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Institute News

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF NITYANANDA INSTITUTE



Special Retreat Issue: **Treasures from Kathmandu**



THE CHÖD IS ABOUT CUTTING THROUGH. CHÖD MEANS CUTTING THROUGH: TO CUT THROUGH MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT THIS BODY, TO CUT THROUGH MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT MIND, AND TO EXPERIENCE AND BECOME ESTABLISHED IN A PLACE THAT IS PERFECT CLARITY AND VAST LOVING-KINDNESS.

THE CHÖD PRACTICE IS A USEFUL TECHNIQUE TO HELP PEOPLE LET GO OF MATERIAL ISSUES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL CONFUSIONS. THE POINT IS TO SURRENDER: TO LEARN WHEN TO LET GO, HOW TO LET GO AND THE ESSENCE OF LETTING GO. IT'S ABOUT OUR ENERGY EXPANDING IN EVERY MOMENT, ESPECIALLY THE DIFFICULT MOMENTS. IT'S ABOUT REFINING AND REFINING OUR ENERGY—THE FIELD WHERE TRUE UNDERSTANDING ARISES. AS SUCH, THE CHÖD IS A VALUABLE EXTENSION AND SUPPORT TO OUR MEDITATION PRACTICE. **SWAMI CHETANANANDA, JULY 1999**



Lama Wangdu Rinpoche and Swami Chetanananda performing a fire puja. Kathmandu, 1999



Vajra Varahi, Tibetan thangka

From the Editors

Over the many years that Swamiji has traveled to Asia, he has searched out authentic spiritual practitioners whose work would deepen and enrich Institute students' understanding of the essence of a spiritual life. In December 1997, in Kathmandu, Swamiji met Lama Wangdu Rinpoche (Wangdu-la), a Tibetan Nyingma Buddhist practitioner of an ancient puja called Chöd.

Swamiji and Wangdu-la both describe their meeting as the coming together of two currents. They immediately recognized the authenticity of each other's spiritual work and the complementary nature of their practices. Since then, they have spent extensive time together in Nepal, sharing knowledge and experiences, and Wangdu-la has recognized Swamiji as a lineage holder in the Chöd practice.

This past winter in Nepal, Swamiji introduced the Chöd firsthand to Institute students. It is now being studied and practiced in Portland, along with corollary Nyingma texts, in conjunction with the Trika Yoga meditation of our lineage.

This issue of the *Institute News* brings these "Treasures from Kathmandu" back into the larger student community for the first time. Its publication coincides with the Institute's

July retreat, where Swamiji will introduce the Chöd practice to over 250 students.

As you will see, we are also inaugurating a different newsletter format with a view toward developing an on-line version and interactive website. This direction will allow us to build a truly dynamic communication link with Swamiji's students and others all over the world.

The essence of the Chöd practice, as it relates to daily life, is the release of habitual patterns of thought and action in favor of the truly creative and vital response. It is our hope that the "new" newsletter and its progeny, the developing website, will open us all to a much larger frame of reference for our work together. Visit this first issue online and let us hear from you!

And, most of all, thank you, Swamiji, for your fearless exploration of Life, so that we may follow in your footsteps!

With much love,

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O N E N E S S

by Swami Chetanananda

Someone recently said to me that they've never had the experience of oneness. It is important to understand that everyone is always having the experience of oneness. Everyone. It is there. There is no other; there is only one. All appearance of other is nothing more than the vitality of the One manifesting Itself. Everything has the same source.

The issue simply is what we choose to focus on, what we want in our lives, what we are committed to cultivating every day. That oneness is there, but we may be too busy trying to do something or get something to feel it, to see it. I promise you, if it isn't there, then neither are we.

We have to practice. I am constantly searching texts and meeting people to see different ways of practice, different ways to view and express this physical mechanism and the range of capabilities intrinsic to our nervous and psychic systems, in order to share them with everyone, to share them with you. But all I'm sharing when I'm doing this—all any of this is about—is the experience of oneness.

We have to approach our daily life with concentration and an awareness of the power of our own creative ability, finding a rhythm within oneself and a flow in our daily life that facilitate change in us. Working the same way year after year is fine, but it isn't going to get us to every depth, breadth, and height of the contact with the creative potential within us.

The ultimate experience, the absolute complete enlightenment, is already present in us. But we cannot hang back from it like a bunch of mice. We have to be like lions and tigers about

that oneness. It is there; we go for it, roar for it.

