



why buddhism?



Vicki seeks Lama Yeshe's advice in the 1980s

The question being asked worldwide is what's the fascination with this Eastern belief system?

*Vicki Mackenzie's latest book, **Why Buddhism?**, went straight onto the best seller list in Australia and will be published in the United States and Europe in 2002.*

NANCY PATTON spoke with VICKI MACKENZIE when she was in Taos, New Mexico.

NP: You've been writing books and articles about the love affair Westerners have with Buddhism for a long time. When did your professional life take this turn?

VM: I met the Dharma 25 years ago, working as a journalist on a major British national newspaper. I had read nothing at all about Buddhism, but I was interested in esoteric spirituality as long as I could remember. T. S. Eliot, William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, arcane Christianity – they all drew me. I was brought up as a Christian but the church ceased to satisfy me.

In 1976 I left my job and went to Hong Kong because I knew what I was looking for was in the East. It was a disaster. People were so materialistic. All they wanted to know was how much money you were making. So I scurried back to London and resumed my job on the paper.

Later that year, I was working in the newsroom when the phone rang. It was a friend, Leslie Kenton, the well-known health and beauty writer. She mentioned she was going to Nepal to meditate with some lamas, and when I

said, "That sounds fabulous," she said, "So why don't you come too?" I heard myself saying, "Yes, I think I will." I had a vision of myself meditating facing a wall – I must have seen a Zen film at one point. I thought I'd never be able to do it for a month, but I went to Kopan with Leslie. I think we were the only two non-hippies there.

It was an incredible and very difficult experience. I was taught to meditate, like a plane being talked down by an air traffic controller. There was a lot of talk, guided meditation, questions and answers, and the people were fascinating. But I was mostly hooked on the lamas. I didn't accept everything they said. I'm a journalist so I'm not an easy believer. I was taught to question everything, and I appreciated the fact that the lamas encouraged that.

I adored Lama Yeshe with his humor, his absolute wisdom (as opposed to knowledge), his understanding, his humility and gratitude. It was the nearest thing to holiness I'd come across. And I'd met a lot of people in my working life – monarchs and commoners, stars and unknowns; the lamas impressed me more than any of them.

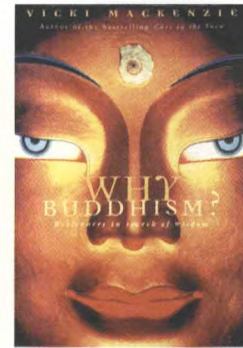


I went back to London and thought, "Well, that was wonderful. I'll do the meditation. I'll try and integrate it into my life." That was the whole point for me: how much it would help with everyday Western existence. That's what I am still exploring.

Buddhism has made a huge difference to my life. The first obvious thing it did was to turn around my journalism. Through the death meditation I did in Kopan, I thought, "My god, I have to rearrange my priorities." I didn't want to lead my life in

Buddhism goes from obscurity to wide acceptance

Allen & Unwin Export
price \$AUD 22.68



Photos: Robin Bath

the light of death doing the fast daily journalism I was doing, often writing scurrilous stories because it got me a bigger byline.

So I became freelance in order to write the way I wanted to: more responsible journalism. The first story I did was triggered by what I'd learnt in Kopan about precious human rebirth. I did a story on how babies born in the 'childbirth without violence' method espoused by French obstetrician, Frederick Le Boyer, had fared in life. [Le Boyer believed that the harsh environment of the traditional delivery room caused psychological trauma to the infant. Better that the infant be delivered in a dimly lit, quiet room and placed on the mother's abdomen until the umbilical cord stops pulsating, whereupon it is placed in a warm bath.] The story got half a page in the *Sunday Times*.

Then for a year as women's editor of the *Observer* I did stories on meditation, mind-body links in medicine, fasting, that sort of thing. This was very radical in those days. It was the flow-on effect of the Kopan course, which had given me so many ideas for features. The response was huge. I just knew the reading public was ready for this.

