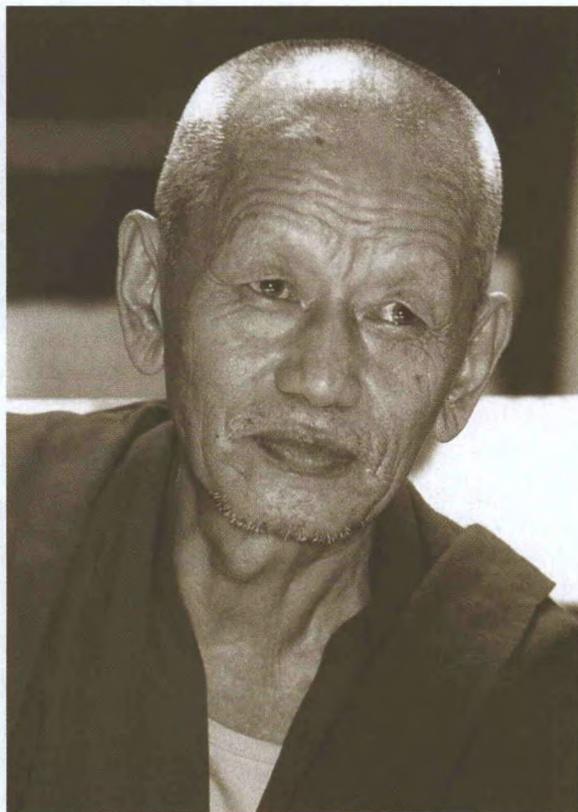


# the exemplary life and death of Geshe Yeshe Tobden



“HE WAS LIKE  
ST. FRANCIS.”

*The way Geshe Yeshe Tobden, Dharamsala meditator and beloved teacher to students around the world, lived and died is an illuminating example of Dharma in practice. Centro Terra di Unificazione's GIOVANNA PESCETTI interviewed one of those closest to him, his attendant Ven. Lobsang Dhonden.*

Geshe Yeshe Tobden had escaped from Tibet by himself in 1960-61 after years of terror and Communist occupation. He was already well known in his monastery in Tibet – Sera-Me – because of his very strict and rigorous practice. He was like St. Francis; he lived according to a very strict discipline, in poverty, humility, and chastity. Thousands of monks knew him and called him a saint from that time. Even the Chinese respected him.

Since his time in Tibet, Geshe-la [affectionate name for a revered teacher] was a well-known disciple of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from whom he had received the Kalachakra initiation. His Holiness took care of him until the last days of his life. Other teachers of his, like Ling Rinpoche and Trijang Rinpoche [the senior and junior tutors respectively of His

Holiness] considered Geshe-la as one of their most important disciples.

After two attempts to flee a Chinese prison, he finally escaped and arrived at the refugee camp in exile, Buxa in India, where he resumed his studies and obtained the highest degree – the degree of Geshe Larampa – at the age of 37.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama sent him to the university of Varanasi to teach Buddhist philosophy for three years. But Geshe-la was not happy there because his highest aspiration was to meditate in a small grotto on the mountain. At that time the conditions to be able to do it were truly difficult. All geshe could not go away to the mountains, and thus Geshe-la submitted to the wish of His Holiness and went to Varanasi.

In Varanasi there were many other important geshe, among them Geshe Rabten who came to know of Geshe Tobden's profound desire. One day, while in discussion with His Holiness, he had the chance to talk to him about it. His Holiness then saw Geshe Tobden personally, asking him if he still wanted to go to the mountain and what he would do there once by himself. And Geshe-la said that he would like so much to meditate on renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness.

His Holiness greatly appreciated Geshe-la's genuine desire and proposed that he go to Dharamsala, saying that he would take care of Geshe-la's material needs, would talk to the director of the university in Varanasi and ask for the collaboration of the Indian state so that Geshe-

la would be released from his teaching duties before the end of his contract. Geshe-la was able to leave immediately.

From that time on he would be considered as a member of the Dalai Lama's own family; His Holiness would always have time to receive him, regardless of his duties. Geshe-la was so happy. The other professors asked him not to go and leave the nice house and a very good salary, one of the highest, higher than that of the minister of the provisional Tibetan government. He was living a good life in Varanasi, worked relatively little and wanted to leave all that! In the eyes of the other professors he seemed a little eccentric.

