

## Encountering the Ocean: Journeying on the Buddhist Path

---

### A Paper Submitted for the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism

Aaron M Pincus, M. Div.

#### 1. Dipping into the Sea

It was the winter solstice of my first year of college, and I drove through the box-housed rows of suburban New Jersey, through the Appalachian mountains of eastern Pennsylvania, west through the countryside to Pittsburg, and then south through the rural and sprawling chain towns of Ohio to arrive at Cincinnati. My girlfriend at the time had invited me to visit her mother for Christmas. It was an ordinary road trip. I simultaneously noticed the cultural monotony and natural majesty of the U.S landscape. It was also an ordinary visit--- seeing friends, going to the movies, playing mini-golf, eating greasy nachos, walking through the city, drinking cocoa, and sharing laughs. Nothing particularly spectacular; it was just a generally quaint time.

I received two small gifts from my girlfriend's mother on Christmas morning. The first was a small glass statuette of the Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha). I remember the undisturbed, clear, and refreshing face of this small figure. The small figure reminded me of something, some peaceful force in the world that I could not quite name. The second gift was a book entitled *Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure*—a small, semi-autobiographical fiction about a young man traveling to Nepal on a snowboarding trip who has an unexpected collision with a Buddhist monk as he rides down a mountain one afternoon. After the collision, the author presents a series of encounters and dialogues between him and this monk.

I was just beginning to be curious about Buddhism at that time. My girlfriend's mother had picked up on this fact and thought that the book would enliven my interest. She had gotten the book from the minister at the Unity Church in downtown Cincinnati. She said it was fun and

interesting, a lighthearted introduction to Buddhism. In the first page preface the author, Dr. Frederick P. Lenz writes:

The following account of my Himalayan adventures is based on a series of experiences that occurred to me some time ago in Nepal. I have taken the liberty of transforming these accounts into a work of fiction, which I hope will entertain and enlighten you.<sup>1</sup>

The adventures include snowboarding monks, astral traveling, Atlantian Mythologies, tea ceremonies, meditating in caves, and visiting a monastery in a Rhododendron forest. It also includes long discussions about the nature of meditation and working with mind and body.

With this book, I dipped my toes in the *ocean of Buddhism* in America. I call it an ocean because it is a collection of diverse, dynamic teachings—many “Buddhisms” as it were—that are contained within a vast sea, an ancient wisdom tradition. This ocean of teachings has touched the landscape of America, and all the cities, the people, the cultural attitudes and assumptions, the creativity, the religious freedom, the consumerism, the relative material wealth, the fast rushing rivers of life in the U.S have flowed into it as well. Therefore, a distinctly American Buddhism is an eclectic blend of flavors and textures that suit the American pallet. In the U.S there is a dizzying array of beliefs and practices of how to live, and Buddhism, what that means and how it is practiced, is just as dizzying. According to the scholar Richard Seager, Buddhism is “now thriving to such a degree that it is impossible to exhaustively catalogue its varieties and combinations in this country.”<sup>2</sup> In his book *Buddhism in America*, Seager states, “The American Buddhist community as a whole encompasses an extremely wide spectrum of opinions of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick P. Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism In America* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1999), 233.

nature of Buddhism.”<sup>3</sup> This enormous diversity links together a vast web of imported, traditionalized, acculturated, and innovative ways of framing the religious institutions and practices that stem from a humble wandering sage who realized complete awareness and peace under a *Bodhi* tree some 2500 years ago: the Buddha Śākyamuni. It is that genuine wakeful realization of the Buddha that lies at the heart of any variation of Buddhism, east or west. This wakefulness or insight that the Buddha had, I think, is at the heart of the sea. It is certainly what has inspired me to swim in the waves of the ocean of Buddhism.

