

Buddhism - visit to the Orgyen Choling Dharma Center

I located the Orgyen Choling Dharma Center on-line and planned on attending their listed 10 am prayer and mediation gathering Sunday morning (http://www.tularosadharm.com/contact_us). I called several times and never got an answer, so I decided to go simply on faith. Hey, at least it would get me out of the house....

I left at about 9 am and drove the 45 minutes to Tularosa. After a bit of a trek down a gravel road, I came to a gate wrapped in Buddhist prayer flags. Out in a field to my left, a man and a woman worked in a fledgling pecan orchard. This was Alex and his girlfriend Sara. This was their personal residence.

From what I gathered, there hadn't been a formalized Buddhist Center at that location for several years and, when it was formal, it was very cloistered and low-key. However, a man named Bhakha Tulku Rinpoche, a teacher and monk, does come to their home once or twice a year to spend some time in the area. He has been known to hold gatherings, but prefers as little attention as possible. The website was created by an over-zealous person who had mis-read Rinpoche's intentions for his stays in NM.

Alex led me up to his and Sara's home to show me the shrine that they are in the process of renovating. There are four large, brass statues and several smaller ones. He told me who they were, the only one of which I can remember is Tara. I did see a foot-tall statue of Kali in the corner that he did not make mention of. There were colorful silk tapestries on the walls depicting Buddha in different forms. There were traditional offering cups, incense, and a white, organza-like fabric wrapped around the statues. He showed me the vases Rinpoche had made during his last visit. They were azure blue ceramic and had colored fabric tied around the mouth to close them. Alex said that Rinpoche would drop these into a deep body of water to bless the world and to help the environment. He pointed out the greenhouse where they grow food and the field full of Tibetan barley. Then, Alex offered me some tea, and we sat and talked.

Alex is a day-trader by trade and splits his years up between NM, New Jersey, and New York. He was born in Dubai to a strict Armenian Christian Orthodox family. When he was 17, he converted to Buddhism (much to his family's displeasure.) In his 20's, he traveled with Rinpoche (I can't remember exactly where. The pitfalls of not being able to take notes....) as he taught. He moved to Tularosa and became the caretaker of the land, which he bought, on which he placed this retreat for Rinpoche.

Alex and I spoke about his faith and he was gracious enough to be patient with my ignorance. He showed me some of the ritual objects they use as well as the books that they use when Rinpoche comes (translations of prayers for people who can't read Tibetan script.) I asked him if he had received any resistance from the surrounding area as far as the "small-town mentality" was concerned and he said that he had been pleasantly surprised at the openness of the people of Tularosa. I asked him to tell me what Rinpoche was like. He is a very, very quiet, low-key person that does not, under any circumstances, promote himself. Alex did tell me a story about Rinpoche that I thought was interesting. Several years ago, when Rinpoche was visiting, a zealous, prideful man tried extremely hard to gain an audience. This man was pushy and rude and, from what I could infer, more of a religious tourist than a Buddhist. When the man came, Rinpoche became quiet and would only speak in Tibetan and very broken English. Eventually, the man left. Later on during Rinpoche's visit, a curious young man came to the center and simply wanted to help out with the fields, etc. Rinpoche not only answered all of this man's questions, but he lectured for over an hour to him, in perfect English. According to Alex, Rinpoche only spoke at that length on rare occasions. This goes to show me that Rinpoche has a wry sense of humor.

I found out later in my visit that Sara is in charge of a Buddhist group in northern New Mexico. Both Sara and Alex invited me back any time. Alex handed me two bundles of Tibetan incense and wished me well. Sara said that she would put my email address on the mailing list for upcoming events or notifications.

Overall, I had a strange sense of familiarity about the whole situation. It was comfortable; the tea, the shrine, and even the conversation. When I asked questions about specific beliefs and ideas, I felt like I already knew what the answer was going to be.

Buddhism is a simple, elegant religion with warm, funny followers. I really do hope that I get to meet or at least see Rinpoche one day.