

2019 NOVEMBER COURSE AT
KOPAN
— MONASTERY —

279 Participants Engage in this Legendary Retreat



Every year, the November Course, a month-long lamrim meditation course at Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, draws diverse students from around the world. What started in 1971 with a dozen students in attendance, reached a record 279 participants from forty-nine countries this year with Ven. Robina Courtin teaching the course for the first time. This was also the first course held in Kopan's new Chenrezig gampa. Mandala editor, Carina Rumrill asked Ven. Robina about this year's course, and we share this beautiful account of her experience and history with this style of retreat.



**THIS YEAR'S
RECORD NUMBER
OF PARTICIPANTS
— 279 PEOPLE
FROM FORTY-NINE
COUNTRIES —
WITH KOPAN'S
ABBOT KHEN
RINPOCHE
THUBTEN
CHONYI, VEN.
ROBINA COURTIN,
AND OTHER
TEACHERS AND
MEDITATION
LEADERS.
PHOTO BY
VEN. THUBTEN
CHOYING (SARAH
BROOKS).**



VEN. ROBINA COURTIN OFFERED A MANDALA TO RINPOCHE REQUESTING TEACHINGS. PHOTO BY VEN. THUBTEN CHOYING (SARAH BROOKS).



AND THE BLESSINGS: YOU COULDN'T HELP BUT FEEL THEM

BY VEN. ROBINA COURTIN

The Kopan November Course is legendary. The first of what became an annual event, one month of lamrim teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to a dozen Westerners fifty years ago, quickly became a magnet for spiritual seekers worldwide. Every year it was a badge of honor to secure a place at this intense event of pre-dawn prostrations and meditation, semi-fasting, silence, and teachings that go on all day and into the night. You sat on a hard cushion in a tent packed with 200 others, enjoyed cold-water washes, and slept on a thin mattress on a dormitory floor.

But the beauty of the place was its saving grace: a hill surrounded on all sides by the terraced fields of the magnificent Kathmandu Valley, with mountains to the north and the holy Boudhanath Stupa visible in the south. And the blessings: you couldn't help but feel them. Once a lake, the valley's waters were released through a gorge created by a slash of Manjushri's sword, thus revealing a crystal stupa, the manifestation of Buddha's holy mind, that now resides in the stupa at Swayambunath high on a hill, which itself is Heruka Chakrasamvara's mandala. All the lamas adore Kathmandu Valley.



A PARTICIPANT'S NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —

Kopan, after forty-three years, was like going home again after no Lama Yeshe, no Geshe Lama Konchog, and what brought a tear to my eye was seeing Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup's real-life statue. Two hundred and fifty of us with our life issues transported to a wonderful hill: eat, sleep, discuss, meditate, taught in the "garden of our mind," as Ven. Robina would say.

— GREG CARR, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**VEN. ROBINA WITH
LAMA ZOPA
RINPOCHE DURING
THE 2019 NOVEMBER
COURSE.
PHOTO BY VEN.
ROGER KUNSANG.**

Soon Kopan became a dual facility, with a handful of monks from Rinpoche's surrounding villages in Solu Khumbu coming down to live full time. In between their studies, they took care of the foreigners.

My first course was Kopan-style, at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia, in June 1976. It was not in a tent, however, but in the newly built gumpa. It was winter, and it was also on a hill, and the absence of the yet-to-arrive louvre windows around the entire room, Queensland-style, welcomed the chilly winds for the entire month. I'll never forget it.

I'll also never forget Rinpoche's teachings. I knew from the moment of arriving that this was my home, but I didn't understand a word of the arcane concepts. I had no idea what to expect but I

would continually wonder, "Where's the Buddhism here?" The one thing that resonated was the word "karma." When I heard what it meant, I knew that was what I'd been missing all my life. I also knew that Rinpoche was a holy being, that was evident, but I was drowning in confusion. But I stayed.

What kept me buoyed up was Lama Yeshe, who'd come from time to time. I sighed with relief when I heard him. Somehow what he said made sense; enlightenment seemed possible.

Just as they've done for countless thousands since then, the teachings of these lamas transformed my life. I arrived at Kopan in November 1977, attended the course, and received my first nun's vows from Rinpoche at Losar the following February.