After I read *Surfing the Himalayas*, I began to look at books by Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.<sup>4</sup> These figures were famous for transplanting Buddha-dharma in the west through creative fusions of Buddhism with modernist (beat) poetry, western psychology and philosophy. These authors challenged me. They all had distinct creative messages, and they all posed a challenge. How to find our way through the crazy, quick, contorted, sometimes fresh, sometimes polluted, and generally bewildering river of America, and how to do this enormous task with the gentle wakefulness that is contained within the Buddhist tradition.

To continue exploring this for myself, I went on to do course work and upper-level seminars in Buddhist Studies at Rutgers. My passion, enthusiasm, and curiosity for deepening my understanding expanded. I began to feel that in order to authentically integrate the material I had gathered about Buddhist philosophy, from both popular American Buddhist sources and famous texts of Indian masters, I needed to take a closer look at my own life, my own mind, and my own body. Meditation offered a natural entryway into deepening my investigative journey

---

<sup>3</sup> Seager, 233.

<sup>4</sup> The Founder of Naropa University and Shambhala Buddhism.

inward. In the winter after I graduated from Rutgers, I began a Buddhist meditation practice with a 10-day silent *vipassana* (insight) meditation retreat in Quebec.

After graduation, there was a big question mark. How do I move forward? I was very inspired by what I gathered from my exploration of Buddhist study and practice. In terms of work, I was an activist. During college, I had worked with people, with communities, and with local ecological systems to create the conditions for sustainable and healing practices for living. Though I had participated in various projects, from inner city after-school programs to community based organic farming, working the lines of the soup kitchen to picking up trash on the polluted coasts of New Jersey, I felt insecure in terms how to use my energy. I felt like there was a fire burning in my veins and I wasn't sure what to do with it. It seemed that everywhere I was looking, there was something out of balance, dangerous, and inhumane. The general situation of life appeared quite overwhelming and sad. The billions of people, the multitudes of species, the great forests and rivers, the oceans, seemed to be in pain and crying for help. When college was over, I really had no idea what to do with all my work experience. At the time, my meditation practice, as well as my understanding of Buddhism, was a powerful tool. I felt confident that looking at my own experience was part of the key to discerning the next step. My fears, hesitations, and anxieties were in response to how I was reacting to the world around me. My practice gave me the patience and clarity to see it, and my deepest desire was to connect with myself and with the world, in a mutually beneficial way. My desire was to be of genuine service. In order to do this I felt compelled to deepen my study and practice of Buddhism in order to inform my efforts to help.

I traveled to California and spent a few weeks in Yosemite National park. I felt my feet on the ground amongst the huge granite slabs of rock, the gushing crystal waterfalls, the ancient

Sequoias, and the black bears roaming in the valleys. With a group of friends, I drove from the Redwooded, foggy Pacific Northwest to the great blue-sky, white-snow, mountainous Colorado. We stopped in Denver. I have the distinct memory of stepping out of the car onto the snowy road and thinking, “I am going to live here in Colorado.” That night I looked at the Naropa University website. Even though I read literature about the legendary first summer program at Naropa Institute in 1974, where Allen Ginsberg taught poetry and Chögyam Trunpqa and Ram Dass taught Eastern spirituality, I never thought that I would attend this school, primarily because of the high tuition. After researching this “Buddhist inspired” university and the contemplative education model, my excitement for applying quickly grew. One week later I returned to my home in New Jersey and applied to the Buddhist Studies Master's program.

My intuition was that Naropa University could aid in my path of Buddhist study, practice, and engaged action. In my application, I tried my best to explain that I wanted the learning process to include all three of these aspects: view, meditation, and action. I also admitted my anxiety around the cost of tuition. When the religious studies department replied to my application they gave me two pieces of advice: the first was to apply to the Masters of Divinity Program, as this would fulfill my need to deepen my learning with engaged, compassionate action, and the second piece of advice was to apply for the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation Merit Scholarship in order to relieve my worries around financing my education.

