

AN EXCERPT FROM  
**BIG LOVE**

In the following pages of *Mandala*, we are proud to share chapter 2, “1941–58: Living a Monastic Life,” from *Big Love: The Life and Teachings of Lama Yeshe*. The chapter, printed here in its entirety, is laid out exactly as it appears in the book.



## 2. 1941–58: LIVING A MONASTIC LIFE

*For the first half of the 1940s, World War II was in full swing on three fronts—Europe, Asia and North Africa. By the time the war came to an end in 1945 the face of world politics had changed drastically.*

*In China, the communists came out victorious in a civil war and in 1949 Mao Zedong formally proclaimed the Communist People’s Republic of China.*

*In Tibet, the political turmoil continued. In early 1941 the controversial Reting Rinpoche decided to enter an extended spiritual retreat and relinquished his role as regent to Taktra Rinpoche under a mutual agreement that he could take the position back upon completion of his retreat. The years under Taktra Rinpoche’s rule were full of corruption and bureaucratic negligence.*



Taktra Rinpoche

### ENTERING SERA MONASTERY

EVERY TIBETAN FAMILY had relatives in monasteries. Those who entered monastic life on Dondrup Dorje’s mother’s side of the family went to Drepung Monastery, whereas those on his father’s side went to Sera. After some deliberation in the family, it was decided that Dondrup Dorje would go to Sera Monastery. The Rakor nuns made him a little set of maroon and yellow robes. And so, in 1941, at the age of six, Dondrup Dorje entered Sera Monastery under the tutelage of his uncle, Ngawang Norbu.

The great monastery of Sera looks over the flat Lhasa plain toward the Potala Palace, home of the Dalai Lamas for over four hundred years. On the mountain behind Sera Monastery sits Sera Chöding, hermitage of the founder of the Gelug lineage, Lama Je Tsongkhapa. It was here that Tsongkhapa wrote a great commentary on *Fundamental Wisdom*, an important Buddhist text composed by the Indian saint Nagarjuna.<sup>13</sup> While writing this commentary, Tsongkhapa invoked Manjushri. At one point the Tibetan

13. See Tsongkhapa’s *Ocean of Reasoning*.



Sera Monastery, ca 1938



Sera Monastery






Sera Chöding

wisdom syllable *ah* appeared in the air in front of him.<sup>14</sup> Once he had finished writing the great commentary, the *ah* syllable embedded itself in a rock below the hermitage and is said to still be visible today. Lama Tsongkhapa prophesied that a large monastery would be built on that spot and the monks there would specialize in the study of the Middle Way. Jamchen Chöje, one of Tsongkhapa's chief disciples, began building Sera Monastery in 1419, the same year his master passed away.

When Dondrup Dorje entered Sera Monastery it was a bustling town with a population of around five thousand monks and comprising two main colleges, Sera Je and Sera Mey, as well as a tantric college, Sera Ngagpa. Winding flagstone paths con-

nected hundreds of buildings made of the same gray stone. The uppermost walls of the main buildings were edged with red *pembe* friezes, borders of tightly bound tamarisk twigs daubed with red paint that traditionally adorn the upper parapets of Tibetan buildings. Those walls were also topped with gold-colored finials. The only other color to catch the eye came from bright cotton door hangings, maroon monks' robes and huge buddha images painted on large flat boulders. Many of these bas-relief images were said to be "self-emanating"—that is, they appeared spontaneously but gradually from the rock face and were then painted.

Inside the main temple buildings, brilliantly colored murals in the intricate Tibetan style portrayed stories of the lives

14. The syllable *ah* is the first syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet, the divine pure language from which the Tibetan alphabet was created. *ah* is said to be the primordial vowel sound, the sound from which all other sound originates, the fundamental cause of all speech and the source of all mantras. Thus it also symbolizes the Buddha's speech and, as such, appears at the throat *chakra* when visualizing an enlightened being. The syllable *ah* is also the essence of all phenomena, embodying the original state of emptiness from which all things arise. In Sanskrit, *ah* is also a word of negation. Thus, *ah* is the shortest version of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*; all the Buddha's wisdom teachings can be condensed in the single syllable *ah*. 



Above left: Shakyamuni Buddha at Sera; Above right: Three great bodhisattvas

of saints. Red lacquered pillars were topped with bands of primary colors; beautiful enormous *thangka* paintings<sup>15</sup> framed in rich brocade hung from the ceilings beside huge golden statues, some three stories high. Inside the temple buildings, the only light came from butter lamps, some of them as large as one meter tall. Everything, including the stone walls and wooden handrails of steep stairways, was blackened and saturated with six hundred years of oily smoke from thousands of butter lamps.<sup>16</sup>

It has been said that around one sixth of the male population of Tibet became monks and resided in monasteries, so it was common to encounter one's relatives there. The Sera monks lived in seventeen different hostels (Tib: *khangtsen*) organized by geographic region. Monks who came from Tölung resided in Tsawa Khangtsen; this was where Dondrup Dorje's uncles and his half-brother Puntsog Thinley lived and where Dondrup Dorje came to live as well. It was here that Dondrup Dorje finally met Dorje

Tsering, his other half-brother, for the first time and learned he had personally known the Rakor abbess, Aché Jampa.

Dondrup Dorje had a number of relatives who were members of Sera Je College. His uncle, Ngawang Norbu, was the student of still another uncle who had once been a cook for the Sera Je assembly hall and had prepared tea and food for the regularly scheduled pujas.

Dondrup Dorje was given a room in Tsawa Khangtsen with an older uncle, a monk called Losang Tsultrim. The room was about six feet by eight feet in size and poorly furnished, with only a thin rug on the floor. Losang Tsultrim instructed the boy in domestic skills and demanded total obedience. Ngawang Norbu, who lived nearby, taught him basic prayers and rituals.

First Dondrup Dorje learned the Tibetan ABCs.<sup>17</sup> Once he had mastered his letters, he learned how to read scriptures, his lessons focusing on learning common prayers. Soon after, much of his day was spent memorizing

15. Tibetan *thangkas* are generally religious paintings on cloth, which are framed with borders of brocade.

16. Butter was the yellow gold of Tibet. Traditional Tibetan tea is made of hot tea, salt and butter churned together into a frothy soup. For a Tibetan, the thicker the slick that forms on top of a cup of tea, the better. Pilgrims would crowd the temples carrying gourds of butter and wooden spoons to ladle it into the offering lamps. Even today Tibetans offer copious amounts of butter in lamps on their temple altars.

