



# The Wanderer

He was a bestselling author and rising star of the Buddhist world, but one day Mingyur Rinpoche just walked out and left it all behind. ANDREA MILLER reports on a modern lama braving the ancient path of the wandering yogi.

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*Mingyur Rinpoche outside  
Tergar Monastery in  
Bodhgaya, India.*



Above left: Mingyur Rinpoche at seven with his father Ugyen Rinpoche, brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and mother Sonam Chodron. Above: Mingyur Rinpoche at eight in Nubri, Nepal. Far left: Mingyur Rinpoche at thirteen with his first three-year retreat group at Sherab Ling. Left: Mingyur Rinpoche participating in meditation research at Richie Davidson's Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging at University of Wisconsin.

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The letter, written in Tibetan, explained that from a young age Mingyur Rinpoche had wanted to practice by traveling alone from place to place in the style of a wandering yogi, and that he'd finally made the decision to do so. "Though I do not claim to be like the great masters of times past," he wrote, "I am now embarking on this journey as a mere reflection of these teachers, as a faithful imitation of the example they set. For a number of years, my training will consist of simply leaving behind my connections, so please do not be upset with my decision." He urged his students to continue practicing in his absence and not to worry about him.

More than eight months have passed since Mingyur Rinpoche disappeared, and still no one knows where he is. Cortland Dahl is the president of the board of Tergar International, a network of meditation centers and study groups under Mingyur Rinpoche's guidance. When I ask Dahl if he has any guesses regarding his teacher's whereabouts, he tells me that the short answer is no, but that there have been rumors.

"I just heard on Facebook," Dahl tells me, "that he was seen at Tso Pema, which is a famous pilgrimage site in northern India, and I heard someone else say they had an unconfirmed sighting in Ladakh. I have no idea if they really did see him. But if anybody did, and he got the sense that people knew he was there, I'm sure the first thing he would do is pack up and head somewhere else."

**T**HE OLD MONK Lama Soto knocked on Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche's door. Then he knocked again. It was noon at Tergar Monastery in Bodhgaya, India, and Lama Soto was bringing Mingyur Rinpoche his lunch, just as he'd done for the past five days, ever since Mingyur Rinpoche had announced that he was going to intensify his practice and remain alone in his room, eating only once a day. Their custom was that Lama Soto would knock on the door; in response, Mingyur Rinpoche would open it a little, then Lama Soto would walk in. But on this day early last June, Mingyur Rinpoche did not open the door and no sound came from his room. At one o'clock, Lama Soto pushed open the unlocked door and on the bed he found a long white ceremonial scarf and a letter. Mingyur Rinpoche was gone and he had taken nothing with him—not money, not a change of clothes, not even a toothbrush. Lama Soto nearly fainted.



Mingyur Rinpoche's mother Sonam Chodron, left, Chimey Yangzo, her husband Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and Mingyur Rinpoche visiting the site of Nalanda, a historic Buddhist university in Bihar, India.

MILAREPA, WHOSE LIFE is the stuff of legends, is Tibet's most famous wandering yogi. About a thousand years ago, he was born into a prosperous family. But then his father died and Milarepa's aunt and uncle took control of the estate, forcing Milarepa and his sister and mother into servitude. This twisted Milarepa's mother into wanting revenge and she manipulated him into studying the black arts. Then one day, when his aunt and uncle were having a party to celebrate their son's engagement, Milarepa brewed up a storm that destroyed their house, killing thirty-five people. The villagers were furious and they set off to hunt him down, but Milarepa got word of their approach and conjured up a hailstorm. Later, however, the full force of his terrible deeds hit him and he was desolate with remorse.

It was at this point that Milarepa met Marpa, a powerful householder yogi, who recognized Milarepa as his future heart son, yet did not tell him. Instead, Marpa was hard on Milarepa. He yelled at him and hit him and refused to teach him until he'd built and demolished three stone towers, one after another. In this way, Marpa helped Milarepa to quickly burn away his negative karma, and then Milarepa was able to dedicate himself to practice. Later, after he attained enlightenment, Milarepa assumed there was no longer any need for him to stay in the mountains and decided to go to cities and villages to teach. Before he could depart, how-

ever, he had a dream that Marpa told him to stay in retreat. If he did that, Marpa said, he would touch the lives of countless people through example.

