

BIG LOVE DAY

A Day of Celebration and Rejoicing, Vajrapani Institute, May 8, 2010

ON MARCH 7, 1984, 200 devastated students from Australia, New Zealand, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Hong Kong and many European countries arrived at Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek, California. Four days earlier, FPMT's precious founder, 49-year-old Lama Thubten Yeshe, had passed away after months of manifesting illness. And now, amid inexpressible grief from all who knew him, Lama Yeshe's cremation was being planned at Vajrapani Institute in California, an FPMT center to which he showed a particular affection.

Before the funeral ceremonies and cremation began, Lama Zopa Rinpoche made the following statement in the Vajrapani gumpa, "I would like to say thanks from my heart to the Vajrapani people who have worked so hard, in the past and now at this time. They have worked with such dedication, doing their work so well without confusion, being so harmonious together."

Twenty-six years later, this dedication, this lack of confusion amongst the staff, and this undeniable vibe of harmony within the community is alive and well, keeping Lama Yeshe's spirit of big love beating in the hearts of students, new and old.

On May 8, 2010, Vajrapani Institute organized an event, Big Love Day, to commemorate the selfless work of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche and to consecrate Lama Yeshe's cremation stupa, built atop the site

where Lama Yeshe's body was cremated 26 years ago.

The day began in true Lama Yeshe style: a brunch of French toast, whipped cream and fresh fruit, a favorite of Lama's, was served outside of the main building. While some people ate, others arrived. You could hear a periodic gasp of delight as many who had not seen each other in years reconnected. Francesca Hampton, an early FPMT student who met Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1975, reflected on seeing some familiar faces after all of these years, "A fascinating and powerful lesson in impermanence for me – my internal image of my generation retains their faces at 20-something. And I was now staring amazed into faces that are at 60- and 70-something and counting."

Margaret Kim, a newcomer to FPMT commented that the "history of the organization was brought alive" for her by the presence of "many devoted original students." She reflects that, "the event was like a big, happy family reunion." Another participant noted, "There was just so much familiarity amongst everyone. Like long-lost family members meeting again after many years."

Following brunch and a couple hours of "catching up" amongst the arriving guests, 200 anxious students climbed up to "the ridge," a 5-10 minute hike uphill from the main building, to the clearing of land where Lama Yeshe's funeral proceedings were held over a



Clockwise from left: Lama Yeshe's cremation, Vajrapani Institute, March 7, 1984. Photo courtesy of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. The finished cremation stupa, May 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier. Final touches of paint on the stupa. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

quarter-century ago. The impressive, freshly painted 6-foot cremation stupa, built by Tom Waggoner, Yeshe Jackson, Benito Guzman and others, stood beaming and welcoming like a perfect host.

Jacob Lindsley, Vajrapani's assistant director, passed out gorgeous programs of the day's events, designed by San Francisco's Keisha Roberts. Keisha also designed a beautiful tribute/timeline of Vajrapani's directors, which

hung on the stairway wall of the main building (image on page 7).

Nick Ribush, early FPMT student and director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, reflects on arriving to the site, "As I walked up to the ridge I remembered the sadness we all felt making that walk just over 26 years ago as we prepared to cremate Lama Yeshe's holy body. This time it felt quite different. This time it was a celebration. A celebration of the unfolding of Lama's vision, of



Top: The crowd at Lama Yeshe's cremation, Vajrapani Institute, March 7, 1984. Photo courtesy of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.
Bottom: The crowd at Big Love Day, Varjapani Institute, May 8, 2010. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.



Above from left: Fabienne Pradelle addresses crowd. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.

Osel addresses crowd. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.

Below: Monks from Gyuto Vajrayana Center, Yangsi Rinpoche, Geshe Dakpa, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s vast waves of virtuous activity that carry us along with them, of a coming together of old friends and new, of the preciousness of the Dharma, which allows us to make sense of it all. It was a beautiful day in so many ways and the big love was palpable.”

The event began with a welcome from Vajrapani’s 37-year-old director, Fabienne Pradelle. She looked around the gathering, almost as if in disbelief that the long anticipated day had arrived and all of these people had actually turned up. “First,” she said, taking in the crowd, “I’d like to welcome you all *home* to Vajrapani.” Those who didn’t tear up at the word “home” just flashed big smiles or gave knowing glances to friends sitting near them.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche presided over the proceedings of the entire day, along with Geshe Ngawang Dakpa of Tse Chen Ling Center in San Francisco, Yangsi Rinpoche of Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon, and



three monks from the Gyuto Vajrayana Center in San Jose, California.

