



capturing a living likeness

It was monsoon season when KYABJE LING RINPOCHE died.

When sculptor

LISA SOFMAN was asked to create a statue in his likeness over his embalmed body, little did she know it would take her three years, fighting the wet, the dry, and mildew before it was completed. The lifelike image became the object of many pilgrimages and, today, it lives on in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's palace.

By Lisa Sofman and Jaffa Elias

While Kyabje Ling Rinpoche sat in meditative equipoise following his passing, Lisa Sofman, an American sculptor and Buddhist student living in Dharamsala, was approached by those representing his affairs. The monsoon season in India was unsuited to preserving a body, unlike Tibet's dry climate. As a Western sculptor, did she have any ideas?

"I suggested the body be coated with polyester resin to seal it off from outside moisture," Lisa said. "'Good,' they said, 'We'd like you to do it. We'd also like you to sculpt a statue in his likeness over his body.'"

"I went into shock," Lisa recalls. Informing them that she was unqualified to undertake the project, she did, however, consent to modeling the head. "I felt I could do a better job than someone who did not know him."

This was not the first time Lisa had been asked to create a sculpture of a high lama. In 1982, having barely arrived in Dharamsala, she answered the door to a man who asked if a Western sculptor lived there.

He was the attendant to Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Junior Tutor, who had passed away earlier that year. Would she sculpt a small statue of him for his stupa?

The statue took Lisa two weeks to complete, and was shown to Kyabje Ling Rinpoche for approval. It could not be used, he said, as it was iconographically incorrect according to the canons of Tibetan art.

Meanwhile Lisa had made a connection with Kyabje Ling Rinpoche at Tushita Meditation Centre where he conducted the Guru Puja. "Our eyes met, but in his, instead of pupils there were holes that led into tunnels of light. It was as if someone was shining a flashlight down the narrow shafts. As I saw this, I was filled with euphoria and wanted to follow this man everywhere."

A week later she went to the Ling Labrang for a blessing, and spoke to Rinpoche about the statue she had just modeled. It was very good, he said, adding that she should study Tibetan sculpture. "But make sure that your proportions are correct. Otherwise, you will accrue a lot of negative karma." She took his advice and began her study. Shortly afterwards she also took refuge with him.

A year into Lisa's apprenticeship Kyabje Rinpoche passed away. This event marked the beginning of a new undertaking for her that lasted for over three years.

After his passing Kyabje Rinpoche's consciousness remained in his body for thirteen days while he sat in meditation. He had stopped breathing, but none of the other signs of death were present – there was no rigor mortis, his face did not turn gray and his body did not smell.

Once Kyabje Ling Rinpoche's consciousness had left his body, it was agreed that Lisa take a mold of his head. "Get ready,"

Kyabje Ling Rinpoche passed away in Dharamsala, India on Christmas Day, 1983. He was eighty-one. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said he had immeasurable qualities. Excelling in scholarship he received the *lharampa* geshe degree and in turn became the discipline master, lama *umzay* and junior abbot of Gyuto Upper Tantric College. After assisting His Holiness the Dalai Lama in debate, he became his Junior Tutor, then his Senior Tutor. He died during his term as the 97th Ganden Tripa, Tsong Khapa's throne holder.

Kyabje Ling Rinpoche's body, His Holiness divined, should be embalmed rather than cremated. Embalming has been a tradition with the throne holders since the lineage's founder Je Tsong Khapa was embalmed in the thirteenth century. Western techniques, His Holiness added, should be employed alongside those traditionally used in preserving the body.



Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, a lama of "immeasurable qualities."



The finished statue.

Photo Lisa Solman

a messenger from the Ling Labrang told her on the twelfth night, "we think he's going to leave tomorrow."

"In the early morning before his consciousness left," Lisa recalls, "there was a rainbow halo around the moon and large snowflakes in the air." His consciousness left his body around noontime and then Lisa was called in to begin her work. She was worried how she might react in the presence of a deceased body of someone who had once been her teacher. "If I became shaky, I told myself, I had to remember that I was doing this to benefit others."

It took her and Sharpa Tulku three hours to make a mold of Kyabje Rinpoche's head and to measure him. "I was spell-bound by how beautiful his body was," Lisa said. "His skin had a golden glow. Instead of appearing like the body of an eighty-one year old, he had a body like that of a sixteen year old. His limbs were slender, youthful, and beautiful to look at."

