

Nel de Jong and Chagpori:

By Paula de Wijs

When we think of Chagpori, those of us in the Netherlands automatically think of Amchi Nel de Jong. Her devotion to Trogawa Rinpoche, her enthusiasm for helping others, especially with traditional Tibetan medicine, and her perseverance in developing her skills to do just that, are well known and respected.

It is interesting to see how her personal development parallels and intertwines with that of Chagpori, both in India and in Europe:

In 1978, Nel took a sabbatical year after many years of working as a psychotherapist. She had the feeling that she was not able to help people do something about the real cause of their problems - she could not get to the core, the essence, of what was wrong with them. She realized that this essence was of a spiritual nature, so she decided to go India and Nepal, in the hope of finding some deeper knowledge or wisdom to help her further.

At Kopan monastery in Nepal she gained inspiration during the month long meditation course under the guidance of Kyabje Zopa Rinpoche. Rinpoche then advised her to take teachings from H.H. the Dalai Lama and she did just that, first in Bodhgaya and then in Dharamsala. She lived in Injie Gompa in Mc Cleod Ganj for a few months, taking teachings at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, and then did a retreat in nearby Tilokpur.

When she returned to Dharamsala she met a nun from Tilokpur who was studying at the MenTsee Khang (The Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, MTK). This nun asked her to teach massage to students there, and Nel agreed to this - but on one condition. She wanted something in return: to go with the MTK students to a place called Mari-la to pick medicinal herbs. At first, she was told that this was too dangerous, but then the head of the pharmacy said that if she went on her own to Mari-la, which is in the mountains above Manali, and joined the group there, it would be possible. So Nel gave massage lessons to the MTK students and then went alone to Mari-la where she joined their group.

Picking herbs there was an intense experience and she learned a valuable lesson, one that was to serve her well in the future. She learned that how, and from which perspective, you look at something will determine what you see. One's perspective determines one's 'story' or experience, and thereby one creates one's own reality, one's own pain and suffering.

Back in Dharamsala she followed a course on medicinal herbs that Dr. Barry Clark gave to a small group of westerners. She then heard about a German group, organized by Klaus Jork from the German Chagpori Support Group, that was also going to pick herbs at Mari-la. She and two others from the Dr. Barry Clark group were able to join them and she not only gained more experience, but also met Trogawa Rinpoche for the first time there.

Rinpoche saw how these three students were working and was impressed. He invited them to Darjeeling, proposing to teach them at his new school there. At that time his life's work was beginning to take shape. He had a clear vision and a strong

wish to re-establish the Chagpori tradition of Tibetan medicine that had existed for centuries in Lhasa, directly across from the Potala Palace.

Nel was already in her forties and thought that she was too old to start something new like this, and she also did not have the money to study for five long years. Then she received unexpected support from the Netherlands where, to her amazement, sponsors spontaneously offered their assistance. So both she and Barbara Gerke, who was also in the Marila group, decided to accept Trogawa Rinpoche's offer. In a meeting with Rinpoche in Delhi, where Amchi Tenzin Dakpa acted as interpreter, they told Rinpoche that they would be coming to study with him. This rather shocked him. He said that the training was actually only for men! But then Amchi Tenzin Dakpa reminded Rinpoche that he himself had invited them to come to Darjeeling. Rinpoche said that he needed some time to contemplate this and that they should come back the next morning for his answer. When they returned the next day, Rinpoche showed them his plans, indicating that they were accepted and could go to Darjeeling to join in the first year of study.

In previous years, Nel had also helped Dr. Barry Clark in Bodhgaya, distributing the Tibetan medicine that he had prescribed. At that time she had met a young Rinpoche who had seen how well she worked there, and had advised her to study more about Tibetan medicine. Just at this moment he happened to be in Delhi, so Nel went to him for a Mo, an advice by divination. He asked her about her health and past illnesses, saying that there were some obstacles, and that her life was not spiritual enough. This surprised her, since she was doing regular meditation practice at the time. To change her karma, she had to do many things - pujas, buy statues (which he helped her choose at the Ladakhi Buddha Vihar), do a long life retreat, etc. She then went with Trogawa Rinpoche to Bodhgaya for a second Mo, then to Dharamsala to do her retreat and finally in February 1992 she and Barbara went to Darjeeling to begin their studies.

