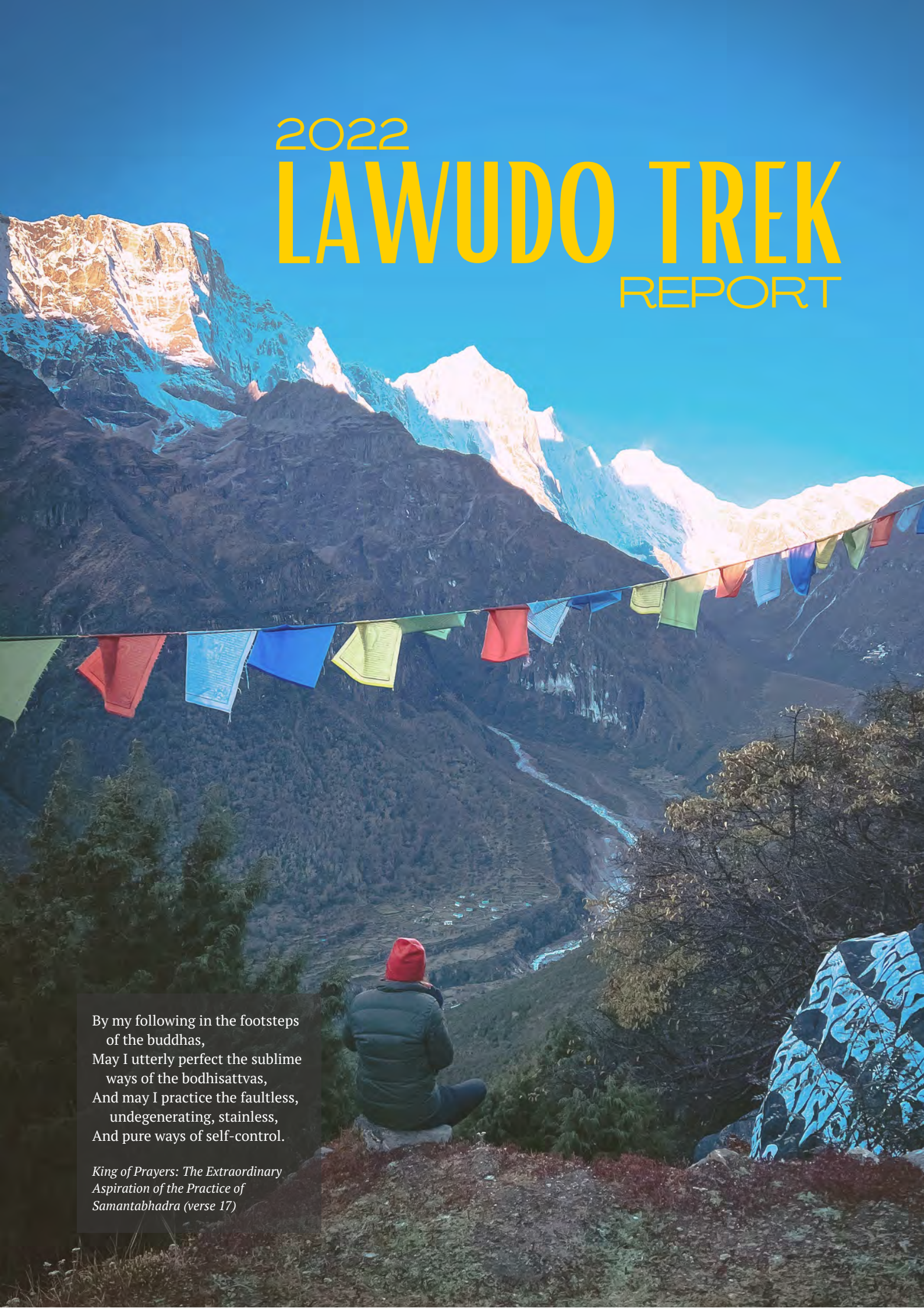
2022 LAWUDO TREK REPORT



By my following in the footsteps
of the buddhas,
May I utterly perfect the sublime
ways of the bodhisattvas,
And may I practice the faultless,
undegenerating, stainless,
And pure ways of self-control.

