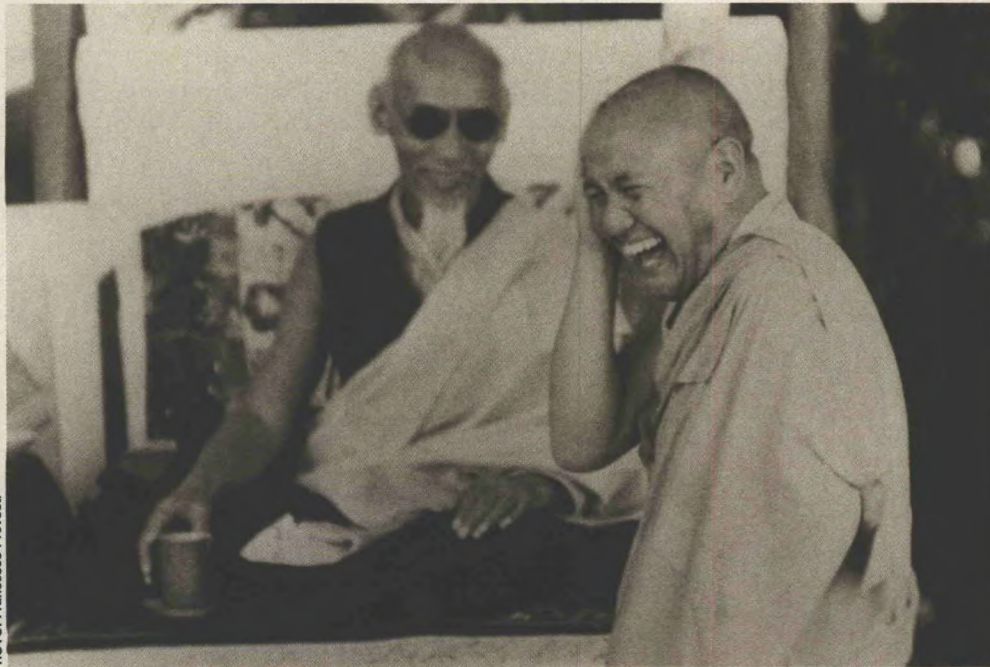


The Abbot: When East Meets West

It's summer, 1978, and the first Western lecture tour by Zong Rinpoche [Abbot of Ganden Monastery] is about to commence at Camp Kennolyn near Soquel, in California. Lama Zopa Rinpoche is to be his translator and travel with him. Lama Yeshe has also invited Dr. Losang Dolma to join the tour. Affectionately known as Ama (mother) Losang, she is a renowned Tibetan doctor in a line of thirteen generations of Tibetan medical practitioners. She has bookings for forty-eight appearances in Southern California alone. Adele Hulse's recapturing of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues ...



Lama Yeshe translating for Zong Rinpoche

Lama Zopa Rinpoche had a Nepalese passport, Lama Yeshe an Australian one, but Zong Rinpoche and Ama Losang only had Certificates of Identity. In order to obtain visas for them the tickets had to be purchased in advance, a huge undertaking for the organization. "It required an outlay we just didn't have," said Peter Kedge. "So we carefully calculated what the costs would be, and divided that between the centers hosting the various courses, according to the number of days they would be there. Then we asked for that sum to be remitted to Kopan. I remember one center did not remit until I sent a desperate telegram at the last minute, saying we would cancel that leg unless the money came. It arrived the next day." The pressures on Peter were enormous and not many people saw that.

When Peter and the Lamas had first gone to England in 1975, Peter spoke to Lama Yeshe over the phone for the first

time. "It was strange, because I remember thinking I should prostrate in his presence," said Peter. The technological revolution just beginning in the West had not come anywhere near Nepal. Neither Kopan nor Tushita Retreat Center had a telephone, and urgent communication was either in person or by telegram. In the early days at Kopan there was no electricity, no reel-to-reel tape recorders, no running water. There was a time when it was almost impossible to make an international telephone call from the telegraph office in Kathmandu. "In 1974 I remember spending two full days in Kathmandu trying to get a line to England," said

Peter. "Delhi was easier. If it was a clear night without wind, one could make a call to England from the Parliament Street telegraph office, but it wasn't easy. It was a totally different world. Thirty years later you could get Lam Rim teachings off the Internet and download commentaries in any language instantaneously – all a long way from the few cherished publications from the Tibetan Library. In those days we studied about the Perfect Human Rebirth. Now we need a perfect human e-birth."

As host, Lama Yeshe made sure his students hadn't overlooked anything. "Zong Rinpoche is the Buddha!" he told everyone. Zong Rinpoche was attended by Tenzin Wangchuk, with Peter Kedge attending Lama Zopa and Ama Losang.

