CREATING THE SACRED



A *MANDALA* EBOOK
FPMT

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A *Mandala* Ebook

FPMT

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Editor's Introduction

"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," Lama Zopa Rinpoche teaches in this book's Foreward. Fortunately for Dharma students around the world, these precious objects no longer exist just in Buddhist countries or in India, Buddhism's country of origin. The blessings to see and have access to powerful pieces of sacred Buddhist art in our centers is due to the kindness of Buddhist masters and the efforts of their Western students.

In this *Mandala* ebook, we have found interviews and stories illuminating the creation of traditional Tibetan Buddhist sacred art in the West. The anthology explores what happens when Western students learn traditional techniques and occasionally find an opportunity for trying out Western technologies. We uncover how these holy objects are dependent arisings and consider what goes into their creation, including discussions with artist and scholars that dive deep into the purpose of creating sacred art.

British artist Peter Griffin explained the following about Buddhist art to Ven. Robina Courtin in a *Mandala* magazine interview from 1997:

> I think it's a very profound tool to change the mind. I think the Buddha was an incredible psychologist. Visual imagery is a very immediate and profound way to convey a whole pantheon of conscious and subconscious information. It works on so many different levels. As well as having an immediate impact upon the mind, through the power of the holy beings there are many layers of experience conveyed to us through the visual form. The holy image does nothing other than convey the Buddha's holy mind; it conveys to us, in two-dimensional form, or three in the case of a statue, the qualities of love and compassion, and as such it is unbelievably inspiring for us. It triggers within us that potential. ...

Please enjoy the following pieces drawn from more than thirty years of *Mandala*'s publishing history. May you feel inspired by these stories and see more clearly the qualities and potential of all the holy objects you encounter.

Laura Miller
Mandala, Managing Editor
September 2017

Foreword:

Why Holy Objects Are Precious and Wish-Fulfilling

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Mandala April–June 2010

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.

Holy objects only leave positive imprints, no negative imprint. When we watch TV or go

sightseeing in the city many of the things we see can leave a negative imprint on our mind, depending on how we look at them. So it is very important to have as many holy objects as possible outside the house and inside the house—maybe not in the toilet because the bad smell might be disrespectful—but otherwise, everywhere. So that wherever you look, always you see a holy object and always you get these skies of benefit.

Just merely seeing a statue or form of Buddha, whether the person is Buddhist or non-Buddhist, a believer or not, creates far more merit than that—numberless great merit. So these holy objects are so precious. These pictures and statues are so precious. Even if somebody makes a very ugly drawing or like a child just draws some kind of design and says it is Buddha, still there is something so the positive effect is there.

Holy objects are really wish-fulfilling, unbelievable. Just by existing, these holy objects make it so easy for sentient beings to purify their negative karma—no matter how bad or how much they have accumulated—and so easy to collect extensive merit. Holy objects are more precious and wish-fulfilling than skies filled with gold, diamonds, or even wish-granting jewels because those material things cannot have the same positive effect on your mind that a statue or painting of the Buddha has.

Usually I keep many photos of Buddha and this is also what I give to other people. For me these are the best, the most precious things. These statues and pictures of Buddha are very precious. Priceless. That's also why I give them to other people.

Excerpted from a talk given at the Mitukpa retreat, Milarepa Center, U.S., August 2002. Edited by Ven. Sarah Thresher and further edited for Mandala *for space.*

For extensive advice on the benefits of statues and stupas, together with advice on how to construct, fill and bless them, please see Benefits and Practices Related to Stupas and Statues, Part 1: Teachings and Instructions, *published by FPMT Education Services and available through the FPMT Foundation Store.*

1. A Mandala Made of Sound

By Lorne Ladner

Mandala November–December 1995

For a number of years now, I have been making small prayer wheels and sharing them with some teachers and friends. I have read and re-read the commentary on this practice that Lama Zopa Rinpoche shared with me and been amazed by the miraculous, deep, expansive benefits enumerated in the commentary. As Rinpoche says, "Simply touching a prayer wheel brings great purification of negative karmas and obscurations," and "Turning a prayer wheel once is the same as having done many years of retreat." Miraculous, deep, expansive.

A few months ago, I attended a day of lectures by Thomas Moore, a best-selling writer of books on archetypal psychology and a psychologist who was formerly a Christian monk for many years. At one point during his lecture, Dr. Moore began speaking about the sacredness of words. He said that if one searched back far enough into the etymology of any word, one would find that that word was rooted in the sacred. He spoke of Christian illuminated manuscripts (so like golden copies of the *Perfection of Wisdom* found in Tibet) and of a Christian practice of writing sacred words on paper, dipping them in holy water, and swallowing them.

We spoke a bit during a break about how modern American society fails to see words as sacred. I reflected on how in California one continually has to drive over words painted on the roads: "Stop," "Ahead," "School," "Crossing," "Yield," "Slow." I mentioned how sometimes, when driving, I would reflect on how each of these words could be seen as sacred, as a Dharma teaching (*slow* the samsaric mind, *stop* committing non-virtuous actions, put others *ahead* of oneself while *crossing* from foolishness to Buddhahood). Thinking in this way, it was uncomfortable driving over them! And if you think of the "ah" in "ahead" as the one syllable expression of the *Perfection of Wisdom*, will you feel comfortable driving over it?

In his lamrim commentary, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Rinpoche says, "We also abandon Dharma when we step over writing, throw any writing away, and so forth. Some people even do things like sitting on writing." How often do we put paper with writing on it into a back pocket? In a culture that produces so much junk mail, daily newspapers, and soda cans and candy wrappers with words on them, who remembers that words are sacred? Who does not crumple, crush, or throw away written words? The insides of our shoes and the bottom of our sneakers are printed with words. Are we abandoning the Dharma with each step? Can we, living in the West, really dare to imagine that Lama Zopa Rinpoche is correct about the power of prayer wheels, that Pabongka Rinpoche is correct about the sacredness of each word?

Perhaps one way of beginning is by imaging backwards, historically or mythologically. Dr. Moore gained a sense of the sacredness of everyday language by looking at etymology, the Catholic monks pray in Latin, and Buddhist mantras are generally Sanskrit. In the commentary on prayer wheels

that Lama Zopa Rinpoche translated, there is a significant section on the lineage of the prayer wheel. It seems important that we know that the prayer wheel was given to a bodhisattva dragon king by the Buddha Mar Mezed, and that it was the Great Nagarjuna who received the prayer wheel and instructions for its use, bringing them to India. What happens if we imagine a scene: Great Nagarjuna passing the prayer wheel he brought to India on to the Lion-Faced Dakini who holds it like a treasure and keeps it with her until she passes it on to Tilopa? Does our feeling about having a prayer wheel in our home change when we reflect that Marpa had one in his home when he was teaching Milarepa? Perhaps seeing that things *were* sacred helps us to realize that they *are* sacred.

After Dr. Moore's lectures, I began thinking about prayer wheels and how they "function." I decided to make one to share with my classmates in a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology and to present it to them, saying *something* about Buddhism and prayer wheels.

I went to a hardware store to buy some wood, nails, tacks, and tools to work with. I saw others buying parts to fix bathrooms, build decks, and the like. Someone walked by as I was carrying a couple of pieces of redwood and joked with me about having to do work around the house on weekends. I smiled.

As I was drilling holes, sanding, filing, hammering, and winding mantras, I wondered at what point these ingredients I'd assembled would become sacred, holy, powerful. I wondered to myself if a prayer wheel was like a spiritual radio I was assembling to tune into Avalokiteshvara's holy frequency or like a cosmic lightning rod, attracting his electric blessings (prayer wheels had sometimes made my hair stand on end.)

As I was drilling into a piece of redwood, I may have been praying, and as I breathed in, I inhaled some redwood sawdust. Imagine a mantra that smells and tastes like redwood. That smell (or taste, or sound) suddenly reminded me of the smell and feel of the land at Vajrapani Institute, that sacred land where Lama Yeshe passed away. And, I thought to myself, *it's already sacred*. The words are already sacred, already empty, already part of Avalokiteshvara's mandala. The trees, the metal, the plastic, they already were part of his mandala. I hadn't recognized it.

Later, when I shared the completed prayer wheel with a class of people studying Jungian psychology, I explained to them that it was a three-dimensional mandala made of sound. (I hope that I was correct.) I told them that the mantras inside contained the essence of all the Buddha's teachings and the best of Jung's psychology as well! Many of them liked it very much. Some asked if they could help to make one. When I brought one in to work, people asked if they could borrow it "for luck."

It seems to me now that the prayer wheel does not invoke Avalokitshvara, but rather that it is Avalokiteshvara: his holy voice, silent, vibrating everywhere; his holy body, here, near enough to touch. "Simply touching a prayer wheel brings purification." I remembered Jane Seidlitz telling us that when we sent a prayer wheel to Rinpoche in Nepal, he did prostrations to it. On some level, I'd still been seeing the metal, film, wood, paper when I looked at a prayer wheel; who did

Rinpoche see there? In Jungian psychology, it is sometimes said that people's problems come from taking things literally instead of seeing them (or seeing through them) metaphorically. Reading that "turning the prayer wheel once is the same as having done many years of retreat," while seeing the prayer wheel as a wheel of prayers and wood, it seems difficult to believe. But, imagine for a moment that a prayer wheel is the body of the Avalokiteshvara, imagine that it is the heart of the Buddha of Compassion; imagine that touching a prayer wheel is touching Avalokiteshvara's heart, that turning one is moving his heart on the behalf of all beings. And from this place of imagining, again read, "Turning the prayer wheel once is the same as having done many years of retreat ... is better than listening, reflecting, and meditating for eons."

Lorne Ladner, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and serves as the director of Guhyasamaja Buddhist Center in Virginia, U.S. He is the author of the book The Wheel of Great Compassion *(Wisdom, 2001), which offers a detailed look at prayer wheel practice—its meaning, benefits, and role as an essential Tibetan Buddhist practice.*

2. Art for Enlightenment: An Interview with Peter and Denise Griffin

Mandala March–April 1997

Ven. Robina Courtin talked to Peter and Denise Griffin in October 1996 in London, England, about their work as sculptors of Buddhist statues. At the time, an FPMT project was just getting started called the Enlightenment Project for Purification and Merit, based at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia. The project would employ sculptors and artists, such as Peter and Denise, and would reproduce and distribute their work for students and centers worldwide. Twenty years later, the Enlightenment Project for Purification and Merit lives on as part of Chenrezig's Art Studio.

Ven. Robina: Tell us about your work.

Denise: I'm a trained sculptor. I studied in Camberwell School of Art in London. It was three years' training.

And this is where you met Peter?

Denise: Yes, he and I studied the same thing.

When did you get involved with the Dharma?

Denise: When we left college we both got involved with the Dharma by going to a center of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in London. I went initially because of skin problems I was having. An alternative doctor who was doing hypnotherapy made me realize you have to look after the mind as well as the body. I started breathing meditation practice and my skin completely cleared. It was quite impressive.

When we left college we decided that we wanted to go traveling. Peter suggested India. We managed to get a scholarship from the Indian National Trust for Art and Architectural Cultural Heritage to study temple architecture in northern India, making drawings along the route. We went to Bodhgaya for the first time.

What year was that?

Denise: That would have been 1988-1989. And that's when we met Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Bodhgaya.

Did you like him straight away?

Denise: Peter did! At that point I didn't have any straight connection. We had just done a twenty-day vipassana retreat, and immediately after that we met Rinpoche, who was teaching the *Heart Sutra* in Bodhgaya. And then we carried on traveling, ending up in Dharamsala.

We went to Tushita, the center there, and started to make tsa-tsas—relief images of the buddhas—

through Trisha Donnelly, who worked at the center. Trisha said all we need are molds. And Peter said, "I can do that!" So that's where it all began.

For me, though, still not much connection with Buddhist art. I didn't relate to the images. We looked in museums everywhere we went, seeing statues and thangka paintings. I found them interesting but they really didn't touch my heart.

Say more about how you thought as an artist before, and talk about your transition from Western art.

Denise: In Western art you could be making a political statement or a personal statement. Basically, I was trying to find out who I was and trying to integrate that into a visual language. My artwork was personal, and I used to collect and collate things. From these resources it would grow and evolve, ending up as an abstract sculptural form. It would be an expression of the deeper feelings I had inside of me, but using, like I say, an architectural support for the form.

There was a connection between me and Peter in our artwork. By our final year at college both Peter and I were using churches as a source of reference for our artwork, in a very abstract way, in a more spatial context. We were interested in these images because of their spiritual nature, as a source of inspiration for modern sculpture. That's where I was at before we started traveling. And the traveling was focused on looking at temples: Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain.

We weren't practicing Christians, but were interested in churches as a three-dimensional form. I had traveled around Europe the previous summer and had visited a lot of old churches in the various countries, looking at not only the way they were decorated with mosaics and frescoes but also the form/space of the church itself. It was this that excited me rather than the way it was decorated. I used this as source material to make my own abstract sculptures; I used the spiritual energy that I had experienced by looking at the churches. Looking back on it now, I guess this was the beginning of my exploration of the spiritual needs within myself.

I think I changed a lot from being in India. When I got back I did a course in Tibetan thangka painting and that really helped to connect me to that imagery. I really enjoyed it. To be an artist you've got to really want to do it. You've got to be 100 percent dedicated. Making Buddhist art was a way of linking my two main interests. I think that is why the Tibetan tradition appealed so much to me because it is so rich, the images are so rich and so powerful.

I imagine that Tibetan thangka painting techniques are the very opposite to those in Western art; that following someone else's pattern would be like losing your individuality, stifling your creativity.

Denise: I always believed the structure was important. If you've got the structure, then you have something to push against. If you have no structure, you are wandering aimlessly—really. But if you have structure, you can, in fact, be more creative. The kind of Western art that appealed to me was medieval Christian art, and so you're going back to the early tradition where there is an underlying geometry or structure. So it really didn't contradict. And when I showed the thangkas that I was

doing to artist friends who had known me for a long time, they said that they didn't see any contradictions, although the visual form was very, very different. What they saw was the same attention to detail and method in both traditions.

I don't see that Western and Tibetan art are so different, in the sense that in both you are trying to capture an essence. I mean, in abstract art you're trying to capture the essence of an energy. In any good art that energy has got to be there.

However, many of my Western friends now see me doing a craft. They would no longer classify it as fine art; they no longer see what we're doing as high art. I would disagree because you are trying to go beyond the basic image. You're still trying to capture the energy in the same way you are in Western art. To me now it is the highest, the most valuable way to dedicate my time, because of the spiritual benefit to others and myself.

So, Peter, how was it for you when you first contacted Buddhist art?

Peter: Straight away, the Dharma really struck a chord. At the time I had just about given up the idea of making art altogether; I only wanted to study and meditate. It was Rinpoche who brought me back into making art again. As soon as I met Rinpoche that became my whole connection with the Dharma. Rinpoche was teaching me the Dharma through art.

Tell us about your first meeting with Rinpoche.

Peter: As Denise said, it was in 1988, in Bodhgaya. It was one of those strange karmic things. Somehow I had heard that Lama Zopa Rinpoche was arriving that day and at a certain time, so I went along to see what this lama, whom we had heard such a lot about, was like. I presumed there would be lots of people there but when I arrived there were maybe four people. I felt embarrassed, so I slunk into this little shadow that I found near the Japanese temple and hoped that no one would realize I was there. Rinpoche saw me and gave me one of those Paddington Bear stares that go right through you! I still remember the feeling. I thought, "Whoa, this is spooky!" He just kept staring at me and staring at me. I didn't know what to do.

That was the first time, but my first real meeting with Rinpoche was in London a few months later. I had made my first statue and wanted to offer this to Rinpoche. Previously in India I had met people who were doing their tsa-tsa preliminary practice and learned that it was really difficult to get hold of the metal molds that are used to form the clay tsa-tsas. I had begun trying to clean up some tsa-tsas for people and had promised I would try and make some bronze molds when I got back to England.

What do you mean make molds—actually carve the images?

Peter: No. A mold is a negative impression taken from a positive form, in this case a small clay relief image of Buddha. Once you have a metal mold, one can stamp out as many impressions as one wishes of that Buddha into clay. To begin with I began making bronze molds of old Tibetan tsa-tsas, but quite often the image was not so clear and so I would try to work on those, to clean up the image. Spanish nun and artist Ven. Jampa Chökyi, who lives at Tushita, had a beautiful

Tibetan Vajrasattva tsa-tsa, really beautiful. Some parts of the image were not so clear because it was very old, so to make another mold from that would've been very difficult. So I worked with her for a while in Dharamsala, trying to clean it up. When I got back in England I made a bronze mold for her and some molds of some other tsa-tsas. I really enjoyed what I was doing, so I tried to model a tsa-tsa from scratch, as Rinpoche had told one monk to make tsa-tsas of a particular deity and we couldn't find an existing Tibetan image. When I look back the artwork was so clumsy. I offered it to Rinpoche when he came to London. Rinpoche was very kind and patient and offered a lot of advice, and from that moment on it was clear what I was going to do.

What was your interest in Western art?

Peter: I wasn't really in it long enough; I was only at art school for four years. In college, I really wanted to just learn techniques—bronze casting, welding, woodwork, etc.

What did you think, then, when you studied?

Peter: It seemed to me the whole system was geared towards exploring emotions, but it always seemed to be negative emotions, because they're the easiest to see, the most tangible. It was about exploring the negative side of the mind. And when you are a part of that you don't see anything wrong with it. But that's college life. It's good fun! People around me would try to bring forth and perpetuate this angry state in order to express something.

And in England during the '80s, art became very conceptual. People would use a material, like nails or like jelly, which triggers something off in a person's mind. It wasn't at all about carving in wood or stone in the traditional sense.

Denise: To get into the art you have to know something about the artist. You have to know their history and how they are using that material to express a certain story. It is sometimes very hard for an outside person to get in. And that was always a problem for me. The art always seemed to be talking to a small educated audience and not a wider audience. Artwork should be about communication. The Buddha image communicates with a lot more people and on many different and very profound levels.

In Western art there seem to be so many styles, so many views, so many concepts: the product of the deluded mind?

Peter: Yes, you're exploring the deluded mind. For example, Camus and other French writers really understood and expressed well suffering, but they didn't have any way out of it. To convey that suffering to other people is what the artist can do, but I don't think there is a real method to cease that suffering.

Denise: I think that what you are doing is identifying with these emotions; you can express anger, say, and then identify with it, because that's a very easy one. The brush marks on a painting, for example, or the combination of forms in a sculpture, its texture, the combination of certain hues juxtaposed: any of these visual tools can capture and evoke anger in the viewer.

But what do you do with this emotion? Artists become skilled at identifying emotions and regurgitating them, but then what do you do? What do you do with them once you recognize them? Where do you take them? How do you transform, get beyond, them? Maybe if we had stuck with making Western art, these questions would have been answered as we matured within ourselves—I don't know. But I'm content with where I am now because the Dharma tells you where to take them and how to dissolve them. That's the exciting part.

How would you describe the purpose of Tibetan art?

Peter: I think it's a very profound tool to change the mind. I think the Buddha was an incredible psychologist. Visual imagery is a very immediate and profound way to convey a whole pantheon of conscious and subconscious information. It works on so many different levels. As well as having an immediate impact upon the mind, through the power of the holy beings there are many layers of experience conveyed to us through the visual form. The holy image does nothing other than convey the Buddha's holy mind; it conveys to us, in two-dimensional form, or three in the case of a statue, the qualities of love and compassion, and as such it is unbelievably inspiring for us. It triggers within us that potential. Enlightened beings are all around us, but due to karma we can't see them.

