

## Dorje Den: The Vajra Seat



Forgive us for being so long overdue, but the 2010 and the Year of the Iron Dragon has been a veritably eventful year for His Eminence Gongkar Dorje Denpa Rinpoche and the Gongkar Sangha. Forgive us as well that, due to technical problems with our editor's computer, we are having to provide the images that we usually like to generously pepper our newsletters with on a separate document on-line! Anyway, here is a glimpse into a little of what's been going on and taking shape...

First and foremost was the annual Sakya Monlam at the end of 2009, which was conducted in Lumbini, birthplace of the Buddha in modern-day Nepal. Not only was this the third time that the Monlam was hosted by Gongkar Chöde Monastery, it also was the main platform to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Enthronement of our Root Guru, His Holiness the Sakya Trizin. The ceremonies for this special event were organised by a special committee, but the rituals for this, another long-life ceremony offered for His Holiness Jigdral Dagchen Rinpoche and the rest of the Monlam were led by the Sangha of Gongkar Chöde Monastery, who worked

tirelessly to ensure a beautiful and successful series of pujas. His Eminence Gongkar Dorje Denpa Rinpoche joined the Dungsyes of both Phodrangs, the Ngor Khen Rinpoches, Tsarpa Zhabdrungs and other distinguished Sangha representatives of all branches and major monasteries of the Sakyapa in the rituals by presenting the Seven Emblems of Majesty to Their Holinesses. This Monlam was one that we all never forget.

May the aspirations expressed at the Monlam - for world peace to prevail and all sentient beings be free from suffering - be fulfilled and, in particular, may the lotus-feet of our glorious holy Guru, His Holiness the Sakya Trizin, remain steadfast for hundreds of aeons

!As soon as everything was tidied up and packed away, His Eminence took a small circle of family and friends for His first full pilgrimage of the holy sites of the Buddha. Here is an account of the journey of devotion from Gordon, one pilgrim who came from the UK:

*It is said to travel a long journey to receive or pay respect to the Triple Gem is auspicious, thus it was for His Eminence Gongkar Dorje Denpa's pilgrimage in December.*

*After a beautiful Monlam, which received warm-hearted appreciation and praise from H.H. Sakya Trizin Rinpoche, he embarked on a pilgrimage of the holy Buddhist sites. Accompanying him were students from the UK, the USA and China, as well as his family who live in the remote Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh and a number of dedicated Sakyapas from India. All had experienced long and hard journeys to arrive in Lumbini and little did they know they would be facing more soon!*

*Lumbini is one of the most peaceful of the principal Nekhor destinations and it was truly inspiring to see how our Guru, H.E. the late great Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, skilfully developed the area nearby and replanted the garden. However, after two busy weeks, the air was becoming thick after five thousand visitors...and no latrines! Our journey hadn't reached five miles before we were stopped in a Nepalese village by an anti-Maoist demonstration. I considered staging an anti-anti-maoist demo of my own but they looked rather young and angry, so we all just relaxed in the sun, observing what sadly has become a norm in modern Nepalese life.*

*Our first proper destination was Shravasti, where the Buddha spent many rainy-season retreats, expounded many Sutras and performed miracles. After a victorious debate with the Hindu overlords about trying to charge Bikshus to enter a holy Buddhist site, we entered what was a sublime and tranquil park with many ancient ruins, bodhi trees and stupas. The morning mist was just starting to clear and there was indeed much shanti (peace). Sadly, this was suddenly distorted by loud Thai pilgrim shouting through a megaphone to another tour, something we hadn't seen the last of! After a brisk khora, we were on our way to Kushinagar, the place of the Buddha's Mahaparanivarna.*

*We were lucky enough to find a Gompa to stay for the night, although the basic water pump, shared outdoor toilets and hard beds were an amusing challenge to some of our Western friends! Apart from the now ubiquitous Thai-tour megaphone gabble, Kushinagar was a sadder place than any other destination. Maybe it was because it was where the Buddha left this world and the decline of his teachings began, but monks begging for money at the place of his cremation was also a sad occurrence.*

*Next stop, Sarnath in Varanasi, where the first public Dharma teaching occurred. The Deer Park was a source of many beautiful Dharma relics, an Ashokan pillar with clear inscriptions, many carvings (although a lot have*

been vandalised) and a huge stupa. It's hard to believe that a stupa with the Buddha's remains was here until the 1700s when it was demolished for the bricks! Unfortunately, as became more common, there were excessive tradesman hawking around the grounds and I often wondered where the entrance fee went, considering the rubbish littering the holy site. It is absolutely forbidden to take photos of the statues in the museum to the extent of a metal detector. By now, my rebellious side was appearing and through slide of hand and some James Bond tactics, I managed to get some excellent pictures!

By then, we were on a better road and enjoyed an easy journey to our final destination - Bodh Gaya, the place where the Tathagata attained complete Enlightenment!

