

Journey to Sikkim

The statue in Sikkim is the largest of Guru Rinpoche in the world.



In the Spring of 2006, after attending His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Monlam teachings in Dharamsala, Lama Zopa Rinpoche made a short trip to Sikkim to view the recently completed gigantic statue of Padmasambhava, which at 135 feet is the largest [of Guru Rinpoche] in the world. Sikkim is perched high in the eastern highlands of the Himalaya mountain range. It is small, but incredibly beautiful. Bhutan lies to its east, Nepal to its west, and Tibet to its north. **Lillian Too**, who flew to Delhi to join Rinpoche's journey to the tiny Himalayan state, shares magical moments of the pilgrimage with *Mandala* readers ...

Traveling with Lama Zopa Rinpoche is always an uncertain itinerary. One is never quite sure about timing and schedules, but this time everything unfolds perfectly. We arrange to meet in Delhi on the night of March 30. We – my friends M.K. and his wife Ming and I – fly in from Kuala Lumpur. Salim Li [former FPMT Board member] comes from Perth, while Ven. Roger Kunsang [Lama Zopa's personal assistant and President and CEO of FPMT Inc.] gets in the night before from Portland, Oregon. Ven. Nyima Tashi [attendant to Charok Lama and a relative of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's: his brother Ven. Tenzin Pemba is co-director of Cham-Tse-Ling center in Hong Kong] has come from Kathmandu, and Rinpoche himself is driving from Dharamsala with his attendant Ven. Jinpa and Charok Lama [the fourteen-year-old reincarnation of a great Nyingma yogi and terton, Kushig Mangden] – a twelve-hour drive that begins at dawn the same day. It is a very tiring drive. Charok Lama [presently studying at Sera Je Monastery] later confides to me how stressful the drive has been – hot, dusty and humid – but Rinpoche shows no sign of fatigue when we all meet for a late night supper. He is relaxed and seems very happy to see us.

Over dinner Roger explains the route we are taking. In the morning, we fly to Bagdogra airport near the border where we apply for our Sikkim visa. We then journey via hired cars to Namchi in South Sikkim where we stay the night before driving up the mountains to view the Guru Rinpoche statue in Samdruptse. Following that we drive to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, where Rinpoche is scheduled to give teachings and a Chenrezig initiation at Sera Je Monastery [a recently constructed branch of Sera and the only Gelug-pa Monastery in Sikkim]. We will stay two nights in Gangtok before driving back to the Indian border town of Bagdogra to catch the flight back to Delhi. It sounds

wonderful. There is something very alluring about Sikkim. Getting there does not sound as hard as I had thought

Rinpoche is keen to see the statue, which has only recently been completed. The rest of us are simply excited to be traveling with Rinpoche to such a mystical place that is so closely associated with Guru Rinpoche. Over dinner, many brochures are passed around. Pictures of the statue look incredibly magnificent.

WE START EARLY. It is not long before I am reminded that when one travels with Rinpoche, there are always unexpected, yummy teachings and transmissions. Rinpoche is incredibly skillful at weaving precious practices into conversations and observations as we travel together. This transforms even the most mundane moments of travel into precious time spent with the guru as we gain insights into enhancing our Dharma practice.

As we drive to Delhi airport, this time, for instance, Rinpoche buys two bunches of red roses from a street vendor when the car stops at a red-light road interchange. He holds on to the flowers until we reach the terminal, at which point he passes the flowers to me. I hold them until Rinpoche leans over and says to me, “You can give them to anyone you like.”

We are passing through security so I give a bunch of flowers to each of the two soldiers checking our passports. They are taken aback – it is not every day they get offered a nice bunch of fresh roses. Flattered, they reward me with a big grin. I can see the flush of pleasure light up their faces. It is a nice gesture, I think, as it must be so unexpected for them to receive something so beautiful so early in the morning, and from a nice lady too! Must have made the day for them.

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From right: Sogyal Rinpoche, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lodi Gyari Rinpoche, Special Envoy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and President, International Campaign for Tibet.



From left: Charok Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Ven. Nyima Tashi, Lillian Too, Low Ming Tsuan, MK Sen, and Salim Lee.

And then Rinpoche leans toward me and says, “Think of them as Buddha as you give them the flowers. Make it an offering practice”

In a flash I realize Rinpoche has just taught me how to transform a simple everyday act into a powerful Dharma practice. Making an offering to anyone, even a total stranger, can be a source of merit if you think the right thoughts!

DELHI’S DOMESTIC AIRPORT is crowded. There is always a sea of people here no matter the time of day so it is a perfect place to practice patience. When you are with Rinpoche it is easy to do this because Rinpoche is never in a rush. Ven. Sarah [Tenzin Yiwong] and a newly-ordained nun, Ven. Elaine [Tenzin Rabchog], join us at the airport. We travel by Deccan Air – a budget airline whose seats are so narrow I wonder how we can fit into them. Rinpoche appears unfazed even though he is flanked by Ven. Roger on one side and a fat passenger on the other. I am luckier as the young Charok Lama sits next to me so I have more elbow room. The flight is surprisingly comfortable but it is delayed, so when we arrive at the border town of Bagdogra, we discover it is too late to make our Sikkim visas. The Tourism office has closed for the day!

