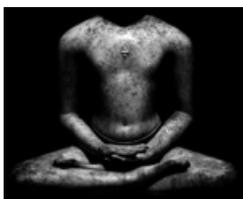



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Reviews and Further Reading 4

REVIEWS AND FURTHER READING LIST



A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU

Mongolia, Tibet, and the Destiny of the Western World
By Peter Kingsley ([The Golden Sufi Center \(GoldenSufi.Org\)](#)), 2010. PP. 192. \$14.95 Paper

Our beautiful blue dot of a planet looks like a wonderland from outer space. But as you get closer, you see the conflicts, the violence, and the ruined opportunities. Move in even closer and you notice personal unhappiness, depression, and violent and aggressive behavior, based on some deep ignorance about meaning and values. Of course, this is using only a negative lens.

In pockets of peace and prosperity, life is also still exciting and promising.

Many earnest people are at work trying to understand how to shift civilization and private lives away from entropy and threat. They try to be intelligent and informed and trust that civilization will thrive on good factual knowledge and the best data. They look to experts in each field to lead the way by means of their education and experience.

But Peter Kingsley offers an alternative point of view, and a solution to these essential questions, by delving deeply into the roots of our civilization. He doesn't do this as a typical philosopher, and he doesn't depict the philosophers he studies in the usual way: as academics surrounded by books and always deep in thought. In his previous books—as in *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*—he demonstrates that philosophy, true to its Greek language roots, is a certain intimate interplay with wisdom, and that classically it is pursued not in abstract and mental terms but through crafted modes of meditation, ritual, and community.

I have taught religion and mythology for many years. People have frequently told me that they studied myth in school, but they didn't know that it had anything to do with their lives. I do my best to point out how myth depicts the deepest urges and patterns that shape our lives. But Peter goes much further.

One bit of mythology he clears up for me has to do with the Greek god Apollo. Often Apollo is understood as the archetypal model of rationality, moderation, and the shining outer achievements of civilization. I've never felt easy with that picture of him—given that his wisdom rose out of a fissure in the earth associated with the mother goddess, a great Python and a mantic seer.

Peter gives a very different portrait of this god, far from the allegorical cipher that you find in books on philosophy or mythology. What's important about this shift in our picture of Apollo is the very point of Peter's new book: a new appreciation for shamanic ecstasy as the only trustworthy source for a civilization's—and I would say a person's—continuing on the adventure of life.

This new book has a drive and energy that is thrilling. I can't go into much detail about

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I see the lack of what I am in others,
When the hand of Grace rests for a moment...

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its substance, because I don't want to spoil the tight, dynamic movement, or its detective-story suspense, or its unexpected and inspiring outcome. Let me just say that the reader does what the story is about. The reader travels with unnatural speed from Mongolia to Greece to where he lives, here and now. He is presented with an unexpected key to his own life. But there is no guarantee that he will accept it, since it is so anachronous and mysterious.

Peter writes in a style that echoes the oral musicality of a traditional storyteller. To all appearances it is a simple style; but profound challenges sit quietly, almost hidden, on every page. Peter is re-writing the ancient philosophical tradition and, in doing so, is making it accessible in a way that, I believe, is most suited to our new century. His style is not linear, entirely logical, nor explanatory. It evokes the mysteries that have long remained invisible in texts that have been presented as though they were the result of factual research. In every way, Peter is closer to dream than to what we think of as fact.

This new book uses fresh investigations into history to give us timeless clues for our survival. His topic is nothing less than civilization and its sources of unfolding and flowering. I also read the book as a psychology of ecstasy.

Peter's point of view is analogous to the one I bring to my practice of psychotherapy, where I trust a dream to tell us much more about the client's situation than any idea either of us may have. Taking a dream seriously is like looking through a window onto a parallel, relevant universe that accounts for our experience, but is generally hidden.

The materialist dismisses dreams as electrical by-products of the brain, and many would dismiss ecstasy as a way to knowledge. Or they demand to know how it all works, and what, after all, is the nature of what you contact in trance or dream. It would be better to enter the process and be convinced by its effects.

