

The Jade Buddha Story

Part Two: The creation

by Ian Green

Even though the jade was now safely in Thailand my constant concern was the steady calls for funding. The big step forward on financing was provided by Judy. Judy loved the look of the jade and started to make some jade items for sale with all the proceeds going to the Great Stupa and Jade Buddha. At the time we were taking some of the vast collection of holy Buddhist relics on tour. This tour took us as far afield as Singapore, New Zealand and Tahiti and well as the capital cities of Australia. Kirk Makepeace had given Judy some beads which made into a mala (prayer beads) which she draped over the Jade Buddha we had on display. The mala caused as much of a sensation as the Buddha which made Judy realize that these malas would be highly sought after. She then started making long and short jade malas which would regularly sell out at the relic tours. We also started to offer these items online through our website. Again Judy did all the work; making the items, taking the orders, packing them up and mailing them. For the next five years Judy made and sold thousands of long malas and short malas as well as countless specialty items such as earrings. Even though this was a very time consuming process, Judy loved this work as it provided a creative outlet as well as making a very real contribution to the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion.

I mentioned in Part 1 that I assumed the design of the Buddha would be a straight forward thing once we had the detailed photos. I had never been involved in the creation of a large carving before and I assumed that once we gave the photos to the carvers it would proceed without difficulty. The procedure as I soon found out was much more complex. Firstly a highly skilled sculptor had to sculpt a half size prototype in clay or molding putty. Once the sculptor was happy with his version of the statue we then took a latex cast of the prototype so that a fiberglass mould could be made.

Judy and I flew to Thailand to view the first prototype. This was also the opportunity for the blessing of the whole project before any of the cutting of the jade had commenced. Vanit has requested Phra Chuwit Thammavichitdet to arrange this blessing. Altogether five Thai Buddhist monks came to the factory. They sat in a line before many offerings. A white cord connected the monks to the jade boulder as well as the prototype of the Jade Buddha. This white cord was a ceremonial way of extending the blessing of the monks to the entire Jade Buddha for Universal Peace project including the carvers and everyone who would work on it. The ceremony ended with monks showering Polar Pride with handfuls of flowers and coins. This was immediately followed by scenes of pandemonium as the factory workers clamored all over Polar Pride in an attempt to collect these "lucky" coins.

Before flying back to Australia we were able to arrange an interview with Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Singapore. We flew with Vanit and the prototype from Thailand to Singapore where we met Rinpoche at the family house of Tara Melwani. Rinpoche looked over the statue in great detail. In fact many corrections were to be made to this first prototype. Rinpoche made several drawings as he pointed out

many changes to the face, hands and feet of the Buddha. Vanit also took detailed notes of the necessary changes which he then took back to his carver in Thailand. Vanit felt sure that he had a good enough idea of the requirements of Lama Zopa to be able to direct the sculptor to create a life size statue. By this stage Vanit had taken detailed measurements of Polar Pride so that he and his Master Carver could tell the exact size of the statue that they could create. The height of the statue being governed by the maximum width that could be obtained from the boulder.

It took several months for the sculptor to create this second prototype which was made full size. In late 2005 Judy and I flew back to Thailand to check the second prototype. My first reaction was "Wow". To see the statue of such a size and so beautiful was very inspiring. But then as I looked more closely I could see that there were many small details which did not look right. And both Judy and I were struck by the fact that while the Buddha was beautiful and did look *similar* to the Buddha from Bodh Gaya still somehow the Buddha was not quite right. The reality was that the Buddha looked like a Thai version of the Indian statue. We talked to Vanit about this but try as he might Vanit and his sculptor could not understand what our problem was. Judy and I realized that even when a sculptor was making a direct copy of the photographs his version was influenced by his own sense of aesthetic beauty. We also realized that we would never be able to obtain a design for the Buddha which was universally appealing without having someone else work with the Thai sculptor. I spoke to Garrey Foulkes, one of the Great Stupa board members about this problem and Garrey suggested we ask Jonathon Partridge to become involved with the Jade Buddha project. Jonathon is an Australian who has been classically trained by a Bhutanese statue maker. After living in India for the last decade, Jonathon with his wife Marie Claire and their children had just recently moved back to Australia.

A few months later Jonathon and I then flew to Thailand so that he and the Thai sculptor could work together on the third prototype. For about a week they worked alongside each other sculpting various aspects of the full size prototype. It was wonderful to see that even though they could not speak a word of each other's language they understood the common language of sculpting. They would look at each other's work making comments and changes with signs and drawings they both understood. At the end of week the sculptors had the third prototype ready to send photos to Rinpoche. This prototype was a rather strange looking composite of some fiberglass, some clay and some modeling putty. We emailed photos of this prototype to Rinpoche and then Jonathon and I had a phone conversation with Rinpoche while simultaneously viewing the photos on the computer. Again several changes were required but by now the changes were becoming more and more refined. Jonathon and I left Thailand after providing detailed instructions with the Thai sculptor for the fourth prototype. This fourth prototype would take several weeks to make and it would be totally cast in fiberglass so that a complete model could be seen in one medium.

