

# A Volunteer's Experience in Bodhgaya

*By Marijke Voorbrood*



Marijke with local midwives after a workshop.

It has always been my deepest wish to offer my free time and experience to those who are most in need. My life was taking its course, serving on the board of FPMT's Gendun Drupa Centre in Martigny, Switzerland, when a fellow Buddhist gave me a DVD about the Shakyamuni Buddha Community Health Care Centre in Bodhgaya, India.

It was March 2007, and my life had changed after separating from my husband. From the moment I saw the short film, I knew I would go to Bodhgaya. I knew I could offer service as a professional nurse and midwife to the Health Care Centre, which first took shape in 1991 when Lama Zopa Rinpoche, one of his gurus, and a group of Westerners found an old man lying on the road

covered in flies and close to death. They took him back to Root Institute and nurtured him until he died peacefully some six months later. This charitable clinic has evolved into a multi-service entity, a grass-roots polyclinic. The Health Care Centre now employs a team of eighteen and offers a wide range of medical services.

I could work with the medical staff on a project to decrease maternal and child mortality in Bodhgaya's rural areas. There in Bodhgaya, the holy place where Buddha attained enlightenment, among the poorest of the poor, I could offer my experience. Bodhgaya – the place to purify negative karma, to atone for all the suffering I had caused to other people because of my ignorance and pride: that was my intention.

After lengthy e-mail discussions with the medical director Rick Fendrick, details of the project were worked out. I opened a bank account, asking family members, friends and acquaintances for donations for the Health Care Centre. My children gave me a plane ticket for my sixtieth birthday. I highly appreciated this, especially considering that they themselves are not interested in Buddhist philosophy or practice.

My arrival in Bodhgaya in October 2007 was not without incident. For a start, my suitcase was lost in Calcutta. "Oh well," I thought, "I'll just have to buy some clothes, and maybe the suitcase will reappear." (It did, five days later and with some personal items missing).

Then, on leaving the train in Gaya, I slipped down the railway station stairs, twisting my ankle. I heard the cracking of the ligaments and my first thought was: "You see, this is how you start to clean up all the negative karma you have caused and created. What a wonderful way to start immediately!"

And so I was on crutches on that first day when I met the director, Ven. Thubten Labdron, and the medical staff. The following night I had a serious stomach infection, resulting in running (on my painful foot) all night and day to the toilet next door.

Being aware of impermanence, again, I said to myself, "What a wonderful way to clean up all the negative karma, how much suffering I must have caused to all my mother

beings," and I started *tonglen* practice.

In 24 hours I felt better, and started working.

People asked me later how I managed to overcome this situation, staying calm, and never complaining. I found the question difficult to answer, afraid to give too much importance to my motivation. But in a private discussion with Ven. Thubten Labdron, she opened my eyes by saying that this way of overcoming suffering (mental and physical) could inspire those coming to the Dharma center, especially young students.

Working in collaboration with the medical staff, nurses, physiotherapists, and other volunteers was a fantastic experience. The various projects here – visits to rural areas, workshops organized for the traditional birth assistants (TBAs), and educational planning – have gone well. The plan will continue for two years.

The experience of working and communicating and exchanging ideas with these wonderful people, who have a deep respect for each other, had an indelible influence on me. Thank you to all who gave me the opportunity to open my mind, to be able to follow the Dharma. You are in my daily prayers. May light and love open your hearts and mind in order to stop suffering.

My next volunteering opportunity? Hopefully, I will be in Nepal for eight weeks at the end of the year. ☸

# Mahamudra 2008/09 Spring & Summer Programme

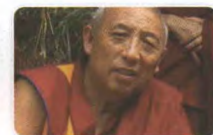
Retreat Centre



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| Oct 8 <sup>th</sup> – 13 <sup>th</sup>     |  | <b>Venerable Tenzin Chogyi</b><br>Lojong Retreat - Thought Transformation |
| Oct 24 <sup>th</sup> – 27 <sup>th</sup>    |  | <b>Venerable Geshe Sangey Thinley</b><br>The Six Perfections              |
| Dec 28 <sup>th</sup> – Jan 4 <sup>th</sup> |  | <b>Geshe Tashi Tsering</b><br>Atisha's Lamp For The Path                  |
| Jan 5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup>      |  | Green Tara Je-Nang & Commentary on Green Tara Practice                    |
| Jan 8 <sup>th</sup> – 14 <sup>th</sup>     |  | <b>Venerable Lobsang Namgyel</b><br>Green Tara Retreat                    |
| Jan 20 <sup>th</sup> & 21 <sup>st</sup>    |  | Reiki I Reiki II Attunement   |
| Jan 23 <sup>rd</sup> – 25 <sup>th</sup>    |  | Healing Emotions, The Wise Way  |
| Jan 30 <sup>th</sup> – Feb 1 <sup>st</sup> |  | Forgiveness   |
| Feb 19 <sup>th</sup> – 23 <sup>rd</sup>    |  | Lam Rim Retreat   |
| Feb 28 <sup>th</sup> & Mar 1 <sup>st</sup> |  | Reiki One Attunement  |



*Geshe Tashi Tsering*



*Venerable Geshe Sangey Thinley*



*Venerable Lobsang Namgyel*



*Venerable Tenzin Chogyi*

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