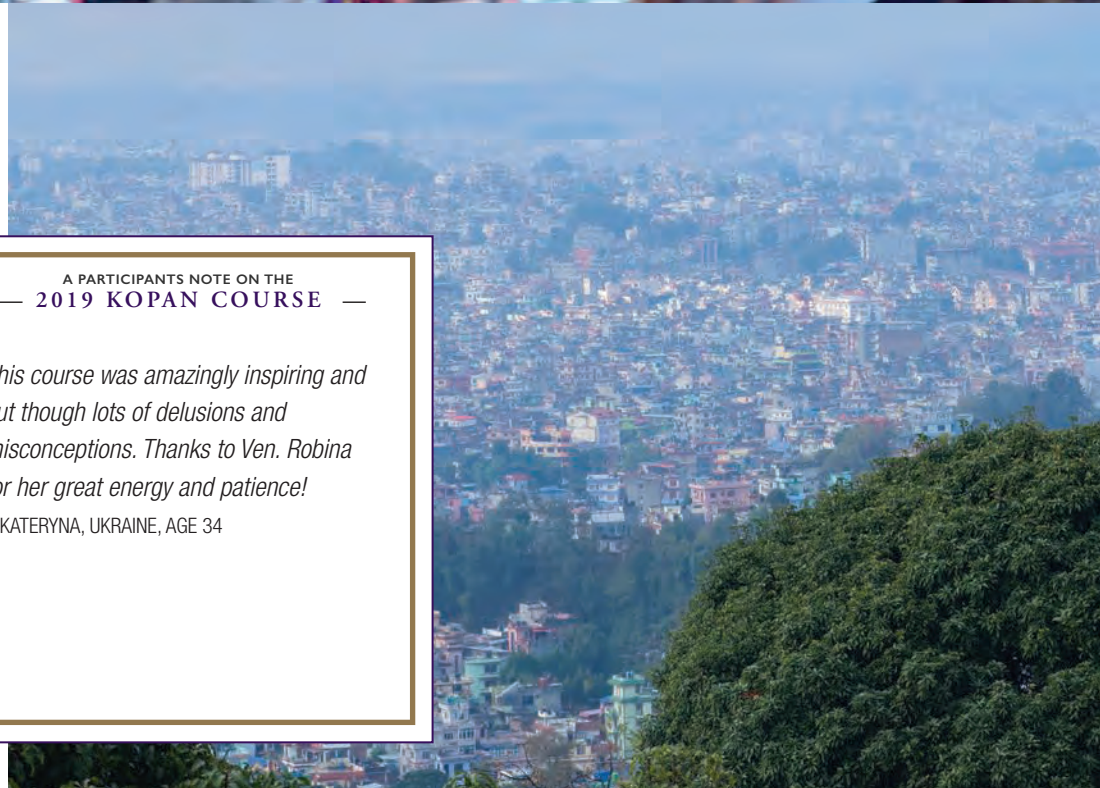
ABOVE:
KHADRO-LA TEACHING,
AT THE REQUEST OF
LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE,
IN THE NEW CHENREZIG
GOMPA, WHICH WAS
COMPLETED JUST IN TIME
FOR THE NOVEMBER
COURSE.

RIGHT:
VIEW OF KATHMANDU
VALLEY FROM KOPAN
MONASTERY. PHOTOS BY
VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

A PARTICIPANTS NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —

*This course was amazingly inspiring and
cut through lots of delusions and
misconceptions. Thanks to Ven. Robina
for her great energy and patience!*

— KATERYNA, UKRAINE, AGE 34



A PARTICIPANTS NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —

I am still not very sure about what happened here, but Ven. Robina and Renato came like yang and yin, turning my mind into shreds, and kindly putting all the pieces together again but in much better shape. I came for the Buddhist philosophy, which I got, but I left with really much more. I saw my own mind as never before and I'm deeply grateful for that. Thanks to all of the staff members who made this possible.

- CAMILO ORCHARD, CHILE



A PARTICIPANTS NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —

It is very powerful to discover we can change our own minds. Whatever negative traits I have in my mind, if I am aware and start practicing the opposite habit, then the new tendency will only grow until it becomes natural.

— ALICE SCHAN, HONG KONG, AGE 30

This year's course at Kopan was no different. The intensity has never lessened—except that now you can retreat to the luxury of a comfortable bed and hot shower in your own room or an espresso in the café. And the terraced fields have been replaced by houses.

