

JM A LAND OF DEMONS

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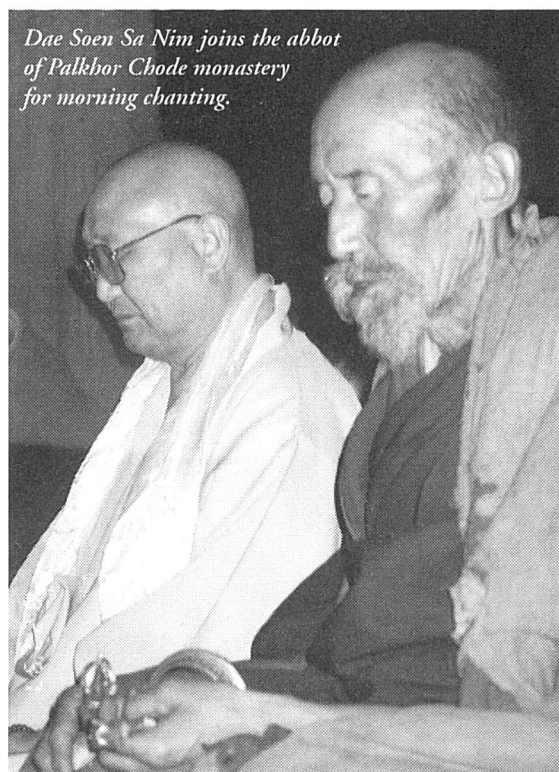
The day before we left Hwa Gye Sah for Tibet, Do Mun Sunim, JDPS, asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "Sir, why do we make this trip to Tibet?" Dae Soen Sa Nim immediately answered, "For you." "But sir, that's not necessary," replied Do Mun Sunim. Without hesitation Dae Soen Sa Nim responded, "Then you don't go!"

Everyone laughed loudly. And, on the bus early the next morning, Do Mun Sunim joined monks, nuns and lay people from Hong Kong, Hungary, Korea, Norway and the United States for the journey to the ancient Buddhist land of Tibet.

Our flight from the Chinese city of Chengdu to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, gave new meaning to the traditional Zen phrase "mountains and waters without end." In eastern Tibet, our beautiful planet folds deeply into canyons and each canyon feeds one of the great Asian rivers—the Salween, Mekong and Yangtse. Above the canyons, diamond peaks capture warm monsoon rains, locking the moisture away in ice. For two hours we flew beyond ridge, valley and peak and over the steep and increasingly barren uplands of Kham.

Central Tibet, a treeless plateau hollowed by broad river valleys, rises more than two miles above sea level. We landed in one of these valleys, forty miles from Lhasa, and gasped as we saw the arid, rounded hills rolling and surging four thousand feet above us into the sun.

We gasped because lungs that work perfectly at sea level don't work quite as well at 12,000 feet. Within hours, many in our group were reeling from altitude sickness—hurting heads, tumbling tummies.



Dae Soen Sa Nim joins the abbot of Palkebor Chode monastery for morning chanting.

But the altitude didn't prevent us from responding with joy to traditional Tibetan culture as it unfolded just a few miles beyond the airport. Green barley fields. Buddhas painted on boulders and cliffs. Small villages with ten, maybe fifteen buildings, each house white-washed with black-outlined windows.

At the corners of every house, bundles of sticks held aloft prayer flags that fluttered vigorously in the stiff wind. Over and over mantras permeated the heavens. *Om mani padme hum.*

Over and over, walking among traditional people, we repeatedly heard this mantra as practice merged with daily life.

Om mani padme hum.

Om mani padme hum.

Om mani padme hum.

We also practiced. Awakening early after the first night in Tibet, I cleared a space in the hotel room for bowing. I began slowly, mindful of the high altitude. After nine faltering, wheezing bows, I decided that perhaps it was time for sitting meditation. Later Ji Soen Sunim told me that she managed a remarkable twenty-seven bows that morning.

Our first stop in Lhasa was the Jokhang temple, the spiritual heart of Tibet and the center of Tibetan Buddhism. Established in the 7th century, this ancient but recently restored sanctuary forms the hub of old Lhasa. Market stalls selling tourist and household items now sur-

round the temple but in the old days the shrine, with its venerated statue of Jowo Shakyamuni, was the focal point of a sacred precinct devoted to practice.

