

THE ROAD TO KOPAN

Tibet, Tibet

By Harry Sutton

I have to go to Tibet!



Ven. Marcel and Harry Sutton, Nepal, 1979.

In 1971, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and their first student, Zina Rachevsky, established Kopan Monastery in Nepal. Zina “pestered” Lama Zopa Rinpoche “like a mosquito” until he agreed to give a one-month lam-rim meditation course to Westerners at the monastery, then called the Mount Everest Center. Twelve Western students attended the first course and for the last forty years, up to two hundred students participate in the annual one-month meditation course. This new section, The Road to Kopan, will feature stories from students who have found their way to, and their home at, Kopan Monastery.

*To unveil this section, we talked to **Harry Sutton**, FPMT student of more than thirty-five years, about how he ended up attending his first Kopan course.*

The beginning always has to go to the guru Buddha. When one looks for the cause or the condition which brought one to Kopan, I think it always goes back to the initial cause condition, the holy kind guru. That can happen years before someone even hears about Kopan, thinks about Kopan or sees Kopan.

Because of not being intelligent, and quite lazy, high school ended a couple of years early, so I took that time to work and travel all around North America and Europe. Through hitchhiking, I got to meet people, to find out what was going on in their lives. Many times there was not

a destination, just going, getting into cars, trucks and people’s lives. It didn’t matter which side of the road to stand on, if I was going north, south, west or east. And when the ride was finished, after listening to their life stories, when the door was closed, I thought: “That’s one life I don’t have to go through.” I lived it through them, for that five-minute, five-hour or two-day ride. Besides, the result was always the same: their lives had discontent, dissatisfaction. After trying everything out in life that the world had to offer for experiencing happiness, I found myself alone and praying into space. I didn’t believe in god but knew there was something greater than me in the universe. And I prayed. I said, usually with tears in my eyes:

“May I meet the perfect teachings and the perfect teacher to help my life and others.” I said that every night. After three months of doing this I felt a very strong feeling in my heart, it had a pull to it. And with that pull in my heart was the mantra: “Tibet, Tibet I have to go to Tibet. Tibet, Tibet, I have to go to Tibet. Tibet, Tibet, I have to go to Tibet.”

At the time I was doing a part-time job and that ended when the bus I was driving went down a hill... without me in it! Of course, I got fired. I was 21. I ended up at my grandmother’s house and I told her, “I am going to Tibet.” And she said, knowing about these things better than me, “You can’t go to Tibet. It is under the control of China.” So I said, “If I can’t go to Tibet, then this pull in my heart is coming from the closest place to Tibet.” I asked for her coffee table atlas and found that part of the world. I had heard of India but had never heard of Nepal. I was looking for the border between India and Tibet. And when my eyes saw the word KATHMANDU I was pulled into the atlas, as if pulled into the map by my heart. At that time I knew the pull was coming from Kathmandu.

Two weeks later, I’m on my way to England, the cheapest way for me to get over the “puddle.” I then hitchhiked from England to Istanbul. Back then, it was 1975, you could take buses, trains and trucks overland from Turkey to India. There was a highway of hippies going back and forth. It was like hippie paradise in those days. When I crossed the Indian/Nepal border, on the top of a bus, I felt, as many other students and friends have described... I felt like... I was coming home. It is a feeling that comes over you when entering Nepal, The Land of Those Gone to Bliss!

We all stayed in the Freak Street area at the time. On the third day in Kathmandu I was in a store. In the same store, on the other side of the wall, were two women talking about two lamas giving a teaching somewhere. I went over and said, “Where is this?” They said, “Kopon.” The next day I got a bike and rode out to Kopon. All the old sangha were there, Dr. Nick, John Feillie, Yogi, Ann, Wongmo, Pemo, Nicole, Thubten Yeshe, Pende and others, who were all inspiring.

Then I had my interview with Ven. Marcel. This made a *very* strong impression on my mind. It was a *very* powerful moment to be sitting in front of Ven. Marcel. I appreciated being in his presence.

Ven. Marcel turned out to be the leader of the eighth course, my first course. I think we had a couple days of 100% pure Ven. Marcel, just to prepare us. Then came the day that Lama Zopa Rinpoche was coming to teach. When the most precious, kind guru Lama Zopa’s holy body entered the tent my whole life passed before me. I could see that every single action I had done up to that point in my life had brought me to meet this being who just entered this tent. Rinpoche’s holy body had entered through the far side of the tent so I couldn’t see the holy body yet but I could feel Rinpoche’s presence. To finally meet my *true* mother, my *true* father, the one who truly loves me, who truly knows how to guide me to where I want to go. Every atom of my body knew this. Tears of great joy poured down. And I thought, “Home at last! Home at last! This is what I have been living for!” And this was all before I even saw Rinpoche’s holy body. When Rinpoche sat up on the throne, I knew that this was my guru, my teacher and I instantly felt very fortunate.

The course was fantastic. It was all the things you couldn’t find in a book. That’s why the course is so great, you don’t find this in print and you are able to meditate on it right away. It was an extremely powerful gathering of people, that 1975 eighth course. About 200 people attended the course. We did the course and then about 80 people went on to a one-month lam-rim retreat. And after that month we said, “Let’s do another month!” After two months we said, “How about another month!” So we did three months of lam-rim group retreat, and we would have kept going on like that except we were told to leave Nepal by the Nepalese Government.

When you are sitting at Kopon, listening to the teachings, doing the retreat, there is not a better place to be on the earth for that one month of your life. Anyone who has the opportunity to experience it is very, very fortunate!

The vast extensiveness of the guru Buddha’s activity to benefit us is totally beyond our awareness. Thinking it was MY idea to go to Nepal to meet the holy kind guru, well, in fact, it was the profound skillfulness of the guru Buddha’s activity all along. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche said in Singapore last February, “There’s no place where there is no guru, there is no place where there is no Buddha. The reality is like that.” ♦

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