When we have a wish to grow, we don't squeak it: "Oh, please, would it be at all possible, do you think maybe just a tiny bit, if it's not too much bother, may I grow? Do you think?" We roar it. We mean it. We believe in our Self. The life we have is special, and this opportunity we have, extraordinary. This is a precious thing. We take hold of it. It is extraordinary.

You have a wonderful chance. Take hold of it. Believe in it. And in believing in it, learn to believe in your Self deeply. Learn to find in yourself something that is not arrogant, something that is empty and profoundly powerful at the same moment. Live from that powerful emptiness that is completely full. This is the oneness that is everywhere and in us at once.

It is there. It is in us. And from within us, we can release all tensions, all struggle. We can become liberated from our personal history and find within ourselves continuously a new life that is sweet. This power, this oneness, doesn't make us a big shot; it doesn't make us important. It makes us more nothing than we were before—and with such love and such sweetness, we see there is nothing more to want. With that love and sweetness, everything becomes possible. Miracles start to work. I look around and see a lot of them every day. They are there for all of us.

So let's don't think we have any problem. We have work to do. This is not a problem; it is a joy. Let's do the work; let's do it with love; let's do it together;

let's have fun doing it. Let's make it fun. Let's care about each other, and in the process of working together and caring about each other, let's learn to communicate in new ways with each other. Let's cultivate within ourselves and show in our environment the richness that is our contact with that profound, highest, spiritual potential within us. Let's show how powerful and wonderful that can be.

Don't have any doubt that you do have it. You've got it. You've had the experience of oneness. It is there. And through your practice and through your mindfulness every single day as you move through your day, learn more about the reach and range of your creative capacity. Learn more about how your careful words or your careful touch, your careful feelings for your environment and the people in it can transform everything, can bring great benefit to people, and can awaken within you an understanding of direct experience of the mind of God, which is at the very core of your existence.

You'll wake up. You are not a limited, struggling, squeaky-voiced, scared creature. You are absolutely not that. Oneness is the ground of all experience; complete creative potential is within you; contact with the power of spirit within you is always available to you. Roar it. Persevere in it. Perseverance in this process is everything. If you really want to grow, you cannot give up. Some days, it will be wonderful and exciting, and you'll run to it with exuberance. Other days, you may have to drag yourself to it. But perseverance is everything—persevering with devotion and love.



This process is going to take you places you never imagined you would go and expose you to experiences and feelings you did not imagine existed. Sometimes the response to that is to suppress or repress or just plain to want to run away. Sometimes you'll journey through unknown territory, taking on tasks the purpose of which is not entirely clear until done—and maybe not even then—and sometimes taking on tasks that seem impossible to accomplish. But because they are tasks that are in front of you, they are part of your life process, and you do them with devotion and love.

The truth is, the meaning of life is whatever meaning you uncover from the oneness that is your core, and the quality of your life experience depends upon that meaning. The devotion and love you constantly dig up from within yourself allow your life to have a meaning that is the richness that oneness truly is.

Persevere with devotion and love. Roar with devotion and love. Roar from your deepest capacity for the benefit of the All that is the One. Because there is one rule that all authentic practitioners have lived by for centuries and still live by, and that one rule is: Don't hold back.



by Monica O'Neal

THE CHÖD PRACTICE

The Bellowing Laugh of the Dakini



Lama Wangdu Rinpoche and Swami Chetanananda performing the Chöd. Kathmandu, 1999

to offer. They were either too poor, or lived as renunciates in caves or cremation grounds. These people developed a practice of visualizing offering one's own body. While this practice may have arisen because people had nothing else to offer, certainly there were those whose passionate wish to devote themselves to God brought forth such a practice from within their hearts.

In the Chöd, our bodies and lives are offered to the gurus of the lineage, and to all visible and invisible energies in us and in the universe. Understanding them all to be aspects of a single truth, no differentiation is made between the offering and the objects of offering. By continually practicing this offering of our lives into the field of awareness, eventually the belief in a separate self is severed, and all concepts of anything to be cut and anyone to do the cutting dissolve into the expanse of absolute consciousness where all things are one.

THE CHÖD PUJA AND OUR MEDITATION PRACTICE

In its essence, the Chöd has many similarities and parallels to Trika Yoga meditation practice. Through studying and practicing the Chöd, we have the opportunity to deepen our understanding of Swamiji's teachings on surrender and service, and gain a clearer feeling of what type of intensity and compassion we need to generate within ourselves to truly lead spiritual lives.