The warmth and care that the professors and staff offered during my application process gave me confidence that this was the right choice for me. I applied to the M.Div program and for the Lenz Scholarship. After I was accepted, I found a job working on a 30-acre organic farm outside of Boulder. I moved across the country by Greyhound bus in April 2008. I was working and getting set up for going to Naropa in the fall. At the end of April, Dr. Phil Stanley called to

notify me that the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism had accepted my application. It was at that time that the previous connection came to me. Suddenly I had a flashing recognition: Frederick P. Lenz, author of the snowboarding Buddhist adventure that I read four years prior, *Surfing the Himalayas*!

It was an incredible coincidence. The book by Lenz had been my first introduction to American Buddhism, and now my continuing journey would be supported by Lenz's foundation that was put together after his death to advance and nurture the seeds and sprouts of Buddha-dharma in the west. I felt honored and awed to receive this support. Seven years have now gone by since I first read *Surfing the Himalayas*, and I have gone on to have my own adventures and learning in the ocean of Buddhism in America. My journey in the Master of Divinity program at Naropa has given me plenty of opportunity to study, practice, and engage in the community. It has lead me into the Rocky Mountains for silent meditation retreats, into long hours of studying Tibetan philosophical texts, into listening circles and sacred rituals, into the streets of Denver where I stayed with the homeless community of Denver during a Zen Peacemakers Street Retreat, into diverse talks led by many senior eastern and western Buddhist teachers, into a chaplaincy internship at Beacon Place Transitional Home for the homeless in west Denver, to briefly name a few things. Through the years at Naropa, through the many peaks and valleys, I have continually been inspired by the way I arrived and the support I received.

In Tibet Buddhism one of the central themes or teachings is called *tendril*. This word is often translated in English as 'auspicious coincidence.' This term describes the interconnectivity of living. Tyler Dewar, the scholar and translator explains:

*Ten* means “to depend” and *drel* means “connection” or “relationship.” So *tendrel* means that all phenomena come into being through an interdependent relationship with other phenomena. As the Buddha famously stated, “In dependence on this, that arises.”<sup>5</sup>

It is often said that these workings, the connections and relationships, that bring together all things and situations in the phenomenal world are so wild and intricate, only a Buddha (a fully awakened being) can see the process happening directly. For practitioners, to appreciate the interwoven display of things, or the way life happens to evolve, is a major part of the journey.

The Buddha’s journey began with an interconnection. Until he was thirty, the historical Buddha lived within the comforts and confines of his father’s palace. He was a prince, who had never encountered the harsh realities of the world. One day, he left his palace and saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a sage: that life consists of birth, old age, sickness, and death. He saw this suffering and his heart was inspired to search through the depth of his own mind and body to find a way to address this all-pervasive pain that exists in all beings. It was these personal encounters with other people that compelled him to search. He was moved by the connection he experienced with others.

The narrator of *Surfing the Himalayas* had an encounter with a Buddhist monk. He was snowboarding down a huge mountain in Nepal, and collided directly with a monk, Master Fwap. Based on this encounter, he began his journey into the depths of himself.

Unexpectedly, I was given the book *Surfing the Himalayas* and the trajectory of my life was shifted in surprising ways—it was an auspicious coincidence. What is even more auspicious is that the same individual who introduced me to Buddhism in the first place would fund my Master's degree in Buddhist studies and engaged compassionate action.

---

<sup>5</sup> Tyler Dewar, “Tendrel,” *BuddhaDharma: The Practitioners Quarterly*, accessed May 31, 2011, [http://archive.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2005/winter/dharma\\_dictionary.html](http://archive.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2005/winter/dharma_dictionary.html).

## 2. Returning to the Source: Surfing.

Now, after seven years, and three years of intensive Buddhist study and practice, I have turned back to *Surfing the Himalayas* (Hereafter: *Surfing*) to take a look at the in it. There are many levels or perspectives from which one could examine this book. Lenz appears to use many kinds of teachings and diverse spiritual frameworks. I'm sure many of his students would have a plethora of understandings as to what this book contains. I will look at Lenz's teachings from the basic point of view of foundational Buddhist teaching, as a precise way to contextualize his colorful and imaginative exploration of Buddhism.