The handful of monks has become a full-fledged monastery of 400, effectively a branch of Sera Je Monastic University in South India, with the power to grant geshe degrees, and a thriving nunnery down the hill, also producing geshemas. And the monks continue to take care of us foreigners, running the place perfectly.

It seems that the demand for places at the November Course only increases. With the beautiful new Chenrezig Gompa replacing the old one destroyed in the 2015 earthquake and the increased number of rooms, this year's course had 279 participants (from forty-nine countries). According to Ven. Fran, who helps manage the courses, soon after registration opened a moment after midnight on August 13, the website crashed. Finally, a hundred people didn't get a place.

JUST LIKE THEY'VE DONE FOR COUNTLESS THOUSANDS... **THESE TEACHINGS TRANSFORMED MY LIFE.**

ON DECEMBER 3, 2019, ALL THE MONKS, NUNS, COURSE PARTICIPANTS, AND MANY VISITORS CELEBRATED RINPOCHE'S 74TH BIRTHDAY WITH A HUGE CAKE, A PLAY, AND MUSIC AND SINGING FROM LOCAL SHERPAS. PHOTO BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.





FROM LEFT: KHADRO-LA AND VEN ROGER ATTENDING RINPOCHE'S BIRTHDAY PARTY.

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE PRESENTED WITH HIS BIRTHDAY CAKE, DECEMBER 3, 2019. PHOTO BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

And these days there's an entire team taking care of the meditations and teachings. As always, Rinpoche is the heart of the course, coming this year for the middle two weeks. And as always, we received the full force of Rinpoche's experiential knowledge: the essence of the entire path, every day, every session: emptiness and subtle dependent arising and bodhichitta.

On December 3 all the monks, nuns, course participants, and many visitors celebrated Rinpoche's 74th birthday with a huge cake, a play, and music and singing from local Sherpas.

A glorious gift this year was the presence of Rangjung Neljorma Khadro Namsel Drönme (Khadro-la)—both a student and a lama of Rinpoche's: "My first lady guru!" he told us.

People were delighted to hear Khadro-la's teachings: so direct, so clear, so uncompromising. They fell in love with her. Kopan's kind and low-key Khen Rinpoche ("Precious Abbot") Thubten Chonyi also taught and answered many questions. And Geshe Tenzin Zopa taught one evening as well.

One of Kopan's resident teachers, Ven. Karin Valham, who's lived there for thirty-plus years, taught and led meditations and questions and answers every evening.

As always, she was impeccable. Ven. Ailsa Cameron and Ven. Joan Nicell shared with her the responsibility of taking personal appointments with the students.

Renato Unterberg, a student of FPMT's *Basic Program* at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, with enthusiasm and kindness led the Eight Mahayana Precepts for two weeks, at 5A.M., led prostrations to the Thirty-five Buddhas every morning at 5:30, and then at 6:30, after morning tea, and again in the evenings at 6P.M., guided the meditation sessions.

I taught a couple of sessions every day, or just one, or sometimes none, when Rinpoche was there. Initially I was worried about teaching for a whole month. But it was relaxed. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

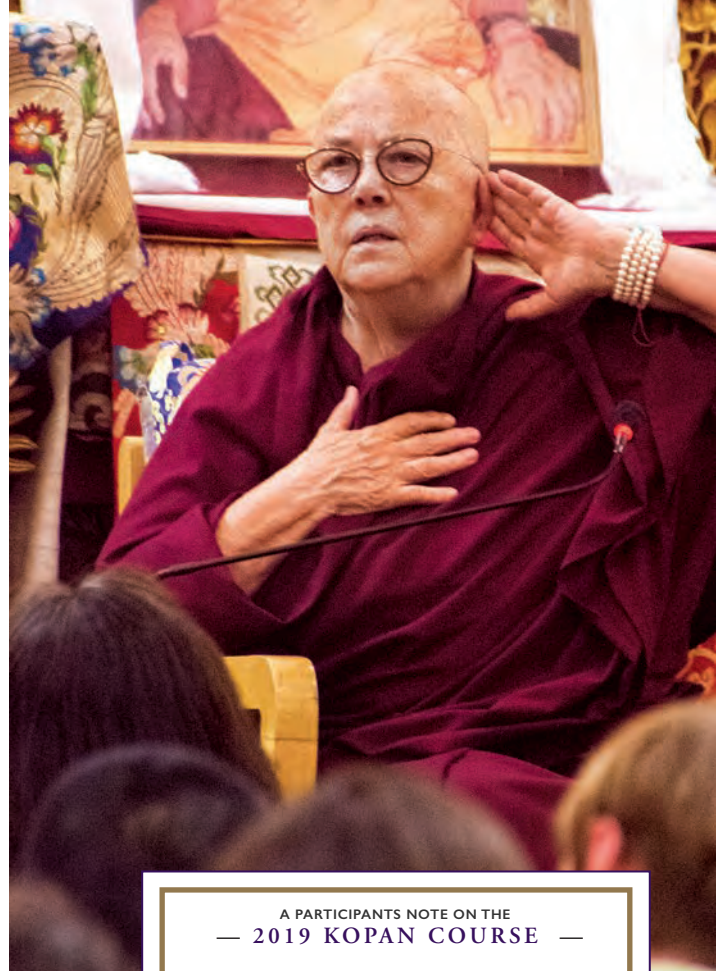
What are the benefits of these courses? For one month you hear the Buddha's teachings in the framework of this marvelous packaging called the lamrim, enhanced by the power of the purification practices. It can't help but go in deep. And for me, having to say the words, it's my analytical meditation done out loud; it's my practice.

