

RETURN TO LAWUDO

In June 2008 Lama Zopa Rinpoche – the Lawudo Lama – led a pilgrimage, walking the Solu Khumbu region of the world’s highest mountain range. This is the land of the Sherpas, one of the holiest regions of the Himalayan mountain range where the precious Guru Padmasambhava was said to have hidden secret teachings to be revealed slowly to the world. The journey to Namche Bazar (11,250 feet/3440 meters) was dramatic, with another ten kilometers or so to reach Lawudo (elevation 13,000 feet/4,000 meters). Along the way the group experienced the incredible magic of the mountains whose face and landscape change swiftly.

Top: Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Lawudo.

Bottom: Waiting for the helicopter

Right: Back row: Rinpoche (center) with his sister Nawang Samden and his brother Sangye, new director of the Lawudo Gompa Project. Front: Ven. Nyima Tashi and Lillian Too.

Rinpoche gives a teaching outside in freezing conditions – with no sound system he had to yell loudly to make himself heard.

People traveled for miles to hear Rinpoche’s teaching.



Lawudo is located high up in the Himalayan mountain range, northeast of Kathmandu and nestled among a range of mountains strongly associated with Guru Rinpoche, the Lotus-Born Guru who in the eighth century had predicted that in the future when “iron birds fly, the Buddhadharma would spread throughout the world”. Soaringly remote and

awesome in their unyielding splendor, here in the Himalayas, every mountain, hill and rock is associated with a protector deity of some kind.

“Lawudo is like another world, it has its own time which seems to bear little if any resemblance to time as we know it in the West,” said Frank Brock, former director of the Lawudo Retreat Centre. “There’s no rush, everything happens with harmony and good nature that puts a smile on everyone’s face. For me, there’s no greater experience of timelessness than sitting in Anila’s [Ngawang Samden, Rinpoche’s sister] kitchen at Lawudo drinking tea. To be in any place at the same time as Lama Zopa Rinpoche is a great blessing, but to be in Lawudo with Rinpoche seemed to me a very great blessing because of the significance of the place. I also felt very grateful to be able to spend time with Rinpoche’s disciples, whose friendship, example and behavior in offering service to Rinpoche I always find very inspiring.”

The journey began when Lama Zopa Rinpoche, his two attendants Ven. Roger Kunsang and Ven. Jinpa, and feng-shui expert Lillian Too (a devout student of Rinpoche’s) took off from Kathmandu airport in a small helicopter and flew to Lukla. Ven. Nyima Tashi, a relative of Rinpoche’s, and director of FPMT’s Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre in Kathmandu, and Sangye, Rinpoche’s brother, who is the new director of Lawudo Retreat Centre, were waiting to join the group. So, too were Chris Davis and Frank Brock, with two monks from Kopan, Thubten Tenzin and Tsultrim Sherab. Their task: to help with Rinpoche’s visit.

“We had walked from Lukla to Namche in one very long day and stayed the night there before going on to Lawudo early the next morning,” Frank said. “A few hours later we walked back down to greet Rinpoche and his party as they began the long climb up to Lawudo.”

It was summer and monsoon, the time of year when cloud cover is heaviest, and many of the magnificent peaks of the Himalayas were shielded from view. The helicopter off-loaded



PHOTOS: Ven. Roger Kunsang

Rinpoche and the others at a small clearing near the village of Namche Bazar. Porters carried the luggage as the group trekked on foot to Lawudo.

SHERPAS WELCOME THEIR LAMA

Meanwhile word had spread that Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who is the reincarnation of the region's very own holy Lawudo Lama, was walking up the mountain, and along the way people came out to offer *khatas*.

In the Sherpa tradition, as in the Tibetan tradition, incarnate lamas are very highly regarded and in the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal there are only a few recognized incarnates. Of these, Lama Zopa Rinpoche has almost movie star status. He is the only lama among the Solu Khumbu incarnates who directs a Buddhist organization, let alone an internationally acclaimed one who is responsible for building the world's largest Buddha statue, and who travels the globe.

Sherpas love to talk over their endless cups of tea, and news of Rinpoche's arrival moved very quickly up and down those Himalayan hillsides. And while it is not uncommon to hear Sherpas complain that their lama "never returns to Khumbu, spending all of his time with *injies*", in their hearts they hold Lama Zopa Rinpoche most dear. When he shows up, nothing will stop even the oldest and most infirm among them from making the steep climb up to Lawudo to receive a blessing from the Lawudo Lama.

"Rinpoche's teaching style to the Sherpas is like his teaching style everywhere," Merry Colony, FPMT's Director of Education, explains. "He will take whatever time is necessary to ensure that people understand the teachings and to explain the importance of putting the teachings into practice. Most of all, Rinpoche will emphasize the true meaning of Dharma. For a Sherpa audience, many of whose elders are illiterate and whose knowledge and practice of Dharma extend no further than the recitation of *OM MANI PADME HUNG*, Rinpoche's teachings are an obtuse treasure trove, a gift they know is brimming with profound meaning, even if they can only understand a portion of it. Because of his unique teaching style, this audience hears more Dharma in one day from Lama

Zopa Rinpoche than they would normally hear in a decade, or even a lifetime from other teachers – which is perhaps why Rinpoche only goes once a decade!"

This time, Rinpoche's visit was especially significant as it had been eleven years since the Sherpas had seen their lama, an event worth living – and certainly worth waiting – for. Any Sherpa knows that the harder the journey is to see him, the longer the teaching goes on, and the more hunger or thirst they may experience, the more merit they will collect. Being a practical people who are accustomed to making do with little, they would have shown up at Lawudo with their thermoses of tea and *chuba* fronts filled with potatoes and dried cheese to receive whatever teachings Rinpoche would bestow. Some of them would have left never knowing what they got.

