Eminent Personalities

Geshe Ngawang Tashi Bapu or simply Lama Tashi is the President of the Siddhartha Foundation in India and former Principal Chant Master of the Dalai Lama’s Drepung Loseling Monastery in India—one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the world with over 3,000 monks. He has travelled extensively throughout the planet, teaching, performing, and recording with monks from his Monastery. He is also the first monk and one of the very few Indians to be nominated for the prestigious Grammy awards. Lama Tashi has mastered the unique multi-phonic chanting style and popularized its mysticism in the western world. After performing the sacred Buddhist chants with top celebrities all across the world, Lama Tashi has come back to India and tried to introduce some of the new technological advances in the traditional Buddhist monasteries here. For example Lama Tashi has helped introduce many monks of his monastery to the Internet and email, thus helping Tibetan Buddhism to enter into the 21st century. Throughout Lama Tashi’s world travels, he has taught extensively and performed and recorded both independently (“The Lost Chord”, “Chant Masters” and “Medicine Buddha”), and with monks of the Drepung Loseling Monastery (“Sacred Tibetan Chants”, “Sounds of the Void”, “Sacred Music/Sacred Dance” and “Compassion”). One of Lama Tashi’s most admirable activities is through the Siddhartha Foundation, a charitable organization which he founded. It is dedicated to preserving and invigorating the Tibetan Buddhist Culture. Though a celebrity monk, name and fame has not affected him, and he remains the simple, compassionate monk that he always has been. No doubt he has learned from the West many new things, but he is proud of his monastic upbringing and wishes for all people to spend at least some years in a monastery so as to form strong healthy characters and remain true to his/her principles. The author of this article on Lama Tashi, Shri Aiyushman Dutta has dealt with his subject in a fitting manner. This article of his had earlier been published in the Melange magazine of the daily newspaper The Sentinel. The author forwarded it to us for publication in Ishani and we are carrying it as we feel that we must tell the readers of Ishani about the illustrious figure from the North-east.

A.A.

The Monk Who Mesmerised the World...

Aiyushman Dutta

Prologue:

For centuries altogether, Buddhist monks and monasteries have been shrouded in secrecy. Cut away from the world, the monasteries form a world in themselves; a world where humanity and the basic tenets of the human condition are still part of the lifestyle of the monks. As a religion, Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to insight into the true nature of life. Buddhist practices like meditation are means of changing oneself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom.
The Power of Sound

Religion is sound. This is how the high priests of Tibetan Buddhism describe the importance of music in their worship. For Tibetan monks, Buddhist chants form the path for their liberation. The life of a Tibetan monk involves practicing compassion for all people with the studying and memorization of sacred texts at the core of this practice. This memorization is carried out by constant oral repetition to a specific tune to which it is later chanted.

Tibetan Buddhist chants were first performed in front of the western world audience after Dalai Lama escaped to India following the Chinese invasion of Tibet. One of His Holiness Dalai Lama’s followers, Geshe Ngawang Tashi Bapu has mastered the unique multi-phonic chanting style and popularised its mysticism in the western world, to become the first monk and one of the very few Indians to be nominated for the prestigious Grammy awards. His achievement does not end here. After performing the sacred Buddhist chants with top celebrities all across the world, he has come back to the monasteries and tried to introduce some of the new technological advances in the traditional Buddhist monasteries.
A Monpa, Lama Tashi was born to Krishok and Karma Tashi of Thembang village of West Kameng district in Arunachal Pradesh. His primary education begun at the age of 6 when his father enrolled him in the newly opened primary school of the village - Pangona Government school - where he studied till the eight standard. A further spell of three years of study in Government Namshu School ensued before he was initiated into the Gontse Gaden Rabgyeling monastery in Bomdila to complete the foundation course of his education. During the same time, the monastery relocated to Karnataka as the Drepung Loseling monastery, where he stayed for twenty long years to complete his higher studies. In Drepung Loseling monastery, Tashi’s major subject was ‘Philosophy in Debate system’, which is a Socratic view of Tibetan Buddhism.

