Lost and Found

When a nice Catholic boy goes Buddhist, fear of death turns to celebration

April 1, 1997 By Regan Solmo

John Lynch has left his Mala beads in a public restroom. The yellow bracelet of Buddhist prayer beads is similar to the Catholic rosary; it helps the user keep track of a repetition of prayers. Some people might be upset that the beads are lost forever, but Lynch is unfazed: “That’s ok, someone else will use them.”

This disregard for material objects is no isolated incident; in the past year, Lynch has also given away 200 books from his impressive library of comparative-religion titles. “I used to look at my books and say, ’Wow, look at all these books I’ve read; aren’t I smart?’ But I realized if they’re things I’m not using, I’m just holding on to something that someone else could use,” he says.

Spirituality permeates everything Lynch does. It extends from his professional life -- a longtime stage actor and theater producer, he’s developing a play called *Tibet Does Not Exist* -- to his home. In the second bedroom of his New York City apartment, a small altar displays objects of spiritual significance, from images of Jesus Christ and the Dalai Lama to an illuminated book of Tibetan chants. Spirituality also extends to his medical life: He takes 50 pills a day, and the practice of organizing them is as meditative as what goes on in a Zen monastery.

Lynch, 33, was once a nice Catholic boy from New Jersey. And in many ways, he still is. He still attends his childhood church and follows many of the tenets of Christianity. However, his HIV diagnosis in 1988 forced him to refocus his spiritual leanings -- from dabbling in transcendental meditation and yoga to seriously pursuing Buddhism. “At the time, AIDS was a death sentence. You couldn’t look to the medical professions for any answers -- they didn’t know anything either -- so you really had to look inside yourself. That was when I started meditating every day.”

The main tenets of Buddhism are that all things are impermanent and that life is a cycle of suffering that can only be broken when one lets go of expectations. This perspective has helped Lynch come to terms with his HIV: “Impermanence is very blatant with HIV and AIDS. You can’t take anything for granted.”

Lynch started with Zen Buddhism -- he met his partner, Mark, at Dai Bosatsu Zendo in New York’s Catskills during an HIV retreat four years ago -- but has recently shifted to Tibetan Buddhism, which focuses primarily on what Lynch calls “the science of dying.” As he describes it, “You can die in a healthy way, but our culture does not address that at all. We tend to fear death, but it’s

really a thing that should be celebrated. It’s a culmination of a whole lifetime.”

Currently combining Western drugs with Eastern herbs, Lynch has seen his viral load plunge from 3 million to 240; his CD4 cells are up from zero to 196. He also takes alfalfa, licorice, dandelion, ginger root and other herbs, and has changed his diet to include more vegetables, fruits, grains and fibers. “I’m actually about to take myself off protease inhibitors. My doctors don’t want me to, but to rely on [Western medicine] is to relinquish the power to heal yourself,” Lynch says. And from a Buddhist perspective, that self-healing is less about physical wellness than about restoring an overall psychological, emotional and spiritual balance, and living a compassionate life.

Lynch admires the compassion with which the Tibetan people, long victimized by the Chinese government, have dealt with their oppressors. The parallel between the AIDS community and the Tibetans is striking, says Lynch. “We’ve endured a lot of frustration due to the apathy and scarlet-letter aspect of this disease, but we can’t let other people’s ignorance and hatred come into us. It depletes our energy.” Lynch focuses his own energy on the Tibetan cause: “I needed to do something, but [AIDS] was too close to home.” He often demonstrates with Students for a Free Tibet and plans to donate the proceeds of *Tibet Does Not Exist* to the organization.

Lynch would like to visit Tibet some day, but probably won’t, because of the difficulty of traveling and getting access to medical care there. “Also, I don’t think the Chinese would let me in,” he says with a tiny grin. “My name’s probably on some list somewhere for anticommunist activities.”

But as any good Buddhist knows, you don’t need to travel across the globe to find enlightenment. It could be as close as your second bedroom.

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