

Long Life Puja for the DALAI LAMA: A Student's Experience

By Kathy Vichta

PHOTOS: Rusty Stewart



Long Life Offering for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Sydney, June 2008.

I have the best job in the world – especially for an old hippie! I get to buy some of the most exquisite objects imaginable, from some of the world's best craftsmen, sometimes travelling to exotic places to find them because they must be as beautiful as possible. Working with some of the wisest and most precious people in this world, I organize to have these objects offered in a moving and wonderful ceremony. In doing this I am able to work with groups of Dharma students around the world, coming together with a common purpose, following the wishes of our teacher, and working for the benefit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. What more could a girl want?

Since 1996, when I fell into the role of organizing the Long Life Puja with which we followed the Kalachakra Initiation that His Holiness gave in Sydney, Australia, it has been my great delight to have the responsibility of organizing the FPMT's annual offering of this lovely event. At that time I had no idea what was involved but jumped in feet first and, with valuable help from old friends Ven. Thubten Donyo, Ven. Thubten Gelek and [Education Department's] Merry Colony, everything fell into place remarkably well.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has requested that we offer this puja every year, requesting His Holiness to stay here with us,

to live long and continue to teach and inspire us. We have offered it in various countries: in India many times (in Dharamsala and in Bodhgaya), in France, in the USA, and now once more in Sydney, Australia [June 2008]. As His Holiness had such a full schedule, he agreed to a short version, which we are calling a "Long Life Offering" rather than a puja, but the intent is the same.

The Long Life Puja involves many prayers and offerings requesting the lama not to leave us for the pure realms, but to stay in this realm to teach and inspire us. Ritual offerings steeped in profound symbolic meaning are presented to the lama in a gorgeous and very moving procession to the chanting of prayers and mantras. It has taken years for me to understand even the most superficial level of this symbolism, and the deeper I go, the more levels there seem to be.

Of course, we offer the body, speech and mind of the Buddha. Specifically, we offer these in their long life forms. The statues of White Tara, Amitayus and Namgyalma signify the body, a long life sutra text signifies the speech and the special long life (Namgyalma) stupa signifies the mind. But there are many other ritual offerings too. For instance, the dharmachakra, which symbolizes turning the wheel of the precious Dharma; the right turning conch shell,

which symbolizes the sound of the Dharma broadcast across the land; and the seven royal emblems which remind us of the seven attributes of a Wheel Turning King and, in turn, the seven requisites of enlightenment.

Each year we ask Rinpoche for advice about the Long Life Puja, checking which of the various pujas will be best, what texts are most auspicious to offer and what special offerings are to be organized. In Australia during the 1996 Long Life Puja, the students offered an antique clock, reminding us of the Kalachakra Initiation we had just received, but also of His Holiness's old interest in clocks and watches. One year, on Rinpoche's advice, I searched the whole of Delhi to find electric clippers for the monks (finally bringing them in from Singapore), and recently Rinpoche ordered a special carving of the harmonious animals carved in pure silver be made.

Offerings also come from centers and students around the world – jewels and crystals, fine woollen cloth and ancient thangkas. One year, a student brought a huge box from China all the way to Bodhgaya. It contained the most exquisite long life man, carved in porcelain by an artist, a living treasure. In the East, the processions are very elaborate. There people are used to such things, and expect it. But in the West, it is preferred that such displays are somewhat more subdued, not to cause negativities in the minds of those onlookers who don't understand the meaning behind them.

No matter how well we organize, there are always last minute dramas, tsog to be bought and prepared for up to 20,000 people, special offerings to be prepared at the last minute – and yet it always comes together beautifully – perhaps His Holiness's karma has something to do with that?

People ask, "What is the point? Why do we offer such pujas and make these lavish offerings so often?"

For me there is no doubt. It is not that I understand the profound meaning of pujas and the deep psychological effects they have, but this is the wish of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and of his pure motivation and perfect wisdom. I have no doubt – therefore there is no question for me. As long as Rinpoche feels that it is beneficial for us to make these offerings, then I will try to follow his wishes.

But this is not really enough for everyone is it? Perhaps it is not completely clear that our offering a puja every year will ensure that His Holiness will live any longer – who knows? But in following the wishes of our teacher,

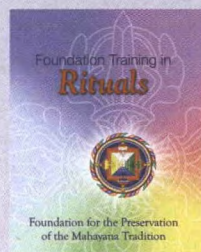
organizing these pujas in the most harmonious and perfect way we can, and in making these prayers as purely and sincerely as we can, I am sure that we create the cause to be close to perfect teachers in this and future lives. We create the causes to have long and healthy lives ourselves in order to be of benefit to sentient beings.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche says that Long Life Pujas purify negative karma and accumulate merit. In order to have our teachers stay with us, we need to purify the negativities that we create in relation to them, especially through not guarding our vows and keeping promises to them.

Rinpoche also teaches, however, that these pujas are not the main thing. To pray for the teacher to have long life is only an empty prayer if we do not follow his advice in practicing the Dharma well, in guarding our vows and commitments, even at the cost of our lives, and in working day and night to bring harmony to our Dharma communities and all around us. ☸



Kathy Vichta



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