I'm so grateful!



**ABOVE:
A KOPAN RESIDENT TEACHER,
VEN. KARIN VALHAM, GAVE TEACHINGS
AND LED MEDITATIONS EVERY EVENING.**

**RIGHT:
VEN. ROBINA ENGAGED IN QUESTIONS
AND ANSWERS WITH PARTICIPANTS,
AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE COURSE.**



**A PARTICIPANTS NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —**

Take control of body and speech,
Moment by moment watch the mind,
Dharma with Ven. Robina and Renato,
So wonderful! So brilliant! So kind!
With so much gratitude for your wisdom
and compassion.

- JANE BIRKBECK, VICTORIA, B.C., CANADA, AGE 73



**RENATO UNTERBERG GUIDED STUDENTS
THROUGH THE INTENSIVE EARLY MORNING
SESSIONS OF THE EIGHT MAHAYANA PRECEPTS,
PROSTRATIONS AND MEDITATION, AND AN
EVENING LAM-RIM SESSION. PHOTOS BY VEN.
THUBTEN CHOYING (SARAH BROOKS).**



TOP:
VEN. ROBINA AND STUDENTS ON THE LAST DAY OF THE COURSE AT SWAYAMBHUNATH STUPA. PHOTO BY VEN. THUBTEN CHOYING (SARAH BROOKS).

RIGHT:
LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE, KHADRO-LA, AND STUDENTS DOING KORWA (CIRCUMAMBULATING) BOUDHANATH STUPA. PHOTO BY HARALD WEICHHART.

A few years ago Rinpoche added a new component to the course. In the early morning of the last day we all climbed into a dozen buses and drove to Swayambhu Stupa and circumambulated the entire hill upon which it sits, each of making our own fervent aspirations and prayers. We came back to Kopan for lunch and then drove down again in the afternoon and circumambulated Boudhanath Stupa. Everyone reveled in it! After thirty days of full immersion in our own minds, it was like a picnic.

Ordained since the late 1970s, Ven. Robina Courtin has served as editorial director of Wisdom Publications, editor of *Mandala*, executive director of Liberation Prison Project, an editor of Lama Yeshe's and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's books, and as a touring teacher. Her life and work with prisoners have been featured in the documentary films *Key to Freedom* (2007) and the award-winning *Chasing Buddha*, released commercially worldwide in 2013.






 COMING TO A
KOPAN COURSE
 IS THE MOST IMPORTANT EDUCATION OF YOUR LIFE

In 2018, Lama Zopa Rinpoche spoke to students about the significance of attending the November course. The following is a short excerpt from that teaching.

So you are coming here to learn meditation. What you are learning, that is the most important thing in the world, the most important thing in your life.

That helps not only this life, it helps not only the next life, it helps hundreds and thousands, millions—it goes on, the benefit goes on and on. It goes on to enlightenment.

Ultimately, it goes on to enlightenment. Your coming here to do meditation—listening and meditating—all this goes up to enlightenment for numberless sentient beings.

You achieve enlightenment for numberless sentient beings—for every ant you see in the road, in the gompa; every bird; every dog and cat; people; every sentient being—to benefit everyone, to free them from the oceans of suffering of samsara and bring them to buddhahood, peerless happiness, buddhahood.

