

Our Pilgrimage to Tibet



By
Michael
Erlewine



Introduction

Our Pilgrimage to Tibet

**By
Michael & Margaret Erlewine**

**This Book is Dedicated
To our Children:**

**lotis
Michael Anne
May
Michael Andrew**

Introduction

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Photos mostly by Margaret Erlewine. Some by Michael Erlewine or Kate White.

Introduction

**This book is also dedicated to
The Venerable
Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche**

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Introduction



Introduction



Preface by Michael Erlewine

Our first trip to Tibet, over ten years ago, was a life-changing event for me and my family. Being asked by my dharma teacher of many years to stop what I was doing, take a leave from my business and go to Tibet—all within about a month—was mind boggling, to say the least. It turned my life upside down.

Of course we would go. I had asked my teacher, for years, in every interview, if there was anything special he wanted me to do, and always he had responded that I should just keep on practicing meditation, and so on. It had become routine that there was nothing in particular he wanted me to do, and then this: go to Tibet, and soon.

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And my wife and I could not just up and leave the kids. After all, we had never even had a babysitter in all those years—and we had four kids. That should tell you something. So, of course, we had to take the kids with us, at least three of them.

This is the story of our pilgrimage to Tibet to see the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the actual golden child that the movie “The Golden Child” was based on. In the process, we visited many of the sacred caves and monasteries in Western Tibet.

Margaret and I made a second trip to Tibet in 2004, this time accompanied by our teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, but that is another story. I hope you enjoy this one.

You Are Going to Tibet

Our Visit to Find the 17th Karmapa

By Michael Erlewine

Although today it seems like some far off dream, only a few short weeks ago I was high in the mountains of Tibet, at Tsurphu Monastery (the seat of the Karma Kagyu Lineage), where I met His Holiness Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. All of this is even more remarkable since my friends know that I hate airplanes and seldom travel far from my home in mid-Michigan. Although I had been interested in Buddhism for many years, I had never seriously considered going to Tibet. Then, suddenly, in less than a month, I am in Tibet, along with my wife, my two daughters, and a young son. How does such an event happen to a middle-aged businessman? It happens when your lama tells you to go to Tibet as soon as you can manage it. Here is our story:

My wife and I are long-time students of Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, and the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dhamachakra) Monastery. Rinpoche was sent to the U.S. in the mid 1970s by His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, to represent the Karma Kagyu Lineage in the United States. Just as the Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, so the Gyalwa Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And, incidentally, the Karmapa's lineage (stemming from Marpa and Milarepa) is the older lineage; His Holiness, the Karmapa, represents the first tulku (reincarnated lama) in the history of Tibet;

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all other reincarnations of this sort are subsequent to the Karmapas.



Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

The Karma Kagyu lineage comes from the Adi Buddha Vajradhara, who imparted teachings to the Indian saint Tilopa, who in turn taught his student Naropa (also in India). Marpa, a Tibetan translator, traveled to India and received these teachings from Naropa and brought them back to Tibet, where he then imparted them to his main student, Milarepa (Tibet's greatest yogi). Milarepa went on to teach his student, Gampopa, who taught the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa. The entire line of the Karmapas—all 17 incarnations—has been formed by successive reincarnations of that same essence. In fact, the lineage today represents an unbroken chain of students and teachers, culminating in the young 17th Karmapa, who resides in Tibet. This Karmapa

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is the reincarnation around which the movie “The Golden Child” was based.

Over the last 20 years, Khenpo Rinpoche and another Rinpoche, Bardor Tulku, Rinpoche, have worked to build an extensive monastery complex near Woodstock, in upstate New York, including a vast shrine hall, an 11-foot gold Buddha, and even a traditional 3-year retreat center (one for men and another for women). A visit to the KTD monastery, high on Meads Mountain, is an unforgettable experience.

Each year we journey from our home in Michigan to KTD Monastery for a 10-day intensive teaching that Khenpo Rinpoche offers to senior students. Now in something like its eighteenth year, this is a chance for students to practice, spend time together, and to receive the Rinpoche’s teaching. In recent years, Khenpo Rinpoche has been giving advanced Mahamudra teachings, not because we students are particularly ready for these teachings, but because, as Rinpoche puts it, if he is to teach this material it will have to be now (due to his age).

During our stay at the monastery, in July of 1997, we had requested and received permission for a personal interview with Rinpoche. During that interview I outlined certain fairly severe business problems I had been going through over the last year or two. Working with a translator, I laid out my questions, and then Rinpoche began to answer.

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But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he, himself, was not going to answer these questions any further; instead, we should take the questions straight to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, and ask them of him directly—Karmapa would be able to answer our questions.

We all looked at each other in amazement. His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery, deep in the reaches of Tibet! I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, well, perhaps next year, next spring or something, but Rinpoche said, “No, this summer, as soon as you can arrange it.” By this time, Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face, as if he were very, very happy for us. We were speechless. He then went on to speak about impermanence and about how short life is, how none of us know the time or manner of our death. He was directing us to go to Tibet soon—this very summer!

Talk about turning your world upside down! Me, go to Tibet? What a novel idea! I almost never traveled, and had never seriously thought of going to Tibet. I had always said—a little smugly, I confess—that I was interested in the ‘Buddhism’ in Tibetan Buddhism and not particularly in the Tibetan culture. Anyway, I left that interview in a daze, my head spinning, but also knowing that I had better go home and pack my bags. “Rinpoche wants us to go to Tibet,” I mused.

For years I had worked with Khenpo Rinpoche, and each year, during our personal interview, I

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would always ask him if there was anything particular I should be doing. Aside from encouraging me to keep practicing, he never gave me any other specific directions. I was always a little disappointed there was never anything more he wanted me to do. And now this! Rinpoche had just told me to go to Tibet, this summer, and it was already mid-July! After the surprise cleared away, we knew we were pumped.

In fact, we were so charged that we went out and climbed to the top of the local mountain that same night, something we had never done in all the years we had been coming to the monastery. Starting out at about 7 PM, with the Sun already dimming, most of my family climbed to the top and surveyed the valley in the distance below us, with all of the twinkling lights. We came down later from the mountain in complete darkness. Our heads were 'right'. We were good to go and, when we returned from the teaching to Michigan, we managed to prepare and take off within a month of this directive from Rinpoche, although, from that first day, we were already as good as gone—to Tibet!

You Are Going to Tibet



**Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (left)
Lodro Nyima Rinpoche
At Mt. Wu Tai Shan in China**

Getting Ready to Go

Getting Ready to Go

What a busy time it was. Suddenly we had everything to do and little time to do it in. The first thing we did was attempt to book tickets within a month. In that same short time, we also had to get passports, visas, arrange a tour, receive inoculations, etc.

Although we made expensive airline reservations right off, trying to book inexpensive tickets took weeks of finagling. What a lot of time was wasted waiting for those long-shot cheap tickets to clear! In the end, we gave up and just paid the going rate, which was about \$2000 per person from here to Kathmandu. Passports were also available in either slow or expedited form, and here too we had to pay extra to expedite the process. Even so, they came through only just in time. And, as far as passports go, you need up-to-date birth certificates to acquire them—the ones with an imprinted seal on them. It turns out that some of our certificates, while good years ago, no longer measured up to these specs. This precipitated a frantic search (and extra fees!) to get fresh copies of what we already had, and have these new ones over-nighted to us. The passport people just held everything up until they got exactly the birth certificates they required.

Inoculations were a mini-drama in themselves. What shots to get? What shots to ignore? What about the wisdom of getting shots at all? We pulled all the information we could from books,

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the internet and local doctors, but the information did not agree. We began calling disease control centers and national experts. One thing is for certain: few people know the whole story about getting immunizations for traveling to other countries, although most local doctors firmly believe they know the facts. And we were on a tighter schedule as well because of the fact that our 11-year old had not gotten all of his shots as a child. Somehow, we all managed to get all of the shots we needed—I believe I got five or six in one fine day. Some of us got sick from them.



Passports, Visas, and Cash

Visas we left up to the tour guide in Kathmandu, although we poked around on the internet and scared ourselves good a couple of times.

As for the itinerary, this was pretty much left up to me. Aside from the shelf of books I bought on Tibet, India, and Nepal, I had access to a couple of sangha members with experience in

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Tibet. Forget about watching the latest movies. Every night found me burning the midnight oil, trying to figure out a million angles. Let's see, there was the Tibetan language, the medical supplies, the trekking equipment, the pilgrimage spots, the maps to find, the clothing—the works.

Speaking of the Tibetan language, I used a few books and made some laminated cheat-sheets for each member of our group. On a pocket-sized sheet, I listed all of the most important phrases we would need, everything from “Please help me” to, “Where is the bathroom?” Then, on a second double-sided laminate, I put all of the elements of Tibetan grammar, plus hundreds of major verbs and nouns—everything we might need to piece together sentences. This took a lot of time, because I had to digest it all in order to condense it.

As for a list of what to take, I collated what I thought would be necessary from the books I had and from what I heard of the experiences of several sangha members who had already been there.

In particular, Michael Doran, of KTD Monastery, who had just returned from his first Asian trip, provided us with the kind of practical advice we thirsted for. And, from those having even more experience—Andy Quintlin and Ward Holmes, both of whom had been Tibetan guides on occasion—we received invaluable and much needed help. It was Andy who helped us get the tour setup. And Gloria Jones, who lives in Kathmandu, helped us in so many

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ways, particularly once we were actually in Kathmandu. She was always ready to help us when we needed her.

Their notes included things like “You can’t bring enough Kleenex!” and “Don’t forget the Tuck’s pads.” I boiled all of these lists down into a master list of items for us to consider, a list promptly ridiculed by my 21-year old daughter who was coming along—she felt she would just bring what she wanted to bring. This list is posted elsewhere in the story.

I made many trips to K-Mart and Wal-Mart with this list in hand, snagging various items as they presented themselves to me in the aisles. My wife, who favors homeopathic and natural remedies worked on that end, while I made sure we had all of the allopathic items that would at least address symptoms. I collected things like laxatives, diarrhea medicine, antihistamines—all those things we love to hate until we need them.

As for clothing, we soon discovered that most of the old standard mail-order catalogs which used to carry good outdoor wear had kind of ‘upscaled’ and now carried more preppy clothes than clothes of real substance. Even old L.L. Bean was now selling dog beds and Christmas wreaths, looking more and more like a J.C.Penny’s catalog. This forced us to turn, for some items, to hiking catalogs such as Patagonia and Marmot, and to whatever expedition or outfitter stores we could find. It was fun when the store cliff-jockey, who was telling us about the advantages of this or that

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sock combination, asked, “Where are you going to be hiking?” and we got to answer, “Tibet.” Their eyes would bug out, despite their best efforts at self-control. Not that we were going to do that much climbing.

When it came to hiking and camping gear, we really got sidetracked. My wife, I believe, ordered some ten different pairs of hiking boots, nine of which she sent back. It took weeks to figure out the boot angle—and it turned out she only went hiking once. I settled for a pair of comfortable Nike hiking boots, rather than the more uncomfortable ‘real thing’. They worked fine for the two times I really hiked. And socks—you know, everyone had to have those \$14-a-pair hiking socks, which were, in fact, worth the money.

I had metal mirrors, mosquito head nets, Swiss-army knives, candles, flashlights, waterproof matches, hidden money pouches, Nalgene water bottles, and so on. About the only things we didn’t take were decoder rings and Ovaltine labels.

But I mostly spent those late nights working on the itinerary for our Tibetan journey. As I did not have a detailed map of Tibet available to me, I photocopied tiny section maps from Victor Chan’s *Tibet Handbook*, piecing these together to create one large map of the areas we were planning to visit. Then, with books in hand, I read and plotted out a path that I hoped we could follow. Of course, the central point in the journey was our visit to Tsurphu. Everything else after that was gravy. It was a

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high-energy time—those weeks preparing for the trip—visions of Tibet danced through my head.

The reaction of my family to the trip was mixed, and changed with the weather. Most were against it right off, especially since they knew I wanted them to go and they weren't really being given a choice. I can't say I blamed them. Our 11-year old was loathe to give up his friends and habits and 'have' to go anywhere. Pretty much the same response came from our 15-year old. My 21-year old daughter was more game, but she didn't really say "Yes!" until Khenpo Rinpoche looked her dead in the eye and said she should go. Then she said, "OK." As for my wife, she went back and forth from being "good to go" to declaring she just might not go at all. In the end, everyone happily got on board the plane. Not one of us ever regretted the decision to go.

The nightmare of tickets, passports, visas, airport taxes, immigration, customs—and the like—I will spare you from for now, although I am sure I could save any of you who are thinking of going some suffering by giving you these details. Suffice it to say that each of these many obstacles appeared formidable at times, but we sweated and clawed our way through each and every one—and there were many! For example, when we were dropped off at the airport at the beginning of our trip, with all our baggage, we found that our flight had been cancelled due to a large storm in Chicago. All flights were off. So there we were, some 50 miles from home, among block-long

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lines of angry fliers, trying to chaperone our six-foot-high pile of baggage, and our ride long gone.

We tried everything to get to Chicago, where our overseas flight was scheduled from. We even tried to rent a car and drive to Chicago, but we had too much luggage for one car (for that long a drive) and the time was short.

In the end, there was nothing we could do but rent the largest car they had and stuff all our gear (and ourselves) into it, and drive the hour back to our hometown to await a flight the following day. Talk about anticlimactic. We slunk back into town and didn't tell anyone we were back, pretending we were not home for 24-hours. We hardly spoke to one another, but just kind of held our breath and waited for the time to pass.

Up early the next day, we caught that plane to Chicago, and from there the one to Tokyo, and then to Hong Kong and on to Kathmandu, until we were finally on board the one-hour flight from Kathmandu to Lhasa, in Tibet. There we were, in the sky over Tibet, gazing on Mt. Everest. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Getting Ready to Go



Our First View of the Himalayas

The Overseas Flight

The 12-hour flight from Chicago to Tokyo is something probably better left *not* described. It is part of the price any traveler pays who wants to visit Asia. There is no way around it, you just have to bite the bullet and ride it out. Like most of the flyers, we did not fly First Class, but we did eye those much wider seats as we filed back to the economy section of the plane, where there are about 11 seats to a row, configured 3-5-3. And these seats are no roomier than the coach seats on smaller aircraft. When the guy in front of you reclines his seat, you have very little space between him and your nose. If you could suddenly make all of the economy-class seats vanish, you would be in very close proximity to a few hundred people.

Pretty much you have to kind of hold still for about 12 hours. Trying to get comfortable is a waste of time. You don't get comfortable, you just get through the experience, and this takes time. In the end, the best position ended up being just sitting in the seat and closing one's eyes. Trying to find the right angle to sleep never worked out.

Also, I had underestimated how cold the air-conditioning would be on the plane and had left my coat and shoes (I had on sandals) in the stored luggage. Luckily, I had an extra pair of socks. Even so, my head was always cold from the hissing air above—although I grabbed about every blanket and pillow I could find.

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In-flight movies, in theory, make sense, but these were not, in fact, very good movies—they ended up reminding me of times when I fall asleep and then awaken while watching television when I have a fever—just something flickering on and on. As for the earphones (when they even worked) they were not much help against the roar of the plane. I am almost done here, with only the food left to comment on.

The food is really funny. In the beginning, when the flight is young, you get a smart-looking menu card outlining the meals you will be served during your long flight. Hey, it looks pretty good on paper, something to look forward to. But I had a hard time identifying the food that was served by what the menu listed. Is this green gelatinous glob really ‘Creamed Spinach Soufflé’? Could it be?

A greater mistake was to request vegetarian meals, or what the flight attendants called “Special Meals.” “Does someone in this row have a ‘special meal?’” they would ask. That would be me. The problem was we did not get vegetarian meals, but rather someone’s (someone who for sure was not a vegetarian) idea of what a vegetarian meal might be. For the most part, these meals were inedible, but we ate them anyway. Meals, no matter how bad, are one of the highlights of these long flights. Meals and bathroom trips are about all the diversion you get. From now on though, I will take the standard meal, meat and all. At least it will be recognizable.

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It is a great kindness that (like life itself) the farther into these long flights you are, the faster time seems to pass. You kind of just give up, let go—and get there.

Tokyo

After more than 12 hours of flying, we landed in Tokyo, where we had several hours to wait for our flight to Hong Kong. One futile effort we made was our attempt to get outside the enclosed airport terminal—not an easy task—so we could breathe some fresh air. You cannot just walk outside, or even walk out on an observation deck, to breathe real Japanese air. To go outside, you have to go through customs and immigration, apply for a temporary visa, and have your passports stamped accordingly. We decided to do this. After a long period of form filling and line-standing, we finally managed to get outside the terminal entrance. There we stood, while an endless line of huge Toyota buses roared past, smoking us with their exhaust. But we were brave, and probably lasted some 30 minutes before we were able to admit to ourselves that this really sucked. We went back in again—through the long-standing process of passports, immigration, etc.

And, we were tired. Although it was only just “lights out” in reality, according to our internal clocks it was two or three in the morning. There was nowhere to rest and our flight had been delayed. Finally, we found a small floor area behind a sign and there we piled our carry-on bags together and tried to take a short nap,

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only to be awakened soon after by a Japanese guard—perhaps worried that we were street people— asking us if we had airline tickets. We showed him our tickets and explained that the airlines had delayed our departure and that we were tired and had nowhere else to rest. He understood and left us alone.



Arriving in Hong Kong

Although the Tokyo airport was about as much of Japan as we saw, I liked that small slice. Although the people were definitely curious about an American family on the road, they were polite and accorded us a sense of space and privacy. Everything about that airport was squeaky clean; Hong Kong, however, was a different story!

Hong Kong!

We took a night flight from Tokyo to Hong Kong, and, as we approached the island, the

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huge brightly-lit high-rise towers of Hong Kong rose out from the darkness like a setting from a sci-fi movie. I had never seen buildings placed so close together in my life! The effect was surreal. We did not have the best experience in Hong Kong, so I should probably not say much at all. I can't resist a few notes, however.

Our arrival there meant claiming our luggage and somehow getting it, and us, to a hotel—through one of the busiest cities in the world. There are 14,000 taxis in Hong Kong. We also had to go through customs, obtain a visa, exchange money, etc. It was quite late by the time we found our way down the long ramp, to the outside of the airport, to search for a taxi. Right away, we got off to a bad start.

As we came out of the terminal, a man rushed forward to solicit us a ride in his taxi. He motioned us to the side, where, behind a dumpster, he had a mini-van parked. Jet-lag and tiredness did not help. We began to move toward his vehicle, but I noticed that it was the only one there and had no taxi marks on it whatsoever. Just then, my older daughter grabbed my arm and said, "No dad, the taxis are over here!" And sure enough, there was a long row of people queued up for taxis and the long line of matching taxis up ahead. We would go there.

Next, we discovered that all of us, along with our luggage, would not fit in one taxi, so we would have to take two. Even then, our bags hardly fit, and the taxi trunks had to remain open on the ride to the hotel, so now we had

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the attendant worry of our luggage perhaps flying out onto the street. Worse, the two cabs did not stay together and thus my family was divided. Hong Kong taxi drivers drive like mad, and most of them are not at all friendly—some are even scarily unfriendly. So, we hurtled through the streets of Kowloon at breakneck speed, with a driver who did not respond to English.



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The City of Hong Kong

The hotels in Hong Kong are exorbitant, with a single room going from between \$200-\$300. There was little choice or alternative, we just had to pay. Once settled at the hotel, we went out and walked through some of the shopping districts, which were side-by-side shops packed with electronic gear, clothes, etc. Everything in Hong Kong seemed jammed together. The streets have traffic on the opposite side to America, so you really do have to look both ways. The many streets all had high-rise buildings placed back-to-back, and these buildings created huge channels, which the air then moved through like rivers. As you walked by a cross-street, you would be flooded by a tide of garbage smell and have to hold your breath, needing to get out of that intersection before you dared breathe again. Everywhere, everything is for sale.

It may have been my imagination, but it was my impression that the Chinese didn't much like Westerners, or, at least Americans. I did not experience anywhere else in Asia the coldness that I did from folks in Hong Kong. Of course, not all of them were like this. We did meet one cab driver who took us under his wing. In fact, we spent a number of hours having him drive us all over both Hong Kong and Kowloon to see the tourist sights. We made one long drive into the New Territories to see the largest Chinese Buddhist temple, and it was there we experienced the only peace and space we were to experience in that city. We also took a sampan boat into Hong Kong

The Overseas Flight

harbor and saw the boat people, an entire subculture of folks who live aboard the closely moored boats. Apart from the outboard fumes and intermittent rain, the boat people were fascinating.

Aside from the temple, I hardly remember the sights, because, as I wrote earlier, what really impressed me were how closely the high-rise buildings were placed, as well as the obvious discrepancy between the very rich and the very poor. We saw some incredible tenements, some quite old, and some quite heartbreaking. We wandered, by mistake, into the basement of one building while looking for a Buddhist center. The slice of life we saw there haunts me still. Everywhere, people in sweat shops, stripped naked to the waist in the heat, not smiling, heads down, working. In every crevice and corner was some kind of bed, the mini-home of an old person or caretaker. We had no business being in there, was the look I got from the many people we passed in the steamy hallways. And we tried to get out of there as quickly as possible.

We squeezed into a tiny elevator (not more than four-foot square) and rode slowly up to what we thought was the floor we wanted, only to have the doors open to a wall of steel—no exit. And then the slow ride down. I have never been more claustrophobic than on that elevator. I prayed it would not lose power and leave us stuck there.

That elevator summed up everything about my experience of Hong Kong. Talk about a foreign

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place. We just did not connect well with that city. In fact, for weeks afterward, whenever we encountered an impossible or gross situation, one of us would shout out “Hong Kong!” My sincere apologies to the residents of Hong Kong, who, I am sure, are wonderful, but this was my particular experience. I wish it had been different.

Hong Kong to Kathmandu

After our Hong Kong experience, the 4-hour flight to Kathmandu was a welcome experience. For one, suddenly we were with a mix of Asian peoples—Chinese, Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan. The flight attendants had to announce everything in three languages instead of just in Chinese and English, as they had on our flight to Hong Kong. The seats were a little scruffy, and the food a bit funky, but the atmosphere on the flight was a lot more like a party than anything we had experienced so far. We were going to Kathmandu! We sat next to a Nyingma monk who was returning to his monastery—it turned out we knew some of the same people. It was a very nice time.

Kathmadu

We Arrive in Kathmandu

The flight from Hong Kong began to descend from the clouds into the beautiful Kathmandu valley, and thus we caught our first view of Nepal. In the approaching twilight, we could still see, clearly, the rich terraced green of the endless rice paddies and the fields below. As we got lower, we saw whole towns, and then individual houses. After deplaning and entering the airport, we walked along a path filled with blooming plants, the air alive with the sound of katydids and crickets. It was warm and smelled great. After almost 48 hours of traveling, we had arrived somewhere we actually wanted to be—at last.



Nepal from the Air

It took what seemed like forever to fill out all the forms, pay airport taxes, examine our passports, receive a visa, get through customs, and exchange money. A note about money

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exchange: I spent far too long studying the various travel catalogues, trying to pick out a money purse or a secret money pouch—as they are sometimes called. In the end, I took a wide variety: the money belt, the wide purse that straps around your midriff; the packet that hangs around your neck; and even the secret money pouch that hangs from your belt, inside your pants, etc. We had them all. However, the one thing that none of these catalogs bother to tell you is that, in most of these countries (Nepal, India, China), even a small amount of money takes up a huge amount of space.

The problem is, almost no vendor is able to cash something as huge as the equivalent of twenty dollars, much less that of fifty or \$100. Perhaps a few of the largest hotels can, but never anywhere else. Finding a place to exchange money is difficult, so when you do find a place, you need to exchange enough to last you until you get to the next bank in a large city. Worse, any money you do exchange has to be exchanged for about the lowest common denominator, since this is the only cash that the common people and the shops will even look at. It is not that they are not willing to—they just don't have the change!

So, the result is that you exchange, say, one thousand dollars, for huge packs of money that end up being somewhere between 4 to 5 inches thick. It is bad enough in Nepal and India, but in China they staple these packs of currency with an industrial stapler, and the staples cannot be removed by hand—you need pliers. So here we are, with all of these nifty

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secret money pouches, and a wad of dough 7 inches thick. Go figure. So you fill up all the money pouches with about ten dollars worth of money and stuff the rest (most) of it, in your knapsack. Your money belts cling to you and you cling to the knapsack.

At any rate, with large rubber-band-bound packs of Nepalese currency jammed into my pockets (like Uncle Scrooge), we were ready to leave the protected area of the airport and venture out to where mobs of taxis and touts were waiting for us. By now, it was quite dark. Originally, there was to be a car sent to meet us, from Thrangu monastery in Kathmandu, but now, since we were a day or so late (remember we had to drive back home for a night) there was little chance of people we did not know being able to track our belated progress through the various delays to this late arrival. Thus, the lot of us crept outside the terminal. I had my family stand back (behind the police lines), with our mountain of baggage, while I ventured forward and carefully surveyed what awaited us.

And it was indeed scary. On all sides, men rushed up and tried to seize any baggage a person might be carrying. Each person spoke in broken English, authoritatively asserting that *only they* could help you and see to your safety, and yet *they* were just what I was afraid of. How to choose, from the array of cars outside, which taxi was trustworthy and which might drive you off to who-knows-where?

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As I emerged from behind the police line, I could see a whole wall of people behind a fence across the road, beckoning to me. I was about the only passenger coming out just then, but all of these people seemed to want my attention. And then, in the middle of those people, I saw a group of maroon-colored robes— Buddhist monks—who almost seemed to actually be waving *at me*—as if they knew who I was.

Could these be the monks we had hoped would come, or, in my tiredness, did I only want to believe this? But no, they kept pointing at me and beckoning. I wasn't dreaming. They did come! These were the monks from Thranqu Monastery, including their head monk, and they had been waiting for us for a very long time. It was too good to believe, but sure enough, there they were, and they had a Toyota Land Cruiser as well. Goodbye taxi hunt!

We moved towards them, and suddenly we almost had to fight to keep track of our luggage, as many hands from unwanted helpers appeared everywhere. The monks struggled to control the flow of our luggage, which sort of floated on a sea of arms toward the back of the vehicle. It was all confusing to us, and we slowly realized that most of these folks were not with the monks. Somehow we got our mountain of bags into the Toyota and started to squeeze ourselves in also—not to mention the monks climbing in on top of that. The unwanted helpers, who had obviously been drinking, were now demanding money,

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but I had not had the foresight to have any small bills handy at that point. The monks were laughing. We were packed in! There were four of us, I believe, smashed into the front seat. Much of my self was hanging outside the window as we pulled away from the airport.

Words fail to describe that first night's ride from the airport to Kathmandu. I was about to get my first taste of a third-world country. We were tired and somewhat disoriented. As mentioned, I was jammed (like never before) into the passenger side of a Toyota Land Cruiser. Much of me, literally, was leaning and hanging out of the window, so everything along the streets was crystal clear to me. It was night, and there were no regular street lights—only a few lights of any kind. It had been raining recently, and the road was filled with both small and very large puddles, many of which had to be driven around. More, we were moving at what I felt was considerable speed, given the road conditions. The road was in bad shape.

Worse, there were all manner of things in the road, a totally new experience for me. Hurtling through the dark we would come upon cows just standing there, and packs of dogs everywhere. And people—people all over the roadway—walking, standing, alone, and in groups. The extreme poverty of this city impressed itself on me, along with all the other input. Beyond the road, people were everywhere in the dark, gathered in small groups, smoking, exchanging things, watching us, and getting out of our way.

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It did not seem to me that the driver, leaning on the horn of the Land Cruiser, really gave anyone or any animal enough time to escape our forward motion. I kept looking for the main part of the city, or for any area of bright lights (civilization) to appear before us, but all I saw was the darkness of the streets, with brief glimpses here and there of what was happening around me. The city I imagined to exist never materialized and it began to sink into me that no such city actually existed—that we were in a very different kind of place than I had ever been in before or had even ever imagined. I was numbed by the constant jolts of the car on the street as it lurched from side to side, hitting the potholes. It was a crazy ride, seemingly right out of a movie like *Blade Runner* or *Road Warrior*. It had a post-apocalyptic feel to it, like a bad acid trip. I knew I was very tired, but I was also very awake now, taking all this in.



We Never Got to the Bright Lights

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The streets got narrower and narrower, until we were crawling through alleys having only inches of side-room to spare, and passing so close to people that their faces were right before my eyes. “What had I gotten us into?” I thought. Thousands of miles from anywhere, I knew, with no obvious place to get to—no city lights, no Holiday Inn. Just alleys and smells and dogs and darkness and... stop. We had arrived through the darkness to a large locked gate, which soon swung open, allowing us to drive into a kind of compound. We were at the Lotus Guest House—our hotel.

Piling out, we were greeted by two woman friends of ours who had arrived some days before. One of them was in tears to finally see us safely there. I was, at this point, quite numb. We were literally helped to our room, our luggage deposited with us, and left alone. Gecko lizards, holding onto the walls with their suction-cup toes, were outside our door catching insects. Dogs barked continuously in the distance. Our rooms were shabby, dirty, soiled, and used. There were no towels, and the bedclothes made me certain I would use my sleeping bag. Any lighting was stark and minimal. The bathroom was a new experience entirely, with a showerhead that used the entire room as its stall—the water just draining out a corner of the room. We were all experiencing jet-lag, shock, and culture shock at the same time. Yet, I was so glad we were here. This was Kathmandu.

That First Day in KTM

The First Day in KTM

That night, sleep was all upside down. Keep in mind that our internal clock had just turned 180-degrees. Only two days before, at this time, it had been the middle of the day for us in Michigan, while now it was the middle of the night for us in Kathmandu. Trying to sleep that first night was one of those never-quite-drifting-off affairs, not helped by the fact that the jet-lag we were experiencing was accompanied by strange smells and sounds. Just before dawn all of the surrounding monasteries (right next door!) began sounding gongs and chanting. Sets of Tibetan horns rang out, some sounding like oboes and others deep bass and rumbling, and then—the dawn! It was eerie but beautiful listening to the sounds that first dawn in Kathmandu. I was so tired and yet so awake.

But rest, I could not. We had already accumulated real problems. Because we had been delayed for two days, we had lost the three-day safety zone we needed to apply for the visas for India and Sikkim. We also had almost lost the time we needed to get our Chinese group visa for Tibet, but this visa was soon taken care of by paying a bunch of extra money—we were to fly to Tibet the next day. Whether we would get to visit India when we returned was another matter, for the three-day waiting period for that visa application had vanished. Worse, this one remaining day we had in Nepal was a Nepalese strike day—something we would come to know only too well.

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It seems that the government of Nepal was trying to create a value-added tax (VAT), something like they have in the United Kingdom and in many other countries. It was perceived as something that would be a real hardship for the people, and they had organized a series of national strikes in protest. On such strike days no motor traffic (cars, buses, etc.) is allowed, thus strangling business for that day. The penalty for violators is the stoning of the vehicle. The result was that we were stranded at our hotel area, unable to take any action on our Sikkimese visa. The embassy office was some 7 kilometers away.

As for our Tibetan visa, the tour guide had arranged for a courier to come by bicycle and pick up a rather large sum of cash we had to pay and then—through the streets of Kathmandu—deliver it. Trusting this much cash to an unknown carrier worried us; in the end, the main guy came to get the money himself, including the extra cash we had to pay the Chinese to do all of this at the last minute. I asked the man if he could help us get the Sikkimese visa, but he just shrugged his shoulders—sorry, he could not help. If I could somehow get to the Indian Embassy, he suggested, at the center of downtown Kathmandu, something might still be done. There was still time, but it would have to be done right away.

I was suffering from sleep deprivation, jet-lag, culture shock...and I had not yet had any breakfast; I was unwilling, however, to give up on visiting Sikkim, because Gyaltsap Rinpoche

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was there, a lama I had always dreamed of meeting. I resolved to find a bicycle and go to the Indian embassy myself—that morning. My wife, who couldn't believe I would attempt such a trip, was too beat to come with me, but my 21-year old daughter, Michael Anne, was game. We would go, no matter what.

