



Within the White Cloud: Life and Work of Lama Govinda

Just as a white summer-cloud, in harmony with heaven and earth, freely floats in the blue sky from horizon to horizon, following the breath of the atmosphere—in the same way the pilgrim abandons himself to the breath of the greater life that wells up from the depth of his being and leads him beyond the farthest horizons to an aim which is already present within him, though yet hidden from his sight.

—Lama Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*¹

Over two thousand five hundred years have passed since the Buddha Shakyamuni turned the Wheel of the Dharma in the Deer Park at Sarnath. For centuries, the teachings spread throughout Asia, evolving into many distinct traditions in India, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and elsewhere. In the last several decades, facilitated by mass communication, jet-age travel, globalization, and the World Wide Web, the Buddha Dharma has become a planetary force. This dynamic process has been further enriched

by the diaspora of the Tibetan people, as well as the westward migration of many other Asian ethnic groups.

The story of how all of this happened is compelling and has many dimensions. The life and work of Lama Anagarika Govinda and his wife, Li Gotami, are inextricably woven into multiple dimensions of that story.

Over thirteen hundred years have passed since Padmasambhava, the Precious Guru, prophesized that “when the iron bird flies and the horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the world, and the Dharma will come to the land of the red men.”² In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet, fulfilling that prophecy. To underscore the poignancy of the prophecy’s fulfillment, the Dalai Lama met with three Hopi elders on his first tour of North America in 1979. One of them, Grandfather David, said, “Welcome home.”

Of course, although dramatic, profoundly inspiring, and of sweeping cultural and geopolitical importance, the Dalai Lama’s journey into exile was not the first visit of a Dharma emissary to the West. The great Japanese Zen abbot Soyen Shaku, the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala, and others traveled to the United States for the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.³ And in the 1960s and 1970s, numerous Buddhist teachers from Tibet (e.g. Chögyam Trungpa), Korea (Dr. Seo), Japan (Suzuki-roshi), Burma and India (Rina Sircar), and elsewhere arrived in the West.

But the story is even richer and more intricately woven, for it is cross-threaded with all those Western seekers—from Theosophical Society founders H. P. Blavastky and Colonel H. S. Olcott to rogue authors, scholars, and artists like W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Nicholas Roerich, Alexandra David-Neel, and yes, the man who would come to be known as Lama Govinda. Overcoming peril and personal hardships, these brave men and women brought the Eastern wisdom back to a parched spiritual landscape.

The triumphs and trials of many beings, known and unknown, from both the East and the West, have established the Buddha Dharma as a planetary force. The echoes of many heartbeats can be heard within deep meditation on the Buddha Dharma. Each one of those heartbeats was a “Turning of the Wheel.”

In the 1800s, traveling in the Indian Ocean, Soyen Shaku voyaged on deck because he could not afford cabin passage. Exposed to the heat of the sun, the salt wind, and the rain, without bread or water, he sat motionless while swarms of mosquitoes like black clouds descended on him. Their noise was deafening. He reminded himself of the old legends of the great Bodhisattvas who were willing to offer their limbs for the sake of alleviating suffering and spreading the teachings:

Repeating such thoughts again and again, I took off my cloth and became stark naked. I sat crossed legged upon the deck, then hurried into the Samadhi which the scriptures call “the Waveless Great Sea.” In the beginning I still noticed the hum of the mosquitoes, but as time advanced, I forgot the heat, the hunger and thirst, and at last forgot the mosquitoes.⁴

In March 1959, Tibetans were massing outside the palace in Lhasa chanting, “The Chinese must go! Leave Tibet to the Tibetans!” The Red Army fired mortar rounds and “invited” the young Dalai Lama to an army post three kilometers away. Instead the Dalai Lama took off his maroon monk’s robes, donned the garb of a Tibetan soldier with a fur cap on his head and a rifle slung over his shoulder, and trekked with thirty-seven companions across the Himalayas for thirteen days to India.⁵

These anecdotes of courage and equanimity have numerous parallels in the adventures of Westerners like Lama Govinda. He and Li Gotami, like the Dalai Lama, though the Red Army was not

