

When the Guru Manifests a Stroke

Ordinary Appearances and Extraordinary Teachings from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

On Friday, April 22, Ven. Roger Kunsang, attendant to Lama Zopa Rinpoche and FPMT CEO, sent an unexpected request to the FPMT community. The brief but urgent sounding message asked students to recite the mantras of long life deities such as White Tara and Amitayus for Rinpoche's health and long life and for centers to "organize extensive Medicine Buddha puja or Medicine Buddha practice with many offerings and strong prayers for Rinpoche's health and long life." The requests came on the "important advice" of Khadro-la, (an extraordinary Tibetan woman who is widely regarded as a dakini, an oracle, and certainly someone special by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Dargi Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche). Ven. Roger ended his message thanking everyone for their understanding, help and support, concluding that this was "very important at this time."

While not uncommon for Ven. Roger to send out periodic requests for prayers and practices for Lama Zopa Rinpoche's health, this message was unusual. After all, Rinpoche was in the middle of teaching a one-month retreat in Bendigo, Australia, and by all accounts, the retreat was surging along with not a moment to spare for general updates from Ven. Roger. Students around the world took a collective breath of concern, got out their Medicine Buddha puja texts, recited mantras, organized group pujas, and waited with bated breath for more news.

Ven. Roger's next update came the following day: "Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been admitted to hospital, the medical staff have confirmed that Rinpoche has had a stroke and temporally lost some of the movement of his right side and his speech is impaired." With these words arrived the unwelcomed reality that the FPMT community's precious guru, object of refuge for countless beings



Lama Zopa Rinpoche in California, USA, February 2011. Photo by Dionne Wilson.

suffering in innumerable ways, kinder than all the buddhas of the three times, was manifesting a serious obstacle to his health and long life.

Ven. Roger reiterated the recommended prayers and practices from the day before, and remarked that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had been informed of Rinpoche's condition and that numerous high lamas close to Lama Zopa Rinpoche as well as Kopan Monastery had already begun doing pujas. Within hours of the startling news concerning the severity of Rinpoche's condition, messages via center listservs, websites, as well as individual student's Facebook pages confirmed that the collective effort would not be small. Pujas

were organized, group prayers initiated, mantras undertaken, animal liberations planned, vows to practice harmony and keep personal commitments were revitalized, service of all variety was offered to Rinpoche and his entourage; and, with fervor, dedication, and heavy but open hearts the FPMT community did what it does best ... it went to work.

Over the following day, a picture emerged of what happened. According to Ven. Roger, in the middle of the Yamantaka initiation, Rinpoche felt, "some sensation on the left side of his head as he left the gompa, then something more on the walk back to his room. Rinpoche said it was 'like something was trying to enter him.'"

Ven. Joan Nicell, who transcribes Rinpoche's teachings in real time during his retreats, reported, "At the beginning of the afternoon session at 3:30 P.M., as Rinpoche started to talk, I thought the audio wasn't adjusted right, as I was having difficulty understanding him. Then, Rinpoche, himself, paused in mid-sentence, with a big smile on his face, to say, 'Do you see the difference in my speech? You can hear it? Do you notice my speech changed? My speaking, do you see a change? That happened when I went out. This morning,

Top: Students greeting Lama Zopa Rinpoche as he arrives to teach the one-month retreat in Bendigo, Australia. Photo by George Manos.

Below: Ven. Roger Kunsang with Lama Zopa Rinpoche on the grounds of Atisha Centre, Australia, April 2011, prior to Rinpoche's manifesting a stroke. Photo by George Manos.



when I went out, I felt that outside. Maybe I shouldn't have gone outside. That's good for the self-cherishing thought, for the selfish mind. It is the opponent to harm, to destroy the self-cherishing thought.' However, after a couple of minutes, Rinpoche started to speak [somewhat] more normally, and continued with the preparation for the Yamantaka initiation for the next three hours."

Ven. Roger later explained, "When Rinpoche arrived back in his room from the session of Yamantaka, it was clear that something wasn't right but Rinpoche was determined to continue the initiation. It was about 8:00 P.M. and Rinpoche was determined to continue. I was quite concerned so there were several calls to Dharamsala discussing with Khadro-la what would be best. When Rinpoche saw that it was difficult to continue the initiation he wanted to have appointments with students. After some back and forth Rinpoche gave up on that which was a relief as it seemed very obvious that Rinpoche really wasn't well."