The first part of the Chöd prepares us to make our offering. We begin by "stomping out"

MAY THE ROOT OF EGO-CLINGING BE CUT

The Tibetan word "Chöd" means to cut, and the heart of the Chöd practice is to cut attachment to the notion of a self as separate from the infinite clear awareness of the divine. Like Kashmir Saivism, the Chöd tradition is non-dualistic. The goal of the practice is to abide in a liberated state free from dualistic, subject-object cognition. In this state, we understand that samsara and nirvana, pain and pleasure, happiness and sorrow, friends and enemies, purity and impurity, in fact all phenomena, including our minds and bodies, are at their essence undifferentiated from clear awareness.

Traditionally, in Asia, the Chöd is practiced in places that evoke fear or humiliation, such as cremation grounds, wildernesses, or public crossroads. The intensity of these environments

arouses our self-protective instincts and latent tensions such as hatred, anger and jealousy. These tensions are visualized as demons or gods but are understood to reside only within the misunderstanding of one's own mind and heart. In the Chöd, we face these tensions with generosity, loving-kindness, equanimity, patience, etc. (qualities known as "the perfections" in Tibetan Buddhism). As we cultivate these qualities, our tensions are released and transformed into energy that may then be directed toward greater service.

In short, by holding to our commitment to keep our hearts open and completely give of ourselves even in the most intense and fearful situations, we draw upon our deepest inner strength and cut through all tensions to see into their ultimate nature.

*Thus to cut off mind itself at the root,
To cut through the five poisons of mental afflictions,
To cut through extreme views and mental formations during meditation,
As well as anxiety, hope and fear in actions
And to cut through arrogance which is grasping at a self
Since all this is a matter of cutting through
This is the real meaning of Chöd.**

WE ARE THE OFFERING IN THE CHÖD PUJA

Pujas are ritualized practices of offering and worship traditional to both Saivism and Buddhism. In most pujas, material goods are offered, such as flowers, fruit, incense, gold, and fine cloth. In India and Tibet, many practitioners had no possessions

INSIDE A BON PO MONASTERY

by Karla Refojo

anger, arrogance and jealousy. This is analogous to releasing tensions and leaving behind mundane concerns as we enter meditation. Next we visualize female deities known as “dakinis” bringing loving-kindness, rejoicing, and equanimity, thereby subduing the demon of ego-clinging. This is akin to the effort we make to open our hearts. We then focus on developing bodhicitta, or the desire for enlightenment, which is analogous to the wish to grow. At the end of the preparation, we practice guru yoga, supplicating to the root guru and Padmasambhava as the symbol of our own root guru.

As the offering section of the puja begins, we visualize the dakini Vajra Varahi rising up through the spinal column and out the top of the head. She represents the kundalini, or vital force, which, rises and expands as we surrender attachment to our small selves. In the process, all differentiation between the



offeror, offering and object of offering disappear. Vajra Varahi finally dissolves into the goddess Tröma Nagmo, who represents the total expanse of emptiness, beyond space and time. She is analogous to the profound experience of oneness with the infinite field of consciousness.

The puja ends with the dissolution of all deities, gurus, and gods into pure light, which merges into us, like water into water. In the fashion of all Tibetan Buddhist rituals, we then dedicate the entire Chöd practice to enlightenment and the peace and prosperity of all beings.

* The Grand Poem on the Perfection of Wisdom
by Aryadeva the Brahmin, translated by
Jerome Edou

As many of you know, I was fortunate enough to spend some time this past winter in Nepal. For most of my visit, I stayed at a hotel in Kathmandu called the Vajra. It was there that I met a lovely Tibetan woman named Kunsel, who was working as the hotel's receptionist. As our friendship developed, I learned that she is a Bon Po practitioner. Bon Po, one of the five sects of Tibetan Buddhism, was the earliest indigenous shamanistic tradition in Tibet. It was eventually assimilated into Buddhism following Padmasambhava's arrival from India in the 8th century.

Having heard Swamiji talk about the Bon Po tradition and its similarities to Nyingma Buddhist practices such as the Chöd and Dzogchen, I was very interested to learn more about Kunsel's experiences. I discovered that her eldest brother is a *tulku* (recognized reincarnation) of a great Bon Po lama, second only to the highest lama in this particular lineage. Similarly, Kunsel's sister is one of only two Bon Po nuns in this lineage.

When I told Swamiji about Kunsel, he suggested I visit her monastery and try to arrange for some of the Bon Po monks to perform some pujas for us next year in Kathmandu. Kunsel kindly arranged for me to go with her to the monastery to meet the Abbot and attend a puja.