I find all of Peter Kingsley's work exciting, captivating, and full of hope. I realize that it demands a shift in paradigm, and maybe it is the catalyst for such a shift. I appreciate the way his new book is organized: a fluid, adventurous story followed by an equal number of pages devoted to notes. We need both powerful narrative and scholarly reflection, and Peter can supply both.

This is a small book. You can read it in an hour. I suggest that you read it several times and really get the golden idea at its core. Then bring that idea to everything you do—every decision, every choice, every plan, and every interpretation. Live by an entirely different guidance. Shift from the left-brain Apollo that has brightened your life, to the god of ecstasy portrayed in this book. Walk like you've never walked before. Let the arrow pierce you.

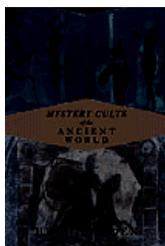
Thomas Moore is the author of the bestselling *Care of the Soul*, as well as many other books. His work has appeared in over twenty languages. He started his career as a friar and has been a psychotherapist for thirty years.

–Reviewed by Thomas Moore



buddhist global relief

Visit and read the Venerable Bhikku Bodhi's article, "[My First Encounter with a Buddhist Monk.](#)"



MYSTERY CULTS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

By Hugh Bowden ([Princeton University Press](#)), 2010. Pp. 256. \$39.95

In the first century B.C., Cicero praised the mystery religions of antiquity, by which, he said, "we have learned ... the first principles of life and have gained the understanding, not only to live happily, but also to die with better hope." Those initiated into these religions—which venerated such gods as Demeter, Cybele, Isis, Dionysus, and Mithras—were sworn to secrecy: the Greek word *mysterion* or "mystery" is derived from the Greek *myein*, "to be silent." The initiates kept their vows well. Today we have only tantalizing clues to what these cults taught and practiced, gleaned from surviving artifacts and allusions in ancient literature.

Hugh Bowden's *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* uses this evidence to paint a portrait of these religions. He begins with the most famous of them, that of the earth goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone at Eleusis, and gives a remarkably vivid picture of what their rites must have been like. He proceeds to the mysteries of the Aegean island of Samothrace—a cult so ancient that the Greeks traced it back to the Pelasgians, the pre-Hellenic inhabitants of the region. Even the real names of the gods involved may have been forgotten: Some of the sources call them the Kabeiroi, but Bowden says there are some serious problems with this identification. He goes on to discuss Cybele, Isis, and Dionysus, as well as Mithras, whose enigmatic cult, devoted to an ostensibly Persian god, flourished chiefly in what is now Germany, Belgium, and Britain among the Roman legions stationed there.

Bowden is a specialist in ancient history, and his approach to the mystery religions is highly conventional. He seems more comfortable dealing with archaeological rather than literary evidence; consequently the book is at its best when the artifacts are most abundant, as they are with Eleusis.

The chapters on Eleusis and Samothrace are the first, and the strongest, in the book; the discussion becomes weaker as it proceeds. Orphism, for example, was an extremely influential religion, leaving its mark on Pindar, Pythagoras, and Plato, and through them on our own concepts of the afterlife. But Bowden inexplicably restricts his discussion of this rich subject to the inscribed golden leaves that were placed on the bodies of dead initiates to serve as guides and talismans for the next life. It is as if someone were to write about medieval Christianity and talk only about Communion chalices.

Bowden's treatment of the Mithraic mysteries is reasonably full. He tells us that the rites and symbols of Mithraism were closely correlated to astrology; many images in the Mithraic system—including the lion, the bull, and the scorpion—are taken from the signs of the zodiac. But some scholars, notably David Ulansey in his *Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries*, have suggested that the rites of Mithras alluded to the astronomical precession of the equinoxes. By this view, the central Mithraic rite, the slaying of a bull, would represent the end of the astrological Age of Taurus. Bowden does not mention this theory, even to dismiss it, and one wishes he had.

Similarly, Bowden's discussion of the relation of the mystery religions to Christianity is cursory. He suggests that terms like *mysterion* in the Greek New Testament simply mean "something hidden," and have no associations with the mystery religions as such. Explicit connections between Christianity and the mystery cults, he claims, do not occur until the fourth century A.D., when Christianity was already well under way to becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire. I personally suspect that his views here are overly reductionist, and that when the intended audience of Paul and the authors of the Gospels encountered the word *mysterion*, they would have taken it in its most obvious sense.