Eastern practices are often misinterpreted or misrepresented as exclusively relating to a practice of meditation. One sees an image of a Japanese monk, legs folded into a pretzel, and assumes that this is the key: to sit still in the pretzel position. The Buddhist path, however, is not purely about settling the mind. While this is a crucial practice within the Buddhist framework, it is not the only point, nor is it the most important point. Foundational Indian Buddhism has three major aspects of the path. These three aspects were seen as a thorough way of practicing in one's life to reach a boundless heart and open mind: wisdom (*prajñā*), meditative concentration (*samadhi*), and awakened conduct (*shila*). Each of the aspects is practiced together to create a holistic and balanced state of mind and body. As the scholar Rupert Gethin comments:

The practice of the path is not simply linear; in one's progress along the path it is not that one first exclusively practices conduct and then, when one has perfected that, moves onto meditative concentration and finally wisdom. The three aspects of the path exist, operate, and are developed in a mutually dependent and reciprocal relationship.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.

In the seven years that I have explored the Buddhist path with interest and devotion, I have felt how these three aspects are invaluable to working with the path authentically and completely. Another way of wording the three parts of the path is the view, meditation, and action. As noted earlier, I find if any one of these aspects, say view, is out of balance or lacking, the whole of my personal path feels wonky, as if I am riding on a bike with a damaged wheel that wobbles a bunch. As I was reading *Surfing*, I couldn't help but see the thematic thread of the three parts of the path alive within Lenz's teachings.

### *Wisdom (prajñā)*

The Buddha taught a comprehensive way to work with one's mind and body by opening the mind, and cutting away at unnecessary beliefs that keep one bound to habitual thinking and reactivity. A habitual thought is, for example, yearning for the pleasure derived from eating a chocolate bar to last forever. It does not take a scientist to figure out that that pleasure is going to fade, usually faster than we imagined. There is still, however, this nagging hope that the tasty goodness of chocolate is going stay. The Buddha's awakening is described as expansive and beyond any such fixations.

*Prajñā* is often likened to a sword that cuts away conceptual fixations. In conversation about this matter Master Fwap, the Tibetan Buddhist Master in *Surfing*, tells his young student about Zen Buddhism and the general idea of cutting through habitual patterns that constantly label the world.

Zen Buddhists believe that when we think of something conceptually, we cut ourselves from its true essence. From a Zen point of view, it is only by going beyond our limited

concept of something, and experiencing its essential nature, that we really come to know that a thing, experience, or understanding truly is non-conceptual.<sup>7</sup>

The point that Master Fwap is trying to convey to his young student is that the more we think or label something good or bad, mine or yours, this or that, the more we are disconnected from the way something actually is, its essential nature or lack thereof. If we buy a chocolate bar, almost immediately our mind begins to label that object: “I loved those chocolates my mother gave me,” “I feel guilty; I love the taste but this chocolate is no good for me,” or “I wish I could make my own chocolate to have it everyday.” The list goes on and on, and it is particular to an individual's dynamic and unique mind-body system—a system that has had plenty of practice at developing these kinds of thoughts. To go beyond our limited conceptual reference means that we have to see through our habitual thought patterns of what we like, dislike, or what's familiar to actually dig into a thing, the chocolate itself, which, from a Buddhist point of view, is beyond our concept of it, beyond reference whatsoever.

This movement beyond concept, however, could be applied to the movement of the entire path. As Lenz put it, “Buddhism is a very scientific approach to self-discovery.”<sup>8</sup> It is a science that uses one's own mind and body as the experiential laboratory. First, we may discover all kinds of thoughts, opinions, and fantasies occurring. The first step of *prajñā* is to discover what kind of thoughts these are, and also the trouble they are causing. For instance, we may have a really strong attachment to our car. We take care of it and hope that it will last for a really long time. The moment that it breaks down or something goes wrong, we become enraged: “How dare these manufactures build a car that is going to break!” To remedy this kind of game of painful

---

<sup>7</sup> Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Lenz, *Lakshmi Series* (United States: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2007), 347.

