

# Lakha Lama and Ringu Tulku, friendship and upbringing in India

In the beginning of the fifties China occupied Tibet and many Tibetans later had to flee from oppression. Due to the devastating consequences, Young Lamas Home School was founded in Dalhousie, India, as a place for young lamas to study in peaceful surroundings.

Lakha Lama and Ringu Tulku were two of the lamas who were fortunate to study at the school. This article records their shared memories of that time in Dalhousie, looking back on the profound influence it had not only on the students who studied there, but also on the development of the Buddhist teachings in the west.

*By Charlotte Maersk Pank (2021)*

Ringu Tulku and Lakha Lama met each other in the early 1960s at Young Lamas Home School in Dalhousie. One of the first things they both remembered and emphasized was the diversity amongst the students, as well as their deep gratitude towards Freda Bedi, the headmistress of the school. Together with His Holiness the Dalai Lama she cofounded the school. The two masters remember the school as a place of freedom. Here young monks were able to continue their studies outside Tibet and the young students also had the possibility to learn a new and strange language, English.

"I remember Freda Bedi. She had a home school for young lamas, Young Lamas Home School. A lot of young Buddhist children went to school there to learn how to speak and write in English.

"There were many monks from different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism represented and gathered in one small place, studying together. It was a place of many opportunities, including learning English, and the school provided many good teachers. I was really happy for this opportunity to learn," Lakha Lama recalls.

Ringu Tulku arrived at the boarding school shortly after Lakha Lama. It was a year later and the school had just been relocated to the region of Himachal Pradesh in the northern part of India. Ringu Tulku was only nine years old at that time and one of the youngest monks, whereas Lakha Lama was seventeen and one of the oldest.



*Freda Bedi, 1911 - 1977*

Just like Lakha Lama, Ringu Tulku also mentions Freda Bedi with a deep sense of compassion:

“Freda Bedi did a lot of good for us. She was very wise and she got things done. She was a good teacher and she had a good heart. She helped many Tibetans both directly and indirectly,” said Ringu Tulku. He continued:

“Many years later I realized Freda Bedi must have been very thorough in her choice of English teachers for the school. I met a Scottish man some years ago who told me he applied for a job as an English teacher at the school, but he was turned down due to his Scottish accent, which I guess did not match the standards for correct pronunciation,” Ringu Tulku laughs.

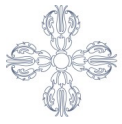
The smile grows only bigger as Ringu Tulku starts to explain how Freda Bedi spoiled the younger lamas serving them hot chocolate. That was a hit and the youngest lamas often went by Freda Bedi’s quarters making noise in hope for an invitation for yet another cup of the sweet cocoa.

## The students in Dalhousie



*In blue circles from the left; Lakha Lama and Ringu Tulku at The Young Lama School, Dalhousie, India 1961*

The first years it was primarily young reincarnated, highly developed, tulkus living at the boarding school. It is said that tulkus have chosen to be reborn on Earth out of compassion for all living beings. They are in Tibetan referred to as “Rinpoche,” which is a respectful honorific meaning “the precious one.”



It was in other words, a unique group of young tulkus and lamas that had gathered at the boarding school and they came from all four main lineages in Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Gelugpa and Sakyapa.<sup>1</sup>

Lakha Lama and Ringu Tulku remember there were children of all ages, but not many monks to teach the students. In fact, there was only one to teach them the first year and that was Ringu Tulku's own teacher. He had to take care of all the students and the teachings on his own.

Later more lamas and tulkus started to arrive from the different lineages, as well as English teachers and volunteers that wanted to help out. The numbers at the school quickly grew:

"We were about thirty students the first year. The second we were about forty. We all lived together in the big bungalow and there were many students in the same room. There were two or three large rooms with ten students or so sleeping together in each of them. There was also a big dining hall. Here we all had to sit on the floor and eat at small round tables. We had plates and glasses and ate with spoons. We did not know how to eat with knives and forks. We learned that later.