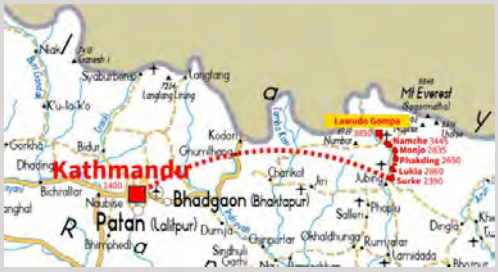
King of Prayers: The Extraordinary Aspiration of the Practice of Samantabhadra (verse 17)

VENERABLE ROBINA LEADS US TO LAWUDO AGAIN

FEBRUARY 2023
Kristina Mah

After a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic, our fourth annual Lawudo Trek to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's cave at Lawudo in Solu Khumbu with Ven. Robina Courtin took place in Nepal's Autumn last year. Twenty-seven of us met on October 3 at Kopan, Rinpoche's monastery in the Kathmandu Valley, where Ven. Robina gave us four days of teachings. An unusually long monsoon meant we had to change plans and travel in small groups by helicopter from Kathmandu rather than take the plane to Lukla. We walked for three days, led by our formidable Amber Tamang and his Three Jewels Adventures team, and spent four days in retreat at Lawudo, perched on the side of a mountain in the Thame Valley in Everest National Park, 12,630 feet (3,850m) above sea level.

Lawudo Treks have raised US$91,000 so far.



Top Right
Ven. Robina enjoying tea next to the gompa before teachings. Photo Kristina Mah.

Above
Our trekking route, this year including Surke, the tiny village where some of us were dropped by our helicopters because of the cloud covering Lukla airport.

The Lawudo Trek offers $500 to Lawudo for each participant, half for Rinpoche's planned replica of Guru Rinpoche's Pure Land, *Zangdok Palri*, Glorious Copper-Colored Mountain, and the other half for maintenance and development. This year we raised $17,000, from contributions from our trekkers as well as benefactors, bringing the total since 2017 to $91,000. We're so glad to have been able to contribute to areas that have improved daily life at Lawudo, such as the water supply, electricity, cooking, bedding and toilets.

"I'm so delighted to lead this trek and to raise funds for the development of Lawudo, especially Rinpoche's vision of Guru Rinpoche's Pure Land," said Ven. Robina.

Three of our trekkers stayed on at Lawudo for six weeks, providing extra hands to Ani Samten, Rinpoche's sister, who's been taking care of Lawudo for fifty-plus years. Aidan and Hayli helped wash the bedding in the many of the rooms and fix a problem of mustiness in two of the rooms by digging a hole and building a rock wall. Bec got word to us that Ani Samten-la wanted to visit Rinpoche at Kopan and see a doctor in Kathmandu. We launched a crowdfunding campaign, raising $5,600 for her journey by helicopter, which had to be postponed because Ajahn-la (Uncle), a long-time resident at Lawudo needed her care, but which is there for her whenever she needs it.

Our 2022 trekking group with Lawudo staff, guides and porters in front of Lawudo Gompa. Center, Ven. Robina and Rinpoche's sister, Ani Samten-la. Everybody loves the retreats at Lawudo and won't forget the place easily.

Sangay Sherpa-la, Rinpoche's brother, has handed over the job of director of Lawudo to Geshe Tsültrim Sherab. Unfortunately, neither could join us because of the weather. It's been a pleasure to work with Sangay-la all these years.

> *"Another experience of a lifetime to travel with such an admirable person.*
> — Amber

As always, our days of teachings from Ven. Robina at Kopan, supported by Ven. Katy leading meditations, set the tone, preparing us for the intensity of the next ten days of trekking up the mountains and retreating at Lawudo. Our group were from Australia, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, and the USA. Some had been booked since 2019. For Dom, visiting Lawudo was fulfilling a wish he has had since 2015: "I couldn't believe it was finally happening!"

