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.

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.
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.

Rebent 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 Sydney 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
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 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, bodhicitta 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.

California 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 obsessions, 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 ...
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 Theravadin 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.
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?**