

First Encounters

Mandala presents a selection of stories from Buddhist practitioners whose lives were transformed by meeting the Dharma.

Finding liberation in the Swiss Alps

By B. Allan Wallace

During the summer of 1970, I was hitchhiking around Europe before matriculating at the University of Göttingen, where I was to spend my third year of university. Having been brought up in a Christian home while pursuing a career in science throughout my youth, I had been seeking without success answers to life's most basic questions. My travels through Europe eventually brought me to the youth hostel in the Swiss alpine village of Grindelwald, where someone had left behind a copy of Evans-Wentz's book *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, with an introduction by Carl Jung. As soon as I began reading, I was enthralled to find that this book, based on the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) school of Tibetan Buddhism, illuminated the very nature of awareness and showed the way to exploring the deepest inner sources of the human spirit.

I continued reading this classic treatise by Padmasambhava as I hitchhiked north to Norway. Intuitively I knew this was the path for me to follow, but I also sensed that I would need more than a book. I needed a teacher. This yearning grew in intensity as I arrived in the city of Bergen, on the west coast of Norway, where I wrote in my journal of my longing to meet "a wise old man" who would give me the personal guidance that I needed. The next morning I set out on the long road through the wilderness to Oslo, but after trying for five hours without success to catch a ride, I started walking back, against the flow of traffic, while absentmindedly letting my hitchhiking thumb dangle. To my surprise, a black VW bug pulled over, and its driver, a wizened old man, beckoned to me, offering me a ride. Tossing my backpack and guitar in the backseat, I happily joined him for the ten minutes that it took before we came to a side road leading to his cabin high in the mountains above. But in those ten minutes, he learned of my interest in Buddhism, and I learned that he was a Buddhist monk named Sugata (an epithet of the Buddha) who had lived with Tibetans in Nepal. He was my wise old man, one of the tiny number of Buddhist monks living in Europe at that time, and

he granted me the essential guidance I needed at that time. "Do some good," he counseled me, "and help the Tibetans."

B. Allan Wallace is founder of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies and a prolific author and translator of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Not interested, thanks. And then ...

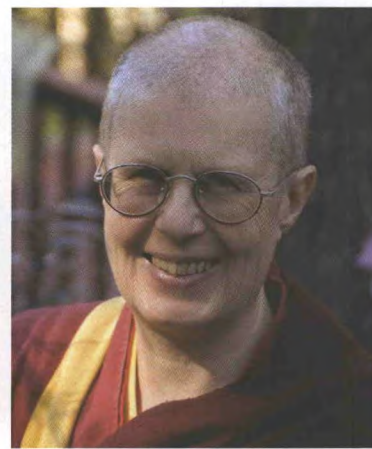
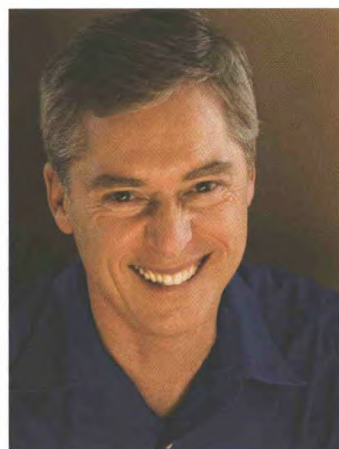
By Phil Hunt

Like the long arm of the law, the Guru's hook of compassion gets you in the end. I was minding my deeply unreligious own business quite happily, when my then-partner Tania (we are now married) asked me to go to a teaching at Vajrayana Institute in Sydney. No thanks. Not interested. She asked again. Your stuff, don't need it. All day Saturday? You must be joking, etc., etc. She didn't want to go on her own. Find a friend. She kept asking, I kept refusing, citing important tasks like reading the paper. Finally she suggested a deal. If you come with me this once, and you really, really don't like it, I'll never ask and hassle you to go again.

So I was fairly confident that my first trip to a Buddhist center was going to be my last. On arrival at the cramped old Newtown premises, my suspicions were confirmed: these Buddhists were a weird lot who could happily do without me. My levels of discomfort rose into the red when I saw the tiny gompa (a standard living room) filled with people on cushions (knee to knee!) who then bowed and prostrated when the monk came in. Prayers and strange songs, unintelligible subject matter: the only comfort I felt was that I didn't have to come back.