Bad weather prevented us from leaving for Lukla as scheduled, so we postponed for a day. We thought about taking helicopters instead, which would add at least $7,000 to our bill. Fortunately a most kind benefactor offered the funds, otherwise we might not have made it to Lawudo at all.

Many of our group had never flown in a helicopter and delighted in the experience, but Jacque "can vividly remember that first terrifying, ominous helicopter ride. Everyone else was all smiles when we landed but I was just happy to have made it out alive!" Our guides pointed out their villages as we passed the lower mountain villages.

We traveled in small groups to get to the mountains. Nineteen of us found ourselves at Surke (8,316ft / 2,535m), a tiny village that was perched 1,066ft / 325m under Lukla. We were dropped there by the helicopters, which could not fly further with the heavy cloud cover at higher altitude. Four of us, Yannai, Bec, Katharina and Geraldine managed to land at Monjo. There, the local monk was so kind and opened the gompa for them to do their own practice. Seven of us had to wait an extra night in Kathmandu before catching our helicopters.

Amber and Furi, the last of our local guiding team, and four trekkers arrived in time for breakfast at Surke. We were thinking about Ven. Robina finally getting her helicopter from Kathmandu all the way to Namche, when just then a helicopter landed on the helipad in the lawn behind the dining room. There was Ven. Robina, and our last group of trekkers, jumping out under the spinning propellers! "What are you all doing at Namche?" Ven. Robina asked, as

> *I'm so delighted to lead this trek and to raise funds for the development of Lawudo, especially Rinpoche's vision of Guru Rinpoche's Pure Land.*
> – Ven. Robina

Top

Twenty-seven of us met at Kopan, Lama Zopa Rinpoche's monastery in Kathmandu before heading to Solu Khumbu, the mountains of East Nepal.

Left

We traveled in small groups. Here, Ven. Robina, Viva, Dawn, Katharina and Manuela waited for their helicopters conveniently next to the coffee shop at the airport.
Photo Kristina Mah.

Right

Ven. Robina Ven. Katy and Dinae landing at Surke on the way to Namche.
Photo Julian Reinhold.

we greeted her on the lawn. "This is Surke, Venerable," Kristina replied. "But we're supposed to be at Namche!" she exclaimed with as much confusion as the rest of us. The pilot flew off without a word!

We took time to have tea and work out our next steps. A larger group of twenty-one trekkers would depart on foot regardless of the weather and a smaller group would wait for the next helicopter out. Ven. Robina

> *"The people and life are so... authentic!"*
> – Toni

brought everyone together for a recitation of the *Heart Sutra* before we parted ways. Thankfully, the same pilot came back to pick up Ven. Robina, Ven. Katy, Dinae and Julian. They would arrive at Namche later that day, where we'd all eventually meet for two days to acclimatize before heading to Lawudo.

For our group, the first day of walking was long. It started with a steep climb towards Lukla and we encountered light rain on the track. Everyone was in good spirits and simply happy to be walking after being mostly indoors since meeting at Kopan. "It's amazing, but harder than I thought it would be," said Dom. At the pace we were going, it seemed more realistic to aim to arrive at Phakding and stay the night there, at Namaste Lodge. Our porters were already waiting for us in Monjo, the original destination of our helicopters. They walked back to Surke to collect our bags and arrived after dark. We were so grateful.

After dinner, Chammi Tenzing Sherpa, the lodge owner, let us use the sound system when Ven. Robina called to check in on us and sing Tara mantras over WhatsApp in the dining room. To make up some lost time, we would walk all the way to Namche the following day.

We set out from Phakding at 8am, refreshed, and walked purposefully. Our pace picked up with the determination to get to Namche where the others already were. We managed to reach Monjo in great time, at 10am. Mahesh, one of our guides, kindly offered our group tea at his own home on the way.

Top Right

Dom navigating one of the longer suspension bridges before Namche. Sometimes they're a bit scary!
Photo Jacque Rabie.

Top Left

Georges and Ken making the best in the rain after lunch at Monjo.
Photo Kat O'Lone.

