

## Tibet Comes to Wales

by

Michael Woodward

[Michael Woodward lived in India fifteen years ago and whilst there visited Darjeeling. He kept a journal at the time. After reading the Dalai Lama's book *The Good Heart*, he recently visited a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Wales, and found the three experiences coming together.]

Off the beaten track covers it. Lam Rim Buddhist Centre lies at the northern end of a straggly village near Raglan in Monmouthshire, reached after miles of twists and turns in a single track road sunk between hedgerows.

It is remote, but it stands fittingly on a hill at a junction of lanes. The day I visit it is snowing lightly. Pentwyn Manor is bigger than I expected, a sprawling mock-tudor house with substantial grounds and outbuildings, including two ageing caravans. It all looks well maintained, with signs of Buddhist care and attention. There are panoramic views towards the Black Mountains.

Eaves and window frames are decked out in the maroon, yellow and white livery of Tibetan Buddhism which I remember from my last encounter, in Darjeeling in 1982. It was cold then too, and there were mountains . . .

9th January 1982

*We were late into Newjaipalguri, but I got a bus straight away for Darjeeling. It was an incredible ride. I just about had a seat under me, with my legs in the aisle, and I had to hang on like anything going around the corners. We went through Siliguri and then started climbing, climbing: always snaking our way upwards, with the narrow gauge steam railway track beside us. We stopped in Kurseong which gave my numb buttocks some relief and then on to Darjeeling. As we wound our way towards Ghoom we had our first glimpse of the Himalayas. It had been fairly breath-taking going up the sides of the tea-valleys, with their stark ridges and sheer drops, but seeing the Himalayan peaks was*

*a dream. They seemed to appear from nowhere, floating on the air high above the horizon, disembodied, like a figment of one's imagination. I was ready for them to dissolve into clouds or icing sugar at any moment but they just hung there, halfway up the sky, suspended between the blue haze above them and the blue haze beneath them. I can see them now from my window, rough-hewn white peaks streaked with granite, and it's still hard to believe they are there, only 100 miles away, so full of challenge and mystery.*

*Getting out of the bus at Darjeeling it was cold but not very - like a fresh, crisp day in November or February in England. I don't know why, but that feeling of a bite in the air made me suddenly homesick. I thought of scarves and snowballs and breath turning to smoke in the winter air, as mine did here.*

Despite the cold, the heavy outer door is slightly open. I ring the bell and shuffle inside, awaiting movement behind the frosted glass of the inner door. There are some pairs of shoes on the floor, and a sign saying PLEASE REMOVE YOUR SHOES.

From the inner door appears a crop-haired, pale and cold looking young man, wearing fingerless gloves and several layers. I give my name.

"I phoned this morning and spoke to Margaret. She said she would show me round."

"She's on the phone upstairs. Please come in."

Inside is a large entrance hall, with a wooden staircase, and rooms and corridors leading elsewhere. Importantly, there is also a roaring fire, with comfortable chairs and a table nearby.

I get the impression that casual visitors are a rarity. There are leaflets about the Centre on the table and, against the wall, a bookcase of Buddhist texts, apparently for sale.

David sits down with me, and I explain that I visited a Buddhist monastery in 1982 when I lived in India. We have India in common; his wariness evaporates. He has been to Dharamsala, and is not long back from Tibet

itself, which he visited with Lam Rim's Geshe, or teacher – who is currently on retreat. Now that is an achievement. I long to hear about it. He says that there is great suffering there; it is well known that the Tibetan culture is being systematically destroyed. But he says it is the Chinese immigrants in Tibet, those with the power and wealth, who are unhappy. We begin to share experiences...

9th January 1982

*The hill-people, as the bewildering mixture of races is collectively called, are very attractive and have a reputation for a happy go lucky attitude to life. Few of them become very rich, as they take no thought for tomorrow, preferring to enjoy what they have today to the full. The people are, I suppose, Nepali based, but there are many, many other strains creating a rich mixture of dress and culture, and men and women of every conceivable size and shape, of body and face. The mountain air must have something to do with it: the atmosphere is pure and light, and one has a strong sense of fellow-feeling amongst the people. They are noted for their willingness to help each other out in bad times, and always stop to assist with a breakdown or similar problem. There is something captivating, very open and generous in their faces. I find this corner of India and the culture of the hill-people deeply absorbing, and I would like to have longer up here. It would be brilliant to go to Bhutan, or to get right up up into the Himalayas, and see Tibet. Too bad; it was hard enough work getting a permit for Darjeeling.*

Margaret joins us, and I introduce myself again. I mention Elizabeth West at the Christian Meditation centre as my contact, and her eyes light up. They shared in the 1994 John Main Seminar in London, a series of meditations and discourses on passages from the Gospels led by the Dalai Lama. It is my reading of the book *The Good Heart*, describing that clearly wonderful, and potentially seminal event, that has prompted me to track down this Buddhist centre on my doorstep, which I knew existed but have never located or visited during my ten years living in the area. I am offered tea.