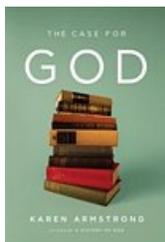
The most curious chapter of this book is the last, in which Bowden mentions two modern phenomena to elucidate the nature of the *enthousiasmos*, or "possession by the god," found in many mystery cults. He discusses the religions of the African diaspora—such as Santería and Voodoo—whose devotees have ecstatic rituals in which some participants are "possessed" by the god. He also describes the snake-handling cults of Appalachia, which induce a kind of religious frenzy that enables participants to handle poisonous snakes without being bitten or harmed (usually). It is praiseworthy that Bowden is taking some of the more exotic aspects of the ancient mystery religions and, rather than dismissing them as superstition, trying to account for them in terms of other types of religious experience. And the parallels he cites are reasonable ones. Unfortunately his book appears to lack enough of a foundation in the study of religions to do full justice to the subject. As a result, like many parts of the text, his examination of the religious nature of the mysteries is brief and perfunctory.

All this said, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* is clearly written and richly illustrated, and gives a solid introduction to an extremely elusive phenomenon. While it might be best supplemented by other works, such as Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion* and Marvin Meyer's *Ancient Mysteries*, it remains a reliable and accessible guide to the religions that gave

“mystery” its name.

Richard Smoley’s books include *Forbidden Faith: The Secret History of Gnosticism*; *Inner Christianity*; and *The Dice Game of Shiva*. He is a consulting editor to Parabola.

–Reviewed by Richard Smoley



THE CASE FOR GOD

By Karen Armstrong (Knopf), 2009. Pp. 406. \$27.95

Karen Armstrong’s exhaustive overview of centuries of religious belief defies easy summary.

Her core theme is that words and concepts are utterly inadequate to pierce the unfathomable mystery called God. Theologians of various faiths long ago concluded that “the words we use to describe mundane things were simply not suitable for God. ‘He’ was not good, divine, powerful, or intelligent in any way that we

could understand.”

For most of history the idea of a Supreme Being was merely a symbol of “indescribable transcendence.” “The modern God,” Armstrong writes, “conceived as powerful creator, first cause, supernatural personality, realistically understood, and rationally demonstrable—is a recent phenomenon.”

Armstrong has impeccable credentials to tackle this weighty subject. A former Catholic nun, she has spent her life lecturing and writing bestselling books such as *A History of God* and *The Battle for God*.

In *The Case for God*, Armstrong says that radical atheism is a relatively modern belief. For centuries scientists and others understood that their expertise involved only the physical world. True, many scientists were agnostic, meaning that they simply did not know if anything existed beyond the material universe, but absolute denial of non-physical reality was rare.

As the modern age of science progressed, some observers predicted that religion and God would soon become relics. But instead recent decades have witnessed a religious resurgence, in part because of the growth of fundamentalism. But fundamentalists who interpret holy books as literal truths are easy targets for atheists, who, Armstrong says, correctly point out the absurdity of reading the Bible or the Qur’an as literal history. The ancient texts, she explains, are filled with myths, such as the Garden of Eden and the parting of the Red Sea, which should not be read as actual historical events.

Armstrong compares the quest for religious truths with the insights gained from art, music, and poetry. “Religion’s task, closely allied with that of art,” Armstrong writes, “was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve: mortality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life.”

Until modern times, she says, spiritual seekers did not interpret stories in holy books as literal truths. The stories were seen as symbols of a reality that transcended language.

Religions disagreed about many things, but they were united around the concept of letting go of ego and caring for one’s neighbor. “Compassion would become the central practice of the religious quest,” Armstrong says. “Everything always came back to the importance of treating others with absolute respect. It was epitomized in the Golden Rule.”

In practice, though, believers often strayed far from the ideal of compassion. Armstrong notes that Christian crusaders in the eleventh century slaughtered 30,000 Jews and Muslims during the conquest of Jerusalem, an event Armstrong calls “an idolatrous catastrophe and one of the most shameful developments in Western Christian history.”

