

My MIDWEST

Hidden Treasure

The soft hills of south-central Wisconsin are home to the Deer Park Buddhist Center, one of the world's most important centers of Tibetan Buddhism.

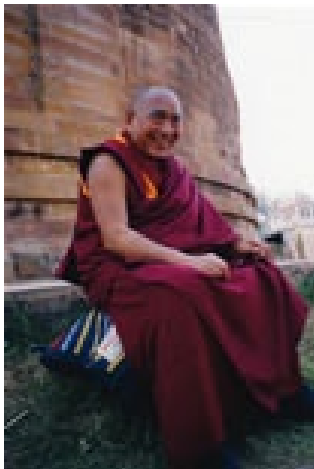
By Joan Fischer

PHOTO BY KALLEEN MORTENSEN

The gentle landscape of south-central Wisconsin, with its weathered barns, cornfields and cattle-dotted pastures, unfolds like pages from a picture book about the rural heartland. It's a quintessentially American landscape, even in those areas where the countryside mingles with suburbia—and it's the last place you'd expect to find one of the nation's most important and active Tibetan Buddhist centers.

Indeed, the Deer Park Buddhist Center, nestled in greenery only 11 miles south of Madison, has direct ties to the Dalai Lama, the exiled political and spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists. His Holiness has visited the center several times and even has a chair reserved for him—a high, ornamented throne of sorts bearing his photo—on the altar of the center's spectacular new \$6.1 million temple, which was funded by private donations and is in the final stages of construction.

Deer Park is the only Tibetan Buddhist center in the Midwest, and possibly in the nation, that not only offers regular religious services, classes and spiritual retreats for the public, but also is a working monastery. It is home to eight robe-clad, shaven-head monks and nuns—a mix of Tibetans and Americans—who spend their days tending to the 13-acre grounds, helping with classes and programs, and studying and meditating upon the sacred texts of their 2,500-year-old faith.



How did a tiny center in the American heartland achieve such stature? The answer may be found in the guiding presence of Deer Park's founder and abbot, Geshe Lhundub Sopa, 85, a globally renowned Buddhist scholar and an emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where in the 1960s he helped establish the nation's first multinational Buddhist Studies doctoral program and became the first Tibetan to be tenured at an American university.

Sopa had a clear vision of spiritual growth, cultural preservation and inter-religious dialogue when he founded Deer Park in 1979. "We wanted to create an enduring home for the preservation and transmission of the Buddha's teachings and a landmark of Tibetan culture in the middle of America," he says.

At its core, Deer Park is a place where people gather to find insight and strength. "We consider the Buddha's teachings to be a form of medicine that can ease suffering and transform ordinary human beings into perfectly compassionate and wise beings," Sopa says. "What is required is a place where people can gather to receive spiritual instruction and guidance from qualified teachers, and where those interested can actively practice, continuing the Buddhist contemplative tradition and lifestyle."

The Midwest could not have hoped for a more qualified leader. Back in Tibet in the 1950s, Sopa was one of only 30 monks selected from thousands to serve as a debate examiner to Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th (and current) Dalai Lama, during his final examinations.

The son of farmers, Sopa would have been content to spend his life in his homeland, studying his beloved books on Buddhism. He begged his parents to let him enter the monastery at age 9—his interest awakened by observing chanting monks at worship during a visit to a nearby monastery—and was noted for his remarkable scholarship while still in his teens.

But history intervened when the Chinese invaded Tibet in the 1950s. In 1959, after the collapse of the Tibetan resistance, Sopa fled over the mountains to India, along with the Dalai Lama and more than 100,000 of his countrymen.



The Dalai Lama established a Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala (India), where Sopa remained until 1962, when the Dalai Lama encouraged him to gather a group of scholars and go to the United States. After spending five years in a monastery in New Jersey, Sopa received a teaching offer from UW-Madison to start a Buddhist Studies program. He started out as a teaching assistant in Tibetan.