And then the old Tibetan monk (Geshe Dawa or was he Geshe-la or Geshe Dawa-la?) seemed to be looking at me. He seems nice, I thought. I looked back. He kept speaking away in Tibetan, looking at me. Out of respect, I listened. He stopped and a Western monk (Ven. Michael Yeshe) translated. I don't remember the exact words, but I knew it was for me. I knew that he knew, and I knew that he knew that I knew. His words soothed my heart from an ongoing argument that

B. Allan Wallace,
Phil Hunt with
Tamsin the goat
and Ven. Margaret
McAndrew.



I had been having with Tania. He knew my mind, no doubt about it. In the discussion group later people commented on how Geshe-la had gone off topic and they weren't sure what it was about. I knew. And the sensible part of my mind saw the reality – it knew I would have to come back.

Phil Hunt and his wife Tania Duratovic are now coordinators of the Animal Liberation Sanctuary in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Travelling freaks

By Ven. Margaret McAndrew

It was the early '70s, and I was travelling in Southeast Asia, India and Nepal, like a lot of other young people. I was 30, which made me quite elderly compared to the others. We were all "travelling freaks," wandering around with rucksacks and trying to live like the locals.

I was looking for some sort of deeper understanding of things and dissatisfied with my life up to that point. I had developed a vague interest in Eastern religions and the possibilities of meditation, and travel presented possibilities of learning something about them – in Australia in those days there was next to nothing.

Somehow as I was travelling my encounters on the road seemed to push me in the direction of Tibetan Buddhism, whether it was in a Minangkabau house in Sumatra or the grounds of a *vihara* in Thailand. I went on to do some meditation courses in the Burmese vipassana tradition but felt that for me something was lacking – I wanted more knowledge about Buddha's teachings. One of these courses brought me to Bodhgaya just before His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave a Kalachakra empowerment to thousands of Tibetans and other Buddhists. It was an overwhelmingly colourful scene, and as a bystander I felt caught up in the joyful energy. But what interested me especially was the teachings on Lam Rim, especially bodhichitta, which was daily presented as summaries in English from His Holiness's

preliminary teachings. I became thirsty to learn more.

I heard about the month-long courses at Kopan in Kathmandu Valley, with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I was assured that if it was teachings that I wanted, I would get teachings. I couldn't wait to enroll for the next one – in April 1974.

Having made my way to Kathmandu and then Boudhanath Stupa, I was wandering along little paths between seemingly endless rice paddies, and was quite sure I was lost, when suddenly a beautiful little temple appeared on the hillside ahead. When I arrived it felt like coming home at last, although it was a totally exotic setting, with sweeping views of the valley and lots of delightful little monks running around everywhere.

About two hundred students from dozens of countries were sitting on the floor in a big tent, mostly "freaks", wearing exotic clothing and fortunately used to roughing it. Students shared the very basic conditions – no electricity, food eaten alfresco sitting on the ground, bathing in the springs, toilets just a trench with boards across, and getting up early in the cold. But after a few days, I was totally blissful. I suddenly realised that this was going to change my life.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche was giving us teachings morning, afternoon, night and often even before breakfast as well. Sometimes Lama Yeshe would give us teachings and lift our hearts with his direct wisdom and radiant presence overriding his flawed English. You couldn't escape thinking deeply about the meaning of the teachings and I became certain that the Lam Rim provided a guide to life, opening a perspective more wonderful than I could have dreamed possible. And I gradually became aware what special beings these lamas were. I knew that I must commit my life to trying to transform my mind in the path under their guidance.

Ven. Margaret McAndrew resides at Chenrezig Institute, Australia



Jerry Powers, Kirsti Kilbane, Andy Weber and Ven. Jangchup Phelgyal.

A voice from a retreat house

By Jerry Powers

Reflecting back on this lifetime so far, I think I've always been Buddhist.

From the stories I wrote when I was a child about the human race being asleep, inching along freeways like pre-programmed sheep oblivious to the fundamental reality around and inside us, to my declaration when I was eight years old that I wanted to be a nun, to a firm belief that there was no external god and if I had to believe in something, I would believe in myself.

But the reality of Buddhism hit home for me after I had been in a relationship for eight years – two and a half of which we were married – and I found myself surrounded by everything I was supposed to ever want to be “happy”. A husband, a brand new home, a new car, a degree, a great career, the big TV, appliances, a landscaped garden, the dog, even the kitchen sink! As I stood amongst hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of stuff, I was overwhelmed by the realization that none of this was making me anywhere near happy.

Through a friend, and good karma, I found Tara Institute in Melbourne where teachings from Geshe Doga showed me very quickly that everything in my life comes from the inside; that I, solely, am responsible for everything in my world, and that I have the ability, and in fact the responsibility, to take control. That was the most liberating, awakening and the most terrifying thing I had ever taken in.