17. In Tibetan, the alphabet is referred to as *ka kha ga nga*, its first four letters.





Sera getsuls

and reciting texts and prayers, such as the *Bodhisattva's Confession of Moral Downfalls* and the *Praises to the Twenty-One Taras*.<sup>18</sup> This is still the traditional method of study for young monks and nuns. Throughout the monastery the days and nights were filled with the sound of young voices loudly reciting texts and prayers, over and over. Mornings were devoted to memorization, and every evening the young monks had to recite what they had memorized that day for their teachers. This technique enables monks to develop absolute recall of scriptures and philosophical texts, to be able to cite such material from memory during debates and to have total familiarity with the root text being taught as well as other relevant commentaries on the same subject. This was also a very practical skill since the dim light inside the monastery buildings often made it impossible to read.

In addition to his studies, Dondrup Dor-

je's daily duties also included sweeping, scrubbing the stone floors and washing and cooking for himself and his two uncles. "We rose just before dawn," Lama Yeshe recalled. "The first thing I did was to clean my uncle's house, sweep the floor, put everything in order, make tea and serve him. We always had the same thing every day, so there was no problem deciding what to eat: we had tsampa for breakfast in the morning, tsampa for lunch, and for dinner, more tsampa. Sometimes we had vegetables and we drank hot butter tea. We all loved butter so much!"

If Dondrup Dorje's work was not perfect he was beaten with a leather strap or a heavy wooden stick. He was even kicked. While some monks at Sera say they were never beaten, the treatment Dondrup Dorje received was not unusual. Many of the younger monks were beaten often—on their heads, shoulders, elbows, knees—wherever it hurt the most. Losang Tsultrim was a tough

18. See *Essential Buddhist Prayers, Volume 1*, pp. 39–54 (Confession) and pp. 187–200 (Twenty-One Taras).

master and monks in rooms nearby often heard the sound of Dondrup Dorje being beaten. Once the boy was beaten unconscious for not cleaning things properly. “But he was really very kind to me, because now I know how to clean,” Lama Yeshe said later.

Tibetan children can be very slightly built and Dondrup Dorje undoubtedly looked quite fragile in his voluminous red robes with his little head shaved. But no one would have felt especially sorry for him, bruised and beaten though he was. He was just one child among hundreds of little monks who came to Sera every year and considered themselves fortunate to be there. Classmates tended to form close friendships and the constant hardships undoubtedly strengthened the bonds between them.

Dondrup Dorje must have cried himself to sleep many times, but in later years Lama Yeshe said the beatings he had received from this uncle taught him great patience and endurance. “I was really happy to be a monk,” he recalled, “but sometimes I questioned the situation regarding my uncle,



Sera getsul

Losang Tsultrim. Everyone knew how tough he was. Usually students stayed with him for only a short time. Some left because there were too many beatings. It was a difficult life, very strict.”

## ORDINATION

After two years at Sera, at the unusually young age of eight, Dondrup Dorje took the thirty-six vows of a novice monk (Tib: *getsul*) and received a new name—Thubten Yeshe. The fourth Purbu Chog Rinpoche, Thubten Jampa Tsultrim Tenzin,<sup>19</sup> probably performed this ceremony, as he ordained most of the young monks of Sera Je in those years.

Around this time Thubten Yeshe fell seriously ill with rheumatic fever, which permanently weakened his heart. He often became breathless and took Tibetan herbal medicine<sup>20</sup> prescribed by doctor lamas from the nearby medical monastic institute at Chagpori.<sup>21</sup> Like a number of recognized reincarnations, Thubten Yeshe was very sensitive and from a very early age needed

19. The first incarnation, Purchog Ngawang Jampa, was a famous textbook writer for Sera Je and wrote many other texts as well. The third Purbu Chog Rinpoche was a tutor of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

20. Tibetan medicine is a complete and discrete medical science and is still practiced today.

21. Chagpori, which literally means Iron Mountain, is a sacred hill in Lhasa just south of the Potala Palace. One of the four holy mountains of central Tibet, Chagpori was the site of the most famous medical monastery in Tibet. Conceived in the seventeenth century by the great Fifth Dalai Lama, Losang Gyatso, for the purpose of preserving and advancing the practice of Tibetan medicine, this medical school complex was built on



to have his own eating utensils. When he ate from the bowls of others, his nose bled and he vomited. He also needed his things to be very clean—which they were, thanks to Losang Tsultrim.

Some monks were provided with food and supplies by their families. Very poor monks often had nothing but the tea served at group pujas performed in the assembly halls. Some monks nearly starved. Pema Wangyal and Jako provided for their three boys at Sera as well as they could. Pema Wangyal made regular trips to Lhasa, his pack animals loaded with tsampa, dried yak meat, cheese, dried dung for fuel, bedding, brooms and utensils. For the most part any food other than tsampa and *thugpa* (soup made with noodles, vegetables and a little meat) was a luxury.



Purbu Chog Rinpoche



Chagpori from the Potala

Iron Mountain by his prime minister, Desi Sangye Gyatso, and opened in 1695. The School of Medicine and Astrology (Mentsikhang) in Lhasa was founded by masters from Chagpori in 1912. Tradition has it that the three main hills of Lhasa embody the “three protectors of Tibet”: Chagpori represents Vajrapani, Pongwari represents Manjushri, and Marpori, the hill on which the Potala Palace stands, represents Avalokiteshvara.)



Lama Yeshe and Jampa Trinley, Kopan, 1975

Thubten Yeshe was particularly fond of the *tsampa* his classmate, Jampa Trinley, received from his wealthy family in Lhasa. Crushed dried cheese and a little sugar mixed with the roasted barley flour made it altogether superior to the simple country fare his family produced. Thubten Yeshe often badgered his friend for a sample when they sat together during pujas. Monks carried their own wooden bowls to puja slipped into the pocket-like front of their *dongka*, the shirt-like monks' upper garment. A bag of *tsampa* was often tucked in there as well.

Lay benefactors regularly sponsored pujas in order to protect their families from sickness and harm, and especially to accumulate the good karma of supporting the Sangha. At the end of the ceremony each monk received a few coins, which the young ones then had to hand over to their guardians to cover the

costs of *tsampa*, firewood and other things when supplies from home were exhausted.

The funeral practices known as sky burials,<sup>22</sup> a kind of excarnation, were a regu-



Sky burial

22. Tib: *cha tor*; literally, "bird scattered."



lar source of such offerings. Corpses were brought up to a special rock platform where they were dismembered by a team of experts known as body-breakers. Vultures familiar with the practice gathered thick and silent on the hills around the body-breakers, waiting to be called. First the flesh and organs were removed from the corpse, wrapped in cloth and kept till last. Then the bones were crushed to a pulp with rocks in bowl-shaped depressions scraped out of the rock and mixed with tsampa. The vultures were then called with cries of “Cha! Cha!” and offered this mixture first. When it was gone they were given the soft tissue, which was what they really liked. By the time they had fin-

ished and the scavenging crows had eaten the vultures’ leftovers, the area had been picked clean.

