

# 2010 Light of the Path Retreat

*It seems that Light of the Path, the annual lam-rim teaching retreat in North Carolina, USA, is by all accounts special. Not only is it one of the few teaching events that Lama Zopa Rinpoche initiated from his own side, but it is one of the few that have been webcasted in five languages, allowing hundreds of students around the world who could not come to North Carolina to benefit from the event. That the retreat takes place in the beautiful Blue Ridge mountains on 1,200 acres of woodland complete with mountain streams and wildflowers, ridges, valleys and spectacular views only adds to the event's transformative power.*



## LIGHTING THE PATH IN NORTH CAROLINA

By Nick Ribush

For the second year running the excellent YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly near Asheville, North Carolina, was the site of the FPMT's Light of the Path retreat, hosted by Kadampa Center, the FPMT center in Raleigh, and taught, of course, by our inexpressibly precious guru, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Most of the more than two hundred people who attended would probably agree that it was two of the best weeks of their lives.

The folks from Kadampa Center again did a fantastic job organizing the retreat and making sure it ran smoothly. Director Dr. Robbie Watkins, Spiritual Program Coordinator Ven. Tendron and Retreat Coordinator Sarah Brooks in particular worked very hard to give everybody a wonderful experience. Similarly, the folks from FPMT

Education Services exceeded themselves in preparing the retreat manual, setting up the live online broadcast, providing a real-time running transcript projected onto a screen above Rinpoche, and then making the whole course available in various media subsequently. Merry Colony, Ven. Joan Nicell, Eamon Walsh, the whole Media team and many others all deserve our grateful thanks.

The program followed the same format as last year. We took the Eight Mahayana Precepts every day and followed this by prostrations to the Thirty-five Buddhas and then *Guru Puja*, usually led by our inspiring retreat leader, Ven. Steve Carlier. The session after breakfast saw the conclusion of the puja and some review of the incomparable Lama Zopa Rinpoche's previous night's teaching. After a long break, the afternoon session would continue with the review followed by a meditation led by Ven. Steve,

Ven. Rene Feusi or Ven. Sarah Thresher. Then, after the dinner break, Lama Zopa Rinpoche would teach until, most nights, after midnight. We kept silence (badly) from the end of the evening session until after lunch the next day.

Rinpoche began his teachings reminding us about some fundamental lam-rim topics such as impermanence and death, the sufferings of the lower realms and the perfect human rebirth, then began giving us the oral transmission of Lama Atisha's *Lamp for the Path* in English.

The next couple of nights Rinpoche taught on emptiness using the famous verse from the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* that starts "A star, a visual aberration," with reference to the

together to swap stories and plan for the future. Not exactly retreat activity, but all part of the big picture.

The retreat continues again next year and I can't encourage you enough to go. There's nothing like it!

## THE ORIGINS OF THE FPMT ONLINE LEARNING CENTER

By Merry Colony

Sometimes the beginnings of a project can become hazy over time, but the origins of the FPMT Online Learning Center remain pretty clear, and perfectly illustrate one of FPMT's unofficial mottos: form follows function.



four schools of Buddhist philosophy. As usual, the teachings were interspersed with Rinpoche's entertaining stories and reminiscences, usually delivered with Rinpoche's great sense of humor. And as the retreat unfolded, Rinpoche also taught on self-cherishing, guru devotion, prostrations, the seven-limb prayer, tsog, karma, the three sufferings and the six perfections. Rinpoche also spoke about the importance of study and gave general practice advice and a great variety of teachings on other topics and some more oral transmissions.

People came from many parts of the world and many of them were old friends and FPMT Dharma center workers, so another great feature of the retreat was people catching up with each other and sharing experiences. And, of course, there were countless meetings, as those of us trying to help Rinpoche accomplish his and Lama Yeshe's vision for the organization took the opportunity of being

Left to Right:

Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaching at the 2010 Light of the Path retreat in North Carolina, USA. Photo by Kalleen Mortensen.

Students form a khata line to greet Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Back row: Catherine Ming, Shankha Mitra and Jim Brady. Front row: Sarah Brooks and Ven. Lhundrup Tendron. Students form a khata line to greet Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Photo by Annelies van der Heijden.

Blue Ridge Assembly, Asheville, NC, USA. Photo by Sarah Brooks.

Retreat leader, Ven. Steve Carlier. Photo by Sarah Brooks.

By 2007 the development of education programming for FPMT centers was nearing completion insofar as the essential curriculum of a wide range of programs was developed and available for centers to use. The next step for FPMT Education Services was to get the programs online, particularly because continually updating the hard copies of our *Discovering Buddhism* and *Basic Program* homestudy modules was



becoming untenable. Lacking technical know-how, I was paralyzed in how to take this next step until Masters Program graduate Patrick Lambelet came to International Office to introduce himself at a staff meeting.

