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Monk-y Business: Controversial NYC guru Michael Roach

Michael Roach, a controversial Buddhist monk, lost his "spiritual partner" to another man—and started partying and dressing in Armani suits. Now his flock is struggling to keep the faith.

By Beth Landman



Photo: Courtesy www.diamondcutterinstitute.com
"Some people are turned off by my robes," (inset) says Michael, who favors sharp suits when giving talks to businesspeople or hitting the clubs.

Last November, Mia*, a comely thirtysomething yoga instructor at a studio downtown, got a strange phone call. Geshe Michael Roach, an ordained Buddhist monk and guru to many in the Union Square spirituality scene, was in town. He wanted to hang out that night with her and some of her other yogi friends, but he didn't want to talk chakras or do vinyasas. He wanted to hit the clubs.

Later that evening, Mia met up with the 57-year-old monk at Cielo, a hip club in the Meatpacking District known for its house beats and tough velvet rope. He wasn't wearing his usual flowing monastic robes. "It was the strangest thing," recalls Mia. "He was in this Armani suit and with a model, and he was now saying that everyone should dress up"—strange indeed, given that thousands of years of tradition dictate that Buddhist monks live spartan, celibate lives.

With his heavily lined face and thin graying hair brushing his shoulders, the guru didn't quite blend with the Cielo scene, though he did his best, boogying down with a young Chanel-clad Russian girl. Erin Vaughan, another yoga teacher there that night, was shocked. "He was on the dance floor, and there was nothing enlightened about it," she says.

With an unorthodox approach to finding enlightenment—Geshe Michael encourages his followers to couple up with spiritual partners and never stray more than 30 feet from each other—he has always moved to his own beat. But after his own spiritual partner left him last summer for a younger man, he started to behave oddly, and now even some of his most loyal devotees are having trouble following his moves.

A Princeton grad, Michael Roach came to Buddhism after his mother's death from breast cancer left him devastated. "It sort of destroyed me," he remembers. "I kept



Photo: Courtesy www.diamondcutterinstitute.com
Geshe Michael and ex-partner Christie speak to followers at an Arizona church.

wondering what the meaning of life was, and I went to India to look for answers. In those days you could go to the Dalai Lama's house and knock on his door." He was ordained as a monk in 1983 and then spent another 12 years studying Tibetan Buddhism to earn the title of geshe, one of only a few Westerners to do so. While studying for the geshe degree, Michael also amassed a personal fortune working in the diamond business, the vast majority of which, he says, he gave away to aid Tibetan refugees. In 1996 he cofounded Three Jewels, a dharma, meditation and yoga center in the East Village. The following year, he met Christie McNally, a young blonde two years out of NYU and 20 years his junior. Geshe Michael recalls their first meeting with a mythic reverence. "A beautiful rainbow came out," he says.

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She came to him as a student, but their relationship quickly blossomed into much more. The two became spiritual partners, vowing never to be more than 15 feet apart. They spent three years, from 2000 to 2003, living together in an Arizona yurt on a silent retreat, their relationship a secret. Soon after, they went public, flying in the face of tradition and prompting outcry.

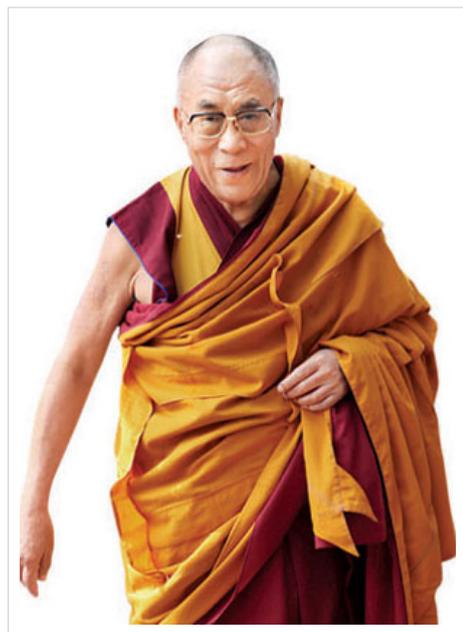


Photo: Rajesh Kumar Singh/Ap Images
The Dalai Lama shunned Michael for his unorthodox practices.

His friend Professor Robert Thurman, father of actress Uma Thurman and a former monk, begged Michael to renounce his monastic vows and stop wearing robes. Michael declined, and the two stopped speaking. The Dalai Lama refused to see him when he traveled to India with a group of students in 2006. Despite such harsh criticism, Geshe Michael continued to live with Christie, though he says he's been celibate since he was 22. Of course, his definition of celibacy differs from the norm.

"We are not allowed to have sex, but in yoga there are practices that involve joining with a partner," he explains. "They are secret, and you are not allowed to disclose them. You might think of them as sex, but their purpose is to move inner energy. It takes very strict training. There would be penetration, but no release of semen." Sex or no sex, the two developed a unique bond, and their unorthodox message attracted thousands of followers around the world, including in New York and Arizona—where in 2004, they founded an unaccredited Buddhist University and

retreat center called Diamond Mountain. When they spoke at St. Bartholomew's Church on the Upper East Side in 2007, some 800 New Yorkers came out to hear their talk on spiritual partnerships. They gave countless lectures, wrote half a dozen books together and helped couple off hundreds of followers into intensely close partnerships like their own. It was a relationship of mythical proportions, but that didn't mean it would last forever.

Last summer Christie left Geshe Michael for another man. Ian Thorson, a young student who had once served as the couple's attendant and delivered them food and robes, had come between them. After nearly a decade of eating off the same plate, reading the same book and never leaving one another's sight, the couple's spiritual partnership came to a dramatic end. Now both Geshe Michael and his followers are devastated and questioning what, and whom, they believe in.



Photo: Lyn Sims Photography
Michael and Christie in the Arizona desert in 2005.

"Everything is going into chaos. It's all exploding," says Erin, who's close to many of his followers. "People are switching partners, and some are leaving him." Christie has fled into silent retreat (where she was at press time and unavailable for comment), most likely with Ian at her side, while Geshe Michael has been hitting the clubs with the Russian blonde. He's also been seen around town holding hands with a yoga instructor. He's even talking about starting a line of women's dresses adorned with synthetic diamonds. According to Mia, the guru has also been telling his followers that "everyone should dress up and look beautiful—it was the opposite of how he usually speaks." More accurately, it

seems to be the opposite of how he used to speak. Other followers have noted that Geshe Michael seems to be espousing different beliefs, preaching that looking good and dressing well can help attract more followers. "It certainly has created confusion," sighs Bengal Shyam, a 28-year-old follower.

Though Geshe Michael talks with only diplomatic grace about his former partner and maintains the relationship wasn't romantic, he is clearly heartbroken. "It's difficult to keep it spiritual," he admits. "We were trained since childhood to think of a partner as romantic, and I don't think anyone truly overcomes that. There's still a little high school stuff going on, but it's a good lesson."

Despite their personal drama, Geshe Michael says he and Christie will still teach together at Diamond Mountain in the spring, though post-breakup, they'll surely bring a different message to their followers. "I will tell them that whenever something difficult happens, you have to try to use it as a path," he says. "You should see your partner as an angel who came to teach you. I look at Christie that way—the education is finished and now she is teaching a new

person. If you try to see it that way, it helps your heart to hurt less."

Meanwhile, Geshe Michael laughs off questions about the clubbing and the Russian girl, saying, "If we don't make it fun and healthy, Buddhism will die out." (*Mia's name has been changed.)

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