

SPIRITUAL CHIC: WINNING WITHOUT EGO

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for
The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism***

I get it, really, mostly I do—the mystical part, anyway—the white light, the countless realities (just like rides at Disneyland), the planes of infinite ecstasy. When I read a talk by Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, "Rama," in which he says, "Beyond the body there is light, infinite light, and enlightenment—oceans of light, continents of light, universes of light,"¹ I am so there.

But then, I've been wired for trippy my whole life, mostly without the support of psychotropics. On my bookshelf, a copy of *How to Know Higher Worlds*, by occult scientist Rudolph Steiner, snugs up to Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the pinnacle of Buddhist logic. Of course, Nāgārjuna, whose name is derived from serpents symbolic of occult knowledge, is no mere razor's edge of logic. His *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is the trippiest ride in Disneyland, leaving no place to even hang a white light.

I love pretty much anyone, Buddhist or not, who is unseduced by the hard, illusory surfaces of the material world, who knows how to dissolve the boundaries between world and mind, who plays in the groundless, magical display of infinity. That is why Rama's eclectic blend of occult, mystic, yogic, shamanist, as well as Buddhist teachings feels right homey to me, and I don't even get any New Age indigestion from the mix. Rama throws in such diverse ingredients as Carlos Castaneda, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and Henry David Thoreau into his spiritual cocktail, regarding it as a matter of expediency:

I learn from every tradition, just like we learn from science. If somebody did an experiment 400 years ago and they came up with a good result, maybe it took them 30 years to get that result—we can read about their experiment in two minutes and do it. It took them 30 years to get to that two minutes. It saves us time. So we study Taoism,

Confucianism, variant forms of Buddhism—Mahayana, Hinayana, Zen—Hinduism, yoga of all forms, Christianity, Judaism—it doesn't really matter what it's called.²

Rama's Tantric Buddhism

Most often Rama calls the mix "Tantric Buddhism," which he defines as "a collection of things that work by doing them." Tantra is "a series of methods that we use to expand awareness beyond awareness."³

The goal of Tantric Buddhism? Annihilation of the ego.⁴

Inasmuch as his goal was dissolution of the ego, you could say that Rama taught old-fashioned Buddhism. Recognizing ego's mistake of imagining a self existing separate from everything else in the universe is the heart of early Buddhism. If you look for an independently existing *self*, your *self*, you cannot find it. What you find is the whole universe attached to what seemed to be a self. Nor can you find any thing in the world that exists independent of your perception of it. The whole universe is empty of inherent existence. No inside, no outside. Trippy.

Dissolution of the delusion of ego was the inspiration that led me five years ago, after my divorce, to take on the inglorious work of becoming a nurses' aide. A milquetoast imitation of Mother Teresa, I bathed hospice patients, changed their soiled briefs, emptied their catheters, moistened their mouths, and kept them swaddled in pillows as they journeyed to the other shore. Basic nursing care is indeed beautiful work, good spiritual practice, with no taint of the eight worldly concerns, but it is physically demanding and the wages are poverty level.

When I learned that the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism supports, among other things, Buddhist education, I applied for a scholarship to attend Naropa University. In 1998, Rama left \$18 million dollars, much of it donated by his students, to form the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism. The mission is to support the activities of

American Buddhism. Such inspired Buddhist organizations as the Zen Hospice Project, Insight Meditation Society, Zen Peacemakers, and the Prison Dharma Network have been grant recipients. The Foundation has also supported Buddhist-inspired initiatives at several universities such as MIT and Brown University, as well as Buddhist-inspired Naropa University.

Thanks to the generosity of Rama and his students, I was able to return to school and earn a Master of Divinity degree, so I can continue to serve in hospice as a Buddhist chaplain. As a Buddhist chaplain, I am part of a growing movement of respect for diversity in spiritual care, in which spiritual support is seen as being for everyone, not just the conventionally religious, and in which artificial distinctions between the religious and the non-religious, the sacred and the secular, are transcended. You might say I am taking a tantric approach to chaplaincy.

Because tantra does not create distinctions between spiritual and secular, annihilation of the ego can happen anywhere. While many spiritual practitioners, like myself, choose traditional service roles that feel more supportive of spiritual practice, Rama suggested that the best place to test your mettle as a spiritual practitioner is the dog-eat-dog arena of American business. In fact, if you were his student, you could expect an assignment to get a high-powered career in technology, or to start your own business, or both.

