



# BON & BENEDICTINE

## a relationship buds

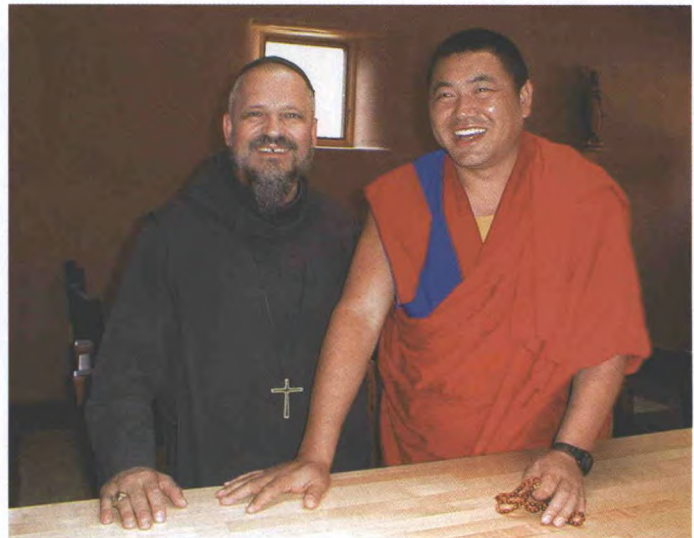
**A**bbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, placed the letters he received from his monastic association's East/West Dialogue group "carefully in the garbage can" – he wanted his monastery, Christ in the Desert, to "focus on the inner reality of Catholic Christian monasticism." In 2002, however, two Bön monks from Menri Monastery, India, arrived on his doorstep. They had been unhappily placed elsewhere. A relationship began and now the two monasteries consider themselves "twin monasteries." **JAFFA ELIAS** explores this connection with Abbot Philip Lawrence and Chongtul Rinpoche, a Menri-educated tulku

### ABBOT PHILIP LAWRENCE, OSB

Abbot Philip Lawrence, fifty-eight and jovial with it, gives an energetic tour of his monastery, which is picturesquely set in a circular valley amidst towering cliffs. He points to a wall in his cell. It is blue and adorned with a *thangka*, photos, and various memorabilia – "this is my Bön wall," he laughs.

Before his family became Catholic, Philip Lawrence, aged 10, had "never heard of religious life." Three years later, however, he took an exam to enter the seminary at Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon. "It was the first time I'd ever seen a monastery, the first time I'd ever heard of a monk, and the minute I saw it, it was what I wanted to do." He joined the seminary at 14. Aged 20 he became a monk and took temporary and final vows, and was ordained a deacon. Aged 30 his spiritual director sent him to Christ in the Desert, New Mexico. He was made the superior of the community, with the title of Prior in 1976. There are now 31 monks.

"Our rule, to live peacefully together and seek God, goes back to Saint Benedict (480 - 550 AD)," Abbot Philip explains. "The great spiritual teaching in the Rule of Benedict is the chapter on humility – the focus of the whole rule – and then the vows of obedience, of conversion of life and stability within the community." Benedictines, Cistercians (reformed Benedictines), and Trappists (reformed Cistercians) all follow the rules of St. Benedict – the Trappists are generally contemplative, and the Benedictines in this country are primarily active. Christ in the Desert, however, focuses on the inner life. The day starts with prayers at 4:00 A.M. and throughout the day the monks break for prayers, going to the Church seven times



*Abbot Philip Lawrence and Chongtul Rinpoche*

in a day and having other times for private prayer and reading. "It's not a day when you say, 'I wonder what I'll do today?' Our type of life is relentless, and it's meant to be relentless," Abbot Philip says. "Here we work in order that we can pray."

Why did he become a monk? When you look back, you see different things, he replied. "I come from an alcoholic family, and at home life was chaotic. At the monastery I saw a very strong father figure in an absolutely peaceful setting. [God] draws us to this life in different ways." Actually, he found the abbot an imperfect father figure, and there wasn't any peace! At the beginning as superior of his community, Abbot Philip admittedly made many mistakes. He now resolves to "create a monastery with good father figures, where we care about the life of the monks, so that they may move towards the fullness of inner life, rather than just observing the monastic rule." In this aim he identifies with His Holiness Menri Trizin Rinpoche, (the Abbot of Menri) – "We have the same kind of challenges: forming monks who really strive to develop an intense inner life, who are able to radiate light from within, who are able to give themselves totally to this inner quest."