Obstacles manifest. It is late afternoon. The plan was to eat lunch while Ven. Nyima got the visas done, after which we would drive to Namchi to stay the night. We cannot eat now. We need to detour to another town to get the visas and we need to reach there before seven. Roger rallies the three cars to get going. It is getting dark. Charok Lama points to the distant hills – there are bright red lights. “What are they?” he asks and I realize they are forest fires. I ask Ven.

Roger, who gives the distant fires a cursory glance and does not comment. I look at Rinpoche who is in the front seat and he too appears undisturbed by the fires.

The roads are winding and narrow. As we drive deeper into the mountains, the forest fires get closer. We see large burning patches of the mountain. Sometimes they get so close to the road I can smell the burning leaves. “This explains the haze covering the mountain,” someone observes. I am scared. The fires look fierce and unrelenting. Once again I look at Rinpoche, but he appears calm and is obviously in deep meditation.

“Hey, Roger, are we on the right road?” I ask. Roger murmurs something: not at all reassuring. Meanwhile, it is now very dark indeed, and the road is lit up only by the headlights of our car. We have been on the road for a couple of hours.

My stomach is growling – I haven’t eaten since breakfast. I wonder about Rinpoche and just as I think this, Rinpoche says, “There is corn. We stop to get some corn maybe ...” Roger replies gently, “Rinpoche, we are late. We have to arrive at the border before 7:00 P.M. to get the visas.” Rinpoche stays silent. I ask Roger for some almonds.

FINALLY WE ARRIVE AT THE OTHER BORDER TOWN, and we are on time. As we wait for our visas, Salim offers grilled corn to Rinpoche. This pleases the guru. He gives Salim a very big smile. We can see that fire-roasted corn is one of Rinpoche’s favorite foods. As he eats, Rinpoche tells Salim he wanted to stop for the corn when he saw it sold by the roadside, but Roger had stopped him. Rinpoche tells us that as a child in Lawudo, he used to feast on grilled corn ...

It is a wonderfully intimate moment for all of us there as we huddle in the car in the middle of the Himalayan mountains, hungry and tired, yet feeling so blissed because Rinpoche is sharing childhood stories with us.

It is just before midnight when we arrive in Namchi, which is in South Sikkim. At the hotel, Rinpoche looks up at the nondescript three-story building and remarks, "This is a ten-star hotel." Rinpoche has a dry sense of humor, which peeps out occasionally. But after so many hours of traveling the hotel does seem luxurious. It provides us with warmth and sanctuary. Dinner is waiting as Ven. Nyima has called through earlier. Miraculously our mobile phones work, so despite the seeming wilderness of the area, we are not in uncharted territory. The marvel of modern technology!

Ah, the food is tasty and excellent! Everyone takes several helpings. The hotel staff speaks Nepali so Ven. Nyima can converse comfortably with them. Although hotel facilities are basic, there is hot water and clean sheets and the electricity works. We sleep like logs that night and wake up to a beautiful morning. It is April 1, 2006.

Soon after breakfast, Rinpoche invites us to his room where preparations are underway for a special puja "to clear all obstacles and to appease the earth spirits." That morning Rinpoche gives us a very precious gift.

RINPOCHE INTRODUCES US TO THE SUTRA OF GREAT LIBERATION. He tells us it is also called "Sung" and reading it brings "limitless benefits." The sutra was taught in 8,000 sets by 10,000 buddhas. "So if you put down the benefits of the mantra of this sutra, you will be underestimating all the buddhas who taught this mantra," he explains. "Anyone who hears this mantra and recites it one time everyday will never go to the lower realms and will ultimately attain buddhahood." Rinpoche stresses that we only need to recite this mantra once a day until we reach enlightenment.

"Start by generating the bodhichitta motivation," he tells us, "and then recite the mantra."

Rinpoche then gives us an oral transmission of the mantra, which he repeats several times, enough times for everyone to write the phonetics down correctly. Allow me to share this wonderful mantra with you: [See next page.]

AFTER LUNCH THAT DAY, WE CLIMB TO SAMDRUPTSE to view the brand new statue of Padmasambhava. This is the highlight of our visit. It is Guru

Rinpoche who caused us to come to Sikkim and each one on the journey has a special affinity with Padmasambhava.

The approach to the statue is from the back. A line of people and monks are waiting to greet Rinpoche and to offer khata. I never cease to be amazed at how local people can always smell the presence of Rinpoche wherever he goes. There are also monks from the Sera Je monastery in Gangtok who have motored down to receive Rinpoche. Now they lead Rinpoche up the steps to the front of the statue.

