

THE BLISS OF PRACTICE

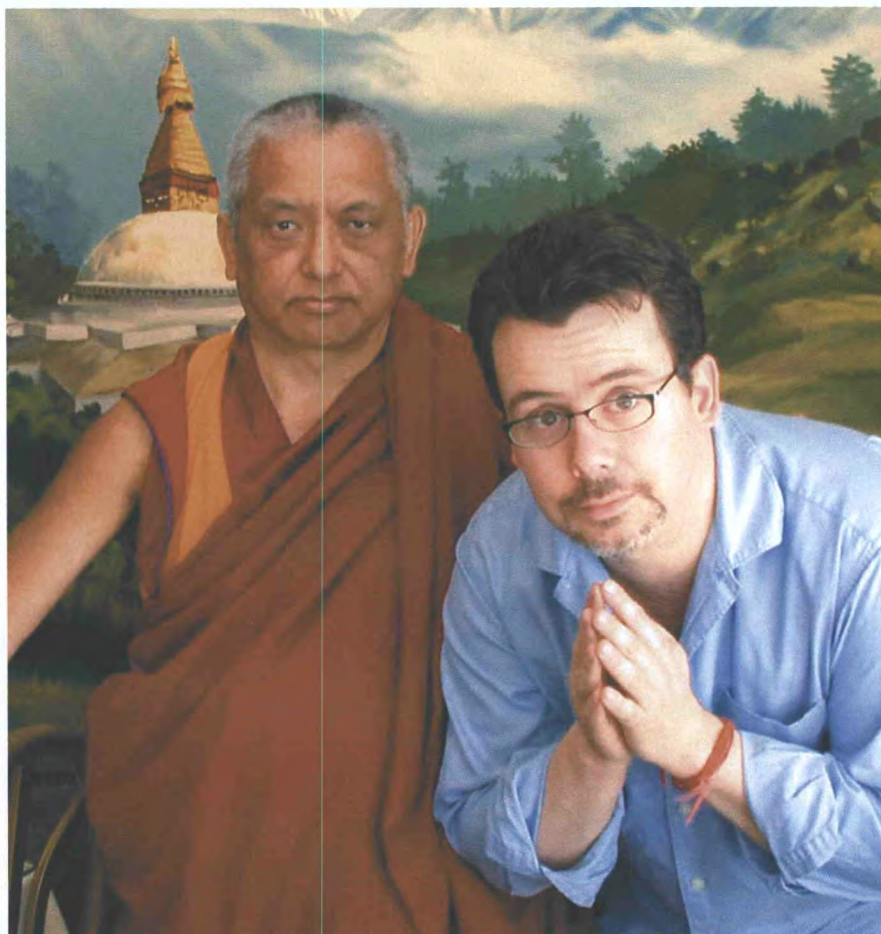


Seattle-born **DAVID GONSALEZ**, 38, dreamt of Tibet as a little boy, and was told by many lamas that he had practiced Dharma in his previous life. As a teen, however, he got the sense that something was missing, and started drinking – he lost touch with the spiritual connection he had, and instead of a sense of wonder, there was despair. Years later, making money by buying houses to remodel and rent out, Gonzalez felt again he was missing the point of life. He speaks to **VEN. ROGER KUNSANG** about his spiritual re-emergence, his life and Aunt Thelma.

VEN. ROGER KUNSANG: How did you first connect with the Dharma?

DAVID GONSALEZ: I read a book by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Kindness Clarity and Insight*, when I was twenty-three. At that point, I had already decided to find some purpose to my life, other than working, and had quit my job to find a spiritual path. I read the book, and that was it – that was the beginning.

VRK: Did you have any feeling or connection with the Dharma before that?



David Gonzalez with his teacher, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, in a Tibetan restaurant in Seattle

DG: Ever since I was a little boy I was always wondering about the deeper meaning of life and the world. When my mother said that [the] things that happened were because of God, I would think, “But I watched the situation. First someone did something, and then something else, and then something happened, so why do you think that God did it?”