On this particular visit, the days poured with rain, unseasonable rains that turned all the seating area into mud. But discomforts of this sort do not dissuade the average Sherpa, particularly if blessing cords and long life pills are in the mix. By all reports the mood that day in the mud was quite ecstatic. On this particular visit, not only had their lama come back, but he was promising to build a new monastery as well, a larger and better equipped monastery that could house their (ordained) children and give them a good Dharma education [see panel next page].

"One doesn't have to knock on too many doors in any given village of the Solu Khumbu region to find a family whose son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter or other relative is a monk or nun at Kopan Monastery or Khachoe Gyakyil Nunnery. Kopan's reputation as not only Nepal's largest monastery, but as a premier educational institution, is known far and wide. And Kopan was, after all, started at Lawudo by the Lawudo Lama and his guru, Lama Yeshe," Merry Colony said.

RINPOCHE IN LAWUDO

By 5:00 A.M. on that first day at Lawudo, the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas were visible in all their glory. "The clouds had sunk into the valley. Everything came into sharp and crisp focus against the blue, blue sky. What a



wonderful way to arrive at Lawudo – rejuvenated, fresh and wide awake!” Lillian Too said.

“I went straight to Rinpoche’s cave, suddenly overwhelmed at the prospect of seeing him in the old Lawudo Lama’s cave. Rinpoche was seated within. I fell to my knees and slowly made three complete full-length prostrations. Rinpoche smiled and gestured for me to sit down. The miracle is that I have Rinpoche in this life, that he has found me, and that I have recognized him, embracing him as the ultimate perfect teacher. Rinpoche is completely pure and so consistent, so single-minded in his quest for enlightenment, so urgently does he work to benefit everyone he comes in contact with – be it people or cows or goats or birds!”

In no time at all Lawudo had become a very busy place. An endless stream of people came to receive blessings from Rinpoche. Over several days Rinpoche offered teachings and initiations and lead many precious and powerful pujas. The mountains resonated with the beautiful chanting of Lawudo nuns reciting *Nyung Nä* and *Jorchö* prayers to the Compassion Buddha. “We also received the long life initiation of Buddha Amitayus,” Ven. Roger Kunsang said.

The trek back down the steep trails that final day was challenging. Ominous thick white clouds blocked the mountains from view. Would the helicopter be able to land? Rinpoche sat deep in meditation on a stool, one of the monk attendants holding an umbrella over him. Nearby juniper incense was burning to overcome obstacles. Behind them lay the mountain that is the “local protector”. Sangye whispered, “Rinpoche needs to clear the clouds there,” and he gestured to where two imposing slopes rise. The gap through which the helicopter would fly looked dangerously narrow. The clouds would have to clear for the pilot to land.

Yet the clouds parted miraculously, revealing blue skies. Rinpoche stood up and walked toward the helicopter as if nothing great had happened ... just the transport arriving. “We had all seen the miracle, and when I tried to thank Rinpoche, he just gave me a big smile. We had to hurry, he indicated, for the clouds will close. We boarded, the doors shut, and we were flying to Lukla to refuel, and then to return to Kathmandu. We arrived at 9:00 A.M. to news that Kathmandu’s city roads were all closed; there had been a weekend of demonstrations. But nothing disturbed my mind any more,” Lillian concluded.

And as Chris Davis said, “The privilege of being in Lawudo and the Khumbu in general, with Rinpoche is unfathomable: I don’t think I can even begin to comprehend it.”

THE LAWUDO GOMPA PROJECT

In the early 1970s when the Lawudo gumpa was built, it was meant to house young monks from the region and was the fulfillment of a promise made by the previous Lawudo Lama to the people of the valley.

Not many years later, the monks moved down to the Kathmandu Valley where Kopan Monastery was built. From that time on, Lawudo has served as a retreat center only. Throughout the ’70s and ’80s, Rinpoche would go every year, or every few years at Saka Dawa, and participate in the annual Nyung Nä retreat. Over time this also stopped because Rinpoche’s world tours demanded more and more of his time. But for several years now Rinpoche has been saying he would like to revitalize Lawudo and establish it once again as a monastic center for the local community.

Merry Colony explains: “The plans now are to take down the existing gumpa, which is sinking and becoming hazardous, and to rebuild a larger, more secure structure that contains a large teaching and meditation hall as well as accommodation for monks. Rinpoche has appointed his younger brother, Sangye Sherpa, as director to oversee the years of work ahead. For the Sherpas, this is an added bonus. Sangye is dearly loved by the Sherpa community. While his tulku brother may not be seen or heard of much, Sangye’s home in Kathmandu is a thoroughfare for all Sherpas coming and going from their homes in the mountains to their homes in Kathmandu or abroad. His generous spirit and honest character has earned him a great deal of respect and love and I’m sure that all Sherpas without exception are delighted that he will now be more involved back in their home country in the mountains.

“Currently, Sangye’s plan is to first gather all the materials for the new gumpa project. These materials will all be stored in Mende, the village below Lawudo. Once these materials have been gathered (and most will have to be brought in by helicopter!) and two new 15,000 - 20,000 liter capacity water tanks have been built (one at Mende, the other in Lawudo), then the old gumpa will be demolished. The new one will be built in its place along with accommodations for residents. Sangye also envisions building fifteen to twenty huts around the gumpa for the benefit of retreatants.”

For more information about the Lawudo Gumpa project, go to www.lawudo.com. See also Frank Brock’s story, “A Vision of Lawudo for the 21st Century,” in Mandala December 2007/January 2008.