



Lama Zopa Rinpoche “opens the eyes” of the Tara statue, Kopan Monastery, 1976

FPMT’S FIRST HOLY OBJECT PROJECT

Connie Miller, an American student, arrived in Nepal in August of 1975 with her university friends, Karuna Cayton, Scott Parris and fifteen others. These students were all doing independent research in Nepal for their final university theses at The Evergreen State College in the state of Washington. While Connie was staying in Kathmandu, Karuna and Scott were both living at Kopan and participating in the group lam-rim retreat there that one hundred students were doing with Thubten Pende. Connie felt unsure about entering the retreat at this stage; after all, she hadn’t attended the previous month-long November meditation course, so how could she just jump into the retreat? After some convincing from new friend and freshly ordained American nun, Ven. Thubten Pemo, Connie decided to attend. She returned to Kathmandu, packed her things, and returned to Kopan on Christmas Day. After getting settled, Connie joined the guided lam-rim retreat and attended the mind training teachings on the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation* from Lama Zopa Rinpoche that were

also taking place. Ven. Thubten Pemo remembers the details of Connie’s central involvement with FPMT’s first holy object. “One day in January, Rinpoche was looking down from the balcony outside his room as Connie sat in the sun behind the gompa. She had fallen ill with bronchitis, and had stopped attending the retreat sessions. After they talked for awhile, Rinpoche invited her to help him paint the large Tara statue that Lama Yeshe had sent [Mummy] Max to find in Kathmandu.”

Rinpoche explained exactly how the statue should be painted and told a visiting elderly relative from Solu Khumbu to help Connie. Lama Yeshe wanted Tara to overlook a triangular pond surrounded by flowers that would be built under the ancient bodhi tree that stood in front of the gompa.

For some time, the unfinished Tara statue sat on the balcony outside the lamas’ rooms; Connie would come up every afternoon to paint for a few hours. Sometimes Lama Yeshe would come out after his afternoon “rest” and talk with her, occasionally sharing his special tea.

“After a while, the statue was moved into the Kopan library, a big room located above the office that was also called Mummy Max’s room, and I continued painting it there. Jampa Chökyi was also working on an embroidered thangka in the same room where I painted,” Connie recalled. Jampa Chökyi made at least two embroidered thangkas, including one of Thousand-armed Chenrezig made of pieces of silk and installed at Lawudo hermitage and a second one of Chittamani Tara, also made of silk, which was eventually hung at Vajrapani Institute in California.

One afternoon, when the painting was nearly done, Lama showed Connie several packets of gems that were destined to adorn the statue of Tara. “Lama often talked to me about Tara. ‘Tara has so many beautiful, natural jewels,’ he once told me. Naturally I was thinking in the most concrete terms, of gemstones, but the way Lama looked at me, it suddenly dawned on me that he was speaking of a very different type of jewel, of Tara’s qualities that transcend anything physical. I felt quite embarrassed by how dense I was!”

Lama supervised the construction of the triangular reflecting pond. A week later, the Tara statue was scheduled to be consecrated in a series of special pujas attended by many dignitaries and Lama Yeshe’s personal friends, who brought mountains of offerings. Connie’s responsibility had been to paint the crown, the robes,

and the lotus seat on which Tara sits, but the fine detailed painting of Tara's facial features, especially her eyes, was done by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Rinpoche was truly able to bring Tara alive when he "opened the eyes" of the statue. This was the last step before the actual consecration, during which Tara was invited to come and reside in the statue.

Connie remembers the consecration: "Two monks carrying Tara on their shoulders led everyone in a joyous

procession all around Kopan Hill. I remember that Lama was wearing a ceremonial crown of the five dhyani buddhas. We stopped at various points to chant and make prayers. Lama explained to everyone that we were showing Tara around her new home. Then she was placed in her house in front of the gompa. I always thought of her as watching over and protecting Kopan from there." And she still does to this day.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe are pictured here at Borobudur Stupa, Java, Indonesia, in 1979. Peter Kedge remembers the details of this visit to one of the world's greatest Buddhist pilgrimage sites, dating back to 800 CE. "It was blisteringly hot the day we were there, humid and absolutely the worst conditions for Lama [Lama Yeshe had a heart condition that was especially aggravated by the heat]. But he insisted on circumambulating the shrine several times, while prostrating. Rinpoche joined him, but I couldn't keep up at all and went off and found some shade."

WHY HOLY OBJECTS ARE PRECIOUS AND WISH-FULFILLING

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Every time you look at holy objects – pictures of the Buddha, statues, scriptures, stupas – they plant the seed of liberation and enlightenment in your mental continuum. So every time you look at them they purify your mind. How? When you look at them they plant a seed or positive imprint on your mental continuum so that later when you meet Buddhadharma, either in this life or in future lives, you are able to understand the words and the meaning of the teachings. From that, you are able to practice the meaning of the Dharma you have understood, which causes you to cease the gross and subtle defilements by actualizing the path and then your mental continuum becomes omniscient mind. This is what is meant when we say that by seeing holy objects it plants the seed of enlightenment on the mind – it contains the whole path from guru devotion and the three principles up to the two stages of tantra and enlightenment.

Every time we see holy objects it purifies so much negative karma, so many defilements. This is because of the power of the holy object. It's like an atomic bomb – even though it is small it can bring so much harm and cause so much destruction. That example is negative but what I am saying is that the material has power, like electricity. The material of an atomic bomb has the power to harm and

destroy the world. The material of holy objects – statues, scriptures and stupas – has the power to affect our mind, to leave a positive imprint.

There are five paths to achieve enlightenment and the first is the Mahayana path of merit. Within that are three levels: small, middle and great. As soon as your mind achieves the great level of the path of merit then wherever you are, whether you are in a holy place or in the toilet, anywhere, you see numberless Buddhas around you. Numberless Buddhas are always there but we just don't see them because our minds are so obscured. When you reach that level you will actually see uncountable Buddhas in nirmanakaya aspect wherever you are. Then, when you reach the right seeing path, you become an arya being and you can see numberless Buddhas in sambhogakaya aspect. This explains the quotation that "even if you look at a drawing of Buddha done on a stone wall out of anger it causes to see ten million Buddhas."

So the benefit we get each time we see a statue of Buddha, a picture of Buddha or a stupa is like the limitless sky. It causes us to achieve all the realizations from guru devotion up to enlightenment and to achieve all the numberless qualities of the Buddha's holy body, speech and mind.