



# LEAVING BUDDHA





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*A Tibetan Monk's Encounter  
with the Living God*

TENZIN LAHKPA  
*with* EUGENE BACH



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

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**LEAVING BUDDHA:**

A Tibetan Monk’s Encounter with the Living God

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## *A Note from the Coauthor*

When I began to write this book, my relationship with Tenzin Lahkpa (a pseudonym) was completely new. I met him at a lunch meeting in August 2017 in western China, where our Back to Jerusalem missionary team was discussing a project to reach out to the Tibetan people. One of the pastors brought along Tenzin, a former Buddhist monk, who shared his personal testimony at the table.

When I heard Tenzin's story, I was speechless. I was so moved and inspired by his experiences that I knew right away this was a story that needed to be shared with others.

Tenzin is not the first Buddhist monk I have met who has come to Christ (although I believe the number is relatively few), but he is the first to allow me to share his amazing story. Every time I sat down at my computer to write his personal account, I trembled with fear, knowing that it was a special project—one I did not feel qualified for due to the challenges and intricacies involved.

The first challenge was to obtain a full version of his story. I had asked Tenzin to write down his experiences so that I could translate them and make his life story available to others—but what I received was a very humble, two-page biography! Additional information came during subsequent interviews where Tenzin felt embarrassed and extremely reluctant to talk about himself. As a Buddhist monk, he had been instructed for years to remove any sign of self-identity in an effort to obtain enlightenment. Talking about his own story and focusing on himself was the exact opposite of what he had been taught to do. Furthermore, like many Christians living in Tibet today, Tenzin does not see himself as anything special. He is simple and unassuming. If you were to meet him on the street, you would most likely not think twice about him.

The second challenge was that I was convinced my level of facility in the Chinese and Tibetan languages was not high enough to adequately translate Tenzin's experiences. Thus, this book was written from a series of interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018 by five of my close colleagues and translated from Amdo Tibetan to Mandarin Chinese and eventually to English.

Third, in October 2017, a political development greatly hindered the interview process and the challenge of verifying an accurate translation of Tenzin's story. The Chinese Communist Party came together in Beijing and passed new oppressive religious laws that came into effect on February 1, 2018. Thus, the interviews with Tenzin were carried out illegally and in secret during some of the most intense crackdowns on Christianity in China in more than a decade.

Fourth, even after scouring the material and running it by Tenzin and the translators, I still felt certain there were things I had missed or did not understand that were important. I also thought there are things I might have misunderstood or translated incorrectly. However, I have checked and double-checked the facts and events in this story to the best of my ability.

Even with these limitations and difficulties, I still believed sharing the story of Tenzin's life and his search for enlightenment was worth the tremendous hurdles needed to communicate it. His experiences give us a greater understanding of those who live in a closed and persecuted part of the world, of the branches and beliefs of Buddhism, of the universal search

for truth, and of the God who is always ready to reach out to those who seek Him.

And so, in addition to the process described above, I used the following methodology to bring Tenzin's story to Western readers. I drew on my personal experiences and resources from working and traveling in Tibet for almost twenty years, which helped me to express some parts of the story in a deeper way than I could if I had only included the specific words Tenzin spoke during our interviews. I also added descriptions as a way to familiarize my audience with the unfamiliar. Even though Tenzin has journeyed to Nepal and India, he has never traveled to a non-Buddhist area of the world. He is only familiar with Tibetan Buddhist culture, aside for brief periods of contact with Western visitors like myself. Consequently, he is unable to identify with a reader who might not know what a typical Tibetan setting, practice, or ceremony might look like and therefore would be unable to offer a comparison or explanation to help them understand it. Additionally, I have described people, places, smells, practices, and ceremonies using auxiliary information.

For security reasons, many names, places, and events have been changed to protect Tenzin's identity. In order to bring clarity to certain aspects of the story, several conversations, people, places, and experiences were added that did not actually happen or did not exist. Some details, names, places, and people have also been added to the story to replace real events that might be a security risk to people if they were to be shared. Also, certain foreign missionaries and charity organizations have been involved in Tenzin's life and have played a significant part in his testimony, but they have been purposefully omitted from his story in order to protect the secrecy of their ongoing work and their presence in China and Tibet.

I acknowledge that the methodology used to convey Tenzin's story is both a strength and a weakness of this book—it takes its readers into the sights, sounds, color, and outlook of Tenzin's world to help them understand it, but ultimately these features can only be representative of many of his experiences. They allow for a story that is strongly based on Tenzin's life but, for the above reasons, necessarily includes aspects he did not personally express or experience.

