

The Kalachakra Initiation at Amaravati

by Diana Cousens

The Kalachakra initiation is one of the great events of the Tibetan community in exile. Every few years His Holiness the Dalai Lama gives the initiation to a crowd of around 100,000 people in India. While more famous sites such as Bodhgaya have been chosen in the past, this time Amaravati was picked because of its legendary association with the original teaching of the tantra.

Amaravati is in Andhra Pradesh, south India, east of Hyderabad. Its most significant site is the Dhanyakataka stupa, a round walled mound with large broken marble slabs surrounding it. It can be dated to the time of the Emperor Ashoka, 273 - 232 BC. The stupa site quickly became a major focus for Tibetan pilgrims who flocked to do circumambulation in the morning and evening, before and after the initiation and teaching times. Prayer flags were hung from trees and candles were burnt on the ancient rock fragments circling the stupa. A central point, with some old carved marble pillars, quickly collected mountains of white scarves and was a focus for deep prayers, with Tibetans standing and pressing their faces into the marble.

Amaravati is a small town. The normal population is about 13,000 and the only place that changes money is a dark room at the back of a lemonade stand. It had no facilities for a crowd of nearly 100,000 and the state government of Andhra Pradesh upgraded the roads, water, electricity, drainage and provided thousands of tents at a cost of over Aus \$16,000,000. They also constructed a 125 foot cement Buddha statue at a cost of Aus \$600,000. While the intention might be seen as simply to promote tourism, the promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage is perhaps one of the most beneficial and benign forms of tourism. The development of Amaravati as a venue for this huge event was combined with a developing awareness of India's ancient history and rich archaeological heritage.

In a small shop on the main road the Tourism Department mounted a display of 18 other important Buddhist sites in the state. These have substantial stupas, buildings, foundations and other features but few have been developed to accommodate visitors. The most famous is Nagarjunakonda, an island in a lake, which boasts a museum and significant statues and other artefacts. It is associated with the great Buddhist scholar, Nagarjuna, who is said to have founded a university there.

Perhaps because Nagarjunakonda was close by, the Dalai Lama gave teachings for three days on Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. In a meeting with the Westerners in Amaravati, the Dalai Lama described himself as a student with blind faith in Nagarjuna. 'Whatever he says, I agree'. He pointed out that Nagarjuna was not just a philosopher but also expert in Ayurvedic Indian medicine and alchemy. He advised the Westerners to cultivate a respectful attitude to other religions. 'All of you are

Kalachakra - Amaravati

originally not Buddhist, but due to your karmic predisposition you have developed an interest in Buddhism. However, even though you have more of an interest in Buddhism, it does not mean that Buddhism is the best religion in the world. Other traditions also benefit humanity and you must have respect for other traditions.' He encouraged everyone to study more, particularly Nagarjuna and Shantideva.

The Dalai Lama found time to meet with most of the identifiably separate groups that had come to the Kalachakra. These groups included 150 mainland Chinese Buddhists, Japanese sponsors, and all of the 9000 Tibetans from Tibet who had been issued with visas by the Chinese government. While the term for this group is 'new arrivals' they were all expected to return to Tibet. The travel document they carried was valid up to Nepal, but Indian flexibility allowed them to travel within India.

Most of the 'new arrivals' spoke no Hindi or English and could only communicate with sign language or through multilingual exile Tibetans. It was remarkable that they could get around at all. While exile Tibetans are highly modernised, the new arrivals were not different to the first refugees of 47 years ago. They had traditional heavy woollen clothes and looked like peasant farmers. They travelled in large groups, usually with one or more exile Tibetans - possibly a distant family member or a monk from a monastery in India - who organised the train tickets, the hotels, and explained the menus. I spoke to one young couple from Dharamsala who had sponsored a party of ten from Tibet, all of whom were seeing relatives after a long absence or for the first time. The new arrivals came with a distrust of Indian cuisine and carried with them sufficient *tsampa* - barley flour - to feed the whole party for the entire six weeks' pilgrimage. They and most other similar groups used the opportunity of a trip to central India to also visit Ajanta, Ellora, possibly Sanchi, certainly Bodhgaya and other famous Buddhist sites. For them it was an epic pilgrimage, the trip of a lifetime. Surprisingly the new arrivals were not entirely impressed with India. The group with the Dharamsala couple thought India was too free, anyone could do whatever they liked, and there were not enough rules.

The accommodation for most people was extremely basic. Simple tents without floors were offered, beds were layers of straw covered by a sheet. The weather was both hot and humid and four elderly Tibetans died of heatstroke combined with heart conditions. I was told that this would be interpreted as a good death in auspicious circumstances. People cooked on kerosene stoves inside the tents and washed themselves and their vegetables under public water pumps outside.

Wealthier visitors and most, but not all, foreigners rented expensive 'luxury tents', with beds, sheets changed every few days, zip up doors and windows and hanging space. Local houses were also rented and these probably provided the best escape from the heat. The unrelenting heat came straight through the canvas ceilings of the tents.

Kalachakra - Amaravati

All the streets and tented areas were routinely sprayed every other day with Malathion, an insecticide. While this was meant to control mosquitoes, the poison's long term side effects were of much greater concern to most Westerners than malaria. Men with canisters strapped to their backs wandered everywhere with noxious gas pouring out behind them. They created enveloping clouds of poison on the streets, in restaurants and offices, with no awareness of the toxic effects of the gas. A better method to control malaria would be to unblock open drains and clean up stagnant water.

