

Lama the environmentalist and art teacher

Of boys and boils and Italian beauties. Adele Hulse continues her recounting of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe.

At the end of 1976 Lama Yeshe sent personally signed Christmas cards to hundreds of students around the world. The usual retreats were held after the Ninth November course and once again, Lama asked Andy Weber to teach thangka painting. Andy's wife was pregnant at the time and he commuted between Kopan and his home in Boudha, outside central Kathmandu and just down the hill from the monastery.

"One afternoon Lama called me to his room, gave me a cake and said, 'Go and see your wife quickly!' I raced down the hill and found she was in terrible pain. There was fear she would miscarry. A doctor was called and she calmed down, but how did Lama know? The attack happened just half an hour after I got to Kopan and she had immediately begun praying to Lama for help. Later, our son was born safely," Andy told me.

Lama Yeshe gave Andy his first commission, asking him to paint a very big Manjushri thangka for the new center in England.

"It took three months to complete and changed my life," said Andy. "Lama didn't want it painted in the traditional style, where you have the lineage holders at the top and bottom of the painting. He wanted just the one single image of Manjushri, which was an unusual request. He wanted it to be huge. He was always telling me, 'Think big! Big paintings for big places!' Since then I have continued painting just one deity in thangkas. We Westerners have to learn to communicate with these on a one-to-one basis before we try and deal with many figures at once.



Susanna Parodi teaches the little monks English – and they try to teach her Tibetan.

"Lama told me that mantras are an atom bomb for the mind – they release energy and change you. Looking at one image properly is a visual atom bomb. Later, I did a big Tara for Tara Institute in Australia and Lama asked me to do a big Vajrapani for Vajrapani Institute in California, but I never got around to that one," said Andy.

Susanna Parodi, a student from Italy, stayed on at Kopan. Lama Yeshe arranged for one of the Mount Everest Centre (MEC) boys to teach her Tibetan and encouraged her to focus on study rather than meditation. "January 9

was my birthday and I got into a very bad mood and locked myself into my room," Susanna told me. "Someone knocked on my door and said Lama wanted to see me. I went to his room and he said, 'It's your birthday, I know!' He had even organized a chocolate cake for me. My mother had given him a photo of my son and he told me not to worry about him. Lama took care of me so well. I used to be so elegant but now I just cut a hole in a blanket and wore that. My hair was a mess and Lama didn't like it. He wanted it cut nicely and said I should dress better. He even got me to teach the little monks English. It was so funny – after a few weeks they were all speaking with Italian accents," she said.

The boys loved having Lama Yeshe at Kopan but knew all about his power. One night when they were enjoying a slide show in the gompa with some Westerners, Lama burst in and struck out at any boys within reach. The lucky ones escaped through an open window. The Injies were baffled because Lama had given the boys permission to attend. That

wasn't the issue, he told them. "I hit them because when they read texts they all fall asleep, but when it is something unimportant they are so wide awake."

Lama Yeshe never played favorites but treated all the boys equally, and complaints were dealt with fairly. If problems arose, Lama fixed them. If someone did well, Lama praised him. Sometimes however, he was unfathomable. "I was circumambulating the Boudha stupa one day and Lama came by in the Jeep," said one boy. "He gave me two rupees and said, 'Here, drink tea, eat food.' But you couldn't buy tea and food anywhere for two rupees."

Sometimes he was magical. An MEC boy receiving treatment for recurring outbreaks of painful boils sought permission to revisit the doctor in Kathmandu. Lama Yeshe delivered a hearty slap on the boy's back – right on the boil, which burst immediately. "You don't need doctor now, so just go back to class," he said. He never got another boil.

Since Kopan was built I don't worry about anything because Mother Tara is there taking care. - LAMA YESHE

Lama Yeshe monitored every aspect of the boys' lives, from their diet and manners to the state of their bedrooms. He heard their prayers and supervised their daily chores, such as watering the gardens, sweeping the courtyard, and picking up rubbish. Tibetans generally paid scant attention to environmental niceties, probably because there was very little inorganic rubbish in Tibet. But Lama wanted Kopan kept spotlessly clean and every scrap of rubbish had to be picked up, although when he was on tour this job was neglected.

One Westerner, shocked at the litter and outright filth all over the road around Kopan while Lama was away, complained it was like wading through a garbage pit. "I got a box from the office and picked it all up – a very distasteful job. Then I asked the girl there where to put it. She called one of the little monks over and all smiles, he took the box, walked over to the wall and dumped it all back on the road."

Water remained a problem at Kopan. A practical-minded Dutchman, Gabriel Forrer, wished to do some service in return for the teachings he found so valuable. Realizing that the huge water tank Lama Pasang was trying to install was bound to topple over when full, he suggested an alternative measure. Lama Pasang could be particularly single-minded but there was a rare karmic connection between these two, and they worked together very happily. They ran a pipe all the

way down the hill to a catchment point where they built a little pump house. Peter Kedge then bought a simple pump. However there was still the matter of the local Nepalis' constant attempts at sabotage. Jealous of foreign modern conveniences they could never afford, and bound by religious laws and superstitions about how water should be handled, they repeatedly severed the pipe under cover of darkness. A guard was set and over time the situation eased.

Yeshe Khadro was still in Australia; Mummy Max was running her fashion business in Delhi and Marcel was running his in Kathmandu. In January 1977 Lama Yeshe called Nick Ribush into his room at Kopan and said, "I think we need a center in Delhi," and instructed Nick to create one there. "Unbeknownst to me Lama had already said the same thing to Sunita Kakaria at the end of the 1976 course," Nick told me. "She was really our only Indian contact at that stage." So Nick began spending most of his time in Delhi.

Lama Yeshe sent Dieter Kratzer to Manjushri Institute in London to help Nicole Couture and Harvey Horrocks. He also sent Jon Landaw and Petey Shane, his acting secretary, off to Geshe Sopa in Madison, Wisconsin, where he was to join them later in the year.

Next Lama turned his attentions to Elisabeth Drukker, one of his two French nuns. She was sponsored by the French industrialist, Denis Huet, and didn't want to leave Kopan. "You have to visit your family," Lama told her. "You have to connect again." "He often told me to pray at the Tara statue over the little pond," said Elisabeth. "He said, 'Since Kopan was built I don't worry about anything because Mother Tara is there taking care.' When I fell ill, which wasn't hard to do at Kopan, he told me to go to the gompa and drink some of the water from the bumpa vase, the ritual water holder that stands on the altar. He called it Dakini water."

As the Lamas prepared to go on tour again, Pelgye (John Douthitt) made a special prayer. "Back in America I'd been a professional cook. I prayed then that at some time I would be able to cook for the Lamas on tour. I was a new monk and convinced my prayer would come true because it felt so forceful," he said. It did come true but not quite in the manner Pelgye hoped for

The next chapter will reveal how Pelgye's dream came true.