I was hooked and it shook my world. That was two-and-a-half years ago.

So after literally giving away my entire life in Australia, I packed what I had left into my back pack and moved to Root Institute in Bodhgaya, where I spent the majority of my time purifying what seemed to be eons of negative karma in just a few short months.

I am now half-way through a five-month Lam Rim retreat set up by our amazingly kind-hearted Lama Zopa Rinpoche (I have great trust that he has great trust that I can actually do this!) and am eagerly hoping to make it back to Bodhgaya and Root Institute to work on my preliminaries, do some more purification (this time I'm going down fighting – ha, ha!) and dedicate myself, for some time, to the precious opportunity to work in a Dharma center in the most spiritual place on Earth.

Jerry Powers, former Root Institute manager, is currently on retreat at Tushita in Dharamsala.

The Slow Learner

By Kirsti Kilbane

From a young age, I had a sense of my own spirituality; the problem was, I couldn't work out who – or *how* – ‘God’ was. As a young child, I asked, “If God made everything, who made God?”

The Buddhist path was not one I purposefully sought out. My first contact with the Dharma, aged 19, was on a sunny day in London, on a break from my job at a pub. Strolling past a discount book display, I spotted a small book with a Tibetan monk on the cover. It was cheap and I hadn't “done” Buddhism yet...

Somewhere between those pages, I discovered with shock (and relief!) that I was, in fact, Buddhist. Having recently and vehemently renounced religion, I quickly hunted down the famed *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, to double check ... but there was no denying it!

Being a self-confessed fun addict slowed the process considerably. Returning to Australia, I began a sporadic relationship with a local Theravada Buddhist center. Hiding at the back, I slowly learned how to meditate and transform my mind. Five years later and back in London, I still hadn't

learned enough: working too hard and playing too much, I knew I was wasting my life!

One day, under a weight of futility and apathy, I turned to meditation for the first time in ages. I visualized His Holiness the Dalai Lama (with whom I sensed a strong connection) and I asked him to help me find my path. My opening eyes rested on an envelope that had been delivered through the front door while I was meditating. I hadn't even heard it fall to the floor.

It was from Jamyang Buddhist Centre. I had never been there, but had called them several weeks previously. Enclosed was an advertisement for teachings with His Holiness in France, in two weeks' time! I took refuge at those teachings. I didn't need any more convincing.

Last Christmas, I quit the job I loved, sold my beautiful house, handed back the company car and left the "god realm" of Perth for Bodhgaya.

Kirsti Kilbane is Spiritual Program Coordinator, Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, India.

On Pilgrimage in 1973

By Andy Weber

Just before sunrise we, two *sadhus* and I, are shivering – it is cold, the scenery staggeringly beautiful, snow-capped mountains, valleys full of fir trees, waterfalls, streams and crystal clean air. We are high up behind the Himalayan chain at 8,000 feet, our frail bodies not yet used to the extreme temperature.

On our left side in the sheer cliffs I detect many caves, like windows in a high-rise apartment block, an indication that this was once a power spot. These dwellings, accessible only by ropes, were used for retreats by yogis, monks and meditators sometimes for months, even years.

The first rays of the sun hit the peaks, turning the mountain caps into glowing golden light. Our path leads through a stupa/temple. I am the last to enter and stop. The walls and ceiling are decorated with mandalas and deities, some crudely executed, but the colors are rich and of natural sources which gives them the extra breath and glow of Mother Earth. My eyes wander from mandala to mandala and my mind gets locked in ... a blissful feeling spreads through my body. The mandalas begin to vibrate and no longer are my eyes seeing the colours and shapes ... no more the "I" who sees and feels, just bliss and inner peace ... I have come home.

The younger *sadhu*, Mayagiri ("mountain of love") drags me out of the temple, and reality, however beautiful and painful, sets in again.

On my journey to that temple I had met many high

beings, solitary meditators, yogis, gurus and lamas, even seen the Dalai Lama, visited many temples and gompas, meditated in caves, visited many powerful places ... and seen many thangkas (Tibetan scroll paintings), but that experience on that cold morning was beyond the ordinary, beyond my mind. I needed to find the key to unlock that mystery.

Many years later when I was painting for Lama Yeshe in Kopan, Mayagiri visited me and mentioned that moment – the moment I changed and took up a new path.

Andy Weber's thangka paintings can be found in many centers and temples throughout the world.

