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Samari Batres

University of Redlands

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THE FLOURISHING OF THE LOTUS FROM THE CACTUS: 
THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEXICAN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Samari Batres
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I. Introduction

Religion is a force of change and at the same time, a force of tradition. When a person converts to a new religion, it shapes their life drastically and the individual can potentially transform their society through their individual conversion. Mexican Tibetan Buddhists is not a common combination of words, but people who identify themselves as the latter might not see the categories as separate as they appear initially. The arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in Mexico has caused the religion to take on characteristics that are particular to Mexican culture and at the same time, the religion has begun to shape the lives and perceptions of the Mexican communities.

This research focuses on the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Mexico and its influence on practitioners through three focal points. First, it draws upon online news coverage of Buddhist events to uncover the public opinion of Buddhism. Second, four interviews were conducted with practitioners, three Buddhist nuns, two of which are Mexican and one Mexican lay practitioner in order to give a direct account of what it is like to be Buddhist in Mexico. All three of the Mexican interviewees were or are members of Casa Tibet and the American nun who was interviewed serves as a spiritual leader to this center. Third, there is an analysis of the online teachings on a page named faceBuda directed towards the Spanish-speaking community in order to see what things are emphasized in teaching this new audience. These three sources show that Tibetan Buddhism has influenced Mexican culture just as the Mexican converts own cultural backgrounds influence the way they practice their Buddhism. At the same time, practicing Buddhism influences a person’s world view which then influences those around the convert and their view of this religious alternative. Finally, this work puts Mexican experience with Tibetan Buddhism in conversation with the United States and Germany and analyzes the
similarities and difference of Buddhism as it develops in Mexico. Through these different perspectives we see that a Mexican cultural focus on family and community has become a central factor in the formation of Tibetan Buddhist communities in Mexico. As such, communities and the relationship of the individual with the community become central to Tibetan Buddhist practice in Mexico.

The spread of Tibetan Buddhism is the result of a tragic event in Tibetan history. Scholar Diane Morgan retells the story, "The disaster was the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. Before the invasion, it is estimated that about 20 percent of the Tibetan population were lamas (Buddhist monks)." A large amount of Tibetans took on vows, which points to the deep religiosity of the Tibetans. After the invasion, many Tibetans were forced into exile. This event in Tibetan history can be seen as a mixed blessing. The horror of the invasion cannot be overstated, but this forced exile then led to the spread of Tibetan culture and religion. Before the invasion, they were rather isolated and their religious tradition was confined to Tibet. A key figure of the global recognition of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama’s role as a public figure solidified in 1989 when he was awarded the Noble Prize. The Dalai Lama is a publicly respected figure around the world and believed to be the XIV incarnation of the spiritual leader of Tibet. The idea that a spiritual leader will be reincarnated and would willingly put himself through the cycles of samsara in order to help other sentient beings emphasizes the characteristics of compassion that Tibetan Buddhism teaches. Maybe it is these teachings on compassion that have allowed for Tibetan Buddhism to grow across the world outside of its original contexts. The Dalai Lama’s focus on keeping the Tibetan culture alive and his role as an

1 Diane Morgan, The Buddhist Experience in America (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 211.
2 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 212.
international figure has led to the establishment of centers focused on educating foreign communities on Tibetan Buddhism.

The Tibetan Buddhist centers in Mexico that are directly connected to the Dalai Lama are called “Casa Tibet” (Tibetan House). They were inaugurated on the 2nd of July of 1989 during the 14th Dalai Lama’s first visit to Mexico as the first Cultural Embassy of Tibet in Latin America. On their web page, they express that their purpose was not easy since they wished to educate the Mexican community about the Tibetan culture but that they now had reaped the results of their work, with more than 2000 active members in Mexico and Central America. For more than 20 years now, these centers have spread teachings with some people choosing to convert to Buddhism. The two Tibetan Buddhist Mexican nuns who now live in India that I interviewed first found Tibetan Buddhism through Casa Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism is growing in Mexico, not because Tibetans are immigrating to Mexico, but because Mexican people are converting. To think of Mexican Tibetan Buddhists opens many questions and possibilities and this research begins to scratch the surface of this new development of Tibetan Buddhism.

Conversion is a process of inner and outer change and as Mexican people convert to Tibetan Buddhism, their lives are being transformed significantly. Before exploring the stories of converts the term “conversion” has to first be defined and explored. Lewis R. Rambo defines conversion as, “a process of dynamic and multifaceted transformation.” Religious conversion can change a person’s life since religion can give meaning and purpose to people’s lives. A convert chooses to transform him or herself through religion. Rambo divides the stages of a conversion into the following: context, crisis, search, encounter, interaction, commitment, and

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3 Casa Tibet now has 17 locations in Mexico.
5 “Casa Tibet Mexico.”
consequences. The first of these, context, is present at all times. Rambo defines context as, "the environment in which the conversion takes place." To be more specific, context includes, "a field of forces composed by the people, the events, the experiences, and the institutions which operate over the conversion." Rambo talks about two layers of context, the macrocontext and the microcontext. The macrocontext is the global environment while the microcontext is the convert’s friends, family and ethnic group. Microcontext is specific to the individual, while macrocontext can be applied to the present state of an entire community or country. The second stage of conversion, crisis, defines what initiates the search in the convert.

Rambo defines two different kinds of crisis, the first questions the fundamental orientation of one’s life, and the other which is a result of the accumulation of many events which finally lead to a crisis. In other words, a person could find herself before a big event which triggers a search for meaning, while another person’s crisis will develop slowly until eventually it leads to a search. Rambo explains that a crisis “can be of religious, political, psychological or cultural origin.” A person does not necessarily have to begin their search for meaning because of religion, but for any other reason that makes the individual feel unsatisfied with the present state of their life. Trying to find a universal reason for conversion is unproductive because of the particularity of the microcontext of each convert. Therefore when speaking about the crisis stage of each convert, it will explain his or her own internal reasons that triggered the search, adding to the complexity of conversion and allowing for a richer conversation surrounding these conversions. The next stages—search, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences—start with the context and crisis. The later stages are

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7 Rambo, Psicosociología de la conversión religiosa, 45.
8 Rambo, Psicosociología de la conversión religiosa, 45.
9 Rambo, Psicosociología de la conversión religiosa, 47.
10 Rambo, Psicosociología de la conversión religiosa 76.
11 Rambo, Psicosociología de la conversión religiosa 73.
intricately woven into the present lives of the converts. To start exploring conversion to Tibetan Buddhism, there must be an understanding of Mexican religiosity because it is distinctive from other countries with Judeo-Christian ideologies due to the religious history of Mexico that shapes the Mexican cultural macrocontext today.

Before the Spanish conquest, the indigenous cultures in present-day Mexico had their own religions and beliefs. Even though it appears that these faiths have been completely wiped out, many characteristics of these early religions persist in Catholicism today. The scholars Standish and Bell state, “the Spaniards came to the Americas with the purpose of spreading Catholicism, and they were highly effective, if somewhat brutal, in doing so.”¹² This style of conversion is violent and oppressive and the converts did not make the decision to convert, but they were forced to convert by brute force. But the traditions of the indigenous communities were not crushed completely, since “the popular Catholic veneration of saints and martyrs, together with manifestations of the Virgin Mary, meshed almost perfectly with pre-Hispanic polytheism.”¹³ In the Spanish conqueror’s desperate attempt to completely crush what they considered a lesser religion, the cultural roots took life in Catholicism and then shaped the religion itself. Today, there is proof of this continuity of indigenous religious belief as it has transformed into religious syncretism, where the religions of the Old and the New World interacted and combined. In present day Mexico, one example of such syncretism is the Virgin of Guadalupe. Standish and Bell describe the multiple functions of the Virgin since, “from the point of view of the indigenous population, the dark-skinned Virgin could be seen as a modified version of the earth goddess Tonantzin.”¹⁴ There is an interesting overlap between this characteristic Mexican way of practicing Catholicism is an interesting overlap with the many

¹² Peter Standish and Steven M. Bell, Culture and Customs of Mexico (Connecticut: Greenwood Press 2004), 37.
¹³ Standish and Bell, Culture and Customs of Mexico 38.
¹⁴ Standish and Bell, Culture and Customs of Mexico 45.
deities of Tibetan Buddhism. Below I explore the similarities among the Catholic saints and Tibetan Buddhist deities and how the role of the deities and saints are quite similar. To say that Mexico is almost completely Catholic would be an accurate statement, but to ignore the fact that this Catholicism is a result of a syncretism of religions is unproductive in understanding Mexican religiosity and spirituality since this syncretism shapes Mexican religious and cultural practices today.

Scholar Dinorah B. Mendez defines Mexican religiosity using its rich and complex history to define its present. In her article, "Key Characteristics of Mexican Spirituality" Mendez studies the characteristics that create the unique identity of Catholic Mexicans. Mendez emphasizes that her study focuses on "popular religiosity", which means the religious practices and spiritual beliefs of the majority of the population. The effects of the conquest on Mexican culture cannot be overstated, since these effects are visible to this day in the Mexican culture and religiosity. Mendez recognizes that in studying Mexican religiosity, one is dealing with what she calls, "mestizo complexity." This statement points to a peculiarity of the Mexican race. When the Spanish arrived, they mixed with the indigenous people. Therefore, most of the Mexican population is "mestizo", a mix of the indigenous race and the Spanish race. The mixed heritage reinforces the religious syncretism that Standish and Bell observed. Mendez identifies what she calls "five of the most important characteristics: sense of ritual, sense of mysticism, sense of sacrifice, sense of festivity and sense of community." All of these characteristics shape how Mexican people live their daily lives. Among these characteristics, similarities start to arise when comparing Tibetan Buddhism and Mexican religious practice. Two of these most

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significantly obvious from this list are the sense of ritual and the sense of community. Mendez’s explanations of these two characteristics, and later the interviewees that I discuss below prove the importance of these characteristics in the lives of the converts.

