

Voice of Clear Light

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Grass Put in Our Heads

Reflections on the Recent Retreats at Lishu Institute in India

In March and April, a two-week Phowa retreat and six-week intensive Tibetan Language Retreat were held at Lishu Institute. Lishu plans to open for full curriculum study in September and will offer a three-year, full-time residential program. Jennie Makihara, who participated in both retreats, shares some impressions of her time at Lishu. (This article also appears in the Spring issue of [Ligmincha Europe Magazine](#)).



The Sights and Sounds of Lishu Institute

Vickie Walter and I arrived at Lishu Institute for the first time in a hired car from Menri Monastery, where we had been enjoying the final days of Losar celebrations. We had been in the car more than six hours, riding down curving mountainous roads, and this was my first time seeing this section of India near Dehradun where Lishu Institute is located. As the car took a turn off the main road, it looked like we were turning into someone's driveway, one-storey farmhouses and cows close to the dirt road. Then we rounded a bend and all of a sudden, standing high above us was the tall Lishu Institute building I had been seeing for the past year in videos and photos. We were greeted by a line of welcomers holding khatas and leis of marigolds. The greeting touched my heart. I had come here to attend two spring retreats held before the three-year residential program begins this fall: a two-week Phowa retreat and a six-week Tibetan Language retreat.



Sunset at Lishu Institute

Everyone lives and practices together in one building at Lishu Institute, which sits atop a small hill above the farming village of Kotra Kalyanpur like a tower, with sights and sounds rising up from below. Teachers, staff and guests lived on the third floor, while we students lived on the second floor below them. I could hear the quiet sounds of morning prayers when an honored guest stayed above my room, or people practicing in the meditation hall or their rooms. A pair of blackbirds would tap loudly at the window above my balcony door each morning at exactly 6:30 a.m., and the sounds of cuckoos, parakeets and other birds were plentiful throughout the day, often joined by the mooing of cows. From our balconies we would wave down at the nearby villagers cutting their wheat with sickles. Most are practicing Hindus, and frequently we heard their drumming and singing during prayers, festivals and weddings. I enjoyed taking my mala up to the west side of the roof each evening to recite Ngondro mantras before dinner. Up there on the Lishu Institute roof I could watch the sun setting most evenings, red and sinking behind the clouds. I watched the colors change as the evening turned to darkness, peaceful sounds of creatures and earth calming, coming in for the night to rest.

On Phowa and Kusha Grass



Mealtime during Phowa retreat

During my first two weeks at Lishu Institute, we students were fortunate to be joined by the Menri Shedrup Lopon Geshe Gelek Gyatso Rinpoche, head teacher of the Bon Dialectic School at Menri Monastery. He taught us the practice of Phowa from the Ma Gyud teachings. Each day for two weeks, we had four practice sessions involving breath, sound and visualization that included shooting our consciousness through the tops of our heads.

We would crack up sometimes, laughing at ourselves and each other when our teacher would call on us to sing — SOLO — one of the Ma Gyud or Phowa prayers to check if we had it right. Sometimes we were on pitch and sometimes we weren't; either way, the spirit and camaraderie were such that no one was judging or critical, just appreciating each other's sincere effort and laughing at our own humanness. And even though four languages were spoken at mealtimes by our diverse group — Tibetan, English, Russian and Hindi — we managed to communicate and grow close as time passed.

