

# Los Angeles Times

November 5, 1987 - The Los Angeles Times - Valley Edition

## Teen-Age Buddhist Monk Comes to Mother's Homeland

Author: MIKE WYMA

Date: Nov 5, 1987

Start Page: 22 Section: View; 5; NO Desk Text Word Count: 1393

Feather Meston was not the only San Fernando Valley schoolchild of the 1950s to grow into a flower child of the 1960s and, smitten with Eastern religion, convert to Buddhism. And like her, others traveled to the East in search of a spiritual master.

But Meston is one of the few who stuck with it to such an extent that, a decade and a half later, she remains a Buddhist nun.

So complete was her immersion into Buddhism that in 1973 she left her 3-year-old son with a Buddhist family in Nepal so she could continue her religious studies, and he could be raised by people more spiritually advanced than herself.

When the boy was 6, she moved him to a Buddhist monastery in Nepal's Katmandu Valley, at the foot of Mt. Everest, where he spent the next nine years. Meston-or Wangmo, as she prefers to be called-visited her son over the years, at times staying in a Buddhist center not far from the monastery.

'Wanted to Be Cute'

The boy is called Daja Greeneye.

"This was the flower time, and Lawrence and I just wanted to be cute," Wangmo, 42, says of the name she and her then-husband gave their son.

Daja and Wangmo were reunited for a month recently in Whittier, where he has come to attend an American high school. She was on a stopover between a Buddhist center in London and one in Hong Kong.

Asked about her son's upbringing, Wangmo explained that it was begun out of choice, not necessity. There had been enough money and family in America for the boy to be raised here. Wangmo's father, John Meston, created the "Gunsmoke" radio and television shows. Her grandmother, Bernadine Fritz, was a wealthy Beverly Hills matron.

"Like any mother, I wanted the best for my child," Wangmo said. "What I didn't want is for him to have the influence and experiences that I had growing up in the Valley and Hollywood-in America. I had never learned anything about morality, and I knew that American society was based on getting ahead for one's self."

Daja looks like a typical American teen-ager, but speaks with an accent that is hard to define. His native language is Tibetan. His second language is Nepalese. He also knows English, Hindi and Italian.

He said he decided a year ago to leave the monastery and learn about the West. Daja renounced his vows as a monk, meaning he needn't pray as often and may date girls, but he said his faith in his religion remains firm.

"My main commitment, also my wish, is to help people," he said. "The way to do that is to get an education and maybe become a teacher."

Daja spent a year at a Buddhist center in Italy before coming to Southern California in August. He attends La Habra High School and lives with an American family that has studied Buddhism. His hosts are also his legal guardians.

"I felt I needed Western education, and I also wanted to see the West," Daja said of his decision to come. "I was always wondering what it is like here."

And what is life like at an American high school for your average ex-monk from Nepal? The adjustment has not been easy. Nearly all the subjects in school are new and difficult.

"In the monastery, he basically learned only three subjects-philosophy, religion and languages," said Bob Shoup, Daja's high school counselor. "That's been the extent of his formal education. One of his problems has been understanding basic mathematics. Multiplication and division were new concepts to him."

Shoup said, however, that the boy perseveres.

"He is not easily discouraged. He rolls with problems. He accepts them and goes on. He doesn't seem to be worried, and he doesn't seem to have a temper."

Daja said making friends has been slow.

In Nepal, "the children have much more respect for their teachers and older people and to their parents," he said. "I have a few friends who are quiet and humble, but there are not many."

Kung Fu Lacking

Fellow students are mostly uninterested in his background, he said.

"They think the monastery is some kind of kung fu place, so they ask me, 'Do you know any kung fu?' I say I don't, and that's all they ask."

He has yet to be invited to the home of a schoolmate.

Wangmo said her longest periods of separation from her son have been for a year, a year and a half and, once, for three years.

"I really did leave him too long that time," she said, while insisting that Buddhism has taught Daja the patience and independence that overcome loneliness. Daja said there were times he missed his mother, but he was seldom miserable.

During one of the periods of separation, Wangmo was locked by her lama, or teacher, inside a "retreat house" in India, where she spoke to no one for more than a year. She recited mantras, studied and performed breathing exercises.

"I was the happiest I've ever been," she said. "There's nothing to bother you. If you're a Buddhist or a practicing spiritual person, it just gives you the space and time for study and meditation. For the Buddhist, the most interesting exploration is of the mind."

What she has learned, Wangmo said, is to have a mind that stays at peace and does not seek diversion or gratification.

Jillion Million Things

"It has been compared to a monkey jumping from tree to tree, the way the mind goes from wanting one thing to another to another," she said. "I learned how to see through the illusion that exterior sense pleasures would deeply satisfy me. I learned that whether you have a jillion million drugs or a jillion million conversations or a jillion million sexual experiences, you are not going to be deeply satisfied.

"Buddhism has a great potential to help the modern world and all the tensions and fears that go with it," she continued. "You can learn how to stop anger, attachment, jealousy; how to have a peaceful mind."

Teaching at Buddhist centers established around the world by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition has become part of her mission. There are two such centers in the U. S., the Vajra Pani Institute near Santa Cruz and a center in Vermont.

Mahayana Buddhism is the type practiced by the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since the takeover of Tibet by China in 1959. The Buddhism practiced in China and Japan is called Theravada.

Wangmo said one of her greatest pleasures was taking part in a pilgrimage of monks and nuns to Tibet that the communist Chinese permitted in the early 1980s.

"We visited places where monks had meditated in one cave for 20 or 30 years," she said.

Wangmo graduated from Occidental College in 1966, attended a year of graduate school at USC and spent two years as a child welfare worker in the county Department of Social Services.

'Be Here Now'

She said she dropped out of society and used drugs heavily in the late 1960s and early '70s, traveling with her husband to a commune in New Mexico, then to Europe. Daja was born in Switzerland. It was "Be Here Now," a book by Ram Dass, the former Richard Alpert, that led her to the East and Buddhism. The couple separated permanently in India.

Daja said he had no contact with his father until last month, when he learned his father was living in Los Angeles and visited him. His father was in a "sad" condition, Daja said, preferring not to elaborate.

After a monthlong stay, Daja's mother left last week for Hong Kong. She said she is looking forward to a subsequent trip to Nepal, where she will get further instructions on her direction in life from her lama.

Daja, who doubts he ever will return to live at the monastery, said he nevertheless misses its leader, Lama Lhundup.

"Sometimes I wish I could be with my teacher," the teen-ager said.

But he's stuck learning math, science and history.

"I go daily in life," Daja said. "It's difficult to plan for the future."

**[Illustration]**

PHOTO: Wangmo with here son, Daja Greeneye, who was raised in a Buddhist monastery in Nepal. / JOE KENNEDY / Los Angeles Times