In the course of Patrick's introduction, he mentioned that he was helping with Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa's online *Basic*



Alexis ben el Hadj, Eamon Walsh, Harald Weicharrt, Antoine Janssen. Missing is Jean Luc Castagner. Photo by Sarah Brooks.

*Program.* Eamon Walsh, International Office's CFO and technology wizard, who had already been helping Maitripa College get their courses online, asked for a tour of Moodle, the software Patrick was using. As I watched Eamon explore Moodle, the way forward revealed itself: utilize Moodle as our online program software and Eamon as our online administrator! The need was clearly apparent, a solution was now clear, and the FPMT Online Learning Center was born.

The FPMT Online Learning Center currently has five programs online and two Light of the Path retreats available through the FPMT Media Center, an archive of video and audio recordings. We are proud that in a single year FPMT Education Services has made available 10 years of program development to Friends of FPMT and the general public.

This year, we successfully expanded the FPMT Media Center's capacity to broadcast Rinpoche's Light of the Path teachings live and in five languages. Behind the miracle was the skilled and steady support of Harald Weicharrt and the FPMT Media Team: Alexis ben el Hadj, Jean Luc Castagner, Antoine Janssen and Eamon Walsh, the most fabulous merging of expertise, good looks and dedication that anyone could ask for!

It's now hard to imagine how we would have provided FPMT's newest program, *Living in the Path*, if it weren't for online delivery. We now have the capability to extract video clips archived in the Media Center, match them together with the transcript (transcribed in real time by the

wondrous Ven. Joan Nicell), arrange it all by topic, pair together with the awareness exercises, meditations and service components, and then by the organizational Dharma genius of Kendall Magnussen, provide neatly packaged, easy to navigate, brilliantly bite-sized modules of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's deep and profound teachings.

The success of the Media Center and Online Learning Center featuring Light of the Path retreat materials is undeniable: during the Light of the Path retreat, from Sept 11-26, 2010, the site received **12,170 hits from 4,951 visitors from 89 countries** with a high of 1,362 visitors on September 20. Over 40 people were consistently online for Rinpoche's live teachings. Other parts of the retreat were broadcast live and approximately 12 people appear to have completed the entire retreat via the video webcasts.

The world is changing fast and technological advancements show no sign of slowing down. Although it is overwhelming to consider that FPMT Education Services must keep aligned with new technological developments in order to remain relevant and accessible, we're excited that we've



Private booths helped translators such as Gerald Noack and Laetitia Franceschini share Rinpoche's teachings live in five languages. Photo by Sarah Brooks.

managed to come this far and confident that we'll creatively adapt to the challenges ahead.

You can access the FPMT Online Learning Center at <http://onlinelearning.fpmt.org> which features modules from five education programs developed by FPMT Education Services. These programs are continually expanding with new modules added each month. Both *Discovering Buddhism* and *Living in the Path* offer one module freely to the public.

The FPMT Media Center, the archive of video and audio recordings from Light of the Path, is accessible through the FPMT Online Learning Center and is absolutely free for the general public.

## GECKO DIVINATIONS

By Sarah Brooks

**O**n the last day of Rinpoche's teachings at the Light of the Path retreat, I was part of a small group of the Kadampa Center staff and volunteers who gathered in the lodge where he was staying. That evening he had taught through the dinner hour, and most of us had not taken the opportunity of precepts that morning so had skipped dinner to hear his teachings. His core volunteer team at the lodge, Cherie Sutorus, Alejandra Almeda, and Hein and Son Pham, had offered to share dinner with us after Rinpoche left the grounds. He was leaving that evening to drive overnight to Washington, DC, to go to his next stop in Mongolia, and an enormous amount of luggage was piled in the corner waiting to be loaded in the car.

We gathered in his lobby and of course hoped for a last opportunity to be in his presence one more time before he left. (I was thinking about food too, of course.) Quite a bit of time passed, and we speculated when he might appear knowing he had a deadline to get to DC. We were all just sitting around talking casually when Rinpoche suddenly walked out of his room with his final appointment and saw us all there. We all stood and bowed, our hands in prostration.

Scattered on the round tables were gifts that Rinpoche did not pack to take with him, and he picked up a figure of a surfer that had been decorated with a mantra and gave a talk about the benefits of even just seeing it.

Then he showed us his stuffed gecko, and while pointing around the room told everyone to spread out. He was going to throw the gecko in the air onto the round table and, depending on who the gecko was looking at upon landing, he or she would get to take it home. Once we realized what he was doing, we started laughing and could hardly stop. By then a

few more people had joined the group, so we all surrounded the round table and watched Rinpoche toss the gecko high in the air. It landed and was looking at his volunteer driver for the retreat, Herb Cunningham, who was thrilled. Herb told Rinpoche that

his wife really likes the Geico gecko and would be very excited when he brought it home.

