

MONGOLIA

REJOICING IN THE 100 Million Mani Retreat in Mongolia



Lama Zopa Rinpoche's first visit to Mongolia since manifesting a stroke in 2011 was certainly a cause of celebration for the hundreds of Mongolians able to participate in the 100 Million Mani Retreat hosted by FPMT Mongolia (FPMTM) August 1-30, 2013. The purpose of the retreat, in accordance with the wishes of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, was to help revive Buddhism in Mongolia, in addition to generating merit and realizations. Dozens of non-Mongolians took the opportunity to travel to Ulaanbaatar to see Rinpoche and be part of the retreat. Long-time students Ven. Joan Nicell and Owen Cole offer a first-hand account of the sights and sounds of the country, its people and the retreat that took place there. Ven. Tsenla Yanzo, current director of FPMT Mongolia's Drolma Ling Nunnery and Lamp of the Path, also shared her insights for this story.

By Ven. Joan Nicell and Owen Cole with additional information from Ven. Tsenla Yanzo

Driving into Mongolia's capital city from the airport, we were struck by the sharp contrast between the open vistas and grassy hills surrounding the city and the ugly construction and grey piles of rubble lining the road. After an initial bad impression, we found the center of Ulaanbaatar to be very clean, with functional buildings and wide roadways constructed during the Soviet era. But traffic jams were ever-present and trying to cross the street at the busy crossroads usually meant putting one's life at risk!

Storefronts had signs in Russian and Mongolian and, with window displays being a rarity, it was generally impossible to know what to expect inside. Hardly anyone spoke English. It could have been a problem; there were about 70 of us non-Mongolians at the 100 Million Mani Retreat and we didn't speak Mongolian. But soon enough, the essentials of Mongolian were learned – how to say “hello,” “goodbye,” and “thank you” – and that “*cyy*” is the Mongolian word for milk.

In the gompa at Idгаа Choizinling Dratsang, however, the language differences disappeared as Mongolians and non-Mongolians harmonized together each day of the retreat doing extensive recitation of prayers in Tibetan – the Mongolians with the prayers in Mongolian phonetics and the rest of us with English phonetics. Forty-nine lay people, 19 nuns and one lone Western monk (excluding those in Rinpoche's entourage) came from 16 different countries to participate in part or all of the month-long retreat in August 2013. Many of the participants were older students who have been offering service to FPMT centers for years, giving the retreat the feeling of a happy family reunion.

Between 250 and 350 Mongolians, with a high percentage of women, attended the retreat sessions every day, some attending from Darkhan, 225 kilometers (140 miles) away. Among them were about 20 Mongolian monks, most of them from Idгаа Choizinling itself, and about 10 nuns, four of whom were from the small FPMTM nunnery, Drolma Ling. The devotion of the Mon-

golians, especially that of the old women in their traditional Mongolian dress, was very moving to see, and their joyful chanting of the Tibetan prayers was a clear sign that the Buddhist culture is still deeply ingrained in the Mongolian people, in spite of decades of oppression.

Idгаа Choizinling Dratsang is one of the more modern temples located within the Ganden Monastery complex in central Ulaanbaatar. FPMT Mongolia offered the financial support for Idгаа Choizinling's rebuilding, which was completed in 2003, and continues to support the monks there with daily nutritious lunches. Initially the mani retreat was going to be held at a conference center on the outskirts of the city, which would have been more convenient for foreigners attending. Lama Zopa Rinpoche, however, wanted the retreat to be held in the center of the capital so as many Mongolian students as possible could attend.

The daily *Lama Chöpa*, spread over three sessions and chanted mainly in Tibetan, was led by a 25-year-old Mongolian nun, Ven. Choinzom, whose heavenly voice enchanted us all. Her haunting chanting of *Calling the Guru from Afar* moved some of us to tears. Each session of the retreat was fine tuned by Rinpoche – the particular prayers done, the sequence of prayers and the manner of chanting as well. Rinpoche wanted this retreat and the way the sessions were done to become a template so that everyone would have the proper knowledge for conducting future retreats, either individually or as a group.