The author's provocative discussion of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will give adherents much to ponder. She contends, for example, that the apostle Paul and the evangelists never claimed that Jesus was divine and, in fact, "would have been quite shocked by this idea." Regarding the miracles attributed to Jesus, Armstrong says miracles were common in ancient times. Old Testament prophets performed miracles similar to those of Jesus, "but nobody ever suggested that they were gods."

Armstrong returns often to the theme that the idea of a Supreme Being outside the physical universe is beyond human comprehension and can be approached only in silence and awe. "What lies behind or beyond the universe is inconceivable to us," she writes. "When we try to think of its 'Creator,' our minds simply seize up."

Armstrong is a scrupulous researcher, but some assertions seem like a stretch. For example, she claims, without citing a source, that "most Christian fundamentalists see Jews and Muslims as destined for hellfire."

The Case for God is not light reading. Armstrong has packed so much history, philosophy, and religion into these pages that readers might feel overwhelmed. Those who are unfamiliar with her work might do better by starting with *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*, her engrossing memoir of spiritual growth published in 2004.

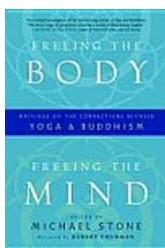
The latest book's title, *The Case for God*, may be misleading. A better choice might have been *The Mystery of God*. Armstrong revels in the mystery, and concludes that it is "impossible to settle either the existence or nonexistence of God by rational arguments alone."

She encourages readers to approach the idea of God from a place of silence, mystery, and awe. "We may find that for a while we have to go into what mystics called the dark night of the soul or the cloud of unknowing," she says. "This will not be easy for people used to getting instant information at the click of a mouse."

Bill Williams is a freelance writer and former religion book reviewer for The Hartford [Connecticut] Courant. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

–Reviewed by Bill Williams

FREEING THE BODY, FREEING THE MIND:



Writings on the Connections between Yoga & Buddhism
By Michael Stone (Shambhala), 2010. Pp. 304. \$18.95 Paper

Robert Thurman, professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, expresses a popular misconception regarding the difference between Buddhism and Yoga. In his Foreword to *Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind: Writings on the Connections Between Yoga and Buddhism*, he remarks: "...certainly Yoga is in essence a highly skillful way of being realistic about the body."

[viii] Like many Western, secular practitioners of either Buddhism or Yoga or both, by using the words "in essence," Thurman seems to equate the term "Yoga" with the physical poses of Hatha Yoga.

But from Michael Stone's introduction onward, this conception is challenged and replaced with more holistic descriptions and analyses of Buddhist and Yogic philosophies and practices. *Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind* identifies the central error as making the over-simplistic distinction between Yoga as a "body practice," and the Buddha's Dharma teachings as "mind practices." "Such oversimplification not only misrepresents the two traditions, but also disregards the long history of dialogue that both Yoga and Buddhism share and the complex ethical, philosophical, and cultural components that underscore each system."

The essays Stone has collected, by scholars, teachers, monks, and priests, illustrate this

interconnectedness and continue the dialogue. Virtually all authors are “dual practitioners,” i.e., either Buddhists who do Yoga or Yogis who incorporate Buddhist meditation and teachings into their practice, or simply consider them intrinsically related. In his concluding essay, Stone shares a personal testimonial from one of his students, a Zen abbot:

There are movements I practiced that brought me into such untouched areas in the body that I could barely handle the emotions ... particularly the shame ... that I have not worked with in my zazen.... These practices—Yoga postures and zazen [seated meditation]—are of equal value. They illuminate wholly different aspects of mind and body.

The aspects may be different, but the crucial point is that both Yoga and Zen Buddhism are recognized as disciplines that work with both mind and body.