When I was very young, about five or six, and I did something wrong, I would kneel by my bed and pray that I could experience the results of my negative actions as suffering in this life, so that I wouldn't have to take them with me when I die.

VRK: Where do you think those thoughts come from?

DG: A lot of lamas have told me that I practiced Dharma in my previous life. When I started practicing Dharma, especially when I was meditating on tranquil abiding, I remembered dreams I had as a little boy, things about Tibet. One time I explained a dream to Geshe Khenrab, who said, “You just described the area around Ganden Monastery.”

I dreamt a lot about sitting in this little room. [I saw] everything in it, the little bed, and door, where the window was, how it was made, and looking out at the valley, the way the river ran through it, and the way the mountain was. There was this feeling of being sad because I wanted to do retreat but I had some responsibility at the monastery.



VRK: Did you understand that these dreams were connected to a previous life?

DG: No. When I was young I was always trying to figure out how the concept of God and Christianity fitted into my philosophy. I created my own little religion in my head, my own sort of spiritual tradition.

As a teenager I told my friends about this theory I had that a table wasn't a table, because if you were a fly, with all these eyes, and you landed on the table, it didn't look like a table, and it was so big that it didn't function as a table. So the fly can't put cups of tea on it! I had this idea that a table only appears that way because it's a certain size in proportion to us and we use it for certain things. My friends would laugh and ask what the point was. “I don't know,” I told them, “but there's something going on.”

In His Holiness's book, he mentions a table in reference to emptiness. I got extremely excited because the table idea was there, but also a little deflated on realizing that all these ideas I had figured out were already in Tibetan Buddhism! [I became] extremely interested in [Tibetan Buddhism] and in one year read close to 100 books on the subject – everything I could find – one book after another for six or seven hours a day.

In my first week of discovering Dharma, after reading a few books, I decided that bodhichitta and tranquil abiding were the two most important things to practice. So I would meditate one

session every day on tranquil abiding using the breath, and another on the methods to cultivate bodhichitta [the ‘seven-fold cause and effect’ and ‘equalizing and exchanging self with others’].

VRK: But you still hadn't met a teacher?

DG: No. After a while I went to the Sakya Monastery in Seattle and took refuge. But I really wanted to make a connection with Lama Tsongkhapa's tradition. I had felt extremely drawn to Lama Tsongkhapa and Trijang Rinpoche, whenever I would read their names – the first time I read Lama Tsongkhapa's name I kind of spaced out for about five or ten minutes. I saw a flyer mentioning that a Gelugpa lama, and disciple of Trijang Rinpoche, was coming to Seattle. I went and met Geshe Khenrab.

I saw him again after a few months in Montreal. Meanwhile I had started *ngöndro* [preliminary practices] and continued to meditate on tranquil abiding and bodhichitta every day. After asking some questions, Geshe-la said that I had, in fact, managed to attain the fifth mental abiding [there are nine levels], but that I should stop meditating on tranquil abiding and finish

my *ngöndro*. I was really disappointed. I had worked really hard for the last year and a half to make that much progress and at that point meditating was really easy and blissful. I asked Geshe-la on another occasion why he told me to stop. Later I should meditate on *tummo* (inner fire) as the object of tranquil abiding, he said, and then I would accomplish many realizations at once. “Once you attain the third or fourth mental abiding,” he continued, “then the winds will enter the central channel. At that point, all the gross distractions disappear, and your concentration becomes really powerful; the gross sinking and excitement disappear, and attaining tranquil abiding becomes very easy.” I am still waiting!

VRK: What were your conditions when you were meditating on tranquil abiding?

DG: I was in a studio apartment. I had to work really hard at it. I was working a couple of days a week, and on my days off I studied Dharma books, was doing my prostrations, and in between I would meditate on tranquil abiding – in a lot of short sessions. The further I got, the more sessions I would do. In the beginning, I just did a couple of short sessions a day, then more and more sessions, then the sessions got longer and longer – a few a day for half an hour or longer. I loved that period of my life!

VRK: What happened when you met Geshe Khenrab again in Montreal?