At first, no one seemed to even know where the Indian embassy was, much less be willing to accompany me there on a bicycle; I finally managed to find, though, a man about my own age who knew where it was. He said he would go with us. As for bicycles, all we could find were some not-too-bad, old-style, one-speed American bikes: you know—the kind with foot brakes and one loop of chain. No ten-speeds! As for the man who would guide us, well, it turned out that what he really had in mind was for his young (perhaps 12-year old) son to accompany us on the trip, not himself. And so the three of us—with the young boy leading in a Mary Poppins sort of way—started out on that 7 kilometer trip through the streets of Kathmandu. We started from Boudinath (where we were) and traveled to a location near the Royal Palace—where the Indian Embassy was located.

That First Day in KTM



Primary Means of Traveling

One lucky thing was that there was no traffic, and so the normal dangers of Kathmandu were reduced to only the presence of military vehicles here and there and the odd car or truck that dared to break the strike—and, of course, there were still motorcycles and motor scooters. On the down side, the streets were unbelievably potholed and rough, not to mention the ever-present dust. However, I did get an instant and close-up introduction to Kathmandu culture. I was so tired and zoned out that the whole thing was quite beautiful even if somewhat surreal—and so, through the streets we went.

Everywhere, there were people and animals, with shops crammed into any available space—one next to another. Often a shop was little more than an old bucket for a seat and one jar full of something or other (like hard candy)—this was the store—a single jar! And there was this sense that everyone was

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everyone else's customer, if that makes sense. Let me try that again. It seemed to me that there were no store customers from outside the neighborhood, but that everyone was just kind of hanging out in each other's store—like one extended family. It was kind of like kids selling lemonade on the streets—gone mad.

We reached the embassy, and my body was almost vibrating on its own after the ride and from the exertion. We had the young boy look after our bikes while we went through the long procedure to apply for the visa. The process would take ten days, which is why we had to do it now—before we left for Tibet, so that the visas would be ready when we returned. Forms and officials, more forms, and, of course, the waiting. At last, the head honcho explained to me how, really, it was impossible for me to get what I wanted, but that he, on the day that I returned (a Saturday = holiday), would interrupt his day off and come down to this office and, unofficially, complete our visas so that we could fly out the next morning. He would do this for me, if, and only if, I could reach him before noon of the day we returned from Tibet. With that news—fees already paid and forms filled—we headed back up the long road to Boudha, which was this time mostly uphill.

I did make it back, covered with sweat, exhausted and hungry, but exhilarated. My butt was bruised and sore from that ride for many weeks after. Margaret was so proud of me and so amazed at my going. We then got to meet Ward Holmes (of the Tsurphu Foundation), and Gloria Jones, secretary of Thrangu Monastery,

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for a late lunch. Things were cool. I liked this Kathmandu place.

Just to complete this story, when we came back from Tibet, I was able to get in from the airport (through a strike zone), and phone the embassy official just barely before noon, arranging to meet in his office—which we did. Taking a cab this time, we met, and he completed our visa for India and Sikkim. He never asked for any money but I gave him a good sum anyway—for the idea was in the air. We ended up (when he found out I was an astrologer) discussing very abstract spiritual philosophy while we filled out the forms—it is something I believe every Indian, at least the Brahmins, are fully able to do. Here I am, slipping him money under the table, and he is telling me about my soul's journey through time. That's India.

On to Tibet

To the Airport and on to Tibet

Our trip to the airport to fly to Tibet was in the hands of the assistant tour guide, and he was a pro. Driving a large Toyota mini-bus, he was unable to get the vehicle close enough to our hotel to pick up our baggage, so he commandeered a smaller street vehicle, whisked us and our stuff into it, and then transferred us to the bus. He should have known, though, that he couldn't have gotten that mini-bus through the tiny alley by the hotel, so this was not so impressive in itself.

What was really impressive was the way he handled the airport. The problem was that there was a planeload of people and baggage and only one counter for everyone to file through. When we arrived, there was already a long line of people. Paying no attention to this, he positioned all of our baggage up front, went behind the counter with the officials, and, in a few moments, was working at the front desk, with a crowd of people around him. He began to look at and handle their tickets. I have no idea what he was doing, but he looked for all the world like an official. Before we knew it, he had us at the front of the line, our baggage being checked through ahead of everyone else's, and soon we had three sets of window seats on the left side of the plane, from where Mt. Everest and the rest of the Himalayas could be seen. Of course, he applied liberal baksheesh (bribe money), but besides that, it was still an amazing display of grace and power. He pushed us through the checkpoint and wished us a good trip. We were off to

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Tibet. We were finally on board for the one-hour flight from Kathmandu, to Lhasa, in Tibet. There we were, in the sky over Tibet, gazing on Mt. Everest and the whole Himalayan range—from the window of the plane. No stopping us now.

Gonghar Airport

Descending from the clouds, the plane dodged the mountains and landed at Gonghar airport (the only large airport in Tibet). We were in an exhilarated mood. Even the officious Chinese guards in their ill-fitting uniforms and holding machine guns (guards we had been warned about and dreaded) failed to bum us out. We walked from the plane and across the tarmac to the airport terminal in the bright Tibetan sunlight, breathing in cool clean Tibetan air. We were euphoric, at least during those first hours.

Our Guides: Pemba and Tashi

We had been warned about the guides that might be assigned to our group once we reached Tibet. There was only so much control that could be exercised from a distance, so it would partly be a matter of dumb luck. If you were lucky, you would get a Tibetan guide who was not in the pay of the Communists, and one who knew and cared something about the dharma. If you were unlucky, you could count on having to argue with and perhaps even order your guide to go to the places you wanted to go—not only to places most convenient for him. In this regard, we were exceptionally lucky.

On to Tibet



Tashi and Penba

Our guide and driver were waiting at the airport for us when we exited the plane. One look at Penba, our translator guide, and I knew we were in safe hands. Here was a gentle intelligent soul who did everything in his power to make our journey a safe and meaningful one. There was a rumor he had once been a monk, but I don't know if that is true or not. Certainly, he knew an enormous amount about

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the places we visited—complete to the last detail on statues. And his English was quite good.

Our driver Tashi spoke no English, but was the perfect complement to Penba. There is no question that he was what we would call a redneck here in the states. Cigarette smoking and beer-drinking, he always had a smile—and was ready for anything that might appear. I have no doubt that, had we been threatened at any time or in any way, Tashi would have stepped right up to the plate and hit a home run. You just knew that about him. Not too easy to get close to, but the more time you spent with him the more loyal and friendly he became. And he liked little Michael Andrew a lot.

Together, Penba and Tashi were an unbeatable team, and they served us well in a wide variety of difficult situations. When a day ended, and our group stumbled into one hotel or another, they kept going, hauling our baggage around, getting fuel for the van, finding bottled water for us, scouting out restaurants, hassling with officials and hotel clerks—whatever it took. And my understanding—gained from others—was that a guide like this might make only \$200 a month!—and I am sure the driver made even less.

As time went on, we shared more and more meals with them. And the kids would shoot pool (and smoke cigarettes!) with them in the evening hours, after I went down with the sun.

On to Tibet

Pemba took great care to explain, and in great detail, about the sacred places we visited. In fact, many times I had to wander off during his explanations so that I could have time to connect with the place and make aspirations. He was very thorough, and knew almost every statue and every thanka.

Nor was he faking interest, either, even though he had been to these sacred places a great many times. He had visited His Holiness, the Karmapa, more than once, and he shared with us the time His Holiness had looked at him and said, “You are starting to have confidence in me”—and how it brought tears to his eyes.

The Tara Shrine

The Tara Shrine

The guides came with a 12-seat minibus, which would house our crew and all our baggage. This was better than the 2 jeeps I had expected. We piled in and headed up the road toward Lhasa, traveling alongside the wide Tsangpo River. We were on our way to a very special shrine of Tara—the Drolma Lhakang—at the village of Netang. We were in high spirits, and altitude sickness had not yet reared its ugly head.

We pulled up to what looked to be a small store, behind which was a large monastery-like compound made of adobe. Dharma banners were hanging from the walk-through gate as we entered the long courtyard and at the end of the courtyard was a large shrine room, the front covered by a dark cloth or hide—you entered on the left side and eventually came out on the right.

Here is as good a point as any to say something about shrine etiquette in Tibet and in Asia (or anywhere, for that matter). When one enters a gompa—a monastery shrine room, the first thing one does is offer three prostrations toward the central deity, or toward the center of the shrine. After this, you proceed down the left-hand side of the room and go to the very front. Most shrine rooms have areas of particular significance: usually the front left, the front middle, and the front right. Often you will find two smaller shrines at the front—one on each side of the main and central deity.

The Tara Shrine



The Tara Shrine

At any rate, you approach the front of the shrine by way of the left side (like circumambulation) and survey what is there, often bowing as you go to any side shrines or deities. At the front, you again move from left to right, eventually moving to the main center of the shrine. You now bow or pay homage to the central deity. Often pilgrims bow and touch their heads to the base on which this deity is

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sitting. Others will touch their mala (rosary) to the base of the deity. More common is to just place one's hands together and bow toward the deity. One then moves a bit farther to the right, to whatever shrine or deity is at the far right-hand side, and bow again, acknowledging the deity there.

This finished, you complete the circumambulation, ending at the back of the shrine—at the center of the back. From that point, you can bow and leave the shrine, or, just be at ease and perhaps walk around some more. I am no expert on it, but this seems to be what happens in shrine rooms.



Some of the Large Tara Statues

The Tara shrine we visited had 21 large and exquisite statues of Tara, plus statues of other deities. As we moved across the front of the shrine and to the center, a monk came forward and pressed a special sacred conch on the back of each of us. Many of us were overcome

The Tara Shrine

by the spirit or vibrations of the place, and just found ourselves weeping. We were very happy here. Perhaps it was because it was our first sacred contact in Tibet, or perhaps it was because this is, indeed, a very special place—I just could not keep from crying; for me, this is a most special place. Every pilgrim stops at the Tara shrine on the road from the Gonghar airport to Lhasa.

Altitude Sickness

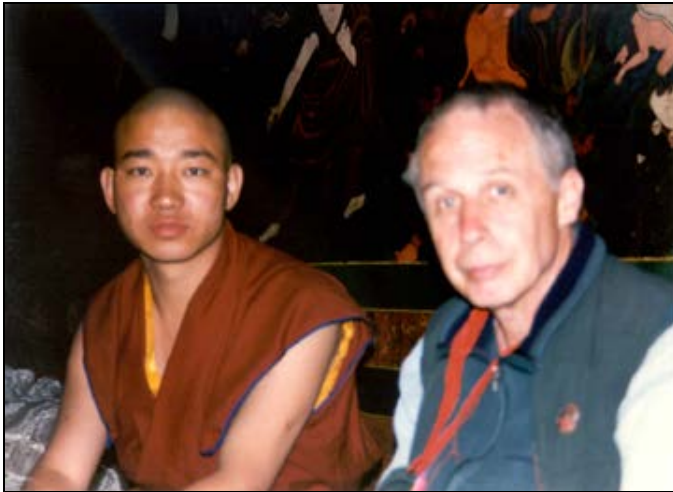
It took about half a day for altitude sickness to really take hold. And I, who got the worst case of it, was not really prepared. Khenpo Rinpoche had had a premonition that one of us would have problems, and maybe even need some extra oxygen, but he had kind of been looking at my wife, Margaret, and she and I had both thought it would be her who might have trouble. As it turned out, I'm the one who had a terrible time with it.

From the books, one doesn't get the idea—when 'altitude sickness' is discussed—that they really mean *sickness*. But you often do get very sick when you are rushed on a plane from Kathmandu to Lhasa—when you go from being at around 3,000 feet to over 13,000 feet in less than an hour. At this very high altitude you are getting about 60% (or less) of your usual amount of oxygen. Wham, there you are. You get out of the plane and it feels different. At first, your body has not figured out what the heck is happening. You feel a bit odd, but not really bad, perhaps a little spacey, but that is kind of cool too. It could be just the thrill of

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being in Tibet, at last, with the bright, bright Sun, the crisp, clear air, and the clouds close overhead. You get the idea.

Within about half a day, after the trip from the Gonghar airport to Lhasa, the deposit of myself and my stuff at a hotel, and that first flight of hotel stairs, I began to get a different picture. I could hardly walk up the damn stairs—and I mean one flight! There I was, leaning against the wall, gasping for breath, my heart racing. What is this, I wondered? And then I flopped down in a chair. Boom.



Altitude Sickness and Fever

This must be what it feels like to get really old, I thought. I couldn't do much of anything, and I didn't like that feeling. I struggled to my feet, determined to go and see the town. I headed out, only to find myself soon feeling my way back to the hotel room, gasping, and grasping for that chair again. And there I sat. Or, I would lie down on the bed and there I would lie—for a

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very long time. I couldn't believe it. I was trapped in what amounted to an 'old-age' body, limited to doing the very least of anything.

Typically, they say you must spend at least three days in Lhasa just getting used to the altitude. And this means three 24-hour days and nights. Often you can't sleep. You are just awake. Your head aches and your face feels puffy and tingly. Something seems very wrong—or at least very different. You can't really do much, because, despite your desire to get out and see this new country, you don't *feel* like doing much. You just don't feel too great, period, even through you are raring to get on with the trip. I found myself waiting this thing out.

And, I had a bad case of it, coupled with a cold, which eventually resulted in a fairly high fever that lasted for three days. In the end, the cold went into my lungs and became bronchitis. I had to take antibiotics and was just plain old sick. I did not like it one bit, but there was nothing I could do about it. Part of it was the cold; part was the endless presence of smoke, fumes, and smells oppressing my lungs, which were already weakened from my prior history of smoking some 30 odd years before. In a word, this was a bummer.

There is no known permanent human habitation above 20,000 feet. According to the books, altitude is measured by a scale, where High Altitude is anything from 8,000 to 12,000 feet, Very High Altitude is in the range from 12,000 to 18,000 feet (Lhasa is at 13,000 feet),

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and Extremely High Altitude is any place over 18,000 feet. Tsurphu Monastery, where we were headed, is some 15,000 feet.

In Lhasa: The Jokhang

Lhasa is a good-sized city, but our hotel was near the Jokhang, a very famous ancient Buddhist shrine; this being so, as far as my experience went, the Jokhang was the center of Lhasa. My first visit to the Jokhang was just too tourist-like for me—having to pay to get in, being pushed through by the crowds of pilgrims, and never really getting a moment to absorb what was there or to look closely at the statues, much less being able to do any practice.

I will not try to detail all of the many fine statues and thankas in the Jokhang. There is so much to see there and there are plenty of books and photos available on this shrine. The place is large and very old. It is quite dark within the buildings—the only real light coming from the many flickering butter lamps. The floors are thick with the butter for endless pilgrims spoon hardened butter granules into the burning butter lamps, always managing to spill some small amount on the floor. In Tibet, my pants were always grease-stained from doing prostrations on butter-slick floors. The smell of old or rancid butter was ubiquitous in the many shrine halls and monasteries.

Waiting in Lhasa



The Roof of the Jokang

In addition to the central large statues were many small grotto-like rooms, set aside from the main area. Each of these was dedicated to a particular deity or a version of that deity. Many of these smaller rooms were chained off—locked tight with heavy hand-made chain-linked screens hung across their openings. You could almost fit your hands through the large gaps in these chain screens, and crowds would be pushed up tight against them, peering at the lovely statues within.

Luckily, we came back on another day when the shrine was closed tight, and, by knocking at the door, got in anyway. On that holiday we were virtually the only people there. In addition, many of the small shrines that are normally locked with huge chain-linked screens were open, and we could venture inside. Lifting the heavy chains, we squeezed through and had the opportunity to do prostrations and say

Waiting in Lhasa

aspirations. When the Jokhang is busy, it is difficult to get near many of the smaller shrines.



Guru Rinpoche Statue in the Jokang

Outside of and encompassing the huge Jokhang is a large circular walkway—the Barkhor—around which pilgrims endlessly circumambulate, carrying their bead malas (rosaries). Constant streams of people walk, in

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a clock-wise direction, swinging their malas in their left hands. This circular Barkhor is filled, on both sides and over its entire length, with shops of all kinds, most carrying dharma items or clothes. Unfortunately, aside from some very fine kataks—white Tibetan offering scarves—most of the dharma items for sale were not of high quality, many of them having simply been imported from Kathmandu. This was ironic and disappointing. One exception was the Tibetan rugs, many of which were very nice indeed.



Beads and Malas along the Barkhor

What was most interesting to me in the Barkhor was a small monastery, called Meru Nyingba, which was attached to the larger Jokhang. This monastery is very old and has a kind of special quality to it. A little difficult to find, it is located down an alley behind where most of the Tibetan rugs are sold. You have to push through the rug merchants and go down the alley, at the end of which is a gompa (shrine room), along with a number of smaller

Waiting in Lhasa

shrines. I fell in love with a tiny protector shrine, the Jambhala Lhakhang, which is the oldest part of this complex. This protector shrine had, along with the Jambhala statue (connected to wealth), a number of other statues of protector deities, including my favorite, Vajrapani, and Nam-Tö-se (Vaishravana), the protector king.

I was immediately attracted to Nam-Tö-se, and even moved to tears, for some reason. I wanted to practice in front of this statue, and I did. Later, I was to find out that the great king, Nam-Tö-Se, is the protector of wealth. Considering that one of the main reasons I had come to Tibet was to ask about certain financial problems, my spontaneous interest in Nam-Tö-se, with his ability to protect wealth, made a certain sense. I met a young monk who watched over this particular shrine...later, I would find my way to Meru Nyingba whenever I had a chance.

On To Tsurphu

I waited out the three days in Lhasa until we could head toward Tsurphu, and to His Holiness. I still had altitude sickness, but it was now time to go on with our trip's schedule. We headed northwest out of Lhasa in a large van. The road was paved, but it became progressively bumpier, especially at sections where it consisted of squares of rock laid together. I asked about the bumpiness of the road and our guide replied that the road "gets a little bumpy" after turning off this road. Gets a little bumpy? What is it now, then? I wondered. But he was so right. It did get bumpier. After some time, we made a sharp left turn, going across a very narrow bridge above a river, and began to head up the Tolung Valley—on almost no road at all! We soon got used to the steady pitch and roll of the vehicle, as it moved very slowly up the valley trail. It was like traveling over an endless series of speed bumps that had been placed side by side.

Bumps and sickness aside, the 3-hour journey up the Tolung Valley toward Tsurphu was brilliant and fresh. It was early autumn, and all the barley fields were golden ripe and ready for harvest. The barley from the Tolung Valley is reputed to be the best in Tibet, and there are hundreds and hundreds of fields. We moved slowly along the rocky road toward Tsurphu, mile by mile, so there was plenty of time to see. Everywhere, mountain streams rushed by, over, under, and even on the road itself. At places the road became a stream bed. As we moved farther upstream, yaks appeared, both

On to Tsurphu

close up and far off—at times scattered on the mountainside all around us. As for other cars, there were none, no traffic at all. As soon as we crossed the bridge from the main road we were just out there, by ourselves. Every so often there were small villages, and everywhere people were working in the fields. Harvesters and workers waved to us, and children raced toward us, waving and shouting “Hello,” perhaps the only English they knew.

We continued on, heading up the valley toward where the two mountain skylines converged, always moving very slowly. After crossing the arch of a lovely stone bridge, our guide pointed to a speck on a mountain in the distance. “Tsurphu,” he announced. And I could almost see it, something sparkling on a mountainside. As we moved on, time was slowed by our eagerness to arrive, but that speck grew steadily larger...now I could see golden roofs reflecting in the sunlight...yet, it was still so far away! And then, even that view would be lost for yet another long while, as we went around yet another curve. Would we ever actually get there? We were ready.

On to Tsurphu



Tsurphu Monastery at Last

At last, we were just below Tsurphu, passing by the Karmapa's lovely summer palace and having less than a half a mile to go. Winding up the last of the trail, we passed through a narrow walled road into the courtyard of Tsurphu, arriving before the large stone steps

On to Tsurphu

of the monastery itself. It was an imposing and welcome sight.

We came armed with many letters of introduction: from our own Rinpoche, from Tai Situ, Rinpoche (acting head of the lineage), etc.—letter after letter. We also brought a Western doctor to treat the ailing Drupon Dechun, Rinpoche, who was suffering from advanced diabetes. He was the man who, single-handedly, had seen to the rebuilding of the monastery after the Chinese had destroyed it. The monks gathering around us now, though, must still be wondering who we were. We proceeded to seek out monks who would seek out still higher monks, etc. until we found someone we were able, at last, to present all of our letters to. We laid them before a small tribunal of monks in the corner of a very dusty room. From the letters, the monks would learn just who we were, and understand we presented no danger to Karmapa. We weren't even searched for weapons, as I have been told most are. A family of five, with two additional women—we obviously seemed harmless enough. Our group was led inward, then, to an open courtyard, and from there we climbed to a second level and into a good-sized room. It was here that we were first served the legendary Tibetan butter tea.

We were thrilled to be there, waiting in that room, with the sun pouring through the thick almost opaque windows. We were anxious to know if we would be granted an interview with His Holiness, and, if so, when. We sat on low bed-like couches; each covered with a Tibetan

On to Tsurphu

rug, and slowly drank our tea. Every few sips of tea found the monks filling our cups, again, to the brim, as is the custom. This strange salty buttered tea was a new but satisfying taste for me. I almost inhaled it. And there were, also, the ever-present sugar-filled cookies and candy. It was a little cold here, up at 15,000+ feet, and smoke from the kitchen, downstairs, found its way into our room, mostly through the open doorway that, due to the constant coming and going of the Tibetans, was impossible to keep closed. Faces peered in on us (some of whom were monks, but most of whom were lay persons) wondering who these Westerners were.



May and Michael Anne and Lunch

And then there was lunch, brought to us in large bowls. There were noodles, and a big bowl of dried yak meat that seemed (by the one taste I gave it) a little funky and old. But food of any kind was good after the long drive,

On to Tsurphu

and we were thrilled to be getting what apparently was VIP treatment. We ate, and then just waited until a monk came and told us that we would see his Holiness that day, at least briefly. We were to hang loose and would be given notice later. Until then, we could just relax and wander around the monastery a bit.

And there was a lot to see. Soon after our arrival a long procession of monks poured forth from main shrine hall and down the front steps of the monastery. Wearing tall curved red hats, they carried large flat drums held up sideways. Here was a ceremony, but for whom? We were hours and hours from any city, and there were few, if any, local people witnessing the event. The answer, which was so hard for my modern-world mind to grasp, was that they were doing it just for its own sake, just for themselves. How odd!



Monks and Ceremonies

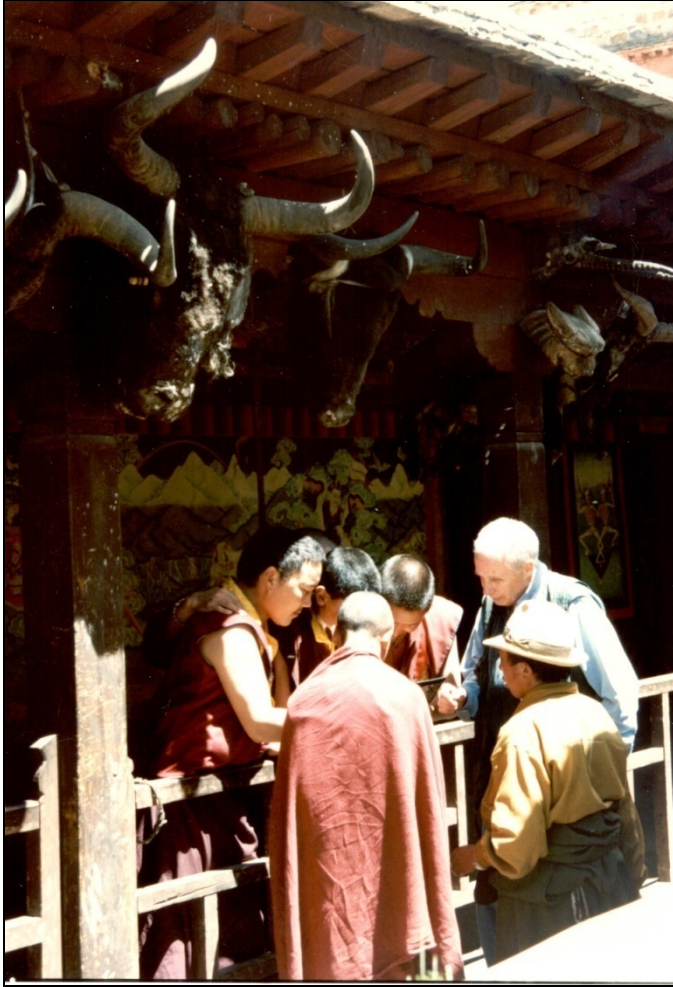
Outside of the room where we had parked our stuff, along the inner face of the second-story courtyard, was a whole series of small shrine rooms dedicated to the fierce Tibetan protectors, the dharmapalas. Above these rooms, and stretching the length of the courtyard, were a series of carcasses, mostly yak heads, as well as the bodies of other local animals, all in various states of decay. I was given to understand that these animals had been found dead, most having been killed by poachers, and that they were here to receive prayers, and also to be an example of what should not be done. The effect was eerie and smelly.

So along this upper courtyard, beneath the carcasses, were the small shrine rooms—dark, candle-lit, and usually smoky. In each room was a lama, or perhaps a lama with an assistant monk or two, all busy making tormas (food offerings), practicing puja or just watching over the place. It looked as if some of these lamas and monks might live in these rooms, for there were bed-like couches in most of them. I wandered from room to room along the open corridor, finally deciding to attempt some practice in a room which had my particularly favorite protector in it—the fierce form of Vajrapani. Using hand gestures, I asked if I could sit and do puja. I was motioned to go ahead and take a seat.

Everywhere in Tibet, when I practiced like this, monks would surround me. Perhaps they had

On to Tsurphu

never seen a westerner practice before. They would sit close—right next to me, often on both sides, behind me, and most disturbing of all, just in front and facing me, looking right into my face—less than a foot away! It made for a difficult practice, to say the least, as I am used to practicing in a room by myself. In this particular case, the resident lama (a lama is a monk who has done the traditional 3-year solitary retreat) wanted to see me do the vulture posture, which leads to the dissolution of the one doing the visualization (for those of you who understand this sort of thing). He showed me how he did it, looking for all the world like Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa. Then he took off his watch, handed it to me, and asked me to time him while he held his breath in the traditional vase-breathing position for as long as he could, which turned out to be about a minute and a half. Of course, he wanted me to do the same. I am afraid (particularly with the low oxygen) that I did not put on a very good performance, not to mention that I was not exactly in a competitive mood. I had to laugh. It was all in good fun, but a bit crazy too.



The Severed Heads of Animals Above

Inevitably, in all these kinds of situations, I would end up showing the monk(s) the small photo album I had brought with me, the one having pictures of our Center, our lamas, our place of business, and, of the house we lived in. They couldn't get enough of looking at these pictures, and would crowd around until the

On to Tsurphu

small picture book would always end up floating out of my hands and into theirs, taking on a destiny of its own. I would wait to get it back. And they all knew my teachers: Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, and Bardor, Tulku, Rinpoche. In fact, often you could hear one monk pointing out to others that 'we' were Khenpo Karthar's. I was amazed that they knew who he was, as he had been gone from Tibet for such a very long time, and was now so very many thousands of miles away from them.



My Son and Karmapa's Teacher

All of the monks liked Michael Andrew, my 11-year old son, and I don't mean just a little. Monks surrounded Michael, shaking his hand, putting their arms (or robes) around him, taking him off walking with them—whatever. We just got used to it. Perhaps it was because he was so young, and a male. Perhaps it was because he had his mala with him, and used it. Who knows? We liked to think it was because of what the lady oracle near the Ramoche

On to Tsurphu

Temple, in Lhasa, had had to say about Michael Andrew, which is a bit of a story in itself. Here goes:

The Ramoche Oracle

We were told by a monk from Rumtek (located in Sikkim), who was visiting at our home during the time we were getting ready to leave for Tibet, that, if we got to Lhasa, we should try to find a famous woman oracle, one who uses a small copper mirror to tell you about yourself and about the future. She was very well known. Since we had plenty of time in Lhasa (waiting for the altitude adjustment to take place), I was willing to try and locate her. One morning, we just drove to the Ramoche Temple and asked around. Did they know of such an oracle, a lady? Did they ever! Soon we were being led by a young girl down roads and alleys, and finally, up to a door in a courtyard where people were washing up. We knocked, and were shown into a small room. In the room there was a lovely shrine, and also two long bed-like couches. The lady oracle sat upon one of these couches. She had nothing of the Jeanne Dixon look the so-called readers in the West have. Middle-aged, and very reserved looking, she was kind of lovely in a serious way. We liked her at once. This is what a reader, we thought—an oracle—should look like. We sat down on the floor in front of her.



The Ramoche Oracle

She used a small bowl of barley kernels, in which was stuck a round copper mirror. The mirror was not really capable of showing much, as it seemed kind of old and more opaque than reflective. The woman asked the years of our births, and, with that information, retrieved the animal (and element) of each person's birth

On to Tsurphu

year according to Chinese astrology. For example, I was born in the year of the Iron Snake. She then took a pinch of barley from her bowl, counted out several grains, and began to speak. I, of course, asked her about some business problems in which I was involved, and received a clear and positive answer about their resolution. We then asked about our four children, and got a clear and very helpful response in regard to each child. She went down the list of children, starting with our oldest daughter.

When she reached our youngest child, our son, Michael Andrew, she announced that he was not an ordinary child, but a *gelong*—a monk, in his last life, and one capable of keeping all of the 250+ Buddhist rules that this so high of a level monk would keep. She went on to say that we should take very special care of him—keep him very clean. Of course, this was unexpected, and started us thinking about him in a new light.

I mention this only because of the inordinate amount of attention he received from almost every monk he met on our journey. Even in the famous Potala, in Lhasa, the great past home of the Dalai Lamas, no less than a Khenpo (an abbot) came forth and greeted Michael Andrew spontaneously, led him around on a private tour, and later presented him with the traditional white scarf. We have picture after picture of Michael surrounded by monks. We mentioned this fact to Bokar, Rinpoche, the main meditation monk in our lineage (a tulku), and he said that he had no way of knowing

On to Tsurphu

whether or not this were true (about Michael Andrew) but even if it were, the path to bringing out those qualities would still be long and arduous. Of course, we also have a picture of Bokar, Rinpoche with his arm draped around Michael Andrew! It is an interesting sidebar, at the very least...



Bokar Rinpoche and Michael Andrew

The Karmapa

The Karmapa

And now, back to Tsurphu, where we were waiting to be led into the presence of His Holiness, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. Every day at 1 PM, His Holiness would have a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to go to that but were told to wait, that we would see him privately. The time ticked away on a slow track as we all waited, filled with anticipation. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, in his previous incarnation, but we felt as if we had, all this time, been in endless touch with him through the lineage. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual and temporal leader of a complete lineage of Tibetan Buddhists. Until one month before, we had had little hope of ever seeing His Holiness, since it was very uncertain if and when the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. And now, here we were, at his ancestral home, and about to meet him in person.

At last the summons came! The Karmapa would see us now. So, off we went, single file toward his interview room, which was some two stories up from where we were. I remember being right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness—still sick, and getting sicker. As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness, I had to stop and do heavy breathing just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. I found myself gasping for breath every few steps. Understand, now, that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder on a boat than the kind of stairs we are used to in a

The Karmapa

residence, and very steep. You really climb. We came to a small courtyard outside of where His Holiness was, where we took off our shoes. I had to sit down and pant. How embarrassing. And then another short flight of steep stairs to the room itself, where I arrived, still breathing hard. I sat down at the back of the room, while everyone else was up front, prostrating to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man at the far end of the room, kind of inset in a wall of golden brocade. I moved forward.