Thubten Yeshe and other young monks were often called upon to attend sky burials and offer prayers. Lama Yeshe recalled these with disarming frankness. “The bodies are taken up there very early in the morning and in winter it is so cold. When I’d arrive back at Sera, my uncle would always ask, ‘How much money did you get?’ I was supposed to meditate up there, to think good things, but really, I was just scared when I saw the dead bodies. How could I be of practical use when I was scared? For me, sky burials were just a hassle.”

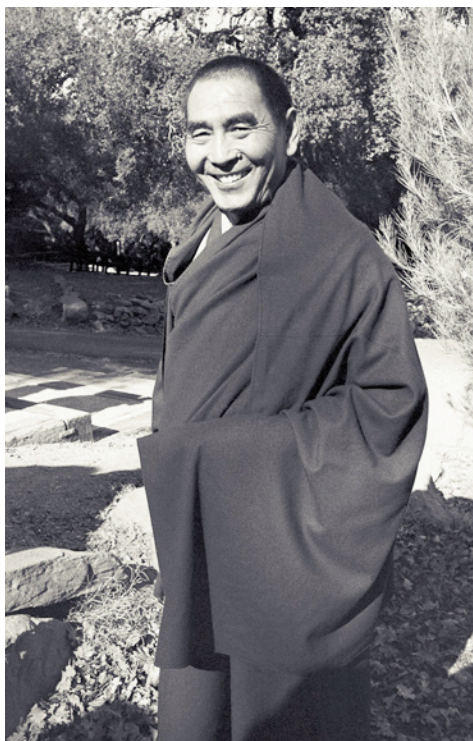
## DEBATE AND STUDY

For many monks, monastic life meant being wholly devoted to receiving intensive instruction in the Dharma, the teachings of Buddha. Some monks dropped out of the monastery while others specialized in the study of just one subject. Some preferred serving the monastery through work instead of studying while others just hung around enjoying monastic life. There were those who weren’t interested in pursuing a geshe degree; some studied for a while and went on to devote their lives to meditation. Only a small percentage of monks who entered Sera Je ever completed the entire course of study. Those who did were subjected to arduous public examinations and, if successful, graduated as *geshes*, literally, spiritual friends.

The complete course of study to become a geshe usually takes at least twenty years. Monks pass through eleven classes while studying the five major Indian treatises that are the core of the curriculum: *Ornament of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayalankara*) by Maitreya/Asanga, which is the study of the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajnaparamita*);

*Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakavatara*) by Chandrakirti, which is the study of Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) philosophy; *Treasury of Higher Knowledge* (*Abhidharmakosha*) by Vasubandhu, which is the study of phenomenology; *Commentary on Valid Cognition* (*Pramanavarttika*) by Dharmakirti, which is the study of epistemology; and the *Vinayasutra* by Gunaprabha, which is the study of the rules of discipline (*Vinaya*). These treatises are works by the great Indian and Tibetan scholars, all of them commentaries on the Mahayana teachings of the Buddha and thus found within the *Tengyur*, the collection of Indian commentaries on the Buddha’s teachings that is a part of the Buddhist canon. The students study these treatises together with explanatory commentaries on them written by great Indian and Tibetan scholars. The classes are generally referred to by the names of the subject matter the students are studying—for example, the Perfection of Wisdom class, the Madhyamaka class, and so on.

At around the age of twelve, Thubten



Geshe Sopa, ca 1978

Yeshe began studying the traditional subjects leading to a geshe degree with Geshe Thubten Wangchuk. Geshe Wangchuk then sent him on to Geshe Lhundub Sopa, who was to become one of his main teachers. He studied with Geshe Sopa both privately and with other classmates. “Geshe Sopa never beat me like my uncle did. He was always incredibly kind,” recalled Lama Yeshe.

Geshe studies introduce the young monks to debate. This, together with memorization, is the traditional educational tool in the monastic universities. In the tradition of Tibetan Buddhist debate, a standing monk, the questioner, poses questions to a seated opponent, the defender. It is the job of the defender to assert a logical position and then defend it, whereas the job of the questioner is to lead the defender into logical inconsistencies, contradictions and consequential absurdities arising from his original posi-

tion. Debate is full of theatrics and noise. As he becomes more confident in his debate tactics, the questioner will take off his *zen*, the long, shawl-like upper robe, and wind it around his waist to signify his control and command of the debate. He wields his rosary to great effect—twirling it around his head, winding it around his arms, stroking it.

There is a lot of shouting and clapping. Whenever the defender delays in giving a reply—the pace of Tibetan debate is very fast—the questioner will goad him to do so with rhythmic triple claps while saying, “*Chir, chir, chir!*” (“Why, why, why!”). Each time he poses a question, the questioner steps forward extending his left hand, palm upward, and lifting his right hand above his right shoulder. He brings his right palm down onto his left in a loud *clap!* and immediately turns his hands over so the left palm faces downward and the right palm faces up, thus crossing his arms. This has great symbolic meaning. The left hand, palm downward, symbolizes closing the doors to the lower realms of rebirth. The two hands coming together signifies the union of method and wisdom on the path. The right hand moving upward, palm up, indicates one’s wish to liberate all sentient beings from the sufferings of samsara, or cyclic existence.

One of the main debating techniques is for the questioner to expose the mistaken concepts put forth by the defender and to lead the defender to the most absurd logical consequences of his mistaken assertions. When the questioner is finally successful in demolishing the position of the defender who finally succumbs, his defeat is greeted with a shout of “*O tsar!*” (“It is finished!”) and an enthusiastic *clap!* to indicate the victorious end of the debate.

Debate is a powerful method for dispelling doubt and increasing wisdom. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has described it as a form of analytical meditation. It could also be seen





Sera monks debating, Tibet

as the monastic equivalent of physical sport and provides an excellent vehicle for wit. Clever, amusing debaters were very popular. Thubten Yeshe proved himself a master from the start. He loved debating.<sup>23</sup>

“He organized two debating teams among our friends so we could practice together and exchange positions,” said his classmate and lifelong friend, Geshe Jampa Gyatso. “He was so enthusiastic he wouldn’t even stop between sessions to eat anything. One time I was the defender and he the questioner. When he won, he jumped on my shoulders and tumbled over my head, shouting, ‘Now I am going to give you the vase initiation!’”<sup>24</sup>

Geshe Sopa’s room at Sera looked down on the debating courtyard. He could easily

pick out Thubten Yeshe in the crowd. “I had many, many students, but I always enjoyed watching this one perform,” he said. Thubten Yeshe’s new teacher wasn’t the only one to notice him. The boy was an outstanding student as well as a wonderfully playful monk who was always ready with a joke. Many years later Thubten Yeshe would quip—usually in Geshe Sopa’s presence—that as he was the youngest monk in the class, if Geshe-la wanted to know if everybody had understood a particular point he would ask Thubten Yeshe, and if he had understood he knew everybody else had, too. Then the lamas would laugh and exchange knowing glances that suggested that this wasn’t strictly true.

