

The Masters Who Opened the Door

The Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959 forced many of that land's most important masters into exile in India and Nepal. This tragic event, like a dark cloud, had a silver lining, inasmuch as it made the world aware of Tibetan Buddhism — previously unknown through Tibet's geographical isolation. This, by a strange coincidence, occurred as the Western world was going through the landmark social and cultural changes of the 1960s. The first waves of spiritual seekers visiting India encountered Tibetan refugee lamas in places like Dharamsala, Darjeeling and Rumtek. As personal bonds were forged and interest grew, these masters found themselves being invited to Europe and the USA and their visits became the focal points around which small study-groups and Tibetan centres started to form.

Before speaking of the masters of each tradition, special mention must be made of an exceptional person and catalyst in the whole process, Gelongma Palmo. Originally Mrs Freda Bedi, she was an English gentlewoman who had married the Indian activist Baba Bedi and striven with him for Indian independence. Moved by the waves of refugees flooding into India after 1959, and crowded into places like the Buxador Refugee Camp, she took an active interest in the Tibetan question and was appointed to care for the first refugee lamas. She soon became aware of the exceptional qualities of young prodigies among them. Deeply concerned for their well-being and education, she helped set up the Young Lamas Home School in Dalhousie, an old hill station in north-west India. Devoted to HH the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, she later became a Buddhist nun, known affectionately as "mummy" to many of the young Tibetans in whose hands lay the spiritual future of Tibetan Buddhism.

The introduction of Buddhism anywhere is a question of both quality and quantity. In the twelfth century, for instance, Marpa's small handful of disciples nurtured in secret, for several generations, what was to become one of the deepest and most widespread of Tibetan lineages. At the same time, Atisa was teaching to multitudes of thousands. Over the past thirty years, the most eminent lamas of each tradition, such as HH the Dalai Lama, have had both popular success and the opportunity to transmit profound teachings. At the same time, some gifted lamas, little known in Tibet, have captured the imagination of the Western world and are now famous. To this, unfortunately, must be

added a certain number of Tibetans of little or no spiritual repute in their own land who have set themselves up as important teachers in a gullible Western world. Authentic Tibetan masters may know them for the charlatans they are but can do little about them. The selection in the following pages of the recognised masters who first brought Tibetan Buddhism to the West can only be but a representative sample and is far from exhaustive, especially with respect to the secret Marpas who are transmitting now, away from the public eye, the deep spirituality of Buddhism's future.

His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama has become the world's best known Buddhist.

Loved for his warmth, directness, humour and dialogue with other religions and Western scientists and philosophers, he has conveyed not just the philosophy but the inner feel of Buddhism to millions of people. He was born in 1935 into a humble farming family in the remote Amdo region of north-eastern Tibet. Recognised at the age of two, he was taken to Lhasa in 1939 and enthroned in 1940. His Holiness received a thorough religious education as well as a preparation for his second role: that of King. He assumed full temporal responsibility at the age of sixteen and had to visit China in 1954 to discuss Tibet's future with Mao Tse Tung. By the age of twenty-four he had attained the highest scholastic distinction. However, he was obliged to lead his government into exile in 1959, after the civil uprising against the Chinese forces. Eventually some one hundred thousand Tibetans followed him into exile in India and Nepal.

At the invitation of the Indian government, he settled in the old hill station of McLeod Ganj, in the foothills of the Himalaya. This became not only the focal point for monks and lamas of the Gelugpa school but also a key point of exchange between East and West. Many leading lights among contemporary Western Buddhist scholars started their Tibetan connection there in the late sixties and early seventies. His Holiness continued his own studies of all four Tibetan traditions and authored some books while signing many others, made from lectures given while travelling the world. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for his campaign for bringing Tibet to peaceful independence.

The Dalai Lama is well known for his work in building bridges between Buddhism and other disciplines. Through encounters with leaders of other religions, such as HH the Pope, or with

physicists and philosophers, he has shown a willingness to test the gold of Buddhism in the fire of modern discoveries and his desire to align its strength with that of other religions to further common goals such as the reduction of war, poverty and ignorance in the world.

Nyingmapa

The two lamas traditionally most important to the Nyingma lineage were not among the early adult refugees and the first contacts with the Western world occurred through the masters Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Tarthang Tulku.

Dudjom Rinpoche (1904-1987) was born in south-eastern Tibet and recognised as the reincarnation of the recently-deceased Dudjom Lingpa, a famous discoverer of hidden texts (*terma*). As a young lama, he studied at all the great seats of Nyingma learning and with many famous and accomplished teachers. He ended up being in the unique position of holding all the Nyingma lineages. He himself discovered *terma* and disseminated their teachings. More importantly, he was a fully-accomplished master of the Great Perfection teachings, able to communicate their inner meaning through direct mind-to-mind transmission to suitable disciples. A prolific author, his texts are appreciated for their sublime poetry and profound content.

