

The Great Retreat: YAMANTAKA

In 1982, **Ven. Paula Chichester** and **Ven. Roger Munro** embarked on the adventure of a lifetime – of this lifetime – so they could, in their own words, “eradicate our negative selfish mind, generate a positive unselfish mind [with the goal of becoming] totally pure beings no longer subject to birth and death, whose omniscient emanations work effortlessly until every sentient being is free from all misery”. That was the year they entered the mandala of Lama Tsong Khapa’s ear-whispered lineage and began a series of meditation retreats that culminated in their four-year cloistered great mantra retreat in Milarepa Center, Vermont, from 1991 to 1995.

But their adventures did not stop there. In January 2000 they entered a Yamantaka retreat that lasted until April 2005. They talked to **Julia Hengst** about this second long retreat:

Ven. Roger: It was an unbelievable blessing to do the Yamantaka Great Retreat. In Lama Tsong Khapa’s lineage, the most extensive way of performing the generation stage practices is by doing all three of these Great Retreats: Yamantaka, Guhyasamaja, and Heruka Chakrasamvara in that order. Because Paula and I had done Chakrasamvara retreat first, Ribur Rinpoche said there were still obstacles in our minds to the realizations of that practice, so we needed to do Yamantaka to clear those obstacles away.

That it did, big time. Both of us had a very difficult time getting into the retreat. I went through several death processes on the way into that retreat because one of the main things Yamantaka deals with is not only purifying anger, but also getting rid of the results of untimely death. There are many other obstacles it gets rid of. Ribur Rinpoche could see we needed that and sent us in to do it, and it was perfect. Some people who saw us going into and coming out of that retreat must have thought we were crazy, but it’s hard to understand what happens in these retreats. The level and depth of obstacles that you’re trying to get rid of is so profound.

Ven. Paula: We couldn’t have done it without Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s help. He advised us to get ordained, and then he kept me as his cook for about a year to help me apply Dharma to the emotions of separation. Rinpoche is so kind.

Ven. Roger: Ribur Rinpoche actually told us to do the

retreat, but it was Lama Zopa Rinpoche who helped bring all the conditions together. When we asked Lama Zopa what we should do, he said, “Whatever Ribur Rinpoche says, that’s what I think.” Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche gave us the oral transmissions of the texts.

You can’t fault the glorious gurus for giving you something difficult to do. You can certainly thank them and I do thank them, from the depths of my heart, for giving me something difficult to do and seeing me through it at the same time. After we finished the retreat and went to offer it to Ribur Rinpoche, he was so happy we’d done it. He even indicated that our retreat had something to do with his recovery from cancer that allowed him to go back to India and sort out his life before he passed on. He had an extra few months of life to go back to India – he thanked us for that.

When Ribur Rinpoche originally asked us to do the retreat, he said it would be of great benefit not only for us but also for him as well as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the FPMT in general. He said we’re doing it for all those reasons.

The day we went to offer the retreat to him is the day he spontaneously recovered from the dementia he seemed to have from the chemotherapy. People who had served him and looked after him didn’t know if he would improve, or if that was it. The day he stopped chemo and we went to visit him, he was back, normal. He was clear with us, he knew us,



Ven. Roger Munro and Ven. Paula Chichester

he knew about what we'd done – it was very special. He was very happy – showing genuine joy – and that's about as good as it gets in this tradition.

Ven. Paula: When you're dedicating and praying every day to clear obstacles away for the FPMT and Maitreya Project, you experience that purification. We had a lot to work with in that retreat.

Julia: *What death processes did you go through to get into your Yamantaka retreat?*

Ven. Roger: The first was building the retreat houses at Land of Medicine Buddha in 1996-97. It took eighteen months to build them and in one short day we had to destroy the entire thing and bury it in a hole in the ground. Not only did that entire project die, but basically Paula Chichester and Roger Munro as a functioning unit – a couple – died.

Julia: *So where did you actually do the retreat?*

Ven. Paula: With Lama Zopa Rinpoche's guidance, we took ordination vows from Geshe Lhundup Sopa in '98. Roger built his retreat hut at Land of Calm Abiding. Rinpoche told me to do it at Vajrapani Institute but there were too many obstacles; kindly, Elaine Jackson offered an unfinished building up the road from Vajrapani, which I finished and lived in for the retreat.

Ven. Roger: A rattlesnake bit me [while helping to fix Ven. Paula's retreat house near Vajrapani] and I nearly died.

Then something very esoteric happened. At the start of the retreat, for eight months I took molybdenum to detoxify acetylaldehyde; it's a toxic byproduct of candida, which I had a very bad case of most of my life up until I was thirty-five. I spent those eight months in a deeply suicidal state, and it just went on and on and on. It was like this toxic substance – acetylaldehyde – had its own mind and as it was coming out of my body that was all I could relate to.

At the end of those eight months, the suicidal mind had subsided completely. Then, Ribur Rinpoche, in his great wisdom, organized at Vajrapani secret teachings on the Six Yogas of Naropa. There were only twenty-five people, and Paula and I were invited. I did all the correct rituals to close the retreat down, then I came up, and Rinpoche tested me. He had me lead the question and answer sessions with him in the room. He had me answer people's questions with him listening. Apparently he was quite happy with how I was able to explain the Six Yogas to people. At the end of meeting with him, he told us, "Now I'm handing you back to Lama Zopa." He was more or less telling us that he was passing on soon: He said, "Don't ask me any more questions about your practice. From now on you ask Lama Zopa."