This particular monastery or *gompa* (as they are referred to in Nepal) is situated on a hill overlooking the valley, just beyond one of the most important ancient Buddhist and Hindu religious sites called Swayambunath. It is not possible to drive right up to the monastery itself. You must climb up a dusty, dirt path for the final stretch to the base of the monastery steps. It is traditional to have hundreds of prayer flags strung all around the gompa. The rippling of the flags in the wind takes on the appearance of water—the visual effect from the base of the monastery is truly brilliant. It's an image that will stay with me forever.

We were first greeted by the resident medical physician, who gave Kunsel some blessed water

and pills for her mother, who has severe rheumatoid arthritis. As we walked through the monastery, I was awed by the dozens of beautiful old Tibetan thangkhas and large paintings covering the walls. We were taken into a small shrine room filled with herbs, inscriptions and various ritual offerings. At the front of the room, large bronze statues of deities were seated on an altar.

The puja performed that afternoon was a long-life puja, said to grant prosperity and re-



move all obstacles. At one point in the ceremony, we all placed our hands on the backs of the people in front of us, forming a sort of chain. A sacred cloth embodying the blessings of the puja was then given to those standing at the front of the room. Through the chain of people, each person received the benefit and energy of the event. At the end of the ceremony, we filed to the front of the room to personally offer a *kata* (Tibetan silk scarf) to the Rinpoche, who in return offered us the prasada (blessed offering) from the puja.

Following the puja, we had the chance to meet with the monastery's Abbot who spoke to us about the three different lineages of the Bon Po tradition and their practices. I, in turn, offered him the Institute newsletter, told him about Swamiji and our lineage, and expressed our interest in doing some pujas with them next year. He was very warm and agreeable, and our meeting ended with the traditional Tibetan custom of touching foreheads and the sense that we would undoubtedly meet again.

Learning the Chöd in Portland

by Mira Ames



One of the instruments played in the Chöd is a drum called a "damaru." The damaru is a double-sided, hand-held drum with two clappers on strings that swing and strike the drum surfaces when the drum is rotated. While it is a relatively simple instrument, at first swivel it seems impossible to play. The clappers, if they even touch the drum at all, hit at different times and swing randomly in all directions. As with any discipline, however, practice transforms this seemingly impossible endeavor into something effortless and joyous.



Playing the damaru is just one of many aspects of the Chöd practice. In its fullest form, the Chöd involves spoken prayers, singing while playing the drum and a bell, blowing a trumpet, visualizations, mudras (hand gestures) as well as dancing.

For several months now, we have been learning and practicing

the Chöd in Portland. Currently, we meet twice a week in the meditation hall and recite the entire text in English. We then sing the melodic sections in Tibetan while playing the instruments. There are also daily practice groups and students practice on their own.

We are very fortunate to have complete texts of the Chöd in English and transliterated Tibetan. In addition, we have scores of the musical sections and videotapes and CDs of Wangdu-la performing the Chöd. Whether practicing on our own or in groups, these have been of immeasurable assistance for us in learning the Chöd.

The transliterated Tibetan and English texts are the products of months of hard work by Monica O'Neal with the generous assistance of Geshe Kelsang, Lama Jamyang and Chris Schin-

dlar. Together, they pieced the texts together using several incomplete texts and recordings of Wangdu-la. The music was transcribed by Andrew Bonner, who spent hours listening to the recording of Wangdu-la singing in order to decipher the melodies and match his words with the text.

The melodies of the Chöd and the Tibetan language are extremely beautiful. However, both were foreign to most of us when we began practicing. We tripped over the pronunciation and struggled to read the music and Tibetan at the same time. We are grateful to Wangdu-la (on video and CD) for serving as our guide. Additionally, Geshe Kelsang, Monica and Andrew were valuable aids in the learning process. We are now moving beyond the struggle to a point where the singing is a spontaneous, direct expression from our hearts.

Because playing the instruments of the Chöd also requires some practice, a group of us has been meeting separately just to learn them. When we first gathered in the sunroom with our drums and bells and tried playing together we sounded—well—raucous. Initially, it was difficult to simply hold a steady beat on one instrument. With practice and the spirited guidance of Duncan Soule, we have slowly gained rhythm and confidence, and some of us are actually creeping into the next stage of playing the drum and bell together while singing. Monica, Howard Boster, Karla Refojo and Paul Rosenberg have ventured into playing the trumpet as well. No easy task!

