

Out of the mouths of young monks

Our Tibetan brothers and sisters meet the Dharma as mere babes in a monastery. Does this give them an edge over young Westerners who are part of an ever-growing spiritual subculture? Or is it simply a different approach to the same goal: enlightenment?

JULIA HENGST meets up with some young lama reincarnates. But first, she gets the inside scoop from a young Spanish boy, Ven. Kunkyen.

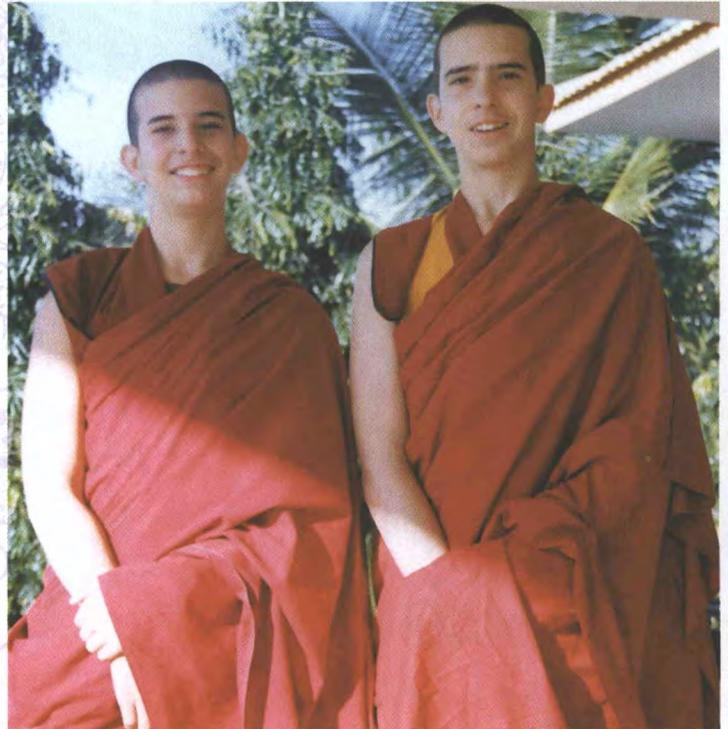
Ven. Thubten Kunkyen, 14, is the brother of sixteen-year-old Lama Osel Rinpoche, Lama Thubten Yeshe's reincarnation. He was ordained at age six. He talks about his life at Sera Je Monastery in South India, where he lives and studies alongside his brother.

Why did you choose to be a monk? I came to Sera on holiday once, and liked how the monks' studies were conducted. When I asked Lama Zopa if I could be a monk, he asked why. The only thing that came out of my mouth was, "To stop anger." I guess he liked that answer! Out of nine children in my family, Lama and I are the only monks.

Do you like monastic life?

Yes – sometimes it's strict, but it's okay. We are always studying; mostly debate and memorization, and the regular studies kids do in Spain. Debate is my favourite; it makes your mind so sharp, and you can get anywhere with debate. My least favourite thing at Sera is the discipline! Every time you want to leave Sera you need a signed and stamped pass.

Do you feel different from other fourteen-year-olds? I definitely feel different. The way they act, the way they talk and think – it's quite different from me. Sometimes it looks like they don't think about the future much, or use common sense. But I do the same thing, and I haven't seen too much of the world yet, so I can't judge them. As for being a monk, I never doubt it. Sometimes it's a little boring, but not often. I feel lucky, like I have a really good opportunity here. Will I be a teacher some day? Who knows! Anything can happen.



Kunkyen, left, with his brother Lama Osel

Photo: POCO HILL

What's it like to be Lama Osel's brother?

It's really special that I get to live with him. Sometimes we fight like normal brothers, but most of the time I really feel happy about this situation. I really think he's someone special. His mind is so sharp and he's so intelligent. Just the way he acts and carries himself ... it's unique.

And who are you the reincarnation of?

I don't know – maybe Lama Yeshe's dog! I think the grave is somewhere close to here.

Maybe you're his protector, Kunkyen.

Yes – maybe! I like that.

Do you have any suggestions for young people interested in Buddhism?

I think the main thing is to really work with the teachings and use them. Don't just leave them in the book.