The lessons began in the cellar of Rinpoche's house where the rest of the (male!) students also lived, whilst she and Barbara stayed in a hotel. Not long afterwards, Nel moved into a house with four others - two students and two teachers. She immediately started working on their emancipation, insisting that the students in that house were not to be the teacher's servants, but rather that the teachers also had to do their share of cooking and housekeeping! It was a good and extremely cosy time for all, with Barbara living across the road. They walked to the lessons every day, and Trogawa Rinpoche made sure that they received all the teachings and loongs that were necessary. It was clear that they were being taught in the traditional manner. After one year, Barbara stopped with the training but Nel continued.

Although all the other students were male, there were only very few moments when Nel felt that there was a difference in the treatment shown to herself and the other students: once, during the preparation of the rock crystal (chongsi dawa osel), she was allowed to be present during the preparation itself, but not at the final stage, which was done under the strongest full moon of the year. Trogawa Rinpoche left her to work out the reasons for this herself, which was in itself a learning process. Another difficult moment was when the school moved to the Hawks' Nest. The students and teachers lived there together but, as a woman, Nel could not do so.

During the third year of her study she felt that - partly due to the language - she was having difficulty keeping up with the class, and she was given the exceptional opportunity of having private lessons with Rinpoche. As compensation, to repay his kindness, she often worked in the Chagpori office.

In 1992 her brother Paul came to visit her in Darjeeling. He was very touched by Rinpoche and offered his services as an interim manager at Chagpori. He reviewed the organization and revised it, and when he returned to the Netherlands he founded the Dutch Chagpori Support Group together with Jen van der Waals and Karen Kruihof. He went back to Darjeeling for the official opening ceremony of Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute (CTMI) and in the following years visited more often to help with the set-up of the organization there.

Rinpoche was exceptional in many ways. It was sometimes quite amazing how Rinpoche manifested to Nel - once, during a consultation, she actually saw him in the aspect of Guru Rinpoche! She also saw him manifest clairvoyant powers, such as when someone whom he had met on the street requested a check-up. Rinpoche did one, not in the traditional manner, but (accurately!) at a distance of several meters! These kind of memories are very precious to Nel: she has them because she was able to be so close to such a great teacher and healer.

In 1994, Rinpoche asked Nel, who was then living and working in the office in Rinpoche's house, to go on a European tour with him. He had been in Europe before (see the articles by Carola de Vries Robles and Ani Jinba), and in 1994 he visited the Netherlands to give the Yuthok Nyintig initiation and commentary in the form of a two-week city retreat. The late Ngawang Tsering translated during the retreat, but Nel translated for Rinpoche during the medical consultations. On the first day of the retreat there was an auspicious and unexpected visit by Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche, who was, according to Trogawa Rinpoche, an emanation of Yuthog Yonten himself.

In the Netherlands, the visit was organized by Xandra Reelick and Jen van der Waals. During that tour, Rinpoche also visited Germany, Austria, Hungary and Switzerland. Nel found it a very special experience to travel through Europe with Rinpoche and to translate for him during the consultations with patients. It was a very unique journey!

However, because of going on tour she was missing out on her studies and, once back in Darjeeling, she was also increasingly working more in the office and studying less. She was concerned about falling behind with her study, but then Rinpoche offered her the opportunity to study the third tantra during the new school year with the third year class. She happily accepted but realized at the same time that her financial resources were running out.

During the winter holiday that year, she was able to go to Sarnath, where she received private medical lessons from the head of the Tibetan Medical Section at the Tibetan University there. And just when her financial situation had become critical, a kind sponsor helped her out once again. She was also encouraged by the way her Tibetan language skills were improving.

Back at college in Darjeeling she had a lot of support from others, amongst whom Jampa Yonten and Gen Dawa, and she worked very hard. She moved closer to the school, living with Norbu la and Sangye la, an arrangement that went very well. Then Chagpori moved to Takdah, and she went too, taking Norbu la and Sangye la's dog with her. Takdah was very isolated and she was glad to be able to go to Darjeeling every now and then!

