

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV in Mcleodganj

IT IS THE EVE OF THE 67TH BIRTHDAY OF HIS Holiness, the Dalai Lama. Up in the hills of Himachal Pradesh in the small town of Mcleodganj near Dharamsala, some students of Buddhist philosophy sway in abandon to the beats of a techno-trance number that plays loudly at a rave party. Shiva Cafe, a 4-km uphill climb from the Bhagsunag temple along a stony, narrow path, is notorious for these raves. Here people often forget the difference between compassion and passion that they learnt in their morning class on Tibetan Buddhism. So amidst uninhibited smooching, petty arguments, umpteen puffs and sniffs of drugs, the night lingers on.

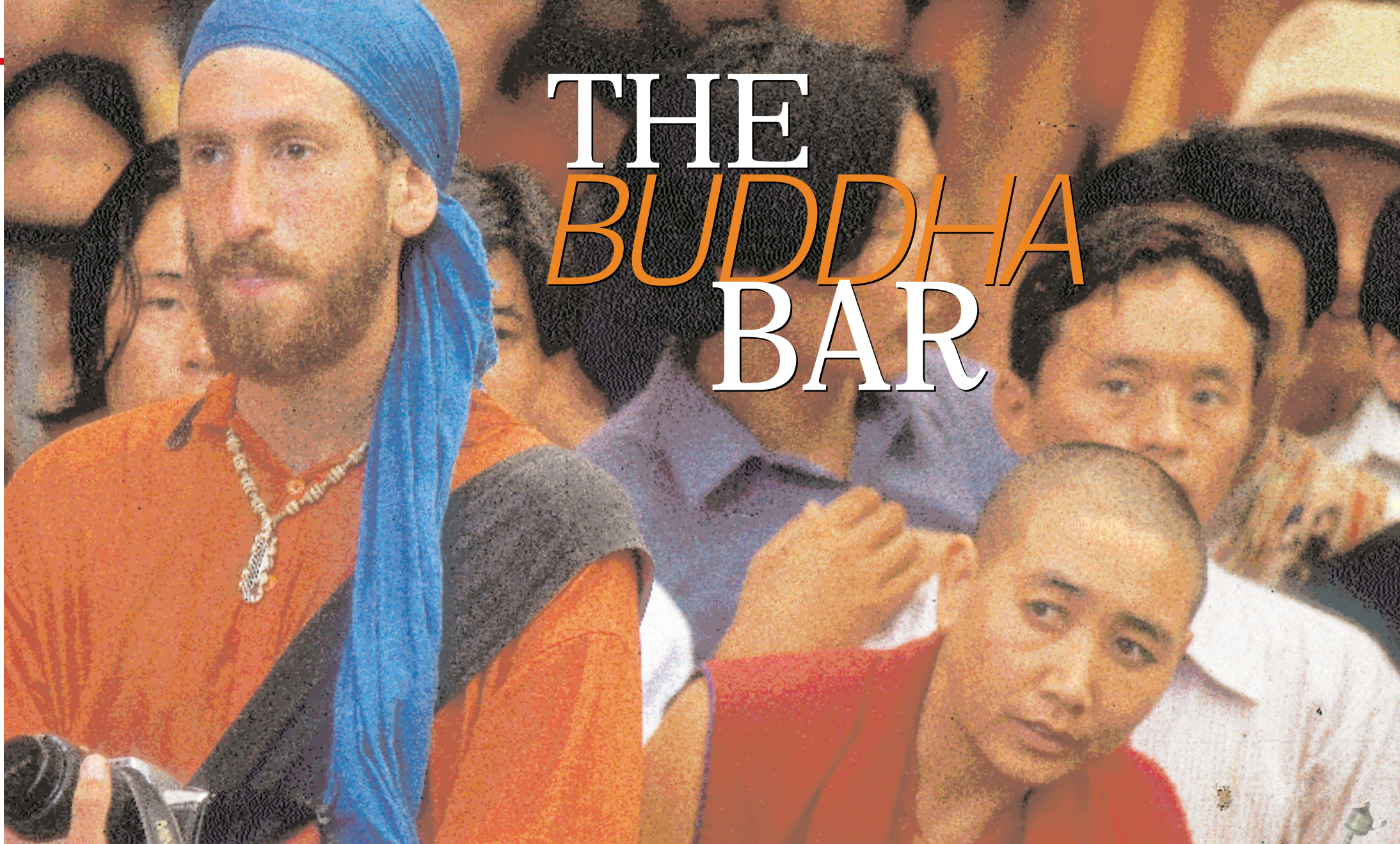
In sharp contrast, at the Geden Choeling nunnery at Mcleodganj there is brooding silence. Looking forward to His Holiness' birthday celebrations the next day, Thupten, a Buddhist nun who has practised compassion for 16 years, says the pursuit of unbridled passion can seldom show the path to enlightenment.

