



A Wayward Way to Buddhist Spirituality

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Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure. By Frederick Lenz. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995. ISBN 0-446-52034-9. 236 pp. Hardcover, \$14.95.

Many years ago I wrote to a Tibetan scholar, Nawang Tsering, for information about a mysterious manuscript that was allegedly kept at the Hemis Gompa Buddhist Monastery in Ladakh—a region north of the India (now part of Kashmir). The manuscript told about the wanderings and teachings of a man named “St. Issa,” who spent his youth in India and Tibet. At age 30 this man returned to his native Israel to preach for several years only to be crucified. He was supposedly Jesus, who began the Christian religion. Tsering graciously researched the story for me with his friend who was both a monk and a historian at the monastery. His reply confirmed my research and that of many others who have invalidated the legend created by adventurer Nicholas Notovitch, who published his *Life of St. Issa* in the late nineteenth century. Notovitch claimed that he got his information from a manuscript at the monastery.

Tsering told me that no such manuscript ever existed at this or any other Buddhist monastery; that it was all “thought construction.” He also wrote that just as we in the West have many legends about Jesus, so too, Buddhists have put up with quite a bit of nonsense in the East about the Buddha.

Frederick Lenz—“Rama” to his cult following—has created a version of Buddhism in *Surfing the Himalayas* that is entirely self-serving, while revising Tibetan religion from an idiosyncratic, New Age perspective. In the book, he introduces us to a fictitious, “enlight-

ened” monk with miraculous powers, Master Fwap. The monk is the sole living teacher from the ancient (fictitious) Rae Chorze-Fwaz Order. Fwap’s lineage stems from the legendary Atlantis that sent great teachers to ancient Egypt and other places before it sank from its karmic depravity. Fwap tells us that the ancient wisdom behind true enlightenment is now contained in his mysterious Buddhist enclave outside of Katmandu, Nepal.

Although *Surfing the Himalayas* is published as a fictional account, Lenz nevertheless claims that the book contains his “real experiences” when he was in Nepal “some time ago.” The story begins with Lenz, the author, as the narrator—a device used by James Redfield in his comparable best-seller, *The Celestine Prophecy*—telling us about his love for the snow and sledding as a young boy. It quickly moves to a period when Lenz was a man of college age—which places the narrative around 1970. He flies to Nepal to “surf” the Himalayas since he has already “successfully snowboarded most of the higher mountains in the United States and Canada.” He checks into the Katmandu Youth Hostel where he falls asleep and has a weird dream in which he meets a magical Buddhist monk on a mountain of snow. The monk appears in the air next to Lenz, who has inadvertently careened off a cliff. The monk teaches him to levitate and saves him.

Later, after awakening, Lenz hires a yak-drawn cart driven by a farmer who takes him from Katmandu to a snow-covered Himalayan mountain “in several

hours.” After a few hours of climbing, Lenz states that he was “on top of a mountain twice as high as any I had snowboarded before.” During his first run he crashes into an old, bald-headed monk who seems to appear out of nowhere. Thus begins his relationship with Fwap, who convinces the boy to become his student because of Lenz’s achievements in past lives as a meditator and occultist. We discover that Lenz has been chosen to carry on the important work of the Rae Chorze-Fwaz Tantra Mystery School and that Fwap is its only living “enlightened” master on the planet.

From Chapter Two onward the text abounds with the wisdom of Fwap, who guides his beguiled young student into the teachings of his order. The master uses the snowboard as a tool during several sessions. In one situation Fwap himself steps on the board with the “wrong shoes” and swiftly glides down a steep slope only to levitate, board and all, back to the top. Fwap directs Lenz to accomplish this by becoming “one with the board.” Such magical guru tricks amaze Lenz who then wants to learn more. But the unflappable Fwap brushes magical power aside, telling his student that it is merely a by-product of enlightenment—the true goal.

Fwap’s preachings are directed by simple questions from his student. On one occasion Lenz asks how to tell if a Buddhist master is enlightened. “The first condition was that the master’s aura would turn a beautiful, bright golden color when he meditated.” The second characteristic was that the master “would always have a totally outrageous sense of humor, because life, when viewed through the eyes of enlightenment, was incredibly funny!”

Some of Fwap’s teachings sound suspiciously like those of the don Juan character created by writer Carlos Castaneda. Fwap discourses about the *second attention*, *luminous beings*, the *tonal*, *places of power*, and *seeing* in terms familiar to anyone who has read Castaneda’s own magical autobiographi-

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cal adventures. Perhaps don Juan was merely teaching the Rae Chorze-Fwaz Tantra philosophy.

