



Lama Zopa at Tushita with Basili Llorca at right. Date unknown.

# Tushita: THE PLACE OF JOY

*It's 1972. An old colonial-style house sits high on a ridge amid pine, oak, and rhododendron forests, beneath the beautiful snow-capped peaks of the Dhauladar Range. It is about to be acquired, along with four acres of land in the foothills of the Himalayas, near Dharamsala in northern India, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and some of his students.*

*In the 1960s it had been the temporary residence of Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. At that time, His Holiness lived just a couple of hundred meters down the mountain track, and his senior tutor, Ling Rinpoche, lived on the other side of the hill. Geshe Rabten's residence was also nearby. In the surrounding mountains yogis were (and still are) living in caves.*

*The property is given the name Tushita, 'the Place of Joy,' the pure land of Maitreya Buddha. As soon as initial repair work is done and some accommodation built, it becomes one of the first FPMT centers, a facility for solitary and group retreats. **Anja Rydén** delved into the center's archives and interviewed some people, and here's the Tushita story...*

In those days students came mainly from the famous November course at Kopan Monastery near Kathmandu, Nepal. Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche resided at Tushita for a few months every year, doing retreats.

Lama Yeshe's first ordained male student was Jhampa Zangpo (Shaneman) from Canada. They flew together from Kathmandu to Delhi in October 1972 to negotiate the purchase of Noroojee Kotee, as the property was then called. Jhampa Zangpo remembers an adventurous episode on the way.

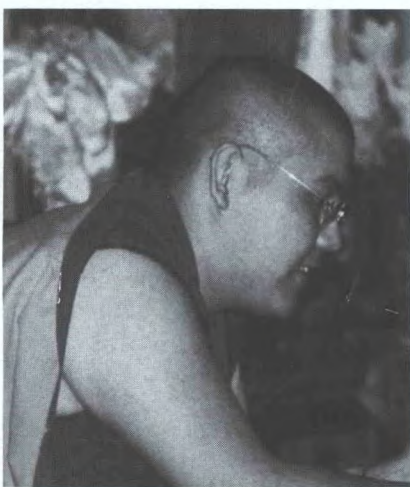
"Lama had collected US\$5,000 toward the purchase price, and it was my job to change the money to rupees," he relates. In Delhi's chaotic Shankar Market, passersby were intrigued to see a young Westerner in robes and a Tibetan lama sitting in a taxi together exchanging two huge piles of notes with local moneychangers.

"I had close to 50,000 rupees to count in 100 rupee notes (mainly donated by an Italian student, Piero Cerri), and they had 50 US\$100 notes to count.

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

**TOP:** Lama Yeshe (center) and Lama Zopa who was recovering from an illness at the time. Next to him is Lawrence, who, with the young Dutchman crouching, painted two large murals of the Four Harmonious Friends and Shakyamuni Buddha on the walls behind the group. The nun in front is Suzanne, from Britain. Others unknown. Date unknown.

**BOTTOM:** The present Ling Rinpoche says that Tushita is "very precious," and should be preserved.



Lama thought this was all quite grand and laughed constantly as I sweated over making sure we were not shortchanged," says Jhampa. "As soon as the amounts were accounted for, the driver told us to get out. I was not happy as we were in an unknown area and I now had 50,000 rupees in my shoulder bag. Lama said not to worry as we walked back to the hotel."

They arrived safely in Dharamsala and together with Piero Cerri and another Italian student, Claudio Cipullo, the purchase was negotiated. Lama Yeshe could not stay long, and left Jhampa, Piero, and Claudio, who were soon to ordain, with the daunting task of getting the place into shape. "Westerners had destroyed much of the house, burnt the furniture, and generally made a mess of things. Lama left me with several thousand rupees and told us to do what we could to make it more habitable," Jhampa recalls.

They were joined in December 1972 by Peter Kedge, who became the next director. He arrived from Kathmandu late one winter evening, climbed the hill in thick snow, and was welcomed by Jhampa, who entered an eight-month retreat soon after.

Among the first tasks was the building of a huge new stove to facilitate cooking for retreaters. "The cook of those years was a character and quite superstitious, so Peter had to arrange for a special ritual to bless the stove," relates Jhampa. "A dough pastry in the shape of a scorpion was hung over the stove, to appease the nagas and stove spirits. Supposedly, it made the food safer for us to eat," he adds.

Over the following year, Peter did hard but rewarding work with Indian and Tibetan workers. They built retaining walls, replaced the slate roof, installed water and toilets, and built retreat houses to accommodate the growing number of Tibetan and Western meditators. They also completed the renovations of the room where Trijang Rinpoche had lived for Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who were very happy to stay in such a blessed room during their visits.

