



Religion today: tradition, modernity and change

Buddhism in the Lake District

Kell Seng Namyell

My name is Kell Seng Namyell, I'm an ordained Buddhist Nun. I live here at Manjushri centre, which is a Buddhist centre in the Lake District that has been running now and operating as a Buddhist centre for the past 25 years.

We run a variety of different spiritual programmes here, some for beginners, some for people who have committed their life to Buddhism and there's a lay and ordained community of about 100 people living here at the moment.

I first got involved in Buddhism when I was living in Perth. I'm originally from Australia. And I'd got to a point in my life where externally I'd done nearly everything that I'd wanted to do. But I still wasn't particularly happy, or didn't feel my life was that meaningful.

And I stumbled across a course on meditation. And within this course they talked a lot about the principle Buddhist ideas that happiness and suffering come from inside you not from outside you. So no matter how perfectly your life is arranged outside you, you still can feel unhappy if your mind is not sorted out. Not long after that, I came back to live in Britain. And I found out about the NTK and Geshi Kel Seng centres. And I was living in London. And I started going to one of the centres in London. And I guess for what I was looking for, they seemed to have what I wanted and I felt like there was some connection.

Geishi Kel Seng is the spiritual Director of the NKT. This means that for students of the NKT he's their spiritual teacher, or we say spiritual guide. Within the different types of Tibetan Buddhism and many Buddhism's, one of the key elements is having one teacher that you follow and it's perfectly fine at the beginning for people to look at many different traditions or many different teachers, before they find a teacher that they feel comfortable with. But for a lot of people and I think myself included, when I came across Geishi Kel Seng's teachings, and met Geishi Kel Seng, I felt like there was some connection.

He is a living example of someone who has compassion. Someone who has wisdom. Someone who is actually able to help people and pull them out of their suffering and for us in this way, when we say spiritual teacher, he is then like a role model as well. This is the type of person we're trying to become and his role in that way is to inspire us because you meet someone like him with so much wisdom, so much compassion and so much effort to help others. Then you think that this is what I can become. This is what I'd like to become.

Samden Gyatso, Head Teacher Manjushri Centre

My name is Samden Gyatso and many years ago I became interested in Buddhism, because I felt dissatisfied, very dissatisfied with my ordinary way of life. I felt that by becoming a Buddhist then I would be able to improve my compassion. And be able to be of greater benefit to others. And Geshi Kel Seng has given me my spiritual life. I think due to his appearing in this world, then he certainly has given me hope. And I think he has given a lot of hope to others. Really to be able to transcend ordinary life and find genuine peace and happiness in life.

Kel Seng Namyell

I do think that's one of his greatest gifts to us almost. Is that he has presented Buddhism in a way that is a completely relevant to our life so in this way the study programmes are just

invaluable because without understanding Buddhist teachings, we've actually got nothing to try to practice and sometimes people just sort of try to practice without understanding the teachings and it just doesn't work. But if you really mix the two in the skilful way that Geshe Kel Seng has with these study programmes. It just has enormously powerful influence in your mind.

Kel Seng Namgyel

On an ideal day I would go to a Puja or a prayer at seven o'clock in the morning and that's my tantric practice from seven until about nine o'clock in the morning. Then after that there is a little bit of time for breakfast and then I prepare for, I've got a study class from eleven 'til one o'clock so I use from nine until eleven to try and do my study and because I'm not a very good student, I need all that time to study.

Then we have lunch from one until two. And we always have a communal lunch, every day of the week. There's a lunch provided for everyone. So not everyone has it, but there's usually a lot of people that have lunch together.

Then for myself, I am the Education Programme Coordinator here so I work through the afternoon. My job is to administer the spiritual programmes so that means anything from finding out why people weren't at the classes that they signed up for; to doing publicity, to all sorts of different things that are to do with the education side of the running of the centre.

In the evening there is either a class or a Puja, which I try to go to as well.

The typical foundation programme class, we begin all classes and actually all Pujas with prostrations. And these prostrations are like a sign of respect to the teacher. The previous teachers, and all the teachings and we do this with all the classes, always begin with prostrations as a sign of respect.

We then begin with prayers. The actual class then sits down and does the prayers. And the prayers are to help us generate particular minds. Like minds of love. Minds of compassion. So to set our motivation in a way that they are ready to do the meditation and to do the, to listen to the teachings.

Then we go into a meditation and in a class like Foundation Programme, we always meditate on something that we've studied in the previous class. This is so that we are taught something. We discuss it and then we spend some time actually contemplating that, to make it a bit firmer and a bit clearer in our mind. From there we go on to the actual teaching. So in the class this morning teaching from Geshe Kelsang's book 'Meaningful to Behold'

Female (*reading from book*)

There are certain actions however that are not directed outwardly but instead affect the perpetrator directly. Such mental actions fall into the group known as holding onto wrong and perverted views and constitute the heaviest and most damaging of all unskilful actions.

