

IG News! Interviews with Steven Landsberg and Mark Farrington

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Perseverance, Engagement, and Personal Commitment.

An Interview with Steve Landsberg

May 10, 2017



The Mirror: Steve, you have recently been appointed as the president of the International Gakyil by Rinpoche and Rosa Namkhai, with the approval of the International Gakyil. Was that a surprise for you?

Steven Landsberg: Yes it came as a total surprise. I had also had a communication from Mark Farrington about the position and the situation. I have had a little bit of experience of being on the Gakyil because I served in Tashigar North (Margarita Island, Venezuela) for many years, but this is a totally new thing for me because the function and purpose of the IG is a little different than the function of a local Gakyil. So there will be a period of adjustment for me while I learn about the IG and what their basic conversation is about.

M: Do you serve in a particular color function like the others or are you solely the director?

SL: I don't think I am associated with any particular color. Mark Farrington said he is handling most of the day-to-day activities. So my position and actual function is still to be revealed and made clear to me. It seems an older student who was more involved with the practice end of things and less with the financial and administrative end of things was desirable to serve as president.

M: So you have served on the Tashigar North Gakyil and you have also been involved with different Community management activities. How do you envision the work of the IG and how would you like to see it function?

SL: I don't have a particular agenda for the way in which the IG should function. From the few messages I have seen, I think it is working quite nicely now and communication between the members is working smoothly. We will have to wait and see before I come up with any particular thought on the direction in which we should go. Obviously we will be taking most of our direction, if not all of our guidance, from Rinpoche's lead. And we will just be trying to administer and facilitate its application. That is more or less what we are going to be doing. Maybe there will come a time when we need to gage a direction in which the Community needs to move.

M: Because you move around a lot and have visited many Communities as a Santi Maha Sangha teacher, based on your observations and experience, how could you see your role, and what do you see as a way to facilitate communication among the international Communities and between the international Communities and the International Gar of [Dzamling Gar](#)?

SL: The key issue is the individuals who are members. It's one thing for everyone to be paying their membership fees etc, but it is certainly not enough. And the main thing is that people as individuals consider the importance of the Dzogchen Teaching and practice and study as much as they possibly can and if that understanding matures then all the other pieces will fall into place automatically. They will naturally want to contribute, get more involved, and there won't be so many details we will need to figure out for everybody. I think the main thing comes down to how the individual member is going to consider his or her place within the Community and that place is going to be pretty much, if not totally, determined by their connection with the Teaching. And that means his or her own personal study and practice.

It will take time to discover what this role is really about and I'm a beginner and I will have to discover basically how it works through contact with the other members and by attending their virtual meetings.

M: Many people around the world know you, but some do not, so can you talk a little about your life, about how you became a spiritual seeker, how you met Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and a kind of general biography?

SL: I was raised the first seventeen years of my life in Los Angeles, California. After a brief period at university I had the opportunity to go to India. This was around 1968. My initial interest in going

to India was to study classical Indian music, and sitar, which I did. After some time in India it is not difficult to realize what a kind of spiritual place it is, and I came into contact with many individuals who were connected with one kind of spirituality or another, and I had a number of friends who were connected to Tibetan Buddhism. Somehow I came in contact with a group of masters who had recently arrived in India, and by recently I mean it had been maybe five or ten years that they had been staying in Darjeeling. I made my initial contact there with several masters, and I did take some teachings, and I started practicing in my more or less naïve way. But you have to sort of jump into the water somehow and get started.

Then after a number of years that I spent in India I returned to the US, and I had made some connections with some people while I was in India who then became students of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, some of their names will be familiar to people, Mario Maglietti and Paolo and Pupe Brunatto, and they kind of encouraged me to go to a retreat with Rinpoche, in July of 1982, at Oz, California.

So at that retreat when I listened to the teachings, and although I had listened to many teachings in India, somehow this was different and it was not like I was just listening to a lot of words, or a lot of information, but somehow it was very much connecting to my own condition, and I related that way and that was the beginning.