The guest-list was impressive and read something like a family tree of FPMT royalty.

Osel Hita, the recognized reincarnation of Lama Yeshe, made the journey from Spain to California to participate in the event. His attendance marked the first public interface Osel has had with FPMT for nearly six years. During the proceedings, Osel took the micro-



Captions from left: Osel makes himself available to the crowd. Lama Zopa Rinpoche with Rhea Rachevsky and son Aris. Photos courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

phone and addressed the crowd who fell silent and collectively inhaled in anticipation as he stood up. Osel kept it brief, thanking the lamas and the audience for being there, ending his direct, gentle hello with, “If anyone wants to talk about anything, just let me know. Here I am.” Many did want to talk. Osel made himself completely available: posing for pictures, chatting with guests, giving and receiving hugs with a confident, though shy, smile.

Osel had the following to say about the day’s events, “I guess the day meant a different thing to everyone who was there. But it was a very nice event and great to see how people enjoyed it. It was the first time in 25 years for lots of people to reconnect, so that gave me a lot of joy.”

Rhea Rachevsky, daughter of Zina Rachevsky (Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s first Western student) also attended the event, driving from Los Angeles with her son, Zina’s grandson, Aris.

This was the first FPMT event ever for Rhea, who hadn’t been in much contact since 1973 when her mother passed away suddenly during retreat in Kathmandu, a six-year-old Rhea in her lap.

Rhea decided to come to the event when her new Facebook friend, Nick Ribush, told her

about it. “I received a Facebook request from Nick a couple of days before the event. I checked and saw that we had one mutual friend, Michael Lobsang Chokyi. I clicked on Nick’s link, and there were all of these images of me as a kid, my mom, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche.” After a couple of exchanges Nick mentioned the Big Love Day event to Rhea and told her, “This might be the most concentrated group of people who knew your mom who will ever assemble again.” Realizing the event fell on Mother’s Day weekend she decided, “Okay! I’ll come. Normally, I don’t even drive one hour out of L.A. if I don’t have to, let alone six! But this felt important,” she explains. “When we arrived, everyone was so warm. I met so many people who knew my mom really well. The day had too much going on for me to ask many questions about her, but we spent all day the following day, Mother’s Day, with Lama Zopa at his house in Aptos. My son really bonded with Lama Zopa and with one of his attendants, Sangpo. He just wanted to be next to them.”



Nick Ribush. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.



Among the faces in the crowd one could spot some of FPMT’s first students such as Sister “Mummy” Max (who had not made a public FPMT appearance in many years); Massimo Corona (former director of FPMT International Office and member of FPMT board of directors and was instrumental in the founding of Istituto Lama Tsongkhapa in Italy); Nick Ribush (former FPMT board member, director of Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive); Paula de Wijs-Koolkin (FPMT board member); Ven. Sarah Thresher (her first visit to Vajrapani was to attend Lama Yeshe’s cremation); Ven. Connie Miller (instrumental in carrying forth Lama’s vision of Universal Education); Peter Kedge (FPMT board member and instrumental in most of

Clockwise from left:
Ven. Sangpo with Aris. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.
Anila Ann McNeil, Sister “Mummy” Max, Tom Waggoner. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.
Peter Kedge and Harvey Horrocks. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.
Susana and Massimo Corona with Peter Kedge in background. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.

FPMT’s early and current activity); Harvey Horrocks (former FPMT board member and director of FPMT International Office); Ven. Roger Kunsang (attendant to Lama Zopa Rinpoche for over twenty years, current CEO of FPMT); Ven. Thubten Pemo (first woman to teach the month long Kopan course); Pam and Karuna Cayton (long time caretakers of Kopan Monastery, instrumental in the founding

Offering Service Vajrapani Institute's Directors

Early Years



Lake Arrowhead course organized by Ven. Thubten Wangmo 1975
Original 30 acres donated by Bob and Janet Brookes and the "Old Landlord"
Genke Gyelchen hosted Genke's earliest first teachings in the USA 1974

Dr. Robinson, Lisa Greenwood, Judy Metzger, Carol Fields, Don Broderson, Shaom and Susan Gross, Heidi Hill, Healy, Chuck Thomas, and Gabriel Audent