Milarepa is remembered today for his beautiful, inspired songs and poetry. For half a lifetime, he wandered the mountains of Tibet. At one point, he lived in a cave and subsisted on nothing but nettle soup, leaving him bone thin and his skin a strange green. Frequently, people would discover that Milarepa, a realized master, was living nearby and they'd gather around him. When the crowds grew too thick, he'd move on.

Another well-known wandering yogi is Dza Patrul Rinpoche, a great Dzogchen master of the nineteenth century. Completely disinterested in fine clothes and titles, Patrul Rinpoche begged for his supper at nomad encampments. Once a great lama arrived whom the nomads greeted with incense and prostrations. Then the lama saw Patrul Rinpoche and hurled himself to the ground at his feet. Only in that way did the people understand the accomplishments of the threadbare wanderer.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was one of the few recent adepts to practice as a wandering yogi. A Dzogchen master, he narrowly escaped Tibet in 1959 and then wandered the streets of Calcutta, begging and living among the Hindu sadhus. Khen Rinpoche, now deceased, was one of Mingyur Rinpoche's most influential teachers.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERGAR INTERNATIONAL

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE was a rising star in the Buddhist world. The author of two bestselling books, he had a large community of students around the globe, and he was the abbot of Tergar Osel Ling Monastery in Nepal and Tergar Rigzin Khacho Targye Ling Monastery in India. Adding it all up, when he slipped away last June, he was leaving a lot behind.

Mingyur Rinpoche was born in Nubri, Nepal, in 1975 to an illustrious Tibetan family. His mother is Sonam Chodron, a descendant of two Tibetan kings, and his father was the late Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, one of the most renowned Dzogchen teachers of the twentieth century. The couple's youngest son, Mingyur Rinpoche has three elder brothers who are themselves accomplished Buddhist teachers: Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche, and Tsoknyi .

Mingyur Rinpoche had what appeared on the surface to be idyllic early years. After all, he had a loving family and a home nestled in a beautiful Himalayan valley. But in *The Joy of Living* he makes a confession, one he acknowledges might sound strange coming from someone regarded as a reincarnate lama who supposedly did wonderful things in past lives. "From earliest childhood," Mingyur Rinpoche writes, "I was haunted by feelings of fear and anxiety. My heart raced and I often broke out in a sweat whenever I was around people I didn't know... Anxiety accompanied me like a shadow."

When Mingyur Rinpoche was about six years old, he found some relief meditating in the caves dotting the hills around his village. In these caves, generations of practitioners had meditated and in them Mingyur Rinpoche tried to follow in their footsteps by mentally chanting the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Though he didn't really understand what he was doing, this practice gave him a temporary calm. Nonetheless, outside of the caves, his anxiety continued to grow until—as we'd say in the West—he had a full-blown panic disorder.

In desperation, Mingyur Rinpoche got up the courage to ask whether he could study formally with his father, Tulku Urgyen. His father agreed and began to teach him various methods of meditation. As it was with the solo chanting, this led Mingyur Rinpoche to experience brief moments of calm, yet his dread and fear persisted. He found it especially stressful that every few months he was sent to Sherab Ling monastery in India to study with unfamiliar teachers, among unfamiliar students. Plus, there was his formal enthronement as the seventh incarnation of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche.

## Lasting Happiness

It's surprisingly easy to achieve lasting happiness—we just have to understand our own basic nature. The hard part, says **MINGYUR RINPOCHE**, is getting over our bad habit of seeking happiness in transient experiences.

I HAVE TRAVELED all over the world teaching people how to meditate. Whether I am talking to a large group or chatting with a few people in private, it seems that everyone wants to know the same thing: Where is lasting happiness to be found? True, not everyone phrases this question the same way—some people may not even know this is what they are asking—but when we reduce our many desires, hopes, and fears down to their essence, this is usually the answer we are seeking.

