

THE KALMYK CONTRIBUTION

The growth of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States could not have occurred the way it did without the contributions of a little-known band of stateless immigrants whose remarkable odyssey spans four centuries and half the globe. On November 23, 1952, a tiny community of refugees, ethnic Mongols from the Soviet Union known as the *Kalmyks* consecrated their first-ever “house of worship” in America in Freewood Acres, New Jersey.¹ This rite marked the westernmost expansion of Tibetan Buddhism in its thousand-year history. (The Kalmyks’ forebears had also brought Tibetan Buddhism to Europe from western Mongolia in the first half of the 17th Century.) They named their temple *Rashi Gempil Ling*, Tibetan for “Sanctuary for the Increase of Auspiciousness and Virtue.” Their communal act of piety represented an extraordinary reversal of the group’s fortunes from just a year earlier. In February, 1951, well into the sixth year of a mirthless confinement in the Displaced Persons Camps of Bavaria, the US Board of Immigration Appeals sustained the Kalmyks’ legal assertion that racially exclusionary provisions in US immigration law should not apply to them.² This novel and socially progressive decision removed the final, and most daunting, barrier to their immigration to the United States. By the end of that year, the first of nearly six hundred Kalmyks began to arrive and settle, for the most part, in urban Philadelphia and in the rural New Jersey hamlet of Freewood Acres.³

It was to the New Jersey community the Kalmyk monk and scholar Geshe Ngawang Wangyal arrived from India on February 3, 1955.⁴ Geshe-la left the Kalmyk steppes for Tibet in 1922 at the behest of his ecclesiastic mentor, the incomparable Buriat-Mongol Lama, Agvan Dorjjeff, a towering figure in the modern history of Inner Asia.⁵ Lama Dorjjeff’s able disciple would spend nearly 30 years in Tibet (also with some time in Beijing and Mongolia) before the Chinese Communist invasion in 1950 convinced him to relocate to Kalimpong, West Bengal. From this former hill station of the British Raj, Geshe-la first learned of the Kalmyks’ good fortune and was instantly

¹ *NY Times*, 11/24/52, p. 5.

² *In the Matter of R_____*, 4 I & N Dec. 275 (BIA, 1951), also, *NY Times*, 08/03/51, p. 8.

³ *NY Times*, 10/28/51, p. 65.

⁴ *NY Times*, 02/04/55, p. 23.

⁵ Snelling, John. *Buddhism in Russia*. Rockport, MA: Element, 1993.

motivated to join them in their new-found sanctuary. Few, if any, could have predicted the immediate and long-term impact he would have on Tibetan Buddhist studies over the next three decades.

Geshe Wangyal was unique among fellow clerics in the Kalmyk community because of his (self-taught) fluency in English and his Geshe degree in Buddhist philosophy from Gomang College at Drepung Monastery in Lhasa. These factors led to a teaching position at Columbia University shortly after his arrival that provided him a measure of economic and personal independence unheard of in Kalmyk clerical circles either in Russia or in the United States. It also brought him to the attention of a diverse group of personalities eager for exposure to an intellectual, philosophical and spiritual tradition hitherto unavailable anywhere outside its Himalayan origins.⁶ In response to this steady growth in interest, Geshe-la founded and incorporated the Lamaist Buddhist Monastery of America (LBMA) in 1958, the first institution dedicated to the academic study of Tibetan Buddhism in this country. He built a temple/schoolhouse in Freewood Acres with assistance from a legion of Kalmyk carpenters who had gravitated to that occupation in response to the burgeoning housing market in central New Jersey during the mid-1950s. This unassuming and typically suburban structure would become the wellspring for the future expansion of Tibetan Buddhism, aided by the dramatic and tragic events then taking place in Tibet.

In March of 1959, after a decade of Chinese Communist occupation, Tibetans staged several uprisings throughout their country that led to even greater Chinese repression and ultimately resulted in the flight of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to India seeking political asylum in 1959.⁷ The first political demonstration in America to denounce Chinese subjugation of Tibet and in support of the Dalai Lama took place in front of the United Nations on March 27, 1959. The demonstrators were the Kalmyks of New Jersey and Philadelphia.⁸

Geshe Wangyal, meanwhile, formulated his own plan of action. Within a year of the installation of a Tibetan government-in-exile in India, Geshe-la applied for and received US citizenship and an American passport. He immediately set off for

⁶ *NY Times*, 02/24/57, p. 204

⁷ *NY Times*, 04/03/59, p. 1

⁸ *NY Times*, 03/28/59, p. 3

consultations with the Dalai Lama on ways the Kalmyk-American community could assist the rapidly growing Tibetan refugee population in India. Geshe Wangyal's connection to His Holiness was greatly facilitated by his friendship with Tagster Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama's older brother, a frequent visitor to the Kalmyk communities where he was endeared for, among other things, his fluency in Mongolian, the root language of the Kalmyks.⁹ As a result of this initial collaboration with His Holiness, four lamas, representing two of the major lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, came to LBMA to learn English. (They were the first of many of monks and scholars who, over the years, would come to America under LBMA sponsorship and live, some temporarily and some, like Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Tharchin, permanently in the Kalmyk community.)

