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## point of view

## The English Seeker and his Secret Identity

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**The English Seeker and his Secret Identity:  
Michael Dillon in India**by [Pagan Kennedy](#)

In the summer of 1958, Michael Dillon stumbled up a mountain path in Kalimpong, India, gasping in the thin air. He was a British gentleman gone to seed, with an unkempt beard, a pipe stuffed into one pocket, and a hunted manner about him. He often glanced over his shoulder, as if someone might be chasing him.

Dillon was on his way toward a retreat he'd heard about—a monastery run by an Englishman. He guessed it was the kind of place where you could become invisible. Hidden on a mountaintop, you could lose your identity and start a new life.

Finally Dillon rounded a corner and spotted a dormitory perched on the side of a cliff. A yellow-robed Englishman stood on the building's porch; with a shaved head and huge horn-rimmed glasses, he resembled a stern owl. The man waved and welcomed Dillon to come in. Speaking with the accent of a working-class Londoner, he introduced himself as Sangharakshita [See Note 1 below]. Once he'd had another name, an English name, but he'd dropped it when he was ordained as a Theravada monk.

By way of explaining his own situation, Dillon reached into a pocket, fished out a newspaper clipping, and handed it to the strange little yellow-robed man.

The monk peered through his thick glasses and read the gossip column item. It concerned a British woman, Laura Dillon, who had changed her sex. She had transformed—legally and medically—into a man, and was now living as a doctor named Michael Dillon. As a male, Dillon stood to inherit an estate and a title: someday, he would become the ninth baronet of Lismullen.

Sangharakshita handed the newsprint back, and the two of them exchanged a long, significant look. This was a bombshell.

Five years before, Christine Jorgensen's sex change had become the number-one news story in America; when Jorgensen appeared on TV bedecked in blonde curls and designer gowns, the public understood that it was possible to metamorphose from man to woman. But few people—even top doctors—knew that the human body could go the other way, too.

Dillon had been the first person ever to undergo a medical transformation from female to male. He was a world-wide tabloid story waiting to happen—if the journalists ever managed to find him.

A few weeks ago, they had discovered Dillon in Baltimore, where he was working as a ship's doctor. A gaggle of newshounds had descended upon him with their notepads and flashbulbs, lobbing questions, threatening to tear off his clothes and see the evidence of his sex change. And so Dillon had fled to India, to the most out-of-the-way spot he could find.

Within the next few days at the monastery, Dillon revealed far more to the monk, spilling some of his closest-held secrets. I know this because Sangharakshita, who is now in his 80s, recounted his side of the story for me.

During their first days together, Dillon confided that he had "an artificial penis, constructed out of skin taken from different parts of his body," according to Sangharakshita. "He was very proud of this organ, and offered to show it to me, but I declined the offer. He also told me that he was taking hormone tablets to promote the growth of facial hair and to suppress menstruation."



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In his own writings from the 1950s and 1960s, Dillon claims that Sangharakshita promised never to repeat such confidences to anyone. "I trusted him because he was both a fellow Englishman and a monk."

Sangharakshita, for his part, insists that he never made any such promise. After all, he was not a Catholic priest, obliged to hear confessions under a seal of secrecy; he had no professional obligation to protect Dillon.

Right from the beginning, the two men misunderstood each other completely.

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That night, Dillon pulled out his pipe and stood on the veranda. Instead of lighting up, he hurled it out into the darkness, where it tumbled into the abyss of the valley. In the following days, he would hurl his name away too—the "Michael" that he'd picked for himself, and the "Dillon" that had linked him to generations of ancestors. He asked Sangharakshita to rename him—not so much for spiritual reasons as practical ones. He needed to lose his English identity.

So Dillon became Jivaka—a name inspired by the doctor who had tended the Buddha. Weeks or months later, to complete his disappearing act, Dillon shaved his beard. He removed every last piece of evidence that would mark him as that "sex change" in that newspaper clipping; and in the process, he'd had to strip away all the props that he'd adopted years before to help establish his male identity: the pipe, the facial hair, the Michael. Jivaka would be another sort of person entirely.

