

Ace of Diamonds

A conversation with Lama Ole Nydahl

July 11th, 2007

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<http://www.praguepost.com/articles/2007/07/11/ace-of-diamonds.php>

Prague blossomed in orange and red last month for a visit by the spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Trinlay Thaye Dorje.

Karma Kagyu, which was established in the 11th century, is one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, passing on the Vajrayana Buddhist practice known as the Diamond Way. In Karma Kagyu, the centuries-old tradition of “oral transfer” of Buddhist practices is highly treasured. Particularly important is the teacher and disciple relationship. The word karmapa means “holder of Buddhist activity,” and his followers believe the current Karmapa is in his 17th conscious human incarnation. The 24-year-old Karmapa was accompanied by Lama Ole Nydahl, a Danish convert to Buddhism who has helped make the Diamond Way the largest and fastest-growing school of Buddhism in the West. After meeting the 16th Karmapa in Tibet in 1969, Nydahl studied for 12 years, became a lama and is now constantly on the road, spreading Buddhist philosophy throughout Europe, the United States, Latin America and Asia. He is known for being able to interpret and explain Buddhist practices in a manner well-suited to modern Western thinking. Nydahl cuts an unlikely figure as a lama, pursuing hobbies such as bungee-jumping, motorcycle-riding and skydiving. A short, extremely energetic man of 66, he is in great health and spirits. His affection for women is undeniable, and his charisma compelling.

Prior to the Karmapa’s lecture at T-Mobile Arena June 16, Nydahl gave an introduction to Buddhism. The Prague Post caught up with him earlier that day at the boutique Hotel Elegant in Prague 6.

The Prague Post: How do you feel about the Czech crowd?

Lama Ole Nydahl: I like coming here and I like the work they do here. The Czechs think independently, they have a lot of good ideas and they always check with us on very big new ideas. This is a place where we observe the most success with the least input from the outside.

TPP: After all your years of teaching, what do you think when you look back?

LON: We did a good job. In the Himalayas in 1972, my wife and I were asked if we had some friends in Europe who would like to learn about meditation. And we had quite a few. We learned from the mistakes we made at the beginning, and today we give quite a solid thing to the world.

TPP: What have you learned from all that you have done?

LON: I have learned that all beings want joy. And that is what we work on: Show them their potential and their joy.

TPP: What was the biggest challenge when you studied at Karma Kagyu?

LON: The biggest challenge was the dirt, which is everywhere in Asia. Dirty toilets, the food you couldn’t eat, the water you couldn’t drink. Survival was the biggest challenge. But that is the biggest challenge for everyone.



VLADIMÍR WEISS/THE PRAGUE POST

A convert to Buddhism, Nydahl has become one of the West’s foremost spokespersons for Vajrayana, the Diamond Way.

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TPP: And within yourself?

LON: The main thing I had to go through was all the abortions that I've caused. That was the hardest thing. Many of my girlfriends in the '60s got pregnant and went for an abortion. That was the worse pain I had, when I found out those were actually living beings. Then I felt very bad.

TPP: What is your biggest fear today?

LON: I have two fears for the world: overpopulation and Islam. Those two things could destroy the world, which could otherwise be a beautiful place. Overpopulation means that a lot of people are born under conditions that are not human. We should pay the poor countries, the poor people, to have less children. If we give them a couple dollars a day, they can have one or two children and educate them instead of having 10 that sit around begging and cannot do anything.

TPP: Is it possible to help the developing countries reach more human conditions?

LON: We can help them first by diminishing the number of children. Then we can try to civilize them. I mean, the Islam world and its suppression of women — the men who suppress women now will probably be the suppressed women in their next life. You and I are very much the products of what we did in our past lives, and what we are doing now will become our next life. So we can try to civilize them gradually, but it takes a long time.

TPP: Why is the Diamond Way so popular in the Western world?

LON: Because people want an experience, not a belief. Belief religions are very good for the East. But in the West today, where everybody is critical, educated, has a computer and can get the facts on everything, experience is the only way.

There are three levels of Buddhism: There is the small way of southern Buddhism, which mainly involves staying out of trouble. Then there is the big way, which is compassion and wisdom. Then there is the Diamond Way, where one uses the energy of every situation to know the mind.

If you have done some very positive actions in your former life and somebody tells you your mind is "clear light," that means it hasn't been born and will never die. Then you have nothing to be afraid of. You can enjoy everything and share your power with others.

TPP: Diamond Way Buddhism is described as nondogmatic and rather freeing. But there are all these rituals — bowing, repeating mantras. Why is this necessary in a search for one's self?

LON: No, you don't have to do that. It's completely free whether you want to do it or not. These methods can be quite useful in removing ego, the feeling of separation between yourself and others. But it's not something you have to do. To be a Buddhist you need three things: the confidence that there is a goal you are going to reach, the methods to do it and friends along the way. That is called Buddha Dharma Sanga.

TPP: How do you keep fit?

LON: Happy night lives, as we say in Denmark. Actually, I just think of myself as protecting others and don't have much time for anything. But I boxed for years when I was young. I drive big motorcycles, I parachute, those different things.

TPP: Yes, there are pictures of you skydiving on your Web site.

LON: It's fun, isn't it?

TPP: Yes, though it's almost like a celebrity watch. This is not how one usually thinks of a lama. You seem to be just the opposite.

LON: If you have the position of being a lama, people must trust you. That means I have to examine myself. Is there fear somewhere I have to work with? Is there fear of heights, for instance? So I have to check myself in order to be able to say to others, I'm solid, you can trust me. That's the official explanation. I also enjoy it, of course.

TPP: How long will you go on teaching the Diamond Way?

LON: Until they carry me away. Of course, if we get anybody who can do it better, I will lean back in a supportive role. But so far I think I'm the most experienced and can do the most.

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