

MARTIN CHAUTARI INVITES YOU TO A LECTURE

Imbibing Eastern Wisdom: Nepal as Dharma Destination

by

Mark Liechty

Martin Chautari Seminar Hall, Thapathali, 2 June 2015 (Tuesday), 3:00pm

This lecture traces the history of religious tourism in Nepal through the stories of westerners who have looked at the Himalayas in general, and Nepal in particular, as a repository of “Eastern” spiritual wisdom. Fleeing the ills of Western modernity, foreign seekers looked to Eastern spirituality (modernity’s imagined inverse) as an antidote to their own malaise and a key to their own “self-discovery.” From 19th century eccentrics like Madam Blavatsky; to her Theosophical offspring like Alexandra David Neel and Karl Heinz Wagner (a.k.a. Sugata); to Beatnik “dharma bum” Gary Snyder; to hippie-era guru Richard Alpert (a.k.a. Baba Ram Dass); to Hollywood starlet, Buddhist nun, and Kopan Monastery founder “Princess” Zina Rachevsky – a wide range of foreign seekers has sought spiritual enlightenment in Nepal. In this paper I examine how the “Eastern Wisdom” that foreigners sought has changed through time and how changing spiritual fashions in the West have led to a shifting focus on either Hinduism or Buddhism. Since the Chinese invasion of Tibet, global sympathy for Tibetan Buddhists has led to a huge surge in interest in Tibetan Buddhism as well as a tide of dharma tourists to Nepal. Today religion – and especially Tibetan Buddhism – is a key part of Nepal’s tourism “brand,” even if the “product” that foreigners seek is as much a part of their own imagination as of any local origin.

Mark Liechty is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA. He is the author of several books on modern Nepali society that attempt to situate contemporary cultural processes in historical context. They include *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (2003, Princeton University Press; reprinted in 2008, Martin Chautari), *Out Here in Kathmandu* (2010, Martin Chautari) and a forthcoming history of tourism in Nepal. He is one of the founding editors of the journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society*.

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This is a public event and participation is open to all.