We identify very strongly with information that comes through our visual senses, and I think, on a very subtle level, it provides an excellent vehicle for the holy mind to communicate with us. The visual senses are very important to us, and I believe that as humans we identify more strongly, feel more comfortable with the figurative form. Like when people are looking at the sky watching the clouds. Perhaps they'll see something that looks like a face. The mind becomes very happy because it sees something it can label. "Oh wow! There's a nose and there are the eyes." Somehow the mind makes some sense out of all this abstraction and it feels happy within that.

How can we express compassion to another person? Whilst compassion remains an abstract emotion for the ordinary being how would this be possible? The image of Chenrezig, Buddha of Compassion, does this. On a subconscious level, the image becomes a framework for us to be able to "see" and get closer to the holy mind of the Buddha. The sounds of the sacred mantras and the chanting of pujas must be working in the same way, but through the auditory sense.

The image of Tara, for example, gives us a glimpse of loving kindness. It works on so many different levels. It's working on a very subconscious level through the blessings of the deity and also within the image itself there is the whole aspect of sacred geometry working within the form—the way the lines within the form are directing the mind in a certain way. The color green, Tara's color, is a very peaceful, loving color—already it pacifies the mind. All of this will have a strong impact on the mind of anyone who just even glances at the image—particularly because of the blessings of the holy object. On top of all this the practitioner will be able to add more and more layers as he or she does the meditations and retreats of Tara, say, and thereby form a stronger and stronger bond with her. All of the person's experiences will get layered onto the image of Tara. The image becomes something like a coat hanger upon which the practitioners can hang all their additional experiences of Tara. As the bond becomes stronger and stronger, the image of Tara

embodies more and more of a personal experience of Tara—loving kindness. You've got something very tangible in front of you in which exists Buddha's holy mind.

Denise: By using the image and trying to identify with that, it helps you understand what you are aiming for within the meditations, I think.

What do you mean?

Denise: Well, when you look at the older paintings and statues, they evoke a feeling, an emotion. Like the little Lama Tsongkhapa statue Rinpoche gave me to work from. I just feel blissful when I look at that, and I'm not quite sure why.

Maybe it's the realization of the person who made it.

Peter: Yes, maybe, because you can't stop being a part of what you are making. Your energy just goes into it. Somehow in trying to do the work, you have to try to get into the meditative state. And so it's really helpful to look at the work of previous artists who have achieved that and learn from them.

It seems there are two things involved. There's the technique, and then there are the inner realizations. You can look at something where the technique isn't so good, but the person who made it had some inner qualities and that makes you happy. Then you can see something that was made well, but it lacks heart.

Peter: Yes, that's very true. In the art texts it talks about how the Buddha comes through the artist and onto the canvas or into the statue; the artist becomes a medium. In the olden times in Tibet, the whole environment was so pure and everyone was practicing purely—no distractions. Everything, even technology, was geared towards the Dharma—the only wheel ever invented in Tibet was the prayer wheel. They didn't have water wheels, they have water *prayer* wheels! So I think at that time this kind of artwork would have been much easier. The whole environment and lifestyle must have been so supportive of and conducive to this kind of artwork.

Tibetan art is practiced, is inseparable from practice.

Peter: Exactly!

Talk about your experience with artists in India, how that evolved.

Peter: We went back to India for a second time in 1991. I had been wanting to take proper teachings from a Tibetan sculptor, so I went in search of one. Later on I found out that there are hardly any statue makers left within the Tibetan tradition. There are a lot of Bhutanese statue makers, however, because the Bhutanese government has really encouraged the training of artists, but they follow a slightly different proportional measurement lineage to the Tibetans. Rinpoche recommended that I find a Tibetan teacher, and I was very fortunate to be accepted as a student by Kesang Dorje-la, my *Gen-la* (teacher). He has done a lot of work for His Holiness the Dalai Lama and is a very highly respected statue maker.

Do you know how the traditions evolved?

Peter: No, but the image evolved initially from tsa-tsas being carried back home from India, along the pilgrimage routes, by the pilgrims and early teachers of the Dharma. The style of the artwork naturally evolved as the Dharma grew within the various countries, but the roots were very strongly placed within the early Indian tradition of art. The main difference is in the features, not so much the proportions as these were all laid down by Lord Buddha in the scriptures. Within the Tibetan tradition there are differences in the style, according to the area within Tibet. For example, the closer to the Chinese border one goes, the rounder the faces become, like the face structure of the people of those areas.

Talk about learning to be a statue maker.

Peter: Traditionally it's a nine-year apprenticeship. You spend the first year making flowers and things just to get you used to working with the tools and the clay. Later you would start making faces, faces of Buddha, repeatedly, again and again; you'd just make faces all day long, all different sizes. They are made hollow, like a mask. Gen-la would say, "Make one three inches high, then make one a thumbnail high, then make one two feet high." Again and again and again, all day long making faces and continually checking with your teacher. When you've finished, Gen-la would scrunch up the clay face and make you start again—I think so that you don't get too attached! This is where you would really learn the proportions—many imprints on the mind. Slowly the teacher would introduce you to a different type of face. The art of the bodhisattva's face, the main peaceful ones: Manjushri, Chenrezig, Vajrasattva; and the peaceful female bodhisattvas. Then he'd teach the wrathful deities.

According to tradition, generally you would do a nine-year apprenticeship, though sometimes students would go through more quickly. Throughout the whole time you'd also be working with your teacher on whatever job he's doing, as his apprentice. If he was making a statue that required flames in the back, he'd get you to do the flames, he'd show you first and then you would do it and he'll correct. Maybe you'd make the hands or the dorje or the robes, but not the main elements of the statue. He would always work on the faces and such, and then slowly you would progress in your learning.

Talk about the techniques, how you make statues.

Peter: There's three main ways. The most common way is clay, and into the clay they would mash up Nepali paper. It's a very fibrous paper, which is soaked in water overnight and then beaten into the clay, which gives it strength. The clay always contracts by about ten percent when the water evaporates, so the clay cracks, and this has to be filled again and again. The fibers inside the clay give it extra strength, and a clay statue can last for hundreds of years in a dry climate like Tibet.

Depending on how big the statue is they'll either make the statue hollow, like you would with a coil pot, or for the bigger statues you put the prayers in first, and build the clay around them—you are kind of making a basic shape of Lord Buddha in prayers, encased in clay. Mixed into the clay, the statue maker will put relics from holy saints, earth from all the holy places in India and Tibet,

water from the holy rivers, stone from places like Mount Kailash. It's really a special process.

When the statue maker is working on a big statue, the whole community will come together. Some people will roll the mantras that will fill the statue, others will prepare the clay—and others will make the tea! It's great because as well as all the sponsors, who are of course very important, there is a role for everyone in the community. This is something I would really like to see happening in our Western centers; it really brings the community together.

I was in south India working on a large Padmasambhava statue with my teacher, and the whole community came together and was just so devoted. They had gathered earth from Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and the holy places in Tibet, and water from the holy Ganga River, and relics from lamas who had passed away from their monastery, and it all went into the clay.

How would you start?

Peter: Well, you start off with the lotus. You would make the ground plan of the lotus and work up from that, making the walls of the lotus as you go up. On a large statue you would fill the statue with prayers as you go along. Then you go to the next level, which might be up to the moon disk, working your way to the top of the statue like this.

So this is one of the three ways they make sculptures.

Peter: Yes, another way is beaten copper, used for the big statues. His Holiness established a school in Dharamsala that does a lot of this. With this method one can make huge statues from many pieces, from very thin sheets of copper that have been beaten to the shape, and then riveted together. The statue of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha in His Holiness's temple in Dharamsala was made like this.

The other method would be to cast in bronze, which the Tibetans learned from Nepal. This method is still used widely in Nepal. A wax statue would be made, and then through a process called the lost wax process, the wax would be cast into bronze or copper. This method can only really be used on small-scale statues, although it's possible to cast the statue in pieces and then assemble later. The huge statue of Lord Buddha on Lantau Island in Hong Kong was made this way, and I believe Rinpoche's statue of Lord Maitreya in Bodhgaya will be constructed using the same process.

In the Tibetan tradition, by far the most common method is to use clay, and although I no longer use clay, I follow the same process.

What material do you use then?

Peter: I use a Western clay substitute, which can be modeled like clay but sets as hard as stone after a few hours. It is incredibly strong and it means that I can carve into the statue and continue to model until I'm happy – or rather until Rinpoche is happy.

How long did your apprenticeship last?

Peter: Oh, about eight months.

What happened?

Peter: I'd get the papal finger from Rinpoche to go off to do some work at Kopan. I really learned a heck of a lot from Gen-la and I really love him. It's sad because statue-making does seem to be a dying tradition. It's so sad! I mean Gen-la, he is not so young now, he is about sixty-eight and his eyesight is going. He can't make anything smaller than two feet. When I show him my tsa-tsas, he just can't see them. He's got a very open mind, and I think he enjoyed having a Westerner around. I'd teach him a few little bits, like how to cast in silicon rubber, which he quite enjoyed. He didn't want me to go, but he knows that Rinpoche is my guru. Rinpoche has become my main statue teacher by far. Same for Denise.

How did Rinpoche learn?

Peter: Well, Rinpoche knows everything! When Rinpoche is talking about making a deity, he's taking about the qualities of the deity, not "how to make" a deity—he really is. You can see that he is seeing the deity there when he's talking about making a statue. For a traditional artist, Vajrasattva's face is within the same classification as Manjushri, same as Amitayus or Chenrezig. When Rinpoche is talking about it, he's talking about the quality of Vajrasattva, he's not talking about the quality of Manjushri. They're very different. And he's talking about that. So it's a very, very different way of teaching. It's so personal.

A few years ago I was staying in the same apartment as Rinpoche in Hong Kong and Rinpoche asked me to make an eight-foot statue for the center in Taiwan. Before I left Hong Kong, Rinpoche would come out of his room each day and describe to me how the deity should be made. Rinpoche explained everything, from the crown down to the toenails, describing how to make each part. Rinpoche would go into what looked like semi-meditation, and would push his cheeks around, trying to express how he wanted the cheeks to be, and he would make the most beautiful *mudras* (hand gestures) to explain how to make the art of the hands. Amazing! Of course, the art of the statue was nothing like what Rinpoche had wanted, but that just shows my limitations.

Denise, tell me about how Rinpoche taught you, how you finally got to start making statues.

Denise: I thought of making thangkas because I love color, but I'm a sculptor, not a painter. I did a thangka painting course with the German artist Andy Weber and really enjoyed it, and so continued in that vein. When we went to India the second time Peter took sculpture classes and I took thangka painting instruction. I had two wonderful Tibetan teachers while we lived in Dharamsala. And then the sculpting began when I was asked by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to work on a small portrait statue of Lama Yeshe. It was wonderful looking at photographs of Lama and watching videos of him. So that was the start. I never pushed from my side to make statues. I always used to really enjoy going to visit Peter and his teacher and just watching, then Rinpoche just requested me to do another statue.

When was that?

Denise: Two or three years ago. Previously I had asked Rinpoche, I said, "I'm trained as a sculptor but I'm thinking of doing thangka painting. Would it be more beneficial that I learn statue making?" He said both for me.

Peter: What did he say?

Denise: He said sculpt, paint, meditate, and study.

Peter: Didn't Rinpoche say to paint during the day and make statues at night?

Denise: Paint daytime, sculpt nighttime! I've never found the energy for that. Now I think it's clear Rinpoche is requesting the statues. I'm very happy to be a sculptor.

The job in Taiwan, to make a big Thousand-Armed Chenrezig statue, how did that happen?

Denise: Basically Rinpoche requested me to do it. Peter was already there, working for a year at Jinsui Farlin, the Taipei center. Peter helped give me the confidence to do the statue because it's the biggest I had made—more than twenty feet high—and technically challenging. Peter has more experience so helps me a lot.

Tell us about it.

Denise: It was in a small nunnery in Puli town in central Taiwan.

Peter: It's in a very, very beautiful location.

Denise: It's where most of the Buddhist monasteries are clustered in Taiwan, very lovely, and I think the most peaceful place I've ever lived. Rinpoche says it's a wonderful place for practicing Dharma. The statue was for a nunnery surrounded by other small nunneries, in the countryside, so all my neighbors were monks and nuns.

Peter: There are 500 monasteries and nunneries and it's just a small local town. There are bamboo mountains, mist, the whole trip, just like a Chinese painting.

Denise: Yeah. There were two nuns organizing the building of the nunnery, and then there was me building the statue; the nunnery was being built around me. The building was there but the windows weren't—these big empty spaces with the birds flying in and out of the windows.

How did Rinpoche want the statue?

Denise: I followed the traditional proportional drawings for a Chenrezig statue. Rinpoche gave me photographic examples of Tibetan statues and said use these for reference. I made a face and then I sent it to Rinpoche to check what I had done, to see whether it was correct or not, and then Rinpoche would send me details of the corrections to be made. The main thing Rinpoche was concerned with was the face. He also told me how he wanted the robes and other things.

How long did it take you?

Denise: I think it took eight months. I worked on the statue in situ, but where the form was

repeated a lot, like the 1,000 hands, I worked with a factory and they made casts.

For the other 998.

Denise: Yes! Taiwan is very well set up. They have a good tradition of artists making Buddha statues; they're very familiar with that kind of work. And so for the gilding and the painting of the eyes and small hands it was done in the factory, then brought back to us within ten days. What's so wonderful about Taiwan is that people are so generous and devoted that they just wanted to offer to Chenrezig. Peter was there to help me in the beginning, with the armature and the basic structure. Because it's big, it's very heavy. We drilled structural supports into the wall and hung it from a metal armature.

Peter: An armature is a steel frame.

It's not free-standing?

Peter: No. It looks like it is but it's not.

Denise: The students from the center were fantastic: they rolled the abundance of prayers needed to fill the statue. And a small group of Kopan monks was in Taiwan at that time making sand mandalas; they also came and helped with rolling up prayers and did a blessing ceremony before we began putting the prayers around the armature. We got to the point where we had a basic form made from prayers, which I then built around, modeling and carving the clay-like material, but more strong, until I was happy with the final form.

What tools did you use?

Denise: The tools are the same as a Tibetan artist uses. You basically carve your own tools out of sandalwood. You make your own tools for each job.

Peter: It has to be sandalwood.

Why?

Peter: It says in a text that the tools should be sandalwood, because it's sweet smelling. Actually it's very practical. I've tried many different woods: it was my rebellious mind, "Oh pine smells nice." I've tried lots of different hard woods but sandalwood glides across the clay so nicely. Other woods get kind of cold. I don't know why it is—Buddha's blessing? And the tools have to be blessed by the lama.

Denise: Along with that you use drills and grinders.

Peter: Make from sandalwood … I'm joking!

Denise: One thing about working on a big statue is that the community really has to get involved. Like assembling the 1,000 hands; that was a community project. And people came and helped me arrange the small hands and glue them onto the wood.

Peter: It's good when the community gets involved.

Denise: And then the carpenters helped me lift these big panels with the thousand arms on them. It's good when the builders get involved as well, people who aren't part of the local Buddhist community.

Peter: They always feel connected afterwards, always.

How did you manage with languages?

Denise: Well, I'd been at Khachoe Ghakyil, the Kopan nunnery, the year before so I was used to listening to people speaking English around me, but in Puli no one speaks fluent English at all, so it was very simple: lots of hand movements. Sometimes it's pleasant to be free from so much chit-chat. It's good for the work—to be a bit quieter.

What did you do in Kopan?

Denise: I made my first life-size statue, out of clay and using traditional Tibetan techniques. I was really nervous to go to a Tibetan community and to make a Tibetan-style statue.

Peter: In front of Tibetan statue-makers. Men.

Denise: As a female with no traditional Tibetan statue training, that was quite a challenge.

How were you accepted?

Denise: With the lamas there was no problem, they're always very accepting. I think everyone else was a bit amused that a woman had art skills. The women just don't get trained. I mean they get trained as thangka painters and then they get married and have children and that becomes a full-time occupation, so they stop. But I don't think there are any Tibetan women trained as sculptors. That was quite a novelty for them. And I enjoyed being in the nunnery, doing something like that as an example for them. I think life in the nunnery is about women becoming strong and independent. It felt good.

How long were you there?

Denise: Almost a year. I learned a lot from the experience of being at the nunnery and I felt very privileged. I'd never been in female energy like that before. There were 90 nuns there at that time, and the energy felt so different. I always loved going up the hill to Kopan, but the energy felt so different. I would have never imagined that before. It was wonderful being with a community of women. Just being able to relax and be yourself without the relationship between men and women, which is very subtle and very strong all our lives. To not have that male influence, for the most part, was wonderful, I really enjoyed it. It's very harmonious at Khachoe Ghakyil. And living with Tibetans like that—I'd lived in Asia but I'd always been with Western people. It was really fantastic because their way of thinking is so different. And there was a lot of warmth, a lot of love within the community. It was wonderful.

You have some future plans, I hear.

Peter: Yes. This is a new phase, I think, for both of us. It's really difficult, moving around. The

logistics of carting around 180 kilos [396 pounds] of tools and artwork from place to place—I don't have the right mantras to get on planes without paying excess baggage! And a lot of the original pieces were getting broken. Also, the visa restrictions make the work difficult sometimes. The idea of a base for the workshop has become quite important, which is what we're trying to do here at Jamyang in London.

What have you got at the moment?

Peter: We're renting a room at Jamyang for our studio, a very nice space. It's important for this kind of work to be based in a Dharma community. We're very fortunate to have sponsorship this year from a number of sponsors, very, very kind sponsors.

Denise: And it's good to be in a center where the teachings are available to us, because often we were living in Dharma centers but not being able to participate because of the language barriers.

Peter: Now, a new FPMT project has recently been established in Australia, which will be reproducing and distributing our work, making it more available to the centers and to individuals. It is Rinpoche's idea and he has named it the Enlightenment Project for Purification and Merit. It's all quite exciting!

The idea came up when Ven. Roger Kunsang, Rinpoche's assistant, suggested that FPMT organize a business, mainly to reproduce and distribute artwork. Rinpoche wants lots of new artwork made by Denise and me, and hopefully the Enlightenment Project will be able to support us both to make this possible.

What does Rinpoche want you to make? Tsa-tsas?

Peter: Well yes, but there are many statues to be made also. Tsa-tsas are my favorites; I feel happiest when I can help people to do their preliminary practices, by making a tsa-tsa of which, perhaps, there is no Tibetan example. I really feel strongly about the tsa-tsas; that's how I got so involved in the Dharma in the first place. I guess it's karma. As far as I am aware, there's no one really making original tsa-tsas nowadays. Now people write to me and say, "Rinpoche has asked me to do Vajrasattva tsa-tsa practice, I need the Medicine Buddha at the top, at the bottom…." They are amazing combinations of deities that are specifically to help that one person. Rinpoche is like a doctor prescribing medications. There's no way that one would ever find such specific tsa-tsas, so I try to do. That's what I really enjoy doing, what gives me the most satisfaction. I feel that I can help people, even if I can't do the formal practices myself.

What are you making now?

Peter: Well, I've just finished making a statue of the Twenty-One Taras and a statue of Thousand-Armed Chenrezig. Rinpoche has just checked them both and we have already started reproducing both of them—the Enlightenment Project is doing it.

What's next?

Peter: When I saw Rinpoche at Kopan in 1995, he wrote out on the back of a postcard of

Boudhanath Stupa a list of work he wants made. The next on that list is a larger tsa-tsa of the Thrity-Five Buddhas. But it looks like first I will be making a nine-foot statue of Buddha Shakyamuni for Jamyang here in London. I guess I will get back to my postcard list after that. I think that that postcard will keep me busy for at least fifteen years!