thoughts that we play with all the things we hold tightly—the things we are attached to—the Buddha taught about “the transitory nature of experience.” Understanding transitoriness or impermanence is not necessarily having some ‘pinned down’ way to understand reality proper. It is a way of thinking that short circuits, or at least interrupts, the often painful concept that things are going to last. In this sense, when we introduce thoughts about impermanence this can be seen as a conceptual *prajñā* —a way of developing wisdom with some analysis and a method for undermining the previous way of thinking that is keeping one bound to the ups and downs that are created by concepts. The stuckness that we feel occurs when the mind is rigidly clasp to one idea or another.

Eventually, as we learn to break the chain of endless thoughts that try to shrink the world and ourselves into our limited concepts, the possibility of developing non-conceptual wisdom becomes closer. As one progresses along the path, insights dawn that usually come from training in conceptual wisdom, but at the same time it is important to understand that ultimately non-conceptual wisdom is beyond our wildest dreams, so to speak. It is beyond what we imagine. Master Fwap tries to convey to his snowboarding friend that talking about the highest wisdom is “almost impossible to explain in words.”<sup>9</sup>

Nirvana is something you have to experience directly in order to know... And Nirvana is not something you can know directly, in the way that you can know a person, know how to do something, or know and understand a concept... the knowing of nirvana is non-conceptual knowledge... That is why in Buddhist philosophy, we say nirvana is the wisdom beyond minds knowing.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 77.

Discussing non-conceptual wisdom is like putting one's toe in the water of an immeasurable sea. Buddha is sometimes called the "knower of the world." This title is meant to convey in conceptual terms one who has seen through their fixation and personal boundary, and therein sees life directly, without the filter of a conceptual thought process.

Buddha also translates as "awakened one." It means that one's mind actually lifts above the dream-like state in which the mind gets caught when it is constantly tugged back and forth by the "limited conditions of pleasure and pain, success and failure, happiness and sorrow, that all...beings are slave to."<sup>11</sup> All conceptual preoccupations keep us bound to the rough ride that we call life. Master Fwap tries to convey the quality of this awakened state that lies beyond conceptual fixations by using a metaphor.

Above the clouds, the sun is always shining. Today if it is a cloudy day, we cannot enjoy the sunshine and feel as much of its warmth that we could feel on a sunny day. But if you and I were to get into a jet plane and fly high above the clouds, there would only be sunshine. It is always sunny above the clouds.<sup>12</sup>

In Mahayana Buddhism, the central theme of the Tathāgatagarbha literature of Buddhism is that everybody contains within them wakefulness, and the example of the clouds obscuring the sun is a hallmark within these teachings. *Tathāgata* refers to Buddha, the one who has gone beyond habitual patterns and awakened to the world in an uncontrived way. *Garbha* means "womb" or "root."<sup>13</sup> It suggests that underneath habitual fixations is an unbounded one that is the latent potentiality of every human being and of every moment of perception. Our fixations are what cloud the clarity and light of complete, pure awareness, which is luminous like the sun. Training

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Gethin, 252.

in wisdom, from conceptual to non-conceptual, is then about seeing what lies behind our distracted, fixated mind at any given moment. We train to gain “a complete awareness of life, without any mental modifications.”<sup>14</sup> We train to see the brilliant sun behind the clouds.

### *Meditative Concentration (samadhi)*

Training in meditative concentration is, as stated above, deeply connected to the development of wisdom. Sitting meditation is, I think, a physical gesture of wisdom. The practice begins by fully inhabiting one’s body in the seated posture, legs and sit bones rooted, strong straight back, and soft open front. In the tradition of meditation in which I have been trained, the eyes are open, with gaze gently resting about three to six feet ahead. This posture brings the mind to attention so that it can mindfully focus on an *object of meditation*, usually the natural breath cycle.