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pursuing them, had to traverse the Himalayas under most unfavorable circumstances. In the late 1940s, struggling to record as much as they could at the ruins of the ancient city of Tsaparang, Govinda and Gotami stayed too long. They had to fold their “frozen tents with numb fingers,” and Govinda had to “break the icicles from his beard.” The two passes that offered the best routes out were blocked by heavy snows, so they had to take the much more dangerous option of walking down the course of a frozen river:

Engaging a crowd of twenty villagers to carry everything, the Govindas set off for the gorge, an extremely deep (several thousand feet) and narrow defile that off-season provided no room for trails. . . . Their descent into the Langchen-Khambab gorge down a series of sand-falls was abrupt and irrevocable. “We had to sit and slip down the hillside to the river’s bank,” Li explained. . . . Slipping and slithering, they slowly managed the watercourse. At times the ice was too thin, they took to the hillsides, a dangerous situation since they were often sheer. But Li’s descriptions of the ice during these times makes the side trips understandable. “Here and there sudden and terrifying gaps appeared in the ice, down which we saw the dark, swirling, swiftly flowing waters. . . .” Boulders also crashed down among them without warning.⁶

And, like Soyen Shaku, Govinda and Li Gotami had some difficult sea voyages, as Govinda relates in this late 1960s’ letter from Burma to his friend Bob Shapiro, a Chicago businessman:

You would probably think that we had reached Calcutta by now, but nothing of the sort! We turned East again and went to Rangoon instead. The heat here is almost unbearable. And since our Java Mail [the ship they had passage on] is not air-conditioned, it is impossible to be in the cabin even for a few minutes, and

we are compelled to sleep on deck, shifting from one corner to another in order to get a little fresh air. One day after Singapore, the kitchen burned out (due to an electrical fire), and for about 10 days no warm meals could be served. In Madras, we had to eat in restaurants in the city and everybody got diarrhea. So we gave up eating altogether. Only now we begin to recover.⁷

Even today, early in the twenty-first century, the saga of Lama Govinda is rich in lessons and inspiration, which glisten with a magical newness and crackle with a crisp relevance.

In his introduction to the 2005 republication of Govinda's autobiographical *The Way of the White Clouds*, Robert Thurman of Columbia University, a distinguished Buddhist scholar in his own right, ranks Govinda as "one of the West's greatest minds of the twentieth century" and equates him with "Einstein, Heisenberg, Wittgenstein, Solzhenitsyn, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama."⁸

Consider this introduction one thread in a celebration of Govinda's extraordinary life and work.

COMPASS READINGS

Very little has been written about the life of Lama Govinda. Although *The Way of the White Clouds* is autobiographical, it concentrates on the narrative of Govinda's journeys in the East, and its insights into other aspects of his life are parenthetical. Almost everything we know about his early life, and much of what we know about his later years, we owe to Ken Winkler and his *A Thousand Journeys: The Biography of Lama Anagarika Govinda*.

Here is a brief narrative woven together from various sources, including the archives of the Human Dimensions Institute, the San Francisco lodge of the Theosophical Society, Winkler's biography,

and Govinda's own writings. The timeline reveals three great movements in Govinda's life: the first movement was an *away from* and *toward*, the second movement was an *inward* and *upward*, the third movement was *outward* and *outpouring*. These three movements can also be related to the compass: the first was southward, the second eastward and northward, and the third westward.

In a powerful way, the life of Govinda was both an archetypal expression of the spiritual path and a global circumambulation.

A REMARKABLE ENCOUNTER

In 1962 Huston Smith, the renowned author of *The Religions of Man*, was on his way back to the United States after a lecture tour of Australian universities. He stopped off in Bangkok, Thailand, to visit another respected writer, John Blofeld, whose *Zen Teachings of Huang Po and Hui Hai* had recently been published. Smith wanted to find out more about Zen and was surprised to learn that Blofeld's personal practice flowed from the Tibetan tradition. By his own admission, Smith knew nothing of the Tibetan teachings: "That the word 'Tibet' does not appear in the index of my *Religions of Man*, published in 1958, shows how much my world has changed since then." He resolved to correct the omission on his next academic leave. Two years later, he wrote Blofeld to ask him where to go, and was referred to two monasteries and to a European expatriate named Lama Govinda.

Smith's journal entries from his October 1964 encounter with Govinda, in the foothills of the Himalayas, offer a wonderful demarcation point for our journey into the life and work of this remarkable man: