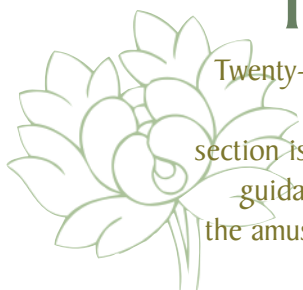


# INTIMATE REFLECTIONS



Twenty-five years after the passing of Lama Yeshe, students who were there in the early years remember their time with this extraordinary guru as if it were yesterday. This section is devoted to the intimate reflections of those early students, forever transformed by the guidance and care of their Lama. Step back with them as they recall the precious advice, the amusing stories, the first Kopan courses, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's perfect partnership and the end of this particular dream when Lama Yeshe passed.

There we were, about fifty out-of-control Westerners from all over the world, strangers stuck together for a month, most of us listening to Dharma teachings for the first time. Up at 5:00 A.M., out into the cold, to sit cross-legged for an hour and a half's meditation. A

There were about a dozen hippies there. They were too freaky for me and I was sure if you turned them all upside down you wouldn't get more than one hundred dollars out of the lot of them.

**Peter Kedge, at the time a Rolls-Royce aeronautical engineer from England, on his experience at the second Kopan course, 1972.**



**Lama Zopa, Ven. Wongmo, Mummy Max, Nick Ribush, Lama Yeshe, 1975**

one-hour break for breakfast, then the morning discourse until lunchtime. After lunch, a group-discussion period followed by the afternoon discourse. Chai at 5:00 P.M., more meditation at 6:00 P.M., dinner at 8:00 P.M., bed at 10:00 P.M. This went on relentlessly for thirty days. For the last two weeks we even skipped breakfast and dinner and got up an hour earlier. Most of us had never disciplined ourselves that much before. Most of us enjoyed it immensely.

**Nick Ribush – current director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive and Kurukulla Center, attended eight Kopan courses – on the third Kopan course, 1972.**

The course of my life led me to Kopan in 1972. A refugee from war-torn America, fatigued and deeply grieved as a result of the US involvement in the Vietnam war, the political violence, the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, I needed a long vacation from America. The riotous years of the late '50s and '60s were leading me to seek a deeper understanding of life. I didn't know that the object of my disgust and disillusion would later be identified as samsara.

**Barbara Vautier, early student, on the third Kopan course, 1972.**

I fronted up feeling ill and dirty. Even the flower I presented to Lama Yeshe smelled bad. But when it was my turn to stand in front of him, something remarkable happened – my awful hangover disappeared and I felt incredibly clean and fresh. People told me I even looked younger. I will never forget that one smile he gave me and felt I really had taken refuge.

**A student taking refuge vows from Lama Yeshe on July 3, 1976 in Australia, who had "partied hard before the refuge ceremony."**

I swear he was glowing! I only went to Kopan to see a friend. I was not interested in Buddhism. In fact, I was completely turned off by the whole scene. Many of the people there seemed unhealthy, both mentally and physically. I thought if this is meditation, who needs it? I was really only an observer and refused to prostrate. However, my first sight of Lama Yeshe changed all that. I immediately sensed he knew things most people don't. I'd met a lot of highly educated people, but none who were wise. Lama Yeshe was as wise as you could get. His compassion and wisdom were so apparent that one was really struck by his presence. I regarded him as a buddha, because if he wasn't, I don't know what he could be. After seeing him, I began doing prostrations.

**Suzi Albright, "a biker girl from Arizona" who attended the sixth Kopan course, later became a nun and did a twelve-year retreat.**

He looked very sick, all soft and squishy, and his skin was a yellow-grey putty color. 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.

**Jacie Keeley, early student, former secretary to Lama Yeshe and FPMT Central Office director.**



Bea Ribush with the Lamas, 1975

[I] burst in on Lama, sobbing hysterically. His eyes widened and he looked very concerned. I just blubbered, out of control, a real spectacle. “What is it dear?” he asked, taking my hands in his and drawing me close to him. Looking around he found flowers someone had given him and said: “Here dear, these are for you.” I said, “No, no, Lama, it’s me who should be offering them to you!”

He handed me some fruit and said to take it, too. “No, Lama, you don’t understand, nothing helps. Not fruit, not flowers, it’s useless! I’m totally isolated and alone. I can’t feel anything. I’m dead. Nothing means anything to me, not even you, Lama!” I shrieked and sobbed.

He said: “Not even me? Impossible, impossible!”

