

# Lama Govinda's Quest for the Truth: A Summary of His Life - Part II

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Lama Anagarika Govinda<sup>1</sup>

*Eternity and Infinity in the spiritual or religious sense are not mathematical values but experiences common to all people who have reached a certain spiritual maturity, and most of all the great leaders of humanity in the fields of culture and religion. Lama Govinda, 1977<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

This is the second and concluding installment of the two-part article dealing with the spiritual quest of Lama Govinda. It begins with the expedition that he and his wife, Li, undertook into Western Tibet and describes in some detail their challenging but rewarding experiences. The remainder of the article summarizes Govinda's and Li's years of productivity, and their joint mission to make Tibetan Buddhism known to the wider world by means of their art, book and lectures. The article concludes with Govinda's death in the San Francisco Zen Centre in California. As in Part I, this article includes appropriate quotations from Govinda's own writings to render the text more colorful.

## The Journey to Tsaparang

The point of departure from which the Govindas set out on their expedition to Western Tibet was the Almora Hill station in the

Almora district in the state of Uttarakhand. This undertaking became possible after lengthy preparations and organization, something for which Li had taken most of the responsibility. It was also thanks to her that they had found a sponsor for their expedition, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, to which Li had committed herself by providing a written record of their trip. When they had finally secured enough men and mules to transport their belongings, they left Almora on the morning of July 22, 1948.<sup>3</sup>

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## About the Author

Iván Kovács is qualified as a fine artist. As a writer he has published art criticism, short stories and poems, and more recently, articles of an esoteric nature. He is a reader of the classics and modern classics, a lover of world cinema, as well as classical and contemporary music. His lifelong interest in Esotericism was rounded off with several years of intensive study with the Arcane School.

Govinda and Li both gave a written account of their travels, albeit each of them from their own perspective. Govinda, always the philosophical thinker and poet, could not be bothered to comment on the day to day details and hardships of their journey. His writing became more descriptive only after their first pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, a pilgrimage to which he devoted three entire chapters in his book, *The Way of the White Clouds*.<sup>4</sup> Li, on the other hand, did not shy away from verbalizing her frustrations and the personal hardships which are an inevitable part of such an enormous undertaking. Yet, she was never bitter or resentful. And even while describing the extreme conditions of their journey, she retained a capacity to express herself in imaginative and creative ways. To illustrate this point one only needs to quote her on some of the specific weather conditions that she and Govinda experienced:

A storm then broke. The rain nearly froze us while the wind howled like hungry wolves around us. Oh, those winds! They are Tibet's *worst enemy*, and if I was ever asked to picture them I would draw a hundred thousand ice-bound daggers with the head of a howling wolf for every hilt.<sup>5</sup>

The landscapes they encountered were stupendous, but the region was sparsely populated. Ken Winkler describes the setting as "a tough, unrelenting land, but preserved deep in its eroded hills and ruined monasteries were remnants of frescoes, icons, and images of incredible beauty and sanctity. It is hard to imagine what became the larger attraction for the Govindas, the faded glories of the earlier artistic and religious fervor or the natural beauty of this harsh and rugged country."<sup>6</sup>

Govinda introduces Mount Kailas—the first great highlight of their journey—with the following words:

There are mountains which are just mountains and there are mountains with personality. The personality of a mountain is more than merely a strange shape that makes it different from others – just as a strangely shaped face or strange actions do not make an individual into a personality.

Personality consists in the power to influence others, and this power is due to consistency, harmony, and one-pointedness of character. If these qualities are present in an individual, in their highest perfection, then this individual is a fit leader of humanity, either as a ruler, a thinker, or a saint, and we recognise him as a vessel of divine power. If these qualities are present in a mountain we recognise it as a vessel of cosmic power, and we call it a sacred mountain.<sup>7</sup>

Mount Kailas is a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Hindus alike and stands isolated in the center of the Trans-Himalayan ranges at an elevation of 22,000 feet. It has a symmetrical peak that is capped by snow and ice that rests on a rocky plinth thousands of feet high. Four of Asia's major rivers have their sources in the region, namely the Brahmaputra, the Indus, the Sutlej and the Karnali.<sup>8</sup>

However, the magic and splendor of Mount Kailas does not stand isolated. As viewed from the south, the sacred mountain forms a triangle with Lake Manasarovar in the right foreground and Lake Rakshastal in the left foreground. Lake Manasarovar is relatively round in shape with a 55-mile circumference and 120 square mile surface area and is a fresh water lake.<sup>9</sup> Lake Rakshastal is unevenly shaped with a surface area of 97 square miles and is a salt water lake.<sup>10</sup>

Lama Govinda comments on the spiritual significance of the two lakes, informing us that the geographical position of the two lakes corresponds to their relationship to light and darkness. Manasarovar, being in the east represents the beginning of the day, while Rakshastal in the west symbolizes the beginning of the night. Moreover, the Tibetan name for Manasarovar, Tso Mapham, stands for the invincible forces of the Buddhas, while Rakshastal is called Lha-nag-Tso, the Lake of the Dark Deities.<sup>11</sup>

True to pilgrim tradition, Govinda and Li circumambulated Mount Kailas, which took them about four or five days. Despite the profound effect that the mountain had on Govinda, his description of the actual pilgrimage is at best sketchy. This might be attributed to the strange

phenomenon which makes the mountain appear to be so close that one could almost touch it, while at the same time it appears to be ethereal and intangible, like the emanation of something more profound. Li, in her article describing the experience as published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in the April 22, 1951 edition, defined Mount Kailas as having a “dreamlike” quality.<sup>12</sup>

