

## **Opening Your Heart, Caring for Others**

An Interview with Geshe Michael Roach

By Lisa F. Weber

On Thursday, March 25, 2004, Geshe Michael Roach appeared at Vitality Natural Foods and Yoga in Wilmette for a book signing of his recently published *The Tibetan Book of Yoga*. At the signing Geshe Michael demonstrated "heart yoga," the Tibetan style of yoga that he is presenting to the U.S. on his book tour. Before the demonstration, I had the pleasure of interviewing Geshe Michael about himself, his new book and heart yoga.

Geshe Michael is a fully ordained Buddhist monk. He received his undergraduate degree from Princeton University and his "Geshe" title (master of Buddhism) from Sera Mey Monastery [a Tibetan monastery transplanted to India] after 22 years of study both in India and the U.S. with Lama Khen Rinposhe Geshe Lobsang Tharchin. Geshe Michael has been teaching Buddhism since 1981 and is a scholar of Sanskrit, Tibetan and Russian. Over the last 20 years, he has incorporated the spiritual principles of Tibetan Buddhism into numerous projects. He has directed a successful diamond company in New York, translated and published numerous works, started the Diamond Mountain University and Retreat Center in rural Arizona and the Enlightened Business Institute, and much more.

LFW: What was your motivation for becoming a Buddhist monk?

GMR: Two things--my mother was dying, and I was having girlfriend problems. My motivation was suffering. My parents were alcoholics and went through a bad divorce. At the time my mom was dying, I was signed up for Christian seminary. I was having trouble understanding why two people who loved each other could turn on each other and why someone who I loved so much could die. I needed clarification. [Then] I received a scholarship to study where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lives [in Dharamsala, India, seat of the Tibetan government in exile], and I studied there for the next 22 years. I didn't reject Christianity. In fact, I still consider myself a Christian. I needed to know what the meaning of life is if everyone has to get old and die.

LFW: Many of us are experiencing this same suffering. What can you tell someone who has experienced alcoholism, death of a loved one and relationship problems that might give them tools for moving through pain and suffering?

GMR: The big thing I learned in Buddhism is that whatever we perceive in the world is a result of how we have treated other people. If you maintain the first ethical code [of the Yoga Sutras ]--the first yama [ ahimsa , nonviolence]--your world will change. The first yama says that if you take care of others, your world will change and violence in your world will disappear. Alcoholism is a type of violence; bad relationships are a type of violence. The Yoga Sutras , which is the mother of all yoga, says that if you take care of others, your world will change.

LFW: Women do that to a fault sometimes. What about codependency and boundaries in response to taking care of others? How can you have a loving and compassionate heart, but still detach?

GMR: Simply put, you cannot take care of others without taking care of yourself. A big part of yoga is taking care of your own mind and body so that you can take care of others. If you sacrifice your own health to serve others, that would be a failure.

LFW: In your book, *The Tibetan Book of Yoga*, the heart yoga style focuses on a different way of doing pranayama. A breath cycle begins with the exhalation, followed by the inhalation. The book says that when we are born we inhale, and when we die we exhale. By reversing this flow of breath we are putting death aside. Help me understand this concept.

GMR: In the Tibetan monastery you are not allowed to do yoga for 25 years. You first study the ethical code of life. When I told the Tibetan lamas that 20 million Americans are doing yoga they were shocked. On the other hand, they thought it was a great karmic ripening. Really, it is pranayama linked to asana linked to meditation. In the monastery, yoga in the long term is used to overcome death itself. The purpose of exhaling first and then inhaling is to open the central channel. That is to change the inner body, the chakra system. To change the body is to change the heart. When the heart chakra opens you become more of a being of light. When you exhale first and then inhale, it has an effect of concentrating prana in the central channel. We call it a harbinger. You still would inhale on the way up and exhale on the way down. In the asana practice, you begin with a movement that has you exhale first. It is really just a different way in which you count the breaths. The Tibetan lamas believe this is a huge spiritual ripening. The ultimate purpose in yoga is to help many people at one time.

LFW: In heart yoga you are paying attention to the flow of your thoughts and sending your loved ones thoughts of love, compassion and patience. The end result is a calming feeling and a compassionate heart.

GMR: Yes! And hopefully it will open it.

