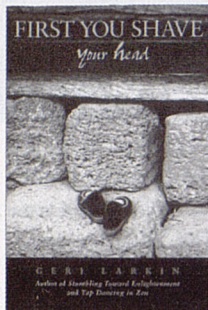


Book Review

Algernon D'Amassa



First You Shave Your Head, by Geri Larkin, Celestial Arts, 2002

Regarding the teacher-student relationship, Zen Master Seung Sahn has told us more than once, "First you must kill your parents; then, you must kill Buddha; and then, you must kill me."

Author Geri Larkin is a dharma teacher under a different Korean teacher, Samu Sunim. Her first two collections of dharma talks (*Stumbling Towards Enlightenment* and *Tap Dancing in Zen*) are inspirational. These two books are completely heartfelt, utterly accessible, and entertaining for a general reader. She is a single mom in Michigan who is also a serious student of Zen, such that when her teacher tells her she must shave her head for a pilgrimage in Korea, she does it—but she prepares herself by consulting fashion magazines. No pretentious, other-worldly Zen here.

This travelogue, in which Larkin and an American dharma sister visit Korean temples under the severe gaze of their teacher, is filled with humor, but it is not *Ally McBeal-goes-to-Asia*: it is a plunge into the unknown. Korea is still very much another world from our own, and all of the confidence Larkin had accumulated on her home turf

is quickly stripped away by the weather, the rough terrain, the austerities of the trip, and the harsh, often incomprehensible behavior of her teacher.

She likens the process to beating a shirt clean. She is left not even with humility—*everything* is taken away and reduced to "don't-know" mind:

The longer and more arduous the trip, the more your heart has a chance to open up until finally, in a moment of utter exhaustion, you realize that's all of you that is left—the heart part. Your mind has disappeared—the one that judges and gets mad and worries and thinks and fantasizes. Instead you are in love with your life, whatever it is. And the whole world is your family with the earth playing the lead role as universal nest, one you are thrilled to share with all takers. I almost forgot. You'll also lose ten pounds without even trying.

But holding on to that isn't it, either. The most wonderful thing this book offers (aside from some choice anecdotes, such as when an elderly monk demonstrates the full versatility of a soccer ball as a home exercise machine) is an open-hearted account of a sincere student finding real faith in her own practice, getting it by losing it completely, and then giving every ounce of the merit away. ☸

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