

Monk's teachings transcend religion: Venerable Buddhist brings message of peace, compassion to Austin

BYLINE: Eileen E. Flynn, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Geshe Thupten Phelgye wears a dark red robe and a mustard yellow sash and speaks quietly, his voice slightly raspy, as he begins a guided meditation. About 30 people sit Monday in the sanctuary of First Unitarian Universalist Church for a daylong retreat for peace with one of Tibetan Buddhism's most venerable teachers.

Geshe Thupten apologizes for his limited English, then speaks eloquently about the need for peace in the face of war, wisdom and spirituality in the face of religious extremism, forgiveness in the face of oppression. He tells of Tibetans' suffering at the hands of Chinese communist leaders, then relates a story about his mean-spirited neighbor in India. Both need his prayers, he says.

"The most important thing at this time in the world is to bring peace and compassion to your neighbors, your neighbor countries and around the world," he tells the audience.

Geshe Thupten, a monk in the lineage of the Dalai Lama, led silent and guided meditation and delivered dharma talks, or sermons, for people who ranged from the practicing Buddhist or Christian to the nonreligious.

"We have so many religions around the world," he said. "We have so many great teachers in every society, in every culture. . . . And the message is how to be compassionate, how to bring peace in your life and to your fellow human beings."

David Zuniga, a staff member at Seton Cove, said Buddhism tends to attract people because "it's seen as very useful and very practical for the suffering that we experience in our lives." And the opportunity to learn from a Geshe, the highest level of monastic training in Tibetan Buddhism, is rare in Austin, said Zuniga, a practicing Buddhist.

Geshe Thupten lives in India, where he serves on the Tibetan Parliament in exile. His trip to the United States included stops in Massachusetts and California.

The word peace caught Pamela Latham's attention when she saw the flier publicizing Geshe Thupten's retreat. Latham coordinates Peace Sunday meditations at the Human Potential Center, a South Austin organization that offers personal growth programs based on humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

"I feel like because of (the war in Iraq), it is even more important that we turn our thoughts and prayers and meditations toward peace," she said.

One participant said the 2,500-year-old Buddhist values of love and forgiveness resonated with his Christian faith. But participants also wanted to know what to do with their anger about the war in Iraq or how to defend themselves when threatened with violence.

Practice tolerance and do not use physical force, Geshe Thupten tells them. These things are more courageous and more difficult, he says. As a young man, he admits, he was short-tempered and prone to hate. Now he finds compassion even for the most unpleasant people.

That nasty neighbor lady back in India? “I take her as my special guru,” he says. “My teacher who teaches me patience. In my meditation, I put her next to His Holiness (the Dalai Lama).”

The retreat participants laugh and Geshe Thupten’s smooth, round face lights up with a grin.