

# The Retreat of a Lifetime:

## Guru Devotion in Australia with Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Story contributors: Helen Patrin, Owen Cole and Adele Hulse. Photos by George Manos.

*I don't think that anyone had ever anticipated that our precious guru would show the aspect of a stroke in the middle of the retreat. This became an intense teaching on so many levels for all of us, whether we were physically present at the retreat or back in our daily lives. The importance of making your life meaningful is resonating in my mind and how we really need to put effort into transforming our minds.*

— HELEN PATRIN, FPMT AUSTRALIA NATIONAL COORDINATOR

From April 2-30, 2011, nearly 200 mostly-Australian students participated in the retreat of a lifetime with Lama Zopa Rinpoche, co-hosted by FPMT's Atisha Centre, Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery and the Great

a long life puja for Lama Zopa Rinpoche on behalf of all FPMT students. However, as Rinpoche has repeatedly demonstrated, things around the guru do not always unfold according to our plans; the teaching we *need* might not be the teachings we anticipate.

The 2011 Australia retreat will be remembered in many ways. It goes without saying that it will be thought of by many students as the retreat at which Lama Zopa Rinpoche manifested the symptoms of a stroke. But the story of the April retreat reaches much more broadly and deeply than the pivotal event that shook the minds and hearts of students and friends worldwide. It is a moving story of guru devotion, told through the incredible organizational efforts of the retreat sponsors and the intense practice of retreat participants.

For many years, FPMT Australia (FPMTA) has jointly requested Lama Zopa Rinpoche to visit Australia to lead a long retreat. In early May 2010, a message arrived from Rinpoche accepting their latest joint invitation and stating that Atisha Centre was where he would like the one-month retreat to take place in 2011.

The request came as a big surprise to Atisha Centre, who shares land with the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion and Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery [see page 64] on the outskirts of Bendigo, a town of 100,000 residents about 150 kilometers (93 miles) northwest of Melbourne. There was little infrastructure available on the land to host what would no doubt be a large retreat. In fact,



Atisha Centre's resident teacher Geshe Konchok Tsering, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Atisha Centre's director Cherry Rattue, Ven. Kunsang in background

Stupa of Universal Compassion in Bendigo, Australia. The preliminary schedule was straightforward: two weeks of commentary on Shantideva's *Bodhicaryavatara* (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*), the transmission of the rare Rinjung Gyatsa initiations during weeks three and four, and ending with the usual heartfelt offering of auspiciousness:



Guru Rinpoche statue at Great Stupa of Universal Compassion near Bendigo, Australia



the plan had been to request Rinpoche to visit in 2015, when their building projects would be further along and they would be better able to host a gathering of great magnitude. But the three centers – familiar with meeting challenges – agreed to host the teachings and quickly began the massive task of speeding up building projects and organizing a month-long retreat with less than a year to prepare.

Miraculously, and thanks to the blessings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the tireless work of staff and key volunteers, Atisha Centre managed to finish and obtain council approval for their new accommodation block just as students were arriving on April 1. Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery completed their new accommodation block as well, although the electrician was unable to get the power in until the second week of the retreat. Organizers had hoped to complete the lower level of the Great Stupa for the retreat but weren't able to. At the last minute, a large white marquee was erected inside the stupa's massive steel framing for the first two weeks of teachings, providing the participants with protection from the elements.

"Their steady calm gives no indication of the enormous courage they have shown in having this retreat here in the first place," long-time student and Lama Yeshe biographer Adele Hulse said of the Bendigo complex staff and their dedicated band of retreat volunteers. In addition to creating a welcoming retreat environment, the organizers also were able to cover the retreat expenses for the 50 Sangha members who attended.

