



LAMA YESHE PASSES

March 3, 1984. Twenty minutes before dawn on the first day of the Tibetan New Year, after months of manifesting illness, the heart of forty-nine year old Lama Thubten Yeshe stopped beating. All around the world phones rang, hushed voices delivered the news and devastated students deliberated about attending the cremation, planned at Vajrapani Institute in California.

Ashley Walker, a Vajrapani resident, heard the news and began sobbing. “Suddenly I heard myself and saw myself. I asked: Who is crying? Then I walked back down to the new gompa we were building, which was just a site full of tools. A few of us arrived there at the same time. Together we realized that very soon hundreds of people were going to be arriving, so we all just set to work. The first job was to clear the road of mudslides so cars could get in more easily.”

Max Matthews, one of Lama Yeshe’s first Western students from the 1970s, was at a fashion trade fair in New York with Massimo Corona, Susanna Parodi, Jacie Keely and Marcel Bertels when Lama Yeshe passed away. “When he [Marcel] told me, my reaction was that I became mad as hell, so angry I didn’t have time to cry. I said shit! How can he go off and die like that and leave me here! I was so angry I just went on with the fashion show and can’t quite remember when I left New York for California. When I got to Vajrapani I asked Rinpoche why Lama had let me go to New York that morning. Rinpoche said that Lama thought I wouldn’t be able to deal with being there,” said Max.

Jan Willis last spoke to Lama while he was at Stanford Medical Center, but did not see him. “He told me on the phone that we students should not have any doubts, that everything was being done for him that could be done and what would happen, would happen. I was in Middletown Connecticut when I suddenly woke up at about 5:00 A.M. on *Losar* morning. I sat straight up in bed, startled but happy. Right in front of me, hanging in space, I saw a huge image of Lama Yeshe’s face with his dazzling smile, his beautiful spaced front teeth and shining loving eyes. It wasn’t yet light outside and I felt so happy and close to Lama all day. It was much later that night when Randy Solick rang to tell me Lama had passed away. So this last visitation from him was perhaps his greatest blessing for me, telling me everything is alright, everything is good,” said Jan.

Jon Landaw was in a taxi in Kathmandu with Chris and Dale Davis when they thought to call in to Pam and Karuna Cayton’s house. Chris jumped out and found a note on the gate from Karuna: “The world is in tears. Lama Yeshe has passed away. Go straight to Kopan,” it read.

“I just couldn’t stop crying,” said Karuna. “I went to see Drubtop Rinpoche at Swayambhunath and asked if I should go to the cremation in California, but he said: ‘What good would that do?’ He suggested I do Vajrasattva retreat instead, which I did. Over the next two weeks every memory of Lama and every word he had ever said came back to me.”

“That day the whole house was either laughing hysterically or crying hysterically,” said Trisha Donnelly, who was living at Tushita Mahayana Meditation Centre, New Dehli. “We had just sent another boy to Sera with puja instructions, so I rang them again with new instructions for different pujas. I also rang Lama’s sister, Mrs. Wong. She just screamed, shrieked, then started crying. I rang everybody. It felt strange being the one to break the news, but Rinpoche had told me to.”

Tara Institute’s first director, Uldis Balodis, was visiting Sera Je Monastery with his parents at the time. They arrived in the evening and went straight to Geshe Legden’s house, but found it empty. “Then we found out everyone was doing puja. I asked what kind of puja and was told ‘Oh, just puja.’ Finally, after a couple of hours, Geshe Legden’s closest student, a young Rinpoche, came up and told us by hand gestures as much as anything else that Lama Yeshe had died. A Western friend of ours was also staying at Sera and they hadn’t told him either. Tibetans have this thing about not wanting to be the bearer of bad news, especially if it’s about your guru. We could see it was difficult and a big responsibility for this young Rinpoche, but somebody had to do it,” said Uldis.

At Tushita Retreat Centre in Dharamsala, progress reports on Lama had been arriving every day. Director Max Redlich heard the news down in McLeod Ganj when a



monk from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Private Office broke it to him. Max knew he had to take the news back up to Tushita, but first he went to His Holiness' residence, where the secretary told him: "A great Lama like Lama Yeshe actually doesn't need anything, but if you would like His Holiness to do pujas, then he will." Monks from the Gyumed Tantric College did pujas and made extensive offerings at Tushita for days and days.

In London, Frances Holmes, early student and former nun, was having a *Losar* party at Manjushri London Centre with lots of dancing and laughing. There was something special in the air and the party went on very late. Nick Ribush, then publisher of Wisdom Publications, and Ven. Robina Courtin, then editor, had been at that party. The call came through to Wisdom Publications at 2:00 A.M. Sarah Thresher, assistant editor, Ven. Robina and Nick immediately decided they all wanted to go to California.

