The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya
Paul V.M. Flesher

As I got out of the jeep, I was greeted by a sight typical of Tibet and northern India. Up a canyon about a mile away appeared a steeply sloping, rounded steeple rising above the trees. The sun gleamed off its tip, where I could see a golden moon with a golden sun above it. The moon and sun topped a Buddhist shrine. This was what I had come to see, the Great Stupa of Dharmakaya. Despite its exotic character, I hadn't traveled far from home; I was near Red Feather Lakes, in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, less than 20 miles south of the Wyoming border.

The Stupa, the largest in North America, will not be complete for another year. As I approached, I could see that below the golden top was a large structure of concrete. The awesome sight of the Stupa above the trees vanished as it became clear that this was just another building site, with construction crews, cement trucks, noise and scaffolding. Although the Stupa’s unusual shape symbolizes the cosmic link between the earth, the heavens and the Buddha-fields beyond, it still has to be built. And that can only happen with the mundane construction techniques used for any ordinary building.

The Stupa in many ways symbolizes the story of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States. The shrine is on the land of the Rocky Mountain Shambala Center, a Buddhist retreat center founded after Tibetans fled the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s. Over the past half-century, the Center has become Americanized. Most of it looks like and serves a similar purpose to the Boy Scout camp down the road and the church camp over by the lakes.

And the people involved have changed too. Although the leaders, teachers and early members were from Tibet (the Stupa itself commemorates the work of the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche), the Center serves and is run by “typical” Americans. The retreat participants are also “typical” Americans. Although they come from across America for intensive instruction in Buddhist beliefs and for extended practice in Buddhist meditation, at break time, they play volleyball and ride horses.

So just as the Stupa is being built with American construction techniques, so Tibetan Buddhism in America is being transformed by American culture. Tibetans brought their sacred beliefs to America, and then, as they spread, those beliefs have been rebuilt in terms of American ingenuity, individualism, and community cooperation. Buddhism here has been anchored on American soil even as it reaches towards its higher cosmic aims.