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BY KATHLEEN HENDRIX

Times Staff Writer

The country was full of young people like Feather Meston in the late 1960s—affluent, educated, liberal, disillusioned.

Feather Meston grew up in Los Angeles where her father, John Meston, was a writer and the creator of Gunsmoke. She graduated from Occidental in 1966, did graduate work at USC, was a child welfare worker for the county for two years and then, increasingly dissatisfied with everything around her, dropped out.

Instead of work there were hallucinogens, love-ins, rock concerts, drifting. Her life as a dropout fit the national syndrome. She married an artist, Lawrence Greenberg; they went from commune to commune in New Mexico. Invariably disappointed, they decided to give Europe a try.

She gave birth to a son, Daja, in Geneva, and then they hit Spain. She had stopped using drugs and had calmed down a lot, but she was still alienated. Then came the inevitable day for so many in that world when west meets east.

She read a book, "Be Here Now" by Ram Dass, the former Richard Alpert, which described how the author found a spiritual master, or guru, in India. Nothing had ever affected her as much. Her real search had begun.

A lot of dropouts wound up on the roads of the Middle East at the turn of the decade. Having chucked Western culture, they were on their way to India, after anything from good hash to truth.

Christianity had failed some of them so utterly they sloughed it off with contempt. Others, like Feather Meston, had grown up in an atmosphere so arreligious that it had never occurred to them to look to Western religion in the first place.

For most it turned out to be just another trip, literally and figuratively. They played at being Asian for a while, got into the culture, the clothes, the religions and then got turned off by the same. The poverty, severity and discipline were too much. They split.

Not many ended up with a name like Thubten Angmo.

Now 30, the former Feather Meston is Thubten Angmo, an ordained Buddhist nun. (Her name: Thubten—the

teaching of the Lord Buddha; Ang—the power of the Buddha, mo—its female aspect.) After studying Buddhism for a year in Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama and a large community of Tibetans reside, Feather Meston and her husband decided to live separately.

Because of visa problems they moved to Nepal, where she studied meditation in a monastery outside Katmandu headed by two English-speaking Tibetan lamas. There she and 16 other Westerners were ordained "getsul," Buddhist monks and nuns, and took 36 vows for life. (Among these, celibacy, abstinence from killing any sentient being, from lying and stealing.)

Her husband returned to the States, and Thubten Angmo placed her son with a Tibetan family living near the monastery and began her life as a nun.

She and the other Westerners formed a community outside of Katmandu which they call the International Ma-

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hayana Institute of Western Buddhist Monks and Nuns. They live at the monastery and center their life around a 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. day.

They pray and meditate for three hours in the morning, breaking midway for a silent breakfast of cereal and buttered tea. The rest of the day is spent doing chores and this monastery's main work, transcribing and publishing the oral Tibetan Buddhist teachings of the lamas. They eat again at midday and at night take buttered tea. In the evenings they come together to meditate and discuss and debate the psychological and philosophical doctrines of the Buddha.

After one and a half years of this existence, Thubten Angmo is back in Los Angeles on a visit, her first in five years. She's seeing her family, lecturing on Buddhism and helping set up a two-week meditation course that the lamas from her monastery, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, will give at Lake Arrowhead in July.

In addition she's trying to raise funds for a school her monastery's lamas have started for young Sherpa boys, the Everest Center for Buddhist Studies. The boys' parents are peasants who have given them over to the monastery's care to become monks. At present there is a

waiting list, since the facilities are crowded. Eventually, Thubten Angmo's 5-year-old son, now called Thubten Ang Chuk, will go there.

Thubten Angmo told her story the other day in the guest house of a friend in Beverly Hills, a one-room, glass-walled place deep in a garden behind a swimming pool. In that unlikely setting she has put a mattress on the floor and made an altar over the fireplace mantle. A candle burns before a Buddha figure; there are small bowls of water-offerings, some photographs from the monastery and several reproductions of tonkas, religious paintings. In addition there's a desk with a telephone on it.

She explained that she has a lot of work to do setting up the meditation course and needed a place where she could both use the phone a lot and have quiet for meditation. She moved out of the Beverly Hills house of her grandmother, Bernadine Fritz, because "I was driving her crazy," she laughed.

There is something refreshing about the contradictions apparent in Thubten Angmo. Seriousness and serenity do not yet seem to be the most natural states for her—her very pale, lightly freckled face, open and unaffected, seems to belong to a good kid dressed up in stately robes and wearing a crew cut, "no more than two fingers' width."

Everything about her spells spontaneity, yet she constantly checks it. Whether answering a question or volunteering something, she speaks laboriously—pausing for a long moment, shutting her eyes tightly, screwing up her face and waiting, once in a while her lips forming a word.

When she does speak, it sounds rehearsed, spoken at a great remove, in complete sentences which she edits, erases and rearranges while she talks. And then, every once in a while, Feather Meston slips a few words in. Her deliberate speech is not because she doesn't talk about her life anymore, not is it that she feels put on the spot as a spokeswoman for Buddhism. Oh, no. She smiles with amused delight, "I do it all the time."

