

A Pilgrim's Progress Report

'Chasing Buddha' in Nepal & India

as published in 'Mandala' magazine Oct/Nov 2004

Many of us had never met Venerable Robina Courtin before, much less travelled under her tutelage throughout strange lands. However, any vague sense of trepidation was – certainly for me – washed away on that first night the 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrims met in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Robina, an ordained Buddhist nun with over 20 years' experience integrating Tibetan Buddhist practice with the western way of life, has been leading these pilgrimages throughout Nepal and India since 2001. Her main project and the key beneficiary of the funds raised from the pilgrimage is the Liberation Prison Project.

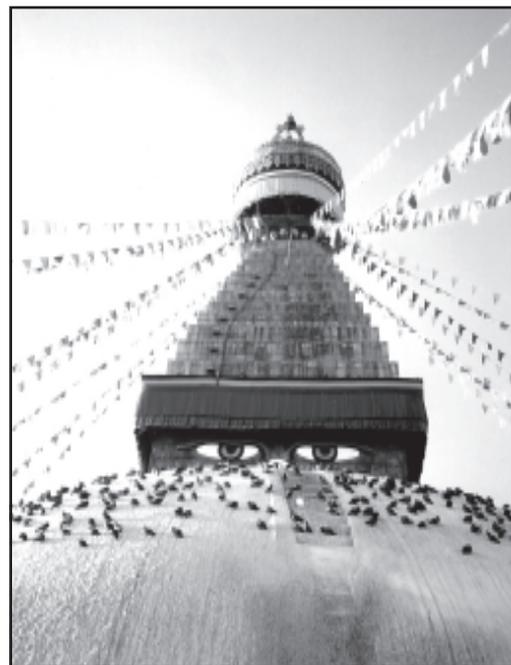
My friend Keri and I had both taken refuge with this extraordinary teacher and undisputed Buddhism dynamo in June 2003 at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia. During that weekend of teachings on bodhicitta which culminated in our formally committing ourselves to seeking Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, Keri and I both realised that the 2003 pilgrimage was not leaving town without us. It was to be a seminal journey for many – not always what was expected but definitely worth every cent and every second. Twenty-three eager pilgrims from throughout the States and Australia came together for four weeks in late October/early November 2003. It was a journey that was to take us to the sacred Buddhist sites of Nepal and India. On a spiritual level, we would travel much further.

The 'soft entry' into the pilgrimage started with pujas at the grand stupas of Boudhanath and Swayambhunath before a week-long retreat in Kopan Monastery. It was a gentle start and a taste of things to come – not the least being just keeping up with Robina who has seemingly limitless energy and can bound up hillsides without raising a sweat. Even if you weren't in the slightest bit interested in Buddhism, Kopan would still move you. There is something quite special about this monastery which now houses over 300 monks and is a member of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT).

One very much feels part of a monastic community at Kopan, the monastery of Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche. The facilities are almost luxurious with a café, library, shop and dharma store. Mornings and evenings resonate with chanting from the main gompa and dharma discussion groups can congregate on the lawns by the magnificent wheel-turning or Dharmachakra stupa built for Geshe Lama Konchog who was Kopan's abbot until his death in October 2001. His successor, Lama Geshe Lhundrup Rigsal, gave a teaching to Robina's pilgrims one evening which engendered even more devotion for these truly extraordinary sentient beings. It was with some sadness that we left Kopan after five short days to really begin our pilgrimage with a short but breathtaking flight to Lumbini, the birthplace of Shakyamuni Buddha.

One of the many striking aspects of this pilgrimage is that, when you arrive at these historical sites, it's all there, just as you have heard in the stories – Ashoka's pillar, the pool in which Mahamaya bathed before the birth of her son 2560-odd years ago. While the forest is not as dense as it once was, it is not hard to imagine the beautiful gardens that surrounded the pool.

Sravasti was another personal high. The Jetavana (Jeta) Grove is stunning. The ruins of the monastery where Buddha and his followers spent many rainy seasons in retreat are accessible and set in beautifully maintained gardens. Robina led a particularly moving puja in one of the ruins.



Continued overleaf

The pilgrimage does not follow a chronological route. Next stop was Kushinagar where the 80-year-old Buddha attained parinirvana and his physical body was cremated. The famous golden statue of the reclining Buddha – commemorating the place of his death – is a hugely popular pilgrimage site. The stupa where the cremation was conducted is quite different to any we had seen previously on the trip. Robina explained that under the white domes common to most stupas was the rugged brickwork that we could see in the Kushinagar stupa.

Throughout the trip, Robina maintained a steady stream of teachings, each one applicable to the site we were visiting and each one rich with significance and clear explanations. To receive such wisdom was precious; to receive it in such surroundings was priceless. At all times, Robina was available. She was happy to meet with us and chat or to be approached more formally for private counsel. What luxury!

We visited some extraordinary places – Nalanda with its sprawling ruins of what was once the world's largest Buddhist university, Rajgir where we stayed in stunning Japanese Zen-style accommodation, Vulture's Peak where the Buddha gave the Second Turning of the Wheel of the Law in teaching the Heart Sutra, and the ghats of Varanasi by the Mother Ganga.

But without doubt, visiting the Buddhist holy of holies, Bodhgaya, was the highlight. This surprisingly small and provincial township is dominated by the 7th century Mahabodhi Temple. It is here that the 35-year-old Buddha attained his Enlightenment under what is now termed the bodhi tree. The fifth-generation descendant of the original peepal tree stands nestled against the temple's western face. Surrounding this hub are beautiful gardens and



2003 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrims prepare offerings at Boudhanath Stupa, Kathmandu.

courtyards where hundreds of pilgrims spend dawn to dusk

prostrating and meditating. Bodhgaya is also home to monasteries established by Tibet, Thailand, Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Japan and Sri Lanka. Robina's pilgrims had the additional treat of receiving teachings at the Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, another pivotal FPMT centre.

For my part, the journey didn't end with the flight back home. Friendships were forged that grow stronger despite physical distance. Lessons learnt from travel abroad remind me of how fortunate I am to live in a free and prosperous country. And most precious of all, the seeds of compassion and wisdom so generously offered by our venerable guru keep me on a greater journey to Enlightenment which has no beginning and no end.

For details about this year's 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrimage from October 23 to November 19 2005, visit www.chasingbuddha.org or contact pilgrimage coordinator Effie Fletcher at Himalayan High Treks in San Francisco on 1-415-551-1005. Cost is still \$US3300.

About LPP

The 'Chasing Buddha' pilgrimage is organised by Himalayan High Treks as a fund raiser for the Liberation Prison Project (LPP) which Ven. Robina founded and directs. The 2001 pilgrimage raised \$12,300, the 2002 pilgrimage raised \$7400, \$13,000 in 2003 and \$15,000 in 2004.

LPP offers free Buddhist books, prayers and practice booklets, practice items, Mandala magazine subscriptions and video and audio tapes of teachings to over 3500 incarcerated individuals and Buddhist study groups in 500 prisons in the US.

Ven. Robina, Ven. Kathie Losang, Ven. Losang Tenzin, Ven. Monlam and other sangha volunteers write to and visit prisoners, giving dharma teachings and offering advice about their practices. LPP provides support for prison chaplains and education officers and has provided prison libraries with some 10,000 books, audio and video tapes. LPP also has branches here in Australia, New Zealand and England. Funded by the generous donations of its supporters, LPP continues to grow, bringing the dharma to many grateful and precious human beings and helping them to transform their minds and their lives.