



South Florida Kagyu News

Published Quarterly by the South Florida Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu Centers • Kagyu Shedrup Chöling
Kagyu Tashi Chö Dzong • Kagyu Yönten Gatsal Chöling • Kagyu Gyurme Gatsal Chöling

Volume 1 Number 2

March 2001

Seminar on *The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen*

by Louise Lee

For four days at the end of January, Ani Karma Chötso gave a seminar that elicited some of the following responses from attendees: "It was one of the most intense experiences of my life, and I hadn't expected that." "It has been a pivotal point in my practice and saved me from much frustration: the timing couldn't have been more perfect." "Attending the seminar was one of the single best things I've done since I took refuge. It deepened my understanding of Buddhist practices and the Kagyu lineage as well as introducing me to powerful new practices."

Last June, Karma Chötso attended a ten-day retreat outside of Seattle led by the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, Abbott of Rumtek Monastery. The retreat teachings were based on a text Karma Chötso had studied

and practiced years before, then taught by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche. *The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen* was written in the 17th century by Karma Chagmey, a Tibetan Lama and terton who also wrote the text we use for the practice of Medicine Buddha. At the end of the Seattle retreat, Karma Chötso asked Trangu Rinpoche if he felt she could give these teachings in South Florida and received his blessing to do so.



*The Venerable
Ani Karma Chötso*

The seminar was one of our major fundraising activities this year. All the proceeds went into our New Dharma Center savings account in the hopes that we will soon have property where a stupa can be built. Attendees came from Key West to Vero Beach and beyond the region. About 25 students attended the eight sessions that began on Wednesday and ended on Saturday night. Karma Chötso's thoughtful and clear explanation of these extraordinary teachings, illustrated

with her own experiences, made this a once in a lifetime opportunity for the seminar participants. Many of the participants commented on the intensity of the experience. Karma Chagmey's text covers the entire Buddhist path from beginning to end. To sit and listen mindfully to the eight two and a half hour sessions was a novel and unforgettable experience for western students. The scope and breadth of the teachings were stunning. Between sessions we stayed together, talking little, eating light, and taking advantage of the opportunity to walk and stretch our legs. At the end of each evening, we hurried back to our homes torn between the desire to practice and the need for sleep. "Every night as we were ready to drop in our tracks we would spend some time reflecting on the profoundness of this teaching and the way in which the Venerable Karma Chötso was able to give us such a clear understanding."

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Christmas Benefit Concert

by Penny McCre

On a clear and unexpectedly chilly evening a few days before Christmas, members of Kagyu Shedrup Chöling, Kagyu Tashi Chö Dzong, friends and family, gathered to celebrate the season at a Christmas Benefit Concert performed by Dr. Robert Gastón at the Miami Shores Community Church, one of South Florida's oldest and prettiest churches.

Robert's warm and rich tenor voice, expertly accompanied by Korean pianist Seungah Lee, filled the church sanctuary with an eclectic mix of his favorite music. It ranged from the classical, such as Verdi's *Ave Maria*, to show tunes like Gershwin's *I Got Plenty of Nuttin'*, to love songs that included the traditional *Siboney* from Robert's homeland of Cuba, beautifully sung in Spanish. The concert ended with Christmas carols that included *Silent Night* and *Cantique de Noël*, giving the audience an opportunity to join in.

Robert is the sangha's very own Renaissance Man. He graduated from M.I.T. with a degree in physics, but these days he practices Traditional Chinese Medicine at the Quan Yin

Medical Center in Miami Shores. He studied voice at The New England Conservatory of Music.

This was the second Christmas Benefit Concert Dr. Gastón has given, raising hundreds of dollars for both the South Florida Dharma Centers and the Community Church. A limited-edition CD of the concert is available at KSC for \$20.

The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen

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The opening prayers for each session included the hauntingly beautiful Dorje Chang Thungma lineage prayer. Before and after each teaching there was a meditation, beginning with simple attention to the breath on the first day and progressing to specific practices described by Karma Chagmey in the text. On both Friday and Saturday, the group meditated outside on the lawn of Temple Beth El. We practiced mixing our minds with the sky and looking into the foot of a ray of sun. After the final outdoor session was finished, a small, beautiful rainbow appeared in an almost cloudless sky. Karma Chötso said it looked "quite a bit like Rinpoche's smile."

