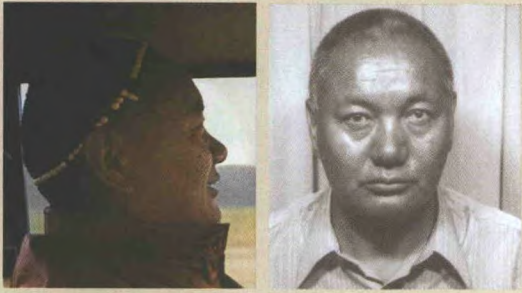


Lama learns to drive



It's 1977, the first year that the Lamas did not spend Losar at Kopan, celebrating it instead with forty students at Geshe Sopa's house in Wisconsin, USA. On March 3, Lama Yeshe held a question and answer session before leaving for Southern California where a course was to begin the very next day. There was no rest, no pause. Travel was expensive, and there were people everywhere depending on him. In turn, Lama Yeshe depended on Peter Kedge to keep the show on the road. Adele Hulse's recounting of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues ...

Lama happily driving.
Lama's serious license photo.

One hundred people enrolled in Lama Zopa Rinpoche's two-week lam-rim course at the Institute for Mental Physics in Yucca Valley, east of Los Angeles. Lama Yeshe gave a couple of talks. Among those meeting him for the first time was Jacie Keeley.

"He looked very sick, all soft and squishy, and his skin was a yellow-grey putty color," said Jacie. "This grey little man walked into the big room, climbed up on this huge throne and sat in meditation. By the time he spoke he was big, golden, and powerful. I was impressed. I wore dark glasses to every talk Lama gave because I cried through every one. On my twenty-eighth birthday I went to Lama, told him I wanted to follow the Bodhisattva path and was willing to help him in any way. I was absolutely hooked."

It was also Janet Brooke's first course. "I was raised a Mormon and was ultra-Christian in outlook. At first, everything the Lamas said reinforced my heartfelt beliefs, but one morning Rinpoche was talking about taking responsibility for ourselves rather than leaving it all to God. Suddenly I felt very confused, started crying and left the room. After attending a group interview with Lama Yeshe I realized it was merely a matter of terminology, and at the end of the course felt perfectly comfortable about taking refuge," said Janet.

Listening to the lam-rim teachings and just being with the Lamas changed some people's lives. One man put his will in order before coming to the course, and found many other students had done the same, sensing that their lives would change forever. During this course someone took a video of the Lamas walking up the trail to the gompa. A great hawk circled above them landing on a branch just beside Lama Yeshe. He walked right over to it and held up his hand. The bird didn't move a muscle. "Power and magic!" exclaimed the devotees of [Mesoamerican shaman] Carlos Casteneda.

The second half of the month in Yucca Valley was devoted to a Vajrapani retreat for which one hundred and forty enrolled. Lama Yeshe delayed the initiation by one day for the sake of a student who was late.

"A qualified tantric guru should know the state of all of his disciples' minds twenty-four hours a day. If he doesn't, he is not qualified," he told them. With typical modesty he declared himself to be unqualified, but repeated that a guru must be able to determine whether a student is capable of keeping the tantric vows. These could be withheld for certain people during the ceremony, he explained. There was no way Lama Yeshe was going to have his tantric lineage watered down to suit the New Age nonsense that abounded in California.

There was always a little competition among the students when it came to performing some personal service for Lama Yeshe, right down to who should have the honor of handing him the freshly-squeezed juice he liked to sip during teachings. He often visited the kitchen to chat with the sangha who washed the dishes, but it soon became clear that he was spending extra time with Chuck Thomas. "Jon Landaw and I spent quite a bit of time with him privately, just hanging out. At the time I didn't realize how lucky I was, and mainly wasted the opportunity. One time he was laughing so much that he just leaned over and threw up into the garbage pail. We realized Lama's body was barely sustaining him, and he told us quite plainly that he kept himself alive with his own psychic powers," said Chuck.

He had no patience with the cry: "I'm so bad!" He pointed out that self-pity was not the same as humility. He wanted them to develop faith in their inner guru, their own potential for enlightenment, and saw guilt and self-disparagement as a Western disease of the spirit.

"After being around Lama for some time, which was a huge luxury, one starts to think when dealing with people in situations in daily life: what would Lama do?" Peter Kedge reflected. "How would he handle this? And his guidance would be there because one could refer back to his indomitable example. Lama often repeated that 'human beings' biggest problem is low self-image,' and it was from that point that Lama taught human potential and in a very structured way.

"Several times it occurred to me that Lama Yeshe was

Lama Tsongkhapa in the same way that Lama Tsongkhapa somehow absorbed and then represented the Buddha's teachings in a manner appropriate, acceptable, and relevant to people in the fifteenth century," Peter said. "That's exactly what Lama did. Lama's teaching was extraordinary, always fun, really meaningful, and relevant to everyone's lives. They were teachings from a very deep place of complete understanding of the psychological mechanics of mind. Not just humans, but all mind. And it seemed to me that if Lama Tsongkhapa were to reincarnate in these times that is exactly what he would do."

Lama Yeshe was determined to get his driving license. Brad Snower, a used car dealer from Chicago who sat at the back of the gompa making malas out of children's plastic pop-beads, gave Lama driving lessons in his luxuriously-fitted-out windowless red van with racing flames painted along the sides. Lama practiced whenever time allowed, and with anyone he could get to go with him.

With Peter Kedge he drove at one hundred miles an hour, eyes fixed on Peter rather than the road. He also liked to floor the accelerator and fishtail out of the car park in a cloud of dust. A terrified Robbie Solick was in the car one day when Lama drove right off the road into the desert at

great speed. "Don't worry, dear, you watch your mind, I'll watch the driving," Lama told him.

Brad Snower accompanied Lama to his written driving test and somehow managed to persuade the authorities to let him sit beside him – "to help with the English," he explained. Not surprisingly, Lama passed. That night Lama came to teachings twirling one of the pop-bead malas and continued to use it for the remainder of the course.

The actual driving test proved a little more difficult and Lama failed it twice – first for driving in the right-hand lane of a four-lane highway; then, when the instructor said to move left, he swept across three lanes without indicating. The trouble was he had no fear. The third time, he presented himself for the test dressed in a maroon sweatshirt and trousers, telling his students he was visualizing himself as a very tough truck driver. He was determined to pass this time. The instructor had him out on the roads for an hour and a half after which he informed Lama Yeshe that although he was obliged under Californian law to grant him a license this time, personally he would rather not. Finally, Lama had his driving license. "When he showed it to the geshe at Kopan, that was the only time I ever saw him show personal pride," said Jimi Neal. ☸



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