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From vision to Buddhism, monk finds a home at MIT
By Michael Kunzelman, Associated Press Writer



Buddhist Chaplain at Massachusetts Institute of Technology Tenzin Priyadarshi of Vaishali, India, checks his laptop in his dorm room at MIT in Cambridge, Mass. Tenzin, who grew up in an upper-class Hindu family of intellectuals and bureaucrats, slipped away from his boarding school one morning with the equivalent of \$5 in his pocket. He left a note for his parents that he was embarking on a spiritual quest. (AP Photo/Chitose Suzuki)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. --Tenzin Priyadarshi's path to becoming a Buddhist monk began when he was just 10 and he ran away from home in pursuit of the recurring "vision" he saw in his dreams of a monastery and an old man.

Tenzin, who grew up in an upper-class Hindu family of intellectuals and bureaucrats, slipped away from his boarding school one morning with the equivalent of \$5 in his pocket. He left a note for his parents that he was embarking on a "spiritual quest."

After a 24-hour train ride, he found himself at the foot of a mountain in Rajgir, India. It was at the top of that mountain, he said, where he found the very same monestary he saw in his dreams. And he recognized the face of one of the monks who greeted him as the same man he saw in his vision.

"This is what in Buddhist terms we call 'karma,'" he said, readily admitting that his story sounds too fantastic to be true.

"I have no reason to fabricate it," he added.

The monks took him in, not realizing he was a runaway child.

"Even at that age, I looked like a 35-year-old guy," recalled the 26-year-old, whose large forearms pour out of his monastic robes.

He probably never envisioned the pursuit of Buddhism would lead him to the United States, on the grounds of one of the nation's elite universities -- the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is the school's first Buddhist chaplain.

Tenzin's parents, who knew about his fascination with Buddhism, tracked him down eight days later. Although they disapproved of his interest in Buddhism,

they agreed to let him split his time between a traditional school and the monastery.

Tenzin never had second thoughts about becoming a monk.

In 1992, he left India to study Buddhism in Nepal and Japan before he enrolled at Syracuse in 1996 to study physics.

"I live to learn," said Tenzin, who speaks five languages. "I live to study new things."

He went from being ordained by the Dalai Lama to earning a physics degree, so it makes sense that Tenzin has found a home at MIT, where the scientists who surround him are on a similar path: unlocking the mysteries of the human mind.

"The methods are different, but the goal is the same," he said. "They're both looking at the nature of reality, whether it's physical or metaphysical."

Tenzin, whose name in Tibetan means "holder of dharma," also believed his religion's teachings and practices, including meditation, could help students cope with the pressures of attending one of the world's most prestigious universities.

"It is visibly the most stressed-out campus in the world," he said. "I believed I could help ease the suffering in students."

Many colleges and universities have added Buddhist monks to their roster of chaplains as the religion has grown in the United States. MIT didn't have one until Tenzin arrived in 2002, while he was completing his graduate work at Harvard

Divinity School.

Robert Randolph, senior associate dean for student life at MIT and a Protestant minister, recruited Tenzin after hearing about him from colleagues at Harvard.

"It has paid off wonderfully," Randolph said. "We wanted to have a religious presence on campus to serve our Buddhist students, but he also has broadened the experience of students who wouldn't know how to spell 'Buddhism.'"

Tenzin not only teaches and counsels students, but he also lives in a campus residence hall, in a studio equipped with a meditation room and a laptop with a high-speed Internet connection.

He started with only three students, who gathered in his room for meditation sessions and a weekly class on basic Buddhist philosophy. His class has since grown to 30 to 40 students, and he has added an open forum on contemporary ethical issues called "Dharma and Chai." Next semester, he plans to start teaching a new course, "Practice of Contemplation."

Tenzin said his students know he isn't there to convert them.

"It's a very non-threatening tradition, and it doesn't require any conversion," he said. "Religious conversion is something that has to be done at a deeper level and takes years of time."

Tenzin isn't hard to pick out of a crowd at MIT, given his habit of roller-blading across campus with his monastic robes flapping in the wind. But what has most impressed his students and colleagues is his encyclopedic command of a diverse range of subjects.

John Essigmann, a professor of chemistry and engineering at MIT, said he saw Tenzin in the dining hall discussing gravitational lensing with a renowned physics professor. The next night, he and a neurophysician were debating theories about meditation's effects on the brain.

"All in a seamless conversation, as natural as could be," Essigmann said.

Tenzin said his spiritual adviser is the 14th Dalai Lama, who is no stranger to MIT himself. The exiled monarch of Tibet visited the campus in 2003 to participate in a conference called "Investigating the Mind: Exchanges Between Buddhism and the Biobehavioral Sciences on How the Mind Works."

B. Alan Wallace, a Buddhist scholar who spoke at that conference, said science and Buddhism is a "match waiting to be made," although there are skeptics on both sides.

"The very conservative elements on both sides will in all likelihood continue to ignore each other for the foreseeable future," he said.

Tenzin said Buddhists have been studying and cultivating the mind for 2,500 years, but he wants to explore ways that science can answer questions that religion cannot.

"Buddhism goes very well with MIT," he said. "We both want people to have good reasons for their beliefs."

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