23. For further information about the Tibetan tradition of debating, see *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping, Debate in Tibetan Buddhism* and *The Course in Buddhist Reasoning & Debate*.

24. This is a reference to certain ceremonies in which an implement such as a vase is touched to the top of one’s head. Monastic jokes tend to be insider affairs.

## THE MONASTIC YEAR

A typical monastic year was divided into several terms with short breaks in between. Some terms offered intensive sessions of debate and prayer; others concentrated on giving monks more time to study. On a typical day, the monks rose around 5:30 a.m. They gathered in the stone courtyard outside the main assembly hall and began the day with a session of full-length prostrations to the Thirty-Five Confession Buddhas. In winter, this was an incredibly cold exercise and the skin on their hands sometimes split and bled. After that the monks proceeded inside to recite prayers and do their morning puja together. In winter, some brought small bags of soil into the temple to spread under their folded legs as insulation from the cold. Tea was served during morning puja and monks brought their own tsampa for breakfast. This first session of the day was called *mangja*, meaning “tea for all.” During morning puja they all recited prayers such as the *Heart Sutra*, which was recited whenever the monks assembled, the *King of Prayers*, *Praises to the Twenty-One Taras* and the *Hundred Deities of the Land of Joy* (*Ganden Lha Gyema*), a central Gelug guru yoga prayer invoking the blessings of Lama Tsongkhapa and his two chief disciples.<sup>25</sup>

Sera Mey and Sera Je monks then went their separate ways, either to their debating areas or to recite prayers. The morning passed with more prayers, a debate at midday, then more prayers leading up to lunch at 2:30, each monk providing his own food.

After lunch, depending on the term, the monks either studied in their rooms or recited more prayers in the debating courtyard. Many used this time to visit their

teachers and receive further explanations of the texts they were currently studying. In the late afternoon most of the monks—



Monks in dagams



Tea is served

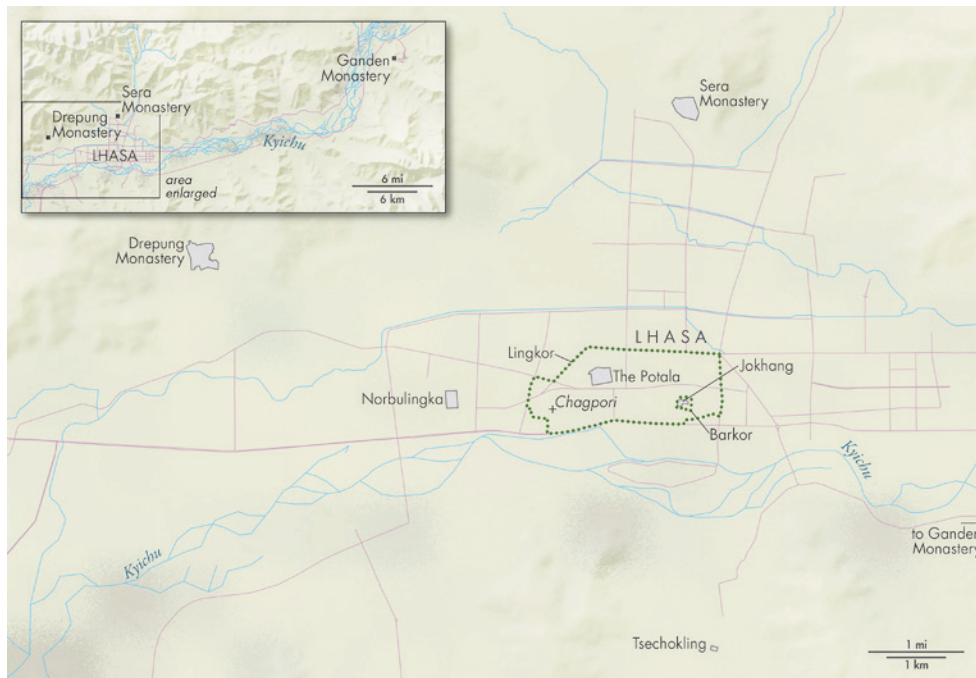
especially the serious students—attended a three-hour session of prayers during which they recited *Praises to the Twenty-One Taras* twenty-one times and the *Heart Sutra* nineteen times, the first time very, very slowly.

“When we chanted the *Heart Sutra*, we chanted it very slowly,” Lama Yeshe said later. “Incredibly slowly, and we contemplated the words. We’d walk from Sera College all the way to Lhasa city and back again;<sup>26</sup> over that distance we recited the *Heart Sutra* just one

25. See *Essential Buddhist Prayers*, pp. 77–81 (*Heart Sutra*) and 249–57 (*King of Prayers*) and online at LamaYeshe.com for *Ganden Lha Gyäma*.

26. A ten-mile round trip.





Lhasa

time. So slow. That way you could contemplate every word. It was very powerful.”

After that prayer session they all took a short break and then started another debate session, during which the disciplinarian (Tib: *gekö*) circulated among all the debating groups, very slowly, visiting each group three times, checking the debates and ensuring all the monks had partners. Finally, late in the evening, they retired to their rooms to review the debates of the day, to meditate or study, or just to sleep.

Every second night the new students in the Perfection of Wisdom and Madhyamaka classes were required to remain in the debate courtyard and continue debating all night long. It was unbelievably cold in winter. In

his autobiography, *Life of a Tibetan Monk*, Geshe Tamdin Rabten, another of Thubten Yeshe’s teachers, wrote of digging a hole in the dirt in order to keep warm when sitting in the debating courtyard. Serious students from other classes could choose to stay and debate through the night as well. Thubten Yeshe often did this.

Altogether, Thubten Yeshe spent twelve years in rigorous geshe studies. He also attended teachings from the Dalai Lama and his two tutors, Kyabje Ling Rinpoche and Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche.<sup>27</sup> From Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Junior Tutor, he received teachings on the lamrim, the graduated path to enlightenment, which outlines the entire sutra path to buddhahood.<sup>28</sup> In addition he

27. *Kyabje* is an honorific term meaning “revered source of refuge.” It is generally applied only to highly respected teachers. Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche was to become the young Thubten Yeshe’s main lama, or root guru.