It took a while to realize that in the ear-whispered lineage, by simply taking one step in the direction of the retreat house, just having the intention to get into the retreat with the correct motivations of renunciation, bodhicitta and the correct view, you create so much merit and purify so many obstacles. Getting into retreat for something like Yamantaka takes a tremendous amount of effort and merit. Paula and I had done the nine extensive ngondro between 1982 and 1989, but at a certain point you need a tailor-made ngondro. When you do things like building houses and tearing them down, or offer service at the guru's house, the lama gets a chance to help you purify your grossest obscurations.

In the first Great Retreat we did at Milarepa Center, the conditions were so harsh but we had a great time anyway. In the Yamantaka retreat we both had very good physical conditions, but it was much harder and took even greater effort and devotion.

We couldn't have done the Yamantaka retreat together. It was so powerful, and we were dealing with such primordially

evil energies – the heaviest, crazy energy we’ve carried since beginningless time – we simply couldn’t be with someone else in a relationship like that and not create negative karma. Our tendency is always to blame the other person. When you’re by yourself you don’t have the luxury of doing that – you constantly have to point your finger back at yourself over and over again.

Ven. Paula: We’ve been practicing for years and I thought I understood what self-cherishing was about. But I didn’t! Lama Yeshe used to say practicing Dharma is like peeling away the layers of an onion. You go deeper and deeper and deeper. The main thing I learned from Yamantaka retreat is that any time I’m unhappy about anything, it’s because of self-cherishing. It’s really about dismantling self-cherishing.

The last year of the retreat was full of mental anguish when I wasn’t meditating. Menopause made it worse! The skill of committing to ten million mantras is that you can’t give up. Now I can see the merit, the benefit, and I can even be grateful for going through such terrifying wrathful cutting of self-cherishing. The mantra that cuts the delusions also generates the bliss and void; and now, speaking modestly, wisdom seems stronger, which cuts worldly concern.

Ven. Roger: Before we started this retreat, while we were at Land of Medicine Buddha, we were extremely fortunate to meet the young Zong Rinpoche when he was ten years old. For those of us who knew the previous Zong Rinpoche, he had a very wrathful side. It would come up very powerfully. That’s how we knew him.

Tenzin Wangchuk, his amazing right-hand man, told us what Zong Rinpoche told him about his wrath. “You know the way I am?” [Wrathful aspect.] “Well, it’s not right. The reason I’m the way I am is because when I did Yamantaka retreat, I didn’t emphasize compassion enough. I got too into the wrathful side.”

So in Yamantaka retreat you’re working with very wrathful, fierce energies. Hearing that Zong Rinpoche himself thought that his own wrath was the product of mistaken practice was such a blessing for us.

Some people think it’s cool to be wrathful – that there’s something special about being wrathful, but there really isn’t. I have fifty-seven gurus who are the kindest, gentlest men I’ve ever met in my entire life. Wrath is a very dangerous energy for anybody to deal with, and even Zong Rinpoche thought it was mistaken practice, so anyone who is dwelling in that energy is possibly deluding themselves, simply because they can’t overcome their own anger.

It was such a great blessing that when we went into retreat, we emphasized great compassion practices. It even got to a point where I couldn’t start my session without doing half an hour of tonglen because the energy of the retreat was so intense. The only way I could take myself into that was through a really extended tonglen visualization process. Both Paula and I started doing that around the same time – emphasizing compassion.

Ven. Paula: That retreat blew apart every relative attachment, even to Dharma. It was scary because it affected everything I have faith in – even the deity and the guru. I came to see that my view of the guru/deity was theistic, that my connection and devotion was tinted by attachment. A lot of us might think Rinpoche is going to save us. Or we think the deities will save us. Really, there is only karma and emptiness.

Ribur Rinpoche said, “The minute you begin to blame something other than yourself for what you’re experiencing, you’ve crossed the line into theism.” It’s just karma! Any time I’m thinking that someone else made me feel this way, I’ve lost the view.

I wondered why I was having such a difficult time being in an isolated retreat, and it occurred to me that women are more relational – they hang out together. Men evolved as solitary hunters, women as groups of gatherers. I think aloneness is harder for women. Later I heard on the radio that women have to say so many thousand words per day or their serotonin levels drop. If women are isolated, their serotonin levels drop, not so for men. I am interested in learning about what nourishes female practitioners. I think Chöd* is great for us – its structure has a feminine quality, it is a gift to us from an enlightened woman.

It took about six months to adapt once we came out of that retreat. We had the energy of a wild bull! When people come out of retreat, it’s important to understand how long it takes to adjust and the loss of depth of awareness that comes with that adjustment. In Tibet it would have been different, the lifestyle being slower. To go from no talking, doing very little, not going anywhere, to having to talk, drive, cell phones, email and so many people each day is quite a challenge. I still have not adjusted and wonder if I ever will. The question is: Can we maintain this meditative lifestyle that allows time for insight and reflection and be a part of this world? ☸

* Ven. Paula and Ven. Roger said that the Yamantaka retreat helped clear the way for them to do a four month-long outdoor Chöd retreat in Scotland in the middle of 2008, which they will describe in a future issue of Mandala. Ed.