This was a vegetarian Kalachakra. No tent restaurant or tea shop could serve meat, on pain of an Aus \$1500 fine. The available food included vegetable noodle soups, cabbage or potato momos, and various Indian rice plates. Ice creams were popular. Campaigns were also run to create awareness of Tibet's endangered species. The gathering was told that it was no longer acceptable to wear leopard or any other rare animal skins, a practice which had apparently become increasingly popular in Eastern Tibet. Spokespersons from four Tibetan NGOs said that while China had ratified the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora and similar covenants, there is an open trade in endangered species in Tibet. There are even state organised fashion shows and festivals where exhibitors and competitors are encouraged to wear rare pelts. The Dalai Lama spoke on the subject on several occasions.

The Kalachakra is a useful environment for broadcasting messages. Nine thousand Tibetans will return to Tibet with news of what they have seen and heard. Another notable campaign was focused on the missing Panchen Lama. A candlelight vigil was held at the stupa, petitions were circulated, there were stands, leaflets and posters.

In recent years the Dalai Lama has delegated the task of political spokesperson to the elected Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government In Exile, Samdhong Rinpoche. He gave a briefing to the press and spoke about the new rules of engagement between the Tibetan government and the Chinese government. The Tibetans have agreed to Chinese requests to stop Tibetan supporters from protesting during the visits of Chinese ministers to foreign countries. The Tibetans have agreed that they are no longer trying to 'get China out of Tibet'. Instead they are working towards greater autonomy within China and the stated guarantees of minority rights which are enshrined in the Chinese constitution. Samdhong Rinpoche referred to the Marxist and Leninist framework of dealing with nationalities. The principle is that large groups should not exploit minorities. Asked a question about how a future more autonomous Tibetan entity could be expanded to include Eastern Tibet and Amdo, Rinpoche said that the unity of the Tibetan people is necessary and indispensable. He referred to recent massive changes in the world which have seen a shift in the concept of the nation state. There are now groups of states such as the European Union and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation, comprised of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the

Kalachakra - Amaravati

Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, which co-operate economically and may provide a new model. He said it may be better to stick with the People's Republic of China and also pointed out that the issue of Tibetan autonomy is not a religious issue, as the future government would be both secular and democratic. Religious freedom is a separate issue to be pursued as a part of a human rights agenda. He had no information on the current state of the Panchen Lama, but the Chinese government have always maintained that he is well and getting an education.

What is the significance of a Kalachakra? On one level, it appears to be an affirmation of faith by all who attend in the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. It also has a profound esoteric aspect, and involves visualisation at the highest and most secret levels of tantric practice.

Entry into the mandala is possible only to those with faith, and faith is an emotional, not rational quality. In the faces of the Tibetans, transfixed with wonder and joy, one saw the expression pure, blind faith. To see the Dalai Lama – particularly for those from Tibet – is to fulfil the hopes of a lifetime.

The Kalachakra is also a mystery rite, which promises that the seed of a higher awareness is laid down into every individual's consciousness during the initiation. It asserts that those who attend will develop the causes to be reborn in the pure land called Shambhala in a future life. However, I doubt if 90,000 people would gather together in a hot and isolated place in central India just to establish causes for a future rebirth in a heaven realm.

The Kalachakra is a communal event – not just a chance to be in connection with the Dalai Lama but a chance to be a part of a massive expression of Tibetan Buddhist identity. Old friends are found, new friends are made, marriages are arranged, countless connections established. All day a loudspeaker announced the names of people seeking their friends and relatives. It has the quality of a festival like a Hindu Kumbha Mela. It is an event with its own momentum. It is a huge party: – two weeks without work with a lot of socialising and shopping. People from remote places have the chance to buy ritual artefacts including paintings, banners, incense, brocade, mallas, posters and religious pictures that they probably cannot find where they live. It brings together a disparate group of people who would not normally have common cause.

These include three generations of Tibetans in exile – the young ones now wearing Western clothes and with fluency in Indian languages and the use of computers. It includes Tibetans from Tibet – unmodernised and possibly of medieval appearance. They have only one set of clothes and are not concerned with bathing. It includes Himalayan peoples from as far away as Lahaul and Ladakh in the West to Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan in the East. These people also wear their traditional clothes, including the pervasive coral necklaces and the Arunachal Pradeshis go about with bare feet. They know Indian languages but are not modernised, unlike Dharamsala Tibetans.

Kalachakra - Amaravati

Mongolians also come, with slightly different clothes and speaking Mongolian and Russian. Then there are the Russian ethnic groups, the Buriats and Kalmuks, possibly in modern clothes but with a strong feeling for tradition.

Added to this heady mix of Central Asian peoples are Koreans, Japanese and overseas Chinese who are principally from Taiwan and South East Asia. They have a Buddhist cultural heritage but have found inspiration in the Tibetan tradition. Increasingly these are the ones who actually bear the costs of these events and even of building and rebuilding monasteries. The Kalachakra at Amaravati was principally funded by Japan's Bushokai Foundation at a cost of US\$419,000. Lastly are the Western Buddhists, from all parts of Europe, Australia and North, South and Central America. There are both Buddhist enthusiasts and a scattering of Tibetologists whose role is more observer than participant. At this Kalachakra there was a daily presence of Indian visitors, who simply sought the blessing of *darshan*, or the sight of the Dalai Lama. He is now one of the great saints of modern India, a contemporary 'Mahatma' or great soul.

This is the greatness of Kalachakra. It brings diverse peoples into a gathering, a meeting and blending of cultures and ages and ideas, all of whom enter the mandala, the magic circle of enlightenment.

19 February 2006