

The Jade Buddha Story

Part One: The idea

by Ian Green

It was early 2003 when I received a phone call from America. I was sitting at home in Bendigo and on the other end of the line was a young man from Santa Cruz, in California. His name was Cheyenne Sun Hill. He explained that he was a jade jeweler and a Buddhist and that he was looking around the world for someone to carve an enormous jade Buddha. Cheyenne sounded like someone from the movies. He said things like “Hey dude” and “Hey man” and I did not know what to think of him. But I continued to listen as Cheyenne told me of an enormous jade boulder in Canada and how he had been trying to get someone to carve the boulder into a jade Buddha. He explained that he had tried to get the Maitreya Project and several temples interested but they either felt it was too hard or too much of a distraction from their main focus. Cheyenne had heard about the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion being built in Australia and almost as a last resort he thought he would give me a call.

At the time I was a Board member of the US-based Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT Inc) and there was a Board meeting coming up in a few months in, of all places, Santa Cruz. I arranged to fly to USA a day early to meet up with Cheyenne to talk further about his idea. He showed me some Canadian jade and he talked about the properties of Nephrite jade with great passion. He told me how this *true* jade had been revered in many ancient cultures including China, Central and Southern America as well as the Maori of New Zealand.

Immediately after the FPMT Inc board meeting I flew to Vancouver to see the enormous boulder of jade. I remember Peter Kedge helped me pay for this flight with his frequent flyer points. Cheyenne and I were met at the Vancouver airport by Kirk Makepeace. Kirk is well known around the world for his work with Canadian jade which he has single-handedly done much to help it gain the recognition it deserves. Kirk, Cheyenne and I went out to dinner and again it was a time for me to go on a steep learning curve about jade. Kirk explained that Nephrite Jade was the traditional jade which had been revered as “the stone of heaven” in China. He also explained that after a jade-like gemstone was discovered relatively recently in Burma, Nephrite had lost much of its popularity to the fashionable new stone which had been called “Jadeite”. In fact Nephrite and Jadeite are quite different and on the basis of their mineral composition have little in common. Under a microscope jadeite appears crystalline while nephrite looks much more “organic”. Microscopically Nephrite appears almost to have fibres like a tree.

The next morning Kirk collected us early for a trip to the yard where his jade is stored. We drove down a bumpy dirt track which gave no indication of the millions of dollars of gemstones that are stored there. Kirk explained that that is just the way he likes it to be.

In the yard were several large brown rocks of various sizes. This brown colour was the outside “rind” of the bright green nephrite jade. Glancing around the yard my eye was drawn to the big boulder – Polar

Pride. From the moment he discovered it Kirk knew he had made a unique find. Nothing of its size and pure, unflawed jade had been found before. It was dubbed the “find of the millennium” and in his book “Jade” the renowned gemologist Fred Ward described Polar Pride in the following terms “Without doubt, this is the largest piece of gem grade jade found in my lifetime and perhaps the millennium. Without going into too much in the geological formation, it is a very, very rare occurrence.” In the same book Kirk was quoted as saying “I named this one Polar Pride, and I am not going to cut it any further. Instead I’ll auction it as a wonder of nature. It’s an icon that I expect to see as a museum piece, a monument, a symbol; the world’s best green nephrite boulder ever.”

For the three years from the time of its discovery until I heard about it in 2003 Kirk received many offers to buy Polar Pride. Most of these offers were from jewelry manufacturers wanting to carve it up for bangles, beads and a multitude of art pieces and jewelry. But there were also plenty of offers to purchase the boulder for the creation of a large monumental piece. The Vancouver airport was interested in Polar Pride to produce a centerpiece for their international departures lounge. Several Chinese temples also expressed interest in purchasing the boulder for holy statues. But as Kirk Makepeace explained “for some reason every offer that was made to us fell through.”