From 1982 to about 1993 I was practicing a lot of the practices I had received from Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, as well as practices that I had received from other teachers, and then in 1994 or 1995, at a certain point I made a commitment that I was going to really get involved with the study of Santi Maha Sangha. I was in Peru at that time and it was in Lake Titicaca, I had been in Machu Pichu, and suddenly I just got this desire to study Santi Maha Sangha and pursue that way and try to do the examination. And then from that point on I became very connected to Rinpoche and his teachings, and especially those related to Santi Maha Sangha.

M: When did you decide to become a [Santi Maha Sangha](#) instructor?

SL: I decided to pursue that around 2007 or 2008, when I was in Margarita. I took my exam at Merigar West in the summer of 2010.

M: When did you move to Tashigar North, Margarita?

SL: In the very beginning, there was a retreat in 2002 that attracted a lot of people from everywhere, and I went to that retreat. Then the issue about buying land and building houses had already started and most of the land has already been allocated or sold, I was living in Nepal at that time and I went back there for a time and a few months later there was information circulated that had been owned by one of the Gars, and they decided that they were not able to go ahead with it, and that land became available and I agreed to take it. And very shortly thereafter I went back to Margarita and designed and built one of the first houses built there. So for a while I continued to

commute between Nepal and Margarita a lot and then in 2007 I actually moved there. I did not get into the Gakyil until 2008 and I remained on the Gakyil there until 2013.

M: What was it like to participate in Tashigar North when there was no longer much activity there after some difficulties and Rinpoche no longer came as often?

SL: That was a really tough period. First of all because it was a huge change from being such an important place and receiving so much attention and developing so rapidly, and then almost coming to a total halt. Financially it was a challenge, in terms of peoples' participation it was a huge challenge and there were a considerable number of obstacles that we had to navigate our way through and work with. It was not easy at all. Even today the membership is very small. Because of the financial crisis that occurred in Venezuela, in some way it benefitted the Community, because, even though it wasn't a lot of money, we could still manage it in a way that worked with the continual exchange due to inflation and due to currency exchange. Now everything is changing there and things are becoming more and more expensive. It is really tough for a Gar that doesn't have that much income. Also how can they make payments to the international community? That becomes a problem as well.

M: So that must give you a kind of base for working on challenging circumstances.

SL: I was the president of the Gakyil there for a number of years too and my principle from the time I started with the Gakyil was don't block anything. If you find motivated people who want to do a job, let them run with the ball. I feel my function on the Gakyil was to encourage those people who actually wanted to do something. We tried to work with the people who were trying to get in the way or create obstacles or block and help them understand that we need to make decisions and we need to move ahead and we can't get bogged down with long discussions about doing or not doing something.

It's a challenge because, for example, for people who have served the Community for twenty-five or thirty years, it's normal, a certain kind of attachment grows, but the condition of the world and the function of the Community is always something that is changing and evolving. And it becomes a challenge for the people who reach my age, for example, to relinquish that kind of attachment. So they need to look at the fact that they are getting older and maybe now it is time to take practice seriously and this critical moment is arriving.

M: Do you see that as an issue in a lot of the places you visit around the world?

SL: There are a lot of Communities, like the Czech Republic, that are young and very dynamic and really moving forward and very, very active, with very strong schedules, and it's great. The people are very excited to learn. Most of the places I visit are doing well. Some places are still not manifesting.

M: So finally, you are an accomplished classical sitar musician, a Santi Maha Sangha instructor and a long time practitioner. How do you feel these accomplishments can contribute to your position on the IG and benefit the Community?

SL: I feel that whatever one does in ones own personal practice, when it comes to some level of maturity, then no matter what one engages in, somehow that experience is going to relate to whatever one engages in. So even though being an administrator or serving on the IG is not exactly what I do, because I am mostly engaged with music and Santi Maha Sangha work, still, if one allows oneself and opens up that space, then you can participate somehow in managing, or helping to administer what needs to be done; and just trying one's best.

M: Also the level of mastery of the sitar you have achieved must require a lot of discipline.

SL: It takes a lot of time, a lot of discipline, it is an endless work, and it's not something that can be really done in a single lifetime. I continue with that because I have spent my life doing it. One of my thoughts is that whatever one starts and practices for a long period of time, one should never give up. Sometimes people embark on something and do it for some time and then they get frustrated and give up. That is a real pity because they have lost that chance.