Some of the characteristics that define Mexican religiosity were common ground between Spanish Catholicism and Indigenous religion. Mendez explains that there were similarities between Spanish Catholic and Indigenous ritual practices in that they, “served to negotiate with the supernatural and had as an end to prevent adversity, to solve problems and difficulties, and/or to avoid causing harm to other.”18 Rituals and ceremonies then become a meeting ground for the sacred and the religious person. Ritual is also of central importance in Tibetan religious practice. Tibetan Buddhism is one of the branches of Buddhism that has many elaborate ritualistic practices that people perceive as inherent characteristics of religion in general. Mexican Catholic rituals revolve around many deities, similarly to Tibetan Buddhism. Mendez notes that, “there are many Christs and many Virgin Marys. To distinguish them, an adjective or identifying term has been added. For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Virgin of Carmen, the Virgin of Zapopan, Jesus of the Miracles, Lord of Chalco, and Jesus of the Great Power.”19 Though these figures are all just variations of one Christ, Mary, or saint, they come in various forms to fulfill the particular needs of the petitioner. Here, another similitude can be observed between Tibetan Buddhism and Mexican Catholicism. Morgan observed that there are many deities in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, the Bodhisattva Tara, “a savior-bodhisattva. She is one form of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, said to arise from his tears when he saw the horrors of hell and the sufferings of its inhabitants.”20 Someone who might have grown up in an extremely Catholic environment may find these many deities as a comforting thought since it is similar to the

20 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience in America, 214.
Catholic ideas of saints and Christ. Though the deities in Tibetan Buddhism do not serve the same exact purpose of Catholic saints, Mary and Christ, the rituals around these sacred figures hold similar significance, that of helping the devotee. The fifth characteristic that Mendez observed in Mexican religiosity was the sense of community that accompanies religion and is worth exploring as it will become extremely important to understanding the convert’s experience.

The average Mexican practices the Catholic religion differently than Catholics in other countries. Mendez explains that “Mexicans satisfy their need for a sense of community in their religious practices.” The emphasis on the sense of community is not something that only Mendez observed, but Damcho, one of the interviewees and an American Buddhist nun, also noticed this particular characteristic of Mexican Buddhists. She explained that collective projects worked very well in these communities because people enjoyed the sense of belonging that came with these projects. As Damcho observed when comparing her experiences in the United States and her experiences in Mexico, Mexican practitioners long for and feel comforted by a sense of community. Mendez traces the unique sense of community back to colonial times. She explains, “The sense of community was very important for the indigenous people” while among the Spaniards, “it is more difficult to see the sense of community because they show also an intense individuality.” These seemingly opposing characteristics have found a way to coexist and individuality and a sense of community both characterize Mexican culture and religiosity. Mendez explains, “Sometimes, the Mexican appears to be a closed being that preserves and maintains himself/herself distant from the world and all others... Then the

22 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
23 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
indigenous heritage, that considers the family as the principal line of defense for security for the individual, promotes loyalty and establishes strong bonds even within the neighborhood or hometown. These characteristics are reflected in their religious practice. Rites of passages like baptism and others are largely communal activities, when the entire family and community participate in the ceremony. Though these activities are symbols of the individual's relationship to the divine, the community still has an important role in the individual's religious practice that is often reason for celebration. Another peculiarity of Mexican religiosity is the way the religious person lives his or her own practice.

To be a Catholic in Mexico is reflected in an everyday manner, not just on Sundays at mass. Standish and Bell explain "for most Mexicans what really matters is informal, everyday rituals." An example of this is as follows: "a taxi driver who may never attend mass... may well have an image of the Virgin on his dashboard, and he may well cross himself every time his vehicle passes by a church. Evidence of religious habits such as this is widespread." Attending mass or others things that might be considered as indicators of religious affiliation are not as important in the Mexican cultural context. The proof of their faith is in their everyday living and the rituals surrounding their daily lives.

In the census of 1950 98.2% of Mexicans declared themselves Catholic, in the census of 2010 this number decreased to 89.3%. This might not seem like a big decline, but it does point to the fact that the Catholic Church is losing its exclusive hold on Mexico. A door has opened new religious alternatives. The Pentecostal movement is one of the alternatives which have gained a lot of momentum. The scholar Virginia Garrard-Burnett points out that, "even in the

26 Standish and Bell, Culture and Customs of Mexico 37.
27 Standish and Bell, Culture and Customs of Mexico 37.
case of a highly “Catholic” country like Mexico, deep pockets of Protestantism can be found in critical areas.”


She continues to explain that among the indigenous population of Chiapas, “only 54 percent... is Catholic, the other 46 is primarily Evangelico.”

Using the census numbers as well as the percentages of Mexicans in certain regions whom call themselves something other than Catholic, it can be concluded that the religious landscape is shifting and the Catholic Church is losing its all-powerful stance. Protestantism encompasses many denominations and they have begun to take root and expand throughout Latin America and Mexico. Garrard-Burnett states that, “Latin Americans who leave the Catholic Church are likely to change their religious affiliations many times, to fit their changing circumstance and perceptions of need.”

These many shifts reflect the search stemming from the crisis of the Mexican people and how this is now affecting the religious context of all of Mexico. Tibetan Buddhism is now another alternative to Catholicism and has begun to gain momentum as a recognized religion in Mexico.

II. The Experience of Tibetan Buddhism in Mexico

Buddhism is an ancient religion with an extremely diverse present. As scholar Diane Morgan expresses, “Buddhism is a religion, a philosophy and a way of life.”

One characteristic that sets Buddhism apart from other world religions is the idea that there is no concept of the self. Morgan explains that the implications of no self in comparison to selflessness by saying, “In Buddhism, however the idea of selflessness is not an ethical idea at all; it’s a profound


Garrard-Burnett “Like a Mighty Rushing Wind” 191.

Garrard-Burnett “Like a Mighty Rushing Wind” 202.

Morgan, The Buddhist Experience in America 1.
metaphysical truth." In contrast with Catholicism, where the individual fights for the salvation of his or her own soul, in Buddhism there is no soul and the ties among individuals are extremely complex. When there is no self, everything people do has a larger effect because all things are seen as interconnected. Another idea particular to Buddhism, is that suffering is caused by attachment, or grasping. To stop suffering, one must not be attached to anything. In Catholicism sin is the cause for damnation, and there is a single lifetime that has eternal effects, whereas in Buddhism there are multiple lifetimes and each lifetime is a result of past karma. The Buddhist goal is therefore to ultimately be liberated from the cycles of samsara, and this is obtained through intensive practice and the elimination of karma. In Catholicism, the goal is to live a life worthy of heaven. The two religions then are comparable, in their ritualistic practices, but different in their philosophy of life and the motivation for compassionate acts.

The Mahayana movement was well defined by the time it arrived in Tibet and then gave birth to Vajrayana. Morgan states that, "Philosophically Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana, is part of the great Mahayana tradition, although it has peculiarities that require it to be treated separately." The ideas of the bodhisattva have been transferred over to Tibet, but with new methods. In particular, what differentiates Vajrayana from Mahayana is "in the means it uses, not its goal. Vajrayana claims that it provides its practitioners a more skillful, faster way of getting from suffering to Buddhahood." The reason one would want to reach Buddhahood faster is for the sake of all beings. The faster one reaches this stage of knowledge, the faster one will be able to help others. Everything should be, ideally, for the sake of all sentient beings and the bodhisattva will go through any means possible to help others out of the cycle of samsara.

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33 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 37.
34 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 211.
35 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 212.
The figure of the bodhisattva is extremely central to Vajrayana Buddhism. Bodhisattvas put off nirvana and resolve to reach buddhahood in order to help other beings. These people show the deepest form of compassion because they willingly remain in samsara for the sake of others, understanding fully that there is no true self that exists separate from others. When Mahayana Buddhism arrived in Tibet, bodhisattva was translated into “byang chub sems dpa’, which means ‘awakening hero,’ indicating that the bodhisattva is viewed by Tibetans as a noble and courageous figure.” A selfless way of living characterizes this particular branch of Buddhism. It can even be concluded that isolation is useless, since Bodhisattvas cannot teach or help others if they isolate themselves. The motivation in this particular Buddhist path is to help others, for the sake of other beings. This leads to a very community-based practice, which can or cannot continue to be the focus once Tibetan Buddhism is outside of its original context. In Mexico, there appears to be a continuity of this focus on community among converts and due to this, there is common knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism even though this is not even a significant minority of Mexicans who adhere to this religion.

How does the average Mexican understand the role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Mexican religious landscape? My interviewees illuminated this for me. Though each one had a different experiences with Buddhism, one area of overlap between all three was the subject of the Dalai Lama. The 14th Dalai Lama has become a respected public figure across the world and Mexico is not the exception. When I asked Dromla, a Mexican Tibetan Buddhist nun, about how people reacted when they saw them on the street, she said, “The most common question is, are you with the Dalai Lama, you’re with the Dalai Lama right? And it’s fortunate to see how people

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recognize and identify such amazing people and identify with a certain kindness." 38 The view of the Dalai Lama is therefore positive and people react to the nuns positively because they connect them to the figure of the Dalai Lama. Nangpel, the other Mexican Tibetan Buddhist nun interviewee, shared a similar experience to Dromla’s. She said, “there is not a place where somebody doesn’t come up with incredible friendliness, wanting to know are you with the Dalai Lama? Are you Buddhist? Where is your center, do you teach meditation?” 39 The common knowledge of and respect of the Dalai Lama in Mexico is therefore significant for understanding Mexican Buddhism.

