

DHARMA -- A PICNIC IN TIBET

I came across this photo taken (with an old Nikon Coolpix 950) some years ago during one of my trips to Tibet, just a point-and-shoot camera. But I like the image and there is a story that goes with it and it has some humor.

This lama in the photo is the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery, which is located in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Rinpoche has been our dharma teacher for almost forty years now, so I was thrilled to get to accompany him to his homeland, perhaps for the last time. This story was when Rinpoche was then in his high eighties. He is 95 today.

At the time Rinpoche was visiting the area of Kham in eastern Tibet where he was born, the high plateau regions. His family were nomads and they lived in tents, moving as the seasons dictated. Rinpoche was a shepherd before he became a monk.

In 2004 Rinpoche had traveled to Tibet with a group of his students (Margaret and I were included) and on that day we were in a small field of flowers by the edge of a meandering stream. Tibetan streams are more like channels in the ground that water rush through rather than what we call streams; they are narrow, deep, and cold. Rinpoche had taken us to this place for a surprise picnic with a packed lunch and all.

There were just a handful of us present and, aside from the sheer beauty of the place, Rinpoche decided we all should entertain one another in whatever ways

we could. Each of us was asked to get up and perform for the group, and no one was prepared for this. Some people danced, others sang, recited a poem, or put on a little skit or whatever they could. Others just hammed it up and were funny. It was quite spontaneous and I cast about in my mind for something I could share.

It is not likely I would dance. Sing a song? Perhaps, but I had a better idea. Back in the Sixties I used to play a mean blues harmonica professionally and I was pretty good at it sometimes. I just happened to have an old harmonica in my day pack, so I found it, blew out the dust and stood up to entertain everyone. They were all ears as I began to play. However, I failed to remember one thing.

And that was the fact that we were high in the mountains of Tibet, somewhere well over 14,000 feet above sea level. What I failed to take into account is that the atmosphere is different up there, less oxygen or whatever in the lungs, like: not enough air.

Everyone was watching, but as I began to play, no sound came out, nothing, and then finally just a kind of hissing noise. Well, that was a surprise, so I tried even harder, but only more hissing came out and maybe just the tiniest squeak of music. I tried and tried, but still nothing. I finally just sat down. There was not enough air in my lungs to play the harmonica. Everyone laughed, including me. It was a great picnic nevertheless.

[Photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at the picnic in Tibet taken by me.]

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish”

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