We enjoyed a much-needed rest to meditate and chant by the Bodhi Tree before taking two day-trips to surrounding holy sites. Amongst these were the place where the Buddha committed austerities and was given rice milk. This was a quiet place of beauty and I wandered if the river nearby was where the sitar teacher was saying 'not too tight, but not too loose' to his student, thereby helping the overhearing Buddha find the Middle Way. Somebody mentioned that today the rice milk would maybe cost the Buddha 20 rupees! Other destinations included Vultures' Peak and Nalanda.

Nalanda was another sad experience, having once been the largest place of learning on this planet; it was destroyed by the invading Muslims in the 11<sup>th</sup> century after a proposed deal from the local Hindu population. Its libraries were so large they burnt for six months! The entire road is crammed with stalls and businesses, and there isn't much peace at all; it has, for all intents and purposes, become a tourist attraction. Unlike Sarnath, where just the foundations remain, an attempt has been made to rebuild Nalanda, but to make it look like ruins, which just adds to the mockery of the situation. The best thing about this visit for me was Rinpoche's scolding of the ticket guards and exposing a tour-guide's ostensible knowledge as being completely false! One piece of profundity was the amount of bodhi tree seedlings that are growing out off the walls, which reminds us of the strength of the Dharma despite any temporal obstacles.

For some, this was the end of the pilgrimage; some continued onwards home or to other places in India. For some of us, there was one last stop and that was to a holy site of Dharma in our time, Gongkar Chöde, the Seat of the current Dorje Denpa and a most beautiful Gompa in peaceful surroundings, with diligent Sangha and where the perfect Dharma is expounded.

Overall, having looked forward to doing pilgrimage for many years, it was a beautiful experience in the company of generous brothers and sisters, but there were plenty of reminders of Samsara and the degeneration of the Dharma, and thus the need to keep ones practice sharp.

Following this, the Fifteenth Day of the Tibetan New Year saw the annual Gongkar Lama Dances (Cham) take place at the monastery, with more visitors than ever - young and old from the local Tibetan and Indian communities, from the UK and other parts of mainland Europe. Here is one account from Jen, a supporter of the monastery who hosted Rinpoche during His visit to England in 2009:

*Our first trip to India was most definitely an eye-opener. It was a truly extraordinary experience. India is a land of extremes. Our spiritual pilgrimage with the vastness and splendour of the religious sites was exhilarating and amazing. In contrast, the lifestyle of the masses was humbling.*

*India can be very noisy. We had days of travelling by road where vehicle horns constantly sound just to let everyone else know you are there, as well other traffic noises. Whenever you stop you are bombarded with the sounds of everyday India. Constant surround sound can get quite claustrophobic...*

*Imagine then, being able to hear the slightest sound; a leaf rustling in the wind; light footsteps; the swish of a monk's robe as he walks by and to feel the warmth of human kindness in the air. To feel the spaciousness around you and an all-encompassing peace. If you can you are at Gongkar Chöde!*

*It could be noisy too, but such wonderful sounds; long horns being blown, drumbeat, bells ringing, melodious chanting and happy laughter.*

*So how come did Rob (my husband) and I end up in paradise? It's all thanks to Venerable Kassapo (Gen Ngawang Khyentse). Last Spring, we had the wonderful opportunity to meet Rinpoche La, Khenpo Choezin La and Umze Chodhar La during their first tour to Europe.*

*One outcome of the tour, through the generosity of supporters, was a much-needed replacement kitchen block at the monastery. But even more rewarding was the new friendships made here and in India.*

*With little idea of what to expect, we were enthralled with the monastery and its surroundings as soon as we arrived. Happiness and acceptance of what is abounds everywhere. The community of the monks, both young and old, could readily be felt.*

*The highlight of our stay was the 15th day of the new lunar year and The Mahakala Prayer Festival with the Cham (ritual) dances, reinstated by H.E. Dorje Denpa Rinpoche at the monastery in exile. We were encompassed with a kaleidoscope of colours, sound, movement and emotions.*

*The energy of the festival and prayers of homage and aspiration was powerful and pervasive. It really did feel like out with the old and in with the new.*

*Gongkar Chöde magnificent in its simplicity, sits in a valley nestled between the Tibetan community and the jungle. It is an oasis of calm, so restful and restorative. At night the silence is almost tangible.*

*Impermanence at its best!*

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*If I only carry one thought away with me, it is that you can lead a spiritual life, be happy and have fun all in the same lifetime.*

Next was Rinpoche's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, the area of His birth, to accompany His Holiness the Sakya Trizin on His first visit to the State, which was a resoundingly beneficial and fruitful for all who were blessed by seeing and hearing our great Teacher. At the outcome of the tour, local representatives expressed the fervent wish for a Sakya monastery to be established in Arunachal, a project which His Holiness has passed onto His Eminence Gongkar Dorje Denpa Rinpoche, and one which will be explored in the coming months.

Rinpoche's feet barely had time to touch down back at the monastery before it was time to answer the repeated requests in Taiwan and other East Asian countries for Him to return and offer teachings. He began in Singapore to apply for the necessary visas and catch up with friends of the monastery. Due to visa complications, His Eminence was unable to bring a retinue of monks from the monastery, so Gen Ngawang Khyentse swiftly flew to Singapore at the last minute, along with the full benefits of a British passport requiring no additional visas, and off they went to Taiwan.