Aside from being an internationally recognized figure, the Dalai Lama’s role in the life of the Mexican community can be seen by the reaction to his latest visit to Mexico in September of 2011. During this visit more about 30,000 Mexicans attended to his talk in “Estadio Azul” titled, “Finding happiness in difficult times.” 40 Here the Dalai Lama took on issues that were relevant to the reality that Mexico faces as a country. He spoke about the “narcoviolencia”, the violence in Mexico caused by the drug wars, and explained that the solution is inside of every person. 41 One peculiarity of this visit was the peddlers who were selling souvenirs for the Dalai Lama’s visit, some of which included shirts and shot glasses with the Dalai Lama’s face imprinted on them. 42 These souvenirs resonate much with Standish and Bell’s statement of the everyday religiosity of most Mexicans. The people attending this even might never enter a Buddhist temple or go to a meditation class, but they might own a shot glass or even a t-shirt with the XIV Dalai Lama’s face on it. Also, one cannot assume that everyone in attendance of this even was

38 Karma Lodro Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
41 “El XIV Dalai Lama y 30 mil mexicanos en el Estadio Azul.”
42 “El XIV Dalai Lama y 30 mil mexicanos en el Estadio Azul.”
Buddhist or was even familiar with Buddhist teachings, but one can say that something drew each individual to the Dalai Lama’s talk. As Nangpel and Dromla have observed, the effects of this visit and the overall reputation of the Dalai Lama has peaked interest and maybe even brought a certain level of respect for Tibetan Buddhism. Damcho, an American Tibetan nun interviewee, explained that Mexicans seem to have a general respect for people in robes and it appears this respect does not get lost in how they react to seeing a Tibetan Buddhist nun on the sidewalks. It can be concluded that most Mexicans view Tibetan Buddhism with respect, maybe in part because they are familiar with the figure of the Dalai Lama and because they associate him with his peaceful talks in Mexico. Another factor is that it has now become part of popular culture. Also, all three nun interviewees have had positive reactions from the people they run into in the street which points to the overlaps between Tibetan Buddhism and Catholicism. Both traditions have a very strong monastic tradition and Mexicans are familiar with this kind of expression of religiosity. Tibetan Buddhism is not as foreign as it appears, with many overlaps that are familiar to people in a strongly Catholic country. Beyond the common recognition of Tibetan Buddhism and its acceptance, Mexican people are also converting to Tibetan Buddhism.

Damcho, an American Buddhist nun who has traveled to teach in Mexico multiple times, began to answer the question of why people are turning towards Buddhism in a largely Catholic country. Damcho expressed that many members of the sangha have shared with her that the sex scandals of the Catholic Church have left many people feeling deceived and this might have been a cause that led them to Buddhism. The crisis for these particular converts would have been a religious one. The religion they had lived for and that had given meaning to their lives had let them down and thus began the crisis that led them for the search of a new religion. Another

43 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
44 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
aspect of being Buddhist in Mexico that Damcho raised is that some people faced their family’s resistance when they converted, so they would bring their entire families in order to share why they were now Buddhists.45 The desire to share their religion points to the importance of family in the Mexican society. Converts are not necessarily joining Buddhism to go against their culture or their family, but instead they want to incorporate their families into their new practice.

Damcho observed that in comparison to her experiences in the United States, experiences in Mexico that Mexican practitioners long for and feel comforted by a sense of community.46 As stated earlier, Mendez explained that, “The sense of community was very important for the indigenous people” while among the Spaniards, “it is more difficult to see the sense of community because they show also an intense individuality.”47 It is worth mentioning these ideas again, because Damcho’s experience directly correlates with Mendez’s descriptions. These seemingly opposing characteristics have found a way to coexist and somehow both individuality and a sense of community both characterize Mexican culture and religiosity. Mendez explains, “Sometimes, the Mexican appears to be a closed being that preserves and maintains himself/herself distant from the world and all others... Then the indigenous heritage, that considers the family as the principal line of defense for security for the individual, promotes loyalty and establishes strong bonds even within the neighborhood or hometown.”48 These characteristics reflect in their practice. Dromla, Nangpel and Leslie are Mexican practitioners who reflect these ideas in very concrete ways.

45 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
46 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
Karma Lodro Dromla was born in the city of Mexico and her family members were all Catholics.⁴⁹ But even in this microcontext of her family which correlated with the macrocontext of Catholicism, Dromla said “I believe that I was raised in a very free and very loving environment with Catholics idea but with enough liberty to choose... and I have been given the liberty to choose since I was very young and I believe that that basic liberty is the one that made me search because I had questions that were not covered by the Catholic system.”⁵⁰ Dromla felt like Catholicism did not answer her questions. Her crisis stemmed from a religion not being able to fulfill her needs and answer her questions. Dromla expressed the freedom that her family provided and the loving environment that allowed for her to search for the answers to her questions, even outside of the more dominant religious context. Her microcontext, beginning from the way she was raised, allowed for the process of conversion to occur. Rambo explains that in some cases, the microcontext can neutralize the macrocontext it appears that that is what happened.⁵¹ Though the dominant culture has dictated what religion is most accepted, the families of the two nuns were supportive in letting them choose their own paths towards religion and spirituality. Here, questions of context and crisis are answered, but the next stages of conversion bring up the question of why did Dromla choose Tibetan Buddhism?

When Dromla was asked to describe how she found out about Tibetan Buddhism and to describe her encounter she explained, “I believe that like many people, trying to look for and find something in our interior I found this part of me... with meditations, with workshops, with talks and also with other friends that also liked to explore we began to understand Buddhism through a classmate that recommended it to us.”⁵² In her personal search, she found out about Buddhism

⁴⁹ Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
⁵⁰ Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
⁵¹ Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
⁵² Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
and began her exploration along with other friends who were on a similar search for something more. It appears that people who come into contact with Buddhism are mostly middle class and educated. She described, “in 2006 thanks to my mother who also attended to some of these workshops like these we received an email about a course...which was going to be completely in Spanish, so I send an email to my friends so they would go... and in that moment I met Venerable Damcho... and for me it is a complete encounter with myself, it was not an encounter with something else, but with all the answers I had been searching for. From that moment I decided to take Buddhism like a serious philosophy.”

Though she had been attending workshops in the past and using the tools that Buddhism offered, she said she had previously seen it as, “a social activity, a way to share with them these activities and this time that gave us tranquility and that would relax us.”

She did see the benefits of Tibetan Buddhism from the beginning, but she did not take it “seriously” and it was after meeting with Damcho at this workshop that she decided to take the teachings in a serious manner and to live according to them. While she first encountered it as a social activity, at this particular moment she realized that what she had been searching for was found in Buddhism. When asked why she attended her first Buddhist session she answered, “I believe that basically the answer is that I found myself within a personal search and Buddhism when I find it is certainly a curiosity.”

This curiosity then turned to devotion as she realized that her many questions had answers and that Buddhism provided a gateway to these answers.

Becoming a Tibetan Buddhist nun is a difficult life-changing decision, much like converting to Tibetan Buddhism. Dromla made this decision. She explained that what led her to her decision to be a nun was, “the conditions that I lived in, having all the desire to do it, I was

53 Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
54 Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
55 Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
not going to be able to accomplish it there... I wasn’t going to be able to accomplish the highest objective that I had to give, give something to others... I had a great desire to give.” Her words are very reflective in Buddhist practice and the way she has decided to live in her life. In the Buddhist philosophy of not self, the focus lies on the community and contributing to the community, much like Mexican conceptions of family and community as the first line of defense. For most Mexicans, family is more important than the individual, much like for a Bodhisattva, the liberation of others is more important than one’s own liberation. Dromla’s desire to be able to contribute to the lives of others led her down the path of Buddhism and she decided that taking on monastic vows would assist her in her contributions to the lives of others. She explained that the way she was raised demanded that she commit to what she chose, “that was a message I heard since I was young, this is the religion of your parents, and you can believe in it and commit to it, or chose another but commit to something so yes... there is liberty but there also needs to be commitment.” Dromla’s commitment is to others, which creates a very inclusive way of practicing religion. This resonates with Mendez’s words about religion as a path for balancing the Spanish and Indigenous heritage. The way Dromla was raised is reflective of Mexican religiosity, one that applied religious life and ritual to everyday life and demands some kind of commitment to your religious calling. Dromla took this and now lives in a way that reflects the way she was raised and her cultural context, but that takes on a new religious path to find meaning. Tenzin Nangpel is also a Mexican Tibetan Buddhist nun whom was interviewed on her conversion and the effects of Buddhism on her life today.

56 Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
57 Dromla, personal interview, October 18, 2012.
Tenzin Nangpel, a Mexican Buddhist nun, was born in the city of Mexico and comes from a family of thirteen brothers and sisters.⁵⁸ Nangpel’s microcontext was one of many faiths. She explained, “my grandfather was a Hassidic Jew, they immigrated from Poland to Mexico, so from my dad’s side the family was very Catholic and a very authentic Catholicism, and from my mom’s side Judaism, and a very Orthodox Judaism.”⁵⁹ One can just picture being brought up amongst two religions, both sides of which were very traditional. Nangpel expressed that between both traditions, “a space opened up for one to consider what was best and finally the important thing I learned in that time was a feeling of the spiritual, the spiritual dimension as a natural part of life.”⁶⁰ She was not necessarily indoctrinated in either one of the religions and thanks to this, she remained open to spirituality, not necessarily religiosity, which could have maybe been problematic with two very different traditions. Unlike Dromla’s uniform Catholic macrocontext, Nangpel’s microcontext was multifaceted and could have played a role in her personal search for a religious alternative that fulfilled her personal needs. Her ability to choose stemmed from the microcontext where she had that freedom to choose. Her search and encounter are similar in form to Dromla’s accounts.

When Nangpel was asked how she came into contact with Buddhism she answered, “the first contact was at the university, it was my time when I was in the university in the 60’s … then Buddhism was very important in the faculty of letters and literature so Zen Buddhism was very important but more from the perspective of poetry and oriental philosophy so my first contact was more like in that university atmosphere and poetry.”⁶¹ Buddhism therefore is not as foreign as it may appear initially. Tracing back to the 1960’s, people who went to universities could

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⁵⁸ Tenzin Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
⁵⁹ Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
⁶⁰ Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
⁶¹ Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
come into contact with the tradition, maybe not so much as a religion, but as a philosophy. This
can be paralleled with Dromla’s initial experience with Buddhism. Both Dromla and Nangpel
were not presented to Buddhism by a missionary who wanted to convert them. In Dromla’s case,
she initially saw Buddhism as something that could be applied to her daily life, regardless of
religion while in Nangpel’s case Buddhist philosophy was applied to literature. Though
Nangpel’s initial encounter did not trigger a conversion, later in her life Nangpel’s search led her
back to Buddhism.

