

# MAITREYA INSTITUUT AMSTERDAM Celebrates its First Ten Years

*By Paula de Wijs-Koolkin*

## The beginning

Once upon a time, a young man went to see Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the end of a November course in Kopan. He first told Rinpoche about how difficult it was for him to meditate in his apartment in an old part of Amsterdam, and then he offered to help Rinpoche financially with whatever project Rinpoche thought was best. To his surprise, Rinpoche suggested that he help start a center in Amsterdam – a place that he himself could use to meditate in! That conversation was the start of a beautiful city center in the heart of Amsterdam, a place where thousands of people have been able to meditate and learn how to come to grips with their lives.

After traveling for some months, our young man returned to the Netherlands, contacted me, and our search for a building began. It took many months, but when the right building was found it was obviously the best we had seen – two interconnected buildings along a small, quiet

canal not far from the railway station and public transport. By accident, we looked at the buildings a day before the official viewing day, and when we were able to communicate our enthusiasm to Rinpoche, he immediately said to “just zoom into it” – and so we did!

The building needed a lot of renovation to turn the store, warehouse and offices into a light and airy center with gumpa, multi-purpose rooms and living areas, but the result was worth it. We made sure that everything downstairs was accessible for those in wheelchairs and had a studio apartment and guest accommodation built upstairs for the teachers who would come to stay. A feng shui practitioner helped the architect with the placement of doors and the rounding of corners, and chose the colors for the high walls. All this helped to make the center visually interesting and give it a peaceful feeling.

We were extremely honored when Lama Zopa Rinpoche came to officially open and bless the center in November 1998. Rinpoche was very pleased with the premises and the way things were set up. He said at the time that this was the way city centers should be, and his praise gave us great encouragement!

We had decided to use the name Maitreya Instituut, so that people would associate us with the country center in Emst, and so we became Maitreya Instituut Amsterdam. Maitreya Instituut had existed since 1979 and was located in the woods in the east of the Netherlands, but somehow there were relatively few people from Amsterdam who were students there. Geshe Sonam Gyaltzen was, and still is, the resident geshe in Emst, and although we did not feel the need to request a geshe for Amsterdam as well, the center could not offer teachings without a teacher.

Centers usually begin with a group of students that grows until the need for premises is felt, but we began the



**Clockwise: Ven. Tendar, director of Nalanda Monastery, and Ven. Losang came to pick up the re-gilded Maitreya statue that accompanies the Relics Tour, and took it back to France. The canal-side Maitreya Instituut. Annelies van der Heijden reads Rinpoche's message to students at the opening of the Relic Tour: Paula de Wijs-Koolkin on her left and Ven. Kaye Miner on her right. PHOTO: Andy Melnic**

other way around – we had a beautiful center; all we needed was a resident teacher and students!

## Our teachers

We were lucky to have visiting teachers like Ven. Sarah Thresher come regularly, and Diana Carroll stayed with us for some months, but then our karma really ripened. Lama Zopa Rinpoche seemed to feel that MI Amsterdam had potential, for he started to look for a teacher for us among his best Western students, and we were fortunate when he decided that Ven. Kaye Miner would be the right teacher for Amsterdam.

Ven. Kaye was living and working in Sydney, Australia in those days and had been a nun for many years. She had lived and worked at Tara Institute in Melbourne for at least six of them. For her it was a major step to leave her job and family behind in Australia and move to rainy Amsterdam, but she trusted her guru's wishes, moved to the other side of the world and she is still with us today – and these days she also teaches in Dutch! It was her experience and natural gift for teaching that would give the center the stability and inspiration it needed to put down roots and to grow.

At first, our program was entirely in English, and the people who came reflected the international metropolis that Amsterdam is. Dutch people often have an excellent command of English, so there were Dutch students, but also ex-pats from England, the U.S., Australia, Latin America, Sweden, France, Italy – and other countries. All these nationalities were, and still are, represented by the students and volunteers at the center.

Ven. Kaye's regular meditations and the structure of the teachings brought continuity to the program, and we could see the numbers of students growing steadily. Ven. Kaye was one of the first to implement the Discovering Buddhism (DB) program, as it fit well into her idea of presenting the teachings in a clear and accessible way, providing a path that people could follow from one subject to the next, or step into at some point on the way. Now she is teaching the fourth round of DB subjects and also the Basic Program (BP). Our program provides a wide range and depth of education, including the FPMT courses like DB and BP and Buddhism in a Nutshell and what we call Meditation 1.0, and also thangka painting, sculpting buddhas, making mantra rolls and hopefully a 16 Guidelines course will be added to our program soon. All of this (except for the Basic Program) is or will be given in Dutch and English.

## More Anniversaries

### **Panchen Losang Chogyen Center, Austria**

celebrated its fifth anniversary as an official FPMT center recently. More than sixty people gathered, including members of the Buddhist Union and local Tibetans. Center director Andrea Husnik reports that there are approximately 150 Tibetan refugees in Vienna, mostly followers of the Gelug tradition. Ven. Rita Riniker led a peace meditation, as it happened to be the United Nations Peace Day, and participants chanted the Tara mantra with the many children who attended. The children took part in an animal liberation project, releasing crickets.