Harvey Horrocks was in England in very unhappy circumstances. Ten days before Lama Yeshe's death, his father had died by suicide. "It was pretty traumatic at home, so I decided to go to a place my father had north of the Lake District and do a White Tara retreat for Lama's long life," said Harvey. "I got in all the supplies and set up a room in this house, worked out a timetable and planned to start around 8:00 P.M. Just as I was going to the door of the meditation room to begin, the phone rang. It was Franco Piatti [one of the founders of ILTK] in Italy telling me the news. I put the phone down, went into the meditation room and changed the retreat to Vajrasattva. I had no confusion about not going to the cremation."

Student Raffaello Longo was in retreat at the time in Italy: "We had a puja for Lama on the last day of the Tibetan year and then a party, because we were so happy he was still alive. A few hours later we had to do another puja. People here were desperate. Geshe Rabten, one of the Lamas' teachers, sent us a letter saying it was not useful to be like a dog at this time, barking and crying; that death is something we have to accept, profit from and practice for."

Margot Kool and Jan-Paul Kool, who were directors of Maitreya Instituut in Holland at the time, were on holiday. "Lama gave such a wonderful feeling of having complete connection with every student in every center that at first I felt it didn't matter if he was dead or not,"

said Margot. "I didn't cry until I saw his ashes. Then I was inconsolable."

In France, the news came to Nalanda Monastery in the evening. The monks did pujas all through the next day, but when the question arose about going to America, Adrian Feldmann, then director of Nalanda, said he felt the best thing to do was to keep the program going. Everyone agreed.

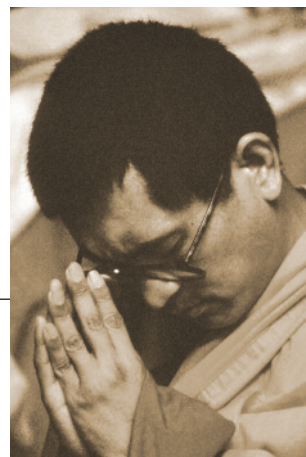
On hearing the news Merry Colony, who was director of Dorje Pamo Monastery at the time, went straight to Nalanda with plans for herself and Nalanda monk, John Feuille, to go to California. Just as they were discussing this, Lama Zopa Rinpoche called and said: "Nobody move, stay where you are, just carry on and don't let things fall apart."

In Germany, the annual winter retreat at Aryatara Institut was still running, with ten days to go. "Every night we had been chanting (in German) the Vajrasattva *tsog* offering Lama had composed in Bodhgaya," said Sylvia Wetzel. "Jacie's call here came on the morning of March 4, but the retreat saved me. I was translating Lama's teachings at the time and listening to his voice every day. The following year I became a nun."

Miffi McKimm, now spiritual program coordinator of Langri Tangpa Center, was asleep at the Brisbane City Center: "I dreamt Lama came into my bedroom, stood there in his robes and talked to me, serious and supportive. When we got the news I felt quite pragmatic and I'm sure the dream was to do with that. I worked out it was a few hours before Lama died. I did feel sad when I saw the sad, sad faces of Lama Zopa and Geshe Thinley, but I was sure Lama would never desert us."

Adele Hulse: "Gillian [Gelbart, now Ven. Tsapel] rang me at home. That night we had a big puja at Tara Institute and I sat where no one could see my face. A couple of nights later I dreamt of Lama lying in his coffin, exactly like a photograph I later saw of him in his coffin. He was dead, just dead. Then one eye opened, looked at me and winked. Then Lama turned his head away from me and vomited. I learned later that dreaming of vomiting is supposed to represent purification. I remember at the time it was not at all distressing and the wink was just wonderful."

Ven. Sangye Khadro was meditating at Dorje Pamo Monastery in France when there was a knock on



Lama Yeshe's funeral at Vajrapani Institute, March 7, 1984

her door: "It came as an unbelievable shock. It was the first time someone very close to me had died. Geshe Tengye led a puja during which I started crying then stopped, because I thought Lama wouldn't like that. He'd want me to be strong for others. I also realized that while Lama was alive I could still be a child, but with him gone I had to grow up."

All around the world the students, their families and people who kept a photo of Lama Yeshe just because they liked his face, bowed their heads in sorrow.

As news of Lama's death spread around the world, around 200 students made their way to Vajrapani

Institute to attend the cremation of Lama Yeshe's body. Amid the continual hum of prayers and pujas, a cremation stupa was quickly erected by several students with the supervision of Song Rinpoche. The stupa was set alight shortly later, followed by a three-hour puja marked by profound stillness and a sense of unexpressed grief, and left to burn for several days before it was reopened by Lama Zopa Rinpoche to examine for relics. After the relics were removed, Rinpoche thanked everyone in attendance, commenting, "I am completely satisfied. Everything has gone so perfectly, nothing inauspicious has happened."