In *Surfing*, the narrator receives his first introduction to sitting meditation. Master Fwap explains, “we meditate and practice mindfulness to go beyond limited concepts that keep us in relatively unreal states of mind.”<sup>15</sup> This teaching is straightforwardly giving a reason for sitting practice. The mind is steadied in mindfulness meditation by continual and non-biased returning of one’s attention to the present moment. Here with awareness, or vipashyana (insight), we directly encounter and unpack our relative concepts and increasing mental overlay attempting to distract us. We also reach an increasing sensitivity to our sense perceptions and feelings, on a very basic level without further thinking. Saykong Mipham, the lineage holder of Naropa University and Shambhala International, writes,

With mindfulness and awareness, we gently and precisely pry our mind away from fantasy, chatter, and subtle whispers of thought, placing it wholly on the here and now.

---

<sup>14</sup> Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas*, 98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

We do this because our scattered mind continually seduces us from our stability, clarity, and strength. So we center ourselves in our mind and place that mind on the breath. We gather it to ground ourselves in a healthy sense of self—wholesome, balanced, confident, pliable.<sup>16</sup>

In a talk on meditation, Dr. Lenz gives a similar description of the effects that come from steadying and gently disciplining the mind in meditation.

When you meditate, you feel joy, harmony, peace, stillness... courage, strength, awareness... In the beginning you will feel these things vaguely, a distant knocking at your castle door. But then as time goes on, they will no longer be vague, but strong and certain.<sup>17</sup>

Meditation is a journey into ourselves—into the direct experience of what it is like to live this human life, moment-to-moment. The resultant qualities that both Sakong Mipham and Dr. Lenz describe—a sense of completeness and positive self-regard—arrive in response to softening ourselves and opening up, acknowledging whatever is arising in our own life.

With the ongoing practice of meditation, there is an eventual move toward more mental/physical balance. In my own experience of pursuing this practice, having patience and a sense of humor regarding the endless ways that conceptual mind will try to tear one's attention and awareness into pieces is key. The idea is to continually train, keep discovering new layers, new levels of awareness and sensitivity, and the even more insidious ways that the clouds obscure the sun, so to speak. Ongoing training in meditation gives the practitioner the tools to further their awareness and wisdom to bring these skills into everyday life.

One of the main tenets of Lenz's teaching is that our meditation is aided by sitting in

---

<sup>16</sup> Sakyong Mipham, *Turning the Mind Into an Ally* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 3.

the *presence* of masters—authentically wakeful personalities. As Lenz writes, “An enlightened master is a perpetual source of cosmic light...”<sup>18</sup> Such an enlightened being is fully aware, kind, compassionate, and open toward whatever life brings. They serve as a wellspring of inspiration and loving energy on an individuals’ journey with meditation. Lenz describes the experience of meditating with Master Fwap and observing the room filling with golden light.<sup>19</sup> After viewing and feeling the texture of Master Fwap’s depth of meditation, the narrator has a flash of insight: “I suddenly just ‘knew’ all about life. I realized I was one with life, and, at the same time a separate and unique part of it.”<sup>20</sup> Lenz is describing a kind of unshakable flashing of knowing that happens when we throw ourselves into the present heart glow of a being who has realized authentic peace and insight through their own path of meditation. This knowing is beyond the usual categories of knowledge; it is a non-conceptual flash that brings us back to the immediacy and immensity of the present moment. This insight is a glimpse of the inseparability of ourselves the world around us. It simultaneously glimpses our unique mental/physical stream expressing itself in the *now*.

It is this spirit of *nowness*, or *freshness*, that the meditation journey is all about. The Buddha taught that we meditate and train our mind to be able to access this *freshness* and reside in the present *vividness* of life. At the same time, he led by example, conveying his own journey of meditation through his presence. I think this is the same spirit that Lenz has portrayed in *Surfing the Himalayas*. Master Fwap describes meditation as a tool for working with the mind in everyday life—a tool that can bring clarity to the often-disorienting state of being alive—and,

---

<sup>18</sup> Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

at the same time, this master conveys the qualities that are cultivated in meditation just by being genuinely and spontaneously himself.