"The house the students lived in served as a place both for study and as their home. It was a very big house, almost like a castle, built by the British during the colonial times," Ringu Tulku recalls.

## Everyday life in Dalhousie

Life at the boarding school followed a steady routine. In the spring and summertime, the students stayed in Dalhousie and each fall and winter they left to go to Delhi:

"It was very cold in Dalhousie during the months of winter. That is the reason we left for a monastery in Delhi. Here we remained until next spring. In Delhi we did not have regular teachings like in Dalhousie where we had a mandatory schedule," Ringu Tulku explains.

In Delhi they ate and slept in Sikh-temples for free. This was thanks to a Sikh tradition of providing free food and shelter for all who pass through one of their temples. This was arranged by Freda Bedi's husband, who was a Sikh and a descendent of the family who founded the Sikh-religion in Punjab in Northern India.

In Dalhousie, the schedule was tighter:

"We got up before sunrise and had one hour of morning prayers before breakfast. Then we had English lessons before lunch and lessons in Tibetan in the afternoon. We were all taught English and we studied hard. We were all at the same level regardless of age," Ringu Tulku adds.

## An introduction to the "West"

The trips to Delhi and the teachings in Dalhousie played an important role in the young monks' upbringing and prepared them for life in a new and, for them, strange place.

"We just arrived from Tibet and a life that was still like it was the seventh or eighth century. In Tibet we did not have money. We did not have banks, shops or post offices. Everything was completely different (compared to the west; ed.). Everything! For example, how to use a toilet,

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<sup>1</sup> source: [www.religion.dk](http://www.religion.dk)



take a shower etc. had to be taught. It was like coming to a completely new world. In my family, I was the first to learn about the world outside Tibet," Ringu Tulku explains.

In Delhi the students were often invited to social gatherings and public events. They visited embassies and were introduced to different cultures. They also met the vice president of India (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's first vice president and later the second president; ed.), one of the greatest philosophers in India at that time.

The students also had guests visiting in Dalhousie. They learnt about other religions and visited Hindu temples, Christian churches and mosques. Asked if these experiences had an impact on the tulkus' way of teaching in the West later Ringu Tulku's answer was clear:

"Yes, I would say so. It had a huge influence. Especially the close bonds and relations between us students and the fact that we studied together had a significant influence on us all. We also met all these people that came to visit us. We were being introduced to other languages and were taught geography, history and many other subjects that we did not know anything about at the time. We even had yoga lessons. Sometimes a Japanese master would also come to teach us the art of tea ceremonies, and once the Indian prime minister visited us."

Ringu Tulku points out that even though the teaching in Dalhousie was formal the education of the young tulkus also included learning, in an informal way, the most simple and practical skills:

"It came down to everything, from learning how to eat with a knife and fork, to how to cross a road, to how to brush your teeth and take a shower. I was literally put in a tub and scrubbed many times because I did not want to have a bath. We learned to eat the Indian way which means you are not at all allowed to eat with your left hand."

Ringu Tulku smiles and continues thoughtfully: "We were like little babies and had to learn everything all over again from the beginning. We needed a foundation to understand the new world we had just arrived in. We were introduced to the modern world. If we still lived in a monastery, just studying the Buddhist scripts thoroughly, we would not have been able to learn about the world outside. So, we had to make an effort. It was not only courses and Buddhist texts. It was an introduction to life itself."

## A brotherhood of monks

Friendships were quickly built in Dalhousie. The school was a place of freedom and peace compared to the hardship and devastating experiences the young children had suffered before their escape from the Chinese invaders:

"I really liked it (Dalhousie; ed.). We had all experienced so many troubles. We escaped from Tibet. For almost two years we were chased by the Chinese army. I was very happy to manage to get to Dalhousie. It could only get better from there. Everybody was kind towards us and we got to learn. It was a good time," Ringu Tulku remembers.

"The circumstances created a unique brotherhood," Lakha Lama explains:

"It did not matter which lineages or tradition in Tibetan Buddhism we belonged to. We were always happy and harmonious together. We had good relations with one another. We lived and



studied together. We were just together and that was all that mattered. It was not important where we came from in Tibet or which traditions we belonged to.”

Also, Ringu Tulku recognizes this:

“We were all very close. We were like brothers. I remember that because I was so young, the others took really good care of me. It was nice. Nobody bullied each other and we had a lot of fun, telling a lot of stories.”

Ringu Tulku remembers one incident in particular, when he was bitten by a scorpion:

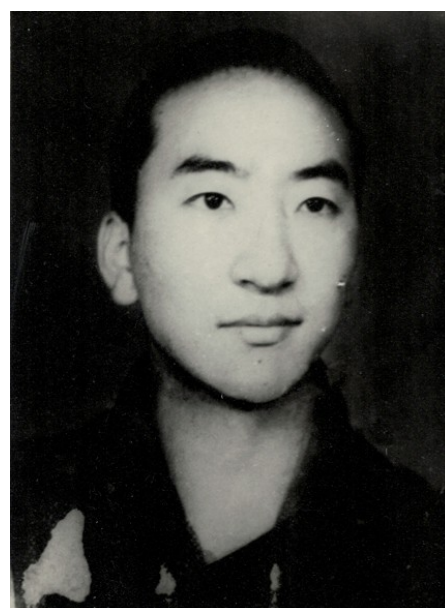
“It was early morning, and I was not fully awake. It was dark outside and my shoes were outside. A scorpion had found shelter in my shoe and bit me. My foot swelled, so Lakha Lama and some of the other students carried me on their backs and ran to get help as fast as possible.”

## Lakha Lama a young man of dignity

Ringu Tulku talks with deep compassion as he looks back on how he remembers Lakha Lama from back then:

“Lakha Rinpoche was older than many of us students. He was a handsome and very well-dressed man who, one of the students told me, was considered a high-ranking lama. He was not ‘just’ a lama, a teacher, but more to be compared to His Holiness the Dali Lama.”

Ringu Tulku explains Lakha Lama was the spiritual leader of a big monastery in Batang located in Eastern Tibet. He remembers that the tulkus at the boarding school belonging to the same lineage as Lakha Lama (Gelugpa; ed.) all sought out his approval and respect. This was something Ringu Tulku believes Lakha Lama was aware of during his time in Dalhousie:



*Lakha Lama, early 1960'th*

“Lakha Rinpoche acted with dignity. He did not run around, and he did not make fun as much as the rest of us. And he always spoke properly. The rest of us were more careless. We ran around and chatted and made fun with each other. So did Lakha Rinpoche, but in a more disciplined and honorable way. Lakha Rinpoche also made jokes and fun, but he was also more attentive to others. He was kind and gentle.”

Lakha Lama also remembers that he was more conscious of the effect of his own behavior and shared, “I really did try to be relaxed while also behaving in an honorable way. I remember I did my very best to keep up a good mood and have good relations with the other students from the different lineages in Tibetan Buddhism who were gathered in Dalhousie. I tried not to think ‘your lineage’ or ‘my lineage,’ but to remember that we were all equal.”

Lakha Lama goes on, explaining, “I will not go into details regarding the friendship between Ringu Tulku and myself. But in general, I will say this about our relationship. Ringu Tulku had a very strict and dominating teacher who wanted to control him and because of this I tried to support Ringu Tulku as much as possible. I do not believe I did anything extraordinary. Instead of



just talking to Ringu Tulku, I tried to be more relaxed and calm towards him and support him morally in the best way I could.”

Lakha Lama explained that there was not much spare time in Dalhousie. A big part of the day would be spent together with the rest of the students. They were often in big groups. Where there was one, more quickly gathered. The little time left after studies was spent walking, talking, playing Tibetan games with dice, playing badminton—or napping. There was a good energy and no hierarchy.