That's right. If you think you can't be spiritual until you quit your soul-sucking job and go live in a monastery, a cave, or a forest, think again. Rama says, "Running off to the ashram and meditating doesn't create enlightenment. Talking to gurus and teachers for hours on end doesn't create enlightenment."

Know what does? Meditation, of course.⁵

But did you really think you were going to just meditate all day long? Who is going to pay the bills?

We are American Buddhists, Rama reminds us repeatedly. For American Buddhists, the workplace is our monastery. No crybabies, no snivelers. Do you want to be enlightened? Do you want to experience your brighter side?

"If you're a sniveler, a whiner, a complainer, you'll never be happy," says Rama. "We all have that side, but we get it under control. Get a little stoical and just take the pain."⁶

Ouch. So, after a ride through universes of light, Rama brings you back down to earth and says, *Okay, kids, time to get a job.*

Maybe you're thinking, "wait a minute, this isn't what the Buddha taught." Actually, according to the book *What the Buddha Taught*, Buddha Shakyamuni did indeed tell people "how important it is to improve their economic condition." He said that, in order to be happy, a man should be "skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession he is engaged, and he should know it well."⁷

The Buddha encouraged career success. Rama, in the contemporary American version, said if you are going to have a career, it might as well be high-paying, challenging, and one that stretches your mental capacity to the max. How about computer programming? Will Arntz, software developer and film producer, remembers:

[Rama] called us "the granola crowd" because we were all very much into health foods. At one point, he said to us, "Well, guys, things are going to change," and he started sending everyone to computer school....One of his favorite lines was, "You know, I could teach you the path to enlightenment by stacking wood, but at the end of the day, you haven't got a pot to piss in. No one respects you if you're a meditator in the West, but they'll respect you if you make a lot of money programming. So, we're doing programming, guys and gals." So off we went.⁸

Reflecting on that favorite line of Rama's, Walter Goodwin, CEO of Terma Labs told a group of business students recently, "He would say, 'I could teach you about enlightenment by stacking logs.' And I would think, 'I sure as hell wish you would do that.'"

But Walter and Will didn't train in enlightenment by stacking logs. Their assignment was to become computer programmers, then software developers, then creators of software companies. Besides giving them a pot to piss in, computer science was deemed by Rama as a particularly fitting field for spiritual practice, in that it requires the same kind of structured concentration and mental agility as a more old-fashioned tantric practitioner would need for sustaining complex visualizations. A career in computer programming was regarded by Rama as unsurpassed for rigorous training of the mind.

Besides, it was the 1980's, careers in technology were heating up, and Rama had a point about meditators being disrespected. Here in the 21st century, Eckhart Tolle has made "resting in the Now" as familiar as talk TV, but in the 1980's, hippies had morphed into yuppies. It was the decade of Armani design, self-indulgence, and big hair; television shows like *Dynasty* glamorized wealth and power; and Linda Evans in a shoulder-padded power suit was the defining fashion statement for women. Meditating or studying Asian religions was regarded as suspicious, cult paranoia was rampant, and money was God.

So, if you had leanings toward the spiritual, it didn't hurt to have a front. At least, that's how Rama saw it: "If you make money, and you're successful, you can stand on your head for ten hours and people think you're successful and not weird."⁹

Thus Rama equated financial security with the safety, well-being, and freedom necessary for spiritual practice. According to his students, Rama would often say, "How can you meditate if you're worrying about the rent?"

Financial security and social acceptability were good reasons for having a successful career, but these were not Rama's main concern. Because his definition of career success is "using your work to advance yourself spiritually," in the type of Buddhism Rama taught, "career

actually is the central point in practice." We spend many more hours a day working than we do in meditation, and if we create a split between work and meditation, then we are wasting most of our day. On the other hand, Rama explains, "If you use work as meditation, if work becomes meditation, then eight hours of work is eight hours of meditation."¹⁰

The best careers for meditation, such as those in information technology, engage the mind in visualizing complex structures that develop attention and awareness. However, the stress and speediness of any career, when approached as spiritual practice, can sharpen attention and foster a panoramic view. Being thrown into the stressful world of business forces you to focus, teaches you to trust yourself, and develops both personal power and humility.

Rama practiced what he preached, throwing himself into all kinds of challenging endeavors, many in which he had no experience—earning a PhD in English literature and teaching college-level classes early in his life, and later becoming a successful businessman, music producer, and the author of a best-selling novel. Whatever he felt drawn to, he believed he could master, and he did.