Currently about sixty of us gather in the meditation hall twice a week before evening meditation class and recite the Chöd in English. We then sing the Tibetan accompanied by all the instruments. As new instrumentalists gain skill in the practice sessions, they join the musicians in the meditation hall. The combination of the bells, damarus, trumpets

and all of our singing voices in the vast hall evokes a feeling and spirit that is joyful, timeless and without boundaries.

Retreat participants in July will see the Chöd performed firsthand, experience its power, and learn how they can begin the study. Like learning the damaru, the entire process of studying the Chöd requires discipline and is challenging. But it is also a lot of fun and offers a priceless return: a deeper understanding of the practice itself and what it means to lead an authentic spiritual life.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the many people whose devotion and hard work have enabled us to learn the Chöd. Above all, our profound gratitude to Swamiji for introducing this practice to us and for his deeply inspiring guidance.

Institute News

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Nityananda Institute promotes the recognition of the creative resource within each of us by supporting individuals in their exploration of the human spirit and its expression in the world.

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Institute Hosts Ven. Geshe Kelsang

by Paul Rosenberg

We are very privileged to be hosting the Venerable Geshe Kelsang during his three-month stay in Portland. Geshe-la, a senior monk of the Tibetan Buddhist Gelukpa sect, is Vice Principal of Dialectics, one of the major branches of monastic study, at the Dalai Lama's University in Dharamsala, India. Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama, is the center of Vajrayana Buddhism and Tibetan culture in the world today.

Geshe-la is one of the last of a vanishing breed of scholarly monks who were born in Tibet and have spent their lives in the traditional monastic system. He is a veritable treasure-house of ancient wisdom and knowledge, and those who have spent time

with him have learned that he truly embodies these precious traditions.

Geshe-la's giving nature, tireless effort and palpable devotion have been great gifts to those who have shared his company. It is rare to have a monk of his stature, from the highest levels of the Dalai Lama's staff, spend such an extended time in Portland. He has been giving ceaselessly of himself to benefit the community at many levels while he is here.

His teaching schedule has included a wide variety of courses in the Portland area over the summer, including a course in Buddhism at Portland State University, Tibetan language classes at the Institute, discourses

on Buddhist sutras, and classes for Tibetan children now living in Portland about aspects of their culture of origin. He also regularly performs pujas and other functions for the local Tibetan community.

He has lent his invaluable translation skills to Swamiji on several important Chöd texts, and has assisted students in their efforts to learn this ancient practice. Swamiji has recently said we are working with Geshe-la to put together a more extensive program of study for the Institute when Geshe-la returns next spring with colleagues from Dharamsala.

Many thanks to Swamiji for giving us the opportunity to study with such an eminent



Ven. Geshe Kelsang

scholar who is also a truly spiritual, sweet and devoted human being. We look forward to spending more time with Geshe-la in the future!

Silk and Brocade Appliqué Master Trains Students at the Institute



Ven. Gyaltzen Chopel demonstrating his art at the Institute.