Less than a week later, Govinda and Li entered a valley which Govinda described as being reminiscent of the Valley of the Kings near Thebes. Even the white-washed buildings that stood out at the foot of the mountains reminded him of the cubic Egyptian temple structures. By all appearances, the place looked like a Buddhist monastery where they hoped to get shelter, but the place seemed to be deserted, so they pitched their tent outside the walls near the river.<sup>13</sup>

The following morning the Govindas sent their caravan leader to the abbot to announce their visit, and were finally granted permission to meet him. After exchanging pleasantries they explained to the abbot that they needed fresh pack animals for the next stage of their journey, but the abbot declined, stating that he could spare neither men nor yaks because they were needed to help with the harvesting. Govinda then produced the Lamyig (travel pass) from Lhasa, which entitled them to transport and food supplies at local prices, but the abbot laughed derisively, and his attitude of friendliness changed to defiance.<sup>14</sup>

Outwardly, Govinda appeared to be calm, but he realized that they had reason to worry. Instead of pressing his point he expressed his admiration to the abbot of how nicely the walls were decorated, thus shifting the subject to the abbot and the monastery itself. The abbot showed them some sacred scriptures which seemed to be familiar to Govinda. But they contained strange names and mantras that made him doubt whether they could be Buddhist texts. The next day, when the caretaker showed them around, he led them in an anti-clockwise direction around the monastery, a strange and improper way of doing things from

the Buddhist perspective, and it finally dawned on Govinda, that the monastery was not Buddhist at all, but Bön.<sup>15</sup>

The monastery’s true identity was further confirmed when the Govindas were allowed to see things in greater detail. For instance, the familiar “Wheel of Life,” depicted among the frescoes of the porch, did not have the usual twelve divisions, but thirteen. And a figure that looked like Amitabha had white as its body color instead of red, and was seated on an elephant throne instead of a peacock throne, and bore the name “God Shen of the White Light.”

Later that day, after they had returned to their tent, it was the abbot himself who paid them an unexpected visit. To their surprise, they realized that he now seemed to be an entirely different man, with none of the proud aloofness and sarcastic smile. The Govindas praised everything that they had seen, further ensuring the abbots goodwill towards them and the necessary number of yaks, as well as guides needed for the continuation of their journey. Thus the morning of the next day they were gratefully on the move again.<sup>16</sup>

Govinda describes the last stage of their journey before their arrival at Tsaparang in *The Way of the White Clouds* in a chapter entitled *The Valley of the Moon Castle*.<sup>17</sup> He gives a detailed account of how they had to ford a river by means of a rope bridge that only had two steel cables for its main support, which were hanging side by side with nothing but short planks and sticks upon them that were fastened with ropes and wires. The yaks had to be unloaded and the luggage carried separately across the bridge. But once it was the turn of the yaks to make the crossing they refused to step on to the swaying bridge and had to be allowed to swim across the river. This was a risky thing to accomplish because there was only one place on the opposite shore where they could safely get out of the stream—all the other places were so steep that they would surely have drowned. With some clever maneuvering and stone-throwing the yaks were prevented from being swept downstream and safely made it to the other shore.<sup>18</sup>

The mood of Govinda's narrative changes when he continues as follows:

In spite of all the dangers and troubles we were richly rewarded by the indescribable grandeur of the canyon country which unfolded itself in all its fantastic beauty the deeper we penetrated into this region. Here the mountain scenery is more than merely a landscape. It is architecture in the highest sense. It is of awe-inspiring monumentality, for which the word "beautiful" would be far too weak, because it is overpowering by the immensity and abstract purity of its million-fold repeated forms that integrate themselves into a vast rhythm, a symphony of stone, without beginning or end.<sup>19</sup>

As they plodded on along the difficult terrain, Li Gotami observed that the straight up-and-down traveling they were forced to endure seemed to go against all laws of gravity and had a nightmarish quality. And having reached the Valley of the Moon Castle, she compared the terrain to that of a different planet.<sup>20</sup> "Here the bizarre-shaped crags and hills appeared as if they were something out of a dream of a post-impressionist artist and we stood spellbound at the sight," she wrote.<sup>21</sup>

They camped there for more than a week because their guides would not go any further and practically deserted them, leaving them only with their luggage. Govinda and Li Gotami, however, were strangely unperturbed, captivated by the surrounding peace and silence. Signs that the place had been inhabited a long time ago were evident from numerous caves that had been hollowed out of the rock formations, many of them connected by inner staircases and passages. They also saw the remains of temples, stupas, monasteries and ancient castles. To their great surprise, they found the main temple not only intact but covered with a golden roof, and its walls painted with ancient frescoes dating back to the end of the tenth century.<sup>22</sup>

But to Govinda's and Li Gotami's good fortune, the Valley of the Moon Castle was not entirely deserted. There were a few herdsmen who grazed their sheep and goats on the pastures of the valley, and Dawa-Dzong (Tibetan

name for the Valley of the Moon Castle) also had a district governor. To procure fresh pack animals the Govindas needed the governor's authorization, but unfortunately he was away touring his jurisdiction. While they waited for this official to return Govinda and Li Gotami visited the sights and did a lot of sketching.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, a messenger arrived and informed them that the yaks which they had been waiting for had been secured and would reach them in a day or two. After the yaks were brought, as promised, Govinda and Li Gotami loaded the animals and embarked on the last lap of their journey. It was on the late afternoon of 2 October 1948, after they had emerged from a gorge and turned the spur of a mountain, that they suddenly beheld the castles of the ancient city of Tsaparang.<sup>24 25</sup>