Thus in 1971 he went to the mountain where he lived in a small house near the temple of His Holiness and adapted to his needs. Some Tibetans had built, in only two days, a humble hut made of stone and sand. He lived in it, just as it was, for 29 years.

In the beginning Geshe-la lived there all year round, but from 1979, when His Holiness first sent Geshe-la to Italy, he spent every winter either in Italy or in Bodhgaya – Christmas in Italy with his disciples, and January in India. He returned to Dharamsala when the climate was warmer.

This came about because Geshe-la had become ill with tuberculosis, and Lama Yeshe, who was his friend, told him to come down from his mountain hermitage. Geshe-la was very thin, looked like Saint Milarepa, only bones, and he did not take care of himself. He did not want to take Western medicines because he said that they inhibited his mental capacity to meditate. He took them for a while and then he “forgot”, and thus the cure could not work.

Lama Yeshe offered him a beautiful house in Tushita, where he could stay and be cured. He remained there for about a year. Thanks to Lama Yeshe, some Italian disciples – Piero Cerri, Claudio Cipullo and Luca Corona – had got to know him better, since they lived in Tushita close to him. Although Geshe-la never spoke, and was always lying down to meditate, they could tell that he was indeed a great meditator, a great yogi.

These Italian students requested an audience with His Holiness and asked that Geshe-la be appointed resident teacher at the newly opened Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Pomaia. With his gentleness and clairvoyance, His Holiness understood that Geshe-la would be just right for the Italians. When Geshe-la later went to speak to His Holiness about his practices, he was very surprised at the sudden proposal that he go to Italy.

Remember that Geshe-la had never thought of going away from India or visiting the West, much less teaching in Italy. His great goal and profound desire was to become and remain a meditator up to his death. During that discussion His Holiness explained that he had done a *mo* [divination with dice] that came out very good, and that by going to the West he could

also be cured (Geshe-la was very weak at this stage). His Holiness had to insist on getting an answer through more than one encounter, until one day Geshe responded, “*Lama khyen, Gyalwa Rinpoche khyen,*” (you know everything. You who are Gyalwa Rinpoche, you know everything).

In June 1979, he went with Luca Corona and stayed at the Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa for two years as a resident teacher.

In those two years many students invited him to various parts of Italy and when he decided to return to India and to his mountain, his disciples tried every way they could to retain him. Geshe-la was immutable and explained that he also had a need of his teacher, and that his teacher was in Dharamsala. When the moment of departure came, his students shed many tears at seeing him go.

I also missed him a lot; for two long years we had been separated. As soon as he returned, he gave 90% of all the gifts that Italian disciples had given him to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the rest to his monastery, Sera-Me. He did not keep anything for himself.

From 1983 he made a trip to Italy every second summer until 1997. The second time, my friend Ngawang Khechog [a former monk and disciple of Geshe-la's who had introduced Ven. Lobsang Dhonden to Geshe-la; see story page 62] and I accompanied him.

I asked permission to stay in Italy and to learn Italian, but Geshe-la said no. Now I thank him for that, because life in the West for a monk, particularly if he is oriental, can be very, very hard!

Geshe-la and I went to America for the first time in 1987. In 1989 we toured FPMT centers in America. In 1993, His Holiness sent Geshe Tobden to Wisconsin University, to Geshe Sopa's Deer Park Center.

We had already been to Italy, so that was a very long trip. Scientists, who had organized a conference on the mind at Deer Park, attached him to wires connected to a computer and were surprised to observe his high level of concentration. Geshe-la responded to specific signals for a long period. They said that an ordinary person would have managed to stay focused for only about 10 to 15 minutes, after which they would have felt fatigue or pain. Geshe-la also visited Switzerland, France, and Canada.

From my experience and memory of this great being, I can say to all students and Western practitioners that if they really want to achieve anything in this life, it is important to practice constantly, and with continuity. I have noticed that Westerners have little consistency and lack the knowledge of what devotion to the guru really means. I lived and traveled a lot with Geshe Tobden and this is also his advice: when there are no good roots, even if one does high practices like Yamantaka, Heruka or Vajrayogini, they do not work.

