

Lama the Businessman

Marcel Bertels, then a monk, was in retreat when Lama Yeshe pulled him out and asked him to “do business” to support the Mount Everest Centre, as so many new boys were arriving at Kopan. And so Marcel developed a fashion manufacturing business in Kathmandu. Adele Hulse’s recounting of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues ...

Marcel still turned up at Kopan for dinner with Lama every night, but with the fashion business rapidly expanding, he came home later and later. By 1978 a slum suburb had sprung up behind the Boudha stupa, and it was through this area he walked at midnight, often carrying large sums of money. It wasn’t safe. Lama told Chophel to leave the Kopan kitchen, become Marcel’s manager, and have his wife cook for them. Chophel rented a small house in the inner city area and proved to be a very good manager.

“Lama told me to walk everywhere and avoid taking rickshaws to save money,” said Marcel, who did everything exactly as Lama instructed. Several Buddhist centers now regularly imported Tibetan incense, offering bowls and such. Peter Stripes in Melbourne, and another student in Florida, imported Tibetan-style jackets, bags and bright boots with curled-up toes. In Italy, Massimo Corona went into business importing the fashion garments designed by Susanna Parodi for the Samsara label. She was a terrific designer.

“Lama Yeshe was always giving me business advice,” said Marcel. “He started promoting the idea that he wanted a shop. I wasn’t that interested, so Lama said he was going to open it by himself, which, of course, demanded I get interested. Then when I was thoroughly involved, he told me I could have this project of his, this shop. He was very clever with me.

“Our first shop was in the new Soaltee Oberoi Hotel, just outside Kathmandu. It lasted about eighteen months and although it didn’t lose money, the area was too quiet for us. Lama bought much of the stock himself during shopping trips to Hong Kong – mostly porcelain, and never any very expensive items. His top price was around two hundred dollars, but ten or twenty dollars was much more common. I was often totally embarrassed, because he never stopped bargaining; he just ground the seller right down. Lama’s sole purpose was to make a profit.

“He was always worried I would sell things too cheaply. Sometimes he came into the shop to check up for himself.

He’d scurry about putting the most ridiculous prices on things then stubbornly refuse to let me lower them when they didn’t sell. As a result the shop was always full of stuff no one would buy. If I reminded him of this he’d say, ‘If people don’t want to pay, then I don’t want to sell!’ But he did finally soften up, and we got rid of everything, eventually.

“Sometimes he asked me for money. For instance, he wanted an air-conditioner for his room, but made it clear he didn’t want to pay for it out of his part of the profits. I was expected to give it to him as a present. What’s more, it had to be a Western one, not a noisy Indian one. Lama was not at all shy about any of this,” said Marcel.

Neither Lama nor Rinpoche owned much personally. “I remember once when we were traveling I bought Rinpoche an electric shaver,” said Peter Kedge. “By the time we got back to Kopan it was gone, because either Rinpoche had offered it to his teacher or another lama. I bought him another one, and the same thing happened, it disappeared. In a fairly short period of time I think I bought five shavers for him and he just gave them all away. It was pretty much the same with everything. Whatever the lamas had, they either gave away or, in Lama’s case, used for the Mount Everest Centre. If Lama could get hold of a sleeping bag or two while he was away, he immediately gave it to the young boys.”

