

## Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be

by Lama Surya Das

(288 pp., Broadway Books, 2003, \$25.00)

REVIEWED BY SUSAN BÜRGGRAF

Like a compassionate prescription for healing, Lama Surya Das's latest book, *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be*, gently points inward. Via numerous anecdotes, spiritual practices, inner exercises and gemlike words of wisdom both traditional and original, he guides us on the journey to wholeness.

This is a book I will refer back to and give to friends who are hurting from loss and disappointment. It makes the full range of Buddhist teachings on change and impermanence, loss and pain accessible, even during our most difficult moments, using language that speaks to our experience in fresh and

direct ways. It shows us how to take *all* the circumstances of our lives and use them as gateways to going deeper to the still point that lies in the center of the storm.

As with many great Buddhist texts throughout the centuries, Lama Surya Das's teaching is organized according to outer, inner and innermost/ultimate. Each chapter begins with outer circumstances of loss and change, describing in-depth explorations into experiences ranging from the author's loss of his laundry to the loss of his father through death. Following an account of experiencing deep disappointment in ending a romance with his great love, he wisely counsels, "Sometimes you have to keep the love in your heart, but let the object of your affection go." What is special about this book is that Lama Surya Das does not bypass everyday disappointment and loss and suggest that we use spiritual practice to turn away from life's difficulties. He shows us how to hold them with deep compassion and even appreciation. I found his genuine and intimate examples reassuring and felt a sense of kinship in reading them.

This book contains rich teachings and complete instructions for practices that directly address the inner psychological interpretations, emotions and beliefs that we layer onto our experi-

ences. This is the medicine that provides relief. In order to put his “Pearl Principle”—no pain, no transformative gain—into action, he offers the transformative “Naming Our Losses” practice: “to bring any painful, orphaned feelings and thoughts into the light of conscious awareness so that we can deal with them intelligently and sensitively.”

He also introduces *Chöd*, the Tibetan Buddhist method of facing our deepest fears. “Where you find your greatest fears, you’ll find buried treasure deep below within your psyche.” This leads us to the realization that “being one with one’s karma and realizing the empty, illusory and transitory nature of the objects of our fear delivers us beyond ourselves into a larger, brighter and more empowered way of being in the world. This is the hero’s way.”

On the deepest level, the spiritual journey, Lama Surya Das tells us, opens us to the innermost center of peace. Such peace is the cure that the Buddha promised, and this wise and generous author shows us the way to this ultimate healing. His treasury of practical guidance includes exercises such as the Medicine Buddha visualization and chanting practices. My favorite passage is his fresh and delightful introduction to mindfulness practice. In an extensive chapter on

spiritual renewal, which I found great for ideas on recharging one’s spiritual practice, he introduces a six-week program for using each of the five senses plus thought as focused mindfulness practices throughout the day.

As this book amply illustrates, Lama Surya Das is a master at integrating the dharma and daily life. Though he was classically trained in traditional Asian monastic and retreat settings, I found him more like a jazz master than a clas-

sical musician when it comes to tuning us up spiritually, teaching us to make deep music using anything and everything. “Love creates its own wake, has its own direction, moves according to its own rhythm, and makes its own music.”

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