### ***The Treasures of the Lost Kingdom of Gugé***

The first impression of Tsaparang as described by Govinda reads as follows:

As if woven of light the city stood against the evening sky, enhaloed by a rainbow, which made the scene as unbelievable as a *fata morgana*.<sup>26</sup> We almost feared that the scene before us might disappear as suddenly as it had sprung up before our eyes, but it remained there as solid as a rock on which it was built. Even the rainbow – in itself a rare phenomenon in an almost rainless country like Western Tibet – remained steady for quite a long time, centred around the towering city like an emanation of its hidden treasures of golden images and luminous colours, in which the wisdom and the visions of a glorious past were enshrined.<sup>27</sup>

Govinda interpreted the presence of the rainbow as a good omen. Nevertheless, this did not negate the fact that they were forced to live and work under the harshest conditions. Their dwelling for the duration of their stay was a crude stone hut which stood in front of a cave. The cave itself was the dwelling of a shepherd who had a wife and child, and who also acted in the capacity of caretaker of the remaining three temples, all of which had withstood the

ravages of time. It was this caretaker, named Wangdu, who supplied the Govindas with water, brushwood, and milk. Being miserably poor, he was only too glad for the little money that he received in payment for his services. Apart from the Govindas and Wangdu and his family the place was devoid of human habitation.<sup>28</sup>

The task that the Govindas had come to perform in Tsaparang was to catalogue the surviving artworks, a monumental undertaking that was to test not only their willpower and determination, but also their adaptability and ingenuity. The manner in which their task was to be executed was rather complex. One method was by means of copying and tracing the frescoes, of which there was a staggering number. These were to be found in the two temples known as the White and the Red Lhakang, and thus named because of the color of their outer walls.<sup>29</sup>

Govinda described these frescoes as being of the highest quality that they had seen in or outside of Tibet. They virtually covered the walls from the floor right up to the high ceiling, “lavishly encrusted with gold and minutely executed,”<sup>30</sup> their range extending from the darkest corners, and up to a height that fell beyond the reach of human sight. Despite the great detail, some of these fresco-figures were as Govinda describes “of gigantic size.”<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the frescoes, there were the larger than life-size golden statues, “gleaming amidst the warm colours of the frescoed walls,” and according to Govinda’s perception, more alive than anything they had seen before of their kind. They were so imposing that apparently even the conquering hordes responsible for the downfall of Tsaparang had refrained “from defiling the silent majesty of these images.”

When they started to work, Govinda and Li traced as many of the frescoes as time and opportunity would allow. Govinda writes that “(m)erely to trace these delicate lines accurately demanded the most intense concentration, and it was a strange sensation to relive the feelings and emotions of people who had lived almost a millennium before us.”<sup>32</sup>

Each day, before commencing with their work, they first performed their devotions, or *puja*, with offerings of light and water, which signified consciousness and life, and then recited the formulas of refuge and self-dedication at the feet of the golden Buddhas.

This filled them with renewed inspiration so that they could perform their task, even forgetting hunger and cold or other hardships.<sup>33</sup>

The hardships referred to were numerous and soon became apparent, when with the passing of time, temperatures started to drop. Govinda records this as follows:

The temple walls were so cold that it became almost impossible to touch them without suffering excruciating pain, so that even tracing became a torture. Li had to keep her bottle of Chinese ink inside her *amphag* to prevent it from freezing and had to breathe from time to time on her brush to thaw the ink which tended to get solid after a few strokes . . . I remember once when she wept in despair on account of the excessive cold that made it almost impossible for her to hold the brush, her tears were frozen before they could reach the floor and bounced up from it as beads of ice with a thud.<sup>34</sup>

Govinda had problems of his own. Because many of the frescoes were painted higher up

***There is no absolute code which divides the world into “good” or “bad” or which tells you what you must do. Buddhist morality is based on freedom, i.e. individual development. As the idea of sin is foreign to the Buddhist, he does not believe in eternal condemnation. Heaven and hell are within us and the possibility of salvation is open to all living beings.***

on the walls, he had to build a rough scaffolding on pyramids of stone blocks, which were gathered from the debris outside the temples. At times, these had to be built and dismantled more than once a day. It was back-breaking work, and Govinda's feet were getting frozen, so he had to go outside the temple to warm up in the sunshine and to get his circulation going again.<sup>35</sup>

Another problem that the Govindas encountered was the uneven distribution of light in the temples. The primary source of light came from a window high up on the opposite side from the main image. The light from this window served to illuminate the statue, and its reflection suffused the rest of the temple, but only moderately. It was sufficient to admire the frescoes and other objects, but sadly deficient when it comes to the drawing or painting of the small details. Because the light was continuously shifting, the Govindas had to follow it from one place to another, and often use sheets to reflect light into dark corners or other places where the pillars obscured the view. As a result, they frequently had to abandon what they were working in favor of other tasks where the light offered greater illumination.<sup>36</sup>

Amidst all the beauty and splendor, Govinda and Li worked ceaselessly from morning to evening. They were convinced that they would be the last people from outside Tibet who were privileged to see these artworks, and thus found it necessary to preserve them by means of their tracings and photographs.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Days of Consternation and a Race against Time***

During the second week of their stay at Tsaparang the Govindas were surprised by the arrival of a nun who had come there in the company of a monk who was in charge of another temple—the Temple of Maitreya—not far from the ruined city. She began to question them in a rather haughty manner, and although Govinda and Li tried to explain the nature of their work, she did not seem to understand and threatened to cut off their water and fuel supply if they did not stop. Even an authorization from the Lhasa Government didn't make much

difference to her, because she questioned the document's authenticity.<sup>38</sup>