For those of us who follow a spiritual path, we may think we know the answer. Anyone who studies the Buddha's teachings, for example, will be able to tell you that true happiness is found within. But if we really understand that our basic nature is already whole, pure, and complete, why do we continue to act as though our level of contentment depends on the size of our paycheck, the quality of our relationships, or on the number of pleasurable experiences we can surround ourselves with. In other words, why do we expect things that are ephemeral and changing by their very nature to provide us with something stable and secure?

The answer is quite simple: It's a bad habit. We have believed this myth for so long, that it takes a while for any new understanding to filter down to the core of our being. What's more, we often bring this same mindset—the expectation that temporary experiences can produce lasting happiness—into our meditation practice as well. We mistake fleeting experiences of peace and relaxation for the true relaxation of feeling at ease with whatever manifests in the present moment. We think that calming the mind means to get rid of thoughts and turbulent emotions, rather than to connect with the natural spaciousness of awareness itself, which doesn't get any better when there are no thoughts or any worse when there are. And we chase after ephemeral experiences of bliss and clarity, all the while missing the profound simplicity of awareness that is with us all the time.

What I'm getting at here is that we need to be patient with ourselves, and with the process of loosening this deep-rooted conditioning. The good news is that everything we hear about meditation is actually true. Our essential nature really is completely pure, whole, and infinitely spacious. No matter how trapped we may feel by anxiety, depression, or guilt, there is

always another option available to us, and one that doesn't ask us to stop feeling what we already feel, or to stop being who and what we are. Quite the contrary, when we know where to look, and *how* to look, we can find peace of mind in the midst of raging emotions, profound insight in the midst of complete confusion, and the seeds of compassion in our darkest moments, even when we feel completely lost and alone.

This may sound too good to be true. In fact, I must admit that the first time I heard this, it did seem a little *too* easy, and *too* convenient. It took me a number of years, actually, before I stopped using meditation like a hammer, trying to beat all of my painful feelings and cruel thoughts out of existence. I can't tell you how hard it was to be confronted continually with the tempest of my own anxiety while still holding onto the idea that difficult thoughts and emotions were keeping me from tasting true peace of mind.

It wasn't until I gave up in desperation that I finally saw the truth of what my teachers had been telling me all along. What they taught me over and over again, waiting patiently for me to see in my own experience what they had learned themselves, was that love, compassion, and wisdom are manifesting all the time. It's not that we are pure way down in the depths of our being, but somehow up on the surface everything is messed up. Rather, we are pure inside and out. Even our most dysfunctional habits are manifestations of this basic goodness.

There is only one problem: We don't see this true nature in the present moment, and even less so the innate compassion and wisdom that arise from it. Even when we understand intellectually that we have buddhanature—the potential to awaken ourselves from the slumber of ignorance and suffering—we rarely acknowledge this innate purity in the present moment. We see it as a distant possibility, as something that we can experience sometime in the future, or maybe even in another lifetime.

Nevertheless, these enlightened qualities really are present, even right now in this very moment. Don't believe me? Well, let's take a moment to see if this rings true. Why are you sitting here reading this magazine? Why are you interested in meditation at all? I'll bet that at least part of the reason is that you want to be happy. Who doesn't? That wish to be happy is the essence of loving-kindness. Once we recognize this basic desire in ourselves, seeing how it manifests all the time in so many little ways, we can begin to extend it to others. Similarly, the flip side of wanting to be happy is the wish to be free from suffering. Once again, I'll bet that in some way, the drive to be free from suffering is motivating you at this very moment. This



PHOTO BY MARVIN MOORE

simple wish is the essence of compassion. And finally, it must be said that even though we want to be happy and free from suffering, we often do things that bring us the opposite result. Reflect for a moment on what it feels like in those moments. When you are looking for lasting happiness somewhere it can never be found. In switching on the TV, for example, can't you feel it in your gut that something isn't quite right? Isn't there a subtle nagging feeling that perhaps you are looking in the wrong place for happiness? Well, that is your buddhanature calling, your innate wisdom.

