



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **Buddhist Scholar Donald Lopez on the Staying Power of Ancient Questions**

The Buddhist and Tibetan Studies professor at the University of Michigan recalls how a tumultuous period in U.S. politics led him to his area of expertise. Plus, what he's learned from his many meetings with a leading Buddhist philosopher, the Dalai Lama. And what attracted him to out-of-the-box thinkers like poet Gendun Chopel.

Fred Lawrence:

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Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations With Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Lawrence: Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Lawrence: Today I'm delighted to welcome Professor Donald S. Lopez Jr., the Arthur E. Link Distinguished University Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies at the University of Michigan. Professor Lopez is the author, translator, and editor of numerous works in the field of Buddhist studies, on topics ranging from Buddhist philosophy to Buddhism in science. He has also written extensively on the European encounter with Buddhism. He's the editor of the Buddhism volume of the Norton Anthology of World Religions, and Buddhist Scriptures for Penguin Classics. His recent books include *Dispelling the*

Darkness: A Jesuit's Quest for the Soul of Tibet, and Gendun Chopel: Tibet's Modern Visionary. Welcome, Professor.

Lopez: Very happy to be here.

Lawrence: Delighted to have a conversation about so many of the topics that you've written about, but I want to start back with the beginning of your journey, before we talk about some of the journeys that you have written about and described for us. You grew up here in Washington, DC, where I am, with a father who was an Air Force pilot, and an official at the Smithsonian. Tell us a little bit about that experience and the influence that all of that had on you and the beginning of your journey.

Lopez: Yeah, so my father was an Air Force officer. He had fought in the Second World War, flew a P-40, those planes with the teeth on it, in China. He was an ace. So like many military families, we moved around a lot as I was a kid. He taught at the Air Force Academy. Then he ended up back at the Pentagon. We moved to Alexandria when I was in the fifth grade and stayed there through high school. So I'm from Alexandria.

Lawrence: You attended University of Virginia for most undergraduate, and graduate work, and your PhD in religious studies, right?

Lopez: That's correct. Yep. I went to UVA, my home state school, and stayed on because they started a Buddhist studies program when I was a senior. So I went on and stayed on for both MA and PhD there.

Lopez: So I came to the topic late. So I was born in 1952, which means that I was 16 in 1968. So those of us who remember that year, know it as one of the most tumultuous years in American history. It was the year of the Tet Offensive, both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, it was the year of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where the whole world was watching protests and riots, Nixon was elected. So that was my 16th year, I think very formative in terms of my view of the world. I went off to UVA in the fall, right after Kent State, where four were killed in Ohio.

Lopez: And so I think many of us in our generation sort of came to college having decided that Western civilization was corrupt. It was over. I really went to school, I think, thinking I was going to be a Shakespeare scholar, but I think that changed as the world changed around me. And so we had the rather, I think in retrospect, naive belief that the answer was to be found in terms that we don't use anymore. Things like Eastern mysticism and Oriental philosophy. So I began studying whatever was available at UVA at the time. It wasn't much, but I got into a fantastic honors program in the Department of Religious Studies and was able to just study with the number of scholars there.

Lawrence: Reminded of the aphorism attributed to Mahatma Gandhi when asked what he thought of Western civilization. He said, it would've been a good idea.

Lopez: Exactly. We all felt that at the time.

Lawrence: So let's talk a little bit about some of the lectures that you've given as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. One of your talks was entitled How The Buddha Became a Christian

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Saint, which was originally thought to be a tale of conversion to Christianity, but later discovered to be a retelling of Buddha's life. Tell us a little bit about the story first and how its true origins were discovered, and then let's talk about how some of that plays out when you take it around the country.

Lopez: So this is the story of Barlaam and Josaphat. These are two medieval saints that had their Saints days quite well known in the Christian tradition, represented quite often in art, and in the story, the prince, Josaphat, his father is a pagan and he has a great fear that his son's going to become a Christian, so he locks him in the palace. And then this Barlaam Christian comes from Serendip in Sri Lanka, and teaches, converts him to the true faith. And so that's basically the story.

Lopez: It was later determined in the, it's filled with many fables, and during the sort of rise of folklore studies in the 19th century in Europe, someone figured out that the fables that appeared in Barlaam and Josaphat also appeared in some Buddhist sources. And then when you go back to the story of the king, who's worried about his son's future and locks him in the palace, the son escapes, it's the life of the Buddha. So there's a very clear line that can be drawn, that was only discovered relatively recently, during the long history of these saints tales. This name Josaphat is, when you sort of trace it back through Greek and then through Arabic and then to Sanskrit, it's actually Bodhisattva. So Bodhisatt, Josaphat. So Bodhisattva is what the Buddha was called before he became the Buddha. He was the Bodhisattva, Prince Siddhartha.

