

A conflicted lama's Canadian connection

By [Justin McElroy](#) | June 25th, 2009 | 7:52 pm

Media-shy Buddhist speaks exclusively to Maclean's OnCampus about his time in British Columbia



Twenty-three years ago, a young Spanish toddler, born Osel Hita Torres, was recognized by the Dalai Lama as a reincarnated lama. The announcement made headlines around the world. Osel was identified as a Buddhist “golden child,” and was renamed Tenzin Ösel Rinpoche. His destiny was to lead the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a Tibetan education organization, and to teach Buddhist principles to the west.

But destiny apparently had other plans. Late last month, following two interviews with Spanish media outlets, the world found out that the lama had rejected his new name. Moreover, if not quite denouncing the Buddhist order (an accusation he has since denied), he was quoted as distancing himself from his divine calling and the FPMT. As the world press seized the story, scores of sensational details emerged: That as a child, at times the only non-monk he was allowed to see was Richard Gere. That he was only allowed to watch the movie *The Golden Child*. That recently, he had shown up at the new-age music and art festival *Burning Man*.

To Buddhists around the world, he is a spiritual figurehead. To the media, he is an irresistible curiosity, an anointed religious leader who has possibly rejected his path. But to those who attended St. Michaels University School (SMUS), a private school in Victoria, he was simply Osel, the foreign transfer student who asked strange questions and said strange things. He may have been one of the most important religious figures in the world, but I heard the news, my first thought was: "That guy? The kid in my creative writing class who didn't know what a Popsicle was?" Of course, if I had read some of his poetry, published in the annual Creative Writing 12 anthology, I might have had an inkling:

*I convince myself existence is a course,
like the ones rivers take, downstream
with one way and no other*

[excerpt from "Darkness", written by Osel Hita Torres in 2004]

Osel's time in Canada happened very much by chance. From an early age, he traveled to monasteries and Buddhist centres around the world, in an effort to reacquaint himself with his reincarnated teacher. By the age of seven, Osel had settled at Sera monastery in India, where he was taught by monks, in relative seclusion, for a decade.

But by 2002, he needed a change. "I had to come out, I had to see what's going on. I couldn't know from the TV, or what people said, or from books, I had to experience it first-hand," he told Maclean's in an exclusive telephone interview. "I had the philosophy down, but I really didn't know much about the outside world."

After a period of time back home in Spain, he was placed under the guidance of Peter Kedge, a board member of the FPMT who had overseen his education. Kedge happened to live in Sooke, a small oceanside town on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and it was there that Kedge went about trying to find a school that would take Osel.

It was a somewhat difficult task. When he originally applied to SMUS, a school best known for producing NBA star Steve Nash and a small army of national team rugby players, he was rejected. However, Robert Cameron and Robert Common, two housemasters for one of the boarding houses at SMUS, found out about his background, and told Peter Tongue, the director of the senior school.

"I showed [Tongue] this information about him, and said this looks like someone to give a go for," says Cameron, who says he was also willing to let Osel live in a spare room in his boarding house.

Recognizing the abnormal circumstances, an agreement was made. Osel would spend the year as a boarding student at SMUS. He would take the courses and exams required to graduate and then go to university. His identity would remain a secret.

“He always wanted to be treated as just another student, and that’s what we did. And whether we’d been asked or not, it’s how we treated everyone, whether they were an Arab prince or a Mexican peasant,” says Cameron.

It’s the way Osel wanted it as well. “No one knew me, so I could build up my personality, and create my own person, from zero, and that was great for me, because I could start over,” he says.

Indeed, Osel spent a year as an average student, kept his identity as a lama hidden, passed his courses, got involved in rugby and the school production of *Evita*, and managed to graduate. At least, that’s the Wikipedia version. But imagine it: you spend the vast majority of your life surrounded by adult monks, tucked away in monasteries half a world away, and then you’re dropped into Grade 12 at an elite private school filled with Type-A personalities a month into the academic year. Osel himself admits, “I was a little bit of a weirdo.”

“This was a special guy by definition,” according to Cameron. “The fact he had spent that many years in a lamasery in India made him very different. And you take a guy like that, in the formative years of his life...that was quite a hurdle for him to overcome, and it was always interesting to see the way he handled it.”

It didn’t always go well. Gender relations, the bane of any teenager’s high school experience, were cited by many who knew him as being a particular challenge.

“He described [the monasteries] as medieval. And it was in some ways, in the very sense of the word,” said Victor Short, one of Osel’s closest friends in his year in Canada. “The only women were matrons, so interaction with other girls...you’re jumping into the deep end of the pool.”