Lama Yeshe has gone. No more shall we see his smiling face or hear the familiar, "Thank you so much, dear." How much he accomplished in the fifteen short years among Westerners, his irrepressible energy lifting us out of our limited concepts to reach for the sky, his kindness melting thousands of hearts and awakening love, appreciation, devotion and admiration.

Yet he is still here. Such was his skill that much of his work was accomplished through his inspiration, not his presence. He would drop into whichever corner of the world his students were carrying out Dharma work – Nepal, India, Europe, America, Australia – and for a few joyous whirlwind days inspire us with teachings, encouragement, scoldings and personal advice. Then he would leave again for the next stop, the strong impression of these short visits sustaining us till we saw him again, new projects keeping everyone so busy that we would almost breathe sighs of relief that he'd gone before giving us more to do! Certainly his presence was constantly felt, whether he was there in person or not – and it still is now.

Nick Ribush in "Letter from the Publisher," *Wisdom Magazine* 2, 1984



I suppose you could say that *Wisdom Magazine* was the precursor of *Mandala*. We published two issues, in 1983 and 1984, when I worked for Wisdom in London. Actually, Lama wanted us to call it *The Propagator!*

We started working on the 1984 issue before Lama passed away, so it turned into a tribute: thirty pages of it devoted to Lama. It took nine months! It was very hard to do, but wonderful too.

We used this amazing photo of Lama for the front cover, taken by Ueli Minder; wrathful but so compassionate too: exactly Lama's nature, it seems to me. I remember hearing that Lama Zopa Rinpoche had said to Ven. Thubten Gyatso, "Everyone should have a copy of this photo."

Ven. Robina Courtin, early student, editor, writer, FPMT touring teacher, former editor of *Wisdom Magazine* and *Mandala*.



Six weeks after Lama Yeshe's passing, Lama Zopa Rinpoche gave a personal tribute to his guru ...



**We have lost our heart jewel,
our wish-granting gem.**

For those of us who have received teachings directly from Lama Yeshe, he was incomparably kinder than all the buddhas of the three times. He took care of us like babies, not only by giving teachings. Lama was more than a mother, more than a father to us, suffering as he did in everyday life for us.

He not only looked after our present life, but our future lives also. He led us, helped us make preparation for happiness in this life all the way up to enlightenment.

For all of us it is the greatest sadness that Lama has passed away. We have lost our heart jewel, our wish-granting gem. The remarkable aspect that we can see, that we can communicate with, that we can hear advice from: This has gone.

I think it must be the greatest sadness not only for us, but for many other people also, Tibetan and Western, who are not his disciples; people who have just talked to Lama, or met him briefly when he was travelling. Or for those who have only read Lama's teachings or just heard his holy words. All these people who have felt Lama's great warmth, his special character, his great loving kindness, his unbearable compassion; I think Lama's passing must be a great sadness for them, too.

Many Tibetan lamas from all the traditions, not just Gelugpa, had heard of Lama and knew about his extensive benefit to people in the West. I have received many letters since Lama passed away from other centers and lamas of other traditions saying how sorry they are about Lama.

Lama's mind was open, you see. His heart was open to all traditions, to all religions. His mind was not tight and narrow. He had such a broad view, he could see far into the distance. He was not like those who tie themselves to the mountain with a rope because they are afraid of the danger of falling down the mountain.

Just seeing Lama's holy body somehow made people happy. Just seeing him could bring peace and joy. This was a quality of Lama's holy body.

Even just seeing a picture of Lama can make people happy. Since I was a child at Buxa [Duar] I had one pen-friend who took care of me for many years, exactly like a mother, and when she died her cousin continued to look after me. When we started writing I sent her a picture of Lama and even though she had never met him, she told me

that when she saw him in the group of people in the picture she felt his warmth. Many people feel this way.

As for the qualities of Lama's holy speech, I don't need to say much. Those of us who have received teachings from Lama, his students, it is our own experience. However, most teachers when they give talks to the public, for example in the West where there are completely new people to the Dharma and not so much acceptance, in these situations most teachers like myself teach only what they themselves know and not so much according to the needs of the people. But Lama, whenever he gave teachings nothing was fixed, he didn't just talk about one subject. In the audience there would be people with various problems – spiritual problems, personal problems, family problems. Lama would speak to all of them. First he would talk about one thing, then another, then another – rather like different dishes. When various dishes of food are served, everybody has a chance to enjoy something.

So, after a one-hour talk from Lama everybody would have received some answer to their problems, whether they were higher class, middle class or lower class, intelligent or not intelligent. In the beginning some might have come just to see how a Tibetan lama looks and others might have come sincerely wanting peace. When Lama had finished, they would all go home with a happy mind.

