

The Caves of Maratika

When Lama Zopa Rinpoche visited Maratika Cave – also known as Haleshi and a very special place associated with Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) and long life – he asked Frances Howland to write about it for *Mandala*. “Maybe people will generate the thought to come here to practice,” he said. “Coming here, visiting holy places, it is better if people do practice, not just take pictures.”

Three days after Losar 2008 Lama Zopa Rinpoche flew from Kathmandu by helicopter to the cave area of Maratika. Rinpoche was accompanied by Kopan monks Ven. Jinpa and Ven. Kunkyen. I was one of two Western students who went along. The other was Ric van Keulen. Five days were spent at this holy site, situated in the mid-hills of Nepal in a remote farming area, with no electricity and where goods are carried in by mule trains.

There are a number of caves in the area but the main cave of pilgrimage is the Maratika Treasury Cave. It is here that Guru Rinpoche, with his consort Mandarava, achieved immortal life through the practice of Amitayus.

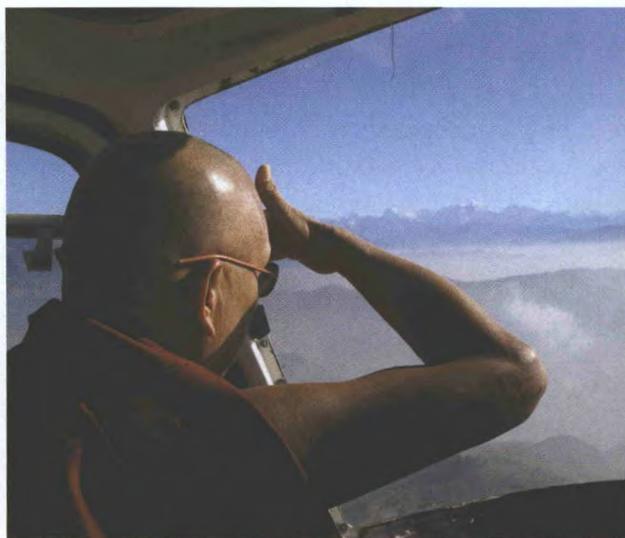
The caves of Maratika are mentioned in Tibetan literature from the twelfth century onwards. A biography of Guru Rinpoche, discovered by Nyangrel Nyima Ozer, describes why the Maratika caves are a sacred place for Buddhists. Other written sources say that at the request of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Buddha Amitabha taught the eighteen tantras of Long Life. The dakinis wrote them down in their symbolic script using melted lapis lazuli on golden paper, and deposited them in a box made of five precious

jewels, which they concealed in the secret Maratika cave. There are said to be many treasures buried in this holy place.

Upon arrival Rinpoche was met by a procession that included the Maratika Lama, 38-year-old Karma Wangchuk, the son of Ngawang Chopel, who was the main disciple of the Lawudo Lama Kunsang Yeshe. Ngawang Chopel's tulku, Tenzin Chogyal, was also present. Born in Sikkim in 2000, he was recognised by Kyabje Trulzhig Rinpoche and was enthroned in January 2003. He studies in Solu at Thubten Choling monastery. Lama Zopa Rinpoche was very affectionate towards him, saying that he seemed special.

Ngawang Chopel, who was born in 1922, was with the Lawudo Lama at his passing away. It was he who made the dangerous crossing from Khumbu into Tibet around 1949 to confirm with three high Lamas, including Kyabje Trulzhig Rinpoche from Rongphu, whether the young Lama Zopa was indeed the incarnation of the Lawudo Lama. Ngawang Chopel completed many retreats during his lifetime and later settled in Maratika, where in 1980 he built a monastery near the cave of Guru Rinpoche. Thereafter he became known as the Maratika Lama, passing away in 1997, while Kyabje Trulzhig Rinpoche was there. Today there are twenty-seven monks in the monastery, which is where we all stayed.

The day we arrived, the Maratika Lama escorted us to the main Treasury Cave. Rinpoche focused many extensive prayers on the long-life vase (*tse bum*) made of stone, which Amitayus placed on the heads of Guru Rinpoche and Mandarava, while bestowing immortal life upon them. This vase is the most holy object of Maratika and it is believed that any prayer made at the *tse bum* will be fulfilled.



On the way to Maratika



Maratika Treasury Cave

We were urged to pray strongly for His Holiness the Dalai Lama's long life and that of our Gurus, the FPMT sangha and others. The cave contains many self-created images and syllables (*rangjung*). There is a rock in the shape of a box that grants all wishes; it is especially for women hoping to become pregnant. Even the sound of the bats in this cave is said to be the sound of the long-life syllable *HRIH*.

Over the years many great lamas have done retreat in the cave, and their life hindrances have been expelled. Kyabje Trulzhig Rinpoche has visited every year since he came into exile to perform life prayers for His Holiness.

The lower cave, ten-minutes walk down the hillside, is the Cave of the Eight Means of Attainment. This is where Guru Rinpoche slew a demon. Inside the entrance is the stone emanation of the flesh and blood of the demon. To the left of the entrance is a white conch shell that comes out from the rock; Ven. Kunkyen and Ven. Jinpa took turns to blow through the hole. It is said that with hearing this sound the evil states of cyclic existence are shattered. Guru Rinpoche flew through the roof of this cave, leaving a large hole through which the sky is visible – this is called the sky door. Five hundred Arhats are said to have visited this place, and many people come here to practice Chöd.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche offered tsog at the Dakini gathering place and at the secret cave, which is an arrow's distance away from the main cave, and is accessed by climbing a precarious bamboo ladder. Here we saw many crystals formed from the rock. On top of the tree-covered hill, Rinpoche and the Maratika Lama, accompanied by the small tulku, performed incense puja. Close by is Guru Rinpoche's toilet in the form of a rock with a deep slit from which warm vapor is emitted from deep within the earth,

and which is said to have curative properties. Nearby you look down through the sky door into the Cave of the Eight Means of Attainment far below.

There are other hills surrounding the caves: Manjushri Hill to the south-east and Vajrapani Hill to the south-west. There is a Garuda cave nearby that we did not visit; Lama Zopa said this would be a good place to go to for people with cancer. A few hours walk away is the cave of Mandarava. On several occasions Rinpoche pointed out auspicious places for possible retreat huts.

One day Rinpoche went nearby to make offerings to the thirty-seven nuns from Thubten Choling monastery, who take turns to stay in Maratika for six months. Under the direction of Kyabje Trulzhig Rinpoche they perform continuous long-life prayers for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

When we left, Rinpoche was offered a bottle of holy water gathered from the caves. This nectar of immortality is said to extend the life span and purify the negative karma that causes one to be reborn in the lower realms. Rinpoche said he would use this when he gives long-life empowerments. We were all offered long-life pills made with this nectar.

One morning Rinpoche was checking to see what day we should return by helicopter to Kathmandu. "I am grasping at Maratika," he said, "Next time we must stay longer."

Upon arrival in Kathmandu Rinpoche remarked, "Now it all seems like a dream."

Already since returning Rinpoche has advised one Kathmandu student to do retreat in Maratika. ☸

Getting there: Flights from Kathmandu to Paphlu and a two-day walk or flight to Lamidanda, followed by an eight-hour walk. All flights are daily, weather permitting. Conditions are very basic but there is a guest house in the village. Detailed instructions are on the website www.maratika.org



Monks and Nuns line the path to the monastery.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche with Tulku Tenzin Chogyal and Maratika Lama Karma Wangchuk