



Excerpt from the Introduction
Within the White Cloud: Life and Work of Lama Govinda
The Lost Teachings of Lama Govinda
Living Wisdom from a Modern Tibetan Master
Richard Power, Editor
Foreword by Lama Surya Das

“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, *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 process also 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.

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Consider this one thread.

Over one thousand three hundred years have passed since Padma Sambhava, 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.”ⁱⁱ

In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet, fulfilling that prophecy.

Indeed, to underscore the poignancy of the prophecy’s fulfillment, on his first tour of North America in 1979, the Dalai Lama met with three Hopi elders. 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 US for the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.ⁱⁱⁱ And in the 1960s and 1970s, numerous Buddhist teachers from Tibet (e.g, Chogyam Trungpa), Korea (e.g., Dr. Seo), Japan (Suzuki-Roshi), Burma and India (e.g., Rina Sircar) and elsewhere arrived in the West.

But there is even more richness and intricacy in the weaving of the story, there is the cross-threading of 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-Neal, 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.

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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.

Within deep meditation on the Buddha Dharma, many the echoes of many heartbeats can be heard. 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 to buy 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 cloths and became stark naked. I sat crossed legged upon the deck, then hurried into the Samadhi 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.”^{iv}

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

These anecdotes of courage and equanimity have numerous corollaries in the adventures of Westerners like Lama Govinda and Li Gotami.

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.” Govinda had to “break the icicles from his beard.” The two passes which offered the best routes out were blocked by the heavy snows.

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...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...”^{vi}

And in the late 1960s, Govinda wrote a 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...”^{vii}

Even today, in early the 21st 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 re-publication of Govinda’s autobiographical *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

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