“We did not ask each other for advice. If we needed advice we went to our teachers. We were just friends. The oldest of course wanted to help us (the young ones; ed.), if we needed anything. We Tibetans are not so emotional,” Ringu Tulku says with a smile on his face.

The debates, however, were another story:

“Any subject you studied—or just about any subject at all was up for discussion amongst the students. Sometimes the debates got so intense that the wooden floor actually broke (when the students eagerly jumped up and down during debates; ed.!) We really used a lot of time to debate. It could go on for hours and it was both interesting and funny to watch. So yes, the debates were often ‘heated’.” Ringu Tulku laughs out loud.



*From the left Lakha Lama and Ringu Tulku reunion in Helsingoer, Denmark, 2022*

## Nothing like Dalhousie

The friendships formed in Dalhousie would not have been possible under normal circumstances in Tibet, where the students and tulkus would have remained in their own monasteries.



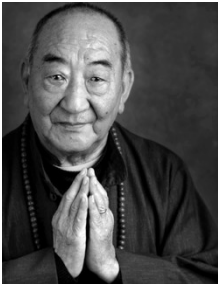
It was an unusual time according to Ringu Tulku. New foundations were being built towards a bigger understanding and openness, reaching further than their own lineage and traditions:

“What happened was historic. Nothing like that had happened before, in Tibet. And also, never since. So, it was very special,” emphasized Ringu Tulku. He continued: “I see it very clearly now. All of us (tulkus; ed.) became very non-sectarian. We studied together, and we got to know each another very well. We became more open minded towards the different Buddhist traditions, and we looked out for and took care of all the lineages. I see that quality in all lamas and tulkus from Dalhousie.”

Most of the students did not stay in Dalhousie for more than one or two years. Afterwards many returned to their own monasteries, while others travelled to the West and started to teach.

Ringu Tulku and Lakha Lama did not see each other much for many years after Dalhousie, but they kept in contact. As Ringu Tulku puts it:

“The time in Dalhousie left a powerful imprint on us all. We were a team.”



Lakha Lama, born Thupten Dorjee in Tibet in 1942, was appointed as a spiritual leader for around 100,000 inhabitants in eastern Tibet at the age of five. In 1959 he fled to India as a refugee and then came to Denmark in 1976, where he settled and started a family.

Based on basic human needs, Lakha Lama shares the Dharma and its message in a unique and simple way that makes the philosophy and methods accessible to all.

Lakha Lama's many humanistic and cross-cultural activities have attracted thousands of followers within Scandinavia and throughout the world. One Swedish follower commented: “*Lakha Lama is to Scandinavia and many Tibetans what the H. H. Dalai Lama is to the world.*”



Ringu Tulku was born in 1952 in Kham Lingsang, Eastern Tibet. He is recognized by His Holiness the 16th Karmapa as the reincarnation of Ringu Tulku. He is a highly respected Buddhist lama who has written several books including “Path to Buddhahood: Teachings on Gampopa's Jewel Ornament of Liberation”.

Since 1990, Ringu Tulku has traveled the world teaching Buddhism and meditation. Among others, he has traveled in Asia, Europe, North and South America and Australia. He is the founder of Bodhicharya, an international, non-profit organization that aims to preserve and translate Buddhist scriptures, promote dialogue across cultures and religions, and initiate social projects ([www.bodhicharya.org](http://www.bodhicharya.org)). Ringu Tulku is the official representative of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa in Europe<sup>2</sup>.

## “Friendship

*You know all the good and bad qualities of your friend, and still you like the person. You see this person as a friend, and you yourself as his or her friend. Your friendship is not affected by your friend's actions. This person is your friend no matter what this person might be and you want to help no matter what. Friendship is more about yourself than the other person. Sometimes people say to me “I have no friends.” Then it is your own personal opinion. But it is not necessarily what your friends think of you.*

—Ringu Tulku

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.bodhicharyana.org> and <https://www.rigpawiki.org>