But there is more here than a mere rip-off of Castaneda. In this book Lenz has condensed significant elements of his own teachings since the early 1980s. His devoted students believe that he is an enlightened being (like Master Fwap or don Juan) who radiates golden light and has an outrageous sense of humor. Well, at least some of them do. The rest seem to believe that they are not spiritually advanced enough to see his luminous aura or appreciate his humor, but they remain loyal with hopes that someday they might.

Surfing the Himalayas was self-published in 1994 by Lenz in a small edition mostly for his students (InterGlobal Seminars, Inc.). The book gained the attention of Warner Books, which has had huge success with another initially self-published spiritual adventure, *The Celestine Prophecy*. Warner bought the rights to *Surfing* for a cool quarter million dollars and planned to publish it under its label in the fall of 1995. After the Warner-Lenz deal appeared in *Publisher's Weekly* (May 22, 1995), Warner received information alleging Lenz was a controversial cult leader with a sordid reputation for sexually manipulating female followers. Warner dropped the contract, but still lost \$80,000 to Lenz in the deal. St. Martin's Press, an earlier bidder, picked up the contract for an undisclosed amount, but according to the *New York Times* (July 13, 1995), St. Martin's was unaware of any controversy surrounding Lenz.

There has been a spate of books geared for the spirituality seeker carried in recent decades by publishing houses hoping to tap the expanding New Age/metaphysical market. Lenz's book

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mimics many others that use literary devices such as a mysterious spiritual master from a mysterious and ancient spiritual order. The remote Himalayan cultures and exotic Tibetan teachers have been foils for many authors. Often these authors gain a cult following gullible enough to believe that the writer actually experienced what he wrote about. For instance, there have been hundreds of thousands of people who believed that the books by T. Lobsang Rampa—the first was the *Third Eye* in 1956—were true stories by a Tibetan monk who gained psychic powers. In reality, T. Lobsang Rampa never existed. The books were written by Cyril Henry Hoskin, the son of a British plumber. He had never visited the Orient.

Lenz's spiritual adventure comes closer in type to another man's, who also posed as a student of a mysterious Tibetan master. Paul Twitchell published *The Tiger's Fang* in 1967 about his magical adventures with Eckankar Master Rebazar Tarzs. Tarzs, according to the book, has been around nigh 500 years and is a member of the ancient Vairagi Order of Soul Travelers. In reality, Twitchell based his Tarzs character partially on Kirpal Singh, a guru from a fringe Sikh organization, the Radhasoami Satsang, with whom Twitchell had studied. Twitchell was known to have plagiarized heavily in writing his "autobiography." The new religion of Eckankar is based on Twitchell's revelations, which curiously blend Theosophy with the Radhasoami tradition of India and Scientology. Twitchell had been a member of the latter group as well.

Lenz had dedicated his first book, *Lifetimes: True Accounts of Reincarnation* (1980) to his guru, Sri Chinmoy, now based outside of Brooklyn. Lenz was called "Atmanada" when he broke with Chinmoy in the early 1980s to start his own cult. His first members had been Chinmoy devotees. Chinmoy is another godman who has made claims to superhuman powers. Chinmoy had been a member of a modern ashram in India

founded by Sri Aurobindo before setting up his own group in the late 1960s. Lenz denounced Chinmoy and proclaimed himself to be Rama around 1983. Although Lenz has been called a charlatan in the media many times, he manages to hold onto several hundred or more dedicated devotees who nearly all pursue computer programming jobs. Many "offer" him as much as several thousands of dollars a month for his "spiritual" support. Fwap, in some ways, is merely a revision of Sri Chinmoy, who claims to be the most evolved human being on the planet.

One former Lenz devotee and close friend who knew him in the early days from 1977 is Mark E. Laxer, who published *Take Me for a Ride: Coming of Age in a Destructive Cult* in 1993. He left Lenz in 1985. Laxer notes that Lenz became progressively more delusional and coy, but manipulative, over the years. Lenz said he believed then that LSD helped a teacher to reorganize a student's aura of luminous fibers and he encouraged its use with special students. Fwap does not talk about LSD, but he does teach that a person's soul or aura needs to be "repatterned" with a master's help in order to speed up enlightenment. I believe that Lenz has chosen this period of his life to revive himself with *Surfing the Himalayas*.

It is highly unlikely that Lenz was snowboarding in Nepal at the time of his story, for several reasons. Snowboards were not developed until the mid 1970s or later. Lenz has never demonstrated his snowboarding abilities to eyewitnesses, to my and former members' knowledge. Even if the snowboarding is merely a fictional device employed by Lenz, the author's knowledge of actual places like Katmandu and the Himalayas is insular. I visited Darjeeling, Katmandu, and other Himalayan communities in February 1981. Himalayan yaks flourish around 14,000 feet or higher and get sickly and die at lower altitudes. I remember seeing a lone yak in the zoo in Darjeeling. It was in terrible shape at 7,500 feet.

