



# Long-Lost Lama

An exiled Tibetan lama returns home after 44 years to find a culture under siege



By TIM MCGIRK LHASA

VISITORS TO THE TIBET CENTER IN MANHATTAN SOMETIMES mistake Khyongla Rato Rinpoche for an old janitor. It could be the broom he's pushing, his second-hand clothes or his fleeting, almost spectral presence in a room. In fact, he is a reincarnate lama. In Tibet, people believe he has been passing on the Buddha's teachings for at least 10 lifetimes, and in the U.S., he is one of the religion's most influential practitioners, counting among his disciples actor Richard Gere and Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys. For centuries, his lineage presided over several monasteries; in his current incarnation, the *rinpoche* (precious one) is a guiding spirit for nomads, who roam eastern Tibet's high green pastures where cloud shadows race like wild horses.

Two months ago, the old nomad returned home. He had fled his native country in 1959 after the Chinese invasion of Tibet and, like the Dalai Lama, has been in exile ever since, barred by a Beijing government that strangles religion and fears a separatist breakaway by Tibetans. But there are signs that China is relaxing strict prohibitions on Buddhist culture and practice in Tibet. Envoys for the Dalai Lama have in the past year twice traveled to Beijing to meet with government officials, hoping to lay the groundwork for his eventual return to Tibet; the Dalai Lama himself met with U.S. President George W. Bush last week, seeking support. Bush said he would continue to encourage talks between the exiled leader and China. Months before, however, the thoroughly Manhattanized *rinpoche*, now 80 years old, decided to try his luck on his own and seek permission to visit. After countless refusals, the Chinese inexplicably granted him a visa, possibly because this time he applied not in the U.S. but in Hong Kong—where Chinese immigration officials may not have realized that the man named Khyongla Rato in his U.S. passport is a spiritual leader.

When he and one of his students, an American monk named Nicholas Vreeland, land at Lhasa airport, it becomes clear that having a visa is not the same as having an invitation. Three cars idle by the airport terminal. A Toyota Land Cruiser, festooned with *kata* prayer scarves, is from the Rato Monastery, where the *rinpoche* once lived. The other two sedans are from the government travel agency and the police. A spy in the monastery has tipped off local authorities to the holy man's arrival. The Rato monks push him into their car and roar off. They have prepared a "long-life" ceremony with assorted yak-butter delicacies to welcome back their exiled lama, and they also are eager to get a jump on the cops. A high-speed chase ensues on the Lhasa road winding along the Kyichu River. The pursuit ends when the police car forces the monks' Land Cruiser to halt.

Stepping from their vehicle, the plainclothes police inform the precious one that he is to be escorted to the Lhasa police bureau,

which is responsible for overseas Tibetans. There, two officers from the Public Security Bureau grill him on his family and contacts in Tibet and abroad, ties with the Dalai Lama and the source of his income in the U.S. The police then lay down a list of restrictions: when the *rinpoche* visits holy places, he is forbidden to teach or bestow blessings; monks and villagers are not allowed to greet him, and no incense should be lit on his behalf. He is also barred from leaving his Lhasa hotel without his appointed, English-speaking tour guide, Tsering, who seems always on his cell phone taking orders from the Public Security Bureau. (On the third day of the trip, he brazenly rifles through Vreeland's shoulder bag.)

FRIENDS IN THE U.S. CALL HIM "THE BLUE-JEAN LAMA" BECAUSE of his humble wardrobe, much of it purchased at Salvation Army stores. The last time the *rinpoche* donned the maroon robes of monkhood was to play an abbot in Bernardo Bertolucci's 1993 film,

*Little Buddha*. He remains in Western garb for his visit to Rato, a 600-year-old monastery situated in the bottom of a terraced valley between broken, jagged peaks. Prior to his arrival, police descended on the village encircling the monastery and warned residents to stay inside their homes. Despite these restrictions and the presence of several plainclothes Chinese cops in dark glasses, the older Tibetans rush toward the *rinpoche* for his blessing as he climbs from his car beside a pole hung with multicolored prayer

flags. He shrugs helplessly, and Tsering marches him up the monastery stairs. Inside, some monks try to slip onto Vreeland the monastic robes of a *geshe*—the former New York photographer is one of a handful of Westerners to achieve this exalted rank in Tibetan Buddhism, which is similar to a

doctorate in philosophy—but Tsering forcibly intervenes.

Banned by Chinese police from giving traditional blessings by laying on hands, the *rinpoche* concocts a subtle dodge, using a photo opportunity as a front for an impromptu religious ritual. He poses for dozens of photos with the monks, his denim-clad arms around them. Then, feigning curiosity, he picks up objects—Buddha figurines, cooking pots, a butter churn—wherever he goes in the monastery, in effect bestowing his blessing. He is also careful to leave his cup of butter tea half drunk, and the monks eagerly share the dregs like sacrament. Three of his old pals, monks also in their 80s, are overcome with emotion at seeing him. He and his mates compare who has lost more teeth or whose hairline has receded most—which is a joke in itself, since monks shave their heads.

