

Garden of Enlightenment

On a secluded site, surrounded by tropical Queensland rainforest, a tranquil garden is emerging. A project of Chenrezig Institute, the towering central development of eight large stupas depicts the great deeds of the Buddha's life.

Many smaller stupas, containing the ashes of those who passed away, have been placed throughout the landscaped slopes along the water features, or under trees planted by visiting teachers. Garrey Foulkes, who has coordinated the Garden over the past twelve years, tells the story.

The Garden is based on an idea Lama Zopa Rinpoche initiated during Chenrezig's twentieth anniversary celebrations.

Initially, we were going to build quite a large stupa (around five stories high) for Geshe Thingley, who was one of our first resident teachers. As I remember, Rinpoche suggested that it would be very beneficial if we created a beautiful garden around that stupa, and in the garden we could place smaller stupas containing the ashes of deceased people.

The project developed from there. Early on the decision was made to place the stupa on the roof of a building to add elevation, and to create a useable indoor display area for more stupas, a mandala house, and other traditional artwork. Eventually there will be 108 prayer wheels on the outside walls of the building under a veranda, enabling circumambulation during the wet season.

As it became more apparent that the project was going to take some time to complete, and there were many difficulties involved with such a large stupa, we had Rinpoche's approval to compromise by building the "eight great stupas."

We are a year or so away from having the eight main stupas finished. The project has been going for about twelve years now, but due to a lack of initial finances we started rather slowly. Over the past eight years we have finished the most difficult physical work and many expensive stages of the construction. Now that this is behind us, there will be an increased focus on preparing all of the ingredients and the decorations for completing the stupas.

The gardens and water features are now well established, and once the stupas are completed the next phase will be the

decoration of the main building and the fine detailing/tuning of the garden.

We decided at the very outset not to try to raise money by asking for donations, but to focus on building stupas and offering a package of a stupa and a site at the project, or stupas to other centers, or to individuals. The estimated cost of the project is around \$AUD250,000 and we are two-thirds of the way there. We are mindful of keeping our prices more than competitive with any similar services.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has given two generous donations and there have been a few others, but largely the funds have been raised selling stupas and sites. Six of the smaller stupas on the main building have been "sponsored," and in exchange we offer niches for ashes in that stupa.



The long-life stupa is dedicated to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and Geshe Tashi Tsering. The forty niches in the base of this stupa are offered at a reduced rate to Sangha.

All internal walls are covered in sponsored *tsa tsa* tiles, with half of the funds going to the Maitreya statue. To date, we have made around two hundred different sized stupas, which have gone to many parts of the world. This is where most of the funding has come from.

All work on the project (apart from a few skilled services) has been voluntary. As the coordinator of the project, I cannot thank these volunteers enough. There were times when the work was incredibly hard, and despite some very daunting moments nobody ever gave up. There are also many instances of tradesmen who had no intention of getting involved becoming regular helpers. Machine operators and other “unlikely” people, when told about the project, gave us generous discounts, and even offered volunteer help. In short, it is most inspiring to see the effect of holy objects. Being able to involve people by offering the opportunity to help with the project, and being able to offer genuine comfort to those who have lost loved ones is the real benefit up to this point.

The Garden is in a very tranquil environment and many visitors comment on how peaceful it feels. Word has spread and the number of new visitors is increasing. By creating a

beautiful garden that contains many holy objects, a lot of people will benefit in different ways; particularly the deceased, and those who have lost loved ones.

The visitors will make contact with those holy objects, perhaps take lunch, visit the Chenrezig Gomba, the bookshop, or pick up brochures. If this happens, a lot of people will benefit, and of course it will help the center.

As more and more people visit the site, and one hears their response to what we are trying to achieve, there is every reason to be optimistic that projects such as this could bring great benefit wherever they are located. Many people have a rather dry view of the way conventional crematorium gardens function, and they see the Garden of Enlightenment as a real alternative that is a lot more personal and familiar for them. “This is where I want to end up” is a common response.

It would be great to see stupa gardens in all of the different climate zones around the world, creating very beautiful, special places as an alternative to conventional funeral practices. I think Rinpoche’s hope was for us to benefit sentient beings and the centers in this particular way when he suggested this idea.

Being forced to move slowly has enabled us to have the flexibility to introduce new concepts and ideas that we may have overlooked if we were working off of a fixed plan, and we would be more than happy to share our ideas with other interested centers. ☸