"Is it Tibetan butter tea?" I ask, remembering that extraordinarily pungent mug of almost clear broth that I grimaced at, but finally enjoyed. They laugh. "No, just tea. Do you take sugar?"

14th January, 1982

*I went for a long walk today, right through town and out the other side towards Ghoom. I was vaguely making for the Buddhist monastery there, but in the village I had the good fortune to see a Buddhist monk a little ahead of me. He was talking to two European girls. From every angle it seemed too good an opportunity to miss, so I dashed up to say hello. The monk (Chadub) was full of smiles, his English liberally spiced with 'sure,' 'O good,' and 'O nice.' He offered to show me where he lived. The two girls turned out to be Germans, and sponsors of the school Chadub's monastery runs for destitute boys.*

*Chadub's monastery was on the way into Darjeeling on the other road, so we walked on, closing the circle I had begun. It was very cold and bleak, with waves of damp mist moving restlessly up and down the hills, but no rain. I chatted to Chadub about what went on in Tibetan Buddhism and he gave some sort of answer to most of my questions, despite the language difficulty. His good spirits were very infectious; we laughed a lot. He is a Red sect monk, and they came to Darjeeling in the 1950s when the Chinese took over Tibet. His monastery is sizeable, with about 70 monks, and a much revered Lama in charge.*

*When we got there, it was a vast maroon and white building clinging to the side of a hill. We went on to Chadub's room; very simple with books and papers strewn across the floor. I felt quite at home. The only luxury was a small fire. He then showed me around the monastery, and I was stunned to find small boys of eight or so toggled up as monks. I was slightly horrified but it is an age old Tibetan practice to give a son, and a great honour if he is accepted. Whatever happens, they get an excellent education out of it and they are free to leave when they are old enough to make up their own mind.*

*We stopped at the kitchen for a cup of tea: I had a normal one with milk and sugar, and then a Tibetan one with butter and salt. I was impressed by the simple friendliness and unpretentiousness of the monks. They were very at ease with each other, and apparently a happy family. The playful affection between the boy-monks and the adults was touching.*

I produce the books I have brought with me. I am curious to know their provenance, what they might weigh in the hands of a Buddhist practitioner. *Land of the White Cloud* by Govinda evidently is a classic travelogue, a detailed account of the customs of a Tibet that is vanishing, or under serious threat. I am thoroughly ashamed that I have had it for 15 years and

never read it. Both Margaret and David look rather pityingly at *The Three Jewels* by Sangharakshita and *Buddhism* by Alexandra David-Neel.

"We can do much better than that," she says, and disappears. I feel like I've turned up to a friend's party in a tank top, loon pants and platform boots. I try to remain confident that they would approve *Born in Tibet*, by Chogyam Trungpa, or *Seven Years in Tibet*, by Heinrich Harrer which I have read, and left at home. At least I can share with them knowledge of my personal favourite, *The Lamas of the Western Heavens*, by René Huc, a nineteenth century rarity that has escaped them.

13th January 1982

*There's a well-stocked bookshop in town and I must have spent two hours rooting through the biggleddy-piggledy shelves. I turned up a couple of things I would like, including a book by Hunt about the 1953 Everest climb, a first edition with an outrageous number of colour and black and white photographs, plus lots of books on Buddhism to choose from. I must check out the local customs and expectations on bargaining with the Jesuits, count my rupees, and go back.*

Margaret returns with *Open Mind, Clear Heart*, an introduction to Buddhism by an American Buddhist nun with a foreword by the Dalai Lama. Also *Mayflower II*, by C.T.Chen, a Chinese American businessman. I have *The Good Heart* with me too, and we talk of the Dalai Lama. I am struck by the way they always call him His Holiness. It is deeply reverent. He is worthy of the title. I almost want to start doing it as well, but somehow don't. I am not a Buddhist practitioner, after all. They agree on how they wish they had known more of the Christian tradition they had grown up amidst, but never really entered. One theme of *The Good Heart* is the Dalai Lama's insistence on the distinctness of the different spiritual paths and, in normal circumstances, the merit in staying with your own faith tradition, however tough it may get at times. It must be so strange to leave one set of practices and enter another. But the leap is right for some. Margaret and David seem very at home.

14th January 1982

*I was surprised to meet a middle-aged Australian monk called Brian. I was preparing to dismiss him as a spaced-out hippy but he was most convincing, and all there, with that gleam of happiness and satisfaction in his eyes. He's immensely dedicated as he divides his time between the monastery and Australia, where he goes to work and earn money he can live on whilst at the monastery. So he's no dilettante. I asked him what the attraction was and he motioned towards the Lama's quarters.*

"That guy," he said.