Lawrence: What do we know about how the story made its way there?

Lopez: We don't know what Buddhist text per se was the source. We just know the general story was the source. So it made its way, first of all, from Sanskrit or some Indian language into Arabic, then it was read in Arabic by some Georgian Christian monks living in Jerusalem, and they took the Muslim version of the story, which was different, of course, from the Buddhist one, and made the hero a Christian. And then went from Georgian to Greek, Greek to Latin, and then from Latin into most of the vernaculars of Europe. And so we find versions of this story all over Europe in the Middle Ages.

Lawrence: Let's take you to the present. We'll go back and forth in time, which maybe for someone in Buddhist and Tibetan studies, is appropriate anyway, not to be too caught up in chronology, and talk a little bit about another of your great topics, the Dalai Lama, from the first Dalai Lama to the present Dalai Lama. Let's start in the present. What is the status of today's Dalai Lama? I do wonder if you've had the chance to actually have a personal encounter with the Dalai Lama as well, but let's start with the status, and then let's hear your stories.

Lopez: Yeah, so he is the 14th. He is living in India. He's been there since 1959. He was born in 1935. So he is getting on in years, but still quite active. In fact, just last week I sent in the page proofs of my translation of his next book of a 500 page work on Indian philosophy. And so he's still quite active. He's been, of course, during the pandemic discovered Zoom and that's become a very important tool for him as it is for all of us. I've been able to spend some time with him over the years. As someone in my field, of course, he's

such an important figure, and I met him for the first time on a Fulbright to India for my dissertation research in 1978.

Lopez: So he first came to the states in 1979 and I was a graduate student. I'd just come back from India, and I was given responsibility for organizing the trip to Charlottesville, Virginia, which involved calling the county sheriff and trying to arrange for a police escort, which is another story, and I've had a chance to spend time with him over the years since then. I brought him to my first job at Middlebury College, I brought him there for a conference and then I invited him to the University of Michigan, and then I spoke at an event in India just a couple years ago where he was also present. So I've had a chance to spend some time with him.

Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about your personal impressions. One of the things, from a distance, I've never had the privilege of meeting the Dalai Lama, but from following his work, he strikes me in a way of something that President Clinton once said about Nelson Mandela. That as much as Mandela is sort of a larger than life figure, and a, if you will, holier than imaginable figure, Clinton also described him as a single best politician he ever met, which is an interesting compliment coming from Bill Clinton, who knew a thing or two about politics. And that explains how a man like Mandela plays a major spiritual presence in South Africa, but also builds a political structure. And the Dalai Lama has managed to keep a culture, and if you will, a nation together in exile. That's no small thing, and that is in part spiritual, but it's in part political, isn't it?

Lopez: That's correct. Yeah. So the fifth Dalai Lama became the head of state, and so the Dalai Lama was the head of state since 1642. But the Dalai Lama, the present one of course, met a challenge that no previous Dalai Lama had met, which was the invasion of his country. And then he went to India in 1959, about a hundred thousand Tibetans followed him into exile, and he's tried to keep, I think quite successfully, Tibetan culture alive while still remaining an inspiration to the Tibetans in Tibet. So he has had both that political and spiritual role.

Lopez: The impression, I think, that is not people have of him, which is not entirely accurate, is that his English is not that good. But he goes on Larry King and all these shows and speaks English, and so he comes across as a person teaching love and compassion, which he does, but without that much sophistication in English. But when you hear him in Tibetan, he is a consummate philosopher and always challenging, interesting, saying all sorts of new things in fascinating ways. And as a Dalai Lama, of course, he speaks Tibetan better than anybody, has a vocabulary bigger than anyone, which makes it hard for people like me sometimes.

Lawrence: My sense as well is that he does play on two different, many different levels, but two that I'm thinking of. One is literally a head of state in exile, but also is a deeply spiritual person in a one-on-one sense, who is praying for individuals, not in some abstract sense, but actually in a very concrete sense.

Lopez: He really does have a kind of interest in every single person he encounters. And so one thing that was noticeable in that first trip in '79 was that all these photographers were

around him trying to take photographs, and they couldn't do that because he wanted to talk with them about how they got interested in photography. So it wasn't just the kind of smiling and shaking hands, but actually in an eye contact engagement with everybody. I remember for the final event, at our big event in Middlebury, we had this fabulous event in the chapel with our wonderful Middlebury student choir with a huge organ. So we had a recessional planned. And so I was leading the procession out. So I walked out and there was no recessional music. It was just silence. Nothing happened. And our great organist came out and I said, "What happened? You didn't play anything." He said, "Well, the Dalai Lama stopped and wanted me to show him how the organ worked." He cares about the individual, and the mass crowd is a crowd of individuals, and that's how he sees people.

