

Kurukulla:

A Work in Progress

One of FPMT's larger centers – in Boston, Massachusetts – did not get that way by chance. Years of dedication to the Dharma by lamas and students, support from the community (for a while there, teachings were held in the Quakers' rooms), and friendships that have endured, have paid off. Nick Ribush tells the story:

In September 1989, Lama Zopa Rinpoche was teaching in Boston when he was visited by Geshe Losang Jampa, resident teacher at Milarepa Center, Vermont, about three hours away. Although Geshe-la was spending nearly all his time at Milarepa, Tim McNeill and Martha Tack had been organizing well-attended monthly teachings in Boston. Since few people were attending his classes in Vermont but many were coming to his talks in Boston, Geshe-la suggested to Rinpoche that it might be more beneficial to reverse the situation and be based in the city and go to Vermont once a month. Rinpoche agreed and asked me to start a new FPMT center, which he named Kurukulla.

I'd just arrived in Boston a few months earlier along with Wisdom Publications, but with the help of Tim, and Martha, and Steve Rosenberg, we were able to get Geshe-la and Thubten Nyinje, his Kopan interpreter, an apartment, incorporate the center, and start a teaching program. Most of the classes were held in Wisdom's centrally-located bookstore.

However, six months after Geshe-la's arrival in Boston he was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and had immediate surgery. He never really recovered and passed away a year later. Great sadness pervaded the small Kurukulla community, and much of the wind went out of our sails. For the next two years we ran a pretty low-key program with mostly visiting teachers.

By 1992 we were ready to invite another resident teacher but felt we could not go it alone, so we got together with Milarepa Center and the recently-founded Kadampa Center, North Carolina, to share a geshe on rotation. Thus, in January 1993, the wonderful Geshe Tsultrim Chöphel

(Geshe Tsulga) arrived in the USA. Around that time, I stepped down as director and Steve Rosenberg took over.

For the next three years, with a different interpreter each year – David Molk, Pasang Tenzin, and Ven. Jampa Konchog – Geshe-la taught in all three centers; when Geshe-la was at Milarepa or Kadampa we kept the program going with visiting teachers such as Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, Dagchen Rinpoche, Geshe Sopa Rinpoche, Geshe Tsultim Gyeltsen, and many Western sangha, including Vens. Adrian Feldmann, George Churinoff, Thubten Döndrub, Sangye Khadro, and Thubten Chodron. At the end of his contract, despite fierce competition from North Carolina, Geshe-la accepted his Boston students' request that he remain here.

For the next four years Geshe-la stayed in a variety of apartments – some better than others – teaching either at home or at a rented facility near Harvard Square. When I look back on those somewhat financially lean years for the Center, I really appreciate Geshe-la's perfect monkhood: how he went wherever we put him, made the most of his environment, never complained, and never asked for anything special.

Steve remained director for two years and was followed by Suzanne Persyn, Jennifer Barlow (who has been treasurer since then), and David Kittelstrom, each of whom also served for about two years. It was during David's tenure that we purchased our property.

The search begins

From the beginning it had been our dream to have our own place, but it had always seemed a financial impossibility. At the CPMT meeting in London, 1996, Lama Zopa

Rinpoche wrote to some of Kurukulla's main benefactors, asking them to help us buy a building. Barry and Connie Hershey, longtime local supporters of the Dharma, offered a \$30,000 matching grant, but for more than a year we did not make much progress.

Then, during his fall 1998 visit to Kurukulla, Lama Zopa Rinpoche encouraged us to make a better plan for purchasing a facility, even adding \$3,000 to the Hershey grant. So we created a formal building committee, and started looking in earnest. However, it soon became apparent that it would take at least half a million dollars to get what we wanted, quite a challenge for a center whose annual budget was around \$50,000.

At the beginning of 1999, Thubten Damchoe, a former Kopan monk, arrived to be our new interpreter, an excellent arrangement that continues to this day. He and Geshe-la moved into a small apartment in a house owned by Tibetans and, for the first time, it felt as if the center had a home. Finding something we could actually own was still another matter.