*I went to see "that guy". He's a large, ageing man, and an impressive presence. Unfortunately, his English is not so impressive, so we just exchanged pleasantries.*

Margaret testifies to the intense prayerfulness of the Dalai Lama's teachings and meditations at the four day Seminar, and comments that the participants were far more attentive than an average Buddhist audience. It is comforting and refreshing to hear that Buddhists are just as adept at neglecting prayer and meditation as Christians. She remembers feeling acutely forlorn and envious when a bus-load of Christian participants went off to a retreat at the end of the Seminar, and she was left standing on the pavement alone, waving.

With our tea finished, we walk around the building. A large room off the corridor is the main conference space. It is a light, airy place with huge windows on two sides. In the garden is a soggy prayer flag, hanging limply against its pole. I am struck by how hard a thing it must be for the Venerable Geshe to come all this way and settle in Wales. Apparently he developed a rapport with Westerners as a student and after he had achieved the distinction of Geshe and had been an Abbot in Ladakh he was invited by the Dalai Lama to go to the West and teach.

"What shall I teach?" he asked.

"Teach them Lam Rim," the Dalai Lama said to him. Lam Rim means "stages of the path," and refers to a careful graduated presentation of the

Buddha's teaching, pioneered by Atisha, an eleventh century Indian missionary to Tibet.

Geshe Damcho and his helpers have developed over the last twenty years a quiet, tasteful jewel of a place. They have just completed some self-contained units for retreats away from the main building, as well as a third of a mile path around the grounds which is conducive to walking meditation; a wonderful Buddhist tradition that can be shared by all practitioners. Lam Rim has a full programme of retreats and teachings as well as courses on Yoga and Tai Chi. It is far less high-profile than the Tibetan Monastery in Scotland, and this is in keeping with Geshe Damcho's own style. I look forward to meeting him another time, when he is not in retreat.

We pass down a corridor to the Chapel. This has a locally made painted wooden cabinet, filled with various Buddha statues, striking different poses. Margaret explains that these are not worshipped, but have a similar status to icons. They are filled with texts from the hundred volume scriptures as well as prayers. Making them is a kind of spiritual practice in itself and there is a long tradition of decoration in which every nuance has a meaning.

In front of the cabinet are beautifully presented offerings of rice, water, a conch shell and other things, even a packet of Walker's crisps. On the walls there are intricately woven and quilted mandalas, representations of the Buddha on cloth, decorated with sumptuous colours. These, too, are aids to meditation. One in particular draws my eye and Margaret tells me it is Gautama at prayer. At the top, in miniature, is a figure not sitting cross-legged in the lotus position. I hear that this is Maitreya, the expected Buddha of loving kindness. His pose apparently suggests that he may appear outside the traditional cultures of Buddhist practice.

14th January 1982

*Chadub showed me the chapel. There was a large gilded Buddha as the centrepiece, along one wall. Next to it were two thrones for eminent lamas. On the other side was a library of Buddhist scripture. These were Tibetan style books, oblong shaped pieces of paper with*

*writing going across the length. The sheets were tied together, and the books trussed up in cloth wallets or bags. Along a shelf running beneath there were various smaller statues, candles for devotion, jars of water given as offerings, and various other offerings of rice, fruit, money etc. The rest of this large room was bare, except for four lengths of carpet running along the wooden floor where the monks sit side by side, for meditation and prayers.*

The floor here in Wales is carpeted, but I find the same bright blue ceiling that represents the sky. I ask about the chants and prayers used, and they seem geared to the Lam Rim practices. I ask about musical instruments. There are none beyond the tiny cymbal-bells, and Margaret laughs when I tell her of how shocked I was when I went to join a meditation session at Chadub's monastery.

15th January 1982

*In the evening I went back to Chadub's monastery. I flagged down a mini-lorry which dropped me off and refused the usual rupee. Something to do with my destination, perhaps. Chadub was pleased to see me but would not accept the oranges I had brought for him. He insisted I should present them to the Lama.*

*I was astonished by the prayers. Sitting cross-legged for an hour I expected, but I hadn't bargained for the incessant noise. Everyone reads or chants out loud at different rates. I had got used to that and had my eyes closed when there came the deafening intervention of several alpine-style horns. I don't know how I had missed seeing them because they were huge. They sound like a ragged chorus of rutting mooses. I thought the train was coming through the floor. There were cymbals, drums and pipes as well. Afterwards I discovered that the evening session is much concerned with charming and warding off malevolent spirits. The morning session is quieter and more meditative.*

