiness, always being aware of bodhichitta, always being aware of being of benefit. In some sense the retreat goes on, it's not like it finishes. And what I gained in the retreat is a strong habit of being aware of each state of mind as it arises and to apply the antidote straight away; to deal with the mind all the time, be aware all the time. It is interesting

now to see how I manage. Many times I had thought that the real retreat would start when I came out of retreat. For that's where you see the results.

So, conclusion, you would recommend retreat?

René: Oh, very much. I think there are two levels of doing retreat. One is doing retreat at the beginning, before one has studied a lot, simply out of enthusiasm. And then there's a second level of doing retreat, after many years of study and practice; simply to go deeper into whatever you want to study. Simply to be able to make the experience on a deeper level, and that is very very precious. It gives a feeling of maturity, of becoming mature in the Dharma, of having digested all of what one has studied. It's not just words anymore.

This I think is very important for people who studied a long time, because Dharma from this point of view is nothing new or exciting anymore. At some point you don't need new information, you need to taste and go deeper and deeper. Now when I listen to discourses, it's different than before. I can go into meditation and the teaching becomes a guided meditation instead of, Oh, I don't care, it's nothing new, I've heard it so many times. Instead of having to think about it myself, somebody is doing the thinking and I can just meditate. So, like that it's kind of enjoyable. But this is because of being able to go deeper in retreat. Whereas before, I felt bored with any more teaching. I could not take it any more.

Tell us how your doing retreat benefits others? At whatever level you think, present or future.

René: I think first, merely the fact of knowing that somebody is in retreat raises a lot of questions for the other people who are not in retreat. How come that person gives up all that pleasure, all this way of living just to go sit there? Maybe the fact that there are people in the world who go away from everyday life, to sit on their own, poses a big question for the rest of the world. If these people did not exist, there would be a great loss. There wouldn't be this question mark, Why are they doing that? What's the purpose? So this I think is very

precious. People can give up the ordinary way of life, and live something completely different. That this alternative way of life exists is very precious. I think if it did not exist, the world would be impoverished.

Another benefit is that, at a subtle level of vibration, the person who does retreat can feed the environment – you know, each being has a certain vibration which he emanates through the environment. So if one is angry and agitated in a city, one spreads that vibration around. The person who meditates generates a peaceful energy, a gentle and loving-kindness energy which spreads around. This feeds the collective energy. And that's how a great yogi blesses places, that's how we have all these blessed places. One being was sitting there and got this incredible realization, and his inner peace created that environment. So that's the second point. On one psychological level your realizations and prayers benefit everybody. I think also on another level, even in a small way, whatever progress one makes in retreat, whatever little loving-kindness, whatever compassion, whatever patience – this benefits all the people you come in contact with after that.

Also, I think if there's nobody anymore who has these realizations, then "lama" becomes a mere word. Then the Buddhadharma has died out like so many other spiritual paths. It is very important that some beings gain experience. Whether Dharma is alive or not depends on the existence of beings who have realizations. And the best way to gain that is through intensive practice, through intense dedication, retreat. You cannot do this if you are very busy, involved; you have that much less time for practice, therefore you have that much less progress. But if one has time to do intensive retreat, definitely one progresses more than if one doesn't have that precious opportunity.