

The Dalai Lama's Time Machine

A Kalachakra Diary (October 2002)

Written as a personal diary of the Kalachakra initiation Graz, 2002, by Christopher Gilchrist and Mary Finnigan

"Chris – why do you want to go to the Kalachakra?"

"Because HHDL is an awesome teacher, because Graz is easily accessible and because in some way that I don't yet understand, the Kalachakra is part of my journey.

"Mary – why do you want to go?"

"Because HHDL is an awesome teacher and I have a long, strong connection with him. Because I've missed out on getting to it several times and because people I know who have been told me it is a profound experience. And I think it's a natural if you've been involved in Tibetan Buddhism for a while."

There was an element of purposeful accident about how we got there. We thought Graz was a lot closer to Munich than it actually is. So, lured by £40 return flights to Munich courtesy of Go, we booked via the internet, only to discover that we'd let ourselves in for a five-hour train ride. Our journey turned into a pilgrimage, with each stage taking us one step further away from our usual world – usual processes, usual mind set. Trundling through the fairyland of autumnal Austrian alpine landscapes amplified our sense of moving into a different realm and boosted anticipation – what were we going to find at our journey's end?

How you get to a place influences your perception of it. We stepped out of our slow train from Munich via Salzburg directly into the Graz Hauptbahnhofplatz – and discovered from an amused taxi driver that our hotel was just a few yards away across the square. We'd traveled slowly and arrived quickly. By plane direct to Graz it would have been the other way around.

"Mary – what were your first impressions of Graz?"

"It seemed like a small, conservative provincial city taken over by a wave of enthusiasm for all things Tibetan. When the novelty of seeing department stores draped with prayer flags and pictures of the Dalai Lama in shoe shop windows wore off, these two radically different cultures seemed to merge quite nicely. After a couple of days I stopped being surprised by the presence of red-robed monks and nuns on every street corner."

"And your's Chris?"

"Trams! I love trams. Sleek, shiny modern trams running all over the city with clockwork regularity. The electronic noticeboards at the stops announced heartfelt welcome to guests at the Kalachakra for World Peace. And it felt like that....the people of Graz seemed genuinely pleased to see us. Graz is amazingly clean, quiet and orderly. I loved the pedestrianised city centre and the relief from crowd pressure."

The Styria State Hall (Stadthalle) in Graz is huge and newly built. Much bigger than either of us had seen in a city of comparable size – so in fact Graz was an ideal location for the Kalachakra – an attractive, relatively unspoilt small city with a hall big enough to accommodate the 10,000 people expected for the initiation. When we turned up there to register, after pre-booking months in advance, an atmosphere of thinly-concealed chaos prevailed. The organising group had had at least a year to prepare, but when it came to the nuts and bolts of doing it for real, it was clear that they were only just holding it together.

Building work on a Tibetan bazaar with dozens of stalls, shops and restaurants was still in progress. We discovered that we would not be able to sit together. The reason for this was that Mary had put “arthritis” on her booking form and had been allocated a seat in the area reserved for the disabled! Also, Mary had been called up as a volunteer worker, which gave her additional privileges.

Chris:

Graz is footwear city, which was fortunate because I’d promised to buy Mary a pair of knee-high boots. So we shoe-shopped. I felt semi-detached while we were roaming the city, comparing prices and trying on boots. I was aware of the magnetic centre being created down the road at the Stadthalle – being a shopper/consumer seemed like a childish game. We found and bought a pair of affordable stylish boots with ease. Mary seemed delighted, but soon afterwards a dharma debate about the nature of emptiness degenerated into a quarrel. Maybe because it’s so difficult to argue about emptiness (neither of us could win and we both knew it) that Mary transferred the battleground to the subject of my domestic living habits (where she stood a better chance of winning).

Mary:

Chris goes monosyllabic sometimes. I mistake this for bad-temper or irritation around *my* habits. He says its more like a tuning-in process for the impending spiritual experience – but this explanation is not immediately forthcoming. So I have a surly companion and after a while start to feel that it’s personal and respond by goading him into conversation. The spat that followed the boot-buying expedition was a classic example of this communication gap.

Mary – again:

I chose to volunteer, Chris chose not to. We discussed it – before, during and after. With hindsight the difference in our experience of the whole event on the basis of me spending swathes of time on the Information Desk and him being a free-roaming creature during these periods created an insightful dynamic.

Chris:

I enjoyed wandering around Graz, exploring alleyways, riding trams to the terminus and back and then sharing my discoveries with Mary, including The Ultimate Cake Shop and The Place of Human Rights in the city park with its wonderful fountain complete with voluptuous mer-people.