Nangpel has previous contact with Buddhism, particularly Zen and she described, “I liked
Zen Buddhism but I felt that I was missing the social component... I kept missing that aspect of
how do I connect? Everything, let’s say, everything that I can earn through the practice in what
way can it benefit others? It can’t be that I will isolate myself in my cave very mellow while the
world is not doing well.” Echoes are heard between these two nun’s stories, with an emphasis
on giving to others. This area of service to others, which in Nangpel’s view, Zen Buddhism
lacked, led her to keep searching for something that in her words “connected” everything
together. She described, “one time a Buddhist monk went to Jalapa and I attended to his
conferences and I listened to the presentation of the Tibetan tradition and it seemed amazing
because there is the emphasis through the bodhisattva which is one of the crucial characters in
this tradition that puts the entire practice on its path.” Tibetan Buddhist served a dual role in
Nangpel’s life, one of giving her the tools to improve her life and one that gives her the method
for sharing what she learns with others. Nangpel explained that her lifelong search for meaning
found a direction in Tibetan Buddhism and the monastic life.

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63 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
Nangpel shared her motivation for choosing the monastic life, saying, “since I was very young I would find something that made sense and I wanted to see what was the way to carry it out truly, that is why I became a communist, a militant.” This particular lifestyle did not prove to work for her and she said that once she found Tibetan Buddhism, “I thought well, if the monastic path is the is a way in which my upmost preoccupation from when I open my eyes until I close them every day is understanding this path, putting it into practice, I don’t have anything else to do.” She felt like practicing this path was what she had searched for her entire life. Where other ideals had failed, Tibetan Buddhism offered something that Nangpel saw as genuine and real, and worth pursuing. In her interview, like in the interview with Dromla, the importance of community kept surfacing and taking a central role in their decisions and in how they experience their practice. How Nangpel’s family reacted to her conversion and how she wrestles with these very deep relationships shows once again that for Mexican practitioners, family does not lose its importance even if religious views are not shared by all of the family members.

Though Tibetan Buddhism does not make up a majority, or even a significant minority of Mexican religion, the views on Buddhism are very much available and according to interviewees and well accepted for the most part, though there is always some resistance. Nangpel’s family was not exactly thrilled to hear that she had decided to become Buddhist. She shared, “For my brothers it has been a personal decision, a bit strange for a lot of them, unsettling for others, like in the first two years they were a bit worried thinking, what sect did she get into?” The reaction is natural, considering that most Mexicans are not Buddhist and Buddhism is a religion that comes for another country, something foreign and new. Nangpel shared her family’s change of heart, she explained that once they figured out that Buddhism “has a solid base, bit by bit they

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64 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
65 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
have begun to come closer and today my family in general highly respects this spiritual path, including my decision to become a nun.”

Respect for the tradition translates to respect for the person who has decided to follow the path. To her family, it was important that Buddhism was a religion with a “solid base,” in other words, that it had roots and had been long-standing, similarly maybe to Catholicism and Judaism. Family acceptance may not be crucial for the convert in other contexts, but in a Mexican context where family is so important, to have your family understand and respect your spiritual path is extremely significant to the convert.

Nangpel expressed that when she decided to become a nun, “it was very difficult because I had to close chapters and imagine...closing chapters of 46 years of existence is extremely complicated and yes, I had to take care of my father and mother until they passed away, bury them, end my marriage harmoniously... separate myself gradually from my family... even though physically we were not together, there were strong connections, it’s a hard situation, we’re like clans.”

Nangpel’s story proves that family ties continue to be extremely important even after conversion. Nangpel did not simply step out and leave everything behind, she carefully “closed chapters” and most of these had to do with family. The fact that Nangpel had been married and has a son adds to the complexity of family ties that Nangpel deals with in her spiritual path.

Since Nangpel decided to take monastic vows later in her life, her ties to the people around ran very deep. She said, “I have a son and for him it was very hard, very difficult and until today it is still something that he is still trying to process.”

Nangpel’s story of renunciation resonates with other women in Buddhist and Catholic religious contexts across history who have decided to step out of the household duties and to focus on their spiritual lives.

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68 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
69 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
Though she left her role as a householder she did not leave her family behind. She said, "I don’t travel when I want to, I don’t visit family when I want to... and for my son it is a bit strange but well I have a granddaughter and for him it is like where is grandma?... but with time we have found that she is four years old and we have seen that it is not an obstacle that I live in India." Aside from being a nun, Nangpel does not forget her family roles which she has left behind physically, but has not abandoned. This reflects Mexican culture, a culture where family and community are the center of the individual’s life. Sharing one's beliefs with one's family is central and as Nangpel expressed, she wishes to share her experiences with her granddaughter: "I would want to be close to my granddaughter... simply in the sense of offering the richness that I have discovered and if she takes it or if she does not take it, it is her decision." Nangpel wants to share, not necessarily to convert, but because she has found something that has been good in her life and she wishes to give to others what she already has. The third interviewee, Leslie Serna is not a nun, but is an influential member of the community, particularly the online community.

Leslie Serna has a degree in sociology and a doctorate in education. All three of the interviewees attended a university at one point in their lives, which may point out that it is easier to come to contact with Buddhism as an educated person. Leslie is now divorced and has one son, whom is also a Buddhist. Leslie holds an important position in the online sangha. She uses her knowledge from education to make a website, faceBuda, useful for teaching people across the Spanish-speaking world about the Dharma. Leslie’s religious macrocontext differentiated much from her microcontext. When answering the question about what her

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70 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
71 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
73 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
religious context was like when she was growing up she said, "My family is Protestant, which is kind of strange in Mexico, maybe not so much nowadays, but when I was a young girl Protestant communities were very small... they were Anglican and I believe that it's a liberal religion." Leslie’s comments about the size of the Protestant population during her childhood reflect the statistics mentioned earlier. She grew up among Protestant, versus the larger context where most Mexican children will grow up Catholic. She explained that even though she was taken to an Anglican church during her childhood, she never professed this faith. She said, "In my teenage years I began to participate in political activities of the left wing, better said of a total rupture with the Church against religion in general. Then since I was fourteen years old I was completely atheist and completely anti-religious and Marxist." This part of her story sounds similar to Nangpel’s, who was also a communist militant at one point in her life. With Leslie’s disdain for religion, it is fascinating to see how Tibetan Buddhism fit the description of what she was searching for in a religious experience.

When asked what made her go to Casa Tibet the first time Leslie said, "I felt like all the areas of my life were covered. I had a family, I had a profession, I had a good job, I had everything I thought I needed to be very happy... nevertheless... I thought...is this what it’s all about?" Her crisis did not necessarily begin with the search for a religion to fill the holes in her life, but it did begin with her questioning life and its meaning. Having “everything” was not enough without a purpose for which to live, which led Leslie to Casa Tibet. When reflecting on why she continued to go to Casa Tibet, Leslie said, “Now seeing it from a distance, it was a step by step thing, because I had a lot of prejudices... against religion the rituals and all of that, and Casa Tibet is in that sense, it has a very intellectual presentation... it’s like going to a school to

74 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
75 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
76 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
listen to a teacher that explains things to you.”77 This characterizes Leslie’s personal attraction to Casa Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. With Leslie’s Marxist and atheist background, the presentation of the religion was very important. She perceived it as a learning tool for her personal life. Tibetan Buddhism was presented in an attractive manner and she continued to attend and become involved there. She was attracted to the fact that it worked and that it made sense, not to the exotic nature of the religion. In this case, it was the difference between her idea of religion and Buddhism that caught Leslie’s attention, not the similarities. Though ritualistic practices were not the ones that attracted Leslie, these practices traditional to Tibetan Buddhism are not being lost in Mexican practitioners.

Leslie and Nangpel’s stories are strikingly similar, especially in the area of ritual practices. When Nangpel was speaking about her journey towards Tibetan Buddhism, she mentioned the ritualistic part of Tibetan Buddhism. She expressed, “I was not very interested in the ritualistic aspect, or the temples or anything like that, but the truth is that now yes, because now I begin to connect a lot more with the deep meanings.”78 Similarly to Nangpel, who also expressed that she was not initially attracted to the ritualistic part of Tibetan Buddhism, Leslie had a similar reaction, rejecting the rituals at the beginning of her practice. Leslie said that after some time, she “began coming closer to the ritual part and other practices, but... in Casa Tibet I broke these prejudices.”79 Leslie and Nangpel shared a communist/Marxist background and they both expressed an initial distaste toward the ritual part of Tibetan Buddhism, something that Dromla did not really appear to have issue with. What is even more interesting to observe is the way that even though they rejected this part of Tibetan Buddhism initially, it now plays a role in their lives and they have found meaning in the ritual practices. Here Buddhism does not change

77 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
78 Nangpel, personal interview, October 16, 2012.
radically, but it is transforming the lives and perceptions of those who have begun and continued to practice Tibetan Buddhism. Along with the understanding and appreciation of ritual, the role of family and community show importance in Leslie’s practice as well.

When Leslie was asked whether or not she was the only one who was Buddhist in her family she said, “My close family is my mom and my son, my mom continues to be Anglican but has gone to various retreats and she listens to the facebuda talks, let’s say she takes the tools that Buddhism puts at grasp of anyone independent of their religion.” Leslie’s mother is an example of how many other Mexican people might be engaging with Buddhist teachings and practices. They identify with another religion, like Anglicanism, yet they use Buddhist tools that can be applied to anyone’s life. Whether or not this is right or wrong is not a judgment that needs to be made. What can be taken from knowing about people like Leslie’s mother is that converts share their beliefs with their families, and that even if the family does not convert, they take what they find useful from Buddhism and apply it to their lives. This is something that Leslie found not only in her family, but in the general Mexican public.

The general reactions to Buddhism are varied and cannot be summarized with just one statement, but we can try to get a sense of how most Mexican people react towards the religion. Leslie explained that when inviting someone to a meditation class versus inviting them to a class on Buddhist teachings there was a more positive acceptance of meditation. She said, “I believe that meditation is something that almost everyone accepts as something good even though they don’t know what it is exactly, but let’s say the idea that people have is that meditation is to relax and to be calm, that is something almost everyone accepts like doing yoga or example.”