The Karmapa



The 17th Gyalway Karmapa

And there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine—and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence—boy was I glad to see him. All I can remember is kind of getting through the

The Karmapa

prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him. He looked at me like I have never been looked at before—his eyes look straight into your eyes and then he ups the ante by focusing intently within you. His dark eyes seem most like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, moving in and out, trying to get the right focus—I have never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then still move in and out, getting a fix on you. But that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds and it was as if time stopped in the grip of his eyes, and then all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head and gave me a welcoming kind look. I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

In this short interview, we presented ourselves, and also whatever questions we had. In my case, I had written out two questions in Tibetan (or had had them written out for me, since I cannot write Tibetan). These I presented to Karmapa. We all offered our scarves and whatever presents we had brought along. It was not a long interview but we were told that he would see us again tomorrow for a longer time; we should come back then and he would have answers to our various questions.

We had also requested to stay overnight at Tsurphu, although this was no longer, in general, allowed, because there was too much liability in regard to potential problems—problems that might reflect badly for Karmapa with the Chinese; however, they said they

The Karmapa

would talk it over. Just before we left, they did tell us we could stay over the *following* night. For this coming night, though, after spending a number of hours at the monastery, we had to start back down the Tolung Valley, toward Lhasa, going at a crawl over the same slow bumpy road we had come up on. It was a glorious sunny afternoon, with all the barley fields golden in the breeze. Our heads were filled with Karmapa. Although it was not raining, all the way down the valley we were greeted by a spectacular series of rainbows, one after another, some of them even double rainbows. We were high.



One of Many Rainbows That Day

The next day, with all of our sleeping gear, we ground back up the same trek as before, this time certain as to where and when the end would come and therefore more free to look around. Small villages of adobe were seen close to and also farther from the trail. With very few windows, and not much room inside

The Karmapa

at all, these small solid fortresses were all that separated the Tibetan people from the harsh winters. And there were no trees at this height, so fuel was scarce and limited to whatever brush could be gathered, bound, and stored. The big thing to burn for heat and cooking were animal droppings, and these were gathered with a science. They are worth a mention.



Fuel for Cooking and Winter

First, cow patties are dried (both sides), and piled in large stacks and rows on the ground and on the tops of walls and houses. It was not unusual to see stacks of yak patties four and five feet high, stretching the entire length of a courtyard perimeter—a wall of dried dung. These were the ones easiest to make. The smaller and rounder droppings (of the horse and so forth) were first gathered very carefully, placed into small mounds, and then these mounds were mashed down into patties. The south sides of many houses were plastered with drying patties—looking like small pizzas—

The Karmapa

that would be harvested later and added to the mounting stacks. It made for a very different wall decoration. Yak and related dung is not treated by Tibetans as being particularly dirty—they treat it more like we might treat dried vegetation. Almost every meal they eat is cooked with it and it heats their houses—many of which have no chimneys! Smoke is a way of life in Tibet.



A Tibetan Horse Race

On our journey, miles from any road-connected town, we came across a large group of Tibetans having a horse race. Dressed in bright red, with tufted hats and decorations of all kinds, came a procession of would-be riders and village people, all led by a person carrying some sort of a holy picture (we could not make it out...perhaps it was of a Rinpoche). Smoke swirled from the central bonfires and the participants were totally involved in the celebration—all of this taking place many miles from what you or I would call anywhere! Where

The Karmapa

they all came from or what it was all about, we could not be sure, but a celebration it was, indeed.

Soon we were told this was all a part of the harvest festival, a celebration of the harvesting of the barley in the Tolung Valley. And these barley fields were all around us, tucked away on every possible piece of land. Most were small to mid-sized, with many small fields having been planted side by side rather than there being only a few larger ones. There were countless thousands of these smaller fields, all golden in the Sun, waving their long extended tassels in the wind. I must say, after this experience, that barley is perhaps the most beautiful grain in the world.



Thousands of Small Barley Fields

We stopped at a small building where supposedly the best barley flour was made. Here was a family working together. They had harnessed one of the many fast-moving

The Karmapa

Tibetan mountain streams, those deep streams that, like small aqueducts, run every which way down the valley. The stream they harnessed ran in one side of their small house and out the other, powering a large grist mill that was in the center of the house. Above the mill hung a leather bag of roasted barley corns from which dribbled a steady stream of barley into the mill.



Roasting Barley

In another room of the home, two women worked hot brush-fed stoves, roasting the barley corns in sand until they were semi-popped—rather like our popcorn is when it does not pop fully. Swirling, choking smoke engulfed these ladies, who worked in it all day. Out on the lawn, on a huge blanket, mounds of fresh-popped barley corns were being tossed, separating the last of the sand from the kernels. The whole effect was positively medieval and beautiful. We helped ourselves to the popped corns and, I can say, it does not get much better than this.

The Karmapa



Popped Roasted Barleycorn

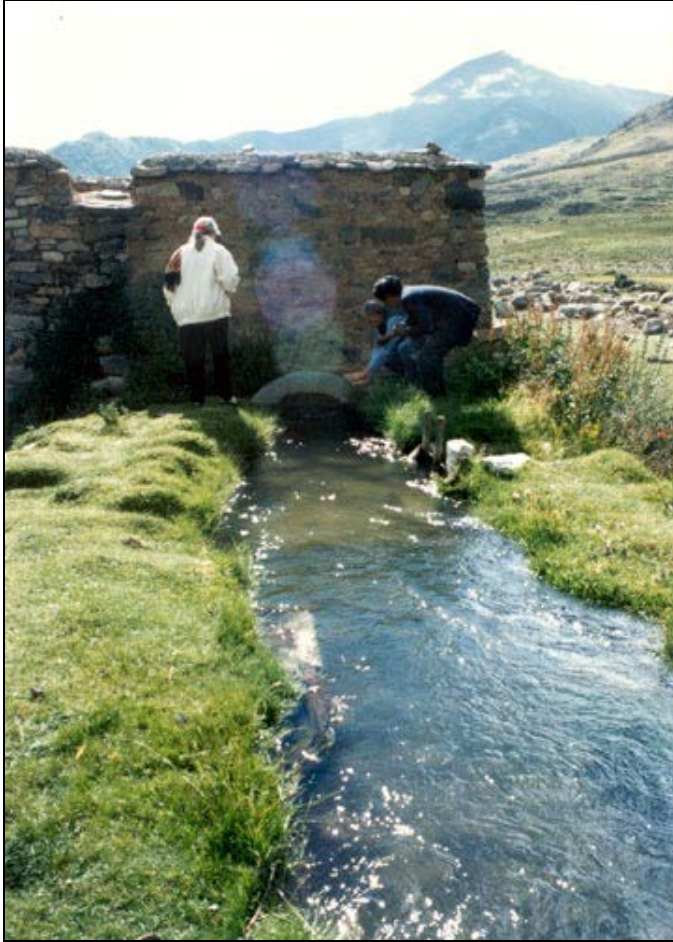
Everywhere, kids (and dogs) ran alongside our van as we crawled up the rock road through the valley. They wanted pens to write with, or money, and were proud to say over and over again perhaps the only English word they knew—“Hello!” They were wide-grin delighted when we answered the same back to them. Everywhere along the road were people walking with horses or by themselves, always engaged in some sort of work or survival-related task. This kind of roadside activity was a far cry from the endless and idle road traffic we encountered later on in our trip, on the hot plains of India and in southern Nepal.

What a strange feeling it was to drive along in the middle of nowhere and come across a family having lunch or tea in the middle of a far-off field, just out there by themselves. And many people working, everywhere—always. Didn't they know that they were all alone out here in Tibet, far from the too-cool happenings

The Karmapa

of the modern world? How could they be so happy out here? It was scary to me, so used to being wrapped in the news and flash of a cyberspace world. The modern world had not yet reached so far as this. Here things were as they had been for thousands of years, and this was a somewhat terrifying experience for thoroughly-modern Michael. They were just out here by themselves—and that is perhaps why they were all working so hard!

The Karmapa



Smalls Streams Run Deep and Fast

And a word about the water—the small rivers and streams; first, there were many, many streams and they all seemed to be going in various directions, although always flowing (of course) down the valley and toward the general direction of Lhasa. As mentioned earlier, these streams crossed and re-crossed the small road we traveled on, and sometimes

The Karmapa

even became the road itself as we drove into them. For the most part, they were not shallow streams, but rather quite deep, more like channels. Only a few feet across, they were a foot or two deep, and conveyed a huge quantity of pushing, rushing water...surging on. The Tibetans had, very carefully (I imagined), helped direct some of these streams over, under, and alongside the road, until you got the sense that they were almost like the deep Roman aqueducts—carrying the most possible water in the least possible space. Or perhaps (and more likely), they were all just natural—nature's way of handling the heavy mountain runoff.

And, lest I forget, we were in a valley, and one that did not seem all that wide, for on two sides were rocky mountains thrusting up, channeling and guiding us toward Tsurphu. There were smaller valleys shooting off at right angles, with paths that took other travelers we knew not where. But in Tibet, valleys are where all the life is. There is nothing that can be done with the mountains, other than to park the occasional monastery in them as high as the human hand can fashion. And then there was the sky, a roof for the valley, always opening upward and filled with those classic Tibetan clouds—the kind they paint into thankas—so lovely and always so grand.

The Karmapa



The Road to Tsurphu Monastery

I am told that, because the atmosphere of the Earth forces clouds to exist only at a certain altitude, the high plateaus of Tibet are one of the few places where the clouds are physically much closer overhead than elsewhere. Perhaps this fact explains the overpowering and grand feeling these vast stretches of clouds had on me—overwhelming.

With the Karmapa

With the Karmapa



A Day of Rainbows

As mentioned, our second drive to Tsurphu was effortless, and we felt like old-timers as we wheeled into the main courtyard and dragged our sleeping bags and other gear up to our allotted room. Once again, we waited to be summoned to His Holiness, filling our time by visiting the various shrines and observing the new buildings still under construction—or perhaps new is not the right word, because these were recreations of buildings destroyed by the Chinese during the 1960s.

It is amazing to me that, as hard as Tsurphu is to get to, the Chinese found plenty of energy to drag their dynamite and munitions all this way and to completely destroy this fragile monastery perched on the edge of the Tolung Valley. The fact that it even exists today is mainly due to the work of one man, Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche, who came from His Holiness' (the 16th Karmapa's) monastery at

With the Karmapa

Rumtek in Sikkim, and set about rebuilding the entire edifice, aided by the support of the surrounding people and by the Tsurphu Foundation.

At this time, Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche was very sick, suffering from advanced diabetes. Attending to his condition was a part of our mission. We had brought a doctor with us, Dr. Kate White, and bags of medical equipment, to see what could be done for him. He lived in a small apartment in a building separate from the main monastery, and was staying in a room that had many windows, part of a small sunny courtyard. He had been very sick, not only with diabetes, but also with an inability to sleep and other problems. We were admitted in to see him and, after prostrating to him, we offered him the traditional white scarf—or katak, which he graciously placed around each of our heads, giving us each a special protection cord at the same time.



Dropon Dechen Rinpoche

We could see how tired he was, and as Kate began to examine him, a perpetual stream of visitors continued to pass through the room, offering kataks and receiving his blessing. The bad news is that not much could be done for some of the complications that had arisen from the advanced diabetes, other than to dress the

With the Karmapa

wounds and confirm the diagnosis. The good news was that Kate did manage to help him get some sleep and to relieve some other equally troubling symptoms. Rinpoche was finally able to rest, much to everyone's relief.



H.H. the 17th Karmapa

That afternoon, we were summoned to His Holiness, and I slowly climbed the multiple (three sets) of ladder-like stairs, huffing and puffing. As we entered the interview room, there was a puja (ritual) going on, with His Holiness leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of monks. We were encouraged to sit up front, and we settled in. Gradually, I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. We found out later that we had experienced a special form of the Mahakala, one only for insiders. It was complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

With the Karmapa

It was very intense. His Holiness led the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was performed complete with drums, cymbals, and various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.



The Karmapa and Our Family

I began to identify this puja as being not much different from my own practice, and then my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it, and what it was about for me. I had done this practice, without fail, every morning, afternoon and/or evening, for many years. I was to do it until my death, or until I completed it by realizing its essential nature.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mind, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of my practice. What was that practice and

With the Karmapa

what was the essence of it? In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character, and I carried that strength or toughness to my practice. In fact, I loved the fierce, wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, here in this room with Karmapa, that same strength and toughness (or we might even say fierceness) came to mind, and began to be examined inwardly, in a new light. But this was no idea I was playing with; instead, I was examining myself, or, to be more exact, I was realizing a part of my self—in this case, the part of myself who had been doing my practice—the one who did the practice.



Dad, Michael Anne, and May after Interview

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell covering up an extremely sensitive inside. I was tough *because* I was so, so sensitive...and, at heart, I was kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion, and with

With the Karmapa

the realization that I was (and always had been, in my deepest part) compassionate concerned and caring, and that this was my natural state, not something to strive for but something already, in fact, the case. It was the state of my being, something to be uncovered and opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for this was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax and let it shine through.

And I should point out, again, that this was not a concept or idea I had, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this—now so obvious—realization. I was, in essence, very simple—just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. I was easy, and all my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all of the suffering I saw around me. At that moment, I felt I understood myself and my practice: all of this taking place in midst of that Mahakala puja, with Karmapa. I was at peace.

With the Karmapa



Michael Anne

After the puja we spent some time together with Karmapa, and during this time he gave us the answers to the questions we had brought to him the day before. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both because of the experience I just

With the Karmapa

described and also, now, from hearing the various and particular answers addressed to our questions. Later Karmapa came out in the courtyard and spent just a little more time with us. You can see from the photos of us at that time that we were all 'deep in the zone', our minds blown quite open. We were just sitting around, kind of in a good shock, feeling very open and whole.



My Wife and Friend Margaret

I had heard many stories about His Holiness as he is in this incarnation, and also ones of him in the previous incarnations: stories of amazing actions, all pointing to his extraordinary character. And these stories helped inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is—that sort of thing. Yet these stories were as nothing compared to the sheer

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largeness of his presence...and this kind of thing defies words...how do you explain that, when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself—of who you are, why you are here, and so forth? I learned things about myself when I was in the presence of His Holiness that I had never known before, important things. The word is—'realization'. I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

With the Karmapa



His Holiness on the Roof

We spent the rest of that day exploring further the various reaches of the monastery. Later, settled in our room, we had food brought to us by the monks. We ate what they ate: thukpa (a

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meat and noodle soup), rice...that sort of thing. As night came on, we hunkered down (night came early and there was little else we could do). The single light bulb glowed for a short while, powered by a small generator, and then the electricity ended. Aside from the light of candles, it was dark. We did what everyone else in that area of the world does when the sun goes down—we went to sleep, or, so I thought we would, at any rate.

For I was about to have a problem: each time I drifted off to sleep, as my breathing started going into the slower mode of sleep, I would startle awake, gasping for breath. I was not getting enough oxygen to go into normal sleep breathing. Like rising to the surface of a swimming pool after being too long underwater, I would burst awake, trying to breathe, gasping for air. It was frightening, to say the least. After many repetitions of this scenario, I realized I was in trouble, and felt around for my tiny flashlight. What to do? I set out to find the doctor who had come with us, but her room was empty, so I stumbled around Tsurphu trying to find someone who spoke English. I tried to explain my problem to the monks—without using English—but they just smiled at me, not getting it. At last, out of the dark appeared Doctor Kate, who had been with the ailing Rinpoche, and she checked my lungs, took note of the fever, and immediately pronounced I had to leave Tsurphu—right away, in the middle of the night. Humiliating.

With the Karmapa



My Son and the Karmapa's Teacher

The ride down was a trip, to say the least. The road to Tsurphu is bad enough in the daylight, but I doubt many even try it in the dark. But down we went, mile by mile, stone by stone, lurching and bumping all the way. The only good thing about the ride was that we discovered a huge owl along the roadway, perhaps two feet in height—who stared at us, even when we walked within a dozen or so feet of it. That aside, I was soon back in Lhasa, as

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was everyone else. All had to go with me because, without a vehicle, should anyone else develop problems, there would be no exit for them. It was probably 2 AM by the time we got to Lhasa and our hotel was locked tight. Even the outer steel fence was chained and locked. Our guide managed to scale the 10-foot fence and bang on the lobby door until it opened. In we poured, disturbing all manner of local people who were sound asleep on the lobby floor—a fact I never would have suspected.

We drove back up in the late morning of the next day for our third and final visit to Tsurphu—and with His Holiness; however, on the way up, our van broke down, and some of us elected to stay in a small village while others went back to Lhasa for another vehicle. We were introduced to a local farmer and his wife, and we stowed our gear on the front porch of their adobe home. After the customary butter tea, we toured the small compound, discovering their pig pen, and, in general, just wandering around. We soon found out that the villagers here were also celebrating the harvest—with a full-scale Tibetan opera! Hundreds of villagers from miles around were gathered in a sort of natural bowl-shaped arena, listening to a country opera, with the actors dressed up in ancient costumes and makeup. It is hard to describe the beauty of all these brightly-dressed people gathered together for a day of festivities. We sat and had lunch in a nearby field alongside a small stream, next to a tied horse. It was a lot like a dream.

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We were very tired from the night before, so we tried to find some shaded area to crawl under and drift off in, if only for a short while. A couple of trees by the edge of a field, a little bit of shadow, and there we were. What we didn't know was that this was a favorite outdoor bathroom spot for the opera goers. Soon there was an endless stream of people going and coming all around us—so much for sleep.

Later, with a new van, we resumed our trip up the Tolung Valley, and sometime in mid-afternoon we made it back to Tsurphu, where everyone was glad to see I was alright. We paid our respects, and then went to see His Holiness for the last time on this trip. We all presented kataks and had them blessed and put around our heads by Karmapa. He also gave us each a special blessed knot to wear around our necks.

With the Karmapa



The Karmapa Giving an Audience

Looking back, it was a special time we spent in Tsurphu, and with a special state of mind that is difficult to put into words. It is not easy to describe the experience of being with His Holiness—of us being so very far from anything we could call home, and yet still feeling so very much a part of him...a home for our hearts. Even when looking at the pictures from that time, it is clear we had entered into the mind and mandala of His Holiness, the 17th

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Karmapa. You can see it in our eyes, a certain softness and clarity. And the blessings of that trip have remained in my mind in the form of an ability to concentrate more on what is really important in life, and have given us all an enhanced ability to continue working on realizing ourselves. I am less distracted now by the many entertainments available to me. I am reminded of what Bokar, Rinpoche said to his English translator, Ngodup Burkhar, my good friend. He said “Tomorrow or next life, which will come first?”



A Typical Tibetan Bathroom (for two)

Here is a typical Tibetan bathroom, in this case with two holes. There are a couple of ropes hanging down from above to hang on to, while you try to position yourself above a hole. This was a new experience. At night, a single light bulb worked dimly, for perhaps a half an hour.

Samye and Chimpuk

After we left Tsurphu, we returned to Lhasa, and then headed away from that city and toward Tsetan. The road from Lhasa to Tsetang (since it is also the road to the airport) is one of the best in Tibet, fully paved and complete with two lanes. We drove out of Lhasa, knowing we would not be back again this trip. We had said our goodbyes. On the way back, we stopped once more at the lovely Tara shrine along the road—the Drolma Lhakang, at Netang—and then continued on, this time driving right past the Gonghar airport and continuing on toward Tsetang, driving along the great Tsangpo River.

We stopped along the road right next to one of those great barley fields ready for harvest, and opened the hated hotel box lunches. About all we could eat of them were the hard-boiled eggs. After lunch, and on down the road—some 30 kilometers or so from Tsetang—we pulled off and just drove right down to the edge of the Tsangpo river. At this point, the Tsangpo must be almost a mile wide. Along the bank were several small barge-like boats—each maybe 30 feet long—and each having small diesel outboard engines on the back.



The Boat to Samye Monastery

We were on our way to Samye Chokor—said to be the first monastery built in Tibet, and unreachable by any highway. The only way to Samye was either overland with back-pack and with horse, or by ferry, which is how we were traveling now. The day was hot, and the Sun, here in the open, was fierce. We had to cross the Tsangpo, but we were ostensibly waiting for another vehicle—the one that was supposed to be bringing our cook, along with a car full of cooking supplies: where we were going, we needed our own cook. Since I had no idea when this cook might arrive from Lhasa, I volunteered to pay the extra boat fee the cook would require, so that we could get started across right away. It was clear that few of us would be able to take a sun exposure sustained beforehand, during an unspecified waiting time on the open beach, as well as that the lengthy crossing was going to entail. All of

Samye and Chimpuk

our gear was piled at the end of one of the boats.

Next ensued a long and hot argument between our guide (and driver) and the staff at the boat livery. It seems that the boat pilot had not yet had his lunch and (somehow) our guide had offended his pride. It was something about the simple meal of tsampa the pilot was about to have...he felt, perhaps, our guide was looking down his nose at him. It was the only argument I witnessed in Tibet, but it was a doozy, with shouting and shoving. We all stood by the boat, waiting to see if we would even have a boat pilot at all. We would.



Crossing the Tsangpo River

The trip across the river to the village of Surkar took more than one and a quarter hours, as the boat, not able to go just straight across, had to move slowly through a maze of sand bars. After we were a certain distance out from the shore, we saw our cook arrive, and there was

Samye and Chimpuk

discussion on whether we should go back to get him. I said we should not—just too much exposure to the sun. On the far side, we could see other barges moored, and several large trucks waiting for us. The trip from Surkar to Samye, by truck, was some eight kilometers.



May and Michael Anne Hang On

We piled our stuff in the back of a truck and climbed in ourselves, hanging on to the

Samye and Chimpuk

overhead frame that stretched over the truck bed. And hang on we did (for dear life!) while the truck lunged down the road and across the sand dunes, going as fast as the driver could push it. The older kids absolutely loved it, and the driver knew it. The rest of us just got numb knuckles while trying to keep from flying off the side. Along this road are the Rignga Chortens, five small stupas that have been carved out of the solid rock of the mountainside. Painted white, they are visible even from the Gonghar road on the South side of the Tsangpo.



Samye Monastery Grounds

After the ride through the dunes, and after passing through groves of trees, we got our first glimpse of the golden roofs of Samye. The monastery is laid out like a vast mandala, with the large Utse temple in the center. The entire perimeter consists of a great elliptical wall, more than a kilometer in circumference, on which are set 1008 small stupas. There are four gates to the city, and these are located at

Samye and Chimpuk

45-degree angles from the North-South/East-West axis. Destroyed by the Chinese, Samye's reconstruction has come far. Inside the perimeter wall are four very large stupas, all of which were, at the time, undergoing reconstruction.

The Utse temple, at the center of Samye, is impressive. Inside the outer walls of the temple is a large square circumambulatory area, filled with prayer wheels that surround the actual gompa (shrine room). The walls along this prayer-wheel route are filled with exquisite murals featuring 35 Buddha images, some of which have been defaced by the Chinese. Above this is a second floor containing the monks quarters, all of which face inward toward the main gompa.

The main shrine hall area is very dark and filled with incredible statues. I was able to practice there one morning before the monks began their morning puja. I had monks all around, as usual, just watching me. One sat immediately in front of me, no more than a foot from my face. Although this was nerve-wracking, everyone was very friendly.

There were not many amenities at Samye. The best we could do was find one large room that had maybe 10 beds in it, lined up side by side. Everyone was in the same room. There is no way that I was going to sleep on those beds without a sleeping bag and a ground cloth. There was no running water, and the open bathroom was not quite far enough away so that we could breathe free—there was no fresh

Samye and Chimpuk

air—or, if we opened the two small windows, we had a continual stream of smoke and bathroom smells. The bathroom was one of those lovely Tibetan two-story open bathrooms, the ones that have some kind of shielding up to your thighs. The idea is, you have to squat down if you don't anyone to see you. No stand-up peeing, like we (men) are used to. Also, it was right on the edge of the building—in plain sight of anyone below. I am not complaining, just explaining.

Our cook arrived, with about a ton of gear, including huge sacks of flour, cans of cooking oil—way more than we could ever need. He set up shop in a room downstairs and he, his helper, and our guide, moved in there. They soon filled the room with both cooking and tobacco smoke. We found out right away that the food would be pretty bad, even though he tried to please.

My opinion of Samye is that it is a heavy place. I don't know if it was heavy just for me, or if it is the kind of place that puts everyone through a lot of changes. I have no way of knowing, but I can say that some tough stuff went down there, stuff I have no intention of even going into here...perhaps it is because Samye is said to be Tibet's oldest monastery. We spent two quite difficult days at Samye Monastery. My son became sick, and my wife, at one point, had to take him out of there and all the way to Tsetang, to a hotel, where he could recover.

Samye and Chimpuk



Main Gompa at Samye

I can remember rising one morning before dawn and going down to the main gompa, hoping to find a place to do my daily practice. It was drizzling rain. The front door to the shrine hall was still locked. The outer cement floor, protected from the rain, was filled with dozens of dogs who had sought shelter there for the night. They slept tightly packed in this small space, all curled up. I had no place to practice, so I shoed some of the dogs to the side and made a little place there on the cement floor. With a small flashlight, I did my practice, surrounded by yawning and scratching dogs. We shared the space.

Climbing to the Caves

Climbing to the Caves



By Horseback to Chimpuk

Another memorable story is our climb to Chimpuk—the Guru Rinpoche caves high above Samye. My wife had taken my son, Michael, who was sick, back to Tsetang, accompanied by our 15-year old daughter, May. This left me, my 21-year old daughter, Michael Anne, and our two sangha friends, at Samye. One of my goals for this trip was to visit some major Guru Rinpoche caves, and Chimpuk is near the top of the list for anyone wishing to do this. My guide suggested that it might be too difficult, but when I did not acquiesce to his way of thinking, he set about finding us some horses to help get us through the plains and up the lower mountain slopes. This meant he had to travel to a village an hour away in search of mounts.

Climbing to the Caves

Sure enough, early in the morning there were three horses parked outside the building we were staying at. Tibetan horses are much smaller than the riding horses we are familiar with here in the states, but don't be fooled by their size. They are tough and nimble animals, used to carrying heavy loads. We mounted up and headed slowly through the back alleys of Samye. The alleys gave way to some farmland and soon we were crossing a small river and heading out across a long plain toward the distant mountain slopes. The horses moved at a slow pace, and the distance we traveled was measured by the time passed and by looking back at the ground covered. Each time we looked back, the glittering gold roofs of Samye were harder and harder to see...then they were gone altogether.



Guide and Michael Anne Start Out

The plains gave way to hills and the path began to wind back and forth along canyon rims, high alongside steep slopes. The horses were patient and sure-footed, if slow. Soon we

Climbing to the Caves

were among rushing streams and in high humidity, and there was much more mountainous vegetation. Thick carpets of bright green short grass and blossoming plants thrived here. In particular, there were the most varied and beautiful kinds of plants with thorns I have ever seen. These plants had long, sharp, brightly-colored thorns, and rich green leaves. It was a natural botanical garden, and, with the slow treading of the horses and the vivid landscapes, almost like an acid trip, or a vision out of a Carlos Casteneda novel. This was the end of the rainy season and everything was in bloom.



Dad Follows the Team

Higher and higher we went, with my horse, who was being a little difficult, often lagging behind the other two horses. The trail turned into a steep path, so steep the horses were actually climbing up the side of the mountain—I had to just hang on. These trails were really meant for human climbers or trekkers. After a

Climbing to the Caves

very long climb, we finally arrived at the Chimphuk Utse nunnery (ani gompa), marking the point where we would have to leave the horses and begin climbing on foot. With the horses tied up, we had a small lunch in what must have been a part of the nunnery kitchen. The only uncomfortable aspect was the fact that a Chinese guard, carrying a machine gun, was posted to the nunnery. He kept hanging around where we were. Apparently, there had been some trouble a few days before and the Chinese had decided to send someone in to protect—I am not sure who.

Farther on, as we began climbing without the horses, a group of monks passed us, going down. We were told that there was an important Rinpoche in their group and that perhaps the guard was watching him, or, watching out for him. I do know that, with the appearance of the Rinpoche, the guard stopped trailing us.

Now we began to climb in earnest, with neither the guide nor my daughter having any real trouble. I lagged behind though, and just did the best I could. It was an endless zigzag trail, always going higher. Sometimes I had to sit down and just rest, even though it was embarrassing to have my daughter peering down from above to see if her dad was alright. Then the guide took my day pack, giving me more room to breathe and a lighter load.

Finally, after what seemed too long of a climb for me, we arrived at some buildings where an old man and old woman were. It was so steep

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getting to them that I literally had to crawl up and then collapse on the ledge where they sat. I could not tell if they were lay people or monks because they had on such a variety of different types and pieces of clothing. My daughter, Michael Anne, and Pemba, our guide, were already settled in when I reached the ledge outside the house. The elders brought us some butter-tea—and did it taste good! It turned out that this man and woman were of the Karma Kagyu lineage. They were thrilled when I showed them the picture I had taken, less than a week before, of His Holiness, the Karmapa. I gave them each a copy and they were very moved by this. It was fun to find people who cared so much about the same person as we did.

Soon, an older nun came along, and we all chatted. She offered to guide us up the trail a ways and point out some of the sacred places: the footprints of Guru Rinpoche, special rocks, etc. This was a real help, as we got to see many small spots and grottoes we might otherwise have passed by. After a time, she turned off, and we climbed on up toward the main cave. By this time I was in a full sweat, and feeling pretty good because of the substance elimination that sweating brings.

At last we reached the top, and had arrived at the Drakmar Keutsang cave. This cave is said to be the ‘Buddha-speech’ place of Guru Rinpoche—the spot where he gave his first special teaching on the eight meditational deities called the Drubpa Kabgye. A two-story building had been erected around the actual

Climbing to the Caves

cave, which is toward the back of this structure. Aside from the many statues, we were shown the rock containing the impression of the body of the princess that Guru Rinpoche is said to have brought back from the dead, so that he could give her a special teaching. The attending monk took a special lingam-shaped rock housed there (said to have come from the Shitavana charnel ground in India) and rubbed it across our backs—a healing tradition.

Later, on the outside terrace, we had butter-tea with the monk who oversees the place. He had been there for two years, summer and winter, practicing. I could only admire his courage and perseverance. We shared a chocolate bar and drank our tea (both forbidden items in my diet) in the bright sun of that high courtyard. It was great. Far, far below, was the plain we had climbed from, shimmering in the distance. We could not even see Samye from where we sat.



Prayer Wheels at Samye Gompa

Climbing to the Caves

Our return trip—from the caves back to the nunnery—was much easier than going up had been. At the nunnery we distributed the rest of our food and provisions to the nuns and made our preparations for the descent to the plain. The shrine room at the ani gompa (nunnery) was very beautiful, and I lingered there awhile first. Then, I tried to switch horses for the trip down, because my first horse was too willful, but the new horse tried to buck me while on the edge of a steep trail. That was something! I went slinking back to my original horse and we went on, together, down the mountain. The horses really took over on the way back, carefully selecting their placement of every hoof. Any prompting of the horse on my part was mostly ignored, as the horse actually climbed down the trail by himself. About all I could do was brace myself to keep from falling off—sit back, hang on—and enjoy the ride. When we reached the plain, my horse went off on a side trail, which was actually the way back to his village; he refused all guidance and kicks from me. This ended up with me being on the other side of a small canyon from the other riders; however, after much urging and a few more kicks on my part, we did manage to rejoin the others just before we all had to cross the wide shallow river.

The trip down was in the full Tibetan sunlight, and I ended up extending my shirt cuffs over the backs of my hands just to keep them from becoming scorched. It was hot! We re-crossed the small river with difficulty (my horse refusing to cross for a time) and wound our way, once

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again, through the back village streets. The sun was going down when we arrived and we pretty much ate some food and went right to bed. I lay down on the bed with my clothes on—with the rest of my family gone to Tsetang, it was kind of strange being there in Samye—and immediately fell asleep. My butt was sore for weeks afterward!

The Crystal Cave

Cave of Guru Rinpoche

One pilgrimage spot that everyone tried to talk me out of going to was the legendary Crystal Cave (Shel Drak) of Guru Rinpoche, on Crystal Mountain, a key pilgrimage site for Tibetans—in particular for those of the Nyingma Lineage. This site is said to represent Guru Rinpoche's Buddha attributes. After all, this was Guru Rinpoche's first meditation cave in Tibet. It was here that he bound the demons and the Bön influences under oath. Many termas were hidden and later revealed here—to practitioners such as Orgyen Lingpa and to others as well. I felt I had to go there.