Therefore, with full disclosure, by adding these descriptions and explanations, I have attempted to explain Tenzin's story in the clearest and fullest way possible. Even as I have done all this, I have humbly tried to write Tenzin's story as close to his direct words as possible and to present his story as a first-person account.

—*Eugene Bach*



## Acknowledgments

I am humbled to think that I have been given the opportunity to attempt to share the special story of Brother Tenzin Lakhpa and his amazing journey to Christ. This journey would not have been possible without the sacrifice of a great many people. For security reasons, I am not even able to mention many of those who were involved in the writing of this story.

I would especially like to thank the Tibetan translator. She translated for Tenzin for this book following the death of her husband. While suffering from loss and grief, she still found the strength to do this work because she strongly believed his story needed to get out to the world.

Without a doubt, two of the greatest blessings during this time were Belinda Chadwell and Ruth Chang (not her real name). They left their families during very busy times, traveled across the globe into the most remote areas of Tibet, and captured many portions of this story in order to fill in missing parts. They wove through the almost impossible maze of translating from Tibetan to Mandarin Chinese to English, and then back

to Mandarin, and back to Tibetan—only to do it all over again, hour after hour and day after day. Without them, this story might never have been told to a wide audience.

Each time I met with Tenzin, his mentor—a Chinese pastor and good friend—was right there beside him. This mentor will never know how much of a help he was in enabling us to understand some of the more difficult details of the culture.

A huge dose of gratitude goes to the Back to Jerusalem manager from the Beijing office. For security reasons, I will not even attempt to give him a pseudonym, but he arranged each meeting with Tenzin during 2017 and 2018—the most intense years for persecution against the Christian church in China in recent years. At a time when many pastors and leaders were going underground and cutting off all contact with foreigners, the BTJ manager took the risk in order to tell this story.

I would also like to thank my good friends at AVC International in Switzerland. For two wonderful decades, I have had the privilege to serve together with them as they have tirelessly supported so many workers and evangelists in China like Tenzin.

Of course, this book would never even have gotten into print if it were not for Bob Whitaker and his sweet daughter Christine. They and their team at Whitaker House are more than ministry partners. They are close friends that Christ has brought into my life to bring amazing testimonies into the library of Christian history.

Of all the people whom I have to knowledge, few are more precious than Joyce Meyer and her son David, who have given untold resources for ministry to Tibet. Without fanfare, they have pushed toward the goal of getting the gospel into the hands of the Tibetan people. It was during an operation that was supported by their ministry that I first met with Tenzin and heard his testimony of leaving Buddha and becoming a follower of Christ.



## *Prologue: The Great Debate*

I was running at the back of the crowd, trying to peek over the shoulders of the village elders who were sitting at the front of the gathering. I kept jumping in the air, looking for the perfect view, but as soon as I was able to find a gap between shoulders or arms, someone would sway and block my view again.

I wanted to witness the debate in our village between two of the most well-known and respected Tibetan *lamas* in our area. I do not remember their names, but I remember the event. I was very young at the time and knew my father had really been looking forward to it. It was all that he wanted to talk about.

Religious debate was the World Cup or the Super Bowl of my village. Debate was not really how issues were settled—it was how we were entertained!

In the middle of our village, there was a small square that had a shady tree in the center and patches of grass here and there. This was the main “ring” for debates between visiting monks. It was in this way that the teachings of our religion reached our village.

Such debates made quite an impression on me. When I was alone in the mountains, I would sometimes pretend I was in a debate with another monk. I would use any opportunity of silence and solitude to pretend that I was an enlightened debater who could capture the imagination of the masses with my intellect.

In a Tibetan debate, the challenging monk stands to his feet and makes his argument, while the defending monk remains in a seated position, carefully listening to the points of the challenger. In this current village debate, as I attempted to look through the crowd, I could not see the two lama teachers enter the square—but I heard the debate as it started. A general buzz rose from the crowd at the front. I could taste the excitement and I desperately wanted a front-row seat.

On the far side of the square, I finally found a small gap between two elderly monks from the monastery. It was the perfect spot. I could see and hear everything that was going on.

The challenging monk, who had been standing, walked away with long struts and then turned in mid-stride like a kung fu warrior, assuming a combatant stance. A string of beads hung from his right hand. He leaned down to speak directly into the face of the defending monk, who was perfectly calm and still.

“Which is more beneficial? To follow the enlightened or the writings of the enlightened?” As he finished his question, he brought his two arms together in a whip-like manner that made a loud clapping thud, immediately demanding the audience’s attention.