28. The *lamrim*, or stages (*rim*) of the path (*lam*) to enlightenment, is a genre of Dharma teachings based on Atisha’s seminal text *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* in which he arranged the essence of the Buddha’s



Ling Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, Trijang Rinpoche, New Delhi, 1956

received many tantric initiations and discourses from both the Junior Tutor and the Senior Tutor, Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, as well as from Dagri Dorje Chang Rinpoche, Kyabje Zong Rinpoche, Lhatsün Dorje Chang Rinpoche and many other great gurus and meditation masters. Some of the meditational deities into whose practices Thubten Yeshe was initiated were Heruka, Vajrabhairava and Guhyasamaja, representing respectively the compassion, wisdom and skillful means of a fully enlightened being. Thubten Yeshe attended these teachings not only during the

term breaks but also during the actual study terms, which was against monastery rules. However, dedicated students were very much their own boss.

Once every year, Thubten Yeshe returned to his family in Shingkarla, and the Rakor nuns were always his first visitors. He now had his own room at Shingka Changmar. While home, he spent most of his time studying. He loved his family dearly, but these annual visits strengthened his resolve to live his life as a monk rather than as a householder.

### MORE DEBATE

Six weeks before *Losar*, Tibetan New Year, the country was in the grip of winter. Every year at this time, monks from all the col-

leges in Sera, Ganden and Drepung gathered together for their annual debating competition, known as *Jang Gönchö*. *Jang* referred

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into a step-by-step presentation that makes it easy to understand the Buddha's intent and to practice the teachings.





Zong Rinpoche, ca 1935



Dignaga, by Peter Iseli

to the location of the event; *gün* means “winter” and *chö* means “Dharma.” Everyone carried their food, clothes and bedding on their backs and walked for a day and a half in long lines—veins of maroon and gold trickling across the countryside—to the Jang area, close to Rato Monastery, which was a few miles north of the lower Kyichu River about twenty-five miles southwest of Lhasa.

The location of Rato Gompa is considered to be a very holy place. The story goes that the Indian pandit Dignaga (480–540) was composing his *Compendium of Valid Cognition* (*Pramana-samucchaya*) using a piece of white rock as chalk and he wrote the first four lines of the text on the wall of a cave. When he came back the next day, the writing had been erased. So he rewrote the four lines, went away, and when he returned later he again found them erased. So then he wrote, “If you don’t agree with what I’ve written and wish to debate with me, don’t just rub out what I write, show up here tomorrow and debate with me.” When he returned the next

day he found his non-Buddhist opponent waiting for him. They debated and Dignaga won—it is even said that he won thrice.

Dignaga then said to him, “Now you must adopt my doctrine,” because in those days, philosophical debates were very serious business. If a person were to lose a debate, then not only was the loser obligated to fully accept the teachings of the winner and renounce his own teachings, but all the loser’s previous writings were then tied to the tail of a donkey and dragged publicly through the streets. On this occasion Dignaga’s opponent became so angry he spat flames. Dignaga became so frustrated at not being able to help even just one sentient being that he tossed his chalk up into the air in despair, swearing the moment it landed he would abandon his bodhisattva vow to be of service to all sentient beings. But the chalk did not fall to earth. Instead, Manjushri appeared to Dignaga to help him. Manjushri told him he should continue to write the text he had been writing because it would become very



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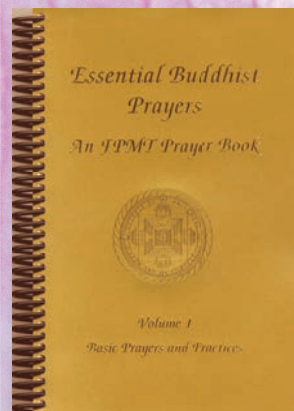
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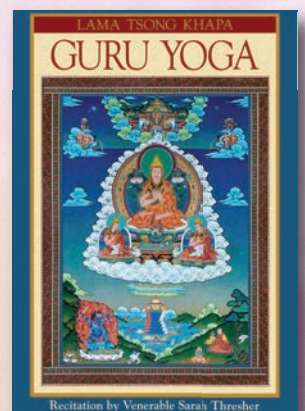
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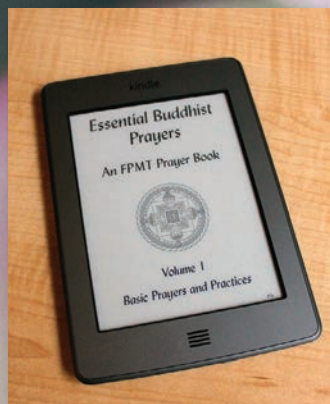
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beneficial to sentient beings in the future. Later, Lama Tsongkhapa taught that “in the future” actually referred to Tibet. The chalk Dignaga had thrown later fell to earth and landed in Tibet, in the Jang area at the place where Rato Gompa was later established, and these yearly debates were held where the chalk was said to have landed. The text debated on these occasions was the very text Dignaga was composing way back then, his *Compendium of Valid Cognition*.

The very best students in the Gelug tradition looked forward all year long to this gathering at Jang and everyone always had a lot of fun. Debates were held in an open courtyard protected from the freezing winter winds by stone walls. The debates commenced before dawn and continued until after midnight, some going right through the night. Competition was fierce. Everyone hoped to bring honor to his college and monks frequently developed large blisters on their hands from the loud ritual clapping. Sometimes these blisters turned into dark, round scars, respected by all as a sign of great perseverance.

It was at the Jang gathering that Thubten Yeshe first made friends with young Ngawang Gelek Rimpoche, a clever young monk from Drepung Loseling who eventually received the geshe *lharampa* degree at the exceptionally young age of twenty.<sup>29</sup> Born into an important political family in Lhasa, he was four years younger than Thubten Yeshe and loved a joke. The two friends had wonderful times together on the icy plain, having fun, cracking jokes and creating puns and word games based on the names of the very few world leaders they had heard of. Winston Churchill became *Cholle cholle*, which means something crooked, and Roosevelt was *Rosos besos*, which means to cough.

“They were silly games,” said Gelek Rim-

poche many years later at his home in the United States. “We didn’t know what was happening in the outside world. We had heard of the American President at that time but didn’t know who he was or how to pronounce his name, so we made these jokes. Some evenings we set up torches and projected hand shadow figures onto the walls. Everyone wondered who was doing it. We laughed and laughed! We loved our little jokes. Thubten Yeshe taught me how to do a rabbit and a horse.