"The director's workload was quite onerous in those days," recalls Peter. "I remember shopping, cooking, serving, cleaning, and managing the workers who arrived every morning." Finances were sorely strained and to get the necessary work done he had to arrange several loans from the manager of Ling Rinpoche.

"On one occasion, I completely ran out of money," says Peter. "Venerable Marcel was in a long retreat. I used to pass his food through a small hatch into his room. I had borrowed all his personal money that he had left in the office, after using up all my own personal funds to keep the operation going," he adds. Peter used his last two rupees to take the bus down to the bank in Dharamsala, "And I found that my good friend Harvey Horrocks had sent me \$150 from Australia! It was always a struggle, but somehow, it always worked."

Lama Yeshe's visits were eagerly awaited by Tushita's staff and residents. "During one of Lama's visits, someone from the telegraph office came panting up the hill," recalls Peter. "Lama happened to be outside and took the telegram and, without

opening it, passed it over to me and said, 'Read this without emotion.' I opened it and read it to Lama, and it was the news that Zina had passed away in the mountains in Nepal." Zina Rachevsky had been Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's first Western student.

Peter marveled at the skills of the local people he worked with. A number of the deodar pine and oak trees on Tushita's property had to be felled to make building material and firewood. "A husband and wife team would come and saw a big tree into lengths, chop the bark off and saw it longitudinally into sleepers." A small wiry man called Chunda Ram was an expert, remembers Peter. "He could chop down a big oak tree and have the entire thing split up into firewood within a few days. All I ever saw him eat were the three small chapattis he brought with him wrapped in a piece of cloth."

Despite a prolonged bout of hepatitis, Peter Kedge says the year he spent at Tushita was the happiest of his life. The air was pristine, the view spectacular. He loved it in the winter when most people had left, and it was very quiet and still. Although he didn't have much time to study or meditate, his mind was light and exhilarated. After a year as director, he returned to Nepal and became ordained.

Jimi Neal has been in and out of Tushita since 1975, starting as a self-professed "neophyte Dharma student," then a monk, a course leader, and later a director. He remembers the first big teaching when Geshe Rabten taught Atisha's *Lam Drön, Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, the source of all lam-rim texts. The following year, 1976, saw the first group Vajrasattva retreat. The director at that time was Lobsang Nyima, one of three monks who escaped from Tibet with Lama Yeshe in 1959.

"After that the late Stefano Piovella, my dear wild friend, then a monk, and Geshe Tsering were co-directors of Tushita," recalls Jimi. The Western nun Thubten Wongmo, Tushita's first female director, had a large mural painted outside the main gompa, which "made it a gompa."

The first EEC (Enlightened Experience Celebration initiated by Lama Yeshe) in 1982 was the greatest event ever held at Tushita, drawing students from all over the world. His Holiness Zong Rinpoche taught the *Heruka Tantra, Chöd*, and the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*. His Holiness Ling Rinpoche gave Yamantaka initiation. There were 200 Sangha in the gompa, and everybody else had to sit outside. The main purpose of the celebration was to give an opportunity for everyone to meet but also for the old lamas to pass their transmissions on before they passed away. Other big

## Over the years

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lamas that Jimi Neal remembers teaching included Serkong Rinpoche, Lati Rinpoche, Kirti Rinpoche, Gen Lamrimpa, Geshe Yeshe Tobden, and Geshe Lobsang Gyatso.

Over the years, a succession of great masters have taught and meditated in and around Tushita, creating a powerful spiritual atmosphere. A stupa above the fire puja house is dedicated to Gen Jampa Wangdu, who was Lama Yeshe's best friend and who lived in lifetime retreat nearby. Trijang Rinpoche's cremation stupa can be found up the road, and a stupa housing Lama Yeshe's own relics dominates Tushita's garden. In 1996, His Holiness the Dalai Lama honored the center with a personal visit. "He went straight to Lama's room and prostrated to his former tutor Trijang Rinpoche's seat," says Jimi.

Since the 1990s, Tushita's program has expanded to accommodate the swelling numbers of tourists in Dharamsala who are keen to learn about Tibetan Buddhism. Through monthly ten-day courses, thousands of visitors from all over the world have met the Dharma here, a service which Lama Zopa Rinpoche said recently is now Tushita's main purpose.

The focus at Tushita today is the renovation of the main gompa. With leaking tin roofs and crumbling walls, the whole building needs major work done. Under Lama Zopa Rinpoche's guidance, plans have been drawn up to renovate rather than rebuild, in an effort to keep the center's unique spiritual heritage intact. An estimated 3 million rupees (US\$67,000) will need to be raised before the work can go ahead.

The present Ling Rinpoche, now nineteen years old, said in an interview that Tushita is very precious: "It has become like a pilgrimage place with all the gurus and great lamas. When you go there, there's a special feeling, in Lama's room and in the whole area. So it should be preserved." ❁