It was in Drepung Loseling monastery that Tashi had his first brush with multi-phonic chanting or the one-voice chant, as it is more commonly known. Thought to arise only from the throat of a person who has realized selfless wisdom, throat or multi-phonic chanting is defined as multiple tones emanating from a single larynx. The harmonic frequencies created by the human vocal apparatus are harnessed in throat singing to select overtones by tuning the resonance in the mouth. The result of tuning allows the singer to create more than one pitch at the same time, with the capability of creating six pitches at once. “Multi-phonic chanting is in vogue in Mongolia though it is prevalent here as well. It is characterised by a deep, vibrating voice, which is produced continuously for 8-9 minutes at a stretch,” says Tashi.

The Tibetan monks believe, that in the creation of the ‘One Voice Chord’, the monks do not ‘make’ the sound. Rather, they become a vehicle through which the sacred sound may manifest. This is a basic principle contained in the Tibetan Buddhist teachings of sacred sound. Tibetan multi-phonic chanting has its own characteristic sound, which has been compared to the Australian Digeridoo or resonance of a drum. The chants are usually metrical, in both
symmetrical and anti-symmetrical measures, and the chant is produced by a close-throated, constricted style, deep in pitch. Tashi tells me, “I mastered the multi-phonic chant and was appointed as the Umzey or Head chant-master of the Drepung Loseling monastery in 1999. I served in that capacity for five years before coming back to Arunachal Pradesh in 2004”.

Lama Tashi Teaching at the 7th Annual Healing Sounds Intensive.

Tashi got the opportunity to perform the famous Buddhist chant in front of the entire world, and also with top celebrities throughout the globe. Though Tibetan chanting was first experienced by Western listeners in 1967, it was Tashi and the monks who have travelled around the world, performing in prestigious places as Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera House. A number of CDs with Tibetan chanting has also been released, thanks to Tashi’s efforts.

It was in 1992 that it all started. The compassion, wisdom and vocal abilities of Lama Tashi so impressed the teachers and spiritual leaders of the monastery that in 1991 he was chosen as one of the monks to travel the world on the Sacred Music and Dance tour of 1991-1992. For 11 months, he travelled throughout the United States, Mexico and Canada performing on the tour. “We performed our chants in more than 100 cities all over Europe. It was a great learning experience,” he says. Tashi toured North America once again in 1999 as part of another tour sponsored by the Drepung Loseling monastery and the Richard Gere foundation. In April 1999, he performed for His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Curitiba in Brazil, alongside renowned Brazilian artists like Gilberto Gil. Later the same year, he led the multi-phonic chant before His Holiness the
Dalai Lama at the World Festival of Sacred Music at the Hollywood Bowl in Pasadena, California and at Central Park in New York City.

The multi-phonic chant, like other aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, is also shrouded in mystery. The western world was particularly curious as to how a human being can produce multi-phonic sounds to give the impression of several singers performing together. Before leaving for the second leg of his world tour, two groups of medical experts had examined Tashi’s throat to unravel the secret behind his vocal chords, not to mention the numerous tests that Tashi had to undergo at hospitals in Canada and the United States. A bemused Tashi recounts, “Once they (doctors) even inserted a camera through my nose to look at my throat. I don’t know anything else but I felt very sleepy when my throat was being examined.”

Tashi and his group of Tibetan monks started recording the Tibetan chanting albums after coming back from the 1992 tour. Finally it was the Tibetan Master Chants that elevated Lama Tashi to international stardom. Tibetan Master Chants was nominated for the 2005 Grammy awards in the Best World Music category. The Singing Monk, Tashi was one of the nominees in the Best Traditional World Music category at the 2006 Grammy Awards.

The album, Tibetan Master Chants, is a unique collection of 12 Buddhist religious hymns rendered in Tashi’s sonorous voice, accompanied by a traditional gong and cymbals. “Vibrating my vocal chords and producing multiple overtones with deep sounds while chanting the mantras is the specialty of the album,” the monk, who loves Hindi film music and folk songs, says. The unassuming 38-year-old tribal monk says that he never in his “wildest dreams” expected to be in the running for the coveted prize when he started chanting Buddhist hymns and added, “I only wanted to spread peace and love in the world through the traditional Buddhist chants.”

