FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Body, Mind & Spirit

Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship
Alexander Berzin
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Most westerners that convert to Buddhism find the profound logic and philosophy of the religion great fuel for their faith. That personal salvation and happiness is within one's own locus of control appeals to the western mind. Converts generally want to leave behind the messy devotion and blind faith required of believers of their native creeds. It is then evident why many western practitioners, when first delving into the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Guru Yoga, experience the same reactions that drove them from the western religions in the first place.

The practice of Guru Yoga requires an aspirant to attempt to perceive his or her spiritual teacher as a fully enlightened Buddha. To some, having to project positive qualities onto someone who may not possess them may feel a bit too close to the denial present in the family system that caused the wounds they are trying to heal through spiritual practice. Berzin points out that it is not the practice itself that causes the reluctance many westerners have, but the filters through which the practice is seen. It is evident then that, though many westerners have left their religions behind, they have not left behind the filters through which they see religion. For instance, the Tibetan term tenpa has often been translated in many Guru Yoga texts as devotion, a rendering that for westerners may conjure an image of the blind adoration of an aloof or punitive patriarchal deity. The term in the Tibetan worldview signifies the feeling that arises when one clearly recognizes a teacher's innate good qualities and that in turn inspires the confidence that he can help acquire those very same qualities.

Alternatively, many new practitioners, so charmed by the Tibetan mythos, have rushed into relationships with lamaist monks prematurely without properly checking their qualifications. When their gurus fall from their pedestals, students wind up feeling disenchanted, betrayed, and even hostile. Even before James Hilton popularized the mystique of the Land of Snows in his novel Lost Horizons, westerners have relished their romantic, and largely inaccurate, notions about Tibetan culture and religion.

Berzin's book not only instructs how to prudently examine potential teachers, but he also presents a fine guidebook through which to understand Tibetan culture. It can then be learned what is realistic to expect from spiritual practices, how to scrutinize potential teachers, and how to prevent misunderstandings caused by innocuous, cultural differences with present teachers. Berzin's new publication, though not easily digested by beginners, will prove indispensable to new, albeit serious, practitioners. (July

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