Bottom

Kristina and Amber Tamang, our lead guide, and his team of four guides, and eight porters, as well as Jeythar the cook. From top left: Lok, Furi, Chopendre, Amber, Pasang, Nirajan, Abinas, Jeythar. Bottom left to right: Mahesh, Mingmar, Kiran, Furi, Niran, Kristina.
Photo Julian Reinhold.

Top Right
Ven. Katy in good spirits on the walk from Namche to Lawudo.
Photo Kristina Mah.

Bottom Right
Anna delighted to be returning to Lawudo since her last visit, five years ago.
Photo Kristina Mah.

Above
Left to right: Geraldine, Bec, Annie, Jacque and Lisa practicing in the gompa at Zamling Guesthouse where we had teachings for two days while we were at Namche. Photo Kristina Mah.

Next page
Amber Tamang, our lead guide, held Ven. Robina's hand for the five hours from Namche up to Lawudo.
Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

The walk was beautiful. After leaving the city it was good to be immersed in the different rhythm and energy of Solu Khumbu. Walking the trail, it is common to see trains of donkey or *dzo* (a hybrid between a yak and a cow) carrying building materials, shopkeepers tending to their stores, children coming and going hand-in-hand, porters with immense loads strapped to their heads and Nepali music playing out of their tinny phone speakers. Toni took time to find the right words: "The people and life are so... authentic!"

It was the first time we have run the trek in Autumn. Although we caught the end of an unusually long rainy season, it also meant that waterfalls hundreds of meters high were overflowing and rainbows glistened through with sunshine. There were clear views of towering snow-capped peaks. Every few hundred meters, stones and

> *When we experience pain for something virtuous, we are purifying eons of attachment. Aren't we lucky!*
> – Ven. Robina

Above
Ven. Robina and the last group of trekkers, Ven. Katy, Anna, Manuela, Justin, Amber and Furi stop for lunch brought down by Lok and Kristina from Ani Samten-la.
Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

Top Right
Viva resting on the way to Mende, the last tea break stop before Lawudo.
Photo Kristina Mah.

Right
Geraldine and Lok stopped to spin prayer wheels at the big stupa close to Furte.
Photo Kristina Mah.

> *So glad to have met so many kind and genuine people to share our journey together.*
> – Mark

enormous boulders carved and painted with ancient prayers lined the path. Prayer wheels and flags were in abundance, not to mention breathtaking views of valleys and mountains at the top of the world. We witnessed a different way of life and experienced a sensory feast and at the same time were offered countless opportunities to observe our attachment to comfort and practice non-attachment when things turned out unexpectedly.

All of us were reunited at Namche, where we met our full Three Jewels Adventures team, of five guides and nine porters. Some of our porters walk for days from their villages to meet us. Amber told us that hundreds of travelers were not able to find flights and were stuck in Kathmandu while our group of twenty-nine people managed to fly and arrive safely at Namche, and we were only one day behind our original schedule. This was amazing.

As in previous years, we stayed at Namche for two nights. After staying in small villages, people were dazzled by the bakeries, massage clinics, cafes with great coffee and shops to buy anything you needed in the mountains and more. "It's the Times Square of the Himlayas!" said Jacque.

> *Truly, a life-changing experience*
> – Jacque

Namche Bazaar is a bustling trade and trekking nexus inside Everest (*Sagarmāthā*) National Park. Trekking parties often stop there before continuing to popular destinations in the region such as Everest Base Camp, Gokyo Lakes, Island Peak (*Imja Tse*). Ven. Robina gave us teachings in the beautiful gompa built into Zamling Guesthouse, where we stay every year. She read to us from Lama Yeshe's *Mahamudra: How to Discover Our True Nature*, inspiring us and get us excited about our retreat at Lawudo. The morning sun streamed through the windows as she began reading "It is extremely difficult to knock out the ego. You cannot seek the ego's projections philosophically, with your intellect. When you practice *mahamudra*, intellect is the enemy. You have to go beyond the intellect —you have to meditate. Then real transformation can come." She looked up from her iPad, "It sounds very tasty, doesn't it?" We were hooked.