Then he opened his eyes very wide and drew my eyes to his, and what felt like my whole being went ... somewhere. I haven’t the words to describe what happened. I felt like he took me into the deepest recesses of his being, and I saw, I knew, that there was nothing there. Absolutely nothing at all. There was just an empty silence, a black hole. There was simply no person called “Lama” inside. It was awesome. In that moment I realized that the friendly, smiling, personable Lama Yeshe I knew was a figment, a persona he’d created solely for our benefit; that behind the charismatic exterior lay unbounded empty space. Lama had allowed me to catch a glimpse of that for one brief, but eternal, moment.

Carol Royce-Wilder, early student, photographer.

[Lama Yeshe] went away for a while and I missed him badly. Then one day I sensed he was back. I went up to Kopan in the pouring rain and sure enough, there

he was. Everyone was having dinner when suddenly, and without making it in any way obvious, he put his hand on mine and said: “You came to see me, dear? You have something to talk about?” I told him I wanted to take refuge and precepts, something Carol Corona had explained to me. He thought for a while then said: “No dear, you go to Lawudo. You take refuge from Lama Zopa up there.” I said I didn’t know Lama Zopa. I was actually a little scared of what I’d heard about him. Such an ascetic! But apparently Lama Yeshe wanted me to have my refuge connection with Zopa Rinpoche, so I would have a strong connection with both of them.

Paula de Wijs-Koolkin, early student, current FPMT board member, former director of Maitreya Institute, speaking of a 1972 experience.

One day during a meditation session that she was leading, Ven. Thubten Wongmo told the students that she prayed to be reborn a man in the next life, influenced no doubt by a traditional Tibetan view that it was better to be born male. These were fighting words. I couldn’t listen to anything more because I was so angry I couldn’t even speak. I missed Wongmo’s next session because I couldn’t stand it. Then along came Lama: “How are you dear?” I said, “I am not fine at all, because Thubten Wongmo prays for a male rebirth and I think that is incredible. So what do you think Lama?”

Ngawang Chotak, Lama Yeshe, Peter Kedge, 1979





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 Wetzel, a “dedicated leftist lesbian feminist from Berlin” who attended the tenth Kopan course, former director of Arya Tara Institute.*

[Lama Zopa] Rinpoche was the most unusual and mystical being and the fact that Rinpoche was still so young (maybe around 27) made it even more special. These were the days when Rinpoche was doing almost twenty-four hours of formal meditation each day, with short breaks for meals and



occasional teachings. Rinpoche was also available for interviews between 4:00 P.M. and 5:00 P.M., fifteen minutes maximum per interview; many were shorter and I can’t remember Rinpoche engaging in any small talk with his students.

*Marcel Bertels, on the third Kopan course, 1972.*

Lama Zopa Rinpoche worked so hard. Hardly slept. Not only did he attend and give all the teachings of the lam-rim, he also attended all the meditation periods and led them, the early morning ones to the last one at night. He was truly with us all the way. We were so fortunate in those beginning years. He was literally spoon-feeding us the Dharma. In that way we learned how to study and meditate and actualize it. He forced us to internalize our own suffering so we could recognize it in others. But first thing, every morning, he would go on and on about, “What Shantideva

says, compassion, compassion, compassion,” and then every afternoon for three weeks, “Suffering, suffering, suffering.” Did we get it? To apply compassion to our own suffering? To heal ourselves?

*Ven. Ann McNeil, one of the first ordained Westerners, attended the first six Kopan courses, former director of Chenrezig and Vajrapani Institutes.*

Life with Lama Yeshe was never dull. Peter Stripes, whom Lama had recently (in 1976) helped to find a Tara statue in Delhi, wished to return the favor. He bought a little red Fiat 500 car for him and sent it up to Chenrezig by train. Yeshe Khadro and Canadian monk, Jhampa Zangpo, had the unenviable task of teaching Lama to drive, but what he lacked in know-how, he made up for with boundless enthusiasm. In the clear country air, the roaring and grinding of gears provided a backdrop to Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s teachings on lam-rim. Much to Yeshe Khadro’s horror, Lama often took both hands off the wheel while bowling along, turning to her with a huge grin.

Jhampa Zangpo, too, was beside himself. “Lama said I got too hysterical, but his antics were hair-raising. He had so much gusto and absolutely no interest in taking things slowly,” he said.