Sitting on the ground and tapping his hands on the dirt, the defending monk responded, “I accept. Both are demanded of us by the Buddha and both are necessary. What do we know of the Buddha that is not written? What school of Buddhism relies only on the *sangha*?” (The sangha refers to those in monastic community.)



This was not a typical debate. Tibetan debates have clearly defined rules: the challenger makes statements and the defender sitting on the ground either accepts or does not accept the statement as a matter of truth and then challenges that the statement be backed up with logic and scripture. But this debate was something more. The defender was challenging the challenger. It was a clash of two great minds, and it was fascinating.

Without missing his cue, it seemed that the defender had now walked right into the trap that had been laid for him. The challenger continued, “Didn’t the Buddha say, ‘My teaching is not a philosophy—but the result of direct experience?’ Didn’t he say, ‘My teaching is a means of practice, not something to hold on to or worship?’ The Buddha taught his disciples so that they could teach us. Our belief is best passed down to us by those who have lived the experience, not by those who have merely studied it. How can you study and explain the color blue if you have never seen the color blue?”

Still sitting on the ground, the defender made a big circle in the air with his hand. “I do not accept. A good disciple will write down what he has learned to share with others. His writings ensure the longevity of the experience for others. To find the path for one’s own sake is a good and noble thing. To find the path and make a map for others to find, as well, is even better. Is it not better to bless others rather than only yourself?”

The defending monk had not needed to end his question with a clap. His point had been made loud and clear. The crowd shifted its attention to the standing monk. How would he respond to that?

The debate started to get heated. The challenging monk raised his voice and demanded to know, “Are you saying that we do not have a choice? The only way that we can find treasures is by following maps? Has the Buddha died? Has he not returned to us? Are we so much in need of writings because your faith in the reincarnate Buddha is lacking?”

With that, he clapped again and held out his left hand as a gesture for the defender to respond. But before the seated monk could answer, the challenger interrupted him and continued, “I do not accept. What good are the writings of a teacher if we have access to the teacher? Writings are only a temporary vehicle from one shore to another when we are in absence

of the teacher. As the Buddha said, 'Only a fool would carry a raft around after he had already reached the other shore of liberation.'"

This was getting good. It was the lively debate my father had been waiting for. The debaters' voices were growing loud, but still there was nothing threatening or violent in their tone. The primary purpose of their debate was to sharpen and hone their skills for defending the Buddhist faith and way of life through logic and truth. The topics were always varied, but purposeful.

The sitting monk calmly pointed to his head and said, "I must rely only on what I have learned, and I have learned through my experiences, the experiences of others, and the education of my mind. Buddha told me to think, so I think. Buddha told me to read, so I read. Buddha told me to pray, so I pray. To overemphasize any of these is to neglect all of them. Buddha taught the Four Reliances: First, to rely on the spirit and meaning of the teachings, not the words. Second, to rely on the teachings, not the personality of the teacher. Third, to rely on real wisdom, not superficial interpretation. And fourth, to rely on the essence of a pure mind—not judgmental perceptions."

To that, the challenger yelled out, "But you are ignoring Buddha when he said, 'Do not accept anything simply because it has been said by your teacher, or because it has been written in your sacred books, or because it has been believed by many, or because it has been handed down by your ancestors. Accept and live only according to what will enable you to see truth face-to-face.' What better way to find truth than to directly learn from those who have experienced it?"

The defender looked up and responded, "The reason is not established. What is your proof? You will not be punished because of your ignorance. You will be punished by it."

I sat there for several hours listening to them go at it. Hearing these two wise lamas debate each other about the pillars and virtues of Buddhism was one of the best educations I could ever get. In the end, I do not know who the winner was, but both monks were celebrated with free food from the village for their effort to make us all better in defending our faith and way of life.

