



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 37 | Number 1

Article 29

June 2017

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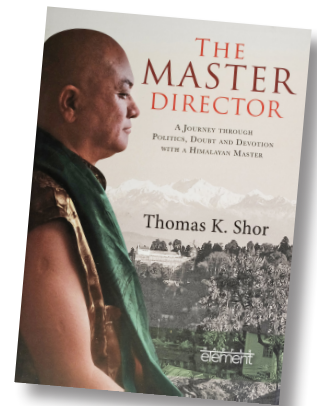
Recommended Citation

McKay, Alex (2017) "Review of *The Master Director: A Journey through Politics, Doubt and Devotion with a Himalayan Master* by Thomas Shor," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 29.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/29>



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The Master Director: A Journey through Politics, Doubt and Devotion with a Himalayan Master

Thomas Shor. Noida, India: Harper Element, 2014. 294 pages. ISBN: 9789350297315.

Reviewed by Alex McKay

As so many Western visitors have discovered, the neat division of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions into separate categories swiftly dissolves on South Asian ground. So, too, can any simplistic construction of authentic/good and inauthentic/bad religious practitioners seem woefully inadequate, particularly in the case of what the headline writers love to call India's "Godmen." These colourful and charismatic spiritual teachers embrace paradoxes and manifest contradictions that challenge Western perceptions of the ideal

His account is a bridge between the paradoxical attitude of the Western observer of the Asian spiritual world and the trust and devotion, albeit multi-layered, of the indigenous insider.

Alex McKay on *The Master Director: A Journey through Politics, Doubt and Devotion with a Himalayan Master*

character and proper behaviour of the truly spiritual individual.

In *The Master Director*, American non-fiction writer Thomas Shor explores his relationship with one such charismatic master, Karma Wangchuk Tulku Gurudeva, known simply to his followers in the eastern Himalayas as Gurudev. Born into the Gurung community in the Darjeeling region, Gurudev has developed a wide following among both Buddhists and Hindus—in line with his teaching of the unity of all religions. Apparently recognised as a Tibetan Buddhist incarnation by the Dalai Lama while still a young boy, he is also considered an incarnation of the god Krishna by his Hindu devotees.

At the heart of this story is the question of the authenticity of those who follow the path of “crazy wisdom.” In each case we must ask if the teachers are psychologically disturbed individuals, charlatans who exploit the gullible, or are they truly enlightened beings who use unorthodox means to bring their followers to higher levels of spirituality?

The author’s first encounter with Gurudev is by chance—if we accept chance as a factor in this context. Shor was not one of those Westerners who come to India seeking a guru. Rather he was content to wander and to absorb the lessons of the road; he was a pilgrim perhaps but not necessarily a seeker

after any human guide. Indeed he was something of a sceptic, with the Western democrats “visceral repulsion at seeing one man treated like royalty” (p. 48). In being drawn into Gurudev’s inner circle he was aware that as “a Westerner, I probably added a little shine to his presentation” (p. 200) and he was reluctant to play the role of devotee.

Given a privileged position and access to Gurudev, he observed the whirl of activity around the Guru, the intense emotion of the devotees, the constant acceptance and passing on of gifts, the attribution of higher meaning to the Guru’s every word and deed, his constant oscillation between traditional teaching and seemingly absurd play. Such teachers are showmen, ringmasters in a circus, but observing Gurudev shouting or whispering orders, laughing or mouthing animal cries, the author comes to accept that it is a show, but “a show that turns the minds of his devotees towards a sense of divinity” (p. 103).

Gurudev’s message is hardly original. Indeed it is rooted in tradition and if he seems to have a “pathological need to control” (p. 118) his inner circle and his wider audience, “what he reveals through his self is universal love” (p. 119). Shor senses “that he is consciously acting,” but that “he is inviting me to see through the game he is playing and to perceive what lies beyond it ... a profound teaching about the nature of reality,” for “in

his expressions of the absurd his highest wisdom was hiding” (p. 34). Ultimately, the author concludes, we all have a role to play in life and different needs to fulfil; “the devotees need to have someone to bow low before” (p. 51). Thus there are different types of teachers for every type of seeker, and the charismatic Gurudev, like others of his ilk, has the charisma and the performance skills that enable him to reach with his teachings those who are not fulfilled by the orthodox clerical world.

Shor is a skilled writer and storyteller, a keen observer of details who brings to life the world of village and streets, forest and backroad, which he traverses with or without Gurudev. He is also a photographer who captures that life beyond the formal monastery or temple. His account is a bridge between the paradoxical attitude of the Western observer of the Asian spiritual world and the trust and devotion, albeit multi-layered, of the indigenous insider. But what lifts this work above the standard tale of Asian guru and Western observer is the political context of Gurudev’s world, a problematic context that is slowly revealed to the reader and turns the book into a page-turner.

Gurudev, the author discovers, is the guru of fellow Gurung Subash Ghising, architect of the reign of terror that began to scar the Darjeeling Hills in the late 1980s. Caught in the claustrophobic vortex

of Gurudev's constant spiritual circus, Shor is forced to confront that problematic association. The violent campaign for a Gurkha state and the inherently corrupt politics of Darjeeling move from backdrop to centre-stage as the author questions whether Gurudev is a part of that darkness, or whether he is trying to counter the politics of fear with the politics of love. It would be unfair to reveal the final conclusions. Suffice to say that the issues are resolved to the extent that this work is a satisfying and illuminating exploration of a very real human world and the universal issues that surround it. It will be enjoyed by Asian and Western readers alike, although not by the thugs who scar the lives of the people they claim to act for.

Alex McKay has a B.A. (hons) in religious studies and a Ph.D. in South Asian history from the London University School of Oriental and African Studies. His latest work is Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography (Brill, 2015).