Katmandu is at 4,600 feet. It is unlikely that Lenz hired a yak-driven cart there. Less likely is a slow-moving animal reaching anywhere near snow-clad slopes from Katmandu in several hours as Lenz describes, even in winter.

Lenz states that he climbed "twice as high" on his first Himalayan peak as he ever had in North America. I have climbed many average American peaks up to 13,000 feet. During the snow season, hiking was extremely difficult if not impossible without snowshoes. Even if Lenz had snowboarded at a mere 12,000 feet in North America, this would have placed him at 24,000 feet in Nepal, no easy feat for a single trekker in one day who may have had to climb around 10,000 feet after a yak cart dropped him off. In any case, Lenz neglects to mention that trekking in Nepal's mountains was not and is not allowed without a permit and a guide with the route approved by the Central Immigration Office.

The yak, the snow-covered peaks, and Fwap all become fantastic literary devices upon analysis of *Surfing the Himalayas* and not part of a possible setting that supports good fiction. Fwap's Rae Chorze-Fwaz Order is as fictional as Tarz's Vairagi Order and a host of other pseudolineages proclaimed by modern cults. Fwap's discourses on Tantric Buddhism speak more of Western New Age occultism and folk Tantra than essential Buddhism. Fwap argues that the Christian-influenced West is linear and hierarchical in its thinking, whereas the Buddhist East is circular and more efficient. He teaches that the earth is polluted psychically by too many unenlightened people; and that he (Fwap) needs to refresh himself at times at his monastery.

"Every living being is psychic. . . . Did you know that the vast majority of thoughts you think and emotions you feel aren't even your own?" Master Fwap asked with a wry smile on his face (p. 55).

Fwap later carries this equivocal concept to extremes: "Whether you are aware of it or not, your board has an inherent knowledge of its own capabilities because it is made up of intelligent

energy, just as you are" (p. 87).

He also stresses that one needs a living, enlightened teacher if one is to seek enlightenment. Fwap's master was Fwaz Shashtra Dup, a monk who died around 1950. Lenz does not tell us if Fwap is available to other seekers, but he does point to himself today as heir to the Tantric throne of enlightenment via the Rae Chorze-Fwaz Order.

Lenz's future plans are indicated in Chapter Four, in which he has a curious dream about himself in the future. His future self convinces Lenz to meet with Fwap rather than go snowboarding on an auspicious day.

"You owe him your life, you know. You ran him down with your snowboard. . . . He could have easily burned you into a very small pile of ashes with his occult power, but because he is a compassionate Buddhist master he let you off the hook."

He reveals this in his vision to himself as a student in a large Buddhist temple with stained glass windows. Lenz meets his future self facing a large white marble altar adorned with six giant red candles. Lenz tells the novice the future: "This is my—our—temple. Not bad, is it? We designed it ourselves."



Witch Hunts Past and Present

PETER HUSTON

Witch-Children: From Salem Witch-Hunts to Modern Courtrooms.
By Hans Sebald. Prometheus Books, Amherst, N.Y., 1995. ISBN 0-87975-965-8. 258 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Throughout the history of human justice, a key problem has been to determine how reliable children's testimony is. A few centuries ago, the perceived reliability of children's testimony was a key factor in many witchcraft trials. Often innocents were executed following the damning testimony of a child. Today, particularly in cases of alleged sexual abuse of children that sometimes includes

Earlier in this review I mentioned Nawang Tsering. In 1979 he published *Buddhism in Ladakh* in India, a biography of an eighteenth-century Ladakhi saint and scholar, Ngag-dbang Tse-ring [sic]. The saint was a historically authentic follower of Buddhist Tantra and, according to Tsering, a pivotal scholar and reformer much loved by his disciples and peers. That is far more than we can say about Fwap—a magical character of the imagination. After initial promotion, including a full-page ad in the *New York Times* in November 1995, *Surfing* is doing very well as a New Age title. Frederick Lenz may have a best-seller by present indications, but that is not surprising.

There is a market for gullible seekers who fail to distinguish either the message or the messenger of Buddhist wisdom. Another case in point, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche has done very well since its release in 1993. If Sogyal Rinpoche is an authentic Buddhist by training, if not in practice, that is more than we can say about Lenz. If you want Buddhist wisdom, first get an education in authentic Buddhist philosophy. Reading books by Sogyal Rinpoche or Lenz is not going to get you closer to Buddhist spirituality. □

satanic-ritual abuse, we once again often see the guilt or innocence of the accused decided on the same sort of evidence.

In this groundbreaking work, *Witch-Children: From Salem Witch-Hunts to Modern Courtrooms*, Hans Sebald examines children's testimony from both eras and draws parallels. Although the information is good and the parallels well drawn, in my opinion the book suffers