However, Thupten and other nuns accept that their version of Buddhism is becoming dated. It is the many groups of bearded, bearded, funkily accessorised moksha-seeking

Photographs by DILIP BANERJEE



THE AMALGAMATION: Spiritual shoppers with the monks (top right and above) and the Tibetans at the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations. Gintaras (top left) looking for flexibility in religion.



THE BUDDHA BAR

Combining meditation with rave parties, a breed of young spiritual seekers has turned Buddhism into a New Age shoppers' stop

tourists clad in tattered blue jeans with pierced lips and eyebrows who are redefining this religion. Buddhism's most seen face now is no longer of the humble, silent monks in yellow and maroon robes. The hang-loose seekers, who get away with combining an indulgent life of drugs, free sex and experimental relationships with a serious and sometimes abiding interest in Buddhist philosophy are turning it into a very saleable religion. They seem to be showing the world that worldly detachment can be on friendly terms with the trappings of desire.

These seekers come to experiment with Buddhism for different reasons. Some because disillusionment sits heavy on their souls, others just to tick off another destination on their list of must-dos in India. Many are customers who have bought the idea of Buddhism through Hollywood films, the pop songs of Tina Turner and Madonna or over counters of the much-marketed Zen aspect of Buddhism. Hollywood stars Richard Gere and Pierce Brosnan too have added to Buddhism's marketable charms.

The next day, as these groupies stand amidst the hundreds of monks and nuns crowding the vast front yard of the Namgyal monastery, where Tibetan songs and dances are being performed to celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday, an image of contemporary Buddhism comes to life. The hedonistic juxtaposed against the compassionate. The materialistic against the detached.

But when the New Age seekers speak, it becomes apparent that their interpretation of "Boodism" is sometimes more insightful and probing than that of some of the monks. "This taste of Buddhism is doing me a lot of good since my disillusionment with Christianity turned me into an atheist," says Gintaras, a Lithuanian who studies Buddhist philosophy. "Spirituality works only if it is flexible. And unlike most other religions, I find Buddhism open to interpretation," he says. "I

had thought of experimenting with different concepts, but Hinduism and Islam are not my cup of tea," he adds.

Over cups of hot Tibetan herbal tea and spinach quiche, Ideno, a 21-year-old Israeli girl, too echoes this philosophy. "Peace does not necessarily have to be about passivity," she says reinterpreting the Buddha's wise lines to suit her argument. "Even as I seek peace, I do not want to withdraw from the path of desire because it will only make me agitated." And for the odd Indian you find studying diligently in the morning, and later chilling out over debates of impermanence made spicy with momos and red sauce, this "combination religion" is an exciting diversion from the disciplined adherence that his own religion demands. "I find Buddhism very easy to practise," says Brijesh Kumar, a philosophy student from Patna. "I have always been a believer of karma

