

March 15, 2005

Lost and Found
**Left in Nepal at 3,
Daja Takes Decades
To Find Out Why**

After Being Raised by Monks,
He Makes His Way to U.S.;
'Mother Where Are You?'

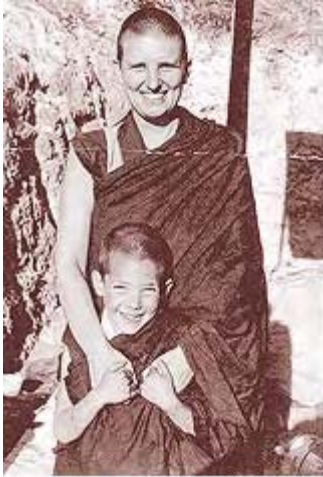
A Leap From a Window Ledge

By CLARE ANSBERRY
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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BOSTON -- Daja Meston, a slight young man with dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses, walked into the admissions office at Brandeis University in 1993 with an extraordinary story.

He told the admissions officer that he had no formal schooling and little money. Then 23 years old, he lived in a Boston settlement house for exiled Tibetans with his 24-year-old wife, and worked at the salad station of a seafood restaurant. In lieu of an application, he presented a 1981 People magazine article about himself as a child. The headline read: "For an American Boy- Monk in Nepal, the Path to Buddhism Began in Beverly Hills."

Over the course of the hour-long interview at Brandeis, Daja explained that his hippie parents had left America in the 1960s in search of spiritual enlightenment. Daja was born in Switzerland and sent for three years to live with a Tibetan family in Nepal. Meanwhile, his father suffered a breakdown and vanished in the Himalayan Mountains. His mother became a Buddhist nun. When he was 6, she enrolled him in a monastery.



Daja Meston, as a young monk, standing with his mother in her Buddhist nun robes in Kathmandu, Nepal.

He was an odd casualty of an era in American history when many young people dropped out of the mainstream and abandoned their homes and families in pursuit of enlightenment and adventure. Some turned to communal ways of child-rearing. Some, like Daja's parents, essentially quit parenting and left their children for others to raise.

One of the refugees of that generation, Daja is still trying to reconnect with the world and people his parents left behind. In the monastery, Daja spent many lonely years exploring broad philosophical riddles including "What is change?" and "What is right?" He later would embark upon yet another journey, one that would take him to Hollywood and China, where he once more made headlines attempting to take his life in a politically motivated leap from a hotel window. Now, though his family story was unusual in the extreme, the questions propelling him were universal ones: Who are my parents? Why did they make the choices they made?

Daja Meston was born Sept. 28, 1970, in a Swiss cottage surrounded by daffodils and pink-blossomed trees. The house had become a way station of sorts for a generation of wanderlust hippies, his parents, Feather Meston and Larry Greenberg, among them.

They had met at a wedding in Southern California in the late 1960s. Flower children in the classic sense, they experimented with psychedelic drugs and went to love-ins. At some point, Larry changed his last name to Greeneye.

Larry, a self-taught artist with a bushy dark beard and thick black glasses, owned an art store and painted in the style of Picasso. Feather, her given name, was a child-welfare worker with long, light brown hair. They were disillusioned with a materialistic society but viewed it from opposite realms.

Feather was the only child of celebrities. Her father, John, helped create and write the television show "Gunsmoke." Her willowy mother, Rosemary, a Vogue model, acted and doubled for Katharine Hepburn in movies. Even her grandmother, Bernardine Szold Fritz, was a Hollywood insider, writing about Marlene Dietrich's slinky lamé gown for the New Yorker magazine.

It was a privileged childhood but not a happy one. Her parents' marriage ended in divorce after 10 years. Feather says she lived with her alcoholic mother in a series of small apartments. When her mother tried to commit suicide, teenage Feather joined her father and his second wife, a famous bullfighter, on their honeymoon in Europe. They sent her to boarding schools. She began drinking and missing school, she says. "I was quite alone."



Michael Abramson

At center, Daja, with fellow monks in Nepal in 1981. His mother sent him to the Buddhist monastery when he was 6 years old.

She became resolutely independent, allowing space in her life only for her grandmother. Thrice married, Bernardine Szold Fritz lived in China for 10 years and shared with Feather her fascination for eastern religions and Buddhism.

Larry's parents were poor and lived in a run-down Los Angeles neighborhood. His father couldn't hold a job, and his parents often fought about money, says his older brother, Albert. Larry, the fifth and youngest child, was sent when he was about 7 years old to live with an older brother. At about age 10, he went to live in an orphanage.