Preparation for the Kalachakra started at around 7.00am on Saturday morning, 12 October 20002. At this time, work began on the sand mandala. Simultaneously His Holiness and monks from the Namgyal monastery in Upper Dharamsala started chanting the lengthy preliminary ritual. For the first session, only sangha were allowed in. But afterwards His Holiness said all participants could come into the hall while the ritual was in progress. The number of people sitting quietly meditating during the ritual increased steadily every day, building up to at least 3,000 on the final day.

Mary:

Our cosmopolitan group on the foyer Information Desk (Austrian, German, British, American, Hungarian, Filipino, French and Portugese) quickly settled into minimally structured, self-regulated teamwork, which allowed all of us to spend time inside the hall during the ritual. Our self-imposed rules included making sure there were at least two people on the desk at all times, one English speaker and one German.

Another was that someone (usually Emilia, our energetic Portuguese scientist) would check that we had up-to-the minute information. The moving goal post factor ensured that this was not an easy task. The Information Desk was a fast-moving, high intensity and sometimes stressful job. All the foibles of the human race came past us. Some problems were solved and some were not. Escaping from this into the tranquil energy of the main hall while the ritual was in progress was a powerful contrast.

Chris:

Wherever I was in my wanderings around Graz, I could orientate myself on the Stadthalle. The sense of energy connection was always there. Sometimes sitting in the hall, I reached the state where sound or the absence of sound were the same. At other times I found it easier to meditate in the park, but whether I was in the hall or the park I was aware of the chanting of the sadhana turning the wheel of the Kalachakra.

There's a sound integrated into the Kalachakra sand mandala. You hear it and never forget it if you see (and hear) the Kalachakra on film. You know instantly where you are and what's happening if you hear it for real. It's the sound of several monks scraping very small metal tubes in order to deliver trickles of coloured sand onto the outlines of the symbolic diagram with pinpoint accuracy. The skill of the young men who do this is hugely impressive. But there's another dimension to their patient, delicate work. The mandala is their meditation. Without single-pointed, effortless concentration it could not happen. In Graz, the unfolding of the mandala was relayed to big screens in the hall and the foyer by a camera pointing directly downwards from the roof of the tent surrounding it. Everyone could follow the progress and as a result, feel personally involved in its development. The sand mandala was our barometer.

According to the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra is primarily an opportunity for Tibetan lamas to deliver their teachings. Alongside and in tandem with His Holiness, masters of the five schools of Tibetan spirituality spoke from the perspectives of their individual lineages. What they said (and how they said it) was aimed at both the spiritual tourists who knew little or nothing about Tibetan Buddhism and at the many experienced practitioners present in the stadhalle.

Lopon Tenzin Namdak, the venerable sage of the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition, spoke from the viewpoint of Dzogchen (self-liberation). Dzogchen is seen as a "completion stage" process within the four Buddhist schools, but in Bon it is regarded as a system in its own right, accessible even to absolute beginners. But modern Bon and Buddhism are inter-woven and the Lopon emphasised the importance of the fundamentals of wisdom and compassion. This theme, linked into contemplative experience, was echoed by Sechen Rabjam Rinpoche representing the Nyingma lineage and His Holiness Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya tradition.

Mary:

We ducked out of the other two traditions – Kagyu and Gelug – because we couldn't endure sitting listening for six hours in one day. We did it for Sakya Trizin, who spoke in the evening after the Dalai Lama gave his first 4-hour teaching session on Tuesday, 15 October. We agreed that one mega-marathon was enough.

Chris:

I liked getting different perspectives. Often I find that I'm telling myself "I know all this", but when

I *really* listen to teachings of this calibre, I realise I don't know it. This is uncomfortable, but so are most things that wake you up.

Chris again:

Arriving at the hall, for the first of HHDL's teaching sessions, I sought the seat whose number appeared on the badge hung around my neck. It did not exist. I discovered that security had abolished several entire rows of seats, in the interests of protecting HH.

The security people in charge of entry to various different areas graciously allowed me to sit up front with the VIPs and sponsors. Later one of the guards told me that several sponsors – who had paid large sums for privileged seats – had complained about the presence in their exclusive enclave of humble participants like me. By luck rather than judgment I got a good seat, so I was content to put up with the sponsors' restlessness and their power-and-lama-centric networking. Being near the front was an unexpected bonus because people sitting near the back of the hall needed binoculars to see the Dalai Lama in person rather than on screen.