Rama taught his students that their thoughts shaped their reality, and that they, too, could break out of their self-imposed limitations and do a lot more than they thought they could. To that end, Rama pushed his students into ever deeper waters of career success. In a recent talk on what he learned from Rama about business, Walter said, "Rama had some sort of confidence that if he threw all of us into the churning white water, we had what it took to survive, and that's something I didn't believe about myself. So, I guess it's more at a meta-level that I learned about business and myself from Rama...After a while I learned to throw myself in."

If you think being a woman kept you out of the deep end of career success, not so. Marcie Barkin, founder and CEO of Axis, a software design company, was already a successful

commercial actress when she met Rama. She saw herself as "right-brained," not intellectual, as "street smart" but not technologically smart. Rama gave Marcie a challenge that forced her to change her image of herself. He "suggested," in his typical way of giving an assignment, that she start her own software company.

So, Marcie says, "kicking and screaming over the next seven or eight years, I did that....It was insane and stressful, but unbelievably joyous at the same time."

Veronica Sanford, an IT project manager who was a waitress when she met Rama, says, "Whenever I had read about student-teacher relationships, it was always between two men, like Merlin and Arthur." She was astonished to find a teacher who treated female students as equals.

In fact, equality was one of the reasons Rama encouraged his female students to pursue careers in computer programming. Veronica recalls that some female students were nurses who were burned out, overworked, disrespected. "Rama would say, the world needs good computer programmers, too. And if you're a good programmer, they can't discriminate against you for being a woman, black, gay, Buddhist...Most women at that time were earning a lot less than men, but his students were making \$100,000 a year."¹¹

Lisa Marshall, who was a law student when she met Rama, is quick to point out that Rama did not throw his students into the deep end without first teaching them to swim. "Rama gave his students support to help them accomplish things they themselves were not certain they could accomplish," she says. "Anyone can throw you in the deep end unprepared. Rama prepared us, then he suggested the deep end would be fun, and we decided to jump in and try."¹²

Rama's American Buddhism

Welcome to Rama's wonderful world of *American Buddhism*. American Buddhism embraces everything in good tantric style, especially everything American. Most emphatically, it

does not depend on the forms of Asian Buddhist traditions. "Buddhism isn't about temples and incense and shaved heads and robes," Rama says, "real Buddhism is about meditation."

Lenz Foundation board member Lisa Lewison, who teaches a course on "Meditation and Women's Empowerment," largely based on Rama's teachings, explains: "American Buddhism uses American or Western artifacts ranging from books to movies to mentally challenging careers to sports as a specific and core path to Buddhist enlightenment. American Buddhism doesn't reject anything western culture has to offer, but rather integrates the basic premises of meditation and mindfulness....Rama said that anyone who meditates is a Buddhist. He meant it literally. Buddhism is not a religion in his view, created by the Buddha and his followers, but a state of awareness."¹³

Bringing meditation and mindfulness to the rawness of American culture and the hard knocks of the American workplace was Rama's specialty. "Rama's genius," says Walter, "and mission/mandate, I guess, was to make Buddhism real real real. If it isn't viscerally about transformation and evolution, then...I would ask if it's really Buddhism...ya know?"

According to Rama, American culture, with its speediness and materialism, is actually superior for transformation and evolution than the life of the hermit or monastic. "There are certain challenges that you face living in the world, certain difficult situations that you deal with that you don't deal with in a monastery. And sooner or later, the person in the monastery is going to have to overcome those things...why not just tackle it to start with?"¹⁴

In reflecting on the transformative challenges that monastics miss out on, Walter says: "Business is visceral, real, dirty and gritty. There are assholes, people who cheat and lie to you, who steal your ideas, who just aren't very nice and friendly, people who want to take your money. It is a spiritual war, an occult war you have with yourself, to test your limits, to see what

you're made of. It's a pretty fertile ground. I learned more about trust and opening myself to the infinite by being overwhelmed in business than by any particular moment of meditation I'd ever had.... "

I am reminded of the Buddhist parable about a monk who retires to the woods to meditate on patience. After years of solitary meditation, a beggar happens upon the hermit . “What are you doing?” the beggar asks.

Wanting to impress the beggar, the hermit solemnly replies, "I am meditating on the Lord Buddha's perfection of patience."

The beggar gives the hermit a knowing wink. "What a great scam! You must be making a killing off the locals!"

The hermit, indignant, tells the beggar to get lost.