At the bottom of the list, in big capitals, Rinpoche wrote, "...and last but not least, the Lama Chöpa merit field." This is probably the most complicated image one could possibly make, encompassing, as it does, the whole pantheon of buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage lamas, and protectors: in all there are about 350 deities. They all sit in a particular order upon a huge throne, which is supported by a huge tree. I thought that I would make each deity about three inches high, making the whole structure about seven feet tall. The way I made the Twenty-One Taras statue was really an experiment to see whether the same method would work for the merit field statue. Each Tara is cast in a separate mold, and then painted separately. She has her own seat on the supporting tree. It works.

The idea is for each center to have one of these merit field statues in their gompa, and it can be made by lots of students. It's a perfect way to learn about and visualize the merit field. The basic background, the empty Merit Tree and all the offerings, will be cast in a huge seven-foot rubber mold. Then students can cast each buddha separately from individual rubber molds, just like making ordinary tsa-tsas, then paint or gild them and place them onto the correct part of the tree according to the scriptures. I hope that Rinpoche doesn't ask anyone to make 100,000! (Maybe I shouldn't say that: it'd be quite good karma!)

I was so happy when Rinpoche asked me to make this statue. I had been praying so hard to be asked. For me, this is the crème de la crème of all possible jobs. It will take at least twelve years to make the original merit field; that's allowing for an average working time of twelve days per deity—and this is probably a bit optimistic. But I can't think of a more beneficial or joyful way to spend twelve years. Now I should pray that it can happen.

What about other artists getting involved in projects?

Peter: I'm sure more artists will get involved, I hope so. It's not an easy vocation. You have to spend a lot of time, you have to be very concentrated. There's a lot of technical stuff to know. I think that for a Westerner, even if you don't use clay, it's invaluable if you can learn how the Tibetans work with the clay, how they build statues. This is so important. It is the most important thing.

Apparently the first thing that the statue maker checks when somebody wants to learn to make statues is whether the person is really into the Dharma. It is the first thing. It is not whether or not they are a good artist. It has nothing to do with that. Actually the nine-year training program could train anybody. If you've got the Dharma, then you have the confidence, the path, everything is there. It doesn't matter if someone is an amazing artist. It's definitely not easy. You've got to have faith. The work is a holy object. It doesn't matter what material or how the art looks. The Tibetans have total belief that once it's been consecrated, it is the deity. I think if a Westerner hasn't seen

that, it would be difficult. I think in general, Westerners don't see it; they still see the statue as art work and not a holy object. Tibetan art is not about having your name signed at the bottom.

3. Manifesting the Buddhas: An Interview with Peter Iseli

Mandala September–December 1998

Swiss artist Peter Iseli has been painting Tibetan Buddhist thangkas since the mid-'70s. He has studied, he said, "with some of the great Tibetan masters of our times," and has been guided by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. He has been commissioned by Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten, and other lamas, and has his paintings hanging in Buddhist centers and monasteries around the world. In 1998, when he talked to Julia Hengst for Mandala, *Peter was working in his studio in Bern, Switzerland, on a twenty-foot painting of Chenrezig for Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia.*

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Switzerland, with mountains, cows, and chocolate!

At what age were you drawn to do art?

I was always drawn to it. As far as I can remember, I wanted to be a painter. I began when I was young and never stopped. After ordinary school I went to art school. My parents were supportive of my artistic inclination, and they still are supportive. It's wonderful.

In fact, my mother was very talented artistically—I still have some of her early work. But then, you know, she didn't continue. She was the mother.

Before you found thangka painting, what did you paint? Were you drawn to any particular style?

No, I tried everything: penguins, stripes, squares, horses, naked ladies … anything! I was always fascinated by everything, anything that was going on. I think art is an expression of this endless fascination with phenomena.

I find that one of the most amazing things about art is that anything I am interested in becomes a subject of art. At a certain point I was just doing paintings and I questioned myself, "Why am I painting this and that?" It is easy to understand why one paints landscapes—external objects are a more direct cause for the expression of art—but I usually didn't paint landscapes. I was more interested in inner images, dreams, not so much what I saw outside. In art, what outside images are, what inner images are, what dreams are—all of this blends together. Drawing the various objects is a way to examine what phenomena are, to investigate their nature. I haven't found out what they are, but I am still fascinated to explore.

How did you meet the Dharma?

I met some teachers in the Vipassana tradition and I did some courses. This was just about Dharma, not the art. Of course, there was a statue of the Buddha that I liked very much. In this tradition, though, there is not much emphasis on the external visuals; more attention is placed simply on sitting in meditation, checking out the mind and the body. I liked this very much. I

thought, “That’s it!” and I didn’t look for anything else.

Then one day some friends who I liked very much told me some Tibetan lamas were giving teachings. I went along with them, and that was the first time Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe came to Switzerland.

What was your experience with them like?

It was a mixture. I knew from the first moment that I heard Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe that what they were saying was true, was exactly right. But at the same time, I had difficulty, because this whole trip with incense and prostrations was too much. For someone like me, a 27-year-old, it felt like too much. I was drawn to Zen, the simplicity.

This was a fourteen-day course with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa, but after nine days I ran away. I knew it was wonderful and right, but it blew my mind. I couldn’t digest it all. It was so much within ten days; they taught everything! The hells—everything! It’s too much if you’re looking to just go and do some meditation.

Were you supporting yourself as a painter?

Yes, I was doing shows in galleries and selling paintings. But it was weird stuff. I experimented with everything. But it was a good time. It was hippie time, and we just tried out everything.

When did you realize you wanted to paint thangkas?

When I studied more about the Dharma and got more interested in Buddhist philosophy, this interest naturally grew. Actually, the first painting I did of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara was done after I finished a so-called retreat, which was not long after meeting the lamas.

Lama Yeshe said we should do retreat. We did it in Switzerland, but not with the lamas. Even though it was mainly just a retreat of eating muesli instead of meat, it had some effect. It was during the retreat that my wish to do the painting came.

Did you speak with Lama Zopa before beginning it?

No, I just started. Maybe it would have been better to talk with him first—there wouldn’t have been so many changes, less work! At that time I was even more stubborn and proud than I am now. That was my problem—I want to do it now, I want to do it alone, I want to do it big, I want to do everything, the whole trip. I looked in books and at pictures and copied some of it. I did it the way I liked, so technically it was not correct. It was some psychedelic idea of a thangka.

How did that particular painting progress? Did you tell the lamas you were painting it?

No. I was painting it at a Buddhist center and one day, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa, and Song Rinpoche came in. They were laughing and speaking in Tibetan. Song Rinpoche asked, “Who is doing this painting?” Lama Yeshe translated for him. I said, “I am. Me! Peter!” It was an ego-booster for me at the time!

But on a serious note, something really happened with that painting. They gave me some support or blessing or something. They came only once, and threw rice and flowers in the air. Song Rinpoche, he was really an incredible yogi. He was like the old Indian saints. Even if you don't know anything about him or who he is, you feel something. Even birds and dogs would react to him differently. He was really a holy being, very exceptional.

Lama Zopa helped me while I was painting it, and at the end he painted the central face. The proportions were not classically correct. I think the reason why this thangka came out somewhat special even without knowing what I was doing is because as I painted it, it was blessed by Lama Zopa, Lama Yeshe, and Song Rinpoche, and it was a very powerful blessing. It is a special thangka even though it is not entirely correct.

Later, when the painting was finished, I heard through some people that he criticized it. He said, "No, it should not be this way, and the arms are too long, and there are no offerings." He was very heavy about this thangka. But that's okay, because he also blessed it!

You didn't work with the grids?

No, I did not know there was a system of grids for getting proportions right. The proportions were not classically correct. And also all the thousand arms and eyes I painted with some silver bicycle paint—it was very shiny! But Lama Zopa told me that wasn't very correct, and I painted over all the hands with correct paint.

Later, when I studied in India with thangka masters, I heard many interesting things. The arms, for example, are typically painted dark red. In the old paintings the artists would use—and some masters still use—a special substance that comes from Bhutan. It is the saliva of certain insects, which they deposit on the trees, and this is then collected, boiled, and used for the paints.

While studying these things, I learned many interesting facts from a painting point of view, not only Dharma point of view. The Tibetan system of art is very complex and very interesting.

How long did the Thousand-Armed Chenrezig take to paint and how big is it?

I was working one year on that, but slowly, slowly, not every day. It is maybe ten or twelve feet high, about twice the size of an adult.

Did you decide to study formally with a master after this?

Yes. While I was doing it, I realized this was what I had been looking for. It was a feeling of coming home. I also realized I needed to study with the masters, there is no other way. Actually, there are two ways to produce this kind of art: either you are a yogi or yogini and you have some sort of direct perception, or vision, of reality as it really is and view the various aspects of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, or you can follow a tradition—I chose the second one!

Did Lama Yeshe or Lama Zopa indicate that you should continue to paint?

No, they didn't push. But ever since I painted the first one, Lama Zopa, Lama Yeshe, Geshe

Rabten, Lodi Gyari Rinpoche, Gonsar Tulku, and other lamas have asked me to do paintings for them. I am always very happy to do them.

I am a Westerner, and I feel they are very kind to give me the opportunity to do things like that. They not only ask me to do certain paintings but they actually do the composition of them. They compose the entire painting and tell me exactly how to do it. They tell me every detail.

It's like in old times in Italy, like hundreds of years ago. Some of my friends who are artists and painters, who do beautiful works, they miss that side of it. They are not asked by friends or teachers or institutions to do something. They produce art and they bring it to the gallery, and this is completely different. For the artist it is very meaningful and beautiful to be requested to do a piece of art.

How many thangkas have you painted and where are they?

Fifteen, I think. One is in Dharamsala, two are in Kopan Monastery (Thirty-Five Buddhas and the Avalokiteshvara that has the entire nyung nä lineage on it), and one is in Nalanda Monastery in France. Two are in Tashi Rabten in Austria, one is at Land of Medicine Buddha in the US, and the next one will go to Australia. Some are in Switzerland—that's about it. I might be forgetting one or two.

What are you working on now?

I am working on a big Thousand-Armed Chenrezig for Chenrezig Institute in Australia. This was also requested from Lama Zopa, and he also composed the whole thing. He is very specific with details.

How detailed does Rinpoche get when he is explaining? Does he write instructions, or tell them to you?

Everything—he writes them, tells them, draws them. He will send me examples from old thangkas. He will teach me using any means. Once Lama Zopa sent me a postcard with the nose of Chenrezig—just the nose. He couldn't finish the rest of the face in time because he had to leave, and then he sent from London this drawing of the holy nose, which I copied. He is very detailed!

He goes in stages. For example, on the thangka I am now working on, Rinpoche tells me to have Chenrezig in the center, and on the top should be the pure lands of Amitabha and Maitreya. Then there is His Holiness and Lama Yeshe, then Serkong Rinpoche, then there are dakinis, Manjushri, Vajrapani, and then there are the seven jewels of royal power, and stories from the life of Gelongma Palmo—all of this is on one painting! I usually do some research, ask questions, and slowly build up. Corrections can be applied, at any time. For example, there are things that need to be modified on the large Medicine Buddha thangka at Land of Medicine Buddha in California.

The beautiful thing about this tradition is that it is a living tradition. It is wonderful—it helps people in their visualizations and carries the blessings of the masters who directly perceived the buddhas. It is still being passed on from teacher to student. For example, the great Egyptian murals

we see are the only ones of their kind. Somehow this fascinating visual language was not continued, somewhere it was broken. It is not done the same way it was 4,000 years ago. That is one of the amazing qualities about the Buddhadharma and the corresponding visual imagery: it is still connected with its roots. It is still alive.

From your personal experience, have you ever felt the blessings of the beings you paint?

Yes, for sure. It is a very pure feeling. If I paint the Buddha for an entire day, not even doing it with special concentration—I am a craftsman, I am not really a meditator—then even at night, in the dreams, there is some very pure, real feeling. I am not saying I am seeing some buddhas, but there is a very strong effect. For me, it is like Dharma practice, like formal meditation. The effect is not something I am hallucinating. There are stories of people who have made strong prayers in front of images of the buddhas, and in their next life the prayers were fulfilled to an extraordinary degree.

Tell us about your relationship with your teacher in India.

It might not be so interesting compared with traditionally trained artists. I never did formal study as I didn't have the patience. I met several other Western artists who tried to study formally, and yet several hindrances arose that prevented us from working as apprentices for an extended amount of time.

It was difficult to live in India or Nepal for a long time due to living conditions and visas, and also there are very few fully qualified teachers. The typical Tibetan way of studying takes many, many years just to learn the basics. Many apprentices live with their teachers, and the learning is built up over a long time. You do drawings and memorize proportions. Then after a couple of years you begin to mix pigments using stones and plants. It's built up very slowly compared with our system. It is similar to the monastic system, which involves several years of life. I have not met one Westerner who has had the patience to go through with the entire process.

How many years would a traditional approach take?

It's very individual. It's not like from one day on you are a thangka painter. It is an organic process that matures and expands with time and experience. Also, some painters work together with other people. The students slowly grow into their qualifications.

I have one teacher, Chating Jamyang, in India who has had a student, Sherab Thubten, for twenty years. He is a great master in his own right and he is also my teacher. They are the great masters and to some degree try to hide it from others. They don't teach, and they don't want everybody coming to the house. They are very humble.

They still work together, sometimes both on one thangka. I don't know how they decide who does which part, as they are both masters. Sometimes at the beginning, even a third person will help put on the flat colors, to fill in the large spaces. This process is similar to one they would use in old Italy.

I don't think any one of these masters would say, "I am a master now." Each thangka is another opportunity to improve. They are not satisfied with what they have done, they only look for ways to become even better. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said spiritual masters are the same: they are never content with what knowledge they have, or which qualities they have developed. They constantly want to improve themselves, and continue to learn even if they are among the most learned or realized beings.

How long did you study in Dharamsala?

I studied here and there, and never did strict formal study. I didn't always do what my teachers told me, either, so I wasn't a very good student. They are very patient, though, and they help me all the time. Luckily for me, I feel relatively confident with technical skills, but the difficulty for me is to have the right motivation, the right attitude. That, for me, is more difficult.

Tibetan painters, true masters, take their ego back very much. When they are working and have true inspiration, their work causes their egos to withdraw, to recede. For me, and maybe for other Western painters, just doing a thangka can become an ego trip.

Do you find that the structured process of thangka painting, including the precise proportions, still allows for individual artistic expression?

Yes, definitely. It's incredible! The structure does not contradict artistic expression. It's not only individual level, it can also be expressive on a cultural level. For example, look at the Indian buddhas, the Japanese buddhas, buddhas in Borobudur, in Java. A Shakyamuni Buddha from Kyoto, and one from Lhasa—they are the same proportions and yet the differences in the artist's creations are unique and individual to both the person as well as the culture. There are many possibilities to create new expressions within existing guidelines. It is incredible! In this way I was thinking to do a Swiss Buddha—just kidding!

Are you trained to paint peaceful deities before moving to wrathful ones?

Yes. Typically a student is taught how to paint Shakyamuni Buddha, and from there they usually learn to compose Manjushri. One interesting experience I have had is that when I paint wrathful deities, I find my mind is more excited, and at times, more agitated. The whole flow of the energy around the painting is more kinetic. It is the same when I work with certain colors. For example, if I work with red all day, the feeling I get differs from when I work with the spacious feeling of blues. For me, it is more of an artistic challenge to paint the peaceful deities.

Which lamas have commissioned paintings from you?

First it was Lama Yeshe. He wanted the Thirty-Five Buddhas. It was not really a commission, though, because he composed it and I painted it. It was like a teacher-student relationship. It was a huge painting, maybe fourteen or fifteen feet high, and he composed it entirely. When Geshe Rabten saw the Thirty-Five Buddhas, he asked me to paint a Shakyamuni Buddha.

How did Lama Yeshe communicate what he wanted?

When I didn't understand what Lama Yeshe meant, he would do drawings. I still have one sketch of how it was supposed to look. He was doing very nice drawings, very simple and reduced, but he was very artistic. I never saw him painting, but he was very artistic when he communicated, and very poetic. He must have studied, or something. He saw what he wanted. He was visionary, and he saw exactly what it looked like—but then it's difficult to tell a guy like me. I didn't have any meditative experience—except for maybe smoking a joint, but that's not really enough to have an idea!

Lama Yeshe told me about the light rays and auras. He said that the auras and light rays are constantly moving, vibrating. He told me, "As an artist, you can do what you like, because it is always moving, bubbling, like atoms." It's difficult to talk about these things, but just today I was reading a book of Lama's called *The Tantric Path of Purification*. In it he says, "Every time you see a Mahayana painting, a deep, positive imprint is placed upon your mind, and you receive transcendental wisdom. In fact, these paintings are talking to you, beyond words." And that's the thing—beyond words. He also communicated like that, beyond words. It's about visions, and it's about buddhas.

I got very inspired by Lama Yeshe. He changed my whole life, anyway, and has inspired so many people. Even when I think about him, it's just so unbelievable, I just cry. He was one of the biggest things to happen in many Western people's lives—very, very special.

Was Geshe Rabten also one of your teachers? Where did he put the thangka of Shakyamuni Buddha?

Yes. He was so different in style from Lama Yeshe. He was sort of like old school, wonderful. He lived in Switzerland for many years so we had many opportunities to see him. The thangka was used in one of his centers.

When Geshe Rabten asked me to paint it, I did two that were practically identical. Nicholas Ribush from Wisdom Publications (now he has the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive) asked for the second one. This thangka hung behind His Holiness the Dalai Lama during some teachings he gave on the ninth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, and it is now at Nalanda Monastery in France.

Have you met His Holiness?

I don't remember what year it was, but I've met His Holiness for private audiences three times; on two occasions he blessed the thangkas.

Which ones?

He blessed the Thirty-Five Buddhas painting, and the second was called the Three Kings. It was requested by Lodi Gyari Rinpoche, who is the special envoy of His Holiness in the United States. So he gave me the opportunity to do this, and it now hangs above His Holiness's throne in Dharamsala, India, in the assembly hall of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

The three kings are the historical three kings of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, Songtsen Gampo and Tri Ralpachen, but in another reality they are Chenrezig, Manjushri, and Vajrapani. I copied it from a very old, very beautiful thangka in New Delhi. It's not actually copied, but it's from where I got the measurements. It was a very interesting painting to do, mainly because this thangka was very special. It is from the seventeenth or eighteenth century and hangs in Tibet House museum in New Delhi. Anyway, I think just by His Holiness looking at a thangka, it is blessed.

What did His Holiness say when he saw your paintings?

When he saw the Thirty-Five Buddhas, he first said, "Do you know the proportions?" I said, "No, not really." It was very embarrassing. He has different eyes, you know—he sees. When he saw the Three Kings a few years later he said, "Now it's a little improved." And I felt very happy. The first time I felt really bad from making so many mistakes. On the other hand it's okay, because you have to learn somehow.

To be around these lamas, Song Rinpoche, His Holiness, Lama Zopa, and Lama Yeshe, it's difficult because they see it—they see what they want painted. As a painter it's difficult to see what's important and how to do it. I just keep trying.

Who else asked you for paintings?

Gonsar Rinpoche asked me to do a huge Maitreya Buddha. He also composed it and told me what he wanted. From then on I have mainly only been doing work for Lama Zopa. Sometimes friends have asked me to do thangkas for them, or for their centers, and I would like to do them, but at the moment I feel that for the next few years I would like to work mainly for Lama Zopa. He is the main inspiration. It is very great, the way he composes the paintings, and it's very inspiring.

Do you consider Rinpoche as one of your art teachers?

Lama Zopa is one of my art teachers, yes. But really, how can you label a buddha? He is my art teacher, my babysitter, my uncle—he is everything. On a conventional level, Rinpoche is one of my thangka masters.