Myself, Truly Found

By Ven. Jangchup Phelgyal

My emotional life played out like a nonstop game of ping-pong. In this unending Olympic trial, competing always with myself, thoughts and feelings shot back and forth, caromed off corners, and sometimes died at the net. Whether singles or doubles, I was all the players as well as the net, the paddles, and the ping-pong ball itself. But my unhappy heart got it worse. It was the ping-pong table, a scarred surface upon which exploded every angry serve, each jealous slam, every self-denigrating backhand.

Having lost my Catholic faith at twenty, I filled the spiritual void with hot button items of the time – Black Pride, sexual politics, massage therapy, shamanism. Added to this were a Ph.D., university tenure, and plenty of drugs, sex, and rock 'n roll. Poised to teach at Harvard or Princeton, sure I was an arrogant jerk, but didn't I have a right to be?

And yet why was there always an ache at my heart?

In 1980, I became Born Again. Having accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, I was told I was on the straight-away to Heaven. I had, however, one niggling question for the minister: What if, say, an illiterate cinnamon farmer in Zanzibar had never heard of Jesus Christ. Where was *he* going?

His answer forced me to continue my search. I stumbled into refuge on my forty-eighth birthday, and was ordained at Ganden-Shartse monastery in Southern India three years later. But it would be another two years before the real miracle occurred. It was at Geshe Gyeltsen's center in Long Beach that I heard for the first time (and instantly accepted as my own) the Dalai Lama's "Prayer to Generate Bodhichitta." The prayer's ending still echoes in my ear:

As long as space remains

As long as sentient beings remain

Until then may I too remain

To dispel the miseries of the world.

Suddenly my heart healed and was whole.

No more self-regarding ping-pong matches with myself. I was to serve the cinnamon farmer in Zanzibar because life, endless and ongoing, was now and forever to be lived for others, always *us*, and in transcendence.

How sweet this awakening! And yes, how sweet at last myself, *truly found*.

A meeting with the "Delhi lama"

By Gabriel Lafitte

It was late 1977, my first time out of Australia, where else but Kathmandu? I couldn't have said it then, but I needed to chill. I was a flaming revolutionary at war with the world. The '60s had been my time, leading marches through the city streets, making angry demands of big corporations, naming and shaming corporate polluters in parliamentary inquiries.

So far, so good. But I was on a mission for a perfect world, of perfect equality; a one-man angry mission to clad the planet's thorny unfairness in soft leather. The world was moving on, and I wasn't. Somewhere along the way I bumped into reality.

In Kathmandu the first sign was meeting Nick Ribush (then a monk, a.k.a. the "Delhi lama"). Like me, he was from a secular Jewish Melbourne suburban home. By 1977 I had switched from print journalism to radio, and I was looking for program ideas, if only to make enough money to keep me going on the trail past Kathmandu. Nick asked me: "What's the plan?" But I was vague and open to ideas about who I might interview. "Why don't you interview the Dalai Lama?"

Why not? I didn't know anything about Tibet or the Dalai Lama, but I seethed with righteous anger toward the selfish materialism of Australia. And, as a journalist, I had the privilege of starting at the top. So I wrote on the hotel letterhead (no faxes or email in those days) and to my amazement, two weeks later I got a letter back from His Holiness' private secretary saying we were to meet in Bodhgaya, January 1978.

The interview went really well. In full view of His Holiness, my microphone plug fell out and I didn't notice for ten minutes. I asked a lot of ignorant and aggressive questions, inviting him to bucket the Chinese and to bucket Western materialism. He considered each question with great care, and then responded with depth, good humor and an inclusiveness that somehow reframed my insistence on excluding the bad guys. What most impressed me was his spontaneity. Here was someone who spoke from his whole being, not just from a prearranged script like a politician

primed to stay "on message".

Only when I got back to Australia, and could do more research, did I discover that even then he had been asked the same dumb questions dozens of times.

But I didn't go back right away. I wanted to find out more. I was intrigued. Instead of quickly topping and tailing the tape, and selling it for broadcast, I spent months talking to Tibetans, young and old, in their refugee camps. The tapes piled up.

Eventually I got to Dharamsala, a hamlet on a Himalayan ridge. I was in a group that had an audience with His Holiness. I had no intention of asking more, I'd had my turn. But he turned to me: "You. You have seen how we Tibetans live. What is your suggestion?"

That was the moment of the turning in my mind. Out of habit, I quickly assembled a list of things the Tibetans could do to lift their game.