The writings vary not only according to the different affiliations of each writer, but also by approach: personal, historical, or philosophical. Chip Hartranft's “Awakening to Prana” starts the book with a detailed, descriptive history of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. It is vital for appreciating the rest of the essays and the purpose of the book, with its definitions of Hatha and Raja Yoga. “Its tenth-century creators called it Hatha Yoga—meaning ‘forceful’ or ‘energy’ Yoga—to distinguish it from the ‘royal’ or ‘highest’ path, Raja Yoga—the cultivation of mental unification, or Samadhi, leading to wisdom and liberation.” He then notes that its inventors intended the two Yogas to be practiced in tandem. Both Zen priest and Iyengar Yoga teacher, Shosan Victoria Austin, like several other writers, reiterates and builds from Hartranft's information in her anecdotal piece, “Zen or Yoga?” She notes that Swami Vivekananda's 1893 Chicago presentation made Hatha Yoga popular for health and balance but obscured “its role in mind training,” which “went largely unnoticed for up to a hundred years.” Most controversial and difficult to follow is “Buddha and the Yogi: Paradigms of Restraint and Renunciation” by current scholar and former Zen monk Mu Soeng. From the start, he puts Yoga and Buddhism in, shall we say, the same shopping cart—as odd items for commercialization. He is sympathetic with the fact that Americans use them for physical fitness and stress reduction, respectively, but argues that “what binds them both is a shared vision of individuals and society grounded in restraint and renunciation, in simplicity, in doing away with the clutter of possessions, and so on.” Soeng thus sees “a fundamental clash of worldviews in these two traditions with those of the Judeo-Christian worldview.” A complex, discursive discussion of Eastern and Western religions and philosophies follows, ending on a resigned, somewhat inconclusive note.

The entire book is a spur to practice, even when one takes issue with the views of different contributors. The gratitude that arises is mitigated, however, by the numerous authorial and editorial lapses that spoil roughly a quarter of the contributions. The problems range from dangling modifiers to sentences full of stuffing. The overuse of words like “ineffable” and “luminous” points to lacks in the users—not in the words. This is the only serious “argument” I have with this truly useful, helpful spiritual guide of a book. Mindfulness ought to extend to the care with which words are placed in sentences, just as it underlies the care with which one bends into an asana or places a foot in kinhin. Both the Buddha's teachings and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are proof of the possibility.

Alexandra Yurkovsky does Zazen and Hatha Yoga in Berkeley, California.

–Reviewed by Alexandra Yurkovsky



ELEGANT FAILURE:

A Guide to Zen Koans

By Richard Shrobe (**Rodmell Press**), 2010. Pp. 256. \$16.95 Paper

Who hasn't been stopped in their mental tracks by the question, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Most of us either give up or assume we already know the answer. We've even heard there's no answer; that the whole point is to stop our busy

thoughts in their habitual flow. So are koans impenetrable? Yes and no. In this refreshing book, we are invited to divest them of their Eastern guru garb and meet them in our everyday life.

According to Richard Shrobe, these “encrypted capsules of spiritual wisdom” serve to “strip away our previously accumulated ideas,” and point us “directly toward facets of spiritual perception, functioning and relationships.” As the guiding teacher of the Chogye International Zen Center of New York, he has been teaching in the Kwan Um School of Zen, the largest Zen organization in North America, for more than twenty-five years, having received inka, or formal certification to teach Zen, in 1984, from Korean Master Seung Sahn. He’s also a Gestalt psychotherapist, an MSW, and earned his living as a professional jazz pianist before that.

Shrobe describes how at his first interview (dokusan), Master Seung Sahn put his Zen stick on the floor between them and asked him, “You and the Zen stick, are they the same or different?” Shrobe answered, “Yes, that is my problem. I always feel that I’m a little separate from what I’m relating to.” The Zen master immediately hit the floor. Shrobe thought that was so absurd and, at the same time, profound that he burst out laughing. The Zen master waited until his student had settled down before teaching him what Lin-chi, for whom the Rinzai school is named, had taught in the ninth century: When you do not make your experience into an object, then there is one unified being.

While the practice of meditation and study of the koans used in the Rinzai, Soto, and Korean traditions encourages great faith, great courage, and great questioning, you don’t have to be rocket scientist to be a Zen master or to find beginner’s mind, Shrobe affirms.

He goes on to point out that that if you live your life without clinging and without rejecting your experiences, you are on the path to becoming more clear-minded and compassionate, thus able to help other sentient beings. It’s through paying attention to the mundane with a spirit of caring, he says, that Zen Buddhists practice what they preach, during meditation and at all times.

