

Voice of Clear Light

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Gathering with the European Sangha in Austria

Rob Patzig Writes About His Visit and Retreat with European Sangha



I was privileged to be able to travel to Maria Alm, Austria, this year for Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's October 14–19 teaching of the fifth and final year of an intensive series of Tibetan Bon Buddhist dzogchen teachings from "The Experiential Transmission of the Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyu."

This was my first meaningful trip to Austria or to Europe (my only prior trip was to Germany, and for less than 72 hours), and also my first trip to a community of practitioners other than at Serenity Ridge. It could not have been more perfect. The moment I arrived I felt myself among friends and family. The European sangha members are deeply committed to the practices, to the teachings and the lineage of the Bon masters. I felt deeply honored to sit and listen and practice with them, especially since we were sharing the final teachings in such a special transmission.

The Experiential Transmission (which Rinpoche will begin again this year at Serenity Ridge during Winter Retreat) is a profound cycle of teachings that lead us from the most basic of practices, like how to sit in the five-point posture, to recognition of the natural state. In between are instructions for ngondro, breathing practices, recognizing inner refuge, sun and sky gazing, instructions for a dark retreat and more. These instructions need to be presented by a qualified teacher, like Tenzin Rinpoche. The text alone is not sufficient.

At the beginning of this cycle of teachings, there were more than 200 attendees. In the fifth year we numbered just over 120, coming from 10 different countries. Other obligations, financial means, health and death prevented about 80 people from completing the teaching cycle. This fact was an excellent teaching for the rest of us that we must practice today, while we are here, with serviceable minds and bodies and with a teacher to guide us. We never know what will come tomorrow or when our lives will end: we mustn't waste our time!

Maria Alm is unbelievably beautiful. "Storybook" was a word that kept coming to mind. Ringed

all around by mountains much, much bigger than we have in Virginia and at a higher elevation, with whole ridges high above the tree line. We were graced with great weather, as has been the case every year there for this cycle of teachings. As my words will not do the region justice, here is a picture taken just minutes away from the retreat center:



Unlike at Serenity Ridge, where the evenings become quiet soon after dinner, in Maria Alm there was an active social life. People gathered together in the central dining room/bar after evening practice and talked until late into the evening. One of my favorite moments was when sitting with a small group, including two people who had attended Rinpoche's first teaching in Austria more than 20 years ago. I asked them what he had taught then. "Exactly what he is teaching now," was the reply. It is good to know the teachings do not change, even as we hope that through them we can change.



Another highlight of the trip was an outdoor practice. We hiked about 45 minutes from the center to a 1,000+ year old oak tree and practiced sun gazing. The tree was like nothing I have ever seen. It had a presence and a stillness that for me embodied the inner refuge. It was big enough that nearly all of us were able to sit under its branches.

The retreat was successful not only because so many people had committed to the cycle of teachings, but because there was so much support and so many volunteers worked to ensure that everything necessary was done. From staffing the bookstore, to decorating for the last night's banquet, to maintaining the altar, to collecting fees, to leading trul khor (Tibetan yoga) and other practices, a spirit of generosity pervaded every part of this retreat.

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