After my trip to Vancouver I returned to Santa Cruz and immediately got in touch with my guru or spiritual master, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I arranged a meeting with him to which I brought Cheyenne along. Cheyenne and Rinpoche got on like old friends and I remember that Rinpoche took particular interest in the garuda which Cheyenne had tattooed across his back. Shortly after we had inspected the tattoo I told Rinpoche about “Polar Pride” and explained what a unique gemstone it was. I didn’t hear much more that night about Polar Pride. But the next morning I received a message that Rinpoche had foreseen that Polar Pride would become a Buddha which would “illuminate the world.” Rinpoche then spoke to me and said “You must turn this giant gemstone into a holy object as an offering to the world.”

When I receive an instruction from my guru I tend not to ask “why” but instead to just start thinking about “how”. The first step in “how” was to commence negotiations to buy Polar Pride. It took us some time to not only negotiate the total price down but also to gain agreement that we could purchase Polar Pride interest-free over a 5 year period. Eventually after much writing and rewriting of contracts we were the owners of “Polar Pride” for a very modest down payment of USD\$250,000. Our dear friend Henry Lau from Singapore was a great reassurance both with financial support and moral support at this critical time.

About a month after signing the contract and paying the first installment I had a call from Kirk. He said that ever since we had bought Polar Pride he had several new offers to buy the boulder for much more than we paid for it. He added “I don’t know that I believe in this fate stuff but I am starting to believe that this enormous boulder of jade is destined to be a Buddha in Australia.” Talking of destiny many people have noted with interest that my name is the colour of the Jade Buddha and the miner’s name is “make peace”.

Once we had paid the first installment on Polar Pride we were faced with the reality of financing the Jade Buddha over the next five years. We needed a steady income stream to complete the payments on

Polar Pride, as well as for the transport, insurance and the carving. We tried many different ideas and most of them failed. One spectacular failure was when I tried to interest people in “investing” in the Jade Buddha by promising them a financial reward once the Buddha was carved. This idea was soundly rejected because most people, quite correctly, did not want to mix business and Buddhism. We also tried to borrow funds with very limited success. I approached two wealthy businessmen; one in Bendigo and one in Australia to seek their support. But neither man was willing to offer any funds or advice. We then tried pre-selling jade statues. But still the money was coming in very slowly. Judy and I tried as much as we could to raise funds from our savings and from our supporters but generally our income was small compared with the regular payments on Polar Pride due at the end of each year and the costs due to the carvers.

At one low point I said to Rinpoche “Making this statue is such hard work. Maybe it is better to re-sell the jade boulder and to put the profit into building the Great Stupa.” In fact some of our supporters were worried that the Jade Buddha was taking our focus away from completing the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion which was the major project which had been given to us by Lama Yeshe. I remember I had a call from Florence, a dear benefactor from Melbourne who said “Why are you always going on these tangents?” As well as the Jade Buddha, Florence was referring to the 4 metre high Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) statue that Lama Zopa had asked us to create before we did any more work on the Great Stupa. For Judy and I our only reply was “Rinpoche asked us to”. In any case the answer I got back on selling Polar Pride was quick and definite. Rinpoche’s reply was simply “No”.

Sometimes it takes an ultimatum to steel your resolve. And when it comes from your holy guru you just say to yourself “OK there must be a way. We will do it.” I am very grateful for the support of Great Stupa board members and especially Wayne Thomson, Tom Castles and Salim Lee at this time. Gradually a few people in Singapore and in Australia had the courage to commit their funds to the project and we started to pre-sell some Buddhas from the off-cuts of Polar Pride. And so a confidence grew that YES we can make the Jade Buddha a reality.

As well as finances we also had to decide what style of Buddha we would carve. But this question was very quickly decided when I said to Rinpoche that I wanted a Buddha that all Buddhists would recognize as their own – one that was universally appealing to Buddhists and indeed to non-Buddhists. Our aim was to find a statue that would inspire the world. Rinpoche replied “Then we will have the Buddha from the Mahabodhi statue in Bodh Gaya as the model for our jade Buddha.”

