



Near East Meets Midwest

Interpreting peace in the shadow of unrest at the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center

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Three horses graze idly in a pasture, a stone's throw away from neighborhoods of newly built suburban houses. It's a typical Midwestern scene just outside the quaint college town of Bloomington, home of Indiana University. But drive just a little further down the rural road and, to paraphrase Dorothy, "We're not in Indiana anymore."

Entering through the brightly painted gates of the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center, visitors are transported to another place—a place where traditional Mongolian tents dot the grassy clearings and Buddhist monks wearing orange and red robes dart in and out of buildings. The gold-leaf peaks of two massive monuments are just visible over the tree tops.

When the Dalai Lama visited the United States in October 2007, the first leg of his whirlwind journey was a stop at the White House for a controversial meeting with President Bush. After that, the Nobel Peace Prize winner was off to Bloomington, Indiana, for the second leg of his visit. Why this place? It was founded by the Dalai Lama's older brother, for starters. Now, it is a major outpost for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in the West with the lofty goals of promoting peace, harmony, compassion, and interfaith dialogue.

Opposite: The Kalachakra Chorten stupa was built in 1999 for world peace and harmony. The shape of the monument resembles the body of Buddha and is meant to evoke his physical presence.



Peace on Earth

The Dalai Lama teaches that before there can be world peace, we must find inner peace; it's one of the guiding principals of Buddhism. The Tibetan Cultural Center is designed to enhance visitors' understanding of peace both within and without.

"The person should have a basic peace inside," says the Tibetan Cultural Center director Arjia Rinpoche. "And then other kinds of

peace come from that. With everything we do here, we're thinking peace first."

Wandering the cultural center's grounds is one way to seek—and possibly find—elusive inner peace. The heavily forested area is home to many animals and birds, including several varieties of woodpeckers. Because Buddhists believe in the sacredness of life and respect for the environment, resident wildlife is

treated with a reverence by the monks. Plans to expand their network of nature trails throughout the grounds are currently in the works.

"We're committed to protecting nature and keeping the environment beautiful," says Rinpoche. "In the future, we're also thinking about adding an interfaith garden."

For visitors needing a little more time to find their center, four Mongolian-style retreat cottages



called *yurts* as well as 11 traditional tents called *gers* are available for overnight stays. The cottages offer the bare minimum—that means no phones or televisions—and the tents offer even fewer amenities. In these hectic times, this kind of relaxation may be exactly what many people need to foster inner calm.

“In this world, everyone is very busy,” says Rinpoche. “There are cars and cell phones, emails and Internet.



TIBETAN MONGOLIAN BUDDHIST CULTURAL CENTER

Above: Arjia Rinpoche (left) and the Dalai Lama dine at Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center luncheon hosted by Elaine Mellencamp, wife of singer John Mellencamp.

Left: This intricately beaded tapestry in the Kumbum Chamtse Ling Temple took Tibetan artists three years to complete.

Our concept is that in coming here you have to forget everything. When you go through the entrance arch, you are in a peaceful place. You come here to meditate and recall that inner peace we used to have.”

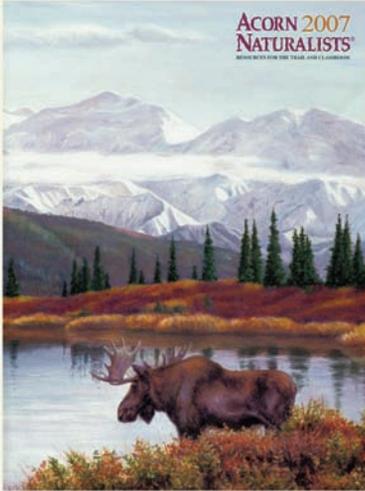
The buildings on the grounds encourage contemplation of the larger issues of world peace. Two gold-topped monuments called *stupas* tower above the grounds. The first stupa recognizes the plight of Tibetan refugees, the second promotes world peace. Both were dedicated by the Dalai Lama. The gold-leaf tops of the stupas contain sacred objects, including the cremated remains of deceased monks.

As visitors search for inner peace, these monuments serve as reminders of the Buddhist belief that the way to achieve peace is through compassion, awareness, and dialogue.

“If a person does not have inner

peace, he cannot interact with others calmly,” says board member Sudha Koneru. “If you have inner peace, you can react calmly to your spouse, your children, your neighbor, your world. That is the way you bring about peace.”

The Kumbum Chamtse Ling Interfaith Temple at the far end of the grounds offers a quiet setting for meditation, and is open to people of all faiths. The elaborate decorations are breathtaking, from the heavily adorned Buddha to the intricately beaded tapestries. Perhaps most remarkably, religious symbols from many faiths—including Catholic, Baha’i, Jewish, Hindu, and Islam—are displayed prominently in the temple. Cultural center leaders emphasize that this is a place for people to find peace in their own way, and to learn about Tibetan culture in the process.



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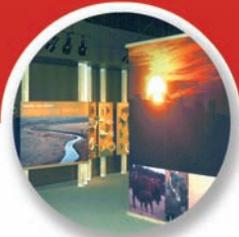
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Humble Beginnings

The story of this Midwestern cultural oasis begins on the other side of the world, with the birth of a baby boy in a small Tibetan mountain village. The boy, Thubten Norbu, was tapped to live the life of a monk at age three. After he turned eight in 1930, monks arrived at Norbu's small cottage and took him to the Kumbum Monastery, the largest monastery in Eastern Tibet. Norbu rose through the ranks and was appointed abbot at age 27. Then in a life-changing turn of events, Norbu's younger brother was named the 14th Dalai Lama.