Rinpoche looked around at the rest of us, and then told Herb he needed the gecko back for a while. He started giving away the other nice things in the room like tsa tsas, a prayer wheel, and things for people's altars. Each time, he would throw the gecko into the air to divine who should receive a gift. As more people came in, they joined the circle of laughter. Rinpoche held up a large crystal and pronounced it a wish-fulfilling jewel, and the gecko decided it was to go to Ven. Steve Carlier, the retreat leader. Some people got several things and others got none – the gecko was unpredictable!

Meanwhile Ven. Roger and the entourage were taking the luggage out and getting ready to leave. Seeing time was short, Ven. Roger urged Rinpoche to remember he had a flight to catch, but Rinpoche just kept throwing gecko divinations until he ran out of things to give away.

We reluctantly said goodbye to Rinpoche and the entourage, and found that during our delightful time together the hour had grown late – almost eleven o'clock. Where my mind had started off hoping for a bite to eat, I felt completely satisfied by Rinpoche's presence and decided to decline dinner after all. Or perhaps my priority had just shifted from food to sleep....

## LIGHT OF THE PATH WORKING RETREAT

By Gelongma Losang Drimay

**F**ollowing the two-week course, I joined a smaller group of eight people for a work-week at a nearby rental house, churning Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings into modules for the online *Living in the Path* (LP) study program. From last year's working retreat there emerged four modules which are already online.

This year, we have identified four new modules on the themes of (exact titles to be determined):

- the Diamond Cutter verse – appearances being deceptive,
- some verses from Shantideva on the connections between mind and karma,
- the refuge-bodhichitta verse – Mahayana refuge,
- and Dharma happiness versus worldly happiness

The LP courses can be done completely online – providing a great benefit to people who do not have access to a Dharma center – and can be held at centers where there are facilitators. Our work week was much easier this year. Last year we had to spend a few days just figuring out what the program was going to look like;



Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the gecko and Herb Cunningham. Photo by Margie Harris.

## Bringing Living in the Path to Your Center

By Merry Colony

*Living in the Path*, the FPMT course based on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Light of the Path teachings, is unique because its primary teacher is Lama Zopa Rinpoche and its content is Rinpoche's heart instructions for practice. It is FPMT's quintessential lam-rim course, exemplary of our precious lineage.

*Living in the Path* takes what Rinpoche taught and packages it into manageable pieces so students can integrate the material in a realistic way, while remaining true to how Rinpoche initially presented the topics at hand.

With the materials already developed *directly* from Rinpoche's teachings, it is easy for centers to offer the course to their students by designating a "facilitator" to walk students through each module. A facilitator must be an FPMT-registered teacher who has attended one or more of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teaching

retreats of two weeks or longer. These retreats include Light of the Path (USA), Mani retreat (France), Lama Tsongkhapa (Italy), Four Kadam Deity (France), Medicine Buddha (USA), or Vajrasattva (USA).

Some centers, such as Maitreya Instituut Amsterdam, have already found that offering *Living in the Path* as a weekend retreat has good results. Other centers in Australia (Chenrezig Institute and Chagtong Chentong) and the United States (Thubten Norbu Ling, Osel Shen Phen Ling and Kadampa Center) already have plans underway to lead similar weekend retreats in the near future.

For study groups without teachers, the program can be followed simply as a group utilizing the online materials provided.

Please contact FPMT Education Services ([education@fpmt.org](mailto:education@fpmt.org)) or visit <http://onlinelearning.fpmt.org> for more information about how to host this inspiring course.

this year we had the advantage of being able to refer to all the materials that Kendall Magnussen had brought to completion – the modules that are already online.

The LP team got along very harmoniously and enjoyed some gut-bursting laughter at times. During our breaks for meals, we heard wild tales from each other about the adventures of pilgrimage, retreat and running Dharma centers in far-flung parts of the world, such as Eamon Walsh's accounts of running the center in Mongolia.

After some members of the work team had already gone to catch their flights, the rest of us went on an outing to a nearby landmark, Chimney Rock, for a hike and a riverside dinner afterward at Genny's "Home-Cooking" Diner, complete with hushpuppies served with every dish. Some other friendly hikers gave us some leads on where to hike when we come again next year.

## MINDFULNESS AND THE KINDNESS OF OTHERS

By Julie Caldwell

This year's focus for the Living in the Path retreat was *mindfulness* – how to really, truly, cherish others; how to combine compassion with joy-filled wisdom continuously – a topic I came to appreciate sitting in a chair at the rear of the gompa, my crutches propped up against the wall, right foot laced up in a black boot, healing the broken long bone of my little toe.