Recounting the Grammy nomination, Tashi - the principal of the Central Institute of Himalayan Studies at Dahung, Arunachal Pradesh - says, “We did some dubbing so as to give the feeling that the mantras are being chanted by a huge group of people. Some journalists and musicians in America asked me if I was a rocker. I said I want people to listen to our hymns and get peace of mind. I have dedicated my life to Buddhism and the Grammy nomination is indeed recognition of our beautiful religious hymns that symbolize peace and love.”

Tashi has rubbed shoulders with the biggest names in the world entertainment industry. Hailing from a monastery and having his roots in a remote village of North-eastern India, has the success had any effect on him? Tashi doesn’t feel so, “Sometimes I feel that I am really lucky to have met stars. But from a spiritual point of view, it is not such a big deal.” Even if the limelight didn’t affect the monk, there must have been some kind of a conflict between his monastic upbringing and way of life with the far more liberal western culture.
It would be a travesty of the truth to say that Tashi was not affected by the outside world for he was instrumental in introducing modern technological gadgets inside the monasteries. He has played a major role in taking Tibetan Buddhism to the 21st century by introducing many monks of his monastery to the internet and e-mail. He says, “Exposure has a lot to offer. I began studying basic English in the monastery but it was through my travels and performances that I became fluent in the language. I remember carrying two dictionaries with me at all times and would constantly engage people in conversation in order to better my language skills. It’s only when you travel that you realize the positive aspects of other cultures and try to introduce them in your own traditional cultures.” He added, “I never wanted to change the system but just try and take in the positive aspects of the outside world inside the monastery. As head chant-master, I had thought of installing broadband connection inside the monastery to transmit to the outside world the happenings inside. We did bring in some important changes in the field of education and healthcare though.” It is also a lesser known fact that Tashi planned to preserve the Tibetan chants in digital format so as to aid in its preservation. When asked, he said, “See, I was trying to preserve the rich Buddhist traditions. As Head chant-master for four years, I tried a lot of things. However, you can say that it didn’t really meet up to my calls.”

Tashi has fond memories of his early monastic life. He grins, “I love the monastery very much. During my entire childhood, I was lost in monastic studies.” Life in a monastery is difficult with the stipulations and regulations. This is evident as Tashi recounts, “I used to wake up at 5:30 in the morning and study the whole day to go to bed only at around 2’0 clock at night. We didn’t really have good food nor the basic hostel facilities but it has made me what I am today. Coming to my question on conflict between traditionalism and modernity, Tashi grins and says, “If you live the western style of life, you will become spoilt - you won’t study, you’ll become bad. Though I wish that the monastery should become more modern but at times, I also wish that people should spend at least a part of their early lives in monasteries. With so much of technology and modernity around, man tends to forget his principles.” He added, “I seriously feel that both the outside world and the monastery have a lot to learn from each other. Monasteries have their own way of living, their own world. On the other hand, western society has its own rules of conduct. Monasteries should also learn from outsiders while outsiders should also learn from monasteries.”

Spending almost one-third of his life inside the closed environs of the traditional monasteries and then suddenly encountering the whole, bad, wide world must have been difficult for Tashi. It would be completely natural to expect that the outside life must have worked a bit of its charm on the monk. He disagrees though. “As a monk, I took the four roots vows - shall not kill, shall not lie, shall remain a celibate and shall not steal. Of course, we took a lot of other vows like being sincere, staying away from intoxicants, etc. It becomes very difficult to practice those vows in modern society. Everywhere
you go, everyone is trying to cheat you, trying to take your belongings away. But if you can practice those vows, that is what makes you a truly great man.” He adds, “Where is the world going? Everyone wants to be rich, to be famous. And to reach that ambition, people resort to stealing, to lying and working with terrorists. That is the most upsetting part of living in the modern world - seeing the basic principles of mankind disintegrate before your eyes.”

The sun had long descended from the skies and the monks who were waiting beside us were slowly starting to make their way out of the room we were sitting in. I realized it was time for me to bid adieu to the celebrity monk. When you are in the presence of Lama Tashi, you are in the presence of compassion itself. I realized it was time for me now to experience that aura of peace and compassion itself as Lama Tashi said his goodbyes and sat down with the monks to rehearse the globally acclaimed ‘multi-phonic chant’. It was only then I realized the power of sound that captured the entire essence of those moments, moments I will forever cherish in my heart.

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