

Masters in our Midst

FPMT is blessed with a treasure trove of Geshes who serve around the world at the invitation of Spiritual Director Lama Zopa Rinpoche. *Mandala* has chosen to profile two Geshes from the FPMT ranks at different ends of a remarkable continuum: Geshe Jampa Gyatso, a dear friend of FPMT founder Lama Yeshe, who is still going strong at age 75 at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Pomaia, Italy; and the young Geshe Thubten Sherab, seven years post-degree, who serves as the headmaster of Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal.

A master whose name means “Ocean of Love” – Geshe Jampa Gyatso

Geshe Jampa Gyatso was born in north-central Tibet in early 1932, the first of seven children of a nomadic family. He was ordained as a boy, but remained with his family. It was not until the age of thirteen that he left home to study at Sera Je Monastery. At Sera, Geshe-la made the fortuitous acquaintance of a young monk named Lama Thubten Yeshe. They would become close, life-long friends. In particular, they were both avid debaters, forming debating groups from amongst their friends in order to practice as much as possible. Sometimes, Geshe-la would sneak away to Lama Yeshe’s room where the two future masters would read about the great yogis and saints of the past.

This period of his life took a dramatic turn when the Chinese army invaded Tibet in 1959. He soon found himself running for his life over the Himalayas, along with Lama Yeshe and thirty-five others. In 1992, Geshe-la recollected the journey that changed his life:

The Chinese army moved into Tibet in 1950. At that time they claimed that they had come to help the Tibetan people. In reality it was not so, but in the following nine years His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government worked to maintain peaceful relations with the Chinese.

In 1959, the Chinese officials in Lhasa invited His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetan government officials, the abbots of the monastic universities, and high incarnate lamas to a reception and movie to be held on March 10 at the Chinese army base that had been constructed in Lhasa. The Chinese insisted that their guests come unattended by bodyguards, servants, or soldiers. The Tibetans saw this as a sign that the Chinese were planning to imprison these high-ranking Tibetans.

On the morning of the 10th, the populace of Lhasa went to the Norbulingka, the summer residence of the Dalai Lama, to

request that His Holiness and the others not attend the reception. That afternoon, the people outside the Norbulingka began to demonstrate, saying that Tibet belongs to Tibetans and that the Chinese should go home. During this protest, some Tibetans who were working for the Chinese were beaten to death by other Tibetans.

Eight days later, without the Chinese knowing, His Holiness the Dalai Lama escaped from Lhasa. On March 19, at two o’clock in the morning, the Chinese, believing that the Dalai Lama was still inside, began to fire cannons and throw hand grenades at the Norbulingka. As many as a thousand Tibetans were killed in this attack. Afterward, the Chinese searched the ruins but were unable to find the body of His Holiness among the many corpses.

On the afternoon of March 20, the Chinese began to fire on Sera Monastery as the monks there were known to have caused them problems in the past. That night I left Sera, together with my teacher and about 35 others. I felt sure that I was going to die as all around cannon balls and grenades were falling, there was the noise of gunshots, and the monastery bells were swaying and ringing. During this attack, many monks were killed. People later told me that two or three weeks afterward there was an incredible stench from all the rotting bodies along the road between Sera Monastery and the city of Lhasa which were being eaten by ferocious dogs.



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While escaping by foot from Tibet, I and my companions often heard the sound of cannons and guns. During our two month journey we slept on the bare ground and on snow as all that we had with us were the clothes that we were wearing. Since we had to avoid the roads, we encountered the difficulties of the rough and rocky ground, icy rivers, and snow covered passes.

We arrived in Kokrajhar in Assam, after having crossed Bhutan, on May 20, 1959. There, we were asked to fill out identification forms as Tibetan refugees. Other Tibetans later said that we had chosen the best escape route both in terms of the geography and the availability of food, but due to the change in climate between Tibet and Bhutan I became quite sick and remained in hospital in India for the next two years.

After Geshe-la's health returned, he renewed his studies at the infamous refugee camp at Buxa, then at the newly-formed Sanskrit University in Varanasi, and finally at the Lower Tantric College. He completed his Geshe examinations in 1972, achieving the highest rank of Geshe Lharampa.

Some years later, after engaging in various research and study projects, he received a letter from his old friend, Lama

Thubten Yeshe. By now, Lama and his disciple, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, had been teaching Westerners for several years; centers had sprung up which needed resident teachers. Lama solicited Geshe-la's help and requested him to travel to the West to teach. In 1980, after a four-year stint of teaching at Kopan, Geshe-la left for Italy where he has been the principal resident teacher and spiritual guide at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa ever since. Since that time, he has also been appointed Abbot of two European monasteries and one nunnery.

In 1998, at the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the FPMT Education Office, he began to teach a seven-year residential program of Buddhist Studies – the FPMT Masters Program – to thirty participants from twelve countries around the world. A long-held dream of Lama Yeshe's, the program has now graduated its first class and will begin its second program in 2008 under Geshe-la's wise and loving leadership. ☸

Biographical information gathered from the 1996 book, Everlasting Rain of Nectar, published by Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA, and with the generous help of Joan Nicell.