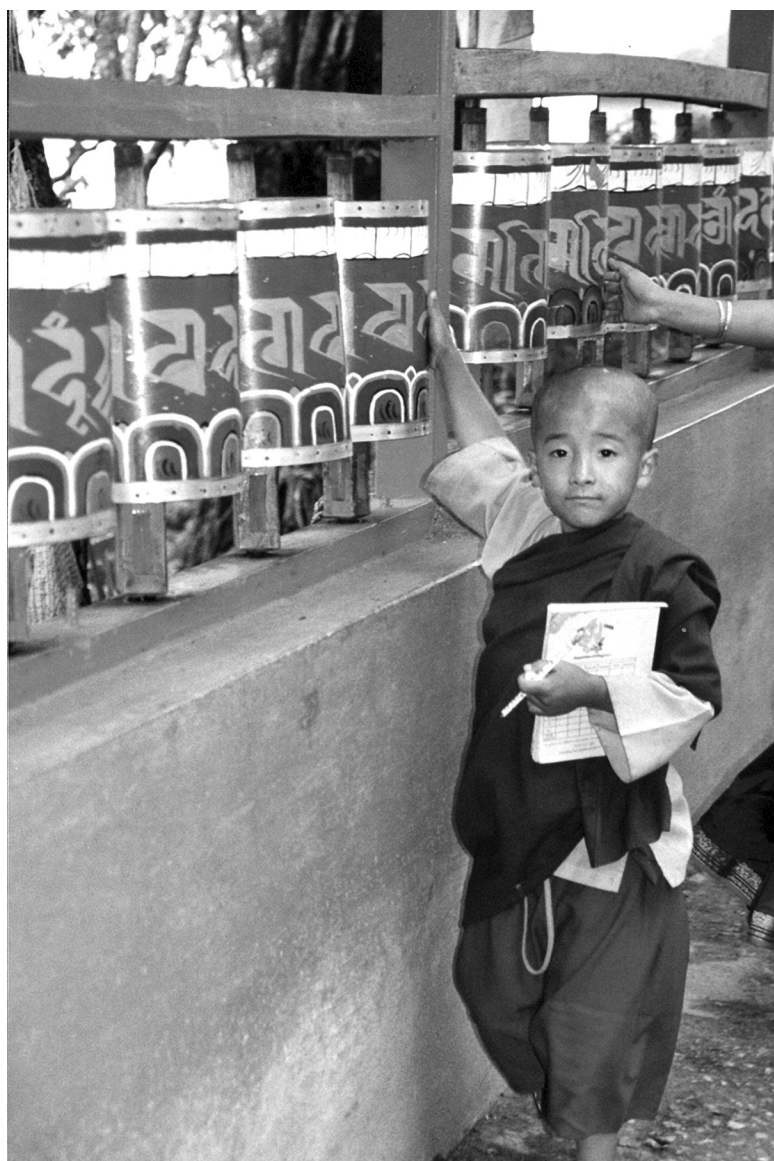
Only a few years later, I would enter fully into my own quest for enlightenment. I could not know then the surprising ways in which my journey would lead me to encounter Truth face-to-face—and the far-reaching consequences of discovering that Truth....



A gathering of Tibetan monks.



Tibetan women with prayer beads and prayer wheels.



A young monk spinning a prayer wheel.





Large prayer wheels.



Giant Buddha statue.



*Part One:*  
*Learning the Ways of Buddha*

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# 1

## BORN IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TIBET

I was born in a small mountain village in Jichu Township, in the same Chinese province where the Dalai Lama came from. I became a Buddhist monk when I was given as a gift by my parents to the local Tibetan Buddhist temple at about the age of fifteen. From my earliest memory, I had always identified as a monk. I did not know how else to refer to myself. I did not have any other identity. I had been following the divine ways of Buddha my entire life.

My family comes from a long line of Tibetan Buddhists. It is in my blood. It is my heritage. For generations, our family has served in the highest levels of the monasteries and has taught others how to follow the ways of Buddha.

In Tibet, everything revolves around Tibetan Buddhism, and no decisions are made without the lama's authority. A *lama* is a revered spiritual leader, but they are more than leaders. Many are considered to be the reincarnation of great sages and teachers from previous generations. A lama, whose title is directly translated as the "superior one," is the cornerstone of the Tibetan people. They are the village magistrates, the family counselors, the teachers in the monasteries, the national political leaders, and those who hold similar significant roles.

Lamas play a big part in the everyday lives of the people. For families like the one I was born into, they function like a Christian pastor, but they are much more than that. They often name babies and incorporate their own names into the names they give. The greater the influence of the lama, the more children who walk around with their name. I received the name *Tenzin* from a senior lama that my family followed. The name comes from the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Because he became extremely famous, many Tibetans today have the same name.

I was the sixth and final child born of my mother. Before this, she had given birth to three other boys and two girls, although one of my sisters

died at birth. I was the baby of the family, and I felt I had a special relationship with my mother. I do not know if this was true or not, but I always had the feeling that I was her favorite child. My older siblings constantly accused me of this, and in many ways, I believed it. I was able to spend more time with my mother than my brothers and sisters were because they were often strapped with daily chores that I did not have to carry out—although, later, I was required to work in the fields.

