

Obituaries

Lama Zopa Rinpoche requests that “students who read *Mandala* pray that the students whose obituaries follow find a perfect human body, meet a Mahayana guru and become enlightened quickly, or be born in a pure land where the teachings exist and they can become enlightened.” Reading these obituaries also helps us reflect upon our own death and rebirth – and so use our lives in the most meaningful way.

Advice and Practices for Death and Dying is available from the Foundation Store www.fpmt.org/shop



Alessandro Falaschi, age 57, died suddenly of a massive heart attack at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, June 20, 2008

By Adalia Telara and Ven. Joan Nicell

Alessandro was one of the many young people who, in the late '70s and early '80s, set off for India on a “spiritual holiday”. He was enjoying the hippie life in McLeod Ganj when word spread that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be passing by. Alessandro, standing back from the crowd in order to get a better view, was struck when suddenly His Holiness turned and seemed to look right at him. Unusual for Alessandro, he burst into unstoppable tears.

Upon returning to Italy, Alessandro heard about the new Buddhist center located in a castle in Pomaia and soon went there to offer his help in its restoration. He lived at the Istituto for several years in a room which breathed of India, filled as it was with silks, oriental images, garlands of flowers, and burning incense. During the summer months, he worked in hotels

and bars on the coast of Tuscany or on Elba Island where he eventually met his long-time companion, Alessandra, and her young child, Maria Chiara. Together they bought an old house that needed restructuring in Pastina, 5 kilometers from the Institute, and eventually had two more girls, Andrea and Rachele.

Over the years Alessandro continued to receive teachings and initiations from many lamas, both in Pomaia and in India. He was a disciple of Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, and always helped out with the visits of His Holiness to Pomaia, acting as body guard and generally doing whatever needed to be done. In addition, he had a particular soft spot for Geshe Yeshe Tobden and Geshe Jampa Gyatso, resident lamas of the Institute.

In fact, after Geshe Jampa Gyatso passed away in late November 2007, Alessandro helped build the cremation stupa, working through the night with other members of the community, to have it ready in time for the cremation the next day, auspiciously Lama Tsongkhapa Day. Until the cremation stupa was opened ten days later, the community organized an around-the-clock watch and Alessandro unfailingly signed up for the 2:00 to 4:00 AM shift, the coldest and loneliest, happy to spare other members of the community and happy to serve his guru.

In June 2008 Alessandro became a regular presence at the Institute when he was asked to temporarily replace a friend of his who worked in the Institute’s Coffee Shop. June 20 seemed like any other day at the Coffee Shop; he had prepared our cappuccinos and espressos that morning with his usual soft smile, expressing his concern for two members of the community who were sick in the hospital. After lunch he returned to serve the after-lunch coffees while waiting for his 3 o’clock appointment with the director to talk about the possibility of formalizing his work for the Istituto (later described by his family and friends as a dream-come-true for him). Some of us were nearby setting up a large tent for Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s upcoming visit, when suddenly we heard a scream. Upon arriving at the Coffee Shop, two men were carrying Alessandro out from behind the bar after he had fallen unconscious to the ground. One of them, a trained Red Cross volunteer, checked his breathing and looked for a pulse. As we watched, Alessandro opened his mouth ever so slightly and seemed to take one tiny last breath. The paramedic performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation together with another person trained in this until an ambulance with a doctor onboard arrived. The doctor tried everything, from injections of drugs to electric shocks, but Alessandro never revived. Later, his own doctor told us that he had had a massive heart attack; it had been as if his heart had been split in two.

The news spread quickly and prayers and mantras, blessed pills and a mandala, were gathered together. As soon as the doctor had finished her work, the pills were put in Alessandro's mouth, the mandala put on his chest, and a group of people began to recite the Five Powerful Mantras and the *King of Prayers*. With Alessandro still lying on the floor where he had been put after he collapsed, we performed the Medicine Buddha Puja. His adopted daughter Maria Chiara was the first to arrive, having been living with Alessandro nearby in Pastina. His partner and two younger children had been called and were already making their way to Pomaia from Elba (several hours away by ferry and car). After the puja, we carried his body on a makeshift stretcher to the small apartment usually reserved for visiting lamas, which we had quickly prepared for this purpose. His body was laid on a bed, an altar set up, and Lama Monlam, who was staying nearby, came to say some prayers. Lama Monlam advised us to offer Lama Chöpa and Tsog, which we did later that afternoon together with his devastated family.

Alessandro was known for his soft smile and his gentleness, and even in his death he looked so calm and relaxed that we kept expecting him to open his eyes and end the joke. But the next day the coffin arrived and he was washed and clothed by several of the Sangha and set in the coffin, which we were permitted to keep open in spite of the hot summer days. Over the next three days he was visited by a stream of family and friends. Pujas were performed by the community on a daily basis – everyone squeezing into the small apartment and overflowing into the garden. His body was sent off to the crematorium with a final prayer by our resident lama, Geshe Tenzin Tenphel,

who in the meantime had returned from a teaching engagement.

Alessandro was only 57, his daughters only 26, 12, and 10, his companion still in love with this gentle man more than 22 years after first meeting him. We hear that it can happen, and then it actually did, right in front of our eyes. One moment he was serving us coffee, the next he was a corpse lying on the ground, and the next he was ashes in an urn... A true Dharma practitioner, he had left a signed letter leaving his possessions to his companion and children and expressing his wish for his body to be cremated and his ashes to be brought to the Istituto. May Alessandro always meet with the Dharma and precious Mahayana gurus in all his future rebirths.



Mitchell Samuels, died June 18 2008, in Auckland, New Zealand, aged 32

Mitchell Justin Samuels' parents are Shirley and Wayne Samuels. Wayne's Niuen birth name is Eteuaita Tuleiatama Lavakula, so Mitchell's ancestry is both Niuean and New Zealand-European. Mitchell was second-born to his brother Steven.

Mitchell described his early childhood as a carefree time which was fun and free. He enjoyed close relationships with grand-

parents and extended family. Some of his best friends were the family dogs.

Mitchell read broadly as a youth and from early on was interested in health and well-being, medicine and spirituality. His first part-time job was as a caregiver in a local rest-home for the elderly. He went on to study nursing, cranial sacral therapy, psychosynthesis and other healing modalities. By the end of his life he had worked in the organics industry and was a physiotherapy assistant at Waimarie Hospital, Remuera.

Mitchell's interest in Buddhism began around 1995. In 1996 he was part of the security team for His Holiness the Dalai Lama on his New Zealand tour. He took refuge with His Eminence Chogye Trichen Rinpoche in 2001 and was given the Dharma name of Rinchen Gonpo, which translates as Precious Protector. In 2002 Mitchell moved into Tashi Gomang Tibetan Buddhist center in Mangere Bridge to strengthen his practice. He received initiations and teachings from many teachers including Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Dorje Chang Institute, Avondale.

Mitchell passed away peacefully in his sleep on the celebration of the Buddha's enlightenment and on a full moon night. Mitchell's spiritual beliefs, his grace in life, his loving exuberance, and his honor and sincerity, are a deep teaching to all those known and loved by him.

The forty-ninth day after Mitchell's passing was honored by a prayer gathering of close friends and family. It was the same day that celebrates when the Buddha gave his first teachings.

Mitchell's dear friend and fiancée, Karla Brodie, sends heartfelt gratitude to all the teachers, guides, friends and family for all the loving support given to Mitchell and her during this time of passing. It is understood that Mitchell is happy with his continuing journey. ☸