“We always shared our delicacies. There were nice cheeses in Tibet. One specialty was a cottage cheese mixed with a little sugar then drained. The remaining lump was then molded into little designs. Whenever I visited my family’s home in Lhasa, I’d always take some of these back to the monastery.”

Big red wooden doors stood at the entrance to the walled debating courtyard at Sera Je. A few small trees offered sparse shelter. When it rained, the monks just carried on, wrapping themselves in their long zens or their *dagams*, the heavy monk’s cloak made with many pleats falling from a high collar. Once the debate had started, no breaks were permitted.

Gelek Rimpoche and Thubten Yeshe loved to debate. One of their favorite tricks was to make their opponent laugh. “Monks love to laugh,” said Gelek Rimpoche. “If you win, they laugh, if you make a mistake, they laugh, if you joke, they laugh. Thubten Yeshe’s body language was very distinctive and he made people laugh with all sorts of silly gestures, jumping around, making shapes with his *mala* (rosary). At Drepung Loseling we were always looking for good opponents. Thubten Yeshe’s bright round eyes shone when he debated and everyone could see he was having a great time. But he was not just a clown. Rather, he was a natural communicator.”

29. There are four levels of geshe degree, *lharampa* being the highest and hardest to achieve.



Sera debating courtyard

Off the debating ground Thubten Yeshe was quiet and humble, but on it he was unmatched. “He was sly,” said another classmate. “He’d argue back and forth and then crack a joke to distract his opponent. If he felt he was losing, he’d turn to a third monk and say, ‘Well, how about you? Aren’t you going to debate with me, too?’ Then that monk jumped into the argument too, confusing the first challenger.”

“Afterward, Thubten Yeshe wrapped himself up and sat under a tree in long silent meditation,” recounted his friend Jampa Trinley. “I’d sneak up and hit him with my long yellow hat and say, ‘You should go off to the mountains, you yogi!’ Sometimes he liked to go over all the points of a debate with close friends.”

Another classmate, Geshe Thubten Thinley, recalled Thubten Yeshe’s talent for coming up with amusing one-liners. “He set the place on fire with his antics. A good

debate was sheer joy to him and time meant nothing. He saw the funny side of everything in a flash. Debate is based on a logical progression toward a conclusion that must be either yes or no, arrived at by reasoning, scriptural references and mutual agreement by the two debaters. Thubten Yeshe never conceded defeat, no matter how strongly his case was proven wrong. He never gave an inch and always showed great flair and elegance in his arguments. He treated each monk with the same respect, regardless of whether they were in a higher class or had just entered the monastery. We had a friend there who enjoyed telling fortunes. He told us the one person in our group whom he could see doing something really special was Thubten Yeshe,” said Geshe Thubten Thinley.

As a member of the Lhasa aristocracy, Gelek Rimpoche had met Heinrich Harer, the author of *Seven Years in Tibet*, and



Foreigners at Sera, 1936

his co-escapee from British internment in India, Peter Aufschnaiter, who had arrived in Tibet in 1944 and Lhasa in 1946. There were very few Westerners in the country: a British Consul, a trade representative and three English radio operators—two in Lhasa and another in Chamdo. Tibetans generally regarded Europeans as “barbarians.” But one day Thubten Yeshe happened to see one of these foreigners in the street: “‘Oh, a barbarian,’ I thought. So I stopped and had a really good look. I decided he was not a barbarian at all.”

Gelek Rinpoche and Thubten Yeshe also exchanged monastery gossip whenever they met. “In those days there was some political unrest at Sera concerning the actions of Reting Rinpoche. It was nothing to do with us, but we all gossiped about it,” said Gelek Rinpoche.

*In 1947 the Sera monks had plenty to gossip about. Having completed his retreat, Reting Rinpoche reappeared in Lhasa, to great fan-*

*fare on the part of his supporters and great alarm on the part of his opponents and detractors. Taktra Rinpoche and his supporters had decided not to honor the original agreement to return power to Reting Rinpoche. There were also indications that some people were actually plotting against the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama and perhaps were even a threat to his life. Reting Rinpoche’s followers attempted to take the government back from Taktra Rinpoche and a close associate of Reting Rinpoche went so far as to send a parcel bomb to the Potala Palace, addressed to Taktra Rinpoche. The bomb exploded prematurely, killing a servant. Reting Rinpoche and some of his associates were accused of the bombing, arrested and imprisoned.*

*But Reting Rinpoche had supporters, including some of the monks at Sera Je, of which he was a member. Furious at his arrest, they staged a revolt and took up armed positions in the monastery, firing on all comers. The siege lasted for twelve days, after which they were overthrown by Tibetan government*



troops. By the end, two hundred monks were dead. In addition, just over a week after his arrest, Reting Rinpoche died mysteriously in prison, possibly of wounds inflicted when he was tortured.<sup>30</sup>

Thubten Yeshe's half-brother, Dorje Tsering, remembered this time. "Our old

uncle, Losang Tsultrim, was in the kitchen sharpening his knife and preparing for war. Thubten Yeshe was memorizing texts. 'You still studying?' Uncle asked him. 'Get up and go to war!' But, young and fearful of Losang Tsultrim as he was, Thubten Yeshe would have none of it. He remained absolutely passive," said Dorje Tsering.

## SICKNESS

Philosophy was just one of the "five sciences" studied in Tibet. Most monks in the monastic universities stuck to the philosophical texts, but Thubten Yeshe also spent long hours studying Tibetan grammar, poetry, astrology and medicine. Generally, he did so in secret because these subjects were considered a distraction from philosophical studies.

His medical studies possibly alerted him to the fact that his heart was not strong because of the bout of rheumatic fever he had suffered when he was small. He sometimes complained to Jampa Trinley about heart pains but said the Tibetan medicine he took made him feel better.

Thubten Yeshe's room was always very sparsely furnished because that was how he preferred it, and it was there that he met with his closest friends, Jampa Trinley and Jampa Khedup, to discuss Dharma over tea and thugpa. Even though he had a great sense of humor and loved to joke with his friends, Thubten Yeshe tended to avoid the frivolous gossip that abounds in closed communities. When monks came by looking for distraction they found him apparently asleep. But once they had gone he resumed his studies. "I'd lie down and pretend to be asleep," he explained. "Sleep is a human right! People can't complain that you're sleeping." Some-

times the friends read the biographies of great saints together behind a locked door they would not open for anyone.



