

# Strong Connections: Dakini Dance Offerings during Long Life Pujas for Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Australia

Two long life pujas for Lama Zopa Rinpoche served as culminating highlights for the CPMT 2014 meeting and the month-long *Bodhicaryavatara* and Rinjung Gyatsa retreat, both held at the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion in Bendigo, Australia. The CPMT long life puja, offered on September 19, and the retreat puja, offered on October 23, were beautifully arranged and featured dakini dance offerings, an ancient tradition.

Kathy Vichta coordinated the first long life puja. She explained how after Lama Zopa Rinpoche manifested a stroke in 2011, Khadro-la (Rangjung Neljorma Khadro Namsel Drolma) advised that FPMT centers include the dakinis' request to the lama in the long life pujas arranged for Rinpoche. "She recommended that we should not just do the verses as we had always done," Kathy said, "but have dancers in full costume. This is relatively easy at Kopan Monastery, where the monks are trained and they have the costumes on hand. It is a little more daunting in Australia, but we started planning with joy."

The first job was finding the costumes. "After trying to borrow them from centers who had done this part of the puja before, we ended up ordering a complete set, in gorgeous five colored brocades, through Ani Fran at Kopan," Kathy said. Next, dakinis needed to be cast. Cynthia Karena stepped up and contacted local students and daughters of students to find a group of dedicated young women to take on the roles.

"Ven. Tsomo from Land of Medicine Buddha in California was invaluable, sending us training videos and instructions. And with the additional fantastic help from Vajrayana Institute's Ven. Chokyi, things were underway!" Kathy recounted. "Ven. Chokyi and Ven. Tsomo and the young women practiced hard for ages to get all the movements perfect and meditated together to make sure the motivation was clear. It was a powerful preparation and all of this was reflected beautifully during the actual puja."

All of the young women who offered the dance said they felt honored to be asked to participate and brought strong determination and focus to learning the dance and keeping a correct motivation. The particular dance the women learned was adapted from the Kalachakra ritual dance from the tradition of Namgyal Monastery in Dharamsala, India.

"Once I got the moves, I was really focused on feeling the dance and trying to channel the White Dakini," shared Rommy Fisher, the White Dakini in the first puja. "This was definitely

easier said than done. I tried to forge a strong connection with the White Dakini by bringing her into my day-to-day living to give me strength when I faced challenges, hoping that this connection would then resonate on the day of the long life puja."

Several of the dancers had to overcome obstacles at home, school, work and with their health in order to attend rehearsals and the pujas. Simone Mitchell, who was the Red Dakini in both pujas, lives six hours from Melbourne, where the early rehearsals took place, and has a young family and a business, but she managed to make it work. "[At first] my thoughts were about myself and my own performance. This quickly changed. When my motivation shifted and I realized the dance was for others and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, my obstacles cleared. The dance became easy and very powerful for me," Simone said.

The women all credit both the practice of the dakini dance and their connection with each other as being very helpful for overcoming their respective obstacles. "We felt that great purification was happening for all of us as a result of offering something of such great merit to Rinpoche," explained Emily Kostos, the Blue Dakini in the second puja and a back-up dancer for the first. "My self-cherishing thoughts became very apparent during the training, and I saw with more and more clarity how this created so many problems for me. Our director, Ven. Chokyi, was always there to remind me of bodhichitta through the actions of her body, speech and mind."

"Learning the dance was a profound psychological process. The five dakinis must work together in absolute unison to make the dance powerful," said Simone. "We all connected in the end in the most powerful way. I would call them sisters now."

"In terms of connecting into the meaning of the dance, it was really about exploring my relationship with Lama Zopa Rinpoche. After being a student online for a couple of years, this was my first opportunity to meet him, and to be able to do so in such a special way was amazing," explained Bec Llewyn, who stepped in a couple of weeks before the second puja as the Green Dakini when another dancer had to step down due to a final exam being scheduled for the same day. "Overall the dance came to be a way to establish from my own side such a strong connection to Rinpoche, as well as a way to offer thanks for all the guidance he has offered."

