

Blessing the World's Waterways



Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche with Alak Rinpoche

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche understands endurance. He spent many years studying sutra and tantra at Kirti Monastery where he became Abbot at the age of 26. At Drepung Monastery in Lhasa he was the great Kirti Rinpoche's debate tutor as he prepared for his Geshe examination. A year later he had to flee his homeland in the face of the Chinese invasion. He went on to survive a fifteen-year retreat in a cold, damp hut in the hills above Dharamsala, often eating his food raw and cold, listening to the mountain lions scratching outside.

Now the beloved 80-year-old learned teacher is experiencing ill-health, but while his students pray for his recovery, they are also rejoicing in his latest adventure. Bruce Farley tells the story of how Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, an inveterate traveler, finally made it to Antarctica, and the extraordinary environmental effects of his visit ...

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche first ventured to the West in 1992, covering eleven countries in eleven months. Since then, always accompanied by his loyal attendant, Alak Rinpoche, he has traveled the world extensively teaching sutra and tantra,

and has bestowed the Kalachakra empowerment thirty-five times.

Of all the Lamas and Rinpoches I have had the good fortune to travel with, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche is notable for his sense of adventure, and



The Russian scientific ship "Akademik Ioffe"

his desire to perform numerous blessings and pujas wherever he travels.

I have been constantly amazed at the public's reaction. Rinpoche exudes a radiance that seems to pacify those around him regardless of their beliefs and status. I asked him about his constant travels and blessings. His reply:

"It is what we describe in the West as combining business with pleasure. I like traveling and visiting new places. It is part of my nature. But when I am out in these places I make sure that I bless the areas I visit. In particular, if there is a body of water in an area. This is because water is such a great carrier of blessings. So lakes, reservoirs, coasts, waterfalls, and rivers are always places I am interested in visiting."

When Rinpoche arrives at a new destination, the first question is always, "Where is the closest lake or river?" Similarly, according to Rinpoche, high places such as hills and mountains are good to visit and bless. "For example, if you write some mantras on a rock in a high mountain pass, the

winds will carry the blessing to a large area." [See *Mandala* August-September 2006 "Buddhism in Latin America."]

One day I asked Rinpoche about his fervor for performing these blessings. He gave a broad, environmental perspective:

"There has been so much pollution, so much mining of precious resources that should never have been extracted from the earth, that should have remained in the earth because as you are extracting you are actually depleting the earth, and then there is so much mass production and so much man-made pollution, and of course all the elements are now out of balance.

"It is important to understand that all these elements [earth, water, fire, air] are disturbed due to our activities, and there is not one element that has remained clean. Now each one of these elements is actually accompanied by deities, so you have the earth deity, the water deities, the fire deities, the wind deities, the atmosphere deities, and they are not very comfortable once their environment is

polluted, so there is a general atmosphere of disturbance, and perhaps dissatisfaction, and Dharma practitioners from their own side should try as best as they can to pacify these deities.”

It was very clear that Rinpoche connected the seemingly increased frequency of “natural disasters” to the disturbance of these powerful deities’ environment.

Antarctic Adventure

And so to our latest adventure. During a lengthy stay with me and my wife in 2001, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and his long-time attendant Alak Rinpoche¹ traveled extensively throughout New Zealand. It was then that the Rinpoches asked Phillipa and me if we could take them to Antarctica. A little surprised at this request, nevertheless, Phillipa made enquiries. It seemed like a difficult and expensive undertaking and it got put on the back burner. However, the Rinpoches continued to raise the topic from time to time and in 2005 we received the official request that Rinpoche seriously wanted to go to Antarctica. This time guru devotion won out. Phillipa put months of energy into arranging and fundraising a journey that included South Africa, Argentina, Antarctica, New Zealand, and Taiwan.

Why Antarctica? According to Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, because it is the most southern pole of the earth, many water currents gather and disperse from Antarctica, finding their way all over the planet. Likewise, many of the world’s weather patterns stem from the southern ocean. Ninety percent of the world’s ice and seventy percent of the world’s fresh water are found in Antarctica. Rinpoche’s wish was to bless these currents with holy water containing blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as water gathered from all the oceans of the world, and from lakes, rivers, etc., visited by Rinpoche over many years. The blessed water also contained sand from many mandalas performed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and by Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche. It is believed that this mixing and unification of water coming from different origins, along with the power of various pujas, can bring about pacification of extreme weather patterns and stabilize and harmonize weather in any place, especially if the weather patterns are disturbed.