A Master from the New Generation – Geshe Thubten Sherab

I was born in 1967 in a very small village of about two hundred people in the province of Manang, which is in the western part of Nepal. Because my parents had five sons, they wanted at least one or two of them to join the monastery; it is an honor and a way of accumulating merit



for the family. My parents had a disagreement about who should join the monastery, me or my younger brother, and finally they decided on my younger brother. They brought him to Kopan Monastery, but Lama Yeshe rejected him, saying that he was too young, although Lama had accepted others of the same

age. I guess he didn't have the karma in this life to be a monk. Then my parents brought me to Lama Yeshe and Lama accepted. So I had the karma.

At that time I wasn't against becoming a monk, but at the same time it wasn't my own decision. It was more or less like going to school. When I was around eighteen, as any normal teenager I struggled a lot, not knowing whether it was best for me to continue or to disrobe. But then, just before I went to Sera, I made the strong decision that being a monk continuously was how I was going to spend my life. Maybe that was when I became fully-ordained in my own mind. It was at that time that I was walking with one of my teachers, the late Geshe Jampa, from Kathmandu to Kopan. He mentioned that the Manang people are all extremely devoted, but they seem to lack an understanding of the Dharma. He told me that it would be good if I could help them understand more, so this had the biggest impact on me and made me want to go to Sera and study in depth.

Also, I had the opportunity to meet extremely great Geshe like Geshe Jampa Gyatso and Geshe Doga who came to Kopan to teach, as well as the late Geshe Jampa, and of course Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Lama Lhundrup and Geshe Lama Konchog. All of these teachers really inspired me to study. I had great respect for them; they were like role models for me in the way, say, Michael Jackson was for teenagers at that time.

I studied in Sera Je Monastery for the Geshe degree from 1987 to 2000. Now I am so happy that I made that decision and I sincerely appreciate and thank my teachers for their guidance. I feel gratitude to my parents especially for not supporting me to disrobe at that difficult time.

What has influenced me greatly, during that time and since, has been spending time around my teachers and observing how they practice, how they engage in their daily lives. One example most of Mandala's readers will under-

stand is being around Lama Zopa Rinpoche. It is so inspiring to see how Rinpoche practices and spends his time. It is a similar inspiration for me with my teachers at Sera.

After I completed my Geshe studies, I went to Gyume Tantric College for a year and then I was sent to the United States to help at FPMT's International Office, as well as teach at the study group and the center there in Taos, New Mexico, and also at Santa Fe. I was there for two and a half years and then returned to Nepal. I did enjoy myself in the U.S. and to some extent I wasn't sure if I should return to Nepal. In the end I made the decision to return; otherwise, I thought, "If I don't go now, I will be stuck here in the U.S. forever."

My role at Kopan Monastery is as Headmaster. This carries more responsibility than the previous Headmasters as the role has greatly expanded. Overall, I am responsible for the education, supervision, and standards of three areas at Kopan: the school, the debate training, and the Tantric training.

The role of a Geshe in Tibetan society is to teach the Dharma and share their knowledge in the monasteries, schools, and amongst the lay people, but unfortunately I think that this is not happening as much as it should from the Geshe's side, and also from the lay people's side. The Tibetan lay people are not like Westerners in that they are not interested in learning the Dharma in depth. They are just happy doing Kora, chanting prayers, and making offerings, etc. Hopefully, the younger Tibetan generation will want to learn the Dharma in more depth.

From the Geshe's side, maybe we need to be more giving in terms of our time to the Tibetan lay people, especially where there is not much income, amongst the poor, in places like Mongolia, Nepal, and parts of India. I also think we can't take for granted that people should respect us because we are a Geshe. In order to gain respect from people internationally, we need to work hard through our practice and our qualities, instead of merely having the label of "Geshe."

Absolutely, we need to think more broadly about ways to benefit more people, whether they are Buddhist or not. My view is that it doesn't matter whether people follow in the traditional way of practicing or even if they are Buddhist: There are so many good aspects of the Dharma that we can share with them. We sincerely need to respect all of the other religious traditions, not just with our mouths, but right from our hearts. We have His Holiness the Dalai Lama as an example of how to treat all other reli-

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gions with respect.

We also need to understand Western culture and psychology so that we, as Geshe, can be more effective and bring more benefit. However, as Geshe, we should not take too many liberties in changing the traditional Dharma way of doing things, just because it doesn't suit the Westerners' way or because they don't like it. We should always think of the long-term benefit and not just short-term results.

For beginners in the Dharma, the most important thing is to try and integrate one's study and practice. You can see some who are only into study, only intellectual, and in this case they become very dry in their hearts. They have knowledge like a computer, knowing everything but nothing really touches the heart. This kind of individual becomes very arrogant and tends to look down on other people with less learning.

Then there is also the case where some people do no study, thinking that all they need to do is practice. But how can you practice if you haven't studied? Study is really crucial. Also, without study, a wrong teacher can easily misguide, take advantage of, and exploit students. I want to emphasize that this is my own personal view and I don't mean to imply criticism of anyone.

Finally, my request of students is to integrate study and practice together, which has always been the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. ☸

Interview and transcription by Frank Brocks, Kopan Monastery, on February 10, 2007.