But by the end of that year the Kopan effect had well and truly worn off. I was exhausted and stressed. A new rampant feminist editor came on board, and she thought I was completely wacky. It was time for more of that Buddhism. I found a place in England where I could take regular courses and get back to work refreshed. Buddhism continued to inform my life. It still does.

When Lama Yeshe, who meant so much to me, died [in 1984] and we were presented with a Westerner, a Spanish child [Lama Osel] as his reincarnation, I thought, "Now there's a story." I'd been grappling with the idea of reincarnation intellectually; but to be presented with a living example of it required a quantum leap.

I wrote a major article on Lama Osel, exploring the phenomenon from a personal point of view, again for the general public because I thought they'd be fascinated. The story of the reborn Lama Yeshe had so much meat. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche [then Lama Yeshe's closest disciple] had verified it, so it had 'credibility.'

From that came my first book, requested by a mainstream publisher, Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd. [The bestseller *Reincarnation: The Boy Lama* is still available as a Wisdom Publications paperback.]

My second book, *Reborn in the West*, also requested by Bloomsbury (because the first had done better than anyone expected), explored the phenomenon of reincarnation, through other Western *tulkus* and Western investigations. My point was not to gauge how *good* the reincarnations were, but rather to explain rebirth to a general audience. The point was that the phenomenon exists. [She would show this through stories of men and women reborn as *tulkus* in Brooklyn, in Montreal, in France and informed comment from the likes of Professor Robert Thurman.]

INTERVIEW

My training as a journalist helped me enormously. I was literally translating concepts into language which I knew Westerners and general audience would like and could grasp.

I find the subject [of Buddhism] fascinating because it's dealing with us, with the human condition. Why do we do what we do, how do we end up in the situations we end up in? We were told there was suffering. As a journalist you know that. I wasn't leading a cozy little existence. Once I was smuggled into a psychiatric unit of a hospital as a cleaner to do a story on how patients were treated; I covered court stories, including the trial of the Yorkshire Ripper. So when I heard the lamas talking about life, it's what I had been faced with. They were offering an explanation. Buddhism says there is a way of existing in peace and happiness and contentment within this drama.

Specifically, the lamas were not just talking theoretically. Their Buddhism had been put to the test when the Chinese invaded and they had faced real hardship. Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa (and the Dalai Lama when I interviewed him) had stories that showed they had been through it. They had 'theory' in Tibet, then when the Chinese came in it was their chance to test it all out. Here was the real hardship!

*I wrote **Reincarnation: The Boy Lama on a portable Olivetti typewriter in Kopan**, going through stacks of paper and carbon. It was just as well – because the electricity kept going off. It was so inspiring being there at that time. A very young Lama Osel happened to be there. He'd watch me write and when I said, "I'm writing now about when Lama Yeshe died," he'd go all shy.*

Reborn in the West I wrote in the Sydney heat and humidity in a room at the top of the house. I was still writing the day I had to get on the plane and deliver it to England. I always go over my deadline with my books!

In 1997 I had to chase Ven. Tenzin Palmo, [a British nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who had spent 12 years in a cave, 15 hours a day in a meditation box] all over the world for *Cave in the Snow*. It was like being in an Indiana Jones movie trying to get to India to find the cave with her. The plane I was in got hit by a typhoon and we were diverted to Taiwan, so I missed my connections which meant I couldn't meet up with her as arranged in Delhi. We had to get a taxi to north India. I got mugged. During that mugging my tape recorder got wet from a smashed water bottle. All my notes were spoiled. Tenzin Palmo became very ill, and we had to put her in a taxi back to Delhi, so I had to find the cave by myself. It was a nightmare. But the book stayed on the bestseller list for ages and I still get letters from all over the world regularly.

NP: *This brings us to your new book, **Why Buddhism? How did you go about planning the book, and choosing the people whose stories appear in it?***

VM: *It was very exciting from a news point of view because the growth of Buddhism in the West is a huge story. Twenty years ago Buddhism was so obscure that the features editor of the *Sunday**

Times had to ask me who precisely the Dalai Lama was when I presented him with an interview I had done. I knew Buddhism had arrived when I drove through busy Taylor's Square in Sydney where a huge billboard proclaimed, "When you come back as a whale you'll be bloody glad you put Greenpeace in your will."