After a moment's reflection Govinda's thoughts turned to his guru, Tomo Geshe. Although he didn't expect that a simple nun in this far off corner of Tibet would have heard of Tomo Geshe, he nevertheless mentioned to her that he was their guru, and that they had both been staying at Dungkar Gumpa only last year. To Govinda's and Li's surprise the nun's attitude changed instantaneously, and she told them that she herself came from Dungkar and that Tomo Geshe Rimpoche was her Tsawai Lama (root guru). The Govindas in turn mentioned the names of several inhabitants of Dungkar Gumpa that the nun recognized. Thus the ice was broken and a personal contact established which later would prove to be most valuable.<sup>39</sup>

When Govinda and Li invited the nun to their quarters at Wangdu's cave, and showed her photographs which Li had taken at Dungkar, the nun could see with her own eyes that they were telling her the truth. Furthermore, when Govinda showed her Tomo Geshe's seal underneath the little Buddha image which he had received from him and always carried with him, the nun reverently bowed down to receive Tomo Geshe's blessings.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the fortunate outcome, their encounter with the nun had to be taken as a warning of how precarious their actual situation was. Thus they continued their work with even more urgency, and took care to keep their activities as secret as possible. This, however, only lasted for about two weeks. Returning from their work one evening they heard the sound of a drum coming from the valley. The sound came nearer and nearer until Govinda and Li were filled with a sense of foreboding. Soon armed horsemen appeared from the foot of the valley, and Wangu informed them that the Dzongpön (governor) of Tsaparang had arrived.<sup>41</sup>

The following day Govinda and Li had no choice but to interrupt their work, call upon the Dzongpön, and try to explain the purpose of their stay in Tsaparang and the nature of their work. Although the Dzongpön listened, he did

not appear to be convinced, and even when they showed him their official papers, he told them that he could only allow them to do their work if he received confirmation from Lhasa that their documents were genuine. To follow up on this might easily take four to five months. By that time their provisions would be exhausted, and they would be reduced to eating nothing more than raw wheat, which they would have to grind themselves. Govinda, as ever, kept up a stiff front and told the Dzongpön that they had no objection to having their papers verified and would not mind waiting.<sup>42</sup>

The Dzongpön changed his tactics and pointed out that Govinda and Li were only entitled to work in the temples founded by Rinchen Zangpo. He insisted that the temples of Tsaparang were not founded by Zangpo, but only those of Tholing, the only place where the Govindas were allowed to work. Govinda contradicted this, and told the Dzongpön that he himself had read in ancient Tibetan books that the temples of Tsaparang are mentioned among those that had been built by Rinchen Zangpo. The Dzongpön demanded to know which books those might be, and Govinda, taking a chance, did not mention *The History of the Kings of Guge*, but replied that he had read it in *The Blue Records (Dep-ther sNgon-po)* by gZon-nud Pal-ldan. This answer seemed to impress the Dzongpön, who was not able to refute Govinda's contention. Dropping the matter he told them that they would have his decision later.<sup>43</sup>

Disheartened and depressed, Govinda and Li returned to their stone hut and spent an uneasy night in which they worried so much they hardly managed to sleep. Govinda writes that “(w)e spent hours in silent meditation, feeling that only the intervention of higher powers could help us.”<sup>44</sup>

It turned out that the “higher powers” were, indeed, favorably disposed towards them. The next morning the Dzongpön came to see them in person. He was accompanied by servants who bore gifts of food. Instead of telling the Govindas to quit Tsaparang, the Dzongpön explained to them that the nun, who had met

them earlier, had told him that Govinda and Li were Nangpas (followers of the Buddha) and personal disciples of Tomo Geshe Rimpoche. In fact, he himself considered Tomo Geshe to be his personal Guru, and held him in the highest regard. He apologized for having distrusted them, but now that he knew that they were all disciples of the same guru, he gave his approval to their doings. They were welcome to continue on the condition that they finished their task within a month, thus allowing them to leave before the winter when the passes to India would close. The Dzongpön provided them with another Lamyig (pass) for their return journey. Two days later he left on a journey, but not before saying that he hoped to meet them at Shipki, a village at the foot of the pass leading to India.<sup>45</sup>

Govinda and Li continued their work, following a ceaseless routine by which they made use of every available daylight hour. As the weather got colder even their watches stopped and they both suffered from headaches and nausea.<sup>46</sup> Then, one evening in mid-December, a group of rough-looking fellows arrived who spent half the night carousing in Wangdu's cave. The following morning a sinister-looking one-eyed man called on the Govindas to inform them that the Dzongpön had given orders that they had to leave Tsaparang and were to be escorted to the frontier pass. The Govindas were not happy with this news because several of the panels that they had been working on were only half finished. Govinda told the man that they would be ready to leave only if the Dzongpön would give them a few days more to finish the work. And in order to win more time, he wrote a letter to the Dzongpön and sent it off with one of his servants. Although Govinda did not expect a favorable reply, he knew that it would take at least a week for the servant to return with an answer—just enough time to finish their work.<sup>47</sup>

And indeed, things worked out just as they had expected. The messenger had stayed away exactly a week, giving Govinda and Li the needed time to finish. In his own words, Govinda concludes as follows: “We left the temples with deep gratitude. Our task had been fulfilled

and what we had gained, no worldly power could take away from us.”<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Trials of the Return Journey***