*From Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe.*

On the flight back to Hong Kong, Lama Yeshe was sitting in the row behind me. At one point he leaned forward and said something I didn’t hear properly so I asked him to repeat it. He leaned forward again and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seat belts.” I thought it mildly amusing and feigned laughter, but a couple of minutes later the plane began shaking most violently. People were screaming, cabin attendants lost their trays: it was probably the worst turbulence I have ever experienced. It was clear too that Lama was already aware of what had not shown up on the weather radar.

*Peter Kedge, leaving Australia with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche on August 4, 1976.*

Having lived in the East for a number of years, “being professional” was something far removed from our daily reality, and many of us had gone through our lives questioning and rejecting this very idea of “professionalism.” Even if students did hold jobs, it was usually a low paying one, and many of us were in our twenties or early thirties. The result was very little income and Kopan and all the new centers were all living hand to mouth.

Clearly Lama wasn’t happy with this and campaigned continuously for all of us to be “professional” in whatever we did, and not reject society. In meeting students, the general focus was clearly Dharma advice, but at the same time Lama put a lot of effort for students to do better in life. Lama often suggested people to finish their education or gave advice on how to develop themselves otherwise.



1974

Even though Lama had this clear and vast vision for the organization and personally guided its development, the lack of experience and skills of those inducted in the process was a huge problem. Lama worked very hard at trying to improve our skills.

As an example, around 1976, Lama Yeshe came up with the idea to send four of us (Yeshe Kadro, Nick Ribush, Peter Kedge and myself, all ordained at this time) to a summer course in Business Administration at a US university. All four of us were deeply involved in admin and business projects for the organization and all of us were held back by our inexperience and lack of suitable education. We had tremendous energy for our projects but simply lacked the necessary skills. Lama clearly thought that some additional education would greatly help us. In the end, Lama dropped the idea, no doubt concerned about our ordination. Nevertheless, looking back over these years, I know such a BA course would have made a big difference in being able to do my various jobs for FPMT much better.

**Marcel Bertels, early student, former director of many early FPMT businesses.**

Lama liked cooking very much, always chopping things very, very fast and saying mantra: “Ommmmmmmm pham pham pham,” while making a big mess for me to clean up. But he didn’t burn anything. He always cooked for Mummy Max because he knew what she liked. I only knew *thukpa*, *momo*, bread, Tibetan tea and *khapse*. That’s all.

Lama Yeshe never drank Tibetan tea – he didn’t like it at all. But Lama Zopa liked it. Lama Yeshe liked sweet Indian tea with milk and sugar served separately, like the *Injies*. I put it all on a tray and took it to him in the early morning. He also ate bread then and sometimes an egg. Sometimes he ate in his room, but most times he ate out on the patio roof with the little dogs.

**Sherpa monk Thubten Monlam, cook for Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Kopan in 1976.**

*continued on page 38*

## Democracy, Lama Style

On October 5, 1976 the Lamas began teaching the second Italian lam-rim course in an old hotel in the village of Taceno, at the foot of the Italian Alps. Eighty people attended the course. A group of students had rented an entire hotel which had been empty for two years.

Future director of the about-to-be-formed Italian center, Massimo Corona, described the dreadful sight that greeted them when they arrived the day before the course was to begin. “We stepped through the front doors and found ourselves ankle-deep in water. The entire ground floor was flooded. There was so much work to do that some of us actually became quite hysterical that day!” Somehow, the place was made ready for the course.

According to the American student Barbara Vautier, it was “a terrible place, a ghastly thermal spa, steamy hot and horrible. I told Lama Yeshe there was no view and he made this gesture – like the view is through the top of your head.”

Student Piero Cerri led the meditations while Massimo tore around fixing things that were broken. Another student, Claudio Cipullo, “supervised.”

Around midnight one night Lama Yeshe called the three of them to his room. “Well, are we going to make a center in Italy or not?” he asked them. “We can call it ‘Atisha’ or ‘Lama Tzong Khapa.’ What do you like?” Piero, who had actually invited Lama to Italy, immediately chose the latter and the others agreed.

Then Lama said, “Who is going to stay here to run it?” Piero pointed out that all three of them were currently studying with Geshe Rabten in Switzerland. Lama was not impressed. “These students need your guidance right here. Now! If you want a center in Italy, then all of you must stay here,” Lama told them. This came as a shock to them; they rather enjoyed their debating classes at Tibet Institute.

Lama Yeshe got right down to business. “So, we call the center ‘Lama Tzong Khapa Institute.’ And who is going to be the Director? I tell you, we make democratic. We vote. I vote for Massimo, who do you vote for?”

