

Buddhist Banter

A practitioner of the Ancient Eastern Religion Takes on Pop-Culture America

Danish Lama Ole Nydahl, who travels the world spreading the doctrine of Buddhism, says one of his greatest challenges in translating the ancient Eastern religion to the modern culture of America lies in retrieving what he calls “the spiritual knowledge that gets run over by the Coca Cola culture.”

“Americans either get totally committed, like what we call fanatics in Europe,” says Nydahl, a tall man with spiky white hair, “or they go the other way and it’s just bubble gum and completely pop culture.”

Yet it was in America, as a teenage exchange student in Connecticut in 1958, that Nydahl first discovered Buddhism. He wrote a thesis on a Buddhist text, and he was hooked.

“I was amazed by how logical it [Buddhism] was,” he says. “I knew I would have to look at it later in my life.”

In 1968, on his honeymoon, Nydahl traveled to Nepal, where he began formally studying Buddhism. Today and for the past quarter of a century, Nydahl has become a nomadic Buddhist, visiting a new town every few days to offer a retreat. He says his teacher, the 16th Karmapa, told him he should teach in America twice a year. He’s found disciples in such unlikely places as small town Idaho.

“I had to drop Hawaii,” he says laughing. “I had some excellent friends there, but they’re just not interested. When the surf is up, the surf is up.”

For someone who takes his work so seriously that he has made it his life’s calling, founding more than 200 Buddhist centers throughout the world and abandoning the stability of house and home, Nydahl has a refreshingly light approach to spreading “the word.” For all his seeming disdain for the pop



culture of America, Nydahl’s lectures take on a laid-back, colloquial tone. He has somehow managed to escape the trap that so many intellectuals and philosophers fall into when discussing their passion—the esoteric, verging on elitist, explanations of their beliefs.

When discussing his religion, Nydahl speaks of “the Teflon coating” that Buddhism gives those who practice it.

“Buddhism’s comparative nature makes it so useful,” he says. “You see that, for whatever is happening to you, there may be something 1000 times worse happening to people in Africa.”

While Nydahl uses words typically associated with Buddhism, such as compassion and joy and fearlessness, he also makes modern-day references that tie the religion with something larger and more immediate for his audiences.

Talking about a book about Chinese-Tibetan Buddhism that was written by Nydahl’s colleague Tomek Lehnert, Nydahl says, “It reads like an Agatha Christie.”

Nydahl says he thinks Buddhism has become so popular in the West recently because people here are becoming more independent.

“Buddhism is excellent for this,”

he says. “It does the same thing a computer does. It allows you to keep several things in the air at once. It allows you a space for several gray zones that haven’t been sorted out yet.”

And, in a videotaped retreat that Nydahl is leading, he tells his disciples not to be discouraged if their progress seems slow at times.

“I know some of you may be thinking, Man, I’m much older than the Buddha when he got enlightened, and I’m still such a blockhead,” he says.

A November 1998 interview with cable TV host Rick Martel comically confirms Nydahl’s ability to reach out to those who might appear to be anything but the ideal student.

Martel opens his interview by telling Nydahl that he has not learned a lot about Buddhism since a previous interview they’d had. Martel follows with a joke about the term “lama,” pointing out that the animals spit a lot.

Nydahl smiles peacefully. When Martel gets deep and says, “You know I’m not doing much for anybody or anything I just wonder—what’s the purpose of life, Lama?” Nydahl nods his head and responds, “I’d say reaching a level where we can benefit all

beings. In Buddhism....”

“But,” Martel cuts him off, “there are very few people like you, sir, that do that.”

“Yes,” says Nydahl, nodding again.

“So?” Martel asks, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, a perplexed expression on his face.

“OK,” says Nydahl. “Then I’d say [the purpose is] trying to evolve as much as possible, trying to discover how rich the mind is and what the mind can do, really trying to live life to the fullest.”

“OK, so what is Christmas like in Denmark?” Martel Asks.

By the conclusion of the interview, Martel is telling Nydahl that just talking with him makes him feel better. Nydahl bids farewell with this piece of knowledge: “Keep the essential questions. Keep digging.”

Analyzing his progress in America, Nydahl recalls a recent talk in Budapest where 1,700 people showed up.

“I was there until 3 a.m.,” he says. “I just couldn’t get rid of them, but in America it’s not so much like that.... If I give a retreat, I get maybe 250 people.”

Nydahl sees no easy solution to winning disciples in America. He believes the transformation to Buddhism is a gradual one that begins with a questioning of traditional beliefs.

“There needs to be a more critical attitude,” he says. “A very big block in my work is that people are afraid of stepping on others’ religions’ beliefs. You [Americans] give more emphasis to belief and less to quality. You are a young society,” Nydahl says, searching for an apt analogy to make this idea relevant to a commercial culture so removed from the simpler philosophy of Buddhism. “You need to expect quality and... you need,” he says pausing dramatically, a hint of triumph in his voice, “to do comparative shopping.”