Journalism is a training in walking into situations, quickly summing them up, dishing out free advice, and walking away, with no responsibility for putting ideas into practice. I must have had my mouth open, ready for a string of why don't you do this and do that. But I hesitated, and in that moment something beyond anger and judgment arose, the smallest seed of compassion and responsibility.

"There are things that could be done so the situation of the Tibetans is better known, and I will try to help." I knew as I said it that this was for life, the first step towards my own inner revolution, covering the inflamed mind with leather rather than a quest for global utopia.

Gabriel Lafitte is an adviser to the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Unexpected happiness

By Rachel Ryer

Hearing about lamas who meditated in the Himalayas – and watching a man carve a 60-foot Buddha out of a cottonwood tree near Toronto where my family was attending a spiritual retreat in the Sufi tradition – were my first impressions of Buddhism. I was ten years old. I wanted to become wise, and I started to brush my tongue like all yogis do.

As a new student at Amherst College, I was assigned a professor, Dr. Robert Thurman, to advise me on my studies. In that hectic first semester I never got around to picking up a ticket for a special psychology seminar with the Dalai Lama. When the time came for the event, I was too late. I realized my mistake and went to sit in the empty Johnson Chapel to glean any benefit I could.

Preparing for a class with Professor Thurman (studying



Gabriel Lafitte, Lama Zopa Rinpoche with Rachel Ryer and Fiona O'Shaughnessy.

Vimalakirti in translation), I struggled just to understand the words. Yet at the end of an intense afternoon of this, I noticed I was truly happy, which made no sense. Eventually, I applied for a semester abroad with Antioch International Buddhist Studies Program. I was going mostly out of an idea that I wanted to do something meaningful. I was studying anthropology. Things are different in India.

When our group arrived in Delhi to an orange fog filled with thick scents, we were approached by a monk in red robes. He was very concerned that he hadn't gotten our train tickets properly. The money intended for our comfortable seats had been used to purchase 100,000 fish in order to benefit the health of a little boy in Spain who was ill. I was impressed by the monk's frantic goodwill, and I volunteered to sit up for the night's travel. My first connection to FPMT had been made, unknown to me.

Two and a half months later, I chose to do my independent study project on overtone chanting in Kathmandu, Nepal. I hiked up the hill from Bodhanath to Kopan and talked with a monk who said, "Oh, you'll want to see Lama Lhundrup on Thursday. But if you like, Lama Zopa is teaching in the main tent in a few minutes". I attended a fabulous teaching in which I heard about emptiness. I was immensely happy.

Rachel Ryer attends Maitripa College, teaches sixth grade humanities, and raises her daughter in Portland, OR.

There is a choice!

By Fiona O'Shaughnessy

Walking through the archway of Trinity College Dublin on a frosty winter's evening on my way to a step aerobics class, a poster caught my eye: Learn to Meditate. I was a staunch critic of what I called the tree-huggers and crystal-worshippers, and that included those who engaged in om-ing and navel gazing, which is what I considered meditation to be.

I thought I should familiarize myself with their beliefs and practices in order to better argue against them. So, I

decided to attend the class after my workout.

The room was in the old quadrangle, centrally-heated, filled with plump, wine-colored couches and armchairs, one of which I grabbed as soon as I entered. There were two men seated in the front of the room on the floor; the younger one "meditating", the older one welcoming people. I inwardly sneered at the meditator, saying to myself:

"You think that's going to impress us!"

The class commenced. The effects of the heat, the comfortable armchair and my workout meant that I was asleep within five minutes. I slept through most of the class but by the end of it I'd decided to return the following week.

The teacher (not the "meditator" but the welcomer) impressed me with his voice and mellow way with people – not overly friendly, just accepting. I felt embarrassed that I'd fallen asleep but somehow I felt he didn't judge me.

One thing he said had struck me like a nail in the head: "Between stimulus and response, there's choice." The idea that I could choose my mental state was a radical one for me. I decided to try it out the following morning.

I used to cycle to work, which was a daily battle with buses and other cyclists sharing the bus lane. Weaving in and out between the buses, I'd get irritated by the exhaust fumes and others' "inconsiderate" road manners, and arrive at work in a state of nervous exhaustion. This morning I decided to watch my mind and choose a response.

That was January 2000. That year was one of those occasional stinkers where the challenges fall like rain. I grew to rely on my daily meditation practice to get me through the disappointments. I remain convinced that "between stimulus and response, there's choice" is one of the most important things I've learnt in this life. ☸

Fiona O'Shaughnessy is a Singapore-based Buddhist and training consultant.