I wanted to be with an inspiring lama, says Gideon

written by Jitka Polanská



At some point of his life, Gideon Makin, a fifty year old university lecturer in philosophy at that time, set out on a trip to Kathmandu. He did not know how long he would stay, and it would have surprised him to know that in the end, he would spend six years there, in close association with the home monastery of his master, Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche.

Usually, I start with asking people when they met Yungdrung Bon. In your case I would be curious about what came even earlier. Are you British, or an Israeli? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I do not know which one I am (laughing). I was born and raised in Israel. Both my parents moved there from England. We spoke English at home, and I have a family in England to this day. I got my undergraduate degree in philosophy and history in Israel and when I was thirty six, I went to do a doctorate in philosophy at Oxford, in 1990. After completing my degree I got research fellowships and lectureships in various universities in England and Scotland. I stayed in the UK until 2006. Then I moved to Kathmandu.

Let us say that I see myself as both Israeli and English. When I lived in Britain, I identified myself as an Israeli; in England I could not get away with saying I am English. In Kathmandu, I presented myself as English. I am a British citizen from birth. For this and other reasons it was more comfortable to identify myself as British there, although some people weren't fooled by that (laughing).

Do you recognize your Jewish identity?

Definitely. My parents clearly identified as Jewish. Not so much as strict practitioners of the religion.

Their identity was driven by a sense of belonging to a specific group scattered around the world and not having their own home. A dream to have their own state was very strong among Jews in the thirties when my parents were young.

What was their life like after they moved?

Very tough. Many of the people who emigrated to Israel at that time left eventually because life there was so tough. It was a poor country, Israel, and people worked very hard, but they were full of idealism.

When did you start being interested in Buddhism?

It was later on, when I completed my doctorate. After a few years of being a researcher and lecturer elsewhere I got a job at the University of Stirling in Scotland. In 2001, Lama Khemsar Rinpoche came to give a talk for the students of the university. I went to the talk mainly out of curiosity. Nevertheless, the lama made a very strong impression on me. But it does not mean I jumped into Dharma right away. He came again the following year and only then I got more involved. There was a group in Glasgow then, six or seven people, all the lama's students, who met every week to do *ngondro*, the preliminary practices. I joined them and it brought me into it. If it was not for that I would not have stayed in the Bonpo tradition I think. Such groups are very important, to keep continuity and motivation.

It is quite unusual that an academic approaches Buddhism starting from something so repetitive as the *ngondro*, isn´t it?

I was drawn to it but I did not understand much of it. It seems even strange to me, to think about it now, I wonder why I did it and how I found time for it, every day. I do not know. I think a strong impulse for approaching the teaching was the impression Lama Khemsar made on me. He was a person I looked up to.

The beginning was slow, you said, but already in 2006 you moved to Kathmandu. It looks like an acceleration in your dedication. What took you there?

I wanted to see Yongdzin Rinpoche. He and Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung came together to Lama Khemsar´s center, near London, and both gave talks, in 2004, if I remember well. That's how I got to know them. The same year, by the way, I went on a pilgrimage to Menri monastery in India. Lama Khemsar organized a trip with his students to Menri and Sikkim, that year. Because it was during the academic year, I could not go, but I went by myself during the summer holiday, following the same route. So, I developed a connection, but it was anything but "suddenly I saw a light" or something like that; it was quite gradual.

I went to Shenten Dargye Ling once, to see Yongdzin Rinpoche; I did not know most of the people there. I got to know most of the western sangha members later, during my stay in Kathmandu, when they would come for short visits to see Rinpoche.



Gideon with Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche at Shenten Dargye Ling, in the summer 2024.

Why did you go to Kathmandu, what was the plan?

There was no plan. I just went to see what it was like and to visit Rinpoche. Although somehow, I think, I was ready for the possibility of staying. I kept in mind what Rinpoche told me in one of our conversations. He said: ”Why don’t you come to Kathmandu? Living costs are just one euro per day.” It turned out not to be exactly that, by the way (he laughs).

When my job at the university of Birmingham – my last academic position – ended, I thought: “There will always be time to look for a new job, let us go to visit Kathmandu and the monastery first”.

When I arrived, Rinpoche was not there. He was somewhere, travelling, and nobody could tell me when exactly he would be coming back. I remember that I was surprised not to find him there. I imagined him being always there except for short periods.

I went to the monastery right from the airport, all excited, and all those whom I met there were very

relaxed. “Sit down, no rush,” they told me, “Rinpoche will come maybe in one month”. They seemed to me people from a different planet, or at least a different epoch.

Did you know where to stay?

I did not arrange anything before but Tsewang, the secretary of the monastery at that time, took care of me, and he found me accommodation. With those people, I felt at home very quickly, or at least very welcome. Geshes did not have their own dining room at that time, they used to have lunch and dinner in the guest dining room, so we guests had meals with them and we spent hours talking. Some of the geshes spoke little English. Tsewang spoke good English and he used to translate.

We had a good time. Lots of Rinpoche´s students came to visit too, for a week, two, three, and during those visits everyone had a lot of time to sit and talk. A bit like here at Shenten, there is time to talk. No one is in a hurry.