He is a painter, but in the same way that he is a geshe; although Rinpoche has not got a geshe degree, he knows everything a geshe knows. He is not acting like a geshe, or a painter—he is a yogi. He is a great artist. It reminds me of a quotation from the book *Wisdom and Compassion*, where Robert Thurman says, "… his or her life itself is nothing but an art that communicates the vision of enlightenment that inspires others to find their own relief and happiness." That's what Rinpoche is—he is the highest level artist. And he also knows how to use the brushes, and how to make statues. I saw him working on statues and paintings, like painting dakinis on the Thirty-Five Buddhas. Artistically he is exceptional.

Do you accept any sort of payment for your work?

Once or twice I took some money, but that was the exception. This is why I work as an artist here in Switzerland. I work with architects here and support myself like this. I do modern art.

I accepted money once because I was in India and had no money. But for me it's like trying to do some practice and getting paid for it. I find it embarrassing to talk about money or no money, these kinds of things. If you were doing a retreat, when you finish, you wouldn't go to your guru and say, "I want to be paid." It's too much.

Last year, when Lama Zopa blessed the seventeen-foot high thangka of Medicine Buddha that you painted for Land of Medicine Buddha, you mentioned that this painting was easier to paint than others. Why?

I had fewer obstacles when I painted that thangka, and felt very happy as I was doing it. I thought maybe I was getting better, I thought my technique was improving! I thought it was to do with me!

But when I told Rinpoche, he said it was because the people at Land of Medicine Buddha are so good, that the energy there is very positive. Even though I painted it in Switzerland, it is the energy of that land in California that had an effect on me. I was amazed when he told me this. It is like a dependent arising—because of them, it made it easier for me. It also showed me how the lamas see a much bigger picture. I do not really understand, but I'm sure it's true.

What did Rinpoche give you at the ceremony to thank you for your work?

This was very precious, what he gave. He gave me some precious relics that Ribur Rinpoche brought from Tibet and some relics of Lama Yeshe. I have been given many things by Lama Zopa: malas, Buddha statues, the most incredible things. That's the story about payment—he gives everything, which makes it ridiculous to talk about money.

What kinds of projects have you worked on in your art job in Bern?

There was one project when a public building was going to be reconstructed into a school. One percent of the budget was used for art. Usually this is a big amount, and they invite four or five artists to make suggestions for what the art should be. I went with some artists, and our project was to design some sort of water fountain for the garden. For two months I worked on designing a fountain for the school, but when I showed them the drawings, I said it would be much nicer to do a fountain or well in Africa or India, at a school there. They said okay, we will do it. We have everything here in Switzerland, and we don't need artwork in school yards.

I traveled twice to India and found a place in a school, in a Tibetan settlement. Six hundred kids attend the school, along with cows and everything! We built a tube well and a water storage tank, as well as all the water lines that go to different buildings and an electric pump station. It's also a piece of art. That's how far art can go these days! It's useful.

Also, the kids at the school here in Switzerland have pen friends in India. They write to one another, and they know about India, they know about this place. The kids in India know about this school in Bern, and they are friends now. After some time we would like to invite some of the Indian school kids to come here for some time. It's a good story.

And then in the school yard here, I made a sculpture out of Indian water vessels, huge copper

water pots. They are very beautiful. I build two towers of them at the school to remind the school kids and the teachers of their friends in India, and to remind them of how precious water is. That is my favorite artwork I have done in the past year besides thangka painting. Also, I was paid to travel to India twice, so that was very nice. I could go see my teacher while I was there.

4. The Making of a Buddha

By Joyce Smith

Mandala May–June 1999

On September 2, 1997, Land of Medicine Buddha (LMB) in Soquel, California, in the United States, consecrated a new statue of the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha, who is very dear to Chinese Buddhists. During a visit of Lama Zopa Rinpoche to the center in 1994, Angela Wang, who served as a co-director at LMB, put a small statue of Kshitigarbha in his room. Rinpoche got the idea of making a big statue of Kshitigarbha to be placed on the land. Around that time, Angela had a dream about doing the same thing. They talked about it, and the idea for creating a large Kshitigarbha statue was born. Lama Zopa determined where it should be located, the direction it should face, and so on, and work began.

Since opening its doors in 1991, LMB has had a strong and positive connection with Chinese people and people of Chinese ancestry, including having many staff members and students from Taiwan, Singapore, and California. However, the State of California has an unhappy history of violently oppressing Chinese laborers and immigrants. In the second-half of the nineteenth century, Chinese workers, especially in mining and logging operations, were exploited, brutalized, and even murdered. The land that is now LMB was itself a logging camp. Many of the early staff at LMB felt that there was some karmic debt that needed to be paid to the Chinese who had been so poorly treated. The statue of Kshitigarbha is one way, they felt, of acknowledging the Chinese participation in Land of Medicine Buddha and of making it a more meaningful place for Chinese people to come and make offerings.

Towering over 11 feet [3.4 meters] tall, the Land of Medicine Buddha statue of Kshitigarbha stands on a base of black granite. The area surrounding the statue is covered with massive white marble tiles. A few steps from the statue is an enormous prayer wheel containing some 12 billion mantras.

The statue's architect, Angelo Grova, spent a year reproducing Kshitigarbha from a twelve-inch original that came from Taiwan. He remembers well the day two Chinese nuns, Thubten Dechen and Wei Yuan, carried the small statue into his studio. "They made a lasting impression upon me," Angelo said, "because of the reverence with which they carried the statue."

A collaborative effort, some fifteen people were involved in the entire project. "It is not unusual for a sculptor to use assistants," Angelo said. "I've done this many times before; however in this instance there was a general consensus that this was an important holy figure. I was pleased to have the opportunity to replicate Kshitigarbha."

Most sculptors work in direct collaboration with a foundry, which reproduces an exact replica of the sculptor's clay or plaster model. The Kshitigarbha statue was cast in bronze (an alloy of 85 percent copper and 5 percent each of tin, lead, and zinc) at the Mussi Art Works Foundry in Oakland, California, using the lost-wax process. This process, first used by the Chinese to cast bronze statuary and ceremonial vessels before 4,000 B.C., is still the most widely used of the

traditional methods for casting metal sculpture.

Assistants and technicians in the foundry executed the construction from Angelo's red clay pattern. First they made a rubber sectional mold backed by a plaster shell. The shell was removed, and layers of wax were painted on the inside surface of the rubber mold to a thickness of about one-eighth of an inch. The wax coating was then replaced by bronze. When the wax cooled, the rubber mold was removed, and detailing and retouching were done to the wax replica to create the desired finish. Sprues and gates in the form of wax rods were then attached to the wax—these rods allow bronze to be poured inside and gases to escape.

To cast the statue, ceramic shell material that formed the mold was poured in and around the hollow wax shell. Inside a kiln, the wax was burned out and the ceramic shell material thoroughly dried. The heated mold containing the negative cavity was packed in sand in a specially prepared pit in the foundry floor. Molten bronze (1,950-2,000 degrees Fahrenheit [1066-1093 degrees Celsius]) was poured from a crucible into the main opening of the mold, filling the cavity. When the metal cooled, it was broken away and the bronze piece was chased, cleaned, and finished. Eighteen castings were used for the statue.

What difficulties did he encounter? "The head and crown were especially difficult," he said. Although he'd been provided with the one-foot original, it was disproportioned. "The mechanical process to enlarge is simple, but when the imagery is not clear, as was the case, then a completely creative effort was required. No detail for the eyes or crown was provided by the original." It took two months to do the modifications and improvements required on the head and crown.

The statue of Kshitigarbha is unlike anything else Angelo has ever done. His use of weight and balance of mass gives the statue such an impact that Kshitigarbha appears even larger than he really is. The textures and finish are varied so as to create shadows, as well as heighten the reflective qualities of the statue's surface detail.

Angelo Grova has been a member of the adjunct faculty of the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) for over ten years and teaches classes out of his large studio located in Santa Cruz. Born in Sicily, Italy, in 1944—the year of the monkey—Angelo Grova came with his father to the United States as a young child, settling in Manhattan. He attended Pratt Institute, Cabrillo College, and UCSC, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree with honors. He received his Master of Fine Arts degree at Rutgers University. He has lived in California since 1969 with his wife, Beverly, and their four children whose ages range from 10 to 29.

Angelo's works vary in diversity and in size from inches to pieces that are 12 feet [3.6 meters] by 21 feet [6.5 meters] in dimension. He has several of his works in public places, including the Santa Cruz City Hall and the UCSC campus. Many of his works are in private collections in China, France, Italy, Japan, and Mexico.

The statue of Kshitigarbha is the first piece Angelo has done of a solely religious nature. "I've been a sculptor for over a quarter century and I'm always saying that I can sculpt anything, but this was perhaps my most inspirational project." He says he was "moved by the concept of creating the

Buddha, not only because of the spiritual aspect of it, but because of my own understanding of Buddhism. I have known for some time that I am a Buddhist in my soul. I believe that everyone should be a Buddhist in their soul." He paused and continued with a smile, "Besides having the uplifting experience of working on the statue, I also realized that I may be one of the few Italians to have ever done a Buddhist sculpture!"

5. Capturing a Living Likeness

By Lisa Sofman and Jaffa Elias

Mandala June–August 2002

It was monsoon season when Kyabje Ling Rinpoche died. When sculptor Lisa Sofman was asked to create a statue in his likeness over his embalmed body, little did she know it would take her three years, fighting the wet, the dry, and mildew before it was completed. The lifelike image became the object of many pilgrimages and remains to this day in Dharamsala.

His Eminence the Sixth Ling Rinpoche passed away in Dharamsala, India, on Christmas Day, 1983. He was eighty-one. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said he had immeasurable qualities. Excelling in scholarship he received the lharampa geshe degree and in turn became the discipline master, lama umzë, and junior abbot of Gyuto Upper Tantric College. After assisting His Holiness the Dalai Lama in debate, he became his junior tutor, then his senior tutor. He died during his term as the 97th Ganden Tripa, Tsongkhapa's throne holder.

Kyabje Ling Rinpoche's body, His Holiness divined, should be embalmed rather than cremated. Embalming has been a tradition with the throne holders since the lineage's founder Je Tsongkhapa was embalmed in the thirteenth century. Western techniques, His Holiness added, should be employed alongside those traditionally used in preserving the body.

While Kyabje Ling Rinpoche sat in meditative equipoise following his passing, Lisa Sofman, an American sculptor and Buddhist student living in Dharamsala, was approached by those representing his affairs. The monsoon season in India was unsuited to preserving a body, unlike Tibet's dry climate. As a Western sculptor, did she have any ideas?

"I suggested the body be coated with polyester resin to seal it off from outside moisture," Lisa said. "Good," they said, "We'd like you to do it. We'd also like you to sculpt a statue in his likeness over his body."

"I went into shock," Lisa recalled. Informing them that she was unqualified to undertake the project, she did, however, consent to modeling the head. "I felt I could do a better job than someone who did not know him."

This was not the first time Lisa had been asked to create a sculpture of a high lama. In 1982, having barely arrived in Dharamsala, she answered the door to a man who asked if a Western sculptor lived there. He was the attendant to Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the junior tutor, who had passed away earlier that year. Would she sculpt a small statue of him for his stupa?

The statue took Lisa two weeks to complete, and was shown to Kyabje Ling Rinpoche for approval. It could not be used, he said, as it was iconographically incorrect according to the canons of Tibetan art.

Meanwhile Lisa had made a connection with Kyabje Ling Rinpoche at Tushita Meditation Centre where he conducted the Guru Puja. “Our eyes met, but in his, instead of pupils there were holes that led into tunnels of light. It was as if someone was shining a flashlight down the narrow shafts. As I saw this, I was filled with euphoria and wanted to follow this man everywhere.”

A week later she went to the Ling Labrang for a blessing, and spoke to Rinpoche about the statue she had just modeled. It was very good, he said, adding that she should study Tibetan sculpture. “But make sure that your proportions are correct. Otherwise, you will accrue a lot of negative karma.” She took his advice and began her study. Shortly afterwards she also took refuge with him.

A year into Lisa’s apprenticeship Kyabje Rinpoche passed away. This event marked the beginning of a new undertaking for her that lasted for over three years.

After his passing Kyabje Rinpoche’s consciousness remained in his body for thirteen days while he sat in meditation. He had stopped breathing, but none of the other signs of death were present—there was no rigor mortis, his face did not turn gray, and his body did not smell.

Once Kyabje Ling Rinpoche’s consciousness had left his body, it was agreed that Lisa take a mold of his head. “Get ready,” a messenger from the Ling Labrang told her on the twelfth night, “we think he’s going to leave tomorrow.”

“In the early morning before his consciousness left,” Lisa recalled, “there was a rainbow halo around the moon and large snowflakes in the air.” His consciousness left his body around noontime, and then Lisa was called in to begin her work. She was worried how she might react in the presence of a deceased body of someone who had once been her teacher. “If I became shaky, I told myself, I had to remember that I was doing this to benefit others.”

It took her and Sharpa Tulku three hours to make a mold of Kyabje Rinpoche’s head and to measure him. “I was spellbound by how beautiful his body was,” Lisa said. “His skin had a golden glow. Instead of appearing like the body of an eighty-one year old, he had a body like that of a sixteen year old. His limbs were slender, youthful, and beautiful to look at.”

The traditional embalming process began.

Denma Locho Rinpoche and others, who wrote to His Holiness’s Private Office for advice, were miraculously furnished with instructions written by Kyabje Ling Rinpoche himself—instructions he had requested of Pabongka Rinpoche when the 13th Dalai Lama had passed away. Said Denma Locho Rinpoche, “It was like a dream; a great thing that happened.”

Mercury was poured down Kyabje Rinpoche’s throat to clear his body, which was then given an herbal bath. This was followed by a purification puja led by Denma Locho Rinpoche with monks from Gyuto and Nechung. Next, Kyabje Rinpoche was placed inside a cabinet of rock salt to dry out his body. Locho Rinpoche led the monks in prayers for fifty-two days in front of the holy body. Every week for the next several months it was taken out of the salt cabinet, cleaned off, and a purification puja performed before it was returned to the cabinet of new salt.

Lisa meanwhile was invited to lunch at the Ling Labrang.

“Have you ordered the plastic yet?” Kungö, the chancellor, asked.

“No,” she replied, “I never said I would create the statue.”

“Make up your mind because the body will soon be ready.” Kungö didn’t give up.

“If I created it, I would have to rely heavily on a consultant,” she rejoined.

“Do all the consulting you want,” Kungö replied.

Encasing an embalmed body in plastic had never been done before—was it even possible? Court Bennet, Lisa’s sculpture teacher from Boston, was now her consultant. He contacted the Zoological Department at Harvard University, the Museum of Science, and scientific supply houses that did embedments.

It was possible in theory, came the consensus, but components in the plastics could react adversely with the body tissue if it wasn’t properly prepared.

As the months wore on, Kyabje Rinpoche’s body continued to dry out in the cabinet. The salt was changed less, once every two weeks. During this time hot roasted barley dough was pressed onto Kyabje Rinpoche’s skin to remove the oil that rose to the surface. This was rolled into small balls and distributed to devotees.

From the drying process, Rinpoche’s body had darkened and he became thinner. “He always remained beautiful to see,” said Lisa. His body was also miraculous. As she was cleaning the salt residue in between the cracks of his hands and feet, Lisa noticed “a beautiful design ‘etched’ into the padding of his palm.” It was a symbol for the Yamantaka mandala. The Tibetan syllable AH was also embossed on his forehead.

“When I undertook the project I thought that everything would go smoothly,” Lisa recounted, “because I had Kyabje Rinpoche’s and His Holiness’s blessings. The absolute opposite occurred—everything that could go wrong did.”

For a start, polyester resin did not like oil—and bodies preserved in the traditional Tibetan way gave off oil for hundreds of years.

Weeks before monsoon, a steel frame was welded together to support Kyabje Rinpoche’s limp body. He was positioned into an upright, seated position with his hands placed in the same mudras as Tsongkhapa’s. Lisa then began to apply the resin and fiberglass to seal the form. Coats of resin were painted on the body, but by the following day, the resin had peeled off “like saran wrap.” The oil that was constantly rising to the skin’s surface had separated the plastic from the skin. More catalyst was added to the resin to speed up the hardening time. Then she began to apply the fiberglass as quickly as she could. “I felt that if I could get a thick layer of fiberglass and resin on him it wouldn’t peel off as the straight resin did.” Several layers were subsequently applied, a painstaking process that took months, not least because of the quality of fiberglass

manufactured in India. The other factor was that the surface of his skin had taken on a contour and texture similar to a dried prune, a surface that fiberglass did not affix to easily.

After Kyabje Rinpoche was sealed under layers of fiberglass, prayers written in gold ink sent by His Holiness were placed at his heart. One prayer was for his quick return, another for Tibet to become free from Chinese oppression, and the third was a prayer that all beings have happiness.

The next phase involved using papier-mâché to build up the form to its original size. “Thirteen people posed for the statue,” Lisa said. “Some had good hands, others had the torso, and a few sat in full lotus for me.”

Modeling the epoxy putty on the papier-mâché form came next. This eventually gave the surface a smooth body like appearance that was ready for painting. However, when the modeling was nearly complete a crack was discovered in the surface of one of the legs. “I opened it up to find the papier-mâché black and wet,” Lisa said. More mildewed paper was discovered in other areas. The epoxy was porous and the water used to apply the medium had leaked through. Luckily, this discovery was quickly fixed. The moldy paper was removed, the areas disinfected and the epoxy surfaces were repaired.

One of the last things to be done was Kyabje Ling Rinpoche’s modeled head. It was sculpted separately out of clay and then cast into resin, and was secured to Rinpoche’s head after which the neck was finished with epoxy putty.

The statue was almost finished, but for the final sealing coat of resin and painting it. Like everything else connected to the project, this stage did not go as it should have either. The resin had thickened to the consistency of honey instead of being more fluid like milk. Nonetheless, there was no time left to go to Delhi to purchase fresh material. It was painted on and sanded down as best as the time allowed, and the primer was sprayed on. After coats of white paint, the final painting began. The statue would be consecrated in five days time.

A spray gun was used to paint on the layers of color to give his skin a realistic look. The surface became shiny instead of the intended translucency. However, that was the least of the problems. It had started to rain and the paint would not dry! The attendants ran space heaters around the statue, but the paint remained wet. Only on the afternoon before the day of the consecration did the rain stop and the sun come out. Kyabje Ling Rinpoche was carried to the lawn and surrounded by a space blanket to reflect the solar rays. At seven o’clock that evening the paint dried. He received a final coat of paste wax, and at ten the attendants began to dress him. They finished their work at four in the morning, and His Holiness arrived at nine.

About a hundred people were invited for the consecration. His Holiness performed the ceremony and invoked Kyabje Rinpoche to enter and abide in the statue. “He became alive,” Lisa said. At the end Lisa received a blessing and gifts from His Holiness. He told her he appreciated her work. “What more does one need to hear?” remarked Lisa. After the ceremony, the public was allowed in. “The room filled with a crowd of noisy, happy people jostling anxiously to see the statue and to offer ceremonial scarves.”

Lisa looked back on the creative process. “Even though it was such an honor and an amazing privilege to be the sculptor for the Kyabje Ling Rinpoche project there was a period of time when I was quite miserable. The things that were closest to me, that I was particularly sensitive about, were all brought to the fore at the same time. I felt that all my buttons were being pushed. My studio had always been a closed-door affair, but during the project it was a different matter. Sometimes I felt my space was not being respected. Living in a different culture means that not everyone understands what you are all about. Sometimes the communication gaps were huge. I remember returning home in the evening fuming about the day’s events on several occasions. Even though the day was gone, the feeling lingered on and I was not happy. Understanding that I was burning up the good karma created from working on the project by becoming angry, I would make the resolve that whatever happened the next day, I would not become upset about it. The next day would come, and, sure enough, I would become angry about something else.