Lawrence: Two of your lectures focus on extraordinary individuals, and I'd love for you to tell us a little bit about each of them. Let's start with the one who's more modern and then we'll move back in time a little bit. Gendun Chopel, who by some lights is the leading 20th century Tibetan intellectual. He was an artist, a philosopher, a poet, critic of modern Hinduism, Christianity, British Imperialism, author of a major work of erotica. This is quite a CV that he assembled. And all of this, if I have it right, packed into a relatively short life. He died before the age of 50. So tell us first a little bit about how you came to be interested in this figure, although maybe that's obvious, it just sounds fascinating to me, and I'm sure to all our listeners, and then tell us a little bit about his journey.

Lopez: So this is Gendun Chopel born in 1903, raised as a Tibetan monk. He's known for his poetry. He's known for his erotica. But his collected writings were not published until 1990. And so he was primarily known as a figure of stories about him, and he would get drunk, and draw these great pictures. That he gave up his monk's vows, of course, at a certain point, and so he's a figure who is beloved for his poetry and for his drawings and his paintings. He also wrote a very controversial book on Buddhist philosophy. It was actually published posthumously, and that's the work where I first encountered him. I had become so deeply steeped in Tibetan scholasticism by the time I left graduate school, that I was ready to kind of give it up, and I knew that his work was critical of that scholasticism on a number of important philosophical points.

Lopez: So I ended up translating this work of his, which was made up both of something that he wrote himself and some notes from one of his students. And so this was published as *The Madman's Middle Way*. His teachers called him the madman in the monastery. But as I was sort of leaping through the three volume set of his writings, I would always pass through a bunch of poetry or something else. I would pause over that. In some ways that was more interesting or captivating than some of these fine points of what is doctrine. So I ended up translating all of his extant poetry, and then I was asked to write a book that published all of his drawings and sketches and watercolors. The Dalai Lama's translator, Thupten Jinpa, is a good friend of mine. Together we translated what's called his travel log. This is the work that he considered his magnum opus, called *Grains of Gold*. And then together, finally, we did the work on *Erotica*, which was a challenge for a lot of reasons. He's a figure that's very dear to me.

Lawrence: Just tell us a little bit about some of the points that you said he raised with Tibetan scholasticism. Can you describe where that critique is coming from, the nature of it?

Lopez: That critique is coming in the context of a topic called valid knowledge. That is, how do we know? How do we know things? And in Buddhism, there are two forms. One is direct perception and one is inference logic. And so he challenges that by really saying that what we know, and what we agree to be true, is primarily just a group think. It's majority opinion. And he tells the following story.

Lopez: A king learns from his astrologers that a rain is about to come and anybody who drinks the rain water will go mad. There's not time to announce this to the populace, but the king covers all of his cisterns, keeps a supply of pure water for himself. And in due time, the entire populace has gone mad. They storm the palace and say, "The king is insane." Not knowing what else to do, the king drinks the water, and then everybody's happy. So that is, in some ways I think, thinking about our present world, a very chilling story about what truth means.

Lawrence: The other figure I know you've spoken about, and you will have to help me with the pronunciation of this Monk's name. Hyecho?

Lopez: Hyecho. Hyecho. Yeah.

Lawrence: Hyecho. Eighth century monk who takes one of the most important journeys in Buddhism, and in Tibetan life, and by even modern standards, in modern transportation standards, this would be an extraordinary journey, but it's almost unimaginable in the ancient world, the eighth century of the common era. So tell us a little bit about him and his journey, and the staying power of the questions that he was asking.

Lopez: So in Buddhist studies, we care a lot about pilgrims because pilgrims tell us things about places that we don't know. Natives don't describe their own countries. What is there to say? Right? It's just common knowledge. There's nothing. It's not interesting. But the Pilgrim, the traveler, tells us a lot. And many, many Chinese monks made the journey by land or by sea, from China to India. And their accounts are essential to us for understanding exactly what Indian Buddhism was like. One of the more obscure of these figures was probably a 19 year old Korean monk named Hyecho. China was the center for Buddhism in east Asia at the time. So anybody who really wanted to study Buddhism seriously from Korea would go to China. He went to China, got on a boat in Guangzhou, Canton. Followed the usual route. You go down the coast of Vietnam and then you stop in Sumatra, which was a major Buddhist center.