So you see, we don't have to look outside the present moment to experience wisdom, compassion, and the boundless purity of our true nature. In fact, these things can't be found anywhere *but* the present moment. We just need to pause to recognize what is always right in front of us. This is a crucial point, because meditation is not about changing who we are, or becoming better people, or even about getting rid of destructive habits. Meditation is about learning to recognize our basic goodness in the immediacy of the present moment, and then nurturing this recognition until it seeps into the very core of our being. ♦



Milarepa

## Twelve Kinds of Yogic Joy

Milarepa describes the happy life of the wandering yogi.

Like a criminal gaining his freedom from a dungeon hole  
The yogi who gives up his native country knows bliss.

Like a spirited horse that's freed of hobbling chains  
The yogi who slips from perceived and perceiver knows bliss.

Like a deer that has been wounded will lie low  
The yogi who lives on his own all alone knows bliss.

Like the king of birds that wings his way on high  
The yogi who gains command over view knows bliss.

Like the wild wind that's roaming through the sky  
The yogi not blocked by any obstruction knows bliss.

Like a shepherd tending his flock of white-fleeced sheep  
The yogi tending his luminous/empty experience knows bliss.

Like the massive bulk of the central king of mountain  
The yogi unfazed by transition and change knows bliss.

Like the constant flow of a great and mighty river  
The unbroken-flow-of-experience-yogi knows bliss.

Like a human corpse as it lies in a cemetery  
The yogi who shuts all activity down knows bliss.

Like a stone that's thrown into the deep blue sea  
The yogi who never turns back again knows bliss.

Like the sun that rises and lights up the whole sky  
The yogi who lights up everything knows bliss.

Like a palm tree when you strip it of its leaves  
The yogi not needing to be reborn knows bliss.

This melody on these twelve kinds of yogic happiness  
Is a dharma gift to all of you, may it answer your question well.

*Translated by Jim Scott, under the direction of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche.*

"Hundreds of people attended the ceremony," he has written, "and I spent hours accepting their gifts and giving them blessings, as if I were somebody really important instead of just a terrified twelve-year-old boy. As the hours passed, I turned so pale that my older brother, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who was standing beside me, thought I was going to faint."

About a year later, Mingyur Rinpoche learned that a three-year retreat was soon to take place at Sherab Ling and it would be led by Saljay Rinpoche, a renowned master. Mingyur Rinpoche was thirteen—an age considered too young for such intense practice—but he suspected that this would be the last three-year retreat that the elderly Saljay Rinpoche would ever lead. Mingyur Rinpoche begged for permission to participate, and in the end permission was granted.

"I'd like to say that everything got better once I was safely settled among the other participants in the three-year retreat," Mingyur Rinpoche has admitted. "On the contrary, however, my first year in retreat was one of the worst of my life. All the symptoms of anxiety I'd ever experienced—physical tension, tightness in the throat, dizziness, and waves of panic that were especially intense during group practices—attacked in full force. In Western terms, I was having a nervous breakdown. In hindsight, I can say that what I was actually going through was what I like to call a 'nervous breakthrough.'"

Mingyur Rinpoche had to make a choice between spending the last two years of the retreat cringing in his room or fully accepting the truth of what he'd learned from his teachers—that whatever problems he was experiencing were habits of thought and perception.

Mingyur Rinpoche chose what he'd been taught and gradually, just by sitting quietly and observing, he found himself able to welcome his thoughts and emotions, to become in a sense, fascinated by their variety and intensity. It was like "looking through a kaleidoscope and noticing how the patterns change," he wrote in *Joyful Wisdom*. "I began to understand, not intellectually, but rather in a direct, experiential way... how thoughts and emotions that seemed overwhelming were actually expressions of the infinitely vast and endlessly inventive power of my own mind."