By the next morning, Rinpoche had lost some use of the right side of his body and his speech was slurred. Ven. Roger arranged to take Rinpoche to the hospital. After nine hours of waiting, tests and medication, Rinpoche was assigned a bed in the men's ward. No private rooms were available and the hospital was short of staff due to it being Easter weekend.

It quickly became apparent that Rinpoche would not physically be able to continue teaching for quite some time when on April 24 Rinpoche's scheduled upcoming teachings in Indonesia and his return to Lawudo in Nepal were canceled.

On April 25, the day after Easter, a CAT scan showed no bleeding or clot in the brain – a huge relief for thousands of increasingly anxious students. Two days later, the doctors at Rinpoche's hospital discouraged visitors for some time, citing Rinpoche's obvious fatigue and warning that future physiotherapy would be very tiring.

As the days unfolded, updates and amended practice advice came through to the FPMT community from Ven.



From left: The first photo of Lama Zopa Rinpoche to appear to the community, after Rinpoche's admittance to the hospital; Ven. Holly Ansett helps Rinpoche put his hands in the mudra of prostration from his hospital bed while an exhausted Ven. Roger grabs a few minutes of sleep.

Roger, Khadro-la and Choden Rinpoche advised a new, specific set of practices for student to engage in: Medicine Buddha puja with extensive offerings, as many sessions of *Four-Mandala Ritual to Chittamani Tara* as possible, as many recitations of Most Secret Hayagriva mantra with supplication as possible, and continual recitation of White Tara mantra with Lama Zopa Rinpoche's name included. Students attending the still-in-progress retreat in Australia began to send reports, keeping their fellow students updated on what it was like to carry on the retreat without their precious guide.

Ven. Roger reflected in his blog, *Life on the Road with Lama Zopa Rinpoche*, "I think Rinpoche is quite exhausted. It is like after 40 years nonstop on the road ... it is all catching up! Now Rinpoche is sleeping through the night! BUT! Give him a chance.... At one stage (in the middle of this) Rinpoche wanted to go back to the course (150 people are still doing the retreat) and sit on the throne and finish the Yamantaka initiation. He typed on the iPad: 'I can sit on the throne, Geshe-la can read the initiation text, then people think they are getting the initiation from me!' I really don't know physically how that could have worked, but Rinpoche wanted to try and obviously had been thinking of how he could manage it. It never happened because when the doctor heard this she said, 'NO. WAY.'"

At the end of April, Rinpoche had what the doctors termed, "a continuation of the stroke," which can be a common occurrence with stroke patients. Ven. Roger explained that this is one of the main reasons why Rinpoche needed to

remain in the hospital, to "gain control over the blood sugar levels and blood pressure, what are seen to be the conditions for [another] stroke if they are not strictly controlled."

Students wondered what Rinpoche looked like and how his holy speech had been affected. The first photo and videos of Rinpoche were released on April 30. In the powerful photo Rinpoche blesses his lunch. The caption read: "Lama Zopa Rinpoche in hospital, with great difficulty putting hands in mudra of prostration during extensive offering practice."

In the videos, although Rinpoche appears clearly exhausted and his speech severely slurred, he maintains his characteristic concern for practicing and remains remarkably joyful. [Videos of Rinpoche in the hospital can be found on FPMT's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/fpmtinc.]

Rinpoche's first written message to the public was released on May 3. The note said: "I am enjoying the hotel, 5 or 10 star hotel." Rinpoche's signature was large and recognizable with a shakily drawn smiling face in the "o." He used his left hand to write it because his right arm remained paralyzed.

Rinpoche continued with physiotherapy. On May 13, Ven. Roger happily reported, "Rinpoche's sugar levels are improving. He is now on insulin. Blood pressure is now close to normal. Rinpoche still gets fatigued quickly which doctors say is normal in this kind of situation, so a lot of rest is required."

