

May 15, 2008

LIVING TOGETHER

Making Their Own Limits in a Spiritual Partnership

By [LESLIE KAUFMAN](#)

Bowie, Ariz.

TEN years ago, Michael Roach and Christie McNally, Buddhist teachers with a growing following in the United States and abroad, took vows never to separate, night or day.

By “never part,” they did not mean only their hearts or spirits. They meant their bodies as well. And they gave themselves a range of about 15 feet.

If they cannot be seated near each other on a plane, they do not get on. When she uses an airport restroom, he stands outside the door. And when they are here at home in their yurt in the Arizona desert, which has neither running water nor electricity, and he is inspired by an idea in the middle of the night, she rises from their bed and follows him to their office 100 yards down the road, so he can work.

Their partnership, they say, is celibate. It is, as they describe it, a high level of Buddhist practice that involves confronting their own imperfections and thereby learning to better serve the world.

“It forces you to deal with your own emotions so you can’t say, ‘I’ll take a break,’ ” said Mr. Roach, 55, who trained in the same Tibetan Buddhist tradition as the [Dalai Lama](#). After becoming a monk in 1983, he trained on-and-off in a Buddhist monastery for 20 years, and is one of a handful of Westerners who has earned the title of geshe, the rough equivalent of a religious doctorate. “You are in each other’s faces 24 hours a day,” he said. “You must deal with your anger or your jealousy.”

Ms. McNally said, “From a Buddhist perspective, it purifies your own mind.” Ms. McNally is 35 and uses the title of Lama, or teacher, an honor not traditionally bestowed on women by the Tibetan orders.

Their exacting commitment to this ideal of spiritual partnership has been an inspiration to many. In China and Israel, and in the United States, where they are often surrounded by devotees, their lectures on how laypeople can build spiritual partnerships are often packed with people seeking mates or ways to deepen their marriages. They hope their recently published book, “The Eastern Path to Heaven,” will appeal to Christians and broaden their American audience.

But their practice — which even they admit is radical by the standards of the religious community whose ideas they aim to further — has sent shock waves through the Tibetan Buddhist community as far as the Dalai Lama himself, whose office indicated its disapproval of the living arrangement by rebuffing Mr. Roach’s attempt to teach at Dharamsala, India, in 2006. (In a letter, the office said his “unconventional behavior does not accord with His Holiness’s teachings and practices.”)

“There is a tremendous amount of opprobrium by the Tibetan monks; they think they have gone wacky,” said Robert Thurman, a professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism at [Columbia University](#).

Professor Thurman, a former monk himself, describes himself as a friend and admirer of Mr. Roach, and said that after the geshe made his relationship with Ms. McNally public in 2003, he begged him to renounce his monastic vows and to stop wearing the robes that mark him as a member of a monastic order. Mr. Roach declined, and the two have not spoken since.

“He is doing this partnership thing and insisting on being a monk,” Professor Thurman said. “It is superhuman. He says he is staying celibate, but people find it hard to believe.”

The yurt in which Mr. Roach and Ms. McNally live when they are not traveling the world (which is often about half the year) sits in the high desert some 100 miles east of Tucson, on a platform overlooking a rift in the cactus-speckled hills. For 100 acres around, the land is the property of Diamond Mountain University, an unaccredited school that Mr. Roach founded with Ms. McNally in 2004 to teach Buddhist principles and translation skills.

Although devoid of modern conveniences, the yurt they live in, which is 22 feet in diameter, feels almost luxurious compared with the spare, desiccated landscape around it. On one side of the tent is their double bed, and beside it a commode elegantly disguised as a wood side table. The floor is covered with carpets. A few carved wooden chests hold clothes and pillows.

Light streams in from a hole at the center of the tent’s roof, illuminating its poles, which were imported from Mongolia. The closeness to nature means that the indoor temperature is essentially the ambient one — beyond baking in the summer and freezing in the winter. (Their one attempt to battle the elements is a wood-burning stove.)

The couple did a three-year silent retreat in this yurt from 2000 to 2003, while their relationship was a secret to all but the few people who brought them food. Soon afterward, Mr. Roach determined it should be public, even if it flew in the face of two millenniums of Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

He acted for two reasons, he said. One, he felt that it was impossible to keep secrets in this age of Google Earth. Two, he decided that if Buddhism was really going to succeed in America, it would have to be more inclusive of women.