About two months later Jonathon and I returned to Maesai to view the fourth prototype. When we arrived at the carving factory we saw the fiberglass prototype looking beautiful and white. Again the Australian and Thai sculptor worked together to go over every fine detail. Then it was time for Jonathon to again check with Rinpoche. I was very happy when I heard that Rinpoche was very pleased. He had some further, final changes to be made to the smile of the Buddha but Jonathon was able to

communicate these changes to the sculptor and master carver without the need for a fifth prototype to be made. In total the sculpting of prototypes took nearly one year before we had the final design.

Now it was time for the sculpting to begin. At first massive diamond saws were used to make the rough shape of the Buddha. Every piece of jade that was cut from Polar Pride was collected and then kept in a secure lock up. These off-cuts would later be carved into statues and other memento items of the Jade Buddha. Once the diamond saws had cut the rough shape of the Jade Buddha it was time for the Master Carver and two or three apprentices to start carving the Buddha. Little by little more was cut away and all the time the Buddha shape revealed itself from within the jade boulder. As the carving became closer to the finished statue the Master Carver would continually check back with the final prototype to make sure all the measurements and proportions were exactly correct.

Jonathon Partridge was to make one more trip to the factory to check the carving process and to answer any questions of the Master Carver. This time I did not accompany Jonathon but I anxiously awaited the call from Jonathon about the statue. Eventually when the call arrived, Jonathon simply said "It's beautiful".

The carving took in total about 9 months. Now only one stage in the carving process was left. This was the polishing. Jade is extremely hard and tough which makes the polishing extremely difficult. If done properly jade can shine like polished glass. The polishing requires a lot of patience as one person can only work on a very small area at one time. Towards the end there were up to 10 people spread all over the statue polishing it with diamond paste and small polishing machines.

Eventually in November 2008, I was in northern Thailand looking at our finished Buddha. I was so inspired by the Buddha. Every time I looked at it my heart rose up. The combination of the translucent gemstone, the connection to the Buddha from Bodh Gaya, the beautiful artwork created by the Thai and the Australian sculptors, the meticulous carving and polishing and the five years of effort made me feel so joyful. Naturally I was very keen to send photos of the finished Buddha to Rinpoche. He responded that was extremely happy with the artwork which he described as "beautiful".

I had spoken to Lama Zopa about the idea of taking the Buddha on a tour. Rinpoche was very enthusiastic about this idea. He said "If you leave the Buddha in one place, then only a few can see it - but if take the Buddha around the world it makes it so easy for billions of beings to receive the blessings of the Jade Buddha."

Vanit and all the carvers at the factory were also very happy and proud of the finished result. They offered to carve a special model of the Jade Buddha as an offering to their King. I agreed that we would offer some of Polar Pride for this special gift. Regrettably due to health issues and some unrest in the country the opportunity to present this gift to the King has not as yet arisen. This gift, now known as "Jade Buddha for the King" is touring with the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace until the day when it can be presented to the monarch.

Vanit was also very keen to show the Jade Buddha off in this country before we started our word tour. In December of 2008 the opportunity came to display the Jade Buddha to a crowd of over 100,000 people

who were coming together on the Thai – Cambodia border for the annual teachings by the famous forest monk Venerable Krubar Boon Choon Yamsunkhvaro.

But as I stood at the factory looking at the Jade Buddha there was one doubt that kept coming back to me. It was the face. The purpose of any Buddha statue is to inspire the viewer to be the best they possibly can be. The look in the eyes, the smile on the face, the glow of the complexion were all part of that inspiration. But jade being so dense and reflective it was difficult to see these features unless the light was perfect. One night as I lay awake in the Maesai hotel I got on the phone to Judy to explain my doubts to her. She immediately suggested “Why don’t we paint the face?” She went on to say that it was the Tibetan tradition that statues always have their faces painted and we could do the same with our Jade Buddha. Judy’s suggestion was like turning on a light in my mind. I said “Of course, this means that we can make sure the features inspire people and at the same time lock into the ancient statue making tradition of painting the face in real gold.” It also meant that we could avoid one of the possible negative aspects of using such a reflective surface as polished jade for a statue. In Buddhism it is considered inauspicious to see your face reflected in the face of the Buddha. And in some lighting the polished jade was like a mirror.

Of course Judy’s idea had to be approved by Rinpoche. I explained our thinking to Rinpoche and he agreed that painting the face was a good idea. He also recommended the person to do the painting; a famous thang’ka painter from Nepal by the name of Rajeesh. Shortly after receiving the advice we arranged to fly Rajeesh from Kathmandu to Thailand. He stayed in Maesai for over a week to paint the face, the Buddha’s hair and bowl.

The decision to paint the face was at first quite controversial. One of our dear friends, Thich Nguyen Tang begged us to scrape the paint off. He said that all his members wanted to see the jade face. However as time has gone on, the painting of the face has become one more of the features that make this statue so unique and so powerful.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche named the jade Buddha “The Jade Buddha for Universal Peace”. He said “It will illuminate the world and bring inconceivable peace and happiness and help prevent the destruction that is happening so much in the world, including war.” So nearly 5 and a half years after I had first seen Polar Pride in that Vancouver backyard our Buddha was at last complete, it had a name and it was ready to be taken to the world.

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