Even for old students, something similar would happen. In that hour, no matter what Lama would be teaching – bodhichitta, lam-rim, tantra, renunciation – in that hour you could almost transform your mind into that realization.

All this shows the qualities of Lama's holy speech.

Regarding Lama's holy mind: you can understand from your own experience about Lama's great compassion, his constant thought of loving kindness; he wanted only to cherish other sentient beings. Even when Lama showed his unhealthy aspect it was incredible just how much time he spent for us: giving teachings, giving personal advice, writing to us, solving our problems, travelling everywhere. Years ago, doctors said that he would not live long, yet he lived for years more, doing so much activity for others. He never stopped dedicating his life to others.

Even an ordinary, healthy person could not possibly do all these activities. What kept Lama alive so long was his unbearable compassion for us. Now, though, we don't have the good fortune to have Lama in that aspect any longer, to receive his guidance. We ran out of merit. But until now, I think Lama tried to live for us and dedicate all his life and time and energy completely to us, day and night.



So, you can see from this, without me saying any more, the qualities of Lama’s holy mind: he completely renounced himself and cherished others.

One time Lama was telling me that the whole point is to transform everything into Dharma, every action should be turned into the Dharma. He said that for some people even breathing became work for other sentient beings. Besides teaching and other normal activities, eating, sleeping, sitting, even the breath benefited others. Every movement becomes work for others.

When he said these things I always felt very much that Lama was describing himself, all his own qualities, his own actions, the realizations of his own holy mind, his own bodhichitta.

Actually, in one way it looked like Lama already had realizations, that Lama was a bodhisattva from the very beginning of his life. I remember one time when a great meditator friend of Lama used to come to see him and they would teach each other. This yogi would say for example that “training the mind in the three principal paths is very old-time talk, very ancient talk.” For him you see, this work was finished ages ago. Anyway, he would talk like this. And Lama said one time, “Oh, shunyata, I realized that while I was debating in the courtyard,” when he was young, at Sera Je.

Lama would always meditate immediately after hearing the teachings, after each session. So, to me it seems that Lama generated bodhichitta at that time; according to the general view it seems like that. But also, Lama was born with bodhichitta.

Lama always used to take a rest after lunch for one or two hours; wherever he was he would do this. At first I thought it was just ordinary rest, but gradually I realized that these were Lama’s meditation sessions. At these times he would continue to practice the meditation on clear light, developing realizations.

I remember one time at Kopan during the ceremonies for the investiture of Yangsi Rinpoche, in 1975, Lama spent time with Rinpoche’s father, Jampa Thinley, who was a very close friend of Lama. This time Lama did not have time for his rest after lunch. I remember noticing how he sat there: It seemed like such a great loss, like a normal person having lost something valuable.

So, to ordinary people who didn’t know Lama’s level of mind, who didn’t know that Lama was a great hidden yogi, Lama would simply have a rest after lunch.

Lama had the power to know exactly a person’s mind. He was able to give people exact advice, suitable advice. Even the jobs that he gave, they suited each person’s karma so perfectly. I found this so many times, that only that particular person was able to do a particular job.

Lama was always so incredibly busy, he never stopped working for others. At Kopan, for example, he would always look after everything. He would look after me, all the boys, even the kitchen, the library, right down to the dogs. He was so busy yet he even washed the dogs and looked after the puppies who were sick.

People would often criticize Lama, “Oh, he is not keeping vinaya,” because he touched everybody. However, I felt completely when I saw Lama touch people that from his head down to his feet he was filled totally with compassion for that person. Like His Holiness the Dalai Lama; I almost cry when I see His Holiness, seeing his unbearable compassion. So, like that. Instead of individual attachment, Lama was completely under the control of compassion, bodhichitta. He renounced himself and cherished others, and was able to see things as illusory.

And Lama had such great scope, great vision, the power to see and have huge plans that would benefit many people. And he actualized these plans.

All this is very briefly what I felt about the qualities of Lama Yeshe’s holy body, holy speech and holy mind.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s original tribute was recorded as a ten-hour video. An extract was first published in Wisdom Magazine 2, 1984; the version here is edited further for space. This tribute, plus many others from the time of Lama’s passing are available at: www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=137&chid=201

On February 12, 1985 in the state hospital of Granada, Spain, Osel Hita Torres was born.

Fourteen months later His Holiness the Dalai Lama concurred with Lama Zopa Rinpoche that Osel was the reincarnation of Lama Thubten Yeshe and he was enthroned at Kopan Monastery in March 1987.

Osel is in his final year of a masters course in cinema, film and documentary making. Osel is well, enjoys his studies and is extremely enthusiastic about his course and the medium for communication it offers. ☸

