

Long way home

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*Ultimate Journey: Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk Who Crossed Asia in Search of Enlightenment* by Richard Bernstein

In 629 Hsuan Tsang, a 26-year-old monk already recognized as the most learned Buddhist scholar in China, set off for India and Nepal in search of manuscripts and teachers. He was frustrated by the lack of reliable translations of Buddhist texts and sought instruction in the true teachings of the Buddha. The journey was filled with obstacles. Deserts and mountains divided China from the Buddhist heartlands. Moreover, since the Chinese emperor had strictly forbidden travel to the West, the young monk had to hide his identity until he reached the regions beyond the emperor's grasp.

His journey lasted 17 years, taking him through much of Central Asia and India. He studied at the most famous Buddhist monastery of the time and triumphed in an 18-day debate attended by heads of state and thousands of monks. Hsuan Tsang then returned to China, where he received a warm welcome from the emperor whose decree he had broken, and spent his later years translating Buddhist texts into Chinese. He would become one of the most famous travelers in the history of China and a major influence on later Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese folk novel *Monkey: A Journey to the West* is based on his trip.

Richard Bernstein, a middle-aged, "secular, non-Buddhist skeptic" who writes book reviews for the *New York Times*, set off to retrace Hsuan Tsang's steps. Bernstein describes himself as a "devout sort of atheist," like his Russian Jewish father. Although he does not believe in God, he respects the ethical wisdom of the Jewish tradition and the suffering of earlier generations of Jews, and he celebrates the Seder service in his home.

Bernstein's travel narrative alternates between observations on current conditions in Asia, the rigors of contemporary travel, the world of Hsuan Tsang and the personal challenges of his own life, especially his hitherto inability to commit to marriage. Bernstein worries that the Chinese authorities will discover his identity and, because

of an earlier book on China that he had coauthored, *The Coming Conflict with China*, abruptly end his trip.

While not committed as profoundly as Hsuan Tsang to finding ultimate enlightenment, Bernstein reads widely and asks questions about Buddhism along the way, providing the reader with an introduction to much of Central Asian history and to some of the debates in Buddhist thought. He is an engaging raconteur, and the narrative offers a wealth of information on both past and present conditions in this part of the world.

On occasion, however, he interprets Buddhism in ways that can be misleading. In his musings on Mahayana Buddhist logic, he never fully grapples with nonduality, the claim that *samsara*, this passing world of suffering and change, is nirvana, the absolute. Instead, he sees the Heart Sutra as "the highest expression of the idea of an Ultimate Reality compared to which all things are empty," thereby pressing the text into a framework more familiar to Jews and Christians than to Buddhists.

For Buddhists, the search for ecstasy is itself an obstacle in meditation, but Bernstein presents them as seeking ecstasy "by meditating on the notion that reality is existent and nonexistent at the same time." Moreover, Bernstein tends to oppose Buddhism to Taoism and Confucianism in a way that does not do justice to the subtle and complex relationship between Chinese Buddhism and the native Chinese traditions.

While Bernstein never arrives at an experience of ultimate enlightenment regarding Buddhist thought, he does come to a resolution of his personal dilemma. He finds wisdom in returning home and accepting the everyday routine of married life. Despite its limitations on matters religious, this attractive and engaging travel narrative opens up a fascinating and remote world too little known to outsiders.