The original Rato Monastery was largely destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution. It has since been rebuilt by villagers. Surprisingly, the *rinpoche's* cramped monastic room escaped destruction and was kept intact as a shrine, complete with mandalas and a pair of embroidered dragons on deep-crimson drapes. "Hmm. Small. Like my studio apartment in New York," the *rinpoche* says, laughing. He says he would like to relax on the bed for



**HOMECOMING HIGHS**  
The *rinpoche* prays before a 2,500-year-old Buddha in Lhasa's Jokhang Temple, left, and dances with nomads in the mountainous Dagyab region, top

a few minutes with his memories and the afternoon sun. But Tsering's cell phone is buzzing again, and he waves impatiently to the *rinpoche*. "This is the last time I come here," grumbles the precious one. But he places a silk scarf on his old bed, which Tibetans say is a sign that a visitor will return.

The next morning, discreet inquiries are made about the possibility of dumping the officious Tsering. The *rinpoche* is told that a new policy bans Tibetans from acting as guides for foreigners—outsiders might pass on anti-Chinese sentiment to their ingenuous hosts. Instead, Chinese students are flown in from Beijing and Chengdu universities to replace the Tibetans and reliably dish out party propaganda. Tsering would seem to be an exception. He insists he's Tibetan. But his fellow countrymen say he doesn't speak their language properly, and he lives in an upscale housing compound reserved for cadres and government officials. One afternoon, the *rinpoche* asks Tsering for an invitation to his home. He is allowed a brief visit. Afterward, the *rinpoche* comments that the prayer room looked more like a showpiece than a family altar. He seems to suspect the guide is party to a charade designed to gain his trust.

IT HAS BEEN 50 YEARS since the *rinpoche* left Dargyab, a region in eastern Tibet where he was born, and the Chinese authorities worry that his reappearance there will lead to mayhem. In Tibet, his followers are *Khampas*, tough nomads renowned throughout the country for producing saints—and bandits. *Khampas* invariably carry daggers, and they are swift to use them. A traveling party bound for Dargyab's mountain villages has been assembled. The group consists of 30 ponies; six tribal chieftains in silken robes; two monk attendants, who ride with umbrellas; several cooks; Vreeland; Tsering; two plainclothes policeman; the *rinpoche* and a dozen of his relatives, who sing during the ride, and a muleteer, who carries large quantities of fermented brew known as *chang*, which is a great hit with Tsering and the cops. As for the precious one, he isn't sure if anyone, aside from his family and a few dotards, will remember him at his birthplace.

When the lama's caravan arrives in Dargyab, the nomads rush straight past him with their prayer scarves, looking for someone more glamorous than an old man dressed in thrift-shop clothing. The home crowd wants all the razzmatazz, with clanging gongs, bleating trumpets, clouds of juniper incense and billowing silk. Instead, they are given this kindly old man in his humble civvies, creaky after four hours in the saddle.

Once they figure out which of the travelers he is, however, the nomad families charge at him, pushing their children forward, proffering prayer scarves and wild flowers. "The faith here is still very strong," says the holy man. "I'm surprised." Some thrust forward sick children for him to cure by blowing on them. "My breath may seem a little funny," he tells one red-cheeked boy. "That's because I've been away in America." Here on a mountaintop, nobody can stop the *rinpoche* from ministering to his flock. In every village and in every nomad encampment, he makes a point of blessing each family with a few prayers and a sprinkling of seeds around the hearth. His knee is hurting him; at an altitude of 4,000 meters, the octogenarian gasps for breath and requires two attendants to help him walk, and yet he

**REUNITED**  
The *rinpoche*, right, is greeted at the Magon Monastery in Dargyab



Below is a house in ruins. It was once his, gutted half a century ago under Chinese orders. "This is a good lesson in impermanence," he says.

doesn't stop until every last tent and farm are sanctified. In the larger villages, the Tibetan officials wait until their Chinese bosses are asleep before knocking on the *rinpoche's* door and asking for a blessing or a divination. By the end of the journey, even Tsering and the two cops are bowing before him.

In Wato Monastery, perched on a high canyon where a lone hawk soars above a juniper forest, the *rinpoche* reflects on his journey. Below is a house in ruins. It was once his, gutted half a century ago under Chinese orders. "This is a good lesson in impermanence," he says. His return to the monasteries has not brought him happiness. "The monks are very young or very old. There is no one teaching the dharma. Many of my friends have died. It's saddening." Earlier, he visited the Potala, the Dalai Lama's former palace, which now has police surveillance cameras in every room. "It's like a museum. There's no feeling of Dalai Lama left

in the Potala." In the past five years, the Chinese have allowed many monasteries to be rebuilt. But "the best teachers have escaped to India, and few ever come back here," the *rinpoche* says. Would he consider leaving Manhattan for Tibet? He shakes his head. "No. If I stayed, I couldn't help very much."

Sitting in a corner of the room are two monks, who have been attending to their revered master and colleague. They smile at each other and clink glasses of orange soda pop. They have reason to celebrate. After all, they have accomplished the unimaginable: they helped bring a long-lost Tibetan sage over the mountain passes in one piece to their monastery. And, while the police sleep off their hangover from a night of drinking *chang*, the *rinpoche* is able to deliver a teaching to dharma-starved monks. Life may indeed be impermanent, but for a few hours in the monastery, it seems like the good old days. ■