

The Dharamsala Experience



By Keren Tueta Sagi

After dealing with a family health problem that had occupied us for months, my husband and I left our safe jobs in Israel, stored our things, and bought a ticket to India. Our families were shocked, because we had only just returned from a one-month vacation (during which we had heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama giving the traditional Losar teaching in Dharamsala). So why were we going to India again?

Most of our parents' friends tried to comfort them in the face of this "tragedy." Our own friends, especially our Dharma friends, were very supportive. My academic colleagues were surprised. We faced the same question again and again: Why?

Even when I told them about the study possibilities, they still were not satisfied. I began to ask myself the same question: Why would people like us want to leave their normal life and spend time in India studying Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language instead of drinking tropical juices on the beach somewhere?

It was my husband's dream to be close to His Holiness and other great lamas, and to study Tibetan Buddhism full-time. What could I say? If someone you love has a dream like that, he should go for it, and I did not want to stand in his way. I did say, though, that we would stay there no more than six months and then come back to our "real" life.

It was this questioning of ourselves that led to the idea of doing some research on Dharamsala while we were there. These are some of the findings ...

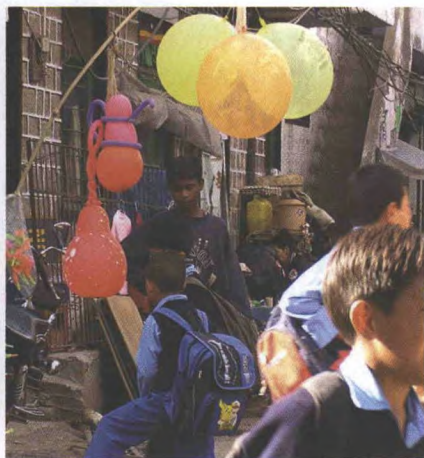
The research population we studied was foreigners: 127 [non-Indian] visitors to Dharamsala who were staying at least one month in the area. All of the visitors were occupied in learning Tibetan Buddhism and/or Tibetan language.

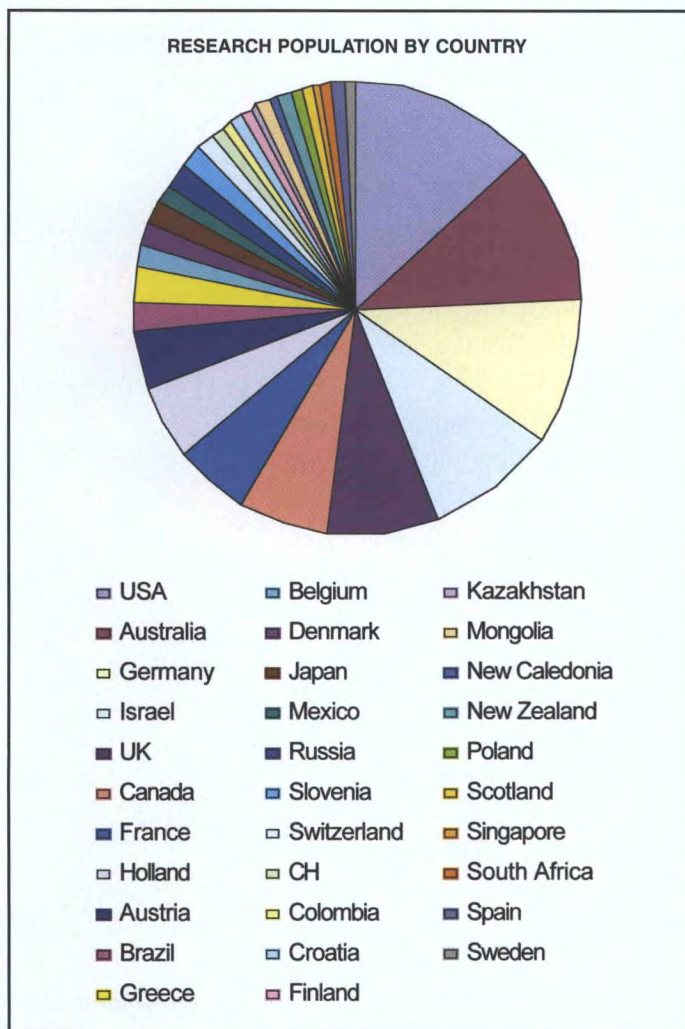
The research aim was to examine the motives and the characteristics of foreign visitors who

study Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language in Dharamsala.