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80 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
81 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
still a lot of misunderstandings about Buddhism. She said, "I believe that there is still a lot of misunderstanding even though Buddhism has grown a lot in Mexico, there is still a lot of misunderstanding, people don’t know what it is, they think that the Buddha is a god and that we pray to that god, the majority of people don’t know." It is interesting that even though some characteristics of Buddhism are recognized, not all of them are properly understood. What can be concluded from this, is that Tibetan Buddhism is a recognized religion, in part due to the Dalai Lama’s figure, but also because people who convert share their practice with others. Maybe similarly to other Judeo-Christian contexts where Buddhism is not a major religion, there is a lack of understanding of some of its beliefs. Leslie now runs the faceBuda page which focuses on this very idea of educating the Spanish speaking community about Tibetan Buddhism.

Damcho, who makes the videos that go on the faceBuda page shared that the kind of teachings she posts are influenced by her audience. Damcho explained that people would tell her that they would listen to the teachings with their kids and family. This led to Damcho making the teachings “family friendly” or in other words, teachings that could be applied to everyday life, in anyone’s life. This way of presenting Buddhist teachings shows that people are sharing their spiritual path with their families. Even if everyone in the household is not Buddhist, Buddhist teachings are being given in a manner that does not exclude people of other religions. For some people they might find their initial encounter with Buddhism, as family member who now considers themselves Buddhist plays a Buddhist teaching in the house. Maybe initially it is not a religion, but simply a life lesson, and then it slowly evolves into something more. By exploring the faceBuda web page, one can get a sense of the audience and the kind of teachings that are being directed towards Spanish-speaking audiences.

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82 Serna, personal interview, December 4, 2012.
83 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
On the home page of faceBuda there is a video of the latest online class recording available for the viewer. If one scrolls down there are two announcements of retreats. One of them will be a pilgrimage/retreat and will take place in the monastery of the Karmapa in New York in July 2013. The first question addressed in this description is, “What significance does this monastery have?” The answer is as follows: "Those who have done spiritual retreats in sacred places know the special power that places which have been blessed by great teachers and their intense spiritual practice possess." Mexican religiosity emphasizes pilgrimages to holy sites and this particular announcement shows this overlap among Mexican religiosity and Tibetan tradition. This pilgrimage/retreat is common ground and the form is similar to that of Mexican pilgrimages. The next question addressed under this retreat is, “What will we do during the retreat?” This particular retreat consists of an initiation into Chenrezig by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche which points to a very important part of Tibetan Buddhism, the passing down of teachings from teacher to student. The description also mentions that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was in Mexico City recently and that due to the difficulty of traveling to Latin America, this will be a chance for them to reconnect with him. It can be assumed that the mention of Mexico in this description shows the importance of Mexico in the spreading of Tibetan Buddhist teachings in the Spanish-speaking world. Teachers commonly go to Mexico versus other Spanish-speaking countries.

The other retreat announced in the home page will take place in Mexico and is done with a similar purpose. This retreat is titled, “Compassion for oneself, compassion for others” and is

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86 “faceBuda”
a one month long retreat in Mexico. According to the description it will be “a month of teachings, meditation, and self-analysis that cover all the subjects of the path of enlightenment, with a focus on unconditional compassion.” An interesting aspect is the use of language in both descriptions. The words, “enlightenment” and “initiation” come up. Keeping in mind that this is the home page, it can be concluded that this language is used freely because it presupposes that the reader knows their meaning and is comfortable enough with these Buddhist concepts that they do not have to explain or define them. We can draw a tentative conclusion that Tibetan Buddhism is not as foreign as it might have been at an earlier point in time and that there is common knowledge available among people who visit this website. Though the home page presents Buddhism in a very upfront way and without much explanation, there is a link for introducing new users to the page and this page deepens the information about the audiences that might end up on this page.

The page titled, “Who are we” introduces people to the faceBuda page. Here it explains that faceBuda is a project of the Dharmadatta Community, which is a monastic community in Dharamsala. The description proceeds to tell Damcho’s story of conversion and her role in the Spanish-speaking community. It also speaks of a tour of a play, “Milarepa, la gira” about the Tibetan lama Milarepa that will tour through many countries in Latin America. The story of Milarepa is central in the Tibetan tradition and a tour of the story of Milarepa once again adds to the common knowledge of Buddhism not only in Mexico but in Latin America as well. Aside from the introductory pages and the home page, there is an archive of the teachings that are posted every Sunday. The categories and types of classes appear to be directed to a very diverse audience.

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90 faceBuda
91 faceBuda
92 faceBuda
The video archives are divided into twelve categories. The videos last from half an hour to an hour and half. Of the twelve categories, four have to do with human relationships, one of them is dedicated to the retelling of important Buddhist life stories, one focuses on meditation, and there is one which focuses on the daily life; the rest of the categories range from dealing with emotions to the concept of karma. The categories seem to be directed at a varied audience, one that might just be becoming familiar with Buddhism, and another that is more “advanced” and might be looking beyond introductory classes. One of the classes titled: “The movement Yosoy132 and social action from a Buddhist perspective” deals with the violence that has escalated in Mexico. By listening to the recordings, one begins to notice a pattern of dealing with every day issues according to Buddhist teachings.

In the recording, Damcho begins by empathizing with the suffering Mexican people and all others who suffer due to violence. Her words break boundaries and begin to build a relationship with the listener, who might be listening to these broadcasts for the first time. In the broadcast, Damcho defines “social action” versus activism, and emphasizes that activism can divide, she says, “From a Buddhist perspective, there is much we can say about social action, and I want to speak of social action instead of activism, firstly because activism easily turns into another “ism” into another theme, another purpose to which we cling to... and “isms” divide us easily.” To work with such a delicate subject, one of politics and of social action and movements shows that the people who make these broadcasts are aware of the context of Mexico. The managers and teachers of this page do not ignore the complexity of the landscape and these issues revolving around communities are important to the audience.

93 “Yo soy 132” is a social movement that started on May 11, 2012 in Mexico City and has been compared to the Occupy movements in the United States. This group demands the right to free speech, the right to inform, the right to equality etc. Ortega Delgado, Federico Vello, “Yo soy 132,” Project Censored’s, October 29, 2012, http://www.mediafreedominternational.org/2012/10/29/yo-soy-132/ (accessed March 26, 2013).
94 “faceBuda”
A pattern that Damcho had already observed in the Mexican context continues to be addressed and supported by this webpage. Of the categories, a large group focused on relationships, and of these recordings, many dealt with issues relevant to the entire community. Once again, the number of people who listen to these teachings cannot really be counted, so the number of people who might adhere to these teachings do not add to the number of Buddhists in the world, but do show that there might be a larger population of those who agree with Buddhism in Mexico than what can be concluded initially. Though there are what we can call the “invisible Buddhists” which we cannot really count or keep track of, those who have converted to Buddhism and live a life led by the Dharma tell us a little bit of what it is like to be a Buddhist in Mexico. The online community allows for an international community to exist, where even though Dromla and Nangpel live in India, they remain deeply connected to the Mexican community. Through all the interviews and the online community, it is obvious that family and community are important factors in the practice of the converts and more interestingly, it can be seen that this is not true in other cultural contexts where people are converting to Tibetan Buddhism.

III. Comparing the Mexican context to the United States and Germany

According to Diane Morgan’s book, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, published in 2004, one third of Buddhist centers in the United States trace themselves to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. About 10,000 Tibetan exiles and immigrants live in the United States, along with many Americans who have converted to Tibetan Buddhism. But what has made Tibetan Buddhism grow so much in the United States? According to Morgan, “While Tibetan ritual is complex and exotic, it is extremely friendly, and most outsiders and novices are made to feel

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95 Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience*, 212.
96 Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience*, 212.
more at home than is often the case in Zen or Vipassana centers."\textsuperscript{97} This can be due to the fact that Morgan observed, "In many respects, Tibetan Buddhism seems much closer to the Western concept of a religion that does Zen... or Vipassana... With its colorful gods, abstruse texts, elaborate worship practices, and mysterious chanting, it seems a curious mixture of traditional Buddhist philosophy, ancient polytheistic faith, and mystic insight."\textsuperscript{98} In comparison to other types of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism’s characteristics, like their many deities, hold a familiar resemblance to what Westerners see and recognize as religion. Of course just because there are resemblances between Judeo-Christian religions and Buddhism it does not mean that Tibetan Buddhism has not changed in response to the American environment.

One of the differences as Tibetan Buddhism has adapted to the United States is the diet. While in Tibet meat was a regular part of their diet, in the United States the Tibetan Buddhists turn to vegetarianism because they have a wide variety of vegetarian foods that were not available to Tibetan Buddhists in Tibet.\textsuperscript{99} Something else that Morgan points out of American practitioners is that "Meditation is deeply characteristic of modern Western Buddhism. It has largely replaced the academic study of Buddhist texts and doctrines, and perhaps more disturbingly, even the practice of the Dharma."\textsuperscript{100} Over the teachings that might have been central in Tibet, the meditative practices seem to be elevated within a Western context, maybe due to the fact that there are many studies that point to the positive effects of meditation on the health of practitioners. As Morgan states, "Pragmatic Americans like Buddhism because it works, whether they understand its finer points, or not. They are attracted, seemingly in equal

\textsuperscript{97} Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 215.
\textsuperscript{98} Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 214.
\textsuperscript{99} Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 220.
\textsuperscript{100} Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 54.
numbers, to its exotic origins, elegant philosophy, practical nature, and peaceful practices.”

With busy schedules and a sense of religiosity that looks for results, Buddhism appears to be a good match with the American audience. Similarly to Leslie’s experience of enjoying the classroom-like style of Casa Tibet’s approach, some part of the American audience enjoys this type of solution-centered approach. There are other Americans who are attracted to the exotic nature, which then leads to a different problem when dealing with family.