The traditional embalming process began.

Denma Locho Rinpoche and others, who wrote to His Holiness's Private Office for advice, were miraculously furnished with instructions written by Kyabje Ling Rinpoche himself – instructions he had requested of Pabongka Rinpoche when the 13th Dalai Lama had passed away. Said Denma Locho Rinpoche, "It was like a dream; a great thing that happened."

Mercury was poured down Kyabje Rinpoche's throat to clear his body, which was then given an herbal bath. This was followed by a purification puja led by Denma Locho Rinpoche with monks from Gyuto and Nechung. Next, Kyabje Rinpoche was placed inside a cabinet of rock salt to dry out his body. Locho Rinpoche led the monks in prayers for fifty-two days in front of the holy body. Every week for the next several months it was taken out of the salt cabinet, cleaned off, and a purification puja performed before it was returned to the cabinet of new salt.

Lisa meanwhile was invited to lunch at the Ling Labrang.

"Have you ordered the plastic yet?" Kungö, the chancellor, asked.

"No," she replied, "I never said I would create the statue." "Make up your mind because the body will soon be ready." Kungö didn't give up.

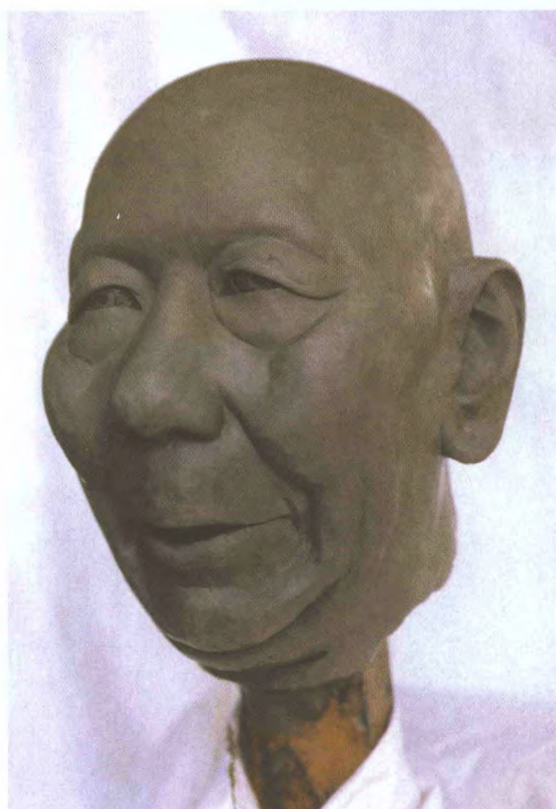
"If I created it, I would have to rely heavily on a consultant," she rejoined.

"Do all the consulting you want," Kungö replied.

Encasing an embalmed body in plastic had never been done before – was it even possible? Court Bennet, Lisa's sculpture teacher from Boston, was now her consultant. He contacted the Zoological Department at Harvard University, the



The salt cabinet in which the body of the late Kyabje Ling Rinpoche was dried out.



The clay modeled head before casting into resin

Photo Lisa Sofman

Photo Lisa Sofman

Museum of Science, and scientific supply houses that did embed-
 iments. It was possible in theory, came the consensus, but
 components in the plastics could react adversely with the body
 tissue if it wasn't properly prepared.

As the months wore on, Kyabje Rinpoche's body continued
 to dry out in the cabinet. The salt was changed less, once every
 two weeks. During this time hot roasted barley dough was pressed
 onto Kyabje Rinpoche's skin to remove the oil that rose to the
 surface. This was rolled into small balls and distributed to devotees.

From the drying process, Rinpoche's body had darkened
 and he became thinner. "He always remained beautiful to see,"
 said Lisa. His body was also miraculous. As she was cleaning the
 salt residue in between the cracks of his hands and feet, Lisa
 noticed "a beautiful design 'etched' into the padding of his
 palm." It was a symbol for the Yamantaka mandala. The
 Tibetan syllable AH was also embossed on his forehead.

**"When I undertook the project I thought that
 everything would go smoothly,"** Lisa recounts, "because I
 had Kyabje Rinpoche's and His Holiness's blessings. The absolute
 opposite occurred – everything that could go wrong did."

For a start, polyester resin did not like oil – and bodies preserved
 in the traditional Tibetan way gave off oil for hundreds of years.

