

A Lama in Hungary

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I met [Lama Chopel](#) six years ago, in 2010, when I was in Budapest courting my wife-to-be. Friends took us to a restaurant featuring thirties-era Hollywood “Oriental” decor laid out as a pseudo-bazaar amid a variety of small stores selling Asian semi-spiritual knickknacks. While taking a break from the strenuous Hungarian meal, I went into one store and found a number of Hungarian books on Buddhism translated by “Lama Csöpel.” Lama Chopel’s books in hand, I wondered what Buddhism might look like in a country with Hungary’s unique, long, and complex history.

Throughout its history, Buddhism has maintained a core of teachings and practices while also adapting itself to the varying beliefs, folkways, tastes, and ethical mores of the countries where it has come to reside. [Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche](#), my own teacher, had come to the West as part of the Tibetan diaspora and taught extensively in the United States and Europe. His relationship with new cultures produced fresh discoveries and unanticipated depths for both teacher and students. One might regard such adaptations as mere pragmatic steps that Buddhist teachers took to gain some kind of foothold in a new world. But far more to the point, by responding to the particular circumstances presented by a new culture, the Buddhist teachings themselves found new emphases and forms of expression. Aspects of teachings and practices that were not developed in one culture were explored, expanded, and deepened in another.

After dinner, I looked up Lama Chopel online. He had been trained in the Karma Kagyu tradition, one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and was currently the head of the Hungarian Karma Kagyupa Community, on whose website he had published several dharma talks. His way of speaking had warmth and solidity. I wrote him, hoping we could meet.

Lama Chopel invited me to one of the Community’s centers, Karmapa Ház [House], located in a somewhat scruffy part of Pest [the eastern part of Budapest]. I soon found myself sitting in a large, traditionally appointed Tibetan shrine room facing a very tall, bearded Hungarian man with a superb nose and a lovely smile. He spoke excellent English and put me very much at ease, but when I told him I no longer taught, he said: “Good. It will be very helpful to the students for you to give a talk.” “OK, but I don’t like to talk about myself,” I said. “Yes, something about your personal path would be very helpful,” he responded. I felt I was meeting a relative from a branch of a family I’d heard of but not encountered before. He was less self-conscious than many American Buddhists and had a kind of direct enthusiasm that indicated less anxiety about finding Buddhism’s place in his culture.

What follows comes from exchanges that took place at Karmapa Ház in 2009, a later conversation over a breakfast in Nándor’s, a wonderful little pastry shop across from a large church, and some correspondence.