In 1997 Lama Zopa Rinpoche had observed that inviting Ribur Rinpoche to Boston would remove hindrances to our finding a place, and since that time we had extended several invitations. In May 2000 Ribur Rinpoche finally came. During this visit Rinpoche strongly encouraged all the center members to work together, and at a community meeting spoke about how when Tibetans received their salary, the first portion they allocated was that with which they would make offerings.

Playing with the idea of tithing, we came up with a plan to raise the funds we needed. We would ask twenty-five center members to pledge ten percent of their salary for five years so that we could make a down payment on a building, and pay off the mortgage within that time. Asking people one-on-one for a commitment didn't quite produce the result we were looking for but, amazingly, it did produce pledges totaling some \$150,000 over three years, which gave us enough confidence to go public at the end of 2000 with an official launch of the building appeal.



A building with a "good feeling" awaits HH the Dalai Lama, 2003. Photo: Tony Lulek



Left: Geshe-la with HH the Dalai Lama at Sera Monastery after inviting him to Kurukulla. Photo: Geshe Damdul

Right: Geshe Tsulga giving Lam-rim Chen-mo oral transmission at Kurukulla, June 2007. Photo: Tsunma Jampa Drolkar

Following a tip from a monk at one of the local Zen centers, committee member Kris Snibbe started looking at old nursing homes slightly further out of town from where we had been looking, and quickly found a promising place. After getting Lama Zopa Rinpoche's "highly beneficial; it has a good feeling" on the premises, Geshe-la's approval, and a few more pledges, on June 6, 2001, the holy day of Saka Dawa, we put \$165,000 down on 68 Magoun Avenue, Medford, took out a \$300,000 mortgage, and put about \$40,000 aside for renovations. Now we really had a home.

After much cleaning and some renovation, mostly by Kurukulla students, teachings at the new center started in January 2002. In September, Lama Zopa Rinpoche appointed Wendy Cook as the new director and she continues in this role today, Kurukulla's longest-serving director.

At the end of 2002, in India, Geshe-la requested His Holiness the Dalai Lama to visit the center when he was in Boston the next year. His Holiness replied that he would do so if it were convenient. Although we're not sure, we feel that the fact that many of the hundreds of local Tibetans, with whom Geshe-la has a very good relationship, use the center regularly for their activities, might have helped His Holiness accept our invitation.

Accordingly, when His Holiness was in Boston in September 2003 for the Mind and Life conference, it turned out to be extremely convenient for him to come by Kurukulla on his way from the airport to his hotel. This was such an amazing event, and extremely gratifying to all those who had worked so hard for so many years for Kurukulla Center to exist. Since this exceptional blessing, the Center has continued to grow and benefit many people, including the now more than a thousand Tibetans in the area, who

often use the gomba on special occasions or just come by to make offerings, prostrations, or circumambulations.

Very special teachings

During his time in Boston, Geshe-la has given a huge variety of teachings, transmissions, and initiations. He has taught the *lam-rim* many times, *Madhyamakavatara*, *Bodhicaryavatara*, thought transformation, and many other profound texts. For the past several years he has been teaching the FPMT Basic Program in great detail. At present we are studying the fourth chapter of the *Abhisamayalamkara* and the lam-rim text, *Path to Bliss*. It has also been such a blessing to have Damchoe-la as our interpreter all these years. And it is not only we locals who benefit. Our teachings are broadcast live over the Internet, so people anywhere in the world can listen or, if they miss the live broadcast, download the teachings from our website soon after they've been given.

Five of Geshe-la's Western students have taken ordination. Currently two nuns, Tsunma Jampa Drolkar and Ven. Yeshe Chodron reside at the center. In February 2004 Geshe-la's nephew, Ven. Ngawang Tenley, arrived from Sera Monastery to be his attendant. We recently received word that Ven. Ngawang has just been awarded his geshe degree so we now have two geshees at Kurukulla!

Our next big project is to build an enlightenment stupa in the back yard and we are busily trying to raise the funds we need to accomplish this highly meritorious project.