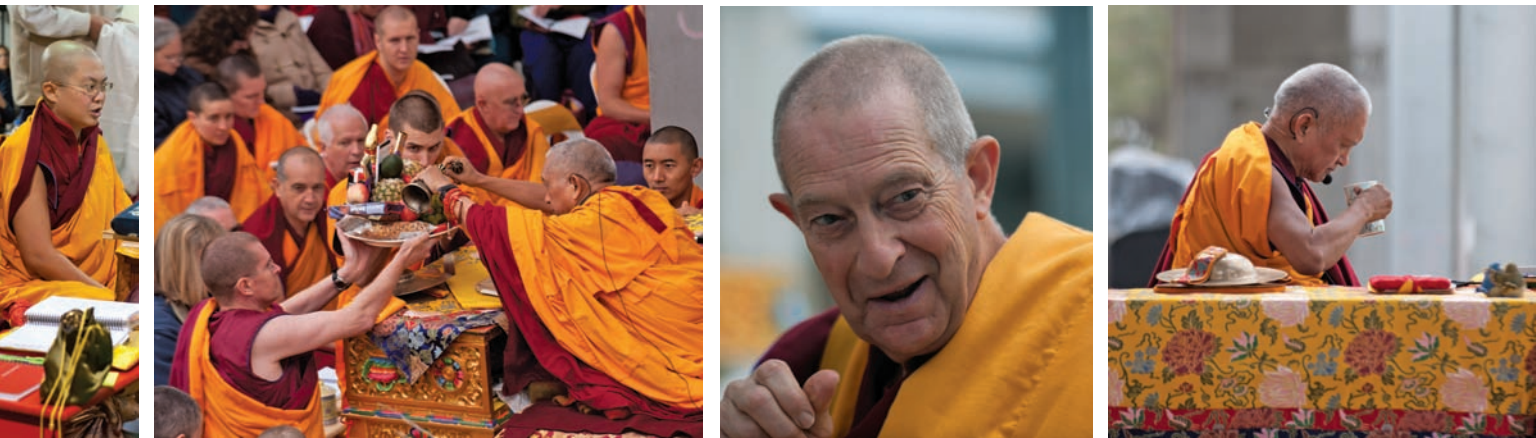
The FPMT organization is no stranger to putting on life-changing retreats. In April 1971, Lama Zopa Rinpoche gave his first ten-day course at Kopan Monastery, then called the Nepal Mahayana Gumpa Centre, attended by about a dozen people. "She pestered me like a mosquito," Rinpoche said, referring to Lama Yeshe and Rinpoche's first Western student Zina Rachevsky, who had the original idea to offer a meditation course to Westerners in Nepal. "She kept on

asking until I began to feel encouraged in my heart and developed a strong wish to do it. I asked Lama Yeshe what he thought. He said, 'Well if you think it will be beneficial, then you do it.' So with Lama's blessing I agreed." Exactly 40 years later, Lama Zopa Rinpoche led the month-long retreat in Bendigo, where he continued to fulfill the heartfelt requests of students for teachings.

As part of a new FPMT tradition initiated three years ago, Rinpoche has established three annual ongoing teachings covering key lineage practices, and it is possible that the commentary on Shantideva's *Bodhicaryavatara* and the 305 Rinjung Gyatsa initiations might become a fourth. Rinpoche has been giving commentary on Lama Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* at the Light of the Path retreat, hosted by the Kadampa Center in North Carolina, USA; *Lama Tsongkhapa Guru Yoga* commentary, held in Singapore at Amitabha Buddhist Centre; and *Lama Chöpa* commentary at Potowa Center, Indonesia. (Please note: Rinpoche's teaching schedule for the remainder of 2011 has been canceled.)

"With these series of teachings, Rinpoche has set in motion the establishment of the absolute complete and perfect package with which we can spend the rest of our lives engaging," said Merry Colony, FPMT Education Services' director. "FPMT's Media Center and Online Learning Center are preserving them in such a way that one can dive into these most amazing teachings again and again, going deeper and deeper as time allows."

"The teaching for the first two weeks was scheduled to be Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*," reported Owen Cole. "Shantideva's life was explained but we didn't start the actual text. Rather, Rinpoche gave us his pressure-cooker, practical style of teaching to motivate and inspire us to get a move on with our Dharma practice."