Piero was shocked into silence. “Fine,” said Lama, “so we all agree. And who is Spiritual Director? I vote for Piero. And we need a Secretary – that is Claudio. See how democracy works? It’s very good,” he concluded.

“And that,” laughed Massimo, “was that. Lama was the only one who voted!”

**From *Big Love*, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe.**



# A Genuine Guru:

## JAN WILLIS REMEMBERS LAMA YESHE



Lama Yeshe and Jan Willis, 1974



Three days before the U.S. presidential election, Professor Jan Willis, one of the early Western students of Lama Yeshe, gave a lecture on Women and Buddhism at Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon. When this renowned African American Buddhist talked to *Mandala* staffer Sandra Peterson, she remembered Lama Yeshe's unique and loving style of encouragement, and his sensible approach to issues of race and gender.

**SANDRA PETERSON:** *I know that you studied with Lama Yeshe. And there's a saying that history is written by the victors. To me, those victors are the "privileged." How would Lama Yeshe allow for the difference in the lens through which the ego is seen by a white male living in Manhattan, who has been to the best schools and by someone living in East L.A. [Los Angeles] without the same kind of advantage?*

**JAN WILLIS:** Or someone from the South who had to drink at a water fountain marked "colored"? It's also often said that history is *his*-story.

**SP:** *Exactly. Or would Lama distill it all down into ego and attachment?*

**JW:** Lama was a genuine guru who could tell what was best for a particular student. When he looked at me, he saw the battle I was having between pride and humility. I talk about this in my book, *Dreaming Me*<sup>1</sup>. "Yes," he said "Pride and humility, they are so tough, so strong." It was as though he saw right to the bottom of me: I had this low self-esteem and had endured all those put-downs from the racism of the

South, but at the same time I wanted to be strong; I wanted to be strong and powerful. There he was one morning, toothbrush poised in his hand, knowing that that was the conflict I was facing. Having a low opinion of myself and yet wanting to have a proud opinion – but not the kind of proud opinion that rubs it in anybody else's face, just one that lets you feel at home in your own skin. It was so amazing. He just bowled me over with just that simple statement – and then he went off to brush his teeth. I thought, Whoa! He really knows me well! He told me I was intelligent, he told me that tasks that I saw as impossible were easy.

**SP:** *What tasks were they?*

**JW:** When I was working on my dissertation, I said to him, "How in the world can I learn all these languages?" And he'd say, "Oh you can, that's so easy. You can do this, this and this." He actually made things seem easy. I'd talk with Lama Zopa (we were these young, thin, things together in those days), and we'd both say, "When was there the time for Lama to have read all these texts?" We would see him talking to everybody, taking care of everybody, being gentle with everybody, but when did he ever have time for himself? You'd ask him a question, and he would answer from some text. It was

<sup>1</sup> *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey*, by Jan Willis, Wisdom Publications, 2008.





perfectly clear that he knew about it, had thought about it, and had done all these debates. He had an incredible, incredible intellect, but you couldn't imagine when he could have possibly found time for all that study. Did he ever sleep?

Lama Yeshe helped me through graduate school when I was so frustrated. "Go back again, that professor has problems, but you'll be alright," he'd say. "The professor has problems. It's not your problem. Go back and do it and everything will be alright." And things *were* alright, and with some things there was probably a little magic involved, certainly his blessings. In other ways Lama Yeshe encouraged me by forcing me to do things.

He'd come by the house and say that in two hours he would have to give a lecture. He'd say, "You write it." What? "Write that lecture. Come on, it's easy, do it. I'll be back in two hours." Then you panic. Your knees buckle. But you find yourself writing it because he's coming back in two hours. There'd be these concrete examples of accomplishing things you never thought you could do.

I often think about the ways that Marpa treated Milarepa, and with me it wasn't through any kind of hardship, rather it was always with encouragement. You can do it. Lama had no doubt. It was a real sense of giving me empowerment. And he did that for fifteen years – I think it actually took that long in my case.

I once got a call from Sister Max – it was just before Lama's last trip to California in 1983. "Hi Jan, Lama wants you to do a month-long philosophy course with him." Me? "Yeah, *you*." Gee, whiz. Then we talked a little bit about where it might happen and then I got up the courage to ask, Why me? "He knows you teach philosophy. He thinks you're a good teacher so who would be better? This is what he wants. And, he wants to read the things in the original. Get it ready."