Mingyur Rinpoche has never had another panic attack, nor has his sense of confidence and well-being wavered. That's not to say, however, that he no longer experiences any ups and downs. He is careful to say that he isn't enlightened, and he's forthright about being subject to the full range of ordinary human experiences, including feeling tired, angry, and bored. What is different is that his relationship to these experiences has permanently shifted; he's no longer overwhelmed by them.

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According to Cortland Dahl, Mingyur Rinpoche's panic attacks led him to begin practicing and studying the dharma in a very atypical way for a lama—a way much closer to how we in the West approach it. He believes that one of the reasons that Mingyur Rinpoche's teachings resonate so much with Western students is his willingness to talk about his own personal challenges.

"For cultural reasons," Dahl explains, "lamas are happy to talk about other people's issues, yet they don't typically talk about their own struggles with practice or emotions. Yes, he was a *tulku*, a reincarnate lama, and yes, he grew up in this amazing environment with a family of great teachers. But he studied the dharma not only because that's the typical training of a young tulku, but because he desperately needed it. He really wanted to find a way to work through this painful episode in his life.

"In a similar way, a lot of us in the West have come to Buddhism because we're suffering and we want some way to work with our minds. Mingyur Rinpoche can really speak to our experience in a very direct way. It's not only that he went through it, but that he is candid about it."

IN A WORLD that equates happiness with big-ticket items, Mingyur Rinpoche stands in stark contrast. Even before leaving the monastery with just the clothes on his back, he had an ultra simple life. Extremely health conscious, he didn't eat any meat or refined sugars and he jogged every day. *He jogged in old penny loafers*. Once, some people wanted to buy him some sneakers, but his response was, "Thank you, but I don't need them—they won't fit in my bag." The one bag he carried with him when he traveled was that tiny.

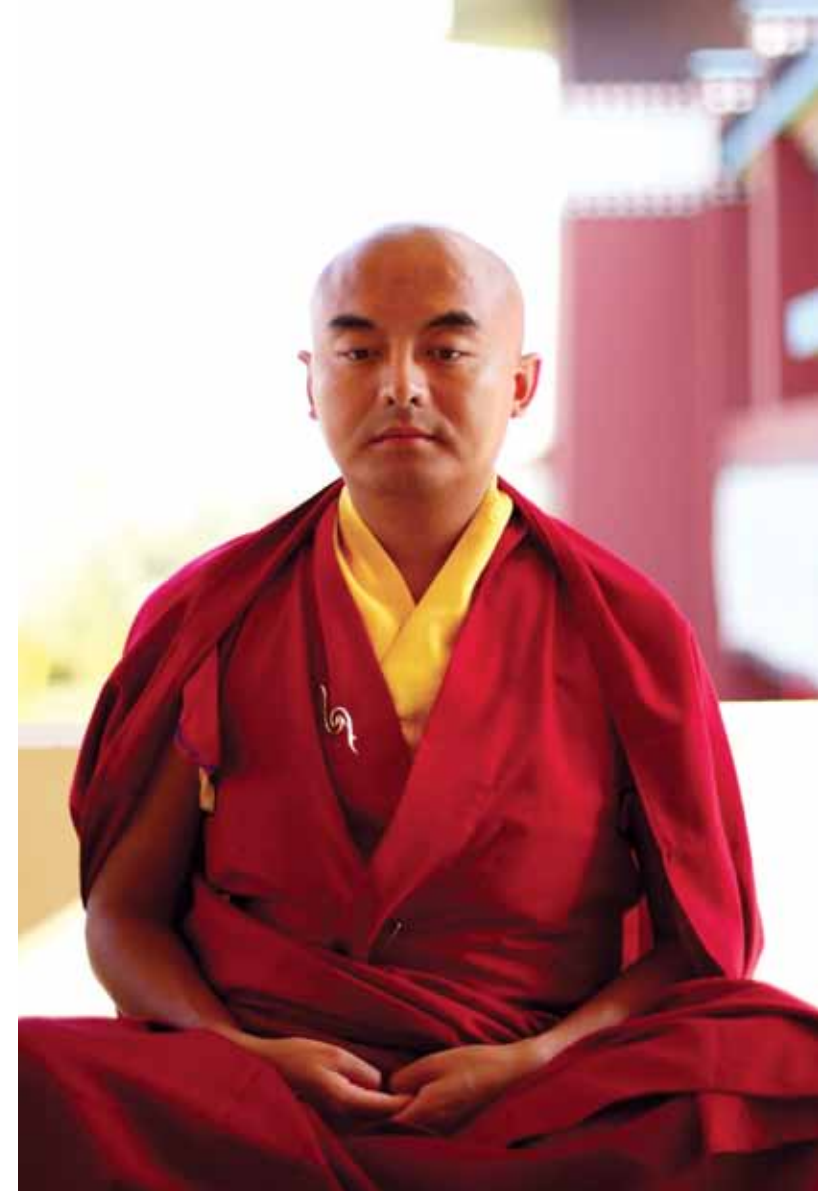
"Everything Mingyur Rinpoche gets," says Cortland Dahl, "all the donations and the money from his books, goes to his monasteries or dharma projects. People are always giving him gifts and offerings, but usually he gives whatever it is to someone else later. He has literally next to nothing."