Female:

Geshe said we don't have to wait a long time to understand the effect negative actions have on our mind. It may be the full effect will come in a future life, or later in this life. But immediately we have a mind of anger. We know destroys any joy that's in our mind. Any good feeling that we're experiencing.

Kels Seng Namgyel

Then from the teaching we go into discussions. So that again people can recall the text. Try to remember what they've actually been studying. Because one of the biggest challenges we read it and we think that's great. And then someone says 'what did you study', and we've completely forgotten. So we do try to recall or remember the text. And then discuss relevant points that we've got. And in a way that makes it practical. That it's not just intellectual.

At the end of the class we come together, decide a conclusion for what we meditate on the next morning and then just finish by some sort of dedication.

So this is the Manjushri centre shop. In the shop we sell a lot of different statues and Buddhist pictures. These pictures and statues are mainly for practitioners to put on their personal shrines in their own rooms and these pictures and statues just serve to remind them of the good qualities of the Buddhas.

We also sell the full range of Geshe Kelsang's books and also some Sadana's or some prayers that people can take away and do either at the centre or at home. We only sell Geshe Kelsang's books because within this tradition, within Tibetan traditions, we just follow one teacher and one spiritual guide so, in that way, we encourage people to be buying the books of our teacher but obviously we're very happy if people have their own spiritual path and buy the books of their own teacher.

Female (*reading to group*)

Furthermore we need not wait until a future life to experience...

Kelsang Namyell

The women within the NKT are very strong and very powerful and there's no hesitation to give them leadership roles of organisational roles and often there is this sense that if you are a strong woman, or any woman has to hide certain characteristics I think to get along. Because strong women sometimes make other people around them feel a little bit uncomfortable. But within this tradition that strength is actually encouraged because it can be used to benefit and help others so it is a very nice feeling to be in an organisation that is so supportive of equality and I am sure the monks and the lay men feel the same for them, that they are able to just be who they are, and there's no pressure on them so it's quite a delight actually to be in that position.

Kelsang Paqpa, Administrative Director, Manjushri Centre

We have 95 residents here and each of them, apart from a few who are sponsored by the centre, pay rent every month to the centre so we get a lot of income from that. and that, because we're a charity obviously that then gets ploughed back into the centre.

Kelsang Namyell

In the main building we have three meditation rooms. One of them at the moment is currently being redecorated. This is our tantric meditation room or our vajragini room. At the moment you can see it's very beautiful with all the gold leafing but when it's finished, it should look really fantastic.

The Manjushri Centre is actually full at the moment. There is quite a waiting list for people wanting to move in. It's quite a mixture. We've got a couple of families living here. There I think are about thirty ordained people living here and then a lot of couples and lay people living here. Many people work outside the centre. A lot of people work as carers but we've got architects, business people as well, who are here. Many people do their work at the centre so there's quite a variety of things going on. We've got one main building where people live a little bit more communally and then we've got cottages with sometimes couples living there, or families living in them.

Female:

I think the main thing for us was that as a family, wanting to study, wanting to attend Pujas. wanting to bring your children up in a Buddhist environment. Actually living in the centre, allows you to do that in a way that you can't do if you don't actually live in the centre. I couldn't possibly manage family life without Buddhist teachings because I just don't think I would do it very well. I mean however well I do it now, I do it because there's some like dama teaching, you know, sort of like going through it that always helps me to try and find a positive solution.

Male:

One thing I've learned over the years, is that balance between formal practice. Sitting on a meditation cushion, and you know taking those opportunities that family life offers you to put the practices into operation and to effect. So maybe you won't spend as long as you'd like on your cushion. But you get opportunity to try and practice patience and try and practice giving to, all day long. And there's nothing like children to draw that out of you so, you know, if opportunities to practice with the food of your spiritual training, then we're full up.

Kelsang Namyell

We do have a few people living here who are artists. Currently we have people making plaques that will be going to the temple in New York when it's finished. We also have people here who can do tenka paintings and painting Buddhist statues so that's very helpful because it means that we have people here that we're able to draw on to help create the shrines and the different environments that we use to practice and study in.

In all Buddhist shrines we always put offerings to the Buddhas and we try to really think that they are actually there in front of us, that this isn't just a statue or this isn't just a picture but it is actual living Buddha in front of us and then we make offerings to them and these can look a little bit strange but in some ways, it's just like if you have a special guest coming to your house. You often would put out special flowers for them. You will get them special food and drink. And in the same way we think if the Buddhas are going to come into our temple or into our room, wherever our shrine is we put out very special things for them to welcome them into our room, welcome them into our place, and create a very special environment for them to be in.