On May 14, Ven. Roger confided to his blog, "We have been here now six weeks (Bendigo, Australia). Maybe this is the longest [stay] in one place for many years. Each day



From left: Ven. Roger at Rinpoche's side in the hospital; Rinpoche writes messages from his hospital bed. Below: Rinpoche's first message: "I am enjoying the hotel, 5 or 10 star hotel." Photos by Ven. Holly Ansett.

over the last week Rinpoche seems to be getting noticeably better. Now three weeks in the hospital, life each day here is busy. You wouldn't think it, but it is! We take on a lot of the work the staff normally do so that Rinpoche is more comfortable. A small Dharma team (Ven. Kunsang, Ven. Ailsa and Gail) cook outside the hospital (at the monastery) and bring the food in three times a day; I stay 24 hours and have a comfortable niche on the floor beside Rinpoche; Ven. Sangpo and Ven. Holly are here 18 hours a day."

Ven. Roger wrote that through this entire experience, "Rinpoche's attitude hasn't changed at all." Rinpoche continued to send messages to friends and students from his hospital bed despite the fatigue and heavy schedule of therapies.

In one message, Rinpoche said:

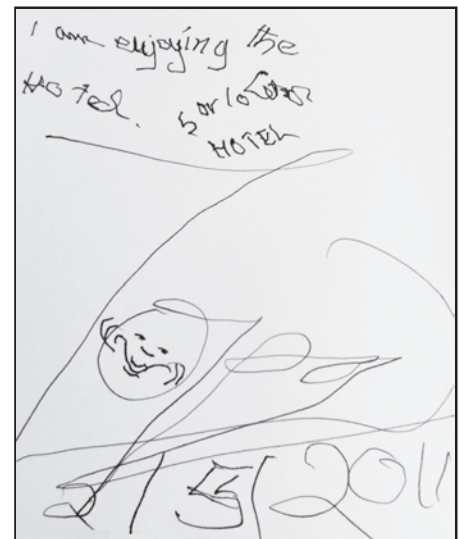
"This is a rare opportunity to be in the hospital. I am very lazy but pray to take on the suffering of all sentient beings, especially the people who have diabetes, blood pressure and paralysis, so it is an incredible opportunity...."

"I realize that being in hospital I can't lift at the moment [referring to his arm to make prostration], [can't maintain] altar [gestures to altar], can't use candles [in the] hospital, [can't make] water bowls. I realized that worms don't have any legs or hands, and their body is long [so they cannot practice], so I realized that so much unbelievable suffering [comes] for people who have two arms and no opportunity to make prostrations [which is] unbelievable, most unbelievable easy [way] to create the cause of enlightenment, highest success of life, wow, wow, wow."

According to Ven. Roger, "Rinpoche sent a message to one high lama: 'This is my past negative karma ripening now, may it be the cause of the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.' That high lama replied, 'Rinpoche is not experiencing negative karma but has taken on a big obstacle for the world of Tibetan Buddhism.'"

Students were delighted to receive a short note from Ven. Roger on May 18: "Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been discharged from the hospital and is now resting comfortably in a private home nearby the hospital." Rinpoche's recovery continues with physiotherapy, Western as well as Chinese treatments and Khadro-la's advice and assistance. Ven. Roger ended his message thanking everyone again for "the support and prayers by so many."

The number of prayers and practices reported by students and supporters around the world continues to grow as do the sincere and heartfelt requests for Rinpoche to please remain in order to continue teaching and to get well and live long for the benefit of all.



Nalanda's Amazing Offering

By Ven. Tenzin Yonten, spiritual program coordinator of Nalanda Monastery

It began with a very quick email from Ven. Holly. The first lines were, "... extremely important and urgent, Rinpoche requests all Nalanda monks to make 7,000 offerings to Namgyälma, and recite 1,000 long Namgyälma mantras.... Rinpoche is hardly able to speak or move ... please give this the highest priority." Ven.

Holly explained that Rinpoche advised, "Doing this practice you receive long life free from sickness. It purifies all obscurations, liberation from hell and so forth, all lower realms. If an animal hears this mantra, then it is its last rebirth as an animal, this mantra stops rebirth in lower realms, and after death you get reborn in Amitabha pure land. It will be last rebirth in the womb. You will get reborn in the heart of a lotus."

From that moment on was a blur of activity, and through the kindness of Geshe Sonam Ngodup, we received the transmission of the long Namgyälma mantra that evening.