*When prayers finished I met the Australian monk Brian again, and we all headed down to the kitchen for some oatmeal soup. It was like going back to the middle ages, cradling the warm bowls in our hands and huddling round the wood fire in a mud hut. Again I was struck by the genuine love shown by the monks for one another. They were simple and natural, and not at all distant or introverted.*



I am aware that Margaret and David have a meeting booked for this morning and I begin to worry that I am taking up too much of their time. However, she continues to answer my questions with great patience. For all the Tantric weirdness that, for a Westerner, may hover around the edges of Tibetan Buddhism its most compelling quality is its sheer matter of factness. Fed up with your personality? Is it hard to deal with other people sometimes? This is why. Want to live at a greater depth, and understand your self and others? This is what you do to achieve it. There is an attitude to spiritual practice that is profoundly refreshing when set against our own crippling Christian neuroses which cluster round mistaken notions of pride and our supposed unworthiness to aspire to the life of God. It comes across strongly in what the Dalai Lama says in *The Good Heart*. His references to "spiritual practice" are warmly encouraging. I have come to realise that if you want to do anything well: play football, learn an instrument, find out about trees - whatever it is, you have to be prepared to make an effort and put the hours in. There are no short cuts to skilfulness, as Buddhists would term such proficiency. Christians would want to say much, too, about the role of grace in the spiritual arena, but the same argument applies. If we genuinely aspire to grow, to know God, to be people of prayer we simply have to spend time at it, make it a priority, not something we pay lip-service to; we have to be practitioners, as the Dalai Lama terms it. There is a remorseless physics to the spiritual life as well as a free flow of grace, a wind that blows where it wills. In the West we have forgotten that. As Bonhoeffer says, there is no cheap grace.

We briefly see the eating place: plain and simple, but the vegetarian food served has a good reputation. I wonder if I have found the perfect venue for a Thomas Merton Society day for Wales, just a dream until today. I think I have. I glimpse a few shelves of jumbled books: the retreatants' library. I ask about the writings of Milarepa and Shantideva, two leads from *The Good Heart*, but there is nothing there. Another time. There has been more than enough to treasure in this visit.

We return to the entrance hall, and I discover that the meeting which is about to start concerns developing an Internet site for Lam Rim.

I remember the gifts I have brought, and give Margaret an apple, a banana and an orange plucked from our fruit bowl this morning. I consider a weak joke about the fruit, the Three Jewels and the Holy Trinity, but such levity seems out of place. She says she will put them in the chapel, with the other offerings. I also give her a copy of my poems, *A Place to Stand*. This, too, is well received. Margaret gives me the books I am borrowing, and thoughtfully adds in a gift of her own, a beautiful small book on the practice of walking meditation. I feel very full.

By the door I notice a display of photographs of the Dalai Lama, and I realise that they are taken here at Lam Rim.

"Yes," says Margaret, anticipating my wonder. "He came here when he went to Cardiff last year." I remember the visit. To my chagrin, I only heard about the Cardiff meeting after it was booked out.

We leave it at that. I reclaim my shoes and say a deep thank you and a fond farewell. I will be back, and I hope I will bring others here too. It's too good to keep to myself. I wonder how Chadub is. Wistfully I remember that Darjeeling, too, was a hard place to leave . . .

*Friday, January 16th*

*Regretfully I said goodbye to Darjeeling after lunch and set off down to Siliguri, back down the hill on a bus. Going down was faster than coming up, also more hair-raising. I had a window seat and at times we got so close to the edge that it was like looking down from an aeroplane, only without the comfort of aero-engines in my line of sight. I don't think those buses will fly very far once they part company with the road. The roadside is scattered with Government notices bearing macabre witticisms about such things as the difference between being a late motorist and the late Mr. Motorist. They also point out such useful things as the fact that "slow" has four letters, and so has "life"; "speed" has five letters; and so has "death". The trouble is that to read the print on them you have to concentrate so hard that it gives you ample opportunity to go sailing over the edge, with your head still craned, trying to catch the clinching words*

As the door closes and I practice walking meditation on the way to my car, I am struck by the way Buddhism has tracked me since Darjeeling. On honeymoon in France, we came across a small community of Tibetan refugees in the Alps of Haute-Provence. From them I bought my wife of ten days a beautiful bracelet with two interlaced strands of beaten and decorated metal, one copper, one brass, the colour of straw. A year ago as the photographs reminded me, I missed the Dalai Lama speaking in Cardiff. Last March I shared in meditation with a Buddhist monk with the rain hammering on the roof of a Catholic chapel in Southampton. Driving away through the thickening snow, I frame the extravagant intention one day to give His Holiness a white silk scarf, the time honoured Tibetan gesture of respect. But Dharamsala is a long way from Wales. As the white road heads homewards, I offer him the scarf quietly now in my heart instead. It is the place within us where dialogue between Christian and Buddhist can take place and, I believe bear, for all of us, rich fruit.