M: Do you have anything you would like to add in conclusion?

SL: The Dzogchen path is definitely a path that requires a lot of perseverance, a lot of engagement, and a lot of personal commitment. It's also a path especially related to ones relation to the Community that demands a lot of patience and dealing not only with ones own conflicts and difficulties, but also dealing with the conflicts and difficulties of many other beings. There is just no other way.

M: Thank you Steven.

Roles of Responsibility within the IG

The Mirror spoke to Mark Farrington, Vice-President of the International Dzogchen Community, about the background to the birth of the IDC and the election process for becoming President.



Mark Farrington

The Mirror: Mark, could you tell us about how the International Gakyil came into being.

Mark Farrington: The whole process began with Enrico Dell'Angelo having a concern that the collection of Dzogchen Gars and Lings around the world was not formally linked together in any particular legal manner and this could be a worry for the future. Gars tended to act autonomously and interpret guidance from Rinpoche differently so it was difficult to envision stability with Rinpoche. When Enrico approached him with this, Rinpoche famously put it to Enrico and told him to 'fix it'.

Enrico then conceived the idea of legal alignment with the primary binding relationship between all the autonomous Gars and Lings with the International Dzogchen Community being the right to use Rinpoche's Longsal symbol, and the right to disseminate his copyrighted teachings. If the Gars and Lings wanted to have access to these things, the students needed to be members of the International Dzogchen Community and adhere to the requests of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche.

Simultaneously, Rinpoche had an idea to buy land for the Global Gar in Tenerife and asked me to do fundraising for this project and help to bring this about. Enrico and I were put together in this case with two independent but overlapping projects. In order to both buy the land for the Global Gar and launch the IDC alignment project we formed the legal entity for the IDC in a rush, as a very wonderful opportunity had presented itself in Playa Paraiso. The non-profit association for the IDC was formed in September 2012 at Merigar, in between Rinpoche's retreats, and we chose founding members from the mixture of old students at the retreat, with many different nationalities, so that it would symbolically represent the international community we were forming.

After the purchase of the property in Playa Paraiso with help of Benedetta, we began to transfer the responsibility of managing the property to Giovanni Boni and others based in Tenerife, and this eventually became Dzamling Gar. Our responsibility then switched back to creating the IDC organizational structure, which was the original task given to Enrico. This has since been our primary focus since 2013.

The Mirror: Can you explain about the roles of responsibility within the International Gakyil and how they have evolved.

MF: At the time of purchasing Dzamling Gar there were only two Gakyil members essentially,

Enrico and I, and so we then began to recruit the first International Gakyil. We had a recruitment process where we chose people based on professional skill sets and also to have some sort of geographical footprint globally across our Community. Enrico was very much in favor of having an Executive Director running the day to day operations, and a separate Board or the Gakyil to oversee decision making. He asked me to be Executive Director and we named Rinpoche as President. However, eventually it became clear that we didn't want Rinpoche to have a legal or administrative role because that would be a burden for him and would also expose him to certain legal and financial liabilities.

With the first revision of Statutes we renamed the 'Spiritual Leader of the Community', Chögyal Namkhai Rinpoche, as Honorary President. We then made Enrico Vice-President, left the office of Presidency vacant, moved me from being Executive Director to Gakyil member, and temporarily made the position of Executive Director dormant.

After a couple of years we tried to submit for recognition of the IDC as a cultural nonprofit, but the Italian authorities would not accept our structure with the Presidency vacant, so for that reason, we had to make Enrico the legal President. This was in October or November of 2016 just before he passed away. Enrico always resisted being named President due to the symbolic importance of this title and issues of succession had not yet been fully discussed.

While we were in that transition between the point when Enrico died and the appointment of a new President, I was acting Vice-President with interim authority as President, and then we began the selection process.

The Mirror: Are the members of the International Gakyil chosen in the same way as the Gakyils at the Gars and Lings?

MF: The selection of the International Gakyil is a very similar but importantly different process to the Gakyils for the Gars and Lings. At the Gars people volunteer, they are presented to Rinpoche, Rinpoche accepts, and they are presented to the general members who vote. This is more or less true for the International Gakyil except that we do specific recruitment to choose members, and then we present the list of recruits to Rinpoche, he approves them, and only then do we present them to members at the AGM. This will always be true for all International Gakyil members.