“The analogy would be if the classics department had invited the pope to be a teaching assistant in first-year Latin,” jokes Joe Elder, a UW-Madison professor of sociology and Asian languages and culture, in an interview with Wisconsin Public Television.



As Sopa’s English improved, he added Tibetan Buddhist theory and philosophy and Buddhist logic to his repertoire. He soon found himself fielding more scholarly requests than he could handle in the classroom—and the idea for Deer Park was born.

Today, more than 122,000 Tibetans remain in exile around the world—7,000 in the U.S. and Canada, including 500 in the Madison area. This population makes a place like Deer Park all the more important, not only as a home away from home for the Tibetan people, but also as a safe place to preserve, foster and celebrate their culture.

Nothing suits this cause more than Deer Park’s new temple. Perched magnificently on a small hillside, it will not only accommodate a growing audience—presently 5,000 people visit Deer Park annually, a number that is expected to double with the increased capacity—but also offers space for the center’s extensive library (which includes sacred Tibetan texts) and works of art.

The old temple sat 70 for services; the new temple will sit more than 200.

Entering the 20,000-square-foot temple is a heartening experience. The red doors are ornamented with hand-hammered copper and surrounded by an intricately carved, brightly painted frame. There are two vividly colored murals that flank the worship hall entryway, representing protective religious guardians of the north, south, east and west, each decorated with their own symbols from various Buddhist myths.

The worship hall itself is lined with tankas, or scrolled paintings, depicting the life of the Buddha and other religious figures. In the center of the altar is a 15-foot-tall Shakyamuni Buddha statue that shimmers in gold against a royal blue backdrop. Buddha is surrounded by smaller statues, artifacts and tapestries. There is a draped, ornamented seat for whoever is leading prayer—and, on one side of the altar, the seven-foot-tall chair with built-in steps that is reserved for the Dalai Lama.

His Holiness will be back July 18-25 to officially open the temple, conduct a teaching series and accept a long-life prayer offering (Tenshug), dividing his time in a round of ceremonies and events both public and private. One of the larger gatherings will be held at the Alliant Energy Center’s Coliseum in Madison, which seats thousands. The visit is being sponsored by Deer Park in partnership with the North America Tibetan Associations.

For Deer Park, the temple-opening festivities will be a time of jubilation. Finally, Tibetans in the Midwest have a refuge and place of celebration befitting their spiritual practice and culture. There is room enough for all who wish to visit and learn, both now and in the future. High above on the temple roof, the golden victory spires stand tall. One can almost hear Sopa say the words: “All hearts may be filled with joy.”

SERENITY NOW

Although the Deer Park Buddhist Center has some deer roaming its grounds, it was actually named for the preserve outside of Varanasi, India, where Gautama Buddha first began teaching.

A prominent symbol of Buddhism features the dharmachakra, or wheel of law, flanked by two deer representing disciples. This is Deer Park’s signature symbol, and it is displayed as a golden statue on the temple roof above the main entry.

Visitors are welcome to walk the grounds—including taking a contemplative clockwise turn around the sacred stupa, a round structure symbolizing the enlightened mind of the Buddha—and participate in celebrations or classes.

Offerings include:

- A visit from the Dalai Lama July 18–25. From July 20-24, he will be teaching at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison. More information at www.dalailama2008na.com.
- Five-week intensive summer courses, held in August, will be slightly shorter this year due to the Dalai Lama’s visit.
- Sunday morning worship services (10 a.m. to noon) held by Geshe Sopa. Thursday evening services (7:30-9 p.m.) are offered by other teachers.
- Celebrations on the Tibetan New Year, Feb. 7; Day of Miracles, Feb. 20; Wesak, the Buddha’s birthday, June 18; the Dalai Lama’s birthday, July 6; the Buddha’s first teaching, Aug. 5.
- The Deer Park library has many original Tibetan texts and a complete set of audiotaped teachings. All works are available for consultation and many can be lent out.

For more information, visit www.deerparkcenter.org.