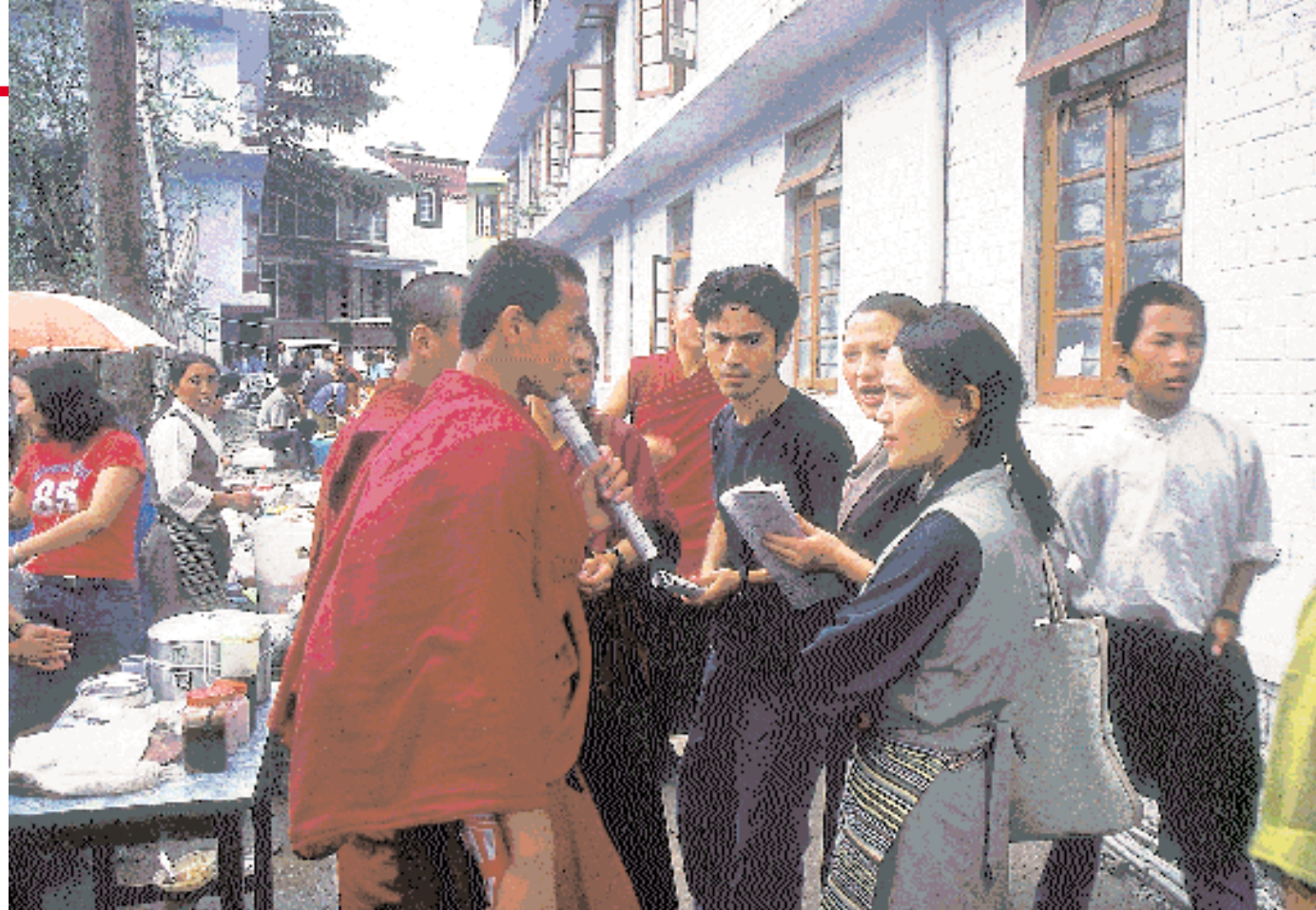
|| We need Dalai Lamas more than the likes of George Bush. ||

CATHERINE, 36, American organic farmer

and Buddhism simplifies life's mysteries," he explains. Does playing footsie with a blonde girl from Israel add zest to his quest? He shrugs and looks dreamily into the horizon.

On the other hand, Catherine, a tall organic farmer from America, says that her disappointment with George W. Bush's way of tackling world terrorism, attracted her to Buddhism. "The world needs spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama more than the likes of George Bush," says this spiritualist, who too has been attracted by the karma theory. No wonder more than 60 students from India and abroad attend the classes on Buddhist philosophy and language, held six days a week for two hours at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala.

YOUNG, confused souls seeking refuge in religion, drugs and sex is nothing new. Varanasi too abounds with the hippies of the 21st century, who, having experimented with everything in life, come for a "taste of religion". They smoke charas with the roadside pandas and then fade away. But the new faithfuls in Mcleodganj are different. Buddhism seems to have found lasting loyalists. The multiple kicks that this Tibetan refugee settlement offers (and which Buddhism obviously doesn't prohibit) seem to beckon the spiritual tourist. In every small Tibetan cafe, shortcuts to instant nirvana are an in-your-face assault. Yoga, reiki, tantra, meditation, vipassana, gem therapy, aura healing, kundalini techniques ... everything comes offered on a placard. Cramped with coloured beads, talismans, rosaries, mandalas on T-shirts and mantra-printed pyjamas, Mcleodganj offers easy availability of drugs like LSD, heroin, also marijuana. And with cafes that offer disco and trance nights, there is a potent combination of worldly desires to choose from. It is like a melting pot, a complete shopper's stop for New Age seekers.