The President, however, should be proposed by Rinpoche himself with possibly some interaction with the Vice-President or other members of the IG that are close to Rinpoche. The main point is to arrive at some kind of very short list of candidates that possess all the important characteristics, and then they are formally asked if they are willing to fulfil this role, rather than individuals volunteering for this role and being elected. So it is a little bit reversed in terms of the starting point of the process.

The Mirror: How does the selection process for being on the short list for President of IDC work?

MF: We considered from the beginning that the role of choosing the President of the IDC should belong to the Honorary President. As spiritual leader of the Community, Rinpoche will want to choose a President that can best represent his vision for the IDC, and is very integrated into the global life of the Sangha. In this particular case, where we suddenly lost our President and needed to quickly fill the position according to Italian law, the short list was produced by consulting closely with Rinpoche and Rosa. We then met with different potential candidates until one was chosen.

The process is obviously not yet formalized in a procedural sense. Enrico was our first President by logical conclusion. Steven Landsberg is our second President, chosen through consultation with Rinpoche & Rosa amid extraordinary circumstances. We agreed from the beginning that the appointment of President would come from a nomination from Rinpoche, so this is the process to date. It is not a democracy, nor is it simply a vote from the IG Board. The President stands in Rinpoche's place to take legal and administrative responsibility for the Community so that Rinpoche doesn't have to. It is not a normal karma yoga role. It is taking on all of this responsibility of administering and legally representing the Dzogchen Community so that Rinpoche can focus on being a Teacher. For that reason we have only dealt with people who have been put forward by Rinpoche. It is very personal selection process and therefore differs from being an ordinary Gakyil member.

The Mirror: So Steve Landsberg's name was put forward to take over this role?

MF: When Enrico passed away, the IG continued to carry out ongoing daily operations and I assumed the role of Vice President. Perhaps there was a belief amongst some people that I would be the one to naturally fall into the role of President. But my own personal view was that, unlike Enrico, I didn't have this capacity to explain well to people exactly what Rinpoche means in his Teachings as it relates to our individual behaviour, what it means to commit to Samaya and to be a Dzogchen Community member. Enrico had this ability to speak up, to make people stop, listen, and remember what Rinpoche had taught and then to follow the guidance that he was giving. I came to believe that the IDC President needed to have this essential ability to speak on behalf of Rinpoche.

The obvious name that everyone immediately put forward was Costantino Albini, but unfortunately his health conditions at the time complicated this simple solution. We then discussed several of Rinpoche's other senior students as successors to Enrico, but one by one they were not able to take on this role due to other responsibilities.

In January I met with Rinpoche and Rosa at the retreat and we discussed many names but had no answer, so we decided to leave it and talk again in April when I returned to Dzamling Gar for the AGM. In April we thought to approach Costantino again, suggesting that he be more of a figurehead President with the IG doing most of the daily operational work. But then Rinpoche suggested Steven Landsberg and we both thought that this was very interesting. In addition to having this skill of being able to speak about samaya, about what it means to be a member of the Dzogchen Community, Steve was an old student that many people around the world knew and

were familiar with. He has not only been travelling around the world to retreats with Rinpoche, but also teaching, living with and being part of different Sanghas around the world. He is a known person and this was considered an important attribute to have, in terms of being a recognizable President.

I also remember that when we chose the first Gakyil, Enrico and I presented it to Rinpoche and showed him the collection of names and there were several people that he didn't know. But what he said about all the people that we had chosen was that they all had a flexible mind. So in his opinion this was one of the most important characteristics to have. Many people are intelligent, familiar with the teaching, but if their minds are not flexible, it is not easy to do this job. Steve has a flexible mind, is easygoing, a good listener, has ideas and opinions but doesn't give them too much importance, so I thought he would be very good. Several years ago I had asked Steve to be part of the IG but he had said he was too busy at that time. This time it was a direct suggestion from Rinpoche and Rosa to be President and when I called him he agreed immediately to take up this position. That is how we arrived at this decision to choose Steven Landsberg.

The Mirror: Thank you, Mark.