Both of the experienced Tibetan trekkers I knew said it was too hard and that neither of them had ever been there. Even our local guide had never been there, and he suggested that anything I had read implying it was doable had probably not been written by someone who actually knew how difficult the journey was. My will to reach the Crystal Cave was not as strong after hearing this—my resolution wavered.

But then, we visited Traduk Temple in the Yarlung Valley, some 7 kilometers South of Tsetang. As we wandered through this beautiful gompa, we came across a room which had a striking gold statue of Guru Rinpoche within. I remember reading that the original statue of Guru Rinpoche had been removed, for safekeeping, from the Crystal Cave, and placed in a nearby monastery. This

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had to be it, and, as the monk at the temple soon explained, it was.



Guru Rinpoche Statue

It was perhaps the most inspiring image of Guru Rinpoche I had ever seen. And seeing this statue rekindled my will to visit the cave where it had once been. I again resolved to reach Shel-Drak. Something inside of me just had to go to the Guru Rinpoche cave at Crystal Mountain. I informed my guide I was going,

The Crystal Cave

even if I had to hire a separate vehicle and go by myself. Resigned, our guide turned his attention to helping us figure how to do it.

One thing I did know is that we would have to start out early, as it would be an all-day hike. Most of our party elected not to even attempt the journey, preferring to stay in the Tsetang area, where our driver would shuttle them from gompa to gompa. Those of us who would attempt to reach Shel-Drak included myself, my wife, our 15-year-old daughter May, and our Tibetan guide.

As for directions, all we knew was that we would have to drive to the Tsechu Bumpa, a well-known stupa in the village of Kato, on outskirts of Tsetang, and try and find a local guide there, perhaps hiring a tractor to carry us a part of the way. Now the Tibetan (or Chinese) tractor is not the beast we all know by that name here in the U.S. What they mean by a tractor in Tibet is more what we would call a large Rototiller, a small 2-wheel, 2-cycle engine that can plow a field and, in Tibet, pull a cart. These tractors fill the streets and side roads of Tibet, pulling carts filled with vegetables, brush, and more often—people.

Our driver found the Tsechu Bumpa Stupa, one of the three main stupas in the Yarlung Valley area, whereupon we began to knock on doors. We located one man with a tractor; however, since it was the harvest time, he had already agreed to work elsewhere that day. Things did not look so good. But then he suggested there might be one fellow, a

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newcomer to the area, who might be free. Knocking at his house, we aroused his fierce dog and brought his wife to the door. He was still asleep, but she would wake him.

After some time, he came out, rubbing his eyes. Our guide gave him the pitch. I cannot understand Tibetan, but I could see by the way he was shaking his head that things were not going the way we had hoped. I told our guide to up the ante until he could not afford to refuse. This tactic worked; he agreed to take us, and our own driver left us standing in the road, waiting for this tractor man to get his machine. Although a building nearby seemed, from the outside, to be a garage, when the man opened what we thought was a garage door, it actually opened into a courtyard (with no roof) where the tractor was kept. Then there was the starting of the tractor and the fact that the cart (where we would ride) was filled with water, which had to be drained. That done, we climbed into the cart, sitting on empty feed bags and blankets that his wife had brought out just as we had been about to get our butts wet. She tucked a small bottle of butter-tea and some tsampa under the driver's seat (his lunch) and off we were, although at what seemed to be a snail's pace.

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The Tibetan Tractor

The idea was to ride the tractor as far up the mountain as it would go, saving our legs for the really hard part. As it turned out, there really wasn't any road to where we were going. Instead, we followed the dry bed of a stream uphill, moving very slowly toward the mountains. After a mile or so, it became difficult for the tractor to pull us on, due to the

The Crystal Cave

soft mud: we all had to get out and push. Pretty soon, we were spending more time pushing than riding and it became apparent we could go no farther. So we left the tractor, and the driver, who would wait for us, perhaps for the whole day.

I have no pictures from the first part of the trip because we were shrouded in a mist, and then in clouds. I can tell you that it was tough going though, even from the start, as in: all uphill and steep at the same time. Our first goal was to climb to the small village of Sekhang Zhirka, which was perched on a ridge, and call that our base camp, from which we would push on up the mountain to the Crystal Cave—a hard 3-hour climb. But reaching the village of Sekhang Zhirka was a long haul from the valley floor, perhaps 5 kilometers and always going up. Even though I don't generally use caffeine, I had mental images of arriving there and having a nice warm cup of butter-tea, knowing that the long climb would burn off any of the bad side effects of the caffeine. At last, we reached the village, which was more like a bunch of houses strung together—but there was no tea. Everyone had abandoned the town to move back down to the valley for the winter. By this time, we were breathing pretty hard. After a good sit, we moved on.

The Crystal Cave



Abandoned Village Sekhang Zhirka

From here on out, it got really steep, something I thought it already had been. It is hard to describe, but in many cases we were just scrambling up steep slopes of boulders, or discovering that what was called the path was just a wide staircase of strewn rock and boulders. My so-called (by me, earlier that morning) *light* day pack soon began to feel very heavy indeed. My wife and I kind of dropped behind, while our daughter and the guide went on ahead. After awhile, the two of us just gave up any pretense of being tough and began to sit down whenever we needed to—which was all the time! At the worst, we were resting every 20 or 30 feet, and I mean sitting down resting.

What can I say? I am getting old, etc., but it was tough. Our guide met a local man who was up on the mountainside looking for lost yaks, hoping to drive them back down for the

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coming winter. He and the guide went on ahead, but our daughter quickly passed them, leaving us all in the dust. One of the guys had taken Margaret's pack, to make it easier for her. We were walking in the clouds, or at least were surrounded by them. In time, we climbed above the mist and clouds and began to be able to see more of the mountains around us. We were essentially walking up the spine of a great wide ridge on the side of a mountain, with a deep canyon across from us. Aside from all the heavy breathing, this place was gorgeous.



Lumo Durtrö Naga Cemetery

From the little I had read the next place we would arrive at would be Lumo Durtrö, a female naga cemetery, dedicated to Tamdrin, the horse-headed deity. This was a place of

The Crystal Cave

traditional Tibetan sky burial, where the bodies are cut up with sharp tools and fed to the vultures. The place was not, however, readily forthcoming.

We climbed and climbed and climbed. Somewhere along in here we met an old man, with skin like leather, coming down from the mountain; he motioned for us to come close and took what looked like a piece of quartz crystal from his pack. Beginning to hack away at it, he eventually handed each of us a small piece—it was rock candy, sugar. We thanked him and moved on. Those small pieces of sugar, something I would never normally eat, turned out to be just the thing—that little bit of energy meant a lot at that point. On we went, and after a very long time our guide pointed through the mist to a distant stupa high on the mountain. Groan. That was the place we should have reached an hour ago, and, it was just a stepping stone on our journey. Panting and struggling, we moved on.

One of the strangest experiences in this kind of climbing is that, sooner or later, you do reach those far-off glimpsed places. It just takes time—and suffering. We finally reached the sky burial place, and, sure enough, there were human bones and meat cutting tools scattered around. A wrist and hand were lying under a small bush. And clothes were everywhere. Apparently, it is the custom to scatter the clothes of the deceased nearby. The place looked like a Good-Will store after a hurricane. This stupa, however, was just a way station for us. We did kora (circumambulating around the

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stupa) and looked to see if there were any more human remains (fascinating), and then marched on.



Walking in the Clouds

After a very long time, the trail began to even out some, and there were even sections offering *almost*—but not quite—level walking, and not very long sections, at that. Margaret offered to help carry my pack, and we took turns with that for a while. We began to have glimpses of a monastery across a canyon that, believe it or not, our guide informed us we would have to get to. It seemed so far away from where we were now! By this time, we were high up, and our yak herder was beginning to find some of his yaks, but they were always on the other side of the canyon from him. He had a sling, and was very adept at winging rocks across the canyon to land near the yaks. They hit with a pinging sound, but the yaks did not pay too much attention. Meanwhile, I couldn't even look around me half the time—I was breathing so hard. It was all I

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could do to look at the ground in front of me and put one foot in front of the other.



Above Shel-Drak Monastery

Just before we reached Shel-Drak Monastery—dedicated to the famous Nyingma tertön, Sangye Lingpa—the path turned into what was almost a rock staircase. We scrambled up this staircase and into a wide courtyard. The monastery had a single large

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door in front, but it was closed, and the monastery looked for all the world as if it were abandoned. “What to do?” I asked our guide. “Try opening the large door,” he said, and, sure enough, it swung open. We pushed inside and collapsed on a porch in a sunny inner courtyard. There we had lunch and butter-tea. Lunch was only hard-boiled eggs, some bread, and a few cookies, but it tasted like ambrosia after that long hike. We were so tired. As it turned out, this gompa marked the end of any “easy” ascent. From here on up, it was almost straight up—rock stairs. The good news is that this last stretch involved less than an hour of climbing before, if all went well, we should reach the cave.

The Crystal Cave



The Cave Where We Are Headed

Starting out, we crossed a small natural rock bridge above a rushing stream. This was the Terchu, or 'Rediscovered Water', a spring sacred to Guru Rinpoche. From here, the way was indeed steep, with sheer drops on one side and a rock face going straight up on the other. The building and the cave high above us seemed far away, protruding out from the mountain side. We climbed on, with both

The Crystal Cave

Margaret and me plopping down often to rest. We stared out over the valley or looked down the steep drop. As we hiked, we began to come across bright strings tied to objects hanging from the rocks. Many pilgrims had been here before us, and they must have taken this very same path, as there was no other. I imagined perhaps Khenpo Rinpoche (not to mention Guru Rinpoche) had once climbed in these very same rocks.

The Crystal Cave



Inside Guru Rinpoche's Cave

Exhausted but exhilarated (and proud of ourselves), we finally made it to the top and entered a small level area next to the two-story building that houses the Crystal Cave (Shel-Drak Drubphuk) and a small gompa and shrine. From here there was an incredible view of the entire Yarlung Valley far below. Next, we climbed some steep ladder-like steps to our left and entered a tiny room, which contained a few

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more steps to an even tinier place, the cave itself. The cave was almost full, with three other pilgrims plus a monk from the monastery below. They were in the midst of doing a Guru Rinpoche puja, complete with tsok, the ritual feast offering. There was just enough room for the four of us to wedge inside. Here was the cave, with rough walls, containing a tiny shrine in which was a statue of Guru Rinpoche, with butter lamps before it. We brought a photo of the young Karmapa, which the attending monk happily put at once in the center of the shrine.

When the puja ended, the monk handed around pieces of tsok torma to everyone; then the pilgrims (and the monk) withdrew from this small cave room. At this point, we were able to do our prostrations and whatever other practices we felt like offering. It was special to be there, and each of us asked for Guru Rinpoche's blessing in our own way.

The Crystal Cave



Looking Out from the Cave

Afterward, we visited the small gompa next to the cave and the excellent shrine there. We looked out over the entire Yarlung Valley, knowing we had come all the way up from the very bottom. This valley, which stretched out far below us, is said to be the place from which the entire Tibetan civilization arose. It was indeed vast and beautiful—‘awesome’ would be a better word. I could not imagine how in

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the wide world we would ever get from where we were now (so high at the top) back to the plain below. It just seemed physically impossible.

But back down we went, and it only took something over two hours (and, for me, a bunch of blisters) to reach the abandoned village. My shoes could not take the constant pressure of the bracing needed for the downhill climb, and my toes suffered. I could feel it happening, but there was nothing I could do about it—down and down we went, mile after mile.

The Crystal Cave



Guru Rinpoche's consort

Yeshe Tsogyal

Our tractor was still waiting, and we rattled back down the riverbed and into town, arriving just as the rains rolled in from the mountains. After some tea at the tractor driver's home, during which the rains slowed, we climbed back into the tractor and were driven to and through Tsetang, to the amusement of everyone who saw us. Perhaps they had never

The Crystal Cave

seen westerners ride (as Tibetans do all the time) in the back of a tractor before. It was a slow cross-town ride through sporadic rain and *lots* of huge puddles.

Once back, I took a hot bath, changed my clothes, and went down to one of those dinners you just inhale. Beyond exhaustion, I was almost euphoric at having actually made, despite obstacles, the climb to the Crystal Cave on Crystal Mountain, and also at having made an aspiration to Guru Rinpoche, on his home turf.

Leaving Tibet



Leaving Tibet: Gonghar Airport

The Chinese have done the people of Gonghar a favor by scheduling the only plane out of Tibet, to Kathmandu, to leave at about 7:00 A.M. Since Lhasa is a three to four hour drive, this means that most people have to spend the night in Gonghar. We did that. The only problem was that when we wheeled up to the hotel in Gonghar, where we had reservations, it had been shut down—gone out of business. Even our guide was surprised.

We were left with either the Chinese-run Gonghar airport hotel or a total fleabag. The quite large modern-looking airport hotel was a real joke. Like many Chinese-run hotels in Tibet, it was, essentially, an emulation of what in the West we would call a 5-star hotel. There were marble floors, high ceilings, long corridors, etc; however, that was where the

Leaving Tibet

similarity ended. The Chinese communists have no clue as to what service is—serving other people. Communism is more a self-serve kind of thing and the concept of service is, in my experience, unknown to them.

For one thing, nothing worked! The toilets didn't work and there was no hot water. In point of fact, there wasn't really any water at all—only a bare dribble. Our rooms were spacious, but they had been totally trashed by letting the Tibetan nomadic people more or less camp out in them. The lovely artificial pond outside our window was filled with trash and green slime. There was what looked like chamber pots (or spittoons) outside of every room, filled with old tea and who-knows-what?

Leaving Tibet



Waiting for a Seat on the Plane

When our two daughters tried to take a walk around, they were directed back to their rooms by the Communist guards. Something not so obvious or easily put into words was the creepy feeling the whole place had. We had come to dislike the Communist presence in Tibet, and the Gonghar Airport Hotel encapsulated everything about that presence we didn't like.

Leaving Tibet

But it was our last night, so we all camped out (like good Tibetans) in a shared two-room suite. As usual, we had airplane worries. The plane from Tibet to Kathmandu only runs two days a week. The previous plane had been unable to take off for one reason or another, and all of the passengers had had to remain in Tibet until our flight. What our guide feared, is that all of these people, plus all of the people scheduled for our flight, would all turn up at the same time to claim whatever seats were available. All would have valid tickets, and there was every reason to be worried that we might not be able to get seats, and thus would be forced to wait many more days for the next plane. But I had a plan.

I would get up at dawn, before any reasonable person would be stirring, and get in line. And so I did. Five o'clock in the morning found me feeling my way down the darkened hallway of the hotel with a small flashlight. But when I got to the main doors they were locked—with chain and padlock, as is the custom everywhere in Tibet. I shudder to think of what would happen if there was a fire. People would die. At any rate, I could not get out.

I managed to find a room marked 'guest service' and beat on the door. After some time a very tired and irritated Chinese man appeared. I pointed to the locked door and said I wanted to go out. He points at his watch and tries to shoo me away, but I would not go. Finally, after giving me a disgusted look, he unlocked the door, turned around, and went back to bed. I stepped outside.

Leaving Tibet



Kids on Pile of Luggage outside Gate

It was raining quite hard, and I, in my sandals, was not prepared for it, but I thought I could somehow make it quickly to the terminal. I wandered in the wet darkness from one vast building to another. All were locked tight—and I was getting wetter. I found what I hoped was the right building and waited under an overhang. Nothing was happening anywhere.

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Finally, I took off my socks and walked back to the hotel in my bare feet and waited there, where I did a short practice in the lobby. Just before 6:00 A.M., our guide shows up, and together we set out again for the terminal. It is still raining. This time we find the right building and position ourselves at one of two possible doors. We wait, and it is somewhat coldish out. People begin to arrive. A tour bus full of trekkers shows up, having driven most of the night—all the way from Lhasa. Their Tibetan guide and our guide knew each other. More people trickle in, but the wait was long.

When the doors finally begin to open, we all race for the locked gateway. The other guide and his people get there first, but I walk right in front of him and say that I have been waiting here since 5:00 A.M. and am not going to let him push me aside. He nods, and together we plan to get our parties through the gate as soon as it opens. We pile our baggage high, making cutting in line difficult. It was another long wait. My family shows up, and the children proceed to fall asleep on our baggage pile.

Leaving Tibet



Waiting for the Plane

At last the Communist officials arrive and the process begins. There is more positioning and shoving. This time, yet another guide cuts in line at yet another point, papers in hand, and tries to position his whole group ahead of ours. We stare him down, calmly handing our papers to the confused attendant. And so it went, with nothing going on—on anyone's part—to be very proud of. But we did make the cut and got our seats on the plane, flying out of Tibet and back to Kathmandu—sorry to be leaving beautiful Tibet, but happily thinking of the much better food in Kathmandu.

The Food in Tibet: An Opinion

Food is important to almost all of us, and I want to say something about the food in Lhasa—and in Tibet in general—to those of you who may plan on going there. In Tibet, the food available for vegetarians (such as we were) is not what I would call good, and therefore, what I have to say here comes close to complaining. Many of you may thus want to skip over this section.

A large part of the problem, as mentioned, was that we were vegetarians, and the Tibetans are anything but; thus, most of the good Tibetan dishes were already off limits to us. Another problem was that the staff at the hotel in Lhasa where we spent most of our time was Nepalese not Tibetan. And, last but not least, the Nepalese were always trying to serve us whatever their concept of Western food was. Take, for example, their continental breakfast. Unbelievable!

Every morning they would have a row of dishes waiting for us, ones we could help ourselves to—smorgasbord style; however, they never lit the burners under the pans, so all of the food was cold! Second, and more serious, they put sugar and egg in everything. Any bread they served came from the same dough, and, no matter what shape they had managed to bake it in—rolls, sliced bread, etc.—this dough was filled with sugar, egg, and cheap oils. This may not sound very bad to you; but, after about one bite of the toast (for example), my stomach would begin retching—refusing anything further. And this was typical.

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Restaurant in Nepal

So, breakfast became the odd banana that was ripe, or perhaps a small can of Chinese mango-something juice (loaded with sugar) along with maybe the so-called porridge, if you could stand it. That was about it. Toward the end, I found something called a masala omelet, which was actually quite good, but I could not eat the scrambled eggs, as they had sugar and I knew not what other strange stuff in them. The bottom line is, we all lost a lot of weight in Tibet, not because there was no food to eat, but because we just could not eat it.

A typical evening would find us sitting in the outdoor courtyard of whatever restaurant our tour was paying for. The scene itself was nice enough—a big paved courtyard shielded from the sun by overhanging brightly-painted canopies, and so on. One of the problems was that you had only about two choices of air: one was air filled with charcoal fumes from the

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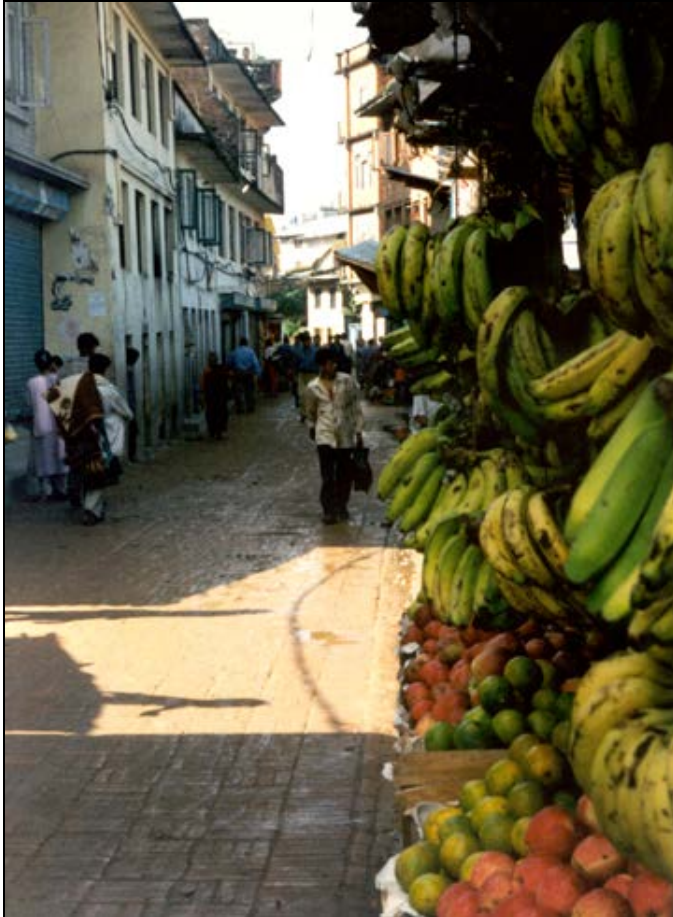
kitchen (the fumes were real bad) and the other the backwash of air from a nearby Tibetan toilet. So, amid polite dinner conversation, you really had to brace yourself for whichever way the wind was blowing. Either way—you lose.

As for the menu, you could choose from Tibetan best-guesses at Western cuisine, some Nepali food, or—Tibetan food. As for the Western cuisine, you really had to guess when trying to recognize some of it. Their idea of pizza was only vaguely reminiscent of the real thing: very thick and oily, and filled with a new set of spices. If you had much of this, you regretted it later. Spaghetti was essentially some kind of square noodles with a hint of tomato. None of these choices tasted very good, and, after a meal or two, it was hard to even look at the menu in good faith and find something on it that you had not already been fooled by. The gag reflex achieved a new meaning for me.

As for the Nepalese food, no problem: it was as advertised, but very, very spicy, in many cases. Unless you enjoy very hot (as in spicy) foods, that leaves Tibetan food. We ate momos (filled dough dumplings) until we could not eat them anymore. And the traditional Tibetan noodle and meat soup, thukpa, we ate without the meat, substituting cabbage or some greens for the beef. Sometimes this was OK, but in general I ended up eating some of the noodles and vegetables and leaving the broth, which often had a bad taste. In some small street

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shops, the thukpa broth was much worse—I won't elaborate.



Lots of Food, but Little We Can Eat

You cannot eat raw salads or vegetables unless they have been cooked to death, nor any fruit that you don't peel yourself, which means that the piles of grapes and other fruit at the farmer's markets were off limits—leaving eggs. We ate a lot of eggs in Tibet, something

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we don't usually eat much of. We ate them hard-boiled or in small omelets. As mentioned, Tibetans insist on putting sugar and milk into scrambled eggs, so these were soon ruled out and their concept of a fried egg is shoe leather.

Forget about toast or western-style sliced bread in general. As I explained earlier—it was the worst. Better were the small round Tibetan breads, a little larger than our English muffins but much heavier. These, on occasion, could be eaten, and were sometimes even good when hot and fresh; many times, though, the oils in them were so bad that they couldn't be eaten either, and often, after several bites, you would catch a taste of something not so good in the dough, and just give up. And, unless these were made for you by a friend, or came from a very good restaurant, once they were cold you might as well forget about eating them at all.

Drinks were interesting. You could not drink the water or use ice or have any drink that had water in it, for instance—most fresh juices. You had to drink boiled water or bottled 'mineral' water—which was a far cry from Perrier. Much of the bottled mineral water is treated with iodine to remove bacteria and that is just how it tastes. You can drink it, but you have to brace yourself to force a swallow, and each time your taste buds recognize the iodine in the water. Even boiled water can be problematic, because at the high altitudes of Tibet, not all bacteria are killed when the boiling point is reached—you need to drink water that has been boiled for 20 minutes! In

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Tibet, where fuel is at a premium, getting anyone to boil water that long is a problem. They will just say they did, and then serve up “under-boiled” hot water.



Food Vendors

So, one drinks the bottled water that can be purchased (sometimes by the case) or the boiled water served up in the huge thermos jugs which are often used in Asia. These thermos jugs are kind of cool. Standing about 2 feet tall, and maybe 8 inches in diameter, these huge jugs are everywhere. All of the hotels offer you a thermos jug full of boiled water, for your room, and the water is often still hot 24 hours later. You grow to like the comfort of that hot cup of water, maybe because there is little else you can drink.

Tsampa, the most popular food in Tibet, was actually quite good. It is a mixture of barley flour, yak butter, tea, and sometimes salt or sugar. All of this is placed in a small bowl, kneaded with the fingers into small dough-like

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pellets, and eaten with the fingers. I liked it when I ate it, but it is kind of tricky to make for oneself, and one might not always want others to make it for you, what with worries of dirty fingers in the dough. It got complicated.

We are vegetarians who eat seafood. Since there was no seafood in Tibet, at different points in our trip we would eat a small amount of meat: sometimes there was little else to eat, or it was already in the food, or it was offered to us by a special person, or we were just plain curious. Dried yak meat is a good example of just plain curious. I tried a piece, but it was kind of moldy—one taste of it was plenty. At His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche's monastery, we were served meat, and ate it, just as we would eat meat at a tsok, a feast offering. Looking back, I can see that our oftentimes refusal of meat in a country where there was little else was somewhat of a foolish gesture.

Bhadrapur and Bharitpur

Though we had arrived at the international airport in Kathmandu, we knew little about the adjacent domestic airport from which we were about to fly out of to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeastern Nepal and very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India, first to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, and then on to Sikkim, where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu centers. All five of our family members had elected to go. We arrived at the much smaller domestic airport and managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts and pile it near the small office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, with whom we had tickets.

For the umpteenth time, we confirmed our tickets, and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection. As usual, the guards demanded we open this or that bag for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what kind of plane we would be on, only I suspected (from the size of this airport) that it might not be a DC-10. We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was being boarded just to make sure it was not our flight and we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time for us to board, and we climbed into the small bus that would drive us out to where the plane was waiting. We kept going farther and farther out, until we were at the very edge of the airport, passing jets and larger transports and then pulling up in

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front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

The small hatchway of the plane had a three to four rung ladder hanging down, touching the runway. Climbing on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame seats. The single flight attendant offered us a tray with cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow. With the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in, and we took off at once. I could not see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour we prepared to land. I looked hard to see the airport, but could see very little. We dropped lower and lower. I still couldn't see a runway, only a grassy field, which, of course, turned out to be the runway. Bumpity bump, we came to a halt, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building with a bunch of people in front. Out we climbed.

It was very hot; as my family watched the growing pile of baggage being tossed from the back of the plane, I went to try and find a taxi to drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border-town of Karkavitta, about a half hour's drive away. I was hoping to find a driver who might also take us across the border and all the way to Mirik, in West Bengal. "How far to the border?" I asked one driver, just to confirm. "Which border?" he said. "Why the Indian border, of course." "It's a ten hour drive," he responded. Here was one confused taxi driver, I thought. "The border is no more than a half-hour from here..."

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“No.” he said, “The Indian border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here.”

I didn’t get it.

“This is Bhadrapur, isn’t it?” I ask.

“No, this is Bharitpur.”

It turns out Bharitpur is in Western Nepal, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction of where we had thought we were going. I began to get excited, and the airport attendant said, in his best Hindu-English accent, “Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane”—which had begun to taxi away—“I have the authority to stop the plane.” “Do stop it,” I stammered. “We have to go back to Kathmandu, right now!” So much for that idea, though, for the plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us (along with our baggage) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, near the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was! The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted ‘Bhadrapur’ as ‘Bharitpur’.

After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all of whom were trying to speak English—which they could not—we were finally helped by a Brahmin—often the only ones of the Nepalese who could truly speak English. There was very little we could do, he explained. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here?

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Well, I refused to accept that fate...spending a night in this little sweatbox of a town, completely screwing up our trip, and with people waiting for us to arrive later that day at the other end, eventually worrying about us...by God, I would rather spend the next ten hours driving to the Indian border, arriving late at night, but getting on with our journey. I set about hiring two cars (since my family, plus baggage, were too much for any one taxi) to drive us that great distance. We were driven to the local Royal Nepal Airlines office, a single room that was soon filled with onlookers ogling us.

We managed to find one middle-aged man (having somewhat of a wreck of a taxi) who was willing to take us, and, after a while, a young Nepalese driver popped up with a very tiny, but newer, vehicle (he was the only one of the two who claimed to know English, which, it turned out, he also did not). We were determined to go, if only to get out of where we were. I explained to both drivers what we were doing, and that, at all times, we must keep each car in view of the other. We must always stay together. Yes, yes, they agreed. As we started out, the older driver had to stop at his house to get his license and a few other things. We waited out front. My wife, my young son, and myself had gotten into the larger, older car, while my two daughters, May and Michael Anne, had went in the smaller car with the young driver. Both cars were jammed with our luggage.

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Roads in Nepal

As we waited for the older driver, the younger of the drivers kept motioning to me from his car to take the wheel of the car I was in, and just take off, leaving the older man behind. Funny guy, I thought. Then, as the older driver came out with his license, the younger driver started right off, moving toward the nearest main drag. We followed as soon as we could close the doors and get moving; and yet, when we reached the main street, there was no sign of the car with the girls. Looking to the right and to the left, we saw nothing. He had vanished, and, with him, my two daughters, aged 15 and 21—just gone.

Well, we would have to catch up. Our driver took off in the correct direction, but we did not manage to catch sight of the other car, even after several miles. "But I told him to stay in lock-step with us," I stammered to the older driver, who understood not one word. All he did

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was throw his hands up in a gesture of futility and say “young driver.” After one or two miles, I was still hopeful, but after ten and fifteen miles, at quite a fast pace, I began to lose hope. Around this time, our driver began to swing into various filling stations and stores, asking if they had seen the other car. Nothing was forthcoming. I was getting quite upset at this point, and began to be more vocal.

At some point, our driver just turned around and we began heading back to the town of Bharitpur, and to the Royal Airline Office. After what seemed an eternity, we arrived at the office and I rushed in and began to explain to the agent there what had happened. My wife wanted to contact the police at once, but the agent didn't really want to do that. He kept saying we should get back on the road and keep driving, and, if after one hour of driving, we did not find the girls, then we should drive back to his office here (another hour) and THEN he would go with us to the police. My wife was having none of this, she insisted we go to the police NOW!—which we did. Time kept slipping by, with well over an hour and a quarter having passed since we last saw the girls.

The police just went round and round, up and down the line of authority, to no real effect. We probably wasted a good 45 minutes in that office before they once again insisted we drive that one hour west along the road to the next town, and, if we did not find them, then we were to call them from that town and they would institute a major search. In the

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meantime, they would call on ahead to the next town with the word. This was not really what we wanted, but we had little choice. We headed back over the same road we had just traveled, covering the same ground for the third time, in what seemed like a futile gesture.



Houses on the Edge of the Jungle

On and on the road went, through incredible scenery—tall grasses along a large river, etc. Still, we did not come to the town. And after more than an hour, we were still driving, looking in every filling station, every store—and there was nothing but stores along these Nepalese roads. I was sick with worry at this point, running any number of horrible scenarios through my head. Then, some 54 miles down the road—there, by the side of the road, was the car, and the young driver—and our girls!—all alive and well.

We were so relieved, but I was really pissed at the driver. The girls were worried too, and did

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not want to ride with the young man any farther. Nothing much had happened. He had made eyes at them, and otherwise tried to impress them. Of course, there was also the fact that he had paid no attention to our instructions. I spoke strongly to him. We decided that the possibility of getting this combination of cars, people, and drivers all of the way across Nepal was unconceivable—we would not try to. We gave up and drove back down that same damn road for the fourth time, this time all the way back to Bharitpur, where we would just have to hole up for the night. Our trip had ground to a halt. Seldom in my life has something stopped me so cold—I really understood, in this case, the word ‘frustrated’.

Back at the Royal Nepal Airline office, I fumed and spouted, refusing to pay the young driver much of anything. Then I arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town—which everyone warned was *way too expensive*. It was called the Safari Hotel, and rooms there were up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me. We packed up all our gear, and, along with our girls, headed for the Safari.

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Elephant Crossing Stream into Jungle

Well, the Safari turned out to be a huge resort, with a pool, a vast dining room—the works. After weeks of marginal hotels, we all hopped into the pool and cooled off. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate—just plain hot. The entranceways, and even some of the rooms, had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch catching insects. As we (half starved) waited for dinner to be served—at what seemed to be a very late time, 7:30 PM—we discovered that what the Safari was really all about was the taking of trips (safaris) into the nearby jungle while straddled atop elephants. Since we had nothing better to do but wait for the next day's plane, we resolved to set off into the jungle the following morning—on elephants! We would start for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-

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pilgrimage act, but it seemed like the right thing to do.