Scientists who connected him by wires to a computer were surprised at his high level of concentration.

## practice and patience

*From Geshe Yeshe Tobden's introduction to his commentary on Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara, translated from Italian by Manu Bazzano*

It is not essential to be a monk or a special person: anyone can practice the Dharma perfectly and there is no difference between being in retreat, with the family, in the office or anywhere else. Many yogis have said that if we practice, nirvana is within the walls of our home, but if we do not practice, we create the causes of an unfortunate rebirth, even though we might be on solitary retreat.

The Buddha we refer to is not a legendary character, but a historical one who gave his first teachings in Sarnath, near Varanasi. At first Buddha was an ordinary human being like us, full of shortcomings and faults, but these can be completely eradicated, and all virtues completely realized, as he proved by succeeding in attaining enlightenment; it is possible to understand logically that we can do the same. Buddha reached this state thanks to his perseverance and his great effort, whereas we continue to wander in cyclic existence from beginningless time due to our indolence.

We also find ourselves having to endure various problems: some of us perhaps do not eat regularly and others sleep badly. We endure many kinds of discomfort for some gain or other. But if we work long hours at the office, for example, the result is limited to this life. What we gain by listening to the Dharma and enduring the difficulties of practice, on the other hand, go far beyond this. Simply hearing the name of a Buddha or a bodhisattva is in itself a great purification, and we benefit simply by listening to the story of the Buddha, or by wishing to be like him, that is, one who has purified all negativity and accumulated all virtues.

If we possess solid foundations in the Dharma, even the ordinary dimensions of our daily life will not present us with difficulties. It will not benefit us, on the other hand, to put spirituality aside and dedicate ourselves exclusively to the material aspects of existence. If we compare a person whose whole life has been dedicated to these material concerns to someone who also took care of his own development and mental training, we will notice that the latter has not only suffered less in this life, but that he has something to take with him after death. Those who follow a spiritual path will have difficulties, but also realizations. However, one should not cultivate the kind of haste that makes us desire to achieve great results the very next day after hearing the teachings. If we plant the seeds of a tree, we cannot possibly expect it to bear fruit the following year. Even in sowing grain or wheat we need to wait five or six months for the harvest. We have the opportunity to listen to the teachings and embark on our spiritual training, but in order to see the results we must be patient and wait. ❁



*Geshe-la debates in front of His Holiness the Dalai Lama*



Photo: Bruno Vannucchi

*The Harmony Stupa (right) at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa. Geshe Jampa Gyatso, center, with Rosario and Fiorella Rizzi.*

MANDALA (Nov-Dec 1999) and SIDDHI magazines have both written about how Geshe-la left his body – the extraordinary signs, the period in which he remained absorbed in clear light and so forth. I would like to add that Geshe-la was gravely ill in the last four months, from April 6 to July 31, 1999. He went back to his mountain where two Tibetan doctors checked him daily and disciples helped him day and night.

What struck me the most is that in all these months I never noticed a moment in which he was preoccupied with his own suffering; instead, he was happy, paying attention to us, hospitable with everyone, never sad for himself, always content