Sessions of the Chenrezig practice were read in Mongolian and led by various translators, while the non-Mongolians read the corresponding sections of the sadhana quietly in English. Ven. Tsenla led the evening protector practices and the long life puja offered to Rinpoche at the end of the retreat. Under the patient guidance of Australian nun Ven. Tenzin Tsapel, resident teacher of FPMT Mongolia's Golden Light Sutra Center in Darkhan, we soon managed to turn our 200 pages of retreat texts to the right place and fell into the rhythm of the retreat. Mantra time was mostly quiet and concentrated, except for the unstoppable ringing of cell phones, at first annoying, but very soon only a cause of shared laughter.

This wasn't a retreat in the strict sense of the word, with silence, the same seat all the time, not meeting non-retreaters and so on. Ganden Monastery is one of Mongolia's most popular spots with hundreds of visitors each day coming to pay homage

Opposite page, clockwise from left:

Participants during long life puja at the end of the 100 Million Mani Retreat in Mongolia, August 30, 2013; Idгаа Choizinling Dratsang, located in the Ganden Monastery complex in central Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, August 2013; Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaching at the 100 Million Mani Retreat, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, August 24, 2013. Photos by Ven. Thubten Kunsang; Ulaanbaatar, with a population of 1.3 million, is the capital and largest city of Mongolia. Photo by Jeppo75/Dreamstime.

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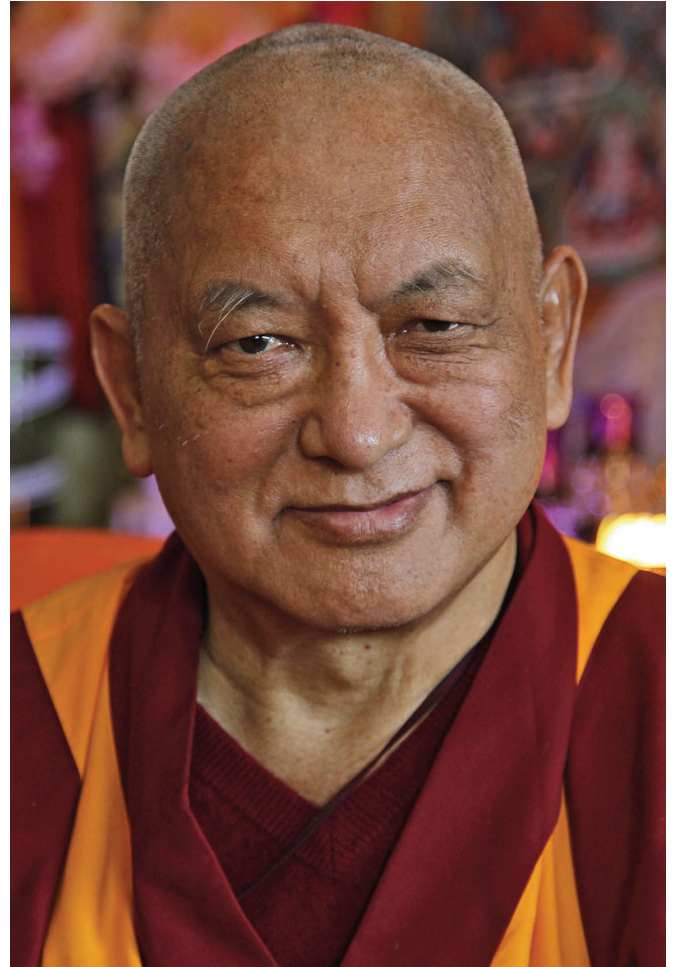
to the Buddha and make charity by buying seed to feed the hundreds of pigeons that have grown accustomed to an easy lunch. Throughout the retreat there were even a number of newlywed couples coming to the complex to receive blessings. In addition, a huge new gumpa is being constructed in the Ganden complex, a positive sign of Buddhism's revival in Mongolia, but on one day this meant a never ending line of concrete trucks revving outside the retreat gumpa, waiting to pour concrete.

The retreat schedule, with its intense sessions punctuated by short breaks, wasn't easy. The schedule had been arranged to accommodate Mongolian participants, who sometimes had to travel long distances and relied on the city's buses. Each day consisted of four sessions: first, a long session followed by two shorter sessions of about two hours and then a final long session. Protector prayers and prostrations to the 35 Buddhas were done before each session. At the end of day, when everyone's legs and minds were usually flagging, came the recitation of the beautiful and inspiring, but long, *King of Prayers*.