The homeward journey was no easy feat, and in comparison, Tsaparang had been warm and comfortable. The guide that had been assigned to the Govindas was none other than the “Dzongpön’s rascally one-eyed servant . . . who tried to get rid of his duty as soon as possible by pushing (them) somewhere over the frontier in a totally uninhabited region, where (they) would have perished from lack of food, shelter, and transport.”<sup>49</sup> It was at Govinda’s insistence that they kept to the main caravan route, and if necessary, putting up with the prospect of having to wait until the passes would open again.<sup>50</sup> The guide’s unruly behavior finally forced the Govindas to employ another guide, a man called Sherab, who turned out to be the one-eyed rascal’s opposite: faithful and solicitous, so that the Govindas felt a real friendship towards him.<sup>51</sup>

The greatest ordeal the Govindas were facing on their return journey was trekking over a frozen river. This undertaking proved to be hazardous due to the uncertainty about whether the ice was solid enough to carry their weight, and also because of its mirror smooth but uneven surface. They had engaged about twenty people from the last village where they had been staying to help with their luggage. But once they had reached the icy surface very little progress was made, because they could barely walk a few steps without falling. By evening, they pitched camp on a narrow boulder-strewn strip of dry land, and that night for the first time they felt comfortably warm, partly to the lower altitude, and partly because the sky had become overcast.<sup>52</sup>

The following morning they found themselves snowed in, and the Govindas were wondering how they would be able to continue their journey. However, far from impeding their progress, they discovered that the snow helped them to walk on the ice without slipping. The trek over the frozen river took six days before they finally emerged at the village of Tyak, at which point they parted ways with the villagers who had assisted them. Their guide, Sherab,

arranged for a new team of yaks, horses, and also people from various villages – an easy task – because they were back again on the regular caravan route. They crossed the Shipki Pass, without incident and descended into what Govinda called “the happy valley” of Poo, which they reached at the end of January.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Final Initiations in the Happy Valley and Farewell to Tibet***

The passes over the Himalayas were closed and would only open again in spring. This meant a three months wait. Thus the Govindas had no other choice but to be patient.<sup>54</sup> They found accommodation in the local rest-house which was run by Namgyal, an old Nyingma Lama known for his great religious devotion and knowledge. Although the Govindas had run out of provisions and money, Namgyal assured them that he would take care of them until such time as they were able to pay him back. He treated them as if they were members of his own family, discussing religious subjects with them, and even giving them access to his religious books—his most precious possessions.<sup>55</sup>

One day Namgyal came to tell the Govindas that he had dreamt seeing a rainbow over their bungalow, which could only mean a lucky event, such as the arrival of a saintly person. This omen proved to be correct when the next day a lama arrived and put up in a little out-house belonging to the compound. The following day the lama called upon the Govindas, and to their great surprise they recognized the lama as the Abbot of Phiyang, the very same lama they had visited at Tsaparang. Govinda had described the abbot as the kindest and most unassuming person, yet one who had great learning and wisdom. At Tsaparang they regretted only being able to spend a short time with him; but now that their paths had crossed again the lama offered to instruct them in the most advanced methods of Tantric Sadhana and Yoga practices.<sup>56 57</sup>

As the daily instructions proceeded under the Phiyang Lama’s guidance, they were finally crowned by two esoteric initiations. These were given in short succession, and introduced the Govindas to many new aspects of medita-



tive practice that belong to the most ancient tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as preserved by the Nyingmapas (lit.: ‘The Old Ones’). Govinda explains that “(i)n these initiations all the psychic centres (chakras) were employed and activated,” a process which he describes in some detail in his book *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*.<sup>58</sup> As described in Part Four of this book, *The Path of Integration*, these are intricate procedures consisting of breathing exercises in combination with energy transfer as visualized and directed between the various energy centers, and consequently falling under the broad classification of kundalini yoga.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, the long wait for the passes to open was not spent in idleness, but in gaining new knowledge and wisdom, rounding off Govinda’s and Li’s education and training in a practical and fruitful way which would not have been possible without the assistance of such an extraordinary person as the Phiyang Lama. Govinda elaborates on his exceptional qualities and services as follows:

Before Phiyang Lama left Poo he performed a very remarkable ceremony which culminated in a baptism or purification through fire, so to say a counterpart or natural complement to the Tsewang, the purification and spiritual renewal through the Water of Life. This ceremony (*me-dbang*) was remarkable . . . for the way in which all participants were actually enveloped by the flames of the fire, without anybody being hurt . . . The procedure was as ingenious as it was impressive. While Phiyang Lama intoned the *mantras* of consecration, he held an earthen bowl with fire in his left hand, and with the other he threw a fine incense powder (made of some local shrub or tree bark) through the open flame, issuing from the bowl. The powder ignited instantly, and being thrown in the direction of the devotees, who were sitting in a group before the lama, the fire enveloped them for a moment in a flash-like flame that vanished before it could burn anybody.<sup>60</sup>

At last, towards the end of April, the passes were opening. While the Govindas were assembling their caravan for their final return to

India, the Phiyang Lama set out for his monastery in the district of Tsaparang. Before he left he gave the Govindas his blessing.<sup>61</sup>

The Govindas also said their farewells to Sherab, who had looked after them like a son, and to Namgyal, whose hospitality had been exceptional. In the last chapter of his book, *The Way of the White Clouds*, Govinda sums up their adventure as follows:

And so we left our “Shangrila,” the Valley of Happiness, and returned to the world, not knowing that Tibet’s hour of fate had struck and that we would never see it again, except in our dreams. But we knew that the Gurus and the treasures of memory that this unforgettable country had bestowed on us would remain with us till the end of our days and that, if we succeeded in passing on to others even a part of those treasures and of the Gurus’ teachings, we would feel that we had repaid a little of the debt of gratitude that we owe to Tibet and to our Teachers.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Interaction with the Wider World***

Although Govinda and Li were never to return to Tibet again, their joint mission to disseminate on a larger scale what they had learnt and experienced regarding Tibetan Buddhism and the Path of Liberation still lay ahead. Govinda was one of those individuals who always knew how to share his life experiences with his fellow human beings no matter their stage of personal development. This was already apparent when he was still a young and aspiring artist and writer in Capri. Now in his early fifties, his knowledge and wisdom were equal to that of a *sannyasin*, a word which so aptly applies to one who has “passed across the burning ground . . . (and who) . . . through detachment from the little self and attachment to the greater Self . . . has left behind all that might hinder and hamper his service.”

