

Transforming Desire into Wisdom with Vajrayogini

The story of a very special Retreat at Vajrapani Institute

By Ven. Jangchup Phelgey

It was seven o'clock on a cool Friday evening but the air in the upstairs gumpa was heated, almost stultifying. More than thirty people were on hand for this first night of the Vajrayogini retreat.

"Going on a Highest Yoga Tantra retreat," Ven. Ann McNeil once remarked, "is like signing up for a shipwreck."

For this retreat at Vajrapani Institute in Northern California there would be no shipwreck. A patch of rough seas at first, but then smooth sailing.

Family and job commitments dropped the number of retreatants to twenty-four by the weekend's end – two dozen tantric practitioners who, for three weeks, from December 1 until December 23, 2006, were led by Ven. Lhundup Nyingje (Paula Chichester) in morning prayers and nightly tsogs. There were yoga breaks and long periods of silence, and for much of the rest of the time students were on their

cushions reciting the mantra to the deity, slowly increasing their count to that hallowed figure of 100,000, and each evening dedicating the merit. Like before a summer storm, the atmosphere in the gumpa grew thick and charged.

Vajrapani Institute had remade itself – the bookstore was strung with coral-colored prayer beads, and bookshelves were packed with texts on highest yoga tantric practice and biographies of women practitioners. Herbal remedies to offset the effects of *lung*¹ were for sale, as well as postcards, flame-colored scarves, silk bags, and other tokens of remembrance. New cooks had been recruited to serve tasty meals hardy enough to support the strenuous mind-work particular to Vajrayogini: transforming desire into wisdom. Bouquets of red winter flowers (poinsettias,

¹ Lung: "meditator's disease." When the mind is not riding smoothly on the subtle winds of the body, stress is experienced.



At a post-retreat party, George Galt, a long-time friend of Vajrapani Institute, makes music with Alison Harr.

Above the altar hung a *thangka* painting of Vajrayogini. Encircled in flames, naked and fierce, the figure represents the triumphant union of bliss and emptiness. By the end of the retreat, the deity would leave her place above the altar and enter fully into her devotees, into their hearts.

roses, and proteas) were placed in cabins and dorm rooms as reminders of the deity.

A week into the retreat, while coming down the stairs of the *gompa*, Ven. Nyingje badly twisted her ankle. Steve Ginsberg, a retreatant and Chinese medicine doctor, ordered her to bed where he treated her with plasters, herbs, and acupuncture. Ginsberg's wife, Tashi Yangzom, mother of Zong Rinpoche, quietly helped to hold the center together in Ven. Nyingje's absence.

Twenty-four hours later, on crutches, Ven. Nyingje hobbled back into the room.

Retreatants had come from far and wide. Margo Van Greta had flown in from Findhorn, Scotland. Anne McGrath, from England, wrapped in a shawl that recalled Mozart's Queen of the Night, had waited more than twenty years to complete her commitment. Another practitioner had come from India. James Linehan planned for a year to take the time off from his San Jose job. They were all smiling, as was Oma Darlene Ford, who had carried the commitment since the early eighties.

Judith Hunt, an amiable seventy-three year old, took her first Vajrayogini empowerment at Kopan Monastery in Nepal in 1981, and her most recent in 2002 from Ribur Rinpoche. "I had an intense case of lung after deciding to come here," she said. At Kopan Monastery, she'd served as an English tutor and acted as *amala*, or "mother," to some forty of the young Kopan monks, all under the age of twelve. "But these retreats draw so many powerful women and men," she said by way of comparison, then beamed her *amala* smile. "I'm just happy to be here!"

Wendy Cook, director of the Kurukulla Center in Medford, Massachusetts, and assistant director of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, led the yoga segments of the retreat. Ven. Nyingje, who had done many long private retreats, including two of four years duration, had personally invited Cook, knowing her prescription of Hatha Yoga postures would help keep bodies and minds supple.

And so it went. Upon her return, Ven. Nyingje offered protector prayers to calm the occasional edginess. Retreatants soon found themselves afloat upon an experience of bliss.

"Where do we go with these feelings?" they asked.



The smiles on the faces of Alison Harr, Kolby Graham, and Alicia Eisenberg show the benefits of a successful retreat.

Ven. Nyingje reminded them of what Lama Yeshe had told her. "You meditate on emptiness," she answered.

A fire *puja* and self-initiation closed the retreat. On the day of the fire *puja* it was raining, so Ven. Nyingje asked Oma Darlene and Ven. Namdrol (Lisa Dupont) to say mantras into a smoke offering to ask for good weather conditions. It kept on raining, and they thought they'd failed, but just as the fire *puja* started, the rain stopped, and when participants invoked Vajrayogini's portion of the *puja*, a very gentle light rain – "rain of flowers" – fell the whole time.

The next day, during self-initiation, as soon as the thirty-minute chanting of offerings began, the center's peahen flew up onto the deck railing so she could see into the *gompa*. From her vantage point she sang along with the retreatants until the end, to their absolute delight. She flew away when they finished.

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