This book explores the challenges, as well as the beauty, of Buddhism coming to the West, because it is so new and we are still working on it. I didn't want to be didactic. The only way to do it justice was through the personal. I envisaged the book as a mosaic, lots of little brightly colored pieces making up one bigger picture. There are as many stories as there are people so I could have gone on forever. And I learnt a lot from doing this book. Being involved in Tibetan Buddhism, I hadn't realized how big other forms of Buddhism were in the West.

Take **SHARON SALZBERG**, a well-known teacher of Vipassana or Insight Meditation and author of *Loving Kindness*. She is one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society whose property in Barre, Massachusetts, is impressive. A vast brick mansion on 300 acres, but very sparing with Buddhist artifacts. *Metta* (loving-kindness) written over the portico, and just one beautiful Buddha in the meditation hall.

People like Sharon, Jack Kornfeld and Joseph Goldstein were in India at the same time [as the Westerners who are now followers of Tibetan Buddhism] and they were major bringers of Buddhism to the West, too. I liked them very much. They are very kind and warm. Very strict. All that silence! They sit on their cushions interspersed with walking meditation. Very serious stuff, not like us with our chat, chat, chat and diversion and our richly colored paintings and incense.

Sharon explained that Vipassana offers a "quality of awareness that allows us to see clearly what our experience is and not be so confused by bias, judgment or projection into the future. To see clearly is to really understand. When that happens we come into harmony. Based on mindfulness there is wisdom. Based on wisdom there is compassion. We use the breath as the first object of meditation in order to learn how to concentrate the mind and collect our energy in the present moment. Then we practice mindfulness of the body and the mind."

I think that's really nice. She emphasized what a lot of Westerners feel: that we must love ourselves, that's the starting point. She'd been through a lot of pain herself, and she said, "When I teach, I often emphasize that loving-kindness is not a feeling, a sentiment, or an emotion, it's a way of seeing. If you think of it as a feeling, it's kind of disgusting. One person said to me, 'I hate that practice; it's like a continually enforced Valentine's Day.' If you think you have to go round smiling, it does seem pretentious and phony. But it's not that. We see that we are all connected and we respond to that."

When Sharon first encountered loving-kindness meditation [through Sayadaw



Sharon Salzberg

Photo: Joyce Goldman

U Pandita, a Burmese meditation master], “There were two very important junctures in that practice for me. One was the fact that you start with yourself, which to my mind was an unusual spiritual perspective. I would have expected more self-denigration in honor of other beings. The Buddha in the Theravada tradition is quoted as saying, ‘you can search the entire universe for someone more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself and you won’t find that person anywhere.’

“The second was when I started to open up to loving-kindness towards what is known as a ‘neutral person’...I found the most amazing thing. You never learn this person’s story, you may not even learn their name, but there is definitely a bond created simply by paying attention.”

One of the things I’ve learned from doing all these books is that we have to start with ourselves. The trouble is, when we hear the Dalai Lama and read the texts about cutting self-cherishing, giving up everything for others, it plugs right into our self-denigration, because we’ve already got that from so many squillion years of Judeo-Christian thinking which says ‘sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice.’ What Sharon is saying is that this is a hindrance, a kind of problem between what the Easterners say when they say ‘cut self-cherishing’ and what we actually hear. We hear something completely different. We just beat ourselves up more.

Another of the stories is about a quintessential Englishwoman, ALISON MURDOCH, who exemplifies what most Westerners are – Judeo-Christians who believe that holiness is about *doing* good. The Eastern emphasis is on *being* good. We struggle with this. (I struggled when I was writing about Tenzin Palmo who left everything to spend years in retreat – and she wants to go back and do more.)