His unique background caused him to be widely recognised as the acting senior Nyingma lama in exile. There, he revised, corrected and edited many texts, including the entire canon of his tradition. He also wrote a political history of Tibet at the request of HH the Dalai Lama. He established vital communities of people practising dharma in Kalimpong and Orissa and monasteries in Tsopema in northwest India and Boudnath in Nepal. These were frequented by many early Western visitors. Tsopema is a lake which played an important part in the story of Guru Padmasambhava. In caves in the hills around it are to be found many yogis in half retreat.

Tarthang Tulku Kungaleg is the reincarnate abbot of Tarthang monastery in the Golok region of Amdo, north-eastern Tibet. Born in 1935, he left Tibet in 1958 and went on to teach Buddhist philosophy for seven years at the Sanskrit University in Varanasi (Benares). In 1968, he left for America, where he established first the Nyingma Meditation centre, in California, and then Dharma Publishing. Dedicated to a high quality of research, translation and publication, Dharma publishing has produced some remarkable volumes creating benchmarks in Buddhist literature.

Tarthang Tulku pioneered much work making the Buddha's teachings available to a Western audience. Along with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he was one of the first Tibetans to write in a way which directly touched the hearts of Western readers. His earlier books especially show the gentle, commonsense psychology of simple Buddhist methods. This line of approach developed intensively

and culminated in his teachings expressed in the work “Time, Space and Knowledge”, the exercises, commentaries and use of in-depth psychology of which have made it a class textbook in many colleges.

Under his editorship, Dharma Publishing also produced a beautiful edition of the 120 volumes of the Buddhist canon.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910-1991), well over two metres in height, was a giant of Buddhism, both literally and metaphorically. His life incarnated perfection in both spheres of Buddhist development: erudition and meditation. The great master Mipham had recognised him as being an exceptional being while he was still in his mother’s womb and he was subsequently formally enthroned and educated at Secchen monastery in eastern Tibet. As a young lama he studied under a host of eminent masters from all traditions and put their teachings into practice during long solitary retreats. Before leaving Tibet, he had spent over twenty years in remote caves and hermitages. He mastered the highest Great Perfection meditations and also discovered *terma*.

As an exile he established his monastery in Nepal and also became spiritual advisor to the royal family of Bhutan. One of the first lamas to tour the newly-established Tibetan Buddhist centres of the West, he served as a living example of Buddhism, his radiant, direct presence sweeping away people’s doubts and bespeaking a spirituality beyond words.

Sakyapa

His Holiness SakyaTrizin is the 41st throne-holders of the Sakya lineage. Born of the royal Khon family in 1945 in southern Tibet, he succeeded to the throne at the age of seven upon his father’s death. He received a full training for his future responsibility, mastering the famous *lam-dre* teachings of the Sakyapas covering all levels of Buddhist practice. This was slightly interrupted by his flight from Tibet in 1959. His Sakya education completed, he also studied the non-sectarian (*ri-me*) teachings and received the Nyingma transmissions of Great Perfection and Iron Bridge. Under his inspiring presence, many monasteries and study centres were established in India and East Asia. He first toured the West in 1974.

HH Jigdal Dagchen Sakya Rinpoche is the forty-second generation holder of the Sakya Khon lineage and he received a thorough education suited to this elevated position. He then studied extensively under some thirty-five important gurus, including Dzongsar Khyentse and Dilgo Khyentse. In 1960 he moved to the USA where he founded the Sakya monastery as a seat from which he oversees a group of Sakya centres.

Dezhung Rinpoche (1906-1987) spent his childhood and youth studying under gifted masters from the Sakya, Nyingma and Gelug traditions. He was enthroned at the age of eighteen as the abbot of Dezhung monastery. An extremely learned master, he was also a deeply -realised master who had spent some ten years in solitary retreat. Following his flight from Tibet, he went almost immediately to America where he participated in research at the University of Washington, Seattle. He taught widely in the USA and Canada for some twenty years.