Largely based at the Sakya Institute of Vajrayana Buddhism in Taipei, myriad initiations, pujas and blessings were bestowed there, at Tharig Monastery's Centre and also at the Phuntsok Phodrang's Centre in Taipei. In all, Rinpoche spent just over a month in Taiwan, also visiting centres and practitioners in Taizong, Gaoshiung, Yuanlin and Yilan to give many profound teachings and blessings, particularly special transmissions composed by the first Gongkar Dorje Denpa, Kunga Namgyal. Rinpoche's vast activities touched the hearts of many people, who urged him to return as often as possible to spread the sacred teachings of the Dzongpa branch of the Palden Sakyapa in Taiwan.

From there, Rinpoche and Khyentse-la made their debut visit to Hong Kong and Macau and the invitation of Mr Zhao and the newly established Sakya Dzongpa Association of Hong Kong and Macau. This coincided with the final days of a visit to Hong Kong by the Eminent Dungsas of Sakya Dolma Phodrang, the co-abbatial Ngor Khen Rinpoches and other venerable Sangha members from Sakya College in India. And so, with the abundantly generous help of the indefatigable Ani Chukyi and her friends from Tibet House in Hong Kong (who offered indispensable support throughout the tour), the Dzongpas hosted the largest ever dinner for members of Vajrayana practitioners in the region, with special guest H.E. Dungse Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, who inaugurated the event with auspicious words of welcome. This was followed by a short introduction to the Dzongpa lineage by H.E. Gongkar Dorje Denpa Rinpoche and a presentation of offerings to all represented centres of the Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu and Gelug traditions, and a delicious vegetarian meal for all. At the end, His Eminence Dungse Ratna Vajra Rinpoche kindly answered questions on Dharma, shedding bountiful light on the philosophy and practice of the Sakya tradition. This event was a great milestone for reviving the Dzongpa lineage in Asia and was followed by enthusiastic attendance a full itinerary of programmes offered by Rinpoche.

A concise explanation on the Sakya *lo-jong* instructions for transforming the mind known as 'Parting from the Four Forms of Clinging' based on the commentary by Nubpa Rigdzin Drag was given at Sakya Tsechen Phuntsok Ling as well as an introduction to Refuge in the Mahayana based on the first chapter of Sakya Pandita's 'Elucidating the Sage's Intent' at a Chinese Buddhist Centre at the generous invitation of Mr Laurence Chen. The advanced initiation was bestowed in Macau of the Dzongpa's Red Jambhala, as well as that of the sickness-dispelling goddess, Parnashavari. In Hong Kong, the Dzongpa's Vajra Garuda as well as Maharakta Ganapati were given, as well as transmission into *Serkyem* offering. A Vajrayogini *Tsok* ceremony was also offered with prayers in dedication to the forthcoming birthday of H.H. Dagchen Rinpoche. In fact, so many people wished to attend the various programmes, that the Garuda initiation had to be given twice! What was more auspicious was that those who attended were keen to receive extensive instructions in the practice of these *Sadhanas* and so forth, including the foundation teachings without which these practices are profound in name alone. Rinpoche explained that it is hard to practice many *Sadhanas* everyday, but at least one must maintain the resolute commitment to cultivate virtue and the two *bodhicittas* in every aspect of one's life. He added that, with this basis, practicing even just one *Sadhana* along with keeping the *Samaya* will be sure to herald results in our practice. With such a rich sharing of Dharma and the establishment of a new centre in Macau, there is no doubt that this was the first of many visits to the region.

Bringing the formal teaching side of the tour to a conclusion, the next port of call was Yogyakarta on the beautiful island of Java in Indonesia - despite being at exactly the same time as Mt Merapi erupted in the very same place! This was at the invitation of long-term friends from Singapore, Ron and Joanne Lui, to make a pilgrimage to the ancient mandala-monument that is Candi Borobudur. Even though they got literally covered in volcanic ash that was still cascading down from Merapi, Rinpoche and friends managed to visit all the Buddhist pilgrimage site in the area, offering extensive prayers not only for the flourishing of Dharma and the welfare of all wandering beings, but also for those who lost their lives in the natural disasters that had struck the region. It was a truly poignant and powerful experience for all involved.

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So now, Rinpoche is back in India and we've come full circle with time for another annual Sakya Monlam, which will probably have just concluded by the time we are able to publish this newsletter. Rinpoche was unable to attend this year in order to research the possibilities of the Arunachal project, but many other Sangha members will be there. Just before New Year, Rinpoche and the monks will be back in Singapore for another special programme, and then onto Malaysia. After the 15<sup>th</sup> Day post-Losar celebrations at the monastery, Rinpoche will be taking friends to visit Arunachal Pradesh, and then teaching tours are scheduled for the UK, USA and, for the first time, Belgium. We'll try to produce details soon; keep your eye on the website for more... including pictures!

