

PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

'Chasing Buddha' in Nepal and India

By Lisbeth Elvery

Many of us had never met Ven. Robina Courtin before, much less traveled under her tutelage throughout strange lands. However, any vague sense of trepidation was – certainly for me – washed away on that first night the 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrims met in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Ven. Robina, an ordained Buddhist nun with over twenty years' experience integrating Tibetan Buddhist practice with the Western way of life, has been leading these pilgrimages throughout Nepal and India since 2001. Her main project and the key beneficiary of the funds raised from the pilgrimage is the Liberation Prison Project.

My friend Keri and I had both taken refuge with this extraordinary teacher and undisputed Buddhist dynamo in June 2003 at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia. During that weekend of teachings on bodhichitta, which culminated in our formally committing ourselves to seeking enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, Keri and I both realized that the 2003 pilgrimage was not leaving town without us.

It was to be a seminal journey for many – not always what was expected but definitely worth every cent and every second.

Twenty-three budding pilgrims from throughout the United States and Australia came together for four weeks in late October/early November 2003. It was a journey that was to take us to the sacred Buddhist sites of Nepal and India. On a spiritual level, we would travel much further.

The soft entry into the pilgrimage started with pujas at the grand stupas of Bouddhanath and Swayambhunath before a weeklong retreat in Kopan Monastery. It was a gentle start and a taste of things to come – not the least being just keeping up with Ven. Robina who has seemingly limitless energy and can bound up hillsides without raising a sweat!

One very much feels part of a monastic community at Kopan, the monastery of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. The facilities are almost luxurious with a café, library, shop, and Dharma store. Mornings and evenings resonate with chanting from the main gompa, and Dharma discussion groups congregate on the lawns by the magnificent wheel-turning, or *dharmachakra*, stupa built for the great yogi Geshe Lama Konchog who passed away at Kopan in 2001. Kopan's abbot, Geshe Lhundrup Rigsel, gave a teaching to the pilgrims one evening, which engendered even more devotion for these truly extraordinary sentient beings.

For me, Kopan was special. I could have died there and died happy. My few naive expectations of the pilgrimage had already been fulfilled. So it was with some sadness that I left Kopan after five short days to really begin our pilgrimage with a short but breathtaking flight to Lumbini, the birthplace of Shakyamuni Buddha.

One of the many striking aspects of this pilgrimage is that when you arrive at these historical sites, it's all there, just as you have heard in the stories – Ashoka's pillar, the pool in which Mahamaya bathed before the birth of her son 2,600-odd years ago. While the forest is not as dense as it once was, it is



Pilgrims had a week-long retreat in Kopan.

not hard to imagine the beautiful gardens that surrounded the pool.

Sravasti was another personal high for me. The Jetavana (Jeta) Grove is stunning. The ruins of the monastery where Buddha and his followers spent many rainy seasons in retreat are accessible and set in

beautifully maintained gardens. Ven. Robina led a particularly moving puja in one of the ruins; it felt like I was sitting in Buddha's lounge room!

Sravasti was also our first taste of India, Lumbini being just inside the Nepalese border. Our Nepalese guide Amber shepherded us with the care of a father looking out for his young. Once we hit India, he was joined by our Indian guide Diamond who lived up to her name as a precious gem. With their experience and local knowledge, as well as the leadership of Ven. Robina and her assistants, Katy Cole from Perth in Western Australia and Californian Sue Shaw, the pilgrims were in safe hands.

Our bus drivers typified Indian hospitality – so courteous and accommodating. Even after driving many hours on less than perfect roads, they were ready with a broad smile and helping hand down the bus stairs. It was sometimes a little difficult to equate the air-conditioned luxury of our transport with the oxen-drawn, suspension-free mode the locals endured. But perhaps endured is the wrong word there. It struck me often that eye contact with anyone in India – regardless of their circumstances – almost always was returned with that same broad smile. This was to become the source of my own culture shock on returning to Western civilization. Does anyone smile around here? Clearly, suffering is relative. The pilgrimage, naturally enough, does not follow a chronological route. The next stop was Kushinagar where the eighty-year-old Buddha attained parinirvana and where his physical body was cremated. The famous golden statue of the reclining Buddha – commemorating the place of his death – is a hugely popular pilgrimage site. The stupa where the cremation was conducted is quite different to any we had seen previously on the trip. Robina explained that under the white domes common to most stupas was the rugged brickwork that we could see in the Kushinagar stupa.