### *Awakened Conduct or Action*

Perhaps the primary message that Lenz tried to transmit through *Surfing* is that we could completely transform our mind and our relationship to the world by meditating and by cultivating understanding of the nature of our mind. Moreover, this coupling of training in wisdom and meditation can lead to a more sacred and inspired way of manifesting and creating in the world.

The main metaphor Lenz uses in *Surfing* is snowboarding. Master Fwap teaches him about Buddhism, meditation, and other esoteric spiritual arts, and finally he teaches him how to perfect his action—in this case, gliding down Himalayan powder on a snowboard. Master Fwap encourages the young student to pursue meditation and contemplation to eventually come to the realization that in all activity there is no dualism of actor and action, there is only a dynamic interconnected process:

Before beginning any action, Master Fwap instructed me, always first empty yourself of thoughts regarding what you are about to do... Instead of your ego directing you and making countless mistakes, allow yourself to be guided by the invisible principles of the universe within your actions. At that time there will be perfect flow of energy in whatever you choose to do, and there will be a grace and power present in all of your movements.<sup>21</sup>

At this point in *Surfing*, something clicks in the young snowboarder and he finds himself

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 134.

in an effortless, yet fully engaged, run down the mountain. He is fully connected to what he is doing as he is doing it. He is fully alive.

Snowboarding becomes a metaphor for directly and thoroughly participating in one's life. That means we actually begin to feel what we feel, taste what we taste, and think what we think. The direct experience of life becomes ground for awakened action, action that is instantaneous and aware. Master Fwap instructs his student that the spiritual path is not about disregarding activity in the world and retreating into a deep state of spiritual bliss. Rather the path to wakefulness is about "turning all the activities and experiences of your daily life into meditation."<sup>22</sup> The spiritual path, from this point of view, is one of radical connectivity and engagement.

This message is at the heart of Lenz's teaching. In a talk, *Living and Working in the World*, he suggests that the path of recluse, of retreating into the woods, a cave, or a cloistered monastic community was a viable way to gain infinite openness and light. The modern American life, however, requires practitioner to be *in the world*, to be part of cultural, economic, and political systems. The idea is that when we advance in our spiritual awareness—wisdom and meditative mind—"it is no longer necessary to run away from society and the world."<sup>23</sup> We are rooted and stable, with one foot in front of the other, moment-to-moment, cultivating ourselves and getting involved with what arises in the world and in our being without being stuck in it. We try to live and engage in a robust life. In this way, the way we act in our life itself is our meditation practice. The fruits of practice and study ripen in the field of the living. The words we say, how we function in our relationships, the jobs we hold, the things we do for fun, and all of our actions are a reflection of how we work with ourselves on our paths.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Lenz, *Lakshmi Series*, 220.

### 3. Ready to Swim

In my readings of Lenz' work, in *Surfing* and other transcribed talks, he emphasized the notion of meditation—of developing direct experience of how one's mind and body moves while sitting. Another area was developing some sense of self-awareness in everyday living, using Buddha-dharma, Hinduism, Taoism, and New Age Metaphysics to try to clarify some of the confused states of mind that many individuals find themselves in. He was offering them a method and path for developing meditation and wisdom. It is clear also in his talk, *Living In the World*, that Lenz holds the work that each individual does in the world at the core of his thought and teaching. He explains:

Selfless service gives you tremendous spiritual advancement, and working at the local plant, computer programming, whatever it may be, is as spiritual as teaching people how to meditate. It doesn't matter what it do; it's why. If you're working every day to define your consciousness, to maintain yourself in the world so you can practice spirituality and so that you can make extra money to help your spiritual group grow, touch more lives who want that light... then your work is the holiest thing you can do.

He emphasized career success as a means toward personal growth. The orientation is selflessly working based on the aspiration to further one's own and others' spiritual lives. He was particularly interested in computer programming, as he had found success in this field in his personal career journey. He thought the mind of meditation and the mind of computer programming were very complementary to one another, and that amassing momentary wealth was a good thing, so long as it was used selflessly.