He was a man in exile, desperate to find someone or something to build his new life around. For now, he only had Sangharakshita, who included him in morning rituals, showed him how to meditate, and assigned him chores.

Sangharakshita happened to be finishing up a book just then, a memoir that would explain how he'd started as a poor boy in London and ended up running a monastery in India. Dillon became his secretary. Even though he'd earned degrees from Oxford and Trinity, Dillon performed this menial work without complaint. He was eager to please his new teacher. He'd begun referring to Sangharakshita as his "guru" and slavishly followed his orders.

During those long, slow afternoons at Kalimpong, while typing drafts for the monk, Dillon got an idea: He decided to write his *own* autobiography. In his own manuscript, he struggled to make sense of all that had happened to him, pouring out the very secrets that he'd come to India in order to protect. Day after day, the pile of delicate onion-skin pages grew taller; inside those pages, Dillon was able to reinvent and re-imagine the life he'd just escaped; he lavished special attention on describing his childhood as an aristocratic girl in a sea-side town.

When Dillon stepped away from the desk, he remained a child of sorts. His guru expected him to obey orders, eat whatever he was served, and sleep where he was given a bedroll.

Soon the two men had forged an intimate and strange relationship. Dillon began to call his guru "Daddy"—an endearment that Sangharakshita apparently tolerated. "I did not really like [it], especially as he was ten years older than me," according to Sangharakshita. But he didn't tell Dillon to stop.

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After a few months, Sangharakshita announced that he would spend the winter traveling around India. While he was gone, Dillon would stay in a guesthouse in Samath, under the auspices of monks who, like Sangharakshita, practiced Theravada Buddhism.

In Samath, Dillon blossomed; he devoured books on Buddhism and wrote articles for small journals, publishing under the name "Jivaka." Now, Buddhism meant more to him than just a hiding place; it had become a refuge from his mental pain. Most of all, he dreamed of belonging to a community of Buddhist monks; after all, he'd spent most of his life fleeing from place to place, friendless. That winter, he took vows as a novice in the Theravada tradition.

When spring came, Dillon returned to Kalimpong to resume his life as Sangharakshita's protégé. He had been looking forward to settling into his old room at the monastery, particularly now that he wore the robe of a novice. If he hewed to his vows for a year or so, he might be allowed to take the higher ordination and become a full-fledged monk. He expected Sangharakshita would recognize him as someone who could one day become an equal.

The guru did not. As Sangharakshita saw it, Dillon was a woman, and therefore completely unfit to take vows in the male community. To this day, Sangharakshita believes that a sex change does nothing to alter an individual's identity. "Jivaka was not able to beget a child [as a man]. To my mind it is this factor that determines the gender to which one belongs," he told me, via email.

Dillon, for his part, felt so ill-used by his guru that after a few months

he decided to leave the monastery and seek his fortunes elsewhere. And so, in the fall of 1959, he packed up his meager belongings and bid goodbye.

Dillon returned again to the hostel in Samath, to study and meditate—and to contemplate how he might bend the rules and become a monk. He'd discovered a law in the Buddhist code that alarmed him: anyone who belonged to the "third sex" could not be ordained. It's not clear what the 2,500-year-old religious codes meant by the term "third sex"—but Dillon was pretty sure it applied to him. Eventually, he worked up his nerve and approached Theravada leaders in Samath, confessing his secret. The leaders conferred and gave him an answer: Dillon could remain a novice but could not become a full-fledged monk.

He was devastated. For the rest of his life, he would denounce the Theravada tradition as rigid and hierarchical. It was then that he resolved to switch his affiliation and throw his lot in with the Tibetans.

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That year, 1959, Tibet was on everyone's mind. China had invaded the country and installed its own government. Tibet's most talented leaders—who were now in danger of being jailed or killed—trekked over the Himalayas and scattered across India.

In Samath, Dillon lived surrounded by refugees. It was the Tibetans of the Gelugpa sect, or "yellow hats," who most struck a chord with him. They had been Tibet's philosophers and bookworms. And now they had flooded into town to eke out an existence, arriving dizzy with grief and hunger.