Entering the Jungle

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn, there we were, hurtling down the back roads in an open jeep, heading toward the jungle. We passed numerous grass houses and shacks, with the people and animals all around them starting their day; everywhere along the road were flowers and plants, the dawn light illuminating their blossoms. We arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a large river, on the other side of which was the jungle. We could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge. After being offered tea, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in and allowed us to climb into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their

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backs. It was four people to an elephant, plus the elephant driver way up front.



We See the Rhinoceros Family

The elephants walked right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream. The river was maybe a quarter of a mile wide. As the current got stronger, the elephants turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to sidestep toward the distant shore—this was a little scary! Gradually, however, we crossed the expanse of the river and climbed up the far shore, moving into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant, because the grass we walked through (called, oddly enough, ‘elephant grass’) was at least a good 5-6 feet high—and there were tigers in this jungle.

The short of it was that we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience! Riding high up on the elephants, we walked right into a

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group of three rhinos—a mom, a pop, and a 3-year old baby (not so much a baby anymore). There they were, just that close. And, as it was, the elephants would leave the trails to crash on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet. As they made their own trails, insects and leaves rained down on us from the foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle they were not sure of. The steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded and, after crossing a stream, the elephants often had to get down on their knees to climb up the other side. I must say, this was an experience I would not soon forget. I sure got close enough to a real jungle; on the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeballing us as we crossed the river—not a good place for swimming!



Elephant Going Where No Trail Exists

An Adventure

After eating breakfast at a camp near the jungle's edge, and playing with giant six-inch millipedes that crawled all over our hands and arms, we were back at the hotel by 10:00 AM. We grabbed our bags and made for airport, there to stand in the heat. The sun was fierce, and I was quickly soaked with sweat, which, as it dried later, actually left a salt residue. At last an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway so that the plane could land. As the siren went off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo back from the landing strip. The plane was able to land, and we climbed aboard, stuffing cotton in our ears. We were on our way, back to Kathmandu to catch the correct plane—the one to Bhadrapur not to Bharitpur! After this experience, though, our two girls elected not to go to India; they wanted to spend the coming week in Kathmandu instead, just doing whatever they felt like. We really couldn't blame them, and although we hated to be separated, we said goodbye to them at the airport.

Back at Kathmandu, a dozen airline officials in three different offices spent two hours running around correcting their original mistake and issuing us new tickets. There we sat—and waited—until we could finally climb aboard another cotton-in-your-ear propeller plane, this time one taking us, hopefully, on to Bhadrapur.

Bhadrapur and Mirik

(Bokar Ngedhon Chokhor Ling)

This time the tiny plane did seem to be headed in the right direction, for we watched the mountains of Nepal align themselves on our left and the wide low plain of India open out on our right. We landed in another grassy field, at another miniscule airport: my wife, my son, my self, and our pile of gear. As before, I set out to find a taxi to take us to the border. As it turned out, there was really only one taxi here, a sturdy jeep-like land cruiser. And, in what turned out to be one of our luckier moments, the driver would take us not only to the border but all the way to Mirik, high in the mountains of West Bengal. This was the good news. The bad news was that he did not speak English, but, at that point, what the hell.

The important thing was that we had been repeatedly warned that the area in India just beyond the border town of Karkavitta was very dangerous, and had to be negotiated with care. It was best to drive right through without stopping. We were told that cars had recently been stopped there, and, in the past, people had even been killed. So now we could only hope that our new driver was not in cahoots with any bad persons, ready to turn us fat-cat westerners over to a band of thieves. Such were the thoughts of us crazy Americans. To aid to our paranoia, just as we began to set off for the border, another man jumped into our jeep uninvited. This kind of thing is common in Nepal and India, where everyone wants to get

Bhadrapur and Mirik

on board and hitch a ride on any moving vehicle. Our driver calmed us, explaining that this person was his friend and that he was only going to the border. This new person spoke some English and explained to us that he was a travel agent. He proceeded to scare us pretty good about the dangers of the border town of Karkavitta and of the area just beyond the customs checkpoints.



Nepal Countryside

And so we drove toward the border on what was called, according to our driver, a ‘national highway’—a road as wide as your average driveway, being stopped every so often by groups of men who demanded one or another kind of road tax. They would lower huge poles to block the road and then demand money. One of the causes they were demanding donations for was some religious celebration they were preparing for. Our driver handled this in various ways, often promising to pay on the way back (which was, in fact, a week away),

Bhadrapur and Mirik

or, he would claim had no small bills, and because of this, he would have to catch them on the way back. Still, this was all very worrisome to us.

Soon we were at the rugged border town of Karkavitta, not a place I would want to spend the night in, as it looked pretty rough overall. We passed through the congested streets horns-a-blaring, and soon reached the border checkpoints between Nepal and India—all three of them, each having their meticulous forms to fill out. I have to laugh—here I am in the heat of the Karkavitta night, in a one-room office with no screens on the windows (malaria!), trying to fill out forms by candlelight—forms more detailed than any U.S. Customs form is—while the Indian in front of me is copying every detail into an ancient ledger while high above him on a shelf sit a stack of similar ledgers, moldering away. He takes every bit of our time he can, insisting on every detail. Sometimes I wonder if these people are simply curious and just take their time because they like to see and observe us westerners. Why else would it take so long? The Nepalese checkpoint was not so bad, but both (two!) of the Indian ones were excruciating. Yet, at long last we are through the border points, and soon moving out onto the hot night of the Indian plain.

Although our driver did not speak English, we both knew that the stretch of road just outside of Karkavitta and just into India was a dangerous one, one we must pass over at the highest speed possible—at whatever speed we

Bhadrapur and Mirik

could muster. This ended up being a much slower speed than we desired because of the many bumps that caused us to slow down to a crawl, or even to a dead stop. It was at these times we were most vulnerable to attack. And night was falling fast—the worst time to travel there—which made these areas even more disturbing. To make matters worse, the road was filled with animals and people, dark forms moving slowly in the twilight.

But we made it through the steamy lowlands and began moving into the hills. The road began to climb very sharply, and a cool breeze began to replace the hot breath of the Indian plains. The road here was less thronged with people, so driving became somewhat easier. We could relax. For hours we climbed higher and higher, now traveling on switchback mountain roads. There was an endless stream of packed buses. Some were traveling in the same direction as us, and we would follow behind them for awhile, while others were coming down from the mountain. Those coming down would end up in front of us, and we would have to stop and back up, letting them pass. We began to be surrounded by huge rain forests, hanging ferns and tea plantations. I breathed a sigh of relief to be going somewhere where the road was not packed with people. And there was the cool mountain air. We had been driving for hours.

Bhadrapur and Mirik



Bokar Rinpoche's Monastery in Mirik

We did not arrive at the town of Mirik, high on the mountains, until after 10:00 PM. It was not hard to get directions to Bokar Ngedhon Chokhor Ling, the monastery of Bokar, Rinpoche. We made the slow climb up to this monastery on a very narrow and even steeper road. Our friend, Ngodup Burkhar, who had been worrying about us for two days—since we had not arrived on time—had given up for the night and was already asleep. He soon appeared, bleary-eyed, and was very happy we were OK. In the cold of the mountain night, he found us a warm room with a Tibetan carpet and couches, and proceeded to prepare a fantastic meal of eggs, rice, too-sweet cookies, and a choice of hot water or tea. Food had never tasted better. After two days of pure adventure, it was good to be at a safe place with known friends. We were soon bedded down at a local hotel, where we were the only guests, and although it was fairly seedy and

Bhadrapur and Mirik

creepy, we got out our sleeping bags and fell fast asleep.



The Kalachakra Stupa

We spent the next day with our friend, Ngodup, at the monastery. Bokar Rinpoche is the meditation head of the entire Karma Kagyu lineage, as well as the chief retreat master. We visited the rare and beautiful Kalachakra stupa housed there, which contains a huge prayer

Bhadrapur and Mirik

wheel that rings a bell each time it goes around. The stupa and the surrounding wall paintings are exquisite, as is pretty much everything else about this monastery, a reflection of fine sensibilities of Bokar, Rinpoche. We were lucky enough to receive a long-life empowerment, given by Rinpoche to some of the older monks and lay people. We crowded into the small room where it was being given. It was very moving.



Bokar Rinpoche's Personal Shrine

Bhadrapur and Mirik

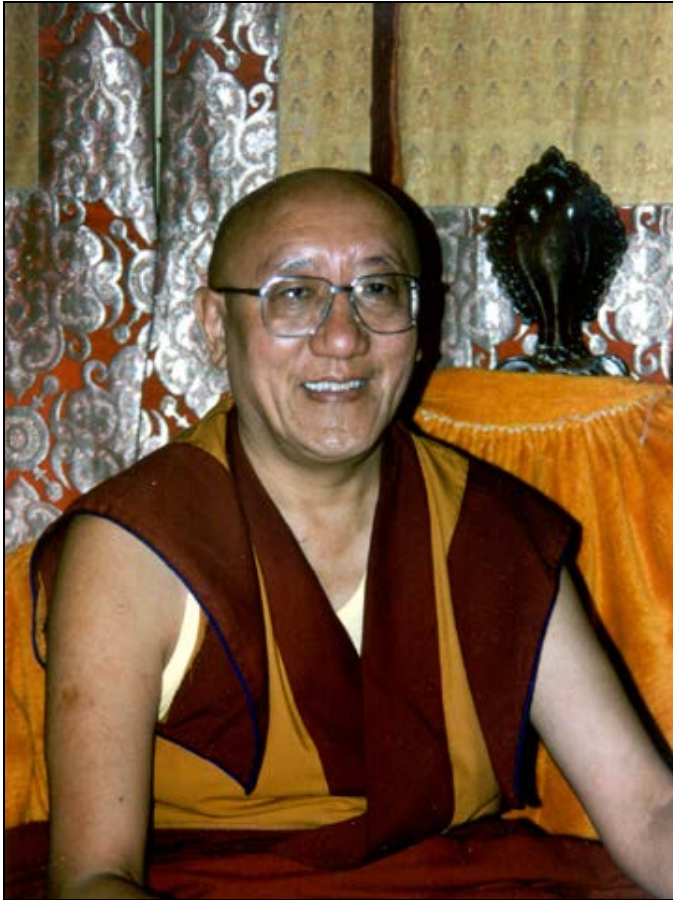
Later I was able to attend a long Amitabha puja (connected to death and dying), which lasted most of the afternoon. Present were most of the monks and Bokar, Rinpoche, himself. While I and the monks squirmed and sat through the long ritual, Bokar, Rinpoche, high on his raised seat, never moved a muscle. Here is a lama that reminds me of my own root lama, Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche. During the puja, there were several servings of tea, and also of tsok, the feast offering. At each break point, a flurry of the youngest monks dashed around serving everyone, filling cups to the brim with hot Tibetan salt-butter tea. Although my knees ached after a while, there was a sense of peace and beauty. My young son Michael Andrew could come and go—in and out of the shrine room—as he pleased, and he would sometimes sit with me for short periods. The large group of monks gathered here, in particular the young elementary-school-age monks, all watched little Michael like a hawk.

Bhadrapur and Mirik



Shrine Hall at Mirik

Watching over the monks, and sitting at the rear of the hall in a special seat, the monk in charge of discipline kept a close eye on these youngest monks. He was not above moving down the aisle quickly and reprimanding any who were foolish enough to indulge in horseplay—finally evicting one of the worst offenders. Later, he went down the whole line of monks, giving a small sum of money to each—money that had been donated by patrons to have this particular ritual performed. He also gave a tiny sum of money to each of the child monks.



Very Venerable Bokar Rinpoche

Later, a personal interview with Rinpoche impressed upon me further that here was an exceptional lama. His comments were direct and very much to the point. Basically, he told us that since we had been to see His Holiness and had obtained his blessing, and since we had been to many sacred places—both in Tibet and in Nepal—that we really had no choice now but to turn our minds to the dharma and to

Bhadrapur and Mirik

practice well—from here on. This was the kind of helpful comment we received. I was sad to leave Rinpoche, and I would look forward to seeing him again, whenever possible. When we left, about 20 monks, who were about to go into 3-year retreat, had just arrived from Pullahari, Jamgon Rinpoche's monastery in Kathmandu. They had come to take a series of empowerments; empowerments that would help prepare them for the retreat. The whole process would take 2 to 3 weeks to complete.

My old friend, Ngodrup, who lives quite a Spartan existence in order to be near Bokar, Rinpoche, decided he would take time from his work as Rinpoche's English translator to go with us for 6-7 days. He knew that, with him along, our way would be eased, and neither would he then have to worry about something happening to us. There is no way I can thank him for this kind of sacrifice—this gift of his self and time—not to mention that he is one of the most fun people to be with I have ever known! So, off we went on the mountain roads to Sikkim, made ever so much safer for us because our long-time friend was along—Ngodrup, of the KTD Monastery in New York, and former translator (12 years) for my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

Ralang and Gyaltsap, Rinpoche

From Mirik, we headed out of West Bengal, India, for Sikkim, but we never really went down to the lowlands again; instead, we clung along the mountain roads, going from village to

Ralang

town, and onward. We were heading for the Sikkim border, and then on to Ralang and the monastery of His Eminence Gyaltsap, Rinpoche, one of the principle regents of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. We drove through vast mountains of tea gardens and tea plantations. It was misty-mountain driving in fog and through clouds. There was a vast rain forest... insects singing, ferns growing... wet, wet...and ever green. This was the tail end of the monsoon season and the rains were beginning to diminish, but for us, the roads got worse, with landslides and sections of the road missing. Local road crews, with shovels and picks, were everywhere, trying to keep up with the sliding mud. As we traveled the final stretch to the monastery, such a large section of road had slid away that we had to creep, with breath held, over what of the road remained, clinging to the cliff-side in our jeep, with one set of wheels edging over the space left where the road was missing—I didn't much care for that.



H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche's New Monastery

Gyaltsap, Rinpoche's new monastery was magnificent and huge. Almost brand new, it stands out in the mountains of Sikkim in the middle of a large area of rain forest. Huge beetles and moths are everywhere. Thanks to Ngodrup and our connections with Khenpo, Rinpoche, we were treated like old friends—given the best of rooms and fed often and well. Gyaltsap Rinpoche's personal attendant even ate with us, and then showed us around the monastery complex. Aside from the main shrine hall, where we were able to practice, we also saw the special shrine where His Eminence does the red-crown ceremony, plus the exquisite apartment they built for His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, for whenever he may happen to visit.



Unfinished Mahakala Statue

What a great spirit was here, everything new and the energy level high. The goma and the additional shrines were all very fine, and we even got a chance to see the dharmapala shrine, which was not yet completed. For this shrine they had brought in a master sculptor, and he had lived there for an extended period of time, creating the most beautiful Mahakala statue I have ever seen. About 6-7 feet tall, it

Ralang

was hand-fashioned from clay and had yet to be painted. As you can see from the pictures, it is exquisite and complete to the last detail. This was one of about ten different statues that this craftsman had sculpted. I had never seen anything better. They were all awesome.

That first afternoon, we had a brief interview with Gyaltsap, Rinpoche, during which I requested from him a Vajrapani empowerment, one of my main practices. I had written to Rinpoche over the years, inviting him to visit our center, and had always dreamed of receiving this empowerment from His Eminence, since he is the emanation of Vajrapani in our lineage. And, even though his schedule was very tight, he agreed to give it that next morning. In his private quarter, my family and I received the Vajrapani empowerment—from Gyaltsap, Rinpoche himself.



H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche and Family

Here is a rinpoche who is more of a yogi than the average lama in our lineage, spending most of his time in practice and in semi-retreat. Because of the various problems within the lineage, he has been the main one to watch over Rumtek monastery all these years. Not given much to small talk or superficial gestures (he is not much on smiles), Gyaltsap Rinpoche just stares at you straight on. There he is. Not much given to cosmetic smiles myself, I felt, in his presence, as if I had come home, safe under the wings of a mother hen. I really identified with Gyaltsap, Rinpoche.

Ralang



His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche

Our short stay at Ralung was, for some reason, very full of meaningful events, both large and small, sequenced back to back; what's more, the food was great—or tasted great to us! The giant beetles and moths, and the closeness of the rain forest, lent an almost unworldly (at least for us Midwesterners) feel to the visit. The place was charged, and we were up to it. The

Ralang

memory, even today, remains clear and present—a special time.

Rumtek Monastery

From Ralang, we headed on across the mountains (and valleys) of Sikkim, to Rumtek Monastery, the one-time home of Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, and the seat of our lineage until the discovery of the 17th Karmapa and his enthronement at Tsurphu Monastery, in Tibet. This was another long and perilous mountain passage, complete with oncoming trucks, sheer drops, landslides and their effects to negotiate—I will spare you the grisly details.



Michael & Ngodup at Rumtek Monastery

Rumtek Monastery, built by the 16th Karmapa, was the seat of His Holiness until his death in 1981. Now that the new Karmapa is in his ancestral home at Tsurphu, Tibet, and not likely to reside in his monastery here in Sikkim, Rumtek is going through, by necessity,

Rumtek Monastery

somewhat of an adjustment period. And what with most of the rinpoches who used to reside at Rumtek working elsewhere around the world, in their own monasteries and with their own activities, this also changes the picture. It was great to visit the home of Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa.



Rumtek Kitchen

We stayed in a lovely house next to Rumtek, one used by Ponlop, Rinpoche when he is at Rumtek. He was kind enough to let us use it. From its windows we could look out over the valley and see the city of Gangtok on the distant mountainside. We toured the monastery and the various shrine rooms, including the large stupa where the relics of Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, are interred. We also visited Shri Nalanda Institute, the main school at Rumtek. I believe Rumtek is a familiar spot to all of us in the lineage, if only from photos, and

Rumtek Monastery

also because of that great film, “The Lion’s Roar.”



Strange Smoke Apparition at Rumtek

Rumtek to Darjeeling

The ride from Rumtek to Darjeeling was remarkable in its difficulty. Taking the back way, traveling on a driveway-like ribbon of a road that went almost straight up, we drove hour after hour, all on switchback curves. At one point, one of the curves was 360-degrees and crossed over a semi-circular bridge. This trip was the only time during our week-long journey in the mountains that the jeep overheated; we had to stop and just let the car rest as we looked out over the endless tea plantations to the valley far below. A misty rain was falling. This tiny road was also very dangerous because there was even less than the usual room to maneuver, and the road was often covered by mist and drive-through

Rumtek Monastery

clouds. You just had to drive through the mist and clouds, not able to see anything of what was coming at you. It was either do this or just sit there. And it was all about curves. It was a full day's trek, and we were exhausted when we reached Darjeeling on our way back toward Mirik. Also, by this time our son Michael Andrew was pretty sick, throwing up and the like. He always got this way when he became overtired and stressed.

Rumtek Monastery



Ngodup Tsering Burkhar and Michael

Darjeeling is quite a large town, perched some 8000 feet in the air on the side of a mountain. Ngodup pointed out hotel after hotel, many of which were new to him. In the end, we decided to splurge and stay at the legendary Windemere Hotel high up on Observatory Hill. The Windemere harkens back to the time when India was ruled by the British. It is a kind of Victorian mansion, complete with a series of

Rumtek Monastery

small parlors and music rooms, each with their own fireplace around which the guests gather in the late afternoons and evenings. Tea and crumpets are served at 4:15 sharp each afternoon.

The service was from another era as well, and included all kinds of maidservants and menservants, many of whom were wearing the classic Indian turban. Another example of old tradition was the meals, included in the price of the room and served precisely at specific times. When you came down to dinner you would find a personal table laid out just for your group, and each table had its own turban-wearing server, not to mention other servants standing by. Unlike most restaurants, meals proceeded at your own pace, with each dish being brought to your table as needed and your portion being served out from a platter. You could have as much as you wanted.



Darjeeling

When you finished one portion, you could have more, or, immediately move on to the next course. And the food was just excellent. There was never any waiting. I did not care one way or the other about being served, but I did appreciate the attention that had obviously been given to the taste and quality of the food being served us. I am sure it was an imitation of a bygone era I knew nothing about, but it was good eating and kind of fun. Dinner was accompanied by some very-old musical standbys played by an Indian pianist seated at the back of the room.

Each of the personal rooms had a working pull-chain toilet and, best of all, a deep-dish bathtub on little lion's feet. The water was hot and in abundance, so everyone took a bath, something we had not been able to do in a long time. On the down side, the coal fumes from the various fireplaces leaked into the rooms and tended to be very bad. The whole thing was just a little much, and we ended up counting the time until we could leave. We were waiting for Ngodup, who had gone on ahead to Mirik, while we waited—because Michael Andrew was too sick to travel. Ngodup would be returning soon, and he would then accompany us on the next leg of our journey. Darjeeling is reputed to have spectacular views of the Himalayas, but the mist never parted long enough for us to see much of anything at all, much less something as far away as the mountains.

Rumtek Monastery



Hindu Practitioner

We waited, and between meals, wandered through the many empty sitting rooms of the Windemere, this being their off season. We climbed Observatory hill and watched the families of monkeys that lived around the various Hindu and Buddhist shrines there. These same monkeys raced around on the copper roofs above our room, occasionally peering over the roof edge at us. We idled about, hoping Ngodrup was safe and would return soon. We even set a place for him at lunch and, sure enough, he showed up, and we had our final fancy meal.

Kalu Rinpoche

We made one more foray while in West Bengal, before we took the plunge off the

Rumtek Monastery

mountain and headed for the hot Indian plains again. This was a short journey to Sonada, the previous home of the Kalu Rinpoche, perhaps the most famous modern Tibetan yogi. The journey to Sonada, although not far, took quite some time due to the heavy traffic and the lack of wide thoroughfares. In fact, the traffic was incredible. The road was not-quite two lanes and was packed with cars and trucks, all moving at a snail's pace.



Kalu Rinpoche's Main Shrine Room

I was sure that some accident must have taken place, but it became clear that this was just the way it was—everyday. Vehicles, large and small, inching forward, and like interlocking parts in a Chinese puzzle, one car giving way, temporarily, to another. This of itself was not great, but what really upped the ante were the clouds of black smoke that belched from every car and truck and then hung in the air, trapped in the valley that was formed by the buildings

Rumtek Monastery

on both sides. There was nothing to do about it except wait, creep forward, and meanwhile try to hold your breath.

At last we reached the outskirts of Darjeeling, and picked up a little speed on this short journey to Sonada. The monastery, which had been the home of Kalu, Rinpoche in his later years, was right along the highway we were traveling on. Several remarkable stupas appeared, enclosed by long sloping walls. Kalu Rinpoche was one lama I had always wanted to meet but somehow it had never happened, and then, before I knew it, he had left this world and was gone. This was his home, and here his body had been entombed in a special stupa constructed inside of his gompa (shrine hall).

And his gompa was different from almost all of the shrine rooms we had visited thus far. Instead of being very ornate and elaborate, it was very simple. The simple wooden flooring made the building seem more like a meeting hall or even a dance hall than a shrine room. Ngodrup explained that Kalu Rinpoche was never much into elaboration, and yet all the other lamas would come here, and the most incredible empowerments and ceremonies had taken place here.



Kalu Rinpoche Enshrined in His Stupa

And there was the stupa. Stupas are rectangular-shaped affairs measuring anywhere from a few inches to 100 feet or more in height, and most have a small window fairly high up, in which a small stature of the Buddha is displayed; however, in this stupa, peering out of the upper window was none other than the body of Kalu Rinpoche himself.

Rumtek Monastery

Somehow, he had been embalmed and his face gold plated, and his body entombed right in the stupa itself, with his head and face looking right out the window at you. It was unnerving. It was so lifelike, yet so strange too. We all made our prayers, took our time, and paid our respects to one of the Kagyu lineage's greatest saints.

After Sonada, it was all downhill—so to speak and in fact—as from the Darjeeling area we now began the 8,000 foot descent to the hot dusty plains of India. It was a comforting experience to finally reach flat land again after so many days of clinging to mountain roads. You could finally let your peripheral vision relax again.

Driving in the 3rd World

And I should mention what it is really like driving and riding on the roads of Nepal. First of all, the Nepalese roads (except perhaps in downtown KTM) are just too small. Most of them are about the size of an average driveway in the U.S., black-topped, and with no shoulders. On these small roads, you have full 2-way traffic, often at high speeds. But the rules for traffic are quite different than in the West. Let's start with the car horn.

In America, the horn is seldom used. When it is used, it is used only as a last resort—as a danger call or a sign of irritation. Not so in Nepal and India; here, the horn is used constantly. In a very real sense, just as we use the steering wheel to drive, the Nepalese use the horn to steer with or to guide the flow of traffic with. It is used all the time, and not just for warnings, but also to acknowledge and thank with; either way, hearing it so constantly is disturbing to those of us trained to recognize it mostly as a last-ditch emergency measure.

Third World Driving



Roads Lined with Shops

Moving right along, let's discuss the Nepalese method of playing chicken—of over-steering to try and force the oncoming vehicle to give way and offer you the most room possible, even if you don't need that much room. First, the larger vehicle will not give way, even if this means a head-on crash. If you are driving a big truck, it is assumed that all of the smaller vehicles will get out of your way. It is not the case that both vehicles will give way equally. Not the case at all. The smaller weaker vehicle gets out of the way of the larger one. And, since the size of the roads are the size of a driveway, this usually means that the smaller vehicle must get off the road—or end up half on the road and half off—every time a larger vehicle comes along, often every few hundred yards or so.

Third World Driving

Also, you might think that in these third-world countries there is less congestion. Wrong. There is more congestion, and each driver makes it a point to stray as far as possible over the middle line so as not to have to give up as much road room when the actual moment of passing occurs; this, coupled with the fact that in most of these countries they drive on the opposite side of the road than is done in America, gives a passenger the recipe for a headache. There you are (in the passenger seat) on the wrong side of the road, in what would be the driver's seat in America. In other words, you are hurtling toward oncoming traffic but you have no way to steer the vehicle. It is like an amusement park-ride gone mad. In all the weeks I was in these countries I never managed to fall asleep while traveling the roads, no matter how long the ride was (sometimes 6-7 hours) or how tired I was. I was bolt awake in the passenger's seat, staring at what was about to happen—which brings me to the most important fact about driving in the 3rd world: the fact of 'things' in the road!

In America, with the exception of vehicles, our roads are almost always empty. It has never occurred to us that there would be any other way. In the 3rd world, the roads are filled with people, animals, and an endless number of smaller vehicles (bikes, rickshaws, carts, motorcycles, etc.). It is this fact which makes driving so difficult, and what made sleep for me so impossible. It is a remarkable fact that the main congregation point for the entire community—animals and people—is the road.

Third World Driving

There is no doubt about it: in the 3rd world, they do it in the road.



Typical Nepal Highway

There is no way I could have anticipated this fact: the roads are filled with activity, day and night. Every dog sleeps in the road, and not just on the side of the road, but right in the very middle. Mothers prop their babies—sit them on the edge of the black top—and leave them there. Kids are sitting all over the road. Animals sleep on the road. And that is just the sitting and lying down population.

A lot more activity is with the walkers on the road. Groups of people and single persons walk in the middle and at the edge of the road constantly, both day and night. People carrying things, often large things, on their heads or backs, people weighed down with huge packs—bales of straw, bricks, raw vegetation. Cows, which are held sacred in this area, stand

Third World Driving

crosswise in the road at all angles. They do not move at all, or move in ways which cannot always be anticipated. If you kill a cow on a road in Nepal, it warrants automatic life imprisonment. Beasts of burden, like the ubiquitous water buffalo, are also everywhere along the road, walking, being walked, being driven singly and in large groups, walking tandem, piled high with burdens—whatever, and also the various herds of sheep and goats, comingled or separate, with or without a master. And we are just getting to vehicles.



The Big Bully “Circus” Trucks

There are bicycles galore, and 3-wheelers carrying loads; rickshaws and motor scooters; 3-wheeled-motorscooter cabs that wrap their passengers in darkness; motorcycles; tiny cars; micro vans that drive like mad; larger cars, jeeps, land cruisers and land rovers; larger vans and small busses—filled to overflowing (every time) with people; and, at

Third World Driving

the top of the food chain are what we liked to call the circus trucks, which have to be seen to be believed. These are large Mack-truck sized vehicles that have a crown of lights and decorations above their cabs. Undoubtedly of Indian design, these gaudy things have just about every Hindu protector deity imaginable painted on their front—to protect their journey. They are huge and garish and they rule the road. And there are thousands of them. They are everywhere and they are dangerous. They assume you will be able to get off the road as they roar past. They never give an inch. Imagine a circus gone mad, hurtling along the highway, and passing you all day and all night.

The Mountain Roads

So far, I have been describing road life on the Indian plain and on the roads in the valleys of Nepal; I must say something also, though, about what it is like to drive on the ribbon-like switch back mountain roads, which are as common. There is no experience like this in America. First, a little background:

Third World Driving



The Road is “The Place”

During my little bit of geographical training, and when reading about far-away places like Darjeeling, I (not knowing) always assumed these were famous places you could easily get to, just as you can get to Chicago or Cleveland. I mean, you drive down the road and you get to them, right? Wrong. You travel to them. You don't just 'get' to a place like Darjeeling, although you may get there, if you are lucky, and I mean lucky; for there is no easy way to get to some of these places—for instance, to Darjeeling.

Darjeeling, a city of less than 100,000, is some 7,000 feet above the Indian plain, perched atop a mountain. The few roads to Darjeeling are tiny ribbons of blacktop often only one-car wide that, switching back and forth, give you painfully slow access to the city. The fact that you have frequent areas where there is a sheer drop-off of who-knows-how-many-hundreds-of-

Third World Driving

feet, we will ignore for now. The fact that the turns and the switchbacks mean every corner is a blind curve is more serious. One should take note. Couple this with the fact that the so-called circus trucks roar up and down these asphalt driveways—you begin to see the problem. And last, add the propensity for humans and animals to congregate in the middle of the road—now, you have the general picture.



Ngopdup and Michael Andrew in Mountains

The suggested method for dealing with all this is to use your horn at every curve. You find signs to this effect at each turn in the road. In equal abundance along the road are signs in English, each carrying some inane aphorism, such as, “If you are slow to drive, you may arrive alive.” Often these aphorisms are multi-lined, requiring you to take your eyes off the road in front of you in order to try to read them. There are hundreds (thousands) of these

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unsolicited aphorisms, most of which could have been written by a school child or by the philosophically impaired.

Now, combine all of these elements together and you have a mountain ride that rivals any theme park roller-coaster ride in the world. A 10-kilometer stretch of road can take well over an hour to travel, and, if there are landslides, you can be delayed for days. Mind you now, I am not complaining, only explaining something I found to be rather amazing. Even the suggested 'honk at every turn' was not fail-safe, and many times we found our vehicle screeching to a halt just inches away from another vehicle coming around the curve from the other direction. In a word, there is no way that two vehicles can get around most curves without one giving way to the other. And giving way means just that, backing a vehicle up (usually ours), along a cliff, however far enough to let the other (larger) vehicle take over most of the road and creep past.

On any of these trips there is endless stopping and backing up, enough to allow this or that big truck just inch by. Maybe I should repeat what I just wrote. Hundreds of times, in the course of a day, you have to stop dead in your tracks and back up the road to let an oncoming truck get through. It happens all day long, and each occasion involves vehicles passing within inches. Depth perception is a crucial requirement for this kind of driving, not to mention a good set of nerves. Even our intrepid guide, who lives on these mountains, told us he is amazed every time a successful

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road trip is completed. From a probability standpoint, it just seems unlikely that one could travel for three hours on such a road and not have an accident. I was grateful to sit in the back seat and leave that exciting passenger seat to someone else. Even from there though, I could never close my eyes, not even for an instant—this is telling you something important.

So my point is that there are places in the world, like Darjeeling, which are large enough to be recognized by name, but to which one cannot just ‘go’—one must *travel* to them.