This statue is famous to Buddhists because it is said to have been commissioned by a contemporary of Buddha himself. The story goes that a very old woman in Bodh Gaya, upon realizing that she was the last person alive who actually knew the Buddha determined that she would make a representation of what the Buddha actually looked like. She then commissioned her nephew to make the statue which she personally directed.

Like all decisions that were made with the Jade Buddha, the more decisions we made the more new questions needed to be answered. So, if we want the Buddha to look like the one in Bodh Gaya how do we go about this? For one thing the Buddha is very rarely seen without cloth robes which are regularly

changed each month. The first step we took was to seek the assistance of the governing body of the Mahabodhi Stupa. Through them we were able to obtain special permission to take many photographs of the statue on one of the robe changing days. Our friends at Root Institute for Wisdom Culture in Bodhi Gaya were especially helpful in setting up this photo session.

Armed with the detailed photos I assumed that making a statue would be a relatively simple process. But never having been involved with the carving of a jade Buddha before, I had a lot to learn. But I will come back to this part of the story after I explain the process for finding the carvers of the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace.

Where in the world were we to find someone we could trust to carve such a large and precious gem? We soon found out that there are not that many places in the world where you can find high quality jade carving. Jade is about 8 on the hardness scale, diamonds being 10. But in regards to toughness jade is much tougher than diamonds which as we all know will shatter under a hammer. In fact they say that jade (nephrite and Jadeite) is tougher than steel. The conclusion of our investigations was that jade is very hard to carve. It can only be done with diamond saws and diamond chisels. We also discovered that you can find excellent carvers in China, Taiwan and in Thailand. What we were looking for was affordability and control. This control was over the final statue and over the highly valuable pieces of jade left over after the statue was carved. These off-cuts were to be critical to the affordability of the Jade Buddha project. Our investigations led us to conclude that Taiwan offered lots of control but was too expensive. While China was very affordable but could not necessarily be relied upon for control. This left us with Thailand. There are several carvers in Thailand but our enquiries pointed us to the oldest carving factory in Thailand; Jade Thongtavee.

In early 2004 Judy and I flew to the jade carving region of Thailand. This mountainous area was previously known as the golden triangle in recognition of the enormous wealth of drugs that were produced in the region which bordered Thailand, Myanmar and Lao. The natural border for all three countries is the Mekong River. Maesai is the town where most of the jade is carved. It lies right on the border with Myanmar. At the end of its main street is the grand border post building and after that you cross the bridge over the Mekong into Myanmar.

Some friends of ours had arranged for a local politician to collect us from Chiang Rai airport and drive us to Maesai. Being in a rural area in the far north of Thailand we were entering that part of Thailand where the supporters of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin were the dominant force. We gave instructions to our political friend that we wished to visit the factory of Jade Thongtavee to see the quality of their work and to commence negotiations. Instead we ended in the Maesai Mayor's office being offered a choice of whisky or tea. After a long awkward pause a gentleman was ushered in who started to show us many photos of alabaster statues. Assuming this was Vanit, the General Manager of Jade Thongtavee I started to explain what we wanted. Fortunately before I got too far into the discussions I asked for some form of identification. I then found out that this man was from another carving factory. He was in fact an ex-employee of Jade Thongtavee who was starting out on his own. Clearly he was also a good friend of the Mayor of Maesai. Later that day we met Vanit and from that day we started a friendship which I am sure

will last a long time. The work we saw was of exemplary standard. His prices seemed reasonable and from what we could judge Jade Thongtavee offered the control we sought.

After deciding on Jade Thongtavee we arranged for the shipping of the boulder in a shipping container to Bangkok. From Bangkok Port, Vanit collected Polar Pride by truck and had it driven to Maesai. Judy and I breathed a collective sigh of relief when Polar Pride was eventually in safe hands in Thailand.

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