Larry spent much of his youth alone, he and family members say, sketching, painting and memorizing long passages from classic Greek literature. When he was about 17, he dropped out of high school, left the orphanage and joined the Navy. Four years later, he returned to Southern California, sold tires for a short time and opened an art store.

When he and Feather met, both were ready to distance themselves from their pasts and start a new life. About five months after their first encounter, they married in her grandmother's Beverly Hills garden. Bride and groom wore matching tie-dyed outfits. Within days, Feather's mother, who hadn't attended the ceremony, committed suicide.

Feather says the death of her mother had no profound effect on her. "I just wasn't that close to her," she says.

With Baby in Tow

The couple lived for a few months in a commune in New Mexico, before Feather decided she wanted to use the money inherited from her mother to leave the country. Larry didn't object. "He kind of did everything I said. He was more passive. Plus, I was paying for it," says Feather.

A few months later, Daja was born. Feather says she came up with the name Daja because she liked the sound of it and because it could be used for either a boy or a girl. With baby in tow, the newlyweds drove in a green Volkswagen van through Spain to Greece, where Feather read a book about spiritual gurus in India.

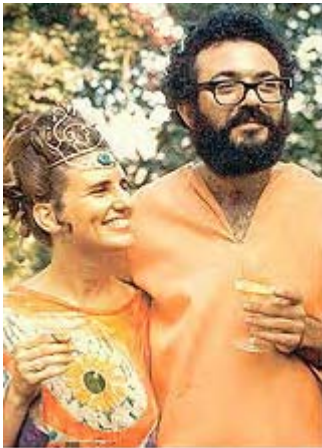
"Something happened to me spiritually," says Feather. "I realized that I could read all these books, but I needed a teacher. So I decided to travel to India."

The family ended up in Dharmasala, India. There, Feather devoted herself to Buddhism. She told Larry that she had decided to become a nun. She was ordained, shaved her head and given the name Thubten Wongmo by her teachers. Thubten means the teachings of the Buddha and Wongmo means powerful female.

At that point, Larry had a psychotic breakdown, family members say. Though he had used drugs, it's not clear what triggered it. Suddenly, he was without Feather and essentially alone in India. He says he began hearing voices insisting he go to the forest. "I had to or I was dead," he says.

That left Daja, now about 3, alone. His mother arranged to have him live in Kathmandu, Nepal, with a Tibetan family composed of a father, two wives and 10 children. To this day, Wongmo says, she has no qualms about her decision. She didn't have a house. Her husband was unable to take care of anyone. At 28 years old, she was more interested in her spiritual quest than traditional motherhood. "It wasn't like he was left to the wolves," she says.

Daja's earliest memories consist of being in a large, pinkish house in Nepal, crying and being cradled by a Tibetan man who gave him an apple to distract him from his mother, who was walking out the door. Over months and years, she became a distant figure, the friendly nun who spoke unfamiliar English, and visited occasionally. Through gestures, she taught him how to tie his shoes and stop hiccups by taking deep breaths.



Feather and Larry at their wedding in a Beverly Hills, Calif., garden.

His new family was kind and loving, and while he referred to the adults in his new home as mother and father, he gradually realized that he didn't belong. His skin, hazel eyes and build distinguished him from the other children. Curious visitors folded his lanky legs to see if he could sit in a meditation position. "From very early on, I felt there was something wrong with me," he recalled years later.

When Daja turned 6, Wongmo decided he should follow her path and sent him to the Buddhist monastery to spend what she assumed would be the rest of his life as a monk.

"Every mother and father choose what kind of school and education their child will have," says Wongmo, who goes by only one name now. "I chose that kind of school. Just because it's different doesn't mean it's bad or wrong."

Daja was proud of his saffron robe, shaved head and new name of Thubten Wangchuk, the latter meaning powerful one. For the next decade, he woke before sunrise and spent days studying the teachings of the Dalai Lama. He says he developed a gentleness that is with him still, walking softly so as not to trample insects, and freeing flies trapped in spider webs.

But meals of thin soup left him hungry, he says. Tired from long days of study, he hid inside empty kerosene drums to nap, so as not to be caught by his teachers and punished. Other monks teased him because he was white, telling him he should coat himself in charcoal.

On weekends, some young monks went home to their families. Daja began to think of his Tibetan family as temporary caretakers. He would sometimes pause outside the gate of their house, and leave, returning to the monastery. He learned a few English words by reading comic books brought to the monastery by Westerners. "Tintin in Tibet" was one.