While we were at Namche, Dawn became unwell, but it wasn't altitude sickness as we'd suspected. After talking to a doctor, Dengue fever was diagnosed. It was deduced that Dawn could have caught it while in Kathmandu and symptoms took a few days to set in. The treatment for Dengue is pain relief, hydration, and rest, so it was decided that she stay put. We made sure she was as comfortable as possible, and Mingmar, one of Amber's team, and our friends at Zamling Guesthouse took care of her for the next five days. She was in kind and capable hands. Ven. Robina would pick her up in her helicopter on the way back down the mountain.

At Namche, we hoped for a break in the weather, but we soon realized that the rain was not going anywhere. It was decided that the twenty-six of us would walk to Lawudo on the morning of October 11 as we didn't want to lose any more time. Fog had sunk deep into the valley. We set out at 8am, hoping to arrive before the predicted afternoon storm. Our group spread out along the trail and many of us arrived at Lawudo in time for lunch at noon.

Our last group, of eight people, led by Ven. Robina, was yet to arrive at 2:30pm. Ani Samten-la sent a lunch of boiled potatoes, chapati, yak cheese and honey with Lok and Kristina, who ran down the hill to greet them. She had sent some masala tea an hour earlier. The group happily stopped for a bite and recharged their energy on the stones along the path on the hill overlooking the Mende helipad.

After lunch, they continued steadily, Ven. Robina mentioning when she paused to catch her breath that "when we experience pain for something virtuous, we are purifying a few eons of attachment. Aren't we lucky!"

Amber had helped Ven. Robina all the way from Namche and up the final leg to Lawudo. "He held my hand for the entire five hours," she said, "as if he was taking care of his grandmother. I wouldn't have made it otherwise."

Above
Walking among white clouds from Mende to Lawudo. Photo Jacque Rabie.

> *A thrill to see the mountains for the first time when the mist finally lifted.*
> – Viva

Amber said that he felt "lucky to walk hand-in-hand with Ven. Robina. And we had blue sky when we hoped for it." Reflecting on the journey later he said, "For me, it was yet another experience of a lifetime to travel with such an admirable person. With all that happened, and particularly because of walking with Ven. Robina, makes me think this was the best trek yet. I can't imagine any other trip better than this!"

Finally at Lawudo's gate, Ven. Robina was greeted by Ani Samten-la. It was moving to see them reunited again after three years.

Top Left

Ven. Robina and Rinpoche's sister, Ani Samten-la, who has taken care of Lawudo for over fifty years, greet each other after a three-year gap. Photo Kristina Mah.

Top Right

Kat relaxing on the gompa steps just after walking in the gates, so glad to be fulfilling a wish she'd had to visit for years. Photo Kristina Mah.

Left

The morning light is mesmerizing, changing the colors of the mountains moment by moment. Photo Julian Reinhold.

Top

The dining room is the coziest room at Lawudo. It's easy to get lost in discussion, with Lawudo's milk chai brew in hand. Photo Kristina Mah.

Middle

From left to right: Geraldine, Annie, Toni, Kat, Hayli, Georges and Dom happy to have arrived and enjoying tea and biscuits. Photo Jacque Rabie.

Bottom

John walked further uphill to visit the stupa of the Lawudo Lama Kunsang Yeshe, the previous life of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Photo Jacque Rabie.

Ven Tsültrim, a Swiss nun who is staying at Lawudo for six months, accompanied Ven. Robina and Amber through the open gate that Ven. Katy was holding while the rest of us cheered. Finally we were all together.

Ven. Robina gave us teachings in the gompa every morning, afternoon and evening. To receive teachings in such a blessed place is pretty special. But it wouldn't be until our third day that the clouds finally lifted to reveal the splendor of the surrounding mountains. It was easy to imagine why Rinpoche's previous incarnation, the yogi Kunsang Yeshe, would have chosen such a place to meditate. For Viva, it was "a thrill to see

Left

We had teachings in the gompa every morning, afternoon and evening. Photo Jacque Rabie.

Below

Getting ready to walk into the gompa for morning teachings. Photo Julian Reinhold.

