

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 33 – Russ Greenfield – Integrating Medicine

The Dalai Lama and Being Well

And now a personal word,

After you spend any time with Russ Greenfield, when you depart, he says ‘Be Well.’ He signs all his emails with the same phrase. He has a countenance about him that is kind and compassionate. His very essence is a wish for you to live a long and healthy life. It’s a bit like being with the Dalai Lama, except Russ wears jeans.

The analogy may be apt. Just as His Holiness, the 14th and current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, lives in exile, seeking Tibetan Buddhist independence from Communist Chinese occupation, so Russ Greenfield has lived in and out of exile from the insurance-driven American healthcare system. He is seeking independence from a system of sickness and intervention to create one of wellness and prevention. Just like Communist Chinese officials become angry at the mere mention of the Dalai Lama, so many hospital administrators and doctors invested in the current healthcare system get angry at Russ Greenfield.

But I suspect the current healthcare establishment gets frustrated with Russ not because he is wrong but because he is right. That is always the response to a prophetic voice. Russ is saying what everyone knows: healthcare shouldn’t be what it is. It doesn’t have to be what it is. If we built a system based on what drew healthcare providers into the profession to begin with, the desire to help others heal and be well, healthcare would be very different. What physicians and nurses studied and practiced would be different. The time with patients would be different. Encounters based on the powers of our minds and bodies would be different. Healthcare would be inspiring.

In Tibetan Buddhist lore, Avalokitesavara, the bodhisattva of compassion, has a special relationship with the people of Tibet and intervenes in Tibetan history by reincarnating as benevolent rulers and teachers. In 1391, a child named Pema Dorje was born in a cattle pen. He was entrusted to the care of a Buddhist monastery where he became a monk. At ordination he changed his name to Gendun Drup. He was soon recognized as an exceptionally gifted student and became abbot of one of the leading monasteries in Tibet. His energy and ability became legendary. He became known as the greatest scholar-saint in Tibetan history. Recognized as having attained Buddhahood, upon his death, his legacy was considered: surely he was the reincarnation of Avalokitesavara and he was given the title Dalai Lama or great teacher.

When a Dalai Lama dies a new Dalai Lama is not chosen but found. The high lamas of the Gelgupa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism search for a person in which Avalokitesavara has reincarnated. They look for visions and signs. When they find a person they suspect may be the next Dalai Lama, they employ a series of tests to ensure that a rebirth has indeed happened. One test is whether the candidate can identify items that secretly belonged to the previous Dalai Lama.

Perhaps Russ Greenfield is a reincarnated bodhisattva. I think he just might be. Compassion does radiate from him. He is on a quest to heal our bodies and lift our spirits. He does seem quite ageless. We would be wise to learn from him and be reborn ourselves.

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