As monks searched for 5,000 plastic cups from Lavour's two supermarkets and another car was dispatched to IKEA to fill a shopping cart with tea lights, there were monks on their knees in the monastery grounds picking daisies for the 1,000 flower offerings, and others dreaming up ingenious methods for assembling make-do trellis tables from scaffolding planks and white sheets.

There were creative thinkers working on ways of beautifully arranging kilo upon kilo of every kind of brightly colored candy, the most perfect and delicious fruits, and strings and nets of fairy lights of every color to hang from anything hang-able, as a small army of people assembled the water offerings by dancing a



5,000 plastic cups were filled with offerings.
Photo courtesy of Nalanda Monastery.

sort of ballet around each other to prevent knocks and spills.

But, where to sit? A gompa filled to the brim with beautiful offerings of every sort now had to accommodate 28 monks, as well as monastery volunteers and other devoted students that came to lend a hand. Somehow, and with some careful mind-

fulness, we managed to squeeze everyone in the spaces between all the tables for the practice and mantra recitation to begin.

In addition to the three daily sessions of Namgyälma, there have been pujas such as *Lama Chöpa*, *Ganden Lha Gyäma* [*Lama Tsongkhapa Guru Yoga*], Medicine Buddha, Chittamani Tara and Sixteen Arhats as well as animal liberation practices to save many fish and countless worms.

Many of the monks have completed the 1,000 long Namgyälma mantras as requested. We plan to reset some large tables of offerings once all the monks have returned to Nalanda (by the first week of June), and we will continue with three sessions a day until Rinpoche's instructions are fulfilled.

Rinpoche, from the bottom our hearts, thank you so very much for giving us so much joy in making these offerings for your healthy, long and prosperous life. All of Nalanda's monks are continuing the recitation and make the most heartfelt dedications so we may create the causes for you to always remain as the perfect and pure example for numberless sentient beings.

Ven. Holly reports that, "Rinpoche is extremely happy with what Nalanda has done. He commented a number of times that possibly they are the only Westerners who have recited the long Namgyälma mantra 1,000 times."

On May 4, the FPMT Board of Directors wrote a heartfelt letter and request to Rinpoche, on behalf of all students around the world. The entire letter can be found at www.mandalamagazine.org, as part of this issue's featured online content. We conclude here with the final moving paragraphs and join in a collective and sincere request to our most kind, incomparable, Lama Zopa Rinpoche.



Most Holy Guru, whose nature is inseparable from the victorious all-pervading Vajradhara. You who are master possessor of the complete teaching lineage of the Buddha, Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche:

... **Your deed of manifesting** the aspect of having a stroke has made tens of thousands of your followers and well-wishers around the globe apply themselves so assiduously in doing so many kinds of practices: recitations, pujas, lights offering and liberating animals, and so on.

These activities have been, and continue to be, dedicated toward your speedy recovery and long and healthy life. Your showing the aspect of illness has in turn benefited sentient beings even more as this compassionate deed of yours has actually spurred us lazy beings of this degenerate time to practice even more. But truly this

manifestation is the very last thing in the world we, the worthless disciples, wish to encounter. We have no wish to encounter this manifestation for even a split second! So now, please, please, for the sake of us all, withdraw from showing this aspect and we as FPMT Board Members will follow all your advice, instructions, and practice and we will strive even more diligently to protect, guide and uphold the FPMT organization the best we can.

By the power of the prayers of all your gurus, all the Sangha in the great monasteries, your disciples around the globe, the Three Jewels, and infallible dependent-arising, our minds filled with devotion and aspiration, we sincerely request and pray: Please withdraw the aspect of showing illness and resume your true aspect of vajra body for the sake of all your disciples. Without you, our minds are so weak and feeble like newly-born babies without parents, the day without sun, the night without the moon and stars, and fish without water.

Please, please, please most Holy Guru, the source of our temporal and ultimate happiness, live long until all beings' sufferings end. ◆

Please see page 10 for advice from Ven. Choden Rinpoche and Ven. Roger Kunsang as well as compiled resources from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive regarding how to view the guru manifesting illness.

To keep up to date on all official reports, announcements and requests concerning Lama Zopa Rinpoche's health, please subscribe to "Rinpoche's Health – Official Updates and Practices" at www.fpmt.org.

Ven. Roger Kunsang's blog, "Life on the Road with Lama Zopa Rinpoche" can be found at www.mandalamagazine.org.