On the days of the pujas, the dancers meditated together before going up to the gumpa in costume. "The anticipation of



*Clockwise from top: Lama Zopa Rinpoche with the five dakinis during long life puja, Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, September 19, 2014. Photo by Kunchok Gyaltsen; Dakini dance offering during long life puja, September 19, 2014. Photo by Laura Miller; The five dakinis walking towards the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion for the long life puja for Lama Zopa Rinpoche, September 19, 2014. Photo by Cynthia Karena.*

waiting at the stupa door and then entering into the dance state had an unequalled intensity. From a point of great silence, we came into actualization with our bells and *damarus* in call and response to the cymbals and drumbeat inside the gompa,” recalled Celeste Clayton, who was the Green Dakini in the first puja and the White Dakini in the second. “Due to the mystique of the costume, where only our lips and hands could be seen, we

could no longer be identified as individuals. We were manifesting dakini energy, moving beyond ordinary appearance.

“Once in movement there is the fluidity of the dance that owns you, carries you through. We were truly existing within the moment of the ritual. Somewhere in the space between the sounds of the ritual instruments, the concentration of each lotus step and the devotion from our hearts, we were traveling with the inner and outer deity.”

## REJOICE!

“People were quite overwhelmed as they moved gracefully in unison up the central aisle towards Rinpoche to then kneel before him, requesting him to return to the pure lands with them,” Kathy Vitche said. “They remained there, tied to the throne by five colored khatas, right through the tsog offering. We all marveled at how long they could stay so still. And then, finally accepting that Rinpoche would stay in this realm for our benefit, they left.” As each dakini made her way out of the gompa, she received offerings from the sponsors of the puja.

“I experienced the realization that we are powerful beyond our wildest dreams,” recalled Simone as she reflected on her

experience during the long life pujas. “I can tell you, the energy was extremely strong and overwhelming. I actually found becoming the Red Dakini a tad uncomfortable and distressing. It’s a confidence and power that is beyond our perceptions of gender, class, race, position, etc. It was so new to me to feel this way. My self-cherishing thoughts and concept of who I was disappeared. I felt light and blissful and full of clarity and white light. ... I feel extremely blessed this happened.”

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Many thanks to Cynthia Karena for helping with this story.



Sangha and students listen intently while Helen Patrin, Drolkar McCallum and Tara Melwani read the “Praise to Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche” during the long life puja for Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, Australia, September 19, 2014. Photos by Kunchok Gyalten.

During the long life puja at the end of the CPMT meeting, regional coordinators Helen Patrin, Australia; Drolkar McCallum, North America; and Tara Melwani, South East Asia, read nine pages of praise to FPMT spiritual director Lama Zopa Rinpoche submitted by FPMT centers, projects and services from every region where FPMT is active. The tribute to Rinpoche profoundly touched those in attendance. We share here the opening lines:

## Praise to Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche on the Occasion of the Long Life Puja at the CPMT Meeting

*“You lions among humans,  
Gone to freedom in the present, past and future  
In the worlds of ten directions,  
To all of you, with body, speech, and sincere mind,  
I bow down.”<sup>1</sup>*

Always and forever we are in prostration at your holy lotus feet, Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche.

We offer this praise to you Rinpoche, on behalf of all of your disciples throughout the world. We offer this praise on behalf of all sentient beings, who wander like blind children at the edge of the perilous cliffs of samsara, certain to fall to our deaths without your guidance.

We offer this praise in connection with this long life offering ceremony, with deep, sincere and fervent requests that you remain stable like a vajra in this lifetime for the benefit of all beings.

**Please remain with us, never separated, and continue to guide all sentient beings and the FPMT organization. ...**

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You can read the complete “Praise to Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche” with this issue’s online content at [fpmt.org/mandala](http://fpmt.org/mandala).

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<sup>1</sup> “King of Prayers,” verse 1, FPMT Education Services, 2008