Norbu faced another drastic change in 1950, when Kumbum was one of the first areas invaded by the People's Republic of China. During the invasion, Norbu was placed under house arrest and followed 24 hours a day. Chinese officials told Norbu he must travel to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa and denounce the Tibetan government and his 15-year-old brother the Dalai Lama. Pretending to go along with the plan, Norbu traveled to the capital, warned his brother about the seriousness of the Chinese invasion and then fled the country.

After escaping to the United States, Norbu began his work as an advocate for Tibetans in exile and joined the faculty of Indiana University in Bloomington as a professor of Tibetan studies. In 1979, Norbu established the Tibetan Cultural Center to promote peace and help Tibetans around the world. While Norbu still lives on the grounds, his health problems led the Dalai Lama to appoint Arjia Rinpoche as the center's new leader in 2005. The new director is a noted Tibetan scholar and architect. Rinpoche is taking the center in a new direction and growing its role in the local community. In 2007, the mission of the center was expanded and it was renamed the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center.

The Center's Mission

As the cultural center grows, its mission and goals have changed as well. The Dalai Lama initially laid out three goals for the center: to educate the West about Buddhism, to help preserve culture and tradition among Mongolians in the West, and to promote a cultural exchange with Tibetans. In addition to that basic mission, the cultural center is increasingly working to reach out to both the local community and to Tibetans and Mongolians in the United States. In recent years, it has been the site of popular community events including traditional ceremonies, a cultural festival, and even a blessing for local pets and their owners.

“We’re open to everybody, and that’s important because someone in the Midwest can come to Indiana and still learn the Tibetan and Mongolian cultures,” says Rinpoche. “They can come here and learn about the culture, learn about life, learn about our language, and see what our food looks like.”

Perhaps the most significant outreach effort is the initiation of interfaith dialogues in the community. During the Dalai Lama’s visit, leaders from nearly every major faith came to greet the famous leader. Rinpoche is quick to point out that while religion is often the wedge that divides us, it can just as easily be faith that draws us together.

“Every religion emphasizes some kind of kindness and love and compassion, but some people use religion for terrible things, like war,” says Rinpoche. “We should have a dialogue and work together and use these things we have in common to make society beautiful and create harmony and cooperation.”

Tibetan exiles and Mongolians also travel long distances to experience the taste of home offered by the cultural center. Hundreds of them visited from all corners of the country to visit during the Dalai Lama’s stay, packing the yards, filling the Mongolian tents, and lining the long road through the center to witness his arrival. Throughout the

The Buddha statue in the Kumbum Chamtse Ling interfaith temple is filled with sacred objects.



week, the Tibetan exiles continued their gathering in the grassy clearings and buildings—sharing stories, celebrating, and laughing.

The Tibetan Cultural Center works to pass down Tibetan culture to the youngest generation by holding an annual summer camp for Tibetan and Mongolian children living in the United States. The camp's goals are to create a close-knit network among these children, who are scattered across the United States, and to help them develop understanding and pride in their cultural heritage.

"They love this place and they love this program," says Rinpoche. "When they come here they feel like they're back at home. They learn so much and they enjoy themselves so much."

Tibet in Turmoil

While the Tibetan Cultural Center itself is not political, it's hard to miss the "Free Tibet" bumper stickers on most of the cars parked in its lots. Even as the cultural center interprets



The brightly colored entrance welcomes visitors. The gate was designed by the cultural center's director, Arjia Rinpoche, who is also an architect.

concepts of peace and tolerance for visitors, the political situation in Tibet grows increasingly turbulent. The People's Republic of China has long claimed Tibet as part of China. However the Tibetan Government in

Exile, led by the Dalai Lama, claims Tibet is an independent country. While no country has recognized Tibet as an independent nation, advocacy groups such as the International Tibet Independence

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Movement continue to work for Tibet's independence.

Tensions between the Tibetan Government in Exile and the People's Republic of China are escalating with the approach of the Beijing Olympics and the aging of the current Dalai Lama. The Olympic Games have heightened the public and media scrutiny of human rights' issues in the People's Republic of China, including questions of Tibet's independence.

"The Olympics were awarded to China with a tacit understanding that the human rights situation in China would improve," says Professor Elliot Sperling, an expert on Tibet at Indiana University. "As a result, there will be attention focused on China's level of adherence to internationally accepted standards of human rights. This will entail attention to China's attitude towards the peaceful expression of Tibetan nationalist sentiment both before and during the games."

In light of the both the turmoil in Tibet and violence around the world, the message of the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center is increasingly relevant. Its leaders feel passing along this message of peace, tolerance, and compassion is one way to change the world for the better.

"The Tibetans don't have a country, we have no economic

strength, we have nothing," says Lhakaba Tshoko, the Dalai Lama's ambassador to Japan. "The only thing that gives us confidence is that through Tibetan culture, there is something we can contribute to society."

If they are accomplishing nothing else, cultural center leaders hope at the very least they are accomplishing this: preserving and sharing the Tibetan culture. The Tibetan culture is a compassionate culture, a peaceful culture. In short, it is a culture we could all learn from. But it is a culture on the move.

The center's leaders say the only place the Tibetan culture truly exists today is at places like this one, in the unlikely location of Bloomington, Indiana. Some of the original Tibetan monasteries have been destroyed. Others have been turned into a sort of "Tibetan Disneyland," sterilized and cleaned up for visiting tourists. But on these wooded acres in a tucked-away corner of the Midwest, the true Tibetan culture is alive and well, bringing together communities, welcoming visitors, and in its own small way, seeking peace.

Megan Tsai is an Indianapolis-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in regional and national publications.

FYI Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center

Contact: www.tibetancc.com, 812-332-0014

How to get there: Located at 3655 Snoddy Road, Bloomington, Indiana, the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center grounds are open to the public during daylight hours year round. For specific driving directions, visit www.tibetancc.com and click on "Contact Us."



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