1975-1977

Ven. Ann McNeil



Arrived on the land
Purchased Jerry Barker's 20 acres including the ridge and retreat cabin

Lama Yeshe
Lama Yeshe visited the land for the first time and taught in the meadow grove across the road from the Enlightenment Stupa shortly after Tucca Valley course

Dakim Rinpoche
Gaidi Bodhi'she vows at Lama Yeshe's request

1977-1979

Chris Vautier



His Holiness the Dalai Lama
Co-sponsored His Holiness' first USA visit at the University of California Santa Cruz 1979

His Holiness Zong Rinpoche
His Holiness Zong Rinpoche first visited the land and blessed it at Lama Yeshe's request 1979

Wind Training teachings at Camp Kenosha, with Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe and Dr. Collins attending 1979

Lama Yeshe
Chemistry initiation, commentary and retreat at Grizzly Lodge 1980

Genke Gyelchen
Lama Wang
Zangpo Tulla Rinpoche
Teaching visits

1979-1980

John Jackson



Purchased Shambhucal and donated parcel of land from Anne Herden 1981
Gampa kitchen completed minus finishing details

His Holiness Zong Rinpoche
Heruka Bhagwa Garuda initiation and commentary, with Goncar Rinpoche, Gaidi Gyelchen and Geshe Thando attending
Heruka Body Mandala initiation and commentary 1982

Sogral Rinpoche
First visit 1982

acting director 1980-1981, director 1982-1986

John Schwartz

His Holiness Zong Rinpoche
Heruka Body Mandala initiation and commentary at Camp Kenosha, translated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, with Lama Yeshe and Dr. Collins attending
Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Mahamudra retreat
Heruka initiation, commentary and retreat 1981



Geshe Lobzang Gyelso, Vajrapani's first resident teacher, arrived 1981
Telephone service to the land 1982
Enlightenment Stupa built 1982
Lati Rinpoche, co-director of the Enlightenment Stupa, with Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Osel Rinpoche attending 1982

1981-1982, 1986-1988

Richard Prinz



His Holiness the Dalai Lama
His Holiness visited Vajrapani 1988
Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Heruka initiation, commentary and retreat
Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche
First visit 1988

Retreat cabins completed 1988

director 1988-1992, co-director 1992-1994

Petra McWilliams

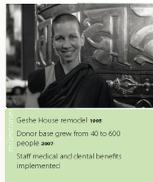


Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche
First visit 1992

Retreat cabins completed 1992
First full-time paid staff

co-director 1992-1994, director 1994-1995

Ven. Amy Miller



Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Most Secret Hayagriva retreat 1997
Elsen Rinpoche
Six Yearly Retreat 1998
Chokden Rinpoche & Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Secret Vajrapani retreat 2000

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche
Meditation program including Jomric Grounds and Pottos 2000-2002

Geshe Wangchu
Resident Teacher 1998-1999
Ven. Rose Fines
Resident Teacher 1998-2001

1995-2004

Elaine Jackson



Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche
Mahamudra 2003
Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Gajayama initiation and commentary 2000
Vajrayogini initiation and commentary 2000

Chokden Rinpoche
Chok retreat 2001
Heruka initiation 2001
Heruka Body Mandala initiation 2001

Genke Sopa
Inhabited-Dependent Origination 2001
Retreat "Shower with a View" 2004
Downs remodelled 2005

2004-2009

Fabienne Pradelle



Chokden Rinpoche
Six Arm Mahabala initiation and commentary 2001
Lama Zopa Rinpoche
1000-Arm Charyapig initiation and Nyung Nae commentary 2001

Lama Yeshe Cremation Stupa built and then consecrated by Lama Zopa Rinpoche during Big Love Day 2001

2009-

Vajrapani Directors timeline, designed by Keisha Roberts.

of Land of Medicine Buddha and many other contributions to the organization since the early years), among many other noteworthy individuals.

Further, many of Vajrapani's past directors, residents and land-benefactors were in attendance including Anila Ann McNeil (FPMT's first western teacher and director of Vajrapani from 1977-1979); Chris Vautier (director 1979-1980); John Jackson (now Ven. Yarphel and one of the first residents of Vajrapani and director 1980-1986); Richard Prinz (director 1988-1994); Ven. Tenzin Chogkyi (director 1992-1995); Ven. Amy Miller (director

1995-2004); Elaine Jackson (among first residents of Vajrapani and director 2004-2009); Tom Post, Janet Brookes and their families (who were responsible for donating the land that Vajrapani resides on); Chuck Thomas (one of the first residents of Vajrapani who was also with Lama Yeshe in Los Angeles the night before he passed away); Tom Waggoner (one of the first residents of Vajrapani who drove Lama Yeshe's body to the mortuary in Los Angeles to Vajrapani); other early/first residents of Vajrapani who attended the event: Åge Delbanco, Shasta Wallace, John



From left: Two daughters of the Brookes family. For many children, Vajrapani is home. Photos courtesy of Barbara Vautier.