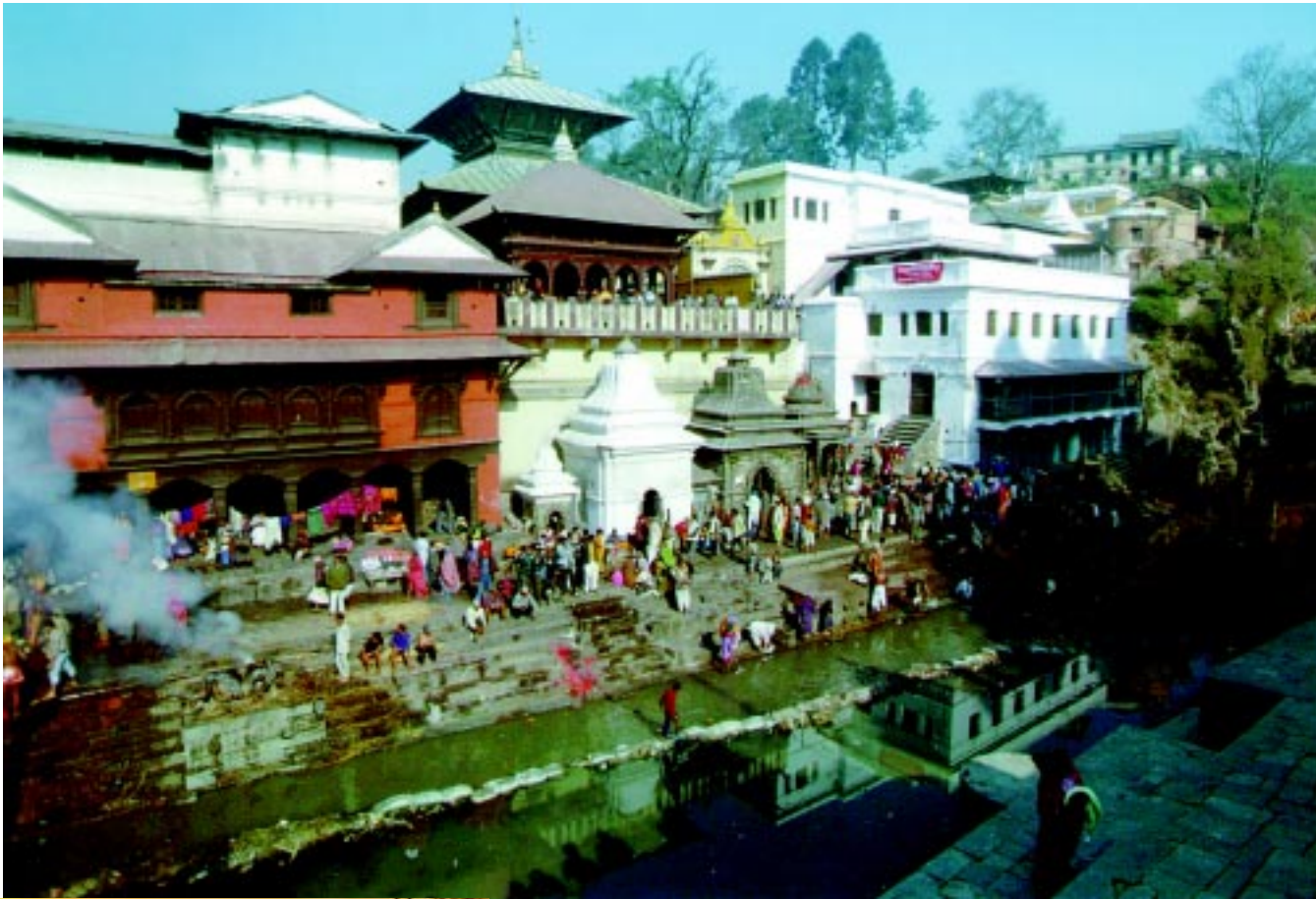
The silk and brocade appliqué thangka is one of the most highly regarded arts of Tibetan culture. Now almost extinct, the tradition is carried forward by less than a handful of remaining living masters. Venerable Gyaltzen Chopel, senior monk of the Nechung Monastery and master in the art, visited the Institute for ten days in June to train two residents in the technique. Launching an eight- by five-foot appliqué thangka project depicting Mahakala, which will eventually hang in the ashram, Gyaltzen-la instructed Monica O'Neal and Vivina Boster in methods of design, fabric preparation, embroidery and the age-old tradition of spinning horse tail hair with silk threads.

Gyaltzen-la is one of the finest living Tibetan artists. His works are commissioned worldwide for monasteries and collectors, including the Dalai Lama. A recent series of his works was exhibited and sold-out in New York, and the School of Sacred Arts there has invited him to teach and hold workshops on a continuing basis.

At Swamiji's invitation, Gyaltzen-la will be returning for two months this fall to work with Institute students on a large-scale Vajra Varahi appliqué thangka for the meditation hall. We are honored to have these opportunities to learn from such an accomplished master, who also shares his good humor and unbelievably delicious mo-mos* with the entire ashram.

*Tibetan dumplings—yum!

Photographs on
this page by
Swami Chetanananda.



*Pashupatinath
temple complex,
Kathmandu*



*Elephant carrying visitors into the jungle.
Chitwan National Forest, Nepal*

ON-LINE!
See this issue at the N.I. website
www.europa.com/~ni/

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Friends of Nityananda Institute

We have been blessed this year with gifts to the new Endowment Fund and with increased participation in the Pledge Program. The work of our growing community is lively, expanding and filled with joy; the benefit to all those whose lives we touch is profound. This year, it is our hope that every Member and Friend will connect with this dynamic unfoldment in their giving.

For your convenience, monthly pledges, single donations and funds earmarked for the Endowment may all be made by debit or credit card. Contact Patty Slote in Accounting, (503) 231-0383.

Rare tiger sighting. Chitwan National Forest, Nepal