DG: I had only been there a few minutes, when he walked up to me and said, “In your previous life you were a disciple of Trijang Rinpoche.” He told me that many times. Gelong Losang Choephel also said the same thing, and in fact gave me

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some of Trijang Rinpoche's personal belongings. Actually, in the Gelug tradition, everyone was Trijang Rinpoche's disciple; you could say that to almost anyone.

Several years later, the night before I left Montreal for the last time, Geshe Khenrab and I had a conversation. I was a little concerned that some of what I had said may have been slightly misleading, and so the next morning I decided to clear things up with Geshe-la. As soon as I started to explain, he interrupted me and said, "Everything that has happened to you, from the time you were born until now, I know!" You can imagine the impact that had on me! At that point I knew he was going to pass away soon. He died a few days later.

I was going to get ordained and live with Geshe Khenrab, but just before I was going to move to Montreal he passed away. Since then, most of my lamas have told me I should be ordained but so far I haven't been able to come to terms with my fear of belonging to a group.

VRK: When did you meet Lama Zopa Rinpoche?

DG: A couple of years later. Lama Zopa gave Chenrezig empowerment in Seattle at my friend's house. I thought it was important to be careful when making a connection with a lama. Lama Zopa gave the motivation teaching for the empowerment and then said, "If you don't want to stay for the empowerment, then you can leave." I listened to the motivation and thought that Lama Zopa was fantastic, but left because I didn't want to rush into a formal relationship with a lama and make a mistake.

In 1997 there were some political problems between His Holiness and some lamas regarding the protector practice. At that time I had read all of Lama Zopa's books, and watched closely how Rinpoche dealt with the situation. I thought that he was the most inspiring, and was exactly how, in my mind, I wanted to be. So I wrote Rinpoche a letter asking him to be my lama. That was the beginning of a teacher-disciple relationship.

VRK: In terms of daily practice, what do you do now?

DG: In the morning [I set up] many offerings – lots of water bowls, light offerings, etc., and bless and increase them with multiplication mantras.

After blessing my mala, I do six-session guru yoga, followed by *Lama Chöpa*, and meditate on each verse of the lam-rim meditations. Then I do *Ganden Lha Gyäma* with the abbreviated *Yamantaka sadhana*, and *torma* offerings, followed by extensive offerings to Palden Lhamo – with the *tsok*, *serkyim*, *torma* offerings and mantra recitation. Then I do self-initiation, which takes a long time.

In the evening I do Heruka tsok offering, and all the prayers, mantras and *torma* offerings for Chittamani Tara. Then I do six-session guru yoga again.

VRK: If you start your prayers at 7:30 A.M. what time do you finish?

DG: Around noon or 1:30 P.M., depending on how much time I have to meditate. If I have time I spend more time on the lam-rim and 'bringing the three kayas into the path to enlightenment' [Transforming ordinary birth, death, and rebirth into the three kayas: nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya, and dharmakaya].

VRK: What do you do for the rest of the day?

DG: Then it's great! I have many projects: translating texts, studying Tibetan language, studying Dharma, helping lamas. I established a non-profit for one of my lamas, Gelong Losang Choephel, and I do a lot of work around that. We've re-built his monastery in India. He has been to Seattle three times now and, when here, I do all the translating, organize the teachings, and take care of his affairs.

I also do pujas for people, like fire pujas, say prayers for people, and do the *mo* [Tibetan divination system]. Every evening I go and see my great aunt Thelma and feed her pie and ice cream. [Aunt Thelma is sick and David takes care of her health care and financial needs].

I recently purchased some land in the mountains, where I am building a retreat house for myself so that when I get some free time I can do some long retreat. That is a lot of work. Everyday there is just so much to do. When I go to bed there is always something I wish I had gotten done.

VRK: If you are so busy, and you gave up your job, how do you support yourself?

DG: Through the kindness of others! People have been supportive, and one person in particular has been very kind.