Generations of pilgrims have performed countless prostrations in the front courtyard of the Jokhang and we saw deep grooves worn into the stone paving by this great effort. Today, the tradition continues in the evening after the market has closed. Several of us went to the Jokhang one night and saw the courtyard packed with bowing people. Many wore knee pads and used a long narrow mat to cushion their bodies. Plastic or cardboard skids were strapped onto their hands. They went down onto their knees and slid their hands out until they were completely prostrate on the ground. Then they would return to standing and repeat. And, of course, each person quietly chanted “Om mani padme hum.”

That same evening we joined in clockwise circumambulation of the Jokhang. Traditionally, there were three circumambulation routes around the temple. All were once closed but now the innermost ring is open for practice and we walked slowly, shoulder to shoulder, with thousands of practicing people. We joined with Tibetans taking turns at a giant prayer wheel—8 feet in diameter—in a small side temple, walking it around, around, around. A solitary monk kept a steady drum rhythm and a small bell pealed with every revolution of the big wheel.

Sometimes the most revealing experiences occurred away from the main tour group. One day, several of us visited an extensive monastery and met a young English-speaking monk. He invited us to his bedroom with its small window, low pallet, stack of silk-wrapped texts and photographs of the Dalai Lama. He then took us through a darkened room to his sitting area, a simple room with a bench along one side. Because this large monastery now houses only a tiny fraction of the monks who once lived there, this young monk has the “luxury” of two rooms.

Our friend courteously offered refreshments and we had the pleasure of traditional yak butter tea. Opening a cabinet, he withdrew a large block of butter wrapped in red plastic, cut off an inch-thick slab and dropped the piece into an electric blender. He then added equal parts of brewed black tea and boiling water. *Whhhrrrrrrr*. We drank and then drank a second cup and talked about practice.

Zen was unknown to him—he trained in Tibetan “debate” practice, perhaps a kind of dharma combat. I offered him a copy of *The Whole World is a Single Flower* and slowly read number 295, “Bell Sound and Seven-Fold Robe”. Although schooled in a very different Buddhist tradition, his sincere “don’t know” puzzlement cut off all history and form. Deep smile.

To culminate the visit, our host joined us in singing “Happy Birthday” to Sonya, a member of Chogye International Zen Center, who was celebrating her birthday in Tibet.

The Dalai Lama images we saw in this young monk’s room were virtually the only photographs of Tibet’s spiritual leader we encountered on the entire trip. But at another monastery, when a few of us were again by ourselves, we entered a very large Buddha hall. The monk who lived in and maintained the hall

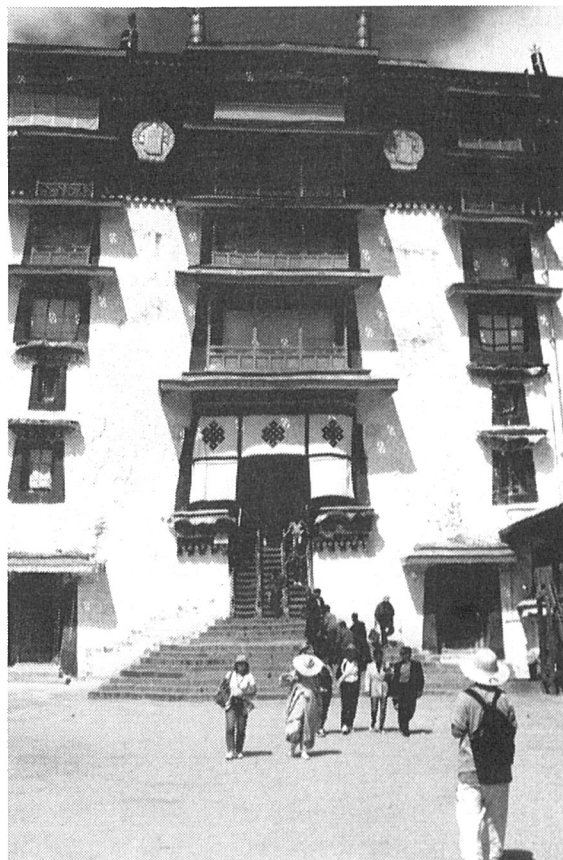
spoke a few words of English and painstakingly asked if any of us had met the Dalai Lama. Several of us had seen him in America and this made the monk very, very happy. He then guided us to a large column wrapped in heavy silk brocade and, slipping his hand deep into a seam of the fabric, pulled out a beautiful color photograph of His Holiness.

Leaving Lhasa, we traveled south for eight hours on the graveled Friendship Highway to Gyantse, the mid-point on the way to India. Our route took us over two 16,000 foot passes adorned with prayer flags, alongside Yamdrok Tso, a remarkably blue lake situated at 15,000 feet, and past several glacier-clad peaks.