After a period during which they moved around in various places in India, they finally settled down in W. Y. Evans-Wentz’s house, on Kasar Devi ridge near Almora. Evans-Wentz now lived in San Diego, California. Evans-Wentz had been on the lookout for reliable people who could inhabit his property,

and who could be entrusted with its upkeep and maintenance. Secluded, yet not inaccessible from social amenities, the place would prove to be a refuge in which the Govindas could live and work undisturbed, and thereby initiate the most productive period of their lives.

Although the area was sparsely populated the Govindas' neighbors turned out to be people with whom they had much in common: "Krishna Prem, the Englishman who became a Hindu monk, lived 16 miles farther up on the trail; Earl Brewster (a friend from Govinda's Capri days) had a large house on the ridge, filled with books and paintings; and living in a small lean-to near a Kali temple was Alfred Sorenson (Sunya), (Govinda's) reclusive, somewhat silent friend from Shantiniketan." The privacy which the Govindas so highly valued would last several years, and on quiet mornings Govinda would work at his small desk and labor over articles and stories that would later be published in a variety of Indian and European journals.<sup>63</sup>

Govinda's book, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, was one of the major works among his writing at this time. The English translation was first published by Rider & Company in London in 1959, closely followed by the American edition in 1960, which was published by E. P. Dutton & Co in New York. Ken Winkler, Govinda's biographer, writes that "(i)t is not a book easily understood by beginners: although Lama Govinda used Western references and quoted European mystical poets and philosophers, some understanding of Buddhist terminology is essential."<sup>64</sup> Early in *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* Govinda stresses the importance of Buddhism as a living experience and writes as follows:

Each new experience, each new situation of life, widens our mental outlook and brings about a subtle transformation within ourselves. Thus our nature changes continually, not only on account of the conditions of life, but – even if these would remain static – because by the constant addition of new impressions, the structure of our mind becomes ever more diverse and complex,

whether we call it 'progress' or 'degeneration', we have to admit the fact that it is the law of all life, in which differentiation and co-ordination balance each other.<sup>65</sup>

Winkler points out that Lama Govinda always acknowledged his indebtedness to his Western heritage, but he was adamant about his own situation as regards his convictions and beliefs. Although he never directly attacked or condemned orthodox Western views, Govinda made it clear that he considered fundamental Christian attitudes to be restrictive and prone to locking a person into one-way-thinking.<sup>66</sup> Govinda confirms this in the following:

There is no absolute code which divides the world into "good" or "bad" or which tells you what you must do. Buddhist morality is based on freedom, i.e. individual development. As the idea of sin is foreign to the Buddhist, he does not believe in eternal condemnation. Heaven and hell are within us and the possibility of salvation is open to all living beings. What we need nowadays are not ready-made solutions – the world, after all, is full of them, and there is no lack of revelations of truth – but we need the spirit of liberal and unconditioned investigation which enables us to discover the truth by ourselves.<sup>67</sup>

Thirty years had passed since Govinda had left Europe, and much had changed in the meantime. Winkler writes that the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation had become the new major factors of anxiety and conflict. He writes that most people had little trust in the post-war promises, and protested against what they considered meaningless and threatening in their societies. Young people, particularly in Western Europe, were looking for alternatives, which resulted in a growing interest in other cultures, especially those that were disappearing. And now that Govinda had decided to return to Europe, his message and mission as an emissary of Tibetan Buddhism couldn't have been more appropriate or relevant.<sup>68</sup>

Govinda's first stop was in Venice, Italy, where he participated at an international religious conference at the request of the Italian government. The purpose of the eight-day con-

ference was to discuss the fundamental problems of spiritual life, a topic close to Govinda's heart. The fact that the trip was fully paid for by the Italian government was hardly an offer that he could ignore. This was followed by an invitation from the Tibet and Buddhist societies in London, who asked him to speak to their members. There he spoke of Tibet's tragedy in a series of lectures, followed by talks in Europe about the problems that Tibetans were facing due to the imposition of Chinese order on their country.<sup>69</sup>

Govinda, of course, had Li by his side, and Winkler described them as "(a)rticulate, handsome and extremely visible in their artistic robes, (they) were a great attraction wherever they went. Personally, they were very gratified by the outpouring sympathy, and became quite adept at handling interviews and discussions . . . When they returned to India they were minor celebrities, and a new chapter in their lives had begun."<sup>70</sup>

Although the Govindas' visit to Europe had been a success, they were glad to be back at Kasar Devi. Govinda was writing again, and engaged in completing his autobiography, *The Way of the White Clouds*. Impressed with the Western interest in Tibet and her culture, he felt that his new book would be an ideal way to meet the demand. Li busied herself with more practical matters, such as the running and maintenance of the estate, which also had fruit trees that demanded constant care. Nevertheless, she found time to sit on a wall outside the house and do some sketching.<sup>71</sup>