Bottom left

Julian enjoying a break in Ven. Robina's teachings on the bodhisattva vows in front of Rinpoche's cave. Photo Kristina Mah.

> *I realized everything was there. It was possible. Achievable. Enlightenment.*
> – Anna

the mountains for the first time when the mist finally lifted."

In between teachings, people involved themselves in different tasks around the hermitage and went on short hikes to explore the area. Georges inspired others to join him during morning yoga sessions on the gompa lawn. One afternoon, Ven. Tsültrim showed Yannai, Manuela, Geraldine and Katharina how to do water bowl offerings Sherpa-style. Mark and Toni cleaned the Lawudo house windows. Many of us visited Lama Kunsang Yeshe's stupa behind the property and walked to the ridge of the mountain. Dom and Jacque walked to Charok, another hermitage and the birthplace of Charok Lama, a contemporary of the Lawudo Lama, on the same side of the mountain. They were lucky to meet Charok Ani-la who lives there and is often on long-term retreat. She served

them warm orange juice, a local drink that we were also served upon arrival at Lawudo. Not many words were exchanged because of the language barrier. But she pointed to a photo and said in English, "It is Charok Lama... My father," and smiled. Dom remembers drinking the warm juice and his cup being instantly refilled. Although he didn't find the drink so tasty, he kept drinking, hoping it would be a cause to return to do retreat there in the future. They kept drinking until Charok Ani-la stopped refilling their cups. After sitting with her in silence for a while, they made offerings, and said goodbye.

> *"Observing this very different way of life in the monastery at such an altitude was eye-opening and life-affirming.*
> – Julian

Ani Samten-la is the mother of Lawudo. She has lived there for over fifty years. Wearing worn-out robes, an apron, a saffron-colored fleece beanie and an old pair of pink and black Sketchers, she's such a presence. She patiently posed for photos with a new pair

Top

Ven. Robina set up her usual office overlooking the valley at the edge of the lawn in front of the gompa where the internet connection is best. Photo Jacque Rabie.

Middle

Ani Samten-la captivated Ven. Tsültrim, Hayli, Geraldine, Dom, Kristina, Dinae, Bec, Yannai and Katharina with stories about Rinpoche as a boy and her life and childhood. Photo Ven. Katy Cole

Bottom

Ani Samten-la, at one of her daily tasks, helped by Nyima who has lived at Lawudo for most of his life. Photo Kristina Mah.

of shoes that Rinpoche had sent with us to offer her. One morning before our teachings, Ani Samten-la came to sit in the sun shining on the gompa steps. A small group formed around her as she told stories of her childhood with Rinpoche – she is about six years older – and stories of the gompa construction and her experiences over the years. She captivated us with her special way of storytelling and her laughter. At one point while talking about herself she said, "No merit. Nothing. Just eating, sleeping... Nothing. Just eating and sleeping." "Like Shantideva," Ven. Tsültrim cut in. We all knew that Ani Samten-la has never stopped working and taking care of everyone who enters the Lawudo gate.

Lawudo feels like a place trapped in time. There has been running water there since only 2019. There are many daily tasks and there is always something to do. Yet, on another level, it is a place that feels separate from the mundane. These mountains have been blessed by the presence of great meditators and holy beings for centuries and it's said that Solu Khumbu is a sacred hidden valley, a *beyul*, blessed by Padmasambhava Guru Rinpoche that offers refuge in times of great strife or trouble.

People feel this special quality. "After a rollercoaster of emotional ups and downs and uncertainty about being able to attend the trek, it was an extraordinary privilege to be allowed access into this *beyul*," Julian

Top

Ven. Tsültrim, who is staying and helping out at Lawudo for six months, showed Yannai, Geraldine, Manuela and Lisa (left to right) how to do water bowl offerings – Sherpa-style. Photo Kristina Mah.

Middle

Jeythar (left) prepares our delicious meals in the pop-up kitchen, helped by Mingmar (right). Photo Kristina Mah.