He guessed they would be sympathetic to him, for he was as much an exile as they were. Through a translator, he asked Denma Locho Rinpoche—an eminent Tibetan monk—about his "third sex" dilemma. As Dillon had expected, the Rinpoche agreed to ordain him, third sex or no. They set a date for the ceremony.

To make sure everything was on the up-and-up, Dillon wrote a letter to Sangharakshita, asking him to come to Samath to act as an English-to-Hindi translator and to preside at the ceremony. Somehow, in the months since he'd left Kalimpong, Dillon had managed to convince himself that Sangharakshita—his "Daddy"—would be proud of him.

The reply was hardly what Dillon had expected. Sangharakshita fired back a letter, in triplicate, to the Rinpoche and other leaders in Samath. The letter revealed Jivaka's Western name and spilled details of the sex-change operation. According to Dillon, it included many false accusations as well.

Nowadays, Sangharakshita still believes that he had no choice but to write the letter. Dillon intended to break monastic law, and Sangharakshita refused to be a party to that.

One Saturday morning, the Rinpoche handed Dillon the letter from Sangharakshita and explained (through a translator) that the ordination was off. It would be too politically dangerous right now to go ahead with the ceremony. Dillon was devastated.

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But all was not lost. Dillon had been lucky to strike up a friendship with Professor Herbert V. Guenther, then in residence at nearby Sanskrit University and an expert in Tibetan traditions. On a sweltering day in November 1959, Dillon arrived at Guenther's office for lunch. That afternoon, the professor spun a tale about a fabled monastery called Rizong.

It was located in Ladakh, a country on the Tibetan border. High up in the Himalayas, in an aerie that was nearly impossible to reach, the monks of Rizong practiced Tibetan Buddhism in its most pure and punishing form, adhering rigidly to rules set down centuries before.

Guenther had never been to this monastery; at that time, it would have seemed an impossible destination; India controlled Ladakh and kept the borders tightly sealed from their rivals, the Chinese. Certainly, no Englishman would be welcome there. Rather, Guenther offered up Rizong as a fable, a vision of monastic Buddhism taken to its furthest extreme. Dillon accepted the story in that spirit—Rizong, like Tibet itself, seemed as much an idea as it was an actual place.

A few months later, Dillon managed to wrangle a meeting with Kushok Bakula, a prince in the royal family of Ladakh, where Rizong monastery was located. Dillon poured out his woes to the prince and was enormously comforted when Kushok Bakula "gave me a look of compassion which I will never forget."

The prince assured Dillon that he could one day be ordained as a full-fledged monk. But until the controversy blew over, Dillon would only be allowed to take vows as a novice in the Tibetan tradition. (While there was a ban against monks who belonged to the "third sex," no such ban existed for novices.) Dillon would be able to enter a monastery in Ladakh, but only if he would inhabit the lowest rank, on par with the 10-year-old boys. Kushok Bakula had picked out a monastery where Dillon would be sent: by chance, it happened to be

Rizong, the famous monastery of fruit trees and punishments.

He arrived at the monastery without any money, not even a decent pair of shoes. He would stay for three months—in these tumble-down buildings set amid the lunar landscape of a Himalayan mountaintop—until his travel permit ran out. Dillon insisted that he should be treated like any other novice who came to the monastery, no concessions for his white skin or advanced age. He would take on exactly the same duties that the boys did, which turned out to be round-the-clock cooking and cleaning in Rizong's filthy kitchen.

The staff woke before dawn and worked until nightfall, but their day was punctuated with pranks, good-humored teasing and laughter. They horsed around, dumping each other in the firewood box. "No one minded; no one's dignity was hurt," not even Dillon who had once been prickly and reserved.

One time, he put his hand out to balance himself on what he thought was a wall—it turned out to be a loose piece of wood paneling. In a Charlie Chaplin-like pratfall, he leaned vertiginously, the wall leaning with him. For a moment the busy kitchen turned into a screwball comedy, and then Dillon and the wall crashed to the floor. There was "great merriment at my expense. But the laughter was so spontaneous and good-natured that I felt no embarrassment and joined in it. In those early days I was always doing something that amused my companions."