So I got the little packet together. Five pages from Plato, five pages from this one, five pages from that one and later Lama Yeshe read, studied and showed me, incredibly, what debate does for you in terms of sharpening your mind.

One morning Lama Yeshe said, "Before we start, this man Plato is wrong." You think so? He hadn't read Aristotle yet, but he knew that Plato was wrong. Why? "Because he says, you see beauty. But you no see beauty. You see beautiful thing. Examples: this, this, that. Beauty doesn't exist. This man is wrong!" Of course this is exactly what Aristotle will argue: that you don't see the universal, you only see the particulars. But as soon

as Lama Yeshe read Plato, boom! He saw the mistake. And I'd think: where does it come from? Is that how sharp the mind becomes because it's been training in the Tibetan system?

*SP: Did he ever attribute any significance to the inference that in his previous life he was a woman?*

*JW:* No. But I love it that he was. I think he was self-effacing in that regard. He'd say, "Oh that so silly, don't worry about that." But I think that many of us students, half-joking, would say, no wonder he gets along so well with women – because he was one, he really understands us in deep ways.

*SP: Did he ever speak specifically about racism or sexism?*

*JW:* Well, I tell a story in *Dreaming Me* about how he embarrassed me once in front of all these people. He pointed to me and said, "All of you, look up here. This is women's liberation." This was after there were rumblings about negative portrayals of women in some Buddhist scriptures during the course at Kopan.

About a week before that, I had given a little talk about a narrative that says a certain person was cursed to be born a woman. I think that's when my interest started with women and Buddhism. I had never felt that personally, though. I always felt so cared for by Lama Yeshe, and I didn't feel any discrimination around any of the monks. In fact, I had just been taken in by the Tibetans since I first met them. They were the caring ones, and it was wonderful.

Maybe Lama Yeshe was just using the rumblings about negative portrayals of women as an excuse to say, "I understand this." I don't really know what he was trying to say, but for me it was embarrassing and wonderful at the same time. Doubly so, because it was the encouragement he was always giving me. In ways beyond my control I was so fortunate to have run into Lama Yeshe. Perhaps he just put out a hook and reeled me home to his place. But it certainly changed my whole life around.

There I was, arriving with a low image of myself, wanting to be a better human being, and still with a lot of defensiveness and insecurity in the world. And he just loved me up. He called me "daughter." It was so endearing. I'm certainly proud of that.

*Jan Willis is a professor of Religion at Wesleyan University. She has studied and taught Buddhism for over four decades. Willis is the author of several books, including Wisdom Publication's Enlightened Beings, and Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey. Willis was recently endowed with the "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism" award.*

# Caring for Our Elders:

## LAMA YESHE GIVES ME A WORK ASSIGNMENT

*By Judith Weitzer*



From Top: Judith working with an elder in Japan; Lama Yeshe and Judith Weitzer, Berkeley 1974; Judith getting “miked up” on *Senior Information Journal*

It was not unusual for Lama Yeshe to give people a “work assignment.” After all, there was much to be done for his growing organization. Often, at the end of a meeting with him, Lama would mention something that he would like you to do. He might ask you to be director of a center, organize a course, or start a school or project. In 1976, one of his requests changed the course of my career and my life. This time, he didn’t offer any particular advice on how to carry out his wishes. He simply said, “It makes my heart break to see how old people are treated. If you can, do something about it.” Frankly, I didn’t have a clue about how I might work on this problem. As a social worker I dealt primarily with families and individuals in crisis. As a teacher, I dealt with children. I had scant knowledge about the lives of elders in America.

After a year in Asia, I returned to my job as a social worker in the Bay Area. I had lost my seniority and had to take whatever position was assigned. The job I was given was evaluating the need for home care for disabled and elderly people, giving me my first glimpse of the challenges people faced to remain independent and to avoid the universally dreaded nursing home. I didn’t link this first change in my life to Lama’s request. There was a long commute and I badly wanted to transfer to an office nearer to my home and resume my previous work.

When a memo came across my desk, seeking people interested in staffing the newly formed Office on Aging, I remembered Lama’s words and felt I owed it to him to apply for the job even though it was outside of my field of expertise. I remember walking up to the County Offices for my oral examination, thinking: “I don’t know a thing about this, so Lama, if you want me to do this work you had better take care of this interview.” Well, he did! I was surprised how easily answers came to me – it was really as if he was whispering in my ear. I was offered the job. Thus began my long (40-year) career in the field of aging.