LFW: In this practice you visualize a rose at your heart with a diamond in the center. You are supposed to inhale your loved one's problems into the diamond and explode it, and at that moment their problems are destroyed. This scares me because if someone isn't good at this technique they could in fact hurt themselves energetically.

GMR: In the monastery they are very, very strict that you don't hold their suffering in for very long at all. You must destroy every last atom of their suffering in a heartbeat. Yes, there should be a moment of hesitation or fear when you are about to inhale the other person's problems. [Then] you must explode the diamond in a flash or it could hurt you!

LFW: In your book you mention Jivamutki. Have you worked with David Life and Sharon Gannon?

GMR: Christie [McNally, his spiritual partner] and I were trained in Tibetan yoga style together. We wanted to do a three-year silent retreat. We did it three years ago. Every four or five months during our three-year silent retreat in the mountainous desert of Arizona, David Life and Sharon Gannon would fly out to teach us. They were very kind to us and the most influential teachers in our yoga practice. They are wonderful people and very dear teachers. During this time we learned that Tibetan yoga came from

the same lineage as ashtanga, Iyengar, Bikram, Anusara, etc. As Sanskrit and Tibetan scholars, Christie and I discovered that 1,000 years ago Tibetan yoga broke off from India because India was attacked by the Muslims.

LFW: Are you a vegetarian? And what can you say about eating meat and karma?

GMR: Yes, [Christie and I] have been vegetarians for a long time. Tibetan lamas eat meat mostly because of where they live. They live so far above tree level. Considering karma, you can experience the karma of the food. When consuming meat, which is gotten through a violent means, your mind will become more violent. You will have more angry thoughts. You have to start from the source--from something as simple as what you eat and put into your body. The main point of the book is that if you practice yoga but are not kind to others, the yoga won't work. If you are kind to other people, that is what you will see in your world. If you harm other people, that is what you will see in your world.

LFW: The alcoholic drinks because he or she is in pain. You are suggesting that this practice is an alternative to drugs and alcohol.

GMR: In the Tibetan monastery you take a vow not to drink alcohol. In [an] ancient [Buddhist] text, 3,000 years old, they say no fermented or chemical intoxicants. I brought my mom when she was dying to see the Dalai Lama who said that if you want to get the same results as intoxicants, practice yoga, practice meditation, study ethics and take care of other people. That is the story of my life and it works. The results will be the same and they will last and they are free.

LFW: Tell me about the Enlightened Business Institute, which you started.

GMR: First, I want to tell you about The Yoga Studies Institute. We come into a yoga studio for two weeks and do an intensive study of the Yoga Sutras. The first one we did was at OM Yoga in New York. We had 100 yoga teachers from all yoga traditions. We trained them really hard on the Yoga Sutras. It was intense and it was beautiful. The next one we are doing is at Jivamukti. We hope to do one here in Chicago. The idea is to bring people the deeper meaning. When we split off one thousand years ago, the Tibetans took the internal stuff and the Indians took the external stuff, and now we are trying to bring it back together, and the planet is ripe [for this]!

EBI is a separate project. I wanted to raise money for the Tibetan refugees. I started this diamond company in New York. It was the fastest growing company in New York, and I based it only on spiritual principles. Through the Enlightened Business Institute we teach you how to conduct your business only through spiritual principles. Yoga or business, it's the same thing. Your yoga only works on your body if you take care of other people, and your business only works if you take care of other people. It is not that you need to make little money and be a failure. By conducting your business through spiritual principles, you become a super business person!

LFW: It sounds like there would be a huge audience for this.

GMR: Yes, huge. In fact, my book *The Diamond Cutter*, which talks about this, is on the bestseller lists in Japan and Taiwan.

GMR's closing comments:

We all have desires in our life. On a very primitive level we all want to eat, to have sex, we want to be successful, we want others to give us attention. On the very deepest level, we want to take care of other people. That is what yoga does. It allows you to connect with that urge. It is what we were put here to do. We don't want to be selfish cruds. We want to take care of other people.

The other thing is to live more simply. You would be happier. The more things you own is harmful. You have less energy to create and to take care of other people. Christie and I live in a hut!

<http://www.yogachicago.com/may04/roachinterview.shtml>

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You can receive the full interview on CD free by going to [lisayoga.com](http://lisayoga.com). (There will be a shipping charge, and you will have the option of making a donation to Yoga for Hope.) To learn more about Geshe Michael Roach, visit [www.world-view.org](http://www.world-view.org).

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