## three stupas in his honor

by Fiorella Rizzi

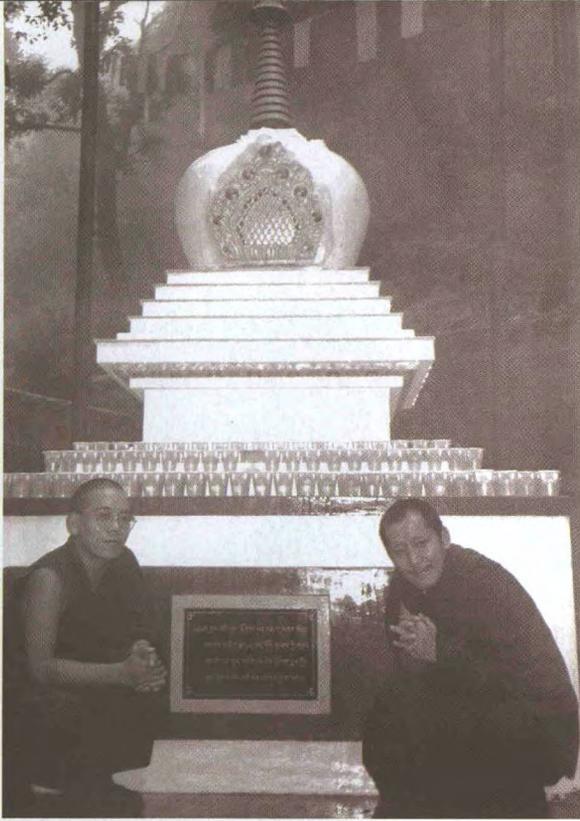


Photo: Fiorella Rizzi

*Geshe-la's Enlightenment Stupa in Dharamsala.  
From left: Chusang Rinpoche and Ven. Lobsang Dhonden.*

and serene. He was a great practitioner; the best practitioners face death with joy, like a child who is going to his parents' house after months at college. I never saw him sad. But when I remembered sometimes that he was very ill, I became very nervous, agitated and stressed, and easily angered. I believe that he was so serene and content because of his practice. I have no doubt about that.

On July 30 Geshe-la appeared to be very ill. When we left for the hospital, he was sleeping deeply and his head was resting on my arm; he had stopped talking and had fallen into a profound sleep. He looked serene and luminous.

Geshe Yeshe Tobden stopped breathing on July 31, 1999, just before entering the hospital in Chandigarh in India. When his body was returned to McLeod Ganj in Dharamsala, he was laid on his bed for 12 days, during which there was no decomposition of his physical body. His disciples gathered around and recited the texts that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had advised until on August 12, in the late afternoon, Geshe-la showed signs of having left his body.

Through this example, Geshe Tobden showed his disciples how great a being he was. He left them in silence, with gentleness, strength, humility and love, showing them that it is possible to live and die like a saint, a bodhisattva, developing one's positive capacity for the benefit of the others. It is thanks to this last teaching of his that it is easier to be "separated" while we pray every day for his speedy rebirth. ☉

**G**ESHE YESHE TOBDEN WAS A TRUE MASTER, SO ONE WANTS TO THINK OF THE possibility of a new contact with him in the future. And so, immediately after the announcement of his death, it seemed completely natural for some of us who live near Pomaia to build a stupa in his memory at the Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa.

Simultaneously, the disciples of Geshe-la in India undertook the same initiative: constructing a stupa in Dharamsala and also a small silver stupa to carry to Sera-Me.

Three special places: on the mountains above Dharamsala where Geshe-la was physically most present; Italy, particularly Pomaia (where he was the first resident lama at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa); and in Sera where he trained his mind, carrying out the studies of a geshe.

In these three places, according to an invisible project of togetherness about which we only got to know after we did it, the three stupas (each containing a part of the ashes of the Master) are now complete: sacred and potent objects to emanate a strong positive influence on the environment and the beings.

The first stupa (pictured this page) was constructed on the terrain given by the Tibetan Children's Village, on the hill behind McLeod Ganj, in the place indicated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama where the holy body of Geshe Tobden was cremated. The stupa was finished in June 2000 and the final ceremony of consecration took place on July 19, 2000.

In his house-cum-laboratory at McLeod Ganj, the artist-goldsmith Ratna Kaji (very close to Geshe-la even by blood relationship) dedicated every free moment to applying leaves of silver on the internal wooden structure, then to sealing and inlaying the small stupa of which Chusang Rinpoche was made the keeper in Sera-Me monastery. There the young Rinpoche is studying, conscious of his special role and responsibility, particularly from the moment when the new reincarnation of Geshe Tobden will be found.

At the same time in Pomaia in July 2000, at the Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa, the preparation of the mantra and the collection of the other items to put in the stupa were completed; Lama Zopa had chosen a stupa of harmony from the eight principal types (pictured opposite). And no one was surprised, because this was the effect that Geshe Tobden produced around him: harmony in the places and the circumstances in which he lived, and harmony in the mind of those who came in contact with him.