My first task was to create an Information and Referral program for elders and concerned family and community. This entailed learning about all of the agencies and services available so that we would have substantial information and help when the calls started coming in. It also meant extensive study and training about the aging process. Eventually, we averaged 1200 calls a month. I felt fortunate to be able to offer service. We noted which problems were easily solved with a referral to the right agency and which problems marked a recurring “gap in service.” Through community organizing, I began creating programs intended to address those gaps. We formed groups and networks of concerned citizens willing to work for the needs of elders. Over time we created a host of new services; Adult Day Care, Senior Housing, Hospice, education programs at local community colleges to enrich the lives of retirees, and many other programs. For a time, I directed a retired senior volunteer program, placing over 600 bodhisattvas, disguised as elderly people, in 85 community





service agencies. Those helpful and loving people contributed millions of dollars worth of service to our county.

After helping to organize the Older Adult Program at the community college, I was asked to teach a course. This was an opportunity for me to craft a curriculum using Dharma principles. I joked with my Buddhist friends that I was teaching Buddhism by stealth. I am convinced that most elders understand Dharma from their life-experience. If given a chance to look at their lives and talk about their experiences, they come up with some of the same conclusions that the Buddha taught. They know about suffering. They know about change. They know about the inevitability of death. And most know about the benefit of selfless service to others. I enjoyed finding ways to teach topics from the lam-rim without a mention of Buddhist vocabulary. For example, teaching about stress is a way to talk about the suffering of change.

I kept Lama informed about all that I was doing and he offered enthusiastic support. One time I complained to him that I was overwhelmed with too much to do. He

shows. He was the unseen director of all that I did. Eventually we were producing prize-winning programs on topics that you usually don't see on television such as "Incontinence, the Dry Facts." We did four shows on "end of life" issues and managed to slip in some footage of Sogyal Rinpoche on a show about how the different faith traditions deal with death. I tried to incorporate a stealthy "dedication of merits" with my closing line:

"Until I see you again, take good care of yourself, and, if you can, take care of those around you."

I am utterly amazed at how karma unfolds, how so much can result from a small seed, planted so many years ago. Lama gave us his vast vision, which could seem overwhelmingly huge. At first I thought, "How can I even affect the lives of just a few people?" What I learned was: You do what you can with what you have where you are. An original seed creates a tree which branches and creates more seeds and more trees. My work just kept expanding and affecting more and more lives. I rejoice that many of the projects I helped create have been replicated and built upon.

I am concerned about the health care options for ordained Sangha and lay people who may not have worked regularly because of their devotion to offering service in Dharma centers or fully engaging in their Buddhist practice and studies.

reminded me that he had given me the Chenrezig initiation and that now I had eleven heads and a thousand arms and therefore could do anything needed for others. I put up a small poster of Chenrezig in my office to keep myself reminded of Lama's words. Sometimes, I worried that maybe I needed to be doing more retreat and practice than I could fit in during the short vacations from my job. Lama always said that he was perfectly happy with my modest formal practice, that it was far more beneficial to carry out the principles of Buddhism in daily life.

Lama didn't live to see my television show, *Senior Information Journal*, which I produced and moderated for ten years. He would have loved it. I had no idea what to do when I walked into the studio the first day, except what I had learned from watching other TV hosts. When the floor director was madly signaling me with some hand gesture that was supposed to convey a message, I just guessed what it meant and crossed my fingers. I relied on the Manjushri mantra to calm my nerves and clear my mind on the way to the studio, another gift from Lama. I always kept Lama in mind as I developed

Lately, I have been working on a project with the IMI (International Mahayana Institute). I am concerned about the health care options for ordained Sangha and lay people who may not have worked regularly because of their devotion to offering service in Dharma centers or fully engaging in their Buddhist practice and studies. For Americans, medical insurance is usually linked to employment, and Medicare is linked to Social Security eligibility. Everyone should have a right to adequate income and medical care and this simply isn't the case. Stay tuned to *Mandala* as we report on what we're discovering from our extensive interviews with the IMI Sangha, and how we propose to go forward with this important work. It was Lama's wish for me to work for improved treatment of our precious elder community, and one assignment I am so grateful to have received.