Mother always kept special sweets hidden throughout the house for me to eat. When no one else was looking, she would tap me on the shoulder, point to an old pot or bag, and tell me to look under it. When I did, I would find a piece of candy or a treat. As soon as I snatched it up, she would place her index finger in front of her lips to indicate that I should be quiet about it so no one else would know.

Consisting of only five children, our family was considered to be a bit smaller than most. My mother came from a more typical-sized Tibetan family. She had eleven brothers and sisters, and she was one of the younger children, so there was a huge age gap between my grandparents and me. They were deceased before I really got to know much about them.

Outside of the Tibetan monasteries, which carefully record everything that happens in the lives of certain prominent lamas, there are not many ways to trace the family lineage of everyday working people like my grandparents. I do not know where they came from, when they married, or other details about their lives. In Tibet, mothers and fathers really do not talk much about family history or genealogy unless it pertains to a family member who was a well-known religious monk or leader.

Our village was made up of about thirty families who lived on the side of a mountain. Today, it is still a typical Tibetan mountain village. The terrain is harsh and the climate is dry. In Tibet, the air is thinner than in other places in China because of the altitude. Monks who visit the village from the basin can easily find themselves sick in the first couple of hours because of the low level of oxygen.

Looking out from my village, there are nothing but brown, sandy mountains for as far as the eye can see. There are few rivers and almost no trees. During the harsh winter months, sand storms blow from side to side,

and there is almost no sign of green life. We do not have a lot of flowers or grass. There are only a few small, thin, sparsely planted trees that are dotted with a few green leaves when the spring rains come—if they come.

When I was growing up in our village, the main crops were wheat and highland barley. We also grew radishes and potatoes when the weather permitted. Unlike the bigger cities of China, my village was free from pollution. We did most of our production and farming naturally and wasted very little. During the day, you could see for miles around. And at night, it seemed as if you could see every star in the sky.

My home was built from local brown clay mud and designed in the same way that Tibetans have been making their homes for thousands of years. The light khaki color of our house matched the surrounding dry, sandy, mountain range. Because trees are scarce, we had to use dry dung as fuel for our fires. We collected manure from our livestock while it was still warm and soft, added straw to it, mixed it up with our hands, and made round patties. Then we put these big, round, wet patties on the outside of our homes so that they could dry in the sun.

The interior of our home was characteristically Tibetan, as well—designed as one large room where everyone lived. The kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom were all located in one main area. In the center of our home was a black, iron, pot belly stove that we used for cooking our meals, warming our tea, and heating our home in the winter. During the day, we would sit near the stove on an elevated wooden structure that turned into our bed at night. We all slept together on thin, flat mattresses around the big black stove.

The elevated wooden structure was also the location where I was born. Women in my village do not go to hospitals to give birth to their children. It is tradition for a local midwife to come and sit with the mothers throughout the birthing process, and everyone prays that there will be no serious complications.

My mother lost only one of her babies giving birth in the traditional Tibetan way, and she survived that ordeal, so we were one of the fortunate families. Usually, when a mother has complications during the birthing process, she loses not only her baby, but also her own life. However, my

mother was a tough woman, and everyone in the village knew and respected her. She had a quiet strength that exuded from her personality. Her strong presence did not need to be announced. It was just there.

My mother did all of the hard, laborious work to keep our family going. She cared for the animals. She plowed the fields and pulled the harvest. She ground the wheat by hand and made the bread. She butchered the animals and cooked the meat. She cleaned the house and cared for the children.

When I was born near the black, iron stove, it was 1969, soon after China's Mao Zedong took over Tibet. The Dalai Lama gave orders for Tibetans to accept the occupation of Mao Zedong, but then he fled to India to save his own life. He left the Tibetan people to suffer under the weight of his decision.

During this time, people were dying from starvation all over the country due to the effects of the "Great Leap Forward" in China (1958–1961), a failed social and economic campaign by the Communist Party. However, the Tibetan people have never been rich, so they were used to surviving off of the land and triumphing over harsh conditions. The Chinese people did not fare so well. Tens of millions of them died during those years.

In many ways, those times were not easy for anyone—neither the Chinese nor the Tibetans.



## 2

### *A DEVOUT MOTHER*

My earliest memories involve my mother praying and teaching me Buddhist scriptures. She spent a lot of time trying to encourage me to memorize the holy scripture of Buddha.

I remember waking up in the early morning hours as a small child and seeing my mother already praying to the different spirits in our home. We were always short on food, and my mother wanted to keep us nourished, so she attempted to appease the gods with hopes of granting us better crops and more livestock.