Strike: Bhadrapur to Biratnagar

Coming back from India and about to enter enter Nepal, we found we had a problem. On the day we were to fly back to Kathmandu, from Bhadrapur, Nepal, another Nepalese nationwide strike day had been scheduled, this one to protest the advent of VAT taxation. In fact, this time the strike was scheduled for two consecutive days, and the first day was declared to be very serious. In order for our vehicle not to get stoned, we had to somehow out of India and into Nepal early enough in the morning so that the strikers were not yet up and about. OK.

We rose well before dawn, grabbed our baggage, and prepared to set off. Our hotel was locked up tighter than a drum, so we had to feel around in the dark for lights, wake the gatekeepers, etc. At any rate, by 5 AM we had left Silagree and were heading toward the Nepalese border. Even in the pre-dawn darkness there was heavy people-traffic on the

The Strike

road, probably because this day was some sort of Hindu holy day. Everywhere were small tent shrines with glaring lights, inside of which were brightly-painted statues, and outside of which loud music played. In many places along the road bare 4-foot florescent tubes were mounted upright and arranged on either side of a shrine, to create a funnel-like light effect into the statue. Perhaps as many as 10-12 tubes would be set up this way, producing an eerie and carnival-like effect. The sacred music boomed out of the darkness as we sped along. It was like a carnival, but a sacred one.

Soon we were once again in the dangerous area outside of Karkavitta as we headed toward the Indian-Nepalese border. At the border, the three official checkpoints were not yet open, and huge booms across the road blocked all traffic from passing through. In our hurry to avoid the strikers, we set about waking up the local officials, who were in no hurry to help us until we promised some 'bakshish', or bribe money. Even then, it was a slow go.

Finally the customs and immigration officials appeared and put us, slowly, through the long form-filling process while we eyed the clock and the coming of dawn. The arrival of dawn would mean the possibility of more danger for us once we were inside Nepal. There were three checkpoints, three sets of forms, and three waits. I left my family locked (like some folks lock dogs in a car when going into K-Mart) in the jeep in the darkness. Of course, the officials then had to have each member of

The Strike

my family come, personally, into the office and sign the forms, even my 11-year old son.

At last we were done. We crossed from Karkavitta into Nepal. Unfortunately, it was now daylight as we headed for the airport. Groups of Nepalese were gathered here and there. Some had rocks in their hands. But luck was with us, and we wheeled into the tiny airport and piled out. We were pleased with ourselves—that all had gone, thus far, so well, and that we were already at the airport. Now all we had to do was wait for the plane. Little did we know!

It was early and no one was around. Our conversation managed to wake a few of the people who had been sleeping at various places in the open building. Our driver had an animated dialogue with one these people and then turned to face us, a little wide-eyed. I thought he was telling me that the plane had been cancelled and would not be coming today. The man next to him nodded in agreement, and, in better English, said the airport had been closed due to water in the field serving as the runway. He was telling me that!

I was in shock, and refused to accept this information. They were happy to repeat it. It sounded no better the second time. My mind was racing. Let's see: The strike was on in Nepal, not just for today, but for tomorrow also. The plane we needed only came twice a week.

In other words, we were stuck hundreds of miles from Kathmandu with no plane and no

The Strike

way to travel to another airport. Worse, we had only two days to make connections for our plane reservations back to America. The start of a two-day strike meant we could not take the all-night bus ride through the mountains to Kathmandu, even if we wanted to. I was not a happy camper. My protestations soon produced an airline official on a motorcycle. He was a Brahmin who spoke English, and he assured me that we could stay here, locally, as long as we wanted, and we would be well treated. Not comforting.

“But I have no intention of staying here,” I protested. The official appealed to the airport manager, who just shook his head. He would allow no planes to land here today, and that was that. The airline official said he would appeal this decision, stating that ‘their’ planes could land in these conditions. Accompanied by another motorcyclist, he went out in the runway field and drove up and down. I was hopeful. But when they returned, they just shook their heads. No plane today, or even soon. He suggested we go to a local restaurant and wait, and he gestured toward a building that was little more than a hovel. “No!” I exclaimed.

By now we had quite a group of people gathered around enjoying the show, watching me freak out. The nearest city was Biratnagar, almost a 3-hour overland journey from where we now were, and there was the strike to consider. A call to the owner of the jeep we had been riding in and paying for, for the last week, brought only the response that he would

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not allow us to use his vehicle. There was too much danger of damage being done to it from the strikers. We were stuck.



Driver, Guard, and Michael Andrew

All of this was made worse by the fact that my son had been quite sick for the last few days, throwing up and not feeling well. He had lost some weight, and we needed to get him back to Kathmandu where there was food he would eat. Thoughts flooded through my mind: of us here for days trying to get out, missing our flights to the states, not to mention the fact we needed those last days in Kathmandu to finish up our trip—after all, we had not yet been to the great Swayambu stupa, etc., and so on.

I pleaded with different folks for help, and then asked if there was an ambulance we could hire to drive to Biratnagar. Surely people would not stone that! I pointed out that my son was sick—he hacked and coughed for them on cue. There was an off-duty policeman standing around: perhaps, I suggested, he could ride up

The Strike

front in the ambulance, and make us look official.

They all liked the ambulance idea and began to call around looking for one. We found one, but it would not be available until afternoon. "Better than nothing," was my response. Upon hearing of the advent of the ambulance, the owner of the jeep (who had refused us the use of it earlier in the day) came down to the airport and dickered with us. He was also a Brahmin, so we had a Brahmin war between the airline official—who was really trying to help us—and this man, who just did not like to see us spending money on an ambulance and putting him out of potential money. So we suggested that the policeman ride in his jeep, along with us, and a stiff fee would be given him, of course. He saw dollars then, and said "Yes." We were willing to chance it. This way, we could start at once. We made a deal to drive through the strike to Biratnagar, and all we could hope for was that there would be a plane leaving soon from the airport there.

After a stop to bless the jeep to protect it from harm, and after laying some garlands of flowers on the front bumper, we headed out—our uniformed policeman sitting up front—into the strike zone. The plan was to tell anyone who stopped us that we were headed to the hospital at Biratnagar and, at the last minute, we would head for the airport instead. My son, Michael Andrew, lay across our laps in the back and hacked and coughed whenever we were stopped. He looked the part. Skinny

The Strike

anyway, he had lost weight in Tibet and India. He did not look well.

And so began a nearly three-hour trip across Southern Nepal. We did stop at different checkpoints, and we also passed many groups of men with stones, but no stones were really thrown—although I did perhaps hear one hit the back of the jeep. Still, there was tension in the air as we drove along. Our policeman sat bolt upright and hung one arm out the window as if he could care less (acting as a policeman should) casually surveying the endless throngs of people along the road who were eyeballing him. The fact that the strike was on meant that the roads were empty of cars but were even more packed with people and animals.

The short of it is that we made it to the airport and through the armed guards who had congregated there. Once inside, we had the extreme good luck of catching a plane to Kathmandu, one that was leaving within the next 30 minutes. Now this was luck! We said goodbye to our driver and to the police guard, giving both of them some extra cash. We checked our pile of baggage and were ushered over to one of those small propeller planes. We were given cotton for our ears, candy for the swallowing, and soon, were on our way back to Kathmandu.

A funny thing happened during that flight. I am not a lucky person—in that I don't win raffles, contests at poker, etc.—and everyone who knows me will tell you that I don't like to fly. I normally don't even travel at all. And yet here I

The Strike

am, flying across Nepal in a prop-driven plane, with cotton in my ears. Then, the flight attendant decides to hold an in-flight drawing, based on one's seat number. They select my son, Michael Andrew, to pick the winning ticket. And, you guessed right—I won the contest! My reward? A free ticket on this same airline for any place in Nepal. Talk about irony. I had to laugh. But I gave the ticket to a friend. All I could think about was getting back to Kathmandu and seeing my daughters again.

Once we arrived, we paid through the nose for a taxi willing to brave the Kathmandu streets (because the strike was still on), but we were soon driven safely back to the Boudnath Stupa area and to the Happy Valley Hotel, where we were finally reunited with our two daughters. We were so glad to arrive! And everyone was very glad to see us also, for they had worried about us when the plane from Bhadrapur hadn't arrived. By mid-afternoon we were all sitting high on the terrace in the Stupa View restaurant, enjoying a quiet (and edible) vegetarian meal, while only hours before it had looked as if there was little hope of reaching Kathmandu for days. What a switch.

Pullahari

On another one of those infamous Nepali strike days (when no cars are allowed) we decided not to let this stop us from making our sacred rounds: we would just *walk* out of Kathmandu and up to Pullahari—His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul's monastery—high above the valley. And so we did, walking through the streets until

Pullahari

the houses began to subside and rice paddies and fields began to take their place. Then we began to climb. We had to pick our way around a group of water buffalo who blocked our path, but we managed to do this, and up the mountain we went.



Nepal Countryside from Pullahari

After about a two-hour climb, we reached Pullahari, built by the late Jamgon, Rinpoche, who was tragically killed in a car crash some years before. Among other things, we had come to visit his kudung, the large stupa in which his remains had been interred. And now, I must make a comment to those of you who are reading this and who are familiar with the Karma Kagyu Lineage and the work of His Eminence Jomgon Kongtul, Rinpoche.

Pullahari



Pullahari

I had received empowerments from Jamgon, Rinpoche, including the 10-day Kalachakra, and had even met with him personally on one occasion. As one of the four regents who looked after the affairs of the Karmapa between births, I knew that he was an important figure in our lineage, but I did not really know much about him. As I traveled to many Kagyu places on our trip, I became increasingly aware of how this lama had touched the lives and activities of so very many people. His handiwork was everywhere, particularly at Rumtek, and, of course, at Pullahari. Only during this trip did I realize what a huge loss his death was to the lineage.

Pullahari



The Grounds of Pullahari

Pullahari was an amazing place, much larger than I had expected. And this was not your typical Kathmandu monastery. The whole complex was spacious, modern, and everywhere neat and clean. Wherever you looked were flowerbeds and trees, walkways, staircases and patios. We were able to see the

Pullahari

many shrine and retreat areas that make up Pullahari, including the kudung of His Eminence, which is housed in a vast shrine room. This very large stupa contains the remains of His Eminence. It is surrounded on three sides by exquisite statues of the previous Jamgon tulkus and by other lineage figures as well. There is even a small wire that comes from inside the stupa (from the heart of His Eminence) to outside, connected to a tiny gold dorje. Pilgrims (like me) often place this dorje to their foreheads. This shrine is very special. We also visited the lay retreat center, which is almost like a resort hotel, having a restaurant on the lower floor and an outdoor patio—lovely. Pullahari, in its entirety, is something to be seen, a place you really must visit. And, I had a surprise while there.

We got to meet the abbot or khenpo—the retreat master, who was in the process of preparing to put about 20 monks into the traditional 3-year Buddhist retreat. As I came into the room, there he sat on a little bed-like couch in what was otherwise an almost empty room. I sat down on the floor before him. The retreat master smiled at me in a special way and said, “Michael, why don’t you come up here and sit next to me.” I was confused to be receiving such personal treatment (How did he know my name?) but I climbed up and sat next to him. And then, I began to get it. I knew this man!



Khenpo Lodro Namgyal

Sure enough, he had spent a number of months at our center (living next door to me!) some years ago, when he was then an acharya. But he had gone into 3-year retreat and had come out quite a different person. I had heard about him: about how well he had done in retreat and about how retreat had changed him. Now, here he was: Khenpo Lodro Namgyal. I was gassed. What a trip this

Pullahari

put me through! How inspiring to see someone you know take serious steps toward enlightenment, and now, to be at a point of really helping others in an important way. We had some good laughs at all this. It remains one of the most important memories of my trip—seeing this transformation, knowing such things are possible.

The Last Days

The Last Days

Our trip was winding down now for sure. It was hard, with so little time, to fully enjoy what remaining time we did have. Suddenly, we had a long list of places we just had to see, things we wanted to find, and people we ought to visit...and so on. For one, there were the thankas.



Giant Dorje (vajra) at Swayambu Stupa

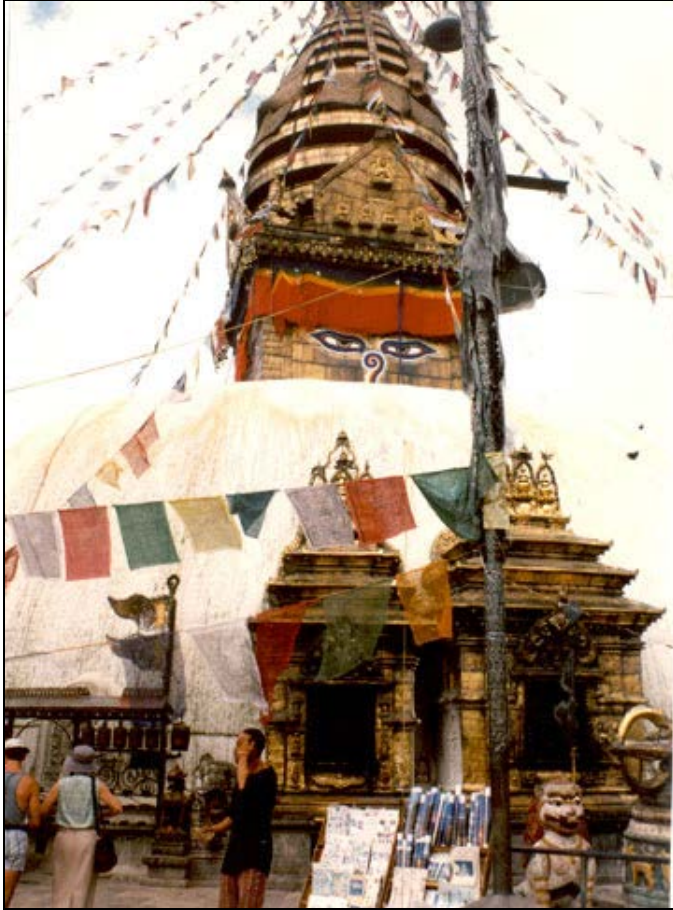
Thankas are lovely hand-painted Tibetan sacred scrolls that are often mounted in rich brocade. In Kathmandu, there are many thankas, but few really fine images. When we left on our trip to Sikkim and India, the young monk who would accompany us back to the states, and his friend, an artist and thanka painter, both promised to comb the Kathmandu area while we were gone, looking for some high quality thankas. Of course, we were very interested in what they had found, which turned out to be—not a lot.

The Last **Days**

They had looked for but not found any real quality thankas. We did trek to one small apartment, where a Kagyu thanka painter showed us a few thankas he had on hand. These were interesting, but not magical, at least not magical enough to inspire purchase. Well, that was that—or so I thought.

It so happened that a German guest, a comedy writer and a nice guy who was staying at the same hotel as us, told us of a thanka painter he had visited and from whom he had ordered at least one thanka. Amazingly enough, this thanka painter's home was only about two blocks from our hotel. Why not go and see?

The Last Days



The Great Swayambu Stupa

We did, and it turned out that this artist was very special. One example: at two of the major Kagyu monasteries in the Swayambu Stupa area, he had done all of the painting. His thankas were just superb, better than any I had seen so far in Kathmandu, or even previously, in the states. He was also very humble. We liked him, and it turned out that we spent the better part of the next day with him, touring the

The Last **Days**

Swayambu stupa, being shown his wall murals, and visiting various rinpoches. It was fun. We ended up purchasing three really fine thankas from him: Mahakala (Bernagchen), Green Tara, and Guru Rinpoche, all of which I am very grateful to own.

But I was not the only one on the hunt. My son, Michael Andrew, was after a statue of Manjushri, a deity with whom he had bonded during the trip, one who had echoes all the way back to his babyhood, where some of his first words were “dee dee,” the sound of Manjushri. All through Tibet he had taken great care to observe and often prostrate before Manjushri statues, to the amazement of us all. I had promised him that we would find a statue for him, one he could take back home for his personal shrine.



Dharma Goods Shops

At the time of my promise, though, we had not anticipated the Nepalese strike, and now we were down to our last day and could not use a

The Last **Days**

vehicle to travel to Patan, where the best statues were made. We were limited to the Bodha area, where, although there were also many small shops carrying statues, these statues were not always of the best kind and were often higher priced. Michael, although disappointed that we could not get to the major shops, set about investigating all of the many shops around us, one by one. It took hours, and he assessed every Manjushri statue, large and small. He finally settled on a very large (and very expensive) statue that was almost 2 feet tall. It was beautiful. It was available. We bought it, and it sits in Michael Andrew's personal shrine, in his bedroom, to this day.

In those last two days we did what we could, given we had no vehicle. We braved the strike at times, taking any cab who dared to accept fares—very high-priced fares—while trying to sort out the still unresolved airline ticket problems. Just for the readers' sake, Nepal Airlines treated us very badly: they refused to honor our tickets (ones that they themselves had booked) and then charged us all over again for this last part of the journey. No amount of appealing or discussion did any good. It was all about the money—ours. I cannot recommend this airline to anyone; unfortunately, they do have a virtual monopoly on the local market.

Boudha

Boudha

I want to write something about Boudha, which is the term for the whole area surrounding the Bodnath Stupa. This is the center of the Tibetan community in Kathmandu, and a haven, of course, for Buddhists. There must be dozens of monasteries close to the stupa and monks are everywhere.



The Great Boudha Stupa

The great stupa at Bodnath is one of the three major stupas in the Kathmandu Valley. The other two are: Swayambu and Namobuddha. The Boudha stupa, by far, has the most traffic of the group. This stupa is a huge dome that rises out of the city, visible for miles. A large spire marks its top, and Buddha eyes stare in all four directions. Around the circumference of the stupa is a circular walkway made of stone sections. It is here that thousands of Buddhists do what they call 'Khora,' or circumambulation,

Boudha

always in clock-wise motion. From the crack of dawn until the last of twilight, hundreds of thousands of devout Buddhists, many of them pilgrims, are doing Khora there, and at a fast pace. The most activity takes place at dawn and at dusk.

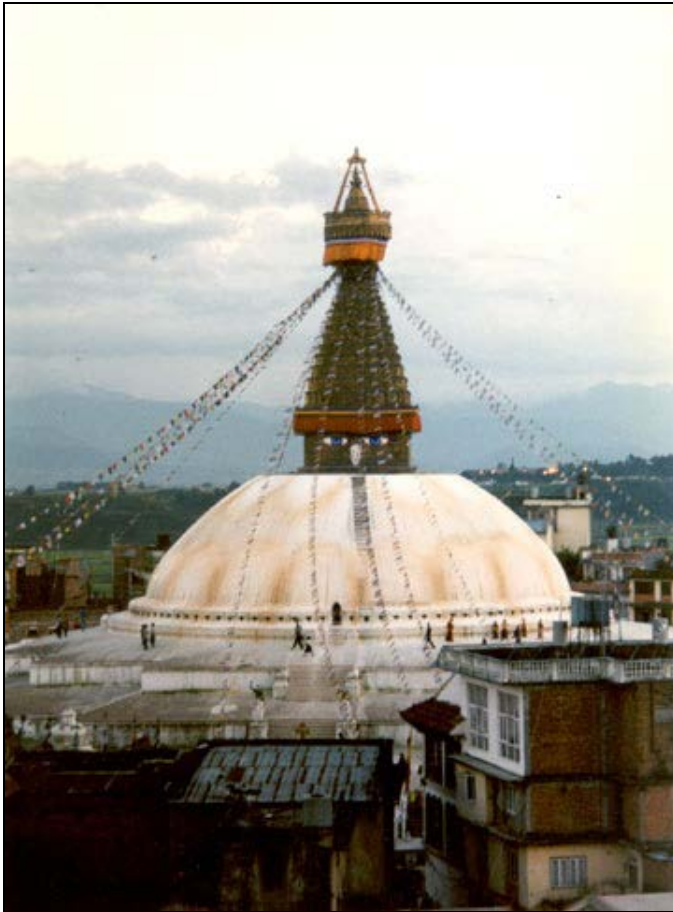
With their 108-bead malas (rosaries) clasped in their left hands and hanging down below their waists, the pilgrims and monks circumambulate the great stupa, saying mantras out loud. So fast do they walk that I had to time my jump onto the walkway to walk with them. Monks and lay persons all walk together. And dogs; everywhere around the stupa are scruffy-looking dogs: dogs sleeping, scratching, walking, and fighting—but mostly sleeping. And, of course, the random cow can be found at the stupa also. So there are always the cow and dog droppings to watch your step with.

What struck me first off about Boudha (and Kathmandu in general) is how run-down and dirty everything is. There doesn't appear to be any kind of sanitation department; every type of garbage and refuse is just sort of shoved into the streets and alleys, where it remains, ripens, and eventually decays. They don't appear to have trash receptacles, so the whole city has to serve as one extended dump.

What I am saying is immediately apparent the moment you step out onto a street (there being few sidewalks). You have to watch where you step at all times because every possible kind of mess is right there, in your way. I realize that I am not being entirely fair, because I have seen

Boudha

many persons with short broom-like whisks sweeping their portion of the sidewalk, or the space in front of their stores; but still, I had the impression that the amount of refuse, the extent of this problem I am describing, was way beyond control. It had become a way of life for them, but one totally foreign to most of us in the West. It does take some getting used to.



The Boudha Stupa

And then there were the beggars—some were lepers and the crippled, but mostly they were children, and mothers with children.

Everywhere there were people begging. The severely crippled are just there, with their hands out, or bowing before you with no expectations. To these, I always tried to give to at once, or after several times around the stupa—after I could sort them out from the next level of beggars, the proactive ones. The proactive ones also had some deformity or disease, but they were more methodical. Their methods always involved making eye and verbal contact with you. They made it hard for you to ignore them. I would vacillate on giving to them. Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't.

Next were those who really did not have all that much wrong with them and who were always making some kind of personal contact with whomever they were begging from. You could see them getting going in the morning—like going to work. These I did my very best to avoid. Next were the mothers with children. This was a tough one. You wanted to give to them, but when you did, there were ten more at your side, each a mother with a child. They worked in teams, or somehow communicated to each other when they received money. This made it very hard to decide to give to them...they would follow you with their hands out, sometimes for a long ways.

Boudha

And there are the children. What to do? Some were in need, but most were just scamming you. Or, yes, they needed the money, but perhaps they could have gotten it in other ways. I was never really good with this group, tending to be too hard on them, trying to get them to back off; my daughters, however, had this group down cold, and they would look or laugh at these children in such a way that the children would give up their pleading looks and burst out laughing. My daughters made friends with them. I could not master that.

All around the circumference of the stupa were shops of all kinds, mostly filled with various dharma goods. The prices were high (by Kathmandu standards), and you could get better quality and better bargains elsewhere in Kathmandu, but it was hard not to look, and, there were some good things, too. My young son dragged me through about every dharma-goods store on the Khora, looking for statues of Manjushri, his main interest—I saw them all.

Bargaining was what was required, and I hate to bargain. I would rather pay the asking price than stain a transaction with bargaining, which, in my case, amounts to bickering; yet, in these shops, bargaining is expected. And I had lessons from a master. In Darjeeling, when I found a meditation shawl I thought I really wanted—extra long to wrap around my legs—my Tibetan friend, Ngodup, volunteered to accompany me, and to act as bargainer for/with me.

Boudha

The elderly gentlemen who managed the shop already had my number; he could see from the first that I wanted that particular shawl—all he had to do was wait. We must have gone in and out of that shop four times, asking, looking at others, trying to get him to bring the price down, walking out abruptly, etc. Ngodup mostly wanted to take the hard stand of walking out, and, if need be, of giving up on it altogether.

I'm afraid I was not much help. Finally Ngodup took me aside and said that if I really wanted the shawl, I should just pay the extra money, since, in U.S. terms, it only amounted to a few dollars anyway. Back at the shop, both Ngodup and the store manager just kind of looked at each other and shook their heads as I tried to bargain. Finally, the manager did lower the price a little, just to put me out of my misery.

After that episode, I would either pay the asking price or pick a number that seemed reasonable to me and stick with it, being willing to walk out if that number was not accepted. Sometimes this did result in a lower price—I found I had to be willing to not have it, so as to get it at a reasonable price. Some dharma items I simply did not want to bargain over, so I would just pay the asking price. I consider it a flaw in my character that I cannot bargain well.

Happy Valley

How unusual it is in Kathmandu to find a clean spot anywhere. For those of you who have never been there, the streets and sidewalks (everywhere, for that matter) are unclean.

Boudha

Unclean means that you have to watch your step at all times because dog and cow (and human!) droppings are right there. You don't ever want to walk in the dark anywhere in Kathmandu, that's for sure. Mounds of garbage accumulate in certain areas and just keep accumulating—and smell! Smoke and fumes and smells of all kinds are what fill the air in Nepalese cities. You get used to it, because you have no choice.



Goodbye Picture at Happy Valley

Everywhere, everything is dirty and damp—dirty beyond our American imagination. Any kind of water product is just thrown into the streets and onto the sidewalks, so walking involves constant vigilance. There are animals everywhere. At night, it seems that all of the sleeping dogs you see during the day all form gangs and run the streets. The sound of dogs fighting and barking fills the night air, and this goes on until dawn. There are no streetlights so, in Kathmandu, you don't go out much at

Boudha

night. Now, enough of this kind of talk; let me tell you about clean.

I must write something about the Happy Valley Hotel, which is located less than one block from the Bodnath Stupa (Boudha, P.O. Box 1012, Kathmandu, Nepal, PH 977-1-471241, Fax: 977-1-471876). Staying here was such a good experience for us. Perhaps most important to us was the fact that it was clean. In a city where they don't have trash containers (because the whole city is treated like one), Happy Valley is an island of mercy. It is run by the Tibetan family of Sushil Lama (father), Tashi Dolma (mother), and Pasang Dolma (daughter), all devout and practicing Buddhists. The entire place was kept spotless, all the way from the lovely stone courtyard up to the high rooftop terrace, from where we would sometimes watch the Sun set or rise.

It is true that the rooms at Happy Valley are more expensive (up to \$50 a night), but for that price you get, essentially, a suite of two rooms with a large walk-out balcony. There is air-conditioning, if you need it, and the bathrooms are tiled and modern; plus, you can sleep in the beds, between the sheets, without worrying about getting lice, or something else—all this, and for less than you would pay for most small rooms in almost any American hotel.

I came to Kathmandu intrigued by the idea of how cheap the rooms and food could be, but I soon found out that those rooms and that food was not what I wanted to have. I was happy to pay a little—or a lot—more, for clean rooms

Boudha

and decent food. Even that 'more' was still cheaper than anything back home. For example, I could take my whole family of five, along with a guest or two, out to a fine rooftop-terrace dinner, at a place like the Stupa View, for less than \$25—and this would include desert.

The staff at Happy Valley was always ready to help us. They did tons of stuff for us. For example, they helped us exchange money, find taxis, get to the airport—anything we needed help with. And what good people they were. Each morning the father could be seen doing some form of Tai Chi, along with meditation, in the outer courtyard. The mother was always at the stupa by dawn, doing khora (circumambulation). And the daughter, who must be around 21 or so, was very bright and always willing to help us with whatever emergency was taking place—and we always seemed to have some sort or other of a desperate situation going on. I gave up going elsewhere for breakfast because the ones at Happy Valley were always the best, and they were served to us by people we had come to consider our friends.



Thrangu Monastery School

The hotel is right next to Thrangu Monastery and school, which was filled with very young and *very active* monks. We would often drift off to sleep to the sound of a choir of these little imps singing Guru Rinpoche's mantra. And our day started with the gong, and with their early morning chanting and music. The entire Bodnath area is filled with monastery sounds in the early morning, and in early evening—very lovely. Never mind that the young monks would shine flashlights into our rooms (and on our faces) at night, from across the courtyard, or, could be seen climbing along the high and narrow ledges between the rooms at any time of the day, as well as engaging in all manner of other pranks; these kids (many of whom are orphans taken in by the lamas) were a trip, and a welcome addition to the Kathmandu scene.

Monks

Monks

For those of you who are into the practice of Buddhism, and who live in the U.S., I must say something about monks. The main thing is, we don't have them here, and they do have them over there. It's that simple. In America, we might see a lama, or even a Rinpoche, now and again, but seldom just an ordinary monk. And yet, in many Asian societies, the monks are everywhere.

More important, they tend to be some of the brightest and most capable members of that society. Because of their spiritual dedication and aspirations, they have a moral authority as well. They receive respect from the lay community around them. But it is the quantity of monks that is impressive. There are so many that they are an important factor in the mix of people on the street and elsewhere. They also represent the position rich people fill in this country—someone to kind of look up to and respect.



Monks

Monks at Thrangu Monastery

Having seen a lot of monks by now I am somewhat less in awe of them. They are just people—some really good and some just average and some even not-so-good. Some are very dedicated while others are worldlier. After my recent experience, I feel the Tibetan people are more monk-like and the monks are more like people, than I had previously thought. And yes, I do know that monks ARE people.

Escorting a Monk to America

We had heard that Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, our teacher, had a nephew, Karma Dhundil, living in Katmandu. We wanted to meet him, of course; what's more, we found out that arrangements were in the works to bring him back to the states and place him at KTD. Better yet, there was a chance that we could accompany him back to the states on our return trip.

And meet him we did, the morning after we arrived in Kathmandu. It turns out that he was staying at Thrangu Monastery, with the very folks who had picked us up at the airport the night before. He showed up at our hotel accompanied by other monks. We were very happy to meet him, of course, and I believe the feeling was mutual. His English was not great, but he was a great communicator—if you know what I mean. Just 20 years old, he was very sincere and appealing. You could tell just by looking at him that: here is a sincere monk. We became friends right off.

Monks

And we were to see Karma Dhundil many times as we came in and out of Kathmandu on our various journeys. We volunteered right off to have him accompany us back to the states, and were gratified when Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche sent a message stating that he would like us to do just that—escort his nephew to America. The details were in the hands of Gloria Jones, Thrangu Rinpoche's secretary, and a most valuable and great person to know in Kathmandu. She was busy making all of the arrangements for Rinpoche's nephew to return with us to America, and she always went out of her way to be helpful. I don't know how many times we met with Karma Dhundil, and conversed as best we could, but we knew he was ready to go with us. He was packing his bags.

The day before we were to fly home, I wanted to take a look at Karma Dhundil's baggage, to make sure there wouldn't be any problems getting it on the airline. Sure enough, he had jury-rigged rope-wrapped bags that weighed a ton. I was not sure how easy these would be to get through customs and onto the plane, so we went out and got two (maroon-colored) duffel bags and I then showed him how to redistribute the weight between them so that he would have two bags of fairly equivalent weight.

The next step was to get him through immigration and onto the plane. This is a pain-in-the-butt even for westerners, but I was given to understand it could be even more difficult for Nepalese leaving their own country. They often were delayed, questioned, and sometimes

Monks

even denied exit. And it was here that I was able to help out a bit. After my family and I were whisked through customs and immigration, I returned to stand in the long line of Nepalese trying to make the same plane. The line moved like a glacier. It was getting closer and closer to take off. I was starting to worry and began making faces and noises to the officials, who were wondering why I was in that line at all.

When we got to the front, they spread out Karma Drundhil's passport and were pouring over it, trying to figure out what was going on here. This is when I stepped forward and announced that I had come to Nepal to escort this monk back to America, where he would reside at a Buddhist monastery. This action on my part kind of took them by surprise. And every time they moved to begin questioning the monk, I would speak up, pointing to the name "Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery" right on his passport, claiming I was here to take him with me and that I would be responsible for him.

Monks



Karma Drundill (right) and Best Friend

In the end, they never asked him a single question, but just let us pass through. As it turns out, we had to run for the plane and were the last people to board. We flew with Karma Dhundil to Hong Kong, where he spent the night with friends at Thrangu Rinpoche's center, in the city. The next morning, we met at the airport, where, aside from losing one of my daughters for about 40 minutes in the place, nothing else eventful happened. We flew from Hong Kong to San Francisco with Karma Dhundil, just as if he were a member of our family. He is only 20 years old.