*Since retiring from government work Judith has continued to consult and teach in the field of aging. She's committed to helping adult children understand the options possible for elders in their family. If you have a concern about an older adult, or would like to learn more about Judith's work with IMI Sangha, please contact her at: [nimadawa@sbcglobal.net](mailto:nimadawa@sbcglobal.net).*





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1978

We did a lot of cooking together, Lama teaching me how. For breakfast he liked French toast with lashings of butter and syrup, as well as sausage or bacon and strong coffee with whipped cream. If Anila Ann had seen that she would have gone nuts. She was always on at me about his diet. I agreed with her at the time but Lama claimed nobody knew his body like he did. “I need strong food to keep it going – steak and milk.” He made these big *momos* but wouldn’t let me buy ground beef for them, it had to be the best steak and he’d chop it up himself. He didn’t like ground beef: “You don’t know what’s in that!” He loved his coffee. He started adding half and half but said it wasn’t strong enough, so moved on to whipping cream.

Ngawang Chotak, early student, former director of Wisdom Publications.

I was always amazed at the amount of food Lama could eat, with all his physical problems. He’d often hold the palm of his open hand on a spot down near his waist and say: “Oh my heart!” I’d say, “Lama, your heart isn’t down there.” But he said it was. I don’t know what he meant by that.

He always had breakfast and I’d lay out a whole spread for lunch. He called it his “California lunch,” with salads and lots of pastrami, salami, cheeses – all the fatty foods. He just loved it. Then he’d have his nap and two hours later he was calling out: “John Shore, where’s my snack!” He loved cold cuts, even with tea, and at night he’d eat a big dinner.

We’d just finished one of these “California lunches” one day when he gets a call from this married Mongolian lama who lived nearby. This guy constantly did pujas and Lama always attended them when invited. So this lama rang to say that his wife just made *momos*. Well, that was the magic word! So he starts putting away these *momos*, looking up at me with sheepish eyes, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, as they brought him plate after plate of them.

Most of the time Lama ate good food. He was one of the few Tibetan lamas to understand about salads and fresh vegetables. He made a garden out the back of the house as soon as he got there, to maximize the growing time. He really had the touch – you never saw vegetables grow so big in just two months. People would come over and say, “I’ve lived in Berkeley all my life and I’ve never seen anyone grow stuff like this.” He gave it away, a lettuce here, tomatoes there, supplying

his students all summer. Lama knew about good food, but he ate junk too.

The late John Schwartz, Lama Yeshe’s attendant in 1980, former director of Vajrapani Institute.

When I returned I noticed this wonderful smell. There was Lama, towel around his waist and laughing loudly, with every saucepan I possessed on the table, under the table, on the stove – the mess was indescribable. We sat down to a magnificent vegetarian lunch of many different dishes. Peter [Kedge] had taken him shopping in Chinatown for the ingredients.

The late Beatrice Ribush, Nick Ribush’s mother, in 1977, describing what awaited her after being sent away from her house for the morning by Lama Yeshe.

“I can’t visualize!” someone called out during one teaching. “Of course you can!” Lama replied. “Pizza!”

It took three months to complete and changed my life. Lama didn’t want it painted in the traditional style, where you have the lineage holders at the top and bottom of the painting. He wanted just the one single image of Manjushri, which was an unusual request. He wanted it to be huge. He was always telling me, “Think big! Big paintings for big places!” Since then I have continued painting just one deity in *thangkas*. We Westerners have to learn to communicate with these on a one-to-one basis before we try and deal with many figures at once.

Artist Andy Weber describing his first commission from Lama Yeshe, a large Manjushri *thangka* for a new center in England.

Towards the end of 1978, Andrea Antonietti, a twenty-one year old Italian man, arrived at Tushita and told Lama Yeshe that Kyabje Ling Rinpoche had agreed to ordain him in a few months’ time. Lama asked if he had obtained his parents’ permission. “Permission, Lama? I have lived away from home for some years. Why do I need their permission?” Lama Yeshe was adamant, adding that he could be ordained at Kopan once his parents consented. Lama Yeshe told Andrea to write a letter to his Catholic parents.

“He told me exactly what to write, word for word, admitting all the problems and worry I had brought them by hanging around with hippies and indulging in ‘extra-sensory experiences.’ He told me to emphasize that my attitude had changed, that now I valued religion. My parents gave permission and said they were very happy to support me as a Buddhist monk,” remembers Andrea.

From *Big Love*, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe.