Alison was going to be a Christian minister before she met the lamas. Although she says she has found absolutely nothing to beat Tibetan Buddhism, and her love and devotion to Lama Zopa is total, she still feels more at home in a church because it’s her culture. She is married to a Christian, Simon, who is working with Father Lawrence and the Dalai Lama in setting up ‘Pathways to Peace,’ reviving Christian meditation. She is director of the FPMT Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, and she helps people in the most practical way: the homeless, the mentally ill, and those in prison.

BOB SHARPLES, a Melbourne counselor and psychotherapist, went through the Student Christian Movement, a heart attack in the middle of a camping trip, and the suicide of his twin brother, until he did a weekend course with a Tibetan geshe in suburban Melbourne and came across a ‘seamless wisdom’ he wanted to be part of. He especially likes the over-riding emphasis on altruism, bodhichitta and the commitment to developing a good heart. He doesn’t find the ritual side of things – the pujas, the spiritual paraphernalia – easy and he has started going back to church for the occasional service. But he thinks of himself as a Buddhist, does several retreats a year, and dispenses a special brand of wisdom to the cancer patients who flock to the Gawler Foundation, famous for its alternative approach to the disease. Bob has managed to extract the essence.

Californian mother and psychotherapist, LAMA PALDEN DROLMA, has done a lot of retreats and as a lama has quite a following. She lived in Bhutan for many years – one of the first and very few Americans to do so – when she married a rinpoche. So she comes from a very solid, integrated East-West background.

She talked to me about the need for psychotherapy even among Buddhist practitioners. “As a lama I was already doing some counseling, and Buddhism and psychotherapy are closely related. Both are working with the human mind and psyche. In actuality there is no way to separate them. Buddha and the many teachers of the lineages who came after him have taught the way to liberation. Yet often we as human beings fall short of being able to fully accomplish what we have taught. We have neuroses and psychological obscurations, East and West alike. Anger, greed, jealousy and pride are endemic to the human condition. Psychological work can help us to unravel some of the unskillful behavior that we can indulge in which in turn helps to improve our capacity to practice.

“Now the Dharma does that too, but basically the Dharma says, do this and don’t do that. Well, that’s fine but some people find they can’t stop the compulsion to act out in negative ways. Even if they practice very devotedly for years they can’t stop their compulsion to act out of greed, or pride, or anger. That’s where counseling can be helpful. Buddhism can help, but it doesn’t necessarily stop the compulsion. And this is where the idea of the subconscious comes in. Buddhist practice doesn’t necessarily deal with deep psychological issues because the human mind has a way of sealing off certain aspects of our personality or experience that we don’t want to deal with. That’s why it’s called the shadow because we block it off and aren’t aware of it. We can practice for a long time without facing what we don’t want to look at. This is where a skilful teacher can come in.”

One of the most moving stories is that of INTA MCKIMM’S death and the reaction of her daughter MIFFI MAXMILLION. I went to see Inta with some trepidation. She looked like a woman about to go a party! Makeup on, wonderful earrings, her eyes were sparkling. She was really dying according to Lama Zopa’s instructions. She told me that it was an incredible surprise to feel so good at the end. She said, “I thought death would be a drab experience, a bleaching out, but it’s not at all. Everything I ever wished for is arriving in abundance ... I’m dying, there’s no denying it. When I get out of bed I wobble all over the place, the tumors that are pressing on my brain mean I can’t see properly. The cancer in my lungs, which doctors tell me is the size of a large apple, is creating pressure all around my body and if it weren’t for the medication I’d cough myself to death in two minutes flat. There’s a little pain, not much but pain is no big thing. Dying is such a celebration. I’m freeing myself from all the things that cluttered me up. I wish everyone could experience what I am going through. I wouldn’t want anyone to miss out on death.

“Of course the first instant [of knowing she was dying] really hurt. It’s like the pain of breaking up with a lover that you really care for ...but when you cut the clinging, the pain disappears. When the pain disappears there is nothing left to fear. All that is left then is pure love and compassion for the suffering of others ...