Jampa Khedup, 1991

Many top students were intensely serious and humorless, busy with their own strict discipline and oblivious to all else. But people were drawn to Thubten Yeshe by his warmth, his ready smile and the kindness he showed to younger students. A high tulku,

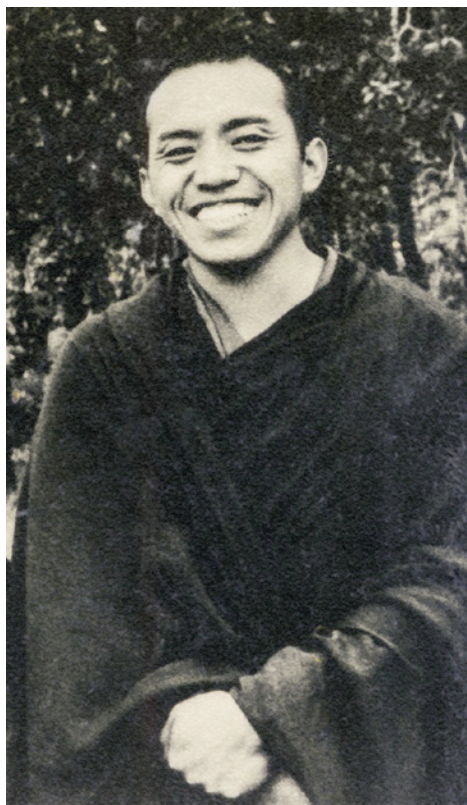
30. See *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 26, and *The Fourteen Dalai Lamas*, pp. 473–77.

Khamlung Rinpoche, twelve years younger than Thubten Yeshe and a fellow student of Geshe Sopa, remembers him during that time. “When Geshe Sopa moved into my house, Thubten Yeshe often came around. I always liked seeing him because he was so relaxed, not like the strict monks who just close up when you talk to them,” he said. Everyone could see Thubten Yeshe was sure to become a lharampa geshe. Even though he was one of the youngest monks in his class, Thubten Yeshe was invited to participate in special debates that occasionally took place in front of the entire Sera Je assembly.

When he was about eighteen years old, he and his friend Jampa Gyatso developed huge, painful carbuncles on their cheeks. “We were debating,” said Geshe Jampa Gyatso, “and this time Thubten Yeshe was the seated defender. He became very excited and shouted. Suddenly the boil burst. As pus was pouring out, he cried in pain. We commiserated with each other over this misfortune and our bad karma. No one else had such painful boils. The doctors couldn’t do anything for us,” he said.

Even though the boil had burst, the infection subsequently returned, at which point Thubten Yeshe attended a Chinese clinic. The nurse was very kind to him but was not able to cure the problem. Finally, Uncle Losang Tsultrim took him to see an old reclusive monk called A To. “He was very old dirty monk and all day he’d just recite special mantras,” said Thubten Yeshe. “I sat in front of him while he said many, many mantras very fast, and then he blew—*sppttt!*—on my sore cheek. Then *pham!* The boil opened up and so much pus came pouring out so strongly. *Boom!* Just by the power of that mantra. I remember the old monk’s breath felt very cool on my skin,” he said.

This had been quite a serious infection and Thubten Yeshe was bedridden for some time. On returning to the debating court-



Khamlung Rinpoche

yard he took Jampa Trinley into a corner and showed him the deep scar he would carry on his cheek for life. “He told me he’d had a very hard time,” said Jampa Trinley. “He said to me, ‘Why didn’t you come and see me when I nearly died?’ He was very dramatic. I really couldn’t tell whether he had been seriously sick or not.”

Jampa Trinley was often sent on business trips on behalf of the monastery, which owned large tracts of land it rented out to farmers. It was quite usual to carry guns on such errands, as the hills were full of brigands. On his return Thubten Yeshe would confront his friend, slap him on the back and say, “Hmmp! I don’t think you’d fall on your knees and implore the buddhas to save your life if you ran into thieves. I think you’d just shoot them in the leg!”

With a twinkle in his eye, Jampa Trinley replied, “I think you’re probably right.”

*After the devastation of war in the 1940s, the 1950s seemed like another time altogether. In Tibet, in the autumn of 1949, the strife that had just taken place around the figure of Reting Rinpoche had shaken the Tibetan people deeply. Across the border in China, the Communist regime of Mao Zedong came to power in Beijing in October, bringing with it a new imperialism. On 1 January 1950, just three months after the creation of the new People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communist government under Mao Zedong announced on Radio Peking that “the tasks for the People’s Liberation Army for 1950 are to liberate Taiwan, Hainan and Tibet.” By October 1950, 30,000 Chinese Communist troops had invaded Tibet, starting with the northeast province of Amdo, then taking over*

*Kham and relentlessly moving toward central Tibet and Lhasa. Their instructions were to be polite.*

*In November 1950, at the urging of the Gadong Oracle, Tenzin Gyatso was invested as the supreme temporal ruler of Tibet. He was only fifteen years old.*

*In May of 1951, a seventeen-point agreement was signed by Chinese delegates and, under duress, by Tibetans. Tibet was offered a choice between “peaceful liberation” and military retaliation. Thus Tibet came under the first stage of Chinese Communist occupation. Initially, the behavior of the invaders was puzzling to many Tibetans: the Chinese assured them their religious freedom would be safeguarded and gave lavish gifts to government representatives and nobility. They also promised modernization and significant improvements, including hospitals, schools, roads etc. But most of the Tibetan people were*



Chinese communist activity in Tibet, 1950s





His Holiness the Dalai Lama's investiture, Norbulingka, 1950

not as gullible as the Chinese believed and saw this largesse as honey on a razor's edge: sweet but very dangerous.

Later on, most particularly in Kham and Amdo, the soft touch of five years of "Democratic Reforms" were followed by much harsher practices of public "struggle sessions" carried out at gunpoint. Entire villages were intimidated by singling out, badgering and beating prominent community members to get them to publicly confess their "crimes against the people." These sessions often ended in public executions that Tibetans themselves were forced to perform. Also, thousands of Tibetan children were actually abducted, removed

from their families and placed as wards of the state in a network of "minority schools" aimed at enforced socialization and the creation of a future upper stratum of Tibetan leaders sympathetic to the Chinese agenda.

By 1954 the Chinese had completed the construction of a main road across Tibet, thereby demolishing traditional trade routes and tightening their grip on the landlocked country. In the remote mountainous Kham region, the fiercely proud Khampas formed bands of guerrilla fighters. The dangers predicted by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, from within (civil war) and without (Chinese invasion), had come to pass.

## SENIOR YEARS AT SERA

Even behind their monastery walls, the monks were aware of what was going on. Many of them traveled great distances across Tibet to visit their families and perform pujas and returned to the monastery with fresh news.

Initially, the Chinese made large donations to the monasteries and declared their support for religion and human rights. “They tried to prove they were sincere,” said Lama Yeshe, “but sincerity is a quality they do not have. After Buddhism was destroyed in China, the Chinese came to Tibet and gave all the monks silver coins. They also spent a lot of money on the Tibetan Government people, trying to show they were friends. But we had our doubts.”

