

50 *Plus* Lifestyles™

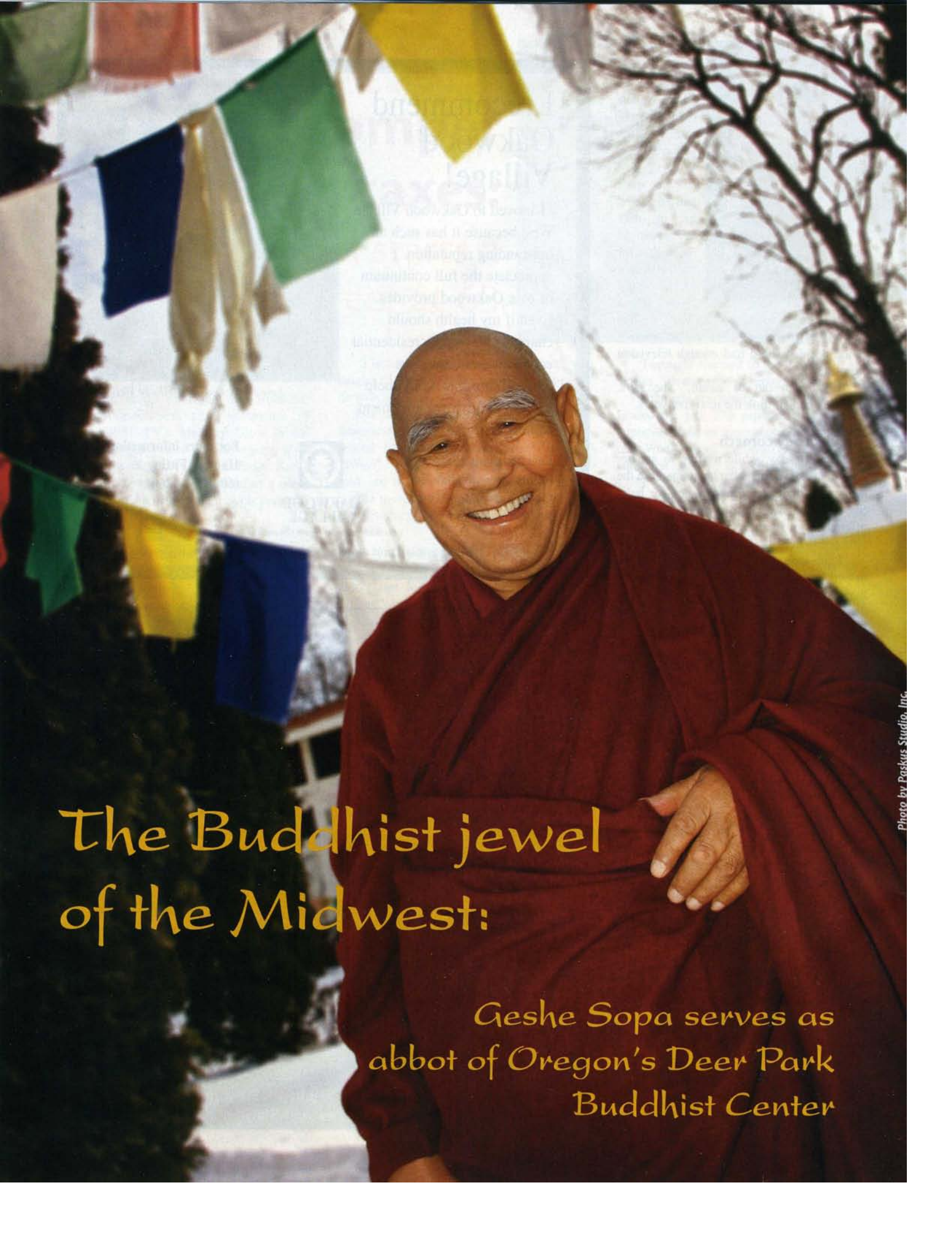
The magazine for Dane County's active 50 Plus population

April 2006

The Tibetan jewel of Wisconsin:

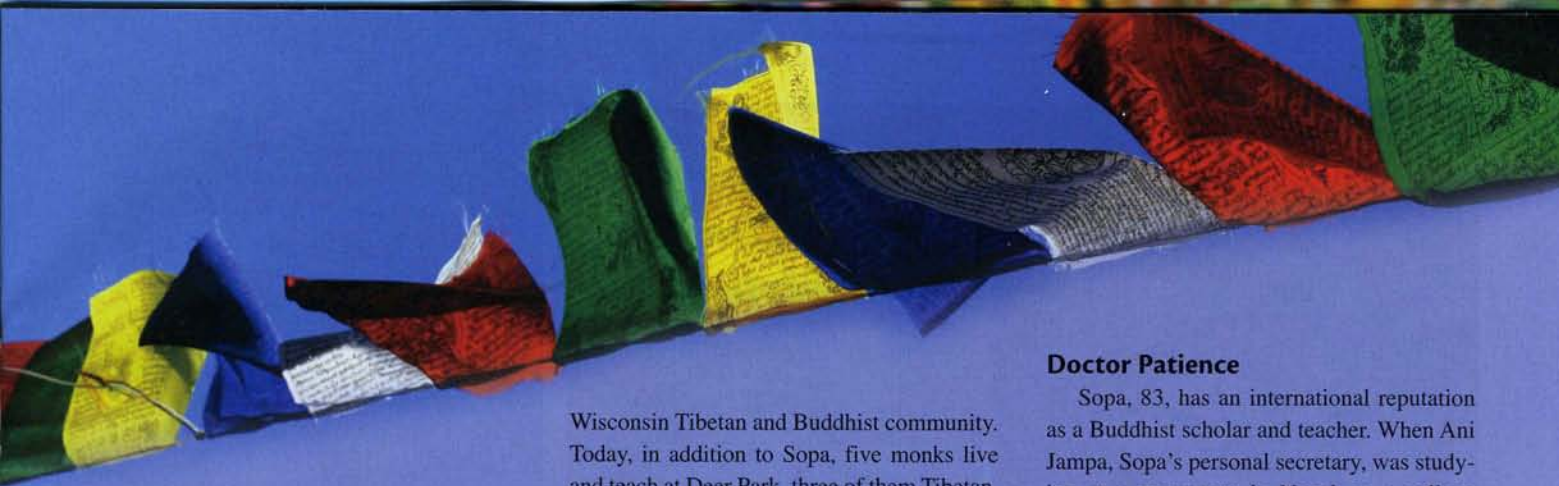
Abbot Geshe Sopa leads
Oregon's Deer Park
Buddhist Temple

Wisconsin's waterfall wonderland
Create an outdoor Eden with perennials
Which digital camera's the right one for you?
A silent epidemic: Aging and alcoholism



*The Buddhist jewel
of the Midwest:*

*Geshe Sopa serves as
abbot of Oregon's Deer Park
Buddhist Center*



by Debra Morrill

Less than half an hour south of Madison in the wooded hills outside Oregon lies Deer Park Buddhist Center. For Geshe Lhundub Sopa, founder and abbot, it's home, albeit a long way from his birthplace in Tibet.

From Tibet to Wisconsin

Sopa left Tibet in 1959 during the Chinese invasion, just days after the Dalai Lama fled the country. After spending two years as a refugee in India, Sopa moved to the United States to continue his work of learning and teaching Tibetan Buddhism. He settled in Madison in 1967 when Richard Robinson recruited him to teach at the University of Wisconsin.

Joe Elder, professor of sociology and languages and cultures of Asia, met Sopa almost the day he arrived in Madison. "He barely spoke any English when he got here, so at first he was used essentially as a teaching assistant in the Tibetan language class," Elder says. "It would be like bringing the pope to Madison to be a TA in the Latin class."

As Sopa learned the language, he became a key part of the university's newly-formed Buddhist Studies program, the first of its kind in the nation. "Nobody anywhere in any university in the United States could teach the way he taught," Elder says. "His knowledge of the text was unsurpassed anywhere in the western hemisphere."

As the program grew and more students came to study with Sopa, he founded Deer Park to meet the needs of a growing southern

Wisconsin Tibetan and Buddhist community. Today, in addition to Sopa, five monks live and teach at Deer Park, three of them Tibetan. Three American Buddhist nuns live nearby.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama came to Deer Park in 1981 to offer the first Kalachakra Ceremony for world peace conducted in the West. The open-air pavilion used in this ceremony was later enclosed with walls and windows to become Deer Park's first temple. This is where students gather today. In the fall of 2007, the Dalai Lama will return to consecrate a new, much larger temple currently under construction on the thirteen-acre site. Deer Park is actively seeking funds for the completion of the Temple Project.

The heart of the new temple will be a two-story assembly hall with seating for approximately three hundred people and overflow space for large events and traditional Tibetan celebrations. For example, every July Madison's Tibetan community comes to Deer Park to celebrate the birthday of the Dalai Lama. The new temple combines traditional elements of Tibetan art and architecture with some components of sustainable, "green" design. Four Tibetan artisans from Lhasa, Tibet, will work on-site later this year.