After two and a half months of watching my bone heal through a series of x-rays, I hobbled off to North Carolina, crutches still in hand, totally dependent on others. My Dharma practice had shifted from being obsessed with helping others to allowing others to help me. This was a big



Left to Right:

Working retreat participants Ed Gibson, Merry Colony, Eamon Walsh, Kendall Magnussen and Ven. Losang Drimay enjoyed breathtaking vistas from Chimney Rock in North Carolina.

Rinpoche makes prostrations before ascending the teaching throne. Photo by Sarah Brooks.



change for me and my long-term co-dependent history of caretaking others.

My Dharma practice now focused on me mindfully taking excellent care of healing my foot. This meant slowing down and following my doctor's advice. Also, I had to think ahead about special needs such as arranging suitable accommodations (and coming to understand the limitations of access to those). Blue Ridge Assembly provided a ramp over the stairs at the entrance of Abbott Hall (my lodge), and gave me a room with a shower. I took responsibility for bringing my own handrail and seat for the shower.

The more I took care of my foot, the more mindful I became about the surrounding environment, the people who showed up and the activities I could and could not do. A deep heartfelt appreciation bubbled up from inside of me, so thankful to each and every being who showed up to help me heal. People offered to give me rides, did my laundry, shopped and cooked for me, and gave me homeopathic lotions. All I had to give back was my deep appreciation. I kept my foot up, practiced *tonglen*, meditated, focused on mindfulness, read lam-rim, chanted mantras and took time to relax, all the time rejoicing in the kindness of others.

During the first week of the retreat, a Kadampa Center volunteer was assigned to drive me from Abbott Hall to the gompa, then to the lunchroom, then to Lee Hall for discussions, and then back to Abbott Hall. At mealtimes different people carried my food to the table. Someone else would carry my books. When inside the gompa, people brought me tea, juice and water. Others would smile at me as they walked in and out of the gompa, some would make small talk, and others shared stories.

Sometimes it seemed kinder to turn away help, especially when it was something I could do for myself. Other times, I saw how much the volunteer needed the experience of helping me. It created space for connection.

By week two I was able to put weight on my healing foot, which inspired me to put Rinpoche's mindfulness and walking practices into action. I walked up the hill to Lee Hall, thinking I was leading all sentient beings to enlightenment just like Ven. Kye and Lama Zopa Rinpoche had explained [see "Walking with Mindfulness," in *Living in the Path*]. It took 45 minutes to reach the top of the hill, walking slowly and with many rests along the way. My ankle was throbbing, standing there in my black boot, out of shape. I sat down in one of the Lee Hall porch rocking chairs and looked at the view. Two hours passed. Now rested, it was time for a shower. I stood up and walked down the hill to Abbott Hall, thinking

I was liberating all beings while chanting mantras, sharing my practice.

It's amazing how much the black boot has taught me about mindfulness.

## SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL IS HAPPENING IN NORTH CAROLINA

By Alison Murdoch

**A** lone and in transit at Charlotte Airport, surrounded by unfamiliar advertisements, I had an E.T. moment: "Help! What am I doing here?! I want to go home!" My jet-lagged mind almost convinced me that traveling halfway across the world to take part in the Light on the Path retreat was one big crazy mistake.

I needn't have worried because only a few hours later I walked into a gompa blazing with light; full of flowers, sparkling water bowls and holy images; packed with friendly welcoming faces; and above all was my precious teacher Lama Zopa Rinpoche sitting on the throne and sharing his heart instructions on how to practice the Dharma. For those few weeks, North Carolina was at the heart of the FPMT mandala, and the best place I could possibly be in the world.

I work full-time for Rinpoche and the FPMT – an immense good fortune, but also sometimes an excuse and distraction from making the time to sit on a cushion in retreat. Light on the Path was the perfect medicine. By the time I flew back through Charlotte, I was a changed person: refreshed, reconnected with my teacher, re-inspired to try to dedicate my life to others, and re-energized to continue with the study and practice that will be needed.

Although we were trying to "give up on this life" there were plenty of worldly delights: blue skies and luminous sunsets above the wooded hillsides of the Blue Ridge center; butterflies and birds around the running stream; and the wooden porches of the buildings strewn with the rocking chairs typical of the American Deep South. It proved to be a wonderful location for developing and deepening Dharma friendships.

The retreat was the highlight of my year, and I'm praying that I'll have the karma to return next September, this time with no hesitation. Something very special is happening in North Carolina. ♦

Next year's Light of the Path retreat is already tentatively scheduled for September 10 - 25, 2011.

For up to date information on Light of the Path 2011, regularly check Kadampa Center's Light of the Path website at [www.kadampa-center.org/lop/](http://www.kadampa-center.org/lop/) or by email at [lopinfo@kadampa-center.org](mailto:lopinfo@kadampa-center.org)