McKay, Steve Pearl (who still lives on the land), Bev Gwyn; plus others who have supported Vajrapani in ways big and small over the years since its beginning in 1975.

It was obvious that this generation of Vajrapani “people,” have matured into a remarkable group of lay and ordained practitioners who inspire those around them with kindness, pure speech, patience, tolerance and a complete undiluted energy of big love. One guest, who hadn’t visited Vajrapani before, commented, “You felt like you were walking on very private, sacred turf, which might have felt intimidating if the community wasn’t so darn welcoming! I met one man who apparently had been one of the founding residents of the center, but you’d never know that, he acted as grateful to be there as everyone else.”

In acknowledgment of this, the day after the event, at the conclusion of the weekend’s teachings which began with Lama Zopa Rinpoche earlier in the week, nine “Big Love Awards” were given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Vajrapani to some members of this generation of Vajrapani pioneers for their years of unending service.

In addition to the many figures from FPMT’s and Vajrapani’s past, the ridge was also filled with new faces: babies, older children, teens, and many people who never had the privilege of meeting Lama Yeshe, yet feel a connection to him, to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and to Lama Yeshe’s message of universal love. To acknowledge the new generation, emerging as big love powerhouses in their own right, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Vajrapani also handed out three “Big Love Hope Awards” to members of the younger generation showing signs of developing the qualities characteristic of the Vajrapani generation before them.

Tove Beatty, who never met Lama Yeshe, but has offered service at Bay Area FPMT centers and *Mandala* magazine over the years, reflects: “I never met Lama Yeshe in his Lama Yeshe lifetime. When I took refuge, I was told that Lama Yeshe was abbess of a nunnery in a previous life and I was one of ‘Lama’s girls,’ which implied a certain independent streak.”

The actual consecration of the stupa lasted two hours, followed by a short Vajrasattva tsoing offering. Lama Zopa Rinpoche took a moment to give a short talk, introducing some notables



Clockwise from top left:

Rob Firefox swallows fire for the crowd. Photo courtesy of Barbara Vautier.

Jacob Lindsay and Chris Olander join Rob in the comedy show. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

Yeshe Jackson with George Galt. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

in the audience including Osel, Rhea Rachevsky and Sister “Mummy” Max. He quickly brought Rhea to tears with his lovely tribute to her mother, Zina, who Lama Zopa Rinpoche explains, “started all of this.” Rinpoche also gave tribute to Lama Yeshe’s kindness, explaining that because of Lama, all of the FPMT centers, all of the social service projects like the Liberation Prison Project and ongoing hospice initiatives were able to take shape and benefit so many others.

Following a break, where cameras flashed, hugs were exchanged and laughter rang out from the ridge, the FPMT Bay Area center directors made a request to Lama Zopa Rinpoche for particular teachings in the Bay Area at their respective centers. Rinpoche giggled in delight as descriptions of their offerings were read:

“We the students of the FPMT present Rinpoche with galaxies filled with every type of

offering, entire universes of gold dust, sapphires, and rubies; kingdoms filled with wealth and prosperity; diamonds as big as hot air balloons, huge ocean liners filled with white roses and pearls; the scent of sandalwood, frankincense, and jasmine; light offerings, as numerous as the grains of sand in the world’s oceans, so bright that they can be seen from as far away as the deepest parts of space.”

Next came the music and talent offering. First on the “stage,” (a clearing of space amongst the crowd in front of the stupa), was Rob Firefox. His bit was billed as a “Comedy Circus Fire Show” and it delivered. Rob happily



From left:
Angelica Walker and Jennifer Kim offer a Yogini Dance. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

The crowd joins in with the Joy Riders. Photo courtesy of Dionne Wilson.

pushed the crowd outside of their comfort zones with his raucous juggling, jokes and, yes, fire show. Some members of the audience laughed and clapped, others sat stunned/confused, but most energetically cheered him on and enjoyed every minute of it.