When Wongmo visited her son, Daja says, he was torn. He wanted her affection, but he also felt distant from her, and he was embarrassed by his mother's floor-length robes and shorn head.

If anyone could freely embrace the monastic belief that attachments led to suffering, it might have been Daja, a young boy whose attachments had been tenuous and painfully short-lived. Yet he longed to belong to someone. "Was I ever happy?" he asks. "I don't know. For the most part, I was just trying to get through life, trying to stay out of trouble."

His mother says she never knew he was sad. "I didn't know he was so emotionally attached to me and teased and that it was so hard for him," she says. "I had no idea."

Visiting Beverly Hills

A turning point for Daja occurred in 1980 when he was 10 and realized that he was related to a group of people who lived thousands of miles away in prosperity.

His mother, Wongmo, took him to Beverly Hills to visit her grandmother, who was ill. In the course of hours, he was transported from one of the poorest nations of the world, where he remembers swimming in manure-filled rivers with buffaloes and sleeping on flea-infested straw mattresses, to one of the

wealthiest, with glimmering swimming pools, gold-plated fixtures, and Disneyland.

Wanting to savor every delicious moment, he woke at sunrise to swim in the pool. He went shopping with his mother and bought a bright red vest. He ate until he was full. "It was Shangri-La," he remembers thinking.

The only unsettling part of the trip involved his father. Larry had been sent back to the U.S. by Indian authorities who found him begging and incoherent in the streets of Delhi. Wongmo took Daja to visit his father, who was being treated for schizophrenia and lived in a group home in Los Angeles. Larry, dirty and unkempt, strummed a guitar and said little during the visit.

At the end of 10 days, Wongmo said it was time to go back to India. Daja was heartbroken. When he got back to Nepal, he wore his red vest over his robes. "I never forgot the West," he says. "It just seemed like such a happy place compared to where I was, superficially anyway."



Larry, left, Phuni, middle, and Daja, right, in Santa Monica, Calif.

After he returned to the monastery, a reporter and photographer from People magazine, apparently tipped off by the well-connected grandmother Ms. Szold Fritz, arrived to do a story on the curious young white monk. The photographer took pictures of him showering in a natural spring. At the end of the article, Daja was quoted as whispering to a visitor: "I'm happy but I miss my mother."

Back in Nepal he grew increasingly disillusioned. He concocted a story about being seduced by a prostitute, knowing other monks had been disrobed for similar transgressions. His ruse worked, and at the age of 16, he shed his robes, determined to come back to the U.S. and go to school.

Wongmo, then in India, was upset that her son had rejected the life she felt best for him. Despite her misgivings about American culture, she eventually agreed to send him to California to live with her relatives. He picked up English watching Judge Wapner on TV and listening to Madonna's "Like a Virgin," among other things.

Within months of Daja's landing in California, his uncle, Albert Greenberg, called and invited him to a Passover seder. Daja had little interest in connecting with his father's family. He reluctantly ended up going, but kept mostly to himself. "I was very cold," he says. "I was trying to keep myself from getting too attached to anyone."

Daja didn't stay long in California. The kids at his high school seemed rude and spoiled. His mother, who was traveling around the world conducting Buddhist retreats, suggested he move to Boston, which had a small Tibetan community and good colleges. He left without visiting his father.

A Tibetan Bride

Eighteen years old, he arrived by train in Boston with a sleeping bag and suitcase. Packed inside were a gray silk suit, a few tapes from the British rock group UB40, a prayer book, and an English vocabulary primer. It was Halloween, 1988. Children wearing plastic masks dashed between houses, filling pillowcases with candy. In the monastery, he recalled, he had hoarded dry pita in his pillowcase.

A few weeks later, Daja met Phuntsok Dolma, a 19-year-old Tibetan woman with long dark hair and a heart-shaped face. She, too, had come to the U.S. for an education, leaving her family in southern India where they lived as exiles from Tibet. "We were both young and felt out of place," he says. "We just wanted someone to make decisions with."

Less than a year later, one day after Daja's 19th birthday, the young couple married. The bride's sister was the only family member who came.

Daja and Phuni lived in a Tibetan settlement house and shared a kitchen with elderly missionaries and theological students. He worked for a landscaper. Phuni worked at a bagel shop. In the evenings, she told him stories about her family. As nomads, they had had only each other. When she was cold, her brothers gave her their coats. When her legs grew weary from hiking in the mountains, her father

carried her. When she got hungry, her mother, who had since died, nursed and comforted her. She missed them.

Daja had few stories about his own parents. He told his wife that he was better off without the family ties.