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VEN. THUBTEN KUNKYEN

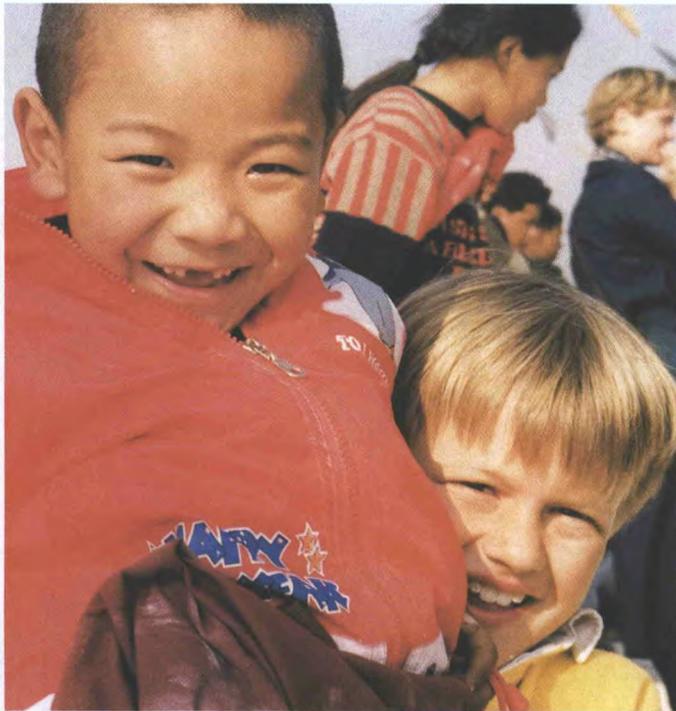


Photo Linda Rose

Cherok Lama, left, with Tenzin Rose.

Cherok Lama is possibly the most gregarious nine year-old you’ll ever meet. A familiar face at Kopan Monastery in Nepal, he recently moved to Sera Je Monastery in South India to engage in traditional studies. Cherok Lama’s previous incarnation was a friend of the Lawudo Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s previous incarnation, and they lived in the same area in Nepal. Interestingly, Cherok Lama feels remarkably keen to teach Westerners (For news of his March 2002 enthronement at Sera Monastery, see News Roundup).

Do you still feel a connection to your previous incarnation as the Cherok Lama? A little bit. When I was born I still felt very attached to my past life. They decided I was the right incarnation partly because I always wanted to go to my old cave. I loved hearing stories about the old Cherok Lama.

You’ve said you want to teach Westerners. Why are you so interested? It’s not so much that I’m inter-

ested, but I want to share. It’s not “I know Buddhism, I know that, I know this.” If I learn all these things and I teach one person, then that person can share it with others. Then, the teachings can spread. Slowly, slowly, all the lamas are trying their best to teach and make all beings happy and without suffering. It’s important to know the *real* Dharma.

Do you notice differences in Westerners – the kinds of problems they face? Yes, they are very different. Some Westerners, their minds are not attached to Buddhism. Their minds are interested in killing, smoking, drinking. Some of them only think of money. If we look at them from the outside, they look happy, as if they really like Buddhism. But if we look close into their minds and know what they feel like – know what they think and believe – sometimes their minds aren’t really so good.

Peace is the first thing Westerners need to know about Buddhism. Many Westerners have killing mind. They don’t look properly. Even big monks over here always look down onto the road. Why? So they can see bugs. If they see an ant, they don’t tread on it.

Are you looking forward to studying at Sera Monastery? Yes. If I go to Sera and study well, I can learn the Dharma, and other people will learn it because I will teach them. After that I will travel the world and try to help the Dalai Lama. If you learn something important, you don’t just keep it for yourself; you need to spread it so others can know. If you see something very special, for example, you should try to tell others about it. Of course, you mustn’t talk about your personal practice. If you do, I don’t know what happens, but it’s not good!

