

A venture in real estate

The idea of establishing a center in California arose during the Yucca Valley course held in March 1977. Janet and Ross Brooke, who were both present at that course, owned two parcels of land in partnership with their friends, James and Miriam Kent, Tom Post, and Harriet Heywood. Deep in the Redwood forest, behind the town of Boulder Creek near Santa Cruz, one piece of the land was fifty acres, the other thirty acres. They asked their partners how they felt about donating their shared investment in the thirty-acre piece and they agreed immediately. It was an extraordinary gesture from a group who were all disciples of Baba Mukhtananda – only the Brookes ever became Buddhists – that led to the future Vajrapani Institute

Adele Hulse's recounting of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues ...



Disciples would be known by the calluses on their shoulders caused by the weight of the guru's hand luggage.

The land was offered before the end of the course and the students formed an organization to assume the remainder of the mortgage.

Robbie Solick rented a big American car for Lama and together with Anila Ann, who had recently returned from Australia, they drove to Boulder Creek with a small convoy of students to inspect the site. "I'd gotten to the point where every button of my North American automobile-scared lifetime of experience was being pushed by Lama's driving and my hair was practically standing on end," said Anila Ann. Miraculously, the party arrived in one piece, and after booking into a motel they braved the equally perilous drive along a barely existing track to the land itself. "Oh dear, this is my interpretation of jungle," Lama Yeshe said as he walked around.

The indomitable Anila Ann once again volunteered to be the pioneer nun at the new center. Lama asked where the boundary line was, and went running up to the highest point on a steep ridge. The land was almost

vertical in parts. Then and there, Lama gave a teaching in a small Redwood grove on the property.

"I was trying to find out where he wanted the gompa built," Ann said. "Lama insisted we start planting things right away. He wanted lots of flower gardens and tended pathways built where people could do walking meditation. His final judgment on the place was that it would make a good retreat center, but not a main center," she said.

Gripped by the pioneering spirit, a bunch of students hastened to set up camp in this majestic Redwood forest. Among those prepared to forego all manner of comforts to labor in the wilds were John and Elaine Jackson. They sold their home, and with their children, aged five and two, set about building a new life on this rugged, uncleared land. Anila Ann, the Brookes, John McKay, Chuck Thomas, Tom Waggoner, Jacie Keeley, and five others followed suit.

In Berkeley, at the center known as Vajrapani North, Lois Greenwood Audant

was appointed chairperson of the company in whose name this land was owned. She and her husband, Gabriel, who kept the books, produced a brochure asking for donations. Lama Yeshe told Pende to move into a house in Los Angeles known as Sera House as its resident teacher and sent Ngawang Chotak to Berkeley.

Before leaving Los Angeles, Lama Yeshe made the obligatory pilgrimage to Disneyland.

Lama Yeshe had a ball and his delight was captured on a video made by two students with Elton John's Crocodile Rock as background music. In the Haunted House Judy asked him if he was scared by the holograms. "Why should I be scared, dear? That's just like the bardo and I've been there many times," he replied. His enthusiasm so exhausted Judy that she begged off accompanying him on a trip to outer space. "But we've been all around the world, dear. Don't you want to go into outer space with me?" he pleaded.

Lama Zopa wasn't present that day, preferring to stay at the house absorbed in prayer and meditation. "Lama came back and said I must go because the automatic mechanisms and how things walk and talk were so incredible," Rinpoche said. "So I went. At first I thought, well, paper is paper, wood is wood, iron is iron – what's there to look at? I went on a boat which goes under a bridge, and gives the appearance that a whole load of garbage falls on your head. Then you go under the water and there was a mermaid there, half-lady, half-snake. I was very surprised to see a Tibetan Naga in Disneyland."

On April 7, 1977 the Lamas and Peter Kedge flew to Albuquerque to spend three days with Geshe Sopa. With no room to spare, he arranged dormitory accommodation for them. "Thubten Yeshe wanted to see an Indian reservation so one of my students, a very nice older man, lent us his very old car. But it broke down, and Peter went and rented a nice one for us, and we drove out onto this huge plain. Lama Yeshe asked me several times if he could drive but I said no, too dangerous," said Geshe Sopa. Lama Yeshe was never going to argue with his teacher.

Lama Zopa returned to Nepal to lead a Chenrezig retreat at Lawudo for one hundred Sherpas and seventeen Injies. By April 10, 1977 Lama Yeshe and Peter were back in Madison, Geshe Sopa's home base. Lama planned to stay there for six weeks and teach fifty students the short version of another of Maitreya's five texts, the *Cho Dang Cho Nyi Nam Che*. Jon Landaw provided a rough English translation.

Jon Landaw accompanied Lama Yeshe to the English classes he attended regularly on the other side of Madison. Naturally, Lama wanted to drive. "I was always telling him to slow down, slow down. 'But they take advantage when I slow down!' he replied. He was fearless in everything and that included driving. Saying mantras while sitting beside him was the only way to keep sane. We'd park in this underground car park after making a right hand turn from a fairly busy street. After a lot of practice he had that maneuver down pretty well. He did it at the same speed every day, then one day he whipped into the car park without slowing down at all. I caught my breath and he said: 'Did I get you hot?' That was his key phrase that summer: Did I get you hot. So I told him, 'Yes, Lama, you got me hot,'" said Jon.

"Another time we drove out of Madison for a picnic. It was getting late, and he wanted to drive back, but I was worried that he was tired, so I asked for the keys. He refused, and I actually wrestled him for them. You couldn't wrestle with ninety-eight percent of Tibetan lamas because you couldn't even touch them, but Lama made it easy," he said.

En route to New Zealand, Lama Yeshe and Peter spent two nights at Gabriel and Lois Audant's house in Berkeley. Vajrapani Institute now had a Board and a Director, Chris Vautier. Lama poured energy into meetings, studied documents, mothered and delighted everyone he met.

The Jackson family lived in a tipi on the Vajrapani land. They also built a separate kitchen, the first building to be erected there. The others strung together tents and hutments made of plastic and old blankets and cooked on campfires for six months. By November, twelve people were settled there and a meadow had been cleared, but it would be some time before more substantial buildings appeared.

There was another mad dash to catch a plane – this time to Hawaii, for three days' rest before flying to New Zealand. While Ngawang Chotak was trying to put Lama Yeshe's shoes onto his feet (always the left one first), overstuffed suitcases were being jammed shut, and people were still lining up to see him.

Peter Kedge commented later that in Milarepa's day, the quality of disciples was measured in the calluses on their buttocks created by sitting in meditation for so long. In the late 20th century, they would be known by the calluses on their shoulders caused by the weight of the guru's hand luggage. ❁