



Lama Govinda at Kesar Deva in Almora

Lama Govinda

by Yvonne Rand

Lama Anagarika Govinda, born as Ernst Lothar Hoffman on 17 May 1898 in Waldheim, Saxonia, Germany, died on 14 January 1985 at his home in Mill Valley, California. Over the past 18 years Lama and his wife, Li Gotami Govinda, have been part of the life of Zen Center, initially through Lama's books on Buddhism, later from visits and lectures at Tassajara and at Green Gulch Farm. In 1975, under the 'umbrella' of Zen Center, the Govindas began their residence here in America. Lama came to feel, at the end of his life, that much as he loved his life in Almora, in the lower levels of the Indian Himalayas, he had more of an audience here in America, for his life-long interest in, devotion to, and work within the Buddhist tradition. He once told me that he actually could see that his thinking was more straightforward and simple and clear in English than was the case when he wrote in German. And in the latter part of his life he would write his essays in English and then translate them into German for his many students in Europe.

When I sit down to write a remembrance of Lama Govinda I am struck most clearly by the quality of sweetness and steady devotion and concentration which he brought to his study and practice of the Buddha's way. And in the past weeks, listening again to tapes of him talking about his early study of meditation and of Buddhist sutras I am struck by how these qualities seem to have marked his life from an early age.

Lama Govinda's mother died when he was three years old. At that time, he and his elder brother went to live with his mother's elder sister. He grew up in a family which daily conversed in three languages: Spanish, French, and German, and which had a range of life experience in South America, England, and Europe. He was sent to a small rather famous boarding school at the age of six, and he seems to have had a classical German schooling from that point on. By the time he was sixteen years old he had already cultivated a serious interest in religion and had embarked on a particular study of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. He became clearly and consciously a Buddhist and by the time he was eighteen he had written his first book on Buddhism.

During the first World War he was drafted into the German army and sent off to the Italian front, where he contracted tuberculosis. From that time on he found the cold climate of Germany too difficult for his weak constitution. By the time he was nineteen or twenty he had moved to Capri for the climate and for his health. He lived in Capri for about ten years. Before he went to Capri he had spent some time at the University at Freiberg studying archeology, architecture, and philosophy. He found the program in architecture too 'technical' for his tastes and made philosophy his primary study. His long interest in architecture however abided, as can be seen in his later interest in and study of Buddhist stupas. When he first went to live in Capri he did research work in Sardinia for the Archeological Institute in Rome. He was particularly attracted by the large conical buildings which date from the megalithic age — earlier than the pyramids — called nuragi. He subsequently became a professor at the Berlitz school on Capri and, after a year or so, when the director suddenly died, Lama became the director of the school. He described this time in his life as a busy one. He lived at the top of the mountain and in order to get to the port at the base of the mountain he could take a funicular or walk. "I ran down, since I liked walking and I could then save the cost of riding on the funicular." During this time he was also studying at the University at Naples, to which the King of Siam had donated a complete set of the Siamese Buddhist Canon. Virtually no one studied these texts because of the difficulty with language. But Lama learned Siamese in order to study the Buddhist Sutras and during the years in Capri he determined to read a sutra every week. And it was from the sutras that he learned to meditate.

"At this time there were not many books on Buddhism and the ones that there were were quite expensive. So I was glad for the opportunity to study the Buddhist Canon at the University in Naples. I found there were very clear instructions on how to meditate. The Buddha gives very clear instructions and I followed these instructions."

At the top of the mountain where Lama lived he found a huge cave. It opened to the sea and was big enough so that a large cathedral could have been built in it. "A path led to the upper edge of the cave. And this became my meditation cave. There was nothing before me but the huge expanse of the sea. Far below there was a small road which skirted the rocks at the base of the mountain and which ringed the island of Capri. It was like a map from where I sat in the cave." So for ten years Lama studied and practiced Buddhism in this way. He had always had a desire to join the Buddhist Sangha in India, but it seemed like a remote possibility, off in the future, for he was quite poor.

Eventually he was able to save enough money to buy a ticket to Ceylon where he spent some years in a monastery on an island in a lagoon. When the tropical heat of the lower realm finally became too difficult for him, he moved to a tea plantation which a friend owned in the highlands. He built a house there. "But when I finished the house — a lovely house with two bedrooms and a meditation room and a studio — I went to India and I never went back. I presented the house to a Buddhist nun who lived in it until she died." It was at this time in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) that Lama took the name "Govinda" under the guidance of the Venerable Mahathera Nyanatiloka and practiced as a Brahmachari and wore white. During his visit to the All India Buddhist Conference in Darjeeling he met his guru, Tomo Geshe Rinpoche (Lama Ngawang Kolsang). From this first meeting he remained in India, living in Ghoom, Darjeeling District, earning his livelihood by lecturing at the University of Shantiniketan and later at the University in Allahabad as well as Patna University. In addition to his Tibetan studies he started an expedition to Western Tibet, via Ladakh, with the famous Buddhist and scholar Rahula Sanskrit-yayana in 1933. And upon his return from the expedition he founded the Arya Maitreya Mandala. His intention was that the members of this order would create a society of Buddhists whose members would look not only backwards but would also strive for a Buddhism related to the times and circumstances in which they were living, and with an open and active attention towards the future symbolized by the Buddha of the future, Maitreya.