“One night, at home and feeling miserable, I looked at who was making me this way. I realized then that I was doing it to myself. It wasn’t a pleasant or comfortable state to be in, and I certainly didn’t want to be unhappy. Yet, I was doing it to myself. No one else was controlling my mind. At that moment I understood that I was the only one responsible for my state of mind, and, therefore, I could change it. The cloud lifted and a transformation took place. I stopped being upset. The next day things did not bother me as they had before. I became more tolerant, flexible, and happier. That was the greatest teaching that Kyabje Ling Rinpoche gave me.”

The reincarnation of Kyabje Ling Rinpoche was discovered in Bir, India, in September 1987. The four children in Bir who showed positive signs were each presented with four rosaries, one of which had belonged to Kyabje Ling Rinpoche. One child chose the correct rosary and immediately turned twenty-one beads on it. He jumped into the laps of Kungö and other members of the Labrang, and then he distributed a tray of cookies and sweets he had been given to everyone present and also gave hand-blessings. His Holiness confirmed the child as the reincarnation and he was enthroned on October 5, 1987.

The statue stayed at the Ling Labrang for five years after Ling Rinpoche’s reincarnation was born. People continued to make pilgrimage to the Labrang to receive blessings from both the reincarnation and the statue. After that, the statue was moved to His Holiness’s palace for His Holiness to meditate with it.

6. The Dharma King Takes Shape: Gautama Vajracharya Discusses the Origins of Buddhist Art

Mandala February–March 2007

Cosmic pillars, the cult of the chakravartin, and the influence of Alexander the Great … Mandala *associate editor Sara Blumenthal sat down with Professor Gautama Vajracharya from the University of Wisconsin–Madison to talk about the rise of Buddhist art in North India and the iconography that has defined it for centuries.*

What is the earliest Buddhist image that is known to exist?

The symbolic representation of a Buddhist idea began to appear in the third century B.C.E. during the time of the Mauryan Imperial Emperor Ashoka [circa 273-232 B.C.E.], but we do not see images of the Buddha or a bodhisattva in human form at that time. Most of the Ashokan pillars that we find contain symbolic animals such as lions, elephants, stallions, and bulls.

Can you tell me more about the animals and iconic images that we see representing Buddha Shakyamuni at this time?

Buddha Shakyamuni's life story contains many references to different animals. For example, when Queen Mayadevi conceived the future Buddha Shakyamuni, a cloud elephant descended from heaven and entered her body. We can therefore understand why Ashokan pillars bear a sculpture of an elephant on the top of the pillar to represent the Buddha. At the same time, Buddha Shakyamuni's early name was Siddhartha Gautama. Gautama means, "the excellent bull." This may be the reason that other Ashokan pillars bear the depiction of a bull. The other reason for animal representations of the Buddha is that many of the different animals that became symbolic of the Buddha were pre-Buddhist. They were originally associated with the monsoon culture of India. Buddhists and Hindus alike incorporated many animal images from this culture into their religion as art.

And then we also see Buddha Shakyamuni represented in these early times by a tree and his throne, by a chakra or wheel, or by a lotus flower, sometimes by a footprint, and sometimes with a trident-like symbol, known to the Buddhists as the Three Jewels.

Some of the early sculptures from North India seem to embody a Greco-Roman influence. How did Greco-Roman culture influence Buddhist art?

What happened is a long history. The Greeks came to India in the fourth century B.C.E. when Alexander the Great invaded Persia as well as the northwest part of India. Alexander and his army stayed in that part of India less than two years, but many other Greeks who came with Alexander continued to stay there and Alexander's generals continued controlling that part of India. After the Alexander invasion, the Maurya empire emerged in India [circa 321-184 B.C.E.]. The very first

Mauryan emperor was Chandragupta Maurya, and it was his grandson, Ashoka, who famously became Buddhist.

The Greeks were still living in this northwest part of India called Gandhara [now part of Afghanistan and Pakistan], and due to Ashoka's missionary attempts, many Greeks became Buddhist. For example, a very famous Greek monarch named Menander who ruled in the Punjab around 160-140 B.C.E. studied Buddhism under Nagarjuna. The monarch was known to the Buddhists as Milinda. There is even a book telling of the conversations between Menander and Nagarjuna called *Questions of Milinda*. The Greeks continued to take an interest in Buddhism even in the later periods.

It wasn't until the time of the Kushan dynasty [circa 60-240 C.E.], when this region had become both Buddhist and "Hellenized" that the art took on a Greco-Roman style. The Kushans were Chinese nomads, without language, literature, or script. But once they settled down in Gandhara, they gradually learned to write Roman script and they incorporated the Greco-Roman style of making sculpture at the same time that they became Buddhist. For instance, when Buddha Shakyamuni begins to be shown in human form he is shown wearing a Roman toga-like robe covering both shoulders.

You mention the Emperor Ashoka. Many people are familiar with Ashokan pillars but may not know their symbolism or significance.

Ashoka erected many pillars, many of them still standing. Why did Ashoka erect pillars to honor Buddha Shakyamuni? This is a big question. It seems that originally these pillars were "cosmic pillars" or "axis mundi." This comes from a Vedic idea that the God Indra separated heaven and earth and in order to keep them separated he erected a cosmic pillar; without the cosmic pillar, heaven and earth would fall into each other and there would no longer be peace, only chaos.

Gradually, this concept became part of the cult of the chakravartin, and we know from Pali literature that Buddha Shakyamuni was always considered to be a chakravartin, a universal monarch who rules without any violence. But in the case of Shakyamuni, the symbolism shifted from a temporal monarch to a spiritual monarch. The chakravartin is not exactly an emperor; he is like an emperor plus a yogi. This again is an ancient Indian concept, that a king is not a warrior, not a hunter; a king is almost like a yogi: he should control his sense organs, just like a monk; he is not supposed to indulge himself in luxury; he is supposed to work for his subjects night and day—as a matter of fact, he was allowed to sleep, according to ancient Indian texts, only five hours a night; and always he should reign peacefully, not with a sword in his hand. This is the reason that Buddha Shakyamuni became identified with a chakravartin, and because cosmic pillars were always associated with chakravartins, Ashoka thought it was a good idea to erect cosmic pillars in honor of Buddha Shakyamuni.

Once we begin to see Shakyamuni Buddha represented in human form, what are his most important characteristics?

An image of Buddha Shakyamuni in human form, endowed with the thirty-two auspicious signs,

began to appear in the Gandharan region and Mathura simultaneously. Not all of these auspicious symbols can be represented in art successfully, but the ushnisha [the prominent bump on the top of the Buddha's head] repeatedly appears, as well as the elongated earlobes, the urna between his eyebrows, and the elongated arms. Many of these signs again go back to the idea of Buddha Shakyamuni as a chakravartin.

Although he is a monk, he also has royal qualities. As a matter of fact, in Buddhist art, Buddha Shakyamuni is never represented as a yogi or monk. From Pali literature, we know that the Buddha used to shave his hair regularly; he might have a prominent bump on his head, but it was hairless. However, he is always represented artistically with hair. And quite often in Mathuran art, we see Buddha Shakyamuni with a well-fed plump body, but from Pali literature we know that he was not in that good of health; quite often he had abdominal pain and was very skinny.

You've spoken about the symbolism of a chakravartin; what is the meaning of chakra in this context?

The chakra is simply a wheel. Two different cults survived in India before Buddhism: the cult of the yaksha—tree worship, and the cult of the chakravartin—worship of the universal monarch. For a universal king, a chakra is a wheel that is visualized to represent his entire empire. If you think of a chakra in this way, the United States is a chakra, Mexico is another chakra, Canada is a chakra. And an emperor's capitol is always in the middle of the wheel. Since Buddha Shakyamuni is a Dharma chakravartin, they incorporated that chakra symbol into Buddhism, but with a different interpretation. It is not an empire anymore, but a symbol of teaching. When a chakravartin turns the wheel, it means he begins to rule his empire peacefully, but when we use the same idiom for the Buddha, when he begins to turn the wheel, it means he begins to teach the Dharma.

Often we see two deer flanking a Dharmachakra. What is the significance of the deer?

The two deer symbolize the forest and teaching where Buddha Shakyamuni first turned the wheel of the Dharma. The name of that forest was Deer Park (*Mriga-dava* in Sanskrit). When he gave this first teaching it is said that the deer came to listen along with the Buddha's first disciples.

An important medium for Buddhist art is the stupa (reliquary). How did Buddhist stupas originate?

I am a historian. I like to study everything in chronological order from the Vedic Upanishad texts to the early Buddhist Pali texts, and so on. From these first two sources we know that the stupa is pre-Buddhist. In pre-Buddhist India, stupas were erected to honor important people, like a chakravartin. The stupa would be erected in the middle of a crossroads so that people would circumambulate it. The chakravartin would be cremated and then his ashes would be distributed to multiple people. His ashes would be placed close to the center, or navel, of that wheel or chakra. And then a cosmic pillar would be erected in the middle of the stupa. Buddha Shakyamuni was seen as a chakravartin so they decided to pull from this ritual to honor him.

Is it true that Buddha Shakyamuni told his devotees to bury him in the manner of a

chakravartin?

Right, that's the story we know from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Buddha Shakyamuni in the beginning said to his disciple Ananda, "Don't worry about my burial, this is not the job of a monk, this is the job of the laypeople, they will do whatever they like to do; you should be worried about understanding the phenomena of samsara and nirvana." But Ananda insisted, he asked again and again, and then the Buddha said, "Okay, in that case you should erect a stupa in accordance with the cult of the chakravartin." It seems that this story may be true. In the stories of his life when people kept insisting on something, just to make them happy he said okay. He was compassionate toward them. It seems that Buddha Shakyamuni was a very flexible person and this may be one of the reasons why Buddhism spread all over Asia.

Dr. Gautama Vajracharya, Ph.D., taught South Asian art and culture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison for almost thirty years. Before going to the University of Wisconsin, he worked for four years at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with the famous South Asian curator Pratapaditya Pal. Dr. Vajracharya is the author of two books and numerous articles on Buddhist and South Asian art, both in English and Nepali languages.

7. Green Tara Rising

By Bertrand Cayla

Mandala August–September 2007

It's 2001. Retreat time at Osel Ling Centro de Retiros in Granada, Spain. Lama Zopa Rinpoche asks artist Bertrand Cayla to create a large statue of Green Tara for one of the hillsides at the center. Little does he know what lies in store.

Bertrand began the creation process in October 2001 in his workshop at Nalanda Monastery in Lavaur, France [where he was a monk at the time]. Under Rinpoche's guidance, the statue underwent many changes; and at the end of 2006, it had reached its fourth incarnation and finalized aspect. Bertrand tells the story ...

When Lama Zopa suggested this project, I was surprised to say the least, because I had no real experience of building such a large statue (more than three meters in height), but at the same time, I was really curious to see what the result might be. I felt that if Lama Zopa was asking for it, there must be a good reason. I didn't know, though, that it would be such a task ... and today, although the statue herself is ready, until it is cast and delivered, it's still not finished.

Even though there were many modifications to be made, by trying to follow the recommendations of Lama Zopa I saw the statue starting to become really nice. At one stage, I really didn't want to make the changes: I even said "no," although later I did as Lama Zopa asked—and didn't touch the statue again for nine months!

It was hard on the ego, and I can say that one thing I've really learned in this process is the need to let go, especially of what my expectations were.

Finally, in the process of transformation, the statue reached a level of refinement which I had believed at the start was possible, but in actual fact it only came about by removing mistakes that were due to my own limitations. The five years that passed in the making of the statue were a complete necessity, as there were many inner obstacles to overcome. Tara was always there, I just had to let her appear.

At the outset, during a visit to Nalanda Monastery, Lama Zopa Rinpoche was heard to say that there would be "many" of these statues, and that it would be "historical." I thought it would take about a year to build the statue, that I could make molds, make a plaster cast, and paint the finished statue. Based on that, I asked Osel Ling for a donation of €15,000 to cover the cost of materials. I had no idea it would take so long, and that there would be so many changes along the way, for myself and for Osel Ling.

Initially Tara was to be housed in a pagoda, but because Osel Ling is in a protected area, planning restrictions would prevent the center from building one. We had to look for a material from which to make the statue that could safely go outside, cope with all weather conditions, and be able to

last many centuries. We decided that it should be made in bronze. A reliable foundry in France has quoted around €120,000 for all of the work, including making the molds and the bronze cast. From the original budget there is less than €2,000 left. Possibly we can get a cheaper cast elsewhere; we're still looking for contacts.

Last November, Lama Zopa Rinpoche saw the latest photos and gave his OK to the "finished" statue. Relieved that I wouldn't need to make any more modifications, I decided to create an organization (Tara Projects) dedicated to getting the Tara statue out of the Nalanda workshop and into the outside world. She's very beautiful and it's a real shame she's not yet where she was destined to be.

I will stay with the project until the statue is on site, and all the finishing touches are complete. But, for the moment, I've done as much as I can on my own.

Photos and videos of the completed Green Tara statue can be seen on the website of Osel Ling Centro de Retiros (oseling.org).

8. The Not-So-Inherent Power of Holy Objects

Mandala April–June 2010

Reader Question:

Why do Buddhists value holy objects (stupas, statues, thangkas, etc.) so much? And how do we justify spending millions of dollars and so much energy on the Maitreya Project, for example, when millions of people suffer from abject poverty, disease, etc.?

Answered by James Blumenthal, Ph.D.

The question of the value and power of holy objects in Buddhism is an interesting one. It is one that I have personally struggled with and thought about quite a bit for many years. I have been perplexed at the way I sometimes find holy objects quite moving and at other times, do not. Likewise, it is curious to me that there are times when I am moved when others present are not, and vice versa. This all suggests to me that there is no inherent power in the holy objects themselves. But what does that mean?

More than fifteen years ago, when I first heard about the Maitreya Project and the millions of dollars it would cost to build an enormous statue, my immediate response to myself was, "What a waste! I can think of a thousand ways to offer much more useful and tangible help to those in need than to build a big statue." Sure, I would love to see a 500-foot [150-meter] statue of Maitreya Buddha, but I would much rather see that money go to caring for the sick and poor, feeding the hungry, finding cures for terrible diseases, etc. Over time, and with more careful consideration, my view has changed.

The role and understanding of holy objects in the Buddhist tradition is in some ways ambiguous. On the one hand, Buddhists have been producing and venerating holy objects since the Buddha instructed his disciples that upon his passing they should place his relics in stupas at holy sites associated with important moments in his life. He said that these could serve as sites of veneration and pilgrimage for the laity. On the other hand, great Buddhist masters like Tsongkhapa have argued quite persuasively in philosophical writings based on other teachings of the Buddha that nothing has any inherent value. Of course it would be a mistake to conflate inherent value or power with conventional value and power and this is where some of the apparent ambiguities become less ambiguous. Let me explain.

Based on the insights of Nagarjuna and the teachings attributed to the Buddha in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, Tsongkhapa taught that no conditioned phenomena (in other words, nothing that depends on causes and conditions for its existence—including holy objects) have an essence, a fixed nature, inherent characteristics, or any absolute way of being. A statue of the Buddha does not have the inherent characteristic of being powerful or transformative. In many senses, the power of a Buddha statue or any other holy object is dependent on a variety of causes and conditions. A hungry animal may see such an object and say to itself, "Not food," and move on—utterly

untransformed by the experience. A devout Buddhist on pilgrimage may see the same object and be profoundly inspired in a transformative way. For example, they may recall what they know of the Buddha's life story, imagine the actual person of the Buddha and his actions, or his amazing liberating teachings, etc., and all this could have quite a positive effect on that person's mind. Even a non-Buddhist may see the peaceful image of a Buddha and be touched or inspired. In contemplating these sorts of things, it seems that the statue, in consort with the mind of the person perceiving it, can be an actual catalyst for a transformative experience. So while a statue may not have inherent power, that is not to say it does not have some causal efficacy, some power to be transformative for those with appropriate karma or when the appropriate conditions are present. Lacking independent, inherent power does not equate with a lack of conventional power. To make this mistake would be to fall into the extreme of nihilism from a Madhyamaka perspective.

When thinking of the power of holy objects, conventional as that power may be, I am reminded of a particular statue of Shakyamuni Buddha that has always been incredibly potent and compelling for me. It dates to the fifth century and is often referred to as the "Sarnath Buddha." It was found in the Deer Park area of Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first teachings, among the remains of an ancient monastery, and currently resides at the Sarnath Museum. I had seen photos of it before and even studied aspects of it in graduate school in a course on Buddhist iconography. I saw it in person for the first time when I went to work on my dissertation and studied at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath from 1997 to 1998. I was blown away! For me personally, it is the most powerful image of the Buddha imaginable. When I look at it, I "feel the presence" of the Buddha. It is tangible. I visited that statue many times that year and have been back several times since. Each visit is equally as powerful and my mental state is altered in a very positive way. I always walk away from it with a more peaceful mind than that with which I approach it. In amorphous ways, I learn from it. It was the catalyst for me thinking about the powerful reality of Shakyamuni Buddha in ways and to depths I had never imagined before. Is there something inherent about the sandstone from which it was carved that made me feel this way? Or was it the particular graceful shape of this statue? Or, perhaps in some mystical way was there a power there due to the thousands or millions who have looked upon that statue with faith for the past 1,500 years? Perhaps the second two possibilities lent a hand, but I would guess, based on my studies of Buddhist philosophy, that the major contributor to my reaction was my own mind. Due to causes and conditions that produced certain karmic predispositions, my mind was primed to be moved when it came into contact with this image.

So what does all of this have to do with my thoughts on the Maitreya Project specifically? I mentioned at the outset that my thinking about the Maitreya Project had changed over time. What I did not think about when I first heard about the project was the way that so many people's minds would be affected positively by this project. I did not think about how everybody who gave something of themselves to make this statue a reality for the benefit of others also benefits. This includes the thousands of donors, the thousands of people who will give of their time to make this happen, the millions of people who will be positively affected by supporting and appreciating the

relic tours that have been circling the globe constantly for years in support of this project, all the sick and poor who will benefit from the social projects and hospitals associated with the project, not to mention the millions who will be inspired for generation after generation by being witness to its stunning presence and all that it represents. Maitreya Buddha represents, among other things, loving kindness in its most perfect form. We need monuments to loving kindness in the world! We need powerful occasions to contemplate loving kindness. We need reminders.

Beyond all of this, I believe my initial assessment was short-sited in another very important way. According to the Buddha, our most basic and fundamental problem, the problem of suffering in all its forms, is a spiritual problem. While I think that feeding the hungry and tending to the sick are critically important and virtuous activities, and that they are aspects of the spiritual path for those that engage in those forms of generosity, I agree with the Buddha when he says that what we fundamentally need to change and heal is our mind. Holy objects inspire people to do just that. I am a huge supporter of socially engaged Buddhism. I believe that being compassionate involves a lot more than contemplating compassion on a cushion. It involves working to co-create a world that engenders peace and our highest spiritual ideals. One way to do that is to tend to the needy or work for justice. But in a fundamental way, creating opportunities for spiritual transformation of the sort that holy objects inspire (with their not-so-inherent conventional power) is an incredible way to be of benefit to others in the world.

James Blumenthal, Ph.D., was an associate professor of Buddhist philosophy at Oregon State University and professor of Buddhist Studies at Maitripa College. He authored The Ornament of The Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Shantarakshita *(Snow Lion, 2004) along with dozens of articles in scholarly journals and popular periodicals on various aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. He also worked with Geshe Lhundup Sopa on* Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Vol. 4 *(Wisdom, 2016), a commentary on the calm-abiding chapter of Je Tsongkhapa's* Lamrim Chenmo.

