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## A CASUALTY OF THE TIMES

### COMES THE PEACE

By Daja Wangchuk Meston  
with Claire Ansberry

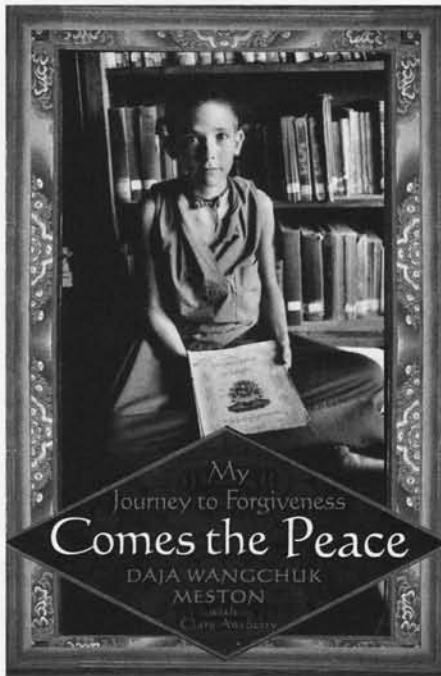
Free Press, 2007  
288 pages; \$25 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Edward W. Bastian

When I first heard about Daja Wangchuk Meston's childhood in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, I immediately remembered another Western boy named Jampa whom I encountered at Sera Monastery around 1977. During the seventies, I was immersed in my Ph.D. in Buddhist studies with Geshe Lhundup Sopa at the University of Wisconsin. As a Fulbright scholar in India, I lived in the refugee monasteries conducting research for my dissertation and experimenting with the idea of becoming a monk. Jampa's blond hair was shaven, and his white body looked pale in contrast to his red Tibetan Buddhist robes and the darker-skinned Tibetans.

He was a sweet kid but seemed a bit lost and out of place. He and I were the only non-Tibetans living at Sera, and I occasionally sought him out to see how he was doing. Even though his mother would

EDWARD W. BASTIAN HAS A PH.D. IN BUDDHIST STUDIES AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND HAS LIVED AND STUDIED IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTERIES. HE COVERED THE VIETNAM WAR AS A WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER AND HAS PRODUCED AWARD-WINNING TELEVISION DOCUMENTARIES ON THE RELIGIONS OF ASIA FOR THE BBC AND PBS.



visit from time to time, the older monks thought this situation was very unusual and that her decision for her son to be a monk was hard for him. They knew that he would never quite fit in to this Tibetan refugee monastic community, and that it would be difficult for him to find a place in his own Western culture, a culture that does not revere or support Buddhist monks. Yet they did their best to include him in their vocation and daily life.

Daja's memoir, *Comes the Peace*, tells the story of a child of American hippies who at age three was placed in the care of a Tibetan family in Kathmandu, and then at age six was sent to live at the nearby Kopan Monastery. He recalls the stern discipline of monastic life and how he was "the other" amidst a community of refugee Tibetan monks in Nepal. And like any child whose parents have left them, he felt both abandonment and guilt, believing he was the cause of their leaving.

Daja's father was mentally ill and eventually returned to California after

suffering breakdowns in Nepal and India. His mother was devotedly Buddhist, and when she enrolled her son in the monastery, she likely believed that she was giving both her son and the world a great gift. She also seems to have doubted her ability to be a good mother and felt that motherhood would deny her the freedom to become a Buddhist nun.

Of course, this story was being played out in the exuberant global theater of the 1970s that showcased a unique mix of idealism and self-righteous narcissism that provided justification for Daja's mother's decision. No doubt many of her peers thought her action was heroic and would further propel Buddhism toward the West.

But the self-centered, immediate-gratification ways of the 1970s were in fact antithetical to classical Buddhist teachings. The twenty-something youth of the industrialized nations wanted instant freedom, and many glommed on to Tibetan Buddhism as a quick path to liberation. This was a phenomenon that Tibetan Buddhist refugee monks were totally unprepared for. They had just fled the Chinese genocide and left behind a culture where Buddhism was the norm. Suddenly, they were surrounded by scantily clad young Western seekers buzzing around them like bees in a honeycomb.