Two years later, Lama Govinda established the International Buddhist University Association to sponsor a Buddhist University at Sarnath, which was to be a part of the Hindu University at Benares. To expand the immediate work for Buddhist students, Lama Govinda founded the "International Buddhist Academy Association" and started with lectures in Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese and Indian languages to promote basic studies in Buddhism. At the same time, he remained active as an artist and held many exhibitions in India, sponsored by men such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose.

An expedition to Western Tibet was planned before World War II, but due to the outbreak of war these plans were abandoned. In 1940, Lama Govinda was the guide for the Chinese Goodwill Mission, led by the last Patriarch of Chinese Buddhism (Chitai Shu). One year later (1942) he was illegally arrested and placed in a detention camp at Ahmednagar and later at Deradhun for a total of five years, in spite of his British passport. He was detained because of his acquaintance with the leaders of the independence movements. The arrest occurred on the same day that leaders of the Indian International Congress were arrested, August 8, 1942 at 5:00 a.m. He was released the same day as Nehru. In the detention camp he suffered at the hands of certain German Nazis so that he, as well as the German born Bhikkhu Nyanaponika, were shifted to the anti-fascist camp. It was here that Lama Govinda and Bhikkhu Nyanaponika did their studies in early Mahayana and continued their Sanskrit studies. When India became free in 1947, Lama Govinda became an Indian National.

In that same year, 1947, he revived preparations for his expedition to Tibet and married Li Gotami, an art student who had just received her diploma from Rabindranath Tagore's International University at Shantiniketan. She was fully trained in Indian and Tibetan painting techniques, and became a well-known pupil of Abanindranath Tagore, and Nandalal Bose. Lama Govinda and Li originally met in

1934 at Shantiniketan where he was teaching philosophy, French, and Buddhist psychology.

They went on to Gyantse where they waited for several months for the Dalai Lama's return to Lhasa in order to receive their passports for Western Tibet. During their wait they accomplished a lot of artistic work. Using his Mala, Lama Govinda secretly took the full measure of the famous Kumbum of Gyantse. Returning to India in order to make the necessary preparations in Calcutta, he began the second part of the expedition (in 1948) across the Shipki Pass into Western Tibet. Passing the Manasarovar lake and Kailash they finally arrived at Tasaparang via Tholing where they accomplished much work in the Red and White temples which were full of Buddhist paintings and frescoes.

Following this expedition in 1949, "*The Illustrated Weekly of India*", which had sponsored the expedition, published several articles and a portion of Li's "Life of the Buddha Series" which consisted of thirty-two panels in its completed form. Several of these paintings now stand in the Tibetan Hall of the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay.

In the years that followed, Lama Govinda wrote his most famous works, beginning with his fundamental book, *The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, first published in German in 1959, in English in 1960, and then translated into more than six languages. This book was followed by a reprint of *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy*, (1962) originally published in 1938 at Allahabad when Lama Govinda was a guest-lecturer at Patna University upon the reference of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore had introduced him to several Indian Universities and considered him as a younger brother. This was followed by his essays and poems in a



Alan Watts and Lama Govinda

work entitled *Mandala* published in German. His famous book, *The Way of the White Clouds*, recounting his expedition to Western Tibet with Li Gotami in 1947-49, was published in English in 1966 and a year later in German, and now appears in many languages.

In 1952, Lama Govinda and Anila Li Gotami Govinda founded the Western Order of the Arya Maitreya Mandala in Sanchi. Since then the order has become the center for Lama Govinda's teachings.

In 1960 Lama Govinda went to Europe to deliver lectures in several European countries, including several radio broadcasts. He met many scientists who sponsored his movement. His first trip to Europe was to a conference of religions in Venice. In the 60's and 70's the Govindas returned several times to Europe and traveled to America, Japan, and several other Asian countries, as well as to South America. During this period he wrote several books, including: *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*, *The Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa*, *The Inner Structure of the I Ching*, and his last book, published in Germany, *Buddhist Reflections*, plus many articles appearing in journals and in other books. He left an unpublished manuscript for a forthcoming book which will be published in Germany under the auspices of the Arya Maitreya Mandala.

The Govindas first came to the United States in 1968 and lectured at various universities and to various groups including Esalen Institute, the Theosophical Society, Oasis, The Alan Watts Society for Comparative Philosophy, Southern Methodist University (where Lama Govinda was a guest lecturer for two semesters), Chapman College and others. He also lectured in California at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley and at Zen Center in San Francisco and at Green Gulch Farm.

In 1977 two large exhibitions of both Lama Govinda's and Li Gotami's work took place in Basel, Switzerland, and Bonn, Germany. At the same time they lectured in Frankfurt and several other German cities. They then returned to America to live in the San Francisco Bay area. In 1984 an exhibition of the entire work of Lama Govinda was shown in the town hall of Stuttgart, where the whole spectrum of Lama's genius became evident: as a religious teacher, as a scientist in archaeology, art history, psychology, Buddhism, and linguistic studies, and as an artist. The exhibition was a great success.

In recent years Lama Govinda concentrated his attention and energies on his book, *The Inner Structure of the I Ching*. The book was the culmination of over thirty years' study and work with the *I Ching*. During this time Lama lectured and wrote, creating the basis of the meditational and spiritual practice of his order. He wrote of what he felt was essential in his last book, *Buddhist Reflections*, and in his book to be published posthumously in German about the dynamic nature of Buddhism.

The Venerable Lama Anagarika Govinda passed away peacefully and unexpectedly on 14 January 1985 at his home in Mill Valley, California. He is survived by his wife, Anila (Shakya Dolma) Li Gotami Govinda.

We remember his great inspiration and are grateful for his example and teaching in person and in his writing.