



It was "the light in his eyes" that moved the lamas to accept Daja Mizu Greenberg in 1976. Now 11, he is an ordained monk with the Buddhist name Thubten Wangchuk.

## FOR AN AMERICAN BOY-MONK IN NEPAL, THE PATH TO BUDDHISM BEGAN IN BEVERLY HILLS



**Living in Beverly Hills.** The child's great-grandmother, Bernadine Szold Fritz, is the author and financial support of the family



**In 1973** Feather (above) became a Buddhist nun and separated from Lawrence Greenberg (below, with Daja at age 2). She now lives in a retreat in India, and he in Santa Monica.



**T**o all who encounter him at the Himalayan monastery in Nepal, the little American is a mystery. A shy, gentle boy with soulful blue eyes, he converses in flawless Tibetan and Nepali but must struggle to communicate with Westerners in his classroom English. He is called Thubten Wangchuk, but he dimly remembers having another name when he lived in Katmandu with the Tibetan family who raised him from the age of 3 until he entered the monastery in 1976. Now 11 and an ordained monk, he haltingly explains that his mother, Thubten Angmo, is a Buddhist nun. His father, he says, is unknown to him. Immigration officials are baffled by the boy's presence in their country, and even the U.S. Embassy can supply few details except that the child's official guardian is the head lama at the monastery called Kopan Gompa.

To the lamas there, Wangchuk is simply a "child of the universe" who came into their midst by divine preordainment. When his mother brought him to them, they questioned him, prayed for him and discerned the "light in his eyes" that marked him for the monastic life. He has lived and studied in this Himalayan hamlet ever since, except for two weeks in 1980. He is taught to meet even the most bizarre experiences with acceptance, yet he still betrays some bemusement at the memory of the long airplane ride last year that took him to see an aging relative in a place called Beverly Hills. Though he spent 10 days in California, his clearest memory seems to be the movie on the plane: "It was much fighting a war. I did not like it."

How did an American boy come to be a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas? Where did he come from?

The answers lie in the story of an extraordinary American family. Thubten Wangchuk's mother is Feather Meston Greenberg, who grew up in Beverly Hills and was educated at the International School in Geneva, Switzerland. Her mother, in turn, was Rosemary Carver Meston, a *Vogue* model and actress who was the toast of London in her time (the British press called her "the Golden Arrow"). Mike Todd and Michael Wilding were among her suitors before she finally settled down with

John Meston, the late creator and producer of the *Gunsmoke* series on radio and TV. Rosemary committed suicide at the age of 35.

The story of the family is told by Thubten Wangchuk's great-grandmother, Bernadine Szold Fritz, whose cousin was the founder of Hadassah and who was herself one of the first Paris correspondents for the *New Yorker*. It was she who sent round-trip tickets to Thubten Wangchuk and his mother last year, so that the boy could discover his "roots" in Beverly Hills.

Her understanding of his destiny begins with her recollection of her daughter, Rosemary. "Everything about Rosemary was beautiful physically," she says, "but she was a troubled romantic. Her dreams didn't come true and she couldn't stand it. After her divorce from John, she fell into a deep despondency she couldn't shake, and she just withdrew from the world. Rosemary tried to commit suicide a number of times, and Feather lived with me during those periods."

By the time of Rosemary's death, John Meston had married a former actress-model known as Bette Ford. She was one of the first female matadors. "Bette was an enormous influence on Feather and she tried to imitate Bette in clothes and style," remembers a roommate at the International School.

After graduation from the International School, Feather returned to Los Angeles, where she attended Occidental College and USC, then began a career in social work. It was in the late 1960s that she met Lawrence Greenberg, an artist, at a party; they married soon after. "Feather was a member of the generation they call 'flower children,'" recalls Bernadine Fritz. "She was disappointed with social work. She found that instead of helping people, she sat at a desk and wrote records and figures in red ink all day. That was not what she wanted to do with her life. She felt Lawrence would take her away from this country and a life she didn't want."

Bernadine was sympathetic to her granddaughter's wish to move on. During an illustrious journalistic career in

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Paris, she had traveled in the eccentric company of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein and Anais Nin. She was also the survivor of three tumultuous marriages and 10 years in China.

In the spirit of adventure, she underwrote the newlyweds' move to Europe. Within a year Feather gave birth in Geneva to a son whom they called Daja Mizu, a Japanese name. Not long after, the family moved to Spain and later Corfu. Then, sometime in 1972, they bought a used Volkswagen bus and set off overland through Egypt and into Afghanistan. Set upon by bandits, they were stripped of their possessions and



One of Wangchuk's favorite niches is Kopan's tranquil, well-stocked library, where he reads Tibetan scriptures.

left on a dirt road. Eventually a jeep came along with two young English people in it. They were en route to India to meet the Dalai Lama and invited the Greenbergs along. "I guess that's what started it all," says Bernadine Fritz.

Feather's conversion was swift. Soon after they arrived in India, she met Lama Yeshe, head of the Kopan Gumpa in Nepal. The American family followed him to Nepal, and both Feather and Lawrence took a course in Buddhist studies. She decided to be ordained as a *getsul*, took 36 vows for life, including celibacy, and adopted the name Thubten Angmo.



With an aesthetic sense perhaps inherited from his father, Wangchuk says he enjoys painting lessons the most.

Finding American showers "too hot," the boy happily returned to the icy Himalayan springs most familiar to him.



Her husband apparently did not approve. "I have a sort of malicious feeling that he thought that would be the end of my support," says Bernadine Fritz. "He was very much against it, and one day he just disappeared into the Himalayas and walked until his sandals fell off and his feet were bloody. Some villagers found him and brought him back to Katmandu. After that he went berserk and started throwing

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rocks at the U.S. Embassy and the monastery. The embassy realized that this lad had gone off his head and sent him back to this country. I've lost track of him since."

Feather remained committed, placing her 3-year-old son, Daja, with a Tibetan family and entering a retreat in India. When Daja was 6, she went back to Nepal to place him in the monastery. "In a way I offered my son to Buddha," Feather, now 36, explained at the time. "I'm still a child myself, really, and the situation allows him to be raised happily and wisely and allows me the freedom to do my spiritual work."

He is indeed a happy child, though his life is far from his birthright. Each dawn, before the mist has lifted off the Himalayas, Wangchuk and his 90 fellow monks rise, wrap themselves in their plum-and-saffron robes and gather at the temple for morning prayers. After a breakfast of cereal and buttered Tibetan tea, they begin the day's classes in English, Tibetan grammar, religion, philosophy and painting. After a lunch consisting usually of vegetable soup and bread, the boys return to classes. Formal debate occupies most of the afternoon and evening, but not the sort of debate familiar to American students. "We debate what is change, what is the meaning of color, what is light, what is wrong," explains Thubten Wangchuk with a shrug that asks: What else? After a final hour of chanting, the little monks return to their pallets to sleep by 10 p.m.

On Sundays, they clean, work in the gardens and visit their families. Thubten Wangchuk often spends the day laboriously writing letters to his mother in the strange language of English.

If he continues his studies and progresses through the five stages of the monastic life, Thubten Wangchuk by the age of 30 will become a *geshe*, a degree equivalent to a Ph.D. in philosophy. Beyond that lie the 253 vows required of a lama and the struggle to purify the mind of the 84,000 delusions that Buddha counted. "When the mind becomes perfect, you become lama," he explains. "Sometimes I never happens."

His fees for room and board, \$11.53 per month, are donated by Bernadine Ritz, who has begun to study Buddhism herself at the age of 87. Already she has learned a great deal. "At first, I

thought of him as a poor little fall far from home," she says. "But when I met him, I saw I could keep my sympathy for myself. He is so happy. When he came to visit, nothing astounded him. It was as though he'd been born right here in Coldwater Canyon. He just accepted that there are some things in one part of the world and other things in another part."

His mother believes their life apart is ultimately better for both of them. "There's still a bond there you can't deny," she has said. "I visit him. We've

kind of adopted each other, but I don't think he misses me." Her son has plainly achieved self-mastery in many areas. Unerringly gentle, he steps aside for insects on the paths at the monastery; he will not so much as swat at a biting mosquito on his shoulder. Yet who could be surprised that, like any other little boy, Thubten Wangchuk feels alone at times? His last words to a visitor, whispered out of earshot of his friends, were wistfully equivocal: "I'm happy, but I miss my mother."

CHERYL MCCALL



"His mother put Daja there for life as a monk," says a former teacher at Kopan. "He's more Asian than American now."