You stayed for six years, in the end…

Yes, I only went once every year to visit England and Israel, for three weeks, and the rest of the time I spent in Kathmandu.

How did you maintain yourself?

I have a small pension. When you find yourself without a job, and are above a certain age, you are given the option of taking early retirement, (in the university’s pension scheme). I was fifty-one then. In England, that penstion would have been negligible, but in Nepal, it was enough to live on.

You look like a very regular person, not the kind of person who would go and stay for years in Kathmandu…

Yes, it is a bit surprising for me too. I am not a “new age” type of person at all.

How did you spend your time there?

I went to the monastery every day. I had lunch there. Not from the very beginning but after a while I started meditating with the monks of the Drubdra group, those who follow a four-year long program and are dedicated mainly to developing their meditation. It was twice a day and those two meditation sessions were the center of my day. There were other things which were interesting and nice, but the important thing about my being in Kathmandu was this discipline to climb the stairs to the monastery every day, at seven in the morning and at five o’clock in the afternoon, and do one hour of meditation there. I did this until my back started hurting at some points which made it impossible for me to sit cross-legged any longer.

I also taught some monks English, there was quite a demand for it among the Geshes.

Did you relate to the fellow monks with whom you meditated or you just joined them for the meditation?

We did not have a common language, but we made some contacts, they were very friendly to me. We used to shake hands, and they used to invite me to have tea in the restaurant just below the stairs to the monastery. I did not feel alone at all. Of course, I was not one of them but they were very welcoming. I made some friends among them.

I also made a special contact with Ponlop Tsangpa Tenzin Rinpoche, the head teacher of the

monastery. He spoke almost no English then, but even without words, we felt sympathy for each other. When he started to come to Shenten, in 2014, I went to many of his teachings there, and finally, I edited a book with his teaching on *ngondro,* a couple of years ago.

What did you do in the evenings?

I was at home. Around seven I would come back from the monastery. At that time, during the winter season, there was no electricity in the evenings. In all Kathmandu there was "power shedding". There was a table showing in advance which area would have electricity at what hours and which would not. We used candles.

I was full of new impressions collected during the day. Maybe because I was in a different country, and it was the first time I lived in the East, Nepal was very interesting for me. I was just looking to see how people dressed, how they behaved, what they did, just simply going around, only to buy milk, was interesting.

I spent my evening reading about Tibet but not only, there were and still are good bookshops in Kathmandu. I also worked on some articles in philosophy, which I promised to write before I left. Those years in Kathmandu were productive for me.

Did you experience any shift, development? Anything to tell about?

I think so. For example, my perception of the monastery changed a lot, gradually.

How?

At first, things struck me as very strange, or arbitrary, but with time they became natural and not at all strange. The strong devotion and respect to the lama, for instance, the strict hierarchy and discipline, the way things are managed may be unfamiliar or even strange for a westerner.

Initially, I had the impression that everything was very chaotic, but I gradually came to understand that it is just a different way of doing things. Ultimately they do get things done, but without the fuss… They just organise themselves differently, more quietly than we do.

Also, our western image of monastic life is of a slow and relaxed kind of existence, but Triten is always bustling with activity. Monks have a lot of duties to fulfill. I had more time to meditate than most monks would.

What brought the experience to an end?

After six years, my need or interest in living close to the monastery and going there daily faded. I felt like I got all that I could. I went back to England, then to Israel. It took me some time to adjust to a new phase of my life. Then, I began attending retreats at Shenten, from 2013 on. Sometimes, I stayed around Shenten after retreats too.

Once I came to Shenten just to visit Yongdzin Rinpoche. He was usually at Shenten from the spring to the summer, even in the periods when there was no teaching going on and very few people were around. I sensed an opportunity and asked if I could do a personal retreat with him, and he said yes. I stayed at the house nearby (where I usually stay whenever I come to Shenten), and met Rinpoche twice a week for about two months. In between I meditated a lot and kept strict silence. I remember I was always complaining to him about my meditation, and he used to say: "Don't push yourself too hard."

For me, the priceless thing was to observe a master of Rinpoche´s stature in everyday situations. I think I learned more from that than from teachings.

What did you learn?

His attitude to things, his neutrality, his genuine modesty, his child-like sincerity, and one thing one does not usually expect from a spiritual master, his being a thoroughly *practical* person. I had lots of opportunities to observe him already when I lived next to the monastery and went there every day. There were plenty of rituals which I attended, I sat in lots of pujas, getting soaked in the atmosphere. Also, sometimes Rinpoche would give teachings to a small group of visiting westerners, and I joined the group. Other times, I spent time alone with him asking about his life. I recorded many hours of interviews with him. I handed them to Charles Ramble as raw material to use when he was editing the biography of Rinpoche, The life of a Great Bonpo Master.

Rinpoche is such an inspiring person for me. This is what I expect from a lama, to inspire me. Each time I met him I felt an urge to go and practice, because I want to be as much like him as I could possibly be.

By far the most important opportunity to be close to Rinpoche and be inspired by him was during the tour of Tibet in the summer of 2007. There was a small group of westerners that travelled with him (Florens Van Canstein published a book about this journey), and I had the rare privilege of being among them.

Phoro credit: Gideon Makin