“Eat shit!” the beggar says.

The monk jumps up, furious, and yells, “No, YOU eat shit!”

The moral of the story, of course, is that you cannot practice patience without adversity. From this perspective, everyday life is, as Rudolph Steiner says, "a good occult school—perhaps the best." As does Rama, Steiner advises deliberately seeking out difficult situations in order to cultivate courage and fearlessness. If you are afraid of failing, don't be—failing is just part of the lesson plan: "We must learn not to be discouraged by failure. We should be able to think: 'I will forget that I have failed again, and I will try once more as if it never happened.'"¹⁵

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Ponlop Rinpoche likewise confirms that "realization can arise within the most mundane and chaotic situation." An overly precious spiritual environment, on the other hand, is a potential hindrance:

... We can experience complete Mahamudra realization while driving down the interstate, if we are in the proper situation, which is the ordinary world. From the

Essence point of view, all these trappings of spirituality that we have—the beautiful and sacred setup of the shrine, the cushions, the banners—can become the very obstacles that prevent us from realizing Mahamudra mind.¹⁶

Accomplished yogis and yoginis, such as chöd practitioner Machig Labdrön, have traditionally sought out the most disturbing places to practice, most notably charnel grounds littered with dismembered and rotting corpses. These provide the best support for contemplations on impermanence and emptiness, and experiential cutting through of ego-clinging.

Clearly, Rama is in good company when it comes to the notion that the stressful life we might see as an obstacle to our enlightenment is not, in fact, a problem at all. In American culture, the most extreme venues of practice, the hell realms and charnel grounds, might be the hospitals and nursing homes, slaughterhouses, slums, and prisons. Certainly, these are the places with the most potential to crack the heart open with compassion and sorrow, or fear and vulnerability. However, the place where most of us face our weaknesses, where we spend our days in spiritual turmoil struggling with more mundane and pervasive forms of aggression, greed, and betrayal is the average place of business.

The most ordinary, workaday situation is as fertile a ground as any for awakening. In fact, Walpola Rahula calls it a "sad misconception, due evidently to a lack of understanding of the teaching of the Buddha" to think that Buddhism "is so lofty and sublime a system that it cannot be practiced by ordinary men and women in this workaday world of ours, and that one has to retire from it to a monastery, or to some quiet place, if one desires to be a true Buddhist."¹⁷

Spiritual Materialism?

From a tantric perspective, I can follow Rama into the clear light and then back down to the earthiness of the American workplace. From the perspective that lines between sacred and the secular are mere concepts, that everything is equally grist for the mill, the workplace

certainly has great potential as a spiritual arena. However, Rama doesn't simply tell us to get a job; he tells us how to be a "winner." In *Zen Tapes*, a collection of transcribed talks on such topics as "Career Success", "Personal Power," and "Developing Willpower," Rama emphasizes meditation as the key to winning in every kind of endeavor, ranging from career to sports to being a student. There is actually a talk entitled "Winning," which claims without apology: "Zen gives you the competitive edge to be a winner."

Yup, that's right, the competitive edge to be a winner—as defined by and understood as being in contrast to a "loser." As in, "If the game of life ended tonight, would you be a winner or a loser?" This prevalent desire to win is American, all right—but is it Buddhism? Is it *Zen*? If the word "Zen" were not insistently repeated throughout the chapters of this collection of talks, I would think I had accidentally picked up *The Seven Lost Secrets of Success: Million Dollar Ideas of Bruce Barton, America's Forgotten Genius*.

If it's all about winning, Rama's school of American Buddhism looks a lot like the plain, old self-serving, ego-driven greed of the average schmuck and of everyday capitalism. Is there really a difference between tantric business, with its supposed goal of ego annihilation, and the ordinary, age-old materialistic business which shamelessly mucks in the eight samsaric concerns—seeking gain, pleasure, fame, and praise, while avoiding loss, pain, infamy, and blame? Is Rama describing a path of spiritual realization or of spiritual materialism?

Spiritual materialism, in case you are not familiar with it, is the term used by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa to describe a particular kind of self-deception in which ego hijacks spirituality for its own purposes.¹⁸

Interestingly enough, about a decade ago, when I first began studying and practicing meditation within the Shambhala lineage, I went through some similar suspicions regarding the

motivations of Chögyam Trungpa himself. While Trungpa had the Tibetan history, lineage, and orthodox teachings behind his name, he threw himself completely into American karma and wholeheartedly embraced an American way of life. His teaching methods and lifestyle were often unorthodox and outrageous, and certainly he blurred distinctions between the sacred and the secular. People close to him sometimes got burned.

