

# The Tenth Course

The saga of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues.

Compiled by Adele Hulse.

The Lamas arrived back at Kopan for the tenth November Course, for which one hundred and eighty students from fourteen different countries had enrolled. The big tent was relocated a little lower down the hill and built into an earth wall. It was a slightly more solid structure than before, but still basically hessian, scrap wood and sheets of tin. It provided no protection against the cold Himalayan winter. There was also the usual army of hungry fleas to contend with. Two recently installed electric pumps delivered water to the top of the hill, though the toilets were still open trenches.

Tom Szymansky was a psychology graduate with five years of clinical experience. His first encounter with Lama Yeshe was to observe him giving one of the Mount Everest Center (MEC) boys a thorough hiding. "He was smacking him hard with his open hand and the kid was crying and yelling out. I didn't know who he was and walked over. He spoke to me so kindly: 'Oh, hello dear.' Then turned angrily back to the boy, whacked him again, then turned back to me. With utter gentleness he said: 'He stole from the gumpa. If I don't do this now he will suffer worse later.' Whack! I was absolutely stunned. I had never seen anybody switch like that from utter wrath to absolute gentleness. He finished beating the boy and sent him off. He said he hoped the experience had not disturbed my mind, but it was necessary. Then he went away. Later I found out that was Lama Yeshe," said Tom.

Tom soon began skipping some of Lama Zopa's lectures. "You not in the session?" queried Lama Yeshe, finding him sitting alone one day. "He started talking to me about mundane things, gardening and such, in very ordinary words. There was nothing you could pick but they had the effect of making me realize these strange things Rinpoche was talking about were also everyday things; that the Dharma was a down-to-earth everyday thing in itself. As soon as my mind grasped that, Lama was gone," said Tom.

Lama Zopa's teaching style never varied. He continued to cough, and clear his throat, repeating himself over and over.

Back from Ibiza, Jampa Chokyi preferred solitude to living cheek by jowl with the Sangha at Kopan. Lama Yeshe told her to have a Tibetan tent made, and even called the tailor for her. A hardy girl, she pitched it on the side of the hill

and spent the entire winter there. "The first time I really tasted Lama's wrath was over my failure to memorize a certain text before beginning a Manjushri retreat he had told me to do," said Jampa Chokyi. "I went to see him with a list of questions and found him up on the flat roof of the gumpa with Rinpoche, Lama Lhundrub, and Lama Pasang.

"So Lama starts: 'Where is the text? You memorized it, so now repeat!' I told him I hadn't memorized it. 'What! You didn't memorize yet?' And he picked up this big stick he had up there. Suddenly I got so angry I took the text, gave it to Rinpoche and said: 'You can have this, I don't want to do the retreat, I'm going away and I don't want to know anything!' Immediately the four lamas all started laughing and laughing. Rinpoche gave the text back to me and said: 'Lama was just joking.' But it made me realize that Lama did want me to memorize things. From then on I made it my job and really memorized a lot of prayers," she told me.

Thubten Monlam kept the Lamas' kitchen spotless, as Lama Yeshe had taught him to do. Lama Zopa still ate less than a bird and much more slowly. "Eat, *kushok*, eat!" Lama shouted.

One day during a meditation session that she was leading, Anila Wongmo told the students that she prayed to be reborn a man in the next lifetime, influenced no doubt by a traditional Tibetan view that it was better to be born male. These were fighting words to Sylvia Wetzel, a dedicated leftist lesbian feminist from Berlin. "I couldn't listen to anything more because I was so angry I couldn't even speak," she said. "I missed Wongmo's next session because I couldn't stand it. Then along came Lama: 'How are you dear?' I said I was not fine at all, 'because Thubten Wongmo prays for a male rebirth and I think that is incredible. So what do you think, Lama? Is it a true teaching that male is better than female or is it just a historical thing?'

