

# Doctor brings culture, medicine to Bloomington

**By Rachel Priest**

*Connections*

Dr. Yangbum Gyal's simple office, which smells like fresh herbs in a rainforest, is where he treats patients at the Center for Wholism. A picture of the Dalai Lama, the influential leader of Tibetans, sits on his desk where he has consultations with his patients. Contrasting with his plain walls is a vibrant wall hanging of medicine Buddha, which serves as a guide for his [Tibetan medicine practice](#).

Of all the places he could have chosen to live in the United States, Gyal chose Bloomington to teach and practice medicine because of the abundant Tibetan culture and diversity that the city has.

"Bloomington has an international kind of culture," said Gyal.



One of Gyal's earliest memories of Bloomington is going to Nick's on Kirkwood one evening for a drink with a friend.

"People talked very loudly in there," Gyal said laughing. "People don't talk that loud at bars in India."

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Dr. Yangbum Gyal teaches Tibetan culture and language at Indiana University. He was born and raised in Amdo, Tibet and stayed there until 1989.

*Image by Rachel Priest*

## **An Early Beginning**

Gyal was born in 1969 in Amdo, Tibet, which was and still is under Chinese control. In 1989 he left Tibet for India, and eventually came to Bloomington, where he [teaches Tibetan culture and language at Indiana University](#) and serves as a doctor at the Center for

Wholism, a medical center that focuses on holistic medicine techniques on Walnut Street.

"I have found him to be a hard-working teacher and a knowledgeable scholar of Tibetan culture," said Elliot Sperling via email, chair of the Central Eurasian Studies program. "He has contributed to our program through his excellent knowledge of Tibetan medicine and his capability in teaching language and literature courses."

Dr. Gyal first studied to be a Tibetan medical doctor in Tibet and then at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute in Dharamalsla, India. His education began as a boy in Amdo, where school was very different than it was for his parent's generation. He compared his own training to brainwashing because the Chinese would not allow students to learn about the history or traditions of Tibet.

"I was not taught about Buddhism in school because of the doctrine of communists China," said Gyal.

When the Chinese government occupied Tibet in the 1950s, it removed aspects of Tibetan culture from everyday life by refusing to acknowledge Buddhism in schools and by tearing down many of the historic buildings in Tibet.

### **Culture Shock**

Gyal first came to Bloomington in August of 2000 to teach Tibetan language and culture in [the Central Eurasian Studies program](#). He returned to India and then came back to Bloomington in August of 2004. He will never be allowed to return to Tibet where his family still lives. If he tries to return he will be questioned and eventually arrested. He can speak to his parents over the phone, but hasn't seen them in over a decade. Gyal also has two young daughters in India that he speaks to on the phone while in the United States.

Dr. Gyal studies and practices Tibetan medicine, which is different in treatment compared to western medicine that is mainstream in the United States because the Tibetan medical system uses holistic treatments.

Tibetan medical practice is still rare in the United States compared to traditional medical practices. Dr. Gyal has written numerous papers on the benefits of Tibetan medicine, and has written the *Tibetan Medical Dietary Book: Vol. 2, The Potency and Preparation of Vegetables*. Dr. Gyal has been to Japan and India on medical tours. He has spoken in Chicago, Iowa, and at the Tibetan Cultural Center here in Bloomington on the treatments and benefits that Tibetan medical practices offer.



The Chamtse Ling Temple is the site of the Sunday Dharma service. The Dalai Lama dedicated it in 2003.  
*Image by Rachel Priest*

### **Important People**

In 1979, Professor Thurbten Norbu, along with his wife, established the Tibetan Cultural Center on Snoddy Road, on the southeastern side of Bloomington. Thorbu grew up in Tibet, but was forced into exile in 1950 during the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Retired in 1987, Norbu taught Uralic and Altaic Studies at Indiana University. His brother is the Dalai Lama.

### **Nearing The End**

Outside of work, Dr. Gyal spends his spare time working on a book about food and grains that will be published next year in India. He attends Dharma services at the [Tibetan Cultural Center](#) and plays basketball with the monks at the center.

Dr. Gyal will stay in Bloomington through 2006, and will continue to teach Tibetan culture and medicine at IU, and practice medicine at the Center for Wholism. He currently teaches every morning at IU and is at the center on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons. After he leaves Bloomington, he will return to India to practice medicine.

Dr. Gyal says that he has had many patients thank him after receiving treatment.

"They would come up to me and say 'Oh you saved my life,'" said Gyal. "That moved me a lot."

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