Throughout the entire proceedings images from cameras at various strategic locations were projected onto a giant screen in the main hall, and another in the entrance foyer. The vision mixer, sitting with the translators in a gallery above the hall, slid skillfully from the sand mandala to HHDL, to faces in the crowd, to close-ups of VIP lamas and so on. Some of us appreciated this movie-in-the-moment as another facet of the Kalachakra.

His Holiness taught for 12 hours, split into three 4-hour sessions before the start of the Kalachakra initiation itself. It does not seem appropriate for us to interpret his teachings or to go into great detail about them here. They related to three principal texts – The Middling Stages of Meditation, the 37 Practices of the Bodhisattvas and The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment. He spoke first about suffering – which seemed like a platform for the expositions on meditation and the Bodhisattva path that followed. On meditation he gave precise instruction on the dynamics of Samatha (calm abiding) and Vipassana (special insight). On the bodhisattva path, he spoke at length about compassion and altruism as the basis of the Mahayana.

Mary:

One of the good fortunes of my life is being able to attend HHDL's teachings many times – and to have been lucky enough to spend time with him on a one-to-one basis on several occasions. I feel as if I know him as a friend as well as having huge respect for him as a spiritual master. At a material level I think he has an impossible job – he can never please all of the people all of the time in the political arena. But as a Buddhist mentor who speaks from both high scholarly and deep experiential levels he invariably holds me spellbound. He achieves so much with such apparent ease, the very least I can do for the privilege of being in his company over several days is to focus my attention onto what he has to say – more or less unwaveringly. Yes, I do lose it now and again – but considering how long we sit and how subtly he teaches I can forgive myself! Each time I hear HHDL, familiar material (even difficult stuff like the emptiness of emptiness) is refreshed into new perceptions. Concurrently older ones become deeper and more directly meaningful.

Chris:

I hadn't heard HH teach since his visit to the Cambridge University Buddhist Society in the early seventies. I'd expected teaching directly related to the Kalachakra initiation but instead got discourses on most of the main lines of Buddhist thought and practice. Just staying focused and aware, listening painfully to the poor English translation of HH's Tibetan through an uncomfortable radio headset that occasionally blasted me with local pop radio stations instead, was a real test of mindfulness. What I found most valuable was the teaching on calm abiding and insight. Having practiced samatha meditation in the Theravada tradition for years it was wonderful to have such a different perspective. In particular, his statement that a one-pointed focus on emptiness was the union between calm abiding and insight was an 'Ah, yes' moment that I could feel setting off a slow domino topple of views. And there was the warmth and humour...

Mary:

One morning during HH's teachings I took absence-with-leave from my info desk duties, to go sight-seeing with Chris to the Graz Schlossberg – the remains of the medieval castle-on-the-hill that gives access to a vast panoramic view of the city and its surrounding hillsides. We took the funicular up, intended to walk down, but ran out of time and jumped into the lift. We encountered the Nyingma lama Sechen Rabjam Rinpoche with a small entourage of western students. Other red-robed figures materialised during our explorations. Later, Chris took me on a tram ride to Mariastrot – an elegant suburb of Graz featuring luxurious chalets, big gardens, lots of woodland, a tramway museum and a cathedral.

Friday 18 Oct was Ritual Offering Dance day when the sand mandala and the preparatory rituals were completed. Monks in magnificent regalia made slow and stately steps in veneration of the deities who, during the rituals, had taken up residence in the mandala and in the vases placed on one of a magical display of altars that grew larger and more ornate each day. We were told that TIPA (The Tibetan Institute of performing Arts) and an Austrian folk group would also perform in the same session. We were *not* told that the folk groups would start their acts while the lama dances were in progress. TIPA made a dramatic entrance in spectacular costumes (snow lions, monkeys etc:) accompanied by their drums, wailing strings, flutes and songs. Then came a moment that bordered on farce. While TIPA did their thing and the lamas continued their dignified gyrations, the sound of an accordion playing Tyrolean knees-up music heralded the arrival of a dozen young couples in dirndls and lederhosen, who duly performed local folk dances. HH grinned from ear to ear as the sounds of the three groups merged into a Monty Python-esque tapestry. To say that it was incongruous puts it mildly. At least one member of the audience failed to get the point of this multi-cultural goulash (deflection of negative energies) and filed a formal complaint about insulting HH with the presence of the Austrian folk dancers!

On Saturday, during the preparation for the initiation, His Holiness spoke for the first time about Tantra, giving us the keys we needed to genuinely experience the initiation. He explained the difference between the Kalachakra as a blessing and as a Tantric empowerment. We were given a little sips of holy water, red protection threads and kusha grass. As there were now 10,000 people in the hall, distribution by squads of volunteers took some time. Those of us taking the full initiation (the majority) also accepted commitments in the form of Mahayana precepts and Tantric vows.