Every time we encountered any kind of checkpoint, we would surround the monk, until the people were very clear that, if they were going to hassle him, they had all of us to deal with also. This worked very well and, at last, we passed through the final customs and immigration checkpoints at San Francisco. I informed Karma Dhundil that he was now

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safely within the United States, and we all went off to drink some American water and have an American sandwich. Karma Dhundil looked around the San Francisco airport and declared to us, “No monks.” “That’s right,” I replied. “There are very few monks here in the United States.”

Karma Dhundil returned with us to our center in Michigan, spent a few days, and was then flown on to New York, where he now lives at KTD Monastery. One last comment on Karma Dhundil: I took him with me to visit a very well-known Sikkimese thanka painter, who now lives in Kathmandu. When he saw the young monk, he told me privately that he knew this monk. He would see him early every morning at the Boudha stupa, doing extensive practice, and not just the usual circumambulation, but including great numbers of prostrations, in all kinds of weather. “This is a very good monk.” he declared. I could not agree more.

Tibetan Astrology

Background: I have been studying Asian astrology since the 1980s. We held the first Vedic Astrology conference in America here at Matrix, followed by a second symposium on the same subject, and then a third, which was specifically on Tibetan astrology. We also held a conference featuring Tibetan astrologer and translator, John M. Reynolds. All of this took place years before the current popularity of the topic.

In 1986, I brought Tibetan astrologer and Sanskrit scholar, Sange Wangchuk, to our center, where he remained for two and a half years. During this time, he translated from a number of astrology texts, and we worked on this translated material, some of which was later published by Wieser, in a book on Eastern astrology. I also computer programmed most of the Tibetan astrological techniques. I released that program (for Windows 95) in May of 1998.

The same summer that I wrote this, the summer of 1997, we brought Dr. Karma Drubgyud Tendar to the Matrix center. Dr. Karma is an accomplished Tibetan astrologer who has been trained in the Tsurphu tradition (the astrological methods used by the Karma Kagyu Lineage). This tradition originated from His Holiness, the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Our most recent goal has been to computer program the complete Tsurphu calendar, and thus preserve its integrity.

During our recent trip to Tibet, I was able to present our preliminary results to the head of

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the Karma Kagyu Lineage, His Holiness Ugyen Trinley Dorje, and the 17th Karmapa. I also traveled to Rumtek Monastery, in Sikkim, the seat of His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, where I met with one of the main astrologers at that monastery. While traveling in the East, I was also able to present our work to the Venerable Bokar, Rinpoche, and His Eminence, Gyaltsap, Rinpoche. I continued to work with Dr. Drubjud Tendar throughout the fall of 1997, in order to complete the calculations we had been working on.

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We're going to Tibet!

We were attending the yearly 10-day teachings of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, at the seat of His Holiness Karmapa in America, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery, on Meads Mountain near Woodstock, NY. I was feeling very determined, and more committed than ever to apply myself to my practice and studies. I had an intense desire to throw myself into the dharma with abandon, and had various scenarios in mind. I was ready to plunge in and get to work. I felt on the verge of setting the course for the rest of my life. Then, one morning when I woke up, Michael, my husband, said he had awakened at 4 a.m. with an intense desire to see His Holiness—in Tibet! I thought—what a huge distraction this would be to my motivation—what a harebrained idea!

We didn't speak of it again until we had our annual brief interview with Khenpo Rinpoche shortly thereafter. Among the many ideas and questions about our lives we presented to Rinpoche, Michael mentioned, as an aside, his having awakened with this desire to visit His Holiness in Tibet. Rinpoche started to respond to our questions, but then suddenly stopped. Instead, smiling and chuckling a little, he said, "Go and ask these questions of His Holiness." He seemed to feel that this was the solution—the perfect one. How could I not but feel the same? After all, this was Khenpo Rinpoche

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talking, happily, about us visiting His Holiness. Just that quickly, I knew we were on our way.

Still, after we returned to our home, I spent a week in shock. I could hardly imagine surviving the main 14 hour plane trip, and this trip would be preceded by an hour-long flight, and then followed by 4 more hours of flying. Plus, there would be layovers—24 hours spent in non-stop travel! And, that would only get us as far as Hong Kong: after a day's rest there would be another 4 hour plane trip to Kathmandu! I had never flown for more than 4 hours, period! I had images of our youngest child, eleven-year-old Michael Andrew, getting nauseous, having headaches, diarrhea, and finding it difficult to eat—loosing weight from his already too slight frame, as well as whining for a month as we traveled. I was right, except for the whining. He was, in fact, very brave through his maladies. (Although at one bad moment he did, understandably, exclaim, "I want to go home to my spoiled life.") I had images of myself being exhausted, having stomach complaints, and getting motion sickness on the airplanes and from the winding mountain roads of Sikkim and West Bengal. Thankfully, I was wrong. I was unfamiliar with but very frightened of altitude sickness (which, it turned out, was for good reason); I was all too familiar, though, with the particular difficulties we would face as an older family of five, traveling together and having to relate to one another under pressure and in close proximity, for a month. Plus, as my family knew very well, getting ready for a trip was one of my *least* favorite things to do, and this was

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far beyond any "getting ready" I had ever done before.

So, during that first week of shock, I could do little but sleep, and read Carl Barks "Donald Duck," as I digested the fact of this huge undertaking before us. I amused myself by imagining Uncle Scrooge, Donald, Huey, Duey, and Louie in Tibet. Michael, meanwhile, collected a library of books on Tibet, pored over maps, plotted our course, arranged the trip, ordered gear, made Tibetan/ English phrase cards, and, in the evenings he could be heard in his office repeating phrases of the Tibetan language he was listening to on tape recordings. I was disgusted.

After that week, I stirred to action and began ordering gear in vast amounts. I got very carried away on hiking boots and must have ordered 10 pairs for myself, looking for the ones that wouldn't hurt. All the boots, plus the few pairs of shoes I ordered, took me three hours to lace and try on. It was madness. The return boxes of gear for everyone equaled much more than we ended up taking.

Karma Drubgyu Tendhar, from Rumtek, was living next door at the Heart Center at this time. He would wander in occasionally as I was poring over catalogs (or sitting among boxes) and say very helpful things—such as how he had traveled all over India (a lot) and had only taken a small bag, or—that one could buy whatever one needed in Kathmandu.

I began to read about the places we would go, and thrilled to the thought of seeing them, and

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of seeing His Holiness, Gyaltsap, Rinpoche, as well as Bokar, Rinpoche.

Finally, we were down to trying to cram everything into the packs we had chosen. It was a sobering moment. After the sleeping bag went in there was little room for anything else. (One word of advice: don't fill a bag too full or you will struggle the whole trip trying to close it.) Somehow, we got the necessary items packed, while others had to be left. I discovered later I really hadn't needed quite so many clothes, and could have left behind a pair of shoes, but that's about it. In fact, when we had to return home on the first day of our journey, because of a canceled flight, I was relieved, because I thought I could really pare down the amount of stuff I was taking. I repacked everything, but only managed to leave out a few more items—not worth the effort. We really used, or needed to have for emergencies, everything else we took. We may have overdone the medicines: I carried homeopathic remedies, herbs and vitamins; Michael carried allopathic medicines; and Kate White, a doctor and fellow student traveling with us, generously made up a first aid kit for each of us. One never knows, though, what might occur. We were prepared for a variety of ailments.

We did survive the air trip. It was difficult, though not as terrible as I had imagined. Michael Andrew, annoyed at being unable to sleep, developed tiny bruises on the sides of his face, and sore ears, from throwing himself around in his seat. Babies were crying and

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kicking the back of Michael's seat all across the ocean. Over-stressed mothers were 'losing it.' The boring movies rolled endlessly and the eagerly anticipated airplane food and drink, constantly wheeled down the narrow aisles by edgy flight attendants, was terrible.

We kept popping, every two hours, a homeopathic remedy called "No Jet Lag." The whole tubular orderly rows of humanity in various states of discomfort and activity hurtled on well above the clouds, chasing the sun through space and across time zones, and through the International Date Line, on this very long day. The flight was smooth and timely. We were on our way.



Tulung Valley

The day arrived for our first journey up the Tulung Valley to Tsurpu. I knew we were going up about 5000 feet higher from where we were, and imagined curvy mountain roads and steep ascents; instead, the incline was very gradual, the high plains broad, and the going

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slow. To reach Tsurpu took three hours, mostly over bumpy, rocky, two track trails, which, at times, were actually shallow streambeds; the water elsewhere rushed down in many narrow and deep streamlets—bubbling, rolling, gurgling, splashing—‘the surging rivers of summer.’

How deeply I appreciated the beauty of the Tulung Valley, with its clean crisp air, rock and green grasses, various birds, and small, brightly colored flowers and fragrant herbs. There was plot after plot of terraced barley, and many small towers of stone, built as offerings to the local spirits. There were cows, yaks, dri (female yaks), and dzo (a cross of cow and yak), along with horses, goats, and sheep. And then there were the native peoples and their dwellings on the treeless landscape, all lit up, in psychedelic clarity, by the brilliant sun. The houses were mostly white, with maroon trim. The windows were usually of single pane and latticed. There was usually a wall of dung patties near each house, stacked for use as fuel, as well as a garden and pots of brightly colored flowers. One house was larger than the rest and particularly nice looking. We laughed later when we discovered that more than one of us in the group had independently imagined that this was the house ‘we’ would choose to live in.



The Road to Tsurphu

We were to travel this same road six times on the three trips we made to Tsurphu. The trip was always interesting. We would open the van windows wide and lean out, drinking it all in. Even coming down, slowly, in the middle of the night, we were met with amazing sights. The galaxy was incredibly bright in the clear night sky; on one of our necessary stops, we studied, closely, with a flashlight, an owl perched on the side of a hill: The Tulung Valley—a cornucopia of beauty pouring down from Tsurphu.

Finally we were in sight of Tsurphu—a deep maroon on a distant mountainside. It seemed unreal we were here! We stopped the van and got out. Could this be true? We drove on and arrived at the gates; soon, we were inside the walls! At the seat of His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dudul Dorje—the seat of all the Karmapas! We were here—incredible, unbelievable!

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At Tsurpu, the destruction was still evident, but so was the strength of the rebuilding in progress. Tsurpu was surrounded by a partly abandoned ancient village, which had a maze of walkways, a retreat high above on a steep cliff, and a nearby nunnery. Across the river, on an incline, there were giant tankas—protector shrines—with a huge fifty-yard long step-type area for displaying the carcasses and heads of wild goats, yaks, and other wild animals. These animal bodies were hung outside to garner protection for each species, as well as prayers for the spirits of the individuals who had been wrongfully killed (often the victims of poaching).

Here was the beautiful and impressive palace of Gyalsap Rinpoche, as well as a shrine to the Karmapas, one to the Sharmapas, and also the main shrine or gumpa. Here was His Holiness' summer palace, with the immense giant deer living there. There was a tent restaurant near the river, with a small table in front from which candies were being sold, as well as a little store nearby selling still more candies. There was smoke billowing everywhere—filling the air—both from the large offering vessels and from the smaller cooking stoves,

I saw a small half-destroyed building full of offering shrubs, outhouses reeking and spilling down the walkway, villagers and monks laboring and milling about, dust, grime, soot, rocks, goats, chickens, cows, and sheep (and their droppings, one of which had my footprint squarely in the middle).

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We were ushered to a room opposite and above the kitchen and there we were served candies, as well as butter tea from huge thermoses. Later, some instant dry soup in Styrofoam containers was brought in and hot water was poured for those who wanted it, with some tsampa being offered along with it. We also had our 'dread' box lunches from a restaurant in Lhasa. We were kept in this room until we stated our purpose—and until they figured out what to do with us—making sure, first, I imagine, that we weren't dangerous.

First, we all went to see Drupon Dechun Rinpoche, who was responsible for most of the rebuilding of Tsurpu after the invasion and destruction of it in the 1950's. It was obvious he was not feeling well. We left Dr. Kate White, who was traveling with us, to attend to him, with Michael to help her. We were told that His Holiness was very busy that day, but could see us later on for a short time. We were very pleased and excited.



His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa

When we first went into His Holiness' room and I saw him for the first time, the atmosphere was very natural and relaxed. He was sitting on his seat behind a small table. He was beautiful. He was only one year older than our eleven-year-old son, about a foot taller, and two to three times bigger in frame and sturdiness (our son is very slight). Unlike most of the Tibetan

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children we met—who looked several years younger than their age—he looked like a fully matured young man of 19 or 20. The only hints that he might be younger came when he eagerly and intently focused on the mound of letters and offerings we had brought, and seemed anxious to delve into them. When he stood up, he was short.

The Karmapa was also very playful, funny, and almost mischievous for short periods of time during his visit with us, and while this is not unusual for Tibetans of any age, his manner during these times also suggested his youth. He looked different from the pictures I had seen. There is something very special going on about his forehead. It is so smooth, well-formed, and luminous. His eyes seemed to pounce forward when he was intent on something. He looked directly at me a few times, when I was near him, and smiled warmly—that was simply the best. It was a great pleasure just to look at him and his splendid features and to watch his gestures and movements.

It was late afternoon when we left Tsurphu on that first day. The sky was clear. We saw rainbow after rainbow on our slow descent down the Tolung Valley. One of them was a splendid double rainbow. The sighting of these rainbows at this time seemed very natural—just as it should be. We had entered His Holiness' mandala.

On our second day at Tsurphu, His Holiness and his entourage performed a Mahakala puja

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in his room, complete with horns, drums, bells, and tsok (food and drink offerings). Our small group was invited to attend. His Holiness certainly was very serious and concentrated for most of the puja. His brow would knit and his eyes would leap forward onto the text. A few times a clock in the room would loudly chime the 'Westminster Chime' and His Holiness would laugh, greatly amused. The puja lasted about an hour. After the puja, we had a short interview. Michael Anne and May couldn't say anything. They just hugged each other and cried. Afterward, we went outside and staggered around. We were high on the roof and high in the mountains of Tibet. Never had my family looked more beautiful to me.

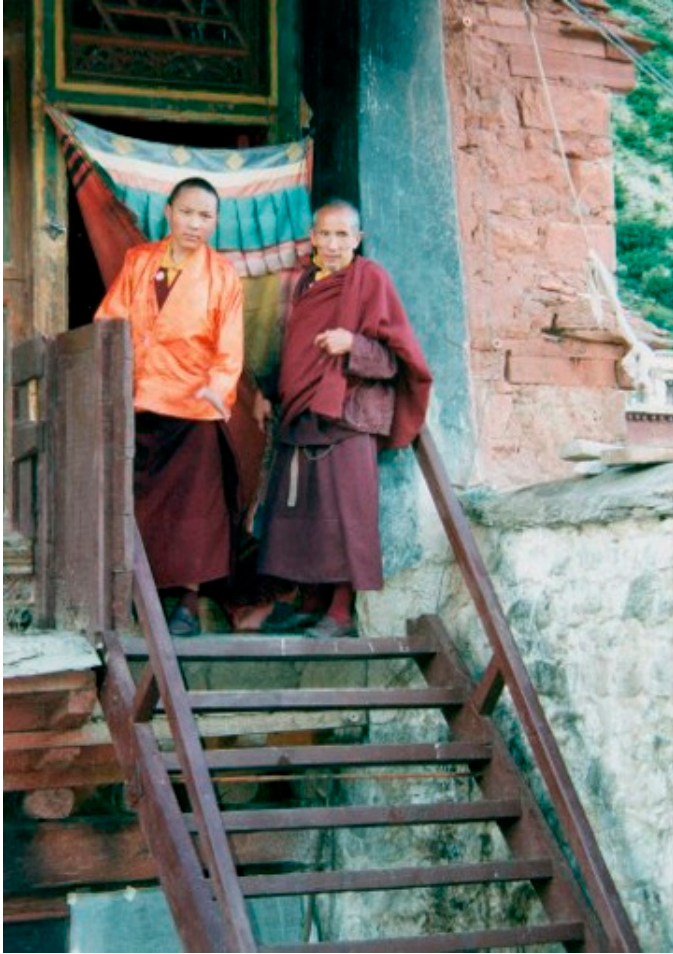


The Tsurphu Foundation

Michael and I moved off to talk, but what we were missing was His Holiness playing through the window with our children, and with Nona Howard (a fellow student and traveler). His room was built up from the roof. His windows looked out over the roof, on which we were all milling about. His Holiness would pull aside the curtain, peer out, and then disappear behind

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the curtain. All of our children were laughing. When I asked them what he was doing they just said, "Funny things." I got the idea that it was easy to see but hard to explain. So we watched. He held Tsurphu Foundation brochures up and then peered over the top of them. He would appear with one, then seconds later be gone, or pull the curtain down so that only the brochure remained in view. His facial expressions varied. It was funny—almost comical; however, Michael knew what he meant. His Holiness wanted us to help Tsurphu, something we had talked about earlier. Michael nodded: we would help.



After the Interviews

After His Holiness had finished with the interviews of everyone in our group, he came down the steep, ladder-like steps that went up to his room and was soon on the roof with us. He moved his arms up and down, straight out from his side, and said in English, smiling, "Thousand Armed Chenrezik," and moved on. It seemed significant. It was also the only

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English I remember him speaking. He returned to us and kept moving slowly, smiling and interacting with us, and then climbed back up the stairs. He appeared and disappeared repeatedly behind the door curtain to his room, foiling any attempts at taking pictures (which may have been the idea behind the curtain movements all along). And then he was gone for the day.

We saw him only briefly the last day, to say goodbye. He gave each of us another protection cord, placing them around our necks, and katas, small blessed items wrapped in envelopes. He told us, through a translator, how much he appreciated us traveling so far to see him. We felt so fortunate to have had the opportunity.

The Protector Shrine

The second day we were at Tsurphu, after we had settled in, there was some time to spare. I had aspired to do my daily practice while there, and thus set about finding a place to do so. I asked (mostly by gestures) if one of the four protector shrines would be an OK place to practice at, and gained an understanding that it would be. The lama in charge of the shrine was in his seat, talking to two women sitting nearby. He motioned to a thick cushion on the buttery, sooty, cement floor. I prostrated to the shrine (oiling my pants at the knees once again) and sat down, taking off my boots. The lama motioned for a young monk to bring me a chogtse (small meditation table) to put my text on. He did, and this table was also covered, of

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course, with soot and butter. I had been packing my text in a plastic bag and I put this bag down to prevent the cloth cover from being soiled. At the same time, the lama told the young monk something, and the monk came over to spread a clean white kata (silk offering scarf) on the chogtse, as I picked up my bag and text. I was touched, and a little embarrassed. I must have seemed so strangely clean, white, and particular to them. Their text covers, clothes, and, in fact, everything there, was well greased and soiled.

I began my practice, while the lama and the women kept on talking. It was a little difficult to concentrate, but I kept on, and soon became somewhat use to their conversing. I could hear May, my 15 year old daughter, in a room across a narrow courtyard. She was playing her small travel guitar and singing her heart out. It seemed appropriate: she was practicing, also. Around this time, the two women left, and the shrine room fell quiet. At one point, another lama came in. The one in attendance must have asked him who I was, because his reply was, "Khenpo Karthar's," and he gestured toward me with a quick affirmative nod. I sat up straighter, concentrated harder, my heart filled with honor at being referred to in this way.

I was so happy to actually be doing practice at Tsurphu. I was remembering what Khenpo Rinpoche had mentioned at the ten-day teachings, that this was the seat of all the Karmapas: throughout the ages, every one of them had lived here. The enormity of that statement began to hit home. I was overcome

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with devotion, and with the desire to be of use to this noble lineage, and to beings in general. Tears began to stream down my face as I continued on with the practice.



A Young Monk

After a while, the lama left too. Only the young monk and I remained. Toward the end of my practice he came over and stood near me; he leaned against a pillar and tenderly, gently,

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peered over my shoulder at my text. Mentally, he was right with me. Softly and shakily, I began to sing out loud—in my poor Tibetan—long-life prayers for His Holiness, Khenpo Rinpoche, and for all the lineage holders. I just felt it was important I verbalize these prayers in this very sacred space. When I was done, the young monk thanked me. I don't know why. I took his picture in front of the shrine. Then he wanted to take mine. I was so moved by the opportunity to practice here, and so extremely grateful.



Shel-Drak

Guru Rinpoche's Crystal Cave on the Crystal Mountain

I was very sorry that I hadn't been able to stay at Sayme and climb the cliffs to Chimphuk. I felt as if Sayme had chewed me up and spat me out. The energy there had been so intense, heavy, and difficult, unlike anything we had previously encountered. I had so looked forward to Chimphuk, and to seeing the Guru Rinpoche rupa at the shrine at Sayme, but Michael Andrew had become quite ill while we were there and the conditions were very rugged—with flies, outhouses, no running water and terrible food. I left with him to go to the hotel in Tsetang. I still think it was the right thing to do, but how I regret missing out on that special Guru Rinpoche monastery. And yet, perhaps I never would have made it to Shel-Drak if I had not missed that monastery, for my resolve to undertake this difficult climb may not

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have been as strong if not for the fact that I did miss out on these other important Guru Rinpoche sites.

So, we began the climb as early in the morning as we could get our guide to go, which was only as early as around 9:00 a.m. Michael, May, myself, and Pemba, our guide, were the only ones attempting the climb. Michael Anne had generously volunteered to stay behind with Michael Andrew, who was still recovering. I am not sure he would have done well on this climb even in the best of health. I tried to take only the necessities, and thought my pack was light enough. Our guide, Pemba, asked us if we wanted to walk to the Tsechu Bumpa, a stupa on the outskirts of Tsetang, where we would try to find a tractor to take us part of the way up. Fortunately, we said no, because it turned out that this stupa was about five miles from the hotel. Was this a joke or something?

After leaving the city and winding our way—in our van, not walking!—through the beautiful stone farming village of Kato, we arrived near the stupa. Pemba found a tractor and a driver willing to take us up as far as he could. Then, off we went, chugging away, riding in a small trailer on the back of this loud Rototiller type tractor, hanging on for dear life, moving over rocky, gravelly, grassy lands, inclining upwards. We rode for an hour. Toward the end we began hopping off a lot and pushing. Finally, it was decided that the ground was just too soft and steep and rocky to go on. We hadn't made it as far as we had thought we could with the tractor, but we were told that it wasn't too far to

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the village. So off we went, walking—too fast for me. I got winded right away, and gave up early on trying to keep up with everyone else. They all slowed some, though, after awhile. After what seemed like a very long time we came to the village. It was abandoned. It looked as if no one had been there for centuries. We sat down and rested for awhile. I was encouraged I felt fine while resting, but I couldn't imagine how I would ever make it if this was the point from where we were *to begin* the three hour trek that the books talked about.



Michael and May (Pemba in distance)

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We resumed our climb. I don't think May stopped again. She just got into a breathing pattern and up she went. Ah, youth! I was another story. Last again, I was struggling along. I began stopping more and more, and for longer and longer periods of time. Then, finally, each time I stopped I would just sit down and pant, catching my breath and letting my heart rate slow down before starting up again. Even so, I would only make it maybe another twenty or thirty feet before having to sit down yet again. Michael was worried about me. He slowed down some so as to keep me in sight. Pemba kept repeating what his father, a nomad, had often told him, "When you climb a mountain, start slowly...slowly." Then off he would walk—whistling!

After a long time we came to a small area that was flat. There were three large piles of various size stones. Pemba explained to us that one of these piles was called Guru Rinpoche's Throne. It was said that when Guru Rinpoche first came to this mountain, he had sat on this pile and rested. Then, a white yak had appeared, and carried him the rest of the way to the Crystal Cave. We circumambulated the pile that was called his Throne, and then rested awhile. No white yaks appeared for us, so on we trudged.

A man was sitting above the area of the stone piles, on the side of a hill. He said he was out looking for his yaks. Michael offered to pay him if he would carry my pack. Michael was afraid I

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wasn't going to make it. I protested. I didn't think it would help that much, I felt embarrassed, and felt that I should be responsible for my own pack. The man said he didn't need any money, as he was going up anyway, and he didn't mind carrying the pack. Off he went, walking with Pemba. May was ahead of them, and Michael and I went on together. It did seem to help quite a bit—not having the pack. It also helped that the man on the hill had told us that, not too far ahead, the path leveled out and became much easier. I seemed to feel better, as if I had finally died all of the climbing deaths I possibly could and was finally getting used to this. It also helped that Michael was beginning to lag a bit now. I could go slowly with him and not have the extra stress of being last (misery loves company). I even took turns carrying his pack! We looked for May's footprints, as we had not seen her for quite some time. We did find some.

We climbed to a sky burial site that was on the pathway. There was a stupa there, and a slab for cutting up bodies. There were cutting implements just strewn around. I remember wondering how these implements could be left out in the elements like this and still be found useable, but there they were. Clothes of the deceased were scattered everywhere outside of the path that went around the stupa, as is the custom. We circumambulated the stupa several times. I began to collect some small rocks to take home and then noticed that there were many small bone fragments among the rocks. We saw a hand under a bush. It was

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blackened and looked like a gorilla hand. Someone mentioned that the vultures weren't coming of late—but still, the area seemed clean. I marveled at the fact that people could somehow bring their dead to this high area. How did they get them here? Where did the people come from? Would they have a ceremony? Would very many people attend?

Later, May told us that she had stopped alone to rest at this stupa, and had lain down on the ground. After awhile, she had looked over and saw the hand lying there—she decided to move on! She did not know it was a sky burial site.

After we left the stupa, May came walking toward us down the path. She hadn't seen the monastery yet. The monastery was our last goal to reach before beginning the steeper incline leading directly to the Crystal Cave. She had started to think she might be going in the wrong direction somehow. This was discouraging news, but we were very glad to see her. The yak herder assured us that it was not too far to the monastery. When I asked him how far it was from the monastery to the cave, he pointed down to the closest valley—a long, long way down—and said, "About that far." I groaned silently and my heart sank. I really questioned whether I could make it. May had already made up her mind that she was going to stay at the monastery. Her lungs hurt from breathing so deeply.

Finally, the path did begin to level out—joy of joys! What a treat it was just to be walking on

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level ground again! This lasted for a good while, but slowly the ground inclined upward again, and soon, once again, the walking became more difficult.



Still a Long Way to Go

Michael began talking about Khenpo Rinpoche—perhaps he had climbed this very path! Certainly Guru Rinpoche had, and many others. I found this very encouraging. I began to think of Khenpo Rinpoche walking there beside me, and I began to get very happy.

We reached the monastery, although every upward step was a strain. We climbed to the front gate, walked in, and climbed up the stairs to a porch and just sat down as soon as we could. It had been nearly four hours of climbing since we had left the tractor. We ate our small lunch of hard-boiled eggs, bread, cookies, and Cliff Bars. Everything tasted so wonderful! I understood for the first time the value of Cliff Bars—and the cookies tasted like heaven.

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The attending lama gave us a tour of the gumpa. We offered him a picture we had taken of His Holiness. He said we should take it up to the cave shrine. This seemed so appropriate to me. Of course we should. I felt so inspired by the thought of taking His Holiness' image up to the cave. It felt like an important and significant mission. He also encouraged us, suggesting it was not too difficult a climb. He even encouraged May to go, telling her that she could do it. When we looked up, the terrain was different from what we had been climbing. The Crystal Mountain was all steep and craggy dark rock—intriguing.

We began our ascent after using the best outhouse I had seen thus far. It was built out over a cliff. Although this was a little unsettling, it was the perfect way to go—everything just falls far below!

Soon we crossed a rock bridge that went over a small steep waterfall-stream. Beautiful fern-type plants grew out from the rocks along the water's edge. We were climbing this black rock staircase. The view was spectacular. All along the way were wonderful natural rock chairs to sit on and from which to look out over the valley far below. There was evidence of other pilgrims—stacks of small rocks and ribbons tied to chains of small rocks—everywhere. Michael and I kept marveling at everything. The closer I got to the cave the happier I felt. I was extremely exhilarated.

When we finally reached the cave—or during the last few feet—all I could think was: "No

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more climbing!" There was a structure built up around the cave. We went in. There were three Tibetan pilgrims there and a lama, all doing a puja complete with tsok. We squeezed in, prostrated in a crunched up way and offered a kata, and then sat on the stone floor. The puja was finished before too long. The three other pilgrims left. We offered the picture of His Holiness to the lama, and he put it up on the glass that was covering the Guru Rinpoche rupa on the low rock shrine. Pemba pointed out various hand and footprints of Guru Rinpoche and his consort. We each did some practice. Everyone left, except for the lama and me. I continued to practice. I could have stayed there forever, so deep and satisfying was the pervading atmosphere. I was distracted by a mouse running on the shrine. Then, I confirmed what I had hoped was not true—the lama was, indeed, standing there, waiting for me to be done—so I finished, gathered my belongings, and climbed out. The lama locked the door behind us. I guess we were fortunate in him having been there at all—that we had been able to enter in the first place—let alone that we had had the privilege of attending part of the puja and had been sent away with a piece of tsok torma.

We looked in on the small stark gompa there, one with a beautiful Guru Rinpoche rupa. This was locked now also. We started down the rocks, heading back to the monastery...then back, back, back, all the way back down. We only stopped once or twice, briefly. My knees could have used more stops, but hey, this was

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a piece of cake compared to the climb up. We were down in two hours, arriving at the place where we had left the tractor. Miraculously, the driver was waiting for us, just as he had said he would be. Another man had joined him—I could never understand where people came from when they appeared in the hills and valleys. It always seemed as if there was absolutely nothing around for miles.

I had no blisters! Those days of boot searching had paid off (though I would recommend a double sock system for such a climb. I didn't use one—I had only carried extra socks along—and had developed a small sore spot as a result). I was amazed the next day that I wasn't even sore! I could tell my body was strained and tired, but not sore. How could this be possible?

Back to Tsetang we went, riding in the trailer on the back of the 'Rototiller'. We stood, hanging on again for dear life, happy with our accomplishment and bone-tired. We went through the streets of Tsetang, past the shops. Everyone was laughing at these Westerners riding around Tibetan-style in the back of this contraption. We laughed and waved back. We had been to Shel-Drak, the Crystal Cave of Guru Rinpoche. May everyone experience it!

Notes by Michael Andrew

OUR TRIP TO TIBET

Being awakened up at 5:00 in the morning, to get ready for a fantastic journey, is not a usual thing in the Erlewine family. Mom & Dad were already making sandwiches for the plane but I was still groggy, although very excited. I dragged myself to the sink and washed my face, so I could wake up! After washing up, Mom tells me to go and wake up my older sister, Michael Anne. I go outside, and walk to her small house through the dark (still night-like) morning. I knock on her door. A faint "What..?" comes from the building. I tell her that, if she wants to go to Tibet, she will have to get up early! She laughs, and I return to our house.

My mother gives me a bag of food. A short while later, it's time to go! Dad and our friend Forest load up the truck. I jump in the car, waiting to go. We drive off, waving to our good friend, Drupjur. Michael Anne and May fall fast asleep in the back seat, with bags piled on top of them. It is not long until we get to the airport.

Dad tells us to wait, and to look after our bags. Mom goes to get the tags for our bags. She tells Anne to get a cart for our luggage. I go with her—two bucks for a cart, that's cheap! Everything goes along smoothly until my dad gets to the flight desk—the flight is canceled!! All that work for nothing! My dad struggles endlessly with the flight attendant, trying to find a way to be able to still go. Finally, the attendant says it would be possible to rent a

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car and drive to the Chicago airport, four hours away, and catch a flight from there. We all agree this is a good idea. So we rent a car and wait for dad to confirm the tickets. A whole hour passes, then, it turns out that the attendant had made a mistake! Oh no! Now we have to go home. Once home, we hide out until the following day.

Bright and early the next morning we are not as rested as we had been the morning before. Mother yells "Come on, Michael, get up!" Michael Anne calls out, laughing, from the bottom of the stairs, "You're going have to have to get up early if you want to go to Tibet!" Finally, I get up; I go down the stairs and wash up, getting ready to go. We're off, going to the airport much faster than the morning before.

Travel Guide: What to Take

Traveling Suggestions

Having taken the trip and returned some of you may benefit from comments on what we took in the way of clothing, etc. Brand names are mentioned only because those are the brands I used, and some of you may benefit from knowing precisely what clothing I am talking about.