The research took place in Dharamsala in the northern part of India. Dharamsala is a magnetic center for studies of Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language because of the Dalai Lama's residence there. There are also many natural and cultural attractions in the area that attract tourists from all over the world.

The ambience that is Dharamsala, with an audience with the Dalai Lama as the highlight. Photos by Keren Sagi and Neta Efioni. Author photo page 48 by Yael Eisner.





Reasons given by participants as to why they came to study in Dharamsala:

- The availability of great teachers, their teachings, and the teaching depth.
- The possibility of seeing His Holiness Dalai Lama and hearing his teachings – and also His Holiness the Karmapa, based outside Dharamsala at Gyuto Tantric Monastery.
- The gift you get from the vibration of the energy of special people like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa, and other high lamas.
- The low cost of living and study.
- Being able to invest all-day-long in studying because there is no need to go to work.
- The conditions for learning the Tibetan language are good because McLeod Ganj, a township of Dharamsala, is largely populated by Tibetans.
- There are fewer distractions and a supportive atmosphere.

Demographics

- Most of the participants were between the ages of 20 and 39.
- The percentage of women (62%) taking part was higher than that of men (38%).
- 76% of the participants in the Dharamsala area who were studying Tibetan Buddhism or Tibetan language were single. Only 20% shared their life with a partner on a regular basis.
- Only a few of the participants who came here for three months or more had children. Some of them had adult children and were theoretically freer to do whatever they liked.
- Almost 60% of the participants had an academic degree. Some of them also had a professional degree.

Purpose of the visit

Most of the respondents had the same purpose for the visit before coming and after their arrival [studying Buddhism or the Tibetan language]. For two of the participants, the original purpose was “holiday and party” and “parties and smoking drugs.” Those purposes completely changed after meeting Buddhism. Both of them became dedicated students.

First encounter with Tibetan Buddhism

Participants in the research study found their way to the path of Tibetan Buddhism at different stages of their lives and in different ways. One woman described how a book by Sogyal Rinpoche influenced her life: “In 1985, my eldest son died. I needed deep answers which I couldn’t get from the Catholics. In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* I found what I was looking for, and I have seen myself as Buddhist ever since.” This particular book also had an influence on several other participants.

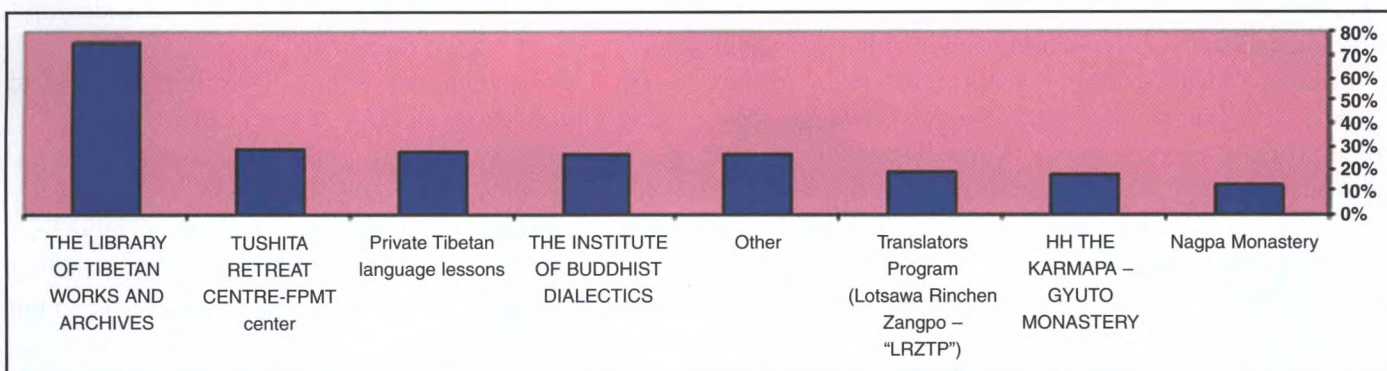
One respondent said: “I left France because I felt disappointed with the Western lifestyle. I traveled to the Far East and to Tibet. There I was touched by the humanity and behavior of the local people. I realized that they had a different way of looking at ‘reality’.” Others were also influenced by visiting Buddhist countries and communities.