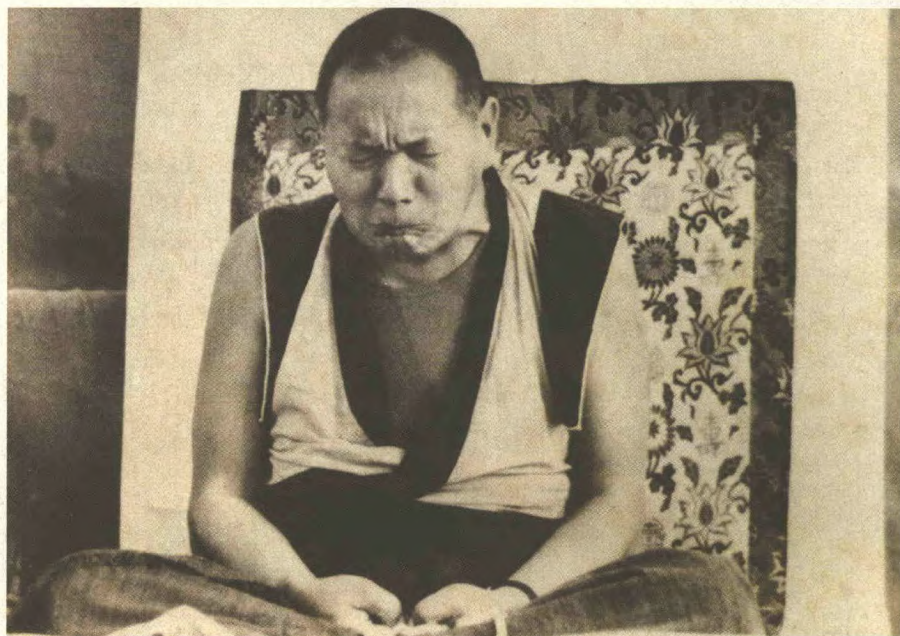
Lama Yeshe was also training Peter Kedge in business. “Lama called me up to his room one time, and produced a cloth bundle full of turquoise, which he called ‘turkle’. ‘Look! For this turkle I pay one thousand dollar. How much you think we can sell in Hong Kong?’ he asked me. I said I had no idea. He told me to go to Hong Kong and sell it, and to take Yeshe Khadro with me. It all looked pretty difficult. We were both ordained, but wore Western dress for this trip. We began by looking around jewelry stores in Hong Kong, and quickly saw that their turquoise was really shiny and clear, while ours was this gnarled, blackened stuff. So we scrubbed it, begged some presentation boxes from a watch shop, put some of our better lumps in them and started

taking them around. Well, people just didn't want to know because it was horrible, low-quality stuff. After four very expensive days we went back to Kathmandu, and told Lama we couldn't sell it. This was awkward, as money was so short and we'd spent a heap on this hopeless venture.

"A couple of weeks later, Lama and I were both in Delhi and I sold the lot to a Tibetan dealer for one thousand rupees. When I told Lama, he said, 'Oh good! That's very good!' Of course he hadn't paid anywhere near one thousand dollars. He wasn't being dishonest, it was just Lama being Lama, and teaching us too."

Quite a few Sangha were sent here and there on business trips. Yeshe Khadro was among those who learned how to finance trips home by selling turquoise in Singapore. "I had the idea Lama was getting us to use up our bad money karma. Plenty of us had been less than honest in the past," said Yeshe Khadro. Indeed, the anti-establishment generation was almost proud to cheat on their taxes, take welfare payments, shoplift and sell hashish.

"Lama was fascinated by economics, and always tried to find out as much as he could," said Peter Kedge. "When he arrived somewhere new, one of the first questions he would always ask someone was how the economic situation was there. Lama surprised me quite often, because he would observe how much construction was going on, and knew from that whether things were going well or not. Lama knew that if the gold price went up, the US dollar went down, and vice versa. In those days, that was just a rule of thumb. I often wondered how Lama knew these things, but I suppose there was the Tibetan word on the street about such fundamental economic issues that were so important to a refugee community. Lama always wanted to know how the world economy functioned. He would read, discuss and ask questions about it, ever aware of the need to provide a sound economic base to the burgeoning Dharma activities. In the early days, there was very little finance apart from Max's salary, and Lama did his utmost to supplement that. He bought things wherever he went with a view to selling them somewhere else – which was often my job.



Lama mimics the "serious" meditator!

"We bought all manner of things, including Duty Free, which always went down well in India. We also brought in things like Chantilly lace saris, electric shavers, a new portable typewriter and calculators. Whenever we travelled out of India, we took incense and khatas – not religious items, but things people were always happy to buy for the course. This, too, helped supplement travel costs.

"Lama was adamant that no religious items should ever be bought or sold as a means of generating income. The only conditions under which Lama would permit us to buy and carry religious items, like dorjes and bells, which people needed in the emerging centers, was if whatever funds came back were used exclusively for the production of religious art, or the printing of texts, or directly in the construction of Kopan monastery. Whatever funds came from the sale of religious items should never be worn or eaten, but used only in the fabric of another religious item.

"Lama had no formal economic, commercial or even mathematical training, yet he was extraordinarily intuitive in this area. It was Lama's idea to invest the funds we began to accumulate for Mount Everest Centre in gold, which we did. Those were the days when inflation was emerging as a significant factor in the world economy, and the price of gold was rising. In a modest way, this investment was really successful. Lama was always interested in property, and wanting to buy a house. When we were at courses in Australia, Lama would send me off to meet with realtors, and look for property. This was at a time when houses on Queensland's Gold Coast were very cheap, and had we bought one or two it would have been very worthwhile in the long term." ●