Pants – I took 3 pairs of L.L Bean tropic-weight cotton pants. I could have gotten by with two, providing laundry opportunities were available. Probably 3 pair is the ideal amount.

Shirts – I took about 9-10, L.L Bean, Chambray Sport Shirts. I rolled them up and stuffed them wherever they would go. Clean shirts were important and shirts got soaked fast in the heat. I do not feel I took too many—I was always on the edge of running out of clean ones.

Socks – One of the most important items you can bring. Trekkers will tell you to take just a couple pairs and wash them all the time. Forget it. I was often moving so fast that there was not time to wash much less dry them. I would take all you have room for.

And forget about taking cotton socks (they get wet fast), and, unless you are a real hiker, forget about double sock systems and all that jazz. What worked best for me were the 100% synthetic hiking socks. The brand name is something like “Thorlo.” Forget about a combination of synthetic and wool—“Smartwool”—which they also make. These

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were OK as a second sock for warmth, but they tended to scratch me, and they also developed holes easily. The synthetic hiking socks are expensive (\$9-\$14 a pair), but they are very stretchy (they go on easy) and have double knit pads where it counts. I did not take enough of these babies and I regretted it. Next time I will take 10 pair.

Shoes & Boots – The same kind of story for shoes. You know if you are a real hiker. If that is the case, you know what to do, or can find out. For the few real hikes I did, I was fine in cheap hiking boots (Nikes) or even in a good pair of running shoes. As it turned out, I wore my Tevas all the time (with socks) and my hiking boots seldom. Next time it will be good running shoes and Tevas, no boots. However, my wife wore her hiking boots a lot, because she liked them and did not like the dirt and dust.

Jackets – My polar-fleece vest was an essential item. I wore it all the time, whenever there was any chill. I had with me a heavier fleece sleeved-jacket (with no wind protection) and a thin nylon shell (for wind protection). Combinations of these three were sufficient for all the weather we encountered in Tibet in August and September.

Cargo Vest – Perhaps the single most useful item of clothing I took was my cargo vest. I used a vest from Travel Smith called the Timbuktu Travel Vest (#2287), which, at \$89, was worth every penny. It has 11 pockets in all, and is made out of a special woven nylon

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fabric (much lighter than cotton). It has a mesh lining inside for quick sweat drying. There are two inside vest pockets, one with a zipper and the second with a Velcro tab. The two outside vest pockets are for eyeglasses and similar sized items. Two large flapped pockets are in front, and just above these are two large zippered pockets. I found these zippered pockets of very great use. I would put my family's passports in one of them and wads of foreign money in the other. I would keep smaller bills in the inside zippered vest pocket. I had bought many other cotton vests and sent them all back. This was the lightest, the strongest, and the best. The proof of what am saying is, that no less of an authority than world traveler/translator Ngodup Burkhar, on seeing my vest, made me promise to send him one (and one for his father), as soon as I got back (if I sent just one, his father would want it anyway). I sent two. You can reach Travel Smith at 1-800-950-1600 for a catalog.

Hats & Gloves – I had a pair of light gloves and a knit hat. Both of these came in very handy many times. One of the most important places to have the hat and a fleece jacket is on the transoceanic flight where you have no control over the cabin temperature. On the trip over, I had mine in the stored luggage and I froze my butt, so be forewarned. On the way back, I just put on the fleece jacket and pulled the knit hat over my eyes and tried to sleep. At least I was warm.

Day Pack – Don't leave home without it. I used mine all the time, carrying it with me almost

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always. In it, I had emergency medicine (aspirin, Imodium, etc.), my nylon shell and knit hat, essential papers, visas, and passport (when it was not in my vest), packs of money, notebook & pens, water purification tablets, nail clippers, army knife, keys, bottled water, etc. I looked at a lot of expensive packs and chose the Approach III from L.L. Bean (2,100 cu. in.) at \$55. It was tougher than any of the rest and looked like new at the end of the trip—and I had had it with me every step of the way. I kept a bottle of water in one side mesh pocket and a hat & socks in the other. A small flashlight, connected by one of those snap-on straps, was always there for night-time needs.

Big Pack – As mentioned elsewhere, I opted for a compromise large pack, which is a duffel-like pack you can carry with either a handle or a shoulder strap; it also has a built-in harness for backpacking it. This harness is hidden behind a zipper. In addition, this luggage has a small daypack (with harness) that zips to the larger one. It was a good choice, and worked well, although I never had to use the harness. Forget about using the small day pack for anything but extra storage. It's just too small.

Money Packs – There is all of this talk about money belts and pouches. What they don't tell you is that in many of these foreign countries you cannot cash large bills. No one will touch them. You must exchange these large bills for small bills in the foreign currency, ones that ordinary shopkeepers will be able to handle.

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The point here is that when you exchange \$1000 in U.S. currency for the equivalence in small bills in Nepalese rupees, Indian Rupees, or Chinese (Tibetan) money, you are going to end up with a wad of money 5 inches thick! In fact, the Indians staple these whole packs of money together so tightly that you almost need a machine to open the pack.

There is no way you can cram this kind of a wad of money into a money pouch, so be forewarned. Often, the places for money exchange are few and far between, so when you get to one, you will want to exchange some serious money (a thousand or more). Bring a bag to carry your money away. This is why I had to put so much of this money in my daypack and then never let that pack off my back or out of my sight.

Water – Almost everywhere we went there was bottled water, although I would for sure not call it ‘mineral water’. Sometimes you had to stock up and buy a case of the stuff—but it was available. I never had to use my iodine tablets (to purify water) but I was still glad I had them in my day pack; take note, though, that much of the Chinese bottled water is purified with iodine and the iodine residue has not been removed. It *is* water, but it taste like iodine.

Laundry – Laundry opportunities are rare, or, if available, can take up to two days or longer, so take note. In Tibet, you can only find someone willing to do your laundry in the largest cities, such as in Lhasa or Tsetang. They charge by the piece, so one sock costs as much as a pair

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of pants. I have no idea what kind of water they are washed in, but often the clothes smell a little like sewage when you get them back. Just thought you should know. And, having laundry done is a tad bit expensive too.

All in all, take plenty of essential items, such as socks and shirts (underwear?) and look for a laundry every time you plan to be in a city for a couple of days. Of course, you can rinse things out in your hotel if you have hot water (or any water), but you may not have time for things to dry. There is also a tendency for laundries to give you back your clothes damp, so be sure to check for that. Fuel is scarce in Tibet, so they use as little of it as possible.

Medicine – Better have whatever allopathic medicines you may need with you or be ready to see a Tibetan doctor and use Tibetan medicine. Tibetan doctors are now using a combination of traditional Tibetan methods coupled with more modern Chinese allopathic medicine, so be aware.

The English Language – There is not a lot of English spoken in Tibet, so have your phrase book handy. Without your guide (and it will happen), you will be facing very many friendly smiling helpful people who have no idea at all of what you, so urgently, are saying to them.

Toilets – Be prepared for a shock anyplace but in the best hotels. The Tibetan toilet is a smelly room with a vertical slot in the floor, flies, and a lot of missed hits. And it stinks, big time. You will find no toilet paper, so bring your own. Or, if there *is* toilet paper, it tends to be the red

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crepe-paper kind that is a new experience in itself. Often toilets are outside and about up to your waist in height. Everyone can see you unless you crouch low, which is the point. You don't want to go near them in stockings or bare feet. At night, you will need a flashlight, for sure.

And, many of the toilets don't take toilet paper well, or only with great care and attention, so don't feed it a bunch. A backed up toilet is not much fun and it may be hard to find anyone willing to fix it for you. Not-working toilets are a staple of travel-life in Tibet.

Also, be ready to just step off the road and find a good place. Everyone else with you will be doing the same thing. In many ways, the in-the-field method is a lot nicer than the indoor toilets. If you tend to constipation, God help you.

Showers & Baths – Forget about baths, you will hardly ever find one. For showers, expect to use the whole bathroom as a stall, which means anything in it (toilet, sink, and your clothes) has a good chance of getting soaked. Hot water may take a very long time to appear, or, it may not appear at all! And you may get only a trickle of water, hot or cold. Many times you will be lucky just to be able to wash up in a basin and throw the water out. And bring your own soap, and one of those travel towels. And keep your mouth closed when you shower. You don't want to get any of that water in your mouth! Many places don't provide soap or towels.

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Heat & Blankets – There was no heat in any of the hotels we stayed in. Often there were so many thick blankets on a bed that they would crush your body. No joke, I have never seen such heavy bedclothes anywhere. Use your sleeping bag (with a vinyl ground cloth under it) and sleep on top of it all. We did this in all but the very best hotels and never got a louse.

Night Life – Forget it. In most places, there are no streetlights. There are bars, but you would have to know how to get there and know what to do when you got there. Most of us found ourselves going to sleep with the Sun and rising when it got light out—just as most people in Tibet do—in bed by 7:30 PM? You bet!

Locks – Keep your money on your person and all other valuables in a daypack that you never let out of your sight. You can't trust the lock on your room and most rooms have no night lock on the inside. I always kept my bags themselves locked—in my room—with those little combination locks set to some number I wouldn't forget. Our whole family used the same combination so that we could open each other's packs if it ever became necessary.

Trip Guidelines

Quick Guidelines for Asia Trip

Pre-trip Comments: These following notes have been compiled with the help of notes made by Michael Doran, Lynn and Marty Marvet...and others, plus from about fifteen different books written about trekking in Nepal, India, and Tibet. What follows is overkill. You probably don't need to bring every item listed, but you would do well to at least consider each item in terms of your own needs and comfort.

Post-Trip Comments: After my trip, I went over the Pre-Trip list and marked items as (1) Worthwhile or (2) Essential. I added other comments as necessary. Please keep in mind that we went in late summer/early autumn, so it was not too cold. Also, don't trust my comments on medicine, since I only marked the things we ended up using.

Most essential items are marked with an arrow, "←."

-- Michael Erlewine

Water

Water purification of some kind is needed. This can be

Water purifier (don't really need).

Water-sterilization tablets (Essential as backup) ←

Water Bottle – One or two 1-litre plastic water bottles that don't leak. Try to find ones that do not taste like plastic. Nalgene bottles are good—their Lexan version is one that doesn't taste like plastic. (I didn't use these much.)

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Water container/thermos (These are everywhere there.)

Money

You will need to have some place to carry your passport, traveler's checks, cash, etc. You can't leave them in your room, in your luggage, or even in the day pack. They must be on your person, and hidden. This means that these valuables must be placed in any one (or two) of the following places—two is preferable, so that all your money is not in one place...

Post-trip: Although I had every kind of money pouch, I ended up using a solid cargo vest from TravelSmith, one that had many pockets, including two sealed inside pockets and two zippered outside pockets. I never took my vest off and it worked very well. I found all of the money pouches a hassle.

Money belt (goes around waist on the inside)



Money pouch (hangs from neck, inside shirt)



Money loop (belt passes through loops; it hangs inside pants) ←

Cargo Vest (I kept my money in the inside pockets of this) ← (Worthwhile)

Shoulder bag (not for money, but to carry whatever—sometimes used instead of day pack)

Trip Guidelines

Food

A number of writers claim that the best food they had in Tibet was the granola, nuts, etc., that they had thought to bring with them, so consider this. I agree. Take some of your favorite energy/snack foods with you. Believe me, you won't regret it.

Power Bars ← (Essential)

Granola mix ←

Dried fruit for emergencies ← (Essential)

Important Items

Adaptors (for electrical appliances)

Camera (extra camera battery) (Worthwhile)

Camera film (20 rolls +)

Alarm clock (battery powered) (Worthwhile)←

Compass (did not use)

Cords (bungee or cord - for drying clothes)

Earplugs (streets can be very noisy) (did not use)

Eating utensils (you may prefer to use your own) (did not use)

Flashlights (small—also batteries and bulbs) ←
(Essential)

Note: Customs officials often steal or take the batteries, replacing them with worthless ones, so hide the batteries elsewhere in your kit.

Garbage bags (did not use)

Trip Guidelines

ZipLoc Bags (all sizes) ← (Essential)

Gluestick

Insect repellent ← (did not use)

Kleenex packets (can't bring enough)
←(Essential)

Knife (Swiss Army knife) ←(Worthwhile)

Laundry detergent

Lock (One good strong U.S. padlock for each traveler and 3 keys) ← (Worthwhile)

Lock (Tiny locks for zippers) ← (Essential)

Cable Lock (if needed to string luggage together) (did not use)

Maps (Worthwhile)

Matches (Waterproof matches)

Mosquito netting (may prefer to bring, but the mosquitoes should not be too bad) (did not use)

Notebooks (Worthwhile)

Pen (and extra pen refills—bring both roller-ballpoint and permanent marker) (Essential)

Offering (Envelopes) ← (Worthwhile)

Offering (Katas) ← (buy in Lhasa or KTM)

Rubber bands

Safety pins (Worthwhile)

Scissors ← (Essential)

Sewing kit

Sunblock ← (Essential)

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Tape (duct tape, for plugging holes in screens, etc.) (Worthwhile)

Umbrella (can buy in Katmandu) (never used)

Whistle (alarm)

Sleeping

Sleeping bag ← (Essential)

You will need a quality sleeping bag that is good to 20-degrees F., one that is light and packs small. If you can't sleep on a hard surface, you might consider bringing a foam mat for underneath—a Therm-A-Rest, for example. You won't need a mat, unless you are camping.

Pillowcase

Ground cloth (To put under sleeping bag; especially necessary in bad hotels, where there may be lice) (Worthwhile)

Personal Hygiene

See the first-aid section for related items.

Teeth

Toothbrush (tight waterproof case) ←
(Essential)

Bring several toothbrushes in case you drop one on the floor or stick it under running water by mistake.

Toothpaste ← (Essential)

Mouthwash (use for brushing teeth)

Dental floss

Trip Guidelines

Eyes

Sunglasses ← (Essential)

You don't need glacier-style sunglasses (with side flaps), but you do need ones with complete UV protection.

Eyeglasses in hard-shell case plus extra pair
← (Worthwhile)

Contact lenses and solution

Eyeglass repair kit

Clean-up

Comb & brush

Mirror (break resistant)

Shampoo ←

Flip Flops (for showering—where you don't want to step)

Deodorant (not always available overseas in your flavor)

Soap (cold-water) ← (Worthwhile)

Razor & blades (or battery-powered shaver)
(Worthwhile)

Shaving cream (Worthwhile)

Sink plug (Squash ball style) (Worthwhile)

Washcloth (Worthwhile)

Ziplock bag to carry wet things in ←
(Worthwhile)

Towel (super absorbent, quick drying) ←
(Essential)

Nail clippers ← (Essential)

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Tweezers ← (Essential)

Toilet paper (2 rolls) ← (Worthwhile)

Tampons ← (Essential)

Condoms/birth control ← (Essential)

Clothes-Related

Layered clothing ← (Worthwhile)

Layered clothing is best, such as a waterproof outer shell (Nylon jacket with hood) and some kind of fleece vest or sweater underneath. You will be putting on and taking off clothing as the weather changes.

Bandanas/face mask (for dust, when traveling)
← (Worthwhile)

Long pants (Shorts on women or men are frowned upon) ← (Worthwhile)

Long-sleeved shirt ← (Worthwhile)

Socks (heavy warm socks—also good to give Tibetans as gifts) ← (Essential)

Note: Spend your money and buy good quality (\$10 a pair) all-synthetic hiking socks. Do NOT take cotton socks.

Hiking Boots: If you are only doing a few hiking trips, you can get by with inexpensive shoes. It is helpful to have ankle support, but not absolutely necessary. What is necessary is to have shoes or boots you are comfortable in, ones that will not immediately cause blisters. Most of the time, I wore my Texas (sandals) everywhere. Spend your money on good socks. This is the weak link for most. I can't say about winter footwear, but sometimes, in

Trip Guidelines

late summer/early autumn, I wore two pair of socks, for warmth, along with my sandals.

Wide Sun Hat (with neck strap for sudden updrafts) ← (Worthwhile)

Sweater (Worthwhile)

T-shirt

Underwear ←

Pajamas

Long underwear for Tibetan nights ← (did not use)

Clothespins & Cord for drying clothes

Poncho (or waterproof shell mentioned above)

Woolite (cold water soap) for hand laundering

Plastic bags for wet things, heavy zip-lock, large sizes ←

Documentation

Passport/Visas (bring at least 4 extra Passport photos) ← (Essential)

Photocopies (a Xerox copy of your passport, visa, credit cards, ID, etc. is important. Keep separate from originals) ← (Worthwhile)

Tickets (Airline tickets) ← (Essential)

Vaccination certificate (an extra copy wouldn't hurt) (did not use)

Printed Stuff

Business Cards (Worthwhile)

Stationary & Envelopes

Phrasebook (Worthwhile)

Trip Guidelines

Address book (Worthwhile)

Reading material (did not need)

Luggage

Pack ← (Worthwhile)

You should not bring a suitcase, since you may have to carry whatever you bring some distance if there is a breakdown. Full hiking packs are good. Margaret and I opted for a compromise; a duffel-like pack you can carry with either a handle or a shoulder strap, and that also has a built-in harness for backpacking it. This harness is hidden behind a zipper. In addition, this luggage has a small daypack (with a harness) that zips to the larger one. You could use a standard duffel bag, but hauling one of these soon becomes very tiring.

Day pack (with harness) for day trips (could be part of above). ← (Essential)

Cautions

Water – Drink bottled water only (and only completely sealed bottled water) or boiled water. When showering, don't let water get in your mouth. Also, use bottled or boiled water, or mouthwash, to brush your teeth.

Food – The only raw food you should eat is fruit that which you peel yourself. Salads are dangerous, because of the water. No dairy foods or creamy sauces.

The cardinal rule is that if it is not boiled, high-heat cooked, or peeled, then DON'T EAT IT.

Trip Guidelines

First-aid Kit

A personal first aid kit should contain many of these items:

Antibiotic ointment

Antibiotics of some kind (if you can get them)

Antihistamine (Benadryl) ←

Anti-itch (for insect bites)

Iodine

Antiseptic agent (Betadine lotion or swabs)

Hydrogen peroxide as antiseptic (can get gel form) ←

Athletes Foot Cream

Bandages

Cotton balls & Q-tips

Band-aids, gauze bandage with adhesive tape.

Hot water bottle

Chapstick (lip salve) (Lips crack in Tibet within days of arrival.)

Tucks pads

Preparation H & Suppositories (didn't need, but was in demand)

Quilted baby fresh aloe wipes

Laxatives (Worthwhile)

Diarrhea medicine (Lomotil, Imodium) ←
(Worthwhile)

Flagyl (for giardia)

Trip Guidelines

Dramamine/Bonine (motion sickness – 12 tabs for every 200 miles travel) ← (Worthwhile)

Drixal (cold/sinus medicine)

Papaya enzyme & Acidophilus (upset stomach & diarrhea) ← (Worthwhile)

Pepto-bismal (lots of chewable ones)

Tylenol/Aspirin/Ibuprofen (your preferred brand) ← (Worthwhile)

Sudafed/cold medicines

Paracetamol (Panadol)

Lotion

Multi-vitamins

Alcohol swabs (for cleaning utensils) ←

Witch Hazel towelettes/handwipes (bring a LOT) ← (did not use)

Rehydration mixture

Thermometer ← (Essential)

Throat lozenges, gum, candy (Worthwhile)

Trip Guidelines

Doctor-related Medicines

Here is the recommended list, but many of these items are prescription only, so who knows what one can do about that.

Diarrhea & Vomiting

Norfloxacin

Tinidazole

Imodium or Lomotil

Rehydration salts

Metoclopramide

Promethazine suppositories

Colds

Throat lozenges

Actifed

Codeine Phosphate

Amoxicillin

Erythromycin

Blisters & Skin Infection

Antiseptic (Betadine)

Cephalexin

Erythromycin

Rashes & Insect Bites

Diphenhydramine

Miconazole Cream

Hydrocortisone 1% cream

Trip Guidelines

Altitude

Acetazolamide

Dexamethasone

Nifedipine

Gastritis/ Antacids

Constipation – Docolax Pills

Urinary Tract – Norfloxacin

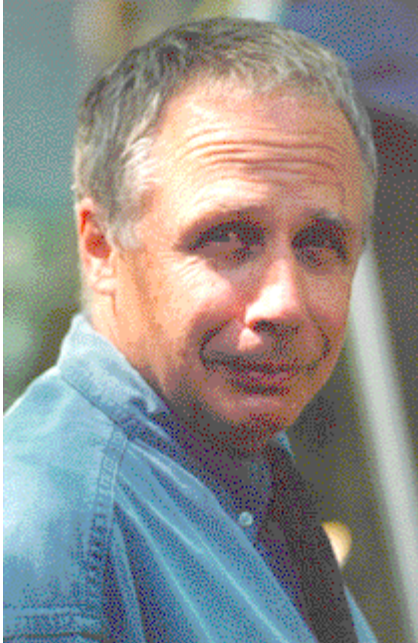
Vaginitis – Mycostatin vaginal tabs

Conjunctivitis – Sodium Sulamyd

Eye Drops

Internal Ear Infection – Amoxicillin, Cephalexin,
Erythromycin, Azithromycin

About Michael Erlewine



Michael Erlewine

Internationally known astrologer and author, Noel Tyl, author of 34 books on astrology, has this to say about Michael Erlewine:

Michael Erlewine

“Michael Erlewine is the giant influence whose creativity is forever imprinted on all astrologers’ work since the beginning of the Computer era! He is the man who single-handedly applied computer technology to astrological measurement, research, and interpretation, and has been the formative and leading light of astrology’s modern growth. Erlewine humanized it all, adding perception and incisive practical analyses to modern, computerized astrology. Now, for a second generation of astrologers and their public, Erlewine’s genius continues with StarTypes ... and it’s simply amazing!”

A Brief Bio of Michael Erlewine

Entrepreneur Michael Erlewine is an internationally-known astrologer and has studied and practiced astrology for over 40 years. He is a respected author, teacher, lecturer, personal consultant, programmer, and conference producer.

Erlewine pioneered computerized astrology. In 1977 he became the very first astrologer to program astrology on microcomputers, making these programs available to his fellow astrologers. He founded the first astrology software company, Matrix Software, in 1978, and this company, along with Microsoft, is the oldest software company on the Internet.

Michael, joined by his astrologer-brother Stephen Erlewine, revolutionized astrology by creating, for the first time, microcomputer software capable of producing written astrological reports, research systems, high-resolution chart wheels, geographic and star maps, and many other computer applications relevant to astrology.

Along the way, Matrix, the company Michael founded, also produced audio programs of astrology, created personal astrological videos and infomercials, and has accomplished many other pioneering feats as well.

Michael went on to found the All-Music Guide and the All-Movie Guide, as well as other major entertainment sites. He has developed astrological content under contract with MSN and AOL. The companies he has founded have received scores of awards. Michael himself

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has received major awards from the American Federation of Astrologers, from UAC (United Astrological Conferences), from AFA (American Federation of Astrologers) and from PIA (Professional Astrologers Incorporated); he has also been the recipient of multiple online awards.

Michael and Stephen Erlewine, together, have published a yearly astrological calendar for almost 30 years—since 1969, and over the years Michael himself has produced and put on more than 36 conferences pertaining to either astrology or Buddhism.



Example Astro*Image Card

Aside from his current work as a consultant for NBC's iVillage, and for Astrology.com, Erlewine has personally designed over 6,000 tarot-like astrology cards, making authentic astrology available to people with little or no

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experience in this area. These Astro*Image™ cards can be found in a variety of astrological software programs and in a number of Erlewine's eBooks as well. Some examples can be found at www.StarTypes.com. A link to his astrological software will be found there also.

Personal Readings in Astrology

Michael has been doing personal astrological readings for almost forty years. He enjoys sharing his knowledge with others. Although his busy schedule makes it difficult to honor all requests, feel free to email him at Michael@Erlewine.net if you wish a personal chart reading. He will let you know if his current schedule allows him the time to work with you.

The following sections provide more detail about Michael Erlewine and his very active Heart Center.

About Michael Erlewine



The Heart Center House

In 1972, Michael and Margaret Erlewine established the Heart Center, a center for community studies. Today, the Heart Center continues to be a center for astrological and spiritual work. Over the years, hundreds of invited guests have stayed at the Heart Center, some for just a night, others for many years. Astrologers, authors, musicians, Sanskrit scholars, swamis—you name it, the Heart Center has been home to a wide variety of individuals, all united by their interest in spiritual or cultural ideas.

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Heart Center Library

Michael Erlewine also founded and directs The Heart Center Astrological Library, the largest astrological library in the United States (and possibly in the world) open to researchers. Meticulously catalogued, the current project of the library is the scanning of the Table of Contents of all the major books and periodicals on astrology.

The library does not have regular hours, so if you wish to visit, please contact ahead of time: Michael@erlewine.net.

About Michael Erlewine



All-Music Guide / All-Movie Guide

Michael Erlewine's devotion to studying and playing the music of Black Americans, in particular the blues, led him to travel to the small blues clubs of Chicago to hear—live—blues greats such as Little Walter, Magic Sam, Big Walter Horton, and many others. He went on to interview dozens of performers. Many of these interviews took place in 1969 and 1970, at the original Ann Arbor Blues Festivals—the first electric blues festivals of any size ever to be held in North America. Later interviews took place at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals.

With their extensive knowledge of blues music, Michael Erlewine and his brother Daniel were asked to play host to a score or so of professional blues musicians and their bands. They were in charge of serving them food and (of course) drink. Michael went on to interview most of the performers at these early festivals, initially using only an audio recorder, but in

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later interviews using video as well.

This interviewing led to more study, and ultimately resulted in Michael founding and developing AMG—the All-Music Guide—which today is the single largest database of music reviews and documentation on the planet.

Michael Erlewine started from a one-room office. The reviewers and music aficionados of the time laughed at his attempt to cover all music, but he persisted, and the all-Music Guide appeared as a Gopher Site—even before the World Wide Web existed—a new database of popular music for all music lovers.

Over the years, as AMG grew, the All-Movie Guide and the All-Game Guide were created also and flourished as well. Michael later established ClassicPosters.com, a guide devoted to the history and documentation of rock n' roll posters—some 35,000 of them!

These guides changed the way music was reviewed and rated. Previous to AMG, review guides, such as the "Rolling Stones Record Guide," were typically run by a few sophisticated reviewers, and the emphasis was on the expertise of the reviewer and their point of view. Erlewine insisted that all artists be treated equally, each on their own merit, and did not compare artist to artist. What is important, Michael emphasized, is finding the best music any artist has produced, not in noting whether a particular artist is better or worse than, say, Jimmie Hendrix or Bob Dylan.

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Erlewine sold AMG in 1996. There were 150 fulltime employees and 500 free-lance writers working for the company at that time. He had edited and published a large number of books and CD-ROMs on film and music. During the time he owned and ran AMG, there were no advertisements on the site, and nothing was being charged. Erlewine wrote that, "All of us deserve to have access to our own popular culture. That is what AMG and ClassicPosters.com are all about." Today, AMG reviews can be found everywhere across the Internet. Erlewine's music collection is housed in an AMG warehouse, it numbers nearly 500,000 CDs.

Heart Center Meditation Room

Michael Erlewine has been active in Buddhism since the 1950s. Here, in his own words:

"Back in the late 1950s and in early 1960, Buddhism was one of the many ideas we stayed up late talking about, while we smoked cigarettes and drank lots of coffee, along with ideas about existentialism, poetry, and the like.

"It was not until I met the Tibetan Lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1974, that I understood Buddhism not just as a Philosophy but also as a path, as a way to get through life. Having been raised Catholic—serving as an altar boy, learning church Latin and all that—I had not been given any kind of path, other than the path of faith. I hung onto that faith as long as I could, but it told me very little about how to live and work in this world.

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“I had been trying to learn the basics of Tibetan Buddhism even before I met Trungpa Rinpoche but the spark able to weld everything together was missing. Trungpa provided that spark. I got to be his chauffeur for a weekend and design a poster for his public talk.

“But most important, only about an hour after we met, Trungpa took me into a small room for a couple of hours and taught me to meditate. I didn’t even understand what I was learning. All that I knew was that I was learning about myself.

“After that meeting, I began to understand more of what I read, but it was almost ten years later before I met my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery, which is located in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Meeting Rinpoche was life-changing.



Heart Center Symbol

“It was not long after this meeting that we started the Heart Center Meditation Center in Big Rapids, Michigan, which is still active today. My wife and I became more and more involved with the monastery in New York, and ended up serving on several boards, becoming fundraisers for the monastery as well. We helped to raise the funds necessary to build a 3-year retreat center in upstate New York—one for men and one for women.

“We established KTD Dharma Goods, a mail-order dharma goods business designed to assist practitioners in locating any meditation materials they might have need of. We also published many sadhanas (the traditional Buddhist practice texts), and other teachings as well, in print and on audio tape.

Though years have gone by, I am still working with Khenpo Rinpoche and the Sangha at the Woodstock monastery. Some years ago,

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Rinpoche surprised my wife and me by telling us we should go to Tibet and meet His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, and that we should go right away, that summer. And I hate to even leave the house!

That trip and a second trip some years later were both pilgrimages that turned out to be life changing. Our center in Big Rapids now has a shrine room (a separate building of its own) and even a small Stupa. Pictures are shown below.

I can never repay the kindness that Khenpo Rinpoche and the other Rinpoches I have taken teachings from have shown me.

Music Career



Michael Erlewine's career in music started early on, when he dropped out of high school and hitchhiked to Venice West, in Santa Monica, California, in an attempt to catch a ride

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on the tail end of the Beatnik era. This was 1960, and he was a little late for that, but right on time for the folk music revival that was just beginning to bloom. Like many other people his age, Erlewine traveled from college center to college center across the nation—from Ann Arbor to Berkeley to Cambridge to Greenwich Village—on a well-beaten track the young folk musicians of the future all traveled on.

Erlewine, who played folk guitar, also hitchhiked for a stint with a young Bob Dylan, and then more extensively with guitar virtuoso and instrumentalist, Perry Lederman. Erlewine helped Dylan put on his first concert in Ann Arbor. He hung out with people like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Joan Baez, The New Lost City Ramblers and The County Gentlemen.

In 1965, the same year that the Grateful Dead was forming, Michael Erlewine, his brother Daniel, and a few others, formed the first new-style band in the Midwest—the Prime Movers Blues Band. Iggy Pop was their drummer—it was during his stint in this band that he got the name 'Iggy'. This was the beginning of the hippie era. Michael was the band's lead singer, and he played an amplified Chicago-style blues harmonica. He still plays.

Erlewine was also the manager of the band and personally designed and silkscreened the band's posters, one of which is shown below.

The Prime Movers became a seminal band throughout the Midwest, and they traveled as far as the West Coast, where they spent the year of 1967—the "Summer of Love"—playing

About Michael Erlewine

at all the famous clubs, and opening for artists such as Eric Clapton and Cream, at the Fillmore Auditorium.

As the 60's wound down and bands began to break up, Erlewine was still studying the music of American Blacks, in particular—blues. Because of their knowledge of the blues and their familiarity with many of the blues players, Michael and his brother Dan were invited to help host the first major electric blues festival ever to be held in the United States—the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival. They got to wine and dine the performers and look after them in general.

Michael interviewed (audio and video) most of the blues players (musicians) at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, including: Big Joe Turner, Luther Allison, Carey Bell, Bobby Bland, Clifton Chenier, James Cotton, Pee Wee Crayton, Arthur Crudup, Jimmy Dawkins, Doctor Ross, Sleepy John Estes, Lowell Fulson, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, J.B. Hutto, Albert King, B.B King, Freddie King, Sam Lay, Lightnin' Hopkins, Manse Lipscomb, Robert Lockwood, Magic Sam, Fred Mcdowell, Muddy Waters, Charlie Musslewhite, Louis Myers , Junior Parker, Brewer Phillips, Otis Rush, Johnnie Shines, George Smith, Son House, Victoria Spivey, Hubert Sumlin, Sunnyland Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, Eddie Taylor, Hound Dog Taylor, Big Mama Thornton, Eddie Vinson, Sippie Wallace, Junior Wells, Big Joe Williams, Robert Pete Williams, Johnny Young, and Mighty Joe Young.

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