"We had a slide show of the history of FPMT, with pictures dating back to Kopan days in 1982," Andrea said. With classical music and a lot of very good food, typical of Vienna, the event was deemed a great success.

### **Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London.** *Mandala*

celebrated Jamyang's 25th anniversary in our December 2004 issue. How time flies: now the London center has celebrated its 30th anniversary.

The center offers an oasis of peace in a very busy city: a place where sentient beings can learn to develop their hearts and minds, guided by skillful teachers from the Mahayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. A big crowd shared their experiences of the past on a Sunday in November, and planned for the center's future. Robin Bath, who has been around since the center started, starred in an entertaining climax.

Director Sally Barraud said a big thank you to everyone who made it possible for Jamyang to offer a service to the community. "From a small apartment room in St. John's Wood 30 years ago, to a lovely Old Courthouse where the center stands today – it has all been possible thanks to the kindness of sentient beings," she said.

Since Ven. Kaye also became center director in Emst in 2003, we've changed most of the weekend courses into Saturday-only courses. These work quite well in a city environment. The annual six-day City Retreat at the beginning of the summer is also very much appreciated by our busy students.

One thing that we have learned is that we should not start a new class or project if there are no capable people

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available to take it on – and take it forward. Over the years, we have had to stop the Death and Dying group, the children's program and now the Tibetan language classes because the person or people driving them had to stop for some reason. However good the idea is, there needs to be someone to both initiate a project and to keep the inspiration alive and do the work, or we won't even try to begin it!

One of the initiatives that had to end was the bookstore at the center. When we began, a bookshop opened in the room at the front, specializing in Buddhist books and artifacts. The idea and the selection of books was excellent, but unfortunately, after many years, it had to close because sales were low and costs high, and Buddhist books are more accessible to the general public than before.

### Highlights

We have been honored with the visits of some high lamas like Ven. Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and Ven. Dagri Rinpoche, and Western teachers like Ven. Neil Dondrub, Ven. Sangye Khadro, Ven. Robina Courtin, Dr. Alex Berzin, Jon Landaw, Prof. Jan Willis and Alan Wallace. Master thangka painter, Andy Weber, comes to teach in Amsterdam twice a year. There was also a quite amazing ceremony with the venerable geshes of many FPMT centers from all over the world during the Geshe Conference in the Netherlands in 2001 which people still remember vividly. Lama Zopa Rinpoche's visit in 2004 and the Medicine Buddha initiation he gave in Amsterdam also made a great impression.

We have been able to host the Heart Shrine Relic Tour at the center twice. The last time was just recently and the opening of the tour was attended by 130 members of Maitreya Instituut. It formed part of the celebration of this, our tenth anniversary.

### Significant achievements

Although we have had many special teachers and events, many of us feel that the most significant achievements are the less tangible ones. The positive change in people's behavior and attitudes over the years, as they learn to live with more awareness, has been truly inspirational. Students have become good friends, and have helped each other in their lives, sometimes at the time of death. Simply put, people

have benefited from the Dharma in ways that affect their lives and the lives of those around them, and that is what gives the center true significance.

Sometimes the people who benefit from the center are not Dharma students in the traditional sense, but people who want to learn to meditate or how to become happier or more peaceful. About 175 people come to the center on a weekly basis, including yoga students who take lessons from qualified teachers at our center. Probably about one thousand different people come through the center on a yearly basis. They may come for a couple of courses and never come again, or resurface after a few years. Others come only to meditate for 45 minutes a week. We like to think that all are benefited in some way.

If there is a secret to the success of a Dharma center, it would have to be a good heart. If the teacher who teaches about it doesn't display it, if the volunteers and people who work at the center don't demonstrate it, there would be no reason for people to believe that Buddhism could offer them something that could benefit their lives. As we celebrate our tenth anniversary, it is really clear that our teacher and our core of about 25 volunteers and staff have made this center what it is today. Some volunteers started to help even before the center existed, like Annelies van der Heijden, who is now the Chair of the Maitreya Instituut National Board, and Annette van Citters, who has done everything from making tables and cupboards to being the bookkeeper, and Marvin de Hont, who has worked in the office and the reception since the very beginning. Our volunteers and staff have been, and still are, really exceptional. On Lha Bab Duchon, November 22, we invited all past and present helpers to come to the center so we could celebrate our tenth anniversary together.

So what will the future bring? We have ideas about starting a Tibetan medical clinic in the front room, hope to start some new courses and expand the Dutch language programs. Those interested can keep track of us through our website or visit us on our quiet canal in Amsterdam! 🍵

*Paula de Wijs-Koolkin is Director of MI Amsterdam and a member of the international board of FPMT, Inc.*

*[www.maitreya.nl/amsterdam-dharma-centrum-cursus-boeddhistisch-tibetaans.htm](http://www.maitreya.nl/amsterdam-dharma-centrum-cursus-boeddhistisch-tibetaans.htm)*