"He looked at me in silence for one minute then said: 'Are you having any problems with being a woman, dear?' Then it was my turn to be silent for one minute. I thought: If I say yes, that would mean women have difficulties in this life. If I say no, I'd be lying. So I think I got the message. Then Lama told me: 'I think what she said is a historical teaching. I think both men and women have the Buddha



nature equally, and are equally able to attain enlightenment. Sometimes in this world it is even better to be a woman, because you are more open to certain aspects of the teachings. Women are not so intellectual; you feel it in your heart.”

Sylvia stayed on for the retreat Wongmo later led, then found herself a job straightening out the Kopan library, where Lama often visited her. He asked if she would help teach the boys English, but she said their classes clashed with her Dharma lectures. “Try to attend a few classes but don’t neglect the boys’ English because it is very important. They are our future translators and some of them will be our future teachers,” he told her.

There were lighter moments too. One day, he said to her: “I heard sex with women is better than sex with men. I heard women can have sex with each other twenty times a night, but men are finished after three or four times. So women have much more fun, don’t they, dear.” Nothing fazed him.

Three weeks into the course, Lama Zopa was suddenly called down to South India to take teachings and was gone before anyone knew about it. Lama Yeshe announced he would teach the last week of the course himself, but give just one lecture a day.

“Lama knew very well what Rinpoche put the students through,” said Adrian Feldmann, who had returned to Kopan as a gelong, ordained (with George Churinoff) by Ling Rinpoche. “He began his first lecture by mimicking Rinpoche – the coughing, the repetition, the gesture of the hand under the chin and staring up into space. He kept it up for the whole two hours, and we were all laughing fit to die. His teachings on bodhichitta had the audience enthralled, mixing heart-shaking profound expositions with the most outlandish comedy.”

“Lama Yeshe had us in stitches so often I had tears rolling down my face from laughing,” another monk recalled. “I remember one guy asking: ‘If you walk down the street and this gorgeous beautiful woman approaches you, well, what do you do?’ Lama opened his arms wide and said ‘Enjoy!’ That brought the house down.”

But Lama was not well. American nun, Thubten Yeshe, known to all as T.Y., was shocked by his appearance when she greeted him at the gompa door one day. “He had great bags under his eyes and shuffled painfully on the path as he leant heavily on Marcel’s arm, barely able to take another step. Then, about six steps away from the tent, his whole posture changed. He became six-foot-tall, broke into a run, charged in the door, flew out of his sandals, and tore up the aisle like he was sixteen. Then he got up on the throne and taught for two hours. Sometimes he’d go quite blue, then he’d take a big breath and be pink again,” she said.

When T.Y.’s parents visited Kopan, Lama Yeshe cancelled his discourse in order to cook them lunch. “My mother was



Lama Yeshe with boys from the Mount Everest Center.

so touched,” said T.Y. “I hadn’t told Lama anything about my parents, but he grabbed my father’s arm and started talking to him about water pumps, which was right up his alley. Later when Dad saw the Dalai Lama on television he said: ‘He’s just like Lama Yeshe!’ They just loved him.”

When it came time to take refuge, Tom Szymansky backed out. “I had this thing about mind control,” he said. “Being woken so early, the one meal a day, the enforced silences and so on, are all hallmarks of indoctrination. Then Lama collared me again, saying: ‘You can stay, even if you don’t take anything.’ So I went along and he sat on the throne and I sat back. Everyone else was meditating with their eyes closed while I watched him as he just faded in and out. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, and he really was fading in and out. So I took refuge,” said Tom.

On the last day of the course, Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche came to give a blessing and an empowerment to say the Chenrezig mantra. He returned at the end of December to continue giving a series of initiations he had begun the year before.

The Tenth Course ended on December 15, 1977 with half the students staying on for the Lam-Rim retreat. To help ease tensions, Lama Yeshe told Wongmo to lead pre-lunch walking meditations. At the end of the retreat, all the Injies, the MEC boys, the Sangha, and the four lamas performed the Lama Chöpa puja at Boudhanath’s great stupa. After lunch at Samten Ling Gompa, they visited a number of local gompas to pay their respects and circumambulated the stupa many times. It was an impressive display of harmony and devotion from this eclectic group of Tibetans, Sherpas, and Injies and attracted a large crowd of onlookers. ❁