Kagyupa

His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa (1924 - 1981) was a child prodigy, born in Kham, Eastern Tibet. Recognised as the Karmapa reincarnation at the age of seven by the Tai Situ and Jamgon Rinpoches, he was enthroned by them. During the early part of this training, he was encouraged to quickly take up his traditional seat at Tsurphu monastery in central Tibet, where he also received teachings from the great Kangkar Rinpoche. As a young teenager, he returned to Kham to further the profound aspect of his Buddhist training under the Tai Situpa. There, he also received transmission of the Sakyapa lineages. Later, the elderly Situ and Jamgon lamas visited him in Tsurphu and completed his formal training. In 1954 he accompanied HH the Dalai Lama to Peking, to discuss Tibet with Mao. Foreseeing the inevitability of the Chinese takeover and the holocaust that it would entail, the

Karmapa prepared his departure from Tibet carefully, leaving several months before the violent conflicts. He was accompanied by an entourage of lamas and in particular the young, high-ranking reincarnations. They saved many important relics and treasures by taking with them whatever could be carried. In response to the generous invitation of the Maharaja, the party travelled to Sikkim, which was an independent kingdom at the time, to the monastery of Rumtek, founded by the envoy of the ninth Karmapa. The Maharaja subsequently invited His Holiness to settle there.

The Karmapa developed Rumtek into one of the most impressive seats of learning and spirituality in India. In 1974 he left it to make a first grand tour of America and Europe. Many centres were established in the wake of these visits, which was followed by a second tour a few years later. His majestic, Buddha-like presence and total ease of spiritual mastery impressed Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Many were the stories of miracles, both in Tibet and the West — such as his rain-making for the Hopi Indians, recorded on film, and his unique death, remaining with a warm heart in profound absorption for three days after clinical death in a major hospital near Chicago. Many considered him the greatest spiritual master of his day.

Khempo Kalu Rinpoche (1905-1992) was one of the most influential figures in the initial diaspora of Tibetan Buddhism. A remarkable figure, learned in all the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and holder of their lineages, he embodied the simplicity and power of the true yogin and yet was also an extremely erudite and experienced scholar. In Tibet, he spent many years in solitary retreat, including twelve years spent alone in the wild snow-covered mountains. He became retreat master at the important Palpung monastery and then travelled widely, both giving and receiving teachings within all the great traditions. He incarnated the spirit of the non-sectarian (*ri-me*) movement. In 1955, the Karmapa asked him to leave Tibet for Bhutan and India, to prepare the way for the probable exile of Tibetan lamas.

Kalu Rinpoche established two monasteries in Bhutan and then his own, near Darjeeling, in 1965. During his tours of Europe and America, the presence of this aged, learned and kindly abbot inspired thousands of people to follow the way of the Buddha. After the passing of the Karmapa, he became the spiritual elder of the Kagyu tradition, transmitting precious teachings to its young lamas. He also preserved the Shangpa Kagyu tradition from annihilation.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), the young abbot of Surmang monastery in Eastern Tibet, was, with Akong Rinpoche, one of Mrs Bedi's proteges. She arranged for them to travel to Oxford, England in 1963 to learn English and broaden their culture. Interest in the Tibetan gurus soon grew and within a few years they and their students were seeking a place to establish a centre. As chance would have it, a small Buddhist centre in Scotland's Southern Uplands, created by the Canadian monk Anandabodhi, was up for sale. In 1967 the two lamas bought it and established the Samye Ling Tibetan Monastic Centre, the first Tibetan centre in the west, naming it after Samye, the first great monastic institution in Tibet.

Returning in 1968 from a pivotal retreat in Bhutan, Trungpa Rinpoche disrobed, married and started to teach in the uncompromising style of the siddhas. Akong Rinpoche thought this an untimely and unwise decision. Their radical disagreement was eventually arbitrated in favour of the latter by HH the Karmapa. Destined to spread Buddhism as a freelance, rather than as a representative of the Kagyu tradition, Trungpa Rinpoche sailed to the USA and started his prodigious yet controversial teaching work there. Reinstated as a Kagyu representative in the late 1970s by HH Karmapa, Trungpa Rinpoche brought mahayana and vajrayana Buddhism to thousands of Americans and Europeans and, moreover, was one of the first to transpose its message into living, modern and even poetic language.

Dr Akong Tulku Rinpoche was not only one of the very first Tibetan lamas to teach in the West but was also responsible for bringing many eminent Tibetan lamas to Europe for the first time. From 1969 onwards, he oversaw the development of Samye Ling as a centre of hinayana, mahayana and vajrayana Buddhism, inviting leading masters from Burmese, Thai and Zen traditions as well as the Tibetan ones. By the early 1980s, he had brought all the leading Kagyu masters to the West and had, in particular, organised a six-month tour of Europe by HH the Karmapa accompanied by an eminent entourage. Akong Rinpoche also took the dharma to Africa, establishing several centres in South Africa and visiting Zimbabwe and Kenya, and established the first Tibetan centres in Belgium, Spain and Ireland.