From left opp. page: Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion construction site; Rinpoche and retreat participants visit the construction site; Ven. Sarah Thresher and Ven. Dechen; Ceremony in front of Guru Rinpoche statue at the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion; Ven. Thubten Gyatso, founder of Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery; Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaching in the unfinished Great Stupa of Universal Compassion

During the teachings, Rinpoche repeatedly emphasized the necessity of seeing the guru as Buddha, purification of negativities in the mind (bad karma), and the accumulation of merit (good karma). He reminded students – many baby boomers and long-time practitioners – of this age of degeneration, where many people die of cancer and sickness, many others are threatened by wars, tsunamis and earthquakes, and we cannot tell who will be affected next. He said that even if we have been studying Dharma for 20 years, when problems arise, we often don't remember karma or the teachings of the Buddha.

“Rinpoche offered the most precious, rare, profound heart instructions on guru devotion! These came from Rinpoche’s heart to our hearts,” said one long-time student. Rinpoche stressed guru devotion as the path to realizations, success and spontaneous happiness. He also focused on the *Seven Limb Prayer* with large parts of some sessions spent meticulously meditating through it with special emphasis on prostrations and rejoicing.<sup>1</sup> Retreat participants quickly developed a rhythm of doing the Eight Mahayana Precepts and *Lama Chöpa Jorchö*<sup>2</sup> in the mornings and going to teachings with Rinpoche in the late afternoon and evening.

Canadian nun Ven. Joan Nicell again did the impossible; she transcribed Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s words as he taught and had them simultaneously displayed on a screen above his head. “The feedback I’ve had has always been good,” said Ven. Joan, who also serves as the study program coordinator at Italy’s Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa. “New students can have difficulty understanding Rinpoche while older students can become sleepy or distracted.” She also has done simultaneous transcribing at Rinpoche’s annual

teachings in Indonesia, Singapore and North Carolina in recent years.

Rinpoche commented early on that the first two weeks of the retreat could be a good time for meetings to be scheduled between sessions. In addition to the FPMTA four-day national meeting [see story on page 55], center directors, spiritual program coordinators, registered teachers, and FPMTA board members all took advantage of this time together and arranged meetings to catch up, share ideas, and strategize plans for the future. Claire Isitt, FPMT Center Services’ director, attended the first two weeks in order to connect and work with people during this time. According to FPMTA coordinator Helen Patrin, the most important discussions were those on Sangha welfare, which Rinpoche had strongly advised to take place with so many Sangha members present and with the vital need to take care of aging Sangha.

At the end of the first half of the retreat, the Great Stupa’s Guru Rinpoche statue, which had been shrouded in tarpaulins, was uncovered for a ceremony around the statue. Retreatants made many offerings and prayers.

The third and fourth weeks of the Australia retreat were scheduled for the rare Rinjung Gyatso transmission. Ven. Thubten Gyatso had requested this series of tantric empowerments from Rinpoche for the Bendigo centers. “My thought was that these three centers are uniquely suited to helping preserve the Vajrayana tradition,” he said. Rinpoche

<sup>1</sup> The seven limbs are prostrating, making offerings, confession, rejoicing, requesting to turn the Dharma wheel, requesting the teachers to remain in the world and dedicating. This standard structure is common throughout Tibetan Buddhist liturgy.

<sup>2</sup> Available through The Foundation Store: [www.fpmt.org/shop/](http://www.fpmt.org/shop/)

had given the initiations before at the Enlightened Experience Celebration of 1982 in India.

The second half of the retreat sessions moved into the gompa at Atisha Centre, which held the smaller group (many students left the retreat following the first half) perfectly. According to Adele Hulse, despite many participants developing heavy colds, which created “liquid and incessant” noise, most attended every session, including early morning prostrations. “Rinpoche’s detailed dedications made it clear that a cold was nothing compared with the opportunity to practice in this lifetime,” she said.

On the morning of April 22, Rinpoche arrived in the gompa at 4:30 A.M. to continue giving Yamantaka initiation. “When he returned that afternoon, he mentioned that he had ‘felt something’ when leaving the gompa that morning, and that now his speech felt different. By the following morning we all knew Rinpoche had suffered a stroke,” Adele recalled. [See page 20 for a complete story on Rinpoche’s health during this period.]