// Peace and prayer does not necessarily have to be about passivity. //

IDENTO, 23, an Israeli student



THE ORIGINALS: Buddhist nuns at the Geden Choeling nunnery at Mcleodganj (above) admit that their version of the religion is becoming dated but that doesn't deter them from their chosen path. On the other hand, there is no mistaking the body language of young monks (above right) who can be seen with women in public places.

tradition has added its own flavour to the core beliefs. In India, Tibetan Buddhism has emerged as a popular combination religion, which is practised, packaged and sold to anyone who wishes to enrol without any preconditions. It is unorthodox and lends itself easily to contemporary adaptations. But the fear, say its critics, is that it is increasingly being held hostage by those who have commercialised it.

"What started as a trickle is now a rush of unrestrained ills in the name of pupils of meditation," says Cheryl Templeton, a schoolteacher who has lived in Mcleodganj for 20 years. "Even mantras are now made to order. When you buy a statue of Buddha or a goddess, the monks will have a mantra read and inserted in it in a matter of an hour," she points out, recalling the days when gifting a mantra required an elaborate ritual. There are others like Templeton who feel that the modernistic reinterpretation is bringing in uncultured behaviour in the name of free religion. "Most of the newcomers are on drugs when they come to register for our classes. Some even report accidental pregnancies during classes," says B.K. Bhog, administrator of the popular S.P. Goenka Vipassana Centre in Dharamkot village. "They have scooped out all experiences of life as they drift aimlessly. Buddhism is just another experiment to them," he adds. Most



THE DRIFTER: Sacha Faller, 25, studied psychology and the science of religion in Switzerland. Now, as a student of Buddhist philosophy, he says he finds himself drifting yet again.

"What better way to understand detachment than to have it constantly tested by an indulgent life?" asks Sacha Faller, a 25-year-old student of psychology from Switzerland who has been skipping his Buddhism classes for the past few weeks because he found himself drifting. "The permission to indulge is the biggest lesson in letting go," he theorises, sounding impressively Buddhist. "I had the most intense relationship of my life here, which lasted only 11 days," recounts Faller adding that the lessons in impermanence helped him regain his balance after his partner left him.

The fine art of weaving the philosophy of freedom in exile into real life is put to test because the temptations are many and varied. "Compassion is a beautiful concept. But should it be necessarily combined with detachment?" asks 24-year-old Suzie Watson, a gorgeous Australian who was drawn to Buddhism after hearing about it from her yoga teacher in Melbourne. "I go to the dance parties. But I don't use drugs because meditation gives me a bigger high," says Watson, who has been studying Buddhism for the past two years and is now married to a Tibetan youth, who too is exploring Buddhism.

Buddhism sells. And the Buddha's philosophy, so spare and non-materialistic, is making sense even to agnostics, whose numbers are increasing all over the world. The evolution of Buddhism from its traditional asceticism and renunciation of the mundane world, to a pick-and-choose buffet religion without any reference to its basic precepts of abstinence from sexual misconduct, untruth, deceit and intoxication has confounded many. One reason, why the modern world's image of Buddhism is so muddled, says Tenzin Yeshe, a young monk from the Namgyal monastery, is because there are so many schools of Buddhist thought and practice. Each culture that has absorbed and passed on the Buddhist

critics agree that like all other religions, Buddhism too should be frequently questioned, instead of it getting blind encouragement of those who buy and sell it.

If there is a crisis in Buddhism, it is not just the pseudo-Buddhists who are the catalysts. The monks too seem to be wading in doubtful waters. "The number of those who give up lives as monks is increasing every year," says Tenzin Nyima Negi of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. "The rest of the vows are easy to keep, but many find it difficult to resist sexual relationships," he adds.

That may be one indicator of a storm within, but there are others. The monks, who walk around in Nike shoes and smart watches, espouse an open acceptance of the materialistic joys. Also, there is no mistaking the body language of young monks who are seen with girls in restaurants and other public places. Is this an indication that the liberated, neo-Buddhists who crowd the philosophy classes are becoming role models for the monks instead of it being the other way round?

The Buddha perhaps knew the fate of Buddhism. After all, it was he who said, "Irony is your only fate." ■