Weeks before monsoon, a steel frame was welded together
 to support Kyabje Rinpoche's limp body. He was positioned
 into an upright, seated position with his hands placed in the
 same mudras as Tsong Khapa's. Lisa then began to apply the
 resin and fiberglass to seal the form. Coats of resin were paint-
 ed on the body, but by the following day, the resin had peeled

off "like saran wrap." The oil that was constantly rising to the
 skin's surface had separated the plastic from the skin. More
 catalyst was added to the resin to speed up the hardening time.
 Then she began to apply the fiberglass as quickly as she could.
 "I felt that if I could get a thick layer of fiberglass and resin on
 him it wouldn't peel off as the straight resin did." Several layers
 were subsequently applied, a painstaking process that took
 months, not least because of the quality of fiberglass manufact-
 ured in India. The other factor was that the surface of his skin
 had taken on a contour and texture similar to a dried prune, a
 surface that fiberglass did not affix to easily.

After Kyabje Rinpoche was sealed under layers of fiber-
 glass, prayers written in gold ink sent by His Holiness were
 placed at his heart. One prayer was for his quick return, another
 for Tibet to become free from Chinese oppression, and the
 third was a prayer that all beings may have happiness.

The next phase involved using papier-mâché to build up
 the form to its original size. "Thirteen people posed for the stat-
 ue," Lisa said. "Some had good hands, others had the torso, and
 a few sat in full lotus for me."

Modeling the epoxy putty on the papier-mâché form
 came next. This eventually gave the surface a smooth body-
 like appearance that was ready for painting. However, when
 the modeling was nearly complete a crack was discovered in
 the surface of one of the legs. "I opened it up to find the
 papier-mâché black and wet," Lisa said. More mildewed
 paper was discovered in other areas. The epoxy was porous
 and the water used to apply the medium had leaked



Above: Lisa sands the modeled epoxy body in the finishing stages.

Far Left: The sculpture of Kyabje Ling Rinpoche freshly painted, with a space blanket behind him to quicken the drying

Left: Denma Locho Rinpoche offers the statue a mandala

Photos Lisa Sofman

through. Luckily, this discovery was quickly fixed. The moldy paper was removed, the areas disinfected and the epoxy surfaces were repaired.

One of the last things to be done was Kyabje Ling Rinpoche's modeled head. It was sculpted separately out of clay and then cast into resin, and was secured to Rinpoche's head after which the neck was finished with epoxy putty.

The statue was almost finished, but for the final sealing coat of resin and painting it. Like everything else connected to the project, this stage did not go as it should have either. The resin had thickened to the consistency of honey instead of being more fluid like milk. Nonetheless, there was no time left to go to Delhi to purchase fresh material. It was painted on and sanded down as best as the time allowed, and the primer was sprayed on. After coats of white paint, the final painting began. The statue would be consecrated in five days time.

A spray gun was used to paint on the layers of color to give his skin a realistic look. The surface became shiny instead of the intended translucency. However, that was the least of the problems. It had started to rain and the paint would not dry! The attendants ran space heaters around the statue, but the paint remained wet. Only on the afternoon before the day of the consecration did the rain stop and the sun come out. Kyabje Ling Rinpoche was carried to the lawn and surrounded by a space blanket to reflect the solar rays. At seven o'clock that evening

the paint dried. He received a final coat of paste wax, and at ten the attendants began to dress him. They finished their work at four in the morning, and His Holiness arrived at nine.

About a hundred people were invited for the consecration. His Holiness performed the ceremony and invoked Kyabje Rinpoche to enter and abide in the statue. "He became alive," Lisa said. At the end Lisa received a blessing and gifts from His Holiness. He told her he appreciated her work. "What more does one need to hear?" remarked Lisa. After the ceremony, the public was allowed in. "The room filled with a crowd of noisy, happy people jostling anxiously to see the statue and to offer ceremonial scarves."

Lisa looked back on the creative process. "Even though it was such an honor and an amazing privilege to be the sculptor for the Kyabje Ling Rinpoche project there was a period of time when I was quite miserable. The things that were closest to me, that I was particularly sensitive about, were all brought to the fore at the same time. I felt that all my buttons were being pushed. My studio had always been a closed-door affair, but during the project it was a different matter. Sometimes I felt my space was not being respected. Living in a different culture means that not everyone understands what you are all about. Sometimes the communication gaps were huge. I remember returning home in the evening fuming about the day's events on several occasions. Even though the day was gone the feeling lingered on and I was not happy. Understanding that I was burning up the good karma created from working

on the project by becoming angry, I would make the resolve that whatever happened the next day, I would not become upset about it. The next day would come, and, sure enough, I would become angry about something else.