For some months after entering the Shambhala path, I kept asking every Trungpa student I met how they felt about the excesses of his American lifestyle and the rough treatment of some of his students. No one ever gave me a particularly satisfying answer. Usually the idea was something to the effect that he played with people's minds, undermined their projections and their unexamined distinctions regarding what is acceptable "spiritual" behavior and what isn't. They said if you were there, if you knew him, his realization was so obvious.

Oh, okay. Never mind about the *losers* who got fried.

In the meantime, I really connected to Trungpa's teachings. Like Rama, Trungpa didn't create distinctions between everyday life and spiritual life. He taught about meditation in action, about the genuine heart of sadness, about warriorship in the world, and about spontaneous action. But what mostly convinced me that Trungpa was for real was his students. Trungpa has some amazing, inspired students. Through the Shambhala organization and Naropa University, these students have been my teachers, my mentors, my models of gentleness and warriorship in the world. Truly, there are a few idiots and an occasional asshole, but most of the ones I have encountered are for real. The genuine students are spacious, good-humored, humble, and spiritually disciplined. They work tirelessly for the sake of others. And they credit their teacher.

Rama's Heirs

So, in contemplating my misgivings about Rama's emphasis on career success, I finally

decided that the best way to tell the tree is by its fruit. I already knew about the Lenz Foundation and its good works, but if the true test of a teacher is in the transmission, it seemed worthwhile to look at what Rama's students are like.

I had already met Walter, who lives in Boulder, and found him to be almost as enigmatic as Rama. Walter is a software developer, the CEO of a cutting-edge software company, a successful businessman—not a profile I usually connect with. But Walter is also mellow, funny, and self-effacing. He wears goofy sneakers and talks dharma. He blows away every petty preconception I have about businessmen. He is kind and generous, and his employees actually seem happy.

"Most of my employees don't know I'm a Buddhist," he says, "but I try to live my life as a Buddhist and run my company as a Buddhist company. What I hope they see is that I try to live my life with integrity, compassion, hard work, ethics, effort, and compassion."¹⁹

Walter's most unexpected and appealing quality, from my perspective, is that he is genuinely repulsed by the ugliness of the business world. Nevertheless, he stays in it and makes a spiritual practice of being in business. "I try to make it about self-giving," he says, "whether it's serving my employees, my customers, my investors, or larger goals."

He sees his role as CEO of Terma Labs as creating a space for people whom he describes as being a lot more talented than himself: "I had to step outside myself and decide who and what I was doing this for. If I couldn't do it for myself, I could find a way if I were doing it for others. As my ego becomes less involved, I could accept more help from smart people. I could ask more questions, get more ideas. I could surround myself with people, try to be humble, and learn from them."

Other students of Rama also attribute their success to being humble enough to bring

together talented people and getting their own ego out of the way. Veronica, who became an electrical engineer while she was Rama's student, claims she "wasn't the best" engineer, but she was successful because she had learned through her practice to have the humility to "be a team player and to pay attention." She observes that, "Americans in business have a hard time working on teams. You have to let go of your ego." In her current management role, Veronica says, "Everyone is an asset. Everyone on my project team has a voice, and I try to use them to the fullest of their ability."

In business, or any social arena, Rama taught that, "The hallmark of enlightenment is how you treat others."²⁰ In that regard, Lisa Marshall remembers Rama's "profound humility," that he "always treated everyone with respect, kindness, and equanimity. Even in the smallest, quietest ways Rama treated people with respect, such as when he talked to a receptionist at a law office or a waiter at a restaurant or a member of the public after one of his lectures."

Rama also taught the tantric art of spontaneous, or egoless, action. The key to egolessness, according to both traditional Buddhist teachings and according to Rama, is learning not to conceptually split yourself off from your activities. Rama teaches the tantric view that when your mind and actions are integrated, you can flow with whatever is happening....

Most people make a mistake in life: they *think* their lives instead of *living* their lives. They believe that what they do, who they are, and how they do what they do, is something they must think about and choose. This way of approaching life, however, doesn't create perfect actions. As a matter of fact, this approach to life makes a person very egotistical. People who *think* their lives instead of living them directly, automatically assume they always know the best way of doing everything....But when we come to see that we *are* the thing that we do, then we will be directed by the doing of that thing rather than egotistically attempting to imperfectly direct our own emotions.²¹

This integrity, living life directly and seeing that we are what we do, is a skill practiced and taught by Stan Koehler, Zen priest and co-creator of *Peace on the Street*.