Bottom

Ajahn-la (Uncle) who is ninety-two years old and lives at Lawudo, is greeted by Kristina. He climbs up the hill from his room to the gompa every morning for his practice. Photo Jacque Rabie.

Ani Samten-la offered us scarves, wished us long lives and thanked us for visiting. Left, Ven. Robina and below, Mark.
Photos Ven. Katy Cole (left) and Julian Reinhold (below).

> *We have met before, and we will meet again!*
> – Georges

said. "Observing this very different way of life in the monastery at such an altitude was eye-opening and life-affirming." Anna was returning to Lawudo after her first visit five years ago. "I realized everything was there. It was possible. Achievable. Enlightenment."

On our last day, we had teachings in front of Rinpoche's cave. Many of us felt that the end of our retreat had come too soon. Our time there was so precious, especially after

Middle

Ven. Robina gave us teachings in front of the cave on the last day of our retreat. We held a refuge ceremony and it felt very auspicious.
Photo Ven. Katy Cole.

Left

Ven. Tsültrim and Pasang came down the hill to wait with Ven. Robina, Ven. Katy, Anna and Dinae for their helicopter back to Kathmandu. No more walking for them!
Photo Mingmar Sherpa.

Above
We gathered for a final practice together at the ancient Boudha Stupa. Before circumambulating, Ven. Robina led us in dedicating all the merits of our amazing journey. Photo Kristina Mah.

the two-year delay and the effort we had to expend to get there. "So thankful to the holy beings who enabled our group to overcome all obstacles to our pilgrimage," said Viva.

As we got ready to part ways and farewell Ani Samten-la and the Lawudo community along with three of our trekkers, Georges assured us confidently, "We have met before, and we will meet again!"

We split up again into small groups for the journey back to Kathmandu. By the end of the trek, Jacque had cut through his fear of helicopters and happily volunteered to catch one to Kathmandu from Lukla. Thankfully, Dawn was feeling much better by the time Ven. Robina arrived back at Namche in her helicopter to pick her up. Ani Samten-la sent her a blessing scarf and chocolate.

Ven. Robina often speaks of the bond that people form and feel when they go on pilgrimage together. Perhaps the bond forms while greeting obstacles and going through "magical moments" along the journey that forge a mini Sangha created from around the world. "It was amazing to see how the group grew closer day by day and friendships were made so quickly," said Julian. "The trek is such a rare opportunity," said Mark. "I was so glad to have met so many kind and genuine people and share our journey together." "It felt like a true pilgrimage with many highs and challenges that we took in stride," said Aidan. For Jacque, his time in Nepal after discovering Ven. Robina on TikTok a month earlier, was "truly, a life-changing experience."

We gathered for a final practice together at the ancient Boudha Stupa, not far from downtown Kathmandu. Before we started our circumambulations, Ven. Robina led us in dedicating all the merits of our amazing journey and refreshed our aspiration to have the courage to always do what is most beneficial and to never give up. It's a sentiment that resonates with us after this trek and Dom captured it beautifully. "The Lawudo Trek was a trip of a lifetime. Not only because of the people we met but the magical moments along the way," he said.

> *"When things looked impossible something would happen and we'd be back on track."*
> – Dom

"When things looked impossible something would happen and we'd be back on track." He would not be alone thinking back to the Lawudo journey and being recharged with "a sense of freshness and confidence to lean on again and again." Ven. Robina was hard to keep up with walking around the stupa. "On flat ground, I am fine!" she said with a smile later at our farewell dinner at the Hyatt.

Amber said, "This was the best trek ever," despite all obstacles and changes of plan. When Ven. Robina heard this, she said, "Isn't that interesting. I trust Amber's wisdom."

Join us on the next Lawudo Trek!