He was sixteen when he came out of his first three-year retreat, and much to his surprise he was appointed master of the very next one. This made him the youngest known lama to ever hold this position. It also meant that he was, effectively, in intensive retreat for almost seven continuous years.

Attending a monastic college, serving as the functioning abbot of Sherab Ling Monastery, taking full ordination vows as a monk—Mingyur Rinpoche's young adulthood was extremely busy. It was 1998 before he was able to delve into a branch of learning that he'd been interested in for years. Science.

As a child, he knew Francisco Varela, a world-renowned neuroscientist who'd come to Nepal to study Buddhism with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. Varela frequently talked to Mingyur Rinpoche about modern science, especially in regard to the structure and function of the brain. Other Western students of Tulku Urgyen gave him informal lessons in biology, psychology, chemistry, and physics.

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Mingyur Rinpoche meditating at Tergar Monastery.

"It was a little bit like learning two languages at the same time," Mingyur Rinpoche has written. "Buddhism on the one hand, modern science on the other. I remember thinking even then that there didn't seem to be much difference between the two." They were both methods of investigation.

In 2002 he was one of the advanced meditators invited to the Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging and Behavior at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where scientists examined the effects of meditation on the brain. Major publications such as *National Geographic* and *Time* reported on the results of the groundbreaking research. Notably, while the adepts meditated on compassion, neural activity in a key center in the brain's system for happiness jumped by 700 to 800 percent. In the control group, made up of people who'd just begun to meditate, activity increased by only 10 to 15 percent. Meditation, the study suggested, had the potential to increase happiness.

Early in 2009, Mingyur Rinpoche let his retreat plans be known to a small circle of people, the people who—as Dahl puts it—

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# Mingyur Rinpoche

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would “keep the ship afloat” in his absence. After he left, his brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche explained during a July 2011 retreat at Garrison Institute that “Mingyur Rinpoche wanted to do retreat and he planned for it—he did not abandon his activities without responsibility. He recorded four to five years of instruction, he trained instructors, he fund-raised, and he delegated all his work. So, he prepared everything.”

Then in the summer of 2010 in Minnesota, Mingyur Rinpoche made a formal public announcement about his retreat plans. People, however, assumed that he intended to take a closed three-year retreat—an assumption that makes sense, as choosing to be a wandering yogi is highly unusual, especially in modern times.

Why is practicing in this style now so rare?

According to Tergar instructor Tim Olmsted, after Tibetans fled their country in the fifties, both first and second generation lamas had to struggle to keep the Buddhist tradition alive. To build monasteries and monastic colleges, they needed to dedicate enormous amounts of time to raising money; they had to publish books and travel to the West and Southeast Asia to gather students. In short, the lamas simply never had the chance to be wandering yogis.