Lama Palden Drolma
Photo: Annik Brune



Inta McKimm with daughter Miffi
Photo: Vicki Mackenzie



Philip Glass



Clive Arrowsmith

bodhichitta [which] has to be generated within because no one else can give it to us. I now know I have to feel bodhichitta towards every living particle without discrimination ...even my cancer cells because they need love as much as anything else.”

I also included Ven. Robina Courtin, who works a lot with prisoners in jails around the world. (If Buddhism is an interior pursuit, there’s no one who has a more interior life than a prisoner.) **GESHE MICHAEL ROACH** because of his work in the diamond industry: I was interested to know how he reconciles the business of making money with spirituality. Australian actor **TRACEY MANN** because she was new to Buddhism. **PHILIP GLASS**, a practicing Buddhist for many years, talked about how he got his inspiration from observing the Tibetan people he met when he was doing the music for the movie, *Kundun*. **STEPHEN BATCHELOR** made it because he’s a skeptic and although I don’t think his arguments against reincarnation hold up, a lot of people are attracted to him because of his book, *Buddhism Without Belief*. I particularly liked his take on Buddhism’s role in fostering a culture of awareness within society. He also talks very succinctly about how Buddhism is one of the few religions that is not incompatible with recent scientific discoveries.

PROFESSOR ROBERT THURMAN gave a wonderful interview on emptiness. He also took the opposite stance to Steven Batchelor. Robert says that a belief in reincarnation gives much more meaning to life, because if you think you are personally involved in your future, it makes a huge difference.

The fashionable **CLIVE ARROWSMITH**, one of Britain’s leading photographers, is a devoted follower of Tibetan Buddhism. He’s very worldly and funny. He told me that Buddhism has improved his photography. “It’s expanded. I’m more competent than I’ve ever been and will get something out of the most dreadful circumstances, even a thunderstorm. Before I was a bit frantic, still am, rather like a gunfighter shooting and hitting a random target. Buddhism has given me the application so I get all the techniques right without losing the verve and inspiration. I now lay the ground out carefully, and from that planning I get a better picture. It’s applying yourself to a situation

and not being distracted. Buddhism says you have to make the preparation if you want to get the best result. It’s so totally practical and methodical. Now when I take the picture it’s like the mongoose and the cobra. We move together. Me and the sitter are in union as in yoga and from that union you get a picture which has movement.”

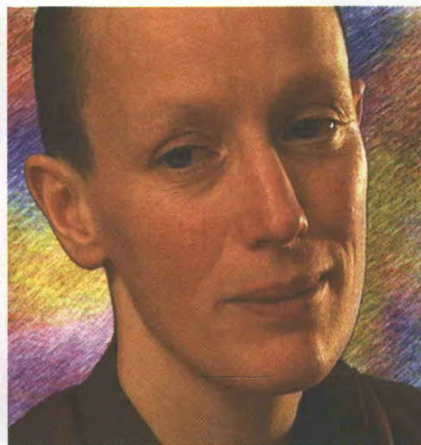
He’s very sincere in his practice. He does all his prayers (usually at great speed) wherever he is, even on airplanes. He says, “I used to drink every day, I’d have a glass of champagne in the studio. Then I’d come home and take drugs and various things like that. It was an escape to get away from the worry of all the jobs and because I was quite nervous and shy. Before I went to photograph someone famous I thought, ‘I’ll just have a glass of champagne.’ I haven’t taken drugs or had a drink or smoked for 13 years now. I can’t stand it. I wish I’d never wasted my time. And life is so much better. The relief. I could take off but I could not land. I believe everyone should have a good time and be happy. But permanent happiness does not exist in things like drugs and drink. Permanent happiness only exists when the mind is free from attachment. Strangely I haven’t had any difficulties stopping taking intoxicants; not at all. I know it’s all due to the grace and blessing of my teacher.”