Yeshe Jackson, son of Elaine Jackson and John Jackson (Ven. Yarphel) who was born on the Vajrapani land, followed the fire show, belting out a touching and sincere version of “Heart of Gold” by Neil Young, accompanied by George Galt.

Vajrapani housekeeper and daughter of Shasta Wallace, Angelica Walker (who was also born on the Vajrapani land) and Vajrapani’s office manager, Jennifer Kim, offered a Yogini

Dance routine, a beautifully choreographed display of light-as-feather dakini dancing.

George Galt, Jacob Lindsley and Jennifer Kim singing Peter Makena’s “Free and Easy” in perfect harmony and the Joy Riders, a Vajrapani-born band made up of George Galt and Ven. Nyingje (Paula Chichester), offered several of their classics, many in the audience singing along by heart.

Alison Harr, former Vajrapani resident and Liberation Prison Project volunteer couldn’t contain her excitement when the Joy Riders took the “stage.” When asked why their music is so special to her she replied, “It’s fabulous when they play because I can sing along and feel the peaceful and loving vibes running through my veins. Ven. Nyingje’s songs seem to put me in a total blissed out energetic state. I feel totally happy as long as she is playing that mandolin and offering Dharma songs. George’s devotion always inspires me to join in.”

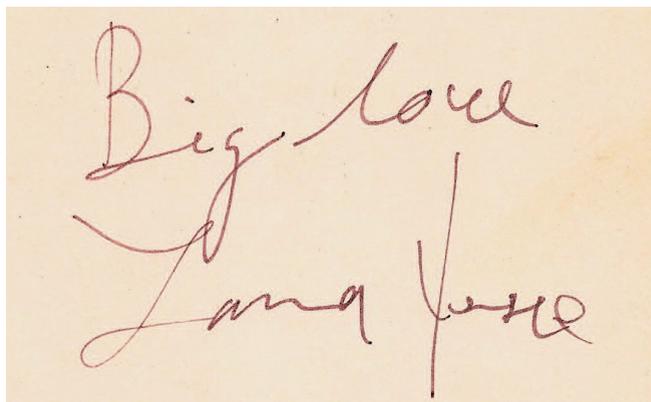
The Joy Riders concluded with their “Dedication Song” which begins with:

When Lama Yeshe first saw Vajrapani
It was not as you see it now
But Lama said to the people around him
“Build a pond and the fish will come.”

In our Lama’s grand vision
We all are playing a part
The merit that we have created
We would like to dedicate.

Following an extensive dedication of the day’s virtue by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, hungry, sun-stained participants trekked down the mountain to the main building, this time for dinner. A bountiful and delicious feast of chai, salad, rice, vegetable curry, chapatti and tzatziki sauce was dished out by smiling and gracious Vajrapani volunteers and staff. People spread out all across the land and throughout the main building, some small groups of two or three found a quiet spot alone, others made larger groups or sat alone in reflection, taking the day in. Lama Zopa Rinpoche took his dinner with Yangsi Rinpoche in the main gumpa, and many students gathered around them in groups, eating, relaxing and finding friends they had lost throughout the day.

At around 10 P.M., following the low-key exit of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Yangsi Rinpoche, a DJ’s turntable came into view. The lights dimmed. Electronic music began to bump from the DJ’s corner. At first, only a few people braved the “dance floor” (the center area of the gumpa). But slowly, two people turned into four, which turned into



Lama Yeshe’s famous signature

six and then at least a dozen. Some people sat on the sidelines, catching up with friends or discussing the day’s events while eating cake or chocolates. New students danced with old, some people spun around in sheer unedited expression, some grooved just a little, but all beamed with joy, the kind of joy that only comes from feeling safe, bonded and comfortable with those around you.

Michelle Stewart, director of Tse Chen Ling in San Francisco noted, “To think that 26 years ago, Lama Yeshe’s body was in this room and everyone was grieving. Now, on the same floor, all these years later, his students are dancing and celebrating his life. It’s outrageously beautiful.” Indeed, it is obvious that Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s message to the “Vajrapani people” 26 years earlier, congratulating them on their dedication, lack of confusion and obvious harmony was taken to heart, fostered and cultivated ever since.

Osel was right. Everyone who attended the event did walk away with different feelings, different impressions and different symbolic memories to cherish. But there might be just one “truth” that the event brought home to all involved: Lama Yeshe’s legacy of big love is alive and well and showing no signs of expiring. ☉