¹ Alak Rinpoche is a high lama in his own right. He was captured by the Chinese and placed in a hard labor camp where the atrocities were horrendous. To purify the negativities of breaking his vows while imprisoned, Alak prostrated from Amdo to Lhasa. This took two years or more to complete, enduring starvation, freezing cold, and being robbed. He has been looking after Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche since the 1980s.

Secondly, Rinpoche wished to place a specially-made stone Buddha, carved in Bodhgaya, India, on the Antarctic ocean floor. (This was also done at the tip of South Africa where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet, and in Tasman Bay, Nelson, New Zealand.)

Before the statues were immersed in the water, they were offered robes as is traditional. In this case, the robes were represented by five khatas. Their five colors represent the five types of primordial awareness, and are offered as a means of accumulating the merit that established the major marks and secondary signs of a Buddha. Of course, these scarves will eventually deteriorate in the water. But in the meantime, they act as a condition for all the sea creatures to develop the five types of primordial awareness. As for the statue itself, it will remain in the water for a long time which is why it was made of stone. Rinpoche says that for as long as these holy forms remain in the water they radiate the blessings of the Buddha. The water that comes in contact with these holy forms becomes blessed, and carries the blessing around the whole of the ocean. Subsequently, whatever comes in contact with that blessed water receives the blessing as well.

Thirdly, the Rinpoches wished to visit Antarctica in order to perform pujas on the actual Antarctic continent.

The Journey Begins

I met up with Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, Alak Rinpoche, and Ven. Amy Miller in Buenos Aires in late December 2005. After a couple of days in this large city, which included a little sightseeing, visits to two of the city’s magnificent cathedrals, and a spectacular and vibrant New Year’s Eve, we flew to Ushuaia on the tip of Tierra del Fuego, the most southern town in the world.

After much research, Phillipa had decided that the best means of getting Rinpoche to Antarctica was with Peregrine Adventures who use the “Akademik Ioffe,” a 117-meter long Russian scientific ship. This was a great decision. It was perfect, staffed by a wonderful Russian crew and hosted by a Peregrine team of around eighteen people, including several naturalist specialists, Antarctic adventurers, two kayak guides, two chefs, and support staff. Basing the Rinpoches on a ship gave them the opportunity to visit



Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche with the stone buddha wrapped in five colored khatas

Rinpoche's Own Words

ON HIS EFFORTS TO PACIFY ENVIRONMENTAL DISTURBANCES

"I offered the five colored scarves to the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha in Bodhgaya and robes to the Sandalwood Lord, as well as flowers in a vase of precious stones together with the five colored scarves.

"When I visited ten monasteries in Buryatia [in east Russia, just north of Mongolia] and Alchanai [a sacred Heruka mountain in Buryatia], I offered back to them all the money that was offered by many people after equally dividing the amount. Having obtained two statues of Shakyamuni Buddha from Bodhgaya, I immersed one in the water off the cliffs of Cape Town in South Africa, where the oceans from the east and west meet. The other one, I immersed in the waters of the South Pole in Antarctica. I also immersed a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha from Borobudur in the waters of Marahau, Tasman Bay, in the South Island of New Zealand.

"I pray that by seeing them, hearing them, or remembering them, even once all the signs of disturbance of the environment and its inhabitants become pacified, that the wishes of His Supreme Holiness be spontaneously fulfilled, and that peace and well-being will prevail in all parts of the world."

CLIMATE CRISIS

this spectacular environment, make twice daily visits ashore, and experience a vast array of wildlife and scenery while still having a comfortable and warm cabin to come home to each evening.

We were all very excited as we steamed our way down the Beagle Channel and entered the Drake Passage heading for the Antarctic Peninsula. With the ocean surprisingly calm, we started preparing the stone Buddha, placing special prayers, mani pills, and other items around the statue. We also taped the names of all the benefactors to the base of the Buddha and then wrapped the Buddha in the five colored scarves. Rinpoche said that although the names will eventually wash off, all the benefactors will receive blessings as long as the Buddha statue remains.