But there is another reason that wandering isn't common today: “It's hard,” Olmsted says bluntly.

Myoshin Kelley, also a Tergar instructor, expands on that. “I don't think many of us are ready for a wandering yogi retreat,” she says. “To have some walls around us, a consistent food supply, and a safe environment to meditate in is a great support, which frees up a lot of energy that we can then direct toward looking deeply into our hearts and minds. For wandering yogis, there is a huge level of uncertainty that they have to deal with on a daily basis. That uncertainty could make it harder to maintain the stable mind that allows for realization. I see being a wandering yogi as an advanced practice.”

Annabella Pitkin, a Columbia University professor who has done extensive research on renunciates and wandering yogis, agrees it's advanced, but that doesn't mean all advanced practitioners wander or should wander. In the Tibetan tradition, there are many valid and powerful paths, she says. Realization is possible whether one is a monastic in an institution, a householder, a hermit recluse, or a wandering yogi. These broad categories are not even so clearly defined. For example, continues Pitkin, “One of the things that you often see in the Tibetan tradition is that people will be monks or nuns in an institutional setting at one point in their lives, maybe early on, then they'll leave and be wanderers. And eventually they'll start to stay in one place because they are teaching so much more.” That said, even monastics who spend their whole lives in an institution do not have a cookie-cutter practice. For instance, some are ritual specialists, while others are administrators or teachers.

“There are lots of things that have to happen to keep the monastic tradition going,” says Pitkin. And it's important to remember how critical it is that it *does* continue. Without the monastic tradition, she says, “there is no Buddhism, no continuity.” At the same time, she asserts, in order to stay fresh, the tradition needs the inspiration offered by wandering yogis, those “figures of vivid passion that dramatically illustrate the totality of the Buddhist path.”

In wandering, says Pitkin, “you renounce your attachment to not just possessions and comfort, but to more subtle things, such as being famous and controlling where you go. As a wandering yogi, you go where circumstances dictate—you're responsive to the situations that you find yourself in. That is, there is total freedom from ordinary entanglements, but also a very profound renunciation of ordinary attachments.

“Renunciation is the core of the Buddhist path, so if the primary role of the lama is to teach others by giving talks, wandering practice helps them to do that, because it develops their own inner qualities. But lamas can also teach by way of demonstration, and being an exemplar of

the renunciate lifestyle is a very powerful way to teach people to rethink their ordinary relationship to their lives and their possessions.”

At the Garrison Institute in July, Sogyal Rinpoche, the author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, spoke about Mingyur Rinpoche's retreat as a wandering yogi. “In the future, Sogyal Rinpoche said, “he'll be someone we all look toward as a guide and refuge.”

MINGYUR RINPOCHE'S close students knew he aspired to become a wandering yogi. What they didn't know was when he would leave. “I think that was very intentional,” says Cortland Dahl. “Rinpoche obviously wants and wanted to be on his own. But it would have been next to impossible for him to do that if he'd actually told anybody when he was leaving. His Tibetan students—out of a mixture of devotion and caring and fear—would have forced an attendant on him.”

The reverence accorded to wandering yogis in the Tibetan tradition is often in the abstract, says Pitkin. In practice, people don't generally want their own guru to leave, so the biographies of the wanderers are peppered with people trying to pin them in place. “It's great that Milarepa wandered,” Pitkin jokes, “but it's much better if *my* teacher stays here with me.”

Mingyur Rinpoche is expected to wander for three to five years, possibly longer, and to come back in the same way he left. Without warning.

Meanwhile, Myoshin Kelley believes that Mingyur Rinpoche is spending or will spend at least part of his time in the mountains. “This is not only for his love of them,” she says, “but because they are such a conducive environment for meditation. He has frequently told stories of yogis coming down from the cave to test their practice in the marketplace. Maybe he will first head for the mountains and then find his way to the chaos of a big city. Really, Mingyur Rinpoche could turn up anywhere and I find this a fun thought. Keep your eyes open and treat everyone as if they are your guru!” ♦