Some respondents encountered Buddhism through His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This next answer shows how an extreme change could come about after such a meeting:

“Three years ago I traveled, looking for parties. In Bodhgaya there was a teaching by the Dalai Lama. He passed three meters away from me. I felt like I did after good drugs. I felt bliss for a long time; it was a completely physical feeling and cheaper than drugs. I wanted to find out what it was.”

Many participants who had previously had a general interest in a spiritual practice or way of life encountered Tibetan Buddhism in a Dharma center.

Institutes and study programs in Tibetan Buddhism in English (and percentage of use by research participants)



The attitude of family and friends

In each interview, participants were asked, "What do your family and friends think about your coming here to study?"

Most respondents reported that their families did not understand this choice. Some of the interviewees felt supported, and some had to face their family's displeasure. Often, families were reported to be concerned, not understanding what their family member was doing in Dharamsala: How could he/she give up a comfortable life in his/her country and go all the way to India to live in terrible conditions? Many families were reportedly very concerned about the traveler's future.

One respondent felt that the family considered this journey to be a "waste of time, and a total misunderstanding. No career, no family, no children, not preparing for a means of livelihood in the future. In short: worries, concern, and disapproval of my diverting from the conventional mainstream." Another respondent reported, "My son thinks that I am out of my mind."

Some of the participant families could reportedly accept this move to Dharamsala, but only if they could see it as ending. One of the interviewees said that his mother was very concerned about the possibility that he might become a monk, while his grandfather was afraid that he would become completely devoted to a guru.

Another respondent answer illustrates a divide between the respondent and his parents in his choice of both location and vocation: "My mother, probably also my father, is afraid about the living conditions in India, and that their son could get a sickness for life ... For my family members, my being a monk and going to India is beyond the thinkable."

Some families were reportedly unhappy because of the participant's choice of the religion: "My parents don't see

Buddhism as a true path, as they are Catholic." Respondents said that when their family was supportive, it was due to two things: (a) the action was related to study, or (b) they were happy in their Indian visit.

Families were reportedly more satisfied if there was a "degree" at the end of a study course and the possibility of a job, such as for the people who finish the Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo Translator Program (LRZTP) and become translators. "My family was very shocked when I became a monk, probably because they didn't see how my future would be secure, as I don't have an income. My parents are now happy that here in India I got an education that, in their eyes, leads to a 'job'," reported one participant.

Friends, in contrast to family, were usually reported to be more supportive, or at least, they were not against the move. The most supportive friends were Dharma friends. Three interviewees who stayed in Dharamsala for more than a year said that their circle of friends changed. The time apart affected some friendships badly, they reported, and their stronger relationships were now with Dharma friends.