Quite fortuitously, shortly after the arrival of these lamas from India in 1962, LBMA received its first three American-born resident students, Robert Thurman (Harvard), Christopher George (Yale), and Jeffrey Hopkins (Harvard).¹⁰ In return for teaching English to the Tibetan-speaking lamas, these students were taught Tibetan and Buddhist philosophy. All members of this "first class" of LBMA's homegrown students were encouraged by Geshe Wangyal to pursue higher academic credentials once they had received their initial training at LBMA. All three completed their PhDs, and two of them, Thurman and Hopkins began their own university programs to promote Tibetan Buddhist studies in American academia. Many of their students have gone on to receive doctorate degrees and prestigious academic postings, creating a second, and the beginnings of a third, generation of Tibetan Buddhist scholars whose roots can be traced to Freewood Acres.

A Harvard graduate who, as an undergraduate, was a student of Robert Thurman (by then a graduate student at Harvard) and subsequently a longtime disciple of Geshe Wangyal would spark the quantum leap in interest that Tibetan Buddhism experienced in 1979 with the first visit of the Dalai Lama to America. Working behind the scenes as a member of President Carter's White House staff, Joel McCleary methodically engineered the demise of a two-decade old policy of official antipathy toward issuing His Holiness

⁹ *NY Times*, 05/05/55, p. 5

¹⁰ *NY Times*, 12/15/63, p. 71

the Dalai Lama a visitor's visa to the US.¹¹ The full impact of this seismic shift in US policy for Tibetan Buddhism and for the Tibetan people's non-violent struggle for meaningful autonomy cannot be underestimated and, unfortunately, is too vast to adequately recount here. Suffice it to say, this initial visit by His Holiness the Dalai Lama forever altered the face of Buddhism in America and jumpstarted the meteoric process by which Tibetan Buddhism's academic credibility, as well as general acceptance by large segments of the population at large, became firmly established.

Another Harvard graduate, Joshua Cutler, after many years of apprenticeship with Geshe Wangyal, succeeded his lama as the Director of LBMA (since renamed Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, TBLC), following Geshe-la's death in 1983 and continues, along with his wife Diana M. Cutler, to extend and enhance the work their teacher began more than 50 years ago.¹² Under the Cutlers' stewardship, TBLC-affiliated scholars collaborated over a twelve-year period to translate all three volumes of Tsong-kha-pa's *magnum opus*, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*.¹³ In recognition of their superlative accomplishment, His Holiness the Dalai Lama bestowed an unprecedented six-day teaching on this quintessential Tibetan Buddhist text in July 2008, an event jointly sponsored by TBLC and Lehigh University.

When Geshe Wangyal permanently moved LBMA to the northwest hills of New Jersey in the early 1970s, Tibetan Buddhist studies in Freewood Acres continued under Geshe Lobsang Tharchin, a graduate of the Mey College of Sera Monastery in Tibet and an alumnus of the program His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Geshe Wangyal started in 1962. By the time of Geshe Tharchin's arrival in 1972 the program's emphasis had shifted toward importing monk/scholars to teach Tibetan Buddhist philosophy to a wider, and increasingly knowledgeable, American audience. In the mid-1970s Geshe Tharchin left LBMA to become Rashi Gempil Ling's first Tibetan abbot. From that base he tirelessly promoted Tibetan Buddhist studies by teaching Tibetan, sponsoring translation projects, giving teachings, hosting renowned teachers and founding his own Dharma organization, the Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Center with branches in Freewood Acres

¹¹ See, pp 7-12, Gyatso, Tenzin. *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*. Ed. & Tr. J. Hopkins. Co-Ed. E. Napper. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2006.

¹² See, *History of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center*, <http://www.labsum.org/history.html>.

¹³ Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, Vols. I, II & III*. Editor-in-Ch. J. Cutler. Ed. G. Newland. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2000, 2002 and 2004.

and Washington, DC. His tenure as abbot of America's first Tibetan Buddhist worship center was briefly interrupted in 1991 when he was appointed abbot of his reconstituted monastic *alma mater* in southern India. Thereafter, he resumed his projects in this country until his death in 2004. His organization and his many students continue the work of their lama and spiritual friend from the grounds of Rashi Gempil Ling.

In the summer of 1991, just weeks from the final death throes of the Soviet Union, His Holiness the Dalai Lama made an historic visit to the Kalmyk Republic of Russia. As he stepped onto the airport tarmac in Elista, the capital, someone shouted, "Your Holiness, why are you here?" Without hesitation, the Dalai Lama responded, "I'm here because of my friend, Geshe Wangyal!"¹⁴ Geshe Wangyal's personal odyssey had come full circle. He left home as a young man to study Buddhist philosophy in Tibet with the hope of returning to share this acquired knowledge with his countrymen and women. Intervening Communist revolutions, World Wars (hot and Cold), and other violence thwarted those plans, and Geshe Wangyal ended up among his tribesmen, themselves war-tossed refugees who had miraculously stumbled into a land of leisure and opportunity that all but a few recognized and celebrated as an unrivaled paradise compared to their past domiciles. The culturally ingrained imperative to preserve their faith, developed over centuries of existence amid the openly hostile political, spiritual and social environment of southern Russia, now served them well enough to create the necessary and sufficient conditions for its propagation in relatively unfettered circumstances. The Kalmyks of America created a spiritually fertile seedbed that awaited skillful cultivation by a Kalmyk scholar with the training, talent, energy, and steely determination to bring forth its first blossoms of wisdom and compassion that would profoundly resonate not only throughout the new land but would, eventually, span the oceans and continents to take root, once again, in the place where they all started.

¹⁴ March 25, 2008. Oral reminiscence of David Urubshurow. Member, Dalai Lama's entourage, Kalmykia Visit, July 1991.