Words were not necessary with Lama Yeshe and we developed our own communication. Occasionally, when he came out from a lecture, he put his arm over my shoulders and said, “Good?” and I answered, “Very good!” Then I would put my right arm around his waist and feel how he was transmitting



energy that filled my whole being with joy. I sat in the front row for his talks so I could get him whatever he needed. I hardly understood what he was talking about, even though it was translated into Spanish. The concepts were light years away from my mind. But now and then Lama pointed to me, and told the others that if they had questions they should ask me because I understood. I felt nothing could be further from the truth but what I did understand was the respectful, kindly and affectionate way he treated people.

**Paco Hita, father of Osel Hita, the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe, speaking about his first meditation course, Ibiza 1978.**

Lama had a unique teaching style. Instead of saying, “Do you understand me?” he’d ask, “Are we communicating?” He acted out what he was saying, which was so helpful, because not all of his students spoke English. Even those who did speak English often couldn’t understand him properly until they caught on to his unusual rhythms of speech. Lama communicated way beyond the meaning of the words, using facial expressions and sometimes just silences. When editing his teachings, I could only use the words he said and always felt there was something missing.

**Jon Landaw, early student, writer, editor and Discovering Buddhism teacher.**



Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche were the perfect pair. Extrovert and introvert, outrageous and traditional, heavy and light, relaxed and disciplined, wrathful and gentle (but always compassionate!). And yet that’s

altogether too simplistic ... It is impossible to categorize them concretely as in “Lama was like this and Rinpoche was like that.” Both of them embodied all qualities, all polarities, just in different measures at different times, according to the needs of different people. In their relationship to each other, however, the love and respect and care and deference that each showed the other – and thereby demonstrated to us – was enormous, inexpressible in words.

**Ven. Connie Miller, writer, editor, early student, early organizer of Universal (now Essential) Education.**

People tended to compete with one another to sit next to Lama Yeshe at meal times. Lama Zopa was so thin and ascetic. He ate so little so slowly it made him seem stern, but Lama Yeshe was heaven. He’d put his arm around you and enfold you in this mass of red material, and he had this incredibly clean slightly aromatic incense-y

smell. All you wanted to do was cuddle up and get closer to him. He’d hold your hand, roar with laughter and kick his legs in the air, which delighted us all enormously.

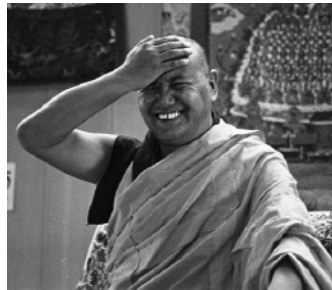
**Mary Finnigan, an English visitor to Kopan in 1970.**

Lama Zopa came into Lama Yeshe’s room, fell to his knees and started to pray. For the benefit of a student Lama pointed towards himself and said: “Dorje Chang,” indicating that Rinpoche was seeing him in the aspect of Dorje Chang. (“Who is Dorje Chang?” a student once asked him. “The biggest Buddha, dear,” Lama replied.) Rinpoche was often seen making offerings to Lama Yeshe with tears running down his face. At other times he would not look up at Lama at all. Lama Yeshe often addressed Lama Zopa as *Kusho*, meaning monk.

**From Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe.**

One night [in 1975] when we were getting the passports and visas ready I went up to the Lamas’ rooms to get them to sign some forms. I went to Lama Zopa’s room first but he appeared to be asleep, so I went to Lama Yeshe’s room and got his signature. “What about Zopa?” he said. I told him I thought Rinpoche was resting. He jumped up and rushed into Rinpoche’s room, but he didn’t stir. Lama Yeshe grabbed him by the shoulder, shook him, pulled him off the bed onto the floor and said: “Sign these papers. There’s no time for sleep!” I felt terrible but that was Lama, the wrathful disciplinarian.

**Nick Ribush, early student, current director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive and Kurukulla Center.**



At the end-of-course puja, with tsog piled high and happy faces all around, Lama bade farewell to those who were not staying on for a ten-day retreat, led by Ven. Marcel. “You people very beautiful,” Lama

Yeshe told them. “Lama is very happy. Thank you so much, soooo much! And remember as much as possible cultivate, activate wisdom action, stay unified much as possible with the universal compassion wisdom and never come down in supermarket. At Kopan we’ll always pray for you people, we’ll always be with you – in the sky, in space. Actually, we’re always together in space – going, coming, going, coming. Absolutely, of course, there is no going or coming. So. Goodbye, thank-you, everything okay. See you soon, on the moon!” ☸

**After the eighth Kopan course, 1975; from Big Love, the forthcoming biography of Lama Yeshe**