Lopez: You can stop there and study some Sanskrit and learn a bit about Buddhism, and you get back on the boat and you get off somewhere around Bengal. And there was already a kind of pilgrims route that one would take. And so he went to most of the usual places, went up into what is today Afghanistan, which was also a Buddhist center at the time, and then perhaps got on the wrong caravan because he then traveled west to Persia. And in his, at least by his own account, Arabia, before making his way back to China, all of this in three years. So his travel journal was discovered in China in the early 20th

century by a French scholar, and the beginning and the end were completely missing. All we had were the middle. And so the project that I came up with, with a group of my students and colleagues, was let's try to reconstruct what his path would have been and must have been, just going by the fragments of the journal and some of the poetry that he left behind.

Lopez: So the journey is unbelievable. That first of all, that he did it. And number two, that he survived. But I thought it was a particularly interesting project to do with my undergraduates because he was their age. And so a colleague and I taught a course together in which we said, "Okay, let's fill in the rest of the story. We don't have the beginning and end. So you students have to write journal entries for him." Okay. Why did he leave? Well, he had a bad relationship. He broke up with his girlfriend, and then he has to sail then from Korea to China. Well, they're attacked by pirates. And so the students came up with all sorts of various sort of adventure story sorts of things to sort fill out the rest of the project. So we did a book. We did an app. We did an art exhibition around it. So it was a great collaborative project, and a way to think about working with colleagues and students, both undergraduates and graduates.

Lawrence: So when you talk about this, it's both the story and the teaching of the story.

Lopez: Exactly. Yeah. Because again, we have very lengthy accounts by these other more famous Chinese pilgrims. His is almost just telegraphic. I went here. The king has elephants. He wasn't telling us that much, but then he writes these very poignant poems about how lonely he is on this journey. So it was the reconstruction of it, which was the real challenge. And I think in some ways, the fun part for all of us.

Lawrence: Is it even conceivable that he could have imagined his work, his writings, his poetry being read well into the future, or would that have been completely beyond his imagination?

Lopez: I think it probably would be beyond his imagination. I think that the poetry is something that I think he probably wanted to send home, and of course it was discovered and so it has survived, but just in these fragments. And so how many other pilgrims were there, whose accounts we don't have. And so we really have to think of that all the time. How many assumptions do we make based on one text when there may have been many, many more?

Lawrence: I love your reference to this extraordinary monk who is going to go on this extraordinary journey, but he's also a 19 year old who maybe just broke up with his girlfriend, maybe had a fight with his parents. All the things that 19 year olds will do. And it's interesting that you turn to your students because frankly they've got an expertise in that area that you and I don't have anymore.

Lopez: Exactly.

Lawrence: I wonder if it's fair to say that this is something of a high watermark time for Buddhism, and I'm thinking of it in terms of the focus on meditation and mindfulness in our time, particularly thinking of the time during the pandemic, when there was a lot of need to

cope with a once in a century type event, and for many people that involved turning in, and meditation, and the mindfulness movement were an important piece of that. So I wonder how the study of Buddhism has been affected by all of that.

Lopez: Well, I mean, mindfulness was already sort of on the map and on the app prior to the pandemic. At Irvine, I was asked to give an additional lecture to the clinical psychology faculty on mindfulness. So I talked a lot about its origins, it's rather recent invention and exactly where it fits into the Buddhist world. And so in some ways, I think that Buddhism's teachings of impermanence and the possibility of suffering, it was in some ways more meaningful to us during the pandemic. I wrote an essay for the University of Michigan called The Demise of the Future Tense, that we really can't speak in the future tense with that much sort of confidence anymore and what does that mean for the way that we live? And so mindfulness is here as part of a kind of self-help movement that has already begun some years before the pandemic struck. But I think Buddhism's philosophical teachings might be of more comfort ultimately.

Lawrence: And find a relevance and a resonance in the 21st century that may be not surprising, but certainly compelling. For many people the topics that you've been studying are ones that are of great deep interest to them. For some, it is a first encounter. I wonder if you could help us with a couple of book suggestions for those who are well informed in the field, and for those for whom this is all new.

Lopez: I just read a great book by a scholar called Reiko Ohnuma at Dartmouth, also Phi Beta Kappa, I know, and it's called Ties That Bind, and it's about the role of motherhood in Buddhism, going back to the Buddha's own mother and the image of women in Buddhism. For those who are new to the topic, I would vainly suggest one of my own books, called The Story of Buddhism, which is the book that I wrote to kind of make a book version of my Intro to Buddhism class that I teach at Michigan. So that kind of covers everything for those who have not studied the topic before.

Lawrence: The relevance of an ancient set of teachings continues on into our time. Delighted to have you here with me today on Key Conversations. Thanks for joining me, Don.

Lopez: It was a great pleasure. I was delighted to be chosen as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. It was a really transformative experience for me.

Lawrence: Delighted to have you in the family and look forward to continuing our conversations.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yon Perchik. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our visiting scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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