She completed the third and fourth years of study, after which it was time to do her apprenticeship. By that time, the NSTG (the Dutch Foundation for Tibetan Medicine) in the Netherlands was up and running in Amsterdam, so she was able to do her apprenticeship there.

The NSTG worked together with the MTK in Dharamsala, who regularly sent an Amchi to work in the NSTG clinic in the heart of Amsterdam.

Good systems of registration, etc. were in place, and Trogawa Rinpoche had also visited, taught and done consultations there. The NSTG had managed to gain a certain acceptance with the Dutch government and were thus able to arrange for consultations given by an Amchi to be covered by the Dutch health insurance system. This pioneering work made it easier for other Amchis, including those in other European countries, to practice Tibetan medicine in the West.

The timing was perfect for Nel, because one year later her teacher in Darjeeling, Amchi Tenzin Dakpa, who was at that time working for the MenTsee Khang, was sent to replace the resident NSTG Amchi. Nel was keenly aware of how precious it was to have such good support so close by during her early days as an independent Amchi. So suddenly and uniquely there were two Amchis in Holland!

After Nel had completed her training, Trogawa Rinpoche said that, as a Westerner, it was better for her to work in the West. She then moved into an apartment on the Schinkelkade in Amsterdam, where she lived and worked until she was able to move to her present location. There, on the Schalk Burgerstraat, two of her teachers - Amchi Tenzin Dakpa and Amchi Ven. Drupgyud Tendar - helped her to paint her new quarters. For Nel, this was another instance of Darjeeling and the Netherlands connecting with each other. It reminded her of how in 1997, when she had been able to give consultations to patients in the Chagpori Thangthong Gyalpo Lhakhang on Chagpori hill in Lhasa, Darjeeling and Tibet had also connected with each other.

In 1998 Trogawa Rinpoche had blessed the Schinkelkade and he was also able to visit her present location. Rinpoche allowed Nel to use the name of Chagpori for her clinic, although she was technically running a private clinic that was not a branch of Chagpori. This privilege was unique and not accorded to other amchis who had left Chagpori.

It was in 2002 that Rinpoche gave a Medicine Buddha retreat in the country center *Us Thus*, where the film *Living Compassion* was made. This film about the life and work of Trogawa Rinpoche will be shown at the anniversary celebration in Darjeeling.

When importing the ingredients for Tibetan medicines became problematic, Nel and Paula de Wijs (Board member of the NSTG), as representatives of her clinic, Chagpori Tibetan Health Centre, and the NSTG, flew to India and raised these serious issues both with Ven. Samdhong Rinpoche, at that time the Prime Minister of

the Tibetan government-in-exile, with the director and staff of the MTK, as well as Amchi Pemba Tsering. They impressed upon the authorities in Dharamsala the necessity of having all medicines made without animal products or heavy metals, since otherwise both importing these medicines into European countries and prescribing them there would be illegal. Nel and Paula also stressed the importance of producing pills and other products under strictly hygienic conditions. Cooperation between Chagpori and the NSTG, and later with other Amchis in the Netherlands, continued until the NSTG closed its doors in 2007.

Since Nel began her practice in the Netherlands in 1998 she has worked continuously to support the work of Chagpori in Darjeeling. She has often hosted other Chagpori Amchis at her practice and supported their travel in Europe, so that they could gain knowledge and experience of the culture here.

She sees an average of nine patients a day, giving each extensive time and attention, and so has seen thousands of patients over the years. It is true to say that people come from all over Europe for a consultation with her. Although there are now other Amchis in the Netherlands, she is the only one in the city of Amsterdam. Information about Chagpori and a donation pot is always to be found on her desk.

Chagpori could not hope for a better representative, in word, deed and spirit, than Amchi Nel de Jong.

Paula de Wijs first met Tibetan Buddhism in 1973 in Nepal. Apart from her work with Maitreya Instituut (she is director of the FPMT centre Maitreya Instituut Amsterdam and on the board of MI Netherlands) she was involved with bringing Tibetan medicine to this country since the first amchi's visit in 1983. She was one of the founders of the NSTG and is now an advisor to the SCTG. She and Nel have known each other for decades and have often worked closely on issues regarding Tibetan Medicine. This article is the result of three conversations between them, and the kind editing by Pamela Moore.