With Judeo-Christian traditions being the majority in the United States, it is almost inevitable that those who convert would feel some kind of resistance to their religious choices. Something that Damcho mentioned in our conversation was that Americans who convert to Buddhism take it as a form of rebellion. They are not concerned with sharing their faith with their family, but in fact converting to Buddhism is a way to rebel from the religion and family life taught to them by their parents. This quite a contrast from the roots of Tibetan Buddhism, where entire families belong to the faith and being a Tibetan Buddhist is a way of life. This may be due to how highly western society values individuality. In American society, individuality is not only valued and respected, but it is also the expectation. Saying like “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” are common and are a reflection of American values. Therefore, the expression of Buddhism in America reflects these aspects of American culture and due to this; Buddhism becomes an individual expression by the convert. This is very different from what was concluded from the interviews, where it seemed like all interviewees shared their faith with their family. Damcho also pointed out that when Mexican converts faced family resistance they would take them to events in order to explain why they were taking on this new spiritual path.

There is a concern in Mexican converts with sharing their faith that is not seen in other countries

101 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience, 3.
102 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
103 Damcho, personal interview, October 10, 2012.
where Judeo-Christian traditions are central to the religious landscape. There are of course, different adaptations of Buddhism in the United States and many times, similarly to Mexico, only some components of the religion are used.

A study done by scholars Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge explores the interreligious dialogue that took place amongst Buddhist and Catholic nuns in the United States. This appears to be the usual “West meets East,” but the dimensions of this dialogue were a bit more complex. The Catholic nuns who participated in this dialogue were making use of Buddhist meditative practices to enhance their monastic life and the dialogue permitted for the Catholic nuns to discuss the practices they were already taking part in. Bender and Cadge explain how these women came to contact with Buddhism, “Many Buddhist nuns traced their interest to their childhood or young adulthood, while the majority of Catholic nuns said that their interest in Buddhism arose after they were vowed.” Across the board, at one point or another, these women became interested in Buddhism, though on different levels and with different motivations. Bender and Cadge define three different constructions of Buddhism, the first which separates Buddhist forms and contents, with focus on the form, the second distinguish form and content but see them as inexorably linked and third does not separate form and content at all. Here issues of whether or not one can meditate without being Buddhist arise and there are opinions from both sides. It seems like meditation is one of the most accepted components of Buddhism and many times practitioners take use of meditation for reasons that may or may not

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105 Bender and Cadge, “Constructing Buddhism(s),” 234-235.

106 Bender and Cadge, “Constructing Buddhism(s),” 233.

107 Bender and Cadge, “Constructing Buddhism(s),” 235-236.
have anything to do with converting to Buddhism. Of course, who is right and who is wrong in
this dialogue is not the question, but how these different constructions are manifested and how
people adjust the religion to fit their needs. Germany is another comparison point for
considering the ways in which Tibetan Buddhism is developing and changing in Judeo-Christian
cultures.

Germany is one of the countries in the West where Tibetan Buddhism has grown
significantly. Scott Stine says that there are over 100 Diamond Way Buddhist Centers in
Germany and he explains that “given that the West has a primarily Judeo-Christian background,
it is important to observe how the different belief systems and practices of Buddhism change the
way in which people... view their world and the effects it has on their lives.” Stine recognizes
that the conversion to a new religion changes the world view of the convert, but it is also obvious
that the culture of the convert influences the way the religion adapts to its new culture. In
Germany, Stine points out that “the style of Buddhism that is being practiced by the Germans...
was relatively free of Tibetan cultural aspects and yet still maintained the essence of what the
Buddha taught.” This seems to be a different reaction than the Buddhism developing in
Mexico. Stine quotes an interviewee who explained, “The Buddha always said his teachings are
like a crystal. Buddha’s teachings in Tibet shine on a Tibetan surface. We do not want the
Tibetan because we are not Tibetan. We are German... we function differently.” Here, this
German convert recognizes that they are taking Tibetan Buddhism and shaping it to fit the needs
of German people without losing the essence. In comparison to this, my Mexican informants
Leslie and Nangpel, who both expressed an initial dislike towards ritualistic practices unique to
Tibetan Buddhism, but both of them found meaning in these rituals with time. The German

109 Stine “Buddhism Meets the West,” 5.
110 Stine “Buddhism Meets the West,” 5.
practitioners appear to be rejecting these Tibetan characteristics of Buddhism, but these characteristics are not being lost in Mexican practice. One reason this might be occurring is because this highly ritualistic culture is also part of the Mexican religion, but as we saw in Leslie and Nangpel’s case, though these ritualistic practices are common, to them they were initially unattractive to these particular women. Why ritualistic practices continue to be important among Mexican Tibetan Buddhists can be speculated, but not answered definitively. We can conclude that Buddhism becomes reflective of the culture in which it exists, the context and people will influence how Tibetan Buddhism is practiced. Another study similar to this one explores these differences among Western countries in contrast with Mexico reinforces the family characteristic of forming Buddhist communities.

Daisuke Inoue focuses on the Soka Gakkai International of Mexico, a Japanese Buddhist organization that follows the teachings of the Japanese Buddhist prophet Nichiren. Inoue used Rambo’s methodology for tracing out the paths of conversion of the Mexicans who were members of the Soka Gakkai centers. In the survey that he conducted, he found that 50% of the members had been introduced by a family member to Nichiren Buddhism, in comparison to 23% of English people and 19% of Americans. The importance of family ties in religious life is reinforced by these findings. Inoue drives home this point by pointing out that in comparison to the other two countries Mexico conserves their firm family ties even when they form part of another religion. Tibetan Buddhism is significantly different from Japanese Buddhism, so the two traditions are comparable but not identical. Inoue’s study found similar results to this study, where family members are the ones bringing people to Buddhism more than other people.

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The gap between a convert’s birth religion and the chosen religion of conversion can be bridged, perhaps by inviting a family member to a meditation class, or by tuning into the faceBuda teachings on Sundays. Mexican spirituality resonates with Tibetan Buddhist ideas of community and the individual’s responsibility towards the community. There seems to be a two Buddhist identities forming in Mexico: some people might not consider themselves Buddhist, but will listen to Buddhist teachings because another family member is Buddhist and on the other end of the spectrum, there are people who convert from their previous beliefs to Buddhism and are influencing the common perception of Buddhism in Mexico. There is no uniform “convert” that can be used as definitional for all Mexican converts, as people converting to Tibetan Buddhism come from different backgrounds and convert for different reasons. There are many other questions that remain unanswered as this research has just begun such as, like who is converting to Tibetan Buddhism? Are these people who were previously Catholic or do they come from other minority religions? Why is there a left wing tendency among converts? Do Mexican identify with the Tibetan struggle for autonomy? While these many research questions await investigation, a tentative description of Mexican Tibetan Buddhism can be offered. A new kind of Buddhism is being formed in this Western cultural context. It is a Western Buddhism that focuses upon community and service to one’s community.
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Tenzin Nangpel’s personal interview

October 16, 2012

Samari: Can you tell me more about yourself?

Tenzin Nangpel: I was born in the city of Mexico, I grew up in different cities of the country, I have a very very large family, 13 siblings. My mother is of Jewish origin but my family is Catholic or it used to be Catholic… My grandfather was a Hassidic Jew, they immigrated from Poland here to Mexico then from the side of my dad the family was very Catholic, and a pretty authentic Catholicism, from my mom’s side, Jewish, a very Orthodox Judaism… authentic and even though my family grew a little more distant from religion one could breathe in spirituality… but I belong to a generation that separated greatly from the family structures… I was a communist militant when I was in my 20’s and my 30’s and then like the whole generation of the left there was a moment in which there was a complete separation. There was a lot of contradiction between the principles we followed and the reality that we were facing so in the latter decades, around mid 35’s I began to search for another type of path, I was always a person that looked for ways to give meaning to their life and the left wing gave me a lot, above all a space to work socially, but it did not satisfy deeper answers in the sense of the coherence between ethical principles and political actions, so I finally found Buddhism around my 40’s. It was something truly beautiful in my life because it gave and it keeps giving today 20 years later, answers each time more satisfying, more beautiful and more congruent so I took the decision, since I am one of the older sisters, I had a lot of familial responsibilities, I had a partnership, a son, etc so I decided to take the decision of closing, let’s say familial responsibilities with the
purpose of as soon as possible taking the monastic life. And that's what I did and now I have been a nun for almost 5 years.

Samari: What is the religious environment that you were raised in like?

Nangpel: From my mother’s side of the family, it was obvious that well the grandfather was an immigrant from Poland in the context of the second war and the holocaust, for him it was obvious that the children of his daughter had to be Jewish, but also for my paternal grandparents it was obvious that they had to be Catholic. So in between that... a space opened up for one to consider best and finally the important thing I learned in this time was a sense of the spiritual, the spiritual dimension as something natural of life, not necessarily connected with one or another religion, thanks to this space that opened up due to the voices of our roots and that never met, they are parallels, no never obviously neither the Jews or the Catholics are willing to give up their demands that nobody else listened to the demands... I received... more of that spirituality than the formal religion.

Samari: How did you find out about Buddhism?

Nangpel: Look, the first contact was in the University, in my time when I was in the University in the 60’s and I grew then Buddhism was very important in the faculty of letters of literature so Zen Buddhism was very important but more from the perspective of poetry and oriental philosophy so my first contact was more in that university atmosphere and poetry and many years well let’s say 15 years later I returned to look for something with the purpose of practicing meditation, it was something that... around in my head... and I began to look through books... I have a black belt in this Japanese martial art well through the practice of this martial art I had a lot of contact with Zen Buddhism and when I began to search, let’s say in my 40’s, yes I liked Zen Buddhism but I felt like I was missing the social part, I went into a Theravada temple
searching... I found a Theravada in Jalapa where I lived and a time I did retreats of meditation
but I kept missing that aspect of how do I connect? Everything let’s say everything that I can win
through the practice would give me a way to benefit others, it can’t be that I isolate myself in my
cave, very passive while the world isn’t well. So when I heard a talk, the parents of some alumni
from the school invited me, I had a ... the parents knew that I liked meditation so one time a
Buddhist monk came to Jalapa and I attended his conferences and heard the presentation of the
Tibetan tradition and it seemed... amazing because there is an emphasis through the bodhisattva
who is one of the crucial characters in this tradition that puts in practice the entire path... and I
found I was not very devoted, today a little more I think I’m devoted, in the sense of rituals
because for me it has more sense, the aspect of congruence of your actions, your words and what
you think, so in the beginning I resisted a lot of time I didn’t resist, it’s that it did not interest me
much, the rituals not the temples nor anything like that, but in reality is now that now it does,
because now I begin to connect much more with the deep sense... to activate certain states
through songs through smells through atmospheres and now I like it and in the Tibetan
atmosphere I find it to the limit.