“One night, at home and feeling miserable, I looked at who was making me this way. I realized then that I was doing it to myself. It wasn’t a pleasant or comfortable state to be in, and I certainly didn’t want to be unhappy. Yet, I was doing it to myself. No one else was controlling my mind. At that moment I understood that I was the only one responsible for my state of mind, and, therefore, I could change it. The cloud lifted and a transformation took place. I stopped being upset. The next day things did not bother me as they had before. I became more tolerant, flexible, and happier. That was the greatest teaching that Kyabje Ling Rinpoche gave me.”

The reincarnation of Kyabje Ling Rinpoche was discovered in Bir, India in September 1987. The four children in Bir who showed positive signs were each presented with four rosaries, one of which had belonged to Kyabje Ling

Rinpoche. One child chose the correct rosary and immediately turned twenty-one beads on it. He jumped into the laps of Kungö and other members of the Labrang, and then he distributed a tray of cookies and sweets he had been given to everyone present and also gave hand-blessings. His Holiness confirmed the child as the reincarnation and he was enthroned on October 5, 1987. (See box below)

The statue stayed at the Ling Labrang for five years after Ling Rinpoche’s reincarnation was born. People continued to make pilgrimage to the Labrang to receive blessings from both the reincarnation and the statue. After that, the statue was moved to His Holiness’s palace for His Holiness to meditate with it. ☸

Lisa Sofman returned to her study of Tibetan sculpture in Dharamsala, India for five more years. She now lives in Rockport, Massachusetts with her husband where she maintains a studio. She creates pottery and Buddhist sculpture. Her email is tara.sofman@verizon.net



A NEW LIFE

Back in a new body to benefit even more sentient beings, **Kyabje Ling Rinpoche** is now seventeen years old, and engages in traditional studies at Drepung Loseling Monastery under the guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Denma Locho Rinpoche. Throngs of Tibetans and Westerners already line up to seek his blessings wherever he goes. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was heard to say this incarnation of Ling Rinpoche “will benefit even more beings than the last.” **Julia Hengst** interviewed him in February. [See page 67 for more stories about young monks in our Young Practitioners feature.]



Photo Julia Hengst

Ling Rinpoche, left, with Khyongla Rato Rinpoche

My first question Rinpoche is, if you theoretically were able to send out countless emanations, what would one of them do first?

The first emanation would help others.

What’s an example?

All suffering comes from ignorance, right? So to relieve the ignorance, you have to first hear the teachings, then you practice, then you realize, right? So in order to hear teachings, you need good teachers. For people who are ignorant, then, the first emanation would give teachings.

What’s the first thing we should do on the path?

To practice Buddhism, we need a certain belief in the Three Gems. We need to know what Dharma is, what a Dharma teaching is. But there are many kinds of Buddhists, many kinds of beliefs – some are Buddhist farmers, some are Buddhist lay people. They pray every day and believe in the Three Gems, but

when you discuss the Dharma with them, and how it exists, they might not know exactly how to explain it. But if you ask geshe and practitioners, “What is Buddhism?” they can explain what the Three Gems are, how Dharma exists, how you practice Dharma, what Dharma is. But to me, there are different kinds of belief. You don’t have to know what Dharma is [like a geshe does] to become a Buddhist, right? First you have faith in the Three Gems, and then we have to practice.

Rinpoche, who is the greatest inspiration in your own life personally?

In my life, maybe His Holiness.

Are there any historical figures that you think are particularly interesting?

Well, I didn’t hear much beyond Tibetan history so I am not sure how to judge. (Laughs). ... Tibetan history is very interesting; everything had to do with religion.

A lot of kings in other countries were mostly Christian, but they were not really religious. Most of our kings were emanations of Chenrezig (not all of them, there were some very bad kings,) unlike the British kings who were not very religious. Maybe if they didn’t like the person they would chop their heads off. (Laughs.)

What is the best way for beginners to listen (or take) the Kalachakra initiation if we don’t understand it?

Well you’d think, “This time I don’t understand,” so next life, through the merit of hearing it, you will have a practitioner’s body and realize all the teachings that you have heard. We could think that. You know what I mean? ☸