Society's reaction to becoming a Buddhist practitioner

The following question tried to examine how Western society is reacting to Buddhist practitioners, according to the experiences of those surveyed: *Many people who live in a Western-based culture and have very little knowledge, if any, of Buddhism, view people like you as somewhat strange; as people who either now have or have had some serious problem in the past; people who want to escape the intense and demanding "reality" of the West; people who choose to be uprooted from their culture/roots; or people who are "riding the wave of New Age religion" and thus are considered to be quite spacey. Do you or did you have such experiences, and in general how do you feel about that?*

Most of the participants reported that they had had such an experience of judgment or suspicion. One respondent reflected on such accusations thusly: "India is not a walk in the park, and studying Buddhism is nothing like a peaceful lake in some idyllic landscape in the countryside. Are we uprooted from our culture/roots, or are we gaining perspective into our own culture and roots, and thus, gaining insight into ourselves and others? I think it is much more like expanding one's culture and roots. Like taking a tree out of a small pot, and planting it in a vast, beautiful, fertile valley, where it can grow strong and beautiful to its full potential."

One respondent referred to the idea that some see Buddhist practitioners as having problems with the following response: "Everybody has problems in his or her life: At least we are trying to deal with it!"

Others said: "I had and still have this kind of feedback, but I can never please everyone"; "In general I'm not so concerned with what people think as I'm very happy to be Buddhist and follow the path"; and "I don't mind, as I got used to it over the years."

The effect of the visit to Dharamsala

According to the interviews, most of the participants could point out a change in themselves, or were expecting that some change would occur for the best, as a result of their visit to Dharamsala:

"Most definitely [there is a change] – all decisions, thoughts about living life, are based around Buddhist philosophy and practice for transforming the mind and studying."

"I have a Tibetan husband. Also I want to work only in Dharma centers; my focus is Buddhism."

"I don't think that I will smoke drugs, drink alcohol, and listen to music at full volume all week long; it doesn't interest me any more. It is clearer to me what I want now."

"[My life] has already changed. I will be involved in a Dharma center in the West. I am happier with my life and more at peace with myself."

"Buddhism will take a major part of my time, which will influence my social activities (they'll become less), there'll be less focus on career, and this will have an influence on materialistic possessions, but I hope I'll be more satisfied. I will choose friends more carefully."

"I hope [for a change to occur]; I will have more control and understanding of my own mind and be able to understand others' minds. Hopefully, I'll understand reality better and help others to get to know their minds."

Only two participants reported that the visit didn't have much of an effect on their lives. (From the results of our

research, we theorize that this response may be due to the unconventional lives those participants led before they came to Dharamsala, thus lessening the impact of this particular trip.)

As for myself, I was initially willing to come to India for six months at the most. After the first month, I fell in love with our life there, and eventually we spent one year and four months abroad.

Coming back to Israel was not easy. We had to go back to living with our parents and looking for jobs. It took us six months to find jobs that we liked and to move into our own place.

The visit to Dharamsala has influenced our routine in Israel. We moved out of the city with which we were so familiar. We are now living in a small settlement which is quiet, with open space. We spend more time with Dharma friends and participate in more Dharma activities, so we have less time for other activities. I have found it easier to give away "stuff" – I like the idea of not having too much. We reflect on our memories quite often; we listen to Indian music and remember Indian movies that we watched.

I haven't forgotten the difficulties I had in Dharamsala. My health was not good; I also had a hard time facing the beggars every day, not knowing how I should react toward them. I remember well the dirt and the noise, not feeling relaxed in the streets because of the traffic and no sidewalks. There were many other difficulties, but we could get up in the morning and decide what we were going to do that day; we could spend most of the day together, and – more than anything – we had the proximity of teachers and Dharma friends, and the influence of them on our minds. I think I was more aware of my actions and my thoughts, thinking about what motivated me. Back home, I have to stop and think about it, because it doesn't arise naturally.

When I look back, going to Dharamsala seems to be the best present we could have given to ourselves. We still hope to go back one day. Thank you, dear friends, for your help: Profesor Nurit Kliot, Yaki, Gila, Zeev, and Maya. ☸

Keren Sagi is a researcher at the University of Haifa in Israel. She worked on this study with her colleague, Dr. Noga Collins-Kreiner. She can be contacted at ksagi@research.haifa.ac.il