Bön monks, Dugsay and Sogyal, stayed at the monastery for one month. Each day Abbot Philip would spend 40 minutes with them, "listening, asking them questions, trying to understand." There were dialogues with the whole community, and



even a couple of debates – they learn through dialectical debate. “We asked them to prepare a debate on reincarnation,” Abbot Philip says, “and we did one on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, where it is believed that our Eucharist, when we say the words with the bread and wine, becomes Jesus. It was fun and there was a lot of exchange/interchange going on.”

After the monks’ return, Abbot Philip received an e-mail from Menri Trizin Rinpoche. “Now you have to send two monks here,” he said. “We need to keep this thing going.” The exchange began in August 2001, when Abbot Philip visited Menri Monastery, in Dolanji, India, with two brothers. “When I met His Holiness Menri Trizin,” Abbot Philip recalls, “he felt like a brother right away – someone I felt totally close to and at peace with.” They bantered back and forth – “one of the reasons my monks like your monastery,” Menri Trizin Rinpoche said, “is because you joke, then they can feel at home right away.” A huge reception awaited Menri Trizin Rinpoche when he and the brothers arrived at Menri – “he pulled me at his side through the whole thing – he wanted people to see that this is an abbot from a Christian monastery. In the temple he blessed me first, and when others came to get a blessing from him, they all bowed to me,” Abbot Philip chuckles.

The days were filled with dialogue, sometimes with the abbot, “whose openness and ability to talk was incredible,” sometimes with the whole community, sometimes just with the geshe. Many of the monks told the abbot they had never spoken to a Christian before. “I couldn’t believe that,” he says. “Here in the West we’re used to talking to anybody, believers in black mass, devil worship, etc., they all show up! This was something very new for them. It was wonderful, and it was truly dialogue.” He was asked what he does when they pray. “My Hail Marys and a lot of quiet inner prayer,” he told them. “There was no attempt on any part for them to change the way we thought or for us to change the way they thought, we were simply trying to understand and respect and love – and see that that is enough.” It was also fun. And challenging. “I still want to understand. I don’t understand a lot of their thinking,” he continues. “The chakras, etc., are not part of our tradition but I am interested to learn more about them. [We were talking about hell] They have seven and we have three. Our idea of hell matches up with what I hear our Bön brothers talking about, if we make really bad choices. It gives you a sense that you do have will power, and freedom of choice. You could say I can choose heaven or hell and I can do that right now: I can choose right now to be in total peace and to look at everything with divine eyes or I could look at things from the point of view of how can I use it, what I can get out

of it, what it will do for me, all of which is unworthy of the human. Instead of that we want to create a world in which the divine shoots through everything – this is the great image I think of all religions, when we get to the best parts of them.”

Often, however, the religions do not share the same beliefs. Once Abbot Philip was invited as part of a diverse group of different religions to participate in the blessing of the Light Sanctuary, a place for different faiths to worship, at Montezuma, the world college in New Mexico. One student asked if all these religions aren’t all the same. Some representatives said yes, they felt like that, but “I could hear the Sufi Nurodeen next to me

mutter, ‘Allah,’” Abbot Philip recalls. “No,” I said, ‘they are not the same. For instance Nurodeen thinks that Jesus is not God, I believe he is God, and I don’t think the world has opposites – you can’t say yes and no about the same thing at the same time – either Jesus is God or he isn’t. I believe he is, but the challenge is how do I respect Nurodeen, who says he’s just a prophet? This is where I think religions have to be clear in stating that we don’t all share the same beliefs, and we look at the world differently, and we believe in opposition to one another at times. But how do we grow from where we are to respect and love the others who have, often times, truths that we don’t have, insights into living. Our Pope said we could learn a lot about peace from the Buddhists. He’s not saying ‘We should all become Buddhist,’

but he’s saying there’s something there that could really change the world if we could study their deep commitment to peace and compassion.”

So here is a connection between two monasteries, East and West. “We call ourselves ‘twin monasteries,’ Abbot Philip says. “Where do we go with all this? It doesn’t have to go anywhere. It’s a modern preoccupation to think it has to go somewhere. The thing is to form your relationship and see what flower it produces. Right now the flower part is just having Chongtul Rinpoche here. Let’s see where that goes over 15 years.”

## CHONGTUL RINPOCHE

Chongtul Rinpoche takes a break from an intense international teaching tour, to spend a couple of days at Christ in the Desert. He is young (35), affable, and relates directly.

Rinpoche was born in Himachel Pradesh, northern India, in 1967, and joined Menri Monastery, in the Bön settlement of Dolanji, aged eleven, taking monks’ vows at thirteen. He graduated as a geshe in 1990 after a nine-year course at the Bön Dialectic School. He has served Menri in many capacities, first as ritual performer in the protector chapel (he was eleven); then as chant leader (he was fourteen). He now takes care of



Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB



## INTERFAITH

the monastery under abbot Menri Trizin Rinpoche's direction, teaches in the Bön Dialectic School and directs the Bön Children's Welfare Center, which cares for 400 orphans and children from poor families.