Another of Rama's technology protégés, Stan, created a successful company but set it aside to devote much of his time to coaching at-risk youth in New York's Spanish Harlem. He teaches integrity, self-confidence, freedom, and focus by integrating concentration exercises and martial arts practice into traditional GED instruction. And he gives a lot of credit to his former teacher: "If someone came in and asked, 'What is Stan teaching?' They could trace it back to Rama's teachings."

In fact, Stan has two portraits of Rama hanging at the school. "The one in the Zendo is a rock-and-roll presentation that he autographed for all of us in the mid-nineties—you can see it in the background of the GED+ video on the website; the other is a poster of Rama with a snowboard, released as part of his *Snowboarding to Nirvana* book tour. Someone found it in a junk shop somewhere and bought it for me for Xmas—all the guys signed it with various Merry Xmas greetings."

Although he does some amazing work in New York's Spanish Harlem, Stan denies that the work he does is altruistic. "It's in front of me," he says, "I am doing what I enjoy doing." That's a Rama kind of statement, of egoless integrity and spontaneous action.

Also like his spiritual teacher, Stan teaches the practical benefits of meditation without the trappings of Asian cultural forms. He tells me, "This to me is what American Buddhism is. Buddhism isn't a religion."

Working with American Buddhism's overarching view that you create your own world, Stan teaches his students about detachment and gaining control of their emotions, about taking responsibility for their own choices. Taking responsibility for our own choices requires the recognition that our experience is largely self-created. Rama taught the Buddha's basic teaching that the world does not exist outside of, or separate from, ourselves. The world is "created anew

at every moment by mind. By your mind."²²

A genuine realization of the radical interconnectedness of mind and world, that we create the world anew at every moment, is a transformative and life-changing paradigm shift. One of Rama's students, Will Arntz, has successfully conveyed this paradigm shift to many people who have never meditated or studied Buddhism.

As the writer, producer, and director of the 2004 film *What the Bleep Do We Know?* Will has been perhaps the most influential of all Rama's students. It is hard to mention Will's film and its impact on people's lives without getting all gushy, so I'll just go ahead and blubber about it long enough to say that, with its exploration of the radical interconnectedness between mind and world, *What the Bleep?* is the kind of movie that transforms lives. People watch it over and over because it explains how our thoughts actually do have tangible effects and how love really can change the world.

Will was interested in the science of mind before he met Rama, but he says that without Rama the film probably would never have been made: "If Rama hadn't been doing his thing and kicking me in the butt all the time, I wouldn't have created the software company. Without him pushing me into doing the software company, I never would have made the movie." Will had no prior business experience, but Rama gave him the assignment to create a software company. Will created and sold not one, but two successful software companies, with which he financed the movie.

Will also credits Rama with the movie on a meta-level: "The teachings sort of get into your cells at certain points. Rama taught an attitude, and when you study with someone for twelve years, it becomes how you look at things...He taught you to use your intent, use your focus. If your mind is clear, you can use your focus rather than the lower mind. He makes the

student more aware, and then you apply that to whatever you're doing."

Learning to throw himself into whatever he wanted to do and trusting that he would figure out how to do it is another Rama skill that worked in Will's favor. Rama's own willingness to take risks inspired Will: "Rama was always trying new stuff. He never did anything half-assed—it was always to the max."

Making *What the Bleep?* was an outrageously risky leap for Will on several fronts. He had never made a movie, he put his own money on the line to make it, and he got no support from Hollywood. He was repeatedly told that the film would never succeed because nobody wanted to see a film that encourages people to think. In spite of these obstacles, the film caught on by word of mouth, and, of course, was phenomenally successful.

Will's fearless self-confidence and willingness to throw himself off the deep end seems to be the hallmark of many of Rama's students. Rama taught his students to take bold leaps into the unknown. "Believe in yourself, always," he taught. "You have no idea what you're capable of. You haven't tried. Try. You'll be surprised, very pleasantly."²³ He says often that it helps to be detached. Give up your clinging to results and have a sense of humor. It's all just fun—however it turns out.