Oh, my! The statue is so awesome.

Guru Rinpoche's face is beautifully stern, almost wrathful, his eyes gazing straight ahead. He sits in the lotus posture, his right hand holding a vajra resting on his lap. In his left hand he holds a staff with three skulls. Guru Rinpoche sits on an open lotus flower, which is resting upon a magnificent throne flanked by white snow lions on four sides.

The statue is huge – 135 feet high. It is the highest and largest statue of Padmasambhava in the world. Conceived almost ten years ago, the foundation stone was laid by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in October 1997. The statue was unveiled and officially opened to the public in February 2004. Made of cement, concrete, and copper, the statue is magnificent and imposing. It casts a special kind of energy over us.

The wind is chilly, but the air is pure and bracing. We follow Rinpoche and the Sera Je monks as they climb to the lotus level of the statue. We follow Rinpoche as he makes heartfelt prostrations to this amazing holy object we have come specially to revere and to honor. Food offerings are quickly laid out as Rinpoche recites all the most wonderful prayers to Guru Rinpoche.

I feel incredibly happy, and very moved.

Feelings of devotion arise as the presence of the great Guru Rinpoche is invoked. Rinpoche recites so many of the most beloved mantras and supplications to Padmasambhava – those that overcome obstacles to Dharma, those to attain success in Dharma, those to attain all our wishes. It is incredibly inspiring. I feel close to tears.

We are fortunate that Ven. Sarah is with us. She knows all the prayers that Rinpoche is reciting; she also has a very beautiful voice. Her songs pierce the cold air adding resonance to the occasion. I can see that even the monks of Sera Je and the locals who have joined us in prayer are impressed.

Later, as we pose for pictures and for the video that Ven. Elaine is making of the visit, Ven. Sarah once again sings her

NAMO BUDDHAYA / NAMO DHARMAYA / NAMO SANGHAYA / ATENDI DHARANI
/ TADYATHA AKASHANI BARBINI / SARVA DHARMA NI BANI / ISHARMADA /
PIPASHANA / BIMALA SUPARI / DHARMANI KANA / BARUNITSAYA DAMALE TSALE
/ HULU HULU / SHIBITE / MANTRA MANTRA MANTRA SVAHA*.

* This mantra has not yet been completely checked against the original Tibetan text.

songs of praise to Guru Rinpoche. It is an uplifting moment being there on that mountain with our precious holy guru who is, of course, Guru Rinpoche himself! I feel incredibly fortunate to have been a part of those few hours. We are definitely connecting with the great Guru Rinpoche in this lifetime. How precious is that!

Everything that comes later is an anticlimax.

It is almost dusk when we start our three-hour drive to Gangtok, the capital. This time there are no forest fires along the way. The drive no longer seems intimidating as it had been the previous night.

Gangtok is a developing city at the edge of modernization. It is 5,500 feet above sea level so the climate is cool. We stay at the Tibet Hotel and that evening, dinner with Rinpoche is imbued with the magic of the day's experience. Salim cannot stop talking about the statue. As an architect, Salim is keen to explore every aspect of its construction.

The next day, Rinpoche gives teachings and Chenrezig initiation at Sera Je monastery. Seeing Rinpoche up close, we realize he never rests. Every moment is spent benefiting others. Rinpoche is always kind, giving every single person he comes into contact with his undivided attention. We see this many times – with hotel staff, with the drivers, the waiters, the monks, and with us. Rinpoche's compassion and his kindness are limitless. It is inspiring to watch.

When we drive back to Bagdogra the next day to catch the flight to Delhi, Rinpoche takes time to visit the Sed Gyud Institute of Buddhist Studies in the town of Salugara in Western Bengal where the monks are expecting him. [Sed

Gyud is of the three tantric colleges and is one of the many monasteries to which Lama Zopa Rinpoche offers daily food.] There, Rinpoche gives a teaching and accepts lunch offered by the monastery. Despite the fact that we have a plane to catch, not once does Rinpoche appear to be in a hurry as he lets himself be led from room to room, from one gompa to another, and then eventually to lunch.

I suppress my impatience but I wonder if we will miss our flight!

Needless to say, I should not have worried. Obliging, our flight is delayed long enough for us to get to the airport on time. Traveling with the guru teaches us to go with the flow. Only three days but it feels like we have spent a lifetime with Rinpoche, the experience is so intense. We stay blissed out for days. ☺

Lillian Too is a leading expert in the Chinese art of geomancy (feng shui) and is the author of more than eighty best-selling books on the subject, translated into thirty languages.

A former successful banker (in 1982 she was the first woman in Asia to be appointed CEO of a bank), she is also founder and chairman of WOFS.com, a feng shui merchandising and franchise company, and the Lillian Too Certified Consultants Institute, which runs correspondence courses and certification programs in feng shui.

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