

California Mud

California 1978. Adele Hulse's recapturing of the life and times of Lama Thubten Yeshe continues ...

Connie Miller had returned to the United States, and Lama finally gave permission for her to be ordained, telling her to invite her elderly parents to the ceremony. "The only robe I had was a *zen*," said Connie. "Lama lent me his *chogu*, the outer yellow robe worn during teachings. Somebody else rustled up a sleeveless yellow blouse and I ran up a *shemtab* on a sewing machine. The night before the ceremony, Lori Cayton and my old boyfriend cut off my hair. When I introduced my parents, Lama looked straight at my father and said: 'How do you like what I have done to your daughter?' My dad answered: 'I think it's wonderful. I have three more you can have!' My mother's mouth just dropped open. My dad worked for the State Department and no one in the family ever went to church, except me.

"We had to figure out how to prostrate with our long *zens*. There are specific movements and folds you have to make with it, and we were all so clumsy. If we hadn't had to kneel so long it might have been funny, but Lama guided us through it so kindly. There was no translation and Zong Rinpoche was extremely stern and businesslike."

Vajrapani's pioneers

Every weekend the Los Angeles students drove up to Vajrapani, where life was tough in summer and winter, and every spare pair of hands was needed to get the work done.

"Water was always a problem," said Anila Ann. "We found a public spring nearly fourteen miles away, where we'd fill up our forty-four gallon drums and bring them back. In the summer of 1978, a drought year, we ended up reduced to one little waterhole guarded by a rattle-snake."

The road leading into the property required a lot of maintenance. No matter how much rock was poured on, it just sank into the winter mud and was never enough. During their first year the residents cleared a spot of land, built a platform and erected a tipi as their first gompa. Meanwhile, they all had to support themselves financially. The ever-optimistic Anila Ann was not concerned: "This is Lama Yeshe's dream, so there's no need to worry. The money will come from the sky!" she exhorted.

Somehow, money did come and always just in time. Living so close to nature and having to work together to



Lama Yeshe with Pam Cowan, sailing in Seattle.

build the center fostered a particularly close and warm bond between Vajrapani's residents.

The Jackson family lived in a tipi for a few months before moving into a frame building with a wooden floor and clear plastic walls. Their third child, Yeshe, was born on the land, eleven months after they moved to Vajrapani.

Janet and Ross Brooke also lived on the land with their children. Their outdoor kitchen had no proper flooring, just strips of linoleum laid over bare earth and consisted of little more than an old wood-fired stove with a wooden roof covered in asphalt shingles. "We had the best of times in that kitchen," said Janet Brooke. "My children remember it as one of their happiest places, with the water rushing across the floor every time it rained. My husband Ross and John McKay milled all the beams used in the gompa from trees on the land. Åge Delbanco and I did the art work." Åge had migrated to the United States and was to spend more than fifteen years living at Vajrapani.

But what could one expect of hippies living in mud among the trees?

Lama Yeshe gave bodhisattva vows in a big tent erected on the ridge at the top of the land. He also gave his Californian students a talking-to that none would forget. He berated them for making the goal of their hard-working, harmonious little community the creation of a sanctuary, primarily for their own use. Centers should not become private Dharma clubs, he warned. He said they had not promoted this center in town, nor offered teachings to new students.

Finally, there was the matter of the poor quality of care they had given to Zong Rinpoche during his tour. Lama Yeshe told them he had brought them the Buddha, and they didn't know how to look after him. He said Camp Kennolyn was old and cold with poor facilities. Next time their standards should be much higher. "But what could one expect of hippies living in mud among the trees?" he added.

Despite all this, Vajrapani was a very happy, harmonious and mutually supportive community.

Lama Yeshe told Thubten Pende that if he had the opportunity to spend an entire year there, he would "shake America!" He had high expectations of his students. Even some recently planted seedlings beside the brand new gompa steps did not meet with his approval. He pointed out how rushed and makeshift they looked.

Walking around Vajrapani's steep terrain with Ross Brooke, Lama took his hand and placed it over his heart. Ross could feel the erratic beat. Was this gesture to show Ross that time was running out? He also spent time with the Posts, the two students of Swami Mukhtananda who had originally owned the place with the Brookes. They were very happy with how things had turned out.

Holiday in Seattle

While Zong Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche went to Geshe Sopa's center, Deer Park in Wisconsin, Jon Landaw accompanied Lama Yeshe to Seattle for English lessons and a rest. Kopan student Pam Cowan graciously made all the arrangements. Lama Yeshe worked hard in his English classes, writing notes such as: "America was discovered by Colomba." These classes were held in the morning and sometimes Jon had to wake him. "One morning I knocked on his door and there was no answer so I opened it, went over and touched his arm. Later he told me that when I woke him I should not touch him. Another time I knocked and knocked, to no reply. I opened the door a crack and there was Lama, lying as if dead. I burst out laughing because I could see straight away he was

fooling. He started laughing too. But the act of playing dead was something he kept up with some people. It was very realistic and he only opened his eyes when they were really panicking. Obviously, he wanted us to get used to the fact of mortality – his and our own," said Jon.

Lama Yeshe was not averse to being touched. It seems that these deep "sleeps" he went into were actually some practice of deep meditative absorption, and that touching someone under these circumstances could be dangerous for them.

Everyone wanted evidence of the powers of this fully magical, vividly clairvoyant Tibetan lama who could read the future, change the weather at will and seem to be in two places at once. If they weren't already "space cadets" from the 1960s, they were deeply enthralled by Eastern mysticism. Real magic, Lama Yeshe kept saying, involves learning to control one's own mind, but he showed some students a few tricks.

Like this one: Having completed several Kopan courses, Jimi Neal decided he wanted to become a monk. But he didn't want to become a beggar as well. With Lama Yeshe's permission he took a job as a bus driver in Seattle. At the time he believed Lama had already left the United States, a rumor deliberately spread to give Lama time to rest.

Jimi Neal: "I had just started my second year on the job. I drove the night shift because I liked the silence and the crazy people who used buses then. Very late one night I was way out at the end of the line in a fancy neighborhood and staring into the dark, when suddenly this apparition appeared right in front of me. It was Lama Yeshe standing alone in a field, just a little to the side of the bus. I thought it must be my hallucination. It was the middle of the night, there was no attendant and besides, he wasn't even in the country.

"But there he was. He even turned and looked at me. So I stopped the bus and looked back at him. A couple of passengers started asking what I thought I was doing. I didn't really know, but then the image just disappeared.

"A couple of days later I got a call from Pam Cowan inviting me to dinner. 'Lama's going to be there, isn't he?' I said. 'How did you know?' she exclaimed. It was a well-kept secret. We ended up having a really nice evening. I went into a bedroom with Lama and talked for a couple of hours. He told me he was really glad I was working so that I didn't have to ask others for money. Later on I heard that at a couple of courses he spoke about seeing me in the bus. He often said that if he could just get his students to see that things do not exist the way they appear to, that would be good enough." ●