"I really like being a monk. It is a very nice life," Chongtul Rinpoche laughs. At fifteen he was recognized as the reincarnation of the head lama of Kyong Tsang Monastery, Eastern Tibet. He was able to visit there in 1997. Scanning the monastery's books he picked one out that seemed familiar and was told that it was his previous incarnation's daily prayer book. You strove to finish that book every day despite sometimes arriving home after midnight, he was told by the monks there.

So is Bön Buddhist? Yes, but not Indian Buddhist, Chongtul explains. "We follow the Three Jewels, but we take Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche (who lived 18,000 years ago) instead of Buddha Shakyamuni as our root teacher. We take refuge in the Bön canon (Dharma) and the Bön lineage masters (Sangha)." At the heart of Bön, the oldest religious tradition in Tibet, lie the practices of refuge and bodhi-chitta. Some say that the Bön took these ideas from Buddhism, Chongtul says, but they are to be found in the Bön canon, which is in the Zhang Zhung language, the ancient language of Bönism.

Since his visit to Menri in 1990, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has done much to dispel the prejudice that Bön practice focuses on blood sacrifice and ignores scholarship. He spent a long time in the library checking out the Bön canon, Chongtul remembers. "And then he asked the monks to debate in front of him. 'Until now,' the Dalai Lama said, 'most Tibetans think Bön is shamanism, blood sacrifice, etc. I have been to their monastery and checked what they are studying. Everything is the same. They have a different founder, and a different canon. They are not studying Buddhist books from India. They are Zhang Zhung Buddhists.'"

In the early sixties, Chongtul's abbot, Menri Trizin Rinpoche, then just a monk, was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation to spend three years in England with Dr. Snellgrove. In his free time he reportedly held a great curiosity for other religious traditions and was the first Tibetan monk to meet with the Pope (in Italy, 1960). He also visited many Catholic and Orthodox churches throughout Europe, and spent time exchanging ideas with their abbots and monks, Chongtul said.

Fond of this exchange Menri Rinpoche thought it would be good for his monks to follow suit. All religions, he said, talk about the mind, but express it in a different way. "We all have a spiritual goal, we all want to go somewhere, but how do we get there? We

[representatives of different religions] have to dialogue with each other about clearest, shortest, simplest way to get there."

How is Chongtul finding it in a Catholic monastery? "I am happy to be here," he says. "Sometimes there is a special feeling, like I am getting a new idea through joining in with monks when they pray and meditate. I also ask them what they ask for when they pray to God, what they study and how they study. I tell them what we study in Menri. This sort of exchange gives rise to a feeling of harmony."

Chongtul spent some time that afternoon fielding a variety of questions from the monks and nuns, which he answered good-naturedly. Abbot Philip, who sat next to him, beamed throughout and occasionally offered his understanding of Bön practices. The feeling of brotherhood was palpable. That morning Chongtul had spoken to the monks about reincarnation, an idea they do not have, he remarks. "They go to a heavenly place and stay there." When does reincarnation end, he was asked by someone. It never ends, he told him, until, that is, all sentient beings become enlightened. "Some monks find the concept of reincarnation a superstitious idea, yet for me rebirth is not just talk. When you understand rebirth it makes you much



*Chongtul Rinpoche at Christ in the Desert*

stronger in studying your way. It is a message for living that is not necessarily religious." He goes on to say: "I am a Tibetan monk wherever I am. My mind is Buddhist, even though I am in a Catholic room."

On a practical level, Chongtul recognizes that the Bön can really learn something from the Catholics about the interface between monastic and lay life as there is lay involvement in taking care of the monastery. "In Tibet fifty years ago, 80% of our society was ordained. Now it is only 20%. What must we do for our religion to survive not just 100 years but until all sentient beings have become enlightened? We have to change the prevailing idea that the monks only take care of the monastery and monastic affairs, and that the lay people think they only need to do business. How do we involve lay people in running our monastery, in coming to pujas, in feeling that our teachings are accessible and relevant to their lives? We can get inspiration from the Catholics' ideas – and if the Catholics are inspired, they can take our ideas. That's true cultural exchange. When there's cultural exchange it means the cultures develop something."

A nunnery is nearing completion in Dolanji. Normally this would have been taken care of by the abbot and the monks, but in this case it was taken care of by the lay people. ☸