Over the years, Phuni encouraged him to send birthday cards or letters to his parents and uncle. "I felt sad for him," she says.

Riding a commuter train one afternoon, Daja looked out the window and saw Brandeis University. It had been his dream to go to college, but felt he would never be accepted anywhere. His wife urged him to apply.

"I sat there completely open-mouthed," says Cliff Hauptman, the admissions officer then, recalling the day that he listened to Daja's story. The applicant was an academic risk, but Mr. Hauptman said he thought Daja was intelligent and resourceful enough to make it. "I went straight to the dean and said, 'You got to hear about this guy.'" "He was accepted and started classes in the fall.

One of the first things Daja learned in college was how to outline an essay or research paper. He began writing down chunks of memories of his life in Nepal. "Mother where are you?" he titled one passage. In it, he wrote: "She is a figure so distant to me...I saw her as a foreigner who gave me nice things when I saw her sometimes. I did not understand that she is the person who gave birth to me, who gave me life and who I should go to for love, affection and support. When I did start to realize that she was my real mother, I started to become extremely angry at her for not having provided me with any of the things that I had always craved for."

For more than a year, he didn't respond to his mother's notes and e-mails. "Please don't be mad at your old mum," she wrote at one point. "I know I haven't been a normal mother, providing you with a normal family life. But I wanted to give you the dharma, which I honestly thought was the best thing I could possibly do for you." Dharma is the path to happiness and freedom from all suffering, she says.

In 1996, about to graduate summa cum laude in sociology, Daja called his mother to invite her to commencement. She told him she was sorry, but she couldn't come. "I was in India," she says. "That's a huge trip for a one-hour ceremony."

Phuni urged him to call his uncle, Albert Greenberg. Though they hadn't been in touch since the Passover seder a decade earlier, Mr. Greenberg and his wife flew from California to attend the ceremony. After his graduation, Daja and his uncle began corresponding and exchanging phone calls. Daja learned that Albert Greenberg had been looking after Daja's father for nearly two decades by that point.

Albert Greenberg arranged a meeting at an outdoor shopping district in Santa Monica. As they walked, Daja asked his father questions. His father replied yes and no. Every so often, Larry stopped to rummage through trash cans, his son recalls. Larry tripped over his own feet because medication relaxed his muscles to near limpness. Albert walked 20 feet behind them and cried.

Waking in a Hospital

After graduating, Daja became active in the Tibetan-rights movement. He remembers as a boy watching Tibetans demonstrate against the Chinese, who took over villages and forced them and others, including the Dalai Lama, into exile. His Tibetan wife told him stories about her own family having to leave their home. She worked with Boston and national Tibetan-rights groups and introduced Daja to people involved. He agreed to be an interpreter for journalists and congressmen traveling to Tibet to look at human-rights issues.

In August 1999, Daja traveled to China on his own. He wanted to see whether ethnic Tibetans were being forced from villages to make room for Chinese farmers as part of a controversial, World Bank-financed economic development project.

After photographing a prison labor camp, he was apprehended by Chinese officials and taken to a hotel room for interrogation. His captors suggested he was a spy. He feared for the lives of the people he had met and refused to name them.

After interrogations that lasted through the night, he was taken back to his room. Alone, he sat on the windowsill, worrying. Daja believed he had two choices: spend the rest of his life in a Chinese jail, or jump three stories, probably to his death. He wasn't afraid to die, he says; he believed another life would follow. Phuni would understand. He hoped his action would bring attention to the cause. An hour passed. Then, exhausted and desperate, he stepped off the window ledge.

He awoke in a Chinese hospital bed, both feet bandaged, rubber tubes protruding from his stomach. Interrogators surrounded him. For a brief moment, he wondered whether his mother knew he was there. He didn't know his wife and uncle had been calling government officials trying to locate him.

Two days later, an official with the U.S. Embassy and an American doctor appeared in his room. News of the American hospitalized while in the hands of Chinese authorities made headlines around the world. Daja became a hero among Tibetans. The Dalai Lama praised his efforts. Brandeis University held a benefit concert with Run-DMC and 10,000 Maniacs to help pay medical expenses. The resettlement project drew greater scrutiny and was ultimately abandoned.

Daja spent weeks in a Boston hospital recovering from shattered heels, fractured vertebrae and a lacerated liver. Phuni's father, who had come to live with the couple in the mid-1990s, slept on the floor of his hospital room and spoon-fed his son-in-law lamb shanks and marrow.