On August 3, 2000, Geshe Jampa Gyatso and Ven. Tulku Gyatso officiated at a blessing ceremony of all the items. Incredibly, financial donations arrived whenever the need arose, and without making a specific request. On the day of the consecration ceremony, in which the budget was closed almost 'perfectly', the small amount in excess was offered to the monks present. ☉

## How I became Geshe-la's attendant

By Ven Lobsang Dhonden

I MET GESHE YESHE TOBDEN FOR the first time in 1975. I was in the military and had gone to the Tibetan refugee camp of Orissa to find my mother and my little sister Dechen. There I met a dear friend, Ngawang Khechog (now a famous flute player who lives in Colorado) who had become a monk and disciple of Geshe Tobden on the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Ngawang had been a very lively young man who bragged to everyone, but from the time he had become a disciple of Geshe-la he had become humble like him. My mother wondered who had succeeded in changing the boy who was once so aggressive and turbulent. She asked Nawang to take me with him, because she wanted me to become a monk like him. She did not like my being a soldier, but I needed to earn money to help my widowed mother raise Dechen.

Thus Ngawang took me with him to Dharamsala. My mother gave me money for the trip and once I got to Dharamsala I lived with a family in a village. Ngawang, who was already a meditator, lived in a small hut near Geshe-la.

I was a layman for the first six or seven months until I took monk's vows from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Aside from His Holiness, Ngawang had a very strong devotion to Geshe-la, while I hardly knew him. When I went up the mountain it was to take food to Ngawang because although he had presented me to Geshe-la, I was not immediately accepted as his disciple. Students are observed first very calmly, and only after a good bit of time does the Master accept you.

### Ngawang falls ill

In 1976 Ngawang became very sick with tuberculosis and we had to take him to various hospitals. Finally, with the help of the Private Office of His Holiness we went to Delhi, where he recovered completely. But his mind was changed. Instead of returning to Dharamsala, he disappeared. He wrote me a brief letter. "Please Lobsang, help my master, Geshe Yeshe Tobden, I will not forget your kindness."

Therefore, Geshe-la was left alone up there in the mountain, but in the meantime I had started to know him better. During

Ngawang's illness, we had gone together to help Geshe-la, who slowly started to accept me much more deeply.

At the beginning we were like friends. I respected him very much because Ngawang had told me so many times that Geshe-la was a great saint, a studious practitioner and a great yogi. I had much devotion, but without having sufficient courage to advance myself in his favor. At that time he was about 50 years old, still youthful; he spoke very little in a low voice, he was always very thin, all skin and bones, and he was often lying down, doing his meditations in that position.

Although he did not call me often, I went just the same to help him as best I could; I did not have money, I was extremely poor, and I could not offer him anything – zero! – but when I could manage it, I bought him something to eat and ran up the mountain to offer it to him. Ngawang had asked me to do that.

In 1977, Geshe-la encouraged me to study in the Buddhist school. With his help I was enrolled and admitted. Geshe-la paid for my school food – 60 rupees a month – and thus I was able to advance in my studies. I considered him my father, he was my most important point of reference.

In the meantime, my mother had died at age 49 in Dharamsala. Geshe Tobden did pujas for her and helped with all the necessary arrangements. After her death he continued to protect not only me, but also my little sister, who was at the Tibetan Children's Village. I knew I had to follow his wishes and help him there on the mountain.

We went on like this from 1977 to 1999; we became like a family, Geshe-la, Dechen and I; whatever problem arose we confronted it together: food, clothes, other difficulties, whatever. Until the last day we divided everything evenly. I felt that my duty was to help and serve Geshe-la in the best way, and I did it with all my heart. Nobody asked me to do this, neither Geshe nor His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Only my dear friend, Ngawang. I have said always that with that little letter he gave me a light, I was living in the dark, and he illuminated something truly precious, as if he told me: Take this thing, and it will be good for you. ☉

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## The Himalayas

An Inner Journey



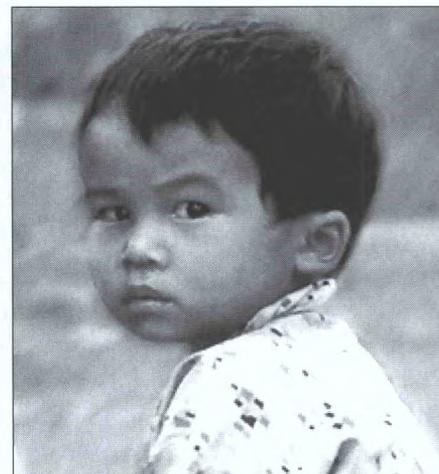
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