Throughout the journey, the Rinpoches were constantly performing prayers. In Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche's words: "For us, this was not a mere cruise to Antarctica. It was a period of intense praying and blessing activities while traveling through a majestic landscape to a unique place. During our trip, myself and my attendant, Alak Rinpoche, would recite the whole stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam-Rim) and Tantric Stages of the Path (nagrim) every day. We would also perform the bathing ceremony as well as a number of other prayers and blessings."

We will never forget our first sighting of Antarctica. After two days of foggy sailing through the convergence where the warm currents meet with the cold Antarctic waters, the fog suddenly lifted and there before us was a glistening panorama of white pyramidal towers sitting on azure waters. We had arrived, and the Rinpoches definitely manifested the appearance of excitement.

For ten days we were treated to the most magnificent vistas and experiences as

we sailed down the Antarctic coast, through channels less than a kilometer wide with 9000-foot mountains on both sides, and glaciers over a kilometer wide running to the sea. The pressure causes skyscraper-size building blocks of ice that tumble into the sea to form icebergs. There was the constant roar of cracking ice. In an ever-changing kaleidoscope, we experienced sun, eerie mist, thick fog, and snow. Twice a day we would board the zodiac inflatables and go ashore to experience the penguin colonies, seal colonies, or visit current and past scientific stations. Some days were spent whale watching, once with up to twenty humpbacks feeding close by. Other days we would go "iceberg cruising," taking in the massive array of icebergs of every shape and size. The Rinpoches never missed one single trip, including sleeping on the ice one night in sub-zero temperatures. Kirti Tsenshab's and Alak Rinpoche's sense of adventure is amazing, and it was such a blessing to share this with them. Tears well up even as I recall this experience.

The Rinpoches' presence on the ship became a topic of conversation among the other guests, and the ship soon became "Tibetanized." Our morning newsletter, which initially had a Russian phrase translated for the benefit of communicating with the crew, soon had a Tibetan phrase each day. I took a long string of prayer flags with me, and in a special ceremony these were hoisted from the bow of the ship right up to the front mast – they looked fantastic flying in the Antarctic breeze. At journey's end, they were taken down and hung around the walls of the ship's library as a permanent fixture. The Rinpoches performed a mirror blessing of the bow of the ship as we sat in one beautiful harbor with many people attending and cameras going crazy! The Rinpoches were the only guests to be hosted by the ship's Captain and

during an exchange of gifts the Captain was clearly moved by the experience.

Our first few trips ashore were to islands just off the coast. The first time we actually set foot on the Antarctic continent proper, Kirti Tsenshab and Alak Rinpoche performed a forty-five minute puja. The place was appropriately called Paradise Bay and it befitted its name. Again, many of the passengers and staff sat through the whole puja – it was very moving.

The Buddha statue was discreetly placed overboard at the southernmost point of our journey, in 3600 feet of water, where it will presumably sit for centuries blessing the oceans, the oceans' inhabitants, and ultimately the entire planet, I am sure.