“From then on we just stayed together doing all the practices we were asked to do. It was a wonderful feeling being together and practicing so hard, with the solid ranks of Sangha in front of us, Ven. Dechen’s exquisite chanting, Ven. Steve Carlier’s thundering voice leading the protector practices and Ven. Sarah Thresher’s utterly moving motivations. Ven. Gyatso led detailed lam-rim meditations,” Adele said. “It was

almost as though Rinpoche had planned that we all just sit and practice together.” Two days after Rinpoche went to the hospital, Ven. Robina Courtin, a student of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche since 1976, wrote, “Last night we recited sutras all night. Lights and flowers fill the gompa. In spite of everything, and even though we’re all a bit shell-shocked, I am very glad to be here, practicing with everyone.”

The retreat ended with *Lama Chöpa* and a big tsog held in front of the Guru Rinpoche statue in the now tent-less and spacious Great Stupa. About 250 people attended the puja, which had been recommended by Khadro-la in Dharamsala. Geshe from FPMT centers in Sydney and Melbourne were there. At the end of the puja, Rinpoche asked that a list of all prayers being done worldwide be read, which inspired and consoled retreatants. Atisha’s resident teacher, Geshe Konchok Tsering, spoke to the group. According to Ven. Robina, “He told us that the most important thing is to keep our commitments purely, in particular to be harmonious with each other, remembering that one of our main vows is to not criticize each other – or, as Rinpoche sometimes puts it, not ‘speak the faults’ of others. He also said that holy beings come into this world to benefit others, and he implied that if people don’t practice, they won’t stay. There’s the teaching for us.”

# What If It Is All True:

## A Retreatant Reflects on the Lessons of a Lifetime

By Renate Ogilvie. Photos by George Manos.

**B**endigo was Gold Rush territory. One hundred fifty years ago, a huge throng was driven by greed and excitement to this harsh and dry part of Australia. A sign at the entrance of Atisha Centre acknowledges that we are on aboriginal land.

Most of the retreatants stay in “Tent City” like the early prospectors. There are kangaroos in the twilight hours, poisonous snakes lurk in the bush, and strange little creepy crawlies live in the showers. It’s a very Aussie retreat, and many students have come from far away – Perth, New Zealand, London and the United States. Atisha Centre itself is a triumph of devotion and effort over the harshness of the terrain.

On the gompa wall are old photographs of bearded young men with ’70s hairstyles, and young women in nostalgic clothes building the early version of the center. Smiles. Some robes. A few children. It looks bucolic, but must have been backbreaking work.

And here they are: a selection of these early Buddhist pioneers among the more recent students – grey-haired and cool, Dharma savvy. Over lunch we hear tales of living in a tree stump at Chenrezig Institute, evading the Nepalese border control, the early days in Kathmandu and Dharamsala.

Towering above everything is the steel construction of the Great Stupa. It is huge, amazing. Even unfinished

*continued on page 19*

## Comments by Retreat Participants

Photos by George Manos



**Bob Sharples**, a Buddhist since 1977, student at Tara Institute, Melbourne, Australia

The power of Rinpoche is extraordinary. He hits you between the eyes. I got a renewed commitment and clarity to my practice and a clearer understanding of what I'm going to do over the next 10-15 years, if I live that long.



**Len Warren**, a Buddhist for 10 years and student at Hayagriva Buddhist Centre, Perth, Australia

I had watched Rinpoche on video and had trouble understanding what he said and didn't know if I was up to the long hours of teaching. However, I could understand him on the retreat and there is a power to his teachings which has strengthened a lot of my beliefs and gives me the energy to keep going and to go deeper. I'm soooo happy that I attended the retreat.



**Ven. Youdan**, ordained seven years and lives at Chandrakirti Centre, New Zealand

I got so much out of the course, it's incredible. Rinpoche is so dynamic and so alive in conveying the teachings. It makes me totally want to be just like him.



**Vicki Taylor**, a Buddhist for 35 years from Sydney, Australia

I can't put into words the improvement in my mind under the influence of Rinpoche. He put immense time and energy at the beginning of sessions into the preparation where I normally rush the practice. Rinpoche slowed things down so it became a powerful practice. The way he does the *Seven Limb Prayer* is profoundly moving and completely transforms your mind.

## Three Weeks of Fluff Stuffing



Robyn, Ronda and Brian stuffing cushions at Atisha Centre. Photo by Marilyn Chambers.