"This tour was quite a coup for Lama," said Peter. "Zong Rinpoche had never been outside India. The Tibetans were in awe of this great abbot of Ganden

Monastery, always bowing low in his presence, slurping their saliva in the traditional way and saying 'los, los'. He was well known for his lashing tongue and did not mince words, ever. His clear gaze looked right through you."

The mechanics of the course were left very much in Peter's hands. He met Zong Rinpoche in Delhi, and accompanied him and Lama Zopa on the flight to California.

"Not once did he acknowledge my presence, but remained utterly austere all the way to America," said Peter. "Teaching *injiies* was an altogether new experience for him. We had explained that he was to give a course, but obviously things had not been put as clearly as they should have been. Tibetans started appearing from all over the place to pay their respects, bringing *khatas*, asking him if he would go to Los Angeles the very next day, and Rinpoche was saying, 'Yes, of course.' But every detail of this course had been organized for three months before he arrived. He could not possibly go shooting off to Los Angeles.

"Lama Yeshe told me exactly what I had to tell him. 'You go in and explain to Rinpoche that in the West people have to work, and can only have so many holidays. We have arranged this course for a long time and the students have made plans to come. They have also paid a lot of money to rent this place.' In short, I was to explain that in the West people have schedules and everyone is expected to adhere to them. I also had to tell him that teachings start on time and stop for lunch and such things.

"Lama had me call a meeting to sort it all out. Lama, Zong Rinpoche, Lama Zopa and Ama Losang were all present, and I was the one wriggling on the end of the stick. Before the meeting Lama Zopa begged me: 'Whatever you do, don't get angry with Rinpoche!' That would have created the worst karma. Zong Rinpoche sat perfectly rigid throughout and Lama Zopa just folded over double on the floor.

"My talk didn't go down well at all. I'd left it a bit late. It all looked so disorganized that at one point Zong Rinpoche threatened to go back to India. No one had ever told him he had to stop his discourse at certain times so people could take *pipi* breaks, eat their lunch and so on. This tour was way beyond the bounds of anything we had ever tried before. Lama was pulling the strings, putting a Westerner in the hot seat to ensure his own relationship with Zong Rinpoche remained intact."

Zong Rinpoche and Geshe Rabten had already been booked to teach at a Gelug summer school at Deer Park, Geshe Sopa's new center in Madison. Elvin, Geshe Sopa's

attendant, wanted Peter to cancel the Californian course altogether.

"I just had to wriggle through," said Peter, "but Lama was absolutely clear about what he wanted. Even Geshe Sopa sometimes rolled his eyes and said, 'That Thubten Yeshe, he's too much!' At this Lama would suck his teeth and grin, knowing full well what he was getting away with."

By mid-summer Geshe Rabten was already at Deer Park, and he and Geshe Sopa invited Lama to come up and stay with them during his term break. Lama was devoted to his teachers and extremely humble with them. It would not have been easy for Lama when he wrote back in late May saying he couldn't come: "The temperature and humidity in Madison at that time of year are so high that my heart and body both become swollen." He stayed in California.

One hundred people enrolled in Zong Rinpoche's Lam Rim course at Camp Kennolyn, which had taken over very large premises belonging to a Catholic organization in Santa Cruz. They included California girls in tight tops and short-shorts, super-casual youngsters who lounged against the walls during teachings, feet stretched out in front of them, chewed gum and yelled out feminist arguments. To this tall, thin, powerful man with blazing eyes, the West was utterly different from anything he had ever seen. Not even the merest shadow of a smile crossed Kyabje Zong Rinpoche's face as he tugged reflectively at his thin white oriental beard and peered at them over the top of his spectacles.

Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's humble devotion to their guru was blindingly apparent to all.

The course Lama Yeshe was teaching at the University of California's Santa Cruz campus ran concurrently with Zong Rinpoche's. Lama Yeshe raced back to Camp Kennolyn to catch the final day of Zong Rinpoche's course, when one hundred people took refuge. Kriya tantra initiations into Vajrapani, Tara, Chenrezig and Vajrasattva were also given, as well as highest yoga tantra initiations into Yamantaka and Vajra Yogini. Unusually, commitments were minimal or dispensed with altogether.

It seems Kyabje Zong Rinpoche, the great traditionalist, saw value in these wild Westerners taking initiations, even if they didn't know what to do with them afterwards. Zong Rinpoche gave a final speech, translated by Lama Yeshe, during which he praised Lama's qualities. Then he asked Lama to translate what he had just said into English. Lama giggled helplessly and hid his face as he mumbled the words. ❀