



PHOTO: AGE DELBANCIO

Lama Yeshe a few weeks before he died.

Some twenty minutes before dawn on the first day of the Tibetan New Year – March 3, 1984 – the heart of Lama Thubten Yeshe stopped beating. He was forty-nine years old.

Lama had been seriously ill for four months, although according to Western medical reports since 1974, it was a miracle that he was alive at all. Two valves in his heart were faulty and because of the enormous amount of extra work it had to do to pump blood, it had enlarged to about twice its normal size. And he himself had said ten years before that he was alive “only through the power of mantra.” By November 1983 it was obvious that his life was in serious danger.

Yet in that last year he found the time to write a letter to Geshe Wangdu, a highly-accomplished Dharamsala scholar and yogi, and a close friend of Lama Yeshe. It may well have been the last letter he was ever able to write ...

A Last Letter from Lama Yeshe

Mindful of our root guru unequaled in kindness, king of great bliss, Heruka of the body mandala, crown ornament of the holders of the practice lineage of Ganden, I here pay homage to Trijang Dorje Chang, and in doing so reply to your series of advice, my spiritual brother, Ven. Jampa Wangdu, which you sent with such great affection. I will avoid exaggerations and will write a reply reflecting the nature of illusion-like dependent arising.

Due to my right and left channels being filled with the violent movement of thought-winds and overflowing out of control beyond the capacity of which my ordinary heart can cope, and in order to safeguard myself from this, I was forced to place this “difficult to find body of leisure and endowments” in the hands of a strange doctor. Upon examining me for half an hour, he advised that I must definitely go into the intensive-care unit of the hospital. Believing that this was the case, I asked him to protect my life. Never have I known the experiences and sufferings that then followed.

First, unending injections throughout the day and night. Second, because the capacity of my heart to pump oxygen was impaired, in order to breathe I used an oxygen tank from which a rubber tube ran to my nose. This was never disconnected and caused me great discomfort. Third, I had to constantly take medicine day and night, sometimes more than ten pills at a time. Due to this medication my mind was powerlessly overcome with pain every two hours and my memory degenerated. Food lost its taste, I was given only salt-less, Indian-style food, I had no appetite for more than a month, and whatever food I did eat I threw up and suffered. Some days I could not do my commitments.

My brother, Thubten Tsering, came to see me. I asked him to recite the self-generation of the body mandala and self-entry and listened with great effort. Often, in my mind’s confusion, my speech would become garbled, and I would

laugh at myself and then become sad. I experienced and understood the confused mind even in regards to merely this. It is extremely difficult to maintain control without becoming confused during the stages of death when the four inner elements are being absorbed. It was at this time that I felt the power of my mind degenerating. When I tried to think about different things and ideas, my mind became confused.

These experiences I am relating to you, my pure-pledged, spiritual brother. Keep them secret from the hardheaded logicians.

My ability to recite prayers of ordinary words degenerated and, after considering what to do, I did stabilizing meditation with strong mindfulness and introspection. By the power of this there arose clarity of mind. Within this state I continued stabilizing meditation with great effort, and this was of much benefit, though the enemy of lethargy often overcame my meditation. I was reminded of the time my spiritual brother and I received the oral transmission, listening to the so-called precepts of the skillful Ensapa tradition at Tsechogling Monastery, from our root guru possessing the three kindnesses.

During this period I received hundreds of letters but was not allowed to read them.

My holy spiritual brother, through reading your series of advice I developed immeasurable joy and happiness in my mind. The strength of my mind increased and my problems lessened and ceased. I will write here in verse the essence of the series of advice of my heart-jewel, spiritual brother.

PRACTICE AND MEDITATE MIND TRAINING:

The sole remedy alleviating unwanted sufferings,
The main object of cultivation
Of really awe-inspiring retreaters,
The path traveled by the great meditators
of the three times,
You need a happy mind, a conscientious mind,
An open mind.
Especially you must cultivate the precept
Of transforming bad circumstances –

The experience of unwanted sufferings –
Into the path.

Take into your heart the sufferings
Of mother sentient beings
And again and again give away your merit
And happiness to them.

Transform the ripening results
Within the beings and the environment
And unfavorable circumstances

Into a pathway leading to enlightenment.

Live contemplating just this – mind training.

My mind has found peace through this and the other advice of my heart-jewel, spiritual brother. I request you, Venerable Jampa Wangdu, to be my Dharma friend all of my life.

In order that my three doors may never be separated from the holy path, I will ever hold fast to the greatness of mind training. The five degenerations are flourishing and the Dharmas of hearing, thinking, and meditating have become the causes of ignorance, hatred, and attachment to this life. It is very rare to make these leisures and endowments meaningful through the practice of the five powers, the essence of all Dharmas. We two and all mother sentient beings, although desiring happiness, are confused about the means of finding it, and thus are continually tortured by the three sufferings. Seeing this, may we generate the realization of the equality of self and others.

It has been forty-one days since I became ill. The condition of my body is such that I have become the lord of a cemetery; my mind is like that of an anti-god and my speech like the barking of an old, mad dog. I still take sixteen pills a day, and because I must depend upon others for moving about and sleeping, and because my hand shakes when I write, read my letter depending upon the meanings intended and not upon the mere words written. ❁

Translated by Gelong Jampa Gendun and Gelong Lobsang Jordan. Thanks to Ven. Sean Price and Dr. Nick Ribush, Director of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, for reminding us of the existence of this precious letter. Go to: www.fpmt.org/teachers/yeshe/lama.asp