Originally I owned two houses, cars and all sorts of things. Then I gave up my job, and when I started practicing, I slowly sold off everything to support my practice. I worked in my friend's Dharma store a couple of days a week, and spent the rest of the time in retreat – I finished the *ngöndro* and have done about twenty mantra retreats.

Eventually I ran out of money and was completely poor. A few times I was down to five dollars and spent half on offerings and half on food. I was poor for a long time.

Things started to change when a great yogi, Gelong Losang Choephel, came to Seattle and gave Palden Lhamo empowerment. After the empowerment he told me that in my lifetime I was going to do so much work for the benefit of sentient beings, that I should make extensive offerings to Palden Lhamo



everyday so that all my Dharma activities would be successful. Since doing that, everything has kept getting better and better.

Shortly after that Gelong Losang Choephel stayed with me for one year in Seattle. Just before that I had been given some money that I was going to use to get a place to do retreat, but since Gelong Losang Choephel was trying to raise money for his monastery, I used almost all the money instead to help him with that. If you have to choose between benefiting the lama and doing retreat then it's obvious that making offerings to the lama is more important. Inspired by my devotion to the lama, a person, who wishes to remain anonymous, offered to build a retreat place for me.

VRK: What kind of retreats have you done over what period of time?

DG: I did Heruka and Vajrayogini retreats while doing *ngöndro*, and I did some retreats twice, like Vajradaka and Vajrasattva. I did four guru yoga retreats. I had the idea that if I had received the empowerment then I should do the retreat.

In the last five or six years, I did Yamantaka, Chittamani Tara, Medicine Buddha, Amitayus, White Tara, Vajrapani-Hayagriva-Garuda, Varjavidharan, Palden Lhamo – most of the major ones. There are still quite a few I want to complete. I also did a few, when I didn't have enough time to do a proper retreat, where I said 100,000 mantras to maintain the connection with the deity, and meditate on bodhichitta, and receive the blessings. So I still have those to do again properly.

VRK: What about the connection with your Aunt?

DG: Ever since I was very young, my Aunt Thelma and I have been very close. We always talked on the phone, and I spent a lot of time with her.

VRK: Is she Buddhist?

DG: No. But one day I was at her house (before she went to an assisted-living center), and she started talking to me about how hard it is to get old. She started in on the exact same points from the lam-rim on why at the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit. The first thing she said was, "Even if I were the richest person in the world, when it is their time to die, all the money in the whole world won't buy you even one more minute." Then she said, "And no matter how many people love you, even if you and

your mother stood at my bed and held onto my arms and legs and begged me not to die, still I couldn't stay for even one more day." Next she said, "Now, my body, the thing I have cherished the most, spent so much time fussing over, is the cause of my own death, now it's nothing but a bag of bones." I found it really inspiring, and whenever I'm meditating on death, I always think of Auntie Thelma. When you are teaching you can talk about it but have no realization, but with her it was very powerful because it was her own direct experience.

Later I went to visit her at the assisted-living center. When I came in the room once, she was looking up into the sky and didn't acknowledge me. She said, "Oh yeah, I knew that David would be living his life exactly the way he is now and that is why I gave him the house." [When she moved into the assisted-living center, Thelma gave David the house she was going to leave him in her will.] When I said her name, it startled her and she said, "Oh, there you are."

When she first got to the assisted-living center she called me once and said, "David, I have a question for you. In the dining room there are beings who are able to have their consciousness in more than one place at one time. I asked them, 'How do you do that?' And they said, 'You should ask David, he knows all about this sort of thing.'" I said, "Wow, Thelma," and asked her a few questions, and she said, "Are you trying to trip me up?" "No," I said, "I was just wondering if they were angels." And she said, "Oh no, I've seen angels before!"

Another time one of my friends went with me to visit my aunt. He joked and said, "Thelma, have you done your Vajrayogini practice today?" and she looked at him and said, "Oh, heavens, no, I don't need to do my practice anymore!" So then he asked her, "You don't even practice in your sleep?" And she laughed and said, "Of course, silly, I always practice in my sleep!"



David's retreat land in Washington State



Aunt Thelma and David have always had a close connection