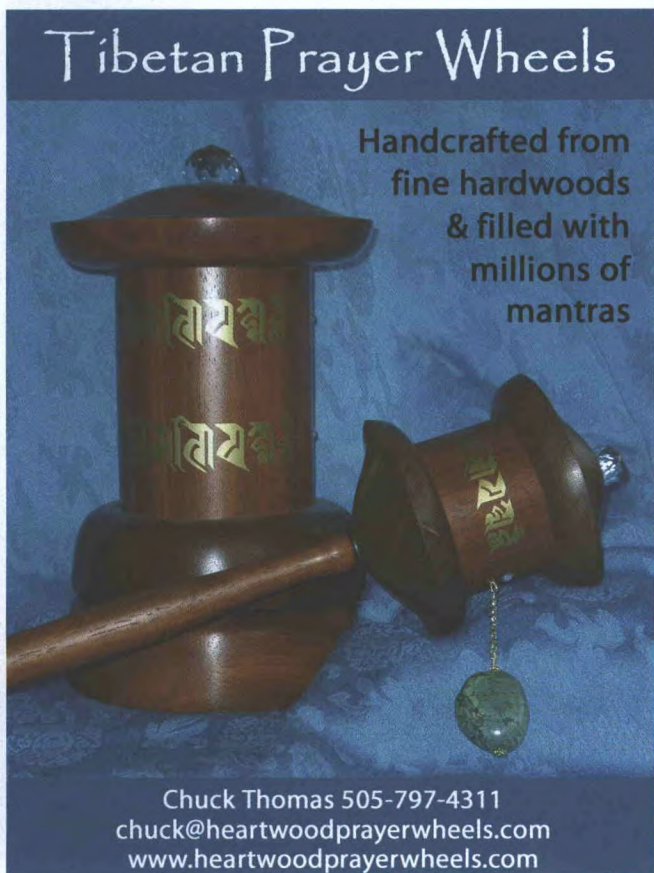
Our journey back to Ushuaia was one of the calmest crossings the ship had ever encountered, and I couldn't help but think that there was a little divine intervention occurring. In fact, our expedition leader, Aaron, said that performing the puja in Paradise Bay was one of the greatest highlights of his seventy-four trips to Antarctica.

As mundane human beings, I suspect that we will never realize exactly what occurred during this particular

Antarctic expedition. However, I have no doubt I was witness to a profound journey of immense benefit to our planet and its inhabitants. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and Alak Rinpoche were extremely happy. They said they achieved everything they set out to do, and that the journey was a complete success. Alak Rinpoche told me we have no idea of the extent and immeasurability of the blessings of Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche in this world. Lama Zopa Rinpoche recently told us that of all the Dharma activities we have ever been involved in, serving Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche has created profoundly more merit than anything else. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche is performing blessings all over the planet at this time in history when degeneration is rapidly escalating.

They have asked that I pass on their heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to this profound adventure, and a special thanks to Phillipa for months of organizing and fundraising and being able to fulfill a special wish of one of the planet's great saints. ☸

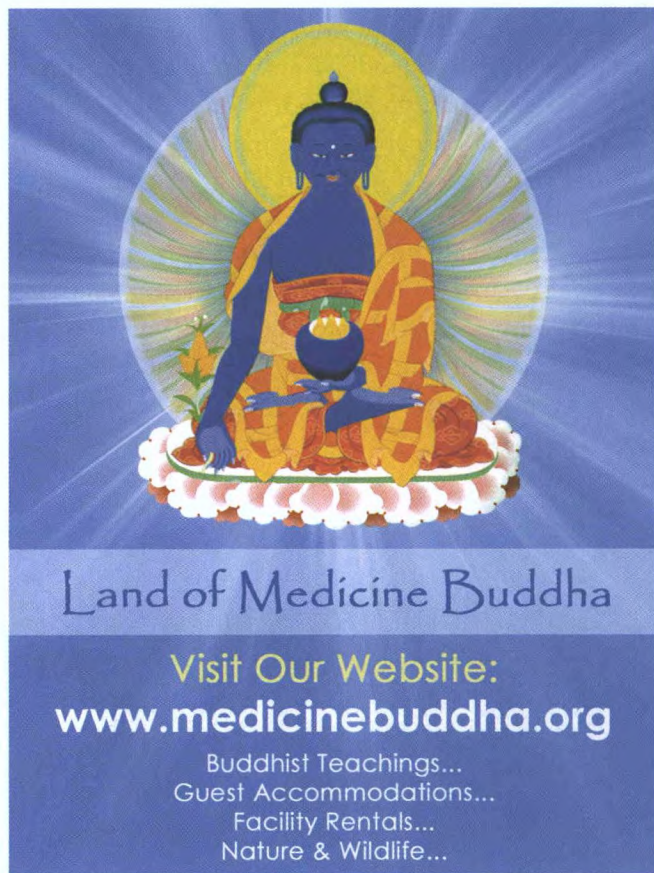
Bruce Farley and Phillipa Rutherford are co-directors of Chandrakirti Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre in Nelson, New Zealand.



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