Spiritual Chic

Every student I talked to has said that because of Rama, they had the confidence to do things they didn't believe they could do. At first, Rama threw them in, but later they learned to trust themselves and the universe enough to throw themselves in. Because we create our experience, if we believe in ourselves, we might surprise ourselves. This is Rama's American Buddhism. This teaching of positive outlook accords with traditional tantra. Lama Yeshe, in *Introduction to Tantra*, expresses this ancient Eastern truth in Western terms:

If the mental image we have of ourselves is positive, then our actions are naturally filled with self-confidence, and the impression we make upon others is one of strength and vitality. On the other hand, if we have a low opinion of ourselves, we appear weak and ineffective, attract many problems and easily fall victim to accident and disease. Over and over again our experiences prove that it is our mental outlook that is fundamentally responsible for whether we are successful or unsuccessful, healthy or ill, attractive or ugly, happy or depressed."²⁴

Like any teacher of tantra, Rama didn't teach positive transformation merely through words. The students I talked to report that he had a powerful, transformative presence. Stan said being in the room with Rama was like accessing the energy of a giant supercomputer. In Rama's presence, changes that would normally take huge amounts of willpower would happen easily, making it easy to change destructive habits. Something that would have been a struggle through willpower alone were easy in Rama's presence. For example, Stan's wife, also a student, was addicted to cigarettes, but on a trip into the desert with Rama, she left her cigarettes in the car. After that trip, she never smoked again.

Although Rama taught his students transformation in whatever ways worked, the most reliable and consistent method was meditation. Meditation is no sideline in Rama's teachings; he emphasized meditation in almost every single talk he gave. His emphasis on meditation is key to the difference between winning in the secular sense and winning as *spiritual chic*, as it is only through mindfulness and meditation that the workplace becomes an arena for spiritual practice.

Rama was emphatic that embracing work or career as spiritual practice does not mean that sitting meditation is dispensable. Quite the opposite. According to Rama, you cannot practice the yoga of career without daily sitting meditation because you simply will not have the mental stamina to make it through the grueling days in the workplace. He says that for him personally, going to work without meditating first is unthinkable and abhorrent. Meditating in the morning is what enables you to do a strong work meditation all day.

Rama does not present meditation as a grim duty, as something we should do because it is good for us, like brushing our teeth. Rama always describes meditation as FUN: "...you look forward to it, and you can't wait to get there. It's like the greatest date you've ever had. You get to go meditate."

Meditation is melting into the light, a joyful experience right now, Rama says, not a mere means to an end. The *immediate* result of genuine spiritual practice is joy, and meditation is an "immediate happiness, a deeper understanding of reality."²⁵ Rama's enthusiasm for the alive experience of meditation is contagious, so much so that his talks have the effect of making me put the book down to meditate.

As in everything else, Rama urges his students to trust themselves as meditators, to have confidence in making choices in their practice. He tells us to get curious about meditation, to try different techniques, to figure out what works. Don't fake it, he says, and don't settle for mediocre. Don't just waste your time sitting there and thinking. Do what you need to do to get it on track, but meditate! "Meditate each day with your whole being," he says, "and you will be free."²⁶

Some of Rama's students continue to teach meditation using Rama's eclectic methods. It is one way of giving back, which Rama emphasized to his students. In the same way he gave of himself, he expected his students to give, too, by living a life of service. One's career success is not for oneself but is in service of others. Walter explains that "Rama's attitude was that anything that serves other people is dharma. And anything that doesn't isn't."

Complementing that perspective, Marcie points out that, for Rama, giving was a matter of pragmatism, sort of a natural law: "It's all about service – what else could it be about? In serving others, you serve yourself."

The most touching story I heard about Rama's view on giving is Will's description of Rama's bidding war with the universe: "Rama stressed that you always have to give back. The universe gives you something, and you give something back to the universe. And then the universe says, ah, you gave that to me, so now I'm going to give twice that back to you. And so you give back again. And up and up it goes."

In addition to the gift of his spiritual teachings, Rama gave back in more conventional ways as well. He was a patron of NPR, ACLU, Amnesty International, Nation Museum of Women and the Arts, B'nai B'rith, Cousteau Society, The Audobon Society, and The Sierra Club, making generous donations to each of these organizations.

Although Rama has been criticized for his unconventional approach to teaching Buddhism, when you consider his legacy—the Lenz Foundation, the continued inspiration and service of his students, his vision of American Buddhism, and his fearless confidence in American culture as a perfectly good basis for spiritual practice—it is hard to deny the authenticity of his vision. He took a huge risk in throwing aside convention and tradition and embracing American Buddhism on its own terms.