'I Wanted to Protect You'

After his fall, Daja spent months in a wheelchair and grew despondent. He remembers watching an ad on TV about a drug that treated depression. "I looked at that and thought, 'That's me,' " he says. He went to see a psychiatrist and decided he needed to find out more about his parents, to understand why they left him and how things in the past affected him in the present. He began looking at old family photos from a new perspective.

In one small black-and-white picture, taken in a field somewhere in Greece, Daja is a baby. His bearded father lifts him in the air. Their faces are inches apart, their mouths open in laughter. "There is a bond there," he says. "I saw my dad as a dad."

Until then, he said, he had spent much of his life building walls around himself, afraid of letting anyone in. Phuni urged him to go see his father again. Over the course of several visits with his uncle and father, Daja learned that Larry was a bright, but fragile man who likewise grew up without his parents. He began to realize that his father hadn't wanted to leave, but was directed by voices over which he had no control.

"I couldn't take care of Daja anymore," says Larry, now 61 and living in a residential treatment facility.

His father's illness helped explain why he had disappeared from Daja's life. His mother, well-educated, privileged and healthy, remained a mystery. She had never told him about her painful childhood or explained why she left the U.S. "Something didn't make sense. I kept asking what happened? Why? Why? Why?" says Daja.

At first Wongmo wasn't interested in talking about her past. Eventually, in response to her son's pleas for explanations, she began telling him about her alcoholic parents, her mother's suicide, and her own abandonment.

"All the things I tried and experienced at home, school, socially and even at the church my father's mother took me to, or in the summer jobs I had...it was all empty. And full of painful disappointments," she wrote her son. "When I came to India with you and your father, I finally found something that brought me peace of mind and purpose to life that my American past never provided. As your mother, I wanted to give you the best in life, I wanted to protect you from my mistakes...."

"I realize now there were times you needed me that I wasn't there, that there are some things that I didn't provide for you emotionally...and I am sorry for that. I truly am," she wrote. "As a parent, you wish the best for your child. As a human, one makes mistakes...I didn't have all the knowledge in the world...."

Daja says the story of his mother's childhood saddened him, but also helped him see another dimension to her. "She was left with a huge hole in her heart," he says. "As long as she was protecting me from the stuff she had suffered, she thought it was enough. She couldn't imagine what else I would need. She didn't think about the emotional needs. She was sent to a boarding school in Switzerland. I was sent away to Nepal."

Strengths and Quirks

Today, Daja, 34, works part-time doing research for a cousin who does public relations for an Internet company. He plans to take graduate courses in literature. He's had several surgeries since his fall to remove metal plates and fuse bones together in his heel and undergone years of physical therapy. He is an inch shorter than he used to be due to compressed vertebrae and can't stand or sit for

long stretches because of back and foot pain. Phuni, 36, is in her senior year at Brandeis and working part time at a high-end boutique. This year, her father died. Daja and Phuni talk about having or adopting children, but both agree they are not ready.

Daja's mother, now 60, lives in Omak, Wash., where she teaches Buddhism and writes to prisoners. She and her son keep in touch through regular e-mail and phone calls, but haven't seen each other in five years. She says she would like to spend time with her son, to talk and look at old photographs. She regrets that she wasn't in touch with him more while he was at the monastery and that she didn't go to his graduation.

"If I could do it all over again, I would do some things differently," she says. "I would be more sensitive to his needs." She says she thought he would learn not to need her, as she had learned not to need her own mother. "I'm much more independent. He's more family-oriented." Being Buddhist means not getting too attached, she says. "Lack of attachment is part of my being."

Daja says he will never understand his mother completely, but isn't angry anymore. "I think I have finally come to a point where I have fewer illusions about who she is," he says. "I accept her fully with all her strengths and quirks." He used to look at small children with their parents at a park or walking down the street and grieve the loss of that in his own life. He no longer does.

Daja says his father has become somewhat more lucid in recent years, thanks in part to new medication. He visited his father in January. Larry tells his son stories about Spain and Greece. Daja has encouraged his father to resume his artwork and sends him sketchbooks, pens and chocolates. The books return filled with intricate drawings, poems and hippie sayings such as "You are groovy because you are you" and "Forgive me my grown up goofs." During phone calls, Larry recites poetry to Daja.

"He calls me his father," Larry says. "When we talk, I say 'I love you.' I have his graduation picture. I keep it on my bureau." He tells his son what he has learned in life. "Accept yourself and who you are and do your best with it," he says.

It's a lesson Daja learned on his own, but he says he nevertheless appreciates his father's advice.

"In my dreams, I make him well," he says. "I've come to love my father quite a bit."

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