The refugee monks in India and Nepal had no worldly possessions except their robes, a few books, and a rosary. Yet heroically they set about rebuilding their monasteries and preserving their tradi-

  
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tions. In the midst of their own immense hardships, they began to teach Westerners the ancient wisdom and practices of Buddhism that had been carefully preserved behind the Himalayas for more than a thousand years.


In Tibet, there were well-established procedures for becoming a monk or nun; there was also support for monasteries and a formal etiquette for reverential behavior toward monks by the laity. The refugee monks were not equipped to advise young Western women and men on how to manage their marital affairs, their children, and their impatient interest in Buddhist liberation. Yet they were nevertheless surrounded by young Westerners hungry for the dharma and they were doing their best to respond. The monks adapted quickly and transformed this burgeoning interest into support and funding for Buddhist monasteries, centers, publishing companies, and dharma businesses that sprung up in Nepal, India, and the industrialized countries of the world.

Young Westerners like Daja's mother had no background or cultural context for Buddhism. Therefore, they simply projected onto Buddhism their own romantic presuppositions, dreams, and expectations. They thought that nonattachment meant rejecting all responsibilities for others and refusing to deal with the ordinary, difficult challenges of human relationships. As Daja explains in his book: "My mother would say it was karma, that in past lives she was Buddhist and was destined to be Buddhist in this one. Doing so meant leaving her old life and all that went with it behind, my father and me included. I could never accept that explanation. Karma doesn't absolve people from responsibilities. Buddhism doesn't mean turning your back on family in the name of disavowing relationships and attachments. That is a convoluted understanding of Buddhism."

But in those days, we all used the Buddhist doctrine of nonattachment as a spiritual justification for selfishness. Still, there were also many, like Daja's mother, who stuck with Buddhism and received a proper training and education through which they could benefit many other aspiring Buddhists and make their own contributions to the world.

What is so wonderful about Daja's story, and what makes this book so

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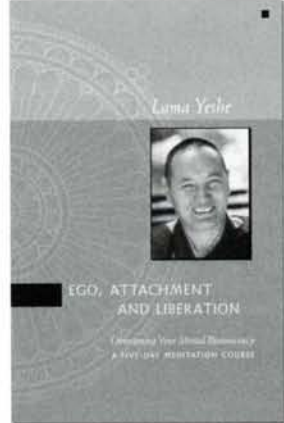


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worthwhile, is how he finally, at age sixteen, broke loose from the monastic environment for which he was unsuited and made a new life for himself in America. This was due in large measure to his own determined persistence and the kindness of his parents' friends and family, who took him into their homes and helped to give him a sense of family and belonging for which he longed.

In America, Daja visited his mentally ill father, at first with great difficulty, and gradually developed compassion and understanding for the causes of his father's illness. In the spirit of Buddhist meditations of loving-kindness and seeing the world through the eyes of others, he came to love and forgive his father. Similarly, he looked into the causes of



The author (right) with his wife and father.

his mother's behavior and empathized with the emotional pain she suffered as a neglected child and then unconsciously reenacted in her upbringing of Daja. In so doing, he transformed his own suffering into compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In Boston, Daja learned to love and to trust another woman who was herself a Tibetan refugee whose family was forced to flee Tibet for India. With her undying love and support, along with the loving, optimistic presence of her wise and resilient Tibetan nomad father who lived in their home, Daja was able to complete his college education and carve out a life for himself and his family.

Daja's story is one of human endurance, purpose, and unrelenting self-honesty. Perhaps most of all, his compelling memoir demonstrates how forgiveness can break loose the shackles of the past and open up a hopeful future. **BD**

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LAMA SURYA DAS is the author of the newly released *Buddha Is As Buddha Does: The Ten Original Practices for Enlightened Living*. He is also the author of *Natural Radiance (Sounds True)*, *Letting Go of the Person You Used To Be* (Broadway Books), and the noted *Awakening Trilogy: Awakening the Buddha Within, Awakening to the Sacred, and Awakening the Buddhist Heart* (all Broadway Books.)

Lama Surya Das is a Lineage Holder of the Dzogchen Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in the Rimé (non-sectarian) tradition. For over thirty years, including more than eight years in secluded retreat, he has studied with the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism. With his open and lively style, he is particularly effective in the transmission of Buddhism by presenting Buddhist values and insight, as well as methods of practice, in a manner accessible to all.

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