Zen Master Seung Sahn taught that to use a koan—a story with a question mark at the end whose purpose is to short-circuit the intellect—you must perceive the koan’s true meaning, what it is pointing at, rather than allowing yourself to be distracted by the narrative. (See “Thinking Non-Thinking: An Interview with John Daido Looi Roshi,” *Parabola*, Fall 2006). In *Elegant Failure*, Shrobe offers a vibrant, informed, and often personal interpretation of twenty-two of the traditional 1,700 koans that have been passed down through the centuries in three well-known collections. His commentary will interest the seasoned practitioner as much as the beginner.

Most of those studied in *Elegant Failure* come from the Blue Cliff Record, along with a few from the Wu-men-kuan. In his first few chapters, Shrobe discusses koans from early Chinese Zen masters, then examines those of the five main schools, and ends the book with some short sections from Buddhist scriptures, fables, or mystery tales.

In Case 81 of the Blue Cliff Record, in which a disciple falls short of the mark, Shrobe helps us understand a metaphor to seeing essential nature. Yao-shan tries to show a monk how to hit the bull’s eye. The monk, who isn’t ready (not yet clear-minded), asks Yao-shan, “On a level field, in the shallow grass, the elk and deer form a herd; how can one shoot the elk of elks?” The level field represents equanimity, clear mind. Shallow grass suggests that all opinions, thoughts, and concepts have to be cut down. The elk and deer form a herd: all divergent mind energies come together in one point. But how does one shoot the elk of elks? In other words, how can one see one’s essential nature (original mind, the true master, mind essence)? Yao-shan answers the monk by saying, “Look—an arrow!” indicating that looking is hitting the bull’s eye; just seeing is essential nature.

This koan emphasizes the importance of keeping the question, rather than answering it or making an image of essential nature. It raises the question, Who is it that sees? Then, we are told, the monk ran away and Yao-shan said, “This wretch playing with a mudball—when will it ever end?” In other words, Yao-shan disapproved of the monk because he

didn't give an engaged answer. Zen, as Shrobe points out, is the practice of becoming fully alive and connecting with situations in our lives, not in running away or hiding from the world or from ourselves.

In another well-known koan, "Yen-kuan's Rhinoceros Fan" (Case 91 of the Blue Cliff Record), Shrobe clears up some of the mystery. The koan:

One day Yen Kuan called his attendant,
"Bring me my rhinoceros fan."

The attendant said, "The fan is broken."

Yen Kuan said, "If the fan is broken,
bring the rhinoceros back to me."

The attendant had no reply.

We're helped to understand the story at a new level when Shrobe explains that the handle or ribs of the fan were actually made from a rhinoceros horn. The Chinese used to consider the rhinoceros a kind of ox, an animal often used in the Zen tradition as a representation of the mind. Since a fan makes wind, it represents something all-pervading, and the fact that the fan is broken may refer to an enlightening or breakthrough experience. Clearly, the attendant in this story didn't get it!

Toward the end of *Elegant Failure*, Shrobe quotes eleventh-century Zen Master Wu-tsu, who addressed an assembly by saying: "When you meet a master on the road don't greet him with speech, don't greet him with silence." Then Shrobe recounts that one of his own students announced she would like to participate in a retreat (sesshin). "That's a good idea," he told her. "We're going to have a three-day retreat here in the Zen Center in New York soon." She replied, "Oh, if I do a retreat, I need to go to the country somewhere, up in the mountains." "I realized," Shrobe writes, "she had not yet understood the essence of what constitutes true silence. That is a very important point—what is true silence versus attachment to quietness?"

Elegant Failure is full of insightful, often personal revelations about the Zen path and Shrobe's experiences with it. Additionally, it becomes an elegant primer to the forthcoming exhibition at the Japan Society in New York City, October 1, 2010–January 16, 2011, "The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin."

Patty de Llosa, author of *The Practice of Presence: Five Paths for Daily Life*, is an Alexander teacher and contributing editor to *Parabola* who lives and practices in New York City.

–Reviewed by Patty de Llosa

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