



## **Daja Meston has lived 24 years and two lives.**

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Daja Meston has lived 24 years and two lives.

The son of Sixties-era exiles seeking enlightenment in the East, he spent his childhood in a Buddhist monastery outside Katmandu in Nepal. As a teen-ager he renounced his vows and returned to the material world that his parents left behind.

Now a sociology major at Brandeis University, Meston - an American Jew by birth - dwells within two cultures, two ways of regarding existence. Such a dichotomy might produce an identity crisis in a person less at peace with himself.

"It's a strange story," said Meston, in the rented room he shares with his Tibetan wife, Phuntsok. He has agreed to discuss his life to help promote a Tibetan conference at Brandeis, an institution for which he feels deep gratitude. His voice is low-pitched, gentle; his nearly flawless English tinged with a distinct accent. He added, with disarming humor, "From my point of view, there's really nothing extraordinary."

Daja Meston was born Daja Mizu Greeneye in Switzerland, the son of Feather Meston Greenburg and Lawrence Greenburg. The father was a free-spirited artist; she was the daughter of John Meston, the producer of TV's "Gunsmoke," and Rosemary Carver, a Vogue model and actress who committed suicide. In the late 1960s, the Greenburg couple left America to roam the world, their quest supported by Feather's grandmother, a former foreign correspondent.

Daja was born in 1970; with him in tow, the couple ended up by chance and the toss of the I Ching in Dharamsala, India, the home of the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government in exile. Here, Feather found the answers she'd been seeking. She decided to become a Buddhist nun. Her husband found only madness; he

suffered a mental breakdown and was sent back to the States. He never recovered.

When his mother found she could not pursue her studies and take care of him, Daja was placed at age 3 with a noble Tibetan family in Katmandu.

"She was really against the States in terms of culture. She really did not want me to grow up here," Meston said.

Like a Japanese artist who paints an image with spare brush strokes, Daja evokes an exotic life with simple words. His new family - with two wives and 12 children - was wealthy only by Nepal standards: "Life in Nepal is hard in general. It was nothing unusual." Bewildered by his mother's departure and soon speaking only Tibetan, he was dimly aware he was different from those he now called father and mother. "I didn't feel unwelcome," he said, slowly.

At age 6, Daja was placed in a Tibetan monastery by his mother, renamed Thubten Wangmo, who wanted him to become a monk. Now named Thubten Wangchuk, he spent his days with meager food and chanting, praying and debating Buddhism. On a day of rest, the young monks - bound by vows not to hurt a living thing - could only play gently for fear of killing an insect.

There he might have remained. But in 1980, at the request of his great-grandmother, Daja and his mother traveled to Beverly Hills for a brief visit. (He also saw his father briefly.)

Amid the culture shock, Daja realized another life - a more comfortable one - was possible. When he was later sent to study at a larger and harsher monastery in India, he decided he wanted a different life. At age 15, he renounced his vows and eventually returned to California, where he lived with family friends and attended an year of high school.

Determined to continue his education, he came to Massachusetts in 1989 to attend a junior college, later transferring to Brandeis. Four years ago, he married a Tibetan woman whose family had fled the Chinese occupation. He remains a Buddhist in religion and outlook.

"I basically have the physical coloring that is American; I feel more Tibet," he said, sitting under a tapestry of a thousand-armed deity of compassion and next to the TV and VCR.

"I think the problem is most people I know look at me as an object of fascination. So sometimes it's difficult to connect with people."

His mother, still a nun, lives in Chicago but may return to India. If he has anger toward her, it doesn't show. A psychiatrist might have field day with his history, but Meston lives the language of letting go.

"It does seem like a past life, almost," he said.

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