This is a risky spiritual position to take or spiritual teaching to transmit. It seems a likely option for people amass wealth to hoard it for their own benefit, or not really have clarity as to how to benefit oneself and others by doing it, or that the project becomes altogether sinister. The idea of gaining wealth as a method for developing spirituality is also a position that can naturally lead to skepticism and/or cynicism for many spectators or people looking into Lenz's teaching and community. However, I think that the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism is a symbol of the fruits that this kind of teaching can have. Lenz and his community's monetary success have directly come to financially benefit institutions such as Naropa University and The Zen Peacemakers.

This foundation has also directly benefited my own personal journey and spiritual growth by lifting some the financial burden off of my shoulders so that I could fully dedicate my time to the study, practice, and engaged action I have done during my M.Div degree. I also appreciate the skillfulness of teaching that encourages people to face the world directly and be creative, not to avert their eyes because it crushes the spirit to look at it.

Lenz passed away a decade ago. Since then I believe that Buddha-dharma in the West has touched more people, more places, and more situations. As I wrote in the beginning of my own story of how I came to Buddhism in the West, at a certain point the world felt like an overwhelmingly painful place to be, and that at every corner there was some sense of aggression or toxicity. Between global warfare and the ecological crisis, it all felt burdensome to me. Going off to be permanent recluse and meditate in a cave somewhere seemed a desirable option. I knew somewhere inside myself that thinking I could escape from the woes of our earth and society was a way of bypassing or covering over the grief and sadness that I felt in the core of my own body and mind. It seems that so much of what we do in this life is try to cover over our pain with a

distraction, to point where we even use pain to cover over the pain. Meditation gives the magnifying glass with which one can examine these layers, and see them for what they are: typically bundles of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations moving with current of our energy. The many iterations and variations of the Buddhist Path that I have come to in my life inspire me to keep learning, keep practicing, and stay engaged in my experience and my world.

One of the most profound lessons that I have gathered from my journey at Naropa University for the past three years was a deep understanding of the Buddha's first noble truth of suffering (*duhka*). The past three years have given plenty of time to contemplate my own experience of that truth. The pain of disappointment, of getting what you do not want, or not getting what you do want, is an endless battle the mind runs through. There is also a simple, visceral pain I think we all connect to when we watch the news of horrific floods, famines, wars, murders and so on. It doesn't take much. However, my understanding of this path is that the deeper we connect to our own sense of suffering in meditation, investigation, or everyday life, the more available we become for welcoming, with warmth and appreciation, the suffering of others. As I have touched into some of my deepest sorrows I feel that I have touched into a very deep well of warmth, love, and wisdom that exists within the heart. It is the raw direct experience of being in this life.

I am now moving onto my next journey within the ocean of Buddhism in America. I have taken a residency position to be the first Buddhist Chaplain at Emory University Hospital. When I first read *Surfing the Himalayas*, I would never have guessed this is where my path would take me. The interconnected flow of life seems to bring us to these unexpected places and situations. The view of chaplaincy that was taught in the Masters of Divinity program is what I described above: we connect to our pain, as well as our own sense of heart, so that we can connect to

others. I take this view as the basis of the next year of my life studying, practicing, and engaging. I am taking on this work with sincere gratitude to all the interconnections that have lead me to this point. I also aspire to continue to swim within the ocean of Buddhism in America, to the point where I can look around and see the sheer possibility of genuine wakefulness in every stroke. Thank you.

## Bibliography

Dewar, Tyler. "Tendrel." *BuddhaDharma: The Practitioners Quarterly*. Accessed May 31, 2011.

[http://archive.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2005/winter/dharma\\_dictionary.html](http://archive.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2005/winter/dharma_dictionary.html).

Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Lenz, P. Frederick. *Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1995.

-----*Lakshmi Series* (United States: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2007), 347.

Mipham, Sakyong. *Turning the Mind Into an Ally*. New York: Peguin, 2004.

Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism In America*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1999.