9. FPMT's First Holy Object Project

Mandala April–June 2010

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 Washington State. While Connie was staying in Kathmandu, Karuna and Scott were both living at Kopan and participating in the group lamrim 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 lamrim 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 a while, Rinpoche invited her to help him paint the large Tara statue that Lama Yeshe had sent [Mummy] Max [Mathews] 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," Ven. 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.

Ven. 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.

Ven. Connie Miller was ordained in 1978 and has taught in FPMT centers around the world. She also helped Lama Yeshe establish Universal Education, which became the Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom. Ven. Connie currently lives in Italy and is the education coordinator at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa.

10. Buddha's Builder: An Interview with Ian Green

Mandala, July–September 2011

Ian Green, a long-time student of both Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, has served FPMT and the Dharma in big ways: as a founder and director of Atisha Centre in Bendigo, Australia, as the chairman of various FPMT-related boards, and as the director of two of FPMT's biggest holy object projects: the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion (the largest stupa in the Western world) and the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace (the largest Buddha carved from gemstone quality jade in the world). Lama Yeshe asked for the Great Stupa and Lama Zopa Rinpoche for the Jade Buddha, making both projects not just impressive in scale, but contemporary examples of indefatigable guru devotion.

How did you first meet the Dharma and the FPMT?

Along with my wife Judy, I have been a Buddhist for over 35 years and a vegetarian for around 20 years. In a way, I owe meeting the Dharma to my career in advertising. Around 1970 I was living life in the fast lane, enjoying the samsaric delights of working in advertising and living the life that a good salary afforded a single guy in a big city. It was a time of long lunches, short affairs, high stake card games, fine wines and much excitement. Somehow I had enough wisdom to realize that despite the enjoyments of this life, if I did not do something, I would wind up leading a very short life. I decided to look around for other approaches to life and in 1971 I took six weeks leave from my work and traveled to India.

As soon as I landed in India I saw that spirituality pervaded every part of Indian society and culture. Every shop, every car and every home had an altar. And every tree or rock seemed to be "holy." All this made me realize just how materialistic our Western society is. But while I loved the "funky-ness" of the Hindu gods, I made no connection with them on a spiritual level.

Toward the end of my Indian journey I visited the holy city of Varanasi. With hash-smoking *sadhus*, burning *ghats* and the spectacle of the mighty Ganges, it was an unforgettable experience. But you can only take so much stimulation, and seeking an escape from the noise and busy-ness of Varanasi, I was attracted to a park which was said to be nearby. The moment I walked into that park I felt a sense of tranquility and calmness that I had not felt before in India and only rarely in Australia. As I remember it, "I felt totally at peace … as if I had just come home after wandering for a very long time."

Standing in the center of the park, I was confronted by a great monolithic object. I could not work out if this was man-made or a natural phenomenon but it seemed to emanate an incredible power which nearly knocked me over. I was looking at the Great Stupa of Sarnath which marks the spot where the Buddha gave his first teaching. This park, which is known as Deer Park, is one of the holiest pilgrimage places of Buddhism.

Whilst at the park I purchased a book entitled *What is Buddhism?* and on the plane home to Australia I read about Buddhist concepts such as karma and reincarnation. I remember this was

also a powerful experience: “As I read that book I had the feeling that I knew all these things, even though I had not seen them written down before.” I now accept that in previous lifetimes I had exposure to Buddhism and that once I met with the right conditions in this life I had “no choice but to become a Buddhist."

Within a few days of coming home I heard a radio interview with a Melbourne doctor who had been ordained by some Tibetan lamas in Nepal. The doctor (i.e., Nick Ribush) was giving a public lecture and so I went along to my first Dharma talk. Listening to Nick’s talk I had the same feeling as when I read the book on Buddhism: I knew it all but had never heard anyone say it before. Within a few days I became a student at Tara House (later, Tara Institute) in Miller Grove Kew (Melbourne) and within a few months I had received teachings from Nick Ribush, Geshe Loden, Zasep Tulku and Konchok Dronma. By the mid-1970s I had my first encounter with my holy gurus Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. In 1979 I completed the month-long course at Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu. Around this time I took up my first official FPMT role as chairman of the Tara House Executive Committee.

What is the history of how the Bendigo Buddhist developments came about?

At the time I served on the Tara House Executive Committee they were looking for a country retreat center. Konchog Dronma, the director of Tara House, had previously bought land at Noojee and started to build a retreat center there. In fact, Lama Yeshe gave a teaching at the Noojee property. But immediately after his teaching Lama told Konchog Dronma, “You must sell this place. It is too cold.”

The search for a retreat center for Tara House went on for months. Uldis Balodis, myself, and one or two others drove all over the state trying to find somewhere suitable. I remember long drives up and down dirt roads looking for places that might be suitable and might be for sale.

One weekend I came home to see my family in Bendigo and was speaking to my father, Ed Green, about the search for the retreat center. In the course of the conversation my father said, “Why don’t you use some of this land?” He had purchased over 700 acres of bushland in the Myers Flat area near Bendigo. I was never quite sure why my father bought the land. It was close to the area where he was bought up and perhaps he felt a connection with the land. In any case, Ed felt he could not go wrong with this purchase—there was so much land, so close to a growing regional city and at a very reasonable price. Later on my family set up a heritage park called Sandhurst Town on the land.

In mid-1980 I wrote to Lama Yeshe to tell him of my father’s offer to donate 50 acres of land to set up a Buddhist center. Lama wrote back to say that he would ask a high lama for a divination on the suitability of the land. News of the divination came shortly and it was that a Buddhist center on the land would be of medium benefit. Not easily deterred, Lama Yeshe then approached two other high lamas for their divination. Their “second opinions” were very positive and indicated that the land would be highly beneficial. Lama then accepted Ed’s offer and agreed to teach on the Bendigo land when he next visited Australia in 1981.

Now the real work had to begin. I had to find some people to shift to Bendigo with me to set up Atisha Centre. At the 1979 Kopan course I had met and befriended Ken Hawter, a physiotherapist from Perth. I asked Ken if he would come with me to Bendigo and he agreed. Ken soon set up a physio practice in Bendigo and became a part of the local community being, amongst other things, a very popular member of the Lockwood Tennis Club. Ken was later ordained and now lives at Chenrezig Institute under his ordained name of Ven. Pende.

I also asked Judy Imer if she would come to Bendigo. Of course this was a very big decision for a mother of three small children. I think that Judy was both excited and frightened by the prospect of the move. But it was after she threw the I-Ching and received a very positive reading about the possibility of ever expanding results that Judy made her life-changing decision.

And so it was that Ken, Judy, Finn, Zack, Cody and I moved to Bendigo in March 1981. At this time our accommodation was railway carriages with no electricity or running water. It was truly an amazing achievement for Judy to look after our three boys by kerosene lamp and water jugs while also helping to set up Atisha Centre.

We only had six months to make Atisha Centre ready to hold a course with Lama Yeshe. He was booked to teach at Atisha Centre for four weeks in August 1981. Fortunately we were joined by some other hardy pioneers to help with the work. Some of the people who came to help were Ven. Harry Sutton, Alex and Stewart Moore, Graham Reid, Kevin Smith, Graham Mathews, and our dear friend Alice Arbuthnott.

There was so much to do. The five railway carriages all had to be painted and have beds and mattresses put in them. Toilets needed to be set up, septic tanks put in, kitchens set up, and so much more.

My father also contributed a great deal to the facilities when he arranged for his company, Stramit, to donate and erect the toilet block, kitchen, small gompa, and adjoining accommodation block. These buildings have contributed to Atisha Centre for the last 30 years. In fact, in those six months, nearly as much building took place at Atisha Centre as happened in all the years since.

We also arranged to "borrow" the church and restaurant from the family tourist attraction, Sandhurst Town, for the course. The course was held in the church and the retreaters ate their meals in the Sandhurst Town restaurant. Interestingly, the same restaurant building (now known as the Great Stupa Exhibition Centre) was used to feed the people attending Lama Zopa Rinpoche's course in April 2011.

Somehow we managed to put everything in place and by August 1981 Atisha Centre was ready to open its doors. Lama was accommodated in my mother's house. And around 120 people came to attend the inaugural course at Atisha Centre which was on mahamudra. Lama also gave a Heruka initiation and held a public talk at the Kangaroo Flat High School hall.

During his stay at Atisha Centre, Lama did a lot to help the center become established in the local community. He had a very convivial meeting with the Bendigo Anglican Bishop, met with the

Council at Marong Shire, and made several media appearances.

After the course was over the retreaters all pitched in to help the community celebrate the birth of Buddhism in Bendigo with an open-day festival. This was held in Sandhurst Town. Entry was free and we had clowns, jugglers, stilt-walkers, food, and rides. We estimate that over 5,000 people turned up on what was a very weather-threatened day. The open day was a great success and Lama loved it.

In fact, Lama contributed greatly to the success of the open day. Early that morning Judy paid him a visit at his house. Lama asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?" Judy replied, almost as a joke "Well, Lama, you could fix the weather for us." Lama smiled and said, "OK." Later in the morning Lama was seen making offerings to the deities. And while black clouds continued to come low overhead for the whole day they were witnessed by many people to separate overhead and leave a hole of blue sky over the open day. There was not a drop of rain during the open day.

During this course, on August 14, 1981, to be exact, Lama walked over land with Garrey Foulkes and myself and gave us his master plan for Atisha Centre, the monastery, an aged-care facility, a lay community, and, of course, the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. Lama spoke at length of his vision for the area to cater for Buddhists throughout their life. His "blueprint" was to set up a Dharma city.

At the time I was aware that what Lama Yeshe had asked me to do was an enormous undertaking. I also considered it to be an opportunity to make my life particularly useful and meaningful. I considered myself, then and now, to be very fortunate.

The original 50 acres (20 hectares) offered by my father was later added to with further land from my mother, Joyce, and myself. In total the Green family has contributed around 150 acres (60 hectares) to set up the Buddhist projects in Bendigo.

An official master plan has been prepared, which lays out Lama Yeshe's vision for this land. And today much of Lama's vision has become a reality.

After Lama left, Judy and I settled into continuing to set up Atisha Centre and for the next 15 years or so we were the directors of Atisha Centre. Our directorship was followed by many who have all made their contribution to fulfilling the vision of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa. Atisha Centre directors since Judy and I were John Wright, Carl Sillery, Ben Karmay, Yien Law, and Cherry Rattue. The contribution of these directors and the members of Atisha Centre have continued the development of this important Dharma teaching and retreat community.

Ven. Thubten Gyatso has been responsible for the creation of Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery on the exact location specified by Lama Yeshe. Gyatso has provided much of the money and even the labor to build the monastery. In addition, Geshe Konchok Tsering, several monks, and benefactors have contributed greatly to the establishment of Australia's first Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

Not much happened on the Great Stupa for the decade after Lama Yeshe's visit as most of my

attention was on making Atisha Centre viable. We did however ask two architects for their input on the Great Stupa. Several rather curious concepts were drawn up including some designs which incorporated aspects of Buddhist stupas and Australian outback homesteads.

In 1994 Lama Zopa Rinpoche sent me a coffee table book of Tibet. Over a spread on the Great Stupa of Gyantse he had written: "This is my idea for the stupa in Bendigo." In 1995, Garrey Foulkes, Peter Stripes, Tao Langham, and I visited Tibet and took many measurements at Gyantse. In 1996 His Holiness the Dalia Lama gave the Great Stupa his blessing (and its name) and I stood down from the Atisha Centre directorship in order to focus on my life's work of building the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. I have continued in the role of chairman of the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, Ltd. until the present day.

Why have you chosen to serve FPMT and Rinpoche in this way?

The short answer is that it is my feeble attempt at guru devotion. My studies and baby-meditations on the lamrim were enough for me to develop a degree of renunciation and faith in the Buddhadharma. Then after having the opportunity to witness first-hand the way the lamrim was put into practice by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa, my devotion to these gurus arose naturally. So when the opportunity to create a Buddhist center, to build a Great Stupa and later on to carve the Jade Buddha came along, I felt fortunate to be able to fulfill the gurus' holy wishes.

A good example of how this works in practice is the creation of the Jade Buddha. Shortly after I had seen the massive jade boulder "Polar Pride" in Canada, I explained to Rinpoche what a unique gemstone it was. The next morning I received a message that Rinpoche had foreseen that Polar Pride would become a Buddha that would "illuminate the world." Rinpoche then told me, "You must turn this giant gemstone into a holy object as an offering to the world." With some small degree of devotion to the guru in my heart my response was not to ask "why" but instead to just start thinking about "how." In the case of the Jade Buddha, the big "how" was: "How do we raise a million dollars to buy Polar Pride?" It took nearly two years to negotiate a deal where we could purchase Polar Pride interest-free over a five-year period. Then, almost miraculously after much writing and rewriting of contracts, we were the owners of Polar Pride for a very modest down payment of USD$250,000. I am sure that such an audacious plan could not be executed without faith in the guru.

Why do you believe that holy objects like the Great Stupa and Jade Buddha are important?

I believe that by creating significant holy objects in the Western world we are shaping the reality of sentient beings. Our view of what is important and indeed what is real is heavily influenced by the physical world we see around us. For most of us the world we see is our urban environment which is dominated by symbols of commerce (office blocks), shopping (shopping malls), sport (arenas) and individuality (suburban housing). We interpret this information to mean that these are the important values of our society. Symbols of the spiritual component of our life are very minor by comparison. And the symbols of religion and the spiritual that do exist in our culture seem to belong to a distant time that many of us find hard to relate to. The Great Stupa and the Jade

Buddha are becoming international symbols of the importance of spirituality and peace in our lives today. By making large holy objects a part of our landscape, we are creating a new reality. This is a reality that presents spirituality as a vital part of being a human being.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche sees this as being very important and often sums this up in his simple statement: "The West needs more holy objects." He also points out that by making large holy objects in the West "we are making it so easy for people to receive the seed to enlightenment."

Did you already have the skills necessary to serve in this way, or did you develop the skills through the service itself?

I do not think anyone has all the skills to do one of the big jobs within FPMT. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy, and I had a career in advertising. While useful, this education and career left big holes in my FPMT skills list. Some of the knowledge I have acquired during my time working for the Lamas includes a working knowledge of architecture, landscape architecture, Buddhist protocols in Tibet, Vietnam, and China, structural engineering, gardening, handling of holy relics, preparing and caring for holy objects, fundraising, feng shui, funerals and memorials, sculpture, sewage treatment plants, town planning, wills and estates, and water irrigation systems. I know a little bit about all these things but I am far from an expert in any of them.

However, I do not want to deter the others who are embarking on big Dharma projects for Lama Zopa. I think it is important not to be daunted by every skill you have to acquire. And don't be afraid to ask questions. Generally, most professionals have quite a lot of patience when it comes to well meaning amateurs.

It is also important not to be scared about making mistakes (as long as they are not costly ones). Sometimes you just have to try something to see if it works. And if it does not work, then you try something else. This is exactly what we did with finding the finance for the big jade boulder. Once we had paid the first installment on the jade boulder "Polar Pride" we were faced with the reality of financing the Jade Buddha over the next five years. We needed a steady income stream to complete the payments on Polar Pride, as well as for the transport, insurance, and the carving. In fact, we tried many different ideas and most of them failed. One spectacular failure was when I tried to interest people in "investing" in the Jade Buddha by promising them a financial reward once the Buddha was carved. This idea was soundly rejected because most people, quite correctly, did not want to mix business and Buddhism. We also tried to borrow funds with very limited success. I approached two wealthy businessmen; one in Bendigo and one in Melbourne to seek their support. But neither man was willing to offer any funds and hardly any advice. We then tried pre-selling jade statues. But still the money was coming in very slowly. Judy and I tried as much as we could to raise funds from our savings and from our supporters, but generally our income was small compared with the regular payments on Polar Pride due at the end of each year and the costs due to the carvers. But in the end we found our finance through a combination of methods which have all contributed to the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace being completed and completely paid for.

When you are appointed the director of an FPMT project you have to become a leader—whether you think you are suitable for that role or not. A leader must inspire confidence in others that the project will happen and that it is in good hands. This does not mean that you have to be a charismatic person. Whatever your personality, you simply be the best that you can. No one can ask more of you than that.

One very handy skill for a leader is learning who you can trust. When you are in a senior position with a large Buddhist project many people come to you with all sorts of suggestions, proposals, and money making schemes. In the early days lots of people had lots of ideas about the Great Stupa that they were passionate about. These ideas ranged from the style to artwork, the type of concrete to the types of vegetation that "must" be used. As the Stupa and Jade Buddha projects have become more widely known around the world, there has been a surge of interest from people with input and ideas. You learn to be astute about those who are simply trying to take advantage or make money out of the holy objects. Even though my experience has shown that at least 90 percent of these ideas are completely wild, I make a determined effort to keep an open mind and give everyone a fair hearing.

I think it is hard to give advice on working out who you can trust. As you have more experiences in life, it is a skill you acquire. I have found the teachings on selecting a guru can be useful; checking up what they say, who they associate with, and the results of their activities. I have also found that Green Tara has been a very reliable guide.

How did you start working on both the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion and the Jade Buddha?

You know the story of how you climb a mountain? You spend quite a while looking at the top and thinking about how you might get there. Then you transfer your gaze to your feet to make sure you have a secure foothold. It is a bit like that.

Rinpoche has commented that the way the Great Stupa has been built is a good example for other major projects to follow. He described our careful, steady progress as being like an aircraft on a runway which takes quite a while to get to maximum speed before taking off and soaring to great heights. He said, and I agree totally with him, that the biggest danger is to leap into things before you are prepared. These leaps can lead to crashes, which can set major projects back for a very long time. Unfortunately, first impressions really do last a very long time.

I have been very conscious with the Great Stupa and Jade Buddha that we maintain the faith with our supporters. We have done this by acting with integrity, keeping supporters informed, not over-promising, and maintaining a momentum so that we are always seen to be moving ahead.

Any Dharma project which is financed by donations relies on integrity. The way you spend money must be seen to be effective and prudent. And above all, the key people on the Dharma project must be seen as excellent agents who are acting with good intentions and integrity. There is an old maxim of fundraising that says that people give to people just as much as they give to causes. I believe this maxim applies to fundraising for Dharma projects too. The way you act to others, the

money you spend on yourself, the regard you show for your personal comfort will all be scrutinized and judged. When you represent a Dharma project you take on the responsibility of upholding the reputation of the Dharma project and in some cases even of Buddhism itself.

Keeping people informed is relatively straightforward but it does require a commitment to see this as a priority. Whereas not over-promising is something I have found difficult. The problem is that you want to keep people enthused about the project and the first question everyone asks is, "When will it be finished?" so you feel a pressure to respond with dates and timelines. In reality dates are very difficult to estimate when your income primarily relies on the generosity of others. Thankfully, Buddhists tend to be forgiving and generally they have chosen to ignore some of my earlier statements about ambitious deadlines. Maintaining momentum has involved looking for something new to show people if they came back each year. This has meant on some occasions we have chosen the phase that was going to make the biggest impression instead of what was the conventional next step. To put it simply, steel in the air looks a lot more impressive than pipes in the ground. Of course, we would never have done this if it wasted money.

Did you think you were ready to handle such immense projects from the outset?

I was sure that I was not ready to handle such immense projects. I sometimes think that getting a big project from Lama or Rinpoche is like being given two bricks and being asked to build a skyscraper. Not having built a skyscraper before, you have no real idea of where to start and what is required to make these projects happen. But you do know that no one else is any better prepared than you and there must be a reason why you were chosen, and if you do not make it happen, no one else is likely to.