He made Samye Ling a model for other centres to follow, establishing a temple in traditional Tibetan style, a school of traditional art and a centre for four-year meditation retreats. He also pioneered a

complete system of psychotherapy based upon Tibetan Buddhist techniques and his own experience as a fully-qualified Tibetan doctor. Insisting on the need for active compassion in Buddhist practice, he also developed Rokpa, an organisation bringing humanitarian aid to three continents and bringing healthcare, education and environmental protection to the Tibetan plateau.

Gelugpa

Whereas the other Tibetan traditions — especially the Kagyu and Nyingma — came to the West over the sixties and early seventies, it was the Europeans and Americans who went East to the Gelug tradition in India. This was due to the pre-eminence of Dharamsala in the world of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. Some erudite Gelug scholars did make early contact with the West on an academic level, aided by the fame of the Dalai Lama and the Gelug tradition's reputation for love of scholarship, but it was a limited contact, not at all like the tidal waves of spiritual awakening created in dharma centres by other lamas, such as Kalu Rinpoche. Besides HH the Dalai Lama, the most eminent Gelugpa lamas are the likes of Ling Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche and Lati Rinpoche. However, it fell mainly upon the following, less lofty, teachers to make that first spark of contact with Westerners and fan it into a blaze.

Geshe Rabten (1920-1986) was a much loved and respected figure for all those who visited Dharamsala in the early 1970s. Having studied in Tibet for some twenty years at the giant Sera monastery, he eventually gained his Geshe degree in exile. Compassionate and brilliant, he was soon appointed personal assistant to the Dalai Lama. He taught to Tibetans and Westerners alike for eight years in Dharamsala before going to Switzerland in 1977, where he founded the Tharpa Choling Centre, which he directed until his death.

Geshe Ngawang Darjey had also studied and taught extensively at Sera. After leaving Tibet, he gained the Geshe degree at the famous Buxador refugee camp. In 1971, he was requested by the Dalai Lama to give teachings to Westerners and to supervise translations in the newly formed Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) in Dharamsala, where he remained until 1984. After teaching at the University of Washington and touring Europe, America and Australasia, he took up residence in New Zealand, where he founded the Dargye dharma centre.

Lamas Thubten Yeshe (1935-1984) and **Thubten Zopa** were responsible for developing another important stop on the early pilgrims' journeys East: Kopang monastery in Nepal. Lama Yeshe had

studied for almost twenty years at Sera before fleeing Tibet. After ten years in the Buxador refugee camp, he and his student, Lama Zopa, moved to Nepal, founding the Mahayana Gonpa which then expanded into the Kopan monastery. Their organisation, which quickly attracted many Western followers, eventually became the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. This grew into over sixty centres in Australasia, Europe, the USA, India and Nepal. Lama Yeshe directed it until his death and was succeeded by Lama Zopa.

Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1901-1983), of Kalmuck-Mongolian origin, went as a young man to Tibet and studied extensively at Drepung monastery. Extremely erudite, his studies took him to Peking, India and eventually, in 1955, to America where, in 1958, he founded the Lamaist Buddhist Monastery in New Jersey, which he directed until his death. He also founded the American Institute of Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts.

Geshe Lhundrup Sopa was born in central Tibet in 1923. As a boy he studied at the monastic universities of Ganden and Sera. He was the most outstanding scholar of his year in 1962 when he gained his Geshe Lharampa degree at Buxador. Later that year, he moved to America as tutor in Geshe Ngawang Wangyal's New Jersey monastery. Since the late 1960s he has been Professor of Tibetan Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin. In 1975 he founded the Deer Park Buddhist Centre in the USA and is abbot of Ewam monastery.

1980s and 1990s: Tibetan Buddhism Flourishes

From the handful of seeds sown by the lamas mentioned in these pages grew an abundant harvest. Without proselytising or marketing, but by simple word of mouth, interest grew and Tibetan Buddhist groups formed in nearly every city of Europe and America. Many of these developed into centres; some into monasteries and colleges. There are now more than one thousand. The late 1990s saw a great popularising of Tibetan Buddhism and an important change in the general public's perception of it. Originally something exotic and magical, in the stamp of early Tibetologists Alexandre David-Neel and Evans-Wentz, it has now become something everyday and accepted,

much as happened with Indian hatha yoga. Very ordinary people now visit these centres to learn to meditate and reflect upon the primal questions of existence. Like learning French cuisine or Japanese flower arranging, its study, although far more profound and far-reaching, has become yet another feature in a one world which shares its treasures.