

Lama Jampa Thaye

Peter Popham

Tibet was a unique storehouse of Buddhist wisdom in 1959 when China's Red Army invaded and ransacked its ancient culture. Thousands of monks and lamas were forced into exile, but Tibet's great loss was the world's gain as powerful teachers with rich spiritual pedigrees turned their attention to the West.

Several years later, a bookish young man from Bolton, Lancashire called David Stott found his own route into Buddhism via the writings of Jack Kerouac and America's Beat poets.

Trying out and discarding mind-expanding drugs and other false panaceas of the hippy years, in 1973 he had his first encounter with exiled Tibetan lamas, in particular a teacher who is nowadays based in Nepal, Karma Thinley Rinpoche.

Stott realised that he was on to something: his quest had reached its goal. "I felt, this is the complete fit," he says. "This is what Buddhism is for me. It was not just sitting but intellectual, too, and the warmth and sublime ordinariness of the Tibetan Lamas co-existed with an extraordinary depth of being. I recognised that Tibetan Buddhism was the form of Buddhism for me. Everything became aligned in that summer of '73. However bad the engine was, it was on the tracks at last."

In recent decades many westerners have spent a year or two dabbling in Tibetan Buddhism, attending retreats and receiving teachings. Some have spent shorter or longer periods in Tibetan monasteries, and a number of them returned to their countries and offered themselves as authentic Buddhist teachers.

David Stott's path was different. Like the lamas he admired, he set great store by learning: he gained a doctorate in comparative religion and taught the subject at Manchester University for more than 20 years. At the same time he applied himself to the spiritual path as the lamas he admired understood it: becoming fluent in classical Tibetan, and receiving teachings in the original language from Karma Thinley Rinpoche and a host of other high lamas. After 15 years of intensive study, he received a unique accolade from that first teacher: the right to call himself a lama, and to confer initiations into the most esoteric Tibetan spiritual practices – the Vajrayana.

Few other western teachers of Tibetan Buddhism have a comparable claim to authority.

As Lama Jampa Thaye, he is at age 63 the founder and head of numerous Buddhist centres in the UK and elsewhere, and travels constantly to deliver teachings to his hundreds of students. Despite a hectic schedule, he cleaves closely to the "warmth and sublime ordinariness" of the lamas to whom he owes his insight and knowledge.

He delivers his message in the plain, vivid language of his birth. "Consciousness arises and passes away from moment to moment like a stream," he says. "It's never the same at any one moment, but there is a continuity, and currents that arise in the stream move forward and

have an effect at a later moment...

“Our grasping ego is so strong that we keep moving from moment to moment unsatisfied, always looking for something to fix onto... We are born and pass away from moment to moment... The more we get this sense of this fluidity, of our nature as process, the more relaxed we become about passing from life to life.”

Often, he says, westerners are too impatient to learn what Buddhism has to teach. “Instead of being patient disciples of the great masters, we think we understand Buddhism. But we don’t. There is nothing racially superior about Asians compared to westerners, but that’s where Dharma – the Buddha’s teaching – comes from. I think our job at the moment is to be disciples, working with the great masters of the great traditions.”

For Lama Jampa, the kernel of the Buddha Dharma is simple: it is the key to both understanding and ending life’s sufferings.

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