Samari: What is a typical day in your life like?

Nangpel: In the present time it has changed a bit, it is changing a bit because our teacher the
friend of Karen, Damcho, she is the one that is varying the community in which we form part of
as nuns, we take the monastic life and we live there, there we study, we practice and ultimately
she has been opening spaces to collaborate more directly in guiding practices of meditation in
group with people and this is a bit different, but before this it’s something that is barely starting,
our main focus was and is forming ourselves as monastic women, in the different aspects of the
ethical discipline that for a monastic person has a specific code of how to use their life in all of
the aspects from how one uses their time like use everything that they do how you use the act of sleeping of studying every activity throughout the day has a purpose that is connected with putting aside the egocentric attitudes and promoting attitudes that help to totally taking responsibility in the well-being of others in a spiritual sense not preaching if not in a sense of... ultimately human next to which other human beings are not in danger, nor of being... a human being that can offer to others an attitude of respect and of basic caring and all of this has to do with the way of living all the time. You are remembering through community service through prayers, meditation practices. A typical day would be, we begin at 5 am in the morning out meditation practice at 7 we prepare breakfast for the community at 7:30 we eat breakfast at 8 everything is picked up from 8:30 to 10:30 we have another meditation session from 10:30 to 11:30 we have to prepare food or clean the community, its roles we have as nuns... eat at 12 pick up at 1 rest and from 2:30 to 4:30 we have time to listen to teachings we have a lot of material for study that we receive ... we go to our program ... to the monastic institute that's at Kamanduno where we receive philosophical information form the lamas that are academically qualified, Tibetan lamas and in the year we study these material and in the evening again we pray as a community, they are a type of prayer for the peace for harmony in this world etc and in the night between all these activities we have one or two breaks, one in the morning and the other in the evening to do exercise or not do anything or simply to be on the roof and to contemplate for a moment what we want to and to do service through these type of things like answer e-mails for friend in the community or interviews of whatever but more or less this is my normal life... there's a lot of things like I tell you in each station we have a different dynamic because during the rainy season we have a retreat and it's different and sometimes we have to travel and the whole structure changes.
Samari: Are you the only one in your family that is Buddhist?

Nangpel: I am the only Buddhist but many of my siblings are not strangers to the principles of Buddhism even though, well they do not consider themselves Buddhists, in fact some of the ones that are more sensitive to this well some are closer to Judaism, because there are 13 of us, we’re a big group and 11 are still alive so Buddhist in the formal sense, no, but they are very respectful and sensitive to this spiritual path they are very respectful and when they have an opportunity they always express respect and affection for what I am doing... It’s a moral support, not yet to the point where they feel that their economic support could be important not to that point. For them it’s like something that you are doing so you know how to handle it, and it’s fine they do support in some things like medical expenses and that. They express their support in that sense not at the level where they would say hey this is a community and a community needs to be survive, not to that point, but I believe that they are close to getting there and they could be part to that level.

Samari: Was it always like this?

Nangpel: No, there was between the closest siblings, I have a son and for him it was very difficult, very very difficult. Until now it is still something he is trying to process but for my brothers and my sisters it was a personal decision, a bit strange for some of them a bit troubling like in the first two years they were a bit worried like in what sect did she get herself into? But as you see there is in reality a whole, that it is something that has a very solid base so bit by bit they have begun to come closer and today the family in general respects this spiritual path a lot and inclusively my decision to become a nun except my son, for him it is a very personal matter in feeling that we separated and etc because living in the community we don’t live... I don’t travel when I want to and I don’t visit the family when I want to and my priority for deciding are the
needs of the community and that for my son is a bit strange but well I have a granddaughter and for him its like where's grandma? And I understand him because I myself resent this. Of course there are moments when I say I wish I was close to my granddaughter yes… simply in the sense of offering the richness that I have discovered and then if she takes it or does not take it it is her decision no? But with time we have found that she is already four years old and we have seen that it is not an obstacle that I am in India no? I am in Mexico in their house for some days so we have found… also his wife is a very sensitive to Buddhism and we have found a way to reconnect.

Samari: How does being Buddhist contribute to your life?

Nangpel: I have learned in these years that it contributes in ways that I don’t even imagine that it contributes because I have come to realize, see above all in Mexico, Mexico has a very strong spiritual background. Even when the Catholic Church no longer has the strong influence it had before but it exists inside the culture, then look many times when I come to Mexico… and I am on the street and there isn’t… a place where someone doesn’t come up to me with incredible sympathy wanting to know are one of the Dalai Lama’s? Are you Buddhist? Hey, where is your center and do you teach meditation? Then there is something in the air in the ambience that makes that people find what is this… that tells them there is something and they don’t know exactly what is it and they want to know and that has taught me that in reality the Dharma and the work that the Buddha founded to transform the mind it itself is offering something, maybe a reminder that we have a potential and that the way to access that potential and to make it grow and that aside from that it’s something that without me even opening my mouth I simply am standing there or I am walking or sitting in a placed and people remember something no?

Because of the way we look. Something so simple, like people say why do you shave your head?
Just that because see it is interesting, the Buddha lived all of this, he saw all these things. It is interesting that we can historically say, well in that time it was a way of being very explicit that we had separated from the mundane home life... today the fact that people say why do you shave, opens a door that I can offer a perspective then for example, say one reason is that people put too much, people project a lot in their hair of what is their personal identity, we don’t need a lot of time in putting it one way or another or another color or moving it or fixing it or cleaning it, its many things. And that is a bit of a challenge, of saying look I don’t have hair and I’m still happy I don’t need this to have happiness...To feel that my life is completely full in another way, I don’t get contaminated and I don’t have to work so much because I don’t have to buy shampoo if you see how many minutes you... take time fixing your hair, how many hours I have in not doing that then that time I use in what I want to do, like studying, talking with you, contemplating the sky and then but any other things. Hey listen what does the color of your robes, anything, is like all the time a door opens for connecting with people and along with her explore all these forms of the world that make us feel that we have many possibilities very open of doing great things with our lives... many ways of serving others... it is very important for us the practice of meditation, we have that wisdom alive in our own way of living and the people that among us the monastics that achieve growing spiritually, they transmit it to others and that is the way in which these ancient traditions survive uninterrupted and can continue in all civilizations and sometimes that maintains a diligent wisdom for our time for the upcoming generations no? Then even then, the carriers of the seed of awakening, even if I don’t accomplish anything I don’t care, but I am part of all this influence, of the current that is carrying that seed of wisdom.

Samari: What motivated you to take the monastic life?
Nangpel: Well see the reason my personality is a bit exaggerated then in reality since I have very young I would find something that had meaning and I would want to see what was the way of fulfilling it truly because of that I became a communist militant and I did many things then finding stages in my life of wanting to find, of looking for what is the best position and truly trying... if not truly taking responsibility of that and it was not different that I found meditation through pure practice, I said well of course that I can I can do what I want to, but if the mind is not a stable mind, not a lucid mind, a clam mind, with an internal quality well it won’t be worth anything and then I began to search search search and very very early in this path of the search I thought well if the monastic path is a way in which my principal preoccupation since I open my eyes until I close them every day it is to understand this path, to put it in practice, I don’t have anything else to do... I arrived to Buddhism older, I had already tried everything that society and culture offered like promises of happiness I had already tried all the relationships, business, career, a partner, prestige everything and everything left me unsatisfied that in the center of everything I was simply empty... its an emptiness of missing something, missing something it would be that it doesn’t matter what we get, always like if we had in the middle that flavor... when I discovered Buddhism and I began to practice meditation I though well if it’s in this way let’s do it, but and I had the great great luck of finding a good monk very early, very authentic and I said, well if this is it, and then I met Damcho and well of course this is the way so no, no it wasn’t very hard to make the decision, to internally make the decision. Externally it was hard because I had to close chapters and imagine at forty something years closing chapters is a work of Romans, or Tibetans! To close chapters of 46 years of existence is complicated and yes I had to take care of dad and mom until they died, bury them, finish my relationship harmoniously...
separate myself gradually from my family... even though physically we were not together, well
there were very strong bonds, no it's hard, we're clans! ... it was very complicated.
Karma Lodro Dromla’s interview

October 18, 2012

Samari: Tell me more about yourself?

Dromla: I was born in Mexico DF, in a family that was completely Catholic surrounded by a Catholic context and I studied a sociology career when I was middle aged when I had already exercised my career a bit I decided to dedicate myself ... to tourism until I finally met Buddhism in the year 2004 and I began to interest myself in it and finally in the year 2008 I decided to leave my routine life ... and dedicate myself completely my time my activities and my life to this. I knew that another way in the industry that I worked with the things I did I was not going to have time to combine both things... and I decided on the better of the two.

Samari: What religious environment were you raised in?

I believe that I was raised in a very free environment, very loving with Catholic ideas but with enough freedom to be able to choose... and I had been given the freedom to be able to choose since I was very young and I think that basically that freedom is what made me search because I had questions that are not covered by the Catholic system and questions and doubts... things I needed answered and well.... I think we can share ideas.

Samari: How did you find out about Buddhism? What was your encounter like?