Breakfast was sweet rice with lots of candied fruit. Lunch for non-Mongolians was a tasty organic vegetarian meal from the FPMTM's Stupa Café. The Mongolian tea (hot milk with a bit of butter, a tiny dash of salt, and seemingly no tea at all!) was served by the monks from Idгаа Choizinling Dratsang throughout the teachings. It proved a challenge for many of us non-Mongolians to appreciate, until we discovered that it could be nicely flavored with a packet of coffee or hot chocolate powder. However, the fermented mare's milk – a Mongolian special treat – proved more difficult, with only the rare person finding the acidic taste palatable.

The aim of the retreat was to help revive Buddhism in Mongolia. Mongolia has a strong history of Buddhist practice in the Tibetan tradition and in particular, mani retreats. The mani retreat started in Mongolia in the mid-15th century under the great Buddhist leader and practitioner, Zanabazar, and continued until the Soviet-backed communist takeover in 1930. During the "Cultural Purges" that followed, more than 1,000 monasteries and temples were destroyed and thousands of monks were killed or forced into labor camps or exiled. For 60 years, the active practice of Buddhism in Mongolia disappeared completely from public view.

Mongolia gained independence in 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet empire, and while Buddhism remained strong in the hearts of the people, the monasteries, monastic learning and knowledge of Buddhist teaching had been nearly obliterated. In the Ganden complex not far from the retreat venue, there was a huge 26-meter (85-foot) Chenrezig statue. It is an inspiring sight, capable of lifting spirits when the retreat's challenges became a bit much. The communists destroyed the original statue, which was built by a Mongolian ruler in 1911. But in the 1990s, the holy object was reconstructed as a sign of Mongolian independence and a gesture demonstrating the strength of Mongolia's Buddhist faith. Since 2000, FPMT



Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Mongolia, September 11, 2013.

Photo by Ven. Roger Kunsang.

Mongolia, under Lama Zopa Rinpoche's guidance, has been helping the Mongolians to reestablish Buddhism through creating centers, offering teachings and supporting Sangha in monasteries and nunneries as well as providing humanitarian support to impoverished Mongolians. The accomplishment of the 100 Million Mani Retreat in Mongolia had been a particularly strong wish of Rinpoche.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's arrival half-way through the retreat caused much joy and excitement. We soon came to expect daily teachings with Rinpoche after the dinner break, though occasionally Rinpoche would surprise us, either by not showing up at all or showing up earlier than usual (if there is a "usual" around Rinpoche!). Rinpoche's teachings were direct, forceful, and to the point, reflecting the new style of teaching that Rinpoche had also manifested earlier in the year in both Singapore and Malaysia. Rinpoche taught on the motivation for and benefits of reciting OM MANI PADME HUM, the verse of *Taking Refuge and Generating Bodhichitta*, how the guru guides us, the power of faith, how fortunate we are to have met the Buddha's teachings, the importance of understanding and preparing for death, the harm caused by anger and the benefits of patience, and more.

Rinpoche was animated and enthusiastic during teachings and spoke very clearly. The teachings were translated into Mongolian by the interpreters from FPMT Mongolia's Ulaanbaatar center, Ganden Do Ngag Shedrup Ling, which gave the sessions with Rinpoche a relaxed pace. Ven. Joan Nicell provided simultaneous transcription of the teachings that appeared on a large flat-screen television. The teachings were also webcast around the world.

Rinpoche made a particularly strong case for vegetarianism, saying that after his stroke he had decided to make a point of *announcing* the case for not eating meat saying:

There is no need for much discussion: if less people eat meat, there will be less killing of animals, whereby there will be less suffering for animals, and less suffering for human beings due to their creating less negative karma.

He later added:

Since sentient beings are so kind to you, how dare you kill them and eat their meat? No way, it is impossible. If you can't repay their kindness even by sacrificing your life numberless times equaling the numberless atoms of the earth, how can you kill them and eat their meat? It is the same as killing your mother of this life and eating her meat. It is the same as that.

Strong statements in a country where the winters are long and frigid and meat – horse meat in particular – is a staple part of the diet. Rinpoche also urged everyone to say 10 malas of mani mantras each day as the result will be that people are purified just by looking at you, and if you go in the ocean or a lake, all the animals in the water will also be purified.

In addition to attending the wonderful retreat, we visitors to Mongolia had a great time seeing the temples and museums, exploring the many Dharma shops, and enjoying the good food at several local vegetarian restaurants. The atmosphere of joy and harmony prevailed even, or perhaps especially, at the Lotus Guest House where, for an entire month, as many as 20 nuns and lay women managed, with seemingly endless laughter, to share a single floor with over-crowded dormitories (two with bunk beds end-to-end), a tiny kitchen that required special skilled maneuvers to pass each other and a constant line for the two showers. Those of us who stayed there can definitely attest to the fact that the blessings of Chenrezig really do work!