Now nineteen years old, Thubten Yeshe continued his studies of the great treatises, beginning a four-year immersion into Madhyamaka philosophy. Long years of study and debate had prepared the young monks’ minds for this intensive study, which is the heart of the wisdom teachings of the Buddha.

Before monks can enter into their Madhyamaka studies, special pujas must be performed over several days to honor the buddhas and overcome any obstacles to success. During these pujas, monks from wealthy families made generous donations on behalf of the whole class. Uncle Losang Tsultrim stepped in at this point with such a generous donation that Thubten Yeshe was recognized as a major benefactor and as a consequence was granted an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. At that time it was extremely rare for ordinary monks to be

able to meet His Holiness, even in a group. This was especially true during those politically sensitive years. Most monks never even caught more than a brief glimpse of *Yizhin Norbu* (Wish-Fulfilling Jewel), or *Kundun* (the Presence),<sup>31</sup> and then only from a distance and as part of a large crowd.

During the first two years of study, serious students in the new Madhyamaka class, like Thubten Yeshe, debated all night long every other night, remaining in the debating courtyard right through until morning puja began. They were still expected to attend daily classes as usual. These were incredibly demanding years, both physically and mentally. On the alternate nights, when the monks slept they didn’t lie down in bed but slept sitting in the meditation posture, wrapped in their thick cloaks.

As Buddhist practitioners, for monks merely to memorize the texts, recall their contents perfectly and debate their points successfully was not considered sufficient. The wisdom of emptiness (Skt: *shunyata*)—a transformative insight into the nature of reality through which all mistaken superimpositions obscuring one’s understanding are removed—had to be realized experientially, through meditation.<sup>32</sup> While the rigors of debate honed their minds, the deep insight that meditation provides allowed them to actually experience the meaning of what they had debated.

Many years later Lama Yeshe said he had realized emptiness one day in the Sera Je debating courtyard. He also spoke of the incredibly close bond that formed between

31. Tibetan people’s respectful epithets for His Holiness. *Kundun* is also the title of Martin Scorsese’s 1997 biopic of HH the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

32. Emptiness is the absence of all false ideas about how things exist; specifically, the lack of the apparent independent, self-existence of phenomena. The direct realization of emptiness is essential for attaining liberation from samsara and full enlightenment.

class members and the important effect this had on their development. There were around two hundred monks in Thubten Yeshe's class and of those around forty or fifty took their studies very seriously. The bonds among this

group of serious students were very strong and studying and debating together was so profound and stimulating that in an almost unstoppable flow, they virtually drove each other along the path to enlightenment.

## JAMPA WANGDU

During these years Thubten Yeshe made friends with a somewhat wild classmate, Jampa Wangdu, a Sera *dob-dob*, the term given to monks who didn't study but just roamed around. Among the Sera monks, Jampa Wangdu was notorious for gambling and getting into fights. Scars on his face and head were visible proof of the latter. He frequently skipped classes, tucked himself into his favorite hiding places and whiled away his time hitting certain old monks on the knees with a stick as they came around the corner. As a child, he used to spit on other monks from above as they walked along the lower terraces.



Geshe Jampa Wangdu

Jampa Wangdu lived in Trehor Khangtsen, which had very strict discipline. Eventually, he was expelled. He didn't seem to be the least bit interested in his studies, despite being considered one of the bright young monks and noted for his debating skills.

Tibetans weren't generally very shocked by bad behavior in young monks, especially on the part of those who were clever—it served to get it out of their system. They were more disappointed by young monks who initially put much effort into their studies only to give them up entirely later on.

Just after Jampa Wangdu was expelled, a large teaching event took place at Tsechokling Monastery, which is situated in the Drip Valley just across the Kyichu River from Lhasa. Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, the Junior Tutor of the Dalai Lama, was giving teachings on *Guru Puja* (Tib: *Lama Chöpa*). Written by the First Panchen Lama, this puja is the most common tantric practice performed in the Gelug lineage. Many thousands of monks attended these teachings, which lasted over a week. During this event Jampa Wangdu teamed up with Thubten Yeshe and suddenly transformed into a very serious monk. They sat beside each other during the discourses and meditated together for hours during the breaks. Jampa Wangdu said later that during these teachings he realized that bodhicitta<sup>33</sup> is the essence of the Dharma.

Many Sera Je monks must have been

33. Bodhicitta is the altruistic wish, rooted in universal compassion and loving kindness, to reach enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings.





Tsechokling Monastery

amazed to see this new friendship develop between the good, kind and happy Thubten Yeshe and the delinquent Jampa Wangdu. After Trijang Rinpoche's teachings finished, the pair departed together for a three-month retreat in mountain caves. It was monsoon time in Tibet. In their retreat, they sat on the bare ground as they had no cushions and made their tea from melted ice, as they had very little food. From then on Jampa Wangdu was a different person. He left Sera and meditated in a cave in the Penpo Valley right up until the fateful month of March 1959, when the Chinese invasion turned to full-scale bloody war and he fled to India.

Thubten Yeshe was changed by that retreat as well. By this time he had already acquired several young students of his own. One of them, Losang Nyima, said that before the retreat Thubten Yeshe greatly preferred studying and debating to performing prayers and pujas but after it he became much more interested in religious practices and rituals.

Sometime later the Sera Je monks received

advice and teachings from a famous meditation master about how to spend their time in caves. Thubten Yeshe was further inspired to ask permission of his teachers and uncles if he could drop his geshe studies and spend the rest of his life in isolation, meditating in the mountains. However, his teachers refused, so it was back to formal studies.

*By 1958 the situation between the Tibetans and the Chinese occupational forces had degenerated greatly. The Chinese had made promises it seemed they never intended to fulfill and sought to divide the Tibetans through political manipulation and subterfuge. They tried to undermine the Dalai Lama's position among his own people and at one point even plotted to assassinate him. The Khampa guerrilla resistance movement continued to fight tirelessly against the Chinese oppressors, who retaliated ruthlessly, unleashing a series of atrocities that shocked even the most hardened soldiers and were extensively documented by the International Commission*



New rules

of Jurists in reports in 1959 and 1960.<sup>34</sup> Thousands of refugees poured into Lhasa in order to come under the protection of the Dalai Lama. By the end of 1958 the fighting had reached to within thirty miles of Lhasa city.

Even the Dalai Lama himself admitted to extreme frustration with a mediation process that had yielded no positive results. The Tibetan people were close to breaking point and things were about to come to a head.

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*Big love  
Lama yeshe*

34. See *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 48.