Karma Chagmey's text, *The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen*, takes the form of eight songs, and comprises a remarkable and profound discourse appropriate for both beginners and advanced dharma students. While the songs would be immensely valuable to a monastic community, these instructions are a road map for the lay practitioner, providing everything he or she needs on the path to enlightenment. This text is especially helpful for western students who have not had the benefit of a lifetime of learning about Buddhism. Most of us have learned piecemeal as opportunities arose. So *The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen* is a special gift for us. It starts at the beginning by pointing out the rarity of the opportunity of having a precious human birth and exposure to the dharma. Karma Chagmey does a remarkable job of making us aware of the importance of practice and of finding a good teacher. It was an amazing experience to sit together as a sangha in this beautiful temple in the middle of South Florida listening to our incredible teacher. We sat spellbound in this large space with sun streaming in the high windows as the sessions progressed from the beginning of the path to the end, with instructions on dying and a practice to prepare for that critical moment.

If there was one common sentiment among all the participants, it was a feeling of being overwhelmed with the magnitude of the teachings. "You will practice this the rest of your life," said Ani Karma Chötso towards the end of the seminar. "The text which was taught is cleverly designed to appear straightforward and simple, leading the student painlessly into the thick of practice and contemplation. Of

course, without the wisdom and depth of Anila's teaching, the profundity of most of the text would have been lost on me," commented one student.

The importance of practice was brought home to all of us. When asked about the seminar, a number of the sangha mentioned reordering priorities in their lives. One student said, "Instead of taking care of business first and letting dharma practice fill in the blank spots, now dharma is the first entry on the agenda. I'd understood with my head the importance of practice, but had become accustomed to the uneasy feeling of living topsy turvy. After this seminar, I understand with my heart, and things are changing."



A participant's question provides a special moment with Anila during the seminar. Photo by Jeanine Maes.

Several students commented on their gratitude for the opportunity of having a teacher such as Karma Chötso here in South Florida. We truly have a rare and precious opportunity that we should never take for granted. It took some effort and planning for each of us to carve these few days out of our busy lives. Fortunately we had several months to get ready, and the effort was quickly forgotten as the seminar began. Karma Chötso herself spent six weeks in semi-retreat to prepare for the teaching. Several days before the seminar, a postcard arrived from Thrangu Rinpoche wishing her Losar Tashi Delek, or a happy and auspicious New Year.

The seminar was followed on Sunday morning with the traditional offering of 108 butterlamps at Kagyu Shedrup Chöling. Special prayers were offered for Lama Tashi Namgyal, resident teacher of the Seattle sangha, Michele Martin, the translator who worked on this text at the Seattle seminar and made it available for our use, and, of course, for Khenchen Trangu Rinpoche's good health and long life. Chanting the sadhana of Chenrezi with a new depth of understanding and a new diligence, we began the long process of absorbing what we had learned from our remarkable teacher.

Dharma Practice in Daily Life

The Importance of Sangha

by *The Venerable Ani Karma Chötsö*

At the beginning of most sutras we find reference made to the location of the particular teaching, to who and, possibly, how many gathered to hear the teaching. Those who gathered and listened to the Buddha were the first Sangha, the assembly of disciples who practiced what he taught. Without them, there would have been no teaching. The Tibetan word for Sangha is *gendun*. According to the dictionary, *ge* (or *gewa*) means virtue and *dun* (or *du pa*) means to desire. So *gendun* refers to those who want or those who practice virtue or, let's say, those who go after virtue. They are the ones who, according to Kalu Rinpoche in *Luminous Mind*, "study, practice and transmit the words and experience of the Dharma."

There are two types of Sangha: the Arya Sangha or the Noble Assembly of Bodhisattvas and Arhats, the third of the Three Jewels in which we take refuge every day; and the Sangha of ordinary people, monks and nuns who have not yet reached these stages of realization but who are practicing on the path. Of course, the sangha of ordinary people is the one we are part of today. Its importance cannot be emphasized enough.