In Tibet, Sopa was one of thirty examiners chosen to debate with the Dalai Lama during the Dalai Lama's final examinations. Sopa received this honor even before he had attained the ranking of *geshe*. *Geshe* (pronounced gay-shay) is an honorific title, somewhat similar to a doctor of philosophy. It takes approximately thirty years of study to achieve.

Doctor Patience

Sopa, 83, has an international reputation as a Buddhist scholar and teacher. When Ani Jampa, Sopa's personal secretary, was studying at a monastery in Nepal on a college semester abroad program in 1991, they asked her where she was from.

"I said, 'The Midwest,' and they asked where again, and I said, 'Near Chicago,' and they asked where again. Thinking they would not understand, I said, 'Wisconsin,'" she says. "They said, 'We know Wisconsin. One of our greatest teachers lives in Wisconsin. You should find him.'"

And she did. After returning from Asia and finishing her undergraduate degree in art history, she moved to Madison for graduate studies. "He can present very complex philosophical material in a way that's very palatable and easier for us to access," she says. "He does that through his great sense of humor and extraordinary kindness."

The name *Sopa* means patience and forbearance. "Dr. Patience," she laughs. "He's perfected patience. He's very gentle and patient with his students."

She served as his teaching assistant for three years and was ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1998, in the first group of Americans to be ordained by Sopa.

Although he retired from the University of Wisconsin in 1997 after thirty years, he continues to teach at Deer Park and travel worldwide. Ani Jampa estimates Geshe Sopa helped produce over thirty graduates with PhD degrees in Buddhist Studies.

Students of Tibetan Buddhism come from all over the world to take a five-week summer course he teaches annually at Deer Park. George Churinoff, a Buddhist monk ordained for over 25 years, moved to

continued on next page →

More about Deer Park

Deer Park Buddhist Center offers classes for the public on various practices and philosophies of Tibetan Buddhism on Thursday evenings from 7:30-9:00 pm and a Sunday morning meditation service with teachings from 10:00 am to noon. The center is located at 4548 Schneider Drive, just outside Oregon off Highway MM.





"It is always nice to know that the staff care about me not only physically but mentally as well"

—Lana, 30 year resident

Linda, LPN 15 yrs.

Lana, resident over 30 yrs.

Betty, CNA 16 yrs.

Vanessa, Activity Director 4 1/2 yrs.

Belmont
Nursing and
Rehabilitation Center

Belmont Nursing and Rehab is:

- Dedicated to Quality Resident Service
- Has used no Pool or Agency Staff in 3 years
- Focused on the whole person

110 Belmont Road • Madison, WI 53714 • (608) 249-7391

willy street co-op

a natural foods cooperative since 1974

1221 Williamson St. • open 8am-4pm
251-6776 • www.willystreet.coop

Supporting over 180 local farmers & producers



Troy Community Farm

Wisconsin a year ago. Sopa invited him to come live at Deer Park to transcribe and edit a series of lectures Sopa had given on some finer points of Buddhist philosophy. When Churinoff's work is complete, it will be published as a book. Sopa has several other publications translated into many languages and a six-volume series being edited and finalized for publication.

"Geshe-la is one of the very highly-educated Tibetan lamas and great scholars," Churinoff says. "There are some other special scholars too, but the special thing about him is his incredible kindness and the development of his Buddhist qualities. He's not only a scholar, he's also a practitioner. He puts the teachings into practice."

Farming roots

In Tibet, it's typical for at least one of the children in larger families to enter religious studies. Sopa was an only child of a farmer. Normally, one son would be kept in the family, since Buddhist monks take vows of celibacy. But Sopa's father was also very religious. "He wanted his son to become a spiritual leader," Sopa says.

That aligned with Sopa's own goals, even at a young age. Some of his mother's relatives were monks, and he would visit them. "Sometimes in the big assembly hall, there would be five hundred monks," he remembers. "I would go to the balcony and look down, and toward the end there were many children. I wanted to be a monk."

He entered the monastery, a day's walk from his home, when he was nine years old.

Sopa has not returned to Tibet since fleeing the country in 1959. He's learned English and gotten a driver's license. He appreciates the freedom we have here in the US.

"People can travel anywhere," he says. "People can speak even against the president. This is the nature of a free country. Any kind of religion, any kind of spiritual thing you want to choose, there is no rejection. Even if you don't want to practice any religion. Even speaking freely is difficult in other countries. America is very free."



Debra Morrill is a freelance writer living in Baraboo. She can be reached at debramorrill@yahoo.com.