In addition to renting 40 accommodation tents plus toilets and showers for retreat participants' comfort, retreat organizers (led by Sally Dudgeon) made sure students had something soft to sit on and an appropriate place

to set their Dharma materials. Atisha Centre secretary Marilyn Chambers headed a team of volunteers who spent three weeks filling 153 mats and 200 cushions with 33 bales of polyester insulation bats made from recycled plastic bottles and two 100-kilogram (220-pound) bales of synthetic yarn tops. The beautifully made blue covers came from Mongolia.

"The sewing team was Hannelore and Marilyn as the mainstays over three weeks, with Julie, Alison, Cilla and Ruby all giving us a couple of days each," Atisha Centre director Cherry Rattue



Liam and the jig. Photo by Marilyn Chambers.

wrote. "Liam [Chambers, Atisha Centre's spiritual program coordinator] invented a 'jig' to help us cut the bats into the right shape to fit the mats. It took two days to cut the bats to size with a power saw. Each cut created a flurry of loose fluff, hence our working title of 'Liam and the fluff stuffers.' Luckily we had an uncarpeted room in the new accommodation building to make the mess in. When the cushions arrived, Annette, Brian, Birgitta, Robyn and Ronda joined in to help the stuffing team. Some of us took bags of stuffing and cushions home too and filled our houses with fluff as we spent evenings stuffing."

Cherry also offered "heartfelt thanks" to FPMT Australia's smallest study group, Shen Phen Ling, who, with just eight members, donated 108 red puja tables for the retreat and helped deliver bales of stuffing to Atisha Centre.



From left: Tent City at Atisha Centre; Lama Zopa Rinpoche with Guru Rinpoche statue at Great Stupa of Universal Compassion

it is awe inspiring. This is history in the making, akin to one of the great cathedrals of Europe being built. What an explosion of merit and good karma, an inspiration for generations to come.

In one corner of the Great Stupa is the stupendous statue of Padmasambhava [Guru Rinpoche], now completely gilded by Rinpoche's Chinese translator and long-time student, Huang Chen Roo. Guru Rinpoche sits in the posture of royal ease, his eyes wide open, looking at suchness. The impact is immense.

What if it is all true? My steadily eroding Western skepticism – feeling the Dharma, and more specifically, the Guru grinding me down, exposing the root of all misery: self cherishing. I am longing for his teachings, welcoming the long night sessions that are to come, with my legs, six decades old, aching. Time is passing. Water bottle empty at night, clean socks diminishing, the strong mints almost gone, ten days to my birthday, then nine, then eight. Stars on the way to the evening session, all constellations seemingly the same but always moving, the world never ever at rest.

The Guru is Buddha, and he is soaking me with his presence. His teachings leave me unhinged, drunk, babbling the first night, speechless the next. I understand once more that there is no security except in his mandala.

In his limitless kindness the Guru-Buddha manifests in his earthly body so I can actually see and hear him teach

the infinitely soft, indestructible method of bodhichitta mindfulness. He shouts: Empty! Merely labeled! Facts fall away and are revealed to be nothing but intense hallucinations. I'm riding high. I love it. There seems to be a definite shift. I'm ready for many more years of Rinpoche's teachings.

But then: the Guru's most powerful, most shocking manifestation.... His illness is a sign of what is to come. Impermanence is no longer just an aesthetic experience.

I flee to my tent and dissolve into self-cherishing. I plead with my Guru not to abandon me, let water flow uphill and defeat illness and Yama, just for me. It is a dark hour.

But this too passes. The Guru is Buddha. The Guru is perfect. We witness the laughing and joking Guru in the Stroke Unit, praying for his fellow patients, taking their suffering on himself, a buddha in his most compassionate manifestation.

Yes, it is all true. ♦

Please see page 20 for an extensive article covering the unfolding of Rinpoche's health during and following the Australia retreat.

Streaming video teachings and a transcript from the Australia retreat are now available for free on the FPMT Online Learning Center at <http://onlinelearning.fpmt.org> under "Bodhicaryavatara commentary." Please see the Site User Guide for instructions on how to create an account to access the Online Learning Center and enroll in this course.