

YOGA RESEARCH

The Yoga Research Society Newsletter

Number 49

September, 2012

Theos Bernard, The White Lama

excerpted from the book

Theos Bernard, The White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life

by Paul G. Hackett, Ph.D.

[Tibet, 1937]

“To have all the inspirational beauty of a barren windblown waste land surrounded by rolling, light brown mounds off to the distant snow covered horizon is quite enough to awaken the dormant awe in any lost and weary soul.”

“Tis no wonder that the Tibetan never leaves his own country, and when he does his consciousness aches until his return, for nowhere can one find a more perfect physical awakening of his inner soul, for the rare atmosphere of the altitude soon begins to make the whole system breathe and by such subtle fanning the sleeping serpent of man’s dormant self slowly begins to rise and its hissings are recorded by the heart.”

The final day’s ride had been a quiet one, broken only by the sound of the footsteps of Theos’s donkey beneath him echoing off the canyon walls and the distant tinkling bells on the harnesses of the yak trains ornately decorated and transporting more and more wool south toward India. After passing the famous Buddha carved in red sandstone from the cliffs outside of Kangma, ten days after setting out from Gangtok, on Sunday, May 23, they passed the two small stupas below the ancient Nanying Monastery at the canyon mouth and finally approached Gyantse. The sight of the fort in the distance brought an uneasy excitement for Theos, as he reflected that “at times I can hardly believe that I am here, if so why and how come.”

As luck would have it...May 25 would be the fifteenth day of the fourth Tibetan month, known as “Saga Dawa”—the annual celebration of the birth, enlightenment, and “final nirvana” of the Buddha—and there would be considerable festivities. Informed



by Tharchin that Theos was a devout (and rich) Buddhist on pilgrimage from America, the abbot suggested that it would only be appropriate to include Theos in the coming days’ activities and offered to incorporate a “long life ceremony” on his behalf, with a thousand-butter-lamp offering. Tharchin informed the abbot that Theos, for his own part, would be honored to serve as patron for the celebratory events and graciously accepted the honor of being allowed to feed the entire monastery, some fifteen hundred monks.

Arriving early the next morning, Theos found that the entire monastery had turned out, assembled in the courtyard before the main temple and seated in row after row on long carpets. Guided through the kitchen and upstairs to the small audience chamber, Theos and Tharchin were greeted by the abbot in his full regalia before being seated on cushions nearby and served tea and sweets; all the while, the cavernous space of the hall below reverberated with the deep chants of the monks. Returning downstairs with the abbot, Theos was led on a tour of the monastery complex commencing with a tribute to the late Dalai Lama, represented

by the chair he once sat on, displayed on the grounds before the main temple. Walking forward with a white silk *khata* in hand, Theos prostrated before the chair, then offered the silk scarf, draping it across the seat. The impact of this small gesture on those who witnessed it was far greater than anything that he could have imagined, for never had a resident of Gyantse witnessed a white man—certainly not any of the British they had met—pay any sign of respect to their religion or spiritual leaders the way Theos had just done. Before the day was over, the entire populace of Gyantse had heard of the public profession of faith and respect and was fully convinced of his sincerity.

For his own part, Theos was indeed sincerely moved when, upon entering the main assembly hall, he was struck by the vision that awaited him:

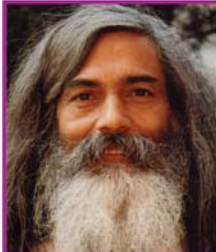
“There were three thousand candles in this dimly lighted sanctuary, and your wildest imagination will never be able to picture the impressiveness of these hundreds of twinkling lights which were placed in a row of two completely around the room. The walls were decorated with handpaintings of the dieties, displaying master craftsmanship on the part of their Lama artists. The Buddha was of the most impressive size, all studded with precious stones. The sixteen bodhisattvas which are usually painted on the walls were represented here in giant figures adding immensely to the impressiveness of the environment which would instill religious devotion in any soul—even the most hardened heathen would want to bow or do something. That is the feeling that it gives you, that you must do something, you know not what and you know not why, but a something deep within is moved that perhaps you never realized existed before.”



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YOGA RESEARCH
back issues are \$3 each.



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