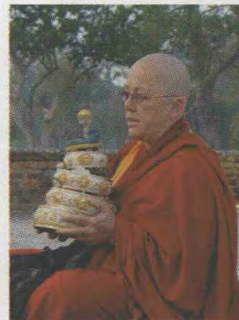
Throughout the trip, Robina maintained a steady stream of teachings, each one applicable to the site we were visiting and each one rich with significance and clear explanations. To receive such wisdom was precious; to receive it in such surroundings was priceless. At all times, Robina was available. She was happy to meet with us and chat or to be approached more formally for private counsel. What luxury!

We visited some extraordinary places – Nalanda, with its sprawling ruins of what was once the world's largest Buddhist university; Rajgir, where we stayed in stunning Japanese Zen-style accommodation; Vulture's Peak, where the Buddha gave the second turning of the wheel of the Dharma in teaching the *Heart Sutra*; and Varanasi, with its burning ghats beside the Mother Ganga.

But without doubt, visiting the Buddhist holy of holies, Bodhgaya, was the highlight. This surprisingly small and provincial township is dominated by the seventh century Mahabodhi Temple. It is here that the thirty-five-year-old Buddha attained his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. The fifth-generation descendant

ABOUT LIBERATION PRISON PROJECT

Liberation Prison Project has been offering spiritual guidance and free books and materials to thousands of prisoners and prison libraries throughout the United States since 1996. There are LPP branches in Australia, England, and New Zealand.



Forty volunteers teach prisoners, individually and in groups, via correspondence and in person, and provide guidance to prison chaplains and education officers.

Funded by the generous donations of hundreds of individuals around the world, LPP brings the light of Dharma to many grateful and precious human beings, helping them to transform their minds and lives.

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Above: Ven. Robina Courtin with her traveling mandala.

of the original *peepal* tree stands nestled against the temple's western face. Surrounding this hub are beautiful gardens and courtyards where hundreds of pilgrims spend dawn to dusk prostrating and meditating. Wow!

Bodhgaya is also home to monasteries established by Tibet, Thailand, Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Japan, and Sri Lanka. Ven. Robina's pilgrims had the additional treat of receiving teachings at Root Institute for Wisdom Culture.

For my part, the journey didn't end with the flight back home. Friendships were forged that grow stronger despite physical distance. Lessons learnt from travel abroad remind me of how fortunate I am to live in a free and prosperous country. And most precious of all, the seeds of compassion and wisdom so generously offered by our venerable guru keep me on a greater journey to enlightenment, a journey which has no beginning and no end. ●

For details about this year's 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrimage from October 24 to November 20, visit www.chasingbuddha.org or contact pilgrimage coordinator Effie Fletcher at Himalayan High Treks in San Francisco on 1 (415) 551-1005.

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PSYCHOLOGY & DHARMA

Different Visions of Sanity

By Lorne Ladner

I recently found myself sitting in the office where I work as a psychologist, worrying about my own sanity. I was not worrying that I'd become insane but rather that I was overly sane. When I caught myself thinking about how I wasn't crazy enough, I thought, "That's nuts," which naturally made me feel a bit better.

Among Western psychotherapists, there's been a long debate about the value of a "healthy ego" for those striving to practice the Dharma. One of the functions of the ego is to help us to fit into society – to be *well adjusted* to the world around us. Freud explained that the ego's job is to modulate our powerful, instinctual impulses, helping us to meet as many of our desires as we can while also not harming others, not breaking the rules of our society, and perhaps contributing something to those around us. From an ego-centered perspective, mental health could be described as fulfilling as many of your own desires as possible while also finding your place in society, not harming others around you, and perhaps helping others also to fulfill their desires. The ego lives in the realm of desire.

Now, having a healthy ego that allows us to adjust to society is clearly better than simply allowing our negative, instinctual impulses to be continually acted out. For those of us whose instincts naturally tend toward desire, aversion, and the like, it's the ego that stops us from stealing the things we want or striking out against those who annoy us.

As a psychologist, I often work with people who experience terrible suffering because they lack the ability to manage their negative impulses effectively. While someone with a healthy human ego will eat right, invest intelligently, compromise reasonably with her spouse, and develop healthy habits for using free time, those with difficulty managing negative, instinctual impulses (who lack what psychologists call "healthy ego defenses") may eat and/or diet compulsively, hoard their money or spend impulsively, retreat in fear or become enraged when in a disagreement, and develop unhealthy or obsessive habits. Without the ability to effectively manage our impulses, we may often find ourselves overwhelmed, confused, trapped, in conflict with others, and caught in self-destructive patterns. On the other hand, the healthy ego leads one to be reasonable, well adjusted, and effective in a society of other desire-driven egos.