And then the careful reply. "Often if we speak too hastily, without being thoughtful, we'll say something just from our emotion or ignorance. I would rather just answer with my wisdom. I want to be careful to say what's true and what won't hurt anybody. I've taken a vow of truth."

Which is why she's so careful in speaking of her husband. She indicated vaguely that he has had misunderstandings with his parents. About their decision to separate, she started to explain, stopped, said, "Oh, dear, how am I going to put this? You can say that, 'Realizing through our meditations that it would be more beneficial to our spiritual growth to live separately . . .'" They are not divorced.

Thubten Angmo could have had her son live with her at the monastery, but she chose not to. "In a way I offered my son to the Buddha," she began her recitation of her own thoughts, "which means that I would do whatever would be most beneficial to his spiritual development."

A long pause. "And at this time I think that a family with other children, people who are more spiritually developed than myself, would be the best environment for him. I'm still a child myself, really, and the situation allows him to be raised happily and wisely, and allows myself the freedom to do my spiritual work."

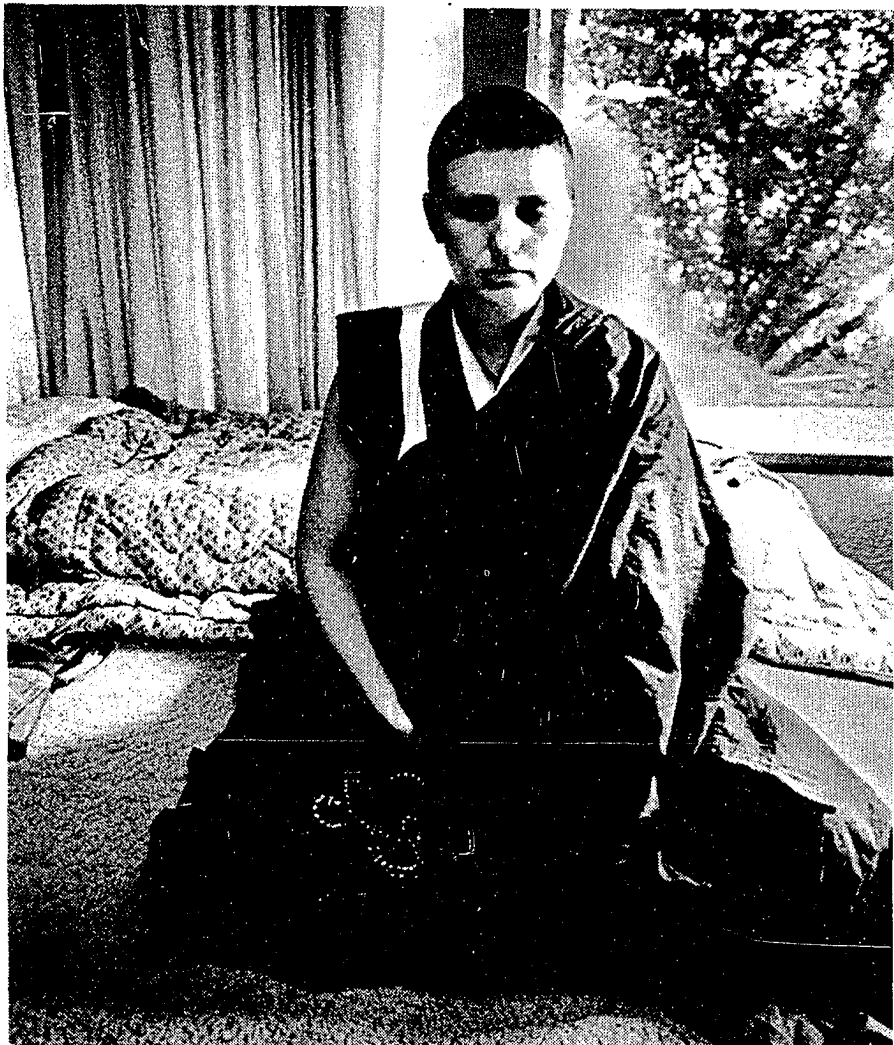
And then she blurted out, "But I'm still his mummy and he's my son. It's a bond you can't deny. I visit him, yes. We've kind of adopted each other. I don't think he does miss me."

It's hard to imagine that Thubten Angmo could become much more serious about the life she has chosen, although, as she says, she has a lot of growing to do. It has meant everything to her.

"Before I was—I would really call it living in darkness and ignorance—having much confusion in my life, little understanding of why I had so many problems and how to stop them. I also didn't feel very worthwhile and didn't know why I was living.

"Through the teachings I've realized I was born a human being in order to purify my mind of greed, anger and ignorance and the other 84,000 delusions of the mind. Yes, 84,000. The Lord Buddha counted them. He has that kind of mind . . ."

She admitted she was still very much an individual, but trying to lose her self-importance. "As an individual I'm struggling hard. I have a big ego. The ego can take all those delusions into it, but the ego is impermanent, just as the delusions are . . . I'm trying to feel myself as totally unimportant—just working for others' happiness, for in doing so you become happy."



A SILENT MOMENT—Thubten Angmo, the former leather Meston of Los Angeles, takes time out to meditate during her visit from Nepal where she lives as a Buddhist nun. See story on Page 9.
Times photo by Michael Mally