As Marcie puts it, "He was trying to teach ancient knowledge in a contemporary western form. He was beyond extraordinarily brave. He taught us the real stuff. I don't think there's been anyone like him before or since. It hadn't been done before."

Certainly we could all benefit if the secular world of American business were infused with Rama's view of career as spiritual practice. Walter reflects,

When I started off in business, I thought I just wanted to make a bunch of money and then retire so I could be spiritual.... I had no interest in technology or business when I met Rama, and now I run a decent-sized and pretty successful (and market innovating) software firm. And beyond that, I see all of my tasks associated with that as deeply integrated with and inseparable from my own spiritual practice. How many lay people feel like they are in practice all day every day? Not many, I would venture to guess...

What a wonderful world for all of us if every business owner approached his business as if he or she were engaged in spiritual practice all day!

Regarding his critics, Rama's advice was to ignore negative people, the ones who are looking to crucify anyone with a different view. "They crucified Christ, you know. They don't take real well, necessarily, on this planet, to the people who see things differently."

Rama calls the ones who like to crucify "losers." They are losers because they are not listening and seeing the doors that can open. "The only loser who walks away from a wise man is the one who walks away. It's not the wise man. So never be concerned with insults or lack of understanding," he advises. "Be brave and be who you are, but turn to the silent mind."²⁷

Rama's message and attitude, in contrast to that of the losers, is always one of humor and optimism. "Grow, develop and always be optimistic," he says. "Always be positive. And ignore those who aren't because they're obviously confused and out of touch with the light."²⁸

The students I talked to seem to have absorbed that lesson, as they are overall good-humored, optimistic, and humbly self-confident people. They credit their teacher and remember him with great respect and love. Will describes Rama as "a trail blazer," and Stan says he was "one giant, wondrous adventure." Marcie says, "I loved him beyond anything, still do. I can see his face in front of me, and I can't do anything but grin. I still feel him laughing at me, prodding me along."

It is not the Eighties anymore, thank God, but I think the most fitting description of Rama's American Buddhism is his rather Eighties term, "spiritual chic." Spiritual chic is realizing who you really are. You are the light, Rama says, not any of that stuck stuff of your ideas—your ideas about religion or enlightenment, how horrible you are or how wonderful you are. Especially all those dreary thoughts about yourself, all your "I'm a failure," or "I'm so good."

Get over yourself, Rama says. "This is trash in the sense that it's boring. It's not chic. It's not hip."

Spiritual chic, what is it? Rama laughs at his own question. "It's to be free of course. It's to be free!"²⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*. (Beverly Hills, CA: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2002), 132.
- ² Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*. (Beverly Hills, CA: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2003), 6.
- ³ Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*. 146, 8.
- ⁴ Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*. 7.
- ⁵ Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*. 252.
- ⁶ Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*, 59.
- ⁷ Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*. (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 76-82.
- ⁸ Ravi Dykema. "What the Bleep was that all about?: An Interview with William Arntz." Nexus. Jan/Feb 2005, accessed 7/2011, http://www.nexuspub.com/articles_2005/interview_2005_jf.php
- ⁹ William Arntz. Telephone interview. 6/19/11
- ¹⁰ Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*, 119.
- ¹¹ Veronica Sandford. Telephone interview. 7/3/11
- ¹² Lisa Marshall. Email . 7/12/11.
- ¹³ Lisa Lewison. Email. 6/11/11
- ¹⁴ Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*, 120-21.
- ¹⁵ Rudolph Steiner. *How to Know Higher Worlds*. Hudson, New York: Anthropoposic Press, 1994), 65-67.
- ¹⁶ Dzogchen Ponlop. *Wild Awakening: The Heart of Mahamudra and Dzogchen*. Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 161.
- ¹⁷ Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*., 76-82.
- ¹⁸ Chögyam Trungpa. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston: Shambhala, 2002), xii.
- ¹⁹ Walter Goodwin. Interview. 6/19/11
- ²⁰ Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*. (Beverly Hills, CA: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2003), 6.
- ²¹ Lenz. *Surfing the Himalayas*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 130.
- ²² Lenz. *Tantric Buddhism*, 118.
- ²³ Ibid, 110.
- ²⁴ Lama Yeshe. *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 37.
- ²⁵ Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*, 112-113.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 34.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 33
- ²⁸ Lenz. *Enlightenment Cycle*, 12.
- ²⁹ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz. *On the Road With Rama*. Beverly Hills, CA: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2002), 14

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