For the first time in his life, Dillon could laugh at himself; something had loosened inside him; some channel to joy had opened up.

The old Michael Dillon had melted away, and a new man, the English novice—white skin gone gray with soot—had taken his place. The greatest surprise of all was this: starved, overworked, and filthy, Dillon had finally stumbled across a fragile kind of happiness.

The three months flew by; Dillon decided Rizong was his true home, and wanted nothing more than to stay. But when his permit ran out, he had to leave or face prison. If the ceasefire between India and China continued through the spring, Dillon hoped to return to Ladakh then.

He imagined a future in which he could belong to this warren of tiny doorways and halls, with its chink-hole windows that winked with views of blue mountains, and to these men and boys he'd come to love. And he was thrilled with a promise that the head of Rizong had made to him: When Dillon returned, he would take vows as a monk and become a ranking member of the community.

Soon, he would make his literary debut in England under the name Lobzang Jivaka, publishing his own version of *The Life of Mlerapa*, the story of Tibet's famous saint. He hoped no one in England would guess his former identity. "I do not wish my Western name known. I am heir to a title and have no desire for publicity. Only six people know where I am or what I am doing," he wrote to editor Simon Young, to whom he also refused to reveal his legal name.

With his book finished, he poured out the first few chapters of another book in a mere matter of weeks. This one told his adventures in Rizong. Titled *Imji Getsul (English Novice)*, the book is more a love story than anything, a paean to the home he'd found and then lost. He sent three chapters to his agent in London, and Routledge snapped up the tale written by the mysterious Lobzang Jivaka.

Dillon banged out the rest of *Imji Getsul* in the last weeks of 1960, while he lived in Samath; in order to obscure his identity, he had to pepper it with fabrications when he described his "boyhood" and his experiences as an "Oxford man." It pained Dillon terribly to tell such lies, but he felt he had no other choice.

That spring, he mounted a trip to Kashmir to visit Kushok Bakula—the prince who had helped him before—hoping to obtain a travel permit so he could return to Rizong. The plan failed. The Indian officials turned down Dillon's application. War was brewing in Ladakh and Western travelers were not welcome.

The next spring, both *The Life of Mlerapa* and *Imji Getsul* appeared in British bookstores, and Dillon braced himself for trouble. Surely, some reader would wonder about the secret identity of Lobzang Jivaka and make inquiries. He decided he could no longer bear to sit around waiting for the press to expose him, to lie about his past, and scuttle around with secrets. He would come clean, no matter what the cost.

On May 1, 1962—his 47th birthday—Dillon hunt-and-pecked on a borrowed typewriter in Samath. He had decided to publish the autobiographical manuscript that he had started years before. The manuscript told the story of Laura Dillon and her disgust with dresses, her grinding desire to be male, the testosterone that morphed her body, and endless surgeries to get a penis.

He typed "by Michael Dillon" on the cover sheet, and then hit the

carriage return and—clack, clack, clack—added "Lobzang Jivaka" underneath. He would write under both his names. No one could threaten him now. No tabloid could get the scoop. He had lifted the mask himself. When the book came out, he would belong to a benighted and despised minority. But he would also live more authentically, more freely, than he'd ever dared to before. He packaged up the pages in an envelope and sent it to his London agent.

Days later, Dillon headed to Kashmir to renew his efforts to enter Ladakh; once again, he would try to find a way into Rizong. But he never made it there. He succumbed to illness during a stopover at a hostel. No one seemed able to say what type of sickness had caused the death. According to Sangharakshita, a rumor circulated that Dillon had been poisoned, but there was no solid proof. The details of his death remain an open question.

His body was cremated and the ashes scattered in the Himalayas. His autobiography, still unpublished, sits in deep storage in a warehouse in London.

#### Notes

**Note 1:** Sangharakshita went on to found a British community called Friends of the Western Buddhist Order; the group now has centers in over a dozen countries worldwide.

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#### About Pagan Kennedy

Pagan Kennedy has published seven books and has written for the *New York Times* magazine, the *Boston Globe* magazine, the *Village Voice*, *Details*, the *Utne Reader*, and *Ms.* magazine. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.



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