Ganden Do Ngag Shedrup Ling, the local FPMT Mongolia center, showed typical Mongolian hospitality, treating us non-Mongolian retreat participants like VIPs. After clearing immigration at the airport on the outskirts of the capital, there was the welcoming face of a center representative holding a sign saying "Mani Retreat." We were then whisked away to our accommodations, which in many cases had been arranged by

the center itself. We were also taken out to the airport to catch flights at all hours of the day or night after the retreat.

This assistance and support was deeply appreciated by those of us not familiar with Mongolian culture. For example, while there are official taxis, the most common way of getting around Ulaanbaatar is to hail a passing motorist, say where you are going, negotiate a price and jump in the car. The center also arranged the extension of visas and immigration registration for those who required it. Otherwise, many would have had to break retreat to deal with these formalities. This may not seem like much, but the immigration office is on the edge of the city and Mongolia has a bureaucracy second to none.

Rinpoche himself showed great pleasure with the large number of Mongolians who participated with so much effort, enthusiasm and constancy in the retreat, and the excellent organization by FPMT Mongolia and the staff of the Mongolian centers. He asked that the event be repeated annually, so that "many people can really enjoy the opportunity to purify the negative karmas and obscurations collected from beginningless rebirths and to collect extensive merits."

Rinpoche stressed how fortunate we had been to be able to do this retreat, to take the Eight Mahayana Precepts, to do prostrations to the 35 Buddhas, and to recite the mantra of Chenrezig, thereby every day, in every session, bringing peace and happiness to all sentient beings, to this world, and in particular to Mongolia. In fact, all of us felt extremely privileged to have been able to participate, even in a small way, in Rinpoche's vast efforts to revive the study and practice of Buddhism in Mongolia.

The Mongolian people who participated were also very happy and most grateful to have had the opportunity to experience such a retreat and thanked FPMT Mongolia for acting as host. The announcement of the retreat as an annual event was greeted with nothing short of excitement and happiness. Preparation for the mani retreat in 2014 hopefully will begin in late spring 2014 with the creation of the sand mandala of Chenrezig.

The retreat concluded with a long life puja attended by as many as one thousand people. A couple of days later, Rinpoche gave a White Tara long life initiation, a gift from Rinpoche to the Mongolians for their enthusiastic participation in the retreat. Rinpoche also offered all the Mongolian participants copies of the *Sanghata Sutra* and *Diamond Cutter Sutra*. Then, as Rinpoche still had some time remaining in Mongolia, he gave a public talk in Darkhan organized by Golden Light Sutra Center, the FPMTM center there. Upon returning to Ulaanbaatar, Rinpoche offered to grant the great initiation of Chenrezig. While the initiation never happened, Rinpoche did give several extra evenings of teachings at Idgaa Choizinling in preparation for it.



Clockwise from left: Chenrezig statue, Ganden Monastery, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Photo by Card76/Dreamstime; Sangha with Rinpoche in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, August 29, 2013. Photo by Ven. Namdrol; Non-Mongolian nuns and lay students, most of whom roomed together at the Lotus Guest House in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, August 19, 2013. Photo courtesy of Ven. Paloma; Participants during the long life puja at the end of the mani retreat, August 30, 2013. Photo by Ven. Thubten Kunsang.

By the end of the retreat, the powerful experience of 100 million manis reverberated in all of us – Mongolian and non-Mongolian alike. The retreat was a huge success for FPMT Mongolia. And Rinpoche seemed very pleased with the 108,939,500 recitations of OM MANI PADME HUM.

May this and all future mani retreats bring enormous benefit to the flourishing of the Buddhistharma throughout this troubled world.

Part of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's "Vast Visions" for the FPMT (see *Mandala* October-December 2010) is for the organization to regularly sponsor and complete 100 million mani retreats. Since 2009, Rinpoche has been sponsoring one nunnery in Nepal to complete this amazing practice. This year, two 100 million mani retreats were sponsored through the Lama Zopa Rinpoche Bodhichitta Fund, a fund which enables Rinpoche's varied and compassionate service to others to flourish. You can participate by visiting <http://fpmt.org/projects/fpmt/lzrbf>.