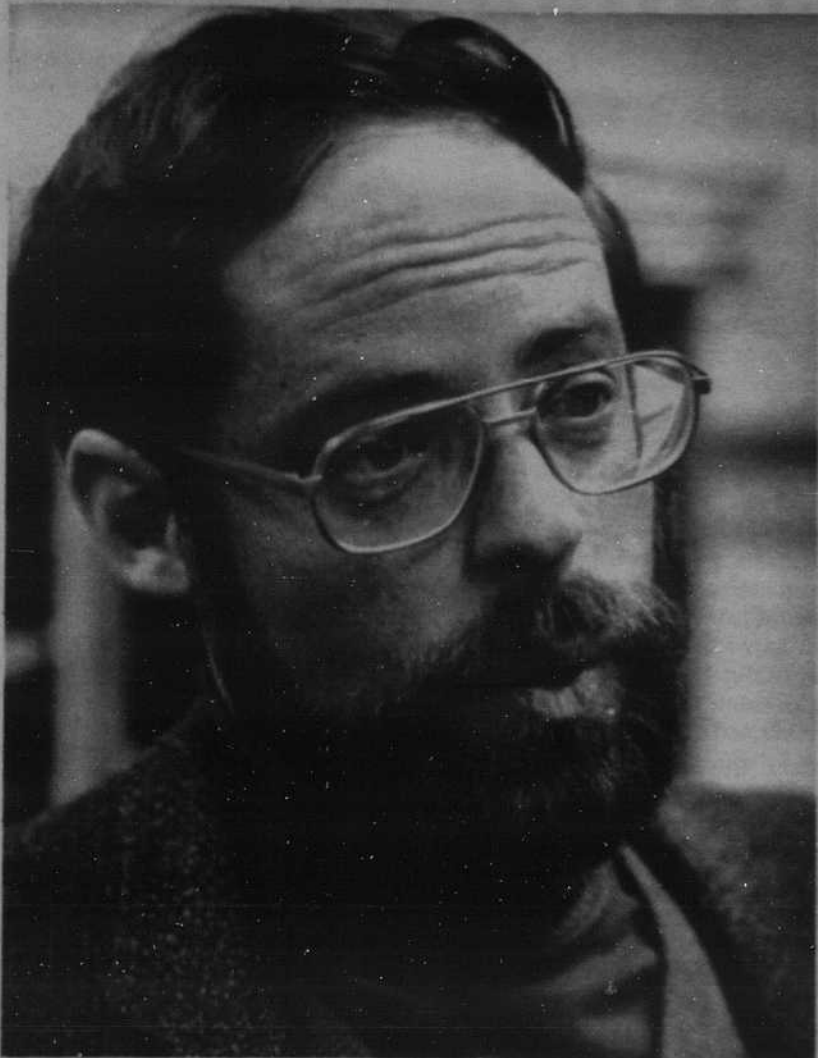


Lecturer sees changes first-hand

Tibet enjoying a religious renewal



Edwin Bernbaum

By Lori Steinhauer
Of the Emerald

Buddhism and monasteries are resurrecting in Tibet, following a religious drought of more than 20 years, according to a national lecturer and author who traveled through the country in the fall of 1983 and again in the spring of 1984.

"For a period of about 20 years, the religion was suppressed and went underground," said Edwin Bernbaum. "It was amazing to see how devoted the people were when they were allowed to practice again."

Bernbaum took more than 150 people from a packed room in the EMU on a guided journey of Tibet Wednesday night, through a slide show and lecture entitled "From Lhasa to Everest: Monasteries and Mountains of Tibet." The presentation was sponsored by the EMU Cultural Forum.

Most Tibetan monasteries were destroyed as Chinese troops moved into the country in the 1950s. "The Chinese

decided Buddhism was a main force against the Chinese takeover," and they did all they could to squelch the religion, Bernbaum said.

However, in the late 1970s, changes in the Chinese government led to the allowance of Buddhism back into Tibet.

Before the takeover, somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 monasteries stood in Tibet, Bernbaum said. But now,

'The Chinese decided Buddhism was a major force against the Chinese takeover, and they did all they could to squelch the religion'

— Edwin Bernbaum

only a handful remain.

"A lot of people who go in don't know what it was like before. You go to a monastery there, and you see some temples, and it looks like everything's in pretty good order. But if you look at some

books from before the 1950s, you see a lot more buildings there."

In his presentation, Bernbaum pointed out one of the few remaining monasteries, at which he found several monks and nuns during his visit. In 1982 a friend of Bernbaum's had gone to the same monastery, and it was deserted.

"To give you some perspective, the monastery had about 300 nuns and monks (before the Chinese takeover)," Bernbaum said.

The downfall of Tibetan religious practices was accompanied by a decline in the native population. Thousands of nuns, monks and religious natives followed their leader, the Dalai Lama, to Nepal after 1959.

The natives who remained suffered from a food shortage when the Chinese planted a failing crop of wheat in place of barley, the main Tibetan crop. Adding to the problem was an increasing number of Chinese being sent to Tibet, where low population density must be maintained because of its high altitude and dry climate, Bernbaum explained.

Today, the country has about 1.5 million Tibetans and about 300,000 Chinese living on 471,660 square miles of land, according to The New American Desk Encyclopedia.

Bernbaum said he was unable to get an accurate account of the current political situation in Tibet, although he knew some Tibetan language, because propaganda was prevalent on both the Tibetan and the Chinese sides. Bernbaum recalls his visit in 1983, when Tibet was having

to increased crime in China and Chinese-ruled countries, Bernbaum said.

In Tibet, such a crackdown carried strong political overtones, he added. Bernbaum recalled feeling the gloom that pervaded Tibet in the fall of 1983, while Tibetan refugees in New York were protesting for the natives in their homeland. When Bernbaum returned to Tibet in 1984, the situation had relaxed, and the natives had a more optimistic view of the future, he recalls.

"It becomes harder for the crackdowns to take place if

Tibet becomes more and more open to foreigners," he said.

Bernbaum currently lectures and shows his slides at the Smithsonian Institution, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and other institutions throughout the United States. He has also written a book entitled "The Way to Shambhala," about a hidden Tibetan valley.

Bernbaum's interest in the mountains and cultures of the world began in his youth, when he resided in various Latin American countries where his father was in the U.S. foreign services.

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