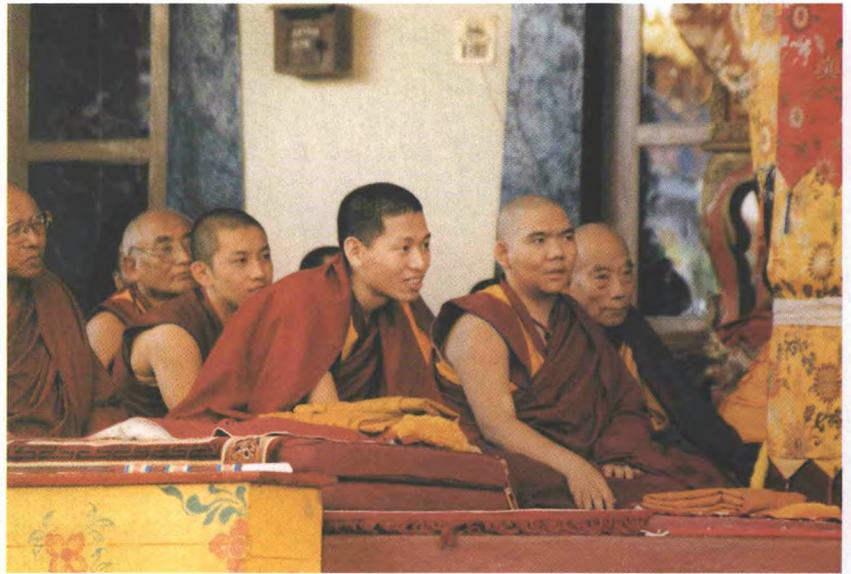
Do you feel drawn to meditation, studying, or teaching? I want to teach, I want to share. That’s what I feel close to.

Why is it important to have a teacher? If you don’t have a teacher, how can you know anything? It’s the teacher that gives you happiness. Happiness comes from the teacher... and from playing!



Photos Julia Hengst

Serkong Dorje Chang



Serkong Dorje Chang, center, with Serkong Rinpoche, right, and other lamas at His Holiness's recent teachings at Ganden.

Serkong Dorje Chang, aged 23, is one of more than a thousand monks studying at Ganden Jangtse Monastery in South India and is the twenty-seventh incarnation in his lineage. The twenty-fifth incarnation was one of the few monk/lamas officially recognized by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to have attained high enough levels on the tantric path to practice with a consort. His son Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche went on to become the debate partner and teacher to the present Dalai Lama. When Serkong Dorje Chang died and reincarnated, Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche became his teacher. Serkong Dorje Chang is believed to be an incarnation of Marpa the translator (Milarepa's teacher), and Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche is said to have been Marpa's son, Tarma Dode. The twenty-sixth Serkong Dorje Chang lived in Nepal, and never taught publicly. Lama Zopa Rinpoche said he would often circumambulate the stupa at Swayambhunath in Kathmandu. "To people who didn't know who he was or the qualities he embodied, he would appear as a very simple monk. He might have appeared like he knew nothing, but in reality, he knew everything."

Who is the biggest inspiration in your life? His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Whenever he gives teachings, it's so easy to understand, and easy to put into practice in daily life.

Do you ever feel stressed by the responsibility of being a high reincarnate lama and having students from previous lives? No, it's not difficult for me. I actually didn't have many students in the previous life. The previous life never left Nepal to go out of the country – he sometimes went to Bhutan, but basically he was an ascetic who didn't know the difference between one rupee or one hundred rupees.

Are you interested in the West – anything outside of monastic studies? No!

Do you think you will have Western students in this lifetime? Until I get the highest geshe degree, I won't teach. All I'm focusing on now is my studies. After that I will go to teach, also in the West.

What is important to think about in terms of explaining Buddhism to young people in the West?

It's important not to talk about certain things too quickly, especially emptiness and karma. If you talk about karma too quickly, people will worry too much and develop fear. Once they've developed faith in Buddhism in general, then you can explain karma gradually. For example, there was once a king whose queen became very ill. At one point the queen passed away, but the doctors didn't tell the king she died. They told him the queen was so sick that she couldn't see anyone, and there was a high chance the queen might die. The king was upset, but his mind got used to the idea that she might die. When the doctors could see that the king could deal with it better, they finally told him she was dead. This made it much easier for the king's mind. It's the same with karma. If you tell beginners about it all of a sudden, it will be too much for their minds to deal with. You need to talk about it gradually.

Do you have any advice for Western lay practitioners, especially about meditation?

Personally, I don't have much experience with meditation yet because I'm focused on my studies. But in general, when we first hear about meditation, we feel extremely interested in it, and feel confident that we can have accomplishments in meditation. It's important to remember the benefits of meditation; if you remember the benefits it will help you stay intensely interested. ☸