There is not enough room here to detail all our past and current activities but our website, www.kurukulla.org, contains much more information about the center, as well as audio and photos from His Holiness's visit. Past issues of our newsletter, *Lotus Arrow*, may also be seen there, offering a detailed look at the Center's development and teaching program. There you will also find a huge library of audio recordings of teachings by Geshe-la, many visiting teachers, such as Ven. Robina Courtin, Ven. Rita Riniker, and Jon Landaw, and some local Kurukulla teachers as well.

Finally, it would be ideal to pay tribute to all those who have contributed and continue to contribute to Kurukulla Center's development, but fortunately they are too many to name here. However, particular mention should be made of Priscilla Sawa, chairperson of the board of directors; Debra Thornburg, Spiritual Program Coordinator since 1999; and assistant director Sean Gonzalez.

As Geshe-la often says, Kurukulla Center has been established to benefit not just those who currently attend but also many generations to come and, ultimately, all sentient beings. Thank you all so much. ☸

Geshe Tsultrim Chöphel

By Ven. Tsunma-la

Venerable Geshe Tsultrim Chöphel (known to all as Geshe Tsulga) was born to a nomad family on May 8, 1939 in the mountainous region of Kham, Tibet. He was one of ten children. The family shared a tent with their yaks and horses, and moved with the seasons from their base at 17,000 feet.

At the age of seven, Geshe-la applied to Dhargye Gompa, one of Kham's main teaching monasteries. At the age of eleven he entered Dhargye Gompa, becoming the first nomad to do so. His family settled nearby in Rango, at 13,500 feet. The remains of his boyhood home still stand in the fields today.

At Dhargye Gompa, Geshe-la studied grammar, the main philosophical texts, and debate, and received transmissions, commentaries, and initiations. In 1957, he received the transmission of the *Lam-rim Chen-mo* from Geshe Jampa Khedrub, a transmission he would give back to Dhargye Gompa in 2006 and to his students at Kurukulla Center in 2007.

As was the custom at the time, when he turned seventeen, Geshe-la traveled by foot to Lhasa to continue his education at the Sera-je division of Sera Monastery, one of the great Gelug monastic universities of Tibet. After leaving Dhargye Gompa he would not see most of his family, friends, or fellow monks again.

Two years later, in 1959, the Chinese invaded Tibet. The monks at Sera were told to hide in the mountains for three days, then return; they left with just the clothes on their backs. Three days later Geshe-la's group received a note to follow His Holiness to India; those who did not returned to Sera and were imprisoned, tortured, or killed.

For four months, under the cover of night, Geshe-la traveled barefoot over glacier-covered mountains and rocky passes. It was so dark and icy that many monks fell to their death. He was chased and shot at by Chinese soldiers on horseback. Food was scarce. Half of his traveling party were captured or killed or died from the elements. But Geshe-la survived, arriving in India with no skin on the soles of his feet, but alive.

When he arrived in India, he was housed in the former prisoner of war camp in Buxaduar, West Bengal. There,



Kurukulla's beloved Geshe-la in the kitchen with interpreters Slava Komarovski (L) and Pasang Tenzin (R) 1994. Photo: David Kittelstrom.

many of those who survived their escape from Tibet died from typhoid, malaria, and other tropical diseases. A few years later Geshe-la and about 120 monks were offered two hundred acres of jungle land in southern India. For three years they cleared the land by hand and gradually rebuilt Sera Monastery. Here, too, life was hard in the heat and humidity of India, with nothing to eat but fruit from the trees. Geshe-la witnessed the death of many great scholars from tuberculosis and other diseases endemic to the area.

Despite this hardship and adversity, Geshe-la continued his studies and in 1989 became a *lharampa geshe*, the highest scholastic achievement a Gelug monastic can attain. Geshe-la graduated at the top of his class in each of the disciplines within this degree.

Geshe-la still maintains a house at Sera-je, visits annually, and is responsible for the education and care of seventy monks from Kham. In addition, he supports five nuns studying in nunneries under his guidance, and six boys and girls ranging in age from five to ten years old who live in the children's village nearby – all placed in his care by their families from his homeland of Kham.

At the request of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Venerable Geshe Tsulga began a new chapter in his life. On January 14, 1993, he arrived in America to help establish the Dharma in the West. ☸