So your coming here, learning lamrim meditation, meditating to actualize, is so the mind, the child mind, is transformed into a mind that cherishes others, like the Buddha did. ...

Excerpted from Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings at Kopan Monastery, December 8, 2017. Simultaneously transcribed by Ven. Joan Nicell. Lightly edited by Laura Miller, October 2018.

A PARTICIPANTS NOTE ON THE
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Every second of the retreat I felt like time was expanding by the light of love and compassion. Every moment was so precious that I kept saying myself, "Stay awake, Elif. You can't miss that." I chose to be in silence for thirty days and in that infinite time period all I saw was the joy in everyone and in everything with feelings of gratitude.

— ELIF, TURKEY, AGE 29

Pilgrimage to India & Nepal with Venerable Robina Courtin

February 5 – 22, 2021

We start with two days at Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu then visit Boudha, Swayambhu, and Lumbini in Nepal before moving on to Sravasti, Kushinagar, Vulture's Peak, Nalanda, Bodhgaya, and Deer Park in India. Ven. Robina will give teachings and lead meditations and pujas according to the advice of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. The program cost of \$5480 from Kathmandu includes accommodation, meals, and internal air.



Itinerary and Information:

Dharma-Journeys.org

Phone +1-415-551-1005 | info@hightreks.com



ALL EXPERIENCES ARE CREATED BY
THE MIND

This teaching is an excerpt from Lama Zopa Rinpoche's lamrim teachings during the first November Course held at Kopan Monastery in 1971.

In order to realize the three lower realms, we must fully see the sufferings that exist there. However, at the moment we have no power to perceive these things directly. Therefore we should try to experience those realms through our practice, using the examples shown in the teachings. In this way we can gain the power to see this suffering clearly in our minds.

Even at this moment, most beings are suffering in the three lower realms, especially in the hell realms. Their suffering has not been created by God or fixed by some other being. It is only a creation of those suffering beings' minds, just as in a dream we may sometimes suffer in a fire, or from all kinds of fearful persons or demons fighting and frightening us. In the same way that these fearful dreams and visions are the creation of our illusive mind, so are the suffering and the realms of the naraks and so forth the creation of beings' ignorant mind. However, the narak realms are not the same as dreams, but are karmic creations of the ignorant mind. This is similar to the way that one place can be seen differently by two different people—one may see a clean place while another person may see a dirty place. Although the object is the same, the view

THEIR SUFFERING HAS NOT BEEN
CREATED BY GOD OR FIXED BY
SOME OTHER BEING. **IT IS ONLY
A CREATION OF THE
SUFFERING BEING'S MIND.**

varies according to the level of mind, fortune, and the karma the being has created. As the mind reaches higher levels, the enjoyments and the visions change and the transcendental awareness and happiness we experience increases more and more.

Each living being's samsara is a creation of that mind; each living being's enlightenment is also a mental creation. In a dim room lit by a small candle with a flickering flame, a person without acute perception may see a fearful moving animal or demon, become afraid and perhaps throw something at it. This problem is only the creation of that person's mind. The person



STUDENTS, INCLUDING HARRY SUTTON AND MERRY COLONY, ATTENDING LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE'S BIRTHDAY PARTY DURING THE 2019 NOVEMBER COURSE. PHOTO BY VEN. THUBTEN CHOYING (SARAH BROOKS).

with a calm, relaxed mind, on the other hand, will see what is actually there clearly. All experiences are created by the mind. Similarly, the suffering of the hell being is merely the creation of that suffering being's mind. Therefore, the choice to experience suffering, to be in a suffering realm, or to be in the perfect peace of enlightenment depends upon the decision of the mind.

Excerpted from the 1971 chapter of *Big Love*, by Adele Hulse, forthcoming from Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. You can read more from this chapter on the Archive's website: www.lamayeshe.com/article/chapter/1971-first-kopan-meditation-course

The 2020 November Course is scheduled to begin in early November. More information about the course will become available at kopanmonastery.com in May/June 2020.

A PARTICIPANT'S NOTE ON THE
— 2019 KOPAN COURSE —

This year's course has rooted my interest in Buddhism. Now there's no way back and I'm so happy about it. I'm going to leave Nepal with a daily practice, a conviction to not give it up, and a strong connection with the teacher, Ven. Robina. I want to follow her everywhere!

— KELSANG, SPAIN, AGE 28