“If these ideas that will help people are going to make it in the West,” Ms. McNally said, “it can’t be a male-dominated culture, because people are not going to accept that.”

Ms. McNally’s path from student to co-teacher and constant partner has been a hard one, they both say. When she met Mr. Roach in 1996, two years out of [New York University](#), where she majored in literature, he was a learned Buddhist. Two decades her senior, he was a Princeton graduate who in his years studying for the geshe degree also built a personal fortune by helping to grow Andin International, a designer, manufacturer and distributor of fine jewelry, from a start-up to a \$100 million-a-year business.

She went to a seminar he was teaching in New York, where he lived at the time. She was just back from India,

where she had studied meditation. It was not long before they fell in love, although they do not describe it that way. They say they began to see each other as angels.

In front of others, she was his acolyte. Otherwise, she was studying the principles of karma and emptiness so that she could eventually teach with him. In private, however, she said, they lived together and he bent over backward to listen to her and to defer to her wisdom.

Over time the two grew toward each other, according to friends — he even visibly. He let his hair grow long like hers and became taut and lean in a way he was not before.

But Anne Lindsey, a teacher at Diamond Mountain who now goes by the Buddhist nun's name Chukyi and has known the couple almost from the start (she was one of those who brought them their food), said Ms. McNally had changed even more. "She has totally transformed," she said. "For him it was a difference in appearance. For her, she was giggly, she was shy. She never talked. She only focused on Geshe Michael. Now she is this powerhouse of a teacher."

There have been serious sacrifices, of course. When she agreed to join his life, two years before the spiritual partner vows, she accepted the rigors of his training, including, at the tender age of 24, celibacy. (He had been celibate, he says, since age 22 when he became a candidate for monkhood.) Even though she now considers sexual touching a "low practice," she said, she still clearly remembers the July day when she gave it up.

But if they have renounced sex, they have replaced it with a level of communion that few other people could understand, much less tolerate.

They eat the same foods from the same plate and often read the same book, waiting until one or the other finishes the page before continuing. Both, they say, are practices of learning to submit one's will to that of another.

They also do yoga together, breath for breath. "We are always inhaling at the same moment and we are always exhaling at the same moment," Ms. McNally said. "It is very intimate, but it is not the kind of intimacy people are used to."

The couple also admit to a hands-on physical relationship that they describe as intense but chaste. Mr. Roach compares it to the relationship his mother had with her doctor when she was dying of breast cancer. "The surgeon lay his hand on her breast, but there wasn't any carnal thought in his mind," he said. "He was doing some life-or-death thing. For us it is the same."

This insistence that they share both purity and intimacy drives traditionalists to distraction. Buddhism has many different branches, most of which allow partners, spiritual or otherwise, in some form — but not for monks. Experts say the lineage of Mr. Roach's branch of Buddhism clearly demands that you renounce monastic vows to have a partner. And many teachers have done just that.

There are very rare instances in the Indo-Buddhist tradition of an individual's being considered holy enough for a chaste spiritual partnership, said Lama Surya Das, an American Buddhist who studied in Tibet and

wrote “Awakening the Buddha Within,” published in 1997. But Mr. Roach, Lama Surya Das said, has not convinced colleagues that he has reached that level.

“He is a good guy and learned person, but the [Bill Clinton](#) question lingers over him,” he said of Mr. Roach. “He is with a much younger blond bombshell. What is a deep relationship that is not sexual? It is hard to understand.”

Mr. Roach and Ms. McNally, however, see their actions as in line with those of a wave of reformers, including the current Dalai Lama, who are taking an ancient, largely monastic and male-dominated tradition and modernizing it to make it more accessible to laypeople and the West.

They understand that their practice is far too extreme for most couples, but they make a point, they say, of doing mainstream things, too. They go to the movies, for example. They tend to like films with visions of alternative realities, like “The Matrix” (her) and “The Truman Show” (him).

They also talk about how they continue to struggle with each other’s wills. It is not an easy practice, even now. But they believe that the basic principles of karma and emptiness at the heart of Buddhism can improve any relationship.

“We are not saying people should live in a tent or 15 feet away from each other,” Mr. Roach said. “What we are teaching is that there is a direct karmic relationship between every incidence of anger you have in the day and how you see your partner.

“If you are consciously patient with people during the day, you will see more beauty.”

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