I also talked to a lovely Theravadan nun, **SISTER KOVIDA**, who has spent some time walking round the villages and towns of rural England with her alms bowl. It was interesting to see how British people responded to a couple of nuns knocking on their door and asking, “May we sleep in your field or your barn for the night?” Or seeing them standing in the high street waiting to receive any offerings of food. Sister Kovida said that she and her companion never experienced any hostility. People were kind. The mendicant nuns are not allowed to accept money so when people put that in their bowls, the nuns would give it back and explain they were there just to receive sustenance for the day. Sister Kovida says it’s an act of faith in people’s willingness to support them in their way of living. “I often feel inspired by the kindness and generosity we receive,” she said.

It can create a fascinating diet, though. Some days it’s mostly chocolate biscuits.



Robert Thurman
Photo: Charles Peterson



Sister Kovida

Photo: Antonio Palmieri



Above Right: Thubten Gelek carrying incense, leads His Holiness back to his quarters after teaching, Bodhgaya, India.



Yvonne Rand

One of the hardest sacrifices Sister Kovida had to face was renouncing physical intimacy. "Being able to express one's affection is one of the strongest urges of human expression, and there's a lot of energy in our nature that inclines towards that. This energy can be transformed, and now I find that I can feel that sense of intimacy more deeply, even at the distance you and I are sitting. It seems that living within the precepts, and also the simplicity which silence and renunciation bring, allow more space to receive others as they are, rather than in terms of my own projections and desires."

When **YVONNE RAND**, a foremost Zen teacher, was told she had to have an operation for cancer, her first thought was, "Oh, a test." Her enthusiasm was quite trying for her family – and for her anesthetist who wasn't happy about her patient going through four hours on local paralyzing and a whole lot of meditation. But it worked. During the entire time none of her vital signs elevated, and by the end of the surgery she was in tears of gratitude for everyone in the theater, and so were they. Some of her students have since followed her example, so it wasn't just her 32 years of practice that made it possible.

THUBTEN GELEK, a former playboy and one of the first Westerners to be ordained in the FPMT, has an ecumenical approach. He takes off his robes (with the Dalai Lama's permission) to work with the dying at Mother Teresa's establishments as a way of opening his heart. He told me that his teachers predicted there would be American, Australian, French, etc., strands of Buddhism, all a little different according to people's characters.

"At the same time it seems to me an enormous problem that we Westerners want to change things according to our liking rather than make the effort to understand the psychological significance in the omniscient ones' purpose and to practice it. If we don't follow the method, how will we get the results?"

"I feel that if changes are to be made, then an all-Buddhist council should be convened as has been done from time to time over the centuries so that changes can be properly ratified and incorporated in the Buddhist canon for the benefit of all. Otherwise the lineage becomes irrelevant and can no longer be called Buddhism."

NP: Why do you think Buddhism has come to the West now, at this time?

VM: The flame of Buddhism has leapt at various times to various countries taking on the culture it has landed in. This is why Japanese Buddhism looks different to Tibetan Buddhism and Burmese Buddhism; now it's the West's turn. It will be quite a while before we get to know the flavor; it's starting to take root; there are little saplings at the moment.

The exodus of the Tibetans out of their own country, and the hippies going to the East, disillusioned with materialism and seeking spiritual truth, is like a confluence of two rivers. Who knows why the renaissance happened when it happened? There are movements in time, which are huge. I just know it is a very exciting time for all of us. We are all pioneers finding our own way.

When Buddhism went from India to Tibet, the Indians really didn't want to give them the Dharma because they thought Tibetans were barbarians and wouldn't know what to do with it. The Tibetans edited stuff out to suit the psyche, mentality and needs of their own people. In the same way I think there are quite a few Tibetans who think that *we* are the barbarians. Except for a few like Lama Yeshe, they wouldn't have a bar of us; they think we have no spiritual values.

But give it to us they did, and trying to transform it is a very delicate process. I always see the Dharma as an unbelievable gold nugget encrusted in a very large outer casing of the culture, time and practice of another land. The encrustation is also very precious because it is what holds the gold. We have to be very careful that in chipping away this outer coating we don't chip at the gold. It's a challenge, but why would it not be at this time? ☸

Vicki Mackenzie today



Photo: Lenny Foster