There is also the issue of what you are willing to sacrifice. To make a major Dharma project happen in the West you need to be a little obsessive and this means being willing to give up some of the normal things that we do with our time. Life goes by so quickly and there is only so much time in a day. So the only way to keep these projects moving is to cut some things out of your life. There is no doubt that I have had to make sacrifices to my family life, my career, my leisure and my spiritual practice to be able to have the time and energy to drive the Great Stupa and Jade Buddha projects. This cost has been shared by those who are closest to me, especially my wife Judy. But I have no regrets. In fact, I feel blessed to have been given the opportunity of making my life meaningful. As I said before, life is short and unless you focus your energy; time can easily slip through your fingers with little to show for your precious human rebirth.

What are the biggest challenges facing these projects? What have been your biggest successes to date?

Perhaps the most important teaching I received from Rinpoche in regard to creating holy objects was: "The greater the merit … the greater the obstacles." This teaching not only made me ready to accept obstacles when they arose before me, it made me expect them and even, in some (rare) cases, to welcome them.

Of course, the biggest challenge has been how do you raise the vast amounts of money required to

build the Great Stupa (AUS$20 million) and create the Jade Buddha (around AUS$2 million)?

At one low point in trying to raise the funds for the Jade Buddha I said to Rinpoche, “Making this statue is such hard work. Maybe it is better to re-sell the jade boulder and to put the profit into building the Great Stupa.” In fact some of our supporters were worried that working on the Jade Buddha was taking our focus away from completing the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion which was the major project which had been given to us by Lama Yeshe. I remember I had a call from Florence, a dear benefactor from Melbourne who said, “Why are you always going off on these tangents?” As well as the Jade Buddha, Florence was referring to the 4-meter (13-feet) high Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) statue that Lama Zopa had asked us to create before we did any more work on the Great Stupa. Our only reply was, “Rinpoche asked us to.” In any case, the answer I got back on selling Polar Pride was quick and definite. Rinpoche’s reply was simply, “No.”

Sometimes it takes an ultimatum to steel your resolve. And when it comes from your holy guru you just say to yourself, “OK, there must be a way. We will do it.” I am very grateful for the support of Great Stupa board members and especially Wayne Thomson, Tom Castles and Salim Lee at this time. Gradually, a few people in Singapore and in Australia had the courage to commit their funds to the project and we started to pre-sell some Buddhas from the off-cuts of Polar Pride. And so a confidence grew that yes we can make the Jade Buddha a reality.

In terms of biggest successes at the Great Stupa I immediately think of when we hosted His Holiness the Dalai Lama and an audience of 2,000 people inside the Great Stupa in 2007. This was the first teaching in the Great Stupa and it was a great success. His Holiness also was very pleased with the Great Stupa. When we first told His Holiness about the Great Stupa in 1996 he said, "This stupa will be very significant for Buddhist spirituality and Tibetan culture. Support for such noble work is a good method to create virtuous karma." When he visited in 2007 His Holiness added, “The Great Stupa should be a center for interfaith dialogue and Buddhism/science dialogue.”

The other great highlight was when Rinpoche climbed the Great Stupa in April 2011 and said, “This is the perfect place for a Great Stupa … It’s amaaaazing!”

How do you maintain your energy, devotion and mental health when you work on such large-scale projects that presumably require constant attention? Do you have any advice or suggestions for FPMT students that want to complete large-scale or other extensive projects?

When you work on BIG projects such as Maitreya Project or the Great Stupa you must remind yourself that you are running a marathon – not a sprint. There have been too many sad examples of devoted students who have burnt themselves out by trying too hard to fulfill the guru’s holy wishes. Realizing we are on a marathon means that we realize we cannot work at full speed all the time, that we need to hold something in reserve, we have to be patient and wait for the right time to put in maximum effort.

You need to honestly know your limits and the reality of your situation. If you are likely to get stressed out (and who isn’t?) then you need to monitor your stress levels to make sure they are

within your limits. If you have family commitments or a demanding job, you need to be realistic about when and what you can do.

Of course a little stress is inevitable and in fact it is even desirable as a spur to action. I guess we all know some people with good Dharma hearts who seem to love talking about Dharma but are not so keen on putting words into action. Perhaps a little bit of stress might be the motivation they need? For me, death meditation which makes me realize that death will happen and it can happen at any time is a great way of keeping a little positive stress in my life. Looking back at our life from our death bed it will seem to have gone very quickly and it is the last place you want to be alone with regrets of what might have been.

At the same time, as the Buddha so kindly pointed out, our way through life should be on the middle path. So we also need to be able to relax and to be kind to ourselves and those dear ones we share the life with.

What are some of your visions or goals for the future of the Great Stupa and Jade Buddha?

The goals of our Lamas' are only BIG—and so should our goals be.

The Jade Buddha is a phenomenon which Lama Zopa has predicted will "illuminate the world." My goal is that the Jade Buddha will inspire billions of beings in this universe to follow the peaceful path. And that it will leave a legacy of lasting peace wherever it tours in the world.

My goal for the Great Stupa is for it to inspire countless beings throughout the universes (all those who see it and even those who hear about it or dream about it) to follow the spiritual, compassionate and peaceful path, and that it liberates tens of thousands of beings every day.

What is the detailed vision for the Great Stupa?

As mentioned before, it is our aim to change the reality of beings by seeing the spiritual dimension as of utmost importance. While this overall goal is spiritual, my intention is that the experience of coming to the Great Stupa will be as easy, comfortable, and pleasurable as possible. These days, people are used to the convenience of shopping malls and we have to be able to "compete" with this. The services people expect are parking that is nearby, convenient and clean toilets, air-conditioning, and being indoors and sheltered from the elements as much as possible. In addition, we will provide some form of buggy transport for infirm visitors. And lifts inside the Great Stupa will provide wheelchair access to the bumpa level.

Given the message of His Holiness that we should do what we can to minimize the impact on the environment, we need to plan to be an example of minimal energy usage in the Great Stupa and to maximize our own electricity generation. We believe that some form of heating and cooling is required in all or at least most levels in the Great Stupa. However, this does not mean, for example, that we would maintain 22 degrees Celsius (72 degrees Fahrenheit) throughout the building. Water will be collected from the terraces and used for watering the garden. Water will also be collected from the roof of the bumpa and piped to a separate point for bottling.

The Great Stupa will be presented as a monument of world standing. This monumental aspect enhances the feeling of "significance" in the visitor's mind and it should be reflected in many ways including that the entrance road should rise up to the main carpark to help create a sense of expectation.

From the carpark the visitor will proceed to a visitor reception center where the experience will be shaped by an introduction to what is about to come. This will include an overview of Buddhism, stupas, and so on. Psychologically this building will also prepare the mind of the visitor for the transition from the mundane to the spiritual.

The landscaping of the Great Stupa then plays an important role in the inspirational experience of visiting the Great Stupa. The entrance to the Great Stupa will follow the natural descent down to a saddle. Along this path will be the "Garden of Samsara" which will feature statues of the suffering realms of existence. At the bottom of the descent the visitor will enter a bodhi tree grove which features Buddha statues amongst the "Forest of the Buddhas." This will be a beautiful area for families to have picnics and relax in the shade. It also represents meeting with Buddha and taking refuge in the Buddha. From this point one rises up to the Great Stupa and symbolically to one's own enlightenment.

Natural sandstones will be used in garden edging to reflect the colorful sandstone and siltstone which is endemic to the area. Herbs with health benefits will also be used in the landscaping. Both lavender and rosemary will be featured in mass plantings. The essential oils from these herbs will be extracted.

Trees around the Great Stupa have been chosen for their beauty and the comfort they provide to people. Trees around the circumambulation paths are deciduous and very suitable to this region: Chinese Elms, Manchurian Pears, and Crepe Myrtle.

The Great Stupa is surrounded by three circumambulation paths which run for a total of 1 kilometer (0.6 miles). Short walks would also be laid out in the bodhi tree grove area. And it is possible that we will have a long kora which provides circumambulation around the Great Stupa, Atisha Centre, and Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery.

The Great Stupa works closely with the neighboring facilities of Atisha Centre and Thubten Shedrup Ling. A number of other facilities will be built to service the needs of the visitors to the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion:

• Visitor reception center/museum: this building will provide a transition from the mundane to the spiritual. Included in this building will be toilets, souvenir and snack shop, an induction area, which may include audio-visual presentations. This building will also house a museum, which will present the history of the Great Stupa, Atisha Centre, Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery, and the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace.

• Temples from various Buddhist traditions: sites have been allocated for four temples from different Buddhist traditions which will be built around the Great Stupa

- Hotel: 80-room hotel overlooking the Great Stupa will cater for "well-being" tourism as well as retreat/course attendees
- Restaurant: 200-seat vegetarian restaurant offering lunchtime buffet and evening meals
- Convenience store

The restaurant and convenience store will service the visitors as well as residents in the nearby village and hotel guests. The hotel will be on the same level as the carpark but located in such a way that guests can have a relatively private and quiet time.

Ian Green has served FPMT in the following capacities: Chairman The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion Ltd. (1996–current); Chairman Jade Buddha for Universal Peace Project (2003–current); Board member Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, Inc. (2000–2006); Board member of FPMT Australia (2004–2006); Chairman of Dalai Lama in Australia, Ltd. (2007–2010); Director of Atisha Centre, Ltd. (1981–1996); and Executive of Tara House, Melbourne (1978–1980). He has received several awards and recognitions for his work promoting peace and multicultural affairs.

Please visit the websites for The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion and The Jade Buddha of Universal Peace to learn more about these projects and what you can do to help them become a reality.

11. Painting the Dharma: The Inspiring Work of Gelek Sherpa

Mandala October–December 2011

One may serve the Dharma in any number of ways, but few kinds of service please the eyes more than the decorative paintings of Gelek Sherpa. The former Kopan monk has transformed gompas, shrines, statues, and stupas into colorful and inspiring examples of traditional Tibetan art, profoundly enriching the environment around them.

More than a painter familiar to FPMT centers, Gelek's life knits closely together with FPMT's history. He was born in 1964 above Thamodeng in Solu Kumbu, Nepal, not far from Lama Zopa Rinpoche's native village of Thame. When he was still quite young, his father took him to Rinpoche's Mount Everest Center for Buddhist Studies at Lawudo, where he became a monk and started learning the Tibetan alphabet and basic prayers. Gelek remembers life being difficult at Lawudo, having to carry water and wash dishes under harsh conditions. But he also remembers meeting Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche there. When the Mount Everest Center monks moved to Kopan Monastery near Kathmandu, Gelek went with them.

While at Kopan, Lama Yeshe told Gelek to paint a merit field that had been printed from a woodblock onto silk. Gelek was still young and not experienced with painting deities or applying color to silk. "It was difficult for me to paint, especially since the figures were very tiny," Gelek said. His efforts didn't go well at first. His watercolors, which he mixed with a lot of water, bled through the silk. Frustrated, he quit the painting. Lama Yeshe, however, did not tolerate this and disciplined Gelek.

With the help of Ven. Jampa Chokyi, who brought some fine brushes and acrylic paint and instructed Gelek to not use too much water, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who gave Gelek a picture of the merit field to look at while he painted, Gelek gained some confidence and was able to continue his work painting the merit field. Gelek also remembers how Lama Zopa Rinpoche sent his drawing of a mudra to Gelek and how Rinpoche taught Gelek to apply gold leaf on a Maitreya statue.

"Now that I've become more skillful, I have come to realize that Lama Yeshe blessed me by manifesting in the form of three deities," Gelek said. "He showed wrathful action that is like Vajrapani, his mala became like Manjushri's wisdom sword, and from inside his heart he showed me compassion like Avalokiteshvara."

Gelek left Kopan in 1985 to attend the Kalachakra initiation in Dharamsala and ended up spending the next four years at Tushita Meditation Centre, painting Lama Yeshe's stupa, cooking, and working in the bookstore. He then attended thangka painting school, due to the kindness of a benefactor. In 1991, Gelek worked with other artists on His Holiness the Dalia Lama's temple in Dharamsala. Then in 1996, Gelek went back to Kopan to paint the new gompa.

Gelek's largest creative challenge came when he arrived at Land of Medicine Buddha in Soquel,

California, in 1998 to paint the Memorial Shrine there. “It was a big job,” Gelek said. And Lama Zopa Rinpoche wasn’t there, so he had to start the work on his own. Over the next five years, Gelek and another Tibetan painter from India, Ngawang Kunkhen, filled the space with traditional paintings, including murals depicting the twelve deeds of Shakyamuni Buddha and panels of Medicine Buddhas, Chenrezig and the nyung nä lineage gurus, Taras, dakinis, and mantras. A large thangka-style painting of the Medicine Buddha mandala adorns the ceiling. According to the Land of Medicine Buddha’s website, “Having these powerful images inside the Memorial Shrine transforms it into a sacred space, as merely seeing these images has a powerful positive effect on the mind.”

Gelek’s beautiful paintings have spread throughout the West Coast of North America. Visitors to Vajrapani Institute in California can see his work in murals and decorations on Lama Yeshe’s cremation stupa. At Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s Washington State retreat house, Buddha Amitabha Pure Land, Gelek has painted extensive altars. And at the FPMT International Office and Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon, he has painted a stunning large altar in the Jokhang gompa and other sacred objects.

“To follow traditional Tibetan style, you need to focus deeply and have patience,” Gelek explained, which is why he doesn’t wear his hearing aids when he paints. “It comes better that way.” Watching him work, you see a man relaxed and confident in his skills and happy with his vocation. While he frequently receives commissions to do paintings, he also does gold leafing, restorations and repairs of sacred objects, as well as opening the eyes of buddhas. For the times when demand for his artistic skills is slow, Gelek has learned how to do electrical work and plumbing.

Gelek’s parents live in Kathmandu and his brother works as a translator in Italy. But Gelek likes living in America and became a citizen in 2010. In the next year, he is scheduled to paint the Enlightenment Stupa for Universal Peace and Environmental Harmony, created by Gendun Drubpa Centre in British Columbia, Canada. As for the longer-term future, he said someday he’d like to try Western style painting with oils, figure drawing, and sculpture.

“Both Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche have been so kind to make my life not only meaningful but also useful in their centers,” Gelek said. “I feel proud and fortunate to serve there. The motivation with which I joined the thangka painting school in Dharamsala and the dedication I made during that time came true. I also owe more than big thanks to our beloved long-time teacher [at Kopan] Lama Lhundrup, who also gave me the opportunity to paint in the new gompa there and also thanks to Valentino Giacomin from Italy who sponsored me during thangka painting school.”

12. Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa Restores *Kundun* Chenrezig

By Francesca Sala

Mandala Online April–June 2014

A large and colorful statue of Chenrezig looked over His Holiness the Dalai Lama during his teachings at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa (ILTK) in Italy in June 2014. Unlike most sacred art, this statue originated on the set of a Hollywood film. Its unusual background did not stop dedicated students from restoring it, and with His Holiness the Dalai Lama's blessings, regarding it as a cherished holy object.

In May 1996, in a small town in the Sahara, Morocco, famous American director Martin Scorsese and his Italian crew began to make a film—*Kundun*—about the life of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. With shooting in India and Tibet out of the question, Scorsese and his production team decided that Morocco would be where they recreated the landscapes of the Tibetan plateau. When they arrived in the town of Ouarzazate, there were only two small hotels, a main street, and plenty of dusty, unfinished houses. With this raw material, they created movie sets to represent where His Holiness was born and grew up.

In 1999, the large statue of Chenrezig that had been created by Dante Ferretti, the film's Italian production designer, to help recreate the Potala Palace was brought to Italy to be part of an installation in Milan at Rotonda della Besana named "Tibet: Art and Spirituality." The installation occurred during His Holiness's visit to the country as part of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of his winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

By 2012, the statue had made its way to Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Pomaia, Italy, and was displayed in the main square to awestruck residents. The giant sculpture, almost 8 meters (26 feet) high, had lost some of its initial splendor as its last months in the Atlas Studio in Morocco had damaged its brittle polystyrene body. However, the extraordinary potential of the statue was clear from the beginning.

Last summer, we began a restoration project to prepare the statue for permanent display as a holy object. The ILTK restoration team decided to cover the statue with resins and fiberglass, an experimental technique not usually employed in sculpture, but rather for building boat hulls. In this way, the hope is that it will withstand the sun, wind, and rain for many years. As a part of the work on this sacred symbol of perfect compassion, the polystyrene hands and steel core are being reshaped; damage is being repaired; clothing, jewelry, and the iconic deer skin are being cast anew.

ILTK's hope is that in June 2014 His Holiness will have the opportunity to bless the statue during his visit to the center.

13. The Inside Story: Microfilm, Holy Objects, and the Passion of Tai Vautier

By Donna Lynn Brown

Mandala Online April 2015

Who hasn't spun a prayer wheel? Whether a massive work of art that we propel with our whole bodies, a desktop ornament we twist with our fingertips, a decorated paint can on a spoke, or a hand-held cylinder, most of us have set a prayer wheel into motion and hoped for blessings to fly out.

But do we consider precisely what is *inside* the wheel? Oh, mantras, you say. You know that. But mantras have to be printed on something. In the old days, that was paper. You may assume that's what is in the wheel you are spinning today, but paper is getting less and less common. It only holds so many mantras, and it deteriorates over time. Perhaps you think it should be replaced by a CD or a flash drive—something digital for the modern world. Would that have the same power to bless? Unfortunately, no. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has explained that mantras in prayer wheels, statues, and stupas need to be visible—even if only by microscope. A mantra that cannot be seen by the human eye in any circumstances carries no blessing.

Exit digital. Enter microfilm. Unlike bits and bytes, microfilm bears actual images of mantras. And thanks to microfilm, a large prayer wheel can contain *billions* of them. Better still, the film can last up to five hundred years. Yet while microfilm may seem outrageously modern compared to ancient mantras, the technology is actually aging and falling out of use. That creates its own challenges.

Tai Vautier knows this better than anyone. Tai, a talented jewelry-maker, was born in Spain to Buddhist parents, raised around FPMT's Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Vajrapani Institute in California, and currently lives in Oregon in the United States. For years now, she has been working to produce mantra microfilm. The story of its current use in FPMT's holy objects is largely Tai's story.

"Back in 2001," she recalled, "I was given a hand-held prayer wheel by another FPMT student, Julia Hengst. Julia always carried a prayer wheel in those days, and I used to tease her about it. The one she gave me was wood and made by Jim Glass. He's passed away now, but he used to make these beautiful prayer wheels. I was skeptical, but when I started spinning the wheel, I noticed right away that it wasn't just a chunk of wood, it was like a 'being'—I felt like I was hanging out with a really good person. I got hooked. Then my husband, Robert Woods, and I decided to make them. Jim Glass taught us in his workshop in Berkeley. This was in 2002, when my kids were just born. We stuck to his design and started making them in our garage in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jim was using microfilm for the mantras. With film, millions and millions of mantras could go into even a small prayer wheel. Julia always stressed how important that was: the sheer

number of mantras. Jim had a stock of microfilm with manis (the mantra OM MANI PADME HUM) on it, but the master had been lost." In the audio-visual world, a master is the original from which copies are made. Without a master for the microfilm manis, there was no way of making more. "So I decided to create a new OM MANI PADME HUM master," Tai continued. "That's how I got started."

It wasn't easy finding a microfilm producer to work with. Producers hadn't heard of prayer wheels and wouldn't give Tai the time of day. Finally, she ran across a Texan in Albuquerque who worked in microfilm—and who had once given his wife a bracelet engraved with OM MANI PADME HUM. When Tai talked about the mantra, he understood. The two of them started working together in 2003. Tai and her husband kept making wooden prayer wheels for about a year, but she wanted to focus on microfilm. They handed the making of the wheels over to long-time friend Chuck Thomas, who also supplies some of the prayer wheels found in the Foundation Store, FPMT's online shop.