When I first began teaching in South Florida there was no sangha here. A few people gathered once a week, seldom the same people, and often teachings were given at the beach because there was no other place for us to meet. Everything that has developed since could not have happened without people who made the commitment to learn and to try their best to practice the ways of virtue as taught by the Buddha. As our sangha has developed, many changes have occurred, some of which came about due to members' negative responses to various situations. We all have been a little spoiled by living in such a rich country and we have quite an "attitude." We have definite likes and dislikes and very little patience. We are used to criticizing others at the drop of a hat and have little training in being supportive. We come to the Dharma with great attachment to our opinions and our ways, not realizing that living "our way" has only led to suffering.

What is wonderful is that we have come to the Dharma to learn how to transform our own negativities and have a positive perspective. That takes time, and while we are working on it we will make mistakes. But we must try to work on our attitude towards each other with great sincerity and daily remember our commitment to the teachings of compassion and selflessness. It is difficult to keep that commitment in the midst of hard work requiring skill in communication to avoid misunderstanding. It is also difficult to practice patience for the first time in situations when we normally would simply walk out. But within the sangha, members are forming relationships that last for lifetimes. This is not an ordinary situation and calls for extraordinary

respect for those who are trying to accomplish just what you are trying to accomplish. So this is not the place to express anger, impatience, jealousy or disrespect. Whenever you need to reinforce the respect and care we want to give one another, look at the many things we accomplish just because we are a group. For one thing, if it weren't for other sangha members you would not be able to receive teachings as there would be no support for a resident teacher or for visiting lamas. It would also be very difficult to run a center all by oneself. But besides many obvious physical/financial reasons, there is the more elusive reason for the importance of the sangha -- support for the practice of Dharma. When we meditate as a group it is more powerful than when we meditate on our own. We are more diligent, more focused when together, allowing for longer periods of deeper concentration. As with the butterlamps we offer every week, to offer just one lamp is not as powerful as offering 100 lamps all together. Together the light is stronger, the heat more intense, the effect more striking and longer lasting.

So now we are all part of a tradition that spans over 2,500 years, a tradition of people coming together in harmony to practice what the Buddha taught in order to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. We are *gendun*, we are going after virtue, and we should find only the greatest joy in accompanying one another on this path.

In Gratitude...

We would like to thank the following for generous donations:

Robert Miller

Kevin Bruk Gallery

Quan Yin Medical Center

The Estate of Jay Fiksel, in his memory

Carol & Cliff Ostrover

Follow-Up...

Everyone enjoyed the article in our last newsletter about the wonderful Summer, the pygmy sperm whale who lived in a lagoon on Stock Island. Unfortunately, Summer passed away shortly after the article appeared. Our sangha mourned her passing, and offered many butterlamps and prayers for her to attain an excellent rebirth.

On-Line Butterlamp e-cards !!!

Thanks to the efforts of our web master, Louise Lee, visitors to our website can now order butterlamps and request prayers on-line, make payments on-line, and send a personalized electronic postcard to the recipient. The beautiful e-card, designed by Louise, opens with a video clip of butterlamps burning at KSC. Visit us at www.kagyusfla.org, make your butterlamp offering, and send your e-card anywhere in the world!

***The Venerable
Lama Norlha Rinpoche***

*will visit the
South Florida Sangha
March 22nd - March 27th*

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*Join us in all activities including
teachings and the empowerments
of Amitabha and Chenrezi.
Look for our upcoming mailing,
call (954) 920-1346, or
check our website for details:*

www.kagyusfla.org

***Art by American
Buddhists***

March 30-April 1

***Woodenhead Gallery
907 Caroline Street
Key West, Florida***

*Artists of the South Florida Kagyu
Dharma Centers will exhibit paintings,
sculpture and videos. Opening Reception
Friday, March 30th. Artist/Buddhist
Dialogue Saturday, March 31st.
Donations from art sales will go to the
New Dharma Center fund.*



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