Visit **LAWUDO-TREK.ORG**
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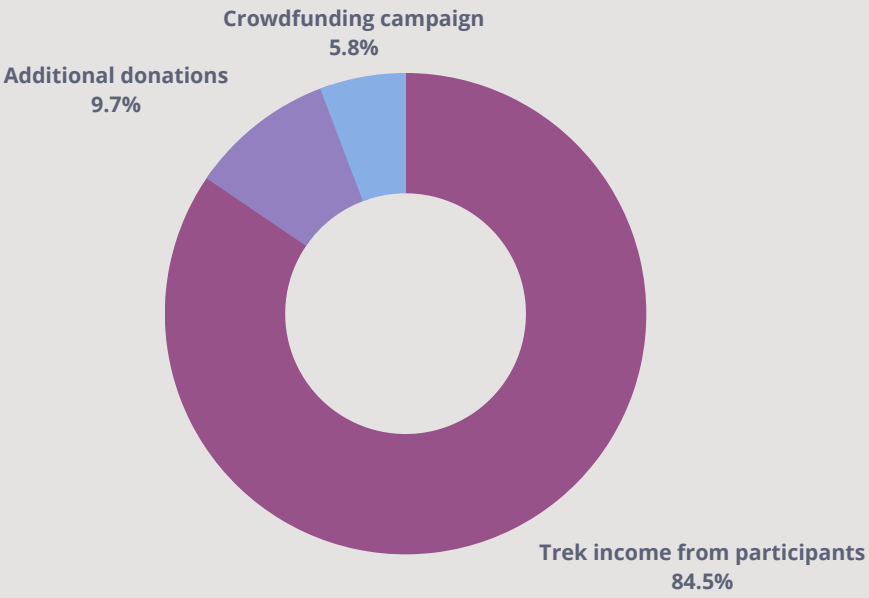
TREK REPORT IN NUMBERS

2022 Trek Income

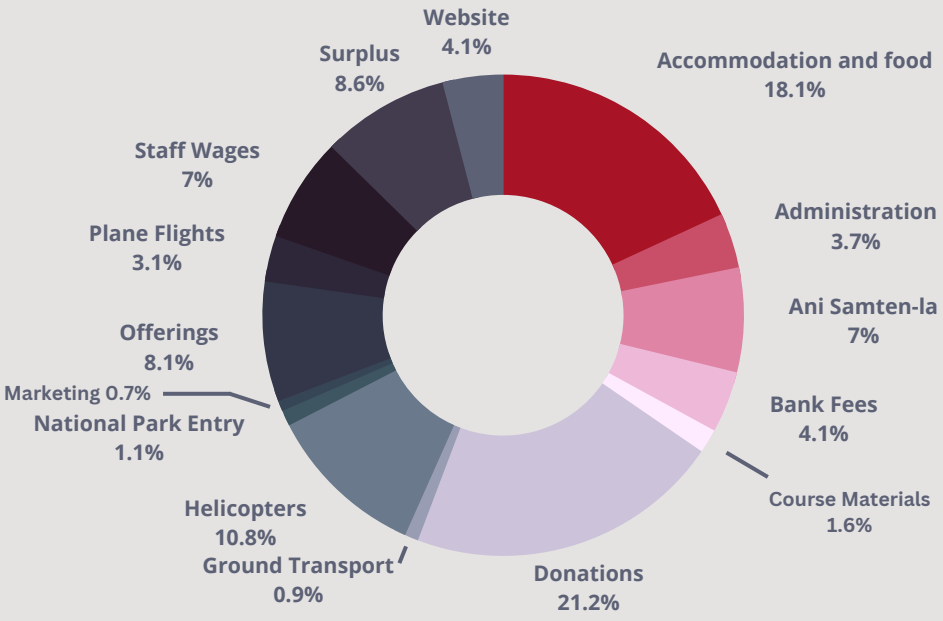
Trek income from participants	$67,798
Additional donations	$7,799
Crowdfunding campaign	$4,631
TOTAL INCOME =	$80,228



2022 Trek Expenses

Accommodation and food	$14,522
Administration	$2,967
Ani Samten-la	$5,631
Bank Fees	$3,318
Course Materials	$1,295
Donations	$17,000
Ground Transport	$733
Helicopters	$8,633
National Park Entry Fees	$845
Marketing	$567
Offerings	$6,465
Plane Flights	$2,478
Staff Wages	$5,622
Surplus	$6,894
Website	$3,257

Total expenses = $80,228



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