Dromla: I think that like many people trying to look for and find something in the interior I found this part of myself... with meditations with workshops with talks and with other friend that also liked to explore we began to get to know Buddhism through a classmate that recommended it to us... in Mexico DF and there were the first Buddhist encounters I began to go with them and in reality it was for me a... social activity, sharing with them these type of activities and this time that contributed to our tranquility and relaxed us... in 2006, thanks to my
mother who also had attended some of these workshops, we received an e-mail of a course which was going to be given on the gradual path from Mexico an American nun, it was going to be completely in Spanish, so I sent an email to my friend so they could go as well... in that moment I met venerable Damcho, I take course with her when she arrived... and for me it is a complete encounter with myself, it was not an encounter with another thing more than with a lot of the answers I had been searching for. From that moment I decide to take Buddhism seriously as a philosophy and I begin to become interested in using it's foundations and living them... and for any activity that venerable Damcho had in Mexico I went. I think that I found myself with the Dharma... my heart had a lot with finding the answer that I couldn't find about death, karma and after meeting her about devotion... a path of true spirituality that could give me all the answer that I was searching for and everything... of giving of giving in of living... truly to live not a religion, but spirituality inside of me and from that moment I think that following her steps and following the instructions has taken me to this stage of my life.

Samari: What do you think made you visit a Buddhist center the first time?

Dromla: I think that basically the answer is that I found myself within a personal search and Buddhism, when I found it, truly it's a curiosity but no... the search for answer to internal situations, personal, social, that Buddhism provides to me in this moment and that basically that is what it gave me, answers to questions that until this moment I still haven’t found.

Samari: How does Buddhism influence a typical day of your life?

Dromla: As a nun definitely... how to include my life in all my spiritual activities and I believe that in my case a typical day is the search for opportunities to be able to apply the teachings and the practices in my daily life because my day begins with religious activities and ends with religious activities, but inside all of them there is a challenge to find how to include all religious
activity, the practice to the decisions and the daily activities and the everyday... activities with
the community... an daily interchange with Dharma friends with spiritual friends, it begins with
prayer and ends with prayer... looking for a way to be able to integrate.

Samari: Is there anyone in your family that is Buddhist?

Dromla: In my family up until now I am the only Buddhist... my mother well, after her
retirement... she has come into contact with different religions... but I think that in the family
there is an interest in trying to understand what I am doing, how to share. My eldest sister is very
Catholic but we share a lot of ideas...

Samari: So there's relatively open communication?

No, yes there is freedom, there is communication, and above all this is very based on the fact...
what you want to do and believe in, be committed... that was a message that I heard since I was
very young. This is your parents religion, and you can believe in it and commit to it, or choose
another but commit yourself to something, then yes... there is freedom but there also needs to be
commitment.

Samari: What made you choose to be a nun?

Dromla: Definitely I have noticed that in the search for happiness it wasn't in the interior, it was
in everything that I was able to do, what I had accomplished along the way... the personal, the
friendships, the partner and feelings... but the mind had not accomplished happiness and...
because it was not at that point yet... for me it a feeling that... taking thoughts that entered the
mind... the conditions in which I lived, having all the desire to do it, I was not going to
accomplish it there... I wasn't going to be able to accomplish the highest goal that I had to give,
give something to others... I had a lot of desire to give... if the mind is not trained to give, it is
not a clear mind... that training that peace to be able to give to others... something good.
Samari: What are people's reactions on the streets?

Dromla: The most common question is: are you of the Dalai Lama, you're one of the Dalai Lama right? And it is fortunate to see how people recognize, identify people, it's amazing and they identify with a certain kindness and desire... that signifies that shows signs of being part of this, aside from that Mexico is incredibly... loving and has a lot of appreciation for religion, inclusively for any religion, in my house I feel a beautiful opening a beautiful affection that I have received... let's not say the people that meet me no, but the people in the street that stop to talk with you, in reality 10 minutes... they stop to be able to listen to you, to know who you are, where do you come from how do you live over there, why are you living over there? And... I feel that with a very deep appreciation for those people who want to dedicate themselves to religion... all their capacities.
Leslie Serna's interview

December 5, 2012

Samari: Can you tell me more about yourself?

Leslie: Well now I am 53 years old I am divorced and I have a son I studied sociology and afterwards I have a doctorate in education and I work... and I don’t know what else?

Samari: Tell me more about being the administrator of the page?

Yes, well my professional area is on the subject of education I offered to venerable Damcho and to the Dharmadatta community my services to be able to support them in the activities that they considered important, but taking advantage of the internet, the new technology of communication... then what I work in we use technology to make educational projects then I thought that we could take advantage of them... Dharma educational projects then that was what was made in reality, it was not my idea the nuns had already been doing some transmissions since last year and I began to help them some months later and then we made a site with more materials and more videos and more things like that no? And also we came up with the idea of doing courses online then we created what we call the virtual classroom which are online courses ... and on top of that it was began to grow grow and grow that now the Karmapa has given it a name and how it’s called the Budhadharma institute.

Samari: How long have you been running this?

Leslie: I began at the end of august last year, more of less a year yes.

Samari: What was the religious environment you were raised in like?

Leslie: My family is Protestant something which is a bit strange in Mexico, not so much today, but when I was a child yes. The Protestants were very small communities, in reality I don’t know why they’re Protestant... it's strange they are Anglicans so it's a rather liberal religion I believe,
not very dogmatic every though we went to church, but let’s say that it was like a community, we
were with other kids doing classes no? The Sunday school activity it was focused on the kids...
and it was really leaning dogmatically... let’s say we went to church with friends.
Samari: So were you protestant yourself?
Leslie: No in reality I went where my mom took me well I didn’t have any idea... well I did
know that there was a Catholic Church because I would see that my friend were in different
churches but I didn’t have an idea in reality but in my teenage years I began to participate in left
wing political activities, better said a complete rupture against the church against religion in
general, so since I was 14 years old I was completely atheist and completely antireligious and
Marxist I thought religion was a problem...
Samari: How did you find out about Buddhism?
Leslie: Well when I was more than 40 years old let’s say I felt that I had all the areas in my life
covered, I had a family I had a profession I had a good job I had everything I thought I needed to
be very happy and well I had everything, nevertheless... I though is this what it’s all about? Is
this all? And then I distanced myself from political activity and I learned that I wanted to explore
the spiritual life but I was open to explore it yes, I had had a difficulty let’s say in believing in
advice, it was going to be very difficult because I had been atheist many years and it was very
hard, I had already met some friends that had spoken to me about Buddhism of the Dalai Lama
of retreats and truth is I went to a lot of places. I lived in Spain for 3 years and it was over there
in reality that I began to search and I went to many different groups, not Buddhist but spiritual
groups of certain kinds... and I didn’t find anything that gave me answers let’s say and
afterwards returning to Mexico searching and searching I found a Theravada Buddhist group that
was going to do a 10 day retreat and I decided to go see what Buddhism was truly... but I simply
went and felt comfortable with meditation with the little explanations because they don’t explain a lot... but I felt comfortable and... in like two years later, I don’t remember too well, and then at a given moment a book came to my hands a book by Allan Wallace that was called Buddhism with attitude and a book that Casa Tibet published and... I saw Casa Tibet Mexico and I looked for it on the internet and that is how I am here.

Samari: What made you continue to go to Casa Tibet?

Leslie: In reality what I liked of Casa Tibet... now seeing it from afar it was a slow process, because I had a lot of prejudices... against religion, ritual, all of that and Casa Tibet in that sense has a very intellectual presentation let say that there is not rituals its like you go to school to listen to a teacher that explains things to you... The person that arrives at Casa Tibet is an intelligent person, they have courses, knowledge of Buddhism then it made sense to me let’s say no, the presentation was very focused in changing aspects of my life that I wanted to change... it made a lot of sense. Afterwards I began to get to know the groups and I went to some retreats ... I began to come closer to the ritual part and other practices but... in Casa Tibet I broke those prejudices.

Samari: What is a typical day like and how does Buddhism influence it?

Leslie: Well it has began to change over time it was been very different but I believe that everything changed two years ago, I did a three month retreat that I believe was a... from that moment I really began to let’s say that the Dharma became the center of my life... before then it was like yes meditation, yes I went to retreats... I wanted it to be the center but my job was more important, my family and that has changed in the last two years I say, I have to keep working at it... but ... and in what translates to all my time outside of work I dedicate it to my own practice,
my meditation... and the projects for the Dhramadatta community, especially the faceBuda page...

Samari: Are you the only Buddhist in your family?

Leslie: My close family is my mom and my son, my mom is still Anglican but had gone to various retreats and listens to the faceBuda talks, let’s say she tries to take the tools that Buddhism puts at disposition of all independently of religion, the managing of emotions and those things and my son, he and I began to study Buddhism together... he is also Buddhist.

Samari: What were your family and friend’s initial reactions?

Leslie: Definitely very open and what they have come to know until now well they like yes, very respectful with my family a little more with my Marxist friends, my older friends from the left wing think I’m crazy...

Samari: What do you think is more attractive, a meditation class or a class on Buddhism?

Leslie: Yes, I believe that meditation is something that almost everyone accepts as something good, even though they don’t know what it is exactly, but let’s say that the idea that people have of meditation is that it’s for relaxing, for being calm, that everyone accepts like doing yoga for example, but Buddhism as an option in which there are certain beliefs... I think that there’s still a lot of lack of understanding even though it has grown much in Mexico, there is still a lot of misconceptions, people don’t know what it is. They think that Buda is a god and that we pray to that god, the majority of people don’t know, but in my job everyone knows I’m Buddhist and they ask me and it seems interesting to them and well the Dalai Lama is very respected and he has come to Mexico multiple times so the people around me are more open...

Samari: How has Buddhism contributed to your life?
Leslie: Well it has helped me understand a bit, let’s say I always thought I had a certain understanding, because I was Marxist, what was happening in the world no? I understood why there were poor people, why there were rich people, why there were wars, but I didn’t understand anything that happened within me and one of the most amazing things of Buddhism is understanding why I react the way I react, why I do the things I do, why do I establish certain kinds of relationships why I have certain patterns... it gives me on another side, knowing what things to change... I knew these conducts that we have to reject in general but I didn’t know how to do it in my personal life how... I was very confused in spite of my age and with Buddhism I began... things became totally clearer then... that especially of being able to understand that what was happening and having an idea of what to change and the tools to change it.

Samari: What are the general reactions to knowing that you are Buddhist?

... The people that are my friend have begun, let’s say to see bit by bit... and with the new people that I meet... in general people have curiosity and interest... in general people are pretty open and there is curiosity and they ask questions.
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