Actually, if you do not believe in the existence of past and future lives, in karma, or in the possibility of

enlightenment, then this ego-centered vision of mental health is reasonable. If the Buddha were wrong about karma, emptiness, and the possibility of enlightenment, then it would be reasonable to spend this one and only lifetime fulfilling your own desires while striving also to help others fulfill their desires.

However, even Freud recognized that the ego-driven life is not ultimately satisfactory; he once wrote (in a letter to Jung) that, "The ego is like a clown in a circus, always trying to stick in its oar to make it look like it has something to do with what is going on." Jung once wrote that the ego grants us only "a more or less illusory freedom" and that it "represents nothing final."

On a practical level, Western psychotherapists have often imagined that one must first have a healthy

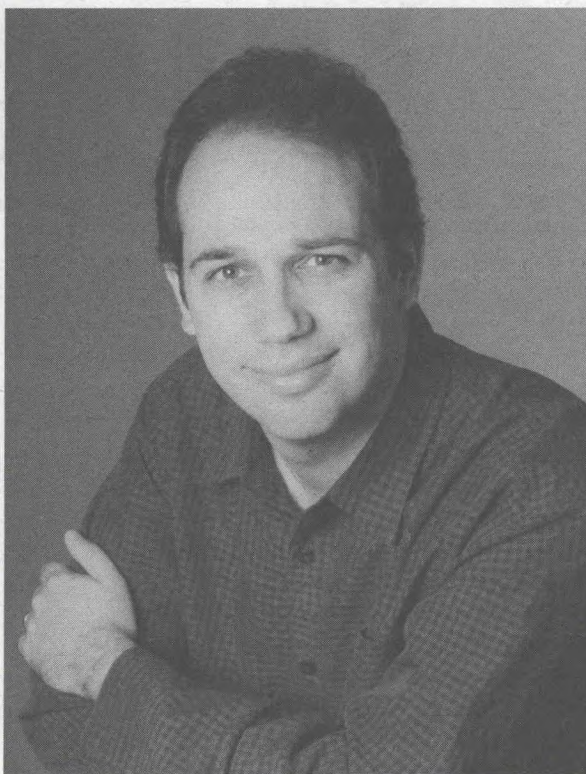
during his early years of labor under Marpa. Clearly a healthy ego that allows us to fit into polite society is not a prerequisite for becoming enlightened.

After Milarepa had meditated for many years, a group of pretty girls came across his emaciated body and expressed concern about his appearance. He noted that, "We are disturbing to each other." From the ego's perspective, anything different is disturbing or threatening. And from the perspective of utter freedom, infinite compassion, perfected wisdom, and enlightened joy, the ego-centered success of being temporarily healthy, attractive, and rich while living in the jaws of impermanence and death is "disturbing," or perhaps even horrific. Lama Zopa Rinpoche sometimes describes it as being as attractive as hoarding vomit.

Ultimately, we are presented with two radically different views of what mental health or sanity is. From an ego-centered view, sanity is being a reasonable person who fits in to society, doesn't harm others, and gets one's instinctual desires met as well as one can. From a Buddhist perspective, issues like fitting in to society or getting one's desires met are irrelevant to mental health. Buddhism presents a vast spectrum of mental illness beginning with the lowest hell realms and presents an exalted vision of mental health encompassing the various paths and grounds of the bodhisattva as well as omniscient buddhahood itself. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, developing sanity and mental health necessarily involves overcoming our delusions and afflictive emotions, cultivating vast positive emotions (such as love and compassion), and gaining insight into the nature of reality.

When I think of the intense suffering of many of my patients – people who suffer from overwhelming depression, anxiety, rage, jealousy, and other negative emotions – I feel thankful for my own transient and relative sanity. And yet when I think of the much more extensive sufferings of samsara and of our potential for enlightenment, then worldly sanity seems to signify being skilled in the eight worldly concerns which are terrible distractions to Dharma practice. At such times, I often recall Milarepa, who sang, "My behavior appears to be that of a madman...but my awareness is truly buddha." ●

Lorne Ladner is a clinical psychologist and director of FPMT's Guhyasamaja Center in Virginia, USA. He is the author of *The Lost Art of Compassion: Discovering the Practice of Happiness in the Meeting of Buddhism and Psychology* (HarperSanFrancisco).



Lorne Ladner: A healthy ego leads one to be reasonable, well adjusted and effective in a society of other desire-driven egos.

ego to practice Dharma effectively. And yet, one of the original arhats was Angulimala, a mass murderer who quickly attained liberation after practicing the Buddha's instructions. And many of the eighty-four great mahasiddhas of India were living on the fringes of society – rather wild and unstable – before attaining enlightenment. Milarepa, too, was a murderer before meeting Marpa, and even he became suicidal