Getting as many mantras as possible on the film, while keeping them legible, was Tai's aim. At first, using an old Ditto machine, she copied mantras from Lorne Ladner's book, *Wheel of Great Compassion: The Practice of the Prayer Wheel in Tibetan Buddhism*, but shrinking made these illegible. She then got the original of one set of Lorne's mantras, which had come from the office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This she scanned and edited in Photoshop. She managed to get an astonishing 880,000,000 manis onto a 2,000-foot (610-meter) roll of microfilm. But although the mantra remained readable, the master, due to the shape of the Tibetan letters, was too fragile to withstand the constant duplication needed to fill large orders. While this master is still available for small jobs, a sturdier one was needed. Tai worked long hours in Photoshop to thicken some parts of the Tibetan letters and spread others apart, in effect designing her own font in order to create mantras that were readable after reduction and didn't cause the film to weaken with heavy use.

Tai's Photoshopped images turned out well, but the files had too much data to be sent digitally to a microfilm camera. They had to be printed. Even the best printers bleed when letters are that small. And no matter how smooth the paper was, its grain distorted the tiny letters. Tai persevered. She discovered she could send her images digitally to a machine that used a highly sensitive photomultiplier tube. With this, a page of miniature mantras could, like a photo, be developed and printed on completely smooth 11" x 14" (28 cm x 36 cm) paper. This was photographed and printed onto a 5/8" (16 mm) frame of microfilm. Each mantra, at this point, was no larger than the tip of a hair and visible only by microscope.

Just how small could they go? In her passion for numbers, Tai worried that she might be shrinking the mantras too much. She consulted Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Size didn't matter, he said, as long as the mantras remained perfectly clear under magnification. To improve quality, she upsized the mantras slightly, going from "super high-density" to "high-density." A 2,000-foot (610-meter) high-density roll of microfilm now holds 685,809,230 mani mantras. Over the years, she made a total of 18 such high-density masters for various mantras requested by different Dharma groups, each one

taking months of painstaking labor to complete.

Tai achieved her goal of putting vast numbers of crystal-clear mantras onto microfilm, and Dharma centers have purchased more than a million dollars worth of high-density film made from her masters. The film is in hundreds of prayer wheels and other holy objects around the world. For Tai, it was a labor of love, and all done as a volunteer. She said, smiling, "I was just happy to help people make mantras. Because of having had my own prayer wheel for a while, I could see how important they were. But after making 18 master rolls, I did need a rest!"

While Tai refocused her life on family and jewelry-making, the company she had worked with to print the microfilm rolls went through ownership changes. Eventually about 50 master rolls of mantras, prayers, and PDFs of sutras made by Tai, FPMT, prayer wheel makers, and others were in company's hands. But over time, the master rolls, some in good condition and some deteriorating with use, were moved to a different city and a company where Tai no longer had a contact. And although Lama Zopa Rinpoche had asked Tai to keep an eye on quality, the changes in ownership and location made this impossible. In 2014, orders started to back up, shipments fell to nothing, and phone calls to the company went unreturned. Worse, the master rolls were nowhere to be found. Tai started getting calls. Was she willing to plunge back into the microfilm project?

Tai didn't hesitate. She contacted the company, and, after some back and forth, managed to get most of the masters back. Missing was the one most heavily used—the mani roll. As fortune would have it, Tom Truty, FPMT's director of Education Services, had a second master of that one at FPMT's International Office in Portland—a back-up wisely archived years earlier. With the help of FPMT as well as translator-scholar Eric Fry-Miller, Tai inspected the master rolls for quality. Some had broken down, but about 30 remained in good enough condition to be put back into use.

She took on yet another challenge: finding a new producer in a world where few printers still work with microfilm. Luck was on her side. Practically on her doorstep, Tai found Jeff Lindquist and his company Linco Micro-Image Systems, of Clackamas, Oregon. Jeff grew up around microfilm—his father was in the business—but was considering getting out in favor of digital. When Tai talked to him, he changed his mind.

"I have a passion for microfilm, so I'm fascinated to see it being used in this unique way," said Jeff. "I've been reading Lorne Ladner's book because I want to learn everything about this so we can do it perfectly. We've invested in a new camera to get the best clarity—with such small images, precision is vital. And quality is our main goal. We're also looking for a second duplicator to make sure we can meet the demand, and I plan to hire one or two new people once everything gets going. It's exciting." Jeff is already filling orders—and Tai is delighted with his commitment to quality and understanding of the details.

And, working with Tom Truty, Tai and Jeff are taking steps to make microfilm easier to order and use.

First, they relabeled each master roll in both English and Tibetan, with labels that show direction as well as name, and can be read without magnification. This helps users to know what is on the

film, install it upright, and ensure it revolves in the correct direction, a priority of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Labels have been inserted every 100 feet (30 meters), so if a film gets broken, the pieces can still be identified.

"Relabeling is something I've wanted to do for a while," Tai explained. "I get complaints from prayer wheel makers about how hard it is to know which film they are using or its direction, since the mantras can only be read with a scientific microscope. And then the microscope flips the image, making it even more complicated to figure out which way it's going. Now, every single roll has a clear indicator that can be seen with the naked eye. Jeff and I spent weeks on this, but it's worth it!"

Second, with the collaboration of Eric Fry-Miller, Tai has been helping Jeff to create a website—buddhistmicrofilm.com—so customers can order on-line from a list of what's available. Jeff also plans to keep a stock of popular mantras on hand for quick delivery. And for those needing to put a new mantra or text on microfilm, he will make PDF-style masters on request. The website will also list makers of prayer wheels.

FPMT is helping too. Even though others will be able to order copies of FPMT's masters from Linco, Tom Truty has made clear that FPMT will not collect royalties—a practical way to keep prices low, and one in keeping with a karma-based approach to spiritual products.

Will Tai make more high-density masters? Existing ones will eventually erode and need replacing, but using the old photomultiplier technology is probably no longer feasible. Making PDFs of pages, or typing then shrinking mantras digitally, are solutions that produce fewer mantras, but allow masters to be created more easily. But Tai hasn't abandoned the dream of high-density. "I'm checking it out," she said. "Jeff has access to a newer technology that may be able to create high-density masters without the time or expense of the old process. We are making test runs and it looks hopeful." She smiled as she explained. "I still want prayer wheels to have *billions* of mantras!"

Tai was thrilled to hear that the new arrangements for microfilm have received a final stamp of approval. "Lama Zopa Rinpoche himself has ordered the first new master roll to be made by Linco. It includes the five powerful mantras, the four Dharmakaya Relic mantras, Avalokiteshvara, and others. And anyone will be able to order it. So we are really honored!"

It's a fitting tribute to Tai's efforts to fill the universe with billions of blessings.

More information on mantra microfilm, including ways to order it for stupas and statues is made available by FPMT Education Services on FPMT.org.

Prayer wheels of different kinds and sizes are available through the Foundation Store, FPMT International Office's online shop. All proceeds from the Foundation Store are used to further the charitable mission of FPMT, Inc.

Donna Lynn Brown is a graduate of Maitripa College and served as an associate editor for Mandala *in 2016-17.*

14. How Do Holy Objects Work?

By Ven. Tenzin Legtsok

Mandala Online July 2015

Recently, a Dharma friend asked me a question that comes up often in relation to holy objects such as stupas, sutras, and mantras. "So, there's a story in the lamrim about a fly unintentionally going around a stupa and as a result having the root of virtue required to take ordination as a novice monk in a future lifetime," he began. "How could it be that virtue was created in that fly's mental continuum when the fly had no positive motivation?" he asked. "And if that root of virtue arose in the fly's mind solely due to the power of the stupa, doesn't that mean the stupa's power to benefit sentient beings exists from its own side and so is inherently existent?"

The story, told in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*,[1] is about an old man named Shrijata who wanted to leave his home and take ordination. Venerable Shariputra refused to give Shrijata novice vows, explaining that he didn't have the roots of virtue to be able to keep ordination. Shrijata was utterly disappointed. Shakyamuni Buddha saw the situation through his clairvoyance, appeared to Shrijata, and told him that he *does* have the roots of virtue to take ordination, but that this virtue is so subtle that Shariputra could not see it. This virtue, the Buddha said, was created in Shrijata's past life when as a fly—following a cartload of dung—he unknowingly circumambulated a stupa.

According to the Buddhist philosophy of the Middle Way clearly expressed by Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, and Lama Tsongkhapa, it's argued that nothing exists inherently or totally independent of other things, from its own side. Even if the virtuous imprint that arose in that fly's mental continuum as a result of going around the stupa was *not dependent* whatsoever on the fly having a virtuous intention or positive motivation, still the fly *had* to go around the stupa for that imprint to be produced. That particular root of virtue couldn't have arisen in the fly's continuum if it hadn't gone around the stupa.

Lama Tsongkhapa wrote in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lamrim Chenmo*), "Those who enjoy the fruits of the innumerable collections amassed by the Teacher need not have accumulated all of the causes of these effects, but they do need to accumulate a portion."[2] So, it's argued that the fly created a portion of the cause to enjoy the results of the merit collected by past buddhas simply by going around the stupa. Thus, the resultant virtuous imprint that arose in the fly's continuum was a complex dependent arising connected to the activity of past holy beings and did not arise solely because of the physical stupa, although it did play a part. Even the physical stupa itself is not inherently existent because it exists in dependence on parts, such as its four sides; in dependence on causes and conditions, such as the people who built the stupa and the material it was made from; and in dependence on mental imputation, the label "stupa" being applied appropriately to the base for this label.

But a question remains: how does an inanimate object—no matter how sacred—affect sentient beings regardless of their motivation? This is not so easy of a question to answer. If you're in doubt that the Buddha taught this, the idea is reiterated in the *King of Concentration Sutra*, where it says that even looking upon a drawing of a stupa with a mind of anger creates the cause to see millions of buddhas in the future. Similar statements are made in other sutras—such as the *Sutra of Golden Light* or the *Sanghata Sutra*—about how hearing merely a few lines from these sutras purifies negative karma collected over eons and helps a practitioner accumulate inconceivable amounts of merit. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has explained that such effects are due to the power of prayer. "It's like mantra," Lama Zopa Rinpoche said. "A mantra has power because a buddha blesses it to have power. A mantra is powerful because a buddha makes it powerful. This [ability], the power of prayer, is one of a buddha's ten powers."[3]

The power of prayer or aspiration (*mönlam gyi wang* in Tibetan) is one of many qualities of the wisdom truth body (jñana-dharmakaya) enumerated in chapter 8 of Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayalamkara*). Lama Tsongkhapa describes this quality as follows, "Because they accomplish just as they wish, they have power over prayers included."[4] In short, this means that buddhas have achieved the power to accomplish whatever prayers they make. Lama Tsongkhapa adds that this ability is the result of joyous effort—the fourth of the six perfections—because in the past as bodhisattvas they never stopped striving for the welfare of sentient beings.

One might counter argue, "How could buddhas have the power to accomplish whatever they pray for? They pray for all sentient being to be free from suffering yet countless sentient beings still suffer." The buddhas' having achieved the power of prayer is similar to their having achieved the perfection of generosity. That a buddha has completed the perfection of generosity doesn't mean that they have eliminated all poverty in the world, but instead, that they have perfected the attitude wishing to give whatever they possess for the welfare of others.[5] Similarly, achieving power over prayer does not mean that a buddha's prayers are all immediately fulfilled exactly in accordance with their aspirations, but that from the buddha's side there is nothing more that could be done to fulfill their prayers. All the incredibly vast oceans of merit that a buddha has accumulated previously as a bodhisattva on the path and as a fully enlightened being has been dedicated toward the fulfillment of their prayers and continually functions to fulfill these intentions. What remains undone is only from the side of sentient beings. Shantideva made a prayer in *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

> If in those who encounter me
> A faithful or an angry thought arises,
> May that eternally be the source
> For fulfilling all their wishes.[6]

Bodhisattvas create unimaginably huge collections of merit and wisdom on the path to enlightenment through their practice of great compassion, bodhichitta, and the six perfections. By dedicating all of this positive energy toward fulfilling the welfare of sentient beings, they make it possible for us to enjoy a portion of the fruits of their virtue, what Lama Tsongkhapa's quote

above was about. Thus, the force of bodhichitta, the two collections of merit and wisdom, prayers from the side of enlightened beings, and from the side of ordinary sentient beings like us, the condition of encountering sacred objects—even *without* a virtuous motivation—together create the possibility for us to easily accumulate virtue, purify negative karma, and plant the seeds for liberation and enlightenment. This is one way that stupas, mantras, and other holy objects are imbued with power, which is the common answer to the questions about the unintentionally virtuous fly.

This ability that stupas, statues, and scriptures have to almost passively plant seeds of virtue and enlightenment in the minds of sentient beings makes it obvious what an incredibly skillful means it is to build such holy objects, especially when we consider how hard it is to create causes for liberation from samsara and complete buddhahood. In his discussion of the second noble truth about the origins of suffering, Lama Tsongkhapa makes the very sobering point that without actual renunciation, bodhichitta, or wisdom realizing emptiness, except by the power of exceptional objects in relation to which we create actions, *all our virtuous actions* contribute to further wandering in cyclic existence under the control of karma. Lama Tsongkhapa says:

> ... you might not have acquired, through extensive meditative analysis of the faults of cyclic existence, the remedy that eradicates the craving for the wonders of cyclic existence. Also you might not have used discerning wisdom to properly analyze the meaning of selflessness, and might not have become familiar with the two spirits of enlightenment [conventional and ultimate]. Under such circumstances, your virtuous activities—with some exceptions on account of the field's power—would constitute typical origins of suffering, and hence would fuel the process of cyclic existence.[7]

For most sentient beings, it is rare to have a truly virtuous thought arise and actual renunciation, bodhichitta, and the wisdom realizing emptiness are unheard of. Even among those fortunate enough to aspire to these attitudes, most do not have a clear idea what they are and exactly how to cultivate them, or, although intellectually understanding them, do not actually generate these realizations in their mindstreams. In short, for most of us it is incredibly difficult to generate an actual cause for liberation and enlightenment. The big exception is "on account of the field's power," which is to say that in relation to exceptional objects such as the Guru, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and the holy objects representing these, we can easily create causes for nirvana and the state of omniscience. If by just seeing such objects with a mind of anger plants the seeds for all the realizations on the path to enlightenment, as indicated in the *King of Concentration Sutra*, then there is no need to mention the far reaching benefits of viewing such objects with a mind of faith, making offerings, constructing, and paying homage to these objects in various ways. Through the power of prayer of extraordinary beings, holy objects provide unique opportunities for sentient beings of all levels of intelligence, from the tiniest insects to the most brilliant humans and gods, to easily create causes for liberation and enlightenment, and enjoy a share of the positive effects of the buddhas' two collections of merit and wisdom.

Two objections can arise from our common understanding of the general characteristics of karma

and they are important to consider. The first is how can a negative attitude such as anger or craving produce a happy result such as seeing millions of buddhas or taking ordination if karma is certain, in the sense that every experience of pleasure must have arisen from a previous positive karma that is its cause, and every experience of suffering must have arisen from non-virtue. The second is how can we experience the results of positive karmic actions created by others such as buddhas and bodhisattvas if we do not experience the effects of karmic actions we did not commit.

In general, one karmic action can be very complex, arising from a collection of positive and negative causes and producing a variety of results, some pleasant and others unpleasant. For instance, when someone gets angry and insults us and we patiently respond with genuine kindness and concern, we create a positive karma. Although the karmic result of this will be a pleasant experience, one cause of that experience is the anger of the person who insulted us. In the case of someone scowling at an image of a buddha with anger, they will definitely suffer as a result of this action because it is motivated by an afflictive emotion. However, due to the power of the object, an incredibly virtuous object in this case, they will also experience a positive result of that action. The negative result arises primarily due to their negative attitude, whereas the positive result arises primarily due to the power of the particular object, such as a buddha image that is able to produce a positive result for the reasons given above.

In response to the second objection, it's true that we don't experience the results of karma created by others with whom we have no relationship whatsoever. However, in some cases, we can experience the results of karma created by others when we form a karmic link with them. For example, when a group of people collectively do an action, like saving the lives of one hundred fish, each member of the group accumulates the karma created by the group. In the case of the lucky fly discussed above, it created a karmic link with enlightened beings by going around the stupa. That small action enabled the fly to experience a portion of the positive results arising from the buddhas' infinite collection of merit and wisdom. In short, the help enlightened beings extend to us is like a hand reaching down to help us climb out of a hole: if we don't extend a hand up for it to grab onto, we can't benefit from it.

The Buddha famously said to analyze his teachings like a goldsmith analyzes gold:

> Like gold [that is acquired] upon being scorched, cut, and rubbed,
> My word is to be adopted by monastics and scholars
> Upon being analyzed well,
> Not out of respect [for me].[8]

We should not throw skepticism to the wind and blindly believe whatever we see in the Buddha's teachings. That wouldn't provide a firm foundation for our spiritual development. However, we also need to avoid scornfully dismissing the possibility that sacred objects and beings can have an enlightening influence on us in ways we cannot readily explain. This could close avenues of possible benefit to us that at the time we can't fully appreciate and lead us to create the heavy negative karma of abandoning the Buddha's teachings.

The subtle workings of karma are among the most difficult topics in which to gain conviction and because they are considered "very hidden phenomena," they are traditionally "proven" by appealing to the validity of the Buddha and his teachings. In Buddhist works on valid cognition and logic, the integrity of Buddha as a teacher is established by showing that his teachings on the four noble truths, and especially on emptiness, are true. Generating faith in the Buddha and his teachings, especially on karma, needs to involve not just our intellect, but more importantly, our heart through personal experimentation with the practices taught, which can be a lifelong endeavor much like developing a deep trusting relationship with a spouse or friend. To develop conviction in the power of holy objects, mantras, and sutras, it helps to have a reasonable way to conceive of how they can affect us and why this is important. For this purpose, I have tried to present a few supporting arguments and scriptural citations to consider. In the end, though, the measure of whether a set of practices are beneficial to us or not must be *our own experience*.

In finding our own way to the mountaintop, it would be foolish not to consult the accounts of past masters who've gone before such as Shakyamuni Buddha, the ancient Indian pandits of Nalanda, and the sages of Tibet by extensively reading their works. As well, it is invaluable to make contact with living teachers who fully embody the Buddha's teachings, listen to their message, and seek their advice. Then while engaging in practices according to their instructions, we monitor whether the transformation in our own minds is for better or worse. Where we see benefit, we delve further and find ourselves discovering possibilities to create inner sources of well-being we had not known before.

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Notes:

1. Pabongka Rinpoche, translated by Michael Richards (Wisdom, Boston 1991) p. 440.

2. Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol. 1, p. 214.

3. From a conversation with the author in Bangalore, India, 2008.

4. Tsongkhapa, *legs bshad rin po che gser gyi phreng ba bzhugs so* (Sera Je Monastic University, 2001). This line was translated by the author although the entire work translated into English by Garath Sparham is published by Jain Publications: *Golden Garland of Eloquence*, and the line cited here is in Vol. 4, p. 180-1.

5. See Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol. 2, edited by Joshua Cutler (Snow Lion, Boston 2004) pp. 114-5.

6. Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. by Stephen Batchelor (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala 1979) Chp. 3, vs. 16.

7. Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Vol. 1, p. 305-6. Tsongkhapa's statement here is based on a passage by Arya Asanga from the *Compendium of Determinations*.

8. Cited in Tshongkhapa's, *Treatise Differentiating Interpretable and Definitive Meanings; The Essence of Elloquence*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins in *Emptiness in the Mind Only School* (University of California Press, London, 1999) p. 71.

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