Gyantse remains a predominately Tibetan town where horse-drawn carts seem to outnumber motorized vehicles. Young children walk the streets selling yak dung for cooking and heating fuel; older people walk along counting mantras with strands of 108 prayer beads. In Gyantse, we visited Palkhor Chode monastery, one of the most important surviving centers of Tibetan Buddhist art.

As he always did when visiting a monastery or temple, Dae Soen Sa Nim presented books and gifts to the abbot at Palkhor Chode. The abbot draped a *khata*, the traditional long white offering scarf, around each of our necks and

The inner courtyard of the Potala, the Dalai Lama’s Winter palace in Lhasa.





then invited us to join the monks in their mid-morning chanting. Dae Soen Sa Nim sat next to the abbot in meditation while our monks, nuns and lay people joined the Tibetan monks on their low cushioned benches. The monks began fast chanting as the abbot rang a hand bell and beat out crescendos with a hand drum. Various monks played cymbals, bells, and larger drums. We practiced for nearly 30 minutes and, when it was time to go, we slipped out as the ancient chants continued.

Older monks, like the abbot of Palkhor Chode, sustain the Buddhist traditions of Tibet. Once a young monk took a few of us to meet his teacher, a 75 year-old lama who ordained at age 4. This lama today trains a young new generation of monks in traditional Buddhist texts and practices. Just as the Dalai Lama and other teachers transmit Buddhism to people throughout the world, the older lamas nourish the traditional ways within Tibet.

Tibet remains a traditional culture profoundly dedicated to Buddhism. On the streets of Lhasa, Gyantse and Shigatse, young and old Tibetans walk along spinning hand-held prayer wheels, repeating their mantras. Outside monasteries, pilgrims spin long rows of large prayer wheels. On mountain passes, travelers add stones to huge rock cairns. Once, traveling through a vast and empty valley far from any settlement, I saw a single person circumambulating a *chorten*, or traditional stupa, placed high up a barren mountain slope.

The fruits of these efforts manifest throughout the land. Imagine a country where nearly the entire population has practiced for over 1,000 years. Imagine.

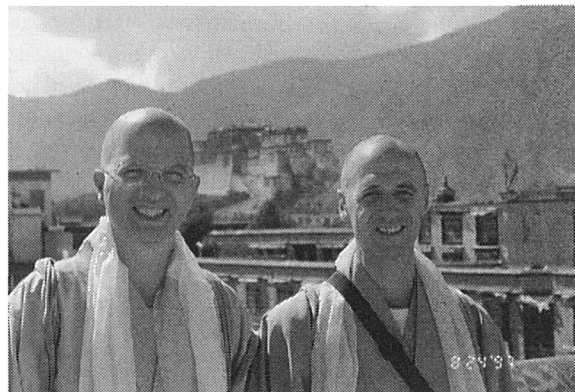
- Ready smiles.
- Clear eyes.
- Open faces.
- Quick laughter.
- Easy strides.

This is Buddhism in Tibet, a place where hard conditions have nurtured hard training.

Dae Soen Sa Nim told us that many demons live in the high mountains of Tibet, so the Tibetan people have learned the necessity of constant practice. I asked him if high mountains were the particular abode of demons. He replied, "High mountains have many demons. Also, lowlands have many demons. Don't make demons, OK?"

Our teacher continued, "Tibetan people only believe in their tradition, in Tibetan Buddhism, in their way."

In the most difficult conditions imaginable, Tibetans have kept their direction alive. *Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum.*



Do Mun Sunim, JDPS (right), and Mu Shim Sunim, JDPS, on the roof of Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa. The Potala sits on the distant hill.

We left Tibet early one dark morning. After a brief pause at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Lhasa, our buses headed south down the long valley road. In the distance, the dawning sky was heavy with rain and soon a steady drizzle began to fall. We drove for over an hour. Then, as we turned into the valley leading to the airport, a single rainbow appeared. Suddenly a multitude of rainbows began arching across the sky, extraordinary single and double rainbows, glimmering with iridescence, embracing the land in every direction.

The Tibetan people, sheltered by rainbows, continue to follow their correct direction, just as they have for over 1,000 years. *Om mani padme hum.*

Mani, the jewel.

Padme, the lotus.

Where can we find this precious lotus?

Om!

What kind of jewel is this?

Hum!

And what kind of practice can help the Tibetan people?