

Lama Yeshe and the Sand Tray



Manjushri Institute : bone-chillingly cold in the English winter.

In July 1977 Lama Yeshe flew to Melbourne, where he and Peter Kedge were guests of Bea Ribush, Nick and Dorian Ribush's mother. Bonnie Rothenberg (Ven Konchog Donma) had moved Tara House into a large rented bungalow, and Dorian Ribush opened an organic food shop nearby. This was the very first shop-front business to operate on behalf of a center anywhere, and although some students worked very hard to make it a success, it lasted just one year. However, in that time it provided food for Tara House, half the costs of a large Shakyamuni Buddha statue, and paid for some solid antique library furniture for the center.

There was time for another meeting with Tibetologist David Templeman, this time at his house. "When Lama said he wanted to visit, I asked what we would do," said David. "He said: 'Oh, we'll sit, talk, cook and make some tea,' which was all we ever did. Lama was very helpful with my Tibetan language, going through texts meticulously with me. His pronunciation was just superb. He treated my efforts at classical Tibetan with great dignity and respect, and never glossed over anything."

"When we left the kitchen we walked into my little study where I had a collection of Buddhist statues, mostly unremarkable except for one that I had always treasured. It is just a misshapen lump of bronze about two inches high, but there is a shape to it, and with half an eye you can just make out Green Tara. I bought it in Nepal in 1969 after seeing it in a

shop many times. Lama walked past my bookshelves and suddenly stopped in front of this statue. He immediately threw back his zen and prostrated on the floor many times. Then he said: 'This is a very ancient and beautiful statue of Tara. You must always treasure it.' And of course I always have, but it was as though the statue had called out and spoken to him," said David.

On the following evening, 19 July 1977, Lama Yeshe gave a public talk at Kew Town Hall to more than three hundred people. Max and Maggie Feldmann lived outside the city with two very small children. Maggie was planning to attend Lama's talk but, ever practical, he put her off. "Not necessary for you to come and hear my blah blah blah. You go home and put the babies to bed," he told her.

The next day Lama Yeshe told Bea Ribush not to prepare lunch, and to please go out for the morning. "When I returned I noticed this wonderful smell. There was Lama, towel around his waist and laughing loudly, with every saucepan I possessed on the table, under the table, on the stove – the mess was indescribable," said Bea. "We sat down to a magnificent vegetarian lunch of many different dishes. Peter had taken him shopping in Chinatown for the ingredients."

Lama wanted a country center. Uldis Balodis drove him to the hills outside Melbourne to look around. On the way home, Uldis got stuck behind a truck on a very winding narrow road. "I just couldn't get past it. Suddenly Lama says:

'Go now!' I explained that I couldn't see ahead but he said: 'Just go! You just let go!' It was an order, so I overtook this truck on a blind curve," said Uldis.

Although it was mid-summer when Lama Yeshe and Peter arrived at Manjushri Institute [Cumbria, England], the temperature inside that damp rotting Gothic pile remained bone-chillingly cold. The teachings were held in a large front room blessed with a Yotel brand wood-burning stove. There was another of these excellent stoves in the dining room, and also one in the Oak Room, which was used as the library.

Manjushri now had a permanent community of thirty, including three mothers with young children. The cost of repairing the dry rot turned out to be four times the original estimate, and more money had to be found for other essential renovations. The residents removed rotten beams, scraped walls, scrubbed and painted, and injected foul-smelling chemicals into the dry rot. In some rooms entire walls and floors had to be removed. It became a place where you could open a door to find nothing inside. The Director, Harvey Horrocks, had a remuneration system that charged residents for room and board according to how many hours they worked per day. Eight hours got you free room and board.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's two-week Lam Rim course preceded Lama Yeshe's arrival. One English businessman found Rinpoche's demanding teaching style excruciating. "My marriage was collapsing, I had nowhere to live, I had never sat cross-legged in my life, everything hurt and here's this monk in front of us stuttering and coughing his way through two weeks. All I heard was 'cough cough, suffering, cough cough, suffering'. Yet the people around me were madly writing it all down. I couldn't understand a word, and was so miserable Dieter Kratzer arranged an interview for me.

"Lama Zopa was sitting on a bed. I offered him an orange, and said my marriage wasn't working. 'Marriage not working – ha ha ha!' he said. Then I said I was thinking of separating from my wife. 'Thinking of separating from your wife – ha ha ha!' he said. He giggled at everything I said, and finally gave me a little homily. I thought, well, this is very trivial. I left the room, and halfway across the lawn I suddenly stopped. Something seemed to hit me hard in the heart, almost like a switch being turned on, and I thought: gosh, he's right. When I came back into the hall, all these people said: 'What's happened to you, you look amazing! You've seen Rinpoche, haven't you?' I said I didn't want to talk about it. During the interview I had told Rinpoche that I didn't understand a word he said in the teachings. I did notice,

though, that he didn't cough once while I was with him. Afterwards everything he said was absolutely clear, and I, too, started taking pages and pages of notes."

Lama Yeshe gave a two-week commentary on Manjushri Yoga Tantra, his lectures scheduled so that he could also attend Dora Kalff's course in Jungian psychology and sand play method. Lama clearly wanted to show that the worlds of Tibetan Buddhism and Western psychology had much to offer each other. He proved to be every bit the serious student, taking notes and spending hours "playing" in the sand tray. Somehow Lama Yeshe made it appear as though he and Mrs Kalff were really teaching the same thing – how to use one's mind to achieve happiness and help others.

"I can't visualize!" someone called out during one teaching. "Of course you can!" Lama replied. "Pizza!"

As usual, Lama's presence had inspired many to devote their lives to Dharma, and more people moved in as residents, including Ronnie King. The Institute's principal benefactor, Sigrid Kremzov, encouraged Ronnie to cultivate medicinal herbs, and another newcomer committed herself to the vegetable garden.

You had to be brave to move into Manjushri as winter drew on. "Everyone had their own kerosene heater. The place stank of it, and we all got burnt sitting too close," said an Australian girl, Alaena van Die. "When we weren't huddled over our heaters we'd stumble about draped in thick grey felt blankets we called 'grey matter'. There were piles of them, and you wore as many as you could carry until you simply froze under their weight. Hot showers were only available between certain hours. Two girls had mushrooms growing from their bedroom walls. Some people formed relationships just to keep warm, but couples had to live in cottages and outhouses, not in the main building," she said.

"I was so cold I slept on the sofa in the library," said Thubten Pemo. "I hardly ever went to my room. I used to walk around wearing four, five or six sweaters and a winter coat, and on top of that I draped a grey blanket. People used to say I looked like a walking bed."

Making the place habitable dominated everything. The billiard room, destined to become the gompa, was without a floor, and there was a gaping hole in the roof. A much publicized Heritage Appeal was launched in the hope that it would raise one million pounds over ten years. The task was monumental but the students were all young, healthy and prepared to work until they dropped. "I'm going to repay you back at the death time," Lama told one worker. ☩