Chris:

The night I slept with the kusha grass under my mattress and pillow I had a very powerful dream, in which the themes of sexual energy and transformation took disturbing forms. I felt no doubt that this was deeply connected with the theme of the ritual.

Mary:

Receiving the kusha grass and the lucid dream instructions that go with it reminded me of previous initiations – in particular the Vajrakilaya given by HH Sakya Trizin on home territory in Bristol. This aroused a sudden insight into Sakya's role during the Kalachakra. He was a rock-steady presence, supporting HHDL throughout the entire proceedings. I saw him as I had done in Bristol, as one of the great yogis of our time.

The actual initiation which took place over the following two days, was a complex and colourful ceremony, with His Holiness explaining and contextualising each stage.

At one point the senior participating lamas, including HH Sakya Trizin and Sechen Rabjam Rinpoche, had to put on bright red bonnets with long pointy tops that made them resemble characters from a children's TV show. It was one of the remarkable aspects of the proceedings that they managed to carry this off without losing their dignity. It was no easy task to follow the intricacies of the Kalachakra – partly because instructions for one unfamiliar visualisation after another came at a rapid rate, but also because of the inadequate English translation and the delays while the German speakers received their version, which nearly always went on longer than the others. Tantric initiations are self-secret. It's easy to describe what happens externally, but impossible to articulate the inner processes that unfold in each individual as you go along – settling progressively deeper into meditative states – despite the discomfort of sitting still, crammed up against your fellow participants for long stretches of time. Sometimes it is an actual physical pain, but mostly the body obliges.

Chris:

The week of the Kalachakra coincided with the publication schedule of a newsletter I edit. So throughout the event I was diving into an internet café for an hour or more, rewriting texts, fiddling with layouts... I had dreaded becoming distracted by this, but was surprised at how easy it was; I just went into functional mode and did what was needed ... it was like a river: multiple twisty vortices and swirly loops in the surface, one steady current down below.

Mary:

It was much the same for me on the information desk. For a few hours every day I was part of a maelstrom – people with problems, people with agendas, lost people, found people, people asking for help and/or advice in several languages simultaneously. At times we were manically busy, during quieter periods we chatted amiably, getting to know each other a little better each day. I think we all experienced the “steady current down below”, because despite our widely different backgrounds and personalities we got on with each other without any bad vibes or bitchy moments whatsoever. Not a single murmur of discontent. Extraordinary.

Monday 21 October was the climax of the Kalachakra initiation. It was solemn, profound, dignified and complex – and also hilariously funny. HHDL always punctuates his discourses with jokes and the Kalachakra was no exception. On this occasion, one of the jokes was visual. While the senior lamas were

being adorned with elaborate symbolic headdresses, His Holiness decided it was time to shield his eyes from the glare of the spotlights – with an eyeshade that resembled a topless baseball cap. At first it sat square on his shaven head, but later tilted slightly into a jaunty angle. Mixed in with the jokes, the mantras and the esoteric symbolism were teachings on Tantra and the most secret aspects of the Kalachakra. In conclusion, His Holiness warned us not to get fixated on ritual and initiation, fancy hats, drums, bells, gongs and dances. The really important thing, he emphasised, is the development of compassion and bodhicitta – the motivation for enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Mary:

Sitting through nine days of Tibetan Buddhist teachings and initiation was a grueling experience – compounded by the long, slow queues to get through the security checks or grab a bite to eat. But spending nine days with the Dalai Lama was a life-enhancing privilege.

In the short term, it boosted my awareness and appreciation of the benefits of spiritual practice. In the longer term I feel the Kalachakra in some fashion every day. It seems to become more deeply embedded as the wheel of time turns.

Chris:

The return of a rumbling tooth abscess meant we left town before the sand mandala was poured into the river. But I felt I didn't need this extra lesson in impermanence. I had absorbed something about bliss and emptiness, was aware of this as a seed with wonderful potential for unpredictable growth. And I wonder about 10,000 people each leaving Graz each with their own seed...

Christopher Gilchrist has practiced *anapanasati* (breathing mindfulness) meditation in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism since the early 1970's. Recently he has started to engage with Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen practice.

Mary Finnigan met the lamas Thubten Yeshe and Thubten Zopa Rinpoche in 1970 and has been involved with Tibetan Buddhism ever since. From 1979 onwards she has been a student of the Dzogchen master Cheogyal Namkhai Norbu.