Complaints to Peter Tongue about his behaviour were not regular, but they did happen. “There was a general awareness that he came from a unique situation,” he says. “My concern was to try and keep the truth concealed while giving people enough information that they had some sympathy for him. When complaints about him came in, we dealt with them on a practical basis. And Osel would listen. He was very teachable, and really did not want to upset people. His Buddhist training in compassion and empathy is very much part of his being.”

“In the monastery I got disciplined all the time, so [punishment] wasn’t a new thing,” says Osel. “But being at high school, around people...it was out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

At the same time, students and teachers alike have fond memories about their experience with him. “The remarkable thing about Osel, as the reincarnation of a Tibetan lama, was that he was charmingly unremarkable,” recalls teacher Terence Young, who taught him creative writing. “He was an ordinary if slightly naive and sweet young man.”

He also had an absurd sense of humour. “Following our after-grad I had an embarrassingly large neck bruise,” says Rowan Melling, a former classmate of Osel’s. “Everyone was giving me a hard time about it, but then Osel said, ‘No! I saw it happen! He was beaten by Orangutans! Here, Rowan, take this bagel and cream cheese. Eat it, it is the best medicine for Orangutan wounds.’ This was a very surreal Buddhist moment [in retrospect]; he used his beautifully unhinged mind to instill peace and end my mockery.”

He may have been far from a normal student, but students never caught on. “The day Osel first joined [my drama class] was the day I presented an existentialist scene that I had written, that examined representations of heaven and hell, mortal and immortal existence, and the relationship between student and teacher,” says Jeremy Hanson-Finger. “Osel really liked it. At the time I thought he was just being friendly.”

*But then, my other self says,
“Is there no choice?”
If it is written there is no change, no wandering,
no point, no purpose...
no use, no significant end...
Everything is a waste, a pointless search for nothing.
There has to be more than that...*

Osel’s time in Canada was a turning point. “When I came back to Spain I was a changed person,” he says. “I felt more confident, I had a degree, I had lived a whole year outside of home by myself.” The normal experience of joining the rugby team, or being given a nickname—it’s “Oz”—gave him feelings of camaraderie he had seldom felt before. But more than that, it was in Canada that he began to break away from his set path, and it’s easy to think he was inspired by the attitudes of his classmates. After graduating, he had one final meeting with Tongue, where he broke down in tears, thanked him for the year, and told him how inspired he was by the “empowered” students that surrounded him.

“The idea in our liberal society that each individual can make goals for themselves, make their lives, produce them on a day to day basis, I think, was something definitely refreshing, exciting, and important to him after coming from in the most extreme case having your life set out for you from childhood to adulthood according to a very set path that was divinely inspired, in the literal case,” said Short.

Osel subsequently went to a junior international college in Switzerland, and eventually wound up at the University of Madrid where he completed a degree in cinematography. While he posted periodic updates on the FPMT website over the next few years, he never again had the same level of contact with his religion as he had for those many years in the Sera monastery. Inevitably, the global press that had tracked his fascinating story for two decades caught up with him, and lurid headlines such as “Dalai Lama’s chosen one slams life as Little Buddha,” appeared far and wide.

For a young man who has relished the past few years of living in anonymity, the return to fame has been unwelcome. “I’m actually really involved with them and in contact a lot,

we do have brainstorming...It's not like I'm a renegade at heart, or a runaway," he says. At the same time, he admits that there is some distance between him and his religion. "Once I left the monastery I completely forgot about all of that, because I had given it too much importance my whole life. So it was about time to say, 'Okay, I'm going to live my own life for a bit without thinking about it,' so I didn't worry too much. But I'm way over that now, I do talk to them and keep in touch."

Tongue remembered a time Osel talked to him about the difficulties he faced. "He was talking about how difficult it was to have all these expectation about who he was and how to act when that wasn't what he wanted to be. So I said to him, 'What is it you actually want to do?' And he said, 'I want to sit down on a street corner, string my guitar, and bring people together spiritually'. And I said, you're the lama, you can do whatever you want!"

Osel's position can't be explained in a soundbite. Parts of him have been pulled by the strands of destiny and reality, the past and modernity, for as long as he has lived. Yet another part of him is just another twenty-something, looking for a good job in a bad economy and figuring out what to do with his life. "I'm working on a masters degree on documentaries, afterwards maybe next year I'll do some course on cooking, become a cook, and then maybe I'll start doing something [with the FPMT], you know. But I'm taking it slow."

*It is more than walking the path to reach and end.
It must be something like flying in the sky
with infinite options at our fingertips.
Life is more than what we see and believe,
there has to be more...*

*The contradictions in myself pacify,
the tension relaxes, eyelids seal, same darkness...
It is too complicated, for now.*

Know it one day, I will.