However, the privacy of the Govinda household couldn't last forever. Govinda had made a lasting impression on the world when he and Li had visited Europe, and now he started to be sought out as a guru and authority on Tibetan Buddhism. In 1961 a small group, headed by

two well-known American poets, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, visited the Govindas at Kasar Devi. Snyder wanted to know more about meditation techniques, while Ginsberg wanted to know about the use of drugs in meditation.<sup>72</sup>

In 1965, Govinda and Li returned to Europe at the invitation of Arya Maitreya Mandala (AAM), a Tantric and Buddhist order that was started by Govinda with Tomo Geshe Rimpoche's encouragement and sanction in 1933.<sup>73 74</sup> The AAM has three main objectives, namely the practical realization of the

Dharma, assisting those who sincerely seek to understand the teachings, and the development of religious practices best suited to the West.<sup>75</sup> Thus, in his capacity as founder of the AAM, most of Govinda's time was taken up by seminars, lectures and meetings, and with each new gathering, more and more people came to participate, and respectfully ask his advice. Apart from this, Govinda also had to make time to speak with the publishers of his soon-to-be-published book, *The Way of the White Clouds*.<sup>76</sup>

In *The Lost Teachings of Lama Govinda* the Editor Richard Power sums up the prevailing situation as regards the East-West cultural surge as follows:

In 1966, *The Way of the White Clouds* was published. Commercial jets and mass communication made the world much more intimate. Infused by the diaspora of the Tibetans and popularized by writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allan Watts, and Ram Dass, as well as Snyder and Ginsberg, Eastern religion in general and Buddhism in particular exploded in the consciousness of the West . . . Many ardent seekers and dedicated workers . . . reached out to Govinda during the halcyon days of the late 1960's and

***There cannot be growth without changes. To live is not only to be, but to become . . . as long as we are in the process of becoming there is life and growth. The worst thing for us is the inability to change . . . as long as there is change, there is hope. But he who believes he has reached perfection has only reached a dead end, because he has ceased to strive.***

early 1970's. They included several individuals in San Francisco, California, which was, of course, one of the hotbeds of the West's revolution in consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

Now there was a need for Govinda to go further afield than Europe. This led to his and Li's tour of America in 1968. The Govindas visited Chicago, New York City, Buffalo, New York, Cleveland, Ohio, and Tulsa Oklahoma. Having started in mid-September, they arrived in California in early November, and a few days later they lectured at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. They also visited Big Sur, Sausalito, and San Diego, the latter to pick up the ashes of their friend Evans-Wentz, who had passed away on 17 July, 1965.<sup>78</sup>

On their next journey, which they started at the end of 1971, the Govindas were traveling for an entire year. Li actively participated on this tour by giving lectures on Tibetan Art. Their first stop-over was in Malaysia and the Philippines, after which they lectured on the West Coast of America. Then they proceeded to Europe and South America. Winkler remarks that one must admire the enterprise which they showed considering their ages. In October 1972, the Govindas even visited South Africa where they laid the foundation stone for the first chorten (Buddhist shrine) on the continent.<sup>79</sup>

In 1975, the Govindas accepted an invitation from Tarthang Tulku Rimpoche (a Tibetan teacher and founder of Dharma Publishing)<sup>80</sup> to live at the Nyingma institute in Berkley, California. It was an ideal place for them to stay, because meals were provided, outside visitors prohibited, and silence enforced. Thus Govinda was able to prepare his *Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* for publication, a collection of his lectures from Shantiniketan, which Dharma released the following year.<sup>81</sup>

Late in November that year Govinda suffered his first serious stroke, which left him completely debilitated for several days, but from which he made a good recovery. In late August 1977, Govinda and Li left California for Europe where the West German government had organized an exhibition in Bonn of their

artworks and publications. This included a book by Li entitled *Tibetan Fantasies*, consisting of paintings, poems, and music for children. Govinda gave a series of lectures and seminars first in Germany and later in Switzerland, and by the end of the year they returned to California and considered the possibility of remaining in America permanently.<sup>82</sup>

On their return to California, the Govindas were given shelter in the local Zen center in the Mill Valley, which is situated north of San Francisco. Govinda expressed his regret for not returning to their Indian friends and family, but he was concerned about Li who had developed Parkinson's disease, and he felt that she would receive better treatment in America than India. In return for the comfort of their lodgings Govinda gave four monthly lectures for the Zen center. Ken Winkler writes that "(p)roviding shelter for a man whom they considered an embodiment of the Dharma underscored their lecture series on meditation, spiritual directions and conscientious living."<sup>83</sup>

## Final Years

In 1978, both Govinda and Li had to face up to problems with ill health. Govinda had a gall-bladder operation, and Li suffered from hallucinations caused by her medication. Govinda was confined to bed for a month, and Li preferred to be left alone. They became permanent residents in America and thus entitled to government health payments, but their medical bills had mounted to thousands of dollars, and friends had to intervene to meet the debt.<sup>84</sup>

However, on the positive side, shortly after resolving their health problems, the Govindas went into negotiations with Dharma Publishing to get Li's photo book, *Tibet in Pictures*, published. The book saw the light of day in 1979, and bore testimony to their joint efforts from their Tsaparang expedition. The book appeared in two volumes, was beautifully bound, and bore witness to the statuary in the temples of Tsaparang and the Kumbum of Gyantse that has been destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

In 1980, the Govindas visited India for the final time and gave up their house at Kasar De-

vi. Govinda felt that change was inevitable, and expressed his thoughts three years later in an article as follows:

There cannot be growth without changes. To live is not only to be, but to become . . . as long as we are in the process of becoming there is life and growth. The worst thing for us is the inability to change . . . as long as there is change, there is hope. But he who believes he has reached perfection has only reached a dead end, because he has ceased to strive.<sup>85</sup>

Kasar Devi was legally secured, and the property's title transferred to the Degunpa Order, who was henceforth responsible for its administration. The Govindas' books, papers and household items were finally moved off the ridge by a long line of bullock carts. Li was unhappy about these developments, and preferred to consider it only a temporary measure, hoping that their return was only a matter of time.<sup>86</sup>

The house in Mill Valley had become a refuge for Govinda and Li. A friend, Yvonne Rand, would visit them daily and take care of their needs. A nurse in an adjoining room also provided a constant, though unobtrusive source of aid and comfort. In his last years, Govinda was confined to a wheelchair, but this did not stop him from being productive. He still wrote numerous articles. In 1981, his most ambitious book, a culmination of forty years' work, *The Inner Structure of the I Ching*, was published. He considered it his most important book.<sup>87</sup>

In May 1984, Arya Maitreya Mandala exhibited Govinda's books and paintings, and also presented lectures by Indialogists and society members. This tribute was paid to Govinda in Stuttgart, West Germany, but due to ill health the Govindas were unable to attend.<sup>88</sup>

Lama Govinda's last written communication was to an English Buddhist friend, Sangharashita, who had also traveled with him in Italy, a country on which Govinda thought back with deep affection. In the following excerpt Govinda says:

I am a great admirer of Italian art, and like you, I always uphold the importance of Eu-

ropean culture. Without knowing the roots of our own culture, how can we absorb the essence of Buddhist culture?

Four days later, on January 14, 1985, Govinda tried to tell Li and a friend a story, but his narration was interrupted by a final stroke, and he died in his wife's arms.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

This article is but a summary of Lama Govinda's highly eventful life, and an attempted testimony of how it is possible to reconcile Eastern and Western values within the mental framework of a single individual. The majority of quotations in this article referring to the Tibetan experience come from *The Way of the White Clouds*, and serve as an incentive to the reader to experience Govinda's writings first hand. His more scholarly works will be discussed in a forthcoming and independent article that will examine the *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism; Creative Meditation and Multidimensional Consciousness; and The Lost Teachings of Lama Govinda*.

<sup>1</sup> The photo of Lama Anagarika Govinda is from the *Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia*. Use permitted for non-profit educational use only. [http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/File:Radio\\_lama\\_Anagarika\\_Govinda.jpg#filelinks](http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/File:Radio_lama_Anagarika_Govinda.jpg#filelinks). (accessed October 9, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Philosophy-Lama-Govinda.htm> (accessed August 30, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys* (Shaftesbury, UK: Element Book Limited, 1990), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966; reprint; London: Rider, 2006), 197 - 219.

<sup>5</sup> Li Gotami, *Illustrated Weekly of India*, from an article dated April 15, 1951, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake\\_Manasarovar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Manasarovar) (accessed April 5, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake\\_Rakshastal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Rakshastal) (accessed April 5, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 202.

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- 12 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 85.  
13 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 221.  
14 Ibid., 221 – 222.  
15 Ibid., 222 – 223.  
16 Ibid., 225 – 226.  
17 Ibid., 228 – 234.  
18 Ibid., 229.  
19 Ibid.  
20 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 89.  
21 Li Gotami, *Illustrated Weekly of India*, from an article dated April 29, 1951, 29.  
22 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 232 – 233.  
23 Ibid., 233 – 234.  
24 Ibid., 233 – 235.  
25 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 90 – 91.  
26 *Fata Morgana*, Italian for “mirage.”  
27 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 235.  
28 Ibid.  
29 Ibid., 236.  
30 Ibid., 237.  
31 Ibid.  
32 Ibid., 236.  
33 Ibid., 237.  
34 Ibid., 238.  
35 Ibid.  
36 Ibid., 238 – 239.  
37 Ibid., 240.  
38 Ibid., 241 – 242.  
39 Ibid., 242, 247.  
40 Ibid., 242.  
41 Ibid., 245.  
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43 Ibid.  
44 Ibid., 247.  
45 Ibid.  
46 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 97.  
47 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 253.  
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58 Ibid., 272.  
59 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 127 – 209.  
60 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 273.  
61 Ibid., 281.  
62 Ibid., 282.  
63 Ibid., 121, 125.  
64 Ibid., 127.  
65 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 35.  
66 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 130.  
67 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Why I am a Buddhist*, (Mahadodhi Youth League, Sarnath, undated), 4.  
68 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 137.  
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73 Richard Power, *The Lost Teachings of Lama Govinda*, (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 2007), xxxiv.  
74 <http://www.arya-maitreya-mandala.org/> (accessed July 7, 2015).  
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76 Ibid., 151.  
77 Richard Power, *The Lost Teachings of Lama Govinda*, xxxiv.  
78 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 154.  
79 Ibid., 155 – 156.  
80 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarthang\\_Tulku](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarthang_Tulku) (accessed July 10, 2015).  
81 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 157.  
82 Ibid., 158.  
83 Ibid., 159.  
84 Ibid., 160.  
85 Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Buddhism as Actuality, Beyond Pessimism and Optimism*, (The American Theosophist, Fall 1983), 361.  
86 Ken Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, 163 – 164.  
87 Ibid., 164 – 165.  
88 Ibid., 168.  
89 Ibid., 168 – 169.